Captain Fracasse

by Théophile Gautier

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CAPTAIN FRACASSE ***

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Contents

CAPTAIN FRACASSE

CHAPTER I. CASTLE MISERY

Upon the southern slope of one of those barren hills that rise abruptly here and there in the desolate expanse of the Landes, in South-western France, stood, in the reign of Louis XIII, a gentleman’s residence, such as abound in Gascony, and which the country people dignify by the name of château.

Two tall towers, with extinguisher tops, mounted guard at the angles of the mansion, and gave it rather a feudal air. The deep grooves upon its facade betrayed the former existence of a draw-bridge, rendered unnecessary now by the filling up of the moat, while the towers were draped for more than half their height with a most luxuriant growth of ivy, whose deep, rich green contrasted happily with the ancient gray walls.

A traveller, seeing from afar the steep pointed roof and lofty towers standing out against the sky, above the furze and heather that crowned the hill-top, would have pronounced it a rather imposing château—the residence probably of some provincial magnate; but as he drew near would have quickly found reason to change his opinion. The road which led to it from the highway was entirely overgrown with moss and weeds, save a narrow pathway in the centre, though two deep ruts, full of water, and inhabited by a numerous family of frogs, bore mute witness to the fact that carriages had once passed that way.

The roof, of dark red tiles, was disfigured by many large, leprous-looking, yellow patches, while in some places the decayed rafters had given way, leaving formidable gaps. The numerous weather-cocks that surmounted the towers and chimneys were

so rusted that they could no longer budge an inch, and pointed persistently in various directions. The high dormer windows were partially closed by old wooden shutters, warped, split, and in every stage of dilapidation; broken stones filled up the loop-holes and openings in the towers; of the twelve large windows in the front of the house, eight were boarded up; the remaining four had small diamond-shaped panes of thick, greenish glass, fitting so loosely in their leaden frames that they shook and rattled at every breath of wind; between these windows a great deal of the stucco had fallen off, leaving the rough wall exposed to view.

Above the grand old entrance door, whose massive stone frame and lintel retained traces of rich ornamentation, almost obliterated by time and neglect, was sculptured a coat of arms, now so defaced that the most accomplished adept in heraldry would not be able to decipher it. Only one leaf of the great double door was ever opened now, for not many guests were received or entertained at the château in these days of its decadence. Swallows had built their nests in every available nook about it, and but for a slender thread of smoke rising spirally from a chimney at the back of this dismal, half-ruined mansion, the traveller would have surely believed it to be uninhabited. This was the only sign of life visible about the whole place, like the little cloud upon the mirror from the breath of a dying man, which alone gives evidence that he still lives.

Upon pushing open the practicable leaf of the great worm-eaten door, which yielded reluctantly, and creaked dolefully as it turned upon its rusty hinges, the curious visitor entered a sort of portico, more ancient than the rest of the building, with fine, large columns of bluish granite, and a lofty vaulted roof. At the point of intersection of the arches was a stone shield, bearing the same coat of arms that was sculptured over the entrance without. This one was in somewhat better preservation than the other, and seemed to bear something resembling three golden storks (cigognes) on an azure field; though it was so much in shadow, and so faded and dingy, that it was impossible to make it out clearly. Fastened to the wall, at a convenient height from

the ground, were great iron extinguishers, blackened by the smoke from torches in long by-gone years, and also iron rings, to which the guests' horses were made fast in the olden times, when the castle was in its glory. The dust that lay thick upon them now showed that it was long since they had been made use of.

From this portico—whence a door on either side opened into the main building; one leading into a long suite of apartments on the ground floor, and the other into what had probably been a guard-room—the explorer passed into an interior court, dismal, damp, and bare. In the corners nettles and various rank weeds were growing riotously amid the great heaps of rubbish fallen from the crumbling cornice high above, and grass had sprung up everywhere in the crevices of the stone pavement. Opposite the entrance a flight of dilapidated, shaky steps, with a heavy stone balustrade, led down into a neglected garden, which was gradually becoming a perfect thicket. Excepting in one small bed, where a few cabbages were growing, there was no attempt at cultivation, and nature had reasserted her rights everywhere else in this abandoned spot, taking, apparently, a fierce delight in effacing all traces of man's labour. The fruit trees threw out irregular branches without fear of the pruning knife; the box, intended to form a narrow border to the curiously shaped flower-beds and grass-plots, had grown up unchecked into huge, bushy shrubs, while a great variety of sturdy weeds had usurped the places formerly devoted to choice plants and beautiful, fragrant flowers. Brambles, bristling with sharp thorns, which had thrown their long, straggling arms across the paths, caught and tried to hold back any bold adventurer who attempted to penetrate into the mysterious depths of this desolate wilderness. Solitude is averse to being surprised in dishabille, and surrounds herself with all sorts of defensive obstacles.

However, the courageous explorer who persisted in following the ancient, overgrown alley, and was not to be daunted by formidable briers that tore his hands and clothing, nor low-hanging, closely interlaced branches that struck him smart blows in the face as he forced his way through them, would have reached at last a

sort of rocky niche, fancifully arranged as a grotto. Besides the masses of ivy, iris and gladiolus, that had been carefully planted long ago in the interstices of the rock, it was draped with a profusion of graceful wild vines and feathery ferns, which half-veiled the marble statue, representing some mythological divinity, that still stood in this lonely retreat. It must have been intended for Flora or Pomona, but now there were tufts of repulsive, venomous-looking mushrooms in the pretty, graceful, little basket on her arm, instead of the sculptured fruit or flowers that should have filled it. Although her nose was broken, and her fair body disfigured by many dark stains, and overgrown in part with clinging mosses, it could still plainly be seen that she had once been very lovely. At her feet was a marble basin, shaped like a shell, half full of discoloured, stagnant water; the lion’s head just above it, now almost entirely concealed by a thick curtain of leaves, no longer poured forth the sparkling stream that used to fall into it with a musical murmur. This little grotto, with its fountain and statue, bore witness to former wealth; and also to the aesthetic taste of some long-dead owner of the domain. The marble goddess was in the Florentine style of the Renaissance, and probably the work of one of those Italian sculptors who followed in the train of del Rosso or Primaticcio, when they came to France at the bidding of that generous patron of the arts, Francis I; which time was also, apparently, the epoch of the greatest prosperity of this noble family, now so utterly fallen into decay.

Behind the grotto rose a high wall, built of stone, crumbling and mouldy now, but still bearing some broken remains of trellis-work, evidently intended to be covered with creepers that would entirely conceal the wall itself with a rich tapestry of verdure. This was the limit of the garden; beyond stretched the wide expanse of the sandy, barren Landes, flecked here and there with patches of scanty heather, and scattered groves of pine trees.

Turning back towards the château it became apparent that this side of it was even more neglected and ruinous than the one we have already described; the recent

poverty-stricken owners having tried to keep up appearances as far as possible, and concentrated their efforts upon the front of their dilapidated abode. In the stable, where were stalls for twenty horses, a miserable, old, white pony stood at an empty manger, nibbling disconsolately at a scanty truss of hay, and frequently turning his sunken, lack-lustre eyes expectantly towards the door. In front of an extensive kennel, where the lord of the manor used to keep a whole pack of hounds, a single dog, pathetically thin, lay sleeping tranquilly and soundly, apparently so accustomed to the unbroken solitude of the place that he had abandoned all habits of watchfulness.

Entering the château the visitor found himself in a broad and lofty hall, containing a grand old staircase, with a richly carved, wooden balustrade—a good deal broken and defaced now, like everything else in this doleful Castle Misery. The walls had been elaborately frescoed, representing colossal figures of Hercules supporting brackets upon which rested the heavily ornamented cornice. Springing from it fantastic vines climbed upward on the arched ceiling, and above them the blue sky, faded and dingy, was grotesquely variegated with dark spots, caused by the water filtering through from the dilapidated roof. Between the oft-repeated figures of Hercules were frescoed niches, wherein heads of Roman emperors and other illustrious historical characters had been depicted in glowing tints; but all were so vague and dim now that they were but the ghosts of pictures, which should be described with the shadows of words—ordinary terms are too substantial to apply to them. The very echoes in this deserted hall seemed startled and amazed as they repeated and multiplied the unwonted sound of footsteps.

A door near the head of the first flight of stairs opened into what had evidently been the great banqueting hall in the old days when sumptuous repasts and numerous guests were not uncommon things in the château. A huge beam divided the lofty ceiling into two compartments, which were crossed at regular intervals by smaller joists, richly carved, and retaining some traces of gilding. The spaces between had

been originally of a deep blue tint, almost lost now under the thick coating of dust and spiders' webs that no housemaid's mop ever invaded. Above the grand old chimney-piece was a noble stag's head, with huge, spreading antlers, and on the walls hung rows of ancient family portraits, so faded and mouldy now that most of the faces had a ghastly hue, and at night, by the dim, flickering lamp-light, they looked like a company of spectres. Nothing in the world is sadder than a collection of old portraits hanging thus, neglected and forgotten, in deserted halls—representations, half obliterated themselves, of forms and faces long since returned to dust. Yet these painted phantoms were most appropriate inhabitants of this desolate abode; real living people would have seemed out of place in the death-stricken house.

In the middle of the room stood an immense dining-table of dark, polished wood, much worm-eaten, and gradually falling into decay. Two tall buffets, elaborately carved and ornamented, stood on opposite sides of the room, with only a few odd pieces of Palissy ware, representing lizards, crabs, and shell-fish, reposing on shiny green leaves, and two or three delicate wine-glasses of quaint patterns remaining upon the shelves where gold and silver plate used to glitter in rich profusion, as was the mode in France. The handsome old chairs, with their high, carved backs and faded velvet cushions, that had been so firm and luxurious once, were tottering and insecure; but it mattered little, since no one ever came to sit in them now round the festive board, and they stood against the wall in prim order, under the rows of family portraits.

A smaller room opened out of this one, hung round with faded, moth-eaten tapestry. In one corner stood a large bed, with four tall, twisted columns and long, ample curtains of rich brocade, which had been delicate green and white, but now were of a dingy, yellowish hue, and cut completely through from top to bottom in every fold. An ebony table, with some pretty gilded ornaments still clinging to it, a mirror dim with age, and two large arm-chairs, covered with worn and faded embroidery, that

had been wrought by the fair fingers of some noble dame long since dead and forgotten, completed the furniture of this dismal chamber.

In these two rooms were the latticed windows seen in the front of the château, and over them still hung long sweeping curtains, so tattered and moth-eaten that they were almost falling to pieces. Profound silence reigned here, unbroken save by occasional scurrying and squeaking of mice behind the wainscot, the gnawing of rats in the wall, or the ticking of the death-watch.

From the tapestried chamber a door opened into a long suite of deserted rooms, which were lofty and of noble proportions, but devoid of furniture, and given up to dust, spiders, and rats. The apartments on the floor above them were the home of great numbers of bats, owls, and jackdaws, who found ready ingress through the large holes in the roof. Every evening they flew forth in flocks, with much flapping of wings, and weird, melancholy cries and shrieks, in search of the food not to be found in the immediate vicinity of this forlorn mansion.

The apartments on the ground floor contained nothing but a few bundles of straw, a heap of corn-cobs, and some antiquated gardening implements. In one of them, however, was a rude bed, covered with a single, coarse blanket; presumably that of the only domestic remaining in the whole establishment.

It was from the kitchen chimney that the little spiral of smoke escaped which was seen from without. A few sticks were burning in the wide, old-fashioned fireplace, but the flames looked pale under the bright light that streamed down upon them through the broad, straight flue. The pot that hung from the clumsy iron crane was boiling sleepily, and if the curious visitor could have peeped into it he would have seen that the little cabbage bed in the garden had contributed of its produce to the pot-au-feu. An old black cat was sitting as close to the fire as he could without singeing his whiskers, and gravely watching the simmering pot with longing eyes. His ears had been closely cropped, and he had not a vestige of a tail, so that he

looked like one of those grotesque Japanese chimeras that everybody is familiar with. Upon the table, near at hand, a white plate, a tin drinking cup, and a china dish, bearing the family arms stamped in blue, were neatly arranged, evidently in readiness for somebody's supper. For a long time the cat remained perfectly motionless, intently watching the pot which had almost ceased to boil as the fire got low, and the silence continued unbroken; but at last a slow, heavy step was heard approaching from without, and presently the door opened to admit an old man, who looked half peasant, half gentleman's servant. The black cat immediately quitted his place by the fire and went to meet him; rubbing himself against the newcomer's legs, arching his back and purring loudly; testifying his joy in every way possible to him.

"Well, well, Beelzebub," said the old man, bending down and stroking him affectionately, "are you really so glad to see me? Yes, I know you are, and it pleases me, old fellow, so it does. We are so lonely here, my poor young master and I, that even the welcome of a dumb beast is not to be despised. They do say that you have no soul, Beelzebub, but you certainly do love us, and understand most times what we say to you too." These greetings exchanged, Beelzebub led the way back to the fire, and then with beseeching eyes, looking alternately from the face of his friend to the pot-au-feu, seemed mutely begging for his share of its contents. Poor Beelzebub was growing so old that he could no longer catch as many rats and mice as his appetite craved, and he was evidently very hungry.

Pierre, that was the old servant's name, threw more wood on the smouldering fire, and then sat down on a settle in the chimney corner, inviting his companion—who had to wait still for his supper as patiently as he might—to take a seat beside him. The firelight shone full upon the old man's honest, weather-beaten face, the few scattered locks of snow-white hair escaping from under his dark blue woollen cap, his thick, black eyebrows and deep wrinkles. He had the usual characteristics of the Basque race; a long face, hooked nose, and dark, gipsy-like complexion. He wore a

sort of livery, which was so old and threadbare that it would be impossible to make out its original colour, and his stiff, soldier-like carriage and movements proclaimed that he had at some time in his life served in a military capacity. “The young master is late to-night,” he muttered to himself, as the daylight faded. “What possible pleasure can he find in these long, solitary rambles over the dunes? It is true though that it is so dreary here, in this lonely, dismal house, that any other place is preferable.”

At this moment a joyous barking was heard without, the old pony in the stable stamped and whinnied, and the cat jumped down from his place beside Pierre and trotted off towards the door with great alacrity. In an instant the latch was lifted, and the old servant rose, taking off his woollen cap respectfully, as his master came into the kitchen. He was preceded by the poor old dog, trying to jump up on him, but falling back every time without being able to reach his face, and Beelzebub seemed to welcome them both—showing no evidence of the antipathy usually existing between the feline and canine races; on the contrary, receiving Miraut with marks of affection which were fully reciprocated.

The Baron de Sigognac, for it was indeed the lord of the manor who now entered, was a young man of five or six and twenty; though at first sight he seemed much older, because of the deep gravity, even sadness, of his demeanour; the feeling of utter powerlessness which poverty brings having effectually chased away all the natural piety and light-heartedness of youth. Dark circles surrounded his sunken eyes, his cheeks were hollow, his mustache drooped in a sorrowful curve over his sad mouth. His long black hair was negligently pushed back from his pale face, and showed a want of care remarkable in a young man who was strikingly handsome, despite his doleful desponding expression. The constant pressure of a crushing grief had drawn sorrowful lines in a countenance that a little animation would have rendered charming. All the elasticity and hopefulness natural to his age seemed to have been lost in his useless struggles against an unhappy fate. Though his frame

was lithe, vigorous, and admirably proportioned, all his movements were slow and apathetic, like those of an old man. His gestures were entirely devoid of animation, his whole expression inert, and it was evidently a matter of perfect indifference to him where he might chance to find himself at home, in his dismal château, or abroad in the desolate Landes.

He had on an old gray felt hat, much too large for him, with a dingy, shabby feather, that drooped as if it felt heartily ashamed of itself, and the miserable condition to which it was reduced. A broad collar of guipure lace, ragged in many places, was turned down over a just-au-corps, which had been cut for a taller and much stouter man than the slender, young baron. The sleeves of his doublet were so long that they fell over his hands, which were small and shapely, and there were large iron spurs on the clumsy, old-fashioned riding-boots he wore. These shabby, antiquated clothes had belonged to his father; they were made according to the fashion that prevailed during the preceding reign; and the poor young nobleman, whose appearance in them was both ridiculous and touching, might have been taken for one of his own ancestors. Although he tenderly cherished his father's memory, and tears often came into his eyes as he put on these garments that had seemed actually a part of him, yet it was not from choice that young de Sigognac availed himself of the paternal wardrobe. Unfortunately he had no other clothes, save those of his boyhood, long ago outgrown, and so he was thankful to have these, distasteful as they could not fail to be to him. The peasants, who had been accustomed to hold them in respect when worn by their old seignior, did not think it strange or absurd to see them on his youthful successor; just as they did not seem to notice or be aware of the half-ruined condition of the château. It had come so gradually that they were thoroughly used to it, and took it as a matter of course. The Baron de Sigognac, though poverty-stricken and forlorn, was still in their eyes the noble lord of the manor; the decadence of the family did not strike them at all as it would a stranger; and yet it was a grotesquely melancholy sight to see the poor young nobleman pass by, in his shabby old clothes,

on his miserable old pony, and followed by his forlorn old dog.

The baron sat down in silence at the table prepared for him, having recognised Pierre's respectful salute by a kindly gesture. The old servant immediately busied himself in serving his master's frugal supper; first pouring the hot soup—which was of that kind, popular among the poor peasantry of Gascony, called "garbure"—upon some bread cut into small pieces in an earthen basin, which he set before the baron; then, fetching from the cupboard a dish of bacon, cold, and cooked in Gascon fashion, he placed that also upon the table, and had nothing else to add to this meagre repast. The baron ate it slowly, with an absent air, while Miraut and Beelzebub, one on each side of him, received their full share from his kind hand.

The supper finished, he fell into a deep reverie. Miraut had laid his head caressingly upon his master's knee, and looked up into his face with loving, intelligent eyes, somewhat dimmed by age, but still seeming to understand his thoughts and sympathize with his sadness. Beelzebub purred loudly meantime, and occasionally mewed plaintively to attract his attention, while Pierre stood in a respectful attitude, cap in hand, at a little distance, motionless as a statue, waiting patiently until his master's wandering thoughts should return. By this time the darkness had fallen, and the flickering radiance from the few sticks blazing in the great fireplace made strange effects of light and shade in the spacious old kitchen. It was a sad picture; this last scion of a noble race, formerly rich and powerful, left wandering like an uneasy ghost in the castle of his ancestors, with but one faithful old servant remaining to him of the numerous retinue of the olden times; one poor old dog, half starved, and gray with age, where used to be a pack of thirty hounds; one miserable, superannuated pony in the stable where twenty horses had been wont to stand; and one old cat to beg for caresses from his hand.

At last the baron roused himself, and signed to Pierre that he wished to retire to his own chamber; whereupon the servant lighted a pine knot at the fire, and preceded

his master up the stairs, Miraut and Beelzebub accompanying them. The smoky, flaring light of the torch made the faded figures on the wall seem to waver and move as they passed through the hall and up the broad staircase, and gave a strange, weird expression to the family portraits that looked down upon this little procession as it moved by below them. When they reached the tapestried chamber Pierre lighted a little copper lamp, and then bade the baron good-night, followed by Miraut as he retraced his steps to the kitchen; but Beelzebub, being a privileged character, remained, and curled himself up comfortably in one of the old arm-chairs, while his master threw himself listlessly into the other, in utter despair at the thought of his miserable loneliness, and aimless, hopeless life. If the chamber seemed dreary and forlorn by day, it was far more so by night. The faded figures in the tapestry had an uncanny look; especially one, a hunter, who might have passed for an assassin, just taking aim at his victim. The smile on his startlingly red lips, in reality only a self-satisfied smirk, was fairly devilish in that light, and his ghastly face horribly life-like. The lamp burned dimly in the damp heavy air, the wind sighed and moaned along the corridors, and strange, frightful sounds came from the deserted chambers close at hand. The storm that had long been threatening had come at last, and large, heavy rain-drops were driven violently against the window-panes by gusts of wind that made them rattle loudly in their leaden frames. Sometimes it seemed as if the whole sash would give way before the fiercer blasts, as though a giant had set his knee against it, and was striving to force an entrance. Now and again, when the wind lulled for a moment while it gathered strength for a fresh assault, the horrid shriek of an owl would be heard above the dashing of the rain that was falling in torrents.

The master of this dismal mansion paid little attention to this lugubrious symphony, but Beelzebub was very uneasy, starting up at every sound, and peering into the shadowy corners of the room, as if he could see there something invisible to human eyes. The baron took up a little book that was lying upon the table, glanced at the familiar arms stamped upon its tarnished cover, and opening it, began to read in a

listless, absent way. His eyes followed the smooth rhythm of Ronsard's ardent love-songs and stately sonnets, but his thoughts were wandering far afield, and he soon threw the book from him with an impatient gesture, and began slowly unfastening his garments, with the air of a man who is not sleepy, but only goes to bed because he does not know what else to do with himself, and has perhaps a faint hope of forgetting his troubles in the embrace of Morpheus, most blessed of all the gods. The sand runs so slowly in the hour-glass on a dark, stormy night, in a half-ruined castle, ten leagues away from any living soul.

The poor young baron, only surviving representative of an ancient and noble house, had much indeed to make him melancholy and despondent. His ancestors had worked their own ruin, and that of their descendants, in various ways. Some by gambling, some in the army, some by undue prodigality in living—in order that they might shine at court—so that each generation had left the estate more and more diminished. The fiefs, the farms, the land surrounding the château itself, all had been sold, one after the other, and the last baron, after desperate efforts to retrieve the fallen fortunes of the family—efforts which came too late, for it is useless to try to stop the leaks after the vessel has gone down—had left his son nothing but this half-ruined château and the few acres of barren land immediately around it. The unfortunate child had been born and brought up in poverty. His mother had died young, broken-hearted at the wretched prospects of her only son; so that he could not even remember her sweet caresses and tender, loving care. His father had been very stern with him; punishing him severely for the most trivial offences; yet he would have been glad now even of his sharp rebukes, so terribly lonely had he been for the last four years; ever since his father was laid in the family vault. His youthful pride would not allow him to associate with the noblesse of the province without the accessories suitable to his rank, though he would have been received with open arms by them, so his solitude was never invaded. Those who knew his circumstances respected as well as pitied the poor, proud young baron, while many of the former

friends of the family believed that it was extinct; which indeed it inevitably would be, with this its only remaining scion, if things went on much longer as they had been going for many years past.

The baron had not yet removed a single garment when his attention was attracted by the strange uneasiness of Beelzebub, who finally jumped down from his arm-chair, went straight to one of the windows, and raising himself on his hind legs put his fore-paws on the casing and stared out into the thick darkness, where it was impossible to distinguish anything but the driving rain. A loud howl from Miraut at the same moment proclaimed that he too was aroused, and that something very unusual must be going on in the vicinity of the château, ordinarily as quiet as the grave. Miraut kept up persistently a furious barking, and the baron gave up all idea of going to bed. He hastily readjusted his dress, so that he might be in readiness for whatever should happen, and feeling a little excited at this novel commotion.

“What can be the matter with poor old Miraut? He usually sleeps from sunset to sunrise without making a sound, save his snores. Can it be that a wolf is prowling about the place?” said the young man to himself, as he buckled the belt of his sword round his slender waist. A formidable weapon it was, that sword, with long blade, and heavy iron scabbard.

At that moment three loud knocks upon the great outer door resounded through the house. Who could possibly have strayed here at this hour, so far from the travelled roads, and in this tempest that was making night horrible without? No such thing had occurred within the baron’s recollection. What could it portend?

CHAPTER II. THE CHARIOT OF THESPIS

The Baron de Sigognac went down the broad staircase without a moment’s delay to answer this mysterious summons, protecting with his hand the feeble flame of the small lamp he carried from the many draughts that threatened to blow it out. The

light, shining through his slender fingers, gave them a rosy tinge, so that he merited the epithet applied by Homer, the immortal bard, to the laughing, beautiful Aurora, even though he advanced through the thick darkness with his usual melancholy mien, and followed by a black cat, instead of preceding the glorious god of day.

Setting down his lamp in a sheltered corner, he proceeded to take down the massive bar that secured the door, cautiously opened the practicable leaf, and found himself face to face with a man, upon whom the light of the lamp shone sufficiently to show rather a grotesque figure, standing uncovered in the pelting rain. His head was bald and shining, with a few locks of gray hair clustering about the temples. A jolly red nose, bulbous in form, a small pair of twinkling, roguish eyes, looking out from under bushy, jet-black eyebrows, flabby cheeks, over which was spread a network of purplish fibres, full, sensual lips, and a scanty, straggling beard, that scarcely covered the short, round chin, made up a physiognomy worthy to serve as the model for a Silenus; for it was plainly that of a wine-bibber and bon vivant. Yet a certain expression of good humour and kindness, almost of gentleness, redeemed what would otherwise have been a repulsive face. The comical little wrinkles gathering about the eyes, and the merry upward turn of the comers of the mouth, showed a disposition to smile as he met the inquiring gaze of the young baron, but he only bowed repeatedly and profoundly, with exaggerated politeness and respect.

This extraordinary pantomime finished, with a grand flourish, the burlesque personage, still standing uncovered in the pouring rain, anticipated the question upon de Sigognac’s lips, and began at once the following address, in an emphatic and declamatory tone:

“I pray you deign to excuse, noble seignior, my having come thus to knock at the gates of your castle in person at this untimely hour, without sending a page or a courier in advance, to announce my approach in a suitable manner. Necessity knows no law, and forces the most polished personages to be guilty of gross breaches of

etiquette at times."

"What is it you want?" interrupted the baron, in rather a peremptory tone, annoyed by the absurd address of this strange old creature, whose sanity he began to doubt.

"Hospitality, most noble seignior; hospitality for myself and my comrades—princes and princesses, heroes and beauties, men of letters and great captains, pretty waiting-maids and honest valets, who travel through the provinces from town to town in the chariot of Thespis, drawn by oxen, as in the ancient times. This chariot is now hopelessly stuck in the mud only a stone's throw from your castle, my noble lord."

"If I understand aright what you say," answered the baron, "you are a strolling band of players, and have lost your way. Though my house is sadly dilapidated, and I cannot offer you more than mere shelter, you are heartily welcome to that, and will be better off within here than exposed to the fury of this wild storm."

The pedant—for such seemed to be his character in the troupe—bowed his acknowledgments.

During this colloquy, Pierre, awakened by Miraut's loud barking, had risen and joined his master at the door. As soon as he was informed of what had occurred, he lighted a lantern, and with the baron set forth, under the guidance of the droll old actor, to find and rescue the chariot in distress. When they reached it Leander and Matamore were tugging vainly at the wheels, while his majesty, the king, pricked up the weary oxen with the point of his dagger. The actresses, wrapped in their cloaks and seated in the rude chariot, were in despair, and much frightened as well—wet and weary too, poor things. This most welcome re-enforcement inspired all with fresh courage, and, guided by Pierre's suggestions, they soon succeeded in getting the unwieldy vehicle out of the quagmire and into the road leading to the château, which was speedily reached, and the huge equipage safely piloted through the grand portico into the interior court. The oxen were at once taken from before it and led

into the stable, while the actresses followed de Sigognac up to the ancient banqueting hall, which was the most habitable room in the château. Pierre brought some wood, and soon had a bright fire blazing cheerily in the great fireplace. It was needed, although but the beginning of September and the weather still warm, to dry the dripping garments of the company; and besides, the air was so damp and chilly in this long disused apartment that the genial warmth and glow of the fire were welcome to all.

Although the strolling comedians were accustomed to find themselves in all sorts of odd, strange lodgings in the course of their wanderings, they now looked with astonishment at their extraordinary surroundings; being careful, however, like well-bred people, not to manifest too plainly the surprise they could not help feeling.

“I regret very much that I cannot offer you a supper,” said their young host, when all had assembled round the fire, “but my larder is so bare that a mouse could not find enough for a meal in it. I live quite alone in this house with my faithful old Pierre; never visited by anybody; and you can plainly perceive, without my telling you, that plenty does not abound here.”

“Never mind that, noble seignior,” answered Blazius, the pedant, “for though on the stage we may sit down to mock repasts—pasteboard fowls and wooden bottles—we are careful to provide ourselves with more substantial and savoury viands in real life. As quartermaster of the troupe I always have in reserve a Bayonne ham, a game pasty, or something, of that sort, with at least a dozen bottles of good old Bordeaux.”

“Bravo, sir pedant,” cried Leander, “do you go forthwith and fetch in the provisions; and if his lordship will permit, and deign to join us, we will have our little feast here. The ladies will set the table for us meanwhile I am sure.”

The baron graciously nodded his assent, being in truth so amazed at the whole proceeding that he could not easily have found words just then; and he followed with wondering and admiring eyes the graceful movements of Serafina and Isabelle,

who, quitting their seats by the fire, proceeded to arrange upon the worn but snow-white cloth that Pierre had spread on the ancient dining-table, the plates and other necessary articles that the old servant brought forth from the recesses of the carved buffets. The pedant quickly came back, carrying a large basket in each hand, and with a triumphant air placed a huge pasty of most tempting appearance in the middle of the table. To this he added a large smoked tongue, some slices of rosy Bayonne ham, and six bottles of wine.

Beelzebub watched these interesting preparations from a distance with eager eyes, but was too much afraid of all these strangers to approach and claim a share of the good things on the table. The poor beast was so accustomed to solitude and quiet, never seeing any one beyond his beloved master and Pierre, that he was horribly frightened at the sudden irruption of these noisy newcomers.

Finding the feeble light of the baron's small lamp rather dim, Matamore bad gone out to the chariot and brought back two showy candelabra, which ordinarily did duty on the stage. They each held several candles, which, in addition to the warm radiance from the blazing fire, made quite a brilliant illumination in this room, so lately dark, cheerless, and deserted. It had become warm and comfortable by this time; its family portraits and tarnished splendour looked their best in the bright, soft light, which had chased away the dark shadows and given a new beauty to everything it fell upon; the whole place was metamorphosed; a festive air prevailed, and the ancient banqueting hall once more resounded with cheery voices and gay laughter.

The poor young baron, to whom all this had been intensely disagreeable at first, became aware of a strange feeling of comfort and pleasure stealing over him, to which, after a short struggle, he finally yielded himself entirely. Isabelle, Serafina, even the pretty soubrette, seemed to him, unaccustomed as he was to feminine beauty and grace, like goddesses come down from Mount Olympus, rather than

mere ordinary mortals. They were all very pretty, and well fitted to turn heads far more experienced than his. The whole thing was like a delightful dream to him; he almost doubted the evidence of his own senses, and every few minutes found himself dreading the awakening, and the vanishing of the entrancing vision.

When all was ready de Sigognac led Isabelle and Serafina to the table, placing one on each side of him, with the pretty soubrette opposite. Mme. Léonarde, the duenna of the troupe, sat beside the pedant, Leander, Matamore, his majesty the tyrant, and Scapin finding places for themselves. The youthful host was now able to study the faces of his guests at his ease, as they sat round the table in the full light of the candles burning upon it in the two theatrical candelabra. He turned his attention to the ladies first, and it perhaps will not be out of place to give a little sketch of them here, while the pedant attacks the gigantic game pasty.

Serafina, the “leading lady” of the troupe, was a handsome young woman of four or five and twenty, who had quite a grand air, and was as dignified and graceful withal as any veritable noble dame who shone at the court of his most gracious majesty, Louis XIII. She had an oval face, slightly aquiline nose, large gray eyes, bright red lips—the under one full and pouting, like a ripe cherry—-a very fair complexion, with a beautiful colour in her cheeks when she was animated or excited, and rich masses of dark brown hair most becomingly arranged. She wore a round felt hat, with the wide rim turned up at one side, and trimmed with long, floating plumes. A broad lace collar was turned down over her dark green velvet dress, which was elaborately braided, and fitted closely to a fine, well-developed figure. A long, black silk scarf was worn negligently around her shapely shoulders and although both velvet and silk were old and dingy, and the feathers in her hat wet and limp, they were still very effective, and she looked like a young queen who had strayed away from her realm; the freshness and radiant beauty of her face more than made up for the shabbiness of her dress, and de Sigognac was fairly dazzled by her many charms.

Isabelle was much more youthful than Serafina, as was requisite for her role of ingenuous young girl, and far more simply dressed. She had a sweet, almost childlike face, beautiful, silky, chestnut hair, with golden lights in it, dark, sweeping lashes veiling her large, soft eyes, a little rosebud of a mouth, and an air of modesty and purity that was evidently natural to her—not assumed. A gray silk gown, simply made, showed to advantage her slender, graceful form, which seemed far too fragile to endure the hardships inseparable from the wandering life she was leading. A high Elizabethan ruff made a most becoming frame for her sweet, delicately tinted, young face, and her only ornament was a string of pearl beads, clasped round her slender, white neck. Though her beauty was less striking at first sight than Serafina's, it was of a higher order: not dazzling like hers, but surpassingly lovely in its exquisite purity and freshness, and promising to eclipse the other's more showy charms, when the half-opened bud should have expanded into the full-blown flower.

The soubrette was like a beautiful Gipsy, with a clear, dark complexion, rich, mantling colour in her velvety cheeks, intensely black hair—long, thick, and wavy—great, flashing, brown eyes, and rather a large mouth, with ripe, red lips, and dazzling white teeth—one's very beau-ideal of a bewitching, intriguing waiting-maid, and one that might be a dangerous rival to any but a surpassingly lovely and fascinating mistress. She was one of the beauties that women are not apt to admire, but men rave about and run after the world over. She wore a fantastic costume of blue and yellow, which was odd, piquant, and becoming, and seemed fully conscious of her own charms.

Mme. Léonarde, the "noble mother" of the troupe dressed all in black, like a Spanish duenna, was portly of figure, with a heavy, very pale face, double chin, and intensely black eyes, that had a crafty, slightly malicious expression. She had been upon the stage from her early childhood, passing through all the different phases, and was an actress of decided talent, often still winning enthusiastic applause at the expense of younger and more attractive women, who were inclined to think her

something of an old sorceress.

So much for the feminine element. The principal roles were all represented; and if occasionally a re-enforcement was required, they could almost always pick up some provincial actress, or even an amateur, at a pinch. The actors were five in number: The pedant, already described, who rejoiced in the name of Blazitis; Leander; Hérode, the tragic tyrant; Matamore, the bully; and Scapin, the intriguing valet.

Leander, the romantic, irresistible, young lover—darling of the ladies—was a tall, fine-looking fellow of about thirty, though apparently much more youthful, thanks to the assiduous care he bestowed on his handsome person. His slightly curly, black hair was worn long, so that he might often have occasion to push it back from his forehead, with a hand as white and delicate as a woman's, upon one of whose taper fingers sparkled an enormous diamond—a great deal too big to be real. He was rather fancifully dressed, and always falling into such graceful, languishing attitudes as he thought would be admired by the fair sex, whose devoted slave he was. This Adonis never for one moment laid aside his role. He punctuated his sentences with sighs, even when speaking of the most indifferent matters, and assumed all sorts of preposterous airs and graces, to the secret amusement of his companions. But he had great success among the ladies, who all flattered him and declared he was charming, until they had turned his head completely; and it was his firm belief that he was irresistibly fascinating.

The tyrant was the most good-natured, easy-going creature imaginable; but, strangely enough, gifted by nature with all the external signs of ferocity. With his tall, burly frame, very dark skin, immensely thick, shaggy eyebrows, black as jet, crinkly, bushy hair of the same hue, and long beard, that grew far up on his cheeks, he was a very formidable, fierce-looking fellow; and when he spoke, his loud, deep voice made everything ring again. He affected great dignity, and filled his role to perfection.

Matamore was as different as possible, painfully thin—scarcely more than mere skin and bones—a living skeleton with a large hooked nose, set in a long, narrow face, a huge mustache turned up at the ends, and flashing, black eyes. His excessively tall, lank figure was so emaciated that it was like a caricature of a man. The swaggering air suitable to his part had become habitual with him, and he walked always with immense strides, head well thrown back, and hand on the pommel of the huge sword he was never seen without.

As to Scapin, he looked more like a fox than anything else, and had a most villainous countenance; yet he was a good enough fellow in reality.

The painter has a great advantage over the writer, in that he can so present the group on his canvas that one glance suffices to take in the whole picture, with the lights and shadows, attitudes, costumes, and details of every kind, which are sadly wanting in our description—too long, though so imperfect—of the party gathered thus unexpectedly round our young baron's table. The beginning of the repast was very silent, until the most urgent demands of hunger had been satisfied. Poor de Sigognac, who had never perhaps at any one time had as much to eat as he wanted since he was weaned, attacked the tempting viands with an appetite and ardour quite new to him; and that too despite his great desire to appear interesting and romantic in the eyes of the beautiful young women between whom he was seated. The pedant, very much amused at the boyish eagerness and enjoyment of his youthful host, quietly heaped choice bits upon his plate, and watched their rapid disappearance with beaming satisfaction. Beelzebub had at last plucked up courage and crept softly under the table to his master, making his presence known by a quick tapping with his fore-paws upon the baron's knees; his claims were at once recognised, and he feasted to his heart's content on the savoury morsels quietly thrown down to him. Poor old Miraut, who had followed Pierre into the room, was not neglected either, and had his full share of the good things that found their way to his master's plate.

By this time there was a good deal of laughing and talking round the festive board. The baron, though very timid, and much embarrassed, had ventured to enter into conversation with his fair neighbours. The pedant and the tyrant were loudly discussing the respective merits of tragedy and comedy. Leander, like Narcissus of old, was complacently admiring his own charms as reflected in a little pocket mirror he always had about him. Strange to say he was not a suitor of either Serafina's or Isabelle's; fortunately for them he aimed higher, and was always hoping that some grand lady, who saw him on the stage, would fall violently in love with him, and shower all sorts of favours upon him. He was in the habit of boasting that he had had many delightful adventures of the kind, which Scapin persistently denied, declaring that to his certain knowledge they had never taken place, save in the aspiring lover's own vivid imagination. The exasperating valet, malicious as a monkey, took the greatest delight in tormenting poor Leander, and never lost an opportunity; so now, seeing him absorbed in self-admiration, he immediately attacked him, and soon had made him furious. The quarrel grew loud and violent, and Leander was heard declaring that he could produce a large chest crammed full of love letters, written to him by various high and titled ladies; whereupon everybody laughed uproariously, while Serafina said to de Sigognac that she for one did not admire their taste, and Isabelle silently looked her disgust. The baron meantime was more and more charmed with this sweet, dainty young girl, and though he was too shy to address any high-flown compliments to her, according to the fashion of the day, his eyes spoke eloquently for him. She was not at all displeased at his ardent glances, and smiled radiantly and encouragingly upon him, thereby unconsciously making poor Matamore, who was secretly enamoured of her, desperately unhappy, though he well knew that his passion was an utterly hopeless one. A more skilful and audacious lover would have pushed his advantage, but our poor young hero had not learned courtly manners nor assurance in his isolated château, and, though he lacked neither wit nor learning, it must be confessed that at this moment he did appear lamentably

stupid.

All the bottles having been scrupulously emptied, the pedant turned the last one of the half dozen upside down, so that every drop might run out; which significant action was noted and understood by Matamore, who lost no time in bringing in a fresh supply from the chariot. The baron began to feel the wine a little in his head, being entirely unaccustomed to it, yet he could not resist drinking once again to the health of the ladies. The pedant and the tyrant drank like old topers, who can absorb any amount of liquor—be it wine, or something stronger—without becoming actually intoxicated. Matamore was very abstemious, both in eating and drinking, and could have lived like the impoverished Spanish hidalgo, who dines on three olives and sups on an air upon his mandoline. There was a reason for his extreme frugality; he feared that if he ate and drank like other people he might lose his phenomenal thinness, which was of inestimable value to him in a professional point of view. If he should be so unfortunate as to gain flesh, his attractions would diminish in an inverse ratio, so he starved himself almost to death, and was constantly seen anxiously examining the buckle of his belt, to make sure that he had not increased in girth since his last meal. Voluntary Tantalus, he scarcely allowed himself enough to keep life in his attenuated frame, and if he had but fasted as carefully from motives of piety he would have been a full-fledged saint.

The portly duenna disposed of solids and fluids perseveringly, and in formidable quantities, seeming to have an unlimited capacity; but Isabelle and Serafina had finished their supper long ago, and were yawning wearily behind their pretty, outspread hands, having no fans within reach, to conceal these pronounced symptoms of sleepiness.

The baron, becoming aware of this state of things, said to them, “Mesdemoiselles, I perceive that you are very weary, and I wish with all my heart that I could offer you each a luxurious bed-chamber; but my house, like my family, has fallen into decay,

and I can only give to you and Madame my own room. Fortunately the bed is very large, and you must make yourselves as comfortable as you can—for a single night you will not mind. As to the gentlemen, I must ask them to remain here with me, and try to sleep in the arm-chairs before the fire. I pray you, ladies, do not allow yourselves to be startled by the waving of the tapestry-which is only due to the strong draughts about the room on a stormy night like this—the moaning of the wind in the chimney, or the wild scurrying and squeaking of the mice behind the wainscot. I can guarantee that no ghosts will disturb you here, though this place does look dreary and dismal enough to be haunted."

"I am not a bit of a coward," answered Serafina laughingly, "and will do my best to reassure this timid little Isabelle. As to our duenna,—she is something of a sorceress herself, and if the devil in person should make his appearance he would meet his match in her."

The baron then took a light in his hand and showed the three ladies the way into the bed-chamber, which certainly did strike them rather unpleasantly at first sight, and looked very eerie in the dim, flickering light of the one small lamp.

"What a capital scene it would make for the fifth act of a tragedy," said Serafina, as she looked curiously about her, while poor little Isabelle shivered with cold and terror. They all crept into bed without undressing, Isabelle begging to lie between Serafina and Mme. Léonarde, for she felt nervous and frightened. The other two fell asleep at once, but the timid young girl lay long awake, gazing with wide-open, straining eyes at the door that led into the shut-up apartments beyond, as if she dreaded its opening to admit some unknown horror. But it remained fast shut, and though all sorts of mysterious noises made her poor little heart flutter painfully, her eyelids closed at last, and she forgot her weariness and her fears in profound slumber.

In the other room the pedant slept soundly, with his head on the table, and the tyrant

opposite to him snored like a giant. Matamore had rolled himself up in a cloak and made himself as comfortable as possible under the circumstances in a large arm-chair, with his long, thin legs extended at full length, and his feet on the fender. Leander slept sitting bolt upright, so as not to disarrange his carefully brushed hair, and de Sigognac, who had taken possession of a vacant arm-chair, was too much agitated and excited by the events of the evening to be able to close his eyes. The coming of two beautiful, young women thus suddenly into his life—which had been hitherto so isolated, sad and dreary, entirely devoid of all the usual pursuits and pleasures of youth—could not fail to rouse him from his habitual apathy, and set his pulses beating after a new fashion. Incredible as it may seem yet it was quite true that our young hero had never had a single love affair. He was too proud, as we have already said, to take his rightful place among his equals, without any of the appurtenances suitable to his rank, and also too proud to associate familiarly with the surrounding peasantry, who accorded him as much respect in his poverty as they had ever shown to his ancestors in their prosperity. He had no near relatives to come to his assistance, and so lived on, neglected and forgotten, in his crumbling château, with nothing to look forward to or hope for. In the course of his solitary wanderings he had several times chanced to encounter the young and beautiful Yolande de Foix, following the hounds on her snow-white palfrey, in company with her father and a number of the young noblemen of the neighbourhood. This dazzling vision of beauty often haunted his dreams, but what possible relations could there ever be hoped for between the rich, courted heiress, whose suitors were legion, and his own poverty-stricken self? Far from seeking to attract her attention, he always got out of her sight as quickly as possible, lest his ill-fitting, shabby garments and miserable old pony should excite a laugh at his expense; for he was very sensitive, this poor young nobleman, and could not have borne the least approach to ridicule from the fair object of his secret and passionate admiration. He had tried his utmost to stifle the ardent emotions that filled his heart whenever his thoughts strayed to the

beautiful Yolande, realizing how far above his reach she was, and he believed that he had succeeded; though there were times even yet when it all rushed back upon him with overwhelming force, like a huge tidal wave that sweeps everything before it.

The night passed quietly at the château, without other incident than the fright of poor Isabelle, when Beelzebub, who had climbed up on the bed, as was his frequent custom, established himself comfortably upon her bosom; finding it a deliciously soft, warm resting-place, and obstinately resisting her frantic efforts to drive him away.

As to de Sigognac, he did not once close his eyes. A vague project was gradually shaping itself in his mind, keeping him wakeful and perplexed. The advent of these strolling comedians appeared to him like a stroke of fate, an ambassador of fortune, to invite him to go out into the great world, away from this old feudal ruin, where his youth was passing in misery and inaction—to quit this dreary shade, and emerge into the light and life of the outer world.

At last the gray light of the dawn came creeping in through the lattice windows, speedily followed by the first bright rays from the rising sun. The storm was over, and the glorious god of day rose triumphant in a perfectly clear sky. It was a strange group that he peeped in upon, where the old family portraits seemed looking down with haughty contempt upon the slumbering invaders of their dignified solitude. The soubrette was the first to awake, starting up as a warm sunbeam shone caressingly full upon her face. She sprang to her feet, shook out her skirts, as a bird does its plumage, passed the palms of her hands lightly over her glossy bands of jet-black hair, and then seeing that the baron was quietly observing her, with eyes that showed no trace of drowsiness, she smiled radiantly upon him as she made a low and most graceful curtsey.

“I am very sorry,” said de Sigognac, as he rose to acknowledge her salute, “that the

ruinous condition of this château, which verily seems better fitted to receive phantoms than real living guests, would not permit me to offer you more comfortable accommodations. If I had been able to follow my inclinations, I should have lodged you in a luxurious chamber, where you could have reposed between fine linen sheets, under silken curtains, instead of resting uneasily in that worm-eaten old chair."

"Do not be sorry about anything, my lord, I pray you," answered the soubrette with another brilliant smile; "but for your kindness we should have been in far worse plight; forced to pass the night in the poor old chariot, stuck fast in the mud; exposed to the cutting wind and pelting rain. We should assuredly have found ourselves in wretched case this morning. Besides, this château which you speak of so disparagingly is magnificence itself in comparison with the miserable barns, open to the weather, in which we have sometimes been forced to spend the night, trying to sleep as best we might on bundles of straw, and making light of our misery to keep our courage up."

While the baron and the actress were exchanging civilities the pedant's chair, unable to support his weight any longer, suddenly gave way under him, and he fell to the floor with a tremendous crash, which startled the whole company. In his fall he had mechanically seized hold of the table-cloth, and so brought nearly all the things upon it clattering down with him. He lay sprawling like a huge turtle in the midst of them until the tyrant, after rubbing his eyes and stretching his burly limbs, came to the rescue, and held out a helping hand, by aid of which the old actor managed with some difficulty to scramble to his feet.

"Such an accident as that could never happen to Matamore," said Hérode, with his resounding laugh; "he might fall into a spider's web without breaking through it."

"That's true," retorted the shadow of a man, in his turn stretching his long attenuated limbs and yawning tremendously, "but then, you know, not everybody has the

advantage of being a second Polyphemus, a mountain of flesh and bones, like you, or a big wine-barrel, like our friend Blazius there."

All this commotion had aroused Isabelle, Serafina and the duenna, who presently made their appearance. The two younger women, though a little pale and weary, yet looked very charming in the bright morning light. In de Sigognac's eyes they appeared radiant, in spite of the shabbiness of their finery, which was far more apparent now than on the preceding evening. But what signify faded ribbons and dingy gowns when the wearers are fresh, young and beautiful? Besides, the baron's eyes were so accustomed to dinginess that they were not capable of detecting such slight defects in the toilets of his fair guests, and he gazed with delight upon these bewitching creatures, enraptured with their grace and beauty. As to the duenna, she was both old and ugly, and had long ago accepted the inevitable with commendable resignation.

As the ladies entered by one door, Pierre came in by the other, bringing more wood for the fire, and then proceeding to make the disordered room as tidy as he could. All the company now gathered round the cheerful blaze that was roaring up the chimney and sending out a warm glow that was an irresistible attraction in the chill of the early morning. Isabelle knelt down and stretched out the rosy palms of her pretty little hands as near to the flames as she dared, while Serafina stood behind and laid her hands caressingly on her shoulders, like an elder sister taking tender care of a younger one. Matamore stood on one leg like a huge heron, leaning against the corner of the carved chimney-piece, and seemed inclined to fall asleep again, while the pedant was vainly searching for a swallow of wine among the empty bottles.

The baron meantime had held a hurried private consultation with Pierre as to the possibility of procuring a few eggs, or a fowl or two, at the nearest hamlet, so that he might give the travellers something to eat before their departure, and he bade the old servant be quick about it, for the chariot was to make an early start, as they had a

long day's journey before them.

"I cannot let you go away fasting, though you will have rather a scanty breakfast I fear," he said to his guests, "but it is better to have a poor one than none at all; and there is not an inn within six leagues of this where you could be sure of getting anything to eat. I will not make further apologies, for the condition of everything in this house shows you plainly enough that I am not rich; but as my poverty is mainly owing to the great expenditures made by my honoured ancestors in many wars for the defence of king and country, I do not need to be ashamed of it."

"No indeed, my lord," answered Hérode in his deep, bass voice, "and many there be in these degenerate days who hold their heads very high because of their riches, who would not like to have to confess how they came in possession of them."

"What astonishes me," interrupted Blazius, "is that such an accomplished young gentleman as your lordship seems to be should be willing to remain here in this isolated spot, where Fortune cannot reach you even if she would. You ought to go to Paris, the great capital of the world, the rendezvous of brave and learned men, the El Dorado, the promised land, the Paradise of all true Frenchmen. There you would be sure to make your way, either in attaching yourself to the household of some great nobleman, a friend of your family, or in performing some brilliant deed of valour, the opportunity for which will not be long to find."

These words, although rather high-flown, were not devoid of sense, and de Sigognac could not help secretly admitting that there was some truth in them. He had often, during his long rambles over the desolate Landes, thought wishfully of undertaking what the pedant had just proposed; but he had not money enough for the journey even, and he did not know where to look for more. Though brave and high-spirited, he was very sensitive, and feared a smile of derision more than a sword-thrust. He was not familiar with the prevailing fashions in dress, but he felt that his antiquated costume was ridiculous as well as shabby, and sure to be laughed at anywhere but

among his own simple peasantry. Like most of those who are disheartened and crushed by extreme poverty, he only looked at the dark side of things, and made no allowance for any possible advantages. Perhaps he might have been delicately as well as generously assisted by some of his father's old friends if he would only have let them know of his situation, but his pride held him back, and he would have died of starvation rather than ask for aid in any form.

"I used to think sometimes of going to Paris," he answered slowly, after some hesitation, "but I have no friends or even acquaintances there; and the descendants of those who perhaps knew my ancestors when they were rich and powerful, and in favour at court, could scarcely be expected to welcome a poverty-stricken Baron de Sigognac, who came swooping down from his ruined tower to try and snatch a share of any prey that chanced to lie within reach of his talons. And besides—I do not know why I should be ashamed to acknowledge it—I have not any of the appurtenances suitable to my rank, and could not present myself upon a footing worthy of my name. I doubt if I have even money enough for the expenses of the journey alone, and that in the humblest fashion."

"But it is not necessary," Blazius hastened to reply, "that you should make a state entry into the capital, like a Roman emperor, in a gilded chariot drawn by four white horses abreast. If our humble equipage does not appear too unworthy to your lordship, come with us to Paris; we are on our way there now. Many a man shines there to-day in brave apparel, and enjoys high favour at court, who travelled thither on foot, carrying his little bundle over his shoulder, swung on the point of his rapier, and his shoes in his hand, for fear of wearing them out on the way."

A slight flush, partly of shame, partly of pleasure, rose to de Sigognac's cheek at this speech. If on the one side his pride revolted at the idea of being under an obligation to such a person as the pedant, on the other he was touched and gratified by this kind proposition so frankly made, and which, moreover, accorded so well with his own

secret desires. He feared also that if he refused the actor's kindly-meant offer he would wound his feelings, and perhaps miss an opportunity that would never be afforded to him again. It is true that the idea of a descendant of the noble old house of Sigognac travelling in the chariot of a band of strolling players, and making common cause with them, was rather shocking at first sight, but surely it would be better than to go on any longer leading his miserable, hopeless life in this dismal, deserted place. He wavered between those two decisive little monosyllables, yes and no, and could by no means reach a satisfactory conclusion, when Isabelle, who had been watching the colloquy with breathless interest, advanced smilingly to where he was standing somewhat apart with Blazius, and addressed the following words to him, which speedily put an end to all his uncertainty:

"Our poet, having fallen heir to a fortune, has lately left us, and his lordship would perhaps be good enough to take his place. I found accidentally, in opening a volume of Ronsard's poems that lay upon the table in his room, a piece of paper with a sonnet written upon it, which must be of his composition, and proves him not unaccustomed to writing in verse. He could rearrange our parts for us, make the necessary alterations and additions in the new plays we undertake, and even perhaps write a piece for us now and then. I have now a very pretty little Italian comedy by me, which, with some slight modifications, would suit us nicely, and has a really charming part for me."

With her last words, accompanied though they were with a smile, she gave the baron such a sweet, wistful look that he could no longer resist; but the appearance of Pierre at this moment with a large omelette created a diversion, and interrupted this interesting conversation. They all immediately gathered round the table, and attacked the really good breakfast, which the old servant had somehow managed to put before them, with great zest. As to de Sigognac, he kept them company merely out of politeness, and trifled with what was on his plate while the others were eating, having partaken too heartily of the supper the night before to be hungry now, and,

besides, being so much preoccupied with weightier matters that he was not able to pay much attention to this.

After the meat was finished, and while the chariot was being made ready for a start, Isabelle and Serafina expressed a desire to go into the garden, which they looked down upon from the court.

“I am afraid,” said de Sigognac, as he aided them to descend the unsteady, slippery stone steps, “that the briers will make sad work with your dresses, for thorns abound in my neglected garden, though roses do not.”

The young baron said this in the sad, ironical tone he usually adopted when alluding to his poverty; but a moment after they suddenly came upon two exquisite little wild roses, blooming directly in their path. With an exclamation of surprise de Sigognac gathered them, and as he offered one to each lady, said, with a smile, “I did not know there was anything of this sort here, having never found aught but rank weeds and brambles before; it is your gracious presence that has brought forth these two blossoms in the midst of ruin and desolation.”

Isabelle put her little rose carefully in the bosom of her dress, giving him her thanks mutely by an eloquent glance, which spoke more perhaps than she knew, and brought a flush of pleasure to his cheeks. They walked on to the statue in its rocky niche at the end of the garden, de Sigognac carefully bending back the branches that obstructed the way. The young girl looked round with a sort of tender interest at this overgrown, neglected spot, so thoroughly in keeping with the ruined château that frowned down upon them, and thought pityingly of the long, dreary hours that the poor baron must have spent here in solitude and despair. Serafina’s face only expressed a cold disdain, but slightly masked by politeness. To her mind the ruinous condition of things was anything but interesting, and though she dearly loved a title she had still greater respect for wealth and magnificence.

“My domain ends here,” said the baron, as they reached the grotto of the statue,

“though formerly all the surrounding country, as far as the eye can reach from the top of that high tower yonder, belonged to my ancestors. But barely enough remains now to afford me a shelter until the day comes when the last of the de Sigognacs shall be laid to rest amid his forefathers in the family vault, thenceforward their sole possession.”

“Do you know you are very much out of spirits this morning?” said Isabelle in reply, touched by the expression of this sad thought that had occurred to her also, and assuming a bright, playful air, in the hope that it might help to chase away the heavy shadow that lay upon her young host’s brow. “Fortune is blind, they say, but nevertheless she does sometimes shower her good gifts upon the worthy and the brave; the only thing is that they must put themselves in her way. Come, decide to go with us, and perhaps in a few years the Château de Sigognac, restored to its ancient splendour, may loom up as proudly as of old; think of that, my lord, and take courage to quit it for a time. And besides,” she added in a lower tone that only de Sigognac could hear, “I cannot bear to go away and leave you here alone in this dreary place.”

The soft light that shone in Isabelle’s beautiful eyes as she murmured these persuasive words was irresistible to the man who already loved her madly; and the idea of following his divinity in a humble disguise, as many a noble knight had done of old, reconciled him to what would otherwise have seemed too incongruous and humiliating. It could not be considered derogatory to any gentleman to accompany his lady-love, be she what she might, actress or princess, and to attach himself, for love of her bright eyes, to even a band of strolling players. The mischievous little boy of the bow had compelled even gods and heroes to submit to all sorts of odd tests and means. Jupiter himself took the form of a bull to carry off Europa, and swam across the sea with her upon his back to the island of Crete. Hercules, dressed as a woman, sat spinning meekly at Omphale’s feet. Even Aristotle went upon all fours that his mistress might ride on his back. What wonder then that our youthful

baron thought that nothing could be too difficult or repulsive in the service of the lovely being at his side! So he decided at once not to let her leave him behind, and begging the comedians to wait a few moments while he made his hurried preparations, drew Pierre aside and told him in few words of his new project. The faithful old servant, although nearly heart-broken at the thought of parting with his beloved master, fully realized how greatly it would be to his advantage to quit the dreary life that was blighting his youth, and go out into the world; and while he felt keenly the incongruity of such fellow travellers for a de Sigognac, yet wisely thought that it was better for him to go thus than not at all. He quickly filled an old valise with the few articles of clothing that formed the baron's scanty wardrobe, and put into a leathern purse the little money he still possessed; secretly adding thereto his own small hoard, which he could safely do without fear of detection, as he had the care of the family finances, as well as everything else about the establishment. The old white pony was brought out and saddled, for de Sigognac did not wish to get into the chariot until they had gone some distance from home, not caring to make his departure public. He would seem thus to be only accompanying his guests a little way upon their journey, and Pierre was to follow on foot to lead the horse back home.

The oxen, great slow-moving, majestic creatures, were already harnessed to the heavy chariot, while their driver, a tall, sturdy peasant lad, standing in front of them leaning upon his goad, had unconsciously assumed an attitude so graceful that he closely resembled the sculptured figures in ancient Greek bas-reliefs. Isabelle and Serafina had seated themselves in the front of the chariot, so that they could enjoy the fresh, cool air, and see the country as they passed along; while the others bestowed themselves inside, where they might indulge in a morning nap. At last all were ready; the driver gave the word of command, and the oxen stepped slowly forward, setting in motion the great unwieldy, lumbering vehicle, which creaked and groaned in lamentable fashion, making the vaulted portico ring again as it passed

through it and out of the château.

In the midst of all this unwonted commotion, Beelzebub and Miraut moved restlessly about the court, evidently very much perplexed as to what could be the meaning of it. The old dog ran back and forth from his master, who always had a caress for him, to Pierre, looking up into their faces with questioning, anxious eyes, and Beelzebub finally went and held a consultation with his good friend, the old white pony, now standing with saddle and bridle on, quietly awaiting his master's pleasure. He bent down his head so that his lips almost touched Beelzebub, and really appeared to be whispering something to him; which the cat in his turn imparted to Miraut, in that mysterious language of animals which Democritus, claimed that he understood, but which we are not able to translate. Whatever it might have been that Bayard, the old pony, communicated to Beelzebub, one thing is certain, that when at last the baron vaulted into his saddle and sallied forth from his ancient castle, he was accompanied by both cat and dog. Now, though it was no uncommon thing for Miraut to follow him abroad, Beelzebub had never been known to attempt such a feat before.

As he rode slowly out through the grand old portico de Sigognac felt his heart heavy within him, and when, after going a few paces from the château, he turned round for one last look at its crumbling walls, he felt an acute grief at bidding them farewell which was an astonishment to himself. As his eyes sought and dwelt upon the roof of the little chapel where his father and mother lay sleeping side by side, he almost reproached himself for wishing to go and leave them, and it required a mighty effort to turn away and ride after the chariot, which was some distance in advance of him. He had soon overtaken and passed it, when a gentle gust of wind brought to him the penetrating, faintly aromatic scent of his native heather, still wet from last night's rain, and also the silvery sound of a distant convent bell that was associated with his earliest recollections. They both seemed to be reproaching him for his desertion of his home, and he involuntarily checked the old pony, and made as if he would turn

back. Miraut and Beelzebub, seeming to understand the movement, looked up at him eagerly, but as he was in the very act of turning the horse's head he met Isabelle's soft eyes fixed on him with such an entreating, wistful look that he flushed and trembled under it, and entirely forgetting his ancient château, the perfume of the heather, and the quick strokes of the distant bell, that still continued ringing, he put spurs to his horse and dashed on in advance again. The struggle was over—Isabelle had conquered.

When the highway was reached, de Sigognac again fell behind the chariot—which moved more quickly over the smooth, hard road—so that Pierre might be able to catch up to him, and rode slowly forward, lost in thought; he roused himself, however, in time to take one last look at the towers of Sigognac, which were still visible over the tops of the pine trees. Bayard came to a full stop as he gazed, and Miraut took advantage of the pause to endeavour to climb up and lick his master's face once more; but he was so old and stiff that de Sigognac had to lift him up in front of him; holding him there he tenderly caressed the faithful companion of many sad, lonely years, even bending down and kissing him between the eyes. Meantime the more agile Beelzebub had scrambled up on the other side, springing from the ground to the baron's foot, and then climbing up by his leg; he purred loudly as his master affectionately stroked his head, looking up in his face as if he understood perfectly that this was a leave-taking. We trust that the kind reader will not laugh at our poor young hero, when we say that he was so deeply touched by these evidences of affection from his humble followers that two great tears rolled down his pale cheeks and fell upon the heads of his dumb favourites, before he put them gently from him and resumed his journey.

Miraut and Beelzebub stood where he had put them down, looking after their beloved master until a turn in the road hid him from their sight, and then quietly returned to the château together. The rain of the previous night had left no traces in the sandy expanse of the Landes, save that it had freshened up the heather with its

tiny purple bells, and the furze bushes with their bright yellow blossoms. The very pine trees themselves looked less dark and mournful than usual, and their penetrating, resinous odour filled the fresh morning air. Here and there a little column of smoke rising from amid a grove of chestnut trees betrayed the homestead of some farmer, and scattered over the gently rolling plain, that extended as far as the eye could reach, great flocks of sheep could be discerned, carefully guarded by shepherd and dog; the former mounted on stilts, and looking very odd to those unaccustomed to the shepherds of the Landes. On the southern horizon the snow-clad tops of the more lofty peaks of the Pyrenees rose boldly into the clear sky, with light wreaths of mist still clinging round them here and there.

Oxen travel slowly, especially over roads where at times the wheels sink deep into the sand, and the sun was high above the horizon before they had gone two leagues on their way. The baron, loath to fatigue his old servant and poor Bayard, determined to bid adieu to them without further delay; so he sprang lightly to the ground, put the bridle into Pierre's trembling hand, and affectionately stroked the old pony's neck, as he never failed to do when he dismounted. It was a painful moment. The faithful servant had taken care of his young master from his infancy, and he turned very pale as he said in faltering tones, "God bless and keep your lordship. How I wish that I could go with you."

"And so do I, my good Pierre, but that is impossible. You must stay and take care of the château for me; I could not bear to think of it entirely abandoned, or in any other hands than yours, my faithful friend! And besides, what would become of Bayard and Miraut and Beelzebub, if you too deserted them?"

"You are right, master," answered Pierre, his eyes filling with tears as he bade him farewell before he turned and led Bayard slowly back by the road they had come. The old pony whinnied loudly as he left his master, and long after he was out of sight could be heard at short intervals calling out his adieux.

The poor young baron, left quite alone, stood for a moment with downcast eyes, feeling very desolate and sad; then roused himself with an effort, and hastened after the chariot. As he walked along beside it with a sorrowful, preoccupied air, Isabelle complained of being tired of her somewhat cramped position, and said that she would like to get down and walk a little way for a change; her real motive being a kind wish to endeavour to cheer up poor de Sigognac and make him forget his sad thoughts. The shadow that had overspread his countenance passed away entirely as he assisted Isabelle to alight, and then offering his arm led her on in advance of the lumbering chariot. They had walked some distance, and she was just reciting some verses, from one of her parts, which she wished to have altered a little, when the sound of a horn close at hand startled them, and from a by-path emerged a gay party returning from the chase. The beautiful Yolande de Foix came first, radiant as Diana, with a brilliant colour in her cheeks and eyes that shone like stars. Several long rents in the velvet skirt of her riding habit showed that she had been following the hounds through the thickets of furze that abound in the Landes, yet she did not look in the least fatigued, and as she came forward made her spirited horse fret and prance under quick, light strokes of her riding-whip—in whose handle shone a magnificent amethyst set in massive gold, and engraved with the de Foix arms. Three or four young noblemen, splendidly dressed and mounted, were with her, and as she swept proudly past our hero and his fair companion-upon whom she cast a glance of haughty disdain—she said in clear ringing tones, “Do look at the Baron de Sigognac, dancing attendance upon a Bohémienne.” And the little company passed on with a shout of laughter.

The poor baron was furious, and instinctively grasped the handle of his sword with a quick, angry movement; but as quickly released it—for he was on foot and those who had insulted him were on horseback, so that he could not hope to overtake them; and besides, he could not challenge a lady. But the angry flush soon faded from his cheek, and the remembrance of his displeasure from his mind, under the

gentle influence of Isabelle, who put forth all her powers of fascination to make her companion forget the affront he had received because of her.

The day passed without any other incident worthy of being recorded, and our travellers arrived in good season at the inn where they were to sup and sleep.

CHAPTER III. THE BLUE SUN INN

It was in front of the largest house in a wretched little hamlet that the weary oxen drawing the chariot of Thespis stopped of their own accord. The wooden sign that creaked distractingly as it swung to and fro at every breath of wind bore a large, blue sun, darting its rays, after the most approved fashion, to the utmost dimensions of the board on which it was painted. Rather an original idea, one would say, to have a blue orb of day instead of a golden one—such as adorned so many other inns on the great post-road—but originality had had nothing whatever to do with it. The wandering painter who produced this remarkable work of art happened to have no vestige of any colour but blue left upon his palette, and he discoursed so eloquently of the superiority of this tint to all others that he succeeded in persuading the worthy innkeeper to have an azure sun depicted on his swinging sign. And not this one alone had yielded to his specious arguments, for he had painted blue lions, blue cocks, blue horses, on various signs in the country round, in a manner that would have delighted the Chinese—who esteem an artist in proportion to the unnaturalness of his designs and colouring.

The few scrawny, unwholesome-looking children feebly playing in the muddy, filthy, little street, and the prematurely old, ghastly women standing at the open doors of the miserable thatched huts of which the hamlet was composed, were but too evidently the wretched victims of a severe type of malarial fever that prevails in the Landes. They were truly piteous objects, and our travellers were glad to take refuge in the inn—though it was anything but inviting—and so get out of sight of

them.

The landlord, a villainous looking fellow, with an ugly crimson scar across his forehead, who rejoiced in the extraordinary name of Chirriguirri, received them with many low obeisances, and led the way into his house, talking volubly of the excellent accommodations to be found therein.

The Baron de Sigognac hesitated ere he crossed the threshold, though the comedians had all drawn back respectfully to allow him to precede them. His pride revolted at going into such a place in such company, but one glance from Isabelle put everything else out of his head, and he entered the dirty little inn at her side with an air of joyful alacrity. In the happy kingdom of France the fortunate man who escorted a pretty woman, no matter where, needed not to fear ridicule or contumely, and was sure to be envied.

The large low room into which Maître Chirriguirri ushered the party, with much ceremony and many bows, was scarcely so magnificent as he had given them reason to expect, but our strolling players had long ago learned to take whatever came in their way without grumbling, and they seated themselves quietly on the rude wooden settles ranged round a rough, stone platform in the centre of the apartment, upon which a few sticks of wood were blazing the smoke escaping through an opening in the roof above. From an iron bar which crossed this opening a strong chain was suspended, and fastened to it was the crane, so that it hung at the proper height over the fire—for this was the kitchen as well as the reception room. The low ceiling was blackened with the smoke that filled the upper part of the room and escaped slowly through the hole over the fire, unless a puff of wind drove it back again. A row of bright copper casseroles hanging against the wall—like the burnished shields along the sides of the ancient triremes, if this comparison be not too noble for such a lowly subject—gleamed vaguely in the flashing of the red fire-light, and a large, half-empty wine-skin lying on the floor in one corner looked

like a beheaded body carelessly flung down there. Certainly not a cheerful looking place, but, the fire being newly replenished burned brightly, and our weary travellers were glad to bask in its genial warmth.

At the end of one of the wooden benches a little girl was sitting, apparently sound asleep. She was a poor, thin, little creature, with a mass of long, tangled, black hair, which hung down over her face and almost concealed it, as she sat with her head drooping forward on her breast. Her scanty clothing was tattered and dirty, her feet and poor, thin, little legs brown and bare, and covered with scratches—some still bleeding which bore witness to much running through the thorny furze thickets.

Isabelle, who chanced to sit down near her, cast many pitying glances upon this forlorn little figure, but took care not to disturb the quiet sleep she seemed to be enjoying in her uncomfortable resting-place. After a little, when she had turned to speak to Serafina, who sat beside her, the child woke with a start, and pushing back the mass of dishevelled hair revealed a sad little face, so thin that the cheek bones were painfully prominent, and pale to ghastliness. A pair of magnificent, dark brown eyes, with heavy sweeping lashes, looked preternaturally large in her woe-begone little countenance, and at this moment were filled with wondering admiration, mingled with fierce covetousness, as she stared at Serafina's mock jewels—and more especially at Isabelle's row of pearl beads. She seemed fairly dazzled by these latter, and gazed at them fixedly in a sort of ecstasy—having evidently never seen anything like them before, and probably thinking they must be of immense value. Occasionally her eyes wandered to the dresses of the two ladies, and at last, unable to restrain her ardent curiosity any longer, she put out her little brown hand and softly felt of Isabelle's gown, apparently finding exquisite delight in the mere contact of her finger-tips with the smooth, glossy surface of the silk. Though her touch was so light Isabelle immediately turned towards the child and smiled upon her encouragingly, but the poor little vagabond, finding herself detected, in an instant had assumed a stupid, almost idiotic look—with an instinctive amount of

histrionic art that would have done honour to a finished actress. Then dropping her eyelids and leaning her shoulders against the hard back of the wooden settle she seemed to fall into a deep sleep, with her head bent down upon her breast in the old attitude.

Meanwhile Maître Chirriguirri had been talking long and loudly about the choice delicacies he could have set before his guests if they had only come a day or two earlier, and enumerating all sorts of fine dishes—which doubtless had existed only in his own very vivid imagination—though he told a high-sounding story about the noblemen and grandees who had supped at his house and devoured all these dainties only yesterday. When at length the flow of his eloquence was checked by a display of ferocity on the part of the tyrant, and he was finally brought to the point, he acknowledged that he could only give them some of the soup called garbure—with which we have already made acquaintance at the Château de Sigognac, some salt codfish, and a dish of bacon; with plenty of wine, which according to his account was fit for the gods. Our weary travellers were so hungry by this time that they were glad of even this frugal fare, and when Mionnette, a gaunt, morose-looking creature, the only servant that the inn could boast, announced that their supper was ready in an adjoining room, they did not wait to be summoned a second time.

They were still at table when a great barking of dogs was heard without, together with the noise of horses' feet, and in a moment three loud, impatient knocks upon the outer door resounded through the house. Mionnette rushed to open it, whereupon a gentleman entered, followed by a number of dogs, who nearly knocked the tall maid-servant over in their eagerness to get in, and rushed into the dining-room where our friends were assembled, barking, jumping over each other, and licking off the plates that had been used and removed to a low side table, before their master could stop them. A few sharp cuts with the whip he held in his hand distributed promiscuously among them, without distinction between the innocent and the guilty ones, quieted this uproar as if by magic, and the aggressive hounds, taking refuge

under the benches ranged along the walls, curled themselves round on the floor and went comfortably to sleep, or lay panting, with their red tongues hanging out of their mouths and heads reposing on their fore-paws—not daring to stir.

The obstreperous dogs thus disposed of, the cavalier advanced into the room, with the calm assurance of a man who feels perfectly at his ease; his spurs ringing against the stone floor at every step. The landlord followed him obsequiously, cap in hand, cringing and bowing in most humble fashion—having entirely laid aside his boasting air and evidently feeling very ill at ease—this being a personage of whom he stood in awe. As the gentleman approached the table he politely saluted the company, before turning to give his orders to Maître Chirriguirri, who stood silently awaiting them.

The newcomer was a handsome man of about thirty, with curly light hair, and a fair complexion, somewhat reddened by exposure to the sun. His eyes were blue, and rather prominent, his nose slightly retroussi; his small blond mustache was carefully turned up at the ends, and scarcely shaded a well-formed but sensual mouth, below which was a small, pointed beard—called a royal in those days, an imperial in these. As he took off his broad felt hat, richly ornamented with long sweeping plumes, and threw it carelessly down on one of the benches, it was seen that his smooth, broad forehead was snowy white, and the contrast with his sunburnt cheeks was not by any means displeasing. Indeed it was a very handsome, attractive face, in which an expression of frank gaiety and good humour tempered the air of pride that pervaded it.

The dress of this gay cavalier was extremely rich and elegant; almost too much so for the country. But when we say that the marquis—for such was his title—had been following the hounds in company with the beautiful Yolande de Foix, we feel that his costume, of blue velvet elaborately decorated with silver braid, is fully accounted for. He was one of the gallants that shone at court in Paris—where he was in the

habit of spending a large portion of every year—and he prided himself on being one of the best dressed noblemen in France.

His order to the obsequious landlord was in few words. “I want some broth for my dogs, some oats for my horses, a piece of bread and a slice of ham for myself, and something or other for my grooms”—and then he advanced smilingly to the table and sat down in a vacant place beside the pretty soubrette, who, charmed with such a gay, handsome seignior, had been pleased to bestow a languishing glance and a brilliant smile upon him.

Maître Chirriguirri hastened to fetch what he had demanded, while the soubrette, with the grace of a Hebe, filled his glass to the brim with wine; which he accepted with a smile, and drank off at a single draught. For a few minutes he was fully occupied in satisfying his hunger—which was veritably that of a hunter—and then looking about him at the party assembled round the table, remarked the Baron de Sigognac, with whom he had a slight acquaintance, seated beside the fair Isabelle—in whose company indeed he had seen him already once before that day. The two young people were talking together in low tones, and quite absorbed in each other; but the language of their eyes was unmistakable, and the marquis smiled to himself as he took note of what he supposed to be a very promising intrigue—wherein he did the youthful pair great injustice. As a thorough man of the world he was not at all surprised at finding de Sigognac with this band of vagabond players, from such a motive, and the half-pitying contempt he had formerly felt for the shabby, retiring young baron was straightway changed to a certain admiration and respect by this evidence of his gallantry. When he caught his eye he made a little gesture of recognition and approval—to show that he understood and appreciated his position—but paid no further attention to him, evidently meaning to respect his incognito, and devoted himself to the soubrette. She received his high-flown compliments with peals of laughter, and paid him back in his own coin with considerable wit and much merriment, to the great delight of the marquis—who

was always delighted to meet with any adventure of this sort.

Wishing to pursue this one, which opened so well, he declared loudly that he was passionately fond of the theatre, and complained pathetically of being deprived altogether of this, his favourite amusement, in the country; then addressing himself to the tyrant he asked whether the troupe had any pressing engagements that would prevent their turning aside a little from the usual route to visit the Château de Bruyères and give one of their best plays there—it would be an easy matter to rig up a theatre for them in the great hall or the orangery.

The tyrant hastened to reply that nothing could be easier, and that the troupe, one of the best that had ever travelled through the provinces, was entirely at his lordship's disposition—"from the king to the soubrette"—he added, with a broad grin.

"That is capital," said the marquis, "and as to money matters, you can arrange them to suit yourself. I should not think of bargaining with the votaries of Thalia—a muse so highly favoured by Apollo, and as eagerly sought after, and enthusiastically applauded, at the court of his most gracious majesty as in town and country everywhere."

After arranging the necessary preliminaries, the marquis, who had meantime surreptitiously squeezed the soubrette's hand under the table, rose, called his dogs together, put on his hat, waved his hand to the company in token of adieu, and took his departure amid much barking and commotion—going directly home, in order to set on foot his preparations to receive the comedians on the morrow at his château.

As it was growing late, and they were to make an early start the next morning, our tired travellers lost no time in going to rest; the women in a sort of loft, where they had to make themselves as comfortable as they could with the bundles of straw that were to serve them for beds, whilst the men slept on the benches in the room where they had supped.

CHAPTER IV. AN ADVENTURE WITH BRIGANDS

Let us return now to the little girl we left feigning to sleep soundly upon a settle in the kitchen. There was certainly something suspicious about the fierce way in which she eyed Isabelle's pearl necklace, and her little bit of clever acting afterwards. As soon as the door had closed upon the comedians she slowly opened her large, dark eyes, looked sharply round the great, dim kitchen, and when she found that nobody was watching her, slipped quietly down from the bench, threw back her hair with a quick movement of the head peculiar to her, crept softly to the door, which she cautiously unlatched, and escaped into the open air without making any more sound than a shadow, then walked slowly and listlessly away until she had turned a corner and was out of sight of the house, when she set off running as fleetly as a deer pursued by the hounds—jumping over the frequent obstacles in her path with wonderful agility, never stumbling, and flying along, with her black hair streaming out behind her, like some wild creature of the desolate pine barrens through which she was skilfully threading her way.

She reached at last a little knoll, crowned by a group of pine trees crowded closely together, and dashing up the steep bank with undiminished speed came to a sudden stop in the very middle of the grove. Here she stood still for a moment, peering anxiously about her, and then, putting two fingers in her mouth, gave three shrill whistles, such as no traveller in those desolate regions can hear without a shudder. In an instant what seemed to be a heap of pine twigs stirred, and a man emerging from beneath them rose slowly to his feet at a little distance from the child.

"Is it you, Chiquita?" he asked. "What news do you bring? You are late. I had given over expecting you to-night, and gone to sleep."

The speaker was a dark, fierce-looking fellow of about five and twenty, with a spare, wiry frame, brilliant black eyes, and very white teeth—which were long and pointed like the fangs of a young wolf. He looked as if he might be a brigand, poacher,

smuggler, thief, or assassin—all of which he had been indeed by turns. He was dressed like a Spanish peasant, and in the red woollen girdle wound several times around his waist was stuck a formidable knife, called in Spain a navaja. The desperadoes who make use of these terrible weapons usually display as many red stripes, cut in the steel, upon their long pointed blades as they have committed murders, and are esteemed by their companions in proportion to the number indicated by this horrible record. We do not know exactly how many of these scarlet grooves adorned Agostino's navaja, but judging by the savage expression of his countenance, and the fierce glitter of his eye, we may safely suppose them to have been creditably numerous.

"Well, Chiquita," said he, laying his hand caressingly on the child's head, "and what did you see at Maître Chirriguirri's inn?"

"A great chariot full of people came there this afternoon," she answered. "I saw them carry five large chests into the barn, and they must have been very heavy, for it took two men to lift them."

"Hum!" said Agostino, "sometimes travellers put stones into their boxes to make them seem very weighty and valuable, and deceive the inn-keepers."

"But," interrupted the child eagerly, "the three young ladies had trimmings of gold on their clothes; and one of them, the prettiest, had round her neck a row of round, shining, white things, and oh! they were so beautiful!" and she clasped her hands in an ecstasy of admiration, her voice trembling with excitement.

"Those must be pearls," muttered Agostino to himself, "and they will be worth having—provided they are real—but then they do make such perfect imitations now-a-days, and even rich people are mean enough to wear them."

"My dear Agostino, my good Agostino," continued Chiquita, in her most coaxing tones, and without paying any attention to his mutterings, "will you give me the beautiful, shining things if you kill that lady?"

“They would go so well with your rags and tatters!” he answered mockingly.

“But I have so often kept watch for you while you slept, and I have run so far to tell you when any one was coming, no matter how cold it was, nor how my poor, bare feet ached—and I have never once kept you waiting for your food, when I used to carry it to you in your hiding places, even when I was bad with the fever, or my teeth chattering with the chill, and I so weak that I could hardly drag myself along. Oh Agostino! do remember what I have done for you, and let me have the beautiful, shining things.”

“Yes, you have been both brave and faithful, Chiquita, I admit; but we have not got the wonderful necklace yet, you know. Now, tell me, how many men were there in the party.”

“Oh! a great many. A big, tall man with a long beard; an old, fat man—one that looked like a fox—two thin men, and one that looked like a gentleman, though his clothes were very old and shabby.”

“Six men,” said Agostino, who had counted them on his fingers as she enumerated them, and his face fell. “Alas! I am the only one left of our brave band now; when the others were with me we would not have minded double the number. Have they arms, Chiquita?”

“The gentleman has a sword, and so has the tall, thin man—a very long one.”

“No pistols or guns?”

“I didn’t see any,” answered Chiquita, “but they might have left them in the chariot, you know; only Maître Chirriguirri or Mionnette would have been sure to send you word if they had, and they said nothing to me about them.”

“Well, we will risk it then, and see what we can do,” said Agostino resolutely. “Five large, heavy chests, gold ornaments, a pearl necklace! they certainly are worth trying for.”

The brigand and his little companion then went to a secret place in the thick pine grove, and set to work industriously, removing a few large stones, a quantity of branches, and finally the five or six boards they had concealed, disclosing a large hole that looked like a grave. It was not very deep, and Agostino, jumping down into it, stooped and lifted out what seemed to be a dead body—dressed in its usual every-day clothes—which he flung down upon the ground beside the hole. Chiquita, who did not appear to be in the least agitated or alarmed by these mysterious proceedings, seized the figure by the feet, with the utmost sang-froid, and dragged it out of Agostino's way, with a much greater degree of strength than could have been expected from such a slight, delicate little creature. Agostino continued his work of exhumation until five other bodies lay beside the first one—all neatly arranged in a row by the little girl, who seemed to actually enjoy her lugubrious task. It made a strange picture in the weird light of the nearly full moon, half veiled by driving clouds—the open grave, the bodies lying side by side under the dark pine trees, and the figures of Agostino and Chiquita bending over them. But the tragic aspect of the affair soon changed to a comic one; for when Agostino placed the first of the bodies in an upright position it became apparent that it was only a sort of a scarecrow—a rude figure intended to frighten timid traveller—which being skilfully disposed at the edge of the grove, partly hidden among the trees, looked at a little distance exactly like a brigand—gun and all. Indeed it really was dressed in the garments of one of his old comrades, who had paid the penalty of his crimes on the gallows. He apostrophized the figure as he arranged it to his liking, calling it by name, relating some of the brave deeds of its prototype, and bewailing the sad fate that had left him to ply his nefarious trade single-handed, with a rude eloquence that was not wanting in pathos. Returning to where the others lay, he lifted up one which he reminded Chiquita, represented her father—whose valour and skill he eulogized warmly—whilst the child devoutly made the sign of the cross as she muttered a prayer. This one being put in position, he carried the remaining figures, one by one,

to the places marked for them, keeping up a running commentary upon the ci-devant brigands whose representatives they were, and calling them each repeatedly by name, as if there were a certain sad satisfaction in addressing them in the old, familiar way.

When this queer task was completed, the bandit and his faithful little companion, taking advantage of a flood of moonlight as the clouds drifted away before the wind, went and stood on the road—not very far from their retreat—by which our travellers were to pass, to judge of the effect of their group of brigands. It was really very formidable, and had often been of great service to the bold originator of the plan; for on seeing so numerous a band apparently advancing upon them, most travellers took to their heels, leaving the coveted spoils behind them for Agostino to gather up at his leisure.

As they slowly returned to the pine grove he said to the child, who was clinging to his arm affectionately as she walked beside him, “The first stage of their journey to-morrow is a long one, and these people will be sure to start in good season, so that they will reach this spot just at the right time for us—in the uncertain light of the dawn. In the darkness of night our brigands yonder could not be seen, and in broad daylight the ruse would be apparent; so we are in luck, Chiquita! But now for a nap—we have plenty of time for it, and the creaking of the wheels will be sure to wake us.” Accordingly Agostino threw himself down upon a little heap of pine branches and heather, Chiquita crept close to him, so that the large cloak with which he had covered himself might protect her also from the chilly night air, and both were soon sound asleep.

It was so early when our travellers were roused from their slumbers and told that it was time for them to resume their journey, by the treacherous landlord of the Blue Sun Inn, that it seemed to them like the middle of the night; to they arranged themselves as comfortably as they could in the great, roomy chariot, and despite the

loud creaking and groaning that accompanied its every movement as it went slowly lumbering along, and the shrill cries of the driver to his oxen, they were all soon asleep again, excepting de Sigognac, who walked beside the chariot, lost in thoughts of Isabelle's beauty, grace and modesty, and adorable goodness, which seemed better suited to a young lady of noble birth than a wandering actress. He tormented himself with trying to devise some means to induce her to reciprocate the ardent love that filled his heart for her, not for an instant suspecting that it was already a fait accompli, and that the sweet, pure maiden had given him, unasked, her gentle, faithful heart. The bashful young baron imagined all sorts of romantic and perilous incidents in which he might constitute himself her knight and protector, and show such brave and tender devotion to her as he had read of in the old books of chivalry; and which might lead up to the avowal he was burning to make, yet dared not. It never occurred to him that the look in his dark eyes whenever they rested on her face, the tone of his voice when he addressed her, the deep sighs he vainly sought to stifle, and the tender, eager care with which he strove to anticipate her every wish had spoken for him, as plainly as any words could do; and that, though he had not dared to breathe one syllable of his passionate love to Isabelle, she knew it, rejoiced in it, and was proud of it, and that it filled her with a delicious, rapturous joy, such as she had never felt before, or even dreamed of.

The morning began to break—the narrow band of pale light on the horizon, which was growing rapidly brighter and assuming a rosy tinge, was reflected here and there in the little pools of water that shone like bits of a broken mirror scattered over the ground—distant sounds were heard, and columns of smoke rising into the still morning air proved that even in this desolate, God-forsaken part of the Landes there were human habitations to be found. Stalking along with giant strides on the highest part of some rising ground not very far off was a grotesque figure, clearly defined against the bright eastern sky, which would have been a puzzle to a stranger, but was a familiar sight to de Sigognac—a shepherd mounted on his high stilts, such as are

to be met with everywhere throughout the Landes.

But the young baron was too much absorbed in his own engrossing thoughts to take any note of his surroundings as he kept pace with the slow-moving chariot, until his eye was caught and his attention fixed by a strange little point of light, glittering among the sombre pines that formed the dense grove where we left Agostino and Chiquita sleeping. He wondered what it could be—certainly not a glow-worm, the season for them was past long ago—and he watched it as he advanced towards it with a vague feeling of uneasiness. Approaching nearer he caught a glimpse of the singular group of figures lurking among the trees, and at first feared an ambuscade; but finding that they continued perfectly motionless he concluded that he must have been mistaken, and that they were only old stumps after all; so he forbore to arouse the comedians, as he had for a moment thought of doing.

A few steps farther and suddenly a loud report was heard from the grove, a bullet sped through the air, and struck the oxen's yoke—happily without doing any damage, further than causing the usually quiet, steady-going beasts to swerve violently to one side—when fortunately a considerable heap of sand prevented the chariot's being overturned into the ditch beside the road. The sharp report and violent shock startled the sleeping travellers in the chariot, and the younger women shrieked wildly in their terror, whilst the duenna, who had met with such adventures before, slipped the few gold pieces she had in her purse into her shoe. Beside the chariot, from which the actors were struggling to extricate themselves, stood Agostino—his cloak wrapped around his left arm and the formidable navaja in his right hand-and cried in a voice of thunder, "Your money or your lives! Resistance is useless! At the first sign of it my band will fire upon you."

Whilst the bandit was shouting out these terrible words, de Sigognac had quietly drawn his sword, and as he finished attacked him furiously. Agostino skilfully parried his thrusts, with the cloak on his left arm, which so disposed made an

excellent shield, and watched his opportunity to give a murderous stab with his navaja, which indeed he almost succeeded in doing; a quick spring to one side alone saved the baron from a wound which must have been fatal, as the brigand threw the knife at him with tremendous force, and it flew through the air and fell ringing upon the ground at a marvellous distance, instead of piercing de Sigognac's heart. His antagonist turned pale, for he was quite defenceless, having depended entirely upon his trusty navaja, which had never failed him before, and he very well knew that his vaunted band could not come to his rescue. However, he shouted to them to fire, counting upon the sudden terror that command would inspire to deliver him from his dilemma; and, indeed, the comedians, expecting a broadside, did take refuge behind the chariot, whilst even our brave hero involuntarily bent his head a little, to avoid the shower of bullets.

