

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen

Andre Theuriet

Table of Contents

<u>Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2</u>	1
<u>Andre Theuriet</u>	1
<u>CHAPTER IV. THE DAWN OF LOVE</u>	1
<u>CHAPTER V. LOVE'S INDISCRETION</u>	11
<u>CHAPTER VI. LOVE BY PROXY</u>	20

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

Andre Theuriet

- CHAPTER IV. THE DAWN OF LOVE
- CHAPTER V. LOVE'S INDISCRETION
- CHAPTER VI. LOVE BY PROXY

This etext was produced by David Widger widger@cecomet.net

CHAPTER IV. THE DAWN OF LOVE

Winter had come, and with it all the inclement accompaniments usual in this bleak and bitter mountainous country: icy rains, which, mingled with sleet, washed away whirlpools of withered leaves that the swollen streams tossed noisily into the ravines; sharp, cutting winds from the north, bleak frosts hardening the earth and vitrifying the cascades; abundant falls of snow, lasting sometimes an entire week. The roads had become impassable. A thick, white crust covered alike the pasture-lands, the stony levels, and the wooded slopes, where the branches creaked under the weight of their snowy burdens. A profound silence encircled the village, which seemed buried under the successive layers of snowdrifts. Only here and there, occasionally, did a thin line of blue smoke, rising from one of the white roofs, give evidence of any latent life among the inhabitants. The Chateau de Buxieres stood in the midst of a vast carpet of snow on which the sabots of the villagers had outlined a narrow path, leading from the outer steps to the iron gate. Inside, fires blazed on all the hearths, which, however, did not modify the frigid atmosphere of the rudely-built upper rooms.

Julien de Buxieres was freezing, both physically and morally, in his abode. His generous conduct toward Claudet had, in truth, gained him the affection of the 'grand chasserot', made Manette as gentle as a lamb, and caused a revulsion of feeling in his favor throughout the village; but, although his material surroundings had become more congenial, he still felt around him the chill of intellectual solitude. The days also seemed longer since Claudet had taken upon himself the management of all details. Julien found that re-reading his favorite books was not sufficient occupation for the weary hours that dragged slowly along between the rising and the setting of the sun. The gossipings of Manette, the hunting stories of Claudet had no interest for young de Buxieres, and the acquaintances he endeavored to make outside left only a depressing feeling of ennui and disenchantment.

His first visit had been made to the cure of Vivey, where he hoped to meet with some intellectual resources, and a tone of conversation more in harmony with his tastes. In this expectation, also, he had been disappointed. The Abbe Pernot was an amiable quinquagenarian, and a 'bon vivant', whose mind inclined more naturally toward the duties of daily life than toward meditation or contemplative studies. The ideal did not worry him in the least; and when he had said his mass, read his breviary, confessed the devout sinners and visited the sick, he gave the rest of his time to profane but respectable amusements. He was of robust temperament, with a tendency to corpulency, which he fought against by taking considerable exercise; his face was round and good-natured, his calm gray eyes reflected the tranquillity and uprightness of his soul, and his genial nature was shown in his full smiling mouth, his thick, wavy, gray hair, and his quick and cordial gestures.

When Julien was ushered into the presbytery, he found the cure installed in a small room, which he used for working in, and which was littered up with articles bearing a very distant connection to his pious calling: nets for catching larks, hoops and other nets for fishing, stuffed birds, and a collection of coleopterx. At the other end of the room stood a dusty bookcase, containing about a hundred volumes, which seemed to have been seldom consulted. The Abbe, sitting on a low chair in the chimney-corner, his cassock raised to his knees, was busy

melting glue in an old earthen pot.

"Aha, good-day! Monsieur de Buxieres," said he in his rich, jovial voice, "you have caught me in an occupation not very canonical; but what of it? As Saint James says: 'The bow can not be always bent.' I am preparing some lime-twigs, which I shall place in the Bois des Ronces as soon as the snow is melted. I am not only a fisher of souls, but I endeavor also to catch birds in my net, not so much for the purpose of varying my diet, as of enriching my collection!"

"You have a great deal of spare time on your hands, then?" inquired Julien, with some surprise.

"Well, yes yes quite a good deal. The parish is not very extensive, as you have doubtless noticed; my parishioners are in the best possible health, thank God! and they live to be very old. I have barely two or three marriages in a year, and as many burials, so that, you see, one must fill up one's time somehow to escape the sin of idleness. Every man must have a hobby. Mine is ornithology; and yours, Monsieur de Buxieres?"

Julien was tempted to reply: "Mine, for the moment, is ennui." He was just in the mood to unburden himself to the cure as to the mental thirst that was drying up his faculties, but a certain instinct warned him that the Abbe was not a man to comprehend the subtle complexities of his psychological condition, so he contented himself with replying, briefly:

"I read a great deal. I have, over there in the chateau, a pretty fair collection of historical and religious works, and they are at your service, Monsieur le Cure!"

"A thousand thanks," replied the Abbe Pernot, making a slight grimace; "I am not much of a reader, and my little stock is sufficient for my needs. You remember what is said in the Imitation: 'Si scires totam Bibliam exterius et omnium philosophorum dicta, quid totum prodesset sine caritate Dei et gratia?' Besides, it gives me a headache to read too steadily. I require exercise in the open air. Do you hunt or fish, Monsieur de Buxieres?"

"Neither the one nor the other."

"So much the worse for you. You will find the time hang very heavily on your hands in this country, where there are so few sources of amusement. But never fear! You can not be always reading, and when the fine weather comes you will yield to the temptation; all the more likely because you have Claudet Sejournant with you. A jolly fellow he is; there is not one like him for killing a snipe or sticking a trout! Our trout here on the Aubette, Monsieur de Buxieres, are excellent of the salmon kind, and very meaty."

Then came an interval of silence. The Abbe began to suspect that this conversation was not one of profound interest to his visitor, and he resumed:

"Speaking of Claudet, Monsieur, allow me to offer you my congratulations. You have acted in a most Christian-like and equitable manner, in making amends for the inconceivable negligence of the deceased Claude de Buxieres. Then, on the other hand, Claudet deserves what you have done for him. He is a good fellow, a little too quick-tempered and violent perhaps, but he has a heart of gold. Ah! it would have been no use for the deceased to deny it the blood of de Buxieres runs in his veins!"

"If public rumor is to be believed," said Julien timidly, rising to go, "my deceased cousin Claude was very much addicted to profane pleasures."

"Yes, yes, indeed!" sighed the Abbe, "he was a devil incarnate but what a magnificent man! What a wonderful huntsman! Notwithstanding his backslidings, there was a great deal of good in him, and I am fain to believe that God has taken him under His protecting mercy."

Julien took his leave, and returned to the chateau, very much discouraged. "This priest," thought he to himself, "is a man of expediency. He allows himself certain indulgences which are to be regretted, and his mind is becoming clogged by continual association with carnal-minded men. His thoughts are too much given to earthly things, and I have no more faith in him than in the rest of them."

So he shut himself up again in his solitude, with one more illusion destroyed. He asked himself, and his heart became heavy at the thought, whether, in course of time, he also would undergo this stultification, this moral depression, which ends by lowering us to the level of the low-minded people among whom we live.

Among all the persons he had met since his arrival at Vivey, only one had impressed him as being sympathetic and attractive: Reine Vincart and even her energy was directed toward matters that Julien looked upon as secondary. And besides, Reine was a woman, and he was afraid of women. He believed with Ecclesiastes the preacher, that "they are more bitter than death . . . and whoso pleaseth God shall escape from them." He had therefore no other refuge but in his books or his own sullen reflections, and, consequently, his old enemy, hypochondria, again made him its prey.

Toward the beginning of January, the snow in the valley had somewhat melted, and a light frost made access to the woods possible. As the hunting season seldom extended beyond the first days of February, the huntsmen were all eager to take advantage of the few remaining weeks to enjoy their favorite pastime. Every day the forest resounded with the shouts of beaters-up and the barking of the hounds. From Auberive, Praslay and Grancey, rendezvous were made in the woods of Charbonniere or Maigrefontaine; nothing was thought of but the exploits of certain marksmen, the number of pieces bagged, and the joyous outdoor breakfasts which preceded each occasion. One evening, as Julien, more moody than usual, stood yawning wearily and leaning on the corner of the stove, Claudet noticed him, and was touched with pity for this young fellow, who had so little idea how to employ his time, his youth, or his money. He felt impelled, as a conscientious duty, to draw him out of his unwholesome state of mind, and initiate him into the pleasures of country life.

"You do not enjoy yourself with us, Monsieur Julien," said he, kindly; "I can't bear to see you so downhearted. You are ruining yourself with poring all day long over your books, and the worst of it is, they do not take the frowns out of your face. Take my word for it, you must change your way of living, or you will be ill. Come, now, if you will trust in me, I will undertake to cure your ennui before a week is over."

"And what is your remedy, Claudet?" demanded Julien, with a forced smile.

"A very simple one: just let your books go, since they do not succeed in interesting you, and live the life that every one else leads. The de Buxieres, your ancestors, followed the same plan, and had no fault to find with it. You are in a wolf country well, you must howl with the wolves!"

"My dear fellow," replied Julien, shaking his head, "one can not remake one's self. The wolves themselves would discover that I howled out of tune, and would send me back to my books."

"Nonsense! try, at any rate. You can not imagine what pleasure there is in coursing through the woods, and suddenly, at a sharp turn, catching sight of a deer in the distance, then galloping to the spot where he must pass, and holding him with the end of your gun! You have no idea what an appetite one gets with such exercise, nor how jolly it is to breakfast afterward, all together, seated round some favorite old beech-tree. Enjoy your youth while you have it. Time enough to stay in your chimney-corner and spit in the ashes when rheumatism has got hold of you. Perhaps you will say you never have followed the hounds, and do not know how to handle a gun?"

"That is the exact truth."

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

"Possibly, but appetite comes with eating, and when once you have tasted of the pleasures of the chase, you will want to imitate your companions. Now, see here: we have organized a party at Charbonniere to-morrow, for the gentlemen of Auberive; there will be some people you know Destourbet, justice of the Peace, the clerk Seurrot, Maitre Arbillot and the tax-collector, Boucheseiche. Hutinet went over the ground yesterday, and has appointed the meeting for ten o'clock at the Belle-Etoile. Come with us; there will be good eating and merriment, and also some fine shooting, I pledge you my word!"

Julien refused at first, but Claudet insisted, and showed him the necessity of getting more intimately acquainted with the notables of Auberive people with whom he would be continually coming in contact as representing the administration of justice and various affairs in the canton. He urged so well that young de Buxieres ended by giving his consent. Manette received immediate instructions to prepare eatables for Hutinet, the keeper, to take at early dawn to the Belle-Etoile, and it was decided that the company should start at precisely eight o'clock.

The next morning, at the hour indicated, the 'grand chasserot' was already in the courtyard with his two hounds, Charbonneau and Montagnard, who were leaping and barking sonorously around him. Julien, reminded of his promise by the unusual early uproar, dressed himself with a bad grace, and went down to join Claudet, who was bristling with impatience. They started. There had been a sharp frost during the night; some hail had fallen, and the roads were thinly coated with a white dust, called by the country people, in their picturesque language, "a sugarfrost" of snow. A thick fog hung over the forest, so that they had to guess their way; but Claudet knew every turn and every sidepath, and thus he and his companion arrived by the most direct line at the rendezvous. They soon began to hear the barking of the dogs, to which Montagnard and Charbonneau replied with emulative alacrity, and finally, through the mist, they distinguished the group of huntsmen from Auberive.

