

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: Fromont and Risler

Alphonse Daudet

Table of Contents

<u>Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: Fromont and Risler, v4</u>	1
<u>Alphonse Daudet</u>	1
BOOK 4	1
<u>CHAPTER XXI. THE DAY OF RECKONING</u>	1
<u>CHAPTER XXII. THE NEW EMPLOYEE OF THE HOUSE OF FROMONT</u>	10
<u>CHAPTER XXIII. CAFE CHANTANT</u>	17
<u>CHAPTER XXIV. SIDONIE'S VENGEANCE</u>	27

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- BOOK 4.

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- CHAPTER XXII. THE NEW EMYLOYEE OF THE HOUSE OF FROMONT
- CHAPTER XXIII. CAFE CHANTANT
- CHAPTER XXIV. SIDONIE'S VENGEANCE

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BOOK 4.

CHAPTER XXI. THE DAY OF RECKONING

The great clock of Saint-Gervais struck one in the morning. It was so cold that the fine snow, flying through the air, hardened as it fell, covering the pavements with a slippery, white blanket.

Risler, wrapped in his cloak, was hastening home from the brewery through the deserted streets of the Marais. He had been celebrating, in company with his two faithful borrowers, Chebe and Delobelle, his first moment of leisure, the end of that almost endless period of seclusion during which he had been superintending the manufacture of his press, with all the searchings, the joys, and the disappointments of the inventor. It had been long, very long. At the last moment he had discovered a defect. The crane did not work well; and he had had to revise his plans and drawings. At last, on that very day, the new machine had been tried. Everything had succeeded to his heart's desire. The worthy man was triumphant. It seemed to him that he had paid a debt, by giving the house of Fromont the benefit of a new machine, which would lessen the labor, shorten the hours of the workmen, and at the same time double the profits and the reputation of the factory. He indulged in beautiful dreams as he plodded along. His footsteps rang out proudly, emphasized by the resolute and happy trend of his thoughts.

Quickening his pace, he reached the corner of Rue des Vieilles-Haudriettes. A long line of carriages was standing in front of the factory, and the light of their lanterns in the street, the shadows of the drivers seeking shelter from the snow in the corners and angles that those old buildings have retained despite the straightening of the sidewalks, gave an animated aspect to that deserted, silent quarter.

"Yes, yes! to be sure," thought the honest fellow, "we have a ball at our house." He remembered that Sidonie was giving a grand musical and dancing party, which she had excused him from attending, by the way, knowing that he was very busy.

Shadows passed and repassed behind the fluttering veil of the curtains; the orchestra seemed to follow the movements of those stealthy apparitions with the rising and falling of its muffled notes. The guests were dancing. Risler let his eyes rest for a moment on that phantasmagoria of the ball, and fancied that he recognized Sidonie's shadow in a small room adjoining the salon.

She was standing erect in her magnificent costume, in the attitude of a pretty woman before her mirror. A shorter shadow behind her, Madame Dobson doubtless, was repairing some accident to the costume, retieing the knot of a ribbon tied about her neck, its long ends floating down to the flounces of the train. It was all very indistinct, but the woman's graceful figure was recognizable in those faintly traced outlines, and Risler tarried long admiring her.

The contrast on the first floor was most striking. There was no light visible, with the exception of a little lamp shining through the lilac hangings of the bedroom. Risler noticed that circumstance, and as the little girl had been ailing a few days before, he felt anxious about her, remembering Madame Georges's strange agitation when she passed him so hurriedly in the afternoon; and he retraced his steps as far as Pere Achille's lodge to inquire.

The lodge was full. Coachmen were warming themselves around the stove, chatting and laughing amid the smoke from their pipes. When Risler appeared there was profound silence, a cunning, inquisitive, significant silence. They had evidently been speaking of him.

"Is the Fromont child still sick?" he asked.

"No, not the child, Monsieur."

"Monsieur Georges sick?"

"Yes, he was taken when he came home to-night. I went right off to get the doctor. He said that it wouldn't amount to anything that all Monsieur needed was rest."

As Risler closed the door Pere Achille added, under his breath, with the half-fearful, half-audacious insolence of an inferior, who would like to be listened to and yet not distinctly heard:

"Ah! 'dame', they're not making such a show on the first floor as they are on the second."

This is what had happened.

Fromont jeune, on returning home during the evening, had found his wife with such a changed, heartbroken face, that he at once divined a catastrophe. But he had become so accustomed in the past two years to sin with impunity that it did not for one moment occur to him that his wife could have been informed of his conduct. Claire, for her part, to avoid humiliating him, was generous enough to speak only of Savigny.

"Grandpapa refused," she said.

The miserable man turned frightfully pale.

"I am lost I am lost!" he muttered two or three times in the wild accents of fever; and his sleepless nights, a last terrible scene which he had had with Sidonie, trying to induce her not to give this party on the eve of his downfall, M. Gardinois' refusal, all these maddening things which followed so closely on one another's heels and had agitated him terribly, culminated in a genuine nervous attack. Claire took pity on him, put him to bed, and established herself by his side; but her voice had lost that affectionate intonation which soothes and persuades. There was in her gestures, in the way in which she arranged the pillow under the patient's head and prepared a quieting draught, a strange indifference, listlessness.

"But I have ruined you!" Georges said from time to time, as if to rouse her from that apathy which made him uncomfortable. She replied with a proud, disdainful gesture. Ah! if he had done only that to her!

At last, however, his nerves became calmer, the fever subsided, and he fell asleep.

She remained to attend to his wants.

"It is my duty," she said to herself.

Her duty. She had reached that point with the man whom she had adored so blindly, with the hope of a long and happy life together.

At that moment the ball in Sidonie's apartments began to become very animated. The ceiling trembled rhythmically, for Madame had had all the carpets removed from her salons for the greater comfort of the dancers. Sometimes, too, the sound of voices reached Claire's ears in waves, and frequent tumultuous applause, from which one could divine the great number of the guests, the crowded condition of the rooms.

Claire was lost in thought. She did not waste time in regrets, in fruitless lamentations. She knew that life was inflexible and that all the arguments in the world will not arrest the cruel logic of its inevitable progress. She did not ask herself how that man had succeeded in deceiving her so long how he could have sacrificed the honor and happiness of his family for a mere caprice. That was the fact, and all her reflections could not wipe it out, could not repair the irreparable. The subject that engrossed her thoughts was the future. A new existence was unfolding before her eyes, dark, cruel, full of privation and toil; and, strangely enough, the prospect of ruin, instead of terrifying her, restored all her courage. The idea of the change of abode made necessary by the economy they would be obliged to practise, of work made compulsory for Georges and perhaps for herself, infused an indefinable energy into the distressing calmness of her despair. What a heavy burden of souls she would have with her three children: her mother, her child, and her husband! The feeling of responsibility prevented her giving way too much to her misfortune, to the wreck of her love; and in proportion as she forgot herself in the thought of the weak creatures she had to protect she realized more fully the meaning of the word "sacrifice," so vague on careless lips, so serious when it becomes a rule of life.

Such were the poor woman's thoughts during that sad vigil, a vigil of arms and tears, while she was preparing her forces for the great battle. Such was the scene lighted by the modest little lamp which Risler had seen from below, like a star fallen from the radiant chandeliers of the ballroom.

Reassured by Pere Achille's reply, the honest fellow thought of going up to his bedroom, avoiding the festivities and the guests, for whom he cared little.

On such occasions he used a small servants' staircase communicating with the counting-room. So he walked through the many-windowed workshops, which the moon, reflected by the snow, made as light as at noonday. He breathed the atmosphere of the day of toil, a hot, stifling atmosphere, heavy with the odor of boiled talc and varnish. The papers spread out on the dryers formed long, rustling paths. On all sides tools were lying about, and blouses hanging here and there ready for the morrow. Risler never walked through the shops without a feeling of pleasure.

Suddenly he spied a light in Planus's office, at the end of that long line of deserted rooms. The old cashier was still at work, at one o'clock in the morning! That was really most extraordinary.

Risler's first impulse was to retrace his steps. In fact, since his unaccountable falling-out with Sigismond, since the cashier had adopted that attitude of cold silence toward him, he had avoided meeting him. His wounded friendship had always led him to shun an explanation; he had a sort of pride in not asking Planus why he bore him

ill-will. But, on that evening, Risler felt so strongly the need of cordial sympathy, of pouring out his heart to some one, and then it was such an excellent opportunity for a tete-a-tete with his former friend, that he did not try to avoid him but boldly entered the counting-room.

The cashier was sitting there, motionless, among heaps of papers and great books, which he had been turning over, some of which had fallen to the floor. At the sound of his employer's footsteps he did not even lift his eyes. He had recognized Risler's step. The latter, somewhat abashed, hesitated a moment; then, impelled by one of those secret springs which we have within us and which guide us, despite ourselves, in the path of our destiny, he walked straight to the cashier's grating.

"Sigismond," he said in a grave voice.

The old man raised his head and displayed a shrunken face down which two great tears were rolling, the first perhaps that that animate column of figures had ever shed in his life.

"You are weeping, old man? What troubles you?"

And honest Risler, deeply touched, held out his hand to his friend, who hastily withdrew his. That movement of repulsion was so instinctive, so brutal, that all Risler's emotion changed to indignation.

He drew himself up with stern dignity.

"I offer you my hand, Sigismond Planus!" he said.

"And I refuse to take it," said Planus, rising.

There was a terrible pause, during which they heard the muffled music of the orchestra upstairs and the noise of the ball, the dull, wearing noise of floors shaken by the rhythmic movement of the dance.

"Why do you refuse to take my hand?" demanded Risler simply, while the grating upon which he leaned trembled with a metallic quiver.

Sigismond was facing him, with both hands on his desk, as if to emphasize and drive home what he was about to say in reply.

"Why? Because you have ruined the house; because in a few hours a messenger from the Bank will come and stand where you are, to collect a hundred thousand francs; and because, thanks to you, I haven't a sou in the cash-box that's the reason why!"

Risler was stupefied.

"I have ruined the house I?"

"Worse than that, Monsieur. You have allowed it to be ruined by your wife, and you have arranged with her to benefit by our ruin and your dishonor. Oh! I can see your game well enough. The money your wife has wormed out of the wretched Fromont, the house at Asnieres, the diamonds and all the rest is invested in her name, of course, out of reach of disaster; and of course you can retire from business now."

