

# **The Champdoce Mystery**

**( Volume I )**

**by Emile Gaboriau**

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## **CHAPTER I. A DUCAL MONOMANIAC.**

The traveller who wishes to go from Poitiers to London by the shortest route will find that the simplest way is to take a seat in the stage coach which runs to Saumur; and when you book your place, the polite clerk tells you that you must take your seat punctually at six o'clock. The next morning, therefore, the traveller has to rise from his bed at a very early hour, and make a hurried and incomplete toilet, and on arriving, flushed and panting, at the office, discover that there was no occasion for such extreme haste.

In the hotel from whence the coach starts every one seems to be asleep, and a waiter, whose eyes are scarcely open, wanders languidly about. There is not the slightest good in losing your temper, or in pouring out a string of violent remonstrances. In a small restaurant opposite a cup of hot coffee can be procured, and it is there that

the disappointed travellers congregate, to await the hour when the coach really makes a start.

At length, however, all is ready, the conductor utters a tremendous execration, the coachman cracks his whip, the horses spring forward, the wheels rattle, and the coach is off at last. Whilst the conductor smokes his pipe tranquilly, the passengers gaze out of the windows and admire the beautiful aspect of the surrounding country. On each side stretch the woods and fields of Bevron. The covers are full of game, which has increased enormously, as the owner of the property has never allowed a shot to be fired since he had the misfortune, some twenty years ago, to kill one of his dependents whilst out shooting. On the right hand side some distance off rise the tower and battlements of the Chateau de Mussidan. It is two years ago since the Dowager Countess of Chevanche died, leaving all her fortune to her niece, Mademoiselle Sabine de Mussidan. She was a kind hearted woman, rough and ready in her manner, but very popular amongst the peasantry. Farther off,

on the top of some rising ground, appears an imposing structure, of an ancient style of architecture; this is the ancient residence of the Dukes of Champdoce. The left wing is a picturesque mass of ruins; the roof has fallen in, and the mullions of the windows are dotted with a thick growth of clustering ivy. Rain, storm, and sunshine have all done their work, and painted the mouldering walls with a hundred varied tints. In 1840 the inheritor of one of the noblest names of France resided here with his only son. The name of the present proprietor was Caesar Guillaume Duepair de Champdoce. He was looked upon both by the gentry and peasantry of the country side as a most eccentric individual. He could be seen any day wandering about, dressed in the most shabby manner, and wearing a coat that was frequently in urgent need of repair, a leathern cap on his head, wooden shoes, and a stout oaken cudgel in his hand. In winter he supplemented to these an ancient sheepskin coat. He was sixty years of age, very powerfully built, and possessing enormous strength. The expression

upon his face showed that his will was as strong as his thews and sinews. Beneath his shaggy eyebrows twinkled a pair of light gray eyes, which darkened when a fit of passion overtook him, and this was no unusual occurrence.

During his military career in the army of the Conde, he had received a sabre cut across his cheek, and the cicatrice imparted a strange and unpleasant expression to his face. He was not a bad hearted man, but headstrong, violent, and tyrannical to a degree. The peasants saluted him with a mixture of respect and dread as he walked to the chapel, to which he was a regular attendant on Sundays, with his son. During the Mass he made the responses in an audible voice, and at its conclusion invariably put a five franc piece into the plate. This, his subscription to the newspaper, and the sum he paid for being shaved twice each week, constituted the whole of his outlay upon himself. He kept an excellent table, however; plump fowls, vegetables of all kinds, and

the most delicious fruit were never absent from it. Everything, however, that appeared upon his well plenished board was the produce of his fields, gardens, or woods. The nobility and gentry of the neighborhood frequently invited him to their hospitable tables, for they looked upon him as the head and chief of the nobility of the county; but he always refused their invitations, saying plainly, "No man who has the slightest respect for himself will accept hospitalities which he is not in a position to return." It was not the grinding clutch of poverty that drove the Duke to this exercise of severe economy, for his income from his estates brought him in fifty thousand francs per annum; and it was reported that his investments brought him in as much more. As a matter of course, therefore, he was looked upon as a miser, and a victim to the sordid vice of avarice.

His past life might, in some degree, offer an explanation of this conduct. Born in 1780, the Duke de Champdoce had joined the band of emigrants which



swelled the ranks of Conde's army. An implacable opposer of the Revolution, he resided, during the glorious days of the Empire, in London, where dire poverty compelled him to gain a livelihood as a fencing master at the Restoration. He came back with the Bourbons to his native land, and, by an almost miraculous chance, was put again in possession of his ancestral domains. But in his opinion he was living in a state of utter destitution as compared to the enormous revenues enjoyed by the dead and gone members of the Champdoce family; and what pained him more was to see rise up by the side of the old aristocracy a new race which had attached itself to commerce and entered into business transactions. As he gazed upon the new order of things, the man whose pride of birth and position almost amounted to insanity, conceived the project to which he determined to devote the remainder of his life. He imagined that he had discovered a means by which he could restore the ancient house of Champdoce to all its former splendor and position. "I can," said he, "by living

like a peasant and resorting to no unnecessary expense, treble my capital in twenty years; and if my son and my grandson will only follow my example, the race of Champdoce will again recover the proud position that it formerly held. Faithful to this idea, he wedded, in 1820, although his heart was entirely untouched, a young girl of noble birth but utterly devoid of beauty, though possessed of a magnificent dowry. Their union was an extremely unhappy one, and many persons did not hesitate to accuse the Duke of treating with harshness and severity a young girl, who, having brought her husband five hundred thousand francs, could not understand why she should be refused a new dress when she urgently needed it. After twelve months of inconceivable unhappiness, she gave birth to a son who was baptized Louis Norbert, and six months afterwards she sank into an untimely grave.

The Duke did not seem to regret his loss very deeply. The boy appeared to be of a strong and robust constitution, and his mother's dowry would go to swell the revenues of

the Champdoce family. He made his recent loss, too, the pretext for further retrenchments and economies.

Norbert was brought up exactly as a farmer's son would have been. Every morning he started off to work, carrying his day's provisions in a basket slung upon his back. As he grew older, he was taught to sow and reap, to estimate the value of a standing crop at a glance, and, last but not least, to drive a hard bargain. For a long time the Duke debated the expediency of permitting his son to be taught to read or write; and if he did so at last, it was owing to some severe remarks by the parish priest upon the day on which Norbert took the sacrament for the first time.

All went on well and smoothly until the day when Norbert, on his sixteenth birthday, accompanied his father to Poitiers for the first time.

At sixteen years of age, Louis Norbert de Champdoce looked fully twenty, and was as handsome a youth as could be seen for miles round. The sun had given a bronzed tint to his features which was exceedingly becoming. He had

black hair, with a slight curl running through it, and large melancholy blue eyes, which he inherited from his mother. Poor girl! it was the sole beauty that she had possessed. He was utterly uncultured, and had been ruled with such a rod of iron by his father that he had never been a league from the Chateau. His ideas were barred by the little town of Bevron, with its sixty houses, its town hall, its small chapel, and principal river; and to him it seemed a spot full of noise and confusion. In the whole course of his life he had never spoken to three persons who did not belong to the district. Bred up in this secluded manner, it was almost impossible for him to understand that any one could lead a different existence to that of his own. His only pleasure was in procuring an abundant harvest, and his sole idea of excitement was High Mass on Sunday.

For more than a year the village girls had cast sly glances at him, but he was far too simple and innocent to notice this. When Mass was over, he generally walked over the farm with his father to inspect the work of the past

week, or to set snares for the birds. His father at last determined to give him a wider experience, and one day said that he was to accompany him to Poitiers.

At a very early hour in the morning they started in one of the low country carts of the district, and under the seat were small sacks, containing over forty thousand francs in silver money. Norbert had long wished to visit Poitiers, but had never done so, though it was but fifteen miles off. Poitiers is a quaint old town, with dilapidated pavements and tall, gloomy houses, the architecture of which dates from the tenth century; but Norbert thought that it must be one of the most magnificent cities in the world. It was market day when they drove in, and he was absolutely stupefied with surprise and excitement. He had never believed there could be so many people in one place, and hardly noticed that the cart had pulled up opposite a lawyer's office. His father shook him roughly by the shoulder.

"Come, Norbert, lad, we are there," said he.

The young man jumped to the ground, and assisted mechanically to remove the sacks. The servile manner of the lawyer did not strike him, nor did he listen to the conversation between him and his father. Finally, the business being concluded, they took their departure, and, driving to the Market Place, put up the horse and cart at an old fashioned, dingy inn, where they took their breakfast in the public room at a table where the wagoners were having a violent quarrel over their meal. The Duke, however, had other business to transact than the investment of his money, for he wanted to find the whereabouts of a miller who was somewhat in his debt. Norbert waited for him in front of the inn, and could not help feeling rather uncomfortable at finding himself alone. All at once some one came up and touched him lightly on the shoulder. He turned round sharply, and found himself face to face with a young man, who, seeing his look of surprise, said,

"What! have you entirely forgotten your old friend Montlouis?"

Montlouis was the son of one of the Duke's farmers, and he and Norbert had often played together in past years. They had driven their cows to the meadows together, and had spent long days together fishing or searching for birds' nests. The dress now worn by Montlouis had at first prevented Norbert from recognizing him, for he was attired in the uniform of the college at which his father had placed him, being desirous of making something more than a mere farmer of his son.

"What are you doing here?" asked Norbert.

"I am waiting for my father."

"So am I. Let us have a cup of coffee together."

Montlouis led his playmate into a small wine shop near at hand. He seemed a little disposed to presume upon the superior knowledge of the world which he had recently acquired.

"If there was a billiard table here," said he, "we could pass away the time with a game, though, to be sure, it runs into money."

Norbert never had had more than a few pence in his pocket at one time, and at this remark the color rose to his face, and he felt much humiliated.

"My father," added the young collegian, "gives me all I ask for. I am certain of getting one, if not two prizes at the next examination; and when I have taken my degree, the Count de Mussidan has promised to make me his steward. What do you think that you will do?"

"I I don't know," stammered Norbert.

"You will, I suppose, dig and toil in the fields, as your father has done before you. You are the son of the noblest and the richest man for miles round, and yet you are not so happy as I am."

Upon the return of the Duke de Champdoce some little time after this conversation, he did not detect any change in his son's manner; but the words spoken by Montlouis had fallen into Norbert's brain like a subtle poison, and a few careless sentences uttered by an inconsiderate lad had annihilated the education of sixteen years, and a complete



change had taken place in Norbert's mind, a change which was utterly unsuspected by those around him, for his manner of bringing up had taught him to keep his own counsel.

The fixed smile on his features entirely masked the angry feelings that were working in his breast. He went through his daily tasks, which had once been a pleasure to him, with utter disgust and loathing. His eyes had been suddenly opened, and he now understood a host of things which he had never before even endeavored to comprehend. He saw now that his proper position was among the nobles, whom he never saw except when they attended Mass at the little chapel in Bevron. The Count de Mussidan, so haughty and imposing, with his snow white hair; the aristocratic looking Marquis de Laurebourg, of whom the peasants stood in the greatest awe, were always courteous and even cordial in their salutations, while the noble dames smiled graciously upon him. Proud and haughty as they were, they evidently looked upon his father and himself as

their equals, in spite of the coarse garments that they wore. The realization of these facts effected a great change in Norbert. He was the equal of all these people, and yet how great a gulf separated him from them. While he and his father tramped to Mass in heavy shoes, the others drove up in their carriages with powdered footmen to open the doors. Why was this extraordinary difference? He knew enough of the value of crops and land to know that his father was as wealthy as any of these gentlemen. The laborers on the farm said that his father was a miser, and the villagers asserted that he got up at night and gazed with rapture upon the treasure that was hidden away from men's eyes.

"Norbert is an unhappy lad," they would say. "He who ought to be able to command all the pleasures of life is worse off than our own children."

He also recollected that one day, as his father was talking to the Marquis de Laurebourg, an old lady, who was doubtless the Marchioness, had said, "Poor boy! he was so early deprived of a mother's care!" What did that mean

unless it was a reflection upon the arbitrary behavior of his father? Norbert saw that these people always had their children with them, and the sight of this filled him with jealousy, and brought tears of anguish to his eyes. Sometimes, as he trudged wearily behind his yoke of oxen, goad in hand, he would see some of these young scions of the aristocracy canter by on horseback, and the friendly wave of the hand with which they greeted him almost appeared to his jaundiced mind a premeditated insult. What could they find to do in Paris, to which they all took wing at the first breath of winter? This was a question which he found himself utterly unable to solve. To drink to intoxication offered no charms to him, and yet this was the only pleasure which the villagers seemed to enjoy. Those young men must have some higher class of entertainment, but in what could it consist? Norbert could hardly read a line without spelling every word; but these new thoughts running through his mind caused him to study, so as to improve his education. His father had often told him that

he did not like lads who were always poring over books; and so Norbert did not discontinue his studies, but simply avoided bringing them under his father's notice. He knew that there was a large collection of books in one of the upstairs rooms of the Chateau. He managed to force the lock of the door, and he found some thousands of volumes, of which at least two hundred were novels, which had been the solace of his mother's unhappy life. With all the eagerness of a man who is at the point of starvation and finds an unexpected store of provisions, Norbert seized upon them. At first he had great difficulty in dividing fact from fiction.

He arrived at two conclusions from perusing this heterogeneous mass of literature one was, that he was most unhappy; and the other was, that he hated his father with a cold and determined loathing. Had he dared, he would have shown this feeling openly, but the Duke de Champdoce inspired him with an unconquerable feeling of terror. This state of affairs continued for some months, and

at the end of that time the Duke felt that he ought to make his son acquainted with his projects. One Sunday, after supper, he commenced this task. Norbert had never seen his father so animated as he was at this moment, when all his ancestral pride blazed in his eyes. He explained at length the acts and deeds of those heroes who had been the ornament of their house, and enumerated the influential marriages which had been made by them in the days when their very name was a power in the land. And what remained of all their power and rank, save their Parisian domicile, their old Chateau, and some two hundred thousand francs of income?

Norbert could hardly credit what he heard; he had never believed that his father possessed such enormous wealth. "Why, it is inconceivable!" he muttered. And yet, as he looked round, he saw that the surroundings were those of a peasant's cottage. How could he endure so many discomforts and wounds to his pride? In his anger he absolutely started to his feet with the intention of

reproaching his father, but his courage failed him, and he fell back into a chair, quivering with emotion.

The Duke de Champdoce was pacing up and down the room.

"Do you think it so little?" asked he angrily.

Norbert knew that not one of the neighboring nobility who had the reputation of being wealthy possessed half this annual income, and it was with a feeling of bitter anger in his heart that he listened to the broken words which fell from his father's lips. All at once the Duke halted in front of his son's chair.

"What fortune I have now," said he in a hoarse voice, "is little or nothing in times like these, when the tradesman contrives to make an almost unlimited income, and, setting up as a gentleman, imitates, not our virtues, but our vices; while the nobles, not understanding the present hour, are in poverty and want. Without money, nothing can be done. To hold his own against these mushroom fortunes, a Champdoce should possess millions. Neither you nor I, my

son, will see our coffers overflowing with millions, but our descendants will reap the benefit of our toil. Our ancestors gained their name and glory by their determination; let us show that we are their worthy offspring."

As he approached the subject which had occupied his mind entirely for years, the old noble's voice quivered and shook.

"I have done my duty," said he, calming himself by a mighty effort, "and it is now your turn to do yours. You shall marry some wealthy heiress, and you shall bring up your son as I have reared and nurtured you. You will be able to leave him fifteen millions; and if he will only follow in our footsteps, he will be able to bequeath to his heir a fortune that a monarch might envy. And this shall and will come to pass, because it is my fixed determination."

The strange outburst of confidence petrified Norbert.

"The task is heavy and painful," continued the Duke, "but it is one that several scores of illustrious houses have accomplished. He who wishes to revive the fallen fortunes

of some mighty house must live only in the future, and have no thought but for the prosperity of his descendants. More than once I have faltered and hesitated, but I have conquered my weakness, and now only live to make the line of Champdoce the most wealthy in France. You have seen me haggle for an hour over a wretched louis, but it was for the reason that at a future day one of our descendants might fling it to a beggar from the window of his magnificent equipage. Next year I will take you to Paris and show you our house there. You will see in it the most wonderful tapestry, pictures by the best masters, for I have ornamented and embellished it as a lover adorns a house for a beloved mistress, and that house, Norbert, is the home that your grandchildren will dwell in."

The Duke uttered these words in a tone of jubilant triumph.

"I have spoken to you thus," resumed he, after a short pause, "because you are now of an age to listen to the truth, and because I wished you to understand the rules by which



you are to regulate your life. You have now arrived at years of discretion, and must do of your own free will what you have up to this time done at my bidding. This is all that I have to say. Tomorrow you will take twenty five sacks of wheat to the miller at Bevron."

Like all tyrannical despots, the Duke never contemplated for a moment the possibility of any one disobeying his commands; yet at this very moment Norbert was registering a solemn mental oath that he would never carry out his father's wishes. His anger, which his fears had so long restrained, now burst all bounds, and it was in the broad chestnut tree avenue, behind the Chateau, far from any listening ear, that he gave way to his despair. So long as he had only looked upon his father as a mere miser, he had permitted himself to indulge in hope; but now he understood him better, and saw that life long plans, such as the Duke had framed, were not to be easily overruled.

"My father is mad," said he; "yes; decidedly mad."

He had made up his mind that for the present he would

yield to his despotism, but afterwards, in the future, what was he to do?

It is an easy thing to find persons to give you bad advice, and the very next day Norbert found one at Bevron in the shape of a certain man called Daumon, a bitter enemy of the Duke.

## **CHAPTER II. A DANGEROUS ACQUAINTANCE.**

Daumon was not a native of this part of the country, and no one knew from whence he came. He said that he had been an attorney's clerk, and had certainly resided for a long time in Paris. He was a little man of fifty years of age, clean shaved, and with a sharp and cunning expression of countenance. His long nose, sharp, restless eyes, and thin lips, attracted attention at first sight. His whole aspect aroused a feeling of distrust. He had come to Bevron, some fifteen years before, with all his provisions in a cotton

handkerchief slung over his shoulder. He was willing to make money in any way, and he prospered and rose. He owned fields, vineyards, and a cottage, which is at the juncture of the highway to Poitiers and the cross road that leads to Bevron. His aim and object were to be seen everywhere, to know everybody, and to have a finger in every pie in the neighborhood around. If any of the farmers or the laborers wanted small advances, they went to him, and he granted them loans at exorbitant rates of interest. He gave most disputants counsel, and had every point of law at his fingers' ends. He could teach people how to sail as close to the wind as possible, and yet to be beyond the reach of the law. He affected to be only too anxious to ameliorate the lot of the peasant class, and yet he was drawing heavy sums from them by way of interest. He endeavored by every means in his power to rouse their feelings of animosity against both the priesthood and the gentry. His artful way of talking, and the long black coat which he wore, had given him the nickname of the "Counsellor" in

the district. The reason why he disliked the Duke was because the latter had more than once shown himself hostile to him, and had taken him before the court of justice, from which Daumon only escaped by means of bribery of suborned witnesses. He vowed that he would be revenged for this, and for five years had been watching his opportunity, and this was the man whom Norbert met when he went to deliver his corn to the miller. As he was coming back with his empty wagon, Daumon asked for a lift back as far as the cross road that led to his cottage.

"I trust, sir," said he with the most servile courtesy, "that you will excuse the liberty I take, but I am so utterly crippled with rheumatism that I can hardly walk, Marquis."

Daumon had read somewhere that the eldest son of a Duke was entitled to be styled /Marquis/, and it was the first time that Norbert had been thus addressed. Before this he would have laughed at the appellation, but now his wounded vanity, and his exasperation at the unhappy condition in which he found himself, tempted him to accept

the title without remonstrance.

"All right, I can give you a lift," said he, and the Counsellor clambered into the cart.

All the time that he was showering thanks upon Norbert for his courtesy he was watching the young man's face carefully.

"Evidently," thought the Counsellor to himself, "something unusual has taken place at the Chateau de Champdoce. Was not the opportunity for revenge here?"

Long since he had decided that through the son he could strike the father. But he must be cautious.

"You must have been up very early, Marquis," said he.

The young man made no reply.

"The Duke," resumed Daumon, "is most fortunate in having such a son as you. I know more than one father who says to his children, 'See what an excellent example the young Marquis de Champdoce sets to you all. He is not afraid of hard work, though he is noble by birth, and

should not soil his hands by labor.' "

A sudden lurch brought the Counsellor's eloquence to a sudden close, but he speedily resumed again.

"I was watching you as you hefted the sacks. Heavens! what muscles! what a pair of shoulders!"

At any other moment Norbert would have gloried in such laudation, but now he felt displeased and annoyed, and vented his anger by a sharp cut at his team.

"When people say that you are as innocent as a girl," continued Daumon, "I always say that you are a sensible young fellow after all, and that if you choose to lead a regular life, it is far better than wasting your future fortune in wine, billiards, cards, or women."

"I don't know that I might not do something of the kind," returned Norbert.

"What did you say?" answered his wily companion.

"I said that if I were my own master, I would live as other young men."

The lad paused abruptly, and Daumon's eyes gleamed

with joy.

"Aha," murmured he to himself; "I have the game in my own hands. I will teach his Grace to interfere with me."

Then, in a voice which could reach Norbert's ears, he continued,

"Of course some parents are far too strict."

An impatient gesture from Norbert showed him that he had wounded him deeply.

"Yes, yes," put in the wily Counsellor, "as the head grows bald, and the blood begins to stagnate, they forget, they forget the days when all was so different. They forget the time when they were young, and when they sowed their wild oats with so lavish a hand. When your father was twenty five, he was precious wild. Ask your father, if you do not believe me."

At this moment the wagon passed the cross road, and Norbert pulled up.

"I cannot thank you enough, Marquis," said the Counsellor as he alighted with difficulty; "but if you would

condescend to come and taste my brandy, I would esteem it a great honor."

Norbert hesitated for an instant: his reasoning powers urged him to decline the offer, but he refused to listen to them, and, fastening his horses to a tree, he followed Daumon down the by road. The cottage was an excellent one, and extremely well furnished. A woman, who acted as Daumon's housekeeper, served the refreshments. The office for he called his room an office, just as if he was a professional man was a strange looking place. On one side was a desk covered with account books, and against the wall were sacks of seed. A number of books on legal matters crowded the shelves, and from the ceiling hung a quantity of dried herbs. The Counsellor welcomed the heir to the dukedom of Champdoce with the greatest deference, seated him in his own capacious leathern arm chair, and pressed the brandy which he had refused upon him.

"I got this brandy from a man down Arcachon way in



return for a kindness that I did him; for, without boasting, I may say that I have done kindnesses for many people in my time." He raised his glass to his lips as he spoke. "It is good, is it not?" said he. "You can't get stuff with an aroma like that hereabouts."

The extreme deference of the man, coupled with the excellence of the spirit, opened Norbert's heart in a very short space of time. Up to the present the conduct of poor Norbert had been blameless, but now, without knowing anything of the Counsellor's character or reputation, he poured out all the secret sorrows of his heart, while Daumon chuckled secretly, preserving all the time the imperturbable face of a physician called in to visit a patient.

"Dear me! dear me!" said he; "this is really too bad. Poor fellow! I really pity you. Were it not for the deep respect that I have for the Duke, your father, I should feel inclined to say that he was not quite in his right senses."

"Yes," continued Norbert, the tears starting to his eyes,

"this is just how I am situated. My destiny has been marked out for me, and I am helpless to alter it. I had better a thousand times be lying under the cold greensward, than vegetate thus above ground."

The peculiar smile on Daumon's lips caused him to pause in his complaint.

"Perhaps," he went on, "you think that I am childish in talking thus?"

"Not at all, Marquis, you have suffered too deeply; but forgive me if I say that you are foolish to despond so much over the future that lies before you."

"Future!" repeated Norbert angrily, "what is the use of speaking to me of the future, when I may be kept in this horrible servitude for the next thirty years? My father is still hale and hearty."

"What of that? You will be of age soon, and then you will have full right to claim your mother's fortune."

The extreme surprise displayed by Norbert at this intelligence convinced the Counsellor that he was much

more unsophisticated than he had supposed him to be.

"A man," continued he, "can, when he attains his majority, dispose of his inheritance as he thinks fit, and your mother's fortune will render you independent of your father."

"But I should never dare to claim it; how could I venture to do so?"

"You need not make the application personally; your solicitor would manage all that for you; but, of course, you must wait until you are of age."

"But I cannot wait until then," said Norbert; "I must at once free myself from this tyranny."

"Luckily there are ways."

"Do you really think so, Daumon?"

"Yes, and I will show you what is done every day. Nothing is more common in noble families. Would you like to be a soldier?"

"No, I do not care for that, and yet "

"That is your last resource, Marquis. First, then, we

could lay a plaint before the court."

"A plaint?"

"Certainly. Do you suppose that our laws do not provide for such a case as a father exceeding the proper bounds of parental authority? Tell me, has the Duke, your father, ever struck you?"

"Never once."

"Well, that is almost a pity. We will say that your father's property is worth two millions, and yet you derive so slight a benefit from this that you are known everywhere as the 'Young Savage of Champdoce'!"

Norbert started to his feet.

"Who dares speak of me like that?" said he furiously.

"Tell me his name."

This outburst of passion did not in the smallest degree discompose Daumon.

"Your father has many enemies, Marquis," he resumed, "for his manners are overbearing and exacting; but you have many friends, and among them all you will find none

more devoted than myself, humble though my position may be. Many ladies of high rank take a great interest in you. Only a day or two ago some persons were speaking of you in the presence of Mademoiselle de Laurebourg, and she blushed crimson at your name. Do you know Mademoiselle Diana?"

Norbert colored.

"Ah, I understand," replied Daumon. "And when you have broken the fetters that now bind you, we shall see something one of these days. And now "

But at this moment Norbert's eyes caught a glimpse of the old fashioned cuckoo clock that hung on the wall in one corner of the room. He started to his feet.

"Why, it is dinner time!" said he. "What upon earth will my father say?"

"What, does he keep you in such order as that?"

But, never heeding the sarcastic question of the Counsellor, Norbert had regained his cart, and was driving off at full speed.

### **CHAPTER III. A BOLD ADVENTURE.**

Daumon had in no way exaggerated when he said that Norbert was spoken of as the "Young Savage of Champdoce," though no one used this appellation in an insulting form. Public opinion had changed considerably regarding the Duke of Champdoce. The first time that he had made his appearance, wearing wooden shoes and a leathern jacket, every one had laughed, but this did not affect him at all, and in the end people began to term his dogged obstinacy indomitable perseverance. The gleam that shone from his hoarded millions imparted a brilliant lustre to his shabby garments. Why should they waste their pity upon a man who would eventually come into a gigantic fortune, and have the means of gratifying all his desires?

Mothers, with daughters especially, took a great interest in the young man, for to get a girl married to the "Young Savage of Champdoce" would be a feat to be proud of; but unluckily his father watched him with all the

vigilance of a Spanish duenna. But there was a young girl who had long since secretly formed a design of her own, and this bold hearted beauty was Diana de Laurebourg. It was with perfect justice that she had received the name of the "Belle of Poitiers." She was tall and very fair, with a dazzling complexion and masses of lustrous hair; but her eyes gleamed with a suppressed fire, which plainly showed the constitution of her nature. She had been brought up in a convent, and her parents, who had wished her to take the veil, had only been induced to remove her owing to her obstinate refusal to pronounce the vows, coupled with the earnest entreaties of the lady superior, who was kept in a constant state of ferment owing to the mutinous conduct of her pupil. Her father was wealthy, but all the property went over to her brother, ten years older than herself; and so Diana was portionless, with the exception of a paltry sum of forty thousand francs.

