

A PLACE FOR EACH.

Brewers should to "Malta" go,
Loggerheads to "Scilly,"
Quakers to the "Friendly Isles,"
And furriers all to "Chili."
The little bawling, squalling babes
That break our nightly rest
Should be packed off to "Babylon,"
To "Lapland" or to "Brest."

From "Spithead" cooks go o'er to "Greece";
And, while the miser waits
His passage to the "Guinea" Coast,
Spendthrifts are in the "Straits."
Musicians hasten to the "Sound,"
To some "Cape Horn" is pain;
Debtors should go to "Ohio,"
And sailors to the "Malay."

Gardeners should to "Botany" go,
Shoeblocks to "Japan,"
Bachelors to the "United States,"
And maids to the "Isle of Man."
Thus emigrants and misplaced men,
They would no longer vex us;
And those not here provided for
Had better go to—"Texas!"

A FRENCH SPECULATION.

CHAPTER I.

It was a bright Sunday afternoon in the early spring, and all the little world of Blois was disporting itself on the promenade by the side of the river Loire. The scene was very gay; under the long line of trees a band of stringed instruments was labouring through an elaborate waltz. The performers were amateurs: they belonged to a choral society got up by the organist of the cathedral, among the young and enterprising *bourgeoisie*; and the affair had proved a great success. As they played now, the admiring eyes of mothers, sisters, and pretty cousins were on them, and they did their best and looked their best, as became their important position.

A little apart from the band sat groups of elderly ladies, chatting among themselves, watching their portly husbands and slim daughters, promenading round the musicians; among them little children trotting about, daintily dressed, and *bonnes* with large white coils on their heads and knitting in their hands. Over all the sunny sky of France, blue, bright, and gay, smiling through the tender green of the young foliage, and reflecting itself beautifully in the fair river.

Truly they seemed a happy and contented people these honest *bourgeois* of the old town, full of their own concerns, and apparently well satisfied to be so. Among a group of *gras papas* who stood chattering together, and leaning on the parapet, stood two men, both of whom seemed graver than the others. The elder of the two was a man of some importance in the town, the owner of a well-known and popular inn "La Pie Blanche." No one was more respected than Monsieur Auguste Benoit; he and his family were most highly considered. Monsieur Benoit was about the average height of the French *bourgeois*, a liberal five-foot five; he was stout, or rather round; his prominent waistcoat was adorned by a huge gold watch-chain; he wore a massive ring set with a carbuncle, on the first finger of his right hand; his hands were fat and dimpled, and tapered to finely-pointed fingers. Monsieur Benoit's face was good-nature and *bonhomie* itself; it was round and large, smooth shaven but for the black moustache. He was bald on the top of his head; the hair behind was black as jet, and so close-cut as to throw two large thin ears into bold relief. His ample double chin rested on a black satin cravat. His dress, from that cravat to the tartan trousers in folds on the hips, and tapering to the very small high-heeled boots, was perfection. Such was Monsieur Benoit on the promenade on Sunday, but to-day the shade of gravity sat on him in an unwonted manner.

Monsieur Benoit's companion was a man who might have been any age between thirty-five and fifty. He belonged to a different type altogether from his friend: he was tall, and very thin; his hair was fair and sprinkled with grey; he wore a short, fair beard, which partly concealed the restless movements of an eager, mobile mouth; his eyebrows also were constantly moving, and his eyes restless, bright, and searching; he was despite this unrestfulness, a handsome man, with straight features and a well-made figure. He was Monsieur Legros, formerly a highly successful *arrest*, now retired upon his laurels, with his money invested in a new and startling investment. That restlessness was the restlessness of speculation; in his little office, in old days of hard work, Legros had been a much calmer man.

That such a man as Camille Legros ever had time or thought to spare for matrimony, was an astonishment to his acquaintance; but so it was. Affairs of importance had taken him to Blois, where he had hired a room in "La Pie Blanche." Madame Benoit herself always presided at the head of the *table d'hôte*, and on her right hand sat her daughter, Mademoiselle Blanche, so named, people said, after the celebrated "Pie." Before Monsieur Legros had dined three times at *table d'hôte* he had determined to make Blanche his wife. He was a man, who, during a busy life, had hardly given a passing thought to women. He was, like most Frenchmen, a devoted son to his widowed mother; but perhaps it was his experience of her that had so completely lowered his conception of what a woman should be, that he expected in a wife a pretty nonentity—a creature not to trust or to share his confidence, but a useful housekeeper, and a credit to his taste in good looks. He was not in love with Blanche Benoit;

he did not know what love was; and he demanded her from her father with a strong sense of the good match he was offering her, and that the obligation would be all on their side. Monsieur Benoit demanded a fair statement of his proposed son-in-law's finances before he would agree to the betrothal. It was given. Camille Legros was too absolutely confident in the success of his great schemes to conceal anything. Benoit was impressed by the size of the fortune, but somewhat startled by hearing that it was all invested in one vast speculation, the building of a little fashionable watering-place that was to rival Dieppe, Dinard, or Etretat in its attractions.