The Belle-Etoile was a circular spot, surrounded by ancient ash-trees, and formed the central point for six diverging alleys which stretched out indefinitely into the forest. The monks of Auberive, at the epoch when they were the lords and owners of the land, had made this place a rendezvous for huntsmen, and had provided a table and some stone benches, which, thirty years ago, were still in existence. The enclosure, which had been chosen for the breakfast on the present occasion, was irradiated by a huge log-fire; a very respectable display of bottles, bread, and various eatables covered the stone table, and the dogs, attached by couples to posts, pulled at their leashes and barked in chorus, while their masters, grouped around the fire, warmed their benumbed fingers over the flames, and tapped their heels while waiting for the last-comers.

At sight of Julien and Claudet, there was a joyous hurrah of welcome. Justice Destourbet exchanged a ceremonious hand-shake with the new proprietor of the chateau. The scant costume and tight gaiters of the huntsman's attire, displayed more than ever the height and slimness of the country magistrate. By his side, the registrar Seurrot, his legs encased in blue linen spatterdashes, his back bent, his hands crossed comfortably over his "corporation," sat roasting himself at the flame, while grumbling when the wind blew the smoke in his eyes. Arbillot, the notary, as agile and restless as a lizard, kept going from one to the other with an air of mysterious importance. He came up to Claudet, drew him aside, and showed him a little figure in a case.

"Look here!" whispered he, "we shall have some fun; as I passed by the Abbe Pernot's this morning, I stole one of his stuffed squirrels."

He stooped down, and with an air of great mystery poured into his ear the rest of the communication, at the close of which his small black eyes twinkled maliciously, and he passed the end of his tongue over his frozen moustache.

"Come with me," continued he; "it will be a good joke on the collector."

He drew Claudet and Hutinet toward one of the trenches, where the fog hid them from sight.

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

During this colloquy, Boucheseiche the collector, against whom they were thus plotting, had seized upon Julien de Buxieres, and was putting him through a course of hunting lore. Justin Boucheseiche was a man of remarkable ugliness; big, bony, freckled, with red hair, hairy hands, and a loud, rough voice.

He wore a perfectly new hunting costume, cap and gaiters of leather, a havana-colored waistcoat, and had a complete assortment of pockets of all sizes for the cartridges. He pretended to be a great authority on all matters relating to the chase, although he was, in fact, the worst shot in the whole canton; and when he had the good luck to meet with a newcomer, he launched forth on the recital of his imaginary prowess, without any pity for the hearer. So that, having once got hold of Julien, he kept by his side when they sat down to breakfast.

All these country huntsmen were blessed with healthy appetites. They ate heartily, and drank in the same fashion, especially the collector Boucheseiche, who justified his name by pouring out numerous bumpers of white wine. During the first quarter of an hour nothing could be heard but the noise of jaws masticating, glasses and forks clinking; but when the savory pastries, the cold game and the hams had disappeared, and had been replaced by goblets of hot Burgundy and boiling coffee, then tongues became loosened. Julien, to his infinite disgust, was forced again to be present at a conversation similar to the one at the time of the raising of the seals, the coarseness of which had so astonished and shocked him. After the anecdotes of the chase were exhausted, the guests began to relate their experiences among the fair sex, losing nothing of the point from the effect of the numerous empty bottles around. All the scandalous cases in the courts of justice, all the coarse jokes and adventures of the district, were related over again. Each tried to surpass his neighbor. To hear these men of position boast of their gallantries with all classes, one would have thought that the entire canton underwent periodical changes and became one vast Saturnalia, where rustic satyrs courted their favorite nymphs. But nothing came of it, after all; once the feast was digested, and they had returned to the conjugal abode, all these terrible gay Lotharios became once more chaste and worthy fathers of families. Nevertheless, Julien, who was unaccustomed to such bibulous festivals and such unbridled license of language, took it all literally, and reproached himself more than ever with having yielded to Claudet's entreaties.

At last the table was deserted, and the marking of the limits of the hunt began.

As they were following the course of the trenches, the notary stopped suddenly at the foot of an ash-tree, and took the arm of the collector, who was gently humming out of tune.

"Hush! Collector," he whispered, "do you see that fellow up there, on the fork of the tree? He seems to be jeering at us."

At the same time he pointed out a squirrel, sitting perched upon a branch, about halfway up the tree. The animal's tail stood up behind like a plume, his ears were upright, and he had his front paws in his mouth, as if cracking a nut.

"A squirrel!" cried the impetuous Boucheseiche, immediately falling into the snare; "let no one touch him, gentlemen I will settle his account for him."

The rest of the hunters had drawn back in a circle, and were exchanging sly glances. The collector loaded his gun, shouldered it, covered the squirrel, and then let go.

"Hit!" exclaimed he, triumphantly, as soon as the smoke had dispersed.

In fact, the animal had slid down the branch, head first, but, somehow, he did not fall to the ground.

"He has caught hold of something," said the notary, facetiously.

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

"Ah! you will hold on, you rascal, will you?" shouted Boucheseiche, beside himself with excitement, and the next moment he sent a second shot, which sent the hair flying in all directions.

The creature remained in the same position. Then there was a general roar.

"He is quite obstinate!" remarked the clerk, slyly.

Boucheseiche, astonished, looked attentively at the tree, then at the laughing crowd, and could not understand the situation.

"If I were in your place, Collector," said Claudet, in an insinuating manner, "I should climb up there, to see "

But Justin Boucheseiche was not a climber. He called a youngster, who followed the hunt as beater-up.

"I will give you ten sous," said he; "to mount that tree and bring me my squirrel!"

The young imp did not need to be told twice. In the twinkling of an eye he threw his arms around the tree, and reached the fork. When there, he uttered an exclamation.

"Well?" cried the collector; impatiently, "throw him down!"

"I can't, Monsieur," replied the boy, "the squirrel is fastened by a wire." Then the laughter burst forth more boisterously than before.

"A wire, you young rascal! Are you making fun of me?" shouted Boucheseiche, "come down this moment!"

"Here he is, Monsieur," replied the lad, throwing himself down with the squirrel which he tossed at the collector's feet.

When Boucheseiche verified the fact that the squirrel was a stuffed specimen, he gave a resounding oath.

"In the name of –! who is the miscreant that has perpetrated this joke?"

No one could reply for laughing. Then ironical cheers burst forth from all sides.

"Brave Boucheseiche! That's a kind of game one doesn't often get hold of!"

"We never shall see any more of that kind!"

"Let us carry Boucheseiche in triumph!"

And so they went on, marching around the tree. Arbillot seized a slip of ivy and crowned Boucheseiche, while all the others clapped their hands and capered in front of the collector, who, at last, being a good fellow at heart, joined in the laugh at his own expense.

Julien de Buxieres alone could not share the general hilarity. The uproar caused by this simple joke did not even chase the frown from his brow. He was provoked at not being able to bring himself within the diapason of this somewhat vulgar gayety: he was aware that his melancholy countenance, his black clothes, his want of sympathy jarred unpleasantly on the other jovial guests. He did not intend any longer to play the part of a killjoy. Without saying anything to Claudet, therefore, he waited until the huntsmen had scattered in the brushwood, and then, diving into a trench, in an opposite direction, he gave them all the slip, and turned in the direction of

Planche–au–Vacher.

As he walked slowly, treading under foot the dry frosty leaves, he reflected how the monotonous crackling of this foliage, once so full of life, now withered and rendered brittle by the frost, seemed to represent his own deterioration of feeling. It was a sad and suitable accompaniment of his own gloomy thoughts.

He was deeply mortified at the sorry figure he had presented at the breakfast–table. He acknowledged sorrowfully to himself that, at twenty– eight years of age, he was less young and less really alive than all these country squires, although all, except Claudet, had passed their fortieth year. Having missed his season of childhood, was he also doomed to have no youth? Others found delight in the most ordinary amusements, why, to him, did life seem so insipid and colorless?

Why was he so unfortunately constituted that all human joys lost their sweetness as soon as he opened his heart to them? Nothing made any powerful impression on him; everything that happened seemed to be a perpetual reiteration, a song sung for the hundredth time, a story a hundred times related.

He was like a new vase, cracked before it had served its use, and he felt thoroughly ashamed of the weakness and infirmity of his inner self. Thus pondering, he traversed much ground, hardly knowing where he was going. The fog, which now filled the air and which almost hid the trenches with its thin bluish veil, made it impossible to discover his bearings. At last he reached the border of some pastureland, which he crossed, and then he perceived, not many steps away, some buildings with tiled roofs, which had something familiar to him in their aspect. After he had gone a few feet farther he recognized the court and facade of La Thuiliere; and, as he looked over the outer wall, a sight altogether novel and unexpected presented itself.

Standing in the centre of the courtyard, her outline showing in dark relief against the light "sugar–frosting," stood Reine Vincart, her back turned to Julien. She held up a corner of her apron with one hand, and with the other took out handfuls of grain, which she scattered among the birds fluttering around her. At each moment the little band was augmented by a new arrival. All these little creatures were of species which do not emigrate, but pass the winter in the shelter of the wooded dells. There were blackbirds with yellow bills, who advanced boldly over the snow up to the very feet of the distributing fairy; robin redbreasts, nearly as tame, hopping gayly over the stones, bobbing their heads and puffing out their red breasts; and tomtits, prudently watching awhile from the tops of neighboring trees, then suddenly taking flight, and with quick, sharp cries, seizing the grain on the wing. It was charming to see all these little hungry creatures career around Reine's head, with a joyous fluttering of wings. When the supply was exhausted, the young girl shook her apron, turned around, and recognized Julien.

"Were you there, Monsieur de Buxieres?" she exclaimed; "come inside the courtyard! Don't be afraid; they have finished their meal. Those are my boarders," she added, pointing to the birds, which, one by one, were taking their flight across the fields. "Ever since the first fall of snow, I have been distributing grain to them once a day. I think they must tell one another under the trees there, for every day their number increases. But I don't complain of that. Just think, these are not birds of passage; they do not leave us at the first cold blast, to find a warmer climate; the least we can do is to recompense them by feeding them when the weather is too severe! Several know me already, and are very tame. There is a blackbird in particular, and a blue tomtit, that are both extremely saucy!"

These remarks were of a nature to please Julien. They went straight to the heart of the young mystic; they recalled to his mind St. Francis of Assisi, preaching to the fish and conversing with the birds, and he felt an increase of sympathy for this singular young girl. He would have liked to find a pretext for remaining longer with her, but his natural timidity in the presence of women paralyzed his tongue, and, already, fearing he should be thought intruding, he had raised his hat to take leave, when Reine addressed him:

"I do not ask you to come into the house, because I am obliged to go to the sale of the Ronces woods, in order to speak to the men who are cultivating the little lot that we have bought. I wager, Monsieur de Buxieres, that you

are not yet acquainted with our woods?"

"That is true," he replied, smiling.

"Very well, if you will accompany me, I will show you the canton they are about to develop. It will not be time lost, for it will be a good thing for the people who are working for you to know that you are interested in their labors."

Julien replied that he should be happy to be under her guidance.

"In that case," said Reine, "wait for me here. I shall be back in a moment."

She reappeared a few minutes later, wearing a white hood with a cape, and a knitted woolen shawl over her shoulders.

"This way!" said she, showing a path that led across the pasture-lands.

