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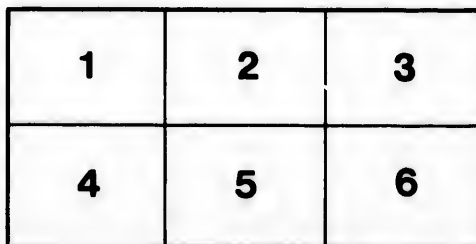
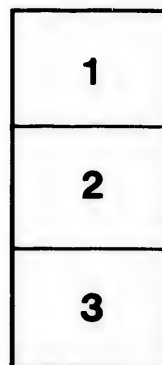
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THE PICTURE

BY

CHARLES READE

AUTHOR OF

"IT IS NEVER TOO LATE TO MEND" "LOVE ME LITTLE, LOVE ME LONG"
"HARD CASH" "FOUL PLAY" "PUT YOURSELF IN HIS PLACE"
"GRIFFITH GAUNT" "WHITE LIES" ETC.

MONTREAL

DAWSON BROTHERS, PUBLISHERS

1884

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MONTREAL

THE PICTURE.

I.

I AM now seventy, and learning something every day ; especially my ignorance. But fifty-two years ago I knew everything, or nearly—I had finished my education. I knew a little Greek and Latin, a very little vernacular, a little mathematics, and a little war: could march a thousand men into a field, and even out of it again—on paper. So I left Paris, and went home to rest on my oars.

Months rolled on ; I still rested on my oars—rested on them so industriously that at last my mother, a very superior woman, took fright at my assiduous inactivity, and bundled me out of the boat.

She had an uncle who loved her, and, indeed, had reared her as a child. She wrote to him, concealing neither her maternal pride nor her maternal anxieties. He replied, "Send the boy here, and if he is anything like you, he shall be my son and successor." He was a notary, and had a good business.

In due course the diligence landed me far from home, at a town in Provence. A boy and an ass were waiting for me. On these beasts of burden I strapped my effects, and the quadruped conducted us by a bridle-road through groves and by purling streams to a range of hills, at whose foot nestled my uncle's villa, lawn, garden, and vineyard. The contrast was admirable. The hills, with their rocky chasms, were bold, grand,

and grim, and the little house, clothed with flowering creepers, the velvet lawn, watered twice a day, and green as emerald, and the violet plums peeping among the olive-colored leaves, were quietly enchanting. "Oh," thought I, "what a bower for a hard notary!"

The hard notary met me with open arms, embraced me, held me out, gazed at me, said, in a broken voice, "You are very like your darling mother," and embraced me again. I was installed in a pretty bedroom with a bay-window, curtained outside by a magnolia in full bloom; pigeons cooed outside every morning an hour before breakfast, leaves glistened with dew, and flowers diffused sweet smells.

Next day my uncle took me into the town to his office, and introduced me to his managing clerk as his partner and successor. He left me under charge of this worthy while he pursued his real vocation, *bric-a-brac*. He was so unfortunate as to pick up a great bargain, a vile old jug; he itched to be home with it; so I had no time to master my new business that day.

The good *curé* dined with us, and my uncle presented us both to him, jug and nephew—especially jug; but the *curé* was impartial, and took a gentle interest, real or fictitious, in us both. He was a man of learning and piety, and had seen strange and terrible things in France; had known great people and great vicissitudes, though now settled in a peaceful village—"post tot naufragia tutus." He was a gentle, amiable soul, a severe judge of nothing but cruelty and deliberate vice, and a most interesting companion if you chose: by which I mean that he had neither the animal spirits nor the vanity which make a man habitually fluent; but if you could suspend your own volubility and question him, a well of knowledge.

My uncle had two servants—Catherine, a tall, gaunt woman; tanned, hollow-eyed, and wrinkled; and Suzon, a pretty, rosy, bright-eyed maid. Her my uncle ignored; Catherine was his favorite, a model of industry, fidelity, and skill; besides, she resembled antique mugs, etc., whereas little Suzon was more

like modern porcelain, Provence roses, and such-like ephemeral things. Suzon was always in the background, Catherine always to the fore. She cooked the dinner; yet she must put on an apron and a cap of the past and wait upon us, even when the *curé* or a stray advocate from Paris was our guest, and Suzon would have done us credit. Ere long this latter arrangement became grievous to me, for I fell in love; and this gaunt creature came between me and the delight of my eyes. It was my first attachment. I had seen a good many pretty girls, and danced with them; but I thought them frivolous, and they took me for a pedant. I was a poet, and aimed high. Accordingly, I fell in love—with a picture—or with the goddess it represented.

My uncle's dining-room combined the *salon* and the *salle à manger*. It was very long and broad, and the round table devoted to meals could be placed in any part of the room. Eight could dine at it, yet there was room for it in the great bay-window, and it ran smoothly upon little wheels instead of casters: so did all the chairs, ottomans, fauteuils, and sofas. Chinese vases five feet high, and always filled with flowers, guarded the four corners of the room; vast landscapes were painted on the walls, and framed in panels of mellow oak; many pieces of curious old plate glittered on the sideboard; a large doorway with no door, but an ample curtain of blue Utrecht velvet, led into a library of choice books splendidly bound, many of them by antique binders, the delight of connoisseurs. Over the mantelpiece of the dining-room hung a picture in an oval frame, massive, and carved with great skill and simplicity; this frame had been chipped in places, and there was a black-looking hole on the right border, and some foreign substance imbedded.

The picture was a portrait (life size) of a young lady, resplendent with youth and beauty, the face oval and forehead pure, the lips and peeping teeth exquisite, and the liquid gray eyes full of languor above and fire below, that arrested and enchanted. The dress had, no doubt, been selected for pictorial effect; for the waist was long and of a natural size, and the no-

ble bare arms adorned only with dark-blue velvet bands, which set off the satin skin.

Soft sensations and vague desires thrilled me as I gazed on this enchanting picture, and I longed and sighed for the original.

The gaunt Catherine at dinner-time kept getting between me and my goddess, and I hated the sight of her, and said she purposely interposed her hideousness between me and that divine beauty. But now, having had fifty years to consider the matter, I think she stood behind her master's chair whether there was a lovesick dreamer at the table or not, and was intent on her duties, not my dreams.

After I had thoroughly absorbed this lovely creature's perfections, and satisfied myself that her character was as noble, arch, and lovable as her features, I found it difficult to go on living without ever hearing her enchanting voice, or kissing her hand, or, at all events, some portion or other of her dress. So I asked my uncle timidly for her name and address.

The answer was discouraging: "How should I know? I bought her for the frame, you may be sure; it is what the fools call *rococo*; that means admirable."

"And so it is, now I look at it," said I; "but oh, uncle, what is that compared with the divine effigy!"

"Divine fiddlestick!" said he. "Look at her little finger, all out of drawing!"

Here was a notary against whom it could not be urged, "*de minimis non curat lex*." Why, I could hardly help laughing in his face.

"Her little finger!" I cried. "Look at her lips, her teeth, her eyes—brimful of heaven!"

"That inspection I leave to you, young man," said my uncle, calmly; "but I should like to know what that black mark in the frame is."

"And so you shall, uncle," said I, with the ready good-nature of youth; and thereupon I jumped on a chair, and from the chair alighted like a bird on the mantelpiece, and my uncle

ejaculated and trembled—for the woodwork, not me. I examined the hole in the frame, and found a substance imbedded. I took out my penknife, nearly fell on my uncle's head, recovered myself with a yell, cut a small slice off the substance, and reported: "Uncle, it is lead—a bullet, a big one. There, now, O base world! Ah, sovereign beauty, your charms have well-nigh cost your life. Some despairing lover, whom she esteemed but could not love, or, likelier still, some rival crushed under her charms, has committed this outrage. Oh! oh! oh! There are some golden hairs attached to the bullet. Horrible! horrible!"

"Malediction on the fools!" cried my uncle. "Why could they not fire at the daub, and spare the frame?" He added, more composedly, that evidently some mob had attacked the house during the troubles, and one of the savages had fired at it out of pure ruffianism.

"No, no," said I; "that does not account for these golden hairs. Oh, uncle, who is she? I will travel all France if necessary. Do but tell me where I can find her."

"How can I tell what churchyard she lies in? Why, it is fifty years since such frames were made in this now tasteless country."

"Cruel uncle, do not say so," cried I, in piteous accents. "Ah, no; they found a quaint old frame to act as a foil to her youth and beauty. I will copy her. I will make an etching of her: I am rather skilful in that way. I will send impressions all round France; I will solicit information. I shall find her. She is single; she has not found her peer in my sex. Is it likely she would? I will surround her with homage; I will tell her how I pined for her and sought her, and found her first because I loved her best; I will throw myself at her feet; I will kiss the hem of her sweet robe. I will— Gone!"

Gone he was, in mid-tirade, with his hands in his pockets; he escaped my juvenile eloquence, and I heard him whistling.

I loved her all the more, and lived for our first rapturous meeting.

In due course another idle attempt was made to refrigerate my immortal love; this one came from that old hag Catherine. I used to set my easel after breakfast, and work nearly all day reproducing the beloved features. One afternoon I could not stop for anything. Catherine came in and potted about, laying the cloth for dinner. That was hard, but I thought it harder when suddenly her voice jarred upon my amorous soul with a calm observation :

“Is not that a waste of time?”

I looked up, amazed at such an interference.

