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REXNA,

OF

GAZERAN CASTLE;

—OR THE—

COUNTESS AND THE GAMEKEEPER.

A STIRRING TALE OF FRANCE.

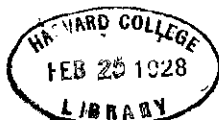
BY PETER QUIRK ROE,

Author of 'The Two Doctors,' &c., &c.

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## REGINA.

### CHAPTER I.

On the outskirts of the forest of Hallate resided Pierre Aubin, the gamekeeper of the neighboring wood of Brasseuse. His small but comfortable dwelling was not far from the banks of the sweet little stream the Aulnette, and at no great distance from the city of Paris.

Through the vista of the forest might be seen, approaching the house, a laughing merry group of peasants who were returning from the Parish church of Flewines, where they had been in procession, to present at the Baptismal Font, the first-born babe of the game-keeper, and his spouse, the pretty Cecile Robert.

Had the infant been the long-desired heir to riches and grandeur, its entrance on the theatre of existence could not have been greeted with a warmer welcome than was bestowed on the girl Philiberte. Yet was the little one not of the sex that had been ardently desired by the husband or the father of the young wife and mother.

This rural festival was attended by young and old from all parts of the neighborhood, and the whole day was a succession of dances, laughter, discharges of musketry, relieved by refreshments, and plentuous liba-

tions of the light wines of the country.

The weather was gloriously propitious for this merriment, which was carried on without doors, on the green sward, under the shade of the magnificent trees—whilst within reclined the delighted mother of three days on a couch of snowy whiteness. She was coquettishly dressed, for the occasion, in her most becoming cap, ruffled to the throat in fine linen and lace and adorned with a profusion of ribands, and on her hands were white gloves, as though she were a bride. At her feet reposed her little girl softly ensconced in eider-down.

How beautiful and interesting Cecile looked in her new happiness, as she smiled on the pledge of conjugal affection.

Pierre Aubin seated by their side regarded his wife and child, alternately, with proud satisfaction—and well he might do so—for he had braved the threat of death and destruction to obtain the charming Cecile, for his bride! Frequently during the entertainment did he leave his guests awhile, thus to contemplate these dear objects of his love.

So happily had time passed away that evening arrived before any one thought it so late. Then in the largest apartment of the house was spread out a feast for which the

present manor called 'La Grange' had been laid under contribution; but as the fashion of the country required that it should be within sight of the convalescent, in whose honor it was given, the door of Cecile's room was left open and the company at table were seated within view, in order to afford a prospect of their enjoyment.

With rustic, national, politeness, the happy guests posted themselves around the well-covered board, one expecting a night of innocent hilarity and good cheer, to terminate a day of pleasure.

A thick fog exhaling from the low rich marshy ground added to the darkness of the night and cast a murky veil over the game-keeper's house. Whilst, however, without all was silent and dark, within was light, cheerfulness and merry noise. The ringing of glasses, the crackling of the fire, and above all the thousand little pleasantries of word and deed—so foolish to repeat, to read, or if out of place and unsuited to the occasion—but which not only seem, but are in reality so delightful and entertaining when they are opportunely brought forward.

Pierre Aubin alone seemed restless, and he frequently left his place at the table, under various little pretexts, to satisfy himself that his Cecile and babe were safe and well.

Think not that it was merely, as he asserted, to retail to her the witticisms of the guests that he so often repaired to the chamber. No! whilst the smile was on his lips and affection in his eye, his heart was a prey to a sad presentment.

Softly, he murmured to himself, as he bent over his sleeping babe and smiling wife—  
'May God, grant me vigilance and strength to guard against the hatred which is on the watch, and the vengeance seeking to be sated.'

In imagination, Pierre made his love a shield of protection for these helpless objects of his tender solicitude, and ragaining con-

fidence he rejoined his company saying to himself,—

'I defy both hatred and revenge: they cannot deprive me of wife and child!

The father of Cecile, a worthy old veteran, had drank the health of his idol Napoleon, and of his former Colonel, so often that he had become inebriated, but very joyous, and he proposed singing the popular revolutionary air—the Marseillaise Hymn. When at the second verse, distinctly was heard in the distance, the dismal shriek of a screech-owl, twice repeated.

'Who is the ill-omened musician who dares to accompany me in this strain?' inquired the singer, Decadi Robert, stopping abruptly and looking angrily around for Nicholas Godard, a notorious jester who had contributed much to the entertainment of the company by his practical jokes. Had he been absent, Decadi would have been at no loss, to whom to attribute the unpleasant interruption, and would have known how to pay him off for it, but the facetious plough-boy had not started from his place.

'I will go on with my song,' said the old soldier.

'Do so, by all means,' exclaimed every one except Pierre Aubin who, though none remarked, had started and turned deathly pale at the cry which had stopped the singing of his father-in-law. Looking towards the chamber where his young wife was reposing, Pierre repeated quite low, the words already used—

'Hatred and revenge I defy you! You cannot deprive me of wife and child.'

The chorus to the second verse was just ended, and, like the crow in the fable, the Grandfather of baby Philiberte was opening his large mouth for the third stanza, when again came the dismal cry of the owl, sounding nearer than before.

'Ah, indeed! The creature is determined

not to let me sing by myself,' remarked Decadi Robert. Then for the first time observing that his son-in-law was greatly disturbed, he said: 'Why, Pierre, you are trembling, you shake like an aspen leaf.'

'I tremble indeed, say you? Not in the least,' so saying, Pierre seizing hold of a glass of wine to show how steady his hand was, raised it to his lips—but set it down untasted, for he felt it was impossible.

'What wonder that he is put out a bit,' said the Godmother. 'Is there not cause for it? This is a bad omen on a christening day. The almanac says,—When the owl sings at the feast, beware, for death is on the watch!'

'Yes it is quite true that we may fear the owl. Every one knows that. But then there is no danger when some one imitates its cry. I would lay a wager that what we have just heard comes from some one, some wag who is amusing himself as a screech-owl—that's all, depend upon it,' said Nicholas Godard.

'Are you sure of that?' inquired Cecile, whom the noise had alarmed also, and who raising herself up had drawn the sleeping Philiberte to her side.

'Certainly I am very sure of it,' replied the clown, 'and to prove it I will reply to the call, and I flatter myself I can do the thing a little more naturally than that laughing fellow, whoever he is.'

Before Pierre Aubin had time to forbid him Nicholas, uttered such a tremendous cry and made so comical a face, that the laughter interrupted for a time was renewed by the whole assembly who burst forth in shouts of mirth.

Notwithstanding the uproarious hilarity, Cecile's husband, who was listening attentively, caught the sound of a third cry—but this time evidently at a greater distance from the house. He arose, saying, in an off-hand

sort of manner, intended to prevent his wife being uneasy:—

'How can you all be talking so about owls and screech owls? The fumes of wine have reached our heads and made us hear strange things. I know what makes the noise. The stable door at the other end of the court yard has been left open, and the least wind makes it creak on its old rusty hinges,' said Pierre Aubin.

'The stable door,' repeated Nicholas, 'That's a good one! It is another tune it will sing when it wants to say—'shut me if you please.'

'The fact is,' gravely remarked Decadi, 'there is no resemblance between the cry that we heard, and the creaking of a door.'

'Can it be any thing else?' anxiously inquired Cecile.

'Bah!' replied Pierre, 'you are mistaken, all of you. I am right in my conjecture, I know. Let us wager that you will hear nothing more after I have shut the stable door.'

'But will you agree not to speak to the owl if I bet with you?' asked Nicholas.

'Certainly I will promise not to speak to it,' answered the game-keeper, assuming a ludicrous serio-comic look.

'Very well sir, in that case I bet you a leg of beef, to be eaten on Sunday next at Vandore's, in Frambourg, that it is a person who is counterfeiting an owl out there.'

'Done! I take the bet!' said Pierre Aubin shaking the extended hand of Nicholas Godard.

The affair of the wager being settled, the game-keeper was going out of the house, when a thought coming to him he turned back to Cecile's room and tenderly embraced his wife and child, then went forth into the yard. As he was crossing the threshold, Nicholas called after him,—

'Remember, if you speak to the owl, or rather, to the pretended owl, the wager is

concluded and I win my leg of beef!

Pierre Aubin made no reply but walked on towards the place he had designated.

The company soon set agoing by some pleasantry of Nicholas, ceased to listen to the retreating foot-steps of the game-keeper, but songs and jokes rapidly succeeding each other, more than a quarter of an hour elapsed before any one remarked the length of time that Pierre had been absent. At last some one expressed wonder as to what could be keeping him so long, and each of the guests instantly looked as if the same question had just occurred to him or her.

Decadi Robert, setting his glass upon the table, exclaimed,—‘I don’t approve of this fun at all, when we are met together to be social, no slipping away say I. It is your fault, Nicholas, that Pierre has played us this trick,’ continued the ex-grenadier of the first Consul’s guard.

‘Mine!’ cried Nicholas astonished at the accusation.

‘That is very unjust. Did I ask him to go? Was it not he who bet that it was not some joker who was playing screech-owl, when it was quite plain and certain that—’

‘Be quiet’ interrupted Decadi—‘I drink no more until Pierre is among us, and in order to bring him back I will go and look for him.’

As Decadi arose from table on announcing his intention, the guests could do no less than imitate the example of the director of the *Fete*.

‘What is the matter said the deaf old bell-ringer who was quite puzzled to account for his being left alone at the festive board where he had calculated all would have remained for hours.

‘What are you going to do?’ he enquired.

‘We are going to dance,’ shouted Nicholas in his ear.

The old man did not hear what Nicholas said, but as usual with him he pretended he did. On more than one occasion that very evening the plough-boy had made sport of the bell-ringer’s deafness—but in this instance those of the company who did not participate in the charm of Decadi took up the joke and repeated the words of the jester, ‘we are going to dance’ so loudly and so loudly and so often, that they ultimately penetrated the tympanum of the deaf man.

‘Very well, I understand,’ said he, ‘one cannot dance without music. Pierre is gone for the Fiddler.’

Pleased with his penetration, he secured a fat old body, nearly as deaf as himself, for his partner in the first cotillion. The women then repaired to the inner room where Cecile was in strange agitation at her husband’s unaccountable absence, and the men followed the old soldier Decadi into the court.

The whole party searched around everywhere, but in vain, and only in whispered accents had they spoken, fearing to add to the alarm of the wife—when suddenly Nicholas shouted at the top of his voice—‘Halloo, Pierre, we are tired of seeking you—speak—tell us where you are.’

Decadi rushed on him and covered the mother of the inconsiderate bawler with both his hard hands, saying—

‘Fool that thou art—thou wilt terrify my poor girl.’

The mischief was already done, and to the grief and annoyance of the father, Cecile appeared at the door of the house.

In spite of the entreaties of her friends she had thrown off the counterpane and springing out of bed, bare-foot and lightly clad, she reached the outer door. Her father, with rough tenderness, caught her in his arms, saying, as he carried her back to bed,—

‘What are you thinking of, Lili? Do you expect to be a good mother if you take such

freaks as these? There, take your little pet and nurse her; that will be much better than joining in our sports.’

‘No, let me go father. There is no sport in this; something has happened to Pierre, and I must know what it is.’

‘Nonsense, child,’ said Decadi, striving to hide his own rising alarm. ‘Nonsense! don’t you understand the howling of Nicholas? It is only for fun that he goes on so—he knows well enough where Pierre is, and so do I. Balanchet told me just now.’

‘Well, then,’ responded Cecile, doubtingly, ‘if you know, why can’t you tell me.’

‘No, my darling, I will not tell you anything until you are snug in bed and your sweet infant in your arms; see, she is awake and crying for you.’

Greatly puzzled what to say next was Decadi, but he had gained his point. The young mother had done as her father insisted, and he had also gained time to reflect.

‘Now, then, tell me as you promised.—Where is Pierre gone? You see I am here, calm and comfortable.’

‘He is gone to St. Frambourg for sugar and nutmeg to make some punch—that is all.’

Nicholas was about to speak, but Decadi trod heavily on his toe and sternly whispered,—

‘If you cry out or speak a word I will kill you.’

Cecile seemed dissatisfied with the explanation, so, to pacify her, her father wished to send off the guests to meet him, for he said gaily,—

‘Cecile is afraid she may lose her good man.’

But no one stirred, and Nicholas, quite mal-a-propos, as usual, inquired,—

‘Where must we go for him?’

‘Where neighbor Balanchet told us, to be

sure,’ said Decadi, pushing the unlucky speaker out of the room, and that with no gentle hand.

‘Oh, father!’ exclaimed Cecile, ‘I know that you are afraid some evil has befallen him.’

‘If that is the case,’ cried the coward Nicholas, ‘I, for one, will not venture after him.’

‘What, are you not gone?’ interposed Decadi. ‘I see how it is. You must have weapons and lights, soft-hearted chickens that you are.’

So saying the veteran got a couple of axes, a scythe, some cudgels, and a few torches, and distributing them among the party—so lately joyous, but now so timorous and dejected—he despatched them on their reluctant expedition, whilst he remained, he said, to guard against such another prank as Cecile had just played them.

In vain the kind old man tried to soothe the fears of his daughter, whose anxiety seemed so much greater than so short an absence would appear to warrant. Her alarm became contagious and her sympathising friends looked upon her compassionately, as if certain some misfortune had actually happened.

Clasping her infant to her breast, at length Cecile cast a look of despair on her silent friends and pointing to the small window, exclaimed,—

‘It is from that quarter that trouble will come. Already has death nearly reached us from that side.’

‘Death!’ gasped out her affrighted companions.

‘Great God! is my child going out o her senses?’

Cecile understood her father’s meaning, and replied,—

‘I may well say death! It was at the conclusion of a *fete*, also—my bridal *fete*. You

did not know of it, father, for Pierre wished me not to tell. Stay, do you only raise the little picture of the Virgin. There, where the head of my bed used to be. That picture conceals something, does it not?

The father removed the picture, but as the wall was in the shade he did not discover anything, so he replied,—

'No, child! I see nothing.'

'Take the light, then, and look again; I promise you will see something.'

Decadi brought the light and holding it close to the wall, he exclaimed, in utter amazement,

'*Sacre-bleu!* why here is a rifle ball sunk in the wall. What wretch took aim at such a mark?'

'That is what Pierre must know, but he will not say. As for me, however, I can guess.'

'Oh, for goodness sake! do tell us,' cried the assembled group.

'Yes, Cecile—speak. Let us hear the name,' added Decadi.

'No, my dear father, I can not—I must not, until Pierre gives me permission. I've promised him not to name any one whom I may suspect.'

'This is showing too much pity for a miserable wretch—a would-be murderer, methinks,' observed the old soldier, 'However powerful he may be, Pierre need not fear him. One man has as good a chance as another.'

Cecile only replied, in a low voice,—

'*Perhaps it was not a man!*'

No one spoke.

Decadi Robert remained some time gazing on the ball, then placing the light on the table, he went to the little window and stood looking into the thick darkness that enveloped the building.

A dreary half hour passed thus in agoniz-

ing suspense, which momentarily became more intense.

At length the words, 'They come—they are returning!' broke from the lips of the listening father, in feverish accents.

The lights drew nearer rapidly.

Cecile, without rising, looked at her father beseechingly, and in stifled tones, said,—

'Pierre, my husband; is he with thee?'

The old man leaned out of the window, the better to be able to distinguish those who were advancing.

'And my husband?' again implored Cecile.

Decadi Robert, who could not see more than the outline of the figures, would have called out, but his voice failed him, he was speechless from emotion—for, alas, the absence of alacrity and exultation in the approaching party proclaimed too clearly, to the anxious watcher, the want of success they had to announce.

'And my husband?' ejaculated Cecile, for the third time.

'I do not see him yet,' replied her father, with evident emotion.

Again the agitated young woman sprang from her bed.

The old man quitted his post at the window and rushed to oppose the entrance of the crowd into his daughter's presence until he should have learned the result of their search.

But he was too late. Cecile in her eagerness was not to be baffled. She caught Nicholas, who was foremost, by the arm, and demanded,—

'What has happened? What have you seen?'

The plough-boy was pale as a corpse, and looked terribly scared. Heeding not the signals made by Decadi Robert, for him not to tell, he bluntly answered,—

'The fact is, we do not know what has

become of Pierre. He has not been at St. Frambourg, at all events, and at the cross-roads near the forest, we saw the hedges beaten down and traces of men and horses, in much confusion, as if there had been a terrible scuffle going on in that place quite recently.'

'O Heaven! robbery or murder!' cried Cecile, in bitter angaish.

'No, the rascals were not robbers,' rejoined Nicholas. 'Pierre had no money about him, or anything worth stealing; but his handkerchief he has lost, for we found it in a ditch close to the place of the squabble, or fight, or whatever it was. See, here it is, there is no mistake but it is it, look and you will know it.'

As he spoke, the fellow drew from his pocket a neck-kerchief, twisted, knotted and torn in many places.

Father Decadi stretched out his hand to get hold of it, in hopes of persuading his poor daughter that Nicholas was mistaken; but Cecile, quicker than he, seized on the criminal article.

With trembling fingers she unfolded it; then, examining it at the light, she discovered the marks of the teeth and traces of foam and blood, indicating that, in a desperate struggle, it had been used as a gag to stifle the cries of the victim.

As this conviction forced itself upon her, a cry of agony and despair escaped the miserable wife, who pronouncing, with ineffable terror, the name, '*Regina Gazeran*,' fell fainting and senseless into the arms of her commiserating and astounded friends.

The father left her to the care of these kind folks, and in a frenzy of fury he caught hold of the bearer of this ill news and almost strangling poor Nicholas, he said,—

'So, good-for-nothing wretch, you and the rest have left Pierre Aubin in the hands of the brigands, cowards that you are. Why

did you not follow and rescue him? Have you no bowels of compassion, no spark of courage and humanity? I will show you how one *who is a man*, will act.'

This spoken, the old soldier released Nicholas, who had changed from deadly pale to deepest crimson under his iron grip. Then, with an eye of fire, a hand convulsively agitated, legs trembling with eagerness not fear, he took his gun, from its place over the chimney, and first examining to see that it was properly loaded and in good trim for service, he snatched a torch from the hand of one of the guests and rushed out into the fields. The rest, stimulated by the excitement and determination of the old man, thought not of his insulting reproaches and each seeing in the eyes of his associates that they were all of one mind, they followed in the rear of Cecile's father, to participate in this strange nocturnal chase.

It seemed as if 'the soldier of the Republic,' one of Napoleon's warriors, had, for the time, recovered the vigor of youth, so agilely did he leap ditches and fences, and overstep every impediment until he arrived at the spot indicated by Nicholas Godard.

The marks of a violent struggle were quite visible, by the aid of his torch. By a deep impression in the soft ground it appeared as though the heavy body of a man had been thrown down and held there by superior force, whilst all around was trampled and marked with the prints of several different-sized feet, showing that there must have been some five or six persons engaged in the contest.

At a little distance, in the down-trodden grass, he found Pierre Aubin's hunting-knife—but it was not bloody.

'Alas, they have killed him ere he could use his weapon,' exclaimed the old man, as he paused, in his research, to wipe his moistened eyes.

At this instant a puff of wind extinguishing his torch, put an end to further investigation, and the sorrowing soldier turned his steps homeward.

Presently, through the gloom of darkness he perceives a glimmering light, like a Will-o'-the-wisp, but he remarked that it was at some little distance from the ground, and was steadily moving in the direction of the village.

Without heeding the repeated calls of his comrades, Decadi follows the wandering light some distance until he judged that it was within range of his gun; then, acting without reflection, under the savage impulse of his excited feelings, he took good aim at the light and pulled the trigger.

The report resounded through the valley, the light was extinguished, and a cry, as of sudden pain was distinctly heard in the darkness.

'I have hit the bird, and must wait for my comrades to come up with their torches, so liloquized Decadi.

The party soon hurried up, and together they all hastened to the spot from whence the cry had proceeded and where the light vanished.

Nothing was to be found but a lantern, which had fallen on the ground and rolled over, extinguishing the flame; but the wick was still smoking.

On the glass of the lantern drops of blood were visible. Except this, however, there was no vestige or indication of the result of the shot so well directed by the old marksman, Decadi Robert.

## CHAPTER II.

It is time now to return to Pierre Aubin, the game-keeper, and, in due course will appear why this strange signal, the screech-owl cry, had made him shudder and become so

violently agitated, and wherefore, at this appeal, he had abruptly quitted the christening festival.

But, before explaining the cause of this mysterious disappearance, permit us to relate what occurred to him on that memorable night.

When Pierre Aubin, in great emotion, had taken leave of his wife and babe and quitted the cottage, as already mentioned, instead of going to the stable—as his father-in-law and the guests supposed was his intention, being misled as to the true object of his absence—Pierre passed through the outer gate of the court-yard and was at once in the open country.

The night being so very dark, on coming from the light within, it took some time before he could make his way through the surrounding obscurity.

Behind, his cottage-home shed its friendly rays, like a Pharos of the deep, and by this aid he trusted to be able, on returning, to guide his steps to all that his heart held dear.

Pierre had proceeded but a short distance when he saw, not far from him, a light.—Three times it slowly raised on high, and three times it is as slowly lowered.

'It is he—it certainly must be him,' said the husband of Cecile to himself in a murmured tone; 'yet why could he not have waited for me closer to the house?'

Although a vague, undefinable uneasiness accompanied this idea, the game-keeper, nevertheless, walked onwards, with a firm step and determined spirit, in the direction of the signal-light.

He advanced hap-hazard, guided only by his knowledge of the localities, and from the skill which his adventurous profession had given him, he was not in much danger of losing his way, even in the darkness of night, in the mazy intricacies of the murky forest.

The light was no longer visible. Then Pierre uttered a peculiar and very shrill whistle, which was responded to by a similar sound.

'Good!' thought he, 'I am not far from him,' and taking a fresh start he continued his march.

After awhile, again seeing a glimmer of the light he was following, he stopped, placed both his hands to his mouth, to convey the sound like a speaking-trumpet, and shouted at the top of his voice,—

'Petit Chauvel, is it thee?'

Then Pierre listened intently, but no answer was returned. To his great surprise, no sound was to be heard.

At this strange silence he became perplexed. It was quite possible that he might be led into a snare, so he stood ready to retrace his steps on the slightest suspicious movement.

Reflecting that the distance from his cottage, to which he had already strayed, was so great as to prevent any cry for help being heard by his friends there, should he be attacked in the dark—Pierre said to himself,—

'Faith it is no use to run into danger at this time of night. It may come soon enough without going to meet it. I will be on my guard and keep a bright look out.'

Thus communing with himself, our honest friend began, with quickened step, to return home.

He scarcely started when he thought he would repeat his call; accordingly he shouted, but in a lower key,—

'Petit Chauvel, Petit Chauvel! art thou there?'

This time there was a response—a childish voice replied,—

'Yes, here am I, master Pierre. Make haste!—I have been waiting a full half hour.'

Pierre Aubin needed no more. His suspicions vanished and he was ashamed of his momentary alarm. Guided by the light, which was freely displayed, and also by the well-known voice, he soon reached the individual addressed as Petit Chauvel.

Petit Chauvel was a shepherd boy full sixteen years of age, but so diminutive that he hardly seemed twelve. Pale and thin as the children brought up in the damp unwholesome quarters of a city, no one would have thought to look at him, that he had always lived in the open air and under the invigorating influence of the sunshine.

When Pierre reached him, he was seated on a stone, his lantern was placed by his side on the ground behind a clump of broom. His air was absent, even appearing anxious. He seemed to be listening attentively, but not in the direction in which the game-keeper came.

Pierre remarked this to the lad, but he laughed foolishly and replied, 'Who would you think I was expecting now that you are come? No one but my dog would want to come after me, and I ran a thorn into his paw to-night to teach him not to run after me when I don't want he should.'

At any other time Pierre would have given vent to his indignation at the cruelty of the boy, but he was too much occupied with the subject of uneasiness that had drawn him to this spot, to notice it, but hurriedly and impatiently he uttered the following queries:—

'What news? Has she arrived? When? Is she alone? What did she say?'

Petit Chauvel—still looking quite unconcerned, with a vacant stare, at Pierre Aubin—was in no haste to reply. His look of stupid indifference was by no means devoid of an expression of hypocrisy and malice. He twisted his cap in his hands, and kept shuffling about as if puzzled how to reply.

At last the boy being pressed to tell his news, he said he did not well know how to



answer so many questions, but he would try, when suddenly the noise of several horses was heard close at hand.

tremble in every limb, and pointing to the place whence the sound came, he stammered, 'Do you hear, master? Oh dear, I am so frightened, I can stay no longer.'

So saying, he rose up, hid the lantern under his blouse, and without heeding the entreaties of Pierre, he fled like a deer, and was instantly lost in the darkness.

Left thus suddenly alone, without having heard a word of the important intelligence which he sought to learn, Pierre bent his ear to the ground to ascertain whether the noise which had put to flight the foolish boy did really proceed from horse's hoofs, or was merely produced by the wind through the trees. Nothing but the howling of a smart breeze, at first met his ear, but after a moment he distinctly heard the neighing of a horse—then all was again silent.

The horsemen have halted, thought Pierre, and reverting to the singular demeanor and abrupt departure of Petit Chauvel he became uneasy. He looked towards his cottage, the light from which was barely visible and he reproached himself for having imprudently wandered so far from it.

For a second time did the stout-hearted game-keeper feel the fearful presentiment which had drawn him to Cecile and Philiberte, but resolutely he began to walk homewards. As he was going he heard a sound, as of stealthy steps on the grass, and the crackling of dry branches, sometimes on one side and then on the other—but it was useless straining his vision, nothing could he discern except once? a shadow seemed to glide along the path-way.

'Who goes there?' said the gamekeeper boldly, as he walked towards the moving figure. No answer was returned—the shadow seemed to have sunk into the earth.

Pierre advanced a step nearer the spot and again challenged with the practiced voice of a soldier—'Who goes there?'

Hardly had he uttered the last word when, from different points four men rushed on him, surrounded, and violently assaulted him.

The husband of Cecile was uncommonly tall and, what is rare, strong in proportion to his height. He had more than once had to contend with the most athletic and most desperate poachers, and had taught them that in a hand-to-hand encounter, when he could see what he was about, he did not fear two foes at once. But what could he do when taken by surprise, in the dark, and attacked by four resolute assassins?

The almost superhuman efforts of despair could not save him. Being convinced that he must be overpowered, Pierre, after fighting manfully for some time in silence, attempted to call for help, but a gag stopped his mouth. Putting forth all his strength in order, if possible, to free himself from the suffocating impediment, the game-keeper by a mighty effort freeing one hand for a moment, he tore away the gag.

This was his own neck handkerchief, which Nicholas Godard found shortly afterwards on the scene of strife, and which he brought back to the young mother.

As soon as Pierre Aubin recovered the power of free respiration, he felt stronger, and with a fearful blow in the chest of, one his adversaries, he felled him to the ground—but unfortunately the man in falling had caught hold of the game-keeper and dragged him down with himself.

Pierre was uppermost and kept the other down, who not vanquished, though underneath, clung so firmly to him as to prevent his rising up. Thus interlaced in a nervous embrace, equally trying to both, they rolled and struggled on the ground.

Each could count the deep-drawn respira-

tions of the other as they writhed together with knee to knee, breast to breast, and face to face. As they turned and twisted Pierre felt the satin of a mask over the features of his vigorous antagonist.

Whilst each was meditating a desperate effort as by tacit consent they slackened the struggle, to gain a little breath, the other assassins, also masked, rushed on Pierre, forced him to let go his hold and tied his hands behind his back, and stopped the victim's mouth with another gag. The man thus released by comrades was able to arise, and in his turn assist them.

Pierre Aubin, still laying on the ground and kept in a painful position by strong cords found it impossible to give utterance to more than stifled sighs. Two of the men now took hold of his legs, as yet unfastened, whilst the other two supported his head and shoulders. Sometimes carrying, sometimes dragging him along the ground, they got him to a short distance where the party halted.

One of them gave a whistle and almost instantly a fifth (masked) person, appeared leading a horse by the bridle.

This latter accomplice was small, thick-set and short. He seemed to move with difficulty. Possibly it was on account of his infirmity that he had not taken part in the struggle. He held the bridle whilst the cowardly conquerors of the game-keeper raised the unfortunate man off the ground, and hoisted him upon the horse.

When he was placed thereon, to their fancy, they tied his feet under the belly of the animal. This of course would prevent his having the power to free himself from his thralldom, but it would not obviate the risk of his destruction in case of turning short round amongst the trees, or should the horse fall, or suddenly set off on a gallop.

Now there seemed little doubt but the brigands meant to take the life of their victim,

but not thus, and in this place was he to die.

To prevent accidents they laid him with his face up-turned and his head resting on the horse's mane, then the powerless, speechless, unresisting man, was firmly secured with other cords skilfully crossed around the neck and breast of the steed.

These preparations completed, the little man—who we may as well, at once, designate as the dwarf, since he is destined to figure much in the following history—went away for a few minutes, into the wood, and returned with four horses on which the four brigands immediately mounted, and their deformed accomplice bestrode the animal on which Pierre Aubin was fastened.

Two of the party placed themselves, one on each side of the prisoner, another rode in advance and the fourth brought up the rear.

All these sinister arrangements being completed, as if previously concerted, not a word was spoken, not a sign interchanged. The capture and subsequent proceedings were conducted so systematically and well, that the five men seemed to act as the different parts of one body directed by a single mind. The programme of the ambush etc., had no need of alteration and amendment, for every incident had been foreseen and provided for.

A torch was lighted, the horseman in advance took it, and silently they all set out at a good round trot. The feeble light from this source, as the rays fell on those in the rear, caused them to look like phantom-figures, in the gloom, and added to the desolation of this nocturnal ride through woods and fields.

The silent cavalcade, after advancing a short distance, had put their horses into a gallop, when the advance-guard fell back, and communicated, in a whisper with the others.

The gamekeeper could not hear what passed, but instantly the torch was extinguished, the party quitted the beaten track, and

Pierre felt assured that they were crossing ploughed fields.

Pierre very soon comprehended the meaning of this change and stoppage, for he heard the sounds of a crowd in motion, and calling and replying to each other.

Motionless and still, behind the screen of bushes which bordered the clearing, remained the mounted kidnappers, as nearer and nearer approached the clamor and the torches—then came the voice of Decadi Robert to the ears of the captive.

Pierre made a violent effort to raise up his head and succeeded so far as to be able to discern the features of his father-in-law, which were illuminated by the light which Decadi held in his left hand, whilst, in the other was his trusty double-barreled gun.

The victim, who but lately had believed himself irrecoverably lost, now caught at the hope of rescue, and his heart filled with lively gratitude towards his supposed deliverer. But it was not ordained thus to be, he veteran soldier passed and repassed, but did not discover the prisoner and his guards.

Imagine the torture, the agony, the suspense, and the final despair of poor Pierre Aubin.

To know that a deliverer is close at hand, a protector within a few paces, an avenger in search of one—to hear, to see him, and yet to be unable to let him know that you are there, placing all your hopes on him, though yourself mute and impotent—what a dreadful situation.

Notwithstanding the harsh manner in which this unwilling state of silence and inaction had been secured, yet, by a superfluity of cruelty and precaution to make sure of their prey, the little dwarfish mask, who rode with Pierre, had climbed on to the body of his prisoner, and, seated like the nightmare of a dream, he placed his hands heavily on the gagged mouth of the helpless man, bent his

forehead down to cover the eyelids of the unfortunate Pierre, whilst his knees rested on the game-keeper's chest.

As if the Fates had conspired in favor of the villains, the very horses assisted in preserving the death-like silence. No neigh, or restless stamping betrayed to the anxious searchers their vicinity.

The last hope of deliverance dies in the heart of the captured man as the lights recede, and the voices of the noisy party led by Decadi are faintly borne on the night-breeze.

Once more the midnight marauders are under way, they have returned to the path, the leader has re-lit his torch, and away they gallop at a pace that will soon put them beyond all danger of a rescue.

As for Pierre, each moment he expected to draw his last breath. His head swam, his eyes were extremely bloodshot and painful.—The clouds seemed to fly above his head, and the trees were dancing in confusion, as, laying in that uncomfortable position, he whizzed past them. He seemed transported to an unknown world, where everything was strange, fantastic, inverted, and in constant motion.

For two weary hours did this unnatural course last, at the end of which time they halted.

Pierre was released from the horse and laid on the ground.—Then his feet were tied together, and he conjectured that his riding was over, 'But what,' thought he, 'are they going to do with me?'

The leader of the masked party placed his hand on the heart of the prostrate man, to ascertain if he yet breathed.

This certainty obtained, Pierre was immediately blindfolded. Then four of the men raised him from the ground and carried him, headforemost, after having turned themselves around with their burden several times, to

prevent the unlikely possibility of his having had presence of mind, or perception enough to recognise the route they had come. The deformed one remained, probably to dispose of the horses.

Pierre Aubin, exhausted by the rough transportation and the struggle that had preceded it, as well as the whirl in which his senses had been kept—utterly weakened in body, but fearless in mind—listened with intense curiosity for some indication of what kind of a place he was in.

At first, as they proceeded (carrying him along) he knew by the footsteps that the soil was sandy.

Presently they trod on harder ground, and after a while firmly, as on flagstones. When they had advanced a little farther they stopped, but it was only to change the position of the prisoner.

Two men went in front and took firm hold of his feet, and the other two supporting his head and shoulders, they resumed their march.

By the slanting position of his body, and the jerks he felt at each step they took, Pierre surmised that they were descending a stairway. He was sensible of the cold damps of a subterranean passage.

He no longer felt the outer air breathing on his face, and drying the perspiration that rolled profusely from his forehead, as at intervals, during the transit, had been the case.

Now, indeed, was the bold huntsman seized with a shiver of terror. He thought they might be bringing him *ALIVE* to this place, to let him *die of hunger and despair in a living tomb!*

Onward they moved in the depths of this long, subterranean vault, and by and by, the distant strains of joyous music reached the ear of the bewildered Pierre.

'Can this be possible, or is it but the illusion of a confused brain? Am I going crazy?' thought he.

But nearer and clearer does the music sound, and at length there could be no doubt on the poor fellow's mind that he actually heard a full orchestra—yet how strange!—where could he be?

Again his posture was shifted, and the game-keeper was carried horizontally. He felt that his bearers were walking on level ground, but their feet slipped, as if it were

damp and slimy. A smell, as if light and air had long been excluded, pervaded the place, and was almost suffocating.

Here the four men paused, but without setting down the heavy burden they had carried so far.

Pierre could distinguish a key grating in a lock, then bolts creaked in the rusty staples, and a door was forced open.

From the different sound of the echoing footsteps, and the stooping gait of his captors, it was plain that they were passing through a low door-way which, it appeared, led into a vaulted passage, some steps below that thro' which they had just come.

A second door was opened with a similar noise. They crossed another threshold, after which the four enemies of the game-keeper of the forest of Brasseuse, stopped for the last time.

The victim of the ambush was deposited on the damp ground, his eyes were unbandaged, and as soon as Pierre recovered from the dazzling light of the torch, he distinguished the masked figures who stood around him, contemplating him in silence.

He next turned to survey the place where he had been thus forcibly conveyed, and dreary was the spot.

It was a vault, the shape of which was octagonal. The only door was narrow and low.

Pierre felt convinced that this was the first time he'd ever been in it, but, from the general resemblance that such places so frequently bear to each other, he could not gleam any information as to whose castle he might be in.

Still was to be heard, overhead, resounding in the gloomy stillness of the dungeon, the harmonious cadence of the music that had already caught the attention of the captive—and also the regular measured movements of a dance.

After the maskers had regarded Pierre for some time, one of them relieved him of the blood-stained gag. Then, without unbinding him, they left him prostrate on the ground, and taking with them the glaring torch, they departed, passing into the outer vault in silence.

Thus was Pierre Aubin left alone in the darkness without a word having been vouchsafed to satisfy painful curiosity or allay uncertainty and alarm.



Noticing, shortly, a glimmer of light proceeding from without and visible beneath the door, an invincible desire to ascertain what was going on there, prompted the prisoner to make an attempt to find it out.

By the help of head and knees, his hands and feet being tied, he managed to move along, somewhat in the fashion of a worm, toward the open space below the door.

Placing his eye against the aperture, he saw the four masked men seated at a stone table, evidently in deliberation. They spoke one after another, in low tones, as if each was delivering an important opinion. Then they were silent, and appeared as if expecting the entrance of some one.

Well might Pierre imagine that the conversation deeply concerned himself, but in vain he tried to catch a word of it.

It was but a few minutes ere the fifth accomplice joined his associates. This was the dwarf who had, with a refinement of cruelty and malice, acted the part of nightmare during the journey, and had been left to take care of the horses.

He seated himself beside the other and spoke vehemently, but inaudibly to Pierre.—When he had finished his harangue, which was listened to with great attention, the party arose. The nocturnal council seemed to be terminated.

At this moment, so interesting and exciting to the spectator of the scene, he heard a rap on the outer door of the mysterious council vault.

The most powerful-looking of the five men had left his place and was advancing towards the door of the prisoner's cell when this occurred, and Pierre, fearing to be surprised in his indiscreet capacity of eaves-dropper, and thinking that his life might depend on his ignorance of what had just passed, drew back as quickly as he was able, to the place where he had been left.

It may be assumed that situated as was Pierre Aubin, and with such intentions as he needs must attribute to his enemies, he had little hope of life—but yet for the sake of wife and child he was willing to endure a great deal rather than die.

Having regained his place he waited in breathless suspense—but no one entered. Nothing but the strains of loud music and cadenced steps above, met his strained ear. The light still showed beneath the door, and

anxious curiosity prevailed over every consideration, so again his painful way was made to the ill-fitting door.

This time he found a new personage was added to the masked party—*A woman!*

Pierre could not see her face, for it was turned towards the men to whom she was speaking, to low, however, to be heard by him, though her gestures denoted anger and a resolute imperious will.

The lady was in a fashionable ball-dress, dazzling, covered with diamonds, her hair was ornamented with rich and rare flowers, in her hand was even yet the *Bouquet de Ball*, and her magnificent shoulders were displayed by her low-necked dress. This splendid creature must have stolen away from the assembly over head to be present at the secret council which probably was to decide, for life or death, the fate of the wretched man.

When the lady had finished speaking she bowed graciously to the five masks, and left the vault.

The heart of Pierre Aubin bounded within his bosom as he saw her face; it confirmed his suspicions. He uttered in under tones, and with violent emotion, the same name that Cecile in her despair had involuntary spoken—*'Regina Gazeran!'*

The leader of the party accompanied this lady to the door, locked and bolted it after her, then pointing to the vault where Pierre was confined he took hold of the lighted torch and moved towards it. No sooner did the captive-game-keeper seen this motion than he regained his station and awaited his fate.

The five men entered together. A ring it appeared was fastened in the wall, and to it Pierre was quickly fastened with a strong chain, they all then drew up before him, and the chief stepped up to the victim and gave him a blow on the cheek.

