

The Abbe Constantin.

BY LUDOVIC HALEVY.

CHAPTER VIII.—CONTINUED

The old priest grew thoughtful, and his head in his hand, was silent for several minutes; then he continued:

"And yet, Jean, do you know what I am thinking about? I have seen a great deal of mademoiselle Bettina since she came to Longueval. And, I have been thinking—it did not surprise me then—it seemed so natural that every one should be interested in you; but, indeed, she was always talking of you, yes, always."

"Of me?"

"Yes, and of your father, and of your mother. She was curious to know all about your life; she asked me to explain to her what a soldier's life was like—a true soldier, who loved his profession, and performed its duties conscientiously. It is strange, since you have told me this, what a tide of memories comes back to me. A thousand little things recur to me. For instance, she came back from Havre, day before yesterday, at three o'clock. Well, in an hour after her arrival she was here. And, immediately, she began to talk about you. She asked me if you had written, if you had been ill, when you would arrive, at what hour, if the regiment would come through the village."

"It is useless, godfather, to recall all this."

"No, it is not useless. She seemed so glad, so happy, even, that she was to see you again. She intended to make a *fete* of the dinner to-night. She was to present you to her brother-in-law. There is no one at the chateau, not a single guest. She made a point of that; and I remember her last words, as she stood in the door: 'There will be only five of us,' she said to me, 'you and Monsieur Jean, my sister, my brother-in-law, and I.' And she added, laughingly: 'A real family dinner.' Her last words, just as she was going were: 'a real family dinner!' Do you know, Jean, what I think?"

"You must not think it, godfather, it must not be!"

"Jean, I think that she loves you!"

"And I, I think so too!"

"You, too!"

"When I left her, three weeks ago, she was so agitated, so moved! She saw that I was sad and unhappy. She did not want to let me go. We were on the steps of the chateau. I had to fly—yes—fly. I should have spoken, have told her all. After going a little way I stopped, and looked back. She could no longer see me. I was in darkness. But I could see her. She stood there in the rain, motionless, her arms and shoulders bare, looking after me. Perhaps I am foolish to think so. Perhaps it was only a feeling of pity. But no, it was something more than pity for do you know what she did the next morning? She came out at five o'clock, in all the storm, to see me go by with the regiment, and, that is the way in which she bade me adieu. Oh! godfather! godfather!"

"But then," said the poor cure completely overwhelmed, completely bewildered, "but then I do not understand it at all. If you love her, Jean, and if she loves you!"

"But it is for that very reason that I must go away. If it only concerned me! If I were sure that she had not discovered my love, sure that she was not afflicted by it, I would stay; I would stay, if only for the pleasure of seeing her, for nothing but the happiness of loving her. But she is perfectly conscious of it and far from discouraging me. It is just this which compels me to go away."

"No, I cannot understand it. I know very well, my poor child, that we are talking about matters on which I am not an authority; but, at least

you are both of you good, young and attractive. You love her, she would love you, and you cannot!"

"But her money, godfather; but her money!"

"What matters her money! Her money has nothing to do with it! Is it on account of her money that you love her? It is rather in spite of her money. Your conscience can rest easy in that respect and that is enough."

"No, that is not enough. It is not enough to have a good opinion of one's self; it is necessary that others should be of the same opinion."

"Oh! Jean, among all who know you, who could misjudge you?"

"Who knows? and then there is something else besides this question of money, something more serious and important. I am not a suitable husband for her."

"And who is more worthy than you?"

"It is not a question of my worth, it is a question of what she is, and of what I am; it is a question of asking myself what her life ought to be, and what my life ought to be. One day, Paul—you know he has rather a coarse way of saying things, but that often gives force to an idea—we were talking of her, and, Paul, suspecting nothing, or he would not have said it, he is very good-hearted—well, Paul said to me: 'What she needs is a husband who devotes himself to her, entirely to her, a husband who has no other care than to make her life a perpetual *fete*; in short, a husband who gives her the worth of her money.' You know me. Such a husband, I cannot, I ought not to be. I am a soldier, and I wish to remain a soldier. If the varying fortunes of my profession should some day send me to a little post in the Alps, or to some out of the way village in Algeria, can I ask her to follow me? Can I condemn her to the life of a soldier's wife, which is, in fact, the life of a soldier! Think of the life she now leads, with all its luxury, all its pleasure!"

"Yes," said the abbe, "this is a more serious question than the money."

"So serious, that no hesitation is possible. While I was alone, in camp, these last three weeks, I have thought it all over; I have thought of nothing else, and loving her as I love her, reasons must be very powerful which can let me see my duty clearly. I must go away, far, very far away. I shall suffer much, but I ought not to see her again! I ought not to see her again!"

Jean dropped into a chair by the hearth, and sat there overwhelmed with his sorrow. The old priest gazed at him sadly.

"Oh! to see you so unhappy! my poor child! that such grief should come to you! It is very sad, very cruel—"

At this moment there was a light knock at the door.

"Do not be uneasy, Jean," said the cure; "I will not let anyone come in."

The abbe went to the door, opened it, and started back as if he had seen an unexpected apparition.

It was Bettina. She saw Jean instantly, and going straight to him:

"You?" she cried. "Oh! how glad I am!"

He had risen, she took both his hands, and addressed the abbe:

"Pardon me, Monsieur le Cure, if I greet him first. I saw you yesterday, and I have not seen him for three whole weeks; not since that evening when he went away so sad and suffering."

She still held Jean's hands. He had not strength to move, or say one word.

"And are you better now?" continued Bettina; "No, not yet, I can see it, still sad. Ah! how well it was that I came! I must have had an inspiration. And yet, I am a little, very much, embarrassed to find you here. You will understand when you

know what I come to ask your godfather."

