

PRINCE BONIFACIO

I. In which it is proved that it is difficult for a prince to satisfy everybody and his son

There was once a prince named Bonifacio, who was the best of men and the most detestable of princes.

I do not want to speak ill of humankind or of power, but it is certain that the private virtues of Prince Bonifacio were deleterious to his public virtues, and that, being endowed with a fabulous generosity, he did not want to force his subjects to pay taxes, thieves for whom prison might have been unhealthy to remain behind bars, or soldiers who had things to do at home to remain under arms, and that, in consequence of these concessions, the administration of finance, justice and the army were in a parlous state.

Now, everyone knows that, without money, Italian princes are not Swiss, and that all the princes in the world are not devoted servants. It is equally constant that justice needs to be administered, if only by the administration of violent beatings, and no one is unaware that an army is as indispensable to a ministry of war as a hare to jugged hare.¹

The prince was not a rigorous observer or monarchical systems, however. He took things at his ease, and permitted others to act in the same fashion in his regard. His subjects did not quibble with regard to an old charter granted by one of his ancestors; and he, for his part, reproached himself bitterly for demanding of his apathetic administrators what he had every right to obtain from them. A mutual tolerance confounded duties, and the reins of government formed a rather confused tangle that no one thought of slicing through.

With such a system, Prince Bonifacio was deeply in debt, and he was obliged to have recourse to numerous loans to have the chimneys of his castle repaired. The people were scarcely any richer; money, which did not circulate, piled up in the coffers of a few financiers; the middle classes complained about the bad state of the roads that led from the capital to the surrounding drinking-dens, without making the reflection that beautiful roads are macadamized as much by good taxes as good gravel. That axiom was unknown in the principality; the bridges and highways had no representatives, and it was the trampling of passers-by that marked out the roads.

Prince Bonifacio XXIII believed, nevertheless, that he was the benefactor of his people, although he took no vanity from it. Every morning he asked his superintendent of police whether everyone was getting four square meals a day; for him, that was a scruple of conscience. The superintendent, whose table was well-provided, reassured the prince, and the latter, delighted to realize the utopia of a chicken in every pot at such low expense, suffered no indigestion and slept free of nightmares. One might have said of him, as his epitaph—the only veridical princely epitaph—that he never ceased dreaming about the happiness of his people. Sleep was, in fact, the prince's usual condition and dreams the only work of his intelligence; he only dreamed because he could not help dreaming, and the work in question was involuntary.

I have forgotten to tell you that Prince Bonifacio's State was effaced from the map of Italy a long time ago. It is, therefore, an old story that I am telling, and lovers of synchronism can place the reign of the sovereign in question in parallel with the story of the king of Yvetot.²

This, all went badly in the principality. That negligence, in making government careless, generated disorder in society: not a tumultuous disorder, the inhabitants being naturally placid, but a silent, peaceful disorder that inclined the principality gently and gradually toward bankruptcy.

¹ The famous first line of a recipe for jugged hare, "first catch your hare," associate in England with Mrs. Beaton, originated in the 18th century French *Cuisinière bourgeoise* [Everyday Cooking]

² The lord of the tiny seigneurie of Yvetot, near Rouen, was given the entitlement to call himself *roi* [king] in the 6th century, and "le roi d'Yvetot," mocked in a popular folk song, became a conventional phrase referring to individuals of great pretention but negligible worth.

A few minds, a little more vigorously tempered—sons who had been educated in the great capitals, such as Monaco, or had breathed the air of some powerful republic, like that of San Marino, tried hard to stir up an opposition. They tried to found a newspaper. No one stopped them, but, liberty being extended to its ultimate limits, and what can be written always being inferior to what can be said, no one felt the need to go out of his way to read a badly-printed rag. The founders of the paper had only one paying subscriber, Prince Bonifacio, and he was a slow payer; it was necessary to end him a bill twenty times over before obtaining settlement.

The party of the future had despaired. Fomenting a revolution was a very cruel means repugnant to the mild mores of those good folk; besides which, the principality had no National Guard. Then again, in order to have the appearance of serious combat, it would have been necessary to have recourse to the methods in use in military plays and to make use of the same actors to represent the prince's army and the revolutionary army. Now that means, excellent for the illusion of the gaze, is detestable in revolutionary practice.