"My child!" said her father to her the first day of her return, "you have come back to us once more, and now all

you have to do is to fascinate some gentleman who is your equal in position and who has plenty of money. If you fail in that, back you go to the convent."

"Time enough to talk about that some years hence," answered the girl with a smile; "at present I am quite contented with being at home with you."

M. de Laurebourg had commented with some severity upon the conduct of the Duke de Champdoce towards his son, but he was perfectly willing to sacrifice his daughter's heart for a suitable marriage.

"I shall gain my end," murmured the girl, "I am sure of it."

She had heard a friend of her father's speaking of Norbert and his colossal expectations.

"Why should I not marry him?" she asked of her own heart; and, with the utmost skill, she applied herself to the execution of her design; for the idea of being a duchess, with an income of two hundred thousand francs, was a most fascinating one. But how was she to meet Norbert?



And how bring over the money raking Duke to her side? Before, however, she could decide on any plan, she felt that she must see Norbert. He was pointed out to her one day at Mass, and she was struck by his beauty and by an ease of manner which even his shabby dress could not conceal. By the quick perception which many women possess, she dived into Norbert's inmost soul; she felt that he had suffered, and her sympathy for him brought with it the dawn of love, and by the time she had left the chapel she had registered a solemn vow that she would one day be Norbert's wife. But she did not acquaint her parents with this determination on her part, preferring to carry out her plans without any aid or advice. Mademoiselle Diana was shrewd and practical, and not likely to err from want of judgment. The frank and open expression of her features concealed a mind of superior calibre, and one which well knew how to weigh the advantages of social rank and position. She affected a sudden sympathy with the poor, and visited them constantly, and might be frequently met in

the lanes carrying soup and other comforts to them. Her father declared, with a laugh, that she ought to have been a Sister of Charity, and did not notice the fact that all Diana's pensioners resided in the vicinity of Champdoce. But it was in vain that she wandered about, continually changing the hour of her visits. The "Savage of Champdoce" was not to be seen, nor was he even a regular attendant at Mass. At last a mere trifle changed the whole current of the young man's existence; for, a week after the conversation in which the Duke had laid bare his scheme to his son, he again referred to it, after their dinner, which they had partaken of at the same table with forty laborers, who had been hired to get in the harvest.

"You need not, my son," began the old gentleman, "go back with the laborers today."

"But, sir "

"Allow me to continue, if you please. My confidential conversation with you the other night was merely a preliminary to my telling you that for the future I did not

expect you to toil as hard as you had hitherto done, for I wish you to perform a duty less laborious, but more responsible; you will for the future act as farm bailiff."

Norbert looked up suddenly into his father's face.

"For I wish you to become accustomed to independent action, so that at my death your sudden liberty may not intoxicate you."

The Duke then rose from his seat, and took a highly finished gun from a cupboard.

"I have been very much pleased with you for some time past," said he, "and this is a sign of my satisfaction. The gamekeeper has brought in a thoroughly trained dog, which will also be yours. Shoot as much as you like, and, as you cannot go about without money in your pocket, take this, but be careful of it; for remember that extravagance on your part will procrastinate the day upon which our descendants will resume their proper station in the world."

The Duke spoke for some time longer, but his son paid no heed to his words, and was too much astonished to

accept the six five franc pieces which his father tendered to him.

"I suppose," said the Duke at last in angry accents, "that you will have the grace to thank me."

"You will find that I am not ungrateful," stammered Norbert, aroused by this reproach.

The Duke turned away impatiently.

"What has the boy got into his head now?" muttered he.

It was owing to the advice of the priest of Bevron that the Duke had acted as he had done; but this indulgence came too late, for Norbert's detestation of his tyrant was too deeply buried in his heart to be easily eradicated.

A gun was not such a wonderful present after all a matter of a few francs, perhaps. Had the Duke offered him the means of a better education, it would be a different matter; but as it was, he would still remain the "Young Savage of Champdoce."

However, Norbert took advantage of the permission

accorded to him, and rambled daily over the estate with his gun and his dog Bruno, to which he had become very much attached. His thoughts often wandered to Daumon; but he had made inquiries, and had heard that the Counsellor was a most dangerous man, who would stick at nothing; but for all that, he had made up his mind to go back to him again for further advice, though his better nature warned him of the precipice on the brink of which he was standing.

#### **CHAPTER IV. A FINANCIAL TRANSACTION.**

Daumon was expecting a visit from the young man, and had been waiting for him with the cool complacency of a bird catcher, who, having arranged all his lines and snares, stands with folded arms until his feathered victims fall into his net. The line that he had displayed before the young man's eyes was the sight of liberty. Daumon had emissaries everywhere, and knew perfectly well what was going on at the Chateau de Champdoce, and could have repeated the

exact words made use of by the Duke in his last conversation with his son, and was aware of the leave of liberty that had been granted to Norbert, and was as certain as possible that this small concession would only hasten the rebellion of the young Marquis.

He often took his evening stroll in the direction of Champdoce, and, pipe in mouth, would meditate over his schemes. Pausing on the brow of a hill that overlooked the Chateau, he would shake his fist, and mutter,

"He will come; ah, yes, he must come to me!"

And he was in the right, for, after a week spent in indecision, Norbert knocked at the door of his father's bitterest enemy. Daumon, concealed behind the window curtain, had watched his approach, and it was with the same air of deference that he had welcomed the Marquis, as he took care to call him; but he affected to be so overcome by the honor of this visit that he could only falter out,

"Marquis, I am your most humble servant."

And Norbert, who had expected a very warm greeting,

was much disconcerted. For a moment he thought of going away again, but his pride would not permit him to do so, for he had said to himself that it would be an act of a fool to go away this time without having accomplished anything.

"I want to have a bit of advice from you, Counsellor," said he; "for as I have but little experience in a certain matter, I should like to avail myself of your knowledge."

"You do me too much honor, Marquis," murmured the Counsellor with a low bow.

"But surely," said the young man, "you must feel that you are bound to assist me after all you told me a day or two back. You mentioned two means by which I could regain my freedom, and hinted that there was a third one. I have come to you today to ask you what it was."

Never did any man more successfully assume an air of astonishment than did Daumon at this moment.

"What," said he, "do you absolutely remember those idle words I made use of then?"

"I do most decidedly."

The villain's heart of Daumon was filled with delight, but he replied,

"Oh, Marquis! you must remember that we say many things that really have no special meaning, for between act and intention there is a tremendous difference. I often speak too freely, and that has more than once got me into trouble."

Norbert was no fool, in spite of his want of education, and the hot blood of his ancestors coursed freely through his veins. He now struck the butt end of his gun heavily upon the floor.

"You treated me like a simpleton, then, it appears?" remarked he angrily.

"My dear Marquis "

"And imagined that you could trifle with me. You managed to learn my real feelings for your own amusement; but, take care; this may cost you more than you think."

"Ah, Marquis, can you believe that I would act so basely?"



"What else can I think?"

Daumon paused for a moment, and then said,

"You will be angry when you hear what I have to say, but I cannot help speaking the truth."

"I shall not be angry, and you can speak freely."

"I am but a very poor and humble man. What have I to gain by securing any note, and by encouraging you to brave your father's anger? Just think what must happen if I opposed the all powerful Duke de Champdoce; why, I might find myself in prison in next to no time."

"And for what reason, if you please?" asked Norbert.

"Have you never studied law in the slightest degree, Marquis? Dear me, how neglectful some parents are! You are not of age, and there is a certain article, 354 in the code, that could be so worked that a poor humble creature like me could be locked up for perhaps five years. The law deals very hardly when any one has dealings with a minor, the more especially when the father is a man of untold wealth. If the Duke should ever discover "

"But how could he ever do so?"

Daumon made no reply, and his silence so plainly showed Norbert that the Counsellor did not trust him, that he repeated the question in an angry voice.

"Your blind subservience to your father is too well known."

"You believe that I should confess everything to him?"

"You yourself told me that when his eyes were fixed on yours you could not avoid yielding to his will."

Norbert's anger gradually died away, as he replied in accents of intense bitterness,

"I may be a savage, but I am not likely to become a traitor. If I once promised to keep a secret, no measures or tortures would tear it from me. I may fear my father, but I am a Champdoce, and fear no other mortal man. Do you understand me?"

"But, Marquis "

"No other mortal man," interrupted Norbert sternly,

"will ever know from me that we have ever exchanged words together."

An expression passed over the features of the Counsellor which cast a ray of hope upon the young man's heart.

"Upon my word," said he, "any one would judge from my hesitation that I had some wrong motive in acting as I am doing, but I never give bad advice, and any one will tell you the same about me, and this is the breviary by which I regulate all my actions."

As he spoke, he took a book from his desk, and waved it aloft.

Norbert looked puzzled and angry.

"What do you mean?" asked he.

"Nothing, Marquis, nothing; have patience; your majority is not far off, and you have only a few years to wait. Remember that your father is an old man; let him carry out his plan for a few years longer, and "

Norbert struck his fist savagely upon the table, crying

out furiously. "It was not worth my coming here if this was all that you had to say;" and, whistling to Bruno, the young man prepared to quit the room.

"Ah, Marquis! you are far too hasty," said the Counsellor humbly.

Norbert paused. "Speak then," answered he roughly.

In a low, impressive voice, Daumon went on.

"Remember, Marquis, that though I should like to see you have a better understanding with your father, yet, at the same time, I should like to work for the happiness of you both. I am like a judge in court, who endeavors to bring about a compromise between the litigants. Can you not, while affecting perfect submission, live in a manner more suited to you? There are many young men of your age in a precisely similar position."

Norbert took a step forward and began to listen earnestly.

"You have more liberty now," continued Daumon.

"Pray, does your father know how you employ your time?"

"He knows that I can do nothing but shoot."

"Well, I know what I would do if I were your age."

"And what would that be?"

"First of all, I would stay at home sufficiently often not to arouse papa's suspicions, and the rest of my leisure I would spend in Poitiers, which is a very pleasant town. I could take nice rooms in which I could be my own master. At Champdoce I could keep to my peasant's clothes, but in Poitiers I would be dressed by the best tailor. I should pick up a few boon companions amongst the jolly students, and have plenty of friends, ladies as well as gentlemen. I would dance, sing, and drink, and would dip into every kind of life, so that "

He paused for a second and then said, "There ought to be a fast horse or so in your father's stables, eh? Well then, if there are, why not take one for your own riding? Then at night, when you are supposed to be snug between the sheets, creep down to the stable, clap a bridle on the horse, and, hey, presto! you are in Poitiers. Put on the

clothes suitable to the handsome young noble you are, and have a joyous carouse with your many companions; and if you do, next day, not choose to go back until the morning, the servants will only tell your father that you are out shooting."

Norbert was a thoroughly strong, honest youth, and the idea of meanness and duplicity were most repugnant to his feelings in general; and yet he listened eagerly to this proposition, for oppression had utterly changed his nature. The career of dissipation and pleasure proposed so adroitly by Daumon dazzled his imagination and his eyes began to sparkle.

"Well," asked the Counsellor invidiously, "and, pray, what is there to prevent you doing all this?"

"Want of funds," returned Norbert, with a deep sigh; "I should want a great deal, and I have hardly any; if I were to ask my father for any, he would refuse me, and wonder "

"Have you no friends who would find you such a sum as you would require until you came of age?"

"None at all;" and, overwhelmed with the sense of his utter helplessness, Norbert sank back upon a chair.

After a brief period of reflection, Daumon spoke with apparent reluctance,

"No, Marquis, I cannot see you so miserably unhappy without doing my best to help you. A man is a fool who puts out his hand to interfere between father and son, but I will find money to lend you what you want."

"Will you do so, Counsellor?"

"Unluckily I cannot, I am only a poor fellow, but some of the neighboring farmers intrust me with their savings for investment. Why should I not use them to make you comfortable and happy?"

Norbert was almost choked with emotion. "Can this be done?" asked he eagerly.

"Yes, Marquis; but you understand that you will have to pay very heavy interest on account of the risk incurred in lending money to a minor. For the law does not recognize such transactions, and I myself do not like them. If I were

in your place, I would not borrow money on these terms, but wait until some friend could help me."

"I have no friends," again answered the young man.

Daumon shrugged his shoulders with the air of a man who says: "Well, I suppose I must give in, but at any rate I have done my duty." Then he began aloud, "I am perfectly aware, Marquis, that, considering the wealth that must one day be yours, this transaction is a most paltry one."

He then went on to enumerate the conditions of the loan, and at each clause he would stop and say, "Do you understand this?"

Norbert understood him so well that at the end of the conversation, in exchange for the thousand francs, he handed to the Counsellor the promissory notes for four thousand francs each, which were made payable to two farmers, who were entirely in Daumon's clutches. The young man, in addition, pledged his solemn word of honor that he would never disclose that the Counsellor had anything to do with the transaction.



"Remember, Marquis, prudence must be strictly observed. Come here to me only after the night has set in."

This was the last piece of advice that Daumon gave his client; and when he was again left alone, he perused with feelings of intense gratification, the two notes that Norbert had signed. They were entirely correct and binding, and drawn up in proper legal form. He had made up his mind to let the young man have all his savings, amounting to some forty thousand francs, and not to press for payment until the young man come into his fortune.

All this, however, hinged upon Norbert's silence and discretion, for, at the first inkling of the matter, the Duke would scatter all the edifice to the winds; but of this happening Daumon had no fear.

As Norbert walked along, followed by his dog, he could not resist putting his hands into his pockets and fingering the tempting, crisp banknotes which lurked there, and making sure that it was a reality and not a dream. That night seemed interminable; and the next morning, with his

gun on his shoulder and his dog at his heels, he walked briskly along the road to Poitiers. He had determined to follow Daumon's advice, to have suitable rooms, and to make the acquaintance of some of the students. On his arrival at Poitiers, which he had only once before visited, Norbert felt like a half fledged bird who knows not how to use its wings. He wandered about the streets, not knowing how to commence what he wanted. Finally, after a sojourn in the town of a very brief duration, he went to the inn where he had breakfasted with his father on his former visit, and, after an unsatisfactory meal, returned to Champdoce, as wretched as he had been joyful and hopeful at his early start in the morning. But later on he went to Daumon, who put him in communication with a friend who, for a commission, took the unsophisticated lad about, hired some furnished rooms, and finally introduced him to the best ladies in the town, while Norbert ordered clothes to the tune of five hundred francs. He now thought himself on the high road to the full gratification of

his desires; but, alas! the reality, compared with what his imagination had pictured, appeared rank and chilling. His timidity and shyness arrested all his progress; he required an intimate friend, and where could he hit upon one?

One evening he entered the Café Castille. He found a large number of students collected there, and was a little disgusted at their turbulent gayety, and, hastily withdrawing, he spent the rest of the weary evening in his own rooms with Bruno, who, for his part, would have much preferred the open country. He had really only enjoyed the four evenings on which he had visited the Martre; but these limited hours of happiness did not make up for the web of falsehood in which he had enmeshed himself, or the daily dread of detection in which he lived.

The Duke had noticed his son's absence, but his suspicions were very wide of the truth. One morning he laughed at Norbert on the continued non success of his shooting.

"Do your best today, my boy," said he, "and try and

bring home some game, for we shall have a guest to dinner."

"To dinner, here?"

"Yes," answered the Duke suppressing a smile. "Yes, actually here; M. Puymandour is coming, and the dining room must be opened and put into proper order."

"I will try and kill some game," answered Norbert to himself as he started on his errand.

This, however, was more easily resolved on than executed. At last he caught sight of an impudent rabbit near a hedge; he raised his gun and fired. A shriek of anguish followed the report, and Bruno dashed into the hedge, barking furiously.

## **CHAPTER V. A BAD START.**

Diana de Laurebourg was a strange compound; under an appearance of the most artless simplicity she concealed an iron will, and had hidden from every one of her family, and even from her most intimate friends, her firm resolve to become the Duchess of Champdoce. All her rambles in the neighborhood had turned out of no avail; and as the weather was now very uncertain, it seemed as if her long strolls in the country roads and fields would soon come to an end. "The day must eventually come," murmured she, "when this invisible prince must make his appearance." And at last the long expected day arrived.

It was in the middle of the month of November, and the weather was exceedingly soft and balmy for the time of year. The sky was blue, the few remaining leaves rustled on the trees, and an occasional bird whistled in the hedgerows. Diana de Laurebourg was walking slowly along the path leading to Mussidan, when all at once she heard a rustling

of branches. She turned round sharply, and all the blood in her body seemed to rush suddenly to her heart, for through an opening in the hedge she caught sight of the man who for the past two months had occupied all her waking thoughts. Norbert was waiting for something with all the eagerness of a sportsman, his finger on the trigger of his gun.

Here was the opportunity for which she had waited so long, and with such ill concealed impatience; and yet she could derive no advantage from it, for what would happen? Simply this: Norbert would bow to her, and she would reply with a slight inclination of her head, and perhaps two months might pass away before she met him again. Just as she was about to take some bold and decisive step she saw Norbert raise his gun and point it in her direction. She endeavored to call out to him, but her voice failed her, and in another moment the report rang out, and she felt a sharp pang, like the touch of a red hot iron upon her ankle. With a wild shriek she threw up her arms and fell upon

the pathway. She did not lose her senses, for she heard a cry in response to her own, and the crashing of something forcing its way through the hedge. Then she felt a hot breath upon her face, and then something cold and wet touched her cheek. She opened her eyes languidly, and saw Bruno licking her face and hands.

At the same moment Norbert dashed through the hedge and stood before her. At once she realized the advantage of her position and closed her eyes once more. Norbert, as he hung over the seemingly unconscious form of this fair young creature, felt that his senses were deserting him, for he greatly feared that he had killed Mademoiselle de Laurebourg. His first impulse was to fly precipitately, and his second to give what aid he could to his victim. He knelt down by her, and, to his infinite relief, found that life was not extinct. He raised her beautiful head.

"Speak to me, mademoiselle, I entreat you," cried he.

All this time Diana was returning thanks to kind

Providence for the fulfillment of her wishes. After a time she made a slight move, and Norbert uttered an exclamation of joy. Then, opening her beautiful eyes, she gazed upon the young man with the air of a person just awaking from a dream.

"It is I," faltered the distracted young man. "Norbert de Champdoce. But forgive me, and tell me if you are in pain?"

Pity came over the wounded girl. She gently drew herself away from the arm that encircled her, and said softly,

"It is I who ought to apologize for my foolish weakness; for I am really more frightened than hurt."

Norbert felt that heaven had opened before his very eyes. "Let me go for help," exclaimed he.

"No, no; it was a mere scratch." And, raising her skirt, she displayed a foot that might have turned a steadier head than Norbert's. "See," said she, "it is there that I am in pain."



And she pointed to a spot of blood upon the delicate white stocking. At the sight of this the young man's terror increased, and he started to his feet.

"Let me run to the Chateau," said he, "and in less than an hour "

"Do nothing of the kind," interrupted the girl; "it is a mere nothing. Look, I can move my foot with ease."

"But let me entreat you "

"Hush! we shall soon see what it is that has happened." And she inspected what she laughingly termed his terrible wound.

It was, as she had supposed, a mere nothing. One pellet had grazed the skin, another had lodged in the flesh, but it was quite on the surface.

"A surgeon must see to this," said Norbert.

"No, no." And with the point of a penknife she pulled out the little leaden shot. The young man remained still, holding his breath, as a child does when he is putting the topmost story on a house of cards. He had never heard so

soft a voice, never gazed on so perfectly lovely a face. In the meantime Diana had torn up her handkerchief and bandaged the wound. "Now that is over," exclaimed she, with a light laugh, as she extended her slender fingers to Norbert, so that he might assist her to rise.

As soon as she was on her feet, she took a few steps with the prettiest limp imaginable.

"Are you in pain?" said he anxiously.

"No, I am not indeed; and by this evening I shall have forgotten all about it. But confess, Marquis," she added, with a coquettish laugh, "that this is a droll way of making an acquaintance."

Norbert started at the word Marquis, for no one but Daumon had ever addressed him thus.

"She does not despise me," thought he.

"This little incident will be a lesson to me," continued she. "Mamma always has told me to keep to the highroad; but I preferred the by paths because of the lovely scenery."

Norbert, for the first time in his life, realized that the

view was a beautiful one.

"I am this way nearly every day," pursued Diana, "though I am very wicked to disobey my mother. I go to see poor La Berven. She is dying of consumption, poor thing, and I take her a little soup and wine every now and then."

She spoke like a real Sister of Mercy, and, in Norbert's opinion, wings only were lacking to transform her into a perfect angel.

"The poor woman has three children, and their father does nothing for them, for he drinks what he earns," the young girl went on.

Berven was one of the identical men to whom Norbert had given his promissory note for four thousand francs, for he was one of the two men who had intrusted Daumon with their savings for investment; but the young man was not in a condition to notice this. Diana had meantime slung her basket on her arm.

"Before I leave you today," said she, "I should so much like to ask a favor of you."

"A favor of me, mademoiselle?"

"Yes; oblige me by saying nothing of what has occurred today to any one; for should it come to my parents' ears, they would undoubtedly deprive me of the little liberty that they now grant me."

"Mademoiselle," answered Norbert, "be sure that I will never mention the terrible accident that my awkwardness has caused."

"Thank you, Marquis," answered the girl, with a half mocking courtesy. "Another time let me advise you, before you shoot, to look that no one is behind a hedge."

With these words she tripped away, without her tiny feet showing any signs of lameness. She had read Norbert's heart like the pages of a book, and felt that there was every chance of her winning the game. "I am sure of it now," said she; "I shall be the Duchess of Champdoce." How grateful she felt for that untimely shot! And she felt sure that Norbert had understood what she meant when she had said that she went along that path. She felt certain that the

young man had not lost one word. She believed that the only opposition would come from his father. As she looked round for a moment, she saw Norbert standing fixed and motionless as the trees around him.

After Diana had departed, the unhappy lad felt as if she had taken half his life with her. Was it all a dream? He knelt down, and, after a slight search, discovered the little pellet, the cause of all the mischief; and, taking it up carefully, returned home. To his extreme surprise, he found the main gateway wide open, and from a window he heard his father's voice calling out in kindly accents,

"Come up quickly, my boy, for our guest has arrived."

## **CHAPTER VI. THE COUNT DE PUYMANDOUR.**

Since the death of the Duchess of Champdoce the greater portion of the Chateau had been closed, but the reception rooms were always ready to be used at a very short notice.

The dining room was a really magnificent apartment. There were massive buffets of carved oak, black with age, ornamented with brass mountings. The shelves groaned beneath their load of goblets and salvers of the brightest silver, engraved with the haughty armorial bearings of the house of Champdoce.

Standing near one of the windows, Norbert saw a man, stout, robust, bald and red faced, wearing a mustache and slight beard. His clothes were evidently made by a first rate tailor, but his appearance was utterly commonplace.

"This is my son," said the Duke, "the Marquis de Champdoce. Marquis, let me introduce you to the Count de

Puymandour."

This was the first time that his father had ever addressed Norbert by his title, and he was greatly surprised. The great clock in the outer hall, which had not been going for fifteen years, now struck, and instantly a butler appeared, bearing a massive silver soup tureen, which he placed on the table, announcing solemnly that his Grace was served, and the little party at once seated themselves. A dinner in such a vast chamber would have been rather dull had it not been enlivened by the amusing tales and witty anecdotes of the Count de Puymandour, which he narrated in a jovial but rather vulgar manner, seasoned with bursts of laughter. He ate with an excellent appetite, and praised the quality of the wine, which the Duke himself had chosen from the cellar, which he had filled with an immense stock for the benefit of his descendants. The Duke, who was generally so silent and morose, smiled buoyantly, and appeared to enjoy the pleasantries of his guest. Was this only the duty of the host, or did his geniality conceal some

hidden scheme? Norbert was utterly unable to settle this question, for though not gifted with much penetration, he had studied his father's every look as a slave studies his master, and knew exactly what annoyed and what pleased him.

The Count de Puymandour lived in a magnificent house, with his daughter Marie, about three miles from Champdoce, and he was exceedingly fond of entertaining; but the gentry, who did not for a moment decline to accept his grand dinners, did not hesitate to say that Puymandour was a thief and a rogue. Had he been convicted of larceny, he could not have been spoken of with more disdainful contempt. But he was very wealthy, and possessed at least five millions of francs. Of course this was an excellent reason for hating him, but the fact was, that Puymandour was a very worthy man, and had made his money by speculation in wool on the Spanish frontier. For a long period he had lived happy and respected in his native town of Orthez, when all at once he was tempted by the



thought of titular rank, and from that time his life was one long misery. He took the name of one of his estates, he bought his title in Italy, and ordered his coat of arms from a heraldic agent in Paris, and now his ambition was to be treated as a real nobleman. The mere fact of dining with the eccentric Duke de Champdoce, who never invited any one to his table, was to him, as it were, a real patent of nobility.

At ten o'clock he rose and declared he must leave, and the Duke escorted him the length of the avenue to the great gates opening on the main road, and Norbert, who walked a few paces in the rear, caught now and then a few words of their conversation.

"Yes," remarked Puymandour, "I will give a million down."

Then came a few words from the Duke, of which Norbert could only catch the words, "thousands and millions."

He paid, however, but little attention, for his mind was

many miles away. Since he looked for meeting with that fair young face, he had thought of nothing else, and he mechanically shook hands with, and bade his guest "Good night" when his father did.

When the Duke was sure that M. de Puymandour could not hear his voice, he took his son by the arm, and the bitterness of feeling which he had so long repressed burst forth in words.

"This," said he, "is a specimen of the mushroom aristocracy that has sprung up, and not a bad sample either; for though he is puffed up by ridiculous vanity, the man is shrewd and intelligent enough, and his descendants, who will have the advantages of a better education than their progenitors, will form a new class, with more wealth and as much influence as the old one."

For more than an hour the Duke de Champdoce enlarged on his favorite topic; but he might as well have been alone, for his son paid no attention to what he said, for his mind was still dwelling upon his adventures of the

morning. Again that sweet, soft laugh, and that modulated voice rang in his ears. How foolish he must have seemed to her! and what a ridiculous figure he must have cut in her eyes! He had by no means omitted to engrave on the tablet of his memory the fact that Diana passed daily down the little path on her errand of bounty, and that there he had the chance of again seeing her. He fancied that he had so much to say to her; but as he found that his bashfulness would deprive him of the power of utterance, he determined to commit his sentiments to paper. That night he composed and destroyed some fifty letters. He did not dare to say openly, "I love you," and yet that was exactly what he wanted to express, and he strove, but in vain, to find words which would veil its abruptness and yet disclose the whole strength of his feelings. At last, however, one of his efforts satisfied him. Rising early, he snatched up his gun, and whistling to Bruno, made his way to the spot where he had the day before seen Diana stretched upon the ground. But he waited in vain, and hour after hour passed away, as

he paced up and down in an agony of suspense. Diana did not come. The young lady had considered her plans thoroughly and kept away. The next day he might have been again disappointed but for a lucky circumstance. Norbert was seated on the turf, awaiting with fond expectation the young girl's approach and as Diana passed the opening to the pathway Bruno scented her, and rushed forward with a joyous bark. She had then no option but to walk up to the spot where Norbert was seated. Both the young people were for the moment equally embarrassed, and Norbert stood silent, holding in his hand the letter which had caused him so much labor to indite.

