

LA CONSTANTIN

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ALEXANDRE DUMAS.

A CONSTANTIN

By

Alexandre Dumas, Pere

FROM THE EIGHT VOLUME SET "CELEBRATED CRIMES"

1910

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LA CONSTANTIN—1660

CHAPTER I

BEFORE beginning our story, we must warn the reader that it will not be worth his while to make researches among contemporary or other records as to the personage whose name it bears. For in truth neither Marie Leroux, widow of Jacques Constantin, nor her accomplice, Claude Perregaud, was of sufficient importance to find a place on any list of great criminals, although it is certain that they were guilty of the crimes with which they were charged. It may seem strange that what follows is more a history of the retribution which overtook the criminals than a circumstantial description of the deeds for which they were punished; but the crimes were so revolting, and so unsuitable for discussion, that it was impossible for us to enter into any details on the subject, so that what we offer in these pages is, we confess quite openly, not a full, true, and particular account of a certain series of events leading up to a certain result; it is not even a picture wherein that result is depicted with artistic completeness, it is only an imperfect narrative imperfectly rounded off. We feel sure, however, that the healthy-minded reader will be grateful for our reticence and total disregard of proportion. In spite of the disadvantage which such a theme imposes on any writer with a deep sense of responsibility, we have resolved to let in some light on these obscure figures; for we can imagine no more effective way of throwing into high relief the low morals and deep corruption into which all classes of society had sunk at the termination of the factious dissensions of the Fronde, which

formed such a fitting prelude to the licence of the reign of the grand roi.

After this explanation, we shall, without further preamble, introduce the reader to a little tavern in Paris, situated in the rue Saint-Andre-des-Arts, on an evening in November 1658.

It was about seven o'clock. Three gentlemen were seated at one of the tables in a low, smoky room. They had already emptied several bottles, and one of them seemed to have just suggested some madcap scheme to the others, the thought of which sent them off into shouts of laughter.

"Pardu!" said one of them, who was the first to recover his breath, "I must say it would be an excellent trick."

"Splendid!" said another; "and if you like, Commander de Jars, we can try it this very evening."

"All right, my worthy king's treasurer, provided my pretty nephew here won't be too much shocked," and as he spoke de Jars gave to the youngest of the three a caressing touch on the cheek with the back of his hand.

"That reminds me, de Jars!" said the treasurer, "that word you have just said piques my curiosity. For some months now this little fellow here, Chevalier de Moranges, follows you about everywhere like your shadow. You never told us you had a nephew. Where the devil did you get him?"

The commander touched the chevalier's knee under the table, and he, as if to avoid speaking, slowly filled and emptied his glass.

"Look here," said the treasurer, "do you want to hear a few plain words, such as I shall rap out when God takes me to task about the peccadilloes of my past life? I don't believe a word about the relationship. A nephew must be the son of either a brother or a sister. Now, your only sister is an abbess, and your late brother's marriage was childless. There is only one way of proving the relationship, and that is to confess that when your brother was young and wild he and Love met, or else Madame l'Abbesse—"

"Take care, Treasurer Jeannin! no slander against my sister!"

"Well, then, explain; you can't fool me! May I be hanged if I leave this place before I have dragged the secret out of you! Either we are friends or we are not. What you tell no one else you ought to tell me. What! would you make use of my purse and my sword on occasion and yet have secrets from me? It's too bad: speak, or our friendship is at an end! I give you fair warning that I shall find out everything and publish it abroad to court and city: when I strike a trail there's no turning me aside. It will be best for you to whisper your secret voluntarily into my ear, where it will be as safe as in the grave."

"How full of curiosity you are, my good friend!" said de Jars, leaning one elbow on the table, and twirling the points of his moustache with his hand; "but if I were to wrap my secret round the point of a dagger would you not be too

much afraid of pricking your fingers to pull it off?"

"Not I," said the king's treasurer, beginning to twirl his moustache also: "the doctors have always told me that I am of too full a complexion and that it would do me all the good in the world to be bled now and then. But what would be an advantage to me would be dangerous to you. It's easy to see from your jaundiced phiz that for you blood-letting is no cure."

"And you would really go that length? You would risk a duel if I refused to let you get to the bottom of my mystery?"

"Yes, on my honour! Well, how is it to be?"

"My dear boy," said de Jars to the youth, "we are caught, and may as well yield gracefully. You don't know this big fellow as well as I do. He's obstinacy itself. You can make the most obstinate donkey go on by pulling its tail hard enough, but when Jeannin gets a notion into his pate, not all the legions of hell can get it out again. Besides that, he's a skilful fencer, so there's nothing for it but to trust him."

"Just as you like," said the young man; "you know all my circumstances and how important it is that my secret should be kept."

"Oh! among Jeannin's many vices there are a few virtues, and of these discretion is the greatest, so that his curiosity is harmless. A quarter of an hour hence he will let himself be killed rather than reveal what just now he is ready to risk his skin to find out, whether we will or no."

Jeannin nodded approvingly, refilled the glasses, and raising his to his lips, said in a tone of triumph—

"I am listening, commander."

"Well, if it must be, it must. First of all, learn that my nephew is not my nephew at all."

"Go on."

"That his name is not Moranges."

"And the next?"

"I am not going to reveal his real name to you."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know it myself, and no more does the chevalier."

"What' nonsense!"

"No nonsense at all, but the sober truth. A few months ago the chevalier came to Paris, bringing me a letter of introduction from a German whom I used to know years ago. This letter requested me to look after the bearer and help him in his investigations. As you said just now, Love and someone once met somewhere, and that was about all was known as to his origin. Naturally the young man wants to cut a figure in the world, and would like to discover the author of his existence, that he may have someone at hand to pay the debts he is

going to incur. We have brought together every scrap of information we could collect as to this person, hoping to find therein a clue that we could follow up. To be quite open with you, and convince you at the same time how extremely prudent and discreet we must be, I must tell you that we think we have found one, and that it leads to no less a dignitary than a Prince of the Church. But if he should get wind of our researches too soon everything would be at an end, don't you see? So keep your tongue between your teeth."

"Never fear," said Jeannin.

"Now, that's what I call speaking out as a friend should. I wish you luck, my gallant Chevalier de Moranges, and until you unearth your father, if you want a little money, my purse is at your service. On my word, de Jars, you must have been born with a caul. There never was your equal for wonderful adventures. This one promises well-spicy intrigues, scandalous revelations, and you'll be in the thick of it all. You're a lucky fellow! It's only a few months since you had the most splendid piece of good fortune sent you straight from heaven. A fair lady falls in love with you and makes you carry her off from the convent of La Raquette. But why do you never let anyone catch a glimpse of her? Are you jealous? Or is it that she is no such beauty, after all, but old and wrinkled, like that knave of a Mazarin?"

"I know what I'm about," answered de Jars, smiling; "I have my very good reasons. The elopement caused a great deal of indignation, and it's not easy to get fanatics to listen to common sense. No, I am not in the least jealous; she is madly in love with me. Ask my nephew."

"Does he know her?"

"We have no secrets from each other; the confidence between us is without a flaw. The fair one, believe me, is good to look on, and is worth all the ogling, fan-flirting baggages put together that one sees at court or on the balconies of the Palais Roy: ah! I'll answer for that. Isn't she, Moranges?"

"I'm quite of your opinion," said the youth; exchanging with de Jars a singularly significant look; "and you had better treat her well, uncle, or I shall play you some trick."

"Ah! ah!" cried Jeannin. "You poor fellow! I very much fear that you are warming a little serpent in your bosom. Have an eye to this dandy with the beardless chin! But joking apart, my boy, are you really on good terms with the fair lady?"

"Certainly I am."

"And you are not uneasy, commander?"

"Not the least little bit."

"He is quite right. I answer for her as for my self, you know; as long as he loves her she will love him; as long as he is faithful she will be faithful. Do you

imagine that a woman who insists on her lover carrying her off can so easily turn away from the man of her choice? I know her well; I have had long talks with her, she and I alone: she is feather-brained, given to pleasure, entirely without prejudices and those stupid scruples which spoil the lives of other women; but a good sort on the whole; devoted to my uncle, with no deception about her; but at the same time extremely jealous, and has no notion of letting herself be sacrificed to a rival. If ever she finds herself deceived, good-bye to prudence and reserve, and then—”

A look and a touch of the commander’s knee cut this panegyric short, to which the treasurer was listening with open-eyed astonishment.

“What enthusiasm!” he exclaimed. “Well, and then—”

“Why, then,” went on the young man, with a laugh, “if my uncle behaves badly, I, his nephew, will try to make up for his wrong-doing: he can’t blame me then. But until then he may be quite easy, as he well knows.”

“Oh yes, and in proof of that I am going to take Moranges with me to-night. He is young and inexperienced, and it will be a good lesson for him to see how a gallant whose amorous intrigues did not begin yesterday sets about getting even with a coquette. He can turn it to account later on.

“On my word,” said Jeannin, “my notion is that he is in no great need of a teacher; however, that’s your business, not mine. Let us return to what we were talking about just now. Are we agreed; and shall we amuse ourselves by paying out the lady in, her own coin?”

“If you like.”

“Which of us is to begin?”

De Jars struck the table with the handle of his dagger.

“More wine, gentlemen?” said the drawer, running up.

“No, dice; and be quick about it.”

“Three casts each and the highest wins,” said Jeannin. “You begin.”

“I throw for myself and nephew.” The dice rolled on the table.

“Ace and three.”

“It’s my turn now. Six and five.”

“Pass it over. Five and two.”

“We’re equal. Four and two.”

“Now let me. Ace and blank.”

“Double six.”

“You have won.”

“And I’m off at once,” said Jeannin, rising, and muffling himself in his mantle, “It’s now half-past seven. We shall see each other again at eight, so I won’t say good-bye.”

“Good luck to you!”

Leaving the tavern and turning into the rue Pavée, he took the direction of the river.

CHAPTER II

IN 1658, at the corner of the streets Git-le-Coeur and Le Hurepoix (the site of the latter being now occupied by the Quai des Augustins as far as Pont Saint-Michel), stood the great mansion which Francis I had bought and fitted up for the Duchesse d'Etampes. It was at this period if not in ruins at least beginning to show the ravages of time. Its rich interior decorations had lost their splendour and become antiquated. Fashion had taken up its abode in the Marais, near the Place Royale, and it was thither that profligate women and celebrated beauties now enticed the humming swarm of old rakes and young libertines. Not one of them all would have thought of residing in the mansion, or even in the quarter, wherein the king's mistress had once dwelt. It would have been a step downward in the social scale, and equivalent to a confession that their charms were falling in the public estimation. Still, the old palace was not empty; it had, on the contrary, several tenants. Like the provinces of Alexander's empire, its vast suites of rooms had been subdivided; and so neglected was it by the gay world that people of the commonest description strutted about with impunity where once the proudest nobles had been glad to gain admittance. There in semi-isolation and despoiled of her greatness lived Angelique-Louise de Guerchi, formerly companion to Mademoiselle de Pons and then maid of honour to Anne of Austria. Her love intrigues and the scandals they gave rise to had led to her dismissal from court. Not that she was a greater sinner than many who remained behind, only she was unlucky enough or stupid enough to be found out. Her admirers were so indiscreet that they had not left her a shred of reputation, and in a court where a cardinal is the lover of a queen, a hypocritical appearance of decorum is indispensable to success. So Angelique had to suffer for the faults she was not clever enough to hide. Unfortunately for her, her income went up and down with the number and wealth of her admirers, so when she left the court all her possessions consisted of a few articles she had gathered together out of the wreck of her former luxury, and these she was now selling one by one to procure the necessaries of life, while she looked back from afar with an envious eye at the brilliant world

from which she had been exiled, and longed for better days. All hope was not at an end for her. By a strange law which does not speak well for human nature, vice finds success easier to attain than virtue. There is no courtesan, no matter how low she has fallen, who cannot find a dupe ready to defend against the world an honour of which no vestige remains. A man who doubts the virtue of the most virtuous woman, who shows himself inexorably severe when he discovers the lightest inclination to falter in one whose conduct has hitherto been above reproach, will stoop and pick up out of the gutter a blighted and tarnished reputation and protect and defend it against all slights, and devote his life to the attempt to restore lustre to the unclean thing dulled by the touch of many fingers. In her days of prosperity Commander de Jars and the king's treasurer had both fluttered round Mademoiselle de Guerchi, and neither had fluttered in vain. Short as was the period necessary to overcome her scruples, in as short a period it dawned on the two candidates for her favour that each had a successful rival in the other, and that however potent as a reason for surrender the doubloons of the treasurer had been, the personal appearance of the commander had proved equally cogent. As both had felt for her only a passing fancy and not a serious passion, their explanations with each other led to no quarrel between them; silently and simultaneously they withdrew from her circle, without even letting her know they had found her out, but quite determined to revenge, themselves on her should a chance ever offer. However, other affairs of a similar nature had intervened to prevent their carrying out this laudable intention; Jeannin had laid siege to a more inaccessible beauty, who had refused to listen to his sighs for less than 30 crowns, paid in advance, and de Jars had become quite absorbed by his adventure with the convent boarder at La Raquette, and the business of that young stranger whom he passed off as his nephew. Mademoiselle de Guerchi had never seen them again; and with her it was out of sight out of mind. At the moment when she comes into our story she was weaving her toils round a certain Duc de Vitry, whom she had seen at court, but whose acquaintance she had never made, and who had been absent when the scandalous occurrence which led to her disgrace came to light. He was a man of from twenty-five to twenty-six years of age, who idled his life away: his courage was undoubted, and being as credulous as an old libertine, he was ready to draw his sword at any moment to defend the lady whose cause he had espoused, should any insolent slanderer dare to hint there was a smirch on her virtue. Being deaf to all reports, he seemed one of those men expressly framed by heaven to be the consolation of fallen women; such a man as in our times a retired opera-dancer or a superannuated professional beauty would welcome with open arms. He had only one fault—he was married. It is true he neglected his wife, according to the custom of the time, and it is probably also true that his wife cared very little about his infidelities. But still

she was an insurmountable obstacle to the fulfilment of Mademoiselle de Guerchi's hopes, who but for her might have looked forward to one day becoming a duchess.