“I mean,” said she, “that we do not need another picture of *her*.”

“You don’t, I dare say; female beauty is not to your taste; but the world requires a great many pictures of this peerless creature; and the world shall have them, whether you like it or not.” Catherine shrugged her shoulders, and said the world could do very well without them. “And for my part,” said she, “I cannot think what you see so admirable in that face.”

“Look at it without envy, hatred, or malice, if you can, and then you will see.”

Thus brought to book, the grim creature folded her arms and gazed on the portrait in a dignified and attentive manner that surprised me. “I find it is beautiful,” said she, calmly.

“What a discovery!”

“The beauty of youth, and health, and rather good features.”

“What a concession!”

“But I search in vain for the beauty of the soul. With youth should go modesty and humility; but here I see vanity and self-sufficiency.”

“And I see only a noble pride, tempered with such sweetness and archness. There, instead of running her down to me, when you might as well blacken the morning star, I should be truly grateful to you if you would help me find out where she lives. Alive she is; my heart tells me so. Death, more merciful than envy, has spared those peerless features.”

Catherine stared. “Who is she?—why, what does that

matter to you? She is old enough to be your grandmother: look at the frame."

"Malediction on the frame! You are as bad as my uncle. He bought her for the frame. *She* is not old; she never will be old; such beauty is immortal. Now tell me, my good Catherine. I dare say you have lived in this district all your life—Gone!"

It was too true; the servant, like the master, had escaped my enthusiasm, and left me to my theories. But I painted on, and loved my idol in spite of them all, and held fast my determination to discover her by publishing her features from Havre to Marseilles.

One day my uncle received a very welcome letter. It announced a visit from an old fellow-collegian of his, a highly distinguished person, a statesman, an ambassador, and peer of France—the Comte de Pontarlais. This thrilled me with excitement and curiosity. I had never sat at the same table with an ambassador. Only I feared our way of living would seem very humble, and, worst of all, that Catherine would wait at table, and get between his Excellency and our one peerless gem, the portrait of my divinity.

I was all in a flutter as the hour drew near, and looked out for a carriage with outriders, whence should emerge a figure striped with broad ribbon and emblazoned with orders.

Arrived with military precision an elderly gentleman on a mule, with a small valise carried by a peasant. He was well dressed, but simply; embraced my uncle affectionately; and they walked up and down the grass arm in arm, to be as near one another as possible, since they met so seldom. From the lawn they entered the library; and I was going thither somewhat shyly, to be presented, when Suzon met me in wild distress.

"Oh, Monsieur Frédéric! what shall we do? Here's Catherine been ailing this three days and scarce able to get about, and the master ordered a great dinner, and she *would* cook it,

and not fit to stand, and she fainted away, and now she is lying down on her bed more dead than alive."

"Poor thing!" said I. "Well, you must get a woman into the kitchen, and you put on your best cap and wait."

"Since *you* order it," said Suzon, demurely, and lowered her eyelashes. Now, this extreme deference had not been her habit hitherto.

Encouraged by this piece of flattery, I added: "And please stand behind *my* chair to-day instead of my uncle's. It is not that I wish to give myself importance—"

"The idea!" said Suzon.

"But that—ahem!—his Excellency—"

"I understand," said Suzon; "you wish *me* to have a good look at him—and so do I."

So may a man's best motives be misinterpreted by shallow minds.

The next moment I entered the library, and was presented, blushing, to his Excellency. He put me at my ease by his kindness and quiet, genial manner. To be sure, such men have a different manner for different occasions. He had long studied with success the great art of pleasing. Under this charming surface, however, I could see a calm authority, and in those well-cut features Voltairian finesse.

By and by Suzon announced dinner, and I took that opportunity to say that poor Catherine was very ill, and his Excellency would have much to excuse.

His Excellency interrupted me: "My young friend, trust to my experience. Company is spoiled by service; the fewer majestic and brainless figures stand behind our chairs, the better for *us*. The most delightful party I can remember, everything was on the table, or on a huge buffet, and we helped ourselves and helped each other. Why, the very circumstance loosened our tongues, that formality would have paralyzed. We puffed all the dishes, to which we invited our fair *convives*; and told romantic stories about them, and not a word of truth." Thus chatting, he entered the *salle à manger* and

was about to take the seat my uncle waved him to, when he suddenly started back, with an ejaculation, not loud but eloquent, and his eyes fixed upon the portrait of my idol.

The very next moment he turned them with a flash of keen and almost suspicious inquiry upon my uncle; then quietly seated himself at the table, and his host, good man, observed nothing.

For my part, I was trembling with curiosity all dinner-time, and longing to ask the great man if he had seen some living beauty who resembled that portrait. But I was too shy. My eyes kept travelling from him to the portrait, and back, but I said nothing. However, his quick eye must have detected me, for, after dinner was over, and Suzon ordered to make the coffee, his Excellency, who was peeling a pear very carefully, looked steadily at *me*, and said, "May I ask how that portrait came here?"

"Oh, yes, monsieur le Comte," said I. "My uncle bought it in a *bric-a-brac* shop.

My uncle hastened to justify his conduct—it was the frame which had tempted him. "However," said he, "the picture, incorrect as it is—just look at that little finger!—has found a rapturous admirer in my nephew there, who, you may have remarked, is very young."

"It has," said I, stoutly. "It reflects her beauty and her expression, and no bad picture does that. I'd give the world to find out the artist, for then he would tell me where I can find the divine original."

"That does not follow," said the Count, dryly; "these fair creatures keep in one place during the sitting; but in the course of the next forty years or so they consider themselves at liberty to move about like the rest of us."

"Oh, of course," said I; "but such beauty must leave traces everywhere. I am sure, if I knew who painted the picture, I could find the original."

"I will put that to the test," said his Excellency. "Come, now—I painted the picture."

I bounded off my chair with the vivacity of youth, and stood staring at our guest with all my eyes. "You!" said I, panting.

"Astonishing!" said my uncle. Then, calmly, "That accounts for the little finger."

"For shame, uncle!" said I. "It's a masterpiece. Ah, sir, you must have been inspired by— Who is she? Who was she?"

"She was my betrothed."

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That ac-

Ah, sir,
Who was

II.

I STARED at the speaker, first stupidly, then incredulously, then with a growing conviction that the marvellous revelation was nevertheless true; then my uncle and I, by one impulse, turned round and looked at the picture with a fresh gush of wonder; then we turned back to the Count again and glared; but found no words.

At last I managed to stammer out, "Betrothed to *her*, and not married!"

"Strange, is it not?" said the Count, with a satirical shrug. "Permit me," said he, with ironical meekness, "to urge in my defence that I have not married any one else."

I said I could well understand that.

"Pooh!" said my uncle, "he has been taken up with affairs of state."

"That is true," said his Excellency; "yet, to be frank, my celibacy is partly due to that fair person. She administered a lesson at a time of life when instruction, deeply engraved, remains in the mind forever."

"Tell us all about it," said my uncle, "if it is not a sore subject."

"Alas, my friend," said Monsieur de Pontarlais, "after forty years, what subject is too sore to handle? Even the tender poets versify their youthful groans. I will tell the whole story—not to you, on whom it will be comparatively wasted, but to my young friend opposite. He is evidently fascinated by my fair betrothed, and her eye enchains him—as it once did me."

I blushed furiously at this keen old man's sagacity, but

stood my ground, and avowed the rapturous interest I felt in a creature so peerless.

Then came to me a bewitching hour. An accomplished old man told us a thrilling passage of his youth, with every charm and grace that could adorn a spoken narrative. The facts struck so deep that I can reproduce them in order; but the tones, the glances, the subtle irony, the governed and well-bred emotion — where are they? They linger still like distant chimes in my memory, and must die with me.

"I was born," said M. de Pontarlais, "when parents married their children, and the young people had hardly a voice. At ten years of age I was betrothed to Mademoiselle Irène, only daughter of the Marquis de Groucy, my father's fast friend. Between that period and my coming of age great changes took place in France, and a terrible revolution drew near. But my father made light of all plebeian notions, so did his friend; and, indeed, if they had listened to anything so absurd as the new cry of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity seemed to them, it would not even then have occurred to them to depart from the rights of nature; and was it not one of those rights that parents should christen, educate, confirm, and marry their children when and how they thought proper?"

"Accordingly, at twenty-one years of age, my parents sent me into this very province to marry and make acquaintance with Mademoiselle de Groucy. The Marquis, a tall, military figure, bronzed by the suns of Provence, met me with his gun slung at his back. He embraced me warmly, and his dogs barked round me with the ready cordiality of sporting dogs. I felt at home directly.

"The Marquis and I dined *en tête-à-tête*; I was anxious to see my bride, but she did not appear. After dinner we adjourned to the *salon*, but she did not appear. I cast timid glances towards all the doors; the Marquis observed, and rang a bell, and ordered coffee and his daughter. The coffee came directly, and while we were sipping it a female figure glided in at the great door, and seemed to traverse the parquet by some undulating

movement which was quite noiseless, though everybody else clattered on the floor at that epoch.

"Instead of the high shoes, bare neck, and short, slight waist of the day, she was in rational shoes, and a loose dress of India muslin that moved every way with her serpentine figure, and veiled without hiding her noble arms and satin bust. As she drew nearer her loveliness dazzled me. I rose and bowed respectfully. Her father apologized for this model of symmetry and beauty.

