

Théophile Gautier

Captain Fracasse

With illustrations by Gustave Doré from the Charpentier, Paris 1866 edition.



The Duel After the Masquerade (1857)
Jean-Léon Gérôme (French, 1824-1904)
Artvee



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Part I: Chapters I-V

Translator's Introduction

Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) was born in Tarbes, in the Hautes-Pyrénées region of south-west France, his family moving to Paris in 1814. He was a friend, at school, of the poet Gérard de Nerval, who introduced him to Victor Hugo. Gautier contributed to various journals, including *La Presse*, throughout his life, which offered opportunities for travel to various countries, among others Spain, Italy, Russia, Turkey and Egypt. He was a devotee of the ballet, writing a number of scenarios including that of *Giselle*. At the time of the 1848 Revolution, he expressed strong support for the ideals of the Second Republic, a support which he maintained for the rest of his life.

A successor to the first wave of Romantic writers, including Chateaubriand and Lamartine, he directed the *Revue de Paris* from 1851 to 1856, worked as a journalist for *La Presse* and *Le Moniteur universel*, and in 1856 became editor of *L'Artiste*, in which he published numerous editorials asserting his anti-utilitarian credo of 'Art for art's sake'. Saint-Beuve secured his critical acclaim; he became chairman of the *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts* in 1862, and in 1868 was granted the sinecure of librarian to Princess Mathilde Bonaparte, a cousin of Napoleon III, having previously been introduced to her salon.

Gautier remained in Paris during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, and the aftermath of the 1871 Commune, dying of heart disease at the age of sixty-one in 1872.

Though ostensibly a Romantic poet, Gautier may be seen as a forerunner to, or point of reference for, a number of divergent poetic movements including Symbolism and Modernism.

Le Capitaine Fracasse, an episodic novel written in 1863, has as its protagonist the Baron de Sigognac, an impoverished seventeenth-century nobleman who, in the reign of Louis XIII of France, abandons his château to join a theatrical company so as to pursue a young actress whom he loves. (For members of this comedy troupe, Gautier adopted and adapted characters from the traditional *commedia dell'arte*.) Sigognac travels with them to Paris, intending to petition the king and seek financial aid in memory of the services rendered to royalty by his ancestors. When one of the actors dies, Sigognac replaces him, taking the stage name of Captain Fracasse (the name derived from the word *fracas*, a skirmish or commotion), and, despite his innate pride, acting the part of a hapless military man. The experience teaches him humility, and this in turn deepens his relationship with the young actress he adores. The novel illustrates Gautier's love of the theatrical, whether drama or ballet; his ability to navigate the ranks of his society without fear or favour; his aesthetic and poetic sensibilities; his expert command of language; and the humour, humanity, and tenderness with which he deals with the world, in all his writing.

This enhanced translation has been designed to offer maximum compatibility with current search engines. Among other modifications, the proper names of people and places, and the titles given to works of art, have been fully researched, modernised, and expanded; comments in parentheses have been added here and there to provide a reference, or clarify meaning; and minor typographic or factual errors, for example incorrect attributions and dates, in the original text, have been eliminated from this new translation.

Chapter I: The Castle of Melancholy



On a slope of one of those barren hills that punctuate Les Landes, between Dax and Mont-de-Marsan, there stood, in the reign of Louis XIII, a manor-house, of the type commonly met with in Gascony, which the local villagers dignified by calling it a château.

Two square towers, topped with sloping four-sided candle-snuffer roofs, occupied the corners of a building the facade of which bore a pair of deeply-cut grooves indicating the former existence of a drawbridge, whose role had been reduced to that of a sinecure due to the filling-in of the moat. The manor-house possessed a somewhat feudal appearance, due to these tall watchtowers, and their conjoined weather vanes. The dark green of a sheet of ivy, half-enveloping one of the towers, contrasted happily with the grey hue of the stone, already ancient at that date.

Any traveller who had seen the castle from afar, its pointed ridges outlined against the sky, high above the broom and heather, might have judged it a suitable dwelling for a provincial squire; but, on approaching, their opinion would certainly have altered. The path which led from the road to the château had been reduced, through the invasion of moss and parasitic vegetation, to a pale, narrow track, like tarnished braid on a threadbare coat. Two ruts filled with rainwater, inhabited by frogs, testified that carriages had once passed that way; but the complacency of those amphibians indicated a long period of possession combined with the certainty of remaining undisturbed. On the central strip bordered by straggling grasses, and soaked by a recent downpour, there was not a human footprint to be seen, and the scrub, burdened with gleaming drops of water, appeared not to have been cleared for many a long day.

Large leprous-yellow patches mottled the browned, disordered tiles of the roofs, whose rafters had rotted and given way in places; rust prevented the weather-vanes from turning, and thereby indicating a change in the wind's direction; the dormer windows were blocked by shutters of warped and split wood. Rubble filled the barbicans of the towers, and of the half-score of windows of the facade, eight were barred by planks, while the other two displayed bombé glass panes, trembling at the slightest breath of the north wind amidst their network of lead. Between these windows, the plaster, fallen in flakes like scales of diseased skin, exposed disjointed bricks, and rubble-stone crumbling due to the pernicious influence of the moon. The doorway, framed by a stone lintel, whose roughened surface bore traces of ancient ornamentation blunted by time and neglect, was surmounted by a crude coat of arms that the most skilled herald would have been powerless to decipher, and whose mantling was fancifully convoluted, and not without numerous breaks, damaging to its continuity. The door panels still offered, towards the top, remnants of oxblood paint, and seemed to blush, ashamed of their state of disrepair; diamond-headed nails held their cracked boards together, and formed incomplete symmetries here and there. One of the door's two leaves could be opened, and was sufficient for the passage of guests visiting the castle, evidently few in number, while against the jamb of the closed leaf rested a decayed wheel, now falling to pieces, the last remnant of a carriage that had perished during the previous reign. Swallows' nests obscured the chimney-tops, and the corners of the windows, and, if it had not been for a thin wisp of pale smoke issuing from one of the brick chimneys, and twisting spirally like the chimney-smoke in those attempts at houses that schoolchildren scribble in the margins of their schoolbooks, one might have thought the house uninhabited: the cookery that was being performed in the depths below must have been meagre, since a soldier's pipe would have produced denser fumes. This smoke was the only sign of life that the house gave, like those at death's door whose continued life is revealed only by the mist produced by their breath.

If one pushed past the movable leaf of the door, which only yielded under protest, and turned with evident displeasure on its rusty and screeching hinges, one found oneself beneath a kind of ogival vault, older than the rest of the dwelling. It was supported on four bluish, sausage-like

granite ribs arching to a projecting keystone on which one could see once more, only a little less worn, the coat of arms sculpted on the outer lintel, consisting of three storks in gold, on an azure field, or some such emblematic creatures since the shadow beneath the vault prevented one distinguishing them clearly. Sealed into the wall, were sheet-metal torch extinguishers, blackened by use, and iron rings to which the visitors' horses were once tethered, now a very rare occurrence judging by the dust that coated them.

Exiting this porch, beneath which were two doorways, one leading to the apartments on the ground floor, the other to a room which might formerly have served as a guardroom, one emerged into a sad, bare, chilly courtyard, surrounded by high walls which were marked by long black stains from the rains of many a winter. In the corners of this courtyard, amidst rubble fallen from the broken cornices, grew nettles, wild-oats, and hemlock, while the interstices of the paving stones were filled with weeds.

At the far end, a ramp, flanked by stone railings adorned with stone orbs topped by spikes, led to a garden below the courtyard. The broken and dilapidated steps shifted underfoot or, if held in place, it was only by filaments of moss, and the roots of plants; and between the supports of the terrace sempervivums, wallflowers, and wild artichokes had grown.

As for the garden itself, it was slowly returning to a state akin to a woodland thicket or even, in places, virgin forest. With the exception of a square, where a few cabbages with veined, verdigrised leaves and starred by golden suns with black hearts were clustered, whose presence testified to some degree of cultivation, Nature was reclaiming her rights over that abandoned space, and erasing the traces of human activity whose vanishing she ever seems to delight in.

The unpruned trees had thrown forth eager branches in all directions. The boxwood hedges, intended to mark the outlines of borders and paths, had become bushes, having not been pruned for many years. Seeds, carried by the wind, had sprouted at random, and were growing with that perennial robustness peculiar to weeds, in beds once occupied by pretty flowers and rare plants. Brambles with thorny spurs arched from one edge of the various paths to the other, and hooked you as you passed, to prevent you from going further, and to hide from you this mysterious place of sadness and desolation. Solitude dislikes being surprised in a state of undress, and creates all sorts of defensive barriers around itself.

Yet, if one had persisted, without fearing the scratches delivered by the brushwood, or blows dealt by the branches, in following the ancient path to its end, a path which had become more obstructed and overgrown than a path in the woods, one would have arrived at a kind of rocky niche representing a rustic cavern. To the plants formerly sown in the stony interstices, such as irises, gladioli, and black-ivy, others had been added, persicaria, hart's tongue ferns, and wild vines, which hung down like beards half-veiling a marble statue representing some mythological divinity, Flora or Pomona, who must have been very charming in her time and brought honour to the sculptor, but due to attrition was nose-less, like Medieval depictions of Death. The poor goddess carried in her basket, instead of flowers, mouldy and poisonous-looking mushrooms; she seemed to have been poisoned herself, patches of brown moss marking her once white body. At her feet, beneath a layer of green duckweed, a brown puddle, the residue of the rain, stagnated in a stone shell, since the lion's mask above, which could still be partially discerned, no longer vomited water, receiving none from the blocked or vanished channels.

This grotesque 'cabinet', as it was then called, testified, ruined though it was, to a certain love of ease and taste for the arts, on the part of the former owners of the castle. Suitably cleaned and restored, the statue would have revealed the style of the Florentine Renaissance, executed in the manner of those Italian sculptors who came to France in the wake of 'Il Rosso' (*Giovanni Battista di Jacopo, 1495–1540*) or Francesco Primaticcio (*1504–1570*), such being the probable period when the now fallen family had flourished in splendour.

The cavern had been constructed adjoining a green, saltpeter-covered wall, erected at the time of the cavern's construction, which was still crisscrossed by fragments of broken trelliswork, no doubt intended to hide the wall's surface beneath a curtain of leafy climbing plants. This wall, barely visible through the disordered foliage of now enormous trees, bordered the garden on the inner side. Beyond stretched the moor, its melancholy bareness dotted with heather.

Returning to the castle, the facade opposite that just described, when viewed, appeared even more ravaged and eroded than the latter, the later owners having tried to keep up appearances by concentrating their limited resources on the side previously described.

In the stable, where twenty horses could have been stabled at ease, a lean Breton pony, whose rump jutted forth in bony protuberances, was pulling a few strands of straw from an empty rack with the tips of his loose yellowed teeth, and from time to time turning toward the door an eye set in a socket within whose depths the rats of Montfaucon (*where the main gallows and gibbet of the Kings of France were sited, in Paris, until the time of Louis XIII*) would not have found the slightest morsel of fat. At the threshold of a kennel, a lone dog slumbered, draped in overly-loose skin beneath which his relaxed muscles were outlined in flaccid lines, his muzzle resting on the meagrely padded pillows of his front paws; he seemed so accustomed to the solitude of the place that he had renounced all pretence of guarding it, and showed no sign of alarm, as dogs, even when drowsy, are wont to do, at the slightest noise they hear.

If one chose to enter the dwelling, one encountered an enormous staircase with a wooden banister and carved balusters. This staircase had only two landings, the building containing no more than two floors. It was constructed of stone up to the first floor, and of bricks and wood from there onwards. On the walls, grisailles partially devoured by humidity had at one time sought to imitate the relief-work of richly-decorated architecture, through the use of chiaroscuro and perspective. One could still divine a series of panels portraying the Labours of Hercules, topped by a moulding, beneath a cornice supported by modillions (*projecting brackets*) from which arched a bower of foliage festooned with vine branches, revealing a sky, faded in colour, and divided into curious islands by the infiltration of rainwater. Between the Hercules' panels, busts of Roman emperors and other illustrious figures from history were painted, in niches; but all was so vague, faded, ruined, or obliterated, that it was rather the ghost of art than art itself, that could be seen, and one would need to describe it with the shadows of words, ordinary words themselves being too substantial to convey its state. The echoes in this empty space seemed quite surprised at repeating the sound of footsteps.

A green door, whose serge had yellowed, and was held together only by a few gilded nails, led into a room that might have served as a dining room, in the fabled days when people indeed dined in this deserted dwelling. A large beam divided the ceiling into two compartments lined with exposed joists, the interstices of which had once been covered with a layer of blue, now obliterated by dust and cobwebs, which no brush would ever disturb at that height. Above the fireplace,

ancient in form, a ten-tined stag's head spread its antlers, and along the walls on darkened canvases smoky portraits representing armoured military captains grimaced, their helmets beside them or held by a page, and gazed at one from profoundly black eyes, the only features seemingly alive in the dead faces of those lords in velvet jackets, their heads supported by stiff starched ruffs, each rather like the head of Saint John the Baptist on the silver platter; or they showed dowagers in old-fashioned costumes, terrifying in their lividity and taking on, through the decomposition of the colours, the appearance of Striges, Lamias and Empusai. These paintings, executed by provincial daubers, presented, due to the very barbarity of the work, a heterogeneous and formidable appearance. Some lacked frames; others had borders of tarnished and reddened gold. All bore at their corners the family crest and age of the person represented; but whether the number of years was low or high, there was no appreciable difference between these different heads with their yellowing hues, and dark charred shadows, smoky with varnish, and sprinkled with dust. The colour tones of two or three of these canvases, faded and covered with a flowering of mould, were those of a rotting corpse, and proved that the last descendant of these men of lineage and military prowess, was wholly indifferent to the effigies of his noble ancestors. At eve, this silent and motionless array was doubtless transformed, in the wavering light of the lamps, to a gallery of ghosts, at the same time both terrifying and ridiculous. Nothing is sadder than such forgotten portraits in deserted rooms; half-erased versions of forms long since vanished below the ground.

As it was, those painted ghosts seemed fitting guests to adorn the desolate solitude of the dwelling. Real inhabitants would have seemed far too alive for that dead house.

In the centre of the room stood a table of blackened pear-wood, its legs carved in spirals like Solomonic columns, which woodworms, undisturbed in their silent work, had pricked with a myriad of holes. A thin grey layer, on which the finger could have traced a message, covered its surface, and showed that the table was not often set for diners.

Two sideboards or *credenzas* in the same wood, decorated with carvings and probably purchased along with the table in happier times, were placed on either side of the room; chipped earthenware, disparate pierces of glassware and two or three rustic figurines, by the potter Bernard Palissy, representing eels, fish, crabs and shells, enamelled on a background of greenery, occupied the otherwise empty shelves.

Five or six chairs covered in velvet that might once have been crimson, but which years and use had rendered a yellowish red, allowed their stuffing to escape through gaps in the fabric, and limped on disparate feet like halting iambic verse, or crippled soldiers returning home after a war. Unless one were a mere spirit, it would have been imprudent to sit there, and, no doubt, those seats were only used when the host of ancestors, having quit their picture-frames, came to sit at the empty table and, over an illusory supper, chatted among themselves, during those long wintry nights so suited to ghostly feasts, regarding the family's decay.

From this room one entered another, slightly smaller, one. A Flemish tapestry, one of those termed 'Verdures' (*depicting verdant wooded landscapes*) adorned the walls. Let not the word 'tapestry' awaken in your imagination the idea of inappropriate luxury. This one was worn, threadbare, and faded; hundreds of loose threads, in coming unwoven, had permitted gaps in the fabric, and the fragments were held together only by a few remaining threads, and longstanding habit. Their discoloured representations of trees were yellowish on one side and bluish on the other. The heron, standing on one leg among the reeds, had suffered considerably from moth damage. The Flemish

farm, its wellhead festooned with hops, was almost indistinguishable and of the pale face of the hunter in pursuit of wild duck his scarlet mouth and dark eyes, their dyes apparently more resistant than the rest, had alone retained their original colouring, so that he looked like a corpse, of waxen pallor, whose mouth had been vermilioned and whose eyebrows had been highlighted. Currents of air played between the surface of the wall and the loose fabric, endowing it with curious undulations. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, if he had been soliloquising there, would doubtless have drawn his sword and poked at Polonius, concealed behind the arras, while crying: 'A rat! A rat!' (*See Act 3, scene 4 of Shakespeare's play*) A thousand little noises, almost-imperceptible whispers, in the room, rendering the silence more tangible, disturbed the ears and thoughts of any visitor bold enough to penetrate there. The mice nibbled hungrily at some strands of wool on the underside of the fabric which had been woven on a low-warp (*horizontal*) loom. Woodworms rasped at the beams producing a dull noise like a file in use, and the fell hand of death struck the hour, with clockwork precision, against the wall-panels.

