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THE TWO RUNAWAYS.

(From the French of Oscar Honore.)

Do you understand the eloquence of old walls, of crumbling and massy espaliers, and that which the iris-colored sun-burning of old window-panes relates about the summers of dead years?

With this title, or with such other as may please you, you should have rested with me under the arched portico of a house bearing the date of 1536, which I discovered lately in a parish on the borders of the wild and uncultivated Auvergne.

The place appeared to have been at one time fortified. An ancient moat, with its rampart converted into a kitchen garden, still made a perceptible hollow at the foot of the village.

The dark and cool portico of the house framed a bright horizon, formed by the planes of a country whose verge was flooded for the moment in a sapphire tint, and by archipelagos of little gilded clouds sleeping in the quiet ether.

Lower and nearer there grew a virgin forest of haremets, putting forth their thick leaved branches upon staffs of dry wood; and then, just back of the nearly filled moat, a plentiful field of carrots.

Disparage carrots, ye painters and poets who eat them! but, a field of carrots is for me a cope of larch-trees in miniature. I fancy it large enough to shelter all the world.

That same day, then, oh, chance meeting of thoughts! a fugitive rabbit—a tame one full of spirit—had found a defect in his grated door, and was gaily ravaging the field of carrots.

An old woman almost bestriding a large fagot, which supplied the place of crutch or cane, went back and forth, stooping and looking right and left, and calling her deserter by turns the tenderest and most outrageous names: "pretty darling," "villain," "glutton," "my cherub," "prison-bird."

I offered her my services. They were accepted, but proved useless. The rabbit must be running still.

The perspiration overspread my forehead.—Less wearied than I, the octogenarian was the first, nevertheless, to give up the hunt.

"Come, sir," she said to me, straightening herself with an air at once sweet and melancholy; "that which is gone returns not; that which is lost is lost!"

"It is like youth," I reflected, hastening to explore a dark corner.

"And like children! we raise them, we feed them, and then of a sudden they are off for a hole, the first that opens!"

I had nothing to object. I did not know to what the old woman alluded, so I preserved silence.

"Come and see, sir," resumed she, "the place from which my rabbit has escaped."

I obeyed. "Fortunately," I said to her, upon inspecting the cage of nibblers, "fortunately for you there are still some left!"

"Ah! do you not see, it is because it was the last grand-nephew of the rabbit of Aglais!"

"Of your daughter, perhaps?"

"Of the young lady."

Here the lone woman wiped away a tear, which had escaped, at these words, from her old eyes.

"Your young lady is no longer with you?"

"Come," responded the dame, hastily, "come and see from where my child has fled."

I followed her again, and, after some moments, at the end of a narrow, badly-kept street, which ran beside the enclosure, she threw away her walking-stick, which was improvised from the tufted stalks of a withered stock-gillflower, and showed me a little loop-hole made in the wall at about a shoulder's height from the ground.

"Behold," she said to me, smiling, as if to cast a defiance at my astonishment and at her own grief, "behold the place through which my Aglais fled!"

Now the opening was no larger than one's two hands, and a child of eighteen months would have been scarcely able to pass its head through without injury.

Though you may have lived but little in the country, you probably know that one dwells there in constant companionship with his thoughts.

Old age is everywhere dreaming; but, in the

noise of cities, its recollection is more of a voluntary character. The widow of the peasant lives in intimate and constant association with her grief; nothing distracts it; everything brings it back to her.

And when, by chance, a stranger comes to the house of the solitary woman, it matters little to her the name, the qualities, the origin, the prejudices of this passing interlocutor. The widow arises, walks with him, and shows him, as a token dear to the memory of the whole human race, the hat which the dear one had worn upon festival days, and the last pear-tree which he had planted.

Thus did the good woman with the memory of her child.

I speak here of old peasants—those who have no other study than their prayer book, when they know how to read. A generation altogether rural and majestic, which I have known, and which is fast passing away.

My new friend was of this class. After these short preliminaries, she gave me her confidence, and I gave her my attention.

We had gained the portico. I installed myself upon a bench to sketch; she sat at my side, upon a block of stone, at the threshold of the kitchen. I took my pencils, she her knitting and her glasses. The subject of the young lady took its strange course:

"My husband was a proud man. But he lived in a time in which the newspapers no longer spoke, it was, however, in a newspaper that I read he had passed from life to death, in battle. I adored my husband. One could scarcely help loving such a man. He was not a peasant like the rest of us. He was a gentleman. He was higher in station than you, and he was in the wars of the first empire. I was his foster-sister; and, according to what he so often said to me, exceedingly pretty. If I dare to speak about that time-to-day, you may be sure it is not from vanity. A shrivelled apple has surely the right to say that it has been a flower.

