

THE LEROUGE CASE

Emile Gaboriau

Table of Contents

<u>THE LEROUGE CASE</u>	1
<u>Emile Gaboriau</u>	1
<u>Special thanks to Dagny for proofing through this text</u>	1
<u>I</u>	1
<u>II</u>	13
<u>III</u>	21
<u>IV</u>	28
<u>V</u>	43
<u>VI</u>	54
<u>VII</u>	69
<u>VIII</u>	79
<u>IX</u>	84
<u>X</u>	97
<u>XI</u>	106
<u>XII</u>	115
<u>XIII</u>	128
<u>XIV</u>	144
<u>XV</u>	152
<u>XVI</u>	164
<u>XVII</u>	175
<u>XVIII</u>	187
<u>XIX</u>	198
<u>XX</u>	209

THE LEROUGE CASE

Emile Gaboriau

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

Special thanks to Dagny for proofing through this text.

- I
 - II
 - III
 - IV
 - V
 - VI
 - VII
 - VIII
 - IX
 - X
 - XI
 - XII
 - XIII
 - XIV
 - XV
 - XVI
 - XVII
 - XVIII
 - XIX
 - XX
-

I

ON Thursday, the 6th of March, 1862, two days after Shrove Tuesday, five women belonging to the village of La Jonchere presented themselves at the police station at Bougival.

They stated that for two days past no one had seen the Widow Lerouge, one of their neighbours, who lived by herself in an isolated cottage. They had several times knocked at the door, but all in vain. The window-shutters as well as the door were closed; and it was impossible to obtain even a glimpse of the interior.

This silence, this sudden disappearance alarmed them. Apprehensive of a crime, or at least of an accident, they requested the interference of the police to satisfy their doubts by forcing the door and entering the house.

Bougival is a pleasant riverside village, peopled on Sundays by crowds of boating parties. Trifling offences are frequently heard of in its neighbourhood, but crimes are rare.

THE LEROUGE CASE

The commissary of police at first refused to listen to the women, but their importunities so fatigued him that he at length acceded to their request. He sent for the corporal of gendarmes, with two of his men, called into requisition the services of a locksmith, and, thus accompanied, followed the neighbours of the Widow Lerouge.

La Jonchere owes some celebrity to the inventor of the sliding railway, who for some years past has, with more enterprise than profit, made public trials of his system in the immediate neighbourhood. It is a hamlet of no importance, resting upon the slope of the hill which overlooks the Seine between La Malmaison and Bougival. It is about twenty minutes' walk from the main road, which, passing by Rueil and Port-Marly, goes from Paris to St. Germain, and is reached by a steep and rugged lane, quite unknown to the government engineers.

The party, led by the gendarmes, followed the main road which here bordered the river until it reached this lane, into which it turned, and stumbled over the rugged inequalities of the ground for about a hundred yards, when it arrived in front of a cottage of extremely modest yet respectable appearance. This cottage had probably been built by some little Parisian shopkeeper in love with the beauties of nature; for all the trees had been carefully cut down. It consisted merely of two apartments on the ground floor with a loft above. Around it extended a much-neglected garden, badly protected against midnight prowlers, by a very dilapidated stone wall about three feet high, and broken and crumbling in many places. A light wooden gate, clumsily held in its place by pieces of wire, gave access to the garden.

"It is here," said the women.

The commissary stopped. During his short walk, the number of his followers had been rapidly increasing, and now included all the inquisitive and idle persons of the neighbourhood. He found himself surrounded by about forty individuals burning with curiosity.

"No one must enter the garden," said he; and, to ensure obedience, he placed the two gendarmes on sentry before the entrance, and advanced towards the house, accompanied by the corporal and the locksmith.

He knocked several times loudly with his leaded cane, first at the door, and then successively at all the window shutters. After each blow, he placed his ear against the wood and listened. Hearing nothing, he turned to the locksmith.

"Open!" said he.

The workman unstrapped his satchel, and produced his implements. He had already introduced a skeleton key into the lock, when a loud exclamation was heard from the crowd outside the gate.

"The key!" they cried. "Here is the key!"

A boy about twelve years old playing with one of his companions, had seen an enormous key in a ditch by the roadside; he had picked it up and carried it to the cottage in triumph.

"Give it to me youngster," said the corporal. "We shall see."

The key was tried, and it proved to be the key of the house.

The commissary and the locksmith exchanged glances full of sinister misgivings. "This looks bad," muttered the corporal. They entered the house, while the crowd, restrained with difficulty by the gendarmes, stamped with impatience, or leant over the garden wall, stretching their necks eagerly, to see or hear something of what was passing within the cottage.

THE LEROUGE CASE

Those who anticipated the discovery of a crime, were unhappily not deceived. The commissary was convinced of this as soon as he crossed the threshold. Everything in the first room pointed with a sad eloquence to the recent presence of a malefactor. The furniture was knocked about, and a chest of drawers and two large trunks had been forced and broken open.

In the inner room, which served as a sleeping apartment, the disorder was even greater. It seemed as though some furious hand had taken a fiendish pleasure in upsetting everything. Near the fireplace, her face buried in the ashes, lay the dead body of Widow Lerouge. All one side of the face and the hair were burnt; it seemed a miracle that the fire had not caught her clothing.

"Wretches!" exclaimed the corporal. "Could they not have robbed, without assassinating the poor woman?"

"But where has she been wounded?" inquired the commissary, "I do not see any blood."

"Look! here between the shoulders," replied the corporal; "two fierce blows, by my faith. I'll wager my stripes she had no time to cry out."

He stooped over the corpse and touched it.

"She is quite cold," he continued, "and it seems to me that she is no longer very stiff. It is at least thirty-six hours since she received her death-blow."

The commissary began writing, on the corner of a table, a short official report.

"We are not here to talk, but to discover the guilty," said he to the corporal. "Let information be at once conveyed to the justice of the peace, and the mayor, and send this letter without delay to the Palais de Justice. In a couple of hours, an investigating magistrate can be here. In the meanwhile, I will proceed to make a preliminary inquiry."

"Shall I carry the letter?" asked the corporal of gendarmes.

"No, send one of your men; you will be useful to me here in keeping these people in order, and in finding any witnesses I may want. We must leave everything here as it is. I will install myself in the other room."

A gendarme departed at a run towards the station at Rueil; and the commissary commenced his investigations in regular form, as prescribed by law.

"Who was Widow Lerouge? Where did she come from? What did she do? Upon what means, and how did she live? What were her habits, her morals, and what sort of company did she keep? Was she known to have enemies? Was she a miser? Did she pass for being rich?"

The commissary knew the importance of ascertaining all this: but although the witnesses were numerous enough, they possessed but little information. The depositions of the neighbours, successively interrogated, were empty, incoherent, and incomplete. No one knew anything of the victim, who was a stranger in the country. Many presented themselves as witnesses moreover, who came forward less to afford information than to gratify their curiosity. A gardener's wife, who had been friendly with the deceased, and a milk-woman with whom she dealt, were alone able to give a few insignificant though precise details.

In a word, after three hours of laborious investigation, after having undergone the infliction of all the gossip of the country, after receiving evidence the most contradictory, and listened to commentaries the most ridiculous, the following is what appeared the most reliable to the commissary.

THE LEROUGE CASE

Twelve years before, at the beginning of 1850, the woman Lerouge had made her appearance at Bougival with a large wagon piled with furniture, linen, and her personal effects. She had alighted at an inn, declaring her intention of settling in the neighbourhood, and had immediately gone in quest of a house. Finding this one unoccupied, and thinking it would suit her, she had taken it without trying to beat down the terms, at a rental of three hundred and twenty francs payable half yearly and in advance, but had refused to sign a lease.

The house taken, she occupied it the same day, and expended about a hundred francs on repairs.

She was a woman about fifty-four or fifty-five years of age, well preserved, active, and in the enjoyment of excellent health. No one knew her reasons for taking up her abode in a country where she was an absolute stranger. She was supposed to have come from Normandy, having been frequently seen in the early morning to wear a white cotton cap. This night-cap did not prevent her dressing very smartly during the day; indeed, she ordinarily wore very handsome dresses, very showy ribbons in her caps, and covered herself with jewels like a saint in a chapel. Without doubt she had lived on the coast, for ships and the sea recurred incessantly in her conversation.

She did not like speaking of her husband who had, she said, perished in a shipwreck. But she had never given the slightest detail. On one particular occasion she had remarked, in presence of the milk-woman and three other persons, "No woman was ever more miserable than I during my married life." And at another she had said, "All new, all fine! A new broom sweeps clean. My defunct husband only loved me for a year!"

Widow Lerouge passed for rich, or at the least for being very well off and she was not a miser. She had lent a woman at La Malmaison sixty francs with which to pay her rent, and would not let her return them. At another time she had advanced two hundred francs to a fisherman of Port-Marly. She was fond of good living, spent a good deal on her food, and bought wine by the half cask. She took pleasure in treating her acquaintances, and her dinners were excellent. If complimented on her easy circumstances, she made no very strong denial. She had frequently been heard to say, "I have nothing in the funds, but I have everything I want. If I wished for more, I could have it."

Beyond this, the slightest allusion to her past life, her country, or her family had never escaped her. She was very talkative, but all she would say would be to the detriment of her neighbours. She was supposed, however, to have seen the world, and to know a great deal. She was very distrustful and barricaded herself in her cottage as in a fortress. She never went out in the evening, and it was well known that she got tipsy regularly at her dinner and went to bed very soon afterwards. Rarely had strangers been seen to visit her; four or five times a lady accompanied by a young man had called, and upon one occasion two gentlemen, one young, the other old and decorated, had come in a magnificent carriage.

In conclusion, the deceased was held in but little esteem by her neighbours. Her remarks were often most offensive and odious in the mouth of a woman of her age. She had been heard to give a young girl the most detestable counsels. A pork butcher, belonging to Bougival, embarrassed in his business, and tempted by her supposed wealth, had at one time paid her his addresses. She, however, repelled his advances, declaring that to be married once was enough for her. On several occasions men had been seen in her house; first of all, a young one, who had the appearance of a clerk of the railway company; then another, a tall, elderly man, very sunburnt, who was dressed in a blouse, and looked very villainous. These men were reported to be her lovers.

Whilst questioning the witnesses, the commissary wrote down their depositions in a more condensed form, and he had got so far, when the investigating magistrate arrived, attended by the chief of the detective police, and one of his subordinates.

M. Daburon was a man thirty-eight years of age, and of prepossessing appearance; sympathetic notwithstanding his coldness; wearing upon his countenance a sweet, and rather sad expression. This settled melancholy had

THE LEROUGE CASE

remained with him ever since his recovery, two years before, from a dreadful malady, which had well-nigh proved fatal.

Investigating magistrate since 1859, he had rapidly acquired the most brilliant reputation. Laborious, patient, and acute, he knew with singular skill how to disentangle the skein of the most complicated affair, and from the midst of a thousand threads lay hold to the right one. None better than he, armed with an implacable logic, could solve those terrible problems in which X—in algebra, the unknown quantity—represents the criminal. Clever in deducing the unknown from the known, he excelled in collecting facts, and in uniting in a bundle of overwhelming proofs circumstances the most trifling, and in appearance the most insignificant.

Although possessed of qualifications for his office so numerous and valuable, he was tremblingly distrustful of his own abilities and exercised his terrible functions with diffidence and hesitation. He wanted audacity to risk those sudden surprises so often resorted to by his colleagues in the pursuit of truth.

Thus it was repugnant to his feelings to deceive even an accused person, or to lay snares for him; in fact the mere idea of the possibility of a judicial error terrified him. They said of him in the courts, "He is a trembler." What he sought was not conviction, nor the most probable presumptions, but the most absolute certainty. No rest for him until the day when the accused was forced to bow before the evidence; so much so that he had been jestingly reproached with seeking not to discover criminals but innocents.

The chief of detective police was none other than the celebrated Gevrol. He is really an able man, but wanting in perseverance, and liable to be blinded by an incredible obstinacy. If he loses a clue, he cannot bring himself to acknowledge it, still less to retrace his steps. His audacity and coolness, however, render it impossible to disconcert him; and being possessed of immense personal strength, hidden under a most meagre appearance, he has never hesitated to confront the most daring of malefactors.

But his specialty, his triumph, his glory, is a memory of faces, so prodigious as to exceed belief. Let him see a face for five minutes, and it is enough. Its possessor is catalogued, and will be recognised at any time. The impossibilities of place, the unlikelihood of circumstances, the most incredible disguises will not lead him astray. The reason for this, so he pretends, is because he only looks at a man's eyes, without noticing any other features.

This faculty was severely tested some months back at Poissy, by the following experiment. Three prisoners were draped in coverings so as to completely disguise their height. Over their faces were thick veils, allowing nothing of the features to be seen except the eyes, for which holes had been made; and in this state they were shown to Gevrol.

Without the slightest hesitation he recognised the prisoners and named them. Had chance alone assisted him?

The subordinate Gevrol had brought with him, was an old offender, reconciled to the law. A smart fellow in his profession, crafty as a fox, and jealous of his chief, whose abilities he held in light estimation. His name was Lecoq.

The commissary, by this time heartily tired of his responsibilities, welcomed the investigating magistrate and his agents as liberators. He rapidly related the facts collected and read his official report.

"You have proceeded very well," observed the investigating magistrate. "All is stated clearly; yet there is one fact you have omitted to ascertain."

"What is that, sir?" inquired the commissary.

"On what day was Widow Lerouge last seen, and at what hour?"

THE LEROUGE CASE

"I was coming to that presently. She was last seen and spoken to on the evening of Shrove Tuesday, at twenty minutes past five. She was then returning from Bougival with a basketful of purchases."

"You are sure of the hour, sir?" inquired Gevrol.

"Perfectly, and for this reason; the two witnesses who furnished me with this fact, a woman named Tellier and a cooper who lives hard by, alighted from the omnibus which leaves Marly every hour, when they perceived the widow in the cross-road, and hastened to overtake her. They conversed with her and only left her when they reached the door of her own house."

"And what had she in her basket?" asked the investigating magistrate.

The witnesses cannot say. They only know that she carried two sealed bottles of wine, and another of brandy. She complained to them of headache, and said, "Though it is customary to enjoy oneself on Shrove Tuesday, I am going to bed."

"So, so!" exclaimed the chief of detective police. "I know where to search!"

"You think so?" inquired M. Daburon.

"Why, it is clear enough. We must find the tall sunburnt man, the gallant in the blouse. The brandy and the wine were intended for his entertainment. The widow expected him to supper. He came, sure enough, the amiable gallant!"

"Oh!" cried the corporal of gendarmes, evidently scandalised, "she was very old, and terribly ugly!"

Gevrol surveyed the honest fellow with an expression of contemptuous pity. "Know, corporal," said he, "that a woman who has money is always young and pretty, if she desires to be thought so!"

"Perhaps there is something in that," remarked the magistrate; "but it is not what strikes me most. I am more impressed by the remark of this unfortunate woman. 'If I wished for more, I could have it.'"

"That also attracted my attention," acquiesced the commissary.

But Gevrol no longer took the trouble to listen. He stuck to his own opinion, and began to inspect minutely every corner of the room. Suddenly he turned towards the commissary. "Now that I think of it," cried he, "was it not on Tuesday that the weather changed? It had been freezing for a fortnight past, and on that evening it rained. At what time did the rain commence here?"

"At half-past nine," answered the corporal. "I went out from supper to make my circuit of the dancing halls, when I was overtaken opposite the Rue des Pecheurs by a heavy shower. In less than ten minutes there was half an inch of water in the road."

"Very well," said Gevrol. "Then if the man came after half-past nine his shoes must have been very muddy. If they were dry, he arrived sooner. This must have been noticed, for the floor is a polished one. Were there any imprints of footsteps, M. Commissary?"

"I must confess we never thought of looking for them."

"Ah!" exclaimed the chief detective, in a tone of irritation, "that is vexatious!"

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Wait," added the commissary; "there is yet time to see if there are any, not in this room, but in the other. We have disturbed absolutely nothing there. My footsteps and the corporal's will be easily distinguished. Let us see."

As the commissary opened the door of the second chamber, Gevrol stopped him. "I ask permission, sir," said he to the investigating magistrate, "to examine the apartment before any one else is permitted to enter. It is very important for me."

"Certainly," approved M. Daburon.

Gevrol passed in first, the others remaining on the threshold. They all took in at a glance the scene of the crime. Everything, as the commissary had stated, seemed to have been overturned by some furious madman. In the middle of the room was a table covered with a fine linen cloth, white as snow. Upon this was placed a magnificent wineglass of the rarest manufacture, a very handsome knife, and a plate of the finest porcelain. There was an opened bottle of wine, hardly touched, and another of brandy, from which about five or six small glassfuls had been taken.

On the right, against the wall, stood two handsome walnut-wood wardrobes, with ornamental locks; they were placed one on each side of the window; both were empty, and the contents scattered about on all sides. There were clothing, linen, and other effects unfolded, tossed about, and crumpled. At the end of the room, near the fireplace, a large cupboard used for keeping the crockery was wide open. On the other side of the fireplace, an old secretary with a marble top had been forced, broken, smashed into bits, and rummaged, no doubt, to its inmost recesses. The desk, wrenched away, hung by a single hinge. The drawers had been pulled out and thrown upon the floor.

To the left of the room stood the bed, which had been completely disarranged and upset. Even the straw of the mattress had been pulled out and examined.

"Not the slightest imprint," murmured Gevrol disappointed. "He must have arrived before half-past nine. You can all come in now."

He walked right up to the corpse of the widow, near which he knelt.

"It can not be said," grumbled he, "that the work is not properly done! the assassin is no apprentice!"

Then looking right and left, he continued: "Oh! oh! the poor devil was busy with her cooking when he struck her; see her pan of ham and eggs upon the hearth. The brute hadn't patience enough to wait for the dinner. The gentleman was in a hurry, he struck the blow fasting; therefore he can't invoke the gayety of dessert in his defense!"

"It is evident," said the commissary to the investigating magistrate, "that robbery was the motive of the crime."

"It is probable," answered Gevrol in a sly way; "and that accounts for the absence of the silver spoons from the table."

"Look here! Some pieces of gold in this drawer!" exclaimed Lecoq, who had been searching on his own account, "just three hundred and twenty francs!"

"Well, I never!" cried Gevrol, a little disconcerted. But he soon recovered from his embarrassment, and added: "He must have forgotten them; that often happens. I have known an assassin, who, after accomplishing the murder, became so utterly bewildered as to depart without remembering to take the plunder, for which he had committed the crime. Our man became excited perhaps, or was interrupted. Some one may have knocked at the

THE LEROUGE CASE

door. What makes me more willing to think so is, that the scamp did not leave the candle burning. You see he took the trouble to put it out."

"Pooh!" said Lecoq. "That proves nothing. He is probably an economical and careful man."

The investigations of the two agents were continued all over the house; but their most minute researches resulted in discovering absolutely nothing; not one piece of evidence to convict; not the faintest indication which might serve as a point of departure. Even the dead woman's papers, if she possessed any, had disappeared. Not a letter, not a scrap of paper even, to be met with. From time to time Gevrol stopped to swear or grumble. "Oh! it is cleverly done! It is a tiptop piece of work! The scoundrel is a cool hand!"

"Well, what do you make of it?" at length demanded the investigating magistrate.

"It is a drawn game monsieur," replied Gevrol. "We are baffled for the present. The miscreant has taken his measures with great precaution; but I will catch him. Before night, I shall have a dozen men in pursuit. Besides, he is sure to fall into our hands. He has carried off the plate and the jewels. He is lost!"

"Despite all that," said M. Daburon, "we are no further advanced than we were this morning!"

"Well!" growled Gevrol. "A man can only do what he can!"

"Ah!" murmured Lecoq in a low tone, perfectly audible, however, "why is not old Tiraclair here?"

"What could he do more than we have done?" retorted Gevrol, directing a furious glance at his subordinate. Lecoq bowed his head and was silent, inwardly delighted at having wounded his chief.

"Who is old Tiraclair?" asked M. Daburon. "It seems to me that I have heard the name, but I can't remember where.

"He is an extraordinary man!" exclaimed Lecoq. "He was formerly a clerk at the Mont de Piete," added Gevrol; "but he is now a rich old fellow, whose real name is Tabaret. He goes in for playing the detective by way of amusement."

"And to augment his revenues," insinuated the commissary.

"He?" cried Lecoq. "No danger of that. He works so much for the glory of success that he often spends money from his own pocket. It's his amusement, you see! At the Prefecture we have nicknamed him 'Tiraclair,' from a phrase he is constantly in the habit of repeating. Ah! he is sharp, the old weasel! It was he who in the case of that banker's wife, you remember, guessed that the lady had robbed herself, and who proved it."

"True!" retorted Gevrol; "and it was also he who almost had poor Dereme guillotined for killing his wife, a thorough bad woman; and all the while the poor man was innocent."

"We are wasting our time, gentlemen," interrupted M. Daburon. Then, addressing himself to Lecoq, he added:—"Go and find M. Tabaret. I have heard a great deal of him, and shall be glad to see him at work here."

Lecoq started off at a run, Gevrol was seriously humiliated. "You have of course, sir, the right to demand the services of whom you please," commenced he, "but yet—"

"Do not," interrupted M. Daburon, "let us lose our tempers, M. Gevrol. I have known you for a long time, and I know your worth; but to-day we happen to differ in opinion. You hold absolutely to your sunburnt man in the

THE LEROUGE CASE

blouse, and I, on my side, am convinced that you are not on the right track!"

"I think I am right," replied the detective, "and I hope to prove it. I shall find the scoundrel, be he whom he may!"

"I ask nothing better," said M. Daburon.

"Only, permit me, sir, to give—what shall I say without failing in respect?—a piece of advice?"

"Speak!"

"I would advise you, sir, to distrust old Tabaret."

"Really? And for what reason?"

"The old fellow allows himself to be carried away too much by appearances. He has become an amateur detective for the sake of popularity, just like an author; and, as he is vainer than a peacock, he is apt to lose his temper and be very obstinate. As soon as he finds himself in the presence of a crime, like this one, for example, he pretends he can explain everything on the instant. And he manages to invent a story that will correspond exactly with the situation. He professes, with the help of one single fact, to be able to reconstruct all the details of an assassination, as a savant pictures an antediluvian animal from a single bone. Sometimes he divines correctly; very often, though, he makes a mistake. Take, for instance, the case of the tailor, the unfortunate Dereme, without me—"

"I thank you for your advice," interrupted M. Daburon, "and will profit by it. Now commissary," he continued, "it is most important to ascertain from what part of the country Widow Lerouge came."

The procession of witnesses under the charge of the corporal of gendarmes were again interrogated by the investigating magistrate.

But nothing new was elicited. It was evident that Widow Lerouge had been a singularly discreet woman; for, although very talkative, nothing in any way connected with her antecedents remained in the memory of the gossips of La Jonchere.

All the people interrogated, however, obstinately tried to impart to the magistrate their own convictions and personal conjectures. Public opinion sided with Gevrol. Every voice denounced the tall sunburnt man with the gray blouse. He must surely be the culprit. Everyone remembered his ferocious aspect, which had frightened the whole neighbourhood. He had one evening menaced a woman, and another day beaten a child. They could point out neither the child nor the woman; but no matter: these brutal acts were notoriously public. M. Daburon began to despair of gaining the least enlightenment, when some one brought the wife of a grocer of Bougival, at whose shop the victim used to deal, and a child thirteen years old, who knew, it was said, something positive.

The grocer's wife first made her appearance. She had heard Widow Lerouge speak of having a son still living.

"Are you quite sure of that?" asked the investigating magistrate.

"As of my existence," answered the woman, "for, on that evening, yes, it was evening, she was, saving your presence, a little tipsy. She remained in my shop more than an hour."

"And what did she say?"

"I think I see her now," continued the shopkeeper: "she was leaning against the counter near the scales, jesting with a fisherman of Marly, old Husson, who can tell you the same; and she called him a fresh water sailor, 'My

THE LEROUGE CASE

husband,' said she, 'was a real sailor, and the proof is, he would sometimes remain years on a voyage, and always used to bring me back cocoanuts. I have a son who is also a sailor, like his dead father, in the imperial navy.'"

"Did she mention her son's name?"

"Not that time, but another evening, when she was, if I may say so, very drunk. She told us that her son's name was Jacques, and that she had not seen him for a very long time."

"Did she speak ill of her husband?"

"Never! She only said he was jealous and brutal, though a good man at bottom, and that he led her a miserable life. He was weak-headed, and forged ideas out of nothing at all. In fact he was too honest to be wise."

"Did her son ever come to see her while she lived here?"

"She never told me of it."

"Did she spend much money with you?"

"That depends. About sixty francs a month; sometimes more, for she always buys the best brandy. She paid cash for all she bought."

The woman knowing no more was dismissed. The child, who was now brought forward, belonged to parents in easy circumstances. Tall and strong for his age, he had bright intelligent eyes, and features expressive of watchfulness and cunning. The presence of the magistrate did not seem to intimidate him in the least.

"Let us hear, my boy," said M. Daburon, "what you know."

"Well, sir, a few days ago, on Sunday last, I saw a man at Madame Lerouge's garden-gate."

"At what time of the day?"

"Early in the morning. I was going to church, to serve in the second mass."

"Well," continued the magistrate, "and this man was tall and sunburnt, and dressed in a blouse?"

"No, sir, on the contrary, he was short, very fat, and old."

"You are sure you are not mistaken?"

"Quite sure," replied the urchin, "I saw him close face to face, for I spoke to him."

"Tell me, then, what occurred?"

"Well, sir, I was passing when I saw this fat man at the gate. He appeared very much vexed, oh! but awfully vexed! His face was red, or rather purple, as far as the middle of his head, which I could see very well, for it was bare, and had very little hair on it."

"And did he speak to you first?"

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Yes, sir, he saw me, and called out, 'Halloa! youngster!' as I came up to him, and he asked me if I had got a good pair of legs? I answered yes. Then he took me by the ear, but without hurting me, and said, 'Since that is so, if you will run an errand for me, I will give you ten sous. Run as far as the Seine; and when you reach the quay, you will notice a large boat moored. Go on board, and ask to see Captain Gervais: he is sure to be there. Tell him that he can prepare to leave, that I am ready.' Then he put ten sous in my hand; and off I went."

"If all the witnesses were like this bright little fellow," murmured the commissary, "what a pleasure it would be!"

"Now," said the magistrate, "tell us how you executed your commission?"

"I went to the boat, sir, found the man, and I told him; and that's all."

Gevrol, who had listened with the most lively attention, leaned over towards the ear of M. Daburon, and said in a low voice: "Will you permit me, sir, to ask the brat a few questions?"

"Certainly, M. Gevrol."

"Come now, my little friend," said Gevrol, "if you saw this man again, would you know him?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Then there was something remarkable about him?"

"Yes, I should think so! his face was the colour of a brick!"

"And is that all?"

"Well, yes, sir."

"But you must remember how he was dressed; had he a blouse on?"

"No; he wore a jacket. Under the arms were very large pockets, and from out of one of them peeped a blue spotted handkerchief."

"What kind of trousers had he on?"

"I do not remember."

"And his waistcoat?"

"Let me see," answered the child. "I don't think he wore a waistcoat. And yet,—but no, I remember he did not wear one; he had a long cravat, fastened near his neck by a large ring."

"Ah!" said Gevrol, with an air of satisfaction, "you are a bright boy; and I wager that if you try hard to remember you will find a few more details to give us."

The boy hung down his head, and remained silent. From the knitting of his young brows, it was plain he was making a violent effort of memory. "Yes," cried he suddenly, "I remember another thing."

"What?"

THE LEROUGE CASE

"The man wore very large rings in his ears."

"Bravo!" cried Gevrol, "here is a complete description. I shall find the fellow now. M. Daburon can prepare a warrant for his appearance whenever he likes."

"I believe, indeed, the testimony of this child is of the highest importance," said M. Daburon; and turning to the boy added, "Can you tell us, my little friend, with what this boat was loaded?"

"No, sir, I couldn't see because it was decked."

"Which way was she going, up the Seine or down?"

"Neither, sir, she was moored."

"We know that," said Gevrol. "The magistrate asks you which way the prow of the boat was turned,—towards Paris or towards Marly?"

"The two ends of the boat seemed alike to me."

The chief of the detective of police made a gesture of disappointment.

"At least," said he, addressing the child again, "you noticed the name of the boat? you can read I suppose. One should always know the names of the boats one goes aboard of."

"No, I didn't see any name," said the little boy.

"If this boat was moored at the quay," remarked M. Daburon, "it was probably noticed by the inhabitants of Bougival."

"That is true, sir," approved the commissary.

"Yes," said Gevrol, "and the sailors must have come ashore. I shall find out all about it at the wine shop. But what sort of a man was Gervais, the master, my little friend?"

"Like all the sailors hereabouts, sir."

The child was preparing to depart when M. Daburon recalled him.

"Before you go, my boy, tell me, have you spoken to any one of this meeting before to-day?"

"Yes, sir, I told all to mamma when I got back from church, and gave her the ten sous."

"And you have told us the whole truth?" continued the magistrate. "You know that it is a very grave matter to attempt to impose on justice. She always finds it out, and it is my duty to warn you that she inflicts the most terrible punishment upon liars."

The little fellow blushed as red as a cherry, and held down his head.

"I see," pursued M. Daburon, "that you have concealed something from us. Don't you know that the police know everything?"

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Pardon! sir," cried the boy, bursting into tears,—"pardon. Don't punish me, and I will never do so again."

"Tell us, then, how you have deceived us?"

"Well, sir, it was not ten sous that the man gave me, it was twenty sous. I only gave half to mamma; and I kept the rest to buy marbles with."

"My little friend," said the investigating magistrate, "for this time I forgive you. But let it be a lesson for the remainder of your life. You may go now, and remember it is useless to try and hide the truth; it always comes to light!"

II

THE two last depositions awakened in M. Daburon's mind some slight gleams of hope. In the midst of darkness, the humblest rush-light acquires brilliancy.

"I will go at once to Bougival, sir, if you approve of this step," suggested Gevrol.

"Perhaps you would do well to wait a little," answered M. Daburon. "This man was seen on Sunday morning; we will inquire into Widow Lerouge's movements on that day."

Three neighbours were called. They all declared that the widow had kept her bed all Sunday. To one woman who, hearing she was unwell, had visited her, she said, "Ah! I had last night a terrible accident." Nobody at the time attached any significance to these words.

"The man with the rings in his ears becomes more and more important," said the magistrate, when the woman had retired. "To find him again is indispensable: you must see to this, M. Gevrol."

"Before eight days, I shall have him," replied the chief of detective police, "if I have to search every boat on the Seine, from its source to the ocean. I know the name of the captain, Gervais. The navigation office will tell me something."

He was interrupted by Lecoq, who rushed into the house breathless. "Here is old Tabaret," he said. "I met him just as he was going out. What a man! He wouldn't wait for the train, but gave me don't know how much to a cabman; and we drove here in fifty minutes!"

Almost immediately, a man appeared at the door, whose aspect it must be admitted was not at all what one would have expected of a person who had joined the police for honour alone. He was certainly sixty years old and did not look a bit younger. Short, thin, and rather bent, he leant on the carved ivory handle of a stout cane. His round face wore that expression of perpetual astonishment, mingled with uneasiness, which has made the fortunes of two comic actors of the Palais-Royal theatre. Scrupulously shaved, he presented a very short chin, large and good natured lips, and a nose disagreeably elevated, like the broad end of one of Sax's horns. His eyes of a dull gray, were small and red at the lids, and absolutely void of expression; yet they fatigued the observer by their insupportable restlessness. A few straight hairs shaded his forehead, which receded like that of a greyhound, and through their scantiness barely concealed his long ugly ears. He was very comfortably dressed, clean as a new franc piece, displaying linen of dazzling whiteness, and wearing silk gloves and leather gaiters. A long and massive gold chain, very vulgar-looking, was twisted thrice round his neck, and fell in cascades into the pocket of his waistcoat.

M. Tabaret, surnamed Tirauclair, stood at the threshold, and bowed almost to the ground, bending his old back

THE LEROUGE CASE

into an arch, and in the humblest of voices asked, "The investigating magistrate has deigned to send for me?"

"Yes!" replied M. Daburon, adding under his breath; "and if you are a man of any ability, there is at least nothing to indicate it in your appearance."

"I am here," continued the old fellow, "completely at the service of justice."

"I wish to know," said M. Daburon, "whether you can discover some clue that will put us upon the track of the assassin. I will explain the—"

"Oh, I know enough of it!" interrupted old Tabaret. "Lecoq has told me the principal facts, just as much as I desire to know."

"Nevertheless—" commenced the commissary of police.

"If you will permit me, I prefer to proceed without receiving any details, in order to be more fully master of my own impressions. When one knows another's opinion it can't help influencing one's judgment. I will, if you please, at once commence my researches, with Lecoq's assistance."

As the old fellow spoke, his little gray eyes dilated, and became brilliant as carbuncles. His face reflected an internal satisfaction; even his wrinkles seemed to laugh. His figure became erect, and his step was almost elastic, as he darted into the inner chamber.

He remained there about half an hour; then came out running, then re-entered and then again came out; once more he disappeared and reappeared again almost immediately. The magistrate could not help comparing him to a pointer on the scent, his turned-up nose even moved about as if to discover some subtle odour left by the assassin. All the while he talked loudly and with much gesticulation, apostrophising himself, scolding himself, uttering little cries of triumph or self-encouragement. He did not allow Lecoq to have a moment's rest. He wanted this or that or the other thing. He demanded paper and a pencil. Then he wanted a spade; and finally he cried out for plaster of Paris, some water and a bottle of oil.

When more than an hour had elapsed, the investigating magistrate began to grow impatient, and asked what had become of the amateur detective.

"He is on the road," replied the corporal, "lying flat in the mud, and mixing some plaster in a plate. He says he has nearly finished, and that he is coming back presently."

He did in fact return almost instantly, joyous, triumphant, looking at least twenty years younger. Lecoq followed him, carrying with the utmost precaution a large basket.

"I have solved the riddle!" said Tabaret to the magistrate. "It is all clear now, and as plain as noon-day. Lecoq, my lad, put the basket on the table."

Gevrol at this moment returned from his expedition equally delighted.

"I am on the track of the man with the earrings," said he; "the boat went down the river. I have obtained an exact description of the master Gervais."

"What have you discovered, M. Tabaret!" asked the magistrate.

THE LEROUGE CASE

The old fellow carefully emptied upon the table the contents of the basket,—a big lump of clay, several large sheets of paper, and three or four small lumps of plaster yet damp. Standing behind this table, he presented a grotesque resemblance to those mountebank conjurers who in the public squares juggle the money of the lookers-on. His clothes had greatly suffered; he was covered with mud up to the chin.

"In the first place," said he, at last, in a tone of affected modesty, "robbery has had nothing to do with the crime that occupies our attention."

"Oh! of course not!" muttered Gevrol.

"I shall prove it," continued old Tabaret, "by the evidence. By—and—by I shall offer my humble opinion as to the real motive. In the second place, the assassin arrived here before half—past nine; that is to say, before the rain fell. No more than M. Gevrol have I been able to discover traces of muddy footsteps; but under the table, on the spot where his feet rested, I find dust. We are thus assured of the hour. The widow did not in the least expect her visitor. She had commenced undressing, and was winding up her cuckoo clock when he knocked."

"These are absolute details!" cried the commissary.

"But easily established," replied the amateur. "You see this cuckoo clock above the secretary; it is one of those which run fourteen or fifteen hours at most, for I have examined it. Now it is more than probable, it is certain, that the widow wound it up every evening before going to bed. How, then, is it that the clock has stopped at five? Because she must have touched it. As she was drawing the chain, the assassin knocked. In proof, I show this chair standing under the clock, and on the seat a very plain foot—mark. Now look at the dress of the victim; the body of it is off. In order to open the door more quickly, she did not wait to put it on again, but hastily threw this old shawl over her shoulders."

"By Jove!" exclaimed the corporal, evidently struck.

"The widow," continued the old fellow, "knew the person who knocked. Her haste to open the door gives rise to this conjecture; what follows proves it. The assassin then gained admission without difficulty. He is a young man, a little above the middle height, elegantly dressed. He wore on that evening a high hat. He carried an umbrella, and smoked a trabucos cigar in a holder."

"Ridiculous!" cried Gevrol. "This is too much."

"Too much, perhaps," retorted old Tabaret. "At all events, it is the truth. If you are not minute in your investigations, I cannot help it; anyhow, I am, I search, and I find. Too much, say you? Well deign to glance at these lumps of damp plaster. They represent the heels of the boots worn by the assassin, of which I found a most perfect impression near the ditch, where the key was picked up. On these sheets of paper, I have marked in outline the imprint of the foot which I cannot take up, because it is on some sand. Look! heel high, instep pronounced, sole small and narrow,—an elegant boot, belonging to a foot well cared for evidently. Look for this impression all along the path; and you will find it again twice. Then you will find it five times repeated in the garden where no one else had been; and these footprints prove, by the way, that the stranger knocked not at the door, but at the window—shutter, beneath which shone a gleam of light. At the entrance to the garden, the man leapt to avoid a flower bed! the point of the foot, more deeply imprinted than usual, shows it. He leapt more than two yards with ease, proving that he is active, and therefore young."

Old Tabaret spoke in a low voice, clear and penetrating: and his eye glanced from one to the other of his auditors, watching the impression he was making.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Does the hat astonish you, M. Gevrol?" he pursued. "Just look at the circle traced in the dust on the marble top of the secretary. Is it because I have mentioned his height that you are surprised? Take the trouble to examine the tops of the wardrobes and you will see that the assassin passed his hands across them. Therefore he is taller than I am. Do not say that he got on a chair, for in that case, he would have seen and would not have been obliged to feel. Are you astonished about the umbrella? This lump of earth shows an admirable impression not only of the end of the stick, but even of the little round piece of wood which is always placed at the end of the silk. Perhaps you cannot get over the statement that he smoked a cigar? Here is the end of a trabucos that I found amongst the ashes. Has the end been bitten? No. Has it been moistened with saliva? No. Then he who smoked it used a cigar-holder."

Lecoq was unable to conceal his enthusiastic admiration, and noiselessly rubbed his hands together. The commissary appeared stupefied, while M. Daburon was delighted. Gevrol's face, on the contrary, was sensibly elongated. As for the corporal, he was overwhelmed.

"Now," continued the old fellow, "follow me closely. We have traced the young man into the house. How he explained his presence at this hour, I do not know; this much is certain, he told the widow he had not dined. The worthy woman was delighted to hear it, and at once set to work to prepare a meal. This meal was not for herself; for in the cupboard I have found the remains of her own dinner. She had dined off fish; the autopsy will confirm the truth of this statement. Besides you can see yourselves, there is but one glass on the table, and one knife. But who is this young man? Evidently the widow looked upon him as a man of superior rank to her own; for in the cupboard is a table-cloth still very clean. Did she use it? No. For her guest she brought out a clean linen one, her very best. It is for him this magnificent glass, a present, no doubt, and it is evident she did not often use this knife with the ivory handle."

"That is all true," murmured M. Daburon, "very true."

"Now, then we have got the young man seated. He began by drinking a glass of wine, while the widow was putting her pan on the fire. Then, his heart failing him, he asked for brandy, and swallowed about five small glassfuls. After an internal struggle of ten minutes (the time it must have taken to cook the ham and eggs as much as they are), the young man arose and approached the widow, who was squatting down and leaning forward over her cooking. He stabbed her twice on the back; but she was not killed instantly. She half arose seizing the assassin by the hands; while he drew back, lifting her suddenly, and then hurling her down in the position in which you see her. This short struggle is indicated by the posture of the body; for, squatting down and being struck in the back, it is naturally on her back that she ought to have fallen. The murderer used a sharp narrow weapon, which was, unless I am deceived, the end of a foil, sharpened, and with the button broken off. By wiping the weapon upon his victim's skirt, the assassin leaves us this indication. He was not, however, hurt in the struggle. The victim must have clung with a death-grip to his hands; but, as he had not taken off his lavender kid gloves,"—

"Gloves! Why this is romance," exclaimed Gevrol.

"Have you examined the dead woman's finger-nails, M. Gevrol? No. Well, do so, and then tell me whether I am mistaken. The woman, now dead, we come to the object of her assassination. What did this well-dressed young gentleman want? Money? Valuables? No! no! a hundred times no! What he wanted, what he sought, and what he found, were papers, documents, letters, which he knew to be in the possession of the victim. To find them, he overturned everything, upset the cupboards, unfolded the linen, broke open the secretary, of which he could not find the key, and even emptied the mattress of the bed. At last he found these documents. And then do you know what he did with them? Why, burned them, of course; not in the fire-place, but in the little stove in the front room. His end accomplished, what does he do next? He flies, carrying with him all that he finds valuable, to baffle detection, by suggesting a robbery. He wrapped everything he found worth taking in the napkin which was to have served him at dinner, and blowing out the candle, he fled, locking the door on the outside, and throwing the key into a ditch. And that is all."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"M. Tabaret," said the magistrate, "your investigation is admirable; and I am persuaded your inferences are correct."

"Ah!" cried Lecoq. "is he not colossal, my old Tiraclair?"

"Pyramidal!" cried Gevrol ironically. "I fear, however, your well-dressed young man must have been just a little embarrassed in carrying a bundle covered with a snow white napkin, which could be so easily seen from a distance."

"He did not carry it a hundred leagues," responded old Tabaret. "You may well believe, that, to reach the railway station, he was not fool enough to take the omnibus. No, he returned on foot by the shortest way, which borders the river. Now on reaching the Seine, unless he is more knowing than I take him to be, his first care was to throw this tell-tale bundle into the water."

"Do you believe so, M. Tiraclair?" asked Gevrol.

"I don't mind making a bet on it; and the best evidence of my belief is, that I have sent three men, under the surveillance of a gendarme, to drag the Seine at the nearest spot from here. If they succeed in finding the bundle, I have promised them a recompense."

"Out of your own pocket, old enthusiast?"

"Yes, M. Gevrol, out of my own pocket."

"If they should however find this bundle!" murmured M. Daburon.

He was interrupted by the entrance of a gendarme, who said: "Here is a soiled table-napkin, filled with plate, money, and jewels, which these men have found; they claim the hundred francs' reward, promised them."

Old Tabaret took from his pocket-book a bank note, which he handed to the gendarme. "Now," demanded he, crushing Gevrol with one disdainful glance, "what thinks the investigating magistrate after this?"

"That, thanks to your remarkable penetration, we shall discover—"

He did not finish. The doctor summoned to make the post-mortem examination entered the room. That unpleasant task accomplished, it only confirmed the assertions and conjectures of old Tabaret. The doctor explained, as the old man had done, the position of the body. In his opinion also, there had been a struggle. He pointed out a bluish circle, hardly perceptible, round the neck of the victim, produced apparently by the powerful grasp of the murderer; finally he declared that Widow Lerouge had eaten about three hours before being struck.

Nothing now remained except to collect the different objects which would be useful for the prosecution, and might at a later period confound the culprit. Old Tabaret examined with extreme care the dead woman's finger-nails; and, using infinite precaution, he even extracted from behind them several small particles of kid. The largest of these pieces was not above the twenty-fifth part of an inch in length; but all the same their colour was easily distinguishable. He put aside also the part of the dress upon which the assassin had wiped his weapon. These with the bundle recovered from the Seine, and the different casts taken by the old fellow, were all the traces the murderer had left behind him.

It was not much; but this little was enormous in the eyes of M. Daburon; and he had strong hopes of discovering the culprit. The greatest obstacle to success in the unravelling of mysterious crimes is in mistaking the motive. If the researches take at the first step a false direction, they are diverted further and further from the truth, in

THE LEROUGE CASE

proportion to the length they are followed. Thanks to old Tabaret, the magistrate felt confident that he was in the right path.

Night had come on. M. Daburon had now nothing more to do at La Jonchere; but Gevrol, who still clung to his own opinion of the guilt of the man with the rings in his ears, declared he would remain at Bougival. He determined to employ the evening in visiting the different wine shops, and finding if possible new witnesses. At the moment of departure, after the commissary and the entire party had wished M. Daburon good-night, the latter asked M. Tabaret to accompany him.

"I was about to solicit that honour," replied the old fellow. They set out together; and naturally the crime which had been discovered, and with which they were mutually preoccupied, formed the subject of their conversation.

"Shall we, or shall we not, ascertain the antecedents of this woman!" repeated old Tabaret. "All depends upon that now!"

"We shall ascertain them, if the grocer's wife has told the truth," replied M. Daburon. "If the husband of Widow Lerouge was a sailor, and if her son Jacques is in the navy, the minister of marine can furnish information that will soon lead to their discovery. I will write to the minister this very night."

They reached the station at Rueil, and took their places in the train. They were fortunate enough to secure a 1st class carriage to themselves. But old Tabaret was no longer disposed for conversation. He reflected, he sought, he combined; and in his face might easily be read the working of his thoughts. M. Daburon watched him curiously and felt singularly attracted by this eccentric old man, whose very original taste had led him to devote his services to the secret police of the Rue de Jerusalem.

"M Tabaret," he suddenly asked, "have you been long associated with the police?"

"Nine years, M. Daburon, more than nine years; and permit me to confess I am a little surprised that you have never before heard of me."

"I certainly knew you by reputation," answered M. Daburon; "but your name did not occur to me, and it was only in consequence of hearing you praised that I had the excellent idea of asking your assistance. But what, I should like to know, is your reason for adopting this employment?"

"Sorrow, sir, loneliness, weariness. Ah! I have not always been happy!"

"I have been told, though, that you are rich."

The old fellow heaved a deep sigh, which revealed the most cruel deceptions. "I am well off, sir," he replied; "but I have not always been so. Until I was forty-five years old, my life was a series of absurd and useless privations. I had a father who wasted my youth, ruined my life, and made me the most pitiable of human creatures."

There are men who can never divest themselves of their professional habits. M. Daburon was at all times and seasons more or less an investigating magistrate.

"How, M. Tabaret," he inquired, "your father the author of all your misfortunes?"

"Alas, yes, sir! I have forgiven him at last; but I used to curse him heartily. In the first transports of my resentment, I heaped upon his memory all the insults that can be inspired by the most violent hatred, when I learnt,— But I will confide my history to you, M. Daburon. When I was five and twenty years of age. I was earning two thousand francs a year, as a clerk at the Monte de Pieté. One morning my father entered my lodging,

THE LEROUGE CASE

and abruptly announced to me that he was ruined, and without food or shelter. He appeared in despair, and talked of killing himself. I loved my father. Naturally, I strove to reassure him; I boasted of my situation, and explained to him at some length, that, while I earned the means for living, he should want for nothing; and, to commence, I insisted that henceforth we should live together. No sooner said than done, and during twenty years I was encumbered with the old—"

"What! you repent of your admirable conduct, M. Tabaret?"

"Do I repent of it! That is to say he deserved to be poisoned by the bread I gave him."

M. Daburon was unable to repress a gesture of surprise, which did not escape the old fellow's notice.

"Hear, before you condemn me," he continued. "There was I at twenty-five, imposing upon myself the severest privations for the sake of my father,—no more friends, no more flirtations, nothing. In the evenings, to augment our scanty revenues, I worked at copying law papers for a notary. I denied myself even the luxury of tobacco. Notwithstanding this, the old fellow complained without ceasing; he regretted his lost fortune; he must have pocket-money, with which to buy this, or that; my utmost exertions failed to satisfy him. Ah, heaven alone knows what I suffered! I was not born to live alone and grow old, like a dog. I longed for the pleasures of a home and a family. My dream was to marry, to adore a good wife, by whom I might be loved a little, and to see innocent healthy little ones gambolling about my knees. But pshaw! when such thoughts entered my heart and forced a tear or two from my eyes, I rebelled against myself. I said: 'My lad, when you earn but three thousand francs a year, and have an old and cherished father to support, it is your duty to stifle such desires, and remain a bachelor.' And yet I met a young girl. It is thirty years now since that time; well! just look at me, I am sure I am blushing as red as a tomato. Her name was Hortense. Who can tell what has become of her? She was beautiful and poor. Well, I was quite an old man when my father died, the wretch, the—"

"M. Tabaret!" interrupted the magistrate, "for shame, M. Tabaret!"

"But I have already told you, I have forgiven him, sir. However, you will soon understand my anger. On the day of his death, looking in his secretary, I found a memorandum of an income of twenty thousand francs!"

"How so! was he rich?"

"Yes, very rich; for that was not all: he owned near Orleans a property leased for six thousand francs a year. He owned, besides, the house I now live in, where we lived together; and I, fool, sot, imbecile, stupid animal that I was, used to pay the rent every three months to the concierge!"

"That was too much!" M. Daburon could not help saying.

"Was it not, sir? I was robbing myself of my own money! To crown his hypocrisy, he left a will wherein he declared, in the name of Holy Trinity, that he had no other aim in view, in thus acting, than my own advantage. He wished, so he wrote, to habituate me to habits of good order and economy, and keep me from the commission of follies. And I was forty-five years old, and for twenty years I had been reproaching myself if ever I spent a single sou uselessly. In short, he had speculated on my good heart, he had . . . Bah! on my word, it is enough to disgust the human race with filial piety!"

M. Tabaret's anger, albeit very real and justified, was so highly ludicrous, that M. Daburon had much difficulty to restrain his laughter, in spite of the real sadness of the recital.

"At least," said he, "this fortune must have given you pleasure."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Not at all, sir, it came too late. Of what avail to have the bread when one has no longer the teeth? The marriageable age had passed. I resigned my situation, however, to make way for some one poorer than myself. At the end of a month I was sick and tired of life; and, to replace the affections that had been denied me, I resolved to give myself a passion, a hobby, a mania. I became a collector of books. You think, sir, perhaps that to take an interest in books a man must have studied, must be learned?"

"I know, dear M. Tabaret, that he must have money. I am acquainted with an illustrious bibliomaniac who may be able to read, but who is most certainly unable to sign his own name."

"This is very likely. I, too, can read; and I read all the books I bought. I collected all I could find which related, no matter how little, to the police. Memoirs, reports, pamphlets, speeches, letters, novels,—all suited me; and I devoured them. So much so, that little by little I became attracted towards the mysterious power which, from the obscurity of the Rue de Jerusalem, watches over and protects society, which penetrates everywhere, lifts the most impervious veils, sees through every plot, divines what is kept hidden, knows exactly the value of a man, the price of a conscience, and which accumulates in its portfolios the most terrible, as well as the most shameful secrets! In reading the memoirs of celebrated detectives, more attractive to me than the fables of our best authors I became inspired by an enthusiastic admiration for those men, so keen scented, so subtle, flexible as steel, artful and penetrating, fertile in expedients, who follow crime on the trail, armed with the law, through the rushwood of legality, as relentlessly as the savages of Cooper pursue their enemies in the depths of the American forests. The desire seized me to become a wheel of this admirable machine,—a small assistance in the punishment of crime and the triumph of innocence. I made the essay; and I found I did not succeed too badly."

"And does this employment please you?"

"I owe to it, sir, my liveliest enjoyments. Adieu weariness! since I have abandoned the search for books to the search for men. I shrug my shoulders when I see a foolish fellow pay twenty-five francs for the right of hunting a hare. What a prize! Give me the hunting of a man! That, at least, calls the faculties into play, and the victory is not inglorious! The game in my sport is equal to the hunter; they both possess intelligence, strength, and cunning. The arms are nearly equal. Ah! if people but knew the excitement of these games of hide and seek which are played between the criminal and the detective, everybody would be wanting employment at the office of the Rue de Jerusalem. The misfortune is, that the art is becoming lost. Great crimes are now so rare. The race of strong fearless criminals has given place to the mob of vulgar pick-pockets. The few rascals who are heard of occasionally are as cowardly as foolish. They sign their names to their misdeeds, and even leave their cards lying about. There is no merit in catching them. Their crime found out, you have only to go and arrest them,—"

"It seems to me, though," interrupted M. Daburon, smiling, "that our assassin is not such a bungler."

"He, sir, is an exception; and I shall have greater delight in tracking him. I will do everything for that, I will even compromise myself if necessary. For I ought to confess, M. Daburon," added he, slightly embarrassed, "that I do not boast to my friends of my exploits; I even conceal them as carefully as possible. They would perhaps shake hands with me less warmly did they know that Tiraclair and Tabaret were one and the same."

Insensibly the crime became again the subject of conversation. It was agreed, that, the first thing in the morning, M. Tabaret should install himself at Bougival. He boasted that in eight days he should examine all the people round about. On his side M. Daburon promised to keep him advised of the least evidence that transpired, and recall him, if by any chance he should procure the papers of Widow Lerouge.

"To you, M. Tabaret," said the magistrate in conclusion, "I shall be always at home. If you have any occasion to speak to me, do not hesitate to come at night as well as during the day. I rarely go out, and you will always find me either at my home, Rue Jacob, or in my office at the Palais de Justice. I will give orders for your admittance whenever you present yourself."

THE LEROUGE CASE

The train entered the station at this moment. M. Daburon, having called a cab, offered a seat to M. Tabaret. The old fellow declined.

"It is not worth while," he replied, "for I live, as I have had the honour of telling you, in the Rue St. Lazare, only a few steps from here."

"Till to-morrow, then!" said M. Daburon.

"Till to-morrow," replied old Tabaret; and he added, "We shall succeed."

III.

M. TABARET'S house was in fact not more than four minutes' walk from the railway terminus of St. Lazare. It was a fine building carefully kept, and which probably yielded a fine income though the rents were not too high. The old fellow found plenty of room in it. He occupied on the first floor, overlooking the street, some handsome apartments, well arranged and comfortably furnished, the principal of which was his collection of books. He lived very simply from taste, as well as habit, waited on by an old servant, to whom on great occasions the concierge lent a helping hand.

No one in the house had the slightest suspicion of the avocations of the proprietor. Besides, even the humblest agent of police would be expected to possess a degree of acuteness for which no one gave M. Tabaret credit. Indeed, they mistook for incipient idiocy his continual abstraction of mind.

It is true that all who knew him remarked the singularity of his habits. His frequent absences from home had given to his proceedings an appearance at once eccentric and mysterious. Never was young libertine more irregular in his habits than this old man. He came or failed to come home to his meals, ate it mattered not what or when. He went out at every hour of the day and night, often slept abroad, and even disappeared for entire weeks at a time. Then too he received the strangest visitors, odd looking men of suspicious appearance, and fellows of ill-favoured and sinister aspect.

This irregular way of living had robbed the old fellow of much consideration. Many believed they saw in him a shameless libertine, who squandered his income in disreputable places. They would remark to one another, "Is it not disgraceful, a man of his age?"

He was aware of all this tittle-tattle, and laughed at it. This did not, however, prevent many of his tenants from seeking his society and paying court to him. They would invite him to dinner, but he almost invariably refused.

He seldom visited but one person of the house, but with that one he was very intimate, so much so indeed, that he was more often in her apartment, than in his own. She was a widow lady, who for fifteen years had occupied an apartment on the third floor. Her name was Madame Gerdy, and she lived with her son Noel, whom she adored.

Noel Gerdy was a man thirty-three years of age, but looking older; tall and well made, with a noble and intelligent face, large black eyes, and black hair which curled naturally. A barrister, he passed for having great talent, and greater industry, and had already gained a certain amount of notoriety. He was an obstinate worker, cold and meditative, though devoted to his profession, and affected, with some ostentation, perhaps, a great rigidity of principle, and austerity of manners.

In Madame Gerdy's apartment, old Tabaret felt himself quite at home. He considered her as a relation, and looked upon Noel as a son. In spite of her fifty years, he had often thought of asking the hand of this charming widow, and was restrained less by the fear of a refusal than its consequence. To propose and to be rejected would sever

THE LEROUGE CASE

the existing relations, so pleasurable to him. However, he had by his will, which was deposited with his notary constituted this young barrister his sole legatee; with the single condition of founding an annual prize of two thousand francs to be bestowed on the police agent who during the year had unravelled the most obscure and mysterious crime.

Short as was the distance to his house, old Tabaret was a good quarter of an hour in reaching it. On leaving M. Daburon his thoughts reverted to the scene of the murder; and, so blinded was the old fellow to external objects, that he moved along the street, first jostled on the right, then on the left, by the busy passers by, advancing one step and receding two. He repeated to himself for the fiftieth time the words uttered by Widow Lerouge, as reported by the milk-woman. "If I wished for any more, I could have it."

"All is in that," murmured he. "Widow Lerouge possessed some important secret, which persons rich and powerful had the strongest motives for concealing. She had them in her power, and that was her fortune. She made them sing to her tune; she probably went too far, and so they suppressed her. But of what nature was this secret, and how did she become possessed of it? Most likely she was in her youth a servant in some great family; and whilst there, she saw, heard, or discovered, something— What? Evidently there is a woman at the bottom of it. Did she assist her mistress in some love intrigue? What more probable? And in that case the affair becomes even more complicated. Not only must the woman be found but her lover also; for it is the lover who has moved in this affair. He is, or I am greatly deceived, a man of noble birth. A person inferior rank would have simply hired an assassin. This man has not hung back; he himself has struck the blow and by that means avoiding the indiscretion or the stupidity of an accomplice. He is a courageous rascal, full of audacity and coolness, for the crime has been admirably executed. The fellow left nothing behind of a nature to compromise him seriously. But for me, Gevrol, believing in the robbery, would have seen nothing. Fortunately, however, I was there. But yet it can hardly be that," continued the old man. "It must be something worse than a mere love affair."

Old Tabaret entered the porch of the house. The concierge seated by the window of his lodge saw him as he passed beneath the gas lamp.

"Ah," said he, "the proprietor has returned at last."

"So he has," replied his wife, "but it looks as though his princess would have nothing to do with him to-night. He seems more loose than ever."

"Is it not positively indecent," said the concierge, "and isn't he in a state! His fair ones do treat him well! One of these fine mornings I shall have to take him to a lunatic asylum in a straight waistcoat."

"Look at him now!" interrupted his wife, "just look at him now, in the middle of the courtyard!"

The old fellow had stopped at the extremity of the porch. He had taken off his hat, and, while talking to himself, gesticulated violently.

"No," said he, "I have not yet got hold of the clue, I am getting near it; but have not yet found it out."

He mounted the staircase, and rang his bell, forgetting that he had his latch-key in his pocket. His housekeeper opened the door.

"What, is it you, sir," said she, "and at this hour!"

"What's that you say?" asked the old fellow.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"I say," replied the housekeeper, "that it is more than half-past eight o'clock. I thought you were not coming back this evening. Have you at least dined?"

"No, not yet."

"Well, fortunately I have kept your dinner warm. You can sit down to it at once."

Old Tabaret took his place at the table, and helped himself to soup, but mounting his hobby-horse again, he forgot to eat, and remained, his spoon in the air, as though suddenly struck by an idea.

"He is certainly touched in the head," thought Manette, the housekeeper. "Look at that stupid expression. Who in his senses would lead the life he does?" She touched him on the shoulder, and bawled in his ear, as if he were deaf,— "You do not eat. Are you not hungry?"

"Yes, yes," muttered he, trying mechanically to escape the voice that sounded in his ears, "I am very hungry, for since the morning I have been obliged—" He interrupted himself, remaining with his mouth open, his eyes fixed on vacancy.

"You were obliged—?" repeated Manette.

"Thunder!" cried he, raising his clenched fists towards the ceiling,— "heaven's thunder! I have it!"

His movement was so violent and sudden that the housekeeper was a little alarmed, and retired to the further end of the dining-room, near the door.

"Yes," continued he, "it is certain there is a child!"

Manette approached him quickly. "A child?" she asked in astonishment.

"What next!" cried he in a furious tone. "What are you doing there? Has your hardihood come to this that you pick up the words which escape me? Do me the pleasure to retire to your kitchen, and stay there until I call you."

"He is going crazy!" thought Manette, as she disappeared very quickly.

Old Tabaret resumed his seat. He hastily swallowed his soup which was completely cold. "Why," said he to himself, "did I not think of it before? Poor humanity! I am growing old, and my brain is worn out. For it is clear as day; the circumstances all point to that conclusion."

He rang the bell placed on the table beside him; the servant reappeared.

"Bring the roast," he said, "and leave me to myself."

"Yes," continued he furiously carving a leg of Presale mutton—"Yes," there is a child, and here is his history! The Widow Lerouge, when a young woman, is in the service of a great lady, immensely rich. Her husband, a sailor, probably had departed on a long voyage. The lady had a lover—found herself enciente. She confided in the Widow Lerouge, and, with her assistance, accomplished a clandestine accouchement."

He called again.

"Manette, the dessert, and get out!"

THE LEROUGE CASE

Certainly such a master was unworthy of so excellent a cook as Manette. He would have been puzzled to say what he had eaten for dinner, or even what he was eating at this moment; it was a preserve of pears.

"But what," murmured he, "has become of the child? Has it been destroyed? No; for the Widow Lerouge, an accomplice in an infanticide, would be no longer formidable. The child has been preserved, and confided to the care of our widow, by whom it has been reared. They have been able to take the infant away from her, but not the proofs of its birth and its existence. Here is the opening. The father is the man of the fine carriage; the mother is the lady who came with the handsome young man. Ha! ha! I can well believe the dear old dame wanted for nothing. She had a secret worth a farm in Brie. But the old lady was extravagant; her expenses and her demands have increased year by year. Poor humanity! She has leaned upon the staff too heavily, and broken it. She has threatened. They have been frightened, and said, 'Let there be an end of this!' But who has charged himself with the commission? The papa? No; he is too old. By jupiter! The son,—the child himself! He would save his mother, the brave boy! He has slain the witness and burnt the proofs!"

Manette all this time, her ear to the keyhole, listened with all her soul; from time to time she gleaned a word, an oath, the noise of a blow upon the table; but that was all.

"For certain," thought she, "his women are running in his head."

Her curiosity overcame her prudence. Hearing no more, she ventured to open the door a little way. The old fellow caught her in the very act.

"Monsieur wants his coffee?" stammered she timidly.

"Yes, you may bring it to me," he answered.

He attempted to swallow his coffee at a gulp, but scalded himself so severely that the pain brought him suddenly from speculation to reality.

"Thunder!" growled he; "but it is hot! Devil take the case! it has set me beside myself. They are right when they say I am too enthusiastic. But who amongst the whole lot of them could have, by the sole exercise of observation and reason, established the whole history of the assassination? Certainly not Gevrol, poor man! Won't he feel vexed and humiliated, being altogether out of it. Shall I seek M. Daburon? No, not yet. The night is necessary to me to sift to the bottom all the particulars, and arrange my ideas systematically. But, on the other hand, if I sit here all alone, this confounded case will keep me in a fever of speculation, and as I have just eaten a great deal, I may get an attack of indigestion. My faith! I will call upon Madame Gerdy: she has been ailing for some days past. I will have a chat with Noel, and that will change the course of my ideas."

He got up from the table, put on his overcoat, and took his hat and cane.

"Are you going out, sir?" asked Manette.

"Yes."

"Shall you be late?"

"Possibly."

"But you will return to-night?"

"I do not know."

THE LEROUGE CASE

One minute later, M. Tabaret was ringing his friend's bell.

Madame Gerdy lived in respectable style. She possessed sufficient for her wants; and her son's practice, already large, had made them almost rich. She lived very quietly, and with the exception of one or two friends, whom Noel occasionally invited to dinner, received very few visitors. During more than fifteen years that M. Tabaret came familiarly to the apartments, he had only met the cure of the parish, one of Noel's old professors, and Madame Gerdy's brother, a retired colonel. When these three visitors happened to call on the same evening, an event somewhat rare, they played at a round game called Boston; on other evenings piquet or all-fours was the rule. Noel, however, seldom remained in the drawing-room, but shut himself up after dinner in his study, which with his bedroom formed a separate apartment to his mother's, and immersed himself in his law papers. He was supposed to work far into the night. Often in winter his lamp was not extinguished before dawn.

Mother and son absolutely lived for one another, as all who knew them took pleasure in repeating. They loved and honoured Noel for the care he bestowed upon his mother, for his more than filial devotion, for the sacrifices which all supposed he made in living at his age like an old man.

The neighbours were in the habit of contrasting the conduct of this exemplary young man with that of M. Tabaret, the incorrigible old rake, the hairless dangler.

As for Madame Gerdy, she saw nothing but her son in all the world. Her love had actually taken the form of worship. In Noel she believed she saw united all the physical and moral perfections. To her he seemed of a superior order to the rest of humanity. If he spoke, she was silent and listened: his word was a command, his advice a decree of Providence. To care for her son, study his tastes, anticipate his wishes, was the sole aim of her life. She was a mother.

"Is Madame Gerdy visible?" asked old Tabaret of the girl who opened the door; and, without waiting for an answer, he walked into the room like a man assured that his presence cannot be inopportune, and ought to be agreeable.

A single candle lighted the drawing-room, which was not in its accustomed order. The small marble-top table, usually in the middle of the room, had been rolled into a corner. Madame Gerdy's large arm-chair was near the window; a newspaper, all crumpled, lay before it on the carpet.

The amateur detective took in the whole at a glance.

"Has any accident happened?" he asked of the girl.

"Do not speak of it, sir: we have just had a fright! oh, such a fright!"

"What was it? tell me quickly!"

"You know that madame has been ailing for the last month. She has eaten I may say almost nothing. This morning, even, she said to me"—

"Yes, yes! but this evening?"

"After her dinner, madame went into the drawing-room as usual. She sat down and took up one of M. Noel's newspapers. Scarcely had she begun to read, when she uttered a great cry,—oh, a terrible cry! We hastened to her; madame had fallen on to the floor, as one dead. M. Noel raised her in his arms, and carried her into her room. I wanted to fetch the doctor, sir, but he said there was no need; he knew what was the matter with her."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"And how is she now?"

"She has come to her senses; that is to say, I suppose so; for M. Noel made me leave the room. All that I do know is, that a little while ago she was talking, and talking very loudly too, for I heard her. Ah, sir, it is all the same, very strange!"

"What is strange?"

"What I heard Madame Gerdy say to M. Noel."

"Ah ha! my girl!" sneered old Tabaret; "so you listen at key-holes, do you?"

"No, sir, I assure you; but madame cried out like one lost. She said,"—

"My girl!" interrupted old Tabaret severely, "one always hears wrong through key-holes. Ask Manette if that is not so."

The poor girl, thoroughly confused, sought to excuse herself.

"Enough, enough!" said the old man. "Return to your work: you need not disturb M. Noel; I can wait for him very well here."

And satisfied with the reproof he had administered, he picked up the newspaper, and seated himself beside the fire, placing the candle near him so as to read with ease. A minute had scarcely elapsed when he in his turn bounded in his chair, and stifled a cry of instinctive terror and surprise. These were the first words that met his eye.

"A horrible crime has plunged the village of La Jonchere in consternation. A poor widow, named Lerouge, who enjoyed the general esteem and love of the community, has been assassinated in her home. The officers of the law have made the usual preliminary investigations, and everything leads us to believe that the police are already on the track of the author of this dastardly crime."

"Thunder!" said old Tabaret to himself, "can it be that Madame Gerdy?"—

The idea but flashed across his mind; he fell back into his chair, and, shrugging his shoulders, murmured,—

"Really this affair of La Jonchere is driving me out of my senses! I can think of nothing but this Widow Lerouge. I shall be seeing her in everything now."

In the mean while, an uncontrollable curiosity made him peruse the entire newspaper. He found nothing with the exception of these lines, to justify or explain even the slightest emotion.

"It is an extremely singular coincidence, at the same time," thought the incorrigible police agent. Then, remarking that the newspaper was slightly torn at the lower part, and crushed, as if by a convulsive grasp, he repeated,—

"It is strange!"

At this moment the door of Madame Gerdy's room opened, and Noel appeared on the threshold.

Without doubt the accident to his mother had greatly excited him; for he was very pale and his countenance, ordinarily so calm, wore an expression of profound sorrow. He appeared surprised to see old Tabaret.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Ah, my dear Noel!" cried the old fellow. "Calm my inquietude. How is your mother?"

"Madame Gerdy is as well as can be expected."

"Madame Gerdy!" repeated the old fellow with an air of astonishment; but he continued, "It is plain you have been seriously alarmed."

"In truth," replied the advocate, seating himself, "I have experienced a rude shock."

Noel was making visibly the greatest efforts to appear calm, to listen to the old fellow, and to answer him. Old Tabaret, as much disquieted on his side, perceived nothing.

"At least, my dear boy," said he, "tell me how this happened?"

The young man hesitated a moment, as if consulting with himself. No doubt he was unprepared for this point blank question, and knew not what answer to make; at last he replied,—

"Madame Gerdy has suffered a severe shock in learning from a paragraph in this newspaper that a woman in whom she takes a strong interest has been assassinated."

"Ah!" replied old Tabaret.

The old fellow was in a fever of embarrassment. He wanted to question Noel, but was restrained by the fear of revealing the secret of his association with the police. Indeed he had almost betrayed himself by the eagerness with which he exclaimed,—

"What! your mother knew the Widow Lerouge?"

By an effort he restrained himself, and with difficulty dissembled his satisfaction; for he was delighted to find himself so unexpectedly on the trace of the antecedents of the victim of La Jonchere.

"She was," continued Noel, "the slave of Madame Gerdy, devoted to her in every way! She would have sacrificed herself for her at a sign from her hand."

"Then you, my dear friend, you knew this poor woman!"

"I had not seen her for a very long time," replied Noel, whose voice seemed broken by emotion, "but I knew her well. I ought even to say I loved her tenderly. She was my nurse."

"She, this woman?" stammered old Tabaret.

This time he was thunderstruck. Widow Lerouge Noel's nurse? He was most unfortunate. Providence had evidently chosen him for its instrument, and was leading him by the hand. He was about to obtain all the information, which half an hour ago he had almost despaired of procuring. He remained seated before Noel amazed and speechless. Yet he understood, that, unless he would compromise himself, he must speak.

"It is a great misfortune," he murmured at last.

