

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy, Zibeline, v3

Phillipe de Masa

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Phillipe de Masa

Translated by D. KNOWLTON RANOUS

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BOOK 3.

CHAPTER XX. ZIBELINE RECEIVES

The Duchesse de Montgeron had no children, and her most tender affections were concentrated upon her husband and her brother. The scruples which caused the latter to forswear matrimony grieved her deeply, for, knowing the inflexibility of his character, she was sure that no one in the world could make him alter his decision.

Thus, on one side the title of the Duc de Montgeron was destined to pass to a collateral branch of the family; and on the other, the title of Marquis de Prerolles would become extinct with the General.

But, although she now considered it impossible to realize the project which she had momentarily cherished, she continued to show the same kindness to Mademoiselle de Vermont. She would have regarded any other course as unworthy of her, since she had made the first advances; moreover, the young girl's nature was so engaging that no one who approached her could resist her charm.

Very reserved or absolutely frank, according to the degree of confidence with which she was treated, Valentine had sufficient intuition to avoid a lack of tact.

She was, in feminine guise, like 'L'Ingenu' of Voltaire, struck, as was Huron, with all that was illogical in our

social code; but she did not make, after his fashion, a too literal application of its rules, and knew where to draw the line, if she found herself on the point of making some hazardous remark, declaring frankly: "I was about to say something foolish!" which lent originality to her playful conversation.

After receiving from Valentine's hands the contract signed in presence of the notary, for the benefit of the Orphan Asylum, the president of the society did not fail to give a dinner in honor of the new patroness.

As she was a foreigner she was placed in the seat of honor at the table, to the great displeasure of Madame Desvanneaux, who was invited to take the second place, in spite of her title of vice-president.

"It is because of her millions that she was placed before me," she said in an undertone to her husband, as soon as the guests had returned to the drawing-room. And, giving orders that her carriage should be summoned immediately, she left the house without speaking to any one, and with the air of a peeress of England outraged in her rights of precedence!

This was, for the hostile pair, a new cause of grievance against Zibeline. When she, in her turn, gave at her home a similar dinner, a fortnight later, she received from them, in reply to her invitation, which was couched in the most courteous terms, a simple visiting card, with the following refusal: "The Comte and the Comtesse Desvanneaux, not being in the habit of accepting invitations during Lent, feel constrained to decline that of Mademoiselle de Vermont."

The dinner was only the more gay and cordial.

Valentine's household was conducted on a footing more elegant than sumptuous.

The livery was simple, but the appearance of her people was irreproachable. The butler and the house servants wore the ordinary dress-coat and trousers; the powdered footmen wore short brown coats, ornamented, after the English fashion, with metal buttons and a false waistcoat; the breeches were of black velveteen, held above the knee by a band of gold braid, with embroidered ends, which fell over black silk stockings. At the end of the ante-chamber where this numerous personnel was grouped, opened a long gallery, ornamented with old tapestries representing mythological subjects in lively and well-preserved coloring. This room, which was intended to serve as a ballroom at need, was next to two large drawing-rooms. The walls of one were covered with a rich material, on which hung costly paintings; the furniture and the ceiling of the other were of oak, finely carved, relieved with touches of gold in light and artistic design.

Everywhere was revealed an evident desire to avoid an effect of heaviness and ostentation, and this was especially noticeable in the dining-room, where the pure tone of the panels and the moulding doubled the intensity of the light thrown upon them. Upon the table the illumination of the apartment was aided by two large candelabra of beautifully chiselled silver, filled with candles, the light of which filtered through a forest of diaphanous little white shades.

The square table was a veritable parterre of flowers, and was laid for twelve guests, three on each side.

The young mistress of the house was seated on one side, between the Duc de Montgeron and the Marquis de Prerolles. Facing her sat the Duchesse de Montgeron, between General Lenaieff and the Chevalier de Sainte-Foy. – Laterally, on one hand appeared Madame de Lisieux, between M. de Nointel and the painter Edmond Delorme; on the other, Madame de Nointel, between M. de Lisieux and the Baron de Samoreau.

Never, during the six weeks that Valentine had had friendly relations with the Duchess, had she appeared so self-possessed, or among surroundings so well fitted to display her attractions of mind and of person. She was a little on the defensive on finding herself in this new and unexpected society, but she felt, this evening, that she

was in the midst of a sympathetic and admiring circle, and did the honors of her own house with perfect ease, finding agreeable words and showing a delicate forethought for each guest, and above all displaying toward her protectress a charming deference, by which the Duchess felt herself particularly touched.

"What a pity!" she said to herself, glancing alternately at Zibeline and at her brother, between whom a tone of frank comradeship had been established, free from any coquetry on her side or from gallantry on his.

The more clearly Henri divined the thoughts of his sister, the more he affected to remain insensible to the natural seductions of his neighbor, to whom Lenaieff, on the contrary, addressed continually, in his soft and caressing voice, compliments upon compliments and madrigals upon madrigals!

"Take care, my dear Constantin!" said Henri to him, bluntly. "You will make Mademoiselle de Vermont quite impossible. If you go on thus, she will take herself seriously as a divinity!"

"Fortunately," rejoined Zibeline, "you are there, General, to remind me that I am only a mortal, as Philippe's freedman reminded his master every morning."

"You can not complain! I serve you as a confederate, to allow you to display your erudition," retorted the General, continuing his persiflage.

But he, too, was only a man, wavering and changeable, to use Montaigne's expression, for his eyes, contradicting the brusqueness of his speech, rested long, and not without envy, on this beautiful and tempting fruit which his fate forbade him to gather. The more he admired her freshness, and the more he inhaled her sweetness, the more the image of Eugenie Gontier was gradually effaced from his memory, like one of those tableaux on the stage, which gauze curtains, descending from the flies, seem to absorb without removing, gradually obliterating the pictures as they fall, one after another.

CHAPTER XXI. A DASHING AMAZON

On leaving the table, the fair "Amphitryonne" proposed that the gentlemen should use her private office as a smoking-room, and the ladies followed them thither, pretending that the odor of tobacco would not annoy them in the least, but in reality to inspect this new room.

Edmond Delorme had finished his work that very morning, and the enormous canvas, with its life-size subject, had already been hung, lighted from above and below by electric bulbs, the battery for which was cleverly hidden behind a piece of furniture.

The portrait, bearing a striking resemblance to the original, was indeed that of "the most dashing of all the Amazons on the Bois," to quote the words of the artist, who was a better painter of portraits than of animals, but who, in this case, could not separate the rider from her steed.

Seaman, a Hungarian bay, by Xenophon and Lena Rivers, was drawn in profile, very erect on his slender, nervous legs. He appeared, on the side nearest the observer, to be pawing the ground impatiently with his hoof, a movement which seemed to be facilitated by his rider, who, drawn in a three-quarters view and extending her hand, allowed the reins to fall over the shoulders of her pure-blooded mount.

"What do you think of it?" Zibeline inquired of General de Prerolles.

"I think you have the air of the commander of a division of cavalry, awaiting the moment to sound the charge."

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"I shall guard her well," said Zibeline, "for she would be sure to be put to rout by your bayonets."

"Not by mine!" gallantly exclaimed Lenaieff. "I should immediately lower my arms before her!"

"You! perhaps! But between General de Prerolles and myself the declaration of war is without quarter. Is it not, General?" said Valentine, laughing.

"It is the only declaration that fate permits me to make to you, Mademoiselle," Henri replied, rather dryly, laying emphasis on the double sense of his words.

This rejoinder, which nothing in the playful attack had justified, irritated the Duchess, but Valentine appeared to pay no attention to it, and at ten o'clock, when a gypsy band began to play in the long gallery, she arose.

"Although we are a very small party," she said, "would you not like to indulge in a waltz, Mesdames? The gentlemen can not complain of being crowded here," she added, with a smile.

M. de Lisieux and M. de Nointel, as well as Edmond Delorme, hastened to throw away their cigarettes, and all made their way to the long gallery. The Baron de Samoreau and the Chevalier de Sainte-Foy remained alone together.

The Duchess took the occasion to speak quietly to her brother.

"I assure you that you are too hard with her," she said. "There is no need to excuse yourself for not marrying. No one dreams of such a thing she no more than any one else. But she seems to have a sentiment of friendship toward you, and I am sure that your harshness wounds her."

A more experienced woman than Madame de Montgeron, who had known only a peaceful and legitimate love, would have quickly divined that beneath her brother's brusque manner lurked a budding but hopeless passion, whence sprang his intermittent revolt against the object that had inspired it.

