

I. The Corne Verte Inn

A large number of small towns exist in France that have not yet been reached by progress. Mores there are simple and primitive, but I cannot affirm that they are any purer in consequence. In these ancient communities, once doubtless bathed by the banks of some stream that has now dried up, or even changed its course, the story of a railway journey is listened to with much greater attention than would be accorded in Paris to an account of an aerostatic ascent.

I rather like those towns, so naïve and ignorant of all the noise that is made in more active circles. Many novelists have said that before me, I know, and many readers, among those who always want something new, will doubtless protest. But, Messieurs—those of my readers who are protesting—I cannot pride myself on writing what has never been said before, and if you desire that, you are certainly not making a small demand. My sole ambition is to interest you. One amuses by means of known facts skillfully organized. The new astonishes.

Oh, you are not ambitious in your demands! A novel is always the same things restated—tell us something new! Messieurs, one does not find that in every century. When Columbus cried “Land ho!”; when Galileo, that Joshua of science, stopped the sun; when Watt tamed the wind on the sea and destroyed distance on land...those men said something new. The novelist tends toward a more modest aim, and does not aspire, so far as I know, to revelation. Psychology is almost his sole study; it is, for him, both distraction and science. As curious as a girl, he ferrets incessantly in the secret alveoli of intimate sentiments, exfoliates lovingly all the layers of unknown sensations, and places a magnifying lens over the tubercles of the heart. Then he reports his observations to those who are interested.

As for me, I consider the novel as a familiar chat with a stranger; except that I chat at my ease and in my own time, without worrying about whether anyone is listening—but I permit those who read me to do the same.

At any rate, I write it frankly, this book is not indispensable to society. One can be a perfectly honest person, exceedingly learned, and never read a novel. These pages are addressed to imaginative young people, leisure-loving people, not to others. And to be sure, I would be enormously sorry if anyone were to waste time because of me. The novel is the fair sex of the world of books; it requires knowledge to frequent it.

But here I am, getting away from my original subject; it is time to close the parentheses. Nevertheless, before continuing, by way of digression, I will confess that, being by nature a trifle butterfly-minded, it is possible that I might, in the course of this narrative, when I bump into some bizarre idea, quit the main line to talk digressively and wander along some side-path.

Perhaps I shall also be reproached for making too much use of the first person. It is not vanity that makes me do it, but it seems unjust and a trifle impolite to me for a writer to attribute to several, by means of a timid “we,” the more-or-less-sensate but occasionally grotesque reflections that he might catch on the wing as they cross his mind. Then again, a book with only one signature necessarily has only one author.

The sole merit of secondary writers is to have been personal in their works. I promise, nevertheless, not to fall into any excess of intimacy.

Bazes is a small town that one encounters some ten leagues from Bordeaux as one heads toward the Pyrenees. Its appearance is dirty and bleak. Narrow, pebble-strewn streets, darkened by coverts, lead to a long square in which stands one of the beautiful cathedrals of France.

The inhabitants of the town have some intelligence, which they distribute among themselves by some unknown means.

The rare travelers that stay in the ancient town find a few hostelries there that I introduce to you as inns—for inns still exist, those fine hostelries in which one is poorly served, where there are never enough beds, and where one can tell, in brief, that one is not at home.

Indeed, traveling does not have the same attractions today as it once had. For a start, everyone travels. At Baden one bumps into one's tailor. In the Pyrenees one allows a storm to pass over in a covert that already shelters a creditor or a former mistress—which comes to the same thing. Then again, comfort follows you everywhere; modern hotels cater to all needs. In Liverpool, you are served little Viennese loaves, in Cadiz, oysters from Ostend. It's unbearable!

The proprietor of the *Corne Verte* inn has never been informed of the meaning of the word *comfort*. Nevertheless, travelers stop there, for it is one of the cleaner hostelries in Bazas.

One evening in the month of October in the year 1849, two men, after having dined together, were resting in front of a good enough fire in the common room of the inn.

The room did not offer any visible luxury. The mantelpiece was as bare as a step on a staircase, and at the back, standing out against a tapestry of life-sized characters, was a hexagonal clock whose chime rendered a muffled sound, as if struck in the distance. That bourgeois chronometer gave enormous pleasure to the proprietor's wife. When the hours sounded, it seemed to her that she was hearing the cathedral clock.

The two travelers placed in front of the hearth seemed to belong to the same level of society, but they were not similar in age. One was a young man, the other might have been about forty. They did not say much. From time to time, the younger of the two ran an indifferent eye over the columns of a local newspaper,

Each of the two gentlemen occupied a corner of the hearth, leaving a large space in the middle, which was not vacant. An enormous dog of the mountain breed was lying there. There was nothing remarkable about the animal but his size. Otherwise, his coarse and bushy coat, his long broad paws, his powerful head with small ears, his ill-formed and gummed-up eyes composed a merely rustic form.

Suddenly his sleep was interrupted by an external noise; he raised his head and growled.

"Silence, Mont-Dore!" ordered his master, the older of the two travelers.

After having darted an anxious glance at the door, Mont-Dore replaced his gross muzzle between his paws, and gave the appearance of sleep.

"You have a terrible defender there," the young man observed.

"It's because he can sense someone coming. He's not normally badly-behaved, but I don't know what's got into him today. He nearly bit a couple of people, who hadn't said anything to him. Come on, Mont-Dore, be quiet."

"His bad moods might cause you some trouble, because he's big enough not to let himself be vanquished."

"Ha ha! I think he's found his master recently, though. After a night of vagabondage more than a month ago he came back in the morning with a bite on his leg." Addressing the animal, while patting his head with the flat of his hand, he added: "A wound that doesn't do you honor, Mont-Dore—a wound on the behind!"

The dog only greeted this caress with a dull growl, to which a few reproachful words put an end. Nevertheless he welcomed without too much suspicion a new arrival who came on to the scene through the door of the *Corne Verte*'s common room.

We shall employ the moment when the third traveler was conversing with the hotel proprietor to introduce the first two individuals—who are to play the principal roles in this drama—to the reader.

The one who was sitting to the right, Mont-Dore's master, is named Horatio Mackinguss. The first impression given by the man's face is one of honesty. Those who have the courage to penetrate further into the labyrinth of this book might perhaps criticize that appreciation, but it is just and true—all the more just and all the more true because it unites the generality of examples. Horatio's face bears a frank expression of probity. It is not permissible for me to say otherwise—and that distresses me, not because it might be the case that the real sentiment is hidden beneath a false effigy, which is of little importance to me, but because I find it disappointing that it does not stand out from the commonplace. To write more would be to anticipate the chapters that follow.