"What it is for Madame Gerdy, I cannot say," replied Noel with a gloomy air; "but, for me, it is an overwhelming misfortune! I am struck to the heart by the blow which has slain this poor woman. Her death, M. Tabaret, has annihilated all my dreams of the future, and probably overthrown my most cherished hopes. I had to avenge

THE LEROUGE CASE

myself for cruel injuries; her death breaks the weapon in my hands, and reduces me to despair, to impotence. Alas! I am indeed unfortunate."

"You unfortunate?" cried old Tabaret, singularly affected by his dear Noel's sadness. "In heaven's name, what has happened to you?"

"I suffer," murmured the barrister, "and very cruelly. Not only do I fear that the injustice is irreparable; but here am I totally without defence delivered over to the shafts of calumny. I may be accused of inventing falsehood, of being an ambitious intriguer, having no regard for truth, no scruples of conscience."

Old Tabaret was puzzled. What connection could possibly exist between Noel's honour and the assassination at La Jonchere? His brain was in a whirl. A thousand troubled and confused ideas jostled one another in inextricable confusion.

"Come, come, Noel," said he, "compose yourself. Who would believe any calumny uttered about you? Take courage, have you not friends? am I not here? Have confidence, tell me what troubles you, and it will be strange, indeed if between us two—"

The barrister started to his feet, impressed by a sudden resolution.

"Well! yes," interrupted he, "yes, you shall know all. In fact, I am tired of carrying all alone a secret that is stifling me. The part I have been playing irritates and wearies me. I have need of a friend to console me. I require a counsellor whose voice will encourage me, for one is a bad judge of his own cause, and this crime has plunged me into an abyss of hesitations."

"You know," replied M. Tabaret kindly, "that I regard you as my own son. Do not scruple to let me serve you."

"Know then," commenced the barrister,— "but no, not here: what I have to say must not be overheard. Let us go into my study."

IV.

WHEN Noel and old Tabaret were seated face to face in Noel's study, and the door had been carefully shut, the old fellow felt uneasy, and said: "What if your mother should require anything?"

"If Madame Gerdy rings," replied the young man drily, "the servant will attend to her."

This indifference, this cold disdain, amazed old Tabaret, accustomed as he was to the affectionate relations always existing between mother and son.

"For heaven's sake, Noel," said he, "calm yourself. Do not allow yourself to be overcome by a feeling of irritation. You have, I see, some little pique against your mother, which you will have forgotten to-morrow. Don't speak of her in this icy tone; but tell me what you mean by calling her Madame Gerdy?"

"What I mean?" rejoined the barrister in a hollow tone,— "what I mean?"

Then rising from his arm-chair, he took several strides about the room, and, returning to his place near the old fellow, said,—

"Because, M. Tabaret, Madame Gerdy is not my mother!"

THE LEROUGE CASE

This sentence fell like a heavy blow on the head of the amateur detective.

"Oh!" he said, in the tone one assumes when rejecting an absurd proposition, "do you really know what you are saying, Noel? Is it credible? Is it probable?"

"It is improbable," replied Noel with a peculiar emphasis which was habitual to him: "it is incredible, if you will; but yet it is true. That is to say, for thirty—three years, ever since my birth, this woman has played a most marvellous and unworthy comedy, to ennoble and enrich her son,—for she has a son,—at my expense!"

"My friend," commenced old Tabaret, who in the background of the picture presented by this singular revelation saw again the phantom of the murdered Widow Lerouge.

But Noel heard not, and seemed hardly in a state to hear. The young man, usually so cold, so self-contained, could no longer control his anger. At the sound of his own voice, he became more and more animated, as a good horse might at the jingling of his harness.

"Was ever man," continued he, "more cruelly deceived, more miserably duped, than I have been! I, who loved this woman, who knew not how to show my affection for her, who, for her sake, sacrificed my youth! How she must have laughed at me! Her infamy dates from the moment when for the first time she took me on her knees; and, until these few days past, she has sustained without faltering her execrable role. Her love for me was nothing but hypocrisy! her devotion, falsehood! her caresses, lies! And I adored her! Ah! why can I not take back all the embraces I bestowed on her in exchange for her Judas kisses? And for what was all this heroism of deception, this caution, this duplicity? To betray me more securely, to despoil me, to rob me, to give to her bastard all that lawfully appertained to me; my name, a noble name, my fortune, a princely inheritance!"

"We are getting near it!" thought old Tabaret, who was fast relapsing into the colleague of M. Gevrol; then aloud he said, "This is very serious, all that you have been saying, my dear Noel, terribly serious. We must believe Madame Gerdy possessed of an amount of audacity and ability rarely to be met with in a woman. She must have been assisted, advised, compelled perhaps. Who have been her accomplices? She could never have managed this unaided; perhaps her husband himself."

"Her husband!" interrupted the barrister, with a laugh. "Ah! you too have believed her a widow. Pshaw! She never had a husband, the defunct Gerdy never existed. I was a bastard, dear M. Tabaret, very much a bastard; Noel, son of the girl Gerdy and an unknown father!"

"Ah! " cried the old fellow; "that then was the reason why your marriage with Mademoiselle Levernois was broken off four years ago?"

"Yes, my friend, that was the reason. And what misfortunes might have been averted by this marriage with a young girl whom I loved! However I did not complain to her whom I then called my mother. She wept, she accused herself, she seemed ready to die of grief: and I, poor fool! I consoled her as best I could, I dried her tears, and excused her in her own eyes. No, there was no husband. Do such women as she have husbands? She was my father's mistress; and, on the day when he had had enough of her, he took up his hat and threw her three hundred thousand francs, the price of the pleasures she had given him."

Noel would probably have continued much longer to pour forth his furious denunciations; but M. Tabaret stopped him. The old fellow felt he was on the point of learning a history in every way similar to that which he had imagined; and his impatience to know whether he had guessed aright, almost caused him to forget to express any sympathy for his friend's misfortunes.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"My dear boy," said he, "do not let us digress. You ask me for advice; and I am perhaps the best adviser you could have chosen. Come, then, to the point. How have you learned this? Have you any proofs? where are they?"

The decided tone in which the old fellow spoke, should no doubt, have awakened Noel's attention; but he did not notice it. He had not leisure to reflect. He therefore answered,—

"I have known the truth for three weeks past. I made the discovery by chance. I have important moral proofs; but they are mere presumptive evidence. A word from Widow Lerouge, one single word, would have rendered them decisive. This word she cannot now pronounce, since they have killed her; but she had said it to me. Now, Madame Gerdy will deny all. I know her; with her head on the block, she will deny it. My father doubtless will turn against me. I am certain, and I possess proofs; now this crime makes my certitude but a vain boast, and renders my proofs null and void!"

"Explain it all to me," said old Tabaret after a pause—"all, you understand. We old ones are sometimes able to give good advice. We will decide what's to be done afterwards."

"Three weeks ago," commenced Noel, "searching for some old documents, I opened Madame Gerdy's secretary. Accidentally I displaced one of the small shelves: some papers tumbled out, and a packet of letters fell in front of my eyes. A mechanical impulse, which I cannot explain, prompted me to untie the string, and, impelled by an invincible curiosity, I read the first letter which came to my hand."

"You did wrong," remarked M. Tabaret.

"Be it so; anyhow I read. At the end of ten lines, I was convinced that these letters were from my father, whose name, Madame Gerdy, in spite of my prayers, had always hidden from me. You can understand my emotion. I carried off the packet, shut myself up in this room, and devoured the correspondence from beginning to end."

"And you have been cruelly punished my poor boy!"

"It is true; but who in my position could have resisted? These letters have given me great pain; but they afford the proof of what I just now told you."

"You have at least preserved these letters?"

"I have them here, M. Tabaret," replied Noel, "and, that you may understand the case in which I have requested your advice, I am going to read them to you."

The barrister opened one of the drawers of his bureau, pressed an invisible spring, and from a hidden receptacle constructed in the thick upper shelf, he drew out a bundle of letters. "You understand, my friend," he resumed, "that I will spare you all insignificant details, which, however, add their own weight to the rest. I am only going to deal with the more important facts, treating directly of the affair."

Old Tabaret nestled in his arm-chair, burning with curiosity; his face and his eyes expressing the most anxious attention. After a selection, which he was some time in making, the barrister opened a letter, and commenced reading in a voice which trembled at times, in spite of his efforts to render it calm.

"My dearly loved Valerie,'—

"Valerie," said he, "is Madame Gerdy."

"I know, I know. Do not interrupt yourself."

THE LEROUGE CASE

Noel then resumed.

"My dearly loved Valerie,

"This is a happy day. This morning I received your darling letter, I have covered it with kisses, I have re-read it a hundred times; and now it has gone to join the others here upon my heart. This letter, oh, my love! has nearly killed me with joy. You were not deceived, then; it was true! Heaven has blessed our love. We shall have a son.

"I shall have a son, the living image of my adored Valerie! Oh! why are we separated by such an immense distance? Why have I not wings that I might fly to your feet and fall into your arms, full of the sweetest voluptuousness! No! never as at this moment have I cursed the fatal union imposed upon me by an inexorable family, whom my tears could not move. I cannot help hating this woman, who, in spite of me bears my name, innocent victim though she is of the barbarity of our parents. And, to complete my misery, she too will soon render me a father. Who can describe my sorrow when I compare the fortunes of these two children?

"The one, the son of the object of my tenderest love, will have neither father nor family, nor even a name, since a law framed to make lovers unhappy prevents my acknowledging him. While the other, the son of my detested wife, by the sole fact of his birth, will be rich, noble, surrounded by devotion and homage, with a great position in the world. I cannot bear the thought of this terrible injustice! How it is to be prevented, I do not know: but rest assured I shall find a way. It is to him who is the most desired, the most cherished, the most beloved, that the greater fortune should come; and come to him it shall, for I so will it."

"From where is that letter dated?" asked old Tabaret. The style in which it was written had already settled one point in his mind.

"See," replied Noel. He handed the letter to the old fellow, who read,—

"Venice, December, 1828."

"You perceive," resumed the barrister, "all the importance of this first letter. It is like a brief statement of the facts. My father, married in spite of himself, adores his mistress, and detests his wife. Both find themselves enceinte at the same time, and his feelings towards the two infants about to be born, are not at all concealed. Towards the end one almost sees peeping forth the germ of the idea which later on he will not be afraid to put into execution, in defiance of all law human or divine!"

He was speaking as though pleading the cause, when old Tabaret interrupted him.

"It is not necessary to explain it," said he. "Thank goodness, what you have just read is explicit enough. I am not an adept in such matters, I am as simple as a juryman; however I understand it admirably so far."

"I pass over several letters," continued Noel, "and I come to this one dated Jan. 23, 1829. It is very long, and filled with matters altogether foreign to the subject which now occupies us. However, it contains two passages, which attest the slow but steady growth of my father's project. 'A destiny, more powerful than my will, chains me to this country; but my soul is with you, my Valerie! Without ceasing, my thoughts rest upon the adored pledge of our love which moves within you. Take care, my darling, take care of yourself, now doubly precious. It is the lover, the father, who implores you. The last part of your letter wounds my heart. Is it not an insult to me, for you to express anxiety as to the future of our child! Oh heaven! she loves me, she knows me, and yet she doubts!'

"I skip," said Noel, "two pages of passionate rhapsody, and stop at these few lines at the end. 'The countess's condition causes her to suffer very much! Unfortunate wife! I hate and at the same time pity her. She seems to divine the reason of my sadness and my coldness. By her timid submission and unalterable sweetness, one would

THE LEROUGE CASE

think she sought pardon for our unhappy union. Poor sacrificed creature! She also may have given her heart to another, before being dragged to the altar. Our fates would then be the same. Your good heart will pardon my pitying her.'

"That one was my mother," cried the barrister in a trembling voice. "A saint! And he asks pardon for the pity she inspires! Poor woman."

He passed his hands over his eyes, as if to force back his tears, and added,—

"She is dead!"

In spite of his impatience, old Tabaret dared not utter a word. Besides he felt keenly the profound sorrow of his young friend, and respected it. After a rather long silence, Noel raised his head, and returned to the correspondence.

"All the letters which follow," said he, "carry traces of the preoccupation of my father's mind on the subject of his bastard son. I lay them, however, aside. But this is what strikes me in the one written from Rome, on March 5, 1829. 'My son, our son, that is my great, my only anxiety. How to secure for him the future position of which I dream? The nobles of former times were not worried in this way. In those days I would have gone to the king, who, with a word, would have assured the child's position in the world. To-day, the king who governs with difficulty his disaffected subjects can do nothing. The nobility has lost its rights, and the highest in the land are treated the same as the meanest peasants!' Lower down I find,—'My heart loves to picture to itself the likeness of our son. He will have the spirit, the mind, the beauty, the grace, all the fascinations of his mother. He will inherit from his father, pride, valour, and the sentiments of a noble race. And the other, what will he be like? I tremble to think of it. Hatred can only engender a monster. Heaven reserves strength and beauty for the children of love!' The monster, that is I!" said the barrister, with intense rage. "Whilst the other— But let us ignore these preliminaries to an outrageous action. I only desired up to the present to show you the aberration of my father's reason under the influence of his passion. We shall soon come to the point."

M. Tabaret was astonished at the strength of this passion, of which Noel was disturbing the ashes. Perhaps, he felt it all the more keenly on account of those expressions which recalled his own youth. He understood how irresistible must have been the strength of such a love and he trembled to speculate as to the result.

"Here is," resumed Noel, holding up a sheet of paper, "not one of those interminable epistles from which I have read you short extracts, but a simple billet. It is dated from Venice at the beginning of May; it is short but nevertheless decisive; 'Dear Valerie,—Tell me, as near as possible, the probable date of your confinement. I await your reply with an anxiety you would imagine, could you but guess my projects with regard to our child.'

"I do not know," said Noel, "whether Madame Gerdy understood; anyhow she must have answered at once, for this is what my father wrote on the 14th: 'Your reply, my darling, is what I did not dare expect it to be. The project I had conceived is now practicable. I begin to feel more calm and secure. Our son shall bear my name; I shall not be obliged to separate myself from him. He shall be reared by my side, in my mansion, under my eyes, on my knees, in my arms. Shall I have strength enough to bear this excess of happiness? I have a soul for grief, shall I have one for joy? Oh! my adored one, oh! my precious child, fear nothing, my heart is vast, enough to love you both! I set out to-morrow for Naples, from whence I shall write to you at length. Happen what may, however, though I should have to sacrifice the important interests confided to me, I shall be in Paris for the critical hour. My presence will double your courage; the strength of my love will diminish your sufferings.'"

"I beg your pardon for interrupting you, Noel," said old Tabaret, "do you know what important affairs detained your father abroad?"

THE LEROUGE CASE

"My father, my old friend," replied the barrister, "was, in spite of his youth, one of the friends, one of the confidants, of Charles X.; and he had been entrusted by him with a secret mission to Italy. My father is Count Rheteau de Commarin."

"Whew!" exclaimed the old fellow; and the better to engrave the name upon his memory, he repeated several times, between his teeth, "Rheteau de Commarin."

For a few minutes Noel remained silent. After having appeared to do everything to control his resentment, he seemed utterly dejected, as though he had formed the determination to attempt nothing to repair the injury he had sustained.

"In the middle of the month of May, then," he continued, "my father is at Naples. It is whilst there, that he, a man of prudence and sense, a dignified diplomatist, a nobleman, prompted by an insensate passion, dares to confide to paper this most monstrous of projects. Listen!

"My adored one,—

"It is Germain, my old valet, who will hand you this letter. I am sending him to Normandy, charged with a commission of the most delicate nature. He is one of those servitors who may be trusted implicitly.

"The time has come for me to explain to you my projects respecting my son. In three weeks, at the latest, I shall be in Paris.

"If my previsions are not deceived, the countess and you will be confined at the same time. An interval of three or four days will not alter my plan. This is what I have resolved.

"My two children will be entrusted to two nurses of Normandy, where my estates are nearly all situated. One of these women, known to Germain, and to whom I am sending him, will be in our interests. It is to this person, Valerie, that our son will be confided. These two women will leave Paris the same day, Germain accompanying her who will have charge of the son of the countess.

"An accident, devised beforehand, will compel these two women to pass one night on the road. Germain will arrange so they will have to sleep in the same inn, and in the same chamber! During the night, our nurse will change the infants in their cradles.

"I have foreseen everything, as I will explain to you, and every precaution has been taken to prevent our secret from escaping. Germain has instructions to procure, while in Paris, two sets of baby linen exactly similar. Assist him with your advice.

"Your maternal heart, my sweet Valerie, may perhaps bleed at the thought of being deprived of the innocent caresses of your child. You will console yourself by thinking of the position secured to him by your sacrifice. What excess of tenderness can serve him as powerfully as this separation? As to the other, I know your fond heart, you will cherish him. Will it not be another proof of your love for me? Besides, he will have nothing to complain of. Knowing nothing he will have nothing to regret; and all that money can secure in this world he shall have.

"Do not tell me that this attempt is criminal. No, my well beloved, no. The success of our plan depends upon so many unlikely circumstances, so many coincidences, independent of our will, that, without the evident protection of Providence, we cannot succeed. If, then, success crowns our efforts, it will be because heaven decreed it.

"Meanwhile I hope."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Just what I expected," murmured old Tabaret.

"And the wretched man," cried Noel, "dares to invoke the aid of Providence! He would make heaven his accomplice!"

"But," asked the old fellow, "how did your mother,—pardon me, I would say, how did Madame Gerdy receive this proposition?"

"She would appear to have rejected it, at first, for here are twenty pages of eloquent persuasion from the count, urging her to agree to it, trying to convince her. Oh, that woman!"

"Come my child," said M. Tabaret, softly, "try not to be too unjust. You seem to direct all your resentment against Madame Gerdy? Really, in my opinion, the count is far more deserving of your anger than she is."

"True," interrupted Noel, with a certain degree of violence,—"true, the count is guilty, very guilty. He is the author of the infamous conspiracy, and yet I feel no hatred against him. He has committed a crime, but he has an excuse, his passion. Moreover, my father has not deceived me, like this miserable woman, every hour of my life, during thirty years. Besides, M. de Commarin has been so cruelly punished, that, at this present moment, I can only pardon and pity him."

"Ah! so he has been punished?" interrogated the old fellow.

"Yes, fearfully, as you will admit. But allow me to continue. Towards the end of May, or, rather, during the first days of June, the count must have arrived in Paris, for the correspondence ceases. He saw Madame Gerdy, and the final arrangements of the conspiracy were decided on. Here is a note which removes all uncertainty on that point. On the day it was written, the count was on service at the Tuileries, and unable to leave his post. He has written it even in the king's study, on the king's paper; see the royal arms! The bargain has been concluded, and the woman who has consented to become the instrument of my father's projects is in Paris. He informs his mistress of the fact.

"Dear Valerie,—Germain informs me of the arrival of your son's, our son's nurse. She will call at your house during the day. She is to be depended upon; a magnificent recompense ensures her discretion. Do not, however, mention our plans to her; for she has been given to understand that you know nothing. I wish to charge myself with the sole responsibility of the deed; it is more prudent. This woman is a native of Normandy. She was born on our estate, almost in our house. Her husband is a brave and honest sailor. Her name is Claudine Lerouge.

"Be of good courage, my dear love I am exacting from you the greatest sacrifice that a lover can hope for from a mother. Heaven, you can no longer doubt it, protects us. Everything depends now upon our skill and our prudence, so that we are sure to succeed!"

On one point, at least, M. Tabaret was sufficiently enlightened. The researches into the past life of widow Lerouge were no longer difficult. He could not restrain an exclamation of satisfaction, which passed unnoticed by Noel.

"This note," resumed the barrister, "closes the count's correspondence with Madame Gerdy."

"What!" exclaimed the old fellow, "you are in possession of nothing more?"

"I have also ten lines, written many years later, which certainly have some weight, but after all are only a moral proof."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"What a misfortune!" murmured M. Tabaret. Noel laid on the bureau the letters he had held in his hand, and, turning towards his old friend, he looked at him steadily,

"Suppose," said he slowly and emphasising every syllable,——"suppose that all my information ends here. We will admit, for a moment, that I know nothing more than you do now. What is your opinion?"

Old Tabaret remained some minutes without answering; he was estimating the probabilities resulting from M. de Commarin's letters.

"For my own part," said he at length, "I believe on my conscience that you are not Madame Gerdy's son."

"And you are right!" answered the barrister forcibly. "You will easily believe, will you not, that I went and saw Claudine. She loved me, this poor woman who had given me her milk, she suffered from the knowledge of the injustice that had been done me. Must I say it, her complicity in the matter weighed upon her conscience; it was a remorse too great for her old age. I saw her, I interrogated her, and she told me all. The count's scheme, simply and yet ingeniously conceived, succeeded without any effort. Three days after my birth, the crime was committed, and I, poor, helpless infant, was betrayed, despoiled and disinherited by my natural protector, by my own father! Poor Claudine! She promised me her testimony for the day on which I should reclaim my rights!"

"And she is gone, carrying her secret with her!" murmured the old fellow in a tone of regret.

"Perhaps!" replied Noel, "for I have yet one hope. Claudine had in her possession several letters which had been written to her a long time ago, some by the count, some by Madame Gerdy, letters both imprudent and explicit. They will be found, no doubt, and their evidence will be decisive. I have held these letters in my hands, I have read them; Claudine particularly wished me to keep them, why did I not do so?"

No! there was no hope on that side, and old Tabaret knew so better than any one. It was these very letters, no doubt, that the assassin of La Jonchere wanted. He had found them and had burnt them with the other papers, in the little stove. The old amateur detective was beginning to understand.

"All the same," said he, "from what I know of your affairs, which I think I know as well as my own, it appears to me that the count has not overwell kept the dazzling promises of fortune he made Madame Gerdy on your behalf."

"He never even kept them in the least degree, my old friend."

"That now," cried the old fellow indignantly, "is even more infamous than all the rest."

"Do not accuse my father," answered Noel gravely; "his connection with Madame Gerdy lasted a long time. I remember a haughty-looking man who used sometimes to come and see me at school, and who could be no other than the count. But the rupture came."

"Naturally," sneered M. Tabaret, "a great nobleman—"

"Wait before judging," interrupted the barrister. "M. de Commarin had his reasons. His mistress was false to him, he learnt it, and cast her off with just indignation. The ten lines which I mentioned to you were written then."

Noel searched a considerable time among the papers scattered upon the table, and at length selected a letter more faded and creased than the others. Judging from the number of folds in the paper one could guess that it had been read and re-read many times. The writing even was here and there partly obliterated.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"In this," said he in a bitter tone, "Madame Gerdy is no longer the adored Valerie: 'A friend, cruel as all true friends, has opened my eyes. I doubted. You have been watched, and today, unhappily, I can doubt no more. You, Valerie, you to whom I have given more than my life, you deceive me and have been deceiving me for a long time past. Unhappy man that I am! I am no longer certain that I am the father of your child.'"

"But this note is a proof," cried old Tabaret, "an overwhelming proof. Of what importance to the count would be a doubt of his paternity, had he not sacrificed his legitimate son to his bastard? Yes, you have said truly, his punishment has been severe."

"Madame Gerdy," resumed Noel, "wished to justify herself. She wrote to the count; but he returned her letters unopened. She called on him, but he would not receive her. At length she grew tired of her useless attempts to see him. She knew that all was well over when the count's steward brought her for me a legal settlement of fifteen thousand francs a year. The son had taken my place, and the mother had ruined me!"

Three or four light knocks at the door of the study interrupted Noel.

"Who is there?" he asked, without stirring.

"Sir," answered the servant from the other side of the door, "madame wishes to speak to you."

The barrister appeared to hesitate.

"Go, my son," advised M. Tabaret; "do not be merciless, only bigots have that right."

Noel arose with visible reluctance, and passed into Madame Gerdy's sleeping apartment.

"Poor boy!" thought M. Tabaret when left alone. "What a fatal discovery! and how he must feel it. Such a noble young man! such a brave heart! In his candid honesty he does not even suspect from whence the blow has fallen. Fortunately I am shrewd enough for two, and it is just when he despairs of justice, I am confident of obtaining it for him. Thanks to his information, I am now on the track. A child might now divine whose hand struck the blow. But how has it happened? He will tell me without knowing it. Ah! if I had one of those letters for four and twenty hours. He has probably counted them. If I ask for one, I must acknowledge my connection with the police. I had better take one, no matter which, just to verify the handwriting."

Old Tabaret had just thrust one of the letters into the depths of his capacious pocket, when the barrister returned.

He was one of those men of strongly formed character, who never lose their self-control. He was very cunning and had long accustomed himself to dissimulation, that indispensable armour of the ambitious.

As he entered the room nothing in his manner betrayed what had taken place between Madame Gerdy and himself. He was absolutely as calm as, when seated in his arm-chair, he listened to the interminable stories of his clients.

"Well," asked old Tabaret, "how is she now?"

"Worse," answered Noel. "She is now delirious, and no longer knows what she says. She has just assailed me with the most atrocious abuse, upbraiding me as the vilest of mankind! I really believe she is going out of her mind."

"One might do so with less cause," murmured M. Tabaret; "and I think you ought to send for the doctor."

"I have just done so."

THE LEROUGE CASE

The barrister had resumed his seat before his bureau, and was rearranging the scattered letters according to their dates. He seemed to have forgotten that he had asked his old friend's advice; nor did he appear in any way desirous of renewing the interrupted conversation. This was not at all what old Tabaret wanted.

"The more I ponder over your history, my dear Noel," he observed, "the more I am bewildered. I really do not know what resolution I should adopt, were I in your situation."

"Yes, my old friend," replied the barrister sadly, "it is a situation that might well perplex even more profound experiences than yours."

The old amateur detective repressed with difficulty the sly smile, which for an instant hovered about his lips.

"I confess it humbly," he said, taking pleasure in assuming an air of intense simplicity, "but you, what have you done? Your first impulse must have been to ask Madame Gerdy for an explanation."

Noel made a startled movement, which passed unnoticed by old Tabaret, preoccupied as he was in trying to give the turn he desired to the conversation.

"It was by that," answered Noel, "that I began."

"And what did she say?"

"What could she say! Was she not overwhelmed by the discovery?"

"What! did she not attempt to exculpate herself?" inquired the detective greatly surprised.

"Yes! she attempted the impossible. She pretended she could explain the correspondence. She told me . . . But can I remember what she said? Lies, absurd, infamous lies."

The barrister had finished gathering up his letters, without noticing the abstraction. He tied them together carefully, and replaced them in the secret drawer of his bureau.

"Yes," continued he, rising and walking backwards and forward across his study, as if the constant movement could calm his anger, "yes, she pretended she could show me I was wrong. It was easy, was it not, with the proofs I held against her? The fact is she adores her son, and her heart is breaking at the idea that he may be obliged to retribute what he has stolen from me. And I, idiot, fool, coward, almost wished not to mention the matter to her. I said to myself, I will forgive, for after all she has loved me! Loved? no. She would see me suffer the most horrible tortures, without shedding a tear, to prevent a single hair falling from her son's head."

"She has probably warned the count," observed old Tabaret, still pursuing his idea.

"She may have tried, but cannot have succeeded, for the count has been absent from Paris for more than a month and is not expected to return until the end of the week."

"How do you know that?"

"I wished to see the count my father, to speak with him."

"You?"

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Yes, I. Do you think that I shall not reclaim my own? Do you imagine that I shall not raise my voice. On what account should I keep silent, who have I to consider? I have rights, and I will make them good. What do you find surprising in that?"

"Nothing, certainly, my friend. So then you called at M. de Commarin's house?"

"Oh! I did not decide on doing so all at once," continued Noel. "At first my discovery almost drove me mad. Then I required time to reflect. A thousand opposing sentiments agitated me. At one moment, my fury blinded me; the next, my courage deserted me. I would, and I would not. I was undecided, uncertain, wild. The scandal that must arise from the publicity of such an affair terrified me. I desired, I still desire to recover my name, that much is certain. But on the eve of recovering it, I wish to preserve it from stain. I was seeking a means of arranging everything, without noise, without scandal."

"At length, however, you made up your mind?"

"Yes, after a struggle of fifteen days, fifteen days of torture, of anguish! Ah! what I suffered in that time! I neglected my business, being totally unfit for work. During the day, I tried by incessant action to fatigue my body, that at night I might find forgetfulness in sleep. Vain hope! since I found these letters, I have not slept an hour."

>From time to time, old Tabaret slyly consulted his watch. "M. Daburon will be in bed," thought he.

"At last one morning," continued Noel, "after a night of rage, I determined to end all uncertainty. I was in that desperate state of mind, in which the gambler, after successive losses, stakes upon a card his last remaining coin. I plucked up courage, sent for a cab, and was driven to the de Commarin mansion."

The old amateur detective here allowed a sigh of satisfaction to escape him.

"It is one of the most magnificent houses, in the Faubourg St. Germain, my friend, a princely dwelling, worthy a great noble twenty times millionaire; almost a palace in fact. One enters at first a vast courtyard, to the right and left of which are the stables, containing twenty most valuable horses, and the coach-houses. At the end rises the grand facade of the main building, majestic and severe, with its immense windows, and its double flight of marble steps. Behind the house is a magnificent garden, I should say a park, shaded by the oldest trees which perhaps exist in all Paris."

This enthusiastic description was not at all what M. Tabaret wanted. But what could he do, how could he press Noel for the result of his visit! An indiscreet word might awaken the barrister's suspicions, and reveal to him that he was speaking not to a friend, but to a detective.

"Were you then shown over the house and grounds?" asked the old fellow.

"No, but I have examined them alone. Since I discovered that I was the only heir of the Rheteau de Commarin, I have found out the antecedents of my new family.

"Standing before the dwelling of my ancestors, continued Noel, "you cannot comprehend the excess of my emotion. Here, said I, is the house in which I was born. This is the house in which I should have been reared; and, above all, this is the spot where I should reign to-day, whereon I stand an outcast and a stranger, devoured by the sad and bitter memories, of which banished men have died. I compared my brother's brilliant destinies with my sad and labourious career; and my indignation well might overmastered reason. The mad impulse stirred me to force the doors, to rush into the grand salon, and drive out the intruder,—the son of Madame Gerdy,—who had taken the place of the son of the Countess de Commarin! Out, usurper, out of this. I am master here. The propriety of legal means at once recurred to my distracted mind, however, and restrained me. Once more I stood before the

THE LEROUGE CASE

habitation of my fathers. How I love its old sculptures, its grand old trees, its shaded walls, worn by the feet of my poor mother! I love all, even to the proud escutcheon, frowning above the principal doorway, flinging its defiance to the theories of this age of levellers."

This last phrase conflicted so directly with the code of opinions habitual to Noel, that old Tabaret was obliged to turn aside, to conceal his amusement.

"Poor humanity!" thought he; "he is already the grand seigneur."

"On presenting myself," continued the advocate, "I demanded to see the Count de Commarin. A Swiss porter, in grand livery, answered, the count was travelling, but that the viscount was at home. This ran counter to my designs; but I was embarked; so I insisted on speaking to the son in default of the father. the Swiss porter stared at me with astonishment. He had evidently seen me alight from a hired carriage, and so deliberated for some moments as to whether I was not too insignificant a person to have the honour of being admitted to visit the viscount."

"But tell me, have you seen him?" asked old Tabaret, unable to restrain his impatience.

"Of course, immediately," replied the barrister in a tone of bitter raillery. "Could the examination, think you, result otherwise than in my favour? No. My white cravat and black costume produced their natural effect. The Swiss porter entrusted me to the guidance of a chasseur with a plumed hat, who, led me across the yard to a superb vestibule, where five or six footmen were lolling and gazing on their seats. One of these gentlemen asked me to follow him. He led me up a spacious staircase, wide enough for a carriage to ascend, preceded me along an extensive picture gallery, guided me across vast apartments, the furniture of which was fading under its coverings, and finally delivered me into the hands of M. Albert's valet. That is the name by which Madame Gerdy's son is known, that is to say, my name."

"I understand, I understand."

"I had passed an inspection; now I had to undergo an examination. The valet desired to be informed who I was, whence I came, what was my profession, what I wanted and all the rest. I answered simply, that, quite unknown to the viscount, I desired five minutes' conversation with him on a matter of importance. He left me, requesting me to sit down and wait. I had waited more than a quarter of an hour, when he reappeared. His master graciously deigned to receive me."

It was easy to perceive that the barrister's reception rankled in his breast, and that he considered it an insult. He could not forgive Albert his lackeys and his valet. He forgot the words of the illustrious duke, who said, "I pay my lackeys to be insolent, to save myself the trouble and ridicule of being so." Old Tabaret was surprised at his young friend's display of bitterness, in speaking of these trivial details.

"What narrow-mindedness," thought he, "for a man of such intelligence! Can it be true that the arrogance of lackeys is the secret of the people's hatred of an amiable and polite aristocracy?"

"I was ushered into a small apartment," continued Noel, "simply furnished, the only ornaments of which were weapons. These, ranged against the walls, were of all times and countries. Never have I seen in so small a space so many muskets, pistols, swords, sabres, and foils. One might have imagined himself in a fencing master's arsenal."

The weapon used by Widow Lerouge's assassin naturally recurred to the old fellow's memory.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"The viscount," said Noel, speaking slowly, "was half lying on a divan when I entered. He was dressed in a velvet jacket and loose trousers of the same material, and had around his neck an immense white silk scarf. I do not cherish any resentment against this young man; he has never to his knowledge injured me: he was in ignorance of our father's crime; I am therefore able to speak of him with justice. He is handsome, bears himself well, and nobly carries the name which does not belong to him. He is about my height, of the same dark complexion, and would resemble me, perhaps, if he did not wear a beard. Only he looks five or six years younger; but this is readily explained, he has neither worked, struggled, nor suffered. He is one of the fortunate ones who arrive without having to start, or who traverse life's road on such soft cushions that they are never injured by the jolting of their carriage. On seeing me, he arose and saluted me graciously."

"You must have been dreadfully excited," remarked old Tabaret.

"Less than I am at this moment. Fifteen preparatory days of mental torture exhausts one's emotions. I answered the question I saw upon his lips. 'Sir,' said I, 'you do not know me; but that is of little consequence. I come to you, charged with a very grave, a very sad mission, which touches the honour of the name you bear.' Without doubt he did not believe me, for, in an impertinent tone, he asked me, 'Shall you be long?' I answered simply, 'Yes.'"

"Pray," interrupted old Tabaret, now become very attentive, "do not omit a single detail; it may be very important, you understand."

"The viscount," continued Noel, "appeared very much put out. 'The fact is,' he explained, 'I had already disposed of my time. This is the hour at which I call on the young lady to whom I am engaged, Mademoiselle d'Arlange. Can we not postpone this conversation?'"

"Good! another woman!" said the old fellow to himself.

"I answered the viscount, that an explanation would admit of no delay; and, as I saw him prepare to dismiss me, I drew from my pocket the count's correspondence, and presented one of the letters to him. On recognizing his father's handwriting, he became more tractable, declared himself at my service, and asked permission to write a word of apology to the lady by whom he was expected. Having hastily written the note he handed it to his valet, and ordered him to send at once to Madame d'Arlange, He then asked me to pass into the next room, which was his library."

"One word," interrupted the old fellow; "was he troubled on seeing the letters?"

"Not the least in the world. After carefully closing the door, he pointed to a chair, seated himself, and said, 'Now, sir, explain yourself.' I had had time to prepare myself for this interview whilst waiting in the ante-room. I had decided to go straight to the point. 'Sir,' said I, 'my mission is painful. The facts I am about to reveal to you are incredible. I beg you, do not answer me until you have read the letters I have here. I beseech you, above all, to keep calm.' He looked at me with an air of extreme surprise, and answered, 'Speak! I can hear all.' I stood up, and said, 'Sir, I must inform you that you are not the legitimate son of M. de Commarin, as this correspondence will prove to you. The legitimate son exists; and he it is who sends me.' I kept my eyes on his while speaking, and I saw there a passing gleam of fury. For a moment I thought he was about to spring at my throat. He soon recovered himself. 'The letters,' said he in a short tone. I handed them to him."

"How!" cried old Tabaret, "these letters,—the true ones? How imprudent!"

"And why?"

"If he had—I don't know; but—" the old fellow hesitated.

THE LEROUGE CASE

The barrister laid his hand upon his friend's shoulder. "I was there," said he in a hollow tone; "and I promise you the letters were in no danger."

Noel's features assumed such an expression of ferocity that the old fellow was almost afraid, and recoiled instinctively. "He would have killed him," thought he.

"That which I have done for you this evening, my friend," resumed the barrister, "I did for the viscount. I obviated, at least for the moment, the necessity of reading all of these hundred and fifty-six letters. I told him only to stop at those marked with a cross, and to carefully read the passages indicated with a red pencil."

"It was an abridgment of his penance," remarked old Tabaret.

"He was seated," continued Noel, "before a little table, too fragile even to lean upon. I was standing with my back to the fireplace in which a fire was burning. I followed his slightest movements; and I scanned his features closely. Never in my life have I seen so sad a spectacle, nor shall I forget it, if I live for a thousand years. In less than five minutes his face changed to such an extent that his own valet would not have recognized him. He held his handkerchief in his hand, with which from time to time he mechanically wiped his lips. He grew paler and paler, and his lips became as white as his handkerchief. Large drops of sweat stood upon his forehead, and his eyes became dull and clouded, as if a film had covered them; but not an exclamation, not a sigh, not a groan, not even a gesture, escaped him. At one moment, I felt such pity for him that I was almost on the point of snatching the letters from his hands, throwing them into the fire and taking him in my arms, crying, 'No, you are my brother! Forget all; let us remain as we are and love one another!'"

M. Tabaret took Noel's hand, and pressed it. "Ah!" he said, "I recognise my generous boy."

"If I have not done this, my friend, it is because I thought to myself, 'Once these letters destroyed, would he recognise me as his brother?'"

"Ah! very true."

"In about half an hour, he had finished reading; he arose, and facing me directly, said, 'You are right, sir. If these letters are really written by my father, as I believe them to be, they distinctly prove that I am not the son of the Countess de Commarin.' I did not answer. 'Meanwhile,' continued he, 'these are only presumptions. Are you possessed of other proofs?' I expected, of course, a great many other objections. 'Germain,' said I, 'can speak.' He told me that Germain had been dead for several years. Then I spoke of the nurse, Widow Lerouge—I explained how easily she could be found and questioned, adding that she lived at La Jonchere."

"And what said he, Noel, to this?" asked old Tabaret anxiously.

"He remained silent at first, and appeared to reflect. All on a sudden he struck his forehead, and said, 'I remember; I know her. I have accompanied my father to her house three times, and in my presence he gave her a considerable sum of money.' I remarked to him that this was yet another proof. He made no answer, but walked up and down the room. At length he turned towards me, saying, 'Sir, you know M. de Commarin's legitimate son?' I answered: 'I am he.' He bowed his head and murmured 'I thought so.' He then took my hand and added, 'Brother, I bear you no ill will for this.'"

"It seems to me," remarked old Tabaret, that he might have left that to you to say, and with more reason and justice."

"No, my friend, for he is more ill-used than I. I have not been lowered, for I did not know, whilst he! . . ."

THE LEROUGE CASE

The old police agent nodded his head, he had to hide his thoughts, and they were stifling him.

"At length," resumed Noel, after a rather long pause, "I asked him what he proposed doing. 'Listen,' he said, 'I expect my father in about eight or ten days. You will allow me this delay. As soon as he returns I will have an explanation with him, and justice shall be done. I give you my word of honour. Take back your letters and leave me to myself. This news has utterly overwhelmed me. In a moment I lose everything: a great name that I have always borne as worthily as possible, a magnificent position, an immense fortune, and, more than all that, perhaps, the woman who is dearer to me than life. In exchange, it is true, I shall find a mother. We will console each other. And I will try, sir, to make her forget you, for she must love you, and will miss you.'"

"Did he really say that?"

"Almost word for word."

"Hypocrite!" growled the old fellow between his teeth.

"What did you say?" asked Noel.

"I say that he is a fine young man; and I shall be delighted to make his acquaintance."

"I did not show him the letter referring to the rupture," added Noel; "it is best that he should ignore Madame Gerdy's misconduct. I voluntarily deprived myself of this proof, rather than give him further pain."

"And now?"

"What am I to do? I am waiting the count's return. I shall act more freely after hearing what he has to say. Tomorrow I shall ask permission to examine the papers belonging to Claudine. If I find the letters, I am saved; if not,—but, as I have told you, I have formed no plan since I heard of the assassination. Now, what do you advise?"

"The briefest counsel demands long reflection," replied the old fellow, who was in haste to depart. "Alas! my poor boy, what worry you have had!"

"Terrible! and, in addition, I have pecuniary embarrassments."

"How! you who spend nothing?"

"I have entered into various engagements. Can I now make use of Madame Gerdy's fortune, which I have hitherto used as my own? I think not."

"You certainly ought not to. But listen! I am glad you have spoken of this; you can render me a service."

"Very willingly. What is it?"

"I have, locked up in my secretary, twelve or fifteen thousand francs, which trouble me exceedingly. You see, I am old, and not very brave, if any one heard I had this money—"

"I fear I cannot—" commenced the barrister.

"Nonsense!" said the old fellow. "To-morrow I will give them to you to take care of." But remembering he was about to put himself at M. Daburon's disposal, and that perhaps he might not be free on the morrow, he quickly added, "No, not to-morrow; but this very evening. This infernal money shall not remain another night in my

THE LEROUGE CASE

keeping."

He hurried out, and presently reappeared, holding in his hand fifteen notes of a thousand francs each. "If that is not sufficient," said he, handing them to Noel, "you can have more."

"Anyhow," replied the barrister, "I will give you a receipt for these."

"Oh! never mind. Time enough to-morrow."

"And if I die to-night?"

"Then said the old fellow to himself, thinking of his will, "I shall still be your debtor. Good-night!" added he aloud. You have asked my advice, I shall require the night for reflection. At present my brain is whirling; I must go into the air. If I go to bed now, I am sure to have a horrible nightmare. Come, my boy; patience and courage. Who knows whether at this very hour Providence is not working for you?"

He went out, and Noel, leaving his door open, listened to the sound of his footsteps as he descended the stairs. Almost immediately the cry of, "Open, if you please," and the banging of the door apprised him that M. Tabaret had gone out. He waited a few minutes and refilled his lamp. Then he took a small packet from one of his bureau drawers, slipped into his pocket the bank notes lent him by his old friend, and left his study, the door of which he double-locked. On reaching the landing, he paused. He listened intently as though the sound of Madame Gerdy's moans could reach him where he stood. Hearing nothing, he descended the stairs on tiptoe. A minute later, he was in the street.

V.

INCLUDED in Madame Gerdy's lease was a coach-house, which was used by her as a lumber room. Here were heaped together all the old rubbish of the household, broken pieces of furniture, utensils past service, articles become useless or cumbrous. It was also used to store the provision of wood and coal for the winter. This old coach-house had a small door opening on the street, which had been in disuse for many years; but which Noel had had secretly repaired and provided with a lock. He could thus enter or leave the house at any hour without the concierge or any one else knowing. It was by this door that the barrister went out, though not without using the utmost caution in opening and closing it. Once in the street, he stood still a moment, as if hesitating which way to go. Then, he slowly proceeded in the direction of the St. Lazare railway station, when a cab happening to pass, he hailed it. "Rue du Faubourg Montmartre, at the corner of the Rue de Provence," said Noel, entering the vehicle, "and drive quick."

The barrister alighted at the spot named, and dismissed the cabman. When he had seen him drive off, Noel turned into the Rue de Provence, and, after walking a few yards, rang the bell of one of the handsomest houses in the street. The door was immediately opened. As Noel passed before him the concierge made a most respectful, and at the same time patronizing bow, one of those salutations which Parisian concierges reserve for their favorite tenants, generous mortals always ready to give. On reaching the second floor, the barrister paused, drew a key from his pocket, and opening the door facing him, entered as if at home. But at the sound of the key in the lock, though very faint, a lady's maid, rather young and pretty, with a bold pair of eyes, ran toward him.

"Ah! it is you, sir," cried she.

This exclamation escaped her just loud enough to be audible at the extremity of the apartment, and serve as a signal if needed. It was as if she had cried, "Take care!"

THE LEROUGE CASE

Noel did not seem to notice it. "Madame is there?" asked he.

"Yes, sir, and very angry too. This morning she wanted to send some one to you. A little while ago she spoke of going to find you, sir, herself. I have had much difficulty in prevailing on her not to disobey your orders."

"Very well," said the barrister.

"Madame is in the smoking room," continued the girl "I am making her a cup of tea. Will you have one, sir?"

"Yes," replied Noel. "Show me a light, Charlotte."

He passed successively through a magnificent dining-room, a splendid gilded drawing-room in Louis XIV. style, and entered the smoking-room. This was a rather large apartment with a very high ceiling. Once inside one might almost fancy oneself three thousand miles from Paris, in the house of some opulent mandarin of the celestial Empire. Furniture, carpet, hangings, pictures, all had evidently been imported direct from Hong Kong or Shanghai. A rich silk tapestry representing brilliantly coloured figures, covered the walls, and hid the doors from view. All the empire of the sun and moon was depicted thereon in vermilion landscapes: corpulent mandarins surrounded by their lantern-bearers; learned men lay stupefied with opium, sleeping under their parasols; young girls with elevated eyebrows, stumbled upon their diminutive feet swathed in bandages. The carpet of a manufacture unknown to Europeans, was strewn with fruits and flowers, so true to nature that they might have deceived a bee. Some great artist of Peking had painted on the silk which covered the ceiling numerous fantastic birds, opening on azure ground their wings of purple and gold. Slender rods of lacquer, inlaid with mother of pearl, bordered the draperies, and marked the angles of the apartment. Two fantastic looking chests entirely occupied one side of the room. Articles of furniture of capricious and incoherent forms, tables with porcelain tops, and chiffoniers of precious woods encumbered every recess or angle. There were also ornamental cabinets and shelves purchased of Lien-Tsi, the Tahan of Sou-Tcheou, the artistic city, and a thousand curiosities, both miscellaneous and costly, from the ivory sticks which are used instead of forks, to the porcelain teacups, thinner than soap bubbles,—miracles of the reign of Kien-Loung. A very large and very low divan piled up with cushions, covered with tapestry similar to the hangings, occupied one end of the room. There was no regular window, but instead a large single pane of glass, fixed into the wall of the house; in front of it was a double glass door with moveable panes, and the space between was filled with the most rare flowers. The grate was replaced by registers adroitly concealed, which maintained in the apartment a temperature fit for hatching silkworms, thus truly harmonising with the furniture.

When Noel entered, a woman, still young, was reclining on the divan, smoking a cigarette. In spite of the tropical heat, she was enveloped in heavy Cashmere shawls. She was small, but then only small women can unite in their persons every perfection. Women who are above the medium height must be either essays, or errors of nature. No matter how lovely they may look, they invariably present some defect, like the work of a statuary, who, though possessed of genius, attempts for the first time sculpture on a grand scale. She was small, but her neck, her shoulders, and her arms had the most exquisite contours. Her hands with their tapering fingers and rosy nails looked like jewels preciously cared for. Her feet, encased in silken stockings almost as thin as a spider's-web, were a marvel; not that they recalled the very fabulous foot which Cinderella thrust into the glass slipper; but the other, very real, very celebrated and very palpable foot, of which the fair owner (the lovely wife of a well-known banker) used to present the model either in bronze or in marble to her numerous admirers. Her face was, not beautiful, nor even pretty; but her features were such as one seldom forgets; for, at the first glance, they startled the beholder like a flash of lightning. Her forehead was a little high, and her mouth unmistakably large, notwithstanding the provoking freshness of her lips. Her eyebrows were so perfect they seem to have been drawn with India ink; but, unhappily the pencil had been used too heavily; and they gave her an unpleasant expression when she frowned. On the other hand, her smooth complexion had a rich golden pallor; and her black and velvety eyes possessed enormous magnetic power. Her teeth were of a pearly brilliancy and whiteness, and her hair, of prodigious opulence, was black and fine, and glossy as a raven's wing.

THE LEROUGE CASE

On perceiving Noel, as he pushed aside the silken hangings, she half arose and leaned upon her elbow. "So you have come at last?" she observed in a tone of vexation; "you are very kind."

The barrister felt almost suffocated by the oppressive temperature of the room. "How warm it is!" said he; "it is enough to stifle one!"

"Do you find it so?" replied the young woman. "Well, I am actually shivering! It is true though, that I am very unwell. Waiting is unbearable to me, it acts upon my nerves; and I have been waiting for you ever since yesterday."

"It was quite impossible for me to come," explained Noel, "quite impossible!"

"You knew, however," continued the lady, "that to-day was my settling day; and that I had several heavy accounts to settle. The tradesmen all came, and I had not a half-penny to give them. The coachmaker sent his bill, but there was no money. Then that old rascal Clergot, to whom I had given an acceptance for three thousand francs, came and kicked up a frightful row. How pleasant all this is!"

Noel bowed his head like a schoolboy rebuked for having neglected his lessons. "It is but one day behind," he murmured.

"And that is nothing, is it?" retorted the young woman. "A man who respects himself, my friend, may allow his own signature to be dishonoured, but never that of his mistress! Do you wish to destroy my credit altogether? You know very well that the only consideration I receive is what my money pays for. So as soon as I am unable to pay, it will be all up with me."

"My dear Juliette," began the barrister gently.

"Oh, yes! that's all very fine," interrupted she. "Your dear Juliette! your adored Juliette! so long as you are here it is really charming; but no sooner are you outside than you forget everything. Do you ever remember then that there is such a person as Juliette?"

"How unjust you are!" replied Noel. "Do you not know that I am always thinking of you; have I not proved it to you a thousand times? Look here! I am going to prove it to you again this very instant." He withdrew from his pocket the small packet he had taken out of his bureau drawer, and, undoing it, showed her a handsome velvet casket. "Here," said he exultingly, "is the bracelet you longed for so much a week ago at Beaugrau's."

Madame Juliette, without rising, held out her hand to take the casket, and, opening it with the utmost indifference, just glanced at the jewel, and merely said, "Ah!"

"Is this the one you wanted?" asked Noel.

"Yes, but it looked much prettier in the shop window." She closed the casket, and threw it carelessly on to a small table near her.

"I am unfortunate this evening," said the barrister, much mortified.

"How so?"

"I see plainly the bracelet does not please you."

"Oh, but it does. I think it lovely . . . besides, it will complete the two dozen."

THE LEROUGE CASE

It was now Noel's turn to say: "Ah! . . ." and as Juliette said nothing, he added: "Well, if you are pleased, you do not show it."

"Oh! so that is what you are driving at!" cried the lady. "I am not grateful enough to suit you! You bring me a present, and I ought at once to pay cash, fill the house with cries of joy, and throw myself upon my knees before you, calling you a great and magnificent lord!"

Noel was unable this time to restrain a gesture of impatience, which Juliette perceived plainly enough, to her great delight.

"Would that be sufficient?" continued she. "Shall I call Charlotte, so that she may admire this superb bracelet, this monument of your generosity? Shall I have the concierge up, and call the cook to tell them how happy I am to possess such a magnificent lover.

The barrister shrugged his shoulders like a philosopher, incapable of noticing a child's banter. "What is the use of these insulting jests?" said he. "If you have any real complaint against me, better to say so simply and seriously."

"Very well," said Juliette, "let us be serious. And, that being so, I will tell you it would have been better to have forgotten the bracelet, and to have brought me last night or this morning the eight thousand francs I wanted."

"I could not come."

"You should have sent them; messengers are still to be found at the street-corners."

"If I neither brought nor sent them, my dear Juliette, it was because I did not have them. I had trouble enough in getting them promised me for to-morrow. If I have the sum this evening, I owe it to a chance upon which I could not have counted an hour ago; but by which I profited, at the risk of compromising myself."

"Poor man!" said Juliette, with an ironical touch of pity in her voice. "Do you dare to tell me you have had difficulty in obtaining ten thousand francs,—you?"

"Yes,—I!"

The young woman looked at her lover, and burst into a fit of laughter. "You are really superb when you act the poor young man!" said she.

"I am not acting."

"So you say, my own. But I see what you are aiming at. This amiable confession is the preface. To-morrow you will declare that your affairs are very much embarrassed, and the day after to-morrow . . . Ah! you are becoming very avaricious. It is a virtue you used not to possess. Do you not already regret the money you have given me?"

"Wretched woman!" murmured Noel, fast losing patience.

"Really," continued the lady, "I pity you, oh! so much. Unfortunate lover! Shall I get up a subscription for you? In your place, I would appeal to public charity."

Noel could stand it no longer, in spite of his resolution to remain calm. "You think it a laughing matter?" cried he. "Well! let me tell you, Juliette, I am ruined, and I have exhausted my last resources! I am reduced to expedients!"

THE LEROUGE CASE

The eyes of the young woman brightened. She looked at her lover tenderly. "Oh, if 'twas only true, my big pet!" said she. "If I only could believe you!"

The barrister was wounded to the heart. "She believes me," thought he; "and she is glad. She detests me."

He was mistaken. The idea that a man had loved her sufficiently to ruin himself for her, without allowing even a reproach to escape him, filled this woman with joy. She felt herself on the point of loving the man, now poor and humbled, whom she had despised when rich and proud. But the expression of her eyes suddenly changed, "What a fool I am," cried she, "I was on the point of believing all that, and of trying to console you. Don't pretend that you are one of those gentlemen who scatter their money broadcast. Tell that to somebody else, my friend! All men in our days calculate like money-lenders. There are only a few fools who ruin themselves now, some conceited youngsters, and occasionally an amorous old dotard. Well, you are a very calm, very grave, and very serious fellow, but above all, a very strong one."

"Not with you, anyhow," murmured Noel.

"Come now, stop that nonsense! You know very well what you are about. Instead of a heart, you have a great big double zero, just like a Homburg. When you took a fancy to me, you said to yourself, 'I will expend so much on passion,' and you have kept your word. It is an investment, like any other, in which one receives interest in the form of pleasure. You are capable of all the extravagance in the world, to the extent of your fixed price of four thousand francs a month! If it required a franc more you would very soon take back your heart and your hat, and carry them elsewhere; to one or other of my rivals in the neighborhood."

"It is true," answered the barrister, coolly. "I know how to count, and that accomplishment is very useful to me. It enables me to know exactly how and where I have got rid of my fortune."

"So you really know?" sneered Juliette.

"And I can tell you, madam," continued he. "At first you were not very exacting, but the appetite came with eating. You wished for luxury, you have it; splendid furniture, you have it; a complete establishment, extravagant dresses, I could refuse you nothing. You required a carriage, a horse, I gave them you. And I do not mention a thousand other whims. I include neither this Chinese cabinet nor the two dozen bracelets. The total is four hundred thousand francs!"

"Are you sure?"

"As one can be who has had that amount, and has it no longer."

"Four hundred thousand francs, only fancy! Are there no centimes?"

"No."

"Then, my dear friend, if I make up my bill, you will still owe me something."

The entrance of the maid with the tea-tray interrupted this amorous duet, of which Noel had experienced more than one repetition. The barrister held his tongue on account of the servant. Juliette did the same on account of her lover, for she had no secrets from Charlotte, who had been with her three years, and with whom she had shared everything, sometimes even her lovers.

Madame Juliette Chaffour was a Parisienne. She was born about 1839, somewhere in the upper end of the Faubourg Montmartre. Her father was unknown. Her infancy was a long alternation of beatings and caresses,

THE LEROUGE CASE

equally furious. She had lived as best she could, on sweetmeats and damaged fruit; so that now her stomach could stand anything. At twelve years old she was as thin as a nail, as green as a June apple, and more depraved than the inmates of the prison of St. Lazare. Prudhomme would have said that this precocious little hussy was totally destitute of morality. She had not the slightest idea what morality was. She thought the world was full of honest people living like her mother, and her mother's friends. She feared neither God nor devil, but she was afraid of the police. She dreaded also certain mysterious and cruel persons, whom she had heard spoken of, who dwell near the Palais de Justice, and who experience a malicious pleasure in seeing pretty girls in trouble. As she gave no promise of beauty, she was on the point of being placed in a shop, when an old and respectable gentleman, who had known her mamma some years previously, accorded her his protection. This old gentleman, prudent and provident like all old gentlemen, was a connoisseur, and knew that to reap one must sow. He resolved first of all to give his protegee just a varnish of education. He procured masters for her, who in less than three years taught her to write, to play the piano, and to dance. What he did not procure her, however, was a lover. She therefore found one for herself, an artist who taught her nothing very new, but who carried her off to offer her half of what he possessed, that is to say nothing. At the end of three months, having had enough of it, she left the nest of her first love, with all she possessed tied up in a cotton pocket handkerchief.

During the four years which followed, she led a precarious existence, sometimes with little else to live upon but hope, which never wholly abandons a young girl who knows she has pretty eyes. By turns she sunk to the bottom, or rose to the surface of the stream in which she found herself. Twice had fortune in new gloves come knocking at her door, but she had not the sense to keep her. With the assistance of a strolling player, she had just appeared on the stage of a small theatre, and spoken her lines rather well, when Noel by chance met her, loved her, and made her his mistress. Her barrister, as she called him, did not displease her at first. After a few months, though, she could not bear him. She detested him for his polite and polished manners, his manly bearing, his distinguished air, his contempt, which he did not care to hide, for all that is low and vulgar, and, above all, for his unalterable patience, which nothing could tire. Her great complaint against him was that he was not at all funny, and also, that he absolutely declined to conduct her to those places where one can give a free vent to one's spirits. To amuse herself, she began to squander money; and her aversion for her lover increased at the same rate as her ambition and his sacrifices. She rendered him the most miserable of men, and treated him like a dog; and this not from any natural badness of disposition, but from principle. She was persuaded that a woman is beloved in proportion to the trouble she causes and the mischief she does.

Juliette was not wicked, and she believed she had much to complain of. The dream of her life was to be loved in a way which she felt, but could scarcely have explained. She had never been to her lovers more than a plaything. She understood this; and, as she was naturally proud, the idea enraged her. She dreamed of a man who would be devoted enough to make a real sacrifice for her, a lover who would descend to her level, instead of attempting to raise her to his. She despaired of ever meeting such a one. Noel's extravagance left her as cold as ice. She believed he was very rich, and singularly, in spite of her greediness, she did not care much for money. Noel would have won her easier by a brutal frankness that would have shown her clearly his situation. He lost her love by the delicacy of his dissimulation, that left her ignorant of the sacrifices he was making for her.

Noel adored Juliette. Until the fatal day he saw her, he had lived like a sage. This, his first passion, burned him up; and, from the disaster, he saved only appearances.

The four walls remained standing, but the interior of the edifice was destroyed. Even heroes have their vulnerable parts, Achilles died from a wound in the heel. The most artfully constructed armour has a flaw somewhere. Noel was assailable by means of Juliette, and through her was at the mercy of everything and every one. In four years, this model young man, this barrister of immaculate reputation, this austere moralist, had squandered not only his own fortune on her, but Madame Gerdy's also. He loved her madly, without reflection, without measure, with his eyes shut. At her side, he forgot all prudence, and thought out loud. In her boudoir, he dropped his mask of habitual dissimulation, and his vices displayed themselves, at ease, as his limbs in a bath. He felt himself so powerless against her, that he never essayed to struggle. She possessed him. Once or twice he attempted to firmly

THE LEROUGE CASE

oppose her ruinous caprices; but she had made him pliable as the osier. Under the dark glances of this girl, his strongest resolutions melted more quickly than snow beneath an April sun. She tortured him; but she had also the power to make him forget all by a smile, a tear, or a kiss. Away from the enchantress, reason returned at intervals, and, in his lucid moments, he said to himself, "She does not love me. She is amusing herself at my expense!" But the belief in her love had taken such deep root in his heart that he could not pluck it forth. He made himself a monster of jealousy, and then argued with himself respecting her fidelity. On several occasions he had strong reasons to doubt her constancy, but he never had the courage to declare his suspicions. "If I am not mistaken, I shall either have to leave her," thought he, "or accept everything in the future." At the idea of a separation from Juliette, he trembled, and felt his passion strong enough to compel him to submit to the lowest indignity. He preferred even these heartbreaking doubts to a still more dreadful certainty.

The presence of the maid who took a considerable time in arranging the tea-table gave Noel an opportunity to recover himself. He looked at Juliette; and his anger took flight. Already he began to ask himself if he had not been a little cruel to her. When Charlotte retired, he came and took a seat on the divan beside his mistress, and attempted to put his arms round her. "Come," said he in a caressing tone, "you have been angry enough for this evening. If I have done wrong, you have punished me sufficiently. Kiss me, and make it up."

She repulsed him angrily, and said in a dry tone,—"Let me alone! How many times must I tell you that I am very unwell this evening."

"You suffer, my love?" resumed the barrister, "where? Shall I send for the doctor?"

"There is no need. I know the nature of my malady; it is called ennui. You are not at all the doctor who could do anything for me."

Noel rose with a discouraged air, and took his place at the side of the tea-table, facing her. His resignation bespoke how habituated he had become to these rebuffs. Juliette snubbed him; but he returned always, like the poor dog who lies in wait all day for the time when his caresses will not be inopportune. "You have told me very often during the last few months, that I bother you. What have I done?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Well, then, why—?"

"My life is nothing more than a continual yawn," answered the young woman; "is it my fault? Do you think it very amusing to be your mistress? Look at yourself. Does there exist another being as sad, as dull as you, more uneasy, more suspicious, devoured by a greater jealousy!"

"Your reception of me, my dear Juliette," ventured Noel "is enough to extinguish gaiety and freeze all effusion. Then one always fears when one loves!"

"Really! Then one should seek a woman to suit oneself, or have her made to order; shut her up in the cellar, and have her brought upstairs once a day, at the end of dinner, during dessert, or with the champagne just by way of amusement."

"I should have done better not to have come," murmured the barrister.

"Of course. I am to remain alone here, without anything to occupy me except a cigarette and a stupid book, that I go to sleep over? Do you call this an existence, never to budge out of the house even?"

"It is the life of all the respectable women that I know," replied the barrister drily.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Then I cannot compliment them on their enjoyment. Happily, though, I am not a respectable woman, and I can tell you I am tired of living more closely shut up than the wife of a Turk, with your face for sole amusement."

"You live shut up, you?"

"Certainly!" continued Juliette, with increased bitterness. "Come, have you ever brought one of your friends here? No, you hide me. When have you offered me your arm for a walk? Never, your dignity would be sullied, if you were seen in my company. I have a carriage. Have you entered it half a dozen times? Perhaps; but then you let down the blinds! I go out alone. I walk about alone!"

"Always the same refrain," interrupted Noel, anger getting the better of him, "always these uncalled for complaints. As though you had still to learn the reason why this state of things exists."

"I know well enough," pursued the young woman, "that you are ashamed of me. Yet I know many bigger swells than you, who do not mind being seen with their mistresses. My lord trembles for his fine name of Gerdy that I might sully, while the sons of the most noble families are not afraid of showing themselves in public places in the company of the stupidest of kept women."

At last Noel could stand it no longer, to the great delight of Madame Chaffour.

"Enough of these recriminations!" cried he, rising. "If I hide our relations, it is because I am constrained to do so. Of what do you complain? You have unrestrained liberty; and you use it, too, and so largely that your actions altogether escape me. You accuse me of creating a vacuum around you. Who is to blame? Did I grow tired of a happy and quiet existence? My friends would have come to see us in a home in accordance with a modest competence. Can I bring them here? On seeing all this luxury, this insolent display of my folly, they would ask each other where I obtained all the money I have spent on you. I may have a mistress, but I have not the right to squander a fortune that does not belong to me. If my acquaintances learnt to-morrow that it is I who keep you, my future prospects would be destroyed. What client would confide his interests to the imbecile who ruined himself for the woman who has been the talk of all Paris? I am not a great lord, I have neither an historical name to tarnish, nor an immense fortune to lose. I am plain Noel Gerdy, a barrister. My reputation is all that I possess. It is a false one, I admit. Such as it is, however, I must keep it, and I will keep it."

Juliette who knew her Noel thoroughly, saw that she had gone far enough. She determined, therefore, to put him in a good humor again. "My friend," said she, tenderly, "I did not wish to cause you pain. You must be indulgent, I am so horribly nervous this evening."

This sudden change delighted the barrister, and almost sufficed to calm his anger. "You will drive me mad with your injustice," said he. "While I exhaust my imagination to find what can be agreeable to you, you are perpetually attacking my gravity; yet it is not forty-eight hours since we were plunged in all the gaiety of the carnival. I kept the fete of Shrove Tuesday like a student. We went to a theatre; I then put on a domino, and accompanied you to the ball at the opera, and even invited two of my friends to sup with us."

"It was very gay indeed!" answered the young woman, making a wry face.

"So I think."

"Do you! Then you are not hard to please. We went to the Vaudeville, it is true, but separately, as we always do, I alone above, you below. At the ball you looked as though you were burying the devil. At the supper table your friends were as melancholy as a pair of owls. I obeyed your orders by affecting hardly to know you. You imbibed like a sponge, without my being able to tell whether you were drunk or not."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"That proves," interrupted Noel, "that we ought not to force our tastes. Let us talk of something else."

He took a few steps in the room, then looking at his watch said: "Almost one o'clock; my love, I must leave you."

"What! you are not going to remain?"

"No, to my great regret; my mother is dangerously ill."

He unfolded and counted out on the table the bank notes he had received from old Tabaret.

"My little Juliette," said he, "here are not eight thousand francs, but ten thousand. You will not see me again for a few days."

"Are you leaving Paris, then?"

"No; but my entire time will be absorbed by an affair of immense importance to myself. If I succeed in my undertaking, my dear, our future happiness is assured, and you will then see whether I love you!"

"Oh, my dear Noel, tell me what it is."

"I cannot now."

"Tell me I beseech you," pleaded the young woman, hanging round his neck, raising herself upon the tips of her toes to press her lips to his. The barrister embraced her; and his resolution seemed to waver.

"No," said he at length, "seriously I cannot. Of what use to awaken in you hopes which can never be realized? Now, my darling, listen to me. Whatever may happen, understand, you must under no pretext whatever again come to my house, as you once had the imprudence to do. Do not even write to me. By disobeying, you may do me an irreparable injury. If any accident occurs, send that old rascal Clergot to me. I shall have a visit from him the day after to-morrow, for he holds some bills of mine."

Juliette recoiled, menacing Noel with a mutinous gesture. "You will not tell me anything?" insisted she.

"Not this evening, but very soon," replied the barrister, embarrassed by the piercing glance of his mistress.

"Always some mystery!" cried Juliette, piqued at the want of success attending her blandishments.

"This will be the last, I swear to you!"

"Noel, my good man," said the young woman in a serious tone, "you are hiding something from me. I understand you, as you know; for several days past there has been something or other the matter with you, you have completely changed."

"I swear to you, Juliette—"

"No, swear nothing; I should not believe you. Only remember, no attempt at deceiving me, I forewarn you. I am a woman capable of revenge."

The barrister was evidently ill at ease. "The affair in question," stammered he, "can as well fail as succeed."

"Enough," interrupted Juliette; "your will shall be obeyed. I promise that. Come, sir, kiss me. I am going to bed."

THE LEROUGE CASE

The door was hardly shut upon Noel when Charlotte was installed on the divan near her mistress. Had the barrister been listening at the door, he might have heard Madame Juliette saying, "No, really, I can no longer endure him. What a bore he is, my girl. Ah! if I was not so afraid of him, wouldn't I leave him at once? But he is capable of killing me!"

The girl vainly tried to defend Noel; but her mistress did not listen. She murmured, "Why does he absent himself, and what is he plotting? An absence of eight days is suspicious. Can he by any chance intend to be married? Ah! if I only knew. You weary me to death, my good Noel, and I am determined to leave you to yourself one of these fine mornings; but I cannot permit you to quit me first. Supposing he is going to get married? But I will not allow it. I must make inquiries."

Noel, however, was not listening at the door. He went along the Rue de Provence as quickly as possible, gained the Rue St. Lazare, and entered the house as he had departed, by the stable door. He had but just sat down in his study, when the servant knocked.

"Sir," cried she, "in heaven's name answer me!"

He opened the door and said impatiently, "What is it?"

"Sir," stammered the girl in tears, "this is the third time I have knocked, and you have not answered. Come, I implore you. I am afraid madame is dying!"

He followed her to Madame Gerdy's room. He must have found the poor woman terribly changed, for he could not restrain a movement of terror. The invalid struggled painfully beneath her coverings. Her face was of a livid paleness, as though there was not a drop of blood left in her veins; and her eyes, which glittered with a sombre light, seemed filled with a fine dust. Her hair, loose and disordered, falling over her cheeks and upon her shoulders, contributed to her wild appearance. She uttered from time to time a groan hardly audible, or murmured unintelligible words. At times, a fiercer pang than the former ones forced a cry of anguish from her. She did not recognise Noel.

"You see, sir," said the servant.

"Yes. Who would have supposed her malady could advance so rapidly? Quick, run to Dr. Herve's, tell him to get up, and to come at once, tell him it is for me." And he seated himself in an arm-chair, facing the suffering woman.

Dr. Herve was one of Noel's friends, an old school-fellow, and the companion of his student days. The doctor's history differed in nothing from that of most young men, who, without fortune, friends, or influence, enter upon the practice of the most difficult, the most hazardous of professions that exist in Paris, where one sees so many talented young doctors forced, to earn their bread, to place themselves at the disposition of infamous drug vendors. A man of remarkable courage and self-reliance, Herve, his studies over, said to himself, "No, I will not go and bury myself in the country, I will remain in Paris, I will there become celebrated. I shall be surgeon-in-chief of an hospital, and a knight of the Legion of Honour."