At this unmanly insult the blood boiled in the veins of the injured man, he foamed at the mouth, but the excess of indignation deprived him of the power of speech. To such a brave and worthy man as Pierre Aubin, to bear this was indeed torture. As he trembled with impotent rage he heard a derisive laugh; it proceeded from the malicious dwarf.

Each successively approached, and in like manner gave the unfortunate man a blow, even the hateful little man, but when his

turn came, the better to enjoy the atrocious pleasure of the insult, he stood looking at Pierre earnestly, then with mock pity he wiped, with his own handkerchief, the cold sweat of anguish from his brow and the tears of blood from his eyes, then completed all by the shameful blow.

This strange and ignoble infliction ended, the four strong cavaliers knelt in the centre of the vault and by their united efforts, and with help of an iron bar, they raised a stone which had been concealed under the well-packed earth which formed the floor of the vault.

A dark gulf was opened beneath, and a mephitic vapor exhaled from the aperture.

Pierre uttered a cry of horror. The music and dancing were still sounding with overpowering din. But ere the cry could be repeated, the wretches seized their helpless victim, suspended him by cords attached to the thongs which confined his arms and legs, and slowly lowered him into the dungeon-abyss.

When Pierre reached the bottom of this horrible pit, the stone that had covered it was replaced, and the unfortunate man found himself alone, and now, *at last hopeless!*

'My wife! My child!' he exclaimed; but this was all that escaped from his almost bursting heart.

During the whole of this foul transaction, the prisoner had been unable to recognize his tormentors, whose voices he had not heard, and whose features had been effectually concealed by the masks. Nevertheless suspicion of certain persons most likely to be the actors or abettors in the dastardly deed, would intrude, but he repulsed the idea, that it could be them, with horror.

After the receding steps of his foes ceased to be heard, all was silent. This silence was, however, but of short duration, and he could make out that some one was in the vault above him. Then he distinguished that the stone over his sepulchre was shaken, as if by some one whose strength was unequal to the task of raising it up, for it resisted the efforts to displace it.

Hope, the sufferer's steadfast companion, whispered in the ear of the buried-alive. Is it a deliverer?

Re-animated by this idea, Pierre aroused himself.

The efforts of the person, to move the

stone, continued. At length it is partially displaced, and the light of the torch, which the stranger had brought, shed its rays into the gloomy dungeon. 'Courage friend,' cried Pierre looking up to his supposed liberator. The stone gives way, but instead of a friendly face, as the game-keeper had hoped to discern—behold a hideous mask. Doubtless it is one of the wretches returned to feast his eyes on his victim, for he holds the light over the yawning chasm and peeps into the gloomy death.

'Cowardly assassin,' cried Pierre, 'At last tell me thy name that I may curse it.'

The sneering laugh which was the sole reply to these words, revealed the malicious Dwarf who had already caused him so much suffering.

The monster of cruelty as if, for the time satisfied with the spectacle he had been enjoying was withdrawing himself, when his mask came off and fell at the feet of Pierre Aubin.

The dwarf hastily sprang backwards—but quick as was the movement, he was recognised!

'*Antoine de Labourdilliere,*' cried the game-keeper, '*Remember that from the days of Cain—God punishes the fratricide!*'

### CHAPTER III.

BEFORE proceeding any farther with the story it may be well to affix the date of it, by mentioning that at this period Charles the Tenth had been five years on the throne of France.

The eldest branch of the house of Bourbon was verging to a fall—thanks to the combined efforts of those who wished, at any cost, to destroy it, and those who, under pretence of preserving it from unseemly contact, kept at a distance all who were inclined to afford it substantial support.

It was about fifteen years since the new alliance had proclaimed, by its heralds, to the absentees, the last lingerers of the great emigration—'*Donnez vous la peine d'entrer,*' which may be translated 'Be pleased to come back.'

From that time a goodly number of the noble descendants of ancient races had returned to live on their estates, for the most part in a pitiful condition. They were as one may say, wedded to the past, and could

not be brought to understand the changes and revolutions that time had wrought in social life and public opinion. Acting as though these things were not, they obstinately retained their old ways and customs brought back, intact, from exile.

In their simplicity these provincial gentry and nobility expected to see renewed the splendor and the arbitrary usages of absolute monarchy. They refused to comply with the fashion of the day, even in the matter of dress. Some repaired their dilapidated castle-towers and re-erected the *signiorial gibbets*.

The latter—an object of derision to those who, passing the castle, perceived it through the court-yard gate—was not altogether an unused plaything. If deprived of the right to exercise sovereign power, the dispossessed noble could no longer hang on it a truly refractory tenant—he consoled himself for his loss of power over the lives of men, by hanging, now and then, some intractable hound to serve as a warning to the pack.

Amongst these incorrigibles—who made it a point of honor not to admit the march of improvement, and to protest, by their influence and practise, against all innovations and every species of reform—it concerns us to instance, as foremost, Emeric, Nepomucene de Labourdilliere, Marquis of Valganest.

The domain possessed by his ancestors was so vast, that it was said, that from sunrise to sunset, a horse urged to a gallop, and continuing at that pace, could hardly make the circuit of it. But the evil days that came on the territorial Lords had so often and so effectually clipped here and there from the manor of Valganest, that when the Marquis found himself, at the restoration, again in possession of the estate and title of his fore-fathers, the inheritance was reduced to such a degree, that a very moderate walker would have gained but a poor appetite if he satisfied himself with making the tour of the *new Valganest*, before his breakfast.

The Marquis derived but a very small income from his curtailed estate, but, proud and poor, he would have considered his dignity compromised had he permitted his farmer to cultivate the smallest portion of the ground assigned, since his return to Valganest, to his game. Whilst he exacted rigid

respect to the boundaries of his preserves in order to secure his own sport, he was utterly unscrupulous about the rights and property of his neighbors, and Emeric de Labourdilliere encroached perpetually, with spade and plough, on the limits which he deemed too circumscribed.

As all the land that could be seen around the castle had once belonged to his ancestors, the Marquis called encroachments on the adjacent fields—*practical experiments of counter-revolution*. By little and little he would, no doubt, have got back all the patrimony of the Labourdilliere family if those whom he wronged, by putting in practise his political theory, had not loudly spoken of having recourse, to law, to obtain justice, and ascertain how far this system of appropriation and aggrandizement would be sanctioned.

The first peasant who had dared to complain to the old gentleman had done so on the occasion of chancing to meet him. Very greatly astonished was the Marquis at his presumption and audacity. This surprise is easily accounted for. He had returned to his old castle after an absence of thirty years, and understood not the vocabulary which the French people had composed for themselves whilst passing through—Republic, Consulate and Empire!

The Marquis de Valganest, challenged by the old clown, looked at him with an air as much as to say, 'I do not understand you.' Then as he had no desire to waste time in listening to claims put forth in terms equally new to him, he shrugged his shoulders and turned on his heel.

After going a few steps the Marquis happened mechanically to look back. The claimant was still standing where he had left him—but cursing and shaking his brawny fist in a threatening manner.

It was not long before the countryman felt the ill effects of this significant but disrespectful gesture, which was more intelligible to the Marquis than had been his language.

On the evening of that very day, as the man was going from the Hamlet of Brasseuse, through the wood of Haut Martel, he was assaulted by some persons, so disguised that he could not recognise them, and beaten with clubs till he was completely senseless. To crown his misfortune, a short

time afterwards, his finest stack of corn was struck by lightning (it was said) and consumed. As the night was free from thunder or storm, some of the boldest and most independent minds in the place would not believe that the interposition of Heaven caused the disaster—but the servant girl of the Priest of St. Frambourg took her oath, that she saw the avenging lightning descend from Heaven on the doomed stack, and on the following Sunday the miracle was proclaimed as *Sacred Truth*.

This occurrence, which might have been an effectual warning to the malcontents, did not prevent another peasant, more audacious even than the former, from doing that which the one who had been so roughly beaten had only threatened to perform.

Complaint was carried before the prosecuting attorney for the crown, at Senlis.

The unlucky constable who was not afraid to carry to the Marquis the summons to appear before the court, to hear himself condemned to keep within his own boundaries, could not boast of the result of this daring exploit.

The easily irritated pride of the old gentleman, who was altogether ignorant of legal proceedings, took umbrage when he saw a fellow present himself to enunciate an order in a castle (where, except during the revolution when things had to be passed over,) no one had assumed the right to enter, save to humble themselves before their master.

When the constable entered the saloon, Emeric de Labourdilliere was surrounded by his five grand-sons—William, James, Francis, Honore and Antoine.

We ought here to observe that it was no part of the intention of the official, entrusted with this delicate mission, to adventure into the interior of the castle in the execution of his duty—on the contrary he only desired to deliver his summons into the hands of the gate-keeper.

To this effect he had already, in this lady's kennel, produced his inkstand, and, the pen in his fingers, was beginning to write in the prescribed French form—'Speaking to the gate-keeper who has declared herself unwilling to sign the —' when an old servitor appeared at the gate of the lodge, and invited *maitre Bonaccueil* to follow him into the presence of *Monseigneur*.

The invitation was so politely worded and

delivered in such mild tones, that it could not fail to succeed in entrapping him.

Eustache Bonaccueil, the constable, was caught by it. He ascended the grand staircase with unflinching step, passed through the large apartments, that led to the saloon where the old man awaited him, without hesitation—but no sooner was he in the presence of the Marquis than his confidence began to fail.

The aspect of the grandsons of the Marquis made the constable uneasy, and the haughty ironical looks of the old man caused him to dread some evil intention on his part. Very soon was he enlightened on the subject, for hardly had *maitre Bonaccueil* presented, with fear and trembling, his citation, to his lordship, when he found himself pinioned in the strong embrace of vigorous arms. In a second he was stripped of his clothing, then he was pitilessly flogged, and without giving him time to dress himself, the five young men, with shouts of laughter, turned him out of doors.

The cold was intense, but the constable felt it not, thanks to the kind attention of the old domestic who let loose a couple of hounds which worried and harrassed him for a quarter of a league.

This repetition of an infamous amusement, which had often been acted in old times with success, cost the Marquis dear, in the present instance. In the meantime, however, he was glad to have an opportunity of showing the heirs of his name how this sort of thing used to be managed.

The poor devil of a constable was hunted by the dogs so far that even after they had ceased to persecute him and he was beyond their reach, he continued his race, thinking they were at his heels, and smarting from the wounds their pangs had inflicted, until he fell exhausted and senseless at his own door.

The neighbors raised him from the ground and placed him in bed. Nine days after that the unfortunate man died of delirious fever.

In days of yore it would only have cost the Marquis some twelve hundred francs to put a stop to the 'hub-bub' excited by such a result to a similar pleasantry—but time had made every thing dearer, even to the life of a constable. So much so that the old Noble, who had not calculated the effects

of revolutions, saw himself on the point of paying with his liberty and honor, for this error in his reckoning.

A criminal trial was in store for him, and the *Gendarmerie* had already crossed the threshold of the castle to arrest its lordly owner.

Emeric de Labourdilliere saw, from his windows, the police penetrate insolently even to the court of Honor. He turned a look of despair on the portraits of his ancestors as though to implore aid to repel the intruders.

Some ages back, in the good old times, the trumpet's sound from the towers of Valganest would have sufficed to call numbers to the defence of the castle, and prepared to hold out to the death, or at least to fight long and valiantly before they yielded. But now resistance was impossible from without—and within the Marquis had not even his five grandsons to assist him—they were absent on a hunting party.

As the Brigadier and his men mounted the steps of the hall-door, indignation and shame at his lost power and present impotence caused the blood to mount to the head of the old man. Regret for past times was his last thought—he exclaimed—'Unhappy France!—Unhappy age!' and apoplexy extinguished his life on the spot as these words passed his lips.

When the *Gendarmes* entered the room they found only a corpse, the clenched fists and curved lips of which seemed yet to protest against the sacrilegious proceedings of revolutionary justice.

This event put an end to judicial action in the matter, for Eustache Bonaccueil had died without being able formally to declare that the grandsons of the deceased Marquis had taken an active part in the brutal treatment he had experienced. Besides, the old servant, Bartholomew, (out of respect to the memory of his late master) deposed on oath that the constable went away from the castle, dressed and unhurt, after leaving the station. He, also, took the precaution to scatter in the woods through which the used man fled, the missing garments. Moreover the public voice accused the deceased of not having exercised his authority very leniently, so that all put together, it began to be generally credited that the constable had been way-laid, by some one who

bore him ill-will, and thus cruelly treated on his way back from the castle.

The widow who had flattered herself with the hope of obtaining heavy damages, reaped nothing from the event, but freedom to take a young husband, which, shortly she did, in the person of the head-clerk of the deceased *maitre Bonaccueil*.

We will now go back to the period when the old Marquis with his five grandsons, just returned from exile, were again in possession of Valganest. Thus re-installed, the proud old gentleman delighted to sit in state in the largest reception room, (as his forefathers had done,) even when there was no company at the castle.

One evening, as he and his family were thus seated, Bartholomew came into the apartment and respectfully whispered to his master.

The valet seemed nervous and embarrassed. The Marquis knit his brows at the communication. Surprise, indecision, anger, all were depicted in his countenance. Some violent struggle convulsed his features and lit up his little grey eyes with fury. Meanwhile Bartholomew awaited patiently the answer which his master hesitated to give.

At length the faithful domestic was dismissed, the Marquis, saying, 'Mind that he waits until I ring, before he enters here.'

Then it was a visitor whom the man had announced. Yes! an embarrassing and unwelcome one, as will be seen.

The five brothers looked with impatience at their grandfather, but restrained by the habitual respect to which he had accustomed them, they did not venture to interrogate him—and yet they were no longer youths. William and James, twins, had entered on their twenty-ninth year, and Antoine the youngest, the deformed, the same who had been recognised by the captive game-keeper was about twenty-four.

The Marquis at last thus deigned to explain—'This is an unlucky day for us, gentlemen—for I have just had an extraordinary and vexatious visit announced. If the man, who is about to present himself, really be the person he represents—then the late Marchioness of Valganest shed torrents of tears without cause, and for nothing have you worn mourning for these eighteen years.'

The brothers trembled at this announce-

ment, and now their looks demanded explicit information, to which mute appeal the Marquis responded in tones of vexation.

'He who is coming calls himself, *Etienne de Labourdilliere*.' 'Our Father!' exclaimed each of the young men rising up.

'Yes, truly, if he be not an impostor, we are compelled, once more, to see the wretched man who has disgraced our name.'

'He must be an impostor,' quickly replied Antoine, the dwarf. His four brothers catching and applauding the idea, repeated,

'He must be an impostor—He shall be an impostor.'

The whole five gentlemen then approached the old man's chair and ranged themselves about him, as if to show by this action that they made common cause with the head of the family against this new comer, be he *Etienne de Labourdilliere* or not.

Well pleased to see those whom he had taken such pains to inspire, from infancy with pride of birth, love for the old system, and hatred to Republican and Imperial France—Emeric smiled his satisfaction, and pulling the bell, muttered between his teeth 'This man may come.'

To make the scene, that is to follow, intelligible, we must premise that *Etienne de Labourdilliere*, who emigrated in 1791, left his wife *Marguerite de Gazeran* and his three sons, with his father, in England, and himself returned to his native land as a spy and secret emissary to aid the restoration of Monarchy.

That the hopes, honors, and emoluments held out as inducements to this perilous undertaking (liable to be repaid by ignominious death) prompted many to adventure in the cause of the Bourbons, is very probable. But that some few were actuated by the purest motives of loyalty, swayed by conviction, and uninfluenced by selfish or interested motives, it can not be denied—and these accepted the commission of *Espionnage* as a glorious one, and regarded death in this connection as martyrdom.

Of this class was the only son of Emeric. When he quitted England to counter-revolutionize France—he believed he was obeying a chivalrous sentiment agreeable to God and beneficial to his country. But the prejudice of education gave way before the glorious acts and deeds he witnessed or heard related on his way to Paris. Long he

struggled conscientiously to repress the enthusiasm which by degrees took possession of him.

A plot, to murder his first consul, one in which he was compromised without having participated in it—finished to disgust him and detach him from a cause which allowed of assassination as a means to attain success. He had the courage to express his indignation at the conventicle from whence the death-signal was to be issued. His accomplices (who had in the first place deceived him as to their true intentions) fancying themselves betrayed by him on whom they so much relied, came very near making him pay with his life, his rupture with them.

*Etienne de Labourdilliere* was not the man to be easily intimidated, and when he heard, murmured in the assembly of conspirators—'He is a traitor—let him die the death of a traitor.' He imposed on them by the reply,

'If within one hour from the moment that I entered here, I am not seen, by a friend whom I shall not name, to pass by a certain spot, which I need not particularise—a full list of all your names will immediately be placed in the hands of the police.'

Saved by his presence of mind, *Etienne* had the good fortune to preserve the life of the man who held in his hands the destiny of the Nation—the mighty Napoleon—as well as his own. The conspirators without more ado dispersed.

A letter from the Marquis (in England) reproaching his son with vacillation etc., being seized by the police came near ruining him. It was plain from the tenor of the communication that a new Royalist plot threatened the repose of France.

*Etienne de Labourdilliere* was cast into prison. Then he was told of the letter which caused his arrest. Immediately he wrote to his father in the presence of his judges—to renounce his adhesion to the party he had hitherto believed best for his country, and expressing his admiration of the existing government.

This avowal, on the part of the son of the Marquis, gave the police hopes of getting a clue to the numerous associates from whom he had seceded. But *Etienne* obstinately refused to denounce any one. At the time that he proclaimed his love of his country and his readiness to enter her service and

peril his life in it—he preserved silence regarding those who were attempting to destroy her peace and subvert her rules.

This refusal to betray his former friends caused doubts as to the sincerity of his professions, and though it was not thought advisable to bring him to trial, it was deemed expedient to detain him in prison, from whence, however, in course of time he was released.

In the last letter which he had written to his father he thus expressed himself:

'I have not apostatized, my Lord, I am no enemy to my ever loved country, whose interest I had mistaken—I am now permitted the honor of shedding my blood in expiation of my error. Instead of pitying or cursing me be proud of your son, my father—he will yet, on the battle-field, win honor for your name.'

Etienne de Labourdilliere, in fact did accept a commission in the army under Napoleon, and began a fresh career in which he nobly distinguished himself.

It would be useless as well as tedious to dwell on the way in which this defection from the Royalist cause was received by the Marquis beyond the sea.

Briefly then—That very day the head of the family called his five grandsons to him, and young as they were, he made them swear to view their father as an enemy whilst he lived, and to curse his memory, as that of a renegade, after death.

The Marchioness, his mother alone, yet in vain, wept over this impious vow.

As to the wife of Etienne, far from participating in the honor and sorrow which her mother-in-law felt at this wickedness, she lent all her maternal authority to support the vindictive old man in his anger. She too taught her children to hate their father—but it was not political fanaticism that made her so willing to instil the rancorous hatred of the Marquis.

It was jealousy. Desperately enamoured of Etienne, who reciprocated not her passion, she had succeeded in becoming his wife, by her influence over her father, and in consequence of the misfortunes of the times which made desirable for the Royalists to strengthen their hands by intermarriages so as to form a more compact fence around the exiled Princes.

Marguerite had been sensible of the im-

patience with which her husband had endured the matrimonial yoke which, weary of the struggle, he had suffered to be imposed on him, and she doubted not that his readiness to accept the secret mission to France arose from the desire to escape from her presence than from devotion to the cause of the Princes. When she learned, in London, that he had deserted the Royalist ranks, she was convinced that her painful surmise was correct.

This was the cause of the jealous fury that made *Marguerite de Gazran* forget that a mother, even if she be a neglected wife, ought not to teach her children to despise and hate their father.

Two years after the departure of Etienne, by some mistake it was officially reported that he was dead—that he had been killed whilst fighting the battles of the Republic.

Eighteen years had passed over the mourning and shame of his family, during which period the report of this death had never been contradicted. Such was believed to have been his end, by his father and his sons when they returned to France, and however glorious it might appear in the eyes of many, was looked upon by them, as infamous and degrading to their name.

The Marquis de Labourdilliere and family being, as already mentioned, amongst the last of the returned emigrants—the first Reign of the *Restoration* was drawing to a close and the *counter-revolution* raised its head, prepared its arms, and imprudently proclaimed itself victorious before having been fairly engaged.

The twin-brothers, William and James, were Majors in the Austrian army—François and Honore were attached to the Bavarian legation—and Antoine, the Benjamin of the old Noble, had never quitted his grandfather.

Such was the situation and such the sentiments of this family into which Etienne de Labourdilliere came, after this lapse of years, to reclaim his station. His mother he was not destined again to behold, on earth! She had died inconsolable for the loss of her much beloved son—But then he was relieved from the disagreeableness of encountering his wife—for she had breathed her last, as the family set foot on their native soil.

Now that past events are made known,

we will return to the saloon where the old gentleman was ringing the bell for the visitor to be called in.

The attitude of the Marquis was solemn and stern—that of his grandsons, insolent—when the door opened and the new-comer, a man between fifty and sixty, entered the apartment.

It was with head erect, a steady eye and firm step that Etienne Labourdilliere advanced to the group of brothers and their grandfather. His dress was military, his hair quite white, a sabre cut had scarred his right cheek, his manner was very dignified, and when he chose to modulate it, his voice was extremely mellow and sweet. Bartholomew, who preceded the unwelcome visitor, hastened to light the wax candles of the two immense and costly candelabra, which were needed fully to illuminate the spacious room.

When within three or four steps from the old Marquis, the soldier half bent his knee; he respectfully said—

'Father, I salute you.'

'I know you not,' sternly replied the old man, and turning to his grandsons who had stationed themselves in his rear, hat in hand, he said to them—

'Replace your hats, gentlemen, or this man may suppose it is only out of respect to him that you stand bare-headed.'

Then, although he had recognised his son, perfectly, at once he added—'Pray sir, who are you?'

'Since it would appear that your Lordship has not understood me,' replied Etienne, looking sternly at his sons, 'I will repeat my words when you desire these impertinent young men to behave towards me with that respect which is due even to a stranger of my age.'

As he finished speaking these words, with a back-handed stroke he sent the hat, which Antoine had insolently placed on his head, flying into the middle of this room.

The dwarf turned pale with anger, his brothers moved as if to resent the affront, but a glance from Etienne caused them to remain in their places, and the latter repeated—

'Father, I salute you.'

'Are you not very audacious thus to address me, sir. Do you not know that my son, *who was*, expiated by death, full eighteen years ago, his treason to his King?'

'It is eighteen years,' replied Etienne, 'since the spy of England, ashamed of the political party to which he was attached, resolved to have done with the past and redeem his error by an opposite course of action. But he was not willing to break every tie that linked him to his family, and instead of being called Labourdilliere of Valganest, to which name he was entitled, he determined to do credit to his *Mother's* name by his honorable services in the brilliant career of the army of his fellow-citizens—therefore he passed from that time as Etienne Seignerolles—Major Seignerolles is the name that now I bear.'

'That is to say, sir, that you have sullied two honorable names, instead of one,' replied the old Noble, forgetting his intention not to recognise his son.

'I hail these words, my Lord Marquis, as an admission on your part, that I am your son.'

Then speaking to the four brothers whom he had not yet obliged to uncover their heads, the major said—

'Off with your hats, gentlemen, and say to me, as I have already twice said to my father—"*Father, I salute you.*"'

Much as it cost their proud spirits to obey this mandate, the five brothers, subdued by the authoritative tone and commanding look of their parent, bent their heads and murmured the prescribed and *customary salutation*.

The major then turning towards the Marquis, continued, 'Now, my father, if I have in any way wounded your feelings, will you not pardon me that I may learn, from your example, to forgive my children.'

'Surely you have not entertained the expectation of a reconciliation with us?' was the ungracious reply; 'If such hope do really exist—better you had died before you entered here, for you would have carried with you a hope that will never be realized. If my grandsons did not participate in my feelings on this subject I would expel them from my presence.'

The sons of Etienne Seignerolles (so called) drew closer to the old Marquis at this speech, on noticing which the major thus addressed his sire.

'I would not deprive my children of your society and affection, to which they so long have been accustomed. I have not come to



impose on you the penance of my sojourn amongst you, my habits and politics are not yours, therefore we could not live happily together.'

'I am glad sir, that you admit so much, but be pleased to inform me what motive led you hither? Methinks both of us could have dispensed with this meeting.'

'I imagined sir,' replied the major, 'that the difficulties through which you have struggled must have straitened your means. The liberality of the *Emperor*, by whom I was personally esteemed, has enabled me to save two hundred thousand francs, and now, that you are about to resume your rank and live worthy of your name, perhaps the offer of my assistance may be of use. I come, therefore, to place my humble fortune at your disposal, for my father and my sons ought not to have recourse to strangers whilst I have the means to offer them.'

The Marquis suffered his son to finish this generous speech, but the flush of indignation which mantled his cheek, and the uneasy convulsive twitches of his body showed the difficulty of sitting it out. At the conclusion of it he sprang to his feet in a perfect fury, exclaiming passionately,—

'It is the price of the blood of our party that you dare to offer me, despicable wretch that you are! No, never will I touch it! Begone sir, begone!'

Etienne de Labourdilliere stood calmly under the explosion of paternal wrath and replied not. After the pause of an instant the old man apostrophising his grandsons, thus delivered himself.

'Should any one of you ever accept but a glass of water from this man, that one will I disinherit, and on whomsoever of you who shall except a legacy from him, is my malediction already pronounced.'

'My Lord Marquis,' remarked Etienne with respectful firmness, 'will please to remember that Major Seignerolles resides at Haut Montel, near Brasseuse. He will there find him as favorably disposed in future, as at present.'

Then bowing and saying, 'Father I salute you!' he was leaving the room, but at the door he halted and turned back.

'Gentlemen your duty is to accompany me to the stair-case.'

The sons looked at each other, but obeying the magnetic influence of his eyes, they

tactfully yielded obedience, and followed by all his sons, Etienne de Labourdilliere reached the foot of the stairs.

'Gentlemen I thank you,' said the father as they had gained the castle steps.

The young men bowed their heads, as it were, in spite of themselves, and each muttered—*Father I salute you!* and thus ended this singular meeting of the long-estranged relatives.

#### CHAPTER IV.

Etienne de Labourdilliere, after this visit to Valgenest, returned to the dwelling he inhabited at Haut-Montel—under the designation, *Major Seignerolles*, and resumed the almost solitary life he had led there previously. His mornings were devoted to field-sports and evenings to reading. His only domestic was Catherine Chauvel, the mother of the little shepherd boy who was instrumental in leading Pierre Aubin into the snare, as already described.

The Major and Decadi Robert, having both served in the Imperial Army, a kind of acquaintance naturally sprang up between them. Time and mutual esteem converted this into actual friendship.

It was after the disbanding of the army of the Loire that the person known as Major Seignerolles had come to reside at Haut-Montel, where he had been for about eight years, when one day he said to the old soldier—'Father Decadi I need your assistance.'

Greatly surprised was the worthy fellow at these words and he looked puzzled.

'Well, will you not grant it?' continued Etienne.

'You surely must be joking Major—you who obtained my pension for me—you, who lent me two thousand francs to repair my house and stock my little farm, can want no aid from me, unless it be to shoot some game for you, or execute some commission at Senlis, in which case I am most completely at your service.'

'You are mistaken, Decadi. It is to obtain a place for me!'

'A place is it? In what *Diligence* then, you have but to name it.'

'Wrong again; I want a permanent situation.'

'For yourself?'

'It is nearly the same thing as for myself. He for whom I wish to procure it, interests me nearly as much. I need not say what tie binds me to him.'

'I do not ask you to do so, Major, but to whom am I to make application?'

'To *Mademoiselle de Gazeran*. She has considerable influence and power in her Uncle's house and I know that they are dissatisfied with the present game-keeper. This is the appointment I should like you to procure for my *protege*.'

'*Pardieu!*' said the old grenadier, 'you would have better success yourself, if you would only speak to the lady, for many times have both Uncle and Niece said to me, "Why does not Major Seignerolles come like a neighbor and visit us? In the country it is well to see one another, we shall be glad to receive him."'

'I go no where—least of all to the house of a *Gazeran*,' replied Etienne in a gloomy tone.

'That settles the matter. I will speak to the young lady myself.'

After the silence of a moment, Decadi Robert hazarded the inquiry,

'Who may the person in the neighborhood be, for whom you want the situation?'

'He is not of these parts.'

'Ah, I see what you are about. Some old soldier, like you or I, for whom you kindly wish to secure a good berth in his age! *Diable!* That will make it more difficult to obtain the situation—for youth is a recommendation at *Gazeran*.'

'Then our claimant will suit, for he is but twenty-three. He has returned from Spain: and wounded too,' said the Major replying to a contemptuous shrug of Decadi's shoulders, at the mention of a campaign, which was generally considered by the people as little more than a military parade—though in reality it had its heroes and its victims.'

'Is it possible he has then seen service and been in battle. I did not know there had been any blood shed, but since you say so, I am convinced such has been the case.'

The result of this conversation was that Decadi was fortunate enough, (as he then considered it,) to interest the *Mademoiselle Gazeran* in the stranger for whom the desired situation of game-keeper was promised, and thus he announced his success. 'The place

is carried by assault—he has only to present himself.'

'Then, my friend, you may have the pleasure of informing him that he is thus provided for.'

'Why, where is the young man?'

'At your own house!'

'How so, at my house!'

'Yes, indeed, Decadi, he has been there for the last three hours.'

'Then you sent him?'

'Who—I? I never saw him. He knows me not, nor do I, as yet, wish myself to be known by him.'

'He must, however, I suppose, know that.'

'He knows,' interrupted the Major, 'that Decadi Robert, to whom his Mother has sent him, means to get him some good employment, if possible, because, she said, Decadi is his worthy Uncle.'

The ex-grenadier looked at the Major in surprise, as his words were so completely enigmatical, and he inquired,—

'Come now, Major, are you in earnest? What is the meaning of this? Am I uncle to the young man in question?'

'Yes, without doubt, that you are most assuredly. Was not your Mother married, (the second time) to the keeper of the *conciergerie of Paris*?'

'True, Sir.'

'Had she not a daughter by that second union?'

'Yes.'

'And the name of that daughter was Euphrosine Aubin?'

'It was.'

'Well, she was thy sister, and had a son, had she not?'

'I must again reply yes. But the father no one knows, he must have been some Noble—an aristocrat I suppose—muttered the old soldier.'

Decadi Robert, however, was not one of those who carry their respect for family honor to that pitch which heaps execrations on the nearest relatives who may, years ago, have brought disgrace on the name they bear. Nor was it an age or a country, where and when, such things were viewed by the generality of people, in any station, in the heinous light that serious christians consistently regard such improper occurrences.



So the veteran citizen of the world composedly added,—

'Truly my sister did, unwisely, act as she felt disposed, yet even so, I fancy if she and I went to confession, it would not be to her lot the heaviest penance would fall. She has been a good mother and is well behaved and respected now—so if my Nephew is a fine, honest fellow, I shall not be sorry to see him.'

The Major pressed the speaker's hand with a warmth so unusual for him to exhibit, that it gave rise to a suspicion which Decadi thus expressed.

'*Pardieu*, Major—excuse the question—but mayhap you are the young man's father!'

'You have, indeed, guessed aright, my friend.'

'Pray tell me then why did you not marry my sister Euphrosine?'

'Because my own wife was alive.'

'That alters the case, I perceive the impossibility.'

All this was said in the tone of ordinary conversation, as if these two men were speaking about the weather, or what not, of trifling interest.

And your son, is he acquainted with the relationship? inquired Decadi Robert.

'No, until I should be free to marry Euphrosine, and legitimate him, she wishes all his affection concentrated on herself.'

'I see, women have their whims—but are you expecting to be free soon?'

'When it shall please the Lord.'

'Really the tie does not seem to press heavily on you since no one here ever heard of Madame Seignerolles.'

'As to that, Decadi, I assure you that if she were coming here to-morrow I would depart hence to-day.'

'Well, then—may she stay away, for we should lose a good neighbor. I will now go home and welcome my nephew.'

'Remember Decadi, it is a secret to be preserved within your own keeping.'

'Faithfully,' was the reply.

Thus the two revolutionary soldiers parted, the one cordially to receive his relative, the other to brood over the memory of his ardent love for the tender, the beautiful Euphrosine, which still clung tenaciously to the fibres of his heart. He recalled the feelings he had experienced when he was

a prisoner in the *conciergerie*, and she had compassionated his lot until love had succeeded pity, and mutually they avowed eternal constancy.

The legal wife of Etienne de Labourdilliere had become, more than ever, an object of detestation to him since he first saw and loved Euphrosine, whom (though a jailor's daughter) he would gladly have married—and whom he positively assured he would yet do so, whenever, by the death of Margaret Gazeran, he should be at liberty to make a fresh legal contract.

It was not long before Euphrosine repented of her having yielded to the sophistry of an union unsanctioned by the church, though unblushingly practised by so many of high and low degree in those fearful and godless times.

After the release of Etienne de Labourdilliere, he joined the army, and Euphrosine withdrew herself, to a seclusion that baffled his exertions to discover, resolving to bring up her son by the labor of her hands; but she contrived to send him a letter in which she stated,—

'You shall know the place of my retreat, when you can announce to me that nothing hinders your legitimating your son. Until then, we must be strangers to each other.—

Thus only can I hope to regain peace of mind. Should I be unable to maintain and educate the unfortunate innocent, you shall be applied to, and may aid me, as it will be your duty. But you need not fear for me—I can support myself.'

Having now narrated the occurrences of by-gone years, necessary to explain passing events, we return to the morning on which the Major requested Decadi Robert to endeavor to obtain the situation of game-keeper for the young man, which was in consequence of a letter just received from the long-unseen, but never-forgotten, Euphrosine, which ran thus:—

'For the first time, Etienne de Labourdilliere, am I obliged to have recourse to you. My son, *Pierre Aubin*, wounded, at Logrono, in Spain, has returned, and is unprovided for. It would be very difficult to settle him in Paris; perhaps, either through your own interest or that of my brother, Decadi Robert, some place in the country may be procured, to suit him. I would rather Pierre did not know by what right you interfere in

his favor. It would be unpleasant to me, and also to him, for he believes that his father is dead. I know that you and my brother are acquainted, and you may tell him all, if you think proper. It is to him I shall send my son. I want for nothing essential myself, but am not rich enough to support two; besides, Pierre would not live at his mother's cost. Do then, as you think right; and I shall be as grateful as if I were not asking the fulfilment of a duty, but a favor. I would gladly have passed my life with this beloved son; but the time has not come when I could meet you without pain. Will that time ever come? I have waited in expectation so long, I may wait on still. At all events, if we are not destined to be united on earth, there is a Heaven where, after our probation here is ended, we may hope to meet without shame or impropriety where all is beatitude and virtue.'

When Decadi Robert returned home, Pierre Aubin was there, as the Major had informed him.

The young man had one of those open, manly countenances which inspire confidence and affection at first sight. His manners and conversation were pleasing, and his air even noble and commanding. In short, he soon made such a favorable impression on the old couple and their only living child, the pretty Cecile, that in a very few weeks the future marriage of the young people was a settled thing.

At the time when Pierre Aubin was appointed to the office of protector of the game in the forests belonging to the Gazeran family, at the recommendation of Regina de Gazeran, that lady was in her twenty-seventh year, and here claims some notice, as about to appear a very important personage.

*Mademoiselle*, then, was at this period in the full perfection of her great beauty, and had been sought in marriage by numbers; but her remaining single during the life-time of her uncle, was the sole condition imposed as the price of her inheriting his immense wealth.

This restriction to celibacy had, hitherto, caused no grief of heart to Regina, the absolute power she possessed over every one, on her uncle's domain, and the unlimited and uncontrolled sway which she exercised, was, to her, of itself happiness enough to compensate for her acquiescence in the prohibi-

tion regarding a matrimonial tie. But from the day on which she first beheld the young and handsome Pierre Aubin, a change came over the haughty dame!

A sudden, violent passion took possession of her heart; and she did not even seek to expel or combat it after she had discovered the nature of her interest in the new game-keeper. All she attempted to do, was to conceal her insensate fancy from the observation of her doting uncle and the public.

Months passed ere her preference was allowed to be so visible, to the object of it, that he could attribute the flattering interest she bestowed on him no longer to simple benevolence.

Pierre Aubin was, also, pre-occupied with his own tender passion for the pretty and amiable Cecile, which caused him to be less clear-sighted in remarking the love which he had unintentionally excited. Nevertheless, he could not always remain ignorant of the impression he had made on the high-born beauty.

The game-keeper trembled at the prospect of the misery his prophetic fears foresaw this love would draw down on his gentle Cecile and himself. He tried to disbelieve the evidence of his senses. He gave no encouragement to her advances, and would not understand the language of her beautiful eyes when they betrayed the intensity of her admiration of him.

How well guarded was his heart by the image that reigned in it—that of the modest loving countenance of his affianced Cecile.

At last came the moment that was to try the power of principle and virtuous love to resist the temptation of the syren's delirious passion for him. There was no longer a possibility of pretending to misunderstand that the niece of his lord and master chose to overlook the, usually considered insuperable, difference of birth and station.

Pierre Aubin could not return this love; and, as an honorable man, he wished to put an end to her unavailing hopes without humiliating the lady who honored him with a passion which so many men of wealth and distinction had been ambitious of exciting. Hoping that a knowledge of his abiding attachment to Cecile, if it inflicted a cruel wound at first, would effectually cure Regina, he, one day, replied to her insinuating compliments, though his tones faltered as he ven-

tured the experiment, — 'If *Mademoiselle* could but know how very dearly I love my cousin Cecile !'

At this announcement, Regina de Gazeran fell to the ground, as though she had been shot !

Possibly, the seeming swoon that ensued, might have been a snare for Pierre Aubin, a last hope for Regina ! She might have instantly perceived, that at once to kindle the torch of love in his pre-occupied heart, was out of the question ; but that *pity* once excited, *love* might succeed.

Frightened, beyond measure, the faithful, betrothed lover of Cecile bent over the noble lady, and regretted having spoken out so bluntly ; and he eagerly tried to restore her to consciousness.

It is perfectly true, that Pierre was vehemently in love with his affianced one, and prided himself on remaining constant and true to her ; nevertheless, it was not in his power to help feeling admiration, in gazing at the beautiful woman before him.

Must we confess it ? Candor compels the avowal, that, in the secret recesses of his soul, Pierre's vanity began, to be agreeably flattered at the persuasion, that *he, the game-keeper*, had actually smitten the heart of the beauteous, accomplished, and much-sought heiress, to such a degree that she was dying of love for him !

If this were a weakness, at his age, it was but natural.

'Oh, how magnificently beautiful she is !' he involuntarily exclaimed aloud, as, with palpitating heart and feverish delight, he looked on her reviving color. 'No, I must not, cannot love thee !—yet how shall I ever be able to forget thee ?'

As these words were pronounced, Regina slowly opened her now languishing eyes.

The surprise affected by the lady on finding herself supported by Pierre Aubin, was expressed so well, so naturally, that he began to fancy he was somewhat astray in his conjectures, and that his vanity had deceived him when he attributed her fainting to his confession of love for Cecile.