Horatio's face was beardless, of an even complexion, pale rather than colored, but of a coarse-grained pallor perhaps caused by the thickness of the dermis. His forehead was broad, slightly bulbous,

surmounting bright eyes. A bright eye, with regard to the pupil, is entirely indicative. His mouth was thinly closed, scarcely sketched, beneath a nose irreproachable in form and contour, except that the nostrils offered the distended dimensions that indicate a propensity to exceptional sensuality. The man's hair was thick and soft, and did not curl.

That is the portrait of Mackinguss, the reproduction of the lines and bumps. He was tall of stature, his bearing full of nobility, his manners free and easy, his voice polite. I can also tell you that Horatio Mackinguss, as his name indicates, was Scottish by birth and origin.

Robert de Rolleboise was sitting opposite Horatio and alongside Mont-Dore, whom we have already met. He was a young man of twenty-five, with an intelligent physiognomy and a casual manner. We shall leave it until later to unveil his intimate tendencies.

While the third traveler was busy with the landlord on the threshold of the room, Robert de Rolleboise had put down the newspaper and was looking at him attentively. Then, as the landlord went out, he stood up and walked toward the young man.

"I'm not mistaken? It's really Monsieur le Vicomte de Saint-Loubès that I have the pleasure of...shaking the hand?"

"But certainly, my dear Rolleboise! I've just arrived from Cauterets, where I left you exceedingly occupied in rendering yourself incurable of a malady of the heart."

"Oh, Monsieur!"

"That's indiscreet, it's true. How is Madame de Lormont, Monsieur de Rolleboise? Is she still taking the waters?"

"No, Monsieur; she has returned to Paris."

"Oh, I beg your pardon—that's true, you're traveling."

The young man's constrained physiognomy displayed the embarrassment that these words caused him.

Monsieur de Saint-Loubès perceived that. "So, after all," he exclaimed, "people still meet up in inns, as in the days of little duodecimo volumes and coaches that cough!"

"There are still inns, Monsieur le Vicomte, and, as you see, people still have the advantage of meeting therein. As regards me, this is the how and why. This is said simply to offer my excuses for an adventure that might perhaps be taken for a pastiche. Before returning to Paris I had the intention of staying for a few days with my uncle, in Auch. That visit has therefore taken me out of my way. In order to resume it, I have taken a somewhat scenic route. Thus, I came from Gers to Agen, the abode of the poet Jasmin."¹

"Yes, I know you're ever subject to an attack of poetry. But the waters, although they haven't cured you, must have had the salutary effect of displacing the seat of the malady."

"What do you mean?"

"Before, you were surely a poet in spirit, were you not?"

"Ah! And today, Monsieur de Saint-Loubès?"

"Today you're one...at heart."

Robert made a gesture of impatience, and continued, without any further reflection: "From Jasmin's home I went to the Château de Nérac, where I found a carriage that brought me here. In that carriage I met Monsieur, who is coming from Montpellier, I believe, and is due, along with me, to catch the Bayonne diligence, which will take us to Paris. We have had a bad dinner together, and I was just reading a good newspaper—I'm referring to its wit rather than its editing. Now, Monsieur, explain to us in your turn what bizarre event has brought about your entry into the *Corne Verte* inn. If it's to explain the sign to us, you'll be cleverer than our host, and we'll be all ears."²

Monsieur de Saint-Loubès brought a chair forward and sat down in front of the fire, to the displeasure of Mont-Dore, who withdrew—not without murmuring—under his master's chair.

¹ The Occitan poet Jacques Jasmin (1798-1864), noted for his images of peasant life.

² English readers will probably be less perplexed, knowing that *corne verte* translates as "greenhorn."

The Vicomte was a rich young man. Nowadays, that description is a whole portrait. Furthermore, as he always had been, he combined that advantage with the rare merit of having the sentiment of an innate politeness and opposing in argumentative conversation a ductility of character that cannot be appreciated too highly. I believe that it would be excessive to talk about his moral and political tendencies now, and to sound his convictions and principles—in brief, to carry out a psychological analysis in his regard.

Monsieur de Saint-Loubès dressed well. He wore trousers of a fashionable narrowness, supple and creased varnished boots, and an ample jacket. Let us record thereafter that he had large fluid eyes, good teeth and a Molière moustache.

“Messieurs,” said the Vicomte, in a strangely reserved one, “I find myself here in circumstances so unfortunate that I am ashamed to reveal them to you. When I was obliged to make them known to the owner of this grotesque caravanserai, I feared that he would laugh in my face. But first, I must tell you one thing. I am an enemy of the vulgar, and I strive as much as possible to liberate myself from the general laws in which the common herd vegetates. My antipathy is to the prosaic.”

“But Monsieur,” observed Horatio, “permit me to believe that all three of us profess the same repulsion.”

“That’s good—but have you noticed that in the last twenty years, things have changed greatly in the realm of the prosaic? Certain men of intelligence have showed it the finger; immediately, the crowd has fled—with the result that the privileged life, independent of heavy ridicule, the artistic circle of old, has become, by invasion, the prosaic world of today! But you’ll never understand...”

“Forgive us, Vicomte. Well enough that one could not formulate your idea better than by saying that you are making yourself prosaic in order not to be.”

“Bravo. So, when I happen to commit an action that is extraordinary and—oh, my God, let’s utter the word, dead as it is: *romantic*...”

“*Romantic* isn’t as old as all that.”

“So the bourgeois employ it. A consequence of my theory.”

“That’s very true.”

“Well, when I fall into that fault, I’m utterly confused. I therefore beg your pardon for confessing to you that my post-chaise has broken down two leagues from here. Alas, yes—as in a novel by Ducray-Duminil or a drama by Monsieur de Pixéricourt!”³

“And to complete the prosaicism, you haven’t broken anything!”

“Not so much as a sprain!”

“Poor Vicomte!”

“What consoles me, however...”

“Ah! Let’s have it!”

“Yes, what ameliorates my situation is that the place where my carriage broke down is a frightful spot, devoid of landscape or color. The best part of the ridicule of the bourgeois who are afflicted by such a stupid adventure is that they fall into deep gorges, rebounding from projections in the rock. Fortunately, in my case, it was on a good road.”