For about three weeks, however, at the time we are speaking of, the duke had neither crossed her threshold nor written. He had told her he was going for a few days to Normandy, where he had large estates, but had remained absent so long after the date he had fixed for his return that she began to feel uneasy. What could be keeping him? Some new flame, perhaps. The anxiety of the lady was all the more keen, that until now nothing had passed between them but looks of languor and words of love. The duke had laid himself and all he possessed at the feet of Angelique, and Angelique had refused his offer. A too prompt surrender would have justified the reports so wickedly spread against her; and, made wise by experience, she was resolved not to compromise her future as she had compromised her past. But while playing at virtue she had also to play at disinterestedness, and her pecuniary resources were consequently almost exhausted. She had proportioned the length of her resistance to the length of her purse, and now the prolonged absence of her lover threatened to disturb the equilibrium which she had established between her virtue and her money. So it happened that the cause of the lovelorn Duc de Vitry was in great peril just at the moment when de Jars and Jeannin resolved to approach the fair one anew. She was sitting lost in thought, pondering in all good faith on the small profit it was to a woman to be virtuous, when she heard voices in the antechamber. Then her door opened, and the king's treasurer walked in.

As this interview and those which follow took place in the presence of witnesses, we are obliged to ask the reader to accompany us for a time to another part of the same house.

We have said there were several tenants: now the person who occupied the rooms next to those in which Mademoiselle de Guerchi lived was a shopkeeper's widow called Rapally, who was owner of one of the thirty-two houses which then occupied the bridge Saint-Michel. They had all been constructed at the owner's cost, in return for a lease for ever. The widow Rapally's avowed age was forty, but those who knew her longest added another ten years to that: so, to avoid error, let us say she was forty-five. She was a solid little body, rather stouter than was necessary for beauty; her hair was black, her complexion brown, her eyes prominent and always moving; lively, active, and if one once yielded to her whims, exacting beyond measure; but until then buxom and soft, and inclined to pet and spoil whoever, for the moment, had arrested her volatile fancy. Just as we make her acquaintance this happy individual was a certain Maitre Quennebert, a notary of Saint Denis, and the comedy played between him and the widow was an exact counterpart of the one going on in the rooms of Mademoiselle de

Guerchi, except that the roles were inverted; for while the lady was as much in love as the Duc de Vitry, the answering devotion professed by the notary was as insincere as the disinterested attachment to her lover displayed by the whilom maid of honour.

Maitre Quennebert was still young and of attractive appearance, but his business affairs were in a bad way. For long he had been pretending not to understand the marked advances of the widow, and he treated her with a reserve and respect she would fain have dispensed with, and which sometimes made her doubt of his love. But it was impossible for her as a woman to complain, so she was forced to accept with resignation the persistent and unwelcome consideration with which he surrounded her. Maitre Quennebert was a man of common sense and much experience, and had formed a scheme which he was prevented from carrying out by an obstacle which he had no power to remove. He wanted, therefore, to gain time, for he knew that the day he gave the susceptible widow a legal right over him he would lose his independence. A lover to whose prayers the adored one remains deaf too long is apt to draw back in discouragement, but a woman whose part is restricted to awaiting those prayers, and answering with a yes or no, necessarily learns patience. Maitre Quennebert would therefore have felt no anxiety as to the effect of his dilatoriness on the widow, were it not for the existence of a distant cousin of the late Monsieur Rapally, who was also paying court to her, and that with a warmth much greater than had hitherto been displayed by himself. This fact, in view of the state of the notary's affairs, forced him at last to display more energy. To make up lost ground and to outdistance his rival once more, he now began to dazzle the widow with fine phrases and delight her with compliments; but to tell the truth all this trouble was superfluous; he was beloved, and with one fond look he might have won pardon for far greater neglect.

An hour before the treasurer's arrival there had been a knock at the door of the old house, and Maitre Quennebert, curled, pomaded, and prepared for conquest, had presented himself at the widow's. She received him with a more languishing air than usual, and shot such arrows at him froth her eyes that to escape a fatal wound he pretended to give way by degrees to deep sadness. The widow, becoming alarmed, asked with tenderness—

“What ails you this evening?”

He rose, feeling he had nothing to fear from his rival, and, being master of the field, might henceforth advance or recede as seemed best for his interests.

“What ails me?” he repeated, with a deep sigh. “I might deceive you, might give you a misleading answer, but to you I cannot lie. I am in great trouble, and how to get out of it I don't know.”

“But tell me what it is,” said the widow, standing up in her turn.

Maitre Quennebert took three long strides, which brought him to the far end of the room, and asked—

“Why do you want to know? You can’t help me. My trouble is of a kind a man does not generally confide to women.”

“What is it? An affair of honour?”

“Yes.”

“Good God! You are going to fight!” she exclaimed, trying to seize him by the arm. “You are going to fight!”

“Ah! if it were nothing worse than that!” said Quennebert, pacing up and down the room: “but you need not be alarmed; it is only a money trouble. I lent a large sum, a few months ago, to a friend, but the knave has run away and left me in the lurch. It was trust money, and must be replaced within three days. But where am I to get two thousand francs?”

“Yes, that is a large sum, and not easy to raise at such short notice.”

“I shall be obliged to have recourse to some Jew, who will drain me dry. But I must save my good name at all costs.”

Madame Rapally gazed at him in consternation. Maitre Quennebert, divining her thought, hastened to add—

“I have just one-third of what is needed.”

“Only one-third?”

“With great care, and by scraping together all I possess, I can make up eight hundred livres. But may I be damned in the next world, or punished as a swindler in this, and one’s as bad as the other to me, if I can raise one farthing more.”

“But suppose someone should lend you the twelve hundred francs, what then?”

“Pardieu! I should accept them,” cried the notary as if he had not the least suspicion whom she could mean. “Do you happen to know anyone, my dear Madame Rapally?”

The widow nodded affirmatively, at the same time giving him a passionate glance.

“Tell me quick the name of this delightful person, and I shall go to him to-morrow morning. You don’t know what a service you are rendering me. And I was so near not telling you of the fix I was in, lest you should torment yourself uselessly. Tell me his name.”

“Can you not guess it?”

“How should I guess it?”

“Think well. Does no one occur to you?”

“No, no one,” said Quennebert, with the utmost innocence.

“Have you no friends?”

“One or two.”

“Would they not be glad to help you?”

“They might. But I have mentioned the matter to no one.”

“To no one?”

“Except you.”

“Well?”

“Well, Madame Rapally—I hope I don’t understand you; it’s not possible; you would not humiliate me. Come, come, it’s a riddle, and I am too stupid to solve it. I give it up. Don’t tantalise me any longer; tell me the name.”

The widow, somewhat abashed by this exhibition of delicacy on the part of Maitre Quennebert, blushed, cast down her eyes, and did not venture to speak.

As the silence lasted some time, it occurred to the notary that he had been perhaps too hasty in his supposition, and he began to cast round for the best means of retrieving his blunder.

“You do not speak,” he said; “I see it was all a joke.”

“No,” said the widow at last in a timid voice, “it was no joke; I was quite in earnest. But the way you take things is not very encouraging.”

“What do you mean?”

“Pray, do you imagine that I can go on while you glare at me with that angry frown puckering your forehead, as if you had someone before you who had tried to insult you?”

A sweet smile chased the frown from the notary’s brow. Encouraged by the suspension of hostilities, Madame Rapally with sudden boldness approached him, and, pressing one of his hands in both her own, whispered—

“It is I who am going to lend you the money.”

He repulsed her gently, but with an air of great dignity, and said—

“Madame, I thank you, but I cannot accept.”

“Why can’t you?”

At this he began to walk round and round the room, while the widow, who stood in the middle, turned as upon a pivot, keeping him always in view. This circus-ring performance lasted some minutes before Quennebert stood still and said—

“I cannot be angry with you, Madame Rapally, I know your offer was made out of the kindness of your heart,—but I must repeat that it is impossible for me to accept it.”

“There you go again! I don’t understand you at all! Why can’t you accept? What harm would it do?”

“If there were no other reason, because people might suspect that I confided my difficulties to you in the hope of help.”

“And supposing you did, what then? People speak hoping to be understood. You wouldn’t have minded asking anyone else.”

“So you really think I did come in that hope?”

“Mon Dieu! I don’t think anything at all that you don’t want. It was I who dragged the confidence from you by my questions, I know that very well. But now that you have told me your secret, how can you hinder me from sympathising with you, from desiring to aid you? When I learned your difficulty, ought I to have been amused, and gone into fits of laughter? What! it’s an insult to be in a position to render you a service! That’s a strange kind of delicacy!”

“Are you astonished that I should feel so strongly about it?”

“Nonsense! Do you still think I meant to offend you? I look on you as the most honourable man in the world. If anyone were to tell me that he had seen you commit a base action, I should reply that it was a lie. Does that satisfy you?”

“But suppose they got hold of it in the city, suppose it were reported that Maitre Quennebert had taken money from Madame de Rapally, would it be the same as if they said Maitre Quennebert had borrowed twelve hundred livres from Monsieur Robert or some other business man?”

“I don’t see what difference it could make.”

“But I do.”

“What then?”

“It’s not easy to express, but—”

“But you exaggerate both the service and the gratitude you ought to feel. I think I know why you refuse. You’re ashamed to take it as a gift, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Well, I’m not going to make you a gift. Borrow twelve hundred livres from me. For how long do you want the money?”

“I really don’t know how soon I can repay you.”

“Let’s say a year, and reckon the interest. Sit down there, you baby, and write out a promissory note.”

Maitre Quennebert made some further show of resistance, but at last yielded to the widow’s importunity. It is needless to say that the whole thing was a comedy on his part, except that he really needed the money. But he did not need it to replace a sum of which a faithless friend had robbed him, but to satisfy his own creditors, who, out of all patience with him, were threatening to sue him, and his only reason for seeking out Madame de Rapally was to take advantage of her generous disposition towards himself. His feigned delicacy was intended to induce her to insist so urgently, that in accepting he should not fall too much in her esteem, but should seem to yield to force. And his plan met with complete success, for at the end of the transaction he stood higher than ever in the opinion of his fair creditor, on account of the noble sentiments he had expressed. The note was written out in legal form and the money counted down on the spot.

“How glad I am!” said she then, while Quennebert still kept up some pretence of delicate embarrassment, although he could not resist casting a stolen look at the bag of crowns lying on the table beside his cloak. “Do you intend to go back to Saint Denis to-night?”

Even had such been his intention, the notary would have taken very good care not to say so; for he foresaw the accusations of imprudence that would follow, the enumeration of the dangers by the way; and it was quite on the cards even that, having thus aroused his fears, his fair hostess should in deference to them offer him hospitality for the night, and he did not feel inclined for an indefinitely prolonged tete-a-tete.

“No;” he said, “I am going to sleep at Maitre Terrasson’s, rue des Poitevins; I have sent him word to expect me. But although his house is only a few yards distant, I must leave you earlier than I could have wished, on account of this money.”

“Will you think of me?”

“How can you ask?” replied Quennebert, with a sentimental expression. “You have compelled me to accept the money, but—I shall not be happy till I have repaid you. Suppose this loan should make us fall out?”

“You may be quite sure that if you don’t pay when the bill falls due, I shall have recourse to the law.”

“Oh, I know that very well.”

“I shall enforce all my rights as a creditor.”

“I expect nothing else.”

“I shall show no pity.”

And the widow gave a saucy laugh and shook her finger at him.

“Madame Rapally,” said the notary, who was most anxious to bring this conversation to an end, dreading every moment that it would take a languishing tone,—“Madame Rapally, will you add to your goodness by granting me one more favour?”

“What is it?”

“The gratitude that is simulated is not difficult to bear, but genuine, sincere gratitude, such as I feel, is a heavy burden, as I can assure you. It is much easier to give than to receive. Promise me, then, that from now till the year is up there shall be no more reference between us to this money, and that we shall go on being good friends as before. Leave it to me to make arrangements to acquit myself honourably of my obligations towards you. I need say no more; till a year’s up, mum’s the word.”

“It shall be as you desire, Maitre Quennebert,” answered Madame Rapally, her eyes shining with delight. “It was never my intention to lay you under embarrassing obligations, and I leave it all to you. Do you know that I am beginning

to believe in presentiments?"

"You becoming superstitious! Why, may I ask?"

"I refused to do a nice little piece of ready-money business this morning."

"Did you?"

"Yes, because I had a sort of feeling that made me resist all temptation to leave myself without cash. Imagine! I received a visit to-day from a great lady who lives in this house—in the suite of apartments next to mine."

"What is her name?"

"Mademoiselle de Guerchi."

"And what did she want with you?"

"She called in order to ask me to buy, for four hundred livres, some of her jewels which are well worth six hundred, for I understand such things; or should I prefer it to lend her that sum and keep the jewels as security? It appears that mademoiselle is in great straits. De Guerchi—do you know the name?"

"I think I have heard it."

"They say she has had a stormy past, and has been greatly talked of; but then half of what one hears is lies. Since she came to live here she has been very quiet. No visitors except one—a nobleman, a duke—wait a moment! What's his name? The Duc-Duc de Vitry; and for over three weeks even he hasn't been near her. I imagine from this absence that they have fallen out, and that she is beginning to feel the want of money."

"You seem to be intimately acquainted with this young woman's affairs."

"Indeed I am, and yet I never spoke to her till this morning."

"How did you get your information, then?"

"By chance. The room adjoining this and one of those she occupies were formerly one large room, which is now divided into two by a partition wall covered with tapestry; but in the two corners the plaster has crumbled away with time, and one can see into the room through slits in the tapestry without being seen oneself. Are you inquisitive?"