They had even tried to recruit to the interest of progress the minister of the prince's kitchens, but that high functionary did not want a change of regime, and was apprehensive of the leaders of the opposition, as they would have been obliged to impose universal Spartan broth.

Boniface XXIII, warned about these murmurs on the part of some of his young subjects, took pleasure in these insurrectional whims; he missed the newspaper greatly when it was forced to close down in order to satisfy the demands of its numerous shareholders, especially because of the charades that the organ of the future had felt obliged to publish at the end of every issue to stimulate the zeal of subscribers and patriots. It never occurred to the prince, however, that he might have to grant any satisfaction to the young people in question.

Bonifacio was a man of regular habits; he wanted to die in his routine. For twenty-five years he had had the same ministers and the same wardrobe. It was impossible for him to change his way of doing things.

"After me," he said, "my son can do as he likes." That was better than saying "After me, the Deluge," but Boniface said it in order to dispense with the need for all reflection, for he had, deep down, not the slightest intention of dying and making way for his son. He loved the latter far too much to want to inflict a mourning-dress on him as painful as that one dons for a father, and he slept far too well on his throne to think about going to sleep on the cold pillow of his ancestors.

When I speak of a throne, it is pure fiction. Boniface had loaned his classic throne a long time ago, in order to augment the accessories of the capital's theater, and the royal seat was a rhetorical figure, just like an academician's armchair.

Bonifacio, as I have just told you, had a son; he had only ever had the one. Heaven had respected the prince's apathy, and had not wanted to complicate the government of his States with a numerous family. Besides which, the Princess Mother had died a few days after the birth of the heir presumptive,³ in consequence of her churching celebration, which had been too copious.

Bonifacio had wept for his wife like a man unaccustomed to weeping—which is to say, abundantly and loudly—and then had consoled himself completely, by virtue of that law of dynamics that bring us promptly back to equilibrium when an abrupt accident had disturbed us, and which makes characters submissive to habit return invariably to their antecedents. The prince's habits being pleasant, he returned to them promptly.

Satisfied by having a son, and not having to fear that his scepter would fall to the distaff side of the family, the prince took pride in that legitimate heritage, and deviated from the dignity of his rank on that point, not wanting any bastards. Free of the companion that he had led with his right hand, he did not want to encumber his left, and put both hands in his pockets, or folded them over his chest, with the beatitude of the best of men in the best of terrestrial positions.

Lorenzo, the young prince, was twenty years old. He was as handsome as a prince in fairy tale; he was not at all the portrait of his father. Dressed to the age of twelve as a girl, in order to spare the civil list the expense of a tutor he had had a French governess who took pleasure in developing tender sentiments in him. She said nothing to him about the constitutional duties of a sovereign, and if she had read him *Télémaque*, the young heir would have been much less preoccupied with maxims of

³ It is not obvious why the story persistently refers to Lorenzo as the heir presumptive when he is obviously the heir apparent, unless it is an ironic reference to Bonifacio's intention not to die.

government than the story of the nymph Eucharis.⁴ He was familiar with all the French romances, and asked nothing better than to act them out in his turn.

Lorenzo was as free as all his father's subjects, and the infinite leisure left to him by the absence of any social profession he employed in dreaming, strolling in a melancholy fashion and passing under a certain window in the city at certain times of day. I cannot affirm that Lorenzo did not commit little verses to paper in secret; I even suspect, speaking frankly, that he had a certain strength in the Apollonian art; but he dared not confide the essays of his muse to anyone—by which I meant anyone of his own sex. His Highness Bonifacio XXIII would have burst out laughing and made uproarious fun of those romantic tastes.

The young prince loved his father, but it must be admitted that he would have liked to love a father who was a little less fat, a little less comical, and a little less careless of celestial and terrestrial matters, more severe in his majesty and graver in his bounty.

Poor Lorenzo was an insufficient companion; he had no liking for dice or cards. As the Council on Ministers was held at table, and affairs of State were deliberated between the pears and the cheese, Lorenzo always wanted to dine alone, in private, out of respect for State secrets. Sometimes, Bonifacio sighed when he glanced at his heir presumptive's empty place and said, while having the Prime Minister fill his glass: "Lorenzo disappoints me; he doesn't understand politics at all!"