"My husband went away never to come back again. I remained with a daughter in my arms. It was the young lady. I nursed her with my milk, as my mother had nursed the father of that dear child. She grew finely; but she was unfit for the country for the cradle; our woollen gowns hurt her, our wooden shoes cut her feet. Her skin was like satin, and a little glass case was as necessary for her as for the good Virgin of wax there upon the mantel.

"It was well, then, that with such a child to care for, I was not in poverty. The house is mine, the garden also, and, more than that, I have some land. It is not very much, but, in short, enough to turn around in.

"I was strong, and easily bore up under the weight of labor, and found it no hardship to give the child a little soup. There was nothing like her eyes; you would have known her for a young lady.

"Entirely by my own endeavors, I reared my Alais.

"An uncommon name in our parts, is it not, sir? This was also a notion of her father!

"What a misfortune! what a misfortune! she grew up, and I was not able to conceal her!—You ask me: 'Why conceal her?' Ah, sir, do you think it is not a heart-break for a poor woman to see, clear as day, that her child will not remain with her? Now she was fair as a love! I took her out once more, to make her first communion; she wore a veil.

"The priest had already greatly terrified me by saying to me: 'Mother Desbouis, you must take care that this child is discreet.' 'Why should she not be discreet?' But I felt great concern, as if there was already something to reprove. 'For this reason,' replied the pastor; 'the little Aglais is too handsome for her condition.' 'Oh! blessed Saviour!' I exclaimed in thought, 'hearken with favor to the poor woman that I am; since the young lady threatens to be too beautiful, restore her father to her!'

"The wall was already good, but not high enough. I had the espaliers raised higher than the ridge-tiles. I shut the door, and answered only from the window to the people who wished to speak with us.

"There are no great people here; but the young lady had some associates. I told them by degrees that Aglais was ill, and then shut the door in their faces. The poor child became a little low-spirited. I had not the means to put her to board in the city. I might have made her a nun, but I feared that her father, if he came back again, would be displeased. A convent was not in his thoughts. The soldiers of those times had no love for monks. What should I do? What plan could I devise? Goats, rabbits, pigeons, she had all to divert her; but these companions were of little account. Fortunately, sir, our venerable priest bought the ground which lay next to ours.

"There was a break in the wall on that side, and for want of money, I had not repaired it; but I had planted a little faggot there, and as the pre-

vious neighbor was old, sullen, and hated children, he took no notice of the young lady.

"It is well, I said to myself, that without going out of the enclosure, Aglais will have some one to speak to. This pious priest was learned as a book. He complained to me for not sending the young lady to her duty, although she was as strict as a nun in her devotions.—However, he made himself familiar with the child, and each morning, after his breakfast, he came in good season to take the tour of his garden; and through the broken wall he chatted with Aglais from one close to the other.

"I do not know if he was a sorcerer, the good man; but the fact is, he taught the finest knowledge to the young lady.

"I listened here from the corner of the bench, where the bee-hive stands, keeping myself quiet, and admiring how much deeper was the mind of the child than that of her mother. She knew the names of flowers, of birds, of quadrupeds, from the greatest to the smallest, the why of the seasons, the history of the town. She was less low spirited, and spoke no more of going out. She became as learned as her teacher; for, without speaking of an herbal which I have there, and in which one would swear the flowers were still fresh, she had succeeded—but for want of proof, you will not believe me, sir—she had succeeded in taming some swallows! There were more than twenty nests of them over this door, and they came, little ones and big ones, when Aglais called them. But—

"Ah! sir, that there should be any ill-doing Christians in this lower world!"

I felt at this exclamation that my epic poetess referred to the catastrophe, and I redoubled my attention.

The old woman proceeded: "One has to suit themselves to circumstances. I had for Aglais only some children's dresses which she had outgrown. I lengthened them, but they were still too small for her pretty form. The poor child was all in rags; yet she was so fine of figure, and so rosy in health, that one could not look at her without being dazzled.

"There I was going on, poor fool that I was, as if we could hinder the roses from opening, and young girls from reaching sixteen years.—But to proceed: my condition was worse than if I had continued to let her run and live with the rest of the world. People ought to have been used to seeing her; she to being seen.—They had, rightly enough, ceased to believe that she was always sick. They even spoke of her beauty without my having opened my mouth about it, not surely the good priest any more than I.

