

The Abbe Constantin.

BY LUDOVIC HALEVY.

CHAPTER VI.

On that same day at half-past seven o'clock, Jean went to the parsonage for the cure, and together they took the road to the chateau.

For a month, an army of workmen had been in possession of the chateau; the village inns and wine shops had made a fortune. Immense freight-wagons had brought cargoes of furniture and upholsteries from Paris. Forty-eight hours before Mrs. Scott's arrival, Mademoiselle Morbeau, the mistress of the post, and Madame Lormier, the Mayor's wife's, had made their way in to the chateau; their accounts turned everyone's head. The old furniture had disappeared, banished to the attic; they wandered through a perfect museum of marvels. And the stables! and the coach-house! A special train had brought from Paris, under Edward's personal supervision, twelve carriages, and such carriages. Twenty horses, and such horses!

The Abbe Constantin thought he knew what luxury was. Once a year he dined with his bishop, Monsi-gneur Foubert, an amiable, rich prelate, who entertained largely. The cure, until now, had thought nothing could be more sumptuous than the episcopal palace at Souvigny, than the chateaux of Lavardens and Longueval. He began to understand, after what he heard of the splendors of Longueval, that the luxury of the fine houses of today wonderfully surpasses the heavy, severe luxury of the ancient houses of former days.

After the Cure and Jean had gone a short distance on the road leading to the chateaux, through the park:

"Look, Jean," said the cure, "what a change! All this part of the park used to be left uncared for, and see, now it is all gravelled and raked. I shall no longer feel at home here, as formerly, I shall not find my old maroon velvet arm-chair, in which it so often happened that I fell asleep after dinner. And if I go to sleep this evening, what will become of me? You must keep watch, Jean. If you see that I am beginning to get sleepy, you must come behind me and pinch my arm a little. You promise me?"

Jean listened only indifferently to the cure's discourse. He was impatient to see Mrs. Scott and Miss Percival again; but his impatience was mingled with very great anxiety. Was he going to find them, in the grand salon of Longueval, the same as he had them in the little dining-room at the parsonage? Perhaps, instead of two women so perfectly simple and easy, enjoying their improvised dinner, on that first day—who met him so graciously and affably, he was going to find two fashionable dolls, elegant, cold, and correct. Was his first impression going to be effaced, to disappear? Or, would it, on the contrary, grow deeper and sweeter in his heart?

They went up the steps, and were received in the lobby by two tall footmen with the most dignified and imposing of manners. This lobby was formerly an immense room, cheerless and bare, in its walls of stone; to day, the walls were covered with beautiful tapestries representing mythological subjects. The cure scarcely looked at the tapestries, but that was enough to perceive that the goddesses who were walking in the fields wore costumes of antique simplicity.

One of the footmen opened the folding doors of the grand salon. Here, the old marchioness was usually sitting, at the right of the large fire-place, and on the left stood the maroon arm-chair. The maroon arm-chair was there no longer. The old furniture of the time of the Empire was replaced by furniture of marvellous antique tapestry, and a great many little chairs and

little *poufs* of all colors and shapes, were placed here and there with an appearance of disorder which was the height of art.

Mrs. Scott, on seeing the cure and Jean, rose, and going to meet them, said:

"How kind of you to come, Monsieur le Cure, and you too monsieur; and I am glad to see you again, my first, my only friends here!"

Jean breathed again. It was just the same woman.

"Permit me," added Mrs. Scott, "to present my children to you—Harry, Bella—come here."

Harry was a very pretty little boy of six years, and Bella, a very pretty little girl of five; they had their mother's large dark eyes and golden hair.

After the cure had kissed the two children, Harry, who was looking admiringly at Jean's uniform, said to his mother:

"And the soldier, shall I kiss the soldier, too, mamma?"

"If you like," replied Mrs. Scott, "and if he is willing."

The two children were installed on Jean's knees, in a few minutes, and overwhelmed him with questions.

"Are you an officer?"