The prince's disappointment necessitated a few more glassfuls, and Lorenzo thus provided his father with regret and joy at the same time.

The party of the discontented, which met in a mediocre hostelry, and was, in consequence, paralyzed in its flight by the insufficiency of the menu and the poor quality of the wines, and could not rise as far as conspiracy, had tried to enlist Lorenzo and appoint him as him as a leader—which is to say, an instrument. Lorenzo had, however, declined that honor as a matter of duty, except that he that thought it appropriate to make a few attempt to excite some activity in his father's mind, and some desire for progress.

"Tut tut!" Bonifacio replied. "What did you want me to do? Create other needs for my subjects than those they can satisfy? That would be running the risk of making them unhappy. Do I tyrannize them?"

"No, Father, but solicitude..."

"Do you want me, on the other hand, to rack my brains to provide them with distraction? I let them be; let them do likewise with respect to me—and long live liberty!"

Discouraged, Lorenzo let his father be. The liberty of nonchalance that he heard so placidly evoked was ironic, a parody of the beautiful and strong liberty that has initiative and activity, and he blushed with shame in thinking that his country only played a ridiculous role in history, on seeing a void gradually form in the finances and disturbance in minds.

It was not, I repeat, that Lorenzo had the slightest idea of government, but he had a heart and there is always, in any kind of tenderness, a kind of illumination that imports foresight into happiness. The young prince would have found it very difficult to submit his plans for reform, but he sensed confusedly that there were other things to do than nothing, and that abandonment is not a principle.

Besides which, he had accessory ideas. Thus, although he was not bellicose, he wanted a small army.

"We can use it for tattoos," he said to the Minister of War, to exhort him to support his plans.

The minister, however, had no reason to prefer work to a sinecure, and he did not lend Lorenzo's proposals the slightest support.

"In that case, let's develop the arts of peace," the poet Lorenzo tried to say. "Let's create an Academy, and floral games."⁵

⁴ *Les Aventures de Télémaque* (1699; tr. as *The Adventures of Telemachus*) is a didactic novel by François de Fénelon, ostensibly offered for the education of an heir to the French throne, recounting the travels of Odysseus' son, accompanied and guided by his tutor Mentor, whose advice constitutes a stern attack on autocracy (as practised by Louis XIV), and a forceful argument for constitutional monarchy. It is obviously one of the models of "Le Prince Bonifacio," albeit in an ironic sense. In *Télémaque*, Eucharis, who has no mythological analogue, although her name translates as something like "lovely grace," is an attendant of the nymph Calypso; Télémaque falls in love with her, as his father had fallen in love with Calypso, but he is persuaded to leave her much more rapidly by Mentor's insistence that he put duty before love.

But the Minister of Fine Arts and Letters was a jolly fellow who did not like boredom and who, under the pretext of a library, was making a collection of all the licentious books of Italy.

Finally, when he had failed in all proposals of the moral order, Lorenzo ended up asking his august father at least to have the streets swept and lighted—for, I am ashamed to say, the capital of the principality was an open sewer, and by night, people would have been forever bumping into walls if devout individuals had not had the idea of lighting little candles in front of statues of the blessed Virgin set up at all the street corners. Thanks to that system, which could also serve to refute the charge of obscurantism that faithless individuals still permitted themselves to level, people could go home without running the risk of spending more than an hour trying to find the door.

But Bonifacio XXIII did not want the filth to be swept away. It was, he said, necessary to think of everybody, and stray dogs did not deserve to be deprived of the ordure heaped up around boundary-markers. As for street-lights and lanterns, he considered them to be baleful inventions. This was his reasoning: “At night, all honest folk ought to be asleep in their homes; now, when one is asleep, one has no need of light. If I allowed the streets to be lit, I couldn’t prevent people from walking in them; now, by walking in them, they might make a noise and wake the people who are asleep.”

It seemed that sleep was the goal of life, and that Prince Bonifacio had no other objective than to make sure that no one was awake.

Lorenzo was saddened by this passive resistance, all the more so because he had that disposition of the soul in which one wants to do good, not only for the sake of doing good, but for the sake of beauty.

Lorenzo had a weakness that does not always spare princes: he was in love.