Sometimes a piece of furniture would creak unexpectedly, as if ennui, engendered by solitude, were stretching its joints, causing one, despite oneself, to shudder nervously. A four-poster bed with conical pillars, enclosed by brocatelle-fabric curtains open at every fold, whose green and white pattern had merged to a single yellowish tint, occupied a corner of the room, nor would one have dared to raise the hangings for fear of revealing, in the shadows, some crouching monster, or a stiff form outlined beneath the white sheets, with a pointed nose, bony cheekbones, clasped hands, and conjoined feet, like the feet of those commemorative statues adorning tombs, so swiftly do things made by human beings, and from which humanity is absent, take on a supernatural air! One might even have supposed that some innocent young princess, laid under a spell, was resting there in centuries-old slumber, like Sleeping Beauty, though the folds had too sinister a rigidity and seemed too mysterious for that, dispelling all ideas of Romance.

A black wooden table with a loosened copper inlay; a vague and cloudy mirror whose silver had blackened, weary of not reflecting a human figure; and an armchair its fabric worked in needlepoint, leisure's patient labour brought to completion by some grandmother or other, but in which nothing but a few silver threads could be discerned amidst the faded silk and wool, completed the furnishings of this room, habitable only for a person who feared neither spirits nor ghosts.

These two rooms corresponded to the two unblocked windows of the facade. A pale, greenish light streamed through the frosted panes, which had last been cleaned a good hundred years ago, and which seemed tinted on the outside. Ample curtains, rumpled where they joined, and which would have been torn apart if anyone had tried to slide them along their rust-eaten rods, further diminished the dim light, adding to the melancholy of the place.

On opening the door at the end of the second room, one was plunged into complete darkness, entering a void, strange and obscure. Little by little, however, the eye became accustomed to the shadows, crossed by a few livid shafts of light filtering through the joints of the boards blocking the windows, and one discovered a confusing series of dilapidated rooms, with uneven parquet floors, strewn with broken panes of glass, their bare walls half-covered by a few shreds of frayed wallpaper, their ceilings revealing the rafters, and allowing water to drip from the sky above, admirably arranged for a horde of rats, and colonies of bats. In some places, it would not have been safe to advance, since the floor undulated and bent beneath one's feet, though no one ever

ventured into this Thebaid (*desert*) of shadow, dust and cobwebs. Standing at the threshold, a lingering odour, a scent of mould and abandonment, and the damp, black chill peculiar to dark places, rose to your nostrils as if one had lifted the stone sealing a vault, and leant into its icy darkness. Indeed, it was the corpse of the past that was slowly collapsing to dust in these rooms, in which the present never set foot; the silent years that rocked themselves, as if in hammocks, in the grey canvases occupying their corners.

Above, in the attics, barn owls and tawny owls roosted during the day, and jackdaws with their feathery ears, cat-like heads, and round phosphorescent eyes. The roof, collapsing in twenty places, allowed those amiable birds to come and go freely, they being as at-ease there as in the ruins of Montlhéry (*in the Île-de-France*) or Château Gaillard (*in Normandy*). Every evening, the dusty occupants flew forth, uttering those clamorous cries that trouble superstitious folk, to seek far-off the nourishment absent from their barren tower.

The ground-floor rooms contained nothing but a half-dozen bales of straw, corn-stalks, and a few gardening implements. In one of these rooms lay a straw mattress filled with dry heads of Turkish wheat and cloaked by a rough woollen coverlet, which appeared to constitute the bed of the only servant in the manor house.

Since my reader may have been wearied by this tour amidst solitude, misery and abandonment, let me take him or her to the only room in the deserted castle that possessed any life, that is the kitchen, whose chimney emitted to the sky that pale, whitish cloud mentioned in the external description of the castle.

A meagre fire licked the chimney-back, with yellow tongues of flame, and from time to time reached the bottom of a cast-iron pot with a handle, that hung from the iron rack, while faint reflections illuminated with their reddish gleams the rims of a few saucepans attached to the wall, amidst the shadows. Daylight falling through the large chimney-pipe with reached the roof unbendingly, highlighted the ashes with bluish tints, and made the fire appear paler, thus, in that cold hearth, the very flames seemed frozen. Without the precaution of its cover the pot would have filled with rainwater, and storms diluted the broth.

The water, slow to heat, finally began to boil, and the kettle complained in a low tone, like an asthmatic person: a few cabbage-leaves simmering, indicated that the still-cultivated portion of the garden had been used for this more than Spartan broth.

A scrawny old black cat, as threadbare as a worn-out muff, the missing fur revealing bluish skin in places, was seated on its rump, as close to the fire as possible without its whiskers burning, and stared at the pot, the pupils of its green eyes as narrow as a letter I, with an air of interested surveillance. Its ears had been cropped close to its head, and its tail close to its spine, which gave it the appearance of those Japanese monsters that are placed in cabinets among other curiosities, or even of those fantastic creatures whom witches, off to their Sabbath, entrust with the task of tending the cauldron in which their potions are seething.

This cat, all alone in the kitchen, appeared to be cooking soup for himself, and doubtless it was he who had set out, on the oak table, a plate decorated in green and red, a pewter goblet, presumably polished with his claws as it was so scratched, and a stoneware pot on the sides of which the coats of arms seen in the porch, on the keystone, and adorning the portraits, was roughly drawn in blue.

Who would seat themselves at this modest meal, in this manor without inhabitants; perhaps the familiar spirit of the house, the *genius loci* (*the spirit of the place*), the Kobold (*the household spirit, 'hausgeist'*) faithful to its adopted home, while the black cat, with the profoundly mysterious gaze, was waiting for its arrival to serve the soup, napkin on paw.

The pot boiled away; the cat remained motionless at its post, like a sentry whose relief had been neglected. At last, a heavy and ponderous footstep was heard, that of an old person; a short preliminary cough sounded, the door latch creaked, and a man, half-peasant, half-servant, entered the kitchen.

At the appearance of the newcomer, the black cat, which seemed a long-time friend of the man, left the hearth and the glowing ashes, and rubbed itself amicably against his legs, arching its back, opening and closing its claws, and emitting from its throat that hoarse murmur which indicates the highest level of satisfaction amongst the feline race.

'Well, well, Beelzebub,' said the old man, bending down to pass a calloused hand twice or thrice over the cat's hairless back, so as not to be outdone in politeness by an animal: 'I know that you love me, and we are solitary enough here, my poor master and I, not to disparage the caresses of a creature lacking a soul, but which nevertheless seems to understand us.'

These mutual courtesies completed, the cat began to walk away from him, leading him towards the fireplace, as if to direct him to the pot, which it was looking at with the most touching air of eager covetousness in the world, for Beelzebub was beginning to grow old, his hearing was less acute, his eyesight less sharp, his paw less nimble than before, and the resource that hunting birds and mice had formerly provided was noticeably diminished; therefore, he kept an eye on the soup, of which he hoped to receive a share, and which caused him lick his lips in anticipation.

Pierre, for that was the old servant's name, took a bundle of twigs, and threw them onto the half-dead fire; they crackled and contorted, and soon a flame, preceded by a billow of smoke, rose bright and clear amidst a joyous fusillade of sparks. It seemed as if the salamanders of legend were frolicking and dancing in the flames. A poor pulmonic cricket, delighted with the warmth and brightness, even tried to chirp by rubbing its wings together, but only managed to produce a wheezing sound.

Pierre, draped in an old piece of green serge, with a toothed border, and yellowed by smoke, sat down on a wooden stool before the hearth, with Beelzebub beside him.

The glow of the fire illuminated his features, which age, sunlight, fresh air, and the inclemency of the seasons had smoked, so to speak, till they were darker than those of a native of the Caribbean; a few strands of white hair, escaping from his blue beret and plastered to his temples, further enhanced the brick tones of his swarthy complexion; his black eyebrows provided a contrast with his snowy hair. Like others of the Basque nation, he had an elongated face, and a nose like the beak of a bird of prey. Large vertical wrinkles, like sabre cuts, furrowed his cheeks from top to bottom.

A sort of livery with faded braid, and of a colour that a professional painter would have found difficulty in defining, half-covered his chamois jacket, rendered shiny and black in places due to the friction produced by a breastplate, producing on its yellow surface tints like those that render green the belly of a well-hung partridge; for Pierre had been a soldier, and some remnants of his

military gear were now visible in his civilian attire. His narrow breeches revealed the warp and weft of a material as light as embroidery canvas, and it was impossible to know whether they had been made of broadcloth, ratteen, or serge. All texture had long since disappeared from these worn breeches; never was a eunuch's chin more hairless. Noticeable patches, added by a hand more accustomed to holding a sword than a needle, which had addressed their weak points, testified to the care taken by the garment's owner to extend its longevity to the furthest point. Like Nestor, these ancient breeches had lived three ordinary lifetimes. It is a strong probability that they were once red, but that vital fact is not absolutely proven.

Rope-soled shoes, which recalled Spanish *alpargatas* (*espadrilles*), attached with blue-cord to woollen stockings from which the foot had been removed, served as Pierre's footwear. These coarse buskins had doubtless been chosen as being more economical than court shoes or drawbridge shoes (*solid shoes with a gap between the heel and the sole*), since a strict, sober, and honest poverty was betrayed in the smallest details of the old man's appearance and even in his pose of gloomy resignation. Sitting with his back against the inner side wall of the chimney, he crossed his large hands, reddened to purplish tones like vine leaves in late autumn, over his knees, so forming a motionless counterpart to the cat, Beelzebub, crouched in the ashes opposite him, with a famished and pitiful air, and gazing with profound attention at the asthmatic bubbling of the cooking pot.

'The young master is very late today,' murmured Pierre as, through the smoky, yellow panes of the only window that lit the kitchen, he watched the last streak of sunlight fade and diminish at the edge of a sky marked by heavy, rain-filled clouds. 'What pleasure does he find walking alone on the moor this way? Though it's true this castle is so sad nowhere else could inspire a greater feeling of tedium.'

A hoarse but joyous barking was now heard; the pony, in the stable, stamped the ground, making the chain that tethered it to the side of its manger rattle; the black cat interrupted its grooming by passing a paw, moist with saliva, over its face, and cropped ears, and stepped towards the door in the manner of a polite and affectionate creature that knows its duty and conforms to it.

The door opened; Pierre rose, respectfully removing his beret as the newcomer appeared in the room, preceded by the old dog we have already mentioned, who attempted to leap up but fell back heavily, weighed down by age. Beelzebub declined to treat the dog, Miraut, with the antipathy that his peers usually profess for canines. On the contrary, he looked at him in a very friendly manner, rolling his green eyes, and arching his back. It was clear that they had known each other for a long time and often kept each other company amidst the solitude of the castle.

The Baron de Sigognac, for it was the young lord of the dilapidated mansion who had just entered the kitchen, was a young man of twenty-five or twenty-six, although at first glance one might have thought him older, so grave and serious did he appear. The feeling of impotence, which accompanies poverty, had made all gaiety flee his features and the bloom of spring, which smooths young faces, fade. Bistre-coloured halos already encircled his bruised eyes, and his hollow cheeks strongly accentuated the prominence of his cheekbones; his mustachios, instead of being cheerfully pointed, drooped a little, and seemed to weep sadly beside his mouth; his hair, combed without due care, hung in black locks around his pale face, with an absence of coquetry rare in a young man who might have passed for handsome, and showing an absolute renunciation of any thought

of pleasing. His habit of nursing a secret sorrow had caused sharp lines to mar a countenance which a modicum of happiness would have rendered charming, and the resolution natural to his years, seemed to have yielded before some misfortune countered in vain.

Although agile, and of a constitution rather robust than weak, the young baron moved with the apathetic sluggishness of one who had relinquished life. His gestures were feeble and somnolent, his countenance inert, and one saw that he was perfectly indifferent as to whether he was here or there, abroad or at home.

His head was covered with an old greyish felt hat, dented and torn, and much too broad, which sloped down almost to his eyebrows, forcing him to raise his nose in order to see clearly. A feather, whose sparse barbs gave it the appearance of a fishbone, was attached to the hat, and was obviously intended to act as a plume, but drooped behind limply as if ashamed of itself. A collar of antique guipure lace, not all of whose shape was due to the skill of its creator, and to which years had added more than one feature, lay flat against his jerkin, the loose folds of which announced that it had been tailored for a man taller, and more ample in form, than the slender baron. The sleeves of his doublet hid his hands like the sleeves of a monk's robe, and he was plunged almost to his thighs in 'cauldron' boots (*also termed 'court' boots, the knee piece flared in the shape of a funnel or cauldron*) equipped with iron spurs. This motley wear was that of his late father, who had been dead for some years, and whose clothes, already ripe for the second-hand clothes dealer at the time of the death of their previous owner, he was wearing to their end. Dressed thus, in garments fashionable perhaps at the beginning of the previous reign, the young baron looked at once ridiculous and touching; one might have taken him for his own grandfather. Though he professed for the memory of his father a completely filial veneration, and tears often came to his eyes when he donned these dear relics which seemed to preserve in their folds the gestures and attitudes of the deceased gentleman, it was not exactly out of preference that young Sigognac adorned himself with the contents of his father's wardrobe. He had no other clothes, and had been pleased to disinter this portion of his inheritance from the depths of a trunk. The garments from his adolescent years no longer fitted. At least, in his father's clothes, he was comfortable. The local villagers, accustomed to seeing a doublet on the old baron's shoulders, judged it no more ridiculous on the son's back, and greeted it with the same reverence and deference; they no more noticed the rents in that doublet than the cracks in the castle walls. Sigognac, poor as he was, was still their lord in their eyes, and the decline of the family did not strike them as forcibly as it might have struck a stranger; and yet it was a somewhat grotesque and melancholy spectacle seeing the young baron pass by in his old clothes, on his aged horse, accompanied by his aged dog, like the knight in Albrecht Durer's engraving (*'Knight, Death, and the Devil', 1513*).

The Baron seated himself, silently, at the table, after responding with a kindly gesture of the hand to Pierre's respectful greeting. The latter detached the cooking-pot from its rack and poured the contents onto a piece of bread he had already placed in the common earthenware bowl which he set before the Baron; it was the everyday soup still eaten in Gascony, under the name of 'garbure' (*combining slow-cooked vegetables of all kinds with preserved meats*); then he took from the cupboard a block of 'miasson' (*thick cornmeal pancake, baked in the oven*) quivering on a napkin, sprinkled it with a little corn-flour and brought it to the table on the board that supported it. This local dish with the 'garbure' and a piece of purloined bacon, once doubtless the bait of a mousetrap, formed, in all its meagreness, the Baron's frugal meal. The latter ate with a distracted air, Miraut

and Beelzebub on either side, both eagerly raising their muzzles in the air on each side of his chair, hoping for some crumbs from the 'feast' to fall to them. From time to time the Baron threw a mouthful of bread, whose close proximity to the slice of bacon had granted it at least the aroma of meat, to Miraut, who did not let the piece reach the ground. The crust fell to the black cat, whose satisfaction was expressed by a low growl, and a paw extended, claws out, as if ready to defend its prey.

His frugal repast over, the Baron seemed to yield to painful thoughts, or at least to a distraction whose subject was far from pleasant. Miraut laid his head on his master's knee and fixed on him eyes that age had clouded with a bluish veil, yet in which a spark of almost human intelligence nonetheless flickered. One would have said that he understood the Baron's thoughts and wished to show his sympathy. Beelzebub, the cat, made his purring noise, much like the hum of a spinning wheel turning as loudly as that of 'Bertha the Spinner' (*Bertha of Swabia, also known as La Filandière or La Reine Fileuse, twice Queen of Italy in the 10th century*), and he uttered little plaintive cries to attract the Baron's fleeting attention. Pierre stood some distance apart, as motionless as those long, stiff, granite statues one sees on the porches of cathedrals, respecting his master's reverie, and awaiting his command.