They walked along silently at first. The sky was clear, the wind had freshened. Suddenly, as if by enchantment, the fog, which had hung over the forest, became converted into needles of ice. Each tree was powdered over with frozen snow, and on the hillsides overshadowing the valley the massive tufts of forest were veiled in a bluish-white vapor.

Never had Julien de Buxieres been so long in *tete-a-tete* with a young woman. The extreme solitude, the surrounding silence, rendered this dual promenade more intimate and also more embarrassing to a young man who was alarmed at the very thought of a female countenance. His ecclesiastical education had imbued Julien with very rigorous ideas as to the careful and reserved behavior which should be maintained between the sexes, and his intercourse with the world had been too infrequent for the idea to have been modified in any appreciable degree. It was natural, therefore, that this walk across the fields in the company of Reine should assume an exaggerated importance in his eyes. He felt himself troubled and yet happy in the chance afforded him to become more closely acquainted with this young girl, toward whom a secret sympathy drew him more and more. But he did not know how to begin conversation, and the more he cudgelled his brains to find a way of opening the attack, the more he found himself at sea. Once more Reine came to his assistance.

"Well, Monsieur de Buxieres," said she, "do matters go more to your liking now? You have acted most generously toward Claudet, and he ought to be pleased."

"Has he spoken to you, then?"

"No; not himself, but good news, like bad, flies fast, and all the villagers are singing your praises."

"I only did a very simple and just thing," replied Julien.

"Precisely, but those are the very things that are the hardest to do. And according as they are done well or ill, so is the person that does them judged by others."

"You have thought favorably of me then, Mademoiselle Vincart," he ventured, with a timid smile.

"Yes; but my opinion is of little importance. You must be pleased with yourself that is more essential. I am sure that it must be pleasanter now for you to live at Vivey?"

"Hm! more bearable, certainly."

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

The conversation languished again. As they approached the confines of the farm they heard distant barking, and then the voices of human beings. Finally two gunshots broke on the air.

"Ha, ha!" exclaimed Reine, listening, "the Auberive Society is following the hounds, and Claudet must be one of the party. How is it you were not with them?"

"Claudet took me there, and I was at the breakfast but, Mademoiselle, I confess that that kind of amusement is not very tempting to me. At the first opportunity I made my escape, and left the party to themselves."

"Well, now, to be frank with you, you were wrong. Those gentlemen will feel aggrieved, for they are very sensitive. You see, when one has to live with people, one must yield to their customs, and not pooh-pooh their amusements."

"You are saying exactly what Claudet said last night."

"Claudet was right."

"What am I to do? The chase has no meaning for me. I can not feel any interest in the butchery of miserable animals that are afterward sent back to their quarters."

"I can understand that you do not care for the chase for its own sake; but the ride in the open air, in the open forest? Our forests are so beautiful look there, now! does not that sight appeal to you?"

From the height they had now gained, they could see all over the valley, illuminated at intervals by the pale rays of the winter sun. Wherever its light touched the brushwood, the frosty leaves quivered like diamonds, while a milky cloud enveloped the parts left in shadow. Now and then, a slight breeze stirred the branches, causing a shower of sparkling atoms to rise in the air, like miniature rainbows. The entire forest seemed clothed in the pure, fairy-like robes of a virgin bride.

"Yes, that is beautiful," admitted Julien, hesitatingly; "I do not think I ever saw anything similar: at any rate, it is you who have caused me to notice it for the first time. But," continued he, "as the sun rises higher, all this phantasmagoria will melt and vanish. The beauty of created things lasts only a moment, and serves as a warning for us not to set our hearts on things that perish."

Reine gazed at him with astonishment.

"Do you really think so?" exclaimed she: "that is very sad, and I do not know enough to give an opinion. All I know is, that if God has created such beautiful things it is in order that we may enjoy them. And that is the reason why I worship these woods with all my heart. Ah! if you could only see them in the month of June, when the foliage is at its fulness. Flowers everywhere yellow, blue, crimson! Music also everywhere the song of birds, the murmuring of waters, and the balmy scents in the air. Then there are the lime-trees, the wild cherry, and the hedges red with strawberries it is intoxicating. And, whatever you may say, Monsieur de Buxieres, I assure you that the beauty of the forest is not a thing to be despised. Every season it is renewed: in autumn, when the wild fruits and tinted leaves contribute their wealth of color; in winter, with its vast carpets of snow, from which the tall ash springs to such a stately height-look, now! up there!"

They were in the depths of the forest. Before them were colonnades of slim, graceful trees, rising in one unbroken line toward the skies, their slender branches forming a dark network overhead, and their lofty proportions lessening in the distance, until lost in the solemn gloom beyond. A religious silence prevailed, broken only by the occasional chirp of the wren, or the soft pattering of some smaller fourfooted race.

"How beautiful!" exclaimed Reine, with animation; "one might imagine one's self in a cathedral! Oh! how I love the forest; a feeling of awe and devotion comes over me, and makes me want to kneel down and pray!"

Julien looked at her with an uneasy kind of admiration. She was walking slowly now, grave and thoughtful, as if in church. Her white hood had fallen on her shoulders, and her hair, slightly stirred by the wind, floated like a dark aureole around her pale face. Her luminous eyes gleamed between the double fringes of her eyelids, and her mobile nostrils quivered with suppressed emotion. As she passed along, the brambles from the wayside, intermixed with ivy, and other hardy plants, caught on the hem of her dress and formed a verdant train, giving her the appearance of the high-priestess of some mysterious temple of Nature. At this moment, she identified herself so perfectly with her nickname, "queen of the woods," that Julien, already powerfully affected by her peculiar and striking style of beauty, began to experience a superstitious dread of her influence. His Catholic scruples, or the remembrance of certain pious lectures administered in his childhood, rendered him distrustful, and he reproached himself for the interest he took in the conversation of this seductive creature. He recalled the legends of temptations to which the Evil One used to subject the anchorites of old, by causing to appear before them the attractive but illusive forms of the heathen deities. He wondered whether he were not becoming the sport of the same baleful influence; if, like the Lamias and Dryads of antiquity, this queen of the woods were not some spirit of the elements, incarnated in human form and sent to him for the purpose of dragging his soul down to perdition.

In this frame of mind he followed in her footsteps, cautiously, and at a distance, when she suddenly turned, as if waiting for him to rejoin her. He then perceived that they had reached the end of the copse, and before them lay an open space, on which the cut lumber lay in cords, forming dark heaps on the frosty ground. Here and there were allotments of chosen trees and poles, among which a thin spiral of smoke indicated the encampment of the cutters. Reine made straight for them, and immediately presented the new owner of the chateau to the workmen. They made their awkward obeisances, scrutinizing him in the mistrustful manner customary with the peasants of mountainous regions when they meet strangers. The master workman then turned to Reine, replying to her remarks in a respectful but familiar tone:

"Make yourself easy, mamselle, we shall do our best and rush things in order to get through with the work. Besides, if you will come this way with me, you will see that there is no idling; we are just now going to fell an oak, and before a quarter of an hour is over it will be lying on the ground, cut off as neatly as if with a razor."

They drew near the spot where the first strokes of the axe were already resounding. The giant tree did not seem affected by them, but remained haughty and immovable. Then the blows redoubled until the trunk began to tremble from the base to the summit, like a living thing. The steel had made the bark, the sapwood, and even the core of the tree, fly in shivers; but the oak had resumed its impassive attitude, and bore stoically the assaults of the workmen. Looking upward, as it reared its proud and stately head, one would have affirmed that it never could fall. Suddenly the woodsmen fell back; there was a moment of solemn and terrible suspense; then the enormous trunk heaved and plunged down among the brushwood with an alarming crash of breaking branches. A sound as of lamentation rumbled through the icy forest, and then all was still.

The men, with unconscious emotion, stood contemplating the monarch oak lying prostrate on the ground. Reine had turned pale; her dark eyes glistened with tears.

"Let us go," murmured she to Julien; "this death of a tree affects me as if it were that of a Christian."

They took leave of the woodsmen, and reentered the forest. Reine kept silence and her companion was at a loss to resume the conversation; so they journeyed along together quietly until they reached a border line, whence they could perceive the smoke from the roofs of Vivey.

"You have only to go straight down the hill to reach your home," said she, briefly; "au revoir, Monsieur de Buxieres."

Thus they quitted each other, and, looking back, he saw that she slackened her speed and went dreamily on in the direction of Planche-au-Vacher.

CHAPTER V. LOVE'S INDISCRETION

In the mountainous region of Langres, spring can hardly be said to appear before the end of May. Until that time the cold weather holds its own; the white frosts, and the sharp, sleety April showers, as well as the sudden windstorms due to the malign influence of the ice-gods, arrest vegetation, and only a few of the more hardy plants venture to put forth their trembling shoots until later. But, as June approaches and the earth becomes warmed through by the sun, a sudden metamorphosis is effected. Sometimes a single night is sufficient for the floral spring to burst forth in all its plenitude. The hedges are alive with lilies and woodruffs; the blue columbines shake their foolscap-like blossoms along the green side-paths; the milky spikes of the Virgin plant rise slender and tall among the bizarre and many-colored orchids. Mile after mile, the forest unwinds its fairy show of changing scenes. Sometimes one comes upon a spot of perfect verdure; at other times one wanders in almost complete darkness under the thick interlacing boughs of the ash-trees, through which occasional gleams of light fall on the dark soil or on the spreading ferns. Now the wanderer emerges upon an open space so full of sunshine that the strawberries are already ripening; near them are stacked the tender young trees, ready for spacing, and the billets of wood piled up and half covered with thistle and burdock leaves; and a little farther away, half hidden by tall weeds, teeming with insects, rises the peaked top of the woodsman's hut. Here one walks beside deep, grassy trenches, which appear to continue without end, along the forest level; farther, the wild mint and the centaurea perfume the shady nooks, the oaks and lime-trees arch their spreading branches, and the honeysuckle twines itself round the knotty shoots of the hornbeam, whence the thrush gives forth her joyous, sonorous notes.

Not only in the forest, but also in the park belonging to the chateau, and in the village orchards, spring had donned a holiday costume. Through the open windows, between the massive bunches of lilacs, hawthorn, and laburnum blossoms, Julien de Buxieres caught glimpses of rolling meadows and softly tinted vistas. The gentle twittering of the birds and the mysterious call of the cuckoo, mingled with the perfume of flowers, stole into his study, and produced a sense of enjoyment as novel to him as it was delightful. Having until the present time lived a sedentary life in cities, he had had no opportunity of experiencing this impression of nature in her awakening and luxuriant aspect; never had he felt so completely under the seductive influence of the goddess Maia than at this season when the abundant sap exudes in a white foam from the trunk of the willow; when between the plant world and ourselves a magnetic current seems to exist, which seeks to wed their fraternizing emanations with our own personality. He was oppressed by the vividness of the verdure, intoxicated with the odor of vegetation, agitated by the confused music of the birds, and in this May fever of excitement, his thoughts wandered with secret delight to Reine Vincart, to this queen of the woods, who was the personification of all the witchery of the forest. Since their January promenade in the glades of Charbonniere, he had seen her at a distance, sometimes on Sundays in the little church at Vivey, sometimes like a fugitive apparition at the turn of a road. They had also exchanged formal salutations, but had not spoken to each other. More than once, after the night had fallen, Julien had stopped in front of the courtyard of La Thuiliere, and watched the lamps being lighted inside. But he had not ventured to knock at the door of the house; a foolish timidity had prevented him; so he had returned to the chateau, dissatisfied and reproaching himself for allowing his awkward shyness to interpose, as it were, a wall of ice between himself and the only person whose acquaintance seemed to him desirable.