This revolt was not only against Zibeline's fortune; it included her all-pervading charm, which penetrated his soul. He was vexed at his sister for having brought them together; he was angry with himself that he had allowed his mind to be turned so quickly from his former prejudices; and, however indifferent he forced himself to appear, he was irritated against Lenaieff because of the attentions which that gentleman showered upon Zibeline, upon whom he revenged himself by assuming the aggressive attitude for which the Duchess had reproached him.

In a still worse humor after the sisterly remonstrance to which he had just been compelled to listen, he seated himself near the entrance of the gallery, where the gypsy band was playing one of their alluring waltzes, of a cadence so different from the regular and monotonous measure of French dance music.

The three couples who were to compose this impromptu ball, yielded quickly to the spell of this irresistible accompaniment.

"Suppose Monsieur Desvanneaux should hear that we danced on the eve of Palm Sunday?" laughingly protested Madame de Lisieux.

"He would report it at Rome," said Madame de Nointel.

And, without further regard to the compromising of their souls, each of the two young women took for a partner the husband of the other.

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Mademoiselle de Vermont had granted the eager request of Lenaieff that she would waltz with him, an occupation in which the Russian officer acquitted himself with the same respectful correctness that had formerly obtained for him the high favor of some grand duchess at the balls in the palace of Gatchina.

He was older and stouter than his brother-in-arms, Henri de Prerolles, and a wound he had received at Plevna slightly impeded his movements, so that he was unable to display the same activity in the dance as the other waltzers, and contented himself with moving a 'trois temps', in an evolution less in harmony with the brilliancy of the music.

Henri, on the contrary, who had been a familiar friend of the Austrian ambassador at the time when the Princess de Metternich maintained a sort of open ballroom for her intimates, had learned, in a good school, all the boldness and elegance of the Viennese style of dancing.

But he sat immovable, as did also Edmond Delorme, because of the lack of partners; and, not wishing to take the second place after Lenaieff, his rival, he would not for the world abandon his role of spectator, unless some one forced him to it.

"Suppose we have a cotillon figure, in order to change partners?" said Valentine suddenly, during a pause, after she had thanked her partner.

And, to set the example, she took, from a basket of flowers, a rosebud, which she offered to Henri.

"Will you take a turn with me?" she said, with the air of the mistress of the house, who shows equal courtesy to all her guests.

"A deux temps?" he asked, fastening the rosebud in his buttonhole.

"Yes, I prefer that," she replied.

He passed his arm around her waist, and they swept out upon the polished floor, he erect and gallant, she light and supple as a gazelle, her chin almost resting upon her left hand, which lay upon her partner's shoulder, her other hand clasped in his.

At times her long train swirled in a misty spiral around her, when they whirled about in some corner; then it spread out behind her like a great fan when they swept in a wide curve from one end of the gallery to the other.

During the feverish flight which drew these two together, their breasts touched, the bosom of the enchantress leaned against the broad chest of the vigorous soldier, her soft hair caressed his cheek, he inhaled a subtle Perfume, and a sudden intoxication overflowed his heart, which he had tried to make as stern and immobile as his face.

"How well you waltz!" murmured Zibeline, in his ear.

"I am taking my revenge for my defeat on the ice," he replied, clasping her a little closer, in order to facilitate their movements.

"The prisoners you take must find it very difficult to escape from your hands," she said, with a touch of malice.

"Does that mean that already you wish to reclaim your liberty?"

"Not yet unless you are fatigued."

"Fatigued! I should like to go thus to the end of the world!"

"And I, too," said Zibeline, simply.

By common consent the other waltzers had stopped, as much for the purpose of observing these two as for giving them more space, while the wearied musicians scraped away as if it were a contest who should move the faster, themselves or the audacious couple.

"What a pity!" again said the Duchess to her husband, whose sole response was a shrug of his shoulders as he glanced at his brother-in-law.

At the end of his strength, and with a streaming brow, the gypsy leader lowered his bow, and the music ceased.

Henri de Prerolles, resuming his sang-froid, drew the hand of Mademoiselle de Vermont through his arm, and escorted her to her place among the other ladies.

"Bravo, General!" said Madame de Lisieux. "You have won your decoration, I see," she added, indicating the rosebud which adorned his buttonhole.

"What shall we call this new order, ladies?" asked Madame de Nointel of the circle.

"The order of the Zibeline," Valentine replied, with a frank burst of laughter.

"What? do you know " stammered the author of the nickname, blushing up to her ears.

"Do not disturb yourself, Madame! The zibeline is a little animal which is becoming more and more rare. They never have been found at all in my country, which I regret," said Mademoiselle de Vermont graciously.

The hour was late, and the Duchess arose to depart. The Chevalier de Sainte-Foy, exercising his function as a sort of chamberlain, went to summon the domestics. Meanwhile Valentine spoke confidentially to Henri.

"General," said she, "I wish to ask a favor of you."

"I am at your orders, Mademoiselle."

"I am delighted with the success of this little dinner," Valentine continued, "and I wish to give another after Easter. My great desire is to have Mademoiselle Gontier with whom I should like to become better acquainted recite poetry to us after dinner. Would you have the kindness to tell her of my desire?"

"I!" exclaimed the General, amazed at such a request.

"Yes, certainly. If you ask her, she will come all the more willingly."

"You forget that I am not in the diplomatic service, Mademoiselle."

"My request annoys you? Well, we will say no more about it," said Zibeline. "I will charge Monsieur de Samoreau with the negotiations."

They rejoined the Duchess, Zibeline accompanying her to the vestibule, always evincing toward her the same pretty air of deference.

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The drive home was silent. The Duke and the Duchess had agreed not to pronounce the name of Mademoiselle de Vermont before Henri, who racked his brain without being able to guess what strange motive prompted the young girl to wish to enter into closer relations with the actress.

A letter from Eugenie was awaiting him. He read:

"Two weeks have elapsed since you have been to see me. I do not ask whether you love me still, but I do ask you, in case you love another, to tell me so frankly.

"ARIADNE."

"So I am summoned to the confessional, and am expected to accuse myself of that which I dare not avow even to my own heart! Never!" said Henri, crushing the note in his hand. "Besides, unless I deceive myself, Ariadne has not been slow in seeking a consoling divinity! Samoreau is at hand, it appears. He played the part of Plutus before; now he will assume that of Bacchus," thought the recreant lover, in order to smother his feeling of remorse.

CHAPTER XXII. AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

The life of General de Prerolles was uniformly regulated. He arose at dawn, and worked until the arrival of his courier; then he mounted his horse, attired in morning military costume.

After his ride, he visited the quartermaster-general of his division, received the report of his chief of staff, and gave necessary orders. It was at this place, and never at the General's own dwelling, that the captains or subaltern officers presented themselves when they had occasion to speak to him.

At midday he returned to breakfast at the Hotel de Montgeron where, morning and evening, his plate was laid; and soon after this meal he retired to his own quarters to work with his orderly, whose duty it was to report to him regarding the numerous guns and pieces of heavy ordnance which make the object of much going and coming in military life.

After signing the usual number of documents, the General would mount another of his horses, and at this hour would appear in civilian attire for an afternoon canter. After this second ride he would pass an hour at his club, but without ever touching a card, no matter what game was in progress.

He dined at different places, but oftenest with his sister, where by this time a studied silence was preserved on the subject of Zibeline. This, however, did not prevent him from thinking of her more and more.

Mademoiselle de Vermont had not been seen again in the Bois de Boulogne since the night of her dinner, although Henri had sought in vain to meet her in the mornings in the bridle-path, and afternoons in the Avenue des Acacias.

He decided that probably she did not wish to ride during Holy Week; but when several days had passed after Easter, and still she was not seen amusing herself in her usual fashion, he said to himself that perhaps it would be the proper thing to make what is called "a dinner-call."

There are some women whose fascination is so overwhelming as to cause the sanest of lovers to commit themselves, whence comes the slightly vulgar expression, "He has lost his bearings." Henri began to feel that he was in this state when he presented himself at Zibeline's home. A domestic informed him that Mademoiselle had been absent a week, but was expected home that evening. He left his card, regretting that he had not waited

twenty-four hours more.

It was now the middle of April, the time when the military governor of Paris is accustomed to pass in review the troops stationed on the territory under his command, and this review was to take place the next morning.

The order for the mobilizing of his own division having been received and transmitted, Henri's evening was his own, and he resolved to pass it with Lenaieff, feeling certain that his colleague at least would speak to him of Zibeline.