"I have ventured to wait for you here, mademoiselle," said he in a voice which trembled with suppressed emotion, "because I was full of anxiety to know how you have been. How did you contrive to return home with your wounded foot?"

He paused, awaiting a word of encouragement, but the girl made no reply, and he continued,

"I was tempted to call and make inquiries at your father's house, but you had forbidden me to speak of the accident, and I did not dare to disobey you."

"I thank you sincerely," faltered Diana.

"Yesterday," the young man went on, "I passed the whole day here. Are you angry with me for my stupidity? I had thought that perhaps you had noticed my anxiety, and might have deigned to "

He stopped short, terrified at his own audacity.

"Yesterday," returned Diana with the most ingenuous air in the world, and not appearing to perceive the young man's embarrassment, "I was detained at home by my mother."

"Yes," replied he, "for the past two days your form, lying senseless and bleeding on the ground, has ever been before my eyes, for I felt as if I were a murderer. I shall always see your pale, white face, and how, when I raised up your head it rested on my arm for a moment, and all the rapture "

"You must not talk like that, Marquis," interrupted Diana, but she spoke in such a low tone that Norbert did not hear her and went on,

"When I saw you yesterday my feelings so overpowered me that I could not put them into words; but as soon as you had left me, it appeared as if all grew dark around me, and throwing myself on my knees, I searched for the tiny leaden pellet that might have caused your death. I at last found it, and no treasure upon earth will ever be more prized by me."

To avoid showing the gleam of joy that flashed from her eyes, Diana was compelled to turn her head on one side.

"Forgive me, mademoiselle," said Norbert, in despair, as he noticed this movement; "forgive me if I have offended you. Could you but know how dreary my past life has been, you would pardon me. It seemed to me, the very moment that I saw you, I had found a woman who would feel some slight interest in me, and that for her sweet

compassion I would devote my whole life to her. But now I see how mad and foolish I have been, and I am plunged into the depths 'of despair.' "

She accompanied these words with a glance sufficiently tender to restore all Norbert's courage.

"Ah, mademoiselle," said he; "do not trifle with me, for that would be too cruel."

She let her head droop on her bosom, and, falling upon his knees, he poured a stream of impassioned kisses upon her hands. Diana felt herself swept away by this stream of passion; she gasped, and her fingers trembled, as she found that she was trapped in the same snare that she had set for another. Her reason warned her that she must bring this dangerous interview to a conclusion.

"I am forgetting all about my poor pensioners," said she.

"Ah, if I might but accompany you!"

"And so you may, but you must walk fast."

It is quite true that great events spring from very trivial

sources; and had Diana gone to visit La Besson, Norbert might have heard something concerning Daumon that would have put him on his guard; but, unfortunately, today Diana was bound on a visit to an old woman in another part of the parish.

Norbert looked on whilst this fair young creature busied herself in her work of charity, and then he silently placed two louis from the money he had borrowed, on the table, and left the cottage. Diana followed him, and, laying her finger upon her lips with the significant word "tomorrow," turned down the path that led to her father's house. Norbert could hardly believe his senses when he found himself again alone. Yes, this lovely girl had almost confessed her affection for him, and he was ready to pour out his life blood for her. He tore up the letter which had cost him so much trouble to compose, for he felt that he could make no use of it. He had now no anxieties regarding the future, and he thanked Providence for having caused him to meet Diana de Laurebourg. It never entered his



brain that this apparently frank and open hearted girl had materially furthered the acts of Providence. At supper that night he was so gay, and in such excellent spirits, that even his father's attention was at last attracted.

"I would lay a wager, my boy," remarked the Duke, "that you have had a good day's sport."

"You would win your wager," answered the young man boldly.

His father did not pursue the subject; but as Norbert felt that he must give some color to his assertion, he stopped the next day, and purchased some quails and a hare. He waited fully half an hour for Diana; and when she did appear, her pale face and the dark marks under her eyes showed that anxiety had caused her to pass a sleepless night.

No sooner had she parted from Norbert than she saw the risk that she was running by her imprudent conduct. She was endangering her whole future and her reputation, all indeed that is most precious to a young girl. For an

instant the thought of confiding all to her parents entered her brain; but she rejected the idea almost as soon as she had conceived it, for she felt that her father would believe that the parsimonious Duke de Champdoce would never consent to such a marriage, and that her entire liberty would be taken from her, and that she might even be sent back to the convent.

"I cannot stop now," she murmured, "and must be content to run all risks to effect an object in which I am now doubly interested."

Diana and Norbert had a long conversation together on this day in a spot which had become so dear to them both, and it was only the approach of a peasant that recalled the girl to the sense of her rash imprudence, and she insisted on going on her ostensible errand of charity. Norbert, as before, escorted her, and even went so far as to offer his arm, upon which she pressed when the road was steep or uneven.

These meetings took place daily, and after a few short minutes spent in conversation, the young lovers would set

off on a ramble. More than once they were met by the villagers, and a little scandal began to arise. This was very imprudent on Diana's side; but it had been a part of her plan to permit her actions to be talked of by the tongue of scandal. Unfortunately the end of November was approaching, and the weather growing extremely cold. One morning, as Norbert arose from his couch, he found that a sharp icy blast was swaying the bare branches of the trees, and that the rain was descending in torrents. On such a day as this he knew that it was vain to expect Diana, and, with his heart full of sadness, he took up a book and sat himself down by the huge fire that blazed in the great hall.

Mademoiselle de Laurebourg had, however, gone out, but it was in a carriage, and she had driven to a cottage to see a poor woman who had broken her leg, and who had nothing but the scanty earnings of her daughter Françoise upon which to exist. As soon as Diana entered the cottage she saw that something had gone wrong.

"What is the matter?" asked she.

The poor creature, with garrulous volubility, exhibited a summons which she had just received, and said that she owed three hundred francs, and that as she could no longer pay the interest, she had been summoned, and that her little property would be seized, and so a finishing stroke would be put to her troubles.

"It is the Counsellor," said she, "that rogue Daumon, who has done all this."

The poor woman went on to say that when she went to her creditor to implore a little delay, he had scoffingly told her to send her pretty daughter to him to plead her cause.

Mademoiselle de Laurebourg was disgusted at this narrative, and her eyes gleamed with anger.

"I will see this wicked man," said she, "and will come back to you at once."

She drove straight to the Counsellor's house. Daumon was engaged in writing when the housekeeper ushered Diana into the office. He rose to his feet, and, taking off his

velvet skull cap, made a profound bow, advancing at the same time a chair for his visitor's accommodation.

Though Diana knew nothing of this man, she was not so unsophisticated as Norbert, and was not imposed upon by the air of servile obsequiousness that he assumed. With a gesture of contempt, she declined the proffered seat, and this act made Daumon her bitter enemy.

"I have come," said she in the cold, disdainful words in which young girls of high birth address their inferiors, "I have come to you from Widow Rouleau."

"Ah! you know the poor creature then?"

"Yes, and I take a great interest in her."

"You are a very kind young lady," answered the Counsellor with a sinister smile.

"The poor woman is in the most terrible distress both of mind and body. She is confined to her bed with a fractured limb, and without any means of support."

"Yes, I heard of her accident."

"And yet you sent her a summons, and are ready to

seize all she possesses in the world."

Daumon put on an air of sympathy.

"Poor thing!" said he. "How true it is that misfortunes never come singly!"

Diana was disgusted at the man's cool effrontery.

"It seems to me," answered she, "that her last trouble is of your making."

"Is it possible?"

"Why, who is it but you who are the persecutor of this poor lone creature?"

"I!" answered he in extreme astonishment; "do you really think that it is I? Ah! mademoiselle, why do you listen to the cruel tongues of scandal mongers? To make a long story short, this poor woman bought barley, corn, potatoes, and three sheep from a man in the neighborhood, who gave her credit to the extent of I daresay three hundred francs. Well, in time, the man asked most naturally for his money, and failing to get it, came to me. I urged him to wait, but he would not listen to me, and vowed that if I did

not do as he wished he would go to some one else. What was I to do? He had the law on his side too. Ah!" continued he, as though speaking to himself, "if I could only see a way of getting this poor creature out of her trouble! But that cannot be done without money."

He opened a drawer and pulled out about fifty francs.

"This is all my worldly wealth," said he sadly. "But how foolish I am! For, of course, when poor Widow Rouleau has a wealthy young lady to take an interest in her, she must have no further fear."

"I will speak to my father on the matter," answered Diana in a voice which showed that she had but little hope of interesting him in the widow's misfortunes.

Daumon's face fell.

"You will go to the Marquis de Laurebourg?" asked he. "Now, if you would take my advice, I should say, go to some intimate friend, to the Marquis de Champdoce, for instance. I know," he went on, "that the Duke does not make his son a very handsome allowance; but the

young gentleman will find no difficulty in raising whatever he may desire as it will not be long before he is of age without counting his marriage, which will put an enormous sum at his disposal even before that."

Diana fell in an instant into the trap the wily Daumon had laid for her.

"A marriage!" exclaimed she.

"I know very little about it; only I know that if the young man wishes to marry without his father's consent, he will have to wait at least five years."

"Five years?"

"Yes; the law requires that a young man who marries against his father's desire should be twenty five years of age."

This last stroke was so totally unexpected, that the girl lost her head.

"Impossible!" cried she. "Are you not making a mistake?"

The Counsellor gave a quiet smile of triumph.



"I am not mistaken," said he, and calmly pointed out in the code the provision to which he had alluded. As Diana read the passage to which his finger pointed, he watched her as a cat watches a mouse.

"After all, what does it matter to me?" remarked Diana, making an effort to recover herself. "I will speak about this poor woman's case to my father;" and, with her limbs bending under her, she left the room.

As Daumon returned from accompanying her to the door, the Counsellor rubbed his hands.

"Things are getting decidedly warm," muttered he.

He felt that he must gain some further information, and this he could not get from Norbert. It would be also as well, he thought, to tell the sheriff to stay proceedings relative to the Widow Rouleau. By this means he might secure another interview with Mademoiselle de Laurebourg, and perhaps win the poor girl's confidence.

As Diana rode home, she abandoned herself to the grief which the intelligence that she had just heard had

caused her, for the foresight of the framers of the law had rendered all her deeply laid plans of no avail.

"The Duke of Champdoce," murmured she to herself, "will never consent to his son's marriage with so scantily a dowered woman as I am; but as soon as Norbert is of age he can marry me, in spite of all his father's opposition; but, oh! 'tis a dreary time to wait."

For a moment she dared to think of the possible death of the old man; but she shuddered as she remembered how strong and healthy he was, and felt that the frail edifice of her hope had been crushed into ten thousand atoms. For all this, however, she did not lose courage. She was not one of those women who, at the first check, beat a retreat. She had not yet decided upon a fresh point of departure, but she had fully made up her mind that she would gain the victory. The first thing was to see Norbert with as little delay as possible. Just then the carriage pulled up at the widow's cottage, which she entered hastily.

"I have seen Daumon," said she. "Do not be alarmed;

all matters will be arranged shortly."

Then, without listening to the thanks and blessings which the poor woman showered upon her, she said,

"Give me a piece of paper to write on," and, standing near the casement, she wrote in pencil on a soiled scrap of paper the following words:

"Diana would, perhaps, have been at the usual meeting place today, in spite of the weather, had she not been compelled to visit a poor woman in a contrary direction. Upon the same business, she will have to call tomorrow at the house of a man called Daumon."

She folded the note and said,

"This letter must be taken at once to M. Norbert de Champdoce. Who will carry it?"

Francoise had made a smock frock for one of the farm servants at Champdoce, and the delivery of it formed a good excuse for going up to the Chateau, and she willingly undertook the errand.

The next day, in the midst of a heavy shower of rain,

Norbert made his appearance at Daumon's office, saying, as a pretext for his visit, that he had exhausted his stock of money, and required a fresh supply. He too was feeling very unhappy, for he feared that this father might entertain matrimonial designs for him which would be utterly opposed to his passion for Mademoiselle de Laurebourg.

Had not the inexorable old man once said, "You will marry a woman of wealth"? But in the event of this matter being brought up, Norbert swore that he would no longer be obedient, but would resist to the last; and he calculated on receiving assistance from Daumon. He was on the point of referring to this matter, when a carriage drew up at the door of the cottage, and Mademoiselle de Laurebourg descended from it. Daumon at once saw how matters stood, and wasted no time in addressing Diana.

"The sheriff will stop proceedings," said he. "I can show you his letter to that effect."

He turned away, and searched as diligently for the letter as if it had existed anywhere except in his own

imagination.

"Dear me," said he at length. "I cannot find it. I must have left it in the other room. I have so much to do, that really there are times when I forget everything. I must find it, however. Excuse me, I will be back immediately."

His sudden departure from the room had been a mere matter of calculation; for, guessing that an assignation had been planned, he thought that he might know what took place at it by a little eavesdropping. He therefore applied first his ear and then his eye to the keyhole, and by these means acquired all the information he desired.

A moment of privacy with the object of his affections seemed to Norbert an inestimable boon. When Diana had first entered, he was horrified at the terrible alteration that had taken place in the expression of her face. He seized her hand, which she made no effort to withdraw, and gazed fixedly into her eyes.

"Tell me," murmured he in accents of love and tenderness, "what it is that has gone wrong."

Diana sighed, then a tear coursed slowly down her cheek. Norbert was in the deepest despair at these signs of grief.

"Great heavens!" cried he. "Will you not trust me? Am not I your truest and most devoted friend?" At first she refused to answer him, but at length she yielded to his entreaties, and confessed that the evening before her father had informed her that a young man had sought her hand in marriage, and one who was a perfectly eligible suitor.

Norbert listened to this avowal, trembling from head to foot, with a sudden access of jealousy.

"And did you make no objections?" asked he.

"How could I?" retorted she. "What can a girl do in opposition to the will of all her family, when she has to choose between the alternative that she loathes, or a life long seclusion in a convent?"

Daumon shook with laughter, as he kept his ear closely to the keyhole.

"Good business," muttered he. "Not so bad. Here's a little girl from a convent. She has a clever brain and a glib tongue, and under my tuition would be a perfect wonder. If this country booby does not make an open declaration at once, I wonder what her next move will be?"

"And you hesitated," said Norbert reproachfully. "Remember you may escape from the walls of the convent, but not from the bonds of an ill assorted marriage."

Diana, who looked more beautiful than ever in her despair, wrung her hands.

"What reason can I give to my father for declining this offer?" said she. "Every one knows that I am almost portionless, and that I am sacrificed to my brother, immolated upon the altar erected before the cruel idol of family pride; and how dare I refuse a suitable offer when one is made for my hand?"

"Have you forgotten me?" cried Norbert. "Have you no love for me?"

"Ah, my poor friend, you are no more free than I am."

"Then you look on me as a mere weak boy?" asked he, biting his lips.

"Your father is very powerful," answered she in tones of the deepest resignation; "his determination is inflexible, and his will inexorable. You are completely in his power."

"What do I care for my father?" cried the young man fiercely. "Am not I a Champdoce too? Woe be to any one, father or stranger, who comes between me and the woman I love devotedly; for I do love you, Diana, and no mortal man shall take you from me."

He clasped Diana to his breast, and pressed a loving kiss upon her lips.

"Aha," muttered Daumon, who had lost nothing from his post of espial, "this is worth fifty thousand francs at least to me."

For a moment Diana remained clasped in her lover's embrace, and then, with a faint cry, released herself from him. She then felt that she loved him, and his kiss and caresses sent a thrill like liquid fire through her veins. She



was half pleased and half terrified. She feared him, but she feared herself more.

"What, Diana! Would you refuse me?" asked he, after a moment's pause. "Do you refuse me, when I implore you to be my wife, and to share my name with me? Will you not be the Duchess of Champdoce?"

Diana only replied with a glance; but if her eyes spoke plainly, that look said "Yes."

"Why, then," returned Norbert, "should we alarm ourselves with empty phantoms? Do you not trust me? My father may certainly oppose my plans, but before long I shall escape from his tyrannical sway, for I shall be of age."

"Ah, Norbert," returned she sadly, "you are feeding upon vain hopes. You must be twenty five years of age before you can marry and give the shelter of your name to the woman whom you have chosen for your wife."

This was exactly the explanation for which Daumon had been waiting.

"Good again, my young lady," cried he. "And so this is

why she came here. There is some credit in giving a lesson to so apt a pupil."

"It is impossible," cried Norbert, violently agitated; "such an iniquitous thing cannot be."

"You are mistaken," answered Diana calmly. "Unfortunately I am telling you exactly how matters stand. The law clearly fixes the age at twenty five. During all this time will you remember that a broken hearted girl "

"Why talk to me of law? When I am of age, I shall have plenty of money," broke in Norbert; "and do you think that I will tamely submit to my father's oppression? No, I will wrest his consent from him."

During this conversation the Counsellor was carefully removing the dust from the knees of his trousers.

"I will pop in suddenly," thought he, "and catch a word or two which will do away with the necessity of all lengthy explanations."

He suited the action to the word, and appeared

suddenly before the lovers. He was not at all disconcerted at the effect his entrance produced upon them, and remarked placidly, "I could not find the sheriff's letter, but I assure you that Widow Rouleau's matter shall be speedily and satisfactorily arranged."

Diana and Norbert exchanged glances of annoyance at finding their secret at the mercy of such a man. This evident distrust appeared to wound Daumon deeply.

"You have a perfect right," remarked he dejectedly, "to say, 'Mind your own business;' but the fact is, that I hate all kinds of injustice so much that I always take the side of the weakest, and so, when I come in and find you deploring your troubles, I say to myself, 'Doubtless here are two young people made for each other.' "

"You forget yourself," broke in Diana haughtily.

"I beg your pardon," stammered Daumon. "I am but a poor peasant, and sometimes I speak out too plainly. I meant no harm, and I only hope that you will forgive me."

Daumon looked at Diana; and as she made no reply,

he went on: "'Well,' says I to myself, 'here are two young folks that have fallen in love, and have every right to do so, and yet they are kept apart by unreasonable and cruel minded parents. They are young and know nothing of the law, and without help they would most certainly get into a muddle. Now, suppose I take their matter in hand, knowing the law thoroughly as I do, and being up to its weak as well as its strong points.'"

He spoke on in this strain for some minutes, and did not notice that they had withdrawn a little apart, and were whispering to each other.

"Why should we not trust him?" asked Norbert. "He has plenty of experience."

"He would betray us; he would do anything for money."

"That is all the better for us then; for if we promise him a handsome sum, he will not say a word of what has passed today."

"Do as you think best, Norbert."

Having thus gained Diana's assent, the young man turned to Daumon. "I put every faith in you, and so does Mademoiselle de Laurebourg. You know our exact situation. What do you advise?"

"Wait and hope," answered the Counsellor. "The slightest step taken before you are of age will be fatal to your prospects, but the day you are twenty one I will undertake to show you several methods of bringing the Duke on his knees."

Nothing could make this speech more explicit; but he was so cheerful and confident, that when Diana left the office, she felt a fountain of fresh hope well up in her heart.

This was nearly their last interview that year, for the winter came on rapidly and with increased severity, so that it was impossible for the lovers to meet out of doors, and the fear of spying eyes prevented them from taking advantage of Daumon's hospitality. Each day, however, the widow's daughter, Françoise, carried a letter to Laurebourg,

and brought back a reply to Champdoce. The inhabitants of the various country houses had fled to more genial climates, and only the Marquis de Laurebourg, who was an inveterate sportsman, still lingered; but at the first heavy fall of snow he too determined to take refuge in the magnificent house that he owned in the town of Poitiers. Norbert had foreseen this, and had taken his measures accordingly. Two or three times in the week he mounted his horse and rode to the town. After changing his dress, he made haste to a certain garden wall in which there was a small door. At an agreed hour this door would gently open, and as Norbert slipped through he would find Diana ready to welcome him, looking more bewitching than ever. This great passion, which now enthralled his whole life, and the certainty that his love was returned, had done away with a great deal of his bashfulness and timidity. He had resumed his acquaintanceship with Montlouis, and had often been with him to the Caf  Castille. Montlouis was only for a short time at Poitiers, for as soon as spring

began he was to join the young Count de Mussidan, who had promised to find some employment for him. The approaching departure was not at all to Montlouis' taste, as he was madly in love with a young girl who resided in the town. He told all to Norbert; and as confidence begets confidence, he more than once accompanied the young Marquis to the door in the garden wall of the Count de Laurebourg's town house.

April came at last. The gentry returned to their country houses, and in time the happy day arrived when Diana de Laurebourg was to return to her father's country mansion. The lovers had now every opportunity to meet, and would exhort each other to have patience, and a week after Diana's return they spent a long day together in the woods. After this delicious day, Norbert, happy and light hearted, returned to his father's house.

"Marquis," said the Duke, plunging at once into the topic nearest his heart, "I have found a wife for you, and in two months you will marry her."

## **CHAPTER VII. AN UNLUCKY BLOW.**

The falling of a thunderbolt at his feet would have startled Norbert less than these words did. The Duke took, or affected to take, no notice of his son's extreme agitation, and in a careless manner he continued,

"I suppose, my son, that it is hardly necessary for me to tell you the young lady's name. Mademoiselle Marie de Puymandour cannot fail to please you. She is excessively pretty, tall, dark, and with a fine figure. You saw her at Mass one day. What do you think of her?"

"Think!" stammered Norbert. "Really I "

"Pshaw," replied the old gentleman; "I thought that you had begun to use your eyes. And look here, Marquis, you must adopt a different style of dress. You can go over with me to Poitiers tomorrow, and one of the tailors there will make you some clothes suitable to your rank, for I don't suppose that you wish to alarm your future wife by the uncouthness of your appearance."



"But, father "

"Wait a moment, if you please. I shall have a suite of apartments reserved for you and your bride, and you can pass your honeymoon here. Take care you do not prolong it for too lengthened a period; and when it is all over, we can break the young woman into all our ways."

"But," interrupted Norbert hastily, "suppose I do not fancy this young lady?"

"Well, what then?"

"Suppose I should beg you to save me from a marriage which will render me most unhappy?"

The Duke shrugged his shoulders. "Why this is mere childishness," said he. "The marriage is a most suitable one, and it is my desire that it should take place." "But, father," again commenced Norbert.

"What! Are you opposing my will?" asked his father angrily. "Pray, do you hesitate?"

"No," answered his son coldly, "I do not hesitate."

"Very good, then. A man of no position can consult the

dictates of his heart when he takes a wife, but with a nobleman of rank and station it is certainly a different matter, for with the latter, marriage should be looked upon as a mere business transaction. I have made excellent arrangements. Let me repeat to you the conditions. The Count will give two thirds of his fortune, which is estimated at five millions just think of that! and when we get that, we shall be able to screw and save with better heart. Think of the restoration of our house, and the colossal fortune that our descendants will one day inherit, and realize all the beauties of a life of self denial."

While the Duke was uttering this string of incoherent sentences, he was pacing up and down the room, and now he halted immediately in front of his son. "You understand," said he; "tomorrow you will go to Poitiers, and on Sunday we will dine at the house of your future father in law."

In this fearful crisis Norbert did not know what to say or how to act.

"Father," he once more commenced, "I have no wish to go to Poitiers tomorrow."

"What are you saying? What in heaven's name do you mean?"

"I mean that as I shall never love Mademoiselle de Puymandour, she will never be my wife."

The Duke had never foreseen the chance of rebellion on the part of his son, and he could not bring his mind to receive such an unlooked for event.

"You are mad," said he at last, "and do not know what you are saying."

"I know very well."

"Think of what you are doing."

"I have reflected."

The Duke was making a violent effort to compose his ordinarily violent temper.

"Do you imagine," answered he disdainfully, "that I shall be satisfied with an answer of this kind? I hope that you will submit to my wishes, for I think that, as the head

of the family, I have conceived a splendid plan for its future aggrandizement; and do you think that, for the mere whim of a boy, I will be turned aside from my fixed determination?"

"No, father," answered Norbert, "it is no boyish whim that makes me oppose your wishes. Tell me, have I not ever been a dutiful son to you? Have I ever refused to do what I was ordered? No; I have obeyed you implicitly. I am the son of the wealthiest man in Poitiers, and I have lived like a laborer's child. Whatever your mandates were, I have never complained or murmured at them."

"Well, and now I order you to marry Mademoiselle de Puymandour."

"Anything but that; I do not love her, and I shall never do so. Do you wish my whole life to be blighted? I entreat you to spare me this sacrifice!"

"My orders are given, and you must comply with them."

"No," answered Norbert quietly, "I will not comply

with them."

A purple flush passed across the Duke's face, then it faded away, leaving every feature of a livid whiteness.

"Great heavens!" said he in a voice before which Norbert, at one time, would have quailed. "Whence comes the audacity that makes you venture to dispute my orders?"

"From the feeling that I am acting rightly."

"How long is it that it has been right for children to disobey their parents' commands?"

"Ever since parents began to issue unjust commands."

This speech put the finishing stroke to the Duke's rage. He made a step across the room, towards his son, raising the stick that he usually carried high in the air. For a moment he stood thus, and then, casting it aside, he exclaimed,

"No, I cannot strike a Champdoce."

Perhaps it was Norbert's intrepid attitude that restrained the Duke's frenzy, for he had not moved a muscle, but stood still, with his arms folded, and his head thrown

haughtily back.

"No, this is an act of disobedience that I will not put up with," exclaimed the old man in a voice of thunder, and, springing upon his son, he grasped him by the collar and dragged him up to a room on the second floor, and thrust him violently through the doorway.

"You have twenty four hours in which to reflect whether you will be willing to accept the wife that I have chosen for you," said he.

"I have already decided on that point," answered Norbert quietly.

The Duke made no reply, but slammed the door, which was of massive oak, and secured by a lock of enormous proportions.

Norbert gazed round; the only other exit from the room was by means of a window some forty feet from the ground. The young man, however, imagined that some one would surely come to make up his bed for the night; that would give him two sheets; these he could knot

together and thus secure a means of escape. He might not be able to see Diana at once, but he could easily send her a message by Daumon, warning her of what had taken place. Having arranged his plans, he threw himself into an armchair with a more easy mind than he had experienced for many months past. The decisive step had been taken, and the relations between his father and himself clearly defined, and thus he naturally considered great progress had been made, and the task before him seemed as nothing to what he had already performed.

"My father," thought he, "must be half mad with passion."

And Norbert was not wrong in his opinion. When the Duke, as usual, took his place at the table, at which the farm laborers ate their meals, not one of them had the courage to make a single observation. Every one knew what a serious altercation had taken place between father and son, and each one was devoured by the pangs of ungratified curiosity.

As soon as the meal was concluded, the Duke called an old and trustworthy servant, who had been in his employment for over thirty years.

"Jean," said he, "your young master is locked in the yellow room. Here is the key. Take him something to eat."

"Very good, your Grace."

"Wait a little. You will spend the night in his room and keep a strict watch upon him. He may design to make his escape. If he attempts it, restrain him, if necessary, by physical force. Should he prove too strong for you, call to me; I shall be near, and will come to your aid."