At other times he would become alarmed at the large place a woman occupied in his thoughts, and he congratulated himself on having resisted the dangerous temptation of seeing Mademoiselle Vincart again. He acknowledged that this singular girl had for him an attraction against which he ought to be on his guard. Reine might be said to live alone at La Thuiliere, for her father could hardly be regarded seriously as a protector. Julien's visits might have compromised her, and the young man's severe principles of rectitude forbade him to cause scandal which he could not repair. He was not thinking of marriage, and even had his thoughts inclined that way, the proprieties and usages of society which he had always in some degree respected, would not allow him to wed

a peasant girl. It was evident, therefore, that both prudence and uprightness would enjoin him to carry on any future relations with Mademoiselle Vincart with the greatest possible reserve.

Nevertheless, and in spite of these sage reflections, the enchanting image of Reine haunted him more than was at all reasonable. Often, during his hours of watchfulness, he would see her threading the avenues of the forest, her dark hair half floating in the breeze, and wearing her white hood and her skirt bordered with ivy. Since the spring had returned, she had become associated in his mind with all the magical effects of nature's renewal. He discovered the liquid light of her dark eyes in the rippling darkness of the streams; the lilies recalled the faintly tinted paleness of her cheeks; the silene roses, scattered throughout the hedges, called forth the remembrance of the young maiden's rosy lips, and the vernal odor of the leaves appeared to him like an emanation of her graceful and wholesome nature.

This state of feeling began to act like an obsession, a sort of witchcraft, which alarmed him. What was she really, this strange creature? A peasant indeed, apparently; but there was also something more refined and cultivated about her, due, doubtless, to her having received her education in a city school. She both felt and expressed herself differently from ordinary country girls, although retaining the frankness and untutored charm of rustic natures. She exercised an uneasy fascination over Julien, and at times he returned to the superstitious impression made upon him by Reine's behavior and discourse in the forest. He again questioned with himself whether this female form, in its untamed beauty, did not enfold some spirit of temptation, some insidious fairy, similar to the Melusine, who appeared to Count Raymond in the forest of Poitiers.

Most of the time he would himself laugh at this extravagant supposition, but, while endeavoring to make light of his own cowardice, the idea still haunted and tormented him. Sometimes, in the effort to rid himself of the persistence of his own imagination, he would try to exorcise the demon who had got hold of him, and this exorcism consisted in despoiling the image of his temptress of the veil of virginal purity with which his admiration had first invested her. Who could assure him, after all, that this girl, with her independent ways, living alone at her farm, running through the woods at all hours, was as irreproachable as he had imagined? In the village, certainly, she was respected by all; but people were very tolerant very easy, in fact on the question of morals in this district, where the gallantries of Claude de Buxieres were thought quite natural, where the illegitimacy of Claudet offended no one's sense of the proprieties, and where the after-dinner conversations, among the class considered respectable, were such as Julien had listened to with repugnance. Nevertheless, even in his most suspicious moods, Julien had never dared broach the subject to Claudet.

Every time that the name of Reine Vincart had come to his lips, a feeling of bashfulness, in addition to his ordinary timidity, had prevented him from interrogating Claudet concerning the character of this mysterious queen of the woods. Like all novices in love-affairs Julien dreaded that his feelings should be divined, at the mere mention of the young girl's name. He preferred to remain isolated, concentrating in himself his desires, his trouble and his doubts.

Yet, whatever efforts he made, and however firmly he adhered to his resolution of silence, the hypochondria from which he suffered could not escape the notice of the 'grand chasserot'. He was not clear-sighted enough to discern the causes, but he could observe the effects. It provoked him to find that all his efforts to enliven his cousin had proved futile. He had cudgelled his brains to comprehend whence came these fits of terrible melancholy, and, judging Julien by himself, came to the conclusion that his ennui proceeded from an excess of strictness and good behavior.

"Monsieur de Buxieres," said he, one evening when they were walking silently, side by side, in the avenues of the park, which resounded with the song of the nightingales, "there is one thing that troubles me, and that is that you do not confide in me."

"What makes you think so, Claudet?" demanded Julien, with surprise.

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

"Paybleu! the way you act. You are, if I may say so, too secretive. When you wanted to make amends for Claude de Buxieres's negligence, and proposed that I should live here with you, I accepted without any ceremony. I hoped that in giving me a place at your fire and your table, you would also give me one in your affections, and that you would allow me to share your sorrows, like a true brother comrade "

"I assure you, my dear fellow, that you are mistaken. If I had any serious trouble on my mind, you should be the first to know it."

"Oh! that's all very well to say; but you are unhappy all the same one can see it in your mien, and shall I tell you the reason? It is that you are too sedate, Monsieur de Buxieres; you have need of a sweetheart to brighten up your days."

"Ho, ho!" replied Julien, coloring, "do you wish to have me married, Claudet?"

"Ah! that's another affair. No; but still I should like to see you take some interest in a woman some gay young person who would rouse you up and make you have a good time. There is no lack of such in the district, and you would only have the trouble of choosing."

M. de Buxieres's color deepened, and he was visibly annoyed.

"That is a singular proposition," exclaimed he, after awhile; "do you take me for a libertine?"

"Don't get on your high horse, Monsieur de Buxieres! There would be no one hurt. The girls I allude to are not so difficult to approach."

"That has nothing to do with it, Claudet; I do not enjoy that kind of amusement."

"It is the kind that young men of our age indulge in, all the same. Perhaps you think there would be difficulties in the way. They would not be insurmountable, I can assure you; those matters go smoothly enough here. You slip your arm round her waist, give her a good, sounding salute, and the acquaintance is begun. You have only to improve it!"

"Enough of this," interrupted Julien, harshly, "we never can agree on such topics!"

"As you please, Monsieur de Buxieres; since you do not like the subject, we will not bring it up again. If I mentioned it at all, it was that I saw you were not interested in either hunting or fishing, and thought you might prefer some other kind of game. I do wish I knew what to propose that would give you a little pleasure," continued Claudet, who was profoundly mortified at the ill-success of his overtures. "Now! I have it. Will you come with me to-morrow, to the Ronces woods? The charcoal-dealers who are constructing their furnaces for the sale, will complete their dwellings this evening and expect to celebrate in the morning. They call it watering the bouquet, and it is the occasion of a little festival, to which we, as well as the presiding officials of the cutting, are invited. Naturally, the guests pay their share in bottles of wine. You can hardly be excused from showing yourself among these good people. It is one of the customs of the country. I have promised to be there, and it is certain that Reine Vincart, who has bought the Ronces property, will not fail to be present at the ceremony."

Julien had already the words on his lips for declining Claudet's offer, when the name of Reine Vincart produced an immediate change in his resolution. It just crossed his mind that perhaps Claudet had thrown out her name as a bait and an argument in favor of his theories on the facility of love-affairs in the country. However that might be, the allusion to the probable presence of Mademoiselle Vincart at the coming fete, rendered young Buxieres more tractable, and he made no further difficulties about accompanying his cousin.

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

The next morning, after partaking hastily of breakfast, they started on their way toward the cutting. The charcoal-dealers had located themselves on the border of the forest, not far from the spot where, in the month of January, Reine and Julien had visited the wood cutters. Under the sheltering branches of a great ash tree, the newly erected but raised its peaked roof covered with clods of turf, and two furnaces, just completed, occupied the ground lately prepared. One of them, ready for use, was covered with the black earth called 'frazil', which is extracted from the site of old charcoal works; the other, in course of construction, showed the successive layers of logs ranged in circles inside, ready for the fire. The workmen moved around, going and coming; first, the head-man or patron, a man of middle age, of hairy chest, embrowned visage, and small beady eyes under bushy eyebrows; his wife, a little, shrivelled, elderly woman; their daughter, a thin awkward girl of seventeen, with fluffy hair and a cunning, hard expression; and finally, their three boys, robust young fellows, serving their apprenticeship at the trade. This party was reenforced by one or two more single men, and some of the daughters of the woodchoppers, attracted by the prospect of a day of dancing and joyous feasting.

These persons were sauntering in and out under the trees, waiting for the dinner, which was to be furnished mainly by the guests, the contribution of the charcoal-men being limited to a huge pot of potatoes which the patroness was cooking over the fire, kindled in front of the hut.

The arrival of Julien and Claudet, attended by the small cowboy, puffing and blowing under a load of provisions, was hailed with exclamations of gladness and welcome. While one of the assistants was carefully unrolling the big loaves of white bread, the enormous meat pastry, and the bottles encased in straw, Reine Vincart appeared suddenly on the scene, accompanied by one of the farm-hands, who was also tottering under the weight of a huge basket, from the corners of which peeped the ends of bottles, and the brown knuckle of a smoked ham. At sight of the young proprietress of La Thuiliere, the hurrahs burst forth again, with redoubled and more sustained energy. As she stood there smiling, under the greenish shadow cast by the ashtrees, Reine appeared to Julien even more seductive than among the frosty surroundings of the previous occasion. Her simple and rustic spring costume was marvellously becoming: a short blue-and-yellow striped skirt, a tight jacket of light-colored material, fitted closely to the waist, a flat linen collar tied with a narrow blue ribbon, and a bouquet of woodruff at her bosom. She wore stout leather boots, and a large straw hat, which she threw carelessly down on entering the hut. Among so many faces of a different type, all somewhat disfigured by hardships of exposure, this lovely face with its olive complexion, lustrous black eyes, and smiling red lips, framed in dark, soft, wavy hair resting on her plump shoulders, seemed to spread a sunshiny glow over the scene. It was a veritable portrayal of the "queen of the woods," appearing triumphant among her rustic subjects. As an emblem of her royal prerogative, she held in her hand an enormous bouquet of flowers she had gathered on her way: honeysuckles, columbine, all sorts of grasses with shivering spikelets, black alder blossoms with their white centres, and a profusion of scarlet poppies. Each of these exhaled its own salubrious springlike perfume, and a light cloud of pollen, which covered the eyelashes and hair of the young girl with a delicate white powder.

"Here, Pere Theotime," said she, handing her collection over to the master charcoal-dealer, "I gathered these for you to ornament the roof of your dwelling."

She then drew near to Claudet; gave him her hand in comrade fashion, and saluted Julien:

"Good-morning, Monsieur de Buxieres, I am very glad to see you here. Was it Claudet who brought you, or did you come of your own accord?"

While Julien, dazed and bewildered, was seeking a reply, she passed quickly to the next group, going from one to another, and watching with interest the placing of the bouquet on the summit of the hut. One of the men brought a ladder and fastened the flowers to a spike. When they were securely attached and began to nod in the air, he waved his hat and shouted: "Hou, houp!" This was the signal for going to table.

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

The food had been spread on the tablecloth under the shade of the ash-trees, and all the guests sat around on sacks of charcoal; for Reine and Julien alone they had reserved two stools, made by the master, and thus they found themselves seated side by side. Soon a profound, almost religious, silence indicated that the attack was about to begin; after which, and when the first fury of their appetites had been appeased, the tongues began to be loosened: jokes and anecdotes, seasoned with loud bursts of laughter, were bandied to and fro under the spreading branches, and presently the wine lent its aid to raise the spirits of the company to an exuberant pitch. But there was a certain degree of restraint observed by these country folk. Was it owing to Reine's presence? Julien noticed that the remarks of the working-people were in a very much better tone than those of the Auberive gentry, with whom he had breakfasted; the gayety of these children of the woods, although of a common kind, was always kept within decent limits, and he never once had occasion to feel ashamed. He felt more at ease among them than among the notables of the borough, and he did not regret having accepted Claudet's invitation.