"You are sure—you are quite sure that the situation is one that will be popular?" asked the inn-keeper, anxiously.

"Sure! I am certain," cried Legros, shrugging up his shoulders and tapping the map over which they were bending, with the back of his hand. "What more can one wish? The air is magnificent: an unbroken *plage* of hard sand; the view exquisite: in the neighbouring inland town, advantages of education, of market, of medical attendance; the railway has agreed with me, for a consideration, to run an additional train from Paris; there are quarries close at hand, from which I draw my stone; it is well adapted to building purposes; labour is cheap just now; I have capital,—what more can one desire?"

"It sounds well," said Monsieur Benoit, musingly. He was dazzled by the talk, by the ready money, by the certainty of Legros; and after a conference with Madame Benoit—for he did not share his future son-in-law's views about women—they agreed to give him their only child.

Blanche was told, and was quite satisfied; she had not thought much of the future, leaving it with perfect confidence in her parents' hands; so she was neither surprised nor disconcerted when Monsieur Legros was presented to her as her future husband; and she smiled a very pretty little smile, and made the set little speech her mother had taught her with so charming a grace, that Legros was enchanted. Blanche was charming; she was tall and slight; her face was a perfect oval, her complexion clear and white; her eyes very large and dark brown, fringed with thick dark lashes—as thick and long at each end of the eyelid as in the centre; her dark hair was cut short on the forehead, in the fashion of the day; the mouth beautifully shaped, tender, mobile, wondrously sweet in expression, but betraying something of childishness and immaturity, which befit her seventeen years.

That Sunday afternoon at Blois was the day preceding the wedding, and Blanche and her mother were seated together for the last time listening to the band.

"That is Jean's violin," said Blanche, touching her mother's hand. "Listen, mamma."

They sat on a bench, Madame Benoit stout in black silk, Blanche all in white; and a violin solo was played in the orchestra.

"He plays well, the little Jean," said Madame Benoit, complacently. "Thy cousin has talent, Blanche."

Yes, he was playing well, the poor boy,—playing on his own heart-strings this evening; for was not Blanche to be married to-morrow, and what should he have to live for—he, the forlorn collegian of nineteen—when his fair cousin was gone? And she never guessed it. Alas, poor Jean!

The solo ended, there was applause. He fancied he could hear her little hands joining in the applause, and he stole away out of the group of musicians, and came and stood beside her wistfully.

By-and-by an evening breeze began to stir the river; it became chilly; Madame Benoit rose.

"Oh, not yet, not yet, mamma," said Blanche, regretfully. "I should like to linger yet a little while."

"Then go to papa, my child. I must go in to be in time for the omnibus that comes from the train. I cannot neglect my possible travellers!" and she hurried away. Blanche went over to the parapet where her father stood.

"We are going to take a walk, *mignonnet*," he said.—"Monsieur Legros and I."

"Perhaps Mademoiselle Blanche would wish to come with us?" said Legros, courteously.

"May I?"

"We are enchanted."

"But how about our conversation and business, *mon cher*?" said Monsieur Benoit.

"See!" said Jean, advancing eagerly. "If these messieurs will allow it, I will walk with my cousin; we will follow you; we shall converse; we will not interrupt you; we shall be happy."

There was a pathetic ring in the last words of the boy that struck Legros. He looked at him keenly, and then at Blanche; but he only said, briefly, "Sut," and they started on their walk.

On the opposite side of the river lay the little suburb of Blois, which is called Vienne. It is an insignificant little place, lying in a flat, low country, intersected with open ditches. Quite across these flat fields ran a long spine formed by a narrow road on an embankment, just sufficiently wide to allow of trees being planted on each side of it; the rank grass and thick bushes growing up the sides of the embankment shut in this little road, and made it very quiet and green. The views now and then through a gap in the trees and undergrowth were charmingly pretty, showing picturesque old Blois, with its piled-up buildings and high steps; the river

below; behind, the wide country, and a low crimson streak of setting sun.