The aide-de-camp general lived at the Hotel Continental, much frequented by Russians of distinction. Henri found his friend just dressing for dinner, and well disposed to accept his proposition.

As they descended the stairs, they passed an imposing elderly man, with white moustache and imperial, still very erect in his long redingote with military buttons a perfect type of the German officer who gets himself up to look like the late Emperor William I. This officer and the French general stopped on the stairs, each eyeing the other without deciding whether he ought to salute or not, as often happens with people who think they recognize some one, but without being able to recall where or in what circumstances they have met before.

It was Henri whose memory was first revived.

"Captain, you are my prisoner!" he said, gayly, seizing the stranger by the collar.

"What! The Commandant de Prerolles!" cried the elderly man, in a reproachful tone, from which fifteen years had not removed the bitterness.

"I know who he is!" said Lenaieff. "Monsieur is your former jailer of the frontier fortress!"

The officer of the landwehr attempted to withdraw from the hand that held him.

"Oh, I don't intend to let you escape! You are coming to dine with us, and we will sign a treaty of peace over the dessert," said Henri, clasping the officer's hand affectionately.

His tone was so cordial that the stranger allowed himself to be persuaded. A quarter of an hour later all three were seated at a table in the Cafe Anglais.

"I present to you General Lenaieff," said Henri to his guest. "You should be more incensed against him than against me, for, if he had done his duty, you would probably have had me imprisoned again."

"Not imprisoned shot!" the Captain replied, with conviction.

"In that case I regret my complicity still less," said Lenaieff, "for otherwise I should have lost an excellent friend, and, had Prerolles been shot, he never could have made me acquainted with the delicious Mademoiselle de Vermont!"

"Ah! So that is what you are thinking of?" Henri said to himself.

"I do not know the young lady of whom you speak," the German interrupted; "but I know that, for having allowed the Commandant to escape, I was condemned to take his place in the prison, and was shut up there for six months, in solitary confinement, without even seeing my wife!"

"Poor Captain! How is the lady?" Henry inquired.

"Very well, I thank you."

"Will you permit us to drink her health?"

"Certainly, Monsieur."

"Hock! hoch!" said Henri, lifting his glass.

"Hock! hoch!" responded the ex-jailer, drinking with his former prisoner.

This delicate toast began to appease the bitterness of the good man; while the memories of his escape, offering a diversion to Henri's mind, put him in sympathetic humor with the stranger.

"Ah! There are mountains that we never climb but once," he said. "We three, meeting in Paris, can prove the truth of that proverb."

"Not only in Paris," said Lenaieff. "If you were in Saint Petersburg, Henri, you might, any evening, see your old flame, Fanny Dorville."

"Does she keep a table d'hote?"

"No, indeed, my boy. She plays duenna at the Theatre Michel, as that fat Heloise used to do at the Palais-Royal. She must have died long ago, that funny old girl!"

"Not at all. She is still living, and is a pensioner of the Association of Dramatic Artists! But, pardon me, our conversation can hardly be amusing to our guest."

"No one can keep a Frenchman and a Russian from talking about women! The habit is stronger than themselves!" said the old officer, with a hearty laugh.

"Well, and you, Captain," said Lenaieff: "Have you not also trodden the primrose path in your time?"

"Gentlemen, I never have loved any other woman than my own wife," replied the honest German, laying his large hand upon his heart, as if he were taking an oath. "That astonishes you Parisians, eh?" he added benevolently.

"Quite the contrary! It assures us peace of mind!" said Lenaieff. "To your health, Captain!"

"And yours, Messieurs!"

And their glasses clinked a second time.

"Apropos," said Lenaieff to Henri, "the military governor has asked me to accompany him to-morrow to the review at Vincennes. I shall then have the pleasure of seeing you at the head of your division."

"Teufel!" exclaimed the German officer; "it appears that the Commandant de Prerolles has lost no time since we took leave of each other."

"Thanks to you, Monsieur! Had you not allowed me to withdraw from your society, I should certainly not have reached my present rank! To your health, Captain!"

"To yours, General!"

Succeeding bumpers finally dissipated entirely the resentment of the former jailer, and when they parted probably never to meet again he and his prisoner had become the best friends in the world.

"Meine besten complimente der Frau Hauptmannin!" said Henri to him, in leaving him on the boulevard.

"Lieber Gott! I shall take good care not to own to her that I dined with you."

"And why, pray?"

"Because there is one thing for which she never will forgive you."

"What is that?"

"The fact that you were the cause of her living alone for six months!"

CHAPTER XXIII. THE MILITARY REVIEW

The different troops, assembled for review, were massed on the parade-ground at Vincennes, facing the tribunes.

In the centre, the artillery brigade, surrounded by two divisions of infantry, was drawn up in two straight columns, connected by regiments; each division of infantry, in double columns, was connected by brigades.

These six columns were separated by spaces varying from twenty to twenty-five metres.

In the background, the cavalry division was lined up in columns; behind that was its artillery, in the same order of formation.

At a given signal, the troops advanced five hundred metres, and, as soon as they halted, drums, clarinets and trumpets beat and sounded from all parts of the field, saluting the arrival of the military governor of Paris.

This functionary, followed by his staff, in the midst of which group glittered the brilliant Russian uniform of the aide-de-camp General Leniaeff, rode slowly past the front and the flanks of the massed body, the troops facing to the left or the right as he passed.

This inspection finished, he took up his stand before the pillars at the entrance, and the march past began by battalions en masse, in the midst of the acclamations of numerous spectators who had come to witness this imposing display, well calculated to stir patriotic pride.

The enthusiasm increased; the Prerolles division marched past after its artillery, and, as always, the martial and distinguished profile of its general produced its usual effect on the public.

He rode Aida, his favorite mare, an Irish sorrel of powerful frame, with solid limbs, whose horizontal crupper and long tail indicated her race; she was one of those animals that are calm and lively at the same time, capable of going anywhere and of passing through all sorts of trials.

After its parade, the infantry, whose part in the affair was finished, retraced their steps and took up a position on the other side of the field of manoeuvres, facing the north, and in front of rising ground, in preparation for the discharge of musketry.

During this time the artillery brigade, re-formed in battle array on the parade-ground, detached six batteries,

which advanced at a trot to within one hundred and fifty metres of the tribunes, where they discharged a volley. The long pieces were run rapidly to right and left, unmasking the cavalry, which, after a similar volley from its own batteries, appeared behind them in battle order, and executed a galloping march, its third line held in reserve.

A few moments later all the troops rejoined the infantry on the ground set apart for rest and for the purpose of partaking of a cold repast, consisting of potted meats, with which each man was furnished.

Nothing more picturesque could be imagined than this temporary camp, with its stacked arms, knapsacks lying on the ground, holes dug in the ground in which to kindle fires, and the clattering of cans. On the other side of the field the artillerymen and cavalrymen ate, holding their reins under their arms, while their officers stood around some temporary table, served by canteen men of the united divisions. Tiny columns of blue smoke rose where coffee was making, and everywhere were the swift movement and sprightly good-fellowship in which the soldier feels himself in his natural element.

The curious spectators crowded themselves in front of the banner, while in the centre of the square the military governor of Paris, and the other officers, talked with some privileged persons who had been able to present themselves among them.

Descending from his mount a little apart from the group, and plunged in thought, the former sub-lieutenant of 'chasseurs a pied' gazed at the old fortress, the sight of which recalled so many sad memories.

Vincennes had been his first garrison, and its proximity to Paris had been disastrous for him. There he had entered one morning, stripped of his fortune!

And what a series of disasters had followed! But for his heavy losses upon that fatal night, he would not have been compelled to sell Prerolles, the income of which, during his long absence, would have sufficed to lessen the tax on the land, transmissible, had events turned out otherwise, to some heir to his name. If only fate had not made Paul Landry cross his path!

"Good morning, General!" came the sound of a fresh, gay voice behind, which sent a thrill through him.

He turned and saw Zibeline, who had just stopped a few steps distant from him, sitting in her carriage, to which was harnessed a pretty pair of cobs, prancing and champing their bits.

"Ah, it is you, Mademoiselle!" he said, carrying his hand to the visor of his kepi, fastened under his chin.

"I found your card last night," said Zibeline, "and I have come here this morning to return your call!"

Then, leaning back in her driving-seat in order to reveal Edmond Delorme installed beside her, she added:

"I have brought also my painter-in-ordinary. We have watched the review together, and he is as enthusiastic as I over the picturesque effect of this improvised bivouac. See! He is so much occupied with his sketch that I can not get a word out of him."