"Not more than you, Madame Rapally."

"Come with me. Someone knocked at the street door a few moments ago; there's no one else in the douse likely to have visitors at this hour. Perhaps her admirer has come back."

"If so, we are going to witness a scene of recrimination or reconciliation. How delightful!"

Although he was not leaving the widow's lodgings, Maitre Quennebert took up his hat and cloak and the blessed bag of crown pieces, and followed Madame Rapally on tiptoe, who on her side moved as slowly as a tortoise and as lightly as she could. They succeeded in turning the handle of the door into the next room without making much noise.

“Sh!” breathed the widow softly; “listen, they are speaking.”

She pointed to the place where he would find a peep-hole in one corner of the room, and crept herself towards the corresponding corner. Quennebert, who was by no means anxious to have her at his side, motioned to her to blow out the light. This being done, he felt secure, for he knew that in the intense darkness which now enveloped them she could not move from her place without knocking against the furniture between them, so he glued his face to the partition. An opening just large enough for one eye allowed him to see everything that was going on in the next room. Just as he began his observations, the treasurer at Mademoiselle de Guerchi’s invitation was about to take a seat near her, but not too near for perfect respect. Both of them were silent, and appeared to labour under great embarrassment at finding themselves together, and explanations did not readily begin. The lady had not an idea of the motive of the visit, and her quondam lover feigned the emotion necessary to the success of his undertaking. Thus Maitre Quennebert had full time to examine both, and especially Angelique. The reader will doubtless desire to know what was the result of the notary’s observation.

CHAPTER III

ANGELIQUE-LOUISE DE GUERCHI was a woman of about twenty-eight years of age, tall, dark, and well made. The loose life she had led had, it is true, somewhat staled her beauty, marred the delicacy of her complexion, and coarsened the naturally elegant curves of her figure; but it is such women who from time immemorial have had the strongest attraction for profligate men. It seems as if dissipation destroyed the power to perceive true beauty, and the man of pleasure must be aroused to admiration by a bold glance and a meaning smile, and will only seek satisfaction along the trail left by vice. Louise-Angelique was admirably adapted for her way of life; not that her features wore an expression of shameless effrontery, or that the words that passed her lips bore habitual testimony to the disorders of her existence, but that under a calm and sedate demeanour there lurked a secret and indefinable charm. Many other women possessed more regular features, but none of them had a greater power of seduction. We must add that she owed that power entirely to her physical perfections, for except in regard to the devices necessary to her calling, she showed no cleverness, being ignorant, dull and without inner resources of any kind. As her temperament led her to share the desires she excited, she was really incapable of resisting an attack conducted with skill and ardour, and if the Duc de Vitry had not been so madly in love, which is the same as saying that he was hopelessly blind, silly, and dense to everything around him, he might have found a score of opportunities to overcome her resistance. We have already seen that she was so straitened in money matters that she had been driven to try to sell her jewels that very morning.

Jeannin was the first to 'break silence.

"You are astonished at my visit, I know, my charming Angelique. But you must excuse my thus appearing so unexpectedly before you. The truth is, I found it impossible to leave Paris without seeing you once more."

"Thank you for your kind remembrance," said she, "but I did not at all expect it."

“Come, come, you are offended with me.”

She gave him a glance of mingled disdain and resentment; but he went on, in a timid, wistful tone—

“I know that my conduct must have seemed strange to you, and I acknowledge that nothing can justify a man for suddenly leaving the woman he loves—I do not dare to say the woman who loves him—without a word of explanation. But, dear Angelique, I was jealous.”

“Jealous!” she repeated incredulously.

“I tried my best to overcome the feeling, and I hid my suspicions from you. Twenty times I came to see you bursting with anger and determined to overwhelm you with reproaches, but at the sight of your beauty I forgot everything but that I loved you. My suspicions dissolved before a smile; one word from your lips charmed me into happiness. But when I was again alone my terrors revived, I saw my rivals at your feet, and rage possessed me once more. Ah! you never knew how devotedly I loved you.”

She let him speak without interruption; perhaps the same thought was in her mind as in *Quennebert’s*, who, himself a past master in the art of lying; was thinking—

“The man does not believe a word of what he is saying.”

But the treasurer went on—

“I can see that even now you doubt my sincerity.”

“Does my lord desire that his handmaiden should be blunt? Well, I know that there is no truth in what you say.”

“Oh! I can see that you imagine that among the distractions of the world I have kept no memory of you, and have found consolation in the love of less obdurate fair ones. I have not broken in on your retirement; I have not shadowed your steps; I have not kept watch on your actions; I have not surrounded you with spies who would perhaps have brought me the assurance, ‘If she quitted the world which outraged her, she was not driven forth by an impulse of wounded pride or noble indignation; she did not even seek to punish those who misunderstood her by her absence; she buried herself where she was unknown, that she might indulge in stolen loves.’ Such were the thoughts that came to me, and yet I respected your hiding-place; and to-day I am ready to believe you true, if you will merely say, ‘I love no one else!’”

Jeannin, who was as fat as a stage financier, paused here to gasp; for the utterance of this string of banalities, this rigmarole of commonplaces, had left him breathless. He was very much dissatisfied with his performance; and ready to curse his barren imagination. He longed to hit upon swelling phrases and natural and touching gestures, but in vain. He could only look at *Mademoiselle de Guerchi* with a miserable, heart-broken air. She remained quietly seated, with

the same expression of incredulity on her features.

So there was nothing for it but to go on once more.

“But this one assurance that I ask you will not give. So what I have—been told is true: you have given your love to him.”

She could not check a startled movement.

“You see it is only when I speak of him that I can overcome in you the insensibility which is killing me. My suspicions were true after all: you deceived me for his sake. Oh! the instinctive feeling of jealousy was right which forced me to quarrel with that man, to reject the perfidious friendship which he tried to force upon me. He has returned to town, and we shall meet! But why do I say ‘returned’? Perhaps he only pretended to go away, and safe in this retreat has flouted with impunity, my despair and braved my vengeance!”

Up to this the lady had played a waiting game, but now she grew quite confused, trying to discover the thread of the treasurer’s thoughts. To whom did he refer? The Duc de Vitry? That had been her first impression. But the duke had only been acquainted with her for a few months—since she had—left Court. He could not therefore have excited the jealousy of her whilom lover; and if it were not he, to whom did the words about rejecting “perfidious friendship,” and “returned to town,” and so on, apply? Jeannin divined her embarrassment, and was not a little proud of the tactics which would, he was almost sure; force her to expose herself. For there are certain women who can be thrown into cruel perplexity by speaking to them of their love-passages without affixing a proper name label to each. They are placed as it were on the edge of an abyss, and forced to feel their way in darkness. To say “You have loved” almost obliges them to ask “Whom?”

Nevertheless, this was not the word uttered by Mademoiselle de Guerchi while she ran through in her head a list of possibilities. Her answer was—

“Your language astonishes me; I don’t understand what you mean.”

The ice was broken, and the treasurer made a plunge. Seizing one of Angelique’s hands, he asked—

“Have you never seen Commander de Jars since then?”

“Commander de Jars!” exclaimed Angelique.

“Can you swear to me, Angelique, that you love him not?”

“Mon Dieu! What put it into your head that I ever cared for him? It’s over four months since I saw him last, and I hadn’t an idea whether he was alive or dead. So he has been out of town? That’s the first I heard of it.”

“My fortune is yours, Angelique! Oh! assure me once again that you do not love him—that you never loved him!” he pleaded in a faltering voice, fixing a look of painful anxiety upon her.

He had no intention of putting her out of countenance by the course he took; he knew quite well that a woman like Angelique is never more at her ease than when she has a chance of telling an untruth of this nature. Besides, he had prefaced this appeal by the magic words, "My fortune' is yours!" and the hope thus aroused was well worth a perjury. So she answered boldly and in a steady voice, while she looked straight into his eyes—

"Never!"

"I believe you!" exclaimed Jeannin, going down on his knees and covering with his kisses the hand he still held. "I can taste happiness again. Listen, Angelique. I am leaving Paris; my mother is dead, and I am going back to Spain. Will you follow me thither?"

"I—follow you?"

"I hesitated long before finding you out, so much did I fear a repulse. I set out to-morrow. Quit Paris, leave the world which has slandered you, and come with me. In a fortnight we shall be man and wife."

"You are not in earnest!"

"May I expire at your feet if I am not! Do you want me to sign the oath with my blood?"

"Rise," she said in a broken voice. "Have I at last found a man to love me and compensate me for all the abuse that has been showered on my head? A thousand times I thank you, not for what you are doing for me, but for the balm you pour on my wounded spirit. Even if you were to say to me now, 'After all, I am obliged to give you up' the pleasure of knowing you esteem me would make up for all the rest. It would be another happy memory to treasure along with my memory of our love, which was ineffaceable, although you so ungratefully suspected me of having deceived you."

The treasurer appeared fairly intoxicated with joy. He indulged in a thousand ridiculous extravagances and exaggerations, and declared himself the happiest of men. Mademoiselle de Guerchi, who was desirous of being prepared for every peril, asked him in a coaxing tone—

"Who can have put it into your head to be jealous of the commander? Has he been base enough to boast that I ever gave him my love?"

"No, he never said anything about you; but somehow I was afraid."

She renewed her assurances. The conversation continued some time in a sentimental tone. A thousand oaths, a thousand protestations of love were, exchanged. Jeannin feared that the suddenness of their journey would inconvenience his mistress, and offered to put it off for some days; but to this she would not consent, and it was arranged that the next day at noon a carriage should call at the house and take Angelique out of town to an appointed place at which the treasurer was to join her.

Maitre Quennebert, eye and ear on the alert, had not lost a word of this conversation, and the last proposition of the treasurer changed his ideas.

"Pardieu!" he said to himself, "it looks as if this good man were really going to let himself be taken in and done for. It is singular how very clear-sighted we can be about things that don't touch us. This poor fly is going to let himself be caught by a very clever spider, or I'm much mistaken. Very likely my widow is quite of my opinion, and yet in what concerns herself she will remain stone-blind. Well, such is life! We have only two parts to choose between: we must be either knave or fool. What's Madame Rapally doing, I wonder?"

At this moment he heard a stifled whisper from the opposite corner of the room, but, protected by the distance and the darkness, he let the widow murmur on, and applied his eye once more to his peephole. What he saw confirmed his opinion. The damsel was springing up and down, laughing, gesticulating, and congratulating herself on her unexpected good fortune.

"Just imagine! He loves me like that!" she was saying to herself. "Poor Jeannin! When I remember how I used to hesitate. How fortunate that Commander de Jars, one of the most vain and indiscreet of men, never babbled about me! Yes, we must leave town to-morrow without fail. I must not give him time to be enlightened by a chance word. But the Duc de Vitry? I am really sorry for him. However, why did he go away, and send no word? And then, he's a married man. Ah! if I could only get back again to court some day!... Who would ever have expected such a thing? Good God! I must keep talking to myself, to be sure I'm not dreaming. Yes, he was there, just now, at my feet, saying to me, 'Angelique, you are going to become my wife.' One thing is sure, he may safely entrust his honour to my care. It would be infamous to betray a man who loves me as he does, who will give me his name. Never, no, never will I give him cause to reproach me! I would rather—"

A loud and confused noise on the stairs interrupted this soliloquy. At one moment bursts of laughter were heard, and the next angry voices. Then a loud exclamation, followed by a short silence. Being alarmed at this disturbance in a house which was usually so quiet, Mademoiselle de Guerchi approached the door of her room, intending either to call for protection or to lock herself in, when suddenly it was violently pushed open. She recoiled with fright, exclaiming—

"Commander de Jars!"

"On my word!" said Quennebert behind the arras, "'tis as amusing as a play! Is the commander also going to offer to make an honest woman of her? But what do I see?"

He had just caught sight of the young man on whom de Jars had bestowed the title and name of Chevalier de Moranges, and whose acquaintance the reader has already made at the tavern in the rue Saint-Andre-des-Arts. His appearance

had as great an effect on the notary as a thunderbolt. He stood motionless, trembling, breathless; his knees ready to give way beneath him; everything black before his eyes. However, he soon pulled himself together, and succeeded in overcoming the effects of his surprise and terror. He looked once more through the hole in the partition, and became so absorbed that no one in the whole world could have got a word from him just then; the devil himself might have shrieked into his ears unheeded, and a naked sword suspended over his head would not have induced him to change his place.

CHAPTER IV

BEFORE Mademoiselle de Guerchi had recovered from her fright the commander spoke.

“As I am a gentleman, my beauty, if you were the Abbess of Montmartre, you could not be more difficult of access. I met a blackguard on the stairs who tried to stop me, and whom I was obliged to thrash soundly. Is what they told me on my return true? Are you really doing penance, and do you intend to take the veil?”

“Sir,” answered Angelique, with great dignity, “whatever may be my plans, I have a right to be surprised at your violence and at your intrusion at such an hour.”

“Before we go any farther,” said de Jars, twirling round on his heels, “allow me to present to you my nephew, the Chevalier de Moranges.”

“Chevalier de Moranges!” muttered Quennebert, on whose memory in that instant the name became indelibly engraven.

“A young man,” continued the commander, “who has come back with me from abroad. Good style, as you see, charming appearance. Now, you young innocent, lift up your great black eyes and kiss madame’s hand; I allow it.”

“Monsieur le commandeur, leave my room; begone, or I shall call—”

“Whom, then? Your lackeys? But I have beaten the only one you keep, as I told you, and it will be some time before he’ll be in a condition to light me downstairs: ‘Begone,’ indeed! Is that the way you receive an old friend? Pray be seated, chevalier.”

He approached Mademoiselle de Guerchi, and, despite her resistance, seized hold of one of her hands, and forcing her to sit down, seated himself beside her.

