

The Abbe Constantin.

BY LUDOVIC HALEVY.

CHAPTER II. (CONTINUED.)

So she took off her travelling cloak; and Jean could not help admiring her lithe and graceful figure, wonderful in its exquisite perfection.

Miss Percival then took off her hat, but with a little too much haste, for it was a signal for a charming inundation. A whole avalanche escaped, and poured in torrents, in long cascades, over Bettina's shoulders; she was standing in front of a window through which the sunlight entered in floods; and this golden light, shining full on her beautiful golden hair, made an exquisite frame for the young girl's radiant beauty.

Confused and blushing, Bettina called her sister to her aid; and Mrs. Scott had no little trouble in bringing order out of this delightful disorder.

When the accident was at length repaired, nothing could prevent Bettina seizing the plates, and the knives and forks.

"What, Monsieur," said she to Jean, "I know perfectly well how to set the table. Ask my sister. Say, Suzie, when I was a little girl in New York, didn't I know how to set the table?"

"Yes; very well," replied Mrs. Scott. And she, too, she begged the cure to excuse Bettina's thoughtlessness, took off her hat and cloak; and Jean, for the second time, had the delightful vision of a charming figure and wonderful hair. But the accident did not occur a second time, much to Jean's regret.

A few minutes later, Mr. Scott, Miss Percival, the cure and Jean, sat down to the little parsonage table; and then through their unexpected and extraordinary meeting—above all, through Bettina's good humor and sprightliness—the conversation very soon became entirely unconstrained and informal.

"You will see, Monsieur le Cure, you will see if I have told you a story—if I am not starving. I warn you that I am ravenous. I was never more pleased to sit down at a table. This dinner makes a pleasant finish to a happy day. We are delighted, my sister and I, to own the chateau, these farms and this forest."

"And to have it in such an extraordinary fashion. It was so unlooked for—so little expected!" said Mrs. Scott.

"You might well say we did not expect it all, Suzie. Do you know, Monsieur l'Abbe, that yesterday was my sister's birthday . . . Bnt, pardon, monsieur . . . Monsieur Jean is it not?"

"Yes, mademoiselle, Monsieur Jean."

"Then, Monsieur Jean, will you give me a little more of that excellent soup, if you please?"

The Abbe Constantin began to feel better, and recover himself; but he was still too much affected to discharge his duties as host quite correctly; and it was Jean who managed godfather's modest dinner. So he filled the plate of the charming American, who looked at him with a pair of large, dark eyes, in which shone artlessness, fearlessness and vivacity. Jean's eyes paid her back in the same coin.

Not three-quarters of an hour before, the young American and the young officer spoke to each other, in the cure's garden, for the first time, and already they were completely at ease with each other—on confidential, almost intimate terms.

"I told you already, Monsieur le Cure, that yesterday was my sister's birthday. A week ago my brother-in-law was obliged to go to America. Just as he was starting, he said to my sister: 'I shall not be here on your birthday, but you will hear from me.' So, yesterday there came presents and bouquets from all directions: but up to five o'clock nothing from my brother-in-law—nothing. We went out to the

Bois on horse-back and—a *propos* of horses—"

She stopped short, and looked down inquiringly at Jean's dusty boots, then she cried:

"Why, Monsieur, you wear spurs?"

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"You are in the cavalry."

"I am in the artillery, mademoiselle, and the artillery is cavalry."

"And your regiment is stationed here?"

"Very near here."

"Why, then you will ride with us?"

"With the greatest pleasure, mademoiselle."

"That is all. Let me see, where was I?"

"You do not know, Bettina, where you are; and you are telling these gentlemen all sorts of things which cannot interest them."

"Oh! I beg your pardon, madame," said the cure. "The sale of the chateau is the great question of this province, just now—and mademoiselle's story interests us very much."

"There, Suzie, you see my story interests Monsieur le Cure very much. Now I will go on. We went out for a ride, we came back at seven o'clock—nothing. We went to dinner, and just as we rose from the table, a despatch from America arrived—only two lines: 'I have, to day, bought for you, in your own name, the chateau and domain of Longueval, near Souvigny, on the Northern Road.' Then we began to laugh, like two children, at the idea."

"No, no, Bettina, that is not quite true. You do us both injustice. Our first emotion was one of gratitude. We are fond of the country, my sister and I. My husband, who is very indulgent, knew that we were anxious to have a country seat in France. He has been looking for six months, but could find nothing. At last, without telling us, he discovered this chateau, which was to be sold on my birthday. It was a generous and delicate attention."

"Yes, Suzie, you are right; but after the first outburst of gratitude, there was a great outburst of laughter."