“Where, if you please?”

“At Beulac—a frightful name.”

“But a very picturesque place.”

“No, no—as flat as my hand.”

“On the banks of the Ciron. It’s very romantic.”

“Have pity on me, Monsieur de Rolleboise! And above all...above all, not a word about this in Paris...otherwise, I’ll deny everything, and I’ll cut you off completely...and Monsieur too.”

³ François Ducray-Duminil (1761-1819) was an author of sentimental and stubbornly moralistic adventure stories, often featuring the tribulations of children, which the disapproving Victor Hugo described in *Les Misérables* as “stupid romances.” René Pixéricourt (1773-1844) wrote and directed numerous plays in a similar vein, including some based on Ducray-Duminil’s novels, although he also wrote more extravagant melodramas. Charles Nodier thought very highly of him, but the younger Romantics considered him a hackneyed representative of the old guard.

“But you’re truly strange!” exclaimed Horatio, laughing. “What, you don’t want to be the hero of a little octavo?”

“Do you know, Monsieur, that my coach-builder abducted his wife in order to marry her, that my tailor was almost poisoned by his son? Today, the bizarre is the ordinary, the exception the generality, the distinctive the colorless...”

“Alas, what the Vicomte says is all too true! Our mores have been so stirred and shifted by the ferments of the century that one dare not advance, that there is not a single drama in life that is as calm as it appears on the surface. Interrogate a stranger traversing the crowd and he will tell you a poignant tale; the woman who is laughing hectically at a feast is feeling her heart ripped by the iron teeth of jealousy, and is bottling up a tortuous episode. Listen to that distant clamor, that vague noise which suddenly troubles your silence; it’s a frightful denouement coming to completion, an evil deed surging from the inferno to fall upon some accursed head.

“And if, in fact, we want to descend even lower into the realism of life, pick up a newspaper, that summary of a day’s events that a flash of light or hazard has hurled out of the shadows, and every paragraph will be the plot of a drama. Thus, for example, here’s a local rag that I was reading just now, the *Glaneur*. Under the rubric of Montpellier there’s a five-line article, and in those five lines one could perhaps find five volumes of true history.”

“From which one can conclude,” added Monsieur de Saint-Loubès, that the most exaggerated novel would be the most tedious novel. If I were a novelist, I’d never write any other.”

“Nevertheless,” Robert went on, after having searched the newspaper. I don’t want to spare you the five lines I just mentioned. Here they are: ‘Individuals who are doubtless ill-informed have spread through our town various versions of a very deplorable event. It is our duty to establish the facts in their exact truth. Monsieur le Comte de B had fought a duel with Monsieur N , a young man of twenty-one, a student at the École Polytechnique. The outcome was fatal to Monsieur N . Politics had nothing to do with the cause of the duel.’

“Thus, there is an account of a death, which many people have read indifferently; perhaps a few women have accorded a thought of commiseration for the victim; then, the newspaper having been put down, the matter has been forgotten. And yet, around the cadaver there is a family in mourning, a mother in tears, the ruination of hopes, all faith in the future collapsed!”

“Certainly, Monsieur, in taking that fact as an example, you have been justly inspired. There is indeed a great drama in that event, one of the strangest of dramas, and where you have only perceived the initials, I can fill in the other letters of the names, for I know all the details that led to the duel in question.”

“Of course—you’ve come from Montpellier!”

“And if it doesn’t frighten you too much, I could tell you the true story before we retire.”

“Oh, this time, I’m doomed!” exclaimed the Vicomte. “On the same evening, to have one’s post-chaise break down, to encounter a friend in a dead town, and, to bring the prosaicism to a peak, to hear a story in an inn—truly, that’s the height of misfortune! I don’t know what I’ve got into...I’m pinching myself but I’m not waking up! No, I’m not asleep...all in all, Monsieur, I’d like to hear your story...but on condition, Messieurs: that it will be your last joke. Except that I ask you for one mercy: if, by chance, during the unfolding of Monsieur’s narration, by virtue of misfortune, my physiognomy and my pose change to the point that my attitude resembles a character of Monsieur le Marquis de Foudras,⁴ Rolleboise, my friend, I beg you, shake me very forcefully. Go on—I’m resigned.”

“You’re decidedly a very amusing individual.”

“No, not at all; I’m excessively bourgeois. I know what time the sun sets, and am much preoccupied with the variations of the barometer.”

“Ah—what does the barometer say, Vicomte?”

⁴ Théodore de Foudras (1800-1872) was credited with being the inventor of a new genre of novel, the *roman cynégétique* [hunting novel], pioneered by *Les Gentilshommes chasseurs* [Gentlemen Who Hunt] (1848).

“Variable, my dear friend, variable! We’ll have a change of weather, I’m sure of it, for it’s high tide this evening at seven minutes past eleven.”

“Well, Monsieur, now that the Vicomte’s fit has eased, we’re all ears. First, can you tell us the names that the newspaper doesn’t indicate?”

“Very easily. The Comte de Boistilla fought with Raoul Noirtier. If I did not fear causing Monsieur de Saint-Loubès to suffer convulsions, however, I would begin my story a few years before the event that has provided its denouement.”

“I curb my head beneath the law of my destiny,” said the bizarre Vicomte, in a piteous humor, while saluting Horatio, as if to assure him that he did not intend to take his joke beyond the bounds of propriety and politeness.

Everyone lit a cigar. It is said that that is a great help in such circumstances. If the author of these lines were more closely linked with his readers, it would be a pleasure—a duty, even—for him to offer them a Havana.

Before commencing, Horatio Mackinguss, after having looked at one of his two listeners with a certain attention, said: “Forgive the liberty of a reflection, Monsieur de Rolleboise, but if I’m not mistaken, you resemble a person that I’ve often met in London, Sir Amadeus Harriss. Might you be a relative?”

“Definitely not, Monsieur; I have no family in England,”

“No matter—you’re resemblance to the gentleman is striking. But let’s get back to our subject.

“Marriage is a lottery that promises a few fortunate results, many unfortunate ones and a large enough quantity of grotesque ones. Thus, on the first of March 1830, Monsieur Noirtier, a young advocate in Montpellier, happened on a fortunate lot, in the reckoning of many people, and even—which is worth just as much—in the opinion of his own heart. He married a young woman he loved, by the name of Valérie.

