

I. A GENEROUS INVALID

Geographical studies, accounts of voyages and adventures of land and sea have always had an irresistible charm for me, and certainly, if I had only had to consult my tastes, I would have become one of the travelers and explorers most avid for research and discovery. How many times have I not envied the fate of those navigators, those illustrious pioneers who have gone out into the world, confronting a thousand perils, risking their lives, bearing all privations and miseries heroically, in order to increase the domain of science and gather a measure of glory!

I felt myself gripped by an ardent love for this grain of dust that supports us all, sages and lunatics alike, and carries us through space with a vertiginous rapidity. But compared to we paltry ephemera, what colossal proportions that grain of dust acquires! I remembered then that the Earth was the *magna mater* of the ancients, the grandmother to whom we owe everything, and on which it would be so good to live as brothers, as the touching expression of Élisée Reclus puts it.¹ I deplored the fact that its surface was not completely known and the humans had not yet explored it entirely.

That desire—or, rather, that geographical dream—haunted me night and day, dominating my entire being and taking me far away, sometimes to the impenetrable forests of America, sometimes to the deserts of Africa, sometimes to the circumpolar regions, and sometimes to the crests of virgin summits. The penury of my resources, the exigencies of life and certain family duties clipped the wings of my enthusiasm, however, and instead of following in the footsteps of the great voyagers of the century, I was obliged to accept a job as a teacher in the worthy and beautiful city of Bordeaux.

Then I grew older, and nothing calms the effervescence of youth like the time we call “the forties”—which marks, for the majority of men, an advanced stage on the way to the point of no return. What I had never been able to put into practice, I taught, either by the spoken word or by means of the pen, and—why should I commit the sin of excessive modesty?—I brought to my teaching a conscience, and application and a kind of fervor that earned me a certain reputation.

Yes, truly, Professor Francis Naphlose was not just anyone in the capital of Guyenne, and, in the most solemn and consecrated terms, he enjoyed an exceptional consideration there. I had excellent connections; my contributions were sought by the serious journals of the region; and for many years I fulfilled the functions of general secretary with respect to the Société de Géographie Commerciale du Sud-Ouest.

“Monsieur le Professeur” and “Monsieur le Secrétaire Général” were the flattering appellations by which I was designated. Probably, many people to whom my name was mentioned would not have recognized it if my name had not been preceded or followed by my titles—titles of which I was proud and which amply satisfied my vanity. Thus, consulted by some, listened to favorably by others and respected by all, I lived tranquilly, absorbed by my cherished studies, forgetting my desires of the past, smiling at the restlessness my legs had once felt, asking Providence to grant me a little restful peace in my old age, and that serenity which permits one to face death philosophically.

Who could have imagined that, at the moment when I said goodbye to the past and to my vanished illusions, when I regulated my existence almost geometrically and took my precautions in order that nothing could henceforth disturb my home and my spiritual quietude, I would suddenly break with all my sedentary traditions and undertake a distant voyage, to become a participant in one of the most surprising adventures?

Before beginning the story of the events of which I am the faithful historian, however, it is indispensable that I talk about the person who provoked them, and vanquished my sage resolutions.

Edgard Pomerol belonged to one of the richest and most honorable families of the Gironde. In Bordeaux, one cited the Pomerols as one cites the Rothschilds in Paris, the Barings in London or the Astors in New York. The inheritor of considerable wealth at the age of twenty-three, and free to spend his fortune, he had left the shipping business that he had taken over from his father in the care of interested employees, and had launched himself with irreflective impetuosity into the life of excess that wears a man out, or kills him.

“Use, don’t abuse,” the wisdom of nations has said, via the mouth of some unknown Sancho Panza. Edgard Pomerol abused his large income in enjoying himself and intoxicating himself to such an extent that he ended up gravely impairing his health. At irregular intervals, he was obliged to return to the family home to rest, or, to employ local terminology, *pull himself together*. The family home, it is true, offered all the comfort and delights that intelligently-employed millions procure. It was a splendid Renaissance-style château, proudly planted on the Lormont “coast,” a vast verdant amphitheater on the right bank of the Garonne, where Bordelaise opulence has built many magnificent country houses.

