

## The Abbe Constantin.

BY LUDOVIC HALEVY.

## CHAPTER VIII.

The day of their memorable conversation about marriages without love, Bettina, for the first time had felt suddenly awoken in her that need of love, which sleeps, but not very profoundly, in the hearts of all young girls. The same sensation had come at the same moment in the soul of Jean and in the soul of Bettina. He, alarmed, thrust it rudely away from him. She, on the contrary, gave herself up, in all the freshness of her perfect innocence, to this new tenderness and emotion.

She was waiting for love, what if this were love! What if the man who could be her thought, her life, her soul should be, he, Jean! Why, not? She knew him better than all those who for a year past had fluttered around her fortune, and in all that she knew of him there was nothing to discourage the confidence and love of a pure young girl.

Both, in fact, were right; both were influenced by duty, and by truth: she, in yielding; he, in resisting. She, in not thinking for a moment of Jean's obscurity and poverty; he, in recoiling from this mountain of millions as he would have recoiled from a crime. She, in thinking that he had no right to parley with honor.

For these reasons, Bettina grew more tender and surrendered herself more completely to love's first appeal; while Jean became more gloomy and troubled from day to day. He was not only afraid of loving, he was afraid of being loved.

He should have stayed away; he had tried, but he could not. The temptation was too strong. He continued his visits; and she would come to meet him, with extended hands, a smile upon her lips, and her heart in her eyes. Everything about her said: "Let us try to love each other, and if we can, let us love!"

Fear seized him. He hardly dared touch those hands which were stretched out to meet his. He tried to avoid those tender, smiling, questioning glances which sought his own. He trembled at the necessity of talking with Bettina, of listening to her.

Jean was going next day. Bettina had insisted that he should spend this last day at Longueval, and dine at the chateau. Jean had refused, alleging the preparations he must make before his departure. He came, on foot, about half-past ten in the evening. Several times on the way he had almost determined to go back.

"If I had the courage," he said to himself, "I would not see her again. I leave to-morrow, and I will not return to Souvigny while she is here. My resolution is firmly fixed."

But he went on: he wanted to see her again, for the last time.

As soon as he had entered the salon, Bettina came running, to meet him:

"You are come at last! How late you are!"

"I have been very busy."

"And you are going to-morrow?"

"Yes, to-morrow."

"Early?"

"At five o'clock."

"Shall you take the road past the park, and through the village?"

"Yes, that is just the route we are to take."

"Why do you go so early in the morning? I would have gone to the top of the terrace to see you pass, and bid you adieu."

Bettina had taken Jean's burning hand and kept it in hers. He drew it away, sadly.

"I must go," said he, "and speak to your sister."

"Presently! she has not seen you—there are a dozen persons round her. Come, sit here a little while with me."

He was obliged to sit down at her side.

"We, too, are going away," she said.

"You?"

"Yes, we received a despatch, an hour ago, from my brother-in-law, which gave us great delight. He did not expect to return for a month; he will be here in twelve days; he will sail from New York, on the Labrador, day after to-morrow. We shall go to meet him at Havre. We shall take the children and start day after to-morrow. It will do them good to be at the seashore a few days. How glad my brother-in-law will be to know you. But he knows you already, for we have spoken of you in all our letters. I am sure that you will like each other. He is so good. How long shall you be gone?"

"Twenty days."

"Twenty days, in a camp."

"Yes, Mademoiselle, the camp of Cercottes."

"In the forest d'Orleans, I found that out from your godfather this morning. I am very glad to go to meet my brother-in-law, but, at the same time I am sorry to be away from here; only for that I should have paid a visit to your godfather every morning. He would have given me news of you. Will you, in a few days write my sister a little bit of a letter, if it is only four lines—that will not take you long—just to tell her how you are, and that you have not forgotten us!"

"Oh! I can never forget you, your kindness, your goodness, never! mademoiselle, never!"

His voice trembled. He was afraid of betraying his emotion. He rose:

"Mademoiselle, I must go and speak to your sister. She sees me, she will think it strange."

He crossed the salon. Bettina looked after him. Mrs. Norton had just seated herself at the piano to play a waltz for the young people. Paul de Lavardens came up to Miss Percival:

"Will you do me the honor, mademoiselle?"

"Thank you. I believe I have just promised Monsieur Jean," replied she.

"But if you have not promised him, you will dance with me."

"Oh! yes."

Bettina went across the room to Jean who had just sat down by Mrs. Scott.

"I have told a story," said she to him. "M. de Lavardens asked me for this waltz, and I told him I had promised you. You will say yes, will you not? You do not object."

To hold her in his arms, to breathe the perfume of her hair! Jean's strength deserted him. He dared not accept.

"I am very sorry, mademoiselle. I cannot—I am ill this evening. I came only to make my adieu before my departure—but it would be impossible for me to dance."

Mrs. Norton struck up the prelude to the waltz.

"Well! mademoiselle," said Paul coming up gaily, "is it his waltz or mine?"

"Yours," said she, sadly, still looking at Jean.

She was so troubled that she answered without really knowing what she said. She immediately regretted that she had accepted. She would rather have stayed there, near him. But it was too late. Paul took her hand and led her away. Jean rose, and looked after Bettina and Paul; a cloud passed before his eyes, he suffered cruelly.

"The only thing for me to do," said he to himself, "it is to take advantage of this waltz and go away. To-morrow morning I will write a few lines to Mrs. Scott, and make my excuses."

He had reached the door. He did not look at Bettina again. If he had, he would have stayed. But Bettina saw him, and suddenly said to Paul:

"Thank you very much monsieur, but I am a little tired. Let us stop, if you please. Excuse me."

Paul offered her his arm.

"No, thank you," said she.