II. In which we learn what a scholar never knows

It was neither a shepherdess nor a princess with whom Lorenzo was smitten. In that matter he was failing both his romantic education and his position as heir presumptive. I suppose that he only had to ask his divinity to put on the costume of a shepherdess—metamorphoses are no more difficult than that—but Lorenzo would not have dared to express that desire and Marta might not have agreed to it. It would have been even easier to become a princess, but I must declare that, in the sincerity of his worship, Lorenzo gave no thought either to the charm of inequality or the prestige of rank. He loved Marta because he loved her. That reason is peremptory in amorous matters. No subtlety can prevail against it.

One day, when he was walking in the fields, on the lookout for rhymes, he encountered a young woman collecting herbs. Lorenzo’s fate was instantaneously fixed. The soft radiance of Marta’s dark eyes, the chaste and proud fashion in which she curtsied in greeting her sovereign’s heir, and the sympathetic little smile that she allowed the young man, a trifle pallid with ennui, to glimpse, all charmed and conquered Lorenzo.

To throw himself at Marta’s feet, to declare his flame and threaten to run himself through with a dainty little épée that he wore for show at his side, was the advice given to him by his reading and memories of his French governess, but true love renders independence. Lorenzo was himself, to the point of expressing honest and sincere sentiments. He simply approached the young woman and was simply welcomed.

Botany betrothed them, without them having to confess that they loved one another, and when one of them wanted to tell the other and the other wanted to allow it to be divined, they found that the declaration was unnecessary. They looked at one another, blushed and exchanged their hearts in a squeeze of the hand.

Marta was the daughter of a scholar, Master Marforio.⁶ She had lost her mother at the age when Lorenzo had lost his. The two orphans found a connection in that loss, for which they were not yet

⁵ The reference is to the *jocs florals* [the Occitan equivalent of the French *jeux florals*], the annual poetry competitions instituted by the *Consistori del Gay Saber* [Society of the Gay Science] in Toulouse, the oldest literary society in France (and the world).

⁶ Marforio is the name of one of the “talking statues” of Rome, on which satirical poems or comments were posted, thus becoming a kind of “bulletin board” and subtle forum for dissent. Marforio was often used to post replies to comments posted on Pasquino, the most famous of the set, who gave his name to the subgenre of satirical literature known as pasquinades.

consoled. They each felt as free as if they had been alone in the world, the scholar being as negligent of his paternal duties as Prince Bonifacio.

Marta and Lorenzo went for long walks, and God knows that no more innocent love was ever reflected in the azure of the heavens. At the end of a month, however, Lorenzo asked his fiancée for permission to visit the paternal house and swear solemnly, on the latest bunch of flowers that they had picked together, that he would rather renounce the throne than renounce the hope of having Marta for a wife.

The young woman was too ignorant of worldly things to appreciate Lorenzo's naïve oath at its full value and to tell herself that the prince might not be promising very much, the throne of his forefathers being extremely worm-eaten and somewhat precarious. She received that engagement of good faith and promised Lorenzo that she would obtain her father's consent.

I am beginning my story on the very day when Marta was due to raise that delicate question with the least delicate of confidants.

Master Marforio was considered, in the eyes of some people—especially his own, which he believed to be infallible—to be the greatest scholar in Italy. I shall not contradict his reputation, and I am disposed, after I have told you about his errors and follies, to admit that he was indeed a great scholar, one of those who had no doubt about anything and who only admitted the existence of God in order to have the pleasure of stealing his secrets.

Master Marforio had scrutinized everything, analyzed everything, passed everything through the alembic of his observatory and reduced everything in the retort of his intelligence. That abuse of investigation had not, however, brought him misfortune, like Dr. Faust. He was, fundamentally, a rather amiable character. Quite different from some of the scholars of our era and many of the scholars who came after him he was only pedantic and sententious at times, when he plunged himself into some difficult problem, and his good humor always shone through, like Noah's rainbow over the abyss. A mistake stimulated him without irritating him. Besides which, could he ever have admitted to making a mistake? His beard had turned white, but without his forehead being creased by overly profound wrinkles. Sedentary work had made him plump, but it is academically notorious that when a scholar grows rotund he is safe from hypochondria and all unhealthy influences.

Marforio was reputed to be a sorcerer, and, while laughing at that renown—which was not without danger in Italy, he was not far from believing that he had the gift of working miracles.