¹ Élisée Reclus (1830-1905) was the author of *La Nouvelle géographie universelle*, published in twenty volumes between 1875 and 1894. It was awarded a gold medal by the Paris Geographical Society, even though Reclus was in exile at the time because of his anarchist political views. He served a brief term as editor of *La Science Illustrée*, but Louis Figuier was the editor at the time the serial was published.

Pampered and spoiled by Dame Fortune, Edgard Pomerol abandoned himself without restraint to his caprices, his faults, and even his vices, with a recklessness that suffered neither resistance nor contradiction. The entirely southern vivacity of his character did not tolerate the slowness of patience, and he sometimes became irritated over trivia or nothing at all, flying into a temper as if he were defending his most cherished interests. One masterly quality, however—almost a virtue, I would say, if did not fear that I might be accused of attenuating the waywardness of that bizarre character—redeemed his excessively numerous imperfections. Edgard Pomerol was kind.

Generosity came as naturally to him as grace to the faces and smiles of certain women. There was never any hint of posing or ostentation in the benefits that he distributed around him with open hands. Delicacy and discretion were warmly recommended to the agents that he employed to soothe misfortunes that were bought to his attention. More than once he had occasion to oblige ingrates, but he laughed at the reflections that I permitted myself. “Bah!” he said. “Where would be the merit in virtue if it were always rewarded? *Only imbeciles are not good*, Alexandre Dumas wrote—and I don’t intend to be taken for an imbecile.”

When I recommended that he exercise more discernment in his gifts or loans, always interest-free, it was a waste of effort.

“Scold me, my dear Professor,” he added, “but don’t force me to extract confessions from the unfortunates we help—aren’t they sufficiently humiliated in being obliged to someone?”

Sometimes, I tried to get angry, but a frank smile and a handshake calmed me down, and my bad humor turned into admiration.

“My dear Professor” or “my dear Master”—that was what the worthy fellow called me. I had, indeed, been Edgard Pomerol’s professor—or, rather, his tutor—and it was under my guidance that he had doubled the redoubtable cape of the baccalaureate at seventeen years of age. Since then, he had manifested a deference and amity toward me that touched me deeply. He never ran into me without inquiring as to the state of my health, and never came back to Bordeaux after a more-or-less prolonged absence without visiting me and offering me a few days’ entirely Oriental hospitality at the Château de Lormont.

I had not seen my former pupil for several months, and had thought that he would be staying for some time to come in Algeria, where he had gone on the advice of his physician, when the following note arrived:

Dear Master.

I have returned, and this time, it’s necessary for you to do without my visit, for illness has confined me to bed. I shall expect you as soon as it will be possible for you to spare some time. I’m counting on you to satisfy the egotistical desire of an invalid and find a few minutes to come and shake my hand.

Your very devoted, etc.

Edgard Pomerol had to be seriously ill to write to me thus, because for him, visiting me unexpectedly and taking me by surprise, knocking me back on my heels when I thought he was away, was a schoolboyish delight.

Two hours after receiving his note, I was sitting at his bedside.

“Oh, thank you,” he said to me, in a weak voice. “Thank you, my dear Professor. I’m very grateful to you for having answered my plea so promptly—but I fear that my gratitude might not have time to manifest itself.”

These words of discouragement saddened me. All that the consolations that the keenest and most sincere friendship could find were imagined and repeated by me, even the banalities always employed in such cases.

My poor pupil, my dear and worthy friend—how he had changed! The consumption had made terrible progress and imported into the masculine beauty of face something vague and indecisive, which was very difficult to characterize. His eyes, shining feverishly, still retained their benevolent expression; the thinness of the face suggested an excessive fatigue rather than the symptoms of an incurable disease. These entirely personal observations reassured me somewhat, and brought hope into my heart—fugitive hope, it is true, but which soothed my affliction.

