

me from very rapture; but when we adjourned to a café close by, and supped as I suspect he had not supped for many a year, the cup of his gratitude was full. He called me his *filz bien aimé*, his friend, his protector, pledged himself to everlasting affection and remembrance; finally, opened his heart to me.

It was a sad story. He had married because he needed bread, and the bread thus obtained was dealt out in niggardly portions, and steeped in bitterness beyond the bitterness of asphodel.

"Of course, when a man marries a lady because she has a house and some hundred francs," he said, with pitiful meekness, "there are little caprices to be endured; but I could not bear to see my poor Blanche made a Cinderella of. Oh, Monsieur! she was so pretty and so sweet, and her step-sister Henriette would have trodden on her neck if she dared."

We were now walking along the boulevard, arm and arm, and he looked behind and before him whilst speaking.

"Blanche had a spirit, but Henriette broke it. She made her do the work of the house, and wear her old dresses; she taunted her with her dependence before all our *pensionnaires*; she—oh, Monsieur, what am I saying? Let us talk of the play—"

"But I am especially interested in Mademoiselle Blanche," I said, persuasively. "Moreover, I am the friend of her faithful lover, Félicien des Essarts—"

"Félicien? Why did he go away? Where is he?"

I answered his questions one by one. The picture of Félicien sick, Félicien lonely, Félicien all but broken-hearted for the loss of Blanche, struck and subdued him. He grew coherent and self-possessed, and he told me what he knew without any effort at concealment.

One night, during his temporary absence, Blanche had disappeared. None could tell whether she had gone or the reason of her going, but Madame and Henriette forbade the mention of her name from that hour.

"I don't think Blanche would willingly have left me so," added the old man, tearfully. "She knew that I had no one else to comfort me; she knew how I should weep for her."

I caught his arm, and cried eagerly, "You do not suspect that they drove her away, or anything more unnatural and wicked?"

"I suspect nothing. I haven't mind enough left for suspicion, Monsieur. I only know that I wish I were dead."

My companion was too overcome, and I too bewildered, to say any more. When we reached the gate of the pension both were striving after self-composure, and both were looking, perhaps with the same thought, towards the chestnut-trees.

Was I dreaming? Had I imbibed the phantasmagoria of "Les Pilules du Diable" so strongly as to see unreal things in a real world? I stood by the little iron gate, I heard Mademoiselle Henriette playing in the salon, I saw the shabby little figure of the poor Goupil beside me, and yet I had lost my senses and knew not where I was.

A shadow—a shape—a something moved amid the chestnut-trees. One moment, and I felt that the diaphanous drapery was tangible, and the figure it covered was living; another, and I caught or imagined that I caught the gleam of a woman's golden head; a third, and Monsieur Goupil was clinging to my knees, pallid and palsied with fear, and about the chestnut-grove were darkness and silence only.

"Oh! Monsieur, Monsieur, that is what I saw once before. It is my Blanche, and yet it is not she. Surely such sights as these portend terrible things!" he cried; and it was a long time before I could soothe him.

To satisfy myself was more difficult still. I put the matter before me in every possible light. I accounted for the old man's hallucination and my own, by various plausibilities. I reduced the mystery to its simplest and least objectionable form. Still it was a mystery; a mystery I resolved to fathom, if indeed it were fathomable; a mystery I could neither forget by night nor by

day, a mystery that made study impossible to me and sleep unhealthy.

From that day I spent all the strategy, of which I was master upon Henriette. I flattered, and provoked her; I dropped hints as to her lover's gallantries; taunted her with his indifference; I played upon her love of gifts and her love of pleasure. For strong-minded as she was, and self-contained as she was, she had a childish love of fine clothes, sweetmeats, cheap music, and street shows.

She did not wholly dislike me. When Monsieur Colin failed to come, she gladly played my favourite songs, mimicked such of her mother's boarders as were absent for my amusement, and, in fine, relieved her *ennui* without relieving her malice.

One evening, when she had been unusually jealous about Monsieur Colin, and, suave to me, I ventured upon a more decided course of action.

We had been talking lightly of love, using without stint or shame what Balzac, happily calls the *argot de cœur*, and recurring again and again to personal experiences. Henriette argued on the side of second love. I opposed whilst I spoke. "Witty and attractive as you are," I said, "you have a rival in Monsieur Colin's heart whom you will not easily supersede. She came first, and will outstay a reign like yours."

The girl's eyes flamed. "I defy her power, and deny her claim," she said.

"Blanche's?" I asked, quietly. She turned upon me, as if determined to sound my knowledge to the bottom.

"I have no secrets," I added, in a voice of cold indifference. "You must be better able to judge of this young lady's hold on your lover's heart."

"I?" she faltered.

"You."

"Pierre has told you—"

"Monsieur Colin has told me nothing I can repeat, Mademoiselle. If you wish to make the world as if it held no Blanche to him, the way is easy."

She looked up eagerly. I bent down and whispered in her ear.