Regina had recovered her sense of dignity and decorum, and, withdrawing from his respectful support, she said,—

'Pierre I thank you for your attention. No doubt it would have been desirable that on such an occasion of illness, Louise my

own maid, or Cecile your cousin, had been in the way to render assistance, however, it could not be foreseen—and in future should such a faintness come over me whilst in your presence, I have to request, beforehand, that you do at once hasten to the nearest habitation and bring the first peasant girl you meet. Any woman understands what to do, under such circumstances, infinitely better than a man.'

This was said in a tone that might well be mistaken for the coldest indifference, and she also continued in a similar vein, as if the thought had just occurred to her mind.

'I do not ask you to keep my sudden fainting-fit, a secret. It is known that I am subject to this unpleasant occurrence, besides were you to endeavor to preserve silence on the subject, your manner might be embarrassed, and carry an appearance of there being a secret between you and I—whilst between Pierre Aubin, the game-keeper, and the lady of Gazeran Castle, there can be no such thing.'

Regina made this speech in the haughtiest manner conceivable, and in strange contrast with her previous condescension, then with a patronising, rather than obliged manner, once more expressing her thanks, she walked homewards.

At the last words and parting looks of the lady, the whole brilliant fabric, that had been erected by vanity on the supposition of her love for him, fell to the ground, and Pierre remained stupefied with amazement, he was vexed at himself for having ever supposed it possible.

Shouldering his gun, which he had propped against a tree, when he flew to raise the lady from the cold grass, he exclaimed mentally as he walked away in a disconsolate mood.—

'I was a presumptuous fool—an ass ! She cares not for me after all. Better though, that it is so.' Nevertheless he said to himself once more—'How very beautiful she is !'

Although *Mademoiselle* had permitted him to speak of the meeting in the wood, and what had passed there, Pierre Aubin did not mention it to any one. He would even gladly have forgotten that in Regina's presence, dazzled by her attractions he had *twice* been obliged to invoke thoughts of Cecile to prevent his eyes misleading his heart.

More perhaps to obliterate such ideas than as the result of his love to Cecile, on the evening of that day. Pierre redoubled his attentions to her. The innocent confiding girl, rejoiced visibly at this more than usual display of feeling, and her affection made him experience remorse for his fleeting admiration of Regina, as though he had really been faithless in heart.

Not long did this cloud overcast the peaceful vision of the game-keeper's love which reverted wholly to his Cecile, the true magnet.

As for Regina, she now avoided, as much as heretofore she had sought, meeting Pierre, and when accident brought him into her presence, her dignified looks and distant manner confirmed the impression, that he must have been mistaken in the supposed nature of her sentiments towards him.

The part which the lady was acting, however, was not sustained without considerable effort. Many times had she, when alone, felt indignant to think that, with her beauty and rank, her first look had not brought to her feet the man whom *she*, so elevated, had deigned to honor with a preference ! Carried away by a passion, which the indifference of Pierre heightened instead of extinguished, she was almost tempted to cast aside disguise and let her words express the feelings of heart, saying, '*Oh, love me as I love you !*'

Such an entreaty, as from the lips of her high-born suitors, she had received with disdain, but which she would have hailed with delight from the humble game-keeper. However, for a time, she managed to triumph over these wild impulses, but, in secret, she shed tears of rage and shame as she thought of Cecile, her innocent and unconscious rival.

'Oh, to think that I should not be able to supplant *her*, and yet be unwilling to relinquish the hope of prevailing over the constancy of Pierre Aubin !'

Thus spoke the proud beauty to her inmost self, and the exclamation which had escaped from the man whom she fondly loved, '*Oh, how magnificently beautiful she is !*' sounded in her ears and kept alive her hopes of ultimate success.

Regina had flattered herself that Pierre would have felt the loss of favor, and been anxious for a renewal of her previously gra-

cious and attractive manner. But her coquettish *hauteur* had failed in its object, and she saw that she must change her plan of attack, make a compromise with her pride and dignity, and advance to meet the hear reluctant to respond to her own. In accordance with this resolution she contrived to get Cecile to the castle under the pretence of wishing her to execute some delicate embroidery.

On her return the pretty rustic spoke of her delightful visit in terms of rapture, and the flattering distinction bestowed on her by the Lady Gazeran, was hailed with pride and pleasure by the parents of Cecile.

Pierre Aubin, alone, was dissatisfied and unrejoiced, he felt that some fresh snare was concealed, by this sudden advance, and that it boded another struggle for which he had no desire. He had come off victorious *once*, but he feared to renew the risk. He had, therefore, declined going to the castle to see his betrothed safe home, as had been arranged by the condescending mistress of the Lordly Halls, and well did he know how to interpret, the circumstance, that the charming lady, Regina, had suddenly been taken with a fainting fit when it was announced that Decadi Robert had come (instead of Pierre Aubin) to escort his daughter back from the castle.

It was, indeed, a blow alike to the love and the pride of the infatuated Regina, for she did not deceive herself as to the motive that kept Pierre away. It was not his duty, as game-keeper, that could cause him to substitute Decadi for himself on such occasion. What could it be but to avoid meeting her ? Thus was she foiled, and unable to put in practise the acts by which she had fully intended to set herself off to advantage by contrast with Cecile, who, guileless and and totally devoid of suspicion, was filled with gratitude for the kindness and attention which had been shown her, and she expatiated to her cousin Pierre on the beauty, talents, and gracefulness of Regina Gazeran.

In vain did the young man strive to turn the conversation. Cecile was so touched with the kindness lavished on her by the *great* lady that, (as Regina had calculated) she could speak to her lover of nothing else, and her praise and admiration were couched in the language of youthful enthusiasm.

Once, during the dangerous commendations of her new friend, Pierre Aubin man- aged to silence his fair cousin completely, by saying to her,—

'It seems to me, Cecile, that I love you less the more you discourse about your visit to Gazeran.'

Cecile did not inquire of her lover how her enthusiastic praise of the lady who had received her so kindly, was displeasing to him—but, loving so warmly, so tenderly, she would scrupulously avoid mention of the name *Regina de Gazeran*.

It has been remarked, that the noble dame of the castle waited but an opportunity to renew the perilous attack, on the game-keeper, which she discovered (with woman's keen perception) that he feared to encounter.

Much time did not elapse ere an event occurred which was favorable to the wishes of the enchanting temptress.

Philiberte Robert, the mother of Cecile, was attacked with a grievous sickness, in fact, of such a nature, that her life was despaired of. This served as a pretext of which Regina eagerly availed herself, to make a show of interest in the peasant girl, by daily visiting the sick mother, and thus she secured a daily meeting with Pierre Aubin.

Death speedily seized his destined prey.

With kindest protestations, and every appearance of sincere affection towards Cecile, Mademoiselle de Gazeran insisted on removing her from the house of mourning to the castle, whither she and her father, Decadi Roberts, took up quarters for about a month.

The repugnance which Pierre felt at the idea of visiting the abode of the Syren, was overcome by consideration of the affliction of his beloved Cecile, who could best be consoled by the sympathy and kindness of his sincere regard and affection. Thus, love and duty combined to lead him where he was obliged to meet the redoubtable Regina.

Between the mistress of the lordly halls and her dependant, the game-keeper, a strange species of contest ensued during this period.

Deeply enamored of the handsome young man, and completely infatuated, Regina gave the strongest and most visible evidence of the state of her feelings. The warmth of her manner was habitually met with the

icy coldness of respect; but the steady concentration of the sun's rays will dissolve the stubborn chilliness of the frozen mass. Despite, therefore, of good resolves and virtuous intention, backed even by sincere love for another,—the respect was, on one solitary occasion, obliterated.

When Cecile, on the succeeding day, received the customary attentions from these two persons, she little suspected that the one was suffering the pangs of shame and remorse, and that the other had added a fresh stain to her tarnished conscience.

For six months, from that time, Pierre Aubin contrived to avoid meeting Regina alone, and the pure love which he bore for the innocent Cecile had but increased, if possible, by the contrast of her purity and virtue, which he would feign emulate.

At last he found himself one day face to face with his evil genius, who thus addressed him,—

'Pierre, I can, I will become free. My uncle, the Lord of Gazeran, is about to make a journey to Italy for the benefit of his health, and he proposes to take me with him. His fortune should devolve upon me,—but I am willing to renounce it—to break my promise of celibacy. You know that I love you. I will no longer admit the control of any person (save you) over my action. Will you marry me?'

He regarded the determined and impassioned beauty with a mournful look of astonishment.

'Will you marry me?' she repeated, adding—

'I will brave public opinion and reproach. I will sacrifice every thing for the man I so warmly love—but if my position should become too irksome we will depart hence. You are silent! Well, I give you two days to consider what I have said. Mind that I receive your answer before the expiration of that time.'

'You shall have it to-morrow,' replied Pierre.

The next day was Sunday, and the curate of the parish of Brasseuse, (according to the custom of the country) announced from the pulpit—the betrothal of Pierre Aubin and Cecile Robert.

This was the answer of Pierre to Regina. On the following Monday Monseigneur de Gazeran and his niece set out for Naples.

Never had the lady appeared more brilliantly beautiful, or so sedulous to please the old gentleman whom she was going to accompany to a foreign land, with tender care to soothe and cherish his old age and infirmity. But the fair and seemingly good and kind Regina left behind her, to be forwarded to Cecile, the following letter which, however, was intercepted by Pierre.

'Cecile you are thinking of being married—beware! I fear for your happiness. Inquire of Pierre, the cause of my distrust, and if he should refuse to make the reason known to you, await my return. Be advised and at all events await my return, ere your fate be sealed. As a friend I bid you take heed! Regina.'

The foregoing recital of events brings us up to the period when old Emeric de Labourdilliere—so moved with indignation at his castle being insolently invaded by the myrmidons of law and justice—cast a despairing look on the portraits of his ancestors, and gave up the ghost.

It has also appeared that the inheritance left by the Marquis, thus deceased, of right devolved upon a more direct heir before coming into the possession of the five brothers. Likewise it will be remembered that his heir was living under the assumed name of Major Seignerolles, whose relationship to the game-keeper has been made known to the reader.

Often had father and son seen each other, and the heart of the old soldier had warmed towards the handsome noble-looking youth of whom he had such good accounts from Decadi Robert the proposed father-in-law. But the silent and solitary dweller of Haut-Montel was averse, to give way to the paternal feelings which urged him to grasp the game-keeper's hand and press a son to his bosom, as this would involve a disclosure of the secret of Euphrosine Aubin—so they passed each other with but the ordinary greeting of strangers.

At length, after a severe internal conflict, and moved by certain painful considerations, the Major determined to meet the youth, as he was returning home from the woods, and to the utter surprise of Pierre he was thus addressed by the hitherto distant and reserved individual.

'Good evening, my friend Pierre. Have you had any late news from your mother?'

'From my mother?' repeated the young man believing that he had not heard aright. 'Yes, I enquire if you have heard from her lately? Does she not write to you sometimes?'

'Yes Major, every month.'

'Well then you can easily answer me.'

'My reply is, that you are very kind to interest yourself about us, and that, God be praised, my mother is quite well.'

A shade of uneasiness passed over the features of Etienne de Labourdilliere during this speech but it instantly disappeared, whilst he muttered:

'What can the gentleman mean by asking after the health of my mother?'

After a pause the Major added:

'I desire to have some conversation with you, Pierre.'

'At your service, sir,' eagerly replied he, placing the butt of his fowling-piece on the ground, and leaning on the muzzle, in the attitude of an attentive listener.

'Not here, Pierre, but at my house, after you have been home and had your supper.'

Suddenly seizing the young man's hand and pressing it warmly, the laconic speaker took leave, saying,—

'Adieu, for the present—we meet again to-night!'—and away he started, with stately step, in the direction of Haut-Montel.

In delicious conference with his accepted love, the time passed unheeded, and Pierre was totally oblivious of his appointment, till interrupted by old Decadi Robert, whose voice saluted his ears, saying,—

'Enough talk between ye; I have something to say to you, Pierre.'

'So has Cecile, my good uncle.'

'You must learn that I do not approve of the fashion of silencing the old that the young may talk. You two will have time enough for your nonsense when you are in your homes. In the meantime, when I speak, all else must be hushed—that's the rule here.'

It would have been a vain thing to interfere with the worthy old soldier's ideas of discipline. Cecile saw that her father was in earnest, and, taking up the embroidery on which she was engaged, she retired to her own chamber, without manifesting any sign of ill-humor.

'There, that is well. Cecile understands the meaning of my words. She perceives that I wish to speak to you alone, in private.'

"In private?" replied Pierre, much astonished. "How the deuce can we have any secrets?"

"In the first place, I would inquire, why you are amusing yourself here?"

"Why? Because, naturally, I am inclined to avail myself of every opportunity to court my cousin, who is engaged to be my lawful wife, with your own consent. Surely, there is no harm in this?"

"Certainly not; but there is a time for all things; and this was not the most pressing business."

"How so? What then, uncle?"

"Did you not meet any one as you were returning home this evening?"

"Oh, yes, indeed! it was a singular occurrence!" replied Pierre, suddenly remembering his interview with the Major.

"Did you not make an engagement?"

"Truly, I did. I promised to go to Haut-Montel to-night."

"And this is the way you keep your word, young man?"

"How could you be aware of this?"

"Never mind. I know that you ought, before this time, to have been off; and to make sure that you do go, I intend to see you to your appointed destination. Eyes right!—Quick step! Forward—march!"

The game-keeper was received by the Major, in person, at the door of his habitation; with the remark, in a reproachful tone:

"You might have come a little sooner; but it is no matter."

Muttering an excuse, Pierre, for the first time, crossed the threshold of his father's house, and he was shown into a room, which was not only furnished with great taste, but had an air of comfort and also style, no usually to be found in such a rustic mansion as the exterior of the building indicated.

There were specimens of rare arms and armory, choice paintings, and splendidly-illuminated books, with various costly objects of luxury.

In one corner, Pierre remarked a portrait of a young country-girl, attired in the costume of the time of the revolution. This figure struck him particularly; but the faint light did not permit him clearly to distinguish the features which he fancied were familiar to him, and the vague impression of recognition passed away.

Etienne de Labourdilliere, without doubt,

in order to atone to his guest for the *brusque* reception, resumed the amiable and familiar tone in which he had once before on that day addressed him; but there was something more solemn in his voice and manner than when he had met the young man, to whom he now said,—

"I did fear, my young friend, that you were not going to come, which would have caused me much regret, and you would have greatly wronged yourself."

"Upon my word, Major, I will frankly confess, that I had almost failed to keep my engagement; but if you have ever been in love, you will admit that it is excusable at my age to have a treacherous memory when in company with the girl whom one adores."

"It was because I suspected something of this kind, that I took the precaution to request Decadi to remind you of your engagement in case of forgetfulness."

"This, truly, did he; and so pertinaciously that, if you were really particularly desirous of seeing me this very night, you may thank him for it."

"Yes, this very night, for to-morrow would be too late."

Pierre, from this, expected that Major Seignerolles, who was thus anxious for an interview, would instantly unfold his motives. He placed himself in the attitude of one ready to listen attentively to some confidential disclosure; but he was, for the time, deceived in his expectations.

Instead of being made acquainted with the secrets which the Major evidently had to reveal, Pierre Aubin was called upon to give minute details of his childhood, his education, and his military career. He underwent a thorough examination of his past life.

While the game-keeper replied with his natural frankness and habitual truth, to the manifold questions of the Major, the latter, though appearing to be listening to him with the deepest interest, was nevertheless very attentive to catch any sound that might be heard from without doors, and sometimes, even, interrupted the narrator, not with his voice, but by a significant gesture of his hand; and then, as if that which was heard in the distance did not correspond to his expectations, he re-united the broken thread of the narration by one of those expressions usually employed to encourage one to proceed in the discourse: such as,—

"You were observing;" or, "And then," etc.

The life of Pierre Aubin was completely developed up to the time when he was installed in the office of game-keeper. Arrived at this point of his own history, which it passed his comprehension to find so interesting to the Major, he continued,—

"I now have nothing more to relate to you. My career since I have been here has been but common-place and un-eventful. I do my duty conscientiously, and love my fair cousin passionately. One day resembles another; and my time passes very happily. To-day is always so agreeable, that I can never desire to-morrow to be more so."

Here Major Seignerolles looked him full in the face, and replied,—

"I have reason to believe that you may have hidden the most important events of your life, previous to your arrival in this part of the country, since you see fit to preserve silence about such things as have transpired in this place."

"To what things do you allude, Major?"

"To what, indeed, but your intrigues with Regina de Gazeran?"

Bashfulness was a stranger to the soldier-game-keeper, and fear unknown to him; yet, at mention of that name, he blushed, and looked abashed as well as amazed. His astonishment was at its height when the Major, contrary to his usual taciturnity, ran over, with exactitude, the principal details of Pierre's meetings and acquaintance with that lady—showing the most extraordinary knowledge of the existing terms and former intimacy, concluding in these ominous words,—

"One Gazeran caused the misery of your father. Another of that name is destined to render you unhappy. It seems to be, in this world, that certain races are decreed to ruin others, as certain animals, birds, beasts, and fishes prey upon and destroy their like!—You, alas! know not the fatality. You were not acquainted with certain circumstances, and could not foresee the lamentable result."

This was, indeed, a day of surprise and mystery to Pierre Aubin; but no time was afforded for conjecture or explanation, as the Major abruptly exclaimed,—

"Here they come, at last!"

Having looked out of the window, to make sure of the fact, the host hurried his bewildered guest into a closet, which was con-

structed so as to afford, to the unseen occupant of it, a view of the apartment he had just quitted, and said to him,—

"Remain here. You will, without offence to my visitors, learn what I desire you to know, and I shall be spared a repetition of the information."

Then disposing of the light so as to illuminate (partially) the rest of the apartment, whilst the receptacle of a hidden eye and ear-witness was thrown into the shade, the Major hastened to receive the new-comers.

Five gentlemen, enveloped in large riding cloaks, and wearing huge slouch-hats, entered; but through their disguise, Pierre discovered them to be scions of the proud and lofty race of Labourdilliere, even before they removed the covering from their heads to make a formal salutation.

The five brothers, grandsons of Emeric de Labourdilliere, being allied to the Gazeran family by the marriage of their father to *Marguerite*, caused their frequent visits to the castle, whereby they were well known to the game-keeper.

The unfortunate connection, however, was not the sole cause of the intercourse between the families: for, four out of the five brothers had openly declared themselves suitors for the hand of Regina Gazeran; and they had bound themselves, by a *solemn compact*, between each other, to abide willingly, and without envy, jealousy, or hatred, by the decision of the lady in her choice of either of them, whichever it might be.

The fifth of the sons of Etienne (the Major) had not promised anything in the matter.—He had not entered the lists with his brothers, having too just an opinion of himself to entertain the hope that such a competition could be successful; and yet, by him, would the conquest of Regina have been most highly prized, as it was inwardly most intensely coveted.

However attractive might be the charms of the niece of the old Lord of Gazeran to the four handsome and well-formed young men, they did not look upon the marriage in any other light than a mere matter of course, the connection being advantageous, and therefore desirable to the family, though very immaterial as to which of the individuals should be the medium to effect it.

Not so with Antoine, the dwarf, who, notwithstanding, was the favorite of the grand-



father. He, on the contrary, was consumed with the violence of his secret love for Regina; and whilst his brothers, regardless of him, entered into the compact to secure the prize, he cherished the wish he dared not hope to see realized, and experienced the miserable feeling arising from consciousness of personal deformity, and consequent inferiority, which in his breast engendered self-hatred and rancorous envy and malice towards all those who were open to love, with hopes of success; and he swore vengeance, sure and secret, on *any* favored rival.

For months, had the coquettish Regina, who delighted in the homage of all men, encouraged, by turns, each of the four brothers, without giving any decided preference to either.

During this period of uncertainty, Antoine suffered the pangs of jealousy from her capricious indecision. Unsuspected and unpitied, he endured the bitter feelings of hatred, mortification, and envy. He could not brook the idea of a favored one; he shuddered at the thought; yet, at the expiration of months of vacillation, when all the brothers seemed likely to be rejected, by the lady of his secret love, Antoine was dissatisfied. The slight to them he resolved to treasure up, to be revenged upon whoever should happen to be preferred to them.

The compact and the courtship here spoken of, it will be understood, had taken place before the visit, to Haut-Montel, of the brothers, whom we had just ushered into the presence of their unwillingly-acknowledged father.

The haughty and rebellious young men had come at the summons of the Major, but were ignorant of his motive in sending for them. They dared not refuse to attend, yet was their salutation disrespectful and scornful; and their manner plainly showed a pre-determination to make no concessions to their rejected parent.

Great was the astonishment of Pierre, the hidden witness, on hearing the Major address these young noblemen as their father, and offer to relinquish his claims to the property of the old Marquis (deceased) in their favor; to allow them to enter into possession of the Labourdilliere inheritance, as though he, the speaker, had in reality passed away from existence, as was generally supposed.

Etienne de Labourdilliere also expressed his willingness to retain his present incognito,

leaving to his sons their political opinions unquestioned and unfettered. To do all this he promised, in return for their simply granting him the satisfaction of passing the residue of life in the society of his sons. Also, to let the past be obliterated from recollection, and the future be spent in such amicable terms as became their relationship.

With gloomy brows, and stern, unmoved countenances, had the four young men listened to the advances so nobly made to them. The *dwarf*, however, had manifested a disrespectful irritation, which was checked several times by his elder brother. He now insolently and ironically put the query that the others hesitated to speak,—

'Are these your only demands for resigning your rights? Is this, then, all you have to say to us?'

'No; it is not all!' was the quiet reply.

'Ah! Ah!' exclaimed the sons, simultaneously, each hoping that some inadmissible proposition would give a color of justification to themselves for the refusal on which they were determined.

'Out of the fortune I propose giving up to you,' continued the kind old man, 'I wish you to set apart any sum you may see fit, as an allowance, in token of your favor and as an evidence of good will towards the individual for whom I would bespeak it. No matter how small the amount you may devote to this purpose, that is of little importance in my sight; it is the *principle* on which you act. My earnest desire is to secure for him your regard, your friendship.'

'Who is the person in question?' inquired William.

'Your brother?'

'How so? Who? What brother?' burst from them, in accents of astonishment.

'If he of whom I speak has not borne my name since the death of your mother, it was, my children, out of consideration to you; but if I have thus deprived him of the title of son, so much the more am I bound to secure him an honorable position; and, what is still better, and dearest to my heart, your united friendship. Truly, I assure you, he is worthy of it.'

Again Antoine was spokesman, rudely saying,—

'Does the Major believe that friendship or affection is to be commanded? and will he inform us who is the individual whom he

would force on our fraternal love?'

'You all know him, gentlemen. His name is—*Pierre Aubin, the game-keeper of Brasseuse!*'

A cry of joy, uncontrollable, escaped from the lips of the unseen listener. It reached the ears of Etienne de Labourdilliere, his, hitherto unknown, father; and the commotion which the announcement of that name had caused amongst the *aristocrat brothers* alone prevented their noticing the sound of wonder and delight.

## CHAPTER V

A FEW moments passed in a tumult of emotions, within the breasts of these actors in an unusual scene. Their feelings were agitated with base and unnatural passions, but they strove to regain outward composure.

The invisible occupant of the closet, bewildered, stood with one hand pressed on his throbbing temples to still the wild beating of his brain, and stifling the loud throbs of his affectionate heart, he mentally inquired, as if doubting his senses,—

'Can it be possible that I, *Pierre Aubin*, am indeed *his* son, and those hard-hearted gentlemen are my brothers?'

The idea now flashed across the game-keeper's memory, that the portrait he had just seen must be that of his mother, Euphrasine, in her early days; but hark! his father speaks.

Breathless the young man listens, and peers into the outer room.

Calmly Etienne de Labourdilliere thus resumed,—

'Gentlemen: Notwithstanding your first expression of disdain and aversion, I still hope I have not asked too much of you, and that you will gratify me by recognizing this young man—not as an equal, that would be too much to expect—I only wish you to remember that I am *his* father as well as *yours*, and therefore that you will receive him well when he comes to Valganest to see me.'

A short pause ensued, and the Major continued,—

'You are silent, my children; perhaps you do not fully comprehend my proposal. Yours is to be, by my proffered gift, the whole fortune of your grandfather. In return, I only demand the satisfaction of being surrounded by *all* my children.—*All my children!*' repeated he, emphatically.

The oldest of the sons shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, and said,—

'You forget, sir, that Valganest can only be the residence of its legitimate lords. It would be in the highest degree unseemly *there* to introduce the *illegitimate!*'

'Unless amongst the menials he took his place,' added the insolent Antoine.

Fortunately these insulting words did not reach the parent's ear; and the Major mildly continued,—

'But I do not require a public recognition of Pierre Aubin as your brother. Fear not that I should give him a right to my name if you desire it withheld from him. The young man is so noble-minded that I can engage for him that if you accept him *secretly*, in token of our reconciliation, he will reveal to no one the secret of his birth.'

'But does he already know this secret?' inquired Antoine.

'He does know it now,' replied the Major, casting a significant glance, furtively, towards the closet.

Silence reigned in the apartment for a few minutes, during which the aristocratic brothers consulted each others' countenances.

William having gleaned the opinion of each, without the medium of speech, advanced towards the old man, their sire; and with a respectful manner and resolute voice addressed him.

'Sir: the oath we took on the occasion of your visit to our late grand-father, and the respect due to his memory, make it our duty to declare that we cannot accept *any* part of your proposal.'

The Major turned pale, and bit his lips.

James, the twin-brother of William, then spoke,—

'You have offered pardon and oblivion.—We need no pardon; nor do our acts court oblivion: We have no cause to blush or seek forgiveness: for we never deserted our holy cause to join in foul rebellion.'

The agonized father clenched his fist spasmodically; and the third brother continued:

'Forgiveness is not for us. Our deeds were right and glorious; and, if whilst fighting against you and your traitorous party victory sided with the good cause, you can expect nothing but the respect due to a conquered enemy.'

The heart of Etienne de Labourdilliere, that brave old soldier, rose indignantly, and



tears of wounded affection dimmed his eyes, unheeding which, the fourth one cruelly added,—

'No—it cannot be! Pardon! Oblivion! All of us to live together! These things are impossible. If you offered us a mine of gold, or the wealth of the world, the answer would still be: *No!—never!* You cannot buy us! *We do not desert our colors!* To accept such a bargain, would be meanness; and *we* are not mean.'

In spite of the efforts of Etienne de La-bourdilliere to restrain himself in presence of his insulting sons, he mechanically raised his hand in a threatening manner, as the young man finished this aggravating speech.

The brothers instantly assumed a hostile attitude, and, with united voices, exclaimed:

'Beware, sir! We will repel violence.'

At the first movement of his aristocratic brethren, Pierre was about to rush from his concealment to the rescue; but at that instant the Major spoke:

'Young men, it is not your numbers which could induce me to calm my outraged feelings at such a trying moment as this, and to extend indulgence towards you. It is the feelings belonging to the title of father. Am I not, indeed, your father, since I can forgive your offences?'

To which feeling, appeal, Antoine brutally remarked:

'You will be none the less a stranger. As much so in fact as the plebian whose existence you have hitherto been ashamed to acknowledge, and yet now seek to force us to recognize.'

The Major, though deeply wounded and sorely grieved, did not reply to this additional insult. What was one more pang to his lacerated heart—one fresh outrage to be forgiven?

The five brothers, with formal bows and mock reverence, now quitted the presence of the Major, and departed for Haut-Montel.

The afflicted parent, no longer obliged to restrain his feelings, sank on a chair, covered his face with his hands, and murmured, in the accents of bitter and touching reproach,—

'Ah! Marguerite de Gazeran! and you my father! I pity you! A terrible reckoning must one day be required of you, for inspiring my sons with such sentiments towards me!'

As soon as his brothers had gone forth,

Pierre Aubin had left his hiding place, and when Etienne raised his eyes, they rested on the affectionate countenance of the game-keeper, who was standing, in respectful silence, beside the grief stricken, outraged, and forsaken man.

Stretching out his hand to Pierre, the Major kindly said:

'My son, I see in you one who is to console me for the sorrow which the others have caused me.'

Pierre clasped it energetically, pressed it to his lips, and exclaiming, '*Father! father!*' sank on his knees before him.

The Major raised the son of his loved Euphrosine, and bidding him sit beside him—as soon as they had regained composure to speak—thus addressed him:

'Had I foreseen this result, I should not have made you a witness of this scene. I expected some remonstrances, but I calculated on ultimate success. I had, it seems, too good an opinion of the pupils of my wife and the Marquis, my father.'

'I hope that you will not seek another interview, my dear sir. It is so distressing.'

'I will not promise that.'

'At least, I beseech you not again to solicit them for friendship towards me. Am I not well enough provided in possessing yours?'

'Yes, Pierre, you deserve alone to possess all my love; but shall I avow it? In spite of myself I feel affection for those who ungratefully spurn me from their hearts. Alas! we do not with impunity descend from a noble race, or cherish the pride of birth, without cost. Regard for the name one bears, will force one to overlook and forgive the injuries of those whom we would not have disgraced.'

'It is not for me, sir, to reproach you for this leaning towards those of your own blood,' replied Pierre. Do I not see in it a guaranty that you will be a kind father to me?'

'No doubt,' replied the Major, pressing his hand.

'No doubt, but listen to me. These five young men, who have just quitted my presence, have grievously offended me—as you yourself witnessed.'

'Yes, indeed, and it needed the promise I had made not to appear unbidden, to enable me to resist my inclination to come to your aid.'

'Because you did not interfere I thank

you most heartily, my son. I appreciate your forbearance. You saw how I restrained my just indignation. I am glad that you also were able to master yourself. I did not choose to force myself on them and compel them to accept me. Who knows but reflection may be a better counsellor than impulse. But, whatever comes of it, I exact from you (who, nevertheless, owe me nothing) that you—'

'Oh, sir,' interrupted Pierre, 'pardon me,—I owe you full obedience since you have called me son!'

'I exact, then,' said Etienne, with a smile of satisfaction, 'that you will never forget—under any provocation, *that they are your brothers*. This *they* will not understand—but should they even be steeped in crime—do thou not deny them a place in thy heart, though they may deny you before men. Pardon them as you ought to do. Love them if you can,—and in case of peril be ready to defend your father's sons. It is this way, above all, that I shall see that you are truly the son of my heart.'

'Father,' said Pierre, 'no circumstances shall ever cause me to attack them, and ever shall I be ready to defend them. This I promise faithfully to him who loved my mother.'

'Oh, my son, thou art the only one who has cause to complain of me, and yet thou art the only one who will consent to love me.'

'With all my heart, father,' said Pierre, 'for *you* would I shed my blood freely. For *you* would I go through fire and water, to save or to serve.'

'Add to that—and for my brothers,' solemnly and earnestly continued Etienne.

'And my brothers!' stammered the dutiful son.

Happy to have obtained this promise, the Major, after a moment's reflection, arose like a man who has taken some decisive resolution, and said to Pierre Aubin,—

'The behaviour of these gentlemen must influence mine. I wished, by making considerable sacrifices, to prove my desire to live in friendship and peace with them. They would not accept my offers—I withdrew them. That which, for some time past, I have hesitated to do—although prompted my heart ever since the death of my wife—I am now willing to do. They

have set me at liberty as regards them.'

'What is it?' plainly inquired the eager looks of Pierre.

'It relates to Euphrosine, your mother,' answered the Major, to the mute appeal.

'My mother? Oh, say on!'

'Of course *you* know *where* she is living!' said the father with bitter emphasis, for it was a reproach to his present feelings that he was ignorant of her place of residence.

'Certainly, I know that very well,' replied the young man.

'Do you then go to her, from me, and tell her I will, at last, do her justice. I will give her my name, and then I shall have a right to acknowledge you publicly as my legal son. Bring her without delay.'

'Is it possible? My mother, oh, my dear mother! What will be her joy, her surprise! I will set out at day-light, and I shall be with you in two days.'

'Not here. At your uncle, Decadi Roberts's, you will be informed, on your return with your mother, where to find me.'

'You are, then, about to leave Haut-Montel?'

'Yes, my son; but I have not spoken so much in so short a time for years, as I have done to-night, therefore am I really fatigued. Enough has been said for the present. You are welcome to remain here to-night if you choose, but to-morrow I suppose it is to Paris you will go; is it not so?'

'Yes, sir—but if you would allow me, I would rather return home to my uncle's house, for, in truth, I should like to take leave of my cousin before starting on this short journey.'

'Very natural, Pierre—be it so. But stay a minute, I must desire you particularly not to speak to *any one*, of the visit of my sons to me. Let what has passed be a secret between us. Also, I request that, until after your return, Decadi should be ignorant that Major Seignerolles and the Marquis de La-bourdilliere are one and the same person.'

Pierre Aubin gave the required promise, and thus they parted. With eager haste the young man regained his home. Decadi Robert, in expectation of a long and interesting relation, was sitting up, waiting, with unusual curiosity, for his intended son-in-law's return.

'I have less to tell you, uncle, than you have, probably, expected,' said Pierre, mind-

ful of his promise. 'No doubt you knew what I was wanted for since you were so anxious for me to go.'

'I suppose that you have, at last, been received at Haut-Montel as the son of its master,' replied the old man; 'but what did the Major say about my sister Euphrosine—your mother?'

'That he loves her still—that he will marry her immediately—that I am to go to Paris to-morrow to tell her so.'

'Ah, that is the best of the story. With this news I need not regret losing so many hours' rest. I shall sleep the better for this pleasing intelligence. At what hour do you set out, Pierre?'

'As soon as I have said adieu to Cecile.'

'Pshaw! you surely will not delay for that. I can say farewell for you; for *Mamselle Lili* is not such an early riser but that you might be three hours on your way before ever she will be awake. You can take my horse at day-light, and ride to Senlis in time to coach it at once on to Paris.'

Pierre would have remonstrated, but the old soldier had said the word, and the lover knew it was no use to oppose him.

'At all events I will waft a parting kiss through the key-hole of her chamber-door. Perhaps, in her dreams, she may receive it.'

'Ah! Well! If that will be any satisfaction to you, by all means do so, you foolish fellow—but be off as soon as you can.'

As Pierre approached the door for this truly lover-like leave-taking, it was softly opened, and the pretty Cecile, in captivating attire, presented her smiling face to receive the adieu of her betrothed.

'A pleasant journey to you, Pierre,' said she, then closed the door so quickly that, to her father, the scene was rapid as enchantment—and remarked, good-naturedly,—

'Ah, the gipsy. She has not been to bed at all, it seems.'

Full of joyful anticipations for the future, the game-keeper set out for Paris.

The Major dismissed his sole attendant, the old house-keeper, who was the mother of *Petit Chauvel*—and was busy all that day (on which Pierre was journeying to the metropolis) preparing to quit Haut-Montel. When evening came he set out to make one more experiment on the feelings of his sons.

It was supper-time at the castle of Valganest, and the five grandsons of the deceased Marquis were seated around a sumptuous table, when the bell of the great gate resounded through the halls. Bartholomew, the old servitor, already mentioned as so unscrupulously devoted to the family honor it was, who opened to the unusually late summons. He was so surprised at sight of the visitor that he hesitated, in confusion, whether to admit him or not.

Taking advantage of this perplexity, the Major brushed hastily past the porter, crossed the court called the *Court of honor*, rapidly ascended the stairs and entered the dining hall unannounced.

On beholding their father, the assembled children shuddered, and simultaneously arose—but not, alas! out of respect.

'For what purpose came you here, sir?' inquired Antoine.

'I come to dwell amicably with you, my sons,' calmly replied Etienne de Labourdilliere.

'Make room for me at this table where I have a right to sit, and be pleased to resume your places, gentlemen. I wish the family to be complete, and henceforth it will be so since I, its chief, am added to you all.'

To this the eldest son replied:—

'Take the place which belongs to you, sir, at this table—we cannot oppose you. Command at Valganest. It is your right. We shall respect your rights. But you cannot force us to live under the same roof with you. The day on which you enter here is the day on which we leave.'

The five brothers then threw their napkins on the table, took their hats, and silently walked out of the dining-hall.

The Major was not prepared for this sudden revolution; he was disturbed, agitated, and for some time knew not what to do.

We will now revert to the game-keeper.

When Pierre Aubin, on his return from his journey to Paris, learned from Mother Chauvel the departure of the Major from Haut-Montel, he supposed that it was at Valganest he should meet the Major, as no direction had been left with Decadi Robert.

To Valganest, therefore, Pierre went, and it happened that old Bartholomew was the person to whom he addressed himself, and the reply he received was,—

'I have heard of such a person, but can-

not tell you where he lives.'

At this moment Honore, who was crossing the court-yard, came up to Pierre and said,

'Who are you inquiring for, my good fellow?'

'I am seeking him who is no longer at Haut-Montel, and should, therefore, be here.'

'Here? Why, who is it?'

'The Major Seignerolles.'

'We do not know any such person. There is none such here,' replied Honore, who then, turning on his heel, rejoined his four brothers, and with them descended the steps of the castle.

Without further explanation the gate was closed on Pierre.

His hopes dashed to pieces, and a prey to the most dreadful suspicions, touching the mysterious disappearance of the Major, the young man returned to his mother to relate the ill success. She, too, at first feared that those who had so much interest in getting rid of him might have silenced his claims for ever.

Decadi Robert, who experienced none of these fears in connection with the young men of Valganest, not knowing who the Major really was, for both mother and son preserved that secret—yet was indefatigable in his researches to discover what had become of the strangely missing man—and he, too, dreaded murder.

Soon, however, these shocking doubts were set at rest, for an anonymous letter was handed to them, by the curate of Brasseuse, bearing the Paris post-mark, addressed to Decadi Robert, bidding him cease his investigations about his old comrade, as he (the Major) had withdrawn in secret, and wished his place of abode to remain undisclosed—that he renounced reluctantly a project that he had entertained for eight years, and which he had hoped was at this time to have been accomplished. The writer besought Pierre to remember all his promises, and concluded with the hope of one day seeing a re-union and happiness.

Although this communication did not bear any signature, they all believed it to be written by the Major, and they surmised that he had secluded himself from them to avoid the projected marriage with Euphrosine.

In a moment of anger towards his aristocratic and rebellious sons he promised to do

us justice,' said Pierre to his meek and gentle mother, 'but on cool reflection the pride of blood regained its dominion over him, and he was, I imagine, ashamed to avow his plebeian connections. Alas! that he had aroused hopes long dormant in you, my mother! How cruel to raise them in me who was so happy before this knowledge.'

'It is useless to repine, my son. No more need we seek to ascertain about the absent one. *He lives!*—That is enough for us to know. Sad, yet contented, I shall return to my peaceful dwelling, in Paris, and resume my calm and customary mode of life—and you, my beloved Pierre, will be happy with your sweet Cecile for a wife.'

No more, for the present, was heard of the Major. The old lady returned to Paris, and the young couple were married; but this event was preceded by the receipt of a threatening letter which Pierre Aubin found on his pillow. The contents left no doubt as to who was the author of it.

This ominous billet bade him beware whilst yet it was time, and defer his marriage with Cecile, until he was freed from other claims—or else to watch well over her safety. It concluded with these words of dire import.