This unexpected precaution upon the Duke's part upset all Norbert's plans of escape. He endeavored to persuade Jean to allow him to go out for a couple of hours, giving his word of honor that he would return at the expiration of that time. Prayers and menaces, however, had no effect. Had the young man gazed from the window, he would have seen his father striding moodily up and down the courtyard, with the thought gnawing at his heart that perhaps after all these



many years of waiting his plans might yet be frustrated.

"There is a woman at the bottom of all this," said he to himself. "It is only woman's wiles that in this brief space of time would effect so complete a change in a young man's disposition. Besides, he would not have so obstinately declined to listen to the proposal I made him had not his affections been engaged elsewhere. Who can she be? and by what means shall I find her out?"

It would be absurd to question Norbert, and the Duke was excessively unwilling to institute any regular inquiry into the matter. He passed the whole night in gloomy indecision, but towards morning an inspiration came to him which he looked upon as a special interposition of Providence.

"Bruno," he exclaimed with a mighty oath. "The dog will show me the place that his master frequents and perhaps lead me to the very woman who had bewitched him."

The brilliant idea soothed him a great deal, and at one

o'clock he took his seat as usual at the head of the table, and ordered food to be taken up to Norbert, but that none of the measures for his safe custody were to be relaxed.

When he thought the moment was a favorable one, he whistled to Bruno, and, though the dog rarely followed him, yet in the absence of his master, he condescended to accompany the Duke down the avenue to the front gates. Three roads branched off from here, but the dog did not hesitate for a moment, and took the one to the left, like an animal who knew his destination perfectly well. Bruno went ahead for nearly half an hour, until he reached the exact spot where Diana had met with her accident. He made a cast round, but finding nothing, sat down, clearly saying,

"Let us wait."

"This, then," muttered the Duke, "is the place where the lovers have been in the habit of meeting each other."

The place was a very lonely one, and, standing on the rising ground, commanded a view of the country for a long

way round.

The Duke noticed this, and took up a position where the trunk of a giant oak almost concealed him from observation. He was delighted at his sagacity, and was almost in a good humor; for now that he had reflected, the danger did not seem by any means so great, for to whom could Norbert have lost his heart? To some little peasant girl, perhaps, who, thinking that the lad was an easy dupe, had tried to induce him to marry her. As these thoughts passed through the Duke's brain, Bruno gave a joyous bark.

"Here she is," muttered he, as he emerged from his hiding place, and at that moment Diana de Laurebourg made her appearance; but as soon as she saw the Duke she uttered a faint cry of alarm. She was inclined to turn and fly, but her strength failed her, and, extending her hands, she grasped the boughs of a slender birch tree that grew close by, to prevent herself from falling. The Duke was quite as much astonished as the young lady. He had expected to see

a peasant girl, and here was the daughter of the Marquis de Laurebourg. But anger soon succeeded to surprise; for though he might have had nothing to fear from the peasant, the daughter of the Marquis de Laurebourg was an utterly different antagonist. He could not rely upon aid from her family, as, for all he knew, they might be aiding and abetting her.

"Well, my child," began he, "you do not seem very glad to see me."

"Your Grace."

"Yes, when you come out to meet the son, it is annoying to meet the father; but do not blame poor Norbert, for I assure you he is not in fault."

Though Mademoiselle de Laurebourg had been startled at first, she was possessed of too strong a will to give in, and soon recovered her self possession.

She never thought to screen herself by a denial of her reasons for being on the spot, for such a course she would have looked on as an act of treacherous cowardice.

"You are quite right," answered she. "I came here to meet your son, and therefore you will pardon me if I take my leave of you."

With a deep courtesy she was about to move away, when the Duke laid a restraining grip upon her arm.

"Permit me, my child," said he, endeavoring to put on a kind and paternal tone, "let me say a few words to you. Do you know why Norbert did not come to meet you?"

"He has doubtless some very good reason."

"My son is locked up in a room, and my servants have my orders to prevent his making his escape by force, if necessary."

"Poor fellow! He deserves the deepest commiseration."

The Duke was much surprised at this piece of impertinence, as he considered it.

"I will tell you," returned he in tones of rising anger, "how it comes that I treat my son, the heir to my rank and fortune, in this manner."

He looked savagely angry as he spoke, but Diana answered negligently, "Pray go on; you quite interest me."

"Well then, listen to me. I have chosen a wife for Norbert; she is as young as you are beautiful, clever, and wealthy."

"And of noble birth, of course."

The sarcasm conveyed in this reply roused the Duke to fury.

"Fifteen hundred thousand francs as a marriage portion will outweigh a coat of arms, even though it should be a tower argent on a field azure." The Duke paused as he made this allusion to the Laurebourg arms, and then continued, "In addition to this, she has great expectations; and yet my son is mad enough to refuse the hand of this wealthy heiress."

"If you think that this marriage will cause your son's happiness, you are quite right in acting as you have done."

"Happiness! What has that to do with the matter, as long as it adds to the aggrandizement of our house and

name? I have made up my mind that Norbert shall marry this girl; I have sworn it, and I never break my oath. I told him this myself."

Diana suffered acutely, but her pride supported her, whilst her confidence in Norbert was so great that she had the boldness to inquire, "And what did he say to that?"

"Norbert will become a dutiful son once more when he is removed from the malignant influence which has been so injurious to him," returned the Duke fiercely.

"Indeed."

"He will obey me, when I show him that though he may not value his name and position, there are others who do so; and that many a woman would fight a brave battle for the honor of being the Duchess of Champdoce. Young lady, my son is a mere boy; but I have known the world, and when I prove to the poor fool that it was only grasping ambition which assumed the garb of love, he will renounce his folly and resume his allegiance to me. I will tell him what I think of the poverty stricken adventuresses

of high birth, whose only weapons are their youth and beauty, and with which they think that they can win a wealthy husband in the battle of life."

"Continue, sir," broke in Diana haughtily. "Insult a defenceless girl with her poverty! It is a noble act, and one worthy of a high born gentleman like yourself!"

"I believed," said the Duke, "that I was addressing the woman whose advice had led my son to break into open rebellion against my authority. Am I right or wrong? You can prove me to be mistaken by urging upon Norbert the necessity for submission."

She made no reply, but bent her head upon her bosom.

"You see," continued the Duke, "that I am correct, and that if you continue to act as you have done, I shall be justified in retaliating in any manner that I may deem fit. You have now been warned. Carry on this intrigue at your peril."

He placed such an insulting emphasis upon the word



"intrigue" that Diana's anger rose to boiling point. At that instant, for the sake of vengeance, she would have risked her honor, her ambition, her very life itself.

Forgetting all prudence, she cast aside her mask of affected indifference, and, with her eyes flashing angry gleams of fire, and her cheeks burning, she said,

"Listen to me. I, too, have sworn an oath, and it is that Norbert shall be my husband; and I tell you that he shall be so! Shut him up in prison, subject him to every indignity at the hands of your menials, but you will never break his spirit, or make him go back from his plighted word. If I bid him, he will resist your will even unto the bitter end. He and I will never yield. Believe me when I tell you, that before you attack a young girl's honor, you had better pause; for one day she will be a member of your family. Farewell."

Before the Duke could recover his senses, Diana was far down the path on her way homewards; and then he burst into a wild storm of menaces, oaths, and insults. He fancied

that he was alone, but he was mistaken; for the whole of that strange scene had a hidden witness, and that witness was Daumon. He had heard of the treatment of the young Marquis from one of his servants at the Chateau, and his first thought had been to acquaint Diana with it. Unfortunately he saw no means of doing this. He dared not go to Laurebourg, and he would have died sooner than put pen to paper. He was in a position of the deepest embarrassment when the idea struck him of going to the lovers' trysting place. The little cry that Diana had uttered upon perceiving the Duke had put him upon his guard. Bruno had found him out; but, as he knew him, merely fawned upon him. He was delighted at the fury of the Duke, whom he hated with cold and steady malignity; but the courage of Diana filled him with admiration. Her sublime audacity won his warmest praises, and he longed for her as an ally to aid him in his scheme of revenge. He knew that the girl would find herself in a terribly embarrassing position, and thus she would be sure to

call upon him for advice before returning home.

"Now," thought he, "if I wish to profit by her anger, I ought to strike while the iron is hot; and to do so, I should be at home to meet her."

Without a moment's delay, he dashed through the woods, striving to get home without the young girl's perceiving him. His movements in the underwood caught the Duke's eye.

"Who is there?" exclaimed he, moving towards the spot from whence the rustling came. There was no reply. Surely he had not been mistaken. Calling to Bruno, he strove to put him on the scent, but the dog showed no signs of eagerness. He sniffed about for a time, and seemed to linger near one special spot. The Duke moved towards it, and distinctly saw the impression of two knees upon the grass.

"Some one has been eavesdropping," muttered he, much enraged at his discovery. "Who can it be? Has Norbert escaped from his prison?"

As he returned through the courtyard, he called one of the grooms to him.

"Where is my son?" asked he.

"Upstairs, your Grace," was the answer.

The Duke breathed more freely. Norbert was still in security, and therefore could not have been the person who had been listening.

"But," added the lad, "the young master is half frantic."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he declared that he would not remain in his room an instant longer; so old Jean called for help. He is awfully strong, and it took six of us to hold him. He said that if we would let him go, he would return in two hours, and that his honor and life were involved."

The Duke listened with a sarcastic smile. He cared nothing about the frantic struggles of his son, for his heart had grown cold and hard from the presence of the fixed idea which had actuated his conduct for so many years, and

it was with the solemn face of a man who was fulfilling a sacred duty that he ascended to the room in which his son was imprisoned. Jean threw open the door, and the Duke paused for a moment on the threshold. The furniture had been overturned, some of it broken, and there were evident signs of a furious struggle having taken place.

A powerful laborer stood near the window, and Norbert was lying on the bed, with his face turned to the wall.

"Leave us," said the Duke, and the man withdrew at once.

"Get up, Norbert," he added; "I wish to speak to you."

His son obeyed him. Any one but the Duke would have been alarmed by the expression of the young man's face.

"What is the meaning of all this?" asked the old nobleman in his most severe voice. "Are not my orders sufficient to insure obedience? I hear that absolute force has had to be used towards you during my absence. Tell me, my

son, what plans you have devised during these hours of solitude, and what hopes you still venture to cherish."

"I intend to be free, and I will be so."

The Duke affected not to hear the reply, uttered as it was in a tone of derision.

"It was very easy for me to discover, from your obstinacy, that some woman had endeavored to entrap you, and by her insidious counsels inducing you to disobey your best friend."

He paused, but there was no reply.

"This woman this dangerous woman I have been in search of, and as you can conceive, I easily found her. I went to the Forest of Bevron, and there I need not tell you I found Mademoiselle de Laurebourg."

"Did you speak to her?"

"I did so, certainly. I told her my opinion of those manoeuvring women who fascinate the dupes they intend to take advantage of "

"Father!"

"Can it be possible that you, simple boy even as you are, could have been deceived by the pretended love of this wily young woman? It is not you, Marquis, that she loves, but our name and fortune; but /I/ know if /she/ does not that the law will imprison women who contrive to entrap young men who are under age."

Norbert turned deadly pale.

"Did you really say that to her?" asked he, in a low, hoarse voice, utterly unlike his own. "You dare to insult the woman I love, when you knew that I was far away and unable to protect her! Take care, or I shall forget that you are my father."

"He actually threatens me," said the Duke, "my son threatens me;" and, raising the heavy stick he held in his hand, he struck Norbert a violent blow. By a fortunate movement the unhappy boy drew back, and so avoided the full force of the stroke, but the end of the stick struck him across the temple, inflicting a long though not a serious wound. In his blind rage Norbert was about to

throw himself upon his father, when his eyes caught sight of the open door. Liberty and safety lay before him, and, with a bound, he was on the stairs, and before the Duke could shout for aid from the window, his son was tearing across the park with all the appearance and gesture of a madman.

## **CHAPTER VIII. THE LITTLE GLASS BOTTLE.**

In order to avoid being seen by Mademoiselle de Laurebourg, Daumon had to take a much longer route to regain his home than the one that Diana had followed. This, however, he could not help. As soon as he arrived at his home he ran hastily upstairs and took from a cleverly concealed hiding place in the wainscoting of his bedroom a small bottle of dark green glass, which he hastily slipped into his pocket. When he had once more descended to his office, he again took it out and examined it carefully to see that it had in no way been tampered with; then, with a hard,



cruel smile, he placed it upon his desk among his ledgers and account books. Diana de Laurebourg might pay him a visit as soon as she liked, for he was quite prepared for her, for he had slipped on his dressing gown and placed his velvet skull cap upon his head, as if he had not quitted the house that day.

"Why on earth does she not come?" muttered he.

He began to be uneasy. He went to the window and glanced eagerly down the road; then he drew out his watch and examined the face of it, when all at once his ears detected a gentle tapping at the door of the office.

"Come in," said he.

The door opened, and Diana entered slowly, without uttering a word, and took no notice of the servile obsequiousness of the Counsellor; indeed, she hardly seemed to notice his presence, and with a deep sigh she threw herself into a chair.

In his inmost heart Daumon was filled with the utmost delight; he now understood why Diana had taken so long in

reaching his house; it was because her interview with the Duke had almost overcome her.

She soon, however, recovered her energy, and shook off the languor that seemed to cling to her limbs, and turning towards her host, said abruptly,

"Counsellor, I have come to you for advice, which I sorely need. About an hour ago "

With a gesture of sympathy Daumon interrupted her,

"Alas!" said he; "spare me the recital, I know all."

"You know "

"Yes, I know that M. Norbert is a prisoner at the Chateau. Yes, mademoiselle, I know this, and I know, too, that you have just met the Duke de Champdoce in the Forest of Bevron. I know, moreover, all that you said to the old nobleman, for I have heard every word from a person who has just left."

In spite of her strong nerves, Diana was unable to restrain a movement of dismay and terror.

"But who told you of this?" murmured she.

"A man who was out cutting wood. Ah! my dear young lady, the forest is not a safe place to tell secrets in, for you never know whether watchful eyes and listening ears are not concealed behind every tree. This man, and I am afraid some of his companions, heard every word that was spoken, and as soon as you left the Duke the man scampered off to tell the story. I made him promise not to say a word, but he is a married man and is sure to tell it to his wife. Then there are his companions; dear me! it is most annoying."

"Then all is lost, and I am ruined," murmured she.

But her despair did not last long, for she was by no means the woman to throw down her arms and sue for mercy. She grasped the arm of the Counsellor.

"The end has not come yet, surely? Speak! What is to be done? You must have some plan. I am ready for anything, now that I have nothing to lose. No one shall ever say that that cowardly villain, the Duke de Champdoce, insulted me with impunity. Tell me, will you help me?"

"In the name of heaven!" cried he, "do not speak so loud. You do not know the adversary that you have to contend with."

"Are you afraid of him?"

"Yes, I do fear him; and what is more, I fear him very much. He is a determined man, and will gain his object at any cost or risk. Do you know that he did his best to crush me because I summoned him to court on behalf of one of my clients? So that now, when any one comes to me and wishes to proceed against the Duke, I am glad to decline to take up the matter."

"And so," returned the young girl in a tone of cold contempt, "after leading us to this compromising position, you are ready to abandon us at the most critical moment?"

"Can you think such a thing, mademoiselle?"

"You can act as you please, Counsellor; Norbert is still left to me; he will protect me."

Daumon shook his head with an air of deep sorrow.

"How can we be sure that at this very moment the

Marquis has not given in to all his father's wishes?"

"No," exclaimed the girl; "such a supposition is an insult to Norbert. He would sooner die than give in. He may be timid, but he is not a coward; the thoughts of me will give him the power to resist his father's tyranny."

Daumon allowed himself to fall into his great armchair as though overcome by the excitement of this interview.

"We can talk coolly enough here and with no one to threaten us; but the Marquis, on the other hand, is exposed to all his father's violence and ill treatment, moral as well as physical, without any defence for aid from a soul in the world, and in such times as these the strongest will may give way."

"Yes, I see it all; Norbert may give in, he may marry another woman, and I shall be left alone, with my reputation gone, and the scorn and scoff of all the neighborhood."

"But, mademoiselle, you still have "

"All I have left is life, and that life I would gladly give

for vengeance."

There was something so terribly determined in the young girl's voice that again Daumon started, and this time his start was sincere and not simulated.

"Yes, you are right," said he, "and there are many besides myself who have vowed to have revenge on the Duke, and their time will come, have no fear. A quiet shot in the woods in the dusk of the evening would settle many a long account. It has been tried, but the old man seems to have the luck of the evil one; and if the gun did not miss fire, the bullets flew wide of the mark. A judge might take a very serious view of such a matter, and term a crime what was merely an act of justice. Who can say whether the death of the Duke de Champdoce might not save him from the commission of many acts of tyranny and oppression and render many deserving persons happy?"

The face of Diana de Laurebourg turned deadly pale as she listened to these specious arguments.

"As things go," continued Daumon, "the Duke may go

on living to a hundred; he is wealthy and influential, and to a certain degree looked up to. He will die peacefully in his bed, there will be a magnificent funeral, and masses will be sung for the repose of his soul."

While he spoke the Counsellor had taken the little bottle from beside his account books and was turning it over and over between his fingers.

"Yes," murmured he, thoughtfully; "the Duke is quite likely to outlive us all, unless, indeed "

He took the cork from the bottle, and poured a little of the contents into the palm of his hand. A few grains of fine white powder, glittering like crystal, appeared on the brown skin of the Counsellor.

"And yet," he went on, in cold, sinister accents, "let him take but a small pinch of this, and no one need fear his tyranny again in this world. No one is much afraid of a man who lies some six feet under ground, shut up in a strong oak coffin, with a finely carved gravestone over his head."

He stopped short, and fixed his keen eyes upon the

agitated girl, who stood in front of him. For at least two minutes the man and the girl stood face to face, motionless, and without exchanging a word. Through the dead, weird silence, the pulsations of their hearts were plainly audible. It seemed as if before speaking again each wished to fathom the depths of guilt that lay in the other's heart. It was a compact entered into by look and not by speech; and Daumon so well understood this, that at length, when he did speak, his voice sank to a hoarse whisper, as though he himself feared to listen to the utterance of his own thoughts.

"A man taking this feels no pain. It is like a heavy, stunning blow on the forehead in ten seconds all is over, no gasp, no cry, but the heart ceases to beat forever; and, best of all, it leaves no trace behind it. A little of this, such a little, in wine or coffee, would be enough. It is tasteless, colorless, and scentless, its presence is impossible to be detected."

"But in the event of a /post mortem/ examination?"



"By skilful analysts in Paris or the larger towns, there would be a chance; but in a place like this, never! Never, in fact, anywhere, unless there had been previous grounds for suspicion. Otherwise only apoplectic symptoms would be observed; and even if it was traced there comes the question, By whom was it administered?"

He stopped short, for a word rose to his lips which he did not dare utter; he raised his hands to his mouth, coughed slightly, and went on,

"This substance is not sold by chemists; it is very rarely met with, difficult to prepare, and terribly expensive. The smallest quantity might be met with in the first class laboratories for scientific purposes, but it is most unlikely for any one in these parts to possess any of this drug, or even to know of its existence."

"And yet you "

"That is quite another matter. Years ago, when I was far away from here, it was in my power to render a great service to a distinguished chemist, and he made me a

present of this combination of his skill. It would be impossible to trace this bottle; I have had it ten years, and the man who gave it to me is dead. Ten years? No, I am wrong, it is now twelve."

"And in all these years has not this substance lost any of its destructive powers?"

"I tried it only a month ago. I threw a pinch of it into a basin of milk and gave it to a powerful mastiff. He drank the milk and in ten seconds fell stark and dead."

"Horrible!" exclaimed Diana, covering her face with her hand, and recoiling from the tempter.

A sinister smile quivered upon the thin lips of the Counsellor.

"Why do you say horrible?" asked he; "the dog had shown symptoms of /rabies/, and had he bitten me, I might have expired in frightful torture. Was it not fair self defence? Sometimes, however, a man is more dangerous than a dog. A man blights the whole of my life; I strike him down openly, and the law convicts me and puts me to death; but I

do not contemplate doing so, for I would suppress such a man secretly."

Diana placed her hands on the man's mouth and stopped a further exposition of his ideas.

"Listen to me," said she. But at this moment a heavy step was heard outside. "It is Norbert," gasped she.

"Impossible! It is more likely his father."

"It is Norbert," cried Mademoiselle de Laurebourg, and snatching the little bottle from the Counsellor's hands, she thrust it into her bosom. The door flew open, and Norbert appeared on the threshold. Diana and the Counsellor both uttered a shriek of terror. His livid countenance seemed to indicate that he had passed through some terrible scene; his gait was unsteady, his clothes torn and disordered, and his face stained with blood, which had flowed from a cut over his temple. Daumon imagined that some outrage had taken place.

"You have been wounded, Marquis?" said he.

"Yes, my father struck me."

"Can it be possible?"

"Yes, he struck me."

Mademoiselle Diana had feared this, and she trembled with the terror of her vague conjectures as she made a step towards her lover.

"Permit me to examine your wound," said she.

She placed both her hands at the side of his head and stood on tip toe, the better to inspect the cut. As she did so, she shuddered; an inch lower, and the consequences might have been fatal.

"Quick," she said, "give me some rags and water."

Norbert gently disengaged himself. "It is a mere nothing," said he, "and can be looked after later on. Fortunately I did not receive the whole weight of the blow, which would otherwise have brought me senseless to the ground, and perhaps I should have been slain by my father's hand."

"By the Duke? and for what reason did he strike you?"

"Diana, he had grossly insulted you, and he dared to tell me of it. Had he forgotten that the blood of the race of Champdoce ran in my veins as well as in his?"

Mademoiselle de Laurebourg burst into a passion of tears.

"I," sobbed she, "I have brought all this upon you."

"You? Why, it is to you that he owes his life. He dared to strike me as if I had been a lackey, but the thoughts of you stayed my hand. I turned and fled, and never again will I enter that accursed house. I renounce the Duke de Champdoce, he is no longer my father, and I will never look upon his face again. Would that I could forget that such a man existed; but, no, I would rather that I remembered him for the sake of revenge."

Again the heart of Daumon overflowed with joy. All his deeply malignant spirit thrilled pleasantly as he heard these words.

"Marquis," said he, "perhaps you will now believe with me that in all misfortunes there is an element of luck,

for your father has committed an act of imprudence which will yet cost him dear. It is very strange that so astute a man as the Duke de Champdoce should have allowed his passion to carry him away."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that you can be freed from the tyranny of your father whenever you like now. We now have all that is necessary for lodging a formal plaint in court. We have sequestration of the person, threats and bodily violence by the aid of third parties, and words and blows which have endangered life; our case is entirely complete. A surgeon will examine your wound, and give a written deposition. We can produce plenty of evidence, and the wound on the head will tell its own story. As a commencement we will petition that we may not be ordered back to our father's custody, and it will further be set forth that our reason for this is that a father has assaulted a son with undue and unnecessary violence. We shall be sure to gain the day, and "

"Enough," broke in Norbert; "will the decision give me the right to marry whom I please without my father's consent?"

Daumon hesitated. Under the circumstances, it seemed to him very likely that the court would grant Norbert the liberty he desired; he, however, thought it advisable not to say so, and answered boldly, "No, Marquis, it will not do so."

"Well, then, the Champdoce family have never exposed their differences to the public, nor will I begin to do so," said Norbert decisively.

The Counsellor seemed surprised at this determination.

"If, Marquis," he began, "I might venture to advise you "

"No advice is necessary, my mind is entirely made up, but I need some help, and in twenty four hours I require a large sum of money twenty thousand francs."

"You can have them, Marquis, but I warn you that you

will have to pay heavily for the accommodation."

"That I care nothing for."

Mademoiselle de Laurebourg was about to speak, but with a gesture of his hand Norbert arrested her.

"Do you not comprehend me, Diana?" said he; "we must fly, and that at once. We can find some safe retreat where we can live happily, where no one will harm us."

"But this is mere madness!" cried Diana.

"You will be pursued," remarked the Counsellor; "and most likely overtaken."

"Can you not trust your life to me?" asked Norbert reproachfully. "I swear that I will devote everything to you, life, thought, and will. On my knees I entreat you to fly with me."

"I cannot," murmured she; "it is impossible."

"Then you do not love me," said he in desponding accents. "I have been a thrice besotted fool to believe that your heart was mine, for you can never have loved me."

"Hear him, merciful powers! he says that I, who am all



his, do not love him."

"Then why cast aside our only chance of safety?"

"Norbert, dearest Norbert!"

"I understand you too well; you are alarmed at the idea of the world's censure, and "

He paused, checked by the gleam of reproach that shone in Diana's eyes.

"Must it be so?" said she; "must I condescend to justify myself? You talk to me of the world's censure? Have I not already defied it, and has it not sat in judgment upon me? And what have I done, after all? Every act and word that has passed between us I can repeat to my mother without a blush rising to my cheek; but would any one credit my words? No, not a living soul. Most likely the world has come to a decision. My reputation is gone, is utterly lost, and yet I am spotless as the driven snow."

Norbert was half mad with anger.

"Who would dare to treat you with anything save the most profound respect?" said he.

"Alas! my dear Norbert," replied she, "tomorrow the scandal will be even greater. While your father was talking to me with such brutal violence and contempt, he was overheard by a woodcutter and perhaps by some of his companions."

"It cannot be."

"No, it is quite true," returned Daumon. "I had it from the man myself."

Mademoiselle de Laurebourg shot one glance at the Counsellor; it was only a glance, but he comprehended at once that she wished to be left alone with her lover.

"Pardon me," said he, "but I think I have a visitor, and I must hinder any one from coming in here."

He left the room as he spoke, closing the door noisily behind him.

"And so," resumed Norbert when alone, "it seems that the Duke de Champdoce did not even take the ordinary precaution of assuring himself that you were in privacy before he spoke as he did, and was so carried away by his

fury that he never thought that in casting dishonor upon you, he was heaping infamy on me. Does he think by these means to compel me to marry the heiress whom he has chose for me, the Mademoiselle de Puymandour?"

For the first time Diana learned the name of her rival.

"Ah!" moaned she between her sobs, "so it is Mademoiselle de Puymandour that he wants you to marry?"

"Yes, the same, or rather her enormous wealth; but may my hand wither before it clasps hers. Do you hear me, Diana?"

She gave a sad smile and murmured, "Poor Norbert!"

The heart of the young man sank; so melancholy was the tone of her voice.

"You are very cruel," said he. "What have I done to deserve this want of confidence?"

Diana made no reply, and Norbert, believing that he understood the reason why she refused to fly with him, said, "Is it because you have no faith in me, that you will not

accompany me in my flight?"

"No; I have perfect faith in you."

"What is it, then? Do I not offer you fortune and happiness? Tell me what it is then."

She drew herself up, and said proudly, "Up to this time, my conscience has enabled me to hold my own against all the scandalous gossip that has been flying about, but now it says, 'Halt, Diana de Laurebourg! You have gone far enough.' My burden is heavy, my heart is breaking, but I must draw back now. No, Norbert; I cannot fly with you."

She paused for a moment, as though unable to proceed, and then went on with more firmness, "Were I alone and solitary in the world, I might act differently; but I have a family, whose honor I must guard as I would my own."

"A family indeed, which sacrifices you to your elder brother."