"Oh oh!" exclaimed Risler in a faint voice, a restrained voice rather, that was insufficient for the multitude of thoughts it strove to express; and as he stammered helplessly he drew the grating toward him with such force that he broke off a piece of it. Then he staggered, fell to the floor, and lay there motionless, speechless, retaining only,

in what little life was still left in him, the firm determination not to die until he had justified himself. That determination must have been very powerful; for while his temples throbbed madly, hammered by the blood that turned his face purple, while his ears were ringing and his glazed eyes seemed already turned toward the terrible unknown, the unhappy man muttered to himself in a thick voice, like the voice of a shipwrecked man speaking with his mouth full of water in a howling gale: "I must live! I must live!"

When he recovered consciousness, he was sitting on the cushioned bench on which the workmen sat huddled together on pay-day, his cloak on the floor, his cravat untied, his shirt open at the neck, cut by Sigismond's knife. Luckily for him, he had cut his hands when he tore the grating apart; the blood had flowed freely, and that accident was enough to avert an attack of apoplexy. On opening his eyes, he saw on either side old Sigismond and Madame Georges, whom the cashier had summoned in his distress. As soon as Risler could speak, he said to her in a choking voice:

"Is this true, Madame Chorche is this true that he just told me?"

She had not the courage to deceive him, so she turned her eyes away.

"So," continued the poor fellow, "so the house is ruined, and I "

"No, Risler, my friend. No, not you."

"My wife, was it not? Oh! it is horrible! This is how I have paid my debt of gratitude to you. But you, Madame Chorche, you could not have believed that I was a party to this infamy?"

"No, my friend, no; be calm. I know that you are the most honorable man on earth."

He looked at her a moment, with trembling lips and clasped hands, for there was something child-like in all the manifestations of that artless nature.

"Oh! Madame Chorche, Madame Chorche," he murmured. "When I think that I am the one who has ruined you."

In the terrible blow which overwhelmed him, and by which his heart, overflowing with love for Sidonie, was most deeply wounded, he refused to see anything but the financial disaster to the house of Fromont, caused by his blind devotion to his wife. Suddenly he stood erect.

"Come," he said, "let us not give way to emotion. We must see about settling our accounts."

Madame Fromont was frightened.

"Risler, Risler where are you going?"

She thought that he was going up to Georges' room.

Risler understood her and smiled in superb disdain.

"Never fear, Madame. Monsieur Georges can sleep in peace. I have something more urgent to do than avenge my honor as a husband. Wait for me here. I will come back."

He darted toward the narrow staircase; and Claire, relying upon his word, remained with Planus during one of those supreme moments of uncertainty which seem interminable because of all the conjectures with which they are thronged.

A few moments later the sound of hurried steps, the rustling of silk filled the dark and narrow staircase. Sidonie appeared first, in ball costume, gorgeously arrayed and so pale that the jewels that glistened everywhere on her dead-white flesh seemed more alive than she, as if they were scattered over the cold marble of a statue. The breathlessness due to dancing, the trembling of intense excitement and her rapid descent, caused her to shake from head to foot, and her floating ribbons, her ruffles, her flowers, her rich and fashionable attire drooped tragically about her. Risler followed her, laden with jewel-cases, caskets, and papers. Upon reaching his apartments he had pounced upon his wife's desk, seized everything valuable that it contained, jewels, certificates, title-deeds of the house at Asnieres; then, standing in the doorway, he had shouted into the ballroom:

"Madame Risler!"

She had run quickly to him, and that brief scene had in no wise disturbed the guests, then at the height of the evening's enjoyment. When she saw her husband standing in front of the desk, the drawers broken open and overturned on the carpet with the multitude of trifles they contained, she realized that something terrible was taking place.

"Come at once," said Risler; "I know all."

She tried to assume an innocent, dignified attitude; but he seized her by the arm with such force that Frantz's words came to her mind: "It will kill him perhaps, but he will kill you first." As she was afraid of death, she allowed herself to be led away without resistance, and had not even the strength to lie.

"Where are we going?" she asked, in a low voice.

Risler did not answer. She had only time to throw over her shoulders, with the care for herself that never failed her, a light tulle veil, and he dragged her, pushed her, rather, down the stairs leading to the counting-room, which he descended at the same time, his steps close upon hers, fearing that his prey would escape.

"There!" he said, as he entered the room. "We have stolen, we make restitution. Look, Planus, you can raise money with all this stuff." And he placed on the cashier's desk all the fashionable plunder with which his arms were filled feminine trinkets, trivial aids to coquetry, stamped papers.

Then he turned to his wife:

"Take off your jewels! Come, be quick."

She complied slowly, opened reluctantly the clasps of bracelets and buckles, and above all the superb fastening of her diamond necklace on which the initial of her name—a gleaming S—resembled a sleeping serpent, imprisoned in a circle of gold. Risler, thinking that she was too slow, ruthlessly broke, the fragile fastenings. Luxury shrieked beneath his fingers, as if it were being whipped.

"Now it is my turn," he said; "I too must give up everything. Here is my portfolio. What else have I? What else have I?"

He searched his pockets feverishly.

"Ah! my watch. With the chain it will bring four-thousand francs. My rings, my wedding-ring. Everything goes into the cash-box, everything. We have a hundred thousand francs to pay this morning. As soon as it is daylight we must go to work, sell out and pay our debts. I know some one who wants the house at Asnieres. That can be settled at once."

He alone spoke and acted. Sigismond and Madame Georges watched him without speaking. As for Sidonie, she seemed unconscious, lifeless. The cold air blowing from the garden through the little door, which was opened at the time of Risler's swoon, made her shiver, and she mechanically drew the folds of her scarf around her shoulders, her eyes fixed on vacancy, her thoughts wandering. Did she not hear the violins of her ball, which reached their ears in the intervals of silence, like bursts of savage irony, with the heavy thud of the dancers shaking the floors? An iron hand, falling upon her, aroused her abruptly from her torpor. Risler had taken her by the arm, and, leading her before his partner's wife, he said:

"Down on your knees!"

Madame Fromont drew back, remonstrating:

"No, no, Risler, not that."

"It must be," said the implacable Risler. "Restitution, reparation! Down on your knees then, wretched woman!" And with irresistible force he threw Sidonie at Claire's feet; then, still holding her arm;

"You will repeat after me, word for word, what I say: Madame "

Sidonie, half dead with fear, repeated faintly: "Madame "

"A whole lifetime of humility and submission "

"A whole lifetime of humil No, I can not!" she exclaimed, springing to her feet with the agility of a deer; and, wresting herself from Risler's grasp, through that open door which had tempted her from the beginning of this horrible scene, luring her out into the darkness of the night to the liberty obtainable by flight, she rushed from the house, braving the falling snow and the wind that stung her bare shoulders.

"Stop her, stop her! Risler, Planus, I implore you! In pity's name do not let her go in this way," cried Claire.

Planus stepped toward the door.

Risler detained him.

"I forbid you to stir! I ask your pardon, Madame, but we have more important matters than this to consider. Madame Risler concerns us no longer. We have to save the honor of the house of Fromont, which alone is at stake, which alone fills my thoughts at this moment."

Sigismond put out his hand.

"You are a noble man, Risler. Forgive me for having suspected you."

Risler pretended not to hear him.

"A hundred thousand francs to pay, you say? How much is there left in the strong-box?"

He sat bravely down behind the gratin, looking over the books of account, the certificates of stock in the funds, opening the jewel-cases, estimating with Planus, whose father had been a jeweller, the value of all those diamonds, which he had once so admired on his wife, having no suspicion of their real value.

Meanwhile Claire, trembling from head to foot, looked out through the window at the little garden, white with snow, where Sidonie's footsteps were already effaced by the fast-falling flakes, as if to bear witness that that precipitate departure was without hope of return.

Up-stairs they were still dancing. The mistress of the house was supposed to be busy with the preparations for supper, while she was flying, bare-headed, forcing back sobs and shrieks of rage.

Where was she going? She had started off like a mad woman, running across the garden and the courtyard of the factory, and under the dark arches, where the cruel, freezing wind blew in eddying circles. Pere Achille did not recognize her; he had seen so many shadows wrapped in white pass his lodge that night.

The young woman's first thought was to join the tenor Cazaboni, whom at the last she had not dared to invite to her ball; but he lived at Montmartre, and that was very far away for her to go, in that garb; and then, would he be at home? Her parents would take her in, doubtless; but she could already hear Madame Chebe's lamentations and the little man's sermon under three heads. Thereupon she thought of Delobelle, her old Delobelle. In the downfall of all her splendors she remembered the man who had first initiated her into fashionable life, who had given her lessons in dancing and deportment when she was a little girl, laughed at her pretty ways, and taught her to look upon herself as beautiful before any one had ever told her that she was so. Something told her that that fallen star would take her part against all others. She entered one of the carriages standing at the gate and ordered the driver to take her to the actor's lodgings on the Boulevard Beaumarchais.

For some time past Mamma Delobelle had been making straw hats for export— a dismal trade if ever there was one, which brought in barely two francs fifty for twelve hours' work.

And Delobelle continued to grow fat in the same degree that his "sainted wife" grew thin. At the very moment when some one knocked hurriedly at his door he had just discovered a fragrant soup 'au fromage', which had been kept hot in the ashes on the hearth. The actor, who had been witnessing at Beaumarchais some dark-browed melodrama drenched with gore even to the illustrated headlines of its poster, was startled by that knock at such an advanced hour.

"Who is there?" he asked in some alarm.

"It is I, Sidonie. Open the door quickly."

She entered the room, shivering all over, and, throwing aside her wrap, went close to the stove where the fire was almost extinct. She began to talk at once, to pour out the wrath that had been stifling her for an hour, and while she was describing the scene in the factory, lowering her voice because of Madame Delobelle, who was asleep close by, the magnificence of her costume in that poor, bare, fifth floor, the dazzling whiteness of her disordered finery amid the heaps of coarse hats and the wisps of straw strewn about the room, all combined to produce the effect of a veritable drama, of one of those terrible upheavals of life when rank, feelings, fortunes are suddenly jumbled together.

"Oh! I never shall return home. It is all over. Free I am free!"

"But who could have betrayed you to your husband?" asked the actor.

"It was Frantz! I am sure it was Frantz. He wouldn't have believed it from anybody else. Only last evening a letter came from Egypt. Oh! how he treated me before that woman! To force me to kneel! But I'll be revenged. Luckily I took something to revenge myself with before I came away.

And the smile of former days played about the corners of her pale lips.

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: Fromont and Risler, v4

The old strolling player listened to it all with deep interest. Notwithstanding his compassion for that poor devil of a Risler, and for Sidonie herself, for that matter, who seemed to him, in theatrical parlance, "a beautiful culprit," he could not help viewing the affair from a purely scenic standpoint, and finally cried out, carried away by his hobby:

"What a first-class situation for a fifth act!"