'Yet, even so, what can thy vigilance avail thee, against certain revenge?'

Notwithstanding this warning, the loving, trusting pair were united in holy wedlock.

The alarming occurrence of the rifle-shot aimed at the fair young bride on the wedding-night, was kept secret until the evening of Pierre's disappearance, on the occasion of the christening-festival, as recorded in the opening chapters.

During the interval no new attempt had been made on the life of Cecile.

Regina had been in Italy with her uncle, but when news of the death of the old lord reached Pierre, he had engaged the *lad*, *Petit Chauvel*, to give him information of her return, that he might be on his guard against her machinations, which, he doubted not, would be directed against his conjugal happiness.

The signal agreed upon was the *screech-owl's* dismal cry.

No wonder will now be felt, that dread struck to the heart of Pierre Aubin when, for the first time, he heard the warning cry, the sound of evil omen—in the midst of the

joyousness of the merry party, met to celebrate the christening of the first-born of Cécile.

The question now will probably arise, Where, during this time, was Major Seigneulle? He was a prisoner in the castle of Valganest.

#### CHAPTER VI.

In the castle of Valganest the Major passed many months, in conformity with a compact he had made with his disdainful sons. Unwilling to resign the castle-home, their rank and fortune, by really carrying out the scornful resolve they had expressed on quitting the supper-table, they had suffered themselves to be induced to remain—provided that their father would agree to conceal himself, and not let it be known that he was alive and a resident beneath his own roof.

Not as a master or guest did Etienne de Labourdilliere take up his abode at Valganest, his lawful inheritance—but as a self-immured prisoner!

To these strange conditions the Major consented, in the hope of ultimately obtaining a portion of the affection of his sons. Fancying that his captivity was a laudable as well as voluntary sacrifice to them, he was satisfied with being thus tolerated. The only thing that the old man could not bear patiently was, being compelled to forego all intercourse with Pierre, Decadi, etc., at Brasseuse, and as latterly happened, being debarred all knowledge of their welfare.

This yearning towards his only affectionate child became more intense, and, after a time, almost unbearable, as from a lofty turret, which overlooked the surrounding country for miles, he witnessed, with pain and alarm, the frequent incendiary-fires which, at this period, devastated the land,—spreading terror, ruin, and destruction, far and near.

The flat-roofed turret, to which we have alluded, was the only promenade permitted the strange prisoner. It was ascended to by a spiral stair-case, at the foot of which was the apartment of Bartholomew, the old valet, who alone, of all the domestics, knew the Major to be the son of the Marquis, and that he was a captive in the castle of his ancestors.

This man was, then, a fitting agent for the five unnatural brothers. He was one

who might be depended on as unwilling to connive at the Major's escape, should he be weary of his solitude and long again to mix in the world—or simply sigh to regain freedom.

Now on this side, and then on the other, would the frequently occurring and appalling conflagrations arise. The merciless flames spared neither rich or poor, levelling all distinctions, as in turn the miserable hovel of the peasant, or the stately baronical hall, was marked by an unseen hand, for destruction.

Isolated and far apart as were most of these habitations, mysteriously doomed to be consumed without warning, and in the dead of the night—many of the conflagrations were attended with an awful loss of life, and the victims were born to their last resting place amid a large concourse of the panic-stricken inhabitants of the district, who quailed at the thought—'Who will be the next to suffer?'

As these melancholy funeral processions passed within sight, the lonely watcher on the tower would kneel down and pray that the inhabitants of the game-keeper of Brasseuse might be spared!

It became noted that the dread visitation which had, in more or less degree, affected all else, within many leagues, had but one total exception. This being the Castle of Valganest, whose occupants, the five brothers, were far from being in good odor with their neighbors—all manner of surmises and ill-natured remarks were, in consequence, freely circulated.

This rather, remarkable exemption was about to cease in an appalling manner—but, meanwhile, an incident of equally awful import claims our attention.

Late in the still night, as the Major was quietly pacing his lonely round, on the turret, his vigilant eye caught sight of the terror-boding smoke ascending high o'er the wood of Brasseuse. His alarm was intense; and thus he spoke his thoughts aloud.

'My worst fears are realized! His turn has, at length, come! Oh! Pierre, my son! Would that I could aid or save you! And ye ruthless ones—ye will give me no intelligence of his fate. Ye accord me not your love, and but rarely your society even, and for this have I relinquished him and all that man holds dear!'

Bitter must have been the reflections of that solitary being at the time of the supposed peril to Pierre Aubin.

It was, however, the neighboring houses and barns of *La Grange* farm which were then burning, though he knew it not; for that time the game-keeper's dwelling was safe—Yet it was not spared from motives of mercy, but in furtherance of a plot involving the destruction of Pierre's good name, he being missing—unaccountably to his neighbors,—though the reader is aware that he was the occupant of a dungeon, whither his abductors had conveyed him, from the scene of festivity which was interrupted by the treacherous screech-owl signal.

To return to the Major.—He could bear the torturing uncertainty no longer. At all hazards to himself he must inquire the fate of his son, Pierre. From his pocket-book he tears a leaf, writes a few lines on it, requesting the finder, whoever he may be,—if Pierre Aubin be *living*, to pass down the avenue in front of the castle, and cut a branch from a sapling on the *right hand side*—if *dead*, to break off one on the *left*.

This writing the anxious prisoner wrapped around two pieces of gold, and tying them in the corner of his handkerchief, he twirled this with the motion of a sling, and thus launched the missive in the air.

Away flew the cloth and its enclosure beyond the bounds of the imprisoning walls.

Alas, for Etienne de Labourdilliere, these articles were picked up, the next morning, by Bartholomew, who handed them to his young lords.

In a body these five men repaired to the turret, where the despised parent was on the look-out for some one to come along and make known whether anything fatal had happened to Pierre. They upbraided their prisoner for this infringement of his contract, feigning to believe he had some deeper motive than appeared, and was desirous of compromising them and freeing himself.

This the old man denied, and he besought them to give him the satisfaction of knowing the result of the last fire, and the fate of Pierre. This they, inhumanly, would not do, but left their father in an agony of suspense.

After this interview a consultation was

held between the brothers, as to what course they should pursue.

'Our common interest requires that this should not occur again,' said Francois, the fourth son. 'We have taken precautions enough, about this would-be-brother, of whom he is so anxious, to prevent his interfering with our proceedings.'

'The walls of Gazeran can alone give any information of him—if the walls of the castle of our beautiful relation, Regina, have ears and tongue. But we must remember, brothers, that we are not much liked in the country. There are not wanting a multitude of unfavorable reports about us, already. What, then, would have been said if that note had fallen into other hands?'

'Perhaps we are suspected of this already. Believe me, our first resolve is best.'

Francois, who thus spoke, was, from his superior, mental, and personal qualifications, the ruling head of the house of Labourdilliere.

'Undoubtedly, you are right!' boldly replied the dwarf, Antoine.

The other three murmured a hesitating consent to that which had previously been suggested, but it was with trepidation and lingering reluctance. To put an end to the irresolution that was manifest, Francois said in a decided tone,—

'Let it be done. I take it upon myself.'

'Be it so!' replied the rest.

The dwarf then dragged a large oaken chest, from a corner, into the middle of the room, examined it, measuring it significantly, and amongst them they carried it up stairs. Depositing the ominous load, where it was hidden by the bed-curtains, the brothers descended, leaving the door of the Major's room open behind them.

'Francois now resolutely said,—'Give me the poignard. You know it is I who am to strike the blow.'

The deadly weapon was handed to him, and Honore asked,—

'Will you venture alone?'

'Certainly!' replied Francois with a dark smile. 'He is old and unarmed. Why, Antoine could do it himself.' But I intend to execute the judgment myself.'

'What if he resist or cries for help?' timidly observed Honore.

'In that case—which I think by no means likely—a whistle will let you know I require

help, and you can, then, come to my assistance.

Having thus spoken, Francois rushed hastily up stairs. The Major had not come down from the turret at the moment when the intended parricide set his foot on the first step of the spiral stair-case.

'You will be too late—he is coming down,' exclaimed the dwarf.

'No, I shall not. I can reach the room before he will!' replied the wretch, and he disappeared in the darkness.

The brothers, below, listened intently to the steps of these two men approaching, from opposite quarters, the appointed place of the death which one was carrying to the other.

It was a moment of interest and excitement, fraught with crime!

'Francois has reached the room, and the other is not yet down. He will have time to conceal himself behind the arras,' said William.

Now the Major is at the door—he is opening it—he is in the room—he has locked the door—now comes the moment of conflict.

Honore could say no more; William and James trembled and turned pale.

One, only, of the brothers retained his ferocious spirit unmingled with pity or remorse. This was Antoine, the fiendish dwarf. He—fearing lest the others might relent, should they hear their father's voice entreating help—took down a hunting horn from the wall, and blew a blast so long, so loud, and fearful, that it sounded, under the dread excitement of the moment, like some unearthly demon-yell.

A pause in the horrid din, and a scuffle was heard overhead—then a shriek—and all was silent as the grave!

Presently a whistle was heard on the stairs. The twins arose, but could hardly stagger along. Antoine and the remaining brother were firm, and together the four mounted the stairs and entered the upper room. There they found Francois alone, bleeding and ghastly pale.

'It is over!' said he, pointing to the chest which stood in the corner. 'He is dead! He is in it!'

Not without horror could the guilty men look on the fatal chest. A long stream of blood stained the floor, and William, touch-

ing his brother's arm, inquired—'Are you not wounded?'

'Yes, in the struggle he turned the pognard on me—but it is only a trifling scratch. Nothing now is to be done—save to burn my clothes, and wash away the stains from the boards. All then is safe!'

'But what are we to do with that—that chest?' asked Honore, with averted gaze, pointing to it.

'Never mind, I will see to it,' replied Francois; 'I will dispose of that myself.'

From this fearful scene we must revert again to Regina. When, pressed by the brothers to select one of them as her future husband, she had told them that she would be the wife of no man until she had been avenged on Pierre Aubin, whom, she alleged, had insulted her with his base love.

This they readily undertook to do, and we have seen how they got him in their power, and conveyed him (as they thought) to a living tomb in the vaults of Gazeran castle. Glad were they to find it was the man whom they previously hated, that was to be the victim of this woman's revenge.

Besieged by suitors, and loving only Pierre, Regina, to be rid of importunity, agreed, ere long, to become the wife of Francois de Labourdilliere. The brothers being satisfied that the coveted property of Gazeran would thus come into the family, the three unsuccessful wooers withdrew their pretensions with a good grace, and renewed their vow—that their paternal feelings should remain undisturbed by this preference.

Antoine, alone, was free to act. He had not entered the lists as competitor for the lady's favor, therefore he took no part in the renewal of the brother's compact. Yet, he was resolved, if possible, to prevent the match, which, however, it will shortly appear, was fearfully obstructed.

It was a festival at Valganest, a grand entertainment given to celebrate the betrothal of Francois and Regina. All the aristocracy of the neighborhood was assembled and amongst the brilliant array—none were more beautiful and magnificent in looks and dress than Regina—none appeared happier than Francois.

If unpleasant memories, in regard to their recently murdered father, crossed the minds and clouded the brows of the other sons, in the midst of the mirth music and splendor

of the party, he, Francois, the most guilty, seemed unconcerned. His head was erect, a ready smile played on his lips, and his heart seemed at ease.

We will pass over the ball and supper without description, to narrate the startling event that shortly after occurred to disturb the scene of joyous festivity.

Suddenly arose the alarming cry of *fire!* High above the gay music of the band sounded the words—*fire! fire!* On the instant of alarm, as the guests hurried to the windows, was to be seen, the ancient pavilion, at the end of the path, glowing in a brilliant blaze—the flames already bursting through the roof.

'Calm yourselves, ladies and gentlemen, there is nothing to be feared! *Let it burn!*' said Antoine; 'It is only a miserable structure which the fire will save us the trouble of pulling down. It only wanted a bon-fire to complete the rejoicings, and the *incendiaries* have taken on themselves this addition to surprise us.'

The panic of the company ceased on this remark, the brothers inwardly applauded the presence of mind of the dwarf, and they also said—'*Let it burn!*'

The sight of the burning pavilion dispelled the gloom that oppressed some of the sons of the Major, and a weight was instantly removed from their guilty minds. They blessed the hand from whence the kindling spark proceeded—for within that blazing pile lay the *coffin-chest*, which now they thought would be effectually disposed of—But the alarm had spread amongst the servants and retainers of the guests. The commands of the lordly brothers, to let the building be consumed, had not reached their ears, and in a body they had gone to endeavor to put out the fire.

The great bell of the castle was loudly tolling, and in an incredibly short time people rushed from all quarters to the conflagration. In vain did the brothers call to the men, from the balconies, to stop and *let it burn.* The strange orders were unheard or unheeded.

Now, indeed, in their turn were the wicked men troubled and afraid. Their fear was worse than that which had, at first, been momentarily experienced by the company.

The haughty brothers interchanged whispered words, and then abruptly forsaking

their guests, hurried at full speed to the burning pavilion.

Those who had first arrived at the spot were busily engaged in throwing out the ancient relics which the building contained. The confusion incident to the occasion made it a difficult job to save the odd medley of articles here stored away; and, in truth, the old-fashioned lumber and family curiosities did not seem worth the risk, to life and limb, of the busy hard-working crowd.

The pavilion was totally enveloped in flames when the owners arrived, but they rushed into it as precipitately as if it contained something very precious which they were anxious to save. As they reached the interior, two stout foot-men were trying to force open the lid of a large chest, apparently too heavy for them to carry out, in order to get at the supposed valuable contents.

'*Leave it, I command you,*' cried William in a thundering tone, and he repulsed the men in so violent a manner, that, in surprise and terror they sprung back beyond the threshold.

'*Let that alone!*' simultaneously exclaimed James, Honore and Antoine, all seeming most violently agitated.

Francois was the last to reach the spot. He forced his way through the crowd, and placing himself before the chest, he pushed his brothers outwards, exclaiming vehemently,—

'For God's sake go out! Save yourselves! Be quick or you are lost!'

As he thus spoke a huge beam gave way, and with a fearful crash the wall came down, inwards, overwhelming the speaker (who, doubtless, had seen the danger) and burying him in the smouldering ruin.

The night was spent in removing the rubbish, and at daylight they found the mutilated and scorched remains of Francois de Labourdilliere close beside the chest which the fire had not consumed.

What a fearful fate for the betrothed of Regina, in the midst of rejoicings and mirth! What a dreadful warning did it not appear to the parricidal brothers. How much mystery attached to that fatal chest!

## CHAPTER VII.

The death of Francois at such a time, and



in such a manner, created a great sensation throughout the district, far and near. It put a stop to the murmured suspicions arising from the previous exemption of the family from sharing the calamity of the country—wrecked by the mysterious fires of ruthless incendiaries—and caused many to regret their hard thoughts and sarcastic words; for which they sought to atone by repairing to the Castle of Valganest to testify respect and condolence.

On the occasion of these frequent disasters, all distinctions of wealth or rank, etc., were for the time submerged; and whether cabin or castle had met its doom, sympathy was extended by the general community to the surviving sufferers; and in cases of loss of life the obsequies were attended by a large concourse of the inhabitants.

When the last offices were performed over the departed, the mass returned to the dwelling, which had been victimized; or, if the devastation had been complete, to the ruins,—where, under the canopy of Heaven, they would spend the rest of the day in drinking to the death of the murderous incendiaries.

It sometimes happened, though, that these barbarous carousals were interrupted by the locsin's sound, or the sudden blaze of a new conflagration.

The most favored of the victims, of the unknown band of depredators, suffered only in their possessions—their stocks of hay or corn, their barns or out-houses, being destroyed by the fiery scourge. But if these disasters were less fatal, they were numerous, and served to keep up the general and continued terror and alarm.

As the place of a murder is marked (in Roman catholic countries) by a cross, to perpetuate the remembrance of the deed, and suggest pious reflections and prayers, on the spot where it occurred—so was it resolved, that a monumental tomb to the unfortunate Francois should be erected over the place where he perished.

Accordingly the ruins of the pavilion were cleared away, and a new burial-vault constructed on its site, under the immediate supervision of the brothers.

During this time they took it by turns to watch (with the relay of priests) beside the coffined-remains of him whom they knew as the ill-fated parricide, who had been struck, as they believed, by the judgment of Heaven,

in presence of his victim, just as they dreaded exposure of the awful crime to which they, hardly less guilty than the deceased, had constructed, and actually connived at.

For two days had the body thus lain in well-guarded state; and the exemplary performance of this fraternal duty with the appearance of affliction and tender solicitude which the aristocrats displayed (though in reality Antoine was callous to all good feeling) contributed not a little to raise the ill-liked fraternity in public estimation.

It had not been credited that they were capable of real attachment even to each other.

The great entrance to Valganest was open to all comers: for any one was free, for the time, to enter there without ceremony. So it happened that no notice was taken of a certain person, who came for a very different purpose than to evince respect for the dead.

This person was evidently a stranger to the castle: for he had no little difficulty in making out the way to the chamber which he sought. However, he seemed at length to have found the right place, for he halted at a door, on which he knocked, in a very peculiar manner, three several times.

Antoine, the occupant of the room, had just been released from watch over the remains of his brother, and had disposed himself for sleep, when his acute ear detected the raps which were so timidly or cautiously made. He raised his head, rubbed his eyes, looked wildly around, and muttered,—

'It cannot be possible!'

The man who stood in the corridor, listening attentively for some sound within the room, having heard the slight noise made by Antoine, repeated not the rapping, but scratched four separate times (with a measured pause between each) on a panel of the door.

'It must be so! It is one of them!' exclaimed the dwarf, half aloud; and greatly annoyed, if not also, alarmed, he hastily quit the bed on which he had flung himself for a brief repose, and opened the door.

The stranger who met his view was a man of imposing height and fine proportions. He was dressed in the long blue surtout, with black collar, that denoted the half-pay officer of that period. A small piece of red-ribbon decorated a button-hole of his coat; he was booted, spurred, and travel-stained.

Antoine most probably expected to have seen some one else, for he appeared overcome with astonishment; and not until the new-comer had closed the door and seated himself, did he recover the power of speech. Then mastering his agitation, he hurriedly and imperatively put these questions to the unknown:—

'Who are you? Whence came you?—What do you want?'

With a waive of the hand, expressive of the necessity for compposure, the stranger whispered his interrogative reply,—

'Can we converse here safely?'

'Converse, say you? First have the goodness to tell me who you are, and from whom you come?' replied Antoine.

'I come on my own account. As to who I am, you shall presently be informed of that.'

Thus speaking, the strange intruder, opening a memorandum-book, took out of it a playing-card—it was the ace of spades—presenting it to Antoine, he inquired,—

'Do you know that, Mr. Mathien?'

This name, which we have used for the first time, to the unworthy sprig of a noble tree, did not appear to cause any surprise to the person thus addressed. He glanced at the card, and an expression of mistrust was legible on his ill-favored features.

As if to remove all doubt and suspicion, the handsome visitor held up the card between him and the light. Immediately it became plain that the figure on the card was perforated by pin-holes, at the angles, the rays of light penetrating through the minute orifices, rendering these marks visible.

'Now, then, perhaps Mr. Mathien can guess who I am!' coolly remarked the unwelcome guest.

'You are one sent to me to settle some old accounts. Tell me the figures and I will set them down,' cunningly replied the dwarf, thus pointing out the part for the stranger to act in case any one should disturb their interview.

'Very well; that will explain, without risk, that which ought not to be overheard by any listener at the door, if such should be there.'

Antoine then took paper and pens from a desk and wrote down figures at the other's dictation, until the whole side of a sheet was filled with these symbolical cyphers.

When the visitor had concluded, Antoine opened a large closet beyond the alcove where his bed stood. Within this closet appeared an immense chest, at sight of which the dwarf recoiled, frowned, and seemed disconcerted.

'Hum!' muttered he; 'William and James might have kept *this* in their own chamber where there is plenty of room, instead of having it brought here whilst I was below on guard.'

Despite his visible repugnance to enter the closet, it was necessary to do so in order to get rid of his visitor.

Not being tall enough to reach the uppermost shelf, otherwise, he stood on tip-toe, in order to get at that which he wanted, but by some slip he stumbled against the chest of horror!

As if terrified by the sudden contact, he sprang quickly backwards, turning deadly pale.

'On what can you have trodden? Was there a viper under your foot?' said the man of figures.

'No! nothing! It was only the cramp. It is all over now,' replied Antoine, forcing an apology for a laugh.

To avoid touching the hateful chest a second time, he took a chair, and, climbing up, found the bunch of keys he required. With one of these he opened a secret drawer in his secretary, where money and other valuables were stowed away, and taking out of this repository a couple of bank bills he silently presented them to the mysterious stranger, who received the money with a polite bow, and instantly departed, without exchanging another word.

Antoine then seated himself at the table, in no very pleasant mood, to look over the columns of figures, which it will be understood served as the medium of secret correspondence.

The purport of these cyphers may thus in brief be rendered:—

'Richard was arrested yesterday. He exacts a thousand francs as the price of his silence. I must have an equal sum for my services and to keep up the ardor and fidelity of our people. I will carry on the business from which Richard has been withdrawn.'

'You may object that you are not Mr. Mathien. It is of no consequence. I know and can testify as to who and what you are.'



You will perceive that I have made no mistake in addressing you. However, we must not be hard with each other. Let there be good faith amongst us all.

'For six months I have been of the number in your employ, and shall continue so, because Richard has confidence in you: and I believe him to be one not easy to be duped. Your interest absolutely requires you to give him the sum he demands; for his *secrecy to the death*, will be secured if the money is honorably paid—he is a man of his word.

'You do not know me personally, it is true; but this visit will testify to my ability, determination, and courage. I had but a slight clue to guide me; but I have succeeded. How I discovered you to be our Mr. Mathien matters not—we understand each other.

'As for myself I do not ask much at present; hereafter, I shall perhaps require more in requital for the talents I so faithfully devote to the hazardous undertakings; however, I give you my word—which is as good as Richard's—that I shall not be greedy or unreasonable.

'We must all live without consuming each other: it is sufficient that we ruin and burn the doomed ones. I shall expect orders as formerly; and I flatter myself they will be as satisfactorily executed.'

To the above was appended the query, 'Have you full confidence in the young shepherd—Petit Chauvel? I am of opinion that he is more knave than fool, and that he knows too much!'

The shepherd-boy may indeed know too much, said Antoine, musingly as he put away the seeming papers of accounts.

Except this visit which exposes one of the mysteries in the life of the dwarf, and shows him to be instrumental in the work of *incendiarism*, which by some mistake had extended to the castle, having however had the effect, as we have seen, of raising the reputation of its occupants and master, by destroying certain vague suspicions. Except this important revelation, nothing worth relating occurred until the evening after the body of Francois was laid with pomp and ceremony in the vault of the Mansoleum, partially constructed where the pavilion had been.

When the brothers found themselves alone, Antoine reproached the others for having

placed the chest in his closet, and he said:

'Either remove it, or one of you must change places with me, for in this room I will not sleep tonight if it remain here. I do not choose to sleep in the room with that vile chest.'

'Are you afraid of seeing a ghost?' sneeringly enquired Honore.

'Never you mind that, if your nerves are stronger than mine, show the fact by making the proposed change, that's all.'

Honore shook his head.

William then said.

'It was James and I who placed it there temporarily, to preserve it from the curiosity of those who saw us defend it from the servants, at the fire. I remarked that it excites their covetousness. Doubtless they thought it contained great treasure,—Oh! had they opened it how dreadful!'

A shudder passed through the frames of all.

A conversation then ensued, the result of which was the decision that the chest should be buried, with the least possible delay, in the most fitting place—that is to say, in the new mausoleum, beside the coffin of the Parricide.

At once, the whole of the party went to the recently constructed family-burying-place.

The workmen had left the tools about, for the monument was not completed, so that the brothers had no difficulty in opening the mouth of the tomb, the mortar being yet moist. Antoine remained on the spot, to guard against intruders, whilst the others returned to the apartment to bring away the object of their fears—the dreaded monitor of guilt.

As they reached the chamber door they heard the sound of a window being raised. Honore peered through the key-hole supposing that whoever was within would have a light. But though all inside shrouded in darkness, yet it was plain to be heard by the movements of the person, who had thus feloniously obtained an entrance, that it was some one perfectly familiar with the locality.

The astonished listeners could distinguish the opening of the closet, and then the noise of something heavy being dragged out into the floor of the room.

The brothers waited no longer but with a

united effort burst open the door, and by the light of the lantern with which they were furnished, they discovered *Petit Chauvel*, the shepherd-boy, bending over the chest, the blade of his knife already under the lid, and in the very act of endeavoring to force the lock.

William, the strongest of the brothers, rushed furiously forward and gave the unhappy boy, thus caught in the act, such a tremendous kick in the stomach, that it doubled him up and sent him rolling to the end of the room where he lay senseless.

The noise made by this forcible entrance roused the domestics whom the masters bade to seize hold of the thief and turn the miserable young vagabond out of doors.

It did not suit them to have the lad taken up for the offence, as that would draw attention to the chest and perhaps lead to investigation, so they said they thought the knave would be sufficiently punished by being turned adrift with the blow he had received.

Bartholomew took hold of the lad by the ear, to lead him out, but he was unable to stand on his feet; he staggered a few steps and fell down powerless. He was carried off and on examination it was discovered that a large blood-vessel had been burst—and within two hours, the spirit thus violently ejected had winged its way to immortal regions.

This violent and sudden death did not cause any uneasiness to the murderer, for it was plain that Petit Chauvel had entered the castle with felonious intent, therefore no scandal would arise from the unpremeditated circumstance of the fatal kick.

This accident had caused a delay and commotion in the castle, which obliged the brothers to postpone for some time until all should be quiet, the removal of the coffin-chest of Etienne to the tomb where the body of his son Francois had been disposed. However they returned to the mansoleum, as soon as the domestics had retired to their beds, to inform Antoine of what had occurred to interfere with their plan and cause their long absence.

When they got there they found the dwarf, stretched on the sod, in strong hysterics, his lips covered with foam and his eyes wildly fixed on an angle of the wall a few paces from him.

By degrees they brought him to his senses,

but still he turned his gaze, of horror and affright, to the same spot.

What had caused this terrible condition, what his strained eye-balls sought to encounter, or what he had seen or experienced thus to terrify and overcome him—he would render no explanation on the subject.

The mystery remains, at a future time, to be explained!

## CHAPTER VIII.

THE arrest of the man called *Richard*, the acting leader of the band of Incendiarists, (though it has appeared that Antoine de Labourdilliere was one of the invisible heads of the truly diabolical business,) did not put a stop to the awful calamity of the country, as the fiery visitation was popularly denominated.

We will, in this place, only hint that personages still more powerful and more exalted (in rank and crime) planned, instigated, and directed these dire calamities, and maintained the system at immense cost and trouble—though to what end and from what motives it is not yet expedient or material to explain.

Some description of the circumstances belongs necessarily to the interest of our story, and concern the development of the plot.

To continue then.

The frequency of these fires kept the whole country in a state of alarm and actual distress, reducing numbers to absolute want and paralysing all efforts at industry, or, in many cases, at precaution to repel attacks from unknown quarters and invisible foes—whilst some even dreaded to irritate the authors of these disasters by opposition which they thought might be the means of causing their names to be inscribed on the list of the *doomed ones*.

Oh how dreadful the state of such a community!

Sometimes in several different quarters of the horizon, simultaneously would arise the devastating flames.

So frequent and general became these conflagrations, that at last it was found necessary to organize the whole country, and in every hamlet and village a patrol was appointed to be kept up during the hours of darkness—whilst even during the day-time the strictest

vigilance was enjoined on the part of every one to seek out a clue to the criminal agents of the universal desolation, and to be ready at any minute's warning to turn out on a fresh alarm.

No where was there to be found a *volunteer guard* in a more efficient and military condition than at Brasseuse.

This is quite natural when we consider how well qualified was Decadi Robert for the station of head of this division of *night police*, to which post the public voice had called him, and which the authorities of the district had duly sanctioned.

The old soldier was in his element, and had ample employment in drilling his raw recruits, and watching over and directing the precautions against danger, and regulating the means by which he hoped, eventually, to surprise an enemy which had, so far, eluded his vigilance.

Sentinels and patrols had to be instructed in their unwonted duty, messengers despatched in every direction to gain information, convey orders, and keep up a communication with similar bodies of *rustic-troops* in adjacent parts, and most particularly must secrecy be attended to—for general distrust and suspicion were not the least unpleasant consequences of the state of things.

No one knew who might not be the one to betray the watch-word and the secret orders of the night!

The 'Grange' had been burned to the ground before the company, under the command of our friend Decadi Robert, had been formed. But, notwithstanding its proximity, the game-keeper's house had escaped. Here, therefore, it was that the old soldier of the consulate established his headquarters, and hither, during the day, came the inhabitants of the country, in detachments, to receive his orders for the ensuing night.

The house of Pierre Aubin, which, on the occasion of the baptism of Philiberte, was so resplendent with light, and so full of joyous sound, was silent and dismal as the grave. One little lamp alone sent its feeble rays through the small window. By the flickering blaze, of the embers expiring on the hearth, sat a half-clad care-worn looking female.

Her hair was in disorder, her face wan, her eyes haggard. No intelligence was in those pupils, and the words which she occa-

sionally chanted, in vain effort at a song, were vague and unconnected! By her side was a vacant cradle, yet the poor mother rocked it, with a sorry smile, as if the object of her affections were really there in tranquil sleep!

This idiotic woman was the once gay, intelligent and lovely Cecile! This sad wreck was the work of that fearful disappearance of her husband, Pierre Aubin, related in the first chapter of our tale.

Poor Cecile had not been in her senses since that memorable *fete*. Philiberte, the little babe, was sent to nurse, and during the day the mother of the unconscious innocent would pass her time with it at the nurse's cottage, but every evening at nightfall she would return home to see if Pierre had come back. When the unfortunate woman found him not, these same words were used:

'I must wait up for my dear Pierre!'

Nothing would induce her to go to bed.—She would place herself in a chair beside the vacant cradle—which it would seem she imagined to contain her darling girl—and sing to its fancied occupant, until, overcome with weariness, she dropt asleep.

The kind-hearted neighbors, who had loved her from her infancy, took it by turns to watch for this moment of oblivion of her sorrows, and seized the opportunity to carry her gently and place her quietly in her own bed, where every morning she would find herself, without question or surprise.

Sometime, however, it happened, in consequence of the confusion and dread that reigned around, that the poor harmless maniac was neglected by these generous women; but this, it must be said, was a rare thing.

This night she was thus unwatched; and, as we have said, it was indeed a dark and dreary night.

In the outer room was but one individual, the only sentinel at headquarters. It was our old acquaintance, Nicholas Godard, the plough-boy and jester, whom neither past experience or present danger had cured of his facetious pranks and love of joking.

The present occupation of Nicholas, however, seemed to be anything but of an agreeable or funny nature. A pitch-fork was in his hand, a heavy axe lay on the floor within his reach, a sword was strapped to his side, and a gun, which he seemed to be earnestly contemplating, rested against the wall.

Courage, as we have already seen, was not the distinguishing characteristic of this rustic, and this formidable equipment was not enough to put him at ease; yet, to wile away the time, keep up appearances, and re-assure himself, as best he might, Nicholas kept whistling the same tune over and over without cessation, save the interruption of a few tremendous yawns and grunts.

Suddenly this hero hears a rap at the door.

'Who—who—who—goes there?' with faltering voice he faintly murmured, and takes refuge beside the gun, presenting his pitch-fork.

'It is only I, you fool, you! It is Jacques Chanu!'

As soon as Nicholas knew who it was, he put on a bold look, brandished his fork and opened the door to the peasant.

'I believe I frightened you, not a little,' said Jacques.

'That is a good joke! frightened me, indeed! Say rather how well I acted the part of a brave soldier.'

'To admiration, truly!' was the mocking assent.

'Did I not speak out boldly and gruffly. I can assure you that I am no chicken-hearted fellow to be so easily scared. You must have heard my formidable challenge, 'Who goes there?'

'Certainly; having uncommonly sharp ears, I confess that I did hear those warlike words.'

'How strangely you talk, man! Why, I tell you if the whole band of the incendiaries were to come here and attack me, I would not give way one inch.'

'That is perfectly true, Nicholas: for of course your back would be resting against the wall. You would not retreat. You would hold your ground, or your wall would hold you. It is all the same.'

Nicholas, finding it impossible to remove the impression of cowardice which the newly-arrived evidently ascribed to him, was very much vexed—for Jacques lived at Fleurines, not at Brasseuse, and the tale would spread—but, without debating the point, changed the subject, by saying,—

'Has anything new occurred, that you have come here to-night?'

'No. I had a load to take to Brasseuse, so I thought I would just come over here and

see the crazy woman. What is she like? I have never seen a maniac.'

This was said with a cunning leer and an affectation of simplicity.

Nicholas Godard shrugged his shoulders, put on an air of superiority, and giving a sound slap on his visitor's back, replied,—

'You have never seen a crazy body, Chanu, and don't know what a madman is like? Why you are a regular know-nothing. A maniac-woman is only one who has lost her senses; nothing else is wanting, unless she has lost something besides. Your desire to gain knowledge I admire; good, now you are satisfied. My description of what it is will have to content you; if not, so much the worse. I shall not let you see her, because father Decadi Robert has ordered me not, and I must obey orders, especially as he is such a savage, violent man.'

'Plague take the old wretch, with his night-watches and patrols, which he has brought into fashion,' said Chanu, apparently satisfied with the lucid explanation given by Nicholas.

'I won't say but walking about all night with lanterns,' he continued, 'is a good thing to terrify the villains who are ruining the country with their fires; but since we are to have all this labor, I think the *Major* ought to pay the cost.'

'But,' rejoined Nicholas, 'we must all join in this soldier-work: for it is all of us who are being burned out of house and home, and cattle, and everything; and besides that, some people already, you know, have lost their lives, too.'

'Why, then, are not these villains arrested, and an end put to the business, so that we might sleep at peace?'

'You think that can be done all at once, you blockhead?'

'No, I know better than that. It is not to be done quickly. But I know the reason why no one has been caught,' said Jacques Chanu, with a knowing wink.

'Well, then, if you are so cute and know more than other folks, just tell me why it is so.'

'I am sure any one might guess; it is for a very good reason: Because it is not wanted that they should be caught. Therefore, they are allowed to escape, the cursed incendiaries.'

'If they have hitherto, it is because no one can lay hands on them when they are not to

be found, and nobody knows who they are—you must be a proper fool.'

'Not I, indeed,' replied the peasant of Fleurines. 'I am not the fool. You say no one knows them—how ignorant you must be! People may pretend not to see who is concerned in this horrid incendiarism; but they know well enough. I could name one, at any rate, if I chose to speak; but you have called me a fool: besides, that hard customer, Decadi, might ruin me if I spoke out.'

'Bah! impossible! You could do no such thing. Yet, I don't know; perhaps you are right,' said Nicholas Godard, passing at once from astonishment and positive denial to doubt and ready credulity.

'I tell you: it is just as I have stated.'

'Yes, indeed, it may be so,' thoughtfully replied Nicholas. 'They ought surely to have taken one or two of the incendiaries by this time, if they had really been in earnest. Can there be anything underhanded that we have not thought of, I wonder.'

'There is a name which, if I were not afraid of *somebody*, I could mention as one of the terrible gang.'

'Surely you are not afraid of me, your friend, are you?'

The look which Jacques Chanu turned and fixed on the speaker was eloquent in the extreme, and served for a sufficient reply to this question.

So Nicholas continued,—

'Well, my good fellow, do tell me whom you suspect.'

Lowering his voice, the countryman from Fleurines replied:

'My opinion is, that Pierre Aubin is one of them.'

'Gracious Heavens! *Pierre Aubin*? exclaimed Nicholas, in utter amazement.

'Yes, I repeat the name, *Pierre Aubin*, the game-keeper of the forest of Brasseuse! Assuredly he is one of them!'

'Impossible!'

'Not in the least. Where is he? Where did he go?'

'Faith, I can't say.'

'You foolishly believe, doubtless, that he was carried off by ghosts, hobgoblins, or something or another, on the day of the christening. Now I believe that he went away of his own accord to join the incendiaries. Is that impossible? I ask you, Nicholas, to say, like a sensible man, if you are

one, which belief is most reasonable?'

'Well, I believe that you have the best of it; but really, I never thought of it before.'

'Have not all these fires taken place since then?'

'Yes; that is true. Within the last two months.'

'During all of which time Pierre Aubin has been missing?'

'Yes.'

'How comes this?—and why has the name, *Pierre Aubin*, been heard at every fire, unless he was present, and some one calling to him?'

'Indeed I cannot say; but are you sure of that?'

'Yes, every body knows it but you.—Neither is that all. Perhaps you have not been informed, that twice have articles, well known to have belonged to him, been picked up near the burnt houses?'

'I knew it not.'

'That is it. Did not Campistron, my neighbor, find one of Pierre's best shoes—that he had on at the christening—last month? Yes he did. And father Decadi gave him a good round sum of money to say nothing about it to any one!—but he told me, for all that.—Also, it is only three days since Pierre's hat was found among the rubbish about the ruins of the house that was consumed near Fleurines.'

'So—so! It would seem that the old soldier is in league with the *devilish incendiaries*!' observed Nicholas, quite staggered with the new aspect of affairs; 'if not, why did he make a secret of his son-in-law's shoe been discovered? It must absolutely be the case.'

'I do not say positively,' rejoined Chanu; 'but I think that more improbable things have happened.'

'It is a pretty joke, certainly, that we should stay here to guard his house, while he is away conniving at those who are burning our own houses,' said Nicholas, indignantly.

'Yes, under pretence of taking care of a sick woman,' continued Chanu; and he added: 'I should like to know what for she should want to leave her home? I tell you, it is only a scheme of Decadi's to get rid of one brave man.'

'Perhaps so,' remarked Nicholas Godard, quite unobtrusively.

Two o'clock struck at this juncture, and

the voices of Decadi Robert and his detachment were heard approaching the house.

Chanu felt alarmed at his accusation of Cecile's father.

'Good-night! I must be off!' said he; 'but I advise you not to repeat what I have been saying to you, or mention my name in the matter, or I will break every bone in your body, as sure as there is a single bone in it.'

With this threat, the peasant disappeared. Nicholas Godard needed not this denunciation, to keep him silent, for intuitively he knew that direful consequences to himself would attend his opening his mouth, which he inwardly determined to keep closed, if possible, dreading, above all things, the anger of Decadi.

As the party reached the house, the clown appeared at the door, yawning and lazily stretching his tired limbs. His listless looks relieved the mind of the anxious parent, who thus expressed himself:

'The stupid animal would not have dared to await my return if anything had happened to my poor girl. Nicholas thinks too much of his ugly carcass, to put himself in my way when I am justly enraged. No—she must be safe.'

Thus the good old man reasoned aloud, and allayed his fears.

Nicholas made his military salute, more to show his skill and fine figure, than out of respect to his superior, who just at that very instant heard his name called in loud and piteous tones, at some little distance. He turned with undefined nervousness to see who at such an hour was calling to him.