" 'Be pleased to excuse her dress,' said he. 'It is my fault: they came roaring at me with news of a wild boar, and I forgot to tell her who was coming to-day.'

"I said I did not pretend to judge ladies' dresses, but thought the costume beautiful. I suppose my eyes conveyed that I knew where the beauty lay. The young lady edged quietly away, and put her father a little between us; but there was no tremor, nor painful, blushing shyness.

"Afterwards, at her father's order, she poured me out a cup of coffee with the loveliest white hand I had ever seen, and, though reserved, she was more self-possessed than I was.

"The Marquis invited me to a game of piquet. I was off my guard, and consented. The beauty saw us fairly engaged, then glided out of the room, leaving me a little mortified with myself as a wooer; for at twenty-one years of age nature prevails over custom, and we desire to please our bride even before we marry her.

"Next day M. de Groucy, who was a mighty sportsman, invited me to join him; but, with some hesitation and confusion, I said I was very desirous to pay respect to my *fiancée*, and to show her how much I admired her already.

"My host thanked me gracefully in his daughter's name, intimated that in his day marriage used to come first and then courtship, but said I was at liberty to reverse the order of things if I chose; it would all come to the same at the end.

"On this understanding I devoted myself to wooing my beautiful betrothed. She gave me no direct encouragement,

but she did not avoid me. She was often in her own room; and out of it she was generally guarded by a stately *gouvernante*, one Mademoiselle Donon. But this lady had the discretion to keep guard a few yards off, and I treated her as a lay figure. These encounters soon destroyed my peace of mind, and filled all my veins with an ardent passion for the peerless creature whose dead likeness hangs there—and it really is a likeness; but where are the prismatic changes that illumined her mobile features? And all of them, even scorn and anger, were beautiful; but each softer sentiment divine.

“Unfortunately, while she set me on fire, she remained quite cool; though she did not avoid me personally, her mind somehow evaded mine on nearly every topic that young people delight in. She listened with polite indifference to all my descriptions of Paris and its gayeties; and when I assured her she would be the acknowledged belle of that brilliant city, she said, quietly, that it would not compensate her for the loss of her beloved mountains; and she turned from me to the window and fixed a long, loving look upon them that set me yearning for one such glance.

“She rarely contradicted me, but that must have been pure indifference, for she never doubted about anything; I soon found out that trait in her character.

“One day a local newspaper related a popular outrage in our neighborhood. The rude peasants in their political ardor had sacked and destroyed a noble château.

“‘Where will this end?’ said I. ‘Will revolutionary madness ever corrupt the simple, primitive people one meets about this château?’

“‘Why, it is done already,’ said my host. ‘Emissaries from Paris, preachers of anarchy, are wriggling like weasels all through the nation, with books and pamphlets and discourses teaching the common people that all titles are an affront to the ignoble, and all hereditary property a theft from those who have no ancestors. (Wait till a peasant gets a landed estate, and then see if his son will resign it to the first beggar that

covets it.) Why, I caught two of their inflammatory treatises in this very house. By the same token, I sent them to the executioner at Marseilles, with a request that he would burn them publicly, and charge me his usual fee for the extinction of vermin.'

"During this tirade Irène changed color, and seemed to glow with ire; but she merely said, or rather ground out between her clinched teeth, 'Nothing will stop the march of free opinion in France.'

" 'I am afraid not,' said her father. 'Still, I have some little faith left in charges of cavalry and discharges of grape-shot.'

" 'A fine argument!' said she, haughtily.

"I was so unlucky as to suggest that it was one the virtuous citizens who had just sacked the neighboring château would probably understand better than any other. The father laughed his approval, but the daughter turned on me with such a flash of furious resentment that I quailed under her eye; it glittered wickedly. Nothing more was said, but from that hour I learned that my glacier was inflammable.

"It was not long before I received another lesson of the same kind. I happened to remark one day that Mademoiselle Donon, the *gouvernante*, as I have called her, must have been a handsome woman in her day. 'Handsome?' said the Marquis; 'there was not such a figure and such a face in the countryside; and the late Marquise used to urge her to marry, and offered her a handsome dowry to wed one of her rustic admirers; and I offered to lick him into shape, and employ him in the house; but poor Donon, accustomed to good society and French, could never bring her mind to marry a rustic, and patter *patois*.'

" 'What blind vanity!' said Irène. 'Those rustics are free men, and she is a menial. Such a husband would have elevated her, in time, to his own level.'

" 'Ay,' said the Marquis; 'this is the cant of the day. But learn, mademoiselle, that in such houses as ours a faithful domestic is not a menial, but a humble friend, respecting and respected. And Donon is an intelligent and educated woman;

she would have really descended in the scale of humanity if she had allied herself to one of these uneducated peasants.'

"Mademoiselle de Groucy made no reply, but her whole frame quivered, and she turned white with wrath. White! She was ghastly. I looked at her with surprise, and with a certain chill foreboding. I had seen red anger and black anger, but this white-hot ire, never; and all about what? Her theories contradicted somewhat roughly by her father; but theories which, I concluded, she could only have gathered from books, for she rarely went abroad except to mass, and never without her duenna. Looking at her pallid ire, and the white of her eye, which seemed to enlarge as she turned her head away from the Marquis in her grim determination not to reply to him, I could not help saying to myself, 'I'm not her father, and husbands are apt to provoke their wives: this fair creature will perhaps kill me some day.' I felt all manner of vague alarms at a character so cold, so fiery, so profound, so unintelligible to me, and asked myself then and there whether it would not be wise to withdraw my claims to her.

"But I could not. Like the bird that flutters round the dazzling serpent, I was fascinated by the beautiful, dangerous creature, and neither able nor honestly willing to escape.

"Meantime the grand and simple character of my father-in-law won my heart, and I used now and then to go out shooting with him—for his company, not the sport. One day he shot a hare running by the edge of a precipice; she rolled over, and lay in sight of us on a ledge of rock, but at a depth of eighty feet at least, and the descent almost perpendicular. The Marquis ordered his dogs by name to go down and fetch up the hare. They ran eagerly to the edge to oblige him, and barked zealously, but did not like the commission. We were about to abandon our prey in despair, when suddenly there appeared on the scene a gigantic peasant with a shock head of red hair so thick and stiff and high that his cap seemed to be perched on a bundle of carrots. Close at his heels, with nose inserted between his calves, came a ragged lurcher. This per-

sonage looked over the edge of the ravine, saw our difficulty, grinned, and with perfect *sang-froid* proceeded to risk his life and his cur's for our hare. He made an oblique descent, with the help of certain projections and shrubs, the dog sliding down at his heels, and on an emergency fixing his teeth in the man's loose trousers, till they reached a part where the descent was easier. Then the lurcher started on his own account, and with great dexterity scrambled down to the hare, and scrambled up with her in his mouth back to his master.

"But now came a very serious question: how were they to get back again? I felt really anxious, and said so; but the Marquis said: 'Oh, don't be afraid; this fellow is the athlete of the district; wins all the prizes; they call him the champion. He will get out of it somehow.' The man hesitated a moment for all that. But he soon hit upon his plan. He took the hare up, and held her by the skin of her back, with teeth the size of ivory chess pawns; then he put his dog before him, and slowly, carefully, driving the points of his thick boots into every crevice, and grasping with iron strength every ledge or tuft that offered, he effected the perilous ascent; but it was no child's play. The perspiration trickled down his face, and he panted a little.

"I offered him a three-franc piece (none of them left now), but he declined it rather cavalierly, and busied himself with putting the hare into the Marquis's game-bag. He was so generous as to add a little wooden figure he took out of his bosom. But this contribution was not observed by the Marquis—only by me—and I was pleased, and still more amazed, by this giant's simplicity.

"On our return we were met in the hall by Irène and her *gouvernante*; and the Marquis, when he took the hare out of the game-bag, told her how it had been recovered for him by the champion and his dog.

"What is the name of that colossus that wins all the prizes?"

"Michel Flaubert," said the young lady.

"Ay, Flaubert, that's his name—a *vaurien* that wrestles,

and dances, and poaches, and won't work. No matter; he saved my hare, he and his cur. I will buy that cur if he will sell him. What have we here?" And he drew out the little wooden figure. We all inspected the crude image. 'It is a sportsman,' said the Marquis, 'leaning on his gun. He will blow his own head off some day.'

"Mademoiselle Donon opined it was a saint, and begged the Marquis not to part with it; it would bring him good luck.

"'You are blind,' said Irène; 'it is a shepherd leaning on his staff.' And she put out her white hand, took the hideous statuette, and put it into her pocket. I said she did it great honor.

"'No,' said she; 'I only do it justice. You, who despise the simple art of a self-taught man, what can you do that you have not been taught?'

"'I can love, for one thing,' said I. And Mademoiselle de Groncy colored high at that, but tossed her head. 'And in the matter of art, if I cannot cut little dolls that resemble nothing in nature, I can paint a picture that shall resemble a creature whose loveliness none but the blind will dispute.'

"'Oh, indeed,' said she, satirically; 'and pray what creature is that?'

"'It is yourself.'

"'Me!'

"'Yes. Do me the honor to sit to me for your portrait, and I am quite content you shall compare my work with the sculpture of the illustrious Flaubert.'

"'A fair challenge!' cried the Marquis, joyously. 'And I back the gentleman.'