"I am glad I came," murmured he in Reine's ear, "and I never have eaten with so much enjoyment!"

"Ah! I am glad of it," replied the young girl, gayly, "perhaps now you will begin to like our woods."

When nothing was left on the table but bones and empty bottles, Pere Theotime took a bottle of sealed wine, drew the cork, and filled the glasses.

"Now," said he, "before christening our bouquet, we will drink to Monsieur de Buxieres, who has brought us his good wine, and to our sweet lady, Mademoiselle Vincart."

The glasses clinked, and the toasts were drunk with fervor.

"Mamselle Reine," resumed Pere Theotime, with a certain amount of solemnity, "you can see, the hut is built; it will be occupied to-night, and I trust good work will be done. You can perceive from here our first furnace, all decorated and ready to be set alight. But, in order that good luck shall attend us, you yourself must set light to the fire. I ask you, therefore, to ascend to the top of the chimney and throw in the first embers; may I ask this of your good-nature?"

"Why, certainly!" replied Reine, "come, Monsieur de Buxieres, you must see how we light a charcoal furnace."

All the guests jumped from their seats; one of the men took the ladder and leaned it against the sloping side of the furnace. Meanwhile, Pere Theotime was bringing an earthen vase full of burning embers. Reine skipped lightly up the steps, and when she reached the top, stood erect near the orifice of the furnace.

Her graceful outline came out in strong relief against the clear sky; one by one, she took the embers handed her by the charcoal-dealer, and threw them into the opening in the middle of the furnace. Soon there was a crackling inside, followed by a dull rumbling; the chips and rubbish collected at the bottom had caught fire, and the air-holes left at the base of the structure facilitated the passage of the current, and hastened the kindling of the wood.

"Bravo; we've got it!" exclaimed Pere Theotime.

"Bravo!" repeated the young people, as much exhilarated with the open air as with the two or three glasses of white wine they had drunk. Lads and lasses joined hands and leaped impetuously around the furnace.

"A song, Reine! Sing us a song!" cried the young girls.

She stood at the foot of the ladder, and, without further solicitation, intoned, in her clear and sympathetic voice, a popular song, with a rhythmical refrain:

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

My father bid me
Go sell my wheat.
To the market we drove
"Good-morrow, my sweet!
How much, can you say,
Will its value prove?"

The embroidered rose
Lies on my glove.

"A hundred francs
Will its value prove."
"When you sell your wheat,
Do you sell your love?"

The embroidered rose
Lies on my glove!

"My heart, Monsieur,
Will never rove,
I have promised it
To my own true love."

The embroidered rose
Lies on my glove.

"For me he braves
The wind and the rain;
For me he weaves
A silver chain."

On my 'broidered glove.
Lies the rose again.

Repeating the refrain in chorus, boys and girls danced and leaped in the sunlight. Julien leaned against the trunk of a tree, listening to the sonorous voice of Reine, and could not take his eyes off the singer. When she had ended her song, Reine turned in another direction; but the dancers had got into the spirit of it and could not stand still; one of the men came forward, and started another popular air, which all the rest repeated in unison:

Up in the woods
Sleeps the fairy to-day:
The king, her lover,
Has strolled that way!
Will those who are young
Be married or nay?
Yea, yea!

Carried away by the rhythm, and the pleasure of treading the soft grass under their feet, the dancers quickened their pace. The chain of young folks disconnected for a moment, was reformed, and twisted in and out among the trees; sometimes in light, sometimes in shadow, until they disappeared, singing, into the very heart of the forest. With the exception of Pere Theotime and his wife, who had gone to superintend the furnace, all the guests, including Claudet, had joined the gay throng. Reine and Julien, the only ones remaining behind, stood in the shade near the borderline of the forest. It was high noon, and the sun's rays, shooting perpendicularly down, made the shade desirable. Reine proposed to her companion to enter the hut and rest, while waiting for the return of the dancers. Julien accepted readily; but not without being surprised that the young girl should be the first to suggest a tete-a-tete in the obscurity of a remote hut. Although more than ever fascinated by the unusual beauty of

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

Mademoiselle Vincart, he was astonished, and occasionally shocked, by the audacity and openness of her action toward him. Once more the spirit of doubt took possession of him, and he questioned whether this freedom of manners was to be attributed to innocence or effrontery. After the pleasant friendliness of the midday repast, and the enlivening effect of the dance round the furnace, he was both glad and troubled to find himself alone with Reine. He longed to let her know what tender admiration she excited in his mind; but he did not know how to set about it, nor in what style to address a girl of so strange and unusual a disposition. So he contented himself with fixing an enamored gaze upon her, while she stood leaning against one of the inner posts, and twisted mechanically between her fingers a branch of wild honeysuckle. Annoyed at his taciturnity, she at last broke the silence:

"You are not saying anything, Monsieur de Buxieres; do you regret having come to this fete?"

"Regret it, Mademoiselle?" returned he; "it is a long time since I have had so pleasant a day, and I thank you, for it is to you I owe it."

"To me? You are joking. It is the good-humor of the people, the spring sunshine, and the pure air of the forest that you must thank. I have no part in it."

"You are everything in it, on the contrary," said he, tenderly. "Before I knew you, I had met with country people, seen the sun and trees, and so on, and nothing made any impression on me. But, just now, when you were singing over there, I felt gladdened and inspired; I felt the beauty of the woods, I sympathized with these good people, and these grand trees, all these things among which you live so happily. It is you who have worked this miracle. Ah! you are well named. You are truly the fairy of the feast, the queen of the woods!"

Astonished at the enthusiasm of her companion, Reine looked at him sidewise, half closing her eyes, and perceived that he was altogether transformed. He appeared to have suddenly thawed. He was no longer the awkward, sickly youth, whose every movement was paralyzed by timidity, and whose words froze on his tongue; his slender frame had become supple, his blue eyes enlarged and illuminated; his delicate features expressed refinement, tenderness, and passion. The young girl was moved and won by so much emotion, the first that Julien had ever manifested toward her. Far from being offended at this species of declaration, she replied, gayly:

"As to the queen of the woods working miracles, I know none so powerful as these flowers."

She unfastened the bouquet of white starry woodruff from her corsage, and handed them over to him in their envelope of green leaves.

"Do you know them?" said she; "see how sweet they smell! And the odor increases as they wither."

Julien had carried the bouquet to his lips, and was inhaling slowly the delicate perfume.

"Our woodsmen," she continued, "make with this plant a broth which cures from ill effects of either cold or heat as if by enchantment; they also infuse it into white wine, and convert it into a beverage which they call May wine, and which is very intoxicating."

Julien was no longer listening to these details. He kept his eyes steadily fixed on Mademoiselle Vincart, and continued to inhale rapturously the bouquet, and to experience a kind of intoxication.

"Let me keep these flowers," he implored, in a choking voice.

"Certainly," replied she, gayly; "keep them, if it will give you pleasure."

"Thank you," he murmured, hiding them in his bosom.

Reine was surprised at his attaching such exaggerated importance to so slight a favor, and a sudden flush overspread her cheeks. She almost repented having given him the flowers when she saw what a tender reception he had given them, so she replied, suggestively:

"Do not thank me; the gift is not significant. Thousands of similar flowers grow in the forest, and one has only to stoop and gather them."

He dared not reply that this bouquet, having been worn by her, was worth much more to him than any other, but he thought it, and the thought aroused in his mind a series of new ideas. As Reine had so readily granted this first favor, was she not tacitly encouraging him to ask for others? Was he dealing with a simple, innocent girl, or a village coquette, accustomed to be courted? And on this last supposition should he not pass for a simpleton in the eyes of this experienced girl, if he kept himself at too great a distance. He remembered the advice of Claudet concerning the method of conducting love-affairs smoothly with certain women of the country. Whether she was a coquette or not, Reine had bewitched him. The charm had worked more powerfully still since he had been alone with her in this obscure hut, where the cooing of the wild pigeons faintly reached their ears, and the penetrating odors of the forest pervaded their nostrils. Julien's gaze rested lovingly on Reine's wavy locks, falling heavily over her neck, on her half-covered eyes with their luminous pupils full of golden specks of light, on her red lips, on the two little brown moles spotting her somewhat decollete neck. He thought her adorable, and was dying to tell her so; but when he endeavored to formulate his declaration, the words stuck fast in his throat, his veins swelled, his throat became dry, his head swam. In this disorder of his faculties he brought to mind the recommendation of Claudet: "One arm round the waist, two sounding kisses, and the thing is done." He rose abruptly, and went up to the young girl:

"Since you have given me these flowers," he began, in a husky voice, "will you also, in sign of friendship, give me your hand, as you gave it to Claudet?"

After a moment's hesitation, she held out her hand; but, hardly had he touched it when he completely lost control of himself, and slipping the arm which remained free around Reine's waist, he drew her toward him and lightly touched with his lips her neck, the beauty of which had so magnetized him.

The young girl was stronger than he; in the twinkling of an eye she tore herself from his audacious clasp, threw him violently backward, and with one bound reached the door of the hut. She stood there a moment, pale, indignant, her eyes blazing, and then exclaimed, in a hollow voice:

"If you come a step nearer, I will call the charcoalmen!"

But Julien had no desire to renew the attack; already sobered, cowed, and repentant, he had retreated to the most obscure corner of the dwelling.

"Are you mad?" she continued, with vehemence, "or has the wine got into your head? It is rather early for you to be adopting the ways of your deceased cousin! I give you notice that they will not succeed with me! "And, at the same moment, tears of humiliation filled her eyes. "I did not expect this of you, Monsieur de Buxieres!"

"Forgive me!" faltered Julien, whose heart smote him at the sight of her tears; "I have behaved like a miserable sinner and a brute! It was a moment of madness forgive it and forgive me!"

"Nobody ever treated me with disrespect before," returned the young girl, in a suffocated voice; "I was wrong to allow you any familiarity, that is all. It shall not happen to me again!"

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

Julien remained mute, overpowered with shame and remorse. Suddenly, in the stillness around, rose the voices of the dancers returning and singing the refrain of the rondelay:

I had a rose
On my heart it lay
Will those who are young
Be married, or nay?
Yea, yea!

"There are our people," said Reine, softly, "I am going to them; adieu do not follow me!" She left the but and hastened toward the furnace, while Julien, stunned with the rapidity with which this unfortunate scene had been enacted, sat down on one of the benches, a prey to confused feelings of shame and angry mortification. No, certainly, he did not intend to follow her! He had no desire to show himself in public with this young girl whom he had so stupidly insulted, and in whose face he never should be able to look again. Decidedly, he did not understand women, since he could not even tell a virtuous girl from a frivolous coquette! Why had he not been able to see that the good-natured, simple familiarity of Reine Vincart had nothing in common with the enticing allurements of those who, to use Claudet's words, had "thrown their caps over the wall." How was it that he had not read, in those eyes, pure as the fountain's source, the candor and uprightness of a maiden heart which had nothing to conceal. This cruel evidence of his inability to conduct himself properly in the affairs of life exasperated and humiliated him, and at the same time that he felt his self-love most deeply wounded, he was conscious of being more hopelessly enamored of Reine Vincart. Never had she appeared so beautiful as during the indignant movement which had separated her from him. Her look of mingled anger and sadness, the expression of her firm, set lips, the quivering nostrils, the heaving of her bosom, he recalled it all, and the image of her proud beauty redoubled his grief and despair.