It was Genevieve Morvan, the nurse of little Philiberte. Her hair was streaming in the wind, her arms spread out wildly, and her whole appearance indicating great distress.

For a moment, Decadi was thunderstruck; he trembled with dismay at the foreboding sensation he experienced.

As he advanced to meet the woman, he exclaimed,—

'Is your cottage on fire? Speak! Yet that cannot be, or else you would have brought the baby!'

Genevieve could not speak, she was so out of breath with the haste she had made.

'*Sacrebleu*! Say what is the matter? you will drive me mad. Is the child burned to death?'

'No—no! It is not fire, but robbery.'

'What! *you robbed*? What can they have stolen from you?'

'Alas, alas! Philiberte.'

'Stolen from your house, my darling? when?'

'To-night.'

'By whom?'

'I know not.'

'You must then have gone out and left the infant alone?'

'I only went for a few minutes to take a little drop of brandy to my good man who was on guard.'

'Wretch!' cried Decadi, transported with rage, and raising his hand involuntarily, as if to strike her, then recollecting himself and checking the violent and disgraceful demonstration—'We must inquire of all the neighbors.'

'I have done so,' sobbed the poor woman, 'already, and no one has seen or heard any thing of the dear babe.'

'Who could have any interest in stealing the child?'

'The fact is,' replied the agitated nurse, 'that not once only, but more than ten times *some one* has tried to carry off Philiberte.'

'Who?'

'Her mother.'

Hardly had the nurse uttered these words, when Decadi Robert bounded into the house, with a vigorous push burst open the inner door, and rushed into his daughter's room. Cecile had disappeared!

This flight of the wife of Pierre Aubin, completely overcame the equanimity of the old man.

Why had she fled from a house where the tenderest care was bestowed on her, if not to re-join her husband, taking her child with her?

In that case, she must, of course, know where to find him. How could she have been informed of the game-keeper's retreat? Would not her craziness have prevented the secret from being imparted to her?

What if this apparent madness were merely feigned? Why was the name of her husband heard at every fire?

These perplexing suggestions all rapidly occurred to the unhappy Decadi, involving him in a chaos of harrowing conjecture.

We must leave him for the present in this distressing perplexity, to relate incidents of

equal importance and interest which were in progress elsewhere, during the period that the events we have just been detailing, embraces, and concerning the characters and scenes with which the reader is partially acquainted.

#### CHAPTER IX.

It was midnight in the Castle of Gazeran, and the wayward, the beautiful Regina, was alone in her boudoir. Her eyes were apparently engaged with the book that lay open before her; but an attentive observer might have perceived that her thoughts were elsewhere. Her elbow lent on the velvet cushion, and her pale cheek was sustained by a most delicate, white hand.

What makes this imperious dame so pensive and irresolute?

Now she rises from her meditations, and, with quick, varying step, paces up and down the elegant apartment. Broken sentences escape from her blanched lips as now and then she pauses in her restless walk, and again and again, in tones of regret and dissatisfaction, the word, '*To-morrow!*' is repeated.

Yes, the die is cast! Regina has consented to take Honore for her husband, in lieu of Francois, so fearfully prevented from completing the union.

Why does she persist? The fortune must be retained in the family. She was personally indifferent to all the brothers; but as she had promised to be the bride of a Labourdilliere, she had already been called on to make a second choice. Again had the brothers sworn to accept the decision, and remain in amity, Antoine, as before, not being included in the compact.

The heartless ceremony is to take place on the morrow. Without display or pomp is it to be celebrated: for the recent death of the formerly chosen one would render such unseemly.

What, then, can it be that thus agitates Regina, and causes this burning impatience and feverish anxiety?

Alas! for the future spouse!—he has no share in the tender thoughts: they are all for another; and yet the fool-hardy, unprincipled couple are about to unite their destiny!—With what a prospect!

In the course of this deep meditation of the beautiful and unhappy mistress of this

lordly dwelling, Agatha, her discreet waiting-maid, entered unbidden. The lady frowned angrily on her, and the poor girl trembled.

'What brings you here, Agatha?' was Regina's interrogation. 'You know that when you have been dismissed, and I retired to my private boudoir, no one, on any pretence, is permitted to intrude on my privacy.'

'Yes, madam, I confess I am aware of it,' was the tremulous answer; 'but excuse me, I pray you; it was not my fault; I could not help it, I assure your ladyship.'

'How so?' interrupted Regina, raising herself to her full height, her attitude being majestic, haughty, and threatening.

'What mean you? Has any one dared presume to control my domestics? Who can have been so insolent? Name the person, and he shall be punished as he deserves to be.'

'Monsieur Honore de Labourdilliere, it was, madam, who insisted on my informing you that he is particularly desirous of seeing you.'

Agatha expected that this name would appease the anger of the lady; but she was mistaken.

Regina was visibly annoyed at the intelligence. Her brow darkened, and she muttered:

'He here at this time of night! It is improper. It is exacting too much. Could he not let me enjoy my last hours of freedom in peace? Is it not enough that to-morrow I shall make him my husband?'

After this soliloquy, as it were, Regina, with her accustomed presence of mind, snatched up one of the unsealed letters of her intended, that lay on the table, broke the seal, and spitefully pitching the others into a drawer, said to Agatha,—

'Show the gentlemen in; but mind you do not leave the room unless expressly told to do so by me. Perhaps,' she added aside, 'this will induce him to hurry his departure.'

A minute, and Agatha returned with the accepted lover.

Honore advanced with timid and hypocritical manner to meet his affianced cousin.

'Pardon my intrusion, at this late hour, dear Regina; I am ashamed of my importunity; but I particularly wished to speak to you to-night.'

'I am ready to listen,' replied the stately beauty, pointing, as she spoke, to a chair be-

side her own.

The indiscreet visitor, instead of accepting the offer made—we will confess solely out of politeness, and not from any desire to detain the unloved bridegroom—motioned his acknowledgment, but remained standing.

Regina was delighted: for she concluded thence, that the visit would be short; so smiling graciously, she remarked:

'I see I shall not have the pleasure of detaining you long at Gazeran to-night.'

'I say not that, dear cousin. I had the honor, on first presenting myself, to mention that I wished for a short interview with you.'

Agatha kept her post.

Honore looked at the abigail, and then at the mistress, expecting the dismissal of the former, which he had not, as yet, the power to command. It was quite plain that the waiting-maid was a restraint that he wished removed. But Agatha only laughed in her sleeve, without budging; and though Regina knew very well his meaning, she pretended not to perceive his drift, and looked as if she expected him to explain.

Honore sighed, took her delicate hand, and pressed it awkwardly to his lips.

Regina laughed outright; the gentleman was disconcerted.

'Well,' said he, 'what is there so amusing that you mock me thus?'

At the same time, Honore cast a glance at his figure, as reflected in the splendid glass, to see if anything, in his well-ordered apparel, was unsuitable or amiss; or if there was anything ridiculous about his appearance.

The examination was satisfactory to his vanity: for he was a noble-looking man; but he caught the reflection of the impertinent smile of Agatha. Ha! thought he, you shall walk pretty soon after I shall have become master at Gazeran!

Honore had retained the pretty little hand of Regina during this short interval. She drew it from his amorous grasp, saying, playfully,—'Truly, if you have nothing more pressing to say, and only such flattering little gallantries to demonstrate, it would be as well, methinks, to postpone them till to-morrow—so now I will wish you good night.'

There was no mistaking the lady's wish to terminate the visit, nevertheless the cavalier replied:—

'Pardon me, my fair and dear cousin, but

engaged as we are, I thought I might intrude this evening, to ask leave to introduce my companions—my three brothers,—who have accompanied me to your castle.'

Regina looked surprised, and coolly responded.

'I am very sorry that they should have taken this trouble, but at this hour it is out of the question for me to receive them.'

'By Jove, Madam, I am fully sensible of my importunity,' persisted Honore, 'but I am bound to tell you that we cannot return without having held a conference on a really important subject which has occasioned this inopportune visit.'

'Why cannot your business—since business it seems has brought you hither—be put off until to-morrow?'

'To-morrow will be too joyous an occasion to deal with any thing of so serious, so painful a nature, a matter, in fact, which it is necessary should precede the happy ceremony of our nuptials.'

At this grave speech Regina's countenance became clouded, a vague uneasiness pervaded her mind, though she could not, as yet, penetrate the motive of this visit, or the meaning of these ominous words. Still, as she spoke not, the intruder continued,—

'You see, therefore, that whilst I regret disturbing you, I cannot delay the interview. I solicit for my brothers and myself—but I promise to limit it to that only about which it is strictly essential to come to an understanding—and to that we doubtless shall arrive.'

The conclusion of this sentence was emphasized in a manner, and spoken with a look which denoted some hidden meaning. Regina regarded the speaker with a fixed, piercing look; but the prudent Honore had resumed his ordinarily smiling and placid expression of countenance—so that the object of the brothers, in this unlooked for visit, was still unsurmised, and she said,—

'As your business is so pressing and important, why did you not say so sooner, and I would not have kept my (so soon to be) brothers-in-law so long in waiting. Agatha, admit the gentlemen, and then leave us.'

The silence which ensued was embarrassing, and a sinister presentiment oppressed the imagination of the bride at this mysterious midnight conference. Presently steps were heard, and the visitor exclaimed, 'Ah,



here they come!"

I shall soon know, thought the anxious lady; and with a forced smile she addressed the brothers as they entered:—

"Will you explain, gentlemen, what has procured me this honor?"

They looked surprised, for they had taken it for granted that he whom it most concerned would have explained the purport of their visit. *They were there not to speak, but to act.*

Honore was ashamed, yet finding himself called upon to say something in explanation, he made an effort—but his natural timidity prevented his utterance, and with an appealing look to his brothers to come to his aid, he remained silent.

"Do you know," said Regina, in tones which she meant to be playful, but which betrayed her nervous excitement (caused by the terrible alarm which she really felt)—"Do you know, my good sirs, that so much hesitation and mystery are very alarming? The affair you come about must be very unpleasant to speak of—as Honore dares not utter it! If *you*, who are *men*, have not courage to speak—I begin to fear that *I*, being but a *mere woman*, shall not have the nerve to listen."

James, who was a blunt-spoken man—a man of middle size, with a narrow forehead, small eyes, his features rendered harsh by deep marks of small-pox, besides having his left cheek scarred by a sabre-cut—took upon himself to address the lady of Gazeran,—

"Why, you see, cousin, it relates to a very plain matter, a matter of course, and one which Honore ought to have mentioned to you, himself, since it is he whom you are about to marry, and, consequently, whom it most concerns. He has scruples, or is afraid to speak, he is bashful—though so near the wedding this delicacy is folly. There ought to be an end to it, and I will be plain and candid. I am a free-spoken man."

"Can any one overhear us?" inquired Honore, looking uneasily around.

"No, it is impossible—continue, I beseech you!" said Regina with feverish motion, and addressing James, who accordingly proceeded, though in a somewhat lower tone.

"We have come to speak about the man

who is here."

Stunned by this announcement, and speaking as if she had not rightly understood, Regina ejaculated—

"What did you say?"

"The prisoner whom you have had here for two months, we mean," said William.

"Well, what of him?" gasped the lady, supporting herself with difficulty on the back of a chair.

Antoine, the shrewd dwarf, who had stood aloof, in a corner, noticed her troubled manner, and muttered very low—

"It is as I guessed."

Honore now spoke to his betrothed in his softest tones,—

"Well, my beautiful bride, this man has been a prisoner long enough; he cannot remain forever, where we left him!"

"No doubt he is weary of confinement," observed the dwarf with a cruel sneer.

"In short, I have said it, my lady of Gazeran—there must be an end made to him. We must finish him," brutally blurted out the former speaker, James.

"Finish him! What do you mean, gentlemen?" said Regina, with such visible anxiety that it could not escape the vigilant notice of Antoine.

"On my soul, I should think there could be no mistaking the meaning of these words, no two ways about it!" drily remarked William.

"Yes!" continued James, "the existence of this man is an insult to you, Madam. To us it is an annoyance, and we have come to remove the cause of embarrassment.—*He must die.*"

Regina shuddered, and exclaimed,—

"*Die! It is murder!*"

"Listen to me, dearest," said Honore, persuasively modulating his accents—"You need not be frightened, my love; you are not called upon to take any part in that which has to be, or even to know any thing about what takes place. This man, you have informed us, has dared to insult you with his love, to persecute you with his scandalous passion. Your courage alone preserved you from being dishonored. This man deserves to be punished. This man must not live. I, who to-morrow shall have the felicity of being your husband—I can not pardon this man, whose existence would be a continued blasting reproach to me."

"Then you have resolved to put him to death?" asked Regina, looking from one to another of the brothers, who remained unmoved.

James,—not knowing what to make of the strange expression of her features, which Antoine readily comprehended,—brusquely replied,—"Of course, Madam, you will not wish him to be taken hence, eh?"

"No, I would have him remain where you, yourselves, my avengers, placed him; but I would have him left alive."

"A woman's plan!" objected William, shrugging his shoulders. "Revenge is sweeter for being prolonged—but you must be content with having enjoyed that pleasure for the last two months. It is not proper, under the circumstances, to continue it longer. Once again, I say, there must be an end to it."

"It is plain," added the dwarf, in his little shrill, harsh voice, "that each hour of this man's life is dangerous to us."

"Lower, brother! Speak lower!" said the timid Honore, fearful that the terrible conversation might, in part, be heard from without. "Of course it is all settled, and the lady of Gazeran will give us the key of the dungeon. The game-keeper, I suppose, is still in the same place?"

At this question a deep blush arose to the very forehead of the lady, though none of them attributed it to the true cause.

"All that we want is this key—the rest follows, of course. We should not have had to tease you with the unpleasant subject, had you left it with us as we desired. The thing would have been done by now, and you would have known nothing about it," remarked William with perfect sang-froid!

Regina shuddered with horror as she abstractedly regarded the vile wretches who spoke, and Honore nervously added—

"The night is dark, the wind blows a hurricane. Every body in the castle will soon be asleep, so we need fear no interruption in this indispensable execution. Besides, the dungeon is in the other wing of the castle, under the grand saloon which is unoccupied."

"Certainly," said Antoine, "the old dungeons are situated on the other side. Below this, Madam, I suppose there are none?"

"None!" falsely affirmed Regina—but her voice was unsteady, and a deadly paleness

came over her.

"Then every thing is favorable," replied Honore.

"Antoine has beneath his cloak all that is needed!" bluntly remarked James.

"Yes; truly," was the dwarf's answer.

"Give us the key, then, sister," said William, "and then adieu until to-morrow!"

During these heartless speeches Regina had stood in silence, with her face averted. Raising her head from her hands she now said, with affected composure,—

"You are right! It must be ended! Pardon my hesitation, I was unprepared for this terrible conclusion; but I see, now, that there is no other way for it to end."

Honore—who had been rather alarmed at the concern and unwillingness which his affianced had manifested—now breathed more freely.

"*Parbleu!*" said William, "I knew our fair cousin would prove reasonable, at last."

"Yes, gentlemen," continued Regina, "I comprehend that prudence, regard for my reputation, and proper consideration for your own safety, require the sacrifice of his life, but—and now she addressed Honore in particular—"but I am superstitious, I am but a woman! I tremble at the thoughts of a murder being committed on the eve of my wedding. It would surely bring ill-luck on our union."

"Nevertheless, he must die!" said James.

"I grant it, but not now—afterwards! You have waited two months—wait one day longer."

"Only one day do you ask?" inquired Antoine.

All eyes were turned on Honore as the one most interested in the decision. He looked irresolute.

Regina, seeing that with him rested the fate of Pierre Aubin, now, for the first time, took the hand of her betrothed in her own, and speaking with bewitching fondness, she said,—

"My dear Honore, to-morrow you will be master here. To-morrow *you will* become *sovereign law!* Let not the last act of my supreme power, in Gazeran, be the death-warrant of a wretched man, a prisoner! Let me not associate thoughts of death with nuptial preparations!"

Antoine, who had watched the character with lynx eyes and sardonic keenness, now



tered to himself—I am sure of it now—she loves the cursed game-keeper of Brasseuse.

Honore, melted by the endearing tones and soft entreaties of the beautiful enchantress, was unable to resist her. Laying his hand gallantly on his heart, and bowing most politely, he replied, —

‘Regina, my love, since you wish it, we will wait. I cannot refuse you anything.’

‘We will wait *until to-morrow*!’ interposed Antoine, desirous of fixing a term for the respite.

‘*Until to-morrow*!’ was echoed by the others.

‘*Until to-morrow, adieu, gentlemen,*’ said Regina, dismissing them.

As the brothers were successively passing out, Honore, who lingered behind, took the fair one’s hand, which this time was not withdrawn from his impassioned grasp. She returned the pressure, and with a tremulousness that well might pass on him for the emotion of love.

‘Thanks, my beloved, and now good night.’

The door closed, and Regina sank exhausted on the sofa.

## CHAPTER X.

SILENCE reigns within and without the castle of Gazeran. No sounds denote the presence of waking mortal within the spacious walls. Its disconsolate mistress raises herself from her recumbent posture, shakes off the despairing melancholy in which she had been plunged since the departure of her visitors, and prepares to put in execution some project that apparently has revived courage or hope.

Leaving the apartment in which the momentous conversation, with the sanguinary brothers, had taken place—Regina went on tip-toe into an inner room, and taking a small dark lantern from out of a box—she lights it, throws a soft warm shawl over her beautifully moulded shoulders of resplendent polish and charming whiteness—and thus prepared to encounter cold, damp and darkness, she descends a private staircase, and threads her noiseless way through many dreary vaults and dismal passages, until, by a circuitous route, she reaches a cell so skilfully constructed that it needed a perfect knowledge of the location to discover it, the entrance was so artfully concealed in the massive

masonry of a circular corridor.

Arrived at this spot, Regina had to press her hand on her heart to still its violent palpitation. Having collected her ideas and overcome her agitation, she slowly turned a key in the lock and opened the secret door.

Before following this wonderful creature into the *new* subterranean abode, where a strange and terrible design is leading her, we may spare a few words in relation to the feudal mansions of those days.

Previous to the revolution,—that is to say the *great and terrible revolution*, in France—almost every castle had a secret hiding-place, unknown to all save the head of the family, a secret refuge during perilous times, not even to be revealed to the members of the household when the storm was over and peril past—for fear of endangering the security of the asylum in case of future need.

Gazeran, of course, had its place of refuge, and this, not long before, had been put in requisition to shelter and conceal the Abbe de Labourdilliere, and also its late master, during the days of terror and bloody persecution. But it was not until her uncle was at the point of death, in Italy—that Regina was informed of this secret vault—and then not because the dying man was apprehensive of a recurrence of those turbulent and dangerous times—but because he had there deposited large sums of money and some very valuable jewels, which he desired her to possess.

This secret spot it was which Regina was now about to enter alone and in the solemn hours of night. It was not in the wing of the castle, spoken of as the place where Pierre Aubin had been immured by the brothers, but deep down below the apartment in which the conference had been held.

The treasures had been removed to some other place of safe-keeping—it was no longer a desired refuge, an ark of hope and security—it was the prison of the game-keeper of Brasseuse!

Warned by instinct that Pierre’s life would be in danger if left at the mercy of those who had placed him in her power, although she was not aware of their relationship or their personal enmity to him, she could not rest until she had removed him to this place, the existence of which was known only to herself.

Strange are the contradictions of passion. How inexplicable are the conflicting feelings of a woman’s heart!

Although Regina kept Pierre Aubin an unwilling captive, a sufferer, in misery, and in her power, near her, literally beneath her feet, because she hoped, in time, to vanquish his coldness and disdain—yet she repulsed with horror the thought of a termination to the sorrows of her prisoner, by a sudden and violent death.

In the delirium of her mad passion for him she would have been puzzled to pronounce, whether she would rather that Pierre Aubin were dead or at liberty, they seemed to her almost alike terrible dooms.

Sometime previous to the night in question—when the brothers had demanded the immediate destruction of the game-keeper—Regina had resolved to devise some stratagem by which to induce Pierre to follow her voluntarily from where he then was, at the opposite extremity of the under-ground passages, to his present place of confinement.

It was easy to determine that no time must be lost in placing him beyond the reach of his captors, and her supposed avengers—but how to get him there without aid, and, being unshackled, without risk to herself, taxed her imagination and ingenuity to the utmost.

Many a plan, which at first seemed feasible, on reflection she found impossible to realise. But bent on the thing—with the indomitable will of a woman—she gave her brains no respite till she hit upon an expedient so simple that she wondered at not having thought of it sooner.

Imagine the poor prisoner’s astonishment when, one night, he saw the proud and beautiful Regina de Gazeran descend into his gloomy vault!

Instead of taunting him, as he expected, the fair, though vile temptress entreated his forgiveness for all that he had endured, which she said she had shared with him, for in all his sufferings her loving woman’s heart had participated. Regret, repentance, sympathy, she expressed to her victim in plausible and persuasive terms, and with a sweet and touching voice. She ended her protestations by offering to prove the truth of them by setting him free! *By restoring him at once to light and liberty!*

At intelligence so unlooked for Pierre

was amazed and almost stupified, yet he gazed on the lovely vision with incredulity, then pressing his temples with both his hands, he exclaimed wildly, —

‘Is it possible? I must be dreaming! I cannot rightly have understood!’

‘Indeed, Pierre, you have understood!’

‘What? Liberty at *your hands*, my lady of Gazeran! From *you*, the author of all my misery? Oh, I cannot believe you!’

‘Behold the proof of my sincerity!’

With these words the lady unloosed his fetters.

Pierre no longer doubted her good intentions, and, beside himself, with surprise and joy, he exclaimed in rapturous delight, —

‘Oh, gracious heaven be praised! I shall then see my dear wife and the sweet Philiberte once more!’

Such were his first thoughts and words. How sadly the allusion to these fond ones sounded to the ears of the infatuated Regina! But she spoke not her feelings though they appeared. Pierre, therefore, began to regret causing sorrow to his deliverer, for he now thought she was not a voluntary accomplice with those who had ensnared him. He knew not even that he was at Gazeran Castle, it was quite as probable he might be in Valganest.

‘Follow me,’ said Regina after an instant’s pause. Slowly only could he move his limbs, crippled by the compression of the galling fetters, but he obeyed his fair guide who, with a lantern in her hand, her neck stretched out and appearing to be listening anxiously at each turn in the damp dismal passages—took the lead, trembling in reality for the issue of her venturesome experiment.

Pierre Aubin, seeing the lady thus watchful and anxious, might well be deceived. His feelings became softened, his hatred towards his persecutress rapidly diminished as he advanced, under her guidance, towards liberation.

It appeared to him that Regina could not have been concerned in this last outrage, which had torn him from his family, and that his aristocratic brothers, alone, had been the cause of his imprisonment in the horrid dungeon from which he had just emerged.

Suddenly, when they had reached the steps of the stone stair-case that led to the secret prison-asylum, Regina uttered a faint cry of terror, and drew back as if alarmed.

'We are lost! Some one is coming!' she stammered.

'How dreadful!' said the really frightened Pierre. Then after listening a moment with breathless eagerness, he added,—

'No, it is only the wind! I hear no one!'

'I tell you some one is coming. Alas, they must have discovered our flight!'

'Who?'

'Those who carried you off.'

'It was not by your orders, then, Madam?'

'I was obliged to permit it, but it was not my wish. I am at their castle.'

'At Valganest?'

'Yes, at Valganest,' she boldly affirmed.

'How came you here, yourself, Madam?'

Instead of replying, Regina pretended a fresh alarm.

'They are coming, I am sure. Fly that way, until the danger is past. It is your only chance.'

As the artful woman said this she pointed in the direction she wished him to take, and Pierre, misled by her well-acted terror, did as he was desired.

'Go on,' said she, 'I will wait a moment to listen whether they have hit upon our track.'

Soon she was flying after him. Agony was in her voice, as, on reaching him she exclaimed,—

'Fly quicker, they are at hand. I would have saved you! They will not spare me now! It is over with us both!'

There was such an appearance of sincerity in the delivery of this speech, and the voices and footsteps of the two fugitives reverberated with so confused and echoing a sound, that it was not hard to imagine oneself pursued.

Guided by the light of the lantern, Pierre ran on at hazard, until passing through the entrance of the *mysterious retreat*, he met with an obstacle—a wall.

That instant the door, through which he had unsuspectingly passed, was shut and double-locked!

Regina was now sure of having her prey within her power, and clambering up the rough stone wall, with marvellous agility she reached the iron wicket, holding on, by which she said to her prisoner:—

'Oh, Pierre Aubin, should I not have

been mad to have set you free, when you thought me kind enough to do so, since your first thoughts and words were of another? Truly should I have been foolish to permit you to learn from other lips than mine—that you are not at Valganest, but at Gazeran.'

Then to give her conduct the color of a recent change of intention, she continued,—

'Happily your ingratitude opened my eyes, in time, to the imprudence which I was about to commit. Now, and forever are you in my power, obdurate man!'

Confounded by this bold deception, and fallen from such bright hopes to the depth of despair, the wretched man was, at first, unable to move or speak. He was overwhelmed by this apparent refinement on cruelty—raising hopes purposely to disappoint them, and that with no visible motive—for Regina withheld the fact that this change of prison would, at least, secure him from the attempts of others, on his life.

As soon as the unfortunate Pierre recovered from the first shock, he used his now unmanacled limbs in violent efforts to burst the door—but it resisted all his power. Furious at his impotence to escape, he vociferated a torrent of invectives on his tormenter and betrayer.

To which the only reply she vouchsafed was—

'Pierre, you may one day learn that I spoke but the truth, in saying that *I came to save you!*'

Regina then withdrew, the captive watching her retiring figure (through the key-hole) until the closing of a second door, which was at the end of the corridor, excluded him from the rest of his species.

We have thus seen how the game-keeper had exchanged one dungeon for another, where he had languished ever since, seeing the face of no living creature, not even that of his beautiful jailor, who attended daily, transmitting his food through the iron wicket, as she dared not open the door, and for a month had he ever, on these occasions, maintained a sullen silence.

It was to this *asylum*, and to visit the doomed prisoner, for the last time, that Regina adventured on the *eve of her bridal*.

This determined woman had settled in her own mind, how to act according to whichever alternative the captive might choose to adopt. She had closed all the

doors behind her, as usual, except the last, that already spoken of at the end of the corridor. On this occasion her agitation was not counterfeit—even, *she trembled*, at the possibility that Pierre might refuse her offer, knowing the fatal consequence—his intended *immediate destruction*. She felt that she had need of all her indomitable spirit, to sustain her in this trying hour.

No sound could the agitated woman detect by placing her ear to the door of his cell! Silence reigned as in the grave!

'Pierre! Pierre!' she cried, in her sweetest and most impassioned accents.

No answer was returned.

Regina was alarmed at the complete absence of all movement or sound within. Clambering up to the wicket, by help of the irregularity of the damp stones of which the massive wall was built, she directed the rays of the lantern, so as to get a view of the interior before opening the door.

The prisoner was quietly seated on the miserable bed in the corner of his cell. Looking up, he cast a glance of disdain at Regina, who exclaimed,—

'Pierre, oh my dear Pierre, why do you preserve so long a silence—silence to me so painful! Still mute! But you cannot help hearing me. This even is a consolation to me. Besides, *I see you*, and I blush not to avow that my happiness depends on this satisfaction.'

Still no reply, and Regina continued,—

'I would much rather hear your angry reproaches, than endure this maddening silence. I suffer as well as you. Indeed you may believe me! Your fate is bad enough, but mine is infinitely worse. I know you have lost confidence in my professions—because you believe I have already once betrayed you. But whether you believe me or not, I assure you, with sacred truth, that to this forced treachery *you owe your life*—for your abductors would have murdered you. But for me you would not, at this instant, be alive! I only deceived in order to save you.'

Regina expected that this declaration would have produced some effect in her favor, and to observe, if possible, what sort of feeling her touching address had produced, she peered intently through the grated aperture.

Pierre merely shrugged his shoulders, and

turned away his head contemptuously.

'Oh, but this is dreadful! He will not listen to me! He does not believe me! How shall I gain credit for my assertions! Pierre, *I swear*, by every thing that is sacred in Heaven or upon earth, *that but for my protection*, which you despise—*this very night you would have been murdered*.'

'No, not so!' replied he. 'To do that they must have caught me napping,—and this night I could not sleep! There is no sleep for me!'

Without noticing the ironical tone of these words, and their ambiguous sense, Regina, too happy to think of aught else, cried out, joyfully,—

'Thank goodness I hear you speak once more! No, Pierre, they cannot kill you, for I will not have it so. I will guard your life, for it is more precious to me than my own existence. You are my property—my treasure—and to none but to me shall you belong. Who, in Gazeran, can find you here? No living soul but myself is acquainted with the entrance to the passage which leads to this retreat which none suspect. It was for this cause that I brought you hither.'

'I tell you but the truth, Pierre, when I say, that to-night, as *they pronounced your death-warrant*, a shudder passed over me, and I trembled from head to foot. I felt more horror than had all of their daggers been pointed at my own heart at that very time.'

'I owe you thanks!' replied the game-keeper, with bitter disdain in his accents. 'I understand your heart, or ought to do so by this time, I should think! Is it not because you desire to monopolize the privilege of tormenting and injuring me, yourself, kind Madam?'

'No. I would that you should live for me—as I would willingly live solely for you.'

It now became necessary for Regina to descend from her uncomfortable position, for she held on to the iron bars until her hands were blistered, and her feet were sore and cramped by being wedged in the interstices of the stone-wall. She could no longer see the prisoner, but she entreated him to give heed to her words—for *much*, she said, it concerned them both.

Nine days ago—Heaven punished one of

your enemies, Pierre. Nine days ago the pavilion at Valganest caught fire, was burnt to the ground, and Francois de Labourdilliere perished amid the ruins!

"Then may my brother be pardoned in the next world for the sins he committed in this!" said Pierre Aubin.

"Your brother?" exclaimed Regina in surprise.

The captive relapsed into silence, and the lady resumed,—

"It was in the midst of a brilliant fete that the accident occurred. I was to have been the bride of him who was thus suddenly launched into eternity. We were met for the betrothal. His death set me free once more!"

"What signifies that to me?" she heard him mutter, but she continued,—

"Although wearied by incessant importunity, I had accepted him, my heart remained true alone to thee."

A mocking laugh grated harshly on the speaker's ear, still she persevered,—

"But this liberty which I had gladly greeted, and had hoped always to preserve—the like importunities are about to deprive me of. *To-morrow must I marry Honore!*"

"So be it," growled Pierre. "So be it. This marriage will justly and severely punish another of the fratricides."

"What mean you by this *fraternity*? inquired Regina, but the prisoner relapsed into taciturnity."

Time was rapidly bringing nearer the wedding-day; but a few more hours remained, during which the destiny of the reluctant bride was under her control—and she had not yet brought Pierre to the pitch she desired—she resumed,—

"If to-morrow I espouse Honore (to whom I am totally indifferent) *to-morrow* must I deliver you up to him and his brothers—for I have promised, that *the day of our union shall be that of your death!*"

"You will not give me up to them!" replied the game-keeper, and his voice was not only confident but defying.

Regina did not notice the strange tone of the remark, she only thought he had guessed her meaning.

"Oh, Pierre! At last you comprehend what I am capable of doing to save you from their fury! Since you can foresee my meaning, my prayers will not be in vain,"

and you will calmly hearken to what I have to say!"

To this there was no response, no assent, and the wilful woman was forced to proceed, for time was all-important.

"After what has taken place you cannot make your appearance at Brasseuse any more—for they would expect you to account for your disappearance, etc. This secret must be confined to those who, alone, know it. Now, those who have lost you must never see you again. This is clearly a matter of imperative necessity. I repeat, *you can never see them again.*"

To this Pierre replied, in the same sneering tone:—

"If Regina de Gazeran has so decided, e'en so it must be. If you say I must never again behold those whom I love, and who are deploring my loss—surely I must give it up. How can I strive against your sovereign power?"

Accepting this irony as a consent, the lady continued:—

"Say but one word, and your sufferings and your captivity are instantly ended! One word, and your dungeon-door is opened."

"Ah! What is the condition?" asked Pierre in surprise.

"I have given you to understand it already. You have but to swear not to show yourself in this country, or betray what has befallen you."

"And if I kept not my oath?"

"You would keep it."

"Would you depend upon an oath under my circumstances?"

"I should rely on the love which had surrounded you with so much happiness—that you would not have the heart to be the death of her who so generously compromised herself on your account."

"Compromised! In what way?"

Delighted at being questioned by the man whose silence had been so intolerable, Regina eagerly replied,—

"I will not marry Honore de Labourdilliere—that would be to consent to your murder. I cannot permit you to return to Brasseuse—it would be destruction to myself. Neither shall you remain a prisoner any longer, to sink under the pangs of loneliness!"

"Pierre Aubin, we will go hence toge-

ther—yes, together must we two leave this place. We will travel far away, no matter into what distant land. I care not where it may be, provided I but enjoy your society—which will secure my utmost happiness,—and that we are removed from this place."

"Of my fortune, which is ample, and will easily be converted into available funds, you shall be absolute master."

"I have persecuted you—I will be your slave. I will bestow every thing I possess upon you, and shall love, henceforth, to owe my all to your generosity. I will forget that you have despised, insulted, and reviled me. So you but love me I am yours heart and soul."

The fire of this violent woman's ardent nature lit up her eyes, and her beauty shone with intense brilliancy as she made this disgraceful proposition and humiliating confession—but she had *disregarded the proprieties of life and the dictates of virtue, so shame and mortification were her natural though bitter portion!*

Severe and cutting was the indignant reply of the game-keeper:

"Oh, madness! oh, vain infatuation! What mean your projects of deliverance and departure? Do I belong to myself? Do I love you? Can I ever love you? You appear to behold in this world none but yourself and me; you forget that I have a loving and beloved wife, a sweet, innocent babe, also, whom I would tenderly cherish!"

"What is your fortune to me? All that I require from you, is the restoration of the double treasure of which you have so barbarously deprived me. You are very gracious to overlook the evil which you have wrought on me—the terrible, relentless persecution with which I have been visited ever since I have had the misfortune to be acquainted with you."

"Think not, however, that I can forget these things! My cry has gone forth to *Heaven, in whose hands is vengeance*—but memory, to my dying day, will present you as vile, abandoned, treacherous, cruel—a *lost woman!*"

"A lost man!" repeated Regina in agony, clenching her hands and bursting into a torrent of tears. "Oh, it is ungenerous thus to taunt me. I shall almost regret having saved you!"

"You saved me!" harshly cried Pierre.

"Another falsehood, noble Regina. I do not believe in your strange, pretended protection. It is too absurd. No, I do not owe my life to you. I should be ashamed to be indebted to you for my existence."

"Unfortunate madman," exclaimed the now furious woman, "do you not know that my blood is boiling, that my brain is ready to burst with frenzy—that you dare thus to brave me? Remember that I love you, you are despising me, and I can be fearfully avenged."

"You can do nothing, Regina!" said the prisoner, coldly.

"It is because you know that I love you to the very depth of weakness; that you presume thus to dare me."

"I do not believe that this is love," remarked Pierre, incredulously.

"This is too bad! You do not even believe in my love, and call me a lost woman! Very well, I will soon force a conviction of this truth, I will remove all doubts on this head. He may despise me, he may even hate me, but he shall be compelled to believe me."

As Regina finished these words she applied a key to the door of the cell, and entered to the surprise of its inmate, who, nevertheless, exhibited no stronger emotion than curiosity. Locking the door she withdrew the key, and holding it up to Pierre, she said with a solemn and determined tone:—

"I have told you that no living person except ourselves, knows of this place of concealment—consequently no one knows that we two are here, or can find their way to seek us. You say, Pierre Aubin, that I do not love you; very well! I will give you the strongest proof to the contrary, by coming here to be near you, and to *die of hunger with you!*"

Having said this, Regina de Gazeran hurled the key through the wicket, and it fell noisily on to the stone flags of the vaulted corridor.

## CHAPTER XI.

We now will revert to the four aristocrat brothers of the incarcerated game-keeper, who had quitted Gazeran together after their nocturnal interview with Regina.

These noble gentlemen proceeded at a slow pace, discussing the subject uppermost

in their minds,—the death of Pierre Aubin, which they considered a settled question, the only matter for consideration being the mode of destruction.

'What need of all four of us to settle one poor wretch, who must be feeble enough by confinement, to be unable to cope with one antagonist, even if he were free from his fetters,' remarked James.

'Certainly; and it concerns Honoré most of all,' said William.

'True,' replied the intended spouse of the Lady of Gazeran. 'True; it is for me to avenge the insult offered by this man to my bride, yet I see no need of violent measures when simples, that cause no resistance or bloodshed, will be equally efficacious. I'll need no assistance, and will announce the fact when all is over.'

These three speakers believed the tale which Regina had told them respecting the prisoner, but not so Antoine.

The unhappy dwarf had taken no part in the conversation, but rode along in silence, brooding over the scene he had lately witnessed.

Smarting under the pangs of unrequited love, and burning with rage and jealousy, his heart had divined the working of passion in Regina.

Plain to him was the motive that caused her to plead for delay in the execution of death. Indifference had veiled from others that which was plainly visible to him,—the love that Regina cherished for Pierre, her captive lover.

Goaded by this maddening conviction, his horse's flanks had at each feverish impulse, been gored by his spurred heels until the poor animal became wild with pain and rage.

The rider was quite unconscious of the irritation he was causing, until the noble beast, galled past endurance, reared up, plunged and snorted, and suddenly sprang blindly forward and rushed headlong thro' the forest.

The risk of being dashed to pieces was imminent, for the fiery courser was ungovernable in his madness.

The dwarf uttered one cry for aid, as he flew past his brothers.

The appeal was not in vain, for the only redeeming qualities in them was their affection for each other. Ere long they managed

to arrest the career of the frightened steed and its rider.

But this accidental race had taken them out of the beaten track and in an opposite direction to Valganest. It was necessary to rest themselves and their horses, also to discover whereabouts in the forest they then were.

'It seems to me that we are not far from Haut-Montel,' said James.

'Then let us go at once to Haut-Montel,' said one and all; for the idea, that this mention of the former residence of their father—known as Major Seignerolles—suggested, was instantaneously shared by all of them.

'Yes,' said the dwarf, 'accident has favored the design, which we have so long entertained of searching the deserted dwelling of the Major.'

'Right,' continued Honoré. 'No one now is likely to be prowling around. The vigilance of the patrol is directed to another quarter, and we may never have a better opportunity of getting possession of the money which we have every reason to believe is concealed somewhere on the premises. We have delayed our search long enough, nothing now need prevent us.'

So saying, the brothers mounted their horses, and in less than half an hour reached the deserted mansion.

It will, doubtless, be fresh in the recollection of the reader that Etienne de Labourdilliere had once offered the sum of two hundred thousand francs to the old Marquis, his father, which had been scornfully refused.—This his sons had never forgotten. They had not been able to learn from him, during his residence at Valganest, where this sum was deposited, as he positively refused any such information until they should agree to recognise Pierre as a brother, and voluntarily provide for him out of that sum.

