

FRANÇOIS THE WAIF
[THE COUNTRY WAIF]

GEORGE SAND

[*Translated by J.M.S.*]

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PREFATORY NOTE

FRANÇOIS LE CHAMPI, a pretty idyl that tells of homely affections, self-devotion, "humble cares and delicate fears," opens a little vista into that Arcadia to which, the poet says, we were all born. It offers many difficulties to the translator. It is a rustic tale, put into the mouths of peasants, who relate it with a primitive simplicity, sweet and full of sentiment in the French, but prone to degenerate into mawkishness and monotony when turned into English. Great care has been taken to keep the English of this version simple and idiomatic, and yet religiously to avoid any breach of faith toward the author. It is hoped that, though the original pure and limpid waters have necessarily contracted some stain by being forced into another channel, they may yet yield refreshment to those thirsty souls who cannot seek them at the fountain-head.

J. M. S.

Stockbridge, January, 1894.

PREFACE

FRANÇOIS LE CHAMPI appeared for the first time in the *feuilleton* of the "*Journal des Débats*." Just as the plot of my story was reaching its development, another more serious development was announced in the first column of the same newspaper. It was the final downfall of the July Monarchy, in the last days of February, 1848.

This catastrophe was naturally very prejudicial to my story, the publication of which was interrupted and delayed, and not finally completed, if I remember correctly, until the end of a month. For those of my readers who are artists either by profession or instinct, and are interested in the details of the construction of works of art, I shall add to my introduction that, some days before the conversation of which that introduction is the outcome, I took a walk through the *Chemin aux Napes*. The word *nape*, which, in the figurative language of that part of the country, designates the beautiful plant called *nénufar*, or *nymphaea*, is happily descriptive of the broad leaves that lie upon the surface of the water, as a cloth (*nappe*) upon a table; but I prefer to write it with a single *p* and to trace its derivation from *napée*, thus leaving unchanged its mythological origin.

The *Chemin aux Napes*, which probably none of you, my dear readers, will ever see, as it leads to nothing that can repay you for the trouble of passing through so much mire, is a break-neck path, skirting along a ditch where, in the muddy water, grow the most beautiful *nymphaeae* in the world, more fragrant than lilies, whiter than camellias, purer than the vesture of virgins, in the midst of the lizards and other reptiles that crawl about the mud and flowers, while the kingfisher darts like living lightning along the banks, and skims with a fiery track the rank and luxuriant vegetation of the sewer.

A child six or seven years old, mounted bare-back upon a loose horse, made the animal leap the hedge behind me, and then, letting himself slide to the ground, left his shaggy colt in the pasture, and returned to try jumping over the barrier which he had so lightly crossed on horseback a minute before. It was not such an easy task for his little legs; I helped him, and had with him a conversation similar to that between the miller's wife and the foundling, related in the beginning of "The Waif." When I questioned him about his age, which he did not know, he literally delivered himself of the brilliant reply that he was two years old. He knew neither his own name, nor that of his parents, nor of the place he lived in; all that he knew was to cling on an unbroken colt, as a bird clings to a branch shaken by the storm.

I have had educated several foundlings of both sexes, who have turned out well physically and morally. It is no less certain, however, that these forlorn children are apt, in rural districts, to become ban-

dits, owing to their utter lack of education. Intrusted to the care of the poorest people, because of the insufficient pittance assigned to them, they often practise, for the benefit of their adopted parents, the shameful calling of beggars. Would it not be possible to increase this pittance on condition that the foundlings shall never beg, even at the doors of their neighbors and friends?

I have also learned by experience that nothing is more difficult than to teach self-respect and the love of work to children who have already begun understandingly to live upon alms.

GEORGE SAND.

Nohant, May 20, 1852.

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INTRODUCTION

R*** AND I were coming home from our walk by the light of the moon which faintly silvered the dusky country lanes. It was a mild autumn evening, and the sky was slightly overcast; we observed the resonance of the air peculiar to the season, and a certain mystery spread over the face of nature. At the approach of the long winter sleep, it seems as if every creature and thing stealthily agreed to enjoy what is left of life and animation before the deadly torpor of the frost; and as if the whole creation, in order to cheat the march of time, and to avoid being detected and interrupted in the last frolics of its festival, advanced without sound or apparent motion toward its orgies in the night. The birds give out stifled cries instead of their joyous summer warblings. The cricket of the fields sometimes chirps inadvertently; but it soon stops again, and carries elsewhere its song or its wail. The plants hastily breathe out their last perfume, which is all the sweeter for being more delicate and less profuse. The yellowing leaves now no longer rustle in the breeze, and the flocks and herds graze in silence without cries of love or combat.

My friend and I walked quietly along, and our involuntary thoughtfulness made us silent and attentive to the softened beauty of nature, and to the enchanting harmony of her last chords, which were dying away in an imperceptible pianissimo. Autumn is a sad and sweet *andante*, which makes an admirable preparation for the solemn *adagio* of winter.

“It is all so peaceful,” said my friend at last, for, in spite of our silence, he had followed my thoughts as I followed his; “everything seems absorbed in a reverie so foreign and so indifferent to the labors, cares, and preoccupations of man, that I wonder what expression, what color, and what form of art and poetry human intelligence could give at this moment to the face of nature. In order to explain better to you the end of my inquiry, I may compare the evening, the sky, and the landscape, dimmed, and yet harmonious and complete, to the soul of a wise and religious peasant, who labors and profits by his toil, who rejoices in the possession of the life to which he is born, without the need, the longing, or the means of revealing and expressing his inner life. I try to place myself in the heart of the mystery of this natural rustic life—I, who am civilized, who cannot enjoy by instinct alone, and who am always tormented by the desire of giving an account of my contemplation, or of my meditation, to myself and to others.

“Then, too,” continued my friend, “I am trying to find out what relation can be established between my intelligence, which is too active, and that of the peasant, which is not active enough; just as I

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had enough and too much of all this sort of thing.”

“Throw what?” asked Madeleine, in amazement.

“Throw what! Then you do not dare to say throw *whom?*”

“Good God! no; I know nothing about it,” said she. “Speak, if you want me to understand you.”

“You will make me lose my temper,” cried Cadet Blanchet, bellowing like a bull. “I tell you that waif is not wanted in my house, and if he is still here by to-morrow morning, I shall turn him out of doors by main force, unless he prefer to take a turn under my mill-wheel.”

“Your words are cruel, and your purpose is very foolish, Master Blanchet,” said Madeleine, who could not help turning as white as her cap. “You will ruin your business if you send the boy away; for you will never find another who will work so well, and be satisfied with such small wages. What has the poor child done to make you want to drive him away so cruelly?”

“He makes a fool of me, I tell you, Madame Wife, and I do not intend to be the laughing-stock of the country. He has made himself master of my house, and deserves to be paid with a cudgel for what he has done.”

It was some time before Madeleine could understand what her husband meant. She had not the slightest conception of it, and brought forward all the reasons she could think of to appease him and prevent his persisting in his caprice.

It was all labor lost, for he only grew the more furious; and when he saw how grieved she was to lose her good servant François, he had a fresh access of jealousy, and spoke so brutally that his meaning dawned on her at last, and she began to cry from mortification, injured pride, and bitter sorrow.

This did not mend matters; Blanchet swore that she was in love with this bundle of goods from the asylum, that he blushed for her, and that if she did not turn the waif out of doors without delay, he would kill him and grind him to powder.

Thereupon she answered more haughtily than was her wont, that he had the right to send away whom he chose from his house, but not to wound and insult his faithful wife, and that she would complain to God and all the saints of Heaven of his cruel and intolerable injustice. Thus, in spite of herself, she came gradually to reproach him with his evil behavior, and confronted him with the plain fact that if a man is dissatisfied with his own cap, he tries to throw his neighbor's into the mud.

It went from bad to worse, and when Blanchet finally perceived that he was in the wrong, anger was his only resource. He threatened to shut Madeleine's mouth with a blow, and would have done so, if Jeannie had not heard the noise and come running in between them, without understanding what the matter was, but quite pale and discomfited by so much wrangling. When Blanchet ordered him

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away, the child cried, and his father took occasion to say that he was ill-brought-up, a cry-baby, and a coward, and that his mother would never be able to make anything out of him. Then Blanchet plucked up courage, and rose, brandishing his stick, and swearing that he would kill the waif.

When Madeleine saw that he was mad with passion, she threw herself boldly in front of him, and he, disconcerted and taken by surprise, allowed her her way. She snatched his stick out of his hands and threw it far off into the river, and then, standing her ground, she said:

“You shall not ruin yourself by obeying this wicked impulse. Reflect that calamity is swift to follow a man who loses his self-control, and if you have no feeling for others, think of yourself and the probable consequences of a single bad action. For a long time you have been guiding your life amiss, my husband, and now you are hastening faster and faster along a dangerous road. I shall prevent you, at least for to-day, from committing a worse crime, which would bring its punishment both in this world and the next. You shall not kill; return to where you came from, rather than persevere in trying to revenge yourself for an affront which was not offered. Go away; I command you to do so in your own interest, and this is the first time in my life that I have ever commanded you to do anything. You will obey me, because you will see that I still observe the deference I owe you. I swear to you on my word and honor that the waif shall not be here to-morrow, and that you may come back without any fear of meeting him.”

Having said this, Madeleine opened the door of the house for her husband, and Cadet Blanchet, baffled by the novelty of her manner, and pleased in the main to receive her submission without danger to his person, clapped his hat upon his head, and without another word, returned to Sévère. He did not fail to boast to her and to others that he had administered a sound thrashing to his wife and to the waif; but as this was not true, Sévère's pleasure evaporated in smoke.

When Madeleine Blanchet was alone again, she sent Jeannie to drive the sheep and the goat to pasture, and went off to a little lonely nook beside the mill-dam, where the earth was much eaten away by the force of the current, and the place so crowded with a fresh growth of branches above the old tree-stumps that you could not see two steps away from you. She was in the habit of going there to pray, for nobody could interrupt her, and she could be as entirely concealed behind the tall weeds as a water-hen in its nest of green leaves.

As soon as she reached there, she sank on her knees to seek in prayer the relief she so needed. But though she hoped this would bring great comfort, she could think of nothing but the poor waif, who was to be sent away, and who loved her so that he would die of

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grief. So nothing came to her lips, except that she was most unhappy to lose her only support and separate herself from the child of her heart. Then she cried so long and so bitterly that she was suffocated, and, falling full length along the grass, lay unconscious for more than an hour, and it is a miracle that she ever came to herself.

At nightfall she made an effort to collect her powers; and when she heard Jeannie come home singing with the flock, she rose with difficulty and set about preparing supper. Shortly afterward, she heard the noise of the return of the oxen, who were drawing home the oak-tree that Blanchet had bought, and Jeannie ran joyfully to meet his friend François, whose presence he had missed all day. Poor little Jeannie had been grieved for a moment by his father's cruel behaviour to his dear mother, and he had run off to cry in the fields, without knowing what the quarrel could be. But a child's sorrow lasts no longer than the dew of the morning, and he had already forgotten his trouble. He took François by the hand, and skipping as gaily as a little partridge, brought him to Madeleine.

There was no need for the waif to look twice to see that her eyes were reddened and her face blanched.

"Good God," thought he, "some misfortune has happened." Then he turned pale too, and trembled, fixing his eyes on Madeleine, and expecting her to speak to him. She made him sit down, and set his meal before him in silence, but he could not swallow a mouthful. Jeannie eat and prattled on by himself; he felt no uneasiness, for his mother kissed him from time to time and encouraged him to make a good supper.

When he had gone to bed, and the servant was putting the room in order, Madeleine went out, and beckoned François to follow her. She walked through the meadow as far as the fountain, and then calling all her courage to her aid, she said:

"My child, misfortune has fallen upon you and me, and God strikes us both a heavy blow. You see how much I suffer, and out of love for me, try to strengthen your own heart, for if you do not uphold me, I cannot tell what will become of me."

François guessed nothing, although he at once supposed that the trouble came from Monsieur Blanchet.

"What are you saying?" said he to Madeleine, kissing her hands as if she were his mother. "How can you think that I shall not have courage to comfort and sustain you? Am not I your servant for as long as I have to stay upon the earth? Am not I your child, who will work for you, and is now strong enough to keep you from want. Leave Monsieur Blanchet alone, let him squander his money, since it is his choice. I shall feed and clothe both you and our Jeannie. If I must leave you for a time, I shall go and hire myself out, though not far from here, so that I can see you every day, and come and spend Sundays with you. I am strong enough now to work and earn all the money you need. You are so careful and live on so little.

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Now you will not be able to deny yourself so many things for others, and you will be the better for it. Come, Madame Blanchet, my dear mother, calm yourself and do not cry, or I think I shall die of grief.”

When Madeleine saw that he had not understood, and that she must tell him everything, she commended her soul to God, and made up her mind to inflict this great pain upon him.

CHAPTER X

“NO, François, my son,” said she, “that is not it. My husband is not yet ruined, as far as I know anything of his affairs, and if it were only the fear of want, you would not see me so unhappy. Nobody need dread poverty who has courage to work. Since you must hear why it is that I am so sick at heart, let me tell you that Monsieur Blanchet is in a fury against you, and will no longer endure your presence in his house.”

“Is that it?” cried François, springing up. “He may as well kill me outright, as I cannot live after such a blow. Yes, let him put an end to me, for he has long disliked me and longed to have me die, I know. Let me see, where is he? I will go to him and say, ‘Tell me why you drive me away, and perhaps I can prove to you that you are mistaken in your reasons. But if you persist, say so, that—that—’ I do not know what I am saying, Madeleine; truly, I do not know; I have lost my senses, and I can no longer see clearly; my heart is pierced and my head is turning. I am sure I shall either die or go mad.”

The poor waif threw himself on the ground, and struck his head with his fists, as he had done when Zabelle had tried to take him back to the asylum.

When Madeleine saw this, her high spirit returned. She took him by the hands and arms, and shaking him, forced him to listen to her.

“If you have no more resignation and strength of will than a child,” said she, “you do not deserve my love, and you will shame me for bringing you up as my son. Get up. You are a man in years, and a man should not roll on the ground, as you are doing. Listen, François, and tell me whether you love me enough to go without seeing me for a time. Look, my child, it is for my peace and good name, for otherwise my husband will subject me to annoyance and humiliation. So you must leave me to-day, out of love, just as I have kept you, out of love, to this day; for love shows itself in different ways according to time and circumstance. You must leave me without delay, because, in order to prevent Monsieur Blanchet from committing a crime, I promised that you should be gone to-morrow morning. Tomorrow is Saint John’s day, and you must go and find a place; but not too near at hand, for if we were able to see each other every day, it would be all the worse in Monsieur Blanchet’s mind.”

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“What has he in his mind, Madeleine? Of what does he complain? How have I behaved amiss? Does he think that you rob the house to help me? That cannot be, because now I am one of his household. I eat only enough to satisfy my hunger, and I do not steal a pin from him. Perhaps he thinks that I take my wages, and that I cost him too much. Very well, let me follow out my purpose of going to explain to him that since my poor mother Zabelle died, I have never received a single penny; or, if you do not want me to tell him this—and indeed if he knew it, he would try to make you pay back all the money due on my wages that you have spent in charity—well, I will make him this proposition for the next year. I will offer to remain in your service for nothing. In this way he cannot think me a burden, and will allow me to stay with you.”

“No, no, no, François,” cried Madeleine, hastily, “it is not possible; and if you said this to him, he would fly into such a rage with you and me that worse would come of it.”

“But why?” asked François; “what is he angry about? Is it only for the pleasure of making us unhappy that he pretends to mistrust me?”