To enter upon this path of thorns, leading to a magnificent triumphal arch, the future academician ran himself twenty thousand francs in debt to furnish a small apartment. Here, armed with a patience which nothing could fatigue, an iron resolution that nothing could subdue, he struggled and waited. Only those who have experienced it can understand what sufferings are endured by the poor, proud man, who waits in a black coat, freshly shaven, with smiling lips, while he is starving of hunger! The refinements of civilization have inaugurated punishments which put in the shade the cruelties of the savage. The unknown physician must begin by attending the poor who cannot pay him. Sometimes too the patient is ungrateful. He is profuse in promises whilst in danger; but, when

THE LEROUGE CASE

cured, he scorns the doctor, and forgets to pay him his fee.

After seven years of heroic perseverance, Herve has secured at last a circle of patients who pay him. During this he lived and paid the exorbitant interest of his debt, but he is getting on. Three or four pamphlets, and a prize won without much intrigue, have attracted public attention to him. But he is no longer the brave young enthusiast, full of the faith and hope that attended him on his first visits. He still wishes, and more than ever, to acquire distinction, but he no longer expects any pleasure from his success. He used up that feeling in the days when he had not wherewith to pay for his dinner. No matter how great his fortune may be in the days to come, he has already paid too dearly for it. For him future success is only a kind of revenge. Less than thirty-five years old, he is already sick of the world, and believes in nothing. Under the appearance of universal benevolence he conceals universal scorn. His finesse, sharpened by the grindstone of adversity, has become mischievous. And, while he sees through all disguises worn by others, he hides his penetration carefully under a mask of cheerful good nature and jovialness. But he is kind, he loves his friends, and is devoted to them.

He arrived, hardly dressed, so great had been his haste. His first words on entering were, "What is the matter?"

Noel pressed his hand in silence, and by way of answer, pointed to the bed. In less than a minute, the doctor seized the lamp, examined the sick woman, and returned to his friend. "What has happened?" he asked sharply. "It is necessary I should know."

The barrister started at the question. "Know what?" stammered he.

"Everything!" answered Herve. "She is suffering from inflammation of the brain. There is no mistaking that. It is by no means a common complaint, in spite of the constant working of that organ. What can have caused it? There appears to be no injury to the brain or its bony covering, the mischief, then, must have been caused by some violent emotion, a great grief, some unexpected catastrophe . . ."

Noel interrupted his friend by a gesture, and drew him into the embrasure of the window. "Yes, my friend," said he in a low tone, "Madame Gerdy has experienced great mental suffering, she has been frightfully tortured by remorse. Listen, Herve. I will confide our secret to your honour and your friendship. Madame Gerdy is not my mother; she despoiled me, to enrich her son with my fortune and my name. Three weeks ago I discovered this unworthy fraud; she knows it, and the consequences terrify her. Ever since, she has been dying minute by minute."

The barrister expected some exclamations of astonishment, and a host of questions from his friend; but the doctor received the explanation without remark, as a simple statement, indispensable to his understanding the case.

"Three weeks," he murmured; "then, that explains everything. Has she appeared to suffer much during the time?"

"She complained of violent headaches, dimness of sight, and intolerable pains in her ears, she attributed all that though to migrains. Do not, however, conceal anything from me, Herve; is her complaint very serious?"

"So serious, my friend, so invariably fatal, that I am almost undertaking a hopeless task in attempting a cure."

"Ah! good heaven!"

"You asked for the truth, and I have told it you. If I had that courage, it was because you told me this poor woman is not your mother. Nothing short of a miracle can save her; but this miracle we may hope and prepare for. And now to work!"

THE LEROUGE CASE

VI.

THE clock of the St. Lazare terminus was striking eleven as old Tabaret, after shaking hands with Noel, left his house, still bewildered by what he had just heard. Obligated to restrain himself at the time, he now fully appreciated his liberty of action. It was with an unsteady gait that he took his first steps in the street, like the toper, who, after being shut up in a warm room, suddenly goes out into the open air. He was beaming with pleasure, but at the same time felt rather giddy, from that rapid succession of unexpected revelations, which, so he thought, had suddenly placed him in possession of the truth.

Notwithstanding his haste to arrive at M. Daburon's he did not take a cab. He felt the necessity of walking. He was one of those who require exercise to see things clearly. When he moved about his ideas fitted and classified themselves in his brain, like grains of wheat when shaken in a bushel. Without hastening his pace, he reached the Rue de la Chaussee d'Antin, crossed the Boulevard with its resplendent cafes, and turned to the Rue Richelieu.

He walked along, unconscious of external objects, tripping and stumbling over the inequalities of the sidewalk, or slipping on the greasy pavement. If he followed the proper road, it was a purely mechanical impulse that guided him. His mind was wandering at random through the field of probabilities, and following in the darkness the mysterious thread, the almost imperceptible end of which he had seized at La Jonchere.

Like all persons labouring under strong emotion without knowing it, he talked aloud, little thinking into what indiscreet ears his exclamations and disjointed phrases might fall. At every step, we meet in Paris people babbling to themselves, and unconsciously confiding to the four winds of heaven their dearest secrets, like cracked vases that allow their contents to steal away. Often the passers-by mistake these eccentric monologuists for lunatics. Sometimes the curious follow them, and amuse themselves by receiving these strange confidences. It was an indiscretion of this kind which told the ruin of Riscara the rich banker. Lambreth, the assassin of the Rue de Venise, betrayed himself in a similar manner.

"What luck!" exclaimed old Tabaret. "What an incredible piece of good fortune! Gevrol may dispute it if he likes, but after all, chance is the cleverest agent of the police. Who would have imagined such a history? I was not, however, very far from the reality. I guessed there was a child in the case. But who would have dreamed of a substitution?—an old sensational effect, that playwrights no longer dare make use of. This is a striking example of the danger of following preconceived ideas in police investigation. We are affrighted at unlikelihood; and, as in this case, the greatest unlikelihood often proves to be the truth. We retire before the absurd, and it is the absurd that we should examine. Everything is possible. I would not take a thousand crowns for what I have learnt this evening. I shall kill two birds with one stone. I deliver up the criminal; and I give Noel a hearty lift up to recover his title and his fortune. There, at least; is one who deserves what he will get. For once I shall not be sorry to see a lad get on, who has been brought up in the school of adversity. But, pshaw! he will be like all the rest. Prosperity will turn his brain. Already he begins to prate of his ancestors. . . . Poor humanity he almost made me laugh. . . . But it is mother Gerdy who surprises me most. A woman to whom I would have given absolution without waiting to hear her confess. When I think that I was on the point of proposing to her, ready to marry her! B-r-r-r!"

At this thought, the old fellow shivered. He saw himself married, and all on a sudden, discovering the antecedents of Madame Tabaret, becoming mixed up with a scandalous prosecution, compromised, and rendered ridiculous.

"When I think," he continued, "that my worthy Gevrol is running after the man with the earrings! Run, my boy, run! Travel is a good thing for youth. Won't he be vexed? He will wish me dead. But I don't care. If any one wishes to do me an injury, M. Daburon will protect me. Ah! there is one to whom I am going to do a good turn. I can see him now, opening his eyes like saucers, when I say to him, 'I have the rascal!' He can boast of owing me something. This investigation will bring him honour, or justice is not justice. He will, at least, be made an officer of the Legion of Honour. So much the better! I like him. If he is asleep, I am going to give him an agreeable

THE LEROUGE CASE

awaking. Won't he just overpower me with questions! He will want to know everything at once."

Old Tabaret, who was now crossing the Pont des Saints-Peres, stopped suddenly. "But the details!" said he. "By Jove! I have none. I only know the bare facts." He resumed his walk, and continued, "They are right at the office, I am too enthusiastic; I jump at conclusions, as Gevrol says. When I was with Noel, I should have cross-examined him, got hold of a quantity of useful details; but I did not even think of doing so. I drank in his words. I would have had him tell the story in a sentence. All the same, it is but natural; when one is pursuing a stag, one does not stop to shoot a blackbird. But I see very well now, I did not draw him out enough. On the other hand, by questioning him more, I might have awakened suspicions in Noel's mind, and led him to discover that I am working for the Rue de Jerusalem. To be sure, I do not blush for my connection with the police, I am even vain of it; but at the same time, I prefer that no one should know of it. People are so stupid, that they detest the police, who protect them; I must be calm and on my best behaviour, for here I am at the end of my journey."

M. Daburon had just gone to bed, but had given orders to his servant; so that M. Tabaret had but to give his name, to be at once conducted to the magistrate's sleeping apartment. At sight of his amateur detective, M. Daburon raised himself in his bed, saying, "There is something extraordinary! What have you discovered? have you got a clue?"

"Better than that," answered the old fellow, smiling with pleasure.

"Speak quickly!"

"I know the culprit!"

Old Tabaret ought to have been satisfied; he certainly produced an effect. The magistrate bounded in his bed. "Already!" said he. "Is it possible?"

"I have the honour to repeat to you, sir," resumed the old fellow, "that I know the author of the crime of La Jonchere."

"And I," said M. Daburon, "I proclaim you the greatest of all detectives, past or future. I shall certainly never hereafter undertake an investigation without your assistance."

"You are too kind, sir. I have had little or nothing to do in the matter. The discovery is due to chance alone."

"You are modest, M. Tabaret. Chance assists only the clever, and it is that which annoys the stupid. But I beg you will be seated and proceed."

Then with the lucidness and precision of which few would have believed him capable, the old fellow repeated to the magistrate all that he had learned from Noel. He quoted from memory the extracts from the letters, almost without changing a word.

"These letters," added he, "I have seen; and I have even taken one, in order to verify the writing. Here it is."

"Yes," murmured the magistrate—"Yes, M. Tabaret, you have discovered the criminal. The evidence is palpable, even to the blind. Heaven has willed this. Crime engenders crime. The great sin of the father has made the son an assassin."

"I have not given you the names, sir," resumed old Tabaret. "I wished first to hear your opinion."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Oh! you can name them," interrupted M. Daburon with a certain degree of animation, "no matter how high he may have to strike, a French magistrate has never hesitated."

"I know it, sir, but we are going very high this time. The father who has sacrificed his legitimate son for the sake of his bastard is Count Rheteau de Commarin, and the assassin of Widow Lerouge is the bastard, Viscount Albert de Commarin!"

M. Tabaret, like an accomplished artist, had uttered these words slowly, and with a deliberate emphasis, confidently expecting to produce a great impression. His expectation was more than realized. M. Daburon was struck with stupor. He remained motionless, his eyes dilated with astonishment. Mechanically he repeated like a word without meaning which he was trying to impress upon his memory: "Albert de Commarin! Albert de Commarin!"

"Yes," insisted old Tabaret, "the noble viscount. It is incredible, I know." But he perceived the alteration in the magistrate's face, and a little frightened, he approached the bed. "Are you unwell, sir?" he asked.

"No," answered M. Daburon, without exactly knowing what he said. "I am very well; but the surprise, the emotion,—"

"I understand that," said the old fellow.

"Yes, it is not surprising, is it? I should like to be alone a few minutes. Do not leave the house though; we must converse at some length on this business. Kindly pass into my study, there ought still to be a fire burning there. I will join you directly."

Then M. Daburon slowly got out of bed, put on a dressing gown, and seated himself, or rather fell, into an armchair. His face, to which in the exercise of his austere functions he had managed to give the immobility of marble, reflected the most cruel agitation; while his eyes betrayed the inward agony of his soul. The name of Commarin, so unexpectedly pronounced, awakened in him the most sorrowful recollections, and tore open a wound but badly healed. This name recalled to him an event which had rudely extinguished his youth and spoilt his life. Involuntarily, he carried his thoughts back to his epoch, so as to taste again all its bitterness. An hour ago, it had seemed to him far removed, and already hidden in the mists of the past; one word had sufficed to recall it, clear and distinct. It seemed to him now that this event, in which the name of Albert de Commarin was mixed up, dated from yesterday. In reality nearly two years elapsed since.

Pierre-Marie Daburon belonged to one of the oldest families of Poitou. Three or four of his ancestors had filled successively the most important positions in the province. Why, then, had they not bequeathed a title and a coat of arms to their descendants?

The magistrate's father possesses, round about the ugly modern chateau which he inhabits, more than eight hundred thousand francs' worth of the most valuable land. By his mother, a Cottevise-Luxe, he is related to the highest nobility of Poitou, one of the most exclusive that exists in France, as every one knows.

When he received his nomination in Paris, his relationship caused him to be received at once by five or six aristocratic families, and it was not long before he extended his circle of acquaintance.

He possessed, however, none of the qualifications which ensure social success. He was cold and grave even to sadness, reserved and timid even to excess. His mind wanted brilliancy and lightness; he lacked the facility of repartee, and the amiable art of conversing without a subject; he could neither tell a lie, nor pay an insipid compliment. Like most men who feel deeply, he was unable to interpret his impressions immediately. He required to reflect and consider within himself.

THE LEROUGE CASE

However, he was sought after for more solid qualities than these: for the nobleness of his sentiments, his pleasant disposition, and the certainty of his connections. Those who knew him intimately quickly learned to esteem his sound judgment, his keen sense of honour, and to discover under his cold exterior a warm heart, an excessive sensibility, and a delicacy almost feminine. In a word, although he might be eclipsed in a room full of strangers or simpletons, he charmed all hearts in a smaller circle, where he felt warmed by an atmosphere of sympathy.

He accustomed himself to go about a great deal. He reasoned, wisely perhaps, that a magistrate can make better use of his time than by remaining shut up in his study, in company with books of law. He thought that a man called upon to judge others, ought to know them, and for that purpose study them. An attentive and discreet observer, he examined the play of human interests and passions, exercised himself in disentangling and manoeuvring at need the strings of the puppets he saw moving around him. Piece by piece, so to say, he laboured to comprehend the working of the complicated machine called society, of which he was charged to overlook the movements, regulate the springs, and keep the wheels in order.

And on a sudden, in the early part of the winter of 1860 and 1861, M. Daburon disappeared. His friends sought for him, but he was nowhere to be met with. What could he be doing? Inquiry resulted in the discovery that he passed nearly all his evenings at the house of the Marchioness d'Arlange. The surprise was as great as it was natural.

This dear marchioness was, or rather is,—for she is still in the land of the living,—a personage whom one would consider rather out of date. She is surely the most singular legacy bequeathed us by the eighteenth century. How, and by what marvellous process she had been preserved such as we see her, it is impossible to say. Listening to her, you would swear that she was yesterday at one of those parties given by the queen where cards and high stakes were the rule, much to the annoyance of Louis XIV., and where the great ladies cheated openly in emulation of each other.

Manners, language, habits, almost costume, she has preserved everything belonging to that period about which authors have written only to display the defects. Her appearance alone will tell more than an exhaustive article, and an hour's conversation with her, more than a volume.

She was born in a little principality, where her parents had taken refuge whilst awaiting the chastisements and repentance of an erring and rebellious people. She had been brought up amongst the old nobles of the emigration, in some very ancient and very gilded apartment, just as though she had been in a cabinet of curiosities. Her mind had awakened amid the hum of antediluvian conversations, her imagination had first been aroused by arguments a little less profitable than those of an assembly of deaf persons convoked to decide upon the merits of the work of some distinguished musician. Here she imbibed a fund of ideas, which, applied to the forms of society of to-day, are as grotesque as would be those of a child shut up until twenty years of age in an Assyrian museum.

The first empire, the restoration, the monarchy of July, the second republic, the second empire, have passed beneath her windows, but she has not taken the trouble to open them. All that has happened since '89 she considers as never having been. For her it is a nightmare from which she is still awaiting a release. She has looked at everything, but then she looks through her own pretty glasses which show her everything as she would wish it, and which are to be obtained of dealers in illusions.

Though over sixty-eight years old she is as straight as a poplar, and has never been ill. She is vivacious, and active to excess, and can only keep still when asleep, or when playing her favorite game of piquet. She has her four meals a day, eats like a vintager, and takes her wine neat. She professes an undisguised contempt for the silly women of our century who live for a week on a partridge, and inundate with water grand sentiments which they entangle in long phrases. She has always been, and still is, very positive, and her word is prompt and easily understood. She never shrinks from using the most appropriate word to express her meaning. So much the worse, if some delicate ears object! She heartily detests hypocrisy.

THE LEROUGE CASE

She believes in God, but she believes also in M. de Voltaire, so that her devotion is, to say the least, problematical. However, she is on good terms with the curate of her parish, and is very particular about the arrangement of her dinner on the days she honours him with an invitation to her table. She seems to consider him a subaltern, very useful to her salvation, and capable of opening the gate of paradise for her.

Such as she is, she is shunned like the plague. Everybody dreads her loud voice, her terrible indiscretion, and the frankness of speech which she affects, in order to have the right of saying the most unpleasant things which pass through her head. Of all her family, there only remains her granddaughter, whose father died very young.

Of a fortune originally large, and partly restored by the indemnity allowed by the government, but since administered in the most careless manner, she has only been able to preserve an income of twenty thousand francs, which diminishes day by day. She is, also, proprietor of the pretty little house which she inhabits, situated near the Invalides, between a rather narrow court-yard, and a very extensive garden.

So circumstanced, she considers herself the most unfortunate of God's creatures, and passes the greater part of her life complaining of her poverty. From time to time, especially after some exceptionally bad speculation, she confesses that what she fears most is to die in a pauper's bed.

A friend of M. Daburon's presented him one evening to the Marchioness d'Arlange, having dragged him to her house in a mirthful mood, saying, "Come with me, and I will show you a phenomenon, a ghost of the past in flesh and bone."

The marchioness rather puzzled the magistrate the first time he was admitted to her presence. On his second visit, she amused him very much; for which reason, he came again. But after a while she no longer amused him, though he still continued a faithful and constant visitor to the rose-coloured boudoir wherein she passed the greater part of her life.

Madame d'Arlange conceived a violent friendship for him, and became eloquent in his praises.

"A most charming young man," she declared, "delicate and sensible! What a pity he is not born!" (Her ladyship meant born of noble parentage, but used the phrase as ignoring the fact of the unfortunates who are not noble having been born at all) "One can receive him though, all the same; his forefathers were very decent people, and his mother was a Cottevise who, however, went wrong. I wish him well, and will do all I can to push him forward."

The strongest proof of friendship he received from her was, that she condescended to pronounce his name like the rest of the world. She had preserved that ridiculous affectation of forgetfulness of the names of people who were not of noble birth, and who in her opinion had no right to names. She was so confirmed in this habit, that, if by accident she pronounced such a name correctly, she immediately repeated it with some ludicrous alteration. During his first visit, M. Daburon was extremely amused at hearing his name altered every time she addressed him. Successively she made it Taburon, Dabiron, Maliron, Laliron, Laridon; but, in three months time, she called him Daburon as distinctly as if he had been a duke of something, and a lord of somewhere.

Occasionally she exerted herself to prove to the worthy magistrate that he was a nobleman, or at least ought to be. She would have been happy, if she could have persuaded him to adopt some title, and have a helmet engraved upon his visiting cards.

"How is it possible," said she, "that your ancestors, eminent, wealthy, and influential, never thought of being raised from the common herd and securing a title for their descendants? Today you would possess a presentable pedigree."—

THE LEROUGE CASE

"My ancestors were wise," responded M. Daburon. "They preferred being foremost among their fellow-citizens to becoming last among the nobles."

Upon which the marchioness explained, and proved to demonstration, that between the most influential and wealthy citizen and the smallest scion of nobility, there was an abyss that all the money in the world could not fill up.

They who were so surprised at the frequency of the magistrate's visits to this celebrated "relic of the past" did not know that lady's granddaughter, or, at least, did not recollect her; she went out so seldom! The old marchioness did not care, so she said, to be bothered with a young spy who would be in her way when she related some of her choice anecdotes.

Claire d'Arlange was just seventeen years old. She was extremely graceful and gentle in manner, and lovely in her natural innocence. She had a profusion of fine light brown hair, which fell in ringlets over her well-shaped neck and shoulders. Her figure was still rather slender; but her features recalled Guide's most celestial faces. Her blue eyes, shaded by long lashes of a hue darker than her hair, had above all an adorable expression.

A certain air of antiquity, the result of her association with her grandmother, added yet another charm to the young girl's manner. She had more sense, however, than her relative; and, as her education had not been neglected, she had imbibed pretty correct ideas of the world in which she lived. This education, these practical ideas, Claire owed to her governess, upon whose shoulders the marchioness had thrown the entire responsibility of cultivating her mind.

This governess, Mademoiselle Schmidt, chosen at hazard, happened by the most fortunate chance to be both well informed and possessed of principle. She was, what is often met with on the other side of the Rhine, a woman at once romantic and practical, of the tenderest sensibility and the severest virtue. This good woman, while she carried her pupil into the land of sentimental phantasy and poetical imaginings, gave her at the same time the most practical instruction in matters relating to actual life. She revealed to Claire all the peculiarities of thought and manner that rendered her grandmother so ridiculous, and taught her to avoid them, but without ceasing to respect them.

Every evening, on arriving at Madame d'Arlange's, M. Daburon was sure to find Claire seated beside her grandmother, and it was for that that he called. Whilst listening with an inattentive ear to the old lady's rigmaroles and her interminable anecdotes of the emigration, he gazed upon Claire, as a fanatic upon his idol. Often in his ecstasy he forgot where he was for the moment and became absolutely oblivious of the old lady's presence, although her shrill voice was piercing the tympanum of his ear like a needle. Then he would answer her at cross-purposes, committing the most singular blunders, which he labored afterwards to explain. But he need not have taken the trouble. Madame d'Arlange did not perceive her courtier's absence of mind; her questions were of such a length, that she did not care about the answers. Having a listener, she was satisfied, provided that from time to time he gave signs of life.

When obliged to sit down to play piquet, he cursed below his breath the game and its detestable inventor. He paid no attention to his cards. He made mistakes every moment, discarding what he should keep in and forgetting to cut. The old lady was annoyed by these continual distractions, but she did scruple to profit by them. She looked at the discard, changed the cards which did not suit her, while she audaciously scored points she never made, and pocketed the money thus won without shame or remorse.

M. Daburon's timidity was extreme, and Claire was unsociable to excess, they therefore seldom spoke to each other. During the entire winter, the magistrate did not directly address the young girl ten times; and, on these rare occasions, he had learned mechanically by heart the phrase he proposed to repeat to her, well knowing that, without this precaution, he would most likely be unable to finish what he had to say.

THE LEROUGE CASE

But at least he saw her, he breathed the same air with her, he heard her voice, whose pure and harmonious vibrations thrilled his very soul.

By constantly watching her eyes, he learned to understand all their expressions. He believed he could read in them all her thoughts, and through them look into her soul like through an open window.

"She is pleased to-day," he would say to himself; and then he would be happy. At other times, he thought, "She has met with some annoyance to-day;" and immediately he became sad.

The idea of asking for her hand many times presented itself to his imagination; but he never dared to entertain it. Knowing, as he did, the marchioness's prejudices, her devotion to titles, her dread of any approach to a misalliance, he was convinced she would shut his mouth at the first word by a very decided "no," which she would maintain. To attempt the thing would be to risk, without a chance of success, his present happiness which he thought immense, for love lives upon its own misery.

"Once repulsed," thought he, "the house is shut against me; and then farewell to happiness, for life will end for me." Upon the other hand, the very rational thought occurred to him that another might see Mademoiselle d'Arlange, love her, and, in consequence, ask for and obtain her. In either case, hazarding a proposal, or hesitating still, he must certainly lose her in the end. By the commencement of spring, his mind was made up.

One fine afternoon, in the month of April, he bent his steps towards the residence of Madame d'Arlange, having truly need of more bravery than a soldier about to face a battery. He, like the soldier, whispered to himself, "Victory or death!" The marchioness who had gone out shortly after breakfast had just returned in a terrible rage, and was uttering screams like an eagle.

This was what had taken place. She had some work done by a neighboring painter some eight or ten months before; and the workman had presented himself a hundred times to receive payment, without avail. Tired of this proceeding, he had summoned the high and mighty Marchioness d'Arlange before the Justice of the Peace.

This summons had exasperated the marchioness; but she kept the matter to herself, having decided, in her wisdom, to call upon the judge and request him to reprimand the insolent painter who had dared to plague her for a paltry sum of money. The result of this fine project may be guessed. The judge had been compelled to eject her forcibly from his office; hence her fury.

M. Daburon found her in the rose-colored boudoir half undressed, her hair in disorder, red as a peony, and surrounded by the debris of the glass and china which had fallen under her hands in the first moments of her passion. Unfortunately, too, Claire and her governess were gone out. A maid was occupied in inundating the old lady with all sorts of waters, in the hope of calming her nerves.

She received Daburon as a messenger direct from Providence. In a little more than half an hour, she told her story, interlarded with numerous interjections and imprecations.

"Do you comprehend this judge?" cried she. "He must be some frantic Jacobin,—some son of the furies, who washed their hands in the blood of their king. Ah! my friend, I read stupor and indignation in your glance. He listened to the complaint of that impudent scoundrel whom I enabled to live by employing him! And when I addressed some severe remonstrances to this judge, as it was my duty to do, he had me turned out! Do you hear? turned out!"

At this painful recollection, she made a menacing gesture with her arm. In her sudden movement, she struck a handsome scent bottle that her maid held in her hand. The force of the blow sent it to the other end of the room, where it broke into pieces.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Stupid, awkward fool!" cried the marchioness, venting her anger upon the frightened girl.

M. Daburon, bewildered at first, now endeavored to calm her exasperation. She did not allow him to pronounce three words.

"Happily you are here," she continued; "you are always willing to serve me, I know. I count upon you! you will exercise your influence, your powerful friends, your credit, to have this pitiful painter and this miscreant of a judge flung into some deep ditch, to teach them the respect due to a woman of my rank."

The magistrate did not permit himself even to smile at this imperative demand. He had heard many speeches as absurd issue from her lips without ever making fun of them. Was she not Claire's grandmother? for that alone he loved and venerated her. He blessed her for her granddaughter, as an admirer of nature blesses heaven for the wild flower that delights him with its perfume.

The fury of the old lady was terrible; nor was it of short duration. At the end of an hour, however, she was, or appeared to be, pacified. They replaced her head-dress, repaired the disorder of her toilette, and picked up the fragments of broken glass and china. Vanquished by her own violence, the reaction was immediate and complete. She fell back helpless and exhausted into an arm-chair.

This magnificent result was due to the magistrate. To accomplish it, he had had to use all his ability, to exercise the most angelic patience, the greatest tact. His triumph was the more meritorious, because he came completely unprepared for this adventure, which interfered with his intended proposal. The first time that he had felt sufficient courage to speak, fortune seemed to declare against him, for this untoward event had quite upset his plans.

Arming himself, however, with his professional eloquence, he talked the old lady into calmness. He was not so foolish as to contradict her. On the contrary, he caressed her hobby. He was humorous and pathetic by turns. He attacked the authors of the revolution, cursed its errors, deplored its crimes, and almost wept over its disastrous results. Commencing with the infamous Marat he eventually reached the rascal of a judge who had offended her. He abused his scandalous conduct in good set terms, and was exceedingly severe upon the dishonest scamp of a painter. However, he thought it best to let them off the punishment they so richly deserved; and ended by suggesting that it would perhaps be prudent, wise, noble even to pay.

The unfortunate word "pay" brought Madame d'Arlange to her feet in the fiercest attitude.

"Pay!" she screamed. "In order that these scoundrels may persist in their obduracy! Encourage them by a culpable weakness! Never! Besides to pay one must have money! and I have none!"

"Why!" said M. Daburon, "it amounts to but eighty-seven francs!"

"And is that nothing?" asked the marchioness; "you talk very foolishly, my dear sir. It is easy to see that you have money; your ancestors were people of no rank; and the revolution passed a hundred feet above their heads. Who can tell whether they may not have been the gainers by it? It took all from the d'Arlanges. What will they do to me, if I do not pay?"

"Well, madame, they can do many things; almost ruin you, in costs. They may seize your furniture."

"Alas!" cried the old lady, "the revolution is not ended yet. We shall all be swallowed up by it, my poor Daburon! Ah! you are happy, you who belong to the people! I see plainly that I must pay this man without delay, and it is frightfully sad for me, for I have nothing, and am forced to make such sacrifices for the sake of my grandchild!"

THE LEROUGE CASE

This statement surprised the magistrate so strongly that involuntarily he repeated half-aloud, "Sacrifices?"

"Certainly!" resumed Madame d'Arlange. Without her, would I have to live as I am doing, refusing myself everything to make both ends meet? Not a bit of it! I would invest my fortune in a life annuity. But I know, thank heaven, the duties of a mother; and I economise all I can for my little Claire."

This devotion appeared so admirable to M. Daburon, that he could not utter a word.

"Ah! I am terribly anxious about this dear child," continued the marchioness. "I confess M. Daburon, it makes me giddy when I wonder how I am to marry her."

The magistrate reddened with pleasure. At last his opportunity had arrived; he must take advantage of it at once.

"It seems to me," stammered he, "that to find Mademoiselle Claire a husband ought not to be difficult."

"Unfortunately, it is. She is pretty enough, I admit, although rather thin, but, now-a-days, beauty goes for nothing. Men are so mercenary they think only of money. I do not know of one who has the manhood to take a d'Arlange with her bright eyes for a dowry."

"I believe that you exaggerate," remarked M. Daburon, timidly."

"By no means. Trust to my experience which is far greater than yours. Besides, when I find a son-in-law, he will cause me a thousand troubles. Of this, I am assured by my lawyer. I shall be compelled, it seems, to render an account of Claire's patrimony. As if ever I kept accounts! It is shameful! Ah! if Claire had any sense of filial duty, she would quietly take the veil in some convent. I would use every effort to pay the necessary dower; but she has no affection for me."

M. Daburon felt that now was the time to speak. He collected his courage, as a good horseman pulls his horse together when going to leap a hedge, and in a voice, which he tried to render firm, he said: "Well! Madame, I believe I know a party who would suit Mademoiselle Claire,—an honest man, who loves her, and who will do everything in the world to make her happy."

"That," said Madame d'Arlange, "is always understood."

"The man of whom I speak," continued the magistrate, "is still young, and is rich. He will be only too happy to receive Mademoiselle Claire without a dowry. Not only will he decline an examination of your accounts of guardianship, but he will beg you to invest your fortune as you think fit."

"Really! Daburon, my friend, you are by no means a fool!" exclaimed the old lady.

"If you prefer not to invest your fortune in a life-annuity, your son-in-law will allow you sufficient to make up what you now find wanting."

"Ah! really I am stifling," interrupted the marchioness. "What! you know such a man, and have never yet mentioned him to me! You ought to have introduced him long ago."

"I did not dare, madame, I was afraid"—

"Quick! tell me who is this admirable son-in-law, this white blackbird? where does he nestle?"

THE LEROUGE CASE

The magistrate felt a strange fluttering of the heart; he was going to stake his happiness on a word. At length he stammered, "It is I, madame!"

His voice, his look, his gesture were beseeching. He was surprised at his own audacity, frightened at having vanquished his timidity, and was on the point of falling at the old lady's feet. She, however, laughed until the tears came into her eyes, then shrugging her shoulders, she said: "Really, dear Daburon is too ridiculous, he will make me die of laughing! He is so amusing!" After which she burst out laughing again. But suddenly she stopped, in the very height of her merriment, and assumed her most dignified air. "Are you perfectly serious in all you have told me, M. Daburon?" she asked.

"I have stated the truth," murmured the magistrate.

"You are then very rich?"

"I inherited, madame, from my mother, about twenty thousand francs a year. One of my uncles, who died last year, bequeathed me over a hundred thousand crowns. My father is worth about a million. Were I to ask him for the half to-morrow, he would give it to me; he would give me all his fortune, if it were necessary to my happiness, and be but too well contented, should I leave him the administration of it."

Madame d'Arlange signed to him to be silent; and, for five good minutes at least, she remained plunged in reflection, her forehead resting in her hands. At length she raised her head.

"Listen," said she. "Had you been so bold as to make this proposal to Claire's father, he would have called his servants to show you the door. For the sake of our name I ought to do the same; but I cannot do so. I am old and desolate; I am poor; my grandchild's prospects disquiet me; that is my excuse. I cannot, however, consent to speak to Claire of this horrible misalliance. What I can promise you, and that is too much, is that I will not be against you. Take your own measures; pay your addresses to Mademoiselle d'Arlange, and try to persuade her. If she says 'yes,' of her own free will, I shall not say 'no.'"

M. Daburon, transported with happiness, could almost have embraced the old lady. He thought her the best, the most excellent of women, not noticing the facility with which this proud spirit had been brought to yield. He was delirious, almost mad.

"Wait!" said the old lady; "your cause is not yet gained. Your mother, it is true, was a Cottevise, and I must excuse her for marrying so wretchedly; but your father is simple M. Daburon. This name, my dear friend, is simply ridiculous. Do you think it will be easy to make a Daburon of a young girl who for nearly eighteen years has been called d'Arlange?"

This objection did not seem to trouble the magistrate.

"After all," continued the old lady, "your father gained a Cottevise, so you may win a d'Arlange. On the strength of marrying into noble families, the Daburons may perhaps end by ennobling themselves. One last piece of advice; you believe Claire to be just as she looks,— timid, sweet, obedient. Undeceive yourself, my friend. Despite her innocent air, she is hardy, fierce, and obstinate as the marquis her father, who was worse than an Auvergne mule. Now you are warned. Our conditions are agreed to, are they not? Let us say no more on the subject. I almost wish you to succeed."

This scene was so present to the magistrate's mind, that as he sat at home in his arm-chair, though many months had passed since these events, he still seemed to hear the old lady's voice, and the word "success" still sounded in his ears.

THE LEROUGE CASE

He departed in triumph from the d'Arlange abode, which he had entered with a heart swelling with anxiety. He walked with his head erect, his chest dilated, and breathing the fresh air with the full strength of his lungs. He was so happy! The sky appeared to him more blue, the sun more brilliant. This grave magistrate felt a mad desire to stop the passers-by, to press them in his arms, to cry to them,—“Have you heard? The marchioness consents!”

He walked, and the earth seemed to him to give way beneath his footsteps; it was either too small to carry so much happiness, or else he had become so light that he was going to fly away towards the stars.

What castles in the air he built upon what Madame d'Arlange had said to him! He would tender his resignation. He would build on the banks of the Loire, not far from Tours, an enchanting little villa. He already saw it, with its facade to the rising sun, nestling in the midst of flowers, and shaded with wide-spreading trees. He furnished this dwelling in the most luxuriant style. He wished to provide a marvellous casket, worthy the pearl he was about to possess. For he had not a doubt; not a cloud obscured the horizon made radiant by his hopes, no voice at the bottom of his heart raised itself to cry, “Beware!”

>From that day, his visits to the marchioness became more frequent. He might almost be said to live at her house. While he preserved his respectful and reserved demeanour towards Claire, he strove assiduously to be something in her life. True love is ingenious. He learnt to overcome his timidity, to speak to the well-beloved of his soul, to encourage her to converse with him, to interest her. He went in quest of all the news, to amuse her. He read all the new books, and brought to her all that were fit for her to read.

Little by little he succeeded, thanks to the most delicate persistence, in taming this shy young girl. He began to perceive that her fear of him had almost disappeared, that she no longer received him with the cold and haughty air which had previously kept him at a distance. He felt that he was insensibly gaining her confidence. She still blushed when she spoke to him; but she no longer hesitated to address the first word. She even ventured at times to ask him a question. If she had heard a play well spoken of and wished to know the subject, M. Daburon would at once go to see it, and commit a complete account of it to writing, which he would send her through the post. At times she intrusted him with trifling commissions, the execution of which he would not have exchanged for the Russian embassy.

Once he ventured to send her a magnificent bouquet. She accepted it with an air of uneasy surprise, but begged him not to repeat the offering.

The tears came to his eyes; he left her presence broken-hearted, and the unhappiest of men. “She does not love me,” thought he, “she will never love me.” But, three days after, as he looked very sad, she begged him to procure her certain flowers, then very much in fashion, which she wished to place on her flower-stand. He sent enough to fill the house from the garret to the cellar. “She will love me,” he whispered to himself in his joy.

These events, so trifling but yet so great, had not interrupted the games of piquet; only the young girl now appeared to interest herself in the play, nearly always taking the magistrate's side against the marchioness. She did not understand the game very well; but, when the old gambler cheated too openly, she would notice it, and say, laughingly,—“She is robbing you, M. Daburon,—she is robbing you!” He would willingly have been robbed of his entire fortune, to hear that sweet voice raised on his behalf.

It was summer time. Often in the evening she accepted his arm, and, while the marchioness remained at the window, seated in her arm-chair, they walked around the lawn, treading lightly upon the paths spread with gravel sifted so fine that the trailing of her light dress effaced the traces of their footsteps. She chatted gaily with him, as with a beloved brother, while he was obliged to do violence to his feelings, to refrain from imprinting a kiss upon the little blonde head, from which the light breeze lifted the curls and scattered them like fleecy clouds. At such moments, he seemed to tread an enchanted path strewn with flowers, at the end of which appeared happiness.

THE LEROUGE CASE

When he attempted to speak of his hopes to the marchioness, she would say: "You know what we agreed upon. Not a word. Already does the voice of conscience reproach me for lending my countenance to such an abomination. To think that I may one day have a granddaughter calling herself Madame Daburon! You must petition the king, my friend, to change your name."

If instead of intoxicating himself with dreams of happiness, this acute observer had studied the character of his idol, the effect might have been to put him upon his guard. In the meanwhile, he noticed singular alterations in her humour. On certain days, she was gay and careless as a child. Then, for a week, she would remain melancholy and dejected. Seeing her in this state the day following a ball, to which her grandmother had made a point of taking her, he dared to ask her the reason of her sadness.

"Oh! that," answered she, heaving a deep sigh, "is my secret,—a secret of which even my grandmother knows nothing."

M. Daburon looked at her. He thought he saw a tear between her long eyelashes.

"One day," continued she, "I may confide in you: it will perhaps be necessary."

The magistrate was blind and deaf. "I also," answered he, "have a secret, which I wish to confide to you in return."

When he retired towards midnight, he said to himself, "To-morrow I will confess everything to her." Then passed a little more than fifty days, during which he kept repeating to himself,—"To-morrow!"

It happened at last one evening in the month of August; the heat all day had been overpowering; towards dusk a breeze had risen, the leaves rustled; there were signs of a storm in the atmosphere.

They were seated together at the bottom of the garden, under the arbour, adorned with exotic plants, and, through the branches, they perceived the fluttering gown of the marchioness, who was taking a turn after her dinner. They had remained a long time without speaking, enjoying the perfume of the flowers, the calm beauty of the evening.

M. Daburon ventured to take the young girl's hand. It was the first time, and the touch of her fine skin thrilled through every fibre of his frame, and drove the blood surging to his brain.

"Mademoiselle," stammered he, "Claire—"

She turned towards him her beautiful eyes, filled with astonishment.

"Forgive me," continued he, "forgive me. I have spoken to your grandmother, before daring to raise my eyes to you. Do you not understand me? A word from your lips will decide my future happiness or misery. Claire, mademoiselle, do not spurn me: I love you!"

While the magistrate was speaking, Mademoiselle d'Arange looked at him as though doubtful of the evidence of her senses; but at the words, "I love you!" pronounced with the trembling accents of the most devoted passion, she disengaged her hand sharply, and uttered a stifled cry.

"You," murmured she, "is this really you?"

M. Daburon, at this the most critical moment of his life was powerless to utter a word. The presentiment of an immense misfortune oppressed his heart. What were then his feelings, when he saw Claire burst into tears. She hid her face in her hands, and kept repeating,—

THE LEROUGE CASE

"I am very unhappy, very unhappy!"

"You unhappy?" exclaimed the magistrate at length, "and through me? Claire, you are cruel! In heaven's name, what have I done? What is the matter? Speak! Anything rather than this anxiety which is killing me."

He knelt before her on the gravelled walk, and again made an attempt to take her hand. She repulsed him with an imploring gesture.

"Let me weep," said she: "I suffer so much, you are going to hate me, I feel it. Who knows! you will, perhaps, despise me, and yet I swear before heaven that I never expected what you have just said to me, that I had not even a suspicion of it!"

M. Daburon remained upon his knees, awaiting his doom.

"Yes," continued Claire, "you will think you have been the victim of a detestable coquetry. I see it now! I comprehend everything! It is not possible, that, without a profound love, a man can be all that you have been to me. Alas! I was but a child. I gave myself up to the great happiness of having a friend! Am I not alone in the world, and as if lost in a desert? Silly and imprudent, I thoughtlessly confided in you, as in the best, the most indulgent of fathers."

These words revealed to the unfortunate magistrate the extent of his error. The same as a heavy hammer, they smashed into a thousand fragments the fragile edifice of his hopes. He raised himself slowly, and, in a tone of involuntary reproach, he repeated,— "Your father!"

Mademoiselle d'Arlange felt how deeply she had wounded this man whose intense love she dare not even fathom. "Yes," she resumed, "I love you as a father! Seeing you, usually so grave and austere, become for me so good, so indulgent, I thanked heaven for sending me a protector to replace those who are dead."

M. Daburon could not restrain a sob; his heart was breaking.

"One word," continued Claire,— "one single word, would have enlightened me. Why did you not pronounce it! It was with such happiness that I leant on you as a child on its mother; and with what inward joy I said to myself, 'I am sure of one friend, of one heart into which runs the overflow of mine!' Ah! why was not my confidence greater? Why did I withhold my secret from you? I might have avoided this fearful calamity. I ought to have told you long since. I no longer belong to myself freely and with happiness, I have given my life to another."

To hover in the clouds, and suddenly to fall rudely to the earth, such was M. Daburon's fate; his sufferings are not to be described.

"Far better to have spoken," answered he; "yet no. I owe to your silence, Claire, six months of delicious illusions, six months of enchanting dreams. This shall be my share of life's happiness."

The last beams of closing day still enabled the magistrate to see Mademoiselle d'Arlange. Her beautiful face had the whiteness and the immobility of marble. Heavy tears rolled silently down her cheeks. It seemed to M. Daburon that he was beholding the frightful spectacle of a weeping statue.

"You love another," said he at length, "another! And your grandmother does not know it. Claire, you can only have chosen a man worthy of your love. How is it the marchioness does not receive him?"

"There are certain obstacles," murmured Claire, "obstacles which perhaps we may never be able to remove; but a girl like me can love but once. She marries him she loves, or she belongs to heaven!"

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Certain obstacles!" said M. Daburon in a hollow voice. "You love a man, he knows it, and he is stopped by obstacles?"

"I am poor," answered Mademoiselle d'Arlange, "and his family is immensely rich. His father is cruel, inexorable."

"His father," cried the magistrate, with a bitterness he did not dream of hiding, "his father, his family, and that withholds him! You are poor, he is rich, and that stops him! And yet he knows you love him! Ah! why am I not in his place? and why have I not the entire universe against me? What sacrifice can compare with love? such as I understand it. Nay, would it be a sacrifice? That which appears most so, is it not really an immense joy? To suffer, to struggle, to wait, to hope always, to devote oneself entirely to another; that is my idea of love."

"It is thus I love," said Claire with simplicity.

This answer crushed the magistrate. He could understand it. He knew that for him there was no hope; but he felt a terrible enjoyment in torturing himself, and proving his misfortune by intense suffering.

"But," insisted he, "how have you known him, spoken to him? Where? When? Madame d'Arlange receives no one."

"I ought now to tell you everything, sir," answered Claire proudly. "I have known him for a long time. It was at the house of one of my grandmother's friends, who is a cousin of his,—old Mademoiselle Goello, that I saw him for the first time. There we spoke to each other; there we meet each other now."

"Ah!" exclaimed M. Daburon, whose eyes were suddenly opened, "I remember now. A few days before your visit to Mademoiselle Goello, you are gayer than usual; and, when you return, you are often sad."

"That is because I see how much he is pained by the obstacles he cannot overcome."

"Is his family, then, so illustrious," asked the magistrate harshly, "that it disdains alliance with yours?"

"I should have told you everything, without waiting to be questioned, sir," answered Mademoiselle d'Arlange, "even his name. He is called Albert de Commarin."

The marchioness at this moment, thinking she had walked enough, was preparing to return to her rose-coloured boudoir. She therefore approached the arbour, and exclaimed in her loud voice:—

"Worthy magistrate, piquet awaits you."

Mechanically the magistrate arose, stammering, "I am coming."

Claire held him back. "I have not asked you to keep my secret, sir," said she.

"O mademoiselle!" said M. Daburon, wounded by this appearance of doubt.

"I know," resumed Claire, "that I can count upon you; but, come what will, my tranquillity is gone."

M. Daburon looked at her with an air of surprise; his eyes questioned her.

"It is certain," continued she, "that what I, a young and inexperienced girl, have failed to see, has not passed unnoticed by my grandmother. That she has continued to receive you is a tacit encouragement of your addresses;

THE LEROUGE CASE

which I consider, permit me to say, as very honourable to myself."

"I have already mentioned, mademoiselle," replied the magistrate, "that the marchioness has deigned to authorise my hopes."

And briefly he related his interview with Madame d'Arlange, having the delicacy, however, to omit absolutely the question of money, which had so strongly influenced the old lady.

"I see very plainly what effect this will have on my peace," said Claire sadly. "When my grandmother learns that I have not received your homage, she will be very angry."

"You misjudge me, mademoiselle," interrupted M. Daburon. "I have nothing to say to the marchioness. I will retire, and all will be concluded. No doubt she will think that I have altered my mind!"

"Oh! you are good and generous, I know!"

"I will go away," pursued M. Daburon; "and soon you will have forgotten even the name of the unfortunate whose life's hopes have just been shattered."

"You do not mean what you say," said the young girl quickly.

"Well, no. I cherish this last illusion, that later on you will remember me with pleasure. Sometimes you will say, 'He loved me,' I wish all the same to remain your friend, yes, your most devoted friend."

Claire, in her turn, clasped M. Daburon's hands, and said with great emotion:—"Yes, you are right, you must remain my friend. Let us forget what has happened, what you have said to-night, and remain to me, as in the past, the best, the most indulgent of brothers."

Darkness had come, and she could not see him; but she knew he was weeping, for he was slow to answer.

"Is it possible," murmured he at length, "what you ask of me? What! is it you who talk to me of forgetting? Do you feel the power to forget? Do you not see that I love you a thousand times more than you love—" He stopped, unable to pronounce the name of Commarin; and then, with an effort he added: "And I shall love you always."

They had left the arbour, and were now standing not far from the steps leading to the house.

"And now, mademoiselle," resumed M. Daburon, "permit me to say, adieu! You will see me again but seldom. I shall only return often enough to avoid the appearance of a rupture."

His voice trembled, so that it was with difficulty he made it distinct.

"Whatever may happen," he added, "remember that there is one unfortunate being in the world who belongs to you absolutely. If ever you have need of a friend's devotion, come to me, come to your friend. Now it is over . . . I have courage. Claire, mademoiselle, for the last time, adieu!"

She was but little less moved than he was. Instinctively she approached him, and for the first and last time he touched lightly with his cold lips the forehead of her he loved so well. They mounted the steps, she leaning on his arm, and entered the rose-coloured boudoir where the marchioness was seated, impatiently shuffling the cards, while awaiting her victim.

"Now, then, incorruptible magistrate," cried she.

THE LEROUGE CASE

But M. Daburon felt sick at heart. He could not have held the cards. He stammered some absurd excuses, spoke of pressing affairs, of duties to be attended to, of feeling suddenly unwell, and went out, clinging to the walls.

His departure made the old card-player highly indignant. She turned to her grand-daughter, who had gone to hide her confusion away from the candles of the card table, and asked, "What is the matter with Daburon this evening?"

"I do not know, madame," stammered Claire.

"It appears to me," continued the marchioness, "that the little magistrate permits himself to take singular liberties. He must be reminded of his proper place, or he will end by believing himself our equal."

Claire tried to explain the magistrate's conduct: "He has been complaining all the evening, grandmamma; perhaps he is unwell."

"And what if he is?" exclaimed the old lady. "Is it not his duty to exercise some self-denial, in return for the honour of our company? I think I have already related to you the story of your granduncle, the Duke de St Hurluge, who, having been chosen to join the king's card party on their return from the chase, played all through the evening and lost with the best grace in the world two hundred and twenty pistoles. All the assembly remarked his gaiety and his good humour. On the following day only it was learned, that, during the hunt, he had fallen from his horse, and had sat at his majesty's card table with a broken rib. Nobody made any remark, so perfectly natural did this act of ordinary politeness appear in those days. This little Daburon, if he is unwell, would have given proof of his breeding by saying nothing about it, and remaining for my piquet. But he is as well as I am. Who can tell what games he has gone to play elsewhere!"

VII.

M. DABURON did not return home on leaving Mademoiselle d'Arlange. All through the night he wandered about at random, seeking to cool his heated brow, and to allay his excessive weariness.

"Fool that I was!" said he to himself, "thousand times fool to have hoped, to have believed, that she would ever love me. Madman! how could I have dared to dream of possessing so much grace, nobleness, and beauty! How charming she was this evening, when her face was bathed in tears! Could anything be more angelic? What a sublime expression her eyes had in speaking of him! How she must love him! And I? She loves me as a father, she told me so,—as a father! And could it be otherwise? Is it not justice? Could she see a lover in a sombre and severe-looking magistrate, always as sad as his black coat? Was it not a crime to dream of uniting that virginal simplicity to my detestable knowledge of the world? For her, the future is yet the land of smiling chimeras; and long since experience has dissipated all my illusions. She is as young as innocence, and I am as old as vice."

The unfortunate magistrate felt thoroughly ashamed of himself. He understood Claire, and excused her. He reproached himself for having shown her how he suffered; for having cast a shadow upon her life. He could not forgive himself for having spoken of his love. Ought he not to have foreseen what had happened?—that she would refuse him, that he would thus deprive himself of the happiness of seeing her, of hearing her, and of silently adoring her?

"A young and romantic girl," pursued he, "must have a lover she can dream of,—whom she can caress in imagination, as an ideal, gratifying herself by seeing in him every great and brilliant quality, imagining him full of nobleness, of bravery, of heroism. What would she see, if, in my absence, she dreamed of me? Her imagination would present me dressed in a funeral robe, in the depth of a gloomy dungeon, engaged with some vile criminal. Is it not my trade to descend into all moral sinks, to stir up the foulness of crime? Am I not compelled to wash in

THE LEROUGE CASE

secrecy and darkness the dirty linen of the most corrupt members of society? Ah! some professions are fatal. Ought not the magistrate, like the priest, to condemn himself to solitude and celibacy? Both know all, they hear all, their costumes are nearly the same; but, while the priest carries consolation in the folds of his black robe, the magistrate conveys terror. One is mercy, the other chastisement. Such are the images a thought of me would awaken; while the other,— the other—"

The wretched man continued his headlong course along the deserted quays. He went with his head bare, his eyes haggard. To breathe more freely, he had torn off his cravat and thrown it to the winds.

Sometimes, unconsciously, he crossed the path of a solitary wayfarer, who would pause, touched with pity, and turn to watch the retreating figure of the unfortunate wretch he thought deprived of reason. In a by-road, near Grenelle, some police officers stopped him, and tried to question him. He mechanically tendered them his card. They read it, and permitted him to pass, convinced that he was drunk.

Anger,—a furious anger, began to replace his first feeling of resignation. In his heart arose a hate, stronger and more violent than even his love for Claire. That other, that preferred one, that haughty viscount, who could not overcome those paltry obstacles, oh, that he had him there, under his knee!

At that moment, this noble and proud man, this severe and grave magistrate experienced an irresistible longing for vengeance. He began to understand the hate that arms itself with a knife, and lays in ambush in out-of-the-way places; which strikes in the dark, whether in front or from behind matters little, but which strikes, which kills, whose vengeance blood alone can satisfy.

At that very hour he was supposed to be occupied with an inquiry into the case of an unfortunate, accused of having stabbed one of her wretched companions. She was jealous of the woman, who had tried to take her lover from her. He was a soldier, coarse in manners, and always drunk.

M. Daburon felt himself seized with pity for this miserable creature, whom he had commenced to examine the day before. She was very ugly, in fact truly repulsive; but the expression of the eyes, when speaking of her soldier, returned to the magistrate's memory.

"She loves him sincerely," thought he. "If each one of the jurors had suffered what I am suffering now, she would be acquitted. But how many men in this world have loved passionately? Perhaps not one in twenty."

He resolved to recommend this girl to the indulgence of the tribunal, and to extenuate as much as possible her guilt.

For he himself had just determined upon the commission of a crime. He was resolved to kill Albert de Commarin.

During the rest of the night he became all the more determined in this resolution, demonstrating to himself by a thousand mad reasons, which he found solid and inscrutable, the necessity for and the justifiableness of this vengeance.

At seven o'clock in the morning, he found himself in an avenue of the Bois de Boulogne, not far from the lake. He made at once for the Porte Maillot, procured a cab, and was driven to his house.

The delirium of the night continued, but without suffering. He was conscious of no fatigue. Calm and cool, he acted under the power of an hallucination, almost like a somnambulist.

He reflected and reasoned, but without his reason. As soon as he arrived home he dressed himself with care, as was his custom formerly when visiting the Marchioness d'Arange, and went out. He first called at an armourer's

THE LEROUGE CASE

and bought a small revolver, which he caused to be carefully loaded under his own eyes, and put it into his pocket. He then called on the different persons he supposed capable of informing him to what club the viscount belonged. No one noticed the strange state of his mind, so natural were his manners and conversations.

It was not until the afternoon that a young friend of his gave him the name of Albert de Commarin's club, and offered to conduct him thither, as he too was a member.

M. Daburon accepted warmly, and accompanied his friend. While passing along, he grasped with frenzy the handle of the revolver which he kept concealed, thinking only of the murder he was determined to commit, and the means of insuring the accuracy of his aim.

"This will make a terrible scandal," thought he, "above all if I do not succeed in blowing my own brains out. I shall be arrested, thrown into prison, and placed upon my trial at the assizes. My name will be dishonoured! Bah! what does that signify? Claire does not love me, so what care I for all the rest? My father no doubt will die of grief, but I must have my revenge!"

On arriving at the club, his friend pointed out a very dark young man, with a haughty air, or what appeared so to him, who, seated at a table, was reading a review. It was the viscount.

M. Daburon walked up to him without drawing his revolver. But when within two paces, his heart failed him; he turned suddenly and fled, leaving his friend astonished at a scene, to him, utterly inexplicable.

Only once again will Albert de Commarin be as near death.

On reaching the street, it seemed to M. Daburon that the ground was receding from beneath him, that everything was turning around him. He tried to cry out, but could not utter a sound; he struck at the air with his hands, reeled for an instant, and then fell all of a heap on the pavement.

The passers-by ran and assisted the police to raise him. In one of his pockets they found his address, and carried him home. When he recovered his senses, he was in his bed, at the foot of which he perceived his father.

"What has happened?" he asked. With much caution they told him, that for six weeks he had wavered between life and death. The doctors had declared his life saved; and, now that reason was restored, all would go well.

Five minutes' conversation exhausted him. He shut his eyes, and tried to collect his ideas; but they whirled hither and thither wildly, as autumn leaves in the wind. The past seemed shrouded in a dark mist; yet, in the midst of the darkness and confusion, all that concerned Mademoiselle d'Arlange stood out clear and luminous. All his actions from the moment when he embraced Claire appeared before him. He shuddered, and his hair was in a moment soaking with perspiration.

He had almost become an assassin. The proof that he was restored to full possession of his faculties was, that a question of criminal law crossed his brain.

"The crime committed," said he to himself, "should I have been condemned? Yes. Was I responsible? No. Is crime merely the result of mental alienation? Was I mad? Or was I in that peculiar state of mind which usually precedes an illegal attempt? Who can say? Why have not all judges passed through an incomprehensible crisis such as mine? But who would believe me, were I to recount my experience?"

Some days later, he was sufficiently recovered to tell his father all. The old gentleman shrugged his shoulders, and assured him it was but a reminiscence of his delirium.

THE LEROUGE CASE

The good old man was moved at the story of his son's luckless wooing, without seeing therein, however, an irreparable misfortune. He advised him to think of something else, placed at his disposal his entire fortune, and recommended him to marry a stout Poitevine heiress, very gay and healthy, who would bear him some fine children. Then, as his estate was suffering by his absence, he returned home. Two months later, the investigating magistrate had resumed his ordinary avocations. But try as he would, he only went through his duties like a body without a soul. He felt that something was broken.

Once he ventured to pay a visit to his old friend, the marchioness. On seeing him, she uttered a cry of terror. She took him for a spectre, so much was he changed in appearance.

As she dreaded dismal faces, she ever after shut her door to him.

Claire was ill for a week after seeing him. "How he loved me," thought she! "It has almost killed him! Can Albert love me as much?" She did not dare to answer herself, She felt a desire to console him, to speak to him, attempt something; but he came no more.

M. Daburon was not, however, a man to give way without a struggle. He tried, as his father advised him, to distract his thoughts. He sought for pleasure, and found disgust, but not forgetfulness. Often he went so far as the threshold of debauchery; but the pure figure of Claire, dressed in white garments, always barred the doors against him.

Then he took refuge in work, as in a sanctuary; condemned himself to the most incessant labour, and forbade himself to think of Claire, as the consumptive forbids himself to meditate upon his malady.

His eagerness, his feverish activity, earned him the reputation of an ambitious man, who would go far; but he cared for nothing in the world.

At length, he found, not rest, but that painless benumbing which commonly follows a great catastrophe. The convalescence of oblivion was commencing.

These were the events, recalled to M. Daburon's mind when old Tabaret pronounced the name of Commarin. He believed them buried under the ashes of time; and behold they reappeared, just the same as those characters traced in sympathetic ink when held before a fire. In an instant they unrolled themselves before his memory, with the instantaneousness of a dream annihilating time and space.

During some minutes, he assisted at the representation of his own life. At once actor and spectator, he was there seated in his arm-chair, and at the same time he appeared on the stage. He acted, and he judged himself.

His first thought, it must be confessed, was one of hate, followed by a detestable feeling of satisfaction. Chance had, so to say, delivered into his hands this man preferred by Claire, this man, now no longer a haughty nobleman, illustrious by his fortune and his ancestors, but the illegitimate offspring of a courtesan. To retain a stolen name, he had committed a most cowardly assassination. And he, the magistrate, was about to experience the infinite gratification of striking his enemy with the sword of justice.

But this was only a passing thought. The man's upright conscience revolted against it, and made its powerful voice heard.

"Is anything," it cried, "more monstrous than the association of these two ideas,—hatred and justice? Can a magistrate, without despising himself more than he despises the vile beings he condemns, recollect that a criminal, whose fate is in his hands, has been his enemy? Has an investigating magistrate the right to make use of his exceptional powers in dealing with a prisoner; so long as he harbours the least resentment against him?"

THE LEROUGE CASE

M. Daburon repeated to himself what he had so frequently thought during the year, when commencing a fresh investigation: "And I also, I almost stained myself with a vile murder!"

And now it was his duty to cause to be arrested, to interrogate, and hand over to the assizes the man he had once resolved to kill.

All the world, it is true, ignored this crime of thought and intention; but could he himself forget it? Was not this, of all others, a case in which he should decline to be mixed up? Ought he not to withdraw, and wash his hands of the blood that had been shed, leaving to another the task of avenging him in the name of society?

"No," said he, "it would be a cowardice unworthy of me."

A project of mad generosity occurred to the bewildered man. "If I save him," murmured he, "if for Claire's sake I leave him his honour and his life. But how can I save him? To do so I shall be obliged to suppress old Tabaret's discoveries, and make an accomplice of him by ensuring his silence. We shall have to follow a wrong track, join Gevrol in running after some imaginary murderer. Is this practicable? Besides, to spare Albert is to defame Noel; it is to assure impunity to the most odious of crimes. In short, it is still sacrificing justice to my feelings."

The magistrate suffered greatly. How choose a path in the midst of so many perplexities! Impelled by different interests, he wavered, undecided between the most opposite decisions, his mind oscillating from one extreme to the other.

What could he do? His reason after this new and unforeseen shock vainly sought to regain its equilibrium.

"Resign?" said he to himself. "Where, then, would be my courage? Ought I not rather to remain the representative of the law, incapable of emotion, insensible to prejudice? am I so weak that, in assuming my office, I am unable to divest myself of my personality? Can I not, for the present, make abstraction of the past? My duty is to pursue this investigation. Claire herself would desire me to act thus. Would she wed a man suspected of a crime? Never. If he is innocent, he will be saved; if guilty, let him perish!"

This was very sound reasoning; but, at the bottom of his heart, a thousand disquietudes darted their thorns. He wanted to reassure himself.

"Do I still hate this young man?" he continued. "No, certainly. If Claire has preferred him to me, it is to Claire and not to him I owe my suffering. My rage was no more than a passing fit of delirium. I will prove it, by letting him find me as much a counsellor as a magistrate. If he is not guilty, he shall make use of all the means in my power to establish his innocence. Yes, I am worthy to be his judge. Heaven, who reads all my thoughts, sees that I love Claire enough to desire with all my heart the innocence of her lover."

Only then did M. Daburon seem to be vaguely aware of the lapse of time. It was nearly three o'clock in the morning.

"Goodness!" cried he; "why, old Tabaret is waiting for me. I shall probably find him asleep."

But M. Tabaret was not asleep. He had noticed the passage of time no more than the magistrate.

Ten minutes had sufficed him to take an inventory of the contents of M. Daburon's study, which was large, and handsomely furnished in accordance with his position and fortune. Taking up a lamp, he first admired six very valuable pictures, which ornamented the walls; he then examined with considerable curiosity some rare bronzes placed about the room, and bestowed on the bookcase the glance of a connoisseur.

THE LEROUGE CASE

After which, taking an evening paper from the table, he approached the hearth, and seated himself in a vast armchair.

He had not read a third of the leading article, which, like all leading articles of the time, was exclusively occupied with the Roman question, when, letting the paper drop from his hands, he became absorbed in meditation. The fixed idea, stronger than one's will, and more interesting to him than politics, brought him forcibly back to La Jonchere, where lay the murdered Widow Lerouge. Like the child who again and again builds up and demolishes his house of cards, he arranged and entangled alternately his chain of inductions and arguments.

In his own mind there was certainly no longer a doubt as regards this sad affair, and it seemed to him that M. Daburon shared his opinions. But yet, what difficulties there still remained to encounter!

There exists between the investigating magistrate and the accused a supreme tribunal, an admirable institution which is a guarantee for all, a powerful moderator, the jury.

And the jury, thank heaven! do not content themselves with a moral conviction. The strongest probabilities cannot induce them to give an affirmative verdict.

Placed upon a neutral ground, between the prosecution and the defence, it demands material and tangible proofs. Where the magistrate would condemn twenty times for one, in all security of conscience, the jury acquit for lack of satisfying evidence.

The deplorable execution of Lesurques has certainly assured impunity to many criminals; but, it is necessary to say it justifies hesitation in receiving circumstantial evidence in capital crimes.

In short, save where a criminal is taken in the very act, or confesses his guilt, it is not certain that the minister of justice can secure a conviction. Sometimes the judge of inquiry is as anxious as the accused himself. Nearly all crimes are in some particular point mysterious, perhaps impenetrable to justice and the police; and the duty of the advocate is, to discover this weak point, and thereon establish his client's defence. By pointing out this doubt to the jury, he insinuates in their minds a distrust of the entire evidence; and frequently the detection of a distorted induction, cleverly exposed, can change the face of a prosecution, and make a strong case appear to the jury a weak one. This uncertainty explains the character of passion which is so often perceptible in criminal trials.

And, in proportion to the march of civilisation, juries in important trials will become more timid and hesitating. The weight of responsibility oppresses the man of conscientious scruple. Already numbers recoil from the idea of capital punishment; and, whenever a jury can find a peg to hang a doubt on, they will wash their hands of the responsibility of condemnation. We have seen numbers of persons signing appeals for mercy to a condemned malefactor, condemned for what crime? Parricide! Every juror, from the moment he is sworn, weighs infinitely less the evidence he has come to listen to than the risk he runs of incurring the pangs of remorse. Rather than risk the condemnation of one innocent man, he will allow twenty scoundrels to go unpunished.

The accusation must then come before the jury, armed at all points, with abundant proofs. A task often tedious to the investigating magistrate, and bristling with difficulties, is the arrangement and condensation of this evidence, particularly when the accused is a cool hand, certain of having left no traces of his guilt. Then from the depths of his dungeon he defies the assault of justice, and laughs at the judge of inquiry. It is a terrible struggle, enough to make one tremble at the responsibility of the magistrate, when he remembers, that after all, this man imprisoned, without consolation or advice, may be innocent. How hard is it, then for the judge to resist his moral convictions!

Even when presumptive evidence points clearly to the criminal, and common sense recognises him, justice is at times compelled to acknowledge her defeat, for lack of what the jury consider sufficient proof of guilt. Thus, unhappily, many crimes escape punishment. An old advocate—general said one day that he knew as many as three

THE LEROUGE CASE

assassins, living rich, happy, and respected, who would probably end by dying in their beds, surrounded by their families, and being followed to the grave with lamentations, and praised for their virtues in their epitaphs.

At the idea that a murderer might escape the penalty of his crime, and steal away from the assize court, old Tabaret's blood fairly boiled in his veins, as at the recollection of some deadly insult.

Such a monstrous event, in his opinion, could only proceed from the incapacity of those charged with the preliminary inquiry, the clumsiness of the police, or the stupidity of the investigating magistrate.

"It is not I," he muttered, with the satisfied vanity of success, "who would ever let my prey escape. No crime can be committed, of which the author cannot be found, unless, indeed, he happens to be a madman, whose motive it would be difficult to understand. I would pass my life in pursuit of a criminal, before avowing myself vanquished, as Gevrol has done so many times."

Assisted by chance, he had again succeeded, so he kept repeating to himself, but what proofs could he furnish to the accusation, to that confounded jury, so difficult to convince, so precise and so cowardly? What could he imagine to force so cunning a culprit to betray himself? What trap could he prepare? To what new and infallible stratagem could he have recourse?

The amateur detective exhausted himself in subtle but impracticable combinations, always stopped by that exacting jury, so obnoxious to the agents of the Rue de Jerusalem. He was so deeply absorbed in his thoughts that he did not hear the door open, and was utterly unconscious of the magistrate's presence.

M. Daburon's voice aroused him from his reverie.

"You will excuse me, M. Tabaret, for having left you so long alone."

The old fellow rose and bowed respectfully.

"By my faith, sir," replied he, "I have not had the leisure to perceive my solitude."

M. Daburon crossed the room, and seated himself, facing his agent before a small table encumbered with papers and documents relating to the crime. He appeared very much fatigued.

"I have reflected a good deal," he commenced, "about this affair—"

"And I," interrupted old Tabaret, "was just asking myself what was likely to be the attitude assumed by the viscount at the moment of his arrest. Nothing is more important, according to my idea, than his manner of conducting himself then. Will he fly into a passion? Will he attempt to intimidate the agents? Will he threaten to turn them out of the house? These are generally the tactics of titled criminals. My opinion, however, is, that he will remain perfectly cool. He will declare himself the victim of a misunderstanding, and insist upon an immediate interview with the investigating magistrate. Once that is accorded him, he will explain everything very quickly."

The old fellow spoke of matters of speculation in such a tone of assurance that M. Daburon was unable to repress a smile.

"We have not got as far as that yet," said he.

"But we shall, in a few hours," replied M. Tabaret quickly. "I presume you will order young M. de Commarin's arrest at daybreak."

THE LEROUGE CASE

The magistrate trembled, like the patient who sees the surgeon deposit his case of instruments upon the table on entering the room.

The moment for action had come. He felt now what a distance lies between a mental decision and the physical action required to execute it.

"You are prompt, M. Tabaret," said he; "you recognize no obstacles."

"None, having ascertained the criminal. Who else can have committed this assassination? Who but he had an interest in silencing Widow Lerouge, in suppressing her testimony, in destroying her papers? He, and only he. Poor Noel! who is as dull as honesty, warned him, and he acted. Should we fail to establish his guilt, he will remain de Commarin more than ever; and my young barrister will be Noel Gerdy to the grave."

"Yes, but—"

The old man fixed his eyes upon the magistrate with a look of astonishment.

"You see, then, some difficulties, sir?" he asked.

"Most decidedly!" replied M. Daburon. "This is a matter demanding the utmost circumspection. In cases like the present, one must not strike until the blow is sure, and we have but presumptions. Suppose we are mistaken. Justice, unhappily, cannot repair her errors. Her hand once unjustly placed upon a man, leaves an imprint of dishonour that can never be effaced. She may perceive her error, and proclaim it aloud, but in vain! Public opinion, absurd and idiotic, will not pardon the man guilty of being suspected."

It was with a sinking heart that the old fellow listened to these remarks. He would not be withheld by such paltry considerations.

"Our suspicions are well grounded," continued the magistrate. "But, should they lead us into error, our precipitation would be a terrible misfortune for this young man, to say nothing of the effect it would have in abridging the authority and dignity of justice, of weakening the respect which constitutes her power. Such a mistake would call for discussion, provoke examination, and awaken distrust, at an epoch in our history when all minds are but too much disposed to defy the constituted authorities."

He leaned upon the table, and appeared to reflect profoundly.

"I have no luck," thought old Tabaret. "I have to do with a trembler. When he should act, he makes speeches; instead of signing warrants, he propounds theories. He is astounded at my discovery, and is not equal to the situation. Instead of being delighted by my appearance with the news of our success, he would have given a twenty-franc piece, I dare say, to have been left undisturbed. Ah! he would very willingly have the little fishes in his net, but the big ones frighten him. The big fishes are dangerous, and he prefers to let them swim away."

"Perhaps," said M. Daburon, aloud, "it will suffice to issue a search-warrant, and a summons for the appearance of the accused."

"Then all is lost!" cried old Tabaret.

"And why, pray?"

"Because we are opposed by a criminal of marked ability. A most providential accident has placed us upon his track. If we give him time to breathe, he will escape."

THE LEROUGE CASE

The only answer was an inclination of the head, which M. Daburon may have intended for a sign of assent.