This eccentric way of disposing of that which he was at liberty to have distributed himself, he would not deviate from, and the brothers having sacrificed the old man to their rage, they had subsequently come to the conclusion that the treasure must be concealed at Haut-Montel.

To this place they had hitherto been prevented from going, because they had no ostensible motive for going openly, and clandestinely they feared to venture while ru-

more were rife against them on so many grounds.

It was not difficult to scale the outer wall and gain admittance to the dwelling which they had never entered but once, which was on the memorable evening when the singular proposition of their father was made known to them.

'Here we are, and there is time enough before daylight for us to make a thorough rummage in every nook and corner—but what are we to do for a light?—it is pitch-dark within,' said Antoine.

'It cannot be,' replied Honoré, 'that he who left such a sum of money behind him could be so stingy as to have used up every bit of candle in the house, or carried off the last match; and if the old woman has not stolen it, there surely ought to be a tinder-box somewhere.'

This seemed plausible, so they descended to the kitchen, and began groping about to discover, by feeling, the means of striking a light. As Antoine was stretching up to the chimney-piece, the toe of his boot happened to touch the ashes on the hearth, and discovered some live coals. The brothers were amazed and startled at this phenomenon. James laid his hand on the ashes—they were hot. Trembling all over, at this discovery, Honoré said, 'some one must inhabit this house at the present time—and yet it was but yesterday that Bartholomew assured us that it had been vacant ever since the disappearance of the Major, which we know is more than a year.'

'We shall soon ascertain, for certain, for prudence demands that we search every room above and below, to discover whether there is any one in the house besides ourselves,' firmly spoke William.

'What if we should encounter a stranger?'

'No matter, we must say that we have lost our way, and are seeking shelter until morning.'

This point settled, there was no difficulty in kindling a blaze, by the light of which they discovered a piece of a candle, and then they commenced a regular, but unsuccessful, research for the two hundred thousand francs.

In vain they sounded the walls, and peered into every place capable, or likely to conceal the missing treasure or a mysterious

inhabitant. Saving the glowing embers, everything betokened that the place had long been, and still remained altogether uninhabited.

'We are alone in the House!' said James. 'And yet,' replied Honoré, 'some one must have been here, and that lately, for the fire could not have kindled itself—or the ashes retain heat for a year. To believe that would be to give credit to fairy-tales.'

'Or to believe in ghosts,' murmured Honoré, with a singular expression of voice.

He wished to appear brave and sceptical, whilst, in reality, he was a coward.

Antoine had been silent and thoughtful for some moments, apparently absorbed in unpleasant reflection. He was, in truth, passing in review all that occurred in the late visit to Regina, and the belief that they had been imposed on by the beautiful lady of the castle, was rapidly gaining strength and shape. Suddenly he exclaimed,—

'Gentlemen, we have been duped! I would lay my life on it! Our sister-in-law, that is to be, has deceived us! Pierre Aubin, you may depend on it, is no longer at Gazeran!'

The brothers could not credit this assertion. What motive could Regina have for doing so? This they thought, and to this effect they expressed themselves.

'Blind must you be not to see that she madly loves the game-keeper. Each look and word betrayed her, and yet you suspected it not.' So spoke the dwarf.

'Can it be possible?' exclaimed the indignant bridegroom. 'The question at present,' continued Antoine, 'is not how this affects you individually, brother; we must only consider how to discover what has become of the wretch whom you spared, why I know not, when it would have been so easy to have settled him for ever!'

'But,' inquired William, whose imagination was not quick enough, at once, to seize the circumstances that had brought Antoine so speedily to a conclusion—'but what reason have you for asserting that Pierre Aubin is no longer a prisoner at Gazeran?'

'One is, that on no other supposition can I account for her unwillingness to permit us, at once, to execute a judgment in which, ostensibly, she acquiesced. Another, that no one but Pierre could have been here, where he, doubtless, knew he should find



the treasure. No one, except him and us, had any interest in coming here."

"Too true!" gloomily responded the others.

"But before saying any thing to Regina on the subject," interposed Honore, "it would be well to make sure, positively, that the man is actually no longer in his dungeon. We have yet two hours to day-light, and Gazeran is but three quarters of a league distant hence.—*To horse—To Gazeran.*"

Silence again reigned within the deserted rooms, as the excited party rode rapidly back to the castle they had visited once before on this eventful night.

The ashes were still hot on the forsaken hearth, how they became so remained a mystery!

Well did the brothers remember the various turnings and windings, which Regina had directed them how to follow, beneath the inhabited part of the castle, in order to reach the dungeon-vaults where they were to deposit the unhappy victim—the game-keeper—on the occasion of their carrying him off—and easily did they force admittance, for what scruples could they have about scaling a wall or forcing locks, who had none in taking the life of a fellow-creature, and he, moreover, the beloved son of their father?

We have seen that the lady had refused them the keys of the three intervening doors, but these obstacles deterred them not, each successively gave way to their united efforts and the brothers reached the corridor that led to the original dungeon of Pierre Aubin. Here there was no lock to force—the door was open—the flag-stone displaced—the prison-vault empty?

James and William uttered exclamations of rage. Honore became pale and speechless with mortification and jealousy.

As to Antoine he spake not a word but immediately let himself down into the yawning tomb. He determined to make sure of the worst.

"Well?" eagerly called his brothers from above.

"No one is here!" was the instant reply.

"Then come up Antoine," they said, stretching down their arms to assist his ascent.

The dwarf was about to comply, when suddenly he shouted—"Wait."

"Have you made any discovery? What is it?"

"Perhaps so—but wait I say—we shall soon see."

The light vanished and the figure of Antoine disappeared from the view of the three brothers.

Twice the impatient and astonished Honore called for the dwarf—but no answer was returned, and they, all, were at a loss to account for this strange disappearance.

"We must follow lest any mischance befall him," cried James, leaping down into the lower vault, and his brothers followed his example. The darkness did not admit their distinguishing any object, but they felt around the damp walls of the six feet square, dungeon—over the rugged floor and across the empty space.

Honore speedily remarked, that the air, instead of only coming down from above, blew on his cheek from one side.

Having their attention turned to this little circumstance, the rest agreed that so it was.

Let us leave them—to seek an explanation of this current of air, and the sudden disappearance of Antoine—and return to those whom we left in circumstances so perilous and seemingly desperate.

## CHAPTER XII.

THE Lady of Gazeran and the game-keeper of the forest of Brasseuse were alone and locked up in the most secret dungeons of the Castle, at the very time whilst the aristocrat brothers were exploring the deserted cell in which they had deposited their victim.

In the delirium of her passion, the beautiful mistress of great wealth, vast possessions, and high rank, was here self-immolated, and willing to resign all these coveted enjoyments to prove the truth and force of her questioned love!

Proudly she cast a look of love and pride on her stoical companion, and she was still quivering with the excitement of her fell resolve. He must be convinced, thought she, shall I not die a lingering death to prove my sincerity and devotedness? Nevertheless, she felt a momentary happiness in view of the sacrifice she was making.

It was a matter of no little wonder to Regina, that Pierre manifested no sign of apprehension at the moment when not the most

feeble ray of hope appeared to exist, either for himself or for her: as they were enclosed in a retreat unknown to every one, and from which escape seemed impossible.

Struck with astonishment and admiration at the Roman heroism of the undaunted man, Regina said, in tremulous accents,—

"Pierre, truly you are brave and resolute!"

The prisoner looked disdainfully at her, but preserved silence.

"Is it possible," continued Regina, "that you suspect I have spoken falsely? Do you think I have another key? No, no, Pierre: there was but one, and it is now beyond our reach. Nobody can pick it up in that corridor. I tell you, Pierre, we must perish here together!"

To this, the gamekeeper made no reply, and even looked indifferent.

Then Regina, transported with admiration, and proud of having bestowed her love on one whose soul was so brave, exclaimed:

"You are, indeed, a hero; and I do not regret dying with you, and for you."

A mocking smile was on the lips of the husband of Cecile Robert, but suddenly it vanished; the triumphant expression gave place to a look of horror! A deadly paleness overspread his livid features, and he silently pointed with his finger to the iron wicket above the door.

There, clinging to the bars with his long, lean fingers, was to be seen the malicious and ill-favored features of the dwarf.

On being discovered, a ferocious burst of laughter resounded in the vaulted corridor, and struck terror to the heart of the amazed Regina.

It now is plain what had become of Antoine. He had followed the direction from whence the current of air came, which put him on the track of the supposed fugitive.

Trusting to the strength of the outer doors, or having overlooked the circumstance, Regina had neglected to close the intermediate doors between the first and the second prison of Pierre—the entrance to the latter of which would nevertheless have been undiscoverable had she not, in her precipitate resolve to immure herself, omitted to replace the immovable flag-stone at the entrance to the secret corridor that led to the inmost and unknown retreat.

This passage being open, Antoine had

heard the key when it fell, being attracted by voices, and had climbed up to look at him whom he doubly hated, as a brother and a rival. Being satisfied that Pierre was securely caught, and his fate now certain, the dwarf felt a savage joy, and hastened back to give notice of his discovery.

He met his brothers about half way, and saying, "Pierre is alive, and still a prisoner, come on!" he quickly retraced his steps, they following him in wondering silence. The last words of Regina to Pierre were uttered as they came up to the door, and were heard by all of the brothers.

No wonder the face of the game-keeper blanched at sight of his implacable foe, and at the perspective of instant death; but the first feeling of dismay—that the bravest under such circumstances may experience for an instant—passed over. Pierre raised his head boldly, and steadily encountered the brutal gaze of his wretched enemy.

The prisoner then looked searchingly in the face of Regina, to see whether she were concerned in some new plot against him; but this time the impress of surprise, trouble, dismay, and concern was too real to be doubted, and he dismissed the suspicion.

Bitter were the taunts which the dwarf, from his perch of safety, poured forth on both of the caged prisoners; but ere he had finished his dastardly reviling, he was roughly pulled down by Honore, who took his place at the wicket, and in faltering accents bade Regina fear nothing for herself, saying also,—

"Antoine has mistaken your motives, my dear Regina, in coming here—I am sure he has. I believe him not. You do not, cannot, love this man. I know you must have merely come out of motives of humanity to tell him to prepare for his final hour. That it has now come, I need hardly say, for why delay until to-morrow that which can and must be done now? He dies instantly!"

Thus speaking, the intended husband of Regina left the wicket, and the prisoners heard him impatiently and imperiously calling on his brothers to search for the key.

Along the resounding corridor were heard the heavy steps, and the light of the dark lantern came, and went repeatedly as they moved back and forth, searching, in vain, for the means of admission to the trembling inmates of the cell.

'Pierre!' sighed Regina, in accents of settled despair; 'oh, Pierre!' you have equally disdained me, repulsed and rejected my love. Well! Let hatred now have its turn. Let revenge be satisfied. I cannot save you if I would; and could I, even, I would not.'

Resuming his tone of defiance, Pierre replied—

'They have not got hold of me yet.'

For a moment after the captive had said this, Regina thought the game-keeper had lost his senses, from terror, for he rushed like a madman to his bed and bore away the mattress in his arms.

Does he hope with this feeble barrier to keep them out?

Curiously the lady watched his movements, and soon she saw that the mattress had covered an orifice which the prisoner had opened beneath, burrowing in the ground; and from the large pile of earth which it had concealed, it was evident that much work had been wrought.

Now, at length, Regina understood the tranquillity and the raillery of Pierre Aubin when she had spoken of their certain death together.

'You see, Regina, that I have not been idle, since you so treacherously conveyed me hither. This night I intended to escape.—But one flag is to be removed, and I am free once more!'

Whilst speaking thus, in an under tone, Regina had been preparing to crawl into the hole. In an instant, he was out of sight beneath the cell.

Regina's first impulse was to give the alarm to those without; but from a complication of feelings, she hesitated, and her voice remained inarticulate in her throat. She was in dreadful and undefined agitation as she listened breathlessly by turns to the brothers searching for the fatal key, and to the noise of the efforts made by Pierre to dislodge the last obstacle to escape and flight.

'I have found the key—here it is!' exclaimed Antoine.

James violently tore it from his grasp, and they all came up to the door.

At this instant, poor Pierre Aubin, covered with dust and perspiration, out of breath, pale with emotion, overcome with fatigue, and in despair at his want of breath to effect his purpose, crept backwards into the cell.

'Alas, alas, Regina! I cannot move the flag!'—then he continued, resolutely,—'Well, so be it. Let them come. Let them murder me.'

'I have the best right to open the door!' Honore was heard to say; and he snatched the key from James.

At length the key begins to creak in the rusty lock. The prisoner is on the verge of his fate. Death is (seemingly) inevitable, when, by a sudden, mysterious revulsion of feeling in the frenzied Regina, she—who had sought the ruin of her unfortunate victim, now when no aid from any other quarter could save him—resolved to come to his rescue herself in this dire extremity.

'Take courage, Pierre, I entreat you.—Take heart, man; and once more try again, I implore. I will delay them.'

As thus she spake, this woman, lately so formidable and relentless, joined her hands in earnest entreaty.

Pierre, in surprise and perplexity, gazed on her suspiciously, to discover if she was speaking in sincerity or mockery.

When the words really proceed from the heart, they find a response that carries instant conviction of their truthfulness. Pierre distrusted her no longer.

With renewed hope and ardor, he once more ventures into the narrow outlet, which would lead to *safety or the grave*.

The key turns again in the lock. Regina, by a sudden inspiration, throws the mattress over the aperture, and extinguishes the light.

The rusty wards have at length been overcome, the door is unlocked, and yet it does not open.

'It must be held from within,' said Honore.

'Of course, he is trying to keep us out,' remarked Antoine.

'But we are four to one,' continued James; and with his powerful fist he struck the door a tremendous blow.

It gave way, but instantly re-closed.

Antoine, instead of lending his assistance to this effect, clambered up once more to the bars, and casting the rays of the lantern on the interior of the cell, called out,—

'Pierre is not there! It is our cousin who is holding the door!'

The last words of the dwarf were unheard, for, pushing with all their might, they burst open the door, upsetting and bruising poor Regina de Gazeran, who, as she fell almost

senseless, yet murmured,—

'He has escaped! They will not kill him!'

Not suspecting that Pierre Aubin was really gone, some little time elapsed in trying to revive the fainting lady, who, knowing the value to the fugitive of every moment's delay, was in no haste to recover.

Antoine was keeping guard with James, at the door, whilst the other two were occupied in the restoration of the bride. Presently, he thought of raising the lantern, to take a survey of the place.

'Master Pierre must have hid himself under the bed, I fancy, for he is not to be seen,' cried he.

This observation caused Regina to move, in her alarm, on seeing the assassins put on the track.

'She is coming to herself!' said William, relinquishing the lady altogether to the care of Honore; 'let us see after him.'

'Yes, now for him!' said Antoine, who, brave in his reliance on his brother's assistance, and eager to be the one to lay hands on the hated game-keeper, rushed towards the prisoner's bed. Raising the mattress, he perceived the excavation beneath, at which sight he uttered a piercing cry of baffled rage.

Like a wild beast entering its den, did the dwarf disappear in the narrow subterranean passage; but he soon returned, and announced, in tones of disappointed hate, that there was no outlet to the hole, that he had followed the passage until farther progress was obstructed by a large flag-stone which he had found it impossible to remove.

Regina, whose anxiety had been intense during the exploration (by the dwarf) of the avenue to escape and freedom, now raised her eyes, with gratitude, to Heaven, and breathed freer. She readily guessed that Pierre had taken the precaution to interpose, between him and his adversaries, the obstacle which had so lately nearly caused his destruction by impeding his flight.

James, in anger at his intelligence, exclaimed,—

'The stone must be displaced, for there is no doubt that this is the way by which the miserable wretch has passed out.'

'I have tried and I could not move it,' said Antoine.

'Then give way to one who can and will,' retorted the other, helping his brother up

from the hole and throwing him aside roughly.

He then entered the narrow opening. They heard him breathing hard and struggling powerfully for some moments, yet they could render no assistance, for but one man at a time could find room there.

With disordered dress and troubled mien, James re-appeared.

'We have lost him!' were his first words; 'this passage opens beyond the castle walls into the fields. See what one gains by sparing people whom we might effectually be rid of! This man knows us—he is at liberty—and will tell all.'

Honore replied,— 'He cannot be far off. Let us be quick, and pursue him—we may, perhaps, re-capture him.'

Leaving Regina alone in the open cell, they all quitted the castle by the path Pierre had dug beneath his dungeon, and went to mount their horses, which they had left secured at no great distance.

Meanwhile, the liberated game-keeper, was fleeing as fast as his trembling limbs could carry him. What direction he had taken he knew not; he dared not pause to think or rest, but must put what space he might between himself and those who were seeking his life.

At first, on emerging into the cold night air, he had staggered like a drunken man; it was so long since he had been beneath the clear vault of Heaven.

A massive damp and loathsome arch of stone had interposed between him and the azure firmament, and he had been nearly suffocated by the impurity of the confined air in his dreary dungeons.

Thus it was that his first contact with the pure atmosphere, and the variety of rapid emotions which he had just experienced, caused poor Pierre Aubin to feel very faint; his knees failed him, and his manly firmness gave way as his bodily strength failed; but momentarily, only, and fleeting, was the unwonted weakness. The danger of his situation and the almost certainty of immediate pursuit, restored his energy and resolution, not passively to be re-taken.

On sped the game-keeper, until unable to run or even walk any further, from physical exhaustion, he sank at the foot of a tree in the woods which he had penetrated at ran-

dom some distance.

Cold as it was, the fugitive resigned himself to sleep. I must wait, perforce, he thought. The morning's light will reveal my situation and enable me to find my way. Uneasy was the slumber of the unfortunate man, though heavy; nor did it last long, when it was suddenly broken by the distant but loud sound of horses' hoofs trotting rapidly over the frozen ground.

It was just peep of day, when the cold is most intense. The poor fellow shook himself, and looked anxiously around. He discovered, with alarm, that he had been sleeping in dangerous proximity to the road along which the horsemen were approaching. He feared to arise and retire farther into the wood, for he might be seen in the act. All he could do, before they came up, was to crawl, on his hands and knees, behind a fallen oak of large size, and cover himself partially with dry leaves. This manoeuvre he successfully executed, and managed, from his snake-like retreat, to see without being seen.

It was the discomfited party, the aristocrat brothers, who were returning with downcast looks like huntsmen with empty game-bags, ashamed of an unsuccessful day's sport.

The escaped prisoner guessed that they had passed the hours, during which he had been sleeping, in seeking him, and that they were now returning to Valganest. He now knew what direction to take. He must be in the forest of Hallate. So avoiding the highway carefully, he commenced his walk towards Brasseuse.

The path led him, after awhile, past a wood-cutter's cottage. He looked through the open door and saw a smiling infant in a cradle by the fire. Pierre thought of his wife and child, and, unmindful of his strange and disorderly appearance, he stopped to contemplate the scene which called up visions of home and happiness.

The old woman of the house eyed him with distrust, suspecting, naturally, in those unsettled times, that he had some sinister design. But to conceal the real alarm, for she was alone with the child, she boldly accosted the stranger, saying,—

'Friend, if you want my husband, he is not far off; that is his axe you hear close by.'

Her tone and looks betrayed the uneasiness and terror which she fain would have

concealed; and the fugitive perceived that he had actually frightened the poor old woman. He cast a glance at his worn and torn, as well as soiled habiliments, and he could not wonder at the circumstance.

Recalled, by the speech of the wood-cutter's wife, to the present object, Pierre Aubin inquired the way to Brasseuse. Having obtained directions, he continued his route, his thoughts still bent on the child he had seen, wondering whose it could be. Certainly, thought he, it cannot belong to the old woman, it is too sweet a little creature.

The way was long; but each step was bringing him nearer to those from whom he had been so cruelly separated for two weary months of solitude and confinement—those beings the dearest of all on earth to him; and he felt not the length or loneliness of his journey.

### CHAPTER XIII.

A sudden turn in the road revealed to the wondering gaze of the retreating game-keeper, the village of Brasseuse, in all its altered aspect. So great was the change since the burning of 'La Grange' farm-house, that he fancied he must have mistaken the way, and that it was some other village that he beheld in the distance. During his captivity, the fires had, unknown to him, been doing their devastating work.

Ignorant of all that had passed beyond his prison walls, no wonder that Pierre Aubin was confounded with astonishment as he looked around him. Enough of the ruined houses, however, remained standing, to satisfy him that he had not gone astray, and that the dwelling of his loved ones was before him.

But soon a new cause of wonder presented itself. His progress was suddenly arrested by a fixed bayonet thrust right before him as he musingly sauntered along, and a voice in quaking accents menaced him with death.

'Halt! Approach a step, and I fire.'

Pierre at once recognized Nicholas Godard, the plough-boy and jester, in the would-be valiant, yet evidently timorous, peasant soldier.

In delight at once again seeing one of his former acquaintances, Pierre stretched out his hand cordially.

Mistaking the friendly intent, Nicholas Godard drew back, levelled his rusty musket

at the game-keeper's breast, and called out to him,—

'I know you are an incendiary. Keep off, or I will let drive.' As he spoke these words, the clown closed his eyes as if afraid to look at the victim of his valor.

Pierre Aubin sprang aside, and then rushed on the terrified Nicholas. As the piece went off, the plough-boy was disarmed, and now the two could have an amicable confabulation in safety.

'You seem not to have a good memory for your friends, Nicholas, methinks,' began the game-keeper.

'Faith, when one is thinking of the countersign, one can think of nothing else. It is hard enough to keep in one's head any way.'

'Well, tell me what is the meaning of this military array? What are you doing here?'

'I am scaring away the accursed incendiaries, to be sure,' replied the disarmed patrol, quite naively; 'but as for you, Pierre, where the deuce do you come from after eight long weeks without sending us any news of what had become of you?'

This question the game-keeper ought to have expected, and been prepared for; but he hesitated ere he replied. It was the first time he had thought that he would be called to account for his singular absence, and he was sorely puzzled how to do this without accusing Regina, who had at last favored his escape, or compromising the aristocrat brothers whom he had promised to the Major Seignerolles (his father) never to criminate or denounce.

Instead, therefore, of answering the question, Pierre retorted with another.

'Do you know how many letters have been received from my mother, Nicholas?'

'How many? Not one! Only yesterday your father-in-law said, "I must go and see why my sister, Euphrosine, does not write."'

'Why she did not write?' replied Pierre. 'Why? Because we thought it useless to write, as I could answer for both in my own proper person.'

'So! you come from Paris, eh?'

'Yes; certainly from Paris.'

'It is the fashion there, I suppose, then, to wear one's beard like a horse's mane, and no hat, is it? No hat, eh?' said Nicholas, maliciously, for he remembered that Pierre's hat had been found at the burning of Fleurines.

The game-keeper was disconcerted, but he replied,—

'The wind carried off my hat as I was passing over a bridge; and as to my beard, I shall wear it as long as I please.'

'Oh, very well; keep it if you like: I will not dispute about the matter: only it has changed you so, that just now I really took you for an incendiary.'

This was spoken in a more assured tone, for Pierre had just restored the musket to the cowardly fellow.

'Why are you continually prating about incendiaries? What incendiaries are to be found in the country?'

'How? You come from Paris and know not that two-thirds of the country has been set on fire? Ah! ha! Tell us I pray you what they talk about there, if they don't mention such things.'

At this announcement of the disasters (so new to him) that had befallen the country, Pierre became pale, and trembled. His emotion was observed by Nicholas, and attributed to another cause than the true one.

'If you want to know what has passed, although it ought to be no news to you, go talk to father Decadi, who of course will be delighted to see you.'

'And Cecile too?'

'Ah yes, enquire about her also,' said Nicholas, with coarse irony. Then blindly adding, 'my hour's guard is at an end, the time is up, they have not come to relieve me, I will relieve myself and go to bed,' and glad to escape from the presence of one whom he really believed to be in league with the burners, he walked away as fast as he could to spread the news of the return of Pierre Aubin in as singularly mysterious a fashion as had been his disappearance.

As Nicholas was passing the door of his captain he bawled out to old Decadi Robert—'Holla! Pierre Aubin has returned captain—so as he has come I am going.'

The gamekeeper had followed as quickly as he could, so that by the time Decadi had arisen and got to the door his son-in-law stood on the threshold.

Instead of cordial greeting and welcome, the old soldier dragged Pierre violently into the inner room, and eagerly said—

'Whence come you unhappy man? Tell me this the first thing of all.'

'I can not tell you father—but Cecile I

dare say is able to gess. Say where is my own Cecile?

'Once again I ask whence came you? You must explain why one of your shoes was found at Valganest—the buttons of your hunting uniform near Gazeran—and the other day your hat at Fleurines! Why has your name been heard at every fire?

'I do not understand you father—but for God's sake tell me where is Cecile! How is Philiberte?

'Miserable! Do you not know?

'How should I know?

'Because my daughter must have gone to join you with her child!

'It was impossible. She could not know where I was when I did not know it myself.

'You?

'Yes I swear to it.

'You are no longer so ignorant I suppose.

'Again I repeat I may not tell you father.

'This is absurd, incredulous. But you will have to speak when the law interrogates.

'What has the law to do with me?

'I have compromised myself to silence the reports that were raised about your mysterious absence, was the answer, and now you will be called upon and obliged to confess where you have been. To pacify my child, your wife, and to quiet the neighbors—I lied. Yes, I who have ever scorned to speak falsely. I said you went to Melun to see a cousin who was dying.

'Oh dear!' exclaimed Pierre, 'oh dear, I have but now told that babbling blockhead Nicholas Godard, that I have just returned from a visit to my mother in Paris—but what signifies that! Speak to me of Cecile! How is she? Where is she?

'Cecile has gone crazy, and night before last she fled we know not whither, but we fancy she must have gone through the forest of Halfate, because her gold cross was found in it.

Pierre Aubin uttered a piercing cry, struck his hand on his forehead and ran off like a madman heedless of old Decadi's entreaties for him to stop.

The heart of the agonised parent assured him that the sweet babe which had struck his imagination so strongly as he passed the woodcutter's hut was his own little Philiberte—and forgetful of fatigue, thither was he bound, to learn tidings of his treasure.

Nor was he wrong! From the old wo-

man's answers to his anxious enquiries he arrived at a thorough conviction that it really was Cecile, his beloved wife who had left the babe there, whilst on her way to Gazeran, which they had made out from her incoherent sentences.

There was great and fresh cause for alarm! Had the unfortunate woman reached her rival's castle previous to his quitting it? Was this the solution of Regina's permitting him escape? Perhaps she knew full well the torture in store for him when disappointed of his wife's smiles and caresses, and thus vengeance would pierce him to the very quick.

What dreadful doubts to assail an affectionate and devoted husband! Poor Cecile! so gentle! How would her crushed spirit bear this additional misery, if indeed, separated from child as well as husband, she were captive to the fierce and vindictive lady of Gazeran, and perchance now an inmate of that dreadful dungeon from which the gamekeeper had but just emerged!

Pierre Aubin determined, at all hazard to himself, to return and learn the worst. Having with difficulty obtained permission, from the old woman, to embrace the infant left in her charge—for she liked not his looks—he once again set out on his travels.

Disappointment still awaited him. On reaching the castle he learned to his dismay that Regina had left at dawn for Paris! In reply to his eager and almost frantic enquiry, whether Cecile had been there, he was assured she had not—but she had been seen wandering in the forest like a crazy woman.

It was, by this time, evening, and faint weary and sorrowful Pierre retraced his steps to the hut, where his child had been left, trusting that maternal instinct would bring the wanderer there, if unharmed and at liberty.

It happened that the old couple, who lived in this solitary place, were but recently established in the forest and knew not the name of Pierre or Decadi Robert. It was, therefore, no re-assurance to be told that their unwelcome visitor was Game-keeper of the forest of Brasseuse.

'This may be the case. Doubtful it is, since you say so,' they replied as the intruder vainly endeavoured to remove the uneasiness which it was visible that they felt at his return. Every effort he made, to this effect, only confirmed their fears.

Pierre had requested permission to await the return of the mother of the child entrusted them, and they dared not refuse him. Truly they fancied it was but a pretext, and that he was one, of the band of incendiaries, whom it would be as dangerous to affront as to retain. This was quite natural and made them, whilst fearful, assume to be hospitable.

Feeling hungry, and wishing to propitiate the poor people, the gamekeeper poured the contents of his leathern purse on the table, and begged the woman to give him some supper and allow him to lodge with them for the night. Now this purse was pretty well filled, containing the sum provided for the minor expenses of the christening, having remained untouched in his pocket ever since that disastrous occasion.

This liberal payment, for wretched fare, confirmed the prejudiced minds of his hosts, against the man so meanly clad. Every excuse was made to get rid of him. They said that he had no spare bed—but he replied that he would willingly sleep on the floor by the fire.

Ah! thought the affrighted paid-out fate is settled! Our humble abode is marked out as the next prey to the devouring flames!

They resolved at all events not to pass the night with this terrible man. So they consulted, apart, and made up a little plot for the husband to denounce him whilst pretending to be seeking a bed at the miller's, that the guest might have the only one—and the wife was to remain till the arrival of the posse to secure him. The old woman would fain have gone at once, but that would arouse suspicion, also she did not like to desert the child—so, through terror of the imaginary villain with whom she was alone, she became more talkative and complaisant.

No sooner had the old wood-cutter got a few paces from the hut, than to his surprise and terror his arm was laid hold of by a stranger. He begged hard to be spared, saying he was but a poor man whose life was not worth taking.

'I neither wish to rob or murder you, was the reply. On the contrary, I mean to enrich you!

'It would not take much to make me rich, I am so poor!

'Tell me truly where you are going?

'Wherever you please!

'You were going to denounce the man in your house?

'I had thought of it, replied the submissive man, but if that is displeasing to you, sir, I will give it up.

'You will do well!

The poor frightened fellow thought—this is an accomplice of the man within. I am in a nice predicament, and he shook with terror.

'Don't tremble so, but listen to me boldly,' said the stranger.

A conversation then ensued, and a singular bargain was concluded, to the effect that the wood-cutter should, that very night, abandon his hut, and all in it, and escape from that part of the country in secrecy, that he should ask no questions, and that he and his wife should no more be seen—in consideration of which he should, on the spot, at the end of their walk, be paid a sum of money double the value he had set on his possessions.

The compact was agreed to, and fulfilled on the part of the stranger. The old man returned to his hut with more money in his pocket than he had ever owned, at one time, in his life before, and telling his wife that they must sleep at the miller's, where they were immediately expected, she reluctantly set out at that unseasonable hour, loath to leave the house with such a man in it.

The game-keeper and his sleeping Philiberte were now alone in the hut—but an hour after midnight the wretched shanty was a mass of lurid flame!

The light of the combustible hovel attracted people to the spot before the walls fell in. No cry came forth from the interior. No person was seen to emerge from the burning building!

In the midst of the commotion and dismay, at the supposed fate of the cottagers, a clamor arose, a cry of exultation was heard. A man had been arrested! One of the gang of incendiaries was taken, with the usual watchword—*Pierre Aubin*—on his lips.

It was, at first, believed that this person was the game-keeper, thus defying them as he was escaping from them—but when the prisoner was brought to the light they saw it was not Pierre. Nevertheless, the man was on the point of being massacred on the spot, had not a detachment of mounted police rode up, at that instant, and protected him from the popular fury.



At some distance, standing on an eminence, two persons were anxiously watching the progress of the fire. One was a woman quite delicious, the other a stern old grey-headed man. This man was holding back the poor woman, who with heartbreaking sobs, kept repeating—'Let me go; I tell you it was there I left my child.'

After this another man arrives at the same place; he was breathless and covered with sweat. In silence he places, into the arms of the young mother, a little child. Then seeing her companion, he uttered a shout of joy.

Cecile, then, has regained both husband and child—but how comes she, here, at Vilvert? How happened Pierre Aubin to direct his flight from the burning hut to the same spot? Who is the protector of the frantic woman?

The explanation of all this must for a short time be postponed. The wood-cutter and his wife did not get clear of the forest with their money unseen and unquestioned. They were discovered; and their being abroad at that hour, without any satisfactory reason, seemed so suspicious that they were taken, by the patrol, before a magistrate for examination.

All the population of Brasseuse and its vicinity collected in the morning, to know the result, for now they expected to obtain a clue to the mysterious burning, since two suspected men were taken up.

The terrified wood-man in giving his account of himself, mentioned the circumstance of a crazy young woman, who said she came from Brasseuse, having come to his hut with her child.

'Is any such person missing from amongst you?' he inquired.

'Yes, it is my poor Cecile and the little Philiberte!' exclaimed Decadi Robert aroused from his despair.

The poor wood-cutter, encouraged by the attention now given to his story, began to entertain hopes of clearing himself, and hastened to tell all that he had thought, and feared, and done, with regard to the man calling himself Pierre Aubin, and the husband of the crazy woman. He then related his conversation with the stranger, telling the bargain that he had made, which accounted for the large sum of money found in his pocket, and finally he described so minutely and with such accuracy (at the desire of the

attentive audience) the person of the supposed accomplice of the game-keeper, now more than ever believed to be an incendiary, that unanimous and simultaneous conviction pervaded the assembly—and it seemed as one voice when all exclaimed:—

*'It is Antoine de Labourdilliere, the wicked dwarf!'*

The public excitement now took another direction; the wood-cutter was removed, and no longer thought about.

The suspicions which had been lulled by the burning of the pavilion and the death of Francois de Labourdilliere, now broke out with violence.

A tumultuous scene succeeded, and after much noisy parleying and altercation, it was decided to assemble in full force and proceed at once to the castle of Valganest before rumor of what had transpired at Brasseuse should reach the detested family and put them on their guard.

As may well be supposed, old Decadi Robert followed the wood-cutter to the temporary prison to inquire particulars of the news that was more interesting to him than the debate in progress.

Armed and equipped in haste, the numerous party set out with hostile purpose towards Valganest. But in advance of them a man, unnoticed, had slipped away, untying the bridle of his horse, which was fastened to a stump behind the ruins of 'La Grange,' he galloped off in the direction of the lordly residence of Labourdilliere.

At a little inn, in the hamlet adjoining the castle, the horseman paused, entered, and called for something to drink, as a pretext to write a note, which he sealed with moistened bread for lack of proper material. The address was that of *Antoine de Labourdilliere* with—'In great haste,' superadded.

This written, the man remounted, and soon was at the castle entrance. He rang without descending from his horse, and as the porter opened the gate, he flung the letter at his feet, and without a word, rode off at full speed. His face was muffled so that his features could not be discovered.

Carefully securing the gate, the astonished menial picked up the note and hastened with it to the common sitting room, to deliver it and tell the three brothers how strangely he had received it.

They already were surprised at the un-

sually prolonged absence of Antoine, and began to be uneasy on his account. The letter perhaps might explain the cause and enlighten them. At all events they decided that the circumstance justified opening a letter plainly intended for him.

How were they then surprised at the contents, which Honore read aloud, as follows—

'The burning of the woodman's hut is likely to lead to the discovery of the instigators of the other conflagrations. I hasten to warn you, whom it most concerns, if found out, that *Clodomir* was caught on the spots and is in the keeping of the *Gendarmes*. The wood-cutter also is in custody, and the inhabitants of Brasseuse are coming *en masse* to your castle. If you have any papers that can compromise yourself, or any of us, destroy the documents immediately—an hour hence will be too late.'

This revelation of a secret, which Antoine had kept from his brothers, filled them with indignation and concern. They had admitted him into their fullest confidence, and now they accidentally learnt his participation in a crime, that had devastated the country, of which they were guiltless. For though these men scrupled not to use any means to further their own interest or gratify revenge and hate, yet they were not familiarised with guilt, simply for the pleasure of inflicting misery on others. But right or wrong, Antoine was in danger, and his peril might affect themselves also.

'If the people force an entrance here' observed Honore, 'there is something that no one ought to see—and yet it is liable to be found.'

He spoke of the chest which had been deposited in the room which Antoine had not used since. Many times they had resolved to remove it, and yet had always put it off, a feeling of horror making them dread to touch the substitute for a coffin which enclosed the corporeal proofs of *Parricide*!

'It must now be done,' said the other two.

The three brothers then went together to the park to open the tomb, where Francois had perished, and where his remains had been interred.

Having accomplished this, they repaired to the forsaken apartment, resolved to conquer remorse and repugnance, and to place the murdered, by the side of the murderer.

Already from the windows of the castle

might be seen at a distance the infuriated peasantry from Brasseuse, their numbers greatly augmented, as they came along, by volunteers from the surrounding hamlets, who came prepared for deeds of violence.

'They are coming, gentlemen! Courage,—be quick!'

The closet was thrown open. Consternation took the place of all other feelings—the chest had disappeared!!! In its place was a paper on which was traced the ominous threat,—

*'Pierre Aubin is your brother—he is free. You have endangered him once; woe be to you if you peril him again!'*

#### CHAPTER XIV.

It is time now to explain how Pierre, his wife, and her unknown protector, came to meet on the eminence adjoining the village of Vilvert at the critical time of the conflagration of the woodman's hut.

At day-break of that morning the present guardian of Cecile, whilst wandering about the skirts of the forest on the Vilvert side, had discovered the unfortunate woman in a fainting condition, at the foot of a tree where she had dropped down overcome with fatigue and alarm.

All night, after leaving her child at the wood-cutter's had she been in the damp air. She had been captured by a party of the bandits, and was terrified almost to death at their *screech-owlery*, which vividly brought back the events that had driven her to madness.

The signal, this time oft repeated, brought around her such a fierce group that she flung herself at the keeper's feet and wildly pleaded for her life.

Convinced that her insanity was not assumed, they took pity on her and revoked their purpose of death, but impressed on her feeble senses—that if she would save her husband's life, and if she hoped ever to see her child again, she must repeat to every body the words they told her, namely—

'There is but one incendiary, and that is Pierre Aubin—I have seen him.'

Having thus provided for their own security and the furtherance of the enmity against her husband, Cecile was escorted for some hours, by two of the men, through so many paths of the forest that, even had she possessed

sed all her faculties as fully as ever, she could not have guided any one to the secret rendezvous of the incendiary-gang.

When found by the stranger, the poor creature was senseless and nearly frozen. He knelt beside the forlorn one, chafed her hands in his own, and recalled her to life by whispering in her ear the names of her husband and child.

Cecile opened her eyes at the appeal, and looked without alarm on the face of her protector, whom she knew not. To induce her to go with him, her preserver told her he would conduct her to her husband. So she arose, and leaning on the stranger's arm in full confidence, went willingly along with him.

On the way to the cottage, near the village, where the old man dwelt alone, he gathered, from the mass of her incoherent discourse, the object of her intended expedition to Gazeran, and he learnt the place where she had deposited Philiberte.

Having thus enticed her within his lonely dwelling, the old man changed his tone from gentleness to that of stern authority, for he had powerful reasons for not taking her either to Gazeran or Brasseuse, to one or other of which places she implored him to guide her. These reasons he could not explain to the unhappy Cecile, therefore he was obliged to intimidate her into acquiescence with his wish that she should, for the present, remain with him.