“My child, do not ask the reason of his anger for I cannot tell you. I should be too much ashamed, and you had better not even try to guess; but I can assure you that your duty toward me is to go away. You are tall and strong, and can do without me; and you will earn your living better elsewhere, as long as you will take nothing from me. All sons have to leave their mothers when they go out to work, and many go far away. You must go like the rest, and I shall grieve as all mothers do. I shall weep for you and think of you, and pray God morning and evening to shield you from all ill.”

“Yes, and you will take another servant who will serve you ill, who will take no care of your son or your property, who will perhaps hate you, if Monsieur Blanchet orders him not to obey you, and will repeat and misrepresent to him all the kind things you do. You may be unhappy, and I shall not be with you to protect and comfort you. Ah! you think that I have no courage because I am miserable? You believe that I am thinking only of myself, and tell me that I shall earn more money elsewhere! I am not thinking of myself at all. What is it to me whether I gain or lose? I do not even care to know whether I shall be able to control my despair. I shall live or die as may please God, and it makes no difference to me, as long as I am prevented from devoting my life to you. What gives me intolerable anguish is that I see trouble ahead for you. You will be trampled upon in your turn, and if Monsieur Blanchet puts me out of the way, it is that he may the more easily walk over your rights.”

“Even if God permits this,” said Madeleine, “I must bear what I cannot help. It is wrong to make one’s fate worse by kicking against the pricks. You know that I am very unhappy, and you may imagine how much more wretched I should be if I learned that you were ill,

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disgusted with life, and unwilling to be comforted. But if I can find any consolation in my affliction, it will be because I hear that you are well behaved, and keep up your health and courage out of love for me.”

This last excellent reason gave Madeleine the advantage. The waif gave in, and promised on his knees, as if in the confessional, that he would do his best to bear his sorrow bravely.

“Then,” said he, as he wiped his eyes, “if I must go to-morrow morning, I shall say good-by to you now, my mother Madeleine. Farewell, for this life, perhaps; for you do not tell me if I shall ever see you and talk with you again. If you do not think I shall ever have such happiness, do not say so, for I should lose courage to live. Let me keep the hope of meeting you one day here by this clear fountain, where I met you the first time nearly eleven years ago. From that day to this, I have had nothing but happiness; I must not forget all the joys that God has given me through you, but shall keep them in remembrance, so that they may help me to bear, from to-morrow onward, all that time and fate may bring. I carry away a heart pierced and benumbed with anguish, knowing that you are unhappy, and that in me you lose your best friend. You tell me that your distress will be greater if I do not take heart, so I shall sustain myself as best I may, by thoughts of you, and I value your affection too much to forfeit it by cowardice. Farewell, Madame Blanchet; leave me here alone a little while; I shall feel better when I have cried my fill. If any of my tears fall into this fountain, you will think of me whenever you come to wash here. I am going to gather some of this mint to perfume my linen. I must soon pack my bundle; and as long as I smell the sweet fragrance among my clothes, I shall imagine that I am here and see you before me. Farewell, farewell, my dear mother; I shall not go back with you to the house. I might kiss little Jeannie, without waking him, but I have not the heart. You must kiss him for me; and to keep him from crying, please tell him to-morrow that I am coming back soon. So, while he is expecting me, he will have time to forget me a little; and then later, you must talk to him of poor François, so that he may not forget me too much. Give me your blessing, Madeleine, as you gave it to me on the day of my first communion, for it will bring with it the grace of God.”

The poor waif knelt down before Madeleine, entreating her to forgive him if he had ever offended her against his will.

Madeleine declared that she had nothing to forgive him, and that she wished her blessing could prove as beneficent as that of God.

“Now,” said François, “that I am again a waif, and that nobody will ever love me any more, will not you kiss me as you once kissed me, in kindness, on the day of my first communion? I shall need to remember this, so that I may be very sure that you still love me in your heart, like a mother.”

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Madeleine kissed the waif in the same pure spirit as when he was a little child. Yet anybody who had seen her would have fancied there was some justification for Monsieur Blanchet's anger, and would have blamed this faithful woman, who had no thought of ill, and whose action could not have displeased the Virgin Mary.

"Nor me, either," put in the priest's servant.

"And me still less," returned the hemp-dresser. Then he resumed:

She returned to the house, but not to sleep. She heard François come in and do up his bundle in the next room, and she heard him go out again at daybreak. She did not get up till he had gone some little distance, so as not to weaken his courage, but when she heard his steps on the little bridge, she opened the door a crack, without allowing herself to be seen, so that she might catch one more last glimpse of him. She saw him stop and look back at the river and mill, as if to bid them farewell. Then he strode away very rapidly, after first picking a branch of poplar and putting it in his hat, as men do when they go out for hire, to show that they are trying to find a place.

Master Blanchet came in toward noon, but did not speak till his wife said:

"You must go out and hire another boy for your mill, for François has gone, and you are without a servant."

"That is quite enough, wife," answered Blanchet. "I shall go, but I warn you not to expect another young fellow."

As these were all the thanks he gave her for her submission, her feelings were so much wounded that she could not help showing it.

"Cadet Blanchet," said she, "I have obeyed your will; I have sent an excellent boy away without a motive, and I must confess that I did so with regret. I do not ask for your gratitude, but, in my turn, I have something to command you, and that is not to insult me, for I do not deserve it."

She said this in a manner so new to Blanchet, that it produced its effect on him.

"Come, wife," said he, holding out his hand to her, "let us make a truce to all this, and think no more about it. Perhaps I may have been a little hasty in what I said; but you see I had my own reasons for not trusting the waif. The devil is the father of all those children, and he is always after them. They may be good in some ways, but they are sure to be scamps in others. I know that it will be hard for me to find another such hard worker for a servant; but the devil, who is a good father, had whispered wantonness into that boy's ear, and I know one woman who had a complaint against him."

"That woman is not your wife," rejoined Madeleine, "and she may be lying. Even if she told the truth, that would be no cause for

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suspecting me.”

“Do I suspect you?” said Blanchet, shrugging his shoulders. “My grudge was only against him, and now that he has gone, I have forgotten about it. If I said anything displeasing to you, you must take it in jest.”

“Such jests are not to my taste,” answered Madeleine. “Keep them for those who like them.”

CHAPTER XI

MADELEINE bore her sorrow very well at first. She heard from her new servant, who had met with François, that he had been hired for eighteen pistoles a year by a farmer, who had a good mill and some land over toward Aigurande. She was happy to know that he had found a good place, and did her utmost to return to her occupations, without grieving too much. In spite of her efforts, however, she fell ill for a long time of a low fever, and pined quietly away, without anybody’s noticing it. François was right when he said that in him she lost her best friend. She was sad and lonely, and, having nobody to talk with, she petted all the more her son Jeannie, who was a very nice boy, as gentle as a lamb.

But he was too young to understand all that she had to say of François, and, besides, he showed her no such kind cares and attentions as the waif had done at his age. Jeannie loved his mother, more even than children ordinarily do, because she was such a mother as is hard to find; but he never felt the same wonder and emotion about her as François did. He thought it quite natural to be so tenderly loved and caressed. He received it as his portion, and counted on it as his due, whereas the waif had never been unmindful of the slightest kindness from her, and made his gratitude so apparent in his behavior, his words and looks, his blushes and tears, that when Madeleine was with him she forgot that her home was bereft of peace, love, and comfort.

When she was left again forlorn, all this evil returned upon her, and she meditated long on the sorrows which François’s affectionate companionship had kept in abeyance. Now she had nobody to read with her, to help her in caring for the poor, to pray with her, or even now and then to exchange a few frank, good-natured jests with her. Nothing that she saw or did gave her any more pleasure, and her thoughts wandered back to the time when she had with her such a kind, gentle, and loving friend. Whether she went into her vineyard, into her orchard, or into the mill, there was not a spot as large as a pocket-handkerchief, that she had not passed over ten thousand times, with this child clinging to her skirts, or this faithful, zealous friend at her side. It was as if she had lost a son of great worth and promise; and it was in vain she heaped her affection on the one who

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still remained, for half her heart was left untenanted.

Her husband saw that she was wearing away, and felt some pity for her languid, melancholy looks. He feared lest she might fall seriously ill, and was loath to lose her, as she was a skilful manager, and saved on her side as much as he wasted on his. As Sévère would not allow him to attend to his mill, he knew that his business would go to pieces if Madeleine no longer had the charge of it, and though he continued to upbraid her from habit, and complained of her lack of care, he knew that nobody else would serve him better.

He exerted himself to contrive some means of curing her of her sickness and sorrow, and just at this juncture it happened that his uncle died. His youngest sister had been under this uncle's guardianship, and now she fell into his own care. He thought, at first, of sending the girl to live with Sévère, but his other relations made him ashamed of this project; and, besides, when Sévère found that the girl was only just fifteen, and promised to be as fair as the day, she had no further desire to be intrusted with such a charge, and told Blanchet that she was afraid of the risks attendant on the care of a young girl.

So Blanchet—who saw that he should gain something by being his sister's guardian, as the uncle, who had brought her up, had left her money in his will; and who was unwilling to place her with any of his other relations—brought her home to his mill, and requested his wife to treat her as a sister and companion, to teach her to work, and let her share in the household labors, and yet to make the task so easy that she should have no desire to go elsewhere.

Madeleine acquiesced gladly in this family arrangement. She liked Mariette Blanchet from the first for the sake of her beauty, the very cause for which Sévère had disliked her. She believed, too, that a sweet disposition and a good heart always go with a pretty face, and she received the young girl not so much as a sister as a daughter, who might perhaps take the place of poor François.

During all this time poor François bore his trouble with as much patience as he had, and this was none at all; for never was man nor boy visited with so heavy an affliction. He fell ill, in the first place, and this was almost fortunate for him, for it proved the kindness of his master's family, who would not allow him to be sent to the hospital, but kept him at home, and tended him carefully. The miller, his present master, was most unlike Cadet Blanchet, and his daughter, who was about thirty years old, and not yet married, had a reputation for her charities and good conduct.

These good people plainly saw, too, in spite of the waif's illness, that they had found a treasure in him.

He was so strong and well-built that he threw off his disease more quickly than most people, and though he set to work before he was cured, he had no relapse. His conscience spurred him on to make up for lost time and repay his master and mistress for their

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kindness. He still felt ill for more than two months, and every morning, when he began his work, he was as giddy as if he had just fallen from the roof of a house, but little by little he warmed up to it, and never told the trouble it cost him to begin. The miller and his daughter were so well pleased with him that they intrusted him with the management of many things which were far above his position. When they found that he could read and write, they made him keep the accounts, which had never been kept before, and the need of which had often involved the mill in difficulties. In short, he was as well off as was compatible with his misfortune; and as he had the prudence to refrain from saying that he was a foundling, nobody reproached him with his origin.

But neither the kind treatment he received, nor his work, nor his illness, could make him forget Madeleine, his dear mill at Cormouer, his little Jeannie, and the graveyard where Zabelle was lying. His heart was always far away, and on Sundays he did nothing but brood, and so had no rest from the labors of the week. He was at such a distance from his home, which was more than six leagues off, that no news from it ever reached him. He thought at first that he would become used to this, but he was consumed with anxiety, and tried to invent means of finding out about Madeleine, at least twice a year. He went to the fairs for the purpose of meeting some acquaintance from the old place, and if he saw one, he made inquiries about all his friends, beginning prudently with those for whom he cared least, and leading up to Madeleine, who interested him most; and thus he had some tidings of her and her family.

“But it is growing late, my friends, and I am going to sleep in the middle of my story. I shall go on with it to-morrow, if you care to hear it. Good night, all.”

The hemp-dresser went off to bed, and the farmer lit his lantern and took Mother Monique back to the parsonage, for she was an old woman, and could not see her way clearly.

CHAPTER XII

THE next evening we all met again at the farm, and the hemp-dresser resumed his story:

François had been living about three years in the country of Aigurande, near Villechiron, in a handsome mill which is called Haut-Champault, or Bas-Champault, or Frechampault, for Champault is as common a name in that country as in our own. I have been twice into those parts, and know what a fine country it is. The peasants there are richer, and better lodged and fed; there is more business there, and though the earth is less fertile, it is more productive. The land is more broken; it is pierced by rocks and washed by torrents, but it is fair and pleasant to the eye. The trees are marvelously beau-

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tiful, and two streams, clear as crystal, rush noisily along through their deep-cut channels.

The mills there are more considerable than ours, and the one where François lived was among the richest and best. One winter day, his master, by name Jean Vertaud, said to him:

“François, my servant and friend, I have something to say to you, and I ask for your attention.

“You and I have known each other for some little time. I have done very well in my business, and my mill has prospered; I have succeeded better than others of my trade; in short, my fortune has increased, and I do not conceal from myself that I owe it all to you. You have served me not as a servant, but as a friend and relation. You have devoted yourself to my interests as if they were your own. You have managed my property better than I knew how to do myself, and have shown yourself possessed of more knowledge and intelligence than I. I am not suspicious by nature, and I should have been often cheated if you had not kept watch of all the people and things about me. Those who were in the habit of abusing my good nature, complained, and you bore the brunt boldly, though more than once you exposed yourself to dangers, which you escaped only by your courage and gentleness. What I like most about you is that your heart is as good as your head and hand. You love order, but not avarice. You do not allow yourself to be duped, as I do, and yet you are as fond of helping your neighbor as I can be. You were the first to advise me to be generous in real cases of need, but you were quick to hold me back from giving to those who were merely making a pretense of distress. You have sense and originality. The ideas you put into practice are always successful, and whatever you touch turns to good account.

“I am well pleased with you, and I should like, on my part, to do something for you. Tell me frankly what you want, for I shall refuse you nothing.”

“I do not know why you say this,” answered François. “You must think, Master Vertaud, that I am dissatisfied with you, but it is not so. You may be sure of that.”

“I do not say that you are dissatisfied, but you do not generally look like a happy man. Your spirits are not good. You never laugh and jest, nor take any amusement. You are as sober as if you were in mourning for somebody.”

“Do you blame me for this, master? I shall never be able to please you in this respect, for I am fond neither of the bottle nor of the dance; I go neither to the tavern nor to balls; I know no funny stories nor nonsense. I care for nothing which might distract me from my duty.”

“You deserve to be held in high esteem for this, my boy, and I am not going to blame you for it. I mention it, because I believe that there is something on your mind. Perhaps you think that you are

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taking a great deal of trouble on behalf of other people, and are but poorly paid for it.”

“You are wrong in thinking so, Master Vertaud. My reward is as great as I could wish, and perhaps I could never have found elsewhere the high wages which you are willing to allow me, of your own free will, and without any urging from me. You have increased them, too, every year, and, on Saint John’s day last, you fixed them at a hundred crowns, which is a very large price for you to pay. If you suffer any inconvenience from it, I assure you that I should gladly relinquish it.”

CHAPTER XIII

“COME, come, François, we do not understand each other,” returned Master Jean Vertaud; “and I do not know how to take you. You are no fool, and I think my hints have been broad enough; but you are so shy that I will help you out still further. Are not you in love with some girl about here?”

“No, master,” was the waif’s honest answer.

“Truly?”

“I give you my word.”

“Don’t you know one who might please you, if you were able to pay your court to her?”

“I have no desire to marry.”

“What an idea! You are too young to answer for that. What’s your reason?”

“My reason? Do you really care to know, master?”

“Yes, because I feel an interest in you.”

“Then I will tell you; there is no occasion for me to hide it: I have never known father or mother. And there is something I have never told you; I was not obliged to do so; but if you had asked me, I should have told you the truth: I am a waif; I come from the foundling asylum.”