"It is evident," continued the old fellow, "that our adversary has foreseen everything, absolutely everything, even the possibility of suspicion attaching to one in his high position. Oh! his precautions are all taken. If you are satisfied with demanding his appearance, he is saved. He will appear before you as tranquilly as your clerk, as unconcerned as if he came to arrange the preliminaries of a duel. He will present you with a magnificent /alibi/, an /alibi/ that can not be gainsayed. He will show you that he passed the evening and the night of Tuesday with personages of the highest rank. In short, his little machine will be so cleverly constructed, so nicely arranged, all its little wheels will play so well, that there will be nothing left for you but to open the door and usher him out with the most humble apologies. The only means of securing conviction is to surprise the miscreant by a rapidity against which it is impossible he can be on his guard. Fall upon him like a thunder-clap, arrest him as he wakes, drag him hither while yet pale with astonishment, and interrogate him at once. Ah! I wish I were an investigating magistrate."

Old Tabaret stopped short, frightened at the idea that he had been wanting in respect; but M. Daburon showed no sign of being offended.

"Proceed," said he, in a tone of encouragement, "proceed."

"Suppose, then," continued the detective, "I am the investigating magistrate. I cause my man to be arrested, and, twenty minutes later, he is standing before me. I do not amuse myself by putting questions to him, more or less subtle. No, I go straight to the mark. I overwhelm him at once by the weight of my certainty, prove to him so clearly that I know everything, that he must surrender, seeing no chance of escape. I should say to him, 'My good man, you bring me an /alibi/; it is very well; but I am acquainted with that system of defence. It will not do with me. I know all about the clocks that don't keep proper time, and all the people who never lost sight of you. In the meantime, this is what you did. At twenty minutes past eight, you slipped away adroitly; at thirty-five minutes past eight, you took the train at the St Lazare station; at nine o'clock, you alighted at the station at Rueil, and took the road to La Jonchere; at a quarter past nine, you knocked at the window-shutter of Widow Lerouge's cottage. You were admitted. You asked for something to eat, and, above all, something to drink. At twenty minutes past nine, you planted the well-sharpened end of a foil between her shoulders. You killed her! You then overturned everything in the house, and burned certain documents of importance; after which, you tied up in a napkin all the valuables you could find, and carried them off, to lead the police to believe the murder was the work of a robber. You locked the door, and threw away the key. Arrived at the Seine, you threw the bundle into the water, then hurried off to the railway station on foot, and at eleven o'clock you reappeared amongst your friends. Your game was well played; but you omitted to provide against two adversaries, a detective, not easily deceived, named Tiraclair, and another still more clever, named chance. Between them, they have got the better of you. Moreover, you were foolish to wear such small boots, and to keep on your lavender kid gloves, besides embarrassing yourself with a silk hat and an umbrella. Now confess your guilt, for it is the only thing left you to do, and I will give you permission to smoke in your dungeon some of those excellent trabucos you are so fond of, and which you always smoke with an amber mouthpiece.'"

During this speech, M. Tabaret had gained at least a couple of inches in height, so great was his enthusiasm. He looked at the magistrate, as if expecting a smile of approbation.

"Yes," continued he, after taking breath, "I would say that, and nothing else; and, unless this man is a hundred times stronger than I suppose him to be, unless he is made of bronze, of marble, or of steel, he would fall at my feet and avow his guilt."

"But supposing he were of bronze," said M. Daburon, "and did not fall at your feet, what would you do next?"

The question evidently embarrassed the old fellow.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Pshaw!" stammered he; "I don't know; I would see; I would search; but he would confess."

After a prolonged silence, M. Daburon took a pen, and hurriedly wrote a few lines.

"I surrender," said he. "M. Albert de Commarin shall be arrested; that is settled. The different formalities to be gone through and the perquisitions will occupy some time, which I wish to employ in interrogating the Count de Commarin, the young man's father, and your friend M. Noel Gerdy, the young barrister. The letters he possesses are indispensable to me."

At the name of Gerdy, M. Tabaret's face assumed a most comical expression of uneasiness.

"Confound it," cried he, "the very thing I most dreaded."

"What?" asked M. Daburon.

"The necessity for the examination of those letters. Noel will discover my interference. He will despise me: he will fly from me, when he knows that Tabaret and Tiraclair sleep in the same nightcap. Before eight days are past, my oldest friends will refuse to shake hands with me, as if it were not an honour to serve justice. I shall be obliged to change my residence, and assume a false name."

He almost wept, so great was his annoyance. M. Daburon was touched.

"Reassure yourself, my dear M. Tabaret," said he. "I will manage that your adopted son, your Benjamin, shall know nothing. I will lead him to believe I have reached him by means of the widow's papers."

The old fellow seized the magistrate's hand in a transport of gratitude, and carried it to his lips. Oh! thanks, sir, a thousand thanks! I should like to be permitted to witness the arrest; and I shall be glad to assist at the perquisitions."

"I intended to ask you to do so, M. Tabaret," answered the magistrate.

The lamps paled in the gray dawn of the morning; already the rumbling of vehicles was heard; Paris was awaking.

"I have no time to lose," continued M. Daburon, "if I would have all my measures well taken. I must at once see the public prosecutor, whether he is up or not. I shall go direct from his house to the Palais de Justice, and be there before eight o'clock; and I desire, M. Tabaret, that you will there await my orders."

The old fellow bowed his thanks and was about to leave, when the magistrate's servant appeared.

"Here is a note, sir," said he, "which a gendarme has just brought from Bougival. He waits an answer."

"Very well," replied M. Daburon. "Ask the man to have some refreshment; at least offer him a glass of wine."

He opened the envelope. "Ah!" he cried, "a letter from Gevrol;" and he read:

"To the investigating magistrate. Sir, I have the honour to inform you, that I am on the track of the man with the earrings. I heard of him at a wine shop, which he entered on Sunday morning, before going to Widow Lerouge's cottage. He bought, and paid for two litres of wine; then, suddenly striking his forehead, he cried, "Old fool! to forget that to-morrow is the boat's fete day!" and immediately called for three more litres. According to the almanac the boat must be called the Saint-Martin. I have also learned that she was laden with grain. I write to the Prefecture at the same time as I write to you, that inquiries may be made at Paris and Rouen. He will be found at

THE LEROUGE CASE

one of those places. I am in waiting, sir, etc."

"Poor Gevrol!" cried old Tabaret, bursting with laughter. "He sharpens his sabre, and the battle is over. Are you not going to put a stop to his inquiries, sir?"

"No; certainly not," answered M. Daburon; "to neglect the slightest clue often leads one into error. Who can tell what light we may receive from this mariner?"

VIII.

ON the same day that the crime of La Jonchere was discovered, and precisely at the hour that M. Tabaret made his memorable examination in the victim's chamber, the Viscount Albert de Commarin entered his carriage, and proceeded to the Northern railway station, to meet his father.

The young man was very pale: his pinched features, his dull eyes, his blanched lips, in fact his whole appearance denoted either overwhelming fatigue or unusual sorrow. All the servants had observed, that, during the past five days, their young master had not been in his ordinary condition: he spoke but little, ate almost nothing, and refused to see any visitors. His valet noticed that this singular change dated from the visit, on Sunday morning, of a certain M. Noel Gerdy, who had been closeted with him for three hours in the library.

The Viscount, gay as a lark until the arrival of this person, had, from the moment of his departure, the appearance of a man at the point of death. When setting forth to meet his father, the viscount appeared to suffer so acutely that M. Lubin, his valet, entreated him not to go out; suggesting that it would be more prudent to retire to his room, and call in the doctor.

But the Count de Commarin was exacting on the score of filial duty, and would overlook the worst of youthful indiscretions sooner than what he termed a want of reverence. He had announced his intended arrival by telegraph, twenty-four hours in advance; therefore the house was expected to be in perfect readiness to receive him, and the absence of Albert at the railway station would have been resented as a flagrant omission of duty.

The viscount had been but five minutes in the waiting-room, when the bell announced the arrival of the train. Soon the doors leading on to the platform were opened, and the travelers crowded in. The throng beginning to thin a little, the count appeared, followed by a servant, who carried a travelling pelisse lined with rare and valuable fur.

The Count de Commarin looked a good ten years less than his age. His beard and hair, yet abundant, were scarcely gray. He was tall and muscular, held himself upright, and carried his head high. His appearance was noble, his movements easy. His regular features presented a study to the physiognomist, all expressing easy, careless good nature, even to the handsome, smiling mouth; but in his eyes flashed the fiercest and the most arrogant pride. This contrast revealed the secret of his character. Imbued quite as deeply with aristocratic prejudice as the Marchioness d'Arlange, he had progressed with his century or at least appeared to have done so. As fully as the marchioness, he held in contempt all who were not noble; but his disdain expressed itself in a different fashion. The marchioness proclaimed her contempt loudly and coarsely; the count had kept eyes and ears open and had seen and heard a good deal. She was stupid, and without a shade of common sense. He was witty and sensible, and possessed enlarged views of life and politics. She dreamed of the return of the absurd traditions of a former age; he hoped for things within the power of events to bring forth. He was sincerely persuaded that the nobles of France would yet recover slowly and silently, but surely, all their lost power, with its prestige and influence.

In a word, the count was the flattered portrait of his class; the marchioness its caricature. It should be added, that M. de Commarin knew how to divest himself of his crushing urbanity in the company of his equals. There he

THE LEROUGE CASE

recovered his true character, haughty, self-sufficient, and intractable, enduring contradiction pretty much as a wild horse the application of the spur. In his own house, he was a despot.

Perceiving his father, Albert advanced towards him. They shook hands and embraced with an air as noble as ceremonious, and, in less than a minute, had exchanged all the news that had transpired during the count's absence. Then only did M. de Commarin perceive the alteration in his son's face.

"You are unwell, viscount," said he.

"Oh, no, sir," answered Albert, laconically.

The count uttered "Ah!" accompanied by a certain movement of the head, which, with him, expressed perfect incredulity; then, turning to his servant, he gave him some orders briefly.

"Now," resumed he, "let us go quickly to the house. I am in haste to feel at home; and I am hungry, having had nothing to-day, but some detestable broth, at I know not what way station."

M. de Commarin had returned to Paris in a very bad temper, his journey to Austria had not brought the results he had hoped for. To crown his dissatisfaction, he had rested, on his homeward way, at the chateau of an old friend, with whom he had had so violent a discussion that they had parted without shaking hands. The count was hardly seated in his carriage before he entered upon the subject of this disagreement.

"I have quarrelled with the Duke de Sairmeuse," said he to his son.

"That seems to me to happen whenever you meet," answered Albert, without intending any raillery.

"True," said the count: "but this is serious. I passed four days at his country-seat, in a state of inconceivable exasperation. He has entirely forfeited my esteem. Sairmeuse has sold his estate of Gondresy, one of the finest in the north of France. He has cut down the timber, and put up to auction the old chateau, a princely dwelling, which is to be converted into a sugar refinery; all this for the purpose, as he says, of raising money to increase his income!"

"And was that the cause of your rupture?" inquired Albert, without much surprise.

"Certainly it was! Do you not think it a sufficient one?"

"But, sir, you know the duke has a large family, and is far from rich."

"What of that? A French noble who sells his land commits an unworthy act. He is guilty of treason against his order!"

"Oh, sir," said Albert, deprecatingly.

"I said treason!" continued the count. "I maintain the word. Remember well, viscount, power has been, and always will be, on the side of wealth, especially on the side of those who hold the soil. The men of '93 well understood this principle, and acted upon it. By impoverishing the nobles, they destroyed their prestige more effectually than by abolishing their titles. A prince dismounted, and without footmen, is no more than any one else. The Minister of July, who said to the people, 'Make yourselves rich,' was not a fool. He gave them the magic formula for power. But they have not the sense to understand it. They want to go too fast. They launch into speculations, and become rich, it is true; but in what? Stocks, bonds, paper,—rags, in short. It is smoke they are locking in their coffers. They prefer to invest in merchandise, which pays eight or ten per cent, to investing in

THE LEROUGE CASE

vines or corn which will return but three. The peasant is not so foolish. From the moment he owns a piece of ground the size of a handkerchief, he wants to make it as large as a tablecloth. He is slow as the oxen he ploughs with, but as patient, as tenacious, and as obstinate. He goes directly to his object, pressing firmly against the yoke; and nothing can stop or turn him aside. He knows that stocks may rise or fall, fortunes be won or lost on 'change; but the land always remains,—the real standard of wealth. To become landholders, the peasant starves himself, wears sabots in winter; and the imbeciles who laugh at him will be astonished by and by when he makes his '93, and the peasant becomes a baron in power if not in name."

"I do not understand the application," said the viscount.

"You do not understand? Why, what the peasant is doing is what the nobles ought to have done! Ruined, their duty was to reconstruct their fortunes. Commerce is interdicted to us; be it so: agriculture remains. Instead of grumbling uselessly during the half-century, instead of running themselves into debt, in the ridiculous attempt to support an appearance of grandeur, they ought to have retreated to their provinces, shut themselves up in their chateaux; there worked, economised, denied themselves, as the peasant is doing, purchased the land piece by piece. Had they taken this course, they would to-day possess France. Their wealth would be enormous; for the value of land rises year after year. I have, without effort, doubled my fortune in thirty years, Blauville, which cost my father a hundred crowns in 1817, is worth to-day more than a million: so that, when I hear the nobles complain, I shrug the shoulder. Who but they are to blame? They impoverish themselves from year to year. They sell their land to the peasants. Soon they will be reduced to beggary, and their escutcheons. What consoles me is, that the peasant, having become the proprietor of our domains will then be all-powerful, and will yoke to his chariot wheels these traders in scrip and stocks, whom he hates as much as I execrate them myself."

The carriage at this moment stopped in the court-yard of the de Commarin mansion, after having described that perfect half-circle, the glory of coachmen who preserve the old tradition.

The count alighted first, and leaning upon his son's arm, ascended the steps of the grand entrance. In the immense vestibule, nearly all the servants, dressed in rich liveries, stood in a line. The count gave them a glance, in passing, as an officer might his soldiers on parade, and proceeded to his apartment on the first floor, above the reception rooms.

Never was there a better regulated household than that of the Count de Commarin. He possessed in a high degree the art, more rare than is generally supposed, of commanding an army of servants. The number of his domestics caused him neither inconvenience nor embarrassment. They were necessary to him. So perfect was the organisation of this household, that its functions were performed like those of a machine, —without noise, variation, or effort.

Thus when the count returned from his journey, the sleeping hotel was awakened as if by the spell of an enchanter. Each servant was at his post; and the occupations, interrupted during the past six weeks, resumed without confusion. As the count was known to have passed the day on the road, the dinner was served in advance of the usual hour. All the establishment, even to the lowest scullion, represented the spirit of the first article of the rules of the house, "Servants are not to execute orders, but anticipate them."

M. de Commarin had hardly removed the traces of his journey, and changed his dress, when his butler announced that the dinner was served.

He went down at once; and father and son met upon the threshold of the dining-room. This was a large apartment, with a very high ceiling, as were all the rooms of the ground floor, and was most magnificently furnished. The count was not only a great eater, but was vain of his enormous appetite. He was fond of recalling the names of great men, noted for their capacity of stomach. Charles V. devoured mountains of viands. Louis XIV. swallowed at each repast as much as six ordinary men would eat at a meal He pretended that one can almost

THE LEROUGE CASE

judge of men's qualities by their digestive capacities; he compared them to lamps, whose power of giving light is in proportion to the oil they consume.

During the first half hour, the count and his son both remained silent. M. de Commarin ate conscientiously, not perceiving or not caring to notice that Albert ate nothing, but merely sat at the table as if to countenance him. The old nobleman's ill-humour and volubility returned with the dessert, apparently increased by a Burgundy of which he was particularly fond, and of which he drank freely.

He was partial, moreover, to an after dinner argument, professing a theory that moderate discussion is a perfect digestive. A letter which had been delivered to him on his arrival, and which he had found time to glance over, gave him at once a subject and a point of departure.

"I arrived home but an hour ago;" said he, "and I have already received a homily from Broisfresnay."

"He writes a great deal," observed Albert.

"Too much; he consumes himself in ink. He mentions a lot more of his ridiculous projects and vain hopes, and he mentions a dozen names of men of his own stamp who are his associates. On my word of honour, they seem to have lost their senses! They talk of lifting the world, only they want a lever and something to rest it on. It makes me die with laughter!"

For ten minutes the count continued to discharge a volley of abuse and sarcasm against his best friends, without seeming to see that a great many of their foibles which he ridiculed were also a little his own.

"If," continued he more seriously,—"if they only possessed a little confidence in themselves, if they showed the least audacity! But no! they count upon others to do for them what they ought to do for themselves. In short, their proceedings are a series of confessions of helplessness, of premature declarations of failure."

The coffee having been served, the count made a sign, and the servants left the room.

"No," continued he, "I see but one hope for the French aristocracy, but one plank of salvation, one good little law, establishing the right of primogeniture."

"You will never obtain it."

"You think not? Would you then oppose such a measure, viscount?"

Albert knew by experience what dangerous ground his father was approaching, and remained silent.

"Let us put it, then, that I dream of the impossible!" resumed the count. "Then let the nobles do their duty. Let all the younger sons and the daughters of our great families forego their rights, by giving up the entire patrimony to the first-born for five generations, contenting themselves each with a couple of thousand francs a year. By that means great fortunes can be reconstructed, and families, instead of being divided by a variety of interests, become united by one common desire."

"Unfortunately," objected the viscount, "the time is not favorable to such devotedness."

"I know it, sir," replied the count quickly; "and in my own house I have the proof of it. I, your father, have conjured you to give up all idea of marrying the granddaughter of that old fool, the Marchioness d'Arlange. And all to no purpose; for I have at last been obliged to yield to your wishes."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Father—" Albert commenced.

"It is well," interrupted the count. "You have my word; but remember my prediction: you will strike a fatal blow at our house. You will be one of the largest proprietors in France; but have half a dozen children, and they will be hardly rich. If they also have as many, you will probably see your grandchildren in poverty!"

"You put all at the worst, father."

"Without doubt: it is the only means of pointing out the danger, and averting the evil. You talk of your life's happiness. What is that? A true noble thinks of his name above all. Mademoiselle d'Arange is very pretty, and very attractive; but she is penniless. I had found an heiress for you."

"Whom I should never love!"

"And what of that? She would have brought you four millions in her apron,—more than the kings of to-day give their daughters. Besides which she had great expectations."

The discussion upon this subject would have been interminable, had Albert taken an active share in it; but his thoughts were far away. He answered from time to time so as not to appear absolutely dumb, and then only a few syllables. This absence of opposition was more irritating to the count than the most obstinate contradiction. He therefore directed his utmost efforts to excite his son to argue.

However he was vainly prodigal of words, and unsparing in unpleasant allusions, so that at last he fairly lost his temper, and, on receiving a laconic reply, he burst forth: "Upon my word, the butler's son would say the same as you! What blood have you in your veins? You are more like one of the people than a Viscount de Commarin!"

There are certain conditions of mind in which the least conversation jars upon the nerves. During the last hour, Albert had suffered an intolerable punishment. The patience with which he had armed himself at last escaped him.

"Well, sir," he answered, "if I resemble one of the people, there are perhaps good reasons for it."

The glance with which the viscount accompanied his speech was so expressive that the count experienced a sudden shock. All his animation forsook him, and in a hesitating voice, he asked: "What is that you say, viscount?"

Albert had no sooner uttered the sentence than he regretted his precipitation, but he had gone too far to stop.

"Sir," he replied with some embarrassment, "I have to acquaint you with some important matters. My honour, yours, the honour of our house, are involved. I intended postponing this conversation till to-morrow, not desiring to trouble you on the evening of your return. However, as you wish me to explain, I will do so."

The count listened with ill-concealed anxiety. He seemed to have divined what his son was about to say, and was terrified at himself for having divined it.

"Believe me, sir," continued Albert slowly, "whatever may have been your acts, my voice will never be raised to reproach you. Your constant kindness to me—"

M. de Commarin held up his hand. "A truce to preambles; let me have the facts without phrases," said he sternly.

Albert was some time without answering, he hesitated how to commence.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Sir," said he at length, "during your absence, I have read all your correspondence with Madame Gerdy. All!" added he, emphasising the word, already so significant.

The count, as though stung by a serpent, started up with such violence that he overturned his chair.

"Not another word!" cried he in a terrible voice. "I forbid you to speak!" But he no doubt soon felt ashamed of his violence, for he quietly raised his chair, and resumed in a tone which he strove to render light and rallying: "Who will hereafter refuse to believe in presentiments? A couple of hours ago, on seeing your pale face at the railway station, I felt that you had learned more or less of this affair. I was sure of it."

There was a long silence. With one accord, father and son avoided letting their eyes meet, lest they might encounter glances too eloquent to bear at so painful a moment.

"You were right, sir," continued the count, "our honour is involved. It is important that we should decide on our future conduct without delay. Will you follow me to my room?"

He rang the bell, and a footman appeared almost immediately.

"Neither the viscount nor I am at home to any one," said M. de Commarin, "no matter whom."

IX.

THE revelation which had just taken place, irritated much more than it surprised the Count de Commarin. For twenty years, he had been constantly expecting to see the truth brought to light. He knew that there can be no secret so carefully guarded that it may not by some chance escape; and his had been known to four people, three of whom were still living.

He had not forgotten that he had been imprudent enough to trust it to paper, knowing all the while that it ought never to have been written. How was it that he, a prudent diplomat, a statesman, full of precaution, had been so foolish? How was it that he had allowed this fatal correspondence to remain in existence! Why had he not destroyed, at no matter what cost, these overwhelming proofs, which sooner or later might be used against him? Such imprudence could only have arisen from an absurd passion, blind and insensible, even to madness.

So long as he was Valerie's lover, the count never thought of asking the return of his letters from his beloved accomplice. If the idea had occurred to him, he would have repelled it as an insult to the character of his angel. What reason could he have had to suspect her discretion? None. He would have been much more likely to have supposed her desirous of removing every trace, even the slightest, of what had taken place. Was it not her son who had received the benefits of the deed, who had usurped another's name and fortune?

When eight years after, believing her to be unfaithful, the count had put an end to the connection which had given him so much happiness he thought of obtaining possession of this unhappy correspondence. But he knew not how to do so. A thousand reasons prevented his moving in the matter.

The principal one was, that he did not wish to see this woman, once so dearly loved. He did not feel sufficiently sure either of his anger or of his firmness. Could he, without yielding, resist the tearful pleading of those eyes, which had so long held complete sway over him?

To look again upon this mistress of his youth would, he feared, result in his forgiving her; and he had been too cruelly wounded in his pride and in his affection to admit the idea of a reconciliation.

THE LEROUGE CASE

On the other hand, to obtain the letters through a third party was entirely out of the question. He abstained, then, from all action, postponing it indefinitely. "I will go to her," said he to himself; "but not until I have so torn her from my heart that she will have become indifferent to me. I will not gratify her with the sight of my grief."

So months and years passed on; and finally he began to say and believe that it was too late. And for now more than twenty years, he had never passed a day without cursing his inexcusable folly. Never had he been able to forget that above his head a danger more terrible than the sword of Damocles hung, suspended by a thread, which the slightest accident might break.

And now that thread had broken. Often, when considering the possibility of such a catastrophe, he had asked himself how he should avert it? He had formed and rejected many plans: he had deluded himself, like all men of imagination, with innumerable chimerical projects, and now he found himself quite unprepared.

Albert stood respectfully, while his father sat in his great armorial chair, just beneath the large frame in which the genealogical tree of the illustrious family of Rheteau de Commarin spread its luxuriant branches. The old gentleman completely concealed the cruel apprehensions which oppressed him. He seemed neither irritated nor dejected; but his eyes expressed a haughtiness more than usually disdainful, and a self-reliance full of contempt.

"Now viscount," he began in a firm voice, "explain yourself. I need say nothing to you of the position of a father, obliged to blush before his son; you understand it, and will feel for me. Let us spare each other, and try to be calm. Tell me, how did you obtain your knowledge of this correspondence?"

Albert had had time to recover himself, and prepare for the present struggle, as he had impatiently waited four days for this interview.

The difficulty he experienced in uttering the first words had now given place to a dignified and proud demeanor. He expressed himself clearly and forcibly, without losing himself in those details which in serious matters needlessly defer the real point at issue.

"Sir," he replied, "on Sunday morning, a young man called here, stating that he had business with me of the utmost importance. I received him. He then revealed to me that I, alas! am only your natural son, substituted through your affection, for the legitimate child borne you by Madame de Commarin."

"And did you not have this man kicked out of doors?" exclaimed the count.

"No, sir. I was about to answer him very sharply, of course; but, presenting me with a packet of letters, he begged me to read them before replying."

"Ah!" cried M. de Commarin, "you should have thrown them into the fire, for there was a fire, I suppose? You held them in your hands; and they still exist! Why was I not there?"

"Sir!" said Albert, reproachfully. And, recalling the position Noel had occupied against the mantelpiece, and the manner in which he stood, he added,— "Even if the thought had occurred to me, it was impracticable. Besides, at the first glance, I recognised your handwriting. I therefore took the letters, and read them."

"And then?"

"And then, sir, I returned the correspondence to the young man, and asked for a delay of eight days; not to think over it myself—there was no need of that,—but because I judged an interview with you indispensable. Now, therefore, I beseech you, tell me whether this substitution really did take place."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Certainly it did," replied the count violently, "yes, certainly. You know that it did, for you have read what I wrote to Madame Gerdy, your mother."

Albert had foreseen, had expected this reply; but it crushed him nevertheless.

There are misfortunes so great, that one must constantly think of them to believe in their existence. This flinching, however, lasted but an instant.

"Pardon me, sir," he replied. "I was almost convinced; but I had not received a formal assurance of it. All the letters that I read spoke distinctly of your purpose, detailed your plan minutely; but not one pointed to, or in any way confirmed, the execution of your project."

The count gazed at his son with a look of intense surprise. He recollected distinctly all the letters; and he could remember, that, in writing to Valerie, he had over and over again rejoiced at their success, thanking her for having acted in accordance with his wishes.

"You did not go to the end of them, then, viscount," he said, "you did not read them all?"

"Every line, sir, and with an attention that you may well understand. The last letter shown me simply announced to Madame Gerdy the arrival of Claudine Lerouge, the nurse who was charged with accomplishing the substitution. I know nothing beyond that."

"These proofs amount to nothing," muttered the count. "A man may form a plan, cherish it for a long time, and at the last moment abandon it; it often happens so."

He reproached himself for having answered so hastily. Albert had had only serious suspicions, and he had changed them to certainty. What stupidity!

"There can be no possible doubt," he said to himself; "Valerie has destroyed the most conclusive letters, those which appeared to her the most dangerous, those I wrote after the substitution. But why has she preserved these others, compromising enough in themselves? and why, after having preserved them, has she let them go out of her possession?"

Without moving, Albert awaited a word from the count. What would it be? No doubt, the old nobleman was at that moment deciding what he should do.

"Perhaps she is dead!" said M. de Commarin aloud.

And at the thought that Valerie was dead, without his having again seen her, he started painfully. His heart, after more than twenty years of voluntary separation, still suffered, so deeply rooted was this first love of his youth. He had cursed her; at this moment he pardoned her. True, she had deceived him; but did he not owe to her the only years of happiness he had ever known? Had she not formed all the poetry of his youth? Had he experienced, since leaving her, one single hour of joy or forgetfulness? In his present frame of mind, his heart retained only happy memories, like a vase which, once filled with precious perfumes, retains the odour until it is destroyed.

"Poor woman!" he murmured.

He sighed deeply. Three or four times his eyelids trembled, as if a tear were about to fall. Albert watched him with anxious curiosity. This was the first time since the viscount had grown to man's estate that he had surprised in his father's countenance other emotion than ambition or pride, triumphant or defeated. But M. de Commarin was not the man to yield long to sentiment.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"You have not told me, viscount," he said, "who sent you that messenger of misfortune."

"He came in person, sir, not wishing, he told me to mix any others up in this sad affair. The young man was no other than he whose place I have occupied,—your legitimate son, M. Noel Gerdy himself."

"Yes," said the count in a low tone, "Noel, that is his name, I remember." And then, with evident hesitation, he added: "Did he speak to you of his—of your mother?"

"Scarcely, sir. He only told me that he came unknown to her; that he had accidentally discovered the secret which he revealed to me."

M. de Commarin asked nothing further. There was more for him to learn. He remained for some time deep in thought. The decisive moment had come; and he saw but one way to escape.

"Come, viscount," he said, in a tone so affectionate that Albert was astonished, "do not stand; sit down here by me, and let us discuss this matter. Let us unite our efforts to shun, if possible, this great misfortune. Confide in me, as a son should in his father. Have you thought of what is to be done? have you formed any determination?"

"It seems to me, sir, that hesitation is impossible."

"In what way?"

"My duty, father, is very plain. Before your legitimate son, I ought to give way without a murmur, if not without regret. Let him come. I am ready to yield to him everything that I have so long kept from him without a suspicion of the truth—his father's love, his fortune and his name."

At this most praiseworthy reply, the old nobleman could scarcely preserve the calmness he had recommended to his son in the earlier part of the interview. His face grew purple; and he struck the table with his fist more furiously than he had ever done in his life. He, usually so guarded, so decorous on all occasions, uttered a volley of oaths that would not have done discredit to an old cavalry officer.

"And I tell you, sir, that this dream of yours shall never take place. No; that it sha'n't. I swear it. I promise you, whatever happens, understand, that things shall remain as they are; because it is my will. You are Viscount de Commarin, and Viscount de Commarin you shall remain, in spite of yourself, if necessary. You shall retain the title to your death, or at least to mine; for never, while I live, shall your absurd idea be carried out."

"But, sir," began Albert, timidly.

"You are very daring to interrupt me while I am speaking, sir," exclaimed the count. "Do I not know all your objections beforehand? You are going to tell me that it is a revolting injustice, a wicked robbery. I confess it, and grieve over it more than you possibly can. Do you think that I now for the first time repent of my youthful folly? For twenty years, sir, I have lamented my true son; for twenty years I have cursed the wickedness of which he is the victim. And yet I learnt how to keep silence, and to hide the sorrow and remorse which have covered my pillow with thorns. In a single instant, your senseless yielding would render my long sufferings of no avail. No, I will never permit it!"

The count read a reply on his son's lips: he stopped him with a withering glance.

"Do you think," he continued, "that I have never wept over the thought of my legitimate son passing his life struggling for a competence? Do you think that I have never felt a burning desire to repair the wrong done him? There have been times, sir, when I would have given half of my fortune simply to embrace that child of a wife too

THE LEROUGE CASE

tardily appreciated. The fear of casting a shadow of suspicion upon your birth prevented me. I have sacrificed myself to the great name I bear. I received it from my ancestors without a stain. May you hand it down to your children equally spotless! Your first impulse was a worthy one, generous and noble; but you must forget it. Think of the scandal, if our secret should be disclosed to the public gaze. Can you not foresee the joy of our enemies, of that herd of upstarts which surrounds us? I shudder at the thought of the odium and the ridicule which would cling to our name. Too many families already have stains upon their escutcheons; I will have none on mine."

M. de Commarin remained silent for several minutes, during which Albert did not dare say a word, so much had he been accustomed since infancy to respect the least wish of the terrible old gentleman.

"There is no possible way out of it," continued the count. "Can I discard you to-morrow, and present this Noel as my son, saying, 'Excuse me, but there has been a slight mistake; this one is the viscount?' And then the tribunals will get hold of it. What does it matter who is named Benoit, Durand, or Bernard? But, when one is called Commarin, even but for a single day, one must retain that name through life. The same moral does not do for everyone; because we have not the same duties to perform. In our position, errors are irreparable. Take courage, then, and show yourself worthy of the name you bear. The storm is upon you; raise your head to meet it."

Albert's impassibility contributed not a little to increase M. de Commarin's irritation. Firm in an unchangeable resolution, the viscount listened like one fulfilling a duty: and his face reflected no emotion. The count saw that he was not shaken.

"What have you to reply?" he asked.

"It seems to me sir, that you have no idea of all the dangers which I foresee. It is difficult to master the revolts of conscience."

"Indeed!" interrupted the count contemptuously; "your conscience revolts, does it? It has chosen its time badly. Your scruples come too late. So long as you saw that your inheritance consisted of an illustrious title and a dozen or so of millions, it pleased you. To-day the name appears to you laden with a heavy fault, a crime, if you will; and your conscience revolts. Renounce this folly. Children, sir, are accountable to their fathers; and they should obey them. Willing or unwilling, you must be my accomplice; willing or unwilling, you must bear the burden, as I have borne it. And, however much you may suffer, be assured your sufferings can never approach what I have endured for so many years."

"Ah, sir!" cried Albert, "it is then I, the dispossessor, who has made this trouble? is it not, on the contrary, the dispossessed! It is not I who you have to convince, it is M. Noel Gerdy."

"Noel!" repeated the count.

"Your legitimate son, yes, sir. You act as if the issue of this unhappy affair depended solely upon my will. Do you then, imagine that M. Gerdy will be so easily disposed of, so easily silenced? And, if he should raise his voice, do you hope to move him by the considerations you have just mentioned?"

"I do not fear him."

"Then you are wrong, sir, permit me to tell you. Suppose for a moment that this young man has a soul sufficiently noble to relinquish his claim upon your rank and your fortune. Is there not now the accumulated rancour of years to urge him to oppose you? He cannot help feeling a fierce resentment for the horrible injustice of which he has been the victim. He must passionately long for vengeance, or rather reparation."

"He has no proofs."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"He has your letters, sir."

"They are not decisive, you yourself have told me so."

"That is true, sir; and yet they convinced me, who have an interest in not being convinced. Besides, if he needs witnesses, he will find them."

"Who? Yourself, viscount?"

"Yourself, sir. The day when he wishes it, you will betray us. Suppose you were summoned before a tribunal, and that there, under oath, you should be required to speak the truth, what answer would you make?"

M. de Commarin's face darkened at this very natural supposition. He hesitated, he whose honour was usually so great.

"I would save the name of my ancestors," he said at last.

Albert shook his head doubtfully. "At the price of a lie, my father," he said. "I never will believe it. But let us suppose even that. He will then call Madame Gerdy."

"Oh, I will answer for her!" cried the count, "her interests are the same as ours. If necessary, I will see her. Yes," he added with an effort, "I will call on her, I will speak to her; and I will guarantee that she will not betray us."

"And Claudine," continued the young man; "will she be silent, too?"

"For money, yes; and I will give her whatever she asks."

"And you would trust, father, to a paid silence, as if one could ever be sure of a purchased conscience? What is sold to you may be sold to another. A certain sum may close her mouth; a larger will open it."

"I will frighten her."

"You forget, father, that Claudine Lerouge was Noel Gerdy's nurse, that she takes an interest in his happiness, that she loves him. How do you know that he has not already secured her aid? She lives at Bougival. I went there, I remember, with you. No doubt, he sees her often; perhaps it is she who put him on the track of this correspondence. He spoke to me of her, as though he were sure of her testimony. He almost proposed my going to her for information."

"Alas!" cried the count, "why is not Claudine dead instead of my faithful Germain?"

"You see, sir," concluded Albert, "Claudine Lerouge would alone render all your efforts useless."

"Ah, no!" cried the count; "I shall find some expedient."

The obstinate old gentleman was not willing to give in to this argument, the very clearness of which blinded him. The pride of his blood paralyzed his usual practical good sense. To acknowledge that he was conquered humiliated him, and seemed to him unworthy of himself. He did not remember to have met during his long career an invincible resistance or an absolute impediment. He was like all men of imagination, who fall in love with their projects, and who expect them to succeed on all occasions, as if wishing hard was all that was necessary to change their dreams into realities."

THE LEROUGE CASE

Albert this time broke the silence, which threatened to be prolonged.

"I see, sir," he said, "that you fear, above all things, the publicity of this sad history; the possible scandal renders you desperate. But, unless we yield, the scandal will be terrible. There will be a trial which will be the talk of all Europe. The newspapers will print the facts, accompanied by heavens knows what comments of their own. Our name, however the trial results, will appear in all the papers of the world. This might be borne, if we were sure of succeeding; but we are bound to lose, my father, we shall lose. Then think of the exposure! think of the dishonour branded upon us by public opinion."

"I think," said the count, "that you can have neither respect nor affection for me, when you speak in that way."

"It is my duty, sir, to point out to you the evils I see threatening, and which there is yet time to shun. M. Noel Gerdy is your legitimate son, recognize him, acknowledge his just pretensions, and receive him. We can make the change very quietly. It is easy to account for it, through a mistake of the nurse, Claudine Lerouge, for instance. All parties being agreeable, there can be no trouble about it. What is to prevent the new Viscount de Commarin from quitting Paris, and disappearing for a time? He might travel about Europe for four or five years; by the end of that time, all will be forgotten, and no one will remember me."

M. de Commarin was not listening; he was deep in thought.

"But instead of contesting, viscount," he cried, "we might compromise. We may be able to purchase these letters. What does this young fellow want? A position and a fortune? I will give him both. I will make him as rich as he can wish. I will give him a million; if need be, two, three,—half of all I possess. With money, you see, much money—"

"Spare him, sir; he is your son."

"Unfortunately! and I wish him to the devil! I will see him, and he will agree to what I wish. I will prove to him the bad policy of the earthen pot struggling with the iron kettle; and, if he is not a fool, he will understand."

The count rubbed his hands while speaking. He was delighted with this brilliant plan of negotiation. It could not fail to result favorably. A crowd of arguments occurred to his mind in support of it. He would buy back again his lost rest.

But Albert did not seem to share his father's hopes, "You will perhaps think it unkind in me, sir," said he, sadly, "to dispel this last illusion of yours; but I must. Do not delude yourself with the idea of an amicable arrangement; the awakening will only be the more painful. I have seen M. Gerdy, my father, and he is not one, I assure you, to be intimidated. If there is an energetic will in the world, it is his. He is truly your son; and his expression, like yours, shows an iron resolution, that may be broken but never bent. I can still hear his voice trembling with resentment, while he spoke to me. I can still see the dark fire of his eyes. No, he will never accept a compromise. He will have all or nothing; and I cannot say that he is wrong. If you resist, he will attack you without the slightest consideration. Strong in his rights, he will cling to you with stubborn animosity. He will drag you from court to court; he will not stop short of utter defeat or complete triumph."

Accustomed to absolute obedience from his son, the old nobleman was astounded at this unexpected obstinacy.

"What is your object in saying all this?" he asked.

"It is this, sir. I should utterly despise myself, if I did not spare your old age this greatest of calamities. Your name does not belong to me; I will take my own. I am your natural son; I will give up my place to your legitimate son. Permit me to withdraw with at least the honour of having freely done my duty. Do not force me to wait till I am

THE LEROUGE CASE

driven out in disgrace."

"What!" cried the count, stunned, "you will abandon me? You refuse to help me, you turn against me, you recognize the rights of this man in spite of my wishes?"

Albert bowed his head. He was much moved, but still remained firm.

"My resolution is irrevocably taken," he replied. "I can never consent to despoil your son."

"Cruel, ungrateful boy!" cried M. de Commarin. His wrath was such, that, when he found he could do nothing by abuse, he passed at once to jeering. "But no," he continued, "you are great, you are noble, you are generous; you are acting after the most approved pattern of chivalry, viscount, I should say, my dear M. Gerdy; after the fashion of Plutarch's time! So you give up my name and my fortune, and you leave me. You will shake the dust from your shoes upon the threshold of my house; and you will go out into the world. I see only one difficulty in your way. How do you expect to live, my stoic philosopher? Have you a trade at your fingers' ends, like Jean Jacques Rousseau's Emile? Or, worthy M. Gerdy, have you learned economy from the four thousand francs a month I allow you for waxing your moustache? Perhaps you have made money on the Bourse! Then my name must have seemed very burdensome to you to bear, since you so eagerly introduced it into such a place! Has dirt, then, so great an attraction for you that you must jump from your carriage so quickly? Say, rather, that the company of my friends embarrasses you, and that you are anxious to go where you will be among your equals."

"I am very wretched, sir," replied Albert to this avalanche of insults, "and you would crush me!"

"You wretched! Well, whose fault is it? But let us get back to my question. How and on what will you live?"

"I am not so romantic as you are pleased to say, sir. I must confess that, as regards the future, I have counted upon your kindness. You are so rich, that five hundred thousand francs would not materially affect your fortune; and, on the interest of that sum, I could live quietly, if not happily."

"And suppose I refuse you this money?"

"I know you well enough, sir, to feel sure that you will not do so. You are too just to wish that I alone should expiate wrongs that are not of my making. Left to myself, I should at my present age have achieved a position. It is late for me to try and make one now; but I will do my best."

"Superb!" interrupted the count; "you are really superb! One never heard of such a hero of romance. What a character! But tell me, what do you expect from all this astonishing disinterestedness?"

"Nothing, sir."

The count shrugged his shoulders, looked sarcastically at his son, and observed: "The compensation is very slight. And you expect me to believe all this! No, sir, mankind is not in the habit of indulging in such fine actions for its pleasure alone. You must have some reason for acting so grandly; some reason which I fail to see."

"None but what I have already told you."

"Therefore it is understood you intend to relinquish everything; you will even abandon your proposed union with Mademoiselle Claire d'Arlange? You forget that for two years I have in vain constantly expressed my disappointment of this marriage."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"No, sir. I have seen Mademoiselle Claire; I have explained my unhappy position to her. Whatever happens, she has sworn to be my wife."

"And do you think that Madame d'Arlange will give her granddaughter to M. Gerdy?"

"We hope so, sir. The marchioness is sufficiently infected with aristocratic ideas to prefer a nobleman's bastard to the son of some honest tradesman; but should she refuse, we would await her death, though without desiring it."

The calm manner in which Albert said this enraged the count.

"Can this be my son?" he cried. "Never! What blood have you then in your veins, sir? Your worthy mother alone might tell us, provided, however, she herself knows."

"Sir," cried Albert menacingly, "think well before you speak! She is my mother, and that is sufficient. I am her son, not her judge. No one shall insult her in my presence, I will not permit it, sir; and I will suffer it least of all from you."

The count made great efforts to keep his anger within bounds, but Albert's behavior thoroughly enraged him. What, his son rebelled, he dared to brave him to his face, he threatened him! The old fellow jumped from his chair, and moved towards the young man as if he would strike him.

"Leave the room," he cried, in a voice choking with rage, "leave the room instantly! Retire to your apartments, and take care not to leave them without my orders. To-morrow I will let you know my decision."

Albert bowed respectfully, but without lowering his eyes and walked slowly to the door. He had already opened it, when M. de Commarin experienced one of those revulsions of feeling, so frequent in violent natures.

"Albert," said he, "come here and listen to me."

The young man turned back, much affected by this change.

"Do not go," continued the count, "until I have told you what I think. You are worthy of being the heir of a great house, sir. I may be angry with you; but I can never lose my esteem for you. You are a noble man, Albert. Give me your hand."

It was a happy moment for these two men, and such a one as they had scarcely ever experienced in their lives, restrained as they had been by cold etiquette. The count felt proud of his son, and recognised in him himself at that age. For a long time their hands remained clasped, without either being able to utter a word.

At last, M. de Commarin resumed his seat.

"I must ask you to leave me, Albert," he said kindly. "I must be alone to reflect, to try and accustom myself to this terrible blow."

And, as the young man closed the door, he added, as if giving vent to his inmost thoughts, "If he, in whom I have placed all my hope, deserts me, what will become of me? And what will the other one be like?"

Albert's features, when he left the count's study, bore traces of the violent emotions he had felt during the interview. The servants whom he met noticed it the more, as they had heard something of the quarrel.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Well," said an old footman who had been in the family thirty years, "the count has had another unhappy scene with his son. The old fellow has been in a dreadful passion."

"I got wind of it at dinner," spoke up a valet de chambre: "the count restrained himself enough not to burst out before me; but he rolled his eyes fiercely."

"What can be the matter?"

"Pshaw! that's more than they know themselves. Why, Denis, before whom they always speak freely, says that they often wrangle for hours together, like dogs, about things which he can never see through."

"Ah," cried out a young fellow, who was being trained to service, "if I were in the viscount's place, I'd settle the old gent pretty effectually!"

"Joseph, my friend," said the footman pointedly, "you are a fool. You might give your father his walking ticket very properly, because you never expect five sous from him; and you have already learned how to earn your living without doing any work at all. But the viscount, pray tell me what he is good for, what he knows how to do? Put him in the centre of Paris, with only his fine hands for capital, and you will see."

"Yes, but he has his mother's property in Normandy," replied Joseph.

"I can't for the life of me," said the valet de chambre, "see what the count finds to complain of; for his son is a perfect model, and I shouldn't be sorry to have one like him. There was a very different pair, when I was in the Marquis de Courtivois's service. He was one who made it a point never to be in good humor. His eldest son, who is a friend of the viscount's, and who comes here occasionally, is a pit without a bottom, as far as money is concerned. He will fritter away a thousand-franc note quicker than Joseph can smoke a pipe."

"But the marquis is not rich," said a little old man, who himself had perhaps the enormous wages of fifteen francs; "he can't have more than sixty thousand francs' income at the most."

"That's why he gets angry. Every day there is some new story about his son. He had an apartment in the house; he went in and out when he pleased; he passed his nights in gaming and drinking; he cut up so with the actresses that the police had to interfere. Besides all this, I have many a time had to help him up to his room, and put him to bed, when the waiters from the restaurants brought him home in a carriage, so drunk that he could scarcely say a word."

"Ha!" exclaimed Joseph enthusiastically, "this fellow's service must be mighty profitable."

"That was according to circumstances. When he was at play, he was lavish with his money; but he always lost: and, when he was drunk, he had a quick temper, and didn't spare the blows. I must do him the justice to say, though, that his cigars were splendid. But he was a ruffian; while the viscount here is a true child of wisdom. He is severe upon our faults, it is true; but he is never harsh nor brutal to his servants. Then he is uniformly generous; which in the long run pays us best. I must say that he is better than the majority, and that the count is very unreasonable."

Such was the judgment of the servants. That of society was perhaps less favorable.

The Viscount de Commarin was not one of those who possess the rather questionable and at times unenviable accomplishment of pleasing every one. He was wise enough to distrust those astonishing personages who are always praising everybody. In looking about us, we often see men of success and reputation, who are simply dolts, without any merit except their perfect insignificance. That stupid propriety which offends no one, that

THE LEROUGE CASE

uniform politeness which shocks no one's vanity, have peculiarly the gift of pleasing and of succeeding.

One cannot meet certain persons without saying, "I know that face; I have seen it somewhere, before;" because it has no individuality, but simply resembles faces seen in a common crowd. It is precisely so with the minds of certain other people. When they speak, you know exactly what they are going to say; you have heard the same thing so many times already from them, you know all their ideas by heart. These people are welcomed everywhere: because they have nothing peculiar about them; and peculiarity, especially in the upper classes, is always irritating and offensive; they detest all innovations.

Albert was peculiar; consequently much discussed, and very differently estimated. He was charged with sins of the most opposite character, with faults so contradictory that they were their own defence. Some accused him, for instance, of entertaining ideas entirely too liberal for one of his rank; and, at the same time, others complained of his excessive arrogance. He was charged with treating with insulting levity the most serious questions, and was then blamed for his affectation of gravity. People knew him scarcely well enough to love him, while they were jealous of him and feared him.

He wore a bored look in all fashionable reunions, which was considered very bad taste. Forced by his relations, by his father, to go into society a great deal, he was bored, and committed the unpardonable sin of letting it be seen. Perhaps he had been disgusted by the constant court made to him, by the rather coarse attentions which were never spared the noble heir of one of the richest families in France. Having all the necessary qualities for shining, he despised them. Dreadful sin! He did not abuse his advantages; and no one ever heard of his getting into a scrape.

He had had once, it was said, a very decided liking for Madame Prosnay, perhaps the naughtiest, certainly the most mischievous woman in Paris; but that was all. Mothers who had daughters to dispose of upheld him; but, for the last two years, they had turned against him, when his love for Mademoiselle d'Arlange became well known.

At the club they rallied him on his prudence. He had had, like others, his run of follies; but he had soon got disgusted with what it is the fashion to call pleasure. The noble profession of *bon vivant* appeared to him very tame and tiresome. He did not enjoy passing his nights at cards; nor did he appreciate the society of those frail sisters, who in Paris give notoriety to their lovers. He affirmed that a gentleman was not necessarily an object of ridicule because he would not expose himself in the theatre with these women. Finally, none of his friends could ever inoculate him with a passion for the turf.

As doing nothing wearied him, he attempted, like the parvenu, to give some meaning to life by work. He purposed, after a while, to take part in public affairs; and, as he had often been struck with the gross ignorance of many men in power, he wished to avoid their example. He busied himself with politics; and this was the cause of all his quarrels with his father. The one word of "liberal" was enough to throw the count into convulsions; and he suspected his son of liberalism, ever since reading an article by the viscount, published in the "*Revue des Deux Mondes*."

His ideas, however, did not prevent his fully sustaining his rank. He spent most nobly on the world the revenue which placed his father and himself a little above it. His establishment, distinct from the count's, was arranged as that of a wealthy young gentleman's ought to be. His liveries left nothing to be desired; and his horses and equipages were celebrated. Letters of invitation were eagerly sought for to the grand hunting parties, which he formed every year towards the end of October at Commarin,—an admirable piece of property, covered with immense woods.

Albert's love for Claire—a deep, well-considered love—had contributed not a little to keep him from the habits and life of the pleasant and elegant idleness indulged in by his friends. A noble attachment is always a great safeguard. In contending against it, M. de Commarin had only succeeded in increasing its intensity and insuring

THE LEROUGE CASE

its continuance. This passion, so annoying to the count, was the source of the most vivid, the most powerful emotions in the viscount. Ennui was banished from his existence.

All his thoughts took the same direction; all his actions had but one aim. Could he look to the right or the left, when, at the end of his journey, he perceived the reward so ardently desired? He resolved that he would never have any wife but Claire; his father absolutely refused his consent. The effort to change this refusal had long been the business of his life. Finally, after three years of perseverance, he had triumphed; the count had given his consent. And now, just as he was reaping the happiness of success, Noel had arrived, implacable as fate, with his cursed letters.

On leaving M. de Commarin, and while slowly mounting the stairs which led to his apartments, Albert's thoughts reverted to Claire. What was she doing at that moment? Thinking of him no doubt. She knew that the crisis would come that very evening, or the next day at the latest. She was probably praying. Albert was thoroughly exhausted; his head felt dizzy, and seemed ready to burst. He rang for his servant, and ordered some tea.

"You do wrong in not sending for the doctor, sir," said Lubin, his valet. "I ought to disobey you, and send for him myself."

"It would be useless," replied Albert sadly; "he could do nothing for me."

As the valet was leaving the room, he added,—"Say nothing about my being unwell to any one, Lubin; it is nothing at all. If I should feel worse, I will ring."

At that moment, to see any one, to hear a voice, to have to reply, was more than he could bear. He longed to be left entirely to himself.

After the painful emotions arising from his explanations with the count, he could not sleep. He opened one of the library windows, and looked out. It was a beautiful night: and there was a lovely moon. Seen at this hour, by the mild, tremulous evening light, the gardens attached to the mansion seemed twice their usual size. The moving tops of the great trees stretched away like an immense plain, hiding the neighbouring houses; the flower-beds, set off by the green shrubs, looked like great black patches, while particles of shell, tiny pieces of glass, and shining pebbles sparkled in the carefully kept walks. The horses stamped in the stable and the rattling of their halter chains against the bars of the manger could be distinctly heard. In the coach-house the men were putting away for the night the carriage, always kept ready throughout the evening, in case the count should wish to go out.

Albert was reminded by these surroundings, of the magnificence of his past life. He sighed deeply.

"Must I, then, lose all this?" he murmured. "I can scarcely, even for myself, abandon so much splendour without regret; and thinking of Claire makes it hard indeed. Have I not dreamed of a life of exceptional happiness for her, a result almost impossible to realise without wealth?"

Midnight sounded from the neighbouring church of St. Clotilde, and as the night was chilly, he closed the window, and sat down near the fire, which he stirred. In the hope of obtaining a respite from his thoughts, he took up the evening paper, in which was an account of the assassination at La Jonchere; but he found it impossible to read: the lines danced before his eyes. Then he thought of writing to Claire. He sat down at his desk, and wrote, "My dearly loved Claire," but he could go no further; his distracted brain could not furnish him with a single sentence.

At last, at break of day, he threw himself on to a sofa, and fell into a heavy sleep peopled with phantoms.

THE LEROUGE CASE

At half-past nine in the morning, he was suddenly awakened, by the noise of the door being hastily opened. A servant entered, with a scared look on his face, and so out of breath from having come up the stairs four at a time, that he could scarcely speak.

"Sir," said he, "viscount, be quick, fly and hide, save yourself, they are here, it is the—"

A commissary of police, wearing his sash, appeared at the door. He was followed by a number of men, among whom M. Tabaret could be seen, keeping as much out of sight as possible.

The commissary approached Albert.

"You are," he asked, "Guy Louis Marie Albert de Rheteau de Commarin?"

"Yes, sir."

The commissary placed his hand upon him, while pronouncing the usual formula: "M. de Commarin, in the name of the law I arrest you."

"Me, sir? me?"

Albert, aroused suddenly from his painful dreams, seemed hardly to comprehend what was taking place, seemed to ask himself,— "Am I really awake? Is not this some hideous nightmare?"

He threw a stupid, astonished look upon the commissary of police, his men, and M. Tabaret, who had not taken his eyes off him."

"Here is the warrant," added the commissary, unfolding the paper.

Mechanically Albert glanced over it.

"Claudine assassinated!" he cried.

Then very low, but distinct enough to be heard by the commissary, by one of his officers, and by old Tabaret, he added,— "I am lost!"

While the commissary was making inquiries, which immediately follow all arrests, the police officers spread through the apartments, and proceeded to a searching examination of them. They had received orders to obey M. Tabaret, and the old fellow guided them in their search, made them ransack drawers and closets, and move the furniture to look underneath or behind. They seized a number of articles belonging to the viscount,—documents, manuscripts, and a very voluminous correspondence; but it was with especial delight that M. Tabaret put his hands on certain articles, which were carefully described in their proper order in the official report:

1. In the ante-room, hung with all sorts of weapons, a broken foil was found behind a sofa. This foil has a peculiar handle, and is unlike those commonly sold. It is ornamented with the count's coronet, and the initials A. C. It has been broken at about the middle; and the end cannot be found. When questioned, the viscount declared that he did not know what had become of the missing end.

2. In the dressing-room, a pair of black cloth trousers was discovered still damp, and bearing stains of mud or rather of mould. All one side is smeared with greenish moss, like that which grows on walls. On the front are numerous rents; and one near the knee is about four inches long. These trousers had not been hung up with the other clothes; but appear to have been hidden between two large trunks full of clothing.

THE LEROUGE CASE

3. In the pocket of the above mentioned trousers was found a pair of lavender kid gloves. The palm of the right hand glove bears a large greenish stain, produced by grass or moss. The tips of the fingers have been worn as if by rubbing. Upon the backs of both gloves are some scratches, apparently made by finger-nails.

4. There were also found in the dressing-room two pairs of boots, one of which, though clean and polished, was still very damp; and an umbrella recently wetted, the end of which was still covered with a light coloured mud.

5. In a large room, called the library, were found a box of cigars of the trabucos brand, and on the mantel-shelf a number of cigar-holders in amber and meerschaum.

The last article noted down, M. Tabaret approached the commissary of police.

"I have everything I could desire," he whispered.

"And I have finished," replied the commissary. "Our prisoner does not appear to know exactly how to act. You heard what he said. He gave in at once. I suppose YOU will call it lack of experience."

"In the middle of the day," replied the amateur detective in a whisper, "he would not have been quite so crestfallen. But early in the morning, suddenly awakened, you know— Always arrest a person early in the morning, when he's hungry, and only half awake."

"I have questioned some of the servants. Their evidence is rather peculiar."

"Very well; we shall see. But I must hurry off and find the investigating magistrate, who is impatiently expecting me."

Albert was beginning to recover a little from the stupor into which he had been plunged by the entrance of the commissary of police.

"Sir," he asked, "will you permit me to say a few words in your presence to the Count de Commarin? I am the victim of some mistake, which will be very soon discovered."

"It's always a mistake," muttered old Tabaret.

"What you ask is impossible," replied the commissary. "I have special orders of the strictest sort. You must not henceforth communicate with a living soul. A cab is in waiting below. Have the goodness to accompany me to it."

In crossing the vestibule, Albert noticed a great stir among the servants; they all seemed to have lost their senses. M. Denis gave some orders in a sharp, imperative tone. Then he thought he heard that the Count de Commarin had been struck down with apoplexy. After that, he remembered nothing. They almost carried him to the cab which drove off as fast as the two little horses could go. M. Tabaret had just hastened away in a more rapid vehicle.

X.

THE visitor who risks himself in the labyrinth of galleries and stairways in the Palais de Justice, and mounts to the third story in the left wing, will find himself in a long, low-studded gallery, badly lighted by narrow windows, and pierced at short intervals by little doors, like a hall at the ministry or at a lodging-house.

It is a place difficult to view calmly, the imagination makes it appear so dark and dismal.

THE LEROUGE CASE

It needs a Dante to compose an inscription to place above the doors which lead from it. From morning to night, the flagstones resound under the heavy tread of the gendarmes, who accompany the prisoners. You can scarcely recall anything but sad figures there. There are the parents or friends of the accused the witnesses, the detectives. In this gallery, far from the sight of men, the judicial curriculum is gone through with.

Each one of the little doors, which has its number painted over it in black, opens into the office of a judge of inquiry. All the rooms are just alike: if you see one, you have seen them all. They have nothing terrible nor sad in themselves; and yet it is difficult to enter one of them without a shudder. They are cold. The walls all seem moist with the tears which have been shed there. You shudder, at thinking of the avowals wrested from the criminals, of the confessions broken with sobs murmured there.

In the office of the judge of inquiry, Justice clothes herself in none of that apparel which she afterwards dons in order to strike fear into the masses. She is still simple, and almost disposed to kindness. She says to the prisoner,—

"I have strong reasons for thinking you guilty; but prove to me your innocence, and I will release you."

On entering one of these rooms, a stranger would imagine that he got into a cheap shop by mistake. The furniture is of the most primitive sort, as is the case in all places where important matters are transacted. Of what consequence are surroundings to the judge hunting down the author of a crime, or to the accused who is defending his life?

A desk full of documents for the judge, a table for the clerk, an arm-chair, and one or two chairs besides comprise the entire furniture of the antechamber of the court of assize. The walls are hung with green paper; the curtains are green, and the floors are carpeted in the same color. Monsieur Daburon's office bore the number fifteen.

M. Daburon had arrived at his office in the Palais de Justice at nine o'clock in the morning, and was waiting. His course resolved upon, he had not lost an instant, understanding as well as old Tabaret the necessity for rapid action. He had already had an interview with the public prosecutor, and had arranged everything with the police.

Besides issuing the warrant against Albert, he had summoned the Count de Commarin, Madame Gerdy, Noel, and some of Albert's servants, to appear before him with as little delay as possible.

He thought it essential to question all these persons before examining the prisoner. Several detectives had started off to execute his orders, and he himself sat in his office, like a general commanding an army, who sends off his aide-de-camp to begin the battle, and who hopes that victory will crown his combinations.

Often, at this same hour, he had sat in this office, under circumstances almost identical. A crime had been committed, and, believing he had discovered the criminal, he had given orders for his arrest. Was not that his duty? But he had never before experienced the anxiety of mind which disturbed him now. Many a time had he issued warrants of arrest, without possessing even half the proofs which guided him in the present case. He kept repeating this to himself; and yet he could not quiet his dreadful anxiety, which would not allow him a moment's rest.

He wondered why his people were so long in making their appearance. He walked up and down the room, counting the minutes, drawing out his watch three times within a quarter of an hour, to compare it with the clock. Every time he heard a step in the passage, almost deserted at that hour, he moved near the door, stopped and listened. At length some one knocked. It was his clerk, whom he had sent for. There was nothing particular in this man; he was tall rather than big, and very slim. His gait was precise, his gestures were methodical, and his face was as impassive as if it had been cut out of a piece of yellow wood. He was thirty-four years of age and during

THE LEROUGE CASE

fifteen years had acted as clerk to four investigating magistrates in succession. He could hear the most astonishing things without moving a muscle. His name was Constant.

He bowed to the magistrate, and excused himself for his tardiness. He had been busy with some book-keeping, which he did every morning; and his wife had had to send after him.

"You are still in good time," said M. Daburon: "but we shall soon have plenty of work: so you had better get your paper ready."

Five minutes later, the usher introduced M. Noel Gerdy. He entered with an easy manner, like a barrister who was well acquainted with the Palais, and who knew its winding ways. He in no wise resembled, this morning, old Tabaret's friend; still less could he have been recognized as Madame Juliette's lover. He was entirely another being, or rather he had resumed his every-day bearing. From his firm step, his placid face, one would never imagine that, after an evening of emotion and excitement, after a secret visit to his mistress, he had passed the night by the pillow of a dying woman, and that woman his mother, or at least one who had filled his mother's place.

What a contrast between him and the magistrate!

M. Daburon had not slept either: but one could easily see that in his feebleness, in his anxious look, in the dark, circles about his eyes. His shirt-front was all rumpled, and his cuffs were far from clean. Carried away by the course of events, the mind had forgotten the body. Noel's well-shaved chin, on the contrary, rested upon an irreproachably white cravat; his collar did not show a crease; his hair and his whiskers had been most carefully brushed. He bowed to M. Daburon, and held out the summons he had received.

"You summoned me, sir," he said; "and I am here awaiting your orders."

The investigating magistrate had met the young barrister several times in the lobbies of the Palais; and he knew him well by sight. He remembered having heard M. Gerdy spoken of as a man of talent and promise, whose reputation was fast rising. He therefore welcomed him as a fellow-workman, and invited him to be seated.

The preliminaries common in the examinations of all witnesses ended; the name, surname, age, place of business, and so on having been written down, the magistrate, who had followed his clerk with his eyes while he was writing, turned towards Noel.

"I presume you know, M. Gerdy," he began, "the matters in connection with which you are troubled with appearing before me?"

"Yes, sir, the murder of that poor old woman at La Jonchere."

"Precisely," replied M. Daburon. Then, calling to mind his promise to old Tabaret, he added, "If justice has summoned you so promptly, it is because we have found your name often mentioned in Widow Lerouge's papers."

"I am not surprised at that," replied the barrister: "we were greatly interested in that poor woman, who was my nurse; and I know that Madame Gerdy wrote to her frequently."

"Very well; then you can give me some information about her."

"I fear, sir, that it will be very incomplete. I know very little about this poor old Madame Lerouge. I was taken from her at a very early age; and, since I have been a man, I have thought but little about her, except to send her

THE LEROUGE CASE

occasionally a little aid."

"You never went to visit her?"

"Excuse me. I have gone there to see her many times, but I remained only a few minutes. Madame Gerdy, who has often seen her, and to whom she talked of all her affairs, could have enlightened you much better than I."

"But," said the magistrate, "I expect shortly to see Madame Gerdy here; she, too, must have received a summons."

"I know it, sir, but it is impossible for her to appear. She is ill in bed."

"Seriously?"

"So seriously that you will be obliged, I think, to give up all hope of her testimony. She is attacked with a disease which, in the words of my friend, Dr. Herve, never forgives. It is something like inflammation of the brain, if I am not mistaken. It may be that her life will be saved, but she will never recover her reason. If she does not die, she will be insane."

M. Daburon appeared greatly vexed. "This is very annoying," he muttered. "And you think, my dear sir, that it will be impossible to obtain any information from her?"

"It is useless even to hope for it. She has completely lost her reason. She was, when I left her, in such a state of utter prostration that I fear she can not live through the day."

"And when was she attacked by this illness?"

"Yesterday evening."

"Suddenly?"

"Yes, sir; at least, apparently so, though I myself think she has been unwell for the last three weeks at least. Yesterday, however, on rising from dinner, after having eaten but little, she took up a newspaper; and, by a most unfortunate hazard, her eyes fell exactly upon the lines which gave an account of this crime. She at once uttered a loud cry, fell back in her chair, and thence slipped to the floor, murmuring, 'Oh, the unhappy man, the unhappy man!'"

"The unhappy woman, you mean."

"No, sir. She uttered the words I have just repeated. Evidently the exclamation did not refer to my poor nurse."

Upon this reply, so important and yet made in the most unconscious tone, M. Daburon raised his eyes to the witness. The barrister lowered his head.

"And then?" asked the magistrate, after a moment's silence, during which he had taken a few notes.

"Those words, sir, were the last spoken by Madame Gerdy. Assisted by our servant, I carried her to her bed. The doctor was sent for; and, since then, she has not recovered consciousness. The doctor—"

"It is well," interrupted M. Daburon. "Let us leave that for the present. Do you know, sir, whether Widow Lerouge had any enemies?"

THE LEROUGE CASE

"None that I know of, sir."

"She had no enemies? Well, now tell me, does there exist to your knowledge any one having the least interest in the death of this poor woman?"

As he asked this question the investigating magistrate kept his eyes fixed on Noel's, not wishing him to turn or lower his head.

The barrister started, and seemed deeply moved. He was disconcerted; he hesitated, as if a struggle was going on within him.

Finally, in a voice which was by no means firm, he replied, "No, no one."

"Is that really true?" asked the magistrate, looking at him more searchingly. "You know no one whom this crime benefits, or whom it might benefit,—absolutely no one?"

"I know only one thing, sir," replied Noel; "and that is, that, as far as I am concerned, it has caused me an irreparable injury."

"At last," thought M. Daburon, "we have got at the letters; and I have not betrayed poor old Tabaret. It would be too bad to cause the least trouble to that zealous and invaluable man." He then added aloud: "An injury to you, my dear sir? You will, I hope, explain yourself."

Noel's embarrassment, of which he had already given some signs, appeared much more marked.

"I am aware, sir," he replied, "that I owe justice not merely the truth, but the whole truth; but there are circumstances involved so delicate that the conscience of a man of honour sees danger in them. Besides, it is very hard to be obliged to unveil such sad secrets, the revelation of which may sometimes—"

M. Daburon interrupted with a gesture. Noel's sad tone impressed him. Knowing, beforehand, what he was about to hear, he felt for the young barrister. He turned to his clerk.

"Constant!" said he in a peculiar tone. This was evidently a signal; for the tall clerk rose methodically, put his pen behind his ear, and went out in his measured tread.

Noel appeared sensible of this kindness. His face expressed the strongest gratitude; his look returned thanks.

"I am very much obliged to you, sir," he said with suppressed warmth, "for your considerateness. What I have to say is very painful; but it will be scarcely an effort to speak before you now."

"Fear nothing," replied the magistrate; "I will only retain of your deposition, my dear sir, what seems to me absolutely indispensable."

"I feel scarcely master of myself, sir," began Noel; "so pray pardon my emotion. If any words escape me that seem charged with bitterness, excuse them; they will be involuntary. Up to the past few days, I always believed that I was the offspring of illicit love. My history is short. I have been honourably ambitious; I have worked hard. He who has no name must make one, you know. I have passed a quiet life, retired and austere, as people must, who, starting at the foot of the ladder, wish to reach the top. I worshipped her whom I believed to be my mother; and I felt convinced that she loved me in return. The stain of my birth had some humiliations attached to it; but I despised them. Comparing my lot with that of so many others, I felt that I had more than common advantages. One day, Providence placed in my hands all the letters which my father, the Count de Commarin, had written to

THE LEROUGE CASE

Madame Gerdy during the time she was his mistress. On reading these letters, I was convinced that I was not what I had hitherto believed myself to be,—that Madame Gerdy was not my mother!"

And, without giving M. Daburon time to reply, he laid before him the facts which, twelve hours before, he had related to M. Tabaret. It was the same story, with the same circumstances, the same abundance of precise and conclusive details; but the tone in which it was told was entirely changed. When speaking to the old detective, the young barrister had been emphatic and violent; but now, in the presence of the investigating magistrate, he restrained his vehement emotions.

One might imagine that he adapted his style to his auditors, wishing to produce the same effect on both, and using the method which would best accomplish his purpose.

To an ordinary mind like M. Tabaret's he used the exaggeration of anger; but to a man of superior intelligence like M. Daburon, he employed the exaggeration of restraint. With the detective he had rebelled against his unjust lot; but with the magistrate he seemed to bow, full of resignation, before a blind fatality.

With genuine eloquence and rare facility of expression, he related his feelings on the day following the discovery,—his grief, his perplexity, his doubts.

To support this moral certainty, some positive testimony was needed. Could he hope for this from the count or from Madame Gerdy, both interested in concealing the truth? No. But he had counted upon that of his nurse,—the poor old woman who loved him, and who, near the close of her life, would be glad to free her conscience from this heavy load. She was dead now; and the letters became mere waste paper in his hands.

Then he passed on to his explanation with Madame Gerdy, and he gave the magistrate even fuller details than he had given his old neighbour.

She had, he said, at first utterly denied the substitution, but he insinuated that, plied with questions, and overcome by the evidence, she had, in a moment of despair, confessed all, declaring, soon after, that she would retract and deny this confession, being resolved at all hazards that her son should preserve his position.

>From this scene, in the barrister's judgment, might be dated the first attacks of the illness, to which she was now succumbing.

Noel then described his interview with the Viscount de Commarin. A few inaccuracies occurred in his narrative, but so slight that it would have been difficult to charge him with them. Besides, there was nothing in them at all unfavourable to Albert.

He insisted, on the contrary, upon the excellent impression which that young man had made on him. Albert had received the revelation with a certain distrust, it is true, but with a noble firmness at the same time, and, like a brave heart, was ready to bow before the justification of right.

In fact, he drew an almost enthusiastic portrait of this rival, who had not been spoiled by prosperity, who had left him without a look of hatred, towards whom he felt himself drawn, and who after all was his brother.

M. Daburon listened to Noel with the most unremitting attention, without allowing a word, a movement, or a frown, to betray his feelings.