Meantime Chiquita, who had breathlessly watched all that passed from her hiding place among some furze bushes close at hand, when she saw her friend in peril, crept softly forth, glided along on the ground like a snake until she reached the knife, lying unnoticed where it had fallen, and, seizing it, in one instant had restored it to Agostino, She looked like a little fury as she did so, and if her strength had been equal to her ferocity she would have been a formidable foe.

Agostino again aimed his navaja at the baron, who was at that moment off his guard, and would not perhaps have escaped the deadly weapon a second time if it had been hurled at him from that skilful hand, but that a grasp of iron fastened upon the desperado's wrist, just in time to defeat his purpose. He strove in vain to extricate his right arm from the powerful grip that held it like a vice—struggling violently, and writhing with the pain it caused him—but he dared not turn upon this new assailant, who was behind him, because de Sigognac would have surely scored his back for him; and he was forced to continue parrying his thrusts with his left arm, still protected by the ample cloak firmly wound around it. He soon discovered that he could not possibly free his right hand, and the agony became so great that his

fingers could no longer keep their grasp of the knife, which fell a second time to the ground.

It was the tyrant who had come to de Sigognac's rescue, and now suddenly roared out in his stentorian voice, "What the deuce is nipping me? Is it a viper? I felt two sharp fangs meet in the calf of my leg."

It was Chiquita, who was biting his leg like a dog, in the vain hope of making him turn round and loose his hold upon Agostino; but the tyrant shook her off with a quick movement, that sent her rolling in the dust at some distance, without relinquishing his captive, whilst Matamore dashed forward and picked up the navaja, which he shut together and put into his pocket.

Whilst this scene was enacting the sun had risen, and poured a flood of radiance upon the earth in which the sham brigands lost much of their life-like effect. "Ha, ha!" laughed the peasant, "it would appear that those gentlemen's guns take a long time to go off; they must be wet with dew. But whatever may be the matter with them they are miserable cowards, to stand still there at a safe distance and leave their chief to do all the fighting by himself."

"There is a good reason for that," answered Matamore, as he climbed up the steep bank to them, "these are nothing but scarecrows." And with six vigorous kicks he sent the six absurd figures rolling in every direction, making the most comical gestures as they fell.

"You may safely alight now, ladies," said the baron, reassuringly, to the trembling actresses, "there's nothing more to fear; it was only a sham battle after all."

In despair at his overwhelming defeat, Agostino hung his head mournfully, and stood like a statue of grief, dreading lest worse still should befall him, if the comedians, who were in too great force for him to attempt to struggle any longer against them, decided to take him on to the next town and deliver him over to the jailor to be locked up, as indeed he richly deserved. His faithful little friend,

Chiquita, stood motionless at his side, as downcast as himself. But the farce of the false brigands so tickled the fancy of the players that it seemed as if they never would have done laughing over it, and they were evidently inclined to deal leniently with the ingenious rascal who had devised it. The tyrant, who had loosened, but not quitted, his hold upon the bandit, assumed his most tragic air and voice, and said to him, “You have frightened these ladies almost to death, you scoundrel, and you richly deserve to be strung up for it; but if, as I believe, they will consent to pardon you—for they are very kind and good—-I will not take you to the lock-up. I confess that I do not care to furnish a subject for the gallows. Besides, your stratagem is really very ingenious and amusing—a capital farce to play at the expense of cowardly travellers—who have doubtless paid you well for the entertainment, eh? As an actor, I appreciate the joke, and your ingenuity inclines me to be indulgent. You are not simply and brutally a robber, and it would certainly be a pity to cut short such a fine career.”

“Alas!” answered Agostino mournfully, “no other career is open to me, and I am more to be pitied than you suppose. I am the only one left of a band formerly as complete as yours; the executioner has deprived me of my brave comrades one by one, and now I am obliged to carry on my operations entirely alone—dressing up my scarecrows, as your friend calls them, and assuming different voices to make believe that I am supported by a numerous company. Ah! mine is a sad fate; and then my road is such a poor one—so few travellers come this way—and I have not the means to purchase a better one. Every good road is owned by a band of brigands, you know. I wish that I could get some honest work to do, but that is hopeless; who would employ such a looking fellow as I am? all in rags and tatters, worse than the poorest beggar. I must surely have been born under an unlucky star. And now this attempt has failed, from which I hoped to get enough to keep us for two months, and buy a decent cloak for poor Chiquita besides; she needs it badly enough, poor thing! Yesterday I had nothing to eat, and I had to tighten my belt to sustain my empty

stomach. Your unexpected resistance has taken the very bread out of my mouth; and since you would not let me rob you, at least be generous and give me something."

"To be sure," said the tyrant, who was greatly amused; "as we have prevented your successfully plying your trade we certainly do owe you an indemnity. Here, take these two pistoles to drink our healths with."

Isabelle meantime sought in the chariot for a piece of new woollen stuff she happened to have with her, which was soft and warm, and gave it to Chiquita, who exclaimed, "Oh! but it is the necklace of shining white things that I want."

Kind Isabelle immediately unclasped it, and then fastened it round the slender neck of the child, who was so overwhelmed with delight that she could not speak. She silently rolled the smooth, white beads between her little brown fingers in a sort of mute ecstasy for a few moments, then suddenly raising her head and tossing back her thick black hair, she fixed her sparkling eyes on Isabelle, and said in a low, earnest voice, "Oh! you are very, very good, and I will never, never kill you." Then she ran swiftly back to the pine grove, clambered up the steep bank, and sat down to admire and enjoy her treasure. As to Agostino, after making his best bow, and thanking the tyrant for his really princely munificence, he picked up his prostrate comrades, and carried them back to be buried again until their services should be needed on some, he hoped, more auspicious occasion.

The driver, who had deserted his oxen and run to hide himself among the furze bushes at the beginning of the affray, returned to his post when he saw that all danger was over, and the chariot once more started upon its way—the worthy duenna having taken her doubloons out of her shoes and restored them to her purse, which was then deposited in the depths of a mysterious pocket.

"You behaved like a real hero of romance," Isabelle said in an undertone to de Sigognac, "and I feel that under your protection we can travel securely; how bravely you attacked that bandit single-handedly when you had every reason to believe that

he was supported by an armed band."

"You overestimate my little exploit," the baron replied modestly, "there was no danger worth mentioning," then sinking his voice to a whisper, "but to protect you I would meet and conquer giants, put to flight a whole host of Saracens, attack and destroy dragons and horrid monsters; I would force my way through enchanted forests filled with snares and perils, such as we read of, and even descend into hell itself, like Æneas of old. In your dear service the most difficult feats would be easy; your beautiful eyes inspire me with indomitable courage, and your sweet presence, or even the bare thought of you, seems to endue me with a super-human strength."

This was, perhaps, rather exaggerated, but perfectly sincere, and Isabelle did not doubt for a moment that de Sigognac would be able to accomplish fabulous deeds of prowess in her honour and for her sake; and she was not so very far wrong, for he was becoming hourly more passionately enamoured of her, and ardent young lovers are capable of prodigies of valour, inspired by the fair objects of their adoration.

Serafina, who had overheard some of the baron's impassioned words, could not repress a scornful smile; so many women are apt to find the fervid protestations of lovers, when addressed to others than themselves, supremely ridiculous, yet they joyfully receive the very same protestations, without detecting anything in the least absurd in them when whispered into their own ears. For a moment she was tempted to try the power of her many charms, which she believed to be irresistible, with the young baron, and win him away from Isabelle; but this idea was speedily rejected, for Serafina held beauty to be a precious gem that should be richly set in gold—the gem was hers, but the golden setting was lamentably wanting, and poor de Sigognac could not possibly furnish it. So the accomplished coquette decided not to interfere with this newly-born love affair, which was "all very well for a simple-minded young girl like Isabelle," she said to herself, with a disdainful smile and toss of the head.

Profound silence had fallen upon the party after the late excitement, and some of them were even growing sleepy again, when several hours later the driver suddenly called out, “There is the Château de Bruyères.”

CHAPTER V. AT THE CHÂTEAU DE BRUYÈRES

The extensive domain of the Marquis de Bruyères was situated just upon the edge of the Landes, and consisted mostly of productive, highly-cultivated land—the barren sand reaching only to the boundary wall of the great park that surrounded the château. An air of prosperity pervaded the entire estate, in pleasing contrast with the desolate region of country close at hand. Outside the park wall was a broad, deep ditch, filled with clear water and spanned by a handsome stone bridge, wide enough for two carriages abreast, which led to the grand entrance gates. These were of wrought iron, and quite a marvel of delicate workmanship and beauty. There was a good deal of gilding about them, and the lofty apex bore a marquis’s crown above a shield supported by two naked savages, upon which the de Bruyères arms were richly emblazoned—it was an entrance worthy of a royal demesne. When our party paused before it, in the course of the morning, a servant in a rich, showy livery was slowly opening the folding leaves of the magnificent gates, so as to admit them into the park. The very oxen hesitated ere they took their slow way through it, as if dazzled by so much splendour, and ashamed of their own homeliness—the honest brutes little suspecting that the wealthy nobleman’s pomp and glitter are derived from the industry of the lowly tillers of the soil. It certainly would seem as if only fine carriages and prancing horses should be permitted to pass through such a portal as this, but the chariot of Thespis, no matter how humble, is privileged, and not only enters, but is welcome everywhere.

A broad avenue led from the bridge to the château, passing by carefully clipped shrubbery, whence marble statues peeped out here and there, and a beautiful garden,

with flower-beds ingeniously laid out in geometrical patterns, and brilliant with well contrasted colours. The narrow walks among them were bordered with box, and strewn with fine sand of various tints, and several little fountains threw up their sparkling jets among the flowers. In the centre of the garden was a magnificent fountain, with a large, oblong, marble basin, and a Triton, on a high pedestal, pouring water from a shell. A row of yews, skilfully trimmed into pyramids, balls, and various fanciful shapes, and placed at regular distances on each side of the grand avenue, extended from the entrance gates to the château, their sombre hue contrasting well with the brighter green of the foliage behind them. Everything was in the most perfect order; not a leaf out of place, nor a particle of dust to be seen anywhere, as if the gardeners had just freshly washed and trimmed every tree, shrub, and plant under their care.

All this magnificence astonished and delighted the poor comedians, who rarely gained admission to such an abode as this. Serafina, affecting indifference, but noting everything carefully from under her lowered eye-lashes, promised herself to supplant the soubrette in the marquis’s favour, feeling that this great seignior was her own legitimate prey, and ought to have devoted himself to her in the first place, instead of weakly yielding to the vulgar blandishments of the pretty waiting-maid, as he should no longer be permitted to do—if she had any power.

Meanwhile the soubrette, feeling sure of her conquest, had given herself up to castle-building with all the fervour of her ardent southern nature. Isabelle, who was not preoccupied by any ambitious projects, turned her head now and then to glance and smile tenderly at de Sigognac, who was sitting in the chariot behind her and who she knew must be feeling acutely the painful contrast between this splendid estate and his own desolate, half-ruined château. Her loving heart ached for him, and her eyes spoke sweetest sympathy to the poor young nobleman, reduced so low a fortune, yet so worthy of a better fate.

The tyrant was deep in thought, trying to decide how, much he might venture to demand for the services of his troupe, and mentally increasing the amount at every step, as new glories disclosed themselves to his wondering eyes. The pedant was looking forward impatiently to the copious draughts of generous wine he felt sure of enjoying in the splendid château that was now in full view, and Leander, striving to smooth his slightly dishevelled locks with a dainty little tortoise-shell pocket-comb, was wondering, with a fluttering heart, whether a fair marquise dwelt within those walls, and would gaze down upon him from one of those windows as he alighted—indulging in high hopes of the impression he should make upon her susceptible heart.

The Château de Bruyères, which had been entirely rebuilt in the preceding reign, was a noble structure, of immense size, three stories in height, and enclosing a large interior court. It was built of red brick, with elaborate, white stone facings. There were many pretty balconies with sculptured stone railings, and large, clear panes of glass—an unusual luxury at that epoch—in the numerous lofty windows, through which the rich hangings within were visible; and a projecting porch, reached by an imposing flight of broad stone steps, in the centre of the facade, marked the main entrance. The high, steep roof was of slate, in several shades, wrought into a quaint, pretty pattern, and the groups of tall chimneys were symmetrically disposed and handsomely ornamented. There was a look of gaiety and luxury about this really beautiful château which gave the idea of great prosperity, but not the slightest approach to vulgar pretension. There was nothing meretricious or glaring; everything was substantial and in perfect taste, and an indescribably majestic, dignified air, if we may be allowed the expression, pervaded the whole establishment, which spoke of ancient wealth and nobility under all this modern splendour.

Behind the château, its gardens and terraces, was a veritable forest of lofty, venerable trees, forming the magnificent park, which was of great extent, and for

centuries had been the pride of the Bruyères.

Although our high-minded young hero had never been envious of any one in his life, he could not altogether suppress the melancholy sigh with which he remembered that in former years the de Sigognacs had stood higher than the de Bruyères in the province, and had taken precedence of them at court; nor could he help contrasting in his own mind this fresh, new château, replete with every beauty and luxury that a cultivated taste could devise and plentiful wealth procure, with his own desolate, dilapidated mansion—the home of owls and rats—which was gradually but surely crumbling into dust, and a keen pang shot through his heart at the thought. He recalled the dreary, solitary, hopeless life he had led there, and said to himself that the Marquis de Bruyères ought to be a very happy man, with so much to make his existence delightful. The stopping of the chariot at the foot of the broad stone steps in the front of the château aroused him from his reverie; he dismissed as quickly as he could the sad thoughts that had engrossed him, endeavoured to dismiss also the dark shadow from his brow, and jumping lightly to the ground turned and held out his hand to help Isabelle to descend, before any one else could offer her that little service.

The Marquis de Bruyères, who had seen the chariot advancing slowly up the avenue, stood in the porch to receive them. He was superbly dressed, and looked very handsome, as both Serafina and the soubrette secretly remarked. He descended two or three steps as the chariot stopped, and welcomed his guests with a friendly wave of the hand—doing them as much honour as if they had been of his own rank—which act of courtesy, let us hasten to explain, was because of the Baron de Sigognac's presence among them; but for that they would not have been brought to the main entrance at all.

At this moment the wily soubrette, seeing her opportunity for a bold stroke, prepared to alight; and as de Sigognac was fully occupied with Isabelle, and nobody else

thought of paying any attention to her—for she always jumped to the ground as lightly as a bird, disdaining assistance—she hesitated for a moment, with an adorable little air of timidity, and then raised an appealing glance to the marquis. He could not resist it, and, rushing down the steps to her aid, held out both hands to her. With wonderful art the clever little actress managed to slip and lose her balance, so as to fall into his extended arms, clasping him around the neck as she did so.

“Pardon me, my lord,” said she, breathlessly, to the marquis, feigning a confusion she was far from really feeling, “I thought I was going to fall, and grasped your collar, just as a drowning man clutches at the nearest object. A fall is a bad omen, you know, as well as a serious matter, for a poor actress.”

“Permit me to look upon this little accident as a favour,” the marquis replied, giving her a most significant glance, and lightly pressing her yielding form in his arms before he released her.

Serafina had watched this little by-play out of the corner of her eye, though her face was apparently turned away from them, and she bit her lip till it bled, with vexation; so after all the soubrette had succeeded, by an abominably bold action, in compelling the marquis to neglect her betters and give his warmest welcome to a low intrigante, said the “leading lady” to herself, swelling with righteous indignation, and abusing the offender roundly in her thoughts—wishing that she could do it aloud, and expose her outrageous, unmannerly artifice.

“Jean,” said the marquis to a servant in livery who stood near, “have this chariot taken into the court, and see that the decorations, scenery, etc., are carefully put in some convenient place; have the luggage of these ladies and gentlemen carried to the rooms that I ordered to be made ready for them, and take care that they have everything they want;” then in a lower tone, but very emphatically, “I desire that they should be treated with the utmost courtesy and respect.”

These orders being given, the marquis gravely ascended the steps, followed by the

comedians, and having consigned them to his major-domo to show them to their respective rooms and make them comfortable, he gracefully bowed and left them; darting an admiring glance at the soubrette as he did so, which she acknowledged by a radiant smile, that Serafina, raging inwardly, pronounced “abominably bold.”

The chariot meantime had made its way into a back court, accompanied by the tyrant, the pedant and Scapin, who superintended the unloading of the various articles that would be needed—a strange medley, which the supercilious servants of the château, in their rich liveries, handled with a very lofty air of contempt and condescension, feeling it quite beneath their dignity to wait upon a band of strolling players. But they dared not rebel, for the marquis had ordered it, and he was a severe master, as well as a very generous one.

The major-domo, however, conducted his charges to their appointed chambers with as profound an air of respect as if they had been real princes and princesses; for the marquis himself had visited the left wing of the château, where they were to be lodged, had specified the room for each guest, and ordered that they should want for nothing—a very unusual proceeding on his part, as he was in the habit of leaving all such minor details to his trusty major-domo. A beautiful chamber, hung with tapestry which represented the loves of Cupid and Psyche, was given to the soubrette, the pretty, dainty, blue one to Isabelle, and the luxurious red one to Serafina, whilst the more sober brown one was assigned to the duenna. The Baron de Sigognac was installed in a magnificent apartment, whose panelled walls were covered with richly embossed Spanish leather. It was close to Isabelle’s room—a delicate attention on the part of the marquis. This superb chamber was always reserved for his most honoured guests, and in giving it to our young hero he desired to testify that he recognised and appreciated his rank, though he religiously respected his incognito.

When de Sigognac was left alone, and at liberty to think over quietly the odd

situation in which he found himself, he looked at his magnificent surroundings with surprise as well as admiration—for he had never in his life seen, or even imagined, such splendour and luxury. The rich glowing colours of the chimerical flowers and foliage embossed on a golden ground of the Spanish leather on the walls, the corresponding tints in the frescoed ceiling and the heavy, silken hangings at the windows and doors and round the bed, the elaborately carved and gilded furniture, the luxurious easy-chairs and sofas, the large mirrors with bevelled edges, and the dainty dressing-table, lavishly furnished with all the accessories of the toilet, with its oval glass draped with lace which was tied back with knots of gay ribbon, certainly did make up a charming whole, and the wood fire burning brightly in the open fireplace gave a cheerful, cosy air to it all.

Our poor young baron blushed painfully as he caught sight of his own figure in one of the long mirrors—his shabby, ill-fitting clothes looked so sadly out of place amidst all this magnificence—and for the first time in his life he felt ashamed of his poverty. Highly unphilosophical this, but surely excusable in so young a man as our hero. With a natural desire to improve his forlorn appearance if he could, he unpacked the scanty supply of clothing that his faithful Pierre had put up for him—hoping that he might come across something a little less thread-bare than the suit he actually had on his back—but the inspection was not satisfactory, and he groaned as he discarded one faded, shabby garment after another. The linen was not any better—worn so that it was thin everywhere, with numerous darns and patches, and many holes, he could not find a single shirt that was whole and in good condition. He was so absorbed in this melancholy inspection that he did not hear a low knock at the door, nor notice that it was slowly pushed open, having been already ajar, to admit the stout person of Blazius, who approached him with many bows and flourishes, though entirely unobserved. When the pedant reached his side de Sigognac was just holding up before him a shirt that had as many openings as the rose window of a cathedral, and slowly shaking his head as he gazed at it, with an

expression of utter discouragement.

“Body of Bacchus!” exclaimed the pedant—his voice, so close at hand, startling the astonished baron, who had believed himself alone, and safe from intrusion—“that shirt has verily a valiant and triumphant air. It looks as if it had been worn by Mars himself in battle, so riddled has it been by lances, spears, darts, arrows, and I know not what besides. Don’t be ashamed of it, Baron!—these holes are honourable to you. Many a shirt of fine linen, ruffled and embroidered, according to the latest fashion, disguises the graceless person of some rascally parvenu—and usurer as well perhaps—who usurps the place of his betters. Several of the great heroes, of immortal fame, had not a shirt to their backs—Ulysses, for example, that wise and valiant man, who presented himself before the beautiful Princess Nausicaa, with no other covering than a bunch of sea-weed—as we are told, in the Odyssey, by the grand old bard, Homer.”

“Unfortunately,” de Sigognac replied, “there is no point of resemblance, my dear Blazius, between me and the brave King of Ithaca, save the lack of linen. I have done no deeds of valour to shed a lustre over MY poverty. I have had no chance to make myself famous, and I fear that the poets will never celebrate my praises in glowing hexameters. But, jesting aside, I must confess that I do feel greatly annoyed at being forced to appear in this guise here. The Marquis de Bruyères recognised me, though he made no sign, and he may betray my secret.”

“It is a pity,” said the pedant in reply, “but there’s a remedy for every ill under the sun, save death, according to the old saying, and if you will permit me, I think that I can help you out of this awkward dilemma. We, poor players, shadows of real men and women, phantoms of personages of every degree, from the highest to the lowest, have the means necessary for assuming almost any character, you know. As ‘costumier’ of the troupe I am accustomed to make all sorts of transformations, and can turn a miserable vagabond into an Alexander, or a vulgar wench into a princess.

Now, if you are not too proud, I will exercise my poor skill in your lordship's service. Since you have been willing to join our company for this journey, do not disdain to make use of our resources, such as they are, and put aside these ill-fitting garments, which disguise your natural advantages, and make you feel ill at ease. Most fortunately I happen to have in reserve a handsome suit of black velvet, which has not the least of a theatrical air about it, and has never been used; any gentleman could wear it, and unless I am much mistaken it will fit you capitally. I have also the fine linen shirt, silk stockings, shoes—with broad buckles, and cloak to go with it—there is nothing wanting, not even the sword."

"Oh! as to that," cried de Sigognac, with a gesture expressive of all that pride of birth which no misfortunes could crush, "I have my father's sword."

"True," answered Blazius, "and guard it sacredly, my lord! for a sword is a faithful friend—defender of its master's life and honour. It does not abandon him in times of peril and disaster, like the false friends who cling only to prosperity. Our stage swords have neither edge nor point, for they are only intended for show; the wounds they make disappear suddenly when the curtain falls, without the aid of the surgeon with his instruments and lint. That trusty sword of yours you can depend upon in any emergency, and I have already seen it doing good service in our behalf. But permit me to go and fetch the things I spoke of; I am impatient to see the butterfly emerge from the chrysalis."

Having thus spoken, in the theatrical way that had become habitual with him, the worthy pedant quitted the room, and soon reappeared, carrying a large package, which he deposited on the table in the centre of the chamber.

"If your lordship will accept an old actor as valet-de-chambre," he said, rubbing his hands joyfully together, "I will beautify you in no time. All the ladies will be sure to fall in love with you, for—with no disrespect to the larder at the Château de Sigognac be it said—you have fasted so much in your lonely life there that it has

made you most interestingly slender and pale—just what the dear creatures delight in. They would not listen to a word from a stout lover, even if the diamonds and pearls of the fairy tale dropped from his lips whenever he spoke. That is the sole reason for my want of success with the fair sex, and I long ago deserted the shrine of Venus for the worship of Bacchus. A big paunch is not amiss among the devotees of that merry god, for it bears witness to plentiful libations."

Thus running on gaily, the worthy pedant strove to amuse the melancholy young nobleman, while he deftly performed his duties as valet; and they were very quickly completed, for the requirements of the stage necessitate great dexterity on the part of the actors to make the metamorphoses frequently needed with sufficient promptness and rapidity. Charmed with the result of his efforts he led de Sigognac up to one of the large mirrors, wherein, upon raising his eyes, he saw a figure which, at the first glance, he thought must be that of some person who had entered the room without his knowledge, and turned to ask who the intruder was—but there was no stranger there, and he discovered that it was his own reflection—so changed that he was mute with astonishment. A young, handsome, richly-dressed de Sigognac stood before him, and a radiant smile parted his lips and lighted up his face as he gazed at his own image, which perfected the really marvellous transformation. Blazius, standing near, contemplated his work with undisguised pride and satisfaction, changing his position several times so as to get different views, as a sculptor might who had just put the finishing touches to his statue altogether to his liking.

"When you have made your way at court, my lord, and regained the position held by your ancestors, as I hope and expect that you will do, I shall pray you to give me a refuge for my old age in your household, and make me intendant of your lordship's wardrobe," said he, with a profound bow to the baron.

"I will not forget your request, my good Blazius, even though I fear that I shall never be able to comply with it," de Sigognac answered with a melancholy smile. "You,

my kind friend, are the first human being that has ever asked a favour of me."

"After our dinner, which we are to have very shortly, we are to consult with his lordship, the marquis, as to what play shall be given this evening, and learn from him where we are to rig our theatre. You will pass for the poet of the troupe; it is by no means an unheard-of thing for men of learning and position to join a band of players thus—either for the fun of the thing, and in hope of adventures, or for the love of a young and beautiful actress. I could tell you of several notable instances; and it is thought to be rather to a man's credit than otherwise in fashionable circles. Isabelle is a very good pretext for you; she is young, beautiful, clever, modest, and virtuous. In fact many an actress who takes like her the role of the ingenuous young girl is in reality all that she personates, though a frivolous and frequently licentious public will not credit it for a moment."

Herewith the pedant discreetly retired, having accomplished, to his great satisfaction, what he had really feared to propose to the young baron, for whom he had conceived a very warm affection.

Meanwhile the elegant Leander, indulging in delightful dreams of the possible fair châtelaine who was to fall a victim to his charms, was making his careful toilet—arraying himself in his most resplendent finery, scrupulously kept for grand occasions—convinced that great good fortune awaited him, and determined to carry the noble lady's heart by storm.

As to the actresses, to whom the gallant marquis, with princely munificence, had sent several pieces of rich stuffs and silks, it is needless to say that they spared no pains to make themselves as charming as possible, and obeyed the summons to dinner radiant with smiles and in high good humour—excepting indeed the fair Serafina, who was inwardly consumed with envy and spite, but careful to conceal it from all beholders.

The marquis, who was of an ardent, impatient nature, made his appearance in the

dining-room before they had quite finished the sumptuous repast which had been served to them; he would not allow them to rise, but seated himself at the table with them, and when the last course had been removed, asked the tyrant to be good enough to give him a list of the plays they were in the habit of acting, so that he might select one for the evening's entertainment. But so many were enumerated that his lordship found it not easy to make a choice, and expressed his desire to have the tyrant's ideas upon the subject.

"There is one piece we often play," Hérode said, "which never fails to please, and is so full of good-natured fun and nonsense that it keeps the audience in a roar of laughter from the beginning to the end."

"Let us have that one, by all means," the marquis exclaimed; "and pray what is the name of this delightful play?"

"The Rodomontades of Captain Matamore."

"A capital title, upon my word! and has the soubrette a good part in it?" asked his lordship, with a languishing glance at her.

"The most racy, mischievous role imaginable," said Hérode warmly, "and she plays it to perfection—it is her chef d'oeuvre. She is always applauded to the echo in it."

At this high praise from the manager, Zerbine—for such was the soubrette's name—tried her best to get up a becoming blush, but in vain. Modesty she had none, and the tint she would fain have called into requisition at that moment was not contained in any of her numerous rouge-pots. So she cast down her eyes, thereby displaying to advantage the length and thickness of her jet-black lashes, and raised her hand with a deprecating gesture, which called attention to its pretty, taper fingers and rosy nails. The marquis watched he admiringly, and she certainly was very charming in her way. He did not vouchsafe even a glance to the other two young actresses—refraining from testifying any marked admiration for Isabelle because of the prior claim of the Baron de Sigognac—though he was secretly very much

delighted with her sweet, refined style of beauty, and the quiet dignity and grace of her deportment. Serafina, who was naturally indignant that the marquis had not even asked if there was a part for her in the piece to be performed, accused him in her heart of being no gentleman, and of having very low, vulgar tastes, but she was the only one of the party that felt any dissatisfaction.

Before the marquis left them he said to Hérode, “I have given orders to have the orangery cleared so that our theatre can be arranged there; they are carrying planks, trestles, benches, hangings, and all other needful articles in there now. Will you kindly superintend the workmen, who are new to this sort of business? They will obey your orders as they would my own.”

Accordingly the tyrant, Blazius and Scapin repaired to the orangery, which was at a little distance from the château and admirably calculated for the purpose it was now to serve, and where they found everything necessary to convert it into a temporary theatre.

Whilst this work is going forward we will make our amiable, indulgent readers acquainted with the fair mistress of the château—having heretofore forgotten to mention that the Marquis de Bruyères was a married man; he thought of it so seldom himself that we may surely be pardoned for this omission. As can be readily imagined, from our last remark, love had not been the moving cause in this union. Adjoining estates, which, united in one, formed a noble domain, and equality of rank had been the chief considerations. After a very brief honeymoon, during which they had become painfully aware of a total want of congeniality, the marquis and marquise—like well-bred people, making no outcry about their matrimonial failure—had tacitly agreed to live amicably under the same roof, but entirely independent of each other—he to go his way and she hers, with perfect freedom. They always treated each other in public, and indeed whenever they chanced to meet, with the greatest courtesy, and might easily have been mistaken by a casual

observer for an unusually happy and united pair. Mme. la Marquise occupied a sumptuous suite of apartments in the château, which her husband never thought of entering without first sending to ascertain whether it would be convenient for madame to receive him, like a formal visitor. But we will avail ourselves of the time-honoured privilege of authors, and make our way into the noble châtelaine's bed-chamber, without any form or ceremony—feeling sure of not disturbing its fair occupant, since the writer of a romance wears upon his finger the wonder-working ring of Gyges, which renders him invisible.

It was a large, lofty room, hung with superb tapestry representing the adventures of Apollo, and exhibiting every luxury that wealth could procure. Here also a bright wood fire was, burning cheerily, and the Marquise de Bruyères sat before her dressing table, with two maids in attendance upon her, absorbed in the all-important business of putting the finishing touches to her extremely becoming as well as effective toilet. Mme. la Marquise was a handsome brunette, whose embonpoint, which had succeeded to the slender outline of early youth, had added to her beauty; her magnificent black hair, which was one of her ladyship's greatest charms, was dressed in the most elaborate fashion—an intricate mass of glossy braids, puffs and curls, forming a lofty structure, and ornamented with a large bow of crimson ribbon, while one long curl fell upon her fair neck, making it look all the whiter by contrast. Her dress of crimson silk, cut very low, displayed to advantage—the plump, dimpled shoulders, and her snowy bosom, and from a band of black velvet round her throat was suspended a heart-shaped locket, set with superb rubies and brilliants. A white satin petticoat covered with priceless old lace, over which the crimson silk gown, open in front, was looped high upon the hips, and then swept back in a long, ample, richly trimmed train, completed the elegant toilet of Mme. la Marquise.

Jeanne, the favourite maid and confidante, held open the box of tiny black, "mouches"—without which no fashionable lady of that epoch considered herself fully equipped—while the marquise placed one, with most happy effect, near the

corner of her rather pretty mouth, and then hesitated some time before she could decide where to put the other, which she held ready on the tip of her forefinger. The two maids stood motionless, breathlessly watching their mistress, as if fully impressed with the importance of this grave question, until at last the little black star found a resting-place just above the edge of the crimson silk bodice, to the left—indicating, in the accepted hieroglyphics of that age of gallantry, that he who aspired to the lips of the fair wearer must first win her heart.

After a last lingering look in the mirror Mme. la Marquise rose and walked slowly towards the fire, but suddenly, remembering that there was yet one adornment wanting, turned back, and took from a beautiful casket standing open on the toilet-table, a large, thick watch—called in those days a Nuremberg egg—which was curiously enamelled in a variety of bright colours, and set with brilliants. It hung from a short, broad chain of rich workmanship, which she hooked into her girdle, near another chain of the same description, from which depended a small hand-mirror in a pretty gold frame.

“Madame is looking her loveliest to-day,” said Jeanne in flattering tones; “her hair is dressed to perfection, and her gown fits like a glove.”

“Do you really think so?” asked her mistress languidly, and with affected indifference. “It seems to me, on the contrary, that I am positively hideous. My eyes are sunken, and this colour makes me look immensely stout. I have half a mind to exchange this dress for a black one now. What do you think, Jeanne? Black makes people look slender, they say.”

“If madame insists upon it I can quickly make the exchange; but it would be a sad pity not to wear such an elegant and becoming costume as madame has on now.”

“Well, let it be then; but it will be all your fault, Jeanne, if I fail to receive as much admiration as usual this evening. Do you know whether the marquis has invited many people to come and see this play?”

“Yes, madame, several messengers have been sent off on horseback in different directions, and there will be sure to be a large gathering—they will come from all the châteaux within driving distance—for such an occasion as this is rare, here in the depths of the country.”

“You are right,” said Mme. la Marquise, with a deep sigh, which was almost a groan; “we are buried alive in this dreary place. And what about these players?—have you seen them, Jeanne?—are there any handsome young actors among them?”

“I have only had a glimpse of them, madame, and such people are so painted and fixed up, they say, that it is hard to tell what they really do look like; but there was one slender young man, with long, black curls and a very good figure, who had quite a grand air.”

“That must be the lover, Jeanne, for it is always the best looking young actor in the troupe who takes that part. It would be ridiculous, you know, to have a stout old codger, or a very ugly man, or even an awkward one, making declarations of love, and going down on their knees, and all that sort of thing—it would not do at all, Jeanne!”

“No, madame, it would not be very nice,” said the maid with a merry laugh, adding shrewdly, “and although it seems to make very little difference what husbands may be like, lovers should always be everything that is charming.”

“I confess that I have a weakness for those stage gallants,” Mme. la Marquise said with a little sigh, “they are so handsome, and so devoted—they always use such beautiful language, and make such graceful gestures—they are really irresistible. I cannot help feeling vexed when their impassioned appeals are received coldly, and they are driven to despair, as so often happens in plays; I would like to call them to me and try to console them, the bewitching creatures!”

“That is because madame has such a kind heart that she can’t bear to see any one

suffer without trying to help and comfort them," said the specious Jeanne. "Now I am of quite a different mind—nothing I would like better than to flout a sentimental suitor; fine words would not gain any favour with me—I should distrust them."

"Oh! you don't understand the matter, Jeanne! You have not read as many romances, or seen as many plays as I have. Did you say that young actor was very handsome?"

"Mme. la Marquise can judge for herself," answered the maid, who had gone to the window, "for he is just crossing the court this blessed minute, on his way to the orangery, where they are rigging up their theatre."

Mme. la Marquise hastened to the window, and there was Leander in full view, walking along slowly, apparently lost in thought, and wearing a tender, sad expression, which he considered especially effective and interesting—as we have said, he never for a moment forgot his role. As he drew near he looked up, as by a sudden inspiration, to the very window where the marquise stood watching him, and instantly taking off his hat with a grand flourish, so that its long feather swept the ground, made a very low obeisance, such as courtiers make to a queen; then drew himself up proudly to his full height, and darting an ardent glance of admiration and homage at the beautiful unknown, put on his broad felt hat again and went composedly on his way. It was admirably well done; a genuine cavalier, familiar with all the gallant usages in vogue at court, could not have acquitted himself better. Flattered by this mark of respect for her rank and admiration of her beauty, so gracefully tendered, Mme. la Marquise could not help acknowledging it by a slight bend of the head, and a little half suppressed smile. These favourable signs did not escape Leander, who, with his usual self-conceit, took a most exaggerated view of their import. He did not for a moment doubt that the fair mistress of the château—for he took it for granted it was she—had fallen violently in love with him, then and there; he felt sure that he had read it in her eyes and her smile. His heart

beat tumultuously; he trembled with excitement; at last it had come! the dream of his life was to be accomplished; he, the poor, strolling player, had won the heart of a great lady; his fortune was made! He got through the rehearsal to which he had been summoned as best he might, and the instant it was over hastened back to his own room, to indite an impassioned appeal to his new divinity, and devise some means to insure its reaching her that same evening.

As everything was in readiness the play was to begin as soon as the invited guests had all assembled. The orangery had been transformed into a charming little theatre, and was brilliantly lighted by many clusters of wax candles. Behind the spectators the orange trees had been arranged in rows, rising one above the other, and filled the air with their delicious fragrance. In the front row of seats, which was composed of luxurious arm-chairs, were to be seen the beautiful Yolande de Foix, the Duchesse de Montalban, the Baronne d'Hagémeau, the Marquise de Bruyres, and many other titled dames, resplendent in gorgeous array, and vying with each other in magnificence and beauty. Rich velvets, brilliant satins, cloth of silver and gold, misty laces, gay ribbons, white feathers, tiaras of diamonds, strings of pearls, superb jewels, glittering in delicate shell-like ears, on white necks and rounded arms, were in profusion, and the scene would have graced the court itself. If the surpassingly lovely Yolande de Foix had not been present, several radiant mortal goddesses in the exceptionally brilliant assemblage might have made it difficult for a Paris to decide between their rival claims to the golden apple; but her beauty eclipsed them all, though it was rather that of the haughty Diana than the smiling Venus. Men raved about her, declared her irresistible, worshipped at her shrine, but never dared aspire to her love; one scornful glance from her cold blue eyes effectually extinguished any nascent hope, and the cruel beauty punished presumption as relentlessly, and won and flung away hearts with as much nonchalance, as ever did her immortal prototype, the fair goddess of the chase.

How was this exquisite creature dressed? It would require more sang-froid than we

are possessed of to venture upon a description of her perfect toilet; her raiment floated about her graceful form like a luminous cloud, in which one could think only of herself; we believe, however, that there were clusters of pearls nestling amid the bright curls that made an aureola—a veritable golden glory—about her beautiful head.

Behind these fair ladies sat or stood the nobles and gentlemen who had the honour of being their fathers, husbands, and brothers. Some were leaning forward to whisper soft nothings and dainty compliments into willing ears, others lounging and fanning themselves lazily with their broad felt hats, and others still standing in the background looking admiringly at the pretty group before them. The hum of conversation filled the air, and a slight impatience was just beginning to manifest itself among the waiting audience, when the traditional three knocks were heard, and all suddenly subsided into silence.

The curtain rose slowly and revealed a very pretty scene representing a public square where several streets met, surrounded by picturesque houses with small latticed windows, overhanging gables, high peaked roofs, and smoke curling upwards from the slender chimneys against the blue sky.

One of these houses had a practicable door and window, whilst two of those in the side scenes enjoyed equal advantages, and one of them was furnished with a balcony. A few trees were scattered about in front of the houses, and, though the painting was not of the highest order of scenic art, the general effect was very good, and won a round of applause from the aristocratic audience. The piece opens with a quarrel between the testy old bourgeois, Pandolphe, and his daughter, Isabelle, who, being in love with a handsome young suitor, obstinately refuses to obey her father’s commands and marry a certain Captain Matamore, with whom he is perfectly infatuated. She is ably supported in her resistance by her pretty maid, Zerbine, who is well paid by Leander, the favoured lover, to espouse his cause. To all the curses

and abuse that Pandolphe showers upon her, she answers gaily with the most exasperating and amusing impertinences, advising him to marry this fine captain himself if he is so fond of him; as for her part she will never suffer her dear, beautiful mistress to become the wife of that horrid old codger, that abominable bully, that detestable scarecrow! Whereupon Pandolphe, furiously angry, orders her into the house, so that he may speak to his daughter alone; and when she refuses to obey, and defies him to make her, he takes her by the shoulders and attempts to force her to go, but she, bending forward with admirable elasticity, from the waist only, at each vigorous effort of his, stands her ground and does not budge one inch from her place, breaking into peals of laughter at every fresh attempt, and accompanying it all with an irresistibly saucy, comical by-play, that wins her round after round of enthusiastic applause—whilst the Marquis de Bruyères, enchanted with her spirited acting, congratulates himself anew upon the happy chance that threw this charming creature in his way.

Another character now enters upon the scene, looking cautiously about him at every step, as if he feared an unpleasant surprise. This is Leander, the horror of fathers, husbands, and guardians, the delight of wives, daughters, and wards—in one word, the lover—the very beau-ideal of a lover; young, handsome, ardent, ready for anything, winning over strict old duennas, bribing pert waiting-maids, climbing up rope-ladders, overcoming every obstacle to reach the fair mistress of his affections, and kneeling at her feet to pour out burning protestations of love and devotion, that no mortal woman could ever resist. Suddenly perceiving that Pandolphe is here, where he only expected to find Isabelle, Leander stops and throws himself into an attitude, which he has frequently practised before the mirror, and which, he flatters himself, shows his handsome person to great advantage; standing with his weight thrown upon the left leg, the right one advanced and slightly bent at the knee; one hand on the hilt of his sword, the other stroking his chin, so as to make the big diamond on his finger flash in the light, and a slight smile playing about his lips. He

really did look very handsome as he stood there, and was greatly admired by all the ladies—even the haughty Yolande herself not disdaining to smile upon him approvingly. Profiting by the opportunity that this pause gave him, Leander fixed his eyes upon the Marquise de Bruyères, with such a look of passionate entreaty and admiration that she blushed crimson in spite of herself under his ardent gaze; then he turned reluctantly towards Isabelle, with an absent, indifferent air, which he intended should indicate to the fair object of his aspirations the difference between real and simulated passion.

When Pandolphe becomes aware of the presence of Leander he is more furious than ever, and hustles his daughter and her maid into the house as quickly as possible, not, however, without Zerbine's finding means to take from Leander a note for Isabelle, which she slips into the pocket of her coquettish little apron. The young man, left alone with the irate father, assures him in the most respectful manner that his intentions are honourable; that he asks the hand of his fair daughter in marriage; that he is of gentle birth, has an ample fortune, and is in high favour at court; that nothing could ever induce him to give up Isabelle; he is ready to risk everything to win her, for he loves her better than his life—delicious words, which the young girl listens to with rapture from her balcony, whence she makes little signs of approval and encouragement to her lover, quite unknown to the stern father, whose back is turned to her, and who believes her safely locked up in the house. Despite the mellifluous eloquence of the ardent young suitor Pandolphe remains obstinate and unmoved, and swears, by all the gods that either he will have Captain Matamore for his son-in-law, or his refractory daughter shall be shut up in a convent and forced to become a nun. Off he bustles in hot haste to find a notary and have the contract of marriage drawn without further delay.

As soon as he is out of sight Leander tries to persuade Isabelle—who is still in her balcony, her father having carried off the key of the street door in his pocket—to consent to fly from such persecution, and accompany him to the cell of a certain

holy hermit whom he knows, and who is always willing and ready to marry runaway couples like themselves, whose loves are thwarted by tyrannical parents. But the young girl answers modestly, yet firmly, that, although she wishes nothing so earnestly as to be permitted to bestow her hand upon her faithful Leander, who already has her heart, she cannot disobey her father, for that she, like all dutiful daughters, is in duty bound to respect and submit to the commands of the author of her being; but she promises never to marry the detested Captain Matamore—she will go into the convent rather than listen to him for a moment. Unable to shake her decision Leander then retires to devise plans, with the aid of his clever valet, to overcome the formidable obstacles in his way—more than ever determined not to give up the fair Isabelle, and promising her to return in the evening and report progress.

Isabelle retires from her balcony and closes her window, and a moment after Captain Matamore strides fiercely upon the stage—his appearance is greeted with peals of laughter—his tall, attenuated figure is encased in an absurd costume, in which the bright red and yellow stripes of his tunic meet in points in front and behind, whilst they run spirally round his long, thin arms and legs, producing the most preposterously comical effect imaginable; a stiffly-starched ruff, immensely broad, encircles his neck, upon which his head seems to be set, like that of John the Baptist on the charger; a large felt hat, turned up at one side, and ornamented with a huge tuft of red and yellow feathers, is stuck jauntily on his head, and a short cloak of the same colour, fastened round his neck and thrown back from his shoulders, floats behind him. He wears an enormous sword, whose heavily weighted hilt keeps the point always raised and standing out prominently behind him, whilst from it dangles a clever imitation of a spider’s web—a convincing proof of how much he is in the habit of making use of this formidable weapon. Closely followed by his valet, Scapin, who is in imminent danger of having an eye put out by the end of his master’s big sword, he marches several times around the stage, taking

preternaturally long strides, rolling his eyes about fiercely, twisting the long ends of his huge mustache, and indulging in a variety of ridiculous gestures indicative of exaggerated rage and fury, which are irresistibly funny—all the more so because there is nothing whatever to provoke this display of ferocity. Finally he stops in front of the footlights, strikes an attitude, and delivers himself thus: “For to-day, Scapin, I am willing to let my man-killer here have a little rest, so that there may be an opportunity to get all its recent victims decently buried, in the cemeteries I contribute so largely towards filling. When a man has performed such feats of courage and carnage as I have—killing my hundreds single-handed, while my dastardly comrades trembled with fear, or turned and fled from the foe—to say nothing of my daily affairs of honour, now that the wars are over—he may assuredly indulge himself occasionally in milder amusements. Besides, the whole civilized world, having now been subjugated by my good sword, no longer offers any resistance to my indomitable arm, and Atropos, the eldest of the dread Parcae sisters, has sent word to me that the fatal scissors, with which she cuts the threads of human lives, have become so dulled by the great amount of work my trusty blade has given her to do with them, that she has been obliged to send them to Vulcan to be sharpened, and she begs for a short respite. So you see, Scapin, I must put force upon myself and restrain my natural ardour—refrain for a time from wars, massacres, sacking of cities, stand-up fights with giants, killing of monsters and dragons, like Theseus and Hercules of glorious memory, and all the other little pastimes which usually occupy my good sword and me. I will take my ease now for a brief period, and Death may enjoy a short rest too. But to whom did my worthy prototype, Mars, the great god of war, devote his leisure hours? in whose sweet society did he find delight? Ask Venus, the immortal goddess of love and beauty, who had the good taste to prefer a warlike man to all others, and lent a willing ear to the suit of my valiant predecessor. So I, following his illustrious example, condescend to turn my attention for the moment to the tender sex, and pay my court

to the fair Isabelle, the young and beautiful object of my ardent love. Being aware that Cupid, with all his assurance, would not dare to aim one of his golden-tipped arrows at such an all-conquering hero as my unworthy self, I have given him a little encouragement; and, in order that the shaft may penetrate to the generous lion's heart that beats in this broad breast, I have laid aside the world-famed coat of mail—made of the rings given to me by goddesses, empresses, queens, infantas, princesses, and great ladies of every degree, my illustrious admirers the world over—which is proof against all weapons, and has so often saved my life in my maddest deeds of daring."

"All of which signifies," interrupts the valet, who had listened to this high-blown tirade with ill-concealed impatience, "as far as my feeble intellect can comprehend such magnificent eloquence, that your most redoubtable lordship has fallen in love with some young girl hereabouts, like any ordinary mortal."

"Really, Scapin," says Matamore, with good-humoured condescension, "you have hit the nail upon the head—you are not so stupid after all, for a valet. Yes, I have fallen in love, but do not imagine for a moment that my courage will suffer diminution on that account. It was all very well for Samson to allow his hair to be cut off, and for Alcides to handle the distaff at the bidding of his mistress; but Delilah would not have dared to touch one hair of my head, and Omphale should have pulled off my boots for me—at the least sign of revolt I would have given her worse to do: cleaning the skin of the Nemaean lion, for instance, when I brought it home all fresh and bleeding, just as I had torn it from the quivering carcass. The thought that has lately occurred to me, that I have subjugated only half of the human race, is humiliating. Women, by reason of their weakness, escape me; I cannot treat them as I do my masculine opponents—cut their throats, run them through the body, or hew off their arms and legs; I must lay siege to their hearts, and conquer them in that way. It is true that I have stormed and taken a greater number of such fair citadels than there are drops of water in the ocean, or stars in the sky—why, I sleep

on a mattress stuffed with thousands of beautiful curls and tresses of every shade, light and dark, golden and jet-black, which are among my most treasured trophies. Juno herself has made overtures to me, but I turned a deaf ear to her blandishments, finding her charms rather too ripe for my taste; I prefer the first flush of youthful beauty; it is a pure and innocent maiden that I would honour with my notice now, but she repulses me—that I should live to say it!—she dares to repulse me. I cannot permit such an impertinence on her part, and the fair Isabelle must humbly sue to me for pardon, and herself bringing the golden keys of the citadel of her heart, upon a salver of silver, offer them to me upon her bended knees, with streaming eyes and dishevelled tresses, begging for grace and favour in my sight. Go now, and summon the fortress to surrender—this house contains the rebellious fair."

But doors and windows remain inexorably closed, and no notice is taken of the valet's thundering knocks and mocking summons to surrender; secure in the strength of their bolts and bars, the garrison, which consists of Isabelle and her maid, vouchsafes no reply. Matamore, becoming more enraged at each vain attempt to gain a response from his fair enemy, stamps about the stage, roaring out his defiance, threatening to sack and burn the place, pouring out volleys of remarkable oaths, and lashing himself into such a fury that he actually foams at the mouth. When his valet at length, after many vain efforts, is able to gain a hearing, and tells him of his formidable rival, Leander, and how he has already won the lady's heart, all his rage is turned against that fortunate suitor, of whom he vows that he will make mince-meat as soon as he can lay hands on him. At this very moment Leander himself returns, and Scapin points him out to his master as he approaches, adding that he will keep a sharp look-out for the police while Matamore is giving him his quietus. But the cowardly braggadocio would fain withdraw, now that the enemy is actually in sight, and is only restrained from flight by his servant, who pushes him forward directly in Leander's path.

Seeing that escape is impossible, Matamore settles his hat firmly on his head, twists

the long ends of his mustache, puts his hand on the hilt of his big sword, and advances threateningly towards Leander—but it is pure bravado, for his teeth are chattering with fear, and his long, thin legs waver and tremble under him visibly, like reeds shaken by the wind. Only one hope remains to him—that of intimidating Leander by loud threats and ferocious gestures, if, by a happy chance, he be a fellow of his own kidney. So in a terrible voice he addresses him thus: “Sir, do you know that I am the great Captain Matamore of the celebrated house of Cuerno de Cornazan, and allied to the no less illustrious family of Escobombardon de la Papirontonda? I am a descendant, on my mother’s side, of the famous Antacus, the ancient hero and giant.”

“Well, you may be a descendant of the man in the moon for all that I care,” answers Leander, with a disdainful shrug of the shoulders; “what the devil have I to do with such absurd stuff and nonsense?”

“Blood and bones! thunder and Mars! You see, sir, you shall see, and that very quickly, what you have to do with it, unless you take yourself off in the twinkling of an eye. I will give you one minute’s grace, for your extreme youth touches me, so take to your heels and fly while there is yet time. Observe me well! I am the terror of the whole world—my path is marked with graves—my own shadow scarcely dares to follow me into the perils I delight in. If I enter a besieged city, it is by the breach—when I quit it I pass under a triumphal arch; if I cross a river, it is one of blood, and the bridge is made of the bodies of my adversaries. I can toss a knight and his horse, both, weighted with armour, high into the air. I can snap elephants’ bones, as you would pipe-stems. When great Mars himself chances to meet me on the battle-field he turns and flees, dreading the weight of my arm. My prowess is so well known, and the terror I inspire so great, that no one dares to meet me face to face, and I never see anything but the backs of my retreating foes.”

“Is it so? well, you shall meet me face to face. Take that, and see how you like it!”

says Leander laughing merrily, and giving him a sounding slap on one cheek which almost knocks the poor devil over, and is instantly followed by an equally hearty one on the other, to restore his equilibrium.

During this scene Isabelle and Zerbine come out upon the balcony. The mischievous soubrette goes into convulsions of laughter, whilst her mistress nods encouragingly to Leander. Meantime Pandolphe, accompanied by the notary, turns the corner of one of the streets and enters the square just in time to see Leander's extraordinary exploit, whereat he is horrified and amazed. The valiant captain bellows like a bull, shrieks out the most frightful threats and curses, vowing all sorts of vengeance, and making prodigious efforts to draw his big sword, so that he may forthwith set about cutting up his unmannerly assailant into mince-meat. He tugs and strains until he is red in the face, but his "man-killer" cannot be induced to quit the scabbard and Leander, growing impatient, follows up his first attack with a vigorous, well directed kick, which sends the unlucky bully flying to the other side of the stage, where he falls all in a heap and rolls in the dust. The handsome, young gallant then bows gracefully to Isabelle and retires from the scene.

Captain Matamore meanwhile lies sprawling on the ground, making ludicrous and ineffectual efforts to regain his feet. Pandolphe and Scapin go to his assistance, and when they have hauled him up, and he has made sure that Leander is no longer present, he roars out in a voice of thunder: "Scapin, quick, hoop me with iron bands or I shall burst! I am in such a rage! I shall explode like a bomb! and you, treacherous blade, do you play me false at such a moment? Is it thus you reward me for having always tried to slake your insatiable thirst with the blood of the bravest and noblest? I don't know why I have not already broken you into a thousand pieces, as you so richly deserve—false, ungrateful weapon that you are! But stay—was it to teach me that it is unworthy of the true warrior to desert his post?—or forget his sterner duties in the soft delights of love?—was it for that you refused to leap from your scabbard as of old? It is true, alas! that thus far this week I have not defeated a

single army—I have killed neither ogre nor dragon—I have not furnished his usual rations to Death—and in consequence my trusty blade has rusted in the scabbard—that I should live to say it! rusted!—and I have been forced to submit to insults, and even blows, before the very eyes of my mistress. What a lesson! Henceforth I shall make it a rule to kill at least three men every morning before I break my fast, so as to be sure that my good sword plays freely—keep me in mind, Scapin, do you hear?"

"Perhaps Leander will return before long," says the valet; "suppose we all help you to draw your 'trusty blade,' so that you may be ready for him."

Matamore, accordingly, plants himself firmly, holding the scabbard in both hands, Scapin seizes the handle of the sword, Pandolphe clasps him firmly round the waist, the notary tries to do as much by Pandolphe's stout person, and they all pull and pull. For some time the rusty old sword resists all their efforts, but at last yields suddenly, and the three fall in a confused heap on the ground, with legs and arms waving wildly in the air, while Matamore tumbles the other way, still clinging to the now empty scabbard. Picking himself up as quickly as possible he seizes his big sword, which has dropped from the valet's hand, and waving it triumphantly says with stern emphasis, "Now Leander's fate is sealed! There is but one way for him to escape certain death. He must emigrate to some distant planet. If he be sufficiently fool-hardy to remain on this globe I will find him, no matter in what distant land he strives to hide himself, and transfix him with this good sword—unless indeed he be first turned to stone by the terrible Medusa-like power of my eye."

In spite of all that he has witnessed, the obstinate old father still feels unbounded faith in Matamore's valour, and persists in his lamentable intention to bestow the hand of his fair daughter upon this magnificent hero. Poor Isabelle bursts into tears, and declares that she prefers the convent to such a fate. Zerbine loudly swears that this marriage shall never take place, and tries to console her weeping mistress.

Matamore attributes this rather discouraging demonstration on the part of Isabelle to an excess of maidenly modesty, not doubting her penchant for himself, though he acknowledges that he has not yet properly paid his court, nor shown himself in all his glory to her—this last from prudential motives, fearing lest she might be dangerously dazzled and overwhelmed if he should burst upon her too suddenly in the full splendour of his heroic character, remembering, and taking warning by, the sad and terrible fate that befell Semele, when Jupiter, reluctantly yielding to her wishes, appeared before her with all the insignia of his majesty.

Isabelle and her maid withdrew from the balcony, without taking any further notice of the valiant Matamore; but he, undaunted, wishing to play the lover after the most approved fashion, plants himself resolutely under her window and sends Scapin to fetch a guitar; upon which he thrums awkwardly for a while, and then accompanies it with his voice, in an attempt at a Spanish love song, which sounds much like the nocturnal caterwauling of a disconsolate tabby than anything else we can compare it to. A dash of cold water, mischievously thrown down on him by Zerbine under pretext of watering the plants in the balcony, does not extinguish his musical ardour. “A gentle shower from the sweet eyes of my Isabelle, moved to tears by this plaintive melody,” says he, “for it is universally conceded that I excel in music as in arms, and wield the lyre as skilfully as the sword.”

Unfortunately for him, Leander suddenly reappears, and highly indignant that this miserable rascal should presume to serenade his mistress, snatches the guitar from his hands and begins whacking him over the head with it, so furiously that it is quickly broken through, and slipping over the unhappy serenader’s head remains fixed round his neck, so that he is completely at the mercy of his assailant. Holding fast to the handle of the guitar, Leander hauls him about the stage, banging him against the side-scenes, dragging him forward to the footlights—making the most absurd scene imaginable—and finally, letting go of him suddenly, sends him sprawling on the ground. Fancy the ridiculous appearance of the unfortunate bully,

who looked as if he had put his head through a frying-pan!

But his miseries are not yet at an end. Leander's valet had been arranging a clever little plot to prevent the fulfilment of the proposed marriage between Isabelle and Captain Matamore. At his instigation, a certain Doralice, very pretty and coquettish, makes her appearance, accompanied by a fierce-looking brother—represented by Hérode—carrying two immensely long rapiers under his arm, and evidently "spoiling for a fight." The young lady complains that she has been shamefully jilted by Captain Matamore, who has deserted her for Isabelle, the daughter of a certain Pandolphe, and demands instant reparation for this outrage, adding that her brother is ready to exact it at the point of the sword, or avenge the insult by taking the life of the heartless villain who has trifled with her youthful affections.

"Make haste to give this rascal his quietus," says Pandolphe to his future son-in-law; "it will be only child's play for you, who have fearlessly encountered, single-handed, a whole army of Saracens."

Very reluctantly, and after many most absurd grimaces, Matamore crosses swords with Doralice's ferocious brother, but he trembles so that the latter, with one quick movement, sends his weapon flying out of his hand, and chastises him with the flat of his sword until he roars for mercy.

To cap the climax, Mme. Léonarde comes upon the scene, mopping her streaming eyes with an enormous pocket-handkerchief, sighing and sobbing, and bewailing herself. She goes straight to Pandolphe and shows him a written promise of marriage, over Matamore's signature, cleverly counterfeited; whereupon the poor wretch, convicted of such abominable and complicated perfidy, is assailed with a new shower of blows and curses, and finally condemned, by the unanimous vote of all present, to marry old Mme. Léonarde—who has made herself as hideous as possible—as a fitting punishment for all his deviltries, rodomontades, and cowardice. Pandolphe, thoroughly disgusted with Matamore at last, makes no

further objections to Leander's suit, and the curtain falls as he gives his consent to the marriage of the two young lovers.

This bouffonnade, being played with great spirit, was enthusiastically applauded. The gentlemen were charmed with the mischievous, coquettish soubrette, who was fairly radiant with beauty that evening; the ladies were greatly pleased with Isabelle's refinement and modesty; whilst Matamore received the well merited encomiums of all. It would have been impossible to find, even in the great Parisian theatres, an actor better fitted for the part he had played so admirably. Leander was much admired by all the younger ladies, but the gentlemen agreed, without a dissenting voice, that he was a horridly conceited coxcomb. Wherever he appeared indeed this was the universal verdict, with which he was perfectly content—caring far more for his handsome person, and the effect it produced upon the fair sex, than for his art; though, to do him justice, he was a very good actor. Serafina's beauty did not fail to find admirers, and more than one young gentleman swore by his mustache that she was an adorable creature—quite regardless of the displeasure of the fair ladies within hearing.

During the play, de Sigognac, hidden in the coulisses, had enjoyed intensely Isabelle's charming rendering of her part, though he was more than a little jealous of the favour she apparently bestowed upon Leander—and especially at the tender tone of her voice whenever she spoke to him—not being yet accustomed to the feigned love-making on the stage, which often covers profound antipathies and real enmity. When the play was over, he complimented the young actress with a constrained, embarrassed air, which she could not help remarking, and perfectly understood.

"You play that part admirably, Isabelle! so well that one might almost think there was some truth in it."

"Is it not my duty to do so?" she asked smilingly, secretly pleased at his displeasure; "did not the manager engage me for that?"

“Doubtless,” de Sigognac replied, “but you seemed to be really in love with that conceited fellow, who never thinks of anything but his own good looks, and how to display them to the best advantage.”

“But the role required it. You surely would not have had me play it as if he disgusted me! besides, did I not preserve throughout the quiet demeanour of a well-bred, respectable girl? If I failed in that you must tell me how and where, so that I may endeavour to correct it in future.”

“Oh no! you appeared from the beginning to the end like a modest, retiring, young lady—no, there is no fault to be found with you in that respect; your acting was inimitable—so graceful, lady-like, and easy—but withal so true to nature that it was almost too real.”

“My dear baron, they are putting out the lights; everybody has gone but ourselves, and we shall be left in the dark if we don’t make haste. Be good enough to throw this cloak around my shoulders and accompany me to the château.”

De Sigognac acquitted himself of this novel duty with less awkwardness than might have been expected, though his hands trembled a little, and he felt an almost irresistible desire to take her into his arms as he wrapped the mantle round her slender form; but he restrained himself, and respectfully offering his arm led her out of the orangery, which by this time was entirely deserted. It was, as we have said, at a little distance from the château, and on the level of the park, lower than the mansion, which stood on a high terrace, with a handsome stone balustrade at the edge, supporting at regular intervals large vases filled with blooming plants, in the pretty Italian fashion. A broad, easy flight of stone steps led up to the terrace, affording in their ascent a most imposing view of the château, which loomed up grandly against the evening sky. Many of the windows on this side were lighted, whilst the others glistened brightly as the silvery moon-beams struck upon them—as did also the dewdrops on the shrubbery and the grass-plots—as if a shower of

diamonds had fallen on this favoured spot. Looking towards the park, the long vistas cut through the wood, losing themselves in the hazy blue of the distance, called to mind Breughel's famous picture of Paradise, or else disclosed the far-away gleam of a marble statue, or the spray of a misty fountain sparkling in the moonlight.

Isabelle and de Sigognac slowly ascended the broad steps, pausing frequently to turn and look back at this enchanting scene, and charmed with the beauty of the night walked for a little while to and fro upon the terrace before retiring to their rooms. As they were in full sight of the windows, and it was not yet very late, the modest young girl felt that there could be no impropriety in this little indulgence; and besides, the baron's extreme timidity was very reassuring to her, and she knew that he would not presume upon the favour accorded to him. He had not made a formal avowal of his love to her, but she was as well aware of it as if he had, and also of his profound respect for her, which sentiment is indeed always an accompaniment of a worthy passion. She knew herself beloved—the knowledge was very sweet to her—and she felt herself safe from all fear of offence in the company of this honourable gentleman and true lover. With the delicious embarrassment of nascent, unavowed love, this young couple wandering by moonlight in a lonely garden, side by side, arm in arm, only exchanged the most insignificant, commonplace remarks; but if no undercurrent was betrayed by actual words, the trembling, voices, long pauses, stifled sighs, and low, confidential tones told of strong emotions beneath this quiet surface.

The chamber assigned to the beautiful Yolande de Foix, near that of Mme. la Marquise, was on this side of the château, overlooking the park, and after she had dismissed her maid, she went to the window to look out once more upon the exceeding beauty of the night, and caught sight of de Sigognac and Isabelle, pacing slowly back and forth on the terrace below, without any other company than their own shadows. Assuredly the disdainful Yolande, haughty as a goddess, could never have felt anything but scorn for our poor young baron, past whom she had

sometimes flashed in a whirlwind of light and noise in the chase, and whom she had so recently cruelly insulted; but still it displeased her to see him devoting himself thus to a beautiful young girl, to whom he was undoubtedly making love at that very moment. She had regarded him as her own humble vassal—for she had not failed to read the passionate admiration in his eyes whenever they met her own—and could not brook his shaking off his allegiance thus; her slaves ought to live and die in her service, even though their fidelity were never rewarded by a single smile. She watched them, with a frowning brow, until they disappeared, and then sought her couch in anything but a tranquil mood, haunted by the lover-like pair that had so roused her wrath, and still kept her long awake.

De Sigognac escorted Isabelle to the door of her chamber, where he bade her good-night, and as he turned away towards his own, saw, at the end of the corridor, a mysterious looking individual closely wrapped in a large cloak, with one end thrown over the shoulder in Spanish fashion, and so drawn up round his face that only the eyes were visible; a slouch hat concealed his forehead, so that he was completely disguised, yet he drew back hurriedly into a dark corner when de Sigognac turned towards him, as if to avoid his notice. The baron knew that the comedians had all gone to their rooms already, and besides, it could not be one of them, for the tyrant was much larger and taller, the pedant a great deal stouter, Leander more slender, Matamore much thinner, and Scapin of quite a different make. Not wishing to appear curious, or to annoy the unknown in any way, de Sigognac hastened to enter his own room—not however without having observed that the door of the tapestry-hung chamber stood ajar. When he had closed his, he heard stealthy footsteps approaching, and presently a bolt shot home softly, then profound silence.

About an hour later, Leander opened his door as quietly as possible, looked carefully to see if the corridor was empty, and then, stepping as lightly and cautiously as a gipsy performing the famous egg-dance, traversed its whole length, reached the staircase, which he descended as noiselessly as the phantoms in a haunted castle,

and passed out into the moonlight; he crept along in the shadow of the wall and of some thick shrubbery, went down the steps into the park, and made his way to a sort of bower, where stood a charming statue of the mischievous little god of love, with his finger on his lip—an appropriate presiding genius of a secret rendezvous, as this evidently must be. Here he stopped and waited, anxiously watching the path by which he had come, and listening intently to catch the first sound of approaching footsteps.

We have already related how Leander, encouraged by the smile with which Mme. la Marquise acknowledged his salutation, and convinced that she was smitten with his beauty and grace, had made bold to address a letter to her, which he bribed Jeanne to place secretly upon her mistress's toilet-table, where she would be sure to see it. This letter we copy here at length, so as to give an idea of the style of composition employed by Leander in addressing the great ladies of whose favours he boasted so loudly.

"Madame, or rather fair goddess of beauty, do not blame anything but your own incomparable charms for this intrusion upon you. I am forced by their radiance to emerge from the deep shadow in which I should remain shrouded, and approach their dazzling brilliancy—just as the dolphins are attracted from the depths of ocean, by the brightness of the fisherman's lanterns, though they are, alas! to find destruction there, and perish by the sharp harpoons hurled pitilessly at them with unerring aim. I know but too well that the waves will be reddened by my blood; but as I cannot live without your favour, I do not fear to meet death thus. It may be strangely audacious, on my part to pretend to the privileges of gods and demi-gods—to die by your fair hand—but I dare to aspire to it; being already in despair, nothing worse can come to me, and I would rather incur your wrath than your scorn, or your disdain. In order to direct the fatal blow aright, the executioner must look upon his victim, and I shall have, in yielding up my life under your fair, cruel hand, the supreme delight of being for one blissful moment the object of your

regard. Yes, I love you, madame! I adore you! And if it be a crime, I cannot repent of it. God suffers himself to be adored; the stars receive the admiration of the humblest shepherd; it is the fate of all such lofty perfection as yours to, be beloved, adored, only by inferior beings, since it has not its equal upon earth, nor scarcely indeed in heaven. I, alas! am but a poor, wandering actor, yet were I a haughty duke or prince, my head would not be on a level with your beauteous feet, and there would be, all the same, between your heavenly height and my kneeling adoration, as great a distance as from the soaring summit of the loftiest Alp to the yawning abyss far, far below. You must always stoop to reach a heart that adores you. I dare to say, madame, that mine is as proud as it is tender, and she who would deign not to repulse it, would find in it the most ardent love, the most perfect delicacy, the most absolute respect, and unbounded devotion. Besides, if such divine happiness be accorded me, your indulgence would not have to stoop so low as you might fancy. Though reduced by an adverse destiny and the jealous hatred of one of the great ones of the earth, who must be nameless, to the dire necessity of hiding myself under this disguise, I am not what I seem. I do not need to blush for my birth—rather I may glory in it. If I dared to betray the secrecy imposed upon me, for reasons of state, I could prove to you that most illustrious blood runs in my veins. Whoever may love me, noble though she be, will not degrade herself. But I have already said too much—my lips are sealed. I shall never be other than the humblest, most devoted of your slaves; even though, by one of those strange coincidences that happen sometimes in real life, I should come to be recognised by all the world as a king’s son. If in your great goodness you will condescend to show me, fair goddess of beauty, by the slightest sign, that my boldness has not angered you, I shall die happy, consumed by the burning brightness of your eyes upon the funeral pyre of my love.”

How would Mme. la Marquise have received this ardent epistle? which had perhaps done him good service already more than once. Would she have looked favourably

upon her humble suitor?—who can tell?—for the feminine heart is past comprehension. Unfortunately the letter did not reach her. Being entirely taken up with great ladies, Leander overlooked their waiting-maids, and did not trouble himself to show them any attentions or gallantries—wherein he made a sad mistake—for if the pistoles he gave to Jeanne, with his precious epistle, had been supplemented by a few kisses and compliments, she would have taken far more pains to execute his commission. As she held the letter carelessly in her hand, the marquis chanced to pass by, and asked her idly what she had got there.

“Oh! nothing much,” she answered scornfully, “only a note from Mr. Leander to Mme. la Marquise.”

“From Leander? that jackanapes who plays the lover in the Rodomontades of Captain Matamore? What in the world can he have to say to Mme. la Marquise? Doubtless he asks for a gratuity!”

“I don’t think so,” said the spiteful waiting-maid; “when he gave me this letter he sighed, and rolled up his eyes like a love-sick swain.”

“Give me the letter,” said the marquis, “I will answer it—and don’t say anything about it to your mistress. Such chaps are apt to be impertinent—they are spoiled by admiration, and sometimes presume upon it.”

The marquis, who dearly loved a joke, amused himself by answering Leander’s extraordinary epistle with one in much the same style—written in a delicate, lady-like hand upon perfumed paper, and sealed with a fanciful device—altogether a production well calculated to deceive the poor devil, and confirm him in his ridiculous fancies. Accordingly, when he regained his bed-chamber after the play was over, he found upon his dressing-table a note addressed to himself. He hastened to open it, trembling from head to foot with excitement and delight, and read as follows: “It is true, as you say so eloquently—too eloquently for my peace of mind—that goddesses can only love mortals. At eleven o’clock, when all the world

is sunk in slumber, and no prying human eyes open to gaze upon her, Diana will quit her place in the skies above and descend to earth, to visit the gentle shepherd, Endymion—not upon Mount Latmus, but in the park—at the foot of the statue of silent love. The handsome shepherd must be sure to have fallen asleep ere Diana appears, so as not to shock the modesty of the immortal goddess—who will come without her cortege of nymphs, wrapped in a cloud and devoid of her silvery radiance."

We will leave to the reader's imagination the delirious joy that filled to overflowing the foolish heart of the susceptible Leander, who was fooled to the top of his bent, when he read this precious note, which exceeded his wildest hopes. He immediately began his preparations to play the part of Endymion—poured a whole bottle of perfume upon his hair and hands, chewed a flower of mace to make his breath sweet, twisted his glossy curls daintily round his white fingers—though not a hair was awry—and then waited impatiently for the moment when he should set forth to seek the rendezvous at the foot of the statue of silent love—where we left him anxiously awaiting the arrival of his goddess. He shivered nervously from excitement, and the penetrating chilliness of the damp night air, as he stood motionless at the appointed spot. He trembled at the falling of a leaf—the crackling of the gravel under his feet whenever he moved them sounded so loud in his ears that he felt sure it would be heard at the château. The mysterious darkness of the wood filled him with awe, and the great, black trees seemed like terrible genii, threatening him. The poor wretch was not exactly frightened, but not very far from it. Mme. la Marquise was tardy—Diana was leaving her faithful Endymion too long cooling his heels in the heavy night dew. At last he thought he heard heavy footsteps approaching,—but they could not be those of his goddess—he must be mistaken—goddesses glide so lightly over the sward that not even a blade of grass is crushed beneath their feet—and, indeed, all was silent again.

"Unless Mme. la Marquise comes quickly, I fear she will find only a half-frozen

lover, instead of an ardent, impatient one," murmured Leander with chattering teeth; and even as the words escaped him four dark shadows advanced noiselessly from behind upon the expectant gallant. Two of these shadows, which were the substantial bodies of stout rascals in the service of the Marquis de Bruyères, seized him suddenly by the arms, which they held pinioned closely to his sides, while the other two proceeded to rain blows alternately upon his back—keeping perfect time as their strokes fell thick and fast. Too proud to run the risk of making his woes public by an outcry, their astonished victim took his punishment bravely—without making a sound. Mutius Scaevola did not bear himself more heroically while his right hand lay among the burning coals upon the altar in the presence of Porsenna, than did Leander under his severe chastisement. When it was finished the two men let go of their prisoner, all four saluted him gravely, and retired as noiselessly as they had come, without a single word being spoken.

What a terrible fall was this! that famous one of Icarus himself, tumbling down headlong from the near neighbourhood of the sun, was not a greater. Battered, bruised, sore and aching all over, poor Leander, crestfallen and forlorn, limping painfully, and suppressing his groans with Spartan resolution, crept slowly back to his own room; but so overweening was his self-conceit that he never even suspected that a trick had been played upon him. He said to himself that without doubt Mme. la Marquise had been watched and followed by her jealous husband, who had overtaken her before she reached the rendezvous in the park, carried her back to the château by main strength, and forced her, with a poniard at her throat, to confess all. He pictured her to himself on her knees, with streaming eyes, disordered dress and dishevelled hair, imploring her stern lord and master to be merciful—to have pity upon her and forgive her this once—vowing by all she held sacred never to be faithless to him again, even in thought. Suffering and miserable as he was after his tremendous thrashing, he yet pitied and grieved over the poor lady who had put herself in such peril for his sake, never dreaming that she was in blissful ignorance

of the whole affair, and at that very moment sleeping peacefully in her luxurious bed. As the poor fellow crept cautiously and painfully along the corridor leading to his room and to those of the other members of the troupe he had the misfortune to be detected by Scapin, who, evidently on the watch for him, was peeping out of his own half-open door, grinning, grimacing, and gesticulating significantly, as he noted the other's limping gait and drooping figure.

In vain did Leander strive to straighten himself up and assume a gay, careless air; his malicious tormentor was not in the least taken in by it.

The next morning the comedians prepared to resume their journey; no longer, however, in the slow-moving, groaning ox-cart, which they were glad, indeed, to exchange for the more roomy, commodious vehicle that the tyrant had been able to hire for them—thanks to the marquis's liberality—in which they could bestow themselves and their belongings comfortably, and to which was harnessed four stout draught horses.

Leander and Zerbine were both rather late in rising, and the last to make their appearance—the former with a doleful countenance, despite his best efforts to conceal his sufferings under a cheerful exterior, the latter beaming with satisfaction, and with smiles for everybody. She was decidedly inclined to be munificent towards her companions, and bestow upon them some of the rich spoils that had fallen plentifully to her share—taking quite a new position among them—even the duenna treating her with a certain obsequious, wheedling consideration, which she had been far from ever showing her before. Scapin, whose keen observation nothing ever escaped, noticed that her box had suddenly doubled in weight, by some magic or other, and drew his own conclusions therefrom. Zerbine was a universal favourite, and no one begrudged her her good fortune, save Serafina, who bit her lip till it bled, and murmured indignantly, "Shameless creature!" but the soubrette pretended not to hear it, content for the moment with the signal humiliation of the arch-coquette.

At last the new Thespian chariot was ready for a start, and our travellers bade adieu to the hospitable château, where they had been so honourably received and so generously treated, and which they all, excepting poor Leander, quitted with regret. The tyrant dwelt upon the bountiful supply of pistoles he had received; the pedant upon the capital wines of which he had drunk his fill; Matamore upon the enthusiastic applause that had been lavished upon him by that aristocratic audience; Zerbine upon the pieces of rich silk, the golden necklaces and other like treasures with which her chest was replete—no wonder that it was heavy—while de Sigognac and Isabelle, thinking only of each other, and happy in being together, did not even turn their heads for one last glimpse of the handsome Château de Bruyere.

CHAPTER VI. A SNOW-STORM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

As may be readily supposed, the comedians were well satisfied with the kind treatment they had received during their brief sojourn at the Château de Bruyères; such a piece of good fortune did not often fall to their lot, and they rejoiced in it exceedingly. The tyrant had distributed among them each one’s share of the marquis’s liberal remuneration for their services, and it was wonderfully pleasant to them to have broad pieces in the purses usually so scantily supplied, and not infrequently quite empty. Zerbine, who was evidently rejoicing over some secret source of satisfaction, accepted good-naturedly all the taunts and jokes of her companions upon the irresistible power of her charms. She was triumphant, and could afford to be laughed at—indeed, joined heartily in the general merriment at her own expense—while Serafina sulked openly, with “envy, hatred, and malice” filling her heart. Poor Leander, still smarting from his severe beating, sore and aching, unable to find an easy position, and suffering agonies from the jolting of the chariot, found it hard work to join in the prevailing gaiety.

When he thought no one was looking at him, he would furtively rub his poor, bruised shoulders and arms with the palm of his hand, which stealthy manœuvre might very readily have passed unobserved by the rest of the company, but did not escape the wily valet, who was always on the lookout for a chance to torment Leander; his monstrous self-conceit being intensely exasperating to him. A harder jolt than usual having made the unfortunate gallant groan aloud, Scapin immediately opened his attack, feigning to feel the liveliest commiseration for him.

“My poor Leander, what is the matter with you this morning? You moan and sigh as if you were in great agony! Are you really suffering so acutely? You seem to be all battered and bruised, like the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance, after he had capered stark naked, for a love penance, among the rocks in the Sierra Morena, in humble imitation of his favourite hero, Amadis de Gaul. You look as if you had not slept at all last night, and had been lying upon hard sticks, rods, or clubs, instead of in a soft, downy bed, such as were given to the rest of us in the fine château yonder. Tell us, I pray you, did not Morpheus once visit you all the night through?”

“Morpheus may have remained shut up in his cavern, but Cupid is a wanderer by night, who does not need a lantern to find the way to those fortunate individuals he favours with a visit,” Leander replied, hoping to divert attention from the tell-tale bruises, that he had fancied were successfully concealed.

“I am only a humble valet, and have had no experience in affairs of gallantry. I never paid court to a fine lady in my life; but still, I do know this much, that the mischievous little god, Cupid, according to all the poets, aims his arrows at the hearts of those he wishes to wound, instead of using his bow upon their backs.”

“What in the world do you mean?” Leander interrupted quickly, growing seriously uneasy at the turn the conversation was taking.

“Oh! nothing; only that I see, in spite of all your efforts to hide it with that handkerchief knotted so carefully round your neck, that you have there on the back

of it a long, black mark, which to-morrow will be indigo, the day after green, and then yellow, until it fades away altogether, like any other bruise—a black mark that looks devilishly like the authentic flourish which accompanies the signature of a good, stout club on a calf's skin—or on vellum, if that term pleases you better."

"Ah! my good Scapin, you do not understand such matters," Leander replied, a scarlet flush mounting to the very roots of his hair, and at his wits' ends to know how to silence his tormentor; "doubtless some dead and gone beauty, who loved me passionately during her lifetime, has come back and kissed me there while I was sleeping; as is well known, the contact of the lips of the dead leave strange, dark marks, like bruises, on human flesh, which the recipient of the mysterious caress is astonished to find upon awaking."

"Your defunct beauty visited you and bestowed her mysterious caress very apropos," remarked Scapin, incredulously; "but I would be willing to take my oath that yonder vigorous kiss had been imprinted upon your lily-white neck by the stinging contact of a stout club."

"Unmannerly jester and scoffer that you are! is nothing sacred to you?" broke in Leander, with some show of heat.

"You push my modesty too far. I endeavoured delicately to put off upon a dead beauty what I should have ascribed to a living one. Ignorant and unsophisticated though you claim to be, have you never heard of kisses so ardent that such traces of them are left?—where pearly teeth have closed upon the soft flesh, and made their mark on the white skin?"

"Memorem dente notam," interrupted the pedant, charmed to have a chance to quote Horace.

"This explanation appears to me very judicious," Scapin said; then, with a low bow to the pedant, "and is sustained by unquestionable if incomprehensible authority; but the mark is so long that this nocturnal beauty of yours, dead or alive, must have had

in her lovely mouth that famous tooth which the three Gorgon sisters owned among them, and passed about from one to the other."

This sally was followed by a roar of laughter, and Leander, beside himself with rage, half rose, to throw himself upon Scopin, and chastise him then and there for his insufferable impertinence; but he was so stiff and sore from his own beating, and the pain in his back, which was striped like a zebra's, was so excruciating, that he sank back into his place with a suppressed groan, and concluded to postpone his revenge to some more convenient season. Hérode and Blazius, who were accustomed to settle such little disputes, insisted upon their making up their differences, and a sort of reconciliation took place-Scapin promising never to allude to the subject again, but managing to give poor Leander one or two more digs that made him wince even as he did so.

During this absurd altercation the chariot had been making steady progress, and soon arrived at an open space where another great post-road crossed the one they were following, at right angles. A large wooden crucifix, much the worse for long exposure to the weather, had been erected upon a grassy mound at the intersection of the two highways. A group, consisting of two men and three mules, stood at its foot, apparently awaiting some one's arrival. As they approached, one of the mules, as if weary of standing still, impatiently shook its head, which was gaily decorated with bright, many-coloured tufts and tassels, and set all the little silver bells about it ringing sharply. Although a pair of leather blinkers, decked with gay embroidery, effectually prevented its seeing to the right or to the left, it evidently was aware of the approach of the chariot before the men's senses had given them any intimation of it.

"The Colonelle shakes her ear-trumpets and shows her teeth," said one of them; "they cannot be far off now."

In effect, after a very few minutes the chariot was seen approaching, and presently

rolled into the open space. Zerbine, who sat in front, glanced composedly at the little group of men and mules standing there, without betraying any surprise at seeing them.

“By Jove! those are fine beasts yonder,” exclaimed the tyrant, “splendid Spanish mules, especially that foremost one; they can easily do their fifteen or twenty leagues a day, I’ll venture, and if we were mounted on the like we should soon find ourselves in Paris. But what the devil are they doing in this lonely place? it must be a relay, waiting for some rich seignior travelling this way.”

“No,” said the duenna, “that foremost mule is intended for a lady—don’t you see the cushions and housings?”

“In that case,” he replied, “there must be an abduction in the wind; those two equerries, in gray liveries, certainly have a very mysterious, knowing sort of an air.”

“Perhaps you are right,” said Zerbine, demurely, with a significant little smile and shrug.

“Can it be possible that the lady is among us?” asked Scapin; “one of the men is coming this way by himself, as if he desired to parley before resorting to violence.”

“Oh! there’ll be no need,” said Serafina, casting a scornful glance at the soubrette, who returned it with interest.

“There are bold creatures that go of their own accord, without waiting to be carried off.”

“And there are others who are NOT carried off, that would like to be,” retorted the soubrette, “but the desire is not sufficient; a few charms are needed too.”

At this point the equerry who had advanced to meet the chariot made a sign to them to stop, and, cap in hand, politely asked if Mlle. Zerbine was among them. The soubrette herself answered this inquiry in the affirmative, and sprang to the ground as lightly as a bird.

“Mademoiselle, I am at your disposal,” said the equerry to her, in a respectful and gallant tone. Zerbine shook out her skirts, adjusted her wraps, and then, turning towards the comedians, delivered this little harangue: “My dear comrades, I pray you pardon me for quitting you in this unceremonious manner. There are times when Opportunity offers itself suddenly for our acceptance, and we must seize it without delay, or lose it altogether; he would be a fool who let it slip through his fingers, for once relinquished it returns not again. The face of Fortune, which until now has always frowned upon me, at last vouchsafes me a smile, and I am delighted to enjoy its brightness, even though it may prove to be only fleeting. In my humble role of soubrette, I could not aspire to, or expect to receive, the admiration of rich lords and gentlemen—that is for my betters; and now that a happy chance has thrown such an unhoped-for piece of good luck in my way, you will not blame me, I am confident, for gladly accepting it. Let me take my belongings then—which are packed in the chariot with the others—and receive my adieux. I shall be sure to rejoin you some day, sooner or later, at Paris, for I am a born actress; the theatre was my first love, and I have never long been faithless to it.”

The two men accordingly, aided by the comedians, took Zerbine’s boxes out of the chariot, and adjusted them carefully on the pack-mule. The soubrette made a sweeping curtsey to her friends in the chariot, and threw a kiss to Isabelle from her finger tips, then, aided by one of the equerries, sprang to her place behind him, on the back of the Colonelle, as lightly and gracefully as if she had been taught the art of mounting in an equestrian academy, nodded a last farewell, and striking the mule sharply with the high heel of her pretty little shoe, set off at a round pace.

“Good-bye, and good luck to you, Zerbine,” cried the comedians heartily, one and all; save only Serafina, who was more furiously angry with her than ever.

“This is an unfortunate thing for us,” said the tyrant regretfully, “a serious loss. I wish with all my heart that we could have kept that capital little actress with us; we

shall not easily find any one to replace her, even in Paris; she is really incomparable in her own role—but she was not in any way bound to stay with us a moment longer than she chose. We shall have to substitute a duenna, or a chaperon, for the soubrette in our pieces for the present; it will be less pleasing of course, but still Mme. Léonarde here is a host in herself, and we shall manage to get on very nicely, I dare say."

The chariot started on its way again as he spoke, at rather a better pace than the lumbering old ox-cart. They were travelling through a part of the country now which was a great contrast to the desolate Landes. To the Baron de Sigognac, who had never been beyond their desolate expanse before, it was a revelation, and he could not sufficiently admire the richness and beauty of this region. The productive, red soil was highly cultivated—not an inch of ground neglected—comfortable, often handsome, stone houses scattered along their route at frequent intervals, and surrounded by large, luxuriant gardens, spoke of a well-to-do population. On each side of the broad, smooth road was a row of fine trees, whose falling leaves lay piled upon the ground in yellow heaps, or whirled in the wind before de Sigognac and Isabelle, as they walked along beneath their spreading branches, finding the exercise a welcome relief after sitting for a long time in the chariot in rather a cramped position. One day as they were walking thus side by side, de Sigognac said to his fair companion, "I wish you would tell me, Isabelle, how it has happened that you, with all the characteristics of a lady of lofty lineage in the innate modesty and dignity of your manners, the refinement and purity of your language, the incomparable grace of your carriage, the elevation of your sentiments upon all subjects, to say nothing of the delicate, aristocratic type of your beauty—should have become a member of a wandering band of players like this—good, honest people no doubt, but not of the same rank or race as yourself."

"Don't fancy that I am a princess in disguise, or a great lady reduced to earn my living in this way," she replied, with an adorable smile, "merely because of some

good qualities you think you have discovered in me. The history of my life is a very simple, uneventful one, but since you show such kind interest in me I will gladly relate it to you. So far from being brought down to the station I occupy by some grievous catastrophe or romantic combination of adverse circumstances, I was born to the profession of an actress—the chariot of Thespis was, so to say, my birthplace. My mother, who was a very beautiful woman and finished actress, played the part of tragic princess. She did not confine her role to the theatre, but exacted as much deference and respect from those around her when off the stage, as she received upon it, until she came to consider herself a veritable princess. She had all the majesty and grace of one, and was greatly admired and courted, but never would suffer any of the gallants, who flutter about pretty actresses like moths around a candle, to approach her—holding herself entirely above them, and keeping her good name unsullied through everything. An account of this unusual conduct on the part of a beautiful young actress chanced to reach the ears of a certain rich and powerful prince, who was very much struck and interested by it, and immediately sought an introduction to my mother. As his actual rank and position equalled hers of imaginary princess, she received his attentions with evident pleasure. He was young, handsome, eloquent, and very much in love with her—what wonder then that she yielded at last to his impassioned entreaties, and gave herself to him, though, because of his high station, he could not do as his heart dictated, and make her his wife. They were very happy in each other's love, and after I was born my young father was devoted to me."

"Ah!" interrupted de Sigognac, eagerly, "that explains it all; princely blood does flow in your veins. I knew it—was sure of it!"