The physician, whom I interrogated after leaving the invalid’s room, shook his head in a significant fashion and did not hide it from me that he dreaded an fatal denouement. The physician was an excellent man, but after a few minutes of conversation I realized that he had too much confidence in himself, and that he belonged to the category of scientists who imagine that there is nothing but error and confusion outside the school to which they belong. He told me that his “client” had contracted a phthisis, probably caused by all the excesses of his disorderly life. In spite of my prejudices, however, I must confess that his confidence disturbed me and would not permit me to close my eyes.

The next day, I hastened to Edgard Pomerol’s house as quickly as I could. “Well, Madame Prudence?” I asked, as I arrived on the veranda of the château.

“Alas, Monsieur le Professeur, he hasn’t had a good night.”

Madame Prudence had been my pupil’s nurse and, one may add, the general manager of all his movable and immovable property. She had been welcomed by the Pomerols when Edward was born, and had remained with the family ever since, devoting a veritable worship to her “child.” The latter, moreover, reciprocated it.

Madame Prudence took me to the invalid. On seeing me, Edgard raised himself up slightly, smiled, offered me his hand and said: "Welcome, my dear Master. I need a long talk with you. Nurse, leave me with Monsieur Francis for a while, and don't let anyone else in while we're together."

"Yes, my child, as you wish," Madame Prudence replied. "Above all, don't tire yourself out—don't talk too much, and don't exhaust yourself needlessly."

"Don't worry, Madame Prudence—Monsieur Edgard will be concise, and I won't make him repeat himself."

"Oh, I have every confidence in you, Monsieur le Professeur."

While I bowed to show how much I prized that compliment, Madame Prudence withdrew.

"Well," I asked, putting on a cheerful expression that scarcely reflected what was in my heart, "what are the profound secrets that you want to confide to me?"

"My friend," Edgard Pomerol replied, "I'm under no illusion as to my fate, and I sense that it will soon be all over for me."

"Where do you get these ideas, sadder and more lugubrious than a shroud?" I countered, already anxious about the turn the conversation was taking. "You're still young—scarcely twenty-eight years old—and you're talking about dying! You can't be serious, and I'm interrogating myself in vain, wondering why you're trying to frighten me."

"No, no," the sick man relied, in a resigned tone that alarmed me. "I'm not putting on any act to frighten you, my friend, and I know that I don't have much time left. It's my own fault. I've enjoyed worldly pleasures too much; I've been prodigal with myself. I've sowed my life in the wind, spend my days recklessly. My existence ought to have had a more elevated, more useful goal, but it's impossible to turn back the clock...."

"Oh!" I said, abruptly, concealing my emotion and holding back the tears that were ready to form in the corners of my eyes. "Is it to impart such confidences that you were determined to be alone with me?"

"My friend, I want to make my will, and before summoning a notary, I want to ask your advice."

"Make your will! You think so? One doesn't make such resolutions at your age. Wait, there's no urgency...."

"It is urgent...exceedingly so. I need to dictate my last wishes while my intelligence has all its plenitude, while I'm entirely conscious of my condition—and I have to choose an executor who will respect them. Now, I thought of you, and only you, for..."

"Of my God!" I replied, shrilly, "I never expected to receive such a mission from you. I warn you, I'll refuse."

"Calm down, my dear friend, and let me finish. I'm certain that you'll change your mind after hearing me out. If my will were to be as banal as most wills, to be sure, I wouldn't have mentioned it to you—but as you know, my relatives are all rich, and I hardly ever see them. I can, therefore, dispose of my fortune without any scruple, and repair by my death all the defects of my existence."

"You? Oh, if only all rich people were like you! How much misery would be eased, how many hateful sentiments would disappear from the world! I still don't understand."

"I mean, my dear Professor, that except for a few specific legacies, it's necessary to put my fortune to noble use...under your direction."

"I can breathe again...I fear that you were about to make me your sole heir."