"How, sir," observed the magistrate when the young man ceased speaking, "could you have told me that, in your opinion, no one was interested in Widow Lerouge's death?"

THE LEROUGE CASE

The barrister made no reply.

"It seems to me," continued M. Daburon, "that the Viscount de Commarin's position has thereby become almost impregnable. Madame Gerdy is insane; the count will deny all; your letters prove nothing. It is evident that the crime is of the greatest service to this young man, and that it was committed at a singularly favourable moment."

"Oh sir!" cried Noel, protesting with all his energy, "this insinuation is dreadful."

The magistrate watched the barrister's face narrowly. Was he speaking frankly, or was he but playing at being generous? Could it really be that he had never had any suspicion of this?

Noel did not flinch under the gaze, but almost immediately continued, —"What reason could this young man have for trembling, or fearing for his position? I did not utter one threatening word, even indirectly. I did not present myself like a man who, furious at being robbed, demands that everything which had been taken from him should be restored on the spot. I merely presented the facts to Albert, saying, 'Here is the truth? what do you think we ought to do? Be the judge.'"

"And he asked you for time?"

"Yes. I had suggested his accompanying me to see Widow Lerouge, whose testimony might dispel all doubts; he did not seem to understand me. But he was well acquainted with her, having visited her with the count, who supplied her, I have since learned, liberally with money."

"Did not this generosity appear to you very singular?"

"No."

"Can you explain why the viscount did not appear disposed to accompany you?"

"Certainly. He had just said that he wished, before all, to have an explanation with his father, who was then absent, but who would return in a few days."

The truth, as all the world knows, and delights in proclaiming, has an accent which no one can mistake. M. Daburon had not the slightest doubt of his witness's good faith. Noel continued with the ingenuous candour of an honest heart which suspicion has never touched with its bat's wing: "The idea of treating at once with my father pleased me exceedingly. I thought it so much better to wash all one's dirty linen at home, I had never desired anything but an amicable arrangement. With my hands full of proofs, I should still recoil from a public trial."

"Would you not have brought an action?"

"Never, sir, not at any price. Could I," he added proudly, "to regain my rightful name, begin by dishonouring it?"

This time M. Daburon could not conceal his sincere admiration.

"A most praiseworthy feeling, sir," he said.

"I think," replied Noel, "that it is but natural. If things came to the worst, I had determined to leave my title with Albert. No doubt the name of Commarin is an illustrious one; but I hope that, in ten years time, mine will be more known. I would, however, have demanded a large pecuniary compensation. I possess nothing: and I have often been hampered in my career by the want of money. That which Madame Gerdy owed to the generosity of my father was almost entirely spent. My education had absorbed a great part of it; and it was long before my

THE LEROUGE CASE

profession covered my expenses. Madame Gerdy and I live very quietly; but, unfortunately, though simple in her tastes, she lacks economy and system; and no one can imagine how great our expenses have been. But I have nothing to reproach myself with, whatever happens. At the commencement, I could not keep my anger well under control; but now I bear no ill-will. On learning of the death of my nurse, though, I cast all my hopes into the sea."

"You were wrong, my dear sir," said the magistrate. "I advise you to still hope. Perhaps, before the end of the day, you will enter into possession of your rights. Justice, I will not conceal from you, thinks she has found Widow Lerouge's assassin. At this moment, Viscount Albert is doubtless under arrest."

"What!" exclaimed Noel, with a sort of stupor: "I was not, then, mistaken, sir, in the meaning of your words. I dreaded to understand them."

"You have not mistaken me, sir," said M. Daburon. "I thank you for your sincere straightforward explanations; they have eased my task materially. To-morrow,—for today my time is all taken up,—we will write down your deposition together if you like. I have nothing more to say, I believe, except to ask you for the letters in your possession, and which are indispensable to me."

"Within an hour, sir, you shall have them," replied Noel. And he retired, after having warmly expressed his gratitude to the investigating magistrate.

Had he been less preoccupied, the barrister might have perceived at the end of the gallery old Tabaret, who had just arrived, eager and happy, like a bearer of great news as he was.

His cab had scarcely stopped at the gate of the Palais de Justice before he was in the courtyard and rushing towards the porch. To see him jumping more nimbly than a fifth-rate lawyer's clerk up the steep flight of stairs leading to the magistrate's office, one would never have believed that he was many years on the shady side of fifty. Even he himself had forgotten it. He did not remember how he had passed the night; he had never before felt so fresh, so agile, in such spirits; he seemed to have springs of steel in his limbs.

He burst like a cannon-shot into the magistrate's office, knocking up against the methodical clerk in the rudest of ways, without even asking his pardon.

"Caught!" he cried, while yet on the threshold, "caught, nipped, squeezed, strung, trapped, locked! We have got the man."

Old Tabaret, more Tiraclair than ever, gesticulated with such comical vehemence and such remarkable contortions that even the tall clerk smiled, for which, however, he took himself severely to task on going to bed that night.

But M. Daburon, still under the influence of Noel's deposition, was shocked at this apparently unseasonable joy; although he felt the safer for it. He looked severely at old Tabaret, saying,—"Hush, sir; be decent, compose yourself."

At any other time, the old fellow would have felt ashamed at having deserved such a reprimand. Now, it made no impression on him.

"I can't be quiet," he replied. "Never has anything like this been known before. All that I mentioned has been found. Broken foil, lavender kid gloves slightly frayed, cigar-holder; nothing is wanting. You shall have them, sir, and many other things besides. I have a little system of my own, which appears by no means a bad one. Just see the triumph of my method of induction, which Gevrol ridiculed so much. I'd give a hundred francs if he were only here now. But no; my Gevrol wants to nab the man with the earrings; he is just capable of doing that. He is a

THE LEROUGE CASE

fine fellow, this Gevrol, a famous fellow! How much do you give him a year for his skill?"

"Come, my dear M. Tabaret," said the magistrate, as soon as he could get in a word, "be serious, if you can, and let us proceed in order."

"Pooh!" replied the old fellow, "what good will that do? It is a clear case now. When they bring the fellow before you, merely show him the particles of kid taken from behind the nails of the victim, side by side with his torn gloves, and you will overwhelm him. I wager that he will confess all, hic et nunc,—yes, I wager my head against his; although that's pretty risky; for he may get off yet! Those milk-sops on the jury are just capable of according him extenuating circumstances. Ah! all those delays are fatal to justice! Why if all the world were of my mind, the punishment of rascals wouldn't take such a time. They should be hanged as soon as caught. That's my opinion."

M. Daburon resigned himself to this shower of words. As soon as the old fellow's excitement had cooled down a little, he began questioning him. He even then had great trouble in obtaining the exact details of the arrest; details which later on were confirmed by the commissary's official report.

The magistrate appeared very surprised when he heard that Albert had exclaimed, "I am lost!" at sight of the warrant. "That," muttered he, "is a terrible proof against him."

"I should think so," replied old Tabaret. "In his ordinary state, he would never have allowed himself to utter such words; for they in fact destroy him. We arrested him when he was scarcely awake. He hadn't been in bed, but was lying in a troubled sleep, upon a sofa, when we arrived. I took good care to let a frightened servant ran in advance, and to follow closely upon him myself, to see the effect. All my arrangements were made. But, never fear, he will find a plausible excuse for this fatal exclamation. By the way, I should add that we found on the floor, near by, a crumpled copy of last evening's 'Gazette de France,' which contained an account of the assassination. This is the first time that a piece of news in the papers ever helped to nab a criminal."

"Yes," murmured the magistrate, deep in thought, "yes, you are a valuable man, M. Tabaret." Then, louder, he added, "I am thoroughly convinced; for M. Gerdy has just this moment left me."

"You have seen Noel!" cried the old fellow. On the instant all his proud self-satisfaction disappeared. A cloud of anxiety spread itself like a veil over his beaming countenance. "Noel here," he repeated. Then he timidly added: "And does he know?"

"Nothing," replied M. Daburon. "I had no need of mentioning your name. Besides, had I not promised absolute secrecy?"

"Ah, that's all right," cried old Tabaret. "And what do you think sir, of Noel?"

"His is, I am sure, a noble, worthy heart," said the magistrate; "a nature both strong and tender. The sentiments which I heard him express here, and the genuineness of which it is impossible to doubt, manifested an elevation of soul, unhappily, very rare. Seldom in my life have I met with a man who so won my sympathy from the first. I can well understand one's pride in being among his friends."

"Just what I said; he has precisely the same effect upon every one. I love him as though he were my own child; and, whatever happens, he will inherit almost the whole of my fortune: yes, I intend leaving him everything. My will is made, and is in the hands of M. Baron, my notary. There is a small legacy, too, for Madame Gerdy; but I am going to have the paragraph that relates to that taken out at once."

"Madame Gerdy, M. Tabaret, will soon be beyond all need of worldly goods."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"How, what do you mean? Has the count—"

"She is dying, and is not likely to live through the day; M. Gerdy told me so himself."

"Ah! heavens!" cried the old fellow, "what is that you say? Dying? Noel will be distracted; but no: since she is not his mother, how can it affect him? Dying! I thought so much of her before this discovery. Poor humanity! It seems as though all the accomplices are passing away at the same time; for I forgot to tell you, that, just as I was leaving the Commarin mansion, I heard a servant tell another that the count had fallen down in a fit on learning the news of his son's arrest."

"That will be a great misfortune for M. Gerdy."

"For Noel?"

"I had counted upon M. de Commarin's testimony to recover for him all that he so well deserves. The count dead, Widow Lerouge dead, Madame Gerdy dying, or in any event insane, who then can tell us whether the substitution alluded to in the letters was ever carried into execution?"

"True," murmured old Tabaret; "it is true! And I did not think of it. What fatality! For I am not deceived; I am certain that—"

He did not finish. The door of M. Daburon's office opened, and the Count de Commarin himself appeared on the threshold, as rigid as one of those old portraits which look as though they were frozen in their gilded frames. The nobleman motioned with his hand, and the two servants who had helped him up as far as the door, retired.

XI.

It was indeed the Count de Commarin, though more like his shadow. His head, usually carried so high, leant upon his chest; his figure was bent; his eyes had no longer their accustomed fire; his hands trembled. The extreme disorder of his dress rendered more striking still the change which had come over him. In one night, he had grown twenty years older. This man, yesterday so proud of never having bent to a storm, was now completely shattered. The pride of his name had constituted his entire strength; that humbled, he seemed utterly overwhelmed. Everything in him gave way at once; all his supports failed him at the same time. His cold, lifeless gaze revealed the dull stupor of his thoughts. He presented such a picture of utter despair that the investigating magistrate slightly shuddered at the sight. M. Tabaret looked frightened, and even the clerk seemed moved.

"Constant," said M. Daburon quickly, "go with M. Tabaret, and see if there's any news at the Prefecture."

The clerk left the room, followed by the detective, who went away regretfully. The count had not noticed their presence; he paid no attention to their departure.

M. Daburon offered him a seat, which he accepted with a sad smile. "I feel so weak," said he, "you must excuse my sitting."

Apologies to an investigating magistrate! What an advance in civilisation, when the nobles consider themselves subject to the law, and bow to its decrees! Every one respects justice now—a—days, and fears it a little, even when only represented by a simple and conscientious investigating magistrate.

"You are, perhaps, too unwell, count," said the magistrate, "to give me the explanations I had hoped for."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"I am better, thank you," replied M. de Commarin, "I am as well as could be expected after the shock I have received. When I heard of the crime of which my son is accused, and of his arrest, I was thunderstruck. I believed myself a strong man; but I rolled in the dust. My servants thought me dead. Why was it not so? The strength of my constitution, my physician tells me, was all that saved me; but I believe that heaven wishes me to live, that I may drink to the bitter dregs my cup of humiliation."

He stopped suddenly, nearly choked by a flow of blood that rose to his mouth.

The investigating magistrate remained standing near the table, almost afraid to move.

After a few moments' rest, the count found relief, and continued,— "Unhappy man that I am! ought I not to have expected it? Everything comes to light sooner or later. I am punished for my great sin,— pride. I thought myself out of reach of the thunderbolt; and I have been the means of drawing down the storm upon my house. Albert an assassin! A Viscount de Commarin arraigned before a court of assize! Ah, sir, punish me, also; for I alone and long ago, laid the foundation of this crime. Fifteen centuries of spotless fame end with me in infamy."

M. Daburon considered Count de Commarin's conduct unpardonable, and had determined not to spare him.

He had expected to meet a proud, haughty noble, almost unmanageable; and he had resolved to humble his arrogance.

Perhaps the harsh treatment he had received of old from the Marchioness d'Arlange had given him, unconsciously, a slight grudge against the aristocracy.

He had vaguely thought of certain rather severe remarks, which were to overcome the old nobleman, and bring him to a sense of his position.

But when he found himself in the presence of such a sincere repentance, his indignation changed to profound pity; and he began to wonder how he could assuage the count's grief.

"Write, sir," continued M. de Commarin with an exaltation of which he did not seem capable ten minutes before,— "write my avowal and suppress nothing. I have no longer need of mercy nor of tenderness. What have I to fear now? Is not my disgrace public? Must not I, Count Rheteau de Commarin appear before the tribunal, to proclaim the infamy of our house? Ah! all is lost now, even honour itself. Write, sir; for I wish that all the world shall know that I am the most deserving of blame. But they shall also know that the punishment has been already terrible, and that there was no need for this last and awful trial."

The count stopped for a moment, to concentrate and arrange his memory.

He soon continued, in a firmer voice, and adapting his tone to what he had to say, "When I was of Albert's age, sir, my parents made me marry, in spite of my protestations, the noblest and purest of young girls. I made her the most unhappy of women. I could not love her. I cherished a most passionate love for a mistress, who had trusted herself to me, and whom I had loved for a long time. I found her rich in beauty, purity and mind. Her name was Valerie. My heart is, so to say, dead and cold in me, sir, but, ah! when I pronounce that name, it still has a great effect upon me. In spite of my marriage, I could not induce myself to part from her, though she wished me to. The idea of sharing my love with another was revolting to her. No doubt she loved me then. Our relations continued. My wife and my mistress became mothers at nearly the same time. This coincidence suggested to me the fatal idea of sacrificing my legitimate son to his less fortunate brother. I communicated this project to Valerie. To my great surprise, she refused it with horror. Already the maternal instinct was aroused within her; she would not be separated from her child. I have preserved, as a monument of my folly, the letters which she wrote to me at that time. I re-read them only last night. Ah! why did I not listen to both her arguments and her prayers? It was

THE LEROUGE CASE

because I was mad. She had a sort of presentiment of the evil which overwhelms me to-day. But I came to Paris;—I had absolute control over her. I threatened to leave her, never to see her again. She yielded; and my valet and Claudine Lerouge were charged with this wicked substitution. It is, therefore, the son of my mistress who bears the title of Viscount de Commarin, and who was arrested but a short time ago."

M. Daburon had not hoped for a declaration so clear, and above all so prompt. He secretly rejoiced for the young barrister whose noble sentiments had quite captivated him.

"So, count," said he, "you acknowledge that M. Noel Gerdy is the issue of your legitimate marriage, and that he alone is entitled to bear your name?"

"Yes, sir. Alas! I was then more delighted at the success of my project than I should have been over the most brilliant victory. I was so intoxicated with the joy of having my Valerie's child there, near me, that I forgot everything else. I had transferred to him a part of my love for his mother; or, rather, I loved him still more, if that be possible. The thought that he would bear my name, that he would inherit all my wealth, to the detriment of the other, transported me with delight. The other, I hated; I could not even look upon him. I do not recollect having kissed him twice. On this point Valerie, who was very good, reproached me severely. One thing alone interfered with my happiness. The Countess de Commarin adored him whom she believed to be her son, and always wished to have him on her knees. I cannot express what I suffered at seeing my wife cover with kisses and caresses the child of my mistress. But I kept him from her as much as I could; and she, poor woman! not understanding what was passing within me, imagined that I was doing everything to prevent her son loving her. She died, sir, with this idea, which poisoned her last days. She died of sorrow; but saint-like, without a complaint, without a murmur, pardon upon her lips and in her heart."

Though greatly pressed for time, M. Daburon did not venture to interrupt the count, to ask him briefly for the immediate facts of the case. He knew that fever alone gave him this unnatural energy, to which at any moment might succeed the most complete prostration. He feared, if he stopped him for an instant, that he would not have strength enough to resume.

"I did not shed a single tear," continued the count. "What had she been in my life? A cause of sorrow and remorse. But God's justice, in advance of man's was about to take a terrible revenge. One day, I was warned that Valerie was deceiving me, and had done so for a long time. I could not believe it at first; it seemed to me impossible, absurd. I would have sooner doubted myself than her. I had taken her from a garret, where she was working sixteen hours a day to earn a few pence; she owed all to me. I had made her so much a part of myself that I could not credit her being false. I could not induce myself to feel jealous. However, I inquired into the matter; I had her watched; I even acted the spy upon her myself. I had been told the truth. This unhappy woman had another lover, and had had him for more than ten years. He was a cavalry officer. In coming to her house he took every precaution. He usually left about midnight; but sometimes he came to pass the night, and in that case went away in the early morning. Being stationed near Paris, he frequently obtained leave of absence and came to visit her; and he would remain shut up in her apartments until his time expired. One evening, my spies brought me word that he was there. I hastened to the house. My presence did not embarrass her. She received me as usual, throwing her arms about my neck. I thought that my spies had deceived me; and I was going to tell her all, when I saw upon the piano a buckskin glove, such as are worn by soldiers. Not wishing a scene, and not knowing to what excess my anger might carry me, I rushed out of the place without saying a word. I have never seen her since. She wrote to me. I did not open her letters. She attempted to force her way into my presence, but in vain; my servants had orders that they dared not ignore."

Could this be the Count de Commarin, celebrated for his haughty coldness, for his reserve so full of disdain, who spoke thus, who opened his whole life without restrictions, without reserve? And to whom? To a stranger.

THE LEROUGE CASE

But he was in one of those desperate states, allied to madness, when all reflection leaves us, when we must find some outlet for a too powerful emotion. What mattered to him this secret, so courageously borne for so many years? He disburdened himself of it, like the poor man, who, weighed down by a too heavy burden, casts it to the earth without caring where it falls, nor how much it may tempt the cupidity of the passers-by.

"Nothing," continued he, "no, nothing, can approach to what I then endured. My very heartstrings were bound up in that woman. She was like a part of myself. In separating from her, it seemed to me that I was tearing away a part of my own flesh. I cannot describe the furious passions her memory stirred within me. I scorned her and longed for her with equal vehemence. I hated her, and I loved her. And, to this day, her detestable image has been ever present to my imagination. Nothing can make me forget her. I have never consoled myself for her loss. And that is not all, terrible doubts about Albert occurred to me. Was I really his father? Can you understand what my punishment was, when I thought to myself, 'I have perhaps sacrificed my own son to the child of an utter stranger.' This thought made me hate the bastard who called himself Commarin. To my great affection for him succeeded an unconquerable aversion. How often, in those days I struggled against an insane desire to kill him! Since then, I have learned to subdue my aversion; but I have never completely mastered it. Albert, sir, has been the best of sons. Nevertheless, there has always been an icy barrier between us, which he was unable to explain. I have often been on the point of appealing to the tribunals, of avowing all, of reclaiming my legitimate heir; but regard for my rank has prevented me. I recoiled before the scandal. I feared the ridicule or disgrace that would attach to my name; and yet I have not been able to save it from infamy."

The old nobleman remained silent, after pronouncing these words. In a fit of despair, he buried his face in his hands, and two great tears rolled silently down his wrinkled cheeks.

In the meantime, the door of the room opened slightly, and the tall clerk's head appeared.

M. Daburon signed to him to enter, and then addressing M. de Commarin, he said in a voice rendered more gentle by compassion: "Sir, in the eyes of heaven, as in the eyes of society, you have committed a great sin; and the results, as you see, are most disastrous. It is your duty to repair the evil consequences of your sin as much as lies in your power."

"Such is my intention, sir, and, may I say so? my dearest wish."

"You doubtless understand me," continued M. Daburon.

"Yes, sir," replied the old man, "yes, I understand you."

"It will be a consolation to you," added the magistrate, "to learn that M. Noel Gerdy is worthy in all respects of the high position that you are about to restore to him. He is a man of great talent, better and worthier than any one I know. You will have a son worthy of his ancestors. And finally, no one of your family has disgraced it, sir, for Viscount Albert is not a Commarin."

"No," rejoined the count quickly, "a Commarin would be dead at this hour; and blood washes all away."

The old nobleman's remark set the investigating magistrate thinking profoundly.

"Are you then sure," said he, "of the viscount's guilt?"

M. de Commarin gave the magistrate a look of intense surprise.

"I only arrived in Paris yesterday evening," he replied; "and I am entirely ignorant of all that has occurred. I only know that justice would not proceed without good cause against a man of Albert's rank. If you have arrested him,

THE LEROUGE CASE

it is quite evident that you have something more than suspicion against him,—that you possess positive proofs."

M. Daburon bit his lips, and, for a moment, could not conceal a feeling of displeasure. He had neglected his usual prudence, had moved too quickly. He had believed the count's mind entirely upset; and now he had aroused his distrust. All the skill in the world could not repair such an unfortunate mistake. A witness on his guard is no longer a witness to be depended upon; he trembles for fear of compromising himself, measures the weight of the questions, and hesitates as to his answers.

On the other hand, justice, in the form of a magistrate, is disposed to doubt everything, to imagine everything, and to suspect everybody. How far was the count a stranger to the crime at La Jonchere? Although doubting Albert's paternity, he would certainly have made great efforts to save him. His story showed that he thought his honour in peril just as much as his son. Was he not the man to suppress, by every means, an inconvenient witness? Thus reasoned M. Daburon. And yet he could not clearly see how the Count de Commarin's interests were concerned in the matter. This uncertainty made him very uneasy.

"Sir," he asked, more sternly, "when were you informed of the discovery of your secret?"

"Last evening, by Albert himself. He spoke to me of this sad story, in a way which I now seek in vain to explain, unless—"

The count stopped short, as if his reason had been struck by the improbability of the supposition which he had formed.

"Unless!—" inquired the magistrate eagerly.

"Sir," said the count, without replying directly, "Albert is a hero, if he is not guilty."

"Ah!" said the magistrate quickly, "have you, then, reason to think him innocent?"

M. Daburon's spite was so plainly visible in the tone of his words that M. de Commarin could and ought to have seen the semblance of an insult. He started, evidently offended, and rising, said: "I am now no more a witness for, than I was a moment ago a witness against. I desire only to render what assistance I can to justice, in accordance with my duty."

"Confound it," said M. Daburon to himself, "here I have offended him now! Is this the way to do things, making mistake after mistake?"

"The facts are these," resumed the count. "Yesterday, after having spoken to me of these cursed letters, Albert began to set a trap to discover the truth,—for he still had doubts, Noel Gerdy not having obtained the complete correspondence. An animated discussion arose between us. He declared his resolution to give way to Noel. I, on the other hand, was resolved to compromise the matter, cost what it might. Albert dared to oppose me. All my efforts to convert him to my views were useless. Vainly I tried to touch those chords in his breast which I supposed the most sensitive. He firmly repeated his intention to retire in spite of me, declaring himself satisfied, if I would consent to allow him a modest competence. I again attempted to shake him, by showing him that his marriage, so ardently looked forward to for two years, would be broken off by this blow. He replied that he felt sure of the constancy of his betrothed, Mademoiselle d'Arlange."

This name fell like a thunderbolt upon the ears of the investigating magistrate. He jumped in his chair. Feeling that his face was turning crimson, he took up a large bundle of papers from his table, and, to hide his emotion, he raised them to his face, as though trying to decipher an illegible word. He began to understand the difficult duty with which he was charged. He knew that he was troubled like a child, having neither his usual calmness nor

THE LEROUGE CASE

foresight. He felt that he might commit the most serious blunders. Why had he undertaken this investigation? Could he preserve himself quite free from bias? Did he think his will would be perfectly impartial? Gladly would he put off to another time the further examination of the count; but could he? His conscience told him that this would be another blunder. He renewed, then, the painful examination.

"Sir," said he, "the sentiments expressed by the viscount are very fine, without doubt; but did he not mention Widow Lerouge?"

"Yes," replied the count, who appeared suddenly to brighten, as by the remembrance of some unnoticed circumstances,—"yes, certainly."

"He must have shown you that this woman's testimony rendered a struggle with M. Gerdy impossible."

"Precisely; sir; and, aside from the question of duty, it was upon that that he based his refusal to follow my wishes."

"It will be necessary, count, for you to repeat to me very exactly all that passed between the viscount and yourself. Appeal, then, I beseech you, to your memory, and try to repeat his own words as nearly as possible."

M. de Commarin could do so without much difficulty. For some little time, a salutary reaction had taken place within him. His blood, excited by the persistence of the examination, moved in its accustomed course. His brain cleared itself.

The scene of the previous evening was admirably presented to his memory, even to the most insignificant details. The sound of Albert's voice was still in his ears; he saw again his expressive gestures. As his story advanced, alive with clearness and precision, M. Daburon's conviction became more confirmed.

The magistrate turned against Albert precisely that which the day before had won the count's admiration.

"What wonderful acting!" thought he. "Tabaret is decidedly possessed of second sight. To his inconceivable boldness, this young man joins an infernal cleverness. The genius of crime itself inspires him. It is a miracle that we are able to unmask him. How well everything was foreseen and arranged? How marvellously this scene with his father was brought about, in order to procure doubt in case of discovery? There is not a sentence which lacks a purpose, which does not tend to ward off suspicion. What refinement of execution! What excessive care for details! Nothing is wanting, not even the great devotion of his betrothed. Has he really informed Claire? Probably I might find out; but I should have to see her again, to speak to her. Poor child! to love such a man! But his plan is now fully exposed. His discussion with the count was his plank of safety. It committed him to nothing, and gained time. He would of course raise objections, since they would only end by binding him the more firmly in his father's heart. He could thus make a merit of his compliance, and would ask a reward for his weakness. And, when Noel returned to the charge, he would find himself in presence of the count, who would boldly deny everything, politely refuse to have anything to do with him and would possibly have him driven out of the house, as an impostor and forger."

It was a strange coincidence, but yet easily explained, that M. de Commarin, while telling his story, arrived at the same ideas as the magistrate, and at conclusions almost identical. In fact, why that persistence with respect to Claudine? He remembered plainly, that, in his anger, he had said to his son, "Mankind is not in the habit of doing such fine actions for its own satisfaction." That great disinterestedness was now explained.

When the count had ceased speaking, M. Daburon said: "I thank you, sir. I can say nothing positive; but justice has weighty reasons to believe that, in the scene which you have just related to me, Viscount Albert played a part previously arranged."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"And well arranged," murmured the count; "for he deceived me!"

He was interrupted by the entrance of Noel, who carried under his arm a black shagreen portfolio, ornamented with his monogram.

The barrister bowed to the old gentleman, who in his turn rose and retired politely to the end of the room.

"Sir," said Noel, in an undertone to the magistrate, "you will find all the letters in this portfolio. I must ask permission to leave you at once, as Madame Gerdy's condition grows hourly more alarming."

Noel had raised his voice a little, in pronouncing these last words; and the count heard them. He started, and made a great effort to restrain the question which leaped from his heart to his lips.

"You must however give me a moment, my dear sir," replied the magistrate.

M. Daburon then quitted his chair, and, taking the barrister by the hand, led him to the count.

"M. de Commarin," said he, "I have the honour of presenting to you M. Noel Gerdy."

M. de Commarin was probably expecting some scene of this kind: for not a muscle of his face moved: he remained perfectly calm. Noel, on his side, was like a man who had received a blow on the head; he staggered, and was obliged to seek support from the back of a chair.

Then these two, father and son, stood face to face, apparently deep in thought, but in reality examining one another with mutual distrust, each striving to gather something of the other's thoughts.

M. Daburon had augured better results from this meeting, which he had been awaiting ever since the count's arrival. He had expected that this abrupt presentation would bring about an intensely pathetic scene, which would not give his two witnesses time for reflection. The count would open his arms: Noel would throw himself into them; and this reconciliation would only await the sanction of the tribunals, to be complete.

The coldness of the one, the embarrassment of the other, disconcerted his plans. He therefore thought it necessary to intervene.

"Count," said he reproachfully, "remember that it was only a few minutes ago that you admitted that M. Gerdy was your legitimate son."

M. de Commarin made no reply; to judge from his lack of emotion, he could not have heard.

So Noel, summoning all his courage, ventured to speak first,— "Sir," he stammered, "I entertain no—"

"You may call me father," interrupted the haughty old man, in a tone which was by no means affectionate. Then addressing the magistrate he said: "Can I be of any further use to you, sir?"

"Only to hear your evidence read over," replied M. Daburon, "and to sign it if you find everything correct. You can proceed, Constant," he added.

The tall clerk turned half round on his chair and commenced. He had a peculiar way of jabbering over what he had scrawled. He read very quickly, all at a stretch, without paying the least attention to either full stops or commas, questions or replies; but went on reading as long as his breath lasted. When he could go on no longer, he took a breath, and then continued as before. Unconsciously, he reminded one of a diver, who every now and then

THE LEROUGE CASE

raises his head above water, obtains a supply of air, and disappears again. Noel was the only one to listen attentively to the reading, which to unpractised ears was unintelligible. It apprised him of many things which it was important for him to know. At last Constant pronounced the words, "In testimony whereof," etc., which end all official reports in France.

He handed the pen to the count, who signed without hesitation. The old nobleman then turned towards Noel.

"I am not very strong," he said; "you must therefore, my son," emphasizing the word, "help your father to his carriage."

The young barrister advanced eagerly. His face brightened, as he passed the count's arm through his own. When they were gone, M. Daburon could not resist a impulse of curiosity. He hastened to the door, which he opened slightly; and, keeping his body in the background that he might not himself be seen, he looked out into the passage. The count and Noel had not yet reached the end. They were going slowly. The count seemed to drag heavily and painfully along; the barrister took short steps, bending slightly towards his father; and all his movements were marked with the greatest solicitude. The magistrate remained watching them until they passed out of sight at the end of the gallery. Then he returned to his seat, heaving a deep sigh.

"At least," thought he, "I have helped to make one person happy. The day will not be entirely a bad one."

But he had no time to give way to his thoughts, the hours flew by so quickly. He wished to interrogate Albert as soon as possible; and he had still to receive the evidence of several of the count's servants, and the report of the commissary of police charged with the arrest. The servants who had been waiting their turn a long while were now brought in without delay, and examined separately. They had but little information to give; but the testimony of each was so to say a fresh accusation. It was easy to see that all believed their master guilty.

Albert's conduct since the beginning of the fatal week, his least words, his most insignificant movements, were reported, commented upon, and explained.

The man who lives in the midst of thirty servants is like an insect in a glass box under the magnifying glass of a naturalist. Not one of his acts escapes their notice: he can scarcely have a secret of his own; and, if they cannot divine what it, they at least know that he has one. From morn till night he is the point of observation for thirty pairs of eyes, interested in studying the slightest changes in his countenance.

The magistrate obtained, therefore, an abundance of those frivolous details which seem nothing at first; but the slightest of which may, at the trial, become a question of life or death.

By combining these depositions, reconciling them and putting them in order, M. Daburon was able to follow his prisoner hour by hour from the Sunday morning.

Directly Noel left, the viscount gave orders that all visitors should be informed that he had gone into the country. From that moment, the whole household perceived that something had gone wrong with him, that he was very much annoyed, or very unwell.

He did not leave his study on that day, but had his dinner brought up to him. He ate very little,—only some soup, and a very thin fillet of sole with white wine. While eating, he said to M. Contois, the butler: "Remind the cook to spice the sauce a little more, in future," and then added in a low tone, "Ah! to what purpose?" In the evening he dismissed his servants from all duties, saying, "Go, and amuse yourselves." He expressly warned them not to disturb him unless he rang.

THE LEROUGE CASE

On the Monday, he did not get up until noon, although usually an early riser. He complained of a violent headache, and of feeling sick. He took, however a cup of tea. He ordered his brougham, but almost immediately countermanded the order. Lubin, his valet, heard him say: "I am hesitating too much;" and a few moments later, "I must make up my mind." Shortly afterwards he began writing.

He then gave Lubin a letter to carry to Mademoiselle Claire d'Arlange, with orders to deliver it only to herself or to Mademoiselle Schmidt, the governess. A second letter, containing two thousand franc notes, was intrusted to Joseph, to be taken to the viscount's club. Joseph no longer remembered the name of the person to whom the letter was addressed; but it was not a person of title. That evening, Albert only took a little soup, and remained shut up in his room.

He rose early on the Tuesday. He wandered about the house, as though he were in great trouble, or impatiently awaiting something which did not arrive. On his going into the garden, the gardener asked his advice concerning a lawn. He replied, "You had better consult the count upon his return."

He did not breakfast any more than the day before. About one o'clock, he went down to stables, and caressed, with an air of sadness, his favorite mare, Norma. Stroking her neck, he said, "Poor creature! poor old girl!"

"At three o'clock, a messenger arrived with a letter. The viscount took it, and opened it hastily. He was then near the flower-garden. Two footmen distinctly heard him say, "She cannot resist." He returned to the house, and burnt the letter in the large stove in the hall.

As he was sitting down to dinner, at six o'clock, two of his friends, M. de Courtivois and the Marquis de Chouze, insisted upon seeing him, in spite of all orders. They would not be refused. These gentlemen were anxious for him to join them in some pleasure party, but he declined, saying that he had a very important appointment.

At dinner he ate a little more than on the previous days. He even asked the butler for a bottle of Chateau-Lafitte, the whole of which he drank himself. While taking his coffee, he smoked a cigar in the dining room, contrary to the rules of the house. At half-past seven, according to Joseph and two footmen, or at eight according to the Swiss porter and Lubin, the viscount went out on foot, taking an umbrella with him. He returned home at two o'clock in the morning, and at once dismissed his valet, who had waited up for him.

On entering the viscount's room on the Wednesday, the valet was struck with the condition in which he found his master's clothes. They were wet, and stained with mud; the trousers were torn. He ventured to make a remark about them. Albert replied, in a furious manner, "Throw the old things in a corner, ready to be given away."

He appeared to be much better all that day. He breakfasted with a good appetite; and the butler noticed that he was in excellent spirits. He passed the afternoon in the library, and burnt a pile of papers.

On the Thursday, he again seemed very unwell. He was scarcely able to go and meet the count. That evening, after his interview with his father, he went to his room looking extremely ill. Lubin wanted to run for the doctor: he forbade him to do so, or to mention to any one that he was not well.

Such was the substance of twenty large pages, which the tall clerk had covered with writing, without once turning his head to look at the witnesses who passed by in their fine livery.

M. Daburon managed to obtain this evidence in less than two hours. Though well aware of the importance of their testimony, all these servants were very voluble. The difficulty was, to stop them when they had once started. From all they said, it appeared that Albert was a very good master,—easily served, kind and polite to his servants. Wonderful to relate! there were found only three among them who did not appear perfectly delighted at the misfortune which had befallen the family. Two were greatly distressed. M. Lubin, although he had been an object

THE LEROUGE CASE

of especial kindness, was not one of these.

The turn of the commissary of police had now come. In a few words, he gave an account of the arrest, already described by old Tabaret. He did not forget to mention the one word "Lost," which had escaped Albert; to his mind, it was a confession. He then delivered all the articles seized in the Viscount de Commarin's apartments.

The magistrate carefully examined these things, and compared them closely with the scraps of evidence gathered at La Jonchere. He soon appeared, more than ever, satisfied with the course he had taken.

He then placed all these material proofs upon his table, and covered them over with three or four large sheets of paper.

The day was far advanced; and M. Daburon had no more than sufficient time to examine the prisoner before night. He now remembered that he had tasted nothing since morning; and he sent hastily for a bottle of wine and some biscuits. It was not strength, however, that the magistrate needed; it was courage. All the while that he was eating and drinking, his thoughts kept repeating this strange sentence, "I am about to appear before the Viscount de Commarin." At any other time, he would have laughed at the absurdity of the idea, but, at this moment, it seemed to him like the will of Providence.

"So be it," said he to himself; "this is my punishment."

And immediately he gave the necessary orders for Viscount Albert to be brought before him.

XII.

ALBERT scarcely noticed his removal from home to the seclusion of the prison. Snatched away from his painful thoughts by the harsh voice of the commissary, saying, "In the name of the law I arrest you," his mind, completely upset, was a long time in recovering its equilibrium. Everything that followed appeared to him to float indistinctly in a thick mist, like those dream-scenes represented on the stage behind a quadruple curtain of gauze.

To the questions put to him he replied, without knowing what he said. Two police agents took hold of his arms, and helped him down the stairs. He could not have walked down alone. His limbs, which bent beneath him, refused their support. The only thing he understood of all that was said around him was that the count had been struck with apoplexy; but even that he soon forgot.

They lifted him into the cab, which was waiting in the court-yard at the foot of the steps, rather ashamed at finding itself such a place; and they placed him on the back seat. Two police agents installed themselves in front of him while a third mounted the box by the side of the driver. During the drive, he did not at all realize his situation. He lay perfectly motionless in the dirty, greasy vehicle. His body, which followed every jolt, scarcely allayed by the worn-out springs, rolled from one side to the other and his head oscillated on his shoulders, as if the muse of his neck were broken. He thought of Widow Lerouge. He recalled her as she was when he went with his father to La Jonchere. It was in the spring-time; and the hawthorn blossoms scented the air. The old woman, in a white cap, stood at her garden gate: she spoke beseechingly. The count looked sternly at her as he listened, then, taking some gold from his purse, he gave it to her.

On arriving at their destination they lifted him out of the cab, the same way as they had lifted him in at starting.

During the formality of entering his name in the jail-book in the dingy, stinking record office, and whilst replying mechanically to everything, he gave himself up with delight to recollections of Claire. He went back to the time of the early days of their love, when he doubted whether he would ever have the happiness of being loved by her in

THE LEROUGE CASE

return; when they used to meet at Mademoiselle Goello's.

This old maid had a house on the left bank of the Seine furnished in the most eccentric manner. On all the dining-room furniture, and on the mantel-piece, were placed a dozen or fifteen stuffed dogs, of various breeds, which together or successively had helped to cheer the maiden's lonely hours. She loved to relate stories of these pets whose affection had never failed her. Some were grotesque, others horrible. One especially, outrageously stuffed seemed ready to burst. How many times he and Claire had laughed at it until the tears came!

The officials next began to search him. This crowning humiliation, these rough hands passing all over his body brought him somewhat to himself, and roused his anger. But it was already over; and they at once dragged him along the dark corridors, over the filthy, slippery floor. They opened a door, and pushed him into a small cell. He then heard them lock and bolt the door.

He was a prisoner, and, in accordance with special orders, in solitary confinement. He immediately felt a marked sensation of comfort. He was alone.

No more stifled whispers, harsh voices, implacable questions, sounded in his ears. A profound silence reigned around. It seemed to him that he had forever escaped from society; and he rejoiced at it. He would have felt relieved, had this even been the silence of the grave. His body, as well as his mind, was weighed down with weariness. He wanted to sit down, when he perceived a small bed, to the right, in front of the grated window, which let in the little light there was. This bed was as welcome to him as a plank would be to a drowning man. He threw himself upon it, and lay down with delight; but he felt cold, so he unfolded the coarse woollen coverlid, and wrapping it about him, was soon sound asleep.

In the corridor, two detectives, one still young, the other rather old, applied alternately their eyes and ears to the peep-hole in the door, watching every movement of the prisoner; "What a fellow he is!" murmured the younger officer. "If a man has no more nerve than that, he ought to remain honest. He won't care much about his looks the morning of his execution, eh, M. Balan?"

"That depends," replied the other. "We must wait and see. Lecoq told me that he was a terrible rascal."

"Ah! look he arranges his bed, and lies down. Can he be going to sleep? That's good! It's the first time I ever saw such a thing."

"It is because, comrade, you have only had dealings with the smaller rogues. All rascals of position—and I have had to do with more than one—are this sort. At the moment of arrest, they are incapable of anything; their heart fails them; but they recover themselves next day."

"Upon my word, one would say he has gone to sleep! What a joke!"

"I tell you, my friend," added the old man, pointedly, "that nothing is more natural. I am sure that, since the blow was struck, this young fellow has hardly lived: his body has been all on fire. Now he knows that his secret is out; and that quiets him."

"Ha, ha! M. Balan, you are joking: you say that that quiets him?"

"Certainly. There is no greater punishment, remember, than anxiety; everything is preferable. If you only possessed an income of ten thousand francs, I would show you a way to prove this. I would tell you to go to Hamburg and risk your entire fortune on one chance at rouge et noir. You could relate to me, afterwards, what your feelings were while the ball was rolling. It is, my boy, as though your brain was being torn with pincers, as though molten lead was being poured into your bones, in place of marrow. This anxiety is so strong, that one feels

THE LEROUGE CASE

relieved, one breathes again, even when one has lost. It is ruin; but then the anxiety is over."

"Really, M. Balan, one would think that you yourself had had just such an experience."

"Alas! sighed the old detective, "it is to my love for the queen of spades, my unhappy love, that you owe the honour of looking through this peephole in my company. But this fellow will sleep for a couple of hours, do not lose sight of him; I am going to smoke a cigarette in the courtyard."

Albert slept four hours. On awaking his head seemed clearer than it had been ever since his interview with Noel. It was a terrible moment for him, when, for the first time he became fully aware of his situation.

"Now, indeed," said he, "I require all my courage."

He longed to see some one, to speak, to be questioned, to explain. He felt a desire to call out.

"But what good would that be?" he asked himself. "Some one will be coming soon." He looked for his watch, to see what time it was, and found that they had taken it away. He felt this deeply; they were treating him like the most abandoned of villains. He felt in his pockets: they had all been carefully emptied. He thought now of his personal appearance; and, getting up, he repaired as much as possible the disorder of his toilet. He put his clothes in order, and dusted them; he straightened his collar, and re-tied his cravat. Then pouring a little water on his handkerchief, he passed it over his face, bathing his eyes which were greatly inflamed. Then he endeavoured to smooth his beard and hair. He had no idea that four lynx eyes were fixed upon him all the while.

"Good!" murmured the young detective: "see how our cock sticks up his comb, and smooths his feathers!"

"I told you," put in Balan, "that he was only staggered. Hush! he is speaking, I believe."

But they neither surprised one of those disordered gestures nor one of those incoherent speeches, which almost always escape from the feeble when excited by fear, or from the imprudent ones who believe in the discretion of their cells. One word alone, "honour," reached the ears of the two spies.

"These rascals of rank," grumbled Balan, "always have this word in their mouths. That which they most fear is the opinion of some dozen friends, and several thousand strangers, who read the 'Gazette des Tribunaux.' They only think of their own heads later on."

When the gendarmes came to conduct Albert before the investigating magistrate, they found him seated on the side of his bed, his feet pressed upon the iron rail, his elbows on his knees, and his head buried in his hands. He rose, as they entered, and took a few steps towards them; but his throat was so dry that he was scarcely able to speak. He asked for a moment, and, turning towards the little table, he filled and drank two large glassfuls of water in succession.

"I am ready!" he then said. And, with a firm step, he followed the gendarmes along the passage which led to the Palais de Justice.

M. Daburon was just then in great anguish. He walked furiously up and down his office, awaiting the prisoner. Again, and for the twentieth time since morning, he regretted having engaged in the business.

"Curse this absurd point of honour, which I have obeyed," he inwardly exclaimed. "I have in vain attempted to reassure myself by the aid of sophisms. I was wrong in not withdrawing. Nothing in the world can change my feelings towards this young man. I hate him. I am his judge; and it is no less true, that at one time I longed to assassinate him. I faced him with a revolver in my hand: why did I not present it and fire? Do I know why? What

THE LEROUGE CASE

power held my finger, when an almost insensible pressure would have sufficed to kill him? I cannot say. Why is not he the judge, I the assassin? If the intention was as punishable as the deed, I ought to be guillotined. And it is under such conditions that I dare examine him!"

Passing before the door he heard the heavy footsteps of the gendarmes in the passage.

"It is he," he said aloud and then hastily seated himself at his table, bending over his portfolios, as though striving to hide himself. If the tall clerk had used his eyes, he would have noticed the singular spectacle of an investigating magistrate more agitated than the prisoner he was about to examine. But he was blind to all around him; and, at this moment, he was only aware of an error of fifteen centimes, which had slipped into his accounts, and which he was unable to rectify.

Albert entered the magistrate's office with his head erect. His features bore traces of great fatigue and of sleepless nights. He was very pale; but his eyes were clear and sparkling.

The usual questions which open such examinations gave M. Daburon an opportunity to recover himself. Fortunately, he had found time in the morning to prepare a plan, which he had now simply to follow.

"You are aware, sir," he commenced in a tone of perfect politeness, "that you have no right to the name you bear?"

"I know, sir," replied Albert, "that I am the natural son of M. de Commarin. I know further that my father would be unable to recognise me, even if he wished to, since I was born during his married life."

"What were your feelings upon learning this?"

"I should speak falsely, sir, if I said I did not feel very bitterly. When one is in the high position I occupied, the fall is terrible. However, I never for a moment entertained the thought of contesting M. Noel Gerdy's rights. I always purposed, and still purpose, to yield, I have so informed M. de Commarin."

M. Daburon expected just such a reply; and it only strengthened his suspicions. Did it not enter into the line of defence which he had foreseen? It was now his duty to seek some way of demolishing this defence, in which the prisoner evidently meant to shut himself up like a tortoise in its shell.

"You could not oppose M. Gerdy," continued the magistrate, "with any chance of success. You had, indeed on your side, the count, and your mother; but M. Gerdy was in possession of evidence that was certain to win his cause, that of Widow Lerouge."

"I have never doubted that, sir."

"Now continued the magistrate, seeking to hide the look which he fastened upon Albert, "justice supposes that, to do away with the only existing proof, you have assassinated Widow Lerouge."

This terrible accusation, terribly emphasised, caused no change in Albert's features. He preserved the same firm bearing, without bravado.

"Before God," he answered, "and by all that is most sacred on earth, I swear to you, sir, that I am innocent! I am at this moment a close prisoner, without communication with the outer world, reduced consequently to the most absolute helplessness. It is through your probity that I hope to demonstrate my innocence."

"What an actor!" thought the magistrate. "Can crime be so strong as this?"

THE LEROUGE CASE

He glanced over his papers, reading certain passages of the preceding depositions, turning down the corners of certain pages which contained important information. Then suddenly he resumed, "When you were arrested, you cried out, 'I am lost,' what did you mean by that?"

"Sir," replied Albert, "I remember having uttered those words. When I knew of what crime I was accused, I was overwhelmed with consternation. My mind was, as it were, enlightened by a glimpse of the future. In a moment, I perceived all the horror of my situation. I understood the weight of the accusation, its probability, and the difficulties I should have in defending myself. A voice cried out to me, 'Who was most interested in Claudine's death?' And the knowledge of my imminent peril forced from me the exclamation you speak of."

His explanation was more than plausible, was possible, and even likely. It had the advantage, too, of anticipating the axiom, "Search out the one whom the crime will benefit!" Tabaret had spoken truly, when he said that they would not easily make the prisoner confess.

M. Daburon admired Albert's presence of mind, and the resources of his perverse imagination.

"You do indeed," continued the magistrate, "appear to have had the greatest interest in this death. Moreover, I will inform you that robbery was not the object of the crime. The things thrown into the Seine have been recovered. We know, also, that all the widow's papers were burnt. Could they compromise any one but yourself? If you know of any one, speak."

"What can I answer, sir? Nothing."

"Have you often gone to see this woman?"

"Three or four times with my father."

"One of your coachmen pretends to have driven you there at least ten times."

"The man is mistaken. But what matters the number of visits?"

"Do you recollect the arrangements of the rooms? Can you describe them?"

"Perfectly, sir: there were two. Claudine slept in the back room."

"You were in no way a stranger to Widow Lerouge. If you had knocked one evening at her window—shutter, do you think she would have let you in?"

"Certainly, sir, and eagerly."

"You have been unwell these last few days?"

"Very unwell, to say the least, sir. My body bent under the weight of a burden too great for my strength. It was not, however, for want of courage."

"Why did you forbid your valet, Lubin, to call in the doctor?"

"Ah, sir, how could the doctor cure my disease? All his science could not make me the legitimate son of the Count de Commarin."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Some very singular remarks made by you were overheard. You seemed to be no longer interested in anything concerning your home. You destroyed a large number of papers and letters."

"I had decided to leave the count, sir. My resolution explains my conduct."

Albert replied promptly to the magistrate's questions, without the least embarrassment, and in a confident tone. His voice, which was very pleasant to the ear, did not tremble. It concealed no emotion; it retained its pure and vibrating sound.

M. Daburon deemed it wise to suspend the examination for a short time. With so cunning an adversary, he was evidently pursuing a false course. To proceed in detail was folly, he neither intimidated the prisoner, nor made him break through his reserve. It was necessary to take him unawares.

"Sir," resumed the magistrate, abruptly, "tell me exactly how you passed your time last Tuesday evening, from six o'clock until midnight?"

For the first time, Albert seemed disconcerted. His glance, which had, till then, been fixed upon the magistrate, wavered.

"During Tuesday evening," he stammered, repeating the phrase to gain time.

"I have him," thought the magistrate, starting with joy, and then added aloud, "yes, from six o'clock until midnight."

"I am afraid, sir," answered Albert, "it will be difficult for me to satisfy you. I haven't a very good memory."

"Oh, don't tell me that!" interrupted the magistrate. "If I had asked what you were doing three months ago, on a certain evening, and at a certain hour, I could understand your hesitation; but this is about Tuesday, and it is now Friday. Moreover, this day, so close, was the last of the carnival; it was Shrove Tuesday. That circumstance ought to help your memory."

"That evening, I went out walking," murmured Albert.

"Now," continued the magistrate, "where did you dine?"

"At home, as usual."

"No, not as usual. At the end of your meal, you asked for a bottle of Bordeaux, of which you drank the whole. You doubtless had need of some extra excitement for your subsequent plans."

"I had no plans," replied the prisoner with very evident uneasiness.

"You make a mistake. Two friends came to seek you. You replied to them, before sitting down to dinner, that you had a very important engagement to keep,"

"That was only a polite way of getting rid of them."

"Why?"

"Can you not understand, sir? I was resigned, but not comforted. I was learning to get accustomed to the terrible blow. Would not one seek solitude in the great crisis of one's life?"

THE LEROUGE CASE

"The prosecution pretends that you wished to be left alone, that you might go to La Jonchere. During the day, you said, 'She can not resist me.' Of whom were you speaking?"

"Of some one to whom I had written the evening before, and who had replied to me. I spoke the words, with her letter still in my hands."

"This letter was, then, from a woman?"

"Yes."

"What have you done with it?"

"I have burnt it."

"This precaution leads one to suppose that you considered the letter compromising."

"Not at all, sir; it treated entirely of private matters."

M. Daburon was sure that this letter came from Mademoiselle d'Arlange. Should he nevertheless ask the question, and again hear pronounced the name of Claire, which always aroused such painful emotions within him? He ventured to do so, leaning over his papers, so that the prisoner could not detect his emotion.

"From whom did this letter come?" he asked.

"From one whom I can not name."

"Sir," said the magistrate severely, "I will not conceal from you that your position is greatly compromised. Do not aggravate it by this culpable reticence. You are here to tell everything, sir."

"My own affairs, yes, not those of others."

Albert gave this last answer in a dry tone. He was giddy, flurried, exasperated, by the prying and irritating mode of the examination, which scarcely gave him time to breathe. The magistrate's questions fell upon him more thickly than the blows of the blacksmith's hammer upon the red-hot iron which he is anxious to beat into shape before it cools.

The apparent rebellion of his prisoner troubled M. Daburon a great deal. He was further extremely surprised to find the discernment of the old detective at fault; just as though Tabaret were infallible. Tabaret had predicted an unexceptionable /alibi/; and this /alibi/ was not forthcoming. Why? Had this subtle villain something better than that? What artful defence had he to fall back upon? Doubtless he kept in reserve some unforeseen stroke, perhaps irresistible.

"Gently," thought the magistrate. "I have not got him yet." Then he quickly added aloud: "Continue. After dinner what did you do?"

"I went out for a walk."

"Not immediately. The bottle emptied, you smoked a cigar in the dining-room, which was so unusual as to be noticed. What kind of cigars do you usually smoke?"

"Trabucos."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Do you not use a cigar-holder, to keep your lips from contact with the tobacco?"

"Yes, sir," replied Albert, much surprised at this series of questions.

"At what time did you go out?"

"About eight o'clock."

"Did you carry an umbrella?"

"Yes."

"Where did you go?"

"I walked about."

"Alone, without any object, all the evening?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now trace out your wanderings for me very carefully."

"Ah, sir, that is very difficult to do! I went out simply to walk about, for the sake of exercise, to drive away the torpor which had depressed me for three days. I don't know whether you can picture to yourself my exact condition. I was half out of my mind. I walked about at hazard along the quays. I wandered through the streets,—"

"All that is very improbable," interrupted the magistrate. M. Daburon, however, knew that it was at least possible. Had not he himself, one night, in a similar condition, traversed all Paris? What reply could he have made, had some one asked him next morning where he had been, except that he had not paid attention, and did not know? But he had forgotten this; and his previous hesitations, too, had all vanished.

As the inquiry advanced, the fever of investigation took possession of him. He enjoyed the emotions of the struggle, his passion for his calling became stronger than ever.

He was again an investigating magistrate, like the fencing master, who, once practising with his dearest friend, became excited by the clash of the weapons, and, forgetting himself, killed him.

"So," resumed M. Daburon, "you met absolutely no one who can affirm that he saw you? You did not speak to a living soul? You entered no place, not even a cafe or a theatre, or a tobacconist's to light one of your favourite trabucos?"

"No, sir."

"Well, it is a great misfortune for you, yes, a very great misfortune; for I must inform you, that it was precisely during this Tuesday evening, between eight o'clock and midnight, that Widow Lerouge was assassinated. Justice can point out the exact hour. Again, sir, in your own interest, I recommend you to reflect,—to make a strong appeal to your memory."

This pointing out of the exact day and hour of the murder seemed to astound Albert. He raised his hand to his forehead with a despairing gesture. However he replied in a calm voice,—"I am very unfortunate, sir: but I can

THE LEROUGE CASE

recollect nothing."

M. Daburon's surprise was immense. What, not an /alibi/? Nothing? This could be no snare nor system of defence. Was, then, this man as cunning as he had imagined? Doubtless. Only he had been taken unawares. He had never imagined it possible for the accusation to fall upon him; and it was almost by a miracle it had done so.

The magistrate slowly raised, one by one, the large pieces of paper that covered the articles seized in Albert's rooms.

"We will pass," he continued, "to the examination of the charges which weigh against you. Will you please come nearer? Do you recognize these articles as belonging to yourself?"

"Yes, sir, they are all mine."

"Well, take this foil. Who broke it?"

"I, sir, in fencing with M. de Courtivois, who can bear witness to it."

"He will be heard. Where is the broken end?"

"I do not know. You must ask Lubin, my valet."

"Exactly. He declares that he has hunted for it, and cannot find it. I must tell you that the victim received the fatal blow from the sharpened end of a broken foil. This piece of stuff, on which the assassin wiped his weapon, is a proof of what I state."

"I beseech you, sir, to order a most minute search to be made. It is impossible that the other half of the foil is not to be found."

"Orders shall be given to that effect. Look, here is the exact imprint of the murderer's foot traced on this sheet of paper. I will place one of your boots upon it and the sole, as you perceive, fits the tracing with the utmost precision. This plaster was poured into the hollow left by the heel: you observe that it is, in all respects, similar in shape to the heels of your own boots. I perceive, too, the mark of a peg, which appears in both."

Albert followed with marked anxiety every movement of the magistrate. It was plain that he was struggling against a growing terror. Was he attacked by that fright which overpowers the guilty when they see themselves on the point of being confounded. To all the magistrate's remarks, he answered in a low voice,— "It is true—perfectly true."

"That is so," continued M. Daburon; "yet listen further, before attempting to defend yourself. The criminal had an umbrella. The end of this umbrella sank in the clayey soil; the round of wood which is placed at the end of the silk, was found moulded in the clay. Look at this clod of clay, raised with the utmost care; and now look at your umbrella. Compare the rounds. Are they alike, or not?"

"These things, sir," attempted Albert, "are manufactured in large quantities."

"Well, we will pass over that proof. Look at this cigar end, found on the scene of the crime, and tell me of what brand it is, and how it was smoked."

"It is a trabucos, and was smoked in a cigar-holder."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Like these?" persisted the magistrate, pointing to the cigars and the amber and meerschaum-holders found in the viscount's library.

"Yes!" murmured Albert, "it is a fatality—a strange coincidence."

"Patience, that is nothing, as yet. The assassin wore gloves. The victim, in the death struggle, seized his hands; and some pieces of kid remained in her nails. These have been preserved, and are here. They are of a lavender colour, are they not? Now, here are the gloves which you wore on Tuesday. They, too, are lavender, and they are frayed. Compare these pieces of kid with your own gloves. Do they not correspond? Are they not of the same colour, the same skin?"

It was useless to deny it, equivocate, or seek subterfuges. The evidence was there, and it was irrefutable. While appearing to occupy himself solely with the objects lying upon his table, M. Daburon did not lose sight of the prisoner. Albert was terrified. A cold perspiration bathed his temples, and glided drop by drop down his cheeks. His hands trembled so much that they were of no use to him. In a chilling voice he kept repeating: "It is horrible, horrible!"

"Finally," pursued the inexorable magistrate, "here are the trousers you wore on the evening of the murder. It is plain that not long ago they were very wet; and, besides the mud on them, there are traces of earth. Besides that they are torn at the knees. We will admit, for the moment that you might not remember where you went on that evening; but who would believe that you do not know when you tore your trousers and how you frayed your gloves?"

What courage could resist such assaults? Albert's firmness and energy were at an end. His brain whirled. He fell heavily into a chair, exclaiming,— "It is enough to drive me mad!"

"Do you admit," insisted the magistrate, whose gaze had become firmly fixed upon the prisoner, "do you admit that Widow Lerouge could only have been stabbed by you?"

"I admit," protested Albert, "that I am the victim of one of those terrible fatalities which make men doubt the evidence of their reason. I am innocent."

"Then tell me where you passed Tuesday evening."

"Ah, sir!" cried the prisoner, "I should have to—" But, restraining himself, he added in a faint voice, "I have made the only answer that I can make."

M. Daburon rose, having now reached his grand stroke.

"It is, then, my duty," said he, with a shade of irony, "to supply your failure of memory. I am going to remind you of where you went and what you did. On Tuesday evening at eight o'clock, after having obtained from the wine you drank, the dreadful energy you needed, you left your home. At thirty-five minutes past eight, you took the train at the St. Lazare station. At nine o'clock, you alighted at the station at Rueil."

And, not disdaining to employ Tabaret's ideas, the investigating magistrate repeated nearly word for word the tirade improvised the night before by the amateur detective.

He had every reason, while speaking, to admire the old fellow's penetration. In all his life, his eloquence had never produced so striking an effect. Every sentence, every word, told. The prisoner's assurance, already shaken, fell little by little, just like the outer coating of a wall when riddled with bullets.

THE LEROUGE CASE

Albert was, as the magistrate perceived, like a man, who, rolling to the bottom of a precipice, sees every branch and every projecture which might retard his fall fail him, and who feels a new and more painful bruise each time his body comes in contact with them.

"And now," concluded the investigating magistrate, "listen to good advice: do not persist in a system of denying, impossible to sustain. Give in. Justice, rest assured, is ignorant of nothing which it is important to know. Believe me; seek to deserve the indulgence of your judges, confess your guilt."

M. Daburon did not believe that his prisoner would still persist in asserting his innocence. He imagined he would be overwhelmed and confounded, that he would throw himself at his feet, begging for mercy. But he was mistaken.

Albert, in spite of his great prostration, found, in one last effort of his will, sufficient strength to recover himself and again protest,— "You are right, sir," he said in a sad, but firm voice; "everything seems to prove me guilty. In your place, I should have spoken as you have done; yet all the same, I swear to you that I am innocent."

"Come now, do you really—" began the magistrate.

"I am innocent," interrupted Albert; "and I repeat it, without the least hope of changing in any way your conviction. Yes, everything speaks against me, everything, even my own bearing before you. It is true, my courage has been shaken by these incredible, miraculous, overwhelming coincidences. I am overcome, because I feel the impossibility of proving my innocence. But I do not despair. My honour and my life are in the hands of God. At this very hour when to you I appear lost,—for I in no way deceive myself, sir,—I do not despair of a complete justification. I await confidently."

"What do you mean?" asked the magistrate.

"Nothing but what I say, sir."

"So you persist in denying your guilt?"

"I am innocent."

"But this is folly—"

"I am innocent."

"Very well," said M. Daburon; "that is enough for to-day. You will hear the official report of your examination read, and will then be taken back to solitary confinement. I exhort you to reflect. Night will perhaps bring on a better feeling; if you wish at any time to speak to me, send word, and I will come to you. I will give orders to that effect. You may read now, Constant."

When Albert had departed under the escort of the gendarmes, the magistrate muttered in a low tone, "There's an obstinate fellow for you." He certainly no longer entertained the shadow of a doubt. To him, Albert was as surely the murderer as if he had admitted his guilt. Even if he should persist in his system of denial to the end of the investigation, it was impossible, that, with the proofs already in the possession of the police, a true bill should not be found against him. He was therefore certain of being committed for trial at the assizes. It was a hundred to one, that the jury would bring in a verdict of guilty.

Left to himself, however, M. Daburon did not experience that intense satisfaction, mixed with vanity, which he ordinarily felt after he had successfully conducted an examination, and had succeeded in getting his prisoner into

THE LEROUGE CASE

the same position as Albert. Something disturbed and shocked him. At the bottom of his heart, he felt ill at ease. He had triumphed; but his victory gave him only uneasiness, pain, and vexation. A reflection so simple that he could hardly understand why it had not occurred to him at first, increased his discontent, and made him angry with himself.

"Something told me," he muttered, "that I was wrong to undertake this business. I am punished for not having obeyed that inner voice. I ought to have declined to proceed with the investigation. The Viscount de Commarin, was, all the same, certain to be arrested, imprisoned, examined, confounded, tried, and probably condemned. Then, being in no way connected with the trial, I could have reappeared before Claire. Her grief will be great. As her friend, I could have soothed her, mingled my tears with hers, calmed her regrets. With time, she might have been consoled, and perhaps have forgotten him. She could not have helped feeling grateful to me, and then who knows—? While now, whatever may happen, I shall be an object of loathing to her: she will never be able to endure the sight of me. In her eyes I shall always be her lover's assassin. I have with my own hands opened an abyss! I have lost her a second time, and by my own fault."

The unhappy man heaped the bitterest reproaches upon himself. He was in despair. He had never so hated Albert,—that wretch, who, stained with a crime, stood in the way of his happiness. Then too he cursed old Tabaret! Alone, he would not have decided so quickly. He would have waited, thought over the matter, matured his decision, and certainly have perceived the inconveniences, which now occurred to him. The old fellow, always carried away like a badly trained bloodhound, and full of stupid enthusiasm, had confused him, and led him to do what he now so much regretted.

It was precisely this unfavorable moment that M. Tabaret chose for reappearing before the magistrate. He had just been informed of the termination of the inquiry; and he arrived, impatient to know what had passed, swelling with curiosity, and full of the sweet hope of hearing of the fulfilment of his predictions.

"What answers did he make?" he asked even before he had closed the door.

"He is evidently guilty," replied the magistrate, with a harshness very different to his usual manner.

Old Tabaret, who expected to receive praises by the basketful, was astounded at this tone! It was therefore, with great hesitancy that he offered his further services.

"I have come," he said modestly, "to know if any investigations are necessary to demolish the /alibi/ pleaded by the prisoner."

"He pleaded no /alibi/," replied the magistrate, dryly.

"How," cried the detective, "no /alibi/? Pshaw! I ask pardon: he has of course then confessed everything."

"No," said the magistrate impatiently, "he has confessed nothing. He acknowledges that the proofs are decisive: he cannot give an account of how he spent his time; but he protests his innocence."

In the centre of the room, M. Tabaret stood with his mouth wide open, and his eyes staring wildly, and altogether in the most grotesque attitude his astonishment could effect. He was literally thunderstruck. In spite of his anger, M. Daburon could not help smiling; and even Constant gave a grin, which on his lips was equivalent to a paroxysm of laughter.

"Not an /alibi/, nothing?" murmured the old fellow. No explanations? The idea! It is inconceivable! Not an /alibi/? We must then be mistaken: he cannot be the criminal. That is certain!"

THE LEROUGE CASE

The investigating magistrate felt that the old amateur must have been waiting the result of the examination at the wine shop round the corner, or else that he had gone mad.

"Unfortunately," said he, "we are not mistaken. It is but too clearly shown that M. de Commarin is the murderer. However, if you like, you can ask Constant for his report of the examination, and read it over while I put these papers in order."

"Very well," said the old fellow with feverish anxiety.

He sat down in Constant's chair, and, leaning his elbows on the table, thrusting his hands in his hair, he in less than no time read the report through. When he had finished, he arose with pale and distorted features.

"Sir," said he to the magistrate in a strange voice, "I have been the involuntary cause of a terrible mistake. This man is innocent."

"Come, come," said M. Daburon, without stopping his preparations for departure, "you are going out of your mind, my dear M. Tabaret. How, after all that you have read there, can—"

"Yes, sir, yes: it is because I have read this that I entreat you to pause, or we shall add one more mistake to the sad list of judicial errors. Read this examination over carefully; there is not a reply but which declares this unfortunate man innocent, not a word but which throws out a ray of light. And he is still in prison, still in solitary confinement?"

"He is; and there he will remain, if you please," interrupted the magistrate. "It becomes you well to talk in this manner, after the way you spoke last night, when I hesitated so much."

"But, sir," cried the old detective, "I still say precisely the same. Ah, wretched Tabaret! all is lost; no one understands you. Pardon me, sir, if I lack the respect due to you; but you have not grasped my method. It is, however, very simple. Given a crime, with all the circumstances and details, I construct, bit by bit, a plan of accusation, which I do not guarantee until it is entire and perfect. If a man is found to whom this plan applies exactly in every particular the author of the crime is found: otherwise, one has laid hands upon an innocent person. It is not sufficient that such and such particulars seem to point to him; it must be all or nothing. This is infallible. Now, in this case, how have I reached the culprit? Through proceeding by inference from the known to the unknown. I have examined his work; and I have formed an idea of the worker. Reason and logic lead us to what? To a villain, determined, audacious, and prudent, versed in the business. And do you think that such a man would neglect a precaution that would not be omitted by the stupidest tyro? It is inconceivable. What! this man is so skillful as to leave such feeble traces that they escape Gevrol's practised eye, and you think he would risk his safety by leaving an entire night unaccounted for? It's impossible! I am as sure of my system as of a sum that has been proved. The assassin has an /alibi/. Albert has pleaded none; then he is innocent."

M. Daburon surveyed the detective pityingly, much as he would have looked at a remarkable monomaniac. When the old fellow had finished,— "My worthy M. Tabaret," the magistrate said to him: "you have but one fault. You err through an excess of subtlety, you accord too freely to others the wonderful sagacity with which you yourself are endowed. Our man has failed in prudence, simply because he believed his rank would place him above suspicion."

"No, sir, no, a thousand times no. My culprit,—the true one,—he whom we have missed catching, feared everything. Besides, does Albert defend himself? No. He is overwhelmed because he perceives coincidences so fatal that they appear to condemn him, without a chance of escape. Does he try to excuse himself? No. He simply replies, 'It is terrible.' And yet all through his examination I feel reticence that I cannot explain."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"I can explain it very easily; and I am as confident as though he had confessed everything. I have more than sufficient proofs for that."

"Ah, sir, proofs! There are always enough of those against an arrested man. They existed against every innocent man who was ever condemned. Proofs! Why, I had them in quantities against Kaiser, the poor little tailor, who—"

"Well," interrupted the magistrate, hastily, "if it is not he, the most interested one, who committed the crime, who then is it? His father, the Count de Commarin?"

"No: the true assassin is a young man."

M. Daburon had arranged his papers, and finished his preparations. He took up his hat, and, as he prepared to leave, replied: "You must then see that I am right. Come and see me by—and—by, M. Tabaret, and make haste and get rid of all your foolish ideas. To—morrow we will talk the whole matter over again. I am rather tired to—night." Then he added, addressing his clerk, "Constant, look in at the record office, in case the prisoner Commarin should wish to speak to me."

He moved towards the door; but M. Tabaret barred his exit.

"Sir," said the old man, "in the name of heaven listen to me! He is innocent, I swear to you. Help me, then, to find the real culprit. Sir, think of your remorse should you cause an—"

But the magistrate would not hear more. He pushed old Tabaret quickly aside, and hurried out.

The old man now turned to Constant. He wished to convince him. Lost trouble: the tall clerk hastened to put his things away, thinking of his soup, which was getting cold.

So that M. Tabaret soon found himself locked out of the room and alone in the dark passage. All the usual sounds of the Palais had ceased: the place was silent as the tomb. The old detective desperately tore his hair with both hands.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "Albert is innocent; and it is I who have cast suspicion upon him. It is I, fool that I am, who have infused into the obstinate spirit of this magistrate a conviction that I can no longer destroy. He is innocent and is yet enduring the most horrible anguish. Suppose he should commit suicide! There have been instances of wretched men, who in despair at being falsely accused have killed themselves in their cells. Poor boy! But I will not abandon him. I have ruined him: I will save him! I must, I will find the culprit; and he shall pay dearly for my mistake, the scoundrel!"

XIII.

AFTER seeing the Count de Commarin safely in his carriage at the entrance of the Palais de Justice, Noel Gerdy seemed inclined to leave him. Resting one hand against the half—opened carriage door, he bowed respectfully, and said: "When, sir, shall I have the honour of paying my respects to you?"

