

The Abbe Constantin.

BY LUDOVIC HALEVY.

CHAPTER VII.

The next morning, on returning from drill, Jean found Paul de Lavardens awaiting him at the barracks. He hardly gave him time to dismount—and as soon as they were alone:

"Tell me," said he, "Tell me, quickly, all about your dinner yesterday I saw them myself in the morning. The little one was driving the four black ponies, at such a rate! I bowed to them—did you speak of me? Did the recognize me? When are you going to take me to Longueval? Answer, answer me!"

"Answer! answer! which question first?"

"The last one."

"When will I take you to Longueval?"

"Yes."

"In about ten days. They do not care to see any one, just yet."

"But are you going to Longueval again before ten days?"

"Oh! I, I am going again to-day, at four o'clock. But I do not count. Jean Reynaud, the cure's godson! That is the way that I have so easily gained the confidence of these two charming women. I am introduced under the patronage and indorsement of the Church—and then, it has been discovered that I can be of service; I know the country well; they are going to make me useful, as a guide. In short, I am a nobody; while you, Count Paul de Lavardens—you are a somebody. So, do not fear, your turn will come with the *setes* and balls, when it is necessary to be brilliant, and know how to dance. You will shine then in all your glory and I shall go back, very humbly, to my obscurity."

"You may laugh at me as much as you please. It is none the less true, that, during these days, you will get the start—the start!"

"How, the start?"

"Look here, Jean, are you trying to make me believe that you are not already in love with one of those women? Is it probable? So much beauty! so much wealth! the wealth perhaps, even more than the beauty! Such luxury as that upsets me, unsettles me! I dreamed all night of those four black ponies, with their white roses, four cockades—and this little—Bettina—is it not?"

"Yes, Bettina."

"Bettina! Countess Bettina de Lavardens! Isn't that rather pretty? And what a perfect little husband she will have in me! My vocation is, to be the husband of a woman absurdly rich. It is not so easy as you might suppose. You must know how to be rich, and I should have that talent. I have proved it; I have already squandered a good deal of money, and if mamma had not stopped me! But I am all ready to begin again. Ah! how happy she would be with me! I would make her life like that of a fairy princess. In all her luxury she would be conscious of the taste, the art, the skill of her husband. I would spend my life in dressing her, advancing her, in making her famous in the world. I would study her beauty, so that it should have the fame that suited it. 'If it were not for him,' she would say to herself, 'I would not be so pretty.' I would know, not only how to love her, but how to amuse her. She would have the worth of her money, both in love and in pleasure. Come, Jean, take me to Mrs. Scott's to-day; it would be a good move."

"I cannot, I assure you."

"Oh! well, only ten days more, and then, I warn you, that I shall establish myself there, and I will not budge. In the first place, it will please mamma. She is, still, a little prejudiced against these Americans, she says that she will manage not to meet them, but I

understand her! When I come home some evening and say to her, 'Mamma, I have won the heart of a charming little person who is afflicted with a capital of twenty millions, and an income of two or three millions.' They exaggerate when they talk about hundreds of millions. That evening, mamma will be delighted—because, what is it, that in her heart, she desires for me? Just what all good mothers desire for their sons.

"You are crazy. I do not think—I never thought."

"Listen, Jean, you may be virtue and wisdom combined; but, say what you may, and do as you will—Listen—and remember what I tell you. Jean, you will fall in love, in that house."

"I do not believe it," cried Jean, laughing.

"I am sure of it. *Au revoir!* I leave you now to your duties."

Jean was perfectly sincere. He had slept well the night before. His second interview with the two sisters had, as by magic, dispelled the slight inquietude which had disturbed him after the first meeting. There was too much money in that house for a poor fellow like him to find a place there, honorably.

Friendship was a different thing. He desired with all his heart, and he would try with all his strength, to gain the esteem and regard of these two women. He would try not to see how beautiful Suzie and Bettina were; he would try not to forget himself again, as he did the night before, in looking at the four little feet on the footstools. They had said to him frankly, cordially, "You will be our friend."

That was all that he desired! To be their friend! And that he would be!

During the following ten days everything conspired for the success of this attempt. Suzie, Bettina, the Abbe and Jean lived in the closest and most confidential intimacy. In the mornings, the two sisters took long drives with the cure; and in the afternoon, long rides on horseback, with Jean.

Jean no longer tried to analyse his feelings, he no longer asked himself, whether he leaned to the right or to the left. He felt the same devotion, the same affection, for both of these women. He was perfectly happy, perfectly contented. Then he could not be in love, for love and contentment rarely dwell harmoniously in the same heart.

It was, however, with a little uneasiness and regret, that Jean saw the day approach, which would bring to Longueval, the Turners, the Nortons, and the whole tide of the American colony. The day came very quickly.

On Wednesday, the 24th of June, at four o'clock, Jean went to the chateau. Bettina received him, quite out of humor.

"Such a disappointment," said she, "my sister is not well. A slight head-ache—nothing serious. It will be all gone to-morrow; but I dare not go to ride with you, all alone. In America, I could; but not here, could I?"

"Certainly not," replied Jean.

"So I must send you away, and that makes me so sorry."

"And I, too, am sorry to go; and to lose this last day, which I had hoped to spend with you. However, since it must be! I will come to-morrow to inquire for your sister."

"She will see you, herself, then; I assure you it is nothing serious. Will you grant me a few minutes conversation? I have something to say to you. Sit down and listen to me, now. My sister and I intended to get you into a corner of the salon after dinner, and she would have told you what I will now try to say for us both. Only I am a little nervous—do not laugh. It is very serious. We both want to thank you for having been so kind, so good, so attentive, ever since we arrived."