“That’s right, my girl,” said he; “now let us talk sense. I understand that before a stranger you consider yourself obliged to appear astonished at my ways of going on. But he knows all about us, and nothing he may see or hear will surprise him. So a truce to prudery! I came back yesterday, but I could not make

out your hiding-place till to-day. Now I'm not going to ask you to tell me how you have gone on in my absence. God and you alone know, and while He will tell me nothing, you would only tell me fibs, and I want to save you from that venial sin at least. But here I am, in as good spirits as ever, more in love than ever, and quite ready to resume my old habits."

Meantime the lady, quite subdued by his noisy entrance and ruffianly conduct, and seeing that an assumption of dignity would only draw down on her some fresh impertinence, appeared to resign herself to her position. All this time Quennebert never took his eyes from the chevalier, who sat with his face towards the partition. His elegantly cut costume accentuated his personal advantages. His jet black hair brought into relief the whiteness of his forehead; his large dark eyes with their veined lids and silky lashes had a penetrating and peculiar expression—a mixture of audacity and weakness; his thin and somewhat pale lips were apt to curl in an ironical smile; his hands were of perfect beauty, his feet of dainty smallness, and he showed with an affectation of complaisance a well-turned leg above his ample boots, the turned down tops of which, garnished with lace, fell in irregular folds over his ankles in the latest fashion. He did not appear to be more than eighteen years of age, and nature had denied his charming face the distinctive sign of his sex for not the slightest down was visible on his chin, though a little delicate pencilling darkened his upper lip: His slightly effeminate style of beauty, the graceful curves of his figure, his expression, sometimes coaxing, sometimes saucy, reminding one of a page, gave him the appearance of a charming young scapegrace destined to inspire sudden passions and wayward fancies. While his pretended uncle was making himself at home most unceremoniously, Quennebert remarked that the chevalier at once began to lay siege to his fair hostess, bestowing tender and love-laden glances on her behind that uncle's back. This redoubled his curiosity.

"My dear girl," said the commander, "since I saw you last I have come into a fortune of one hundred thousand livres, neither more nor less. One of my dear aunts took it into her head to depart this life, and her temper being crotchety and spiteful she made me her sole heir, in order to enrage those of her relatives who had nursed her in her illness. One hundred thousand livres! It's a round sum—enough to cut a great figure with for two years. If you like, we shall squander it together, capital and interest. Why do you not speak? Has anyone else robbed me by any chance of your heart? If that were so, I should be in despair, upon my word—for the sake of the fortunate individual who had won your favour; for I will brook no rivals, I give you fair warning."

"Monsieur le commandeur," answered Angelique, "you forget, in speaking to me in that manner, I have never given you any right to control my actions."

"Have we severed our connection?"

At this singular question Angelique started, but de Jars continued—
 “When last we parted we were on the best of terms, were we not? I know that some months have elapsed since then, but I have explained to you the reason of my absence. Before filling up the blank left by the departed we must give ourselves space to mourn. Well, was I right in my guess? Have you given me a successor?”

Mademoiselle de Guerchi had hitherto succeeded in controlling her indignation, and had tried to force herself to drink the bitter cup of humiliation to the dregs; but now she could bear it no longer. Having thrown a look expressive of her suffering at the young chevalier, who continued to ogle her with great pertinacity, she decided on bursting into tears, and in a voice broken by sobs she exclaimed that she was miserable at being treated in this manner, that she did not deserve it, and that Heaven was punishing her for her error in yielding to the entreaties of the commander. One would have sworn she was sincere and that the words came from her heart. If Maitre Quennebert had not witnessed the scene with Jeannin, if he had not known how frail was the virtue of the weeping damsel, he might have been affected by her touching plaint. The chevalier appeared to be deeply moved by Angelique’s grief, and while his, uncle was striding up and down the room and swearing like a trooper, he gradually approached her and expressed by signs the compassion he felt.

Meantime the notary was in a strange state of mind. He had not yet made up his mind whether the whole thing was a joke arranged between de Jars and Jeannin or not, but of one thing he was quite convinced, the sympathy which Chevalier de Moranges was expressing by passionate sighs and glances was the merest hypocrisy. Had he been alone, nothing would have prevented his dashing head foremost into this imbroglio, in scorn of consequence, convinced that his appearance would be as terrible in its effect as the head of Medusa. But the presence of the widow restrained him. Why ruin his future and dry up the golden spring which had just begun to gush before his eyes, for the sake of taking part in a melodrama? Prudence and self-interest kept him in the side scenes.

The tears of the fair one and the glances of the chevalier awoke no repentance in the breast of the commander; on the contrary, he began to vent his anger in terms still more energetic. He strode up and down the oaken floor till it shook under his spurred heels; he stuck his plumed hat on the side of his head, and displayed the manners of a bully in a Spanish comedy. Suddenly he seemed to have come to a swift resolution: the expression of his face changed from rage to icy coldness, and walking up to Angelique, he said, with a composure more terrible than the wildest fury—

“My rival’s name?”

“You shall never learn it from me!”

“Madame, his name?”

“Never! I have borne your insults too long. I am not responsible to you for my actions.”

“Well, I shall learn it, in spite of you, and I know to whom to apply. Do you think you can play fast and loose with me and my love? No, no! I used to believe in you; I turned, a deaf ear to your traducers. My mad passion for you became known; I was the jest and the butt of the town. But you have opened my eyes, and at last I see clearly on whom my vengeance ought to fall. He was formerly my friend, and I would believe nothing against him; although I was often warned, I took no notice. But now I will seek him out, and say to him, ‘You have stolen what was mine; you are a scoundrel! It must be your life, or mine!’ And if, there is justice in heaven, I shall kill him! Well, madame, you don’t ask me the name of this man! You well know whom I mean!”

This threat brought home to Mademoiselle de Guerchi how imminent was her danger. At first she had thought the commander’s visit might be a snare laid to test her, but the coarseness of his expressions, the cynicism of his overtures in the presence of a third person, had convinced her she was wrong. No man could have imagined that the revolting method of seduction employed could meet with success, and if the commander had desired to convict her of perfidy he would have come alone and made use of more persuasive weapons. No, he believed he still had claims on her, but even if he had, by his manner of enforcing them he had rendered them void. However, the moment he threatened to seek out a rival whose identity he designated quite clearly, and reveal to him the secret it was so necessary to her interests to keep hidden, the poor girl lost her head. She looked at de Jars with a frightened expression, and said in a trembling voice—

“I don’t know whom you mean.”

“You don’t know? Well, I shall commission the king’s treasurer, Jeannin de Castille, to come here to-morrow and tell you, an hour before our duel.”

“Oh no! no! Promise me you will not do that!” cried she, clasping her hands.

“Adieu, madame.”

“Do not leave me thus! I cannot let you go till you give me your promise!”

She threw herself on her knees and clung with both her hands to de Jars’ cloak, and appealing to Chevalier de Moranges, said—

“You are young, monsieur; I have never done you any harm; protect me, have pity on me, help me to soften him!”

“Uncle,” said the chevalier in a pleading tone, “be generous, and don’t drive this woman to despair.”

“Prayers are useless!” answered the commander.

“What do you want me to do?” said Angelique. “Shall I go into a convent to atone? I am ready to go. Shall I promise never to see him again? For God’s sake, give me a little time; put off your vengeance for one single day! To-morrow evening, I swear to you, you will have nothing more to fear from me. I thought myself forgotten by you and abandoned; and how should I think otherwise? You left me without a word of farewell, you stayed away and never sent me a line! And how do you know that I did not weep when you deserted me, leaving me to pass my days in monotonous solitude? How do you know that I did not make every effort to find out why you were so long absent from my side? You say you had left town but how was I to know that? Oh! promise me, if you love me, to give up this duel! Promise me not to seek that man out to-morrow!”

The poor creature hoped to work wonders with her eloquence, her tears, her pleading glances. On hearing her prayer for a reprieve of twenty-four hours, swearing that after that she would never see Jeannin again, the commander and the chevalier were obliged to bite their lips to keep from laughing outright. But the former soon regained his self-possession, and while Angelique, still on her knees before him, pressed his hands to her bosom, he forced her to raise her head, and looking straight into her eyes, said—

“To-morrow, madame, if not this evening, he shall know everything, and a meeting shall take place.”

Then pushing her away, he strode towards the door.

“Oh! how unhappy I am!” exclaimed Angelique.

She tried to rise and rush after him, but whether she was really overcome by her feelings, or whether she felt the one chance of prevailing left her was to faint, she uttered a heartrending cry, and the chevalier had no choice but to support her sinking form.

De Jars, on seeing his nephew staggering under this burden, gave a loud laugh, and hurried away. Two minutes later he was once more at the tavern in the rue Saint-Andre-des-Arts.

“How’s this? Alone?” said Jeannin.

“Alone.”

“What have you done with the chevalier?”

“I left him with our charmer, who was unconscious, overcome with grief, exhausted Ha! ha! ha! She fell fainting into his arms! Ha! ha! ha!”

“It’s quite possible that the young rogue, being left with her in such a condition, may cut me out.”

“Do you think so?—Ha! ha! ha!”

And de Jars laughed so heartily and so infectiously that his worthy friend was obliged to join in, and laughed till he choked.

In the short silence which followed the departure of the commander, Maitre Quennebert could hear the widow still murmuring something, but he was less disposed than ever to attend to her.

“On my word,” said he, “the scene now going on is more curious than all that went before. I don’t think that a man has ever found himself in such a position as mine. Although my interests demand that I remain here and listen, yet my fingers are itching to box the ears of that Chevalier de Moranges. If there were only some way of getting at a proof of all this! Ah! now we shall hear something; the hussy is coming to herself.”

And indeed Angelique had opened her eyes and was casting wild looks around her; she put her hand to her brow several times, as if trying to recall clearly what had happened.

“Is he gone?” she exclaimed at last. “Oh, why did you let him go? You should not have minded me, but kept him here.”

“Be calm,” answered the chevalier, “be calm, for heaven’s sake. I shall speak to my uncle and prevent his ruining your prospects. Only don’t weep any more, your tears break my heart. Ah, my God! how cruel it is to distress you so! I should never be able to withstand your tears; no matter what reason I had for anger, a look from you would make me forgive you everything.”

“Noble young man!” said Angelique.

“Idiot!” muttered Maitre Quennebert; “swallow the honey of his words, do But how the deuce is it going to end? Not Satan himself ever invented such a situation.”

“But then I could never believe you guilty without proof, irrefutable proof; and even then a word from you would fill my mind with doubt and uncertainty again. Yes, were the whole world to accuse you and swear to your guilt, I should still believe your simple word. I am young, madam, I have never known love as yet—until an instant ago I had no idea that more quickly than an image can excite the admiration of the eye, a thought can enter the heart and stir it to its depths, and features that one may never again behold leave a lifelong memory behind. But even if a woman of whom I knew absolutely nothing were to appeal to me, exclaiming, ‘I implore your help, your protection!’ I should, without stopping to consider, place my sword and my arm at her disposal, and devote myself to her service. How much more eagerly would I die for you, madam, whose beauty has ravished my heart! What do you demand of me? Tell me what you desire me to do.”

“Prevent this duel; don’t allow an interview to take place between your uncle and the man whom he mentioned. Tell me you will do this, and I shall be safe; for you have never learned to lie; I know.”

“Of course he hasn’t, you may be sure of that, you simpleton!” muttered Maitre Quennebert in his corner. “If you only knew what a mere novice you are at that game compared with the chevalier! If you only knew whom you had before you!”

“At your age,” went on Angelique, “one cannot feign—the heart is not yet hardened, and is capable of compassion. But a dreadful idea occurs to me—a horrible suspicion! Is it all a devilish trick—a snare arranged in joke? Tell me that it is not all a pretence! A poor woman encounters so much perfidy. Men amuse themselves by troubling her heart and confusing her mind; they excite her vanity, they compass her round with homage, with flattery, with temptation, and when they grow tired of fooling her, they despise and insult her. Tell me, was this all a preconcerted plan? This love, this jealousy, were they only acted?”

“Oh, madame,” broke in the chevalier, with an expression of the deepest indignation, “how can you for an instant imagine that a human heart could be so perverted? I am not acquainted with the man whom the commander accused you of loving, but whoever he may be I feel sure that he is worthy of your love, and that he would never have consented to such a dastardly joke. Neither would my uncle; his jealousy mastered him and drove him mad—

“But I am not dependent on him; I am my own master, and can do as I please. I will hinder this duel; I will not allow the illusion and ignorance of him who loves you and, alas that I must say it, whom you love, to be dispelled, for it is in them he finds his happiness. Be happy with him! As for me, I shall never see you again; but the recollection of this meeting, the joy of having served you, will be my consolation.”

Angelique raised her beautiful eyes, and gave the chevalier a long look which expressed her gratitude more eloquently than words.

“May I be hanged!” thought Maitre Quennebert, “if the baggage isn’t making eyes at him already! But one who is drowning clutches at a straw.”

“Enough, madam,” said the chevalier; “I understand all you would say. You thank me in his name, and ask me to leave you: I obey—yes, madame, I am going; at the risk of my life I will prevent this meeting, I will stifle this fatal revelation. But grant me one last prayer—permit me to look forward to seeing you once more before I leave this city, to which I wish I had never come. But I shall quit it in a day or two, to-morrow perhaps—as soon as I know that your happiness is assured. Oh! do not refuse my last request; let the light of your eyes shine on me for the last time; after that I shall depart—I shall fly far away for ever. But if perchance, in spite of every effort, I fail, if the commander’s jealousy should make him impervious to my entreaties—to my tears, if he whom you love should come and overwhelm you with reproaches and then abandon you, would you drive me from your presence if I should then say, ‘I love you’? Answer me, I beseech you.”

“Go!” said she, “and prove worthy of my gratitude—or my love.”

Seizing one of her hands, the chevalier covered it with passionate kisses.

“Such barefaced impudence surpasses everything I could have imagined!” murmured Quennebert: “fortunately, the play is over for to-night; if it had gone on any longer, I should have done something foolish. The lady hardly imagines what the end of the comedy will be.”