“Is it possible?” exclaimed Jean Vertaud, somewhat taken aback by this confession. “I should never have thought it.”

“Why should you never have thought it? You do not answer, Master Vertaud. Very well, I shall answer for you. You saw that I was a good fellow, and you could not believe that a waif could be like that. It is true, then, that nobody has confidence in waifs, and that there is a prejudice against them. It is not just or humane; but since such a prejudice exists, everybody must conform to it, and the best people are not exempt, since you yourself—”

“No, no,” said Master Vertaud, with a revulsion of feeling, for he was a just man, and always ready to abjure a false notion; “I do not wish to fail in justice, and if I forgot myself for a moment, you must forgive me, for that is all past now. So, you think you cannot marry,

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because you were born a waif?"

"Not at all, master; I do not consider that an obstacle. There are all sorts of women, and some of them are so kind-hearted that my misfortune might prove an inducement."

"That is true," cried Jean Vertaud. "Women are better than we are. Yet," he continued, with a laugh, "a fine handsome fellow like you, in the flower of youth, and without any defect of body or mind, might very well add a zest to the pleasure of being charitable. But come, give me your reason."

"Listen," said François. "I was taken from the asylum and nursed by a woman whom I never knew. At her death I was intrusted to another woman, who received me for the sake of the slender pittance granted by the government to those of my kind; but she was good to me, and when I was so unfortunate as to lose her, I should never have been comforted but for the help of another woman, who was the best of the three, and whom I still love so much, that I am unwilling to live for any other woman but her. I have left her, and perhaps I may never see her again, for she is well off, and may never have need of me. Still, her husband has had many secret expenses, and I have heard that he has been ill since autumn, so it may be that he will die before long, and leave her with more debts than property. If this happened, master, I do not deny that I should return to the place she lives in, and that my only care and desire would be to assist her and her son, and keep them from poverty by my toil. That is my reason for not undertaking any engagement which would bind me elsewhere. You employ me by the year, but if I married, I should be tied for life. I should be assuming too many duties at once. If I had a wife and children, it is not to be supposed that I could earn enough bread for two families; neither is it to be supposed, if, by extraordinary luck, I found a wife with some money of her own, that I should have the right to deprive my house of its comforts, to bestow them upon another's. Thus I expect to remain a bachelor. I am young, and have time enough before me; but if some fancy for a girl should enter my head, I should try to get rid of it; because, do you see, there is but one woman in the world for me, and that is my mother Madeleine, who never despised me for being a waif, but brought me up as her own child."

"Is that it?" answered Jean Vertaud "My dear fellow, what you tell me only increases my esteem for you. Nothing is so ugly as ingratitude, and nothing so beautiful as the memory of benefits received. I may have some good reasons for showing you that you could marry a young woman of the same mind as yourself, who would join you in aiding your old friend, but they are reasons which I must think over, and I must ask somebody else's opinion."

No great cleverness was necessary to guess that Jean Vertaud, with his honest heart and sound judgment, had conceived of a marriage between his daughter and François. His daughter was comely,

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and though she was somewhat older than François, she had money enough to make up the difference. She was an only child, and a fine match, but up to this time, to her father's great vexation, she had refused to marry. He had observed lately that she thought a great deal of François, and had questioned her about him, but as she was a very reserved person, he had some difficulty in extorting any confession from her. Finally, without giving a positive answer, she consented to allow her father to sound François on the subject of marriage, and awaited the result with more uneasiness than she cared to show.

Jean Vertaud was disappointed that he had not a more satisfactory answer to carry to her; first, because he was so anxious to have her married, and next, because he could not wish for a better son-in-law than François. Besides the affection he felt for him, he saw clearly that the poor boy who had come to him was worth his weight in gold, on account of his intelligence, his quickness at his work, and his good conduct.

The young woman was a little pained to hear that François was a foundling. She was a trifle proud, but she made up her mind quickly, and her liking became more pronounced when she learned that François was backward in love. Women go by contraries, and if François had schemed to obtain indulgence for the irregularity of his birth, he could have contrived no more artful device than that of showing a distaste toward marriage.

So it happened that Jean Vertaud's daughter decided in François's favor, that day, for the first time.

"Is that all?" said she to her father. "Doesn't he think that we should have both the desire and the means to aid an old woman and find a situation for her son? He cannot have understood your hints, father, for if he knew it was a question of entering our family, he would have felt no such anxiety."

That evening, when they were at work, Jeannette Vertaud said to François:

"I have always had a high opinion of you, François; but it is still higher now that my father has told me of your affection for the woman who brought you up, and for whom you wish to work all your life. It is right for you to feel so. I should like to know the woman, so that I might serve her in case of need, because you have always been so fond of her. She must be a fine woman."

"Oh! yes," said François, who was pleased to talk of Madeleine, "she is a woman with a good heart, a woman with a heart like yours."

Jeannette Vertaud was delighted at this, and, thinking herself sure of what she wanted, went on:

"If she should turn out as unfortunate as you fear, I wish she could come and live with us. I should help you take care of her, for I suppose that she is no longer young. Is not she infirm?"

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“Infirm? No,” said François; “she is not old enough to be infirm.”

“Then is she still young?” asked Jeannette Vertaud, beginning to prick up her ears.

“Oh! no, she is not young,” answered François, simply. “I do not remember how old she is now. She was a mother to me, and I never thought of her age.”

“Was she attractive?” asked Jeannette, after hesitating a moment before putting the question.

“Attractive?” said François, with some surprise; “do you mean to ask if she is a pretty woman? She is pretty enough for me just as she is; but to tell the truth, I never thought of that. What difference can it make in my affection for her? She might be as ugly as the devil, without my finding it out.”

“But cannot you tell me about how old she is?”

“Wait a minute. Her son was five years younger than I. Well! She is not old, but she is not very young; she is about like—”

“Like me?” said Jeannette, making a slight effort, to laugh. “In that case, if she becomes a widow, it will be too late for her to marry again, will it not?”

“That depends on circumstances,” replied François. “If her husband has not wasted all the property, she would have plenty of suitors. There are fellows, who would marry their great-aunts as willingly as their great-nieces, for money.”

“Then you have no esteem for those who marry for money?”

“I could not do it,” answered François.

Simple-hearted as the waif was, he was no such simpleton as not to understand the insinuations which had been made him, and he did not speak without meaning. But Jeannette would not take the hint, and fell still deeper in love with him. She had had many admirers, without paying attention to any of them, and now the only one who pleased her, turned his back on her. Such is the logical temper of a woman’s mind.

François observed during the following days that she had something on her mind, for she ate scarcely anything, and her eyes were always fixed on him, whenever she thought he was not looking. Her attachment pained him. He respected this good woman, and saw that the more indifferent he appeared, the more she cared about him; but he had no fancy for her, and if he had tried to cultivate such a feeling, it would have been the result of duty and principle rather than of spontaneous affection.

He reflected that he could not stay much longer with Jean Vertaud, because he knew that, sooner or later, such a condition of affairs must necessarily give rise to some unfortunate difference.

Just at this time, however, an incident befell which changed the current of his thoughts.

CHAPTER XIV

ONE morning the parish priest of Aigurande came strolling over to Jean Vertaud's mill, and wandered round the place for some time before espying François, whom he found at last in a corner of the garden. He assumed a very confidential air, and asked him if he were indeed François, surnamed Strawberry, a name that had been given him in the civil register—where he had been inscribed as a foundling—on account of a certain mark on his left arm. The priest then inquired concerning his exact age, the name of the woman who had nursed him, the places in which he had lived; in short, all that he knew of his birth and life.

François produced his papers, and the priest seemed to be entirely satisfied.

"Very well," said he, "you may come this evening or to-morrow morning to the parsonage; but you must not let anybody know what I am going to tell you, for I am forbidden to make it public, and it is a matter of conscience with me."

When François went to the parsonage, the priest carefully shut the doors of the room, and drawing four little bits of thin paper from his desk, said:

"François Strawberry, there are four thousand francs that your mother sends you. I am forbidden to tell you her name, where she lives, or whether she is alive or dead at the present moment. A pious thought has induced her to remember you, and it appears that she always intended to do so, since she knew where you were to be found, although you lived at such a distance. She knew that your character was good, and gives you enough to establish yourself with in life, on condition that for six months you never mention this gift, unless it be to the woman you want to marry. She enjoins me to consult with you on the investment or the safe deposit of this money, and begs me to lend my name, in case it is necessary, in order to keep the affair secret. I shall do as you like in this respect; but I am ordered to deliver you the money, only in exchange for your word of honor that you will neither say nor do anything that might divulge the secret. I know that I may count upon your good faith; will you pledge it to me?"

François gave his oath and left the money in the priest's charge, begging him to lay it out to the best advantage, for he knew this priest to be a good man; and some priests are like some women, either all good or all bad.

The waif returned home rather sad than glad. He thought of his mother, and would have been glad to give up the four thousand francs for the privilege of seeing and embracing her. He imagined, too, that perhaps she had just died, and that her gift was the result of one of those impulses which come to people at the point of death;

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and it made him still more melancholy to be unable to bear mourning for her and have masses said for her soul. Whether she were dead or alive, he prayed God to forgive her for forsaking her child, as her child forgave her with his whole heart, and prayed to be forgiven his sins in like manner.

He tried to appear the same as usual; but for more than a fortnight, he was so absorbed in a reverie at meal-times that the attention of the Vertauds was excited.

“That young man does not confide in us,” observed the miller. “He must be in love.”

“Perhaps it is with me,” thought the daughter, “and he is too modest to confess it. He is afraid that I shall think him more attracted by my money than my person, so he is trying to prevent our guessing what is on his mind.”

Thereupon, she set to work to cure him of his shyness, and encouraged him so frankly and sweetly in her words and looks, that he was a little touched in spite of his preoccupation.

Occasionally, he said to himself that he was rich enough to help Madeleine in case of need, and that he could well afford to marry a girl who laid no claim to his fortune. He was not in love with any woman, but he saw Jeannette Vertaud’s good qualities, and was afraid of being hard-hearted if he did not respond to her advances. At times he pitied her, and was almost ready to console her.

But all at once, on a journey which he made to Crevant on his master’s business, he met a forester from Presles, who told him of Cadet Blanchet’s death, adding that he had left his affairs in great disorder, and that nobody knew whether his widow would be able to right them.

François had no cause to love or regret Master Blanchet, yet his heart was so tender that when he heard the news his eyes were moist and his head heavy, as if he were about to weep; he knew that Madeleine was weeping for her husband at that very moment, that she forgave him everything, and remembered only that he was the father of her child. The thought of Madeleine’s grief awoke his own, and obliged him to weep with her over the sorrow which he was sure was hers.

His first impulse was to leap upon his horse and hasten to her side; but he reflected that it was his duty to ask permission of his master.

CHAPTER XV

MASTER,” said he to Jean Vertaud, “I must leave you for a time; how long I cannot tell. I have something to attend to near my old home, and I request you to let me go with a good will; for, to tell the truth, if you refuse to give your permission, I shall not be able to

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obey you, but shall go in spite of you. Forgive me for stating the case plainly. I should be very sorry to vex you, and that is why I ask you as a reward for all the services that I may have been able to render you, not to take my behavior amiss, but to forgive the offense of which I am guilty, in leaving your work so suddenly. I may return at the end of a week, if I am not needed in the place where I am going; but I may not come back till late in the year, or not at all, for I am unwilling to deceive you. However, I shall do my best to come to your assistance if you need me, or if anything were to occur which you cannot manage without me. Before I go, I shall find you a good workman to take my place, and, if necessary, offer him as an inducement all that is due on my wages since Saint John's day last. Thus I can arrange matters without loss to you, and you must shake hands to wish me good luck, and to ease my mind of some of the regret I feel at parting with you."

Jean Vertaud knew that the waif seldom asked for anything, but that when he did, his will was so firm that neither God nor the devil could bend it.

"Do as you please, my boy," said he, shaking hands with him. "I should not tell the truth if I said I did not care; but rather than have a quarrel with you, I should consent to anything."

François spent the next day in looking up a servant to take his place in the mill, and he met with a zealous, upright man who was returning from the army, and was happy to find work and good wages under a good master; for Jean Vertaud was recognized as such, and was known never to have wronged anybody.

Before setting out, as he intended to do at daybreak the next day, François wished to take leave of Jeannette Vertaud at supper-time. She was sitting at the barn door, saying that her head ached and that she could not eat. He observed that she had been weeping, and felt much troubled in mind. He did not know how to thank her for her kindness, and yet tell her that he was to leave her in spite of it. He sat down beside her on the stump of an alder-tree, which happened to be there, and struggled to speak, without being able to think of a single word to say. She saw all this, without looking up, and pressed her handkerchief to her eyes. He made a motion to take her hand in his and comfort her, but drew back as it occurred to him that he could not conscientiously tell her what she wanted to hear. When poor Jeannette found that he remained silent, she was ashamed of her own sorrow, and rising quietly without showing any bitterness of feeling, she went into the barn to weep unrestrained.

She lingered there a little while, in the hope that he would make up his mind to follow her and say a kind word, but he forbore, and went to his supper, which he ate in melancholy silence.

It would be false to say that he had felt nothing for Jeannette when he saw her in tears. His heart was a little fluttered, as he reflected how happy he might be with a person of so excellent a dispo-

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sition, who was so fond of him, and who was not personally disagreeable to him. But he shook off all these ideas when it returned to his mind that Madeleine might stand in need of a friend, adviser, and servant, and that when he was but a poor, forsaken child, wasted with fever, she had endured, worked, and braved more for him than anybody else in the world.

“Come,” said he to himself, when he woke next morning before the dawn; “you must not think of a love-affair or your own happiness and tranquillity. You would gladly forget that you are a waif, and would throw your past to the winds, as so many others do, who seize the moment as it flies, without looking behind them. Yes, but think of Madeleine Blanchet, who entreats you not to forget her, but to remember what she did for you. Forward, then; and Jeannette, may God help you to a more gallant lover than your humble servant.”

Such were his reflections as he passed beneath the window of his kind mistress, and if the season had been propitious, he would have left a leaf or flower against her casement, in token of farewell; but it was the day after the feast of the Epiphany; the ground was covered with snow, and there was not a leaf on the trees nor a violet in the grass.

He thought of knotting into the corner of a white handkerchief the bean which he had won the evening before in the Twelfth-night cake, and of tying the handkerchief to the bars of Jeannette’s window, to show her that he would have chosen her for his queen, if she had deigned to appear at supper.

“A bean is a very little thing,” thought he, “but it is a slight mark of courtesy and friendship, and will make my excuses for not having said good-by to her.”

But a still, small voice within counseled him against making this offering, and pointed out to him that a man should not follow the example of those young girls who try to make men love, remember, and regret them, when they have not the slightest idea of giving anything in return.

“No, no, François,” said he, putting back his pledge into his pocket, and hastening his step; “a man’s will must be firm, and he must allow himself to be forgotten when he has made up his mind to forget himself.”

Thereupon, he strode rapidly away, and before he had gone two gunshots from Jean Vertaud’s mill he fancied that he saw Madeleine’s image before him, and heard a faint little voice calling to him for help. This dream drew him on, and he seemed to see already the great ash-tree, the fountain, the meadow of the Blanchets, the mill-dam, the little bridge, and Jeannie running to meet him; and in the midst of all this, the memory of Jeannette Vertaud was powerless to hold him back an inch.

He walked so fast that he felt neither cold nor hunger nor thirst,

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nor did he stop to take breath till he left the highroad and reached the cross of Plessys, which stands at the beginning of the path which leads to Presles.

