

M. Alphonse looked at his watch. It was hardly half-past nine. His mother had not yet completed her toilet. He hesitated no longer; he took off his coat, called for a vest, and defied the Spaniards. I, smiling, saw him do this with some surprise.

"The honour of the country must be sustained," said he.

It was then I found him quite handsome. He was impassioned. His toilet, which shortly before this had occupied him so much, did not now concern him. A few minutes ago, he would not turn his head for fear of disarranging his cravat. Now, he no longer thought of his frizzled hair, nor of his frills, so well plaited; nor even of his betrothed! I do believe, if it had been necessary, he would have postponed the marriage. I saw him rapidly draw on a pair of sandals, roll up his shirt sleeves, and, with an air of confidence, put himself at the head of the beaten party, like Caesar rallying his soldiers at Dyrrachium. I leaped over the hedge and placed myself conveniently under the shade of a nettle-tree, so that I might have a good view of the two camps. Contrary to the general expectation, M. Alphonse missed the first ball; it is true, it came grazing the ground, having been thrown with surprising force by an Aragonais, who appeared to be the chief of the Spaniards.

He was a man of about forty years of age, spare and nervous, six feet high; and his olive skin had a tint almost as deep as the bronze of the Venus.

M. Alphonse threw his tennis bat to the ground in a rage.

"It is this cursed ring," cried he, "which squeezes my finger and causes me to miss even a sure ball!"

He took it off, though not without difficulty; I approached to take it from him, but he pushed me aside, ran to the Venus, put the ring upon her ring finger, and again took his post at the head of the Illois.

He was pale, but calm and resolute. From that time forth he did not make a single mistake; and the Spaniards were completely vanquished. The enthusiasm of the crowd was a beautiful spectacle; some uttering a thousand joyful cries, throwing their caps in the air; others pressing his hands, calling him the honour of the country! If he had been repelling an invasion, I doubt whether he could have received more lively or sincerer felicitations. The chagrin of the conquered added still more to the *éclat* of his victory.

"We will have some other games, my brave fellow," said he to the Aragonais in a tone of superiority, "but I will give you points!"

I could have wished that M. Alphonse had been more modest, for I was almost sorry at the humiliation of his rivals.

The Spanish giant felt deeply this insult. I saw him turn pale under his dusky skin. He gazed with a dejected air upon his bat, grinding his teeth; then with a stifled voice, he muttered quite low: *Me lo pagaras.*

The voice of M. de Peyrehorade marred the triumph of his son. My host, much astonished at not finding him getting ready the new carriage, was still more astonished to find him all in a sweat, the bat in his hand. M. Alphonse ran to the house, washed his face and hands, put on his new coat and his polished shoes, and five minutes afterwards we were on the high road to Puygarrig.

We had reached Puygarrig and the cortège was getting ready to set out for the Hotel de Ville, when M. Alphonse, striking his forehead, said to me in a low voice, "What a blunder! I have forgotten the ring! It is on the finger of the Venus, the devil take it! Remember, do not say anything to my mother about it. Perhaps she will never miss it."

"You can send some one for it," said I.

"Unfortunately my valet has remained at Ille. Those here I can scarcely trust. Twelve hundred francs worth of diamonds! that would tempt more than one of them. Besides, what would they think here of my distraction? They would poke fun at me; they would call me the husband of the statue. . . . provided they do not steal it from me! Fortunately the idol makes my rascals fear her. They dare not come within the length of those arms. Oh! it is nothing; I have another ring."

The two ceremonies, civil and religious, were performed with the usual *éclat*; and Mademoiselle de Puygarrig received the ring of a Paris milliner without suspecting that her betrothed was making the sacrifice of another's pledge of love.

At Ille, supper awaited us, and what a supper! The bridegroom, who had disappeared for an instant before sitting down to table, was pale and serious. Every now and then he drank some old wine of Collioure, almost as strong as brandy. I was at his side and felt myself obliged to warn him.

"Take care! they say that the wine" . . . I do not know what nonsense I said to him, so that the guests would not notice my anxiety.

He touched my knee, and in a very low voice said:

"When they leave the table, let me speak two words with you."

His solemn mood surprised me. I looked at him attentively and remarked a strange alteration in his features.

"Do you feel indisposed?" I asked him.

"No;" and he commenced to drink again.

I had a severe headache; and then, too, I know not why, a marriage always makes me sad. This one, besides, disgusted me a little.

The last song having been sung by the Deputy-Mayor (and I must say it was extremely indecorous), the company passed into the drawing-room, to be present at the departure of the bride, who was soon about to be conducted to her chamber, for it was nearly midnight.

M. Alphonse took me into a window recess, and, turning away his eyes, said to me:

"You will laugh at me, . . . But I know that I have . . . I am bewitched! the devil take me!"