"Who knows?" he sometimes said. "I've never tried."

On that point, Master Marforio was mistaken; he had, in fact, wrought one miracle: Marta was by far the most prodigious achievement of that infallible scholar.

How could that lovely creature, so sweet, so simple, so charming in her figure and so candid in her soul, that harmonious statue of innocence, name him Father? That was a real conundrum—but it did not puzzle Master Marforio, who scarcely gave it a thought. Besides which, having found the secret of making roses bloom without rose-bushes he would have had no difficulty in laying claim to that flower-bed perfumed with all the virtues and blossoming with all the virtues. In the series of his works, his daughter was classified somewhere between an experiment in chemistry or alchemy and a demonstration in physics.

Master Marforio's study would have delighted a painter and horrified an auctioneer. Everything there was piled up in confusion; it was chaos. Skeletons lay on books, like death on life; flowers were mingled pell-mell with stuffed monsters, spirit-lamps and telescopes, and in the midst of all that, those indefatigable shroud-weavers the spiders covered the books, the flowers, the instruments and all the rest of the debris with their cobwebs, like the irony of the progress that effaces and levels the instruments of the past.

Beside that official sanctuary, in which he granted his audiences, Dr. Marforio had a mysterious redoubt into which no one—I should say no living person—had ever entered. What happened in that laboratory, no one could say. It was, for the innocent Marta, like Bluebeard's closet. The young woman did not believe that there were women in it wickedly put to death by her father, but she knew that, for some strange and exotic endeavor, the secret of which had not been confided to her, Master Marforio had dealings with the gravedigger, and that the latter sometimes arrived and went away again with heavy burdens.

At any rate, the endeavor, whatever it was, caused the scholar no remorse; after each of these passably sinister visits, he was even conspicuously cheerful; he rubbed his hands together, patted his belly and tugged his beard.

“Bravo, bravo!” he murmured. “All’s going well! Humankind is marching toward its cycle of renovation. Paracelsus was nothing but a simpleton; the philosopher’s stone is nothing but a pebble. Isaac Hollandus, Basilius Valentinus and all those who have claimed to enable human beings to live beyond their natural span would want to come back to life to enjoy my discovery.⁷ The homunculus was a chimera. Humans can’t be created, but they can be preserved; they can’t be given life, but they can keep it. It’s the sacred fire.”

So, one day, in the middle of one of these monologues, which he renewed on a daily basis, with a few variations, Dr. Marforio heard a knock on his study door.

“Come in,” he said.

Marta appeared, with a smile on her lips and a slight blush on her cheeks, not daring to cross the threshold.

“Is that you, my daughter?” asked the scholar, with a veritable astonishment and a slight solemnity in his tone. “What’s happened? Why so serious?”

“Father, first of all I wanted to embrace you. For some time now, you no longer look at me, you no longer think about me.”

“I’ve been wrong, I confess,” said the doctor, opening his white beard, to allow kisses to pass me by. The sight of innocence is a good counsel and a precious inspiration. I’ve been wrong, my little star! *Virgo virginea!* Albertus Magnus instructs humans to live far from men; he didn’t say far from young women. I permit you to come and bid me good day every morning, mirror of the firmament, and every morning I will bless you.”

While speaking thus, with his usual volubility, Dr. Marforio had drawn Marta toward him and solemnly gave her the most banal of paternal kisses on her lovely forehead, between the tresses of her long dark hair.

“Well, my girl, are you content?” he asked, after granting her this favor, as if to send her away.

Marta hesitated to speak. It seemed to her to be sacrilegious to surrender the pure and dear secret of her soul, which would doubtless be greeted by a burst of laughter. She stood in the middle of the study, motionless, her head bowed, tracing bizarre and impossible lines with her finger in the dust that covered a stout book placed on a shelf close at hand.

Fortunately, Dr. Marforio, although he did not know very much about the art of provoking consequences, was possessed of a loquacity convenient for timid listeners; it gave them time to arrange and organize their ideas. Scholars sometimes have these fortuitous utilities.