"It may be so, and therefore my task is all the greater. Who ever had of virtue as something easy to practise?"

Norbert never remembered what an example of

rebellion she had set.

"My heart and my conscience dictate the same course to me. The result must ever be fatal, when a young girl sets at defiance the rules and laws of society; and you would never care to look with respect on one upon whom others gazed with the eye of contempt."

"What sort of an opinion have you of me, then?"

"I believe you to be a man, Norbert. Let us suppose that I fly with you, and that the next day I should hear that my father has been killed in a duel fought on my account; what then? Believe me, that when I tell you to fly by yourself, I give you the best advice in my power. You will forget me, I know; but what else can I hope for?"

"Forget you!" said Norbert angrily. "Can you forget me?"

His face was so close to hers that she felt the hot breath upon her cheek.

"Yes," stammered she, with a violent effort, "I can."

Norbert drew a pace back, that he might read her

meaning more fully in her eyes.

"And if I go away," asked he, "what will become of you?"

A sob burst from the young girl's breast, and her strength seemed to desert her limbs.

"I," answered she, in the calm, resigned voice of a Christian virgin about to be cast to the lions that roared in the arena, "I have my destiny. Today is the last time that we shall ever meet. I shall return to my home, where everything will shortly be known. I shall find my father angry and menacing. He will place me in a carriage, and the next day I shall find myself within the walls of the hated convent."

"But that life would be one long, slow agony to you. You have told me this before."

"Yes," answered she, "it would be an agony, but it would also be an expiation; and when the burden grows too heavy, I have this."

And as she spoke, she drew the little bottle from its

hiding place in her bosom, and Norbert too well understood her meaning. The young man endeavored to take it from her, but she resisted. This contest seemed to exhaust her little strength, her beautiful eyes closed, and she sank senseless into Norbert's arms. In an agony of despair, the young man asked himself if she was dying; and yet there was sufficient life in her to enable her to whisper, soft and low, these words, "My only friend let me have it back, dear Norbert." And then, with perfect clearness, she repeated all the deadly properties of the drug, and the directions for its use that the Counsellor had given to her.

On hearing the woman whom he loved with such intense passion confess that she would sooner die than live apart from him, Norbert's brain reeled.

"Diana, my own Diana!" repeated he, as he hung over her.

But she went on, as though speaking through the promptings of delirium.

"The very day after such a fair prospect! Ah, Duke de

Champdoce! You are a hard and pitiless man. You have robbed me of all I held dear in the world, blackened my reputation, and tarnished my honor, and now you want my life."

Norbert uttered such a cry of anger, that even Daumon in the passage was startled by it. He placed Diana tenderly in the Counsellor's arm chair, saying,

"No, you shall not kill yourself, nor shall you leave me."

She smiled faintly, and held out her arms to him. Her magic spells were deftly woven.

"No," cried he; "the poison which you had intended to use on yourself shall become my weapon of vengeance, and the instrument of punishment of the one who has wronged you."

And with the gait of a man walking in his sleep, he left the Counsellor's office.

Hardly had the young man's footsteps died away, than Daumon entered the room. He had not lost a word or action



in the foregoing scene, and he was terribly agitated; and he could scarcely believe his eyes when he saw Diana, whom he had supposed to be lying half sensible in the arm chair, standing at the window, gazing after Norbert, as he walked along the road leading from the Counsellor's cottage.

"Ah! what a woman!" muttered he. "Gracious powers, what a wonderful woman!"

When Diana had lost sight of her lover, she turned round to Daumon. Her face was pale, and her eyelids swollen, but her eyes flashed with the conviction of success.

"Tomorrow, Counsellor," said she, "tomorrow I shall be the Duchess de Champdoce."

Daumon was so overwhelmed that, accustomed as he was to startling events and underhand trickery, he could find no words to express his feelings.

"That is to say," added Diana thoughtfully, "if all goes as it should tonight."

Daumon felt a cold shiver creep over him, but summoning up all his self possession, he said, "I do not understand you. What is this that you hope will be accomplished tonight?" She turned so contemptuous and sarcastic a look on him, that the words died away in his mouth, and he at once saw his mistake in thinking that he could sport with the girl's feelings as a cat plays with a mouse; for it was she who was playing with him, and she, a simple girl, had made this wily man of the world her dupe.

"Success is, of course, a certainty," answered she coldly; "but Norbert is impetuous, and impetuous people are often awkward. But I must return home at once. Ah, me!" she added, as her self control gave way for a moment, "will this cruel night never pass away, and give way to the gentle light of dawn? Farewell, Counsellor. When we meet again, all matters will be settled, one way or other."

The Parthian dart which Mademoiselle de Laurebourg had cast behind her went true to the mark; the allusion to

Norbert's impetuosity and awkwardness rendered the Counsellor very unhappy. He sat down in his arm chair, and, resting his head on his hands, and his elbows on his desk, he strove to review the position thoroughly. Perhaps by now all might be over. Where was Norbert, and what was he doing? he asked himself.

At the time that Daumon was reflecting, Norbert was on the road leading to Champdoce. He had entirely lost his head, but he found that his reason was clear and distinct. Those who have been accustomed to the treatment of maniacs know with what startling rapidity they form a chain of action, and the cloud that veiled Norbert's brain appeared to throw out into stronger relief the murderous determination he had formed. He had already decided how the deed was to be done. The common wine of the country was always served to the laborers at the table, but the Duke kept a better quality for his own drinking, and the bottle containing this was after meals placed on a shelf in a cupboard in the dining room. It was thus within every one's

reach, but not a soul in the household would have ventured to lay a finger upon it. Norbert's thoughts fell upon this bottle, and in his mind's eye he could see it standing in its accustomed place. He crossed the courtyard, and the laborers, engaged in their tasks, gazed at him curiously. He passed them, and entered the dining room, which was untenanted. With a caution that was not to be expected from the agitation of his mind, he opened each door successively, in order to be certain that no eyes were gazing upon him. Then, with the greatest rapidity, he took down the bottle, drew the cork with his teeth, and dropped into the wine, not one, but two or three pinches of the contents of the little vial. He shook the bottle gently, to facilitate the dissolution of the powder. A few particles of the poison clung to the lip of the bottle; he wiped off these, not with a napkin, a pile of which lay on the shelf beside him, but with his own handkerchief. He replaced the bottle in its accustomed place, and seating himself by the fire, awaited the course of events.

At this moment the Duke de Champdoce was coming up the avenue at a rapid pace. For the first time, perhaps, in his life, this man perceived that one of his last acts had been insensate and foolish in the extreme. All the possibilities of the law to which Daumon had alluded struck the Duke with over whelming force, and he at once saw that his violent conduct had given ample grounds upon which to base a plaint, with results which he greatly feared. If the court entertained the matter, his son would most likely be removed from his control. He knew that such an idea would never cross Norbert's brain, but there were plenty of persons to suggest it to him. The danger of his position occurred to him, and at the same time he felt that he must frame his future conduct with extreme prudence. He had not given up his views regarding his son's marriage with Mademoiselle de Puymandour. No; he would sooner have resigned life itself, but he felt that he must renounce violence, and gain his ends by diplomacy. The first thing to be done was to get Norbert to return home,

and the father greatly doubted whether the son would do so. While thinking over these things, with a settled gloom upon his face, one of the servants came running up to him with the news of Norbert's return.

"I hold him at last," muttered he, and hastened on to the Chateau.

When the Duke entered the dining room, Norbert did not rise from his seat, and the Duke was disagreeably impressed by this breach of the rules of domestic etiquette.

"On my word," thought he, "it would appear that the young booby thinks that he owes me no kind of duty whatever."

He did not, however, allow his anger to be manifest in his features; besides, the sight of the blood, with which his son's face was still smeared, caused him to feel excessively uncomfortable.

"Norbert, my son," said he, "are you suffering? Why have you not had that cut attended to?"

The young man made no reply, and the Duke

continued,

"Why have you not washed the blood away? Is it left there as a reproach to me? There is no need for that, I assure you; for deeply do I deplore my violence."

Norbert still made no answer, and the Duke became more and more embarrassed. To give himself time for reflection, more than because he was thirsty, he took a glass, and filled it from his own special bottle.

Norbert trembled from head to foot as he saw this act.

"Come, my son," continued the Duke, "just try if you cannot find some palliation for what your old father has done. I am ready to ask your forgiveness, and to apologize, for a man of honor is never ashamed to acknowledge when he has been in the wrong."

He raised his glass, and raised it up to the light half mechanically. Norbert held his breath; the whole world seemed turning round.

"It is hard, very hard," continued the Duke, "for a father thus to humiliate himself in vain before his son."

It was useless for Norbert to turn away his head; he saw the Duke place the glass to his lips. He was about to drink, but the young man could endure it no longer, and with a bound he sprang forward, snatched the glass from his father's hand, and hurled it from the window, shouting in a voice utterly unlike his own,

"Do not drink."

The Duke read the whole hideous truth in the face and manner of his son. His features quivered, his face grew purple, and his eyes filled with blood. He strove to speak, but only an inarticulate rattle could be heard; he then clasped his hands convulsively, swayed backwards and forwards, and then fell helplessly backwards, striking his head against an oaken sideboard that stood near. Norbert tore open the door.

"Quick, help!" cried he. "I have killed my father."



## **CHAPTER IX. THE HONOR OF THE NAME.**

The account that the Duke of Champdoce had given of M. de Puymandour's mad longing for rank and title was true, and afforded a melancholy instance of that peculiar kind of foolish vanity. He was a much happier man in his younger days, when he was known simply as Palouzet, which was his father's name, whose only wish for distinction was to be looked upon as an honest man. In those days he was much looked up to and respected, as a man who had possessed brains enough to amass a very large fortune by strictly honest means. All this vanished, however, when the unhappy idea occurred to him to affix the title of Count to the name of an estate that he had recently purchased.

From that moment, all his tribulations in life may have been said to have commenced. The nobility laughed at his assumption of hereditary rank, while the middle classes frowned at his pretensions to be superior to them, so that he

passed the existence of a shuttlecock, continually suspended in the air, and struck at and dismissed from either side.

It may, therefore, be easily imagined how excessively anxious he was to bring about the marriage between his daughter Marie and the son of that mighty nobleman, the Duke of Champdoce. He had offered to sacrifice one third of his fortune for the honor of forming this connection, and would have given up the whole of it, could he but have seen a child in whose veins ran the united blood of Palouzet and the Champdoce seated upon his knee. A marriage of this kind would have given him a real position; for to have a Champdoce for a son in law would compel all scoffers to bridle their tongues.

The day after he had received a favorable reply from the Duke, M. de Puymandour thought that it was time to inform his daughter of his intentions. He never thought that she would make any opposition, and, of course, supposed that she would be as delighted as he was at the honor that

awaited her. He was seated in a magnificently furnished room which he called his library when he arrived at this conclusion, and ringing the bell, ordered the servant to inquire of mademoiselle's maid if her mistress could grant him an interview. He gave this curious message, which did not appear to surprise the servant in the least, with an air of the utmost importance. The communication between the father and daughter was always carried on upon this basis; and scoffers wickedly asserted that M. de Puymandour had modelled it upon a book of etiquette, for the guidance of her household, written by a venerable arch duchess.

Shortly after the man had departed on his errand, a little tap came to the door.

"Come in," exclaimed M. de Puymandour.

And Mademoiselle Marie ran in and gave her father a kiss upon each cheek. He frowned slightly, and extricated himself from her embrace.

"I thought it better to come to you, my dear father,"

said she, "than to give you the trouble of coming all the way to me."

"You always forget that there are certain forms and ceremonies necessary for a young lady of your position.

Marie gave a little gentle smile, for she was no stranger to her father's absurd whims; but she never thwarted them, for she was very fond of him. She was a very charming young lady, and in the description that the Duke had given of her to his son, he had not flattered her at all. Though she differed greatly in appearance from Mademoiselle de Laurebourg, Marie's beauty was perfect in a style of its own. She was tall and well proportioned, and had all that easy grace of movement, characteristic of women of Southern parentage. Her large soft dark eyes offered a vivid contrast to her creamy complexion; her hair, in utter disregard of the fashionable mode of dressing, was loosely knotted at the back of her head. Her nature was soft and affectionate, capable of the deepest devotion, while she had the most

equable temper that can be imagined.

"Come, my dear papa," said she; "do not scold me any more. You know that the Marchioness of Arlanges has promised to teach me how to behave myself according to all the rules of fashionable society next winter, and I declare to you that I will so practise them up in secret, that you will be astonished when you behold them."

"How woman like!" muttered her father. "She only scoffs at matters of the most vital importance."

He rose from his seat, and, placing his back to the fireplace, took up an imposing position, one hand buried in his waistcoat, and the other ready to gesticulate as occasion required.

"Oblige me with your deepest attention," commenced he. "You were eighteen years of age last month, and I have an important piece of intelligence to convey to you. I have had an offer of marriage for you."

Marie looked down, and endeavored to hide her confusion at these tidings.

"Before coming to a conclusion upon a matter of such importance," continued he, "it was, of course, necessary for me to go into the question most thoroughly. I spared no means of obtaining information, and I am quite certain that the proposed connection would be conducive to your future happiness. The suitor for your hand is but little older than yourself; he is very handsome, very wealthy, and is a Marquis by hereditary right."

"Has he spoken to you then?" inquired Marie in tones of extreme agitation.

"He! Whom do you mean by he?" asked M. de Puymandour; and as his daughter did not reply, he repeated his question.

"Who? Why, George de Croisenois."

"Pray, what have you to do with Croisenois? Who is he, pray? Not that dandy with a mustache, that I have seen hanging about you this winter?"

"Yes," faltered Marie; "that is he."

"And why should you presume that he had asked me

for your hand? Did he tell you that he was going to do so?"

"Father, I declare "

"What, the daughter of a Puymandour has listened to a declaration of love unknown to her father? Ten thousand furies! Has he written to you? Where are those letters?"

"My dear father "

"Silence; have you those letters? Let me see them. Come, no delay; I will have those bits of paper, if I turn the whole house upside down."

With a sigh Marie gave the much prized missives to her father; there were four only, fastened together with a morsel of blue ribbon.

He took one out at random, and read it aloud, with a running fire of oaths and invectives as a commentary upon its contents.

"MADEMOISELLE,

"Though there is nothing upon earth that I dread so much as your anger, I dare, in spite of your commands to the contrary, to write to you once again. I have learned that

you are about to quit Paris for several months. I am twenty four years of age. I have neither father nor mother, and am entirely my own master. I belong to an ancient and honorable family. My fortune is a large one, and my love for you is of the most honorable and devoted kind. My uncle, M. de Saumeuse, knows your father well; and will convey my proposals to him upon his return from Italy, in about two or three weeks' time. Once more intreating you to forgive me,

"I remain, "Yours respectfully, "GEORGE DE CROISENOIS."

"Very pretty indeed," said M. de Puymandour, as he replaced the letter in its envelope. "This is sufficient, and I need not read the others; but pray, what answer did you give?"

"That I must refer him to you, my dear father."

"Indeed, on my word, you do me too much honor; and did you really think that I would listen to such proposals? Perhaps you love him?"



She turned her lovely face towards her father, with the great tears rolling down her cheeks for her sole reply.

This mute confession, for as such he regarded it, put the finishing touch to M. de Puymandour's exasperation.

"You absolutely love him, and have the impudence to tell me so?"

Marie glanced at her father, and answered,

"The Marquis de Croisenois is of good family."

"Pooh! you know nothing about it. Why, the first Croisenois was one of Richelieu's minions, and Louis XIII. conferred the title for some shady piece of business which he carried out for him. Has this fine Marquis any means of livelihood?"

"Certainly; about sixty thousand francs a year."

"Humbug! What did he mean by addressing you secretly? Only to compromise your name, and so to secure your fortune, and perhaps to break off your marriage with another."

"But why suppose this?"

"I suppose nothing; I am merely going upon facts. What does a man of honor do when he falls in love?"

"My dear father "

"He goes to his solicitor, acquaints him with his intentions, and explains what his means are; the solicitor goes to the family solicitor of the young lady, and when these men of the law have found out that all is satisfactory, then love is permitted to make his appearance upon the scene. And now you may as well attend to me. Forget De Croisenois as soon as you can, for I have chosen a husband for you, and, having pledged my word of honor, I will abide by it. On Sunday the eligible suitor will be introduced to you, and on Monday we will visit the Bishop, asking him to be good enough to perform the ceremony. On Tuesday you will show yourself in public with him, in order to announce the betrothal. Wednesday the marriage contract will be read. Thursday a grand dinner party. Friday an exhibition of the marriage presents; Saturday a day of rest; Sunday the publication of the banns, and at the end of

the following week the marriage will take place."

Mademoiselle Marie listened to her father's determination with intense horror.

"For pity's sake, my dear father, be serious," cried she.

M. de Puymandour paid no attention to her entreaty, but added, as an afterthought:

"Perhaps you would wish to know the name of the gentleman I have selected as a husband for you. He is the Marquis Norbert, the son and heir of the Duke de Champdoce."

Marie turned deadly pale.

"But I do not know him; I have never seen him," faltered she.

"I/ know him, and that is quite sufficient. I have often told you that you should be a duchess, and I mean to keep my word."

Marie's affection for George de Croisenois was much deeper than she had told her father, much deeper even than

she had dared to confess to herself, and she resented this disposal of her with more obstinacy than any one knowing her gentle nature would have supposed her capable of; but M. de Puymandour was not the man to give up for an instant the object which he had sworn to attain. He never gave his daughter an instant's peace, he argued, insisted, and bullied until, after three days' contest, Marie gave her assent with a flood of tears. The word had scarcely passed her lips, before her father, without even thanking her for her terrible sacrifice, exclaimed in a voice of triumph:

"I must take these tidings to Champdoce without a moment's delay."

He started at once, and as he passed through the doorway said:

"Goodby, my little duchess, goodby."

He was most desirous of seeing the Duke, for, on taking leave of him, the old nobleman had said, "You shall hear from me tomorrow"; but no letter had as yet reached him from Champdoce. This delay however, had suited M.

de Puymandour's plans, for it had enabled him to wring the consent from his daughter; but now that this had been done, he began to feel very anxious, and to fear that there might be some unforeseen hitch in the affair.

When he reached Bevron, he saw Daumon talking earnestly with Francoise, the daughter of the Widow Rouleau. M. de Puymandour bowed graciously, and stopped to talk with the man, for he was just now seeking for popularity, as he was a candidate, and the elections would shortly take place; and, besides, he never failed to talk to persons who exercised any degree of influence, and he knew that Daumon was a most useful man in electioneering.

"Good morning, Counsellor," said he gayly. "What is the news today?"

Daumon bowed profoundly.

"Bad news, Count," answered he. "I hear that the Duke de Champdoce is seriously indisposed."

"The Duke ill impossible!"

"This girl has just given me the information. Tell us all about it, Francoise."

"I heard today at the Chateau that the doctors had quite given him over."

"But what is the matter with him?"

"I did not hear."

M. de Puymandour stood perfectly aghast.

"It is always the way in this world," Daumon philosophically said. "In the midst of life we are in death!"

"Good morning, Counsellor," said De Puymandour; "I must try and find out something more about this."

Breathless, and with his mind filled with anxiety, he hurried on.

All the servants and laborers on the Champdoce estate were gathered together in a group, talking eagerly to each other, and as soon as M. de Puymandour appeared, one of the servants, disengaging himself from his fellows, came towards him. This was the Duke's old, trustworthy servant.

"Well?" exclaimed M. de Puymandour.

"Oh, sir," cried the old man, "this is too horrible; my poor master will certainly die."

"But I do not know what is the matter with him; no one has told me anything, in fact."

"It was terribly sudden," answered the man. "It was about this time the day before yesterday that the Duke was alone with M. Norbert in the dining room. All at once we heard a great outcry. We ran in and saw my poor master lying senseless on the ground, his face purple and distorted."

"He must have had a fit of apoplexy."

"Not exactly; the doctor called it a rush of blood to the brain; at least, I think that is what he said, and he added that the reason he did not die on the spot was because in falling he had cut open his head against the oaken sideboard, and the wound bled profusely. We carried him up to his bed; he showed no signs of life, and now "

"Well, how is he now?"

"No one dare give an opinion; my poor master is quite unconscious, and should he recover and I do not think for a moment that he will the doctor says his mind will have entirely gone."

"Horrible! Too horrible! And a man of such intellectual power, too. I shall not ask you to let me look at him, for I could do no good, and the sight would upset me. But can I not see M. Norbert?"

"Pray, do not attempt to do so, sir."

"I was his father's intimate friend, and if the condolences of such a one could assuage the affliction under which "

"Impossible!" answered the man in a quick, eager manner. "M. Norbert was with his father at the time of his seizure, and has given strict orders that he is not to be disturbed on any account; but I must go to him at once, for we are expecting the physicians who are coming from Poitiers."

"Very well, then I will go now, but tonight I will send



up one of my people for news."

With these words, M. de Puymandour walked slowly away, absorbed in thought. The manner and expression of the servant had struck him as extremely strange. He noted the fact that Norbert was alone with his father at the time of the seizure, and, recalling to mind the opposition he had met with from his daughter, he began to imagine that the Duke had found his son rebellious, and that the apoplectic fit had been brought on by a sudden access of passion. Interest and ambition working together brought him singularly near the truth.

"If the Duke dies, or becomes a maniac," thought he to himself, "the end as regards us will be the same for Norbert will break off the match to a certainty."

He felt that such a proceeding would cause him to be more jeered at and ridiculed than ever, and that the only path of escape left open to him was to marry his daughter to the Marquis de Croisenois, which was a most desirable alliance, in spite of all he had said against it. A voice close

to his ear aroused him from his reflections: it was that of Daumon, who had come up unperceived.

"Was the girl's information correct, Count?" asked he.  
"How are the Duke and M. Norbert, for of course you have seen them both?"

"M. Norbert is too much agitated by the sad event to see any one."

"Of course that was to be looked for," returned the wily Counsellor; "for the seizure was terribly sudden."

M. de Puymandour was too much occupied with his own thoughts to spare much pity for Norbert. He would have given a great deal to have known what the young man was doing, and especially what he was thinking of at the present moment.

The poor lad was standing by the bedside of his dying father, watching eagerly for some indication, however slight, of returning life or reason. The hours of horror and self reproach had entirely changed his feelings and ideas; for it was only at the instant when he saw his father raise

the poisoned wine to his lips that he saw his crime in all its hideous enormity. His soul rose up in rebellion against his crime, and the words, "Parricide! murderer!" seemed to ring in his ears like a trumpet call. When his father fell to the ground, his instinct made him shout for aid; but an instant afterwards terror took possession of him, and, rushing from the house, he sought the open country, as though striving to escape from himself.

Jean, the old servant, who had noticed Norbert's strange look, was seized with a terrible fear. Trusted as he was by both the Duke and his son, he had many means of knowing all that was going on in the household, and was no stranger to the differences that had arisen recently between father and son. He knew how violent the tempers of both were, and he also knew that some woman was urging on Norbert to a course of open rebellion. He had seen the cruel blow dealt by the Duke, and had wondered greatly when he saw Norbert return to the Chateau. Why had he done so? He had been in the courtyard when Norbert threw the glass

from the window. Putting all these circumstances together, as soon as the inanimate body of the Duke had been laid upon a bed, Jean went into the dining room, feeling sure that he should make some discovery which would confirm his suspicions. The bottle from which the Duke had filled his glass stood half emptied upon the table. With the greatest care, he poured a few drops of its contents into the hollow of his hand, and tasted it with the utmost caution. The wine still retained its customary taste and scent. Not trusting, however, to this, Jean, after making sure that he was not observed, carried the bottle to his own room, and concealed it. After taking this precaution, he ordered one of the other servants to remain by the side of the Duke until the arrival of the doctor, and then went in search of Norbert.

For two hours his efforts were fruitless. Giving up his search in despair, he turned once more to regain the Chateau, and, taking the path through the wood, suddenly perceived a human form stretched on the turf beneath a tree.

He moved cautiously towards the figure, and at once recognized Norbert. The faithful servant bent over his young master, and shook him by the arm to arouse him from his state of stupor. At the first touch, Norbert started to his feet with a shriek of terror. With mingled fear and pity, Jean noticed the look that shone in the young man's eyes, more like that of some hunted animal than a human being.

"Do not be alarmed, M. Norbert; it is only I," said he.

"And what do you want?"

"I came to look for you, and to entreat you to come back with me to Champdoce."

"Back to Champdoce?" repeated Norbert hoarsely; "no, never!"

"You must, Master Norbert; for your absence now would cause a terrible scandal. Your place at this critical time is by the bedside of your father."

"Never! never!" repeated the poor boy; but he yielded passively when Jean passed his arm through his, and led

him away towards the Chateau. Supported thus by the old man's arm, he crossed the courtyard, and ascended the staircase; but at his father's door he withdrew his hand, and struggled to get away.

"I will not; no, no, I cannot," gasped he.

"You must and you shall," returned the old man firmly. "Whatever your feelings may be, no stain shall rest on the family honor."

These words roused Norbert; he stepped across the room, and dropped on his knees by the bed, placing his forehead upon his father's icy hand. He burst into a passion of tears and sobs, and the simple peasants, who surrounded the couch of the insensible nobleman, breathed a sigh; for, from his pallid face and burning eyes, they believed he must be mad. They were not far out in this surmise; but the tears relieved his over wrought brain, and with this relief came the sense of intense suffering. When the physician arrived, he was able to appear before him merely as a deeply anxious son.

"There is no hope for the Duke, I regret to say," said the medical man, who felt that it was useless to keep Norbert in suspense. "There is a feeble chance of saving his life; but even should we succeed in doing so, his intellect will be irretrievably gone. This is a sad truth, but I feel it my duty to inform you of it. I will come again tomorrow."

As the doctor left the room, Norbert threw himself into a chair, and clasped his hands round his head, which throbbed until it seemed as if it would burst. For more than half an hour he sat motionless, and then started to his feet with a stifled cry; for he remembered the bottle into which he had poured the poison, and which had been left on the table. Had any one drunk from it? What had become of it? The agony of his mind gave him the necessary strength to descend to the dining room; but the bottle was not on the table, nor was it in its customary place in the cupboard. The unhappy boy was looking for it everywhere, when the door silently opened, and Jean appeared on the threshold. The expression upon his young master's face so startled the

faithful old man that he nearly dropped the lighted candle that he carried in his hand.

"Why are you here, Master Norbert?" asked he in a voice that trembled with emotion.

"I was looking for I wanted to find," faltered Norbert.

Jean's suspicions at once became certainties; he walked up to his young master, and whispered in his ear,

"You are looking for the Duke's bottle of wine, are you not? It is quite safe; for I have taken it to my room. Tomorrow the contents shall be emptied away, and there will be no proof existing."

Jean spoke in such a low voice that Norbert guessed rather than heard his words, and yet it seemed that the accusing whisper resounded like thunder through the Chateau, filling the old house from cellar to roof tree.

"Be quiet," said he, laying his hand on the old man's lips, and gazing around him with wild and affrighted glances.

A more complete confession could hardly have been



made.

"Fear nothing, Master Norbert," answered Jean; "we are quite alone. I know that there are words which should never be even breathed; and if I have ventured to speak, it was because it was my duty to warn you, and to inculcate on you the necessity of caution."