"Yes, I am an officer."

"In what?"

"In the artillery."

"The artillery. They are the ones who fire off the cannon. Oh! how much I would like to be very close to the cannon and hear it fire."

"Will you take us, some day, when they fire off the cannon; say, you will?"

Mrs. Scott, during this time, was talking with the cure, and Jean, while answering the children's questions, was looking at Mrs. Scott. She wore a dress of white muslin, but the muslin was almost concealed by a mass of valenciennes flounces. It was cut square in front, very low. Her arms were bare to the elbow, a large bunch of red roses on the corsage, and a red rose fastened in her hair with a diamond *agrafe*: that was all.

Mrs. Scott suddenly saw that Jean was going through a military examination by the two children:

"Oh! I beg your pardon, Monsieur Harry! Bella!"

"Leave them with me, I beg of you, madame."

"I am so sorry to keep you waiting for dinner! My sister has not come down yet. Ah! here she comes."

Bettina entered. The same white muslin dress, the same profusion of lace, the same red roses, the same smiling, gracious, cordial welcome.

"I beg you to excuse me, Monsieur le Cure. Have you pardoned me my horrible giddiness of the other day?"

Then turning to Jean and holding out her hand.

"*Bonjour Monsieur . . . Monsieur.* Ah! I cannot recollect your name, and yet it seems to me that we are old friends? *Monsieur —*"

"Jean Reynaud."

"Jean Reynaud, that is it. *Bonjour, Monsieur Reynaud!* but I give you fair warning that we shall be such old friends, in a week, that I shall call you Monsieur Jean. Jean is a very pretty name."

Dinner was announced. The governesses came for the children. Mrs. Scott took the cure's arm; Bettina, Jean's. Until the moment of Bettina's appearance, Jean had said to himself: "Mrs. Scott is the prettier!" When he saw Bettina's little hand slip into his arm, and when she turned her lovely face around to him he said to himself, "Miss Percival is the prettier!" But he fell back into the same perplexity when he was seated between the two sisters. If he looked to his right, it was on that side he saw himself threatened with falling in love; and if he turned to the left the danger immediately changed places, and passed over to the left side.

The conversation was animated, unreserved and easy. The two sisters were in raptures. They had already taken a walk in the park. They had promised themselves a long ride in the forest next day. To ride on horseback—that was their passion, their *folie!* And it was also Jean's passion; so much so that, at the end of fifteen minutes, he had been invited to join them the next day and had accepted with delight.

No one knew the vicinity better than he; it was his birth-place. He would be so happy to do the honors and show them any number of charming little places, which they never would discover without him.

"Do you ride every day?" asked Bettina.

"Every day, and sometimes twice. In the morning on duty, and in the evening for pleasure."

"Early in the morning."

"At half-past five."

"At half-past five every morning?"

"Yes, except on Sunday."

"Then you must tire. . . ?"

"At half-past four."

"And is it daylight?"

"Oh! at this season, broad daylight."

"That is astonishing, to rise at half-past four! Our day very often ends just at the hour when you are beginning yours. And do you like your profession?"

"Very much, Mademoiselle. It is pleasant to have your work lie straight before you, with all your duties plain and well-defined."

"Still," said Mrs. Scott, "not to be one's own master, to be obliged always to obey!"

"Perhaps that suits me best. There is nothing easier than to obey; and then, to learn to obey is the only way to learn to command."

"Ah! what you say is very true!"

"Yes, no doubt," said the cure, "but what he does not say, is, that he is the most distinguished officer in his regiment, is that —"

"Godfather, I beg of you."

The cure, in spite of Jean's protests, was going on with the panegyric of his godson, when Bettina interrupted:

"It is needless, Monsieur le Cure, to say anything. We know all that you would tell us. We have had the curiosity to inquire about, oh! I was going to say Monsieur Jean, about Monsieur Reynaud. But indeed! the accounts were wonderful!"

"I am curious to know what they were."