“What do you want from me?” he said to his daughter. “You’re not yet at an age when one needs to remake nature’s jewel-case. Do you need an elixir to preserve and maintain your hair? Scholars to come, French and German chemists, will exhaust themselves in vain efforts to find the solution or ointment that will stop hair turning gray and falling out. I shall take that secret with me to the grave. Do you need an enamel for your teeth? Rouge for your cheeks? I would rather demand them of you, charm of my life. Speak! I can open infinity for you, for I can dispense eternal, immutable beauty!”

The doctor paused, pensively, and then continued: “Oh, I confess that it would cost me to try that operation on you. My hand might perhaps tremble. Do you have confidence in your father, Marta. Are you convinced, as you ought to be, that he is the greatest scholar in the principality, one of the greatest scholars in Italy, and, in consequence, one of the greatest scholars in the world? If I said to you, ‘My darling, I’m going, with a little instrument of which it’s unnecessary to be afraid, to make a light incision in your forehead, about which it’s unnecessary to worry, and make a few little cuts in your lovely skull with a pretty little saw,’ tell me, my little star, would you be scared?”

⁷ Johannes Isaac Hollandus and Basilius Valentinus were pseudonyms attached to a number of apocryphal alchemical treatises. The former, who allegedly lived in the latter part of the 16th century, is most famously credited with a volume known in French as *L’Oeuvre de Saturne* (tr. as *A Work of Saturn*), while the latter, allegedly active a century previously, appeared on a number of works in both Latin and German, including *Duodecim claves philosophicae* [The Twelve Philosophical Keys] and *De microcosmo deque mango mundi mysterio et medicina hominis* [On the Microcosm, the Great Secret of the World and Human Medicine].

Marta opened her eyes wide and stared at her father; she really was afraid, but of being obliged to recognize that her illustrious father was mad. The poor child had no understanding at all of science or scientists.

“But that’s not what it’s about,” she stammered.

“What is it about, then? It’s true, *Primavera*, I was wrong! To offer youth to you is to desire zephyrs for the spring and roses for the month of May. What do you want? Is your heart sighing after some impossible dream? If that’s all it is, you shall have it. Or have you, daughter of a mortal woman, merely requiring the love of a mortal man, come to me, poor modest flower invisible to the gaze, to ask me for a philter, to render you visible and beloved?”

Marta could not help smiling; her father had skirted her secret; but the young woman had not come in search of a philter; her gaze was a sufficient powerful alchemist, and had already carried out the task.

“Aha!” said Dr. Marforio, who had seen his child’s smile. “I’ve guessed it! Eureka! Nothing escapes a scholar! You want a philter, Marta. It’s a great imprudence; it’s necessary not to toy with philters. Fortunately, I’ll always be here to cure you, to save you, and it wouldn’t displease me if you were in some danger, in order to provide more proof how infallible I am.”

“But Father, I no longer need a philter.”

And the young woman, laughing and blushing at the same time, emphasized the phrase *no longer*, to assist her secret to escape.

Although he was a scholar, Dr. Marforio was not a complete stranger to worldly matters. He had lucid moments; it was a residue of inferiority. Who among us can flatter himself on being perfect, alas? In addition, he might have been young himself once. At an age when science was a muse and not yet a shrewish and exclusive spouse, he might have experimented with something analogous to amour. He understood, therefore, what his daughter was implying, and made a movement of surprise that did not testify to a profound amazement.

“Aha! You’ve permitted yourself...in fact, why not? Have I forbidden you to? Explain to me, then, what you’re asking of me.”

Significantly reassured by these reactions, which she thought paternal, Marta confessed Lorenzo’s name and explained the heir presumptive’s desire.

“A prince!” exclaimed the doctor, with laughing out loud. “He’s only a prince! I was afraid he might be Apollo in person. You deserve better than that, my daughter—although I know how difficult it would have been to find anything better in the principality.”

“You’re making fun of me, Father,” the young woman murmured, with an imploring gesture.

“Well, let’s not laugh anymore,” the joyful scholar went on. “What do you want to do with your little prince, my dear daughter, and what do you want me to do to him? Perhaps he’s fearful of humiliating his dynasty, vowed by tradition to uselessness, if he plies the bellows at my furnaces. In any case, Albertus Magnus, in his eighth precept, says expressly: ‘The man who dreams of the Great Work will avoid any relationship with princes and lords.’ Do you want to make me run aground so close to port?”