"Reinstate your step-sister in her home and the game would be in your own hands."

Thunderstruck as she was, she never for a single instant lost self-possession. She accepted my knowledge of the family secret as a matter of course, and gave me no clue to the unravelling of it.

"Have you forgotten that Blanche is ten years younger than I?" she asked, evidently anticipating a triumph for herself now. She was disappointed.

"What of that? Were Blanche beautiful as an angel, her presence could not harm you as her unexplained absence is doing. Monsieur Colin is not a boy of eighteen, and would tire of her after two days' ineffectual courting."

"You do not know him."

"But why keep this pretty Blanche hidden from us all?" I said, in an altered tone. "You are cruel, Mademoiselle, and will leave us soon. Are we to have no one in your place?"

"Monsieur," Henriette answered, very distantly and drily, "it may be the fashion in England, but in France nothing excuses inquisitiveness as to domestic affairs. Oblige me by changing the subject."

Thus it happened that I risked all and gained nothing. I felt utterly powerless now to help my friend Félicien, much as I desired it. I felt even more than powerless, since I became an object of suspicion to both Madame Goupil and her daughter. The old man avoided me, partly, as I imagined, from fear of his wife, and partly from fear of himself. He could not help prattling of his troubles, and the very winds seemed to turn eavesdroppers on Madame's behalf.

All circumstances combined to make life in the Rue de Buffon a dreary affair at this time. Madame fed us ill, Henriette's tongue became venomous as the sting of a wasp, Monsieur Colin stayed away altogether, and the threadbare bachelors and shabby spinsters played dominoes and whist without a smile.

Félicien still lived, and on one or two occa-

sions was enabled to see me. He had grown fiercely suspicious of the two Goupils now, and would fain have set the police upon their track, have charged them with the murder of Blanche, have done a hundred unconsidered things. I promised to take the initiative, but felt that too much caution could not be used. If, after all, Blanche were living, we might dearly repent such precipitate conduct; and precipitation alone could do no good.

One evening, events were brought to an unlooked-for crisis without any interference whatever. I had paid up my arrears to Madame, fully intent upon quitting the Rue de Buffon next day, which resolution seemed rather satisfactory than otherwise to the two ladies. Every one else, including Monsieur Colin, expressed unfeigned sorrow, and as to "ce pauvre père Goupil," as my friend the chicken-feeder, informed me, he cried whenever he found himself alone.

It was the first really autumnal evening, and though the windows of the salon were open still, and Henriette's white muslin dress simulated summer, every one shivered sympathetically.

Candles were not yet lighted, for Madame practiced every possible economy that could be supported on sentimental grounds. Fruit and vegetables were the food of man before sin came, therefore it was proper and poetic to live on apples and potatoes. The summer was too beautiful to let go too easily; therefore it behoved every one to go without fires till near Christmas. Twilight induced dreaminess and spirituality; therefore her unhappy boarders were doomed to two or three hours of inactivity and darkness.

To-night the twilight was unusually deceptive and depressing. The garden lay in deep shadow, unbroken, save when the chestnut boughs tossed like funeral plumes against a cold grey sky. Not a sound broke the stillness, save the murmur of the outlying world of Paris, and the hoarse chaunt of a blind beggar in the neighbouring street.

Henriette sat at the piano and played fitfully, as the fancy seized her, Madame dozed on the sofa, rousing herself now and then to praise her daughter's performance, or to beg her dear Goupil to run and see how Jeannette was getting on with her ironing. Monsieur Colin smoked, nibbled chocolate, and took no notice of anyone. The *pensionnaires*, one and all, whispered to each other during the performance of Henriette's loudest passages, and held their peace at other times.

I perhaps enjoyed the most cheerful mood. Whatever exertions I might take on Félicien's behalf, however close the future might bring me to the old sordid life in the Rue de Buffon, I felt already removed from it, and the feeling was refreshing.

I could but regret, however, my poor old friend Monsieur Goupil, and the little chicken-feeder, and the power I should lose of henceforth brightening their lives. I thought, too, of the shadow among the chestnut-trees, alternately doubting, questioning, believing it.

On a sudden, as if the brain were indeed able to clothe its idolon with shape and substance, I saw before me all I had just before seen in the eyes of fancy only.

A figure clothed in fantastic drapery of light colour moved slowly across the lawn. One hand bore a lamp, and the light of it made clear what else would have been phantasmal; a small head weighed down with golden hair, a lissom form crouched as if in fear; a pale, sweet face, large wondering eyes; all these were as plain to see as if it had been daylight.

I uttered an exclamation, and started to my feet.

"Look!" I cried; "Madame, Mademoiselle Henriette, look! You at least should not miss this sight."

From that moment I could understand the capability of blind men to interpret the passions and gestures of those around them. It was perfectly dark in the salon, yet I knew instinctively and momentarily all the emotion that Madame displayed, and Henriette suppressed. The former drew back, shrinking and praying; but I could