Sternly then the really kind-hearted old man assured the poor wearied meaniac that she must not attempt to leave the house or make any outcry to attract attention; for if she did either—never more would she see husband or child.

From that moment Cecile was quiet and resigned.

Towards evening a peasant came to the cottage with a supply of provisions for the old man, who gave him some secret order, which Cecile could not hear, and soon after the countryman went away saying:—

'It shall be done as you direct, sir.'

The messenger took the direction to the forest of Hallate, and arrived at the wood-man's hut just after the aged couple had quitted it. He was sent by the friend of Cecile to bring away the child from those in whose care the little one had been left.

Great was this man's astonishment to meet

Pierre, in this place, for he had known the gamekeeper of old, but had not heard of his return.

No sooner had the man told his errand and where Cecile was, than sure now where to find his unhappy wife, Pierre Aubin snatched the babe from the cradle, and without asking if the honest peasant were willing to return without rest or refreshment—he commenced a rapid walk towards Vilyert, leaving the man to follow at his leisure.

Thus it was that Pierre Aubin escaped the death prepared for him by the revengeful dwarf.

To explain this we have only to mention that the aristocrat brothers being aware that the escaped gamekeeper could reveal their dastardly capture and imprisonment of him, and their murderous purpose, were most anxious to have him again in their power.

To this end, Antoine volunteered his services. His jealous heart suggested that the beloved of Regina would linger in, or return to the vicinity. He was repaid for his vigilance by seeing Pierre (though on a different errand to that which he expected might attract him there) at the castle-gate, of Gazeran, inquiring for Cecile.

How bitterly the dwarf regretted his importance, alone to cope with the object of his hatred on whose traces he followed in hopes of tracking him to his hiding place. But as the wolf follows in the rear trusting that accident may furnish an opportunity of attacking a too powerful prey, unawares—so did Antoine dodge the unconscious object, hoping that Bartholomew, the faithful and unscrupulous old servitor of the family, or Clodomir, a chief amongst the incendiaries, might accidentally come to his aid. But no one appeared to help him, and he saw Pierre enter the wood-cutter's hut.

Antoine did not apply for admittance, but he peered through a crevice in the rude building, and listened until he was assured that the game-keeper intended to pass the night there. With fiendish joy he overheard the plot of the old people to denounce their unbidden guest as an incendiary, and he laid his plans on the suggestions which it inspired.

It will readily be imagined, therefore, that it was Antoine de Labourdilliere who purchased the hovel, meaning to burn it, with the unconscious father and child, hoping

thus to rid himself of the man whom he feared and hated—and at the same time cast the blame of the crime on the innocent Pierre, by having his name called out, as usual, at the burning of the dwelling. He concluded that the old couple, being missing, would be supposed to have been consumed in the flames.

We have seen that Clodomir was taken on the spot with the name of his supposed accomplice, Pierre Aubin, on his tongue. The bargain had been revealed, and the gamekeeper had escaped the intended destruction.

It would seem as if the diabolical plot was about to recoil on the head of its projector, and that Antoine, instead of Pierre, would be sacrificed to the popular fury.

It is now appropriate that we revert to the party which we left marching to Valganest, and see how they were received, whilst Cecile, her husband and child are sojourning with their protector, to whom she shall presently refer.

It cannot be forgotten that the occasion of the tumultuous excitement of the populace of Brasseuse against the inhabitants of the castle, and Antoine in particular, arose from their identifying the dwarf as the purchaser of the wood-man's hut. They were determined on sacking the house, should he not be delivered up to them.

As for the brothers, notwithstanding the consternation they felt on discovering the abstraction of the important coffer and the substitution of the menacing letter—the imminence of the emergency restored their courage and presence of mind.

The angry mob were close at hand. They were to be seen, from the windows, fiercely gesticulating. These men must not be irritated by opposition, they must be courteously received, imposed on by apparent frankness, and the absence of all appearance of apprehension. This course alone would give any chance of allaying suspicion and avoiding a search.

Had it not been for the dread that the chest of mystery might still be in the castle, and that the cover might be raised, to seek the missing Antoine in its dark recess, and reveal the skeleton remains of another instead of the living object of their search—the haughty lords of Valganest would doubtless have dared and defied scrutiny.

Acting on this wise impulse, they gave di-

rections for the gates to be thrown open to the turbulent visitors.

The three brothers then met the intruders and blandly inquired what was desired.

The people were unprepared with a reply suited to the unexpected suavity and unconcern of the brothers. The reasons they assigned for the absence of Antoine passed as valid, and one by one all their prejudices and convictions vanished for the time. The doors having been opened without demur, had dispelled a portion of the anger of the crowd, who deputed a small portion of their number to enter; the rest remain outside, and after the conference—they all slunk away stammering excuses, embarrassed and ashamed of their temerity and audacity.

Three weeks passed away, during which no further manifestations of ill feeling had been evinced towards the masters of Valganest—and Antoine had not yet returned home. It was not to be imagined that he was inactive, but of what he was about, his brothers were ignorant, and were anxious about his fate, dreading also the disgrace to the noble name of Labourdilliere, should it come out on the trial of Clodomir, the incendiary, who had been arrested, that Antoine was one of the principal leaders of the atrocious band.

The three weeks during which the trial lasted, were an age of torture, and to secure correct and speedy information they sent Bartholomew (the day after the rising of the mob) to Pont St. Maxence—where Clodomir was at first confined in prison—from which place he followed the prisoner when removed to Beauvais. Thence he daily despatched notice of the incidents of the trial and proceedings the court of assize.

To the great relief of the aristocrat brothers, they found that Clodomir had courageously allowed himself to be sentenced to death without betraying Antoine.

According to the provincial custom, in France, eight o'clock was the family supper-hour amongst the country-aristocracy, and this was the most important and most social meal. One evening whilst partaking of this repast, unannounced, and unlooked for, Antoine presented himself.

At the sudden appearance of the delinquent, the brothers arose from the table, but instead of returning his cordial greeting, their indignant looks and gestures showed that he was by no means welcome.

'Devilish strange this, gentlemen,' he grumbled forth, 'a short absence it seems is enough to elicit a singular reception. However, whilst you are explaining the meaning of your conduct you will excuse my eating my supper for I am deucedly hungry after a lengthy ride.'

Thus saying, the dwarf went to work in earnest.

The cool effrontery of the incendiary somewhat calmed the indignation of his brothers, and in whispered consultation it was remarked by one of them—

'The more culpable he really is, the more cautious should we be not to arouse the attention of justice. To drive him away would be to attract notice and to compromise ourselves.'

This timely reflection caused them to resume their places, and silently the repast was concluded. Not till then did Antoine speak, when he remarked with perfect sangfroid—

'I think I can guess what has put you in such a bad humor, doubtless you have heard evil reports about me!'

'Dreadful, indeed!' responded Honore.

'Bah! What may they be?'

'We know you to be a wretched incendiary,' said James with a frowning aspect and gloomy voice.

Antoine, not in the least confounded, made answer:—

'As to a wretch, that I am not—but an incendiary, certainly I am; that is a fact. It is fortunate that some one has relieved me of the unpleasantness of making the circumstance known to you.'

'It is then absolutely true that you are thus guilty?'

'I have admitted it.'

'Then we ought to give you up to the law, and let you meet the fate you merit—you who have shielded yourself under the name of Matthien,' said William fiercely.

'Ah! you know me by that name also. Well that proves to you that I have respected the name and honor of the family!' retorted the dwarf.

'You vile wretch!' exclaimed James, clenching his hand and frowning darkly.

Antoine, still composed and unmoved, continued, with bitter sarcasm, '*Pardieu!* I find you suddenly very squeamish, gentlemen, and it appears to me that you are unreasonably so. Let us examine fairly, my very

scrupulous brothers, and I think we shall be obliged to admit, that none of us have a right to upbraid one another as vile, seeing there is so slight a difference between us.—If I indeed am an incendiary, are not all of us *Parricides?*'

It required all the hardihood of the wretch to make this allusion to the common crime which weighed heavily on his less deformed brothers, sleeping or waking. All three of them looked down self-condemned, and as they remained silent, Antoine continued:—

'Never mind; I wish to act the part of a good brother, at all events, and you will remember that it is for our common interest to be united and true to each other. Though I confess I am doubly guilty, yet if we should be called to account by the law, I am no more compromised than you, since I have only one life to lose, and death would as surely be your portion as mine. As it is evidently best for us to draw still closer, if possible, the bonds of fraternity, let us drink together in token of this amicable resolution.'

To this speech the brothers made no reply, no friendly advance.

'I see,' remarked the dwarf, 'that you view me in a wrong light. You entertain the same opinion as those whose dwellings etc., have been destroyed by mysterious agency. You think, I suppose, that these multitudinous disasters are the work of mere thievish villains for the paltry sake of plunder! How blind are ye! The object of these conflagrations that extend over the whole of France, is a great political one. We shall save the monarchy!'

The brothers partly incredulous, yet interested by this dawn of confidence, drew nearer, and Antoine continued:—

'Yes; in spite of itself we will sustain and protect the throne, which feels not that it is tottering, but which we see daily is failing fast. A fatal security is causing the crown to be insecure, the populace must be excited, despair must urge them to the utterance of clamorous cries of rebellion—then the parties of the restoration will muster their forces, and perceiving their inefficiency to hold in check the mutinous people who desire its fall, will call to their aid those who established it in the first place. The brothers of the mongrel *Regeine* under which we live, will disappear before the will and might of the allied sovereigns, who this time, and for a

permanence, will give us monarchy free from all mixture with revolutionary elements.'

'And is it for the accomplishment of this great work that bandits, such as Clodomir, have devoted themselves?'

'No indeed, only five men in France know the true meaning of what is doing and the high object at which we aim. I am one of these five! As for the instruments we employ, weak or wretched, they obey the promptings of revenge or repine. If taken, so be it. We can find others to replace the victims of the guillotine.'

As Antoine gave this explanation, the three brothers passed from horror of the crime to respect for the motive that scattered disaster and destruction over France.

'Now,' continued the dwarf, who suddenly appeared so great in their eyes as one of the secret but mighty prime movers of a great political party—'Now I have only to speak of myself. You have not questioned me as to the cause of my absence.'

'That is what I was just about to do,' said William.

Antoine deliberately emptied his glass and gave a long narration of his late proceedings, the brief summary of which we shall present to our reader.

The dwarf having witnessed the capture of Clodomir, to avoid risk to himself in case of betrayal, had retreated to the cellars of Haut Mantel, where he had been securely concealed, and had prepared a fresh plot to gratify his party against the game-keeper of Brasseuse—which he assured his brothers, to their great alarm, he was pretty certain would ensure his destruction by means of the law.

Antoine also stated that he had greatly bettered their fortune whilst thus in hiding, in proof of which he produced the identical sum, two hundred thousand francs, once proffered by major Seignerolles, and rejected by the old Marquis, as also subsequently by themselves.

To their eager queries as to how and where he discovered the treasure, he told them that having ventured to light a fire, one cold night on the hearth of the kitchen, of some old room handles etc., when being at a loss to keep it up—he took hold of an old-fashioned chair and broke it up to burn. From a cavity in the back of this antiquated piece of furniture the roll of bills fell out,

which he now handed over for general use.

In their delight at this seasonable increase of funds the brothers forgot their alarm about Pierre, but wondered how Antoine had silenced Clodomir.

'Tell us quickly what you have done, and then we will explain much that concerns you,' said William.

'Well, then, as Clodomir knew that I was the so-called Mr. Matthien, from whom this division of the band received orders, I had fears that he might compromise me at the trial. I therefore repaired regularly at night to the place of rendezvous in the forest, and at last I found a billet in the hollow elm, our place of deposit, in which he promised to maintain strict silence regarding me, provided that I would pay one thousand francs to a certain woman named Hortense Malsaigne, whom he had formerly loved, but had forsaken, and whom he now wished to secure from indignance.

'The abode of this person he designated: it was in Paris. I agreed to the terms, and went to the house indicated, where I saw Hortense. She is a beautiful, but thoroughly-debased, creature, and excessively vulgar, jealous, and revengeful. Having set her a-talking, I soon discovered this; and it was not long before we concluded a treaty, which will effectually rid you, Honore, of a rival; and all of us of an enemy much to be feared.'

'Alas! unhappy man!' said William, 'you have brought us all into danger.'

'How so?' inquired the dwarf.

They then told him of the coming of the mob to the castle—the visit to the closet—the disappearance of the chest. They put into his hands the written threat against them, should they ever again molest their brother, Pierre Aubin.

The paper fell from the hands of Antoine, and he muttered,—

'It is too late to stop! How unfortunate! The train is laid! We must abide the consequences!'

The bargain which Antoine made with Hortense Malsaigne was, that, in consideration of a certain large sum of money, she should prevail upon Clodomir to make a public confession that Pierre Aubin, the game-keeper of the forest of Brasseuse, was one of the incendiaries, and had been present with him, and assisting on several occasions.

In fact, that he was the very worst of them all.

The condemned man was to be beguiled into the belief that if he did this, repeating it on the scaffold, his pardon would most assuredly—through the interest of Mr. Mattien—be pronounced then and there, and he would be set free.

For the sake of revenge for former slights and insults, as well as in order to obtain the large bribe, the woman undertook the job, and completely succeeded. The poor victim believed, until an instant before the fatal knife descended and instantly terminated his mortal career, that the wicked falsehood he was uttering would preserve his life.

Thus perished Clodomir; and thus was the unfortunate game-keeper again stigmatized as a villain.

## CHAPTER XV

IMMEDIATELY after the execution of Clodomir, Bartholomew quitted Beauvais and returned to Valganest. He had ever felt a strong attachment for Francois, the principal parricide, and prompted by the pious wish to visit his remains, in the new family-vault, constructed over the fatal spot, on the very day of this old servant's return he went to the mournful building. Hardly had he entered its walls, than he uttered an exclamation of surprise and joy.

There was the missing chest by the side of the coffin of Francois de Labourdilliere.

Bartholomew, having previously learned from his young lords of the mysterious, and, as they supposed, the supernatural, disappearance of this important depositary of some weighty secret, hastened to communicate the discovery and remove their apprehensions regarding its fate.

When terror of ghostly interference vanished, the brothers were astonished at their former fears, and each tacitly explained the matter to his own satisfaction, on the supposition that one of the others had privately removed the chest, and deposited the paper in its place, hoping thus by fulfilling the most ardent wish of the departed to atone for acquiescence in the murder, and in a measure allay the pangs of remorse.

However, none of them gave utterance to these thoughts at the time; so they retained their consoling idea of security. No other

idea suggested itself, unless Bartholomew himself, whose mother had been the nurse of Etienne de Labourdilliere, had thus secretly given sepulture to the remains of his foster-brother and former master.

'Try to re-call to the memory of my sons, that Pierre Aubin is also a child of mine,' they had once overheard their father say to the old man; and this injunction now recurred to them.

Each of these unnatural sons preferred believing either of these solutions of the strange removal of the proofs of their guilt, to a return of their former impressions on the subject. But one thing was certain, the threatening paper had lost its power over their actions.

We have seen that they had, in their fright, prevailed upon Antoine to give anonymous notice to Pierre that he had better flee from a threatened prosecution in time, and conceal himself from the public indignation, now roused to an alarming pitch, in consequence of Clodomir's accusation on the scaffold.

This frustration of their well-laid plan to ruin the game-keeper, they now regretted, and released from superstitious fears, they once again gave reins to hatred.

Pierre had at last discovered from Decadi Robert the stigma attached to his absence, and felt the impossibility of clearing himself and keeping his promise—on no account to accense his legitimate brothers; and he grieved to see the puzzled state of his father-in-law's mind.

The kind old man did not in heart believe Pierre to be one of the guilty band; yet he could not dismiss a dread of the consequences which might spring from the circumstantial evidence which strongly condemned the unfortunate man.

Pierre was greatly shocked at the altered manner of all his neighbors whom he encountered on his way from Vilvert to Brasseuse, and still more so when at night they assembled around the house with cries of—

*'Death to the incendiary! Burn his house over his head, as he has burnt our homes!'*

Mr. Simeron, the magistrate of the district, and gendarmes, appearing, at this juncture, to investigate the rumors by Pierre's reported strange return, saved his life on that occasion, but not his home.

The game-keeper satisfied the worthy magistrate, that the evidence of the witnesses

against him was altogether faulty, contradictory and inconclusive. Some swore positively to his being present at fires at such time and place; whilst others as positively deposed, that he was at some other burning, far distant, on the same day and at the specified hour, which conflicting evidence it was impossible to reconcile to truth.

Although Pierre would not explain where he had been for the last two months, Mr. Simeson credited his assertion that he was bound to secrecy by an oath unconnected with the incendiaries or their wicked doings.

Poor Cecile believed the tale that was invented to pacify her shattered intellects—that the neighbors had assembled to celebrate Pierre's return.

Decadi seconded the magistrate's advice, to Pierre, to retire from Brasseuse for awhile to the asylum of his own residence, i. e. Mr. Simezon, for the sake of his wife and child, but relying on his innocence Pierre resolved to stay and face the calumny. When, however, at dusk, the house was fired, it was time to flee, and secretly, by the garden they escaped.

Quietly had they stayed in their friendly refuge during the trial of Clodomir, which of course Pierre could not suppose would effect as he had never seen the man. Neither was there any further notice taken of Pierre by the people of Brasseuse who were satisfied with having destroyed his dwelling and got rid of him.

During those three weeks the game-keeper was exempt from popular ignominy, but when the false accusation of Clodomir, in his last moments revived in full force the old belief that he was one of the miscreants, he felt that the magistrate's house would no longer afford him protection, nor could he hope to continue to be secreted by him.

The intelligence of this fresh irritation of the public mind against, *the victim of circumstances*, was brought by Decadi who had remained at Brasseuse, but hurried to warn Pierre of the anonymous advice (sent by the brothers) to escape, and of Clodomir's accusative confession.

Of course no one suspected that the criminal had been wrought on, by delusive hopes of pardon, to this perjury, therefore the disclosure was believed to be conscientious and true.

'I see that I must bend to the storm of

persecution, and out of proper consideration for the kind Mr. Simeron who has generously allowed me to take refuge here during his absence, I must go hence—but how can I remove Cecile who is still confined to bed with fever.'

'Do not grieve about that my poor fellow, I will manage it for you. Rely securely on me. If she cannot walk I will get a vehicle for her and the dear little Philliberte.'

Decadi, who thus spoke, would gladly have removed his cherished ones instantly from the impending danger, but he had to seek a horse and cart, and that so discreetly that no one should suspect he was going to help Pierre to elude justice.

'To-morrow night,' said the old soldier of Napoleon, 'I will be at the entrance of the wood with a good horse and cart, mattress, and some warm coverlids for the mother and her babe, so you need not fear that they will be any the worse for the journey. Meanwhile you must decide whither we are to go.'

Pierre replied that he would consider what was best to be done, though he had already decided whither to turn, but was not at liberty to mention his plan without permission.

Decadi Robert stayed not to await the awakening of his dear daughter Cecile, but started back again to Brasseuse to make preparations for their safety.

Pierre Aubin left Chamecy for the cottage of the old man who had rescued Cecile, to see if this asylum was still available.

The poor, demented wife besought him not to leave her, saying, she was sure she was able to walk.

Her terror at every absence, of even an hour's duration, was so excessive that her husband did not notice at the time that she seemed to have a prophetic presentiment of impending peril.

He thought it was only her usual nervous anxiety, and soothing her with assurance of a speedy return, he set out, alone, for Vilvert.

Alas! during that fatal absence, a visitor had been at Chamecy. The luckless game-keeper returned, entered the house, and in a few moments rushed forth from it like a madman, and uttering fearful cries of woe and vengeance.

When Decadi came at the appointed hour to remove the whole party, he found *only*



the unhappy Cécile, who was writhing in despair on her sick bed.

At Gazeran Castle there has been a wedding, Regina has this day given her hand to Honore de Labourdilliere. They had become reconciled and had publicly solemnized a marriage, although each knew that love was wanting; and they had entered into an agreement mutually never to upbraid each other in private, and before the public always to preserve the semblance of conjugal esteem and affection.

Splendid had been the feast from which the numerous guests had arisen to proceed to the ball-room where the nobility and gentry of the neighborhood, and others, were assembling fast and thick, for the joyous dance.

Truly it was a princely sight, a noble entertainment!

Presently the orchestra struck up the most enlivening sounds, the dancers took their places, and the bride opened the ball. From a recess in one corner, Antoine, the deformed and malevolent, cast envious glances on the newly married couple.

The hilarity and excitement had reached its highest pitch, when all at once, in the midst of the intoxicating ebullitions of pleasure a man—who certainly is not one of the invited—presents himself in the ball-room.

This person's dress is soiled and dusty, his features are distorted, he is pale and out of breath. With a bound he had sprung through the outer entrance, and rushed violently past every one until he arrived at the saloon, and interrupted the dancing by wildly demanding to see the Lady of the castle.

Fear seized on the astonished company.—They regard the intruder with curiosity, emotion and even with sympathy, as they perceive the tears rolling down his cheeks and his knees knocking together. In his trembling hands he holds something wrapped up in a sheet.

Every one expects some dismal disclosure. All eyes are turned on Regina as she advances towards the man, who is calling for her with the authority derived from grief and desperation.

As soon as Pierre Aubin, for he it was, perceived Regina, he darted angrily forward to meet her. Casting a look on the lady, that rooted her to the spot, he opened the sheet

and held up to her view—a dead infant. *It was Philberte!*

'Behold your work, madam,' said he to the bride, with a hoarse, deep voice. 'It is you who have killed my child!'

Having said this, the bereaved father covered the inanimate corpse with kisses and tears.

Regina uttered a cry of horror, and with her hand pushed away the dead little one presented to her; then, as she staggered backwards, she stammered—

'The man is mad—turn him out!'

The spectators of this mournfully interesting scene were petrified with astonishment. A dead silence prevailed as they contemplated the unhappy parent and the strangely-accused bride.

The three brothers alone looked elsewhere. Their angry regards were simultaneously turned upon Antoine. Before the mute appeal, the dwarf was confused, pale, and guilty-looking.

As for the assemblage of the lofty and high-born, it may well be supposed that they, being ignorant of the love on one side and aversion on the other, were unable to conceive any grounds of accusation.

Pierre Aubin, the game-keeper, seemed by his social position so far removed from the beautiful and aristocratic bride, that no acquaintance or cause of hatred could be imagined to actuate her to such a crime.

The actual belief that the noble lady's pride and self-respect would necessarily have kept her aloof from any familiarity with a man in his station, made them accept the few words that had escaped her as the true explanation of the melancholy and incredible assertion of her guilt.

'He is mad!' she had said, in reply to the grave charge of murder; and many believed this to be the case.

However, in the opinion of some of the company, Regina appeared more surprised than indignant. She had denied the charge, but not with the energy of voice and look that might have been expected from an innocent person; whilst the tone and manner of her accuser had the unfaltering impress of truth and confidence.

Opinions were divided how to treat the author of this dreadfully scandalous interruption to the marriage festival. The greater number of the guests were for turning Pierre

out; but one imposing minority said,—

'Let us hear him first!'

The bridegroom and his brothers seeing that the sensation was becoming somewhat favorable to Pierre, came forward to make an end to the painful scene, by directing the servants to put him out as carefully as might be, and to treat him gently, as one whom great sorrow had driven out of his senses.

These apparently kind and considerate orders were given because they feared that any display of roughness or needless severity towards the afflicted parent would increase sympathy for him. The menials obeyed; but when removed from the observation of the guests, they brutally ill-treated the intruder, and, despite his resistance, forcibly ejected him.

At the gate of the castle, as they were ignominiously expelling Pierre, the hard-hearted set were confronted with Mr. Simeron, the magistrate, who had furnished the game-keeper a retreat in his own house at Chamecy, and old Decadi, who flung his arms around the neck of the ill-fated son-in-law, and took the now lifeless pet of his old age from its father's arms and pressed it to his own heart.

This time, Mr. Simeron—who was accompanied by an efficient number of the myrmidons of the law—was not, as formerly, amiably disposed towards Pierre Aubin, for he no longer believed him innocent.

The persecuted game-keeper soon discovered that the opinions of his hitherto staunch friend was changed, for he addressed him as a wretch and deceiver, saying, sternly and solemnly,—

'Pierre Aubin, you have imposed on me once by your protestations of innocence.—You managed to draw unmerited compassion on yourself; but Providence does not long permit falsehood to triumph. It has ordained that one of your accomplices should atone your crime before expiating his own upon the scaffold. In short, when to-day I went to Chamecy to arrest you, it was Providence directed my steps here. The judgment which you hoped to elude, has overtaken you. You need not expect to escape from just punishment.'

The brothers, who had followed to see what became of the game-keeper, and prevent his holding conversation with any one about the castle, witnessed his arrest, and were overjoyed at this turn of the affair which

seemed to promise all that they could desire.

'I ask no confession or denial from your lips,' pursued the incensed magistrate.

'We know, beyond a doubt, that you were one of the guilty parties who set fire to Fleurines. You were discovered, also, concealing yourself in the village. This was on the sixth day of November last; and has been duly deposed on the oath of a man on the point of death—the wretched Clodomir!'

Pierre heard the words of Mr. Simeron without seeming to heed or understand them, his mind was pre-occupied, his heart was oppressed and accessible only to the idea of his heavy loss; and in the delirium of despair and anguish, he exclaimed,—

'My daughter! my daughter! They have killed my sweet little Philberte!—Oh, I cannot be deceived! It is she! It is that wicked woman who has murdered my darling child!' Then addressing the magistrate, he continued,—

'Mr. Simeron, you said truly, just now, that Providence sent you here. My daughter has been murdered. I demand justice!'

Thus saying, he pointed to Decadi, who still held the cold remains of the hapless Philberte, which he was tearfully embracing.

The magistrate, touched with pity, replied,—

'I respect your grief, Pierre, but I cannot admit your accusation, because Cécile, your wife, informed me that her child was alive when she fell asleep with it beside her—that when she awoke, there it was, but dead!—and yet no one had been in the room. It must then, of course, have been stifled whilst she slept.'

'But look!' said Pierre, pointing to the neck of his little one; 'see! an assassin has strangled the babe. Cécile had not her right senses, it is true; but Cécile never could destroy her own, her beloved child.'

'Whom, then, do you suspect?' asked Mr. Simeron, compassionately.

'Who? Her who has threatened to visit her persecution of me on those whom I love. I have already named the guilty one before a crowded assembly, and I would repeat it in the face of the universe, were it possible for every one to hear me. It was to accuse my enemy, sir, and not to escape from justice, that I came here. I repeat it, it is a woman who has stifled my child. I have already declared her name before them all in there, and

I was not believed; but *you* will credit me, *you* will avenge my cruel wrongs, notwithstanding that the culprit bears a noble name, although she is mistress of this castle—the beautiful and high-born *Regina de Gazeran*!’

‘Impossible!’ said the astonished magistrate.

Honore now stepped forward, and tried hard to make it appear that Pierre must be mad to suppose that his bride had done such a deed; and he stated that it was because they felt so certain that this was the case, that they had out of compassion and generosity, taken no notice of his absurd accusation, except by turning him out of the castle.

‘Do not believe him!’ vehemently exclaimed the indignant game-keeper; ‘I am not mad. Unhappily I speak the dreadful truth. I say my child is killed!—behold her dead body. I say, the Lady of Gazeran is the author of the murder—that is, if she did it not herself, she must have caused it to be done.’

‘I assert this positively, because I most firmly believe it; and assuredly I have good grounds for belief. Is it not she who has driven my poor Cecile crazy? Was it not by her orders that a rifle-ball nearly deprived my bride of life, on our wedding night?—What hand but her’s directed the murderous aim? From whence came the gold which paid this attempt at the assassination of a young and innocent creature? *From her purse!*’

Cecile has lost her senses. See still the work of the implacable Regina de Gazeran. Philiberte, the darling of my soul, is no longer in existence, because Regina de Gazeran willed her death!

‘I shall prove what I say, Mr. Simeron.—So many crimes must surely draw down vengeance on her guilty head.’

‘Justice shall be done to every one,’ was the emphatic reply of the magistrate, who, nevertheless, placed no faith in the shocking imputations against the lady.

‘Thanks, kind sir. After this promise, I am content to be taken wherever you please. You may accuse me, condemn me, or any thing. Provided the death of my child is avenged by the arm of justice, I ask no more. But stay; before being taken hence, I would fain, in your presence, be led before her whom I accuse. I will reproach her with her crime, and we shall see whether she will

dare treat me as a madman, having you for a judge between us.’

‘This melancholy affair will take its regular turn when the proper time arrives. If then it is deemed right to have the investigation you demand, it will take place. Meanwhile, you must be taken into custody, to render an account to society for the crimes of which you, yourself, are accused.’

‘Ah! yes; I remember! They pretend that I am one of the incendiaries; and you, Mr. Simeron, have come, at last, to credit the abominable calumny? Would to God that I might speak!—that I were permitted to tell all that has befallen me!’

‘And who hinders you?’ asked the magistrate. ‘Both law and conscience make it a sacred obligation to disclose the truth. But would it not be the truth to confess yourself guilty, and to say that you are overwhelmed by the accusation of your accomplice, Clodomir?’

‘Clodomir? Who is he, sir? I assure you I never heard of him until you mentioned the name!’ said Pierre.

The truth was, that the trial at Beauvais and its results, had not reached the ears of the game-keeper in his seclusion at Chamecy, and Decadi, when warning him to escape, had, in his hurry, said nothing about Clodomir.

‘You inquire who Clodomir is?’ rejoined the magistrate. ‘Well, he is the man with whom you went to Fleurines on the sixth day of November.’

‘The sixth of November?’ repeated Pierre eagerly. ‘I could not have been at Fleurines on that day. This I can prove.’

‘How?—by what means?’

‘Let me be confronted with Madame de Gazeran!—and she shall acknowledge that I was *here*—a prisoner in this very castle at that identical time!’

‘I must remark, that what you assert is highly improbable.’

‘Nevertheless, it is the truth. I accuse no one. I am not breaking my oath!’ said Pierre, looking significantly at the legitimate sons of his father. ‘I will not tell how or by whom I was brought to Gazeran; but I may declare that I was here, in confinement, at that date; and I invoke the testimony of *Madame de Labourdilliere*, since it seems that now is the name of the Lady of Gazeran. I beseech you to consult her, Mr. Simeron. I

expect she will not deny the fact.’

‘We shall see,’ replied the magistrate, who thought that Pierre had become completely crazy by the murder of his child, and therefore spoke compassionately to him.—Then apologizing to the brothers for having disturbed them by the arrest, prepared to go away.

The brothers, seeing they were about to have Pierre Aubin removed out of their way, and firmly entangled in the meshes of the law, expressed hypocritical pity for the *poor deluded man*; and Antoine, eager to account for the murder, ventured to say,—

‘The poor devil who accuses everybody, has, perhaps, in a fit of insane frenzy, himself been the death of the little innocent whose fate he now so pathetically bemoans.’

‘Horrid wretch! Dare you say that I could kill my own sweet Philiberte?’ shouted Pierre, trembling with rage, and with a violent effort escaping from his guards, and rushing towards the villainous dwarf.

At this instant, Regina, uneasy at the long conference with the delegates of justice, appeared, bedecked in bridal attire.

#### CHAPTER XVI.

It must be granted, that the victim of so much persecution, the unfortunate game-keeper, judging from the past, might well believe Regina capable of any act of violence and cruelty; yet in the present instance he wronged her.

This crime was committed by Antoine, although it was not premeditated on his part. His only object was to delay Pierre one day longer at Chamecy, in order to secure his arrest.

The discovery of the chest in the pavilion—sepulchre having, as already noticed, removed the superstitious dread of the denunciation of the paper found in the closet, renewed the hostile feelings of the brothers against Pierre, whose death they now again desired.

Antoine, who doubly hated the game-keeper as the beloved of Regina, was even more desirous than Honore that this man should perish on the scaffold as an incendiary, he therefore determined to destroy the effect of the warning that had been sent to Pierre to escape, by stealing the child and thus detaining the father in the neighborhood.

It will now be understood who was the

visiter during the fatal absence of Pierre.

The kidnapper possessed himself of the unconscious little one without difficulty, the father being away and the mother having fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion.

The villain had quitted the house, and was passing along the garden hedge, which was high enough to screen him from the sight of the gardener who was at work, when the hapless infant, frightened at the stranger’s ill-looks, began to scream.

The gardener raised his head at the sound, and Antoine heard his heavy steps approaching. He stepped back, and hid behind a wall, then, to still the cries of the child, he sat down on the ground and laid her across his knees. With one hand he rudely grasped its tender throat, and, with the other, he pressed heavily on its little mouth.

The child became silent, for it had ceased to live!

On discovering this, the assassin would preferred leaving the body on the spot, but he feared detection. Therefore, hiding it under his cloak, he returned to the house, and laid it by the side of the still sleeping Cecile.

It was a bold step to venture back with the inanimate babe, but Antoine was adventurous in crime, and had faith that his evil genius would not desert him. Indeed, every thing seemed to be favorable to the success of his wickedness: the lengthened sleep of the poor mother—the solitude of the place—the absence of Pierre. So, with a light heart, this inhuman wretch quitted the spot where he had wrought this fresh evil on the devoted game-keeper.

‘Pierre will be taken to prison to-morrow,’ said he to himself, ‘for he will stay here to console his wife, and his destruction is secured.’

It had been settled that Antoine should repair to Gazeran, after his secret mission—the unexpected result of which we have just narrated—without returning to Valganest: for the wedding which had been deemed expedient, was to take place on the same day on which they hoped the law would entrap the detested son of their murdered parent.

This will account for the surprise of the three brothers in the ball room, for all that the dwarf had said when he joined the bridal party was,—

‘All is satisfactorily arranged. The game-

keeper will cause you no more heart-burning, Honore!

We will now revert to what was passing, at the castle-gate, where we left off at the end of the last chapter.

The gendarmes were about to lead their prisoner away, when Regina appeared on the threshold.

On seeing his enemy, Pierre struggled hard to free himself, begging to be allowed to remain a few minutes to speak to her, to which the magistrate reluctantly consented, and Pierre cried out boldly,—

Madam, I am accused of having set fire to Fleurines on the sixth day of November last. I conjure you to speak the truth. Say, was I not, on that day, in this very castle?—Tell also, I pray you, at what date I quitted it.

This unexpected question at first confused Regina, but, being re-assured by the presence of her brothers, she replied,—

What means the man? I do not even know him!

Then you refuse to exculpate me, when my character and life are at stake, and a word of truth from you would save me. I ought to have expected this from you. Go on, madam; I shall be able to prove it without your concurrence.

Growing animated as he continued to speak, and exasperated beyond measure, Pierre said to the magistrate,—

You ought to be informed, sir, that the lady who will not speak at my request, and pretends not to know me, has, nevertheless, written to me—yes, familiarly, too! One day, whilst I was detained here in a dungeon, on the occasion of her going to some festival when she was to be absent for a day or two, the Lady of Gazeran condescended to write me a note in which she named the conditions on which she would release me, for I was her prisoner. By providential good luck, it happens that this letter was dated *sixth of November*, an important date indeed to me, since it appears to be that of the conflagration of Fleurines. Will you say this, also, is false, Madam?

The lady was powerfully affected, but her cousins surrounded her, and begged Mr. Simeron to excuse an emotion compatible with perfect innocence suddenly assailed by such scandalous imputations.

Regina, restored to composure by the

words of her husband and his brothers, took courage, and again assured Mr. Simeron that the man must be mad. Then casting a contemptuous glance on Pierre, said it was time for her to re-join the company in the ball-room.

Humbled, scorned, and disbelieved by everybody, Pierre, foaming with rage and goaded by despair, exclaimed,—

Wo betide my wicked persecutors! This letter which the *cidevant* Regina de Gazeran pretends not to have written—this letter—

Well, that letter? interrupted the law-officer, who began to suspect that all the prisoner was raving about could not be wholly imaginary—that letter, if such as you describe, would clear you, I grant; but perhaps you will tell us it has been destroyed.

No, sir; no such thing. It still exists.

Does it?

Yes; I am sure of it.

Why not produce it, then? or do you mean to say you do not know where it is?

There, fortunately, you are mistaken, Mr. Simeron. I can tell where it may be found, because I hid it myself in the ground, in a corner to the right of the door in my dungeon, in the second dungeon to which I was transferred. I put it there for safety, intending to carry it away with me if ever I should leave the castle alive. But my flight was so sudden, and attended with such incidents, that, when leaving my terrible prison, I did not think of the letter—I only thought of preserving my life and regaining liberty.

The *Messieurs* de Labourdilliere had not followed the bride, wishing to see their enemy fairly in custody and removed from the premises; and on hearing Pierre's assertions they looked at each other in consternation.

The worthy and humane magistrate, busied with turning over in his mind the strange charges of the game-keeper, did not observe their troubled mien, as he replied to the prisoner,—

Admitting that what you say is true, my poor fellow, it seems very unlikely you should leave so important a paper behind you, in a castle where, according to your account, you were imprisoned.

It would appear quite natural, sir, if I might tell under what circumstances I escaped from my dungeon; but I must not, I ought not, I cannot reveal.

Mr. Simeron, not knowing what to think

of such contradictory statements, turned to Honore, and inquired, saying,—

What am I to make of this?

Truly, this is a pretty question to address to me, sir! was the bridegroom's sarcastic reply. What must you believe respecting the accusation against my wife? Has not every bad action some powerful motive or interest to instigate its commission? Now what motive or reason could the lofty Regina de Gazeran have had for persecuting Pierre Aubin, the game-keeper?

Besides, added William, if the shadow of a doubt could exist, our sister-in-law will doubtless consider it her duty to throw open the interior of the castle to the examination of the officers of justice.

The magistrate being satisfied, was about to withdraw, when Pierre again earnestly implored him to make instant search.

Oh, sir, if you go not at once and seize upon this precious letter, it will have disappeared ere to-morrow, and I shall be ruined. I demand, in justice, to be taken at once to the subterranean dungeons of this castle. I will show you the letter where I have told you I buried it.

The subterranean dungeons! thoughtfully repeated Mr. Simeron, aloud. How comes he to know that there are any such here?

Parbleu! sneered Antoine; there is nothing strange about that, seeing Pierre is, as it were, one of the household of Gazeran—he was game-keeper when the old lord was alive.

Yes, added James; he had every opportunity, as a domestic of the late lord, to become, in the execution of his master's orders, thoroughly acquainted with the secret places of the castle.

Ah!—indeed! Then how happened it that Madame de Labourdilliere disclaimed all knowledge of the man?

Sir, do you mean to cross-question us? said William, haughtily.

Certainly; it is my right and my duty to do so, was the firm rejoinder of the magistrate.

It is very plain, that, in your official capacity, you are not used to dealing with honorable men, said James, in a loud voice.

Silence; you will spoil all, whispered Honore.

Gentlemen, continued Mr. Simeron, the

unseemly tone of your remarks, and your very improper manner of treating me, have induced an alteration of my views and intentions. The search which Pierre Aubin has demanded, shall take place immediately. I will superintend it myself.