"He comprehended my embarrassment, and came to see me one fine evening, when the young lady was already asleep in her little bed, her hands crossed like the dear love that she was, and with a breath so sweet that one might say a June breeze was blowing over the potato blossoms.

"I expected to be found fault with, and was not wholly at ease.

"Mother Desbouis," he said to me, "you are decidedly a little fool. What would you do with your child? Do you intend to keep her in private confinement till the day of her death? Do we raise our children for ourselves or for themselves? No body understands why you persist in living like two wolves in you, square of plantation, without letting anybody enter. I do not utterly blame you for the intention, as you have had the well-being of your daughter in view; but the curiosity which it excites is the worst of services you can render her. You deceive yourself, Mother Desbouis, if you believe that people's tongues do not avenge themselves for the occupation of which you deprive them, in hiding your Aglais like a bag of crown-pieces in the bottom of a chest of drawers. Being ignorant of the truth, will they not invent? You know where the opinions of the town are formed; in this blind alley where the gossips go to hatch hemp, when the harvest is gathered in. There are chatters there who know that the slightest question makes you tremble from head to foot. Woman, though these walls are thick and high as some houses, there are ladders everywhere; and the inquisitive, in the absence of a ladder in the town, would be capable of going and fetching one from La Pallisse or Clermont. They chatter, therefore, of the young lady;—and they add something very unpleasant, which you might guess if you would, about the ease with which certain people enter here, while others remain without. They go on even to tell who the person is who knows the means of penetrating to you."

"This that the priest told me came upon me like a clap of thunder.

"Ah! father," I replied, when I was able to speak, "are you not there to silence these evil tongues? And has Aglais, whom you see and to whom you speak every day, any secret from you?"

"You are mistaken, mother Desbouis; I have

not power sufficient to hold women's tongues.—I have come to give you good counsel, the only thing which I am prepared to do in your favor. Announce that your daughter is well again, or nearly so. Make her some respectable clothes, and let her go out with you. Take her to Mass next Sunday.

"And then—and then, marry her as soon as possible. You are worth something; husbands will not be lacking for a pretty woman, wise and well fitted out."

"Upon my word," said I to mother Desbouis, interrupting her; "the counsel of the old priest was very reasonable. In your place, I should have followed it to the letter."

"I thought like you, sir, much as it was a heart-break for me to put up, as at auction, my sweet treasure, and all which remained to me of what had belonged to my husband, of whom Aglais was the living portrait. I commenced, therefore, to carry out my intentions towards the young lady on the next day, and I spoke to her of contracting, if God permitted it, an honorable and good marriage.

"A marriage! And with whom?" demanded the little one of me. "Are there any suitors here?"

"We will find one, my daughter, with the aid of God and our pastor."

"At this, she made no reply, and hung her head. I believed that she was disposed, as she ever was, to obedience, for that dear child was sweetness itself!

"A suitor! did she indeed know what this meant? No matter! She burst into tears before the garden and the ruins which you see. So much and so bitterly did she weep, that I paused to say to her, 'Thou needst not grieve so, my child!'

"And the loop-hole?" said I, breaking in upon mother Desbouis.

"Leave that to me, sir; the loop-hole will appear soon enough, for I imagine that at this time it was already pierced in the wall. It opened upon a foot-path which was seldom used;—but, in brief, one reaches by it the forest, which you see at the right of the brook, and the chateau whose towers are in sight.

"I know neither when nor why the opening was made, nor of what color were the hands of the mason; but at least it was on an evening of that same year I found the young lady, who I believed to have been asleep for some time, busy in looking at the effect of the moonlight in that direction.

"I took no notice of her, and did not show myself. She, for her part, said to me very naturally the next day:

"I believe I have found what I want."

"What! A suitor? But it is on next Sunday that we are to go out for the first time.—Thy new dress is but two-thirds made, and it is Friday now! We must make haste, if we wish to get done in time!"

"I believe, I repeated Aglais, in returning to her sewing at my side, 'that I have found what I want.'

"I questioned her again. She shook her head with an air of mystery, blushing, and laughing softly.

"See here; if it is a husband, explain to me a little who it is, and in what manner he was found."

"It is not easy, now, mamma; first, I have promised him not to disclose anything; and then—"

"And then, nothing at all."

"There should be nothing at all which could not be told to me!" I said to the young lady.—"If his motives are good, thy suitor has no reason to hide himself."

"You have kept me quite hidden, mamma, for some years, and was it for a good motive?"

"Ah! pretty gipsy, thou wishest to take me in my own net. But fear nothing; come! If thy suitor is a good one, he has only to show himself, and we will give him a good reception. Is he good looking? Is he of our town?"