"The last time, the last time!" said Jean in a low earnest whisper, as the two followed the elder men at a short distance behind.

"No, no; not the last time. Many and many a time shall we pace this promenade again," said Blanche, gaily. Only to the boy it was the very last time.

Beautiful yellow dragon-flies flitted across their path. One alighted on Blanche's white gown, and she had leisure during one brief second to admire it. Then bright blue butterflies, brilliant as a patch of sky, flitted to and fro. A little damp, and very green, with a faint sweet smell of marshy plants below, this walk was a perfect paradise for lovely and rare insects.

Monsieur Benoit and Legros recked not of the brilliant insect-world, save when a blundering common dragon-fly in his steel-blue armour bounced against Monsieur Benoit's face causing him to emit a hasty expression of impatience. They were deep in business. It was a subject that had been, so to speak, already talked thread-bare; but this terrible Camille Legros would come back to it again and again. Blanche would have an excellent *dot* after her father's death; but till that occurred, nothing—"not one sou," said the good man energetically.

"But see, my good friend," urged Legros over and over again, "I am nearly as old as thee, and we are not either of us old! *Ma foi*, no! I tell you two thousand francs now would be of more value than twenty thousand after you are no more."

"No, no; ask me no more. After all, my friend, this grand affair of your at St. Didier, it is but a speculation; and if it fail, you will then have this snug little nest-egg of Blanche's to fall back upon. I know what I am about—*est-ce*?"

"Less than this has broken a marriage, *mon cher*," said Legros, somewhat gloomily.

"Break it! break it!" Only it must be done to-night, my friend," said Monsieur Benoit. "To-morrow it will be too late!" and he proceeded to light a fresh cigar. Legros walked on thoughtfully for a few steps. He was afraid to show how he longed to obtain possession of some of the promised money, or how valuable it would be to him at this moment.

"A truce to joking," he said suddenly, clearing his brow. "If you are determined, there is no more to be said. Break off the marriage! *Peste*! With me it has become an affair of the heart."

"And when you have once conversed with Blanche, it will be still more so," cried her father enthusiastically. "I know it is not etiquette, but would you like to walk home with her now?"

"I should," said Legros, smiling a little. Monsieur Benoit turned round: "Jean, Jean, my boy."

Jean joined him, and he passed his arm through his and walked on. Monsieur Legros stepped back, and placed himself by the side of his young betrothed. "You are fond of flowers?" he said, observing that her hands were full of them.

"Yes, monsieur."

"There are flowers at St. Didier, and I am planting them, making gardens everywhere."

"Yes, monsieur."

"Have you ever been away from Blois?"

"No, monsieur."

"Then you cannot imagine St. Didier. All is new, new, new. None of those crumbling streets and mouldy buildings. All is fresh and bright, and the houses are very gay—some painted pink, and some green and white. And there is a casino, which will be very gay when the place is full of *beauties*. See, here are the plans," and he drew a roll from his pocket. "That is the great hotel, and there is the English church with a spire, and here is an artist's studio; and on the cliffs gay villas, with gardens running down to the sea."

"It must be charming—charming, monsieur."

"What are they doing, Jean?" asked Monsieur Benoit, pressing the arm of his young cousin. "It would not be discreet for me to look, but thou—thou mayst look."

What were they doing? Jean's heart failed him, for he thought of what he himself would have been doing—whispering honeyed words, stealing loving looks from shy, downcast eyes. With hot impatience he looked back.

"Ah, bah!" he said. "You may look, monsieur, without the smallest indiscretion. He is explaining to her the plans of St. Didier."

CHAPTER II.

The courtyard of the "Pie Blanche" was very gaily decorated the next morning—scarlet cloth over the pavement, festoons of leaves and flowers all round the windows, and a magnificent motto in scarlet and white over the archway leading into the street. The bridal party had been to the Mairie at eight o'clock in the morning, after which they returned to the hotel, to emerge in full splendour at half-past ten.

All the busy laughing and chattering ceased when the procession was formed. They went two and two,—the bride and her father at the head, Blanche dressed all in white, with her flowing veil hiding her blushing face—all the other relations arm-in-arm behind; three bride-maids each with her cavalier; the mother leaning on an uncle; all the friends; the ladies dressed in the height of the fashion—fawn-coloured silk, cream-coloured satin and brown, Bismarck *cravat*, *prune de Monsieur*,

noir corbeau, *sang de bœuf*—all varieties of colours; their hair frizzed, their heels two inches high;—the gentleman in full evening dress, cut-away coats, white waistcoats, and gloves, with exquisite bouquets in their button-holes.