She did not bear him. Absorbed by some evil thought, which made her smile in anticipation, she stretched out to the fire her dainty shoes, saturated with snow, and her openwork stockings.

"Well, what do you propose to do now?" Delobelle asked after a pause.

"Stay here till daylight and get a little rest. Then I will see."

"I have no bed to offer you, my poor girl. Mamma Delobelle has gone to bed."

"Don't you worry about me, my dear Delobelle. I'll sleep in that armchair. I won't be in your way, I tell you!"

The actor heaved a sigh.

"Ah! yes, that armchair. It was our poor Zizi's. She sat up many a night in it, when work was pressing. Ah, me! those who leave this world are much the happiest."

He had always at hand such selfish, comforting maxims. He had no sooner uttered that one than he discovered with dismay that his soup would soon be stone-cold. Sidonie noticed his movement.

"Why, you were just eating your supper, weren't you? Pray go on."

"'Dame'! yes, what would you have? It's part of the trade, of the hard existence we fellows have. For you see, my girl, I stand firm. I haven't given up. I never will give up."

What still remained of Desiree's soul in that wretched household in which she had lived twenty years must have shuddered at that terrible declaration. He never would give up!

"No matter what people may say," continued Delobelle, "it's the noblest profession in the world. You are free; you depend upon nobody. Devoted to the service of glory and the public! Ah! I know what I would do in your place. As if you were born to live with all those bourgeois the devil! What you need is the artistic life, the fever of success, the unexpected, intense emotion."

As he spoke he took his seat, tucked his napkin in his neck, and helped himself to a great plateful of soup.

"To say nothing of the fact that your triumphs as a pretty woman would in no wise interfere with your triumph as an actress. By the way, do you know, you must take a few lessons in elocution. With your voice, your intelligence, your charms, you would have a magnificent prospect."

Then he added abruptly, as if to initiate her into the joys of the dramatic art:

"But it occurs to me that perhaps you have not supped! Excitement makes one hungry; sit there, and take this soup. I am sure that you haven't eaten soup 'au fromage' for a long while."

He turned the closet topsy-turvy to find her a spoon and a napkin; and she took her seat opposite him, assisting him and laughing a little at the difficulties attending her entertainment. She was less pale already, and there was a pretty sparkle in her eyes, composed of the tears of a moment before and the present gayety.

The strolling actress! All her happiness in life was lost forever: honor, family, wealth. She was driven from her house, stripped, dishonored. She had undergone all possible humiliations and disasters. That did not prevent her supping with a wonderful appetite and joyously holding her own under Delobelle's jocose remarks concerning her vocation and her future triumphs. She felt light-hearted and happy, fairly embarked for the land of Bohemia, her true country. What more would happen to her? Of how many ups and downs was her new, unforeseen, and whimsical existence to consist? She thought about that as she fell asleep in Desiree's great easy-chair; but she thought of her revenge, too her cherished revenge which she held in her hand, all ready for use, and so unerring, so fierce!

CHAPTER XXII. THE NEW EMPLOYEE OF THE HOUSE OF FROMONT

It was broad daylight when Fromont Jeune awoke. All night long, between the drama that was being enacted below him and the festivity in joyous progress above, he slept with clenched fists, the deep sleep of complete prostration like that of a condemned man on the eve of his execution or of a defeated General on the night following his disaster; a sleep from which one would wish never to awake, and in which, in the absence of all sensation, one has a foretaste of death.

The bright light streaming through his curtains, made more dazzling by the deep snow with which the garden and the surrounding roofs were covered, recalled him to the consciousness of things as they were. He felt a shock throughout his whole being, and, even before his mind began to work, that vague impression of melancholy which misfortunes, momentarily forgotten, leave in their place. All the familiar noises of the factory, the dull throbbing of the machinery, were in full activity. So the world still existed! and by slow degrees the idea of his own responsibility awoke in him.

"To-day is the day," he said to himself, with an involuntary movement toward the dark side of the room, as if he longed to bury himself anew in his long sleep.

The factory bell rang, then other bells in the neighborhood, then the Angelus.

"Noon! Already! How I have slept!"

He felt some little remorse and a great sense of relief at the thought that the drama of settling-day had passed off without him. What had they done downstairs? Why did they not call him?

He rose, drew the curtains aside, and saw Risler and Sigismond talking together in the garden. And it was so long since they had spoken to each other! What in heaven's name had happened? When he was ready to go down he found Claire at the door of his room.

"You must not go out," she said.

"Why not?"

"Stay here. I will explain it to you."

"But what's the matter? Did any one come from the Bank?"

"Yes, they came the notes are paid."

"Paid?"

"Risler obtained the money. He has been rushing about with Planus since early morning. It seems that his wife had superb jewels. The diamond necklace alone brought twenty thousand francs. He has also sold their house at Asnieres with all it contained; but as time was required to record the deed, Planus and his sister advanced the money."

She turned away from him as she spoke. He, on his side, hung his head to avoid her glance.

"Risler is an honorable man," she continued, "and when he learned from whom his wife received all her magnificent things "

"What!" exclaimed Georges in dismay. "He knows?"

"All," Claire replied, lowering her voice.

The wretched man turned pale, stammered feebly:

"Why, then you?"

"Oh! I knew it all before Risler. Remember, that when I came home last night, I told you I had heard very cruel things down at Savigny, and that I would have given ten years of my life not to have taken that journey."

"Claire!"

Moved by a mighty outburst of affection, he stepped toward his wife; but her face was so cold, so sad, so resolute, her despair was so plainly written in the stern indifference of her whole bearing, that he dared not take her in his arms as he longed to do, but simply murmured under his breath:

"Forgive! forgive!"

"You must think me strangely calm," said the brave woman; "but I shed all my tears yesterday. You may have thought that I was weeping over our ruin; you were mistaken. While one is young and strong as we are, such cowardly conduct is not permissible. We are armed against want and can fight it face to face. No, I was weeping for our departed happiness, for you, for the madness that led you to throw away your only, your true friend."

She was lovely, lovelier than Sidonie had ever been, as she spoke thus, enveloped by a pure light which seemed to fall upon her from a great height, like the radiance of a fathomless, cloudless sky; whereas the other's irregular features had always seemed to owe their brilliancy, their saucy, insolent charm to the false glamour of the footlights in some cheap theatre. The touch of statuesque immobility formerly noticeable in Claire's face was vivified by anxiety, by doubt, by all the torture of passion; and like those gold ingots which have their full value only when the Mint has placed its stamp upon them, those beautiful features stamped with the effigy of sorrow had acquired since the preceding day an ineffaceable expression which perfected their beauty.

Georges gazed at her in admiration. She seemed to him more alive, more womanly, and worthy of adoration because of their separation and all the obstacles that he now knew to stand between them. Remorse, despair, shame entered his heart simultaneously with this new love, and he would have fallen on his knees before her.

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: Fromont and Risler, v4

"No, no, do not kneel," said Claire; "if you knew of what you remind me, if you knew what a lying face, distorted with hatred, I saw at my feet last night!"

"Ah! but I am not lying," replied Georges with a shudder. "Claire, I implore you, in the name of our child "

At that moment some one knocked at the door.

"Rise, I beg of you! You see that life has claims upon us," she said in a low voice and with a bitter smile; then she asked what was wanted.

Monsieur Risler had sent for Monsieur to come down to the office.

"Very well," she said; "say that he will come."

Georges approached the door, but she stopped him.

"No, let me go. He must not see you yet."

"But "

"I wish you to stay here. You have no idea of the indignation and wrath of that poor man, whom you have deceived. If you had seen him last night, crushing his wife's wrists!"

As she said it she looked him in the face with a curiosity most cruel to herself; but Georges did not wince, and replied simply:

"My life belongs to him."

"It belongs to me, too; and I do not wish you to go down. There has been scandal enough in my father's house. Remember that the whole factory is aware of what is going on. Every one is watching us, spying upon us. It required all the authority of the foremen to keep the men busy to-day, to compel them to keep their inquisitive looks on their work."

"But I shall seem to be hiding."

"And suppose it were so! That is just like a man. They do not recoil from the worst crimes: betraying a wife, betraying a friend; but the thought that they may be accused of being afraid touches them more keenly than anything. Moreover, listen to what I say. Sidonie has gone; she has gone forever; and if you leave this house I shall think that you have gone to join her."

"Very well, I will stay," said Georges. "I will do whatever you wish."

Claire descended into Planus' office.

To see Risler striding to and fro, with his hands behind his back, as calm as usual, no one would ever have suspected all that had taken place in his life since the night before. As for Sigismond, he was fairly beaming, for he saw nothing in it all beyond the fact that the notes had been paid at maturity and that the honor of the firm was safe.

When Madame Fromont appeared, Risler smiled sadly and shook his head.

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: Fromont and Risler, v4

"I thought that you would prefer to come down in his place; but you are not the one with whom I have to deal. It is absolutely necessary that I should see Georges and talk with him. We have paid the notes that fell due this morning; the crisis has passed; but we must come to an understanding about many matters."

"Risler, my friend, I beg you to wait a little longer."

"Why, Madame Chorche, there's not a minute to lose. Oh! I suspect that you fear I may give way to an outbreak of anger. Have no fear let him have no fear. You know what I told you, that the honor of the house of Fromont is to be assured before my own. I have endangered it by my fault. First of all, I must repair the evil I have done or allowed to be done."

"Your conduct toward us is worthy of all admiration, my good Risler; I know it well."

"Oh! Madame, if you could see him! he's a saint," said poor Sigismond, who, not daring to speak to his friend, was determined at all events to express his remorse.

"But aren't you afraid?" continued Claire. "Human endurance has its limits. It may be that in presence of the man who has injured you so "

Risler took her hands, gazed into her eyes with grave admiration, and said:

"You dear creature, who speak of nothing but the injury done to me! Do you not know that I hate him as bitterly for his falseness to you? But nothing of that sort has any existence for me at this moment. You see in me simply a business man who wishes to have an understanding with his partner for the good of the firm. So let him come down without the slightest fear, and if you dread any outbreak on my part, stay here with us. I shall need only to look at my old master's daughter to be reminded of my promise and my duty."

"I trust you, my friend," said Claire; and she went up to bring her husband.

The first minute of the interview was terrible. Georges was deeply moved, humiliated, pale as death. He would have preferred a hundred times over to be looking into the barrel of that man's pistol at twenty paces, awaiting his fire, instead of appearing before him as an unpunished culprit and being compelled to confine his feelings within the commonplace limits of a business conversation.