The door had just closed. Jean had gone. Bettina hastily crossed the salon, leaving Paul standing alone, very much astonished, and at a loss to understand what was passing.

Jean was already on the porch, when he heard some one call:

"Monsieur Jean! Monsieur Jean!"

He stopped and turned around. She was there at his side.

"You are going away, without saying good-by to me?"

"Pardon me. I am very tired."

"Then, you must walk home. It looks like a storm."

She held out her hand.

"Why! It is raining a little now."

"Oh, only a little."

"Come and take a cup of tea with me in the little salon, and I will send you home in a carriage."

And turning to one of the footmen: "Tell them to have a coupe ready immediately."

"No, mademoiselle, I beg of you. The fresh air is good for me. I shall feel better if I walk. Let me go."

"Very well, then! But you have no overcoat. You must take one."

"I shall not feel the cold; but you, in that thin dress. I must go so that you will go in."

With out even taking her hand, he escaped and ran rapidly down the steps.

"If I touch her hand," said he to himself. "I am lost. My secret will escape me."

His secret! He did not know that Bettina read his heart like an open book.

When Jean reached the bottom of the steps, he hesitated for an instant. These words were on his lips:

"I love you! I adore you! And that is why, I must see you no more."

But he must not utter them, he must fly; and in a few moments he was lost in the darkness.

Bettina stood there on the door steps framed in the light which streamed through the open door. Big drops of rain, driven by the wind, fell on her bare shoulders, and made her shiver; but she did not heed them; she only heard the beating of her heart.

"I knew very well that he loved me," she said to herself, "but I am very sure that I too—oh! yes, I too—"

Turning suddenly, the reflection, in one of the large mirrors in the hall, of the two tall footmen standing, motionless, near the oaken table, recalled her to herself. Bettina took a few steps in the direction of the salon, she heard the laughter and the waltz still going on. She stopped. She wanted to be alone, all alone, and turning to one of the servants.

"Go," said she, "and tell Madame that I am very much fatigued; I am going to my room."

Annie, her maid, was sleeping in an arm chair. She sent her away. She threw herself down upon the sofa. A sweet sadness oppressed her.

The door opened and Mrs. Scott entered.

"Are you ill, Bettina?"

"Ah! Suzie, it is you, my Suzie! How glad I am that you have come! Sit down by me, close to me." She threw herself into her sister's arms, like a child, pressing her burning cheeks to Suzie's cool shoulder, then, suddenly, she burst into a flood of tears.

"Bettina! my darling, what is the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing, I am nervous; it is for joy."

"For joy?"

"Yes, yes, wait; but let me cry a little, it will do me good! Do not be frightened!"

Suzie's kisses calmed and soothed her.

"It is over now, and I am going to tell you. I want to talk to you about Jean."

"Jean! Do you call him Jean?"

"Yes, I call him Jean. Have you not noticed how sad and depressed he has been for some time?"

"Yes, I have indeed."

"He would come, and he would go immediately to you, and stay there absorbed; and to such a point, silent, that for several days I asked myself—forgive me for speaking so plainly, if he were not in love with you my Suzie. You are so charming, it would not have been strange! But no; it was not you, it was me:

"You?"

"Yes, me! Let me tell you! He hardly dared look at me. He avoided me, he fled from me. He was afraid of me—actually afraid—and, now, to do me justice, I am not frightful. Am I?"

"Certainly not."

"Ah! he was not afraid of me, it was my frightful money! My money which attracts all the rest, and is so tempting to them, my money frightens him and drives him to despair, because he is not like the rest—because he—"

"Take care, my darling, perhaps you are mistaken."

"Oh! no, I am not mistaken. Just now, on the steps, as he was going away, he said a few words to me. The words were nothing, but if you had seen his distress, in spite of his efforts to conceal it! Suzie, darling Suzie, by my love, for you—and God knows how great a love it is—I am convinced, that if I had been a poor, little girl, without any money, instead of being Miss Percival, Jean would have taken my hand just now, and have told me that he loved me; and if he told me so, do you know what I would have answered him?"

"That you loved him, too."

"Yes, and that is why I am so happy. It is my firm resolve to marry for love. I do not say that I worship Jean, not yet; but I am just commencing to, Suzie, and the beginning is so sweet."

"Bettina, it frightens me to see you in such a state of exaltation. I do not doubt that Monsieur Reynaud has a great regard for you."

"Oh! more than this—more than that."

"Love, then, if you will. Yes, you are right, you are not mistaken. He loves you; and are you not worthy, my darling, of all the love that any one can give for you? As for Jean—you see how easy it is for me also, to call him Jean—you know what I think of him; very often, during the last month, we have had occasion to say to each other—'I esteem him highly, very highly.' But, in spite of that, is he a suitable husband for you?"

"Yes, if I love him."

"I try to reason with you, and you interrupt me. Bettina, I have an experience which you cannot have; do not misunderstand me. Ever since our arrival in Paris, we have been thrown into very gay, brilliant, aristocratic society. Already, if you had been willing, you might have been a marchioness or a princess."

"Yes, but I was not willing."

"Then you are contented to be only Madame Reynaud?"

"Perfectly, if I love him."

"Ah, you always come back to that."

"Because, that is the only question. There is no other, and I want to be reasonable. I confess that this question is not quite decided, and that perhaps I am a little hasty. Now, see, how sensible I can be. Jean is going away to-morrow. I shall not see him again for three weeks. I will have all that time to question myself, to deliberate, to find out the real state of my feelings. Beneath all my flighty ways, I am serious and thoughtful; you will acknowledge that?"

"Yes, I acknowledge it."

"Well, then! I ask you this, as I would ask our mother, if she were here. If at the end of these three weeks, I say to you: 'Suzie, I am sure that I love him!' will you let me go to him, all by myself, and ask him if he will have me for his wife? That is what you did with Richard."