"Come with me now," said the old nobleman.

The barrister, still leaning forward, muttered some excuses. He had, he said, important business: he must positively return home at once.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Come," repeated the count, in a tone which admitted no reply.

Noel obeyed.

"You have found your father," said M. de Commarin in a low tone; "but I must warn you, that at the same time you lose your independence."

The carriage started; and only then did the count notice that Noel had very modestly seated himself opposite him. This humility seemed to displease him greatly.

"Sit here by my side, sir," he exclaimed; "are you not my son?"

The barrister, without replying, took his seat by the side of the terrible old man, but occupied as little room as possible.

He had been very much upset by his interview with M. Daburon; for he retained none of his usual assurance, none of that exterior coolness by which he was accustomed to conceal his feelings. Fortunately, the ride gave him time to breathe, and to recover himself a little.

On the way from the Palais de Justice to the De Commarin mansion, not a word passed between the father and son. When the carriage stopped before the steps leading to the principal entrance, and the count got out with Noel's assistance, there was great commotion among the servants.

There were, it is true, few of them present, nearly all having been summoned to the Palais; but the count and the barrister had scarcely disappeared, when, as if by enchantment, they were all assembled in the hall. They came from the garden, the stables, the cellar, and the kitchen. Nearly all bore marks of their calling. A young groom appeared with his wooden shoes filled with straw, shuffling about on the marble floor like a mangy dog on a Gobelin tapestry. One of them recognised Noel as the visitor of the previous Sunday; and that was enough to set fire to all these gossip-mongers, thirsting for scandal.

Since morning, moreover, the unusual events at the De Commarin mansion had caused a great stir in society. A thousand stories were circulated, talked over, corrected, and added to by the ill-natured and malicious,—some abominably absurd, others simply idiotic. Twenty people, very noble and still more proud, had not been above sending their most intelligent servants to pay a little visit among the count's retainers, for the sole purpose of learning something positive. As it was, nobody knew anything; and yet everybody pretended to be fully informed.

Let any one explain who can this very common phenomenon: A crime is committed; justice arrives, wrapped in mystery; the police are still ignorant of almost everything; and yet details of the most minute character are already circulated about the streets.

"So," said a cook, "that tall dark fellow with the whiskers is the count's true son!"

"You are right," said one of the footmen who had accompanied M. de Commarin; "as for the other, he is no more his son than Jean here; who, by the way, will be kicked out of doors, if he is caught in this part of the house with his dirty working-shoes on."

"What a romance," exclaimed Jean, supremely indifferent to the danger which threatened him.

"Such things constantly occur in great families," said the cook.

"How ever did it happen?"

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Well, you see, one day, long ago, when the countess who is now dead was out walking with her little son, who was about six months old, the child was stolen by gypsies. The poor lady was full of grief; but above all, was greatly afraid of her husband, who was not over kind. What did she do? She purchased a brat from a woman, who happened to be passing; and, never having noticed his child, the count has never known the difference."

"But the assassination!"

"That's very simple. When the woman saw her brat in such a nice berth, she bled him finely, and has kept up a system of blackmailing all along. The viscount had nothing left for himself. So he resolved at last to put an end to it, and come to a final settling with her."

"And the other, who is up there, the dark fellow?"

The orator would have gone on, without doubt, giving the most satisfactory explanations of everything, if he had not been interrupted by the entrance of M. Lubin, who came from the Palais in company of young Joseph. His success, so brilliant up to this time, was cut short, just like that of a second-rate singer when the star of the evening comes on the stage. The entire assembly turned towards Albert's valet, all eyes questioning him. He of course knew all, he was the man they wanted. He did not take advantage of his position, and keep them waiting.

"What a rascal!" he exclaimed at first. "What a villainous fellow is this Albert!"

He entirely did away with the "Mr." and the "Viscount," and met with general approval for doing so.

"However," he added, "I always had my doubts. The fellow didn't please me by half. You see now to what we are exposed every day in our profession, and it is dreadfully disagreeable. The magistrate did not conceal it from me. 'M. Lubin,' said he, 'it is very sad for a man like you to have waited on such a scoundrel.' For you must know, that, besides an old woman over eighty years old, he also assassinated a young girl of twelve. The little child, the magistrate told me, was chopped into bits."

"Ah!" put in Joseph; "he must have been a great fool. Do people do those sort of things themselves when they are rich, and when there are so many poor devils who only ask to gain their living?"

"Pshaw!" said M. Lubin in a knowing tone; "you will see him come out of it as white as snow. These rich men can do anything."

"Anyhow," said the cook, "I'd willingly give a month's wages to be a mouse, and to listen to what the count and the tall dark fellow are talking about. Suppose some one went up and tried to find out what is going on."

This proposition did not meet with the least favour. The servants knew by experience that, on important occasions, spying was worse than useless.

M. de Commarin knew all about servants from infancy. His study was, therefore, a shelter from all indiscretion. The sharpest ear placed at the keyhole could hear nothing of what was going on within, even when the master was in a passion, and his voice loudest. One alone, Denis, the count's valet, had the opportunity of gathering information; but he was well paid to be discreet, and he was so.

At this moment, M. de Commarin was sitting in the same arm-chair on which the evening before he had bestowed such furious blows while listening to Albert.

As soon as he left his carriage, the old nobleman recovered his haughtiness. He became even more arrogant in his manner, than he had been humble when before the magistrate, as though he were ashamed of what he now

THE LEROUGE CASE

considered an unpardonable weakness.

He wondered how he could have yielded to a momentary impulse, how his grief could have so basely betrayed him.

At the remembrance of the avowals wrested from him by a sort of delirium, he blushed, and reproached himself bitterly. The same as Albert, the night before, Noel, having fully recovered himself, stood erect, cold as marble, respectful, but no longer humble.

The father and son exchanged glances which had nothing of sympathy nor friendliness.

They examined one another, they almost measured each other, much as two adversaries feel their way with their eyes before encountering with their weapons.

"Sir," said the count at length in a harsh voice, "henceforth this house is yours. From this moment you are the Viscount de Commarin; you regain possession of all the rights of which you were deprived. Listen, before you thank me. I wish, at once, to relieve you of all misunderstanding. Remember this well, sir; had I been master of the situation, I would never have recognised you: Albert should have remained in the position in which I placed him."

"I understand you, sir," replied Noel. "I don't think that I could ever bring myself to do an act like that by which you deprived me of my birthright; but I declare that, if I had the misfortune to do so, I should afterwards have acted as you have. Your rank was too conspicuous to permit a voluntary acknowledgment. It was a thousand times better to suffer an injustice to continue in secret, than to expose the name to the comments of the malicious."

This answer surprised the count, and very agreeably too. But he wouldn't let his satisfaction be seen, and it was in a still harsher voice that he resumed.

"I have no claim, sir, upon your affection; I do not ask for it, but I insist at all times upon the utmost deference. It is traditional in our house, that a son shall never interrupt his father when he is speaking; that, you have just been guilty of. Neither do children judge their parents; that also you have just done. When I was forty years of my father was in his second childhood; but I do not remember ever having raised my voice above his. This said, I continue. I provided the necessary funds for the expenses of Albert's household completely, distinct from my own, for he had his own servants, horses, and carriages; and besides that I allowed the unhappy boy four thousand francs a month. I have decided in order to put a stop to all foolish gossip, and to make your position the easier, that you should live on a grander scale; this matter concerns myself. Further, I will increase your monthly allowance to six thousand francs; which I trust you will spend as nobly as possible, giving the least possible cause for ridicule. I cannot too strongly exhort you to the utmost caution. Keep close watch over yourself. Weigh your words well. Study your slightest actions. You will be the point of observation of the thousands of impertinent idlers who compose our world; your blunders will be their delight. Do you fence?"

"Moderately well."

"That will do! Do you ride?"

"No; but in six months I will be a good horseman, or break my neck."

"You must become a horseman, and not break anything. Let us proceed. You will, of course, not occupy Albert's apartments. They will be walled off, as soon as I am free of the police. Thank heaven! the house is large. You will occupy the other wing; and there will be a separate entrance to your apartments, by another staircase. Servants,

THE LEROUGE CASE

horses, carriages, furniture, such as become a viscount, will be at your service, cost what it may, within forty-eight hours. On the day of your taking possession, you must look as though you had been installed there for years. There will be a great scandal; but that cannot be avoided. A prudent father might send you away for a few months to the Austrian or Russian courts; but, in this instance, such prudence would be absurd. Much better a dreadful outcry, which ends quickly, than low murmurs which last forever. Dare public opinion; and, in eight days, it will have exhausted its comments, and the story will have become old. So, to work! This very evening the workmen shall be here; and, in the first place, I must present you to my servants."

To put his purpose into execution, the count moved to touch the bell-rope. Noel stopped him.

Since the commencement of this interview, the barrister had wandered in the regions of the thousand and one nights, the wonderful lamp in his hand. The fairy reality cast into the shade his wildest dreams. He was dazzled by the count's words, and had need of all his reason to struggle against the giddiness which came over him, on realising his great good fortune. Touched by a magic wand, he seemed to awake to a thousand novel and unknown sensations. He rolled in purple, and bathed in gold.

But he knew how to appear unmoved. His face had contracted the habit of guarding the secret of the most violent internal excitement. While all his passions vibrated within him, he appeared to listen with a sad and almost indifferent coldness.

"Permit me, sir," he said to the count "without overstepping the bounds of the utmost respect, to say a few words. I am touched more than I can express by your goodness; and yet I beseech you, to delay its manifestation. The proposition I am about to suggest may perhaps appear to you worthy of consideration. It seems to me that the situation demands the greatest delicacy on my part. It is well to despise public opinion, but not to defy it. I am certain to be judged with the utmost severity. If I install myself so suddenly in your house, what will be said? I shall have the appearance of a conqueror, who thinks little, so long as he succeeds, of passing over the body of the conquered. They will reproach me with occupying the bed still warm from Albert's body. They will jest bitterly at my haste in taking possession. They will certainly compare me to Albert, and the comparison will be to my disadvantage, since I should appear to triumph at a time when a great disaster has fallen upon our house."

The count listened without showing any signs of disapprobation, struck perhaps by the justice of these reasons. Noel imagined that his harshness was much more feigned than real; and this idea encouraged him.

"I beseech you then, sir," he continued, "to permit me for the present, in no way to change my mode of living, By not showing myself, I leave all malicious remarks to waste themselves in air,—I let public opinion the better familiarise itself with the idea of a coming change. There is a great deal in not taking the world by surprise. Being expected, I shall not have the air of an intruder on presenting myself. Absent, I shall have the advantages which the unknown always possess; I shall obtain the good opinion of all those who have envied Albert; and I shall secure as champions all those who would to-morrow assail me, if my elevation came suddenly upon them. Besides, by this delay, I shall accustom myself to my abrupt change of fortune. I ought not to bring into your world, which is now mine, the manners of a parvenu. My name ought not to inconvenience me, like a badly fitting coat."

"Perhaps it would be wisest," murmured the count.

This assent, so easily obtained, surprised Noel. He got the idea that the count had only wished to prove him, to tempt him. In any case, whether he had triumphed by his eloquence, or whether he had simply shunned a trap, he had succeeded. His confidence increased; he recovered all his former assurance.

"I must add, sir," he continued, "that there are a few matters concerning myself which demand my attention. Before entering upon my new life, I must think of those I am leaving behind me. I have friends and clients. This

THE LEROUGE CASE

event has surprised me, just as I am beginning to reap the reward of ten years of hard work and perseverance. I have as yet only sown; I am on the point of reaping. My name is already known; I have obtained some little influence. I confess, without shame, that I have heretofore professed ideas and opinions that would not be suited to this house; and it is impossible in the space of a day—"

"Ah!" interrupted the count in a bantering tone, "you are a liberal. It is a fashionable disease. Albert also was a great liberal."

"My ideas, sir," said Noel quickly, "were those of every intelligent man who wishes to succeed. Besides, have not all parties one and the same aim—power? They merely take different means of reaching it. I will not enlarge upon this subject. Be assured, sir, that I shall know how to bear my name, and think and act as a man of my rank should."

"I trust so," said M. de Commarin; "and I hope that you will never make me regret Albert."

"At least, sir, it will not be my fault. But, since you have mentioned the name of that unfortunate young man, let us occupy ourselves about him."

The count cast a look of distrust upon Noel.

"What can now be done for Albert?" he asked.

"What, sir!" cried Noel with ardour, "would you abandon him, when he has not a friend left in the world? He is still your son, sir, he is my brother; for thirty years he has borne the name of Commarin. All the members of a family are jointly liable. Innocent, or guilty, he has a right to count upon us; and we owe him our assistance."

"What do you then hope for, sir?" asked the count.

"To save him, if he is innocent; and I love to believe that he is. I am a barrister, sir, and I wish to defend him. I have been told that I have some talent; in such a cause I must have. Yes, however strong the charges against him may be, I will overthrow them. I will dispel all doubts. The truth shall burst forth at the sound of my voice. I will find new accents to imbue the judges with my own conviction. I will save him, and this shall be my last cause."

"And if he should confess," said the count, "if he has already confessed?"

"Then, sir," replied Noel with a dark look, "I will render him the last service, which in such a misfortune I should ask of a brother, I will procure him the means of avoiding judgment."

"That is well spoken, sir," said the count, "very well, my son!"

And he held out his hand to Noel, who pressed it, bowing a respectful acknowledgment. The barrister took a long breath. At last he had found the way to this haughty noble's heart; he had conquered, he had pleased him.

"Let us return to yourself, sir," continued the count. "I yield to the reasons which you have suggested. All shall be done as you desire. But do not consider this a precedent. I never change my plans, even though they are proved to be bad, and contrary to my interests. But at least nothing prevents your remaining here from to-day, and taking your meals with me. We will, first of all, see where you can be lodged, until you formally take possession of the apartments which are to be prepared for you."

Noel had the hardihood to again interrupt the old nobleman.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Sir," said he, "when you bade me follow you here, I obeyed you, as was my duty. Now another and a sacred duty calls me away. Madame Gerdy is at this moment dying. Ought I to leave the deathbed of her who filled my mother's place?"

"Valerie!" murmured the count. He leaned upon the arm of his chair, his face buried in his hands; in one moment the whole past rose up before him.

"She has done me great harm," he murmured, as if answering his thoughts. "She has ruined my whole life; but ought I to be implacable? She is dying from the accusation which is hanging over Albert our son. It was I who was the cause of it all. Doubtless, in this last hour, a word from me would be a great consolation to her. I will accompany you, sir."

Noel started at this unexpected proposal.

"O sir!" said he hastily, "spare yourself, pray, a heart-rending sight. Your going would be useless. Madame Gerdy exists probably still; but her mind is dead. Her brain was unable to resist so violent a shock. The unfortunate woman would neither recognise nor understand you."

"Go then alone," sighed the count, "go, my son!"

The words "my son," pronounced with a marked emphasis, sounded like a note of victory in Noel's ears.

He bowed to take his leave. The count motioned him to wait.

"In any case," he said, "a place at table will be set for you here. I dine at half-past six precisely. I shall be glad to see you."

He rang. His valet appeared.

"Denis," said he, "none of the orders I may give will affect this gentleman. You will tell this to all the servants. This gentleman is at home here."

The barrister took his leave; and the count felt great comfort in being once more alone. Since morning, events had followed one another with such bewildering rapidity that his thoughts could scarcely keep pace with them. At last, he was able to reflect.

"That, then," said he to himself, "is my legitimate son. I am sure of his birth, at any rate. Besides I should be foolish to disown him, for I find him the exact picture of myself at thirty. He is a handsome fellow, Noel, very handsome. His features are decidedly in his favour. He is intelligent and acute. He knows how to be humble without lowering himself, and firm without arrogance. His unexpected good fortune does not turn his head. I augur well of a man who knows how to bear himself in prosperity. He thinks well; he will carry his title proudly. And yet I feel no sympathy with him; it seems to me that I shall always regret my poor Albert. I never knew how to appreciate him. Unhappy boy! To commit such a vile crime! He must have lost his reason. I do not like the look of this one's eye. They say that he is perfect. He expresses, at least, the noblest and most appropriate sentiments. He is gentle and strong, magnanimous, generous, heroic. He is without malice, and is ready to sacrifice himself to repay me for what I have done for him. He forgives Madame Gerdy; he loves Albert. It is enough to make one distrust him. But all young men now-a-days are so. Ah! we live in a happy age. Our children are born free from all human shortcomings. They have neither the vices, the passions, nor the tempers of their fathers; and these precocious philosophers, models of sagacity and virtue, are incapable of committing the least folly. Alas! Albert, too, was perfect; and he has assassinated Claudine! What will this one do?—All the same," he added, half-aloud, "I ought to have accompanied him to see Valerie!"

THE LEROUGE CASE

And, although the barrister had been gone at least a good ten minutes, M. de Commarin, not realising how the time had passed, hastened to the window, in the hope of seeing Noel in the court-yard, and calling him back.

But Noel was already far away. On leaving the house, he took a cab and was quickly driven to the Rue St. Lazare.

On reaching his own door, he threw rather than gave five francs to the driver, and ran rapidly up the four flights of stairs.

"Who has called to see me?" he asked of the servant.

"No one, sir."

He seemed relieved from a great anxiety, and continued in a calmer tone, "And the doctor?"

"He came this morning, sir," replied the girl, "while you were out; and he did not seem at all hopeful. He came again just now, and is still here."

"Very well. I will go and speak to him. If any one calls, show them into my study, and let me know."

On entering Madame Gerdy's chamber, Noel saw at a glance that no change for the better had taken place during his absence. With fixed eyes and convulsed features, the sick woman lay extended upon her back. She seemed dead, save for the sudden starts, which shook her at intervals, and disarranged the bedclothes.

Above her head was placed a little vessel, filled with ice water, which fell drop by drop upon her forehead, covered with large bluish spots. The table and mantel-piece were covered with little pots, medicine bottles, and half-emptied glasses. At the foot of the bed, a piece of rag stained with blood showed that the doctor had just had recourse to leeches.

Near the fireplace, where was blazing a large fire, a nun of the order of St. Vincent de Paul was kneeling, watching a saucepan. She was a young woman, with a face whiter than her cap. Her immovably placid features, her mournful look, betokened the renunciation of the flesh, and the abdication of all independence of thought.

Her heavy grey costume hung about her in large ungraceful folds. Every time she moved, her long chaplet of beads of coloured box-wood, loaded with crosses and copper medals, shook and trailed along the floor with a noise like a jingling of chains.

Dr. Herve was seated on a chair opposite the bed, watching, apparently with close attention, the nun's preparations. He jumped up as Noel entered.

"At last you are here," he said, giving his friend a strong grasp of the hand.

"I was detained at the Palais," said the barrister, as if he felt the necessity of explaining his absence; "and I have been, as you may well imagine, dreadfully anxious."

He leant towards the doctor's ear, and in a trembling voice asked: "Well, is she at all better?"

The doctor shook his head with an air of deep discouragement.

"She is much worse," he replied: "since morning bad symptoms have succeeded each other with frightful rapidity."

THE LEROUGE CASE

He checked himself. The barrister had seized his arm and was pressing it with all his might. Madame Gerdy stirred a little, and a feeble groan escaped her.

"She heard you," murmured Noel.

"I wish it were so," said the doctor; "It would be most encouraging. But I fear you are mistaken. However, we will see. He went up to Madame Gerdy, and, whilst feeling her pulse, examined her carefully; then, with the tip of his finger, he lightly raised her eyelid.

The eye appeared dull, glassy, lifeless.

"Come, judge for yourself; take her hand, speak to her."

Noel, trembling all over, did as his friend wished. He drew near, and, leaning over the bed, so that his mouth almost touched the sick woman's ear, he murmured: "Mother, it is I, Noel, your own Noel. Speak to me, make some sign, do you hear me, mother?"

It was in vain; she retained her frightful immobility. Not a sign of intelligence crossed her features.

"You see," said the doctor, "I told you the truth."

"Poor woman!" sighed Noel, "does she suffer?"

"Not at present."

The nun now rose; and she too came beside the bed.

"Doctor," said she: "all is ready."

"Then call the servant, sister, to help us. We are going to apply a mustard poultice."

The servant hastened in. In the arms of the two woman, Madame Gerdy was like a corpse, whom they were dressing for the last time. She was as rigid as though she were dead. She must have suffered much and long, poor woman, for it was pitiable to see how thin she was. The nun herself was affected, although she had become habituated to the sight of suffering. How many invalids had breathed their last in her arms during the fifteen years that she had gone from pillow to pillow!

Noel, during this time, had retired into the window recess, and pressed his burning brow against the panes.

Of what was he thinking, while she who had given him so many proofs of maternal tenderness and devotion was dying a few paces from him? Did he regret her? was he not thinking rather of the grand and magnificent existence which awaited him on the other side of the river, at the Faubourg St. Germain? He turned abruptly round on hearing his friend's voice.

"It is done," said the doctor; "we have only now to wait the effect of the mustard. If she feels it, it will be a good sign; if it has no effect, we will try cupping."

"And if that does not succeed?"

The doctor answered only with a shrug of the shoulders, which showed his inability to do more.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"I understand your silence, Herve," murmured Noel. "Alas! you told me last night she was lost."

"Scientifically, yes; but I do not yet despair. It is hardly a year ago that the father-in-law of one of our comrades recovered from an almost identical attack; and I saw him when he was much worse than this; suppuration had set in."

"It breaks my heart to see her in this state," resumed Noel. "Must she die without recovering her reason even for one moment? Will she not recognise me, speak one word to me?"

"Who knows? This disease, my poor friend, baffles all foresight. Each moment, the aspect may change, according as the inflammation affects such or such a part of the brain. She is now in a state of utter insensibility, of complete prostration of all her intellectual faculties, of coma, of paralysis so to say; to-morrow, she may be seized with convulsions, accompanied with a fierce delirium."

"And will she speak then?"

"Certainly; but that will neither modify the nature nor the gravity of the disease."

"And will she recover her reason?"

"Perhaps," answered the doctor, looking fixedly at his friend; "but why do you ask that?"

"Ah, my dear Herve, one word from Madame Gerdy, only one, would be of such use to me!"

"For your affair, eh! Well, I can tell you nothing, can promise you nothing. You have as many chances in your favour as against you; only, do not leave her. If her intelligence returns, it will be only momentary, try and profit by it. But I must go," added the doctor; "I have still three calls to make."

Noel followed his friend. When they reached the landing, he asked: "You will return?"

"This evening, at nine. There will be no need of me till then. All depends upon the watcher. But I have chosen a pearl. I know her well."

"It was you, then, who brought this nun?"

"Yes, and without your permission. Are you displeased?"

"Not the least in the world. Only I confess—"

"What! you make a grimace. Do your political opinions forbid your having your mother, I should say Madame Gerdy, nursed by a nun of St. Vincent?"

"My dear Herve, you—"

"Ah! I know what you are going to say. They are adroit, insinuating, dangerous, all that is quite true. If I had a rich old uncle whose heir I expected to be, I shouldn't introduce one of them into his house. These good creatures are sometimes charged with strange commissions. But, what have you to fear from this one? Never mind what fools say. Money aside, these worthy sisters are the best nurses in the world. I hope you will have one when your end comes. But good-bye; I am in a hurry."

THE LEROUGE CASE

And, regardless of his professional dignity, the doctor hurried down the stairs; while Noel, full of thought, his countenance displaying the greatest anxiety, returned to Madame Gerdy.

At the door of the sick-room, the nun awaited the barrister's return.

"Sir," said she, "sir."

"You want something of me, sister?"

"Sir, the servant bade me come to you for money; she has no more, and had to get credit at the chemist's."

"Excuse me, sister," interrupted Noel, seemingly very much vexed; "excuse me for not having anticipated your request; but you see I am rather confused."

And, taking a hundred-franc note out of his pocket-book, he laid it on the mantel piece.

"Thanks, sir," said the nun; "I will keep an account of what I spend. We always do that," she added; "it is more convenient for the family. One is so troubled at seeing those one loves laid low by illness. You have perhaps not thought of giving this poor lady the sweet aid of our holy religion! In your place, sir, I should send without delay for a priest,—"

"What, now, sister? Do you not see the condition she is in? She is the same as dead; you saw that she did not hear my voice."

"That is of little consequence, sir," replied the nun; "you will always have done your duty. She did not answer you; but are you sure that she will not answer the priest? Ah, you do not know all the power of the last sacraments! I have seen the dying recover their intelligence and sufficient strength to confess, and to receive the sacred body of our Lord Jesus Christ. I have often heard families say that they do not wish to alarm the invalid, that the sight of the minister of our Lord might inspire a terror that would hasten the final end. It is a fatal error. The priest does not terrify; he reassures the soul, at the beginning of its long journey. He speaks in the name of the God of mercy, who comes to save, not to destroy. I could cite to you many cases of dying people who have been cured simply by contact with the sacred balm."

The nun spoke in a tone as mournful as her look. Her heart was evidently not in the words which she uttered. Without doubt, she had learned them when she first entered the convent. Then they expressed something she really felt, she spoke her own thoughts; but, since then, she had repeated the words over and over again to the friends of every sick person that she attended, until they lost all meaning so far as she was concerned. To utter them became simply a part of her duties as nurse, the same as the preparation of draughts, and the making of poultices.

Noel was not listening to her; his thoughts were far away.

"Your dear mother," continued the nun, "this good lady that you love so much, no doubt trusted in her religion. Do you wish to endanger her salvation? If she could speak in the midst of her cruel sufferings—"

The barrister was on the point of replying, when the servant announced that a gentleman, who would not give his name, wished to speak with him on business.

"I will come," he said quickly.

"What do you decide, sir?" persisted the nun.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"I leave you free, sister, to do as you may judge best."

The worthy woman began to recite her lesson of thanks, but to no purpose. Noel had disappeared with a displeased look; and almost immediately she heard his voice in the next room, saying: "At last you have come, M. Clergeot, I had almost given you up!"

The visitor, whom the barrister had been expecting, is a person well known in the Rue St. Lazare, round about the Rue de Provence, the neighbourhood of Notre Dame de Lorette, and all along the exterior Boulevards, from the Chaussee des Martyrs to the Rond-Point of the old Barriere de Clichy.

M. Clergeot is no more a usurer than M. Jourdin's father was a shopkeeper. Only, as he has lots of money, and is very obliging, he lends it to his friends; and, in return for this kindness, he consents to receive interest, which varies from fifteen to five hundred per cent.

The excellent man positively loves his clients, and his honesty is generally appreciated. He has never been known to seize a debtor's goods; he prefers to follow him up without respite for ten years, and tear from him bit by bit what is his due.

He lives near the top of the Rue de la Victoire. He has no shop, and yet he sells everything saleable, and some other things, too, that the law scarcely considers merchandise. Anything to be useful or neighbourly. He often asserts that he is not very rich. It is possibly true. He is whimsical more than covetous, and fearfully bold. Free with his money when one pleases him, he would not lend five francs, even with a mortgage on the Chateau of Ferrieres as guarantee, to whosoever does not meet with his approval. However, he often risks his all on the most unlucky cards.

His preferred customers consist of women of doubtful morality, actresses, artists, and those venturesome fellows who enter upon professions which depend solely upon those who practice them, such as lawyers and doctors.

He lends to women upon their present beauty, to men upon their future talent. Slight pledges! His discernment, it should be said, however, enjoys a great reputation. It is rarely at fault. A pretty girl furnished by Clergeot is sure to go far. For an artist to be in Clergeot's debt was a recommendation preferable to the warmest criticism.

Madame Juliette had procured this useful and honourable acquaintance for her lover.

Noel, who well knew how sensitive this worthy man was to kind attentions, and how pleased by politeness, began by offering him a seat, and asking after his health. Clergeot went into details. His teeth were still good; but his sight was beginning to fail. His legs were no longer so steady, and his hearing was not all that could be desired. The chapter of complaints ended—"You know," said he, "why I have called. Your bills fall due to-day; and I am devilishly in need of money. I have one of ten, one of seven, and a third of five thousand francs, total, twenty-two thousand francs."

"Come, M. Clergeot," replied Noel, "do not let us have any joking."

"Excuse me," said the usurer; "I am not joking at all."

"I rather think you are though. Why, it's just eight days ago to-day that I wrote to tell you that I was not prepared to meet the bills, and asked for a renewal!"

"I recollect very well receiving your letter."

"What do you say to it, then?"

THE LEROUGE CASE

"By my not answering the note, I supposed that you would understand that I could not comply with your request; I hoped that you would exert yourself to find the amount for me."

Noel allowed a gesture of impatience to escape him.

"I have not done so," he said; "so take your own course. I haven't a sou."

"The devil. Do you know that I have renewed these bills four times already?"

"I know that the interest has been fully and promptly paid, and at a rate which cannot make you regret the investment."

Clergeot never likes talking about the interest he received. He pretends that it is humiliating.

"I do not complain; I only say that you take things too easily with me. If I had put your signature in circulation all would have been paid by now."

"Not at all."

"Yes, you would have found means to escape being sued. But you say to yourself: 'Old Clergeot is a good fellow.' And that is true. But I am so only when it can do me no harm. Now, to-day, I am absolutely in great need of my money. Ab—so—lute—ly," he added, emphasising each syllable.

The old fellow's decided tone seemed to disturb the barrister.

"Must I repeat it?" he said; "I am completely drained, com—plete— ly!"

"Indeed?" said the usurer; "well, I am sorry for you; but I shall have to sue you."

"And what good will that do? Let us play above board, M. Clergeot. Do you care to increase the lawyers' fees? You don't do you? Even though, you may put me to great expense, will that procure you even a centime? You will obtain judgment against me. Well, what then? Do you think of putting in an execution? This is not my home; the lease is in Madame Gerdy's name."

"I know all that. Besides, the sale of everything here would not cover the amount."

"Then you intend to put me in prison, at Clichy! Bad speculation, I warn you, my practice will be lost, and, you know, no practice, no money."

"Good!" cried the worthy money-lender. "Now you are talking nonsense! You call that being frank. Pshaw! If you supposed me capable of half the cruel things you have said, my money would be there in your drawer, ready for me."

"A mistake! I should not know where to get it, unless by asking Madame Gerdy, a thing I would never do."

A sarcastic and most irritating little laugh, peculiar to old Clergeot, interrupted Noel.

"It would be no good doing that," said the usurer; "mamma's purse has long been empty; and if the dear creature should die now,—they tell me she is very ill,—I would not give two hundred napoleons for the inheritance."

The barrister turned red with passion, his eyes glittered; but he dissembled, and protested with some spirit.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"We know what we know," continued Clergeot quietly. "Before a man risks his money, he takes care to make some inquiries. Mamma's remaining bonds were sold last October. Ah! the Rue de Provence is an expensive place! I have made an estimate, which is at home. Juliette is a charming woman, to be sure; she has not her equal, I am convinced; but she is expensive, devilish expensive."

Noel was enraged at hearing his Juliette thus spoke of by this honourable personage. But what reply could he make? Besides, none of us are perfect; and M. Clergeot possessed the fault of not properly appreciating women, which doubtless arises from the business transactions he has had with them. He is charming in his business with the fair sex, complimenting and flattering them; but the coarsest insults would be less revolting than his disgusting familiarity.

"You have gone too fast," he continued, without deigning to notice his client's ill looks; "and I have told you so before. But, you would not listen; you are mad about the girl. You can never refuse her anything. Fool! When a pretty girl wants anything, you should let her long for it for a while; she has then something to occupy her mind and keep her from thinking of a quantity of other follies. Four good strong wishes, well managed, ought to last a year. You don't know how to look after your own interests. I know that her glance would turn the head of a stone saint; but you should reason with yourself, hang it! Why, there are not ten girls in Paris who live in such style! And do you think she loves you any the more for it? Not a bit. When she has ruined you, she'll leave you in the lurch."

Noel accepted the eloquence of his prudent banker like a man without an umbrella accepts a shower.

"What is the meaning of all this!" he asked.

"Simply that I will not renew your bills. You understand? Just now, if you try very hard, you will be able to hand me the twenty-two thousand francs in question. You need not frown: you will find means to do so to prevent my seizing your goods,—not here, for that would be absurd, but at your little woman's apartments. She would not be at all pleased, and would not hesitate to tell you so."

"But everything there belongs to her; and you have no right—"

"What of that? She will oppose the seizure, no doubt, and I expect her to do so; but she will make you find the requisite sum. Believe me, you had best parry the blow. I insist on being paid now. I won't give you any further delay; because, in three months' time, you will have used your last resources. It is no use saying 'No,' like that. You are in one of those conditions that must be continued at any price. You would burn the wood from your dying mother's bed to warm this creature's feet. Where did you obtain the ten thousand francs that you left with her the other evening? Who knows what you will next attempt to procure money? The idea of keeping her fifteen days, three days, a single day more, may lead you far. Open your eyes. I know the game well. If you do not leave Juliette, you are lost. Listen to a little good advice, gratis. You must give her up, sooner or later, mustn't you? Do it to-day, then."

As you see, our worthy Clergeot never minces the truth to his customers, when they do not keep their engagements. If they are displeased, so much the worse for them! His conscience is at rest. He would never join in any foolish business.

Noel could bear it no longer: and his anger burst forth.

"Enough," he cried decidedly. "Do as you please, M. Clergeot, but have done with your advice. I prefer the lawyer's plain prose. If I have committed follies, I can repair them, and in a way that would surprise you. Yes, M. Clergeot, I can procure twenty-two thousand francs; I could have a hundred thousand to-morrow morning, if I saw fit. They would only cost me the trouble of asking for them. But that I will not do. My extravagance, with all

THE LEROUGE CASE

due deference to you, will remain a secret as heretofore. I do not choose that my present embarrassed circumstances should be even suspected. I will not relinquish, for your sake, that at which I have been aiming, the very day it is within my grasp."

"He resists," thought the usurer; "he is less deeply involved than I imagined."

"So," continued the barrister, "put your bills in the hands of your lawyer. Let him sue me. In eight days, I shall be summoned to appear before the Tribunal de Commerce, and I shall ask for the twenty-five days' delay, which the judges always grant to an embarrassed debtor. Twenty-five and eight, all the world over, make just thirty-three days. That is precisely the respite I need. You have two alternatives: either accept from me at once a new bill for twenty-four thousand francs payable in six weeks, or else, as I have an appointment, go off to your lawyer."

"And in six weeks," replied the usurer, "you will be in precisely the same condition you are to-day. And forty-five days more of Juliette will cost—"

"M. Clergeot," interrupted Noel, "long before that time, my position will be completely changed. But I have finished," he added rising; "and my time is valuable."

"One moment, you impatient fellow!" exclaimed the good-natured banker, "you said twenty-four thousand francs at forty-five days?"

"Yes. That is about seventy-five per cent,—pretty fair interest."

"I never cavil about interest," said M. Clergeot; "only—" He looked slyly at Noel scratching his chin violently, a movement which in him indicated how insensibly his brain was at work. "Only," he continued, "I should very much like to know what you are counting upon."

"That I will not tell you. You will know it ere long, in common with all the world."

"I have it!" cried M. Clergeot, "I have it! You are going to marry! You have found an heiress, of course, your little Juliette told me something of the sort this morning. Ah! you are going to marry! Is she pretty? But no matter. She has a full purse, eh? You wouldn't take her without that. So you are going to start a home of your own?"

"I did not say so."

"That's right. Be discreet. But I can take a hint. One word more. Beware of the storm; your little woman has a suspicion of the truth. You are right; it wouldn't do to be seeking money now. The slightest inquiry would be sufficient to enlighten your father-in-law as to your financial position, and you would lose the damsel. Marry and settle down. But get rid of Juliette, or I won't give five francs for the fortune. So it is settled: prepare a new bill for twenty-four thousand francs, and I will call for it when I bring you the old ones on Monday."

"You haven't them with you, then?"

"No. And to be frank, I confess that, knowing well I should get nothing from you, I left them with others at my lawyer's. However, you may rest easy: you have my word."

M. Clergeot made a pretence of retiring; but just as he was going out, he returned quickly.

"I had almost forgotten," said he; "while you are about it, you can make the bill for twenty-six thousand francs. Your little woman ordered some dresses, which I shall deliver to-morrow; in this way they will be paid for."

THE LEROUGE CASE

The barrister began to remonstrate. He certainly did not refuse to pay, only he thought he ought to be consulted when any purchases were made. He didn't like this way of disposing of his money.

"What a fellow!" said the usurer, shrugging his shoulders; "do you want to make the girl unhappy for nothing at all? She won't let you off yet, my friend. You may be quite sure she will eat up your new fortune also. And you know, if you need any money for the wedding, you have but to give me some guarantee. Procure me an introduction to the notary, and everything shall be arranged. But I must go. On Monday then."

Noel listened, to make sure that the usurer had actually gone. When he heard him descending the staircase, "Scoundrel!" he cried, "miserable thieving old skinflint! Didn't he need a lot of persuading? He had quite made up his mind to sue me. It would have been a pleasant thing had the count come to hear of it. Vile usurer! I was afraid, one moment, of being obliged to tell him all."

While inveighing thus against the money-lender, the barrister looked at his watch.

"Half-past five already," he said.

His indecision was great. Ought he to go and dine with his father? Could he leave Madame Gerdy? He longed to dine at the de Commarin mansion; yet, on the other hand, to leave a dying woman!

"Decidedly," he murmured, "I can't go."

He sat down at his desk, and with all haste wrote a letter of apology to his father. Madame Gerdy, he said, might die at any moment; he must remain with her. As he bade the servant give the note to a messenger, to carry it to the count, a sudden thought seemed to strike him.

"Does madame's brother," he asked, "know that she is dangerously ill?"

"I do not know, sir," replied the servant, "at any rate, I have not informed him."

"What, did you not think to send him word? Run to his house quickly. Have him sought for, if he is not at home; he must come."

Considerably more at ease, Noel went and sat in the sick-room. The lamp was lighted; and the nun was moving about the room as though quite at home, dusting and arranging everything, and putting it in its place. She wore an air of satisfaction, that Noel did not fail to notice.

"Have we any gleam of hope, sister?" he asked.

"Perhaps," replied the nun. "The priest has been here, sir; your dear mother did not notice his presence; but he is coming back. That is not all. Since the priest was here, the poultice has taken admirably. The skin is quite reddened. I am sure she feels it."

"God grant that she does, sister!"

"Oh, I have already been praying! But it is important not to leave her alone a minute. I have arranged all with the servant. After the doctor has been, I shall lie down, and she will watch until one in the morning. I will then take her place and—"

"You shall both go to bed, sister," interrupted Noel, sadly. "It is I, who could not sleep a wink, who will watch through this night."

THE LEROUGE CASE

XIV.

OLD TABARET did not consider himself defeated, because he had been repulsed by the investigating magistrate, already irritated by a long day's examination. You may call it a fault, or an accomplishment; but the old man was more obstinate than a mule. To the excess of despair to which he succumbed in the passage outside the magistrate's office, there soon succeeded that firm resolution which is the enthusiasm called forth by danger. The feeling of duty got the upper hand. Was it a time to yield to unworthy despair, when the life of a fellow-man depended on each minute? Inaction would be unpardonable. He had plunged an innocent man into the abyss; and he must draw him out, he alone, if no one would help him. Old Tabaret, as well as the magistrate, was greatly fatigued. On reaching the open air, he perceived that he, too, was in want of food. The emotions of the day had prevented him from feeling hungry; and, since the previous evening, he had not even taken a glass of water. He entered a restaurant on the Boulevard, and ordered dinner.

While eating, not only his courage, but also his confidence came insensibly back to him. It was with him, as with the rest of mankind; who knows how much one's ideas may change, from the beginning to the end of a repast, be it ever so modest! A philosopher has plainly demonstrated that heroism is but an affair of the stomach.

The old fellow looked at the situation in a much less sombre light. He had plenty of time before him! A clever man could accomplish a great deal in a month! Would his usual penetration fail him now? Certainly not. His great regret was, his inability to let Albert know that some was working for him.

He was entirely another man, as he rose from the table; and it was with a sprightly step that he walked towards the Rue St. Lazare. Nine o'clock struck as the concierge opened the door for him. He went at once up to the fourth floor to inquire after the health of his former friend, her whom he used to call the excellent, the worthy Madame Gerdy.

It was Noel who let him in, Noel, who had doubtless been thinking of the past, for he looked as sad as though the dying woman was really his mother.

In consequence of this unexpected circumstance, old Tabaret could not avoid going in for a few minutes, though he would much have preferred not doing so. He knew very well, that, being with the barrister, he would be unavoidably led to speak of the Lerouge case; and how could he do this, knowing, as he did, the particulars much better than his young friend himself, without betraying his secret? A single imprudent word might reveal the part he was playing in this sad drama. It was, above all others, from his dear Noel, now Viscount de Commarin, that he wished entirely to conceal his connection with the police.

But, on the other hand, he thirsted to know what had passed between the barrister and the count. His ignorance on this single point aroused his curiosity. However, as he could not withdraw he resolved to keep close watch upon his language and remain constantly on his guard.

The barrister ushered the old man into Madame Gerdy's room. Her condition, since the afternoon, had changed a little; though it was impossible to say whether for the better or the worse. One thing was evident, her prostration was not so great. Her eyes still remained closed; but a slight quivering of the lids was evident. She constantly moved on her pillow, and moaned feebly.

"What does the doctor say?" asked old Tabaret, in that low voice one unconsciously employs in a sick room.

"He has just gone," replied Noel; "before long all will be over."

The old man advanced on tip-toe, and looked at the dying woman with evident emotion.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Poor creature!" he murmured; "God is merciful in taking her. She perhaps suffers much; but what is this pain compared to what she would feel if she knew that her son, her true son, was in prison, accused of murder?"

"That is what I keep thinking," said Noel, "to console myself for this sight. For I still love her, my old friend; I shall always regard her as a mother. You have heard me curse her, have you not? I have twice treated her very harshly. I thought I hated her; but now, at the moment of losing her, I forget every wrong she has done me, only to remember her tenderness. Yes, for her, death is far preferable! And yet I do not think, no, I cannot think her son guilty."

"No! what, you too?"

Old Tabaret put so much warmth and vivacity into this exclamation, that Noel looked at him with astonishment. He felt his face grow red, and he hastened to explain himself. "I said, 'you too,'" he continued, "because I, thanks perhaps to my inexperience, am persuaded also of this young man's innocence. I cannot in the least imagine a man of his rank meditating and accomplishing so cowardly a crime. I have spoken with many persons on this matter which has made so much noise; and everybody is of my opinion. He has public opinion in his favor; that is already something."

Seated near the bed, sufficiently far from the lamp to be in the shade, the nun hastily knitted stockings destined for the poor. It was a purely mechanical work, during which she usually prayed. But, since old Tabaret entered the room, she forgot her everlasting prayers whilst listening to the conversation. What did it all mean? Who could this woman be? And this young man who was not her son, and who yet called her mother, and at the same time spoke of a true son accused of being an assassin? Before this she had overheard mysterious remarks pass between Noel and the doctor. Into what strange house had she entered? She was a little afraid; and her conscience was sorely troubled. Was she not sinning? She resolved to tell all to the priest, when he returned.

"No," said Noel, "no, M. Tabaret; Albert has not public opinion for him. We are sharper than that in France, as you know. When a poor devil is arrested, entirely innocent, perhaps, of the crime charged against him, we are always ready to throw stones at him. We keep all our pity for him, who, without doubt guilty, appears before the court of assize. As long as the justice hesitates, we side with the prosecution against the prisoner. The moment it is proved that the man is a villain, all our sympathies are in his favour. That is public opinion. You understand, however, that it affects me but little. I despise it to such an extent, that if, as I dare still hope, Albert is not released, I will defend him. Yes, I have told the Count de Commarin, my father, as much. I will be his counsel, and I will save him."

Gladly would the old man have thrown himself on Noel's neck. He longed to say to him: "We will save him together." But he restrained himself. Would not the barrister despise him, if he told him his secret! He resolved, however, to reveal all should it become necessary, or should Albert's position become worse. For the time being, he contented himself with strongly approving his young friend.

"Bravo! my boy," said he; "you have a noble heart. I feared to see you spoiled by wealth and rank; pardon me. You will remain, I see, what you have always been in your more humble position. But, tell me, you have, then, seen your father, the count?"

Now, for the first time, Noel seemed to notice the nun's eyes, which, lighted by eager curiosity, glittered in the shadow like carbuncles. With a look, he drew the old man's attention to her, and said: "I have seen him; and everything is arranged to my satisfaction. I will tell you all, in detail, by-and-by, when we are more at ease. By this bedside, I am almost ashamed of my happiness."

M. Tabaret was obliged to content himself with this reply and this promise. Seeing that he would learn nothing that evening, he spoke of going to bed, declaring himself tired out by what he had had to do during the day. Noel

THE LEROUGE CASE

did not ask him to stop. He was expecting, he said, Madame Gerdy's brother, who had been sent for several times, but who was not at home. He hardly knew how he could again meet this brother, he added: he did not yet know what conduct he ought to pursue. Should he tell him all? It would only increase his grief. On the other hand, silence would oblige him to play a difficult part. The old man advised him to say nothing; he could explain all later on.

"What a fine fellow Noel is!" murmured old Tabaret, as he regained his apartments as quietly as possible. He had been absent from home twenty-four hours; and he fully expected a formidable scene with his housekeeper. Mannette was decidedly out of temper, and declared once for all, that she would certainly seek a new place if her master did not change his conduct.

She had remained up all night, in a terrible fright, listening to the least sound on the stairs, expecting every moment to see her master brought home on a litter, assassinated. There had been great commotion in the house. M. Gerdy had gone down a short time after her master, and she had seen him return two hours later. After that, they had sent for the doctor. Such goings on would be the death of her, without counting that her constitution was too weak to allow her to sit up so late. But Mannette forgot that she did not sit up on her master's account nor on Noel's but was expecting one of her old friends, one of those handsome Gardes de Paris who had promised to marry her, and for whom she had waited in vain, the rascal!

She burst forth in reproaches, while she prepared her master's bed, too sincere, she declared, to keep anything on her mind, or to keep her mouth closed, when it was a question of his health and reputation. M. Tabaret made no reply, not being in the mood for argument. He bent his head to the storm, and turned his back to the hail. But, as soon as Mannette had finished what she was about, he put her out of the room, and double locked the door.

He busied himself in forming a new line of battle, and in deciding upon prompt and active measures. He rapidly examined the situation. Had he been deceived in his investigations? No. Were his calculations of probabilities erroneous? No. He had started with a positive fact, the murder. He had discovered the particulars; his inferences were correct, and the criminal was evidently such as he had described him. The man M. Daburon had had arrested could not be the criminal. His confidence in a judicial axiom had led him astray, when he pointed to Albert.

"That," thought he, "is the result of following accepted opinions and those absurd phrases, all ready to hand, which are like mile-stones along a fool's road! Left free to my own inspirations, I should have examined this case more thoroughly, I would have left nothing to chance. The formula, 'Seek out the one whom the crime benefits' may often be as absurd as true. The heirs of a man assassinated are in reality all benefited by the murder; while the assassin obtains at most the victim's watch and purse. Three persons were interested in Widow Lerouge's death:—Albert, Madame Gerdy, and the Count de Commarin. It is plain to me that Albert is not the criminal. It is not Madame Gerdy, who is dying from the shock caused by the unexpected announcement of the crime. There remains, then, the Count. Can it be he? If so, he certainly did not do it himself. He must have hired some wretch, a wretch of good position, if you please, wearing patent leather boots of a good make, and smoking trabucos cigars with an amber mouth-piece. These well-dressed villains ordinarily lack nerve. They cheat, they forge; but they don't assassinate. Supposing, though, that the count did get hold of some dare-devil fellow. He would simply have replaced one accomplice by another still more dangerous. That would be idiotic, and the count is a sensible man. He, therefore, had nothing whatever to do with the matter. To be quite sure though, I will make some inquiries about him. Another thing, Widow Lerouge, who so readily exchanged the children while nursing them, would be very likely to undertake a number of other dangerous commissions. Who can say that she has not obliged other persons who had an equal interest in getting rid of her? There is a secret, I am getting at it, but I do not hold it yet. One thing is certain though, she was not assassinated to prevent Noel recovering his rights. She must have been suppressed for some analogous reason, by a bold and experienced scoundrel, prompted by similar motives to those of which I suspected Albert. It is, then, in that direction that I must follow up the case now. And, above all, I must obtain the past history of this obliging widow, and I will have it too, for in all probability the particulars which have been written for from her birthplace will arrive tomorrow."

THE LEROUGE CASE

Returning to Albert, old Tabaret weighed the charges which were brought against the young man, and reckoned the chances which he still had in favour of his release.

"From the look of things," he murmured, "I see only luck and myself, that is to say absolutely nothing, in his favor at present. As to the charges, they are countless. However, it is no use going over them. It is I who amassed them; and I know what they are worth! At once everything and nothing. What do signs prove, however striking they may be, in cases where one ought to disbelieve even the evidence of one's own senses? Albert is a victim of the most remarkable coincidences; but one word might explain them. There have been many such cases. It was even worse in the matter of the little tailor. At five o'clock, he bought a knife, which he showed to ten of his friends, saying, 'This is for my wife, who is an idle jade, and plays me false with my workmen.' In the evening, the neighbours heard a terrible quarrel between the couple, cries, threats, stampings, blows; then suddenly all was quiet. The next day, the tailor had disappeared from his home, and the wife was discovered dead, with the very same knife buried to the hilt between her shoulders. Ah, well! it turned out it was not the husband who had stuck it there; it was a jealous lover. After that, what is to be believed? Albert, it is true, will not give an account of how he passed Tuesday evening. That does not affect me. The question for me is not to prove where he was, but that he was not at La Jonchere. Perhaps, after all, Gevrol is on the right track. I hope so, from the bottom of my heart. Yes; God grant that he may be successful. My vanity and my mad presumption will deserve the slight punishment of his triumph over me. What would I not give to establish this man's innocence? Half of my fortune would be but a small sacrifice. If I should not succeed! If, after having caused the evil, I should find myself powerless to undo it!"

Old Tabaret went to bed, shuddering at this last thought. He fell asleep, and had a terrible nightmare. Lost in that vulgar crowd, which, on the days when society revenges itself, presses about the Place de la Rouquette and watches the last convulsions of one condemned to death, he attended Albert's execution. He saw the unhappy man, his hands bound behind his back, his collar turned down, ascend, supported by a priest, the steep flight of steps leading on to the scaffold. He saw him standing upon the fatal platform, turning his proud gaze upon the terrified assembly beneath him. Soon the eyes of the condemned man met his own; and, bursting his cords, he pointed him, Tabaret, out to the crowd, crying, in a loud voice: "That man is my assassin." Then a great clamour arose to curse the detective. He wished to escape; but his feet seemed fixed to the ground. He tried at least to close his eyes; he could not. A power unknown and irresistible compelled him to look. Then Albert again cried out: "I am innocent; the guilty one is——" He pronounced a name; the crowd repeated this name, and he alone did not catch what it was. At last the head of the condemned man fell.

M. Tabaret uttered a loud cry, and awoke in a cold perspiration. It took him some time to convince himself that nothing was real of what he had just heard and seen, and that he was actually in his own house, in his own bed. It was only a dream! But dreams sometimes are, they say, warnings from heaven. His imagination was so struck with what had just happened that he made unheard of efforts to recall the name pronounced by Albert. Not succeeding, he got up and lighted his candle. The darkness made him afraid, the night was full of phantoms. It was no longer with him a question of sleep. Beset with these anxieties, he accused himself most severely, and harshly reproached himself for the occupation he had until then so delighted in. Poor humanity!

He was evidently stark mad the day when he first had the idea of seeking employment in the Rue de Jerusalem. A noble hobby, truly, for a man of his age, a good quiet citizen of Paris, rich, and esteemed by all! And to think that he had been proud of his exploits, that he had boasted of his cunning, that he had plumed himself on his keenness of scent, that he had been flattered by that ridiculous sobriquet, "Tiraclair." Old fool! What could he hope to gain from that bloodhound calling? All sorts of annoyance, the contempt of the world, without counting the danger of contributing to the conviction of an innocent man. Why had he not taken warning by the little tailor's case.

Recalling his few satisfactions of the past, and comparing them with his present anguish, he resolved that he would have no more to do with it. Albert once saved, he would seek some less dangerous amusement, and one more generally appreciated. He would break the connection of which he was ashamed, and the police and justice

THE LEROUGE CASE

might get on the best they could without him.

At last the day, which he had awaited with feverish impatience, dawned. To pass the time, he dressed himself slowly, with much care, trying to occupy his mind with needless details, and to deceive himself as to the time by looking constantly at the clock, to see if it had not stopped. In spite of all this delay, it was not eight o'clock when he presented himself at the magistrate's house, begging him to excuse, on account of the importance of his business, a visit too early not to be indiscreet.

Excuses were superfluous. M. Daburon was never disturbed by a call at eight o'clock in the morning. He was already at work. He received the old amateur detective with his usual kindness, and even joked with him a little about his excitement of the previous evening. Who would have thought his nerves were so sensitive? Doubtless the night had brought deliberation. Had he recovered his reason? or had he put his hand on the true criminal?

This trifling tone in a magistrate, who was accused of being grave even to a fault, troubled the old man. Did not this quizzing hide a determination not to be influenced by anything that he could say? He believed it did; and it was without the least deception that he commenced his pleading.

He put the case more calmly this time, but with all the energy of a well-digested conviction. He had appealed to the heart, he now appealed to reason; but, although doubt is essentially contagious, he neither succeeded in convincing the magistrate, nor in shaking his opinion. His strongest arguments were of no more avail against M. Daburon's absolute conviction than bullets made of bread crumbs would be against a breastplate. And there was nothing very surprising in that.

Old Tabaret had on his side only a subtle theory, mere words; M. Daburon possessed palpable testimony, facts. And such was the peculiarity of the case, that all the reasons brought forward by the old man to justify Albert simply reacted against him, and confirmed his guilt.

A repulse at the magistrate's hands had entered too much into M. Tabaret's anticipations for him to appear troubled or discouraged. He declared that, for the present, he would insist no more; he had full confidence in the magistrate's wisdom and impartiality. All he wished was to put him on his guard against the presumptions which he himself unfortunately had taken such pains to inspire.

He was going, he added, to busy himself with obtaining more information. They were only at the beginning of the investigation; and they were still ignorant of very many things, even of Widow Lerouge's past life. More facts might come to light. Who knew what testimony the man with the earrings, who was being pursued by Gevrol, might give? Though in a great rage internally, and longing to insult and chastise he whom he inwardly styled a "fool of a magistrate," old Tabaret forced himself to be humble and polite. He wished, he said, to keep well posted up in the different phases of the investigation, and to be informed of the result of future interrogations. He ended by asking permission to communicate with Albert. He thought his services deserved this slight favour. He desired an interview of only ten minutes without witnesses.

M. Daburon refused this request. He declared, that, for the present, the prisoner must continue to remain strictly in solitary confinement. By way of consolation, he added that, in three or four days, he might perhaps be able to reconsider this decision, as the motives which prompted it would then no longer exist.

"Your refusal is cruel, sir," said M. Tabaret; "but I understand it, and submit."

That was his only complaint: and he withdrew almost immediately, fearing that he could no longer master his indignation. He felt that, besides the great happiness of saving an innocent man, compromised by his imprudence, he would experience unspeakable delight in avenging himself for the magistrate's obstinacy.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Three or four days," he muttered, "that is the same as three or four years to the unfortunate prisoner. He takes things quite at his ease, this charming magistrate. But I must find out the real truth of the case between now and then."

Yes, M. Daburon only required three or four days to wring a confession from Albert, or at least to make him abandon his system of defence.

The difficulty of the prosecution was not being able to produce any witness who had seen the prisoner during the evening of Shrove Tuesday.

One deposition alone to that effect would have such great weight, that M. Daburon, as soon as Tabaret had left him, turned all his attention in that direction. He could still hope for a great deal. It was only Saturday, the day of the murder was remarkable enough to fix people's memories, and up till then there had not been time to start a proper investigation.

He arranged for five of the most experienced detectives in the secret service to be sent to Bougival, supplied with photographs of the prisoner. They were to scour the entire country between Rueil and La Jonchere, to inquire everywhere, and make the most minute investigations. The photographs would greatly aid their efforts. They had orders to show them everywhere and to everybody and even to leave a dozen about the neighbourhood, as they were furnished with a sufficient number to do so. It was impossible, that, on an evening when so many people were about, no one had noticed the original of the portrait either at the railway station at Rueil or upon one of the roads which lead to La Jonchere, the high road, and the path by the river.

These arrangements made, the investigating magistrate proceeded to the Palais de Justice, and sent for Albert. He had already in the morning received a report, informing him hour by hour of the acts, gestures, and utterances of the prisoner, who had been carefully watched. Nothing in him, the report said, betrayed the criminal. He seemed very sad, but not despairing. He had not cried out, nor threatened, nor cursed justice, nor even spoken of a fatal error. After eating lightly, he had gone to the window of his cell, and had there remained standing for more than an hour. Then he laid down, and had quietly gone to sleep.

"What an iron constitution!" thought M. Daburon, when the prisoner entered his office.

Albert was no longer the despairing man who, the night before, bewildered with the multiplicity of charges, surprised by the rapidity with which they were brought against him, had writhed beneath the magistrate's gaze, and appeared ready to succumb. Innocent or guilty, he had made up his mind how to act; his face left no doubt of that. His eyes expressed that cold resolution of a sacrifice freely made, and a certain haughtiness which might be taken for disdain, but which expressed the noble resentment of an injured man. In him could be seen the self-reliant man, who might be shaken but never overcome by misfortune.

On beholding him, the magistrate understood that he would have to change his mode of attack. He recognized one of those natures which are provoked to resistance when assailed, and strengthened when menaced. He therefore gave up his former tactics, and attempted to move him by kindness. It was a hackneyed trick, but almost always successful, like certain pathetic scenes at theatres. The criminal who has girt up his energy to sustain the shock of intimidation, finds himself without defence against the wheedling of kindness, the greater in proportion to its lack of sincerity. Now M. Daburon excelled in producing affecting scenes. What confessions he had obtained with a few tears! No one knew so well as he how to touch those old chords which vibrate still even in the most corrupt hearts: honour, love, and family ties.

With Albert, he became kind and friendly, and full of the liveliest compassion. Unfortunate man! how greatly he must suffer, he whose whole life had been like one long enchantment. How at a single blow everything about him had fallen in ruins. Who could have foreseen all this at the time when he was the one hope of a wealthy and

THE LEROUGE CASE

illustrious house! Recalling the past, the magistrate pictured to him the most touching reminiscences of his early youth, and stirred up the ashes of all his extinct affections. Taking advantage of all that he knew of the prisoner's life, he tortured him by the most mournful allusions to Claire. Why did he persist in bearing alone his great misfortune? Had he no one in the world who would deem it happiness to share his sufferings? Why this morose silence? Should he not rather hasten to reassure her whose very life depended upon his? What was necessary for that? A single word. Then he would be, if not free, at least returned to the world. His prison would become a habitable abode, no more solitary confinement; his friends would visit him, he might receive whomsoever he wished to see.

It was no longer the magistrate who spoke; it was a father, who, no matter what happens, always keeps in the recesses of his heart, the greatest indulgence for his child.

M. Daburon did even more. For a moment he imagined himself in Albert's position. What would he have done after the terrible revelation? He scarcely dared ask himself. He understood the motive which prompted the murder of Widow Lerouge; he could explain it to himself; he could almost excuse it. (Another trap.) It was certainly a great crime, but in no way revolting to conscience or to reason. It was one of those crimes which society might, if not forget, at least forgive up to a certain point, because the motive was not a shameful, one. What tribunal would fail to find extenuating circumstances for a moment of frenzy so excusable. Besides was not the Count de Commarin the more guilty of the two? Was it not his folly that prepared the way for this terrible event? His son was the victim of fatality, and was in the highest degree to be pitied.

M. Daburon spoke for a long time upon this text, seeking those things most suitable in his opinion to soften the hardened heart of an assassin. And he arrived always at the same conclusion,—the wisdom of confessing. But he wasted his eloquence precisely as M. Tabaret had wasted his. Albert appeared in no way affected. His answers were of the shortest. He began and ended as on the first occasion, by protesting his innocence.

One test, which has often given the desired result, still remained to be tried.

On this same day, Saturday, Albert was confronted with the corpse of Widow Lerouge. He appeared impressed by the sad sight, but no more than anyone would be, if forced to look at the victim of an assassination four days after the crime. One of the bystanders having exclaimed: "Ah, if she could but speak!" he replied: "That would be very fortunate for me."

Since morning, M. Daburon had not gained the least advantage. He had had to acknowledge the failure of his manoeuvres; and now this last attempt had not succeeded either. The prisoner's continued calmness filled to overflowing the exasperation of this man so sure of his guilt. His spite was evident to all, when, suddenly ceasing his wheedling, he harshly gave the order to re-conduct the prisoner to his cell.

"I will compel him to confess!" he muttered between his teeth.

Perhaps he regretted those gentle instruments of investigation of the middle ages, which compelled the prisoner to say whatever one wished to hear. Never, thought he, did any one ever meet a culprit like this. What could he reasonably hope for from his system of persistent denial? This obstinacy, absurd in the presence of such absolute proofs, drove the magistrate into a rage. Had Albert confessed his guilt, he would have found M. Daburon disposed to pity him; but as he denied it, he opposed himself to an implacable enemy.

It was the very falseness of the situation which misled and blinded this magistrate, naturally so kind and generous. Having previously wished Albert innocent, he now absolutely longed to prove him guilty, and that for a hundred reasons which he was unable to analyze. He remembered, too well, his having had the Viscount de Commarin for a rival, and his having nearly assassinated him. Had he not repented even to remorse his having signed the warrant of arrest, and his having accepted the duty of investigating the case. Old Tabaret's incomprehensible change of

THE LEROUGE CASE

opinion troubled him, too.

All these feelings combined, inspired M. Daburon with a feverish hatred, and urged him on in the path which he had chosen. It was now less the proofs of Albert's guilt which he sought for than the justification of his own conduct as magistrate. The investigation became embittered like a personal matter.

In fact, were the prisoner innocent, he would become inexcusable in his own eyes; and, in proportion as he reproached himself the more severely, and as the knowledge of his own failings grew, he felt the more disposed to try everything to conquer his former rival, even to abusing his own power. The logic of events urged him on. It seemed as though his honour itself was at stake; and he displayed a passionate activity, such as he had never before been known to show in any investigation.

M. Daburon passed all Sunday in listening to the reports of the detectives he had sent to Bougival.

They had spared no trouble, they stated, but they could report nothing new.

They had heard many people speak of a woman, who pretended, they said, to have seen the assassin leave Widow Lerouge's cottage; but no one had been able to point this woman out to them, or even to give them her name.

They all thought it their duty, however, to inform the magistrate that another inquiry was going on at the same time as theirs. It was directed by M. Tabaret, who personally scoured the country round about in a cabriolet drawn by a very swift horse. He must have acted with great promptness; for, no matter where they went, he had been there before them. He appeared to have under his orders a dozen men, four of whom at least certainly belonged to the Rue de Jerusalem. All the detectives had met him; and he had spoken to them. To one, he had said: "What the deuce are you showing this photograph for? In less than no time you will have a crowd of witnesses, who, to earn three francs, will describe some one more like the portrait than the portrait itself."

He had met another on the high-road, and had laughed at him.

"You are a simple fellow," he cried out, "to hunt for a hiding man on the high-way; look a little aside, and you may find him."

Again he had accosted two who were together in a cafe at Bougival, and had taken them aside.

"I have him," he said to them. "He is a smart fellow; he came by Chatois. Three people have seen him—two railway porters and a third person whose testimony will be decisive, for she spoke to him. He was smoking."

M. Daburon became so angry with old Tabaret, that he immediately started for Bougival, firmly resolved to bring the too zealous man back to Paris, and to report his conduct in the proper quarter. The journey, however, was useless. M. Tabaret, the cabriolet, the swift horse, and the twelve men had all disappeared, or at least were not to be found.

On returning home, greatly fatigued, and very much out of temper, the investigating magistrate found the following telegram from the chief of the detective force awaiting him; it was brief, but to the point:

"ROUEN, Sunday.

"The man is found. This evening we start for Paris. The most valuable testimony. GEVROL."

THE LEROUGE CASE

XV.

ON the Monday morning, at nine o'clock, M. Daburon was preparing to start for the Palais de Justice, where he expected to find Gevrol and his man, and perhaps old Tabaret. His preparations were nearly made, when his servant announced that a young lady, accompanied by another considerably older, asked to speak with him. She declined giving her name, saying, however, that she would not refuse it, if it was absolutely necessary in order to be received.

"Show them in," said the magistrate.

He thought it must be a relation of one or other of the prisoners, whose case he had had in hand when this fresh crime occurred. He determined to send her away quickly. He was standing before the fireplace, seeking for an address in a small china plate filled with visiting cards. At the sound of the opening of the door, at the rustling of a silk dress gliding by the window, he did not take the trouble to move, nor deign even to turn his head. He contented himself with merely casting a careless glance into the mirror.

But he immediately started with a movement of dismay, as if he had seen a ghost. In his confusion, he dropped the card-plate, which fell noisily on to the hearth, and broke into a thousand pieces.

"Claire!" he stammered, "Claire!"

And as if he feared equally either being deceived by an illusion or actually seeing her whose name he had uttered, he turned slowly round.

It was truly Mademoiselle d'Arlange. This young girl, usually so proud and reserved, had had the courage to come to his house alone, or almost so, for her governess, whom she had left in the ante-room, could hardly count. She was evidently obeying some powerful emotion, since it made her forget her habitual timidity.

Never, even in the time when a sight of her was his greatest happiness, had she appeared to him more fascinating. Her beauty, ordinarily veiled by a sweet sadness, was bright and shining. Her features had an animation which he had never seen in them before. In her eyes, rendered more brilliant by recent tears but partly wiped away, shone the noblest resolution. One could see that she was conscious of performing a great duty, and that she performed it, if not with pleasure, at least with that simplicity which in itself is heroism.

She advanced calm and dignified, and held out her hand to the magistrate in that English style that some ladies can render so gracefully.

"We are always friends, are we not?" asked she, with a sad smile.

The magistrate did not dare take the ungloved hand she held out to him. He scarcely touched it with the tips of his fingers, as though he feared too great an emotion.

"Yes," he replied indistinctly, "I am always devoted to you."

Mademoiselle d'Arlange sat down in the large armchair, where, two nights previously, old Tabaret had planned Albert's arrest. M. Daburon remained standing leaning against his writing-table.

"You know why I have come?" asked the young girl.

With a nod, he replied in the affirmative.

THE LEROUGE CASE

He divined her object only too easily; and he was asking himself whether he would be able to resist prayers from such a mouth. What was she about to ask of him? What could he refuse her? Ah, if he had but foreseen this? He had not yet got over his surprise.

"I only knew of this dreadful event yesterday," pursued Claire; "my grandmother considered it best to hide it from me, and, but for my devoted Schmidt, I should still be ignorant of it all. What a night I have passed! At first I was terrified; but, when they told me that all depended upon you, my fears were dispelled. It is for my sake, is it not, that you have undertaken this investigation? Oh, you are good, I know it! How can I ever express my gratitude?"

What humiliation for the worthy magistrate were these heartfelt thanks! Yes, he had at first thought of Mademoiselle d'Arlange, but since— He bowed his head to avoid Claire's glance, so pure and so daring.

"Do not thank me, mademoiselle," he stammered, "I have not the claim that you think upon your gratitude."

Claire had been too troubled herself, at first, to notice the magistrate's agitation. The trembling of his voice attracted her attention; but she did not suspect the cause. She thought that her presence recalled sad memories, that he doubtless still loved her, and that he suffered. This idea saddened her, and filled her with self-reproach.

"And yet, sir," she continued, "I thank you all the same. I might never have dared go to another magistrate, to speak to a stranger! Besides, what value would another attach to my words, not knowing me? While you, so generous, will re-assure me, will tell me by what awful mistake he has been arrested like a villain and thrown into prison."

"Alas!" sighed the magistrate, so low that Claire scarcely heard him, and did not understand the terrible meaning of the exclamation.

"With you," she continued, "I am not afraid. You are my friend, you told me so; you will not refuse my prayers. Give him his liberty quickly. I do not know exactly of what he is accused, but I swear to you that he is innocent."

Claire spoke in the positive manner of one who saw no obstacle in the way of the very simple and natural desire which she had expressed. A formal assurance given by her ought to be amply sufficient; with a word, M. Daburon would repair everything. The magistrate was silent. He admired that saint-like ignorance of everything, that artless and frank confidence which doubted nothing. She had commenced by wounding him, unconsciously, it is true, but he had quite forgotten that.

He was really an upright man, as good as the best, as is proved from the fact that he trembled at the moment of unveiling the fatal truth. He hesitated to pronounce the words which, like a whirlwind, would overturn the fragile edifice of this young girl's happiness. He who had been so humiliated, so despised, he was going to have his revenge; and yet he did not experience the least feeling of a shameful, though easily understood, satisfaction.

"And if I should tell you, mademoiselle," he commenced, "that M. Albert is not innocent?"

She half-raised herself with a protesting gesture.

He continued, "If I should tell you that he is guilty?"

"Oh, sir!" interrupted Claire, "you cannot think so!"

"I do think so, mademoiselle," exclaimed the magistrate in a sad voice, "and I must add that I am morally certain of it."

THE LEROUGE CASE

Claire looked at the investigating magistrate with profound amazement. Could it be really he who was speaking thus. Had she heard him aright? Did she understand? She was far from sure. Had he answered seriously? Was he not deluding her by a cruel unworthy jest? She asked herself this scarcely knowing what she did: for to her everything appeared possible, probable, rather than that which he had said.