Risler pretended not to look at him, and continued to pace the floor as he talked:

"Our house is passing through a terrible crisis. We have averted the disaster for to-day; but this is not the last of our obligations. That cursed invention has kept my mind away from the business for a long while. Luckily, I am free now, and able to attend to it. But you must give your attention to it as well. The workmen and clerks have followed the example of their employers to some extent. Indeed, they have become extremely negligent and indifferent. This morning, for the first time in a year, they began work at the proper time. I expect that you will make it your business to change all that. As for me, I shall work at my drawings again. Our patterns are old-fashioned. We must have new ones for the new machines. I have great confidence in our presses. The experiments have succeeded beyond my hopes. We unquestionably have in them a means of building up our business. I didn't tell you sooner because I wished to surprise you; but we have no more surprises for each other, have we, Georges?"

There was such a stinging note of irony in his voice that Claire shuddered, fearing an outbreak; but he continued, in his natural tone.

"Yes, I think I can promise that in six months the Risler Press will begin to show magnificent results. But those six months will be very hard to live through. We must limit ourselves, cut down our expenses, save in every way that we can. We have five draughtsmen now; hereafter we will have but two. I will undertake to make the absence of the others of no consequence by working at night myself. Furthermore, beginning with this month, I abandon my interest in the firm. I will take my salary as foreman as I took it before, and nothing more."

Fromont attempted to speak, but a gesture from his wife restrained him, and Risler continued:

"I am no longer your partner, Georges. I am once more the clerk that I never should have ceased to be. From this day our partnership articles are cancelled. I insist upon it, you understand; I insist upon it. We will remain in that relation to each other until the house is out of difficulty and I can But what I shall do then concerns me alone. This is what I wanted to say to you, Georges. You must give your attention to the factory diligently; you must show yourself, make it felt that you are master now, and I believe there will turn out to be, among all our misfortunes, some that can be retrieved."

During the silence that followed, they heard the sound of wheels in the garden, and two great furniture vans stopped at the door.

"I beg your pardon," said Risler, "but I must leave you a moment. Those are the vans from the public auction rooms; they have come to take away my furniture from upstairs."

"What! you are going to sell your furniture too?" asked Madame Fromont.

"Certainly to the last piece. I am simply giving it back to the firm. It belongs to it."

"But that is impossible," said Georges. "I can not allow that."

Risler turned upon him indignantly.

"What's that? What is it that you can't allow?"

Claire checked him with an imploring gesture.

"True true!" he muttered; and he hurried from the room to escape the sudden temptation to give vent to all that was in his heart.

The second floor was deserted. The servants, who had been paid and dismissed in the morning, had abandoned the apartments to the disorder of the day following a ball; and they wore the aspect peculiar to places where a drama has been enacted, and which are left in suspense, as it were, between the events that have happened and those that are still to happen. The open doors, the rugs lying in heaps in the corners, the salvers laden with glasses, the preparations for the supper, the table still set and untouched, the dust from the dancing on all the furniture, its odor mingled with the fumes of punch, of withered flowers, of rice— powder all these details attracted Risler's notice as he entered.

In the disordered salon the piano was open, the bacchanal from 'Orphee aux Enfers' on the music—shelf, and the gaudy hangings surrounding that scene of desolation, the chairs overturned, as if in fear, reminded one of the saloon of a wrecked packet—boat, of one of those ghostly nights of watching when one is suddenly informed, in the midst of a fete at sea, that the ship has sprung a leak, that she is taking in water in every part.

The men began to remove the furniture. Risler watched them at work with an indifferent air, as if he were in a stranger's house. That magnificence which had once made him so happy and proud inspired in him now an

insurmountable disgust. But, when he entered his wife's bedroom, he was conscious of a vague emotion.

It was a large room, hung with blue satin under white lace. A veritable cocotte's nest. There were torn and rumpled tulle ruffles lying about, bows, and artificial flowers. The wax candles around the mirror had burned down to the end and cracked the candlesticks; and the bed, with its lace flounces and valances, its great curtains raised and drawn back, untouched in the general confusion, seemed like the bed of a corpse, a state bed on which no one would ever sleep again.

Risler's first feeling upon entering the room was one of mad indignation, a longing to fall upon the things before him, to tear and rend and shatter everything. Nothing, you see, resembles a woman so much as her bedroom. Even when she is absent, her image still smiles in the mirrors that have reflected it. A little something of her, of her favorite perfume, remains in everything she has touched. Her attitudes are reproduced in the cushions of her couch, and one can follow her goings and comings between the mirror and the toilette table in the pattern of the carpet. The one thing above all others in that room that recalled Sidonie was an 'etagere' covered with childish toys, petty, trivial knickknacks, microscopic fans, dolls' tea-sets, gilded shoes, little shepherds and shepherdesses facing one another, exchanging cold, gleaming, porcelain glances. That 'etagere' was Sidonie's very soul, and her thoughts, always commonplace, petty, vain, and empty, resembled those gewgaws. Yes, in very truth, if Risler, while he held her in his grasp last night, had in his frenzy broken that fragile little head, a whole world of 'etagere' ornaments would have come from it in place of a brain.

The poor man was thinking sadly of all these things amid the ringing of hammers and the heavy footsteps of the furniture-movers, when he heard an interloping, authoritative step behind him, and Monsieur Chebe appeared, little Monsieur Chebe, flushed and breathless, with flames darting from his eyes. He assumed, as always, a very high tone with his son-in-law.

"What does this mean? What is this I hear? Ah! so you're moving, are you?"

"I am not moving, Monsieur Chebe I am selling out."

The little man gave a leap like a scalded fish.

"You are selling out? What are you selling, pray?"

"I am selling everything," said Risler in a hollow voice, without even looking at him.

"Come, come, son-in-law, be reasonable. God knows I don't say that Sidonie's conduct But, for my part, I know nothing about it. I never wanted to know anything. Only I must remind you of your dignity. People wash their dirty linen in private, deuce take it! They don't make spectacles of themselves as you've been doing ever since morning. Just see everybody at the workshop windows; and on the porch, too! Why, you're the talk of the quarter, my dear fellow."

"So much the better. The dishonor was public, the reparation must be public, too."

This apparent coolness, this indifference to all his observations, exasperated Monsieur Chebe. He suddenly changed his tactics, and adopted, in addressing his son-in-law, the serious, peremptory tone which one uses with children or lunatics.

"Well, I say that you haven't any right to take anything away from here. I remonstrate formally, with all my strength as a man, with all my authority as a father. Do you suppose I am going to let you drive my child into the street. No, indeed! Oh! no, indeed! Enough of such nonsense as that! Nothing more shall go out of these rooms."

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: Fromont and Risler, v4

And Monsieur Chebe, having closed the door, planted himself in front of it with a heroic gesture. Deuce take it! his own interest was at stake in the matter. The fact was that when his child was once in the gutter he ran great risk of not having a feather bed to sleep on himself. He was superb in that attitude of an indignant father, but he did not keep it long. Two hands, two vises, seized his wrists, and he found himself in the middle of the room, leaving the doorway clear for the workmen.

"Chebe, my boy, just listen," said Risler, leaning over him. "I am at the end of my forbearance. Since this morning I have been making superhuman efforts to restrain myself, but it would take very little now to make my anger burst all bonds, and woe to the man on whom it falls! I am quite capable of killing some one. Come! Be off at once! "

There was such an intonation in his son-in-law's voice, and the way that son-in-law shook him as he spoke was so eloquent, that Monsieur Chebe was fully convinced. He even stammered an apology. Certainly Risler had good reason for acting as he had. All honorable people would be on his side. And he backed toward the door as he spoke. When he reached it, he inquired timidly if Madame Chebe's little allowance would be continued.

"Yes," was Risler's reply, "but never go beyond it, for my position here is not what it was. I am no longer a partner in the house."

Monsieur Chebe stared at him in amazement, and assumed the idiotic expression which led many people to believe that the accident that had happened to him exactly like that of the Duc d'Orleans, you know was not a fable of his own invention; but he dared not make the slightest observation. Surely some one had changed his son-in-law. Was this really Risler, this tiger-cat, who bristled up at the slightest word and talked of nothing less than killing people?

He took to his heels, recovered his self-possession at the foot of the stairs, and walked across the courtyard with the air of a conqueror.

When all the rooms were cleared and empty, Risler walked through them for the last time, then took the key and went down to Planus's office to hand it to Madame Georges.

"You can let the apartment," he said, "it will be so much added to the income of the factory."

"But you, my friend?"

"Oh! I don't need much. An iron bed up under the eaves. That's all a clerk needs. For, I repeat, I am nothing but a clerk from this time on. A useful clerk, by the way, faithful and courageous, of whom you will have no occasion to complain, I promise you."

Georges, who was going over the books with Planus, was so affected at hearing the poor fellow talk in that strain that he left his seat precipitately. He was suffocated by his sobs. Claire, too, was deeply moved; she went to the new clerk of the house of Fromont and said to him:

"Risler, I thank you in my father's name."

At that moment Pere Achille appeared with the mail.

Risler took the pile of letters, opened them tranquilly one by one, and passed them over to Sigismond.

"Here's an order for Lyon. Why wasn't it answered at Saint-Etienne?"

He plunged with all his energy into these details, and he brought to them a keen intelligence, due to the constant straining of the mind toward peace and forgetfulness.

Suddenly, among those huge envelopes, stamped with the names of business houses, the paper of which and the manner of folding suggested the office and hasty despatch, he discovered one smaller one, carefully sealed, and hidden so cunningly between the others that at first he did not notice it. He recognized instantly that long, fine, firm writing, To Monsieur Risler Personal. It was Sidonie's writing! When he saw it he felt the same sensation he had felt in the bedroom upstairs.

All his love, all the hot wrath of the betrayed husband poured back into his heart with the frantic force that makes assassins. What was she writing to him? What lie had she invented now? He was about to open the letter; then he paused. He realized that, if he should read that, it would be all over with his courage; so he leaned over to the old cashier, and said in an undertone:

"Sigismond, old friend, will you do me a favor?"

"I should think so!" said the worthy man enthusiastically. He was so delighted to hear his friend speak to him in the kindly voice of the old days.

"Here's a letter someone has written me which I don't wish to read now. I am sure it would interfere with my thinking and living. You must keep it for me, and this with it."

He took from his pocket a little package carefully tied, and handed it to him through the grating.

"That is all I have left of the past, all I have left of that woman. I have determined not to see her, nor anything that reminds me of her, until my task here is concluded, and concluded satisfactorily, I need all my intelligence, you understand. You will pay the Chebes' allowance. If she herself should ask for anything, you will give her what she needs. But you will never mention my name. And you will keep this package safe for me until I ask you for it."