When there, he flung himself on his knees and kissed the wood of the cross with the ardor of a good Christian who meets again with a good friend. Then he began to descend the great track, which is like a road, except that it is as broad as a field. It is the finest common in the world, and is blessed with a beautiful view, fresh air, and extended horizon. It slopes so rapidly that in frosty weather a man could go post-haste even in an ox-cart and take an unexpected plunge in the river, which runs silently below.

François mistrusted this; he took off his sabots more than once, and reached the bridge without a tumble. He passed by Montipouret on the left, not without sending a loving salute to the tall old clock-tower, which is everybody's friend; for it is the first to greet the eyes of those who are returning home, and shows them the right road, if they have gone astray.

As to the roads, I have no fault to find with them in summertime, when they are green, smiling, and pleasant to look upon. You may walk through some of them with no fear of a sunstroke; but those are the most treacherous of all, because they may lead you to Rome, when you think you are going to Angibault. Happily, the good clock-tower of Montipouret is not chary of showing itself, and through every clearing you may catch a glimpse of its glittering steeple, that tells you whether you are going north or northwest.

The waif, however, needed no such beacon to guide him. He was so familiar with all the wooded paths and byways, all the shady lanes, all the hunters' trails, and even the very hedge-rows along the roads, that in the middle of the night he could take the shortest cut, and go as straight as a pigeon flies through the sky.

It was toward noon when he first caught sight of the mill of Cormouer through the leafless branches, and he was happy to see curling up from the roof a faint blue smoke, which assured him that the house was not abandoned to the rats.

For greater speed he crossed the upper part of the Blanchet meadow, and thus did not pass close by the fountain; but as the trees and bushes were stript of their leaves, he could still see sparkling in the sunlight the open water, that never freezes, because it bubbles up from a spring. The approach to the mill, on the contrary, was icy and so slippery that much caution was required to step safely over the stones, and along the bank of the river. He saw the old mill-wheel, black with age and damp, covered with long icicles, sharp as needles, that hung from the bars.

Many trees were missing around the house, and the place was much changed. Cadet Blanchet's debts had called the ax into play, and here and there were to be seen the stumps of great alders, freshly cut, as red as blood. The house seemed to be in bad repair; the

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roof was ill-protected, and the oven had cracked half open by the action of the frost.

What was still more melancholy was that there was no sound to be heard of man or beast; only a brindled black-and-white dog, a poor country mongrel, jumped up from the door-step and ran barking toward François; then he suddenly ceased, and came crawling up to him and lay at his feet.

“Is it you, Labriche, and do you know me?” said François. “I did not recognize you, for you are so old and miserable; your ribs stick out, and your whiskers are quite white.”

François talked thus to the dog, because he was distressed, and wanted to gain a little time before entering the house. He had been in great haste up to this moment, but now he was alarmed, because he feared that he should never see Madeleine again, that she might be absent or dead instead of her husband, or that the report of the miller’s death might prove false; in short, he was a prey to all those fancies which beset the mind of a man who has just reached the goal of all his desires.

CHAPTER XVI

FINALLY François drew the latch of the door, and beheld, instead of Madeleine, a lovely young girl, rosy as a May morning, and lively as a linnet. She said to him, with an engaging manner: “What is it you want, young man?”

Though she was so fair to see, François did not waste time in looking at her, but cast his eyes round the room in search of Madeleine. He saw nothing but the closed curtains of her bed, and he was sure that she was in it. He did not wait to answer the pretty girl, who was Mariette Blanchet, the miller’s youngest sister, but without a word walked up to the yellow bed and pulled the curtains noiselessly aside; there he saw Madeleine Blanchet lying asleep, pale and wasted with fever.

He looked at her long and fixedly, without moving or speaking; and in spite of his grief at her illness, and his fear of her dying, he was yet happy to have her face before him, and to be able to say: “I see Madeleine.”

Mariette Blanchet pushed him gently away from the bed, drew the curtains together, and beckoned to him to follow her to the fire-side.

“Now, young man,” said she, “who are you, and what do you want? I do not know you, and you are a stranger in the neighborhood. Tell me how I may oblige you.”

François did not listen to her, and instead of answering her, he began to ask questions about how long Madame Blanchet had been ill, whether she were in any danger, and whether she were well cared

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for.

Mariette answered that Madeleine had been ill since her husband's death, because she had overexerted herself in nursing him, and watching at his bedside, day and night; that they had not as yet sent for the doctor, but that they would do so in case she was worse; and as to her being well cared for, Mariette declared that she knew her duty and did not spare herself.

At these words, the waif looked the girl full in the face, and had no need to ask her name, for besides knowing that soon after he had left the mill, Master Blanchet had placed his sister in his wife's charge, he detected in the pretty face of this pretty girl a striking resemblance to the sinister face of the dead miller. There are many fine and delicate faces which have an inexplicable likeness to ugly ones; and though Mariette Blanchet's appearance was as charming as that of her brother had been disagreeable, she still had an unmistakable family look. Only the miller's expression had been surly and irascible, while Mariette's was mocking rather than resentful, and fearless instead of threatening.

So it was that François was neither altogether disturbed nor altogether at ease concerning the attention Madeleine might receive from this young girl. Her cap was of fine linen, neatly folded and pinned; her hair, which she wore somewhat after the fashion of town-bred girls, was very lustrous, and carefully combed and parted; and both her hands and her apron were very white for a sick-nurse. In short, she was much too young, fresh, and gay to spend the day and night in helping a person who was unable to help herself.

François asked no more questions, but sat down in the chimney-corner, determined not to leave the place until he saw whether his dear Madeleine's illness turned for the better or worse.

Mariette was astonished to see him take possession of the fire so cavalierly, just as if he were in his own house. He stared into the blaze, and as he seemed in no humor for talking, she dared inquire no further who he was and what was his business. After a moment, Catherine, who had been the house-servant for eighteen or twenty years, came into the room. She paid no attention to him, but approached the bed of her mistress, looked at her cautiously, and then turned to the fireplace, to see after the potion which Mariette was concocting. Her behavior showed an intense interest for Madeleine, and François, who took in the truth of the matter in a throb, was on the point of addressing her with a friendly greeting; but—

“But,” said the priest's servant, interrupting the hemp-dresser, “you are using an unsuitable word. A *throb* does not express a moment, or a minute.”

“I tell you,” retorted the hemp-dresser, “that a moment means nothing at all, and a minute is longer than it takes for an idea to rush into the head. I do not know how many millions of things you can

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think of in a minute, whereas you only need a throb of time to see and hear some one thing that is happening. I will say a little throb, if you please."

"But a throb of time!" objected the old purist.

"Ah! A throb of time! Does that worry you, Mother Monique? Does not everything go by throbs? Does not the sun, when you see it rising in the clouds of flames, and it makes your eyes blink to look at it? And the blood that beats in your veins; the church clock that sifts your time particle by particle, as a bolting-machine does the grain; your rosary when you tell it; your heart when the priest is delayed in coming home; the rain falling drop by drop, and the earth that turns round, as they say, like a mill-wheel? Neither you nor I feel the motion, the machine is too well oiled for that; but there must be some throbbing about it, since it accomplishes its period in twenty-four hours. As to that, too, we use the word period when we speak of a certain length of time. So I say a throb, and I shall not unsay it. Do not interrupt me any more, unless you wish to tell the story."

"No, no; your machine is too well oiled, too," answered the old woman. "Now let your tongue throb a little longer."

CHAPTER XVII

I WAS saying that François was tempted to speak to big old Catherine, and make himself known to her; but as in the same throb of time he was on the point of crying, he did not wish to behave like a fool, and did not even raise his head. As Catherine stooped over the ashes, she caught sight of his long legs and drew back in alarm.

"What is all that?" whispered she to Mariette in the other corner of the room. "Where does that man come from?"

"Do you ask me?" said the girl; "how should I know? I never saw him before. He came in here, as if he were at an inn, without a good-morning or good-evening. He asked after the health of my sister-in-law as if he were a near relation, or her heir; and there he is sitting by the fire, as you see. You may speak to him, for I do not care to do so. He may be a disreputable person."

"What? Do you think he is crazy? He does not look wicked, as far as I can see, for he seems to be hiding his face."

"Suppose he has come for some bad purpose?"

"Do not be afraid, Mariette, for I am near to keep him in check. If he alarms you, I shall pour a kettle of boiling water over his legs, and throw an andiron at his head."

While they were chattering thus, François was thinking of Madeleine.

"That poor dear woman," said he to himself, "who has never had anything but vexation and unkindness from her husband, is now

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lying ill because she nursed and helped him to the end. Here is this young girl, who was the miller's pet sister, as I have heard say, and her face bears no traces of sorrow. She shows no signs of fatigue or tears, for her eyes are as clear and bright as the sun."

He could not help looking at her from under the brim of his hat, for never until then had he seen such fresh and joyous beauty. Still, though his eyes were charmed, his heart remained untouched.

"Come," continued Catherine, in a whisper to her young mistress, "I am going to speak to him. I must find out his business here."

"Speak to him politely," said Mariette. "We must not irritate him; we are all alone in the house, and Jeannie may be too far away to hear our cries."

"Jeannie!" exclaimed François, who caught nothing from all their prattle, except the name of his old friend. "Where is Jeannie, and why don't I see him? Has he grown tall, strong, and handsome?"

"There," thought Catherine, "he asks this because he has some evil intention. Who is the man, for Heaven's sake? I know neither his voice nor his figure; I must satisfy myself and look at his face." She was strong as a laborer and bold as a soldier, and would not have quailed before the devil himself, so she stalked up to François, determined either to make him take off his hat, or to knock it off herself, so that she might see whether he were a monster or a Christian man. She approached the waif, without suspecting that it was he; for being as little given to thinking of the past as of the future, she had long forgotten all about François, and, moreover, he had improved so much and was now such a handsome fellow that she might well have looked at him several times before recalling him to mind; but just as she was about to accost him rather roughly, Madeleine awoke, and called Catherine, saying in a faint, almost inaudible voice that she was burning with thirst.

François sprang up, and would have been the first to reach her but for the fear of exciting her too much, which held him back. He quickly handed the draught to Catherine, who hastened with it to her mistress, forgetting everything for the moment but the sick woman's condition.

Mariette, too, did her share, by raising Madeleine in her arms, to help her drink, and this was no hard task, for Madeleine was so thin and wasted that it was heartbreaking to see her.

"How do you feel, sister?" asked Mariette.

"Very well, my child," answered Madeleine in the tone of one about to die. She never complained, to avoid distressing the others.

"That is not Jeannie over there," she said, as she caught sight of the waif. "Am I dreaming, my child, or who is that tall man standing by the fire?"

Catherine answered:

"We do not know, dear mistress; he says nothing, and behaves

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like an idiot.”

The waif, at this moment, made a little motion to go toward Madeleine, but restrained himself, for though he was dying to speak to her, he was afraid of taking her by surprise. Catherine now saw his face, but he had changed so much in the past three years that she did not recognize him, and thinking that Madeleine was frightened, she said:

“Do not worry, dear mistress; I was just going to turn him out, when you called me.”

“Don’t turn him out,” said Madeleine, in a stronger voice, pulling aside the curtain of her bed; “I know him, and he has done right in coming to see me. Come nearer, my son; I have been praying God every day to permit me the grace of giving you my blessing.”

The waif ran to her, and threw himself on his knees beside her bed, shedding tears of joy and sorrow that nearly suffocated him. Madeleine touched his hands, and then his head; and said, as she kissed him:

“Call Jeannie; Catherine, call Jeannie, that he may share this happiness with us. Ah! I thank God, François, and I am ready to die now, if such is his will, for both my children are grown, and I may bid them farewell in peace.”

CHAPTER XVIII

CATHERINE rushed off in pursuit of Jeannie, and Mariette was so anxious to know what it all meant, that she followed to ask questions. François was left alone with Madeleine, who kissed him again, and burst into tears; then she closed her eyes, looking still more weak and exhausted than she had been before. François saw that she had fainted, and knew not how to revive her; he was beside himself, and could only hold her in his arms, calling her his dear mother, his dearest friend, and imploring her, as if it lay within her power, not to die so soon, without hearing what he had to say.

So, by his tender words, devoted care, and fond endearments, he restored her to consciousness, and she began again to see and hear him. He told her that he had guessed she needed him, that he had left all, and had come to stay as long as she wanted him, and that, if she would take him for her servant, he would ask nothing but the pleasure of working for her, and the solace of spending his life in her service.

“Do not answer,” he continued; “do not speak, my dear mother; you are too weak, and must not say a word. Only look at me, if you are pleased to see me again, and I shall understand that you accept my friendship and help.”

Madeleine looked at him so serenely, and was so much comforted by what he said, that they were contented and happy together,

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notwithstanding the misfortune of her illness.

Jeannie, who came in answer to Catherine's loud cries, arrived to take his share of their joy. He had grown into a handsome boy between fourteen and fifteen, and though not strong, he was delightfully active, and so well brought up that he was always friendly and polite.

"Oh! How glad I am to see you like this, Jeannie," said François. "You are not very tall and strong, but I am satisfied, because I think you will need my help in climbing trees and crossing the river. I see that you are delicate, though you are not ill, isn't it so? Well, you shall be my child, still a little while longer, if you do not mind. Yes, yes; you will find me necessary to you; and you will make me carry out your wishes, just as it was long ago."

"Yes," said Jeannie; "my four hundred wishes, as you used to call them."

"Oho! What a good memory you have! How nice it was of you, Jeannie, not to forget François! But have we still four hundred wishes a day?"

"Oh, no," said Madeleine; "he has grown very reasonable; he has no more than two hundred now."

"No more nor less?" asked François.

"Just as you like," answered Jeannie; "since my darling mother is beginning to smile again, I am ready to agree to anything. I am even willing to say that I wish more than five hundred times a day to see her well again."

"That is right, Jeannie," said François. "See how nicely he talks! Yes, my boy, God will grant those five hundred wishes of yours. We shall take such good care of your darling mother, and shall cheer and gladden her little by little, until she forgets her weariness."

Catherine stood at the threshold, and was most anxious to come in, to see and speak to François, but Mariette held her by the sleeve, and would not leave off asking questions.

"What," said she, "is he a foundling? He looks so respectable."

She was looking through the crack in the door, which she held ajar.

"How comes it that he and Madeleine are such friends?"

"I tell you that she brought him up, and that he was always a very good boy."

"She has never spoken of him to me, nor have you."

"Oh, goodness, no! I never thought of it; he was away; and I almost forgot him; then, I knew, too, that my mistress had been in trouble on his account, and I did not wish to recall it to her mind."

"Trouble! What kind of trouble?"

"Oh! because she was so fond of him; she could not help liking him, he had such a good heart, poor child. Your brother would not allow him in the house, and you know your brother was not always very gentle!"

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“We must not say that, now that he is dead, Catherine.”

“Yes, yes; you are right; I was not thinking. Dear me, how short my memory is! And yet it is only two weeks since he died! But let me go in, my young lady; I want to give the boy some dinner, for I think he must be hungry.”

She shook herself loose, ran up to François, and kissed him. He was so handsome that she no longer remembered having once said that she would rather kiss her sabot than a foundling.

“Oh, poor François,” said she, “how glad I am to see you! I was afraid that you would never come back. See, my dear mistress, how changed he is! I wonder that you were able to recognize him at once. If you had not told me who he was, I should not have known him for ages. How handsome he is, isn’t he? His beard is beginning to grow; yes, you cannot see it much, but you can feel it. It did not prick when you went away, François, but now it pricks a little. And how strong you are, my friend! What hands and arms and legs you have! A workman like you is worth three. What wages are you getting now?”