Neither did Quennebert. It was an evening of adventures. It was written that in the space of two hours Angelique was to run the gamut of all the emotions, experience all the vicissitudes to which a life such as she led is exposed: hope, fear, happiness, mortification, falsehood, love that was no love, intrigue within intrigue, and, to crown all, a totally unexpected conclusion.

CHAPTER V

THE chevalier was still holding Angelique's hand when a step resounded outside, and a voice was heard.

"Can it be that he has come back?" exclaimed the damsel, hastily freeing herself from the passionate embrace of the chevalier. "It's not possible! Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! it's his voice!"

She grew pale to the lips, and stood staring at the door with outstretched arms, unable to advance or recede.

The chevalier listened, but felt sure the approaching voice belonged neither to the commander nor to the treasurer.

"His voice'?" thought Quennebert to himself. "Can this be yet another aspirant to her favour?"

The sound came nearer.

"Hide yourself!" said Angelique, pointing to a door opposite to the partition behind which the widow and the notary were ensconced. "Hide yourself there!—there's a secret staircase—you can get out that way."

"I hide myself!" exclaimed Moranges, with a swaggering air. "What are you thinking of? I remain."

It would have been better for him to have followed her advice, as may very well have occurred to the youth two minutes later, as a tall, muscular young man entered in a state of intense excitement. Angelique rushed to meet him, crying—

"Ah! Monsieur le duc, is it you?"

"What is this I hear, Angelique?" said the Duc de Vitry. "I was told below that three men had visited you this evening; but only two have gone out—where is the third? Ha! I do not need long to find him," he added, as he caught sight of the chevalier, who stood his ground bravely enough.

"In Heaven's name!" cried Angelique,— "in Heaven's name, listen to me!"

"No, no, not a word. Just now I am not questioning you. Who are you, sir?"

The chevalier's teasing and bantering disposition made him even at that critical moment insensible to fear, so he retorted insolently—

“Whoever I please to be, sir; and on my word I find the tone in which you put your question delightfully amusing.”

The duke sprang forward in a rage, laying his hand on his sword. Angelique tried in vain to restrain him.

“You want to screen him from my vengeance, you false one!” said he, retreating a few steps, so as to guard the door. “Defend your life, sir!”

“Do you defend yours!”

Both drew at the same moment.

Two shrieks followed, one in the room, the other behind the tapestry, for neither Angelique nor the widow had been able to restrain her alarm as the two swords flashed in air. In fact the latter had been so frightened that she fell heavily to the floor in a faint.

This incident probably saved the young man’s life; his blood had already begun to run cold at the sight of his adversary foaming with rage and standing between him and the door, when the noise of the fall distracted the duke’s attention.

“What was that?” he cried. “Are there other enemies concealed here too?” And forgetting that he was leaving a way of escape free, he rushed in the direction from which the sound came, and lunged at the tapestry-covered partition with his sword. Meantime the chevalier, dropping all his airs of bravado, sprang from one end of the room to the other like a cat pursued by a dog; but rapid as were his movements, the duke perceived his flight, and dashed after him at the risk of breaking both his own neck and the chevalier’s by a chase through unfamiliar rooms and down stairs which were plunged in darkness.

All this took place in a few seconds, like a flash of lightning. Twice, with hardly any interval, the street door opened and shut noisily, and the two enemies were in the street, one pursued and the other pursuing.

“My God! Just to think of all that has happened is enough to make one die of fright!” said Mademoiselle de Guerchi. “What will come next, I should like to know? And what shall I say to the duke when he comes back?”

Just at this instant a loud cracking sound was heard in the room. Angelique stood still, once more struck with terror, and recollecting the cry she had heard. Her hair, which was already loosened, escaped entirely from its bonds, and she felt it rise on her head as the figures on the tapestry moved and bent towards her. Falling on her knees and closing her eyes, she began to invoke the aid of God and all the saints. But she soon felt herself raised by strong arms, and looking round, she found herself in the presence of an unknown man, who seemed to have issued from the ground or the walls, and who, seizing the only light left unextinguished in the scuffle, dragged her more dead than alive into the next room.

This man was, as the reader will have already guessed, Maitre Quennebert. As soon as the chevalier and the duke had disappeared, the notary had run towards the corner where the widow lay, and having made sure that she was really unconscious, and unable to see or hear anything, so that it would be quite safe to tell her any story he pleased next day, he returned to his former position, and applying his shoulder to the partition, easily succeeded in freeing the ends of the rotten laths from the nails which held there, and, pushing them before him, made an aperture large enough to allow of his passing through into the next apartment. He applied himself to this task with such vigour, and became so absorbed in its accomplishment, that he entirely forgot the bag of twelve hundred livres which the widow had given him.

“Who are you? What do you want with me?” cried Mademoiselle de Guerchi, struggling to free herself.

“Silence!” was Quennebert’s answer.

“Don’t kill me, for pity’s sake!”

“Who wants to kill you? But be silent; I don’t want your shrieks to call people here. I must be alone with you for a few moments. Once more I tell you to be quiet, unless you want me to use violence. If you do what I tell you, no harm shall happen to you.”

“But who are you, monsieur?”

“I am neither a burglar nor a murderer; that’s all you need to know; the rest is no concern of yours. Have you writing materials at hand?”

“Yes, monsieur; there they are, on that table.”

“Very well. Now sit down at the table.”

“Why?”

“Sit down, and answer my questions.”

“The first man who visited you this evening was M. Jeannin, was he not?”

“Yes, M. Jeannin de Castille.”

“The king’s treasurer?”

“Yes.”

“All right. The second was Commander de Jars, and the young man he brought with him was his nephew, the Chevalier de Moranges. The last comer was a duke; am I not right?”

“The Duc de Vitry.”

“Now write from my dictation.”

He spoke very slowly, and Mademoiselle de Guerchi, obeying his commands, took up her pen.

“To-day,” dictated Quennebert,—“to-day, this twentieth day of the month of November, in the year of the Lord 1658, I—

“What is your full name?”

“Angelique-Louise de Guerchi.”

“Go on! ‘I, Angelique-Louise de Guerchi, was visited, in the rooms which—I occupy, in the mansion of the Duchesse d’Etampes, corner of the streets Git-le-Coeur and du Hurepoix, about half-past seven o’clock in the evening, in the first place, by Messire Jeannin de Castille, King’s Treasurer; in the second place, by Commander de Jars, who was accompanied by a young man, his nephew, the Chevalier de Moranges; in the third place, after the departure of Commander de Jars, and while I was alone with the Chevalier de Moranges, by the Duc de Vitry, who drew his sword upon the said chevalier and forced him to take flight.’

“Now put in a line by itself, and use capitals “DESCRIPTION OF THE CHEVALIER DE MORANGES.”

“But I only saw him for an instant,” said Angelique, “and I can’t recall—

“Write, and don’t talk. I can recall everything, and that is all that is wanted.”

“Height about five feet.’ The chevalier,” said Quennebert, interrupting himself, “is four feet eleven inches three lines and a half, but I don’t need absolute exactness.” Angelique gazed at him in utter stupefaction.

“Do you know him, then?” she asked.

“I saw him this evening for the first time, but my eye is very accurate.

“Height about five feet; hair black, eyes ditto, nose aquiline, mouth large, lips compressed, forehead high, face oval, complexion pale, no beard.’

“Now another line, and in capitals: “SPECIAL MARKS.’

“A small mole on the neck behind the right ear, a smaller mole on the left hand.’

“Have you written that? Now sign it with your full name.”

“What use are you going to make of this paper?”

“I should have told you before, if I had desired you to know. Any questions are quite useless. I don’t enjoin secrecy on you, however,” added the notary, as he folded the paper and put it into his doublet pocket. “You are quite free to tell anyone you like that you have written the description of the Chevalier de Moranges at the dictation of an unknown man, who got into your room you don’t know how, by the chimney or through the ceiling perhaps, but who was determined to leave it by a more convenient road. Is there not a secret staircase? Show me where it is. I don’t want to meet anyone on my way out.”

Angelique pointed out a door to him hidden by a damask curtain, and Quennebert saluting her, opened it and disappeared, leaving Angelique convinced that she had seen the devil in person. Not until the next day did the sight of the displaced partition explain the apparition, but even then so great was her fright, so deep was the terror which the recollection of the mysterious man inspired, that despite the permission to tell what had happened she mentioned her adventure to no one, and did not even complain to her neighbour, Madame Ra-

pally, of the inquisitiveness which had led the widow to spy on her actions.

CHAPTER VI

WE left de Jars and Jeannin, roaring with laughter, in the tavern in the rue Saint Andre-des-Arts.

“What!” said the treasurer, “do you really think that Angelique thought I was in earnest in my offer?—that she believes in all good faith I intend to marry her?”

“You may take my word for it. If it were not so, do you imagine she would have been in such desperation? Would she have fainted at my threat to tell you that I had claims on her as well as you? To get married! Why, that is the goal of all such creatures, and there is not one of them who can understand why a man of honour should blush to give her his name. If you had only seen her terror, her tears! They would have either broken your heart or killed you with laughter.”

“Well,” said Jeannin, “it is getting late. Are we going to wait for the chevalier?”

“Let us call, for him.”

“Very well. Perhaps he has made up his mind to stay. If so, we shall make a horrible scene, cry treachery and perjury, and trounce your nephew well. Let’s settle our score and be off.”

They left the wine-shop, both rather the worse for the wine they had so largely indulged in. They felt the need of the cool night air, so instead of going down the rue Pavee they resolved to follow the rue Saint-Andre-des-Arts as far as the Pont Saint-Michel, so as to reach the mansion by a longer route.

At the very moment the commander got up to leave the tavern the chevalier had run out of the mansion at the top of his speed. It was not that he had entirely lost his courage, for had he found it impossible to avoid his assailant it is probable that he would have regained the audacity which had led him to draw his sword. But he was a novice in the use of arms, had not reached full physical development, and felt that the chances were so much against him that he would only have faced the encounter if there were no possible way of escape. On leaving the house he had turned quickly into the rue Git-le-Coeur; but on hearing the door

close behind his pursuer he disappeared down the narrow and crooked rue de l'Hirondelle, hoping to throw the Duc de Vitry off the scent. The duke, however, though for a moment in doubt, was guided by the sound of the flying footsteps. The chevalier, still trying to send him off on a false trail, turned to the right, and so regained the upper end of the rue Saint-Andre, and ran along it as far as the church, the site of which is occupied by the square of the same name today. Here he thought he would be safe, for, as the church was being restored and enlarged, heaps of stone stood all round the old pile. He glided in among these, and twice heard Vitry searching quite close to him, and each time stood on guard expecting an onslaught. This marching and counter-marching lasted for some minutes; the chevalier began to hope he had escaped the danger, and eagerly waited for the moment when the moon which had broken through the clouds should again withdraw behind them, in order to steal into some of the adjacent streets under cover of the darkness. Suddenly a shadow rose before him and a threatening voice cried—

“Have I caught you at last, you coward?”

The danger in which the chevalier stood awoke in him a flickering energy, a feverish courage, and he crossed blades with his assailant. A strange combat ensued, of which the result was quite uncertain, depending entirely on chance; for no science was of any avail on a ground so rough that the combatants stumbled at every step, or struck against immovable masses, which were one moment clearly lit up, and the next in shadow. Steel clashed on steel, the feet of the adversaries touched each other, several times the cloak of one was pierced by the sword of the other, more than once the words “Die then!” rang out. But each time the seemingly vanquished combatant sprang up unwounded, as agile and as lithe and as quick as ever, while he in his turn pressed the enemy home. There was neither truce nor pause, no clever feints nor fencer's tricks could be employed on either side; it was a mortal combat, but chance, not skill, would deal the death-blow. Sometimes a rapid pass encountered only empty air; sometimes blade crossed blade above the wielders' heads; sometimes the fencers lunged at each other's breast, and yet the blows glanced aside at the last moment and the blades met in air once more. At last, however, one of the two, making a pass to the right which left his breast unguarded, received a deep wound. Uttering a loud cry, he recoiled a step or two, but, exhausted by the effort, tripped and fell backward over a large stone, and lay there motionless, his arms extended in the form of a cross.

The other turned and fled.

“Hark, de Jars!” said Jeannin, stopping, “There's fighting going on hereabouts; I hear the clash of swords.”

Both listened intently.

"I hear nothing now."

"Hush! there it goes again. It's by the church."

"What a dreadful cry!"

They ran at full speed towards the place whence it seemed to come, but found only solitude, darkness, and silence. They looked in every direction.

"I can't see a living soul," said Jeannin, "and I very much fear that the poor devil who gave that yell has mumbled his last prayer."

"I don't know why I tremble so," replied de Jars; "that heart-rending cry made me shiver from head to foot. Was it not something like the chevalier's voice?"

"The chevalier is with La Guerchi, and even if he had left her this would not have been his way to rejoin us. Let us go on and leave the dead in peace."

"Look, Jeannin! what is that in front of us?"

"On that stone? A man who has fallen!"

"Yes, and bathed in blood," exclaimed de Jars, who had darted to his side. "Ah! it's he! it's he! Look, his eyes are closed, his hands cold! My child he does not hear me! Oh, who has murdered him?"

He fell on his knees, and threw himself on the body with every mark of the most violent despair.

"Come, come," said Jeannin, surprised at such an explosion of grief from a man accustomed to duels, and who on several similar occasions had been far from displaying much tenderness of heart, "collect yourself, and don't give way like a woman. Perhaps the wound is not mortal. Let us try to stop the bleeding and call for help."

"No, no—"

"Are you mad?"

"Don't call, for Heaven's sake! The wound is here, near the heart. Your handkerchief, Jeannin, to arrest the flow of blood. There—now help me to lift him."

"What does that mean?" cried Jeannin, who had just laid his hand on the chevalier. "I don't know whether I'm awake or asleep! Why, it's a—"

"Be silent, on your life! I shall explain everything—but now be silent; there is someone looking at us."