Sigismond locked the letter and the package in a secret drawer of his desk with other valuable papers. Risler returned at once to his correspondence; but all the time he had before his eyes the slender English letters traced by a little hand which he had so often and so ardently pressed to his heart.

CHAPTER XXIII. CAFE CHANTANT

What a rare, what a conscientious clerk did that new employe of the house of Fromont prove himself!

Every day his lamp was the first to appear at, and the last to disappear from, the windows of the factory. A little room had been arranged for him under the eaves, exactly like the one he had formerly occupied with Frantz, a veritable Trappist's cell, furnished with an iron cot and a white wooden table, that stood under his brother's portrait. He led the same busy, regular, quiet life as in those old days.

He worked constantly, and had his meals brought from the same little creamery. But, alas! the disappearance forever of youth and hope deprived those memories of all their charm. Luckily he still had Frantz and Madame "Chorche," the only two human beings of whom he could think without a feeling of sadness. Madame "Chorche" was always at hand, always trying to minister to his comfort, to console him; and Frantz wrote to him often, without mentioning Sidonie, by the way. Risler supposed that some one had told Frantz of the disaster that had befallen him, and he too avoided all allusion to the subject in his letters. "Oh! when I can send for him to come home!" That was his dream, his sole ambition: to restore the factory and recall his brother.

Meanwhile the days succeeded one another, always the same to him in the restless activity of business and the heartrending loneliness of his grief. Every morning he walked through the workshops, where the profound respect he inspired and his stern, silent countenance had reestablished the orderly conditions that had been temporarily disturbed. In the beginning there had been much gossip, and various explanations of Sidonie's departure had been made. Some said that she had eloped with a lover, others that Risler had turned her out. The one fact that upset all conjectures was the attitude of the two partners toward each other, apparently as unconstrained as before. Sometimes, however, when they were talking together in the office, with no one by, Risler would suddenly start convulsively, as a vision of the crime passed before his eyes.

Then he would feel a mad longing to spring upon the villain, seize him by the throat, strangle him without mercy; but the thought of Madame "Chorche" was always there to restrain him. Should he be less courageous, less master of himself than that young wife? Neither Claire, nor Fromont, nor anybody else suspected what was in his mind. They could barely detect a severity, an inflexibility in his conduct, which were not habitual with him. Risler awed the workmen now; and those of them upon whom his white hair, blanched in one night, his drawn, prematurely old features did not impose respect, quailed before his strange glance—a glance from eyes of a bluish-black like the color of a gun-barrel. Whereas he had always been very kind and affable with the workmen, he had become pitilessly severe in regard to the slightest infraction of the rules. It seemed as if he were taking vengeance upon himself for some indulgence in the past, blind, culpable indulgence, for which he blamed himself.

Surely he was a marvellous employe, was this new officer in the house of Fromont.

Thanks to him, the factory bell, notwithstanding the quavering of its old, cracked voice, had very soon resumed its authority; and the man who guided the whole establishment denied himself the slightest recreation. Sober as an apprentice, he left three-fourths of his salary with Planus for the Chebes' allowance, but he never asked any questions about them. Punctually on the last day of the month the little man appeared to collect his little income, stiff and formal in his dealings with Sigismond, as became an annuitant on duty. Madame Chebe had tried to obtain an interview with her son-in-law, whom she pitied and loved; but the mere appearance of her palm-leaf shawl on the steps put Sidonie's husband to flight.

In truth, the courage with which he armed himself was more apparent than real. The memory of his wife never left him. What had become of her? What was she doing? He was almost angry with Planus for never mentioning her. That letter, above all things, that letter which he had had the courage not to open, disturbed him. He thought of it continually. Ah! had he dared, how he would have liked to ask Sigismond for it!

One day the temptation was too strong. He was alone in the office. The old cashier had gone out to luncheon, leaving the key in his drawer, a most extraordinary thing. Risler could not resist. He opened the drawer, moved the papers, and searched for his letter. It was not there. Sigismond must have put it away even more carefully, perhaps with a foreboding of what actually happened. In his heart Risler was not sorry for his disappointment; for he well knew that, had he found the letter, it would have been the end of the resigned and busy life which he imposed upon himself with so much difficulty.

Through the week it was all very well. Life was endurable, absorbed by the innumerable duties of the factory, and so fatiguing that, when night came, Risler fell on his bed like a lifeless mass. But Sunday was long and sad. The silence of the deserted yards and workshops opened a far wider field to his thoughts. He tried to busy himself, but he missed the encouragement of the others' work. He alone was busy in that great, empty factory whose very breath was arrested. The locked doors, the closed blinds, the hoarse voice of Pere Achille playing with his dog in the deserted courtyard, all spoke of solitude. And the whole neighborhood also produced the same effect. In the streets, which seemed wider because of their emptiness, and where the passers-by were few and silent, the bells ringing for vespers had a melancholy sound, and sometimes an echo of the din of Paris, rumbling wheels, a belated hand-organ, the click of a toy-peddler's clappers, broke the silence, as if to make it even more noticeable.

Risler would try to invent new combinations of flowers and leaves, and, while he handled his pencil, his thoughts, not finding sufficient food there, would escape him, would fly back to his past happiness, to his hopeless misfortunes, would suffer martyrdom, and then, on returning, would ask the poor somnambulist, still seated at his table: "What have you done in my absence?" Alas! he had done nothing.

Oh! the long, heartbreaking, cruel Sundays! Consider that, mingled with all these perplexities in his mind, was the superstitious reverence of the common people for holy days, for the twenty-four hours of rest, wherein one recovers strength and courage. If he had gone out, the sight of a workingman with his wife and child would have made him weep, but his monastic seclusion gave him other forms of suffering, the despair of recluses, their terrible outbreaks of rebellion when the god to whom they have consecrated themselves does not respond to their sacrifices. Now, Risler's god was work, and as he no longer found comfort or serenity therein, he no longer believed in it, but cursed it.

Often in those hours of mental struggle the door of the draughting-room would open gently and Claire Fromont would appear. The poor man's loneliness throughout those long Sunday afternoons filled her with compassion, and she would come with her little girl to keep him company, knowing by experience how contagious is the sweet joyousness of children. The little one, who could now walk alone, would slip from her mother's arms to run to her friend. Risler would hear the little, hurrying steps. He would feel the light breath behind him, and instantly he would be conscious of a soothing, rejuvenating influence. She would throw her plump little arms around his neck with affectionate warmth, with her artless, causeless laugh, and a kiss from that little mouth which never had lied. Claire Fromont, standing in the doorway, would smile as she looked at them.

"Risler, my friend," she would say, "you must come down into the garden a while, you work too hard. You will be ill."

"No, no, Madame, on the contrary, work is what saves me. It keeps me from thinking."

Then, after a long pause, she would continue:

"Come, my dear Risler, you must try to forget."

Risler would shake his head.

"Forget? Is that possible? There are some things beyond one's strength. A man may forgive, but he never forgets."

The child almost always succeeded in dragging him down to the garden. He must play ball, or in the sand, with her; but her playfellow's awkwardness and lack of enthusiasm soon impressed the little girl. Then she would become very sedate, contenting herself with walking gravely between the hedges of box, with her hand in her friend's. After a moment Risler would entirely forget that she was there; but, although he did not realize it, the warmth of that little hand in his had a magnetic, softening effect upon his diseased mind.

A man may forgive, but he never forgets!

Poor Claire herself knew something about it; for she had never forgotten, notwithstanding her great courage and the conception she had formed of her duty. To her, as to Risler; her surroundings were a constant reminder of her sufferings. The objects amid which she lived pitilessly reopened the wound that was ready to close. The staircase, the garden, the courtyard, all those dumb witnesses of her husband's sin, assumed on certain days an implacable expression. Even the careful precaution her husband took to spare her painful reminders, the way in which he called attention to the fact that he no longer went out in the evening, and took pains to tell her where he had been during the day, served only to remind her the more forcibly of his wrong-doing. Sometimes she longed to ask him to forbear, to nor Fromont, nor anybody else suspected what was in his mind. They could barely detect a severity,

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Risler would try to invent new combinations of flowers and leaves, and, while he handled his pencil, his thoughts, not finding sufficient food there, would escape him, would fly back to his past happiness, to his hopeless misfortunes, would suffer martyrdom, and then, on returning, would ask the poor somnambulist, still seated at his table: "What have you done in my absence?" Alas! he had done nothing.

Oh! the long, heartbreaking, cruel Sundays! Consider that, mingled with all these perplexities in his mind, was the superstitious reverence of the common people for holy days, for the twenty—four hours of rest, wherein one recovers strength and courage. If he had gone out, the sight of a workingman with his wife and child would have made him weep, but his monastic seclusion gave him other forms of suffering, the despair of recluses, their terrible outbreaks of rebellion when the god to whom they have consecrated themselves does not respond to their sacrifices. Now, Risler's god was work, and as he no longer found comfort or serenity therein, he no longer believed in it, but cursed it.

Often in those hours of mental struggle the door of the draughting—room would open gently and Claire Fromont would appear. The poor man's loneliness throughout those long Sunday afternoons filled her with compassion, and she would come with her little girl to keep him company, knowing by experience how contagious is the sweet joyousness of children. The little one, who could now walk alone, would slip from her

mother's arms to run to her friend. Risler would hear the little, hurrying steps. He would feel the light breath behind him, and instantly he would be conscious of a soothing, rejuvenating influence. She would throw her plump little arms around his neck with affectionate warmth, with her artless, causeless laugh, and a kiss from that little mouth which never had lied. Claire Fromont, standing in the doorway, would smile as she looked at them.

"Risler, my friend," she would say, "you must come down into the garden a while,—you work too hard. You will be ill."

"No, no, Madame,—on the contrary, work is what saves me. It keeps me from thinking."

Then, after a long pause, she would continue:

"Come, my dear Risler, you must try to forget."

Risler would shake his head.

"Forget? Is that possible? There are some things beyond one's strength. A man may forgive, but he never forgets."

The child almost always succeeded in dragging him down to the garden. He must play ball, or in the sand, with her; but her playfellow's awkwardness and lack of enthusiasm soon impressed the little girl. Then she would become very sedate, contenting herself with walking gravely between the hedges of box, with her hand in her friend's. After a moment Risler would entirely forget that she was there; but, although he did not realize it, the warmth of that little hand in his had a magnetic, softening effect upon his diseased mind.

A man may forgive, but he never forgets!