Madeleine laughed softly to see Catherine so pleased with François, and was overjoyed that he was so strong and vigorous. She wished that her Jeannie might grow up to be like him. Mariette was ashamed to have Catherine look so boldly in a man’s face, and blushed involuntarily. But the more she tried not to look at him, the more her eyes strayed toward him; she saw that Catherine was right; he was certainly remarkably handsome, tall and erect as a young oak.

Then, without stopping to think, she began to serve him very politely, pouring out the best wine of that year’s vintage, and recalling his attention when it wandered to Madeleine and Jeannie, and he forgot to eat.

“You must eat more,” said she; “you scarcely take anything. You should have more appetite after so long a journey.”

“Pay no attention to me, young lady,” answered François, at last; “I am too happy to be here to care about eating and drinking. Come now,” continued he, turning to Catherine, when the room was put to rights, “show me round the mill and the house, for everything looks neglected, and I want to talk to you about it.”

When they were outside, he questioned her intelligently on the state of things, with the air of a man determined to know the whole truth.

“Oh, François,” said Catherine, bursting into tears, “everything is going to grief, and if nobody comes to the assistance of my poor mistress, I believe that wicked woman will turn her out of doors, and make her spend all she owns in lawsuits.”

“Do not cry,” said François, “for if you do, I cannot understand what you say; try to speak more clearly. What wicked woman do you mean? Is it Sévère?”

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“Oh! yes, to be sure. She is not content with having ruined our master, but now lays claim to everything he left. She is trying to prosecute us in fifty different ways; she says that Cadet Blanchet gave her promissory notes, and that even if she sold everything over our heads, she would not be paid. She sends us bailiffs every day, and the expenses are already considerable. Our mistress has paid all she could, in trying to pacify her, and I am very much afraid that she will die of this worry, on top of all the fatigue she underwent during her husband’s illness. At this rate, we shall soon be without food and fire. The servant of the mill has left us, because he was owed two years’ wages, and could not be paid. The mill has stopped running, and if this goes on, we shall lose our customers. The horses and crops have been attached, and are to be sold; the trees are to be cut down. Oh, François, it is ruin!”

Her tears began to flow afresh.

“And how about you, Catherine?” asked François; “are you a creditor, too? Have your wages been paid?”

“I, a creditor?” said Catherine, changing her wail into a roar; “never, never! It is nobody’s business whether my wages are paid or not!”

“Good for you, Catherine; you show the right spirit!” said François. “Keep on taking care of your mistress, and do not bother about the rest. I have earned a little money in my last place, and I have enough with me to save the horses, the crops, and the trees. I am going to pay a little visit to the mill, and if I find it in disorder, I shall not need a wheelwright to set it going again. Jeannie is as swift as a little bird, and he must set out immediately and run all day, and then begin again to-morrow morning, so as to let all the customers know that the mill is creaking like ten thousand devils, and that the miller is waiting to grind the corn.”

“Shall we send for a doctor for our mistress?”

“I have been thinking about it; but I am going to wait and watch her all day, before making up my mind.

“Do you see, Catherine, I believe that doctors are useful when the sick cannot do without them; but if the disease is not violent, it is easier to recover with God’s help, than with their drugs: not taking into consideration that the mere presence of a doctor, which cures the rich, often kills the poor. He cheers and amuses those who live in luxury, but he scares and oppresses those who never see him except in the day of danger. It seems to me that Madame Blanchet will recover very soon, if her affairs are straightened.

“And before we finish this conversation, Catherine, tell me one thing more; I ask the truth of you, and you must not scruple to tell it to me. It will go no further; I have not changed, and if you remember me, you must know that a secret is safe in the waif’s bosom.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” said Catherine; “but why do you consider yourself a waif? Nobody will call you any more by that name, for

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you do not deserve it, François."

"Never mind that. I shall always be what I am, and I am not in the habit of plaguing myself about it. Tell me what you think of your young mistress, Mariette Blanchet."

"Oh, she! She is a pretty girl. Have you already taken it into your head to marry her? She has some money of her own; her brother could not touch her property, because she was a minor, and unless you have fallen heir to an estate, Master François—"

"Waifs never inherit anything," said François, "and as to marrying, I have as much time to think of it as the chestnut in the fire. What I want to hear from you is whether this girl is better than her brother, and whether she will prove a source of comfort or trouble to Madeleine, if she stays on here."

"Heaven knows," said Catherine, "for I do not. Until now, she has been thoughtless and innocent enough. She likes dress, caps trimmed with lace, and dancing. She is not very selfish, but she has been so well-treated and spoiled by Madeleine, that she has never had occasion to show whether she could bite or not. She has never had anything to suffer, so we cannot tell what she may be."

"Was she very fond of her brother?"

"Not very, except when he took her to balls, and our mistress tried to convince him that it was not proper to take a respectable girl in Sévère's company. Then the little girl, who thought of nothing but her own pleasure, overwhelmed her brother with attentions, and turned up her nose at Madeleine, who was obliged to yield. So Mariette does not dislike Sévère as much as I should wish to have her, but I cannot say that she is not good-natured and nice to her sister-in-law."

"That will do, Catherine; I ask nothing further. Only I forbid you to tell the young girl anything of what we have been talking about."

François accomplished successfully all that he had promised Catherine. By evening, owing to Jeannie's diligence, corn arrived to be ground, and the mill too was in working order; the ice was broken and melted about the wheel, the machinery was oiled, and the woodwork repaired, wherever it was broken. The energetic François worked till two in the morning, and at four he was up again. He stepped noiselessly into Madeleine's room, and finding the faithful Catherine on guard, he asked how the patient was. She had slept well, happy in the arrival of her beloved servant, and in the efficient aid he brought. Catherine refused to leave her mistress before Mariette appeared, and François asked at what hour the beauty of Cormouet was in the habit of rising.

"Not before daylight," said Catherine.

"What? Then you have two more hours to wait, and you will get no sleep at all."

"I sleep a little in the daytime, in my chair, or on the straw in the

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barn, while the cows are feeding.”

“Very well, go to bed now,” said François, “and I shall wait here to show the young lady that some people go to bed later than she, and get up earlier in the morning. I shall busy myself with examining the miller’s papers and those which the bailiffs have brought since his death. Where are they?”

“There, in Madeleine’s chest,” said Catherine. “I am going to light the lamp, François. Come, courage, and try your best to make things straight, as you seem to understand law-papers.”

She went to bed, obeying the commands of the waif as if he were the master of the house; for true it is that he who has a good head and good heart rules by his own right.

CHAPTER XIX

BEFORE setting to work, François, as soon as he was left alone with Madeleine and Jeannie (for the young child always slept in the room with his mother), went to take a look at the sleeping woman, and thought her appearance better than when he had first arrived. He was happy to think that she would have no need of a doctor, and that he alone, by the comfort he brought, would preserve her health and fortune.

He began to look over the papers, and was soon fully acquainted with Sévère’s claims and the amount of property that Madeleine still possessed with which to satisfy them. Besides all that Sévère had already made Cadet Blanchet squander upon her, she declared that she was still a creditor for two hundred pistoles, and Madeleine had scarcely anything of her own property left in addition to the inheritance that Blanchet had bequeathed to Jeannie—an inheritance now reduced to the mill and its immediate belongings—that is, the courtyard, the meadow, the outbuildings, the garden, the hemp-field, and a bit of planted ground; for the broad fields and acres had melted like snow in the hands of Cadet Blanchet.

“Thank God!” thought François, “I have four hundred pistoles in the charge of the priest of Aigurande, and in case I can do no better, Madeleine can still have her house, the income of her mill, and what remains of her dowry. But I think we can get off more easily than that. In the first place, I must find out whether the notes signed by Blanchet to Sévère were not extorted by strategem and undue influence, and then I must do a stroke of business on the lands he sold. I understand how such affairs are managed, and knowing the names of the purchasers, I will put my hand in the fire if I cannot bring this to a successful issue.”

The fact was that Blanchet, two or three years before his death, straightened for money and over head and ears in debt to Sévère, had sold his land at a low price to whomsoever wanted to buy, and

turned all his claims for it over to Sévère, thus expecting to rid himself of her and of her comrades who had helped her to ruin him. But, as usually happens in such sales, almost all those who hastened to buy, attracted by the sweet fragrance of the fertile lands, had not a penny with which to pay for them, and only discharged the interest with great difficulty. This state of things might last from ten to twenty years; it was an investment for Sévère and her friends, but a bad investment, and she complained loudly of Cadet Blanchet's rashness, and feared that she would never be paid. So she said, at least; but the speculation was really a reasonably good one. The peasant, even if he has to lie on straw, pays his interest, so unwilling is he to let go the bit of land he holds, which his creditor may seize if he is not satisfied.

We all know this, my good friends, and we often try to grow rich the wrong way, by buying fine property at a low price. However low it may be, it is always too high for us. Our covetousness is more capacious than our purse, and we take no end of trouble to cultivate a field the produce of which does not cover half the interest exacted by the seller.

When we have delved and sweated all our poor lives, we find ourselves ruined, and the earth alone is enriched by our pains and toil. Just as we have doubled its value, we are obliged to sell it. If we could sell it advantageously, we should be safe; but this is never possible. We have been so drained by the interest we have had to pay, that we must sell in haste, and for anything we can get. If we rebel, we are forced into it by the law-courts, and the man who first sold the land gets back his property in the condition in which he finds it; that means that for long years he has placed his land in our hands at eight or ten per cent., and when he resumes possession of it, it is by our labors, twice as valuable, in consequence of a careful cultivation which has cost him neither trouble nor expense, and also by the lapse of time which always increases the value of property. Thus we poor little minnows are to be continually devoured by the big fish which pursue us; punished always for our love of gain, and just as foolish as we were before.

Sévère's money was thus profitably invested in a mortgage at a high interest, but at the same time she had a firm hold of Cadet Blanchet's estate, because she had managed him so cleverly that he had pledged himself for the purchasers of his land, and I had gone surety for their payment.

François saw all this intrigue, and meditated some possible means of buying back the land at a low price, without ruining anybody, and of playing a fine trick upon Sévère and her clan, by causing the failure of their speculation.

It was no easy matter. He had enough money to buy back almost everything at the price of the original sale, and neither Sévère nor anybody else could refuse to be reimbursed. The buyers would

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find it to their profit to sell again in all haste, in order to escape approaching ruin; for I tell you all, young and old, if you buy land on credit, you take out a patent for beggary in your old age. It is useless for me to tell you this, for you will have the buying mania no whit the less. Nobody can see a plowed furrow smoking in the sun, without being in a fever to possess it, and it was the peasant's mad fever to hold on to his own piece of soil that caused François's uneasiness.

Do you know what the soil is, my children? Once upon a time, everybody in our parishes was talking about it. They said that the old nobles had attached us to the soil to make us drudge and die, but the Revolution had burst our bonds, and that we no longer drew our master's cart like oxen. The truth is that we have bound ourselves to our own acres, and we drudge and die no less than before.

The city people tell us that our only remedy would be to have no wants or desires. Only last Sunday, I answered a man who was preaching this doctrine very eloquently, that if we poor peasants could only be sensible enough never to eat or sleep, to work all the time, and to drink nothing but fresh clear water, provided the frogs had no objection, we might succeed in saving a goodly hoard, and in receiving a shower of compliments for our wisdom and discretion.

Following this same train of thought, François cudged his brains to find some means of inducing the purchasers of the land to sell it back again. He finally hit upon the plan of whispering in their ears the little falsehood, that though Sévère had the reputation of being fabulously rich, she had really as many debts as a sieve has holes, and that some fine morning her creditors would lay hands upon all her claims, as well as upon all her property. He meant to tell them this confidentially, and when they were thoroughly alarmed, he expected to buy back Madeleine Blanchet's lands at the original price, with his own money.

He scrupled, however, to tell this untruth, until it occurred to him that he could give a small bonus to all the poor purchasers, to make them amends for the interest they had already paid. In this manner Madeleine could be restored to her rights and possessions without loss or injury to the purchasers.

The discredit in which Sévère would be involved by his plan caused him no scruple whatever. It is right for the hen to pull out a feather from the cruel bird that has plucked her chickens.

When François had reached this conclusion, Jeannie awoke, and arose softly, to avoid disturbing his mother's slumbers; then, after a good-morning to François, he lost no time in going off to announce to the rest of their customers that the mill was in good order, and that a strong young miller stood in readiness to grind the corn.

CHAPTER XX

IT was already broad daylight when Mariette Blanchet emerged

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from her nest, carefully attired in her mourning, which was so very black and so very white that she looked as spick and span as a little magpie. The poor child had one great care, and that was that her mourning would long prevent her going to dances, and that all her admirers would be missing her. Her heart was so good that she pitied them greatly.

“How is this?” said she, as she saw François arranging the papers in Madeleine’s room. “You attend to everything here, Master Miller! You make flour, you settle the business, you mix the medicines; soon we shall see you sewing and spinning.”

“And you, my young lady,” said François, who saw that she regarded him favorably, although she slashed him with her tongue, “I have never as yet seen you sewing or spinning; I think we shall soon find you sleeping till noon, and it will do you good, and keep your cheeks rosy!”

“Oho! Master François, you are already beginning to tell me truths about myself. You had better take care of that little game; I can tell you something in return.”

“I await your pleasure, my young lady.”

“It will soon come; do not be afraid, Master Miller. Have the kindness to tell me where Catherine is, and why you are here watching beside our patient. Should you like a hood and gown?”

“Are you going to ask, in your turn, for a cap and blouse, so that you may go to the mill? As I see you do no woman’s work, which would be nursing your sister for a little while, I suppose you would like to sift out the chaff, and turn the grindstone. At your service. Let us change clothes.”

“It looks as if you were trying to give me a lesson.”

“No; you gave me one first, and I am only returning, out of politeness, what you lent me.”

“Good! You like to laugh and tease, but you have chosen the wrong time. We are not merry here, and it is only a short time ago that we had to go to the graveyard. If you chatter so much, you will prevent my sister-in-law from getting the sleep she needs so greatly.”

“On that very account, you should not raise your voice so much, my young lady; for I am speaking very low, and you are not speaking, just now, as you should in a sick-room.”

“Enough, if you please, Master François,” said Mariette, lowering her tone, and flushing angrily. “Be so good as to see if Catherine is at hand, and tell me why she leaves my sister-in-law in your charge.”

“Excuse me, my young lady,” said François, with no sign of temper. “She could not leave her in your charge, because you are too fond of sleeping, so she was obliged to intrust her to mine. I shall not call her, because the poor woman is jaded with fatigue. Without meaning to offend you, I must say that she has been sitting up every night for two weeks. I sent her off to bed, and, until noon, I mean to

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do her work and mine too, for it is only right for us all to help one another."

"Listen, Master François," said the young girl, with a sudden change of tone; "you appear to hint that I think only of myself and leave all the work to others. Perhaps I should have sat up in my turn, if Catherine had told me that she was tired; but she insisted that she was not at all tired, and I did not understand that my sister was so seriously ill. You think that I have a bad heart, but I cannot imagine where you have learned it. You never knew me before yesterday, and we are not, as yet, intimate enough for you to scold me as you do. You behave exactly as if you were the head of the family, and yet—"

"Come, out with it, beautiful Mariette, say what you have on the tip of your tongue. And yet I was taken in and brought up out of charity, is not it so? And I cannot belong to the family, because I have no family; I have no right to it, as I am a foundling! Is that all you wanted to say?"

As François gave Mariette this straightforward answer, he looked at her in a way that made her blush up to the roots of her hair, for she saw that his expression was that of a stern and serious person, although he appeared so serene and gentle that it was impossible to irritate him, or to make him think or say anything unjust.