"Their happiness continued," resumed Isabelle, "until reasons of state made it necessary for him to tear himself away from her, to go on a diplomatic mission to one of the great capitals of Europe; and ere his return to France an illustrious marriage had been arranged for him by his family, with the sanction of royalty,

which he found it impossible to evade. In these cruel circumstances he endeavoured to do everything in his power to soften the pain of this rupture to my poor mother—himself almost broken-hearted at being forced to leave her—and made every possible arrangement for her comfort and well-being; settling a generous income on her, and providing lavishly for my maintenance and education. But she would accept nothing from him—she could not receive his money without his love—'all or nothing' was her motto; and taking me with her she fled from him, successfully concealing her place of refuge. She soon after joined a band of players travelling through the provinces, and resumed her old role; but her heart was broken, and she gradually faded away, dying at last when I was only about seven years old. Even then I used to appear upon the stage in parts suitable to my age. I was a precocious little thing in many ways. My mother's death caused me a grief far more acute than most children, even a good deal older than I was then, are capable of feeling. How well I remember being punished because I refused to act the part of one of Medea's children, the day after she died. But my grief was not very long-lived—I was but a child after all, and the actors and actresses of the troupe were so good to me, always petting me, and devising all sorts of ways to please and divert me—theatrical people are proverbially kind to comrades in distress, you know. The pedant, who belonged to our company, and looked just as old and wrinkled then as he does now, took the greatest interest in me, constituted himself my master, and taught me thoroughly and indefatigably all the secrets of the histrionic art—taking unwearied pains with me. I could not have had a better teacher; perhaps you do not know that he has a great reputation, even in Paris. You will wonder that a man of his fame and attainments should be found in a strolling company of players like this, but his unfortunate habits of intemperance have been the cause of all his troubles. He was professor of elocution in one of the celebrated colleges, holding an enviable and lucrative position, but lost it because of his inveterate irregularities. He is his own worst enemy, poor Blazius! In the midst of all

the confusion and serious disadvantages of a vagabond life, I have always been able to hold myself somewhat apart, and remain pure and innocent. My companions, who have known me from babyhood, look upon me as a sister or daughter, and treat me with invariable affection and respect; and as for the men of the outside world who haunt the coulisses, and seem to think that an actress is public property, off the stage as well as upon it, I have thus far managed to keep them at a distance—continuing in real life my role of modest, ingenuous, young girl, without hypocrisy or false pretensions."

Thus, as they strolled along together, and could talk confidentially without fear of listeners, Isabelle related the story of her life to de Sigognac, who was a most attentive and delighted listener, and ever more and more charmed with his fair divinity.

"And the name of the prince," said he, after a short pause, "do you remember it?"

"I fear that it might be dangerous to my peace to disclose it," she replied; "but it is indelibly engraven upon my memory."

"Are there any proofs remaining to you of his connection with your mother?"

"I have in my possession a seal-ring bearing his coat of arms" Isabelle answered; "it is the only jewel of all he had lavished upon her that my mother kept, and that entirely on account of the associations connected with it, not for its intrinsic value, which is small. If you would like to see it I will be very glad to show it to you some day."

It would be too tedious to follow our travellers step by step on their long journey, so we will skip over a few days—which passed quietly, without any incidents worth recording—and rejoin them as they were drawing near to the ancient town of Poitiers. In the meantime their receipts had not been large, and hard times had come to the wandering comedians. The money received from the Marquis de Bruyères had all been spent, as well as the modest sum in de Sigognac's purse-who had

contributed all that he possessed to the common fund, in spite of the protestations of his comrades in distress. The chariot was drawn now by a single horse-instead of the four with which they had set off so triumphantly from the Château de Bruyères—and such a horse! a miserable, old, broken-down hack, whose ribs were so prominent that he looked as if he lived upon barrel-hoops instead of oats and hay; his lack-lustre eyes, drooping head, halting gait, and panting breath combined to make him a most pitiable object, and he plodded on at a snail's pace, looking as if he might drop down dead on the road at any moment. Only the three women were in the chariot—the men all walking, so as to relieve their poor, jaded beast as much as possible. The weather was bitterly cold, and they wrapped their cloaks about them and strode on in silence, absorbed in their own melancholy thoughts.

Poor de Sigognac, well-nigh discouraged, asked himself despondingly whether it would not have been better for him to have remained in the dilapidated home of his fathers, even at the risk of starving to death there in silence and seclusion, than run the risk of such hardships in company with these Bohemians. His thoughts flew back to his good old Pierre, to Bayard, Miraut, and Beelzebub, the faithful companions of his solitude; his heart was heavy within him, and at the sudden remembrance of his dear old friends and followers his throat contracted spasmodically, and he almost sobbed aloud; but he looked back at Isabelle, wrapped in her cloak and sitting serenely in the front of the chariot, and took fresh courage, feeling glad that he could be near her in this dark hour, to do all that mortal man, struggling against such odds, could compass for her comfort and protection. She responded to his appealing glance with a sweet smile, that quickened his pulses and sent a thrill of joy through every nerve. She did not seem at all disheartened or cast down by the greatness of their misery. Her heart was satisfied and happy; why should she be crushed by mere physical suffering and discomforts? She was very brave, although apparently so delicate and fragile, and inspired de Sigognac, who could have fallen down and worshipped her as he gazed up into her beautiful eyes, with some of her own

undaunted courage.

The great, barren plain they were slowly traversing, with a few dreary skeletons of misshapen old trees scattered here and there, and not a dwelling in sight, was not calculated to dissipate the melancholy of the party. Save one or two aged peasants trudging listlessly along, bending under the weight of the fagots they carried on their backs, they had not seen a human being all day long. The spiteful magpies, that seemed to be the only inhabitants of this dreary waste, danced about in front of them, chattering and almost laughing at them, as if rejoicing in and making fun of their miseries. A searching north wind, that penetrated to the very marrow in their bones, was blowing, and the few white flakes that flew before it now and then were the avant-couriers of the steady fall of snow that began as nightfall approached.

“It would appear,” said the pedant, who was walking behind the chariot trying to find shelter from the icy wind, “that the celestial housewife up above has been plucking her geese, and is shaking the feathers out of her apron down upon us. She might a great deal better send us the geese themselves. I for one would be glad enough to eat 114 them, without being very particular as to whether they were done to a turn, and without sauce or seasoning either.”

“Yes, so would I, even without salt,” added the tyrant, “for my stomach is empty. I could welcome now an omelette such as they gave us this morning, and swallow it without winking, though the eggs were so far gone that the little chicks were almost ready to peep.”

By this time de Sigognac also had taken refuge behind the chariot—Isabelle having been driven from her seat in front to a place in the interior by the increasing violence of the storm-and Blazius said to him, “This is a trying time, my lord, and I regret very much that you should have to share our bad fortune; but I trust it will be only of brief duration, and although we do get on but slowly, still every step brings us nearer to Paris.”

“I was not brought up in the lap of luxury,” de Sigognac answered, “and I am not a man to be frightened by a few snowflakes and a biting wind; but it is for these poor, suffering women that I am troubled; they are exposed to such severe hardships—cold, privations, fatigue—and we cannot adequately shelter and protect them, do what we will.”

“But you must remember that they are accustomed to roughing it, my dear baron, and what would be simply unendurable to many of their sex, who have never been subjected to such tests, they meet bravely, and make light of, in a really remarkable manner.”

The storm grew worse and worse; the snow, driven with great force by the wind, penetrated into the chariot where Isabelle, Serafina, and Mme. Léonarde had taken refuge among the luggage, in spite of all that could be done to keep it out, and had soon covered their wraps with a coating of white. The poor horse was scarcely able to make any headway at all against the wind and snow; his feet slipped at every step, and he panted painfully. Hérode went to his head, and took hold of the bridle with his strong hand to lead him and try to help him along, while the pedant, de Sigognac, and Scapin put their shoulders to the wheels at every inequality in the road and whenever he paused or stumbled badly, and Leander cracked the whip loudly to encourage the poor beast; it would have been downright cruelty to strike him. As to Matamore, he had lingered behind, and they were expecting every moment to see his tall, spare figure emerge from the gloom with rapid strides and rejoin them. Finally the storm became so violent that it was impossible to face it any longer; and though it was so important that they should reach the next village before the daylight was all gone, they were forced to halt, and turn the chariot, with its back to the wind. The poor old horse, utterly exhausted by this last effort, slipped and fell, and without making any attempt to rise lay panting on the ground. Our unhappy travellers found themselves in a sad predicament indeed—wet, cold, tired and hungry, all in the superlative degree—blinded by the driving snow, and lost, without any means of

getting on save their own powers of locomotion, in the midst of a great desert—for the white covering which now lay upon everything had obliterated almost all traces of the road; they did not know which way to turn, or what to do. For the moment they all took refuge in the chariot, until the greatest violence of the tempest should be over, huddled close together for warmth, and striving not to lose heart entirely. Presently the wind quieted down all of a sudden, as if it had expended its fury and wanted to rest; but the snow continued to fall industriously, though noiselessly, and as far as the eye could reach through the gathering darkness the surface of the earth was white, as if it had been wrapped in a winding sheet.

“What in the world has become of Matamore?” cried Blazius suddenly; “has the wind carried him off to the moon I wonder?”

“Yes; where can he be?” said the tyrant, in an anxious tone; “I can’t see him anywhere—I thought he was among us; perhaps he is lying asleep among the stage properties at the back of the chariot; I have known him curl himself down there for a nap before now. Holloa! Matamore! where are you? wake up and answer us!” But no Matamore responded, and there was no movement under the great heap of scenery, and decorations of all sorts, stowed away there.

“Holloa! Matamore!” roared Hérode again, in his loudest tones, which might have waked the seven sleepers in their cavern, and roused their dog too.

“We have not seen him here in the chariot at all today,” said one of the actresses; “we thought he was walking with the others.”

“The deuce!” exclaimed Blazius, “this is very strange. I hope no accident has happened to the poor fellow.”

“Undoubtedly he has taken shelter in the worst of the storm on the lee side of the trunk of a tree somewhere,” said de Sigognac, “and will soon come up with us.”

After a short discussion, it was decided to wait where they were a few minutes longer, and then if he did not make his appearance go in search of him. They

anxiously watched the way by which they had come, but no human form appeared on the great expanse of white, and the darkness was falling rapidly upon the earth, as it does after the short days of December. The distant howling of a dog now came to their ears, to add to the lugubrious effect of their surroundings, but they were all so troubled at the strange absence of their comrade that their own individual miseries were for the moment forgotten. The doleful howling, so far away at first, gradually became louder, until at last a large, black dog came in sight, and sitting down upon the snow, still a long distance from them, raised his head so that his muzzle pointed upward to the sky and howled, as if in the greatest distress.

“I’m afraid something terrible has happened to our poor Matamore,” cried the tyrant, and his voice trembled a little; “that dog howls as if for a death.”

At this speech the two young women turned even paler than they had been before, if that were possible, and made the sign of the cross devoutly, while Isabelle murmured a prayer.

“We must go in search of him without a moment’s delay,” said Blazius, “and take the lantern with us; it will as a guiding star to him if he has wandered off from the road, as is very probable, with everything covered with snow like this.”

They accordingly lighted their horn lantern, and set off with all possible speed—the tyrant, Blazius, and de Sigognac—whilst Scapin and Leander remained with the three women in the chariot. The dog, meantime, kept up his dismal howling without a moment’s intermission as the three men hastened towards him. The darkness and the newfallen snow, which had completely obliterated all traces of footsteps, made the task of looking for the missing actor a very difficult one, and after walking nearly a mile without seeing a sign of him, they began to fear that their search would prove fruitless. They kept calling, “Matamore! Matamore!” but there was no reply, nothing to be heard but the howling of the large black dog, at intervals now, or the scream of an owl, disturbed by the light of the lantern. At last de Sigognac, with his

penetrating vision, thought he could make out a recumbent figure at the foot of a tree, a little way off from the road, and they all pressed forward to the spot he indicated.

It was indeed poor Matamore, sitting on the ground, with his back against the tree, and his long legs, stretched out in front of him, quite buried under the snow; he did not stir at the approach of his comrades, or answer their joyful shout of recognition, and when Blazius, alarmed at this strange apathy, hastened forward and threw the light of the lantern upon his face, he had nearly let it fall from fright at what it revealed. Poor Matamore was dead, stiff and stark, with wide-open, sunken eyes staring out vaguely into the darkness, and his ghastly face wearing that pinched, indescribable expression which the mortal puts on when the spirit that dwelt within has fled. The three who had found him thus were inexpressibly shocked, and stood for a moment speechless and motionless, in the presence of death. The tyrant was the first to recover himself, and hoping that some sign of life might yet remain he stooped and took the cold hand into his, and essayed to find a pulse at the wrist—in vain! it was still and icy. Unwilling yet to admit that the vital spark was extinct, he asked Blazius for his gourd, which he always carried with him, and endeavoured to pour a few drops of wine into his mouth—in vain! the teeth were tightly locked together, and the wine trickled from between his pale lips, and dropped slowly down upon his breast.

“Leave him in peace! do not disturb these poor remains!” said de Sigognac in trembling tones; “don’t you see that he is dead?” “Alas! you are right,” Blazius added, “he is dead; dead as Cheops in the great pyramid. Poor fellow! he must have been confused by the blinding snow, and unable to make his way against that terrible wind, turned aside and sat down under this tree, to wait until its violence should be spent; but he had not flesh enough on his bones to keep them warm, and must have been quickly frozen through and through. He has starved himself more than ever lately, in hopes of producing a sensation at Paris, and he was thinner than

any greyhound before. Poor Matamore! thou art out of the way of all trouble now; no more blows, and kicks, and curses for thee, my friend, whether on or off the stage, and thou wilt be laughed at no more forever."

"What shall we do about his body?" interrupted the more practical tyrant. "We cannot leave it here for dogs, and wolves, and birds of prey to devour—though indeed I almost doubt whether they would touch it, there is so little flesh upon his bones."

"No, certainly, we cannot leave him here," Blazius replied; "he was a good and loyal comrade; he deserves better of us than that; we will not abandon him, poor Matamore! He is not heavy; you take his head and I will take his feet, and we will carry him to the chariot. To-morrow morning we will bury him as decently as we can in some quiet, retired spot, where he will not be likely to be disturbed. Unfortunately we cannot do better for him than that, for we, poor actors, are excluded by our hard-hearted and very unjust step-mother, the church, from her cemeteries; she denies us the security and comfort of being laid to rest for our last long sleep in consecrated ground. After having devoted our lives to the amusement of the human race—the highest as well as the more lowly among them, and faithful sons and daughters of holy church too—we must be thrown into the next ditch when the end comes, like dead dogs and horses. Now, Hérode, are you ready? and will you, my lord, lead the way with the lantern?"

The mournful little procession moved slowly forward; the howling dog was quiet at last, as if his duty was done, and a deathlike stillness prevailed around them. It was well that there were no passers-by at that hour; it would have been a strange sight, almost a frightful one, for any such, for they might well have supposed that a hideous crime had been committed; the two men bearing the dead body away at night, lighted by the third with his lantern, which threw their shadows, long, black and misshapen, upon the startling whiteness of the snow, as they advanced with

measured tread. Those who had remained with the chariot saw from afar the glimmer of de Sigognac's lantern, and wondered why they walked so slowly, not perceiving at that distance their sad burden. Scapin and Leander hastened forward to meet them, and as soon as they got near enough to see them distinctly the former shouted to them—"Well, what is the matter? why are you carrying Matamore like that? is he ill, or has he hurt himself?"

"He is not ill," answered Blazius, quietly, as they met, "and nothing can ever hurt him again—he is cured forever of the strange malady we call life, which always ends in death."

"Is he really dead?" Scapin asked, with a sob he did not even try to suppress, as he bent to look at the face of the poor comic actor, for he had a tender heart under his rough exterior, and had cherished a very sincere affection for poor Matamore.

"Very dead indeed, for he is frozen as well," Blazius replied, in a voice that belied the levity of his words.

"He has lived! as they always say at the end of a tragedy," said Hérode; "but relieve us, please, it is your turn now; we have carried the poor fellow a long way, and it is well for us that he is no heavier."

Scapin took Hérode's place, reverently and tenderly, while Leander relieved the pedant—though this office was little to his taste—and they resumed their march, soon reaching the chariot. In spite of the cold and snow, Isabelle and Serafina sprang to the ground to meet them, but the duenna did not leave her seat—with age had come apathy, and selfishness had never been wanting. When they saw poor Matamore stiff and motionless, and were told that he was dead, the two young women were greatly shocked and moved, and Isabelle, bursting into tears, raised her pure eyes to heaven and breathed a fervent prayer for the departed soul.

And now came the question, what was to be done? The village for which they were bound was still a league away; but they could not stay where they were all night, and

they decided to go on, even if they had to abandon the chariot and walk—anything would be better than freezing to death like poor Matamore. But after all, things were not at such a desperate pass as they supposed; the long rest, and a good feed of oats that Scapin had been thoughtful enough to give their tired horse, had so revived the poor old beast that he seemed to be ready and willing to go forward again—so their most serious difficulty was removed. Matamore's body was laid in the chariot, and carefully covered with a large piece of white linen they fortunately happened to have among their heterogeneous belongings, the women resumed their seats, not without a slight shudder as they thought of their ghastly companion, and the men walked—Scapin going in front with the lantern, and Hérode leading the horse. They could not make very rapid progress, but at the end of two hours perceived—oh, welcome sight!—the first straggling houses of the village where they were to spend the night. At the noise of the approaching vehicle the dogs began to bark furiously, and more than one nightcapped head appeared at the windows as they passed along through the deserted street—so the pedant was able to ask the way to the inn, which proved to be at the other end of the hamlet—and the worn-out old horse had to make one more effort; but he seemed to feel that the stable, where he should find shelter, rest and food, was before him, and pushed on with astonishing alacrity.

They found it at last—the inn—with its bunch of holly for a sign. It looked a forlorn place, for travellers did not usually stop over night in this small, unimportant village; but the comedians were not in a mood to be fastidious, and would have been thankful for even a more unpromising house of entertainment than this one. It was all shut up for the night, with not a sign of life to be seen, so the tyrant applied himself diligently to pounding on the door with his big fists, until the sound of footsteps within, descending the stairs, showed that he had succeeded in rousing somebody. A ray of light shone through the cracks in the rickety old door, then it was cautiously opened just a little, and an aged, withered crone, striving to protect the flame of her flaring candle from the wind with one skinny hand, and to hold the

rags of her most extraordinary undress together with the other, peered out at them curiously. She was evidently just as she had turned out of her bed, and a more revolting, witch-like old hag it would be hard to find; but she bade the belated travellers enter, with a horrible grimace that was intended for a smile, throwing the door wide open, and telling them they were welcome to her house as she led the way into the kitchen. She kindled the smouldering embers on the hearth into a blaze, threw on some fresh wood, and then withdrew to mount to her chamber and make herself a little more presentable—having first roused a stout peasant lad, who served as hostler, and sent him to take the chariot into the court, where he was heard directly unharnessing the weary horse and leading him into the stable.

“We cannot leave poor Matamore’s body in the chariot all night, like a dead deer brought home from the chase,” said Blazius; “the dogs out there in the court might find it out. Besides, he had been baptized, and his remains ought to be watched with and cared for, like any other good Christian’s.”

So they brought in the sad burden tenderly, laid it on the long table, and covered it again carefully with the white linen cloth. When the old woman returned, and saw this strange and terrible sight, she was frightened almost to death, and, throwing herself on her knees, began begging volubly for mercy—evidently taking the troupe of comedians for a band of assassins, and the dead man for their unfortunate victim. It was with the greatest difficulty that Isabelle finally succeeded in calming and reassuring the poor, distracted, old creature, who was beside herself with terror, and made her listen to the story of poor Matamore’s death. When, at last, she fully understood the true state of the case, she went and fetched more candles, which she lighted and disposed symmetrically about the dead body, and kindly offered to sit up and watch it with Mme. Léonarde—also to do all that was necessary and usual for it—adding that she was always sent for in the village when there was a death, to perform those last, sad offices. All this being satisfactorily arranged—whereat they were greatly relieved—the weary travellers were conducted into another room, and

food was placed before them; but the sad scenes just enacted had taken away their appetites, though it was many long hours since they had eaten. And be it here recorded that Blazius, for the first time in his life, forgot to drink his wine, though it was excellent, and left his glass half full. He could not have given a more convincing proof of the depth and sincerity of his grief.

Isabelle and Serafina spent the night in an adjoining chamber, sharing the one small bed it contained, and the men lay down upon bundles of straw that the stable-boy brought in for them. None of them slept much—being haunted by disturbing dreams inspired by the sad and trying events of the previous day—and all were up and stirring at an early hour, for poor Matamore's burial was to be attended to. For want of something more appropriate the aged hostess and Mme. Léonarde had enveloped the body in an old piece of thick canvass—still bearing traces of the foliage and garlands of flowers originally painted in bright colours upon it—in which they had sewed it securely, so that it looked not unlike an Egyptian mummy. A board resting on two cross pieces of wood served as a bier, and, the body being placed upon it, was carried by Hérode, Blazius, Scapin and Leander. A large, black velvet cloak, adorned with spangles, which was used upon the stage by sovereign pontiffs or venerable necromancers, did duty as a pall—not inappropriately surely. The little cortege left the inn by a small door in the rear that opened upon a deserted common, so as to avoid passing through the street and rousing the curiosity of the villagers, and set off towards a retired spot, indicated by the friendly old woman, where no one would be likely to witness or interfere with their proceedings. The early morning was gray and cold, the sky leaden—no one had ventured abroad yet save a few peasants searching for dead wood and sticks, who looked with suspicious eyes upon the strange little procession making its way slowly through the untrodden snow, but did not attempt to approach or molest it. They reached at last the lonely spot where they were to leave the mortal remains of poor Matamore, and the stable-boy, who had accompanied them carrying a spade, set to work to dig the

grave. Several carcasses of animals lay scattered about close at hand, partly hidden by the snow—among them two or three skeletons of horses, picked clean by birds of prey; their long heads, at the end of the slender vertebral columns, peering out horribly at them, and their ribs, like the sticks of an open fan stripped of its covering, appearing above the smooth white surface, bearing each one its little load of snow. The comedians observed these ghastly surroundings with a shudder, as they laid their burden gently down upon the ground, and gathered round the grave which the boy was industriously digging. He made but slow progress, however, and the tyrant, taking the spade from him, went to work with a will, and had soon finished the sad task. Just at the last a volley of stones suddenly startled the little group, who, intent upon the mournful business in hand, had not noticed the stealthy approach of a considerable number of peasants.

These last had been hastily summoned by their friends who had first perceived the mysterious little funeral procession, without priest, crucifix, or lighted tapers, and taken it for granted that there must be something uncanny about it.

They were about to follow up the shower of stones by a charge upon the group assembled round the open grave, when de Sigognac, outraged at this brutal assault, whipped out his sword, and rushed upon them impetuously, striking some with the flat of the blade, and threatening others with the point; while the tyrant, who had leaped out of the grave at the first alarm, seized one of the cross pieces of the improvised bier, and followed the baron into the thick of the crowd, raining blows right and left among their cowardly assailants; who, though they far outnumbered the little band of comedians, fled before the vigorous attack of de Sigognac and Hérode, cursing and swearing, and shouting out violent threats as they withdrew. Poor Matamore’s humble obsequies were completed without further hindrance. When the first spadeful of earth fell upon his body the pedant, with great tears slowly rolling down his cheeks, bent reverently over the grave and sighed out, “Alas! poor Matamore!” little thinking that he was, using the very words of Hamlet,

prince of Denmark, when he apostrophized the skull of Yorick, an ancient king's jester, in the famous tragedy of one Shakespeare—a poet of great renown in England, and protégé of Queen Elizabeth.

The grave was filled up in silence, and the tyrant—after having trampled down the snow for some distance around it, so that its exact whereabouts might not be easy to find in case the angry peasants should come back to disturb it—said as they turned away, "Now let us get out of this place as fast as we can; we have nothing more to do here, and the sooner we quit it the better. Those brutes that attacked us may return with reinforcements—indeed I think it more than likely that they will—in which case your sword, my dear baron, and my stick might not be enough to scatter them again. We don't want to kill any of them, and have the cries of widows and orphans resounding in our ears; and besides, it might be awkward for us if we were obliged to do it in self-defence, and then were hauled up before the local justice of peace to answer for it."

There was so much good sense in this advice that it was unanimously agreed to follow it, and in less than an hour, after having settled their account at the inn, they, were once more upon the road.

CHAPTER VII. CAPTAIN FRACASSE

The comedians pushed forward at first as rapidly as the strength of their horse—resuscitated by a night's rest in a comfortable stable, and a generous feed of oats—would allow; it being important to put a good distance between themselves and the infuriated peasants who had been repulsed by de Sigognac and the tyrant. They plodded on for more than two leagues in profound silence, for poor Matamore's sad fate weighed heavily upon their hearts, and each one thought, with a shudder, that the day might come when he too would die, and be buried secretly and in haste, in some lonely and neglected spot by the roadside, wherever they chanced

to be, and there abandoned by his comrades.

At last Blazius, whose tongue was scarcely ever at rest, save when he slept, could restrain it no longer, and began to expatiate upon the mournful theme of which all were thinking, embellishing his discourse with many apt quotations, apothegms and maxims, of which in his role of pedant he had an ample store laid up in his memory. The tyrant listened in silence, but with such a scowling, preoccupied air that Blazius finally observed it, and broke off his eloquent disquisition abruptly to inquire what he was cogitating so intently.

“I am thinking about Milo, the celebrated Crotonian,” he replied, “who killed a bullock with one blow of his fist, and devoured it in a single day. I always have admired that exploit particularly, and I feel as if I could do as much myself to-day.”

“But as bad luck will have it,” said Scapin, putting in his oar, “the bullock is wanting.”

“Yes,” rejoined the tyrant, “I, alas! have only the fist and the stomach. Oh! thrice happy the ostrich, that, at a pinch, makes a meal of pebbles, bits of broken glass, shoe-buttons, knife-handles, belt-buckles, or any such-like delicacies that come in its way, which the poor, weak, human stomach cannot digest at all. At this moment I feel capable of swallowing whole that great mass of scenery and decorations in the chariot yonder. I feel as if I had as big a chasm in me as the grave I dug this morning for poor Matamore, and as if I never could get enough to fill it. The ancients were wise old fellows; they knew what they were about when they instituted the feasts that always followed their funerals, with abundance of meats and all sorts of good things to eat, washed down with copious draughts of wine, to the honour of the dead and the great good of the living. Ah! if we only had the wherewithal now to follow their illustrious example, and accomplish worthily that philosophical rite, so admirably calculated to stay the tears of mourners and raise their drooping spirits.”

“In other words,” said Blazius, “you are hankering after something to eat.

Polyphemus, ogre, Gargantua, monster that you are! you disgust me."

"And you," retorted the tyrant, "I know that you are hankering after something to drink. Silenus, hogshead, wine-bottle, sponge that you are! you excite my pity."

"How delightful it would be for us all if you both could have your wish," interposed Scapin, in a conciliatory tone.

"Look, yonder by the roadside is a little grove, capitally situated for a halting-place. We might stop there for a little, ransack the chariot to find whatever fragments may yet remain in it of our last stock of provisions, and gathering them all up take our breakfast, such as it may be, comfortably sheltered from this cold north wind on the lee side of the thicket there. The short halt will give the poor old horse a chance to rest, and we meantime, while we are breakfasting, can discuss at our leisure some expedients for supplying our immediate needs, and also talk over our future plans and prospects—which latter, it seems to me, look devilishly dark and discouraging."

"Your words are golden, friend Scapin," the pedant said, "let us by all means gather up the crumbs that are left of former plenty, though they will be but few and musty, I fear. There are still, however, two or three bottles of wine remaining—the last of a goodly store—enough for us each to have a glass. What a pity that the soil hereabouts is not of that peculiar kind of clay upon which certain tribes of American savages are said to subsist, when they have been unlucky in their hunting and fishing, and have nothing better to eat."

They accordingly turned the chariot off from the road into the edge of the thicket, unharnessed the horse, and left him free to forage for himself; whereupon he began to nibble, with great apparent relish, at the scattered spears of grass peeping up here and there through the snow. A large rug was brought from the chariot and spread upon the ground in a sheltered spot, upon which the comedians seated themselves, in Turkish fashion, in a circle, while Blazius distributed among them the sorry rations he had managed to scrape together; laughing and jesting about them in such an

amusing manner that all were fain to join in his merriment, and general good humour prevailed. The Baron de Sigognac, who had long, indeed always, been accustomed to extreme frugality, in fact almost starvation, and found it easier to bear such trials with equanimity than his companions, could not help admiring the wonderful way in which the pedant made the best of a really desperate situation, and found something to laugh at and make merry over where most people would have grumbled and groaned, and bewailed their hard lot, in a manner to make themselves, and all their companions in misery, doubly unhappy. But his attention was quickly absorbed in his anxiety about Isabelle, who was deathly pale, and shivering until her teeth chattered, though she did her utmost to conceal her suffering condition, and to laugh with the rest. Her wraps were sadly insufficient to protect her properly from such extreme cold as they were exposed to then, and de Sigognac, who was sitting beside her, insisted upon sharing his cloak with her—though she protested against his depriving himself of so much of it—and beneath its friendly shelter gently drew her slender, shrinking form close to himself, so as to impart some of his own vital warmth to her. She could feel the quickened beating of his heart as he held her respectfully, yet firmly and tenderly, embraced, and he was soon rewarded for his loving care by seeing the colour return to her pale lips, the happy light to her sweet eyes, and even a faint flush appear on her delicate cheeks.

While they were eating—or rather making believe to eat their make-believe breakfast—a singular noise was heard near by, to which at first they paid no particular attention, thinking it was the wind whistling through the matted branches of the thicket, if they thought of it at all; but presently it grew louder, and they could not imagine what it proceeded from. It was a sort of hissing sound, at once shrill and hoarse, quite impossible to describe accurately.

As it grew louder and louder, and seemed to be approaching them, the women manifested some alarm.

“Oh!” shrieked Serafina “I hope it’s not a snake; I shall die if it is; I am so terrified by the horrid, crawling creatures.”

“But it can’t possibly be a snake,” said Leander, reassuringly; “in such cold weather as this the snakes are all torpid and lying in their holes underground, stiffer than so many sticks.”

“Leander is right,” added the pedant, “this cannot be a snake; and besides, snakes never make such a sound as that at any time. It must proceed from some wild creature of the wood that our invasion has disturbed; perhaps we may be lucky enough to capture it and find it edible; that would be a piece of good fortune, indeed, quite like a fairy-tale.”

Meantime Scapin was listening attentively to the strange, incomprehensible sound, and watching keenly that part of the thicket from which it seemed to come. Presently a movement of the underbrush became noticeable, and just as he motioned to the company to keep perfectly quiet a magnificent big gander emerged from the bushes, stretching out his long neck, hissing with all his might, and waddling along with a sort of stupid majesty that was most diverting—closely followed by two geese, his good, simple-minded, confiding wives, in humble attendance upon their infuriated lord and master.

“Don’t stir, any of you,” said Scapin, under his breath, and I will endeavour to capture this splendid prize”—with which the clever scamp crept softly round behind his companions, who were still seated in a circle on the rug, so lightly that he made not the slightest sound; and while the gander—who with his two followers had stopped short at sight of the intruders—was intently examining them, with some curiosity mingled with his angry defiance, and apparently wondering in his stupid way how these mysterious figures came to be in that usually deserted spot, Scapin succeeded, by making a wide detour, in getting behind the three geese unseen, and noiselessly advancing upon them, with one rapid, dexterous movement, threw his

large heavy cloak over the coveted prize. In another instant he had the struggling gander, still enveloped in the cloak, in his arms, and, by compressing his neck tightly, quickly put an end to his resistance—and his existence at the same time; while his two wives, or rather widows, rushed back into the thick underbrush to avoid a like fate, making a great cackling and ado over the terrible catastrophe that had befallen their quondam lord and master.

“Bravo, Scapin! that was a clever trick indeed,” cried Hérode; “it throws those you are so often applauded for on the stage quite into the shade—a masterpiece of strategy, friend Scapin!—for, as is well known, geese are by nature very vigilant, and never caught off their guard—of which history gives us a notable instance, in the watchfulness of the sacred geese of the Capitol, whose loud cackling in the dead of night at the stealthy approach of the Gauls woke the sleeping soldiers to a sense of their danger just in time to save Rome. This splendid big fellow here saves us—after another fashion it is true, but one which is no less providential.”

The goose was plucked and prepared for the spit by Mme. Léonarde, while Blazius, the tyrant, and Leander busied themselves in gathering together a goodly quantity of dead wood and twigs, and laying them ready to light in a tolerably dry spot. Scapin, with his large clasp-knife, cut a straight, strong stick, stripped off the bark for a spit, and found two stout forked branches, which he stuck firmly into the ground on each side of the fire so that they would meet over it. A handful of dry straw from the chariot served as kindling, and they quickly had a bright blaze, over which the goose was suspended, and being duly turned and tended by Scapin, in a surprisingly short space of time began to assume a beautiful light brown hue, and send out such a savoury delicious odour that the tyrant sprang up and strode away from its immediate vicinity, declaring that if he remained near it the temptation to seize and swallow it, spit and all, would surely be too strong for him. Blazius had fetched from the chariot a huge tin platter that usually figured in theatrical feasts, upon which the goose, done to a turn, was finally placed with all due ceremony, and a second

breakfast was partaken of, which was by no means a fallacious, chimerical repast like the first. The pedant, who was an accomplished carver, officiated in that capacity on this auspicious occasion; begging the company, as he did so, to be kind enough to excuse the unavoidable absence, which he deeply regretted, of the slices of Seville oranges that should have formed a part of the dish—being an obligatory accessory of roast goose—and they with charming courtesy smilingly expressed their willingness to overlook for this once such a culinary solecism.

"Now," said Hérode, when nothing remained of the goose but its well-picked bones, "we must try to decide upon what is best to be done. Only three or four pistoles are left in the exchequer, and my office as treasurer bids fair to become a sinecure. We have been so unfortunate as to lose two valuable members of the troupe, Zerbine and poor Matamore, rendering many of our best plays impossible for us, and at any rate we cannot give dramatic representations that would bring in much money here in the fields, where our audience would be mainly composed of crows, jackdaws, and magpies—who could scarcely be expected to pay us very liberally for our entertainment. With that poor, miserable, old horse there, slowly dying between the shafts of our chariot, hardly able to drag one foot after another, we cannot reasonably expect to reach Poitiers in less than two days—if we do then—and our situation is an unpleasantly tragic one, for we run the risk of being frozen or starved to death by the wayside; fat geese, already roasted, do not emerge from every thicket you know."

"You state the case very clearly," the pedant said as he paused, "and make the evil very apparent, but you don't say a word about the remedy."

"My idea is," rejoined Hérode, "to stop at the first village we come to and give an entertainment. All work in the fields is at a standstill now, and the peasants are idle in consequence; they will be only too delighted at the prospect of a little amusement. Somebody will let us have his barn for our theatre, and Scapin shall go round the

town beating the drum, and announcing our programme, adding this important clause, that all those who cannot pay for their places in money may do so in provisions. A fowl, a ham, or a jug of wine, will secure a seat in the first row; a pair of pigeons, a dozen eggs, or a loaf of bread, in the second, and so on down. Peasants are proverbially stingy with their money, but will be liberal enough with their provisions; and though our purse will not be replenished, our larder will, which is equally important, since our very lives depend upon it. After that we can push on to Poitiers, and I know an inn-keeper there who will give us credit until we have had time to fill our purse again, and get our finances in good order."

"But what piece can we play, in case we find our village?" asked Scapin. "Our repertoire is sadly reduced, you know. Tragedies, and even the better class of comedies, would be all Greek to the stupid rustics, utterly ignorant as they are of history or fable, and scarcely even understanding the French language. The only thing to give them would be a roaring farce, with plenty of funny by-play, resounding blows, kicks and cuffs, ridiculous tumbles, and absurdities within their limited comprehension. The Rodomontades of Captain Matamore would be the very thing; but that is out of our power now that poor Matamore is dead."

When Scapin paused, de Sigognac made a sign with his hand that he wished to speak, and all the company turned respectfully towards him to listen to what he had to say. A little flush spread itself over his pale countenance, and it was only after a brief but sharp struggle with himself that he opened his tightly compressed lips, and addressed his expectant audience, as follows: "Although I do not possess poor Matamore's talent, I can almost rival him in thinness, and I will take his role, and do the best I can with it. I am your comrade, and I want to do my part in this strait we find ourselves in. I should be ashamed to share your prosperity, as I have done, and not aid you, so far as lies in my power, in your adversity, and this is the only way in which I can assist you. There is no one in the whole world to care what may become of the de Sigognacs; my house is crumbling into dust over the tombs of my

ancestors; oblivion covers my once glorious name, and the arms of my family are almost entirely obliterated above the deserted entrance to the Château de Sigognac. Perhaps I may yet see the three golden storks shine out brilliantly upon my shield, and life, prosperity, and happiness return to the desolate abode where my sad, hopeless youth was spent. But in the meantime, since to you I owe my escape from that dreary seclusion, I beg you to accept me freely as your comrade, and my poor services as such; to you I am no longer de Sigognac."

Isabelle had laid her hand on his arm at his first sentence, as soon as she comprehended what he meant to say, to try to stop him, and here she made another effort to interrupt; but for once he would not heed her, and continued, "I renounce my title of baron for the present; I fold it up and put it away at the bottom of my portmanteau, like a garment that is laid aside. Do not make use of it again, I pray you; we will see whether under a new name I may not succeed in escaping from the ill fortune that has thus far pursued me as the Baron de Sigognac. Henceforth then I take poor Matamore's place, and my name is Captain Fracasse."

"Bravo! vive Captain Fracasse!" cried they all, with enthusiasm, "may applause greet and follow him wherever he goes."

This sudden move on de Sigognac's part, at which the comedians were greatly astonished, as well as deeply touched, was not so unpremeditated as it seemed; he had been thinking about it for some time. He blushed at the idea of being a mere parasite, living upon the bounty of these honest players—who shared all they had with him so generously, and without ever making him feel, for a moment, that he was under any obligation to them, but—rather that he was conferring an honour upon them—he deemed it less unworthy a gentleman to appear upon the stage and do his part towards filling the common purse than to be their pensioner in idleness; and after all, there was no disgrace in becoming an actor. The idea of quitting them and going back to Sigognac had indeed presented itself to his mind, but he had

instantly repulsed it as base and cowardly—it is not in the hour of danger and disaster that the true soldier retires from the ranks. Besides, if he had wished to go ever so much, his love for Isabelle would have kept him near her; and then, though he was not given to day-dreams, he yet fancied that wonderful adventures, sudden changes, and strokes of good fortune might possibly be awaiting him in the mysterious future, into which he fain would peer, and he would inevitably lose the chance of them all if he returned to his ruinous château.

Everything being thus satisfactorily arranged, the old horse was harnessed up again, and the chariot moved slowly forward on its way. Their good meal had revived everybody's drooping spirits, and they all, excepting the duenna and Serafina, who never walked if they could possibly help it, trudged cheerily along, laughing and talking as they went.

Isabelle had taken de Sigognac's offered arm, and leaned on it proudly, glancing furtively up into his face, whenever he was looking away from her, with eyes full of tenderness and loving admiration, never suspecting, in her modesty, that it was for love of her that he had decided to turn actor—a thing so revolting, as she knew, to his pride as a gentleman. He was a hero in her eyes, and though she wished to reproach him for his hasty action, which she would have prevented if she could, she had not the heart to find fault with him for his noble devotion to the common cause after all. Yet she would have done anything, suffered everything herself, to have saved him this humiliation; hers being one of those true, loyal hearts that forget themselves in their love, and think only of the interests and happiness of the being beloved. She walked on beside him until her strength was exhausted, and then returned to her place in the chariot, giving him a look so eloquent of love and admiration, as he carefully drew her wraps about her, that his heart bounded with joy, and he felt that no sacrifice could be too great which was made for her sweet sake.

In every direction around them, as far as the eye could reach, the snow-covered country was utterly devoid of town, village, or hamlet; not a sign of life was anywhere to be seen.

“A sorry prospect for our fine plan,” said the pedant, after a searching examination of their surroundings, “and I very much fear that the plentiful store of provisions Hérode promised us will not be forthcoming. I cannot see the smoke of a single chimney, strain my eyes as I will, nor the weather-cock on any village spire.”

“Have a little patience, Blazius!” the tyrant replied. “Where people live too much crowded together the air becomes vitiated, you know, and it is very salubrious to have the villages situated a good distance apart.”

“What a healthy part of the country this must be then the inhabitants need not to fear epidemics—for to begin with there are no inhabitants. At this rate our Captain Fracasse will not have a chance very soon to make his debut.”

By this time it was nearly dark, the sky was overcast with heavy leaden clouds, and only a faint lurid glow on the horizon in the west showed where the sun had gone down. An icy wind, blowing full in their faces, and the hard, frozen surface of the snow, made their progress both difficult and painful. The poor old horse slipped at every step, though Scapin was carefully leading him, and staggered along like a drunken man, striking first against one shaft and then against the other, growing perceptibly weaker at every turn of the wheels behind him. Now and again he shook his head slowly up and down, and cast appealing glances at those around him, as his trembling legs seemed about to give way under him. His hour had come—the poor, old horse! and he was dying in harness like a brave beast, as he was. At last he could no more, and falling heavily to the ground gave one feeble kick as he stretched himself out on his side, and yielded up the ghost. Frightened by the sudden shock, the women shrieked loudly, and the men, running to their assistance, helped them to clamber out of the chariot. Mme. Léonarde and Serafina were none the worse for the

fright, but Isabelle had fainted quite away, and de Sigognac, lifting her light weight easily, carried her in his arms to the bank at the side of the road, followed by the duenna, while Scapin bent down over the prostrate horse and carefully examined his ears.

“He is stone dead,” said he in despairing tones; “his ears are cold, and there is no pulsation in the auricular artery.”

“Then I suppose we shall have to harness ourselves to the chariot in his place,” broke in Leander dolefully, almost weeping. “Oh! cursed be the mad folly that led me to choose an actor’s career.”

“Is this a time to groan and bewail yourself?” roared the tyrant savagely, entirely out of patience with Leander’s everlasting jeremiads; “for heaven’s sake pluck up a little courage, and be a man! And now to consider what is to be done; but first let us see how our good little Isabelle is getting on; is she still unconscious? No; she opens her eyes, and there is the colour coming back to her lips; she will do now, thanks to the baron and Mme. Léonarde. We must divide ourselves into two bands; one will stay with the women and the chariot, the other will scour the country in search of aid. We cannot think of remaining here all night, for we should be frozen stiff long before morning. Come, Captain Fracasse, Leander, and Scapin, you three being the youngest, and also the fleetest of foot, off with you. Run like greyhounds, and bring us succour as speedily as may be. Blazius and I will meantime do duty as guardians of the chariot and its contents.”

The three men designated signified their readiness to obey the tyrant, and set off across country, though not feeling at all sanguine as to the results of their search, for the night was intensely dark; but that very darkness had its advantages, and came to their aid in an unexpected manner, for though it effectually concealed all surrounding objects, it made visible a tiny point of light shining at the foot of a little hill some distance from the road.

"Behold," cried the pedant, "our guiding star! as welcome to us weary travellers, lost in the desert, as the polar star to the distressed mariner 'in periculo maris.' That blessed star yonder, whose rays shine far out into the darkness, is a light burning in some warm, comfortable room, which forms—Heaven be praised!—part of the habitation of human and civilized beings—not Laestrygon savages. Without doubt there is a bright fire blazing on the hearth in that cosy room, and over it hangs a famous big pot, from which issue puffs of a delicious odour—oh, delightful thought!—round which my imagination holds high revel, and in fancy I wash down with generous wine the savoury morsels from that glorious pot-au-feu."

"You rave, my good Blazius," said the tyrant, "the frost must have gotten into your brain—that makes men mad, they say, or silly. Yet there is some method in your madness, some truth in your ravings, for yonder light must indicate an inhabited dwelling. This renders a change in the plans for our campaign advisable. We will all go forward together towards the promised refuge, and leave the chariot where it is; no robbers will be abroad on such a night as this to interfere with its contents. We will take our few valuables—they are not so numerous or weighty but that we can carry them with us; for once it is an advantage that our possessions are few. To-morrow morning we will come back to fetch the chariot: now, forward, march!—and it is time, for I am nearly frozen to death."

The comedians accordingly started across the fields, towards the friendly light that promised them so much—Isabelle supported by de Sigognac, Serafina by Leander, and the duenna dragged along by Scapin; while Blazius and the tyrant formed the advance guard. It was not easy work; sometimes plunging into deep snow, more than knee high, as they came upon a ditch, hidden completely under the treacherously smooth white surface, or stumbling, and even falling more than once, over some unseen obstacle; but at length they came up to what seemed to be a large, low building, probably a farm-house, surrounded by stone walls, with a big gate for carts to enter. In the expanse of dark wall before them shone the light which had

guided their steps, and upon approaching they found that it proceeded from a small window, whose shutters—most fortunately for them, poor, lost wanderers—had not yet been closed. The dogs within the enclosure, perceiving the approach of strangers, began to bark loudly and rush about the yard; they could hear them jumping up at the walls in vain efforts to get at the intruders. Presently the sound of a man's voice and footsteps mingled with their barking, and in a moment the whole establishment seemed to be on the alert.

"Stay here, all of you," said the pedant, halting at a little distance from the gate, "and let me go forward alone to knock for admission. Our numbers might alarm the good people of the farm, and lead them to fancy us a band of robbers, with designs upon their rustic Penates; as I am old, and inoffensive looking, they will not be afraid of me."

This advice was approved by all, and Blazius, going forward by himself, knocked gently at the great gate, which was first opened cautiously just a very little, then flung impetuously back; and then the comedians, from their outpost in the snow, saw a most extraordinary and inexplicable scene enacted before their astonished eyes. The pedant and the farmer who had opened the gate, after gazing at each other a moment intently, by the light of the lantern which the latter held up to see what manner of man his nocturnal visitor might be, and after exchanging rapidly a few words, that the others could not hear, accompanied by wild gesticulations, rushed into each other's arms, and began pounding each other heartily upon the back—mutually bestowing resounding accolades—as is the manner upon the stage of expressing joy at meeting a dear friend. Emboldened by this cordial reception, which yet was a mystery to them, the rest of the troupe ventured to approach, though slowly and timidly.

"Halloa! all of you there," cried the pedant suddenly, in a joyful voice, "come on without fear, you will be made welcome by a friend and a brother, a world-famed

member of our profession, the darling of Thespis, the favourite of Thalia, no less a personage than the celebrated Bellombre—you all know his glorious record. Blessed is the happy chance that has directed our steps hither, to the philosophic retreat where this histrionic hero reposes tranquilly upon his laurels."

"Come in, I pray you, ladies and gentlemen," said Bellombre, advancing to meet them, with a graceful courtesy which proved that the ci-devant actor had not put aside his elegant, courtly manners when he donned his peasant dress.

"Come in quickly out of this biting wind; my dwelling is rude and homely, but you will be better off within it than here in the open air."

They needed no urging, and joyfully accepting his kind invitation followed their host into the house, charmed with this unhoped-for good fortune. Blazius and Bellombre were old acquaintances, and had formerly been members Of the same troupe; as their respective roles did not clash there was no rivalry between them, and they had become fast friends—being fellow worshippers at the shrine of the merry god of wine. Bellombre had retired from the stage some years before, when at his father's death he inherited this farm and a small fortune. The parts that he excelled in required a certain degree of youth, and he was not sorry to withdraw before wrinkles and whitening locks should make it necessary for him to abandon his favourite roles. In the world he was believed to be dead, but his splendid acting was often quoted by his former admirers—who were wont to declare that there had been nothing to equal it seen on the stage since he had made his last bow to the public.

The room into which he led his guests was very spacious, and served both as kitchen and sitting-room—there was also a large curtained bed standing in an alcove at the end farthest from the fire, as was not unusual in ancient farm-houses. The blaze from the four or five immense logs of wood heaped up on the huge andirons was roaring up the broad chimney flue, and filling the room with a bright, ruddy glow—a most welcome sight to the poor half-frozen travellers, who gathered around it and

luxuriated in its genial warmth. The large apartment was plainly and substantially furnished, just as any well-to-do farmer's house might be, but near one of the windows stood a round table heaped up with books, some of them lying open as if but just put down, which showed that the owner of the establishment had not lost his taste for literary pursuits, but devoted to them his long winter evenings.

The cordiality of their welcome and the deliciously warm atmosphere in which they found themselves had combined to raise the spirits of the comedians—colour returned to pale faces, light to heavy eyes, and smiles to anxious lips—their gaiety was in proportion to the misery and peril from which they had just happily escaped, their hardships were all forgotten, and they gave themselves up entirely to the enjoyment of the hour. Their host had called up his servants, who bustled about, setting the table and making other preparations for supper, to the undisguised delight of Blazius, who said triumphantly to the tyrant, "You see now, Hérode, and must acknowledge, that my predictions, inspired by the little glimmer of light we saw from afar, are completely verified—they have all come literally true. Fragrant puffs are issuing even now from the mammoth pot-au-feu there over the fire, and we shall presently wash down its savoury contents with draughts of generous wine, which I see already awaiting us on the table yonder. It is warm and bright and cosy in this room, and we appreciate and enjoy it all doubly, after the darkness and the cold and the danger from which we have escaped into the grateful shelter of this hospitable roof; and to crown the whole, our host is the grand, illustrious, incomparable Bellombre—flower and cream of all comedians, past, present and future, and best of good fellows."

"Our happiness would be complete if only poor Matamore were here," said Isabelle with a sigh.

"Pray what has happened to him?" asked Bellombre, who knew him by reputation.

The tyrant told him the tragic story of the snow-storm, and its fatal consequences.

“But for this thrice-blessed meeting with my old and faithful friend here,” Blazius added, “the same fate would probably have overtaken us ere morning—we should all have been found, frozen stiff and stark, by the next party of travellers on the post road.”

“That would have been a pity indeed,” Bellombre rejoined, and glancing admiringly at Isabelle and Serafina, added gallantly, “but surely these young goddesses would have melted the snow, and thawed the ice, with the fire I see shining in their sparkling eyes.”

“You attribute too much power to our eyes,” Serafina made answer; “they could not even have made any impression upon a heart, in the thick, impenetrable darkness that enveloped us; the tears that the icy cold forced from them would have extinguished the flames of the most ardent love.”

While they sat at supper, Blazius told their host of the sad condition of their affairs, at which he seemed no way surprised.

“There are always plenty of ups and downs in a theatrical career,” he said—“the wheel of Fortune turns very fast in that profession; but if misfortunes come suddenly, so also does prosperity follow quickly in their train. Don’t be discouraged!—things are brightening with you now. Tomorrow morning I will send one of my stout farm-horses to bring your chariot on here, and we will rig up a theatre in my big barn; there is a large town not far from this which will send us plenty of spectators. If the entertainment does not fetch as good a sum as I think it will, I have a little fund of pistoles lying idle here that will be entirely at your service, for, by Apollo! I would not leave my good Blazius and his friends in distress so long as I had a copper in my purse.”

“I see that you are always the same warm-hearted, openhanded Bellombre as of old,” cried the pedant, grasping the other’s outstretched hand warmly; “you have not grown rusty and hard in consequence of your bucolic occupations.”

“No,” Bellombre replied, with a smile; “I do not let my brain lie fallow while I cultivate my fields. I make a point of reading over frequently the good old authors, seated comfortably by the fire with my feet on the fender, and I read also such new works as I am able to procure, from time to time, here in the depths of the country. I often go carefully over my own old parts, and I see plainly what a self-satisfied fool I was in the old days, when I was applauded to the echo every time I appeared upon the stage, simply because I happened to be blessed with a sonorous voice, a graceful carriage, and a fine leg; the doting stupidity of the public, with which I chanced to be a favourite, was the true cause of my success.”

“Only the great Bellombre himself would ever be suffered to say such things as these of that most illustrious ornament of our profession,” said the tyrant, courteously.

“Art is long, but life is short,” continued the ci-devant actor, “and I should have arrived at a certain degree of proficiency at last perhaps, but—I was beginning to grow stout; and I would not allow myself to cling to the stage until two footmen should have to come and help me up from my rheumatic old knees every time I had a declaration of love to make, so I gladly seized the opportunity afforded me by my little inheritance, and retired in the height of my glory.”

“And you were wise, Bellombre,” said Blazius, “though your retreat was premature; you might have given ten years more to the theatre, and then have retired full early.”

In effect he was still a very handsome, vigorous man, about whom no signs of age were apparent, save an occasional thread of silver amid the rich masses of dark hair that fell upon his shoulders.

The younger men, as well as the three actresses, were glad to retire to rest early; but Blazius and the tyrant, with their host, sat up drinking the latter’s capital wine until far into the night. At length they, too, succumbed to their fatigue; and while they are sleeping we will return to the abandoned chariot to see what was going on there. In

the gray light of the early morning it could be perceived that the poor old horse still lay just as he had fallen; several crows were flitting about, not yet venturing to attack the miserable carcass, peering at it suspiciously from a respectful distance, as if they feared some hidden snare. At last one, bolder than its fellows, alighted upon the poor beast's head, and was just bending over that coveted dainty, the eye—which was open and staring—when a heavy step, coming over the snow, startled him. With a croak of disappointment he quitted his post of vantage, rose heavily in the air, and flapped slowly off to a neighbouring tree, followed by his companions, cawing and scolding hoarsely. The figure of a man appeared, coming along the road at a brisk pace, and carrying a large bundle in his arms, enveloped in his cloak. This he put down upon the ground when he came up with the chariot, standing directly in his way, and it proved to be a little girl about twelve years old; a child with large, dark, liquid eyes that had a feverish light in them—eyes exactly like Chiquita's. There was a string of pearl beads round the slender neck, and an extraordinary combination of rags and tatters, held together in some mysterious way, hung about the thin, fragile little figure. It was indeed Chiquita herself, and with her, Agostino—the ingenious rascal, whose laughable exploit with his scarecrow brigands has been already recorded—who, tired of following a profession that yielded no profits, had set out on foot for Paris—where all men of talent could find employment they said—marching by night, and lying hidden by day, like all other beasts of prey. The poor child, overcome with fatigue and benumbed by the cold, had given out entirely that night, in spite of her valiant efforts to keep up with Agostino, and he had at last picked her up in his arms and carried her for a while—she was but a light burden—hoping to find some sort of shelter soon.

"What can be the meaning of this?" he said to Chiquita. "Usually we stop the vehicles, but here we are stopped by one in our turn; we must look out lest it be full of travellers, ready to demand our money or our lives."

"There's nobody in it," Chiquita replied, having peeped in under the cover.

“Perhaps there may be something worth having inside there,” Agostino said; “we will look and see,” and he proceeded to light the little dark lantern he always had with him, for the daylight was not yet strong enough to penetrate into the dusky interior of the chariot. Chiquita, who was greatly excited by the hope of booty, jumped in, and rapidly searched it, carefully directing the light of the lantern upon the packages and confused mass of theatrical articles stowed away in the back part of it, but finding nothing of value anywhere.

“Search thoroughly, my good little Chiquita!” said the brigand, as he kept watch outside, “be sure that you don’t overlook anything.”

“There is nothing here, absolutely nothing that is worth the trouble of carrying away. Oh, yes! here is a bag, with something that sounds like money in ft.”

“Give it to me,” cried Agostino eagerly, snatching it from her, and making a rapid examination of its contents; but he threw it down angrily upon the ground, exclaiming, “the devil take it! I thought we had found a treasure at last, but instead of good money there’s nothing but a lot of pieces of gilded lead and such-like in it. But we’ll get one thing out of this anyhow—a good rest inside here for you, sheltered from the wind and cold. Your poor little feet are bleeding, and they must be nearly frozen. Curl yourself down there on those cushions, and I will cover you with this bit of painted canvas. Now go to sleep, and I will watch while you have a nap; it is too early yet for honest folks to be abroad, and we shall not be disturbed.” In a few minutes poor little Chiquita was sound asleep.

Agostino sat on the front seat of the chariot, with his navaja open and lying beside him, watching the road and the fields all about, with the keen, practised eye of a man of his lawless profession. All was still. No sound or movement any where, save among the crows. In spite of his iron will and constitution he began to feel an insidious drowsiness creeping over him, which he did not find it easy to shake off; several times his eyelids closed, and he lifted them resolutely, only to have them fall

again in another instant. In fact he was just dropping into a doze, when he felt, as in a dream, a hot breath on his face, and suddenly waked to see two gleaming eyeballs close to his. With a movement more rapid than thought itself, he seized the wolf by the throat with his left hand, and picking up his navaja with the other, plunged it up to the hilt into the animal's breast. It must have gone through the heart, for he dropped down dead in the road, without a struggle.

Although he had gained the victory so easily over his fierce assailant, Agostino concluded that this was not a good place for them to tarry in, and called to Chiquita, who jumped up instantly, wide awake, and manifested no alarm at sight of the dead wolf lying beside the chariot.

"We had better move on," said he, "that carcass of the horse there draws the wolves; they are often mad with hunger in the winter time you know, and especially when there is snow on the ground. I could easily kill a pretty good number of them, but they might come down upon us by scores, and if I should happen to fall asleep again it would not be pleasant to wake up and find myself in the stomach of one of those confounded brutes. When I was disposed of they would make only a mouthful of you, little one! So come along, we must scamper off as fast as ever we can. That fellow there was only the advance guard, the others will not be far behind him—this carcass will keep them busy for a while, and give us time to get the start of them. You can walk now, Chiquita, can't you?"

"Yes, indeed," she replied cheerily, "that little nap has done me so much good. Poor Agostino! you shall not have to carry me again, like a great clumsy parcel. And Agostino," she added with a fierce energy, "when my feet refuse to walk or run in your service you must just cut my throat with your big knife there, and throw me into the next ditch. I will thank you for it, Agostino, for I could not bear to have your precious life in danger for the sake of poor, miserable little me." Thereupon this strange pair, both very fleet of foot, set off running, side by side, the brigand holding

Chiquita by the hand, so as to give her all the aid and support he could, and they quickly passed out of sight. No sooner had they departed than the crows came swooping down from their perch in the nearest tree, and fell to fiercely upon their horrible feast, in which they were almost directly joined by several ravenous wolves—and they made such good use of their time, that in a few hours nothing remained of the poor old horse but his bones, his tail, and his shoes. When somewhat later the tyrant arrived, accompanied by one of Bellombre's farm-hands, leading the horse that was to take the chariot back with them, he was naturally astonished to find only the skeleton, with the harness and trappings, still intact, about it, for neither birds nor beasts had interfered with them, and his surprise was increased when he discovered the half-devoured carcass of the wolf lying under the chariot wheels. There also, scattered on the road, were the sham louis-d'or that did duty upon the stage when largesses were to be distributed; and upon the snow were the traces, clearly defined, of the footsteps of a man, approaching the chariot from the way it had come, and of those of the same man, and also of a child, going on beyond it.

"It would appear," said Hérode to himself, "that the chariot of Thespis has received visitors, since we abandoned it, of more than one sort, and for my part I am very thankful to have missed them all. Oh, happy accident! that, when it happened, seemed to us so great a misfortune, yet is proven now to have been a blessing in disguise. And you, my poor old horse, you could not have done us a greater service than to die just when and where you did. Thanks to you we have escaped the wolves—two-legged ones, which are perhaps the most to be dreaded of all, as well as the ravenous brethren of this worthy lying here. What a dainty feast the sweet, tender flesh of those plump little pullets, Isabelle and Serafina, would have been for them, to say nothing of the tougher stuff the rest of us are made of. What a bountiful meal we should have furnished them—the murderous brutes!" While the tyrant was indulging in this soliloquy Bellombre's servant had detached the chariot from the

skeleton of the poor old horse, and had harnessed to it, with considerable difficulty, the animal he had been leading, which was terrified at sight of the bleeding, mutilated carcass of the wolf lying on the snow, and the ghastly skeleton of its predecessor. Arrived at the farm, the chariot was safely stowed away under a shed, and upon examination it was found that nothing was missing. Indeed, something had been left there, for a small clasp-knife was picked up in it, which had fallen out of Chiquita's pocket, and excited a great deal of curiosity and conjecture. It was of Spanish make, and bore upon its sharp, pointed blade, a sinister inscription in that language, to this effect—

"When this viper bites you, make sure That you must die—for there is no cure."

No one could imagine how it had come there, and the tyrant was especially anxious to clear up the mystery that puzzled them all. Isabelle, who was a little inclined to be superstitious, and attach importance to omens, signs of evil, and such-like, felt troubled about it. She spoke Spanish perfectly, and understood the full force and significance of the strange inscription upon the wicked-looking blade of the tiny weapon.

Meantime, Scapin, dressed in his freshest and most gaudy costume, had marched into the neighbouring town, carrying his drum; he stationed himself in the large, public square, and made such good play with his drum-sticks that he soon had a curious crowd around him, to whom he made an eloquent address, setting forth in glowing terms the great attractions offered by "the illustrious comedians of Hérode's celebrated troupe," who, "for this night only," would delight the public by the representation of that screaming farce, the Rodomontades of Captain Fracasse; to be followed by a "bewitching Moorish dance," performed by the "incomparable Mlle. Serafina." After enlarging brilliantly upon this theme, he added, that as they were "more desirous of glory than profit," they would be willing to accept provisions of all kinds, instead of coin of the realm, in payment of places, from those who had not

the money to spare, and asked them to let all their friends know. This closing announcement made a great sensation among his attentive listeners, and he marched back to the farm, confident that they would have a goodly number of spectators. There he found the stage already erected in the barn, and a rehearsal in progress, which was necessary on de Sigognac's account.

Bellombre was instructing him in various minor details as the play went on, and for a novice he did wonderfully well—acting with much spirit and grace, showing decided talent, and remarkable aptitude. But it was very evident that he was greatly annoyed by some portions of the piece, and an angry flush mounted to the roots of his hair at the whacks and cuffs so liberally bestowed upon the doughty captain.

His comrades spared him as much as possible—feeling that it must be intensely repugnant to him—but he grew furious in spite of all his efforts to control his temper, and at each fresh attack upon him his flashing eyes and knitted brows betrayed the fierce rage he was in; then, suddenly remembering that his role required a very different expression of countenance, he would pull himself up, and endeavour to imitate that which Matamore had been wont to assume in this character. Bellombre, who was watching him critically, stopped him a moment, to say: "You make a great mistake in attempting to suppress your natural emotions; you should take care not to do it, for they produce a capital effect, and you can create a new type of stage bully; when you have gotten accustomed to this sort of thing, and no longer feel this burning indignation, you must feign it. Strike out in a path of your own, and you will be sure to attain success—far more so than if you attempt to follow in another's footsteps. Fracasse, as you represent him, loves and admires courage, and would fain be able to manifest it—he is angry with himself for being such an arrant coward. When free from danger, he dreams of nothing but heroic exploits and superhuman enterprises; but when any actual peril threatens him, his too vivid imagination conjures up such terrible visions of bleeding wounds and violent death that his heart fails him. Yet his pride revolts at the idea of being beaten; for a

moment he is filled with rage, but his courage all disappears with the first blows he receives, and he finally shows himself to be the poltroon that he himself despises. This method it appears to me is far superior to the absurd grimaces, trembling legs, and exaggerated gestures, by which indifferent actors endeavour to excite the laughter of their audience—but meantime lose sight entirely of their art."

The baron gratefully accepted the veteran actor's advice, and played his part after the fashion indicated by him with so much spirit that all present applauded his acting enthusiastically, and prophesied its success. The performances were to begin at an early hour, and as the time approached, de Sigognac put on poor Matamore's costume, to which he had fallen heir, and which Mme. Léonarde had taken in hand and cleverly altered for him, so that he could get into it. He had a sharp struggle with his pride as be donned this absurd dress, and made himself ready for his debut as an actor, but resolutely repressed all rising regrets, and determined faithfully to do his best in the new role he had undertaken.

A large audience had gathered in the big barn, which was brilliantly lighted, and the representation began before a full house. At the end farthest from the stage, and behind the spectators, were some cattle in their stalls, that stared at the unwonted scene with an expression of stupid wonder in their great, soft eyes—the eyes that Homer, the grand old Greek poet, deemed worthy to supply an epithet for the beauteous orbs of majestic Juno herself—and in the midst of one of the most exciting parts of the play, a calf among them was moved to express its emotions by an unearthly groan, which did not in the least disconcert the audience, but had nearly been too much for the gravity of the actors upon the stage.

Captain Fracasse won much applause, and indeed acted his part admirably, being under no constraint; for he did not need to fear the criticism of this rustic audience as he would have done that of a more cultivated and experienced one; and, too, he felt sure that there could be nobody among the spectators that knew him, or anything

about him. The other actors were also vigorously clapped by the toil-hardened hands of these lowly tillers of the soil—whose applause throughout was bestowed, Bellombre declared, judiciously and intelligently. Serafina executed her Moorish dance with a degree of agility and voluptuous grace that would have done honour to a professional ballet-dancer, or to a Spanish gipsy, and literally brought down the house.

But while de Sigognac was thus employed, far from his ancient château, the portraits of his ancestors that hung upon its walls were frowning darkly at the degeneracy of this last scion of their noble race, and a sigh, almost a groan, that issued from their faded lips, echoed dismally through the deserted house. In the kitchen, Pierre, with Miraut and Beelzebub on either side of him—all three looking melancholy and forlorn—sat thinking of his absent lord, and said aloud, “Oh, where is my poor, dear master now?” a big tear rolling down his withered cheek as he stooped to caress his dumb companions.

CHAPTER VIII. THE DUKE OF VALLOMBREUSE

The next morning Bellombre drew Blazius aside, and untying the strings of a long leathern purse emptied out of it into the palm of his hand a hundred pistoles, which he piled up neatly on the table by which they were standing; to the great admiration of the pedant, who thought to himself that his friend was a lucky fellow to be in possession of so large a sum—absolute wealth in his eyes. But what was his surprise when Bellombre swept them all up and put them into his own hands.

“You must have understood,” he said, “that I did not bring out this money in order to torment you in like manner with Tantalus, and I want you to take it, without any scruples, as freely as it is given—or loaned, if you are too proud to accept a gift from an old friend. These pieces were made to circulate—they are round, you see—and by this time they must be tired of lying tied up in my old purse there. I

have no use for them; there's nothing to spend them on here; the farm produces everything that is needed in my household, so I shall not miss them, and it is much better in every way that they should be in your hands."

Not finding any adequate reply to make to this astonishing speech, Blazius put the money into his pocket, and, after first administering to his friend a cordial accolade, grasped and wrung his hand with grateful fervour, while an inconvenient tear, that he had tried in vain to wink away, ran down his jolly red nose. As Bellombre had said the night before, affairs were brightening with the troupe; good fortune had come at last, and the hard times they had met and struggled against so bravely and uncomplainingly were among the things of the past. The receipts of the previous evening—for there had been some money taken in, as well as plentiful stores of edibles—added to Bellombre's pistoles, made a good round sum, and the chariot of Thespis, so deplorably bare of late, was now amply provisioned. Not to do things by halves, their generous host lent to the comedians two stout farm horses, with a man to drive them into Poitiers, and bring them back home again. They had on their gala-day harness, and from their gaudily-painted, high-peaked collars hung strings of tiny bells, that jingled cheerily at every firm, regular step of the great, gentle creatures. So our travellers set out in high feather, and their entry into Poitiers, though not so magnificent as Alexander's into Babylon, was still in very fine style indeed. As they threaded their way through the narrow, tortuous streets of that ancient town, the noise of their horses' iron shoes ringing out against the rough stone pavement, and the clatter of their wheels drew many inmates of the houses they passed to the windows, and a little crowd collected around them as they stood waiting for admission before the great entrance door of the Armes de France; the driver, meanwhile, cracking his whip till it sounded like a volley of musketry, to which the horses responded by shaking their heads, and making all the little bells about them jingle sharply and merrily. There was a wonderful difference between this and their arrival at the last inn they had stopped at—the night of the

snow-storm—and the landlord, hearing such welcome sounds without, ran himself to admit his guests, and opened the two leaves of the great door, so that the chariot could pass into the interior court. This hotel was the finest in Poitiers, where all the rich and noble travellers were in the habit of alighting, and there was an air of gaiety and prosperity about it very pleasing to our comedians, in contrast with all the comfortless, miserable lodgings they had been obliged to put up with for a long time past. The landlord, whose double, or rather triple chin testified to bountiful fare, and the ruddy tints of his face to the excellence of his wines, seemed to be the incarnation of good humour.

He was so plump, so fresh, so rosy and so smiling, that it was a pleasure only to look at him. When he saw the tyrant, he fairly bubbled over with delight. A troupe of comedians always attracted people to his house, and brought him in a great deal of money; for the young men of leisure of the town sought their company, and were constantly drinking wine with the actors, and giving dainty little suppers, and treats of various kinds, to the actresses.

“You are heartily welcome, Seignior Hérode! What happy chance brings you this way?” said the landlord, smilingly. “It is a long time since we have had the pleasure of seeing you at the Armes de France.”

“So it is, Maître Bilot,” the tyrant answered; “but we cannot be giving our poor little performances always in the same place, you see; the spectators would become so familiar with all our tricks that they could do them themselves, so we are forced to absent ourselves for a while. And how are things going on here, now? Have you many of the nobility and gentry in town at present?”

“A great many, Seignior Hérode, for the hunting is over, so they have come in from the châteaux. But they don’t know what to do with themselves, for it is so dull and quiet here. People can’t be eating and drinking all the time, and they are dying for want of a little amusement. You will have full houses.”

“Well,” rejoined the tyrant, “then please give us seven or eight good rooms, have three or four fat capons put down to roast, bring up, from that famous cellar of yours, a dozen of the capital wine I used to drink here—you know which I mean—and spread abroad the news of the arrival of Hérode’s celebrated troupe at the Armes de France, with a new and extensive repertoire, to give a few representations in Poitiers.”

While this conversation was going on the rest of the comedians had alighted, and were already being conducted to their respective rooms by several servants. The one given to Isabelle was a little apart from the others—those in their immediate vicinity being occupied—which was not displeasing to the modest young girl, who was often greatly annoyed and embarrassed by the promiscuous, free-and-easy way of getting on, inseparable from such a Bohemian life. She always accepted the inevitable with a good grace, and never complained of the vexation she felt at being obliged to share her bed-chamber with Serafina or the duenna, or perhaps both; but it was a luxury she had scarcely dared to hope for to have her room entirely to herself, and moreover sufficiently distant from her companions to insure her a good deal of privacy.

In a marvellously short space of time the whole town had become acquainted with the news of the arrival of the comedians, and the young men of wealth and fashion began flocking to the hotel, to drink a bottle of Maître Bilot’s wine, and question him about the beauty and charms of the actresses; curling up the points of their mustaches as they did so with such an absurdly conceited, insolent air of imaginary triumph, that the worthy landlord could not help laughing in his sleeve at them as he gave his discreet, mysterious answers, accompanied by significant gestures calculated to turn the silly heads of these dandified young calves, and make them wild with curiosity and impatience.

Isabelle, when left alone, had first unpacked a portion of her clothing, and arranged

it neatly on the shelves of the wardrobe in her room, and then proceeded to indulge in the luxury of a bath and complete change of linen. She took down her long, fine, silky hair, combed it carefully, and arranged it tastefully, with a pale blue ribbon entwined artistically in it; which delicate tint was very becoming to her, with her fair, diaphanous complexion, and lovely flush, like a rose-leaf, on her cheek. When she had put on the silvery gray dress, with its pretty blue trimmings, which completed her simple toilet, she smiled at her own charming reflection in the glass, and thought of a pair of dark, speaking eyes that she knew would find her fair, and pleasant to look upon. As she turned away from the mirror a sunbeam streamed in through her window, and she could not resist the temptation to open the casement and put her pretty head out, to see what view there might be from it. She looked down into a narrow, deserted alley, with the wall of the hotel on one side and that of the garden opposite on the other, so high that it reached above the tops of the trees within. From her window she could look down into this garden, and see, quite at the other end of it, the large mansion it belonged to, whose lofty, blackened walls testified to its antiquity. Two gentlemen were walking slowly, arm in arm, along one of the broad paths leading towards the house, engrossed in conversation; both were young and handsome, but they were scarcely of equal rank, judging by the marked deference paid by one, the elder, to the other.

We will call this friendly pair Orestes and Pylades for the present, until we ascertain their real names. The former was about one or two and twenty, and remarkably handsome and distingué—strikingly so—with a very white skin, intensely black hair and eyes, a tall, slender, lithe figure, shown to advantage by the rich costume of tan-coloured velvet he wore; and well-formed feet, with high, arched insteps, small and delicate enough for a woman’s—that more than one woman had envied him—encased in dainty, perfectly fitting boots, made of white Russia leather. From the careless ease of his manners, and the haughty grace of his carriage, one would readily divine that he was a great noble; one of the favoured few of the earth, who

are sure of being well received everywhere, and courted and flattered by everybody. Pylades, though a good-looking fellow enough, with auburn hair and mustache, was not nearly so handsome or striking, either in face or figure, as his companion. They were talking of women; Orestes declaring himself a woman-hater from that time forward, because of what he was pleased to call the persecutions of his latest mistress, of whom he was thoroughly tired—no new thing with him—but who would not submit to be thrown aside, like a cast-off glove, without making a struggle to regain the favour of her ci-devant admirer. He was anathematizing the vanity, treachery, and deceitfulness of all women, without exception, from the duchess down to the dairy-maid, and declaring that he should renounce their society altogether for the future, when they reached the end of the walk, at the house, and turned about to pace its length again.

As they did so he chanced to glance upward, and perceived Isabelle at her window. He nudged his companion, to direct his attention to her, as he said, “Just look up at that window! Do you see the delicious, adorable creature there? She seems a goddess, rather than a mere mortal woman—Aurora, looking forth from her chamber in the East—with her golden brown hair, her heavenly countenance, and her sweet, soft eyes. Only observe the exquisite grace of her attitude—leaning slightly forward on one elbow, so as to bring into fine relief the shapely curves of her beautiful form. I would be willing to swear that hers is a lovely character—different from the rest of her sex. She is one by herself—a peerless creature—a very pearl of womanhood—a being fit for Paradise. Her face tells me that she is modest, pure, amiable, and refined. Her manners must be charming, her conversation fresh, sparkling, and elevating.”

“The deuce!” exclaimed Pylades, laughingly, “what good eyes you must have to make out all that at such a distance! Now I see merely a woman at a window, who is rather pretty, to tell the honest truth, but not likely to possess half the perfections you so lavishly bestow upon her. Take care, or you will be in love with her directly.”

“Oh! I’m that now, over head and ears. I must find out forthwith who she is, and what; but one thing is certain, mine she must be, though it cost me the half, nay, the whole of my fortune to win her, and there be a hundred rivals to overcome and slay ere I can carry her off from them in triumph.”

“Come, come, don’t get so excited,” said Pylades, “you will throw yourself into a fever; but what has become of the contempt and hatred for the fair sex you were declaring so vehemently just now? The first pretty face has routed it all.”

“But when I talked like that I did not know that this lovely angel existed upon earth, and what I said was an odious, outrageous blasphemy—a monstrous, abominable heresy—for which I pray that Venus, fair goddess of love and beauty, will graciously forgive me.”

“Oh, yes! she’ll forgive you fast enough, never fear, for she is always very indulgent to such hot-headed lovers as you are.”

“I am going to open the campaign,” said Orestes, “and declare war courteously on my beautiful enemy.”

With these words he stopped short, fixed his bold eyes on Isabelle’s face, took off his hat, in a gallant and respectful way, so that its long plume swept the ground, and wafted a kiss on the tips of his fingers towards the new object of his ardent admiration. The young actress, who saw this demonstration with much annoyance, assumed a cold, composed manner, as if to show this insolent fellow that he had made a mistake, drew back from the window, closed it, and let fall the curtain; all done calmly and deliberately, and with the frigid dignity with which she was wont to rebuke such overtures.

“There,” exclaimed Pylades, “your Aurora is hidden behind a cloud; not very promising, that, for the rest of the day.”

“I don’t agree with you; I regard it, on the contrary, as a favourable augury that my little beauty has retired. Don’t you know that when the soldier hides himself behind

the battlements of the tower, it signifies that the besieger's arrow has hit him? I tell you she has mine now, sticking in under her left wing; that kiss will force her to think of me all night, if only to be vexed with me, and tax me with effrontery—a fault which is never displeasing to ladies, I find, though they do sometimes make a great outcry about it, for the sake of appearances. There is something between me and the fair unknown now; a very slight, almost imperceptible thread it may seem at present, but I will so manage as to make from it a rope, by which I shall climb up into her window."

"I must admit," rejoined Pylades respectfully, "that you certainly are wonderfully well versed in all the stratagems and ruses of love-making."

"I rather pique myself upon my accomplishments in that line, I will confess," Orestes said, laughingly; "but come, let's go in now; the little beauty was startled, and will not show herself at the window again just yet. This evening I shall begin operations in earnest." And the two friends turned about and strolled slowly back towards the house, which they presently entered, and disappeared from sight.

There was a large tennis-court not far from the hotel, which was wonderfully well suited to make a theatre of; so our comedians hired it, took immediate possession, set carpenters and painters to work, furbished up their own rather dilapidated scenery and decorations, and soon had a charming little theatre, in which all the numbered seats and boxes were eagerly snapped up, directly they were offered to "the nobility and gentry of Poitiers," who secured them for all the representations to be given by the troupe, so that success was insured. The dressing-room of the tennis players had to serve as green-room, and dressing-room as well for the comedians, large folding screens being disposed round the toilet tables of the actresses, so as to shut them off as much as possible from the gentlemen visitors always lounging there. Not a very agreeable arrangement for the former, but the best that could be done, and highly approved by the latter, of course.

“What a pity it is,” said the tyrant to Blazius, as they were arranging what pieces they could play, seated at a window looking into the interior court of the Armes de France, “what a great pity it is that Zerbine is not with us here. She is almost worth her weight in gold, that little minx; a real treasure, so full of fun and deviltry that nobody can resist her acting; she would make any piece go off well—a pearl of soubrettes is Zerbine.”

“Yes, she is a rare one,” Blazius replied, with a deep sigh, “and I regret more and more every day our having lost her. The devil fly away with that naughty marquis who must needs go and rob us of our paragon of waiting-maids.”

Just at this point they were interrupted by the noise of an arrival, and leaning out of the window saw three fine mules, richly caparisoned in the gay Spanish fashion, entering the court, with a great jingling of bells and clattering of hoofs. On the first one was mounted a lackey in gray livery, and well armed, who led by a long strap a second mule heavily laden with baggage, and on the third was a young woman, wrapped in a large cloak trimmed with fur, and with her hat, a gray felt with a scarlet feather, drawn down over her eyes, so as to conceal her face from the two interested spectators at the window above.

“I say, Hérode,” exclaimed the pedant, “doesn’t all this remind you of something? It seems to me this is not the first time we have heard the jingling of those bells, eh?”

“By Saint Alipantin!” cried the tyrant, joyfully, “these are the very mules that carried Zerbine off so mysteriously. Speak of a wolf—”

“And you will hear the rustling of his wings,” interrupted Blazius, with a peal of laughter. “Oh! thrice happy day!—day to be marked with white!—for this is really Mlle. Zerbine in person. Look, she jumps down from her mule with that bewitching little air peculiar to herself, and throws her cloak to that obsequious lackey with a nonchalance worthy of a princess; there, she has taken off her hat, and shakes out her raven tresses as a bird does its feathers; it delights my old eyes to see her again.

Come, let’s go down and welcome her.”

So Blazius and his companions hastened down to the court, and met Zerbine just as she turned to enter the house.

The impetuous girl rushed at the pedant, threw her arms around his neck, and kissed him heartily, crying, “I must kiss your dear, jolly, ugly old face, just the same as though it were young and handsome, for I am so glad, so very glad to see it again. Now don’t you be jealous, Hérode, and scowl as if you were just going to order the slaughter of the innocents; wait a minute! I’m going to kiss you, too; I only began with my dear old Blazius here because he’s the ugliest.”

And Zerbine loyally fulfilled her promise. Then giving a hand to each of her companions, went up-stairs between them to the room Maître Bilot had ordered to be made ready for her. The moment she entered it she threw herself down into an arm-chair standing near the door, and began to draw long deep breaths, like a person who has just gotten rid of a heavy load.

“You cannot imagine,” she said after a little, “how glad I am to get back to you again, though you needn’t go and imagine that I am in love with your old phizes because of that; I’m not in love with anybody, Heaven be praised! I’m so joyful because I’ve gotten back into my own element once more. Everything is badly off out of its own element, you know. The water will not do for birds, nor the air for fishes. I am an actress by nature, and the atmosphere of the theatre is my native air; in it alone do I breathe freely; even its unpleasant odours are sweet to my nostrils. Real, everyday life seems very dull and flat. I must have imaginary love affairs to manage for other people, and take part in the whirl of romantic adventures to be found only on the stage, to keep me alive and happy. So I’ve come back to claim my old place again. I hope you haven’t found any one else to fill it; though of course I know that you couldn’t get anybody to really replace me. If you had I should scratch her eyes out, that I promise you, for I am a real little devil when my rights are

encroached upon, though you might not think it."

"There's no need for you to show your prowess in that way," said the tyrant, "for we have not had any one to take your role, and we're delighted, overjoyed, to have you back again. If you had had some of the magic compound Apuleius tells us of, and had thereby changed yourself into a bird, to come and listen to what Blazius and I were saying a little while ago, you would have heard nothing but good of yourself—a rare thing that for listeners—and you would have heard some very enthusiastic praise besides."

"That's charming!" the soubrette exclaimed. "I see that you two are just the same good old souls as ever, and that you have missed your little Zerbine."

Several servants now came in, carrying trunks, boxes, portmanteaus, packages, no end of baggage, which Zerbine counted over and found correct; and when they had gone she opened two or three of the larger chests with the keys she had on a small silver ring. They were filled with all sorts of handsome things—silks and velvets, laces and jewels—and among the rest a long purse, crammed as full as it could hold of gold pieces, which Zerbine poured out in a heap on the table; seeming to take a childish delight in looking at and playing with her golden treasure, while laughing and chattering merrily all the time.

"Serafina would burst with rage and envy if she should see all this money," said she gaily, "so we will keep it out of her sight. I only show it to you to prove that I didn't need to return to my profession, but was actuated by a pure love of my art. As to you, my good old friends, if your finances happen to be not just as you could wish, put your paws into this and help yourselves; take just as much as ever they will hold."

The two actors thanked her heartily for her generous offer, but assured her that they were very well off, and in need of no assistance.

"Ah well!" said Zerbine, "it will be for another time then. I shall put it away in my

strong box, and keep it for you, like a faithful treasurer."

"But surely you haven't abandoned the poor marquis," said Blazius, rather reproachfully. "Of course I know there was no question of his giving you up; you are not one of that sort. The role of Ariadne would not suit you at all; you are a Circe. Yet he is a splendid young nobleman-handsome, wealthy, amiable, and not wanting in wit."

"Oh! I haven't given him up; very far from it," Zerbine replied, with a saucy smile. "I shall guard him carefully, as the most precious gem in my casket. Though I have quitted him for the moment, he will shortly follow me."

"Fugax sequax, sequax fugax," the pedant rejoined; "these four Latin words, which have a cabalistic sound, not unlike the croaking of certain batrachians, and might have been borrowed, one would say, from the 'Comedy of the Frogs,' by one Aristophanes, an Athenian poet, contain the very pith and marrow of all theories of love and lovemaking; they would make a capital rule to regulate everybody's conduct—of the virile as well as of the fair sex."

"And what under the sun do your fine Latin words mean, you pompous old pedant?" asked Zerbine. "You have neglected to translate them, entirely forgetting that not everybody has been professor in a college, and knight of the ferule, like yourself."

"Their meaning," he replied, "may be expressed in this little couplet:

'If you fly from men, they'll be sure to pursue, But if you follow them, they will fly from you."

"Ha! ha!" laughed Zerbine, "that's a verse that ought to be set to music." And she began singing it to a merry tune at the top of her voice; a voice so clear and ringing that it was a pleasure to hear it. She accompanied her song with such an amusing and effective pantomime, representing flight and pursuit, that it was a pity she had not had a larger audience to enjoy it. After this outburst of merriment she quieted down a little, and gave her companions a brief, history of her adventures since she

had parted from them, declaring that the marquis had invariably treated her with the courtesy and generosity of a prince. But in spite of it all she had longed for her old wandering life with the troupe, the excitement of acting, and the rounds of applause she never failed to win; and at last she confessed to the marquis that she was pining for her role of soubrette.

"'Very well,' he said to me, 'you can take your mules and your belongings and go in pursuit of the troupe, and I will shortly follow in pursuit of you. I have some matters to look after in Paris, that have been neglected of late, and I have been too long absent from the court. You will permit me to applaud you I suppose, and truth to tell I shall be very glad to enjoy your bewitching acting again.' So I told him I would look for him among the audience every evening till he made his appearance, and, after the most tender leave-taking, I jumped on my mule and caught you up here at the Armes de France, as you know."

"But," said Hérode, "suppose your marquis should not turn up at all! you would be regularly sold."

This idea struck Zerbine as being so utterly absurd that she threw herself back and laughed until she had to hold her sides, and was fairly breathless. "The marquis not come!" she cried, when she could speak, "you had better engage rooms for him right away—not come! Why my fear was that he would overtake me on the road; you will see him very soon, I can guarantee. Ah! you abominable old bear! you doubt the power of my charms, do you? You're decidedly growing stupid, Hérode, as you grow old; you used to be rather clever than otherwise."

At this moment appeared Leander and Scapin, who had heard of Zerbine's arrival from the servants, and came to pay their respects, soon followed by old Mme. Léonarde, who greeted the soubrette with as much obsequiousness as if she had-been a princess. Isabelle came also to welcome her, to the great delight of Zerbine, who was devotedly fond of her, and always trying to do something to

please her. She now insisted upon presenting her with a piece of rich silk, which Isabelle accepted very reluctantly, and only when she found that the warm-hearted soubrette would be really wounded if she refused her first gift. Serafina had shut herself up in her own room, and was the only one that failed to come and bid Zerbine welcome. She could neither forget nor forgive the inexplicable preference of the Marquis de Bruyères for her humble rival, and she called the soubrette all sorts of hard names in her wrath and indignation; but nobody paid any attention to her bad humour, and she was left to sulk in solitude.

When Zerbine asked why Matamore had not come to speak to her with the rest, they told her the sad story of his death, and also that the Baron de Sigognac now filled his role, under the name of Captain Fracasse.

“It will be a great honour for me to act with a gentleman whose ancestors figured honourably in the crusades,” said she, “and I only hope that my profound respect for him will not overwhelm me, and spoil my acting; fortunately I have become pretty well accustomed to the society of people of rank lately.”

A moment later de Sigognac knocked at the door, and came in to greet Zerbine, and courteously express his pleasure at her return. She rose as he approached, and making a very low curtsey, said, “This is for the Baron de Sigognac; and this is for my comrade, Captain Fracasse;” kissing him on both cheeks—which unexpected and unprecedented proceeding put poor de Sigognac completely out of countenance; partly because he was not used to such little theatrical liberties, but more, because he was ashamed to have such a thing happen in the presence of his pure and peerless Isabelle.

And now we will return to Orestes and Pylades, who, after their eventful promenade in the garden, were cosily dining together. The former, that is to say the young Duke of Vallombreuse, had scarcely eaten any dinner, and had even neglected his glass of wine, so preoccupied was he with thoughts of his lovely unknown. The Chevalier de

Vidalinc, his friend and confidant, tried in vain to draw him into conversation; he replied only by monosyllables, or not at all, to the other's brilliant sallies. When the dessert had been put upon the table, and the servants had retired and left them alone, the chevalier said to the duke: "I am entirely at your service in this new affair, of course, ready to help you bag your bird in any way you please; shall I go and send out the beaters to drive it towards your nets?"

"No, indeed, you will do nothing of the kind; I shall go myself, for there is nothing I enjoy so much as the pursuit of game, of whatever sort it may be. I would follow a deer, or a pheasant, to the ends of the earth but what I would have it; how much more a divine creature like this. It is only after I have captured the flying prize that I lose all interest in it; so do not, I pray you, propose to deprive me of the delights of the chase; the more difficult it is the better I like it, the more fascinating I find it. The most annoying thing is that women are always so willing to be caught; if I could only find an obdurate, cruel fair one, who would fly from me in earnest, how I should adore her! but, alas! such an anomaly does not exist on this terraqueous globe."

"If I were not so well acquainted with your innumerable triumphs, I should be obliged to tax you with conceit," said Vidalinc, "but as it is I must admit that you are justified in what you say. But perhaps your wish may be gratified this time, for the young beauty certainly did seem to be very modest and retiring, as well as positively cold and forbidding in her manner of receiving your little act of gallantry."

"We will see about that, and without any delay. Maître Bilot is always ready and glad to tell all he knows whenever he can secure a good listener, and he is sharp enough to find out very quickly pretty much all that's worth knowing about his guests in the hotel. Come, we'll go and drink a bottle of his best Madeira; I will draw him out, and get all the information he can give us about this fair inmate of his house."