She dropped Jean's hands and turning to the abbe:

"I come, Monsieur le Cure, to beg you to listen to my confession. Yes, my confession. But you need not go away, Monsieur Jean. I will make my confession publicly. I am very willing to speak before you, and I think, perhaps, it will be better. Let us sit down."

She was full of courage and confidence. She was in a fever, but it was the fever which gives to the soldier on the field of battle, order, heroism, and disregard of danger.

The emotion which caused Bettina's heart to beat so quickly, was lofty and noble. She said to herself:

"I want to be loved! I want to love! I want to be happy! I want him to be happy! And, since he has not courage enough, I must have it for both of us; I must take the field alone, and with a fearless heart, march on to the conquest of our love, of our happiness."

Bettina's first words completely conquered both the abbe and Jean. They let her speak while they remained silent. They felt that the hour was, indeed, supreme, they knew that what was about to happen was decisive and irrevocable; but they could not foresee. They sat down passively—almost automatically. They waited—they listened. Between these two bewildered men, Bettina, alone, was self-possessed. Her voice was clear and distinct as she began:

"First, I will tell you Monsieur le Cure, to make your conscience entirely easy, that I am here with the full consent of my sister and my brother-in-law. They know why I came, they know what I am going to do. They not only know it, they approve of it. That is understood, it is not? Well! It is your letter, Monsieur Jean, which brings me here; the letter in which you told my sister that you could not come to dine with us this evening, and that you were absolutely obliged to go away. This letter disarranged all my plans. This evening, with the same permission of my sister and my brother-in-law, I wanted to take you to the park, Monsieur Jean, to there sit down with you. I was even so childish as to choose the very place, beforehand, and deliver a little address to you—carefully prepared and studied, and almost learned by heart; for ever since your departure, I have thought of nothing else. I recite it to myself from morning till night. This was what I proposed to do, and you can understand how disconcerted I was when your letter came. I reflected a little while, and then I said to myself, that, if I addressed my little speech to your godfather, it would be almost the same as if to yourself. I have therefore come, Monsieur le Cure, to beg you to listen to me."

"I am listening to you," faltered the abbe.

"I am rich, Monsieur le Cure, very rich; and to be frank, I love my money—yes, I love it very much. I owe to it the luxury which surrounds me, this luxury, which, I admit—this is a confession—is not disagreeable to me. My excuse is, that I am very young; perhaps, this will pass away with age. But I am not quite sure of it. And I have another excuse; it is, that if I love my money for all the pleasures it procures for me, I love it still more for the good it enables me to do to those around me. I love it selfishly, if you will, for the delight which the pleasure of giving affords me. Indeed, I do not think my fortune fell into bad hands. For, Monsieur le Cure, it seems to me that just as you have the charge of souls, so I have charge of my riches. I always say to myself: 'Above all things, I desire that my husband shall be worthy to share this immense fortune; I want to be sure that he will help me to make good use

of it while I live, and after my death, should I die first. Besides I must love the man, who will be my husband! And, here, Monsieur le Cure, is where my confession really begins. There is a man, who, for the last two months, has done all he could to conceal his love from me. But, I do not doubt that he loves me—for you do love me, Jean, do you not?"

"Yes," said Jean in a low voice, looking down, guiltily, "yes, I love you!"

"I was sure of it, but I wanted to hear you say so. And now Jean, I implore you, do not say a single word. It would be useless, and only trouble me, and hinder me from going straight through to the end, and telling you what I have resolved to say to you. Promise me to sit there, silently, and hear me."

"Yes, I promise."

Bettina lost her self-command for a moment, and her voice trembled; she went on, however, with a playfulness that was a little forced:

"Monsieur le Cure, I do not positively accuse you of all that has happened; but, nevertheless it is a little your fault."

"My fault!"

"Ah! you must not speak, either. Yes, I repeat it, your fault. I am sure that you have told Jean a great deal about me, a great deal too much. Perhaps, except for that, he would not have thought of me. And at the same time, you have told me a great deal about him—not too much; no, no, but at least a good deal! Then I, having so much confidence in you, began to watch and study him more attentively. I began to compare him with all those who, during the past year had asked my hand in marriage. It seemed to me that he was superior to them in every respect. At last, one day, or rather one evening—it was three weeks ago, the night before your departure, Jean, I discovered that I loved you. Yes, Jean, I love you! I implore you, Jean, not to speak, sit still, and do not come near me. I had plenty of courage when I came, but you see I am losing it. I have still something to say to you, most important of all. Jean, listen to me. I do not desire an answer prompted by your emotion. I know that you love me. If you should marry me, it must be not only from love but from reason. During the fortnight which preceded your departure, you took such pains to shun me; you were so reserved when we met, that I could not be myself with you. Perhaps, there are some traits in my character of which you know nothing as yet. Jean I understand you, I know what I should undertake in becoming your wife; and I would be, not only loving and tender, but brave and strong. Your whole life is known to me, your godfather has told it to me. I know why you are a soldier, I know what duties and sacrifices you may have to encounter in the future. Jean, do not distrust me; I will not dissuade you from any of these duties and sacrifices. You may have thought that I would wish you to abandon your profession. Never! never! I would never ask you to do such a thing. I love you, and I wish you to be just what you are. It because your life is different, and better than the lives of all those who have sought me for a wife, that I have wished you to be my husband. I would not love you so well, perhaps, I would not love you at all—though that would be hardly possible—if you lived as they do. When I could, I would follow you; and everywhere that you were, my duty and my happiness would be. And if a day should come, when you could not take me with you, a day when you must depart alone, oh! Jean! that day I promise you I will be brave, so that you shall not lose your courage. And now, Monsieur le Cure, it is not to him, it is to you that I address myself, and I want you to answer me: Tell me, if he loves