Poor Claire herself knew something about it; for she had never forgotten, notwithstanding her great courage and the conception she had formed of her duty. To her, as to Risler; her surroundings were a constant reminder of her sufferings. The objects amid which she lived pitilessly reopened the wound that was ready to close. The staircase, the garden, the courtyard, all those dumb witnesses of her husband's sin, assumed on certain days an implacable expression. Even the careful precaution her husband took to spare her painful reminders, the way in which he called attention to the fact that he no longer went out in the evening, and took pains to tell her where he had been during the day, served only to remind her the more forcibly of his wrong-doing. Sometimes she longed to ask him to forbear,—to say to him: "Do not protest too much." Faith was shattered within her, and the horrible agony of the priest who doubts, and seeks at the same time to remain faithful to his vows, betrayed itself in her bitter smile, her cold, uncomplaining gentleness.

Georges was wofully unhappy. He loved his wife now. The nobility of her character had conquered him. There was admiration in his love, and—why not say it?—Claire's sorrow filled the place of the coquetry which was contrary to her nature, the lack of which had always been a defect in her husband's eyes. He was one of that strange type of men who love to make conquests. Sidonie, capricious and cold as she was, responded to that whim of his heart. After parting from her with a tender farewell, he found her indifferent and forgetful the next day, and that continual need of wooing her back to him took the place of genuine passion. Serenity in love bored him as a voyage without storms wearies a sailor. On this occasion he had been very near shipwreck with his wife, and the danger had not passed even yet. He knew that Claire was alienated from him and devoted entirely to the child, the only link between them thenceforth. Their separation made her seem lovelier, more desirable, and he exercised all his powers of fascination to recapture her. He knew how hard a task it would be, and that he had no ordinary, frivolous nature to deal with. But he did not despair. Sometimes a vague gleam in the depths of the mild and apparently impassive glance with which she watched his efforts, bade him hope.

As for Sidonie, he no longer thought of her. Let no one be astonished at that abrupt mental rupture. Those two superficial beings had nothing to attach them securely to each other. Georges was incapable of receiving lasting impressions unless they were continually renewed; Sidonie, for her part, had no power to inspire any noble or durable sentiment. It was one of those intrigues between a cocotte and a coxcomb, compounded of vanity and of wounded self-love, which inspire neither devotion nor constancy, but tragic adventures, duels, suicides which are rarely fatal, and which end in a radical cure. Perhaps, had he seen her again, he might have had a relapse of his disease; but the impetus of flight had carried Sidonie away so swiftly and so far that her return was impossible. At all events, it was a relief for him to be able to live without lying; and the new life he was leading, a life of hard work and self-denial, with the goal of success in the distance, was not distasteful to him. Luckily; for the courage and determination of both partners were none too much to put the house on its feet once more.

The poor house of Fromont had sprung leaks on all sides. So Pere Planus still had wretched nights, haunted by

the nightmare of notes maturing and the ominous vision of the little blue man. But, by strict economy, they always succeeded in paying.

Soon four Risler Presses were definitively set up and used in the work of the factory. People began to take a deep interest in them and in the wall-paper trade. Lyons, Caen, Rixheim, the great centres of the industry, were much disturbed concerning that marvellous "rotary and dodecagonal" machine. One fine day the Prochassons appeared, and offered three hundred thousand francs simply for an interest in the patent rights.

"What shall we do?" Fromont Jeune asked Risler Aine.

The latter shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"Decide for yourself. It doesn't concern me. I am only an employe."

The words, spoken coldly, without anger, fell heavily upon Fromont's bewildered joy, and reminded him of the gravity of a situation which he was always on the point of forgetting.

But when he was alone with his dear Madame "Chorche," Risler advised her not to accept the Prochassons' offer.

"Wait,—don't be in a hurry. Later you will have a better offer."

He spoke only of them in that affair in which his own share was so glorious. She felt that he was preparing to cut himself adrift from their future.

Meanwhile orders came pouring in and accumulated on their hands. The quality of the paper, the reduced price because of the improved methods of manufacture, made competition impossible. There was no doubt that a colossal fortune was in store for the house of Fromont. The factory had resumed its former flourishing aspect and its loud, business-like hum. Intensely alive were all the great buildings and the hundreds of workmen who filled them. Pere Planus never raised his nose from his desk; one could see him from the little garden, leaning over his great ledgers, jotting down in magnificently molded figures the profits of the Risler press.

Risler still worked as before, without change or rest. The return of prosperity brought no alteration in his secluded habits, and from the highest window on the topmost floor of the house he listened to the ceaseless roar of his machines. He was no less gloomy, no less silent. One day, however, it became known at the factory that the press, a specimen of which had been sent to the great Exposition at Manchester, had received the gold medal, whereby its success was definitely established. Madame Georges called Risler into the garden at the luncheon hour, wishing to be the first to tell him the good news.

For the moment a proud smile relaxed his prematurely old, gloomy features. His inventor's vanity, his pride in his renown, above all, the idea of repairing thus magnificently the wrong done to the family by his wife, gave him a moment of true happiness. He pressed Claire's hands and murmured, as in the old days:

"I am very happy! I am very happy!"

But what a difference in tone! He said it without enthusiasm, hopelessly, with the satisfaction of a task accomplished, and nothing more.

The bell rang for the workmen to return, and Risler went calmly upstairs to resume his work as on other days.

In a moment he came down again. In spite of all, that news had excited him more than he cared to show. He wandered about the garden, prowled around the counting-room, smiling sadly at Pere Planus through the window.

"What ails him?" the old cashier wondered. "What does he want of me?"

At last, when night came and it was time to close the office, Risler summoned courage to go and speak to him.

"Planus, my old friend, I should like—"

He hesitated a moment.

"I should like you to give me the—letter, you know, the little letter and the package."

Sigismond stared at him in amazement. In his innocence, he had imagined that Risler never thought of Sidonie, that he had entirely forgotten her.

"What—you want—?"

"Ah! I have well earned it; I can think of myself a little now. I have thought enough of others."

"You are right," said Planus. "Well, this is what we'll do. The letter and package are at my house at Montrouge. If you choose, we will go and dine together at the Palais-Royal, as in the good old times. I will stand treat. We'll water your medal with a bottle of wine; something choice! Then we'll go to the house together. You can get your trinkets, and if it's too late for you to go home, Mademoiselle Planus, my sister, shall make up a bed

for you, and you shall pass the night with us. We are very comfortable there—it's in the country. To-morrow morning at seven o'clock we'll come back to the factory by the first omnibus. Come, old fellow, give me this pleasure. If you don't, I shall think you still bear your old Sigismond a grudge."

Risler accepted. He cared little about celebrating the award of his medal, but he desired to gain a few hours before opening the little letter he had at last earned the right to read.

He must dress. That was quite a serious matter, for he had lived in a workman's jacket during the past six months. And what an event in the factory! Madame Fromont was informed at once.

"Madame, Madame! Monsieur Risler is going out!"

Claire looked at him from her window, and that tall form, bowed by sorrow, leaning on Sigismond's arm, aroused in her a profound, unusual emotion which she remembered ever after.

In the street people bowed to Risler with great interest. Even their greetings warmed his heart. He was so much in need of kindness! But the noise of vehicles made him a little dizzy.

"My head is spinning," he said to Planus:

"Lean hard on me, old fellow—don't be afraid."

And honest Planus drew himself up, escorting his friend with the artless, unconventional pride of a peasant of the South bearing aloft his village saint.

At last they arrived at the Palais-Royal.

The garden was full of people. They had come to hear the music, and were trying to find seats amid clouds of dust and the scraping of chairs. The two friends hurried into the restaurant to avoid all that turmoil. They established themselves in one of the large salons on the first floor, whence they could see the green trees, the promenaders, and the water spurting from the fountain between the two melancholy flower-gardens. To Sigismond it was the ideal of luxury, that restaurant, with gilding everywhere, around the mirrors, in the chandelier and even on the figured wallpaper. The white napkin, the roll, the menu of a table d'hote dinner filled his soul with joy. We are comfortable here, aren't we?" he said to Risler.

And he exclaimed at each of the courses of that banquet at two francs fifty, and insisted on filling his friend's plate.

"Eat that—it's good."

The other, notwithstanding his desire to do honor to the fete, seemed preoccupied and gazed out-of-doors.

"Do you remember, Sigismond?" he said, after a pause.

The old cashier, engrossed in his memories of long ago, of Risler's first employment at the factory, replied:

"I should think I do remember—listen! The first time we dined together at the Palais-Royal was in February, 'forty-six, the year we put in the planches-plates at the factory."

Risler shook his head.

"Oh! no—I mean three years ago. It was in that room just opposite that we dined on that memorable evening."

And he pointed to the great windows of the salon of Cafe Vefour, gleaming in the rays of the setting sun like the chandeliers at a wedding feast.

"Ah! yes, true," murmured Sigismond, abashed. What an unlucky idea of his to bring his friend to a place that recalled such painful things!

Risler, not wishing to cast a gloom upon their banquet, abruptly raised his glass.

"Come! here's your health, my old comrade."

He tried to change the subject. But a moment later he himself led the conversation back to it again, and asked Sigismond, in an undertone, as if he were ashamed:

"Have you seen her?"

"Your wife? No, never."

"She hasn't written again?"

"No—never again."

"But you must have heard of her. What has she been doing these six months? Does she live with her parents?"

"No."

Risler turned pale.

He hoped that Sidonie would have returned to her mother, that she would have worked, as he had worked, to forget and atone. He had often thought that he would arrange his life according to what he should learn of her

when he should have the right to speak of her; and in one of those far-off visions of the future, which have the vagueness of a dream, he sometimes fancied himself living in exile with the Chebes in an unknown land, where nothing would remind him of his past shame. It was not a definite plan, to be sure; but the thought lived in the depths of his mind like a hope, caused by the need that all human creatures feel of finding their lost happiness.

"Is she in Paris?" he asked, after a few moments' reflection.

"No. She went away three months ago. No one knows where she has gone."

Sigismond did not add that she had gone with her Cazaboni, whose name she now bore, that they were making the circuit of the provincial cities together, that her mother was in despair, never saw her, and heard of her only through Delobelle. Sigismond did not deem it his duty to mention all that, and after his last words he held his peace.

Risler, for his part, dared ask no further questions.

While they sat there, facing each other, both embarrassed by the long silence, the military band began to play under the trees in the garden. They played one of those Italian operatic overtures which seem to have been written expressly for public open-air resorts; the swiftly-flowing notes, as they rise into the air, blend with the call of the swallows and the silvery splash of the fountain. The blaring brass brings out in bold relief the mild warmth of the closing hours of those summer days, so long and enervating in Paris; it seems as if one could hear nothing else. The distant rumbling of wheels, the cries of children playing, the footsteps of the promenaders are wafted away in those resonant, gushing, refreshing waves of melody, as useful to the people of Paris as the daily watering of their streets. On all sides the faded flowers, the trees white with dust, the faces made pale and wan by the heat, all the sorrows, all the miseries of a great city, sitting dreamily, with bowed head, on the benches in the garden, feel its comforting, refreshing influence. The air is stirred, renewed by those strains that traverse it, filling it with harmony.