Not daring to raise his eyes, he continued in a tone, expressive of the sincerest pity, "I suffer cruelly for you at this moment, mademoiselle; but I have the sad courage to tell you the truth, and you must summon yours to hear it. It is far better that you should know everything from the mouth of a friend. Summon, then, all your fortitude; strengthen your noble soul against a most dreadful misfortune. No, there is no mistake. Justice has not been deceived. The Viscount de Commarin is accused of an assassination; and everything, you understand me, proves that he committed it."

Like a doctor, who pours out drop by drop a dangerous medicine, M. Daburon pronounced this last sentence slowly, word by word. He watched carefully the result, ready to cease speaking, if the shock was too great. He did not suppose that this young girl, timid to excess, with a sensitiveness almost a disease, would be able to hear without flinching such a terrible revelation. He expected a burst of despair, tears, distressing cries. She might perhaps faint away; and he stood ready to call in the worthy Schmidt.

He was mistaken. Claire drew herself up full of energy and courage. The flame of indignation flushed her cheeks, and dried her tears.

"It is false," she cried, "and those who say it are liars! He cannot be—no, he cannot be an assassin. If he were here, sir, and should himself say, 'It is true,' I would refuse to believe it; I would still cry out, 'It is false!'"

"He has not yet admitted it," continued the magistrate, "but he will confess. Even if he should not, there are more proofs than are needed to convict him. The charges against him are as impossible to deny as is the sun which shines upon us."

"Ah! well," interrupted Mademoiselle d'Arlange, in a voice filled with emotion, "I assert, I repeat, that justice is deceived. Yes," she persisted, in answer to the magistrate's gesture of denial, "yes, he is innocent. I am sure of it; and I would proclaim it, even were the whole world to join with you in accusing him. Do you not see that I know him better even than he can know himself, that my faith in him is absolute, as is my faith in God, that I would doubt myself before doubting him?"

The investigating magistrate attempted timidly to make an objection; Claire quickly interrupted him.

"Must I then, sir," said she, "in order to convince you, forget that I am a young girl, and that I am not talking to my mother, but to a man! For his sake I will do so. It is four years, sir, since we first loved each other. Since that time, I have not kept a single one of my thoughts from him, nor has he hid one of his from me. For four years, there has never been a secret between us; he lived in me, as I lived in him. I alone can say how worthy he is to be loved; I alone know all that grandeur of soul, nobleness of thought, generosity of feelings, out of which you have so easily made an assassin. And I have seen him, oh! so unhappy, while all the world envied his lot. He is, like me, alone in the world; his father never loved him. Sustained one by the other, we have passed through many unhappy days; and it is at the very moment our trials are ending that he has become a criminal? Why? tell me, why?"

"Neither the name nor the fortune of the Count de Commarin would descend to him, mademoiselle; and the knowledge of it came upon him with a sudden shock. One old woman alone was able to prove this. To maintain his position, he killed her."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"What infamy," cried the young girl, "what a shameful, wicked, calumny! I know, sir, that story of fallen greatness; he himself told me of it. It is true, that for three days this misfortune unmanned him; but, if he was dismayed, it was on my account more than his own. He was distressed at thinking that perhaps I should be grieved, when he confessed to me that he could no longer give me all that his love dreamed of. I grieved? Ah! what to me are that great name, that immense wealth? I owe to them the only unhappiness I have ever known. Was it, then, for such things that I loved him? It was thus that I replied to him; and he, so sad, immediately recovered his gaiety. He thanked me, saying, 'You love me; the rest is of no consequence.' I chided him, then, for having doubted me; and after that, you pretend that he cowardly assassinated an old woman? You would not dare repeat it."

Mademoiselle d'Arlange ceased speaking, a smile of victory on her lips. That smile meant, "At last I have attained my end: you are conquered; what can you reply to all that I have said?"

The investigating magistrate did not long leave this smiling illusion to the unhappy child. He did not perceive how cruel and offensive was his persistence. Always the same predominant idea! In persuading Claire, he would justify his own conduct to himself.

"You do not know, mademoiselle," he resumed, "how a sudden calamity may effect a good man's reason. It is only at the time a thing escapes us that we feel the greatness of the loss. God preserve me from doubting all that you have said; but picture to yourself the immensity of the blow which struck M. de Commarin. Can you say that on leaving you he did not give way to despair? Think of the extremities to which it may have led him. He may have been for a time bewildered, and have acted unconsciously. Perhaps this is the way the crime should be explained.

Mademoiselle d'Arlange's face grew deathly pale, and betrayed the utmost terror. The magistrate thought that at last doubt had begun to effect her pure and noble belief.

"He must, then, have been mad," she murmured.

"Possibly," replied the magistrate; "and yet the circumstances of the crime denote a well-laid plan. Believe me, then, mademoiselle, and do not be too confident. Pray, and wait patiently for the issue of this terrible trial. Listen to my voice, it is that of a friend. You used to have in me the confidence a daughter gives to her father, you told me so; do not, then, refuse my advice. Remain silent and wait. Hide your grief to all; you might hereafter regret having exposed it. Young, inexperienced, without a guide, without a mother, alas! you sadly misplaced your first affections."

"No, sir, no," stammered Claire. "Ah!" she added, "you talk like the rest of the world, that prudent and egotistical world, which I despise and hate."

"Poor child," continued M. Daburon, pitiless even in his compassion, "unhappy young girl! This is your first deception! Nothing more terrible could be imagined; few women would know how to bear it. But you are young; you are brave; your life will not be ruined. Hereafter you will feel horrified at this crime. There is no wound, I know by experience, which time does not heal."

Claire tried to grasp what the magistrate was saying, but his words reached her only as confused sounds, their meaning entirely escaped her.

"I do not understand you, sir," she said. "What advice, then, do you give me?"

"The only advice that reason dictates, and that my affection for you can suggest, mademoiselle. I speak to you as a kind and devoted brother. I say to you: 'Courage, Claire, resign yourself to the saddest, the greatest sacrifice

THE LEROUGE CASE

which honour can ask of a young girl. Weep, yes, weep for your deceived love; but forget it. Pray heaven to help you do so. He whom you have loved is no longer worthy of you."

The magistrate stopped slightly frightened. Mademoiselle d'Arlange had become livid.

But though the body was weak, the soul still remained firm.

"You said, just now," she murmured, "that he could only have committed this crime in a moment of distraction, in a fit of madness?"

"Yes, it is possible."

"Then, sir, not knowing what he did, he can not be guilty."

The investigating magistrate forgot a certain troublesome question which he put to himself one morning in bed after his illness.

"Neither justice nor society, mademoiselle," he replied, "can take that into account. God alone, who sees into the depths of our hearts, can judge, can decide those questions which human justice must pass by. In our eyes, M. de Commarin is a criminal. There may be certain extenuating circumstances to soften the punishment; but the moral effect will be the same. Even if he were acquitted, and I wish he may be, but without hope, he will not be less unworthy. He will always carry the dishonour, the stain of blood cowardly shed. Therefore, forget him."

Mademoiselle d'Arlange stopped the magistrate with a look in which flashed the strongest resentment.

"That is to say," she exclaimed, "that you counsel me to abandon him in his misfortune. All the world deserts him; and your prudence advises me to act with the world. Men behave thus, I have heard, when one of their friends is down; but women never do. Look about you; however humiliated, however wretched, however low, a man may be, you will always find a woman near to sustain and console him. When the last friend has boldly taken to flight, when the last relation has abandoned him, woman remains."

The magistrate regretted having been carried away perhaps a little too far. Claire's excitement frightened him. He tried, but in vain, to stop her.

"I may be timid," she continued with increasing energy, but I am no coward. I chose Albert voluntarily from amongst all. Whatever happens, I will never desert him. No, I will never say, 'I do not know this man.' He would have given me half of his prosperity, and of his glory. I will share, whether he wishes it or not, half of his shame and of his misfortune. Between two, the burden will be less heavy to bear. Strike! I will cling so closely to him that no blow shall touch him without reaching me, too. You counsel me to forget him. Teach me, then, how to. I forget him? Could I, even if I wished? But I do not wish it. I love him. It is no more in my power to cease loving him than it is to arrest, by the sole effort of my will, the beating of my heart. He is a prisoner, accused of murder. So be it. I love him. He is guilty! What of that? I love him. You will condemn him, you will dishonour him. Condemned and dishonoured, I shall love him still. You will send him to a convict prison. I will follow him; and in the prison, under the convict's dress, I will yet love him. If he falls to the bottom of the abyss, I will fall with him. My life is his, let him dispose of it. No, nothing will separate me from him, nothing short of death! And, if he must mount the scaffold. I shall die, I know it, from the blow which kills him."

M. Daburon had buried his face in his hands. He did not wish Claire to perceive a trace of the emotion which affected him.

"How she loves him!" he thought, "how she loves him!"

THE LEROUGE CASE

His mind was sunk in the darkest thoughts. All the stings of jealousy were rending him. What would not be his delight, if he were the object of so irresistible a passion as that which burst forth before him! What would he not give in return! He had, too, a young and ardent soul, a burning thirst for love. But who had ever thought of that? He had been esteemed, respected, perhaps feared, but not loved; and he never would be. Was he, then, unworthy of it? Why do so many men pass through life dispossessed of love, while others, the vilest beings sometimes, seem to possess a mysterious power, which charms and seduces, and inspires those blind and impetuous feelings which to assert themselves rush to the sacrifice all the while longing for it? Have women, then, no reason, no discernment?

Mademoiselle d'Arlange's silence brought the magistrate back to the reality. He raised his eyes to her. Overcome by the violence of her emotion, she lay back in her chair, and breathed with such difficulty that M. Daburon feared she was about to faint. He moved quickly towards the bell, to summon aid; but Claire noticed the movement, and stopped him.

"What would you do?" she asked.

"You seemed suffering so," he stammered, "that I——"

"It is nothing, sir," replied she. "I may seem weak; but I am not so. I am strong, believe me, very strong. It is true that I suffer, as I never believed that one could suffer. It is cruel for a young girl to have to do violence to all her feelings. You ought to be satisfied, sir. I have torn aside all veils; and you have read even the inmost recesses of my heart. But I do not regret it; it was for his sake. That which I do regret is my having lowered my self so far as to defend him; but he will forgive me that one doubt. Your assurance took me unawares. A man like him does not need defence; his innocence must be proved; and, God helping me, I will prove it."

As Claire was half-rising to depart, M. Daburon detained her by a gesture. In his blindness, he thought he would be doing wrong to leave this poor young girl in the slightest way deceived. Having gone so far as to begin, he persuaded himself that his duty bade him go on to the end. He said to himself, in all good faith, that he would thus preserve Claire from herself, and spare her in the future many bitter regrets. The surgeon who has commenced a painful operation does not leave it half-finished because the patient struggles, suffers, and cries out.

"It is painful, Mademoiselle,——" he began.

Claire did not let him finish.

"Enough, sir," said she; "all that you can say will be of no avail. I respect your unhappy conviction. I ask, in return, the same regard for mine. If you were truly my friend, I would ask you to aid me in the task of saving him, to which I am about to devote myself. But, doubtless, you would not do so."

"If you knew the proofs which I possess, mademoiselle," he said in a cold tone, which expressed his determination not to give way to anger, "if I detailed them to you, you would no longer hope."

"Speak, sir," cried Claire imperiously.

"You wish it, mademoiselle? Very well; I will give you in detail all the evidence we have collected. I am entirely yours, as you are aware. But yet, why should I harass you with all these proofs? There is one which alone is decisive. The murder was committed on the evening of Shrove Tuesday; and the prisoner cannot give an account of what he did on that evening. He went out, however, and only returned home about two o'clock in the morning, his clothes soiled and torn, and his gloves frayed."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Oh! enough, sir, enough!" interrupted Claire, whose eyes beamed once more with happiness. "You say it was on Shrove Tuesday evening?"

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"Ah! I was sure," she cried triumphantly. "I told you truly that he could not be guilty."

She clasped her hands, and, from the movement of her lips, it was evident that she was praying. The expression of the most perfect faith represented by some of the Italian painters illuminated her beautiful face while she rendered thanks to God in the effusion of her gratitude.

The magistrate was so disconcerted, that he forgot to admire her. He awaited an explanation.

"Well?" he asked impatiently.

"Sir," replied Claire, "if that is your strongest proof, it exists no longer. Albert passed the entire evening you speak of with me."

"With you?" stammered the magistrate.

"Yes, with me, at my home."

M. Daburon was astounded. Was he dreaming? He hardly knew.

"What!" he exclaimed, "the viscount was at your house? Your grandmother, your companion, your servants, they all saw him and spoke to him?"

"No, sir; he came and left in secret. He wished no one to see him; he desired to be alone with me."

"Ah!" said the magistrate with a sigh of relief. The sigh signified: "It's all clear—only too evident. She is determined to save him, at the risk even of compromising her reputation. Poor girl! But has this idea only just occurred to her?"

The "Ah!" was interpreted very differently by Mademoiselle d'Arlange. She thought that M. Daburon was astonished at her consenting to receive Albert.

"Your surprise is an insult, sir," said she.

"Mademoiselle!"

"A daughter of my family, sir, may receive her betrothed without danger of anything occurring for which she would have to blush."

She spoke thus, and at the same time was red with shame, grief, and anger. She began to hate M. Daburon.

"I had no such insulting thought as you imagine, mademoiselle," said the magistrate. "I was only wondering why M. de Commarin went secretly to your house, when his approaching marriage gave him the right to present himself openly at all hours. I still wonder, how, on such a visit, he could get his clothes in the condition in which we found them."

"That is to say, sir," replied Claire bitterly, "that you doubt my word!"

THE LEROUGE CASE

"The circumstances are such, mademoiselle,—"

"You accuse me, then, of falsehood, sir. Know that, were we criminals, we should not descend to justifying ourselves; we should never pray nor ask for pardon."

Mademoiselle d'Arlange's haughty, contemptuous tone could only anger the magistrate. How harshly she treated him! And simply because he would not consent to be her dupe.

"Above all, mademoiselle," he answered severely, "I am a magistrate; and I have a duty to perform. A crime has been committed. Everything points to M. Albert de Commarin as the guilty man. I arrest him; I examine him; and I find overwhelming proofs against him. You come and tell me that they are false; that is not enough. So long as you addressed me as a friend, you found me kind and gentle. Now it is the magistrate to whom you speak: and it is the magistrate who answers, 'Prove it.'"

"My word, sir,—"

"Prove it!"

Mademoiselle d'Arlange rose slowly, casting upon the magistrate a look full of astonishment and suspicion.

"Would you, then, be glad, sir," she asked, "to find Albert guilty? Would it give you such great pleasure to have him convicted? Do you then hate this prisoner, whose fate is in your hands? One would almost think so. Can you answer for your impartiality? Do not certain memories weigh heavily in the scale? Are you sure that you are not, armed with the law, revenging yourself upon a rival?"

"This is too much," murmured the magistrate, "this is too much!"

"Do you know the unusual, the dangerous position we are in at this moment? One day, I remember, you declared your love for me. It appeared to me sincere and honest; it touched me. I was obliged to refuse you, because I loved another; and I pitied you. Now that other is accused of murder, and you are his judge; and I find myself between you two, praying to you for him. In undertaking the investigation you acquired an opportunity to help him; and yet you seem to be against him."

Every word Claire uttered fell upon M. Daburon's heart like a slap on his face. Was it really she who was speaking? Whence came this sudden boldness, which made her choose all those words which found an echo in his heart?

"Mademoiselle," said he, "your grief has been too much for you. From you alone could I pardon what you have just said. Your ignorance of things makes you unjust. If you think that Albert's fate depends upon my pleasure, you are mistaken. To convince me is nothing; it is necessary to convince others. That I should believe you is all very natural, I know you. But what weight will others attach to your testimony, when you go to them with a true story—most true, I believe, but yet highly improbable?"

Tears came into Claire's eyes.

"If I have unjustly offended you, sir," said she, "pardon me; my unhappiness makes me forget myself."

"You cannot offend me, mademoiselle," replied the magistrate. "I have already told you that I am devoted to your service."

"Then sir, help me to prove the truth of what I have said. I will tell you everything."

THE LEROUGE CASE

M. Daburon was fully convinced that Claire was seeking to deceive him; but her confidence astonished him. He wondered what fable she was about to concoct.

"Sir," began Claire, "you know what obstacles have stood in the way of my marriage with Albert. The Count de Commarin would not accept me for a daughter-in-law, because I am poor, I possess nothing. It took Albert five years to triumph over his father's objections. Twice the count yielded; twice he recalled his consent, which he said had been extorted from him. At last, about a month ago, he gave his consent of his own accord. But these hesitations, delays, refusals, had deeply hurt my grandmother. You know her sensitive nature; and, in this case, I must confess she was right. Though the wedding day had been fixed, the marchioness declared that we should not be compromised nor laughed at again for any apparent haste to contract a marriage so advantageous, that we had often before been accused of ambition. She decided, therefore, that, until the publication of the banns, Albert should only be admitted into the house every other day, for two hours in the afternoon, and in her presence. We could not get her to alter this determination. Such was the state of affairs, when, on Sunday morning, a note came to me from Albert. He told me that pressing business would prevent his coming, although it was his regular day. What could have happened to keep him away? I feared some evil. The next day I awaited him impatiently and distracted, when his valet brought Schmidt a note for me. In that letter, sir, Albert entreated me to grant him an interview. It was necessary, he wrote, that he should have a long conversation with me, alone, and without delay. Our whole future, he added, depended upon this interview. He left me to fix the day and hour, urging me to confide in no one. I did not hesitate. I sent him word to meet me on the Tuesday evening, at the little garden gate, which opens into an unfrequented street. To inform me of his presence, he was to knock just as nine o'clock chimed at the Invalides. I knew that my grandmother had invited a number of her friends for that evening; and I thought that, by pretending a headache, I might retire early, and so be free. I expected, also, that Madame d'Arlange would keep Schmidt with her."

"Excuse me, mademoiselle," interrupted M. Daburon, "what day did you write to M. Albert?"

"On Tuesday."

"Can you fix the hour?"

"I must have sent the letter between two and three o'clock."

"Thanks, mademoiselle. Continue, I pray."

"All my anticipations," continued Claire, "were realised. I retired during the evening, and I went into the garden a little before the appointed time. I had procured the key of the little door; and I at once tried it. Unfortunately, I could not make it turn, the lock was so rusty. I exerted all my strength in vain. I was in despair, when nine o'clock struck. At the third stroke, Albert knocked. I told him of the accident; and I threw him the key, that he might try and unlock the door. He tried, but without success. I then begged him to postpone our interview. He replied that it was impossible, that what he had to say admitted of no delay; that, during three days he had hesitated about confiding in me, and had suffered martyrdom, and that he could endure it no longer. We were speaking, you must understand, through the door. At last, he declared that he would climb over the wall. I begged him not to do so, fearing an accident. The wall is very high, as you know; the top is covered with pieces of broken glass, and the acacia branches stretch out above like a hedge. But he laughed at my fears, and said that, unless I absolutely forbade him to do so, he was going to attempt to scale the wall. I dared not say no; and he risked it. I was very frightened, and trembled like a leaf. Fortunately, he is very active, and got over without hurting himself. He had come, sir, to tell me of the misfortune which had befallen him. We first of all sat down upon the little seat you know of, in front of the grove; then, as the rain was falling, we took shelter in the summer house. It was past midnight when Albert left me, quieted and almost gay. He went back in the same manner, only with less danger, because I made him use the gardener's ladder, which I laid down alongside the wall when he had reached the other side."

THE LEROUGE CASE

This account, given in the simplest and most natural manner, puzzled M. Daburon. What was he to think?

"Mademoiselle," he asked, "had the rain commenced to fall when M. Albert climbed over the wall?"

"No, sir, the first drops fell when we were on the seat. I recollect it very well, because he opened his umbrella, and I thought of Paul and Virginia."

"Excuse me a minute, mademoiselle," said the magistrate.

He sat down at his desk, and rapidly wrote two letters. In the first, he gave orders for Albert to be brought at once to his office in the Palais de Justice. In the second, he directed a detective to go immediately to the Faubourg St. Germain to the d'Arlange house, and examine the wall at the bottom of the garden, and make a note of any marks of its having been scaled, if any such existed. He explained that the wall had been climbed twice, both before and during the rain; consequently the marks of the going and returning would be different from each other.

He enjoined upon the detective to proceed with the utmost caution, and to invent a plausible pretext which would explain his investigations.

Having finished writing, the magistrate rang for his servant, who soon appeared.

"Here," said he, "are two letters, which you must take to my clerk, Constant. Tell him to read them, and to have the orders they contain executed at once,—at once, you understand. Run, take a cab, and be quick! Ah! one word. If Constant is not in my office, have him sought for; he will not be far off, as he is waiting for me. Go quickly!"

M. Daburon then turned and said to Claire: "Have you kept the letter, mademoiselle, in which M. Albert asked for this interview?"

"Yes, sir, I even think I have it with me."

She arose, felt in her pocket, and drew out a much crumpled piece of paper.

"Here it is!"

The investigating magistrate took it. A suspicion crossed his mind. This compromising letter happened to be very conveniently in Claire's pocket; and yet young girls do not usually carry about with them requests for secret interviews. At a glance, he read the ten lines of the note.

"No date," he murmured, "no stamp, nothing at all."

Claire did not hear him; she was racking her brain to find other proofs of the interview.

"Sir," said she suddenly, "it often happens, that when we wish to be, and believe ourselves alone, we are nevertheless observed. Summon, I beseech you, all of my grandmother's servants, and inquire if any of them saw Albert that night."

"Inquire of your servants! Can you dream of such a thing, mademoiselle?"

"What, sir? You fear that I shall be compromised. What of that, if he is only freed?"

M. Daburon could not help admiring her. What sublime devotion in this young girl, whether she spoke the truth or not! He could understand the violence she had been doing to her feelings during the past hour, he who knew her

THE LEROUGE CASE

character so well.

"That is not all," she added; "the key which I threw to Albert, he did not return it to me; he must have forgotten to do so. If it is found in his possession, it will well prove that he was in the garden."

"I will give orders respecting it, mademoiselle."

"There is still another thing," continued Claire; "while I am here, send some one to examine the wall."

She seemed to think of everything.

"That is already done, mademoiselle," replied M. Daburon. "I will not hide from you that one of the letters which I have just sent off ordered an examination of your grandmother's wall, a secret examination, though, be assured."

Claire rose joyfully, and for the second time held out her hand to the magistrate.

"Oh, thanks!" she said, "a thousand thanks! Now I can well see that you are with me. But I have still another idea: Albert ought to have the note I wrote on Tuesday."

"No, mademoiselle, he burnt it."

Claire drew back. She imagined she felt a touch of irony in the magistrate's reply. There was none, however. M. Daburon remembered the letter thrown into the fire by Albert on the Tuesday afternoon. It could only been the one Claire had sent him. It was to her, then, that the words, "She cannot resist me," applied. He understood, now, the action and the remark.

"Can you understand, mademoiselle," he next asked, "how M. de Commarin could lead justice astray, and expose me to committing a most deplorable error, when it would have been so easy to have told me all this?"

"It seems to me, sir, that an honourable man cannot confess that he has obtained a secret interview from a lady, until he has full permission from her to do so. He ought to risk his life sooner than the honour of her who has trusted in him; but be assured Albert relied on me."

There was nothing to reply to this; and the sentiments expressed by Mademoiselle d'Arlange gave a meaning to one of Albert's replies in the examination.

"This is not all yet, mademoiselle," continued the magistrate; "all that you have told me here, you must repeat in my office, at the Palais de Justice. My clerk will take down your testimony, and you must sign it. This proceeding will be painful to you; but it is a necessary formality."

"Ah, sir, I will do so with pleasure. What can I refuse, when I know that he is in prison? I was determined to do everything. If he had been tried at the assizes, I would have gone there. Yes, I would have presented myself, and there before all I would have told the truth. Doubtless," she added sadly, "I should have been greatly compromised. I should have been looked upon as a heroine of romance; but what matters public opinion, the blame or approval of the world, since I am sure of his love?"

She rose from her seat, readjusting her cloak and the strings of her bonnet.

"Is it necessary," she asked, "that I should await the return of the police agents who are examining the wall?"

"It is needless, mademoiselle."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Then," she continued in a sweet voice, "I can only beseech you," she clasped her hands, "conjure you," her eyes implored, "to let Albert out of prison."

"He shall be liberated as soon as possible; I give you my word."

"Oh, to-day, dear M. Daburon, to-day, I beg of you, now, at once! Since he is innocent, be kind, for you are our friend. Do you wish me to go down on my knees?"

The magistrate had only just time to extend his arms, and prevent her.

He was choking with emotion, the unhappy man! Ah! how much he envied the prisoner's lot!

"That which you ask of me is impossible, mademoiselle," said he in an almost inaudible voice, "impracticable, upon my honour. Ah! if it depended upon me alone, I could not, even were he guilty, see you weep, and resist."

Mademoiselle d'Arlange, hitherto so firm, could no longer restrain her sobs.

"Miserable girl that I am!" she cried, "he is suffering, he is in prison; I am free, and yet I can do nothing for him! Great heaven! inspire me with accents to touch the hearts of men! At whose feet must I cast myself to obtain his pardon?"

She suddenly stopped, surprised at having uttered such a word.

"Pardon!" she repeated fiercely; "he has no need of pardon. Why am I only a woman? Can I not find one man who will help me? Yes," she said after a moment's reflection, "there is one man who owes himself to Albert; since he it was who put him in this position,—the Count de Commarin. He is his father, and yet he has abandoned him. Ah, well! I will remind him that he still has a son."

The magistrate rose to see her to the door; but she had already disappeared, taking the kind-hearted Schmidt with her.

M. Daburon, more dead than alive, sank back again in his chair. His eyes filled with tears.

"And that is what she is!" he murmured. "Ah! I made no vulgar choice! I had divined and understood all her good qualities."

He had never loved her so much; and he felt that he would never be consoled for not having won her love in return. But, in the midst of his meditations, a sudden thought passed like a flash across his brain.

Had Claire spoken the truth? Had she not been playing a part previously prepared? No, most decidedly no! But she might have been herself deceived, might have been the dupe of some skillful trick.

In that case old Tabaret's prediction was now realised.

Tabaret had said: "Look out for an indisputable /alibi/."

How could he show the falsity of this one, planned in advance, affirmed by Claire, who was herself deceived?

How could he expose a plan, so well laid that the prisoner had been able without danger to await certain results, with his arms folded, and without himself moving in the matter?

THE LEROUGE CASE

And yet, if Claire's story were true, and Albert innocent!

The magistrate struggled in the midst of inextricable difficulties, without a plan, without an idea.

He arose.

"Oh!" he said in a loud voice, as though encouraging himself, "at the Palais, all will be unravelled."

XVI.

M. DABURON had been surprised at Claire's visit.

M. de Commarin was still more so, when his valet whispered to him that Mademoiselle d'Arlange desired a moment's conversation with him.

M. Daburon had broken a handsome card-plate; M. de Commarin, who was at breakfast, dropped his knife on his plate.

Like the magistrate he exclaimed, "Claire!"

He hesitated to receive her, fearing a painful and disagreeable scene. She could only have, as he knew, a very slight affection for him, who had for so long repulsed her with such obstinacy. What could she want with him? To inquire about Albert, of course. And what could he reply?

She would probably have some nervous attack or other; and he would be thoroughly upset. However, he thought of how much she must have suffered; and he pitied her.

He felt, that it would be cruel, as well as unworthy of him, to keep away from her who was to have been his daughter-in-law, the Viscountess de Commarin.

He sent a message, asking her to wait a few minutes in one of the little drawing-rooms on the ground floor.

He did not keep her waiting long, his appetite having been destroyed by the mere announcement of her visit. He was fully prepared for anything disagreeable.

As soon as he appeared, Claire saluted him with one of those graceful, yet highly dignified bows, which distinguished the Marchioness d'Arlange.

"Sir—," she began.

"You come, do you not, my poor child, to obtain news of the unhappy boy?" asked M. de Commarin.

He interrupted Claire, and went straight to the point, in order to get the disagreeable business more quickly over.

"No sir," replied the young girl, "I come, on the contrary, to bring you news. Albert is innocent."

The count looked at her most attentively, persuaded that grief had affected her reason; but in that case her madness was very quiet.

"I never doubted it," continued Claire; "but now I have the most positive proof."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Are you quite sure of what you are saying?" inquired the count, whose eyes betrayed his doubt.

Mademoiselle d'Arlange understood his thoughts; her interview with M. Daburon had given her experience.

"I state nothing which is not of the utmost accuracy," she replied, "and easily proved. I have just come from M. Daburon, the investigating magistrate, who is one of my grandmother's friends; and, after what I told him, he is convinced that Albert is innocent."

"He told you that, Claire!" exclaimed the count. "My child, are you sure, are you not mistaken?"

"No, sir. I told him something, of which every one was ignorant, and of which Albert, who is a gentleman, could not speak. I told him that Albert passed with me, in my grandmother's garden, all that evening on which the crime was committed. He had asked to see me—"

"But your word will not be sufficient."

"There are proofs, and justice has them by this time."

"Heavens! Is it really possible?" cried the count, who was beside himself.

"Ah, sir!" said Mademoiselle d'Arlange bitterly, "you are like the magistrate; you believed in the impossible. You are his father, and you suspected him! You do not know him, then. You were abandoning him, without trying to defend him. Ah, I did not hesitate one moment!"

One is easily induced to believe true that which one is anxiously longing for. M. de Commarin was not difficult to convince. Without thinking, without discussion, he put faith in Claire's assertions. He shared her convictions, without asking himself whether it were wise or prudent to do so.

Yes, he had been overcome by the magistrate's certitude, he had told himself that what was most unlikely was true; and he had bowed his head. One word from a young girl had upset this conviction. Albert innocent! The thought descended upon his heart like heavenly dew.

Claire appeared to him like a bearer of happiness and hope.

During the last three days, he had discovered how great was his affection for Albert. He had loved him tenderly, for he had never been able to discard him, in spite of his frightful suspicions as to his paternity.

For three days, the knowledge of the crime imputed to his unhappy son, the thought of the punishment which awaited him, had nearly killed the father. And after all he was innocent!

No more shame, no more scandalous trial, no more stains upon the escutcheon; the name of Commarin would not be heard at the assizes.

"But, then, mademoiselle," asked the count, "are they going to release him?"

"Alas! sir, I demanded that they should at once set him at liberty. It is just, is it not, since he is not guilty? But the magistrate replied that it was not possible; that he was not the master; that Albert's fate depended on many others. It was then that I resolved to come to you for aid."

"Can I then do something?"

THE LEROUGE CASE

"I at least hope so. I am only a poor girl, very ignorant; and I know no one in the world. I do not know what can be done to get him released from prison. There ought, however, to be some means for obtaining justice. Will you not try all that can be done, sir, you, who are his father?"

"Yes," replied M. de Commarin quickly, "yes, and without losing a minute."

Since Albert's arrest, the count had been plunged in a dull stupor. In his profound grief, seeing only ruin and disaster about him, he had done nothing to shake off this mental paralysis. Ordinarily very active, he now sat all day long without moving. He seemed to enjoy a condition which prevented his feeling the immensity of his misfortune. Claire's voice sounded in his ear like the resurrection trumpet. The frightful darkness was dispelled; he saw a glimmering in the horizon; he recovered the energy of his youth.

"Let us go," he said.

Suddenly the radiance in his face changed to sadness, mixed with anger.

"But where," he asked. "At what door shall we knock with any hope of success? In the olden times, I would have sought the king. But to-day! Even the emperor himself cannot interfere with the law. He will tell me to await the decision of the tribunals, that he can do nothing. Wait! And Albert is counting the minutes in mortal agony! We shall certainly have justice; but to obtain it promptly is an art taught in schools that I have not frequented."

"Let us try, at least, sir," persisted Claire. "Let us seek out judges, generals, ministers, any one. Only lead me to them. I will speak; and you shall see if we do not succeed."

The count took Claire's little hands between his own, and held them a moment pressing them with paternal tenderness.

"Brave girl!" he cried, "you are a noble, courageous woman, Claire! Good blood never fails. I did not know you. Yes, you shall be my daughter; and you shall be happy together, Albert and you. But we must not rush about everywhere, like wild geese. We need some one to tell us whom we should address,—some guide, lawyer, barrister. Ah!" he cried, "I have it,—Noel!"

Claire raised her eyes to the count's in surprise.

"He is my son," replied M. de Commarin, evidently embarrassed, "my other son, Albert's brother. The best and worthiest of men," he added, repeating quite appropriately a phrase already uttered by M. Daburon. "He is a barrister; he knows all about the Palais; he will tell us what to do."

Noel's name, thus thrown into the midst of this conversation so full of hope, oppressed Claire's heart.

The count perceived her affright.

"Do not feel anxious, dear child," he said. "Noel is good; and I will tell you more, he loves Albert. Do not shake your head so; Noel told me himself, on this very spot, that he did not believe Albert guilty. He declared that he intended doing everything to dispel the fatal mistake, and that he would be his barrister."

These assertions did not seem to reassure the young girl. She thought to herself, "What then has this Noel done for Albert?" But she made no remark.

"I will send for him," continued M. de Commarin; "he is now with Albert's mother, who brought him up, and who is now on her deathbed."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Albert's mother!"

"Yes, my child. Albert will explain to you what may perhaps seem to you an enigma. Now time presses. But I think--"

He stopped suddenly. He thought, that, instead of sending for Noel at Madame Gerdy's, he might go there himself. He would thus see Valerie! and he had longed to see her again so much!

It was one of those actions which the heart urges, but which one does not dare risk, because a thousand subtle reasons and interests are against it.

One wishes, desires, and even longs for it; and yet one struggles, combats, and resists. But, if an opportunity occurs, one is only too happy to seize it; then one has an excuse with which to silence one's conscience.

In thus yielding to the impulse of one's feelings, one can say: "It was not I who willed it, it was fate."

"It will be quicker, perhaps," observed the count, "to go to Noel."

"Let us start then, sir."

"I hardly know though, my child," said the old gentleman, hesitating, "whether I may, whether I ought to take you with me. Propriety--"

"Ah, sir, propriety has nothing to do with it!" replied Claire impetuously. "With you, and for his sake, I can go anywhere. Is it not indispensable that I should give some explanations? Only send word to my grandmother by Schmidt, who will come back here and await my return. I am ready, sir."

"Very well, then," said the count.

Then, ringing the bell violently, he called to the servant, "My carriage."

In descending the steps, he insisted upon Claire's taking his arm. The gallant and elegant politeness of the friend of the Count d'Artois reappeared.

"You have taken twenty years from my age," he said; "it is but right that I should devote to you the youth you have restored to me."

As soon as Claire had entered the carriage, he said to the footman: "Rue St. Lazare, quick!"

Whenever the count said "quick," on entering his carriage, the pedestrians had to get out of the way. But the coachman was a skillful driver, and arrived without accident.

Aided by the concierge's directions, the count and the young girl went towards Madame Gerdy's apartments. The count mounted slowly, holding tightly to the balustrade, stopping at every landing to recover his breath. He was, then, about to see her again! His emotion pressed his heart like a vice.

"M. Noel Gerdy?" he asked of the servant.

The barrister had just that moment gone out. She did not know where he had gone; but he had said he should not be out more than half an hour.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"We will wait for him, then," said the count.

He advanced; and the servant drew back to let them pass. Noel had strictly forbidden her to admit any visitors; but the Count de Commarin was one of those whose appearance makes servants forget all their orders.

Three persons were in the room into which the servant introduced the count and Mademoiselle d'Arange.

They were the parish priest, the doctor, and a tall man, an officer of the Legion of Honour, whose figure and bearing indicated the old soldier.

They were conversing near the fireplace, and the arrival of strangers appeared to astonish them exceedingly.

In bowing, in response to M. de Commarin's and Claire's salutations, they seemed to inquire their business: but this hesitation was brief, for the soldier almost immediately offered Mademoiselle d'Arange a chair.

The count considered that his presence was inopportune; and he thought that he was called upon to introduce himself, and explain his visit.

"You will excuse me, gentlemen," said he, "if I am indiscreet. I did not think of being so when I asked to wait for Noel, whom I have the most pressing need of seeing. I am the Count de Commarin."

At this name, the old soldier let go the back of the chair which he was still holding and haughtily raised his head. An angry light flashed in his eyes, and he made a threatening gesture. His lips moved, as if he were about to speak; but he restrained himself, and retired, bowing his head, to the window.

Neither the count nor the two other men noticed his strange behaviour; but it did not escape Claire.

While Mademoiselle d'Arange sat down rather surprised, the count, much embarrassed at his position, went up to the priest, and asked in a low voice, "What is, I pray, M. l'Abbe; Madame Gerdy's condition?"

The doctor, who had a sharp ear, heard the question, and approached quickly.

He was very pleased to have an opportunity to speak to a person as celebrated as the Count de Commarin, and to become acquainted with him.

"I fear, sir," he said, "that she cannot live throughout the day."

The count pressed his hand against his forehead, as though he had felt a sudden pain there. He hesitated to inquire further.

After a moment of chilling silence, he resolved to go on.

"Does she recognise her friends?" he murmured.

"No, sir. Since last evening, however, there has been a great change. She was very uneasy all last night: she had moments of fierce delirium. About an hour ago, we thought she was recovering her senses, and we sent for M. l'Abbe."

"Very needlessly, though," put in the priest, "and it is a sad misfortune. Her reason is quite gone. Poor woman! I have known her ten years. I have been to see her nearly every week; I never knew a more worthy person."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"She must suffer dreadfully," said the doctor.

Almost at the same instant, and as if to bear out the doctor's words, they heard stifled cries from the next room, the door of which was slightly open.

"Do you hear?" exclaimed the count, trembling from head to foot.

Claire understood nothing of this strange scene. Dark presentiments oppressed her; she felt as though she were enveloped in an atmosphere of evil. She grew frightened, rose from her chair, and drew near the count.

"She is, I presume, in there?" asked M. de Commarin.

"Yes, sir," harshly answered the old soldier, who had also drawn near.

At any other time, the count would have noticed the soldier's tone, and have resented it. Now, he did not even raise his eyes. He remained insensible to everything. Was she not there, close to him? His thoughts were in the past; it seemed to him but yesterday that he had quitted her for the last time.

"I should very much like to see her," he said timidly.

"That is impossible." replied the old soldier.

"Why?" stammered the count.

"At least, M. de Commarin," replied the soldier, "let her die in peace."

The count started, as if he had been struck. His eyes encountered the officer's; he lowered them like a criminal before his judge.

"Nothing need prevent the count's entering Madame Gerdy's room," put in the doctor, who purposely saw nothing of all this. "She would probably not notice his presence; and if—"

"Oh, she would perceive nothing!" said the priest. "I have just spoken to her, taken her hand, she remained quite insensible."

The old soldier reflected deeply.

"Enter," said he at last to the count; "perhaps it is God's will."

The count tottered so that the doctor offered to assist him. He gently motioned him away.

The doctor and the priest entered with him; Claire and the old soldier remained at the threshold of the door, facing the bed.

The count took three or four steps, and was obliged to stop. He wished to, but could not go further.

Could this dying woman really be Valerie?

He taxed his memory severely; nothing in those withered features, nothing in that distorted face, recalled the beautiful, the adored Valerie of his youth. He did not recognise her.

THE LEROUGE CASE

But she knew him, or rather divined his presence. With supernatural strength, she raised herself, exposing her shoulders and emaciated arms; then pushing away the ice from her forehead, and throwing back her still plentiful hair, bathed with water and perspiration, she cried, "Guy! Guy!"

The count trembled all over.

He did not perceive that which immediately struck all the other persons present—the transformation in the sick woman. Her contracted features relaxed, a celestial joy spread over her face, and her eyes, sunken by disease, assumed an expression of infinite tenderness.

"Guy," said she in a voice heartrending by its sweetness, "you have come at last! How long, O my God! I have waited for you! You cannot think what I have suffered by your absence. I should have died of grief, had it not been for the hope of seeing you again. Who kept you from me? Your parents again? How cruel of them! Did you not tell them that no one could love you here below as I do? No, that is not it; I remember. You were angry when you left me. Your friends wished to separate us; they said that I was deceiving you with another. Who have I injured that I should have so many enemies! They envied my happiness; and we were so happy! But you did not believe the wicked calumny, you scorned it, for are you not here?"

The nun, who had risen on seeing so many persons enter the sick room, opened her eyes with astonishment.

"I deceive you?" continued the dying woman; "only a madman would believe it. Am I not yours, your very own, heart and soul? To me you are everything; and there is nothing I could expect or hope for from another which you have not already given me. Was I not yours, alone, from the very first? I never hesitated to give myself entirely to you; I felt that I was born for you, Guy, do you remember? I was working for a lace maker, and was barely earning a living. You told me you were a poor student; I thought you were depriving yourself for me. You insisted on having our little apartment on the Quai Saint-Michel done up. It was lovely, with the new paper all covered with flowers, which we hung ourselves. How delightful it was! From the window, we could see the great trees of the Tuileries gardens; and by leaning out a little we could see the sun set through the arches of the bridges. Oh, those happy days! The first time that we went into the country together, one Sunday, you brought me a more beautiful dress than I had ever dreamed of, and such darling little boots, that it was a shame to walk out in them! But you had deceived me! You were not a poor student. One day, when taking my work home, I met you in an elegant carriage, with tall footmen, dressed in liveries covered with gold lace, behind. I could not believe my eyes. That evening you told me the truth, that you were a nobleman and immensely rich. O my darling, why did you tell me?"

Had she her reason, or was this a mere delirium?

Great tears rolled down the Count de Commarin's wrinkled face, and the doctor and the priest were touched by the sad spectacle of an old man weeping like a child.

Only the previous evening, the count had thought his heart dead; and now this penetrating voice was sufficient to regain the fresh and powerful feelings of his youth. Yet, how many years had passed away since then!

"After that," continued Madame Gerdy, "we left the Quai Saint-Michel. You wished it; and I obeyed, in spite of my apprehensions. You told me, that, to please you, I ought to look like a great lady. You provided teachers for me, for I was so ignorant that I scarcely knew how to sign my name. Do you remember the queer spelling in my first letter? Ah, Guy, if you had really only been a poor student! When I knew that you were so rich, I lost my simplicity, my thoughtlessness, my gaiety. I feared that you would think me covetous, that you would imagine that your fortune influenced my love. Men who, like you, have millions, must be unhappy! They must be always doubting and full of suspicions, they can never be sure whether it is themselves or their gold which is loved, and this awful doubt makes them mistrustful, jealous, and cruel. Oh my dearest, why did we leave our dear little

THE LEROUGE CASE

room? There, we were happy. Why did you not leave me always where you first found me? Did you not know that the sight of happiness irritates mankind? If we had been wise, we would have hid ours like a crime. You thought to raise me, but you only sunk me lower. You were proud of our love; you published it abroad. Vainly I asked you in mercy to leave me in obscurity, and unknown. Soon the whole town knew that I was your mistress. Every one was talking of the money you spent on me. How I blushed at the flaunting luxury you thrust upon me! You were satisfied, because my beauty became celebrated; I wept, because my shame became so too. People talked about me, as those women who make their lovers commit the greatest follies. Was not my name in the papers? And it was through the same papers that I heard of your approaching marriage. Unhappy woman! I should have fled from you, but I had not the courage. I resigned myself, without an effort, to the most humiliating, the most shameful of positions. You were married; and I remained your mistress. Oh, what anguish I suffered during that terrible evening. I was alone in my own home, in that room so associated with you; and you were marrying another! I said to myself, 'At this moment, a pure, noble young girl is giving herself to him.' I said again, 'What oaths is that mouth, which has so often pressed my lips, now taking?' Often since that dreadful misfortune, I have asked heaven what crime I had committed that I should be so terribly punished? This was the crime. I remained your mistress, and your wife died. I only saw her once, and then scarcely for a minute, but she looked at you, and I knew that she loved you as only I could. Ah, Guy, it was our love that killed her!"

She stopped exhausted, but none of the bystanders moved. They listened breathlessly, and waited with feverish emotion for her to resume.

Mademoiselle d'Arlange had not the strength to remain standing; she had fallen upon her knees, and was pressing her handkerchief to her mouth to keep back her sobs. Was not this woman Albert's mother?

The worthy nun was alone unmoved; she had seen, she said to herself, many such deliriums before. She understood absolutely nothing of what was passing.

"These people are very foolish," she muttered, "to pay so much attention to the ramblings of a person out of her mind."

She thought she had more sense than the others, so, approaching the bed, she began to cover up the sick woman.

"Come, madame," said she, "cover yourself, or you will catch cold."

"Sister!" remonstrated the doctor and priest at the same moment.

"For God's sake!" exclaimed the soldier, "let her speak."

"Who," continued the sick woman, unconscious of all that was passing about her, "who told you I was deceiving you? Oh, the wretches! They set spies upon me; they discovered that an officer came frequently to see me. But that officer was my brother, my dear Louis! When he was eighteen years old, and being unable to obtain work, he enlisted, saying to my mother, that there would then be one mouth the less in the family. He was a good soldier, and his officers always liked him. He worked whilst with his regiment; he taught himself, and he quickly rose in rank. He was promoted a lieutenant, then captain, and finally became major. Louis always loved me; had he remained in Paris I should not have fallen. But our mother died, and I was left all alone in this great city. He was a non-commissioned officer when he first knew that I had a lover; and he was so enraged that I feared he would never forgive me. But he did forgive me, saying that my constancy in my error was its only excuse. Ah, my friend, he was more jealous of your honour than you yourself! He came to see me in secret, because I placed him in the unhappy position of blushing for his sister. I had condemned myself never to speak of him, never to mention his name. Could a brave soldier confess that his sister was the mistress of a count? That it might not be known, I took the utmost precautions, but alas! only to make you doubt me. When Louis knew what was said, he wished in his blind rage to challenge you; and then I was obliged to make him think that he had no right to defend

THE LEROUGE CASE

me. What misery! Ah, I have paid dearly for my years of stolen happiness! But you are here, and all is forgotten. For you do believe me, do you not, Guy? I will write to Louis; he will come, he will tell you that I do not lie, and you cannot doubt his, a soldier's word."

"Yes, on my honour," said the old soldier, "what my sister says is the truth."

The dying woman did not hear him; she continued in a voice panting from weariness: "How your presence revives me. I feel that I am growing stronger. I have nearly been very ill. I am afraid I am not very pretty today; but never mind, kiss me!"

She opened her arms, and thrust out her lips as if to kiss him.

"But it is on one condition, Guy, that you will leave me my child? Oh! I beg of you, I entreat you not to take him from me; leave him to me. What is a mother without her child? You are anxious to give him an illustrious name, an immense fortune. No! You tell me that this sacrifice will be for his good. No! My child is mine; I will keep him. The world has no honours, no riches, which can replace a mother's love. You wish to give me in exchange, that other woman's child. Never! What! you would have that woman embrace my boy! It is impossible. Take away this strange child from me; he fills me with horror; I want my own! Ah, do not insist, do not threaten me with anger, do not leave me. I should give in, and then, I should die. Guy, forget this fatal project, the thought of it alone is a crime. Cannot my prayers, my tears, can nothing move you? Ah, well, God will punish us. All will be discovered. The day will come when these children will demand a fearful reckoning. Guy, I foresee the future; I see my son coming towards me, justly angered. What does he say, great heaven! Oh, those letters, those letters, sweet memories of our love! My son, he threatens me! He strikes me! Ah, help! A son strike his mother. Tell no one of it, though. O my God, what torture! Yet he knows well that I am his mother. He pretends not to believe me. Lord, this is too much! Guy! pardon! oh, my only friend! I have neither the power to resist, nor the courage to obey you."

At this moment the door opening on to the landing opened, and Noel appeared, pale as usual, but calm and composed. The dying woman saw him, and the sight affected her like an electric shock. A terrible shudder shook her frame; her eyes grew inordinately large, her hair seemed to stand on end. She raised herself on her pillows, stretched out her arm in the direction where Noel stood, and in a loud voice exclaimed, "Assassin!"

She fell back convulsively on the bed. Some one hastened forward: she was dead.

A deep silence prevailed.

Such is the majesty of death, and the terror which accompanies it, that, in its presence, even the strongest and most sceptical bow their heads.

For a time, passions and interests are forgotten. Involuntarily we are drawn together, when some mutual friend breathes his last in our presence.

All the bystanders were deeply moved by this painful scene, this last confession, wrested so to say from the delirium.

And the last word uttered by Madame Gerdy, "assassin," surprised no one.

All, excepting the nun, knew of the awful accusation which had been made against Albert.

To him they applied the unfortunate mother's malediction.

THE LEROUGE CASE

Noel seemed quite broken hearted. Kneeling by the bedside of her who had been as a mother to him, he took one of her hands, and pressed it close to his lips.

"Dead!" he groaned, "she is dead!"

The nun and the priest knelt beside him, and repeated in a low voice the prayers for the dead.

They implored God to shed his peace and mercy on the departed soul.

They begged for a little happiness in heaven for her who had suffered so much on earth.

Fallen into a chair, his head thrown back, the Count de Commarin was more overwhelmed and more livid than this dead woman, his old love, once so beautiful.

Claire and the doctor hastened to assist him.

They undid his cravat, and took off his shirt collar, for he was suffocating. With the help of the old soldier, whose red, tearful eyes, told of suppressed grief, they moved the count's chair to the half-opened window to give him a little air. Three days before, this scene would have killed him. But the heart hardens by misfortune, like hands by labour.

"His tears have saved him," whispered the doctor to Claire.

M. de Commarin gradually recovered, and, as his thoughts became clearer, his sufferings returned.

Prostration follows great mental shocks. Nature seems to collect her strength to sustain the misfortune. We do not feel all its intensity at once; it is only afterwards that we realize the extent and profundity of the evil.

The count's gaze was fixed upon the bed where lay Valerie's body. There, then, was all that remained of her. The soul, that soul so devoted and so tender, had flown.

What would he not have given if God would have restored that unfortunate woman to life for a day, or even for an hour? With what transports of repentance he would have cast himself at her feet, to implore her pardon, to tell her how much he detested his past conduct! How had he acknowledged the inexhaustible love of that angel? Upon a mere suspicion, without deigning to inquire, without giving her a hearing, he had treated her with the coldest contempt. Why had he not seen her again? He would have spared himself twenty years of doubt as to Albert's birth. Instead of an isolated existence, he would have led a happy, joyous life.

Then he remembered the countess's death. She also had loved him, and had died of her love.

He had not understood them; he had killed them both.

The hour of expiation had come; and he could not say: "Lord, the punishment is too great."

And yet, what punishment, what misfortunes, during the last five days!

"Yes," he stammered, "she predicted it. Why did I not listen to her?"

Madame Gerdy's brother pitied the old man, so severely tried. He held out his hand.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"M. de Commarin," he said, in a grave, sad voice, "my sister forgave you long ago, even if she ever had any ill feeling against you. It is my turn to-day; I forgive you sincerely."

"Thank you, sir," murmured the count, "thank you!" and then he added: "What a death!"

"Yes," murmured Claire, "she breathed her last in the idea that her son was guilty of a crime. And we were not able to undeceive her."

"At least," cried the count, "her son should be free to render her his last duties; yes, he must be. Noel!"

The barrister had approached his father, and heard all.

"I have promised, father," he replied, "to save him."

For the first time, Mademoiselle d'Arlange was face to face with Noel. Their eyes met, and she could not restrain a movement of repugnance, which the barrister perceived.

"Albert is already saved," she said proudly. "What we ask is, that prompt justice shall be done him; that he shall be immediately set at liberty. The magistrate now knows the truth."

"The truth?" exclaimed the barrister.

"Yes; Albert passed at my house, with me, the evening the crime was committed."

Noel looked at her surprised; so singular a confession from such a mouth, without explanation, might well surprise him.

She drew herself up haughtily.

"I am Mademoiselle Claire d'Arlange, sir," said she.

M. de Commarin now quickly ran over all the incidents reported by Claire.

When he had finished, Noel replied: "You see, sir, my position at this moment, to-morrow—"

"To-morrow?" interrupted the count, "you said, I believe, to-morrow! Honour demands, sir, that we act to-day, at this moment. You can show your love for this poor woman much better by delivering her son than by praying for her."

Noel bowed low.

"To hear your wish, sir, is to obey it," he said; "I go. This evening, at your house, I shall have the honour of giving you an account of my proceedings. Perhaps I shall be able to bring Albert with me."

He spoke, and, again embracing the dead woman, went out.

Soon the count and Mademoiselle d'Arlange also retired.

The old soldier went to the Mayor, to give notice of the death, and to fulfil the necessary formalities.

The nun alone remained, awaiting the priest, which the cure had promised to send to watch the corpse.

THE LEROUGE CASE

The daughter of St. Vincent felt neither fear nor embarrassment, she had been so many times in a similar position. Her prayers said, she arose and went about the room, arranging everything as it should be in the presence of death. She removed all traces of the illness, put away the medicine bottles, burnt some sugar upon the fire shovel, and, on a table covered with a white cloth at the head of the bed, placed some lighted candles, a crucifix with holy water, and a branch of palm.

XVII.

GREATLY troubled and perplexed by Mademoiselle d'Arlange's revelations, M. Daburon was ascending the stairs that led to the offices of the investigating magistrates, when he saw old Tabaret coming towards him. The sight pleased him, and he at once called out: "M. Tabaret!"

But the old fellow, who showed signs of the most intense agitation, was scarcely disposed to stop, or to lose a single minute.

"You must excuse me, sir," he said, bowing, "but I am expected at home."

"I hope, however—"

"Oh, he is innocent," interrupted old Tabaret. "I have already some proofs; and before three days— But you are going to see Gevrol's man with the earrings. He is very cunning, Gevrol; I misjudged him."

And without listening to another word, he hurried away, jumping down three steps at a time, at the risk of breaking his neck.

M. Daburon, greatly disappointed, also hastened on.

In the passage, on a bench of rough wood before his office door, Albert sat awaiting him, under the charge of a Garde de Paris.

"You will be summoned immediately, sir," said the magistrate to the prisoner, as he opened his door.

In the office, Constant was talking with a skinny little man, who might have been taken, from his dress, for a well-to-do inhabitant of Batignolles, had it not been for the enormous pin in imitation gold which shone in his cravat, and betrayed the detective.

"You received my letters?" asked M. Daburon of his clerk.

"Your orders have been executed, sir; the prisoner is without, and here is M. Martin, who this moment arrived from the neighbourhood of the Invalides.

"That is well," said the magistrate in a satisfied tone. And, turning towards the detective, "Well, M. Martin," he asked, "what did you see?"

"The walls had been scaled, sir."

"Lately?"

"Five or six days ago."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"You are sure of this?"

"As sure as I am that I see M. Constant at this moment mending his pen."

"The marks are plain?"

"As plain as the nose on my face, sir, if I may so express myself. The thief—it was done by a thief, I imagine," continued M. Martin, who was a great talker—"the thief entered the garden before the rain, and went away after it, as you had conjectured. This circumstance is easy to establish by examining the marks on the wall of the ascent and the descent on the side towards the street. These marks are several abrasions, evidently made by feet of some one climbing. The first are clean; the others, muddy. The scamp—he was a nimble fellow—in getting in, pulled himself up by the strength of his wrists; but when going away, he enjoyed the luxury of a ladder, which he threw down as soon as he was on the top of the wall. It is to see where he placed it, by holes made in the ground by the fellow's weight; and also by the mortar which has been knocked away from the top of the wall."

"Is that all?" asked the magistrate.

"Not yet, sir. Three of the pieces of glass which cover the top of the wall have been removed. Several of the acacia branches, which extend over the wall have been twisted or broken. Adhering to the thorns of one of these branches, I found this little piece of lavender kid, which appears to me to belong to a glove."

The magistrate eagerly seized the piece of kid.

It had evidently come from a glove.

"You took care, I hope, M. Martin," said M. Daburon, "not to attract attention at the house where you made this investigation?"

"Certainly, sir. I first of all examined the exterior of the wall at my leisure. After that, leaving my hat at a wine shop round the corner, I called at the Marchioness d'Arlange's house, pretending to be the servant of a neighbouring duchess, who was in despair at having lost a favourite, and, if I may so speak, an eloquent parrot. I was very kindly given permission to explore the garden; and, as I spoke as disrespectfully as possible of my pretended mistress they, no doubt, took me for a genuine servant."

"You are an adroit and prompt fellow, M. Martin," interrupted the magistrate. "I am well satisfied with you; and I will report you favourably at headquarters."

He rang his bell, while the detective, delighted at the praise he had received, moved backwards to the door, bowing the while.

Albert was then brought in.

"Have you decided, sir," asked the investigating magistrate without preamble, "to give me a true account of how you spent last Tuesday evening?"

"I have already told you, sir."

"No, sir, you have not; and I regret to say that you lied to me."

Albert, at this apparent insult, turned red, and his eyes flashed.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"I know all that you did on that evening," continued the magistrate, "because justice, as I have already told you, is ignorant of nothing that it is important for it to know."

Then, looking straight into Albert's eyes, he continued slowly: "I have seen Mademoiselle Claire d'Arlange."

On hearing that name, the prisoner's features, contracted by a firm resolve not to give way, relaxed.

It seemed as though he experienced an immense sensation of delight, like a man who escapes almost by a miracle from an imminent danger which he had despaired of avoiding. However, he made no reply.

"Mademoiselle d'Arlange," continued the magistrate, "has told me where you were on Tuesday evening."

Albert still hesitated.

"I am not setting a trap for you," added M. Daburon; "I give you my word of honour. She has told me all, you understand?"

This time Albert decided to speak.

His explanations corresponded exactly with Claire's; not one detail more. Henceforth, doubt was impossible.

Mademoiselle d'Arlange had not been imposed upon. Either Albert was innocent, or she was his accomplice.

Could she knowingly be the accomplice of such an odious crime? No; she could not even be suspected of it.

But who then was the assassin?

For, when a crime has been committed, justice demands a culprit.

"You see, sir," said the magistrate severely to Albert, "you did deceive me. You risked your life, sir, and, what is also very serious, you exposed me, you exposed justice, to commit a most deplorable mistake. Why did you not tell me the truth at once?"

"Mademoiselle d'Arlange, sir," replied Albert, "in according me a meeting, trusted in my honour."

"And you would have died sooner than mention that interview?" interrupted M. Daburon with a touch of irony. "That is all very fine, sir, and worthy of the days of chivalry!"

"I am not the hero that you suppose, sir," replied the prisoner simply. "If I told you that I did not count on Claire, I should be telling a falsehood. I was waiting for her. I knew that, on learning of my arrest, she would brave everything to save me. But her friends might have hid it from her; and that was what I feared. In that event, I do not think, so far as one can answer for oneself, that I should have mentioned her name."

There was no appearance of bravado. What Albert said, he thought and felt. M. Daburon regretted his irony.

"Sir," he said kindly, "you must return to your prison. I cannot release you yet; but you will be no longer in solitary confinement. You will be treated with every attention due to a prisoner whose innocence appears probable."

Albert bowed, and thanked him; and was then removed.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"We are now ready for Gevrol," said the magistrate to his clerk.

The chief of detectives was absent: he had been sent for from the Prefecture of Police; but his witness, the man with the earrings, was waiting in the passage.

He was told to enter.

He was one of those short, thick-set men, powerful as oaks, who look as though they could carry almost any weight on their broad shoulders.

His white hair and whiskers set off his features, hardened and tanned by the inclemency of the weather, the sea winds and the heat of the tropics.

He had large callous black hands, with big sinewy fingers which must have possessed the strength of a vice.

Great earrings in the form of anchors hung from his ears. He was dressed in the costume of a well-to-do Normandy fisherman, out for a holiday.

The clerk was obliged to push him into the office, for this son of the ocean was timid and abashed when on shore.

He advanced, balancing himself first on one leg, then on the other, with that irregular walk of the sailor, who, used to the rolling and tossing of the waves, is surprised to find anything immovable beneath his feet.

To give himself confidence, he fumbled over his soft felt hat, decorated with little lead medals, like the cap of king Louis XI. of devout memory, and also adorned with some of that worsted twist made by the young country girls, on a primitive frame composed of four or five pins stuck in a hollow cork.

M. Daburon examined him, and estimated him at a glance. There was no doubt but that he was the sunburnt man described by one of the witnesses at La Jonchere.

It was also impossible to doubt his honesty. His open countenance displayed sincerity and good nature.

"Your name?" demanded the investigating magistrate.

"Marie Pierre Lerouge."

"Are you, then, related to Claudine Lerouge?"

"I am her husband, sir."

What, the husband of the victim alive, and the police ignorant of his existence!

Thus thought M. Daburon.

What, then, does this wonderful progress in invention accomplish?

To-day, precisely as twenty years ago, when Justice is in doubt, it requires the same inordinate loss of time and money to obtain the slightest information.

On Friday, they had written to inquire about Claudine's past life; it was now Monday, and no reply had arrived.

THE LEROUGE CASE

And yet photography was in existence, and the electric telegraph. They had at their service a thousand means, formerly unknown; and they made no use of them.

"Every one," said the magistrate, "believed her a widow. She herself pretended to be one."

"Yes, for in that way she partly excused her conduct. Besides, it was an arrangement between ourselves. I had told her that I would have nothing more to do with her."

"Indeed? Well, you know that she is dead, victim of an odious crime?"

"The detective who brought me here told me of it, sir," replied the sailor, his face darkening. "She was a wretch!" he added in a hollow voice.

"How? You, her husband, accuse her?"

"I have but too good reason to do so, sir. Ah, my dead father, who foresaw it all at the time, warned me! I laughed, when he said, 'Take care, or she will dishonour us all.' He was right. Through her, I have been hunted down by the police, just like some skulking thief. Everywhere that they inquired after me with their warrant, people must have said 'Ah, ha, he has then committed some crime!' And here I am before a magistrate! Ah, sir, what a disgrace! The Lerouges have been honest people, from father to son, ever since the world began. Inquire of all who have ever had dealings with me, they will tell you, 'Lerouge's word is as good as another man's writing.' Yes, she was a wicked woman; and I have often told her that she would come to a bad end."

"You told her that?"

"More than a hundred times, sir."

"Why? Come, my friend, do not be uneasy, your honour is not at stake here, no one questions it. When did you warn her so wisely?"

"Ah, a long time ago, sir," replied the sailor, "the first time was more than thirty years back. She had ambition even in her blood; she wished to mix herself up in the intrigues of the great. It was that that ruined her. She said that one got money for keeping secrets; and I said that one got disgraced and that was all. To help the great to hide their villainies, and to expect happiness from it, is like making your bed of thorns, in the hope of sleeping well. But she had a will of her own."

"You were her husband, though," objected M. Daburon, "you had the right to command her obedience."

The sailor shook his head, and heaved a deep sigh.

"Alas, sir! it was I who obeyed."

To proceed by short inquiries with a witness, when you have no idea of the information he brings, is but to lose time in attempting to gain it. When you think you are approaching the important fact, you may be just avoiding it. It is much better to give the witness the rein, and to listen carefully, putting him back on the track should he get too far away. It is the surest and easiest method. This was the course M. Daburon adopted, all the time cursing Gevrol's absence, as he by a single word could have shortened by a good half the examination, the importance of which, by the way, the magistrate did not even suspect.

"In what intrigues did your wife mingle?" asked he. "Go on, my friend, tell me everything exactly; here, you know, we must have not only the truth, but the whole truth."

THE LEROUGE CASE

Lerouge placed his hat on a chair. Then he began alternately to pull his fingers, making them crack almost sufficiently to break them, and ultimately scratched his head violently. It was his way of arranging his ideas.

"I must tell you," he began, "that it will be thirty-five years on St. John's day since I fell in love with Claudine. She was a pretty, neat, fascinating girl, with a voice sweeter than honey. She was the most beautiful girl in our part of the country, straight as a mast, supple as a willow, graceful and strong as a racing boat. Her eyes sparkled like old cider; her hair was black, her teeth as white as pearls, and her breath was as fresh as the sea breeze. The misfortune was, that she hadn't a sou, while we were in easy circumstances. Her mother, who was the widow of I can't say how many husbands, was, saving your presence, a bad woman, and my father was the worthiest man alive. When I spoke to the old fellow of marrying Claudine he swore fiercely, and eight days after, he sent me to Porto on a schooner belonging to one of our neighbours, just to give me a change of air. I came back, at the end of six months, thinner than a marling spike, but more in love than ever. Recollections of Claudine scorched me like a fire. I could scarcely eat or drink; but I felt that she loved me a little in return, for I was a fine young fellow, and more than one girl had set her cap at me. Then my father, seeing that he could do nothing, that I was wasting away, and was on the road to join my mother in the cemetery, decided to let me complete my folly. So one evening, after we had returned from fishing and I got up from supper without tasting it, he said to me, 'Marry the hag's daughter, and let's have no more of this.' I remember it distinctly, because, when I heard the old fellow call my love such a name, I flew into a great passion, and almost wanted to kill him. Ah, one never gains anything by marrying in opposition to one's parents!"

The worthy fellow was lost in the midst of his recollections. He was very far from his story. The investigating magistrate attempted to bring him back into the right path, "Come to the point," he said.

"I am going to, sir; but it was necessary to begin at the beginning. I married. The evening after the wedding, and when the relatives and guests had departed, I was about to join my wife, when I perceived my father all alone in a corner weeping. The sight touched my heart, and I had a foreboding of evil; but it quickly passed away. It is so delightful during the first six months one passes with a dearly loved wife! One seems to be surrounded by mists that change the very rocks into palaces and temples so completely that novices are taken in. For two years, in spite of a few little quarrels, everything went on nicely. Claudine managed me like a child. Ah, she was cunning! She might have seized and bound me, and carried me to market and sold me, without my noticing it. Her great fault was her love of finery. All that I earned, and my business was very prosperous, she put on her back. Every week there was something new, dresses, jewels, bonnets, the devil's baubles, which the dealers invent for the perdition of the female sex. The neighbors chattered, but I thought it was all right. At the baptism of our son, who was called Jacques after my father, to please her, I squandered all I had economized during my youth, more than three hundred pistoles, with which I had intended purchasing a meadow that lay in the midst of our property."

M. Daburon was boiling over with impatience, but he could do nothing.

"Go on, go on," he said every time Lerouge seemed inclined to stop.

"I was well enough pleased," continued the sailor, "until one morning I saw one of the Count de Commarin's servants entering our house; the count's chateau is only about a mile from where I lived on the other side of the town. It was a fellow named Germain whom I didn't like at all. It was said about the country that he had been mixed up in the seduction of poor Thomassine, a fine young girl who lived near us; she appears to have pleased the count, and one day suddenly disappeared. I asked my wife what the fellow wanted; she replied that he had come to ask her to take a child to nurse. I would not hear of it at first, for our means were sufficient to allow Claudine to keep all her milk for our own child. But she gave me the very best of reasons. She said she regretted her past flirtations and her extravagance. She wished to earn a little money, being ashamed of doing nothing while I was killing myself with work. She wanted to save, to economize, so that our child should not be obliged in his turn to go to sea. She was to get a very good price, that we could save up to go towards the three hundred pistoles. That confounded meadow, to which she alluded, decided me."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Did she not tell you of the commission with which she was charged?" asked the magistrate.

This question astonished Lerouge. He thought that there was good reason to say that justice sees and knows everything.

"Not then," he answered, "but you will see. Eight days after, the postman brought a letter, asking her to go to Paris to fetch the child. It arrived in the evening. 'Very well,' said she, 'I will start to-morrow by the diligence.' I didn't say a word then; but next morning, when she was about to take her seat in the diligence, I declared that I was going with her. She didn't seem at all angry, on the contrary. She kissed me, and I was delighted. At Paris, she was to call for the little one at a Madame Gerdy's, who lived on the Boulevard. We arranged that she should go alone, while I awaited for her at our inn. After she had gone, I grew uneasy. I went out soon after, and prowled about near Madame Gerdy's house, making inquiries of the servants and others; I soon discovered that she was the Count de Commarin's mistress. I felt so annoyed that, if I had been master, my wife should have come away without the little bastard. I am only a poor sailor, and I know that a man sometimes forgets himself. One takes too much to drink, for instance, or goes out on the loose with some friends; but that a man with a wife and children should live with another woman and give her what really belongs to his legitimate offspring, I think is bad—very bad. Is it not so, sir?"

The investigating magistrate moved impatiently in his chair. "Will this man never come to the point," he muttered. "Yes, you are perfectly right," he added aloud; "but never mind your thoughts. Go on, go on!"

"Claudine, sir, was more obstinate than a mule. After three days of violent discussion, she obtained from me a reluctant consent, between two kisses. Then she told me that we were not going to return home by the diligence. The lady, who feared the fatigue of the journey for her child, had arranged that we should travel back by short stages, in her carriage, and drawn by her horses. For she was kept in grand style. I was ass enough to be delighted, because it gave me a chance to see the country at my leisure. We were, therefore, installed with the children, mine and the other, in an elegant carriage, drawn by magnificent animals, and driven by a coachman in livery. My wife was mad with joy; she kissed me over and over again, and chinked handfuls of gold in my face. I felt as foolish as an honest husband who finds money in his house which he didn't earn himself. Seeing how I felt, Claudine, hoping to pacify me, resolved to tell me the whole truth. 'See here,' she said to me,—"

Lerouge stopped, and, changing his tone, said, "You understand that it is my wife who is speaking?"

"Yes, yes. Go on."

"She said to me, shaking her pocket full of money, 'See here, my man, we shall always have as much of this as ever we may want, and this is why: The count, who also had a legitimate child at the same time as this bastard, wishes that this one shall bear his name instead of the other; and this can be accomplished, thanks to me. On the road, we shall meet at the inn, where we are to sleep, M. Germain and the nurse to whom they have entrusted the legitimate son. We shall be put in the same room, and, during the night, I am to change the little ones, who have been purposely dressed alike. For this the count gives me eight thousand francs down, and a life annuity of a thousand francs.'"

"And you!" exclaimed the magistrate, "you, who call yourself an honest man, permitted such villainy, when one word would have been sufficient to prevent it?"