"Good looking! He looks too well; but he is not of our town."

"Too well; then he is squint eyed."

"I assure you, mamma, that he is not squint-eyed at all. He squint-eyed, mamma!"

"Well, is he a farmer?"

"No, indeed! no indeed!"

"A merchant?"

"No more a merchant than a farmer."

"A soldier? I do not like soldiers very much now; a soldier?"

"Was not papa one, then?"

"I was silenced by her question.

"But he is not a soldier, mamma," added Aglais.

"Is he then a gentleman?"

"The young lady said nothing, and her needle moved more rapidly.

"All at once I considered that we were but three-quarters of a league from the chateau.—Was it any one from there? I resolved to test her."

I said suddenly, taking the young lady by the arm.

"My ruse succeeded. She sprang quickly upon the stone bench.

"Not in this direction, my daughter, not in this direction, at least. I said to her—'Never, never! They are but grasshoppers who take the little birds of thy species. The gentlemen of the chateau have nothing to see here.'

"Why, then, have you kept me guarded?" replied Aglais, in a voice which turned my mind upside down. "Not for a peasant like us? Not for a gentleman like my father? Why, then, pray?"

"Oh! that I might, my poor roe, ever see thee sporting in our little garden! But I feel well that this will not satisfy thee. What shall I do! oh, what shall I do?"

Here mother Desbouis laid her knitting on her knees, and was silent. She gazed into vacancy, and seemed again to seek the solution of the maternal problem to which her reason had before succumbed.

I now take up the discourse in my turn, still holding the thread of the old woman's narrative. The new dress of Aglais was finished on Saturday evening, and she wore it on the next day. The beautiful girl went to Mass with her mother. To believe the latter, her appearance was an epoch in the parish, which was not, perhaps, a country of Dianas and Venuses.

By a chance, inexplicable in a great many ways, the neighboring chateaux were found in an open carriage upon the square of the town, at the same hour when the peasants were going to church; and so narrow was the street that mother Desbouis was able to perceive an exchange of looks, frightful from its very tenderness, between her daughter and a young man who accompanied the carriage upon horseback.

It was the first time, without doubt, that Aglais had seen her lover in the midst of a life of luxury and pomp. If this hunter on foot, in gaiters soiled with mud, and followed by a dog, had appeared to her in the darkness of night to be almost an equal with her, judgment, that great master of perspective, restored the dashing cavalier and his opulent family to their true distance and to their accustomed eminences.

But this correctness of view struck the eyes of the young recluse so suddenly as to draw tears from them. Aglais was about to enter into a life where she would find a cross to bear.

Without doubt the good old priest knew not to what extent he was the agent of Providence, when, on that same day, after resper, he resorted to the house of mother Desbouis, with a young man of the neighborhood—"having come," said the pastor, "purposely to talk over affairs."

Aglais, who was in a corner sitting upon a chair tipped against the wall, reading her prayer-book, raised her eyes at the noise of the two arrivals. She saw the silly-embarrassed air, the rough hands, the nailed jack-boots of the young man who followed the pastor, and she understood all.

They sat down, and the old priest took the lead in conversation.

He gave to his protegee the praise which he merited; he spoke of his condition, and of his opportunities for advancement. The candidate was head groom on a very large estate.

Mother Desbouis considered by turns her daughter and the new comer.

This was certainly discouraging to the prospects of this virgin of animated wax. Aglais seemed disposed to agree to all, after she had said, with a certain courage, that her future husband must not be a drunkard, nor likely to become one in time; and, above all, when she was assured that the candidate lived at a distance of six full leagues from her parish.

They separated to think the matter over, and to meet again in a fortnight; but a mutual consent was already given on all sides.

"My child," said mother Desbouis, "at an other time thou didst weep at the thought of leaving our house; now dost thou rejoice to think that thy husband carries thee away to the other side of the mountains?"

"Yes, my mother," responded Aglais, melting into tears.

"Yes" was henceforth the only word which they were able to obtain from the young lady. She soon ceased weeping, but cheerfulness was banished from her countenance, as from her heart. "She said 'Yes' when the fortnight had elapsed, and when the young man came to obtain a reply.

She said 'Yes' when he demanded of her before her mother, the kiss of betrothal.

She said 'Yes' when it was proposed to her to celebrate the nuptials at the end of the month. But she had a slight illness, and they were obliged to put off the marriage until the month following.

They scarcely expected that this marriage would prove to be like the point of meeting of those geometrical lines which approach each other infinitely without ever uniting.