It was Aida, whose bridle was held by a dragoon, that served as a model for the artist's pencil.

"Will you permit me?" he said to Henri.

"It appears decidedly, that my mare has caught your eye," replied the General, approaching the carriage and resting his spurred foot on its step.

"She has superb lines," said the painter, without interrupting his drawing.

"Well, I am curious to know whether she could beat Seaman," said Zibeline. "Are you willing to run a race with me, General?"

"As you please some morning when you return to the Bois."

"You noticed my absence, then?"

"I assure you that I did," Henri replied, earnestly.

Then, fearing that he had said too much, he added:

"I, and many others!"

"Good! You were almost making a pretty speech to me, but, as usual, the disavowal was not slow in coming. Fortunately, here comes your friend Lenaieff, who is hastening to make amends to me."

"What good fortune to meet you here, Mademoiselle!" cried Constantin, who, having perceived Valentine from a distance, had taken an abrupt leave of his general-in-chief.

"I know that you have called to see me several times," said she, "but I was in the country."

"So early in the month of April?"

"Oh! not to live there. Monsieur de Perolles knows that I have promised to build our Orphan Asylum at a certain distance from Paris, and hardly three weeks remain to me before I must hand over the property. If I am not ready on the day appointed, Monsieur Desvanneaux will be sure to seize my furniture, and I could not invite you any more to dinner, Messieurs! A propos, General, Monsieur de Samoreau has failed in his negotiations. Mademoiselle Gontier refuses to come to recite at my next soiree!"

"What necessity is there for you to make her acquaintance?" demanded Henri.

"Ah, that is my secret!"

During this conversation a hired fiacre, well appointed, had stopped beside the road, and Eugenie Gontier descended from it, inquiring of an officer belonging to the grounds where she could find General de Prerolles. When the officer had pointed out the General to her, she started to walk toward him; but, on seeing her former lover leaning familiarly against the door of Zibeline's carriage, she immediately retraced her steps and quickly reentered her own.

"There is no longer any doubt about it!" said Mademoiselle de Vermont, who had been observing Eugenie's movements. "Mademoiselle Gontier has made a fixed resolution to avoid meeting me."

"That is because she is jealous of you!" said Lenaieff naively.

"Jealous? And why?" said Zibeline, blushing.

Visibly embarrassed, Henri drew out his watch in order to avert his countenance.

"Midday!" he cried. "This is the hour for the return of the troops to their barracks. You would do well not to delay in starting for home, Mademoiselle. The roads will be very crowded, and your horses will not be able to trot. I beg your pardon for taking away your model, my dear Delorme, but I really must be off.

"It is all the same to me; I have finished my sketch," said the painter, closing his portfolio.

At this moment, as the military governor passed near them, on his way to the crossway of the Pyramid, Henri made a movement as if to rejoin him.

"Do not disturb yourself, General de Prerolles," said the military governor. "The compliments which I have made you on the fine appearance of your troops are probably not so agreeable to you as those to which you are listening at present!"

And saluting Mademoiselle de Vermont courteously, he went his way.

"Now you are free, Henri. Suppose we accompany Mademoiselle back to Paris?" suggested Lenaieff, seeming to read his friend's mind.

"What an honor for me!" Valentine exclaimed.

The General made a sign to his orderly, who approached to receive his instructions.

"Tell the brigadier-generals that I am about to depart. I need no more escort than two cavalymen for General Lenaieff and myself. Now I am ready, Mademoiselle," Henri continued, turning toward Valentine. "If you will be guided by me, we should do well to reach the fortifications by way of the Lake of Saint-Mande."

She made a little sound with her tongue, and the two cobs set off in the direction indicated, the crowds they passed stopping to admire their high action, and asking one another who was that pretty woman who was escorted by two generals, the one French, the other a foreigner.

"I must look like a treaty of peace in a Franco-Russian alliance!" said Zibeline, gayly.

The sun shone brightly, the new leaves were quivering on the trees, the breeze bore to the ear the echo of the military bands.

Animated by the sound, the two cobs went ahead at a great pace, but they were kept well in hand by their mistress, who was dressed this morning in a simple navy-blue costume, with a small, oval, felt hat, ornamented with two white wings, set on in a manner that made the wearer resemble a valkyrie. Her whip, an unnecessary accessory, lay across the seat at her right, on which side of the carriage Henri rode.

The General's eyes missed none of the graceful movements of the young girl. And his reflections regarding her, recently interrupted, returned in full force, augmenting still more his regret at the inexorable fate that separated him from her. "What a pity!" he thought in his turn, repeating unconsciously the phrase so often uttered by his sister.

Arrived at the Place du TrValentine stopped her horses a moment, and addressed her two cavaliers:

"I thank you for your escort, gentlemen. But however high may be your rank, I really can not go through Paris looking like a prisoner between two gendarmes! So good-by! I shall see you this evening perhaps, but good-by for the present."

They gave her a military salute, and the carriage disappeared in the Faubourg St. Antoine, while the two horsemen followed the line of the quays along the Boulevard Diderot.

CHAPTER XXIV. THE CHALLENGE

That person who, in springtime, between ten o'clock and midday, never has walked beside the bridle-path in the Bois de Boulogne, under the deep shade of the trees, can form no idea of the large number of equestrians that for many years have been devoted to riding along that delightful and picturesque road.

To see and to be seen constitutes the principal *raison d'etre* of this exercise, where the riders traverse the same path going and coming, a man thus being able to meet more than once the fair one whom he seeks, or a lady to encounter several times a cavalier who interests her.

On this more and more frequented road, the masculine element displayed different costumes, according to the age and tastes of each rider. The young men appeared in careless array: leggings, short coats, and small caps. The older men, faithful to early traditions, wore long trousers, buttoned-up redingotes, and tall hats, like those worn by their fathers, as shown in the pictures by Alfred de Dreux.

For the feminine element the dress is uniform. It consists of a riding-habit of black or dark blue, with bodice and skirt smoothly molded to the form by one of the two celebrated habit-makers, Youss or Creed. The personal presence alone varied, according to the degree of perfection of the model.

A cylindrical hat, a little straight or turned-over collar, a cravat tied in a sailor's knot, a gardenia in the buttonhole, long trousers and varnished boots completed the dress of these modern Amazons, who, having nothing in common with the female warriors of ancient times, are not deprived, as were those unfortunates, of any of their feminine charms.

The military element is represented by officers of all grades from generals to sub-lieutenants, in morning coats, with breeches and high boots, forbidden under the Second Empire, but the rule at present.

At the top of the Pre-Catelan, the path is crossed by the Bagatelle road to the lakes, a point of intersection situated near a glade where the ladies were fond of stopping their carriages to chat with those passing on horseback. A spectator might have fancied himself at the meet of a hunting-party, lacking the whippers-in and the dogs.

A few days after the review at Vincennes, on a bright morning in May, a file of victorias and pony-chaises were strung out along this sylvan glade, and many persons had alighted from them. Announcing their arrival by trumpet-blasts, two or three vehicles of the Coaching Club, headed by that of the Duc de Mont had discharged a number of pretty passengers, whose presence soon caused the halt of many gay cavaliers.

Several groups were formed, commenting on the news of the day, the scandal of the day before, the fete announced for the next day.

More serious than the others, the group surrounding Madame de Montgeron strolled along under the trees in the side paths which, in their windings, often came alongside of the bridle-path.

"What has become of Mademoiselle de Vermont, Duchess?" inquired Madame de Lisieux, who had been surprised not to find Zibeline riding with their party.

"She is in the country, surrounded by masons, occupied in the building of our Orphan Asylum. The time she required before making over the property to us expires in two weeks."

"It is certainly very singular that we do not know where we are to go for the ceremonies of inauguration," said Madame Desvanneaux, in her usual vinegary tones.

"I feel at liberty to tell you that the place is not far away, and the journey thence will not fatigue you," said the president, with the air of one who has long known what she has not wished to reveal heretofore.

"The question of fatigue should not discourage us when it is a matter of doing good," said M. Desvanneaux. "Only, in the opinion of the founders of the Orphan Asylum, it should be situated in the city of Paris itself."

"The donor thought that open fields and fresh air would be better for the children."

"Land outside of Paris costs very much less, of course; that is probably the real reason," said M. Desvanneaux.

"Poor Zibeline! you are well hated!" Madame de Nointel could not help saying.