“Valérie did not even possess the idea of a dowry, but Heaven had imparted to her instead a face that might doom many fortunes. She was one of those imposing, mystic and serious beauties that one dares not love, placid and cold in indifference, splendidly effusive next to an adored head.

“Beside that beautiful woman, the advocate looked out of place. He was a frail young man, not strong by nature, with a physiognomy that was pleasant but weak. Only Valérie had welcomed him. She loved him by virtue of the same bizarre law of the heart that leads handsome young men, vigorous in health and brilliant in fortune, to prefer to the beautiful women who surround them some modest ignored child, insignificant in appearance and mediocre in intelligence. Nevertheless, our two spouses suited on another very well, and as I only have the right of the storyteller, let us congratulate Monsieur and not criticize Madame at all.

“If you will bear in mind that this happened in 1830, and in the provinces, you will permit me to add that there was some dancing at Monsieur Noirtier’s wedding. Even today, a considerable number of petty people have not yet abolished the wedding ball, that joyful preface to an exceedingly vulgar novel.

“For fear of running into a bizarrerie of taste—or, rather, an accuracy of judgment—I shall not suggest that Valérie was the prettiest of the woman present at the ball, but she was certainly the most beautiful. Among the men, there was also one who stood out as the most handsome.

“That individual, a friend of the husband, was not French. He was from the United States. His name was Dr. Nohé-Nahm.

“Nohé-Nahm was twenty-five years old, but thanks to his beardless face he seemed younger. Undemonstrative by nature, his movements were accomplished slowly and smoothly, and his passions were not externally manifest. Dissimulation was never readable in his overt physiognomy; perhaps he even possessed the art of veiling insincerity. Nevertheless, the facility of his mores and the ductility of his manners made him sought-after in society. He had been in love with Valérie but she, by virtue of a feminine caprice, had preferred the young advocate.

“That defeat had not cooled the cordiality between the two young men, and each of them surrounded the other with so much politeness that nothing transpired of it outside the intimacy of the circle. It is true that fatal characters exist on which offended pride has a terrible influence, tenebrous intellects that reflect

on a tormenting until the ultimate cry of pain and the extreme stab of anguish, but Nohé-Nahm did not appear to have any resemblance to those sick minds.

“In the course of the evening, he found himself alone with Madame Noirtier. The young man’s physiognomy, as always, was calm and unalterable. ‘Madame,’ he said, with an affectionate and tender smile, ‘my wishes are realized: you are happy.’

“‘Is it with frankness of heart that you wish me happiness, Monsieur?’

“‘Madame, I have only loved once in my life, and I have not been loved. Doubtless, I do not merit it. I am courageous and prompt before firm decisions. My heart has been broken and my love is extinct!’

“‘You will be our friend, will you not?’

“‘Friendship! Alas, Madame, I am extreme in my sentiments, and I loved you very much!’

“‘You’re distorting the meaning of my words. I am asking for your friendship; will you refuse it to me?’

“‘Friendship is not promised; it is proven.’

“‘You are extreme in everything, you say?’

“‘That is true, Madame.’

“‘I dare not understand you. I dread to question you as to the sentiment that now animates you in my regard,’

“‘I will tell you.’

“‘When?’

“‘When? Oh, a long time from today!’ he added, with a smile on his lips, and in a tone of the greatest deference.

“Two years went by. Valérie had a son.

“Among the society that received the young advocate, Nohé-Nahm was regarded as the most familiar and the most intimate. No dissimulation was detectable in his manners, and when alone with Valérie, nothing in his words gave rise to any suspicion that he loved the woman in question. He was a friend of the family.

“1832 was, as everyone remembers, a terrible year for France. The plague that seems to follow in the wake of Revolutions was ravaging Paris and the larger cities of the provinces.⁵ The mortality assumed frightful proportions.

“One evening, Monsieur Noirtier felt ill and went to bed before nightfall. As it was more a surfeit of fatigue than a preliminary symptom of disease, Valérie was not worried. Besides which, her salon claimed her. She therefore asked Monsieur Nohé-Nahm to visit her husband.

“When he entered Noirtier’s room, the latter—only, as we have said, requiring rest—was dozing lightly. A single night-light offered feeble resistance to the obscurity. The doctor woke the invalid up and took his hands with an amicable smile.

“The wan light illuminated half of the physician’s handsome face, and dark shadows struck him. Having been smiling, his expression suddenly became grave and astonished. Without saying a word he lit a lamp and placed it next to the bed.

“‘I’m tired, and only need rest,’ said Valérie’s husband, closing his eyes, afflicted by the light.

“Nohé-Nahm’s face darkened; with his two hands leaning on the bed, and his head bending over the husband of the woman he had loved with a vast and contained passion, he said in a slow voice: ‘You’re ill.’

“‘A slight headache, that’s all. Sleep will dissipate it.’

“‘Listen Noirtier, time is precious. Don’t be disturbed, but, I repeat: you’re ill.’

“‘What is it, then?’ asked Valérie’s husband, anxiously, sitting up in bed.

“‘Are you courageous, my friend?’

“‘Speak! How pale you are!’

⁵ The great cholera epidemic that reached its peak two years after the July Revolution of 1830 was still remembered fearfully when cholera struck again in the wake of the revolution of 1848, reaching its peak as the present novel was being written.

“Let's not frighten your wife; don't be alarmed yourself, and I'll save you,'

“But tell me—what illness do you suppose that I have?’

“I don't suppose—I'm sure. You have all the symptoms of the epidemic. Within an hour, if we don't make haste, you'll have the cholera.’

“Sweat moistened the appalled face of the invalid. His teeth were chattering and his voice as incapable of articulating a word. A malady as destructive as the plague—terror—had gripped him.

“An hour later, Noirtier really did have cholera. During the night, in spite of the doctor's treatment, he died.

“Valérie's despair was immense; people briefly feared for her life, and much longer for her reason. But through the somber mourning that enveloped her, the handsome head of the physician was always visible, who emerged victorious in his double duel with nature. What cares did he not lavish on the woman he had loved! All that a lover might imagine, that a son might suffer, he surpassed. He spent entire nights watching over the stricken head, anxiously following the course of the illness, hopefully observing the progress of the remedy. In a word, he performed a near-miracle; he defied nature and Madame Noirtier entered into convalescence.

“The advocate's death was a double blow to Valérie. Once the paroxysm of the heart's anguish had passed, she saw that the event had left her poor, with an infant son.