Meanwhile, night had fallen, and great shadows filled the corners of the kitchen, like giant bats clinging to the walls with fingers cloaked in membranous wings. A remnant of fire, fanned by the gusts of wind blowing down the chimney and into the fireplace, coloured with strange reflections the group gathered around the table in a sort of sad intimacy that further emphasised the castle's melancholy solitude. Of the once powerful and wealthy family, only this single isolated offspring remained, wandering like a shade about the manor peopled by his ancestors; of the large household, only this one devoted and irreplaceable servant was left; of the pack of thirty hounds, only the one dog survived, almost blind and grey with age, while the lone black cat served as the soul of the deserted dwelling.

The Baron signalled to Pierre that he wished to withdraw.



'His frugal repast over, the Baron seemed to yield to painful thoughts'

Pierre, stooping to the hearth, lit a length of pine wood coated with resin, a kind of economical candle used by the poor, and preceded the young lord; Miraut and Beelzebub joined the procession: the smoky glow of the torch made the faded frescoes on the walls of the staircase flicker, giving an appearance of life to the smoky portraits in the dining room whose black, fixed gaze seemed to cast a pained look of pity on their descendant.

Arriving at the curious bedroom I described previously, the old servant lit a small copper lamp with a nozzle, whose wick was folded in the oil like a tapeworm steeped in alcohol in an apothecary's timepiece, and withdrew, followed by Miraut. Beelzebub, who savoured his grand entrances, settled himself in one of the two armchairs. The Baron collapsed in the other, overcome by solitude, idleness, and ennui.

If his chamber looked like a roomful of ghosts during the day, it appeared even worse at night, in the wavering light of the lamp. The tapestry took on livid tones, and the huntsman, against a background of dark vegetation, seemed, illuminated thus, almost real. With his arquebus at the ready, he resembled an assassin waiting for his victim, and his red lips were highlighted even more strangely in his pale face. His mouth looked like that of a vampire flushed with blood.

In the damp atmosphere, the lamp gave off a crackling sound, and threw forth intermittent gleams; the wind caused the corridors to give out organ-like sighs; while frightening and unusual noises were heard issuing from the rooms.

The weather had worsened, and large drops of rain, driven on gusts of wind, tinkled against the panes of glass and rattled them in their networks of lead. Sometimes the glass seemed about to bend, and part from its frame, beneath the pressure from outside. It was as if the storm was leaning against the frail obstacle. Sometimes, to add a further note to the strange harmony, one of the owls, nesting beneath the roof, would utter a cry like that of a child whose throat was being cut, or, troubled by the light, would fly down to strike the window with slowly beating wings.

The lord of this sad manor, accustomed to such gloomy symphonies, paid no attention. Beelzebub alone, with the anxiety natural to members of his species, stirred the roots of his cropped ears at every noise and stared fixedly into the dark corners, as if he had perceived, by employing his scotopic vision, something invisible to the human eye. This far-seeing cat, with his diabolical name and manner, would have alarmed a less brave person than the Baron; for the creature seemed to know many things learned in his nocturnal wanderings through the attics and uninhabited rooms of the castle; more than once, at the end of a corridor, he must have encountered that which might turn a person's hair white.

Sigognac took from the table a small volume whose tarnished binding bore the stamped crest of his family, and began to turn the leaves with an indifferent finger. Though his eyes followed the lines exactly, his mind was elsewhere, or showed only a mediocre interest in Ronsard's short odes (*odelets*) and love sonnets, despite their lovely rhymes, and their ideas acquired from the Greeks. It was not long before he set the book down, and began to unbutton his doublet slowly, like a man who has no desire for sleep but, weary of war, lies down because he knows not what else to do, and seeks to drown his boredom in slumber. The grains of sand in the hourglass fall slowly and sadly on a dark, rainy night in the depths of a ruined castle, surrounded by a sea of heather, and bare of a single living being for ten leagues about!

The young Baron, now the sole survivor of the Sigognac family, had, indeed, many reasons for melancholy. His ancestors had ruined themselves in various ways, whether through gambling, warfare, or the vain desire to shine amongst their peers, such that each generation had bequeathed an increasingly diminished heritage to the next.

The fiefs, farms, tenant-farms, and land that belonged to the castle had vanished item by item; and the previous Baron de Sigognac, after incredible efforts to restore the family fortune, efforts without result because it is ever too late to repair the leaks in a sinking ship, had left to his son only the castle in disrepair, and the few acres of sterile land that surrounded it; the rest had to be abandoned to his creditors.

Poverty had thus cradled the young child in its thin hands, and he had suckled at a withered breast. Deprived, while yet very young of his mother who had died of melancholy in that

dilapidated castle, thinking on the misery that would later weigh on her son and prevent him winning a career, he had lacked the sweet caresses and tender care with which youth is surrounded, even in the least happy of families. The solicitude of his father, whose absence he nonetheless regretted, had hardly translated into anything more than a few kicks in the rear, or the order that the whip be applied to it. Now, he was so filled with ennui that he would have been happy to receive one of those paternal admonitions whose memory brought tears to his eyes; for a kick dealt by the father to the son still represents a human relationship of a kind, and, during four years that the old Baron had lain outstretched beneath his flagstone in the Sigognac family vault, his son had lived in the midst of a profound solitude. His youthful pride rendered him reluctant to appear among the nobility of the province, at festivals or hunts, without the equipage appropriate to his status.

What would they have said, indeed, on seeing the Baron de Sigognac dressed like a beggar at the door, or like an apple-picker from Le Perche (*in Normandy, famed for its orchards and cider*)? This consideration had prevented him from offering his services as a servant to some prince. Many were those who believed that the line of the Sigognacs was extinct, and oblivion, which hides the dead even more swiftly than the grass, had erased this once important and wealthy family, while pitifully few were those who knew of the existence of a last descendant of that diminished race.

For some moments, Beelzebub had seemed restless; he raised his head as if he suspected some disturbance; he stood against the window, pressing his paws against the panes, trying to pierce the sombre black of the night streaked with an impressed hatching of raindrops; his nose wrinkled and twitched. A prolonged howl from Miraut, amidst the silence soon endorsed the cat's pantomime; something unusual was definitely happening in the vicinity of this castle, usually so quiet. Miraut continued to bark with all the energy that chronic hoarseness allowed him. The Baron, to be ready for any eventuality, buttoned the doublet he had been about to doff and rose to his feet.

'What's driving Miraut to make such a racket, he who as soon as the sun sets ever snores like the Seven Sleepers' dog, midst the straw in his kennel? Could a wolf be prowling near the walls?' said the young man to himself, girding on a broad iron sword which he detached from the wall, and buckling the belt at its innermost hole, since the leather cut to fit the old baron's waist would have gone twice round that of the son.

Three violent knocks on the castle door sounded at measured intervals, making the empty rooms echo. Who could it be at this hour who disturbed the manor's solitude and the nocturnal silence? What unwise traveller now knocked at a door which had not been opened for a guest for so long a period of time, though not through lack of courtesy on the part of the master, but merely because of the absence of visitors? Who sought to be received in this inn of starvation, this plenary courtyard of Lent, this hotel of misery and poverty?

Chapter II: The Chariot of Thespis

Sigognac descended the stairs, employing his hand to protect his lamp against the drafts that threatened to extinguish it. The light of the flame penetrated his thin phalanges, and coloured them a diaphanous red, so that, although it was night and he was followed by a black cat instead of himself preceding the sun, he deserved the epithet applied by the good Homer to the hands of Dawn (*'rosy-fingered'*).

He lowered the bar at the door, half-opened the movable leaf, and found himself facing a personage, to whose nose he held his lamp. Illuminated by its rays, a somewhat grotesque figure was highlighted against the shadowy background without: amidst the rain, a skull the colour of rancid butter gleamed in the light. Grey hair plastered to the temples; a nose crimson as September wine (*traditionally a strong, well-aged, red*), and adorned with small buboes, which flowered on the bulbous heights, between two small odd-shaped eyes covered with very thick and strangely black eyebrows; flabby cheeks, marked by winey tones, and crossed with reddened veins; the swollen lips of a drunkard and satyr; and a chin decked out with a wart in which were implanted a few rough, harsh hairs like those on a clothes-brush, composed a physiognomy wholly worthy of those sculpted faces beneath the cornice of the Pont-Neuf in Paris. A certain look of witty bonhomie tempered a visage that might have appeared uninviting at first glance. The creases at the corners of the eyes and the lips directed towards the ears indicated the makings of a gracious smile. This head of a marionette, set on a ruff of equivocal whiteness, surmounted a body in a loose black smock, that bowed in an arc with an exaggerated affectation of politeness.

The salutations accomplished, the burlesque character, anticipating, on the Baron's lips, the question that was about to spring from them, said, in a slightly emphatic and declamatory tone: 'Please forgive me, noble castellan, if I come knocking at the postern of your fortress without being preceded by a page, or a dwarf blowing a horn, and at this late hour. Necessity knows no laws, and forces the politest people in the world to barbaric conduct.'

— 'What is it you want?' interrupted the Baron rather sharply, annoyed by the old fellow's verbiage.

— 'Hospitality for me and my comrades, princes and princesses, Leanders and Isabellas (*commedia dell'arte* characters), doctors and captains who travel from town to town, in the chariot of Thespis (*the first actor, according to Greek legend, being also a poet and dramatist*), which chariot, drawn by oxen in the ancient manner, is now stuck in the mud a few steps from your castle.'

— 'If I understand you correctly, you are provincial actors on tour, and you have deviated from the straight and narrow?'

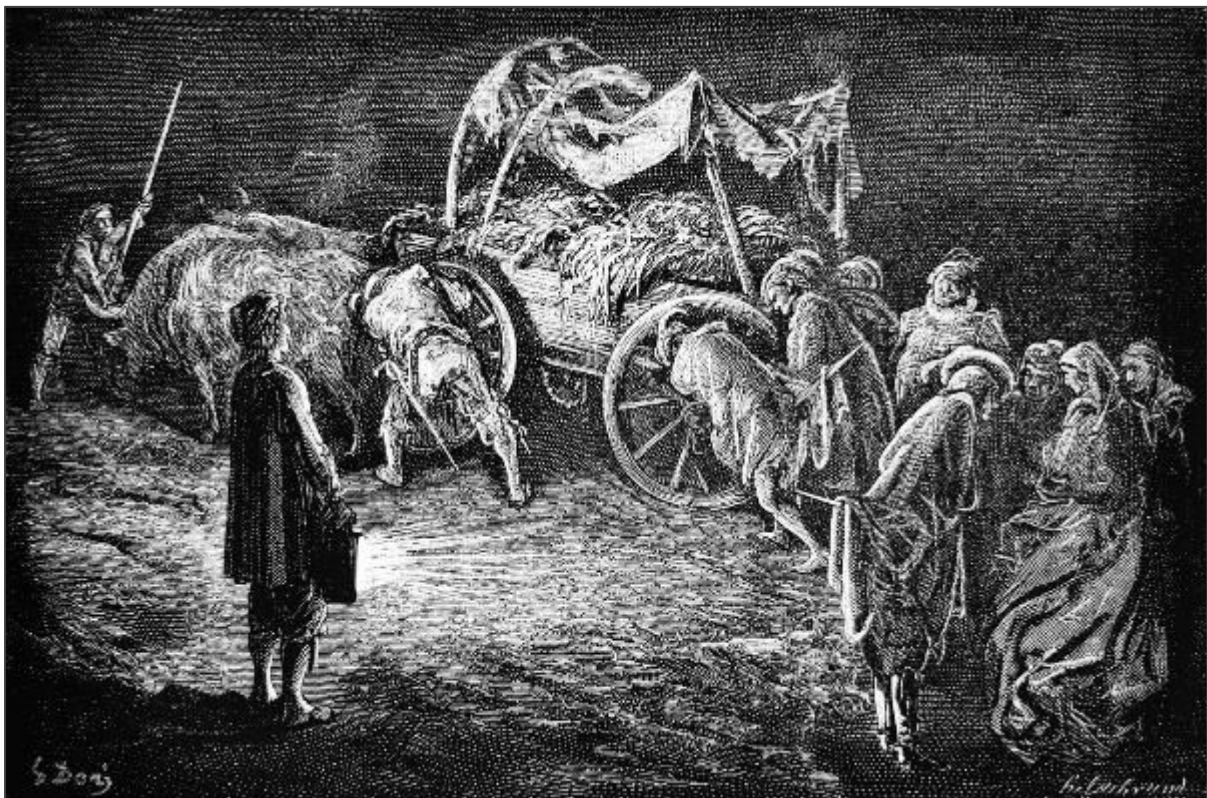
— 'My words could not be better explained,' replied the actor, 'and what you say fits the situation precisely. May I hope that Your Lordship will grant my request?'

— ‘Though my house is rather dilapidated and has little to offer, you will nonetheless be a little more comfortable here than out in the open, in the pouring rain.’

The Pedant, for such appeared to be his *commedia dell’arte* role, bowed in assent.

During this conversation, Pierre, awakened by Miraut’s barking, had risen, and joined his master in the porch. Informed of what was happening, he lit a lantern, and all three headed towards the foundered wagon.

The ‘Leander’ and the ‘Captain Matamore’ (*two other commedia dell’arte characters, ‘Matamore’ means ‘Braggart’*) of the troupe set their shoulders to the wheels, while the ‘Tyrant’ pricked the oxen with his ‘tragic’ dagger. The women, wrapped in their cloaks, moaned in despair, and uttered little cries. The unexpected reinforcements, and especially Pierre’s experience, soon extracted the heavy wagon which, directed to firmer ground, reached the castle, passed under the ogival vault, and was soon stationary in the courtyard.



‘The unexpected reinforcements, and especially Pierre’s experience, soon extracted the heavy wagon.’

The unharnessed oxen went to take up their places in the stable, next to the white Breton pony; the actresses jumped out of the wagon, smoothing their crumpled skirts, and ascended, guided by Sigognac, to the dining room, the most habitable room in the house. Pierre found a bundle, and a few loose armfuls, of brushwood in the depths of the woodshed, which he added to the fireplace, and which began to blaze cheerfully. Though it was still only the start of autumn, the

fire was necessary to dry the ladies' damp clothing; besides, the night air was cold, and whistled through the disjointed woodwork of that frequently uninhabited room.

The actors, though accustomed by their wandering life to the most diverse lodgings, looked with astonishment at this strange dwelling which seemed long since abandoned to the shades of the dead, and which involuntarily gave rise to thoughts of past tragedies; yet, as well-bred people, they showed neither terror nor surprise.

— 'I can give you no more than a table to eat at,' said the young Baron, 'my pantry barely contains enough to feed a mouse. I live alone in this manor, and never receive guests, and, as you can see without my saying, Fortune does not dwell here.'

— 'No matter,' replied the Pedant; 'though, in the theatre, we are served cardboard chickens and bottles carved from wood, we deal, in real life, with more substantial dishes. Those hollow pieces of meat and simulated drinks would rest poorly on our stomachs, and, as quartermaster of the troupe, I always keep a little Bayonne ham in reserve, along with some venison pâté, a loin of *Rivière* veal (*from the river-meadows near Rouen, by the Seine*), and half a score of bottles of Cahors and Bordeaux wine.'

— 'Well said, Pedant,' exclaimed Leander, 'go and fetch the provisions, and if this lord permits it and deigns to sup with us, let us set the table here for a feast. There is enough crockery in these sideboards, and these ladies will set the table for us all.'

At a nod of assent from the Baron, who was quite astounded by the whole adventure, Isabella and Donna Serafina both seated near the fireplace, rose and laid the table, which had been previously wiped clean by Pierre, and covered with an old, worn, but still white tablecloth. The Pedant soon reappeared carrying a basket in each hand, and triumphantly placed, in the centre of the table a fortress of a pie with blond and golden walls, which enclosed within its flanks a garrison of ortolans and partridges. He surrounded this gastronomic fort with six bottles, to act as advanced works, which would have to be taken away before the fortress could be conquered. A smoked ox-tongue, and a slice of ham, completed the symmetry.

Beelzebub, who had perched on top of a sideboard and, full of curiosity, was following these extraordinary preparations with his eyes, tried to appropriate, at least by smell, all these exquisite things displayed in abundance. His truffle-coloured nose inhaled the fragrant emanations deeply; his green eyes exulted and sparkled, while a little hint of covetousness silvered his moist chin. He would have liked to approach the table and take his share of this Gargantuan-style feast so beyond the normally hermitic sobriety of the house; but the sight of all these new faces terrified him, and his cowardice countered his gluttony.