"We neither like nor dislike her, Madame. We regard her as indifferently as we do that," the churchwarden replied, striking down a branch with the end of his stick, with the superb air of a Tarquin.

Still gesticulating, he continued:

"The dust that she throws in the eyes of others does not blind us, that is all!"

The metaphor was not exactly happy, for at that instant the unlucky man received full in his face a broadside of gravel thrown by the hoofs of a horse which had been frightened by the flourishing stick, and which had responded to the menace by a violent kick.

This steed was none other than Seaman, ridden by Mademoiselle de Vermont. She had recognized the Duchess and turned her horse back in order to offer her excuses for his misconduct, the effects of which Madame Desvanneaux tried to efface by brushing off the gravel with the corner of her handkerchief.

"What has happened?" asked General de Prerolles, who at that moment cantered up, mounted on Aida.

"Oh, nothing except that Mademoiselle has just missed killing my husband with that wicked animal of hers!" cried the Maegera, in a fury.

"Mademoiselle might turn the accusation against him," Madame de Nointel said, with some malice. "It was he who frightened her horse."

The fiery animal, with distended veins and quivering nostrils, snorted violently, cavorted sidewise, and tried to run. Zibeline needed all her firmness of grasp to force him, without allowing herself to be thrown, to stand still on the spot whence had come the movement that had alarmed him.

"Your horse needs exercise," said Henri to the equestrienne. "You ought to give him an opportunity to do something besides the formal trot around this path."

"I should be able to do so, if ever we could have our match," said Zibeline. "Will you try it now?"

"Come on!"

She nodded, gave him her hand an instant, and they set off, side by side, followed by Zibeline's groom, no less well mounted than she, and wearing turned-over boots, bordered with a band of fawn-colored leather, according

to the fashion.

CHAPTER XXV. THE AMAZON HAS A FALL

They were a well-matched pair: he, the perfect type of the elegant and always youthful soldier; she, the most dashing of all the Amazons in the Bois, to quote the words of Edmond Delorme.

Everyone was familiar with the personal appearance of both riders, and recognized them, but until now Mademoiselle de Vermont had always ridden alone, and now to see her accompanied by the gallant General, whose embroidered kepi glittered in the sunlight, was a new spectacle for the gallery.

The people looked at them all the more because Seaman was still prancing, but without unseating his mistress, who held him at any gait or any degree of swiftness that pleased her.

"What a good seat you have!" said Henri.

"That is the first real compliment you ever have paid me. I shall appropriate it immediately, before you have time to retract it," Zibeline replied.

At the circle of Melezes, Henri proposed to turn to the right, in order to reach Longchamp.

"A flat race! You are joking!" Zibeline cried, turning to the left, toward the road of La Vierge,

"You don't intend that we shall run a steeplechase, I hope."

"On the contrary, that is exactly my intention! You are not afraid to try it, are you?"

"Not on my own account, but on yours."

"You know very well that I never am daunted by any obstacle."

"Figuratively, yes; but in riding a horse it is another matter."

"All the more reason why I should not be daunted now," Zibeline insisted.

When they arrived at the public square of the Cascades, in front of the Auteuil hippodrome, she paused a moment between the two lakes, uncertain which course to take.

It was Thursday, the day of the races. The vast ground, enclosed on all sides by a fence, had been cleared, since early morning, of the boards covering the paths reserved for pedestrians on days when there was no racing; but it was only eleven o'clock, and the place was not yet open to the paying public. Several workmen, in white blouses, went along the track, placing litters beside the obstacles where falls occurred most frequently.

"Do you think the gatekeeper will allow us to enter at this hour?" Zibeline asked.

"I hope not!" Henri replied.

"Well, then, I shall enter without his permission! You are free to declare me the winner. I shall be left to make a walkover, I see!" And setting off at a gallop along the bridle-path, which was obstructed a little farther on by the fence itself, she struck her horse resolutely, and with one audacious bound sprang over the entrance gate. She was

now on the steeplechase track.

"You are mad!" cried the General, who, as much concerned for her safety as for his own pride, urged on his mare, and, clearing the fence, landed beside Zibeline on the other side.

"All right!" she cried, in English, dropping her whip, as the starter drops the flag at the beginning of a race.

The die was cast. Henri bent over Aida's neck, leaning his hands upon her withers in an attitude with which experience had made him familiar, and followed the Amazon, determined to win at all hazards.

Zibeline's groom, an Englishman, formerly a professional jockey, had already jumped the fence, in spite of the cries of the guard, who ran to prevent him, and coolly galloped after his mistress, keeping at his usual distance.

The first two hedges, which were insignificant obstacles for such horses, were crossed without effort.

"Not the brook, I beg of you!" cried Henri, seeing that, instead of running past the grand-stand, Zibeline apparently intended to attempt this dangerous feat.

"Come on! Seaman would never forgive me if I balk at it!" she cried, riding fearlessly down the slope,

The good horse gathered up his four feet on the brink, took one vigorous leap, appearing for a second to hover over the water; then he fell lightly on the other side of the stream, with a seesaw movement, to which the intrepid Amazon accommodated herself by leaning far back. The rebound threw her forward a little, but she straightened herself quickly and went on.

The General, who had slackened his pace that he might not interfere with her leap, gave vent to a sigh of relief. He pressed Aida's flanks firmly, and the big Irish mare jumped after her competitor, with the majestic dignity of her race.

Reassured by the 'savoir-faire' of his companion, the former winner of the military steeplechase felt revive within himself all his ardor for the conflict, and he hastened to make up the distance he had lost.

The two horses, now on the west side of the racetrack, were almost neck- and-neck, and it would have been difficult to prognosticate which had the better chance of victory. Zibeline's light weight gave Seaman the advantage, but Aida gained a little ground every time she leaped an obstacle; so that, after passing the hurdles and the third hedge, the champions arrived simultaneously at the summit of the hill, from which point the track extends in a straight line, parallel with the Allee des Fortifications.

Feeling himself urged on still harder, the English horse began to lay back his ears and pull so violently on the rein that his rider had all she could do to hold him, and lacked sufficient strength to direct his course. Seeing Zibeline's danger, Henri hastened to slacken his horse's pace, but it was too late: the almost perpendicular declivity of the other side of the hill added fresh impetus to the ungovernable rush of Seaman, who suddenly became wild and reckless.

The situation was all the more critical for the reason that the next obstacle was a brook, only two metres wide, but of which the passage was obstructed on the farther side of the track by heavy beams, laid one on top of another, solidly riveted and measuring one metre and ten millimetres from the base to the summit. The excited horse charged obliquely toward this obstruction with all his might. Paying no more attention to the pressure upon his bit, he rose in the air, but as he had not given himself sufficient time to take plenty of room for the leap, his hoofs struck violently against the top beam, the force of resistance of which threw him over on one side; his hindquarters turned in the air, and he fell in a heap on the other side of the obstacle, sending up a great splash of

water as he went into the brook.

Had Zibeline been crushed by the weight of the horse in this terrible fall, or, not having been able to free herself from him, had she been drowned under him? Henri uttered a hoarse cry, struck his spurs into the sides of his mare, crossed the brook breathlessly, stopping on the other side as soon as he could control his horse's pace; then, rushing back, he leaped to the ground to save the poor girl, if there was still time to do so.

Zibeline lay inanimate on the grass, her face lying against the earth. By a lucky chance, the horse had fallen on his right side, so that his rider's limbs and skirt had not been caught. Unhorsed by the violence of the shock, Zibeline had gone over the animal's head and fallen on the other side of the brook. Her Amazon hat, so glossy when she had set out, was now crushed, and her gloves were torn and soiled with mud; which indicated that she had fallen on her head and her hands.

Henri knelt beside her, passed his arm around her inert and charming body, and drew her tenderly toward him. Her eyes were half-open and dull, her lips pale; her nose, the nostrils of which were usually well dilated, had a pinched look; and a deadly pallor covered that face which only a moment before had been so rosy and smiling.

These signs were the forerunners of death, which the officer had recognized so many times on the battlefield. But those stricken ones had at least been men, devoting themselves to the risks of warfare; while in the presence of this young girl lying before him, looking upon this victim of a reckless audacity to which he felt he had lent himself too readily, the whole responsibility for the accident seemed to him to rest upon his own shoulders, and a poignant remorse tore his heart.

He removed her cravat, unhooked her bodice, laid his ear against her breast, from which an oppressed breathing still arose.