“That child offered himself to her eyes as a transformation of the lost individual. Thus, uniting tortured sentiment with maternal love, she created more than love, by adoration, for her son. She bid adieu to the joys of the earth, retired from society with her cradle, and commenced, not without courage a great work.

“In that epoch, the physiognomy of the widow was modified, like the sentiment of her heart. Her beauty became austere. Her languid cheeks paled into a sallow complexion, her mouth lost all sensual expression and her large dark eyes were ringed. She was no longer the beautiful Raphaellesque virgin but the black-clad image, the meager and lifeless head, of the mother of Christ in the old painting by Franck.

“The young woman was poor, as we have said. Her income scarcely sufficed to sustain her modest existence, and that penury frightened her, not for herself but for her son. However, as in any pensive soul, hope radiated in her eyes. One man had not forgotten her. The friendship of Nohé-Nahm promised protection for her child for the future.

“Raoul's childhood was happy. His mother did not punish him and never scolded him. If he did something wrong, however, she became sad; if it was serious, she wept. Raoul loved his mother as much as she loved him, and as a mother's tears touch a child's young heart, he almost never made her weep.

“Raoul reached his tenth year, the age at which, the cares of a family being most necessary to children, school takes them away. By using his influence, Nohé-Nahm obtained a bursary for his friend's son.

“In order not to be so distantly separated from the person she loved more than anything, the poor mother left her humble country dwelling and came to reside in the town. It was a very sad day for her when it was necessary for her to return home alone, and she wept for a long time.

“His new existence required an excessive expenditure, but the courageous mother, entirely dedicated to her ambitious project, was not frightened by that. She increased her privations; for her son's sake, she became a miser. Her clothes, surrounded by precautions, defied wear and tear; her hats were transformed, but never replaced. It is true, too, that Raoul had white trousers for Sundays, the luxury garment of pupils subject to uniform. For a fortnight, Valérie removed a plate from her table, economized on bread and sugar with a bitter joy, and drank water scarcely tinted with wine, but almost every evening she brought a delicacy to Raoul at supper time, and every holiday, he found an excellent meal at his mother's house. That kind of life—poor but not miserable—lasted for eight years, until the young pupil obtained his baccalaureate.

“We shall not take the trouble to discover or declare whether Raoul did well in class or won a sufficient number of prizes, for a man's serious education only begins when he leaves school. Valérie knew that very well, so that moment brought her a poignant anxiety. A friendly hand, however,

anticipated all her steps. Nohé-Nahm, that good familiar spirit, appeared before her one day; he was constantly the same, promising nothing but obtaining, firm in devotion, impassive and mysterious.

“The widow took his hand and kissed it. The man that she had once rejected, she admired that day.

“Without preamble, in a tone that announces a resolution already made, he said: ‘Your son, Madame, is about to leave school; what have you destined for him?’

“‘Alas, my friend, my plan is to take him to Paris.’

“‘You want to make him study law. Well, that’s not my opinion. Law is a gulf into which capacities and incapacities are nowadays thrown. Your son is intelligent; we can do better than make him an advocate.’

“Valérie’s face was radiant with pride and hope.

“‘Place him in a preparatory school for admission to the École Polytechnique.⁶ We’ll easily pass over the chapter of the expenses those studies will necessitate. I have some funds available; I offer them to you. When he emerges from the École, the government will repay your son, so his future is a certain mortgage for me.’

“The poor mother, moved to tears, could not speak. She seized the doctor’s hands and threw herself into his arms. The latter received her without any demonstrative emotion.

“Young Raoul Noirtier emerged as one of the foremost graduates from the École Polytechnique. It would be impossible to describe the joy his mother experienced when he appeared before her. The creation had thus attained the height of the dream. Before her work, Valérie nearly went mad. Nothing could balance that admiration of the mother for her son; it was ecstasy, delirium, childishness, ridiculousness. In addition, Raoul was handsome: a magnificent marble illuminated by a keen intelligence; and, more fortunate than the sculptor Pygmalion, the mother had an animate statue.

There is, for proud souls, no sweeter sentiment than that of superiority conquered. Valérie had the opportunity to savor it with pride.

“She had, as it happened, a niece as little favored as herself by fortune, but excessive in beauty. Now, it came about that one of those men who, in seeming violation of destiny, combine an indomitable nature with the power of gold, took a fancy to her. His name was the Comte de Boistilla. For a long time he circled the woman, but his lack of success injected a strong dose of vanity into his love; unable to hope of obtaining Valérie’s niece for a mistress, he employed a deplorable means, and married her.

“Needless to say, Comtesse Mathilde, in her character and her beauty, contrasted in every way with her husband. The latter loved her brutally, and received in return the fearful submission that certain debauchees prefer to love.

“The Comte never wanted to see her relative, Madame Noirtier—that pauper he called her, who had been stupid enough to prefer an unhealthy cretin to the handsome Nohé-Nahm. Soon, however, there was talk in society of young Raoul’s success. Serious men attract the acquaintance of women, those frivolous, and futile beings who find pretty appearances agreeable. So long as obscurity had enveloped the two individuals, no one had bothered to notice the scant liaison that existed between the aristocrat and his relative; that disdain for poor relative even found approval among certain intimates of the Comte. But then, whispers began to circulate. Monsieur de Boistilla was apprised of them; so, advised by his wife, he resolved to invite his young cousin to spend a few days on his estate. That invitation added an intoxication to the self-esteem of Raoul’s mother.

“The great day arrived; the happy Valérie prepared her son’s almost-military costume, passed her beautiful white hands through the young man’s brown hair, and then kissed his forehead, his eyes and his silky moustache. Finally, he departed—but the mother, placed at the window, admired him in the street, utterly joyful when a passer-by turned to look at his costume, or a woman furtively glanced at his proud bearing.

“It was a brilliant autumnal day, the blazing sunlight tempered by an easterly wind that made the leaves tremble, for Raoul had reached the country. He felt happy too. He was twenty years old! For the first time, life seemed independent to him, and the horizon of his thoughts broadened. He was also going

⁶ A college whose primary purpose was to prepare young men for military service, particularly military engineers.

to see a beautiful woman, his cousin Mathilde, and like all very young men, he became amorous by anticipation. The amorous are dreamers—and then, what is there to do at twenty unless one dreams? So, Raoul created a portrait of his cousin at his leisure. He saw her tall, slightly corporeal—for young men are rarely smitten with spare girls—her face ornamented with an appetizing mouth, a nose with fleshy lobes and two large eyes scintillating like full wine-glasses

“In his sketch, our genteel cousin was not mistaken; such, indeed, was the Comtesse Mathilde de Boistilla.