Edgard Pomerol smiled, and took my hand, which he shook effusively. "Perhaps," he went on, "I will thus redeem the uselessness to which I have gladly devoted myself, under the pretext that I possessed great wealth. Oh, triple fool that I have been! As I am about to die, I take inspiration from Napoléon Gobert, who was carried off at almost my age by a wasting disease, and who is eternally honored by the foundations and donations to which his name is attached.² Today, I take for my own count what he wrote at the head of his will: *I would have liked to make my life useful to my homeland; I have made plans, and would not have lacked the necessary courage, but health did not light the torch of my intelligence and all my faculties, which might have been great, are languishing, extinct. Study is a struggle that exhausts me, and in which I succumb. Let my death, at least, be useful to my fatherland, and may I do with my wealth what I could not do with my mind.* Tell me, dear Master—is there a finer and better example to follow?"

Good God! How foolish humans sometimes are. That noble speech moved me so profoundly that to begin with, I could not find a single word by way of reply. If my pupil had not been lying in a bed of pain, I would have hurled myself into his arms to embrace him, not wishing—or, rather, not being able—to translate my anguish and admiration in any other way. Suddenly, the tears that I had been striving with all my might to retain sprang forth.

"Oh, my friend," I exclaimed, "how good your heart is!"

² Napoléon Gobert (1807-1833), the Emperor's godson, became a diplomat after being invalided out of the army, but died in Cairo after drinking polluted water from the Nile. He left a substantial legacy to fund an annual pension for the writer of the best history in France, to be retained only until a better one came along (Adolphe Thiers won it, and retained it until his death in 1877).

"I knew that you would accept, in the end," he said.

"What are you demanding of me?"

"That you give me some good advice with regard to establishing 'Pomerol prizes' destined for the Institut and certain scientific societies...when I am no longer here. That you indicate to me thereafter how one might create a highly moral and philanthropic institution in order to help the disinherited of this world. In sum, my dear master, exercise our ingenuity, find the means of doing the greatest possible good with the few millions that presently comprise my fortune."

"That's good—I'll search."

"Soon, no?"

"However..."

"Come on, don't try to deceive me with regard to my situation. I feel my illness, and can measure its seriousness better than anyone else. Act, act promptly, submit your plans to me, my dear Master. When my dispositions are conclusively settled, it seems to me that I shall *depart* more tranquil and satisfied."

What response was possible to that noble stubbornness? I promised to do everything he wished, giving my entire acquiescence to all his desires—and left, broken-hearted, to go home.

II. PIERRE MAGUERON

The illness did not get worse, however. There was a pause for a few days, which gave me hope—the supreme consolation—and seemed to me augur well for the future. The physician continued his significant head-shaking, though, in which there was no room for misunderstanding, and Madame Prudence, taking that solemn Sangrado³ for an oracle, lamented and despaired.

Edgard Pomerol did not lose sight of his testament, and asked almost every day how I was getting on with my task. To satisfy his mania, I was obliged to sketch out in broad strokes a few projects that gave satisfaction to the inclinations of his mind. Under various pretexts, however, I still put off the step of bringing the notary to the château.

Bizarrely enough, that revealed an inclination of my nature that I can't explain. It seemed to me that the will was a passport to the other world, and that, while it remained unmade, my pupil would live. It was puerile, I know, but who could blame me?

One evening, however, I was afraid, and I thought that I would be forced to call some lawyer or other. It was in March, and the day had been as radiant as the spring it announced. The sun was shining joyfully on the windows, and seemed to be saying *open up, I want to come in*. Our poor invalid sat up then, an indefinable smile playing upon his colorless lips, and he asked for the window to be opened.

The vernal air came into the room, brisk and fresh. In the distance the view was splendid. The sunlit earth seemed to be celebrating, intoning a hosanna of eternal youth in the buzzing of insects, the chirping of sparrows hopping from branch to branch, and the cooing of pigeons dancing on a scarcely-grassed lawn. Further away, the luminous waters of the Garonne were rolling along, streaked with boats, the smoke-plumes of steamers extending a light fog from one bank to the other, like the vapors of a gigantic stream of molten silver. The animated spectacle delighted my former pupil and put a hint of juvenility into his gaze—and yet, how many times had the same spectacle unfolded before him without his paying the slightest attention to it?