Two laborers hurried to open the gate and soon arrived at the spot with a litter, guided by the groom, whose horse had refused to jump the brook, and who since then had followed the race on foot outside the track. While the General placed Zibeline on the litter, the groom took Aida by the bridle, and the sad procession made its way slowly toward the enclosure surrounding the weighing-stand.

As for Seaman, half submerged in the stream, and with an incurable fracture of the leg, nothing was left to do for the poor animal but to kill him.

CHAPTER XXVI. AN UNCONSCIOUS AVOWAL

Walking slowly, step by step, beside her whose power had so quickly and so wholly subjugated him, watching over her removal with more than paternal solicitude, Henri de Prerolles, sustained by a ray of hope, drew a memorandum-book from his pocket, wrote upon a slip of paper a name and an address, and, giving it to the groom, ordered him to go ahead of the litter and telephone to the most celebrated surgeon in Paris, requesting him to go as quickly as possible to the domicile of Mademoiselle de Vermont, and, meantime, to send with the greatest despatch one of the eight-spring carriages from the stables.

It was noon by the dial on the grand-stand when the litter was finally deposited in a safe place. The surgeon could hardly arrive in less than two hours; therefore, the General realized that he must rely upon his own experience in rendering the first necessary aid.

He lifted Valentine's hand, unbuttoned the glove, laid his finger on her pulse, and counted the pulsations, which were weak, slow, and irregular.

While the wife of the gate-keeper kept a bottle of salts at the nostrils of the injured girl, Henri soaked a handkerchief in tincture of arnica and sponged her temples with it; then, pouring some drops of the liquid into a glass of water, he tried in vain to make her swallow a mouthful. Her teeth, clenched by the contraction of muscles, refused to allow it to pass into her throat. At the end of half an hour, the inhalation of the salts began to produce a little effect; the breath came more regularly, but that was the only symptom which announced that the swoon might soon terminate. The landau with the high springs arrived. The General ordered the top laid back, and helped to lift and place upon the cushions on the back seat the thin mattress on which Zibeline lay; then he took his place on the front seat, made the men draw the carriage-top back into its proper position, and the equipage rolled smoothly, and without a jar, to its destination. On the way they met the first carriages that had arrived at the Auteuil hippodrome, the occupants of which little suspected what an exciting dramatic incident had occurred just before the races. Zibeline's servants, by whom she was adored, awaited their mistress at the threshold, and for her maids it was an affair of some minutes to undress her and lay her in her own bed. During this delay, the surgeon, who had hastened to answer the call, found Henri nervously walking about from one drawing-room to the other; and, having received information as to the details of the fall, he soon entered the bedchamber. While awaiting the sentence of life or of death which must soon be pronounced, he who considered himself the chief cause of this tragic event continued to pace to and fro in the gallery that gallery where, under the intoxication of a waltz, the demon of temptation had so quickly demolished all his resolutions of resistance. A half-hour an age! elapsed before the skilled practitioner reappeared. "There is no fracture," he said, "but the cerebral shock has been such that I can not as yet answer for the consequences. If the powerful reactive medicine which I have just given should bring her back to her senses soon, her mental faculties will suffer no harm. If not, there is everything to fear. I will return in three hours," he added. Without giving a thought to the conventionalities, Henri entered the bedchamber, to the great astonishment of the maids, and, installing himself at the head of the bed, he decided not to leave that spot until Valentine had regained her senses, should she ever regain them. An hour passed thus, while Henri kept the same attitude, erect, attentive, motionless, with stray scraps of his childhood's prayers running through his brain. Suddenly the heavy eyelids of the wounded girl were lifted; the dulness of the eyes disappeared; her body made an involuntary attempt to change its position; the nostrils dilated; the lips quivered in an effort to speak. Youth and life had triumphed over death. With painful slowness, she tried to raise her hand to her head, the seat of her pain, where, though half paralyzed, thought was beginning to return. Her eyes wandered to and fro in the shadowy room, seeking to recognize the surroundings. A ray of light, filtering through the window-curtains, showed her the anxious face bending tenderly over her. "Henri!" she murmured, in a soft, plaintive voice. That name, pronounced thus, the first word uttered after her long swoon, revealed her secret. Never had a more complete yet modest avowal been more simply expressed; was it not natural that he should be present at her reentrance into life, since she loved him? With women, the sentiment of love responds to the most diverse objects. The ordinary young girl of Zibeline's age, either before or after her sojourn in a convent, considers that a man of thirty has arrived at middle age, and that a man of forty is absolutely old. Should she accept a man of either of these ages, she does it because a fortune, a title, or high social rank silences her other tastes, and her ambition does the rest. But, with an exceptional woman, like Mademoiselle de Vermont, brought up in view of wide horizons, in the midst of plains cleared by bold pioneers, among whom the most valorous governed the others, a man like General de Prerolles realized her ideal all the more, because both their natures presented the same striking characteristics: carelessness of danger, and frankness carried to its extremest limit. Therefore, this declaration to use the common expression entirely free from artifice or affectation, charmed Henri for one reason, yet, on the other hand, redoubled his perplexity. How could he conciliate his scruples of conscience with the aspirations of his heart? The problem seemed then as insoluble as when it had been presented the first time. But Valentine was saved. For the moment that was the essential point, the only one in question. The involuntary revelation of her secret had brought the color to her cheeks, the light to her eyes, a smile to her lips, in spite of the leaden band that seemed still pressing upon her head. "How you have frightened me!" said Henri, in a low voice, seating himself on the side of the bed and taking her hand. "Is that true?" she asked, softly pressing his fingers. "Hush!" he said, making a movement to enjoin silence. She obeyed, and they remained a few moments thus. Nevertheless, he reflected that the account of the accident would soon be spread everywhere, that Valentine's new friends would hear about it as soon as they arrived at the race-track that day, and that he could no longer prolong his stay beside her.

"Are you leaving me so soon?" Valentine murmured, when he said that he must go.

"I am going to tell my sister and the Chevalier de Sainte-Foy of your mishap."

"Very well," she replied, as if already she had no other desire than to follow his wishes.

He gave the necessary orders, and again took his place beside the bed, awaiting the second visit of the doctor, whose arrival was simultaneous with that of the Duchess.

This time the verdict was altogether favorable, with no mention of the possibility of any aggravating circumstances. An inevitable feverishness, and a great lassitude, which must be met with absolute repose for several days, would be the only consequences of this dangerous prank.

The proprieties resumed their normal sway, and it was no longer possible for Henri to remain beside the charming invalid.

CHAPTER XXVII. DISTRACTION

The Duchesse de Montgeron, who had passed the rest of the day with Mademoiselle de Vermont, did not return to her own dwelling until eight o'clock that evening, bearing the most reassuring news.

Longing for fresh air and exercise, Henri went out after dinner, walked through the Champs-Elysees, and traversed the crossing at l'Etoile, in order to approach the spot where Zibeline lay ill.

If one can imagine the feelings of a man of forty-five, who is loved for himself, under the most flattering and unexpected conditions, one can comprehend the object of this nocturnal walk and the long pause that Henri made beneath the windows of Zibeline's apartment. A small garden, protected by a light fence, was the only obstacle that separated them. But how much more insuperable was the barrier which his own principles had raised between this adorable girl and himself.

Had he not told his sister, confided to Eugenie Gontier, and reiterated to any one that would listen to him, the scruples which forbade him ever to think of marriage? To change this decision, in asking for the hand of Mademoiselle de Vermont, would—in appearance, at least sacrifice to the allurements of wealth the proud poverty which he had long borne so nobly.

But the demon of temptation was then, as always, lurking in the shadow, the sole witness of this duel to the death between prejudice and love.

When he returned to his rooms he found another note from his former mistress:

"You have just had a terrible experience, my dear friend. Nothing that affects you can be indifferent to me. I beg you to believe, notwithstanding the grief which our separation causes me, in all the prayers that I offer for your happiness.

"ARIADNE."

"My happiness? My torture, rather!" he said, the classic name of Ariadne suggesting the idea that the pseudonym of Tantalus might well be applied to himself.

But he had long kept a rule to write as little as possible, and was guarded in making reply to any letter, especially to such a communication as this.

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy, Zibeline, v3

When he left the house the next morning, on his way to attend to military duties, he learned that his sister had gone away early on an excursion to one of the suburbs, and that she would not return until evening. As the Duchess was the only person who had been initiated into the mystery surrounding Zibeline on the subject of the building of the Orphan Asylum, it was evident that she had gone to take her place in the directing of the work.