Norbert was filled with horror when he saw that the old man believed him to be really guilty.

"Jean," cried he, "you are wrong in your suspicions. I tell you that my father never tasted that wine. I snatched the glass from him before his lips had touched it. I flung it out into the courtyard, and, if you search, you will find its scattered fragments there still."

"I am not sitting in judgment upon you; what you tell me to believe I am ready to accept."

"Ah!" cried Norbert passionately, "he does not believe me; he thinks that I am guilty. I swear to you by all that I hold most sacred in this world, that I am innocent of this deed."

The attached servant shook his head with a melancholy air.

"Of course, of course," said he; "but it is for us two to save the honor of the house of Champdoce. Should it happen that any suspicions should be aroused, put all the guilt upon my shoulders. I will defend myself in a manner which will only fix the crime more firmly upon me. I will not throw away the bottle, but will retain it in my room, so that it may be found there, and its contents will be a damnatory evidence against me. What matters it how a poor man like me is sent out of the world? but with you it is different. You "

Norbert wrung his hands in abject despair; the sublime devotion of the old servant showed how firmly Jean believed in his criminality. He was about to assert his innocence further, when the loud sound of a closing door was heard above stairs.

"Hush!" said the old man; "some one approaches; we must not be seen whispering together like two plotters, for

their suspicions would be certainly awakened; and I fear that my face or your eyes will reveal the secret. Quick, go upstairs, and endeavor, as soon as possible, to resume your calmness. I beg you not to compromise the honor of your name, which is in deadly peril."

Without another word Norbert obeyed. His father was alone, and only the man to whom Jean had delegated the task of watcher remained by his bedside. At the sight of his young master he rose.

"The prescription which the doctor ordered to be made up has arrived," said he. "I have administered a dose to the Duke, and it seems to me that the result has been favorable."

Norbert drew up a heavy arm chair to the foot of the bed, and took his seat upon it. From this position he could see his father's face. His brain was dazed, and it was with the utmost difficulty that he could recall the chain of events which had drawn him towards the abyss into which he had so nearly been precipitated.

The veil had been taken from his eyes, and he now saw with perfect clearness and seemed again to hear his father's voice as it roughly warned him that the woman he loved was a mere plotter, who cared not for him, but was scheming for his fortune and his name. Then he had been furiously indignant and looked upon the words as almost blasphemous, but now he saw that his father was right. How was it that he had not before seen that Diana was flinging herself in his way, and that all her affected openness and simplicity were merely the perfections of art, and that step by step she had led him to the brink of the terrible precipice which yawned before him? The whole hideous part as played by Daumon was no longer a sealed book to him. She whom he had looked on as a pure and innocent girl was merely the accomplice of a scheming villain like the Counsellor, and after exciting his hatred and anger almost to madness, had placed the poison which was to take his father's life in his hands. A cold shiver ran through him as he realized this, and all his ardent love for

Diana de Laurebourg was changed into a feeling of loathing and disgust.

At last the first pale rays of dawn broke through the casement, but before that Norbert, worn out with conflicting emotions, had fallen into a restless and uneasy sleep, and when he awoke the doctor was standing by the bedside of the sick man. At the first sound made by Norbert as he stirred in the chair, the doctor came towards him, saying, "We shall preserve his life."

This prognostication was complete, for that very evening the Duke de Champdoce was able to move in his bed, the next day he uttered some incoherent words, and later on asked for food; but the will of iron had passed away, the features had lost their expression of determination, and the eye the glitter of pride and power. Never again would the Duke be able to exert that keen, stern intellect which had enabled him to influence all those around him; and in this terrible state of imbecility the haughty nobleman would ever remain, fed and looked after like a child, with no

thought beyond his desires and his warm fire, and without a care for anything that was going on in the world around him.

After the enormity of his crime had been brought before him, the greatness of the punishment that he must endure now came across Norbert's mind. It was only now that Jean had ventured to tell him of M. de Puymandour's visit; and such a change had taken place in Norbert that he looked upon this visit as a special arrangement made by Providence.

"My father's will shall be carried out in every respect," said he to himself, and without an hour's delay he wrote to M. de Puymandour, begging him to call, and hoping that the grief which had fallen upon him had in no way altered the plan which had already been arranged.

## **CHAPTER X. A THUNDERBOLT.**

As the miner, who sets fire to the fuse and seeks shelter from the coming explosion, so did Diana de Laurebourg return to her father's house after her visit to Daumon. During dinner it was impossible for her to utter a word, and it was with the greatest difficulty that she succeeded in swallowing a mouthful. Fortunately neither her father nor mother took any notice of her. They had that day received a letter announcing the news that their son, for whose future prosperity they had sacrificed Diana, was lying dangerously ill in Paris, where he was living in great style. They were in terrible affliction, and spoke of starting at once, so as to be with him. They therefore expressed no surprise when, on leaving the table, Diana pleaded a severe headache as an excuse for retiring to her own room. When once she was alone, having dismissed her maid, she heaved a deep sigh of relief. She never thought of retiring to bed, but throwing open her

window, leaned out with her elbow on the window sill.

It seemed to her that Norbert would certainly make some effort to see her, or at any rate by some means to let her know whether he had succeeded or failed.

"But I must be patient," murmured she, "for I can't hear anything until the afternoon of tomorrow."

In spite, however, of her resolutions, patience fled from her mind, and as soon as the servants had begun moving about, she went out into the garden and took up a position which commanded a view of the highroad, but no one appeared. The bell rang for breakfast. Again she had to seat herself at table with her parents, and the terrible penance of the past evening had to be repeated. At three o'clock she could endure the suspense no longer, and making her escape from the Chateau, she went over to Daumon, who, she felt, must have obtained some intelligence. Even if she found that he knew nothing, it would be a relief to speak to him and to ask him when he thought that this terrible delay would come to an end. But



she got no comfort at Daumon's, for he had passed as miserable a night as herself, and was nearly dead with affright. He had remained in his office all the morning, starting at the slightest sound, and though he was as anxious as Diana for information, he had only gone out a little before her arrival. He met Mademoiselle Laurebourg on his return at the door of his cottage, and taking her inside, he informed her that at a late hour the night before the doctor had been sent for to Champdoce to attend the Duke, who was supposed to be dying. Then he reproved her bitterly for her imprudence in visiting him.

"Do you wish," said he, "to show all Bevron that you and I are Norbert's accomplices?"

"What do you mean?" asked she.

"I mean that if the Duke does not die, we are lost. When I say we, I mean myself, for you, as the daughter of a noble family, will be sure to escape scot free, and I shall be left to pay for all."

"You said that the effect was immediate."

"I did say so, and I thought so too. Ah, if I had but reflected a little! You will however see that I do not intend to give in without a fight. I will defend myself by accusing you. I am an honest man, and have been your dupe. You have thought to make me a mere tool; your fine Norbert is a fool, but he will pay for his doings with his head all the same."

At these gross insults Mademoiselle de Laurebourg rose to her feet and attempted to speak, but he cut her short.

"I can't stop to pick and choose my words, for I feel at the present moment as if the axe of the guillotine were suspended over my head. Now just oblige me by getting out of this, and never show your face here again."

"As you like. I will communicate with Champdoce."

"You shall not," exclaimed Daumon with a gesture of menace. "You might as well go and ask how the Duke enjoyed the taste of the poison."

His words, however, did not deter Diana, for any risk

seemed preferable to her than the present state of suspense.

With a glance of contempt at the Counsellor she left the cottage, determined to act as she thought fit.

After Diana's departure, Daumon felt too that he must learn how matters were going on, and going over to the Widow Rouleau's, he despatched her daughter Francoise to the Chateau de Champdoce, under the pretext that he wanted some money which he had lent to one of the Duke's servants. He had instructed the girl so cunningly that she had no suspicion of the real end and object of her mission, and set out on it with the most implicit confidence. He had not long to wait for her return, for in about half an hour his messenger returned.

"Well," said he anxiously, "has the scamp sent my money?"

"No, sir, I am sorry to say that I could not even get to speak to him."

"How was that? Was he not at Champdoce?"

"I cannot even tell you that. Ever since the Duke has

been ill, the great gates of the Chateau have been bolted, for it seems that the poor old gentleman is at his last gasp."

"Did you not hear what was the matter with him?"

"No, sir, the little I have told you I got from a stable boy, who spoke to me through a grating in the gate, but before he could say ten words Jean came up and sent him off."

"Do you mean Jean, the Duke's confidential man?"

"Just so," returned the girl, "and very angry he was. He abused the lad and told him to be off to the stables, and then asked, 'Well, my girl, and pray what do you want?' I told him that I had come with a message to the man Mechenit; but before I could say any more he broke in with, 'Well, he isn't here, you can call again in a month.' "

"You silly little fool, was that all you said?"

"Not quite, for I said that I must see Mechenit. Then, looking at me very suspiciously, he said, 'And who sent you here, you little spy?' "

The Counsellor started.

"Indeed! and what did you say in return?" asked he.

"Why, of course I said that you had sent me."

"Yes, yes, that was right."

"And then Jean rubbed his hand over his chin, and looking at me very curiously, said sternly,

" 'So you have come from the Counsellor, have you? Ah, I see it all, and so shall he one of these days.' "

At these words Daumon felt his knees give way under him; but all further questioning was stopped by the appearance of M. de Puymandour on his way to Champdoce. He therefore dismissed Françoise, and awaited the return of this gentleman, from whom he hoped to gain the fullest information regarding the Duke's malady. The intelligence which he received calmed him a little, and repenting of his treatment of Diana, he went and hung about the gates of the Chateau de Laurebourg, until he was lucky enough to catch sight of the girl in the garden, for her anxiety would not permit her to remain in the house. He beckoned to her, and then said,

"M. Norbert did not make the dose strong enough. The Duke is as strong as a horse; but it is all right, for should he live, he will be an idiot, and so our end is as much gained as if he had died."

"But why does not Norbert write to me?" asked Diana seriously.

"Why, because he has some faint glimmerings of common sense. How do you know that he may not have half a dozen spies about him? You must wait."

Diana and the Counsellor waited for a week, but Norbert made no sign. Diana suffered agonies, and the days seemed to pass with leaden feet. Sunday came at last. The Marchioness de Laurebourg had attended early Mass, and had given orders that her daughter should go to high Mass under the escort of her maid. Diana was highly pleased with this arrangement, for she hoped to have a chance of seeing Norbert, but she was disappointed. The Mass had commenced when she entered, but the spot occupied by the Duke and his son was vacant. She followed

the service in a purely mechanical manner, and at last noticed that the priest had taken his place in the pulpit.

This was generally an exciting moment for the inhabitants of Bevron, for it was immediately before the sermon that the banns of marriage were published. The priest gazed blandly down upon the expectant crowd, coughed slightly, used his handkerchief, and finally took from his breviary a sheet of paper.

"I have," said he, "to publish the banns of marriage between " here he made a little pause, and all the congregation were on the tenterhooks of expectation; "between," he continued, "Monsieur Louis Norbert, Marquis de Champdoce, a minor, and only legitimate son of Guillaume Caesar, Duke de Champdoce, and of his wife Isabella de Barnaville, now deceased, but who both formerly resided in this parish, and Desiree Anne Marie Palouzet, minor, and legitimate daughter of Rene Augustus Palouzet, Count de Puymandour, and of Zoe Staplet, his wife, but now deceased, also residents of this parish."

This was the thunderbolt launched from the pulpit, which seemed to crush Diana into the earth, and her heart almost ceased to beat.

"Let any one," continued the priest, "who knows of any impediment to this marriage, take warning that he or she must acquaint us with it, under the penalty of excommunication. At the same time let him be warned under the same penalty to bring forward nothing in malice or without some foundation."

An impediment! What irony lay veiled beneath that word. Mademoiselle de Laurebourg knew of more than one. A wild desire filled her heart to start from her seat and cry out,

"It is impossible for this marriage to take place, for that Norbert was her affianced husband in the sight of Heaven, and that he was bound to her by the strongest of all links, that of crime."

But by a gigantic effort she controlled herself, and remained motionless, pallid as a spectre, but with a forced



smile on her lips, and with unparalleled audacity made a little sign to one of her female friends, which plainly meant, "This is, indeed, something unexpected." All her mind was concentrated to preserve a calm and unmoved aspect. The singing of the choir seemed to die away, the strong odor of the incense almost overpowered her, and she felt that unless the service soon came to an end, she must fall insensible from her chair. At last the priest turned again to the congregation and droned out the */Ita missa est/*, and all was over. Diana grasped the arm of her maid and forced her away, without saying a word. As she reached home, a servant ran up to her with a face upon which agitation was strongly painted.

"Ah, mademoiselle," gasped he, "such a frightful calamity. Your father and mother are expecting you; it is really too terrible."

Diana hastened to obey the summons. Her father and mother were seated near each other, evidently in deep distress. She went towards them, and the Marquis, drawing

her to him, pressed her against his heart.

"Poor child! My dear daughter!" murmured he, "you are all that is left to us now."

Their son had died, and the sad news had been brought to the Chateau while Diana was at Mass. By her brother's death she had succeeded to a princely fortune, and would now be one of the richest heiresses for many a mile round. Had this event happened but a week before, her marriage to Norbert would have met with no opposition from his father, and she would never have plunged into this abyss of crime. It was more than the irony of fate; it was the manifest punishment of an angry Divinity. She shed no tear for her brother's death. Her thoughts were all firmly fixed on Norbert, and that fearful announcement made in the house of God rang still in her ears. What could be the meaning of this sudden arrangement, and why had the marriage been so suddenly decided on?

She felt that some mystery lay beneath it all, and vowed that she would fathom it to its nethermost depths.

What was it that had taken place at Champdoce? Had the Duke, contrary to Daumon's prognostications, recovered? Had he discovered his son's insidious attack upon his life, and only pardoned it upon a blind compliance being given to his will? She passed away the whole day in these vain suppositions, and tried to think of every plan to stay the celebration of this union, for she had not given up her hopes, nor did she yet despair of ultimate success. Her new and unlooked for fortune placed a fresh weapon at her disposal, and she felt that the victory would yet be hers if she could but see Norbert again, were it but for a single instant. Was she not certain of the absolute power that she exercised over him, for had she not by a few words induced him to enter upon the terrible path of crime? She must see him, and that without a moment's delay, for the danger was imminent. A day now would be worth a year hereafter. She determined that, upon that very night, she would visit Champdoce. A little after midnight, when the inhabitants of the Chateau were wrapped in slumber,

she crept on tiptoe down the grand staircase, and made her exit by a side door. She had arranged her plan as to how she would find Norbert, for he had often described the interior arrangements of the Chateau to her. She knew that his room was on the ground floor, with two windows looking on to the courtyard. When, however, she reached the old Chateau, she hesitated. Suppose that she should go to the wrong window. But she had gone too far to recede, and determined that if any one else than Norbert should open the window, she would turn and fly. She tapped at the window softly, and then more loudly. She had made no mistake. Norbert threw open the window, with the words,

"Who is there?"

"It is I, Norbert; I, Diana."

"What do you want?" asked Norbert in an agitated tone of voice. What do you want to do here?"

She looked at him anxiously and hardly recognized his face, so great was the change that had come over it. It absolutely terrified her.

"Are you going to marry Mademoiselle de Puymandour?" asked she.

"Yes I am."

"And yet you pretended to love me?"

"Yes, I loved you ardently, devotedly, with a love that drove me to crime; but you had no love; you cared but for rank and fortune."

Diana raised her hands to heaven in an agony of despair. "Should I be here at this hour if what you say is true?" asked she wildly. "My brother is dead, and I am as wealthy as you are, Norbert, and yet I am here. You accuse me of being mercenary, and for what reason? Was it because I refused to fly with you from my father's house? Oh, Norbert, it was but the happiness of our future life that I strove to protect. It was "

Her speech failed her, and her eyes dilated with horror, for the door behind Norbert opened, and the Duke de Champdoce entered the room, uttering a string of meaningless words, and laughing with that mirthless laugh

which is so sure a sign of idiotcy.

"Can you understand now," exclaimed Norbert, pointing to his father, "why the remembrance of my love for you has become a hateful reminiscence? Do you dare to talk of happiness to me, when this spectre of a meditated crime will ever rise between us?" and with a meaning gesture he pointed to the open gate of the courtyard.

She turned; but before passing away, she cast a glance upon him full of the deepest fury and jealousy. She could not forgive Norbert for his share in the crime that she herself prompted, for the crime which had blighted all her hopes of happiness. Her farewell was a menace.

"Norbert," she said, as she glided through the gate like a spectre of the night, "I will have revenge, and that right soon."

## **CHAPTER XI. MARRIAGE BELLS; FUNERAL KNELLS.**

Three days of hard work had completed all the arrangements necessary for the marriage of Norbert and Mademoiselle de Puymandour. He had been presented to the lady, and neither had received a favorable impression of the other. At the very first glance each one felt that inevitable repugnance which the lapse of years can never efface. While dreading the anger of her obdurate father, Marie had at one time thought of confiding the secret of her attachment to George de Croisenois to Norbert, for she had the idea that if she told him that her heart was another's, he might withdraw his pretensions to her hand; but several times, when the opportunity occurred, fear restrained her tongue, and she let the propitious moment pass away. Had she done so, Norbert would at once have eagerly grasped at a pretext for absolving himself from a promise which he had made mentally of

obeying in all things a father who now, alas! had no means of enforcing his commands.

Each day he paid his visit to Puymandour as an accepted suitor, bearing a large bouquet with him, which he regularly presented to his betrothed upon his entrance into the drawing room, which she accepted with a painful flush rising to her cheek. The pair conversed upon indifferent topics, while an aged female connection sat in the room to play propriety. For many hours they would remain thus, the girl bending over her fancy work, and he vainly striving to find topics of conversation, and, consequently, saying hardly anything, in spite of Marie's feeble efforts to assist in the conversation. It was a slight relief when M. de Puymandour proposed a walk; but this was a rare occurrence, for that gentleman usually declared that he never had a moment's leisure. Never had he seemed so gay and busy since the approaching marriage of his daughter had been the theme of every tongue. He took all the preparations for the ceremony into his own hands, for he



had determined that everything should be conducted on a scale of unparalleled magnificence. The Chateau was refurnished, and all the carriages repainted and varnished, while the Champdoce and the Puymandour arms were quartered together on their panels. This coat of arms was to be seen everywhere over the doors, on the walls, and engraved on the silver, and it was believed that M. de Puymandour would have made no objection to their being branded on his breast.

In the midst of all this turmoil and bustle Norbert and Marie grew sadder and sadder as each day passed on. One day M. de Puymandour heard so astounding a piece of intelligence that he hurried into the drawing room, where he knew that he should find the lovers (as he styled them) together.

"Well, my children," exclaimed he, "you have set such an excellent example, that everybody seems disposed to copy you, and the mayor and the priest will be kept to their work rather tightly this year."

His daughter tried to put on an appearance of interest at this speech.

"Yes," continued M. de Puymandour, "I have just heard of a marriage that will come off almost directly after yours has been celebrated, and will make a stir, I can assure you."

"And whose is that, pray?"

"You are acquainted, I presume," returned the father, addressing himself to Norbert, "with the son of the Count de Mussidan?"

"What, the Viscount Octave?"

"The same."

"He lives in Paris, does he not?"

"Yes, generally; but he has been staying at Mussidan, and in the short space of a week has managed to lose his heart here; and to whom do you think? Come, give a guess."

"We cannot think who it can be, my dear father," said Marie, "and we are devoured with curiosity."

"It is reported that the Viscount de Mussidan has proposed for the hand of Mademoiselle de Laurebourg."

"Why," remarked Marie, "it is only three weeks since her brother died!"

Norbert flushed scarlet, and then turned a livid white; so great was his agitation at hearing this news, that he nearly dropped the album which he held in his hand.

"I like the Viscount," continued M. de Puymandour, "while Mademoiselle Diana is a charming girl. She is very handsome, and, I believe, has many talents; and she is a good model for you to copy, Marie, as you are so soon to become a duchess."

When he got upon his favorite hobby, it was very difficult to check M. de Puymandour. His daughter, therefore, waited until he had concluded, and then left the room, under the pretext of giving an order to the servants. The Count hardly noticed her absence, as he had still Norbert at his mercy.

"Reverting again to Mademoiselle Diana," said he:

"she looks charming in black, for women should look upon a death in the family as a most fortunate occurrence; but I ought not to be praising her to you, who are so well acquainted with her."

"I?" exclaimed Norbert.

"Yes, you. I do not suppose that you intend to deny that you have had a little flirtation with her?"

"I do not understand you."

"Well, /I/ do then, my boy; I heard all about your making love to her. Why, you are really blushing! What is up now?"

"I can assure you "

De Puymandour burst into a loud laugh.

"I have heard a good deal of your little country walks, and all the pretty things that you used to say to each other."

In vain did Norbert deny the whole thing, for his intended father in law would not believe him; and at last he got so annoyed that he refused to remain and dine with the Count, alleging anxiety for his father as an excuse. He

returned home as soon as he possibly could, much agitated by what he had heard; and as he was walking rapidly on, he heard his name called by some one who was running after him: Norbert turned round, and found himself face to face with Montlouis.

"I have been here a week," said the young man. "I am here with my patron, for I have one now. I am now with the Viscount de Mussidan, as his private secretary. M. Octave is not the most agreeable man in the world to get on with, as he gets into the most violent passions on very trivial occasions; but he has a good heart, after all, and I am very pleased with the position I have gained."

"I am very glad to hear it, Montlouis, very much pleased indeed."

"And you, Marquis, I hear, are to marry Mademoiselle de Puymandour; I could scarcely credit the news."

"And why, pray?"

"Because I remembered when we used to wait outside a certain garden wall, until we saw a certain door open

discreetly."

"But you must efface all this from your memory, Montlouis."

"Do not be alarmed; save to you, my lips would never utter a word of this. No one else would ever make me speak."

"Stop!" said Norbert, with an angry gesture. "Do you venture to say "

"To say what?"

"I wish you to understand that Mademoiselle Diana is as free from blame today as she was when first I met her. She has been indiscreet, but nothing more, I swear it before heaven!"

"I believe you perfectly."

In reality Montlouis did not believe one word of Norbert's assertion, and the young Marquis could read this in his companion's face.

"The more so," continued the secretary, "as the young lady is about to be married to my friend and patron."

"But where," asked Norbert, "did the Viscount meet with Mademoiselle de Laurebourg?"

"In Paris; the Viscount and her brother were very intimate, and nursed him during his last illness, and as soon as the scheming parents heard of the Viscount being in the neighborhood they asked him to call on them. Of course he did so, and saw Mademoiselle Diana, and returned home in a perfect frenzy of love."

Norbert seemed so incensed at this that Montlouis broke off his recital, feeling confident that the Marquis still loved Diana, and was consumed with the flame of jealousy.

"But, of course," he added carelessly, "nothing is yet settled."

Norbert, however, was too agitated to listen to the idle gossip of Montlouis any longer, so he pressed his hand and left him rather abruptly, walking away at the top of his speed, leaving his friend silent with astonishment. It seemed to Norbert as if he was imprisoned in one of those

iron dungeons he had read of, which slowly contracted day by day, and at last crushed their victims to atoms. He saw Diana married to the Viscount de Mussidan, and compelled to meet daily the man who knew all about her illicit meetings with her former lover, and who had more than once, when Norbert was unable to leave Champdoce, been intrusted with a letter or a message for her. And how would Montlouis behave under the circumstances? Would he possess the necessary tact and coolness to carry him through so difficult a position? What would be the end of this cruel concatenation of circumstances? Would Diana be able to endure the compromising witness of her youthful error? She would eagerly seek out some pretext for his dismissal; he could easily detect this, and in his anger at the loss of a position which he had long desired, would turn on her and repeat the whole story. Should Montlouis let loose his tongue, the Viscount, indignant at the imposition that had been practised upon him, would separate from his wife. What would be Diana's conduct when she



found herself left thus alone, and despised by the society of which she had hoped to be a queen? Would she not, in her turn, seek to revenge herself on Norbert? He had just asked himself whether at this juncture death would not be a blessing to him, when he caught sight of Francoise, the daughter of the Widow Rouleau, close by him. For two hours she had been awaiting his coming, concealed behind a hedge.

"I have something to give you, my lord Marquis," said she.

He took the letter that she held out to him, and, opening it, he read,

"You said that I did not love you perhaps this was but a test to prove my love. I am ready to fly with you tonight. I shall lose all, but it will be for your sake. Reflect, Norbert; there is yet time, but tomorrow it will be too late."

These were the words that Mademoiselle de Laurebourg had had the courage to pen, which to the former lover were full of the most thrilling eloquence. The

usually bold, firm writing of Diana was, in the letter before him, confused and almost illegible, showing the writer's frame of mind. There were blurs and blisters upon the paper as though tears had fallen upon it, perhaps because the writing had been made purposely irregular and drops of water are an excellent substitute for tears.

"Does she really love me?" murmured he.

He hesitated; yes, he absolutely hesitated, impressed by the idea that for him she was ready to sacrifice position and honor, that he had but to raise his finger and she was his, and that in the space of a couple of hours she might be the companion of his flight to some far distant land. His pulse throbbed madly, and he could scarcely draw his breath, when some fifty paces down the road he caught sight of the figure of a man; it was his father. This was the second time that the Duke by his mere presence had spread the web of Diana's temptations and allurements.

"Never!" exclaimed Norbert, with such fire and energy that the girl fell back a pace. "Never! no, never!" and

crushing up the letter, he dashed it upon the ground, from whence Françoise picked it up as he ran forward to meet his father. The Duke had recovered from his attack as far as the mere fact of his life not having been sacrificed; he could walk, sleep, eat and drink as he had formerly done. He could look at the laborers in the fields or the horses in the stables, but five minutes afterwards he had no recollection of what he heard or saw. The sudden loss of his father's aid would have caused Norbert much embarrassment had it not been for the shrewdness and sagacity of M. de Puymandour, who had assisted him greatly. But all these arrangements which had to be made had necessarily delayed the wedding. But it came at last; M. de Puymandour took absolute possession of him, and after the unhappy young man had passed a sleepless night, he was allowed no time for reflection. At eleven o'clock he entered the carriage, and was driven fast to the Mayor's office, and from thence to the chapel, and by twelve o'clock all was finished and he fettered for life. A little before

dinner the Viscount de Mussidan came to offer his congratulations, and gained them at the same time for himself by announcing his speedy union with Mademoiselle Diana de Laurebourg.

Five days later the newly married pair took possession of their mansion at Champdoce. Hampered with a wife whom he had never affected to love, and whose tearful face was a constant reproach to him, and with a father who was an utter imbecile, the thoughts of suicide more than once crossed Norbert's brain. One day a servant informed Norbert that his father refused to get up. A doctor was sent for, and he declared that the Duke was in a highly critical condition. A violent reaction had taken place, and all day the invalid was in a state of intense excitement. The power of speech, which he had almost entirely lost, seemed to have returned to him in a miraculous manner; at length, however, he became delirious, and Norbert dismissed the servants who had been watching by his father's bed, lest in the incoherent ravings of the invalid, the words

"Parricide" or "Poison" should break forth. At eleven o'clock he grew calmer, and slept a little, when all at once he started up in bed, exclaiming: "Come here, Norbert," and Jean, who had remained by his old master's side, ran up to the bed and was much startled at the sight. The Duke had entirely recovered his former appearance. His eyes flashed, and his lips trembled, as they always did when he was greatly excited.