Either because Edgard Pomerol remained exposed to the outside air for too long, or because the temperature was not warm enough for him, he felt ill, and that evening, a rather violent fever became manifest. Summoned immediately, the physician judged the case very serious and affirmed that a consultation was necessary. In fact, the consultation was virtually a conference, held in the large drawing-room, and after a discussion lasting more than an hour, four of the most authoritative disciples of Aesculapius fell into accord in order to tell me, yet again—you'll never guess—that the case was very serious.

Oh, good Lord! I knew perfectly well that the case was very serious, but at such a moment, I could not be content with such an unsatisfactory appraisal, and I interrogated the physician in charge.

"Monsieur," I said, "I need to speak frankly. My friend Edgard Pomerol has already expressed his intention of dictating his last will and testament, but until now I have dissuaded him, not believing that he was in mortal danger. Now, it is indispensable that I be certain as to his condition, in order that all precautions might be taken to safeguard certain interests with which he has acquainted me."

The doctor smiled, and spoke to me with the respectful deference that one shows to a future heir—especially an heir to several millions.

"Make no mistake," I hastened to add, "It doesn't concern me at all. I know that Edgard Pomerol feels a keen sympathy for my person, but I also know that, apart from a few specific memories, he won't leave me anything substantial."

The doctor bowed more respectfully than before, and appeared not to believe what I said. He was too much a man of the world to reveal his thoughts, and yet, behind his spectacles, his half-closed eyes seemed to be saying: "You're a sly one...you're playing your game perfectly, and your disinterest is merely clever play-acting. My compliments, dear chap."

"Come on," I said, impatiently. "Assume that I'm his heir, and don't hide anything from me."

The doctor lost himself in scientific and pedantic phraseology, which did not tell me very much. I thought I understood, however, that with attentive care, calculated consideration and a sojourn in southern Europe, Edgard might prolong his existence for a few more months, unless there were "unexpected complications." Monsieur de La Palisse could not have expressed himself better.⁴

I was momentarily furious, and approved of the mockery that Molière had heaped upon physicians, only regretting that he had not been more acerbic. Fortunately for my pupil, though, the crisis was temporary. The following day, he was a little better, but the amelioration soon slowed down, and the illness resumed its normal

³ Sangrado—Spanish for "bleeding"—is the name attributed to a physician by Alain René le Sage in the classic 18th century comedy *Gil Blas*.

⁴ When Jacques de Chabannes, Seigneur de La Palice, died in battle his men composed a song about him containing the couplet "A quarter of an hour before his death/He was still alive"—meaning that he fought to the end. The couplet was subsequently used as an example of stating the obvious, which became, in common parlance, "a La Palice (or La Palisse) verity."

state. I began to despair, and I was about to put the famous last will and testament in hand when chance led me to encounter an old schoolfellow for whom I had the greatest esteem...even though he as a physician.

Pierre Magueron owed his situation entirely to his energy and strength of character. The fourth or fifth child of an impoverished peasant family, he had initially behaved as badly as any village scamp, often playing truant, stuffing himself with blackberries along the hedgerows, wearing out his trousers climbing trees to raid birds' nests or eating green apples, lending himself to all the luxuries of idleness in the shade of haystacks at harvest-time. While leading this independent, almost vagabond, existence, exempt from constraint, Magueron declared himself to be the "assistant" of an old bone-setter.

"I watched out for him," he told me later, "and whenever he left home to attend animals or people—for he exercised the professions of physician and veterinarian indiscriminately—I followed him everywhere, prouder than Artaban⁵ when he deigned to entrust me with his umbrella, his instrument-case or the tin-plate box in which he put the wild flowers we collected as we walked."