Marta was scarcely thinking about that; she had a strong desire to interrupt her father to tell him that this was not about him, but only about her; that Lorenzo did not worship the scholar, but the scholar’s daughter; and that she had not come to ask for the role of bellows-operator on her hero’s behalf. Without being able to admit that scholars in general are implacable in their egotism, however, the young woman knew from filial experience that Dr. Marforio had a very particular fashion of evaluating everyday events, and that it was a waste of time to try to interest him in anything other than his laboratory for very long. So she sighed, and continued to listen.

“He’s genteel, isn’t he, my love, your bird of romance? Well, he’d cut a sorry figure in the midst of my stuffed owls. Release the thread that retains his wings; let him fly away, Marta, and I’ll find you a handsome scholar, who will be my pupil, and who will espouse my doctrine as well as my daughter.”

Marta was unsure whether to laugh or cry. She was very emotional.

“I love Lorenzo and will never love anyone but him,” she said, finally.

“The words of a young woman—light leaves that the wind bears away, as Ovid says.”

“Lorenzo loves me too, Father. Anyway, just because he’s a prince, that doesn’t mean he’s ignorant.”

Love is the school of diplomacy; the last French Republic proved that conclusively by creating a School of Administration. Marta was becoming clever.

“What does he know, your handsome prince?” asked the doctor, with a mockery that as not exempt from curiosity.

“Oh, we haven’t talked about science,” Marta replied, “but we’ve talked about you, Father, and Lorenzo admires you.”

Incense never loses its perfume. Dr. Marforio smiled—but he had not yet been flattered enough.

“Well, if he admires your father, I can’t say that I admire his. His Excellency Bonifacio XXIII is a brute, for whom furnaces only serve as ovens in his kitchen. Oh, if he had understood scholars! What a prince! What a principality? With him, I would have been able to experiment with my system on a large scale. And you expect the son of such a prince, of a buffoon who pays no heed to me, you expect the heir to that stupidity to be anything other than an idiot? A pretty idiot, if you wish, but an idiot.”

“I don’t expect anything, Father,” said Marta, who had been momentarily reassured and was glimpsing triumph. “I don’t know anything about politics, but I’m certain that Lorenzo has intelligence, and that he loves science sufficiently to make his father love scientists, if he wanted to take the trouble.”

“I’m not saying that it would take a Cicero to appreciate my worth,” said the doctor, shrugging his shoulders, “but do you seriously believe, my daughter, that your prince, if he wanted to...”

“He’s irresistible, Father.”

“For young women, maybe—but for Prince Bonifacio?”

“Good fathers don’t refuse their children anything,” said Marta, slyly placing her forehead on the doctor’s shoulder.

“So Bonifacio is a good father, is he?” said Marforio, laughing. “Well then, that’s the only virtue he’s forgotten to lose. You can tell Lorenzo that my house is open to him.”

“Thank you, Father,” said Marta, effusively.

“You’ll be a princess, on condition that your prince is or becomes a scientist. Perhaps it’s the great Alchemist of Hearts who has prepared this little sentimental romance, in order that I might put myself in a position to preside over the destiny of the principality. There’s a woman at the beginning of all great things; but it would be lacking regard for fortune not to lay down one condition. You’ll only be a princess on the day that I become Bonifacio’s prime minister.”

“You’re scaring me, Father!”

“That’s a good sign. So much the worse for you, my darling, if you’re making me ambitious. I have my reckless love too; you have your prince, I want to have mine.”

Marta sighed, and smiled. Lorenzo could come; that was what delighted her—but these burlesque conditions, these pretensions on the scientist’s part, appeared likely to spoil or compromise the lovely poem that she sensed stirring and singing in her heart.

As for the doctor, he was possessed by a joy that might have caused an alienist to tremble. He could distinctly see his star rising on the horizon—and although it would be painful only to be the prime minister of a microscopic principality, he was impatient to hear the hour chime when the principality, paltry as it was, would become a gigantic laboratory, whose inhabitants would be his subjects of analysis, the ministry his spirit-lamp, and Prince Bonifacio his bellows-operator.

As for the ambition of having the hereditary prince as a son-in-law, he scarcely thought about that, and to the pure and simple happiness of his daughter, he gave no thought at all. Dr. Marforio was too great a scientist to lower himself to such vulgar sentiments.