“There was to be a big hunt the following day, St. Hubert’s Day. That solemnity, unnoticed in towns, had attracted to the Comte’s roof a numerous company of noisy hunters. The kennels were resounding with the deep voices of running dogs, and the greyhounds were turning the courtyard into a carousel.

“Raoul was very well-received. His cousin, a cold, hard man, introduced him casually to his young wife, who welcomed him with a smile before which he blushed a deeper red than the flaps of his coat, and to his friends, who passed him curiously in review.

“Monsieur de Boistilla had a violent and brutal character. Everyone in his château took note of his bad moods and dreaded them, his servants and dogs alike. He was one of those men who are said to be good at heart, but whose anger is terrible. In the heat of the moment, they will break one of your limbs, but they will be sorry afterwards—excellent fellows!

“Few women were to be seen in the Comte’s drawing room, and none of them could pretend to the title envied by their sex. We are speaking, of course, about the guests. Raoul, crammed full of mathematics, falling into the midst of that unrefined society, did not understand those exclusive minds and conversations in the style of poachers at all. He had a moment of self-doubt—but Nohé-Nahm, who, in his capacity as a doctor, was one of the regular visitors to the house, came to his rescue.

“Dinner time arrived. The Comte was a great eater, perhaps his only quality, so his table was justly reputed throughout the region. Raoul, although he had not reached the age at which an intelligent man becomes a gourmand, was nevertheless sensible of the splendid aspect of the Comte’s service. He had been seated between an honest landowner whose fields were undoubtedly much better cultivated than his mind and an old maid of reasonable ugliness, but that grotesque frame did not distress our young friend at all, who was able look across the table at his beautiful cousin. He was at the dangerous age when a man is subject to devastating attacks of love.

“After the meal, digestion, that seductive procuress, murmured mad hopes in a gleeful whisper into the adolescent’s heart. Leaning on his elbows, alone at an open window, facing the immense scaffolding of clouds behind which the sun takes so long to set in autumn, he surrendered his imagination to a thousand strange thoughts. All the guests had formed a circle around a center represented by the Comte, engaged in a loud debate about dogs.

“Suddenly, the gracious form of the Comtesse came to stand close to Raoul, but turning her back on the outside for the sake of propriety, her guest and herself. That presence certainly caused the young man a sharp joy, but also, it must be said, a great deal of embarrassment.

““Well, Cousin, what do you think of our friends?”

““They’re very fortunate, Madame, if you see them often.”

““Their conversation doesn’t interest you, and even the hunt that occupies my husband so much is perhaps not the attraction for you that we would like. Truly, if I did not fear incurring the misesteem of these gentlemen, I would offer to let you remain with us tomorrow, near the carriages.”

“Raoul dared not—or rather dreaded to—express too enthusiastically how happy he would be to sacrifice all possible hunts for the pleasure of remaining close to his cousin. But the latter continued in a more serious tone: ‘Listen, Cousin, I’m your elder and your relative, two authorities that permit me to speak to you frankly. I’ve noticed in you the great fault of many young people in society: timidity, or, if you prefer, self-mistrust. Timidity has the danger that it leads to weakness, and weakness is an incurable illness, as one philosopher says. All these men who are talking so loudly, whose movements are so casual and whose voices are so confident, are twice as old as you. Now, be assured that you possess twice as much knowledge as them, and that at their age, the frequentation of society will have initiated you into more polite mores. In a drawing room, never allow yourself to be influenced by numbers. Intelligence is

quite different from figures, grouping does not increase it. Now you're alone in the shadow; enter into the middle of that circle, vigorously give the debate a new direction, and you'd be alone in the light.'

"Thank you, Madame; I understand the accuracy of your words, and I shall remember them. In any case, I have no illusions. But what you call shadow, when I am close to you, I take for light.'

"The young Comtesse blushed; her beautiful lips were animated by the radiance of a smile, and, abandoning her role as mentor, she resumed playfully: 'Is it at the École, then, that you've learned to address flatteries to women, Cousin?'

"No, Madame, but it's in your company that I'm learning to be true and to almost to make my sentiments clear.'

"You're a child, and if you don't speak more wisely I'll withdraw my protection from you. Listen—they're bringing lamps; they're about to open the gaming tables; in order not to find yourself in evident inoccupation, sit down at one of them.'

"The conversation about dogs no longer holding the interest, people were ready to play cards. Mathilde, armed with her richest smile, indicated an armchair to Raoul facing the landowner next to whom he had been seated at dinner.

"It is probable that the cultivation of the fields brings a better return than that of the mind, for Raoul's opponent was getting ready to play for high stakes. There was more gold on the table than silver. The young man's physiognomy was suddenly covered by a blush of embarrassment. His red ears were buzzing. His eyes strayed anxiously to the other tables, where there was not the slightest glitter of any hundred-sou silver coin. And Valérie, the poor mother, had only slipped two five-franc pieces into her son's pocket!

"Women do not think of everything at first, but by way of compensation, when they wish, they divine everything. Mathilde understood the young man's situation, and felt sorry for him. So, while replying to some indifferent remark, she passed close to Raoul and slipped her handkerchief into his hand. The latter unfolded it under the table. It contained a purse. The young man's gaze, although a trifle confused, went to meet his young cousin's gratefully.

"Raoul was a very good card-player. So, after having beaten the first landowner he put a second *hors de combat*, and then a proud squire, and finally a fat notary. Under his hand chattered the silvery voices of gold coins, in such number that he had to arrange them in stacks.

"One man had seen what the Comtesse has done. The cold eyes of that man had paused for some time on Raoul's hands, agitating in the shadow, putting the empty purse in one pocket and the handkerchief in another. That was Dr. Nohé-Nahm. Leaning against the mantelpiece, alone, he watched his young protégé play, but said nothing.

"For twenty years, the woman he had loved had received from him the proof of a true affection, but never the slightest intimate demonstration. He had aided her in the difficult course of her life, without a word of encouragement, without a heartfelt smile. As a child, Raoul had never received a caress or a kiss from him; as a young man, he had never shaken his hand. Raoul received Nohé-Nahm's words as a matter of instruction rather than advice. A romantic intelligence would have suspected a mystery in the heart of that impassive being, but the people who knew him were perfectly sane.