A few minutes later the two young gentlemen entered the Armes de France, and asked for Maître Bilot. The worthy landlord came forward at once, and himself conducted them into a cosy, well-lighted room on the ground floor, where a bright fire was burning cheerily; he took the old, dusty bottle, with cobwebs clinging about it, from the waiter's hands, drew the cork very carefully, and then poured the amber wine, as clear as a topaz, into the delicate Venetian glasses held out for it by the duke and his companion, with a hand as steady as if it had been of bronze. In taking upon himself this office Maître Bilot affected an almost religious solemnity, as though he were a priest of Bacchus, officiating at his altar, and about to celebrate the mysterious rites of the ancient worshippers of that merry god; nothing was wanting but the crown of vine leaves. He seemed to think that this ceremoniousness was a sort of testimony to the superior quality of the wine from his well-stocked cellar, which needed no recommendation, for it was really very good, worthy of even a royal table, and of wide-spread fame.

Maître Bilot, having finished his little performance, was about to withdraw, when a significant glance from the duke made him pause respectfully on the threshold.

"Maître Bilot," said he, "fetch a glass for yourself from the buffet there, and come and drink a bumper of this capital wine to my health."

This command, for such it was in reality, was instantly obeyed, and after emptying his glass at a single draught, the well-pleased landlord stood, with one hand resting on the table and his eyes fixed on the duke, waiting to see, what was wanted of him.

"Have you many strangers in your house now?" asked Vallombreuse, "and who and what are they?" Bilot was about to reply, but the young duke interrupted him, and continued, "But what's the use of beating about the bush with such a wily old miscreant as you are, Maître Bilot? Who is the lady that has the room with a window, the third one from the corner, looking into my garden? Answer to the point, and you shall have a gold piece for every syllable."

“Under those conditions,” said Bilot, with a broad grin, “one must be very virtuous indeed to make use of the laconic style so highly esteemed by the ancients. However, as I am devoted to your lordship, I will answer in a single word—Isabelle.”

“Isabelle! a charming and romantic name. But do not confine yourself to such Lacedaemonian brevity, Maître Bilot; be prolix! and relate to me, minutely, everything that you know about the lovely Isabelle.”

“I am proud and happy to obey your lordship’s commands,” the worthy landlord answered, with a low bow; “my cellar, my kitchen, my tongue and myself are all at your lordship’s disposition. Isabelle is an actress, belonging to the celebrated troupe of Seignior Hérode, stopping at present at the Armes de France.”

“An actress!” exclaimed the young duke, with an air of disappointment. “I should have taken her for a lady of rank, from her quiet, dignified mien, or at least a well-bred bourgeoise, rather than a member of a band of strolling players.”

“Yes, your lordship is right; any one might think so, for her manners and appearance are very lady-like, and she has an untarnished reputation, despite the difficulties of her position. No one understands better how to keep all the gallants that hover about her at a respectful distance; she treats these would-be suitors for her favour with a cold, reserved, yet perfect politeness that there is no getting over.”

“What you say pleases me,” interrupted Vallombreuse, “for there is nothing I so thoroughly despise as a fortress that is ready to capitulate before the first assault has been made.”

“It would need more than one to conquer this fair citadel, my lord, though you are a bold and successful captain, not used to encountering any serious resistance, and sweeping everything before you; and, moreover, it is guarded by the vigilant sentinel of a pure and devoted love.”

“Oh ho! she has a lover then, this modest Isabelle!” cried the young duke, in a tone

at once triumphant and annoyed, for though on the one side he had no faith in the steadfast virtue of any woman, on the other he was vexed to learn that he had a successful rival.

“I said love, not lover,” continued the landlord with respectful persistency, “which is by no means the same thing. Your lordship is too well versed in such matters not to appreciate the difference. A woman that has one lover may have two, as the old song says; but a woman who loves, with a pure love, and has that love returned in every sense, it is impossible, or at least very difficult, to win away from it. She possesses already everything that you, my lord, or any one, could offer for her acceptance.”

“You talk as if you had been studying the subject of love diligently—and Petrarch’s sonnets as well; but notwithstanding all that, Maître Bilot, I don’t believe you thoroughly understand anything outside of your own wines and sauces, which, I am bound to admit, are always excellent. And pray, who is the favoured object of this Platonic attachment?”

“One of the members of the troupe,” Bilot replied, “and it is not to be wondered at, for he’s a handsome young fellow, and very different from the rest of them; far superior, more like a gentleman than an actor; and I shrewdly suspect he is one,” added the landlord, with a knowing look.

“Well, now you must be happy!” said the Chevalier de Vidalinc to his friend. “Here are unexpected obstacles in plenty, and a perfect none-such of a prize. A virtuous actress is a rare phenomenon, not to be found every day in the week. You are in luck!”

“Are you sure,” continued the young duke, still addressing the landlord, and without paying any attention to the last remark, “that this chaste Isabelle does not accord any privileges secretly to that conceited young jackanapes? I despise the fellow thoroughly, and detest him as well.”

“Your lordship does not know her,” answered Maître Bilot, “or I should not need to

declare, as I do, that she is as spotless as the ermine. She would rather die than suffer a stain upon her purity. It is impossible to see much of her without perceiving that; it shines out in everything that she says and does."

Hereupon a long discussion followed as to the best manner of conducting the attack upon this fair citadel, which the young nobleman became more and more determined to conquer, as new difficulties were suggested. The worthy landlord, who was a shrewd fellow and had made a just estimate of Isabelle's character, finished by advising his noble interlocutor to turn his attention to Serafina, "who was very charming, and not less beautiful than Isabelle, and who would be greatly pleased and flattered by his lordship's notice." This, because he felt sure that the duke would not succeed with Isabelle, in spite of his exalted rank, handsome person, and immense wealth, and he wished to spare him an inevitable disappointment.

"It is Isabelle that I admire, and will have," said Vallombreuse, in a dry tone that put an end to the discussion. "Isabelle, and no other, Maître Bilot."

Then plunging his hand into his pocket, he drew forth a goodly number of gold pieces, and throwing them down carelessly on the table, said, "Pay yourself for the bottle of wine out of this, and keep the balance."

The landlord gathered up the louis with a deprecating air, and dropped them one by one into his purse. The two gentlemen rose, without another word, put on their broad, plumed hats, threw their cloaks on their shoulders, and quitted the hotel. Vallombreuse took several turns up and down the narrow alley between the Armes de France and his own garden wall, looking up searchingly at Isabelle's window every time he passed under it; but it was all for naught. Isabelle, now on her guard, did not approach the window again; the curtain was drawn closely over it, and not a sign visible from without that the room was occupied. Tired at last of this dull work, the duke slowly withdrew to his own mansion, feeling highly indignant that this inappreciative little actress should presume to slight the attentions of a great and

powerful noble like himself; but he found some comfort in the thought that when she came to see and know him she could not long hold out against his numerous attractions. As to his rival—if the fellow ventured to interfere with him too much, he would quietly suppress him, by means of certain stout ruffians—professional cut-throats—he had in his employ, to do all that sort of work for him; his own dignity not allowing him to come into personal contact with such cattle as actors. Though Vallombreuse had not seen anything of Isabelle at her window, he himself had been closely watched, by jealous eyes, from a neighbouring casement that commanded the same view. They belonged to de Sigognac, who was greatly annoyed and incensed by the manœuvres of this mysterious personage under Isabelle's window. A dozen times he was on the point of rushing down, sword in hand, to attack and drive away the impertinent unknown; but he controlled himself by a strong effort; for there was after all nothing in the mere fact of a man's promenading back and forth in a deserted alley to justify him in such an onslaught, and he would only bring down ridicule on himself; besides, the name of Isabelle might be dragged in—sweet Isabelle, who was all unconscious of the ardent glances directed at her window from below, as well as of the burning indignation, because of them, of her own true lover close at hand. But he promised himself to keep a watchful eye for the future upon this young gallant, and studied his features carefully, every time his face was raised towards Isabelle's window, so that he should be sure to recognise him when he saw him again.

Hérode had selected for their first representation in Poitiers a new play, which all the comedians were very much occupied in learning and rehearsing, to be followed by the Rodomontades of Captain Fracasse, in which de Sigognac was to make his real debut before a real public having only acted as yet to an audience of calves, horned cattle, and peasants in Bellombre's barn. He was studying diligently under the direction of Blazius, who was more devoted to him than ever, and who had proposed something which was a most welcome suggestion to the sensitive young baron. This

was for him to wear what is called a half-mask, which covers only the forehead and nose, but if arranged with skill alters entirely the wearer's appearance—so that his nearest friend would not recognise him—without interfering materially with his comfort. This idea de Sigognac hailed with delight, for it insured his preserving his incognito; the light pasteboard screen seemed to him like the closed visor of a helmet, behind which he need not shrink from facing the enemy—that is to stay the gazing crowd on the other side of the foot-lights. With it he would take merely the part of the unknown, concealed intelligence that directs the movements of the marionette, and the voice that makes it speak; only he should be within it, instead of behind the scenes pulling the strings—his dignity would have nothing to suffer in playing the game in that manner, and for this relief from a dreaded ordeal he was unspeakably thankful. Blazius, who never could take too much pains in the service of his dear baron, himself modelled and fashioned the little mask, very deftly, so as to make his stage physiognomy as unlike his real, every-day countenance as possible. A prominent nose, very red at the point, bushy, high-arched eyebrows, and an immensely heavy mustache drooping over his mouth, completely disguised the well-cut, regular features of the handsome young nobleman, and although in reality it only concealed the forehead and nose, yet it transfigured the whole face.

There was to be a dress rehearsal the evening before the first representation, so that they might judge of the general effect in their improvised theatre, and test its capabilities; and as the actresses could not very well go through the streets in full costume, they were to finish their toilets in the green-room, while the actor themselves ready for the stage in the small dressing-closets set aside for that purpose. All the gentlemen in Poitiers, young and old, were wild to penetrate into this temple, or rather sacristy, of Thalia, where the priestesses of that widely worshipped muse adorned themselves to celebrate her mysterious rites, and a great number of them had succeeded in gaining admittance. They crowded round the actresses, offering advice as to the placing of a flower or a jewel, handing the

powder-box or the rouge-pot, presenting the little hand-mirror, taking upon themselves all such small offices with the greatest “empressement,” and vying with each other in their gallant attendance upon the fair objects of their admiration; the younger and more timid among them holding a little aloof and sitting on the large chests scattered about, swinging their feet and twisting their mustaches, while they watched the proceedings of their bolder companions with envious eyes. Each actress had her own circle of admiring cavaliers about her, paying her high-flown compliments in the exaggerated language of the day, and doing their best to make themselves agreeable in every way they could think of. Zerbine laughed at them all, and made fun of them unmercifully, turning everything they said into ridicule; yet so coquettishly that they thought her bewitching, in spite of her sharp tongue, which was like a two-edged sword. Serafina, whose vanity was overweening, delighted in the fulsome homage paid to her charms, and smiled encouragingly upon her throng of admirers, but Isabelle, who was intensely annoyed at the whole thing, did not pay the slightest attention to them, nor even once raise her eyes to look at them; being apparently absorbed in the duties of her toilet, which she accomplished as quietly and modestly as possible—having left only the finishing touches to be given in that public place.

The Duke of Vallombreuse was careful, of course, not to miss this excellent opportunity, of which he had been informed by Maître Bilot, to see Isabelle again, and entering the green-room in good season, followed by his friend Vidalinc, marched straight up to her toilet-table. He was enchanted to find that, on this close inspection, she was even more beautiful than he had supposed, and in his enthusiastic delight at this discovery could scarcely refrain from seizing her in his arms and declaring his passion there and then; only the presence of the crowd of lookers-on saved Isabelle from what would have been a most trying and painful scene.

The young duke was superbly dressed. He had spared no pains, for he wanted to

dazzle Isabelle, and he certainly did look splendidly handsome. He wore a magnificent costume of rich white satin, slashed and trimmed with crimson, with many knots of ribbon about it fastened with diamond clasps, with broad ruffles of exquisitely fine lace at throat and wrists, with a wide belt of cloth of silver supporting his sword, and with perfumed gloves on the hands that held his white felt hat, with its long crimson feather. His wavy black hair fell around the perfect oval of his face, enhancing its smooth whiteness; a delicate mustache shaded, not concealed, his full red lips; his splendid, great black eyes flashed through their thick, silky fringes, and his neck, white and round as a marble column, rose from amid its surrounding of soft, priceless lace, proudly supporting his haughty, handsome head. Yet with all this perfection of outline and colouring, his appearance was not entirely pleasing; a repelling haughtiness shone out through the perfectly modelled features, and it was but too evident that the joys and sorrows of his fellow mortals would awaken no sympathy in the owner of that surpassingly handsome face and form. He believed that he was not made of common clay like other men, but was a being of a higher order, who condescended to mingle with his inferiors—a piece of fine porcelain amid homely vessels of coarser earthenware.

Vallombreuse stationed himself silently close beside the mirror on Isabelle's dressing-table, leaning one elbow on its frame all the other gallants respectfully making way for him—just where she could not possibly help seeing him whenever she looked in the glass; a skilful manœuvre, which would surely have succeeded with any other than this modest young girl. He wished to produce an impression, before addressing a word to her, by his personal beauty, his lordly mien, and his magnificence of apparel. Isabelle, who had instantly recognised the audacious gallant of the garden, and who was displeased by the imperious ardour of his gaze, redoubled her reserve of manner, and did not lift her eyes to the mirror in front of her at all; she did not even seem to be aware that one of the handsomest young noblemen in all France was standing there before her, trying to win a glance from

her lovely eyes—but then, she was a singular girl, this sweet Isabelle! At length, exasperated by her utter indifference, Vallombreuse suddenly took the initiative, and said to her, “Mademoiselle, you take the part of Sylvia in this new play, do you not?”

“Yes, sir,” Isabelle answered curtly, without looking at him—not able to evade this direct question.

“Then never will a part have been so admirably played,” continued the duke. “If it is poor your acting will make it excellent, if it is fine you will make it peerless. Ah! happy indeed the poet whose verses are intrusted to those lovely lips of yours.”

These vague compliments were only such as admiring gallants were in the habit of lavishing upon pretty actresses, and Isabelle could not with any show of reason resent it openly, but she acknowledged it only by a very slight bend of the head, and still without looking up. At this moment de Sigognac entered the green-room; he was masked and in full costume, just buckling around his waist the belt of the big sword he had inherited from Matamore, with the cobweb dangling from the scabbard. He also marched straight up to Isabelle, and was received with a radiant smile.

“You are capitally gotten up,” she said to him in a low, tone, so low that he had to bend down nearer her to hear, “and I am sure that no fierce Spanish captain ever had a more superbly arrogant air than you.”

The Duke of Vallombreuse drew himself up to his full height, and looked this unwelcome new-comer over from head to foot, with an air of the coolest, most haughty disdain. “This must be the contemptible scoundrel they say she’s in love with,” he said to himself, swelling with indignation and spite—filled with amazement too—for he could not conceive of a woman’s hesitating for an instant between the magnificent young Duke of Vallombreuse and this ridiculous play-actor. After the first rapid glance he made as if he did not perceive de Sigognac

at all, no more than if he had been a piece of furniture standing there; for him Captain Fracasse was not a man, but a thing, and he continued to gaze fixedly at poor Isabelle—his eyes fairly blazing with passion—exactly as though no one was near. She, confused at last, and alarmed, blushed painfully, in spite of all her efforts to appear calm and unmoved, and hastened to finish what little remained to be done, so that she might make her escape, for she could see de Sigognac's hand close spasmodically on the handle of his sword, and, realizing how he must be feeling, feared an outbreak on his part. With trembling fingers she adjusted a little black "mouche" near the corner of her pretty mouth, and pushed back her chair preparatory to rising from it—having a legitimate cause for haste, as the tyrant had already more than once roared out from the stage door, "Mesdemoiselles, are you ready?"

"Permit me, mademoiselle," said the duke starting forward, "you have forgotten to put on an 'assassine,'" and touching the tip of his forefinger to his lips he plunged it into the box of patches standing open on the dressing-table, and brought one out on it. "Permit me to put it on for you—here, just above your snowy bosom; it will enhance its exquisite whiteness."

The action followed so quickly upon the words that Isabelle, terrified at this cruel effrontery, had scarcely time to start to one side, and so escape his profane touch; but the duke was not one to be easily balked in anything he particularly desired to do, and pressing nearer he again extended his hand towards Isabelle's white neck, and had almost succeeded in accomplishing his object, when his arm was seized from behind, and held firmly in a grasp of iron.

Furiously angry, he turned his head to see who had dared to lay hands upon his sacred person, and perceived that it was the odious Captain Fracasse.

"My lord duke," said he calmly, still holding his wrist firmly, "Mademoiselle is in need of no assistance from you, or any one else, in this matter." Then his grasp

relaxed and he let go of the duke's arm.

Vallombreuse, who looked positively hideous at that moment, his face pale to ghastliness and disfigured by the rage he felt, grasped the hilt of his sword with the hand released by de Sigognac, and drew it partly out of its scabbard, as if he meant to attack him, his eyes flashing fire and every feature working in its frenzy—the baron meanwhile standing perfectly motionless, quietly awaiting the onset.

But ere he had touched him the duke stopped short; a sudden thought had extinguished his blazing fury like a douche of cold water; his self-control returned, his face resumed its wonted expression, the colour came to his lips, and his eyes showed the most icy disdain, the most supreme contempt that it could be possible for one human being to manifest for another. He had remembered just in time that he must not so greatly demean himself as to cross swords with a person of no birth, and an actor besides; all his pride revolted at the bare idea of such a thing. An insult coming from a creature so low in the social scale could not reach him. Does a gentleman declare war upon the mud that bespatters him? However, it was not in his character to leave an offence unpunished, no matter whence it proceeded, and stepping nearer to de Sigognac he said, "You impertinent scoundrel, I will have every bone in your body broken for you with cudgels, by my lackeys."

"You'd better take care what you do, my lord," answered the baron, in the most tranquil tone and with the most careless air imaginable, "you'd much better take care what you do! My bones are not so easily broken, but cudgels may be. I do not put up with blows anywhere but on the stage."

"However insolent you may choose to be, you graceless rascal, you cannot provoke me to do you so much honour as to attack you myself; that is too high an ambition for such as you to realize," said Vallombreuse, scornfully.

"We will see about that, my lord duke," de Sigognac replied; "it may happen that I, having less pride than yourself, will fight you, and conquer you, with my own

hands."

"I do not dispute with a masker," said the duke shortly, taking Vidalinc's arm as if to depart.

"I will show you my face, duke, at a more fitting time and place," de Sigognac continued composedly, "and I think it will be still more distasteful to you than my false nose. But enough for the present. I hear the bell that summons me, and if I wait any longer here with you I shall miss my entry at the proper moment."

He turned on his heel and leisurely walked off, with admirable nonchalance, leaving the haughty duke very much disconcerted, and at a disadvantage, as indeed de Sigognac had cleverly managed that he should be throughout the brief interview.

The comedians were charmed with his courage and coolness, but, knowing his real rank, were not so much astonished as the other spectators of this extraordinary scene, who were both shocked and amazed at such temerity.

Isabelle was so terrified and excited by this fierce altercation that a deathly pallor had overspread her troubled face, and Zerbine, who had flown to her assistance, had to fetch some of her own rouge and bestow it plentifully upon the colourless lips and cheeks before she could obey the tyrant's impatient call, again resounding through the green-room.

When she tried to rise her trembling knees had nearly given way under her, and but for the soubrette's kind support she must have fallen to the floor. To have been the cause, though innocently, of a quarrel like this was a terrible blow to poor Isabelle sweet, pure, modest child that she was—for she knew that it is a dreadful thing for any woman to have her name mixed up in such an affair, and shrank from the publicity that could not fail to be given to it; besides, she loved de Sigognac with fervour and devotion, though she had never acknowledged it to him, and the thought of the danger to which he was exposed, of a secret attack by the duke's hired ruffians, or even of a duel with his lordship himself, drove her well-nigh frantic with

grief and terror.

In spite of this untoward incident, the rehearsal went on, and very smoothly; the theatre was found to be all that they could desire, and everybody acted with much spirit. Even poor, trembling Isabelle did herself credit, though her heart was heavy within her; but for de Sigognac's dear sake, whose anxious glances she strove to meet with a reassuring smile, she succeeded in controlling her emotion, and felt inspired to do her very best. As to Captain Fracasse, excited by the quarrel, he acted superbly. Zerbine surpassed herself. Shouts of laughter and storms of clapping followed her animated words and gestures. From one corner, near the orchestra, came such vigorous bursts of applause, leading all the rest and lasting longer than any, that at last Zerbine's attention was attracted and her curiosity excited.

Approaching the foot-lights, in such a way as to make it appear part of her usual by-play, she peered over them and caught sight of her marquis, beaming with smiles and flushed from his violent efforts in her behalf.

"The marquis is here," she managed to whisper to Blazius, who was playing Pandolphe; "just look at him! how delighted he is, and how he applauds me—till he is actually red in the face, the dear man! So he admires my acting, does he? Well, he shall have a spicy specimen of it, then."

Zerbine kept her word, and, from that on to the end of the piece, played with redoubled spirit. She was never so sparkling, so bewitchingly coquettish, so charmingly mischievous before, and the delighted marquis was more fascinated than ever. The new play, entitled "Lygdamon et Lydias," and written by a certain Georges de Scudéry (a gentleman who, after having served with honour in the French Guards, quitted the sword for the pen, which he wielded with equal success), was next rehearsed, and highly approved by all—without a single dissenting voice. Leander, who played the leading part of Lygdamon, was really admirable in it, and entertained high hopes of the effect he should produce upon the fair ladies of

Poitiers and its environs.

But we will leave our comedians now, and follow the Duke of Vallombreuse and his devoted friend Vidalinc.

Quite beside himself with rage, the young duke, after the scene in the green-room in which he had played so unsatisfactory a part to himself, returned to his own home and there raved to Vidalinc about his revenge, threatening the insolent captain with all manner of punishments, and going on like a madman. His friend tried in vain to soothe him.

He rushed wildly around the room, wringing his hands, kicking the furniture about right and left, upsetting tables and arm-chairs, and finally, seizing a large Japanese vase, very curious and costly, threw it violently on the floor, where it broke into a thousand pieces.

“Oh!” he shrieked, “if I could only smash that abominable blackguard like this vase, trample him under foot as I do this debris, and then have the remains of him swept up and thrown out into the dust-heap, where he belongs. A miserable scoundrel, that dares to interpose between me, the Duke of Vallombreuse, and the object of my desires! If he were only a gentleman I would fight him, on foot or on horseback, with swords, daggers, pistols, anything in the shape of a weapon, until I had him down, with my foot on his breast, and could spit into the face of his corpse.”

“Perhaps he is one,” said Vidalinc; “his audacious defiance looks like it. You remember what Maître Bilot told you about Isabelle’s favoured lover? This must be the one, judging by his jealousy of you, and the agitation of the girl.”

“Do you really mean what you say?” cried Vallombreuse, contemptuously. “What! a man of birth and condition mingle voluntarily and on terms of equality with these low buffoons of actors, paint his nose red, and strut about the stage, receiving cuffs and kicks from everybody? Oh no, Vidalinc, the thing is impossible.”

“But just remember,” persisted the chevalier, “that mighty Jove himself resorted to

the expedient of adopting the shapes of various beasts, as well as birds, in his terrestrial love affairs, which was surely much more derogatory to the majesty of the king of the gods than to play in a comedy is to the dignity of a gentleman."

"Never mind," said the duke, as he rang a small hand bell sharply; "be he what he may, I intend first to have the scamp well punished in his character of play-actor; even though I should be obliged to chastise the gentleman afterward, if there prove to be one hidden behind that ridiculous mask—which idea I cannot credit."

"If there be one! There's no doubt of it, I tell you," rejoined his friend, with an air of conviction. "The more I think of it, the more positive I am of it. Why, his eyes shone like stars under his overhanging false eye-brows, and in spite of his absurd pasteboard nose he had a grand, majestic air about him that was very imposing, and would be utterly impossible to a low-born man."

"Well, so much the better," said Vallombreuse; "for if you are right, I can make his punishment twofold."

Meantime a servant, in rich livery, had entered, and after bowing low stood as motionless as a statue, with one hand on the knob of the door, awaiting his master's orders; which were presently given, as follows: "Go and call up Basque, Azolan, Mérindol, and Labriche, if they have gone to bed; tell them to arm themselves with stout cudgels and go down to the tennis-court, find a dark corner near by and wait there, until the players come out, for a certain Captain Fracasse. They are to fall upon him and beat him until they leave him for dead upon the pavement, but to be careful not to kill him outright—it might be thought that I was afraid of him if they did, you know," in an aside to Vidalinc.

"I will be responsible for the consequences; and with every blow they are to cry, 'This is from the Duke of Vallombreuse,' so that he may understand plainly what it means."

This order, though of so savage and fierce a nature, did not seem to surprise the

lackey, who, as he retired, assured his lordship, with an unmoved countenance and another low bow, that his commands should be immediately obeyed.

“I am sorry,” said Vidalinc, after the servant had closed the door behind him, “that you mean to treat this man so roughly, for after all he showed a spirit superior to his position, and becoming a gentleman. Suppose you let me go and pick a quarrel with him, and kill him for you in a duel. All blood is red when it is shed, the lowly as well as the lofty, though they do pretend that the blood of the nobles is blue. I come of a good and ancient family, if not so high in rank as yours, and I have no fear of belittling myself in this affair. Only say the word, and I will go this instant, for this histrionic captain is, it seems to me, more worthy of the sword of a gentleman than the cudgels of your hired ruffians.”

“I thank you heartily for this offer,” answered the duke, “which proves your faithful devotion to me and my interests, but I cannot accept it. That low scoundrel has dared to lay hands upon me, and he must expiate his crime in the most ignominious way. Should he prove to be a gentleman, he will be able to find redress. I never fail to respond, as you know, when there is question of settling a matter by the sword.”

“As you please, my lord duke,” said Vidalinc, stretching out his legs lazily and putting his feet on the fender, with the air of a man who can do no more, but must stand aside and let things take their own course. “By the way, do you know that that Serafina is charming? I paid her several compliments, which were very graciously received; and more than that, she has promised to allow me to call upon her, and appointed the time. She is a very amiable as well as beautiful young woman. Maître Bilot was perfectly correct in his statements to us.”

After which the two gentlemen awaited, in almost unbroken silence, the return of the four ruffians who had gone forth to chastise de Sigognac.

CHAPTER IX. A MÊLÉE AND A DUEL

The rehearsal was over, and the comedians were preparing to return to their hotel; de Sigognac, expecting some sort of an assault on his way through the deserted streets, did not lay aside Matamore's big sword with the rest of his costume. It was an excellent Spanish blade, very long, and with a large basket hilt, which made a perfect protection for the hand—altogether a weapon which, wielded by a brave man, was by no means to be despised, and which could give, as well as parry, good hard thrusts. Though scarcely able to inflict a mortal wound, as the point and edge had been blunted, according to the usual custom of theatrical sword owners, it would be, however, all that was requisite to defend its wearer against the cudgels of the ruffians that the Duke of Vallombreuse had despatched to administer his promised punishment. Hérode, who also anticipated an attack upon de Sigognac, and was not one to desert a friend when danger threatened, took the precaution to arm himself with the big heavy club that was used to give the signal—three loud raps—for the rising of the curtain, which made a very formidable weapon, and would do good service in his strong hands.

"Captain," said he to the baron as they quitted the tennis-court, "we will let the women go on a little way in advance of us, under the escort of Blazius and Leander, one of whom is too old, the other too cowardly, to be of any service to us in case of need. And we don't want to have their fair charges terrified, and deafening us with their shrieks. Scapin shall accompany us, for he knows a clever trick or two for tripping a man up, that I have seen him perform admirably in several wrestling bouts. He will lay one or two of our assailants flat on their backs for us before they can turn round. In any event here is my good club, to supplement your good sword."

"Thanks, my brave friend Hérode," answered de Sigognac, "your kind offer is not one to be refused; but let us take our precautions not to be surprised, though we are in force. We will march along in single file, through the very middle of the street, so that these rogues, lurking in dark corners, will have to emerge from their hiding places to come out to us, and we shall be able to see them before they can strike us. I

will draw my sword, you brandish your club, and Scapin must cut a pigeon wing, so as to make sure that his legs are supple and in good working order. Now, forward march!"

He put himself at the head of the little column, and advanced cautiously into the narrow street that led from the tennis-court to the hotel of the Armes de France, which was very crooked, badly paved, devoid of lamps, and capitally well calculated for an ambuscade. The overhanging gable-ends on either side of the way made the darkness in the street below them still more dense—a most favourable circumstance for the ruffians lying in wait there. Not a single ray of light streamed forth from the shut-up house whose inmates were presumably all sleeping soundly in their comfortable beds, and there was no moon that night. Basque, Azolan, Labriche and Mérindol had been waiting more than half an hour for Captain Fracasse in this street, which they knew he was obliged to pass through in returning to his hotel. They had disposed themselves in pairs on opposite sides of the way, so that when he was between them their clubs could all play upon him together, like the hammers of the Cyclops on their great anvil. The passing of the group of women, escorted by Blazius and Leander, none of whom perceived them, had warned them of the approach of their victim, and they stood awaiting his appearance, firmly grasping their cudgels in readiness to pounce upon him; little dreaming of the reception in store for them—for ordinarily, indeed one may say invariably, the poets, actors, bourgeois, and such-like, whom the nobles condescended to have cudgeled by their hired ruffians, employed expressly for that purpose, took their chastisement meekly, and without attempting to make any resistance. Despite the extreme darkness of the night, the baron, with his penetrating eyes, made out the forms of the four villains lying in wait for him, at some distance, and before he came up with them stopped and made as if he meant to turn back—which ruse deceived them completely—and fearing that their prey was about to escape them, they rushed impetuously forth from their hiding places towards him. Azolan was the first, closely followed by the others,

and all crying at the tops of their voices, “Kill! Kill! this for Captain Fracasse, from the Duke of Vallombreuse.” Meantime de Sigognac had wound his large cloak several times round his left arm for a shield, and receiving upon it the first blow from Azolan’s cudgel, returned it with such a violent lunge, full in his antagonist’s breast, that the miserable fellow went over backward, with great force, right into the gutter running down the middle of the street, with his head in the mud and his heels in the air. If the point of the sword had not been blunted, it would infallibly have gone through his body, and come out between his shoulder-blades, leaving a dead man, instead of only a stunned one, on the ground. Basque, in spite of his comrade’s disaster, advanced to the charge bravely, but a furious blow on his head, with the flat of the blade, sent him down like a shot, and made him see scores of stars, though there was not one visible in the sky that night. The tyrant’s club encountering Mérindol’s cudgel broke it short off, and the latter finding himself disarmed, took to his heels; not however without receiving a tremendous blow on the shoulder before he could get out of Hérode’s reach. Scapin, for his part, had seized Labriche suddenly round the waist from behind, pinning down his arms so that he could not use his club at all, and raising him from the ground quickly, with one dexterous movement tripped him up, and sent him rolling on the pavement ten paces off, so violently that he was knocked senseless—the back of his neck coming in contact with a projecting stone—and lay apparently lifeless where he fell.

So the way was cleared, and the victory in this fierce encounter was honourably gained by our hero and his two companions over the four sturdy ruffians, who had never been defeated before. They were in a sorry plight—Azolan and Basque creeping stealthily away, on their hands and knees, trying under cover of the darkness to put themselves beyond the reach of further danger; Labriche lying motionless, like a drunken man, across the gutter, and Mérindol, less badly hurt, flying towards home as fast as his legs could carry him. As he drew near the house, however, he slackened his pace, for he dreaded the duke’s anger more than Hérode’s

club, and almost forgot, for the moment, the terrible agony from his dislocated shoulder, from which the arm hung down helpless and inert. Scarcely had he entered the outer door ere he was summoned to the presence of the duke, who was all impatient to learn the details of the tremendous thrashing that, he took it for granted, they had given to Captain Fracasse. When Mérindol was ushered in, frightened and embarrassed, trembling in every limb, not knowing what to say or do, and suffering fearfully from his injured shoulder, he paused at the threshold, and stood speechless and motionless, waiting breathlessly for a word or gesture of encouragement from the duke, who glared at him in silence.

"Well," at length said the Chevalier de Vidalinc to the discomfited Mérindol, seeing that Vallombreuse only stared at him savagely and did not seem inclined to speak, "what news do you bring us? Bad, I am sure, for you have by no means a triumphant air—very much the reverse, indeed, I should say."

"My lord, the duke, of course cannot doubt our zeal in striving to execute his orders, to the best of our ability," said Mérindol, cringingly, "but this time we have had very bad luck."

"What do you mean by that?" asked the duke sharply, with an angry frown and flashing eyes, before which the stout ruffian quailed. "There were four of you! do you mean to tell me that, among you, you could not succeed in thrashing this miserable play-actor?"

"That miserable play-actor, my lord," Mérindol replied, plucking up a little courage, "far exceeds in vigour and bravery the great Hercules they tell us of. He fell upon us with such fury that in one instant he had knocked Azolan and Basque down into the gutter. They fell under his blows like pasteboard puppets—yet they are both strong men, and used to hard knocks. Labriche was tripped up and cleverly thrown by another actor, and fell with such force that he was completely stunned; the back of his head has found out that the stones of Poitiers pavements are harder than it is,

poor fellow! As for me, my thick club was broken short off by an immense stick in the hands of that giant they call Hérode, and my shoulder so badly hurt that I sha'n't have the use of my arm here for a fortnight."

"You are no better than so many calves, you pitiful, cowardly knaves!" cried the Duke of Vallombreuse, in a perfect frenzy of rage. "Why, any old woman could put you to rout with her distaff, and not half try. I made a horrid mistake when I rescued you from the galleys and the gallows, and took you into my service, believing that you were brave rascals, and not afraid of anything or anybody on the face of the globe. And now, answer me this: When you found that clubs would not do, why didn't you whip out your swords and have at him?"

"My lord had given us orders for a beating, not an assassination, and we would not have dared to go beyond his commands."

"Behold," cried Vidalinc, laughing contemptuously, "behold a faithful, exact and conscientious scoundrel whose obedience does not deviate so much as a hair's breadth from his lord's commands. How delightful and refreshing to find such purity and fidelity, combined with such rare courage, in the character of a professional cut-throat! But now, Vallombreuse, what do you think of all this? This chase of yours opens well, and romantically, in a manner that must be immensely pleasing to you, since you find the pursuit agreeable in proportion to its difficulty, and the obstacles in the way constitute its greatest charms for you. I ought to congratulate you, it seems to me. This Isabelle, for an actress, is not easy of access; she dwells in a fortress, without drawbridge or other means of entrance, and guarded, as we read of in the history of ancient chivalry, by dragons breathing out flames of fire and smoke. But here comes our routed army."

Azolan, Basque, and Labriche, who had recovered from his swoon, now presented themselves reluctantly at the door, and stood extending their hands supplicatingly towards their master. They were a miserable-looking set of wretches enough—very

pale, fairly livid indeed, haggard, dirty and blood-stained; for although they had only contused wounds, the force of the blows had set the blood flowing from their noses, and great red stains disfigured their hideous countenances.

“Get to your kennel, ye hounds!” cried the duke, in a terrible voice, being moved only to anger by the sight of this forlorn group of supplicants. “I’m sure I don’t know why I have not ordered you all soundly thrashed for your imbecility and cowardice. I shall send you my surgeon to examine your wounds, and see whether the thumps you make such a babyish outcry about really were as violent and overpowering as you represent. If they were not, I will have you skinned alive, every mother’s son of you, like the eels at Melun; and now, begone! out of my sight, quick, you vile canaille!” The discomfited ruffians turned and fled, thankful to make their escape, and forgetful for the moment of their painful wounds and bruises; such abject terror did the young duke’s anger inspire in the breasts of those hardened villains. When the poor devils had disappeared, Vallombreuse threw himself down on a heap of cushions, piled up on a low, broad divan beside the fire, and fell into a revery that Vidalinc was careful not to break in upon. They evidently were not pleasant thoughts that occupied him; dark, tempestuous ones rather, judging by the expression of his handsome face, as he lay back idly among the soft pillows, looking very picturesque in the rich showy costume he still wore. He did not remain there long. Only a short time had elapsed when he suddenly started up, with a smothered imprecation, and bidding his friend an abrupt good-night, retired to his own chamber, without touching the dainty little supper that had just been brought in. Vidalinc sat down and enjoyed it by himself, with perfect good humour, thinking meanwhile of Serafina’s remarkable beauty and amiability, with which he was highly charmed, and not neglecting to drink her health in the duke’s choice wine ere he quitted the table, and, following his example, retired to his own room, where he slept soundly, dreaming of Serafina, until morning; while Vallombreuse, less fortunate, and still haunted by disturbing thoughts, tossed restlessly, and turned from

side to side, courting sleep in vain, under the rich silken hangings drawn round his luxurious bed.

When de Sigognac, the tyrant and Scapin reached the Armes de France, after having overcome the serious obstacles in their way, they found the others in a terrible state of alarm about them. In the stillness of the night they had distinctly heard the loud cries of the duke's ruffians, and the noise of the fierce combat, and feared that their poor friends were being murdered. Isabelle, nearly frantic in her terror lest her lover should be overpowered and slain, tried to rush back to him, never remembering that she would be more of a hindrance than a help; but at the first step she had again almost fainted away, and would have fallen upon the rough pavement but for Blazius and Zerbine, who, each taking an arm, supported her between them the rest of the way to the hotel When they reached it at last, she refused to go to her own room, but waited with the others at the outer door for news of their comrades, fearing the worst, yet prayerfully striving to hope for the best. At sight of de Sigognac—who, alarmed at her extreme pallor, hastened anxiously to her side—she impetuously raised her arms to heaven, as a low cry of thanksgiving escaped her lips, and letting them fall around his neck, for one moment hid her streaming eyes against his shoulder; but quickly regaining her self-control, she withdrew herself gently from the detaining arm that had fondly encircled her slender, yielding form, and stepping back from him a little, resumed with a strong effort her usual reserve and quiet dignity.

"And you are not wounded or hurt?" she asked, in her sweetest tones, her face glowing with happiness as she caught his reassuring gesture; he could not speak yet for emotion. The clasp of her arms round his neck had been like a glimpse of heaven to him a moment of divine ecstasy. "Ah! if he could only snatch her to his breast and hold her there forever," he was thinking, "close to the heart that beat for her alone," as she continued: "If the slightest harm had befallen you, because of me, I should have died of grief. But, oh! how imprudent you were, to defy that handsome, wicked

duke, who has the assurance and the pride of Lucifer himself, for the sake of a poor, insignificant girl like me. You were not reasonable, de Sigognac! Now that you are a comedian, like the rest of us, you must learn to put up with certain impertinences and annoyances, without attempting to resent them."

"I never will," said de Sigognac, finding his voice at last, "I swear it, I never will permit an affront to be offered to the adorable Isabelle in my presence even when I have on my player's mask."

"Well spoken, captain," cried Hérode, "well spoken, and bravely. I would not like to be the man to incur your wrath. By the powers above! what a fierce reception you gave those rascals yonder. It was lucky for them that poor Matamore's sword had no edge. If it had been sharp and pointed, you would have cleft them from head to heels, clean in two, as the ancient knight-errants did the Saracens, and wicked enchanters."

"Your club did as much execution as my sword, Hérode, and your conscience need not reproach you, for they were not innocents that you slaughtered this time."

"No, indeed!" the tyrant rejoined, with a mighty laugh, "the flower of the galleys these—the cream of gallows-birds."

"Such jobs would scarcely be undertaken by any other class of fellows you know," de Sigognac said; "but we must not neglect to make Scapin's valiant deeds known, and praise them as they deserve. He fought and conquered without the aid of any other arms than those that nature gave him."

Scapin, who was a natural buffoon, acknowledged this encomium with a very low obeisance—his eyes cast down, his hand on his heart—and with such an irresistibly comical affectation of modesty and embarrassment that they all burst into a hearty laugh, which did them much good after the intense excitement and alarm.

After this, as it was late, the comedians bade each other good-night, and retired to their respective rooms; excepting de Sigognac, who remained for a while in the

court, walking slowly back and forth, cogitating deeply. The actor was avenged, but the gentleman was not. Must he then throw aside the mask that concealed his identity, proclaim his real name, make a commotion, and run the risk of drawing down upon his comrades the anger of a powerful nobleman? Prudence said no, but honour said yes. The baron could not resist its imperious voice, and the moment that he decided to obey it he directed his steps towards Zerbine's room.

He knocked gently at the door, which was opened cautiously, a very little way at first, by a servant, who instantly admitted the unexpected guest when he saw who it was.

The large room was brilliantly lighted, with many rose-coloured wax candles in two handsome candelabra on a table covered with fine damask, on which smoked a dainty supper. Game and various other delicacies were there, most temptingly served. One crystal decanter, with sprigs of gold scattered over its shining surface, was filled with wine rivalling the ruby in depth and brilliancy of hue, while that in the other was clear and yellow as a topaz. Only two places had been laid on this festive board, and opposite Zerbine sat the Marquis de Bruyères, of whom de Sigognac was in search. The soubrette welcomed him warmly, with a graceful mingling of the actress's familiarity with her comrade with her respect for the gentleman.

"It is very charming of you to come and join us here, in our cosy little nest," said the marquis to de Sigognac, with much cordiality, "and we are right glad to welcome you. Jacques, lay a place for this gentleman—you will sup with us?"

"I will accept your kind invitation," de Sigognac replied; "but not for the sake of the supper. I do not wish to interfere with your enjoyment, and nothing is so disagreeable for those at table as a looker-on who is not eating with them."

The baron accordingly sat down in the arm-chair rolled up for him by the servant, beside Zerbine and opposite the marquis, who helped him to some of the partridge

he had been carving, and filled his wine-glass for him; all without asking any questions as to what brought him there, or even hinting at it. But he felt sure that it must be something of importance that had caused the usually reserved and retiring young nobleman to take such a step as this.

“Do you like this red wine best or the other?” asked the marquis. “As for me, I drink some of both, so that there may be no jealous feeling between them.”

“I prefer the red wine, thank you,” de Sigognac said, with a smile, “and will add a little water to it. I am very temperate by nature and habit, and mingle a certain devotion to the nymphs with my worship at the shrine of Bacchus, as the ancients had it. But it was not for feasting and drinking that I was guilty of the indiscretion of intruding upon you at this unseemly hour. Marquis, I have come to ask of you a service that one gentleman never refuses to another. Mlle. Zerbine has probably related to you something of what took place in the green-room this evening. The Duke of Vallombreuse made an attempt to lay hands upon Isabelle, under pretext of placing an mouche for her, and was guilty of an insolent, outrageous, and brutal action, unworthy of a gentleman, which was not justified by any coquetry or advances on the part of that young girl, who is as pure as she is modest and for whom I feel the highest respect and esteem.”

“And she deserves it,” said Zerbine heartily, “every word you say of her, as I, who know her thoroughly, can testify. I could not say anything but good of her, even if I would.”

“I seized the duke’s arm, and stopped him before he had succeeded in what he meant to do,” continued de Sigognac, after a grateful glance at the soubrette; “he was furiously angry, and assailed me with threats and invectives, to which I replied with a mocking sang-froid, from behind my stage mask. He declared he would have me thrashed by his lackeys, and in effect, as I was coming back to this house, a little while ago, four ruffians fell upon me in the dark, narrow street. A couple of blows

with the flat of my sword did for two of the rascals, while Hérode and Scapin put the other two hors-de-combat in fine style. Although the duke imagined that only a poor actor was concerned, yet as there is also a gentleman in that actor's skin, such an outrage cannot be committed with impunity. You know me, marquis, though up to the present moment you have kindly and delicately respected my incognito, for which I thank you. You know who and what my ancestors were, and can certify that the family of de Sigognac has been noble for more than a thousand years, and that not one who has borne the name has ever had a blot on his scutcheon."

"Baron de Sigognac," said the marquis, addressing him for the first time by his own name, "I will bear witness, upon my honour, before whomsoever you may choose to name, to the antiquity and nobility of your family. Palamède de Sigognac distinguished himself by wonderful deeds of valour in the first crusade, to which he led a hundred lances, equipped, and transported thither, at his own expense. That was at an epoch when the ancestors of some of the proudest nobles of France to-day were not even squires. He and Hugues de Bruyères, my own ancestor, were warm friends, and slept in the same tent as brothers in arms."

At these glorious reminiscences de Sigognac raised his head proudly, and held it high; he felt the pure blood of his ancestors throbbing in his veins, and his heart beat tumultuously. Zerbine, who was watching him, was surprised at the strange inward beauty—if the expression may be allowed—that seemed to shine through the young baron's ordinarily sad countenance, and illuminate it. "These nobles," she said to herself, "are certainly a race by themselves; they look as if they had sprung from the side of Jupiter, not been born into the world like ordinary mortals. At the least word their pride is up in arms, and transforms them, as it does the Baron de Sigognac now. If he should make love to me, with eyes like those, I simply could not resist him; I should have to throw over my marquis. Why, he fairly glows with heroism; he is god-like."

Meantime de Sigognac, in blissful ignorance of this ardent admiration, which would have been so distasteful to him, was saying to the marquis, “Such being your opinion of my family, you will not, I fancy, object to carry a challenge from me to the Duke of Vallombreuse.”

“Assuredly I will do it for you,” answered the marquis, in a grave, measured way, widely different from his habitual good-natured, easy carelessness of manner and speech; “and, moreover, I offer my own services as your second. To-morrow morning I will present myself at the duke’s house in your behalf; there is one thing to be said in his favour—that although he may be, in fact is, very insolent, he is no coward, and he will no longer intrench himself behind his dignity when he is made acquainted with your real rank. But enough of this subject for the present; I will see you to-morrow morning in good season, and we will not weary poor Zerbine any longer with our man’s talk of affairs of honour. I can plainly see that she is doing her best to suppress a yawn, and we would a great deal rather that a smile should part her pretty red lips, and disclose to us the rows of pearls within. Come, Zerbine, fill the Baron de Sigognac’s glass, and let us be merry again.”

The soubrette obeyed, and with as much grace and dexterity as if she had been Hebe in person; everything that she attempted to do she did well, this clever little actress.

The conversation became animated, and did not touch upon any other grave subject, but was mainly about Zerbine’s own acting—the marquis overwhelming her with compliments upon it, in which de Sigognac could truthfully and sincerely join him, for the soubrette had really shown incomparable spirit, grace, and talent. They also talked of the productions of M. de Scudéry—who was one of the most brilliant writers of the day—which the marquis declared that he considered perfect, but slightly soporific; adding that he, for his part, decidedly preferred the Rodomontades of Captain Fracasse to Lygdamon et Lydias—he was a gentleman of taste, the marquis!

As soon as he could do so without an actual breach of politeness, de Sigognac took his leave, and retiring to his own chamber locked himself in; then took an ancient sword out of the woollen case in which he kept it to preserve it from rust—his father's sword—which he had brought with him from home, as a faithful friend and ally. He drew it slowly out of the scabbard, kissing the hilt with fervent affection and respect as he did so, for to him it was sacred. It was a handsome weapon, richly, but not too profusely, ornamented—a sword for service, not for show; its blade of bluish steel, upon which a few delicate lines of gold were traced, bore the well-known mark of one of the most celebrated armourers of Toledo. The young baron examined the edge critically, drawing his fingers lightly over it, and then, resting the point against the door, bent it nearly double to test its elasticity. The noble blade stood the trial right valiantly, and there was no fear of its betraying its master in the hour of need. Delighted to have it in his hand again, and excited by the thought of what was in store for it and himself, de Sigognac began to fence vigorously against the wall, and to practise the various thrusts and passes that his faithful old Pierre, who was a famous swordsman, had taught him at Castle Misery. They had been in the habit of spending hours every day in these lessons, glad of some active occupation, and the exercise had developed the young baron's frame, strengthened his muscles, and greatly augmented his natural suppleness and agility. He was passionately fond of and had thoroughly studied the noble art of fencing, and, while he believed himself to be still only a scholar, had long been a master in it—a proficient, such as is rarely to be found, even in the great cities. A better instructor than old Pierre he could not have had—not in Paris itself—and buried though he had been in the depths of the country, entirely isolated, and deprived of all the usual advantages enjoyed by young men of his rank, he yet had become, though perfectly unconscious of it, a match for the most celebrated swordsmen in France—that is to say, in the world—able to measure blades with the best of them. He may not have had all the elegant finish, and the many little airs and graces

affected by the young sprigs of nobility and polished men of fashion in their sword-play, but skilful indeed must be the blade that could penetrate within the narrow circle of flashing steel in which he intrenched himself. Finding, after a long combat with an imaginary foe, that his hand had not lost its cunning, and satisfied at length both with himself and with his sword, which he placed near his bedside, de Sigognac was soon sleeping soundly, and as quietly as if he had never even dreamed of sending a challenge to that lofty and puissant nobleman, the Duke of Vallombreuse.

Isabelle meanwhile could not close her eyes, because of her anxiety about the young baron. She knew that he would not allow the matter to rest where it was, and she dreaded inexpressibly the consequences of a quarrel with the duke; but the idea of endeavouring to prevent a duel never even occurred to her. In those days affairs of honour were regarded as sacred things, that women did not dream of interfering with, or rendering more trying to their near and dear ones by tears and lamentations, in anticipation of the danger to be incurred by them.

At nine o’clock the next morning, the Marquis de Bruyères was astir, and went to look up de Sigognac, whom he found in his own room, in order to regulate with him the conditions of the duel. The baron asked him to take with him, in case of incredulity, or refusal of his challenge, on the duke’s part, the old deeds and ancient parchments, to which large seals were suspended, the commissions of various sorts with royal signatures in faded ink, the genealogical tree of the de Sigognacs, and in fact all his credentials, which he had brought away from the château with him as his most precious treasures; for they were indisputable witnesses to the nobility and antiquity of his house. These valuable documents, with their strange old Gothic characters, scarcely decipherable save by experts, were carefully wrapped up in a piece of faded crimson silk, which looked as if it might have been part of the very banner borne by Palamède de Sigognac at the head of his hundred followers in the first crusade.

“I do not believe,” said the marquis, “that these credentials will be necessary; my word should be sufficient; it has never yet been doubted. However, as it is possible that this hot-headed young duke may persist in recognising only Captain Fracasse in your person, I will let my servant accompany me and carry them for me to his house, in case I should deem it best to produce them.”

“You must do whatever you think proper and right,” de Sigognac answered; “I have implicit confidence in your judgment, and leave my honour in your hands, without a condition or reservation.”

“It will be safe with me, I do solemnly assure you,” said the Marquis de Bruyères earnestly, “and we will have satisfaction yet from this proud young nobleman, whose excessive insolence and outrageously imperious ways are more than a little offensive to me, as well as to many others. He is no better than the rest of us, whose blood is as ancient and noble as his own, nor does his ducal coronet entitle him to the superiority he arrogates to himself so disagreeably. But we won’t talk any more about it—we must act now. Words are feminine, but actions are masculine, and offended honour can only be appeased with blood, as the old saying has it.”

Whereupon the marquis called his servant, consigned the precious packet, with an admonition, to his care, and followed by him set off on his mission of defiance. The duke, who had passed a restless, wakeful night, and only fallen asleep towards morning, was not yet up when the Marquis de Bruyères, upon reaching his house, told the servant who admitted him to announce him immediately to his master. The valet was aghast at the enormity of this demand, which was expressed in rather a peremptory tone. What! disturb the duke! before he had called for him! it would be as much as his life was worth to do it; he would as soon venture unarmed into the cage of a furious lion, or the den of a royal tiger. The duke was always more or less surly and ill-tempered on first waking in the morning, even when he had gone to bed in a good humour, as his servants knew to their cost.

“Your lordship had much better wait a little while, or call again later in the day,” said the valet persuasively, in answer to the marquis. “My lord, the duke, has not summoned me yet, and I would not dare—”

“Go this instant to your master and announce the Marquis de Bruyères,” interrupted that gentleman, in loud, angry tones, “or I will force the door and admit myself to his presence. I must speak to him, and that at once, on important business, in which your master’s honour is involved.”

“Ah! that makes a difference,” said the servant, promptly, “why didn’t your lordship mention it in the first place? I will go and tell my lord, the duke, forthwith; he went to bed in such a furious, blood-thirsty mood last night that I am sure he will be enchanted at the prospect of a duel this morning—delighted to have a pretext for fighting.”

And the man went off with a resolute air, after respectfully begging the marquis to be good enough to wait a few minutes. At the noise he made in opening the door of his master’s bedroom, though he endeavoured to do it as softly as possible, Vallombreuse, who was only dozing, started up in bed, broad awake, and looked round fiercely for something to throw at his head.

“What the devil do you mean by this?” he cried savagely. “Haven’t I ordered you never to come in here until I called for you? You shall have a hundred lashes for this, you scoundrel, I promise you; and you needn’t whine and beg for mercy either, for you’ll get none from me. I’d like to know how I am to go to sleep again now?”

“My lord may have his faithful servant lashed to death, if it so please his lordship,” answered the valet, with abject respect, “but though I have dared to transgress my lord’s orders, it is not without a good reason. His lordship, the Marquis de Bruyères, is below, asking to speak with my lord, the duke, on important business, relating to an affair of honour, and I know that my lord never denies himself to any gentleman on such occasions, but always receives visits of that sort, at any time of day or

night."

"The Marquis de Bruyères!" said the duke, surprised, "have I any quarrel with him? I don't recollect a difference between us ever; and besides, it's an age since I've seen him. Perhaps he imagines that I want to steal his dear Zerbine's heart away from him; lovers are always fancying that everybody else is enamoured of their own particular favourites. Here, Picard, give me my dressing-gown, and draw those curtains round the bed, so as to hide its disorder; make haste about it, do you hear? we must not keep the worthy marquis waiting another minute."

Picard bustled about, and brought to his master a magnificent dressing-gown-made, after the Venetian fashion, of rich stuff, with arabesques of black velvet on a gold ground—which he slipped on, and tied round the waist with a superb cord and tassels; then, seating himself in an easychair, told Picard to admit his early visitor.

"Good morning, my dear marquis," said the young duke smilingly, half rising to salute his guest as he entered. "I am very glad to see you, whatever your errand may be. Picard, a chair for his lordship! Excuse me, I pray you, for receiving you so unceremoniously here in my bedroom, which is still in disorder, and do not look upon it as a lack of civility, but rather as a mark of my regard for you. Picard said that you wished to see me immediately."

"I must beg you to pardon me, my dear duke," the marquis hastened to reply, "for insisting so strenuously upon disturbing your repose, and cutting short perhaps some delicious dream; but I am charged to see you upon a mission, which, among gentlemen, will not brook delay."

"You excite my curiosity to the highest degree," said Vallombreuse, "and I cannot even imagine what this urgent business may be about."

"I suppose it is not unlikely, my lord," rejoined the marquis, "that you have forgotten certain occurrences that took place last evening. Such trifling matters are not apt to make a very deep impression, so with your permission I will recall them to

your mind. In the so-called green-room, down at the tennis-court, you deigned to honour with your particular notice a young person, Isabelle by name, and with a playfulness that I, for my part, do not consider criminal, you endeavoured to place an assassine for her, just above her white bosom, complimenting her upon its fairness as you did so. This proceeding, which I do not criticise, greatly shocked and incensed a certain actor standing by, called Captain Fracasse, who rushed forward and seized your arm."

"Marquis, you are the most faithful and conscientious of historiographers," interrupted Vallombreuse. "That is all true, every word of it, and to finish the narrative I will add that I promised the rascal, who was as insolent as a noble, a sound thrashing at the hands of my lackeys; the most appropriate chastisement I could think of, for a low fellow of that sort."

"No one can blame you for that, my dear duke, for there is certainly no very great harm in having a play-actor—or writer either, for that matter—thoroughly thrashed, if he has had the presumption to offend," said the marquis, with a contemptuous shrug; "such cattle are not worth the value of the sticks broken over their backs. But this is a different case altogether. Under the mask of Captain Fracasse—who, by the way, routed your ruffians in superb style—is the Baron de Sigognac; a nobleman of the old school, the head of one of the best families we have in Gascony; one that has been above reproach for many centuries."

"What the devil is he doing in this troupe of strolling players, pray?" asked the Duke of Vallombreuse, with some heat, toying nervously with the cord and tassels of his dressing-gown as he spoke. "Could I be expected to divine that there was a de Sigognac hidden under that grotesque costume, and behind that absurd false nose?"

"As to your first question," the marquis replied, "I can answer it in one word—Isabelle. Between ourselves, I believe that the young baron is desperately in love with her. Indeed, he makes no secret of that fact; and, not having been able to

induce her to remain with him in his château, he has joined the troupe of which she is a member, in order to pursue his love affair. You certainly ought not to find this gallant proceeding in bad taste, since you also admire the fair object of his pursuit."

"No; I admit all that you say. But you, in your turn, must acknowledge that I could not be cognisant of this extraordinary romance by inspiration, and that the action of Captain Fracasse was impertinent."

"Impertinent for an actor, I grant you," said the marquis, "but perfectly natural, indeed inevitable, for a gentleman, resenting unauthorized attentions to his mistress, and angry at an affront offered to her. Now Captain Fracasse throws aside his mask, and as Baron de Sigognac sends you by me his challenge to fight a duel, and demands redress in that way for the insult you have offered him."

"But who is to guarantee me that this pretended Baron de Sigognac, who actually appears on the stage before the public with a company of low buffoons as one of themselves, is not a vulgar, intriguing rascal, usurping an honourable name, in the hope of obtaining the honour of crossing swords with the Duke of Vallombreuse?"

"Duke," said the Marquis de Bruyères, with much dignity, and some severity of tone, "I would not serve as second to any man who was not of noble birth, and of honourable character. I know the Baron de Sigognac well. His château is only a few leagues from my estate. I will be his guarantee. Besides, if you still persist in entertaining any doubts with regard to his real rank, I have here with me all the proofs necessary to convince you of his right to the ancient and distinguished name of Sigognac. Will you permit me to call in my servant, who is waiting in the antechamber? He will give you all those documents, for which I am personally responsible."

"There is no need," Vallombreuse replied courteously; "your word is sufficient. I accept his challenge. My friend, the Chevalier de Vidalinc, who is my guest at present, will be my second; will you be good enough to consult with him as to the

necessary arrangements? I will agree to anything you may propose—fight him when and where you please, and with any weapons he likes best; though I will confess that I should like to see whether the Baron de Sigognac can defend himself against a gentleman's sword as successfully as Captain Fracasse did against my lackeys' cudgels. The charming Isabelle shall crown the conqueror in this tournament, as the fair ladies crowned the victorious knights in the grand old days of chivalry. But now allow me to retire and finish my toilet. The Chevalier de Vidalinc will be with you directly. I kiss your hand, valiant marquis, as our Spanish neighbours say."

With these courteous words the Duke of Vallombreuse bowed with studied deference and politeness to his noble guest, and lifting the heavy portière of tapestry that hung over the door opening into his dressing-room, passed through it and vanished. But a very few moments had elapsed when the Chevalier de Vidalinc joined the marquis, and they lost no time in coming to an understanding as to the conditions of the duel. As a matter of course, they selected swords—the gentleman's natural weapon—and the meeting was fixed for the following morning, early; as de Sigognac, with his wonted consideration for his humble comrades, did not wish to fight that same day, and run the risk of interfering with the programme Hérode had announced for the evening, in case of his being killed or wounded. The rendezvous was at a certain spot in a field outside the walls of the town, which was level, smooth, well sheltered from observation, and advantageous in every way—being the favourite place of resort for such hostile meetings among the duellists of Poitiers.

The Marquis de Bruyères returned straightway to the Armes de France, and rendered an account of the success of his mission to de Sigognac; who thanked him warmly for his services, and felt greatly relieved, now that he was assured of having the opportunity to resent, as a gentleman should do, the affront offered to his adored Isabelle.

The representation was to begin very early that evening, and all day the town crier

went about through the streets, beating his drum lustily, and, whenever he had gathered a curious crowd around him, stopping and announcing the "great attractions—offered for that evening by Hérode's celebrated troupe." Immense placards were posted upon the walls of the tennis-court and at the entrance of the Armes de France, also announcing, in huge, bright-coloured capitals, which reflected great credit on Scapin, who was the calligraphist of the troupe, the new play of "Lygdamon et Lydias," and the Rodomontades of Captain Fracasse. Long before the hour designated an eager crowd had assembled in the street in front of the theatre, and when the doors were opened poured in, like a torrent that has burst its bounds, and threatened to sweep everything before them. Order was quickly restored, however, within, and "the nobility and gentry of Poitiers" soon began to arrive in rapid succession. Titled dames, in their sedan chairs, carried by liveried servants, alighted amid much bowing and flourishing of attendant gallants. Gentlemen from the environs came riding in, followed by mounted grooms who led away their masters' horses or mules. Grand, clumsy old carriages, vast and roomy, with much tarnished gildings and many faded decorations about them, and with coats-of-arms emblazoned on their panels, rolled slowly up, and out of them, as out of Noah's ark, issued all sorts of odd-looking pairs, and curious specimens of provincial grandeur; most of them resplendent in the strange fashions of a bygone day, yet apparently well satisfied with the elegance of their appearance. The house was literally packed, until there was not room left for another human being, be he never so slender. On each side of the stage was a row of arm-chairs, intended for distinguished spectators, according to the custom of the times, and there sat the young Duke of Vallombreuse, looking exceedingly handsome, in a very becoming suit of black velvet, elaborately trimmed with jet, and with a great deal of exquisite lace about it. Beside him was his faithful friend, the Chevalier de Vidalinc, who wore a superb costume of dark green satin, richly ornamented with gold. As to the Marquis de Bruyères, he had not claimed his seat among the notables, but was

snugly ensconced in his usual place—a retired corner near the orchestra—whence he could applaud his charming Zerbine to his heart's content, without making himself too conspicuous. In the boxes were the fine ladies, in full dress, settling themselves to their satisfaction with much rustling of silks, fluttering of fans, whispering and laughing. Although their finery was rather old-fashioned, the general effect was exceedingly brilliant, and the display of magnificent jewels—family heirlooms—was fairly dazzling. Such flashing of superb diamonds on white bosoms and in dark tresses; such strings of large, lustrous pearls round fair necks, and twined amid sunny curls; such rubies and sapphires, with their radiant surroundings of brilliants; such thick, heavy chains of virgin gold, of curious and beautiful workmanship; such priceless laces, yellow with age, of just that much-desired tint which is creamy at night; such superb old brocades, stiff and rich enough to stand alone; and best of all, such sweet, sparkling, young faces, as were to be seen here and there in this aristocratic circle. A few of the ladies, not wishing to be known had kept on their little black velvet masks, though they did not prevent their being recognised, spoken of by name, and commented on with great freedom by the plebeian crowd in the pit. One lady, however, who was very carefully masked, and attended only by a maid, baffled the curiosity of all observers. She sat a little back in her box, so that the full blaze of light should not fall upon her, and a large black lace veil, which was loosely fastened under her chin, covered her head so effectually that it was impossible to make out even the colour of her hair. Her dress was rich and elegant in the extreme, but sombre in hue, and in her hand she held a handsome fan made of black feathers, with a tiny looking-glass in the centre. A great many curious glances were directed at her, which manifestly made her uneasy, and she shrank still farther back in her box to avoid them; but the orchestra soon struck up a merry tune, and attracted all eyes and thoughts to the curtain, which was about to rise, so that the mysterious fair one was left to her enjoyment of the animated scene in peace. They began with "Lygdamon et Lydias," in which Leander, who played the principal part,

and wore a most becoming new costume, was quite overwhelmingly handsome. His appearance was greeted by a murmur of admiration and a great whispering among the ladies, while one unsophisticated young creature, just emancipated from her convent-school, exclaimed rapturously, aloud, “Oh! how charming he is!” for which shocking indiscretion she received a severe reprimand from her horrified mama, that made her retire into the darkest corner of the box, covered with blushes and confusion. Yet the poor girl had only innocently given expression to the secret thought of every woman in the audience, her own dignified mother included; for, really, Leander was delightfully, irresistibly handsome as Lygdamon—a perfect Apollo, in the eyes of those provincial dames. But by far the most agitated of them all was the masked beauty; whose heaving bosom, trembling hand—betrayed by the fan it held—and eager attitude—leaning breathlessly forward and intently watching Leander’s every movement—would inevitably have borne witness to her great and absorbing interest in him, if anybody had been observing her to mark her emotion; but fortunately for her all eyes were turned upon the stage, so she had time to recover her composure. Leander was surpassing himself in his acting that night, yet even then he did not neglect to gaze searchingly round the circle of his fair admirers, trying to select the titled dames, and decide which one among them he should favour with his most languishing glances. As he scrutinized one after another, his eyes finally reached the masked lady, and at once his curiosity was on the qui vive—here was assuredly something promising at last; he was convinced that the richly dressed, graceful incognita was a victim to his own irresistible charms, and he directed a long, eloquent, passionate look full at her, to indicate that she was understood. To his delight—his rapturous, ecstatic delight—she answered his appealing glance by a very slight bend of the head, which was full of significance, as if she would thank him for his penetration. Being thus happily brought en rapport, frequent glances were exchanged throughout the play, and even little signals also, between the hero on the stage and the lady in her box.

Leander was an adept in that sort of thing, and could so modulate his voice and use his really fine eyes in making an impassioned declaration of love to the heroine of the play, that the fair object of his admiration in the audience would believe that it was addressed exclusively to herself. Inspired by this new flame, he acted with so much spirit and animation that he was rewarded with round after round of applause; which he had the art to make the masked lady understand he valued less than the faintest mark of approbation and favour from her.

After “Lygdamon et Lydias” came the Rodomontades of Captain Fracasse, which met with its accustomed success. Isabelle was rendered very uneasy by the close proximity of the Duke of Vallombreuse, dreading some act of insolence on his part; but her fears were needless, for he studiously refrained from annoying her in any way—even by staring at her too fixedly. He was moderate in his applause, and quietly attentive, as he sat in a careless attitude in his arm-chair on the stage throughout the piece. His lip curled scornfully sometimes when Captain Fracasse was receiving the shower of blows and abuse that fell to his share, and his whole countenance was expressive of the most lofty disdain, but that was all; for though violent and impetuous by nature, the young duke was too much of a gentleman—once his first fury passed—to transgress the rules of courtesy in any way; and more especially towards an adversary with whom he was to fight on the morrow—until then hostilities were suspended, and he religiously observed the truce.

The masked lady quietly withdrew a little before the end of the second piece, in order to avoid mingling with the crowd, and also to be able to regain her chair, which awaited her close at hand, unobserved; her disappearance mightily disturbed Leander, who was furtively watching the movements of the mysterious unknown. The moment he was free, almost before the curtain had fallen, he threw a large cloak around him to conceal his theatrical costume, and rushed towards the outer door in pursuit of her. The slender thread that bound them together would be broken past

mending he feared if he did not find her, and it would be too horrible to lose sight of this radiant creature—as he styled her to himself—before he had been able to profit by the pronounced marks of favour she had bestowed upon him so lavishly during the evening. But when he reached the street, all out of breath from his frantic efforts in dashing through the crowd, and bustling people right and left regardless of everything but the object he had in view, there was nothing to be seen of her; she had vanished, and left not a trace behind. Leander reproached himself bitterly with his own folly in not having endeavoured to exchange a few words with his lost divinity in the brief interval between the two plays, and called himself every hard name he could think of; as we are all apt to do in moments of vexation.

But while he still stood gazing disconsolately in the direction that she must have taken, a little page, dressed in a dark brown livery, and with his cap pulled down over his eyes, suddenly appeared beside him, and accosted him politely in a high childish treble, which he vainly strove to render more manly. “Are you M. Leander? the one who played Lygdamon a while ago?”

“Yes, I am,” answered Leander, amused at the pretentious airs of his small interlocutor, “and pray what can I do for you, my little man?”

“Oh! nothing for me, thank you,” said the page, with a significant smile, “only I am charged to deliver a message to you—if you are disposed to hear it—from the lady of the mask.”

“From the lady of the mask!” cried Leander. “Oh I tell me quickly what it is; I am dying to hear it.”

“Well, here it is, then, word for word,” said the tiny page jauntily. “If Lygdamon is as brave as he is gallant, he will go at midnight to the open square in front of the church, where he will find a carriage awaiting him; he will enter it without question, as without fear, and go whither it will take him.”

Before the astonished Leander had time to answer, the page had disappeared in the

crowd, leaving him in great perplexity, for if his heart beat high with joy at the idea of a romantic adventure, his shoulders still reminded him painfully of the beating he had received in a certain park at dead of night, and he remembered with a groan how he had been lured on to his own undoing. Was this another snare spread for him by some envious wretch who begrudged him his brilliant success that evening, and was jealous of the marked favour he had found in the eyes of the fair ladies of Poitiers? Should he encounter some furious husband at the rendezvous, sword in hand, ready to fall upon him and run him through the body? These thoughts chilled his ardour, and had nearly caused him to disregard entirely the page's mysterious message. Yet, if he did not profit by this tempting opportunity, which looked so promising, he might make a terrible mistake; and, if he failed to go, would not the lady of the mask suspect him of cowardice, and be justified in so doing? This thought was insupportable to the gallant Leander, and he decided to venture, though low be it spoken—in fear and trembling. He hastened back to the hotel, scarcely touched the substantial supper provided for the comedians—his appetite lost in his intense excitement—and retiring to his own chamber made an elaborate toilet; curling and perfuming his hair and mustache, and sparing no pains to make himself acceptable to the lovely lady of the mask. He armed himself with a dagger and a sword, though he did not know how to use either; but he thought that the mere sight of them might inspire awe.

When he was all ready at last, he drew his broad felt hat well down over his eyes, threw the corner of his cloak over his shoulder, in Spanish fashion, so as to conceal the lower part of his face, and crept stealthily out of the hotel—for once being lucky enough to escape the observation of his wily tormentor, Scapin, who was at that moment snoring his loudest in his own room at the other end of the house.

The streets had long been empty and deserted, for the good people of the ancient and respectable town of Poitiers go early to bed. Leander did not meet a living creature, excepting a few forlorn, homeless cats, prowling about and bewailing themselves in

a melancholy way, that fled before him, and vanished round dark corners or in shadowy doorways. Our gallant reached the open square designated by the little page just as the last stroke of twelve was vibrating in the still night air. It gave him a shudder; a superstitious sensation of horror took possession of him, and he felt as if he had heard the tolling of his own funeral bell. For an instant he was on the point of rushing back, and seeking quiet, safe repose in his comfortable bed at the Armes de France, but was arrested by the sight of the carriage standing there waiting for him, with the tiny page himself in attendance, perched on the step and holding the door open for him. So he was obliged to go on—for few people in this strange world of ours have the courage to be cowardly before witnesses—and instinctively acting a part, he advanced with a deliberate and dignified bearing, that gave no evidence of the inward fear and agitation that had set his heart beating as if it would burst out of his breast, and sent strong shivers over him from his head to his feet. Scarcely had he taken his seat in the carriage when the coachman touched his horses with the whip, and they were off at a good round pace; while he was in utter darkness, and did not even know which way they went, as the leathern curtains were carefully drawn down, so that nothing could be seen from within, or without. The small page remained at his post on the carriage step, but spoke never a word, and Leander could not with decency question him, much as he would have liked to do so. He knew that his surroundings were luxurious, for his exploring fingers told him that the soft, yielding cushions, upon which he was resting, were covered with velvet, and his feet sank into a thick, rich rug, while the vague, delicious perfume, that seemed to surround and caress him, soothed his ruffled feelings, and filled his mind with rapturous visions of bliss. He tried in vain to divine who it could be that had sent to fetch him in this delightfully mysterious way, and became more curious than ever, and also rather uneasy again, when he felt that the carriage had quitted the paved streets of the town, and was rolling smoothly and rapidly along over a country road. At last it stopped, the little page jumped down and flung the door wide open, and

Leander, alighting, found himself confronted by a high, dark wall, which seemed to inclose a park, or garden; but he did not perceive a wooden door close at hand until his small companion, pushing back a rusty bolt, proceeded to open it, with considerable difficulty, and admitted him into what was apparently a thick wood.

“Take hold of my hand,” said the page patronizingly to Leander, “so that I can guide you; it is too dark for you to be able to make out the path through this labyrinth of trees.”

Leander obeyed, and both walked cautiously forward, feeling their way as they wound in and out among the trees, and treading the crackling, dry leaves, strewn thickly upon the ground, under their feet. Emerging from the wood at last, they came upon a garden, laid out in the usual style, with rows of box bordering the angular flower beds, and with yew trees, cut into pyramids, at regular intervals; which, just perceptible in the darkness, looked like sentinels posted on their way—a shocking sight for the poor timid actor, who trembled in every limb. They passed them all, however, unchallenged, and ascended some stone steps leading up to a terrace, on which stood a small country house—a sort of pavilion, with a dome, and little turrets at the corners. The place seemed quite deserted, save for a subdued glimmer of light from one large window, which the thick crimson silk curtains within could not entirely conceal. At this reassuring sight Leander dismissed all fear from his mind, and gave himself up to the most blissful anticipations. He was in a seventh heaven of delight; his feet seemed to spurn the earth; he would have flown into the presence of the waiting angel within if he had but known the way. How he wished, in this moment of glory and triumph, that Scapin, his mortal enemy and merciless tormentor, could see him. The tiny page stepped on before him, and after opening a large glass door and showing him into a spacious apartment, furnished with great luxury and elegance, retired and left him alone, without a word. The vaulted ceiling—which was the interior of the dome seen from without—was painted to represent a light blue sky, in which small rosy clouds were floating, and bewitching

little Loves flying about in all sorts of graceful attitudes, while the walls were hung with beautiful tapestry. The cabinets, inlaid with exquisite Florentine mosaics and filled with many rare and curious objects of virtu, the round table covered with a superb Turkish cloth, the large, luxurious easy-chairs, the vases of priceless porcelain filled with fragrant flowers, all testified to the wealth and fastidious taste of their owner. The richly gilded candelabra, of many branches, holding clusters of wax candles, which shed their soft, mellow light on all this magnificence, were upheld by sculptured arms and hands in black marble, to represent a negro's, issuing from fantastic white marble sleeves; as if the sable attendants were standing without the room, and had passed their arms through apertures in the wall.

Leander, dazzled by so much splendour, did not at first perceive that there was no one awaiting him in this beautiful apartment, but when he had recovered from his first feeling of astonishment, and realized that he was alone, he proceeded to take off his cloak and lay it, with his hat and sword, on a chair in one corner, after which he deliberately rearranged his luxuriant ringlets in front of a Venetian mirror, and then, assuming his most graceful and telling pose, began pouring forth in dulcet tones the following monologue: "But where, oh! where, is the divinity of this Paradise? Here is the temple indeed, but I see not the goddess. When, oh! when, will she deign to emerge from the cloud that veils her perfect form, and reveal herself to the adoring eyes, that wait so impatiently to behold her?" rolling the said organs of vision about in the most effective manner by way of illustration.

Just at that moment, as if in response to this eloquent appeal, the crimson silk hanging, which fell in front of a door that Leander had not noticed, was pushed aside, and the lady he had come to seek stood before him; with the little black velvet mask still over her face, to the great disappointment and discomfiture of her expectant suitor. "Can it be possible that she is ugly?" he thought to himself; "this obstinate clinging to the mask alarms me." But his uncertainty was of short duration, for the lady, advancing to the centre of the room, where Leander stood respectfully

awaiting her pleasure, untied the strings of the mask, took it off, and threw it down on the table, disclosing a rather pretty face, with tolerably regular features, large, brilliant, brown eyes, and smiling red lips. Her rich masses of dark hair were elaborately dressed, with one long curl hanging down upon her neck, and enhancing its whiteness by contrast; the uncovered shoulders were plump and shapely, and the full, snowy bosom rose and fell tumultuously under the cloud of beautifully fine lace that veiled, not concealed, its voluptuous curves.

“Mme. la Marquise de Bruyères!” cried Leander, astonished to the highest degree, and not a little agitated, as the remembrance of his last, and first, attempt to meet her, and what he had found in her place, rushed back upon him; “can it be possible? am I dreaming? or may I dare to believe in such unhoped-for, transcendent happiness?”

“Yes; you are not mistaken, my dear friend,” said she, “I am indeed the Marquise de Bruyères, and recognised, I trust, by your heart as well as your eyes.”

“Ah! but too well,” Leander replied, in thrilling tones. “Your adored image is cherished there, traced in living lines of light; I have only to look into that devoted, faithful heart, to see and worship your beauteous form, endowed with every earthly grace, and radiant with every heavenly perfection.”

“I thank you,” said the marquise, “for having retained such a kind and tender remembrance of me; it proves that yours is a noble, magnanimous soul. You had every reason to think me cruel, ungrateful, false—when, alas! my poor heart in reality is but too susceptible, and I was far from being insensible to the passionate admiration you so gracefully testified for me. Your letter addressed to me did not reach my hands, but unfortunately fell into those of the marquis—through the heartless treachery of the faithless maid to whom it was intrusted—and he sent you the answer which so cruelly deceived you, my poor Leander! Some time after he showed me that letter, laughing heartily over what he was wicked enough to call a

capital joke; that letter, in every line of which the purest, most impassioned love shone so brightly, and filled my heart with joy, despite his ridicule and coarse abuse. It did not produce the effect upon me that he expected and intended; the sentiment I cherished secretly for you was only increased and strengthened by its persuasive eloquence, and I resolved to reward you for all that you had suffered for my sake. Knowing my husband to be perfectly absorbed in his most recent conquest, and so oblivious of me that there was no danger of his becoming aware of my absence from the Château de Bruyères, I have ventured to come to Poitiers; for I have heard you express fictitious love so admirably, that I long to know whether you can be as eloquent and convincing when you speak for yourself."

"Mme. la Marquise," said Leander, in his sweetest tones, sinking gracefully on his knees, upon a cushion at the feet of the lady, who had let herself fall languidly into a low easy-chair, as if exhausted by the extreme effort that her confession had been to her modesty. "Madame, or rather most lovely queen and deity, what can mere empty words, counterfeit passion, imaginary raptures, conceived and written in cold blood by the poets, and make-believe sighs, breathed out at the feet of an odious actress, all powdered and painted, whose eyes are wandering absently around the theatre—what can these be beside the living words that gush out from the soul, the fire that burns in the veins and arteries, the hyperboles of an exalted passion, to which the whole universe cannot furnish images brilliant and lofty enough to apply to its idol, and the aspirations of a wildly loving heart, that would fain break forth from the breast that contains it, to serve as a footstool for the dear object of its adoration? You deign to say, celestial marquise, that I express with some feeling the fictitious love in the pieces I play. Shall I tell you why it is so? Because I never look at, or even think of, the actress whom I seem to address—my thoughts soar far above and beyond her—and I speak to my own perfect ideal; to a being, noble, beautiful, spirituelle as yourself, Mme. la Marquise! It is you, in fine, you that I see and love under the name of Silvie, Doralice, Isabelle, or whatever it may chance to

be; they are only your phantoms for me.”

With these words Leander, who was too good an actor to neglect the pantomime that should accompany such a declaration, bent down over the hand that the marquise had allowed him to take, and covered it with burning kisses; which delicate attention was amiably received, and his real love-making seemed to be as pleasing to her ladyship as even he could have desired.

The eastern sky was all aflame with the radiance of the coming sun when Leander, well wrapped in his warm cloak, was driven back to Poitiers. As he lifted a corner of one of the carefully lowered curtains, to see which side of the town they were approaching, he caught sight of the Marquis de Bruyères and the Baron de Sigognac, still at some distance, who were walking briskly along the road towards him, on their way to the spot designated for the duel.

Leander let the curtain drop, so as not to be seen by the marquis, who was almost grazed by the carriage wheels as they rolled by him, and a satisfied smile played round his lips; he was revenged—the beating was atoned for now.

The place selected for the hostile meeting between the Baron de Sigognac and the Duke of Vallombreuse was sheltered from the cold north wind by a high wall, which also screened the combatants from the observation of those passing along the road. The ground was firm, well trodden down, without stones, tufts of grass, or inequalities of any kind, which might be in the way of the swordsmen, and offered every facility to men of honour to murder each other after the most correct and approved fashion. The Duke of Vallombreuse and the Chevalier de Vidalinc, followed by a surgeon, arrived at the rendezvous only a few seconds after the others, and the four gentlemen saluted each other with the haughty courtesy and frigid politeness becoming to well-bred men meeting for such a purpose. The duke’s countenance was expressive of the most careless indifference, as he felt perfect confidence in his own courage and skill. The baron was equally cool and collected,

though it was his first duel, and a little nervousness or agitation would have been natural and excusable. The Marquis de Bruyères watched him with great satisfaction, auguring good things for their side from his quiet sang-froid. Vallombreuse immediately threw off his cloak and hat, and unfastened his pourpoint, in which he was closely imitated by de Sigognac. The marquis and the chevalier measured the swords of the combatants, which were found to be of equal length, and then each second placed his principal in position, and put his sword in his hand.

“Fall to, gentlemen, and fight like men of spirit, as you are,” said the marquis.

“A needless recommendation that,” chimed in the Chevalier de Vidalinc; “they go at it like lions—-we shall have a superb duel.”

The Duke of Vallombreuse, who, in his inmost heart, could not help despising de Sigognac more than a little, and had imagined that he should find in him but a weak antagonist, was astonished when he discovered the strength of the baron’s sword, and could not deny to himself that he wielded a firm and supple blade, which baffled his own with the greatest ease—that he was, in fine, a “foeman worthy of his steel.” He became more careful and attentive; then tried several feints, which were instantly detected. At the least opening he left, the point of de Sigognac’s sword, rapid as lightning in its play, darted in upon him, necessitating the exercise of all his boasted skill to parry it. He ventured an attack, which was so promptly met, and his weapon so cleverly struck aside, that he was left exposed to his adversary’s thrust, and but for throwing himself back out of reach, by a sudden, violent movement, he must have received it full in his breast. From that instant all was changed for the young duke; he had believed that he would be able to direct the combat according to his own will and pleasure, but, instead of that, he was forced to make use of all his skill and address to defend himself. He had believed that after a few passes he could wound de Sigognac, wherever he chose, by a thrust which, up to that time, he had

always found successful; but, instead of that, he had hard work to avoid being wounded himself. Despite his efforts to remain calm and cool, he was rapidly growing angry; he felt himself becoming nervous and feverish, while the baron, perfectly at his ease and unmoved, seemed to take a certain pleasure in irritating him by the irreproachable excellence of his fence.

“Sha’n’t we do something in this way too, while our friends are occupied?” said the chevalier to the marquis.

“It is very cold this morning. Suppose we fight a little also, if only to warm ourselves up, and set our blood in motion.”

“With all my heart,” the marquis replied; “we could not do better.”

The chevalier was superior to the Marquis de Bruyères in the noble art of fencing, and after a few passes had sent the latter’s sword flying out of his hand. As no enmity existed between them, they stopped there by mutual consent, and turned their attention again to de Sigognac and Vallombreuse. The duke, sore pressed by the close play of the baron, had fallen back several feet from his original position. He was becoming weary, and beginning to draw panting breaths. From time to time, as their swords clashed violently together, bluish sparks flew from them; but the defence was growing perceptibly weaker, and de Sigognac was steadily forcing the duke to give way before his attack. When he saw the state of affairs, the Chevalier de Vidalinc turned very pale, and began to feel really anxious for his friend, who was so evidently getting the worst of it.

“Why the devil doesn’t he try that wonderful thrust he learned from Girolamo of Naples?” murmured he. “This confounded Gascon cannot possibly know anything about that.”

As if inspired by the same thought, the young duke did, at that very moment, try to put it into execution; but de Sigognac, aware of what he was preparing to do, not only prevented but anticipated him, and touched and wounded his adversary in the

arm—his sword going clean through it.

The pain was so intense that the duke's fingers could no longer grasp his sword, and it fell to the ground. The baron, with the utmost courtesy, instantly desisted, although he was entitled by the rules of the code to follow up his blow with another—for the duel does not necessarily come to an end with the first blood drawn. He turned the point of his sword to the ground, put his left hand on his hip, and stood silently awaiting his antagonist's pleasure. But Vallombreuse could not hold the sword which his second had picked up and presented to him, after a nod of acquiescence from de Sigognac; and he turned away to signify that he had had enough. Whereupon, the marquis and the baron, after bowing politely to the others, set forth quietly to walk back to the town.

CHAPTER X. A MIDNIGHT ADVENTURE

After the surgeon had bandaged his injured arm, and arranged a sling for it, the Duke of Vallombreuse was put carefully into a chair, which had been sent for in all haste, to be taken home. His wound was not in the least a dangerous one, though it would deprive him of the use of his right hand for some time to come, for the blade had gone quite through the forearm; but, most fortunately, without severing any important tendons or arteries. He suffered a great deal of pain from it of course, but still more from his wounded pride; and he felt furiously and unreasonably angry with everything and everybody about him. It seemed to be somewhat of a relief to him to swear savagely at his bearers, and call them all the hardest names he could think of, whenever he felt the slightest jar, as they carried him slowly towards home, though they were walking as steadily as men could do, and carefully avoiding every inequality in the road. When at last he reached his own house, he was not willing to be put to bed, as the surgeon advised, but lay down upon a lounge instead, where he was made as comfortable as was possible by his faithful Picard, who was in despair

at seeing the young duke in such a condition; astonished as well, for nothing of the kind had ever happened before, in all the many duels he had fought; and the admiring valet had shared his master's belief that he was invincible. The Chevalier de Vidalinc sat in a low chair beside his friend, and gave him from time to time a spoonful of the tonic prescribed by the surgeon, but refrained from breaking the silence into which he had fallen. Vallombreuse lay perfectly still for a while; but it was easy to see, in spite of his affected calmness, that his blood was boiling with suppressed rage. At last he could restrain himself no longer, and burst out violently: "Oh! Vidalinc, this is too outrageously aggravating! to think that that contemptible, lean stork, who has flown forth from his ruined château so as not to die of starvation in it, should have dared to stick his long bill into me! I have encountered, and conquered, the best swordsmen in France, and never returned from the field before with so much as a scratch, or without leaving my adversary stretched lifeless on the ground, or wounded and bleeding in the arms of his friends."

"But you must remember that the most favoured and the bravest of mortals have their unlucky days, Vallombreuse," answered the chevalier sententiously, "and Dame Fortune does not always smile, even upon her prime favourites. Until now you have never had to complain of her frowns, for you have been her pampered darling all your life long."

"Isn't it too disgraceful," continued Vallombreuse, growing more and more heated, "that this ridiculous buffoon—this grotesque country clown—who takes such abominable drubbings on the stage, and has never in his life known what it was to associate with gentlemen, should have managed to get the best of the Duke of Vallombreuse, hitherto by common accord pronounced invincible? He must be a professional prize-fighter, disguised as a strolling mountebank."

"There can be no doubt about his real rank," said Vidalinc, "for the Marquis de Bruyères guarantees it; but I must confess that his unequalled performance to-day

filled me with astonishment; it was simply marvellous. Neither Girolamo nor Paraguante, those two world-renowned swordsmen, could have surpassed it. I watched him closely, and I tell you that even they could not have withstood him. It took all your remarkable skill—which has been so greatly enhanced by the Neapolitan's instructions—to avoid being mortally wounded; why your defeat was a victory in my eyes, in that it was not a more overwhelming one."

"I don't know how I am to wait for this wound to heal," the duke said, after a short pause, "I am so impatient to provoke him again, and have the opportunity to revenge myself."

"That would be a very hazardous proceeding, and one that I should strongly advise you not to attempt," Vidalinc replied in an earnest tone. "Your sword-arm will scarcely be as strong as before for a long time I fear, and that would seriously diminish your chances of success. This Baron de Sigognac is a very formidable antagonist, and will be still more so, for you, now that he knows your tactics; and besides, the confidence in himself which his first victory naturally gives him would be another thing in his favour. Honour is satisfied, and the encounter was a serious one for you. Let the matter rest here, I beseech you!"

Vallombreuse could not help being secretly convinced of the justice of these remarks, but was not willing to avow it openly, even to his most intimate friend. He was a sufficiently accomplished swordsman himself to appreciate de Sigognac's wonderful prowess, and he knew that it far surpassed his own much vaunted skill, though it enraged him to have to recognise this humiliating fact. He was even obliged to acknowledge, in his inmost heart, that he owed his life to the generous forbearance of his hated enemy; who might have taken it just as well as not, but had spared him, and been content with giving him only a flesh wound, just severe enough to put him hors-de-combat, without doing him any serious injury. This magnanimous conduct, by which a less haughty nature would have been deeply

touched, only served to irritate the young duke's pride, and increase his resentment. To think that he, the valiant and puissant Duke of Vallombreuse, had been conquered, humiliated, wounded! the bare idea made him frantic. Although he said nothing further to his companion about his revenge, his mind was filled with fierce projects whereby to obtain it, and he swore to himself to be even yet with the author of his present mortification—if not in one way, then in another; for injuries there be that are far worse than mere physical wounds and hurts.