"'Oh, of course,' said his daughter. 'But the day is gone by for despising our fellow-creatures.'

"'I despise no honest man,' said I. 'But so long as education and refined sentiments go with birth, you will be superior in my eyes to any peasant girl, and why not I to a peasant?'

"The Marquis stopped me. 'Why waste your time in combating moonshine? My daughter knows these rustics only in

landscapes and revolutionary pamphlets. Oh, I forget!—she has seen them in church; but she never heard them, far less smelled them. Ye gods! when that Flaubert toiled up the precipice and brought me my hare, it was like a kennel of foxes.'

"At that Mademoiselle de Groucy left the room with queenly dignity. She was invincible. Her way of retiring put us both in the wrong, especially me, and I made a vow to connive at her theories in future. What did they matter, after all? But I had gained one great point this time: I was to paint her picture. I foresaw, as a lover, many advantages to be gained by that, and I lost no time in buying and preparing the canvas. The best-lighted room for the purpose proved to be Irène's boudoir; so I was introduced into that sanctum, and for some hours every day had all the delight of a painter in love. I directed her superb poses; I had the right to gaze at her and enjoy all her prismatic changes. She was reserved and full of defence, but not childishly shy. She could not be always on her guard, so ever and anon came happy moments when she seemed conscious only of her youth and her beauty. Then a tender light glowed through her limpid eyes, and she looked at me with that divine smile which my hand, inspired by love, has rendered better perhaps than a skilful artist would have done whose heart was not in the work. The picture advanced slowly but surely. The Marquis himself one day spared his partridges and sat with us. He was delighted, and said, 'This portrait is mine, since I give you the original;' and he ordered a magnificent frame for it directly.

"The portrait was finished at last, and my courtship proceeded with a certain smoothness; only I made no very perceptible advances. I never contradicted her republican theories; indeed, I was so subdued by her grand beauty I dared not thwart her in any way. Yet somehow I could not find out her heart; it evaded me. Often she seemed to be looking over my head at some greater person or grander character. I remember once in particular that I sat by her side on the ve-

randa. After many attempts on my part the conversation died, and I was content to sit a little behind her, and watch her grace and beauty. She leaned her swan-like neck softly forward, her white brow just touched the flowering creepers, and she seemed in a soft revery. I, too, contemplated her in quiet ecstacy. Suddenly she blushed and quivered, and her lovely bosom rose and fell tumultuously. I started up, and looked over to see who or what it was that moved her so. Instinct then told me I had a rival, and that he was in sight.

"I looked far and near. I could see no rival. It was the usual sleepy landscape: a few washerwomen at the fountain hard by, a few peasants dispersed over the background.

"For all that, my mind misgave me, and at last I opened my heart to my friend the Marquis. I told him I was discouraged and unhappy; his daughter's heart seemed above my reach.

"'Fiddle-de-dee!' said he. 'It all comes of this new system; courting young ladies before marriage spoils them. They don't know all they gain by marriage, so they give themselves airs.'

"'Ay,' said I; 'but that is not all: I have watched her closely, and there is some one her heart beats for, though not for me.'

"'Nonsense!' said he; 'there is not a gentleman she would look at in the district. I know them all.'

"'But, monsieur,' said I, 'perhaps some prince of the blood has passed this way, or some great general, or hero, or patriot, and she has given him her heart; for she looks above me, and does not disguise it.'

"'She has seen no such personage,' was the reply. 'Ask Donon, who never leaves her.'

"'Then,' said I, 'it must be some imaginary character too lofty for poor me to compete with; for an idol she has.'

"'Humph!' said the Marquis. 'That is possible.'

"'She reads pernicious books,' said I. 'I found her reading the "Nouvelle Héloïse" in her boudoir.'

"M. de Groucy lost his composure directly. 'The "Nouvelle Héloïse,"' said he; 'and did you not fling it out of the window?'

"I confessed I dared not. I dared do nothing to offend her.

"The Marquis bestowed a look of pity on me, and left the room all in a hurry, and I awaited his return in no little anxiety. He came back in about half an hour, which he must have spent in ransacking his daughter's library. He reappeared with the 'Nouvelle Héloïse,' a philosophic History, by I forget whom, a discourse on Superstition (vulgarly called Religion), by D'Alembert, and one or two works tending to remove the false distinction civilization had invented between *meum* and *tuum* and the classes of society. The Marquis showed me the books, and then invited me to follow him. He went first to the kitchen, and made the cook brand these *chef-d'œuvres* of modern sentiment with a red-hot iron. Then he had them carefully packed in a box and sent to the executioner at Marseilles for public conflagration.

"Having thus eased his mind, he reviewed the situation more calmly. 'My son,' said he, 'you have tried your new-fangled system, with the result that might have been expected. You approach the girl cap in hand, and she gives herself airs accordingly. Now we will try ancestral wisdom. Next Sunday I shall publish your banns in the church, and this day week (Wednesday) you will marry her; and on Thursday you will find her obliging; on Friday, affectionate; on Saturday, cajoling. Saturday *afternoon* she will probably make the usual attempt to be master—they all do. You will put that down with a high hand, and from that hour she will respect and love you with all the loyalty of her race.'

"His confidence inspired me. His affection and partisanship affected me deeply. I threw myself into his arms, and I remember I said, 'If she would only love me as much as I love you—' And then my tongue faltered.

"The Marquis patted me tenderly on the head with his huge

hand—he was a man of great stature—and said, ‘She shall adore you. Leave that to me.’

“I am bound to admit that so much of the programme as depended on him was carried out to the letter. The very next Sunday we all went to mass in state; and after the service the priest read out from the altar with a loud voice:

“‘Are betrothed this day, the high and excellent Seigneur Grégoire, Viscount of Pontarlais, and the high and excellent damsel Irène de Groncy,’ etc. There was an angry murmur from the crowd: they objected to our titles. The Marquis shrugged his shoulders with unutterable scorn at that, and said, aloud, ‘Monsieur le Vicomte, do me the honor to give your hand to your bride, and pass out before the rest of us.’

“I came forward with a beating heart. Mademoiselle de Groncy was pale, and trembled a little—she was evidently taken by surprise; but she put her hand in mine without a moment’s hesitation, and we marched down the aisle, and through the western door. But, once outside the place, the people flocked round us, and there were some satirical murmurs, at which the Marquis changed color, and his eyes flashed contemptuous ire. But presently a band of about twelve broke through the mass, headed by that very peasant who had rescued our hare for us; and he came cap in hand, and begged the Marquis to preside at the wrestling and shooting for prizes which were to take place that afternoon.

“I think, had it been any other applicant, the offended gentleman would have refused; but he remembered his hare, and the fellow’s good services, and gave a cold consent. Then we turned to go home, but the crowd once more embarrassed us, and it was not a friendly crowd. My blood got up, and, taking my betrothed under my arm, I prepared to force a passage; but she slipped from me like an eel, and said, imperiously, ‘Flaubert, clear the way.’ The giant, on this order, stepped in front of us, and shoved the other peasants out of the way, right and left, as if they had been so much dirt. As soon as we were clear, he turned on his heel with as utter a contempt

for those who were not his *equals* in brute strength as ever a French noble showed for those who were not his equals in birth and breeding.

"We walked home, mademoiselle in front, haughtily, as one whom no such trifles could disturb; but the Marquis sombre and agitated. He put his hand on my shoulder, and said: 'We have almost been insulted. This will end in bloodshed. I shall prepare the defence of my castle. You said a good thing the other day: grape-shot is an argument the *canaille* can understand. Meantime, we honor that village with no more visits. Your wedding will be celebrated in my private chapel.'

"I looked anxiously to see how my betrothed received this. She said nothing; but, somehow, her whole body seemed to hear it. After breakfast I entered her boudoir, and found her trimming a scarf of many colors with gold-lace. It was in the worst possible taste, but I dared not say so. I asked, with feigned admiration, whom it was to adorn.

"'You, if you can earn it,' said she, dryly. 'It is for the victor in the sports; the swiftest runner, the strongest wrestler. You have only to eclipse these despised peasants in such manly exercises, and I shall have the honor of placing it on your shoulders.'

"I saw she was bent on mortifying me, and perhaps drawing me into a quarrel; so I remembered Wednesday was near, and said, as pleasantly as I could: 'Do not think I share our father's violent prejudices. I desire to be just to all men. There is much to admire in the hardy, honest sons of toil. But neither are the gentry fit subjects of wholesale contempt. The peasant who carves a figure which one critic takes for a shepherd, another for a sportsman, and another for a saint, could not paint your picture to save his life, and a polite duel with glittering rapiers demands more true manhood than a wrestling bout.'

"My words, I knew, would not please her, so I made the tone so humble and conciliatory that she vouchsafed no reply.

"Then I sat down beside her, and asked her to forgive me if I esteemed a little too highly that class she belonged to and adorned. None the less should her *opinions* always be respected by me. Then I added: 'Why should we waste our time on such subjects? For my part, I am too happy to dispute. Oh, if I was only more worthy of you! and if I but knew how to make you love me a little, now that you have accepted me publicly as your betrothed—'

"Say '*my espouser*,'" said she, calmly. Then I remembered that in Rousseau's volume of poison that pedantic, sensual hussy applies this term to the two suitors she despises. I was stung with the scorpion jealousy, and my old suspicion revived and maddened me. 'Ah!' said I, haughtily, 'and who is the St. Preux for whom you mortify me so cruelly? If he is worthy of you, how comes it he is afraid to show his face?'