In the afternoon Henri called to inquire for the invalid, and was received by the Chevalier de Sainte-Foy. She had had a quiet night; a little fever had appeared toward morning, and, above all, an extreme weakness, requiring absolute quiet and freedom from any excitement. On an open register in the reception-room were inscribed the names of all those persons who had called to express their interest in Mademoiselle de Vermont: Constantin Lenaieff, the Lisieux, the Nointels, Edmond Delorme, the Baron de Samoreau, and others. Only the Desvanneaux had shown no sign of life. Their Christian charity did not extend so far as that.

Henri added his name to the list, and for several days he returned each morning to inscribe it anew, feeling certain that, as soon as Valentine was able to be placed half-reclining on a couch, she would give orders that he should be admitted to her presence. But nothing of the kind occurred.

On the evening of the fifth day after the accident, the Duchess informed her brother that their young friend had been taken to the country, where it was thought a complete cure would sooner be effected.

This hasty departure, made without any preliminary message, caused Henri to feel the liveliest disappointment.

Had he deceived himself, then? Was it, after all, only by chance that she had so tenderly pronounced his name, and had that familiar appellation only been drawn from her involuntarily because of her surprise at beholding his unexpected presence at her bedside?

Regarding the matter from this point of view, the whole romance that he had constructed on a fragile foundation had really never existed save in his own imagination!

At this thought his self-esteem suffered cruelly. He felt a natural impulse to spring into a carriage and drive to the dwelling of Eugenie Gontier, and there to seek forgetfulness. But he felt that his bitterness would make itself known even there, and that such a course would be another affront to the dignity of a woman of heart, whose loyalty to himself he never had questioned.

Try to disguise it as he would, his sombre mood made itself apparent, especially to his brother-in-law, who had no difficulty in guessing the cause, without allowing Henri to suspect that he divined it.

The date for the formal transfer of the Orphan Asylum to the committee had been fixed for the fifteenth day of May.

On the evening of the fourteenth, at the hour when the General was signing the usual military documents in his bureau, a domestic presented to him a letter which, he said, had just been brought in great haste by a messenger on horseback:

The superscription, "To Monsieur the General the Marquis de Prerolles," was inscribed in a long, English hand, elegant and regular. The orderly gave the letter to his chief, who dismissed him with a gesture before breaking the seal. The seal represented, without escutcheon or crown, a small, wild animal, with a pointed muzzle, projecting teeth, and shaggy body, under which was a word Henri expected to find: Zibeline!

The letter ran thus:

"MY DEAR GENERAL:

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"An officer, like yourself, whose business it is to see that his orders are obeyed, will understand that I have not dared, even in your favor, to infringe on those imposed upon me by the doctor. But those orders have been withdrawn! If you have nothing better to do, come to-morrow, with your sister, to inspect our asylum, before Monsieur Desvanneaux takes possession of it!

"Your military eye will be able to judge immediately whether anything is lacking in the quarters. Yours affectionately,

"VALENTINE DE VERMONT.

"P.S. Poor Seaman is dead! I beg you to carry this sad news to his friend Aida. V."

If a woman's real self is revealed in her epistolary style, finesse, good-humor, and sprightliness were characterised in this note. Zibeline's finesse had divined Henri's self-deception; her good-humor sought to dissipate it; and her sprightliness was evidenced by her allusions to M. Desvanneaux and the loss of her horse.

When they found themselves reunited at the dinner-hour, the Duchess said simply to her brother:

"You must have received an invitation to-day from Mademoiselle de Vermont. Will you accompany us tomorrow?"

"Yes, certainly. But where? How? At what hour?"

"We must leave here at one o'clock. Don't disturb yourself about any other detail we shall look after everything."

"Good! I accept."

As he was not so curious as the Desvanneaux, it mattered little to him to what place they took him, so long as he should find Zibeline at the end of the journey.

At the appointed hour the brother and sister drove to the Gare du Nord. The Duke, a director of the road, who had been obliged to attend a convocation of the Council until noon, had preceded them. He was waiting for them beside the turnstile at the station, having already procured their tickets and reserved a carriage in one of the omnibus trains from Paris to Treport which make stops at various suburban stations.

"Will it be a very long journey?" Henri asked, on taking his place in the carriage.

"Barely three-quarters of an hour," said the Duke, as the train started on its way.

CHAPTER XXVIII. THE VOW REDEEMED

The third road, constructed between the two lines which met at Creil, passing, the one by way of Chantilly, the other, by Pontoise, was not in existence in 1871, when, after the war, Jeanne and Henri de Prerolles went to visit the spot, already unrecognizable, where they had passed their childhood. L'Ile-d'Adam was at that time the nearest station; to day it is Presles, on the intermediate line, which they now took.

"This is our station," said Madame de Montgeron, when the train stopped at Montsoult. They descended from the carriage, and found on the platform two footmen, who conducted them to a large char-a-banc, to which were harnessed four dark bay Percherons, whose bridles were held by postilions in Zibeline's livery, as correct in their

appearance as those belonging to the imperial stables, when the sojourn of the court was at Compiègne or at Fontainebleau.

"Where are we going now, Jeanne?" asked Henri, whose heart seemed to him to contract at the sight of Maffliers, which he knew so well.

"A short distance from here," his sister replied.

The horses set off, and, amid the sound of bells and the cracking of whips, the carriage reached the national road from Paris to Beauvais, which, from Montsoul, passes around the railway by a rapid descent, from the summit of which is visible, on the right, the Chateau of Franconville; on the left, the village of Nerville perched on its crest.

One of the footmen on the rear seat held the reins, and a quarter of an hour later the carriage stopped just before arriving at the foot of Valpendant.

Valpendant had formerly been a feudal manor within the confines of Ile-de-France, built midway upon a hill, as its name indicated. On the side toward the plain was a moat, and the castle itself commanded the view of a valley, through which ran the little stream called Le Roi, which flows into the river Oise near the hamlet of Mours. Acquired in the fifteenth century by the lords of Prerolles, it had become an agricultural territory worked for their profit, first by forced labor, and later by farmers.

Even recently, the courtyard, filled with squawking fowls and domestic animals of all kinds, and the sheds crowded with agricultural implements piled up in disorder, presented a scene of confusion frequent among cultivators, and significant of the alienation of old domains from their former owners.

"We have arrived!" said the Duchess, alighting first.

"What, is it here?" Henri exclaimed, his heart beating more quickly.

"Your old farm was for sale just at the time that Mademoiselle de Vermont was seeking an appropriate site for the Orphan Asylum. This spot appeared to her to combine all the desirable conditions, and she has wrought the transformation you are about to behold. It might as well be this place as another," the Duchess added. "In my opinion, it is a sort of consolation offered to us by fate."

"Be it so!" said Henri, in a tone of less conviction.

He followed his sister along the footpath of a bluff, which as children they had often climbed; while the carriage made a long detour in order to reach the main entrance to the grounds.

The footpath, winding along near the railway embankment, ended at a bridge, where Zibeline awaited the three visitors. A significant pressure of her hand showed Henri how little cause he had had for his apprehensions.

They entered. Seen from the main entrance, the metamorphosis of the place was complete.

The old tower that had served as a barn alone remained the same; it was somewhat isolated from the other building, and had been repaired in the style of its period, making a comfortable dwelling for the future director of the Asylum. Mademoiselle de Vermont occupied it temporarily.

On each side of the grounds, standing parallel, rose two fine buildings: on the ground floor of each were all the customary rooms and accessories found on model farms; on the upper floors were dormitories arranged to receive a large number of children of both sexes. There were schoolrooms, sewing-rooms, a chapel—in short, nothing was

lacking to assist in the children's intellectual and manual education.

"You have done things royally," said the Duke to the happy donor, when, having finished the inspection of the premises, they returned to the directors' room, indicated by a plate upon its door.

As for Henri, silent and absorbed, he hesitated between the dread of facing a new emotion and the desire to go once more to gaze upon the tower of Prerolles, hardly more than two kilometres distant.

"What is the matter with you, General?" Zibeline asked, observing that he did not appear to take pleasure in the surprise she had prepared.

"I lived here many years a long time ago," he replied. "I am thinking of all that it recalls to me; and, if you would not consider it discourteous on my part, I should like to leave you for a little time to make a pilgrimage on foot around the neighborhood."

"Would you like to have me take you myself? I have a little English cart which can run about anywhere," said Zibeline.

The proposition was tempting. The sweetness of a tete-a-tete might diminish the bitterness of recollections. He accepted.

She ordered the cart brought around, and they climbed into the small vehicle, which was drawn by a strong pony, driven by Zibeline herself.