"You have drunk too much of the Collioure wine, my dear M. Alphonse," said I to him. "I warned you."

"Yes, perhaps, but it is something far more terrible than that." His voice was broken, I believed him to be quite drunk.

"You recollect my ring?" pursued he, after a pause.

"Well, they have taken it?"

"No."

"In that case, you have it."

"No . . . I . . . I cannot get it off the finger of that she-devil of a Venus."

"You have not pulled hard enough."

"Yes, indeed, . . . but the Venus, . . . she has squeezed my finger."

He looked at me fixedly, with a haggard air, supporting himself on the window-fastening to keep himself from falling.

"What an extraordinary story!" said I to him. "You have forced the ring on too hard. To-morrow you will have pinchers; but take care you do not injure the statue."

"No, I tell you, the finger of the Venus is contracted, bent back, she squeezes the hand; do you understand me?—It is my wife, apparently, since I have given her my ring. . . . She does not want to give it back again."

A sudden shivering came over me for an instant. I felt my flesh creep. Then a deep sigh which he heaved wafted to me a whiff of wine, and every emotion disappeared.

"The wretch," said I, "is unquestionably drunk."

"You are an antiquarian, sir," added the bridegroom in a gruesome tone; "you know all about these statues—there is perhaps some spring, some jugglery, about which I know nothing. If you would go and see."

"Willingly," said I, "come with me."

"No; I would rather you would go alone."

I left the drawing-room.

The weather had changed during supper, and the rain commenced to fall heavily. I was going to ask for an umbrella, when a thought arrested me. "I would be a great fool," thought I, "to go to verify what has been communicated to me by a drunken man! How do I know, besides, that he is not trying to play some trick upon me, so that these simple-minded provincials might have their laugh. The least that I can gain by it is to be soaked to the skin and catch a cold."

From the door I threw a glance at the statue, streaming with water, and I ascended to my chamber without returning to the drawing-room. I went to bed; but sleep was a long time in coming. All the events of the day presented themselves to my mind. I thought of this young girl, so beautiful and pure, thrown away upon a drunkard. What an odious thing, I said to myself, is a marriage of expediency! A mayor invests himself with a tri-coloured scarf, a minister with a stole, and, behold! the most virtuous girl in the world is handed over to minotaur! What can two beings who do not love each other say in such a moment—a moment which two real lovers would purchase with their existence? Can a woman ever love a man whom she has once seen a brute?

First impressions are never effaced, and I am sure this M. Alphonse will deserve to be hated.

During my monologue, which I must abridge, I heard great stirrings in the house, doors opening and shutting, carriages driving off; then it seemed to me that I heard the light steps of several women going in the direction of the end of the corridor, opposite my chamber.

It was probably the cortège of the bride whom they were conducting to bed. Then there was a re-descending of the stairs. The door of Madame de Peyrehorade was closed.

How this poor girl, I mused, must be troubled and ill at ease!

I turned in my bed in a very bad humour. A bachelor plays a foolish part in a house where a marriage is going on!

Silence reigned for some time, when it was disturbed by heavy steps, which ascended the stairs. The wooden steps creaked audibly.

What a lout, I cried, I bet he will fall on the stairs.

All became quiet again. I took up a book to change the current of my thoughts. It was a book containing the statistics of the Department embellished with a memoir, by M. de Peyrehorade, on the Druidical monuments of the Arrondissement of Prades. I got drowsy at the third page. I slept badly, and woke several times. It must have been five o'clock in the morning, and I had been awake for more than twenty minutes, when the cock crew.

Day was breaking. Then I heard distinctly the same loud steps, the same creaking of the stairs which I had heard before I went to sleep. That appeared to me singular. Yawning, I tried to guess why M. Alphonse got up so early. I did not imagine anything that was probable. I was on the point of closing my eyes again when my attention was excited anew by strange stampings, with which were mingled the tinkling of bells and the noise of doors being slammed; then I heard confused cries.

My drunkard must have set some part of the house on fire, I thought, as I jumped from my bed.

I dressed quickly and entered the corridor. From the opposite extremity there proceeded cries and lamentations and a heart-rending voice was heard over all the others.

I caught the words: "My son! my son!" It was evident that an accident had happened to M. Alphonse. I ran to the nuptial chamber; it was full of people. The first object which arrested my attention was the young man, half dressed, and stretched across the bed, the wood of which was broken. He was livid and motionless. His mother wept and cried at his side. M. de Peyrehorade, greatly agitated, rubbed the young man's temples with *eau de cologne*, and applied salts to his nose. Alas! soon it was apparent that his son was dead. On a couch, at the other end of the chamber, was the bride in horrible convulsions. She uttered inarticulate cries, and two strong servants had the greatest difficulty in keeping her down.