"'Be assured,' said she, with sullen dignity, 'I shall never marry any one of whom I am ashamed.'

"'Of that I am sure,' said I; 'and if ever St. Preux appears, and comes between my betrothed and me, it will be an honor to me to cross steel with him, and a greater still to kill him, which I shall do, as sure as heaven is above us.' At that time I was an accomplished swordsman.

"'Oh,' said she, 'then you would marry me against my will?'

"'No,' said I, staggered by so direct a blow; 'but I would not go back from my troth plighted at the altar; would you? The conversation is taking such a turn that I think monsieur the Marquis de Groucy is entitled to share in it.'

"She turned pale, but recovered herself in a moment. 'That is unnecessary,' said she. 'I am sorry if I have offended you.' She drooped her head with infinite grace, and when she raised it she smiled on me and said: 'I am flattered by your affection. You have the prejudices of your class, but not their vices. Let us be friends.' She held out her white hand. I fell on my knees and kissed it devotedly.

"'Oh, how I adore you!' I sighed; and my eyes filled with

tenderness. Even hers seemed to dwell on me with a gentler expression than I had ever seen before in them.

"But just as I was making friends with her so sweetly, came a cruel interruption."

These words were scarcely out of the narrator's mouth when what I thought a cruel interruption occurred. The *curé* came in, dripping. My hospitable uncle had his outer garment removed, and a pint of old Burgundy spiced and heated, and in his warm hospitality would have resigned the story altogether.

But that was intolerable to me. As soon as I could with decency I said, timidly, "*Monsieur le curé* loves a good story as well as anybody."

"That I do," said the *curé*, with such zeal that I could have hugged him. And in short, after a few polite speeches, and a reminder from me as to where he had left off, Monsieur de Pontarlais resumed; and it struck me at the time that he was not sorry to have one more intelligent and attentive auditor, for indeed the good *curé* seemed to drink in every word.

"Well, gentlemen, my courtship was interrupted by a summons to visit the sports. As to the running and the shooting, I remember only that it was nothing to boast of, and that the prize for the latter was won by that red-headed giant, and that he came to the Marquis, cap in hand, and received a pewter mug.

"Then came the wrestling. Two rustics, naked to the waist, struggled together with more strength than skill. One was thrown, and retired crestfallen. Another came on, and threw the victor. Each bout occupied a long time. The sun began to sink, and your humble servant to yawn.

"My betrothed was all eyes and enthusiasm, though the sight was more monotonous than delicate; but the Marquis pitied me, and said: '*You* are not bound to endure all this. The result is known beforehand. After two dozen encounters, a victor will be declared, and then "*the champion*" will throw *him* with considerable ease: the champion is that red-headed giant

Flaubert. He will come forward and go down on one knee, and my daughter will bestow this scarf on him.—Brought your smelling-bottle, child, I hope?—Then, on other occasions, I used to feast them all; but after their insolence at the church door—insolence to you, *monsieur mon gendre*—I shall admit only the champion Flaubert and his guard of honor, twelve in number. Pierre has his orders: if the rest try to force their way, he will let the porteuillis down on their heads. They have all been told that, *and why.*'

"Well, I did not care to see my betrothed put that scarf upon the champion, so I strolled away, and wandered about the château. An irresistible curiosity led me to that part of the building in which Mademoiselle de Groucy slept. Her bedroom was in a large tower looking down upon the parterre, which was, like the hanging gardens of Babylon, full thirty feet above the plain the castle stood on; for, indeed, it was a castle rather than a château. I entered her bedroom with a tremor of curiosity and delight; it was large and lofty; the bed had no curtains, and was covered with a snowy sheet—nothing more. Spartan simplicity was seen in every detail. The picture, framed as you see it now, rested on two huge chairs; and at this my heart beat. On a table by the side of the looking-glass I discovered the quaint little figure Flaubert had bestowed upon the Marquis along with the famous hare. 'Well,' thought I, looking at that monstrosity and at my picture, 'that is a comparison she is welcome to make.' I was ashamed of my curiosity, and soon retired. I went and sat in her boudoir. Her work was about; there were many signs of her presence; a delicate perfume mingled with the scents of the flowers. I sat at the open window. Voices murmured in the château, but outside all was still. Soft dreams of coming happiness possessed me; I leaned my head out of window and drank the evening air, and thought of Wednesday, and the life of bliss to follow. I was calm, and for the first time ineffably happy.

"The sun set; the castle was still; no doubt even the limited number of visitors admitted by the Marquis had re-

tired; still I remained there in a delicious revery. Presently, in the darkness, I thought I saw a figure pass along close to the wall, and stop at the tower a little while. Then it suddenly disappeared, so that it was most likely a shadow. Shadow or not, I was going to be jealous again, when my betrothed entered the room gayly, and invited me to supper.

"You must not abandon us altogether," said she, and she beamed so, and her manner was so kind and caressing, that I was in the seventh heaven directly. She gave me her hand of her own accord, and I conducted her to the *salle à manger*.

"Oh, you have found him, have you?" said the Marquis, gayly. "That is lucky, for I have the appetite of a wolf."

"A noble repast was served in honor of our betrothal, and we did honor to it. I forget what was said, but I remember that for the first time Irène allowed her gifts to appear. What animation! what grace! what sparkling wit without ill-nature! what inimitable powers of pleasing, coupled for once with the desire to please! Oh, marvellous inconsistency of woman!"

"Her father was fascinated as well as I, and embraced her warmly when she retired, with a sweet, submissive apology to me, saying that the day, though delightful, had been a little fatiguing.

"Her father and I remained, and instead of our invariable piquet, were well content to sing her praises, and congratulate ourselves.

"The subject was inexhaustible, and I am sure we had sat together more than an hour, when a great murmur of voices was heard, and Mademoiselle Donon came in with a terrified air to say that there was a tumult outside.

"More likely a serenade on this festive occasion," suggested the Marquis. But at that moment the great bell of the church began to peal. It was the tocsin.

"Are we on fire," cried the Marquis, "and don't know it?"

"I ran to the window, threw it open, and looked out. I saw flaming torches moving towards the castle from various parts, and heard angry murmurs.

“‘Sir,’ said I, in no little agitation, ‘they are going to attack us, as they did that other château.’

“De Grouey smiled grimly. ‘All the worse for them if they do. I had the drawbridge raised at dusk, and we have plenty of ammunition.’

“Here a servant came in with a face of news.

“‘What is the matter?’ asked the Marquis.

“‘They have not the sense to say,’ replied the man. He was the master of the hounds. ‘I hailed them through the grating, and asked them to declare their grievance. But the fools kept roaring “The champion! the champion!” and not another word could I get out of them. Do they think we have taken the blackguard prisoner?’

“‘Stuff!’ said the Marquis; ‘that is a blind. Load all the muskets with ounce bullets this instant.’

“The man retired to execute this order.

“‘But, sir,’ said I, ‘may not the champion have been shut in when you raised the drawbridge? I thought I saw a figure on the parterre, groping his way about in the dark.’

“‘No, no,’ said the Marquis. ‘If any one had been shut in by accident, he would have come to the postern, and the janitor would have let him out. Any stick to beat a dog! any excuse to insult or pillage their betters!—that is the France we live in now. So be it. Not one of the *canaille* shall enter the place alive.’

“‘I am at your orders,’ said I, catching fire.

“All these, you must understand, were hurried words, spoken as we marched, the Marquis leading the way, up the great staircase. At the head of it Pierre and Guillaume met him, with the loaded muskets and ammunition, and he then said to me:

“‘You wonder, perhaps, to see me so calm, with women under my charge, and wild beasts howling outside. But I am a soldier, and know what I am about. This castle is simply impregnable to foes of that kind except at one spot, the small postern, and that is bound with iron. Should they batter it

down, the aperture is small; we three can kill them all, one at a time; and at daybreak I will hand the survivors over to Captain Beaumont, who will be here with a squadron of mounted carabineers. The worst of it is, Vicomte, I must disturb your betrothed, for it is only from her window we can fire upon the postern.'

"He led the way to his daughter's room, and we naturally drew back. In the passage adjoining a cold wind blew on us, and a small but massive door with gigantic bolts was found to be ajar.

"The Marquis turned round on us, astonished, and for the first time showed anxiety. He said, in a low, unsteady voice:

"'Who has opened this passage?'

"'Does it lead to the parterre?' said I, and began to fear some strange mystery.

"'It did,' said he, 'but I condemned it ten years ago.'

"'Full that, sir,' said Pierre; 'twas I nailed it up, by your orders. I wish I knew the traitor who has taken out the nails and drawn the bolts back.'

"The Marquis's cheek was pale and his eyes flashed. 'To the portecullis, Pierre and Guillaume,' said he; 'and if any stranger comes to it from the house, kill him without a word. You and I, son-in-law, can defend the postern.'

"Our forces thus separated, he went on to his daughter's room, and knocked gently; there was no reply. He knocked louder; there was no reply.

"'She is asleep,' said he; 'I will go in and prepare her.'

"Then I drew back, out of delicacy.

"He took out a pass-key and opened the door.

"There was a man in his daughter's room.

"That man was 'the champion.'

"'The champion' stood motionless, and looked quite stupefied.