Not finding the light of the lamp sufficiently radiant, Captain Matamore recovered two theatrical torches, made of wood wrapped in gilded paper and each equipped with several candles, from the wagon, reinforcements which produced a rather magnificent level of illumination. Such torches, whose shape recalled that of the seven-branched candlestick of Scripture (*see Exodus 25: 31-40*), were ordinarily placed on the marriage altar, at the conclusion of plays with spectacular staging, or on the banquet table in Alexandre Hardy's '*Mariamne*' (c1605) and '*La Marianne*' by Tristan L'Hermite (*François L'Hermite, 1636; 'La Marianne' is derived from Hardy's play*).

In their light, and that of the blazing brushwood, the moribund room had taken on a kind of life. Faint blushes coloured the pale cheeks of the portraits once more, and if the virtuous dowagers, huddled in their ruffs and stiffened beneath their farthingales, took on a somewhat frosty air at the sight of the young actresses frolicking in that grave manor-house, the warriors and Knights of Malta, on the other hand, seemed to smile at them from the depths of their frames, happy to attend such a celebration, with the exception of two or three old grey-moustachioed gentlemen stubbornly sulking beneath their yellow varnish, and retaining, despite everything, the forbidding expressions with which the painter had endowed them.

A warmer and more lively air circulated in this vast room, where one usually breathed only the mouldy humidity experienced in a sepulchre. The decayed state of the furniture and hangings was less visible, and the pale spectre of misery seemed to have abandoned the castle even if only for a few moments.

Sigognac, to whom their surprising arrival had at first seemed disagreeable, gave way to an unknown sensation of well-being. Isabella, Donna Serafina, and even the Soubrette, gently troubled his imagination and seemed to him more like divinities descended to earth than mere mortals. They were, in fact, very pretty women, and would have occupied the thoughts of lesser novices than our young baron. All this produced a dream-like effect, and he feared at any moment to awake from its delights.

The Baron gave Donna Serafina his hand, and placed her on his right. Isabella took a seat on his left, the Soubrette sat opposite, the Duenna sat next to the Pedant, and Leander and Captain Matamore, sat where they chose. The young master of the castle was then able to study at leisure the faces of his guests, brightly-illuminated and highlighted in full relief. His examination focused first on the women, of whom it would not be out of place to draw a slight sketch here, while the Pedant made a breach in the ramparts of the pie.

Serafina was a young woman of twenty-four or twenty-five, whose habit of playing the grande coquette had given her a worldly air, and somewhat the manners of a lady of the Court. Her face, a slightly elongated oval, her slightly aquiline nose, her grey eyes set flush with her head, her crimson mouth, whose lower lip was cut by a small cleft, like that of Anne of Austria, and resembled a cherry, formed a charming and noble physiognomy, to which twin cascades of chestnut hair falling in waves across her cheeks contributed; a physiognomy to which animation and warmth had brought pretty shades of pink. Two longish locks of hair, each tied by a trio of rosettes of black ribbon, detached themselves capriciously from her crimped curls, and emphasised their vaporous grace much as do the vigorous touches a painter gives to the picture he is completing. Her round-brimmed felt hat, adorned with feathers, the last of which curled around the lady's shoulders in a plume, while the others curled in billows, gave Serafina the look of a cavalier; a man's turned-down collar, trimmed with Alençon lace, and fastened in front by a black ribbon, overlapped a green velvet dress with slashed sleeves, trimmed with braided cords and knots, whose cleavage allowed her linen to show; and a white silk scarf, across the shoulder, completed her gallant and resolute appearance.

Thus attired, Serafina had the air of a Penthesilea (*the Amazonian queen who fought at Troy*) or a Marfisa (*the queen of India who fought for the Saracens in the 'Orlando Innamorato' of Matteo Boiardo, and its sequel the 'Orlando Furioso' of Ludovico Ariosto*), most appropriate to adventures and comedies involving cloaks and swords. Certainly, all her attire was not in its first freshness, wear had polished

the skirt's velvet in places, the frieze-cloth was a little crumpled, the lace would have appeared a little russet in hue in broad daylight; the embroidery of the scarf, on closer inspection, was reddening, and betrayed the underlying strips of tinsel; several braided cords had lost their studs, and the braid of various knots had unravelled in places; the ruffled feathers of her plume flapped flaccidly against the edges of the felt, her hair was a little uncurled, and a few straws, acquired during the journey by hay-wagon, mingled rather poorly with its opulence.

These small details did not prevent Donna Serafina from showing the bearing of a queen without a kingdom. Though her dress was faded, her face was fresh and glowing, and, indeed, her attire seemed the most dazzling in the world to the young Baron de Sigognac, unaccustomed to such magnificence, and who rarely saw anything but peasant women dressed in sackcloth skirts and shiny woollen capes. He was, moreover, too preoccupied with the lady's eyes to pay attention to any deficiencies in her costume.

The company's 'Isabella' was younger than Donna Serafina, as her role as an ingénue required; nor was her costume so audacious, but of an elegant and bourgeois simplicity, as befits the daughter of Cassandro (*a commedia dell'arte character, elderly and troublesome*). She had a charming face, almost childlike; lovely hair, a silky chestnut in hue; eyes veiled by long eyelashes; a small heart-shaped mouth; and an air of virginal modesty, more natural than feigned. A bodice of grey taffeta, trimmed with black velvet and jet, extended downwards to a point over a skirt of the same colour; a ruff, slightly starched, rose behind her pretty neck where little curls of wild hair, and a string of false pearls bordered her nape; and although at first sight she attracted the eye less than did Serafina, she held the attention longer. If she did not dazzle, she charmed, which has its advantages.

The Soubrette fully deserved the epithet *morena* that the Spaniards endow brunettes with. Her skin was golden and tawny in tone like that of a gypsy-girl. Her thick, frizzy hair was a deep black, and her yellow-brown eyes sparkled with diabolical malice. Her mouth, large and crimson red, revealed a set of teeth, flashing white, that would have done credit to a wolf cub. In addition, she was lean, as if consumed by ardour and wit, but with that youthful healthy thinness that is not unpleasant to look at. She was doubtless as expert at delivering and receiving a love-letter in the city as on the stage; but the lady who used such a 'Dariolette' (*a go-between; the character created by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo in his novel Amadis de Gaula, 1508*) must surely be reliant on her charms! In her hands, more than one declaration of love had not reached its destination, and the neglected gallant was left lingering in the antechamber. She was one of those women whom their female companions find ugly, but who are irresistible to men, one seemingly seasoned with salt, pepper, and *cantharides* (*Spanish fly, an extract from the blister beetle, a traditional aphrodisiac*) though that fails to prevent them from being as cold as usurers when it comes to their own interests. A fanciful costume, blue and yellow with a bib of false lace, composed her attire.

Dame Leonarda, the noble mother of the troupe, was dressed all in black like a Spanish duenna. Her plump, many-chinned face was framed by a muslin headdress, pale and soiled as if by forty years' worth of rouge. Shades of yellowed ivory, and old wax, paled her unhealthy plumpness, which derived more from age than unhealthiness. Her eyes, above which hung drooping eyelids, had a shrewd expression, and were like two black spots in her pale face. A few hairs were beginning to obscure the corners of her lips, although she carefully plucked them out with tweezers. Feminine character had almost disappeared from this face, the wrinkles of which might have told a tale or two, had anyone taken the trouble to look for them. An actress since childhood, Dame Léonarda

had followed a career in which she had successively filled all the roles, and now that of duenna, so difficult for the coquette to accept, being always unconvinced of the ravages of time. Leonarda had talent, and old as she was, she knew how to win applause, even when cast beside the young and pretty, who were surprised to see the cavaliers pay their addresses to this 'witch'.

So much for the women. The main female roles of comedy were represented there, and if a character was missing, some wandering actor, or follower of the theatre, acquired along the way, was ever happy to take on some small role, and thus bolster the Angelicas and Isabellas. The male cast consisted of the Pedant, already described and to whom there is no need to return, Leander, Scapin, the Tyrant, and Captain Matamore, the Braggart.



(Left to right) The Tyrant, Captain Matamore, and Scapin

Leander, obliged by his role to render the fiercest Hyrcanian tigress as gentle as a sheep, to dupe Truffaldino (*the 'Servant of Two Masters', in Carlo Goldoni's play, and a variant of Harlequin*), to push aside Ergastes (*the shepherd in Honoré d'Urfé's 'Astrea'*), and to ever appear superb and triumphant on stage, was a young man of thirty whose excessive care for his own person made him appear much younger. It is no small matter to represent, for the audience, the 'Lover', that mysterious and perfect being, whom each one fashions as he pleases after Amadis or Celadon (*the lover in 'Astrea'*). So, Leander greased his muzzle with whale blubber, and floured himself every evening with talcum powder; his eyebrows, from which he plucked the unruly hairs with tweezers, each resembled a line drawn in Indian ink, and ended in a rat's tail. His teeth, brushed to excess and rubbed with paste, shone like oriental pearls in his red gums, which he uncovered at every opportunity, ignoring the Greek proverb that says 'a fool laughs even when nothing is amusing' (*Arsenius, 5.29b*). His comrades claimed that, even in the city, he added a touch of rouge to brighten the effect of his eyes. Black hair, carefully arranged, twisted across his cheeks in shiny spirals, now a little sodden from the rain, which he took the opportunity to twine with a finger on which glittered a diamond much too large to be real, thus revealing a very white hand. His turned-down collar revealed a rounded, white neck shaved so closely that no beard was visible. A length of fairly clean linen showed between his jacket and his hose, piped with a world of ribbons, the preservation of which seemed to occupy him greatly. Gazing at the wall, he seemed to be dying of love, and could scarcely ask for a drink without swooning. He punctuated his sentences with sighs and, when talking about the most indifferent things, he winked, launched meaningful glances, and made laughable faces; but the women found him charming.

The Tyrant, for his part, was a most benign man whom nature had endowed, doubtless as a jest, with all the outward signs of ferocity. Never did a gentler soul display a more forbidding exterior. Large, black eyebrows, two fingers wide, as if they had been made of moleskin, meeting at the root of his nose; frizzy hair; a thick beard reaching up to his ears, which he neglected to trim so as not to have to adopt a hairpiece when he played the tyrannous Herod, or Polyphonte (*see Voltaire's 'Mérope', 1743*); a swarthy complexion of a hue akin to that of Cordoba leather, gave him a truculent and formidable look, such as painters like to grant to executioners and their assistants, when depicting the flaying of Saint Bartholomew, or the beheading of John the Baptist. A bull's bellow of a voice that made the windows tremble, and the glasses on the table rattle, contributed not a little to maintaining the terror inspired by his appearance, that of a bogeyman, which was enhanced by a black velvet doublet in an outmoded style; he achieved enormous success by howling out, terrifyingly, lines from the dramas of Robert Garnier and Georges de Scudéry. He was, moreover, ample in breadth, and capable of filling a throne.

Captain Matamore had a thinnish face, gaunt, dark, and scorched, like a hanged man in summer. His skin looked like parchment stuck to the bones beneath; while a large nose, curved like the beak of a bird of prey, the narrow bridge of which gleamed like horn, partitioned the two sides of a face like a shuttle-shaped knife-blade, which was further lengthened by a pointed goatee. These twin profiles, separate yet close together, found great difficulty in forming a whole face, and the eyes, to accommodate their presence, were upturned somewhat in the Chinese manner towards the temples. The half-shaven eyebrows curved into a black comma above anxious-seeming pupils; his moustaches, of an excessive length, greased and coated at each end with pomade, rose in an arc to stab at the sky; his ears set far apart from the surface of the head represented the twin handles of a cooking pot, and provided a grip for those who might deal a light flick or a punch to

his nose. All these extravagant features, more caricatured than natural, might have been sculpted in playful fancy on the head of a rebec (*a Medieval and early Renaissance stringed instrument with an angled head to the neck*) or copied from those absurd creatures, those chimeras à la Rabelais, which rotate in the evening on pastry-cooks' lanterns. His hair was tawny and, similar to a wolf's coat was felt-like, reinforcing the character of some malicious beast that his physiognomy conveyed. One was tempted to look at the hands of this fellow to see if there were any calluses on them caused by handling the oar, for he certainly looked as if he had spent several seasons writing his memoirs, at sea, with that fifteen-foot quill. His falsetto voice, sometimes high, sometimes low, proceeded by sudden changes of tone and bizarre yelps, which surprised one, and made one laugh without wishing to; and his unexpected movements, as if determined by the sudden release of a hidden spring; represented something illogical and disturbing, and seemed to serve more to delay an interlocutor than to express a thought or a feeling. They were part of the fox's swift gyrations, as he performed a hundred evolutions beneath the tree from the top of which the fascinated turkeys observed him before falling, dizzy, to the ground (*see Aesop's fable 'The Fox and the Turkeys'*). He wore a grey smock over his costume, the stripes of which were visible, either because he had not had time to undress after his last performance, or because the limited capacity of his trunk, allowed him too little room to pack both his city clothes and his theatrical clothes, but over the smock he had draped, for greater effect, a blanket whose border was raised by his sword, an oversized rapier that he never discarded, and whose iron hilt, of fenestrated openwork, weighed a good fifty pounds. Had he danced, his cockerel-legs would have swung about like flutes in their carrier when the musician bears them away. Such were the accoutrements of this rascal. Let me add, so as not to omit anything, that two cockerel-quills, bifurcated like a cuckold's crest, adorned, grotesquely, his grey felt hat, which was extended into a funnel of cloth.

As for Scapin, he had a fox's face, shrewd, pointed, mocking: his eyebrows rose on his forehead in the shape of circumflex accents, above swivel eyes ever in motion, whose yellow pupils trembled like gold coins in quicksilver; crow's feet, forming malignant wrinkles, creased the corners of his eyelids fit to conceal lies, trickery, and deceit; his lips, thin and flexible, moved perpetually, and showed, through an equivocal smile, sharp canines rather ferocious in appearance; and, when he removed his white and red striped cap, his short hair revealed the contours of a strangely humped head. His boastful grimaces had become, in the long run, his habitual physiognomy and, on emerging from the wings, he would walk onstage, legs flung wide as those of a compass, head thrown back, his left hand, rounded in a fist, on his hip, and his right hand on the hilt of his sword. A yellow jerkin, curved like a cuirass, embellished with green, and slashed in the Spanish-style, its slits ranged along the ribs; a starched ruff supported by iron wire and cardboard, as wide as the Round Table and about which the Twelve Peers could have taken their meals; breeches adorned with, and held up by strips of braid; and pale shoes of Russian leather, completed his costume.

The writer's art is inferior to that of the painter in that it can only describe objects successively. In a painting, a glance would be enough to grasp the various figures, grouped by the artist about the table, whose forms have just been detailed; one could view them there, the shadows and highlights, their contrasting attitudes, the colours proper to each, and an infinity of details as regards the scene, which are missing from a description already too extensive, though I have sought to make it as brief as possible; yet it was necessary in order to acquaint you with this comedy troupe that had penetrated, so unexpectedly, the solitude of the manor of Sigognac.

The meal commenced in silence; great appetites are mute like great passions! But, the first pangs of hunger appeased, tongues were loosened. The young Baron, who perhaps had not dined adequately since the day he was weaned, although possessed by the greatest longing in the world to appear an amorous and romantic figure before Serafina and Isabella, ate, or rather devoured, the meal with an ardour that would not have aroused the slightest suspicion that he had already eaten. The Pedant, amused by this youthful hunger, heaped partridge-wings and slices of ham onto the lord of Sigognac's plate, which disappeared as swiftly as snowflakes on a red-hot shovel. Beelzebub, in transports of gluttony, had determined, despite his fears, to leave the unassailable post he occupied on the cornice of the dresser, and had concluded, triumphantly, that it would be hard for any of the troupe to tug at his ears, since he possessed none, and that none of them could indulge in the vulgar jest of shining a saucepan on his rear end, since his missing tail prohibited such an act, one more worthy of rogues than decent folk, as the guests gathered around this table, laden with dishes of unusual succulence and fragrance, seemed to be. He had approached, taking advantage of the shadows, and so flat to the ground that the joints of his front legs formed angles above his head, like a black panther stalking a gazelle, without anyone having paid any attention to him. Having reached the Baron's chair, he had reverted to his normal stance, and, so as to attract the attention of his master, plucked a tune on his knee with his ten claws as if playing a guitar. Sigognac, indulgent to this humble friend who had suffered so long from lack of nourishment in his service, allowed him to share in his good fortune by passing him bones and leftovers under the table, which were received with frantic gratitude. Miraut, for his part, who had managed to enter the banqueting hall behind Pierre, also received more than one good morsel.