The poor child, who was ordinarily so ready with her tongue, was overawed for a moment, but although she was a little frightened, she still felt a desire to please this handsome fellow, who spoke so decidedly and looked her so frankly in the eyes. She was so confused and embarrassed, that it was with difficulty she restrained her tears, and she turned her face quickly the other way, to hide her emotion.

He observed it, however, and said very kindly:

"I am not angry, Mariette, and you have no cause to be, on your part. I think no ill of you; I see only that you are young, that there is misfortune in the house, and that you are thoughtless. I must tell you what I think about it."

"What do you think about it?" asked she; "tell me at once, that I may know whether you are my friend or my enemy."

"I think that you are not fond of the care and pains people take for those whom they love, who are in trouble. You like to have your time to yourself, to turn everything into sport, to think about your dress, your lovers, and your marriage by and by, and you do not mind having others do your share. If you have any heart, my pretty child, if you really love your sister-in-law, and your dear little nephew, and even the poor, faithful servant who is capable of dying in harness like a good horse, you must wake up a little earlier in the morning, you must care for Madeleine, comfort Jeannie, relieve Catherine, and, above all, shut your ears to the enemy of the family, Madame Sévère, who is, I assure you, a very bad woman. Now you

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know what I think, neither more nor less.”

“I am glad to hear it,” said Mariette, rather dryly; “and now please tell me by what right you wish to make me think as you do.”

“Oh! This is the way you take it, is it?” answered François. “My right is the waif’s right, and to tell you the whole truth, the right of the child who was taken in and brought up by Madame Blanchet; for this, it is my duty to love her as my mother, and my right to try to requite her for her kindness.”

“I have no fault to find,” returned Mariette, “and I see that I cannot do better than give you my respect at once, and my friendship as time goes on.”

“I like that,” said François; “shake hands with me on it.”

He strode toward her, holding out his great hand, without the slightest awkwardness; but the little Mariette was suddenly stung by the fly of coquetry, and, withdrawing her hand, she announced that it was not proper to shake hands so familiarly with a young man.

François laughed and left her, seeing plainly that she was not frank, and that her first object was to entangle him in a flirtation.

“Now, my pretty girl,” thought he, “you are much mistaken in me, and we shall not be friends in the way you mean.”

He went up to Madeleine, who had just waked, and who said to him, taking both his hands in hers: “I have slept well, my son, and God is gracious to let me see your face first of all, on waking. How is it that Jeannie is not with you?”

Then, after hearing his explanation, she spoke some kind words to Mariette, telling the young girl how sorry she was to have her sit up all night, and assuring her that she needed no such great care. Mariette expected François to say that she had risen very late; but François said nothing and left her alone with Madeleine, who had no more fever and wanted to try to get up.

After three days, she was so much better that she was able to talk over business affairs with François. “You may put yourself at ease, my dear mother,” said he. “I sharpened my wits when I was away from here, and I understand business pretty well. I mean to see you through these straits, and I shall succeed. Let me have my way; please do not contradict anything I say, and sign all the papers I shall bring you. Now, that my mind is at ease on the score of your health, I am going to town to consult some lawyers. It is market-day, and I shall find some people there whom I want to see, and I do not think my time will be wasted.”

He did as he said; and after receiving instructions and advice from the lawyers, he saw clearly that the last promissory notes which Blanchet had given Sévère would be a good subject for a lawsuit; for he had signed them when he was beside himself with drink, fever, and infatuation. Sévère believed that Madeleine would not dare to go to law, on account of the expense. François was unwilling to advise Madame Blanchet to embark in a lawsuit, but he thought there

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was a reasonable chance of bringing the matter to an amicable close, if he began by putting a bold face on it; and as he needed somebody to carry a message into the enemy's camp, he bethought himself of a plan which succeeded perfectly.

For several days he had watched little Mariette, and assured himself that she took a daily walk in the direction of Dollins, where Sévère lived, and that she was on more friendly terms with this woman than he could wish, chiefly because she met at her house all her young acquaintances, and some men from town who made love to her. She did not listen to them, for she was still an innocent girl, and had no idea that the wolf was so near the sheepfold, but she loved flattery, and was as thirsty for it as a fly for milk. She kept her walks secret from Madeleine; and as Madeleine never gossiped with the other women, and had not as yet left her sickroom, she guessed nothing, and suspected no evil. Big Catherine was the last person in the world to notice anything, so that the little girl cocked her cap over her ear, and, under the pretext of driving the sheep to pasture, she soon left them in charge of some little shepherd-boy, and was off to play the fine lady in poor company.

François, however, who was going continually to and fro on the affairs of the mill, took note of what the girl was doing. He never mentioned it at home, but turned it to account, as you shall hear.

CHAPTER XXI

HE planted himself directly in her way at the river-crossing; and just as she stepped on the foot-bridge which leads to Dollins, she beheld the waif, astride of the plank, a leg dangling on each side above the water, and on his face the expression of a man who has all the time in the world to spare. She blushed as red as a cherry, and if she had not been taken so by surprise, she would have swerved aside, and pretended to be passing by accident.

But the approach to the bridge was obstructed by branches, and she did not see the wolf till she felt his teeth. His face was turned toward her, so she had no means of advancing or retreating, without being observed.

"Master Miller," she began, saucily, "can't you move a hair-breadth to let anybody pass?"

"No, my young lady," replied François, "for I am the guardian of this bridge till evening, and I claim the right to collect toll of everybody."

"Are you mad, François? Nobody pays toll in our country, and you have no right on any bridge, or foot-bridge, or whatever you may call it in your country of Aigurande. You may say what you like, but take yourself off from here, as quickly as you can; this is not the place for jesting; you will make me tumble into the water."

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“Then,” said François, without moving, and folding his arms in front of him, “you think that I want to laugh and joke with you, and that my right of toll is that of paying you my court? Pray get rid of that idea, my young lady; I wish to speak sensibly to you, and I will allow you to pass if you give me permission to accompany you for a short part of your way.”

“That would not be at all proper,” said Mariette, somewhat flustered by her notion of what François was thinking. “What would they say of me hereabouts, if anybody met me out walking alone with a man to whom I am not betrothed?”

“You are right,” said François; “as Sévère is not here to protect you, people would talk of you; that is why you are going to her house, so that you may walk about in her garden with all your admirers. Very well, so as not to embarrass you, I shall speak to you here, and briefly, for my business is pressing, and this it is. You are a good girl; you love your sister-in-law Madeleine; you see that she is in difficulties, and you must want to help her out of them.”

“If that is what you want to say,” returned Mariette, “I shall listen to you, for you are speaking the truth.”

“Very well, my dear young lady,” said François, rising and leaning beside her, against the bank beside the little bridge, “you can do a great service to Madame Blanchet. Since it is for her good and interest, as I fondly believe, that you are so friendly with Sévère, you must make that woman agree to a compromise. Sévère is trying to attain two objects which are incompatible: she wants to make Master Blanchet’s estate security for the payment of the land he sold for the purpose of paying his debts to her; and in the second place, she means to exact payment of the notes which he signed in her favor. She may go to law, if she likes, and wrangle about this poor little estate, but she cannot succeed in getting more out of it than there is. Make her understand that if she does not insist upon our guaranteeing the payment of the land, we can pay her notes; but if she does not allow us to get rid of one debt, we shall not have funds enough to pay the other, and if she makes us drain ourselves with expenses which bring her no profit, she runs the risk of losing everything.”

“That is true,” said Mariette; “although I understand very little about business, I think I can understand as much as that. If I am able, by any chance, to influence her, which would be better: for my sister-in-law to pay the notes, or to be obliged to redeem the security?”

“It would be worse for her to pay the notes, for it would be more unjust. We could contest the notes and go to law about them; but the law requires money, and you know that there is none, and never will be any, at the mill. So, it is all one to your sister, whether her little all goes in a lawsuit or in paying Sévère; whereas it is better for Sévère to be paid, without having a lawsuit.

“As Madeleine is sure to be ruined in either case, she prefers to

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have all her possessions seized at once, than to drag on after this under a heavy burden of debt, which may last all her lifetime; for the purchasers of Cadet Blanchet's land are not able to pay for it. Sévère knows this well, and will be forced, some fine day, to take back her land; but this idea is not at all distressing to her, as it will be a profitable speculation for her to receive the land in an improved condition, having long drawn a heavy rate of interest from it. Thus, Sévère risks nothing in setting us free, and assures the payment of her notes."

"I shall do as you say," said Mariette; "and if I fail, you may think as ill of me as you choose."

"Then, good luck, Mariette, and a pleasant walk to you," said François, stepping out of her way.

Little Mariette started off to Dollins, well pleased to have such a fine excuse for going there, for staying a long time, and for returning often during the next few days. Sévère pretended to like what she heard, but she really determined to be in no haste. She had always hated Madeleine Blanchet, because of the involuntary respect her husband had felt for her. She thought she held her safely in her claws for the whole of her lifetime, and preferred to give up the notes, which she knew to be of no great value, rather than renounce the pleasure of harassing her with the burden of an endless debt.

François understood all this perfectly, and was anxious to induce her to exact the payment of this debt, so that he might have an opportunity to buy back Jeannie's broad fields from those who had purchased them for a song. When Mariette returned with her answer, he saw that they were trying to mislead him with words; that, on one hand, the young girl was glad to have her errands last for a long time to come, and that, on the other hand, Sévère had not reached the point of being more desirous for Madeleine's ruin than for the payment of her notes.

To clinch matters, he took Mariette aside, two days afterward.

"My dear young lady," said he, "you must not go to Dollins today. Your sister has learned, though I do not know how, that you go there more than once a day, and she says it is no place for a respectable girl. I have tried to make her understand that it is for her interest that you are so friendly with Sévère; but she blamed me as well as you. She says that she would rather be ruined than have you lose your reputation, that you are under her guardianship, and that she has authority over you. If you do not obey of your own free will, you will be prevented from going by main force. If you do as she says, she will not mention this to you, as she wishes to avoid giving you pain, but she is very much displeased with you, and it would be well for you to beg her pardon."

François had no sooner unleashed the dog than it began to bark and bite. He was correct in his estimate of little Mariette's temper, which was as hasty and inflammable as her brother's had been.

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“Indeed, indeed!” she exclaimed; “do you expect me to obey my sister-in-law, as if I were a child of three? You talk as if she were my mother, and I owed her submission! What makes her think that I may lose my reputation? Tell her that it is quite as well buckled on as her own, and perhaps better. Why does she imagine that Sévère is not so good as other people? Is it wicked not to spend the whole day sewing, spinning, and praying? My sister-in-law is unjust because she has a quarrel with her about money, and she thinks she can treat her as she pleases. It is very imprudent of her, for if Sévère wished she could turn her out of the house she lives in; and as Sévère is patient, and does not make use of her advantage, she is certainly better than she is said to be. And this is the way in which you thank me, who have been obliging enough to take part in these disputes, which are no concern of mine! I can tell you, François, that the most respectable people are not always the most prudish, and when I go to Sévère’s I do no more mischief than if I stayed at home.”

“I don’t know about that,” said François, who was determined to make all the scum of the vat mount to the surface; “perhaps your sister was right in thinking that you are in some mischief there. Look here, Mariette, I see that you like to go there too well. It is not natural. You have delivered your message about Madeleine’s affairs, and since Sévère has sent no answer, it is evident that she means to give none. Do not go back there any more, or I shall think, with Madeleine, that you go with no good intention.”

“Then, Master François,” cried Mariette, in a fury, “you think you are going to dictate to me? Do you mean to take my brother’s place at home, and make yourself master there? You have not enough beard on your chin to give me such a lecture, and I advise you to leave me alone. Your humble servant,” she added, adjusting her coif; “if my sister-in-law asks where I am, tell her that I am at Sévère’s, and if she sends you after me, you will see how you are received.”

She burst the door open violently, and flew off with a light foot toward Dollins; but as François was afraid that her anger would cool on the way, especially as the weather was frosty, he allowed her a little start. He waited until he thought she had nearly reached Sévère’s house, and then putting his long legs in motion he ran like a horse let loose, and caught up with her, to make her believe that Madeleine had sent him in pursuit of her.

He was so provoking that she raised her hand against him. He dodged her every time, being well aware that anger evaporates with blows, and that a woman’s temper improves when she has relieved herself by striking. Then he ran away, and as soon as Mariette arrived at Sévère’s house she made a great explosion. The poor child had really no bad designs; but in the first flame of her anger she disclosed everything, and put Sévère into such a towering passion that François, who was retreating noiselessly through the lane, heard

them at the other end of the hemp-field, hissing and crackling like fire in a barn full of hay.

CHAPTER XXII

HIS plan succeeded admirably, and he was so sure of it that he went over to Aigurande next day, took his money from the priest, and returned at night, carrying the four little notes of thin paper, which were of such great value, and yet made no more noise in his pocket than a crumb of bread in a cap. After a week's time, Sévère made herself heard. All the purchasers of Blanchet's land were summoned to pay up, and as not one was able to do it, Sévère threatened to make Madeleine pay instead.

Madeleine was much alarmed when she heard the news, for she had received no hint from François of what was coming.

"Good!" said he to her, rubbing his hands; "a trader cannot always gain, nor a thief always rob. Madame Sévère is going to make a bad bargain and you a good one. All the same, my dear mother, you must behave as if you thought you were ruined. The sadder you are, the gladder she will be to do what she thinks is to your harm. But that harm is your salvation, for when you pay Sévère you will buy back your son's inheritance."

"What do you expect me to pay her with, my child?"

"With the money I have in my pocket, and which belongs to you."

Madeleine tried to dissuade him; but the waif was headstrong, as he said himself, and no one could loose what he had bound. He hastened to deposit two hundred pistoles with the notary, in the widow Blanchet's name, and Sévère was paid in full, willingly or unwillingly, and also all the other creditors of the estate, who had made common cause with her.

Moreover, after François had indemnified all the poor purchasers of the land for their losses, he had still enough money with which to go to law, and he let Sévère know that he was about to embark in a lawsuit on the subject of the promissory notes which she had wrongfully and fraudulently extracted from the miller. He set afloat a report which spread far and wide through the land. He pretended that in fumbling about an old wall of the mill which he was trying to prop up, he had found old Mother Blanchet's money-box, filled with gold coins of an ancient stamp, and that by this means Madeleine was richer than she had ever been. Weary of warfare, Sévère consented to a compromise, hoping also that François would be lavish of the crowns which he had so opportunely discovered, and that she could wheedle from him more than he gave her to expect. She got nothing for her pains, however, and he was so hard with her that she was forced to return the notes in exchange for a

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hundred crowns.

To revenge herself, she worked upon little Mariette, telling her that the money-box of old Mother Blanchet, who was the girl's grandmother, should have been divided between her and Jeannie, that she had a right to her share, and should go to law against her sister.

Then the waif was forced to tell the true source of the money he had provided, and the priest of Aigurande sent him the proofs in case of there being a lawsuit.

He began by showing these proofs to Mariette, begging her to make no unnecessary disclosures, and making it clear to her that she had better keep quiet. But Mariette would not keep at all quiet; her little brain was excited by the confusion in the family, and the devil tempted the poor child. In spite of all the kindness she had received from Madeleine, who had treated her as a daughter and indulged all her whims, she felt a dislike and jealousy of her sister-in-law, although her pride prevented her from acknowledging it. The truth is that in the midst of her tantrums and quarrels with François, she had inadvertently fallen in love with him, and never suspected the trap which the devil had set for her. The more François upbraided her for her faults and vagaries, the more crazy she was to please him.