"Mademoiselle de Groucy, quick as he was slow, darted before him with extended arms to protect him; but the next moment cried, 'Fly, fly for your life!' The moment she made way for him to fly the Marquis levelled his musket, and fired at his head with as little hesitation as he would at a wild boar.

"What I took to be the champion's brains flew horribly before the discharge; the air was all smoke; a heavy body rushed between the Marquis and me and drove us apart, and the door of the condemned passage was slammed. M. de Groucy strode into the room; I followed him. The smoke began to clear, and all things were visible as in a mist; patches of hair floated about, mowed by the bullet off the champion's skull.

"Irène leaned against the mantelpiece, white as a ghost; but only her body crouched, and that not much; her haughty head was erect, and her eyes faced us, shining supernaturally. The Marquis, stout as he was, sank into a chair and trembled.

"How did that man get in here?" said he, hoarsely.

"I let him in by the condemned door," said she, pale but unflinching. "Cannot you see that I love him?"

"You love that *canaille*?" groaned the Marquis.

"I love that young man because he is a man, and has all the virtues that belong to his humble condition. He earns his bread, and I shall be proud to earn mine with him. But it is you and this gentleman who have hastened things; you were forcing me and hurrying me into a marriage without love. No misery, no degradation, can equal that. That is why I called him to my aid. I placed myself under his protection."

"I will kill him," said the Marquis to me, with deadly calmness.

"She came forward directly and folded her arms before him. 'Then you will kill my honor, for he is my lover; I belong to him.'

"At that audacious avowal the Marquis rose like a tower, and lifted his hand to fell her to the earth. But he did not strike her. Better for her, perhaps, if he had, for words can be more terrible than blows.

"Since you can fall no lower," said he, "marry your peasant, and live on his dunghill with him. You are no child of mine. I banish you, and I disown you, and may God's curse light on you and him forever!"

"Then for the first time her proud head drooped upon her

hand, and that hand upon the mantelpiece. 'You will forgive me one day,' she murmured, faintly.

"'Forgive you?' said he, with unutterable scorn; 'I shall forget you. You are no more to me now than the dirt I walk on. Come, my son, my only child.' He took my hand and drew me away. He never looked back; but I cast one long, miserable glance on her whom it was my misery to love and hate. Her white wrist rested on a high chair, her head was bowed, yet her fearless eyes did not turn from us. She was beautiful as she stood there half cowed by a father's curse; as beautiful as she had been in her scorn, in her ire, and in her happy reveries, when her lips parted with that happy smile, and a tender fire glowed in her dewy eyes."

While the narrator paused, and we sat silent, looking at the picture, Suzon came hurriedly in, with tears in her eyes, and told the *curé* Catherine was very ill indeed, and begging to see him. He rose directly and accompanied her.

"You had better sleep here," said my uncle; "your bed is always ready, you know."

"With pleasure," said he.

As soon as the door had closed on him I remarked, rather peevishly, that I never knew an interesting story allowed to proceed without a whole system of interruption.

The elders smiled at my impatience. M. de Pontarlais suggested that perhaps I felt those interruptions more than others. My uncle said: "We must take good men as they are, and thank God for them. I have known him fourteen years, yet never once to neglect a sick person for any personal gratification whatever."

Then, I remember, I was half ashamed of myself, and said I venerated the good *curé* and loved him dearly, and if he would stay with Catherine, well and good; but he would be coming back in a few minutes, and it was this perpetual *va-et-vient* that was breaking my heart and the thread of the only beautiful story I had ever heard told by word of mouth.

"Calm yourself, my young friend," said Monsieur de Pontarlais; "my story is nearly ended.

"The Marquis compelled me to leave him, after a while, and seek repose. I could not find it; I raged with fury; I sickened with despair; I loved and I hated. This is the world's hell.

"The first thing next morning Mademoiselle Donon came to the Marquis and me, in tears, and told us she had heard all, but implored us not to believe one word against Irène's honor. She could only, until that fatal night, have spoken to the man at the village fêtes, or from the balcony of the parterre, forty feet above the ground. 'Poor inexperienced girl,' said she, 'how should she measure her words? She did not know what she was saying.'

"'The pupils of Rousseau have not much to learn,' was the grim reply.

"The next minute Pierre came in and told us mademoiselle had left the house with a bundle in her hand, and dressed like a peasant girl. I started up; but the Marquis laid a hand of iron on me. 'Let her go,' said he. 'Let her taint a peasant's home; she shall not dishonor mine. Her own mother should not keep her if she were alive and went on her knees to me.'

"This was the end. I stayed that miserable day, and then the Marquis sent me home. I told him I should tell my father our tempers were irreconcilable, his daughter's and mine.

"'What! tell a lie about her?' said the iron noble. 'Tell the truth, my son, and retain *my* love.'

"Well, that difficulty was solved for me. I reached home in a high fever, and it soon settled on my brain, and I was insensible for weeks.

"I recovered slowly, and it was many months ere I could walk. Ah, fatal beauty! you nearly killed two men: the black-guard you adored with all those queenly airs of yours—a bullet grazed his skull and ploughed his hair to the roots; and all through you the gentleman you despised lay at death's door many a day."

Our friend the *curé* came in as these words were spoken.

He looked very grave, and said that he must stay the night. Catherine was, he feared, a dying woman. She was asleep just now, but a sleep of utter exhaustion.

My uncle was much concerned. He got up directly to go and see his faithful servant, and the story was interrupted again, as I had foreseen, and the conversation turned on poor Catherine and her humble virtues till my uncle returned, looking very glum. Then Suzon came in, bearing a huge silver bowl, and this was speedily filled with wine, sugar, lemon, and spices—a delicious and fragrant compound.

It was ladled out into our glasses, and under its influence I took courage, and implored the Count to finish the story. He consented at once, but said it would have little interest for me now, since the principal figure had disappeared.

“I lay a long time between life and death, and even when I was out of danger my mind was confused and troubled. However, by degrees I recovered a certain dogged calm of mind, and, indeed, since then I have observed in other victims of the tender passion that a brain-fever from disappointed love either kills the body or cures the heart.

“My long and dangerous illness was followed by a period of bodily weakness, during which those about me seemed leagued together to know nothing about the family of De Groucy. No doubt they had their orders.

“At last, one day, being now stronger, I asked my father, with feigned composure, if he still corresponded with my dear friend the Marquis de Groucy.

“‘Yes, my son,’ was his reply. ‘He is in England. He has sold his property and emigrated. He came here on his way, and wept over you; but you did not know him.’ This made my tears flow. After a while I said, ‘Father, she whom I loved so dearly—oh, father, I can bear anything now; tell me. Her own parent has abandoned her, but perhaps she has come to her senses, and only needs a friend to save her from that wretch.’

“‘Grégoire,’ said my father, firmly, ‘be a man; forget that

woman. She is not worth a thought. She has chosen her dunghill; let her lie on it.' Then, as I persisted in begging him to tell me something about her, he said, 'I will tell you this much: you have no betrothed, my poor friend has no daughter, and his noble race is extinct.'

"After that I maintained a sort of sad and gloomy silence, and all those who really loved me flattered themselves I had forgotten her; but now, after so many years, I own to you, Monsieur Frédéric, that her beauty and her voice and the love I had given her haunted me, and were an obstacle to marriage, until celibacy became too fixed a habit. Even now, in the decline of life, my old heart thrilled at the sudden sight of her shadow there, the life-like image of one I loved too well."

This set us all gazing at the portrait, and the *curé* in particular got up and examined it very closely, and with a puzzled air.

But I still thirsted for more. "Surely," said I, "in the course of all these years, you must have heard something more about her?"

"Not a word."

"Made some inquiries?"

"None?"

"At least, sir, you know whether she is alive or dead?"

"No, I do not."

Then I began to bemoan my ill fortune. "Oh, sir," said I, "when you began your beautiful story I felt sure I should hear all about her, and where she is now; but you lost sight of her when she was no older than I am, and there you drop the curtain, and all is dark. It is all over now; nobody will ever tell me the story of her life; nobody knows anything about her."

"You are mistaken," said the *curé*, gravely. "I know a great deal about her."

"Is it possible?" I cried, wild with excitement. "Oh, how fortunate! Ah, my dear friend, tell us all you know."

"Not so, Monsieur Frédéric. I must not tell you what I know as her confessor and director, but I will tell you all that I have a right to tell. Alas! it is a short, but terrible, history.

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"Well, then, for many years before I came here I had a cure on the other side of the mountains, and among my parishioners was a family of farmers called Flaubert. The head of it was a widow woman, who farmed a little freehold with great ability and keenness, and kept the house with strict economy. She had two sons and their wives under her roof.

"The elder took after her, was prudent, laborious, and married a young woman who had a piece of land and a bit of money, and was also a managing woman. She had two children, and no more. The other son was a young man spoiled early in life by his physical gifts. He was of colossal size, yet could run like a deer, and dance like a faun; a first-rate shot, a poacher, and the champion wrestler of the district. Indeed, he was called 'the champion' even in his own family, and they were proud of him three or four times a year, when he brought home prizes from the fairs; the rest of the time they blushed for him. This young man's wife was a person you could not fail to remark. Her figure was stately and erect; her carriage graceful. As to her face, it had not the bloom of youth and beauty which illumines that lovely picture. Seven years of peasant life and the hot sun of Provence had tanned her neck and arms, and a discontented mind, which never looked to religion for comfort, had imbittered her very face. I remember that even then a deep line crossed her forehead, and her cheeks were hollow, compared with that plump beauty, and her throat was not a smooth column like that. But, now I think of it, her hands, though brown with exposure, were shapely, and not like a peasant's, and her eyes and eyebrows were really superb, and her forehead and face were white and smooth as ivory. Yes, I can just believe that this picture was like her in the flower of her youth. Only, as I said before, when I first saw her she was hardened by labor, bronzed by the sun, withered, as I now learn, by a father's curse, and soured by infidelity.