"I shall cut a sorry figure enough now in the eyes of the fair Isabelle," said he at last, with a forced laugh, "with my arm here run through and rendered useless by the sword of her devoted gallant. Cupid, weak and disabled, never did find much favour with the Graces, you know. But oh! how charming and adorable she seems to me, this sweet, disdainful Isabelle! I am actually almost grateful to her for resisting me so; for, if she had yielded, I should have been tired of her by this time, I fancy. Her nature certainly cannot be a base, ordinary one, or she would never have refused thus the advances of a wealthy and powerful nobleman, who is ready to lavish upon her everything that heart could desire, and whose own personal attractions are not to be despised; if the universal verdict of the fair sex of all ranks can be relied upon. There is a certain respect and esteem mingled with my passionate admiration for her, that I have never felt before for any woman, and it is very sweet to me. But how in the world are we to get rid of this confounded young sprig of nobility, her self-constituted champion? May the devil fly away with him!"

"It will not be an easy matter," the chevalier replied, and especially now that he is upon his guard. "But even if you did succeed in getting rid of him, Isabelle's love for him would still be in your way, and you ought to know, better than most men, how obstinate a woman can be in her devoted attachment to a man."

"Oh! if I could only kill this miserable baron," continued Vallombreuse, not at all impressed by the chevalier's last remark, "I could soon win the favour of this

virtuous young person, in spite of all her little prudish airs and graces. Nothing is so quickly forgotten as a defunct suitor."

These were by no means the chevalier's sentiments, but he refrained from pursuing the subject then, wishing to soothe, rather than irritate, his suffering friend.

"You must first get well as fast as you can," he said, "and it will be time enough then for us to discuss the matter. All this talking wearies you, and does you no good. Try to get a little nap now, and not excite yourself so. The surgeon will tax me with imprudence, and call me a bad nurse, I'm afraid, if I don't manage to keep you more quiet—mentally as well as physically."

His patient, yielding with rather an ill grace to this sensible advice, sank back wearily upon his pillows, closed his eyes, and soon fell asleep—where we will leave him, enjoying his much needed repose.

Meantime the Marquis de Bruyères and de Sigognac had quietly returned to their hotel, where, like well-bred gentlemen, they did not breathe even a hint of what had taken place. But walls have ears they say, and eyes as well it would appear, for they certainly see as much as they ever hear. In the neighbourhood of the apparently solitary, deserted spot where the duel had taken place, more than one inquisitive, hidden observer had closely watched the progress of the combat, and had not lost a moment after it was over in spreading the news of it; so that by breakfast-time all Poitiers was in a flutter of excitement over the intelligence that the Duke of Vallombreuse had been wounded in a duel with an unknown adversary, and was exhausting itself in vain conjectures as to who the valiant stranger could possibly be. No one thought of de Sigognac, who had led the most retired life imaginable ever since his arrival; remaining quietly at the hotel all day, and showing only his stage mask, not his own face, at the theatre in the evening.

Several gentlemen of his acquaintance sent to inquire ceremoniously after the Duke of Vallombreuse, giving their messengers instructions to endeavour to get some

information from his servants about the mysterious duel, but they were as taciturn as the mutes of a seraglio, for the very excellent and sufficient reason that they knew nothing what ever about it. The young duke, by his great wealth, his overweening pride, his uncommon good looks, and his triumphant success among fair ladies everywhere, habitually excited much secret jealousy and hatred among his associates, which not one of them dared to manifest openly—but they were mightily pleased by his present discomfiture.

It was the first check he had ever experienced, and all those who had been hurt or offended by his arrogance—and they were legion—now rejoiced in his mortification. They could not say enough in praise of his successful antagonist, though they had never seen him, nor had any idea as to what manner of man he might be. The ladies, who nearly all had some cause of complaint against the haughty young noble man, as he was wont to boast loudly of his triumphs, and basely betray the favours that had been accorded to him in secret, were full of enthusiastic and tender admiration for this victorious champion of a woman's virtue, who, they felt, had unconsciously avenged for them many scornful slights, and they would have gladly crowned him with laurel and myrtle, and rewarded him with their sweetest smiles and most distinguished favour.

However, as nothing on this terraqueous and sublunary globe can long remain a secret, it soon transpired through Maître Bilot, who had it direct from Jacques, the valet of the Marquis de Bruyères, who had been present during the momentous interview between his master and the Baron de Sigognac, that the duke's brave antagonist was no other than the redoubtable Captain Fracasse; or rather, a young nobleman in disguise, who for the sake of a love affair had become a member of Hérode's troupe of travelling comedians. As to his real name, Jacques had unfortunately forgotten it, further than that it ended in "gnac," as is not uncommon in Gascony, but on the point of his rank he was positive. This delightfully romantic and "ower-true tale" was received with acclamations by the good folk of Poitiers.

They were fairly overflowing with admiration for and interest in the valiant gentleman who wielded such a powerful blade, and the devoted lover who had left everything to follow his mistress, and when Captain Fracasse appeared upon the stage that evening, the prolonged and enthusiastic applause that greeted him, and was renewed over and over again before he was allowed to speak a single word, bore witness unmistakably to the favour with which he was regarded; while the ladies rose in their boxes and waved their handkerchiefs, even the grandest and most dignified among them, and brought the palms of their gloved hands daintily together in his honour. It was a real ovation, and best of all a spontaneous one. Isabelle also received a perfect storm of applause, which alarmed and had nearly overcome the retiring young actress, who blushed crimson in her embarrassment, as she made a modest curtsey in acknowledgment of the compliment.

Hérode was overjoyed, and his face shone like the full moon as he rubbed his hands together and grinned broadly in his exuberant delight; for the receipts were immense, and the cash-box was full to bursting. Everybody had rushed to the theatre to see and applaud the now famous Captain Fracasse—the capital actor and high-spirited gentleman—who feared neither cudgels nor swords; and had not shrunk from encountering the dreaded Duke of Vallombreuse, the terror of all the country round, in mortal combat, as the champion of offended beauty. Blazius, however, did not share the tyrant's raptures, but on the contrary foreboded no good from all this, for he feared, and not without reason, the vindictive character of the Duke of Vallombreuse, and was apprehensive that he would find some means of revenging himself for his defeat at de Sigognac's hands that would be detrimental to the troupe. "Earthen vessels," said he, "should be very careful how they get in the way of metal ones, lest, if they rashly encounter them, they be ignominiously smashed in the shock." But Hérode, relying upon the support and countenance of the Baron de Sigognac and the Marquis de Bruyères, laughed at his fears, and called him faint-heart, a coward, and a croaker.

When the comedians returned to their hotel, after the play was over, de Sigognac accompanied Isabelle to the door of her room, and, contrary to her usual custom, the young actress invited him to enter it with her. When they found themselves quite alone, and safe from all curious eyes, Isabelle turned to de Sigognac, took his hand in both of hers, and pressing it warmly said to him in a voice trembling with emotion,

“Promise me never to run such a fearful risk for my sake again, de Sigognac; promise me! Swear it, if you really do love me as you say.”

“That is a thing I cannot do,” the baron replied, “even to please you, sweet Isabelle! If ever any insolent fellow dares to show a want of proper respect for you, I shall surely chastise him for it, as I ought, be he what he may—duke, or even prince.”

“But remember, de Sigognac, that I am nothing but an actress, inevitably exposed to affronts from the men that haunt the coulisses. It is the generally received opinion, which alas! is but too well justified by the usual ways of the members of my profession, that an actress is no better than she should be; in fine, not a proper character nor worthy of respect. From the moment that a woman steps upon the stage she becomes public property, and even if she be really pure and virtuous it is universally believed that she only affects it for a purpose. These things are hard and bitter, but they must be borne, since it is impossible to change them. In future trust to me, I pray you, to repel those who would force their unwelcome attentions upon me in the green-room, or endeavour to make their way into my dressing-room. A sharp rap over the knuckles with a corset board from me will be quite as efficacious as for you to draw your sword in my behalf.”

“But I am not convinced,” said de Sigognac, with a smile; “I must still believe, sweet Isabelle, that the sword of a chivalrous ally would be your best weapon of defence, and I beg you not to deprive me of the precious privilege of being your devoted knight and champion.”

Isabelle was still holding de Sigognac's hand, and she now raised her lovely eyes, full of mute supplication, to meet his adoring gaze, hoping yet to draw from him, the much desired promise. But the baron was incorrigible; where honour was concerned he was as firm and unyielding as a Spanish hidalgo, and he would have braved a thousand deaths rather than have allowed an affront to the lady of his love to pass unpunished; he wished that the same deference and respect should be accorded to Isabelle upon the stage, as to a duchess in her drawing-room.

"Come, de Sigognac, be reasonable," pleaded the young actress, "and promise me not to expose yourself to such danger again for so frivolous a cause. Oh! what anxiety and anguish I endured as I awaited your return this morning. I knew that you had gone out to fight with that dreadful duke, who is held in such universal terror here; Zerbine told me all about it. Cruel that you are to torture my poor heart so! That is always the way with men; they never stop to think of what we poor, loving women must suffer when their pride is once aroused! off they go, as fierce as lions, deaf to our sobs and blind to our tears. Do you know, that if you had been killed I should have died too?"

The tears that filled Isabelle's eyes, and the excessive trembling of her voice, showed that she was in earnest, and that she had not even yet recovered her usual calmness and composure. More deeply touched than words can express by her emotion, and the love for himself it bore witness to, de Sigognac, encircling her slender form with the arm that was free, drew her gently to him, and softly kissed her fair forehead, whilst he could feel, as he pressed her to his breast, how she was panting and trembling. He held her thus tenderly embraced for a blissful few seconds of silent ecstasy, which a less respectful lover would doubtless have presumed upon; but he would have scorned to take advantage of the unreserved confidence bestowed upon him in a moment of such agitation and sorrowful excitement.

“Be comforted, dear Isabelle,” said he at last, tenderly. “I was not killed you see, nor even hurt; and I actually wounded my adversary, though he does pass for a tolerably good swordsman hereabouts, I believe.”

“Yes, I well know what a strong hand is yours, and what a brave, noble heart,” Isabelle replied; “and I do not scruple to acknowledge that I love you for it with all my heart; feeling sure that you will respect my frank avowal, and not endeavour to take advantage of it. When I first saw you, de Sigognac, dispirited and desolate, in that dreary, half-ruined château, where your youth was passing in sadness and solitude, I felt a tender interest in you suddenly spring into being in my heart; had you been happy and prosperous I should have been afraid of you, and have shrunk timidly from your notice. When we walked together in that neglected garden, where you held aside the brambles so carefully for me to pass unscathed, you gathered and presented to me a little wild rose—the only thing you had to give me. As I raised it to my lips, before putting it in my bosom, and kissed it furtively under pretence of inhaling its fragrance, I could not keep back a tear that dropped upon it, and secretly and in silence I gave you my heart in exchange for it.”

As these entrancing words fell upon his ear, de Sigognac impulsively tried to kiss the sweet lips so temptingly near his own, but Isabelle withdrew herself gently from his embrace; not with any show of excessive prudery, but with a modest timidity that no really gallant lover would endeavour to overcome by force.

“Yes, I love you, de Sigognac,” she continued, in a voice that was heavenly sweet, “and with all my heart, but not as other women love; your glory is my aim, not my own pleasure. I am perfectly willing to be looked upon as your mistress; it is the only thing that would account satisfactorily to the world at large for your presence in this troupe of strolling players. And why should I care for slanderous reports, so long as I keep my own self-esteem, and know myself to be virtuous and true? If there were really a stain upon my purity it would kill me; I could not survive it. It is

the princely blood in my veins doubtless that gives rise to such pride in me; very ridiculous, perhaps, in an actress, but such is my nature."

This enchanting avowal, which would not have taught anything new to a more conceited or bolder suitor, but was a wonderful revelation to de Sigognac, who had scarcely dared to hope that his passionate, devoted love might some day be returned, filled him with such rapturous, overwhelming delight, that he was almost beside himself. A burning flush overspread his usually pale face; he seemed to see flames before his eyes; there was a strange ringing in his ears, and his heart throbbed so violently that he felt half suffocated. Losing control of himself in this moment of ecstasy, so intense that it was not unmixed with pain, he suddenly seized Isabelle passionately in his arms, strained her trembling form convulsively to his heaving breast, and covered her face and neck with burning kisses. She did not even try to struggle against this fierce embrace, but, throwing her head back, looked fixedly at him, with eyes full of sorrow and reproach. From those lovely eyes, clear and pure as an angel's, great tears welled forth and rolled down over her blanched cheeks, and a suppressed sob shook her quivering frame as a sudden faintness seemed to come over her. The young baron, distracted at the sight of her grief, and full of keen self-reproach, put her gently down into a low, easy-chair standing near, and kneeling before her, took in both his own the hands that she abandoned to him, and passionately implored her pardon; pleading that a momentary madness had taken possession of him, that he repented of it bitterly, and was ready to atone for his offence by the most perfect submission to her wishes.

"You have hurt me sadly, my friend!" said Isabelle at last, with a deep-drawn sigh. "I had such perfect confidence in your delicacy and respect. The frank, unreserved avowal of my love for you ought to have been enough, and have shown you clearly, by its very openness, that I trusted you entirely. I believed that you would understand me and let me love you in my own way, without troubling my tenderness for you by vulgar transports. Now, you have robbed me of my feeling of security. I

do not doubt your words, but I shall no longer dare to yield to the impulses of my own heart. And yet it was so sweet to me to be with you, to watch you, to listen to your dear voice, and to follow the course of your thoughts as I saw them written in your eyes. I wished to share your troubles and anxieties, de Sigognac, leaving your pleasures to others. I said to myself, among all these coarse, dissolute, presuming men that hover about us, there is one who is different—one who believes in purity, and knows how to respect it in the woman he honours with his love. I dared to indulge in a sweet dream—even I, Isabelle the actress, pursued as I am constantly by a gallantry that is odious to me—I dared to indulge in the too sweet dream of enjoying with you a pure mutual love. I only asked to be your faithful companion, to cheer and comfort you in your struggles with an adverse fate until you had reached the beginning of happiness and prosperity, and then to retire into obscurity again, when you had plenty of new friends and followers, and no longer needed me. You see that I was not very exacting."

"Isabelle, my adored Isabelle," cried de Sigognac, "every word that you speak makes me reproach myself more and more keenly for my fault, and the pain I have given you. Rest assured, my own darling, that you have nothing further to fear from me. I am not worthy to kiss the traces of your footprints in the dust; but yet, I pray you, listen to me! Perhaps you do not fully understand all my thoughts and intentions, and will forgive me when you do. I have nothing but my name, which is as pure and spotless as your sweet self, and I offer it to you, my own beloved Isabelle, if you will deign to accept it."

He was still kneeling at her feet, and at these ardently spoken words she leaned towards him, took his upraised face between her hands with a quick, passionate movement, and kissed him fervently on the lips; then she sprang to her feet and began, hurriedly and excitedly, pacing back and forth in the chamber.

"You will be my wife, Isabelle?" cried de Sigognac in agitated tones, thrilling in

every nerve from the sweet contact of her pure, lovely mouth—fresh as a flower, ardent as a flame.

“Never, never,” answered Isabelle, with a clear ring of rapture in her voice. “I will show myself worthy of such an honour by refusing it. I did mistake you for a moment, my dearest friend; I did mistake you; forgive me. Oh! how happy you have made me; what celestial joy fills my soul! You do respect and esteem me, then, to the utmost? Ah! de Sigognac, you would really lead me, as your wife, into the hall where all the portraits of your honoured ancestors would look down upon us? and into the chapel, where your dead mother lies at rest? I could meet fearlessly, my beloved, the searching gaze of the dead, from whom nothing is hidden; the crown of purity would not be wanting on my brow.”

“But what!” exclaimed the young baron, “you say that you love me, Isabelle, with all that true, faithful heart of yours, yet you will not accept me! either as lover or husband?”

“You have offered me your name, de Sigognac, your noble, honoured name, and that is enough for me. I give it back to you now, after having cherished it for one moment in my inmost heart. For one instant I was your wife, and I will never, never be another’s. While my lips were on yours I was saying yes to myself, and oh! I did not deserve such happiness. For you, my beloved, it would be a sad mistake to burden yourself with a poor little actress like me, who would always be taunted with her theatrical career, however pure and honourable it may have been. The cold, disdainful mien with which great ladies would be sure to regard me would cause you keen suffering, and you could not challenge them, you know, my own brave champion! You are the last of a noble race, de Sigognac, and it is your duty to build up your fallen house. When, by a tender glance, I induced you to quit your desolate home and follow me, you doubtless dreamed of a love affair of the usual sort, which was but natural; but I, looking into the future, thought of far other things. I saw you

returning, in rich attire, from the court of your gracious sovereign, who had reinstated you in your rights, and given you an honourable office, suitable to your exalted rank. The château had resumed its ancient splendour. In fancy I tore the clinging ivy from its crumbling walls, put the fallen stones back in their places, restored the dilapidated roof and shattered window-panes, regilded the three storks on your escutcheon over the great entrance door, and in the grand old portico; then, having installed you in the renovated home of your honoured ancestors, I retired into obscurity, stifling a sigh as I bade you adieu, though sincerely rejoicing in your well merited good fortune."

"And your dream shall be accomplished, my noble Isabelle; I feel sure of it—but not altogether as you relate it to me; such an ending would be too sad and grievous. You shall be the first, you, my own darling, with this dear hand clasped in mine, as now, to cross the threshold of that blessed abode, whence ruin and desolation shall have disappeared, and have been replaced by prosperity and happiness."

"No, no, de Sigognac, it will be some great, and noble, and beautiful heiress, worthy of you in every way, who will accompany you then; one that you can present with just pride to all your friends, and of whom none can say, with a malicious smile, I hissed or applauded her at such a time and place."

"It is downright cruelty on your part to show your self so adorable, so worthy of all love and admiration, my sweet Isabelle, and at the same time to deprive me of every hope," said de Sigognac, ruefully; "to give one glimpse of heaven and then shut me out again; nothing could be more cruel. But I will not despair; I shall make you yield to me yet."

"Do not try, I beseech you," continued Isabelle, with gentle firmness, "for I never shall; I should despise myself if I did. Strive to be content, de Sigognac, with the purest, truest, most devoted love that ever filled a woman's heart, and do not ask for more. Is it such an unsatisfactory thing to you," she added, with a bright smile, "to

be adored by a girl that several men have had the bad taste to declare charming? Why, even the Duke of Vallombreuse himself professes that he would be proud of it."

"But to give yourself to me so absolutely, and to refuse yourself to me as absolutely! to mingle such sweet and bitter drops in the same cup—honey and wormwood—and present it to my lips! only you, Isabelle, could be capable of such strange contradictions."

"Yes, I am an odd girl," she replied, "and therein I resemble my poor mother; but such as I am you must put up with me. If you should persist in persecuting me, I know well how I could elude and escape you, and where I could hide myself from you so that you would never be able to find me. But there will be no need of that, we will not talk of it; our compact is made. Let it be as I say, de Sigognac, and let us be happy together while we may. It grows late now, and you must go to your own room; will you take with you these verses, of a part that does not suit me at all, and remodel them for me? they belong to a piece that we are to play very soon. Let me be your faithful little friend, de Sigognac, and you shall be my great, and well-beloved poet."

Isabelle, as she spoke, drew forth from a bureau a roll of manuscript, tied with a rose-coloured ribbon, which she gave to the baron with a radiant smile.

"Now kiss me, and go," she said, holding up her cheek for his caress. "You are going to work for me, and this is your reward. Good-night, my beloved, good-night."

It was long after he had regained the quiet of his own room ere de Sigognac could compose himself sufficiently to set about the light task imposed upon him by Isabelle. He was at once enchanted and cast down; radiant with joy, and filled with sorrow; in a seventh heaven of ecstasy, and in the depths of despair. He laughed and he wept alternately, swayed by the most tumultuous and contradictory emotions.

The intense happiness of at last knowing himself beloved by his adored Isabelle made him exultant and joyful, while the terrible thought that she never would be his made his heart sink within him. Little by little, however, he grew calmer, as his mind dwelt lovingly upon the picture Isabelle had drawn of the Château de Sigognac restored to its ancient splendour, and as he sat musing he had a wonderful vision of it—so glowing and vivid that it was like reality. He saw before him the facade of the château, with its large windows shining in the sunlight, and its many weather-cocks, all freshly gilded, glistening against the bright blue sky, whilst the columns of smoke rising from every chimney, so long cold and unused, told of plenty and prosperity within, and his good faithful Pierre, in a rich new suit of livery, stood between Miraut and Beelzebub at the great entrance door awaiting him. He saw himself, in sumptuous attire, proudly leading his fair Isabelle by the hand towards the grand old home of his forefathers; his beautiful Isabelle, dressed like a princess, wearing ornaments bearing a device which seemed to be that of one of the greatest, most illustrious families of France, and with a ducal coronet upon her shapely head. But with it all she did not appear to be proud or haughty—she was just her own sweet, modest self—and in the hand that was free she carried the little wild rose, fresh as when it was first plucked, that he had given her, and from time to time raised and pressed it tenderly to her lips as she inhaled its fragrance; it seemed more precious to her than all the superb jewels that she wore. As they approached the château a most stately and majestic old man, whose breast was covered with orders, and whose face seemed not entirely unfamiliar to de Sigognac, stepped forth from the portico to meet and welcome them. But what greatly surprised him was that a remarkably handsome young man, of most proud and lofty bearing, accompanied the old prince, who closely resembled the Duke of Vallombreuse, and who smilingly advanced and offered a cordial salutation and welcome to Isabelle and himself. A great crowd of tenantry stationed near at hand hailed them with lusty cheers, making many demonstrations of hearty joy and delight, and his own happiness seemed to be

complete. Suddenly the sound of a horn was heard, and at a little distance he saw the beautiful Yolande de Foix, radiant and charming as ever, riding slowly by—apparently returning from the chase. He followed her with his eyes admiringly, but felt no regret as her figure was lost to view amid the thick gorse bushes bordering the road down which she was going, and turned with ever increasing love and adoration to the sweet being at his side. The memory of the fair Yolande, whom he had once worshipped in a vague, boyish way, faded before the delicious reality of his passionate love for Isabelle; who satisfied so fully every requirement of his nature, and had so thoroughly healed the wound made by the scorn and ridicule of the other, that it seemed to be entirely forgotten then.

It was not easy for de Sigognac to rouse himself after this entrancing vision, which had been so startlingly real, and fix his attention upon the verses he had promised to revise and alter for Isabelle, but when at last he had succeeded, he threw himself into his task with enthusiasm, and wrote far into the night—inspired by the thought of the sweet lips that had called him her poet, and that were to pronounce the words he penned; and he was rewarded for his exertions by Isabelle's sweetest smile, and warmest praise and gratitude.

At the theatre the next evening the crowd was even greater than before, and the crush unprecedented. The reputation of Captain Fracasse, the valiant conqueror of the Duke of Vallombreuse; increased hourly, and began to assume a chimerical and fabulous character. If the labours of Hercules had been ascribed to him, there would have been some credulous ones to believe the tale, and he was endowed by his admirers with the prowess of a dozen good knights and brave, of the ancient times of chivalrous deeds. Some of the young noblemen of the place talked of seeking his acquaintance, and giving a grand banquet in his honour; more than one fair lady was desperately in love with him, and had serious thoughts of writing a billet-doux to tell him so. In short, he was the fashion, and everybody swore by him. As for the hero of a this commotion, he was greatly annoyed at being thus forcibly dragged forth from

the obscurity in which he had desired to remain, but it was not possible to avoid it, and he could only submit. For a few moments he did think of bolting, and not making his appearance again upon the stage in Poitiers; but the remembrance of the disappointment it would be to the worthy tyrant, who was in an ecstasy of delight over the riches pouring into the treasury, prevented his carrying out this design. And, indeed, as he reminded himself, were not these honest comedians, who had rescued him from his misery and despair, entitled in all fairness to profit, so far as they could, by this unexpected and overwhelming favour which he had all unwittingly gained? So, resigning himself as philosophically as he could to his fate, he buckled his sword-belt, draped his cloak over his shoulder, put on his mask and calmly awaited his call to the stage.

As the receipts were so large, Hérode, like a generous manager, had doubled the usual number of lights, so that the theatre was almost as radiant as if a flood of sunshine had been poured into it. The fair portion of the audience, hoping to attract the attention of the valiant Captain Fracasse, had arrayed themselves in all their splendour; not a diamond was left in its casket; they sparkled and flashed, every one, on necks and arms more or less white and round, and on heads more or less shapely, but all filled with an ardent desire to please the hero of the hour; so the scene was a brilliant one in every way. Only one box yet remained unoccupied, the best situated and most conspicuous in the whole house; every eye was turned upon it, and much wonder expressed at the apathy manifested by those who had secured it, for all the rest of the spectators had been long settled in their places. At length, just as the curtain was rising, a young lady entered and took her seat in the much observed box, accompanied by a gentleman of venerable and patriarchal appearance; apparently an indulgent old uncle, a slave to the caprices of his pretty niece, who had renounced his comfortable after-dinner nap by the fire, in order to obey her behest and escort her to the theatre. She, slender and erect as Diana, was very richly and elegantly dressed, in that peculiar and exquisite shade of delicate sea green which can be worn

only by the purest blondes, and which seemed to enhance the dazzling whiteness of her uncovered shoulders, and the rounded, slender neck, diaphanous as alabaster, that proudly sustained her small, exquisitely poised head. Her hair, clustering in sunny ringlets round her brow, was like living gold, it made a glory round her head, and the whole audience was enraptured with her beauty, though an envious mask concealed so much of it; all, indeed, save the snow-white forehead, the round dimpled chin, the ripe red lips, whose tint was rendered yet more vivid by the contrast with the black velvet that shaded them, the perfect oval of the face, and a dainty little ear, pink as a sea-shell—a combination of charms worthy of a goddess, and which made every one impatient to see the radiant, beauteous whole. They were soon gratified; for the young deity, either incommoded by the heat, or else wishing to show a queenly generosity to the gazing throng, took off the odious mask, and disclosed to view a pair of brilliant eyes, dark and blue as lapis lazuli, shaded with rich golden fringes, a piquant, perfectly cut little nose, half Grecian, half aquiline, and cheeks tinged with a delicate flush that would have put a rose-leaf to shame. In fine, it was Yolande de Foix, more radiantly beautiful than ever, who, leaning forward in a negligent, graceful pose, looked nonchalantly about the house, not in the least discomposed by the many eyes fixed boldly and admiringly upon her. A loud burst of applause, that greeted the first appearance of the favourite actor, drew attention from her for a moment, as de Sigognac stalked forward upon the stage in the character of Captain Fracasse. As he paused, to wait until his admirers would allow him to begin his first tirade, he looked negligently round the eager audience, and when his eyes fell upon Yolande de Foix, sitting tranquil and radiant in her box, calmly surveying him with her glorious eyes, he suddenly turned dizzy and faint; the lights appeared first to blaze like suns, and then sink into darkness; the heads of the spectators seemed sinking into a dense fog; a cold perspiration started out on him from head to foot; he trembled violently, and felt as if his legs were giving way under him; composure, memory, courage, all seemed to have failed him, as utterly

as if he had been struck by lightning.

Oh, shame! oh, rage! oh, too cruel stroke of fate! for him, a de Sigognac, to be seen by her—the haughty beauty that he used to worship from afar—in this grotesque array, filling so unworthy, so ridiculous a part, for the amusement of the gaping multitude! and he could not hide himself, he could not sink into the earth, away from her contemptuous, mocking gaze. He felt that he could not, would not bear it, and for a moment was upon the point of flying; but there seemed to be leaden soles to his shoes, which he could by no means raise from the ground. He was powerless to move hand or foot, and stood there in a sort of stupefaction; to the great astonishment of Scapin, who, thinking that he must have forgotten his part, whispered to him the opening phrases of his tirade. The public thought that their favourite actor desired another round of applause, and broke out afresh, clapping, stamping, crying bravo, making a tremendous racket, which little respite gave poor de Sigognac time to collect his scattered senses, and, with a mighty effort, he broke the spell that had bound him, and threw himself into his part with such desperation that his acting was more extravagant and telling than ever. It fairly brought down the house. The haughty Yolande herself could not forbear to smile, and her old uncle, thoroughly aroused, laughed heartily, and applauded with all his might. No one but Isabelle had the slightest idea of the reason of Captain Fracasse's unwonted fury—but she saw at once who was looking on, and knowing how sensitive he was, realized the effect it must infallibly produce upon him. She furtively watched the proud beauty as she modestly played her own part, and thought, not without a keen pang through her faithful, loving heart, that here would be a worthy mate for the Baron de Sigognac, when he had succeeded in re-establishing the lost splendour of his house. As to the poor young nobleman, he resolved not to glance once again at Yolande, lest he should be seized by a sudden transport of rage and do something utterly rash and disgraceful, but kept his eyes fixed, whenever he could, upon his sweet, lovely Isabelle. The sight of her dear face was balm to his wounded

spirit—her love, of which he was now so blissfully sure, consoled him for the openly manifested scorn of the other, and from her he drew strength to go on bravely with his detested part.

It was over at last—the piece was finished—and when de Sigognac tore off his mask, like a man who is suffocating, his companions were alarmed at his altered looks. He was fairly livid, and let himself fall upon a bench standing near like a lifeless body. Seeing that he was very faint, Blazius hastened to fetch some wine—his sovereign remedy for every ill—but de Sigognac rejected it, and signed that he wanted water instead.

"A great mistake," said the pedant, shaking his head disapprovingly, "a sad mistake—water is only fit for frogs, and fish, and such-like cold-blooded creatures—it does not do for human beings at all. Every water-bottle should be labelled, 'For external use only.' Why, I should die instantly if so much as a drop of the vile stuff found its way down my throat. Take my advice, Captain Fracasse, and let it alone. Here, have some of this good strong wine; it will set you right in a jiffy."

But de Sigognac would not be persuaded, and persisted in motioning for water. When it was brought, cool and fresh, he eagerly swallowed a large draught of the despised liquid, and found himself almost immediately revived by it—his face resuming a more natural hue, and the light returning to his eyes. When he was able to sit up and look about him again, Hérode approached, in his turn, and said, "You played admirably this evening, and with wonderful spirit, Captain Fracasse, but it does not do to take too much out of yourself in this way—such violent exertions would quickly do for you. The comedian's art consists in sparing himself as much as possible, whilst producing striking effects; he should be calm amidst all his simulated fury, and cool in his apparently most burning rage. Never did actor play this part as superbly as you have done to-night—that I am bound to acknowledge—but this is too dear a price to pay for it."

“Yes, wasn’t I absurd in it?” answered the baron bitterly. “I felt myself supremely ridiculous throughout—but especially when my head went through the guitar with which Leander was belabouring me.”

“You certainly did put on the most comically furious airs imaginable,” the tyrant replied, “and the whole audience was convulsed with laughter. Even Mlle. Yolande de Foix, that very great, and proud, and noble lady, condescended to smile. I saw her myself.”

“It was a great honour for me assuredly,” cried de Sigognac, with flaming cheeks, “to have been able to divert so great a lady.”

“Pardon me, my lord,” said the tyrant, who perceived the painful flush that covered the baron’s face, “I should have remembered that the success which is so prized by us poor comedians, actors by profession, cannot but be a matter of indifference to one of your lordship’s rank.”

“You have not offended me, my good Hérode,” de Sigognac hastened to reply, holding out his hand to the honest tyrant with a genial smile, “whatever is worth doing is worth doing well. But I could not help remembering that I had dreamed of and hoped for very different triumphs from this.”

Isabelle, who meantime had been dressing for the other piece, passed near de Sigognac just then, and gave him such an angelic look—so full of tenderness, sympathy, and passionate love—that he quite forgot the haughty Yolande, and felt really happy again. It was a divine balm, that healed his wounded pride—for the moment at least; but such wounds are all too apt to open and bleed again and again.

The Marquis de Bruyères was at his post as usual, and though very much occupied in applauding Zerbine, yet found time to go and pay his respects to Mlle. Yolande de Foix. He related to her, without mentioning the baron’s name, the affair of the duel between Captain Fracasse and the Duke of Vallombreuse saying that he ought to be able to give all the details of that famous encounter better than anybody else, since

he had been present as one of the seconds.

“You need not be so mysterious about it,” answered Yolande, “for it is not difficult to divine that your Captain Fracasse is no other than the Baron de Sigognac. Didn’t I myself see him leaving his old owl-haunted towers in company with this little Bohémienne, who plays her part of ingenuous young girl with such a precious affectation of modesty?” she added, with a forced laugh. “And wasn’t he at your château with these very players? Judging from his usual stupid, silly air, I would not have believed him capable of making such a clever mountebank, and such a faithful gallant.”

As he conversed with Yolande, the marquis was looking about the house, of which he had a much better view than from his own place near the stage, and his attention was caught and fixed by the masked lady, whom he had not seen before, as his back was always turned to her box. Although her head and figure were much enveloped and disguised in a profusion of black laces, the attitude and general contour of this mysterious beauty seemed strangely familiar to him, and there was something about her that reminded him forcibly of the marquise, his own wife. “Bah!” said he to himself, “how foolish I am; she must be all safe at the Château de Bruyères, where I left her.” But at that very moment he caught sight of a diamond ring—a large solitaire, peculiarly set—sparkling on her finger, which was precisely like one that the Marquise de Bruyères always wore.

A little troubled by this strange coincidence, he took leave abruptly of the fair Yolande and her devoted old uncle, and hastened to the masked lady’s box. But, prompt as his movements had been, he was too late—the nest was empty—the bird had flown. The lady, whoever she might be, had vanished, and the suspicious husband was left in considerable vexation and perplexity. “Could it be possible,” he murmured, as his doubts became almost certainty, “that she was sufficiently infatuated to fall in love with that miserable Leander, and follow him here?

Fortunately I had the rascal thoroughly thrashed, so I am even with him, how ever it may be." This thought restored his ruffled serenity, and he made his way as fast as he could to the green-room, to rejoin the soubrette, who had been impatiently expecting him, and did not hesitate to rate him soundly for his unwonted delay.

When all was over, and Leander—who had been feeling excessively anxious about the sudden disappearance of his marquise—was free, he immediately repaired to the open square where he had been first bidden to meet the carriage sent to fetch him, and where he had found it awaiting him nightly ever since. The little page, who was there alone, put a letter and a small package into his hand, without a word, and then running swiftly away, before Leander had time to question him, vanished in the darkness. The note, which was signed simply Marie, was from the marquise, who said that she feared her husband's suspicions had been excited, and that it would no longer be safe for them to meet just then, bade him an affectionate farewell until it might be their good fortune to see each other again, expressed much regret at this unlucky contretemps, and begged him to accept the gold chain she sent therewith as a little souvenir, to remind him of the many happy hours they had spent together. Leander was at first very much vexed and disappointed, but was somewhat reconciled and consoled when he felt the weight of his golden treasure, and saw its length and thickness; and, on the whole, was rather glad to come off with such flying colours from an adventure that might have brought down a yet more severe punishment than that he had already received upon his devoted head.

When Isabelle regained her own room she found a very rich and elegant casket awaiting her there, which had been placed conspicuously on the dressing-table, where it could not fail to meet her eye the moment she entered the chamber. A folded paper was lying under one corner of the casket, which must have contained some very precious gems, for it was a real marvel of beauty itself. The paper was not sealed, and bore only these two words, evidently written by a weak and trembling hand, "For Isabelle." A bright flush of indignation overspread her sweet face when

she perceived it, and without even yielding to her feminine curiosity so far as to open the richly carved and inlaid casket for a peep at its contents, she called for Maître Bilot, and ordered him peremptorily to take it immediately out of her room, and give it back to whomsoever owned it, for she would not suffer it to remain where it was another minute. The landlord affected astonishment, and swore by all he held sacred that he did not know who had put the casket there, nor whose it was; though it must be confessed that he had his suspicions, and felt very sure that they were correct. In truth, the obnoxious jewel-case had been secretly placed upon Isabelle's table by old Mme. Léonarde, to whom the Duke of Vallombreuse had had recourse, in the hope that she might be able to aid him, and in the full belief, shared by her, that the superb diamonds which the beautiful casket contained would accomplish all that he desired with Isabelle. But his offering only served to rouse her indignation, and she spoke very severely to Maître Bilot, commanding him to remove it instantly from her sight, and to be careful not to mention this fresh affront to Captain Fracasse. The worthy landlord could not help feeling enthusiastic admiration for the conduct of the young actress, who rejected jewels that would have made a duchess envious, and as he retired bowed to her as respectfully and profoundly as he would have done to a queen. After he had withdrawn and she was left alone, Isabelle, feeling agitated and feverish, opened her window for a breath of fresh air, and to cool her burning cheeks and brow. She saw a bright light issuing from a couple of windows in the mansion of the Duke of Vallombreuse—doubtless in the room where the wounded young nobleman lay—but the garden and the little alley beneath her seemed absolutely deserted. In a moment, however, she caught a low whisper from the latter, not intended for her ears, which said, "She has not gone to bed yet." She softly leaned out of her window—the room within was not lighted, so she could not be seen—and peering anxiously into the darkness thought she could distinguish two cloaked figures lurking in the alley, and farther away, near one end of it, a third one, apparently on the watch. They seemed to feel that they were

observed, and all three presently slunk away and vanished, leaving Isabelle half in doubt as to whether they were the creatures of her excited imagination, or had been real men prowling there. Tired at last of watching, without hearing or seeing anything more, she withdrew from the window, closed and secured it softly, procured a light, saw that the great, clumsy bolt on her door was property adjusted, and made her preparations for bed; lying down at last and trying to sleep, for she was very tired, but haunted by vague fears and doubts that made her anxious and uneasy. She did not extinguish her light, but placed it near the bed, and strove to reassure herself and reason away her nameless terror; but all in vain. At every little noise—the cracking of the furniture or the falling of a cinder in the fire-place, she started up in fresh alarm, and could not close her eyes. High up in the wall of one side of her room was a small round window—a bull's eye—evidently intended to give light and air to some dark inner chamber or closet, which looked like a great black eye in the gray wall, keeping an unwinking watch upon her, and Isabelle found herself again and again glancing up at it with a shudder. It was crossed by two strong iron bars, leaving four small apertures, so that there could not possibly be any danger of intrusion from that quarter, yet she could not avoid feeling nervous about it, and at times fancied that she could see two gleaming eye-balls in its black depths. She lay for a long time perfectly motionless gazing at it, like one under a spell, and at last was paralyzed with horror when a head actually appeared at one of the four openings—a small, dark head, with wild, tangled elf-locks hanging about it; next came a long, thin arm with a claw-like hand, then the shoulder followed, and finally the whole body of a slender, emaciated little girl wriggled dexterously, though with much difficulty, through the narrow aperture, and the child dropped down upon the floor as lightly and noiselessly as a feather, a snow-flake, or a waft of thistle-down. She had been deceived by Isabelle's remaining so long perfectly quiet, and believed her asleep; but when she softly approached the bed, to make sure that her victim's slumber had not been disturbed by her own advent, an expression of extreme

surprise was depicted on her face, as she got a full view of the head lying upon the pillow and the eyes fixed upon her in speechless terror. “The lady of the necklace!” she exclaimed aloud. “Yes, the lady of the necklace!” putting one hand, as she spoke, caressingly upon the string of pearl beads round her little, thin, brown neck. Isabelle, for her part, though half dead with fright, had recognised the little girl she had first seen at the Blue Sun inn, and afterwards on the road to the Château de Bruyères, in company with Agostino, the brigand. She tried to cry out for help, but the child put her hand quickly and firmly over her mouth.

“Don’t scream,” she said reassuringly, “nothing shall hurt you. Chiquita promised that she would never kill nor harm the good, sweet lady, who gave her the pearls that she meant to steal.”

“But what have you come in here for, my poor child?” asked Isabelle, gradually recovering her composure, but filled with surprise at this strange intrusion.

“To open the great bolt on your door there that you are so careful to close every night,” answered Chiquita, in the most matter-of-fact way. “They chose me for it because I am such a good climber, and as thin and supple as a snake; there are not many holes that I cannot manage to crawl through.”

“And why were you to open my door, Chiquita? so that thieves could come in and steal what few things I have here? There is nothing of value among them, I assure you.”

“Oh, no!” Chiquita replied disdainfully, “it was to let the men in who were to carry you off.”

“My God! I am lost!” cried poor Isabelle, wringing her hands in despair.

“Not at all,” said Chiquita, “and you need not be so frightened. I shall just leave the bolt as it is, and they would not dare to force the door; it would make too much noise, and they would be caught at it; they’re not so silly as that, never fear.”

“But I should have shrieked at the top of my voice, and clung to the bedstead with

all my might, if they had tried to take me," exclaimed Isabelle excitedly, "so that I would have been heard by the people in the neighbouring rooms, and I'm sure they would have come to my rescue."

"A good gag will stifle any shrieks," said Chiquita sententiously, with a lofty contempt for Isabelle's ignorance that was very amusing, "and a blanket rolled tightly about the body prevents any movements; that is an easy matter you see. They would have carried you off without the slightest difficulty, for the stable boy was bribed, and was to open the back door for them."

"Who has laid this wicked plot?" asked the poor, frightened, young girl, with a trembling voice, horror-stricken at the danger she had escaped.

"The great lord who has given them all such heaps of money; oh! such quantities of big gold pieces—by the handful," said Chiquita, her great dark eyes glittering with a fierce, covetous expression, strange and horrible to see in one so young. "But all the same, you gave me the pearls, and he shall not hurt you; he shall not have you if you don't want to go. I will tell them that you were awake, and there was a man in the room, so that I could not get in and open the door for them; they will all go away quietly enough; you need not be afraid. Now let me have one good look at you before I go—oh, how sweet and pretty you are—and I love you, yes, I do, ever so much; almost as much as Agostino. But what is this?" cried she suddenly, pouncing upon a knife that was lying on the table near the bed. "Why, you have got the very knife I lost; it was my father's knife. Well, you may keep it—it's a good one."

'When this viper bites you, make sure That you must die, for there's no cure.'

"See, this is the way to open it, and then you use it like this: strike from below upwards—the blade goes in better that way—and it's so sharp it will go through anything. Carry it in the bosom of your dress, and it is always ready; then if anybody bothers you, out with it, and paf! you have them ripped up in no time," and the strange, eerie little creature accompanied her words with appropriate gestures, by

way of illustration. This extraordinary lesson in the art of using a knife, given in the dead of night, and under such peculiar circumstances, seemed like a nightmare to Isabelle.

“Be sure you hold the knife like this, do you see? tightly clasped in your fingers—as long as you have it no one can harm you, but you can hurt them. Now, I must go—adieu, and don’t forget Chiquita.”

So saying, the queer little elf pushed a table up to the wall under the bull’s eye, mounted it, sprang up and caught hold of the iron bar with the agility of a monkey, swung herself up in some extraordinary fashion, wriggled through the small opening and disappeared, chanting in a rude measure, “Chiquita whisks through key-holes, and dances on the sharp points of spear-heads and the broken glass on garden walls, without ever hurting herself one bit—and nobody can catch her.”

Isabelle, left alone, awaited the break of day with trembling impatience, unable to sleep after the fright and agitation she had experienced, and momentarily dreading some fresh cause of alarm; but nothing else happened to disturb her. When she joined her companions at breakfast, they were all struck with her extreme pallor, and the distressed expression of her countenance. To their anxious questions she replied by giving an account of her nocturnal adventure, and de Sigognac, furious at this fresh outrage, could scarcely be restrained from going at once to demand, satisfaction for it from the Duke of Vallombreuse, to whom he did not hesitate to attribute this villainous scheme.

“I think,” said Blazius, when he could make himself heard, “that we had better pack up, and be off as soon as we can for Paris; the air is becoming decidedly unwholesome for us in this place.”

After a short discussion all the others agreed with him, and it was decided that they should take their departure from Poitiers the very next day.

CHAPTER XI. THE PONT-NEUF

It would be too long and tedious to follow our comedians, step by step, on their way up to Paris, the great capital. No adventures worthy of being recorded here befell them; as they were in good circumstances financially, they could travel rapidly and comfortably, and were not again subjected to such hardships and annoyances as they had endured in the earlier stages of their long journey. At Tours and Orléans they stopped to give a few representations, which were eminently successful, and very satisfactory to the troupe as well as the public. No attempt being made to molest them in any way, Blazius after a time forgot his fears, which had been excited by the vindictive character of the Duke of Vallombreuse, but Isabelle could not banish from her memory the wicked plot to abduct her, and many times saw again in her dreams Chiquita's wild, weird face, with the long, tangled elf-locks hanging around it, just as it had appeared to her that dreadful night at the Armes de France, glaring at her with fierce, wolfish eyes. Then she would start up, sobbing and trembling, in violent agitation, and it required the most tender soothing from her companion, Zerbine, whose room she had shared ever since they quitted Poitiers, to quiet and reassure her. The soubrette, thoroughly enamoured of Isabelle as of old, was devoted to her, and took great delight in watching over and ministering to her; an own sister could not have been kinder or more affectionately considerate.

The only evidence that de Sigognac gave of the anxiety which he secretly felt, was his always insisting upon occupying the room nearest Isabelle's, and he used to lie down in his clothes, with his drawn sword on the bed beside him, so as to be ready in case of any sudden alarm. By day he generally walked on in advance of the chariot, taking upon himself the duty of a scout; redoubling his vigilance wherever there happened to be bushes, thickets, high walls, or lurking places of any kind, favourable to an ambuscade, near the roadside. If he perceived from afar a group of travellers approaching, whose appearance seemed to him in the least suspicious, he

would instantly draw his sword and fall back upon the chariot, around which the tyrant, Scapin, Blazius and Leander formed an apparently strong guard; though, of the last two mentioned, one was incapacitated for active service by age, and the other was as timid as a hare. Some times, varying his tactics like a good general, who thinks of and provides against every emergency, the baron would constitute himself a rear guard, and follow the chariot at a little distance, keeping watch over the road behind them. But all his precautions were needless, for no attack was made upon the travellers, or any attempt to interfere with them, and they proceeded tranquilly on their way, “without let or hindrance.” Although it was winter, the season was not a rigorous one, and our comedians, well fortified against the cold by plenty of warm clothing and good nourishing food, did not mind their exposure to the weather, and found their journey a very enjoyable affair. To be sure, the sharp, frosty air brought a more brilliant colour than usual into the cheeks of the fair members of the troupe, but no one could say that it detracted from their charms; and even when it extended, as it did sometimes, to their pretty little noses, it could not be found serious fault with, for everything is becoming to a young and beautiful woman.

At last they drew near to the capital—following the windings of the Seine, whose waters flow past royal palaces, and many another edifice of world-wide renown—and at four o’clock of a bright winter afternoon came in sight of its spires and domes. The smoke rising from its forest of chimneys hung over it in a semi-transparent cloud, through which the sun shone, round and red, like a ball of fire. As they entered the city by the Porte Saint Bernard, a glorious spectacle greeted their wondering eyes. In front of them Notre Dame stood out in bold relief, with its magnificent flying buttresses, its two stately towers, massive and majestic, and its slender, graceful spire, springing from the lofty roof at the point of intersection of the nave and transepts. Many other lesser towers and spires rose above churches and chapels that were lost amid the densely crowded houses all about them, but de

Sigognac had eyes only for the grand old cathedral, which overwhelmed him with astonishment and delight. He would have liked to linger for hours and gaze upon that splendid triumph of architecture, but he needs must go forward with the rest, however reluctantly. The wonderful and unceasing whirl and confusion in the narrow, crowded streets, through which they made their way slowly, and not without difficulty, perplexed and distracted him, accustomed as he had been all his life to the vast solitude of the Landes, and the deathly stillness that reigned almost unbroken in his own desolate old château; it seemed to him as if a mill-wheel were running round and round in his head, and he could feel himself staggering like a drunken man. The Pont-Neuf was soon reached, and then de Sigognac caught a glimpse of the famous equestrian statue in bronze of the great and good king, Henri IV, which stands on its lofty pedestal and seems to be keeping guard over the splendid bridge, with its ever-rolling stream of foot-passengers, horsemen, and vehicles of every kind and description, from the superb court carriage to the huckster’s hand-cart; but in a moment it was lost to view, as the chariot turned into the then newly opened Rue Dauphine. In this street was a fine big hotel, frequently patronized by ambassadors from foreign lands, with numerous retinues; for it was so vast that it could always furnish accommodations for large parties arriving unexpectedly. As the prosperous state of their finances admitted of their indulging in such luxury, Hérode had fixed upon this house as their place of abode in Paris; because it would give a certain prestige to his troupe to be lodged there, and show conclusively that they were not mere needy, vagabond players, gaining a precarious livelihood in their wanderings through the provinces, but a company of comedians of good standing, whose talents brought them in a handsome revenue.

Upon their arrival at this imposing hostelry, they were first shown into an immense kitchen, which presented an animated, busy scene—a whole army of cooks bustling about the great roaring fire, and around the various tables, where all sorts of culinary rites were in active progress; while the mingling of savoury odours that pervaded the

whole place so tickled the olfactory organs of Blazius, Hérode, and Scapin, the gourmands of the troupe, that their mouths expanded into the broadest of grins, as they edged as near as possible to the numerous saucepans, etc., from which they issued. In a few moments a servant came to conduct them to the rooms that had been prepared for them, and just as they turned away from the blazing fire, round which they had gathered, to follow him, a traveller entered and approached it, whose face seemed strangely familiar to de Sigognac. He was a tall, powerful man, wearing large spurs, which rang against the stone floor at every step, and the great spots of mud—some of them not yet dry—with which he was bespattered from head to foot, showed that he must have been riding far and fast. He was a fierce-looking fellow, with an insolent, devil-may-care, arrogant sort of expression, and bold, swaggering gait, yet he started at sight of the young baron, and plainly shrunk from his eye; hastening on to the fire and bending over it, with his back turned to de Sigognac, under pretence of warming his hands. In vain did our hero try to recall when and where he had seen the man before, but he was positive that he had come in contact with him somewhere, and that recently; and he was conscious of a vague feeling of uneasiness with regard to him, that he could not account for. However, there was nothing for him to do but follow his companions, and they all went to their respective chambers, there to make themselves presentable for the meal to which they were shortly summoned, and which they thoroughly enjoyed, as only hungry travellers can. The fare was excellent, the wine capital, the dining-room well lighted, warm, and comfortable, and all were in high spirits; congratulating each other upon having happily reached the end of their long journey at last, and drinking to their own future success in this great city of Paris. They indulged in the flattering hope of producing a sensation here as well as at Poitiers, and even dared to dream of being commanded to appear before the court, and of being rewarded royally for their exertions to please. Only de Sigognac was silent and preoccupied, and Isabelle, whose thoughts were all of him, cast anxious glances at him, and wished that she

could charm away his melancholy. He was seated at the other end of the table, and still puzzling over the face that he had seen in the kitchen, but he soon looked towards her, and caught her lovely eyes fixed upon him, with such an adorable expression of chaste love and angelic tenderness in their shadowy depths, that all thoughts save of her were at once banished from his mind. The warmth of the room had flushed her cheeks a little, her eyes shone like stars, and she looked wonderfully beautiful; the young Duke of Vallombreuse would have been more madly enamoured of her than ever if he could have seen her then. As for de Sigognac, he gazed at her with unfeigned delight, his dark, expressive eyes eloquent of adoring love and deep reverence. A new sentiment mingled with his passion now—ever since she had opened her heart to him, and let him see all its heavenly purity and goodness—which elevated, ennobled, and intensified it. He knew now the true, lofty beauty of her soul, that it was akin to the angels, and but for the keen, ever-increasing grief he suffered because of her firm refusal to give herself wholly to him, his happiness, in possessing her faithful, devoted love, would have been too perfect for this life of trials and sorrow.

When supper was over, de Sigognac accompanied Isabelle to the threshhold of her own room, and said ere he left her, “Be sure to fasten your door securely, my sweet Isabelle, for there are so many people about in a great hotel like this that one cannot be too careful.”

“You need have no fears for me here, my dear baron,” she replied; “only look at this lock, and you will be convinced of that. Why it is strong enough for a prison door, and the key turns thrice in it. And here is a great thick bolt besides—actually as long as my arm. The window is securely barred, and there is no dreadful bull’s eye, or opening of any kind in the wall, to make me afraid. Travellers so often have articles of value with them that I suppose it is necessary for them to have such protections against thieves. Make yourself easy about me, de Sigognac! never was the enchanted princess of a fairy tale, shut up in her strong tower guarded by dragons, in greater

security than am I in this fortress of mine."

"But sometimes it chances that the magic charms and spells, represented by these bolts and bars, are insufficient, my beloved Isabelle, and the enemy manages to force his way in, despite them all—and the mystic signs, phylacteries, and abracadabras into the bargain."

"Yes; but that is when the princess within secretly favours his efforts," said Isabelle, with a mischievous smile, "and in some mysterious way constitutes herself his accomplice; being tired of her seclusion, perhaps, or else in love with the bold intruder—neither of which is my case you know, de Sigognac! Surely if I'm not afraid—I, who am more timid than the trembling doe when she hears the dread sound of the hunter's horn and the baying of the hounds you should not fear—you, who are brave as Alexander the Great himself. Sleep in peace to-night, my friend, I pray you, and sleep soundly—not with one eye open, as you have done so often of late for my sake; and now, good night."

She held out to him a pretty little hand, white and soft enough to have belonged to a veritable princess, which he kissed as reverently as if it had been a queen's; then waited to hear her turn the big, clumsy, iron key three times in the lock—no easy task for her delicate fingers—and push home the heavy bolt. Breathing a fervent blessing upon her, he turned away reluctantly towards his own door. As he paused an instant before it he saw a shadow moving, turned round quickly, and caught sight of the very man he had been thinking of, and puzzling over, so much that evening—whose approach he had not heard at all—passing stealthily along the corridor, presumably on his way to his own room. Not an extraordinary circumstance, that; but the baron's suspicions were instantly aroused, and under pretext of trying to introduce his key into the lock, he furtively watched him the whole length of the passage, until a turn in it hid him from view, as he gained an unfrequented part of the house; a moment later, the sound of a door being softly

opened and closed announced that he had probably reached his own chamber, and then all was still again.

“Now what does this mean?” said de Sigognac to himself, and haunted by a vague feeling of anxiety and uneasiness, he could not even bring himself to lie down upon his bed and rest his weary frame; so, after pacing restlessly about the room for a while, he concluded to occupy himself in writing a letter to his good old Pierre; he had promised to apprise him of his arrival in Paris. He was careful that the handwriting should be very large, clear, and distinct, for the faithful old servant was not much of a scholar, and addressed him as follows:

MY GOOD PIERRE:—Here I am at last, actually in Paris, the great capital, where, according to general belief, I am to fall in with some sort of good fortune or other, that will enable me to re-establish the ancient prosperity of my house—though in truth I cannot see where I am to look for it. However, some happy chance may bring me into relations with the court, and if I could only get to speak to the king—the great dispenser of all favours—the important and famous services rendered by my ancestors to his royal predecessors would surely incline him to listen to me with indulgence and interest. His gracious majesty could not, it seems to me, suffer a noble family, that had devoted all their possessions to the service of king and country, in many wars, to die out so miserably, if once he knew of it. Meantime, for want of other employment, I have taken to acting, and have made a little money thereby—part of which I shall send to you, as soon as I can find a good opportunity. It would have been better perhaps if I had enlisted as a soldier; but I could not give up my liberty, and however poverty-stricken a man may be, his pride revolts at the idea of putting himself under the orders of those whom his noble ancestors used to command. The only adventure worth relating that has befallen me since I left you was a duel that I fought at Poitiers, with a certain young duke, who is held to be invincible; but, thanks to your good instructions, I was able to get the better of him easily. I ran him through the right arm, and could just as well have run him through

the body, and left him dead upon the field, for his defence was weak and insufficient—by no means equal to his attack, which was daring and brilliant, though very reckless—and several times he was entirely at my mercy, as he grew heated and angry. He has not been so thoroughly trained to preserve his sang-froid, whatever may happen, as I, and I now appreciate, for the first time, your wonderful patience and perseverance in making me a master of the noble art of fencing, and how valuable my proficiency in it will be to me. Your scholar does you honour, my brave Pierre, and I won great praise and applause for my really too easy victory. In spite of the constant novelty and excitement of my new way of life, my thoughts often return to dwell upon my poor old château, crumbling gradually into ruin over the tombs of my ancestors. From afar it does not seem so desolate and forlorn, and there are times when I fancy myself there once more, gazing up at the venerable family portraits, wandering through the deserted rooms, and I find a sort of melancholy pleasure in it. How I wish that I could look into your honest, sunburnt face, lighted up with the glad smile that always greeted me—and I am not ashamed to confess that I long to hear Beelzebub's contented purring, Miraut's joyful bark, and the loud whinnying of my poor old Bayard, who never failed to recognise my step. Are they all still alive—the good, faithful, affectionate creatures—and do they seem to remember me? Have you been able to keep yourself and them from starvation thus far? Try to hold out until my return, my good Pierre, so as to share my fate—be it bright or dark, happy or sad—that we may finish our days together in the place where we have suffered so much, yet which is so dear to us all. If I am to be the last of the de Sigognacs, I can only say, the will of God be done. There is still a vacant place left for me in the vault where my forefathers lie.

"BARON DE SIGOGNAC."

The baron sealed this letter with the ring bearing his family arms, which was the only jewel remaining in his possession; directed it, and put it into his portfolio, to wait until he should find an opportunity to forward it to Gascony. Although by this

time it was very late, he could still hear the vague roar of the great city, which, like the sound of the ocean, never entirely ceases, and was so strange and novel to him, in contrast with the profound silence of the country that he had been accustomed to all his life long. As he sat listening to it, he thought he heard cautious footsteps in the corridor, and extinguishing his light, softly opened his door just a very little way, scarcely more than a crack—and caught a glimpse of a man, enveloped in a large cloak, stealing along slowly in the direction the other one had taken. He listened breathlessly until he heard him reach, and quietly enter, apparently the same door. A few minutes later, while he was still on the lookout, another one came creeping stealthily by, making futile efforts to stifle the noise of his creaking boots. His suspicions now thoroughly aroused, de Sigognac continued his watch, and in about half an hour came yet another—a fierce, villainous looking fellow, and fully armed, as every one of his predecessors had been also. This strange proceeding seemed very extraordinary and menacing to the baron, and the number of the men—four—brought to his mind the night attack upon him in the streets of Poitiers, after his quarrel with the Duke of Vallombreuse. This recollection was like a ray of light, and it instantly flashed upon him that the man he had seen in the kitchen was no other than one of those precious rascals, who had been routed so ignominiously—and these, without doubt, were his comrades. But how came they there? in the very house with him—not by chance surely. They must have followed him up to Paris, stage by stage, in disguise, or else keeping studiously out of his sight, Evidently the young duke’s animosity was still active, as well as his passion, and he had not renounced his designs upon either Isabelle or himself. Our hero was very brave by nature, and did not feel the least anxiety about his own safety trusting to his good sword to defend himself against his enemies—but he was very uneasy in regard to his sweet Isabelle, and dreaded inexpressibly what might be attempted to gain possession of her. Not knowing which one of them the four desperadoes had in view now, he determined not to relax his vigilance an instant, and to take such

precautions as he felt pretty sure would circumvent their plans, whatever they might be. He lighted all the candles there were in his room—a goodly number—and opened his door, so that they threw a flood of light on that of Isabelle's chamber, which was exactly opposite his own. Next he drew his sword, laid it, with his dagger, on a table he had drawn out in front of the door, and then sat down beside it, facing the corridor, to watch. He waited some time without hearing or seeing anything. Two o'clock had rung out from a neighbouring church tower when a slight rustling caught his listening ear, and presently one of the four rascals—the very man he had first seen—emerged from the shadow into the bright light streaming out into the passage from his open door. The baron had sprung to his feet at the first sound, and stood erect on the threshold, sword in hand, with such a lofty, heroic, and triumphant air, that Mérindol—for it was he—passed quickly by, without offering to molest him, with a most deprecating, crestfallen expression; a laughable contrast to his habitual fierce insolence. His three doughty comrades followed in quick succession—but not one of them dared to attack de Sigognac, and they slunk out of sight as rapidly as possible. He saluted each one with a mocking gesture as he passed, and stood tranquilly watching them as long as he could see them. In a few minutes he had the satisfaction of hearing the stamping of horses' feet in the court-yard below, then the opening of the outer door to let them pass out into the street, and finally a great clattering of hoofs as they galloped off down the Rue Dauphine.

At breakfast the next morning the tyrant said to de Sigognac, "Captain, doesn't your curiosity prompt you to go out and look about you a little in this great city—one of the finest in the world, and of such high renown in history? If it is agreeable to you I will be your guide and pilot, for I have been familiar from my youth up with the rocks and reefs, the straits and shallows, the scyllas and charybdises of this seething ocean, which are often so dangerous—sometimes so fatal—to strangers, and more especially to inexperienced country people. I will be your Palinurus—but I promise

you that I shall not allow myself to be caught napping, and so fall overboard, like him that Virgil tells us about. We are admirably located here for sight-seeing; the Pont-Neuf, which is close at hand, you know, is to Paris what the Sacra Via was to ancient Rome—the great resort and rallying place of high and low, great and small, noble men, gentlemen, bourgeois, working men, rogues and vagabonds. Men of every rank and profession under the sun are to be found gathered together at this general rendezvous."

"Your kind proposition pleases me greatly, my good Hérode," de Sigognac replied, "and I accept it with thanks; but be sure to tell Scapin that he must remain here, and keep a sharp watch over all who come and go; and, above all, that he must not let any one gain access to Isabelle. The Duke of Vallombreuse has not given up his designs against her and me—I feel very anxious about her safety," and therewith he recounted the occurrences of the preceding night.

"I don't believe they would dare to attempt anything in broad daylight," said the tyrant; "still it is best to err on the safe side, and we will leave Scapin, Blazius and Leander to keep guard over Isabelle while we are out. And, by the way, I will take my sword with me, too, so that I can be of some assistance in case they should find an opportunity to fall upon you in the streets."

After having made every arrangement for Isabelle's safety, de Sigognac and his companion sallied forth into the Rue Dauphine, and turned towards the Pont-Neuf. It was quickly reached, and when they had taken a few steps upon it a magnificent view suddenly burst upon them, which held the young baron enthralled. In the immediate foreground, on the bridge itself, which was not encumbered with a double row of houses, like the Pont au Change and the Pont Saint Michel, was the fine equestrian statue of that great and good king, Henri IV, rivalling in its calm majesty the famous one of Marcus Aurelius, on the Capitoline Hill at Rome. A high railing, richly gilded, protected its pedestal from injury by mischievous street arabs,

and the deep, strong tints of the bronze horse and rider stood out vigorously against the appropriate background formed by the distant hill-sides beyond the Pont Rouge. On the left bank of the river the spire of the venerable old church of Saint Germain des Pres pointed upwards from amid the houses that completely hemmed it in, and the lofty roof of the unfinished Hôtel de Nevers towered conspicuously above all its surroundings. A little farther on was the only tower still standing of the famous, and infamous, Hôtel de Nesle, its base bathed by the river, and though it was in a ruinous condition it still lifted itself up proudly above the adjacent buildings. Beyond it lay the marshy Grenouillere, and in the blue, hazy distance could be distinguished the three crosses on the heights of Calvary, or Mont-Valérien. The palace of the Louvre occupied the other bank right royally, lighted up by the brilliant winter sunshine, which brought out finely all the marvellous details of its rich and elaborate ornamentation. The long gallery connecting it with the Tuileries, which enabled the monarch to pass freely from his city palace to his country house, especially challenged their admiration; with its magnificent sculptures, its historical bas-reliefs and ornamented cornices, its fretted stonework, fine columns and pilasters, it rivalled the renowned triumphs of the best Greek and Roman architects. Beyond the gardens of the Tuileries, where the city ended, stood the Porte de la Conférence, and along the river bank, outside of it, were the trees of Cours-la-Reine, the favourite promenade of the fashionable world, which was thronged of an afternoon with gay and luxurious equipages. The two banks, which we have thus hastily sketched, framed in the most animated scene imaginable; the river being covered with boats of all sorts and descriptions, coming and going, crossing and recrossing, while at the quay, beside the Louvre, lay the royal barges, rich with carving and gilding, and gay with bright-coloured awnings, and near at hand rose the historic towers of Saint Germain l’Auxerrois.

After gazing silently for a long time at this splendid view, de Sigognac turned away reluctantly at his companion’s instance, and joined the little crowd already gathered

round the "Samaritan," waiting to see the bronze figure surmounting the odd little hydraulic edifice strike the hour with his hammer on the bell of the clock. Meanwhile they examined the gilt bronze statue of Christ, standing beside the Samaritan, who was leaning on the curb of the well, the astronomic dial with its zodiac, the grotesque stone mask pouring out the water drawn up from the river below, the stout figure of Hercules supporting the whole thing, and the hollow statue, perched on the topmost pinnacle, that served as a weathercock, like the Fortune on the Dogana at Venice and the Giralda at Seville. As the hands on the clock-face at last pointed to ten and twelve respectively, the little chime of bells struck up a merry tune, while the bronze man with the hammer raised his ponderous arm and deliberately struck ten mighty blows, to the great delight of the spectators. This curious and ingenious piece of mechanism, which had been cunningly devised by one Lintlaer, a Fleming, highly amused and interested de Sigognac, to whom everything of the kind was absolutely new and surprising.

"Now," said Hérode, "we will glance at the view from the other side of the bridge, though it is not so magnificent as the one you have already seen, and is very much shut in by the buildings on the Pont au Change yonder. However, there is the tower of Saint Jacques, the spire of Saint Méderic, and others too numerous to mention; and that is the Sainte Chapelle—a marvel of beauty, so celebrated, you know, for its treasures and relics. All the houses in that direction are new and handsome, as you see; when I was a boy I used to play at hop-scotch where they now stand. Thanks to the munificence of our kings, Paris is being constantly improved and beautified, to the great admiration and delight of everybody; more especially of foreigners, who take home wondrous tales of its splendour."

"But what astonishes me," said de Sigognac, "more even than the grandeur and sumptuousness of the buildings, both public and private, is the infinite number of people swarming everywhere—in the streets and open squares, and on the bridges—like ants when one has broken into an ant hill; they are all rushing

distractedly about, up and down, back and forth, as if life and death depended upon their speed. How strange it is to think that every individual in this immense crowd must be lodged and fed—and what a prodigious amount of food and wine it must take to satisfy them all."

And indeed, it was not surprising that the great numbers of people, moving in every direction, should strike one unaccustomed to the crowded thoroughfares of large cities as extraordinary. On the Pont-Neuf an unceasing stream of vehicles rolled in each direction—fine carriages, richly decorated and gilded, drawn by two or four prancing horses, with lackeys in brilliant liveries clinging on behind, and stately coachmen on the box; less pretentious carriages with more quiet steeds and fewer servants; heavy carts laden with stone, wood, or wine-barrels, whose drivers swore loudly at the detentions they were frequently obliged to submit to, and which were unavoidable in such a crush of vehicles; and among them all, gentlemen on horseback, threading their way carefully in and out among the press of carts and carriages, and endeavouring to avoid coming in contact with their muddy wheels—not always successfully; while here and there a sedan chair crept slowly along, keeping upon the edge of the stream, so as not to be crushed; and the narrow, raised walk on either side was thronged with pedestrians. Presently a drove of cattle made its appearance on the bridge, and then the uproar and confusion became terrible indeed; horses, as well as foot-passengers, were frightened, and tried to run away from danger, requiring all the strength of their drivers to restrain them. Soon after that excitement was over a detachment of soldiers came marching along, with drums beating and colours flying, and everybody had to make way for the valiant sons of Mars, no matter at what inconvenience to themselves. And so it went on, one thing after another—a constant scene of bustle, hurry, and commotion. As de Sigognac and the tyrant strolled slowly along they were beset by beggars, more or less impudent and pertinacious, and by all sorts of odd characters, plying various extraordinary vocations for the amusement of the passers-by, for which they seemed

to be liberally enough remunerated. Here was an improvisatore, singing, not unmelodiously, his rather clever verses; there a blind man, led by a stout, jolly-looking old woman, who recited his dolorous history in a whining voice, and appealed to the charity of the ever-changing multitude; farther on a charlatan, loudly claiming to be able to cure “all the ills that flesh is heir to” by his magical compound—and finding plenty of dupes; and next to him a man with a monkey, whose funny tricks caused much merriment. Suddenly a great tumult arose near the other end of the bridge, and in a moment a compact crowd had gathered around four men, who, with loud cries and imprecations, were fighting with swords—apparently with great fury, though in reality it was only a mock combat, probably intended to give a good chance to the thieves and pickpockets in the throng, with whom they were in league; such tactics being very common, as well as successful. By Hérode’s advice, de Sigognac refrained from mingling with the crowd immediately around the combatants, so he could not get a very good view of them; but he was almost sure that they were the very men he had met first in the streets of Poitiers, to their great discomfiture, and had seen again the previous night at the hotel in the Rue Dauphine, where they certainly had gained no advantage to make up for their former defeat. He communicated his suspicions to the tyrant, but the rascals had already slipped away, and it would have been as useless to attempt to find them in the throng as to look for a needle in a haystack.

“It certainly is possible,” said Hérode, thoughtfully, “that this quarrel was gotten up with a view to involving you in it, by some means or other, for we are undoubtedly followed and watched by the emissaries of the Duke of Vallombreuse. One of the scoundrels might have made believe that you were in the way, or that you had struck him, and falling upon you suddenly, before you had time to draw your sword, have given you a thrust that would have done for you; and if he failed to wound you mortally; the others could have pretended to come to their comrade’s aid, and have completed the job—nothing would have been easier. Then they would have

separated, and slipped away through the crowd, before any one could interfere with them, or else have stood their ground, and declared unanimously that they had been obliged to attack you in self defence. It is next to impossible in such cases to prove that the act was premeditated, and there is no redress for the unhappy victim of such a conspiracy."

"But I am loath to believe," said the brave, generous young baron, "that any gentleman could be capable of such an utterly base and unworthy act as this—what, send a set of hired ruffians to foully assassinate his rival! If he is not satisfied with the result of our first encounter, I am willing and ready to cross swords with him again and again, until one or the other of us is slain. That is the way that such matters are arranged among men of honour, my good Hérode!"

"Doubtless," replied the tyrant, dryly, "but the duke well knows—despite his cursed pride—that the result of another meeting with you could not but be disastrous to himself. He has tried the strength of your blade, and learned by bitter experience that its point is sharp. You may be sure that he hates you like the very devil, and will not scruple to make use of any means whatever to revenge himself for his defeat at your hands."

"Well, if he does not care to try my sword again, we could fight on horseback with pistols. He could not accuse me of having any advantage of him there."

Talking thus the two had reached the Quai de l'Ecole, and there a carriage just missed running over de Sigognac, though he did his best to get out of its way. As it was, only his extremely slender figure saved him from being crushed between it and the wall, so close did it come to him—notwithstanding the fact that there was plenty of room on the other side, and that the coachman could easily have avoided the foot passenger he actually seemed to pursue. The windows of the carriage were all closed, and the curtains drawn down, so that it was impossible to tell whether it had any inmates or not—but if de Sigognac could have peeped within he would have

seen, reclining languidly upon the luxurious cushions, a handsome young nobleman, richly dressed, whose right arm was supported by a black silk scarf, arranged as a sling. In spite of the warm red glow from the crimson silk curtains, he was very pale, and, though so remarkably handsome, his face wore such an expression of hatred and cruelty, that he would have inspired dislike, rather than admiration—as he sat there with a fierce frown contracting his brow, and savagely gnawing his under lip with his gleaming white teeth. In fine, the occupant of the carriage that had so nearly run over the Baron de Sigognac was no other than the young Duke of Vallombreuse.

"Another failure!" said he to himself, with an oath, as he rolled along up the broad quay past the Tuileries. "And yet I promised that stupid rascal of a coachman of mine twenty-five louis if he could be adroit enough to run afoul of that confounded de Sigognac—who is the bane of my life—and drive over him, as if by accident. Decidedly the star of my destiny is not in the ascendant—this miserable little rustic lordling gets the better of me in everything. Isabelle, sweet Isabelle, adores him, and detests me—he has beaten my lackeys, and dared to wound me. But there shall be an end of this sort of thing, and that speedily—even though he be invulnerable, and bear a charmed life, he must and shall be put out of my way—I swear it! though I should be forced to risk my name and my title to compass it."

"Humph!" said Hérode, drawing a long breath; "why those brutes must be of the same breed as the famous horses of that Diomedes, King of Thrace, we read of, that pursued men to tear them asunder, and fed upon their flesh. But at least you are not hurt, my lord, I trust! That coachman saw you perfectly well, and I would be willing to wager all I possess in the world that he purposely tried to run over you—he deliberately turned his horses towards you—I am sure of it, for I saw the whole thing. Did you observe whether there was a coat of arms on the panel? As you are a nobleman yourself I suppose you must be familiar with the devices of the leading families in France."

"Yes, I am of course," answered de Sigognac, "but I was too much occupied in getting out of the way of the swift rolling carriage to notice whether there was anything of that kind on it or not."

"That's a pity," rejoined the tyrant regretfully, "for if we only knew that, we should have a clew that might lead to our discovering the truth about this most suspicious affair. It is only too evident that some one is trying to put you out of the way, quibuscumque viis, as the pedant would say. Although we unfortunately have no proof of it, I am very much inclined to think that this same carriage belongs to his lordship, the Duke of Vallombreuse, who wished to indulge himself in the pleasure of driving over the body of his enemy in his chariot, in true classical and imperial style."

"What extraordinary idea have you got into your head now, Sir Hérode?" said de Sigognac, rather indignantly. "Come, that would be too infamous and villainous a proceeding for any gentleman to be guilty of, and you must remember that after all the Duke of Vallombreuse is one, and that he belongs to a very high and noble family. Besides, did not we leave him in Poitiers, laid up with his wound? How then could he possibly be in Paris, when we have only just arrived here ourselves?"

"But didn't we stop several days at Tours? and again at Orléans? And even if his wound were not entirely healed he could easily travel in his luxurious carriage, by easy stages, from Poitiers to Paris. His hurt was not of a dangerous character, you know, and he is young and vigorous. You must be on your guard, my dear captain, unceasingly; never relax your vigilance for one moment, for I tell you there are those about who seek your life. You once out of the way, Isabelle would, be in the duke's power—for what could we, poor players, do against such a great and powerful nobleman? Even if Vallombreuse himself be not in Paris—though I am almost positive that he is—his emissaries are, as you know, and but for your own courage and watchfulness you would have been assassinated in your bed by them

last night."

This de Sigognac could not dispute, and he only nodded in token of assent, as he grasped the hilt of his sword, so as to be ready to draw it at the slightest cause for suspicion or alarm. Meantime they had walked on as far as the Porte de la Conférence, and now saw ahead of them a great cloud of dust, and through it the glitter of bayonets. They stepped aside to let the cavalcade pass, and saw that the soldiers preceded the carriage of the king, who was returning from Saint Germain to the Louvre. The curtains of the royal vehicle were raised, and the glasses let down, so that the people could distinctly see their sovereign, Louis XIII, who, pale as a ghost and dressed all in black, sat as motionless as an effigy in wax. Long, dark brown hair fell about his mournful, ghastly countenance, upon which was depicted the same terrible ennui that drove Philip II of Spain, to seclude himself so much, during the later years of his life, in the silence and solitude of the dreary Escorial. His eyes were fixed on vacancy, and seemed utterly lifeless—no desire, no thought, no will lent them light or expression. A profound disgust for and weariness of everything in this life had relaxed his lower lip, which fell sullenly, in a morose, pouting way. His hands, excessively thin and white, lay listlessly upon his knees, like those of certain Egyptian idols. And yet, for all, there was a truly royal majesty about this mournful figure, which personified France, and in whose veins flowed sluggishly the generous blood of Henri IV.

The young baron had always thought of the king as a sort of supernatural being, exalted above all other men. Glorious and majestic in his person, and resplendent in sumptuous raiment, enriched with gold and precious stones; and now he saw only this sad, motionless figure, clad in dismal black, and apparently unconscious of his surroundings, sunk in a profound reverie that none would dare to intrude upon. He had dreamed of a gracious, smiling sovereign, showering good gifts upon his loyal subjects, and here was an apathetic, inanimate being, who seemed capable of no thought for any one but himself. He was sadly disappointed, shocked, amazed; and

he felt, with a sinking heart, how hopeless was his own case. For even should he be able to approach this mournful, listless monarch, what sympathy could be expected from him? The future looked darker than ever now to this brave young heart. Absorbed in these sorrowful reflections he walked silently along beside his companion, who suspected his taciturn mood, and did not intrude upon it, until, as the hour of noon approached, he suggested that they should turn their steps homeward, so as to be in time for the mid-day meal. When they reached the hotel they were relieved to find that nothing particular had happened during their absence. Isabelle, quietly seated at table with the others when they entered, received the baron with her usual sweet smile, and held out her little white hand to him. The comedians asked many questions about his first experiences in Paris, and inquired mischievously whether he had brought his cloak, his purse, and his handkerchief home with him, to which de Sigognac joyfully answered in the affirmative. In this friendly banter he soon forgot his sombre thoughts, and asked himself whether he had not been the dupe of a hypochondriac fancy, which could see nothing anywhere but plots and conspiracies.

He had not been alarmed without reason however, for his enemies, vexed but not discouraged by the failure of their several attempts upon him, had by no means renounced their determination to make away with him. Mérindol, who was threatened by the duke with being sent back to the galleys whence he had rescued him, unless he and his comrades succeeded in disposing of the Baron de Sigognac, resolved to invoke the assistance of a certain clever rascal of his acquaintance, who had never been known to fail in any job of that kind which he undertook. He no longer felt himself capable to cope with the baron, and moreover now, laboured under the serious disadvantage of being personally known to him. He went accordingly to look up his friend, Jacquemin Lampourde by name, who lodged not very far from the Pont-Neuf, and was lucky enough to find him at home, sleeping off the effects of his last carouse. He awoke him with some difficulty, and was

violently abused for his pains. Then, having quietly waited until his friend's first fury was exhausted, he announced that he had come to consult with him on important business, having an excellent job to intrust to him, and begging that he would be good enough to listen to what he had to say.

"I never listen to anybody when I am drunk," said Jacquemin Lampourde, majestically, putting his elbow on his knee as he spoke, and resting his head on his hand—"and besides, I have plenty of money—any quantity of gold pieces. We plundered a rich English lord last night, who was a walking cash-box, and I am a gentleman of wealth just at present. However, one evening at lansquenet may swallow it all up. I can't resist gambling you know, and I'm deuced unlucky at it, so I will see you to-night about this little matter of yours. Meet me at the foot of the bronze statue on the Pont-Neuf at midnight. I shall be as fresh and bright as a lark by that time, and ready for anything. You shall give me your instructions then, and we will agree upon my share of the spoils. It should be something handsome, for I have the vanity to believe that no one would come and disturb a fellow of my calibre for any insignificant piece of business. But after all I am weary of playing the thief and pickpocket—it is beneath me—and I mean to devote all my energies in future to the noble art of assassination; it is more worthy of my undisputed prowess. I would rather be a grand, man-slaying lion than any meaner beast of prey. If this is a question of killing I am your man—but one thing more, it must be a fellow who will defend himself. Our victims are so apt to be cowardly, and give in without a struggle—it is no better than sticking a pig—and that I cannot stand, it disgusts me. A good manly resistance, the more stubborn the better, gives a pleasant zest to the task."

"You may rest easy on that score," Mirindol replied, with a malicious smile; "you will find a tough customer to handle, I promise you."

"So much the better," said Lampourde, "for it is a long time since I have found an

adversary worth crossing swords with. But enough of this for the present. Good-bye to you, and let me finish my nap."

But he tried in vain to compose himself to sleep again, and, after several fruitless efforts, gave it up as a bad job; then began to shake a companion, who had slept soundly on the floor under the table during the preceding discussion, and when he had succeeded in rousing him, both went off to a gaming-house, where lansquenet was in active progress. The company was composed of thieves, cut-throats, professional bullies, ruffians of every sort, lackeys, and low fellows of various callings, and a few well-to-do, unsophisticated bourgeois, who had been enticed in there—unfortunate pigeons, destined to be thoroughly plucked. Lampourde, who played recklessly, had soon lost all his boasted wealth, and was left with empty pockets. He took his bad luck with the utmost philosophy.

"Ouf!" said he to his companion, when they had gone out into the street, and the cool, night air blew refreshingly upon his heated face, "here am I rid of my money, and a free man again. It is strange that it should always make such a brute of me. It surprises me no longer that rich men should invariably be such stupid fools. Now, that I haven't a penny left, I feel as gay as a lark—ready for anything. Brilliant ideas buzz about my brain, like bees around the hive. Lampourde's himself again. But there's the Samaritan striking twelve, and a friend of mine must be waiting for me down by the bronze Henri IV, so goodnight."

He quitted his companion and walked quickly to the rendezvous, where he found Mérindol, diligently studying his own shadow in the moonlight; and the two ruffians, after looking carefully about them to make sure that there was no one within ear-shot, held a long consultation, in very low tones. What they said we do not know; but, when Lampourde quitted the agent of the Duke of Vallombreuse, he joyously jingled the handful of gold pieces in his pocket, with an imprudent audacity that showed conclusively how much he was respected by the thieves and cut throats

who haunted the Pont-Neuf.

CHAPTER XII. THE CROWNED RADISH

Jacquemin Lampourde, after parting company with Mérindol, seemed in great uncertainty as to which way he should go, and had not yet decided when he reached the end of the Pont-Neuf. He was like the donkey between two bundles of hay; or, if that comparison be not pleasing, like a piece of iron between two magnets of equal power. On the one side was lansquenet, with the fascinating excitement of rapidly winning and losing the broad gold pieces that he loved; and on the other the tavern, with its tempting array of bottles; for he was a drunkard as well as a gambler, this same notorious Jacquemin Lampourde. He stood stock still for a while, debating this knotty point with himself, quite unable to come to a decision, and growing very much vexed at his own hesitation, when suddenly a brilliant idea occurred to him, and, plunging his hand into his well-filled pocket, he drew forth a gold piece, which he tossed into the air, crying, “Head for the tavern, tail for lansquenet.” The coin rang upon the pavement as it fell, and he kneeled down to see what fate had decided for him; head was up. “Very well,” said he, philosophically, as he picked up the piece of money, carefully wiped off the mud, and put it back in his pocket, “I’ll go and get drunk.” Then, with long strides, he made off to his favourite tavern, which had the advantage of being in the immediate vicinity of his own lodgings, so that with a few zigzags he was at home, after he had filled himself with wine from the soles of his boots to the apple in his throat. It was not an inviting-looking place, this same tavern, with the odd device of an enormous radish, bearing a golden crown—now rather tarnished—which had served as its sign for many generations of wine-drinkers. The heavy wooden shutters were all closed when Lampourde reached it; but by the bright light streaming through their crevices, and the sounds of song and revelry that reached his ear, he knew that there must be a numerous company

within. Knocking on the door in a peculiar way with the handle of his sword, he made himself known as an habitué of the house, and was promptly admitted—the door being carefully made fast again the moment he had entered. The large, low room into which he made his way was filled with the smoke from many pipes, and redolent with the fumes of wine. A cheerful wood fire was blazing on the hearth, lighting up the array of bottles in the bar, which was placed near it, where the master of the establishment sat enthroned, keeping a watchful eye on the noisy crowd gathered round the many small tables with which the room abounded, drinking, smoking, playing at various games, and singing ribald songs. Lampourde paid no attention to the uproarious throng, further than to look about and make sure that none of his own particular friends and associates were among them. He found an unoccupied table, to which a servant quickly brought a bottle of fine old Canary wine, very choice and rare, which was reserved for a few privileged and appreciative customers, who could afford to indulge in such luxuries. Although he was quite by himself, two glasses were placed before him, as his dislike of drinking alone was well known, and at any moment a comrade might come in and join him. Meantime he slowly filled his glass, raised it to the level of his eyes, and looked long and lovingly through the beautiful, clear topaz of the generous wine. Having thus satisfied the sense of sight, he passed to that of smell, and held the glass under his nostrils, where he could enjoy the delicious aroma arising from it, giving the wine a rotary motion as he did so, in a very artistic manner; then, putting the glass to his lips, he let a few drops trickle slowly down over his tongue to his palate, lengthening out the enjoyment as much as possible, and approving smack of relish as he at last swallowed the smooth nectar. Thus Maître Jacquemin Lampourde managed to gratify three of the five senses man is blessed with by means of a single glass of wine. He pretended that the other two might also have a share of the enjoyment—that of touch by the highly polished surface and swelling curves of the wine-glass, and that of hearing by the merry ringing when two glasses are clinked

together, or by the musical sounds to be brought forth from a glass by drawing the moistened finger round and round the edge of it. But these are fantastic and paradoxical ideas, which only serve to show the vicious refinement of this fastidious ruffian. He had been but a few minutes alone when an odd-looking, shabbily dressed individual came in, who rejoiced in a remarkably pale face, which looked as if it had been chalked, and a nose as red and fiery as a live coal; the idea of how many casks of wine and bottles of brandy must have been imbibed to bring it to such an intensity of erubescence would be enough to terrify the ordinary drinker. This singular countenance was like a cheese, with a bright, red cherry stuck in the middle of it; and to finish the portrait it would only be necessary to add two apple seeds, placed a little obliquely, for the eyes, and a wide gash for a mouth. Such was Malartic—the intimate friend, the Pylades, the Euryalus, the "fidus Achates" of Jacquemin Lampourde; who certainly was not handsome—but his mental and moral qualities made up for his little physical disadvantages. Next to Lampourde—for whom he professed the most exalted admiration and respect—he was accounted the most skillful swordsman in Paris; he was always lucky at cards, and could drink to any extent without becoming intoxicated. For the rest, he was a man of great delicacy and honour, in his way—ready to run any risk to help or support a friend, and capable of enduring any amount of torture rather than betray his comrades—so that he enjoyed the universal and unbounded esteem of his circle.

Malartic went straight to Lampourde's table, sat down opposite to him, silently seized the glass the other had promptly filled, and drained it at a single draught; evidently his method differed from his friend's, but that it was equally efficacious his nose bore indisputable witness. The two men drank steadily and in silence until they had emptied their third bottle, and then called for pipes. When they had puffed away for a while, and enveloped themselves in a dense cloud of smoke, they fell into conversation, deploring the bad times since the king, his court and followers, had all gone to Saint Germain, and comparing notes as to their own individual doings since

their last meeting. Thus far they had paid no attention whatever to the company round them, but now such a loud discussion arose over the conditions of a bet between two men about some feat that one of them declared he could perform and the other pronounced impossible, that they both looked round to see what it was all about. A man of lithe, vigorous frame, with a complexion dark as a Moor's, jet-black hair and flashing eyes, was drawing out of his red girdle a large, dangerous looking knife, which, when opened, was nearly as long as a sword, and called in Valencia, where it was made, a navaja. He carefully examined and tested the edge and point of this formidable weapon, with which he seemed satisfied, said to the man he had been disputing with, "I am ready!" then turned and called, "Chiquita! Chiquita!"

At the sound of her name a little girl, who had been sleeping, rolled up in a cloak, on the floor in a dark corner, rose and came towards Agostino—for it was he of course—and, fixing her large dark eyes upon his face earnestly, said, "Master, what do you want me to do? I am ready to obey you here as everywhere else, because you are so brave, and have so many red marks on your navaja."