She was not the kind of girl to pine and consume away in grief and tears; but it robbed her of her peace to think that François was so handsome, rich, and upright, so kind to everybody, and so clever and brave; that he was a man to shed his last drop of blood for the woman he loved, and yet that none of this was for her, although she was the prettiest and richest girl in the neighborhood, and counted her lovers by the dozen.

One day she opened her heart to her false friend, Sévère. It was in the pasture at the end of the road of the water-lilies, underneath an old apple-tree that was then in blossom. While all these things were happening, the month of May had come, and Sévère strolled out under the apple-blossoms, to chat with Mariette, who was tending her flock beside the river.

It pleased God that François, who was near by, should overhear their conversation. He had seen Sévère enter the pasture, and at once suspected her of meditating some intrigue against Madeleine; and as the river was low, he walked noiselessly along the bank, beneath the bushes which are so tall just there that a hay-cart could pass under their shade. When he came within hearing distance, he sat down on the ground, without making a sound, and opened his ears very wide.

The two women plied their tongues busily. In the first place, Mariette confessed to not caring for a single one of her suitors, for the sake of a young miller, who was not at all courteous to her, and the thought of whom kept her awake at night. Sévère, on the other hand, wanted to unite her to a young man of her acquaintance, who

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was so much in love with the girl, that he had promised a handsome wedding-present to Sévère, if she succeeded in marrying him to Mariette Blanchet. It appeared also that Sévère had exacted a gratuity beforehand from him and from several others; so she naturally did all in her power to put Mariette out of conceit with François.

“A plague take the waif!” she exclaimed. “What, Mariette, a girl in your position marry a foundling! You would be called Madame Strawberry, for he has no other name. I should be ashamed for you, my poor darling. Then you have no chance; you would be obliged to fight for him with your sister-in-law, for he is her lover, as true as I live.”

“Sévère,” cried Mariette, “you have hinted this to me more than once; but I cannot believe you; my sister-in-law is too old.”

“No, no, Mariette; your sister-in-law is not old enough to do without this sort of thing; she is only thirty, and when the waif was but a boy, your brother discovered that he was too familiar with his wife. That is why he gave him a sound thrashing with the butt of his whip, and turned him out of doors.”

François felt a lively desire to spring out of the bushes and tell Sévère that she lied; but he restrained himself, and sat motionless.

Sévère continued to ring the changes on this subject, and told so many shocking lies that François’s face burned, and it was with great difficulty that he kept his patience.

“Then,” said Mariette, “he probably means to marry her now that she is a widow; he has already given her a good part of his fortune, and he must wish to have a share in the property which he has bought back.”

“Somebody else will outbid him,” said the other; “for now that Madeleine has plundered him, she will be on the lookout for a richer suitor, and will be sure to find one. She must take a husband to manage her property, but while she is trying to find him, she keeps this great simpleton with her, who serves her for nothing, and amuses her solitude.”

“If she is going along at that pace,” said Mariette, much vexed, “I am in a most disreputable house, in which I run too many dangers! Do you consider, my dear Sévère, that I am very ill-lodged, and that people will talk against me? Indeed, I cannot stay where I am; I must leave. Oh! yes, these pious women criticize everybody else, because they themselves are shameless only in God’s sight! I should like to hear her say anything against you and me now! Very well! I am going to say good-by to her, and I am coming to live with you; if she is angry, I shall answer her; if she tries to bring me back by force, to live with her, I shall go to law; and I shall let people know what she is—do you hear?”

“A better remedy for you, Mariette, is to get married as soon as possible. She will not refuse her consent, because I am sure she is anxious to rid herself of you. You stand in the way of her relations

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with the handsome waif. You must not delay, cannot you understand, for people will say that he belongs to both of you, and then nobody will marry you. Go and get married, then, and take the man I advise."

"Agreed," said Mariette, breaking her shepherd's crook violently, against the old apple-tree. "I give you my word. Go and tell him, Sévère; let him come to my house this evening, to ask for my hand, and let our banns be published next Sunday."

CHAPTER XXIII

FRANÇOIS was never sadder than when he emerged from the river-bank where he had hidden himself to listen to the women's talk. His heart was as heavy as lead, and when he had gone halfway home he lost courage to return, and, stepping aside into the path of the water-lilies, he sat down in the little grove of oaks, at the end of the meadow.

Once there, by himself, he wept like a child, and his heart was bursting with sorrow and shame; for he was ashamed to hear of what he was accused, and to think that his poor dear friend Madeleine, whom, through all his life, he had loved so purely and constantly, reaped nothing but insult and slander from his devotion and fidelity.

"Oh! my God, my God!" said he to himself, "how can it be that the world is so wicked and that a woman like Sévère can have the insolence to measure the honor of a woman like my dear mother, by her own standard? And that little Mariette, who should naturally be inclined to innocence and truth, a child as she is, who does not as yet know the meaning of evil, even she listens to this infernal calumny, and believes in it, as if she knew how it stung! Since this is so, others will believe it too; as the larger part of people living mortal life are old in evil, almost everybody will think that because I love Madame Blanchet, and she loves me, there must be something dishonorable in it."

Then poor François undertook a careful examination of his conscience, and searched his memory to see whether, by any fault of his, he were responsible for Sévère's wicked gossip; whether he had behaved wisely in all respects, or whether, by a lack of prudence and discretion, he had involuntarily given rise to evil thinking. But it was in vain that he reflected, for he could not believe that he had appeared guilty of what had never even crossed his mind.

Still absorbed in thought and reverie, he went on saying to himself:

"Suppose that my liking had turned to loving, what harm would it be in God's sight, now that she is a widow and her own mistress? I have given a good part of my fortune to her and Jeannie, but I still have a considerable share left, and she would not wrong her child if

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she married me. It would not be self-seeking on my part to desire this, and nobody could make her believe that my love for her is self-interested. I am a foundling, but she does not care for that. She has loved me with a mother's love, which is the strongest of all affections, and now she might love me in another way. I see that her enemies will force me to leave her if I do not marry her, and I should rather die than leave her a second time. Besides, she needs my help, and I should be a coward to leave her affairs in such disorder when I have strength as well as money with which to serve her. Yes, all I have should belong to her, and as she often talks to me about paying me back in the end, I must put that idea out of her head, by sharing all things in common with her, in accordance with the permission of God and the law. She must keep her good name for her son's sake, and she can save it only by marrying me. How is it that I never thought of this before, and that I needed to hear it suggested by a serpent's tongue? I was too simple-minded and unsuspecting; and my poor mother is too charitable to others to take to heart the injuries which are done her. Everything tends toward good, by the will of Heaven; and Madame Sévère, who was plotting mischief, has done me the service of teaching me my duty."

Without indulging any longer in meditation or wonder, Francis set off on his way home, determined to speak of his plan to Madame Blanchet without loss of time, and on his knees to entreat her to accept him as her protector, in the name of God, and for eternal life.

When he reached Cormouer, he saw Madeleine spinning on her doorstep, and for the first time in his life her face had the effect of making him timid and confused. He was in the habit of walking straight up to her, looking her full in the face to ask her how she did; but this time he paused on the little bridge as if he were examining the mill-dam, and only looked at her out of the corners of his eyes.

When she turned toward him, he moved farther away, not understanding himself what his trouble was, or why a matter which, a few minutes ago, had seemed to him so natural and opportune, should suddenly become so awkward to confess.

Madeleine called him.

"Come here to me," said she, "for I have something to say to you, dear François. We are alone, so come and sit down beside me, and open your heart to me, as if I were your father-confessor, for I want to hear the truth from you."

Francis was reassured by Madeleine's words, and he sat down beside her.

"I promise, my dear mother," said he, "to open my heart to you as I do to God, and to give you a true confession."

He fancied that something had come to her ears which had brought her to the same conclusion as himself; he was delighted, and waited to hear what she had to say.

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“François,” she went on, “you are in your twenty-first year, and it is time for you to think of marrying; you are not opposed to it, I hope?”

“No, I am not opposed to anything you wish,” answered Francis, blushing with pleasure; “go on, my dear Madeleine.”

“Good!” said she. “I expected this, and I have guessed the right thing. Since you wish it, I wish it too, and perhaps I thought of it before you did. I was waiting to see whether the person in question cared for you, and I think that if she does not as yet, she will, very soon. Don’t you think so, too, and shall I tell you where you stand? Why do you look at me with such a puzzled expression? Don’t I speak clearly enough? I see that you are shy about it, and I must help you out. Well, the poor child pouted all the morning because you teased her a little yesterday, and I dare say she thinks you do not love her. But I know that you do love her, and if you scold her sometimes for her little caprices it is because you are a trifle jealous. You must not hold back for that, François. She is young and pretty; but though there is some danger in this, if she truly loves you she will willingly submit herself to you.”

“I should like,” said François, much disappointed, “to know whom you are talking of, my dear mother, for I am wholly at a loss.”

“Really!” said Madeleine; “don’t you know what I mean? Am I dreaming, or are you trying to keep a secret from me?”

“A secret from you!” said François, taking Madeleine’s hand. He soon dropped it, and took up instead the corner of her apron, which he crumpled as if he were provoked, then lifted toward his lips as if about to kiss it, and finally let go just as he had done with her hand. He was first inclined to cry; then he felt angry, and then giddy, all in succession.

Madeleine was amazed.

“You are in trouble, my child,” she cried, “and this means that you are in love—that all does not go as you wish. I can assure you that Mariette has a good heart; she, too, is distressed, and if you speak openly with her she will tell you, in return, that she thinks of no one but you.”

François sprang up, and walked up and down the courtyard for some time in silence; then he returned to Madeleine’s side.

“I am very much surprised to hear what you have in your mind, Madame Blanchet; this never once occurred to me, and I am well aware that Mariette has no liking for me, and that I am not to her taste.”

“Oh, come!” said Madeleine; “you are speaking petulantly, my child! Don’t you think I noticed how often you talked with her? Though I could not catch the meaning of what you said, it was evident that she understood very well, for her face glowed like a burning coal. Do you think I do not know that she runs away from the pasture every day, leaving her flock in charge of the first person she

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meets? Her sheep flourish at the expense of our wheat; but I do not want to cross her, or talk to her of sheep, when her head is full of nothing but love and marriage. The poor child is just of an age to guard her sheep ill, and her heart still worse. But it is great good luck for her, François, that instead of falling in love with one of those bad fellows whom I was so much afraid of her meeting at Sévère's, she had the good sense to think of you. It makes me, too, very happy to think that, when you are married to my sister-in-law, who is almost the same as a daughter to me, you will live with me and make part of my family, and that I may harbor you in my house, work with you, bring up your children, and thus repay your kindness to me. So, do not let your childish notions interfere with all the joys I have planned. Try to see clearly, and forget your jealousy. If Mariette is fond of dress, it is because she is anxious to please you. If she has been rather idle lately, it is only because she is thinking too much of you; and if she answers me sometimes rather sharply, she does so because she is vexed with your reprimands, and does not know whom to blame for them. The proof that she is good and desirous of mending her ways, is that she has recognized your goodness and wisdom, and wants you for her husband."

"You are good, my dear mother," said Francis, quite crestfallen. "Yes, it is you who are good, for you believe in the goodness of others and deceive yourself. I can tell you that, if Mariette is good, too, and I will not say she is not, lest I should injure her in your opinion, it is in a way very different from yours, and, consequently, very displeasing to me. Do not say anything more to me about her. I swear to you on my word and honor, on my heart and soul, that I am no more in love with her than I am with old Catherine, and if she has any regard for me, it is her own misfortune, because I cannot return it. Do not try to make her say she loves me; your tact would be at fault, and you would make her my enemy. It is quite the contrary; hear what she will say to you to-night, and let her marry Jean Aubard, whom she has made up her mind to accept. Let her marry as soon as possible, for she is out of place in your house. She is not happy there, and will not be a source of comfort to you."

"Jean Aubard!" exclaimed Madeleine; "he is not a proper person for her; he is a fool, and she is too clever to submit herself to a stupid man."

"He is rich, and she will not submit to him. She will manage him, and he is just the man for her. Will you not trust in your friend, my dear mother? You know that, up to this time, I have never given you any bad advice. Let the young girl go; she does not love you as she ought, and she does not know your worth."

"You say this because your feelings are hurt, François," said Madeleine, laying her hand on his head and moving it gently up and down, as if she were trying to shake the truth out of it. François was exasperated that she would not believe him, and it was the first time

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in his life that there had been any dispute between them. He withdrew, saying in a dissatisfied tone of voice:

“Madame Blanchet, you are not just to me. I tell you that girl does not love you. You force me to say this, against my will; for I did not come here to bring distrust and strife. So, if I tell it to you, you may know that I am sure of it; and do you think I can love her after that? You cannot love me any more, if you will not believe me.”

Wild with grief, François rushed off to weep all alone by the fountain.

CHAPTER XXIV

MADELEINE was still more perplexed than François, and was on the point of following him with questions and words of encouragement; but she was held back by the sudden appearance of Mariette, who, with a strange expression on her face, announced the offer of marriage she had received from Jean Aubard. Madeleine, who was unable to disabuse herself of the idea that the whole affair was the result of a lovers' quarrel, attempted to speak to the girl of François; but Mariette answered in a tone which gave her great pain, and was utterly incomprehensible to her:

“Those people who care for foundlings may keep them for their own amusement; I am an honest girl, and shall not allow my good name to suffer because my poor brother is dead. I am perfectly independent, Madeleine; and if I am forced by law to ask your advice, I am not forced to take it when it is not for my good. So please do not stand in my way, or I may stand in yours hereafter.”

“I cannot imagine what is the matter with you, my dear child,” said Madeleine, very sweetly and sadly. “You speak to me as if you had neither respect nor affection for me. I think you must be in some distress which has confused your mind; so I entreat you to take three or four days, in which to decide. I shall tell Jean Aubard to come back, and if you are of the same opinion after a little quiet reflection, I shall give you free leave to marry him, as he is a respectable man, and comfortably off. But you are in such an excited condition, just now, that you cannot know your own mind, and you shut your heart against my affection. You grieve me very much, but as I see that you are grieved too, I forgive you.”

Mariette tossed her head, to show how much she despised that sort of forgiveness, and ran away to put on her silk apron and prepare for the reception of Jean Aubard, who arrived, an hour later, with big Sévère in gala dress.

This time, at last, Madeleine was convinced of Mariette's ill-will toward her, since the girl had brought into her house, on a family matter, a woman who was her enemy, and whom she blushed to see. Notwithstanding this, she advanced very politely to meet Sévère, and

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served her with refreshments, without any appearance of anger or dislike; for she feared that if Mariette were opposed, she would prove unmanageable. So Madeleine said that she made no objection to her sister-in-law's desire, but requested three days' grace before giving her answer.

Thereupon Sévère said, insolently, that was a very long time to wait. Madeleine answered quietly that it was a very short time.

Jean Aubard then left, looking like a blockhead, and giggling like a booby, for he was sure that Mariette was madly in love with him. He had paid well for this illusion, and Sévère gave him his money's worth.

As Sévère left the house, she said to Mariette that she had ordered a cake and some sweets at home for the betrothal, and even if Madame Blanchet delayed the preliminaries, they must sit down to the feast. Madeleine objected that it was not proper for a young girl to go off in the company of a man who had not as yet received his answer from her family.

"If that is so, I shall not go," said Mariette, in a huff.

"Oh, yes, yes; you must come," Sévère insisted; "are not you your own mistress?"

"No, indeed," returned Mariette; "you see my sister-in-law forbids me to go."