Life seemed to have returned to this dead dwelling; there was light, warmth, and noise. The actresses, having drunk two fingers of wine, chattered away like parakeets on their perches, and complimented each other on their mutual successes. The Pedant and the Tyrant disputed over the superiority of theatrical comedy or tragedy; the one maintaining that it was harder to make honest people laugh than to frighten them with nursery tales whose only merit was their antiquity; the other claiming that the scurrility and buffoonery employed by the makers of comedies greatly debased the author. Leander had taken a small mirror from his pocket and was gazing at himself with as much complacency as the long-dead Narcissus viewing his reflection in the water. Contrary to Leander's custom, he was not in love with Isabella; he aimed higher. He hoped, by means of his grace and gentlemanly manners, to catch the eye of some rich and readily-moved widow, whose four-horse carriage would arrive to collect him at the stage door, and carry him off to some château, where the susceptible beauty would await him, dressed in the most charming of negligées, seated in front of a most delightful feast. Had this vision ever been realised? Leander affirmed it... Scapin denied it, and it was the subject of endless disputes between them. Scapin, that accursed valet, as malicious as a monkey, claimed that poor Leander had fluttered his eyes, cast murderous glances at the boxes, laughed so as to show his thirty-two teeth, stretched his hamstrings, arched his waist, passed a small comb through the hair of his wig, and changed his linen for each performance, even though he had been forced to skip lunch to pay the laundress, but had not yet managed to make the least baroness, even one of forty-five years or more, afflicted with rosacea, and adorned with an incipient moustache, yearn for his presence.

Scapin, seeing Leander absorbed in contemplation, had cunningly raised the subject again, and the furious beau had offered to fetch from his luggage a chest filled with love-letters smelling of musk and benzoin, sent to him by a host of ladies of quality, countesses, marchionesses,

baronesses, all madly in love with him, which was not merely boasting on his part, since the weakness of yielding to actors and musicians was common enough given the loose morals of the time. Serafina said that if she were one of these ladies, she would have Leander whipped, for his impertinence and indiscretion; while Isabella swore, in jest, that if he did not show a little more modesty, she would decidedly not wed him at the end of the play. Sigognac, though he was too embarrassed to say a word, and only uttered vague phrases, greatly admired Isabella, and his eyes spoke where his tongue could not. The young girl had noticed the effect she had produced on the young Baron, and responded with a few languid glances, to the great displeasure of Matamore, who was secretly in love with her, though devoid of hope, given his grotesque role. Another youth more adept, and more audacious, than Sigognac would have pursued his suit; but our poor Baron in his dilapidated castle had not been able to acquire the fine manners of the Court, and though he lacked neither learning nor wit, he appeared somewhat stupid at that moment.

The half-score bottles had been religiously emptied, the Pedant toppling the last one, having drunk the last drop; this gesture was understood by Matamore, who went off to the wagon to fetch more. The Baron, though he was already a little tipsy, could not refrain from raising a glass, full to the brim, to the princesses' health, which completed the process.

The Pedant and the Tyrant drank like accomplished tipplers, who, if they are not completely in control of themselves, are nonetheless never completely intoxicated; Matamore was sober in the Spanish manner, and would have lived like those hidalgos who dine on three ripe olives, and drink the melody on a mandolin. There was a reason for this frugality: he feared, by eating and drinking too much, to lose the phenomenal leanness which was his best comic device. If he grew fat, his role would be diminished, thus he could only survive as an actor in a state of starvation, was in a perpetual trance, and often glanced at the buckle of his belt to make sure that he had not, by some mischance, grown fatter since the day before. A voluntary Tantalus, this abstemious actor, a martyr to leanness,

a self-dissected anatomy, only touched food with the tips of his teeth, and if he had only dedicated his fasting to a pious purpose like Saint Anthony of Egypt, or Saint Macarius, he would have been destined for paradise. The Duenna gulped down solids and liquids in a formidable manner; her flabby jowls, and dewlaps trembling at every motion of her well-stocked jaws. As for Serafina and Isabella, neither having a fan to hand, they yawned as best they could, behind the diaphanous rampart of their pretty fingers. Sigognac, although a little dizzy from the fumes of wine, noted this and said to them:

— 'Ladies, I see that you are longing for sleep, though civility makes you fight against it. I would love to be able to grant you each an apartment with a dressing-room and a closet, but my poor castle is falling to ruin like my ancestral line of which I am the last representative... however, I give my own room over to you, the only one more or less free of damp; you will both be comfortable there with madame; the bed is large, and night soon over. These gentlemen will stay here, and will make do with the armchairs and benches... above all, do not be frightened by the rippling tapestry, nor the wind moaning in the fireplace, nor the scuffling of mice; I can assure you that, though the place is rather gloomy, no ghosts make themselves at home here.'

— 'I play Bradamante (*a warrior-maid in the 'Orlando Innamorato' of Matteo Boiardo, and its sequel the 'Orlando Furioso' of Ludovico Ariosto*) and am no coward. I will reassure our timid Isabella,' said

Serafina, laughing; 'as for our Duenna, she is a bit of a witch, and if the Devil comes, he'll have someone to talk with.'

Sigognac took a light, and led the ladies into the bedroom, which seemed to them, indeed, quite fantastical in appearance, as the wavering lamp, agitated by the wind, made bizarre shadows flicker over the beams of the ceiling, such that monstrous forms seemed to crouch in the unlit corners.

— 'This would make an excellent set for the fifth act of a tragedy,' said Serafina, looking about her, while Isabella could not suppress a shiver, half from cold, half from terror, at feeling herself enveloped in an atmosphere of darkness and dampness. The three females slipped under the covers without undressing. Isabella placed herself between Serafina and the Duenna so that if the furry paw of some ghostly creature, or the hand of an incubus, emerged from beneath the bed, it would first encounter one of her comrades. The two brave souls soon fell asleep, but the timid young girl remained for a long time with her eyes open and fixed on the closed door, as if she had sensed a world of ghosts and nocturnal terror beyond. The door remained shut, however, nor did any ghosts emerge, dressed in shrouds, or rattling their chains, though strange noises were sometimes heard in the other empty rooms; and sleep finally threw its gilded dust over the eyelids of the fearful Isabella, and soon her even breathing joined the more accentuated sighs of her companions.

The Pedant was fast asleep, his nose on the table, opposite the Tyrant, who was snoring like an organ pipe and muttering, dreamily, a few hemistichs of alexandrines. Captain Matamore, the Braggart, his head resting on the edge of an armchair and his feet stretched out on the fire-dogs, had rolled himself up in his grey cape and looked like a herring wrapped in paper. To avoid disturbing his curls, Leander held his head upright, and slumbered soundly. Sigognac had settled himself in a vacant armchair, but the events of the evening had agitated him too much for him to be able to sleep.

Two young women do not burst into the life of a young man without troubling it, especially when the said young man has lived till then a sad, chaste, and isolated life, deprived of the amusements of youth by that harsh stepmother named Poverty.

It might be thought unlikely a boy of twenty could have lived without a love affair of some kind; but Sigognac was proud, and, being unable to present himself in the manner appropriate to his rank and lineage, he had remained at home. His parents, whose help he could have called on without incurring any shame, were dead. Each day he had sunk deeper into retirement, and oblivion. He had indeed sometimes, during his solitary walks, met Yolande de Foix, mounted on her white mare, hunting the deer with her father, and the young noblemen of the neighbourhood. The gleaming vision of her often traversed his dreams; but what connection could be hoped for between that rich and beautiful lady, and himself, a poor, ruined, melancholy squire? Far from seeking to attract her attention, he had, during such meetings, withdrawn as much as possible, not wishing to be laughed at on account of his pitifully dented felt hat with its rat-eaten plume, his faded and over-large clothes, and his old unwarlike steed, more suitable to serve as a mount for a country priest than a gentleman; for nothing is sadder, for a true heart, than to appear ridiculous in the eyes of whoever it loves, and he had reasoned with himself, so as to stifle his nascent passion, employing all the arguments poverty inspires. Had he succeeded? ... I cannot say. He believed so,

at least, and had rejected his thoughts as mere chimeras; he found himself miserable enough, without adding to his cares the torments of unrequited love.

The night passed without incident except for Isabella taking fright at the sight of Beelzebub, who had curled up on her chest, like Smarra (see the tale *'Smarra ou les Démons de la Nuit'*, 1821, by Charles Nodier), and would not be moved, finding his cushion very soft.



“The night passed without incident except for Isabella taking fright at the sight of Beelzebub”

As for Sigognac, his eyes scarcely closed, either because he was not used to sleeping away from his own bed, or because the proximity of those pretty women exercised his brain. I prefer to think that a vague project was beginning to take shape in his mind, and that was what kept him awake, and perplexed. The arrival of these actors seemed to him a stroke of fate, almost like an embassy

from Fortune inviting him to leave this feudal hovel where his life was mouldering away in the shadows, profitlessly wasted.



'As for Sigognac, his eyes scarcely closed'

Day was beginning to break, and already bluish glimmers filtering through the leaded windows made the light of the foundering lamps appear a livid, sickly yellow. The faces of the sleepers were illuminated strangely by these dual sources of light, and striped with their different colours, like surcoats of the Middle Ages. Leander took on the tones of a yellow candle, and resembled those wax statues of Saint John in a silk wig, whose rouge has faded despite the glass dome covering it. Matamore, his eyes tightly closed, his cheekbones prominent, his jaw muscles tense, his nose tapered as if it had been pinched by the thin fingers of death, resembled a corpse. Violent blushes and apoplectic patches marbled the face of the Pedant; the rubies of his nose had changed to amethysts, and on his thick lips the blue flower of wine blossomed. A few drops of sweat, threading the ravines and counterscarps of his forehead, had been halted at his bushy and grizzled eyebrows; his flabby cheeks hung flaccidly. The daze produced by heavy sleep rendered hideous that face which, awake and invigorated by the spirit, seemed jovial; leaning thus on the edge of the table, the Pedant looked like an old satyr, felled by debauchery, at the side of a ditch, following a bacchanal. The Tyrant, he of the pallid face and black beard was still quite composed; his visage, that of a good-natured Hercules, or paternalistic executioner scarcely ever altered. The Soubrette also bore the daylight's indiscreet visitation quite well; she was relatively unmarred by it. Her eyes, ringed by slightly browner bruises, her cheeks, displaying a little purplish marbling, alone betrayed

the fatigue of a poor night's sleep. A lewd ray of sunlight, slipping amongst the empty bottles, half-full glasses, and the remains of the meal, caressed the young girl's chin and mouth, like a faun teasing a sleeping nymph. The chaste dowagers of the tapestry, with their bilious complexions, sought to blush beneath their varnish, at the sight of their retreat, now violated by this gypsy encampment, for the banqueting hall presented an aspect at once sinister and grotesque.

The maid awoke first under the kiss of morning light; she stood on her little feet, shook her skirts as a bird shakes its plumage, ran the palms of her hands over her hair to tidy it, and, seeing the Baron de Sigognac seated in his armchair, his eyes clear as those of a basilisk (*a monster of fable whose gaze was fatal*), she went to his side, and greeted him with a pretty comedic bow.

— 'I regret,' said Sigognac, returning the Soubrette's greeting, 'that the state of disrepair of this house, more suited to ghosts than the living, prevents me from receiving you in a more fitting manner; I would have wished you to rest between Holland sheets and beneath a curtain of Indian damask, instead of leaving you to languish on this worm-eaten chair.'

— 'Regret nothing, sir,' replied the Soubrette; 'if it were not for you, we would have spent the night in our wagon, stuck in the mire, shivering amidst the pouring rain, and morning would have found us in a dreadful state. Moreover, these lodgings that you disdain are magnificent compared to the barns, open to all the winds, in which we are often obliged to sleep, with bales of straw for beds, whether Tyrants or subjects, princes or princesses, Leanders or maids, in our life as actors wandering from town to town.'

While the Baron and the Soubrette exchanged these pleasantries, the Pedant crashed to the ground amidst a pile of broken wood. His chair, weary of bearing him, had come apart, and the fat fellow, stretched out with legs bent, was struggling like an upturned tortoise, uttering inarticulate sounds. In his fall, he had caught, blindly, at the edge of the tablecloth, and caused a cascade of dishes whose remnants returned upon him. The crash woke the whole company, with a start. The Tyrant, after stretching his arms and rubbing his eyes, extended a helping hand to the old comic actor and set him on his feet.

— 'Such an accident would never happen to Scapin,' said the Tyrant, with a sort of cavernous grunt that served as a laugh; 'he could fall into a spider's web without breaking it.'

— 'That's true,' Scapin, thus challenged, replied, unfolding his long limbs, articulated like the legs of a crane-fly 'not everyone has the advantage of being a Polyphemus (*the one-eyed Cyclops of Greek myth*), a Cacus (*the fire-breathing giant slain by Hercules*), a mountain of flesh and bones like you, nor a wine-sack, a two-legged barrel, like Blazius here.'

The uproar brought Isabella, Serafina and the Duenna to the threshold. These two young women, though a little tired and pale, were still charming in the light of day. They seemed to Sigognac the most radiant young ladies in the world, though a meticulous observer might have found something to improve upon in their slightly wrinkled and faded elegance; but what matter a few faded ribbons, a few frayed and shimmering strips of fabric, a few mishaps and incongruities of dress, when those who wear them are young and pretty? Besides, the Baron's eyes, accustomed to the sight of aged, dusty, faded, and dilapidated objects, were incapable of discerning such trifles. Serafina and Isabella seemed to him superbly attired in the midst of his sinister castle, where everything was sliding into disrepair. Their graceful figures invoked the sensations of a dream.

As for the Duenna, thanks to her age, she enjoyed the privilege of immutable ugliness; nothing could alter that physiognomy of carved boxwood, in which owl eyes shone. Sunlight or candlelight was a matter of indifference to her.

At this moment, Pierre entered, bent on tidying the room, adding wood to the fire, in which a few burnt embers whitened under a plush robe, and clearing the remains of the feast, always so unpleasant once one's hunger has been sated.

The flames in the hearth, licking at a cast-iron plaque bearing the Sigognac coat of arms, which was unaccustomed to such caresses, drew the whole comedic troupe into a circle, illuminating it with its bright glow. A clear, blazing fire is always pleasant after a night that, if not sleepless, has proved gloomy, and the discomfort betrayed on their faces by their grimaces, and more or less visible bruises, vanished completely, thanks to its beneficial influence. Isabella held out the palms of her hands, tinted with pink reflections, towards the fireplace, and, vermillioned by this light rouge, her pallor was unnoticeable. Donna Serafina, taller and more robust, stood behind her, like an older sister who, less tired, permits her younger sister to sit. As for Scapin, perched on one of his heron-like legs, he was half-dreaming like a water bird at the edge of a marsh, his beak in his crop, his foot tucked under his belly. Blazius, the Pedant, running his tongue over his lips, raised the bottles one after the other to see if there were still a few drops left.

The young Baron had taken Pierre aside to find out if a few dozen eggs could be obtained in the village to feed the actors, or a few chickens whose necks could be wrung, and the old servant had slipped away to carry out the commission as swiftly as possible, the troupe having expressed their intention of leaving early, to cover a large distance yet not arrive too late in the evening.

— 'Lunch will be inadequate, I'm afraid,' said Sigognac to his guests, 'and you'll have to be content with a Pythagorean (*vegetarian*) repast; but still, better a mediocre lunch than no lunch at all, and there isn't a single tavern or eating-house within twenty miles. The state of this castle tells you I'm not rich, but, as my poverty results from the expenses my ancestors incurred in war, on behalf of royalty, I have nothing to be ashamed of.'

— 'No, indeed not, sir,' replied the Tyrant, in his bass voice, 'and many who boast of their wealth would doubtless be embarrassed to name its source. The merchant dresses in cloth of gold, and the nobility have holes in their cloaks, but through those holes honour shines.'

— 'What astonishes me,' added Blazius, the Pedant, 'is that an accomplished gentleman, such as this gentleman seems to be, should let his youth be wasted thus, in the depths of solitude, where Fortune is unlikely to find him, however much she may wish to do so; if she passed by this castle, whose style of architecture was all very well two hundred years ago, she would go on her way, thinking it uninhabited. Monsieur le Baron should go to Paris, the central eye of the world, the meeting place of fine bold minds, the Eldorado of the Spaniards in France, the Canaan of the Jews amidst its Christians, the blessed land illuminated by the rays of the Court's sunlight. There, he would not fail to be recognised according to his merit, and to rise, either by attaching himself to some great person, or by performing some brilliant action for which an opportunity would infallibly be found.'