"Pardon, father; pardon," cried Norbert, falling upon his knees.

The Duke softly stretched out his hand. "I was mad with family pride," said he; "and God punished me. My son, I forgive you."

Norbert's sobs broke the stillness of the chamber.

"My son, I renounce my ideas," continued the Duke. "I do not desire you to wed Mademoiselle de Puymandour if you feel that you cannot love her."

"Father," answered Norbert, "I have obeyed your wishes, and she is now my wife."

A gleam of terrible anguish passed over the Duke's countenance; he raised his hands as though to shield his eyes from some grizzly spectre, and in tones of heartrending agony exclaimed: "Too late! Too late!"

He fell back in terrible convulsions, and in a moment was dead. If, as has been often asserted, the veil of the hereafter is torn asunder, then the Duke de Champdoce had a glimpse into a terrible future.

## **CHAPTER XII. "RASH WORD, RASH DEED."**

After her repulse by Norbert, Diana, with the cold chill of death in her heart, made her way back to the Chateau of the De Laurebours, over the same road which but a short time before she had traveled full of expectation and hope. The sudden appearance of the Duke de Champdoce had filled her with alarm, but her imagination was not of that kind upon which unpleasant impressions remain for any long period; for after she had

regained her room, and thrown aside her out door attire, and removed all signs of mud stains, she once more became herself, and even laughed a little rippling laugh at all her own past alarms. Overwhelmed with the shame of her repulse, she had threatened Norbert; but as she reasoned calmly, she felt that it was not he for whom she felt the most violent animosity. All her hatred was reserved for that woman who had come between her and her lover for Marie de Puymandour. Some hidden feeling warned her that she must look into Marie's past life for some reason for the rupture of her engagement with Norbert, though the banns had already been published. This was the frame of mind in which Diana was when the Viscount de Mussidan was introduced to her, the friend of the brother whose untimely death had left her such a wealthy heiress. He was tall and well made, with handsomely chiseled features; and, endowed with physical strength and health, Octave de Mussidan had the additional advantages of noble descent and princely fortune. Two women, both renowned for their

wit and beauty, his aunt and his mother, had been intrusted with the education which would but enable him to shine in society.

Dispatched to Paris, with an ample allowance, at the age of twenty, he found himself, thanks to his birth and connections, in the very center of the world of fashion. At the sight of Mademoiselle de Laurebourg his heart was touched for the first time. Diana had never been more charmingly fascinating than she was at this period. Octave de Mussidan did not suit her fancy; there was too great a difference between him and Norbert, and nothing would ever efface from her memory the recollection of the young Marquis as he had appeared before her on the first day of their meeting in the Forest of Bevron, clad in his rustic garb, with the game he had shot dangling from his hand. She delighted to feast her recollection, and thought fondly of his shyness and diffidence when he hardly ventured to raise his eyes to hers. Octave, however, fell a victim at the first glance he caught of Diana, and permitted



himself to be swept away by the tide of his private emotions, which upon every visit that he paid to Laurebourg became more powerful and resistless. Like a true knight, who wishes that he himself should gain the love of his lady fair, Octave addressed himself directly to Diana, and after many attempts succeeded in finding himself alone with her, and then he asked her if she could permit him to crave of her father, the Marquis de Laurebourg, the honor of her hand. This appeal surprised her, for she had been so much absorbed in her own troubles that she had not even suspected his love for her. She was not even frightened at his declaration, as is the patient when the surgeon informs him that he must use the knife. She glanced at De Mussidan strangely as he put this question to her, and after a moment's hesitation, replied that she would give him a reply the next day. After thinking the matter over, she wrote and dispatched the letter which Francoise had carried to Norbert. The prisoner in the dock as he anxiously awaits the sentence of his judge, can

alone appreciate Diana's state of agonized suspense as she stood at the end of the park at Laurebourg awaiting the return of the girl. Her anxiety of mind lasted nearly three hours, when Françoise hurried up breathless.

"What did the Marquis say?" asked Diana.

"He said nothing; that is, he cried out very angrily, 'Never! no, never!' "

In order to prevent any suspicions arising in the girl's mind, Mademoiselle de Laurebourg contrived to force a laugh, exclaiming: "Ah! indeed, that is just what I expected."

Françoise seemed as if she had something to say on the tip of her tongue, but Diana hurriedly dismissed her, pressing a coin into her hand. All anxiety was now at an end; for her there was no longer any suspense or anguish; all her struggles were now futile, and she felt grateful to Octave for having given her his love. "Once married," thought she, "I shall be free, and shall be able to follow the Duke and Duchess to Paris."

Upon her return to the Chateau, she found Octave awaiting her. His eyes put the question that his lips did not dare to utter; and, placing her hand in his with a gentle inclination of her head, she assented to his prayer.

This act on her part would, she believed, free her from the past; but she was in error. Upon hearing that his dastardly attempt at murder had failed, the Counsellor was for the time utterly overwhelmed with terror, but the news that he had gained from M. de Puymandour calmed his mind in a great measure. He was not, however, completely reassured until he heard for certain that the Duke had become a helpless maniac, and that the doctor, having given up all hopes of his patient's recovery, had discontinued his visits to the Chateau. As soon as he had heard that Norbert's marriage had been so soon followed by his father's death, he imagined that every cloud had disappeared from the sky. All danger now seemed at an end, and he recalled with glee that he had in his strong box the promissory notes, signed by Norbert, to the amount of

twenty thousand francs, which he could demand at any moment, now that Norbert was the reigning lord of Champdoce. The first step he took was to hang about the neighborhood of Laurebourg, for he thought that some lucky chance would surely favor him with an opportunity for a little conversation with Mademoiselle Diana. For several days in succession he was unsuccessful, but at last he was delighted at seeing her alone, walking in the direction of Bevron. Without her suspecting it, he followed her until the road passed through a small plantation, when he came up and addressed her.

"What do you want with me?" asked she angrily.

He made no direct reply; but after apologizing for his boldness, he began to offer his congratulations upon her approaching marriage, which was now the talk of the whole neighborhood, and which pleased him much, as M. de Mussidan was in every way superior to

"Is that all you have to say to me?" asked Diana, interrupting his string of words.

As she turned from him, he had the audacity to lay his hand upon the edge of her jacket.

"I have more to say," said he, "if you will honor me with your attention. Something about you can guess what."

"About whom or what?" asked she, making no effort to hide her supreme contempt.

He smiled, glanced around to see that no one was within hearing, and then said in a low voice,

"It is about the bottle of poison."

She recoiled, as though some venomous reptile had started up in front of her.

"What do you mean?" cried she. "How dare you speak to me thus?"

All his servile manner had now returned to him, and he uttered a string of complaints in a whining tone of voice. She had played him a most unfair trick, and had stolen a certain little glass bottle from his office; and if anything had leaked out, his head would have paid the penalty of a crime in which he had no hand. He was quite ill, owing to

the suspense and anxiety he had endured; sleep would not come to his bed, and the pangs of remorse tortured him continually.

"Enough," cried Diana, stamping her foot angrily on the ground. "Enough, I say."

"Well, mademoiselle, I can no longer remain here. I am far too nervous, and I wish to go to some foreign country."

"Come, let me hear the real meaning of this long preface."

Thus adjured, Daumon spoke. He only wished for some little memento to cheer his days and nights of exile, some little recognition of his services; in fact, such a sum as would bring him in an income of three thousand francs.

"I understand you," replied Diana. "You wish to be paid for what you call your kindness."

"Ah, mademoiselle!"

"And you put a value of sixty thousand francs upon it; that is rather a high price, is it not?"

"Alas! it is not half what this unhappy business has cost me."

"Nonsense; your demand is preposterous."

"Demand!" returned he; "I make no demand. I come to you respectfully and with a little charity. If I were to demand, I should come to you in quite a different manner. I should say, 'Pay me such and such a sum, or I tell everything.' What have I to lose if the whole story comes to light? A mere nothing. I am a poor man, and am growing old. You and M. Norbert are the ones that have something to fear. You are noble, rich, and young, and a happy future lies before you."

Diana paused and thought for an instant.

"You are speaking," answered she at last, "in a most foolish manner. When charges are made against people, proofs must be forthcoming."

"Quite right, mademoiselle; but can you say that these proofs are not in my hands? Should you, however, desire to buy them, you are at liberty to do so. I give you the first

option, and yet you grumble."

As he spoke, he drew a battered leather pocket book from his breast, and took from it a paper, which, after having been crumpled, had been carefully smoothed out again. Diana glanced at it, and then uttered a stifled cry of rage and fear, for she at once recognized her last letter to Norbert.

"That wretch, Françoise, has betrayed me," exclaimed she, "and I saved her mother from a death by hunger and cold."

The Counsellor held out the letter to her. She thought that he had no suspicion of her, and made an attempt to snatch it from him; but he was on his guard, and drew back with a sarcastic smile on his face.

"No, mademoiselle," said he; "this is not the little bottle of poison; however, I will give it to you, together with another one, when I have obtained what I ask. Nothing for nothing, however; and if I must go to the scaffold, I will do so in good company."



Mademoiselle de Laurebourg was in utter despair.

"But I have no money," said she. "Where is a girl to find such a sum?"

"M. Norbert can find it."

"Go to him, then."

Daumon made a negative sign with his head.

"I am not quite such a fool," answered he; "I know M. Norbert too well. He is the very image of his father. But you can manage him, mademoiselle; besides, you have much interest in having the matter settled."

"Counsellor!"

"There is no use in beating about the bush. I come to you humbly enough, and you treat me like so much dirt. I will not submit to this, as you will find to your cost. /I/ never poisoned any one; but enough of this kind of thing. Today is Tuesday; if on Friday, by six o'clock, I do not have what I have asked for, your father and the Count Octave will have a letter from me, and perhaps your fine marriage may come to nothing after all."

This insolence absolutely struck Diana dumb, and Daumon had disappeared round a turning of the road before she could find words to crush him for his vile attempt at extortion. She felt that he was capable of keeping his word, even if by so doing he seriously injured himself without gaining any advantage.

A nature like Diana's always looks danger boldly in the face. She had, however, but little choice how she would act for to apply to Norbert was the only resource left to her for she knew that he would do all in his power to ward off the danger which threatened both of them so nearly. The idea, however, of applying to him for aid was repugnant to her pride. To what depths of meanness and infamy had she descended! and to what avail had been all her aspirations of ambition and grandeur?

She was at the mercy of a wretch of Daumon, in fact. She was forced to go as a suppliant to a man whom she had loved so well that she now hated him with a deadly hatred. But she did not hesitate for a moment. She went straight to

the cottage of Widow Rouleau, and despatched Francoise in quest of Norbert.

She ordered the girl to tell him that he must without fail be at the wicket gate in the park wall at Laurebourg on the coming night, where she would meet him, and that the matter was one of life and death.

As Diana gave these orders to Francoise, the woman's nervous air and flushed features plainly showed that she was a mere creature of Daumon's; but Mademoiselle de Laurebourg felt it would be unwise to take any notice of her discovery, but to abstain from employing her in confidential communications for the future.

As the hour of the meeting drew near a host of doubts assailed her. Would Norbert come to the meeting? Had Francoise contrived to see him? Might he not be absent from home? It was now growing dark, and the servants brought candles into the dining room, and Diana, contriving to slip away, gained the appointed spot. Norbert was waiting, and when he caught sight of her, rushed

forward, but stopped as though restrained by a sudden thought, and remained still, as if rooted to the ground.

"You sent for me, mademoiselle?" said he. "I did."

After a pause, in which she succeeded in mastering her emotion, Diana began with the utmost volubility to explain the extortion that Daumon was endeavoring to practise upon her, magnifying, though there was but little need to do so, all the threats and menaces that he had made use of. She had imagined that this last piece of roguery on the part of Daumon would drive Norbert into a furious passion, but to her surprise it had no such effect. He had suffered so much and so deeply, that his heart was almost dead against any further emotion.

"Do not let this trouble you," answered he apathetically; "I will see Daumon and settle with him."

"Can you leave me thus, at our last meeting, without even a word?"

asked she.

"What have I to say? My father forgave me on his

death bed, and I pardon you."

"Farewell, Norbert; we shall see no more of each other. I am going to marry, as you have doubtless been informed. Can I oppose my parent's will? Besides, what does it signify? Farewell; remember no one wishes more sincerely for your future happiness than I do."

"Happy!" exclaimed Norbert. "How can I ever be happy again? If you know the secret, for pity's sake break it to me. Tell me how to forget and how to annihilate thought. Do you not know that I had planned a life of perfect happiness with you by my side? I had visions; and now plans and visions are alike hateful to me. And as they ever and anon recur to my memory, they will fill me with terror and despair."

As Diana heard these words of agony, a wild gleam of triumph shot from her eyes, but it faded away quickly, and left her cold and emotionless as a marble statue; and when she reappeared in the drawing room, after taking leave of Norbert, her face wore so satisfied an expression, that the

Viscount complimented her upon her apparent happiness.

She made some jesting retort, but there was a shade of earnestness mixed with her playfulness, for to her future husband she only wished to show the amiable side of her character; but all the time she was thinking. Will Norbert see Daumon in time?

The Duke kept his word, and the next day the faithful Jean discreetly handed her a packet. She opened it and found that besides the two letters of which the Counsellor had spoken, it contained all her correspondence with Norbert more than a hundred letters in all, some of great length, and all of them compromising to a certain extent. Her first thought was to destroy them, but on reflection she decided not to do so, and hid the packet in the same place as she had concealed the letters written by Norbert to her.

Norbert had given Daumon sixty thousand francs, and in addition owed him twenty thousand on his promissory notes. This sum, in addition to what he had already saved, would form such a snug little fortune that it would enable

the Counsellor to quit Bevron, and take up his abode in Paris, where his peculiar talents would have more scope for development. And eight days later the village was thrown into a state of intense excitement by the fact becoming known that Daumon had shut up his house and departed for Paris, taking Francoise, the Widow Rouleau's daughter, with him. The Widow Rouleau was furious, and openly accused Mademoiselle de Laurebourg of having aided in the committal of the act which had deprived her of her daughter's services in her declining years; and the old woman who had acted as housekeeper, who on Daumon's departure had thrown open the place, did not hesitate to assert that all her late master's legal lore had been acquired in prison, where he had undergone a sentence of ten years' penal servitude.

In spite of all this, however, Mademoiselle de Laurebourg was secretly delighted at the departure of Daumon and Francoise; for she experienced an intense feeling of relief at

knowing that she no longer was in any risk of meeting her accomplice in her daily walks. Norbert, too, was going to Paris with his wife; and M. de Puymandour was going about saying that his daughter, the Duchess of Champdoce, would not return to this part of the country for some time to come.

Diana drew a long breath of relief, for it seemed to her as if all the threatening clouds, which had darkened the horizon, were fast breaking up and drifting away. Her future seemed clear, and she could continue the preparations for her marriage, which was to be celebrated in a fortnight's time; and the friend of Octave who had been asked to act as his best man had answered in the affirmative.

Diana had taken accurate measurement of the love that Octave lavished upon her, and did her utmost to increase it. She had another cruel idea, and that was that the bewitching manner which she had assumed towards her betrothed was excellent practice, and by it she might judge



of her future success in society when she resided in Paris. Octave was utterly conquered, as any other man would have been under similar circumstances.

Upon the day of her wedding she was dazzling in her beauty, and her face was radiant with happiness; but it was a mere mask, which she had put on to conceal her real feelings. She knew that many curious eyes were fixed on her as she left the chapel; and the crowd formed a line for her to pass through. She saw many a glance of dislike cast upon her; but a more severe blow awaited her, for on her arrival at the Chateau de Mussidan, to which she was driven directly after the ceremony, the first person she met was Montlouis, who came forward to welcome her. Bold and self possessed as she was, the slight of this man startled her, and a bright flush passed across her face. Fortunately Montlouis had had time to prepare himself for this meeting, and his face showed no token of recognition. But though his salutation was of the most respectful description, Madame de Mussidan thought she saw in his eyes that

ironical expression of contempt which she had more than once seen in Daumon's face.

"That man must not, shall not, stay here," she murmured to herself.

It was easy enough for her to ask her husband to dismiss Montlouis from his employ, but it was a dangerous step to take; and her easiest course was to defer the dismissal of the secretary until some really good pretext offered itself. Nor was this pretext long in presenting itself; for Octave was by no means satisfied with the young man's conduct. Montlouis who had been full of zeal while in Paris, had renewed his /liaison/, on his return to Mussidan, with the girl with whom he had been formerly entangled at Poitiers. This, of course, could not be permitted to go on, and an explosion was clearly to be expected; but what Diana dreaded most was the accidental development of some unseen chance.

After she had been married some two weeks, when Octave proposed in the afternoon that they should go for a

walk, she agreed. Her preparations were soon completed, and they started off, blithe and lively as children on a holiday ramble. As they loitered in a wooded path, they heard a dog barking in the cover. It was Bruno, who rushed out, and,

standing on his hind legs, endeavored to lick Diana's face.

"Help, help, Octave!" she exclaimed, and her husband, springing to her side, drove away the animal.

"Were you very much alarmed, dearest?" asked he.

"Yes," answered she faintly; "I was almost frightened to death."

"I do not think that he would do you any harm," remarked Octave.

"No matter; make him go away"; and as she spoke she struck at him with her parasol. But the dog never for a moment supposed that Diana was in earnest, and, supposing that she intended to play with him, as she had often done before, began to gambol round her, barking joyously the whole time.

"But this dog evidently knows you, Diana," observed the Viscount.

"Know me? Impossible!" and as she spoke Bruno ran up and licked her hand. "If he does, his memory is better than mine; at any rate, I am half afraid of him. Come, Octave, let us go."

They turned away, and Octave would have forgotten all about the

occurrence had not Bruno, delighted at having found an old acquaintance, persisted in following them.

"This is strange," exclaimed the Viscount, "very strange indeed. Look here, my man," said he, addressing a peasant, who was engaged in clipping a hedge by the roadside, "do you know whose dog this is?"

"Yes, my lord, it belongs to the young Duke of Champdoce."

"Of course," answered Diana, "I have often seen the dog at the Widow Rouleau's, and have occasionally given it a piece of bread. He was always with Francoise, who ran

off with that man Daumon. Oh, yes, I know him now; here, Bruno, here!"

The dog rushed to her, and, stooping down, she caressed him, thus hoping to conceal her tell tale face.

Octave drew his wife's arm within his without another word. A strange feeling of doubt had arisen in his mind. Diana, too, was much disturbed, and abused herself mentally for having been so weak and cowardly. Why had she not at once confessed that she knew the dog? Had she said at once, "Why, that is Bruno, the Duke of Champdoce's dog," her husband would have thought no more about the matter; but her own folly had made much of a merely trivial incident.

Ever since that fatal walk the Viscount's manner appeared to have changed, and more than once Diana fancied that she caught a look of suspicion in his eyes. How could she best manage to make him forget this unlucky event? She saw that for the rest of her life she must affect a terror of dogs; and, for the future, whenever she saw

one, she uttered a little cry of alarm, and insisted upon all Octave's being chained up. But for all this she lived in a perfect atmosphere of suspicion and anxiety, while the very ground upon which she walked seemed to have been mined beneath her feet. Her sole wish now was to fly from Mussidan, and leave Bevron and its environs, she cared not for what spot. It has been first arranged that immediately after the marriage they should make a short tour; but in spite of this, they still lingered at Mussidan; and all that Diana could do was to keep this previous determination before her husband, without making any direct attack.

The blow came at last, and was more unexpected and terrible than she had anticipated. On the afternoon of the 26th of October, as Diana was gazing from her window, an excited crowd rushed into the courtyard of the Chateau, followed by four men bearing a litter covered with a sheet, under which could be distinguished the rigid limbs of a dead body, while a cruel crimson stain upon one side of the

white covering too plainly showed that some one had met with a violent death.

The hideous sight froze Diana with terror, and it was impossible for her to leave the window or quit the object on the litter, which seemed to have a terrible fascination for her. That very morning her husband, accompanied by his friend the Baron de Clinchain, Montlouis, and a servant named Ludovic, had gone out for a day's shooting. It was evident that something had happened to one of the party; which of them could it be? The doubt was not of very long duration; for at that moment her husband entered the courtyard, supported by M. de Clinchain and Ludovic. His face was deadly pale, and he seemed scarcely able to drag one leg after the other. The dead man therefore must be Montlouis. She need no longer plot and scheme for the dismissal of the secretary, for his tongue had been silenced forever.

A ray of comfort dawned in Diana's heart at this idea, and gave her the strength to descend the staircase. Halfway

down she met M. de Clinchain, who was ascending. He seized her by the arm, and said hoarsely,

"Go back, madame, go back!"

"But tell me what has happened."

"A terrible calamity. Go back to your room, I beg of you. Your husband will be here presently"; and, as Octave appeared, he absolutely pushed her into her own room.

Octave followed, and, extending his arms, pressed his wife closely to his breast, bursting as he did so into a passion of sobs.

"Ah!" cried M. de Clinchain joyously, "he is saved. See, he weeps; I had feared for his reason."

After many questions and incoherent answers, Madame de Mussidan at last arrived at the fact that her husband had shot Montlouis by accident. Diana believed this story, but it was far from the truth. Montlouis had met his death at her hands quite as much as the Duke de Champdoce had done. He had died because he was the possessor of a fatal secret.



This was what had really occurred. After lunch, Octave, who had drunk rather freely, began to rally Montlouis regarding his mysterious movements, and to assert that some woman must be at the bottom of them. At first Montlouis joined in the laugh; but at length M. de Mussidan became too personal in remarks regarding the woman his secretary loved, and Montlouis responded angrily. This influenced his master's temper, and he went on to say that he could no longer permit such doings, and he reproached his secretary for risking his present and future for a woman who was worthy neither of love nor respect, and who was notoriously unfaithful to him. Montlouis heard this last taunt with compressed lips and a deep cloud upon his brow.

"Do not utter a word more, Count," said he; "I forbid you to do so."

He spoke so disrespectfully that Octave was about to strike him, but Montlouis drew back and avoided the blow; but he was so intoxicated with fury that this last insult

roused him beyond all bounds.

"By what right do you speak thus," said he, "who have married another man's mistress? It well becomes you to talk of woman's virtue, when your wife is a "

He had no time to finish his sentence, for Octave, levelling his gun, shot him through the heart.

M. de Mussidan kept these facts from his wife because he really loved her, and true love is capable of any extreme; and he felt that, however strong the cause might be, he should never have the courage to separate from Diana; that whatever she might do in the future, or had already done in the past, he could not choose but forgive her.

Acquitted of all blame, thanks to Clinchain's and Ludovic's evidence for they had mutually agreed that the tragical occurrence should be represented to have been the result of an accident the conscience of M. de Mussidan left him but little peace. The girl whom Montlouis had loved had been driven from her home in disgrace, owing to having given birth to a son. Octave sought her out, and,

without giving any reason for his generosity, told her that her son, whom she had named Paul, after his father, Montlouis, should never come to want.

Shortly after this sad occurrence, M. de Mussidan and his wife quitted Poitiers, for Diana had more than once determined that she would make Paris her residence for the future. She had taken into her service a woman who had been in the service of Marie de Puymandour, and through her had discovered that, previous to her marriage with Norbert, Marie had loved George de Croisenois; and she intended to use this knowledge at some future date as a weapon with which to deal the Duke de Champdoce a deadly blow.

### **CHAPTER XIII. A SCHEME OF VENGEANCE.**

The marriage between Norbert and Mademoiselle de Puymandour was entirely deficient in that brief, ephemeral light that shines over the honeymoon. The icy wall that stood between them became each day stronger and taller. There was no one to smooth away inequalities, no one to exercise a kindly influence over two characters, both haughty and determined. After his father's death, when Norbert announced his intention of residing in Paris, M. de Puymandour highly approved of this resolution, for he fancied that if he were to remain alone in the country, he could to a certain extent take the place and position of the late Duke, and, with the permission of his son in law, at once take up his residence at Champdoce.

Almost as soon as the young Duchess arrived in Paris she realized the fact that she was the most unfortunate woman in the world. As Champdoce was almost like her own home, her eyes lighted on familiar scenes; and if she

went out, she was sure of being greeted by kindly words and friendly features; but in Paris she only found solitude, for everything there was strange and hostile. The late Duke, pinching and parsimonious as he had been towards himself and his son, launched out into the wildest extravagances when he imagined he was working for his coming race, and the home which he had prepared for his great grandchildren was the incarnation of splendor and luxury.

Upon the arrival of Norbert and his wife, they could almost fancy that they had only quitted their town house a few days before, so perfect were all the arrangements. Had Norbert been left to act for himself, he might have felt a little embarrassed, but his trusty servant Jean aided him with his advice, and the establishment was kept on a footing to do honor to the traditions of the house of Champdoce. Everything can be procured in Paris for money, and Jean had filled the ante rooms with lackeys, the kitchens and offices with cooks and scullions, and the stables with grooms, coachmen, and horses, while every

description of carriage stood in the place appointed for their reception.

But all this bustle and excitement did not seem in the eyes of the young Duchess to impart life to the house. It appeared to her dead and empty as a sepulchre. It seemed as if she were living beneath the weight of some vague and indefinable terror, some hideous and hidden spectre which might at any moment start from its hiding place and drive her mad with the alarm it excited. She had not a soul in whom she could confide. She had been forbidden by Norbert to renew her acquaintance with her old Parisian friends, for Norbert did not consider them of sufficiently good family, and in addition he had used the pretext of the deep mourning they were in to put off receiving visitors for a twelvemonth at least. She felt herself alone and solitary, and, in this frame of mind, how was it possible for her not to let her thoughts wander once again to George de Croisenois. Had her father been willing, she might have been his wife now, and have been wandering hand in hand

in some sequestered spot beneath the clear blue sky of Italy.

/He/ had loved her, while Norbert.

Norbert was leading one of those mad, headstrong lives which have but two conclusions ruin or suicide. His name had been put up for election at a fashionable club by his uncle, the Chevalier de Septraor, as soon as he arrived in Paris. He had been elected at once, being looked on as a decided acquisition to the list of members. He bore one of the oldest names to be found among the French nobility, while his fortune gigantic as it was had been magnified threefold by the tongue of common report. He was received with open arms everywhere, and lived in a perfect atmosphere of flattery. Not being able to shine by means of cultivation or polish, he sought to gain a position in his club by a certain roughness of demeanor and a cynical mode of speech. He flung away his money in every direction, kept racers, and was uniformly fortunate in his betting transactions. He frequented the world of gallantry, and was constantly to be seen in the company of women

whose reputations were exceedingly equivocal. His days were spent on horseback, or in the fencing room, and his nights in drinking, gambling, and all kinds of debauchery. His wife scarcely ever saw him, for when he returned home it was usually with the first beams of day, either half intoxicated or savage from having lost large sums at the gambling table. Jean, the old and trusty retainer of the house of Champdoce, was deeply grieved, not so much at seeing his master so rapidly pursuing the path to ruin as at the fact that he was ever surrounded by dissolute and disreputable acquaintances.

"Think of your name," he would urge; "of the honor of your name."

"And what does that matter," sneered Norbert, "provided that I live a jolly life, and shuffle out of the world rapidly?"