"Oh! mademoiselle. I beg of you—It is I . . ."

"Oh! do not interrupt me. You put me all out. I do not know how to go on. I insist, however, that it is for us to thank you—not you us. We came here, two strangers. We were so fortunate as to find friends, immediately—yes, friends. You took us by the hand. You went with us to see the farmers, and the keepers, and your godfather took us to see the poor—and everywhere that we went, they loved you so much, that they immediately began to like us a little on your account. They worship you here, do you know it?"

"I was born here—all these good people have known me from my childhood, and are grateful to me for all that my grandfather and my father did for them. And then, I belong to their race—the race of peasants. My great grandfather was a farmer at Bargecourt, a village two leagues from here."

"Oh! oh! you seem to be very proud of it!"

"Neither proud, nor ashamed."

"I beg pardon. I thought you seemed a little proud! Well, then, I can reply to that; that my mother's great-grandfather was a farmer in Bretagne. He went to Canada toward the close of the last century, when Canada still belonged to France. And do you like this country very much, where you were born?"

"Very much; but I shall soon, perhaps, be obliged to leave it."

"Why?"

"When I am promoted I shall be changed into another regiment, and then I must go from post to post. But when I get to be an old, retired general or colonel, I shall certainly come back to live and die here in my father's little house."

"And always alone?"

"Why alone? Indeed, I hope not."

"You mean to marry?"

"Yes, certainly."

"And you are endeavoring to marry?"

"No. One may think about marrying, but one must not seek to marry."

"But there are people who do seek to marry, and some of them have wished to marry you."

"How do you know that?"

"Oh, I know very well all about your little affairs. You are what is called a good match; and I repeat it, some have wished to marry you."

"Who told you so?"

"Monsieur le Cure."

"My godfather did wrong," said Jean, with considerable spirit.

"No, no, he did not do wrong; if any one was to blame it was I, and to blame through kindness and not through curiosity, I assure you. I discovered that your godfather was never so happy as when speaking of you. During our walks in the morning, when alone with him, in order to please him, I mention you, and he tells me all about your life. You are rich—you are quite rich. You receive two hundred and thirteen francs and some centimes a month from the Government. Isn't that so?"

"Yes," replied Jean, deciding to take his share of the cure's indiscretions with a good grace.

"You have an income of eight thousand francs."

"Almost, not quite."

"Added to that, your house, which is worth about thirty thousand francs. In short, you are in excellent circumstances, and already your hand has been asked for."

"My hand asked for! No! no!"

"Yes, indeed! Yes, indeed! Twice—and you have refused two very fine marriages—two very fine dots—if you prefer. It is all the same thing to so many people. Two hundred thousand francs one side, three hundred thousand on the other. That is considered an immense sum here, and you have re-

fused it. Tell me why? If you only knew how curious I am to know!"

"Ah, well! It was in relation to two very charming young girls—"

"That is understood; they always say that."

"But whom I hardly know. I was compelled—for I resisted—I was compelled to spend two or three evenings with them last winter."

"And then?"

"Then—I do not know very well how to explain to you. I had only a feeling of embarrassment, of uneasiness, of dulness, of weariness—"

"In short," said Bettina, boldly, "not the slightest suspicion of love."

"No, not the least; and I very wisely went back to my bachelor quarters, for I think it is better not to marry at all than to marry without love. That is my opinion."

"And it is mine, also."

She looked at him. He looked at her. And all at once, to the great surprise of both, they found nothing more to say—nothing at all.

Fortunately, at this moment, Harry and Bella came rushing into the *salon* with cries of delight.

"Monsieur Jean! Monsieur Jean! Are you there, Monsieur Jean? Come and see our ponies."

"Ah!" said Bettina, her voice a little unsteady. "Edwards has just returned from Paris, and has brought some mites of ponies for the children. Let us go and see them!"

They went out to see the ponies, which were, indeed, worthy of figuring in the stables of the King of Lilliput.

CHAPTER VIII.

Three weeks have passed. Jean is to leave with his regiment the next day for the camp of Cercottes, in the forest of Orleans; they will be ten days on the march in going and coming, and ten days in camp. The regiment is to return to Souvigny on the 10th of August.

Jean is no longer calm: Jean is no longer happy. He sees the moment of departure come, with impatience, at the same time, with dread. With impatience, for he is suffering martyrdom; he is in haste to escape it. With dread, for during these twenty days, what will become of him without seeing her, without speaking to her, in short, without her! Her, that is Bettina! He loves her!

Since when? Since the first day, since that meeting, in the cure's garden, in the month of May! That was the truth! But Jean struggled and argued with himself against this truth. He thought he had loved Bettina only since that day when they two had such a pleasant friendly talk in the little salon. She was sitting on the blue divan near the window, and while she chatted, she amused herself in smoothing out the ruffled toilette of a Japanese princess, one of Bella's dolls, which was lying on a chair, and which Bettina had picked up mechanically.

How did Miss Percival happen to speak to him of those two young girls whom he might have married. And yet, the question did not displease him. He had replied, that if he did not then feel an inclination to marry, it was because the interviews with these young girls had caused him no emotion, no agitation. He had smiled as he said this: but in a few minutes afterwards he smiled no longer. He had suddenly learned the meaning of these emotions and agitations. Jean did not deceive himself; he was fully aware of the extent of his wound;—it had struck at his heart.

Jean, however, did not despair. That very day as he went away he said to himself: "Yes, it is severe, very severe, but I shall recover from it." He sought an excuse for his madness, and he found it in circumstances. This lovely girl had been with him too much during the last ten days, too much alone with him! How could he resist such a temptation! He was fascinated with