Fortunately, the old bone-setter did not believe in the infallibility of his art, like the majority of his peers. He practiced in for a living rather than out of conviction. Besides, he loved nature passionately, and credited her with his success whenever he cured a quadruped or a biped. He formed a fast friendship with the miscreant that he always found under his feet, and who offered his services so politely in order to relieve him of the small burdens that he was obliged to transport.

Recognizing a keen and unfettered intelligence in the boy, the bone-setter taught him all he knew. His empirical baggage only consisted of a few notions regarding herbal remedies, but immediately captivated the child's mind. Their plant-gathering, conducted in haste on the edge of a wood, the rim of a ditch or in the shadow of a bush, was not very scientific, and little more instructive, according to Magueron's own confession. It was only necessary to examine the plants, sniff them, taste them, to appreciate their curative properties immediately and determine the doses appropriate to this malady or that. The child learned something in that fashion, though, and the bone-setter gave him the desire to know more. Then he went to school assiduously, and became an excellent pupil.

Several years passed, and the most astonished man in the whole of France and Navarre was Père Magueron on the day when the schoolmaster told him that his son Pierre was an "exceptional" student and that he ought to cultivate his scientific aptitude by sending him to some local secondary school. It was good advice, but Père Magueron was in a delicate situation with regard to the god Plutus,⁶ and was unable to make considerable sacrifices to complete his son's education. The old bone-setter came to the rescue, playing the part of a brave and obliging sorcerer. He spoke in such good terms of his protégé, interested so many people in his fate, and schemed so cleverly, initially with respect to the mayor of the commune and then the general council of the canton, that he obtained a full scholarship for him at the community collage of my native town.

I was there that I met Pierre Magueron and we became fast friends. He slogged away at the sciences, I at the humanities, and no rivalry troubled our reciprocal sympathy. I rejoiced as much in his successes as in my own...when I obtained any. My comrade brought the indomitable tenacity of a peasant to his labor; he was fully conscious of the pursuit that he had undertaken, and did not want to lose his way. He was cited as the most hard-working of pupils; he passed all his examinations triumphantly and his head gave way under the crowns of laurels that the university distributed freely to those who showed themselves worthy of its solicitude.

We went our separate ways, and when the hazards of life brought us together again, I was a teacher and Pierre Magueron had been a physician for some years. Instead of setting himself up in a village to wait patiently for clients, my comrade had gone into service aboard steamships. That existence, entirely composed of work and struggle, suited his independent nature admirably. He had already travelled the world in almost all its latitudes and reported his peregrinations in *mémoires* mentioned with flattering distinction by the Académie des Sciences. I ought to add that if I enjoy some reputation as a geographer, it is thanks to the information and the innumerable documents always put at my disposal by my friend.

Pierre Magueron was a physician with the Compagnie des Messageries Maritimes when I had the opportunity to render him a service that I would not mention if it were not directly related to the events I have just recounted. One day, I ran into him on one of the Bordeaux docks, and was struck by his anxious expression. Naturally, I asked him why he was upset. He told me that he needed ten thousand francs within twenty-four hours.

Ten thousand francs! That was quite a sum, especially for poor wretches like Magueron and me. I didn't ask why he needed the ten thousand francs; it wasn't important for me to know what obligations he had contracted, since I was unable to help him. When he asked me the brief and expressive question "Do you have them?" I raised my arms into the air and let them fall back dejectedly, like an unarmed soldier.

⁵ The name of the ancient Persian statesman Artabanus somehow became a by-word for overweening arrogance. No one knows why.

⁶ The Greek god of wealth, recalled in the word "plutocracy," and sometimes confused with the Roman god of the Underworld, Pluto, although his own subterranean connections were entirely connected with mining.

My pantomime must have informed him adequately as to my financial situation, for he seized my hand, shook it forcefully, and pronounced the single word: “Adieu!”