"Which way?" she asked, when they had passed through the gates.

"To the right," he said, pointing to a rough, half-paved slope, an abandoned part of what had been in former days the highway, which now joins the new road at the Beaumont tunnel.

Passing this point, and leaving on their left the state road of l'Ile- d'Adam, they drove through a narrow cross-cut, between embankments, by which one mounts directly to the high, plateau that overlooks the town of Presles.

The hill was steep, and the pony was out of breath. They were compelled to stop to allow him to rest.

"It is not necessary to go any farther," said Henri to his companion. "I need only to take a few steps in order to see what interests me."

"I will wait for you here," she replied, alighting after him. "Don't be afraid to leave me alone. The horse will not move; he is used to stopping."

He left her gathering daisies, and walked resolutely to the panoramic point of view, where a strange and unexpected sight met his eyes!

All that had once been so dear to him had regained its former aspect. The kitchen-gardens had given place to the rich pastures, where yearling colts frisked gayly. The factory had disappeared, and the chateau had been restored to its original appearance. The walls enclosing the park had been rebuilt, and even several cleared places indicated the sites of cottages that had been pulled down.

Henri de Prerolles could hardly believe his eyes! Was he the sport of a dream or of one of those mirages which rise before men who travel across the sandy African deserts? The latitude and the position of the sun forbade this interpretation. But whence came it, then? What fairy had turned a magic ring in order to work this miracle?

A crackling of dry twigs under a light tread made him turn, and he beheld Zibeline, who had come up behind him.

The fairy was there, pale and trembling, like a criminal awaiting arrest.

"Is it you who have done this?" Henri exclaimed, with a sob which no human strength could have controlled.

"It is I!" she murmured, lowering her eyes. "I did it in the hope that some day you would take back that which rightfully belongs to you."

"Rightfully, you say? By what act?"

"An act of restitution."

"You never have done me any injury, and nothing authorizes me to accept such a gift from Mademoiselle de Vermont."

"Vermont was the family name of my mother. When my father married her, he obtained leave to add it to his own. I am the daughter of Paul Landry."

"You!"

"Yes. The daughter of Paul Landry, whose fortune had no other origin than the large sum of which he despoiled you."

Henri made a gesture of denial.

"Pardon me!" Zibeline continued. "He was doubly your debtor, since this sum had been increased tenfold when you rescued him from the Mexicans who were about to shoot him. 'This is my revenge!' you said to him, without waiting to hear a word from him. Your ruin was the remorse of his whole life. I knew it only when he lay upon his deathbed. Otherwise "

She paused, then raised her head higher to finish her words.

"Never mind!" she went on. "That which he dared not do while living, I set myself to do after his death. When I came to Paris to inquire what had become of the Marquis de Prerolles, your glorious career answered for you; but even before I knew you I had become the possessor of these divided estates, which, reunited by me, must be restored to your hands. You are proud, Henri," she added, with animation, "but I am none less proud than you. Judge, then, what I have suffered in realizing our situation: I, overwhelmed with riches, you, reduced to your officer's pay. Is that a satisfaction to your pride? Very well! But to my own, it is the original stain, which only a restitution, nobly accepted by you, ever can efface!"

She paused, looking at him supplicatingly, her hands clasped. As he remained silent, she understood that he still hesitated, and continued:

"To plead my cause, to vanquish your resistance, as I am trying now to triumph over it, could be attempted with any chance of success only by a dear and tender friend; that is the reason why I sought to establish relations with "

"With Eugenie Gontier?"

"But she would not consent to it all the worse for her! For, since then, you and I have come to know each other well. Your prejudices have been overcome one by one. I have observed it well. I am a woman, and even your harshness has not changed my feelings, nor prevented me from believing that, in spite of yourself, you were beginning to love me. Have I been deceiving myself? tell me!"

"You know that you have not, since, as I look at you and listen to you, I know not which I admire more—your beauty or the treasures of your heart!"

"Then come!"

"Whither?"

"To Prerolles, where all is ready to receive you."

"Well, since this is a tale from the Arabian Nights, let us follow it to the end! I will go!" said Henri.

Browsing beside the road, the pony, left to himself, had advanced toward them, step by step, whinnying to his mistress. Valentine and Henri remounted the cart; which soon drew up before the gates of the chateau, where, awaiting them, reinstated in his former office, stood the old steward, bent and white with years.

The borders of the broad driveway were of a rich, deep green. Rose—bushes in full bloom adorned the smooth lawns. The birds trilled a welcome in jumping from branch to branch, and across the facade of the chateau the open windows announced to the surrounding peasantry the return of the prodigal master.

At the top of the flight of steps Valentine stepped back to allow Henri to pass before her; then, changing her mind, she advanced again.

"No, you are at home," she said. "It is I that must enter first!"

He followed her docilely, caring no longer to yield to any other will than hers.

Within the chateau, thanks to the complicity of the Duchess, the furnishings resembled as closely as possible those of former days. The good fairy had completed successfully two great works: the restoration of the chateau and the building of the asylum. The inhabitants of the one would be so much the better able to foresee the needs of the other.

Having explored one of the wings, they returned to the central hall. Mademoiselle de Vermont made a sign to the steward to remain there, and beckoned to Henri to accompany her to the historic gallery. After they had entered it, she closed the door. The family portraits had been rehung in their former places, in chronological order, and, in its proper place, figured that of the General of Division the Marquis de Prerolles, in full uniform, mounted on Aida, the portrait being the work of Edmond Delorme.

At this sight, touched to the depths of his heart, Henri knelt before Valentine, and carried her hand to his lips.

"I adore you!" he said, without attempting to hide the tears of gratitude that fell upon those generous hands.

"Do you, indeed?" Zibeline murmured.

"You shall see!" he replied, rising. "Come, in your turn."

He led her before the portrait of the ancestral marshal of France, and said:

"Twenty–three years ago I vowed before that portrait either to vanquish the enemy or to regain with honor all that I had lost at play. I have kept my word. Will you be my wife?"

"Ah, you know my heart is yours!" Zibeline whispered, hiding her face upon his shoulder.

The door at the end of the gallery opened; the Duc and the Duchesse de Montgeron appeared. Henri took Zibeline's hand and approached them.

"The Marquise de Prerolles!" he said, presenting her to his sister and her husband.

CHAPTER XXIX. THE MARQUISE DE PREROLLES

The next day a special train landed the fair patronesses at the station of Presles, whence Zibeline's carriages conducted them to Valpendant.

The deed of gift was signed before M. Durand and his colleague, a notary of Pontoise.

This formality fulfilled, M. Desvanneaux, whose own role, for a moment overshadowed, appeared to him to renew its importance, took the floor and said:

"It remains to us, Mesdames, to assure the support of the Orphan Asylum by means of an annual income."

"The Marquis and the Marquise de Prerolles assume this responsibility," said the ministerial officer, treasurer of the Asylum. "This mutual engagement will form the object of a special clause in the drawing up of their contract."

In this way was the news of the approaching marriage between Valentine and Henri announced to the Society.

"The little intriguer!" murmured the churchwarden, nudging the elbow of his Maegera.

The General, who noted the effect which this announcement had produced upon the peevish pair, divined the malicious words upon the hypocritical lips. He drew the husband aside, and put one hand upon his shoulder.

"Desvanneaux," he said, "you have known me twenty–five years, and you know that I am a man of my word. If ever a malevolent word from you regarding my wife should come to my ears, I shall elongate yours to such a degree that those of King Midas will be entirely eclipsed! Remember that!"

The ceremony took place six weeks later, in the church of St. Honore– d'Eylau, which was not large enough to hold the numerous public and the brilliant corps of officers that assisted.

The witnesses for the bridegroom were the military governor of Paris and the Duc de Montgeron. Those of the bride were the aide–de–camp General Lenaieff, in full uniform, wearing an astrachan cap and a white cloak with the Russian eagle fastened in the fur; and the Chevalier de Sainte– Foy.

On the evening before, a last letter from his former mistress had come to the General:

"I have heard all the details of your romance, my dear Henri. Its conclusion is according to all dramatic rules, and I congratulate you without reserve.

"If, on the eve of contracting this happy union, an examination of your conscience should suggest to you some remorse for having abandoned me so abruptly, let me say that no shadow, not even the

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy, Zibeline, v3

lightest, must cloud the serenity of this joyous day: I am about to leave the stage forever, to become the wife of the Baron de Samoreau!

Always affectionately yours,
"EUGENIE GONTIER."