"The Flaubert family lived a quarter of a league from the village, and I saw the wife of Michel about, more than once, before I spoke to her. Her appearance and carriage were so

striking that I made inquiries about her of the villagers with whom I had already made acquaintance.

“‘Oh! the fair peasant!’ said one. ‘The countess!’ said another, in coarse derision of her superior; and they told me she was the daughter of a red-hot aristo, who had fled to England because she married a peasant for love. They gave me plenty of details, and you would smile if you heard the vulgar romances each narrator constructed on her true story, which, nevertheless, was romantic enough.

“The widow and her eldest daughter attended mass, and I conversed with them. In due course I asked the widow if she had not another daughter-in-law.

“The two women looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders. ‘Yes, I have, sir,’ said the widow, ‘to my misfortune.’

“‘Shall I not see her at mass?’

“‘Let us hope not; for she would only come to yawn or to mock. She is a pagan, I believe, among her other qualities.’

“‘Perhaps she attends to the home while you are out?’

“‘She attend to the home!’ and both women laughed heartily at the idea—so heartily that the younger thought it necessary to make an apology. The elder chimed in and said, in the sly way of a Provençal peasant, ‘If her outside has interested *M. le Curé*, I can give him a picture of her at this moment. She is sitting over my fire, burning her petticoat, with her hands lolling by her sides, making useless embroidery, or else in a pure revery. As for her household occupation, she is either letting the pot boil over or get cold. I could not swear which; but ’tis one or t’other.’

“Of course I checked these remarks, and lectured upon Christian charity. My discourse was received with respectful silence, but my hearers seemed turned into wood.

“Some days after this I was caught in a heavy rain, and the nearest shelter was the farmhouse of the Flauberts. I knocked at the door, no notice was taken; I knocked again; a light footstep, and the door was opened by Madame Michel. She did

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not receive me hospitably. She said, in broad Provençal, 'There is nobody in the house,' and she held the door in her hand. Then I tried her in French. 'Madame,' said I, 'I am wet through, and if I could, without incommoding you—'

"'Do me the honor to come in,' said she, with perfect accent and the most graceful courtesy. She seated me by the fire, and we entered into conversation. I believe we conversed about trifles, and I could not help admiring her grace and courtesy, and the French language, the language of politeness, which had at once recalled her to her native good-breeding. She spoke it exquisitely, notwithstanding the little use she now made of it.

"I forget all our small-talk; but I remember at last that she fixed her eyes full upon mine and said, 'Monsieur, why did you speak to me in French?'

"I answered her honestly, and with some emotion: 'Because, madame, I know your story from others' (her pale cheek colored at that), 'and, to be quite frank, I came here hoping, by my advice and authority, to make matters smoother and more pleasant in this house.'

"'You would but waste your time,' said she. 'These people hate me with all their hearts, and I despise them with all my soul. Matters are come to such a pitch that we endure each other only because we are about to part. My husband is heir to a small sum of money, and he has purchased a cottage and a few acres that are sold very cheap, belonging to an *émigré*. We shall do very well when we are alone.'

"'You have my best wishes,' said I; 'but I am afraid you are too little accustomed to the hard life of a working farmer; and even your husband has never learned to dig and mow a labor like his brother; his tastes appear to be for pastimes and games and—'

"'You need not mince the matter,' said she; 'he is lazy, and, worse still, he is fond of drinking and gambling. But it is all his mother's fault, with her weak indulgence; and now she encourages him to desert his home out of her jealousy of

me. Once I get him away from this vile woman he will stay beside me, and lead an honest, industrious life, as I shall for his sake.'

"I knew Michel was hardened in his ill habits, and that love could not convert him without religion. I thought it my duty to tell her so. The woman froze directly, and when I urged my views she encountered me with all the cold infidelity and satire of this unhappy age. She was armed at all points by Messieurs Volney, D'Alembert, Voltaire, and others, and by her own self-confidence. So I told her I would not argue with her, but pray for her.

"'Do you believe prayers are heard?' said she, ironically.

"I told her I thought earnest prayers were always heard, and sometimes granted.

"'Well,' said she, 'the most earnest prayer I ever heard was when my own father cursed me and my husband. Will God grant that?'

"'Not against your souls,' said I.

"She shrugged her shoulders, as much as to say the exception was of very little value; and I left the house defeated and sad."

"And I answer for it you kept your word, and prayed for this perverse creature," said my uncle.

"With all my heart and soul," replied the good *curé*.

He continued:

"The next time I saw her was one evening; the whole family was there except Michel. They all received me in a friendly manner, and gave me the place of honor at a long table, about which they were all seated, picking the shoots out of some damaged wheat for their own use.

"The eldest son entertained me with a voluble discourse about the markets, the price of grain; and all the time Michel's wife sat with her feet at the fire, and her arms folded, and her head against the wall, in an attitude of sleepy disdain.

"But presently there was a whistle heard in the yard, and she started up, all animation.

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"There he is!" she cried, and darted out of the door. She soon returned with 'the champion,' who greeted us all, in a loud, jovial voice, with blunt civility.

"Daughter-in-law," said her mother, 'serve your husband.'

"Then she cut an enormous slice of bread, and ladled a large basinful of soup out of the great pot. Unfortunately, the pot had been taken off the fire to put on more wood, and the soup was lukewarm. The champion made a grimace.

"Cold weather outside and cold soup within," said he. This was not said harshly, but his mother fired up directly.

"Saints in paradise!" she cried, turning towards her obnoxious daughter-in-law. 'Is it possible that a woman can reach your years and not learn to keep her man's soup hot against he comes home wet and hungry?'

"The young woman just turned two haughty eyes upon her, and said, 'It's nobody's business if Michel does not complain.' Then I, to make peace, said I feared that I was the person in fault, for I had moved the pot a little to warm my feet.

"The champion—a good-humored fellow at bottom—stopped me, and said: 'Don't let's make a mountain of a molehill. The soup's very good if it is a little cold, and it's going to a warm place anyway;' and with this he shovelled it rapidly down his throat. 'The worst of it is,' said he, 'that my feet are wet through with the snow and the slush;' and he took off a pair of enormous shoes and threw them roughly towards his wife, and said, 'There, wife, put all that right for me.'

"The daughter of the Marquis de Groucy took her peasant lord's shoes, bowed her head meekly over them, scraped the clay from them with a piece of stick, then wiped them with a damp cloth, then put some hot cinders inside, shook them out again, and brought the shoes to her master. He received them without a word of thanks. This gave me some pain, and I soon after took my leave. Michel's wife, remembering, I suppose, the habits of her youth, accompanied me to the end of the court that lay before the door. I took this opportunity of saying that since she had learned to humble herself before a

man, and do the duty of a wife so meekly, I felt sure she would some day learn to humble herself before God, who abaseth the proud and lifteth up the lowly.

"What think you was the answer I received from this keen spirit, nursed upon the wit of Messieurs Volney, D'Alembert, and Voltaire ?

" 'Monsieur,' says she, 'there are *curés* who can only talk religion; there are some who can also talk reason; you are one of the happy few who can talk reason if you choose, for you have been a man of the world. If it is all the same to you, pray, when you do me the honor to converse with me, don't talk religion; talk sense.'

" 'I consent, madame,' said I, sorrowfully; 'but you must permit me to pray for you.'

"About a fortnight after this I met the champion. He was going to a neighboring fair, dressed in his Sunday clothes. I asked him if he was going to compete for the prize for wrestling, as usual. He said: 'No; this time it's more serious. My mother has at last paid me the eight hundred francs she has long promised me, and I am going to buy a cottage and a bit of emigrant's land—house and farm. There my wife and I shall keep house alone. The truth is, *Monsieur le curé*,' said he, 'that the women can't agree at home: my mother despises my wife, and my wife hates my mother. We shall do better apart.'

"I had my doubts on that point, and thought both husband and wife equally unfitted for the labor and self-denial that lay before them; but I kept that to myself, and all I did was to warn this confident young man against the temptations of the fair.

" 'Have no fear,' said he; and went away full of buoyant confidence.

"That very evening he called at my house, pale and agitated and told me a different tale. He had been induced to gamble for a small sum, in order, he said, to buy his wife a gold chain he had lost it, and his wild endeavors to recover it by the same unlikely means had thrown away his little fortune. One virtue the poor fellow had—filial reverence. He told me with

felt sure she would tears in his eyes of all his mother's goodness and self-denial, and he said that he couldn't face her and tell her he had wasted in a day what had cost her four years to save. He spoke of leaving the country, and begged me to carry her his penitence and shame. I said, 'My son, I'll do better: I will take you to her, and show you the depth of a mother's love.'