"Oh! nothing—nothing—you shall know nothing about them. I do not want to make you blush, and you would be obliged to blush."

Then turning to the cure:

"And about you, too, Monsieur le Cure, we have had accounts of you. It seems that you are a saint."

"Oh, as to that, it is quite true," cried Jean.

This time, it was the cure who cut short Jean's eloquence. The dinner was nearly over. The old priest had not gone through the dinner without considerable trepidation. Several times he had been served with unknown complicated constructions, upon which he ventured with a trembling hand—he was afraid everything would tumble to pieces: quivering castles of jelly, pyramids of trifles, fortresses of cream, parapets of pastry and towers of ices. The Abbe Constantin dined heartily, however, and did not flinch before two or three glasses of champagne. He did not dislike good living. Perfection is not of this world.

The coffee was served on the terrace in front of the chateau. The sound of the old village clock, striking nine, was heard at a distance. The woods and meadows slept. The outlines of the park grew indistinct and vague. The moon rose slowly above the tops of the tall trees.

Bettina placed a box of cigars on the table.

"Do you smoke?" said she to Jean.

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"Take one then, monsieur Jean, there I have said it. Take, but no; listen."

And speaking in a low tone, as she offered him the cigars:

"It is dark now, you can blush at your ease. I am going to tell you, what I would not tell you at the table just now. The old notary at Souvigny, who was your guardian, came to see my sister about the payments for the chateau. He told us what you did after your father's death, what you did for that poor mother, and that young girl. We were very much touched by it, my sister and I."

"Yes, monsieur," continued Mrs. Scott, "and that is the reason we have received you to day with so much pleasure. We would not have given every one such a welcome, you may rest assured. Now take your cigar. My sister is waiting."

Jean could not find a word to reply. Bettina was there, in front of him, with the box of cigars in both hands, and her eyes fixed full on Jean's face. She was enjoying that very genuine, very keen delight which may be expressed in this phrase:

"It seems to me that I am looking at an honest young man." "And now," said Mrs. Scott, "let us sit down and enjoy this lovely night. Take your coffee and smoke."

"And we will not talk, Suzie, we will not talk. This grand stillness of the country is adorable after the uproar of Paris. Let us be still, without speaking. Let us look at the sky, and the moon, and the stars."

So all four began to carry out the little programme with great enjoyment. Suzie and Bettina, quiet, resting, absolutely separated from their life of the day before, and already feeling an affection for this country which had just received them and was going to keep them.

Jean was less calm; Miss Percival's words had moved him deeply; his heart had not yet resumed its regular beating.

But, happiest of all, was the Abbe Constantin. He had thoroughly enjoyed the little episode which had put Jean's modesty to such a severe, yet such a pleasant, test. The abbe loved his godson so dearly. The tenderest of fathers never loved more fondly his dearest child. When the old cure looked at the young officer, he often said to himself:

"Heaven has blessed me! I am a priest, and yet I have a son!"

The abbe was lost in a very delightful reverie; he found himself at home again, more at home than he ever imagined could again be the case; his ideas gradually became confused and entangled. Reverie became drowsiness, drowsiness became sleep; the disaster was soon complete, irreparable. The cure was asleep, sound asleep. The extraordinary dinner and the two or three glasses of champagne had, perhaps, something to do with the catastrophe.

Jean had not observed anything. He had forgotten his promise to his godfather. And, why had he forgotten it. Because Mrs. Scott and Miss Percival had chosen to put their feet on the foot-stools in front of their big willow chairs, lined with cushions. Then they leaned back, lazily in their chairs, and their muslin skirts were raised a little, a very little, but still sufficiently to disclose four little feet. whose outlines appeared very clear and distinct in the moonlight, under the two pretty billows of white lace. Jean looked at the little feet and asked himself this question:

"Which are the smaller?"

While he was trying to solve the problem, Bettina suddenly said to him in a low tone:

"Monsieur Jean! Monsieur Jean!"

"Mademoiselle?"