He remained a long time concealed in the shadow of the hut. Finally, when he heard the voices dying away in different directions, and was satisfied that the charcoal-men were attending to their furnace work, he made up his mind to come out. But, as he did not wish to meet any one, instead of crossing through the cutting he plunged into the wood, taking no heed in what direction he went, and being desirous of walking alone as long as possible, without meeting a single human visage.

As he wandered aimlessly through the deepening shadows of the forest, crossed here and there by golden bars of light from the slanting rays of the setting sun, he pondered over the probable results of his unfortunate behavior. Reine would certainly keep silence on the affront she had received, but would she be indulgent enough to forget or forgive the insult? The most evident result of the affair would be that henceforth all friendly relations between them must cease. She certainly would maintain a severe attitude toward the person who had so grossly insulted her, but would she be altogether pitiless in her anger? All through his dismal feelings of self-reproach, a faint hope of reconciliation kept him from utter despair. As he reviewed the details of the shameful occurrence, he remembered that the expression of her countenance had been one more of sorrow than of anger. The tone of melancholy reproach in which she had uttered the words: "I did not expect this from you, Monsieur de Buxieres!" seemed to convey the hope that he might, one day, be forgiven. At the same time, the poignancy of his regret showed him how much hold the young girl had taken upon his affections, and how cheerless and insipid his life would be if he were obliged to continue on unfriendly terms with the woodland queen.

He had come to this conclusion in his melancholy reflections, when he reached the outskirts of the forest.

He stood above the calm, narrow valley of Vivey; on the right, over the tall ash-trees, peeped the pointed turrets of the chateau; on the left, and a little farther behind, was visible a whitish line, contrasting with the surrounding verdure, the winding path to La Thuiliere, through the meadow-land of Planche-au-Vacher. Suddenly, the sound of voices reached his ears, and, looking more closely, he perceived Reine and Claudet walking side by side down the narrow path. The evening air softened the resonance of the voices, so that the words themselves were not audible, but the intonation of the alternate speakers, and their confidential and friendly gestures, evinced a very

animated, if not tender, exchange of sentiments. At times the conversation was enlivened by Claudet's bursts of laughter, or an amicable gesture from Reine. At one moment, Julien saw the young girl lay her hand familiarly on the shoulder of the 'grand chssserot', and immediately a pang of intense jealousy shot through his heart. At last the young pair arrived at the banks of a stream, which traversed the path and had become swollen by the recent heavy rains. Claudet took Reine by the waist and lifted her in his vigorous arms, while he picked his way across the stream; then they resumed their way toward the bottom of the pass, and the tall brushwood hid their retreating forms from Julien's eager gaze, although it was long before the vibrations of their sonorous voices ceased echoing in his ears.

"Ah!" thought he, quite overcome by this new development, "she stands less on ceremony with him than with me! How close they kept to each other in that lonely path! With what animation they conversed! with what abandon she allowed herself to be carried in his arms! All that indicates an intimacy of long standing, and explains a good many things!"

He recalled Reine's visit to the chateau, and how cleverly she had managed to inform him of the parentage existing between Claudet and the deceased Claude de Buxieres; how she had by her conversation raised a feeling of pity in his mind for Claudet; and a desire to repair the negligence of the deceased.

"How could I be so blind!" thought Julien, with secret scorn of himself; "I did not see anything, I comprehended none of their artifices! They love each other, that is sure, and I have been playing throughout the part of a dupe. I do not blame him. He was in love, and allowed himself to be persuaded. But she! whom I thought so open, so true, so loyal! Ah! she is no better than others of her class, and she was coquetting with me in order to insure her lover a position! Well! one more illusion is destroyed. Ecclesiastes was right. 'Inveni amarivrem morte mulierem', 'woman is more bitter than death!'"

Twilight had come, and it was already dark in the forest. Slowly and reluctantly, Julien descended the slope leading to the chateau, and the gloom of the woods entered his heart.

CHAPTER VI. LOVE BY PROXY

Jealousy is a maleficent deity of the harpy tribe; she embitters everything she touches.

Ever since the evening that Julien had witnessed the crossing of the brook by Reine and Claudet, a secret poison had run through his veins, and embittered every moment of his life. Neither the glowing sun of June, nor the glorious development of the woods had any charm for him. In vain did the fields display their golden treasures of ripening corn; in vain did the pale barley and the silvery oats wave their luxuriant growth against the dark background of the woods; all these fairylike effects of summer suggested only prosaic and misanthropic reflections in Julien's mind. He thought of the tricks, the envy and hatred that the possession of these little squares of ground brought forth among their rapacious owners. The prolific exuberance of forest vegetation was an exemplification of the fierce and destructive activity of the blind forces of Nature. All the earth was a hateful theatre for the continual enactment of bloody and monotonous dramas; the worm consuming the plant; the bird mangling the insect, the deer fighting among themselves, and man, in his turn, pursuing all kinds of game. He identified nature with woman, both possessing in his eyes an equally deceiving appearance, the same beguiling beauty, and the same spirit of ambush and perfidy. The people around him inspired him only with mistrust and suspicion. In every peasant he met he recognized an enemy, prepared to cheat him with wheedling words and hypocritical lamentations. Although during the few months he had experienced the delightful influence of Reine Vincart, he had been drawn out of his former prejudices, and had imagined he was rising above the littleness of every-day worries; he now fell back into hard reality; his feet were again embedded in the muddy ground of village politics, and consequently village life was a burden to him.

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

He never went out, fearing to meet Reine Vincart. He fancied that the sight of her might aggravate the malady from which he suffered and for which he eagerly sought a remedy.

But, notwithstanding the cloistered retirement to which he had condemned himself, his wound remained open. Instead of solitude having a healing effect, it seemed to make his sufferings greater. When, in the evening, as he sat moodily at his window, he would hear Claudet whistle to his dog, and hurry off in the direction of La Thuiliere, he would say to himself: "He is going to keep an appointment with Reine." Then a feeling of blind rage would overpower him; he felt tempted to leave his room and follow his rival secretly a moment afterward he would be ashamed of his meanness. Was it not enough that he had once, although involuntarily, played the degrading part of a spy! What satisfaction could he derive from such a course? Would he be much benefited when he returned home with rage in his heart and senses, after watching a love-scene between the young pair? This consideration kept him in his seat, but his imagination ran riot instead; it went galloping at the heels of Claudet, and accompanied him down the winding paths, moistened by the evening dew. As the moon rose above the trees, illuminating the foliage with her mild bluish rays, he pictured to himself the meeting of the two lovers on the flowery turf bathed in the silvery light. His brain seemed on fire. He saw Reine in white advancing like a moonbeam, and Claudet passing his arm around the yielding waist of the maiden. He tried to substitute himself in idea, and to imagine the delight of the first words of welcome, and the ecstasy of the prolonged embrace. A shiver ran through his whole body; a sharp pain transfixed his heart; his throat closed convulsively; half fainting, he leaned against the window-frame, his eyes closed, his ears stopped, to shut out all sights or sounds, longing only for oblivion and complete torpor of body and mind.

He did not realize his longing. The enchanting image of the woodland queen, as he had beheld her in the dusky light of the charcoal-man's hut, was ever before him. He put his hands over his eyes. She was there still, with her deep, dark eyes and her enticing cherry lips. Even the odor of the honeysuckle arising from the garden assisted the reality of the vision, by recalling the sprig of the same flower which Reine was twisting round her fingers at their last interview. This sweet breath of flowers in the night seemed like an emanation from the young girl herself, and was as fleeting and intangible as the remembrance of vanished happiness. Again and again did his morbid nature return to past events, and make his present position more unbearable.

"Why," thought he, "did I ever entertain so wild a hope? This wood-nymph, with her robust yet graceful figure, her clear-headedness, her energy and will-power, could she ever have loved a being so weak and unstable as myself? No, indeed; she needs a lover full of life and vigor; a huntsman, with a strong arm, able to protect her. What figure should I cut by the side of so hearty and well-balanced a fellow?"

In these fits of jealousy, he was not so angry with Claudet for being loved by Reine as for having so carefully concealed his feelings. And yet, while inwardly blaming him for this want of frankness, he did not realize that he himself was open to a similar accusation, by hiding from Claudet what was troubling him so grievously.

Since the evening of the inauguration festival, he had become sullen and taciturn. Like all timid persons, he took refuge in a moody silence, which could not but irritate his cousin. They met every day at the same table; to all appearance their intimacy was as great as ever, but, in reality, there was no mutual exchange of feeling. Julien's continued ill-humor was a source of anxiety to Claudet, who turned his brain almost inside out in endeavoring to discover its cause. He knew he had done nothing to provoke any coolness; on the contrary, he had set his wits to work to show his gratitude by all sorts of kindly offices.

By dint of thinking the matter over, Claudet came to the conclusion that perhaps Julien was beginning to repent of his generosity, and that possibly this coolness was a roundabout way of manifesting his change of feeling. This seemed to be the only plausible solution of his cousin's behavior. "He is probably tired," thought he, "of keeping us here at the chateau, my mother and myself."

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

Claudet's pride and self-respect revolted at this idea. He did not intend to be an incumbrance on any one, and became offended in his turn at the mute reproach which he imagined he could read in his cousin's troubled countenance. This misconception, confirmed by the obstinate silence of both parties, and aggravated by its own continuance, at last produced a crisis.

It happened one night, after they had taken supper together, and Julien's ill-humor had been more evident than usual. Provoked at his persistent taciturnity, and more than ever convinced that it was his presence that young de Buxieres objected to, Claudet resolved to force an explanation. Instead, therefore, of quitting the dining-room after dessert, and whistling to his dog to accompany him in his habitual promenade, the 'grand chasserot' remained seated, poured out a small glass of brandy, and slowly filled his pipe. Surprised to see that he was remaining at home, Julien rose and began to pace the floor, wondering what could be the reason of this unexpected change. As suspicious people are usually prone to attribute complicated motives for the most simple actions, he imagined that Claudet, becoming aware of the jealous feeling he had excited, had given up his promenade solely to mislead and avert suspicion. This idea irritated him still more, and halting suddenly in his walk, he went up to Claudet and said, brusquely:

"You are not going out, then?"

"No," replied Claudet, "if you will permit me, I will stay and keep you company. Shall I annoy you?"

"Not in the least; only, as you are accustomed to walk every evening, I should not wish you to inconvenience yourself on my account. I am not afraid of being alone, and I am not selfish enough to deprive you of society more agreeable than mine."

"What do you mean by that?" cried Claudet, pricking up his ears.

"Nothing," muttered Julien, between his set teeth, "except that your fancied obligation of keeping me company ought not to prevent you missing a pleasant engagement, or keeping a rendezvous."

"A rendezvous," replied his interlocutor, with a forced laugh, "so you think, when I go out after supper, I go to seek amusement. A rendezvous! And with whom, if you please?"

"With your mistress, of course," replied Julien, sarcastically, "from what you said to me, there is no scarcity here of girls inclined to be good-natured, and you have only the trouble of choosing among them. I supposed you were courting some woodman's young daughter, or some pretty farmer girl, like like Reine Vincart."