There was indeed a man wrapped in a mantle standing motionless some steps away.

"What are you doing here?" asked de Jars.

"May I ask what you are doing, gentlemen?" retorted Maitre Quennebert, in a calm and steady voice.

"Your curiosity may cost you dear, monsieur; we are not in the habit of allowing our actions to be spied on."

“And I am not in the habit of running useless risks, most noble cavaliers. You are, it is true, two against one; but,” he added, throwing back his cloak and grasping the hilts of a pair of pistols tucked in his belt, “these will make us equal. You are mistaken as to my intentions. I had no thought of playing the spy; it was chance alone that led me here; and you must acknowledge that finding you in this lonely spot, engaged as you are at this hour of the night, was quite enough to awake the curiosity of a man as little disposed to provoke a quarrel as to submit to threats.”

“It was chance also that brought us here. We were crossing the square, my friend and I, when we heard groans. We followed the sound, and found this young gallant, who is a stranger to us, lying here, with a wound in his breast.”

As the moon at that moment gleamed doubtfully forth, Maitre Quennebert bent for an instant over the body of the wounded man, and said:

“I know him more than you. But supposing someone were to come upon us here, we might easily be taken for three assassins holding a consultation over the corpse of our victim. What were you going to do?”

“Take him to a doctor. It would be inhuman to leave him here, and while we are talking precious time is being lost.”

“Do you belong to this neighbourhood?”

“No,” said the treasurer.

“Neither do I,” said Quennebert. “but I believe I have heard the name of a surgeon who lives close by, in the rue Hauteville.”

“I also know of one,” interposed de Jars, “a very skilful man.”

“You may command me.”

“Gladly, monsieur; for he lives some distance from here.”

“I am at your service.”

De Jars and Jeannin raised the chevalier’s shoulders, and the stranger supported his legs, and carrying their burden in this order, they set off.

They walked slowly, looking about them carefully, a precaution rendered necessary by the fact that the moon now rode in a cloudless sky. They glided over the Pont Saint-Michel between the houses that lined both sides, and, turning to the right, entered one of the narrow streets of the Cite, and after many turnings, during which they met no one, they stopped at the door of a house situated behind the Hotel-de-Ville.

“Many thanks, monsieur,” said de Jars,—“many thanks; we need no further help.”

As the commander spoke, Maitre Quennebert let the feet of the chevalier fall abruptly on the pavement, while de Jars and the treasurer still supported his body, and, stepping back two paces, he drew his pistols from his belt, and placing a finger on each trigger, said—

“Do not stir, messieurs, or you are dead men.” Both, although encumbered by their burden, laid their hands upon their swords.

“Not a movement, not a sound, or I shoot.”

There was no reply to this argument, it being a convincing one even for two duellists. The bravest man turns pale when he finds himself face to face with sudden inevitable death, and he who threatened seemed to be one who would, without hesitation, carry out his threats. There was nothing for it but obedience, or a ball through them as they stood.

“What do you want with us, sir?” asked Jeannin.

Quennebert, without changing his attitude, replied—

“Commander de Jars, and you, Messire Jeannin de Castille, king’s treasurer,—you see, my gentles, that besides the advantage of arms which strike swiftly and surely, I have the further advantage of knowing who you are, whilst I am myself unknown,—you will carry the wounded man into this house, into which I will not enter, for I have nothing to do within; but I shall remain here; to await your return. After you have handed over the patient to the doctor, you will procure paper and write—now pay great attention—that on November 20th, 1658, about midnight, you, aided by an unknown man, carried to this house, the address of which you will give, a young man whom you call the Chevalier de Moranges, and pass off as your nephew—”

“As he really is.”

“Very well.”

“But who told you—?”

“Let me go on: who had been wounded in a fight with swords on the same night behind the church of Saint-Andre-des-Arts by the Duc de Vitry.”

“The Duc de Vitry!—How do you know that?”

“No matter how, I know it for a fact. Having made this declaration, you will add that the said Chevalier de Moranges is no other than Josephine-Charlotte Boullenois, whom you, commander, abducted four months ago from the convent of La Raquette, whom you have made your mistress, and whom you conceal disguised as a man; then you will add your signature. Is my information correct?”

De Jars and Jeannin were speechless with surprise for a few instants; then the former stammered—

“Will you tell us who you are?”

“The devil in person, if you like. Well, will you do as I order? Supposing that I am awkward enough not to kill you at two paces, do you want me to ask you in broad daylight and aloud what I now ask at night and in a whisper? And don’t think to put me off with a false declaration, relying on my not being able to read it by the light of the moon; don’t think either that you can take me by surprise when you hand it me: you will bring it to me with your swords sheathed

as now. If this condition is not observed, I shall fire, and the noise will bring a crowd about us. To-morrow I shall speak differently from to-day: I shall proclaim the truth at all the street corners, in the squares, and under the windows of the Louvre. It is hard, I know, for men of spirit to yield to threats, but recollect that you are in my power and that there is no disgrace in paying a ransom for a life that one cannot defend. What do you say?"

In spite of his natural courage, Jeannin, who found himself involved in an affair from which he had nothing to gain, and who was not at all desirous of being suspected of having helped in an abduction, whispered to the commander—

"Faith! I think our wisest course is to consent."

De Jars, however, before replying, wished to try if he could by any chance throw his enemy off his guard for an instant, so as to take him unawares. His hand still rested on the hilt of his sword, motionless, but ready to draw.

"There is someone coming over yonder," he cried,—“do you hear?"

"You can't catch me in that way," said Quennebert. "Even were there anyone coming, I should not look round, and if you move your hand all is over with you."

"Well," said Jeannin, "I surrender at discretion—not on my own account, but out of regard for my friend and this woman. However, we are entitle to some pledge of your silence. This statement that you demand, once written,—you can ruin us tomorrow by its means."

"I don't yet know what use I shall make of it, gentlemen. Make up your minds, or you will have nothing but a dead body to place—in the doctor's hands. There is no escape for you."

For the first time the wounded man faintly groaned.

"I must save her!" cried de Jars,—“I yield."

"And I swear upon my honour that I will never try to get this woman out of your hands, and that I will never interfere with your conquest. Knock, gentlemen, and remain as long as may be necessary. I am patient. Pray to God, if you will, that she may recover; my one desire is that she may die."

They entered the house, and Quennebert, wrapping himself once more in his mantle, walked up and down before it, stopping to listen from time to time. In about two hours the commander and the treasurer came out again, and handed him a written paper in the manner agreed on.

"I greatly fear that it will be a certificate of death," said de Jars.

"Heaven grant it, commander! Adieu, messieurs."

He then withdrew, walking backwards, keeping the two friends covered with his pistols until he had placed a sufficient distance between himself and them to be out of danger of an attack.

The two gentlemen on their part walked rapidly away, looking round from time to time, and keeping their ears open. They were very much mortified at having been forced to let a mere boor dictate to them, and anxious, especially de Jars, as to the result of the wound.

CHAPTER VII

ON the day following this extraordinary series of adventures, explanations between those who were mixed up in them, whether as actors or spectators, were the order of the day. It was not till Maitre Quennebert reached the house of the friend who had offered to put him up for the night that it first dawned on him, that the interest which the Chevalier de Moranges had awakened in his mind had made him utterly forget the bag containing the twelve hundred livres which he owed to the generosity of the widow. This money being necessary to him, he went back to her early next morning. He found her hardly recovered from her terrible fright. Her swoon had lasted far beyond the time when the notary had left the house; and as Angelique, not daring to enter the bewitched room, had taken refuge in the most distant corner of her apartments, the feeble call of the widow was heard by no one. Receiving no answer, Madame Rapally groped her way into the next room, and finding that empty, buried herself beneath the bedclothes, and passed the rest of the night dreaming of drawn swords, duels, and murders. As soon as it was light she ventured into the mysterious room once more; without calling her servants, and found the bag of crowns lying open on the floor, with the coins scattered all around, the partition broken, and the tapestry hanging from it in shreds. The widow was near fainting again: she imagined at first she saw stains of blood everywhere, but a closer inspection having somewhat reassured her, she began to pick up the coins that had rolled to right and left, and was agreeably surprised to find the tale complete. But how and why had Maitre Quennebert abandoned them? What had become of him? She had got lost in the most absurd suppositions and conjectures when the notary appeared. Discovering from the first words she uttered that she was in complete ignorance of all that had taken place, he explained to her that when the interview between the chevalier and Mademoiselle de Guerchi had just at the most interesting moment been so unceremoniously interrupted by the arrival of the duke, he had become so absorbed in watching them that he had not noticed that the partition was bending before the pressure of his body, and that just as the duke

drew his sword it suddenly gave way, and he, Quennebert, being thus left without support, tumbled head foremost into the next room, among a perfect chaos of overturned furniture and lamps; that almost before he could rise he was forced to draw in self-defence, and had to make his escape, defending himself against both the duke and the chevalier; that they had pursued him so hotly, that when he found himself free he was too far from the house and the hour was too advanced to admit of his returning, Quennebert added innumerable protestations of friendship, devotion, and gratitude, and, furnished with his twelve hundred crowns, went away, leaving the widow reassured as to his safety, but still shaken from her fright.

While the notary was thus soothing the widow, Angelique was exhausting all the expedients her trade had taught her in the attempt to remove the duke's suspicions. She asserted she was the victim of an unforeseen attack which nothing in her conduct had ever authorised. The young Chevalier de Moranges had, gained admittance, she declared, under the pretext that he brought her news from the duke, the one man who occupied her thoughts, the sole object of her love. The chevalier had seen her lover, he said, a few days before, and by cleverly appealing to things back, he had led her to fear that the duke had grown tired of her, and that a new conquest was the cause of his absence. She had not believed these insinuations, although his long silence would have justified the most mortifying suppositions, the most cruel doubts. At length the chevalier had grown bolder, and had declared his passion for her; whereupon she had risen and ordered him to leave her. Just at that moment the duke had entered, and had taken the natural agitation and confusion of the chevalier as signs of her guilt. Some explanation was also necessary to account for the presence of the two other visitors of whom he had been told below stairs. As he knew nothing at all about them, the servant who admitted them never having seen either of them before, she acknowledged that two gentlemen had called earlier in the evening; that they had refused to send in their names, but as they had said they had come to inquire about the duke, she suspected them of having been in league with the chevalier in the attempt to ruin her reputation, perhaps they had even promised to help him to carry her off, but she knew nothing positive about them or their plans. The duke, contrary to his wont, did not allow himself to be easily convinced by these lame explanations, but unfortunately for him the lady knew how to assume an attitude favourable to her purpose. She had been induced, she said, with the simple confidence born of love, to listen to people who had led her to suppose they could give her news of one so dear to her as the duke. From this falsehood she proceeded to bitter reproaches: instead of defending herself, she accused him of having left her a prey to anxiety; she went so far as to imply that there must be some foundation for the hints of the chevalier, until at last the duke, although

he was not guilty of the slightest infidelity, and had excellent reasons to give in justification of his silence, was soon reduced to a penitent mood, and changed his threats into entreaties for forgiveness. As to the shriek he had heard, and which he was sure had been uttered by the stranger who had forced his way into her room after the departure of the others, she asserted that his ears must have deceived him. Feeling that therein lay her best chance of making things smooth, she exerted herself to convince him that there was no need for other information than she could give, and did all she could to blot the whole affair from his memory; and her success was such that at the end of the interview the duke was more enamoured and more credulous than ever, and believing he had done her wrong, he delivered himself up to her, bound hand and foot. Two days later he installed his mistress in another dwelling....

Madame Rapally also resolved to give up her rooms, and removed to a house that belonged to her, on the Pont Saint-Michel.

The commander took the condition of Charlotte Boullenois very much to heart. The physician under whose care he had placed her, after examining her wounds, had not given much hope of her recovery. It was not that de Jars was capable of a lasting love, but Charlotte was young and possessed great beauty, and the romance and mystery surrounding their connection gave it piquancy. Charlotte's disguise, too, which enabled de Jars to conceal his success and yet flaunt it in the face, as it were, of public morality and curiosity, charmed him by its audacity, and above all he was carried away by the bold and uncommon character of the girl, who, not content with a prosaic intrigue, had trampled underfoot all social prejudices and proprieties, and plunged at once into unmeasured and unrestrained dissipation; the singular mingling in her nature of the vices of both sexes; the unbridled licentiousness of the courtesan coupled with the devotion of a man for horses, wine, and fencing; in short, her eccentric character, as it would now be called, kept a passion alive which would else have quickly died away in his blase heart. Nothing would induce him to follow Jeannin's advice to leave Paris for at least a few weeks, although he shared Jeannin's fear that the statement they had been forced to give the stranger would bring them into trouble. The treasurer, who had no love affair on hand, went off; but the commander bravely held his ground, and at the end of five or six days, during which no one disturbed him, began to think the only result of the incident would be the anxiety it had caused him.

Every evening as soon as it was dark he betook himself to the doctor's, wrapped in his cloak, armed to the teeth, and his hat pulled down over his eyes. For two days and nights, Charlotte, whom to avoid confusion we shall continue to call the Chevalier de Moranges, hovered between life and death. Her youth and the strength of her constitution enabled her at last to overcome the fever, in

spite of the want of skill of the surgeon Perregaud.

Although de Jars was the only person who visited the chevalier, he was not the only one who was anxious about the patient's health. Maitre Quennebert, or men engaged by him to watch, for he did not want to attract attention, were always prowling about the neighbourhood, so that he was kept well informed of everything that went on: The instructions he gave to these agents were, that if a funeral should leave the house, they were to find out the name of the deceased, and then to let him know without delay. But all these precautions seemed quite useless: he always received the same answer to all his questions, "We know nothing." So at last he determined to address himself directly to the man who could give him information on which he could rely.