She went into her room and slammed the door; but she merely passed through the house, went out by the back door, and caught up with Sévère and her suitor at the end of the meadow, laughing and jeering at Madeleine's expense.

Poor Madeleine could not restrain her tears when she saw how things were going.

"François was right," thought she; "the girl does not love me, and she is ungrateful at heart. She will not believe that I am acting for her good, that I am most anxious for her happiness, and wish only to prevent her doing something which she will regret hereafter. She has taken evil counsel, and I am condemned to see that wretched Sévère stirring up trouble and strife in my family. I have not deserved all these troubles, and I must submit to God's will. Fortunately, poor François was more clear-sighted than I. How much he would suffer with such a wife!"

She went to look for him, to let him know what she thought; but when she found him in tears beside the fountain, she supposed he was grieving for the loss of Mariette, and attempted to comfort him. The more she said the more pained he was, for it became clear to him that she refused to understand the truth, and that her heart could never feel for him in the way he had hoped.

In the evening, when Jeannie was in bed and asleep, François sat with Madeleine, and sought to explain himself.

He began by saying that Mariette was jealous of her, and that Sévère had slandered her infamously; but Madeleine never

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dreamed of his meaning.

“What can she say against me?” said she, simply; “and what jealousy can she put into poor silly little Mariette’s head? You are mistaken, François; something else is at stake, some interested reason which we shall hear later. It is not possible that she should be jealous; I am too old to give any anxiety to a young and pretty girl. I am almost thirty, and for a peasant woman who has undergone a great deal of trouble and fatigue, that is old enough to be your mother. The devil only could say that I think of you in any way but as my son, and Mariette must know I longed to have you both marry. No, no; never believe that she has any such evil thought, or, at least, do not mention it to me, for I should be too much pained and mortified.”

“And yet,” said François, making a great effort to speak, and bending low over the fire to hide his confusion from Madeleine, “Monsieur Blanchet had some such evil thought when he turned me out of doors!”

“What! Do you know that now, François?” exclaimed Madeleine. “How is it that you know it? I never told you, and I never should have told you. If Catherine spoke of it to you, she did wrong. Such an idea must shock and pain you as much as it does me, but we must try not to think of it any more and to forgive my husband, now that he is dead. All the obloquy of it falls upon Sévère; but now Sévère can be no longer jealous of me. I have no husband, and I am as old and ugly as she could ever have wished, though I am not in the least sorry for it, for I have gained the right of being respected, of treating you as a son, and of finding you a pretty young wife, who will live happily with me and love me as a mother. This is my only wish, François, and you must not distress yourself, for we shall find her. So much the worse for Mariette if she despises the happiness I had in store for her. Now, go to bed, my child, and take courage. If I thought I were any obstacle to your marrying, I should send you away at once; but you may be sure that nobody worries about me, or imagines what is absolutely impossible.”

As François listened to Madeleine, he was convinced that she was right, so accustomed was he to believe all that she said. He rose to bid her good night, but, as he took her hand, it happened that, for the first time in his life, he looked at her with the intention of finding out whether she were old and ugly; and the truth is, she had long been so sad and serious that she deceived herself, and was still as pretty a woman as she had ever been.

So when François saw all at once that she was still young and as beautiful as the blessed Virgin, his heart gave a great bound, as if he had climbed to the pinnacle of a tower. He went back for the night to the mill, where his bed was neatly spread in a square of boards among the sacks of flour. Once there, and by himself, he shivered and gasped as if he had a fever; but it was only the fever of love, for

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he who had all his life warmed himself comfortably in front of the ashes, had suddenly been scorched by a great burst of flame.

CHAPTER XXV

FROM that time on, the waif was so melancholy that it made one's heart ache to see him. He worked like a horse, but he found no more joy or peace, and Madeleine could not induce him to say what was the matter with him. It was in vain he swore that he neither loved nor regretted Mariette, for Madeleine would not believe him, and could assign no other cause for his depression. She was grieved that he should be in distress and yet no longer confide in her, and she was amazed that his trouble should make him so proud and self-willed.

As it was not in her nature to be tormenting, she made up her mind to say nothing further to him on the subject. She attempted to make Mariette reverse her decision, but her overtures were so ill-received that she lost courage, and was silent. Though her heart was full of anguish, she kept it to herself, lest she should add to the burden of others.

François worked for her, and served her with the same zeal and devotion as before. As in the old time, he stayed as much as possible in her company, but he no longer spoke as he used. He was always embarrassed with her, and turned first red as fire, and then white as a sheet in the same minute. She was afraid he was ill, and once took his hand to see if he were feverish; but he drew back from her as if her touch hurt him, and sometimes he reproached her in words which she could not understand.

The trouble between them grew from day to day. During all this time, great preparations were being made for Mariette's marriage to Jean Aubard, and the day which was to end her mourning was fixed as that of the wedding.

Madeleine looked forward to that day with dread; she feared that François would go crazy, and was anxious to send him to spend a little time at Aigurande, with his old master Jean Vertaud, so as to distract his mind. François, however, was unwilling to let Mariette believe what Madeleine insisted upon thinking. He showed no vexation before her, was on friendly relations with her lover, and jested with Sévère, when he met her along the road, to let her see that he had nothing to fear from her. He was present at the wedding; and as he was really delighted to have the house rid of the girl, and Madeleine freed from her false friendship, it never crossed anybody's mind that he had been in love with her. The truth began to dawn even on Madeleine, or at least she was inclined to believe that he had consoled himself. She received Mariette's farewell with her accustomed warmth of heart; but as the young girl still cherished a

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grudge against her on account of the waif, Madeleine could not help seeing that her sister-in-law left her without love or regret. Inured as she was to sorrow, Madeleine wept over the girl's hardness of heart, and prayed God to forgive her.

After a week had passed, François unexpectedly told her that he had some business at Aigurande that would call him there for the space of five or six days. She was not surprised, and hoped it would be for the good of his health, for she believed that he had stifled his grief, and was ill in consequence.

But that grief, which she thought he had overcome, increased with him day by day. He could think of nothing else, and whether asleep or awake, far or near, Madeleine was always in his heart and before his eyes. It is true that all his life had been spent in loving her and thinking of her, but until lately these thoughts of her had been his happiness and consolation, whereas they were now his despair and his undoing. As long as he was content to be her son and friend, he wished for no better lot on earth; but now his love had changed its character, and he was exquisitely unhappy. He fancied that she could never change as he had done. He kept repeating to himself that he was too young, that she had known him as a forlorn and wretched child, that he could be only an object of care and compassion to her, and never of pride. In short, he believed her to be so lovely and so attractive, so far above him, and so much to be desired, that when she said she was no longer young and pretty, he thought she was adopting a role to scare away her suitors.

In the mean time, Sévère, Mariette, and their clan were slandering her openly on his account, and he was in terror lest some of the scandal should come to her ears, and she should be displeased and long for his departure. He knew she was too kind to ask him to go, but he dreaded being again a cause of annoyance to her, as he had been once before, and it occurred to him to go to ask the advice of the priest of Aigurande, whom he had found to be a just and God-fearing man.

He went, but with no success, as the priest was absent on a visit to his bishop; so François returned to the mill of Jean Vertaud, who had invited him for a few days' visit, while waiting for the priest's return.

He found his kind master as true a man and as faithful a friend as he had left him, and his good daughter Jeannette on the brink of marriage with a very respectable man whom she had accepted from motives of prudence rather than of enthusiasm, but for whom she fortunately felt more liking than distaste. This put François more at his ease with her than he had ever been, and the next day being Sunday, he had a long talk with her, and confided in her Madame Blanchet's many difficulties, and his satisfaction in rescuing her from them.

Jeannette was quick-witted, and from one thing and another she

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guessed that the waif was more agitated by his attachment to Madeleine than he would confess. She laid her hand on his arm, and said to him abruptly:

“François, you must hide nothing from me. I have come to my senses now, and you see that I am not ashamed to tell you that I once thought more of you than you did of me. You knew my feelings, and you could not return them, but you would not deceive me, and no selfish interest led you to do what many others would have done in your place. I respect you both for your behavior toward me and for your constancy to the woman you loved best in the world; and instead of disowning my regard for you, I am glad to remember it. I expect you to think the better of me for acknowledging it, and to do me the justice to observe that I bear no grudge or malice toward you for your coolness. I mean to give you the greatest possible token of my esteem. You love Madeleine Blanchet, not indeed as a mother, but as a young and attractive woman, whom you wish for your wife.”

“Oh!” said François, blushing like a girl, “I love her as a mother, and my heart is full of respect for her.”

“I have no doubt of it,” answered Jeannette; “but you love her in two ways, for your face says one thing and your words another. Very well, François; you dare not tell her what you dare not even confess to me, and you do not know whether she can answer your two ways of loving.”

Jeannette Vertaud spoke with so much sense and sweetness, and showed François such true friendship, that he had not the courage to deceive her, and pressing her hand, he told her that she was like a sister to him, and the only person in the world to whom he had the heart to disclose his secret.

Jeannette asked him several questions, which he answered truly and openly.

“François, my friend,” said she, “I understand it all. It is impossible for me to know what Madeleine Blanchet will think about it; but I see that you might be for years in her company without having the boldness to tell her what you have on your mind. No matter. I shall find out for you, and shall let you know. My father and you and I shall set out to-morrow for a friendly visit to Cormouer, as if we went to make the acquaintance of the kind woman who brought up our friend François; you must take my father to walk about the place, under pretext of asking his advice, and I shall spend the time talking with Madeleine. I shall use a great deal of tact, and shall not tell what your feelings are until I am certain of hers.”

François was so grateful to Jeannette that he was ready to fall on his knees before her; and Jean Vertaud, who, with the waif’s permission, was informed of the situation, gave his consent to the plan. Next day they set out; Jeannette rode on the croup behind her father, and François started an hour earlier than they to prepare Mad-

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eleine for the visit she was to receive.

The sun was setting as François approached Cormouer. A storm came up during his ride, and he was drenched to the skin; but he never murmured, for he had good hope in Jeannette's friendly offices, and his heart was lighter than when he had left home. The water was dripping from the bushes, and the blackbirds were singing like mad in thankfulness for a last gleam from the sun before it sank behind the hill of Grand-Corlay. Great flocks of birds fluttered from branch to branch around François, and their joyous chattering cheered his spirits. He thought of the time when he was little, and roamed about the meadows, whistling to attract the birds, absorbed in his childish dreams and fancies. Just then a handsome bullfinch hovered round his head, like a harbinger of good luck and good tidings, and his thoughts wandered back to his Mother Zabelle and the quaint songs of the olden time, with which she used to sing him to sleep.

Madeleine did not expect him so soon. She had even feared that he would never come back at all, and when she caught sight of him, she could not help running to kiss him, and was surprised to see how much it made him blush. He announced the approaching visit, and apparently as much afraid of having her guess his feelings as he was grieved to have her ignore them, in order to prevent her suspecting anything, he told her that Jean Vertaud thought of buying some land in the neighborhood.

Then Madeleine bestirred herself to prepare the best entertainment she could offer to François's friends.

Jeannette was the first to enter the house, while her father was putting up their horse in the stable; and as soon as she saw Madeleine, she took a great liking for her, a liking which the other woman fully returned. They began by shaking hands, but they soon fell to kissing each other for the sake of their common love for François, and they spoke together freely, as if they had had a long and intimate acquaintance. The truth is they were both excellent women, and made such a pair as is hard to find. Jeannette could not help a pang on seeing Madeleine, whom she knew to be idolized by the man for whom she herself still cherished a lingering fondness; but she felt no jealousy, and tried to forget her grief in the good action on which she was bent. On the other hand, when Madeleine saw the young woman's sweet face and graceful figure, she supposed that it was she whom François had loved and pined for, that they were now betrothed, and that Jeannette had come to bring the news in person; but neither did she feel any jealousy, for she had never thought of François save as her own child.

In the evening, after supper, Father Vertaud, who was tired by his ride, went to bed; and Jeannette took Madeleine out into the garden with her, after first instructing François to keep a little aloof with Jeannie, but still near enough to see her let down the corner of

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her apron, which she wore tucked up on one side, for this was to be the signal for him to join them. She then fulfilled her mission conscientiously, and so skilfully that Madeleine had no time to exclaim, although beyond measure astonished, as the matter was unfolded to her. At first she thought it but another proof of François's goodness of heart, that he wished to put a stop to all evil gossip, and to devote his life to her service; and she would have refused, thinking it too great a sacrifice on the part of so young a man to marry a woman older than himself. She feared he would repent later, and could not long keep his faith to her, without vexation and regret; but Jeannette gave her to understand that the waif was in love with her, heart and soul, and that he was losing his health and peace of mind because of her.

This was inconceivable to Madeleine. She had lived such a sober and retired life, never adorning her person, never appearing in public, nor listening to flattery, that she had no longer any idea of the impression she might make upon a man.

"Then," said Jeannette, "since he loves you so much, and will die if you refuse him, will you persist in closing your eyes and ears to what I say to you? If you do, it must be because you dislike the poor young fellow, and would be sorry to make him happy."

"Do not say that, Jeannette," answered Madeleine; "I love him almost, if not quite, as much as my Jeannie, and if I had ever suspected that he thought of me in another light, it is quite possible that my affection for him would have been more passionate. But what can you expect? I never dreamed of this, and I am still so dazed that I do not know how to answer. I ask for time to think of it and to talk it over with him, so that I may find out whether he does this from a whim or out of mere pique, or whether, perhaps, he thinks it is a duty he owes me. This I am afraid of most of all, and I think he has repaid me fully for the care I took of him, and it would be too much for him to give me his liberty and himself, at least unless he loves me as you think he does."

When Jeannette heard these words, she let down the corner of her apron, and François, who was waiting near at hand with his eyes fixed upon her, was beside them in an instant. The clever Jeannette asked Jeannie to show her the fountain, and they strolled off together, leaving Madeleine and François together.

But Madeleine, who had expected to put her questions to the waif, in perfect calmness, was suddenly covered with shyness and confusion, like a young girl; for confusion such as hers, so sweet and pleasant to see, belongs to no age, but is bred of innocence of mind and purity of life. When François saw that his dear mother blushed and trembled as he did, he received it as a more favorable token than if she had kept her usual serene manner. He took her hand and arm, but he could not speak. Trembling all the while, she tried to shake herself loose and to follow Jeannie and Jeannette, but he

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held her fast, and made her turn back with him. When Madeleine saw his boldness in opposing his will to hers, she understood, better than if he had spoken, that it was no longer her child, the waif, but her lover, François, that walked by her side.

After they had gone a little distance, silent, but linked arm in arm, as vine is interlaced with vine, François said:

“Let us go to the fountain; perhaps I may find my tongue there.”

They did not find Jeannie and Jeannette beside the fountain, for they had gone home; but François found courage to speak, remembering that it was there he had seen Madeleine for the first time, and there, too, he had bidden her farewell, eleven years afterward. We must believe that he spoke very fluently, and that Madeleine did not gainsay him, for they were still there at midnight. She was crying for joy, and he was on his knees before her, thanking her for accepting him for her husband.

“There ends the story,” said the hemp-dresser, “for it would take too long to tell you about the wedding. I was present, myself, and the same day the waif married Madeleine in the parish of Mers, Jeannette was married in the parish of Aigurande. Jean Vertaud insisted that François and his wife, and Jeannie, who was happy as a king, with their friends, relations, and acquaintances, should come to his house for the wedding-feast, which was finer, grander, and more delightful than anything I have ever seen since.”

“Is the story true in all points?” asked Sylvine Courtioux.

“If it is not, it might be,” answered the hemp-dresser. “If you do not believe me, go and see for yourself.”