"Refine Vincart!" repeated Claudet, sternly, "what business have you to mix up her name with those creatures to whom you refer? Mademoiselle Vincart," added he, "has nothing in common with that class, and you have no right, Monsieur de Buxieres, to use her name so lightly!"

The allusion to Reine Vincart had agitated Claudet to such a degree that he did not notice that Julien, as he pronounced her name, was as much moved as himself.

The vehemence with which Claudet resented the insinuation increased young de Buxieres's irritation.

"Ha, ha!" said he, laughing scornfully, "Reine Vincart is an exceedingly pretty girl!"

"She is not only pretty, she is good and virtuous, and deserves to be respected."

"How you uphold her! One can see that you are interested in her."

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

"I uphold her because you are unjust toward her. But I wish you to understand that she has no need of any one standing up for her her good name is sufficient to protect her. Ask any one in the village there is but one voice on that question."

"Come," said Julien, huskily, "confess that you are in love with her."

"Well! suppose I am," said Claudet, angrily, "yes, I love her! There, are you satisfied now?"

Although de Buxieres knew what he had to expect, he was not the less affected by so open an avowal thrust at him, as it were. He stood for a moment, silent; then, with a fresh burst of rage:

"You love her, do you? Why did you not tell me before? Why were you not more frank with me?"

As he spoke, gesticulating furiously, in front of the open window, the deep red glow of the setting sun, piercing through the boughs of the ash-trees, threw its bright reflections on his blazing eyeballs and convulsed features. His interlocutor, leaning against the opposite corner of the window-frame, noticed, with some anxiety, the extreme agitation of his behavior, and wondered what could be the cause of such emotion.

"I? Not frank with you! Ah, that is a good joke, Monsieur de Buxieres! Naturally, I should not go proclaiming on the housetops that I have a tender feeling for Mademoiselle Vincart, but, all the same, I should have told you had you asked me sooner. I am not reserved; but, you must excuse my saying it, you are walled in like a subterranean passage. One can not get at the color of your thoughts. I never for a moment imagined that you were interested in Reine, and you never have made me sufficiently at home to entertain the idea of confiding in you on that subject."

Julien remained silent. He had reseated himself at the table, where, leaning his head in his hands, he pondered over what Claudet had said. He placed his hand so as to screen his eyes, and bit his lips as if a painful struggle was going on within him. The splendors of the setting sun had merged into the dusky twilight, and the last piping notes of the birds sounded faintly among the sombre trees. A fresh breeze had sprung up, and filled the darkening room with the odor of honeysuckle.

Under the soothing influence of the falling night, Julien slowly raised his head, and addressing Claudet in a low and measured voice like a father confessor interrogating a penitent, said:

"Does Reine know that you love her?"

"I think she must suspect it," replied Claudet, "although I never have ventured to declare myself squarely. But girls are very quick, Reine especially. They soon begin to suspect there is some love at bottom, when a young man begins to hang around them too frequently."

"You see her often, then?"

"Not as often as I should like. But, you know, when one lives in the same district, one has opportunities of meeting at the beech harvest, in the woods, at the church door. And when you meet, you talk but little, making the most of your time. Still, you must not suppose, as I think you did, that we have rendezvous in the evening. Reine respects herself too much to go about at night with a young man as escort, and besides, she has other fish to fry. She has a great deal to do at the farm, since her father has become an invalid."

"Well, do you think she loves you?" said Julien, with a movement of nervous irritation.

"I can not tell," replied Claudet shrugging his shoulders, "she has confidence in me, and shows me some marks of friendship, but I never have ventured to ask her whether she feels anything more than friendship for me. Look

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

here, now. I have good reasons for keeping back; she is rich and I am poor. You can understand that I would not, for any consideration, allow her to think that I am courting her for her money "

"Still, you desire to marry her, and you hope that she will not say no you acknowledge that!" cried Julien, vociferously.

Claudet, struck with the violence and bitterness of tone of his companion, came up to him.

"How angrily you say that, Monsieur de Buxieres!" exclaimed he in his turn; "upon my word, one might suppose the affair is very displeasing to you. Will you let me tell you frankly an idea that has already entered my head several times these last two or three days, and which has come again now, while I have been listening to you? It is that perhaps you, yourself, are also in love with Reine?"

"I!" protested Julien. He felt humiliated at Claudet's perspicacity; but he had too much pride and self-respect to let his preferred rival know of his unfortunate passion. He waited a moment to swallow something in his throat that seemed to be choking him, and then, trying in vain to steady his voice, he added:

"You know that I have an aversion for women; and for that matter, I think they return it with interest. But, at all events, I am not foolish enough to expose myself to their rebuffs. Rest assured, I shall not follow at your heels!"

Claudet shook his head incredulously.

"You doubt it," continued de Buxieres; "well, I will prove it to you. You can not declare your wishes because Reine is rich and you are poor? I will take charge of the whole matter."

"I do not understand you," faltered Claudet, bewildered at the strange turn the conversation was taking.

"You will understand—soon," asserted Julien, with a gesture of both decision and resignation.

The truth was, he had made one of those resolutions which seem illogical and foolish at first sight, but are natural to minds at once timid and exalted. The suffering caused by Claudet's revelations had become so acute that he was alarmed. He recognized with dismay the disastrous effects of this hopeless love, and determined to employ a heroic remedy to arrest its further ravages. This was nothing less than killing his love, by immediately getting Claudet married to Reine Vincart. Sacrifices like this are easier to souls that have been subjected since their infancy to Christian discipline, and accustomed to consider the renunciation of mundane joys as a means of securing eternal salvation. As soon as this idea had developed in Julien's brain, he seized upon it with the precipitation of a drowning man, who distractedly lays hold of the first object that seems to offer him a means of safety, whether it be a dead branch or a reed.

"Listen," he resumed; "at the very first explanation that we had together, I told you I did not intend to deprive you of your right to a portion of your natural father's inheritance. Until now, you have taken my word for it, and we have lived at the chateau like two brothers. But now that a miserable question of money alone prevents you from marrying the woman you love, it is important that you should be legally provided for. We will go to-morrow to Monsieur Arbillot, and ask him to draw up the deed, making over to you from me one half of the fortune of Claude de Buxieres. You will then be, by law, and in the eyes of all, one of the desirable matches of the canton, and you can demand the hand of Mademoiselle Vincart, without any fear of being thought presumptuous or mercenary."

Claudet, to whom this conclusion was wholly unexpected, was thunderstruck. His emotion was so great that it prevented him from speaking. In the obscurity of the room his deep-set eyes seemed larger, and shone with the tears he could not repress.

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

"Monsieur Julien," said he, falteringly, "I can not find words to thank you. I am like an idiot. And to think that only a little while ago I suspected you of being tired of me, and regretting your benefits toward me! What an animal I am! I measure others by myself. Well! can you forgive me? If I do not express myself well, I feel deeply, and all I can say is that you have made me very happy!" He sighed heavily. "The question is now," continued he, "whether Reine will have me! You may not believe me, Monsieur de Buxieres, but though I may seem very bold and resolute, I feel like a wet hen when I get near her. I have a dreadful panic that she will send me away as I came. I don't know whether I can ever find courage to ask her."

"Why should she refuse you?" said Julien, sadly, "she knows that you love her. Do you suppose she loves any one else?"

"That I don't know. Although Reine is very frank, she does not let every one know what is passing in her mind, and with these young girls, I tell you, one is never sure of anything. That is just what I fear may be possible."

"If you fear the ordeal," said de Buxieres, with a visible effort, "would you like me to present the matter for you?"

"I should be very glad. It would be doing me a great service. It would be adding one more kindness to those I have already received, and some day I hope to make it all up to you."

The next morning, according to agreement, Julien accompanied Claudet to Auberive, where Maitre Arbillot drew up the deed of gift, and had it at once signed and recorded. Afterward the young men adjourned to breakfast at the inn. The meal was brief and silent. Neither seemed to have any appetite. As soon as they had drunk their coffee, they turned back on the Vivey road; but, when they had got as far as the great limetree, standing at the entrance to the forest, Julien touched Claudet lightly on the shoulder.

"Here," said he, "we must part company. You will return to Vivey, and I shall go across the fields to La Thuiliere. I shall return as soon as I have had an interview with Mademoiselle Vincart. Wait for me at the chateau."

"The time will seem dreadfully long to me," sighed Claudet; "I shall not know how to dispose of my body until you return."

"Your affair will be all settled within two or three hours from now. Stay near the window of my room, and you will catch first sight of me coming along in the distance. If I wave my hat, it will be a sign that I bring a favorable answer."

Claudet pressed his hand; they separated, and Julien descended the newly mown meadow, along which he walked under the shade of trees scattered along the border line of the forest.

The heat of the midday sun was tempered by a breeze from the east, which threw across the fields and woods the shadows of the white fleecy clouds. The young man, pale and agitated, strode with feverish haste over the short-cropped grass, while the little brooklet at his side seemed to murmur a flute-like, soothing accompaniment to the tumultuous beatings of his heart. He was both elated and depressed at the prospect of submitting his already torn and lacerated feelings to so severe a trial. The thought of beholding Reine again, and of sounding her feelings, gave him a certain amount of cruel enjoyment. He would speak to her of love love for another, certainly but he would throw into the declaration he was making, in behalf of another, some of his own tenderness; he would have the supreme and torturing satisfaction of watching her countenance, of anticipating her blushes, of gathering the faltering avowal from her lips. He would once more drink of the intoxication of her beauty, and then he would go and shut himself up at Vivey, after burying at La Thuiliere all his dreams and profane desires. But, even while the courage of this immolation of his youthful love was strong within him, he could not prevent a dim feeling of hope from crossing his mind. Claudet was not certain that he was beloved; and possibly Reine's answer would be a refusal. Then he should have a free field.

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

By a very human, but very illogical impulse, Julien de Buxieres had hardly concluded the arrangement with Claudet which was to strike the fatal blow to his own happiness when he began to forestall the possibilities which the future might have in store for him. The odor of the wild mint and meadow-sweet, dotting the banks of the stream, again awoke vague, happy anticipations. Longing to reach Reine Vincart's presence, he hastened his steps, then stopped suddenly, seized with an overpowering panic. He had not seen her since the painful episode in the hut, and it must have left with her a very sorry impression. What could he do, if she refused to receive him or listen to him?

While revolting these conflicting thoughts in his mind, he came to the fields leading directly to La Thuiliere, and just beyond, across a waving mass of oats and rye, the shining tops of the farm-buildings came in sight. A few minutes later, he pushed aside a gate and entered the yard.

The shutters were closed, the outer gate was closed inside, and the house seemed deserted. Julien began to think that the young girl he was seeking had gone into the fields with the farm-hands, and stood uncertain and disappointed in the middle of the courtyard. At this sudden intrusion into their domain, a brood of chickens, who had been clucking sedately around, and picking up nourishment at the same time, scattered screaming in every direction, heads down, feet sprawling, until by unanimous consent they made a beeline for a half-open door, leading to the orchard. Through this manoeuvre, the young man's attention was brought to the fact that through this opening he could reach the rear facade of the building. He therefore entered a grassy lane, winding round a group of stones draped with ivy; and leaving the orchard on his left, he pushed on toward the garden itself a real country garden with square beds bordered by mossy clumps alternating with currant-bushes, rows of raspberry-trees, lettuce and cabbage beds, beans and runners climbing up their slender supports, and, here and there, bunches of red carnations and peasant roses.