One night the commander left the surgeon's feeling more cheerful than usual, for the chevalier had passed a good day, and there was every hope that he was on the road to complete recovery. Hardly had de Jars gone twenty paces when someone laid a hand on his shoulder. He turned and saw a man whom, in the darkness, he did not recognise.

"Excuse me for detaining you, Commander de Jars," said Quennebert, "but I have a word to say to you."

"Ali! so it's you, sir," replied the commander. "Are you going at last to give me the opportunity I was so anxious for?"

"I don't understand."

"We are on more equal terms this time; to-day you don't catch me unprepared, almost without weapons, and if you are a man of honour you will measure swords with me."

"Fight a duel with you! why, may I ask? You have never insulted me."

"A truce to pleasantries, sir; don't make me regret that I have shown myself more generous than you. I might have killed you just now had I wished. I could have put my pistol to your breast and fired, or said to you, 'Surrender at discretion!' as you so lately said to me."

"And what use would that have been?"

"It would have made a secret safe that you ought never to have known."

"It would have been the most unfortunate thing for you that could have happened, for if you had killed me the paper would have spoken. So! you think that if you were to assassinate me you would only have to stoop over my dead body and search my pockets, and, having found the incriminating document, destroy it. You seem to have formed no very high opinion of my intelligence and common sense. You of the upper classes don't need these qualities, the law is on your side. But when a humble individual like myself, a mere nobody, undertakes to investigate a piece of business about which those in authority are not anxious to be enlightened, precautions are necessary. It's not enough for him to have

right on his side, he must, in order to secure his own safety, make good use of his skill, courage, and knowledge. I have no desire to humiliate you a second time, so I will say no more. The paper is in the hands of my notary, and if a single day passes without his seeing me he has orders to break the seal and make the contents public. So you see chance is still on my side. But now that you are warned there is no need for me to bluster. I am quite prepared to acknowledge your superior rank, and if you insist upon it, to speak to you uncovered."

"What do you desire to know, sir?"

"How is the Chevalier de Moranges getting on?"

"Very badly, very badly."

"Take care, commander; don't deceive me. One is so easily tempted to believe what one hopes, and I hope so strongly that I dare not believe what you say. I saw you coming out of the house, not at all with the air of a man who had just heard bad news, (quite the contrary) you looked at the sky, and rubbed your hands, and walked with a light, quick step, that did not speak of grief."

"You're a sharp observer, sir."

"I have already explained to you, sir, that when one of us belonging to a class hardly better than serfs succeeds by chance or force of character in getting out of the narrow bounds in which he was born, he must keep both eyes and ears open. If I had doubted your word as you have doubted mine on the merest suspicion, you would have said to your servants, 'Chastise this rascal.' But I am obliged to prove to you that you did not tell me the truth. Now I am sure that the chevalier is out of danger."

"If you were so well informed why did you ask me?"

"I only knew it by your asserting the contrary."

"What do you mean?" cried de Jars, who was growing restive under this cold, satirical politeness.

"Do me justice, commander. The bit chafes, but yet you must acknowledge that I have a light hand. For a full week you have been in my power. Have I disturbed your quiet? Have I betrayed your secret? You know I have not. And I shall continue to act in the same manner. I hope with all my heart, however great would be your grief; that the chevalier may die of his wound. I have not the same reasons for loving him that you have, so much you can readily understand, even if I do not explain the cause of my interest in his fate. But in such a matter hopes count for nothing; they cannot make his temperature either rise or fall. I have told you I have no wish to force the chevalier to resume his real name. I may make use of the document and I may not, but if I am obliged to use it I shall give you warning. Will you, in return, swear to me upon your honour that you will keep me informed as to the fate of the chevalier, whether you remain in Paris or whether you leave? But let this agreement be a secret between us, and do not

mention it to the so-called Moranges.”

“I have your oath, monsieur, that you will give me notice before you use the document I have given you against me, have I? But what guarantee have I that you will keep your word?”

“My course of action till to-day, and the fact that I have pledged you my word of my own free will.”

“I see, you hope not to have long to wait for the end.”

“I hope not; but meantime a premature disclosure would do me as much harm as you. I have not the slightest rancour against you, commander; you have robbed me of no treasure; I have therefore no compensation to demand. What you place such value on would be only a burden to me, as it will be to you later on. All I want is, to know as soon as it is no longer in your possession, whether it has been removed by the will of God or by your own, I am right in thinking that to-day there is some hope of the chevalier’s recovery, am I not?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Do you give me your promise that if ever he leave this house safe and sound you will let me know?”

“I give you my promise.”

“And if the result should be different, you will also send me word?”

“Certainly. But to whom shall I address my message?”

“I should have thought that since our first meeting you would have found out all about me, and that to tell you my name would be superfluous. But I have no reason to hide it: Maitre Quennebert, notary, Saint-Denis. I will not detain you any longer now, commander; excuse a simple citizen for dictating conditions to a noble such as you. For once chance has been on my side although a score of times it has gone against me.”

De Jars made no reply except a nod, and walked away quickly, muttering words of suppressed anger between his teeth at all the—humiliations to which he had been obliged to submit so meekly.

“He’s as insolent as a varlet who has no fear of a larruping before his eyes: how the rapscaillon gloried in taking advantage of his position! Taking-off his hat while putting his foot on my neck! If ever I can be even with you, my worthy scrivener, you’ll pass a very bad quarter of an hour, I can tell you.”

Everyone has his own idea of what constitutes perfect honour. De Jars, for instance, would have allowed himself to be cut up into little pieces rather than have broken the promise he had given Quennebert a week ago, because it was given in exchange for his life, and the slightest paltering with his word under those circumstances would have been dastardly. But the engagement into which he had just entered had in his eyes no such moral sanction; he had not been forced into it by threats, he had escaped by its means no serious danger, and therefore in

regard to it his conscience was much more accommodating. What he should best have liked to do, would have been to have sought out the notary and provoked him by insults to send him a challenge.

That a clown such as that could have any chance of leaving the ground alive never entered his head. But willingly as he would have encompassed his death in this manner, the knowledge that his secret would not die with Quennebert restrained him, for when everything came out he felt that the notary's death would be regarded as an aggravation of his original offence, and in spite of his rank he was not at all certain that if he were put on his trial even now he would escape scot free, much less if a new offence were added to the indictment. So, however much he might chafe against the bit, he felt he must submit to the bridle.

"By God!" said he, "I know what the clodhopper is after; and even if I must suffer in consequence, I shall take good care that he cannot shake off his bonds. Wait a bit! I can play the detective too, and be down on him without letting him see the hand that deals the blows. It'll be a wonder if I can't find a naked sword to suspend above his head."

However, while thus brooding over projects of vengeance, Commander de Jars kept his word, and about a month after the interview above related he sent word to Quennebert that the Chevalier de Moranges had left Perregaud's completely recovered from his wound. But the nearly fatal result of the chevalier's last prank seemed to have subdued his adventurous spirit; he was no longer seen in public, and was soon forgotten by all his acquaintances with the exception of Mademoiselle de Guerchi. She faithfully treasured up the memory of his words of passion, his looks of love, the warmth of his caresses, although at first she struggled hard to chase his image from her heart. But as the Due de Vitry assured her that he had killed him on the spot, she considered it no breach of faith to think lovingly of the dead, and while she took the goods so bounteously provided by her living lover, her gentlest thoughts, her most enduring regrets, were given to one whom she never hoped to see again.

CHAPTER VIII

WITH the reader's permission, we must now jump over an interval of rather more than a year, and bring upon the stage a person who, though only of secondary importance, can no longer be left behind the scenes.

We have already said that the loves of Quennebert and Madame Rapally were regarded with a jealous eye by a distant cousin of the lady's late husband. The love of this rejected suitor, whose name was Trumeau, was no more sincere than the notary's, nor were his motives more honourable. Although his personal appearance was not such as to lead him to expect that his path would be strewn with conquests, he considered that his charms at least equalled those of his defunct relative; and it may be said that in thus estimating them he did not lay himself—open to the charge of overweening vanity. But however persistently he preened him self before the widow, she vouchsafed him not one glance. Her heart was filled with the love of his rival, and it is no easy thing to tear a rooted passion out of a widow's heart when that widow's age is forty-six, and she is silly enough to believe that the admiration she feels is equalled by the admiration she inspires, as the unfortunate Trumeau found to his cost. All his carefully prepared declarations of love, all his skilful insinuations against Quennebert, brought him nothing but scornful rebuffs. But Trumeau was nothing if not persevering, and he could not habituate himself to the idea of seeing the widow's fortune pass into other hands than his own, so that every baffled move only increased his determination to spoil his competitor's game. He was always on the watch for a chance to carry tales to the widow, and so absorbed did he become in this fruitless pursuit, that he grew yellower and more dried up from day to day, and to his jaundiced eye the man who was at first simply his rival became his mortal enemy and the object of his implacable hate, so that at length merely to get the better of him, to outwit him, would, after so long-continued and obstinate a struggle and so many defeats, have seemed to him too mild a vengeance, too incomplete a victory.

Quennebert was well aware of the zeal with which the indefatigable Trumeau sought to injure him. But he regarded the manoeuvres of his rival with supreme unconcern, for he knew that he could at any time sweep away the network of cunning machinations, underhand insinuations, and malicious hints, which was spread around him, by allowing the widow to confer on him the advantages she was so anxious to bestow. The goal, he knew, was within his reach, but the problem he had to solve was how to linger on the way thither, how to defer the triumphal moment, how to keep hope alive in the fair one's breast and yet delay its fruition. His affairs were in a bad way. Day by day full possession of the fortune thus dangled before his eyes, and fragments of which came to him occasionally by way of loan, was becoming more and more indispensable, and tantalising though it was, yet he dared not put out his hand to seize it. His creditors dunned him relentlessly: one final reprieve had been granted him, but that at an end, if he could not meet their demands, it was all up with his career and reputation.

One morning in the beginning of February 1660, Trumeau called to see his cousin. He had not been there for nearly a month, and Quennebert and the widow had begun to think that, hopeless of success, he had retired from the contest. But, far from that, his hatred had grown more intense than ever, and having come upon the traces of an event in the past life of his rival which if proved would be the ruin of that rival's hopes, he set himself to gather evidence. He now made his appearance with beaming looks, which expressed a joy too great for words. He held in one hand a small scroll tied with a ribbon. He found the widow alone, sitting in a large easy-chair before the fire. She was reading for the twentieth time a letter which Quennebert had written her the evening before. To judge by the happy and contented expression of the widow's face, it must have been couched in glowing terms. Trumeau guessed at once from whom the missive came, but the sight of it, instead of irritating him, called forth a smile.

"Ah! so it's you, cousin?" said the widow, folding the precious paper and slipping it into the bosom of her dress. "How do you do? It's a long time since I saw you, more than a fortnight, I think. Have you been ill?"

"So you remarked my absence! That is very flattering, my dear cousin; you do not often spoil me by such attentions. No, I have not been ill, thank God, but I thought it better not to intrude upon you so often. A friendly call now and then such as to-day's is what you like, is it not? By the way, tell me about your handsome suitor, Maitre Quennebert; how is he getting along?"

"You look very knowing, Trumeau: have you heard of anything happening to him?"

"No, and I should be exceedingly sorry to hear that anything unpleasant had happened to him."

Now you are not saying what you think, you know you can't bear him."

"Well, to speak the truth, I have no great reason to like him. If it were not for him, I should perhaps have been happy to-day; my love might have moved your heart. However, I have become resigned to my loss, and since your choice has fallen on him,"—and here he sighed,—“well, all I can say is, I hope you may never regret it.”

"Many thanks for your goodwill, cousin; I am delighted to find you in such a benevolent mood. You must not be vexed because I could not give you the kind of love you wanted; the heart, you know, is not amenable to reason."

"There is only one thing I should like to ask."

"What is it?"

"I mention it for your good more than for my own. If you want to be happy, don't let this handsome quill-driver get you entirely into his hands. You are saying to yourself that because of my ill-success with you I am trying to injure him; but what if I could prove that he does not love you as much as he pretends—?"

"Come, come, control your naughty tongue! Are you going to begin back-biting again? You are playing a mean part, Trumeau. I have never hinted to Maitre Quennebert all the nasty little ways in which you have tried to put a spoke in his wheel, for if he knew he would ask you to prove your words, and then you would look very foolish."

"Not at all, I swear to you. On the contrary, if I were to tell all I know in his presence, it is not I who would be disconcerted. Oh! I am weary of meeting with nothing from you but snubs, scorn, and abuse. You think me a slanderer when I say, 'This gallant wooer of widows does not love you for yourself but for your money-bags. He fools you by fine promises, but as to marrying you—never, never!'"

"May I ask you to repeat that?" broke in Madame Rapally

"Oh! I know what I am saying. You will never be Madame Quennebert."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Jealousy has eaten away whatever brains you used to possess, Trumeau. Since I saw you last, cousin, important changes have taken place: I was just going to send you to-day an invitation to my wedding."

"To your wedding?"

"Yes; I am to be married to-morrow."

"To-morrow? To Quennebert?" stammered Trumeau.

"To Quennebert," repeated the widow in a tone of triumph.

"It's not possible!" exclaimed Trumeau.

"It is so possible that you will see us united tomorrow. And for the future I must beg of you to regard Quennebert no longer as a rival but as my husband,

whom to offend will be to offend me.”

The tone in which these words were spoken no longer left room for doubt as to the truth of the news. Trumeau looked down for a few moments, as if reflecting deeply before definitely making up his mind. He twisted the little roll of papers between his fingers, and seemed to be in doubt whether to open it and give it to Madame Rapally to read or not. In the end, however, he put it in his pocket, rose, and approaching his cousin, said—

“I beg your pardon, this news completely changes my opinion. From the moment Maitre Quennebert becomes your husband I shall not have a word to say against him. My suspicions were unjust, I confess it frankly, and I hope that in consideration of the motives which prompted me you will forget the warmth of my attacks. I shall make no protestations, but shall let the future show how sincere is my devotion to your interests.”