"When Raoul quit the game, he found himself so rich that he did not know where to put his gold. It was, therefore, easy for him furtively to return the purse to his cousin as he had received it, while whispering ardent thanks into her ear. He did not give back the handkerchief, and Mathilde did not ask for it. Perhaps neither of them thought of it, but there are grounds to suspect that the real reason that prevented Raoul from adding it to the purse is that he thought too much of it.

"Retired to his bedroom, our youth did not go to sleep. A fortunate age, when a gifted flower, a squeeze of the hand or the clutch of a handkerchief can enfever the heart and chase away sleep!

"That same evening, Nohé-Nahm wrote a letter, with singular care.

"The following day announced itself with a magnificent sky. Since dawn the preparations for the hunt had been keeping the grooms and the beaters busy. Horses for the hunters and English carriages for a few ladies that were to follow them were waiting in the courtyard. The impatience of the dogs added to

the Comte's. They set off. The location of the rendezvous was in the middle of a wooded plain dotted with heaths.

At the most animated moment of the hunt the Comte, gone astray, stopped to orientate himself by means of the voice of the pack, which faded away from time to time. Suddenly, a beater came galloping up and handed him a letter. While letting his horse proceed at its own pace, the Comte read it. His face turned red, his eyes became wild, and with a formidable oath he launched himself into a clearing.

"Raoul was paying little heed to the wolf that was being pursued. Lost in an enclosed fern-brake in the forest, he was savoring at his leisure the joys procured by a nascent sentiment. Sometimes, however, a thought saddened him—for the intoxication was only temporary; the following day, he would return to the austere life that his mother led. Poor human nature: however excellent it may be, a whiff of amour can make it almost ingrate!

"Suddenly, his reverie was disturbed by the arrival of three horsemen who, emerging from a thicket, headed toward him. One of the three hunters—the one in the lead—was the Comte de Boistilla.

"As he approached, Raoul immediately returned a small lace-trimmed handkerchief to the coat of his uniform, unbuttoned at the top.

"My genteel cousin, is it the government that furnishes you with such cambric?" he said, reaching out to take the piece of fabric marked with the Comtesse's monogram from the young man's bosom. With barbaric composure he added: 'It's doubtless not us for whom you're waiting here—or perhaps we've arrived too late!'

"Monsieur, that handkerchief was not given to me...

"You doubtless found it in the forest—isn't that right, my pretty Monsieur—that's how one responds in school. Well, I have a lesson to teach you, my young schoolboy!'

"And so saying, the Comte struck Raoul's face with his horsewhip. The latter bounded backwards and drew his épée.

"We have no épée, Monsieur, but you have pistols in your saddle-holsters, as I have. Let's get down from our horses and, if these gentlemen would care to summon two more witnesses, we can settle this affair immediately.'

"In spite of the injustice and the brutality of the Comte's accusation, Raoul, who was brave, put off the explanations that he could give until the outcome of the combat.

"One of Monsieur de Boistilla's companions, who had absented himself, soon returned, followed by two hunters. The duel took place.

"The following day, the cadaver of her son was returned to Madame Noirtier. That event was a mortal blow for the poor mother.

"On her deathbed, Dr. Nohé-Nahm leaned over her gasping mouth, and said to her, in his cold and calm voice: 'Twenty years ago, Valérie, on the day of your marriage, you asked me what sentiment I felt for you. I can answer you today. It is hatred. I have killed your husband, I have killed your son, and I am killing you.'

"Two days later, two coffins were lowered into a single grave.

"Messieurs, it is nearly eleven o'clock; the diligence passes here early in the morning; I shall therefore permit myself to take my leave of you for the night. You will not begrudge me that, Monsieur de Saint-Loubès."

"Monsieur, your story has interested me keenly, since I am confident of its veracity. So, if I were to hold a grudge against anyone here, it would only be myself."

"Come on, Mont-Dore, let's go to sleep."

"It's not to address a wry compliment to you in your capacity as narrator, but it seems that your dog was very interested in the incidents of the poor widow's story. He has not slept at all. I even saw his blazing eyes fixed upon us the whole time. Unless I were his master, I would not want to have such an animal in my bedroom."

"Mont-Dore is faithful and devoted to me. With him I can sleep with the door open, my watch and my purse at the disposal of anyone who could take them. Come on, Mont-Dore!"

The dog raised himself up on his four paws and, while following his master, who bowed on the threshold, he uttered a dull growl, at the sound of which the Vicomte moved sideways.

“Well, it only lacks my being bitten by a dog for my evening to be complete!” said Saint-Loubès to Robert when they were alone.

“Would you like to know an idea that occurred to me, Vicomte?”

“I would.”

“It’s that I strongly suspect that stranger of being one of the characters in the drama he related to us.”

“My dear friend, as I’ve often remarked to you, you make the mistake of seeing the extraordinary in everything. You’re more infatuated with the fantastic than...a woman we know; and moreover, your love of it is the more constant. In the conditions in which we find ourselves, that man would have seemed to me excessively eccentric had he not acted as he did.”

“He’s some storyteller, then, who constructed a moving intrigue on the basis of that newspaper article?”

“Not in the least—he’s simply an honest commercial traveler who possesses an old story, already recounted a hundred times over: a melodramatic adventure handed down to him by his father, whose audition he’s imposed on us. And now, Monsieur de Rolleboise, let’s talk about more intimate things. So you find still yourself under the tutelage of that inconvenient viscera that only serves, in my opinion, to make us commit follies in times of youth and to gratify us with aneurisms in old age!

“Don’t let that lightness of expression cause you to suppose an ingrate character. I want to talk to you seriously, as a friend, about that passion. You’re blowing tobacco-smoke at me—that’s all right; I understand the pantomime, and I don’t want to cure you of an affliction of which you don’t want to be cured. However, did you know that woman before I met you?”

“I saw Madame de Lormont for the first time last season at Cauterets. I’m in love with her, and I congratulate myself for it. If I did not have that passion in my heart, who would occupy me, I ask you?”

“Yes, I’d also like to find myself in that interesting state of mind—but that would be a frightful imitation.”

“After all, that delightful woman has already procured me the dream of delightful hours. Perhaps she will have an influence on my destiny...for good...or ill...it really doesn’t matter! When I savor an exquisite wine, I don’t worry about whether it will occasion a heart attack, or anything else, in my old age!”