Suddenly, at the end of a long avenue, he discovered Reine Vincart, seated on the steps before an arched door, communicating with the kitchen. A plum-tree, loaded with its violet fruit, spread its light shadow over the young girl's head, as she sat shelling fresh-gathered peas and piling the faint green heaps of color around her. The sound of approaching steps on the grassy soil caused her to raise her head, but she did not stir. In his intense emotion, Julien thought the alley never would come to an end. He would fain have cleared it with a single bound, so as to be at once in the presence of Mademoiselle Vincart, whose immovable attitude rendered his approach still more difficult. Nevertheless, he had to get over the ground somehow at a reasonable pace, under penalty of making himself ridiculous, and he therefore found plenty of time to examine Reine, who continued her work with imperturbable gravity, throwing the peas as she shelled them into an ash-wood pail at her feet.

She was bareheaded, and wore a striped skirt and a white jacket fitted to her waist. The checkered shadows cast by the tree made spots of light and darkness over her face and her uncovered neck, the top button of her camisole being unfastened on account of the heat. De Buxieres had been perfectly well recognized by her, but an emotion, at least equal to that experienced by the young man, had transfixed her to the spot, and a subtle feminine instinct had urged her to continue her employment, in order to hide the sudden trembling of her fingers. During the last month, ever since the adventure in the hut, she had thought often of Julien; and the remembrance of the audacious kiss which the young de Buxieres had so impetuously stolen from her neck, invariably brought the flush of shame to her brow. But, although she was very indignant at the fiery nature of his caress, as implying a want of respect little in harmony with Julien's habitual reserve, she was astonished at herself for not being still more angry. At first, the affront put upon her had roused a feeling of indignation, but now, when she thought of it, she felt only a gentle embarrassment, and a soft beating of the heart. She began to reflect that to have thus broken loose from all restraint before her, this timid youth must have been carried away by an irresistible burst of passion, and any woman, however high-minded she may be, will forgive such violent homage rendered to the sovereign power of her beauty. Besides his feeding of her vanity, another independent and more powerful motive predisposed her to indulgence: she felt a tender and secret attraction toward Monsieur de Buxieres. This healthy and energetic girl had been fascinated by the delicate charm of a nature so unlike her own in its sensitiveness and disposition to self-blame. Julien's melancholy blue eyes had, unknown to himself, exerted a magnetic influence on Reine's dark,

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

liquid orbs, and, without endeavoring to analyze the sympathy that drew her toward a nature refined and tender even to weakness, without asking herself where this unreflecting instinct might lead her, she was conscious of a growing sentiment toward him, which was not very much unlike love itself.

Julien de Buxieres's mood was not sufficiently calm to observe anything, or he would immediately have perceived the impression that his sudden appearance had produced upon Reine Vincart. As soon as he found himself within a few steps of the young girl, he saluted her awkwardly, and she returned his bow with marked coldness. Extremely disconcerted at this reception, he endeavored to excuse himself for having invaded her dwelling in so unceremonious a manner.

"I am all the more troubled," added he, humbly, "that after what has happened, my visit must appear to you indiscreet, if not improper."

Reine, who had more quickly recovered her self-possession, pretended not to understand the unwise allusion that had escaped the lips of her visitor. She rose, pushed away with her foot the stalks and pods, which encumbered the passage, and replied, very shortly:

"You are excused, Monsieur. There is no need of an introduction to enter La Thuiliere. Besides, I suppose that the motive which has brought you here can only be a proper one."

While thus speaking, she shook her skirt down, and without any affectation buttoned up her camisole.

"Certainly, Mademoiselle," faltered Julien, "it is a most serious and respectable motive that causes me to wish for an interview, and if I do not disturb you "

"Not in the least, Monsieur; but, if you wish to speak with me, it is unnecessary for you to remain standing. Allow me to fetch you a chair."

She went into the house, leaving the young man overwhelmed with the coolness of his reception; a few minutes later she reappeared, bringing a chair, which she placed under the tree. "Sit here, you will be in the shade."

She seated herself on the same step as before, leaning her back against the wall, and her head on her hand.

"I am ready to listen to you," she said.

Julien, much less under his own control than she, discovered that his mission was more difficult than he had imagined it would be; he experienced a singular amount of embarrassment in unfolding his subject; and was obliged to have recourse to prolonged inquiries concerning the health of Monsieur Vincart.

"He is still in the same condition," said Reine, "neither better nor worse, and, with the illness which afflicts him, the best I can hope for is that he may remain in that condition. But," continued she, with a slight inflection of irony; "doubtless it is not for the purpose of inquiring after my father's health that you have come all the way from Vivey?"

"That is true, Mademoiselle," replied he, coloring. "What I have to speak to you about is a very delicate matter. You will excuse me, therefore, if I am somewhat embarrassed. I beg of you, Mademoiselle, to listen to me with indulgence."

"What can he be coming to?" thought Reine, wondering why he made so many preambles before beginning. And, at the same time, her heart began to beat violently.

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

Julien took the course taken by all timid people after meditating for a long while on the best way to prepare the young girl for the communication he had taken upon himself to make he lost his head and inquired abruptly:

"Mademoiselle Reine, do you not intend to marry?"

Reine started, and gazed at him with a frightened air.

"I!" exclaimed she, "Oh, I have time enough and I am not in a hurry." Then, dropping her eyes: "Why do you ask that?"

"Because I know of some one who loves you and who would be glad to marry you."

She became very pale, took up one of the empty pods, twisted it nervously around her finger without speaking.

"Some one belonging to our neighborhood?" she faltered, after a few moments' silence.

"Yes; some one whom you know, and who is not a recent arrival here. Some one who possesses, I believe, sterling qualities sufficient to make a good husband, and means enough to do credit to the woman who will wed him. Doubtless you have already guessed to whom I refer?"

She sat motionless, her lips tightly closed, her features rigid, but the nervous twitching of her fingers as she bent the green stem back and forth, betrayed her inward agitation.

"No; I can not tell," she replied at last, in an almost inaudible voice.

"Truly?" he exclaimed, with an expression of astonishment, in which was a certain amount of secret satisfaction; "you can not tell whom I mean? You have never thought of the person of whom I am speaking in that light?"

"No; who is that person?"

She had raised her eyes toward his, and they shone with a deep, mysterious light.

"It is Claudet Sejournant," replied Julien, very gently; and in an altered tone.

The glow that had illumined the dark orbs of the young girl faded away, her eyelids dropped, and her countenance became as rigid as before; but Julien did not notice anything. The words he had just uttered had cost him too much agony, and he dared not look at his companion, lest he should behold her joyful surprise, and thereby aggravate his suffering.

"Ah!" said Reine, coldly, "in that case, why did not Claudet come himself and state his own case?"

"His courage failed him at the last moment and so "

"And so," continued she, with sarcastic bitterness of tone, "you took upon yourself to speak for him?"

"Yes; I promised him I would plead his cause. I was sure, moreover, that I should not have much difficulty in gaining the suit. Claudet has loved you for a long time. He is good-hearted, and a fine fellow to look at. And as to worldly advantages, his position is now equal to your own. I have made over to him, by legal contract, the half of his father's estate. What answer am I to take back?"

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: A Woodland Queen, v2

He spoke with difficulty in broken sentences, without turning his eyes toward Mademoiselle Vincart. The silence that followed his last question seemed to him unbearable, and the contrasting chirping of the noisy grasshoppers, and the buzzing of the flies in the quiet sunny garden, resounded unpleasantly in his ears.

Reine remained speechless. She was disconcerted and well-nigh overpowered by the unexpected announcement, and her brain seemed unable to bear the crowd of tumultuous and conflicting emotions which presented themselves. Certainly, she had already suspected that Claudet had a secret liking for her, but she never had thought of encouraging the feeling. The avowal of his hopes neither surprised nor hurt her; that which pained her was the intervention of Julien, who had taken in hand the cause of his relative. Was it possible that this same M. de Buxieres, who had made so audacious a display of his tender feeling in the hut, could now come forward as Claudet's advocate, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for him to do? In that case, his astonishing behavior at the fete, which had caused her so much pain, and which she had endeavored to excuse in her own mind as the untutored outbreak of his pentup love, that fiery caress, was only the insulting manifestation of a brutal caprice? The transgressor thought so little of her, she was of such small importance in his eyes, that he had no hesitation in proposing that she marry Claudet? She beheld herself scorned, humiliated, insulted by the only man in whom she ever had felt interested. In the excess of her indignation she felt herself becoming hardhearted and violent; a profound discouragement, a stony indifference to all things, impelled her to extreme measures, and, not being able at the moment to find any one on whom she could put them in operation, she was almost tempted to lay violent hands on herself.

"What shall I say to Claudet?" repeated Julien, endeavoring to conceal the suffering which was devouring his heart by an assumption of outward frigidity.

She turned slowly round, fixed her searching eyes, which had become as dark as waters reflecting a stormy sky, upon his face, and demanded, in icy tones:

"What do you advise me to say?"

Now, if Julien had been less of a novice, he would have understood that a girl who loves never addresses such a question; but the feminine heart was a book in which he was a very poor speller. He imagined that Reine was only asking him as a matter of form, and that it was from a feeling of maidenly reserve that she adopted this passive method of escaping from openly declaring her wishes. She no doubt desired his friendly aid in the matter, and he felt as if he ought to grant her that satisfaction.

"I have the conviction," stammered he, "that Claudet will make a good husband, and you will do well to accept him."

Reine bit her lip, and her paleness increased so as to set off still more the fervid lustre of her eyes. The two little brown moles stood out more visibly on her white neck, and added to her attractions.

"So be it!" exclaimed she, "tell Claudet that I consent, and that he will be welcome at La Thuiliere."

"I will tell him immediately." He bent gravely and sadly before Reine, who remained standing and motionless against the door. "Adieu, Mademoiselle!"

He turned away abruptly; plunged into the first avenue he came to, lost his way twice and finally reached the courtyard, and thence escaped at breakneck speed across the fields.

Reine maintained her statue-like pose as long as the young man's footsteps resounded on the stony paths; but when they died gradually away in the distance, when nothing could be heard save the monotonous trill of the grasshoppers basking in the sun, she threw herself down on the green heap of rubbish; she covered her face with

her hands and gave way to a passionate outburst of tears and sobs.

In the meanwhile, Julien de Buxieres, angry with himself, irritated by the speedy success of his mission, was losing his way among the pasturages, and getting entangled in the thickets. All the details of the interview presented themselves before his mind with remorseless clearness. He seemed more lonely, more unfortunate, more disgusted with himself and with all else than he ever had been before. Ashamed of the wretched part he had just been enacting, he felt almost childish repugnance to returning to Vivey, and tried to pick out the paths that would take him there by the longest way. But he was not sufficiently accustomed to laying out a route for himself, and when he thought he had a league farther to go, and had just leaped over an intervening hedge, the pointed roofs of the chateau appeared before him at a distance of not more than a hundred feet, and at one of the windows on the first floor he could distinguish Claudet, leaning forward, as if to interrogate him.

He remembered then the promise he had made the young huntsman; and faithful to his word, although with rage and bitterness in his heart, he raised his hat, and with effort, waved it three times above his head. At this signal, the forerunner of good news, Claudet replied by a triumphant shout, and disappeared from the window. A moment later, Julien heard the noise of furious galloping down the enclosures of the park. It was the lover, hastening to learn the particulars of the interview.