I don’t know what happened inside me, but my keenly alarmed friendship imagined a sinister drama. Did he need to hand over those ten thousand francs by virtue of an inexorable contract? Were they a gambling debt? And I saw Magueron being unable to settle up and killing himself to escape dishonor. An inspiration flashed through my brain with lightning rapidity, and I said: “Come to my house at six o’clock this evening—I’ll give you your ten thousand francs.”

“I’ll be there,” my friend replied, and we separated.

I ran in all haste to Edgard Pomerol and informed him, in a few words, of the purpose of my visit.

“You’ve done the right thing,” that excellent fellow informed me. “You did well to think of me.” And when, having pocketed the sum, I prepared to give him a duly signed and stamped receipt, Edgard hastened to add: “I hope, my dear Master, that you won’t do me the injury of believing that I doubt your word. I want you to have all the merit of your action; there’s no need for your friend to know where you got the ten thousand francs of which he seems to be in such pressing need.”

Search in all the handbooks of *Morality in Action* published for the instruction of the young, and if you can find two examples of such generosity, I’ll consent to be skinned alive. You might object that my pupil possessed a large fortune, and that, in sum, it was easy for him to display his generosity so complacently, but I shall not waste time on such paltry considerations and reply that many rich men are utterly selfish.

At the appointed hour, Pierre Magueron was in my apartment, and I handed him the ten thousand francs, without telling him how I had procured them. In his turn, he thanked me, but without telling me where the money was bound. I was discreet enough not to ask him. I was thus permitted to provide a conclusion that suited me to the tragic drama built by my imagination. Magueron certainly never suspected that I had transformed him into one of the melodramatic characters inspired by *Trente ans ou la vie d’un joueur*.⁷

Some time afterwards he returned the ten thousand francs, but without letting go of his reticence.

Thus, when I met Pierre Magueron, whom I had not seen for six months, I immediately spoke to him about Edgard Pomerol. “You alone,” I said, “are capable of saving him.”

“I don’t like poaching on my colleagues’ territory,” he replied, “and taking on responsibilities that they seem to be shirking.”

I insisted. It was futile. Then I fired my final shot and told him the story of the ten thousand franc loan. Magueron listened to my story attentively, and manifested his astonishment—or, rather, his emotion—with approving nods of the head.

“You’re right,” he said, vehemently. “Everything must be attempted to save such a man. When can I see him?”

“As soon as you wish.”

“Tomorrow morning. First, who is his physician?”

“It’s Monsieur X. And if you want my opinion of M. X, I think he’s a donkey.”

“You’re wrong, my friend; the time of Diaforius and the Purgons is past.⁸ Before the title of doctor is conferred on someone ambitious to acquire it, serious studies and firm guarantees of capability are demanded. I know, damn it, that it’s considered good form in certain quarters to make fun of medicine and physicians, to mock them and jeer them, but it would be very difficult for our overexcited society to do without them. If they didn’t exist, they’d be invented, so useful are they.”

“All right, all right,” I replied, wanting to attenuate the forcefulness of my opinion, “But the exception proves the rule.”

“That’s enough about a colleague,” Magueron replied, “and if he’s Dr. So-much-the worse, let’s try to be Dr. So-much-the-better.”

I shook his hand warmly, and told him that I would notify Edgard of his visit the next day.

“Listen, Francis,” he said, “if I judge the case of your pupil to be hopeless, I’ll tell you frankly, and won’t show my face again. If I recognize that it’s possible to save him, you have to promise to support me energetically in persuading him to follow all my prescriptions, however strange and bizarre they seem. That’s the price of salvation.”

I swore an oath to put all my influence at the disposal of Edgard Pomerol’s new physician.

⁷ A famous sentimental melodrama by Victor Ducange and Prosper Goubaux, première at the Porte-Saint-Martin theater in 1827. The title translates as “Thirty Years, or the life of a Gambler.”

⁸ Thomas Diaforius is the principal physician featured in Molière’s satirical comedy *La Malade imaginaire* [The Hypochondriac]. Dr. Purgon is one of the others, standing in for a whole school of medicine based on purgation—hence the use of the plural here.