Poor Risler felt as if the tension upon all his nerves were relaxed.

"A little music does one good," he said, with glistening eyes. "My heart is heavy, old fellow," he added, in a lower tone; "if you knew—"

They sat without speaking, their elbows resting on the window-sill, while their coffee was served.

Then the music ceased, the garden became deserted. The light that had loitered in the corners crept upward to the roofs, cast its last rays upon the highest windowpanes, followed by the birds, the swallows, which saluted the close of day with a farewell chirp from the gutter where they were huddled together.

"Now, where shall we go?" said Planus, as they left the restaurant.

"Wherever you wish."

On the first floor of a building on the Rue Montpensier, close at hand, was a cafe chantant, where many people entered.

"Suppose we go in," said Planus, desirous of banishing his friend's melancholy at any cost, "the beer is excellent."

Risler assented to the suggestion; he had not tasted beer for six months.

It was a former restaurant transformed into a concert-hall. There were three large rooms, separated by gilded pillars, the partitions having been removed; the decoration was in the Moorish style, bright red, pale blue, with little crescents and turbans for ornament.

Although it was still early, the place was full; and even before entering one had a feeling of suffocation, simply from seeing the crowds of people sitting around the tables, and at the farther end, half-hidden by the rows of pillars, a group of white-robed women on a raised platform, in the heat and glare of the gas.

Our two friends had much difficulty in finding seats, and had to be content with a place behind a pillar whence they could see only half of the platform, then occupied by a superb person in black coat and yellow gloves, curled and waxed and oiled, who was singing in a vibrating voice

Mes beaux lions aux crins dores,
Du sang des troupeaux alteres,
Halte la!—Je fais sentinello!

[My proud lions with golden manes
Who thirst for the blood of my flocks,

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: Fromont and Risler, v4

Stand back!—I am on guard!]

The audience—small tradesmen of the quarter with their wives and daughters—seemed highly enthusiastic: especially the women. He represented so perfectly the ideal of the shopkeeper imagination, that magnificent shepherd of the desert, who addressed lions with such an air of authority and tended his flocks in full evening dress. And so, despite their bourgeois bearing, their modest costumes and their expressionless shop-girl smiles, all those women, made up their little mouths to be caught by the hook of sentiment, and cast languishing glances upon the singer. It was truly comical to see that glance at the platform suddenly change and become contemptuous and fierce as it fell upon the husband, the poor husband tranquilly drinking a glass of beer opposite his wife: "You would never be capable of doing sentry duty in the very teeth of lions, and in a black coat too, and with yellow gloves!"

And the husband's eye seemed to reply:

"Ah! 'dame', yes, he's quite a dashing buck, that fellow."

Being decidedly indifferent to heroism of that stamp, Risler and Sigismond were drinking their beer without paying much attention to the music, when, at the end of the song, amid the applause and cries and uproar that followed it, Pere Planus uttered an exclamation:

"Why, that is odd; one would say—but no, I'm not mistaken. It is he, it's Delobelle!"

It was, in fact, the illustrious actor, whom he had discovered in the front row near the platform. His gray head was turned partly away from them. He was leaning carelessly against a pillar, hat in hand, in his grand make-up as leading man: dazzlingly white linen, hair curled with the tongs, black coat with a camellia in the buttonhole, like the ribbon of an order. He glanced at the crowd from time to time with a patronizing air: but his eyes were most frequently turned toward the platform, with encouraging little gestures and smiles and pretended applause, addressed to some one whom Pere Planus could not see from his seat.

There was nothing very extraordinary in the presence of the illustrious Delobelle at a cafe concert, as he spent all his evenings away from home; and yet the old cashier felt vaguely disturbed, especially when he discovered in the same row a blue cape and a pair of steely eyes. It was Madame Dobson, the sentimental singing-teacher. The conjunction of those two faces amid the pipe-smoke and the confusion of the crowd, produced upon Sigismond the effect of two ghosts evoked by a bad dream. He was afraid for his friend, without knowing exactly why; and suddenly it occurred to him to take him away.

"Let us go, Risler. The heat here is enough to kill one."

Just as they rose—for Risler was no more desirous to stay than to go—the orchestra, consisting of a piano and several violins, began a peculiar refrain. There was a flutter of curiosity throughout the room, and cries of "Hush! hush! sit down!"

They were obliged to resume their seats. Risler, too, was beginning to be disturbed.

"I know that tune," he said to himself. "Where have I heard it?"

A thunder of applause and an exclamation from Planus made him raise his eyes.

"Come, come, let us go," said the cashier, trying to lead him away.

But it was too late.

Risler had already seen his wife come forward to the front of the stage and curtsy to the audience with a ballet-dancer's smile.

She wore a white gown, as on the night of the ball; but her whole costume was much less rich and shockingly immodest.

The dress was barely caught together at the shoulders; her hair floated in a blond mist low over her eyes, and around her neck was a necklace of pearls too large to be real, alternated with bits of tinsel. Delobelle was right: the Bohemian life was better suited to her. Her beauty had gained an indefinably reckless expression, which was its most characteristic feature, and made her a perfect type of the woman who has escaped from all restraint, placed herself at the mercy of every accident, and is descending stage by stage to the lowest depths of the Parisian hell, from which nothing is powerful enough to lift her and restore her to the pure air and the light.

And how perfectly at ease she seemed in her strolling life! With what self-possession she walked to the front of the stage! Ah! could she have seen the desperate, terrible glance fixed upon her down there in the hall,

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: Fromont and Risler, v4

concealed behind a pillar, her smile would have lost that equivocal placidity, her voice would have sought in vain those wheedling, languorous tones in which she warbled the only song Madame Dobson had ever been able to teach her:

Pauv' pitit Mamz'elle Zizi,
C'est l'amou, l'amou qui tourne
La tete a li.

Risler had risen, in spite of Planus's efforts. "Sit down! sit down!" the people shouted. The wretched man heard nothing. He was staring at his wife.

C'est l'amou, l'amou qui tourne
La tete a li,

Sidonie repeated affectedly.

For a moment he wondered whether he should not leap on the platform and kill her. Red flames shot before his eyes, and he was blinded with frenzy.

Then, suddenly, shame and disgust seized upon him and he rushed from the hall, overturning chairs and tables, pursued by the terror and imprecations of all those scandalized bourgeois.

CHAPTER XXIV. SIDONIE'S VENGEANCE

Never had Sigismond Planus returned home so late without giving his sister warning, during the twenty years and more that he had lived at Montrouge. Consequently Mademoiselle Planus was greatly worried. Living in community of ideas and of everything else with her brother, having but one mind for herself and for him, the old maid had felt for several months the rebound of all the cashier's anxiety and indignation; and the effect was still noticeable in her tendency to tremble and become agitated on slight provocation. At the slightest tardiness on Sigismond's part, she would think:

"Ah! mon Dieu! If only nothing has happened at the factory!"

That is the reason why on the evening in question, when the hens and chickens were all asleep on their perches, and the dinner had been removed untouched, Mademoiselle Planus was sitting in the little ground-floor living-room, waiting, in great agitation.

At last, about eleven o'clock, some one rang. A timid, melancholy ring, in no wise resembling Sigismond's vigorous pull.

"Is it you, Monsieur Planus?" queried the old lady from behind the door.

It was he; but he was not alone. A tall, bent old man accompanied him, and, as they entered, bade her good-evening in a slow, hesitating voice. Not till then did Mademoiselle Planus recognize Risler Aine, whom she had not seen since the days of the New Year's calls, that is to say, some time before the dramas at the factory. She could hardly restrain an exclamation of pity; but the grave taciturnity of the two men told her that she must be silent.

"Mademoiselle Planus, my sister, you will put clean sheets on my bed. Our friend Risler does us the honor to pass the night with us."

The sister hastened away to prepare the bedroom with an almost affectionate zeal; for, as we know, beside "Monsieur Planus, my brother," Risler was the only man excepted from the general reprobation in which she enveloped the whole male sex.

Upon leaving the cafe concert, Sidonie's husband had had a moment of frantic excitement. He leaned on Planus's arm, every nerve in his body strained to the utmost. At that moment he had no thought of going to Montrouge to get the letter and the package.

"Leave me—go away," he said to Sigismond. "I must be alone."

But the other knew better than to abandon him thus to his despair. Unnoticed by Risler, he led him away from the factory, and as his affectionate heart suggested to the old cashier what he had best say to his friend, he talked to him all the time of Frantz, his little Frantz whom he loved so dearly.

"That was genuine affection, genuine and trustworthy. No treachery to fear with such hearts as that!"

While they talked they left behind them the noisy streets of the centre of Paris. They walked along the quays, skirted the Jardin des Plantes, plunged into Faubourg Saint-Marceau. Risler followed where the other led. Sigismond's words did him so much good!

In due time they came to the Bievre, bordered at that point with tanneries whose tall drying-houses with open sides were outlined in blue against the sky; and then the ill-defined plains of Montsouris, vast tracts of land scorched and stripped of vegetation by the fiery breath that Paris exhales around its daily toil, like a monstrous dragon, whose breath of flame and smoke suffers no vegetation within its range.

From Montsouris to the fortifications of Montrouge is but a step. When they had reached that point, Planus had no great difficulty in taking his friend home with him. He thought, and justly, that his tranquil fireside, the spectacle of a placid, fraternal, devoted affection, would give the wretched man's heart a sort of foretaste of the happiness that was in store for him with his brother Frantz. And, in truth, the charm of the little household began to work as soon as they arrived.

"Yes, yes, you are right, old fellow," said Risler, pacing the floor of the living-room, "I mustn't think of that woman any more. She's like a dead woman to me now. I have nobody left in the world but my little Frantz; I don't know yet whether I shall send for him to come home, or go out and join him; the one thing that is certain is that we are going to stay together. Ah! I longed so to have a son! Now I have found one. I want no other. When I think

that for a moment I had an idea of killing myself! Nonsense! it would make Madame What-d'ye-call-her, yonder, too happy. On the contrary, I mean to live—to live with my Frantz, and for him, and for nothing else."

"Bravo!" said Sigismond, "that's the way I like to hear you talk."

At that moment Mademoiselle Planus came to say that the room was ready.

Risler apologized for the trouble he was causing them.

"You are so comfortable, so happy here. Really, it's too bad to burden you with my melancholy."

"Ah! my old friend, you can arrange just such happiness as ours for yourself," said honest Sigismond with beaming face. "I have my sister, you have your brother. What do we lack?"