Chiquita said this rapidly, in a patois which was as unintelligible to the Frenchmen around her as German, Hebrew or Chinese. Agostino took her by the hand and placed her with her back against the door, telling her to keep perfectly still, and the child, accustomed to that sort of thing, showed neither alarm nor surprise, but stood quietly, looking straight before her with perfect serenity, while Agostino, at the other end of the room, standing with one foot advanced, balanced the dread navaja in his hand. Suddenly with a quick jerking movement he sent it flying through the air, and it struck into the wooden door, just over Chiquita's head. As it darted by, like a flash of lightning, the spectators had involuntarily closed their eyes for a second, but the fragile child's long dark eyelashes did not even quiver. The brigand's wonderful skill elicited a loud burst of admiration and applause from an audience not easily surprised or pleased, in which even the man who had lost his

wager joined enthusiastically. Agostino went and drew out the knife, which was still vibrating, and returning to his place this time sent it in between Chiquita's arm—which was hanging down by her side—and her body; if it had deviated a hair's breadth it must have wounded her. At this everybody cried "Enough!" but Agostino insisted upon aiming at the other side as well, so as to prove to them that there was no chance about it; that it was purely a matter of skill. Again the terrible navaja flew through the air, and went straight to the mark, and Chiquita, very much delighted at the applause that followed, looked about her proudly, glorying in Agostino's triumph. She still wore Isabelle's pearl beads round her slender brown neck; in other respects was much better dressed than when we first saw her, and even had shoes on her tiny feet; they seemed to worry and annoy her very much, it is true, but she found them a necessary nuisance on the cold Paris pavements, and so had to submit to wearing them with as good a grace as she could muster. When Agostino gave her leave to quit her position she quietly returned to her corner, rolled herself up anew in the large cloak, and fell sound asleep again, while he, after pocketing the five pistoles he had won, sat down to finish his measure of cheap wine; which he did very slowly, intending to remain where he was as long as possible; he had no lodging place yet in Paris, having arrived that very evening, and this warm room was far more comfortable than a refuge in some convent porch, or under the arch of a bridge perhaps, where he had feared that he and Chiquita might have to lie shivering all night long.

Quiet being restored, comparatively speaking, Lampourde and Malartic resumed their interrupted conversation, and after a few remarks upon the strange performance they had just witnessed—in which Lampourde especially praised Agostino's marvellous skill, and Malartic warmly commended Chiquita's wonderful courage and sang-froid—the former confided to his friend that he had a piece of work in prospect, in which he would need some assistance, and desired to have his opinion as to which of their comrades would be best suited for his purpose. He told him that,

in the first place, he was commissioned to despatch a certain Captain Fracasse, an actor, who had dared to interfere with the love affair of a very great lord. In this, of course, he would not require any aid; but he had also to make arrangements for the abduction of the lady, a very beautiful young actress, who was beloved by both the nobleman and the comedian, and who would be zealously defended by the members of the dramatic company to which she belonged; so that he should be obliged to resort to some stratagem, and would probably need the help of several hands to carry it out—adding that they were sure of being well paid, for the young lord was as generous and open handed as he was wealthy and determined. Thereupon they fell to discussing the respective merits of their numerous friends and acquaintances—gentlemen of the same stamp as themselves—and having decided upon four, and determined to keep an eye upon Agostino, who seemed a clever rascal and might be of use, they called for another bottle of wine. When that was finished Jacquemin Lampourde was indisputably drunk, and having loyally kept his word, retired, somewhat unsteadily, to his own quarters in a high state of maudlin satisfaction, accompanied by his friend Malartic, whom he had invited to spend the night with him. By this time—it was nearly four o'clock in the morning—the Crowned Radish was almost deserted, and the master of the establishment, seeing that there was no prospect of further custom, told his servants to rouse up and turn out all the sleepers—Agostino and Chiquita among the rest—and his orders were promptly executed.

CHAPTER XIII. A DOUBLE ATTACK

The Duke of Vallombreuse was not a man to neglect his love affairs, any more than his enemies. If he hated de Sigognac mortally, he felt for Isabelle that furious passion which the unattainable is apt to excite in a haughty and violent nature like his, that has never met with resistance. To get possession of the young actress had

become the ruling thought of his life. Spoiled by the easy victories he had always gained heretofore, in his career of gallantry, his failure in this instance was utterly incomprehensible to him, as well as astonishing and maddening. He could not understand it. Oftentimes in the midst of a conversation, at the theatre, at church, at the court, anywhere and everywhere, the thought of it would suddenly rush into his mind, sweeping everything before it, overwhelming him afresh with wonder and amazement. And indeed it could not be easy for a man who did not believe that such an anomaly as a truly virtuous woman ever existed—much less a virtuous actress—to understand Isabelle's firm resistance to the suit of such a rich and handsome young nobleman as himself. He sometimes wondered whether it could be that after all she was only playing a part, and holding back for a while so as to obtain more from him in the end—tactics that he knew were not unusual—but the indignant, peremptory way in which she had rejected the casket of jewels proved conclusively that no such base motives actuated Isabelle. All his letters she had returned unopened. All his advances she had persistently repulsed; and he was at his wit's end to know what to do next. Finally he concluded to send for old Mme. Léonarde to come and talk the matter over with him; he had kept up secret relations with her, as it is always well to have a spy in the enemy's camp. The duke received her, when she came in obedience to his summons, in his own particular and favoured room, to which she was conducted by a private staircase. It was a most dainty and luxurious apartment, fitted up with exquisite taste, and hung round with portraits of beautiful women—admirably painted by Simon Vouet, a celebrated master of that day—representing different mythological characters, and set in richly carved oval frames. These were all likenesses of the young duke's various mistresses, each one displaying her own peculiar charms to the greatest possible advantage, and having consented to sit for her portrait—in a costume and character chosen by the duke—as a special favour, without the most remote idea that it was to form part of a gallery.

When the duenna had entered and made her best curtsey, the duke condescendingly

signed to her to be seated, and immediately began to question her eagerly about Isabelle—as to whether there were any signs yet of her yielding to his suit, and also how matters were progressing between her and the detested Captain Fracasse. Although the crafty old woman endeavoured to put the best face upon everything, and was very diplomatic in her answers to these searching questions, the information that she had to give was excessively displeasing to the imperious young nobleman, who had much ado to control his temper sufficiently to continue the conversation. Before he let her go he begged her to suggest some plan by which he could hope to soften the obdurate beauty—appealing to her great experience in such intrigues, and offering to give her any reward she chose to claim if she would but help him to succeed. She had nothing better to propose, however, than secretly administering a strong narcotic to Isabelle, and concerting some plan to deliver her into his hands while unconscious from the effects of it; which even the unscrupulous young duke indignantly rejected. Whereupon, fixing her wicked old eyes admiringly upon his handsome face, and apparently moved by a sudden inspiration, she said: “But why does not your lordship conduct this affair in person? why not begin a regular and assiduous courtship in the good old style? You are as beautiful as Adonis, my lord duke! You are young, fascinating, powerful, wealthy, a favourite at court, rich in everything that is pleasing to the weaker sex; and there is not a woman on earth who could long hold out against you, if you would condescend, my lord, to plead your own cause with her.”

“By Jove! the old woman is right,” said Vallombreuse to himself, glancing complacently at the reflection of his own handsome face and figure in a full-length mirror opposite to him; “Isabelle may be virtuous and cold, but she is not blind, and Nature has not been so unkind to me that the sight of me should inspire her with horror. I can at least hope to produce the same happy effect as a fine statue or picture, which attracts and charms the eye by its symmetry, or its beautiful and harmonious colouring. Then, kneeling at her feet, I can softly whisper some of those

persuasive words that no woman can listen to unmoved—accompanied by such passionately ardent looks that the ice round her heart will melt under them and vanish quite away. Not one of the loftiest, haughtiest ladies at the court has ever been able to withstand them—they have thawed the iciest, most immaculate of them all; and besides, it surely cannot fail to flatter the pride of this disdainful, high-spirited little actress to have a real duke actually and openly kneeling at her feet. Yes, I will take the old woman's advice, and pay my court to her so charmingly and perseveringly that I shall conquer at last—she will not be able to withstand me, my sweet Isabelle. And it will be a miracle indeed if she has a regret left then for that cursed de Sigognac; who shall no longer interfere between my love and me—that I swear! She will soon forget him in my arms."

Having dismissed old Mme. Léonarde with a handsome gratuity, the duke next summoned his valet, Picard, and held an important consultation with him, as to his most becoming costumes, finally deciding upon a very rich but comparatively plain one, all of black velvet; whose elegant simplicity he thought would be likely to suit Isabelle's fastidious taste better than any more gorgeous array, and in which it must be confessed that he looked adorably handsome—his really beautiful face and fine figure appearing to the utmost advantage.

His toilet completed, he sent a peremptory order to his coachman to have the carriage, with the four bays, ready in a quarter of an hour. When Picard had departed on this errand, Vallombreuse began pacing slowly to and fro in his chamber, glancing into the mirror each time he passed it with a self-satisfied smile. "That proud little minx must be deucedly cross-grained and unappreciative," said he, "if she does not perceive how much more worthy I am of her admiration than that shabby de Sigognac. Oh, yes! she'll be sure to come round, in spite of her obstinate affectation of such ferocious virtue, and her tiresome, Platonic love for her impecunious suitor. Yes, my little beauty, your portrait shall figure in one of those oval frames ere long. I think I'll have you painted as chaste Diana, descended from

the sky, despite her coldness, to lavish sweet kisses on Endymion. You shall take your place among those other goddesses, who were as coy and hard to please at first as yourself, and who are far greater ladies, my dear, than you ever will be. Your fall is at hand, and you must learn, as your betters have done before you, that there's no withstanding the will of a Vallombreuse. 'Frango nec frangor,' is my motto."

A servant entered to announce that the carriage awaited his lordship's pleasure, and during the short drive from his own house to the Rue Dauphine, the young duke, despite his arrogant assurance, felt his heart beating faster than usual as he wondered how Isabelle would receive him. When the splendid carriage, with its four prancing horses and servants in gorgeous liveries, drove into the courtyard of the hotel where the comedians were stopping, the landlord himself, cap in hand, rushed out to ask the pleasure of the lordly visitor; but, rapid as were his movements, the duke had already alighted before he could reach him. He cut short the obsequious host's obeisances and breathless offers of service by an impatient gesture, and said peremptorily:

"Mlle. Isabelle is stopping here. I wish to see her. Is she at home? Do not send to announce my visit; only let me have a servant to show me the way to her room."

"My lord, let me have the glory of conducting your lordship myself—such an honour is too great for a rascally servant—I myself am not worthy of so distinguished a privilege."

"As you please," said Vallombreuse, with haughty negligence, "only be quick about it. There are people at every window already, staring down at me as if I were the Grand Turk in person."

He followed his guide, who, with many bows and apologies, preceded him upstairs, and down a long, narrow corridor with doors on either side, like a convent, until they reached Isabelle's room, where the landlord paused, and, bowing lower than ever, asked what name he should have the honour of announcing.

"You can go, now," the duke replied, laying his hand on the door; "I will announce myself."

Isabelle was sitting by the window, diligently studying her part in a new play to be shortly put in rehearsal, and, at the moment the Duke of Vallombreuse softly entered her chamber, was repeating, in a low voice and with closed eyes, the verses she was learning by heart—just as a child does its lessons. The light from the window shone full upon her beautiful head and face—seen in profile—and her lovely figure, thrown back in a negligent attitude full of grace and abandon. She made a most bewitching picture thus, and with a delicious effect of chiaroscuro that would have enchanted an artist—it enthralled the young duke.

Supposing that the intruder who entered so quietly was only the chambermaid, come to perform some forgotten duty, Isabelle did not interrupt her study or look up, but went on composedly with her recitation. The duke, who had breathlessly advanced to the centre of the room, paused there, and stood motionless, gazing with rapture upon her beauty. As he waited for her to open her eyes and become aware of his presence, he sank gracefully down upon one knee, holding his hat so that its long plume swept the floor, and laying his hand on his heart, in an attitude that was slightly theatrical perhaps, but as respectful as if he had been kneeling before a queen. Excitement and agitation had flushed his pale cheeks a little, his eyes were luminous and full of fire, a sweet smile hovered on his rich, red lips, and he had never looked more splendidly, irresistibly handsome in his life. At last Isabelle moved, raised her eyelids, turned her head, and perceived the Duke of Vallombreuse, kneeling within six feet of her. If Perseus had suddenly appeared before her, holding up Medusa's horrid head, the effect would have been much the same. She sat like a statue, motionless, breathless, as if she had been petrified, or frozen stiff—her eyes, dilated with excessive terror, fixed upon his face, her lips parted, her throat parched and dry, her tongue paralyzed—unable to move or speak. A ghastly pallor overspread her horror-stricken countenance, a deathly chill seized

upon all her being, and for one dreadful moment of supreme anguish she feared that she was going to faint quite away; but, by a desperate, prodigious effort of will, she recalled her failing senses, that she might not leave herself entirely defenceless in the power of her cruel persecutor.

“Can it be possible that I inspire such overwhelming horror in your gentle breast, my sweet Isabelle,” said Vallombreuse in his most dulcet tones, and without stirring from his position, “that the mere sight of me produces an effect like this? Why, a wild beast, crouching to spring upon you from his lair, with angry roar and blazing eyeballs, could not terrify you more. My presence here may be a little sudden and startling, I admit; but you must not be too hard upon one who lives only to love and adore you. I knew that I risked your anger when I decided to take this step; but I could not exist any longer without a sight of you, and I humbly crave your pardon if I have offended you by my ardour and devotion. I kneel at your feet, fair lady, a despairing and most unhappy suppliant for your grace and favour.”

“Rise, my lord, I beseech you,” said the frightened, trembling girl, speaking with great difficulty and in a voice that sounded strange in her own ears; “such a position does not become your rank. I am only an actress, and my poor attractions do not warrant such homage. Forget this fleeting fancy, I pray you, and carry elsewhere the ardour and devotion that are wasted upon me, and that so many great and noble ladies would be proud and happy to receive and reward.”

“What do I care for other women, be they what they may?” cried Vallombreuse impetuously, as he rose in obedience to her request; “it is your pride and purity that I adore, your beauty and goodness that I worship; your very cruelty is more charming to me than the utmost favour of any other woman in the world. Your sweet modesty and angelic loveliness have inspired in me a passion that is almost delirium, and unless you can learn to love me I shall die—I cannot live without you. You need not be afraid of me,” he added, as Isabelle recoiled when he made one step forward, and

tried to open the window with her trembling hands, as if she meant to throw herself out in case of his coming any nearer; “see, I will stay where I am. I will not touch you, not even the hem of your garment, so great is my respect for you, charming Isabelle! I do not ask anything more than that you will deign to suffer my presence here a little longer now, and permit me to pay my court to you, lay siege to your heart, and wait patiently until it surrenders itself to me freely and of its own accord, as it surely will. The most respectful lover could not do more.”

“Spare me this useless pursuit, my lord,” pleaded Isabelle, “and I will reward you with the warmest gratitude; but love you I cannot, now or ever.”

“You have neither father, brother, husband, or affianced lover,” persisted Vallombreuse, “to forbid the advances of a gallant gentleman, who seeks only to please and serve you. My sincere homage is surely not insulting to you; why do you repulse me so? Oh! you do not dream what a splendid prospect would open out before you if you would but yield to my entreaties. I would surround you with everything that is beautiful and dainty, luxurious and rare. I would anticipate your every wish; I would devote my whole life to your service. The story of our love should be more enchanting, more blissful than that of Love himself with his delicious Psyche—not even the gods could rival us. Come, Isabelle, do not turn so coldly away from me, do not persevere in this maddening silence, nor drive to desperation and desperate deeds a passion that is capable of anything, of everything, save renouncing its adored object, your own sweet, charming self!”

“But this love, of which any other woman would be justly proud,” said Isabelle modestly, “I cannot return or accept; you must believe me, my lord, for I mean every word I say, and I shall never swerve from this decision. Even if the virtue and purity that I value more highly than life itself were not against it, I should still feel myself obliged to decline this dangerous honour.”

“Deign to look upon me with favour and indulgence, my sweet Isabelle,” continued

Vallombreuse, without heeding her words, “and I will make you an object of envy to the greatest and noblest ladies in all France. To any other woman I should say—take what you please of my treasures—my châteaux, my estates, my gold, my jewels—dress your lackeys in liveries richer than the court costumes of princes—have your horses shod with silver—live as luxuriously as a queen—make even Paris wonder at your lavish splendour if you will—though Paris is not easily roused to wonder—but I well know that you have a soul far above all such sordid temptations as these. They would have no weight with you, my noble Isabelle! But there is a glory that may touch you—that of having conquered Vallombreuse—of leading him captive behind your chariot wheels—of commanding him as your servant, and your slave. Vallombreuse, who has never yielded before—who has been the commander, not the commanded—and whose proud neck has never yet bowed to wear the fetters that so many fair hands have essayed to fasten round it.”

“Such a captive would be too illustrious for my chains,” said Isabelle, firmly, “and as I could never consent to accept so much honour at your hands, my lord, I pray you to desist, and relieve me of your presence.”

Hitherto the Duke of Vallombreuse had managed to keep his temper under control; he had artfully concealed his naturally violent and domineering spirit under a feigned mildness and humility, but, at Isabelle’s determined and continued—though modest and respectful—resistance to his pleading, his anger was rapidly rising to boiling point. He felt that there was love—devoted love—for another behind her persistent rejection of his suit, and his wrath and jealousy augmented each other. Throwing aside all restraint, he advanced towards her impetuously—whereat she made another desperate effort to tear open the casement. A fierce frown contracted his brow, he gnawed his under lip savagely, and his whole face was transformed—if it had been beautiful enough for an angel’s before, it was like a demon’s now.

“Why don’t you tell the truth,” he cried, in a loud, angry voice, “and say that you are

madly in love with that precious rascal, de Sigognac? That is the real reason for all this pretended virtue that you shamelessly flaunt in men's faces. What is there about that cursed scoundrel, I should like to know, that charms you so? Am I not handsomer, of higher rank, younger, richer, as clever, and as much in love with you as he can possibly be? aye, and more—ten thousand times more."

"He has at least one quality that you are lacking in, my lord," said Isabelle, with dignity; "he knows how to respect the woman he loves."

"That's only because he cares so little about you, my charmer!" cried Vallombreuse, suddenly seizing Isabelle, who vainly strove to escape from him, in his arms, and straining her violently to his breast—despite her frantic struggles, and agonized cry for help. As if in response to it, the door was suddenly opened, and the tyrant, making the most deprecating gestures and profound bows, entered the room and advanced towards Isabelle, who was at once released by Vallombreuse, with muttered curses at this most inopportune intrusion.

"I beg your pardon, mademoiselle," said Hérode, with a furtive glance at the duke, "for interrupting you. I did not know that you were in such good company; but the hour for rehearsal has struck, and we are only waiting for you to begin."

He had left the door ajar, and an apparently waiting group could be discerned without, consisting of the pedant, Scapin, Leander, and Zerbine; a reassuring and most welcome sight to poor Isabelle. For one instant the duke, in his rage, was tempted to draw his sword, make a furious charge upon the intruding canaille, and disperse them "vi et armis"—but a second thought stayed his hand, as he realized that the killing or wounding of two or three of these miserable actors would not further his suit; and besides, he could not stain his noble hands with such vile blood as theirs. So he put force upon himself and restrained his rage, and, bowing with icy politeness to Isabelle, who, trembling in every limb, had edged nearer to her friends, he made his way out of the room; turning, however, at the threshold to say, with

peculiar emphasis, “Au revoir, mademoiselle!”—a very simple phrase certainly, but replete with significance of a very terrible and threatening nature from the way in which it was spoken. His face was so expressive of evil passions as he said it that Isabelle shuddered, and felt a violent spasm of fear pass over her, even though the presence of her companions guaranteed her against any further attempts at violence just then. She felt the mortal anguish of the fated dove, above which the cruel kite is circling swiftly in the air, drawing nearer with every rapid round.

The Duke of Vallombreuse regained his carriage, which awaited him in the court followed by the obsequious landlord, with much superfluous and aggravating ceremony that he would gladly have dispensed with, and the next minute the rumble of wheels indicated to Isabelle that her dangerous visitor had taken his departure.

Now, to explain the timely interruption that came so opportunely to rescue Isabelle from her enemy’s clutches. The arrival of the duke in his superb carriage at the hotel in the Rue Dauphine had caused an excitement and flutter throughout the whole establishment, which soon reached the ears of the tyrant, who, like Isabelle, was busy learning his new part in the seclusion of his own room. In the absence of de Sigognac, who was detained at the theatre to try on a new costume, the worthy tyrant, knowing the duke’s evil intentions, determined to keep a close watch over his actions, and having summoned the others, applied his ear to the key-hole of Isabelle’s door, and listened attentively to all that passed within—holding himself in readiness to interfere at any moment, if the duke should venture to offer violence to the defenceless girl—and to his prudence and courage it was due that she escaped further persecution, on that occasion, from her relentless and unscrupulous tormentor.

That day was destined to be an eventful one. It will be remembered that Lampourde, the professional assassin, had received from Mérindol—acting for the Duke Of Vallombreuse—a commission to put Captain Fracasse quietly out of the way, and

accordingly that worthy was dodging about on the Pont-Neuf, at the hour of sunset, waiting to intercept his intended victim, who would necessarily pass that way in returning to his hotel. Jacquemin awaited his arrival impatiently, frequently breathing on his fingers and rubbing them vigorously, so that they should not be quite numb with the cold when the moment for action came, and stamping up and down in order to warm his half-frozen feet. The weather was extremely cold, and the sun had set behind the Pont Rouge, in a heavy mass of blood-red clouds. Twilight was coming on apace, and already there were only occasional foot-passengers, or vehicles, to be encountered hurrying along the deserted streets.

At last de Sigognac appeared, walking very fast, for a vague anxiety about Isabelle had taken possession of him, and he was in haste to get back to her. In his hurry and preoccupation he did not notice Lampourde, who suddenly approached and laid hold of his cloak, which he snatched off, with a quick, strong jerk that broke its fastenings. Without stopping to dispute the cloak with his assailant, whom he mistook at first for an ordinary foot-pad, de Sigognac instantly drew his sword and attacked him. Lampourde, on his side, was ready for him, and pleased with the baron's way of handling his weapon, said to himself, though in an audible tone, "Now for a little fun." Then began a contest that would have delighted and astonished a connoisseur in fencing—such swift, lightning-like flashing of the blades, as they gave and parried cut and thrust—the clashing of the steel, the blue sparks that leaped from the contending swords as the fight grew more furious—Lampourde keeping up meanwhile an odd running commentary, as his wonder and admiration grew momentarily greater and more enthusiastic, and he had soon reached an exulting mood. Here at last was a "foeman worthy of his steel," and he could not resist paying a tribute to the amazing skill that constantly and easily baffled his best efforts, in the shape of such extraordinary and original compliments that de Sigognac was mightily amused thereby. As usual, he was perfectly cool and self-possessed, keeping control of his temper as well as of his sword—though by

this time he felt sure that it was another agent of the Duke of Vallombreuse's he had to deal with, and that his life, not his cloak, was the matter at stake. At last Lampourde, who had begun to entertain an immense respect for his valiant opponent, could restrain his curiosity no longer, and eagerly asked,

"Would it be indiscreet, sir, to inquire who was your instructor? Girolamo, Paraguante, or Cote d'Acier would have reason to be proud of such a pupil. Which one of them was it?"

"My only master was an old soldier, Pierre by name," answered de Sigognac, more and more amused at the oddities of the accomplished swordsman he was engaged with. "Stay, take that! it is one of his favourite strokes."

"The devil!" cried Lampourde, falling back a step, "I was very nearly done for, do you know! The point of your sword actually went through my sleeve and touched my arm—I felt the cold steel; luckily for me it was not broad daylight—I should have been winged; but you are not accustomed, like me, to this dim, uncertain light for such work. All the same, it was admirably well done, and Jacquemin Lampourde congratulates you upon it, sir! Now, pay attention, to me—I will not take any mean advantage of such a glorious foe as you are, and I give you fair warning that I am going to try on you my own secret and special thrust Captain Fracasse—the crowning glory of my art, the 'ne plus ultra' of my science—the elixir of my life. It is known only to myself, and up to this time has been infallible. I have never failed to kill my man with it. If you can parry it I will teach it to you. It is my only possession, and I will leave it to you if you survive it; otherwise I will take my secret to the grave with me. I have never yet found any one capable of executing it, unless indeed it be yourself—admirable, incomparable swordsman that you are! It is a joy to meet such an one. But suppose we suspend hostilities a moment to take breath."

So saying Jacquemin Lampourde lowered the point of his sword, and de Sigognac did the same. They stood eyeing each other for a few moments with mutual

admiration and curiosity, and then resumed the contest more fiercely than ever—each man doing his best, as he had need to do, and enjoying it. After a few passes, de Sigognac became aware that his adversary was preparing to give the decisive blow, and held himself on his guard against a surprise; when it came, delivered with terrible force, he parried it so successfully that Lampourde's sword was broken short off in the encounter with his own trusty weapon, leaving only the hilt and a few inches of the blade in his hand.

"If you have not got the rest of my sword in your body," cried Lampourde, excitedly, "you are a great man!—a hero!—a god!"

"No," de Sigognac replied calmly, "it did not touch me; and now, if I chose, I could pin you to the wall like a bat; but that would be repugnant to me, though you did waylay me to take my life, and besides, you have really amused me with your droll sayings.

"Baron," said Jacquemin Lampourde, calmly, "permit me, I humbly pray you, to be henceforth, so long as I live, your devoted admirer, your slave, your dog! I was to be paid for killing you—I even received a portion of the money in advance, which I have spent. But never mind that; I will pay it back, every penny of it, though I must rob some one else to do it."

With these words he picked up de Sigognac's cloak, and having put it carefully, even reverentially, over his shoulders, made him a profound obeisance, and departed.

Thus the efforts of the Duke of Vallombreuse, to advance his suit and to get rid of his rival, had once more failed ignominiously.

CHAPTER XIV. LAMPOURDE'S DELICACY

It is easy to imagine the frame of mind in which the Duke of Vallombreuse returned home after his repulse by Isabelle, and her rescue from his arms by the timely

intervention of her friends, the comedians. At sight of his face, fairly livid and contorted with suppressed rage, his servants trembled and shrunk away from him—as well they might—for his natural cruelty was apt to vent itself upon the first unhappy dependent that happened to come in his way when his wrath was excited. He was not an easy master to serve, even in his most genial mood—this haughty, exacting young nobleman—and in his frantic fits of anger he was more savage and relentless than a half-starved tiger. Upon entering his own house he rushed through it like a whirlwind, shutting every door behind him with such a violent bang that the very walls shook, and pieces of the gilt mouldings round the panels were snapped off, and scattered on the floor. When he reached his own room he flung down his hat with such force that it was completely flattened, and the feather broken short off. Then, unable to breathe freely, he tore open his rich velvet pourpoint, as he rushed frantically to and fro, without any regard for the superb diamond buttons that fastened it, which flew in every direction. The exquisitely fine lace ruffles round his neck were reduced to shreds in a second, and with a vigorous kick he knocked over a large arm-chair that stood in his way, and left it upside down, with its legs in the air.

“The impudent little hussy!” he cried, as he continued his frenzied walk, like a wild beast in a cage. “I have a great mind to have her thrown into prison, there to be well-whipped, and have her hair shaved off, before being sent to a lunatic asylum—or better still to some strict convent where they take in bad girls who have been forcibly rescued from lives of infamy. I could easily manage it. But no, it would be worse than useless—persecution would only make her hate me more, and would not make her love that cursed de Sigognac a bit less. How can I punish her? what on earth shall I do?” and still he paced restlessly to and fro, cursing and swearing, and raving like a madman. While he was indulging in these transports of rage, without paying any attention to how the time was passing, evening drew on, and it was rapidly growing dark when his faithful Picard, full of commiseration,

screwed up his courage to the highest point, and ventured to go softly in—though he had not been called, and was disobeying orders—to light the candles in his master's room; thinking that he was quite gloomy enough already without being left in darkness as well, and hoping that the lights might help to make him more cheerful. They did seem to afford him some relief, in that they caused a diversion; for his thoughts, which had been all of Isabelle and her cruel repulse of his passionate entreaties, suddenly flew to his successful rival, the Baron de Sigognac.

"But how is this?" he cried, stopping short in his rapid pacing up and down the room. "How comes it that that miserable, degraded wretch has not been despatched before this? I gave the most explicit orders about it to that good-for-nothing Mérindol. In spite of what Vidalinc says, I am convinced that I shall succeed with Isabelle when once that cursed lover of hers is out of my way. She will be left entirely at my mercy then, and will have to submit to my will and pleasure with the best grace she can muster—for I shall not allow any sulking or tears. Doubtless she clings so obstinately to that confounded brute in the belief that she can induce him to marry her in the end. She means to be Mme. la Baronne de Sigognac—the aspiring little actress! That must be the reason of all this mighty display of mock modesty, and of her venturing to repulse the attentions of a duke, as scornfully, by Jove! as if he were a stable-boy. But she shall rue it—the impertinent little minx! and I'll have no mercy shown to the audacious scoundrel who dared to disable this right arm of mine. Halloa there! send Mérindol up to me instantly, do you hear?"

Picard flew to summon him, and in a few moments the discomfited bully made his appearance; pale from abject terror, with teeth chattering and limbs trembling, as he was ushered into the dread presence of his angry lord. In spite of his efforts to assume the sang-froid he was so far from feeling, he staggered like a drunken man, though he had not drank enough wine that day to drown a fly, and did not dare to lift his eyes to his master's face.

"Well, you cowardly beast," said Vallombreuse angrily, how long, pray, are you going to stand there speechless, like a stupid fool, with that hang-dog air, as if you already had the rope that you so richly deserve round your wicked neck? "I only awaited your lordship's orders," stammered Mérindol, trying to appear at ease, and failing lamentably. "My lord duke knows that I am entirely devoted to his service—even to being hanged, if it seems good to your lordship."

"Enough of that cant!" interrupted the duke impatiently. "Didn't I charge you to have that cursed de Sigognac, otherwise Captain Fracasse, cleared out of my way? You have not done it—my orders have not been obeyed. It is worth while, upon my word, to keep confounded hired rascals to do such work for me, at this rate! All that you are good for is to stuff yourself in the kitchen, you dastardly beast, and to guzzle my good wine from morning until night. But I've had enough of this, by Jove! and if there is not a change, and that without any further loss of time, to the hangman you shall go—do you hear? just as sure as you stand there, gaping like a drivelling idiot."

"My lord duke," said Mérindol in a trembling voice, "is unjust to his faithful servant, who desires nothing but to do his lord's bidding. But this Baron de Sigognac is not to be disposed of so easily as my lord believes. Never was there a braver, more fearless man. In our first attack on him, at Poitiers, he got the better of us in a most wonderful way—we never saw the like of it—and all he had to fight with was a dull, rusty sword, not intended for use at all; a theatre sword, just for looks. And when we tried to do for him here in Paris, the very night he got here, it all came to naught, because he was so watchful, and somehow suspected what we were up to, and was ready for us; and that upset our beautiful little plan entirely. I never was so surprised in my life; and there was nothing for us to do, the whole four of us, but to get out of his sight as fast as we could, and he standing there laughing at us. Oh! he's a rare one, is Captain Fracasse. And now he knows my face, so I can't go near him myself. But I have engaged the services of a particular friend of

mine—the bravest man and the best fighter in Paris—he hasn't his equal in the world with the sword, they all say. He is lying in wait for him on the Pont-Neuf now, at this very moment, and there'll be no mistake this time. Lampourde will be sure to despatch him for us—if it is not done already—and that without the slightest danger of your lordship's name being mixed up with the affair in any way, as it might have been if your lordship's own servants had done it."

"The plan is not a bad one," said the young duke, somewhat mollified, "and perhaps it is better that it should be done in that way. But are you really sure of the courage and skill of this friend of yours? He will need both to get the better of that confounded de Sigognac, who is no coward, and a master hand with the sword, I am bound to acknowledge, though I do hate him like the devil."

"My lord need have no fears," said Mérindol enthusiastically, being now more at his ease. "Jacquemin Lampourde is a hero, a wonder, as everybody will tell your lordship. He is more valiant than Achilles, or the great Alexander. He is not spotless certainly, like the Chevalier Bayard, but he is fearless."

Picard, who had been hovering about for a few minutes in an uneasy way, now seeing that his master was in a better humour, approached and told him that a very odd-looking man was below, who asked to see him immediately on most important business.

"You may bring him in," said the duke, "but just warn him, Picard, that if he dares to intrude upon me for any trifling matter, I'll have him skinned alive before I let him go."

Mirindol was just about leaving the room, when the entrance of the newcomer rooted him to the spot; he was so astonished and alarmed that he could not move hand or foot. And no wonder, for it was no other than the hero whose name he had just spoken—Jacquemin Lampourde in person—and the bare fact of his having dared to penetrate so boldly into the dread presence of that high and mighty seignior,

the Duke of Vallombreuse, ignoring entirely the agent through whom his services had been engaged, showed of itself that something very extraordinary must have taken place.

Lampourde himself did not seem to be in the least disconcerted, and after winking at his friend furtively in a very knowing way, stood unabashed before the duke, with the bright light of the many wax candles shining full upon his face. There was a red mark across his forehead, where his hat had been pressed down over it, and great drops of sweat stood on it, as if he had been running fast, or exercising violently. His eyes, of a bluish gray tint, with a sort of metallic lustre in them, were fixed upon those of the haughty young nobleman, with a calm insolence that made Mérindol's blood run cold in his veins; his large nose, whose shadow covered all one side of his face, as the shadow of Mount Etna covers a considerable portion of the island of Sicily, stood out prominently, almost grotesquely, in profile; his mustache, with its long stiff points carefully waxed, which produced exactly the effect of an iron skewer stuck through his upper lip, and the "royal" on his chin curled upward, like a comma turned the wrong way, all contributed to make up a very extraordinary physiognomy, such as caricaturists dote on. He wore a large scarlet cloak, wrapped closely about his erect, vigorous form, and in one hand, which he extended towards the duke, he held suspended a well filled purse—a strange and mysterious proceeding which Mirindol could by no means understand.

"Well, you rascal," said the duke, after staring for a moment in astonishment at this odd-looking specimen, "what does this mean? Are you offering alms to me, pray, or what? with your purse there held out at arm's length, apparently for my acceptance."

"In the first place, my lord duke," said Lampourde, with perfect sang-froid and gravity, "may it not displease your highness, but I am not a rascal. My name is Jacquemin Lampourde, and I ply the sword for a living. My profession is an honourable one. I have never degraded myself by taking part in trade of any kind, or

by manual labour. Killing is my business, at the risk of my own life and limb—for I always do my work alone, unaided, armed only with my trusty sword. Fair play is a jewel, and I would scorn to take a mean advantage of anybody. I always give warning before I attack a man, and let him have a chance to defend himself—having a horror of treachery, and cowardly, sneaking ways. What profession could be more noble than mine, pray? I am no common, brutal assassin, my lord duke, and I beseech your lordship to take back that offensive epithet, which I could never accept, save in a friendly, joking way—it outrages too painfully the sensitive delicacy of my amour-propre, my lord!"

"Very well, so be it, Maître Jacquemin Lampourde, since you desire it," answered Vallombreuse, very much amused at the oddity of his strange visitor. "And now have the goodness to explain your business here, with a purse in your hand, that you certainly appear to be steadily offering to me."

Jacquemin satisfied by this concession to his susceptibility, suddenly jerked his head forward, without bending his body, while he waved the hat that he held slowly to and fro, making, according to his ideas, a salute that was a judicious mingling of the soldier's and the courtier's—which ceremony being concluded, he proceeded as follows with his explanation:

"Here is the whole thing in a nutshell, my lord duke! I received, from Mérindol—acting for your lordship—part payment in advance for despatching a certain Baron de Sigognac, commonly called Captain Fracasse. On account of circumstances beyond my control, I have not been able to finish the job, and as I am a great stickler for honesty, and honour also, I have hastened to bring back to you, my lord duke, the money that I did not earn."

With these words he advanced a step, and with a gesture that was not devoid of dignity, gently laid the purse down on a beautiful Florentine mosaic table, that stood at the duke's elbow.

"Verily," said Vallombreuse sneeringly, "we seem to have here one of those droll bullies who are good for naught but to figure in a comedy; an ass in a lion's skin, whose roar is nothing worse than a bray. Come, my man, own up frankly that you were afraid of that same de Sigognac."

"Jacquemin Lampourde has never been afraid of anybody in his life," the fighting man replied, drawing himself up haughtily, "and no adversary has ever seen his back. Those who know me will tell your lordship that easy victories have no charm for me. I love danger and court it. I take positive delight in it. I attacked the Baron de Sigognac 'secundum artem,' and with one of my very best swords—made by Alonzo de Sahagun, the elder, of Toledo."

"Well, and what happened then?" said the young duke eagerly. "It would seem that you could not have been victorious, since you wish to refund this money, which was to pay you for despatching him."

"First let me inform your highness that in the course of my duels and combats, of one sort and another, I have left no less than thirty-seven men stretched dead upon the ground—and that without counting in all those I have wounded mortally or crippled for life. But this Baron de Sigognac intrenched himself within a circle of flashing steel as impenetrable as the walls of a granite fortress. I called into requisition all the resources of my art against him, and tried in every possible way to surprise him off his guard, but he was ready for everything—as quick as a flash, as firm as a rock—he parried every thrust triumphantly, magnificently, with the most consummate science, and a grace and ease I have never seen equalled. He kept me busy defending myself too all the time, and more than once had nearly done for me. His audacity was astonishing, his sang-froid superb, and his perfect mastery over his sword, and his temper, sublime—he was not a man, but a god. I could have fallen down and worshipped him. At the risk of being spitted on his sword, I prolonged the fight as much as I dared, so as to enjoy his marvellous, glorious, unparalleled

method to the utmost. However, there had to be an end of it, and I thought I was sure of despatching him at last by means of a secret I possess—an infallible and very difficult thrust, taught and bequeathed to me by the great Girolamo of Naples, my beloved master—no man living has a knowledge of it but myself—there is no one else left capable of executing it to perfection, and upon that depends its success. Well, my lord duke, Girolamo himself could not have done it better than I did to-night. I was thunderstruck when my opponent did not go down before it as if he had been shot. I expected to see him lying dead at my feet. But not at all, by Jove! That devil of a Captain Fracasse parried my blow with dazzling swiftness, and with such force that my blade was broken short off, and I left completely at his mercy, with nothing but the stump in my hand. See here, my lord duke! just look what he did to my precious, priceless Sahagun." And Jacquemin Lampourde, with a piteous air, drew out and exhibited the sorry remains of his trusty sword—almost weeping over it—and calling the duke's attention to the perfectly straight and even break.

"Your highness can see that it was a prodigious blow that snapped this steel like a pipe-stem, and it was done with such ease and precision. To despatch Captain Fracasse by fair means is beyond my skill, my lord duke, and I would scorn to resort to treachery. Like all truly brave men, he is generous. I was left entirely defenceless, and he could have spitted me like an ortolan just by extending his arm, but he refrained; he let me go unscathed. A miraculous display of delicacy, as well as chivalrous generosity, from a gentleman assaulted in the gloaming on the Pont-Neuf. I owe my life to him, and moreover, such a debt of gratitude as I shall never be able to repay. I cannot undertake anything more against him, my lord duke; henceforth he is sacred to me. Besides, it would be a pity to destroy such a swordsman—good ones are rare in these degenerate days, and growing more so every year. I don't believe he has his equal on earth. Most men handle a sword as if it were a broomstick nowadays, and then expect to be praised and applauded, the clumsy, stupid fools! Now, I have given my reasons for coming to inform your highness that I must resign

the commission I had accepted. As for the money there, I might perhaps have been justified in keeping it, to indemnify me for the great risk and peril I incurred, but such a questionable proceeding would be repugnant to my tender conscience and my honest pride, as your highness can understand."

"In the name of all the devils in the infernal regions, take back your money!" cried Vallombreuse impetuously, "or I will have you pitched out of the window yonder, you and your money both. I never heard of such a scrupulous scoundrel in my life. You, Mérindol, and your cursed crew, have not a spark of honour or honesty among you all; far enough from it." Then perceiving that Lampourde hesitated about picking up the purse, he added, "Take it, I tell you! I give it to you to drink my health with."

"In that, my lord duke, you shall be religiously obeyed," Lampourde replied joyfully; "however, I do not suppose that your highness will object to my dedicating part of it to lansquenet." And he stretched out his long arm, seized the purse, and with one dexterous movement, like a juggler, chucked it jingling into the depths of his pocket.

"It is understood then, my lord duke, that I retire from the affair so far as the Baron de Sigognac is concerned," continued Lampourde, "but, if agreeable to your highness, it will be taken in hand by my 'alter ego,' the Chevalier Malartic, who is worthy to be intrusted with the most delicate and hazardous enterprises, because of his remarkable adroitness and superior ability, and he is one of the best fellows in the world into the bargain. I had sketched out a scheme for the abduction of the young actress, in whom your highness condescends to take an interest, which Malartic will now carry out, with all the wonderful perfection of detail that characterizes his clever way of doing things. Mérindol here, who knows him, will testify to his rare qualifications, my lord duke, and you could not find a better man for your purpose. I am presenting a real treasure to your lordship in tendering

Malartic's services. When he is wanted your highness has only to send a trusty messenger to mark a cross in chalk on the left-hand door-post of the Crowned Radish. Malartic will understand, and repair at once, in proper disguise, to this house, to receive your lordship's last orders."

Having finished this triumphant address, Maître Jacquemin Lampourde again saluted the duke as before, then put his hat on his head and stalked majestically out of the room, exceedingly well satisfied with his own eloquence, and what he considered courtly grace, in the presence of so illustrious a nobleman. His oddity and originality, together with his strange mingling of lofty notions of honour and rascality, had greatly amused and interested the young Duke of Vallombreuse, who was even willing to forgive him for not having despatched de Sigognac; for, if even this famous professional duellist could not get the better of him, he really must be invincible, and in consequence the thought of his own defeat became less galling and intolerable to his pride and vanity. Moreover, he had not been able to get rid of an uncomfortable consciousness, even in his most angry mood, that his endeavouring to compass de Sigognac's assassination was rather too great an enormity, not on account of any conscientious scruples, but simply because his rival was a gentleman; he would not have hesitated a second about having half-a-dozen bourgeois murdered, if they had been rash or unfortunate enough to interfere with him, the blood of such base, ignoble creature being of no more consequence in his eyes than so much water. Vallombreuse would have liked to despatch his enemy himself in honourable combat, but that was rendered impossible by the baron's superior ability as a swordsman, of which he still had a painful reminder in his wounded arm; which was scarcely healed yet, and would prevent his indulging in anything like a duel for some time to come. So his thoughts turned to the abduction of the young actress; a pleasanter subject to dwell upon, as he felt not the slightest doubt that once he had her to himself, separated from de Sigognac and her companions, she would not long be able to withstand his eloquent pleading and

personal attractions. His self-conceit was boundless, but not much to be wondered at, considering his invariable and triumphant success in affairs of gallantry; so, in spite of his recent repulse, he flattered himself that he only required a fitting opportunity to obtain from Isabelle all that he desired.

“Let me have her for a few days in some secluded place,” said he to himself, “where she cannot escape from me, or have any intercourse with her friends, and I shall be sure to win her heart. I shall be so kind and good and considerate to her, treat her with so much delicacy and devotion, that she cannot help feeling grateful to me; and then the transition to love will be easy and natural. But when once I have won her, made her wholly mine, then she shall pay dearly for what she has made me suffer. Yes, my lady, I mean to have my revenge—you may rest assured of that.”

CHAPTER XV. MALARTIC AT WORK

If the Duke of Vallombreuse had been furious after his unsuccessful visit to Isabelle, the Baron de Sigognac was not less so, when, upon his return that evening, he learned what had taken place during his absence. The tyrant and Blazius were almost obliged to use force to prevent his rushing off, without losing a minute, to challenge the duke to mortal combat—a challenge sure to be refused; for de Sigognac, being neither the brother nor husband of the injured fair one, had no earthly right to call any other gentleman to account for his conduct towards her; in France all men are at liberty to pay their court to every pretty woman.

As to the attack upon the baron on the Pont-Neuf, there could be no doubt that it was instigated by the Duke of Vallombreuse; but how to prove it? that was the difficulty. And even supposing it could be proved, what good would that do? In the eyes of the world the Baron de Sigognac, who carefully concealed his real rank, was only Captain Fracasse, a low play-actor, upon whom a great noble, like the Duke of Vallombreuse, had a perfect right to inflict a beating, imprisonment, or even

assassination, if it so pleased him; and that without incurring the blame, or serious disapproval, of his friends and equals.

So far as Isabelle was concerned, if the affair were made public, nobody would believe that she was really pure and virtuous—the very fact of her being an actress was enough to condemn her—for her sake it was important to keep the matter secret if possible. So there was positively no means of calling their enemy to account for his flagrant misdeeds, though de Sigognac, who was almost beside himself with rage and indignation, and burning to avenge Isabelle's wrongs and his own, swore that he would punish him, even if he had to move heaven and earth to compass it. Yet, when he became a little calmer, he could not but acknowledge that Hérode and Blazius were right in advising that they should all remain perfectly quiet, and feign the most absolute indifference; but at the same time keep their eyes and ears very wide open, and be unceasingly on their guard against artful surprises, since it was only too evident that the vindictive young duke, who was handsome as a god and wicked as the devil, did not intend to abandon his designs upon them; although thus far he had failed ignominiously in everything he had undertaken against them.

A gentle, loving remonstrance from Isabelle, as she held de Sigognac's hands, all hot and trembling with suppressed rage, between her own soft, cool palms, and caressingly interlaced her slender white fingers with his, did more to pacify him than all the rest, and he finally yielded to her persuasions; promising to keep quiet himself, and allow, things to go on just as usual.

Meantime the representations of the troupe had met with splendid success. Isabelle's modest grace and refined beauty, Serafina's more brilliant charms, the soubrette's sparkling vivacity and bewitching coquetry, the superb extravagances of Captain Fracasse, the tyrant's majestic mien, Leander's manly beauty, the grotesque good humour of the pedant, Scapin's spicy deviltries, and the duenna's perfect acting had taken Paris by storm, and their highest hopes were likely to be realized. Having

triumphantly won the approbation of the Parisians, nothing was wanting but to gain also that of the court, then at Saint Germain, and a rumour had reached their ears that they were shortly to be summoned thither; for it was asserted that the king, having heard such favourable reports of them, had expressed a desire to see them himself. Whereas Hérode, in his character of treasurer, greatly rejoiced, and all felt a pleasant excitement at the prospect of so distinguished an honour. Meanwhile the troupe was often in requisition to give private representations at the houses of various people of rank and wealth in Paris, and it quickly became the fashion among them to offer this very popular style of entertainment to their guests.

Thus it befell that the tyrant, being perfectly accustomed to that sort of thing, was not at all surprised, or suspicious of evil, when one fine morning a stranger, of most venerable and dignified mien, presented himself at the hotel in the Rue Dauphine, and asked to speak with him on business. He appeared to be the major-domo, or steward, of some great nobleman’s establishment, and, in effect, announced to Hérode that he had been sent to consult with him, as manager of the troupe, by his master, the Comte de Pommereuil.

This highly respectable old functionary was richly dressed in black velvet, and had a heavy gold chain round his neck. His face was slightly sunburnt; the wavy hair that fell upon his shoulders, his thick, bushy eyebrows, heavy mustache, and long, sweeping beard were all white as snow. He had the most patriarchal, benevolent air imaginable, and a very gentle, yet dignified manner. The tyrant could not help admiring him very much, as he said, courteously, “Are you, sir, the famous Hérode I am in quest of, who rules with a hand as firm as Apollo’s the excellent company of comedians now playing in Paris? Their renown has gone abroad, beyond the walls of the city, and penetrated even to my master’s ears, on his estate out in the country.”

“Yes, I have the honour to be the man you seek,” the tyrant answered, bowing very graciously.

“The Comte de Pommereuil greatly desires to have you give one of your celebrated representations at his château, where guests of high rank are sojourning at this moment, and I have come to ascertain whether it will be possible for you to do so. The distance is not very considerable, only a few leagues. The comte, my master, is a very great and generous seignior, who is prepared to reward your illustrious company munificently for their trouble, and will do everything in his power to make them comfortable while they are under his roof.”

“I will gladly do all that I can to please your noble master,” the tyrant replied, “though it will be a little difficult for us to leave Paris at present, just in the height of the season; even if it be only for a short absence.”

“Three days would suffice for this expedition,” said the venerable major-domo persuasively; “one for the journey, the second for the representation, and the third for the return to Paris. There is a capital theatre at the château, furnished with everything that is requisite, so that you need not be encumbered with much luggage—nothing beyond your costumes. Here is a purse containing a hundred pistoles that the Comte de Pommereuil charged me to put into your hands, to defray the expenses of the journey. You will receive as much more before you return, and there will be handsome presents for the actresses forthcoming, of valuable jewels, as souvenirs of the occasion.”

After a momentary hesitation, the tyrant accepted the well-filled purse tendered to him, and, with a gesture of acquiescence, put it into his pocket.

“I am to understand then that you accept, and I may tell my master that you will give a representation at the château, as he desires?”

“Yes, I place myself and my company at his disposition,” Hérode said, smilingly. “And now let me know what day you want us to go, and which of our pieces your master prefers.”

“Thursday is the day my master designated; as for selecting the play, that he leaves

to your own good taste and discretion."

"Very well; and now you have only to give me directions as to the road we must take to reach the château. Be as explicit as you can, I pray you, so that there may be no danger of our going astray."

The agent of the Comte de Pommereuil accordingly gave the most minute and exact directions possible, but ended by saying, "Never mind, you need not burden your memory with all these troublesome details! I will send you a lackey to serve as guide."

Matters being thus satisfactorily arranged, the charming old major-domo took leave of Hérode, who accompanied him down the stairs and across the court to the outer door of the hotel, and departed, looking back to exchange a last polite sign of farewell ere he turned the corner of the street. If the honest tyrant could have seen him as he walked briskly away, the moment he was safely out of sight, he would have been astonished at the way the broad, stooping shoulders straightened themselves up, and at the rapid, vigorous step that succeeded to the slow, rather infirm gait of his venerable visitor—but these things our worthy Hérode neither saw nor suspected.

On Wednesday morning, as the comedians were finishing the packing of their chariot, which stood ready for departure in the courtyard of the hotel, with a pair of fine spirited horses before it that the tyrant had hired for the journey, a tall, rather fierce-looking lackey, dressed in a neat livery and mounted on a stout pony, presented himself at the outer door, cracking his whip vigorously, and announcing himself as the guide, sent according to promise by the considerate major-domo, to conduct them to the Château de Pommereuil.

Eight clear strokes rang out from the Samaritan just as the heavy vehicle emerged into the Rue Dauphine, and our company of players set forth on their ill-fated expedition. In less than half an hour they had left the Porte Saint Antoine and the

Bastile behind them, passed through the thickly settled faubourg and gained the open country; advancing towards Vincennes, which they could distinguish in the distance, with its massive keep partially veiled by a delicate blue mist, that was rapidly dispersing under the influence of the bright, morning sunshine. As the horses were fresh, and travelled at a good pace, they soon came up with the ancient fortress—which was still formidable in appearance, though it could not have offered any adequate resistance to the projectiles of modern artillery. The gilded crescents on the minarets of the chapel built by Pierre de Montereau shone out brightly, as if joyous at finding themselves in such close proximity to the cross—the sign of redemption. After pausing a few minutes to admire this monument of the ancient splendour of our kings, the travellers entered the forest, where, amid the dense growth of younger trees, stood a few majestic old oaks—contemporaries doubtless of the one under which Saint Louis, that king of blessed memory, used to sit and dispense justice to his loyal subjects in person—a most becoming and laudable occupation for a monarch.

The road was so little used that it was grass-grown in many places, and the chariot rolled so smoothly and noiselessly along over it that they occasionally surprised a party of rabbits frolicking merrily together, and were very much amused to see them scamper away, in as great a hurry as if the hounds were at their heels. Farther on a frightened deer bounded across the road in front of them, and they could watch its swift, graceful flight for some distance amid the leafless trees. The young baron was especially interested in all these things, being country-bred, and it was a delight unspeakable to him to see the fields, the hedgerows, the forest, and the wild creatures of the wood once more. It was a pleasure he had been deprived of ever since he had frequented cities and towns, where there is nothing to look at but dingy houses, muddy streets and smoky chimneys—the works of man not of God. He would have pined in them for the fresh country air if he had not had the sweet companionship of the lovely woman he adored; in whose deep, blue eyes he saw a

whole heaven of bliss.

Upon emerging from the wood the road wound up a steep hill-side, so the horses were stopped, to rest a few minutes before beginning the ascent, and de Sigognac, profiting by the opportunity thus afforded him, said to Isabelle, “Dear heart, will you get down and walk a little way with me? You will find it a pleasant change and rest after sitting still in the chariot so long. The road is smooth and dry, and the sunshine deliciously warm—do come!”

Isabelle joyfully acceded to this request, and putting her hand into the one extended to help her, jumped lightly down. It was a welcome means of according an innocent tête-à-tête to her devoted lover, and both felt as if they were treading on air, they were so happy to find themselves alone together, as, arm in arm, they walked briskly forward, until they were out of sight of their companions. Then they paused to look long and lovingly into each other’s eyes, and de Sigognac began again to pour out to Isabelle “the old, old story,” that she was never weary of hearing, but found more heavenly sweet at every telling. They were like the first pair of mortal lovers in Paradise, entirely sufficient to and happy in each other. Yet even then Isabelle gently checked the passionate utterances of her faithful suitor, and strove to moderate his rapturous transports, though their very fervour made her heart rejoice, and brought a bright flush to her cheeks and a happy light to her eyes that rendered her more adorably beautiful than ever.

“Whatever you may do or say, my darling,” he answered, with a sweet, tender smile, “you will never be able to tire out my constancy. If need be, I will wait for you until all your scruples shall have vanished of themselves—though it be not till these beautiful, soft brown tresses, with their exquisite tinge of gold where the sun shines on them, shall have turned to silver.”

“Oh!” cried Isabelle, “I shall be so old and so ugly then that even your sublime courage will be daunted, and I fear that in rewarding your perseverance and fidelity

by the gift of myself I should only be punishing my devoted knight and brave champion."

"You will never be ugly, my beloved Isabelle, if you live to be a hundred," he replied, with an adoring glance, "for yours is not the mere physical beauty, that fades away and vanishes—it is the beauty of the soul, which is immortal."

"All the same you would be badly off," rejoined Isabelle, "if I were to take you at your word, and promise to be yours when I was old and gray. But enough of this jesting," she continued gravely, "let us be serious! You know my resolution, de Sigognac, so try to content yourself with being the object of the deepest, truest, most devoted love that was ever yet bestowed on mortal man since hearts began to beat in this strange world of ours."

"Such a charming avowal ought to satisfy me, I admit, but it does not! My love for you is infinite—it can brook no bounds—it is ever increasing—rising higher and higher, despite your heavenly voice, that bids it keep within the limits you have fixed for it."

"Do not talk so, de Sigognac! you vex me by such extravagances," said Isabelle, with a little pout that was as charming as her sweetest smile; for in spite of herself her heart beat high with joy at these fervent protestations of a love that no coldness could repel, no remonstrance diminish.

They walked on a little way in silence—de Sigognac not daring to say more then, lest he should seriously displease the sweet creature he loved better than his own life. Suddenly she drew her arm out of his, and with an exclamation of delight, sprang to a little bank by the road-side, where she had spied a tiny violet, peeping out from amid the dead leaves that had lain there all the winter through—the first harbinger of spring, smiling up at her a friendly greeting, despite the wintry cold of February. She knelt down and gently cleared away the dry leaves and grass about it, carefully broke the frail little stem, and returned to de Sigognac's side with her

treasure—more delighted than if she had found a precious jewel lying hidden among the mosses.

“Only see, how exquisitely beautiful and delicate it is”—said she, showing it to him—“with its dear little petals scarcely unrolled yet to return the greeting of this bright, warm sunshine, that has roused it from its long winter sleep.”

“It was not the sunshine, however bright and warm,” answered de Sigognac, “but the light of your eyes, sweet Isabelle, that made it open out to greet you—and it is exactly the colour too of those dear eyes of yours.”

“It has scarcely any fragrance, but that is because it’s so cold,” said Isabelle, loosening her scarf, and putting it carefully inside the ruff that encircled her slender, white neck. In a few minutes she took it out again, inhaled its rich perfume, pressed it furtively to her lips, and offered it to de Sigognac.

“See how sweet it is now! The warmth I imparted to it has reassured the little modest, timid blossom, and it breathes out its incomparable fragrance in gratitude to me.”

“Say rather that it has received it from you,” he replied, raising the violet tenderly to his lips, and taking from it the kiss Isabelle had bestowed—“for this delicate, delicious odour has nothing gross or earthly about it—it is angelically pure and sweet, like yourself, my own Isabelle.”

“Ah! the naughty flatterer,” said she, smiling upon him with all her heart in her eyes. “I give him a little flower that he may enjoy its perfume, and straightway he draws from it inspiration for all sorts of high-flown conceits, and fine compliments. There’s no doing anything with him—to the simplest, most commonplace remark he replies with a poetical flight of fancy.”

However, she could not have been very seriously displeased, for she took his arm again, and even leaned upon it rather more heavily than the exigencies of the way actually required; which goes to prove that the purest virtue is not insensible to

pretty compliments, and that modesty itself knows how to recompense delicate flattery.

Not far from the road they were travelling stood a small group of thatched cottages—scarcely more than huts—whose inhabitants were all afield at their work, excepting a poor blind man, attended by a little ragged boy, who sat on a stone by the wayside, apparently to solicit alms from those who passed by. Although he seemed to be extremely aged and feeble, he was chanting a sort of lament over his misfortunes, and an appeal to the charity of travellers, in a loud, whining, yet vigorous voice; promising his prayers to those who gave him of their substance, and assuring them that they should surely go to Paradise as a reward for their generosity. For some time before they came up with him, Isabelle and de Sigognac had heard his doleful chant—much to the annoyance of the latter; for when one is listening, entranced, to the sweet singing of the nightingale, it is sorely vexatious to be intruded upon by the discordant croaking of a raven. As they drew near to the poor old blind man, they saw his little attendant bend down and whisper in his ear, whereupon he redoubled his groans and supplications—at the same time holding out towards them a small wooden bowl, in which were a few coppers, and shaking it, so as to make them rattle as loudly as possible, to attract their attention. He was a venerable looking old man, with a long white beard, and seemed to be shivering with cold, despite the great, thick, woollen cloak in which he was wrapped. The child, a wild-looking little creature, whose scanty, tattered clothing was but a poor protection against the stinging cold, shrunk timidly from notice, and tried to hide himself behind his aged charge. Isabelle's tender heart was moved to pity at the sight of so much misery, and she stopped in front of the forlorn little group while she searched in her pocket for her purse—not finding it there she turned to her companion and asked him to lend her a little money for the poor old blind beggar, which the baron hastened to do—though he was thoroughly out of patience with his whining jeremiads—and, to prevent Isabelle's coming in actual contact with him,

stepped forward himself to deposit the coins in his wooden bowl. Thereupon, instead of tearfully thanking his benefactor and invoking blessings upon his head, after the usual fashion of such gentry, the blind man—to Isabelle's inexpressible alarm—suddenly sprang to his feet, and straightening himself up with a jerk, opened his arms wide, as a vulture spreads its wings for flight, gathered up his ample cloak about his shoulders with lightning rapidity and flung it from him with a quick, sweeping motion like that with which the fisherman casts his net. The huge, heavy mantle spread itself out like a dense cloud directly above de Sigognac, and falling over and about him enveloped him from head to foot in its long, clinging folds, held firmly down by the lead with which its edges were weighted—making him a helpless prisoner—depriving him at once of sight and breath, and of the use of his hands and feet. The young actress, wild with terror, turned to fly and call for help, but before she could stir, or utter a sound, a hand was clapped over her mouth, and she felt herself lifted from the ground. The old blind beggar, who, as by a miracle, had suddenly become young and active, and possessed of all his faculties, had seized her by the shoulders, while the boy took her by the feet, and they carried her swiftly and silently round a clump of bushes near by to where a man on horseback and masked, was waiting for them. Two other men, also mounted and masked, and armed to the teeth, were standing close at hand, behind a wall that prevented their being seen from the road. Poor Isabelle, nearly fainting with fright, was lifted up in front of the first horseman, and seated on a cloak folded so as to serve for a cushion; a broad leather strap being passed round her waist, which also encircled that of the rider, to hold her securely in her place. All this was done with great rapidity and dexterity, as if her captors were accustomed to such manœuvres, and then the horseman, who held her firmly with one hand, shook his bridle with the other, drove his spurs into the horse's sides, and was off like a flash—the whole thing being done in less time than it takes to describe it. Meanwhile de Sigognac was struggling fiercely and wildly under the heavy cloak that enveloped him—like a gladiator

entangled in his adversary's net—beside himself with rage and despair, as he gasped for breath in his stifling prison, and realized that this diabolical outrage must be the work of the Duke of Vallombreuse. Suddenly, like an inspiration, the thought flashed into his mind of using his dagger to free himself from the thick, clinging folds, that weighed him down like the leaden cloaks of the wretched condemned spirits we read of with a shudder in Dante's Inferno. With two or three strong, quick strokes he succeeded in cutting through it, and casting it from him, with a fierce imprecation, perceived Isabelle's abductors, still near at hand, galloping across a neighbouring field, and apparently making for a thick grove at a considerable distance from where he was standing. As to the blind beggar and the child, they had disappeared—probably hiding somewhere near by—but de Sigognac did not waste a second thought on them; throwing off his own cloak, lest it should impede him, he started swiftly in pursuit of the flying enemy and their fair prize, with fury and despair in his heart. He was agile and vigorous, lithe of frame, fleet of foot, the very figure for a runner, and he quickly began to gain on the horsemen. As soon as they became aware of this one of them drew a pistol from his girdle and fired at their pursuer, but missed him; whereupon de Sigognac, bounding rapidly from side to side as he ran, made it impossible for them to take aim at him, and effectually prevented their arresting his course in that way. The man who had Isabelle in front of him tried to ride on in advance, and leave the other two to deal with the baron, but the young actress struggled so violently on the horse's neck, and kept clutching so persistently at the bridle, that his rider could not urge him to his greatest speed. Meantime de Sigognac was steadily gaining upon them; without slackening his pace he had managed to draw his sword from the scabbard, and brandished it aloft, ready for action, as he ran. It is true that he was one against three—that he was on foot while they were on horseback—but he had not time to consider the odds against him, and he seemed possessed of the strength of a giant in Isabelle's behalf. Making a prodigious effort, he suddenly increased his speed, and coming up with the two

horsemen, who were a little behind the other one, quickly disposed of them, by vigorously pricking their horses' flanks with the point of his sword; for, what with fright and pain, the animals, after plunging violently, threw off all restraint and bolted—dashing off across country as if the devil were after them, and carrying their riders with them, just as de Sigognac had expected and intended that they should do. The brave young baron was nearly spent—panting, almost sobbing, as he struggled desperately on—feeling as if his heart would burst at every agonizing throb; but he was indued with supernatural strength and endurance, and as Isabelle's voice reached his ear calling, "Help, de Sigognac, help!" he cleared with a bound the space that separated them, and leaping up to catch the broad leathern strap that was passed round her and her captor, answered in a hoarse, shrill tone, "I am here." Clinging to the strap, he ran along beside the galloping horse—like the grooms that the Romans called desultores—and strove with all his might to pull the rider down out of his saddle. He did not dare to use his sword to disable him, as they struggled together, lest he should wound Isabelle also; and, meantime, the man on horseback was trying his utmost to shake off his fierce assailant-unsuccessfully, because he had both hands fully occupied with his horse and his captive, who was doing all she could to slip from his grasp, and throw herself into her lover's arms. Loosing his hold on the rein for a second, the horseman managed to draw a knife from his girdle, and with one blow severed the strap to which the baron was clinging; then, driving his spurs into the horse's sides made the frightened animal spring suddenly forward, while de Sigognac—who was not prepared for this emergency, and found himself deprived of all support—fell violently upon his back in the road. He was up again in an instant, and flying after Isabelle, who was now being borne rapidly away from him, and whose cries for help came more and more faintly to his ear; but the moment he had lost made his pursuit hopeless, and he knew that it was all in vain when he saw her disappear behind the thicket her ravisher had been aiming for from the first. His heart sank within him, and he staggered as he still ran feebly

on—feeling now the effects of his superhuman exertions, and fearing at each step that his feet would carry him no farther. He was soon overtaken by Hérode and Scapin, who, alarmed by the pistol shot, and fearing that something was wrong, had started in hot pursuit, though the lackey who served them as guide had done all that he possibly could to hinder them, and in a few faltering words he told them what had occurred.

“Vallombreuse again!” cried the tyrant, with an oath. “But how the devil did he get wind of our expedition to the Château de Pommereuil? or can it be possible that it was all a plot from the beginning, and we are bound on a fool’s errand? I really begin to think it must be so. If it is true, I never saw a better actor in my life than that respectable old major-domo, confound him! But let us make haste and search this grove thoroughly; we may find some trace of poor Isabelle; sweet creature that she is! Rough old tyrant though I be, my heart warms to her, and I love her more tenderly than I do myself. Alas! I’m afraid, that this poor, innocent, little fly is caught in the toils of a cruel spider, who will take care never to let us get sight of her again.”

“I will crush him,” said de Sigognac, striking his heel savagely on the ground, as if he actually had the spider under it. “I will crush the life out of him, the venomous beast!” and the fierce, determined expression of his usually calm, mild countenance showed that this was no idle threat, but that he was terribly in earnest.

“Look,” cried Hérode, as they dashed through the thicket, “there they are!”

They could just discern, through the screen of leafless but thickly interlaced branches, a carriage, with all the curtains carefully closed, and drawn by four horses lashed to a gallop, which was rapidly rolling away from them in the distance. The two men whose horses had run away with them had them again under control, and were riding on either side of it—one of them leading the horse that had carried Isabelle and her captor. He was doubtless mounting guard over her in the

carriage—perhaps using force to keep her quiet—at thought of which de Sigognac could scarcely control the transport of rage and agony that shook him. Although the three pursuers followed the fugitives, as fast as they could run, it was all of no avail, for they soon lost sight of them altogether, and nothing remained to be done but to ascertain, if possible, the direction they had taken, so as to have some clew to poor Isabelle's whereabouts. They had considerable difficulty in making out the marks of the carriage wheels, for the roads were very dry; and when at length they had succeeded in tracing them to a place where four roads met they lost them entirely—it was utterly impossible to tell which way they had gone. After a long and fruitless search they turned back sorrowfully to join their companions, trying to devise some plan for Isabelle's rescue, but feeling acutely how hopeless it was. They found the others in the chariot waiting for them, just where the tyrant and Scapin had left them, for their false guide had put spurs to his horse and ridden off after his confederates, as soon as he became aware that their undertaking had proved successful. When Hérode asked an old peasant woman, who came by with a bundle of fagots on her back, how far it was to the Château de Pommereuil, she answered that there was no place of that name anywhere in the country round. Upon being questioned closely, she said that she had lived in the neighbourhood for seventy years, knew every house within many leagues, and could positively assure them that there was no such Château within a day's journey. So it was only too evident that they were the dupes of the clever agents of the Duke of Vallombreuse, who had at last succeeded in getting possession of Isabelle, as he had sworn that he would do. Accordingly, all of the party turned back towards Paris, excepting de Sigognac, the tyrant and Scapin, who had decided to go on to the next village, where they hoped to be able to procure horses, with which to prosecute their search for Isabelle and her abductors.

After the baron's fall, she had been swiftly taken on to the other side of the thicket, where the carriage stood awaiting her; then lifted down from the horse and put into

it, in spite of her frantic struggles and remonstrances. The man who had held her in front of him got down also and sprang in after her, closing the door with a bang, and instantly they were off at a tremendous pace. He seated himself opposite to her, and when she impetuously tried to pull aside the curtain, so that she could see out of the window nearest to her, he respectfully but firmly restrained her.

“Mademoiselle, I implore you to keep quiet,” he said, with the utmost politeness, “and not oblige me to use forcible means to restrain so charming and adorable a creature as your most lovely self. No harm shall come to you—do not be afraid!—only kindness is intended; therefore I beseech you do not persist in vain resistance. If you will only submit quietly, you shall be treated with as much consideration and respect as a captive queen, but if you go on acting like the devil, struggling and shrieking, I have means to bring you to terms, and I shall certainly resort to them. This will stop your screaming, mademoiselle, and this will prevent your struggling.”

As he spoke he drew out of his pocket a small gag, very artistically made, and a long, thick, silken cord, rolled up into a ball.

“It would be barbarous indeed,” he continued, “to apply such a thing as this to that sweet, rosy mouth of yours, mademoiselle, as I am sure that you will admit—or to bind together those pretty, delicate, little wrists, upon which no worse fetters than diamond bracelets should ever be placed.”

Poor Isabelle, furious and frightened though she was, could not but acknowledge to herself that further physical resistance then would be worse than useless, and determined to spare herself at least such indignities as she was at that moment threatened with; so, without vouchsafing a word to her attendant, she threw herself back into the corner of the carriage, closed her eyes, and tried to keep perfectly still. But in spite of her utmost endeavours she could not altogether repress an occasional sob, nor hold back the great tears that welled forth from under her drooping eyelids

and rolled down over her pale cheeks, as she thought of de Sigognac's despair and her own danger.

"After the nervous excitement comes the moist stage;" said her masked guardian to himself, "things are following their usual and natural course. I am very glad of it, for I should have greatly disliked to be obliged to act a brutal part with such a sweet, charming girl as this."

Now and then Isabelle opened her eyes and cast a timid glance at her abductor, who finally said to her, in a voice he vainly strove to render soft and mild:

"You need not be afraid of me, mademoiselle! I would not harm you in any way for the world. If fortune had been more generous to me I certainly would never have undertaken this enterprise against such a lovely, gentle young lady as you are; but poor men like me are driven to all sorts of expedients to earn a little money; they have to take whatever comes within their reach, and sacrifice their scruples to their necessities."

"You do admit then," said Isabelle vehemently, "that you have been bribed to carry me off? An infamous, cruel, outrageous thing it is."

"After what I have had to do," he replied, "it would be idle to deny it. There are a good many philosophers like myself in Paris, mademoiselle, who, instead of indulging in love affairs, and intrigues of various sorts, of their own, interest themselves in those of other people, and, for a consideration, make use of their courage, ingenuity and strength to further them. But to change the subject, how charming you were in that last new play! You went through the scene of the avowal with a grace I have never seen equalled. I applauded you to the echo; the pair of hands that kept it up so perseveringly and vigorously, you know, belonged to me."

"I beg you to dispense with these ill-judged remarks and compliments, and to tell me where you are taking me, in this strange, outrageous manner, against my will, and, in despite of all the ordinary usages of civilized society."

“I cannot tell you that, mademoiselle, and besides, it would do you no sort of good to know. In our profession, you see, we are obliged to observe as much secrecy and discretion as confessors and physicians. Indeed, in such affairs as this we often do not know the names of the parties we are working for ourselves.”

“Do you mean to say that you do not know who has employed you to commit this abominable, cruel crime?”

“It makes no difference whether I know his name or not, since I am not at liberty to disclose it to you. Think over your numerous admirers, mademoiselle! the most ardent and least favoured one among them would probably be at the bottom of all this.”

Finding that she could not get any information from him, Isabelle desisted, and did not speak again. She had not the slightest doubt that the Duke of Vallombreuse was the author of this new and daring enterprise. The significant and threatening way in which he had said “au revoir, mademoiselle,” as he quitted her presence after she had repulsed him a few days before, had haunted her, and she had been in constant dread ever since of some new outrage. She hoped, against hope, that de Sigognac, her valiant lover, would yet come to her rescue, and thought proudly of the gallant deeds he had already done in her behalf that day—but how was he to find out where to seek her?

“If worst comes to worst,” she said to herself, “I still have Chiquita’s knife, and I can and will escape from my persecutor in that way, if all other means fail.”

For two long hours she sat motionless, a prey to sad and terrible thoughts and fears, while the carriage rolled swiftly on without slackening its speed, save once, for a moment, when they changed horses. As the curtains were all lowered, she could not catch even a glimpse of the country she was passing through, nor tell in what direction she was being driven. At last she heard the hollow sound of a drawbridge under the wheels; the carriage stopped, and her masked companion, promptly

opening the door, jumped nimbly out and helped her to alight. She cast a hurried glance round her, as she stepped down, saw that she was in a large, square court, and that all the tall, narrow windows in the high brick walls that surrounded it had their inside shutters carefully closed. The stone pavement of the spacious courtyard was in some places partly covered with moss, and a few weeds had sprung up in the corners, and along the edges by the walls. At the foot of a broad, easy flight of steps, leading up to a covered porch, two majestic Egyptian sphinxes lay keeping guard; their huge rounded flanks mottled here and there with patches of moss and lichens. Although the large château looked lonely and deserted, it had a grand, lordly air, and seemed to be kept in perfect order and repair. Isabelle was led up the steps and into the vestibule by the man who had brought her there, and then consigned to the care of a respectable-looking majordomo, who preceded her up a magnificent staircase, and into a suite of rooms furnished with the utmost luxury and elegance. Passing through the first—which was enriched with fine old carvings in oak, dark with age—he left her in a spacious, admirably proportioned apartment, where a cheery wood fire was roaring up the huge chimney, and she saw a bed in a curtained alcove. She chanced to catch sight of her own face in the mirror over an elaborately furnished dressing-table, as she passed it, and was startled and shocked at its ghastly pallor and altered expression; she scarcely could recognise it, and felt as if she had seen a ghost—poor Isabelle! Over the high, richly ornamented chimney-piece hung a portrait of a gentleman, which, as she approached the fire, at once caught and riveted her attention. The face seemed strangely familiar to her, and yet she could not remember where she had seen it before. It was pale, with large, black eyes, full red lips, and wavy brown hair, thrown carelessly back from it-apparently the likeness of a man about forty years of age and it had a charming air of nobility and lofty pride, tempered with benevolence and tenderness, which was inexpressibly attractive. The portrait was only half-length—the breast being covered with a steel cuirass, richly inlaid with gold, which was partly concealed by a white scarf, loosely

knotted over it. Isabelle, despite her great alarm and anxiety, could not long withdraw her eyes or her thoughts from this picture, which seemed to exert a strange fascination over her. There was something about it that at the first glance resembled the Duke of Vallombreuse, but the expression was so different that the likeness disappeared entirely upon closer examination. It brought vague memories to Isabelle's mind that she tried in vain to seize—she felt as if she must be looking at it in a dream. She was still absorbed in reverie before it when the major-domo reappeared, followed by two lackeys, in quiet livery, carrying a small table set for one person, which they put down near the fire; and as one of them took the cover off an old-fashioned, massive silver tureen, he announced to Isabelle that her dinner was ready. The savoury odour from the smoking soup was very tempting, and she was very hungry; but after she had mechanically seated herself and dipped her spoon into the broth, it suddenly occurred to her that the food might contain a narcotic—such things had been done—and she pushed away the plate in front of her in alarm. The major-domo, who was standing at a respectful distance watching her, ready to anticipate her every wish, seemed to divine her thought, for he advanced to the table and deliberately partook of all the viands upon it, as well as of the wine and water—as if to prove to her that there was nothing wrong or unusual about them. Isabelle was somewhat reassured by this, and feeling that she would probably have need of all her strength, did bring herself to eat and drink, though very sparingly. Then, quitting the table, she sat down in a large easy-chair in front of the fire to think over her terrible position, and endeavour to devise some means of escape from it. When the servants had attended to their duties and left her alone again, she rose languidly and walked slowly to the window—feeling as weak as though she had had a severe illness, after the violent emotions and terrors of the day, and as if she had aged years in the last few hours. Could it be possible that only that very morning she and de Sigognac had been walking together, with hearts full of happiness and peace—and she had rapturously hailed the appearance of the first spring violet as an

omen of good, and gathered the sweet little blossom to bestow upon the devoted lover who adored her? And now, alas! alas! they were as inexorably and hopelessly separated as if half the globe lay between them. No wonder that her breast heaved tumultuously with choking sobs, and hot tears rained down over her pallid cheeks, as she wept convulsively at the thought of all she had lost. But she did not long indulge her grief—she remembered that at any moment she might have need of all her coolness and fortitude—and making a mighty effort, like the brave heroine that she was, she regained control over herself, and drove back the gushing tears to await a more fitting season. She was relieved to find that there were no bars at the window, as she had feared; but upon opening the casement and leaning out she saw immediately beneath her a broad moat, full of stagnant water, which surrounded the château, and forbade any hope of succour or escape on that side. Beyond the moat was a thick grove of large trees, which entirely shut out the view; and she returned to her seat by the fire, more disheartened and cast down than ever. She was very nervous, and trembled at the slightest sound—casting hasty, terrified glances round the vast apartment, and dreading lest an unseen door in some shadowy corner should be softly opened, or a hidden panel in the wall be slipped aside, to admit her relentless enemy to her presence. She remembered all the horrible tales she had ever heard of secret passages and winding staircases in the walls, that are supposed to abound in ancient castles; and the mysterious visitants, both human and supernatural, that are said to be in the habit of issuing from them, in the gloaming, and at midnight. As the twilight deepened into darkness, her terror increased, and she nearly fainted from fright when a servant suddenly entered with lights.

While poor Isabelle was suffering such agony in one part of the château, her abductors were having a grand carouse in another. They were to remain there for a while as a sort of garrison, in case of an attack by de Sigognac and his friends; and were gathered round the table in a large room down on the ground floor—as remote as possible from Isabelle’s sumptuous quarters. They were all drinking like sponges,

and making merry over their wine and good cheer, but one of them especially showed the most remarkable and astounding powers of ingurgitation—it was the man who had carried off the fair prize before him on his horse; and, now that the mask was thrown aside, he disclosed to view the deathly pale face and fiery red nose of Malartic, bosom friend and “alter ego” of Maître Jacquemin Lampourde.

CHAPTER XVI. VALLOMBREUSE

Isabelle sat for a long time perfectly motionless in her luxurious chamber, sunk in a sad reverie, apparently entirely oblivious of the glow of light, warmth, and comfort that closed her in—glancing up occasionally at the portrait over the chimney-piece, which seemed to be smiling down upon her and promising her protection and peace, while it more than ever reminded her of some dear face she had known and loved long ago. After a time, however, her mood changed. She grew restless, and rising, began to wander aimlessly about the room; but her uneasiness only increased, and finally, in desperation, she resolved to venture out into the corridor and look about her, no matter at what risk. Anything would be better than this enforced inactivity and suspense. She tried the door with a trembling hand, dreading to find herself locked in, but it was not fastened, and seeing that all was dark outside, she took up a small lamp, that had been left burning on a side table, and boldly setting forth, went softly down the long flight of stairs, in the hope of finding some means of exit from the château on the lower floor. At the foot of the stairs she came to a large double door, one leaf of which yielded easily when she timidly tried to open it, but creaked dolefully as it turned on its hinges. She hesitated for a moment, fearing that the noise would alarm the servants and bring them out to see what was amiss; but no one came, and taking fresh courage, she moved on and passed into a lofty, vaulted hall, with high-backed, oaken benches ranged against the tapestry-covered walls, upon which hung several large trophies of arms, and sundry swords, shields, and steel

gauntlets, which caught and flashed back the light from her lamp as she held it up to examine them. The air was heavy, chilly, and damp. An awful stillness reigned in this deserted hall. Isabelle shivered as she crept slowly along, and nearly stumbled against a huge table, with massive carved feet, that stood in the centre of the tesselated marble pavement. She was making for a door, opposite the one by which she had entered; but, as she approached it, was horror-stricken when she perceived two tall men, clad in armour, standing like sentinels, one on either side of it. She stopped short, then tried to turn and fly, but was so paralyzed with terror that she could not stir, expecting every instant that they would pounce upon her and take her prisoner, while she bitterly repented her temerity in having ventured to leave her own room, and vainly wished herself back by the quiet fireside there. Meanwhile the two dread figures stood as motionless as herself—the silence was unbroken, and "the beating of her own heart was the only sound she heard." So at last she plucked up courage to look more closely at the grim sentinels, and could not help smiling at her own needless alarm, when she found that they were suits of armour, indeed, but without men inside of them—just such as one sees standing about in the ancient royal palaces of France. Passing them with a saucy glance of defiance, and a little triumphant toss of the head, Isabelle entered a vast dining room, with tall, sculptured buffets, on which stood many superb vessels of gold and silver, together with delicate specimens of exquisite Venetian and Bohemian glass, and precious pieces of fine porcelain, fit for a king's table. Large handsome chairs, with carved backs, were standing round the great dining-table, and the walls, above the heavy oaken wainscot, were hung with richly embossed Cordova leather, glowing with warm, bright tints and golden arabesques.

She did not linger to examine and admire all the beautified things dimly revealed to her by the feeble light of her small lamp, but hurried on to the third door, which opened into an apartment yet more spacious and magnificent than the other two. At one end of it was a lordly dais, raised three steps above the inlaid floor, upon which

stood a splendid great arm-chair, almost a throne, under a canopy emblazoned with a brilliant coat of arms and surmounted by a tuft of nodding plumes. Still hurrying on, Isabelle next entered a sumptuous bed-chamber, and, as she paused for an instant to hold up her lamp and look about her, fancied that she could hear the regular breathing of a sleeper in the immense bed, behind the crimson silk curtains which were closely drawn around it. She did not dare to stop and investigate the matter, but flew on her way, as lightly as any bird, and next found herself in a library, where the white busts surmounting the well-filled book-cases stared down at her with their hard, stony eyes, and made her shudder as she nervously sought for an exit, without delaying one moment to glance at the great variety of curious and beautiful objects scattered lavishly about, which, under any ordinary circumstances, would have held her enthralled.

Running at right angles with the library, and opening out of it, was the picture gallery, where the family portraits were arranged in chronological order on one side, while opposite to them was a long row of windows, looking into the court. The shutters were closed, but near the top of each one was a small circular opening, through which the moon shone and faintly lighted the dusky gallery, striking here and there directly upon the face of a portrait, with an indescribably weird and startling effect. It required all of Isabelle’s really heroic courage to keep on past the long line of strange faces, looking down mockingly it seemed to her from their proud height upon her trembling form as she glided swiftly by, and she was thankful to find, at the end of the gallery, a glass door opening out upon the court. It was not fastened, and after carefully placing her lamp in a sheltered corner, where no draughts could reach it, she stepped out under the stars. It was a relief to find herself breathing freely in the fresh, pure air, though she was actually no less a prisoner than before, and as she stood looking up into the clear evening sky, and thinking of her own true lover, she seemed to feel new courage and hope springing up in her heart.

In one corner of the court she saw a strong light shining out through the crevices in

the shutters that closed several low windows, and heard sounds of revelry from the same direction—the only signs of life she had detected about the whole place. Her curiosity was excited by them, and she stole softly over towards the quarter from whence they came, keeping carefully in the shadow of the wall, and glancing anxiously about to make sure that no one was furtively watching her. Finding a considerable aperture in one of the wooden shutters she peeped through it, and saw a party of men gathered around a table, eating and drinking and making merry in a very noisy fashion. The light from a lamp with three burners, which was suspended by a copper chain from the low ceiling, fell full upon them, and although she had only seen them masked before, Isabelle instantly recognised those who had been concerned in her abduction. At the head of the table sat Malartic, whose extraordinary face was paler and nose redder than ever, and at sight of whom the young girl shuddered and drew back. When she had recovered herself a little, she looked in again upon the repulsive scene, and was surprised to see, at the other end of the table, and somewhat apart from the others, Agostino, the brigand, who had now laid aside the long white beard in which he had played the part of the old blind beggar so successfully. A great deal of loud talking was going on, constantly interrupted by bursts of laughter, but Isabelle could not hear distinctly enough through the closed window to make out what they were saying. Even if she had been actually in the room with them, she would have found much of their conversation incomprehensible, as it was largely made up of the extraordinary slang of the Paris street Arabs and rascals generally. From time to time one or the other of the participants in this orgy seemed to propose a toast, whereupon they would all clink their glasses together before raising them to their lips, drain them at a draught, and applaud vociferously, while there was a constant drawing of corks and placing of fresh bottles on the table by the servant who was waiting upon them. Just as Isabelle, thoroughly disgusted with the brutality of the scene before her, was about to turn away, Malartic rapped loudly on the table to obtain a hearing, and after making a

proposition, which met with ready and cordial assent, rose from his seat, cleared his throat, and began to sing, or rather shout, a ribald song, all the others joining in the chorus, with horrible grimaces and gesticulations, which so frightened poor Isabelle that she could scarcely find strength to creep away from the loathsome spectacle.

Before re-entering the house she went to look at the drawbridge, with a faint hope that she might chance upon some unexpected means of escape, but all was secure there, and a little postern, opening on the moat, which she discovered near by, was also carefully fastened, with bolts and bars strong enough to keep out an army. As these seemed to be the only means of exit from the château, she felt that she was a prisoner indeed, and understood why it had not been deemed necessary to lock any of the inner doors against her. She walked slowly back to the gallery, entered it by the glass door, found her lamp burning tranquilly just where she had left it, retraced her steps swiftly through the long suite of spacious apartments already described and flew up the grand staircase to her own room, congratulating herself upon not having been detected in her wanderings. She put her lamp down in the antechamber, but paused in terror on the threshold of the inner room, stifling a shriek that had nearly escaped her as she caught sight of a strange, wild figure crouching on the hearth. But her fears were short-lived, for with an exclamation of delight the intruder sprang towards her and she saw that it was Chiquita—but Chiquita in boy's clothes.

"Have you got the knife yet?" said the strange little creature abruptly to Isabelle—"the knife with three bonny red marks."

"Yes, Chiquita, I have it here in my bosom," she replied. "But why do you ask? Is my life in danger?"

"A knife," said the child with fierce, sparkling eyes, "a knife is a faithful friend and servant; it never betrays or fails its master, if he is careful to give it a drink now and then, for a knife is often thirsty you know."

"You frighten me, you naughty child!" exclaimed Isabelle, much troubled and

agitated by these sinister, extravagant words, which perhaps, she thought, might be intended as a friendly warning.

“Sharpen the edge on the marble of the chimney-piece, like this,” continued Chiquita, “and polish the blade on the sole of your shoe.”

“Why do you tell me all this?” cried Isabelle, turning very pale.

“For nothing in particular, only he who would defend himself gets his weapons ready—that’s all.”

These odd, fierce phrases greatly alarmed Isabelle, yet Chiquita’s presence in her room was a wonderful relief and comfort to her. The child apparently cherished a warm and sincere affection for her, which was none the less genuine because of its having arisen from such a trivial incident—for the pearl beads were more precious than diamonds to Chiquita. She had given a voluntary promise to Isabelle never to kill or harm her, and with her strange, wild, yet exalted notions of honour she looked upon it as a solemn obligation and vow, by which she must always abide—for there was a certain savage nobility in Chiquita’s character, and she could be faithful unto death. Isabelle was the only human being, excepting Agostino, who had been kind to her. She had smiled upon the unkempt child, and given her the coveted necklace, and Chiquita loved her for it, while she adored her beauty. Isabelle’s sweet countenance, so angelically mild and pure, exercised a wonderful influence over the neglected little savage, who had always been surrounded by fierce, haggard faces, expressive of every evil passion, and disfigured by indulgence in the lowest vices, and excesses of every kind.

“But how does it happen that you are here, Chiquita?” asked Isabelle, after a short silence. “Were you sent to keep guard over me?”

“No, I came alone and of my own accord,” answered Chiquita, “because I saw the light and fire. I was tired of lying all cramped up in a corner, and keeping quiet, while those beastly men drank bottle after bottle of wine, and gorged themselves

with the good things set before them. I am so little, you know, so young and slender, that they pay no more attention to me than they would to a kitten asleep under the table. While they were making a great noise I slipped quietly away unperceived. The smell of the wine and the food sickened me. I am used to the sweet perfume of the heather, and the pure resinous odour of the pines. I cannot breathe in such an atmosphere as there is down below there."

"And you were not afraid to wander alone, without a light, through the long, dark corridors, and the lonely, deserted rooms?"

"Chiquita does not know what it is to be afraid—her eyes can see in the dark, and her feet never stumble. The very owls shut their eyes when they meet her, and the bats fold their wings when she comes near their haunts. Wandering ghosts stand aside to let her pass, or turn back when they see her approaching. Night is her comrade and hides no secrets from her, and Chiquita never betrays them to the day."

Her eyes flashed and dilated as she spoke, and Isabelle looked at her with growing wonder, not unmixed with a vague sensation of fear.

"I like much better to stay here, in this heavenly quiet, by the fire with you," continued the child, "than down there in all the uproar. You are so beautiful that I love to look at you-you are like the Blessed Virgin that I have seen shining above the altar. Only from afar though, for they always chase me out of the churches with the dogs, because I am so shabby and forlorn. How white your hand is! Mine looks like a monkey's paw beside it—and your hair is as fine and soft as silk, while mine is all rough and tangled. Oh! I am so horribly ugly—you must think so too."