"That, I acknowledge. When we reflected that we suddenly found ourselves—for what belongs to one, belongs to the other—proprietors of a chateau, without knowing, where it was, or what it was like, or how much it cost—why, it seemed like a fairy story. For five good minutes we laughed heartily. Then we took a map of France, and succeeded, not without some difficulty, in unearthing Souvigny. After the map, it was the Railroad Guide's turn, and this morning, at ten o'clock, we took the express train for Souvigny."

"We have spent the whole day in visiting the chateau, the stables, the farms. We have not seen every thing, for it was so immense; but we are delighted with everything we have seen. Only, Monsieur le Cure, there is one thing which perplexed me. I know that the estate was publicly sold yesterday—I saw the large placards, all along the road. But I did not dare ask any one of the farmers or keepers who accompanied us on our rounds—my ignorance would have looked so foolish!—how much it all cost. My husband forgot to tell me, in his despatch. It is only a little thing, in the delights of ownership, but I would not be sorry to know. Tell me, Monsieur le Cure, tell me, if you know—the price of it."

"An enormous price," replied the cure.

"An enormous price! You frighten me. How much exactly?"

"Three millions!"

"Only three millions!" cried Mrs. Scott, "the farms, the forest, and all for three millions?"

"Yes, three millions."

"Why, that is nothing," said Bettina.

"That charming little river, going

through the park is, alone, worth three millions."

"And you said, just now, Monsieur le Cure, you said there were many persons who bid against us for the lands and the chateau?"

"Yes, madame."

"And was my name mentioned before these people, after the sale?"

"Yes, madame."

"And when my name was mentioned, was there any one who knew me, who spoke of me? Yes—yes—your silence answers me—they did speak of me. Ah! well, I am serious now, Monsieur le Cure, very serious. I beg of you, as a favor, tell me what they said about me."

"Why, madame," replied the poor cure, who was on hot coals, "they spoke of your large fortune."

"Yes, they must have spoken of that; no doubt they said I was very rich, and very recently a *parvenue*, did they not? Very well; but that was not at all, they must have said something else."

"No, I did not hear anything."

"Oh! Monsieur le Cure, you are telling what you call a pious story. I distress you, for you are truth itself. But if I torment you, it is because I have a great interest in knowing what was said."

"Indeed! madame," interrupted Jean, "You are right, they did say something else, only my godfather is embarrassed in telling you; but, since you insist, they said that you were one of the most elegant, most brilliant, most—"

"One of the prettiest women in Paris? They might say that, as a little compliment, one could say it; but that was not at all. There was something else."

"Ah! for instance—"

"Yes; there was something else, and I would like to have a frank, plain explanation with you now. I do not know—but I think this one of my lucky days; it may be to soon to say it, perhaps, but it seems to me that both of you are in some degree, my friends. Well, then, tell me, if false, absurd stories are told about me, am I not right in thinking that you will help me to contradict them?"

"Yes, madam," replied Jean with eagerness, "you are right in thinking so."

"Then it is to you, monsieur, that I address myself. You are a soldier. It belongs to your profession to have courage. Promise me to be brave. Do you promise me?"

"What do you understand, madame, by being brave?"

"Promise—promise without explanations or conditions."

"Well, then, I promise."

"You will answer, then, frankly, yes or no, to the questions that I am going to ask you."

"I will answer."

"Did they tell you that I had begged in the streets of New York?"

"Yes, madam, they told me so."

"And that I had been a rider in a traveling circus?"

"They told me that, madame."

"I thought it! Well, you have heard the worst! But I would observe, in the first place, that there is nothing discreditable in all that. But if it is not true, And have I not the right to say that it is not true? And it is not true. I will tell you my history in a few words; and if I tell to you—on the very first day—it is that you will have the goodness to repeat it to all those speak of me to you. I am going to spend a part of my life in this country, and I desire to have it known where I come from, and what I am. Poor! that I have been very poor. It was eight years ago. My father had died—very soon after the death of our mother. I was eighteen years old, and Bettina nine. We were alone in the world, with heavy debts and a great lawsuit. My father's last words were: 'Suzie, never compromise the lawsuit,

never, never. You will have millions, my children, millions! He kissed us both. Then his mind wandered, and he died, repeating: 'Millions!' The next day an agent presented himself, who offered to pay all our debts and give me ten thousand dollars, if I would sell my interest in the lawsuit. It concerned the possession of a large tract of land in Colorado. I refused. Then it was, that for several months, we were very poor."

"And it was then," said Bettina, "that I used to set the table."

TO BE CONTINUED.



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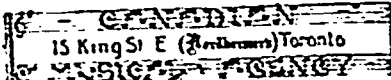
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