There was one fixed star in all the dark clouds that surrounded him, which now seemed to blaze brightly, and this star was Diana de Mussidan. Do what he would, it was



impossible to efface her image from his memory. Even amidst the fumes of wine and the debauched revelry of the supper table he could see the form that he had once so passionately loved standing out like a pillar of light, clear and distinct against the darkness. He had led this demoralizing existence for fully six months, when one day, as he was riding down the Avenue des Champs Elysees, he saw a lady give him a friendly bow. She was seated in a magnificent open carriage, wrapped in the richest and most costly furs. Thinking that she might be one of the many actresses with whom he was acquainted, Norbert turned his horse's head towards the carriage; but as he got nearer he saw, to his extreme amazement and almost terror, that it was Diana de Mussidan who was seated in it. He did not turn back, however; and as the carriage had just drawn up, he reined in his horse alongside of it. Diana was as much agitated as he was, and for a moment neither of them spoke, but their eyes were firmly fixed upon each other, and they sat pale and breathless, as if each had some sad

presentiment which fate was preparing for them both. At last Norbert felt that he must break the silence, for the servants were beginning to gaze upon them with eyes full of curiosity.

"What, madame, you here, in Paris?" said he with an effort.

She had drawn out a slender hand from the mass of furs in which she was enveloped, and extended it to him, as she replied in a tone which had a ring of tenderness beneath its commonplace tone,

"Yes, we are established here, and I hope that we shall be as good friends as we were once before. Farewell, until we meet again."

As if her words had been a signal, the coachman struck his horses lightly with his whip, and the magnificent equipage rolled swiftly away. Norbert had not accepted Diana's proffered hand, but presently he realized the whole scene, and plunging his spurs into his horse dashed furiously up the Avenue in the direction of the Arc

de Triomphe.

"Ah!" said he, as a bitter pang of despair shot through his heart, "I still love her, and can never care for any one else; but I will see her again. She has not forgotten me. I could read it in her eyes, and detect it all in the tones of her voice." Here a momentary gleam of reason crossed his brain. "But will a woman like Diana ever forgive an offence like mine? and when she seems most friendly the danger is the more near."

Unfortunately he thrust aside this idea, and refused to listen to the voice of reason. That evening he went down to his club with the intention of asking a few questions regarding the Mussidans. He heard enough to satisfy himself, and the next day he met Madame de Mussidan in the Champs Elysees, and for many days afterwards in rapid succession. Each day they exchanged a few words, and at last Diana, with much simulated hesitation, promised to alight from her carriage when next they met in the Bois, and talk to Norbert unhampered by the presence of the

domestics.

Madame de Mussidan had made the appointment for three o'clock, but before two Norbert was on the spot, in a fever of expectation and doubt.

"Is it I," asked he of himself, "waiting once more for Diana, as I have so often waited for her at Bevron?"

Ah, how many changes had taken place since then! He was now no longer waiting for Diana de Laurebourg, but for the Countess de Mussidan, another man's wife, while he also was a married man. It was no longer the whim of a monomaniac that kept them apart, but the dictates of law, honor, and the world.

"Why," said he, in a mad burst of passion, "why should we not set at defiance all the cold social rules framed by an artificial state of society; why should not the woman leave her husband and the man his wife?" Norbert had consulted his watch times without number before the appointed hour came. "Ah," sighed he, "suppose that she should not come after all."

As he said these words a cab stopped, and the Countess de Mussidan alighted from it. She came rapidly along towards him, crossing an open space without heeding the irregularities of the ground, as that diminished the distance which separated her from Norbert. He advanced to meet her, and taking his arm, they plunged into the recesses of the Bois. There had been heavy rain on the day previous, and the pathway was wet and muddy, but Madame de Mussidan did not seem to notice this.

"Let us go on," said she, "until we are certain of not being seen from the road. I have taken every precaution. My carriage and servants are waiting for me in front of St. Philippe du Roule; but for all that I may have been watched."

"You were not so timid in bygone days."

"Then I was my own mistress; and if I lost my reputation, the loss affected me only; but on my wedding day I had a sacred trust confided to me the honor of the man who has given me his name, and that I must guard

with jealous care."

"Then you love me no longer."

She stopped suddenly, and overwhelming Norbert with one of those glacial glances which she knew so well how to assume, answered in measured accents,

"Your memory fails you; all that has remained to me of the past is the rejection of a proposal conveyed in a certain letter that I wrote."

Norbert interrupted her by a piteous gesture of entreaty.

"Mercy!" said he. "You would pardon me if you knew all the horrors of the punishment that I am enduring. I was mad, blind, besotted, nor did I love you as I do at this moment."

A smile played round Diana's beautiful mouth, for Norbert had told her nothing that she did not know before, but she wished to hear it from his own lips.

"Alas!" murmured she; "I can only frame my reply with the fatal words, 'Too late/!' "

"Diana!"

He endeavored to seize her hand, but she drew it away with a rapid movement.

"Do not use that name," said she; "you have no right to do so. Is it not sufficient to have blighted the young girl's life? and yet you seek to compromise the honor of the wife. You must forget me; do you understand? It is to tell you this that I am here. The other day, when I saw you again, I lost my self command. My heart leapt up at the sight of you, and, fool that I was, I permitted you to see this; but base no hopes on my weakness. I said to you, Let us be friends. It was a mere act of madness. We can never be friends, and had better, therefore, treat each other as strangers. Do you forget that lying tongues at Bevron accused me of being your mistress? Do you think that this falsehood has not reached my husband's ears? One day, when your name was mentioned in his presence, I saw a gleam of hatred and jealousy in his eye. Great heavens! should he, on my return, suspect that my hand had rested in yours, he would

expel me from his house like some guilty wretch! The door of our house must remain forever closed to you. I am miserable indeed. Be a man; and if your heart still holds one atom of the love you once bore for me, prove it by never seeking me again."

As she concluded she hurried away, leaving in Norbert's heart a more deadly poison than the one she had endeavored to persuade the son to administer to his father, the Duke de Champdoce. She knew each chord that vibrated in his heart, and could play on it at will. She felt sure that in a month he would again be her slave, and that she could exercise over him a sway more despotic than she had yet done, and, in addition to this, that he would assist her in executing a cruel scheme of revenge, which she had long been plotting.

After having followed Diana about like her very shadow for several days, Norbert at last ventured to approach her in the Champs Elysees. She was angry, but not to such an extent that he feared to repeat his offence.



Then she wept, but her tears could not force him to avoid her. At first her system of defence was very strong, then it gradually grew weaker. She granted him another interview, and then two others followed. But what were these meetings worth to him? They took place in a church or a public gallery, in places where they could scarcely exchange a grasp of the hand. At length she told him that she had thought of a place which would render their interviews less perilous, but that she hardly dared tell him where it was. He pressed her to tell him, and, by degrees, she permitted herself to be persuaded. Her idea was to become the friend of the Duchess of Champdoce.

Norbert now felt that she was more an angel than a woman, and it was agreed that on the next day he himself would introduce her to his wife.

## **CHAPTER XIV. FALSE FRIEND, OLD LOVER.**

It was on a Wednesday morning that the Duke de Champdoce, instead of, as usual, going to his own or one of his friends' clubs to breakfast, took his seat at the table where his wife was partaking of her morning meal. He was in excellent spirits, gay, and full of pleasant talk, a mood in which his wife had never seen him since their ill fated marriage. The Duchess could not understand this sudden change in her husband; it terrified and alarmed her, for she felt that it was the forerunner of some serious event, which would change the current of her life entirely.

Norbert waited until the domestics had completed their duty and retired, and as soon as he was alone with his wife he took her hand and kissed it with an air of gallantry.

"It has been a long time, my dear Marie, since I had resolved to open my heart to you entirely, and now a full and open explanation has become absolutely necessary."

"An explanation!" faltered Marie.

"Yes, certainly; but do not let the word alarm you. I fear that I must have appeared in your eyes the most morose and disagreeable of husbands. Permit me to explain. Since we came here, I have gone about my own affairs, I have gone out early and returned extremely late, and sometimes three days have elapsed without our even setting eyes on each other."

The young Duchess listened to him like a woman who could not believe her ears. Could this be her husband who was heaping reproaches upon himself in this manner?

"I have made no complaint," stammered she.

"I know that, Marie; you have a noble and forgiving nature; but, however, it is impossible, as a woman, that you should not have condemned me."

"Indeed, but I have not done so."

"So much the better for me. On this I shall not have to find either defence or excuse for my conduct; you must know, however, that you are ever foremost in my thoughts, even when I am away from you."

He was evidently doing his best to put on an air of tenderness and affection, but he failed; for though his words were kind, the tone of his voice was neither tender nor sympathetic.

"I hope I know my duty," said the Duchess.

"Pray, Marie," broke in he, "do not let the word duty be uttered between us. You know that you have been much alone, because it was impossible for the friends of Mademoiselle de Puymandour to be those of the Duchess de Champdoce!"

"Have I made any opposition to your orders?"

"Then, too, our mourning prevents us going out into the world for five months longer at least."

"Have I asked to go out?"

"All the more reason that I should endeavor to make your home less dull for you. I should like you to have with you some person in whose society you could find pleasure and distraction. Not one of those foolish girls who have no thought save for balls and dress, but a sensible woman of

the world, and, above all, one of your own age and rank, a woman, in short, of whom you could make a friend. But where can such a one be found? It is a perilous quest to venture on, and upon such a friend often depends the happiness and misery of a home.

"But," continued he, after a brief pause, "I think that I have discovered the very one that will suit you. I met her at the house of Madame d'Ailange, who spoke eloquently of her charms of mind and body, and I hope to have the pleasure of presenting her to you today."

"Here, at our house?"

"Certainly; there is nothing odd in this. Besides, the lady is no stranger to us; she comes from our own part of the country, and you know her."

A flush came over his face, and he busied himself with the fire to conceal it as he added,

"You recollect Mademoiselle de Laurebourg?"

"Do you mean Diana de Laurebourg?"

"Exactly so."

"I saw very little of her, for my father and hers did not get on very well together. The Marquis de Laurebourg looked on us as too insignificant to "

"Ah, well," interrupted he, "I trust that the daughter will make up for the father's shortcomings. She married just after our wedding had been celebrated, and her husband is the Count de Mussidan. She will call on you today, and I have told your servants to say that you are at home."

The silence that followed this speech lasted for nearly a couple of minutes, and became exceedingly embarrassing, when suddenly the sound of wheels was heard on the gravel of the courtyard, and in a moment afterwards a servant came and announced that the Countess de Mussidan was in the drawing room. Norbert rose, and, taking his wife's arm, led her away.

"Come, Marie, come," said he; "she has arrived."

Diana had reflected deeply before she had taken this extraordinarily bold step. In paying a visit so contrary to all the usual rules of etiquette, she exposed herself to the

chance of receiving a severe rebuff. The few seconds that elapsed while she was still alone in the drawing room seemed like so many centuries; but the door was opened, and Norbert and his wife appeared. Then, with a charming smile, Madame de Mussidan rose and bowed gracefully to the Duchess de Champdoce, making a series of half jesting apologies for her intrusion. She had been utterly unable, she said, to resist the pleasure she should experience in seeing an old country neighbor, the more so as they were now separated by so short a distance. She had, therefore, disregarded all the rules of etiquette so that they might have a cozy chat about Poitiers, Bevron, Champdoce, and all the country where she had been born, and which she so dearly loved.

The Duchess listened in silence to this torrent of words, and the expression of her face showed how surprised she was at this unexpected visit. A less perfectly self possessed woman than Diana de Mussidan might have felt abashed, but the slight annoyance was not to

be compared to the prospective advantages that she hoped to gain, and she brought all the mettle of her talent and diplomacy into play.

Norbert was moving about the room, half ashamed of the ignoble part that he was playing. As soon as he thought that the welcome between the two ladies had been partially got over, and imagined that they were conversing more amicably together, he slipped out of the room, not knowing whether to be pleased or angry at the success of the trick.

The trick was rather a more difficult one than Diana had, from Norbert's account, anticipated, as she had thought that she would have been received by the Duchess like some ministering angel sent down to earth to console an unhappy captive. She had expected to find a simple, guileless woman, who, upon her first visit, would throw her arms round her visitor's neck and yield herself entirely to her influence. Far, however, from being dismayed, Diana was rather pleased at this unexpected difficulty, and so fully exerted all her powers of fascination, that when she took



her leave, she believed that she had made a little progress.

On that very evening the Duchess remarked to her husband,

"I think that I shall like Madame de Mussidan; she seems an excellent kind of woman."

"Excellent is just the proper word," returned Norbert. "All Bevron was in tears when she was married and had to leave, for she was a real angel among the poor."

Norbert was intensely gratified by Diana's success; for was it not for him that she had displayed all her skill, and was not this a proof that she still cherished a passion for him?

He was not, however, quite so much pleased when he met Madame de Mussidan the next day in the Champs Elysees. She looked sad and thoughtful.

"What has gone wrong?" asked he.

"I am very angry with myself for having listened to the voice of my own heart and to your entreaties," answered she, "and I think that both of us have committed a

grave error."

"Indeed, and what have we done?"

"Norbert, your wife suspects something."

"Impossible! Why, she was praising you after you had left."

"If that is the case, then she is indeed a much more clever woman than I had imagined, for she knows how to conceal her suspicions until she is in a position to prove them."

Diana spoke with such a serious air of conviction, that Norbert became quite alarmed.

"What shall we do?" asked he.

"The best thing would be to give up meeting each other, I think."

"Never; I tell you, never!"

"Let me reflect; in the meantime be prudent; for both our sakes, be prudent."

To further his ends, Norbert entirely changed his mode of life. He gave up going to his clubs, refused invitations to

fast suppers, and no longer spent his nights in gambling and drinking. He drove out with his wife, and frequently spent his evenings with her, and at the club began to be looked on as quite a model husband. This great change, however, was not effected without many a severe inward struggle. He felt deeply humiliated at the life of deception that he was forced to lead, but Diana's hand, apparently so slight and frail, held him with a grip of steel.

"We must live in this way," said she, in answer to his expostulations, "first, because it must be so; and, secondly, because it is my will. On our present mode of conduct depends all our future safety, and I wish the Duchess to believe that with me happiness and content must have come to her fireside."

Norbert could not gainsay this very reasonable proposition on the part of Madame de Mussidan, for he was more in love than ever, and the terrible fear that if he went in any way contrary to her wishes that she would refuse to see him any more, stayed the words of objection that rose

to his lips.

After hesitating for a little longer, the Duchess made up her mind to accept the offer of friendship which Diana had so ingenuously offered to her, and finished by giving herself up to the bitterest enemy that she had in the world. By degrees she had no secrets from her new friend, and one day, after a long and confidential conversation, she acknowledged to Diana the whole secret of the early love of her girlish days, the memory of which had never faded from the inmost recesses of her heart, and was rash enough to mention George de Croisenois by name. Madame de Mussidan was overjoyed at what she considered so signal a victory.

"Now I have her," thought she, "and vengeance is within my grasp."

Marie and Diana were now like two sisters, and were almost constantly together; but this intimacy had not given to Norbert the facile means of meeting Diana which he had so ardently hoped for. Though Madame de Mussidan

visited his house nearly every day, he absolutely saw less of her than he had done before, and sometimes weeks elapsed without his catching a glimpse of her face. She played her game with such consummate skill, that Marie was always placed as a barrier between Norbert and herself, as in the farce, when the lover wishes to embrace his mistress, he finds the wrinkled visage of the duenna offered to his lips. Sometimes he grew angry, but Diana always had some excellent reason with which to close his mouth. Sometimes she held up his pretensions to ridicule, and at others assumed a haughty air, which always quelled incipient rebellion upon his part.

"What did you expect of me?" she would say, "and of what base act did you do me the honor to consider me capable?"

He was treated exactly like a child, or more cruel still, like a person deficient in intellect, and this he was thoroughly aware of. He could not meet Madame de Mussidan as he had formerly done, for now in the Bois, at

Longchamps, or at any place of public amusement she was invariably surrounded by a band of fashionable admirers, among whom George de Croisenois was always to be found. Norbert disliked all these men, but he had a special antipathy to George de Croisenois, whom he regarded as a supercilious fool; but in this opinion he was entirely wrong, for the Marquis de Croisenois was looked upon as one of the most talented and witty men in Parisian society, and in this case the opinion of the world was a well founded one. Many men envied him, but he had no enemies, and his honest and straightforward conduct was beyond all doubt. He had the noble instincts of a knight of the days of chivalry.

"Pray," asked Norbert, "what is it that you can see in this sneering dandy who is always hanging about you?"

But Diana, with a meaning smile, always made the same reply,

"You ask too much; but some time you will learn all."

Every day she contrived, when with the Duchess, to turn the conversation skilfully upon George de Croisenois, and she had in a manner accustomed Marie to look certain possibilities straight in the face, from the very idea of which she would a few months back have recoiled with horror. This point once gained, Madame de Mussidan believed that the moment had arrived to bring the former lovers together again, and fancied that one sudden and unexpected encounter would advance matters much more quickly than all her half veiled insinuations. One day, therefore, when the Duchess had called on her friend, on entering the drawing room, she found it only tenanted by George de Croisenois. An exclamation of astonishment fell from the lips of both as their eyes met; the cheek of each grew pale. The Duchess, overcome by her feelings, sank half fainting into a chair near the door.

"Ah," murmured he, scarcely knowing the meaning of the words he uttered, "I had every confidence in you, and you have forgotten me."

"You do not believe the words you have just spoken," returned the Duchess haughtily; "but," she added in softer accents, "what could I do? I may have been weak in obeying my father, but for all that I have never forgotten the past."

Madame de Mussidan, who had stationed herself behind the closed door, caught every word, and a gleam of diabolical triumph flashed from her eyes. She felt sure that an interview which began in this manner would be certain to be repeated, and she was not in error. She soon saw that by some tacit understanding the Duchess and George contrived to meet constantly at her house, and this she carefully abstained from noticing. Things were working exactly as she desired and she waited, for she could well afford to do so, knowing that the impending crash could not long be delayed.



## **CHAPTER XV. A STAB IN THE DARK.**

September had now arrived; and though the weather was very bad, the Duke de Champdoce, accompanied by his faithful old servant, Jean, left Paris on a visit to his training stables. Having had a serious difference with Diana, he had made up his mind to try whether a long absence on his part would not have the effect of reducing her to submission, and at the same time remembering the proverb, that "absence makes the heart grow fonder."

He had already been away two whole days, and was growing extremely anxious at not having heard from Madame de Mussidan, when one evening, as he was returning from a late inspection of his stud, he was informed that there was a man waiting to see him. The man was a poor old fellow belonging to the place, who eked out a wretched subsistence by begging, and executing occasional commissions.

"Do you want me?" asked the Duke.

With a sly look, the man drew from his pocket a letter.

"This is for you," muttered he.

"All right; give it to me, then."

"I was told to give it to you only in private."

"Never mind that; hand it over."

"Well, if I must, I must."

Norbert's sole thought was that this letter must have come from Diana, and throwing the man a coin, hurried to a spot where it was light enough to read the missive. He did not, however, recognize Diana's firm, bold hand on the envelope.

"Who the devil can this be from?" thought Norbert, as he tore open the outer covering. The paper within was soiled and greasy, and the handwriting was of the vilest description, it was full of bad spelling, and ran thus:

"Sir,

"I hardly dare tell you the truth, and yet my conscience will give me no relief until I do so. I can no

longer bear to see a gentleman such as you are deceived by a woman who has no heart or honorable feeling. Your wife is unfaithful to you, and will soon make you a laughing stock to all. You may trust to this being true, for I am a respectable woman, and you can easily find out if I am lying to you. Hide yourself this evening, so that you may command a view of the side door in the wall of your garden, and between half past ten and eleven you will see your wife's lover enter. It is a long time since he has been furnished with a key. The hour for the meeting has been judiciously fixed, for all the servants will be out; but I implore you not to be violent, for I would not do your wife any harm, but I feel that you ought to be warned.

"From one "WHO KNOWS."

Norbert ran through the contents of this infamous anonymous letter in an instant. The blood surged madly through his brain, and he uttered a howl of fury. His servants ran in to see what was the matter.

"Where is the fellow who brought this letter?" said he.

"Run after him and bring him back to me."

In a few minutes the sturdy grooms made their appearance, pushing in the messenger, who seemed overpowered with tears.

"I am not a thief," exclaimed he. "It was given to me, but I will give it back."

He was alluding to the louis given to him by Norbert, for the largeness of the sum made him think that the donor had made a mistake.

"Keep the money," said the Duke; "I meant it for you; but tell me who gave this letter to you."

"I can't tell you," answered the man. "If I ever saw him before, may my next glass of wine choke me. He got out of a cab just as I was passing near the bridge, and calling to me, said, 'Look at this letter; at half past seven take it to the Duke de Champdoce, who lives by his stables in the road to the Forest. Do you know the place?' 'Yes,' I says, and then he slips the letter and a five franc piece into my hand, got back into the cab, and off he went."

"What was the man like?" asked he.

"Well, I can hardly say. He wasn't young or old, or short or tall. I recollect he had a gold watch chain on, but that was about all I noticed."

"Very well; you can be off."

At this moment Norbert's anger was turned against the writer of the letter only, for he did not place the smallest credence in the accusations against his wife. If he did not love her, he at any rate respected her. "My wife," said he to himself, "is an honorable and virtuous woman, and it is some discharged menial who has taken this cowardly mode of revenge." A closer inspection of the letter seemed to show him that the faults in caligraphy were intentional. The concluding portion of the letter excited his attention, and, calling Jean, he asked him if it was true that all the servants would be absent from the house today.

"There will be none there this evening; not until late at night," answered the old man.

"And why, pray?"

"Have you forgotten, your Grace, that the first coachman is going to be married, and the Duchess was good enough to say that all might go to the wedding dinner and ball, as long as some one remained at the porter's lodge?"

After the first outburst, Norbert affected an air of calmness, and laughed at the idea of having permitted himself to be disturbed for so trivial a cause. But this was mere pretence, for doubt and suspicion had entered his soul, and no power on earth could expel them. "Why should not my wife be unfaithful to me?" thought Norbert. "I give her credit for being honorable and right minded, but then all deceived husbands have the same idea. Why should I not take advantage of this information, and judge for myself? But no. I will not stoop to such an act of baseness. I should be as infamous as the writer of this letter if I was to play the spy, as she recommends me to do." He glanced round, and perceived that his servants were looking at him with undisguised curiosity.

"Go to your work," said he. "Extinguish the lights, and see that all the doors and windows are carefully closed."

He had made up his mind now, and taking out his watch, saw that it was just eight o'clock. "I have time to reach Paris," muttered he, "by the appointed time." Then he called Jean to him again. There was no need to conceal anything from this trusty adherent of the house of Champdoce. "I must start for Paris," said the Duke, "without an instant's delay."

"On account of that letter?" asked the old man with an expression of the deepest sorrow upon his features.

"Yes, for that reason only."

"Some one has been making false charges against the Duchess."

"How do you know that?"

"It was easy enough to guess."

"Have the carriage got ready, and tell the coachman to wait for me in front of the club. I myself will go on foot."

"You must not do that," answered Jean gravely. "The

servants may have conceived the same suspicions as I have. You ought to creep away without any one being a bit the wiser. The other domestics need not even suppose that you have left the house. I can get you a horse out of the little stables without any one being the wiser. I will wait for you on the other side of the bridge."

"Good; but remember that I have not a moment to lose."

Jean left the room, and as he reached the passage Norbert heard him say to one of the servants, "Put some cold supper on the table; the Duke says that he is starving."

Norbert went into his bedroom, put on a great coat and a pair of high boots, and slipped into his pocket a revolver, the charges of which he had examined with the greatest care. The night was exceedingly dark, a fine, icy rain was falling, and the roads were very heavy. Norbert found Jean with the horse at the appointed spot, and as he leaped into the saddle the Duke exclaimed, "Not a soul saw me leave the house."



"Nor I either," returned the attached domestic. "I shall go back and act as if you were at supper. At three in the morning I will be in the wine shop on the left hand side of the road. When you return, give a gentle tap on the window pane with the handle of your whip." Norbert sprang into the saddle, and sped away through the darkness like a phantom of the night. Jean had made an excellent choice in the horse he had brought for his master's use, and the animal made its way rapidly through the mud and rain; but Norbert by this time was half mad with excitement, and spurred him madly on. As he neared home a new idea crossed his brain. Suppose it was a practical joke on the part of some of the members of the club? In that case, they would doubtless be watching for his arrival, and, after talking to him on indifferent subjects, would, when he betrayed any symptoms of impatience, overwhelm him with ridicule. The fear of this made him cautious. What should he do with the horse he was riding? The wine shops were open, and perhaps he might pick up some man there

who would take charge of it for him. As he was debating this point, his eyes fell upon a soldier, probably on his way to barracks.

"My man," asked the Duke, "would you like to earn twenty francs?"

"I should think so, if it is nothing contrary to the rules and regulations of the army."

"It is only to take my horse and walk him up and down while I pay a visit close by."

"I can stay out of the barracks a couple of hours longer, but no more," returned the soldier.

Norbert told the soldier where he was to wait for him, and then went on rapidly to his own house, and reached the side street along which ran the garden belonging to his magnificent residence. On the opposite side of the street the houses all had porticoes, and Norbert took up his position in one of these, and peered out carefully. He had studied the whole street, which was not a long one, from beginning to end, and was convinced that he was the only person in it.

He made up his mind that he would wait until midnight; and if by that time no one appeared, he would feel confident that the Duchess was innocent, and return without any one but Jean having known of his expedition. From his position he could see that three windows on the second floor of his house were lighted up, and those windows were in his wife's sleeping apartment. "She is the last woman in the world to permit a lover to visit her," thought he. "No, no; the whole thing is a hoax." He began to think of the way in which he had treated his wife. Had he nothing to reproach himself with? Ten days after their marriage he had deserted her entirely; and if during the last few weeks he had paid her any attention, it was because he was acting in obedience to the whims of another woman. Suppose a lover was with her now, what right had he to interfere? The law gave him leave, but what did his conscience say? He leaned against the chill stone until he almost became as cold as it was. It seemed to him at that moment that life and hope were rapidly drifting away from

him. He had lost all count of how long he had been on guard. He pulled out his watch, but it was too dark to distinguish the hands or the figures on the dial plate. A neighboring clock struck the half hour, but this gave him no clue as to the time. He had almost made up his mind to leave, when he heard the sound of a quick step coming down the street. It was the light, quick step of a sportsman, of a man more accustomed to the woods and fields than the pavement and asphalt of Paris. Then a shadow fell upon the opposite wall, and almost immediately disappeared. Then Norbert knew that the door had opened and closed, and that the man had entered the garden. There could be no doubt upon this point, and yet the Duke would have given worlds to be able to disbelieve the evidence of his senses. It might be a burglar, but burglars seldom work alone; or it might be a visitor to one of the servants, but all the servants were absent. He again raised his eyes to the windows of his wife's room. All of a sudden the light grew brighter; either the lamp had been turned up, or fresh candles lighted. Yes,

it was a candle, for he saw it borne across the room in the direction of the great staircase, and now he saw that the anonymous letter had spoken the truth, and that he was on the brink of a discovery. A lover had entered the garden, and the lighted candle was a signal to him. Norbert shuddered; the blood seemed to course through his veins like streams of molten fire, and the misty atmosphere that surrounded him appeared to stifle him. He ran across the street, forced the lock, and rushed wildly into the garden.