"No, my dear child," Isabelle replied, touched by her naive expressions of affection and admiration, "I do not think so. You have beauty too—you only need to make yourself neat and clean to be as pretty a little girl as one would wish to see."

"Do you really think so? Are you telling me true? I would steal fine clothes if they would make me pretty, for then Agostino would love me."

This idea brought a little flush of colour to her thin brown cheeks, and for a few minutes she seemed lost in a pleasant reverie.

“Do you know where we are?” asked Isabelle, when Chiquita looked up at her again.

“In a château that belongs to the great seignior who has so much money, and who wanted to carry you off at Poitiers. I had only to draw the bolt and it would have been done then. But you gave me the pearl necklace, and I love you, and I would not do anything you did not like.”

“Yet you have helped to carry me off this time,” said Isabelle reproachfully. “Is it because you don’t love me any more that you have given me up to my enemies?”

“Agostino ordered me, and I had to obey; besides, some other child could have played guide to the blind man as well as I, and then I could not have come into the château with you, do you see?—here I may be able to do something to help you. I am brave, active and strong, though I am so small, and quick as lightning too—and I shall not let anybody harm you.”

“Is this château very far from Paris?” asked Isabelle, drawing Chiquita up on her lap. “Did you hear any one mention the name of this place?”

“Yes, one of them called it—now what was it?” said the child, looking up at the ceiling and absently scratching her head, as if to stimulate her memory.

“Try to remember it, my child!” said Isabelle, softly stroking Chiquita’s brown cheeks, which flushed with delight at the unwonted caress—no one had ever petted the poor child in her life before.

“I think that it was Val-lom-breuse,” said Chiquita at last, pronouncing the syllables separately and slowly, as if listening to an inward echo. “Yes, Vallombreuse, I am sure of it now. It is the name of the seignior that your Captain Fracasse wounded in a duel—he would have done much better if he had killed him outright—saved a great deal of trouble to himself and to you. He is very wicked, that rich duke, though he does throw his gold about so freely by the handfuls—just like a man sowing grain.

You hate him, don't you? and you would be glad if you could get away from him, eh?"

"Oh yes, indeed!" cried Isabelle impetuously. "But alas! it is impossible—a deep moat runs all around this château the drawbridge is up, the postern securely fastened—there is no way of escape."

"Chiquita laughs at bolts and bars, at high walls and deep moats. Chiquita can get out of the best guarded prison whenever she pleases, and fly away to the moon, right before the eyes of her astonished jailer. If you choose, before the sun rises your Captain Fracasse shall know where the treasure that he seeks is hidden."

Isabelle was afraid, when she heard these incoherent phrases, that the child was not quite sane, but her little face was so calm, her dark eyes so clear and steady, her voice so earnest, and she spoke with such an air of quiet conviction, that the supposition was not admissible, and the strange little creature did seem to be possessed of some of the magic powers she claimed. As if to convince Isabelle that she was not merely boasting, she continued, "Let me think a moment, to make a plan—don't speak nor move, for the least sound interferes with me—I must listen to the spirit."

Chiquita bent down her head, put her hand over her eyes, and remained for several minutes perfectly motionless; then she raised her head and without a word went and opened the window, clambered up on the sill, and gazed out intently into the darkness.

"Is she really going to take flight?" said Isabelle to herself, as she anxiously watched Chiquita's movements, not knowing what to expect. Exactly opposite to the window, on the other side of the moat, was an immense tree, very high and old, whose great branches, spreading out horizontally, overhung the water; but the longest of them did not reach the wall of the château by at least ten feet. It was upon this tree, however, that Chiquita's plan for escape depended. She turned away from

the window, drew from her pocket a long cord made of horse-hair, very fine and strong, which she carefully unrolled to its full length and laid upon the floor; then produced from another pocket an iron hook, which she fastened securely to the cord. This done to her satisfaction, she went to the window again, and threw the end of the cord with the hook into the branches of the tree. The first time she was unsuccessful; the iron hook fell and struck against the stone wall beneath the casement; but at the second attempt the hook caught and held, and Chiquita, drawing the cord taut, asked Isabelle to take hold of it and bear her whole weight on it, until the branch was bent as far as possible towards the château—coming five or six feet nearer to the window where they were. Then Chiquita tied the cord firmly to the ornamental iron railing of the tiny balcony, with a knot that could not slip, climbed over, and grasping the cord with both hands, swung herself off, and hung suspended over the waters of the moat far below. Isabelle held her breath. With a rapid motion of the hands Chiquita crossed the clear space, reached the tree safely, and climbed down into it with the agility of a monkey.

“Now undo the knot so that I can take the cord with me,” she said, in a low but very distinct tone of voice to Isabelle, who began to breathe freely again, “unless, indeed, you would like to follow me. But you would be frightened and dizzy, and might fall, so you had better stay where you are. Good-bye! I am going straight to Paris, and shall soon be back again; I can get on quickly in this bright moonlight.”

Isabelle did as she was bid, and the branch, being no longer held by the cord, swung back to its original position. In less than a minute Chiquita had scrambled down to the ground, and the captive soon lost sight of her slender little figure as she walked off briskly towards the capital.

All that had just occurred seemed like a strange dream to Isabelle, now that she found herself alone again. She remained for some time at the open casement, looking at the great tree opposite, and trembling as she realized the terrible risk

Chiquita had run for her sake—feeling warm gratitude and tender affection for the wild, incomprehensible little creature, who manifested such a strong attachment for herself, and a new hope sprang up in her heart as she thought that now de Sigognac would soon know where to find her. The cold night air at last forced her to close the window, and after arranging the curtains over it carefully, so as to show no signs of having been disturbed, she returned to her easy-chair by the fire; and just in time, for she had scarcely seated herself when the major-domo entered, followed by the two servants, again carrying the little table, set for one, with her supper daintily arranged upon it. A few minutes earlier and Chiquita's escape would have been discovered and prevented. Isabelle, still greatly agitated by all that had passed, could not eat, and signed to the servants to remove the supper untouched. Whereupon the major-domo himself put some bread and wine on a small table beside the bed, and placed on a chair near the fire a richly trimmed dressing-gown, and everything that a lady could require in making her toilet for the night. Several large logs of wood were piled up on the massive andirons, the candles were renewed, and then the major-domo, approaching Isabelle with a profound obeisance, said to her that if she desired the services of a maid he would send one to her. As she made a gesture of dissent he withdrew, after again bowing to her most respectfully. When they had all gone, Isabelle, quite worn out, threw herself down on the outside of the bed without undressing, so as to be ready in case of any sudden alarm in the night; then took out Chiquita's knife, opened it, and laid it beside her. Having taken these precautions, she closed her eyes, and hoped that she could for a while forget her troubles in sleep; but she had been so much excited and agitated that her nerves were all quivering, and it was long before she even grew drowsy. There were so many strange, incomprehensible noises in the great, empty house to disturb and startle her; and in her own room, the cracking of the furniture, the ticking of a death-watch in the wall near her bed, the gnawing of a rat behind the wainscot, the snapping of the fire. At each fresh sound she started up in terror, with her poor heart throbbing as if it would

burst out of her breast, a cold perspiration breaking out on her forehead, and trembling in every limb. At last, however, weary nature had to succumb, and she fell into a deep sleep, which lasted until she was awakened by the sun shining on her face. Her first thought was to wonder that she had not yet seen the Duke of Vallombreuse; but she was thankful for his absence, and hoped that it would continue until Chiquita should have brought de Sigognac to the rescue.

The reason why the young duke had not yet made his appearance was one of policy. He had taken especial pains to show himself at Saint Germain on the day of the abduction—had joined the royal hunting party, and been exceedingly and unwontedly affable to all who happened to come in contact with him. In the evening he had played at cards, and lost ostentatiously sums that would have been of importance to a less wealthy man—being all the time in a very genial mood—especially after the arrival of a mounted messenger, who brought him a little note. Thus the duke's desire to be able to establish an incontestable alibi, in case of need, had spared Isabelle thus far the infliction of his hated presence; but while she was congratulating herself upon it, and welcoming the sunshine that streamed into her room, she heard the drawbridge being let down, and immediately after a carriage dashed over it and thundered into the court. Her heart sank, for who would be likely to enter in that style save the master of the house? Her face grew deathly pale, she reeled, and for one dreadful moment felt as if she should faint; but, rallying her courage, she reminded herself that Chiquita had gone to bring de Sigognac to her aid, and determined afresh to meet bravely whatever trials might be in store for her, until her beloved knight and champion should arrive, to rescue her from her terrible danger and irksome imprisonment. Her eyes involuntarily sought the portrait over the chimney-piece, and after passionately invoking it, and imploring its aid and protection, as if it had been her patron saint, she felt a certain sense of ease and security, as if what she had so earnestly entreated would really be accorded to her.

A full hour had elapsed, which the young duke had employed in the duties of the

toilet, and in snatching a few minutes of repose after his rapid night-journey, when the major-domo presented himself, and asked respectfully if Isabelle would receive the Duke of Vallombreuse.

“I am a prisoner,” she replied, with quiet dignity, “and this demand, which would be fitting and polite in any ordinary case, is only a mockery when addressed to one in my position. I have no means of preventing your master’s coming into this room, nor can I quit it to avoid him. I do not accept his visit but submit to it. He must do as he pleases about it, and come and go when he likes. He allows me no choice in the matter. Go and tell him exactly what I have said to you.”

The major-domo bowed low, and retired backward to the door, having received strict orders to treat Isabelle with the greatest respect and consideration. In a few minutes he returned, and announced the Duke of Vallombreuse.

Isabelle half rose from her chair by the fire, but turned very pale and fell back into it, as her unwelcome visitor made his appearance at the door. He closed it and advanced slowly towards her, hat in hand, but when he perceived that she was trembling violently, and looked ready to faint, he stopped in the middle of the room, made a low bow, and said in his most dulcet, persuasive tones:

“If my presence is too unbearably odious now to the charming Isabelle, and she would like to have a little time to get used to the thought of seeing me, I will withdraw. She is my prisoner, it is true, but I am none the less her slave.”

“This courtesy is tardy,” Isabelle replied coldly, “after the violence you have made use of against me.”

“That is the natural result,” said the duke, with a smile, “of pushing people to extremity by a too obstinate and prolonged resistance. Having lost all hope, they stop at nothing—knowing that they cannot make matters any worse, whatever they do. If you had only been willing to suffer me to pay my court to you in the regular way, and shown a little indulgence to my love, I should have quietly remained

among the ranks of your passionate adorers; striving, by dint of delicate attentions, chivalrous devotion, magnificent offerings, and respectful yet ardent solicitations, to soften that hard heart of yours. If I could not have succeeded in inspiring it with love for me, I might at least have awakened in it that tender pity which is akin to love, and which is so often only its forerunner. In the end, perhaps, you would have repented of your cruel severity, and acknowledged that you had been unjust towards me. Believe me, my charming Isabelle, I should have neglected nothing to bring it about."

"If you had employed only honest and honourable means in your suit," Isabelle rejoined, "I should have felt very sorry that I had been so unfortunate as to inspire an attachment I could not reciprocate, and would have given you my warm sympathy, and friendly regard, instead of being reluctantly compelled, by repeated outrages, to hate you instead.

"You do hate me then?—you acknowledge it?" the duke cried, his voice trembling with rage; but he controlled himself, and after a short pause continued, in a gentler tone, "Yet I do not deserve it. My only wrongs towards you, if any there be, have come from the excess and ardour of my love; and what woman, however chaste and virtuous, can be seriously angry with a gallant gentleman because he has been conquered by the power of her adorable charms? whether she so desired or not."

"Certainly, that is not a reason for dislike or anger, my lord, if the suitor does not overstep the limits of respect, as all women will agree. But when his insolent impatience leads him to commit excesses, and he resorts to fraud, abduction, and imprisonment, as you have not hesitated to do, there is no other result possible than an unconquerable aversion. Coercion is always and inevitably revolting to a nature that has any proper pride or delicacy. Love, true love, is divine, and cannot be furnished to order, or extorted by violence. It is spontaneous, and freely given—not to be bought, nor yet won by importunity."

"Is an unconquerable aversion then all that I am to expect from you?" said Vallombreuse, who had become pale to ghastliness, and been fiercely gnawing his under lip, while Isabelle was speaking, in her sweet, clear tones, which fell on his ear like the soft chiming of silver bells, and only served to enhance his devouring passion.

"There is yet one means of winning my friendship and gratitude—be noble and generous, and give me back the liberty of which you have deprived me. Let me return to my companions, who must be anxiously seeking for me, and suffering keenly because of their fears for my safety. Let me go and resume my lowly life as an actress, before this outrageous affair—which may irreparably injure my reputation—has become generally known, or my absence from the theatre been remarked by the public."

"How unfortunate it is," cried the duke, angrily, "that you should ask of me the only thing I cannot do for you. If you had expressed your desire for an empire, a throne, I would have given it to you—or if you had wished for a star, I would have climbed up into the heavens to get it for you. But here you calmly ask me to open the door of this cage, little bird, to which you would never come back of your own accord, if I were stupid enough to let you go. It is impossible! I know well that you love me so little, or rather hate me so much, that you would never see me again of your own free will—that my only chance of enjoying your charming society is to lock you up—keep you my prisoner. However much it may cost my pride, I must do it—for I can no more live without you than a plant without the light. My thoughts turn to you as the heliotrope to the sun. Where you are not, all is darkness for me. If what I have dared to do is a crime, I must make the best of it, and profit by it as much as I can—for you would never forgive nor overlook it, whatever you may say now. Here at least I have you—I hold you. I can surround you with my love and care, and strive to melt the ice of your coldness by the heat of my passion. Your eyes must behold me—your ears must listen to my voice. I shall exert an influence over you, if only

by the alarm and detestation I am so unfortunate as to inspire in your gentle breast; the sound of my footsteps in your antechamber will make you start and tremble. And then, besides all that, this captivity separates you effectually from the miserable fellow you fancy that you love—and whom I abhor; because he has dared to turn your heart away from me. I can at least enjoy this small satisfaction, of keeping you from him; and I will not let you go free to return to him—you may be perfectly sure of that, my fair lady!"

"And how long do you intend to keep me captive?—not like a Christian gentleman, but like a lawless corsair."

"Until you have learned to love me—or at least to say that you have, which amounts to the same thing."

Then he made her a low bow, and departed, with as self-satisfied and jaunty an air as if he had been in truth a favoured suitor. Half an hour later a lackey brought in a beautiful bouquet, of the rarest and choicest flowers, while the stems were clasped by a magnificent bracelet, fit for a queen's wearing. A little piece of folded paper nestled among the flowers—a note from the duke—and the fair prisoner recognised the handwriting as the same in which "For Isabelle" was written, on the slip of paper that accompanied the casket of jewels at Poitiers. The note read as follows:

"DEAR ISABELLE—I send you these flowers, though I know they will be ungraciously received. As they come from me, their beauty and fragrance will not find favour in your eyes. But whatever may be their fate, even though you only touch them to fling them disdainfully out of the window, they will force you to think for a moment—if it be but in anger—of him who declares himself, in spite of everything, your devoted adorer,

"VALLOMBREUSE."

This note, breathing of the most specious gallantry, and tenacity of purpose, did produce very much the effect it predicted; for it made Isabelle exceedingly angry;

and, without even once inhaling the delicious perfume of the flowers, or pausing for an instant to admire their beauty, she flung the bouquet, diamond bracelet and all, out into the antechamber. Never surely were lovely blossoms so badly treated; and yet Isabelle was excessively fond of them; but she feared that if she even allowed them to remain a little while in her room, their donor would presume upon the slight concession. She had scarcely resumed her seat by the fire, after disposing of the obnoxious bouquet, when a maid appeared, who had been sent to wait upon her. She was a pretty, refined looking girl, but very pale, and with an air of deep melancholy—as if she were brooding over a secret sorrow. She offered her services to Isabelle without looking up, and in a low, subdued voice, as if she feared that the very walls had ears. Isabelle allowed her to take down and comb out her long, silky hair, which was very much dishevelled, and to arrange it again as she habitually wore it; which was quickly and skilfully done. Then the maid opened a wardrobe and took out several beautiful gowns, exquisitely made and trimmed, and just Isabelle's size; but she would not even look at them, and sharply ordered that they should instantly be put back where they belonged, though her own dress was very much the worse for the rough treatment it had been subjected to on the preceding day, and it was a trial to the sweet, dainty creature to be so untidy. But she was determined to accept nothing from the duke, no matter how long her captivity might last. The maid did not insist, but acceded to her wishes with a mild, pitying air—just as indulgence is shown, as far as possible, to all the little whims and caprices of prisoners condemned to death. Isabelle would have liked to question her attendant, and endeavour to elicit some information from her, but the girl was more like an automaton than anything else, and it was impossible to gain more than a monosyllable from her lips. So Isabelle resigned herself with a sigh to her mute ministerings, not without a sort of vague terror.

After the maid had retired, dinner was served as before, and Isabelle made a hearty meal—feeling that she must keep up her strength, and also hopeful of hearing

something in a few hours more from her faithful lover. Her thoughts were all of him, and as she realized the dangers to which he would inevitably be exposed for her sake, her eyes filled with tears, and a sharp pang shot through her heart. She was angry with herself for being the cause of so much trouble, and fain to curse her own beauty—the unhappy occasion of it all. She was absorbed in these sad thoughts when a little noise as if a hail-stone had struck against the window pane, suddenly aroused her. She flew to the casement, and saw Chiquita, in the tree opposite, signing to her to open it, and swinging back and forth the long horse-hair cord, with the iron hook attached to it. She hastened to comply with the wishes of her strange little ally, and, as she stepped back in obedience to another sign, the hook, thrown with unerring aim, caught securely in the iron railing of the little balcony. Chiquita tied the other end of the cord to the branch to which she was clinging, and then began to cross over the intervening space as before; but ere she was half-way over, the knot gave way, and poor Isabelle for one moment of intense agony thought that the child was lost. But, instead of falling into the moat beneath her, Chiquita, who did not appear to be in the least disconcerted by this accident, swung over against the wall below the balcony, and climbing up the cord hand over hand, leaped lightly into the room, before Isabelle had recovered her breath. Finding her very pale, and tremulous, the child said smilingly, “You were frightened, eh? and thought Chiquita would fall down among the frogs in the moat. When I tied my cord to the branch, I only made a slip-knot, so that I could bring it back with me. I must have looked like a big spider climbing up its thread,” she added, with a laugh.

“My dear child,” said Isabelle, with much feeling, and kissing Chiquita’s forehead, “you are a very brave little girl.”

“I saw your friends. They had been searching and searching for you; but without Chiquita they would never have found out where you were hidden. The captain was rushing about like an angry lion—his eyes flashed fire—he was magnificent. I came back with him. He rode, and held me in front of him. He is hidden in a little wood

not far off, he and his comrades—they must keep out of sight, you know. This evening, as soon as it is dark, they will try to get in here to you—by the tree, you know. There's sure to be a scrimmage—pistol shots and swords clashing—oh! it will be splendid; for there's nothing so fine as a good fight; when the men are in earnest, and fierce and brave. Now don't you be frightened and scream, as silly women do; nothing upsets them like that. You must just remain perfectly quiet, and keep out of their way. If you like, I will come and stay by you, so that you will not be afraid."

"Don't be uneasy about that, Chiquita! I will not annoy my brave friends, who come to save my life at the risk of their own, by any foolish fears or demonstrations; that I promise you."

"That's right," the child replied, "and until they come, you can defend yourself with my knife, you know. Don't forget the proper way to use it. Strike like this, and then do so; you can rip him up beautifully. As for me, I'm going to hunt up a quiet corner where I can get a nap. No, I can't stay here, for we must not be seen together; it would never do. Now do you be sure to keep away from that window. You must not even go near it, no matter what you hear, for fear they might suspect that you hoped for help from that direction. If they did, it would be all up with us; for they would send out and search the woods, and beat the bushes, and find our friends where they lie hidden. The whole thing would fall through, and you would have to stop here with this horrid duke that you hate so much."

"I will not go near the window," Isabelle answered, "nor even look towards it, however much I may wish to. You may depend upon my discretion, Chiquita, I do assure you."

Reassured upon this important point, Chiquita crept softly away, and went back to the lower room where she had left the ruffians carousing. They were still there—lying about on the benches and the floor, in a drunken sleep, and evidently

had not even missed her. She curled herself up in a corner, as far as might be from the loathsome brutes, and was asleep in a minute. The poor child was completely tired out; her slender little feet had travelled eight leagues the night before, running a good part of the way, and the return on horseback had perhaps fatigued her even more, being unaccustomed to it. Although her fragile little body had the strength and endurance of steel, she was worn out now, and lay, pale and motionless, in a sleep that seemed like death.

“Dear me! how these children do sleep to be sure,” said Malartic, when he roused himself at last and looked about him. “In spite of our carouse, and all the noise we made, that little monkey in the corner there has never waked nor stirred. Halloa! wake up you fellows! drunken beasts that you are. Try to stand up on your hind legs, and go out in the court and dash a bucket of cold water over your cursed heads. The Circe of drunkenness has made swine of you in earnest—go and see if the baptism I recommend will turn you back into men, and then we’ll take a little look round the place, to make sure there’s no plot hatching to rescue the little beauty we have in charge.”

The men scrambled to their feet slowly and with difficulty, and staggered out into the court as best they might, where the fresh air, and the treatment prescribed by Malartic, did a good deal towards reviving them; but they were a sorry looking set after all, and there were many aching heads among them. As soon as they were fit for it, Malartic took three of the least tipsy of them, and leading the way to a small postern that opened on the moat, unchained a row-boat lying there, crossed the broad ditch, ascended a steep flight of steps leading up the bank on the other side, and, leaving one man to guard the boat, proceeded to make a tour of inspection in the immediate vicinity of the château; fortunately without stumbling on the party concealed in the wood, or seeing anything to arouse their suspicions; so they returned to their quarters perfectly satisfied that there was no enemy lurking near.

Meantime Isabelle, left quite alone, tried in vain to interest herself in a book she had found lying upon one of the side-tables. She read a few pages mechanically, and then, finding it impossible to fix her attention upon it, threw the volume from her and sat idly in front of the fire, which was blazing cheerily, thinking of her own true lover, and praying that he might be preserved from injury in the impending struggle. Evening came at last—a servant brought in lights, and soon after the major-domo announced a visit from the Duke of Vallombreuse. He entered at once, and greeted his fair captive with the most finished courtesy. He looked very handsome, in a superb suit of pearl gray satin, richly trimmed with crimson velvet, and Isabelle could not but admire his personal appearance, much as she detested his character.

“I have come to see, my adorable Isabelle, whether I shall be more kindly received than my flowers,” said he, drawing up a chair beside hers. “I have not the vanity to think so, but I want you to become accustomed to my presence. To-morrow another bouquet, and another visit.”

“Both will be useless, my lord,” she replied, “though I am sorry to have to be so rude as to say so—but I had much better be perfectly frank with you.”

“Ah, well!” rejoined the duke, with a malicious smile, “I will dispense with hope, and content myself with reality. You do not know, my poor child, what a Vallombreuse can do—you, who vainly try to resist him. He has never yet known what it was to have an unsatisfied desire—he invariably gains his ends, in spite of all opposition—nothing can stop him. Tears, supplication, laments, threats, even dead bodies and smoking ruins would not daunt him. Do not tempt him too powerfully, by throwing new obstacles in his way, you imprudent child!”

Isabelle, frightened by the expression of his countenance as he spoke thus, instinctively pushed her chair farther away from his, and felt for Chiquita’s knife. But the wily duke, seeing that he had made a mistake, instantly changed his tone, and begging her pardon most humbly for his vehemence, endeavoured to persuade

her, by many specious arguments, that she was wrong in persistently turning a deaf ear to his suit—setting forth at length, and in glowing words, all the advantages that would accrue to her if she would but yield to his wishes, and describing the happiness in store for her. While he was thus eloquently pleading his cause, Isabelle, who had given him only a divided attention, thought that she heard a peculiar little noise in the direction whence the longed-for aid was to come, and fearing that Vallombreuse might hear it also, hastened to answer him the instant that he paused, in a way to vex him still further—for she preferred his anger to his love-making. Also, she hoped that by quarrelling with him she would be able to prevent his perceiving the suspicious little sound—now growing louder and more noticeable.

"The happiness that you so eloquently describe, my lord, would be for me a disgrace, which I am resolved to escape by death, if all other means fail me. You never shall have me living. Formerly I regarded you with indifference, but now I both hate and despise you, for your infamous, outrageous and violent behaviour to me, your helpless victim. Yes, I may as well tell you openly—and I glory in it—that I do love the Baron de Sigognac, whom you have more than once so basely tried to assassinate, through your miserable hired ruffians."

The strange noise still kept on, and Isabelle raised her voice to drown it. At her audacious, defiant words, so distinctly and impressively enunciated—hurled at him, as it were—Vallombreuse turned pale, and his eyes flashed ominously; a light foam gathered about the corners of his mouth, and he laid hold of the handle of his sword. For an instant he thought of killing Isabelle himself, then and there. If he could not have her, at least no one else should. But he relinquished that idea almost as soon as it occurred to him, and with a hard, forced laugh said, as he sprang up and advanced impetuously towards Isabelle, who retreated before him:

"Now, by all the devils in hell, I cannot help admiring you immensely in this mood. It is a new role for you, and you are deucedly charming in it. You have got such a

splendid colour, and your eyes are so bright—you are superb, I declare. I am greatly flattered at your blazing out into such dazzling beauty on my account—upon my word I am. You have done well to speak out openly—I hate deceit. So you love de Sigognac, do you? So much the better, say I—it will be all the sweeter to call you mine. It will be a pleasing variety to press ardent kisses upon sweet lips that say 'I hate you,' instead of the insipid, everlasting 'I love you,' that one gets a surfeit of from all the pretty women of one's acquaintance."

Alarmed at this coarse language, and the threatening gestures that accompanied it, Isabelle started back and drew out Chiquita's knife.

"Bravo!" cried the duke—"here comes the traditional poniard. We are being treated to a bit of high tragedy. But, my fierce little beauty, if you are well up in your Roman history, you will remember that the chaste Mme. Lucretia did not make use of her dagger until after the assault of Sextus, the bold son of Tarquin the Proud. That ancient and much-cited example is a good one to follow."

And without paying any more attention to the knife than to a bee-sting, he had violently seized Isabelle in his arms before she could raise it to strike.

Just at that moment a loud cracking noise was heard, followed by a tremendous crash, and the casement fell clattering to the floor, with every pane of glass in it shattered; as if a giant had put his knee against it and broken it in; while a mass of branches protruded through the opening into the room. It was the top of the tree that Chiquita had made such good use of as a way of escape and return. The trunk, sawed nearly through by de Sigognac and his companions, was guided in its fall so as to make a means of access to Isabelle's window; both bridging the moat, and answering all the purposes of a ladder.

The Duke of Vallombreuse, astonished at this most extraordinary intrusion upon his love-making, released his trembling victim, and drew his sword. Chiquita, who had crept into the room unperceived when the crash came, pulled Isabelle's sleeve and

whispered, “Come into this corner, out of the way; the dance is going to begin.”

As she spoke, several pistol shots were heard without, and four of the duke’s ruffians—who were doing garrison duty came rushing up the stairs, four steps at a time, and dashed into the room-sword in hand, and eager for the fray.

CHAPTER XVII. THE AMETHYST RING

The topmost branches of the tree, protruding through the window, rendered the centre of the room untenable, so Malartic and his three aids ranged themselves two and two against the wall on either side of it, armed with pistols and swords—ready to give the assailants a warm welcome.

“You had better retire, my lord duke, or else put on a mask,” whispered Malartic to the young nobleman, “so that you may not be seen and recognised in this affair.”

“What do I care?” cried Vallombreuse, flourishing his sword. “I am not afraid of anybody in the world—and besides, those who see me will never go away from this to tell of it.”

“But at least your lordship will place this second Helen in some safe retreat. A stray bullet might so easily deprive your highness of the prize that cost so dear—and it would be such a pity.”

The duke, finding this advice judicious, went at once over to where Isabelle was standing beside Chiquita, and throwing his arms round her attempted to carry her into the next room. The poor girl made a desperate resistance, and slipping from the duke’s grasp rushed to the window, regardless of danger, crying, “Save me, de Sigognac! save me!” A voice from without answered, “I am coming,” but, before he could reach the window, Vallombreuse had again seized his prey, and succeeded in carrying her into the adjoining room, closing and bolting the stout oaken door behind him just as de Sigognac bounded into the chamber he had quitted. His entrance was so sudden, and so swiftly and boldly made, that he entirely escaped the

pistol shots aimed at him, and the four bullets all fell harmless. When the smoke had cleared away and the “garrison” saw that he was unhurt, a murmur of astonishment arose, and one of the men exclaimed aloud that Captain Fracasse—the only name by which they knew him—must bear a charmed life; whereupon, Malartic cried, “Leave him to me, I’ll soon finish him, and do you three keep a strict guard over the window there; for there will be more to follow this one if I am not mistaken.”

But he did not find his self-imposed task as easy as he supposed—for de Sigognac was ready for him, and gave him plenty to do, though his surprise and disappointment were overwhelming when he found that Isabelle was nowhere to be seen.

“Where is she?” he cried impetuously. “Where is Isabelle? I heard her voice in here only a moment ago.”

“Don’t ask me!” Malartic retorted. “You didn’t give her into my charge.” And all this time their swords were flashing and clashing, as the combat between them grew more animated.

A moment later, before the men had finished reloading their pistols, Scapin dashed in through the window, throwing a remarkable somersault like an acrobat as he came, and seeing that the three ruffians had laid down their swords beside them on the floor while attending to their other weapons, he seized upon them all, ere their owners had recovered from their astonishment at his extraordinary advent, and hurled them through the broken casement down into the moat. Then, laying hold of one of the three from behind, and pinning down his arms securely, he placed him in front of himself for a shield—turning him dexterously this way and that, in order to keep his body always between his own and the enemy; so that they dared not fire upon him lest they should kill their comrade, who was vehemently beseeching them to spare his life, and vainly struggling to escape from Scapin’s iron grip.

The combat between de Sigognac and Malartic was still going on, but at last, the

baron—who had already wounded his adversary slightly, and whose agony and desperation at being kept from prosecuting his search for Isabelle were intense—wrested Malartic's sword from his grasp, by a dexterous manœuvre with his own, and putting his foot upon it as it lay on the floor raised the point of his blade to the professional ruffian's throat, crying "Surrender, or you are a dead man!"

At this critical moment another one of the besieging party burst in through the window, who, seeing at a glance how matters stood, said to Malartic in an authoritative tone, "You can surrender without dishonour to this valiant hero—you are entirely at his mercy. You have done your duty loyally—now consider yourself a prisoner of war."

Then turning to de Sigognac, he said, "You may trust his word, for he is an honourable fellow in his way, and will not molest you again—I will answer for him."

Malartic made a gesture of acquiescence, and the baron let him go—whereupon the discomfited bully picked up his sword, and with a crestfallen air walked off very disconsolately to a corner, where he sat down and occupied himself in staunching the blood that was flowing from his wound. The other three men were quickly conquered, and, at the suggestion of the latest comer, were securely bound hand and foot as they lay upon the floor, and then left to reflect upon their misfortunes.

"They can't do any more mischief now," said Jacquemin Lampourde, mockingly; for it was that famous fighting man in person, who, in his enthusiastic admiration, or rather adoration, for de Sigognac, had offered his services on this momentous occasion—services by no means to be despised. As to the brave Hérode, he was doing good service in fighting the rest of the garrison below. They had hastened out and crossed the moat in the little row-boat as quickly as possible after the alarm was given, but arrived too late, as we have seen, to prevent the assailants from ascending their strange scaling ladder. So they determined to follow, hoping to overtake and

dislodge some of them. But Hérode, who had found the upper branches bending and cracking in a very ominous manner under his great weight, was forced to turn about and make his way back to the main trunk, where, under cover of darkness, he quietly awaited the climbing foe. Mérindol, who commanded this detachment of the garrison, was first, and being completely taken by surprise was easily dislodged and thrown down into the water below. The next one, aroused to a sense of his danger by this, pulled out a pistol and fired, but in the agitation of the moment, and the darkness, missed his aim, so that he was entirely at the tyrant's mercy, and in an instant was held suspended over the deep waters of the moat. He clung desperately to a little branch he had managed to lay hold of, and made such a brave fight for his life, that Hérode, who was merciful by nature, though so fierce of aspect, decided to make terms with him, if he could do so without injuring the interests of his own party; and upon receiving a solemn promise from him to remain strictly neutral during the remainder of the fray, the powerful actor lifted him up, with the greatest ease, and seated him in safety upon the tree-trunk again. The poor fellow was so grateful that he was even better than his word, for, making use of the password and giving a pretended order from Mérindol to the other two, who were some distance behind him and ignorant of what had happened, he sent them off post-haste to attend to an imaginary foe at some distance from the château; availing himself of their absence to make good his escape, after heartily thanking Hérode for his clemency. The moon was just rising, and by its light the tyrant spied the little row-boat, lying not very far off at the foot of a flight of steps in the steep bank, and he was not slow to make use of it to cross the moat, and penetrate into the interior court of the château—the postern having been fortunately left open. Looking about him, to see how he could best rejoin his comrades within the building, his eyes fell upon the porch guarded by the two huge, calm sphinxes, and he wisely concluded that through it must lie his way to the scene of action.

Meantime de Sigognac, Scapin and Lampourde, having a chance to look about them,

were horrified to find that they were prisoners in the room where the battle had been fought. In vain they tried to burst open the stout oaken door which was their only means of egress—for the tree had, but a moment before, given way and fallen with a loud crash into the moat; in vain they strove to cut through one of the panels, or force the lock from its fastenings. To de Sigognac this delay was maddening, for he knew that the Duke of Vallombreuse had carried Isabelle away, and that he must still be with her. He worked like a giant himself, and incited the others to redouble their efforts; making battering rams of various pieces of furniture—resorting to every means that their ingenuity could devise—but without making the least impression on the massive barrier. They had paused in dismay, when suddenly a slight, grinding noise was heard, like a key turning in a lock, and the door, so unsuccessfully attacked, opened as if by magic before them.

“What good angel has come to our aid?” cried de Sigognac; “and by what miracle does this door open of itself, after having so stoutly resisted all our efforts?”

“There is neither angel nor miracle; only Chiquita,” answered a quiet little voice, as the child appeared from behind the door, and fixed her great, dark, liquid eyes calmly on de Sigognac. She had managed to slip out with Vallombreuse and Isabelle, entirely unnoticed by the former, and in the hope of being of use to the latter.

“Where is Isabelle?” cried the baron, as he crossed the threshold and looked anxiously round the anteroom, which was dimly lighted by one little flickering lamp. For a moment he did not perceive her; the Duke of Vallombreuse, surprised at the sudden opening of the door, which he had believed to be securely fastened and impenetrable, had retreated into a corner, and placed Isabelle, who was almost fainting from terror and exhaustion, behind him. She had sunk upon her knees, with her head leaning against the wall, her long hair, which had come down, falling about her, and her dress in the utmost disorder; for she had struggled desperately in the

arms of her captor; who, feeling that his fair victim was about to escape from his clutches, had vainly striven to snatch a few kisses from the sweet lips so temptingly near his own.

“Here she is,” said Chiquita, “in this corner, behind the Duke of Vallombreuse; but to get to her you must first kill him.”

“Of course I shall kill him,” cried de Sigognac, advancing sword in hand towards the young duke, who was ready to receive him.

“We shall see about that, Sir Captain Fracasse—doughty knight of Bohémiennes!” said Vallombreuse disdainfully, and the conflict began. The duke was not de Sigognac’s equal at this kind of work, but still he was skilful and brave, and had had too much good instruction to handle his sword like a broom-stick, as Lampourde expressed it. He stood entirely upon the defensive, and was exceedingly wary and prudent, hoping, as his adversary must be already considerably fatigued by his encounter with Malartic, that he might be able to get the better of him this time, and retrieve his previous defeat. At the very beginning he had succeeded in raising a small silver whistle to his lips with his left hand—and its shrill summons brought five or six armed attendants into the room.

“Carry away this woman,” he cried, “and put out those two rascals. I will take care of the captain myself.”

The sudden interruption of these fresh forces astonished de Sigognac, and as he saw two of the men lift up and carry off Isabelle—who had fainted quite away—he was thrown for an instant off his guard, and very nearly run through the body by his opponent.

Roused to a sense of his danger, he attacked the duke with renewed fury, and with a terrible thrust, that made him reel, wounded him seriously in the upper part of the chest.

Meanwhile Lampourde and Scapin had shown the duke’s lackeys that it would not

be a very easy matter to put them out, and were handling them rather roughly, when the cowardly fellows, seeing that their master was wounded, and leaning against the wall, deathly pale, thought that he was done for, and although they were fully armed, took to their heels and fled, deaf to his feeble cry for assistance. While all this was going on, the tyrant was making his way up the grand staircase, as fast as his corpulence would permit, and reached the top just in time to see Isabelle, pale, dishevelled, motionless, and apparently dead, being borne along the corridor by two lackeys. Without stopping to make any inquiries, and full of wrath at the thought that the sweet girl had fallen a victim to the wickedness of the cruel Duke of Vallombreuse, he drew his sword, and fell upon the two men with such fury that they dropped their light burden and fled down the stairs as fast as their legs could carry them. Then he knelt down beside the unconscious girl, raised her gently in his arms, and found that her heart was beating, though but feebly, and that she apparently had no wound, while she sighed faintly, like a person beginning to revive after a swoon. In this position he was found by de Sigognac, who had effectually gotten rid of Vallombreuse, by the famous and well-directed thrust that had thrown Jacquemin Lampourde into a rapture of admiration and delight. He knelt down beside his darling, took both her hands in his, and said, in the most tender tones, that Isabelle heard vaguely as if in a dream:

“Rouse yourself, dear heart, and fear nothing. You are safe now, with your own friends, and your own true lover—nobody can harm or frighten you again.”

Although she did not yet open her eyes, a faint smile dawned upon the colourless lips, and her cold, trembling, little fingers feebly returned the tender pressure of de Sigognac’s warm hands. Lampourde stood by, and looked down with tearful eyes upon this touching group—for he was exceedingly romantic and sentimental, and always intensely interested in a love affair. Suddenly, in the midst of the profound silence that had succeeded to the uproar of the mêlée, the winding of a horn was heard without, and in a moment energetically repeated. It was evidently a summons

that had to be instantly obeyed; the drawbridge was lowered in haste, with a great rattling of chains, and a carriage driven rapidly into the court, while the red flaring light of torches flashed through the windows of the corridor. In another minute the door of the vestibule was thrown open, and hasty steps ascended the grand staircase. First came four tall lackeys, in rich liveries, carrying lights, and directly behind them a tall, noble-looking man, who was dressed from head to foot in black velvet, with an order shining on his breast—of those that are usually reserved for kings and princes of the blood, and only very exceptionally bestowed, upon the most illustrious personages.

When the four lackeys reached the landing at the head of the stairs, they silently ranged themselves against the wall, and stood like statues bearing torches; without the raising of an eyelid, or the slightest change in the stolid expression of their countenances to indicate that they perceived anything out of the usual way—exhibiting in perfection that miraculous imperturbability and self-command which is peculiar to well-bred, thoroughly trained menservants. The gentleman whom they had preceded paused ere he stepped upon the landing. Although age had brought wrinkles to his handsome face, and turned his abundant dark hair gray, it was still easy to recognise in him the original of the portrait that had so fascinated Isabelle, and whose protection she had passionately implored in her distress.

It was the princely father of Vallombreuse—the son bearing a different name, that of a duchy he possessed, until he in his turn should become the head of the family, and succeed to the title of prince.

At sight of Isabelle, supported by de Sigognac and the tyrant, whose ghastly pallor made her look like one dead, the aged gentleman raised his arms towards heaven and groaned.

“Alas! I am too late,” said he, “for all the haste I made,” and advancing a few steps he bent over the prostrate girl, and took her lifeless hand in his. Upon this hand,

white, cold and diaphanous, as if it had been sculptured in alabaster, shone a ring, set with an amethyst of unusual size. The old nobleman seemed strangely agitated as it caught his eye. He drew it gently from Isabelle's slender finger, with a trembling hand signed to one of the torch-bearers to bring his light nearer, and by it eagerly examined the device cut upon the stone; first holding it close to the light and then at arm's length; as those whose eyesight is impaired by age are wont to do. The Baron de Sigognac, Hérode and Lampourde anxiously watched the agitated movements of the prince, and his change of expression, as he contemplated this jewel, which he seemed to recognise; and which he turned and twisted between his fingers, with a pained look in his face, as if some great trouble had befallen him.

"Where is the Duke of Vallombreuse?" he cried at last, in a voice of thunder. "Where is that monster in human shape, who is unworthy of my race?"

He had recognised, without a possibility of doubt, in this ring, the one bearing a fanciful device, with which he had been accustomed, long ago, to seal the notes he wrote to Cornelia—Isabelle's mother, and his own youthful love. How happened it that this ring was on the finger of the young actress, who had been forcibly and shamefully abducted by Vallombreuse? From whom could she have received it? These questions were torturing to him.

"Can it be possible that she is Cornelia's daughter and mine?" said the prince to himself. "Her profession, her age, her sweet face, in which I can trace a softened, beautified likeness of her mother's, but which has a peculiarly high bred, refined expression, worthy of a royal princess, all combine to make me believe it must be so. Then, alas! alas! it is his own sister that this cursed libertine has so wronged, and he has been guilty of a horrible, horrible crime. Oh! I am cruelly punished for my youthful folly and sin."

Isabelle at length opened her eyes, and her first look fell upon the prince, holding the ring that he had drawn from her finger. It seemed to her as if she had seen his face

before—but in youth, without the gray hair and beard. It seemed also to be an aged copy of the portrait over the chimney-piece in her room, and a feeling of profound veneration filled her heart as she gazed at him. She saw, too, her beloved de Sigognac kneeling beside her, watching her with tenderest devotion; and the worthy tyrant as well—both safe and sound. To the horrors of the terrible struggle had succeeded the peace and security of deliverance. She had nothing more to fear, for her friends or for herself—how could she ever be thankful enough?

The prince, who had been gazing at her with passionate earnestness, as if her fair face possessed an irresistible charm for him, now addressed her in low, moved tones:

“Mademoiselle, will you kindly tell me how you came by this ring, which recalls very dear and sacred memories to me? Has it been long in your possession?”

“I have had it ever since my infancy; it is the only thing that my poor mother left me,” Isabelle replied, with gentle dignity.

“And who was your mother? Will you, tell me something about her?” continued the prince, with increasing emotion.

“Her name was Cornelia, and she was an actress, belonging to the same troupe that I am a member of now.”

“Cornelia! then there is no possible doubt about it,” murmured the prince to himself, in great agitation. “Yes, it is certainly she whom I have been seeking all these years—and now to find her thus!”

Then, controlling his emotion, he resumed his usual calm, majestic demeanour, and turning back to Isabelle, said to her, “Permit me to keep this ring for the present; I will soon give it back to you.”

“I am content to leave it in your lordship’s hands,” the young actress replied, in whose mind the memory of a face, that she had seen long years ago bending over her cradle, was growing clearer and more distinct every moment.

“Gentlemen,” said the prince, turning to de Sigognac and his companions, “under any other circumstances I might find your presence here, in my château, with arms in your hands, unwarranted, but I am aware of the necessity that drove you to forcibly invade this mansion, hitherto sacred from such scenes as this—I know that violence must be met with violence, and justifies it; therefore I shall take no further notice of what has happened here to-night, and you need have no fears of any evil consequences to yourselves because of your share in it. But where is the Duke of Vallombreuse? that degenerate son who disgraces my old age.”

As if in obedience to his father’s call, the young duke at that moment appeared upon the threshold of the door leading into what had been Isabelle’s apartment, supported by Malartic. He was frightfully pale, and his clinched hand pressed a handkerchief tightly upon his wounded chest. He came forward with difficulty, looking like a ghost. Only a strong effort of will kept him from falling—an effort that gave to his face the immobility of a marble mask. He had heard the voice of his father, whom, depraved and shameless as he was, he yet respected and dreaded, and he hoped to be able to conceal his wound from him. He bit his lips so as not to cry out or groan in his agony, and resolutely swallowed down the bloody foam that kept rising and filling his mouth. He even took off his hat, in spite of the frightful pain the raising of his arm caused him, and stood uncovered and silent before his angry parent.

“Sir,” said the prince, severely, “your misdeeds transcend all limits, and your behaviour is such that I shall be forced to implore the king to send you to prison, or into exile. You are not fit to be at large. Abduction—imprisonment—criminal assault. These are not simple gallantries; and though I might be willing to pardon and overlook many excesses, committed in the wildness of licentious youth, I never could bring myself to forgive a deliberate and premeditated crime. Do you know, you monster,” he continued approaching Vallombreuse, and whispering in his ear, so that no one else could hear, “do you know who this young girl is? this good and chaste Isabelle, whom you have forcibly abducted, in spite of her determined and

virtuous resistance! She is your own sister!

“May she replace the son you are about to lose,” the young duke replied, attacked by a sudden faintness, and an agony of pain which he felt that he could not long endure and live; “but I am not as guilty as you suppose. Isabelle is pure—stainless. I swear it, by the God before whom I must shortly appear. Death does not lie, and you may believe what I say, upon the word of a dying gentleman.”

These words were uttered loudly and distinctly, so as to be heard by all. Isabelle turned her beautiful eyes, wet with tears, upon de Sigognac, and read in those of her true and faithful lover that he had not waited for the solemn attestation, “in extremis,” of the Duke of Vallombreuse to believe in the perfect purity of her whom he adored.

“But what is the matter?” asked the prince, holding out his hand to his son, who staggered and swayed to and fro in spite of Malartic’s efforts to support him, and whose face was fairly livid.

“Nothing, father,” answered Vallombreuse, in a scarcely articulate voice, “nothing—only I am dying”—and he fell at full length on the floor before the prince could clasp him in his arms, as he endeavoured to do.

“He did not fall on his face,” said Jacquemin Lampourde, sententiously; “it’s nothing but a fainting fit. He may escape yet. We duellists are familiar with this sort of thing, my lord; a great deal more so than most medical men, and you may depend upon what I say.”

“A doctor! a doctor!” cried the prince, forgetting his anger as he saw his son lying apparently lifeless at his feet. “Perhaps this man is right, and there may be some hope for him yet. A fortune to whomsoever will save my son!—my only son!—the last scion of a noble race. Go! run quickly! What are you about there?—don’t you understand me? Go, I say, and run as fast as you can; take the fleetest horse in the stable.”

Whereupon two of the imperturbable lackeys, who had held their torches throughout this exciting scene without moving a muscle, hastened off to execute their master's orders. Some of his own servants now came forward, raised up the unconscious Duke of Vallombreuse with every possible care and precaution, and by his father's command carried him to his own room and laid him on his own bed, the aged prince following, with a face from which grief and anxiety had already driven away all traces of anger. He saw his race extinct in the death of this son, whom he so dearly loved—despite his fault—and whose vices he forgot for the moment, remembering only his brilliant and lovable qualities. A profound melancholy took complete possession of him, as he stood for a few moments plunged in a sorrowful reverie that everybody respected.

Isabelle, entirely revived, and no longer feeling at all faint, had risen to her feet, and now stood between de Sigognac and the tyrant, adjusting, with a trembling hand, her disordered dress and dishevelled hair. Lampourde and Scapin had retired to a little distance from them, and held themselves modestly aloof, whilst the men within, still bound hand and foot, kept as quiet as possible; fearful of their fate if brought to the prince's notice. At length that aged nobleman returned, and breaking the terrible silence that had weighed upon all, said, in severe tones, "Let all those who placed their services at the disposition of the Duke of Vallombreuse, to aid him in indulging his evil passions and committing a terrible crime, quit this château instantly. I will refrain from placing you in the hands of the public executioner, though you richly deserve it. Go now! vanish! get ye back to your lairs! and rest assured that justice will not fail to overtake you at last."

These words were not complimentary, but the trembling offenders were thankful to get off so easily, and the ruffians, whom Lampourde and Scapin had unbound, followed Malartic down the stairs in silence, without daring to claim their promised reward. When they had disappeared, the prince advanced and took Isabelle by the hand, and gently detaching her from the group of which she had formed a part, led

her over to where he had been standing, and kept her beside him.

“Stay here, mademoiselle,” he said; “your place is henceforth by my side. It is the least that you can do to fulfil your duty as my daughter, since you are the innocent means of depriving me of my son.” And he wiped away a tear, that, despite all his efforts to control his grief, rolled down his withered cheek. Then turning to de Sigognac, he said, with an incomparably noble gesture, “Sir, you are at liberty to withdraw, with your brave companions. Isabelle will have nothing to fear under her father’s protection, and this château will be her home for the present. Now that her birth is made known it is not fitting that my daughter should return to Paris with you. I thank you, though it costs me the hope of perpetuating my race, for having spared my son a disgraceful action—what do I say? An abominable crime. I would rather have a bloodstain on my escutcheon than a dishonourable blot. Since Vallombreuse was infamous in his conduct, you have done well to kill him. You have acted like a true gentleman, which I am assured that you are, in chivalrously protecting weakness, innocence and virtue. You are nobly in the right. That my daughter’s honour has been preserved unstained, I owe to you—and it compensates me for the loss of my son—at least my reason tells me that it should do so; but the father’s heart rebels, and unjust ideas of revenge might arise, which I should find it difficult to conquer and set at rest. Therefore you had better go your way now, and whatever the result may be I will not pursue or molest you. I will try to forget that a terrible necessity turned your sword against my son’s life.”

“My lord,” said de Sigognac, with profound respect, “I feel so keenly for your grief as a father, that I would have accepted any reproaches, no matter how bitter and unjust, from you, without one word of protest or feeling of resentment; even though I cannot reproach myself for my share in this disastrous conflict. I do not wish to say anything to justify myself in your eyes, at the expense of the unhappy Duke of Vallombreuse, but I beg you to believe that this quarrel was not of my seeking. He persistently threw himself in my way, and I have done everything I could to spare

him, in more than one encounter. Even here it was his own blind fury that led to his being wounded. I leave Isabelle, who is dearer to me than my own soul, in your hands, and shall grieve my whole life long for this sad victory; which is a veritable and terrible defeat for me, since it destroys my happiness. Ah! if only I could have been slain myself, instead of your unhappy son; it would have been better and happier for me."

He bowed with grave dignity to the prince, who courteously returned his salute, exchanged a long look, eloquent of passionate love and heart-breaking regret, with Isabelle, and went sadly down the grand staircase, followed by his companions—not however without glancing back more than once at the sweet girl he was leaving—who to save herself from falling, leaned heavily against the railing of the landing, sobbing as if her heart would break, and pressing a handkerchief to her streaming eyes. And, so strange a thing is the human heart, the Baron de Sigognac departed much comforted by the bitter grief and tears of her whom he so devotedly loved and worshipped. He and his friends went on foot to the little wood where they had left their horses tied to the trees, found them undisturbed, mounted and returned to Paris.

"What do you think, my lord, of all these wonderful events?" said the tyrant, after a long silence, to de Sigognac, beside whom he was riding. "It all ends up like a regular tragi-comedy. Who would ever have dreamed, in the midst of the mêlée, of the sudden entrance upon the scene of the grand old princely father, preceded by torches, and coming to put a little wholesome restraint on the too atrociously outrageous pranks of his dissolute young son? And then the recognition of Isabelle as his daughter, by means of the ring with a peculiar device of his own engraved upon it; haven't you seen exactly the same sort of thing on the stage? But, after all, it is not so surprising perhaps as it seems at the first glance—since the theatre is only a copy of real life. Therefore, real life should resemble it, just as the original does the portrait, eh? I have always heard that our sweet little actress was of noble birth.

Blazius and old Mme. Léonarde remember seeing the prince when he was devoted to Cornelia. The duenna has often tried to persuade Isabelle to seek out her father, but she is of too modest and gentle a nature to take a step of that kind; not wishing to intrude upon a family that might reject her, and willing to content herself in her own lowly, position."

"Yes, I knew all about that," rejoined de Sigognac, "for Isabelle told me some time ago her mother's history, and spoke of the ring; but without attaching any importance to the fact of her illustrious origin. It is very evident, however, from the nobility and delicacy of her nature, without any other proof, that princely blood flows in her veins; and also the refined, pure, elevated type of her beauty testifies to her descent. But what a terrible fatality that this cursed Vallombreuse should turn out to be her brother! There is a dead body between us now—a stream of blood separates us—and yet, I could not save her honour in any other way. Unhappy mortal that I am! I have myself created the obstacle upon which my love is wrecked, and killed my hopes of future bliss with the very sword that defended the purity of the woman I adore. In guarding her I love, I have put her away from me forever. How could I go now and present myself to Isabelle with blood-stained hands? Alas! that the blood which I was forced to shed in her defence should have been her brother's. Even if she, in her heavenly goodness, could forgive me, and look upon me without a feeling of horror, the prince, her father, would repulse and curse me as the murderer of his only son. I was born, alas! under an unlucky star."

"Yes, it is all very sad and lamentable, certainly," said the tyrant; "but worse entanglements than this have come out all right in the end. You must remember that the Duke of Vallombreuse is only half-brother to Isabelle, and that they were aware of the relationship but for a few minutes before he fell dead at our feet; which must make a great difference in her feelings. And besides, she hated that overbearing nobleman, who pursued her so cruelly with his violent and scandalous gallantries. The prince himself was far from being satisfied with his wretched son—who was

ferocious as Nero, dissolute as Heliogabalus, and perverse as Satan himself, and who would have been hanged ten times over if he had not been a duke. Do not be so disheartened! things may turn out a great deal better than you think now."

"God grant it, my good Hérode," said de Sigognac fervently. "But naturally I cannot feel happy about it. It would have been far better for all if I had been killed instead of the duke, since Isabelle would have been safe from his criminal pursuit under her father's care. And then, I may as well tell you all, a secret horror froze the very marrow in my bones when I saw that handsome young man, but a moment before so full of life, fire, and passion, fall lifeless, pale and stiff at my feet. Hérode, the death of a man is a grave thing, and though I cannot suffer from remorse for this one, since I have committed no crime, still, all the time I see Vallombreuse before me, lying, motionless and ghastly, with the blood oozing slowly from his wound. It haunts me. I cannot drive the horrid sight away."

"That is all wrong," said the tyrant, soothingly—for the other was much excited—"for you could not have done otherwise. Your conscience should not reproach you. You have acted throughout, from the very beginning to the end, like the noble gentleman that you are. These scruples are owing to exhaustion, to the feverishness due to the excitement you have gone through, and the chill from the night air. We will gallop on swiftly in a moment, to set our blood flowing more freely, and drive away these sad thoughts of yours. But one thing must be promptly done; you must quit Paris, forthwith, and retire for a time to some quiet retreat, until all this trouble is forgotten. The violent death of the Duke of Vallombreuse will make a stir at the court, and in the city, no matter how much pains may be taken to keep the facts from the public, and, although he was not at all popular, indeed very much the reverse, there will be much regret expressed, and you will probably be severely blamed. But now let us put spurs to these lazy steeds of ours, and try to get on a little faster."

While they are galloping towards Paris, we will return to the château—as quiet now as it had been noisy a little while before. In the young duke's room, a candelabrum, with several branches, stood on a round table, so that the light from the candles fell upon the bed, where he lay with closed eyes, as motionless as a corpse, and as pale. The walls of the large chamber, above a high wainscot of ebony picked out with gold, were hung with superb tapestry, representing the history of Medea and Jason, with all its murderous and revolting details. Here, Medea was seen cutting the body of Pelias into pieces, under pretext of restoring his youth—there, the madly jealous woman and unnatural mother was murdering her own children; in another panel she was fleeing, surfeited with vengeance, in her chariot, drawn by huge dragons breathing out flames of fire. The tapestry was certainly magnificent in quality and workmanship, rich in colouring, artistic in design, and very costly—but inexpressibly repulsive. These mythological horrors gave the luxurious room an intensely disagreeable, lugubrious aspect, and testified to the natural ferocity and cruelty of the person who had selected them. Behind the bed the crimson silk curtains had been drawn apart, exposing to view the representation of Jason's terrible conflict with the fierce, brazen bulls that guarded the golden fleece, and Vallombreuse, lying senseless below them, looked as if he might have been one of their victims. Various suits of clothes, of the greatest richness and elegance, which had been successively tried on and rejected, were scattered about, and in a splendid great Japanese vase, standing on an ebony table near the head of the bed, was a bouquet of beautiful flowers, destined to replace the one Isabelle had already refused to receive—its glowing tints making a strange contrast with the death-like face, which was whiter than the snowy pillow it rested on. The prince, sitting in an arm-chair beside the bed, gazed at his unconscious son with mournful intentness, and bent down from time to time to listen at the slightly parted lips; but no fluttering breath came through them; all was still. Never had the young duke looked handsomer. The haughty, fierce expression, habitual with him, had given place to a

serenity that was wonderfully beautiful, though so like death. As the father contemplated the perfect face and form, so soon to crumble into dust, he forgot, in his overwhelming grief, that the soul of a demon had animated it, and he thought sorrowfully of the great name that had been revered and honoured for centuries past, but which could not go down to centuries to come. More even than the death of his son did he mourn for the extinction of his home.

Isabelle stood at the foot of the bed, with clasped hands, praying with her whole soul for this new-found brother, who had expiated his crime with his life—the crime of loving too much, which woman pardons so easily.

The prince, who had been for some time holding his son's icy cold hand between both his own, suddenly thought that he could feel a slight warmth in it, and not realizing that he himself had imparted it, allowed himself to hope again.

"Will the doctor never come?" he cried impatiently; "something may yet be done; I am persuaded of it."

Even as he spoke the door opened, and the surgeon appeared, followed by an assistant carrying a case of instruments. He bowed to the prince, and without saying one word went straight to the bedside, felt the patient's pulse, put his hand over his heart, and shook his head despondingly. However, to make sure, he drew a little mirror of polished steel from his pocket, removed it from its case, and held it for a moment over the parted lips; then, upon examining its surface closely, he found that a slight dimness was visible upon it. Surprised at this unexpected indication of life, he repeated the experiment, and again the little mirror was dimmed—Isabelle and the prince meantime breathlessly watching every movement, and even the expression of the doctor's face.

"Life is not entirely extinct," he said at last, turning to the anxious father, as he wiped the polished surface of his tiny mirror. "The patient still breathes, and as long as there is life there is hope, But do not give yourself up to a premature joy that

might render your grief more bitter afterwards. I only say that the Duke of Vallombreuse has not yet breathed his last; that is all. Now, I am going to probe the wound, which perhaps is not fatal, as it did not kill him at once."

"You must not stay here, Isabelle," said the prince, tenderly; "such sights are too trying for a young girl like you. Go to your own room now, my dear, and I will let you know the doctor's verdict as soon as he has pronounced it."

Isabelle accordingly withdrew, and was conducted to an apartment that had been made ready for her; the one she had occupied being all in disorder after the terrible scenes that had been enacted there.

The surgeon proceeded with his examination, and when it was finished said to the prince, "My lord, will you please to order a cot put up in that corner yonder, and have a light supper sent in for my assistant and myself? We shall remain for the night with the Duke of Vallombreuse, and take turns in watching him. I must be with him constantly, so as to note every symptom; to combat promptly those that are unfavorable, and aid those that are the reverse. Your highness may trust everything to me, and feel assured that all that human skill and science can do towards saving your son's life shall be faithfully done. Let me advise you to go to your own room now and try to get some rest; I think I may safely answer for my patient's life until the morning."

A little calmed and much encouraged by this assurance, the prince retired to his own apartment, where every hour a servant brought him a bulletin from the sick-room.

As to Isabelle, lying in her luxurious bed and vainly trying to sleep, she lived over again in imagination all the wonderful as well as terrible experiences of the last two days, and tried to realize her new position; that she was now the acknowledged daughter of a mighty prince, than whom only royalty was higher; that the dreaded Duke of Vallombreuse, so handsome and winning despite his perversity, was no longer a bold lover to be feared and detested, but a brother, whose passion, if he

lived, would doubtless be changed into a pure and calm fraternal affection. This château, no longer her prison, had become her home, and she was treated by all with the respect and consideration due to the daughter of its master. From what had seemed to be her ruin had arisen her good fortune, and a destiny radiant, unhoped-for, and beyond her wildest flights of fancy. Yet, surrounded as she was by everything to make her happy and content, Isabelle was far from feeling so—she was astonished at herself for being sad and listless, instead of joyous and exultant—but the thought of de Sigognac, so infinitely dear to her, so far more precious than any other earthly blessing, weighed upon her heart, and the separation from him was a sorrow for which nothing could console her. Yet, now that their relative positions were so changed, might not a great happiness be in store for her? Did not this very change bring her nearer in reality to that true, brave, faithful, and devoted lover, though for the moment they were parted? As a poor nameless actress she had refused to accept his offered hand, lest such an alliance should be disadvantageous to him and stand in the way of his advancement, but now—how joyfully would she give herself to him. The daughter of a great and powerful prince would be a fitting wife for the Baron de Sigognac. But if he were the murderer of her father's only son; ah! then indeed they could never join hands over a grave. And even if the young duke should recover, he might cherish a lasting resentment for the man who had not only dared to oppose his wishes and designs, but had also defeated and wounded him. As to the prince, good and generous though he was, still he might not be able to bring himself to look with favour upon the man who had almost deprived him of his son. Then, too, he might desire some other alliance for his new-found daughter—it was not impossible—but in her inmost heart she promised herself to be faithful to her first and only love; to take refuge in a convent rather than accept the hand of any other; even though that other were as handsome as Apollo, and gifted as the prince of a fairy tale. Comforted by this secret vow, by which she dedicated her life and love to de Sigognac, whether their destiny should give them to

each other or keep them asunder, Isabelle was just falling into a sweet sleep when a slight sound made her open her eyes, and they fell upon Chiquita, standing at the foot of the bed and gazing at her with a thoughtful, melancholy air.

“What is it, my dear child?” said Isabelle, in her sweetest tones. “You did not go away with the others, then? I am glad; and if you would like to stay here with me, Chiquita, I will keep you and care for you tenderly; as is justly due to you, my dear, for you have done a great deal for me.”

“I love you dearly,” answered Chiquita, “but I cannot stay with you while Agostino lives; he is my master, I must follow him. But I have one favour to beg before I leave you; if you think that I have earned the pearl necklace now, will you kiss me? No one ever did but you, and it was so sweet.”

“Indeed I will, and with all my heart,” said Isabelle, taking the child’s thin face between her hands and kissing her warmly on her brown cheeks, which flushed crimson under the soft caress.

“And now, good-bye!” said Chiquita, when after a few moments of silence she had resumed her usual sang-froid. She turned quickly away, but, catching sight of the knife she had given Isabelle, which lay upon the dressing-table, she seized it eagerly, saying, “Give me back my knife now; you will not need it any more,” and vanished.

CHAPTER XVIII. A FAMILY PARTY

The next morning found the young Duke of Vallombreuse still living, though his life hung by so slender a thread, that the surgeon, who anxiously watched his every breath, feared from moment to moment that it might break. He was a learned and skilful man, this same Maître Laurent, who only needed some favourable opportunity to bring him into notice and make him as celebrated as he deserved to be. His remarkable talents and skill had only been exercised thus far “in anima vili,” among the lower orders of society—whose living or dying was a matter of no

moment whatever. But now had come at last the chance so long sighed for in secret, and he felt that the recovery of his illustrious patient was of paramount importance to himself. The worthy doctor's amour-propre and ambition were both actively engaged in this desperate duel he was fighting with Death, and he set his teeth and determined that the victory must rest with him. In order to keep the whole glory of the triumph for himself, he had persuaded the prince—not without difficulty—to renounce his intention of sending for the most celebrated surgeons in Paris, assuring him that he himself was perfectly capable to do all that could be done, and pleading that nothing was more dangerous than a change of treatment in such a case as this. Maître Laurent conquered, and feeling that there was now no danger of his being pushed into the background, threw his whole heart and strength into the struggle; yet many times during that anxious night he feared that his patient's life was slipping away from his detaining grasp, and almost repented him of having assumed the entire responsibility. But with the morning came encouragement, and as the watchful surgeon stood at the bedside, intently gazing upon the ghastly face on the pillow, he murmured to himself:

"No, he will not die—his countenance has lost that terrible, hippocratic look that had settled upon it last evening when I first saw him—his pulse is stronger, his breathing free and natural. Besides, he must live—his recovery will make my fortune. I must and will tear him out of the grim clutches of Death—fine, handsome, young fellow that he is, and the heir and hope of his noble family—it will be long ere his tomb need be made ready to receive him. He will help me to get away from this wretched little village, where I vegetate ignobly, and eat my heart out day by day. Now for a bold stroke!—at the risk of producing fever—at all risks—I shall venture to give him a dose of that wonder-working potion of mine." Opening his case of medicines, he took out several small vials, containing different preparations—some red as a ruby, others green as an emerald—this one yellow as virgin gold, that bright and colourless as a diamond—and on each one a small label bearing a Latin inscription.

Maître Laurent, though he was perfectly sure of himself, carefully read the inscriptions upon those he had selected several times over, held up the tiny vials one after another, where a ray of sunshine struck upon them, and looked admiringly through the bright transparent liquids they contained—then, measuring with the utmost care a few drops from each, compounded a potion after a secret recipe of his own; which he made a mystery of, and refused to impart to his fellow practitioners. Rousing his sleeping assistant, he ordered him to raise the patient's head a little, while, with a small spatula, he pried the firmly set teeth apart sufficiently to allow the liquid he had prepared to trickle slowly into the mouth. As it reached the throat there was a spasmodic contraction that gave Maître Laurent an instant of intense anxiety—but it was only momentary, and the remainder of the dose was swallowed easily and with almost instantaneous effect. A slight tinge of colour showed itself in the pallid cheeks, the eyelids trembled and half unclosed, and the hand that had lain inert and motionless upon the counterpane stirred a little. Then the young duke heaved a deep sigh, and opening his eyes looked vacantly in about him, like one awakening from a dream, or returning from those mysterious regions whither the soul takes flight when unconsciousness holds this mortal frame enthralled. Only a glance, and the long eyelashes fell again upon the pale cheeks—but a wonderful change had passed over the countenance.

"I staked everything on that move," said Maître Laurent to himself, with a long breath of relief, "and I have won. It was either kill or cure—and it has not killed him. All glory be to Æsculapius, Hygeia, and Hippocrates!"

At this moment a hand noiselessly put aside the hangings over the door, and the venerable head of the prince appeared—looking ten years older for the agony and dread of the terrible night just passed.

"How is he, Maître Laurent?" he breathed, in broken, scarcely audible tones.

The surgeon put his finger to his lips, and with the other hand pointed to the young

duke's face-still raised a little on the pillows, and no longer wearing its death-like look; then, with the light step habitual with those who are much about the sick, he went over to the prince, still standing on the threshold, and drawing him gently outside and away from the door, said in a low voice, "Your highness can see that the patient's condition, so far from growing worse, has decidedly improved. Certainly he is not out of danger yet—his state is very critical—but unless some new and totally unforeseen complication should arise, which I shall use every effort to prevent, I think that we can pull him through, and that he will be able to enjoy life again as if he had never been hurt."

The prince's care-worn face brightened and his fine eyes flashed at these hopeful words; he stepped forward to enter the sick-room, but Maître Laurent respectfully opposed his doing so.

"Permit me, my lord, to prevent your approaching your son's bedside just now—doctors are often very disagreeable, you know, and have to impose trying conditions upon those to whom their patients are dear. I beseech you not to go near the Duke of Vallombreuse at present. Your beloved presence might, in the excessively weak and exhausted condition of my patient, cause dangerous agitation. Any strong emotion would be instantly fatal to him, his hold upon life is still so slight. Perfect tranquility is his only safety. If all goes well—as I trust and believe that it will—in a few days he will have regained his strength in a measure, his wound will be healing, and you can probably be with him as much as you like, without any fear of doing him harm. I know that this is very trying to your highness, but, believe me, it is necessary to your son's well-being."

The prince, very much relieved, and yielding readily to the doctor's wishes, returned to his own apartment; where he occupied himself with some religious reading until noon, when the major-domo came to announce that dinner was on the table.

"Go and tell my daughter, the Comtesse Isabelle de Lineuil—such is the title by

which she is to be addressed henceforth—that I request her to join me at dinner," said the prince to the major-domo, who hastened off to obey this order.

Isabelle went quickly down the grand staircase with a light step, and smiled to herself as she passed through the noble hall where she had been so frightened by the two figures in armour, on the occasion of her bold exploring expedition the first night after her arrival at the château. Everything looked very different now—the bright sunshine was pouring in at the windows, and large fires of juniper, and other sweet-smelling woods, had completely done away with the damp, chilly, heavy atmosphere that pervaded the long disused rooms when she was in them before.

In the splendid dining-room she found a table sumptuously spread, and her father already seated at it, in his large, high-backed, richly carved chair, behind which stood two lackeys, in superb liveries. As she approached him she made a most graceful curtsey, which had nothing in the least theatrical about it, and would have met with approbation even in courtly circles. A servant was holding the chair destined for her, and with some timidity, but no apparent embarrassment, she took her seat opposite to the prince. She was served with soup and wine, and then with course after course of delicate, tempting viands; but she could not eat her heart was too full—her nerves were still quivering, from the terror and excitement of the preceding day and night.

She was dazzled and agitated by this sudden change of fortune, anxious about her brother, now lying at the point of death, and, above all, troubled and grieved at her separation from her lover—so she could only make a pretence of dining, and played languidly with the food on her plate.

"You are eating nothing, my dear comtesse," said the prince, who had been furtively watching her; "I pray you try to do better with this bit of partridge I am sending you."

At this title of comtesse, spoken as a matter of course, and in such a kind, tender

tone, Isabelle looked up at the prince with astonishment written in her beautiful, deep blue eyes, which seemed to plead timidly for an explanation.

“Yes, Comtesse de Lineuil; it is the title which goes with an estate I have settled on you, my dear child, and which has long been destined for you. The name of Isabelle alone, charming though it be, is not suitable for my daughter.”

Isabelle, yielding to the impulse of the moment—as the servants had retired and she was alone with her father—rose, and going to his side, knelt down and kissed his hand, in token of gratitude for his delicacy and generosity.

“Rise, my child,” said he, very tenderly, and much moved, “and return to your place. What I have done is only just. It calls for no thanks. I should have done it long ago if it had been in my power. In the terrible circumstances that have reunited us, my dear daughter, I can see the finger of Providence, and through them I have learned your worth. To your virtue alone it is due that a horrible crime was not committed, and I love and honour you for it; even though it may cost me the loss of my only son. But God will be merciful and preserve his life, so that he may repent of having so persecuted and outraged the purest innocence. Maître Laurent, in whom I have every confidence, gives me some hope this morning; and when I looked at Vallombreuse—from the threshold of his room only—I could see that the seal of death was no longer upon his face.”

They were interrupted by the servants, bringing in water to wash their fingers, in a magnificent golden bowl, and this ceremony having been duly gone through with, the prince threw down his napkin and led the way into the adjoining salon, signing to Isabelle to follow him. He seated himself in a large arm-chair in front of the blazing wood fire, and bidding Isabelle place herself close beside him, took her hand tenderly between both of his, and looked long and searchingly at this lovely young daughter, so strangely restored to him. There was much of sadness mingled with the joy that shone in his eyes, for he was still very anxious about his son, whose life was

in such jeopardy; but as he gazed upon Isabelle's sweet face the joy predominated, and he smiled very lovingly upon the new comtesse, as he began to talk to her of long past days.

"Doubtless, my beloved child, in the midst of the strange events that have brought us together, in such an odd, romantic, almost supernatural manner, the thought has suggested itself to your mind, that during all the years that have passed since your infancy I have not sought you out, and that chance alone has at last restored the long-lost child to her neglectful father. But you are so good and noble that I know you would not dwell upon such an idea, and I hope that you do not so misjudge me as to think me capable of such culpable neglect, now that you are getting a little better acquainted with me. As you must know, your mother, Cornelia, was excessively proud and high-spirited. She resented every affront, whether intended as such or not, with extraordinary violence, and when I was obliged, in spite of my most heartfelt wishes, to separate myself from her, and reluctantly submit to a marriage that I could not avoid, she obstinately refused to allow me to provide for her maintenance in comfort and luxury, as well as for you and your education. All that I gave her, and settled on her, she sent back to me with the most exaggerated disdain, and inexorably refused to receive again. I could not but admire, though I so deplored, her lofty spirit, and proud rejection of every benefit which I desired to confer upon her, and I left in the hands of a trusty agent, for her, the deeds of all the landed property and houses I had destined for her, as well as the money and jewels—so that she could at any time reclaim them, if she would—hoping that she might see fit to change her mind when the first flush of anger was over. But, to my great chagrin, she persisted in her refusal of everything, and changing her name, fled from Paris into the provinces; where she was said to have joined a roving band of comedians. Soon after that I was sent by my sovereign on several foreign missions that kept me long away from France, and I lost all trace of her and you. In vain were all my efforts to find you both, until at last I heard that she was dead. Then I

redoubled my diligence in the search for my little motherless daughter, whom I had so tenderly loved; but all in vain. No trace of her could I find. I heard, indeed, of many children among these strolling companies, and carefully investigated each case that came to my knowledge; but it always ended in disappointment. Several women, indeed, tried to palm off their little girls upon me as my child, and I had to be on my guard against fraud; but I never failed to sift the matter thoroughly, even though I knew that deceit was intended, lest I should unawares reject the dear little one I was so anxiously seeking. At last I was almost forced to conclude that you too had perished; yet a secret intuition always told me that you were still in the land of the living. I used to sit for hours and think of how sweet and lovely you were in infancy; how your little rosy fingers used to play with and pull my long mustache—which was black then, my dear—when I leaned over to kiss you in your cradle—recalling all your pretty, engaging little baby tricks, remembering how fond and proud I was of you, and grieving over the loss that I seemed to feel more and more acutely as the years went on. The birth of my son only made me long still more intensely for you, instead of consoling me for your loss, or banishing you from my memory, and when I saw him decked with rich laces and ribbons, like a royal babe, and playing with his jewelled rattle, I would think with an aching heart that perhaps at that very moment my dear little daughter was suffering from cold and hunger, or the unkind treatment of those who had her in charge. Then I regretted deeply that I had not taken you away from your mother in the very beginning, and had you brought up as my daughter should be—but when you were born I did not dream of our parting. As years rolled on new anxieties tortured me. I knew that you would be beautiful, and how much you would have to suffer from the dissolute men who hover about all young and pretty actresses—my blood would boil as I thought of the insults and affronts to which you might be subjected, and from which I was powerless to shield you—no words can tell what I suffered. Affecting a taste for the theatre that I did not possess, I never let an opportunity pass to see every company

of players that I could hear of—hoping to find you at last among them. But although I saw numberless young actresses, about your age, not one of them could have been you, my dear child—of that I was sure. So at last I abandoned the hope of finding my long-lost daughter, though it was a bitter trial to feel that I must do so. The princess, my wife, had died three years after our marriage, leaving me only one child—Vallombreuse—whose ungovernable disposition has always given me much trouble and anxiety. A few days ago, at Saint Germain, I heard some of the courtiers speak in terms of high praise of Hérode's troupe, and what they said made me determine to go and see one of their representations without delay, while my heart beat high with a new hope—for they especially lauded a young actress, called Isabelle; whose graceful, modest, high-bred air they declared to be irresistible, and her acting everything that could be desired—adding that she was as virtuous as she was beautiful, and that the boldest libertines respected her immaculate purity. Deeply agitated by a secret presentiment, I hastened back to Paris, and went to the theatre that very night. There I saw you, my darling, and though it would seem to be impossible for even a father's eye to recognise, in the beautiful young woman of twenty, the babe that he had kissed in its cradle, and had never beheld since, still I knew you instantly—the very moment you came in sight—and I perceived, with a heart swelling with happiness and thankfulness, that you were all that I could wish. Moreover, I recognised the face of an old actor, who had been I knew in the troupe that Cornelia joined when she fled from Paris, and I resolved to address myself first to him; so as not to startle you by too abrupt a disclosure of my claims upon you. But when I sent the next morning to the hotel in the Rue Dauphine, I learned that Hérode's troupe had just gone to give a representation at a château in the environs of Paris, and would be absent three days. I should have endeavoured to wait patiently for their return, had not a brave fellow, who used to be in my service, and has my interest at heart, come to inform me that the Duke of Vallombreuse, being madly in love with a young actress named Isabelle, who resisted his suit with the utmost

firmness and determination, had arranged to gain forcible possession of her in the course of the day's journey—the expedition into the country being gotten up for that express purpose—that he had a band of hired ruffians engaged to carry out his nefarious purpose and bring his unhappy victim to this château—and that he had come to warn me, fearing lest serious consequences should ensue to my son, as the young actress would be accompanied by brave and faithful friends, who were armed, and would defend her to the death. This terrible news threw me into a frightful state of anxiety and excitement. Feeling sure, as I did, that you were my own daughter, I shuddered at the thought of the horrible crime that I might not be in time to prevent, and without one moment's delay set out for this place—suffering such agony by the way as I do not like even to think of. You were already delivered from danger when I arrived, as you know, and without having suffered anything beyond the alarm and dread—which must have been terrible indeed, my poor child! And then, the amethyst ring on your finger confirmed, past any possibility of doubt, what my heart had told me, when first my eyes beheld you in the theatre."

"I pray you to believe, dear lord and father," answered Isabelle, "that I have never accused you of anything, nor considered myself neglected. Accustomed from my infancy to the roving life of the troupe I was with, I neither knew nor dreamed of any other. The little knowledge that I had of the world made me realize that I should be wrong in wishing to force myself upon an illustrious family, obliged doubtless by powerful reasons, of which I knew nothing, to leave me in obscurity. The confused remembrance I had of my origin sometimes inspired me—when I was very young—with a certain pride, and I would say to myself, when I noticed the disdainful air with which great ladies looked down upon us poor actresses, I also am of noble birth. But I outgrew those fancies, and only preserved an invincible self-respect, which I have always cherished. Nothing in the world would have induced me to dishonour the illustrious blood that flows in my veins. The disgraceful license of the coulisses, and the loathsome gallantries lavished upon all

actresses, even those who are not comely, disgusted me from the first, and I have lived in the theatre almost as if in a convent. The good old pedant has been like a watchful father to me, and as for Hérode, he would have severely chastised any one who dared to touch me with the tip of his finger, or even to pronounce a vulgar word in my presence. Although they are only obscure actors, they are very honourable, worthy men, and I trust you will be good enough to help them if they ever find themselves in need of assistance. I owe it partly to them that I can lift my forehead for your kiss without a blush of shame, and proudly declare myself worthy, so far as purity is concerned, to be your daughter. My only regret is to have been the innocent cause of the misfortune that has overtaken the duke, your son. I could have wished to enter your family, my dear father, under more favourable auspices."

"You have nothing to reproach yourself with, my sweet child, for you could not divine these mysteries, which have been suddenly disclosed by a combination of circumstances that would be considered romantic and improbable, even in a novel; and my joy at finding you as worthy in every way to be my beloved and honoured daughter, as if you had not lived amid all the dangers of such a career, makes up for the pain and anxiety caused by the illness and danger of my son. Whether he lives or dies, I shall never for one moment blame you for anything in connection with his misfortune. In any event, it was your virtue and courage that saved him from being guilty of a crime that I shudder to contemplate. And now, tell me, who was the handsome young man among your liberators who seemed to direct the attack, and who wounded Vallombreuse? An actor doubtless, though it appeared to me that he had a very noble bearing, and magnificent courage."

"Yes, my dear father," Isabelle replied, with a most lovely and becoming blush, "he is an actor, a member of our troupe; but if I may venture to betray his secret, which is already known to the Duke of Vallombreuse, I will tell you that the so-called Captain Fracasse conceals under his mask a noble countenance, as indeed you already know, and under his theatrical pseudonym, the name of an illustrious

family."

"True!" rejoined the prince, "I have heard something about that already. It would certainly have been astonishing if an ordinary, low-born actor had ventured upon so bold and rash a course as running counter to a Duke of Vallombreuse, and actually entering into a combat with him; it needs noble blood for such daring acts. Only a gentleman can conquer a gentleman, just as a diamond can only be cut by a diamond."

The lofty pride of the aged prince found much consolation in the knowledge that his son had not been attacked and wounded by an adversary of low origin; there was nothing compromising in a duel between equals, and he drew a deep breath of relief at thought of it.

"And pray, what is the real name of this valiant champion?" smilingly asked the prince, with a roguish twinkle in his dark eyes—"this dauntless knight, and brave defender of innocence and purity!"

"He is the Baron de Sigognac," Isabelle replied blushingly, with a slight trembling perceptible in her sweet, low voice. "I reveal his name fearlessly to you, my dear father, for you are both too just and too generous to visit upon his head the disastrous consequences of a victory that he deplores."

"De Sigognac?" said the prince. "I thought that ancient and illustrious family was extinct. Is he not from Gascony?"

"Yes; his home is in the neighbourhood of Dax."

"Exactly—and the de Sigognacs have an appropriate coat of arms—three golden storks on an azure field. Yes, it is as I said, an ancient and illustrious family—one of the oldest and most honourable in France. Paramede de Sigognac figured gloriously in the first crusade. A Raimbaud de Sigognac, the father of this young man without doubt, was the devoted friend and companion of Henri IV, in his youth, but was not often seen at court in later years. It was said that he was embarrassed financially, I

remember."

"So much so, that when our troupe sought refuge of a stormy night under his roof, we found his son living in a half ruined château, haunted by bats and owls, where his youth was passing in sadness and misery. We persuaded him to come away with us, fearing that he would die there of starvation and melancholy—but I never saw misfortune so bravely borne."

"Poverty is no disgrace," said the prince, "and any noble house that has preserved its honour unstained may rise again from its ruins to its ancient height of glory and renown. But why did not the young baron apply to some of his father's old friends in his distress? or lay his case before the king, who is the natural refuge of all loyal gentlemen under such circumstances?"

"Misfortunes such as his are apt to breed timidity, even with the bravest," Isabelle replied, "and pride deters many a man from betraying his misery to the world. When the Baron de Sigognac consented to accompany us to Paris, he hoped to find some opportunity there to retrieve his fallen fortunes; but it has not presented itself. In order not to be an expense to the troupe, he generously and nobly insisted upon taking the place of one of the actors, who died on the way, and who was a great loss to us. As he could appear upon the stage always masked, he surely did not compromise his dignity by it."

"Under this theatrical disguise, I think that, without being a sorcerer, I can detect a little bit of romance, eh?" said the prince, with a mischievous smile. "But I will not inquire too closely; I know how good and true you are well enough not to take alarm at any respectful tribute paid to your charms. I have not been with you long enough yet as a father, my sweet child, to venture upon sermonizing."

As he paused, Isabelle raised her lovely eyes, in which shone the purest innocence and the most perfect loyalty, to his, and met his questioning gaze unflinchingly. The rosy flush which the first mention of de Sigognac's name had called up was gone,

and her countenance showed no faintest sign of embarrassment or shame. In her pure heart the most searching looks of a father, of God himself, could have found nothing to condemn. Just at this point the doctor's assistant was announced, who brought a most favourable report from the sick-room. He was charged to tell the prince that his son's condition was eminently satisfactory—a marked change for the better having taken place; and that Maître Laurent considered the danger past—believing that his recovery was now only a question of time.

A few days later, Vallombreuse, propped up on his pillows, received a visit from his faithful and devoted friend, the Chevalier de Vidalinc, whom he had not been permitted to see earlier. The prince was sitting by the bedside, affectionately watching every flitting expression on his son's face, which was pathetically thin and pale, but handsomer than ever; because the old haughty, fierce look had vanished, and a soft light, that had never been in them before, shone in his beautiful eyes, whereat his father's heart rejoiced exceedingly. Isabelle stood at the other side of the bed, and the young duke had clasped his thin, startlingly white fingers round her hand. As he was forbidden to speak, save in monosyllables—because of his injured lung—he took this means of testifying his sympathy with her, who had been the involuntary cause of his being wounded and in danger of losing his life, and thus made her understand that he cherished no resentments. The affectionate brother had replaced the fiery lover, and his illness, in calming his ardent passion, had contributed not a little to make the transition a less difficult one than it could possibly have been otherwise. Isabelle was now for him really and only the Comtesse de Lineuil, his dear sister. He nodded in a friendly way to Vidalinc, and disengaged his hand for a moment from Isabelle's to give it to him—it was all that the doctor would allow—but his eyes were eloquent enough to make up for his enforced silence.

In the course of a few weeks, Vallombreuse, who had gained strength rapidly, was able to leave his bed and recline upon a lounge near the open window; so as to enjoy

the mild, delightful air of spring, that brought colour to his cheeks and light to his eyes. Isabelle was often with him, and read aloud for hours together to entertain him; as Maître Laurent's orders were strict that he should not talk, even yet, any more than was actually necessary. One day, when Isabelle had finished a chapter in the volume from which she was reading to him, and was about to begin another, he interrupted her, and said, "My dear sister, that book is certainly very amusing, and the author a man of remarkable wit and talent; but I must confess that I prefer your charming conversation to your delightful reading. Do you know, I would not have believed it possible to gain so much, in losing all hope of what I desired more ardently than I had ever done anything in my whole life before. The brother is very much more kindly treated than the suitor—are you aware of that? You are as sweet and amiable to the one as you were severe and unapproachable to the other. I find in this calm, peaceful affection, charms that I had never dreamed of, and you reveal to me a new side of the feminine character, hitherto utterly unknown to me. Carried away by fiery passions, and irritated to madness by any opposition, I was like the wild huntsman of the ancient legend, who stopped for no obstacle, but rode recklessly over everything in his path. I looked upon whatever beautiful woman I was in pursuit of as my legitimate prey. I scouted the very idea of failure, and deemed myself irresistible. At the mention of virtue, I only shrugged my shoulders, and I think I may say, without too much conceit, to the only woman I ever pursued who did not yield to me, that I had reason not to put much faith in it. My mother died when I was a mere baby; you, my sweet sister, were not near me, and I have never known, until now, all the purity, tenderness, and sublime courage of which your sex is capable. I chanced to see you. An irresistible attraction, in which, perhaps, the unknown tie of blood had its influence, drew me to you, and for the first time in my life a feeling of respect and esteem mingled with my passion. Your character delighted me, even when you drove me to despair. I could not but secretly approve and admire the modest and courteous firmness with which you rejected my

homage. The more decidedly you repulsed me, the more I felt that you were worthy of my adoration. Anger and admiration succeeded each other in my heart, and even in my most violent paroxysms of rage I always respected you. I descried the angel in the woman, and bowed to the ascendency of a celestial purity. Now I am happy and blessed indeed; for I have in you precisely what I needed, without knowing it—this pure affection, free from all earthly taint—unalterable—eternal. I possess at last the love of a soul."

"Yes, my dear brother, it is yours," Isabelle replied; "and it is a great source of happiness to me that I am able to assure you of it. You have in me a devoted sister and friend, who will love you doubly to make up for the years we have lost—above all, now that you have promised me to correct the faults that have so grieved and alarmed our dear father, and to exhibit only the good qualities of which you have plenty."

"Oh! you little preacher," cried Vallombreuse, with a bright, admiring smile; "how you take advantage of my weakness. However, it is perfectly true that I have been a dreadful monster, but I really do mean to do better in future—if not for love of virtue itself, at least to avoid seeing my charming sister put on a severe, disapproving air, at some atrocious escapade of mine. Still, I fear that I shall always be Folly, as you will be Reason."

"If you will persist in paying me such high-flown compliments," said Isabelle, with a little shrug of her pretty shoulders, "I shall certainly resume the reading, and you will have to listen to a long story that the corsair is just about to relate to the beautiful princess, his captive, in the cabin of his galley."

"Oh, no! surely I do not deserve such a severe punishment as that. Even at the risk of appearing garrulous, I do so want to talk a little. That confounded doctor has kept me mute long enough in all conscience, and I am tired to death of having the seal of silence upon my lips, like a statue of Hippocrates."

“But I am afraid you may do yourself harm; remember that your wound is scarcely healed yet, and the injured lung is still very irritable. Maître Laurent laid such stress upon my reading to you, so that you should keep quiet, and give your chest a good chance to get strong and well again.”