Risler smiled vaguely. He fancied himself already installed with Frantz in a quiet little quakerish house like that.

Decidedly, that was an excellent idea of Pere Planus.

"Come to bed," he said triumphantly. "We'll go and show you your room."

Sigismond Planus's bedroom was on the ground floor, a large room simply but neatly furnished; with muslin curtains at the windows and the bed, and little squares of carpet on the polished floor, in front of the chairs. The dowager Madame Fromont herself could have found nothing to say as to the orderly and cleanly aspect of the place. On a shelf or two against the wall were a few books: Manual of Fishing, The Perfect Country Housewife, Bayeme's Book-keeping. That was the whole of the intellectual equipment of the room.

Pere Planus glanced proudly around. The glass of water was in its place on the walnut table, the box of razors on the dressing-case.

"You see, Risler. Here is everything you need. And if you should want anything else, the keys are in all the drawers—you have only to turn them. Just see what a beautiful view you get from here. It's a little dark just now, but when you wake up in the morning you'll see; it is magnificent."

He opened the widow. Great drops of rain were beginning to fall, and lightning flashes rending the darkness disclosed the long, silent line of the fortifications, with telegraph poles at intervals, or the frowning door of a casemate. Now and then the footsteps of a patrol making the rounds, the clash of muskets or swords, reminded them that they were within the military zone.

That was the outlook so vaunted by Planus—a melancholy outlook if ever there were one.

"And now good-night. Sleep well!"

But, as the old cashier was leaving the room, his friend called him back:

"Sigismond."

"Here!" said Sigismond, and he waited.

Risler blushed slightly and moved his lips like a man who is about to speak; then, with a mighty effort, he said:

"No, no—nothing. Good-night, old man."

In the dining-room the brother and sister talked together a long while in low tones. Planus described the terrible occurrence of the evening, the meeting with Sidonie; and you can imagine the—"Oh! these women!" and "Oh! these men?" At last, when they had locked the little garden-door, Mademoiselle Planus went up to her room, and Sigismond made himself as comfortable as possible in a small cabinet adjoining.

About midnight the cashier was aroused by his sister calling him in a terrified whisper:

"Monsieur Planus, my brother?"

"What is it?"

"Did you hear?"

"No. What?"

"Oh! it was awful. Something like a deep sigh, but so loud and so sad! It came from the room below."

They listened. Without, the rain was falling in torrents, with the dreary rustling of leaves that makes the country seem so lonely.

"That is only the wind," said Planus.

"I am sure not. Hush! Listen!"

Amid the tumult of the storm, they heard a wailing sound, like a sob, in which a name was pronounced with difficulty:

"Frantz! Frantz!"

It was terrible and pitiful.

When Christ on the Cross sent up to heaven His despairing cry: 'Eli, eli, lama sabachthani', they who heard him must have felt the same species of superstitious terror that suddenly seized upon Mademoiselle Planus.

"I am afraid!" she whispered; "suppose you go and look—"

"No, no, we will let him alone. He is thinking of his brother. Poor fellow! It's the very thought of all others that will do him the most good."

And the old cashier went to sleep again.

The next morning he woke as usual when the drums beat the reveille in the fortifications; for the little family, surrounded by barracks, regulated its life by the military calls. The sister had already risen and was feeding the poultry. When she saw Sigismond she came to him in agitation.

"It is very strange," she said, "I hear nothing stirring in Monsieur Risler's room. But the window is wide open."

Sigismond, greatly surprised, went and knocked at his friend's door.

"Risler! Risler!"

He called in great anxiety:

"Risler, are you there? Are you asleep?"

There was no reply. He opened the door.

The room was cold. It was evident that the damp air had been blowing in all night through the open window. At the first glance at the bed, Sigismond thought: "He hasn't been in bed"—for the clothes were undisturbed and the condition of the room, even in the most trivial details, revealed an agitated vigil: the still smoking lamp, which he had neglected to extinguish, the carafe, drained to the last drop by the fever of sleeplessness; but the thing that filled the cashier with dismay was to find the bureau drawer wide open in which he had carefully bestowed the letter and package entrusted to him by his friend.

The letter was no longer there. The package lay on the table, open, revealing a photograph of Sidonie at fifteen. With her high-necked frock, her rebellious hair parted over the forehead, and the embarrassed pose of an awkward girl, the little Chebe of the old days, Mademoiselle Le Mire's apprentice, bore little resemblance to the Sidonie of to-day. And that was the reason why Risler had kept that photograph, as a souvenir, not of his wife, but of the "little one."

Sigismond was in great dismay.

"This is my fault," he said to himself. "I ought to have taken away the keys. But who would have supposed that he was still thinking of her? He had sworn so many times that that woman no longer existed for him."

At that moment Mademoiselle Planus entered the room with consternation written on her face.

"Monsieur Risler has gone!" she exclaimed.

"Gone? Why, wasn't the garden-gate locked?"

"He must have climbed over the wall. You can see his footprints."

They looked at each other, terrified beyond measure.

"It was the letter!" thought Planus.

Evidently that letter from his wife must have made some extraordinary revelation to Risler; and, in order not to disturb his hosts, he had made his escape noiselessly through the window, like a burglar. Why? With what aim in view?

"You will see, sister," said poor Planus, as he dressed with all haste, "you will see that that hussy has played him still another trick." And when his sister tried to encourage him, he recurred to his favorite refrain:

"I haf no gonfidence!"

As soon as he was dressed, he darted out of the house.

Risler's footprints could be distinguished on the wet ground as far as the gate of the little garden. He must have gone before daylight, for the beds of vegetables and flowers were trampled down at random by deep footprints with long spaces between; there were marks of heels on the garden-wall and the mortar was crumbled slightly on top. The brother and sister went out on the road skirting the fortifications. There it was impossible to follow the footprints. They could tell nothing more than that Risler had gone in the direction of the Orleans road.

"After all," Mademoiselle Planus ventured to say, "we are very foolish to torment ourselves about him; perhaps he has simply gone back to the factory."

Sigismond shook his head. Ah! if he had said all that he thought!

"Return to the house, sister. I will go and see."

And with the old "I haf no gonfidence" he rushed away like a hurricane, his white mane standing even more erect than usual.

At that hour, on the road near the fortifications, was an endless procession of soldiers and market-gardeners, guard-mounting, officers' horses out for exercise, sutlers with their paraphernalia, all the bustle and activity that is seen in the morning in the neighborhood of forts. Planus was striding along amid the tumult, when suddenly he stopped. At the foot of the bank, on the left, in front of a small, square building, with the inscription.

CITY OF PARIS,
ENTRANCE TO THE QUARRIES,

on the rough plaster, he saw a crowd assembled, and soldiers' and custom-house officers' uniforms, mingled with the shabby, dirty blouses of barracks-loafers. The old man instinctively approached. A customs officer, seated on the stone step below a round postern with iron bars, was talking with many gestures, as if he were acting out his narrative.

"He was where I am," he said. "He had hanged himself sitting, by pulling with all his strength on the rope! It's clear that he had made up his mind to die, for he had a razor in his pocket that he would have used in case the rope had broken."

A voice in the crowd exclaimed: "Poor devil!" Then another, a tremulous voice, choking with emotion, asked timidly:

"Is it quite certain that he's dead?"

Everybody looked at Planus and began to laugh.

"Well, here's a greenhorn," said the officer. "Don't I tell you that he was all blue this morning, when we cut him down to take him to the chasseurs' barracks!"

The barracks were not far away; and yet Sigismond Planus had the greatest difficulty in the world in dragging himself so far. In vain did he say to himself that suicides are of frequent occurrence in Paris, especially in those regions; that not a day passes that a dead body is not found somewhere along that line of fortifications, as upon the shores of a tempestuous sea,—he could not escape the terrible presentiment that had oppressed his heart since early morning.

"Ah! you have come to see the man that hanged himself," said the quartermaster-sergeant at the door of the barracks. "See! there he is."

The body had been laid on a table supported by trestles in a sort of shed. A cavalry cloak that had been thrown over it covered it from head to foot, and fell in the shroud-like folds which all draperies assume that come in contact with the rigidity of death. A group of officers and several soldiers in duck trousers were looking on at a distance, whispering as if in a church; and an assistant-surgeon was writing a report of the death on a high window-ledge. To him Sigismond spoke.

"I should like very much to see him," he said softly.

"Go and look."

He walked to the table, hesitated a minute, then, summoning courage, uncovered a swollen face, a tall, motionless body in its rain-soaked garments.

"She has killed you at last, my old comrade!" murmured Planus, and fell on his knees, sobbing bitterly.

The officers had come forward, gazing curiously at the body, which was left uncovered.

"Look, surgeon," said one of them. "His hand is closed, as if he were holding something in it."

"That is true," the surgeon replied, drawing nearer. "That sometimes happens in the last convulsions.

You remember at Solferino, Commandant Bordy held his little daughter's miniature in his hand like that? We had much difficulty in taking it from him."

As he spoke he tried to open the poor, tightly-closed dead hand.

"Look!" said he, "it is a letter that he is holding so tight."

He was about to read it; but one of the officers took it from his hands and passed it to Sigismond, who was

still kneeling.

"Here, Monsieur. Perhaps you will find in this some last wish to be carried out."

Sigismond Planus rose. As the light in the room was dim, he walked with faltering step to the window, and read, his eyes filled with tears:

"Well, yes, I love you, I love you, more than ever and forever! What is the use of struggling and fighting against fate? Our sin is stronger than we . . ."

It was the letter which Frantz had written to his sister-in-law a year before, and which Sidonie had sent to her husband on the day following their terrible scene, to revenge herself on him and his brother at the same time.

Risler could have survived his wife's treachery, but that of his brother had killed him.

When Sigismond understood, he was petrified with horror. He stood there, with the letter in his hand, gazing mechanically through the open window.

The clock struck six.

Yonder, over Paris, whose dull roar they could hear although they could not see the city, a cloud of smoke arose, heavy and hot, moving slowly upward, with a fringe of red and black around its edges, like the powder-smoke on a field of battle. Little by little, steeples, white buildings, a gilded cupola, emerged from the mist, and burst forth in a splendid awakening.

Then the thousands of tall factory chimneys, towering above that sea of clustered roofs, began with one accord to exhale their quivering vapor, with the energy of a steamer about to sail. Life was beginning anew. Forward, ye wheels of time! And so much the worse for him who lags behind!

Thereupon old Planus gave way to a terrible outburst of wrath.

"Ah! harlot-harlot!" he cried, shaking his fist; and no one could say whether he was addressing the woman or the city of Paris.