"Well, at last I prevailed on him to come with me to the house, but he couldn't be induced to come in until I had made his confession for him. As I expected, the mother said: 'Poor foolish boy! Just tell him to come in to his supper; his mother's arms shall not be closed to him.' So I brought him in. The others received him in grim silence, but the old woman merely said: 'Why, Michel, it's a pity you had not more sense; but 'tis your own money you have lost, and no one else has a right to complain. This house is always open to you.' Then, finding his wife dead silent and terribly pale, he went to her to make his peace with her; but she started back from him and said: 'Don't you come near me, you vile prodigal and madman. You've condemned me to live all my life with these people, who hate me, and I hate them with all my heart.' As an outrageous quarrel was clearly impending, I withdrew; but something—I know not what—induced me to wait at a little distance, and pray for the peace of this ill-assorted couple. Alas! I had better have stayed; for, as I learned from the others, that angry wife reproached him and taunted him in her fury till he actually raised his huge hand and struck her on the face.

"She was stunned at first, I heard, but soon uttered a wild cry of anguish and frenzy, and catching up, with a woman's strange intent, some embroidery she had been working upon, she turned round and cursed them all.

"'Rot on your dunghill, all of you!' she cried, and tore open the door and dashed out.

"Then the old woman cried, 'Mind, Michel, she will disgrace you!' and he dashed after her.

"Unluckily, she stumbled over something in the yard, and I saw the swift-footed champion overtake her, and seize her, and

drag her back towards the house. She screamed, she struggled, in vain ; but at last, by a furious effort, she half freed herself for a moment, and I saw her lift her hand high, and the strike the man on the breast. At this moment I was coming forward to interfere.

"To my surprise, the giant uttered a cry of dismay, and staggered away from her, and burst headlong into the house. To be sure, the blow was furious, but it was only a woman's hand that struck, and I saw no weapon in that hand. As for her, she rushed the other way, and I think would have passed me without notice but that I uttered an ejaculation of pity and concern ; then she stopped and glared at me, and I must tell you that I then noticed something which Monsieur de Pontarlais has already drawn attention to—the whites of her eyes showed themselves to me in the moonlight with a strange and I may say, a terrible expression—the expression of some infuriated wild animal. 'He struck me!' she cried. 'He struck me! the woman who gave up all for him, and braved a father's curse. My curse and my father's be on *him* and all his brood. With that she darted past me and disappeared.

"After a moment's hesitation I felt it my duty to enter the house, and make some sort of endeavor, however hopeless, to repair the mischief ; indeed, I was prepared to use all the authority my office gave me, and take part with great severity against this ruffian, and all the rest who, by their animosity had paved the way for this abominable outrage.

"Well, I went in at the open door ; I found the champion leaning with his back against the wall, rolling his eyes as if in pain and groaning loudly. The situation seemed to amuse his brother ; at least, that person was jeering him for not being able to bring his wife back by force. 'You'll win no more prizes from wrestling at the fair.'

"'No,' said the colossus ; 'I'm done for ;' and with that still groaning, he seemed to sink half down by the wall, and his hands grasped wildly at his breast.

"Then I looked, and saw something that began to give me

amed, she struggled half freed her hand high, and the instant I was coming terrible misgiving. Being in his gala dress, he had on a white shirt, and in the middle of his ample bosom was something that had first looked like a very large stud or breastpin made of mother-of-pearl.

"Round this thing was a thin circle of red, fine as a hair, and this red circle I saw enlarging. My experience in the army told me how serious this was, and I cried, 'Silence! the man is stabbed, and is bleeding internally.' As these words left my lips, the poor champion sunk to the ground, and gasped out once more '*Je suis un homme perdu.*' In a moment they were around him, and after a few hurried words, with his mother's consent I took on me to draw the weapon out from the wound. It was an instrument ladies used in that day for embroidery. I think they opened a passage for the needle with it. The whole instrument was not four inches long, and the steel portion of it scarcely three inches; but a woman's hand had driven it home so keenly that even a portion of the handle had entered the wound. When I withdrew this insignificant but fatal weapon the champion gave a sigh of relief. He then ceased to bleed inwardly, but immediately the blood spouted and poured out of him through that small aperture. All attempts to stanch it were vain, and, indeed, were useless, for his fate was to bleed to death either inwardly with pain or outwardly without pain. I told them all that, very gravely, and as tenderly as I could. Then the poor wretches burst out into imprecations on the woman that had brought him to that. Then I put on for the first time the authority of the Church. I took out my crucifix, and I ordered them all, even the mother who bore him, from the room. That grand body, so full of blood, of strength, and youth, resisted long the fatal drain, and God gave me time to do his work. The dying man confessed his sins; he owned the justice of this fatal blow, since he had raised his hand against the weak creature he had vowed to protect and cherish; he blessed his mother and his brother, and forgave his wife. Then I gave him absolution with all my heart and conscience, and he died in peace.

"Ah, my friends, who that had seen this could pride himself on youth and superior strength? Here was the champion of all those parts lying on his own floor, surrounded by the jug and mugs and plates he had won by conquering the other Sansons of the district, felled by a woman's hand armed with bare bodkin.

"I spare you, my friends, the mother's agony and all the sorrow of the house—sorrow that didn't soften the hatred, and that you cannot wonder at. They set the emissaries of justice upon the culprit's track, and she was easily found, for no sooner did she hear the fatal news than she gave herself up to the law. She was tried at Marseilles, and it's a wonder to me that my good friend here does not remember that trial, for it caused no little sensation at the time. The friends of the deceased and the mother especially, urged the prosecution with the utmost bitterness. The old woman, indeed, said that nothing could console her for the loss of her son but to see the murderer's head roll in the basket of the executioner. I was at the trial, and I remember little of it except the few words spoken by the accused; those words seem somehow graven in my memory. She wore a peasant's dress, but her demeanour was that of a noble; she was depressed, but dignified and patient; never interrupted, and never complained. When her time came to speak in her defence, she said:

"Citizens, the public accuser has told you I killed my husband, and that, alas! is too true; but he has told you I killed him maliciously, and there he is quite mistaken. My husband was my all. I gave up father, friends, rank, wealth, everything for him, and I loved him dearly. He gave me a bitter provocation, and I reproached him cruelly. Then he struck me barbarously. What did I do? Did I seize some deadly weapon and strike him in return? No. I merely fled; and if he had let me escape, this calamity would never have occurred. But he caught me, and seized me, and was dragging me back to my house where every man and woman was my enemy. My passion was great, I admit, but my fear was greater, and in fear

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struck, not malice. Did I seek some deadly weapon? No; I struck with what was in my hand, scarcely knowing at the time what was in my hand. I believe that when the weak are attacked with overpowering strength they are permitted to make matters equal with some weapon. But can you call that puny instrument of woman's art a weapon? Was ever a strong man slain with such a thing before? My husband died by the finger of God; I was the unhappy instrument: and I am his best mourner, and shall mourn him when all else have forgotten him. Even his mother has another son, but he was my all in this world. I say these things because they are the truth, not to avert punishment. How can you punish me? Imprisonment cannot add to my misery, and death would end it. Therefore I ask no mercy: be just.'

"Before these words, and their sad and noble delivery, the charge of wilful homicide dissolved away. The prisoner was condemned to two years' seclusion in a religious house.

"I visited there many times; and found her a changed woman. Her heart was broken and contrite; she wept for hours together, and in time she found consolation. Great was now her humility. When she regained her liberty I became her director.

"The penance I inflicted was—obscurity. For many years she has gained her own living under another name, and never revealed the story of her life. Some people say, with a sneer, 'The greater the sinner, the greater the saint.' But there is truth in it. Men can go on sinning within certain bounds all their lives, and not feel themselves sinners; but when they commit a crime, the world helps them to undeceive themselves, and penitence enters when self-deception retires. That criminal has long been a truly pious woman, humble, industrious, faithful, self-denying, and full of Christian charity. On earth she is obscure by choice; but methinks her seat will be high in heaven."

The good *curé's* words melted us all; and now we all desired to know her in her humble condition and alleviate her lot.

But the *curé* would not hear of it. "No," said he. "This is a secret of the confessional. She is vowed to obscurity, and she must persevere to the end. But if you, Monsieur de Pontarlais, can forgive her the pain she once caused you, that would be a comfort to her."

"Ah! poor soul, with all my heart," cried he, and put his handkerchief to his eyes.

After this narrative and these reflections we none of us felt disposed for small-talk, and we soon retired to bed, all but the good *curé*, who was summoned hastily to Catherine's bedside by Suzon. That night the house seemed to me strangely unquiet. I was awakened several times by hurrying to and fro. But sleep soon comes again to careless youth. In the morning I found Suzon in tears, and my uncle himself very sad: the faithful Catherine was dead.

After breakfast the *curé* requested us to witness the official document he had to prepare on that melancholy occasion. He handed it to us with this remark: "The confessional has no secrets now." Judge my surprise when I read these words: "Died, the 10th day of July, 1821, of general prostration, Irène de Groucy, widow of Michel Flaubert."

My uncle took the picture down. "I prefer," said he, "to think of my poor faithful Catherine as she was." I was of the same mind. But when my dear uncle died, and it became my own, I hung it again in a room I frequented but little.

Lately, in the decline of my own life, drawing near to that place where beautiful souls shall be highest, I have given the once-loved picture a place of honor. Being so strange a reminiscence of my youth, I think sometimes of poor Catherine viewing her own picture with such grace, dignity, and pious humility; and I expect to find that white-robed saint more beautiful by far than the picture which so fascinated me.

THE END.

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