The words of the good man, despite his comically exaggerated phrasing which was the involuntary result of his role as the Pedant, were not without weight. Sigognac felt their accuracy,

and had often said to himself, during his long wanderings on the moor, the words Blazius now spoke aloud.

Yet he lacked the money to undertake so long a journey, and knew not how to obtain any. Though brave, he was proud, and more fearful of a mocking smile than a sword thrust. Without being well informed about fashion, he felt ridiculous in his dilapidated gear, already ancient in the last reign. According to the way of those rendered timid by penury, he took no count of the positive aspects of his situation, and saw it only in the negative. Perhaps he might have enlisted the help of some of his father's old friends by cultivating them a little, but it was not in his nature to do so, and he would sooner have died seated on an empty chest, chewing on a toothpick like a Spanish hidalgo, beneath his coat of arms than request a gift or loan. He was one of those who, with an empty stomach seated before an excellent dinner, to consume which they have been invited, pretend to have dined already, for fear of being suspected of hunger.

— 'I have thought about it on occasions,' he said, 'but lack friends in Paris, and the descendants of those who knew my family when it was richer and held office at court, will care little for a gaunt, thin Sigognac, arriving crow-like, with open beak and empty claws, from the summit of his ruined tower, to share in the common prey. And then, I know not why I should blush to say it, I have no decent clothing, and so could not appear on a footing worthy of my name; I know not how, I could reach Paris even by combining my meagre resources with those of Pierre.'

— 'But you are not obliged,' replied Blazius, 'to enter the capital triumphantly, like a Roman Caesar mounted on a chariot, drawn by a quadriga of white horses. If our humble ox-wagon is not beneath the pride of your lordship, come to Paris with us, since that is where our troupe is headed. There is one who shines there now who made his entrance on foot, with his bundle tied to the end of his rapier, and holding his shoes in his hand for fear of wearing them out.'

A faint blush coloured Sigognac's cheekbones, a blush half of shame, half of pleasure. If, on the one hand, his ancestral pride rebelled at the idea of being obliged to a mere actor, on the other, his natural kindness of heart was touched by an offer, frankly made, which corresponded so well to his secret longing. He feared, moreover, that if he refused Blazius, he would wound the actor's pride, and perhaps miss an opportunity that would never present itself again. Doubtless, the thought of the last descendant of the Sigognacs riding in the chariot of Thespis with nomadic histrions had something shocking about it, which ought to make the armorial unicorns neigh and the red-tongued lions roar, yet, after all, the young Baron had sulked long enough, contrary to his true desire, behind his feudal walls.

He was hovering, uncertain whether to say yes or no, and inwardly weighing those two decisive monosyllables, when Isabella, advancing with a graceful air, and placing herself before the Baron and The Pedant, Blazius, uttered these words which put an end to the young man's doubts:

— 'Since our former poet, having inherited a fortune, has quit the company, Monsieur le Baron could replace him, for I found, unintentionally, while opening a copy of Ronsard's verse, which was on the table near his bed, a sonnet, marked with erasures, which must be of his own composition; he could amend our roles, making the necessary additions and deletions, and, if needs be, write a piece on a subject we could suggest. I have, in fact, an Italian plot outlined, in which there would be a fine role for myself, if someone would but give the thing some polish.'

As she said this, Isabella cast such a tender, penetrating look at Sigognac, that he could not resist it. The arrival of Pierre, bringing a large bacon omelette, and a fairly respectable quarter of ham, interrupted her remarks. The whole party took their places round the table and began to eat with an appetite. As for Sigognac, he touched, as a pure formality, the dishes placed before him; his customary sobriety was not capable of indulging in a meal so close to the previous one, and, besides, his mind was preoccupied in several ways.

Their repast over, and while the cowherd was twisting the straps of the yoke around his oxen's horns, Isabella and Serafina had the fancy of descending to the garden, which could be seen from the courtyard.

— 'I greatly fear,' said Sigognac, offering them his hand to help them negotiate the loose, moss-covered steps, 'that you may leave some shreds of your dress in the clutches of those brambles, for though there is no rose without thorns, as they say, there are, on the other hand, a host of thorns lacking a rose.'

The young Baron said the words in that tone of melancholy irony which was customary with him, when alluding to his poverty; but, as if the garden, having been belittled, prided itself on its honour, two small briar-roses, their cluster of five petals half-opening around the yellow pistils, suddenly gleamed from a transverse branch barring the path of the young women. Sigognac picked them, and gallantly offered them to Isabella and Serafina, saying: 'I had not thought my garden so full of flowers; only weeds normally grow here, and the only bouquets one can make are of nettles and hemlock; it is you who have made these two little flowers bloom, and smile on a scene of desolation, like poetry among the ruins.'



'I had not thought my garden so full of flowers'

Isabella carefully tucked the eglantine (*rosa canina*) into her bodice, giving the young man a long, grateful look to demonstrate the value she attached to the little gift. Serafina, chewing the stem of her flower, held the petals to her mouth, as if to force their pale pink to compete with the carnation of her lips.

They progressed to the statue of the mythological divinity whose ghostly form was outlined at the end of the path, Sigognac pushing aside the foliage that might otherwise have marred the faces of his guests as they passed. The young ingénue looked with a sort of tender interest at this fallow garden so in harmony with the ruined chateau. She thought of the sad hours that Sigognac must have spent in this abode of ennui, misery, and solitude, his forehead pressed against the windowpane, his eyes fixed on the deserted path, with no other company than a black cat and a

white-haired dog. Serafina's stronger features expressed only cold disdain masked by politeness; she definitely found this gentleman far too poor, although she had a certain respect for titled folk.

— 'This is where my domain ends,' said the Baron, arriving at the rocky niche where Pomona, if it were she, stood mouldering. 'Formerly, the terrain as far as the eye can see from the top of these dilapidated turrets, hill and plain, field and heath, belonged to my ancestors; and now I own just enough to await the hour when the last of the Sigognacs will join his ancestors in the family vault, it being then our sole possession.'

— 'You are very gloomy, you know, so early in the morning?' replied Isabella, touched by her own thought, and assuming a cheerful air to dissipate the air of sadness clouding Sigognac's brow. Fortune is a woman, and, though she is said to be blind, she sometimes distinguishes, from the height of her wheel, a knight, in the crowd, of birth and merit; it is only a matter of placing oneself in her path. Come, make up your mind, join us, and perhaps, in a few years' time, the turrets of Sigognac, restored and whitewashed, and topped with new slates, will cut as proud a figure then as now they make a pitiful one; and besides, it would sadden me to leave you in this mansion fit only for owls,' she added in a low voice, low enough so that Serafina could not hear her.

The soft light that shone in Isabella's eyes triumphed over the Baron's reluctance. The attraction of it being a gallant adventure offset in his own eyes the humiliating aspect of the journey. It was nothing unusual to follow an actress out of love for her, and harness oneself as a suitor to the comedic chariot; the finest horseman would not have scrupled. The quiver-bearing god Amor obliges even gods and heroes to engage willingly in a thousand bizarre actions and disguises: Jupiter took the form of a bull to seduce Europa; Hercules spun his distaff at Omphale's feet; Aristotle, that prudent man, scrambled about on all fours, carrying his wife on his back, she wishing to pursue philosophy (a charming display of horsemanship!); all of which were things contrary to divine or human dignity. Was Sigognac in love with Isabella? He did not seek to pursue the matter further, but felt that he would henceforth experience dreadful sadness were he to remain in his château, which had been so enlivened for an instant by the presence of this young and graceful being.

So, he swiftly made up his mind, asked the actors to wait a little and, taking Pierre aside, confided his intention to him. That faithful servant, whatever he felt about being separated from his master, was only too aware himself of the disadvantages of remaining at Sigognac. He had watched, with regret, the young man fading away in dull repose and indolent sadness, and though a troupe of players seemed a singular retinue for a lord of Sigognac, he still preferred his master's means of seeking a better fate, to the profound atony which, for the last two or three years in particular, had overcome the young Baron. He had soon filled a trunk with the few belongings his master possessed, gathered in a leather purse the few pistoles scattered in the drawers of the old chest, to all of which he took care to add, without a word, his humble savings, a modest act of devotion which the Baron would doubtless fail to note, for Pierre, in addition to the various roles he performed at the castle, also occupied that of treasurer, somewhat of a sinecure.

The white horse was saddled, for Sigognac did not wish to mount the actors' wagon till he was at least half a dozen miles from the castle, so as to conceal his departure; he thus appeared to be only escorting his guests; Pierre was obliged to follow on foot, in order to return the mount to the stable.

The oxen were beneath the yoke and, despite its weight, were attempting to raise their damp, black muzzles, from which hung filaments of silvery saliva; the red and yellow esparto-reed tiaras which they were wearing, and the white linen caparisons enveloping them like shirts to protect them from fly-bites, gave them a most Mithraic and majestic air. Standing in front of them, the ox-driver, a tall, tanned, rustic fellow like a shepherd from the countryside around Rome, was leaning on the shaft of his goad, in a pose which recalled, unknowingly, that of the Greek heroes on ancient bas-reliefs. Isabella and Serafina seated themselves at the front of the chariot to enjoy a view of the landscape; The Duenna, the Pedant, and Leander occupied the rear, more interested in continuing their slumber than admiring the moorland perspective. All was ready; the drover touched his animals, who lowered their heads, braced themselves on their lumpy legs, and plodded forward; the wagon moved, the boards groaned, the inadequately-greased wheels squealed, and the porch's vaulting echoed to the heavy tramp of the team. They were away.

During these preparations, Beelzebub and Miraut, realizing that something unusual was happening, paced back and forth with a frightened and anxious air, searching their limited brains to understand the presence of so many people in a place ordinarily so deserted. The dog ran vaguely from Pierre to his master, questioning both with his bluish-eyed gaze, and growling at the strangers. The cat, more reflective, sniffed the wheels cautiously, and examined the imposing mass of the oxen from a little further off. They, with an unexpected movement of their horns, made him jump backwards in a prudent manner; then he went and sat, facing the old white horse with whom he seemed to communicate, and of whom he seemed to ask a question. The kindly steed bent his head towards the cat, who raised his own, and moving his grey lips bristling with long hair, doubtless as it ground away at some bit of fodder stuck between his aged teeth, seemed truly to be speaking to his feline friend. What was he saying? Democritus alone, who was said to be capable of understanding the language of animals, could have understood him. Whatever it was, Beelzebub, after this silent conversation, which he communicated to Miraut with a few blinks of the eyes, and two or three short, plaintive cries, seemed sure of the reason for all this commotion. When the Baron was in the saddle and had gathered the reins, Miraut took the right, and Beelzebub the left, of his horse, and the Lord of Sigognac left his ancestral castle between the dog and the cat. For the prudent tomcat to have adopted this bold approach, so unusual for his race, he must have divined some supreme resolution on his master's part.

As he was about to leave the sad dwelling, Sigognac felt deep heart-ache. He scanned once more those walls, black with decay, green with moss, every stone of which was familiar to him; those towers with their rusty weathervanes which he had contemplated during so many tedious hours, with that fixed and distracted gaze which sees nothing; the windows of those devastated rooms which he had wandered through like the ghost in an accursed house, almost afraid of the sound of his own footsteps; that uncultivated garden where toads crawled on the damp earth, where snakes slithered among the brambles; that chapel with its collapsed roof, its crumbling arches which blocked with rubble the greenish flagstones beneath which his dead parents lay side by side, an imposing image, as vague as the memory of a dream, barely glimpsed in childhood. He thought also of the portraits in the gallery which had accompanied his solitude, and had smiled for twenty years with their immoveable smiles; of the hunter of young duck, who graced the tapestry; of his four poster-bed, whose pillow he had so often wet with his tears; all these old, wretched, dreary, dusty, gloomy, somnolent things, which had inspired in him so much disgust and ennui, now seemed to him full of a charm which he had previously failed to recognise. He felt ungrateful

towards the poor old dilapidated château which had nonetheless sheltered him as best it could, and had, despite its decrepitude, remained stubbornly upright so as not to crush him in its fall, like an octogenarian servant who stands on his trembling legs as long as his master is present; a thousand bitter-sweet memories, a thousand sad pleasures, a thousand moments of quiet melancholy came back to him; habit, that slow, pale companion of life, seated on the familiar threshold, turned towards him eyes drowned in a gloomy tenderness, murmuring in a faint yet irresistible voice a refrain from childhood, a refrain uttered by his nurse, and it seemed to him, as he traversed the porch, that an invisible hand was pulling at his coat, to draw him back. As he emerged from the doorway, preceding the wagon, a gust of wind brought a fresh smell of rain-washed heather, a sweet and penetrating aroma of his native countryside; a distant bell tinkled, and its silvery vibrations arrived on the wings of the same breeze as the scent of the moors. It was all too much, and Sigognac, seized by profound nostalgia, though he was barely a few steps from home, made a movement as if to turn back; the old horse was already bending his neck in the direction indicated with more agility than his age seemed to allow; Miraut and Beelzebub simultaneously raised their heads, as if aware of their master's feelings, and halting their forward march, fixed their questioning eyes on him. But this part-reversal had a result quite different from that which might have been expected, for it caused Sigognac's gaze to meet that of Isabella, and the young girl charged hers with such caressing languor, and such a mute yet intelligible prayer, that the Baron felt himself turn pale and blush; he completely forgot his manor's cracked walls, the scent of the heather, and the sound of the bell, which nevertheless still continued its melancholy call; rather he gave a sudden tug at the bridle, and urged his horse onwards with a light pressure from his calves. The battle was over; Isabella had conquered.

The wagon set off along the road mentioned previously, causing frogs to leap from the waterlogged ruts in fear. Once they had reached the road, and the oxen, then on drier ground, were able to move, albeit slowly, the heavy cart to which they were harnessed, Sigognac moved from the vanguard to the rearguard, not wishing to show too assiduous an attention towards Isabella, and perhaps also to abandon himself more freely to the thoughts that were stirring his soul.

The château's pepper-pot towers were already half hidden behind clumps of trees; the Baron raised himself in his saddle to catch sight of them again, and, in lowering his eyes to the ground, saw Miraut and Beelzebub, whose doleful faces expressed all the pain that creatures can show. Miraut, taking advantage of the pause necessitated by this contemplation of the castle's turrets, stretched out his stiff and aged legs, and tried to jump up to his master's face, in order to lick him one last time. Sigognac, guessing the poor creature's intention, seized him at the level of his boot, by the overly wide skin of his neck, drew him onto the pommel of his saddle, and kissed Miraut's black, nose, rough like a truffle, without trying to escape the wet caress with which the grateful animal polished his moustache. During this scene, Beelzebub, more agile, and with the help of his as yet sharp claws, had climbed Sigognac's boot and thigh, on the other side, and presented his black, hairless head at the level of the saddle-bow, purring formidably and rolling his large yellow eyes; he also begged a mark of farewell. The young Baron passed his hand two or three times over the cat's head, which the animal raised, pushing itself forward to better enjoy the kindly attention. I trust that my hero will not be mocked, if I say that the humble proofs of affection given by these creatures supposedly deprived of soul, but not lacking in feeling, made him experience a strange

emotion, and that twin tears, rising from his heart with a sob, fell on the heads of Miraut and Beelzebub, and baptised them 'friends' of their master, in the human sense of the term.

The pair watched for some time, after Sigognac had put his mount to a trot, so as to join the wagon; then, having lost sight of him at a bend in the road, they fraternally returned to the manor.

The night's storm had left no trace of the heavy downpours on the sandy terrain of the moors, as it does on less arid soil; the landscape, merely refreshed, offered a kind of rustic beauty. The heather, cleaned of its layer of dust by the rain from above, burgeoned with little gleaming purple buds at the edge of the embankments. Golden flowers on the bright green gorse swayed; aquatic plants spread over the brimming pools; the pines themselves shook their dark foliage less funereally, and gave off a resinous scent; spirals of bluish smoke rose gaily from the heart of a clump of chestnut-trees betraying the habitation of some tenant farmer; and on the undulations of the plain, rolling like waves, as far as the eye could see, various marks indicated scattered groups of sheep, being guarded by some shepherd dreaming on his stilts (*the stilt-walking shepherds were a traditional feature of the tangled moors and heaths of Les Landes*). On the edge of the horizon, like archipelagos of white cloud shaded with azure, appeared the distant peaks of the Pyrenees, half-blurred by the light vapours of the autumn morning.