"Sir, I beg of you," entreated Lerouge, "permit me to finish."

"Well, continue!"

THE LEROUGE CASE

"I could say nothing at first, I was so choked with rage. I must have looked terrible. But she, who was generally afraid of me when I was in a passion, burst out laughing, and said, 'What a fool you are! Listen, before turning sour like a bowl of milk. The count is the only one who wants this change made; and he is the one that's to pay for it. His mistress, this little one's mother, doesn't want it at all; she merely pretended to consent, so as not to quarrel with her lover, and because she has got a plan of her own. She took me aside, during my visit in her room, and, after having made me swear secrecy on a crucifix, she told me that she couldn't bear the idea of separating herself from her babe forever, and of bringing up another's child. She added that, if I would agree not to change the children, and not to tell the count, she would give me ten thousand francs down, and guarantee me an annuity equal to the one the count had promised me. She declared, also, that she could easily find out whether I kept my word, as she had made a mark of recognition on her little one. She didn't show me the mark; and I have examined him carefully, but can't find it. Do you understand now? I merely take care of this little fellow here. I tell the count that I have changed the children; we receive from both sides, and Jacques will be rich. Now kiss your little wife who has more sense than you, you old dear!' That, sir, is word for word what Claudine said to me."

The rough sailor drew from his pocket a large blue-checked handkerchief, and blew his nose so violently that the windows shook. It was his way of weeping.

M. Daburon was confounded. Since the beginning of this sad affair, he had encountered surprise after surprise. Scarcely had he got his ideas in order on one point, when all his attention was directed to another.

He felt himself utterly routed. What was he about to learn now? He longed to interrogate quickly, but he saw that Lerouge told his story with difficulty, laboriously disentangling his recollections; he was guided by a single thread which the least interruption might seriously entangle.

"What Claudine proposed to me," continued the sailor, "was villainous; and I am an honest man. But she kneaded me to her will as easily as a baker kneads dough. She turned my heart topsy-turvy: she made me see white as snow that which was really as black as ink. How I loved her! She proved to me that we were wronging no one, that we were making little Jacques's fortune, and I was silenced. At evening we arrived at some village; and the coachman, stopping the carriage before an inn, told us we were to sleep there. We entered, and who do you think we saw? That scamp, Germain, with a nurse carrying a child dressed so exactly like the one we had that I was startled. They had journeyed there, like ourselves, in one of the count's carriages. A suspicion crossed my mind. How could I be sure that Claudine had not invented the second story to pacify me? She was certainly capable of it. I was enraged. I had consented to the one wickedness, but not to the other. I resolved not to lose sight of the little bastard, swearing that they shouldn't change it; so I kept him all the evening on my knees, and to be all the more sure, I tied my handkerchief about his waist. Ah! the plan had been well laid. After supper, some one spoke of retiring, and then it turned out that there were only two double-bedded rooms in the house. It seemed as though it had been built expressly for the scheme. The innkeeper said that the two nurses might sleep in one room, and Germain and myself in the other. Do you understand, sir? Add to this, that during the evening I had surprised looks of intelligence passing between my wife and that rascally servant, and you can imagine how furious I was. It was conscience that spoke; and I was trying to silence it. I knew very well that I was doing wrong; and I almost wished myself dead. Why is it that women can turn an honest man's conscience about like a weather-cock with their wheedling?"

M. Daburon's only reply was a heavy blow of his fist on the table.

Lerouge proceeded more quickly.

"As for me, I upset that arrangement, pretending to be too jealous to leave my wife a minute. They were obliged to give way to me. The other nurse went up to bed first. Claudine and I followed soon afterwards. My wife undressed and got into bed with our son and the little bastard. I did not undress. Under the pretext that I should be in the way of the children, I installed myself in a chair near the bed, determined not to shut my eyes, and to keep

THE LEROUGE CASE

close watch. I put out the candle, in order to let the women sleep, though I could not think of doing so myself; and I thought of my father, and of what he would say, if he ever heard of my behaviour. Towards midnight, I heard Claudine moving. I held my breath. She was getting out of bed. Was she going to change the children? Now, I knew that she was not; then, I felt sure that she was. I was beside myself, and seizing her by the arm, I commenced to beat her roughly, giving free vent to all that I had on my heart. I spoke in a loud voice, the same as when I am on board ship in a storm; I swore like a fiend, I raised a frightful disturbance. The other nurse cried out as though she were being murdered. At this uproar, Germain rushed in with a lighted candle. The sight of him finished me. Not knowing what I was doing, I drew from my pocket a long Spanish knife, which I always carried, and seizing the cursed bastard, I thrust the blade through his arm, crying, "This way, at least, he can't be changed without my knowing it; he is marked for life!"

Lerouge could scarcely utter another word. Great drops of sweat stood out upon his brow, then, trickling down his cheeks, lodged in the deep wrinkles of his face. He panted; but the magistrate's stern glance harassed him, and urged him on, like the whip which flogs the negro slave overcome with fatigue.

"The little fellow's wound," he resumed, "was terrible. It bled dreadfully, and he might have died; but I didn't think of that. I was only troubled about the future, about what might happen afterwards. I declared that I would write out all that had occurred, and that everyone should sign it. This was done; we could all four write. Germain didn't dare resist; for I spoke with knife in hand. He wrote his name first, begging me to say nothing about it to the count, swearing that, for his part, he would never breathe a word of it, and pledging the other nurse to a like secrecy."

"And have you kept this paper?" asked M. Daburon.

"Yes, sir, and as the detective to whom I confessed all, advised me to bring it with me, I went to take it from the place where I always kept it, and I have it here."

"Give it to me."

Lerouge took from his coat pocket an old parchment pocket-book, fastened with a leather thong, and withdrew from it a paper yellowed by age and carefully sealed.

"Here it is," said he. "The paper hasn't been opened since that accursed night."

And, in fact, when the magistrate unfolded it, some dust fell out, which had been used to keep the writing, when wet, from blotting.

It was really a brief description of the scene, described by the old sailor. The four signatures were there.

"What has become of the witnesses who signed this declaration?" murmured the magistrate, speaking to himself.

Lerouge, who thought the question was put to him, replied, "Germain is dead. I have been told that he was drowned when out rowing. Claudine has just been assassinated; but the other nurse still lives. I even know that she spoke of the affair to her husband, for he hinted as much to me. His name is Brosette, and she lives in the village of Commarin itself."

"And what next?" asked the magistrate, after having taken down the name and address.

"The next day, sir, Claudine managed to pacify me, and extorted a promise of secrecy. The child was scarcely ill at all; but he retained an enormous scar on his arm."

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Was Madame Gerdy informed of what took place?"

"I do not think so, sir. But I would rather say that I do not know."

"What! you do not know?"

"Yes, sir, I swear it. You see my ignorance comes from what happened afterwards."

"What happened, then?"

The sailor hesitated.

"That, sir, concerns only myself, and—"

"My friend," interrupted the magistrate, "you are an honest man, I believe; in fact, I am sure of it. But once in your life, influenced by a wicked woman, you did wrong, you became an accomplice in a very guilty action. Repair that error by speaking truly now. All that is said here, and which is not directly connected with the crime, will remain secret; even I will forget it immediately. Fear nothing, therefore; and, if you experience some humiliation, think that it is your punishment for the past."

"Alas, sir," answered the sailor, "I have been already greatly punished; and it is a long time since my troubles began. Money, wickedly acquired, brings no good. On arriving home, I bought the wretched meadow for much more than it was worth; and the day I walked over it, feeling that it was actually mine, closed my happiness. Claudine was a coquette; but she had a great many other vices. When she realised how much money we had these vices showed themselves, just like a fire, smouldering at the bottom of the hold, bursts forth when you open the hatches. From slightly greedy as she had been, she became a regular glutton. In our house there was feasting without end. Whenever I went to sea, she would entertain the worst women in the place; and there was nothing too good or too expensive for them. She would get so drunk that she would have to be put to bed. Well, one night, when she thought me at Rouen, I returned unexpectedly. I entered, and found her with a man. And such a man, sir! A miserable looking wretch, ugly, dirty, stinking; shunned by everyone; in a word the bailiff's clerk. I should have killed him, like the vermin that he was; it was my right, but he was such a pitiful object. I took him by the neck and pitched him out of the window, without opening it! It didn't kill him. Then I fell upon my wife, and beat her until she couldn't stir."

Lerouge spoke in a hoarse voice, every now and then thrusting his fists into his eyes.

"I pardoned her," he continued; "but the man who beats his wife and then pardons her is lost. In the future, she took better precautions, became a greater hypocrite, and that was all. In the meanwhile, Madame Gerdy took back her child; and Claudine had nothing more to restrain her. Protected and counselled by her mother, whom she had taken to live with us, on the pretence of looking after Jacques, she managed to deceive me for more than a year. I thought she had given up her bad habits, but not at all; she lived a most disgraceful life. My house became the resort of all the good-for-nothing rogues in the country, for whom my wife brought out bottles of wine and brandy, whenever I was away at sea, and they got drunk promiscuously. When money failed, she wrote to the count or his mistress, and the orgies continued. Occasionally I had doubts which disturbed me; and then without reason, for a simple yes or no, I would beat her until I was tired, and then I would forgive her, like a coward, like a fool. It was a cursed life. I don't know which gave me the most pleasure, embracing her or beating her. My neighbors despised me, and turned their backs on me; they believed me an accomplice or a willing dupe. I heard, afterwards, that they believed I profited by my wife's misconduct; while in reality she paid her lovers. At all events, people wondered where all the money came from that was spent in my house. To distinguish me from a cousin of mine, also named Lerouge, they tacked an infamous word on to my name. What disgrace! And I knew nothing of all the scandal, no, nothing. Was I not the husband? Fortunately, though, my poor father was dead."

THE LEROUGE CASE

M. Daburon pitied the speaker sincerely.

"Rest a while, my friend," he said; "compose yourself."

"No," replied the sailor, "I would rather get through with it quickly. One man, the priest, had the charity to tell me of it. If ever he should want Lerouge! Without losing a minute, I went and saw a lawyer, and asked him how an honest sailor who had had the misfortune to marry a hussy ought to act. He said that nothing could be done. To go to law was simply to publish abroad one's own dishonour, while a separation would accomplish nothing. When once a man has given his name to a woman, he told me, he cannot take it back; it belongs to her for the rest of her days, and she has a right to dispose of it. She may sully it, cover it with mire, drag it from wine shop to wine shop, and her husband can do nothing. That being the case, my course was soon taken. That same day, I sold the fatal meadow, and sent the proceeds of it to Claudine, wishing to keep nothing of the price of shame. I then had a document drawn up, authorising her to administer our property, but not allowing her either to sell or mortgage it. Then I wrote her a letter in which I told her that she need never expect to hear of me again, that I was nothing more to her, and that she might look upon herself as a widow. That same night I went away with my son."

"And what became of your wife after your departure?"

"I cannot say, sir; I only know that she quitted the neighbourhood a year after I did."

"You have never lived with her since?"

"Never."

"But you were at her house three days before the crime was committed."

"That is true, but it was absolutely necessary. I had had much trouble to find her, no one knew what had become of her. Fortunately my notary was able to procure Madame Gerdy's address; he wrote to her, and that is how I learnt that Claudine was living at La Jonchere. I was then at Rome. Captain Gervais, who is a friend of mine, offered to take me to Paris on his boat, and I accepted. Ah, sir, what a shock I experienced when I entered her house! My wife did not know me! By constantly telling everyone that I was dead, she had without a doubt ended by believing it herself. When I told her my name, she fell back in her chair. The wretched woman had not changed in the least; she had by her side a glass and a bottle of brandy—"

"All this doesn't explain why you went to seek your wife."

"It was on Jacques's account, sir, that I went. The youngster has grown to be a man; and he wants to marry. For that, his mother's consent was necessary; and I was taking to Claudine a document which the notary had drawn up, and which she signed. This is it."

M. Daburon took the paper, and appeared to read it attentively. After a moment he asked: "Have you thought who could have assassinated your wife?"

Lerouge made no reply.

"Do you suspect any one?" persisted the magistrate.

"Well, sir," replied the sailor, "what can I say? I thought that Claudine had wearied out the people from whom she drew money, like water from a well; or else getting drunk one day, she had blabbed too freely."

THE LEROUGE CASE

The testimony being as complete as possible, M. Daburon dismissed Lerouge, at the same time telling him to wait for Gevrol, who would take him to a hotel, where he might wait, at the disposal of justice, until further orders.

"All your expenses will be paid you," added the magistrate.

Lerouge had scarcely left, when an extraordinary, unheard of, unprecedented event took place in the magistrate's office. Constant, the serious, impressive, immovable, deaf and dumb Constant, rose from his seat and spoke.

He broke a silence of fifteen years. He forgot himself so far as to offer an opinion.

"This, sir," said he, "is a most extraordinary affair."

Very extraordinary, truly, thought M. Daburon, and calculated to rout all predictions, all preconceived opinions.

Why had he, the magistrate, moved with such deplorable haste? Why before risking anything, had he not waited to possess all the elements of this important case, to hold all the threads of this complicated drama?

Justice is accused of slowness; but it is this very slowness that constitutes its strength and surety, its almost infallibility. One scarcely knows what a time evidence takes to produce itself. There is no knowing what important testimony investigations apparently useless may reveal.

When the entanglement of the various passions and motives seems hopeless, an unknown personage presents himself, coming from no one knows where, and it is he who explains everything.

M. Daburon, usually the most prudent of men, had considered as simple one of the most complex of cases. He had acted in a mysterious crime, which demanded the utmost caution, as carelessly as though it were a case of simple misdemeanour. Why? Because his memory had not left him his free deliberation, judgment, and discernment. He had feared equally appearing weak and being revengeful. Thinking himself sure of his facts, he had been carried away by his animosity. And yet how often had he not asked himself: Where is duty? But then, when one is at all doubtful about duty, one is on the wrong road.

The singular part of it all was that the magistrate's faults sprang from his very honesty. He had been led astray by a too great refinement of conscience. The scruples which troubled him had filled his mind with phantoms, and had prompted in him the passionate animosity he had displayed at a certain moment.

Calmer now, he examined the case more soundly. As a whole, thank heaven! there was nothing done which could not be repaired. He accused himself, however, none the less harshly. Chance alone had stopped him. At that moment he resolved that he would never undertake another investigation. His profession henceforth inspired him with an unconquerable loathing. Then his interview with Claire had re-opened all the old wounds in his heart, and they bled more painfully than ever. He felt, in despair, that his life was broken, ruined. A man may well feel so, when all women are as nothing to him except one, whom he may never dare hope to possess. Too pious a man to think of suicide, he asked himself with anguish what would become of him when he threw aside his magistrate's robes.

Then he turned again to the business in hand. In any case, innocent or guilty, Albert was really the Viscount de Commarin, the count's legitimate son. But was he guilty? Evidently he was not.

"I think," exclaimed M. Daburon suddenly, "I must speak to the Count de Commarin. Constant, send to his house a message for him to come here at once; if he is not at home, he must be sought for."

THE LEROUGE CASE

M. Daburon felt that an unpleasant duty was before him. He would be obliged to say to the old nobleman: "Sir, your legitimate son is not Noel, but Albert." What a position, not only painful, but bordering on the ridiculous! As a compensation, though, he could tell him that Albert was innocent.

To Noel he would also have to tell the truth: hurl him to earth, after having raised him among the clouds. What a blow it would be! But, without a doubt, the count would make him some compensation; at least, he ought to.

"Now," murmured the magistrate, "who can be the criminal?"

An idea crossed his mind, at first it seemed to him absurd. He rejected it, then thought of it again. He examined it in all its various aspects. He had almost adopted it, when M. de Commarin entered. M. Daburon's messenger had arrived just as the count was alighting from his carriage, on returning with Claire from Madame Gerdy's.

XVIII.

OLD TABARET talked, but he acted also.

Abandoned by the investigating magistrate to his own resources, he set to work without losing a minute and without taking a moment's rest.

The story of the cabriolet, drawn by a swift horse, was exact in every particular.

Lavish with his money, the old fellow had gathered together a dozen detectives on leave or rogues out of work; and at the head of these worthy assistants, seconded by his friend Lecoq, he had gone to Bougival.

He had actually searched the country, house by house, with the obstinacy and the patience of a maniac hunting for a needle in a hay-stack.

His efforts were not absolutely wasted.

After three days' investigation, he felt comparatively certain that the assassin had not left the train at Rueil, as all the people of Bougival, La Jonchere, and Marly do, but had gone on as far as Chatou.

Tabaret thought he recognized him in a man described to him by the porters at that station as rather young, dark, and with black whiskers, carrying an overcoat and an umbrella.

This person, who arrived by the train which left Paris for St. Germain at thirty-five minutes past eight in the evening, had appeared to be in a very great hurry.

On quitting the station, he had started off at a rapid pace on the road which led to Bougival. Upon the way, two men from Marly and a woman from La Malmaison had noticed him on account of his rapid pace. He smoked as he hurried along.

On crossing the bridge which joins the two banks of the Seine at Bougival, he had been still more noticed.

It is usual to pay a toll on crossing this bridge; and the supposed assassin had apparently forgotten this circumstance. He passed without paying, keeping up his rapid pace, pressing his elbows to his side, husbanding his breath, and the gate-keeper was obliged to run after him for his toll.

He seemed greatly annoyed at the circumstance, threw the man a ten sou piece, and hurried on, without waiting

THE LEROUGE CASE

for the nine sous change.

Nor was that all.

The station master at Rueil remembered, that, two minutes before the quarter past ten train came up, a passenger arrived very agitated, and so out of breath that he could scarcely ask for a second class ticket for Paris.

The appearance of this man corresponded exactly with the description given of him by the porters at Chatou, and by the gatekeeper at the bridge.

Finally, the old man thought he was on the track of some one who entered the same carriage as the breathless passenger. He had been told of a baker living at Asnieres, and he had written to him, asking him to call at his house.

Such was old Tabaret's information, when on the Monday morning he called at the Palais de Justice, in order to find out if the record of Widow Lerouge's past life had been received. He found that nothing had arrived, but in the passage he met Gevrol and his man.

The chief of detectives was triumphant, and showed it too. As soon as he saw Tabaret, he called out, "Well, my illustrious mare's-nest hunter, what news? Have you had any more scoundrels guillotined since the other day? Ah, you old rogue, you want to oust me from my place I can see!"

The old man was sadly changed.

The consciousness of his mistake made him humble and meek. These pleasantries, which a few days before would have made him angry, now did not touch him. Instead of retaliating, he bowed his head in such a penitent manner that Gevrol was astonished.

"Jeer at me, my good M. Gevrol," he replied, "mock me without pity; you are right, I deserve it all."

"Ah, come now," said the chief, "have you then performed some new masterpiece, you impetuous old fellow?"

Old Tabaret shook his head sadly.

"I have delivered up an innocent man," he said, "and justice will not restore him his freedom."

Gevrol was delighted, and rubbed his hands until he almost wore away the skin.

"This is fine," he sang out, "this is capital. To bring criminals to justice is of no account at all. But to free the innocent, by Jove! that is the last touch of art. Tiraclair, you are an immense wonder; and I bow before you."

And at the same time, he raised his hat ironically.

"Don't crush me," replied the old fellow. "As you know, in spite of my grey hairs, I am young in the profession. Because chance served me three or four times, I became foolishly proud. I have learned too late that I am not all that I had thought myself; I am but an apprentice, and success has turned my head; while you, M. Gevrol, you are the master of all of us. Instead of laughing, pray help me, aid me with your advice and your experience. Alone, I can do nothing, while with your assistance----!"

Gevrol is vain in the highest degree.

THE LEROUGE CASE

Tabaret's submission tickled his pretensions as a detective immensely; for in reality he thought the old man very clever. He was softened.

"I suppose," he said patronisingly, "you refer to the La Jonchere affair?"

"Alas! yes, my dear M. Gevrol, I wished to work without you, and I have got myself into a pretty mess."

Cunning old Tabaret kept his countenance as penitent as that of a sacristan caught eating meat on a Friday; but he was inwardly laughing and rejoicing all the while.

"Conceited fool!" he thought, "I will flatter you so much that you will end by doing everything I want."

M. Gevrol rubbed his nose, put out his lower lip, and said, "Ah,— hem!"

He pretended to hesitate; but it was only because he enjoyed prolonging the old amateur's discomfiture.

"Come," said he at last, "cheer up, old Tiraclair. I'm a good fellow at heart, and I'll give you a lift. That's kind, isn't it? But, to-day, I'm too busy, I've an appointment to keep. Come to me to-morrow morning, and we'll talk it over. But before we part I'll give you a light to find your way with. Do you know who that witness is that I've brought?"

"No; but tell me, my good M. Gevrol."

"Well, that fellow on the bench there, who is waiting for M. Daburon, is the husband of the victim of the La Jonchere tragedy!"

"Is it possible?" exclaimed old Tabaret, perfectly astounded. Then, after reflecting a moment, he added, "You are joking with me."

"No, upon my word. Go and ask him his name; he will tell you that it is Pierre Lerouge."

"She wasn't a widow then?"

"It appears not," replied Gevrol sarcastically, "since there is her happy spouse."

"Whew!" muttered the old fellow. "And does he know anything?"

In a few sentences, the chief of detectives related to his amateur colleague the story that Lerouge was about to tell the investigating magistrate.

"What do you say to that?" he asked when he came to the end.

"What do I say to that?" stammered old Tabaret, whose countenance indicated intense astonishment; "what do I say to that? I don't say anything. But I think,—no, I don't think anything either!"

"A slight surprise, eh?" said Gevrol, beaming.

"Say rather an immense one," replied Tabaret.

But suddenly he started, and gave his forehead a hard blow with his fist.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"And my baker!" he cried, "I will see you to-morrow, then, M. Gevrol."

"He is crazed," thought the head detective.

The old fellow was sane enough, but he had suddenly recollected the Asnieres baker, whom he had asked to call at his house. Would he still find him there?

Going down the stairs he met M. Daburon; but, as one has already seen, he hardly deigned to reply to him.

He was soon outside, and trotted off along the quays.

"Now," said he to himself, "let us consider. Noel is once more plain Noel Gerdy. He won't feel very pleased, for he thought so much of having a great name. Pshaw! if he likes, I'll adopt him. Tabaret doesn't sound so well as Commarin, but it's at least a name. Anyhow, Gevrol's story in no way affects Albert's situation nor my convictions. He is the legitimate son; so much the better for him! That however, would not prove his innocence to me, if I doubted it. He evidently knew nothing of these surprising circumstances, any more than his father. He must have believed as well as the count in the substitution having taken place. Madame Gerdy, too, must have been ignorant of these facts; they probably invented some story to explain the scar. Yes, but Madame Gerdy certainly knew that Noel was really her son, for when he was returned to her, she no doubt looked for the mark she had made on him. Then, when Noel discovered the count's letters, she must have hastened to explain to him—"

Old Tabaret stopped as suddenly as if further progress were obstructed by some dangerous reptile. He was terrified at the conclusion he had reached.

"Noel, then, must have assassinated Widow Lerouge, to prevent her confessing that the substitution had never taken place, and have burnt the letters and papers which proved it!"

But he repelled this supposition with horror, as every honest man drives away a detestable thought which by accident enters his mind.

"What an old idiot I am!" he exclaimed, resuming his walk; "this is the result of the horrible profession I once gloried in following! Suspect Noel, my boy, my sole heir, the personification of virtue and honour! Noel, whom ten years of constant intercourse have taught me to esteem and admire to such a degree that I would speak for him as I would for myself! Men of his class must indeed be moved by terrible passions to cause them to shed blood; and I have always known Noel to have but two passions, his mother and his profession. And I dare even to breath a suspicion against this noble soul? I ought to be whipped! Old fool! isn't the lesson you have already received sufficiently terrible? Will you never be more cautious?"

Thus he reasoned, trying to dismiss his disquieting thoughts, and restraining his habits of investigation; but in his heart a tormenting voice constantly whispered, "Suppose it is Noel."

He at length reached the Rue St. Lazare. Before the door of his house stood a magnificent horse harnessed to an elegant blue brougham. At the sight of these he stopped.

"A handsome animal!" he said to himself; "my tenants receive some swell people."

They apparently received visitors of an opposite class also, for, at that moment, he saw M. Clergeot came out, worthy M. Clergeot, whose presence in a house betrayed ruin just as surely as the presence of the undertakers announce a death. The old detective, who knew everybody, was well acquainted with the worthy banker. He had even done business with him once, when collecting books. He stopped him and said: "Halloa! you old crocodile,

THE LEROUGE CASE

you have clients, then, in my house?"

"So it seems," replied Clergeot dryly, for he does not like being treated with such familiarity.

"Ah! ah!" said old Tabaret. And, prompted by the very natural curiosity of a landlord who is bound to be very careful about the financial condition of his tenants, he added, "Who the deuce are you ruining now?"

"I am ruining no one," replied M. Clergeot, with an air of offended dignity. "Have you ever had reason to complain of me whenever we have done business together? I think not. Mention me to the young barrister up there, if you like; he will tell you whether he has reason to regret knowing me."

These words produced a painful impression on Tabaret. What, Noel, the prudent Noel, one of Clergeot's customers! What did it mean? Perhaps there was no harm in it; but then he remembered the fifteen thousand francs he had lent Noel on the Thursday.

"Yes," said he, wishing to obtain some more information, "I know that M. Gerdy spends a pretty round sum."

Clergeot has the delicacy never to leave his clients undefended when attacked.

"It isn't he personally," he objected, "who makes the money dance; it's that charming little woman of his. Ah, she's no bigger than your thumb, but she'd eat the devil, hoofs, horns, and all!"

What! Noel had a mistress, a woman whom Clergeot himself, the friend of such creatures, considered expensive! The revelation, at such a moment, pierced the old man's heart. But he dissembled. A gesture, a look, might awaken the usurer's mistrust, and close his mouth.

"That's well known," replied Tabaret in a careless tone. "Youth must have its day. But what do you suppose the wench costs him a year?"

"Oh, I don't know! He made the mistake of not fixing a price with her. According to my calculation, she must have, during the four years that she has been under his protection, cost him close upon five hundred thousand francs."

Four years? Five hundred thousand francs! These words, these figures, burst like bombshells on old Tabaret's brain. Half a million! In that case, Noel was utterly ruined. But then—

"It is a great deal," said he, succeeding by desperate efforts in hiding his emotion; "it is enormous. M. Gerdy, however, has resources."

"He!" interrupted the usurer, shrugging his shoulders. "Not even that!" he added, snapping his fingers; "He is utterly cleaned out. But, if he owes you money, do not be anxious. He is a sly dog. He is going to be married; and I have just renewed bills of his for twenty—six thousand francs. Good—bye, M. Tabaret."

The usurer hurried away, leaving the poor old fellow standing like a milestone in the middle of the pavement. He experienced something of that terrible grief which breaks a father's heart when he begins to realize that his dearly loved son is perhaps the worst of scoundrels.

And, yet, such was his confidence in Noel that he again struggled with his reason to resist the suspicions which tormented him. Perhaps the usurer had been slandering his friend. People who lend their money at more than ten per cent are capable of anything. Evidently he had exaggerated the extent of Noel's follies.

THE LEROUGE CASE

And, supposing it were true? Have not many men done just such insane things for women, without ceasing to be honest?

As he was about to enter his house, a whirlwind of silk, lace, and velvet, stopped the way. A pretty young brunette came out and jumped as lightly as a bird into the blue brougham.

Old Tabaret was a gallant man, and the young woman was most charming, but he never even looked at her. He passed in, and found his concierge standing, cap in hand, and tenderly examining a twenty franc piece.

"Ah, sir," said the man, "such a pretty young person, and so lady-like! If you had only been here five minutes sooner."

"What lady? why?"

"That elegant lady, who just went out, sir; she came to make some inquiries about M. Gerdy. She gave me twenty francs for answering her questions. It seems that the gentleman is going to be married; and she was evidently much annoyed about it. Superb creature! I have an idea that she is his mistress. I know now why he goes out every night."

"M. Gerdy?"

"Yes, sir, but I never mentioned it to you, because he seemed to wish to hide it. He never asks me to open the door for him, no, not he. He slips out by the little stable door. I have often said to myself, 'Perhaps he doesn't want to disturb me; it is very thoughtful on his part, and he seems to enjoy it so.'"

The concierge spoke with his eyes fixed on the gold piece. When he raised his head to examine the countenance of his lord and master, old Tabaret had disappeared.

"There's another!" said the concierge to himself. "I'll bet a hundred sous, that he's running after the superb creature! Run ahead, go it, old dotard, you shall have a little bit, but not much, for it's very expensive!"

The concierge was right. Old Tabaret was running after the lady in the blue brougham.

"She will tell me all," he thought, and with a bound he was in the street. He reached it just in time to see the blue brougham turn the corner of the Rue St. Lazare.

"Heavens!" he murmured. "I shall lose sight of her, and yet she can tell me the truth."

He was in one of those states of nervous excitement which engender prodigies. He ran to the end of the Rue St. Lazare as rapidly as if he had been a young man of twenty.

Joy! He saw the blue brougham a short distance from him in the Rue du Havre, stopped in the midst of a block of carriages.

"I have her," said he to himself. He looked all about him, but there was not an empty cab to be seen. Gladly would he have cried, like Richard the III., "My kingdom for a cab!"

The brougham got out of the entanglement, and started off rapidly towards the Rue Tronchet. The old fellow followed.

He kept his ground. The brougham gained but little upon him.

THE LEROUGE CASE

While running in the middle of the street, at the same time looking out for a cab, he kept saying to himself: "Hurry on, old fellow, hurry on. When one has no brains, one must use one's legs. Why didn't you think to get this woman's address from Clergeot? You must hurry yourself, my old friend, you must hurry yourself! When one goes in for being a detective, one should be fit for the profession, and have the shanks of a deer."

But he was losing ground, plainly losing ground. He was only halfway down the Rue Tronchet, and quite tired out; he felt that his legs could not carry him a hundred steps farther, and the brougham had almost reached the Madeleine.

At last an open cab, going in the same direction as himself, passed by. He made a sign, more despairing than any drowning man ever made. The sign was seen. He made a supreme effort, and with a bound jumped into the vehicle without touching the step.

"There," he gasped, "that blue brougham, twenty francs!"

"All right!" replied the coachman, nodding.

And he covered his ill-conditioned horse with vigorous blows, muttering, "A jealous husband following his wife; that's evident. Gee up!"

As for old Tabaret, he was a long time recovering himself, his strength was almost exhausted.

For more than a minute, he could not catch his breath. They were soon on the Boulevards. He stood up in the cab leaning against the driver's seat.

"I don't see the brougham anywhere," he said.

"Oh, I see it all right, sir. But it is drawn by a splendid horse!"

"Yours ought to be a better one. I said twenty francs; I'll make it forty."

The driver whipped up his horse most mercilessly, and growled, "It's no use, I must catch her. For twenty francs, I would have let her escape; for I love the girls, and am on their side. But, fancy! Forty francs! I wonder how such an ugly man can be so jealous."

Old Tabaret tried in every way to occupy his mind with other matters. He did not wish to reflect before seeing the woman, speaking with her, and carefully questioning her.

He was sure that by one word she would either condemn or save her lover.

"What! condemn Noel? Ah, well! yes."

The idea that Noel was the assassin harassed and tormented him, and buzzed in his brain, like the moth which flies again and again against the window where it sees a light.

As they passed the Chaussee d'Antin, the brougham was scarcely thirty paces in advance. The cab driver turned, and said: "But the Brougham is stopping."

"Then stop also. Don't lose sight of it; but be ready to follow it again as soon as it goes off."

Old Tabaret leaned as far as he could out of the cab.

THE LEROUGE CASE

The young woman alighted, crossed the pavement, and entered a shop where cashmeres and laces were sold.

"There," thought the old fellow, "is where the thousand franc notes go! Half a million in four years! What can these creatures do with the money so lavishly bestowed upon them? Do they eat it? On the altar of what caprices do they squander these fortunes? They must have the devil's own potions which they give to drink to the idiots who ruin themselves for them. They must possess some peculiar art of preparing and spicing pleasure; since, once they get hold of a man, he sacrifices everything before forsaking them."

The cab moved on once more, but soon stopped again.

The brougham had made a fresh pause, this time in front of a curiosity shop.

"The woman wants then to buy out half of Paris!" said old Tabaret to himself in a passion. "Yes, if Noel committed the crime, it was she who forced him to it. These are my fifteen thousand francs that she is frittering away now. How long will they last her? It must have been for money, then, that Noel murdered Widow Lerouge. If so, he is the lowest, the most infamous of men! What a monster of dissimulation and hypocrisy! And to think that he would be my heir, if I should die here of rage! For it is written in my will in so many words, 'I bequeath to my son, Noel Gerdy!' If he is guilty, there isn't a punishment sufficiently severe for him. But is this woman never going home?"

The woman was in no hurry. The weather was charming, her dress irresistible, and she intended showing herself off. She visited three or four more shops, and at last stopped at a confectioner's, where she remained for more than a quarter of an hour.

The old fellow, devoured by anxiety, moved about and stamped in his cab. It was torture thus to be kept from the key to a terrible enigma by the caprice of a worthless hussy! He was dying to rush after her, to seize her by the arm, and cry out to her: "Home, wretched, creature, home at once! What are you doing here? Don't you know that at this moment your lover, he whom you have ruined, is suspected of an assassination? Home, then, that I may question you, that I may learn from you whether he is innocent or guilty. For you will tell me, without knowing it. Ah! I have prepared a fine trap for you! Go home, then, this anxiety is killing me!"

She returned to her carriage. It started off once more, passed up the Rue de Faubourg Montmartre, turned into the Rue de Provence, deposited its fair freight at her own door, and drove away.

"She lives here," said old Tabaret, with a sigh of relief.

He got out of the cab, gave the driver his forty francs, bade him wait, and followed in the young woman's footsteps.

"The old fellow is patient," thought the driver; "and the little brunette is caught."

The detective opened the door of the concierge's lodge.

"What is the name of the lady who just came in?" he demanded.

The concierge did not seem disposed to reply.

"Her name!" insisted the old man.

The tone was so sharp, so imperative, that the concierge was upset.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Madame Juliette Chaffour," he answered.

"On what floor does she reside?"

"On the second, the door opposite the stairs."

A minute later, the old man was waiting in Madame Juliette's drawing-room. Madame was dressing, the maid informed him, and would be down directly.

Tabaret was astonished at the luxury of the room. There was nothing flaring or coarse, or in bad taste. It was not at all like the apartment of a kept woman. The old fellow, who knew a good deal about such things, saw that everything was of great value. The ornaments on the mantelpiece alone must have cost, at the lowest estimate, twenty thousand francs.

"Clergeot," thought he, "didn't exaggerate a bit."

Juliette's entrance disturbed his reflections.

She had taken off her dress, and had hastily thrown about her a loose black dressing-gown, trimmed with cherry-coloured satin. Her beautiful hair, slightly disordered after her drive, fell in cascades about her neck, and curled behind her delicate ears. She dazzled old Tabaret. He began to understand.

"You wished, sir, to speak with me?" she inquired, bowing gracefully.

"Madame," replied M. Tabaret, "I am a friend of Noel Gerdy's, I may say his best friend, and—"

"Pray sit down, sir," interrupted the young woman.

She placed herself on a sofa, just showing the tips of her little feet encased in slippers matching her dressing-gown, while the old man sat down in a chair.

"I come, madame," he resumed, "on very serious business. Your presence at M. Gerdy's—"

"Ah," cried Juliette, "he already knows of my visit? Then he must employ a detective."

"My dear child—" began Tabaret, paternally.

"Oh! I know, sir, what your errand is. Noel has sent you here to scold me. He forbade my going to his house, but I couldn't help it. It's annoying to have a puzzle for a lover, a man whom one knows nothing whatever about, a riddle in a black coat and a white cravat, a sad and mysterious being—"

"You have been imprudent."

"Why? Because he is going to get married? Why does he not admit it then?"

"Suppose that it is not true."

"Oh, but it is! He told that old shark Clergeot so, who repeated it to me. Any way, he must be plotting something in that head of his; for the last month he has been so peculiar, he has changed so, that I hardly recognize him."

THE LEROUGE CASE

Old Tabaret was especially anxious to know whether Noel had prepared an /alibi/ for the evening of the crime. For him that was the grand question. If he had, he was certainly guilty; if not, he might still be innocent. Madame Juliette, he had no doubt, could enlighten him on that point.

Consequently he had presented himself with his lesson all prepared, his little trap all set.

The young woman's outburst disconcerted him a little; but trusting to the chances of conversation, he resumed.

"Will you oppose Noel's marriage, then?"

"His marriage!" cried Juliette, bursting out into a laugh; "ah, the poor boy! If he meets no worse obstacle than myself, his path will be smooth. Let him marry by all means, the sooner the better, and let me hear no more of him."

"You don't love him, then?" asked the old fellow, surprised at this amiable frankness.

"Listen, sir. I have loved him a great deal, but everything has an end. For four years, I, who am so fond of pleasure, have passed an intolerable existence. If Noel doesn't leave me, I shall be obliged to leave him. I am tired of having a lover who is ashamed of me and who despises me."

"If he despises you, my pretty lady, he scarcely shows it here," replied old Tabaret, casting a significant glance about the room.

"You mean," said she rising, "that he spends a great deal of money on me. It's true. He pretends that he has ruined himself on my account; it's very possible. But what's that to me! I am not a grabbing woman; and I would much have preferred less money and more regard. My extravagance has been inspired by anger and want of occupation. M. Gerdy treats me like a mercenary woman; and so I act like one. We are quits."

"You know very well that he worships you."

"He? I tell you he is ashamed of me. He hides me as though I were some horrible disease. You are the first of his friends to whom I have ever spoken. Ask him how often he takes me out. One would think that my presence dishonoured him. Why, no longer ago than last Tuesday, we went to the theatre! He hired an entire box. But do you think that he sat in it with me? Not at all. He slipped away and I saw no more of him the whole evening."

"How so? Were you obliged to return home alone?"

"No. At the end of the play, towards midnight, he deigned to reappear. We had arranged to go to the masked ball at the Opera and then to have some supper. Ah, it was amusing! At the ball, he didn't dare to let down his hood, or take off his mask. At supper, I had to treat him like a perfect stranger, because some of his friends were present."

This, then, was the /alibi/ prepared in case of trouble. Juliette, had she been less carried away by her own feelings, would have noticed old Tabaret's emotion, and would certainly have held her tongue. He was perfectly livid, and trembled like a leaf.

"Well," he said, making a great effort to utter the words, "the supper, I suppose, was none the less gay for that."

"Gay!" echoed the young woman, shrugging her shoulders; "you do not seem to know much of your friend. If you ever ask him to dinner, take good care not to give him anything to drink. Wine makes him as merry as a funeral procession. At the second bottle, he was more tipsy than a cork; so much so, that he lost nearly everything he had with him: his overcoat, purse, umbrella, cigar-case—"

THE LEROUGE CASE

Old Tabaret couldn't sit and listen any longer; he jumped to his feet like a raving madman.

"Miserable wretch!" he cried, "infamous scoundrel! It is he; but I have him!"

And he rushed out, leaving Juliette so terrified that she called her maid.

"Child," said she, "I have just made some awful blunder, have let some secret out. I am sure that something dreadful is going to happen; I feel it. That old rogue was no friend of Noel's, he came to circumvent me, to lead me by the nose; and he succeeded. Without knowing it I must have spoken against Noel. What can I have said? I have thought carefully, and can remember nothing; but he must be warned though. I will write him a line, while you find a messenger to take it."

Old Tabaret was soon in his cab and hurrying towards the Prefecture of Police. Noel an assassin! His hate was without bounds, as formerly had been his confiding affection. He had been cruelly deceived, unworthily duped, by the vilest and the most criminal of men. He thirsted for vengeance; he asked himself what punishment would be great enough for the crime.

"For he not only assassinated Claudine," thought he, "but he so arranged the whole thing as to have an innocent man accused and condemned. And who can say that he did not kill his poor mother?"

He regretted the abolition of torture, the refined cruelty of the middle ages: quartering, the stake, the wheel. The guillotine acts so quickly that the condemned man has scarcely time to feel the cold steel cutting through his muscles; it is nothing more than a fillip on the neck. Through trying so much to mitigate the pain of death, it has now become little more than a joke, and might be abolished altogether.

The certainty of confounding Noel, of delivering him up to justice, of taking vengeance upon him, alone kept old Tabaret up.

"It is clear," he murmured, "that the wretch forgot his things at the railway station, in his haste to rejoin his mistress. Will they still be found there? If he has had the prudence to go boldly, and ask for them under a false name, I can see no further proofs against him. Madame Chaffour's evidence won't help me. The hussy, seeing her lover in danger, will deny what she has just told me; she will assert that Noel left her long after ten o'clock. But I cannot think he has dared to go to the railway station again."

About half way down the Rue Richelieu, M. Tabaret was seized with a sudden giddiness.

"I am going to have an attack, I fear," thought he. "If I die, Noel will escape, and will be my heir. A man should always keep his will constantly with him, to be able to destroy it, if necessary."

A few steps further on, he saw a doctor's plate on a door; he stopped the cab, and rushed into the house. He was so excited, so beside himself, his eyes had such a wild expression, that the doctor was almost afraid of his peculiar patient, who said to him hoarsely: "Bleed me!"

The doctor ventured an objection; but already the old fellow had taken off his coat, and drawn up one of his shirtsleeves.

"Bleed me!" he repeated. "Do you want me to die?"

The doctor finally obeyed, and old Tabaret came out quieted and relieved.

THE LEROUGE CASE

An hour later, armed with the necessary power, and accompanied by a policeman, he proceeded to the lost property office at the St. Lazare railway station, to make the necessary search. It resulted as he had expected. He learnt that, on the evening of Shrove Tuesday, there had been found in one of the second class carriages, of train No. 45, an overcoat and an umbrella. He was shown the articles; and he at once recognised them as belonging to Noel. In one of the pockets of the overcoat, he found a pair of lavender kid gloves, frayed and soiled, as well as a return ticket from Chatou, which had not been used.

In hurrying on, in pursuit of the truth, old Tabaret knew only too well, what it was. His conviction, unwillingly formed when Clergeot had told him of Noel's follies, had since been strengthened in a number of other ways. When with Juliette, he had felt positively sure, and yet, at this last moment, when doubt had become impossible, he was, on beholding the evidence arrayed against Noel, absolutely thunderstruck.

"Onwards!" he cried at last. " Now to arrest him."

And, without losing an instant, he hastened to the Palais de Justice, where he hoped to find the investigating magistrate. Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, M. Daburon was still in his office. He was conversing with the Count de Commarin, having related to him the facts revealed by Pierre Lerouge whom the count had believed dead many years before.

Old Tabaret entered like a whirlwind, too distracted to notice the presence of a stranger.

"Sir," he cried, stuttering with suppressed rage, "we have discovered the real assassin! It is he, my adopted son, my heir, Noel!"

"Noel!" repeated M. Daburon, rising. And then in a lower tone, he added, "I suspected it."

"A warrant is necessary at once," continued the old fellow. "If we lose a minute, he will slip through our fingers. He will know that he is discovered, if his mistress has time to warn him of my visit. Hasten, sir, hasten!"

M. Daburon opened his lips to ask an explanation; but the old detective continued: "That is not all. An innocent man, Albert, is still in prison."

"He will not be so an hour longer," replied the magistrate; "a moment before your arrival, I had made arrangements to have him released. We must now occupy ourselves with the other one."

Neither old Tabaret nor M. Daburon had noticed the disappearance of the Count de Commarin. On hearing Noel's name mentioned, he gained the door quietly, and rushed out into the passage.

XIX.

NOEL had promised to use every effort, to attempt even the impossible, to obtain Albert's release. He in fact did interview the Public Prosecutor and some members of the bar, but managed to be repulsed everywhere. At four o'clock, he called at the Count de Commarin's house, to inform his father of the ill success of his efforts.

"The Count has gone out," said Denis; "but if you will take the trouble to wait——"

"I will wait," answered Noel.

"Then," replied the valet, "will you please follow me? I have the count's orders to show you into his private room."

THE LEROUGE CASE

This confidence gave Noel an idea of his new power. He was at home, henceforth, in that magnificent house, he was the master, the heir! His glance, which wandered over the entire room, noticed the genealogical tree, hanging on the wall. He approached it, and read.

It was like a page, and one of the most illustrious, taken from the golden book of French nobility. Every name which has a place in our history was there. The Commarins had mingled their blood with all the great families; two of them had even married daughters of royalty. A warm glow of pride filled the barrister's heart, his pulse beat quicker, he raised his head haughtily, as he murmured, "Viscount de Commarin!"

The door opened. He turned, and saw the count entering. As Noel was about to bow respectfully, he was petrified by the look of hatred, anger, and contempt on his father's face.

A shiver ran through his veins; his teeth chattered; he felt that he was lost.

"Wretch!" cried the count.

And, dreading his own violence, the old nobleman threw his cane into a corner. He was unwilling to strike his son; he considered him unworthy of being struck by his hand. Then there was a moment of mortal silence, which seemed to both of them a century.

At the same time their minds were filled with thoughts, which would require a volume to transcribe.

Noel had the courage to speak first.

"Sir," he began.

"Silence!" exclaimed the count hoarsely; "be silent! Can it be, heaven forgive me! that you are my son? Alas, I cannot doubt it now! Wretch! you knew well that you were Madame Gerdy's son. Infamous villain! you not only committed this murder, but you did everything to cause an innocent man to be charged with your crime! Parricide! you have also killed your mother."

The barrister attempted to stammer forth a protest.

"You killed her," continued the count with increased energy, "if not by poison, at least by your crime. I understand all now; she was not delirious this morning. But you know as well as I do what she was saying. You were listening, and, if you dared to enter at that moment when one word more would have betrayed you, it was because you had calculated the effect of your presence. It was to you that she addressed her last word, 'Assassin!'"

Little by little, Noel had retired to the end of the room, and he stood leaning against the wall, his head thrown back, his hair on end, his look haggard. A convulsive trembling shook his frame. His face betrayed a terror most horrible to see, the terror of the criminal found out.

"I know all, you see," continued the count; "and I am not alone in my knowledge. At this moment, a warrant of arrest is issued against you."

A cry of rage like a hollow rattle burst from the barrister's breast. His lips, which were hanging through terror, now grew firm. Overwhelmed in the very midst of his triumph, he struggled against this fright. He drew himself up with a look of defiance.

M. de Commarin, without seeming to pay any attention to Noel, approached his writing table, and opened a drawer.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"My duty," said he, "would be to leave you to the executioner who awaits you; but I remember that I have the misfortune to be your father. Sit down; write and sign a confession of your crime. You will then find fire-arms in this drawer. May heaven forgive you!"

The old nobleman moved towards the door. Noel with a sign stopped him, and drawing at the same time a revolver from his pocket, he said: "Your fire-arms are needless, sir; my precautions, as you see, are already taken; they will never catch me alive. Only-----"

"Only?" repeated the count harshly.

"I must tell you, sir," continued the barrister coldly, "that I do not choose to kill myself—at least, not at present."

"Ah!" cried M. de Commarin in disgust, "you are a coward!"

"No, sir, not a coward; but I will not kill myself until I am sure that every opening is closed against me, that I cannot save myself."

"Miserable wretch!" said the count, threateningly, "must I then do it myself?"

He moved towards the drawer, but Noel closed it with a kick.

"Listen to me, sir," said he, in that hoarse, quick tone, which men use in moments of imminent danger, "do not let us waste in vain words the few moments' respite left me. I have committed a crime, it is true, and I do not attempt to justify it; but who laid the foundation of it, if not yourself? Now, you do me the favor of offering me a pistol. Thanks. I must decline it. This generosity is not through any regard for me. You only wish to avoid the scandal of my trial, and the disgrace which cannot fail to reflect upon your name."

The count was about to reply.

"Permit me," interrupted Noel imperiously. "I do not choose to kill myself; I wish to save my life, if possible. Supply me with the means of escape; and I promise you that I will sooner die than be captured. I say, supply me with means, for I have not twenty francs in the world. My last thousand franc note was nearly all gone the day when— you understand me. There isn't sufficient money at home to give my mother a decent burial. Therefore, I say, give me some money."

"Never!"

"Then I will deliver myself up to justice, and you will see what will happen to the name you hold so dear!"

The count, mad with rage, rushed to his table for a pistol. Noel placed himself before him.

"Oh, do not let us have any struggle," said he coldly; "I am the strongest."

M. de Commarin recoiled. By thus speaking of the trial, of the scandal and of the disgrace, the barrister had made an impression upon him.

For a moment hesitating between love for his name and his burning desire to see this wretch punished, the old nobleman stood undecided.

Finally his feeling for his rank triumphed.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Let us end this," he said in a tremulous voice, filled with the utmost contempt; "let us end this disgraceful scene. What do you demand of me?"

"I have already told you, money, all that you have here. But make up your mind quickly."

On the previous Saturday the count had withdrawn from his bankers the sum he had destined for fitting up the apartments of him whom he thought was his legitimate child.

"I have eighty thousand francs here," he replied.

"That's very little," said the barrister; "but give them to me. I will tell you though that I had counted on you for five hundred thousand francs. If I succeed in escaping my pursuers, you must hold at my disposal the balance, four hundred and twenty thousand francs. Will you pledge yourself to give them to me at the first demand? I will find some means of sending for them, without any risk to myself. At that price, you need never fear hearing of me again."

By way of reply, the count opened a little iron chest imbedded in the wall, and took out a roll of bank notes, which he threw at Noel's feet.

An angry look flashed in the barrister's eyes, as he took one step towards his father.

"Oh! take care!" he said threateningly; "people who, like me, have nothing to lose are dangerous. I can yet give myself up, and——"

He stooped down, however, and picked up the notes.

"Will you give me your word," he continued, "to let me have the rest whenever I ask for them?"

"Yes."

"Then I am going. Do not fear, I will be faithful to our compact, they shall not take me alive. Adieu, my father! in all this you are the true criminal, but you alone will go unpunished. Ah, heaven is not just. I curse you!"

When, an hour later, the servants entered the count's room, they found him stretched on the floor with his face against the carpet, and showing scarcely a sign of life.

On leaving the Commarin house, Noel staggered up the Rue de l'Universite.

It seemed to him that the pavement oscillated beneath his feet, and that everything about him was turning round. His mouth was parched, his eyes were burning, and every now and then a sudden fit of sickness overcame him.

But, at the same time, strange to relate, he felt an incredible relief, almost delight. It was ended then, all was over; the game was lost. No more anguish now, no more useless fright and foolish terrors, no more dissembling, no more struggles. Henceforth he had nothing more to fear. His horrible part being played to the bitter end, he could now lay aside his mask and breathe freely.

An irresistible weariness succeeded the desperate energy which, in the presence of the count, had sustained his impudent arrogance. All the springs of his organization, stretched for more than a week past far beyond their ordinary limits, now relaxed and gave way. The fever which for the last few days had kept him up failed him now; and, with the weariness, he felt an imperative need of rest. He experienced a great void, an utter indifference for everything.

THE LEROUGE CASE

His insensibility bore a striking resemblance to that felt by persons afflicted with sea-sickness, who care for nothing, whom no sensations are capable of moving, who have neither strength nor courage to think, and who could not be aroused from their lethargy by the presence of any great danger, not even of death itself.

Had any one come to him then he would never have thought of resisting, nor of defending himself; he would not have taken a step to hide himself, to fly, to save his head.

For a moment he had serious thoughts of giving himself up, in order to secure peace, to gain quiet, to free himself from the anxiety about his safety.

But he struggled against this dull stupor, and at last the reaction came, shaking off this weakness of mind and body.

The consciousness of his position, and of his danger, returned to him. He foresaw, with horror, the scaffold, as one sees the depth of the abyss by the lightning flashes.

"I must save my life," he thought; "but how?"

That mortal terror which deprives the assassin of even ordinary common sense seized him. He looked eagerly about him, and thought he noticed three or four passers-by look at him curiously. His terror increased.

He began running in the direction of the Latin quarter without purpose, without aim, running for the sake of running, to get away, like Crime, as represented in paintings, fleeing under the lashes of the Furies.

He very soon stopped, however, for it occurred to him that this extraordinary behaviour would attract attention.

It seemed to him that everything in him betokened the murderer; he thought he read contempt and horror upon every face, and suspicion in every eye.

He walked along, instinctively repeating to himself: "I must do something."

But he was so agitated that he was incapable of thinking or of planning anything.

When he still hesitated to commit the crime, he had said to himself; "I may be discovered." And with that possibility in view, he had perfected a plan which should put him beyond all fear of pursuit. He would do this and that; he would have recourse to this ruse, he would take that precaution. Useless forethought! Now, nothing he had imagined seemed feasible. The police were seeking him, and he could think of no place in the whole world where he would feel perfectly safe.

He was near the Odeon theatre, when a thought quicker than a flash of lightning lit up the darkness of his brain.

It occurred to him that as the police were doubtless already in pursuit of him, his description would soon be known to everyone, his white cravat and well trimmed whiskers would betray him as surely as though he carried a placard stating who he was.

Seeing a barber's shop, he hurried to the door; but, when on the point of turning the handle, he grew frightened.

The barber might think it strange that he wanted his whiskers shaved off, and supposing he should question him!

He passed on.

THE LEROUGE CASE

He soon saw another barber's shop, but the same fears as before again prevented his entering.

Gradually night had fallen, and, with the darkness, Noel seemed to recover his confidence and boldness.

After this great shipwreck in port, hope rose to the surface. Why should he not save himself? There had been many just such cases. He could go to a foreign country, change his name, begin his life over again, become a new man entirely. He had money; and that was the main thing.

And, besides, as soon as his eighty thousand francs were spent, he had the certainty of receiving, on his first request, five or six times as much more.

He was already thinking of the disguise he should assume, and of the frontier to which he should proceed, when the recollection of Juliette pierced his heart like a red hot iron.

Was he going to leave without her, going away with the certainty of never seeing her again? What! he would fly, pursued by all the police of the civilized world, tracked like a wild beast, and she would remain peaceably in Paris? Was it possible? For whom then had he committed this crime? For her. Who would have reaped the benefits of it? She. Was it not just, then, that she should bear her share of the punishment?

"She does not love me," thought the barrister bitterly, "she never loved me. She would be delighted to be forever free of me. She will not regret me, for I am no longer necessary to her. An empty coffer is a useless piece of furniture. Juliette is prudent; she has managed to save a nice little fortune. Grown rich at my expense, she will take some other lover. She will forget me, she will live happily, while I— And I was about to go away without her!"

The voice of prudence cried out to him: "Unhappy man! to drag a woman along with you, and a pretty woman too, is but to stupidly attract attention upon you, to render flight impossible, to give yourself up like a fool."

"What of that?" replied passion. "We will be saved or we will perish together. If she does not love me, I love her; I must have her! She will come, otherwise—"

But how to see Juliette, to speak with her, to persuade her. To go to her house, was a great risk for him to run. The police were perhaps there already.

"No," thought Noel; "no one knows that she is my mistress. It will not be found out for two or three days and, besides, it would be more dangerous still to write."

He took a cab not far from the Carrefour de l'Observatoire, and in a low tone told the driver the number of the house in the Rue de Provence, which had proved so fatal to him. Stretched on the cushions of the cab, lulled by its monotonous jolts, Noel gave no thought to the future, he did not even think over what he should say to Juliette. No. He passed involuntarily in review the events which had brought on and hastened the catastrophe, like a man on the point of death, reviews the tragedy or the comedy of his life.

Just one month before, ruined, at the end of his expedients and absolutely without resources, he had determined, cost what it might, to procure money, so as to be able to continue to keep Madame Juliette, when chance placed in his hands Count de Commarin's correspondence. Not only the letters read to old Tabaret, and shown to Albert, but also those, which, written by the count when he believed the substitution an accomplished fact, plainly established it.

The reading of these gave him an hour of mad delight.

THE LEROUGE CASE

He believed himself the legitimate son; but his mother soon undeceived him, told him the truth, proved to him by several letters she had received from Widow Lerouge, called on Claudine to bear witness to it, and demonstrated it to him by the scar he bore.

But a falling man never selects the branch he tries to save himself by. Noel resolved to make use of the letters all the same.

He attempted to induce his mother to leave the count in his ignorance, so that he might thus blackmail him. But Madame Gerdy spurned the proposition with horror.

Then the barrister made a confession of all his follies, laid bare his financial condition, showed himself in his true light, sunk in debt; and he finally begged his mother to have recourse to M. de Commarin.

This also she refused, and prayers and threats availed nothing against her resolution. For a fortnight, there was a terrible struggle between mother and son, in which the barrister was conquered.

It was then that the idea of murdering Claudine occurred to him.

The unhappy woman had not been more frank with Madame Gerdy than with others, so that Noel really thought her a widow. Therefore, her testimony suppressed, who else stood in his way?

Madame Gerdy, and perhaps the count. He feared them but little. If Madame Gerdy spoke, he could always reply: "After stealing my name for your son, you will do everything in the world to enable him to keep it." But how to do away with Claudine without danger to himself?

After long reflection, the barrister thought of a diabolical stratagem.

He burnt all the count's letters establishing the substitution, and he preserved only those which made it probable.

These last he went and showed to Albert, feeling sure, that, should justice ever discover the reason of Claudine's death, it would naturally suspect he who appeared to have most interest in it.

Not that he really wished Albert to be suspected of the crime, it was simply a precaution. He thought that he could so arrange matters that the police would waste their time in the pursuit of an imaginary criminal.

Nor did he think of ousting the Viscount de Commarin and putting himself in his place. His plan was simply this; the crime once committed, he would wait; things would take their own course, there would be negotiations, and ultimately he would compromise the matter at the price of a fortune.

He felt sure of his mother's silence, should she ever suspect him guilty of the assassination.

His plan settled, he decided to strike the fatal blow on the Shrove Tuesday.

To neglect no precaution, he, that very same evening, took Juliette to the theatre, and afterwards to the masked ball at the opera. In case things went against him, he thus secured an unanswerable /alibi/.

The loss of his overcoat only troubled him for a moment. On reflection, he reassured himself, saying: "Pshaw! who will ever know?"

Everything had resulted in accordance with his calculations; it was, in his opinion, a matter of patience.

THE LEROUGE CASE

But when Madame Gerdy read the account of the murder, the unhappy woman divined her son's work, and, in the first paroxysms of her grief, she declared that she would denounce him.

He was terrified. A frightful delirium had taken possession of his mother. One word from her might destroy him. Putting a bold face on it, however, he acted at once and staked his all.

To put the police on Albert's track was to guarantee his own safety, to insure to himself, in the event of a probable success, Count de Commarin's name and fortune.

Circumstances, as well as his own terror, increased his boldness and his ingenuity.

Old Tabaret's visit occurred just at the right moment.

Noel knew of his connection with the police, and guessed that the old fellow would make a most valuable confidant.

So long as Madame Gerdy lived, Noel trembled. In her delirium she might betray him at any moment. But when she had breathed her last, he believed himself safe. He thought it all over, he could see no further obstacle in his way; he was sure he had triumphed.

And now all was discovered, just as he was about to reach the goal of his ambition. But how? By whom? What fatality had resuscitated a secret which he had believed buried with Madame Gerdy?

But where is the use, when one is at the bottom of an abyss, of knowing which stone gave way, or of asking down what side one fell?

The cab stopped in the Rue de Provence. Noel leaned out of the door, his eyes exploring the neighbourhood and throwing a searching glance into the depths of the hall of the house. Seeing no one, he paid the fare through the front window, before getting out of the cab, and, crossing the pavement with a bound, he rushed up stairs.

Charlotte, at sight of him, gave a shout of joy.

"At last it is you, sir!" she cried. "Ah, madame has been expecting you with the greatest impatience! She has been very anxious."

Juliette expecting him! Juliette anxious!

The barrister did not stop to ask questions. On reaching this spot, he seemed suddenly to recover all his composure. He understood his imprudence; he knew the exact value of every minute he delayed here.

"If any one rings," said he to Charlotte, "don't open the door. No matter what may be said or done, don't open the door!"

On hearing Noel's voice, Juliette ran out to meet him. He pushed her gently into the salon, and followed, closing the door.

There for the first time she saw his face.

He was so changed; his look was so haggard that she could not keep from crying out, "What is the matter?"

Noel made no reply; he advanced towards her and took her hand.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Juliette," he demanded in a hollow voice, fastening his flashing eyes upon her,—"Juliette, be sincere; do you love me?"

She instinctively felt that something dreadful had occurred: she seemed to breathe an atmosphere of evil; but she, as usual, affected indifference.

"You ill-natured fellow," she replied, pouting her lips most provokingly, "do you deserve—"

"Oh, enough!" broke in Noel, stamping his feet fiercely. "Answer me," he continued, bruising her pretty hands in his grasp, "yes, or no,—do you love me?"

A hundred times had she played with her lover's anger, delighting to excite him into a fury, to enjoy the pleasure of appeasing him with a word; but she had never seen him like this before.

She had wronged him greatly; and she dared not complain of this his first harshness.

"Yes, I love you," she stammered, "do you not know it?"

"Why?" replied the advocate, releasing her hands; "why? Because, if you love me you must prove it; if you love me, you must follow me at once,—abandon everything. Come, fly with me. Time presses——"

The young girl was terrified.

"Great heavens! what has happened?"

"Nothing, except that I have loved you too much, Juliette. When I found I had no more money for your luxury, your caprices, I became wild. To procure money, I,—I committed a crime,—a crime; do you understand? They are pursuing me now. I must fly: will you follow me?"

Juliette's eyes grew wide with astonishment; but she doubted Noel.

"A crime? You?" she began.

"Yes, me! Would you know the truth? I have committed murder, an assassination. But it was all for you."

The barrister felt that Juliette would certainly recoil from him in horror. He expected that terror which a murderer inspires. He was resigned to it in advance. He thought that she would fly from him; perhaps there would be a scene. She might, who knows, have hysterics; might cry out, call for succor, for help, for aid. He was wrong.

With a bound, Juliette flew to him, throwing herself upon him, her arms about his neck, and embraced him as she had never embraced him before.

"Yes, I do love you!" she cried. "Yes, you have committed a crime for my sake, because you loved me. You have a heart. I never really knew you before!"

It had cost him dear to inspire this passion in Madame Juliette; but Noel never thought of that.

He experienced a moment of intense delight: nothing appeared hopeless to him now.

But he had the presence of mind to free himself from her embrace.

THE LEROUGE CASE

"Let us go," he said; "the one great danger is, that I do not know from whence the attack comes. How they have discovered the truth is still a mystery to me."

Juliette remembered her alarming visitor of the afternoon; she understood it all.

"Oh, what a wretched woman I am!" she cried, wringing her hands in despair; "it is I who have betrayed you. It occurred on Tuesday, did it not?"

"Yes, Tuesday."

"Ah, then I have told all, without a doubt, to your friend, the old man I supposed you had sent, Tabaret!"

"Has Tabaret been here?"

"Yes; just a little while ago."

"Come, then," cried Noel, "quickly; it's a miracle that he hasn't been back."

He took her arm, to hurry her away; but she nimbly released herself.

"Wait," said she. "I have some money, some jewels. I will take them."

"It is useless. Leave everything behind. I have a fortune, Juliette; let us fly!"

She had already opened her jewel box, and was throwing everything of value that she possessed pell mell into a little travelling bag.

"Ah, you are ruining me," cried Noel, "you are ruining me!"

He spoke thus; but his heart was overflowing with joy.

"What sublime devotion! She loves me truly," he said to himself; "for my sake, she renounces her happy life without hesitation; for my sake, she sacrifices all!"

Juliette had finished her preparations, and was hastily tying on her bonnet, when the door-bell rang.

"It is the police!" cried Noel, becoming, if possible, even more livid.

The young woman and her lover stood as immovable as two statues, with great drops of perspiration on their foreheads, their eyes dilated, and their ears listening intently. A second ring was heard, then a third.

Charlotte appeared walking on tip-toe.

"There are several," she whispered; "I heard them talking together."

Grown tired of ringing, they knocked loudly on the door. The sound of a voice reached the drawing-room, and the word "law" was plainly heard.

"No more hope!" murmured Noel.

"Don't despair," cried Juliette; "try the servants' staircase!"

THE LEROUGE CASE

"You may be sure they have not forgotten it."

Juliette went to see, and returned dejected and terrified. She had distinguished heavy foot-steps on the landing, made by some one endeavouring to walk softly.

"There must be some way of escape!" she cried fiercely.

"Yes," replied Noel, "one way. I have given my word. They are picking the lock. Fasten all the doors, and let them break them down; it will give me time."

Juliette and Charlotte ran to carry out his directions. Then Noel, leaning against the mantel piece, seized his revolver and pointed it at his breast.

But Juliette, who had returned, perceiving the movement, threw herself upon her lover, but so violently that the revolver turned aside and went off. The shot took effect, the bullet entering Noel's stomach. He uttered a frightful cry.

Juliette had made his death a terrible punishment; she had prolonged his agony.

He staggered, but remained standing, supporting himself by the mantel piece, while the blood flowed copiously from his wound.

Juliette clung to him, trying to wrest the revolver from his grasp.

"You shall not kill yourself," she cried, "I will not let you. You are mine; I love you! Let them come. What can they do to you? If they put you in prison, you can escape. I will help you, we will bribe the jailors. Ah, we will live so happily together, no matter where, far away in America where no one knows us!"

The outer door had yielded; the police were now picking the lock of the door of the ante-chamber.

"Let me finish!" murmured Noel; "they must not take me alive!"

And, with a supreme effort, triumphing over his dreadful agony, he released himself, and roughly pushed Juliette away. She fell down near the sofa.

Then, he once more aimed his revolver at the place where he felt his heart beating, pulled the trigger and rolled to the floor.

It was full time, for the police at that moment entered the room.

Their first thought was, that before shooting himself, Noel had shot his mistress. They knew of cases where people had romantically desired to quit this world in company; and, moreover, had they not heard two reports? But Juliette was already on her feet again.

"A doctor," she cried, "a doctor! He can not be dead!"

One man ran out; while the others, under old Tabaret's direction, raised the body, and carried it to Madame Juliette's bedroom where they laid it on the bed.

"For his sake, I trust his wounds are mortal!" murmured the old detective, whose anger left him at the sight. "After all, I loved him as though he were my own child; his name is still in my will!"

THE LEROUGE CASE

Old Tabaret stopped. Noel just then uttered a groan, and opened his eyes.

"You see that he will live!" cried Juliette.

The barrister shook his head feebly, and, for a moment, he tossed about painfully on the bed, passing his right hand first under his coat, and then under his pillow. He even succeeded in turning himself half-way towards the wall and then back again.

Upon a sign, which was at once understood, someone placed another pillow under his head. Then in a broken, hissing voice, he uttered a few words: "I am the assassin," he said. "Write it down, I will sign it; it will please Albert. I owe him that at least."

While they were writing, he drew Juliette's head close to his lips.

"My fortune is beneath the pillow," he whispered. "I give it all to you."

A flow of blood rose to his mouth; and they all thought him dead. But he still had strength enough to sign his confession, and to say jestingly to M. Tabaret, "Ah, ha, my friend, so you go in for the detective business, do you! It must be great fun to trap one's friends in person! Ah, I have had a fine game; but, with three women in the play, I was sure to lose."

The death struggle commenced, and, when the doctor arrived, he could only announce the decease of M. Noel Gerdy, barrister.

XX.

SOME months later, one evening, at old Mademoiselle de Goello's house, the Marchioness d'Arlange, looking ten years younger than when we saw her last, was giving her dowager friends an account of the wedding of her granddaughter Claire, who had just married the Viscount Albert de Commarin.

"The wedding," said she, "took place on our estate in Normandy, without any flourish of trumpets. My son-in-law wished it; for which I think he is greatly to blame. The scandal raised by the mistake of which he had been the victim, called for a brilliant wedding. That was my opinion, and I did not conceal it. But the boy is as stubborn as his father, which is saying a good deal; he persisted in his obstinacy. And my impudent granddaughter, obeying beforehand her future husband, also sided against me. It is, however, of no consequence; I defy anyone to find to-day a single individual with courage enough to confess that he ever for an instant doubted Albert's innocence. I have left the young people in all the bliss of the honeymoon, billing and cooing like a pair of turtle doves. It must be admitted that they have paid dearly for their happiness. May they be happy then, and may they have lots of children, for they will have no difficulty in bringing them up and in providing for them. I must tell you that, for the first time in his life, and probably for the last, the Count de Commarin has behaved like an angel! He has settled all his fortune on his son, absolutely all. He intends living alone on one of his estates. I am afraid the poor dear old man will not live long. I am not sure that he has entirely recovered from that last attack. Anyhow, my grandchild is settled, and grandly too. I know what it has cost me, and how economical I shall have to be. But I do not think much of those parents who hesitate at any pecuniary sacrifice when their children's happiness is at stake."

The marchioness forgot, however, to state that, a week before the wedding, Albert freed her from a very embarrassing position, and had discharged a considerable amount of her debts.

Since then, she had not borrowed more than nine thousand francs of him; but she intends confessing to him some

THE LEROUGE CASE

day how greatly she is annoyed by her upholsterer, by her dressmaker, by three linen drapers, and by five or six other tradesmen.

Ah, well, she is all the same a worthy woman; she never says anything against her son-in-law!

Retiring to his father's home in Poitou, after sending in his resignation, M. Daburon has at length found rest; forgetfulness will come later on. His friends do not yet despair of inducing him to marry.

Madame Juliette is quite consoled for the loss of Noel. The eighty thousand francs hidden by him under the pillow were not taken from her. They are nearly all gone now though. Before long the sale of a handsome suite of furniture will be announced.

Old Tabaret, alone, is indelibly impressed. After having believed in the infallibility of justice, he now sees everywhere nothing but judicial errors.

The ex-amateur detective doubts the very existence of crime, and maintains that the evidence of one's senses proves nothing. He circulates petitions for the abolition of capital punishment, and has organised a society for the defence of poor and innocent prisoners.