As you please, said William, a little sobered by this menace; we will accompany you as guides, if you choose.

I accept your offer.

You will permit me to assist your investigation? said Pierre, whose countenance was radiant with joyful hope.

Certainly; you shall go with us to indicate the spot.

Torches were instantly brought, and whilst Regina, all impatience and anxiety was compelling herself to act the apparently unconcerned part of amiable hostess with the bridal party, the bridegroom and the game-keeper, with the officers of justice, were descending deep below the festive-halls, into the gloomy vaults, before entering which Honore had contrived to send word of what was transpiring to his anxious bride.

On learning that a search was actually taking place for the criminating letter, Regina had difficulty from fainting, in earnest; but curious eyes were watching every change of countenance, and she succeeded, by a violent effort, in repressing her feelings. She looked calmly and even smilingly around her.

For an hour this frightful uncertainty lasted. It was, indeed, a long period of agony and restraint!

At the end of that time the four brothers returned to the ball-room, and by their looks it was evident that the paper had not been found. On approaching her, Honore whispered,—

Pierre could not discover the entrance to the cell.

How fortunate! exclaimed Regina; and she breathed audibly, as though her chest had been freed from a heavy weight.

Honore frowned, and said, inquiringly,—

Then there is such a letter?

Yes, too truly! gasped Regina.

Imprudent woman, why write?

Absent in person, I must confess I wished to be present to his thoughts.

You love him greatly, then, madam?

That is a fact which I never disguised from you, sir. You were aware of it when I first accepted your hand. You know it be-

yond all doubt when, a week ago, you came again to solicit my promised hand, in Paris. Remember what passed then, and our mutual vows not to reproach each other with bygones. You had your motives of self-interest, etc., and I—

Regina, I am not reproaching you—what you say is strictly true—but this proof must be destroyed.

Yes, undoubtedly so; and presently, when they leave me alone in my own chamber, I will go myself, alone, and bring away the letter.

Regina, I will only stipulate that you give it to me. I would fain destroy the vexatious document myself.

*It shall be so!* the lady replied.

This conversation was held in a tone so low that no one could overhear it; but the jealous dwarf divined from their looks, and by watching the movement of the speakers' lips, the project for recovering the letter.

A strange and ferocious light shone in the dark eyes of the wicked Antoine, and a bitter smile wreathed his cynical lips—he, too, formed a sudden plan, and slyly he slipped from the assembly as the guests were preparing to depart.

Whilst bent on putting his horrible design into execution, Antoine was making a circuit of the castle-walls, minutely searching for a particular spot—Pierre Aubin was being borne away, under a strong escort, to prison. He had been unable to find the passage that led to the entrance of his last dungeon—the secret asylum of the former Lords of Gazeran—and as all hopes of obtaining the hidden letter was at an end, it appeared that no chance remained for proving his innocence.

Leaving the unfortunate game-keeper for the present, we must (imagining his despair and agony on the mournful journey,) proceed to narrate the object and the result of Antoine's project.

The vile and unhappy dwarf was consumed by the violence of two opposite passions—love and hatred. He detested the game-keeper; and nothing had lessened the love which for years he had cherished, in secret, for his cousin, Regina.

From the first moment when he dared admit to himself the fact of this passion, he had been sensible of the folly, the utter hopelessness of his adoration. He fully realised a sense of the invincible obstacles that separat-

ed him from the idol of his love—yet the feeling acquired, by degrees, the gigantic force that frequently is the result of secretly and intensely dwelling on one idea or passion until it makes head against every obstacle.

The passionate (unsuspected) lover was willing to cherish her image in his breast without giving utterance to his feelings. He would have been happy to have bestowed on Regina his soul's ardent worship, all unknown to her, had she never loved or married, as at one time he thought might be the case.

It would have satisfied this singular being, and been bliss enough to content his hopes in admiring and loving Regina—provided that she had been insensible to love. He was infatuated to such a degree that she should be like a marble divinity, insensible to the adoration of her numerous admirers—though living in an atmosphere of love and adoration, that she should bestow no sympathy or affection, in return, on mortal man.

This hope ceased when his divinity proved she was not cold and impervious as marble. Oh! what torture she had inflicted upon him by the smiles which she lavished on her admirers, and the encouragement she gave them since the death of her uncle! Moreover she had accepted Francois, without being in love,—and after his death she had just become the wife of Honore.

How dreadful, during that period, had been the feelings of the wretched dwarf! Every smile had cut him to the heart. Every kind word that Regina uttered wrought his evil passions to a species of delirium. He could contemplate the death of a rival without even the hope of taking his place. A rival to him was not an obstacle to his love, only an enemy the more, the life or death of whom could change nothing in the destiny of him who felt that his ardent imaginings were not ordained to become realities. Nevertheless he viewed a rival with abhorrence. Thus we might say that his hatred was in a measure disinterested although, ferocious, pitiless.

Such was the love of Antoine—jealous, without hope for himself, yet resolved that the object of his passion (unrequited and unknown) should die rather than belong to another.

It was in order to prevent the marriage of

Regina with Francois that he had made use of his power as a chief amongst the incendiaries, intending that the castle should have been fired—but the pavilion—and this at a late hour, when assistance would not have been at hand to stay the devouring flames—but his directions, as we have seen, had been misunderstood; the pavilion was consumed, and Francois perished in the ruins of it.

The object of Antoine in wishing the castle to be set on fire, was, that he might have an opportunity to bear Regina away from the flames in his arms. If saved, he would have a claim on her gratitude. If she perished even, that would be better than to let her live for another. It would be in his arms that she would die, and she could not prevent or repulse the caresses he might imprint on her lovely features—and he looked forward to a frightful death with frenzied delight instead of horror.

The anticipated catastrophe did not occur. Regina, it is true, became free once more—but the weight of a brother's death, fruitlessly brought about, was added to his load of sin.

Without affection had Regina consented to marry him who had thus suddenly been called out of this world, and still without love, she had just espoused another. Thus was removed the struggle in the fiery breast of the only one of the *aristocrat brothers*, who really loved the lady.

Bad as these considerations were to be borne, the suffering they occasioned was light compared to that proceeding from the certainty of Regina's love for the game-keeper of the forest of Brassense, and bitter was Antoine's hatred in consequence of it.

The errand on which this malignant man was now bound, has not fire and certain death for its object—yet it is an appalling one. He has satisfied himself that Regina will repair to the cell from which Pierre escaped, by the hole which he had burrowed with his hands, to gain possession of the important love-letter, and although he gnashed his teeth with fury to think that she should waste a love (so prized by him) on one who was insensible to and scorned it—yet he hated not Pierre the less, for being so indifferent.

To the wild and wicked imagination of the dwarf, this visit of the bride, to the loathsome dungeon, appeared an opportunity,

such as he could never again have, of obtaining a hold over Regina—and he determined to profit by it.

Could he reach the prison before Regina, and seize the letter, then on her acquiescence would depend its restoration to herself—her very life perhaps—and also the honor of the family. For in his blind passion he resolved that, should she prove invincible to prayers and threats, either from repugnance to him personally, or from regard to her new position, or any other cause—he would himself place in the magistrate's hand the document which would completely blast her reputation and clear Pierre Aubin.

Having great faith in the power he should acquire by means of the letter, Antoine did not reflect that the proposed alternative, whilst punishing the woman whom he loved better than life itself, would exonerate and save the man he mortally execrated. O, trusting that this extremity would not arise, he thought only of discovering the outlet to the dungeon made by Pierre.

The attempt to enter the cell, he felt must be made from the outside, for if the game-keeper, having so strong an interest in the matter, could not find the moveable entrance to the corridor, how should he succeed? Besides, should he ever make it out, and reach the door of the inmost-cell, he had not the key of it—therefore the attempt must be made from without.

At last, after rigid scrutiny, he found the large flag-stone which he sought. The same that had resisted his efforts from underneath, but now he had room to work, and he vigorously applied himself to the removal of this impediment. The great weight of it was such, that in spite of his incredible exertions, he could not stir the obstacle that barred his entrance.

Antoine wiped the profuse perspiration from his reeking brow, and looked about for something to assist his efforts. Suddenly he remembered Archimedes and the lever! He had found what he wanted.

A strong pole from an arbor in the pleasure grounds close by, furnished the extra power which his arm lacked; the stone was displaced sufficiently to permit him to insinuate his body into the narrow conduit.

The dwarf soon found, to his dismay, that this passage was not so easy to penetrate as when he had passed through it in pursuit of



the fugitive prisoner.

Either the natural caving in of the earth had narrowed the way, or it had been obstructed on purpose. However he had entered with his hands extended before him, and his head bent forward, he pushed his way onward, hoping that the tunnel would be larger as he progressed. But oh horror!

A little further on it was completely choked up.

The dreadful thought assailed him, and terrifying it was, that possibly the cavity was closed up, *intentionally*, from within the dungeon! If this were the case what would become of him? Retreat was next to impossible, for the ascent was steep and sudden; also the deformities and the corporal weakness of Antoine would be dreadful, if not insurmountable, hindrances to his extricating himself from this perilous pass by *receding*.

The dwarf therefore tried hard to advance—but his efforts only weakened him, and proved the strength of the obstructions above and in front of him.

The blood began to mount to his temples. The air became rarified around him. The earth and gravel falling down, as it was disturbed by the motion of his feet, rolled after him towards the inner end of the passage, blocking up the rear; and his mouth filled with foam. He bit the stones that wounded his face—and gave himself up for lost!

Here, here he was to die! To die in the grave which was momentarily closing tighter and tighter on him!

It was impossible to call for help. Impossible was it for him even to hudge at all. He felt that he was being thoroughly wedged in the smallest possible compass. The fallen rubbish from beneath the dungeons had encompassed him, and was bearing heavily on his back and shoulders, and seemed to compress his very muscles. His feet only had any space at all wherein to move, but he dared not stir for fear of aggravating his frightful position.

The dwarf now felt convinced that he was about to perish of suffocation! His chest had no room to beat, he could scarcely respire. He felt as if he must soon explode like a bomb. The blood filled his eyes, useless as they were in the utter darkness, it rushed into his mouth, it burst forth from

his ears! The torture was horrible!

In his despair, at this crisis, Antoine made a convulsive motion with his feet, as he writhed in this sheath of earth and gravel—the agony he was enduring lent force to the kick—the stone which he had but partially displaced to allow his entrance to this horrible place—was knocked off the balance, and it fell in, sinking down and pressing hard against the miserable helpless man!

Surely now it is all over with the guilty Antoine!

Not so! By good-luck, or rather by, perhaps, the reverse, it happened that the fall of this stone which overwhelmed him and seemed to ensure destruction, was the means of providing escape.

The enormous weight of the stone urging the body of Antoine forward, as the passage inclined down-wards, and the jar produced by its fall setting in motion the rubbish that choked up the inner mouth of the excavation—the adventurous dwarf thus impelled onward, descending in to the cell, amid a shower of earth, dust and gravel!

Notwithstanding the perilous and agonising situation from which he had so miraculously escaped—though still trembling as he wiped the clammy death-sweat of horror from his brow—the determination of Antoine de Labourdilliere to carry out the purpose for which he had penetrated thus hazardingly to the late prison of Pierre, was not in the least shaken.

Having recovered a little by the faint air that entered the cell through the iron grating above the door, and recruited his strength by a few short minutes of rest, he flung himself on the stone floor and began eagerly to scratch in the corner that Pierre had indicated as the depositary of the important letter.

The search was not in vain! Presently he screamed with delight.

*'I have got it! Oh this precious letter. I have it now!'*

Overcome by the fatigue that he had undergone, the varied and intense emotions which had excited him, the moment of the accomplishment of this great object, was overpowering, and he sank back exhausted against the humid walls of the dungeon, clenching the paper with convulsive grasp!

Some little time after, as he was reviving, he heard light footsteps approaching the

door, and he muttered ferociously—

*'Here comes Regina! Her letter has cost me dear—but how much greater the price she will have to pay for it!'*

## CHAPTER XVII.

Whilst on the one hand Pierre Aubin, a prey to sorrow and despair, was being conducted by the *Gendarmerie*, to the prison at Senlis, and Antoine de Labourdilliere was fighting his way to the dungeon, as described in the last chapter, the ball-room in the castle of Gazeran had resumed its gaiety, the music resounded as before the embarrassing interruption, and the company assembled to celebrate the nuptials, returned with fresh vigor and animation to the festivities of the night.

Madame de Labourdilliere having been informed of the inability of the game-keeper to find the letter, and of his departure for a jail, recovered her self-possession, and by her flow of spirits, grace, urbanity and beauty, attracted the attention, and commanded the admiration of her numerous and distinguished guests.

Notwithstanding this appearance of ease and unconcern, Regina felt the time long until she was at liberty to retire.

At length the moment arrived when Regina could set about the important undertaking, on the success of which depended her dignity, her reputation, her honor!

With a lamp in one hand, and the keys she required in the other, this bold woman made her midnight-journey through the subterraneous intricacies which led to the vault in which was concealed the imprudent avowal of her guilty and scandalous passion. This tell tale paper she was about to recover, and it destroyed, nothing would be left to sustain the blighting imputations of Pierre.

Thus thought Regina, who knew not that to *recover*, it would be requisite to purchase it.

With a shudder of inward exultation she applied the key to the lock of the secret dungeon in which she had for so long a time immured her love. Still she hesitated an instant, before opening the door, to cast a look behing, in order to ascertain whether any one had followed her.

It was of Honore that Regina thought, and yet why should she dread *his espionage* or presence? Was he not informed

of the past? Had she not that evening, even, admitted her former love?

This was perfectly true, nevertheless, Regina did not wish the love-letter to fall into the hands of her husband. She intended to tell him in the first instance, that she had not been able to find it, and to reserve to herself the power of using it at a future period, according to circumstances—either to put an end to the persecution of Pierre by Honore—or in case the former, by fresh insults and humiliating disclosures, should drive her to extremities, to produce this galling epistle as a means of causing the death of the game-keeper through the invitation of her husband.

Being satisfied that she was alone in the corridor, Regina entered the cell and flew towards the spot where she expected to find the letter.

Instantly she recoiled with horror, shrieking involuntary!

Regina was not alone in the dungeon! On the ground lay a man in convulsions. His clothes were torn and covered with dirt. His lips were covered with foam, his eyes bloodshot, and almost starting out of their sockets. His contortions and apparent agony were fearful to look upon. The sounds which proceeded from his mouth were unintelligible, but expressive, in the greatest degree, of fear and rage combined.

What could this mean? Who could this man be?

Notwithstanding her own terror, Regina drew near, and holding the light in his face, she recognised, in this miserable object, Antoine de Labourdilliere!

The wretched creature appeared to know her also, but his agitation was too great to allow him to express what he was labouring to say; and the astounding spectacle deprived Regina, for a few moments, of the power of speech.

As soon as Antoine was able to make articulate sounds, he exclaimed over and over again, in rapid succession, and a vivid expression of horror—

*'The phantom, the phantom! It was he! He has stolen the letter from me! He, the phantom!'*

*'What! has any one been here?'* inquired Regina.

*'Yes, he has, the spirit!'*

*'The phantom, the phantom!'* was all that could be extracted from the raving dwarf.

All that the lady of Gazeran could make out from this incoherency was—that some strange event had very lately occurred in this remote and secret place, and that some mysterious personage had appeared to her brother-in-law. Without staying to puzzle herself about this strange matter, she hurried to the corner where the letter was said to have been. Plainly she saw that it had been but recently removed, the earth was fresh that had covered it, and appeared beyond doubt to have just been scratched out.

Yes, indeed, but a few minutes previous, Antoine had held it in his frenzied fingers, and exulted at the anticipation of his triumph over his coveted idol—and yet the paper had vanished, and he seemed a maniac.

How this had happened—what had taken place—who had carried off the missing letter on which so much depended—remained for the time an impenetrable mystery.

Regina, in this dilemma, was obliged to acquaint her husband immediately with a true statement of her adventure in the dungeon, and he, with his brothers, hurried down to remove the miserable dwarf, who was at once carefully escorted to Valganest.

For eight days and nights Antoine was in a raging fever, and completely delirious, raving incessantly about—'the letter' and 'the phantom'!

During the whole of this time, one or other of the brothers, kept vigilant watch and guard at his bedside. The disappearance of the letter was a constant source of uneasiness to them, for whilst it would establish the innocence of Pierre Aubin, it would, as we have seen, as effectually disgrace the lady who had become the wife of one of the aristocrat brothers, and of course the sister-in-law of the rest.

It was impossible for them, in the mean time, to obtain any clue as the person who had abstracted the letter, no light having been thrown on the subject by the dwarf who could only say—

'It was he!—It was the phantom! He took the letter!'

Having made these exclamations, the delirious wretch would, in his paroxysms, refer to the murder of their father, and the chest that was employed to conceal his remains.

These dreadful revelations were of too serious a nature to be allowed to reach other ears than their own, therefore the brothers

took the precaution not to allow any one else to enter the sick man's chamber under any pretence.

Once, and once only, had they departed from this rule. Honore had called in a doctor to see his brother!

Doctor Pascal was eminently successful in his profession, and was highly esteemed, throughout a large extent of country, by high and low, to whom he devoted his rare skill and care indiscriminately. Thus he was a favorite every where, and did not fail on all occasions, *save one*, to be well and cordially received wherever his valuable services were required.

The exception, to this universal welcome, occurred to Valganest, on the occasion of his calling to pay a second visit to Antoine.

James—who had giving his opinion, that it was better to allow the fever to take its course, should it even carry off their brother, than admit any one to see him whilst thus raving—had encountered doctor Pascal, and refused him admittance to his patient. The doctor insisted, an altercation ensued. From being rude, James became absolutely insolent, and ended by imperatively dismissing him.

Immediately after, James entered the room where William and Honore were sitting at the bedside of Antoine. His face was still flushed, and the traces of his late anger were visible.

'Well, James, what is the matter? Who has been vexing you?' asked his elder brother, who had indistinctly heard the sounds of wrath.

'It was that rascally doctor, who would come in here whether or no. In vain I tried, by soft words, to dissuade him, saying it was too early, etc. He replied that a doctor must consult the state of his patient, and not the time of day. At last I lost all patience with him, I had a great mind to pitch him out of the window.'

'Gracious Heavens! exclaimed the ever timid Honore, 'I hope you did nothing of the kind.'

'Morbleu, I almost regret that I did not.'

'You would have done very wrong. I think as you do, that it was an unwise thing on our part to call in the doctor, because Antoine babbled worse than ever, and there is no knowing what suspicions it might create, nevertheless, the doctor ought not to

have been dismissed without the greatest politeness and precaution.

Thus said William—and Regina's husband added—

'Yes, indeed, it becomes us, above all things, to try and raise up friends.'

'That, I think, is not our fate,' replied James, 'in proof of which, know that the accused doctor dared almost to threaten us.'

'To threaten? With what? What does he know? What can he do to us? Surely you have not compromised?'

'Why, Honore you are always a afraid,' remarked William. 'What can signify the words or actions of this Esculapius? I value them not a pin. But though I am not uneasy about so trifling a matter, I should like to know what the man threatened.'

He muttered, that he was driven away from Valganest because he was attending Cecile, the wife of Pierre Aubin, whom he called our victim,' said James, carelessly, and he continued—

'It appears that old Decadi Robert, the father of this woman, is straining every nerve to substantiate the innocence of his son-in-law. Doctor Pascal also told me that this devil of a Decadi asserts that we well know that Pierre is not guilty, and that we could prove it, only that the whole of us have sworn the destruction of the game-keeper of Brasseuse.'

Honore shuddered at each word, and William, who had become uneasy, and very attentive, asked his brother—

'Did doctor Pascal say nothing at all about Antoine then?'

Oh yes, but I had nearly forgotten it, for in truth I did not pay much heed to his impertinence. He said we were afraid to let him approach the sick man on account of the revelations which he was making under the influence of fever. In short, in his rage at being turned out of doors—he called out, when beyond my reach, something about the law—that the law knew nothing about nobility, or gentry, or commoners, that the only distinction in his sight was guilt or innocence.'

'God help us, can this doctor know?'—exclaimed Honore, in utter dismay.

'What can he know, you frightened fellow, except flying reports? Had he the slightest suspicion of the truth, he would not have scrupled to have cast it up to me in his

passion—and then gentlemen I think it would have been unwise to have allowed him to leave Valganest in a hurry.'

'I think, with James, that doctor Pascal is only an echo of the family of Decadi Robert, by whom we need not expect to be held in the order of sanctity. Any evil that they may say of us can only be of little importance. Pierre Aubin, denounced as an incendiary, has assumed the position of accuser of Regina. Now, as Regina has become allied to us, so long as the accusation against her remains unproved, we can not suffer from this calumny.'

'It is in vain to talk so,' replied Honore. 'I am not satisfied. James was too hasty. He ought not to have turned out the doctor so unceremoniously.'

'Say rather that we ought never to have sent for him.'

'Then perhaps Antoine would not be alive at this time,' remarked William.

'This may be true,' continued Honore, nevertheless it would have been the most prudent course for us to have pursued.'

'Let us be done with this. What I did I do not regret,' said James, and to put an end to the conversation, he walked out of the sick room.

At breakfast time James re-appeared, but he did not appear as easy and satisfied as when he had left them. He held in his hand a newspaper, folded in a wrapper, the address on which he read, with evident surprise, and then exclaimed—

'How long have you been a subscriber to the "Propagateur de L'Oirise" Honore?'

'I a subscriber indeed? Never—for shame—a radical paper!' nervously, remonstrated he. But why the question. Is that number addressed to me?'

'Assuredly!'

'The devil it is. What can this mean? It must contain something that relates to us. Quick, let me open it.'

With trembling hand he tore off the cover, unfolded the paper, and running eagerly over columns, his rapid glance was arrested by the following notice, under a flaming caption—

He read with tremulous voice—

SUPREME COURT AT SENLIS.

We learn from our correspondent at Senlis, a strange and highly interesting piece of intelligence.

It will not have been forgotten that in consequence of the confession of Clodomir, the incendiary, Pierre Aubin, the gamekeeper of the forest of Brasseuse, was arrested and thrown into the Jail of this city notwithstanding the grave charges so solemnly made against this man, he persisted in asserting his entire innocence, but the evidence was so overwhelming, that no one would credit his assertions.

It is now stated, on the most reliable authority, that a mysterious and providential intervention has occurred, that will completely justify and absolve him whom the public, in advance of a trial, had already condemned as a *guilty man, an incendiary!*

We are positively assured that a letter has reached the hands of Mr. Simeron, (who has laid it before the court,) which it is said will prove an *alibi* on the part of the accused. Neither is this all that the letter will establish!

From the same source we learn that this letter compromises, in the most scandalous manner, a certain great lady, recently married, belonging to one of the noblest and most aristocratic families in the country.

This affair promises some rich disclosures, which we will hasten to lay before our readers.

It was indeed with fear and trembling, and in broken accents, that Honore read this announcement so menacing to the parricides, to the persecutors of Pierre Aubin, their brother.

When Honore had concluded the fatal paragraph, he sank in a chair, saying, in despair—

'I am a dishonored man! My wife will be an object of public scorn and contempt—and *Pierre Aubin has escaped from us!*

Then he cast a mournful and imploring look upon James and William, but they remained mute, confused, and ashamed.

The sick man, the dwarf, without having been sensible of what had passed, caught the words of Honore, uttered in the piercing tone of anguish and despair, and rising up in bed, he shouted—

'*Pierre Aubin has escaped from us!*

#### CHAPTER XVIII.

On the evening of that day on which, through the medium of the newspaper which they had received, they became apprised of

the probable speedy deliverance of Pierre Aubin, with honorable acquittal, and the almost certain public disgrace of Regina—the three aristocrats assembled in the chamber of Antoine.

The dwarf continued getting worse, and sorely perplexed were his brothers at the complication of troubles which oppressed them.

With dejected and sorrowful looks, the three brothers watched the prostrate dwarf, preserving a mournful silence, for they felt how useless would any thing be that they could suggest!

Suddenly a great noise is heard without the castle—then in the court-yard, over the dungeon-vaults of Valganest, the tramp of men and horses—and nearer yet, the sound spurred heels on the stone-flagged corridors, and the martial clank of sabres trailing through the arched halls.

At this instant, old Bartholomew, pale and trembling, rushed into the room. The three gentlemen had arisen, and were approaching the door, when they were arrested by the entrance of this man, who, almost beside himself with fear, exclaimed—

'*The Police!—The Gendarmes!*

Mr. Simeron, the magistrate, who presided over the affair, with the most formal politeness, apologized for his appearance with so numerous and formidable a retinue.—

'But, gentleman,' he continued, 'resistance alone will render necessary the assistance of this force; that I hope, will not be required.'

James, with difficulty, restrained by his brothers, haughtily replied to the magistrate—

'Spare your politeness, sir, and tell us at once what this is about. Speak, I say What do you want?'

With magisterial dignity, Mr. Simeron made answer—

'*Messieurs de Labourdillere, you are accused of having murdered Major Seigneurolles!*

Deathly was the pallor that overspread the countenances of the guilty men as the name was pronounced.

Antoine, who, up to this instant, had remained immovable as a corpse, started up in his bed, his haggard eyes wildly rolling, and repeated in a hollow voice—

'*Major Seigneurolles,* adding 'Yes, yes, *Parricides, Parricides, all of us!*

The wretched being having thus exclaimed,

ed, sank back on his pillow.

'*For proof?*' growled James, '*Then seek it!*

'As a first step, I demand the key of the family burial-vault.'

'The key of the tomb of our family? ejaculated Honore, with evident fear and horror.

'It shall never be given up. The sepulchre of the Labourdillieres shall not be profaned without passing over my dead body,' furiously exclaimed Honore.'

'In the name of the law I insist upon your producing this key instantly,' said the magistrate, most peremptorily.

'No magistrate can allow such a violation—it is sacrilege.'

'The door must be opened without further delay.'

Finding opposition useless, Honore ordered Bartholomew to unlock the entrance to the tomb.

Dreadful was the suspense, and ominous the sullen silence! At length heavy steps are heard ascending the stairs.

'Oh, my God, they are bringing the fatal chest!' said Honore to his brothers, and his face became livid and ghastly.

Too surely, borne by four *gendarmes*, the dreadful chest was brought into the room, and set down in the middle of the floor.

'Do you recognise this chest, inquired Mr. Simeron of them, but he received no reply.'

'Then we will proceed to open it.'

Two of the *gendarmes* where then ordered to burst open the lid of this large, heavy, and mysterious, chest.

Scarcely had they struck the first blow, when the work was arrested, by the sudden entrance of a stranger.

This instant that the brothers caught sight of this man, they simultaneously uttered a shout of surprise and affright.

Decadi Robert seemed to recognise the new comer also—and he, too, shouted, but it was with delight—and he sprang instantly forward, and seizing the stranger's hands, he kissed them, and bathed them with the tears of joy.

At this loud noise and fresh commotion, Antoine once again raised himself up, and catching sight of the unexpected visitor—he pointed at him with his attenuated fingers—and with the most appalling look of horror, he exclaimed—

'*It is he! The phantom!*

As the dwarf pronounced these words, he fell backwards, gave a last groan, and expired!!

Walking up to the bed, the new-comer took hold of the hand of the corpse, and pressing it with emotion, exclaimed—

'*My son! Oh, my son!*

Then turning to the bewildered spectators of the extraordinary scene, this person thus addressed them—

'Gentlemen, I have learned that my sons were accused for *Parricide*—therefore am I here. Behold me!—Recognise me!—I am Major Seigneurolles—or, rather, I am Etienne de Labourdillere!'

#### CHAPTER XIX.

As there could be no doubt of the existence or identity of Major Seigneurolles, the magistrate and his suite soon took their departure.

There, in the chamber of the clay-cold dwarf, the brothers stood, self-condemned, and utterly humiliated!

The father's heart had compassion, even for his wicked children, whom he mourned with bitter sorrow—and for a time all were silent.

Through the opportune appearance of the Major, that is, Etienne de Labourdillere, his sons were preserved from public punishment,—but not from the disgrace of having premeditated the crime, which the dying words of Antoine proved his belief had been perpetrated.

Pierre Aubin was cleared from the stigma that had been attached to his name, and the danger that menaced his life, when it was ascertained where he had passed his time during the absence which it had been supposed was spent amongst the incendiaries—not in the dungeon-vaults of Gazeran Castle. But, he too, was in trouble, on account of his child's death, and his wife's impaired health and reason.

Decadi, however, the old soldier, and he alone, seemed to feel pleasurable feelings on the occasion. He was unfeignedly glad to find that his old commander, the Major, was still alive.

Etienne de Labourdillere then gave a solution of the mystery of his escape from the death they believed Francois had inflicted, and to this, all listened with attention.

'*Ma foi,*' said the old soldier, 'we believed

that you had repented of your resolve to acknowledge Pierre, and had absconded to get clear of us!

'You wronged me Decadi, and this my future actions will declare better than words—but my sons I see are anxious to learn how it comes that I am luckily alive to save them not only from condign punishment, but, I would fain hope, from the pangs of remorse.'

'You speak truly, father!' said Honore, timidly. 'Indeed we have known no peace since that dreadful hour, when our brother Francois re-appeared from your chamber, wounded and bleeding—with, as we believed, your blood on his hands, and your death on all our guilty consciences.'

Honore paused, and shuddered at the recollection; and William added—

'We heard a fearful struggle, too, as it appeared.'

'I will relate what occurred,' said Etienne de Labourdilliere—

'When Francois entered my apartment, I saw from his livid look, and the desperate expression of his countenance, that his purpose was to put an end to my existence, which I knew my sons unhappily considered a burthen to them. I saw also that he was not altogether so hardened as to have no compunctions about the dreadful deed he had undertaken to perform, and resolving to spare him the certain remorse that would assuredly follow and avenge such a crime, I said—

'Beware! I am armed! Approach not a step nearer at your peril!'

'Disregarding my warning, Francois rushed upon me, and the dagger which I had drawn to protect myself, and deter him, unintentionally wounded him. I threw the weapon from me, and grappled with my adversary, determined, if possible, to overpower, and then force him to listen to my plan for his salvation.

'This I managed to effect, and easily, for my arms were nerved with the courage of affection and a good purpose,—whilst his were enfeebled by the wickedness of his object.

'When I had mastered and pinioned my unhappy son, I implored him to listen to me. I assured him, that notwithstanding this outrage, he was too dear for me to harm, and I placed his conduct in such a light as drew tears from the eyes of both of us.

'What shall I do to make atonement for this sin, oh my father,' said he, penitentially. 'You must allow your brothers to believe that you accomplished your mission. To keep up this appearance, we will bring out that chest, which you can privately fill with stones, at your leisure, and you will persuade them that you have put my mangled corpse into it, as you doubtless intended.'

'The horn which your brothers were sounding down stairs, in order, I suppose, to drown my cries, and which fortunately hindered their hearing your appeal to them for aid—has ceased, we will therefore make a noise, as if scuffling, which will account for your sound.

'Obey me,' I continued, and I will be as though dead to you all in future, as much so as if I really were an inanimate occupant of that chest, whose very sight, I prophesy, will be torture to your brothers. Never shall I re-appear *unless to save or serve!* On these terms he went down unstained by a father's blood.

'Alas! it is too true—but I forgive him, and Pierre also will pardon him, I am sure.'

'Antoine is gone to render his final account,' said William, solemnly, 'Let us not judge the departed. As for me, I will hide my shame within a cloister's walls! To-morrow I will take refuge from poverty and contempt in the solitude of the great *Chatreuse* of Grenoble.'

'I will accompany you wherever you go,' said James, 'we have never yet been separated, and I am sick of a world where every thing is turned topsy turvy. There will be none but upstarts in high places soon, I am weary of this miserable state of things, I will, with you, withdraw from the world.'

Having thus given vent to his spleen, James inquired of his brother Honore what he meant to do?

'Valganest is no place for me,' he replied, 'I am no longer its lord—I will at once leave it, and give place to the present Marquis, Etienne de Labourdilliere, whose rank and title none can dispute.'

'Whither will you turn your steps?'

'I must, without delay, hie to Gazeran, to break this intelligence to Regina, and consult with her about our future movements. You know that being married, I am not free to act so independently as you, brothers,' he added, noticing their looks of surprise.

'Surely you will not live with her after the public are aware of her prior love and intrigues?'

'It is rather embarrassing and unpleasant, but doubtless some means may be found to hush up the matter and avoid scandal. My wife is rich, young, noble and beautiful; we may make some kind of a compromise, for I am almost entirely dependent on her.'

Having thus explained his views, Honore ordered his horse, add taking leave of his forgiving parent with more cordiality and good feeling than he had ever before expressed or felt, he left the castle of his ancestors for ever.

On arriving at Gazeran, he found that Regina had fled from thence on the day following the announcement of the newspaper concerning the discovery of the fatal letter.

It appeared that she had hurried to Paris, settled her affairs with the utmost dispatch, and with a large amount in cash and jewels, had proceeded to a seaport, whence she embarked on board a vessel bound for the Brazils.

All this the determined spirit of the woman had effected, while the brothers were supinely watching the progress of events, by the bedside of their conscience-stricken brother.

Regina left a letter for her husband, in which she stated her reasons for taking the step of expatriating herself without consulting him. Thus she skilfully avoided the unpleasant scenes which she well knew would be inevitable if she remained. The letter concluded in these words,—

'If you really love me, Honore, and choose to follow as soon as your affairs in France can be arranged—I promise, sacredly, you shall have no reason to regret having made Regina de Gazeran your wife, if the most complete devotion and the strictest constancy with a never failing desire to please on my part can secure your happiness.'

Honore did not hesitate. He had no longer any estate to embarrass his movements, and but little property of any kind. He sailed—but the vessel did not reach its destination and he was never more heard of!

The other brothers put their intentions into practise, but, ere their noviciate concluded, a contagious fever, sweeping with destructive fury through the cloistered cells, assailed life, without allowing preparation for death, and

*speedily they were no more.*

None but Etienne de Labourdilliere, the aggrieved father, and Pierre Aubin, the disowned and persecuted brother, were found to regret the *extinction of the aristocrat brothers.*

But little now remains to relate, though that little can not well remain untold.

The fortune of the game-keeper of the forest of Brasseuse, took a new and happy turn from the date of his acquittal, and he was looked upon as a noble martyr to persecution and tyranny, and a pattern of forbearance and honor, in that he had not betrayed those who had so shamefully ill-treated him.

It may readily be surmised, by the reader, who was the (to her unknown) protector of Cecile—and why Pierre was so delighted to see that old man on the night of his escape from the woodman's burning hut.

In Vilvert, had the supposed victim of parricides, remained in seclusion, watching over the lives of his children. He had obtained a promise from Pierre, not to prosecute or accuse the aristocrat brothers, when he received him on his escape from Gazeran dungeons.

This sacred promise it was that caused the game-keeper, to endure the suspicions and calumny of his neighbors, without making known the truth, which would have exculpated him.

When, at length, Pierre Aubin was set free, in virtue of the alibi which Regina's letter established—he found Cecile at her father's (for his house had been burnt down by the indignant peasantry) a prey to grief, sickness, and delirium, and under the care of Doctor Pascal.

On the first visit which the Doctor paid, subsequent to his ignominious expulsion from Valganest, he detailed the treatment he had received at the hands of James de Labourdilliere, and related the terrible ravings of Antoine, which confirmed the suspicions of old Decadi Robert that the Major Seigneurilles had met with foul play.

Pierre being bound by his promise to conceal this knowledge of the existence of the Major, could say nothing that would remove the impression that this person had been murdered, without having the permission of Etienne, which he immediately went to seek.

Decadi, thereupon hurried to the magistrate, and laid before him the statement of the



doctor, and his own grounds for fearing the worst from the sudden and unaccountable disappearance of Major Seignerolles.

Mr. Simeron, taking the doctor and Decadi Robert with him, repaired, as we have seen, to the castle, to investigate the matter.

Pierre Aubin, out of kind consideration for his fallen persecutors, did not make his appearance; but when all the legitimate sons of Etienne, the now acknowledged Marquis de Labourdilliere, had left him to his solitary grandeur—the game-keeper was heartily welcomed by the old man.

The Marquis resolved, without delay, to set about making atonement to his long-neglected son, and to the exemplary mother of that son.

To this end, he made use of his recovered title and consequence to obtain a decree legitimating that son, Pierre Aubin; and he determined to marry the unfortunate mother, for which purpose he journeyed to Paris.

This object was not so easily attained as he had expected. It took the united entreaties of Decadi and Pierre, besides his own, to induce Euphrosine to accept the *tardy act of justice*, which would render her the sharer of his name and rank!

However, Euphrosine did consent that the ceremony should be performed, which made her Marchioness de Labourdilliere! She, who had toiled, with her needle, for years, to give bread to her son!

Once, and for a long time, Euphrosine had patiently looked forward with delight to the nuptial day; but it came so late, it found her calm and sad. The romance of feeling was over—the romance of reality was taking place! She was at once raised from indigence to wealth—from insignificance to a lofty position.

This marriage also restored her to her son's society, and that of her brother Decadi, for which she was truly grateful. Ere long, her tender care and judicious nursing, added to the happiness of all, by being the means, under Providence, of restoring Cecile to health, reason, and the enjoyment of domestic love.

During this period the Castle of Valganest was occupied solely by the domestics in whose care it had been left: for the marriage ceremony of Etienne de Labourdilliere and the gentle Euphrosine had taken place in Paris, whither Cecile had been taken for change of

air, change of scene, and medical advice. There, also, the party remained for a considerable time, as it was resolved that until Pierre Aubin could be received at Valganest as the legitimate heir of its lord, he should not enter the halls of his ancestors.

This delay was profitably spent by the happy family, the newly adopted members of which were gradually prepared by the eccentric but accomplished Etienne, to take their places creditably among the *magnates* of the country.

The game-keeper of the forest of Brasseuse and his dear Cecile, furnished occasion for another christening festival, which was celebrated on a grander scale than that with which our story commenced, but which we will forbear to describe; suffice it to say, that the whole country participated in the joyful *fete*, at which Pierre Aubin appeared no longer as the game-keeper, but as the heir to the property of his brother, now no more.

The republican bias of the nobility, even, as well as the other classes of society, caused this triumph, of the plebian-mother and son, to be looked on with complacency.

The rejoicings on the return of Etienne with his family to take possession of Valganest, with the christening of the grandson of the Marquis de Labourdilliere, were universal and sincere; for few, if any, regretted the change of masters which had taken place.

Etienne, known and esteemed formerly as Major Seignerolles, passed his last years happily, in carrying out his republican principles, in ameliorating the condition of his tenantry, and in the quiet domestic circle he had wisely gathered about him.

Decadi Robert and he, used, together, to talk over their old campaigns and the glories of the consular days, and amuse themselves with the grand-children successively presented to them by the faithful and ever-loving couple, Pierre and Cecile.

Eventually, on the death of Regina, Gazeran Castle and estates came into the possession of Pierre as the *lawful heir*.

Thus was the *game-keeper* rewarded for his constancy to Cecile, and his generosity to the unworthy *aristocrat brothers*, by a very unusual share of prosperity and happiness.

THE END.