Sometimes the road was hollowed out between two escarpments whose crumbling sides revealed nothing but white sand, like powdered sandstone, and which bore on their summits a mop of brushwood, tangled filaments whipping the canvas of the wagon as it passed. In some places the ground was so soft that it had been necessary to line it with fir trunks laid transversely, causing the cart to jolt and the actresses to utter little cries. At other times it was necessary to cross, over unstable culverts, pools of stagnant water and streams that obstructed the path. At each perilous spot, Sigognac helped the Duenna and Isabella, more timid or less lazy than Serafina, to descend from the carriage. As for the Tyrant and Blazius the Pedant they slumbered without a care, tossed about between the trunks, like folk who had experienced it all before. Scapin walked beside the wagon to maintain, through exercise, his phenomenal thinness, of which he took the greatest care, and seeing him from a distance raising his long legs, one would have taken him for a reaper walking amidst the wheat. He took such enormous strides that he was often obliged to stop to wait for the rest of the troop, having acquired in his role, the habit of carrying his hip forward, and walking with his legs wide as a compass, he could not shake this gait either in the city or in the country, and only took giant steps.

Ox-carts travel slowly, especially on the moors, where the wheels are sometimes plunged in sand up to the hubs, and where the roads are distinguishable from the wasteland only by a pair of ruts a foot or two deep; and although those brave beasts, bending their sinewy necks, pushed forward bravely, urged on by the ox-driver's goad, the sun had already risen high above the horizon before they had travelled five miles; country miles, it is true, which are as long as a day without dining, and similar to the miles that, after a fortnight or so, would surely have been marked out by those amorous couples charged by King Pharamond, according to Rabelais (*see 'Gargantua and Pantagruel', Book 2: XXXIII*), with setting up milestones in France. The peasants who crossed the road, burdened by a bundle of grass or sticks, became fewer in number, and the moor displayed a desolate bareness as wild as a *despoblado* (*wilderness*) in Spain or the American pampas. Sigognac, judging it useless to tire his poor old mount further, leapt down, and threw the reins to Pierre, whose swarthy features revealed through twenty layers of tan the pallor of a deep emotion. The

moment of separation between master and servant had arrived, a painful moment, for Pierre had witnessed Sigognac's birth, and fulfilled the role of a humble friend rather than that of a valet to the Baron.

— 'May God guide your lordship,' said Pierre, bowing over the hand the Baron extended to him, 'and raise up the line of the Sigognacs; I regret that Fortune does not permit me to accompany you.'

— 'What would I do with you, my poor Pierre, in this as yet unknown life I am about to enter? With so few resources, I cannot burden fate with the care of both our existences. At the château, you will always be able to keep alive, more or less; our old tenant farmers would never let their master's faithful servant die of hunger. Besides, we must not bar the doors of Sigognac, and abandon it to the owls and snakes, as if were a mere hovel, visited by death and haunted by ghosts; the soul of that ancient dwelling still lives within me, and, as long as I shall live, there will be a guardian there to stop the village children aiming their sling-stones at our coat of arms.'

Pierre nodded, for his religion, like that of all old servants attached to noble families, was embodied in the seignorial manor, and Sigognac, despite its wretched state of dilapidation, still seemed to him one of the finest castles in the world.

— 'Moreover,' added the Baron, smiling, 'who would look after Bayard, Miraut and Beelzebub?'

— 'True, master,' replied Pierre; and he seized the bridle of Bayard, his master's steed, whose neck Sigognac was slapping with the palm of his hand by way of a caress and a farewell.

As he parted from his master, the good horse neighed several times, and Sigognac, for a long while, could still hear the affectionate sounds uttered by the grateful beast, weakened though they were by distance.

Sigognac, once alone, experienced the sensation people feel at embarkation, when leaving their friends behind on shore; it is perhaps the bitterest moment of any departure; the world in which one has lived recedes, and one hastens to rejoin one's travelling companions, so sad and destitute does the heart feel, and so greatly does one require the sight of a human face: thus, the young man lengthened his stride, so as to rejoin the wagon which rolled on painfully slowly, the sand squeaking beneath its wheels which traced furrows like ploughshares as they progressed.

Seeing Sigognac alongside the wagon, Isabella complained of being seated uncomfortably, and said that she wished to descend and stretch her legs a little, though in reality possessed by the charitable intention of not leaving the young lord prey to melancholy, but distracting him with cheerful conversation.

The veil of sadness that covered Sigognac's face parted like a cloud traversed by a ray of sunlight, when the young girl asked for the support of his arm, so as to walk a few paces along the road, which was smooth at that spot.

They were walking close together thus, Isabella reciting to Sigognac a few lines from one of her roles, which she was unhappy with and which she wanted him to rework, when a hunting-horn suddenly emitted a burst of sound from a thicket on the right of the road; the branches parted before the chests of the horses as they felled the saplings; and young Yolande de Foix appeared in the centre of the road, in all the splendour of Diana the huntress. The excitement of the hunt had

brought a richer colour to her cheeks, her nostrils quivered, and her heart beat more rapidly beneath the velvet and gold of her bodice. A few snagged threads in her long skirt, a few scratches on her horse's flanks, proved that the intrepid Amazon feared neither thickets nor undergrowth. Though the noble beast's ardour needed no arousal, and the knots of veins in its neck, flecked with foam, were generously swollen with blood, she tickled its rump with the tip of her whip, the pommel of which was set with an amethyst engraved with her coat of arms. The animal reared, and bowed, to the great admiration of three or four young gentlemen, richly-costumed and well-mounted, who applauded the bold grace of this new Bradamante. Yolande, reining her horse back, soon ceased this pretentious cavorting and swiftly passed in front of Sigognac, at whom she cast a look full of disdain and aristocratic insolence.

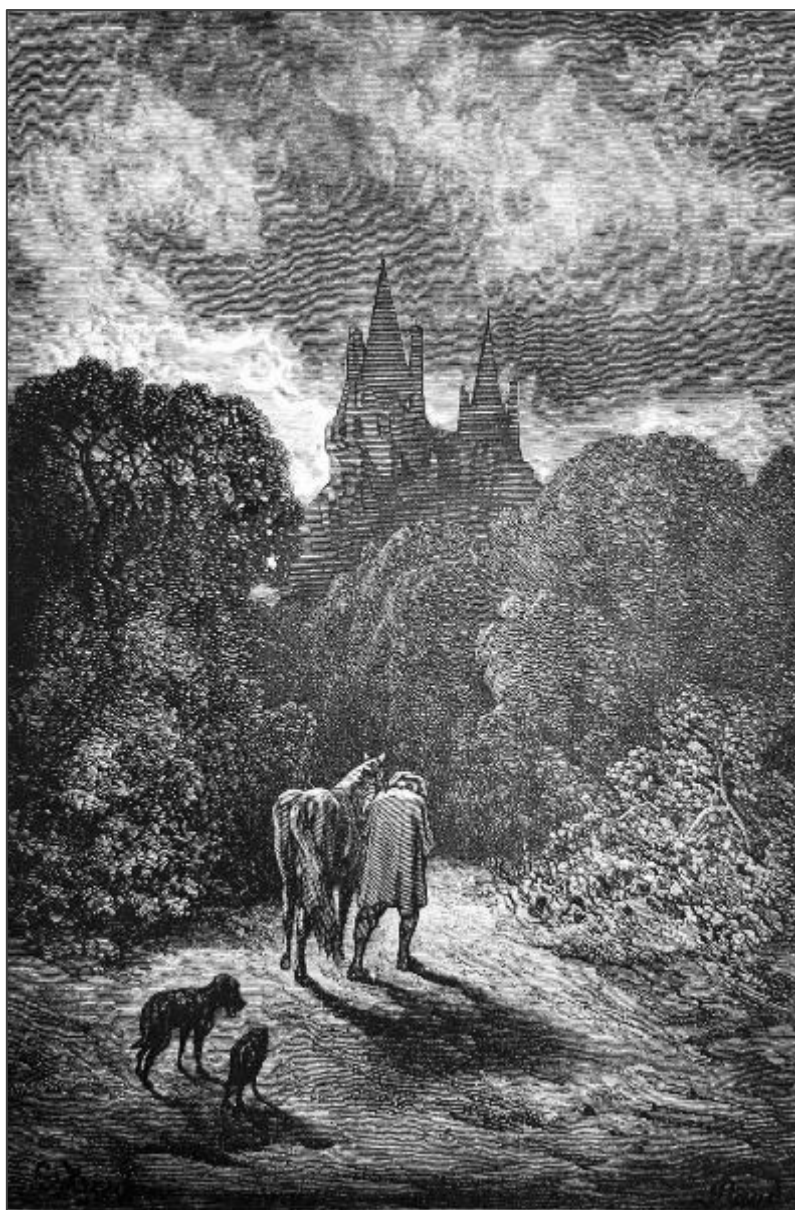
— 'Behold,' she cried to the three young fellows, now galloping after her, 'Baron de Sigognac has turned himself from a knight to a gipsy!'

And the group passed on, with a burst of laughter, in a cloud of dust. Sigognac made a gesture of anger and shame, and swiftly placed his hand on the hilt of his sword; but he was on foot, and it would have been madness to chase after people on horseback, and besides, he could not challenge Yolande to a duel. A languid and submissive glance from the actress soon made him forget the haughty look of the lady of the manor.

The day passed without further incident, and they arrived at the place where they would lodge and dine, at about four in the afternoon.

That evening, at the château of Sigognac, was a melancholy one; the portraits looked even gloomier and more forbidding than usual, which one might have thought scarcely possible; the staircase creaked loudly and emptily, the bare rooms seemed to have grown larger and barer still. The wind sounded strangely in the corridors, and even the spiders, seemingly restless and curious, slid down from the ceiling on their silken threads. The cracks in the walls yawned wide like jaws distended in ennui; the old, dilapidated house seemed to recognise the absence of the young master and be grieved by it.

Beside the fireplace, Pierre by the smoky light of a resin candle, shared his meagre meal with Miraut and Beelzebub, while they listened to Bayard, in the stables, dragging on his chain, and champing at the edge of his manger.



'That evening, at the château of Sigognac, was a melancholy one'

Chapter III: The Inn of the Blue Sun

It was a sorry collection of huts, which in a place less wild none would have thought of terming even a hamlet, this place where the weary oxen halted of their own accord, shaking off the long filaments of saliva hanging from their wet muzzles, with an air of satisfaction.

The five or six dwellings were scattered beneath fairly mature trees, whose growth had been encouraged with a little topsoil, augmented by manure and detritus of all sorts. These homes, made of mud, stones, half-squared tree-trunks, and pieces of planking, and covered by large thatched roofs brown with moss descending almost to the ground, with their associated sheds in which a few mud-soiled agricultural implements were lying about, and seemingly discarded, appeared more suitable for housing domestic animals than creatures supposedly fashioned in the Lord's image; consequently, a few black pigs shared them with their owners without showing the slightest disgust, which showed scant sensitivity on the part of these resident hogs.

Before their doorways, a few brats with round bellies and feverish complexions lingered, dressed in ragged shirts, too short at the back or the front, or even in simple vests laced with string, a degree of nudity which seemed to no more embarrass their innocence than if their place of habitation had been the earthly paradise. Through the undergrowth of their hair, which had likely never seen a comb, their phosphorescent pupils, full of curiosity shone, gleaming as the eyes of nocturnal birds do amidst the branches. Fear and longing disputed the supremacy in their countenance; they would have loved to run and hide behind a hedge, but the wagon and its burden held them transfixed, in a state of fascination.

A little behind them, at the threshold of her cottage, a lean woman, with a pale complexion and swarthy eyes, was cradling a famished infant in her arms. The child was kneading, with one small, already-tanned hand, a dried-up breast, a little whiter than the rest of the woman's front, and still evoking the young girl concealed within this human being degraded by poverty. The woman gazed at the actors with a dull stare of stupefaction, without seeming fully aware of what she was seeing. Crouching beside this daughter, her grandmother, more bowed and wrinkled than Hecuba, the wife of Priam, King of Troy, was daydreaming, her chin on her knees, her hands crossed on her bony legs, in the pose of an ancient Egyptian idol. Her fingers, no more than a set of phalanges, and a network of prominent veins, the sinews stretched like guitar strings, made her ancient sun-scorched hands look like an anatomical preparation long ago left, forgotten, in some cupboard by a careless surgeon. Her arms were likewise nothing more than sticks over which hung parchment-like skin, creased at the joints with transverse wrinkles like marks from the blows of a hatchet. Long tufts of hair bristled on her chin; a hoary coating like moss blocked her ears; her eyebrows, like the trailing plants one finds growing at the entrance to a cave, hung before the cavernous eye-sockets in which her somnolent orbs appeared half-veiled by the flabby skin of her eyelids. As for her mouth, her gums seemed to have swallowed it, and its location was recognisable

only by a star of concentric wrinkles. At the sight of this ancient scarecrow, the Pedant, who was on foot, cried:

— ‘Ah! See that dreadful, diabolical, damnable old woman! Next to her, the Fates are mere girls; she is so steeped in decay, so antiquated, so covered in mould, that no fountain of youth could ever rejuvenate her. She is the very Mother of Eternity; and when she was born, if she ever came into this world, for her nativity must surely have preceded creation, Time already sported a white beard. What a pity Master Alcofribas Nasier (*an anagram of François Rabelais, and that writer’s pseudonym*) failed to behold her before seeking to portray his Sibyl of Panzoust (*see ‘Gargantua and Pantagruel’ Book 3: XVI-XVIII*) or his old woman, whom the lion had the fox wipe with the latter’s tail? (*Book 2: XV*) He would have known then what wrinkles, cracks, furrows, ditches, and counterscarps, the ruins of a human being can be composed of, and would have given a masterful description of them. This witch was doubtless beautiful in her springtime, for the prettiest girls make the most horrid of old women. A warning to you, young ladies,’ continued Blazius, addressing Isabella and Serafina who had drawn near to listen. ‘When I think that sixty winters following on your April will be enough to render you as filthy, abominable, and fantastical as this old woman, this mummy escaped from its sarcophagus, it truly afflicts me, and makes me cherish my own unprepossessing features, which cannot be transformed into those of a spectre out of Tragedy, but whose ugliness, on the contrary, has been perfected, as regards Comedy, by the years.’

Young women are never happy at the prospect of becoming old and ugly, which amount to the same thing, even in the most distant future. So, the two actresses turned their backs on the Pedant, each with a little disdainful shrug, as if accustomed to hearing such nonsense, and, halting beside the wagon from which the trunks were being unloaded, appeared to be extremely busy ensuring that their belongings were not mistreated; there was no reply with which they could attack the Pedant. Blazius, by declaring his own ugliness in advance, had denied them the most obvious one. He often used this same subterfuge to deliver barbs, while avoiding receiving any.

The house in front of which the oxen had halted, on account of that instinct that ensures such animals never forget a place where they have found food and shelter, was one of the most considerable in the village. It stood, with a certain self-assurance, at the edge of the road, from which the other cottages had retreated, ashamed of their dilapidation and hiding their nakedness with a few handfuls of leaves, like ugly girls unfortunately surprised when bathing. Convinced of being the finest house in the place, the inn seemed anxious to provoke the traveller’s gaze, its sign stretching an arm out above the road, as if to stop passers-by ‘on foot or on horseback.’

The sign, projecting from the facade and supported by a sort of ironwork gallows from which a man might be hanged if needs be, consisted of a rusty sheet of metal, creaking away on the metal rod from which it hung, being exposed to every gust of wind.

A passing artist had painted the daystar there, not with the traditional face and golden wig, but as a blue disc with blue outspread rays, in the manner of those ‘shadows of the sun’ with which heraldic art sometimes sprinkles the field of its coats of arms (*‘ombre de soleil’: in heraldry, a sun of which only the rays are visible, and whose transparent disc lacks features such as eyes, nose, or mouth*). What reason lay behind the choice of “The Blue Sun” as the name of this hostelry? That there are so many ‘Golden Suns’ along the high roads that one can no longer distinguish them from one another, thus a little singularity would not go amiss as regards a sign? That was not the real motive, however plausible it might seem. The dauber who had created the image had nothing but blue

pigment remaining on his palette, and to replenish the palette with other hues, he would have had to make a trip to some major city. He also preached the pre-eminence of azure above all other tints, and with that celestial colour he had painted blue lions, blue horses and blue roosters on the signs of various inns, for which the Chinese would have praised him, who esteem an artist all the more the further he deviates from nature.

The Blue Sun Inn had a tiled roof, many of the tiles being brown with age, while others were still of a reddish complexion, which bore witness to recent repairs, and proved that at least the rooms would be dry.