“You reason admirably...as a fantasist. Nevertheless, your fever allows you a few hours of remission, of calm, from time to time?”

“Often, yes.”

“Are you in one of those depressions of the heart?”

“Perhaps.”

“So much the better.”

“Why so much the better?”

“Because we’re going to be able to talk.”

“Let’s talk, then...but over tea.”

“Bazas tea! Never. Listen to me. When I met Madame de Lormont in the society of the spa, like many people, I did not neglect to accord her the sort of interest that the sight of a young and beautiful wife in the company of an aged husband always excites in you—for Monsieur de Lormont is old enough to be her father. Nevertheless, not being at all amorous—God preserve me!—I was able to observe at my ease.”

“Oh, you’re going to torture my heart! But no matter—speak.”

“Don’t be frightened of jealousy. To plunge that gluttonous sentiment into the soul is to throw a bundle of firewood into the furnace; the flame only becomes more active. Nevertheless, far be it from me to have the intention of offering you the shadow of a suspicion. In a word, what strikes my mind when I recall those guests, otherwise very amiable, is the mysterious penumbra with which they were enveloped.”

“That reflection has never occurred to me.”

"I can believe it—you have a blindfold over our eyes! Otherwise, if you had cared to observe, you would have been struck by the artistry with which the conversation was kept away from certain subjects. Often, in a seemingly insignificant discussion, a word from the husband threw attention on to another point, or a gesture from the wife distracted the speaker. I have seen Madame pale at a single word, quiver at an exclamation, or the simple sound of a door opening. Never a newspaper on the table, nor ever addressed to someone coming in the commonplace banality: 'What's new?' So, I repeat to you with conviction: between those two persons there exists a great secret, a great mystery!"

"I know people who, in my place, would offer all those remarks as an aliment to their anxious mind—but I have the good fortune not to be made that way. On the contrary, if I were egotistical, I would even congratulate myself on a subject of interior preoccupation that deflects suspicion away from me. So, do you believe that I'm excessively demanding? Not at all. Happy sentiments make me a child again. My reverie is content with the faintest favor. A flower or a smile is a festival in my heart. As you see, being a poet is good for something."

"Your joys are, indeed, weakly ambitious. Like the poor devils who take delight in the vicinity of the Mint in the clink of coins vomited by the machines, or the Savoyards who delight in the fumes from the kitchens of the Palais-Royal, the simple preludes of amour satisfy you."

"You're depressing, Vicomte."

"I'm not amorous, that's all. When I see an intoxicated man, I don't pity him. His joy is false, but it's nonetheless a joy."

"Oh, yes, it's an intoxication that transports me, a splendid intoxication, without lassitude, without brutalization, a reasoned intoxication, felt all the more keenly because I know that it's only an intoxication. Alas, our life is like that! Storm and tempest, then a few lightning flashes, which sometimes open the sky!"

"Yes, I love that woman. What does it matter to me who she is? What does her past matter? I love her with all my heart! All my thoughts in the day are of her, all my dreams in the night. The memory of her beauty alimnts my passion more than her possession would aliment an ordinary love. One day, Vicomte, one day..."

"Yes, I can guess—you were lucky."

"Oh, you think that I'm going to tell you about one of those favors that count as necessary to happiness! No, Vicomte, no. One day, in a corridor, I dared..."

"To offer her a flower?"

"No, not so much. I dare to take her hand...that hand she did not draw back...and for an instant, we remained there, without a word, without a gesture! Oh, if Heaven had only desired, in that blissful second to stop the course of time and prolong my happiness...but no; she left."

"Admirable, my dear Robert! I'm glad to see you as utterly egotistical as the lovers of the theater. Indeed, would it not have been charming if Heaven had listened to you! But it might not be to very agreeable for many people! So, a dentist is preparing to relieve me of a diseased tooth; at the first creaking of the roots, when my entire jaw is in agony, instead of hastening the extraction, the operator pauses on that pain and makes my torture continue. I blaspheme. 'Oh, Monsieur,' he says to me, complacently, 'have a little patience; it's your friend Monsieur de Rolleboise who has obtained that time should stop on a happy moment that has just fallen to him. It won't be long.' It's very jolly, your idea, Robert, very jolly! Anyway, Madame de Lormont has left the spa, and you're immediately hastening to follow her to Paris. You're very young!"

"You're very old, Vicomte."

"Anyway, we'll talk at greater length about his subject during our journey—for I assume that you'll be amiable enough to accept a place in my carriage."

"No—you'll take me into a realm entirely opposite to the one for which I'm bound!"

"Oh, Robert, my friend, how little you know me to suppose that I would adopt scenic means! Have I not run into enough strangeness this evening? Uncertainty, the unexpected and the extraordinary—but they, for me, are toxic morals that I've never been able to resist."

The two young men stayed up rather late before the last whitening logs, talking from time to time, or meditating, one on intimate memories, the other on puffs of cigar smoke, or nothing, or everything—perhaps the most attractive reverie of all.

Suddenly, the silence was disrupted by two gunshots, doubtless fired in one of the rooms of the inn.

The Vicomte de Saint-Loubès shuddered on his seat. Then starting to stride back and forth in the large room, he cried, furiously: “There! That was all I lacked! After having traversed all the ridiculous phases of the destinies that enfevered imaginations invent, to encounter the heroes of truculent melodramas in an inn! My God, I’m in a fine mess! I’m hip-deep in crime. I can already see myself at the assizes, as a witness! The newspapers will write about my costume, the sound of my voice, whether I’ve put on weight or am flagging. *L’Illustration* is capable of publishing my portrait! Women will fall in love with me! Oh, my God, my God, what a future!”

At that moment, the landlord came in, half-dressed and very troubled.

“Let me go!” cried the Vicomte. “Has my carriage been repaired?”

“What, Monsieur, go? You fire rifle-shots in my home, perhaps commit murder, and you want to flee! Oh, no, no...”

“What? Are you mad, innkeeper.”

“But, I don’t know—I hear gunshots and I find a traveler who wants to run away, so I stop him!”

“Wretch! The noise came from the bedrooms.”

“Then let’s run there, Monsieur, I beg you—follow me!”

“Are you afraid?”

“No, I’m not afraid—but there might be danger and I wouldn’t be sorry to avoid it. I’m the father of a family...”