Madame Rapally was too happy, too certain of being loved, not to pardon easily. With the self-complacency and factitious generosity of a woman who feels herself the object of two violent passions, she was so good as to feel pity for the lover who was left out in the cold, and offered him her hand. Trumeau kissed it with every outward mark of respect, while his lips curled unseen in a smite of mockery. The cousins parted, apparently the best of friends, and on the understanding that Trumeau would be present at the nuptial benediction, which was to be given in a church beyond the town hall, near the house in which the newly-married couple were to live; the house on the Pont Saint-Michel having lately been sold to great advantage.

“On my word,” said Trumeau, as he went off, “it would have been a great mistake to have spoken. I have got that wretch of a Quennebert into my clutches at last; and there is nobody but himself to blame. He is taking the plunge of his own free will, there is no need for me to shove him off the precipice.”

The ceremony took place next day. Quennebert conducted his interesting bride to the altar, she hung with ornaments like the shrine of a saint, and, beaming all over with smiles, looked so ridiculous that the handsome bridegroom reddened to the roots of his hair with shame. Just as they entered the church, a coffin, on which lay a sword, and which was followed by a single mourner, who from his manners and dress seemed to belong to the class of nobles, was carried in by the same door. The wedding guests drew back to let the funeral pass on, the living giving precedence to the dead. The solitary mourner glanced by chance at Quennebert, and started as if the sight of him was painful.

“What an unlucky meeting!” murmured Madame Rapally; “it is sure to be a bad omen.”

“It’s sure to be the exact opposite,” said Quennebert smiling.

The two ceremonies took place simultaneously in two adjoining chapels; the funeral dirges which fell on the widow's ear full of sinister prediction seemed to have quite another meaning for Quennebert, for his features lost their look of care, his wrinkles smoothed themselves out, till the guests, among whom was Trumeau, who did not suspect the secret of his relief from suspense, began to believe, despite their surprise, that he was really rejoiced at obtaining legal possession of the charming Madame Rapally.

As for her, she fled the daylight hours by anticipating the joyful moment when she would have her husband all to herself. When night came, hardly had she entered the nuptial chamber than she uttered a piercing shriek. She had just found and read a paper left on the bed by Trumeau, who before leaving had contrived to glide into the room unseen. Its contents were of terrible import, so terrible that the new-made wife fell unconscious to the ground.

Quennebert, who, without a smile, was absorbed in reflections on the happiness at last within his grasp, heard the noise from the next room, and rushing in, picked up his wife. Catching sight of the paper, he also uttered a cry of anger and astonishment, but in whatever circumstances he found himself he was never long uncertain how to act. Placing Madame Quennebert, still unconscious, on the bed, he called her maid, and, having impressed on her that she was to take every care of her mistress, and above all to tell her from him as soon as she came to herself that there was no cause for alarm, he left the house at once. An hour later, in spite of the efforts of the servants, he forced his way into the presence of Commander de Jars. Holding out the fateful document to him, he said:

"Speak openly, commander! Is it you who in revenge for your long constraint have done this? I can hardly think so, for after what has happened you know that I have nothing to fear any longer. Still, knowing my secret and unable to do it in any other way, have you perchance taken your revenge by an attempt to destroy my future happiness by sowing dissension and disunion between me and my wife?"

The commander solemnly assured him that he had had no hand in bringing about the discovery.

"Then if it's not you, it must be a worthless being called Trumeau, who, with the unerring instinct of jealousy, has run the truth to earth. But he knows only half: I have never been either so much in love or so stupid as to allow myself to be trapped. I have given you my promise to be discreet and not to misuse my power, and as long as was compatible with my own safety I have kept my word. But now you must see that I am bound to defend myself, and to do that I shall be obliged to summon you as a witness. So leave Paris tonight and seek out some safe retreat where no one can find you, for to-morrow I shall speak. Of course if I am quit for a woman's tears, if no more difficult task lies before me than to

soothe a weeping wife, you can return immediately; but if, as is too probable, the blow has been struck by the hand of a rival furious at having been defeated, the matter will not so easily be cut short; the arm of the law will be invoked, and then I must get my head out of the noose which some fingers I know of are itching to draw tight.”

“You are quite right, sir,” answered the commander; “I fear that my influence at court is not strong enough to enable me to brave the matter out. Well, my success has cost me dear, but it has cured me for ever of seeking out similar adventures. My preparations will not take long, and to-morrow’s dawn will find me far from Paris.”

Quennebert bowed and withdrew, returning home to console his Ariadne.

CHAPTER IX

THE accusation hanging over the head of Maitre Quennebert was a very serious one, threatening his life, if proved. But he was not uneasy; he knew himself in possession of facts which would enable him to refute it triumphantly.

The platonic love of Angelique de Guerchi for the handsome Chevalier de Moranges had resulted, as we have seen, in no practical wrong to the Duc de Vitry. After her reconciliation with her lover, brought about by the eminently satisfactory explanations she was able to give of her conduct, which we have already laid before our readers, she did not consider it advisable to shut her heart to his pleadings much longer, and the consequence was that at the end of a year she found herself in a condition which it was necessary to conceal from everyone. To Angelique herself, it is true, the position was not new, and she felt neither grief nor shame, regarding the coming event as a means of making her future more secure by forging a new link in the chain which bound the duke to her. But he, sure that but for himself Angelique would never have strayed from virtue's path, could not endure the thought of her losing her reputation and becoming an object for scandal to point her finger at; so that Angelique, who could not well seem less careful of her good name than he, was obliged to turn his song of woe into a duet, and consent to certain measures being taken.

One evening, therefore, shortly before Maitre Quennebert's marriage, the fair lady set out, ostensibly on a journey which was to last a fortnight or three weeks. In reality she only made a circle in a post-chaise round Paris, which she re-entered at one of the barriers, where the duke awaited her with a sedan-chair. In this she was carried to the very house to which de Jars had brought his pretended nephew after the duel. Angelique, who had to pay dearly for her errors, remained there only twenty-four hours, and then left in her coffin, which was hidden in a cellar under the palace of the Prince de Conde, the body being covered with quicklime. Two days after this dreadful death, Commander de Jars presented himself at the fatal house, and engaged a room in which he installed the chevalier.

This house, which we are about to ask the reader to enter with us, stood at the corner of the rue de la Tixeranderie and the rue Deux-Portes. There was nothing in the exterior of it to distinguish it from any other, unless perhaps two brass plates, one of which bore the words MARIE LEROUX-CONSTANTIN, WIDOW, CERTIFIED MIDWIFE, and the other CLAUDE PERREGAUD, SURGEON. These plates were affixed to the blank wall in the rue de la Tixeranderie, the windows of the rooms on that side looking into the courtyard. The house door, which opened directly on the first steps of a narrow winding stair, was on the other side, just beyond the low arcade under whose vaulted roof access was gained to that end of the rue des Deux-Portes. This house, though dirty, mean, and out of repair, received many wealthy visitors, whose brilliant equipages waited for them in the neighbouring streets. Often in the night great ladies crossed its threshold under assumed names and remained there for several days, during which La Constantin and Claude Perregaud, by an infamous use of their professional knowledge, restored their clients to an outward appearance of honour, and enabled them to maintain their reputation for virtue. The first and second floors contained a dozen rooms in which these abominable mysteries were practised. The large apartment, which served as waiting and consultation room, was oddly furnished, being crowded with objects of strange and unfamiliar form. It resembled at once the operating-room of a surgeon, the laboratory of a chemist and alchemist, and the den of a sorcerer. There, mixed up together in the greatest confusion, lay instruments of all sorts, caldrons and retorts, as well as books containing the most absurd ravings of the human mind. There were the twenty folio volumes of Albertus Magnus; the works of his disciple, Thomas de Cantopre, of Alchindus, of Averroes, of Avicenna, of Alchabitius, of David de Plaine-Campy, called L'Edelphe, surgeon to Louis XIII and author of the celebrated book *The Morbific Hydra Exterminated by the Chemical Hercules*. Beside a bronze head, such as the monk Roger Bacon possessed, which answered all the questions that were addressed to it and foretold the future by means of a magic mirror and the combination of the rules of perspective, lay an eggshell, the same which had been used by Caret, as d'Aubigne tells us, when making men out of germs, mandrakes, and crimson silk, over a slow fire. In the presses, which had sliding-doors fastening with secret springs, stood Jars filled with noxious drugs, the power of which was but too efficacious; in prominent positions, facing each other, hung two portraits, one representing Hierophilos, a Greek physician, and the other Agnodice his pupil, the first Athenian midwife.

For several years already La Constantin and Claude Perregaud had carried on their criminal practices without interference. A number of persons were of course in the secret, but their interests kept them silent, and the two accomplices had at last persuaded themselves that they were perfectly safe. One evening,

however, Perregaud came home, his face distorted by terror and trembling in every limb. He had been warned while out that the suspicions of the authorities had been aroused in regard to him and La Constantin. It seemed that some little time ago, the Vicars-General had sent a deputation to the president of the chief court of justice, having heard from their priests that in one year alone six hundred women had avowed in the confessional that they had taken drugs to prevent their having children. This had been sufficient to arouse the vigilance of the police, who had set a watch on Perregaud's house, with the result that that very night a raid was to be made on it. The two criminals took hasty counsel together, but, as usual under such circumstances, arrived at no practical conclusions. It was only when the danger was upon them that they recovered their presence of mind. In the dead of night loud knocking at the street door was heard, followed by the command to open in the name of the king.

"We can yet save ourselves!" exclaimed surgeon, with a sudden flash of inspiration.

Rushing into the room where the pretended chevalier was lying, he called out—

"The police are coming up! If they discover your sex you are lost, and so am I. Do as I tell you."

At a sign from him, La Constantin went down and opened the door. While the rooms on the first floor were being searched, Perregaud made with a lancet a superficial incision in the chevalier's right arm, which gave very little pain, and bore a close resemblance to a sword-cut. Surgery and medicine were at that time so inextricably involved, required such apparatus, and bristled with such scientific absurdities, that no astonishment was excited by the extraordinary collection of instruments which loaded the tables and covered the floors below: even the titles of certain treatises which there had been no time to destroy, awoke no suspicion.

Fortunately for the surgeon and his accomplice, they had only one patient—the chevalier—in their house when the descent was made. When the chevalier's room was reached, the first thing which the officers of the law remarked were the hat, spurred boots, and sword of the patient. Claude Perregaud hardly looked up as the room was invaded; he only made a sign to those—who came in to be quiet, and went on dressing the wound. Completely taken in, the officer in command merely asked the name of the patient and the cause of the wound. La Constantin replied that it' was the young Chevalier de Moranges, nephew of Commander de Jars, who had had an affair of honour that same night, and being slightly wounded had been brought thither by his uncle hardly an hour before. These questions and the apparently trustworthy replies elicited by them being duly taken down, the uninvited visitors retired, having discovered nothing to justify their visit.

All might have been well had there been nothing the matter but the wound on the chevalier's sword-arm. But at the moment when Perregaud gave it to him the poisonous nostrums employed by La Constantin were already working in his blood. Violent fever ensued, and in three days the chevalier was dead. It was his funeral which had met Quennebert's wedding party at the church door.

Everything turned out as Quennebert had anticipated. Madame Quennebert, furious at the deceit which had been practised on her, refused to listen to her husband's justification, and Trumeau, not letting the grass grow under his feet, hastened the next day to launch an accusation of bigamy against the notary; for the paper which had been found in the nuptial chamber was nothing less than an attested copy of a contract of marriage concluded between Quennebert and Josephine-Charlotte Boullenois. It was by the merest chance that Trumeau had come on the record of the marriage, and he now challenged his rival to produce a certificate of the death of his first wife. Charlotte Boullenois, after two years of marriage, had demanded a deed of separation, which Quennebert had opposed. While the case was going on she had retired to the convent of La Raquette, where her intrigue with de Jars began. The commander easily induced her to let herself be carried off by force. He then concealed his conquest by causing her to adopt male attire, a mode of dress which accorded marvellously well with her peculiar tastes and rather masculine frame. At first Quennebert had instituted an active but fruitless search for his missing wife, but soon became habituated to his state of enforced single blessedness, enjoying to the full the liberty it brought with it. But his business had thereby suffered, and once having made the acquaintance of Madame Rapally, he cultivated it assiduously, knowing her fortune would be sufficient to set him straight again with the world, though he was obliged to exercise the utmost caution and reserve in his intercourse with her, as she on her side displayed none of these qualities. At last, however, matters came to such a pass that he must either go to prison or run the risk of a second marriage. So he reluctantly named a day for the ceremony, resolving to leave Paris with Madame Rapally as soon as he had settled with his creditors.

In the short interval which ensued, and while Trumeau was hugging the knowledge of the discovery he had made, a stroke of luck had brought the pretended chevalier to La Constantin. As Quennebert had kept an eye on de Jars and was acquainted with all his movements, he was aware of everything that happened at Perregaud's, and as Charlotte's death preceded his second marriage by one day, he knew that no serious consequences would ensue from the legal proceedings taken against him. He produced the declarations made by Mademoiselle de Guerchi and the commander, and had the body exhumed. Extraordinary and improbable as his defence appeared at first to be, the exhumation proved the truth of his assertions. These revelations, however, drew the eye of justice again

on Perregaud and his partner in crime, and this time their guilt was brought home to them. They were condemned by parliamentary decree to “be hanged by the neck till they were dead, on a gallows erected for that purpose at the cross roads of the Croix-du-Trahoir; their bodies to remain there for twenty-four hours, then to be cut down and brought back to Paris, where they were to be exposed on a gibbet,” etc., etc.

It was proved that they had amassed immense fortunes in the exercise of their infamous calling. The entries in the books seized at their house, though sparse, would have led, if made public, to scandals, involving many in high places; it was therefore judged best to limit the accusation to the two deaths by blood-poisoning of Angelique de Querchi and Charlotte Boullenois.

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LA CONSTANTIN ***

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