“Maître Laurent doesn’t know what he’s talking about, and only wants to prolong his own importance to me. My lungs work as well as ever they did. I feel perfectly myself again, and I’ve a great mind to order my horse and go for a canter in the forest.”

“You had better talk than do such a wildly imprudent thing as that; it is certainly less dangerous.”

“I shall very soon be about again, my sweet little sister, and then I shall have the pleasure of introducing you into the society suitable to your rank—where your incomparable grace and beauty will create a sensation, and bring crowds of adorers to your feet. From among them you will be able to select a husband, eh?” “I can have no desire to do anything of that kind, Vallombreuse, and pray do not think this the foolish declaration of a girl who would be very sorry to be taken at her word. I am entirely in earnest, I do assure you. I have bestowed my hand so often in the last act of the pieces I have played that I am in no hurry to do it in reality. I do not wish for anything better than to remain quietly here with the prince and yourself.”

“But, my dear girl, a father and brother will not always content you—do not think it! Such affection cannot satisfy the demands of the heart forever.”

“It will be enough for me, however, and if some day they fail me, I can take refuge in a convent.”

“Heaven forbid! that would be carrying austerity too far indeed. I pray you never to mention it again, if you have any regard for my peace of mind. And now tell me, my sweet little sister, what do you think of my dear friend, the Chevalier de Vidalinc? does not he seem to be possessed of every qualification necessary to make a good

husband?”

“Doubtless, and the woman that he marries will have a right to consider herself fortunate but however charming and desirable your friend may be, my dear Vallombreuse, I shall never be that woman.”

“Well, let him pass, then—but tell me what you think of the Marquis de l’Estang, who came to see me the other day, and gazed spell-bound at my lovely sister all the time he was here. He was so overwhelmed by your surpassing grace, so dazzled by your exquisite beauty, that he was struck dumb, and when he tried to pay you pretty compliments, did nothing but stammer and blush. Aside from this timidity, which made him appear to great disadvantage, and which your ladyship should readily excuse, since you yourself were the cause of it, the marquis is an accomplished and estimable gentleman. He is handsome, young, of high birth and great wealth. He would do capitally for my fair sister, and is sure to address himself to the prince—if indeed he has not already done so—as an aspirant to the honour of an alliance with her.”

“As I have the honour of belonging to this illustrious family,” said Isabelle a little impatiently, for she was exceedingly annoyed by this banter, “too much humility would not become me, therefore I will not say that I consider myself unworthy of such an alliance; but if the Marquis de l’Estang should ask my hand of my father, I would refuse him. I have told you, my dear brother, more than once, that I do not wish to marry—and you know it too—so pray don’t tease me any more about it.”

“Oh! what a fierce, determined little woman is this fair sister of mine. Diana herself was not more inaccessible, in the forests and valleys of Haemus—yet, if the naughty mythological stories may be believed, she did at last smile upon a certain Endymion. You are vexed, because I casually propose some suitable candidates for the honour of your hand; but you need not be, for, if they do not please you, we will hunt up one who will.”

“I am not vexed, my dear brother, but you are certainly talking far too much for an invalid, and I shall tell Maître Laurent to reprimand you, or not permit you to have the promised bit of fowl for your supper.”

“Oh! if that’s the case I will desist at once,” said Vallombreuse, with a droll air of submission, “for I’m as hungry as an ogre—but rest assured of one thing, my charming sister: No one shall select your husband but myself.”

To put an end to this teasing, Isabelle began to read the corsair’s long story, without paying any attention to the indignant protests that were made, and Vallombreuse, to revenge himself, finally closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep; which feigned slumber soon became real, and Isabelle, perceiving that it was so, put aside her book and quietly stole away.

This conversation, in which, under all his mischievous banter, the duke seemed to have a definite and serious purpose in view, worried Isabelle very much, in spite of her efforts to banish it from her mind. Could it be that Vallombreuse was nursing a secret resentment against de Sigognac? He had never once spoken his name, or referred to him in any way, since he was wounded by him; and was he trying to place an insurmountable barrier between his sister and the baron, by bringing about her marriage with another? or was he simply trying to find out whether the actress transformed to a countess, had changed in sentiments as well as in rank? Isabelle could not answer these questions satisfactorily to herself. As she was the duke’s sister, of course the rivalry between him and de Sigognac could no longer exist; but, on the other hand, it was difficult to imagine that such a haughty, vindictive character as the young duke’s could have forgotten, or forgiven, the ignominy of his first defeat at the baron’s hands, and still less of the second more disastrous encounter. Although their relative positions were changed, Vallombreuse, in his heart, would doubtless always hate de Sigognac—even if he had magnanimity enough to forgive him, it could scarcely be expected that he should also love him,

and be willing to welcome him as a member of his family. No, all hope of such a reconciliation must be abandoned. Besides, she feared that the prince, her father, would never be able to regard with favour the man who had imperilled the life of his only son. These sad thoughts threw poor Isabelle into a profound melancholy, which she in vain endeavoured to shake off. As long as she considered that her position as an actress would be an obstacle to de Sigognac, she had resolutely repelled the idea of a marriage with him, but now that an unhoped-for, undreamed-of stroke of destiny had heaped upon her all the good things that heart could desire, she would have loved to reward, with the gift of her hand and fortune, the faithful lover who had addressed her when she was poor and lowly—it seemed an actual meanness, to her generous spirit, not to share her prosperity with the devoted companion of her misery. But all that she could do was to be faithful to him—for she dared not say a word in his favour, either to the prince or to Vallombreuse.

Very soon the young duke was well enough to join his father and sister at meals, and he manifested such respectful and affectionate deference to the prince, and such an ingenuous and delicate tenderness towards Isabelle, that it was evident he had, in spite of his apparent frivolity, a mind and character very superior to what one would have expected to find in such a licentious, ungovernable youth as he had been, and which gave promise of an honourable and useful manhood. Isabelle took her part modestly—but with a very sweet dignity, that sat well upon her—in the conversation at the table, and in the salon, and her remarks were so to the point, so witty, and so apropos, that the prince was astonished as well as charmed, and grew daily more proud of and devoted to his new treasure; finding a happiness and satisfaction he had longed for all his life in the affection and devotion of his children.

At last Vallombreuse was pronounced well enough to mount his horse, and go for a ride in the forest—which he had long been sighing for—and Isabelle gladly consented to bear him company. They looked a wonderfully handsome pair, as they

rode leisurely through the leafy arcades. But there was one very marked difference between them.

The young man's countenance was radiant with happiness and smiles, but the girl's face was clouded over with an abiding melancholy. Occasionally her brother's lively sallies would bring a faint smile to her sweet lips, but they fell back immediately into the mournful droop that had become habitual with them. Vallombreuse apparently did not perceive it—though in reality he was well aware of it, and of its cause—and was full of fun and frolic.

"Oh! what a delicious thing it is to live," he cried, "yet how seldom we think of the exquisite enjoyment there is in the simple act of breathing," and he drew a long, deep breath, as if he never could get enough of the soft, balmy air. "The trees surely were never so green before, the sky so blue, or the flowers so fragrant. I feel as if I had been born into the world only yesterday, and was looking upon nature for the first time to-day. I never appreciated it before. When I remember that I might even now be lying, stiff and stark, under a fine marble monument, and that instead of that I am riding through an elysium, beside my darling sister, who has really learned to love me, I am too divinely happy. I do not even feel my wound any more. I don't believe that I ever was wounded. And now for a gallop, for I'm sure that our good father is wearying for us at home."

In spite of Isabelle's remonstrances he put spurs to his horse, and she could not restrain hers when its companion bounded forward, so off they went at a swift pace, and never drew rein until they reached the château. As he lifted his sister down from her saddle, Vallombreuse said, "Now, after to-day's achievement, I can surely be treated like a big boy, and get permission to go out by myself."

"What! you want to go away and leave us already? and scarcely well yet, you bad boy!"

"Even so, my sweet sister; I want to make a little journey that will take several

days," said Vallombreuse negligently.

Accordingly, the very next morning he departed, after having taken an affectionate leave of the prince, his father; who did not oppose his going, as Isabelle had confidently expected, but seemed, on the contrary, to approve of it heartily. After receiving many charges to be careful and prudent, from his sister, which he dutifully promised to remember and obey, the young duke bade her good-bye also, and said, in a mysterious, yet most significant way,

"Au revoir, my sweet little sister, you will be pleased with what I am about to do." And Isabelle sought in vain for the key to the enigma.

CHAPTER XIX. NETTLES AND COBWEBS

The worthy tyrant's advice was sensible and good, and de Sigognac resolved to follow it without delay. Since Isabelle's departure, no attraction existed for him in the troupe, and he was very glad of a valid pretext for quitting it; though he could not leave his humble friends without some regrets. It was necessary that he should disappear for a while—plunge into obscurity, until the excitement consequent upon the violent death of the young Duke of Vallombreuse should be forgotten in some new tragedy in real life.

So, after bidding farewell to the worthy comedians, who had shown him so much kindness, he departed from the gay capital—mounted on a stout pony, and with a tolerably well-filled purse—his share of the receipts of the troupe, which he had fairly earned. By easy stages he travelled slowly towards his own ruined château. After the storm the bird flies home to its nest, no matter how ragged and torn it may be. It was the only refuge open to him, and in the midst of his despondency he felt a sort of sad pleasure at the thought of returning to his ancestral home—desolate and forlorn as it was—where it would have been better, perhaps, for him to have quietly remained—for his fortunes were not improved, and this last crowning disaster had

been ruinous to all his hopes and prospects of happiness.

“Ah, well!” said he to himself, sorrowfully, as he jogged slowly on, “it was predestined that I should die of hunger and ennui within those crumbling walls, and under my poor, dilapidated, old roof, that lets the rain run through it like a huge sieve. No one can escape his destiny, and I shall accomplish mine. I am doomed to be the last de Sigognac.”

Then came visions of what might have been, that made the sad present seem even darker by contrast; and his burden was well-nigh too heavy for him to bear, when he remembered all Isabelle’s goodness and loveliness—now lost to him forever. No wonder that his eyes were often wet with tears, and that there was no brightness even in the sunshine for him.

It is needless to describe in detail a journey that lasted twenty days, and was not marked by any remarkable incidents or adventures. It is enough to say that one fine evening de Sigognac saw from afar the lofty towers of his ancient château, illuminated by the setting sun, and shining out in bold relief against the soft purple of the evening sky; whilst one of the few remaining casements had caught the fiery sunset glow, and looked like a great carbuncle set in the fine facade of the stately old castle. This sight aroused a strange tenderness and agitation in the young baron’s breast. It was true that he had suffered long and acutely in that dreary mansion, yet after all it was very dear to him—far more than he knew before he had quitted it—and he was deeply moved at seeing it again. In a few moments more the glorious god of day had sunk behind the western horizon, and the château seemed to retreat, until it became scarcely perceptible as the light faded, forming only a vague, gray blot in the distance as the gloaming succeeded to the glow. But de Sigognac knew every step of the way perfectly, and soon turned from the highway into the neglected, grass-grown road that led to the château. In the profound stillness, which seemed wonderfully peaceful and pleasant to him, he fancied that he could

distinguish the distant barking of a dog, and that it sounded like Miraut. He stopped to listen; yes, there could be no doubt about it, and it was approaching. The baron gave a clear, melodious whistle—a signal well known of old to Miraut-and in a few moments the faithful dog, running as fast as his poor old legs could carry him, burst through a break in the hedge—panting, barking, almost sobbing for joy. He strove to jump up on the horse's neck to get at his beloved master; he was beside himself with delight, and manifested it in the most frantic manner, whilst de Sigognac bent down to pat his head and try to quiet his wild transports. After bearing his master company a little way, Miraut set off again at full speed, to announce the good news to the others at the château—that is to say, to Pierre, Bayard, and Beelzebub—and bounding into the kitchen where the old servant was sitting, lost in sad thoughts, he barked in such a significant way that Pierre knew at once that something unusual had happened.

"Can it be possible that the young master is coming? said he aloud, rising, in compliance with Miraut's wishes, who was pulling at the skirts of his coat, and imploring him with his eyes to bestir himself and follow him. As it was quite dark by this time, Pierre lighted a pine torch, which he carried with him, and as he turned into the road its ruddy light suddenly flashed upon de Sigognac and his horse.

"Is it really you, my lord?" cried Pierre, joyfully, as he caught sight of his young master; "Miraut had tried to tell me of your arrival in his own way before I left the house, but as I had not heard anything about your even thinking of coming, I feared that he might be mistaken. Welcome home to your own domain, my beloved master! We are overjoyed to see you."

"Yes, my good Pierre, it is really I, and not my wraith. Miraut was not mistaken. Here I am again, if not richer than when I went away, at least all safe and sound. Come now, lead the way with your torch, and we will go into the château."

Pierre, not without considerable difficulty, opened the great door, and the Baron de

Sigognac rode slowly through the ancient portico, fantastically illuminated by the flaring torchlight, in which the three sculptured storks overhead seemed to be flapping their wings, as if in joyful salutation to the last representative of the family they had symbolized for so many centuries. Then a loud, impatient whinny, like the blast of a trumpet, was heard ringing out on the still night air, as Bayard, in his stable, caught the welcome sound of his master's voice.

"Yes, yes, I hear you, my poor old Bayard," cried de Sigognac, as he dismounted in the court, and threw the bridle to Pierre; "I am coming to say how d'you do," and as he turned he stumbled over Beelzebub, who was trying to rub himself against his master's legs, purring and mewing alternately to attract his attention. The baron stooped down, took the old black cat up in his arms, and tenderly caressed him as he advanced towards the stables; then put him down gently as he reached Bayard's stall, and another touching scene of affectionate greeting was enacted. The poor old pony laid his head lovingly on his master's shoulder, and actually tried to kick up his hind legs in a frisky way in honour of the great event; also, he received the horse that de Sigognac had ridden all the way from Paris, and which was put in the stall beside his own, very politely, and seemed pleased to have a companion in his solitary grandeur.

"And now that I have responded to the endearments of my dumb friends," said the baron to Pierre, "we will go into the kitchen, and examine into the condition of your larder. I had but a poor breakfast this morning, and no dinner at all, being anxious to push on and reach my journey's end before nightfall. I am as hungry as a bear, and will be glad of anything, no matter what."

"I have not much to put before you, my lord, and I fear that you will find it but sorry fare after the delicacies you must have been accustomed to in Paris; but though it will not be tempting, nor over savoury, it will at least satisfy your hunger."

"That is all that can be required of any food," answered de Sigognac, "and I am not

as ungrateful as you seem to think, my good Pierre, to the frugal fare of my youth, which has certainly made me healthy, vigorous, and strong. Bring out what you have, and serve it as proudly as if it were of the choicest and daintiest; I will promise to do honour to it, for I am desperately hungry."

The old servant bustled about joyously, and quickly had the table ready for his master; then stood behind his chair, while he ate and drank with a traveller's appetite, as proudly erect as if he had been a grand major-domo waiting on a prince. According to the old custom, Miraut and Beelzebub, stationed on the right and on the left, watched their master's every motion, and received a share of everything that was on the table. The great kitchen was lighted, not very brilliantly, by a torch, stuck in an iron bracket just inside the broad, open chimney, so that the smoke should escape through it and not fill the room, and the scene was so exactly a counterpart of the one described at the beginning of this narrative, that the baron, struck with the perfect resemblance, fancied that he must have been dreaming, and had never quitted his ancient château at all. Everything was precisely as he had left it, excepting that the nettles and weeds had grown a little taller, and the cobweb draperies a little more voluminous; all else was unchanged. Unconsciously lapsing into the old ways, de Sigognac fell into a deep reverie after he had finished his simple repast, which Pierre, as of old, respected, and even Miraut and Beelzebub did not venture to intrude upon. All that had occurred since he last sat at his own table passed in review before him, but seemed like adventures that he had read of, not actually participated in himself. It had all passed into the background. Captain Fracasse, already nearly obliterated, appeared like a pale spectre in the far distance; his combats with the Duke of Vallombreuse seemed equally unreal. In fine, everything that he had seen, done, and suffered, had sunk into shadowy vagueness; but his love for Isabelle had undergone no change; it had neither diminished nor grown cold; it was as passionate and all-absorbing as ever; it was his very life; yet rather like an aspiration of the soul than a real passion, since with it all he knew that

the angelic being who was its object, and whom he worshipped from afar, could never, never be his. The wheels of his chariot, which for a brief space had turned aside into a new track, were back in the old rut again, and realizing that there could be no further escape from it possible for him, he gave way sullenly to a despairing, stolid sort of resignation, that he had no heart to struggle against, but yielded to it passively; blaming himself the while for having presumed to indulge in a season of bright hopes and delicious dreams. Why the devil should such an unlucky fellow as he had always been venture to aspire to happiness? It was all foolishness, and sure to end in bitter disappointment; but he had had his lesson now, and would be wiser for the future.

He sat perfectly motionless for a long time, plunged in a sad reverie—sunk in a species of torpor; but he roused himself at last, and perceiving that his faithful old follower's eyes were fixed upon him, full of timid questioning that he did not venture to put into words, briefly related to him the principal incidents of his journey up to the capital, and his short stay there. When he graphically described his two duels with the Duke of Vallombreuse—the old man, filled with pride and delight at the proficiency of his beloved pupil, could not restrain his enthusiasm, and snatching up a stick gave vigorous illustrations of all the most salient points of the encounters as the baron delineated them, ending up with a wild flourish and a shout of triumph.

"Alas! my good Pierre," said he, with a sigh, when quiet was restored, "you taught me how to use my sword only too well. My unfortunate victory has been my ruin, and has sent me back, hopeless and bereaved, to this poor old crumbling château of mine, where I am doomed to drag out the weary remainder of my days in sorrow and misery. I am peculiarly unhappy, in that my very triumphs have only made matters worse for me—it would have been better far for me, and for all, if I had been wounded, or even killed, in this last disastrous encounter, instead of my rival and enemy, the young Duke of Vallombreuse."

"The de Sigognacs are never beaten," said the old retainer loftily. "No matter what may come of it, I am glad, my dear young master, that you killed that insolent duke. The whole thing was conducted in strict accordance with the code of honour—what more could be desired? How could any valiant gentleman object to die gloriously, sword in hand, of a good, honest wound, fairly given? He should consider himself most fortunate."

"Ah well! perhaps you are right—I will not dispute you," said de Sigognac, smiling secretly at the old man's philosophy. "But I am very tired, and would like to go to my own room now—will you light the lamp, my good Pierre, and lead the way?"

Pierre obeyed, and the baron, preceded by his old servant and followed by his old dog and cat, slowly ascended the ancient staircase. The quaint frescoes were gradually fading, growing ever paler and more indistinct, and there were new stains on the dull blue sky of the vaulted ceiling, where the rain and melting snow of winter storms had filtered through from the dilapidated roof. The ruinous condition of everything in and about the crumbling old château, to which de Sigognac had been perfectly accustomed before he quitted it, and taken as a matter of course, now struck him forcibly, and increased his dejection. He saw in it the sad and inevitable decadence of his race, and said to himself, "If these ancient walls had any pity for the last forlorn remnant of the family they have sheltered for centuries, they would fall in and bury me in their ruins."

When he reached the landing at the head of the stairs he took the lamp from Pierre's hand, bade him good-night and dismissed him—not willing that even his faithful old servant, who had cared for him ever since his birth, should witness his overpowering emotion. He walked slowly through the great banqueting hall, where the comedians had supped on that memorable night, and the remembrance of that gay scene rendered the present dreary solitude and silence more terrible than they had ever seemed to him before. The death-like stillness was only broken by the horrid

gnawing of a rat somewhere in the wall, and the old family portraits glared down at him reproachfully, as he passed on below them with listless step and downcast eyes, oblivious of everything but his own deep misery, and his yearning for his lost Isabelle. As he came under the last portrait of all, that of his own sweet young mother, he suddenly looked up, and as his eyes rested on the calm, beautiful countenance—which had always worn such a pathetic, mournful expression that it used to make his heart ache to look at it in his boyish days—it seemed to smile upon him. He was startled for an instant, and then, thrilling with a strange, exquisite delight, and inspired with new hope and courage, he said in a low, earnest tone, "I accept my dear dead mother's smile as a good omen—perhaps all may not be lost even yet—I will try to believe so."

After a moment of silent thought, he went on into his own chamber, and put down the small lamp he carried, upon the little table, where still lay the stray volume of Ronsard's poems that he had been reading—or rather trying to read—on that tempestuous night when the old pedant knocked at his door. And there was his bed, where Isabelle had slept—the very pillow upon which her dear head had rested. He trembled as he stood and gazed at it, and saw, as in a vision, the perfect form lying there again in his place, and the sweetest face in all the world turned towards him, with a tender smile parting the ripe red lips, a rosy flush mantling in the delicate cheeks, and warm lovelight shining in the deep blue eyes. He stood spell-bound—afraid to move or breathe—and worshipped the beautiful vision with all his soul and strength, as if it had been indeed divine—but alas! it faded as suddenly as it had appeared, and he felt as if the doors of heaven had been shut upon him. He hastily undressed, and threw himself down in the place where Isabelle had actually reposed; passionately kissed the pillow that had been hallowed by the touch of her head, and bedewed it with his tears. He lay long awake, thinking of the angelic being who loved him and whom he adored, whilst Beelzebub, rolled up in a ball, slept at his feet, and snored like the traditional cat of Mahomet, that lay and

slumbered upon the prophet's sleeve.

When morning came, de Sigognac was more impressed than ever with the dilapidated, crumbling condition of his ancient mansion. Daylight has no mercy upon old age and ruins; it reveals with cruel distinctness the wrinkles, gray hairs, poverty, misery, stains, fissures, dust and mould in which they abound; but more kindly night softens or conceals all defects, with its friendly shade, spreading over them its mantle of darkness. The rooms that used to seem so vast to their youthful owner had shrunken, and looked almost small and insignificant to him now, to his extreme surprise and mortification; but he soon regained the feeling of being really at home, and resumed his former way of life completely; just as one goes back to an old garment, that has for a time been laid aside, and replaced by a new one. His days were spent thus: early in the morning he went to say a short prayer in the half-ruined chapel where his ancestors lay, ere he repaired to the kitchen where his simple breakfast awaited him; that disposed of, he and old Pierre fetched their swords, and fought their friendly duels; after which he mounted Bayard, or the pony he had brought home with him, and went off for long, solitary rides over the desolate Landes. Returning late in the afternoon he sat, sad and silent as of old, until his frugal supper was prepared, partook of it, also in silence, and then retired to his lonely chamber, where he tried to read some musty old volume which he knew by heart already, or else flung himself on his bed—never without kissing the sacred pillow that had supported Isabelle's beloved head—and lay there a prey to mournful and bitter meditations, until at last he could forget his troubles and grief in sleep. There was not a vestige left of the brilliant Captain Fracasse, nor of the high-spirited rival of the haughty Duke of Vallombreuse; the unfortunate young Baron de Sigognac had relapsed entirely into the sad-eyed, dejected master of Castle Misery.

One morning he sauntered listlessly down into the garden, which was wilder and more overgrown than ever—a tangled mass of weeds and brambles. He mechanically directed his steps towards the straggling eglantine that had had a little

rose ready for each of the fair visitors that accompanied him when last he was there, and was surprised and delighted to see that it again held forth, as if for his acceptance, two lovely little blossoms that had come out to greet him, and upon each of which a dewdrop sparkled amid the frail, delicately tinted petals. He was strangely moved and touched by the sight of these tiny wild roses, which awoke such tender, precious memories, and he repeated to himself, as he had often done before, the words in which Isabelle had confessed to him that she had furtively kissed the little flower, his offering, and dropped a tear upon it, and then secretly given him her own heart in exchange for it—surely the sweetest words ever spoken on this earth. He gently plucked one of the dainty little roses, passionately inhaled its delicate fragrance and pressed a kiss upon it, as if it had been her lips, which were not less sweet, and soft, and fresh. He had done nothing but think of Isabelle ever since their separation, and he fully realized now, if he had not before, how indispensable she was to his happiness. She was never out of his mind, waking or sleeping, for he dreamed of her every night, and his love grew fonder, if that were possible, as the weary days went on. She was so good and true, so pure and sweet, so beautiful, so everything that was lovely and desirable, “made of all creatures’ best,” a veritable angel in human guise. Ah! how passionately he loved her—how could he live without her? Yet he feared—he was almost forced to believe—that he had lost her irreparably, and that for him hope was dead. Those were terrible days for the poor, grief-stricken young baron, and he felt that he could not long endure such misery and live. Two or three months passed away thus, and one day when de Sigognac chanced to be in his own room, finishing a sonnet addressed to Isabelle, Pierre entered, and announced to his master that there was a gentleman without who wished to speak with him.

“A gentleman, who wants to see me!” exclaimed the astonished baron. “You must be either romancing or mad, my good Pierre! There is no gentleman in the world who can have anything to say to me. However, for the rarity of the thing, you may

bring in this extraordinary mortal—if such there really be, and you are not dreaming, as I shrewdly suspect. But tell me his name first, or hasn't he got any?"

"He declined to give it, saying that it would not afford your lordship any information," Pierre made answer, as he turned back and opened wide both leaves of the door.

Upon the threshold appeared a handsome young man, dressed in a rich and elegant travelling costume of chestnut brown cloth trimmed with green, and holding in his hand a broad felt hat with a long green plume; leaving his well shaped, proudly carried head fully exposed to view, as well as the delicate, regular features of a face worthy of an ancient Greek statue. The sight of this fine cavalier did not seem to make an agreeable impression upon de Sigognac, who turned very pale, and rushing to where his trusty sword was suspended, over the head of his bed, drew it from the scabbard, and turned to face the new-comer with the naked blade in his hand.

"By heaven, my lord duke, I believed that I had killed you!" he cried in excited tones. "Is it really you—your very self—or your wraith that stands before me?"

"It is really I—my very self—Hannibal de Vallombreuse, in the flesh, and no wraith; as far from being dead as possible," answered the young duke, with a radiant smile. "But put up that sword I pray you, my dear baron! We have fought twice already, you know, and surely that is enough. I do not come as an enemy, and if I have to reproach myself with some little sins against you, you have certainly had your revenge for them, so we are quits. To prove that my intentions are not hostile, but of the most friendly nature if you will so allow, I have brought credentials, in the shape of this commission, signed by the king, which gives you command of a regiment. My good father and I have reminded his majesty of the devotion of your illustrious ancestors to his royal ones, and I have ventured to bring you this good news in person. And now, as I am your guest, I pray you have something or other killed, I don't care what, and put on the spit to roast as quickly as may be—for the

love of God give me something to eat—I am starving. The inns are so far apart and so abominably bad down here that there might almost as well be none at all, and my baggage-wagon, stocked with edibles, is stuck fast in a quagmire a long way from this. So you see the necessities of the case."

"I am very much afraid, my lord duke, that the fare I can offer will seem to you only another form of revenge on my part," said de Sigognac with playful courtesy; "but do not, I beseech you, attribute to resentment the meagre repast for which I shall be obliged to claim your indulgence. You must know how gladly I would put before you a sumptuous meal if I could; and what we can give you will at least, as my good Pierre says, satisfy hunger, though it may not gratify the palate. And let me now say that your frank and cordial words touch me deeply, and find an echo in my inmost heart. I am both proud and happy to call you my friend—henceforth you will not have one more loyal and devoted than myself—and though you may not often have need of my services, they will be, none the less, always at your disposition. Halloa! Pierre! do you go, without a moment's delay, and hunt up some fowls, eggs, meat, whatever you can find, and try to serve a substantial meal to this gentleman, my friend, who is nearly dying with hunger, and is not used to it like you and I."

Pierre put in his pocket some of the money his master had sent him from Paris—which he had never touched before—mounted the pony, and galloped off to the nearest village in search of provisions. He found several fowls—such as they were—a splendid Bayonne ham, a few bottles of fine old wine, and by great good luck, discovered, at the priest's house, a grand big pâté of ducks' livers—a delicacy worthy of a bishop's or a prince's table—and which he had much difficulty to obtain from his reverence, who was a bit of a gourmand, at an almost fabulous price. But this was evidently a great occasion, and the faithful old servant would spare no pains to do it honour. In less than an hour he was at home again, and leaving the charge of the cooking to a capable woman he had found and sent out to the château, he immediately proceeded to set the table, in the ancient banqueting hall—gathering

together all the fine porcelain and dainty glass that yet remained intact in the two tall buffets—evidences of former splendour. But the profusion of gold and silver plate that used to adorn the festive board of the de Sigognacs had all been converted into coin of the realm long ago.

When at last the old servant announced that dinner was ready, the two young men took their places opposite to each other at table, and Vallombreuse, who was in the gayest, most jovial mood, attacked the viands with an eagerness and ferocity immensely diverting to his host. After devouring almost the whole of a chicken, which, it is true, seemed to have died of a consumption, there was so little flesh on its bones, he fell back upon the tempting, rosy slices of the delicate Bayonne ham, and then passed to the pâté of ducks' livers, which he declared to be supremely delicious, exquisite, ambrosial—food fit for the gods; and he found the sharp cheese, made of goat's milk, which followed, an excellent relish. He praised the wine, too—which was really very old and fine and drank it with great gusto, out of his delicate Venetian wine-glass. Once, when he caught sight of Pierre's bewildered, terrified look, as he heard his master address his merry guest as the Duke of Vallombreuse—who ought to be dead, if he was not—he fairly roared with laughter, and was as full of fun and frolic as a school-boy out for a holiday; Meantime de Sigognac, whilst he endeavoured to play the attentive host, and to respond as well as he could to the young duke's lively sallies, could not recover from his surprise at seeing him sitting there opposite to himself, as a guest at his own table—making himself very much at home, too, in the most charming, genial, easy way imaginable—and yet he was the haughty, overbearing, insolent young nobleman, who had been his hated rival; whom he had twice encountered and defeated, in fierce combat, and who had several times tried to compass his death by means of hired ruffians. What could be the explanation of it all?

The Duke of Vallombreuse divined his companion's thoughts, and when the old servant had retired, after placing a bottle of especially choice wine and two small

glasses on the table, he looked up at de Sigognac and said, with the most amicable frankness, “I can plainly perceive, my dear baron, in spite of your admirable courtesy, that this unexpected step of mine appears very strange and inexplicable to you. You have been saying to yourself, How in the world has it come about, that the arrogant, imperious Vallombreuse has been transformed, from the unscrupulous, cruel, blood-thirsty tiger that he was, into the peaceable, playful lamb he seems to be now—which a ‘gentle shepherdess’ might lead about with a ribbon round its neck!—I will tell you. During the six weeks that I was confined to my bed, I made various reflections, which the thoughtless might pronounce cowardly, but which are permitted to the bravest and most valiant when death stares them in the face. I realized then, for the first time, the relative value of many things, and also how wrong and wicked my own course had been; and I promised myself to do very differently for the future, if I recovered. As the passionate love that Isabelle inspired in my heart had been replaced by a pure and sacred fraternal affection—which is the greatest blessing of my life—I had no further reason to dislike you. You were no longer my rival; a brother cannot be jealous in that way of his own sister; and then, I was deeply grateful to you, for the respectful tenderness and deference I knew you had never failed to manifest towards her, when she was in a position that authorized great license. You were the first to recognise her pure, exalted soul, while she was still only an obscure actress. When she was poor, and despised by those who will cringe to her now, you offered to her—lowly as was her station—the most precious treasure that a nobleman can possess: the time-honoured name of his ancestors. You would have made her your wife then—now that she is rich, and of high rank, she belongs to you of right. The true, faithful lover of Isabelle, the actress, should be the honoured husband of the Comtesse de Lineuil.”

“But you forget,” cried de Sigognac, in much agitation, “that she always absolutely refused me, though she knew that I was perfectly disinterested.”

“It was because of her supreme delicacy, her angelic susceptibility, and her noble

spirit of self-sacrifice that she said that. She feared that she would necessarily be a disadvantage to you—an obstacle in the way of your advancement. But the situation is entirely changed now."

"Yes, now it is I who would be a disadvantage to her; have I then a right to be less generous and magnanimous than she was?"

"Do you still love my sister?" said Vallombreuse, in a grave tone. "As her brother, I have the right to ask this question."

"I love her with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my strength," de Sigognac replied fervently, "as much and more than ever man loved woman on this earth—where nothing is perfect—save Isabelle."

"Such being the case, my dear Captain of Mousquetaires, and governor of a province—soon to be—have your horse saddled, and come with me to the Château of Vallombreuse, so that I may formally present you to the prince, my father, as the favoured suitor of the Comtesse de Lineuil, my sister. Isabelle has refused even to think of the Chevalier de Vidalinc, or the Marquis de l'Estang, as aspirants to her hand—both right handsome, attractive, eligible young fellows, by Jove!—but I am of opinion that she will accept, without very much persuasion, the Baron de Sigognac."

The next day the duke and the baron were riding gaily forward, side by side, on the road to Paris.

CHAPTER XX. CHIQUITA'S DECLARATION OF LOVE

A compact crowd filled the Place de Grève, despite the early hour indicated by the clock of the Hôtel de Ville.

The tall buildings on the eastern side of the square threw their shadows more than

half-way across it, and upon a sinister-looking wooden framework, which rose several feet above the heads of the populace, and bore a number of ominous, dull red stains. At the windows of the houses surrounding the crowded square, a few heads were to be seen looking out from time to time, but quickly drawn back again as they perceived that the interesting performance, for which all were waiting, had not yet begun. Clinging to the transverse piece of the tall stone cross, which stood at that side of the open square nearest the river, was a forlorn, little, ragged boy, who had climbed up to it with the greatest difficulty, and was holding on with all his might, his arms clasped round the cross-piece and his legs round the upright, in a most painful and precarious position. But nothing would have induced him to abandon it, so long as he could possibly maintain himself there, no matter at what cost of discomfort, or even actual distress, for from it he had a capital view of the scaffold, and all its horribly fascinating details—the wheel upon which the criminal was to revolve, the coil of rope to bind him to it, and the heavy bar to break his bones.

If any one among the anxious crowd of spectators, however, had carefully studied the small, thin countenance of the child perched up on the tall stone cross, he would have discovered that its expression was by no means that of vulgar curiosity. It was not simply the fierce attractions of an execution that had drawn thither this wild, weird-looking young creature, with his sun-burned complexion, great, flashing, dark eyes, brilliant white teeth, unkempt masses of thick, black hair, and slender brown hands—which were convulsively clinging to the rough, cold stone. The delicacy of the features would seem to indicate a different sex from the dress—but nobody paid any attention to the child, And all eyes were turned towards the scaffold, or the direction from which the cart bearing the condemned criminal was to come. Among the groups close around the scaffold were several faces we have seen before; notably, the chalky countenance and fiery red nose of Malartic, and the bold profile of Jacquemin Lampourde, also several of the ruffians engaged in the abduction of Isabelle, as well as various other habitués of the Crowned Radish. The Place de

Grève, to which sooner or later they were all pretty sure to come and expiate their crimes with their lives, seemed to exercise a singular fascination over murderers, thieves, and criminals of all sorts, who invariably gathered in force to witness an execution. They evidently could not resist it, and appeared to find a fierce satisfaction in watching the terrible spectacle that they themselves would some day probably furnish to the gaping multitude. Then the victim himself always expected his friends' attendance—he would be hurt and disappointed if his comrades did not rally round him at the last. A criminal in that position likes to see familiar faces in the throng that hems him in. It gives him courage, steadies his nerves.

He cannot exhibit any signs of cowardice before those who appreciate true merit and bravery, according to his way of thinking, and pride comes to his aid. A man will meet death like a Roman under such circumstances, who would be weak as a woman if he were despatched in private.

The criminal to be executed on that occasion was a thief, already notorious in Paris for his daring and dexterity, though he had only been there a few months. But, unfortunately for himself—though very much the reverse for the well-to-do citizens of the capital in general—he had not confined himself to his legitimate business. In his last enterprise—breaking into a private dwelling to gain possession of a large sum of money that was to be kept there for a single night—he had killed the master of the house, who was aroused by his entrance; and, not content to stop there, had also brutally murdered his wife, as she lay quietly sleeping in her bed—like a tiger, that has tasted blood and is wild for more. So atrocious a crime had roused the indignation of even his own unscrupulous, hardened companions, and it was not long ere his hiding-place was mysteriously revealed, and he was arrested, tried, and condemned to death. Now he was to pay the penalty of his guilt.

As the fatal hour approached, a carriage drove down along the quay, turned into the Place de Grève, and attempted to cross it; but, becoming immediately entangled in

the crowd, could make little or no progress, despite the utmost exertions of the majestic coachman and attendant lackeys to induce the people to make way for it, and let it pass.

But for the grand coat of arms and ducal coronet emblazoned on the panels, which inspired a certain awe as well as respect in the motley throng of pedestrians, the equipage would undoubtedly have been roughly dealt with-but as it was, they contented themselves with resolutely and obstinately barring its passage, after it had reached the middle of the square. The indignant coachman did not dare to urge his spirited horses forward at all hazards, ruthlessly trampling down the unlucky individuals who happened to be directly in his way, as he would certainly have done in any ordinary crowd, for the canaille, that filled the Place de Grève to overflowing, was out in too great force to be trifled with—so there was nothing for it but patience.

“These rascals are waiting for an execution, and will not stir, nor let us stir, until it is over,” said a remarkably handsome young man, magnificently dressed, to his equally fine looking, though more modestly attired friend, who was seated beside him in the luxurious carriage. “The devil take the unlucky dog who must needs be broken on the wheel just when we want to cross the Place de Grève. Why couldn’t he have put it off until to-morrow morning, I should like to know!”

“You may be sure that the poor wretch would be only too glad to do so if he could,” answered the other, “for the occasion is a far more serious matter to him than to us.”

“The best thing we can do under the circumstances, my dear de Sigognac, is to turn our heads away if the spectacle is too revolting—though it is by no means easy, when something horrible is taking place close at hand. Even Saint Augustine opened his eyes in the arena at a loud cheer from the people, though he had vowed to himself beforehand to keep them closed.”

“At all events, we shall not be detained here long,” rejoined de Sigognac, “for there comes the prisoner. See, Vallombreuse, how the crowd gives way before him,

though it will not let us move an inch."

A rickety cart, drawn by a miserable old skeleton of a horse, and surrounded by mounted guards, was slowly advancing through the dense throng towards the scaffold. In it were a venerable priest, with a long white beard, who was holding a crucifix to the lips of the condemned man, seated beside him, the executioner, placed behind his victim, and holding the end of the rope that bound him, and an assistant, who was driving the poor old horse. The criminal, whom every one turned to gaze at, was no other than our old acquaintance, Agostino, the brigand.

"Why, what is this!" cried de Sigognac, in great surprise. "I know that man—he is the fellow who stopped us on the highway, and tried to frighten us with his band of scarecrows, as poor Matamore called them. I told you all about it when we came by the place where it happened."

"Yes, I remember perfectly," said Vallombreuse; "it was a capital story, and I had a good laugh over it. But it would seem that the ingenious rascal has been up to something more serious since then—his ambition has probably been his ruin. He certainly is no coward—only look what a good face he puts on it."

Agostino, holding his head proudly erect, but a trifle paler than usual perhaps, seemed to be searching for some one in the crowd. When the cart passed slowly in front of the stone cross, he caught sight of the little boy, who had not budged from his excessively uncomfortable and wearisome position, and a flash of joy shone in the brigand's eyes, a slight smile parted his lips, as he made an almost imperceptible sign with his head, and said, in a low tone, "Chiquita!"

"My son, what was that strange word you spoke?" asked the priest. "It sounded like an outlandish woman's name. Dismiss all such subjects from your mind, and fix your thoughts on your own hopes of salvation, for you stand on the threshold of eternity."

"Yes, my father, I know it but too well, and though my hair is black and my form

erect, whilst you are bowed with age, and your long beard is white as snow, you are younger now than I—every turn of the wheels, towards that scaffold yonder, ages me by ten years."

During this brief colloquy the cart had made steady progress, and in a moment more had stopped at the foot of the rude wooden steps that led up to the scaffold, which Agostino ascended slowly but unfalteringly—preceded by the assistant, supported by the priest, and followed by the executioner. In less than a minute he was firmly bound upon the wheel, and the executioner, having thrown off his showy scarlet cloak, braided with white, and rolled up his sleeves, stooped to pick up the terrible bar that lay at his feet. It was a moment of intense horror and excitement. An anxious curiosity, largely mixed with dread, oppressed the hearts of the spectators, who stood motionless, breathless, with pale faces, and straining eyes fixed upon the tragic group on the fatal scaffold. Suddenly a strange stir ran through the crowd—the child, who was perched up on the cross, had slipped quickly down to the ground, and gliding like a serpent through the closely packed throng, reached the scaffold, cleared the steps at a bound, and appeared beside the astonished executioner, who was just in the act of raising the ponderous bar to strike, with such a wild, ghastly, yet inspired and noble countenance—lighted up by a strength of will and purpose that made it actually sublime—that the grim dealer of death paused involuntarily, and withheld the murderous blow about to fall.

"Get out of my way, thou puppet!" he roared in angry tones, as he recovered his sang-froid, "or thou wilt get thy accursed head smashed."

But Chiquita paid no attention to him—she did not care whether she was killed too, or not. Bending over Agostino, she passionately kissed his forehead, whispered "I love thee!"—and then, with a blow as swift as lightning, plunged into his heart the knife she had reclaimed from Isabelle. It was dealt with so firm a hand, and unerring an aim, that death was almost instantaneous—scarcely had Agostino time to murmur

"Thanks."

With a wild burst of hysterical laughter the child sprang down from the scaffold, while the executioner, stupefied at her bold deed, lowered his now useless club; uncertain whether or not he should proceed to break the bones of the man already dead, and beyond his power to torture.

"Well done, Chiquita, well done, and bravely!" cried Malartic—who had recognised her in spite of her boy's clothes—losing his self-restraint in his admiration. The other ruffians, who had seen Chiquita at the Crowned Radish, and wondered at and admired her courage when she stood against the door and let Agostino fling his terrible navaja at her without moving a muscle, now grouped themselves closely together so as to effectually prevent the soldiers from pursuing her. The fracas that ensued gave Chiquita time to reach the carriage of the Duke of Vallombreuse—which, taking advantage of the stir and shifting in the throng, was slowly making its way out of the Place de Grève. She climbed up on the step, and catching sight of de Sigognac within, appealed to him, in scarcely audible words, as she panted and trembled—"I saved your Isabelle, now save me!"

Vallombreuse, who had been very much interested by this strange and exciting scene, cried to the coachman, "Get on as fast as you can, even if you have to drive over the people."

But there was no need—the crowd opened as if by magic before the carriage, and closed again compactly after it had passed, so that Chiquita's pursuers could not penetrate it, or make any progress—they were completely baffled, whichever way they turned. Meanwhile the fugitive was being rapidly carried beyond their reach. As soon as the open street was gained, the coachman had urged his horses forward, and in a very few minutes they reached the Porte Saint Antoine. As the report of what had occurred in the Place de Grève could not have preceded them, Vallombreuse thought it better to proceed at a more moderate pace—fearing that

their very speed might arouse suspicion—and gave orders accordingly; as soon as they were fairly beyond the gate he took Chiquita into the carriage—where she seated herself, without a word, opposite to de Sigognac. Under the calmest exterior she was filled with a preternatural excitement—not a muscle of her face moved; but a bright flush glowed on her usually pale cheeks, which gave to her magnificent dark eyes—now fixed upon vacancy, and seeing nothing that was before them—a marvellous brilliancy. A complete transformation had taken place in Chiquita—this violent shock had torn asunder the childish chrysalis in which the young maiden had lain dormant—as she plunged her knife into Agostino's heart she opened her own. Her love was born of that murder—the strange, almost sexless being, half child, half goblin, that she had been until then, existed no longer—Chiquita was a woman from the moment of that heroic act of sublime devotion. Her passion, that had bloomed out in one instant, was destined to be eternal—a kiss and a stab, that was Chiquita's love story.

The carriage rolled smoothly and swiftly on its way towards Vallombreuse, and when the high, steep roof of the château came in sight the young duke said to de Sigognac, "You must go with me to my room first, where you can get rid of the dust, and freshen up a bit before I present you to my sister—who knows nothing whatever of my journey, or its motive. I have prepared a surprise for her, and I want it to be complete—so please draw down the curtain on your side, while I do the same on mine, in order that we may not be seen, as we drive into the court, from any of the windows that command a view of it. But what are we to do with this little wretch here?"

Chiquita, who was roused from her deep reverie by the duke's question, looked gravely up at him, and said, "Let some one take me to Mlle. Isabelle—she will decide what is to be done with me."

With all the curtains carefully drawn down the carriage drove over the drawbridge

and into the court. Vallombreuse alighted, took de Sigognac's arm, and led him silently to his own apartment, after having ordered a servant to conduct Chiquita to the presence of the Comtesse de Lineuil. At sight of her Isabelle was greatly astonished, and, laying down the book she was reading, fixed upon the poor child a look full of interest, affection, and questioning.

Chiquita stood silent and motionless until the servant had retired, then, with a strange solemnity, which was entirely new in her, she went up to Isabelle, and timidly taking her hand, said:

"My knife is in Agostino's heart. I have no master now, and I must devote myself to somebody. Next to him who is dead I love you best of all the world. You gave me the pearl necklace I wished for, and you kissed me. Will you have me for your servant, your slave, your dog? Only give me a black dress, so that I may wear mourning for my lost love—it is all I ask. I will sleep on the floor outside your door, so that I shall not be in your way. When you want me, whistle for me, like this,"—and she whistled shrilly—"and I will come instantly. Will you have me?"

In answer Isabelle drew Chiquita into her arms, pressed her lips to the girl's forehead warmly, and thankfully accepted this soul, that dedicated itself to her.

CHAPTER XXI. HYMEN! OH HYMEN!

Isabelle, accustomed to Chiquita's odd, enigmatical ways, had refrained from questioning her—waiting to ask for explanations until the poor girl should have become more quiet, and able to give them. She could see that some terrible catastrophe must have occurred, which had left all her nerves quivering, and caused the strong shudders that passed over her in rapid succession; but the child had rendered her such good service, in her own hour of need, that she felt the least she could do was to receive and care for the poor little waif tenderly, without making any inquiries as to her evidently desperate situation. After giving her in charge to her

own maid, with orders that she should be properly clothed, and made thoroughly comfortable in every way, Isabelle resumed her reading—or rather tried to resume it; but her thoughts would wander, and after mechanically turning over a few pages in a listless way, she laid the book down, beside her neglected embroidery, on a little table at her elbow. Leaning her head on her hand, and closing her eyes, she lapsed into a sorrowful reverie—as, indeed, she had done of late many times every day.

"Oh! what has become of de Sigognac?" she said to herself. "Where can he be? and does he still think of me, and love me as of old? Yes, I am sure he does; he will be true and faithful to me so long as he lives, my brave, devoted knight! I fear that he has gone back to his desolate, old château, and, believing that my brother is dead, does not dare to approach me. It must be that chimerical obstacle that stands in his way—otherwise he would surely have tried to see me again—or at least have written to me. Perhaps I ought to have sent him word that Vallombreuse had recovered; yet how could I do that? A modest woman shrinks from even seeming to wish to entice her absent lover back to her side. How often I think that I should be far happier if I could have remained as I was—an obscure actress; then I could at least have had the bliss of seeing him every day, and of enjoying in peace the sweetness of being loved by such a noble, tender heart as his. Despite the touching affection and devotion that my princely father lavishes upon me, I feel sad and lonely in this magnificent château. If Vallombreuse were only here his society would help to pass the time; but he is staying away so long—and I try in vain to make out what he meant when he told me, with such a significant smile, as he bade me adieu, that I would be pleased with what he was about to do. Sometimes I fancy that I do understand; but I dare not indulge myself with such blissful thoughts for an instant. If I did, and were mistaken after all, the disappointment would be too cruel—too heart-rending. But, if it only could be true! ah! if it only might! I fear I should go mad with excess of joy."

The young Comtesse de Lineuil was still absorbed in sad thoughts when a tall lackey appeared, and asked if she would receive his lordship, the Duke of Vallombreuse

who had just arrived, at the château and desired to speak with her.

“Certainly, I shall be delighted to see him,” she said in glad surprise; “ask him to come to me at once.”

In a few minutes—which had seemed like hours to Isabelle—the young duke made his appearance, with beaming eyes, rosy cheeks, light, elastic step, and that air of glorious health and vigour which had distinguished him before his illness. He threw down his broad felt hat as he came in, and, hastening to his sister’s side, took her pretty white hands and raised them to his lips.

“Dearest Isabelle,” he cried, “I am so rejoiced to see you again! I was obliged to stay away from you much longer than I wished, for it is a great deprivation to me now not to be with you every day—I have gotten so thoroughly into the habit of depending upon your sweet society. But I have been occupied entirely with your interests during my absence, and the hope of pleasing my darling sister, and adding to her happiness, has helped me to endure the long separation from her.”

“The way to please me most, as you ought to have known,” Isabelle replied, “was to stay here at home quietly with your father and me, and let us take care of you, instead of rushing off so rashly—with your wound scarcely healed, or your health fully re-established—on some foolish errand or other, that you were not willing to acknowledge.”

“Was I ever really wounded, or ill?” said Vallombreuse, laughing. “Upon my word I had forgotten all about it. Never in my life was I in better health than at this moment, and my little expedition has done me no end of good. But you, my sweet sister, are not looking as well as when I left you; you have grown thin and pale. What is the matter? I fear that you find your life here at the château very dull. Solitude and seclusion are not at all the thing for a beautiful young woman, I know. Reading and embroidery are but melancholy pastimes at best and there must be moments when even the gravest, most sedate of maidens grows weary of gazing out

upon the stagnant waters of the moat, and longs to look upon the face of a handsome young knight."

"Oh! what an unmerciful tease you are, Vallombreuse, and how you do love to torment me with these strange fancies of yours. You forget that I have had the society of the prince, who is so kind and devoted to me, and who abounds in wise and instructive discourse."

"Yes, there is no doubt that our worthy father is a most learned and accomplished gentleman, honoured and admired at home and abroad; but his pursuits and occupations are too grave and weighty for you to share, my dear little sister, and I don't want to see your youth passed altogether in such a solemn way. As you would not smile upon my friend, the Chevalier de Vidalinc, nor condescend to listen to the suit of the Marquis de l'Estang, I concluded to go in search of somebody that would be more likely to please your fastidious taste, and, my dear, I have found him. Such a charming, perfect, ideal husband he will make! I am convinced that you will dote upon him."

"It is downright cruelty, Vallombreuse, to persecute me as you do, with such unfeeling jests. You know perfectly well that I do not wish to marry; I cannot give my hand without my heart, and my heart is not mine to give."

"But you will talk very differently, I do assure you, my dear little sister, when you see the husband I have chosen for you."

"Never! never!" cried Isabelle, whose voice betrayed her distress. "I shall always be faithful to a memory that is infinitely dear and precious to me; for I cannot think that you intend to force me to act against my will."

"Oh, no! I am not quite such a tyrant as that; I only ask you not to reject my protégé before you have seen him."

Without waiting for her reply, Vallombreuse abruptly left the room, and returned in a moment with de Sigognac, whose heart was throbbing as if it would burst out of

his breast. The two young men, hand in hand, paused on the threshold, hoping that Isabelle would turn her eyes towards them; but she modestly cast them down and kept them fixed upon the floor, while her thoughts flew far away, to hover about the beloved being who she little dreamed was so near her. Vallombreuse, seeing that she took no notice of them, and had fallen into a reverie, advanced towards her, still holding de Sigognac by the hand, and made a ceremonious bow, as did also his companion; but while the young duke was smiling and gay, de Sigognac was deeply agitated, and very pale. Brave as a lion when he had to do with men, he was timid with women—as are all generous, manly hearts.

"Comtesse de Lineuil," said Vallombreuse, in an emphatic tone of voice, "permit me to present to you one of my dearest friends, for whom I entreat your favour—the Baron de Sigognac."

As he pronounced this name, which she at first believed to be a jest on her brother's part, Isabelle started, trembled violently, and then glanced up timidly at the newcomer.

When she saw that Vallombreuse had not deceived her, that it was really he, her own true lover, standing there before her, she turned deathly pale, and had nearly fallen from her chair; then the quick reaction came, and a most lovely blush spread itself all over her fair face, and even her snowy neck, as far as it could be seen. Without a word, she sprang up, and throwing her arms round her brother's neck hid her face on his shoulder, while two or three convulsive sobs shook her slender frame and a little shower of tears fell from her eyes. By this instinctive movement, so exquisitely modest and truly feminine, Isabelle manifested all the exceeding delicacy and purity of her nature. Thus were her warm thanks to Vallombreuse, whose kindness and generosity overcame her, mutely expressed; and as she could not follow the dictates of her heart, and throw herself into her lover's arms, she took refuge in her transport of joy with her brother, who had restored him to her.

Vallombreuse supported her tenderly for a few moments, until he found she was growing calmer, when he gently disengaged himself from her clasping arms, and drawing down the hands with which she had covered her face, to hide its tears and blushes, said, “My sweet sister, do not, I pray you, hide your lovely face from us; I fear my protégé will be driven to believe that you entertain such an invincible dislike to him you will not even look at him.”

Isabelle raised her drooping head, and turning full upon de Sigognac her glorious eyes, shining with a celestial joy, in spite of the sparkling tear-drops that still hung upon their long lashes, held out to him her beautiful white hand, which he took reverentially in both his own, and bending down pressed fervently to his lips. The passionate kiss he imprinted upon it thrilled through Isabelle’s whole being, and for a second she turned faint and giddy; but the delicious ecstasy, which is almost anguish, of such emotion as hers, is never hurtful, and she presently looked up and smiled reassuringly upon her anxious lover, as the colour returned to her lips and cheeks, and the warm light to her eyes.

“And now tell me, my sweet little sister,” began Vallombreuse, with an air of triumph, and a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, “wasn’t I right when I declared that you would smile upon the husband I had chosen for you? and would not be discouraged, though you were so obstinate? If I had not been equally so, this dear de Sigognac would have gone back to his far-away château, without even having seen you; and that would have been a pity, as you must admit.”

“Yes, I do admit it, my dearest brother, and also that you have been adorably kind and good to me. You were the only one who, under the circumstances, could bring about this reunion, and we both know how to appreciate what you have so nobly and generously done for us.”

“Yes, indeed,” said de Sigognac warmly; “your brother has given us ample proof of the nobility and generosity of his nature—he magnanimously put aside the

resentment that might seem legitimate, and came to me with his hand outstretched, and his heart in it. He revenges himself nobly for the harm I was obliged to do him, by imposing an eternal gratitude upon me—a light burden, that I shall bear joyfully so long as I live."

"Say nothing more about that, my dear baron!" Vallombreuse exclaimed. "You would have done as much in my place. The differences of two valiant adversaries are very apt to end in a warm mutual attachment—we were destined from the beginning to become, sooner or later, a devoted pair of friends; like Theseus and Pirithous, Nisus and Euryalus, or Damon and Pythias. But never mind about me now, and tell my sister how you were thinking of her, and longing for her, in that lonely château of yours; where, by the way, I made one of the best meals I ever had in my life, though you do pretend that starvation is the rule down there."

"And I had a charming supper there too," said Isabelle with a smile, "which I look back upon with the greatest pleasure."

"Nevertheless," rejoined de Sigognac, "plenty does not abound there—but I cannot regret the blessed poverty that was the means of first winning me your regard, my precious darling! I am thankful for it—I owe everything to it."

"I am of opinion," interrupted Vallombreuse, with a significant smile, "that it would be well for me to go and report myself to my father. I want to announce your arrival to him myself, de Sigognac! Not that he will need to be specially prepared to receive you, for I am bound to confess—what may surprise my little sister here—that he knew such a thing might come about, and was equally implicated with my graceless self in this little conspiracy. But one thing yet—tell me before I go, Isabelle, Comtesse de Lineuil, whether you really do intend to accept the Baron de Sigognac as your husband—I don't want to run any risk of making a blunder at this stage of the proceedings, you understand, after having conducted the negotiations successfully up to this point. You do definitely and finally accept him, eh?—that is

well—and now I will go to the prince. Engaged lovers sometimes have matters to discuss that even a brother may not hear, so I will leave you together, feeling sure that you will both thank me for it in your hearts. Adieu!—make the most of your time, for I shall soon return to conduct de Sigognac to the prince."

With a laughing nod the young duke picked up his hat and went away, leaving the two happy lovers alone together, and—however agreeable his company may have been to them, it must be admitted that his absence was, as he had predicted, very welcome to both. The Baron de Sigognac eagerly approached Isabelle, and—again possessed himself of her fair hand, which she did not withdraw from his warm, loving clasp. Neither spoke, and for a few minutes the fond lovers stood side by side and gazed into each other's eyes. Such silence is more eloquent than any words. At last de Sigognac said softly, "I can scarcely believe even yet in the reality of so much bliss. Oh! what a strange, contradictory destiny is mine. You loved me, my darling, because I was poor and unhappy—and thus my past misery was the direct cause of my present felicity. A troupe of strolling actors, who chanced to seek refuge under my crumbling roof, held in reserve for me an angel of purity and goodness—a hostile encounter has given me a devoted friend—and, most wonderful of all, your forcible abduction led to your meeting the fond father who had been seeking you so many years in vain. And all this because a Thespian chariot went astray one stormy night in the Landes."

"We were destined for each other—it was all arranged for us in heaven above. Twin souls are sure to come together at last, if they can only have patience to wait for the meeting. I felt instinctively, when we met at the Château de Sigognac, that you were my fate. At sight of you my heart, which had always lain dormant before, and never responded to any appeal, thrilled within me, and, unasked, yielded to you all its love and allegiance. Your very timidity won more for you than the greatest boldness and assurance could have done, and from the first moment of our acquaintance I resolved never to give myself to any one but you, or God."

“And yet, cruel, hard-hearted child that you were—though so divinely good and lovely—you refused your hand to me, when I sued for it on my knees. I know well that it was all through generosity, and that of the noblest—but, my darling, it was a very cruel generosity too.”

“I will do my best to atone for it now, my dearest de Sigognac, in giving you this hand you wished for, together with my heart, which has long been all your own. The Comtesse de Lineuil is not bound to be governed by the scruples of Isabelle, the actress. I have had only one fear—that your pride might keep you from ever seeking me again as I am now. But, even if you had given me up, you would never have loved another woman, would you, de Sigognac? You would have been faithful to me always, even though you had renounced me—I felt so sure of that. Were you thinking of me down there in your ancient château, when Vallombreuse broke in upon your solitude?”

“My dearest Isabelle, by day I had only one thought—of you—and at night, when I kissed the sacred pillow on which your lovely head had rested, before laying my own down upon it, I besought the god of dreams to show me your adored image while I slept.”

“And were your prayers sometimes answered?”

“Always—not once was I disappointed—and only when morning came did you leave me, vanishing through ‘the ivory gates.’ Oh I how interminable the sad, lonely days seemed to me, and how I wished that I could sleep, and dream of you, my angel, all the weary time.”

“I saw you also in my dreams, many nights in succession. Our souls must have met, de Sigognac, while our bodies lay wrapped in slumber. But now, thanks be to God, we are reunited—and forever. The prince, my father, knew and approved of your being brought here, Vallombreuse said, so we can have no opposition to our wishes to fear from him. He has spoken to me of you several times of late in very flattering

terms; looking at me searchingly, the while, in a way that greatly agitated and troubled me, for I did not know what might be in his mind, as Vallombreuse had not then told me that he no longer hated you, and I feared that he would always do so after his double defeat at your hands. But all the terrible anxiety is over now, my beloved, and blessed peace and happiness lie before us."

At this moment the door opened, and the young duke announced to de Sigognac that his father was waiting to receive him. The baron immediately rose from his seat beside Isabelle, bowed low to her, and followed Vallombreuse to the prince's presence. The aged nobleman, dressed entirely in black, and with his breast covered with orders, was sitting in a large arm-chair at a table heaped up with books and papers, with which he had evidently been occupied. His attitude was stately and dignified, and the expression of his noble, benevolent countenance affable in the extreme. He rose to receive de Sigognac, gave him a cordial greeting, and politely bade him be seated.

"My dear father," said Vallombreuse, "I present to you the Baron de Sigognac; formerly my rival, now my friend, and soon to be my brother, if you consent. Any improvement that you may see in me is due to his influence, and it is no light obligation that I owe to him—though he will not admit that there is any. The baron comes to ask a favour of you, which I shall rejoice to see accorded to him."

The prince made a gesture of acquiescence, and looked reassuringly at de Sigognac, as if inviting him to speak fearlessly for himself. Encouraged by the expression of his eyes, the baron rose, and, with a low bow, said, in clear, distinct tones, "Prince, I am here to ask of you the hand of Mlle. la Comtesse Isabelle de Lineuil, your daughter."

The old nobleman looked at him steadily and searchingly for a moment, and then, as if satisfied with his scrutiny, answered: "Baron de Sigognac, I accede to your request, and consent to this alliance, with great pleasure—so far, that is, as my

paternal will accords with the wishes of my beloved daughter—whom I should never attempt to coerce in anything. The Comtesse de Lineuil must be consulted in this matter, and herself decide the question which is of such vital importance to her. I cannot undertake to answer for her—the whims and fancies of young ladies are sometimes so odd and unexpected."

The prince said this with a mischievous smile—as if he had not long known that Isabelle loved de Sigognac with all her heart, and was pining for him. After a brief pause, he added: "Vallombreuse, go and fetch your sister, for, without her, I cannot give a definite answer to the Baron de Sigognac."

The young duke accordingly went for Isabelle, who was greatly alarmed at this summons, and obeyed it in fear and trembling. Despite her brother's assurances, she could not bring herself to believe in the reality of such great happiness. Her breast heaved tumultuously, her face was very pale, at each step her knees threatened to give way under her, and when her father drew her fondly to his side she was forced to grasp the arm of his chair tightly, to save herself from falling.

"My daughter," said the prince gravely, "here is a gentleman who does you the honour to sue for your hand. For my own part, I should hail this union with joy—for he is of an ancient and illustrious family, of stainless reputation and tried courage, and appears to me to possess every qualification that heart could desire. I am perfectly satisfied with him—but has he succeeded in pleasing you, my child? Young heads do not always agree with gray ones. Examine your own heart carefully, and tell me if you are willing to accept the Baron de Sigognac as your husband. Take plenty of time to consider—you shall not be hurried, my dear child, in so grave a matter as this."

The prince's kindly, cordial smile gave evidence that he was in a playful mood, and Isabelle, plucking up courage, threw her arms round her father's neck, and said in the softest tones, "There is no need for me to consider or hesitate, my dear lord and

father! Since the Baron de Sigognac is so happy as to please you, I confess, freely and frankly, that I have loved him ever since we first met, and have never wished for any other alliance. To obey, you in this will be my highest happiness."

"And now clasp hands, my children, and exchange the kiss of betrothal," cried the Duke of Vallombreuse gaily. "Verily, the romance ends more happily than could have been expected after such a stormy beginning. And now the next question is, when shall the wedding be?"

"It will take a little time to make due preparation," said the prince. "So many people must be set to work, in order that the marriage of my only daughter may be worthily celebrated. Meanwhile, Isabelle, here is your dowry, the deed of the estate of Lineuil—from which you derive your title, and which yields you an income of fifty thousand crowns per annum—together with rent-rolls, and all the various documents appertaining thereto"—and he handed a formidable roll of papers to her. "As to you, my dear de Sigognac, I have here for you a royal ordinance, which constitutes you governor of a province; and no one, I venture to say, could be more worthy of this distinguished honour than yourself."

Vallombreuse, who had gone out of the room while his father was speaking, now made his appearance, followed by a servant carrying a box covered with crimson velvet.

He took it from the lackey at the door, and advancing, placed it upon the table in front of Isabelle.

"My dear little sister," said he, "will you accept this from me as a wedding gift?"

On the cover was inscribed "For Isabelle," in golden letters, and it contained the very casket which the Duke of Vallombreuse had offered at Poitiers to the young actress, and which she had so indignantly refused to receive, or even look at.

"You will accept it this time?" he pleaded, with a radiant smile; "and honour these diamonds of finest water, and these pearls of richest lustre, by wearing them, for my

sake. They are not more pure and beautiful than yourself."

Isabelle smilingly took up a magnificent necklace and clasped it round her fair neck, to show that she harboured no resentment; then put the exquisite bracelets on her round, white arms, and decked herself with the various superb ornaments that the beautiful casket contained.

And now we have only to add, that a week later Isabelle and de Sigognac were united in marriage in the chapel at Vallombreuse, which was brilliantly lighted, and filled with fragrance from the profusion of flowers that converted it into a very bower. The music was heavenly, the fair bride adorably beautiful, with her long white veil floating about her, and the Baron de Sigognac radiant with happiness. The Marquis de Bruyères was one of his witnesses, and a most brilliant and aristocratic assemblage "assisted" at this notable wedding in high life. No one, who had not been previously informed of it, could ever have suspected that the lovely bride—at once so noble and modest, so dignified and graceful, so gentle and refined, yet with as lofty a bearing as a princess of the blood royal—had only a short time before been one of a band of strolling players, nightly fulfilling her duties as an actress. While de Sigognac, governor of a province, captain of mousquetaires, superbly dressed, dignified, stately and affable, the very beau-ideal of a distinguished young nobleman, had nothing about him to recall the poor, shabby, disconsolate youth, almost starving in his dreary, half-ruined château, whose misery was described at the beginning of this tale.

After a splendid collation, graced by the presence of the bride and groom, the happy pair vanished; but we will not attempt to follow them, or intrude upon their privacy—turning away at the very threshold of the nuptial chamber, singing, in low tones, after the fashion of the ancients, "Hymen! oh Hymen!"

The mysteries of such sacred happiness as theirs should be respected; and besides, sweet, modest Isabelle would have died of shame if so much as a single one of the

pins that held her bodice were indiscreetly drawn out.

CHAPTER XXII. THE CASTLE OF HAPPINESS

EPILOGUE

It will be readily believed that our sweet Isabelle had not forgotten, in her exceeding happiness as Mme. la Baronne de Sigognac, her former companions of Hérode's troupe. As she could not invite them to her wedding because they would have been so much out of place there—she had, in commemoration of that auspicious occasion, sent handsome and appropriate gifts to them all; offered with a grace so charming that it redoubled their value. So long as the company remained in Paris, she went often to see them play; applauding her old friends heartily, and judiciously as well, knowing just where the applause should be given. The young baronne did not attempt to conceal the fact that she had formerly been an actress herself—not parading it, but referring to it quietly, if necessary, as a matter of course; an excellent method to disarm ill-natured tongues, which would surely have wagged vigorously had any mystery been made about it. In addition, her illustrious birth and exalted position imposed silence upon those around her, and her sweet dignity and modesty had soon won all hearts—even those of her own sex—until it was universally conceded that there was not a greater or truer lady in court circles than the beautiful young Baronne de Sigognac.

The king, Louis XIII, having heard Isabelle's eventful history, praised her highly for her virtuous conduct, and evinced great interest in de Sigognac, whom he heartily commended for his respectful, honourable gallantry, under circumstances that, according to general opinion, would authorize all manner of license. His deference to defenceless virtue peculiarly pleased the chaste, reserved monarch, who had no sympathy with, or indulgence for the wild, unbridled excesses of the licentious youth of his capital and court. As to Vallombreuse, he had entirely changed and

amended his way of life, and seemed to find unfailing pleasure and satisfaction, as well as benefit, in the companionship of his new friend and brother, to whom he was devoted, and who fully reciprocated his warm affection; while the prince, his father, joyfully dwelt in the bosom of his reunited family, and found in it the happiness he had vainly sought before. The young husband and wife led a charming life, more and more in love with and devoted to each other, and never experiencing that satiety of bliss which is ruinous to the most perfect happiness. Although Isabelle had no concealments from her husband, and shared even her inmost thoughts with him, yet for a time she seemed very much occupied with some mysterious business—apparently exclusively her own.

She had secret conferences with her steward, with an architect, and also with certain sculptors and painters—all without de Sigognac's knowledge, and by the connivance of Vallombreuse, who seemed to be her confidant, aider and abettor.

One fine morning, several months after their marriage, Isabelle said to de Sigognac, as if a sudden thought had struck her: "My dear lord, do you never think of your poor, deserted, old château? and have you no desire to return to the birthplace of our love?"

"I am not so unfeeling as that, my darling, and I have thought of it longingly many times of late. But I did not like to propose the journey to you without being sure that it would please you. I did not like to tear you away from the delights of the court—of which you are the chief ornament—and take you to that poor, old, half-ruined mansion, the haunt of rats and owls, where I could not hope to make you even comfortable, yet, which I prefer, miserable as it is, to the most luxurious palaces; for it was the home of my ancestors, and the place where I first saw you, my heart's delight!—spot ever sacred and dear to me, upon which I should like to erect an altar."

"And I," rejoined Isabelle, "often wonder whether the eglantine in the garden still

blooms, as it did for me."

"It does," said de Sigognac, "I am sure of it—having once been blessed by your touch, it must be always blooming—even though there be none to see."

"Ah! my lord, unlike husbands in general, you are more gallant after marriage than before," Isabelle said, laughingly, yet deeply touched by his tender words, "and you pay your wife compliments as if she were your ladylove. And now, since I have ascertained that your wishes accord with my whim, will it please your lordship to set out for the Château de Sigognac this week? The weather is fine. The great heat of summer is over, and we can really enjoy the journey. Vallombreuse will go with us, and I shall take Chiquita. She will be glad to see her own country again."

The needful preparations were soon made, and the travelling party set off in high spirits. The journey was rapid and delightful. Relays of horses had been sent on in advance by Vallombreuse, so that in a few days they reached the point where the road leading to the Château de Sigognac branched off from the great post-road. It was about two o'clock of a bright, warm afternoon when the carriage turned off the highway, and as they got, at the same moment, their first view of the château, de Sigognac could not believe the testimony of his own eyes—he was bewildered, dazzled, overwhelmed—he no longer recognised the familiar details which had been so deeply impressed upon his memory. All was changed, as if by magic. The road, smooth, free from grass and weeds, and freshly gravelled, had no more ruts; the hedges, neatly trimmed and properly tended, no longer reached out long, straggling arms to catch the rare passer-by; the tall trees on either side had been carefully pruned, so that their branches met in an arch overhead, and framed in a most astonishing picture. Instead of the dreary ruin, slowly crumbling into dust, a fine new château rose before them—resembling the old one as a son resembles his father. It was an exact reproduction—nothing had been changed, only renewed—it was simply the ancient mansion rejuvenated. The walls were smooth and unbroken, the

lofty towers intact, rising proudly at the four angles of the building, with their freshly gilded weathercocks gleaming in the sunlight. A handsome new roof, tastefully ornamented with a pretty design in different coloured slates, had replaced the broken, weather-stained tiles, through which the rain used to find its way down into the frescoed hall, and the long suite of deserted rooms. Every window had bright large panes of clear glass shining in its casement, and a magnificent great door, turning smoothly and noiselessly upon its huge hinges, had superseded the old, worm-eaten one, that used to groan and creak piteously when opened ever so little. Above it shone the de Sigognac arms—three golden storks upon an azure field, with this noble motto—entirely obliterated of old—"Alta petunt."

For a few moments de Sigognac gazed at it all in silence, overcome by astonishment and emotion. Then he suddenly turned to Isabelle, with joyful surprise written in every line of his speaking countenance, and seizing her hands passionately, and holding them firmly clasped in his, said: "It is to you, my kind, generous fairy, that I owe this marvellous transformation of my poor, dilapidated, old château. You have touched it with your wand and restored its ancient splendour, majesty and youth. I cannot tell you how enchanted, how gratified I am by this wonderful surprise. It is unspeakably charming and delightful, like everything that emanates from my good angel. Without a word or hint from me, you have divined, and carried out, the secret and most earnest wish of my heart."

"You must also thank a certain sorcerer, who has greatly aided me in all this," said Isabelle softly, touched by her husband's emotion and delight, and pointing to Vallombreuse, who was sitting opposite to her. The two young men clasped hands for a moment, and smiled at each other in friendly fashion. There was a perfect under standing between these kindred spirits now, and no words were needed on either side.

By this time the carriage had reached the château, where Pierre, in a fine new

livery—and a tremor of delight—was waiting to receive them. After an affectionate, as well as respectful, greeting from the faithful old servant, they entered the grand portico, which had been, like all the rest, admirably restored, and, alighting from the carriage, paused a moment to admire its magnificent proportions ere they passed on into the frescoed hall, where eight or ten tall lackeys were drawn up in line, and bowed profoundly to their new master and mistress. Skilful artists had retouched the ancient frescoes, and made them glow with all their original brilliant tints. The colossal figures of Hercules were still supporting the heavy cornice, and the busts of the Roman emperors looked out majestically from their niches. Higher up, the vine climbing on its trellis was as luxuriant as in the olden time, and there were no unsightly stains on the bright blue sky of the vaulted roof to mar its beauty. A like metamorphosis had been worked everywhere—the worm-eaten woodwork had been renewed, the uneven floors relaid, the tarnished gilding restored to its original splendour—and the new furniture throughout had been made exactly like the old that it replaced. The fine old tapestry in de Sigognac's own room had been minutely copied, down to the smallest detail, and the hangings of the bed were of green and white brocade, in precisely the same delicate tint and graceful pattern as the old.

Isabelle, with her innate delicacy and perfect taste, had not aimed at producing a sensation, by any overwhelming magnificence or dazzling splendour in renovating the intrinsically fine old Château de Sigognac, but had simply wished to gratify and delight the heart of her husband, so tenderly loved, in giving back to him the impressions and surroundings of his childhood and youth, robbed of their misery and sadness. All was bright and gay now in this lordly mansion, erst so dreary and melancholy; even the sombre old family portraits, cleansed, retouched and revarnished by skilful hands, smiled down upon them, as if pleased with the new order of things; especially their own handsome, richly gilt frames.

After looking through the interior of the château, de Sigognac and Isabelle went out into the court, where no weeds or nettles were to be seen, no grass growing up

between the paving stones, no heaps of rubbish in the corners, and through the clear glass panes of the numerous windows looking into it were visible the folds of the rich curtains in the chambers that were formerly the favourite haunt of owls and bats. They went on down into the garden, by a noble flight of broad stone steps, no longer tottering and moss-grown, and turned first to seek the wild eglantine which had offered its delicate little rose to the young actress, on the memorable morning when the baron had decided to go forth from his ruined castle for love of her. It had another dainty blossom ready for her now, which Isabelle received from de Sigognac's hand, with tears, that told of a happiness too deep for words, welling up into her eyes, and exchanged with her adored and adoring husband a long, fond look, that seemed to give to each a glimpse of heaven.

The gardeners had been busy too, and had converted the neglected wilderness we made acquaintance with long ago into a veritable little paradise. At the end of the well-ordered and exquisitely arranged garden, Pomona still stood in her cool grotto, restored to all the beauty of her youth, while a stream of pure, sparkling water poured from the lion's mouth, and fell with a musical murmur into the marble basin. Even in their best and most glorious days the garden and the château had never known greater beauty and luxury than now. The baron, ever more and more astonished and enchanted, as he rambled slowly through it all, like one in a delicious dream, kept Isabelle's arm pressed tenderly to his heart, and was not ashamed to let her see the tears that at last he could no longer restrain, and which came from a very full heart.

"Now," said Isabelle, "that we have seen everything here, we must go and inspect the different pieces of property we have been able to buy back, so as to reconstruct, as nearly as possible, the ancient barony of Sigognac. I will leave you for a few moments, to go and put on my riding habit; I shall not be long, for I learned to make changes of that sort very rapidly in my old profession, you know. Will you, meantime, go and select our horses, and order that they should be made ready?"

Vallombreuse accompanied de Sigognac to the stables, where they found ten splendid horses contentedly munching their oats in their oaken stalls. Everything was in perfect order, but ere the baron had time to admire and praise, as he wished to do, a loud whinnying that was almost deafening suddenly burst forth, as good old Bayard peremptorily claimed his attention. Isabelle had long ago sent orders to the château that the superannuated pony should always have the best place in the stable, and be tenderly cared for. His manger was full of ground oats, which he seemed to be enjoying with great gusto, and he evidently approved highly of the new regime. In his stall Miraut lay sleeping, but the sound of his master's voice aroused him, and he joyfully jumped up and came to lick his hand, and claim the accustomed caress. As to Beelzebub, though he had not yet made his appearance, it must not be attributed to a want of affection on his part, but rather to an excess of timidity. The poor old cat had been so unsettled and alarmed at the invasion of the quiet château by an army of noisy workmen, and all the confusion and changes that had followed, that he had fled from his usual haunts, and taken up his abode in a remote attic; where he lay in concealment, impatiently waiting for darkness to come, so that he might venture out to pay his respects to his beloved master.

The baron, after petting Bayard and Miraut until they were in ecstasies of delight, chose from among the horses a beautiful, spirited chestnut for himself, the duke selected a Spanish jennet, with proudly arched neck and flowing mane, which was worthy to carry an Infanta, and an exquisite white palfrey, whose skin shone like satin, was brought out for the baronne. In a few moments Isabelle came down, attired in a superb riding habit, which consisted of a dark blue velvet basque, richly braided with silver, over a long, ample skirt of silver-gray satin, and her broad hat of white felt, like a cavalier's, was trimmed with a floating, dark blue feather. Her beautiful hair was confined in the most coquettish little blue and silver net, and as she came forward, radiant with smiles, she was a vision of loveliness, that drew forth fervent exclamations of delight from her two devoted and adoring knights. The

Baronne de Sigognac certainly was enchantingly beautiful in her rich equestrian costume, which displayed the perfection of her slender, well-rounded figure to the greatest advantage, and there was a high-bred, dainty look about her which bore silent witness to her illustrious origin. She was still the sweet, modest Isabelle of old, but she was also the daughter of a mighty prince, the sister of a proud young duke, and the honoured wife of a valiant gentleman, whose race had been noble since before the crusades. Vallombreuse, remarking it, could not forbear to say: “My dearest sister, how magnificent you look to-day! Hippolyte, queen of the Amazons, was never more superb, or more triumphantly beautiful, than you are in this most becoming costume.”

Isabelle smiled in reply, as she put her pretty little foot into de Sigognac’s hand, and sprang lightly into her saddle.

Her husband and brother mounted also, and the little cavalcade set forth in high glee, making the vaulted portico ring with their merry laughter, as they rode through it. Just in front of the château they met the Marquis de Bruyères, and several other gentlemen of the neighbourhood, coming to pay their respects. They wished to go back into the château and receive their guests properly, saying that they could ride out at any time, but the visitors would not listen to such a thing, and turning their horses’ heads proposed to ride with them. The party, increased by six or eight cavaliers in gala dress—for the provincial lordlings had made themselves as fine as possible to do honour to their new neighbours—was really very imposing; a cortege worthy of a princess. They rode on between broad green fields, through woods and groves and highly cultivated farms, all of which had now been restored to the estate they had originally belonged to; and the grateful, adoring glances that the Baron de Sigognac found opportunity to bestow upon his lovely baronne, made her heart beat high with a happiness almost too perfect for this weary world of trials and sorrows.

As they were riding through a little pine wood, near the boundary line of the estate,

the barking of hounds was heard, and presently the party met the beautiful Yolande de Foix, followed by her old uncle, and one or two attendant cavaliers. The road was very narrow, and there was scarcely room to pass, though each party endeavoured to make way for the other. Yolande's horse was prancing about restively, and the skirt of her long riding-habit brushed Isabelle's as she passed her. She was furiously angry, and sorely tempted to address some cutting words to the "Bohémienne" she had once so cruelly insulted; but Isabelle, who had a soul above such petty malice, and had long ago forgiven Yolande for her unprovoked insolence, felt how much her own triumph must wound the other's proud spirit, and with perfect dignity and grace bowed to Mlle. de Foix, who could not do less than respond by a slight inclination of her haughty head, though her heart was filled with rage, and she had much ado to control herself. The Baron de Sigognac, with a quiet, unembarrassed air, had bowed respectfully to the fair huntress, who looked eagerly, but in vain, into the eyes of her former adorer for a spark of the old flame that used to blaze up in them at sight of her. Angry and disappointed, she gave her horse a sharp cut with the whip, and swept away at a gallop.

"Now, by Venus and all the Loves," said Vallombreuse to the Marquis de Bruyères, beside whom he was riding, "that girl is a beauty, but she looked deucedly savage and cross. How she did glare at my sister, eh! as if she wanted to stab her."

"When one has long been the acknowledged queen of a neighbourhood," the marquis replied, "it is not pleasant to be dethroned, you know, and every one must admit that Mme. la Baronne de Sigognac bears off the palm."

The gay cavalcade, after a long ride, returned to the château, to find a sumptuous repast awaiting them in the magnificent banqueting hall, where the poor young baron had once supped with the wandering comedians, upon their own provisions. What a transformation had been effected! now a superb service of silver, bearing the family arms, shone upon the fine damask that covered the table, in which also the

three storks were apparent, while beautiful porcelain and dainty glass, lovely flowers and luscious fruits contributed to the attractions of the bountifully furnished board. Isabelle sat in the same place she had occupied on the eventful night that had changed the destiny of the young lord of the château, and she could not but think of, and live over, that widely different occasion, as did also the baron, and the married lovers exchanged furtive smiles and glances, in which tender memories and bright hopes were happily mingled.

Near one of the tall buffets stood a large, fine-looking man with a thick black beard, dressed in black velvet, and wearing a massive chain of silver round his neck, who kept a watchful eye upon the numerous lackeys waiting on the guests, and from time to time gave an order, with a most majestic air. Presiding over another buffet, on which were neatly arranged numerous wine-bottles of different forms and dimensions, was another elderly man, of short, corpulent figure, and with a jolly red face, who stepped about actively and lightly, despite his age and weight, dispensing the wine to the servants as it was needed. At first de Sigognac did not notice them, but chancing to glance in their direction, was astonished to recognise in the first the tragic Hérode, and in the second the grotesque Blazius. Isabelle, seeing that her husband had become aware of their presence, whispered to him, that in order to provide for the old age of those two devoted and faithful friends she had thought it well to give them superior positions in their household; in which they would have only easy duties to perform, as they had to direct others in their work, not to do any themselves; and the baron heartily approved and commended what his sweet young wife, ever considerate for others, had been pleased to do.

Course succeeded to course, and bottle to bottle—there was much laughing and talking around the convivial board, and the host was exerting himself to do honour to the festive occasion, when he felt a head laid on his knee, and a tattoo vigorously played by a pair of paws on his leg that was well known to him of old. Miraut and Beelzebub, who had slipped into the room, and under the table, without being

detected, thus announced their presence to their indulgent master. He did not repulse them, but managed, without attracting notice, to give them a share of everything on his plate, and was especially amused at the almost insatiable voracity of the old black cat—who had evidently been fasting in his hiding-place in the attic. He actually seemed to enjoy, like an epicure, the rich and dainty viands that had replaced the frugal fare of long ago, and ate so much that when the meal was over he could scarcely stand, and made his way with difficulty into his master's bed-chamber, where he curled himself up in a luxurious arm-chair and settled down comfortably for the night.

Vallombreuse kept pace with the Marquis de Bruyères, and the other guests, in disposing of the choice wines, that did credit to the pedant's selection; but de Sigognac, who had not lost his temperate habits, only touched his lips to the edge of his wine-glass, and made a pretence of keeping them company. Isabelle, under pretext of fatigue, had withdrawn when the dessert was placed upon the table. She really was very tired, and sent at once for Chiquita, now promoted to the dignity of first lady's maid, to come and perform her nightly duties. The wild, untutored child had—under Isabelle's judicious, tender and careful training—developed into a quiet, industrious and very beautiful young girl. She still wore mourning for Agostino, and around her neck was the famous string of pearl beads—it was a sacred treasure to Chiquita, and she was never seen without it. She attended to her duties quickly and deftly—evidently taking great delight in waiting upon the mistress she adored—and kissed her hand passionately, as she never failed to do, when all was finished and she bade her good-night.

When, an hour later, de Sigognac entered the room in which he had spent so many weary, lonely nights—listening to the wind as it shrieked and moaned round the outside of the desolate château, and wailed along the corridors-feeling that life was a hard and bitter thing, and fancying that it would never bring anything but trials and misery to him—he saw, by the subdued light from the shaded lamp, the face to him

most beautiful in all the world smiling lovingly to greet him from under the green and white silken curtains that hung round his own bed, where it lay resting upon the pillow he had so often kissed, and moistened with his tears. His eyes were moist now—but from excess of happiness, not sorrow—as he saw before him the blessed, blissful realization of his vision.

Towards morning Beelzebub, who had been excessively uneasy and restless all night, managed, with great difficulty, to clamber up on the bed, where he rubbed his nose against his master's hand—trying at the same time to purr in the old way, but failing lamentably. The baron woke instantly, and saw poor Beelzebub looking at him appealingly, with his great green eyes unnaturally dilated, and momentarily growing dim; he was trembling violently, and as his master's kind hand was stretched out to stroke his head, fell over on his side, and with one half-stifled cry, one convulsive shudder, breathed his last.

"Poor Beelzebub!" softly said Isabelle, who had been roused from her sweet slumber by his dying groan, "he has lived through all the misery of the old time, but will not be here to share and enjoy the prosperity of the new."

Beelzebub, it must be confessed, fell a victim to his own intemperance—a severe fit of indigestion, consequent upon the enormous supper he had eaten, was the cause of his death—his long-famished stomach was not accustomed to, nor proof against, such excesses. This death, even though it was only that of a dumb beast, touched de Sigognac deeply; for poor Beelzebub had been his faithful companion, night and day, through many long, weary years of sadness and poverty, and had always shown the warmest, most devoted affection for him. He carefully wrapped the body in a piece of fine, soft cloth, and waited, until evening should come, to bury it himself; when he would be safe from observation and possible ridicule. Accordingly, after nightfall, he took a spade, a lantern, and poor Beelzebub's body, which was stiff and stark by that time, and went down into the garden, where he set to work to dig the

grave, under the sacred eglantine, in what seemed to him like hallowed ground. He wanted to make it deep enough to insure its not being disturbed by any roaming beast of prey, and worked away diligently, until his spade struck sharply against some hard substance, that he at first thought must be a large stone, or piece of rock perhaps. He attempted, in various ways, to dislodge it, but all in vain, and it gave out such a peculiar, hollow sound at every blow, that at last he threw down his spade and took the lantern to see what the strange obstacle might be.

He was greatly surprised at finding the corner of a stout oaken chest, strengthened with iron bands, much rusted, but still intact. He dug all round it, and then, using his spade as a lever, succeeded in raising it, though it was very heavy, to the edge of the hole, and sliding it out on the grass beside it; then he put poor Beelzebub into the place it had occupied, and filled up the grave. He carefully smoothed it over, replaced the sod, and when all was finished to his satisfaction, went in search of his faithful old Pierre, upon whose discretion and secrecy he knew that he could rely. Together they carried the mysterious strong box into the château, but not without great difficulty and frequent pauses to rest, because of its immense weight. Pierre broke open the chest with an axe, and the cover sprang back, disclosing to view a mass of gold coins—all ancient, and many of them foreign. Upon examination, a quantity of valuable jewelry, set with precious stones, was found mingled with the gold, and, under all, a piece of parchment, with a huge seal attached, bearing the three storks of the de Sigognacs, still in a good state of preservation; but the writing was almost entirely obliterated by dampness and mould. The signature, however, was still visible, and letter by letter the baron spelled it out—“Raymond de Sigognac.” It was the name of one of his ancestors, who had gone to serve his king and country in the war then raging, and never returned; leaving the mystery of his death, or disappearance, unsolved. He had only one child, an infant son, and when he left home—in those troublous times—must have buried all his treasures for safety, and they had remained undiscovered until this late day. Doubtless, he had

confided the secret of their whereabouts to some trusty friend or retainer, who, perhaps, had died suddenly before he could disclose it to the rightful heir. From the time of that Raymond began the decadence of the de Sigognacs, who, previous to that epoch, had always been wealthy and powerful.

Of course, the mystery about this treasure—so strangely brought to light—could never be cleared up now; but one thing was certain, beyond a question or a doubt, that the strong box and its contents belonged of right to the present Baron de Sigognac—the only living representative of the family. His first move was to seek his generous, devoted wife, so that he might show her the mysterious treasure he had found, and claim her sweet sympathy in his joy, which would be incomplete without it. After relating to her all the surprising incidents of the evening, he finished by saying, "Decidedly, Beelzebub was the good genius of the de Sigognacs—through his means I have become rich—and now that my blessed angel has come to me he has taken his departure; for there is nothing else left for him to do, since you, my love, have given me perfect happiness."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CAPTAIN FRACASSE ***

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