As the last of them passed under the archway, the two old waiters who were left behind each flicked the napkin in his hand with a somewhat discontented flick.

"I wish mad'demoiselle was not going so far off, Battiste," said the younger of the two, who might be sixty. "Oh la! la! we shall miss her sweet face." "Yes," answered Battiste, ruefully. "And her monsieur is a queer sort of man, never gives one a look or a word, and sits up night after night over his accounts, like one that is not certain which side the balance will lie."

"Umph!—well, the old 'Pie Blanche' will be something solid for mad'demoiselle to fall back upon, anyhow; we do well, *heia!*"

Up the narrow picturesque streets, up flights of stairs, mounting the hill, the procession at last reached the cathedral. With one of the bride-maids leaning on his arm, a simpering girl in blue, came Jean, and as he walked his heart grew heavier. When they reached the great western door he could bear it no longer, he could not see Blanche given away to this stranger—it would break his heart. There was a pause at the entrance, congratulating friends pressing round, and among them Jean slipped away, leaving the aggrieved bride-maid to do as best she might.

The cathedral stands on one height of the picturesque old town, and on another height the castle. Behind the cathedral is a dark, tree-shaded old garden, with a parapet from which to view the lawn beneath, the flowing Loire, the great gloomy walls of the old Chateau de Blois. The old trees grew closely together, and even with their young spring foliage made a thick impenetrable shade. The garden of the old *Evêché* it is called; but when Jean went into it with his sore heart, there were no dark-robed priests pacing its alleys; it was completely deserted, the cathedral bells clanging a joyous marriage *salve*, which smote on his ear. He flung himself on a low stone bench, hid his face in his hands, and wept. It seemed an eternity. When it was all over there was a joyous movement and murmur. He emerged from the old garden, and was just in time to see them come out, bride and bridegroom first, bowing, smiling, shaking hands. His Blanche! no, she was his no longer—she belonged to Camille Legros. It was all over, all over, and he wished that he was dead.

The sun should shine on a wedding-day, it is true, and very sunny was Blanche's wedding-day; but it is equally important that it should shine on her first entry into her new home, and so, unfortunately, it did not. The Legros remained for about a week at Blois—a week which seemed interminable to the bridegroom, who felt it a grievous waste of time—a week full of mingled disappointment, hurry, and grief, to Blanche. She was dreadfully afraid of her husband, never sufficiently at ease with him to let him have any insight into her real character and the intelligence of her judgments and opinions. Her conversation was limited to monosyllables, her remarks to interjections. He pored over his plans all day, giving vent to such vivid descriptions of the charms of St. Didier, that Blanche formed a most brilliant conception of what her new home would be; and finding that that subject pleased him best, grew bold enough to ask a few flattering questions about it. Unluckily the questions were not easy to answer. For instance, "Will it not be difficult to have any privacy among all these people, monsieur?" She had yet to learn that the people were still to come. Then, "I am glad my new gowns were made so much *à la mode*. Who sets the fashion at St. Didier, monsieur?" and so on.—Monsieur Legros, blustering a little, and talking of the coming "season" and the present dead time of the year.

Blanche had one of those clinging natures who cannot live without loving some one. A very few gentle words, a very little affection, from her husband in the first days of their marriage, sufficed to make her love him; but it was with a timid, deprecating love, easily subdued, and very shrinking.

It was a grey, cloudy, windy day when the bride first saw her new home. The journey was a tedious one, with many changes. Blanche had wept bitterly on leaving her home and her parents for the first time. Her head ached; she was confused by the unknown bustle of travelling, and longed, poor child, for a kiss and a kind word; but Legros was not a demonstrative man. She took refuge in the thought of the charms of the new home, and of the welcome that awaited her from Madame Berthe, her husband's mother, who lived with him, and had hitherto managed his household. They reached the station, transferred themselves and their baggage to a very shabby-looking one-horse omnibus, and were soon started on their way.

The country was flat and green, with no interesting features whatever. By-and-by, as they drove on, it grew colder and colder. A sharp north wind blowing over the sea, there was a fresher smell and taste in the air; but Blanche was so tired that she could hardly keep awake, and her eyes closed again and again. Monsieur Legros showed her some little tenderness then. He put his arm round her, and drew a shawl over her knees, and looking at the pale, beautiful little face which almost rested on his shoulder, felt a thrill of gratification and pride.