The wall facing the road was plastered with a lime rendering that hid the cracks and damage, and gave the house a certain air of cleanliness. The timber-framed beams, forming X's and lozenges, were accentuated in the Basque style (*traditionally Basque house timbering is painted in oxblood-red, blue, or green*). On the other walls, this luxury had been neglected, and their tones of rammed earth appeared quite stark. Richer or more sophisticated than the other inhabitants of the hamlet, the innkeeper had made some concessions to the delights of civilised life. The window of the best room boasted glass panes, a rare thing at that time, and in that region; the windows of the others consisted of frames covered with canvas or oiled paper, or were equipped with a shutter painted the same oxblood red as the timbers of the facade.

A shed adjoining the house provided sufficient shelter for carriages and animals. Abundant bales of hay hung between the bars of the mangers as if through the teeth of enormous combs, and long troughs, dug from old fir trunks and supported on trestles, contained the least fetid water that the neighbouring ponds could provide.

It was therefore with good reason that the innkeeper, Chirriguirri, claimed that there was no other within thirty miles around as happily constructed, as well supplied with provisions and victuals, as well heated by a good fire, equipped with as comfortable beds, or such a wealth of draperies and crockery, as the inn of The Blue Sun; and in this he was not mistaken, and deceived none, since the nearest inn was at least two days' walk away.

In spite of himself, Baron de Sigognac felt a little ashamed to find himself entangled with a troupe of itinerant actors, and he hesitated to cross the threshold of the inn, though Blazius, the Tyrant, Captain Matamore, and Leander had granted him the honour of entering first, when Isabella, divining the Baron's genuine reservation, advanced towards him with a resolute and sulky little face:

— 'Come! Monsieur le Baron, you are colder with womankind than Joseph (*who resisted the advances of Potiphar's wife, see Genesis, 39*) or Hippolytus (*who, in Greek myth, likewise resisted Phaedra*). Will you not offer me your arm, and escort me within?'

Sigognac, bowing, hastened to do so, and Isabella rested the tips of her delicate fingers on the Baron's threadbare sleeve, so as to encourage him with their gentle pressure. Thus sustained, his courage returned, and he entered the inn with a glorious air of triumph; it mattered not, at that moment, if the whole world saw him. In this pleasant kingdom of France, he who accompanies a pretty woman is never ridiculous, but merely arouses jealousy.

Chirriguirri came to meet his guests, and offer lodging to the travellers, with a forthrightness that hinted at the proximity of Spain. A leather jacket in the style of the Malagueños (*residents of*

Málaga) encircled at the hips by a belt with a copper buckle, highlighted the vigorous structure of his chest; but an apron turned up at one corner, and a large kitchen knife in a wooden sheath, tempered whatever fierceness his expression might have suggested, and the physiognomy of a former *contrabandista* was mixed with a reassuring portion of chef, just as his benign smile counterbalanced the troubling effect of a deep scar which, starting from the middle of the forehead, vanished into his short hair. This scar that Chirriguirri, bowing in welcome, beret in hand, necessarily presented to the gaze, was distinguished from the skin by a purplish colour and a depression in the underlying flesh which had proved unable to completely fill that fearsome hiatus. One would have had to have been strong indeed for one's soul not to have escaped through such a crack; thus, Chirriguirri was a strong fellow, and his soul, no doubt, was in no hurry to discover what the other world had in store for it. Cautiously timid travellers would perhaps have found the profession of innkeeper a suspiciously pacific one for a hotelier of his appearance; but, as I said, The Blue Sun, was the only acceptable place in which to lodge in all that wasteland.

The room into which Sigognac and the troupe entered, was not quite as magnificent as Chirriguirri had implied: the floor consisted of beaten earth, and, in the centre of the room, a sort of platform formed of large stones composed the hearth. An opening cut in the ceiling, traversed by an iron bar from which hung a chain hooked to the rack, replaced the usual hood and chimney-pipe, so that the whole top of the room half-vanished in a fog of smoke whose vapours slowly rose towards the opening, if the wind, by chance, failed to blow them back. The smoke had covered the beams of the roof with a bitumen glaze similar to those seen in old paintings, which contrasted with the recently-applied lime plaster on the walls.

Around the hearth on three sides, the fourth allowing the chef free access to the cooking-pot, wooden benches set on the rough floor, which was calloused like the skin of a monstrous orange, were wedged with shards of pots or pieces of brick, so as to level them. Here and there, stood a few stools, made of a wooden board to act as a seat supported by three wooden legs one of which passed through it, so as to support a transverse piece of wood which could, at a pinch, serve as a backrest for people who cared little for their comfort, and which a sybarite would certainly have regarded as an instrument of torture. A kind of hutch, in one corner, completed the furniture, in which the crudeness of construction was matched only by the coarseness of the material employed. Lighted splinters of fir-wood, stuck on iron pegs, cast a red, swirling light over the scene, the smoke they gave off mixing, at a certain height, with the cloud from the hearth. A few saucepans, hung along the wall like shields on the sides of a trireme, if that comparison is not too noble and heroic a one for such objects, glowed dimly, reflecting dull red light, amidst the shadows. On a table, a half-deflated wineskin lay slumped in a limp, dead attitude like a decapitated torso. From the ceiling hung, in sinister manner, a long flitch of bacon on the end of a hook, which, amidst the cloud of smoke rising from the hearth, had the alarming appearance of a hanged man.

Certainly this hovel, despite the host's pretensions, was a gloomy sight, and an isolated passer-by, though no coward, might have felt the imagination dwell on gloomy fantasies, and have feared to find instead of the customary fare one of those pies filled with human flesh to the detriment of solitary travellers; but the troupe of actors was too numerous for such terrors to grip brave histrions accustomed, moreover, by their wandering life, to the strangest of dwellings.

On the corner of one of the benches, when the actors entered, a little girl of eight or nine years old was sleeping; or at least she appeared to be of that age, so thin and puny was she. Leaning her

shoulders against the back of the bench, she had allowed her head to fall forward onto her chest, her long strands of matted hair preventing her features from being distinguished. The sinews of her neck, which was slender as that of a plucked bird, were straining and seemingly finding it difficult to prevent the hairy mass from rolling to the ground. Her arms hung loosely on either side of her body, her hands lay open, and her legs, too short to reach the ground, hung in the air, one foot crossed over the other. Thin as spindles, those legs, were brick red from the effects of cold, sunlight, and the weather. Numerous scratches, some healed, others relatively fresh, revealed habitual journeys through the undergrowth and thickets. Her feet, small and delicate in shape, were clad in boots of a dusty grey, the only footwear she had probably ever worn.

As for her costume, it was very simple and consisted of two pieces: a canvas shirt so coarse that vessels employ a finer weave for their sails, and a little jacket of yellow fustian, cut in Aragonese fashion from the best-preserved piece of what had been a maternal skirt. The bird, embroidered in various colours, and commonly adorning this style of petticoat, was part of the shirt made for the little one, doubtless because the woollen threads supported the dilapidated fabric a little. The bird, superimposed thus, produced a singular effect, for though its beak bordered the waist and its legs the edge of the hem, its body, crumpled and distorted by the folds, took on a bizarre anatomical form, resembling those chimerical birds of the Medieval bestiaries, or of old Byzantine mosaics.



'A little girl of eight or nine years old'

Isabella, Serafina, and the Soubrette took their places on this bench, though their weight, combined with the very slight weight of the little girl, was barely enough to counterbalance the mass of the Duenna, who seated herself at the other end. The men distributed themselves on the remaining benches, leaving an empty space between themselves and Baron de Sigognac, out of deference.

A few handfuls of brushwood had rekindled the fire, and the crackle of dry branches twisting in the flames cheered the travellers, somewhat stiff from the day's fatigue, and unknowingly feeling the influence of the malaria that reigned in the neighbourhood, being surrounded by stagnant waters that the impermeable ground failed to absorb.

Chirriguirri approached them courteously, and with all the graciousness his naturally forbidding countenance allowed him.

— ‘What shall I serve your lordships? My house is stocked with everything enjoyed by gentlemen. Indeed, what a shame you were not here yesterday! I had prepared a boar’s head with pistachios, with so delicious an aroma, so candied in spices, so delicate to the taste, that sadly there was not enough left for a hollow tooth to chew!’

— ‘Truly, most painful,’ said the Pedant, licking his lips sensually at these imaginary delights, ‘a pistachio mould pleases me above all other delicacies; I would gladly have risked indigestion to taste it.’

— ‘What then would you have said to the venison pie, which the lords I hosted this morning devoured to the last piece of crust, having sacked its interior without mercy, or quarter?’

— ‘I would have deemed it excellent, Master Chirriguirri, and praised as is fitting the unparalleled merit of the chef; but what is the use of whetting our appetites, in so cruel a manner, with illusory dishes already being digested at this very hour, since you have no lack of pepper, chili, nutmeg and other spurs to drinking. Instead of those, now defunct, dishes whose succulence cannot be doubted, but which can no longer sustain us, recite to us your menu of the day, since the past tense is merely annoying as regards cuisine, while hunger loves the present indicative when at table. Be done with the past! It means but despair and fasting; the future, at least, allows, as regards the stomach, pleasant reveries. For pity’s sake, cease reciting to poor devils as starved and weary as a pack of hounds your tale of these ancient gastronomic delights.’

— ‘You are right, sir, their memory is hardly substantial,’ said Chirriguirri, giving a gesture of assent, ‘but I cannot help but regret my having imprudently stripped myself of provisions thus. Yesterday, my pantry was overflowing, and not more than two hours since I showed further imprudence in sending to the castle my last six terrines of duck-livers; admirable, monstrous livers! Real mouthfuls, fit for a king!’

— ‘Oh! What a wedding-feast like that at Cana (*see the ‘Gospel of Saint John’, 2:1-12*), or that of Camacho (*see Cervantes’ ‘Don Quixote’, Chapter XX*), we might have made, with all the dishes you no longer have to hand, and which more fortunate folk have devoured! For you pain us too much; confess, without rhetoric, what you do have, having spoken so eloquently of what you do not.’

— ‘That is only fair. I have *garbure* (*a thick soup or stew, often of cabbage, meat, and beans*) some ham, and a hake or two,’ replied the innkeeper, attempting a modest blush, like an honest housewife taken by surprise whose husband has brought three or four friends to dine.

— ‘Then,’ cried the starving troop in chorus, ‘bring us your hake, ham, and garbure.’

— ‘And what a garbure!’ continued the innkeeper, regaining his composure, raising his voice like a trumpet fanfare, ‘croutons simmered in the finest goose fat, curly-leafed cabbages of an ambrosial taste, such as Savoy scarcely equals, cooked with bacon whiter than the snow on the summit of Maladeta (*in the Pyrenees*); a soup to be served at the table of the gods!’

— ‘My mouth is watering already. But serve it quickly, for I am dying of starvation,’ said the Tyrant with the air of an ogre smelling fresh human flesh.

— ‘Zagarriga, set the table in the best room as fast as you can!’ shouted Chirriguirri, to an imaginary boy it seemed, for the latter gave no sign of life, despite the urgent tone employed by his master.

— ‘As for the ham, I hope your Lordships will be satisfied; it can compete with the most exquisite ones of La Mancha or Bayonne; it is preserved in rock salt, and the meat, streaked with white and pink, is the most appetising in the world.’

— ‘We believe it as firmly as any precept in the Gospels,’ cried the exasperated Pedant; ‘but quickly unfold this ham-shaped marvel, or else scenes of cannibalism like those seen on shipwrecked galleons or caravels will take place before your eyes. We are not guilty of crimes like those of Tantalus (*who, in Greek myth, was punished by food and water being ever beyond his grasp*), to be tormented by elusive and imaginary sustenance.’

— ‘I cannot but agree,’ Chirriguirri continued in the most tranquil tone. ‘Hello! Hey! You in the kitchen, make an effort, strive, hurry now! These noble travellers are hungry, and can scarcely wait!’

There was no sound or movement from the kitchen, nor from the aforementioned Zagarriga either, the reason being that he, more imaginary than real, did not exist and had never existed. The only servant in the inn consisted of a tall, haggard, dishevelled girl, named Mionnette; but this perfect servant, whom Chirriguirri constantly called upon, gave the inn, according to himself, a fine air, enlivened it, peopled it, and justified the high price of lodging there. By dint of calling his other chimerical servants by their names, the innkeeper of The Blue Sun had come to believe in their existence, and was almost surprised they failed to demand their wages, a show of discretion for which he was most grateful.

Divining, from the dull clatter of dishes in the adjoining room that the table was not yet set, the innkeeper, to gain time, began to praise the hake, a somewhat sterile theme, and one which required a certain degree of eloquent effort. Fortunately, Chirriguirri was accustomed to enhancing insipid dishes with verbal spice.

— ‘Your graces doubtless think that hake is a common delicacy, and in that they are not wrong; but there are hake, and hake. This one was caught on the very banks of Newfoundland by the boldest sailor in the Bay of Biscay. It is a choice hake, white and excellent taste-wise, not tough to eat, excellent when fried in olive oil from Aix-en-Provence, preferable to salmon, tuna, or swordfish. Our Holy Father the Pope, may he grant us his indulgence, consumes nothing else during Lent; he also enjoys it on Fridays and Saturdays, and such other lean days when he is tired of teal or scoter (*sea-duck*). Pierre Lestorbat, who supplies me, also supplies His Holiness. The Holy Father’s hake; that, by God, is not to be despised, and your lordships are not ones to disregard it, otherwise you would not be good Catholics!’

— ‘None of us cares for Protestant beef,’ replied the Pedant, ‘and we would be flattered to gobble up this Papal hake; but, stone the crows, let this magnificent fish deign to jump from the frying pan onto the plate, or we will vanish in smoke as spectres or wraiths do at cockcrow, when the sun rises!’

— ‘It would be indecent to eat fried food before the soup; that would be putting the cart before the horse, culinary-wise,’ said Chirriguirri with an air of supreme disdain, ‘and your lordships are too well-bred to allow such an incongruity. Patience, the garbure still needs a moment or two.’

— ‘By the Devil’s horns and the Pope’s belly!’ roared the Tyrant. ‘I’d be content with a Spartan broth if it were served instantly!’

Throughout all this, Baron de Sigognac spoke not a word, and showed no impatience; he had eaten the day before! In the unending famine endured at his ‘Castle of Hunger’, he had long since become accustomed to eremitic abstinence, and his sober stomach revolted at the sight of these frequent meals. Isabella and Serafina made no complain either, for a display of voracity scarcely becomes young ladies, who are supposed to sustain themselves on dew and flower-pollen like bees. Scapin, seeking to preserve his leanness, seemed delighted, and merely tightened his belt by a notch, and the tongue of its leather buckle hung freely. Leander yawned and bared his teeth. The Duenna was dozing, while beneath her drooping chin three folds of flabby flesh bulged out like sausages.

The little girl, who had been sleeping at the other end of the bench, had woken, and now sat upright. You could see her face free of her hair, the colour of which seemed to have rubbed off on her forehead, so tawny was the latter. Beneath the tan of her face lay a waxy pallor, a profound pallor, matte in hue. Her cheeks lacked colour, and her cheekbones were prominent. The skin of her bluish lips was cracked in thin strips, though her sickly smile revealed pearl-white teeth. All life seemed to have taken refuge in her eyes.

The thinness of her face made these appear enormous, and the large brown bruises that surrounded them like haloes granted them a feverish and singular brilliance. The whites appeared almost blue in tone, so prominent were the dark brown pupils, and so thick and full the double line of the eyelashes. At that moment those curious eyes expressed both childish admiration and ferocious longing, her gaze being fixed, steadily, on the jewels Isabella and Serafina were wearing, of whose meagre worth the little savage, was doubtless unaware. The scintillation of their gilt trimmings, the deceptive orientalism of a necklace of Venetian pearls, dazzled her and gripped her as if in a state of ecstasy. Evidently, she had never, in her life, seen anything so beautiful. Her nostrils flared, a faint flush rose to her cheeks, and a sardonic smile hovered on her pale lips, erased from time to time by a feverish, rapid, dry chattering of her teeth.

Fortunately, none of the company were looking towards that wretched little pile of rags, shaking as if possessed by a nervous fit of trembling, or they would have been appalled by the fierce, sinister expression printed on the features of that livid mask.

Unable to control her curiosity, the child stretched out a brown hand, delicate and cold as that of a monkey, towards Isabella’s dress, the fabric of which her fingers stroked, with a visible expression of pleasure and voluptuous titillation. That crumpled velvet, shimmering in every fold, seemed to her the finest, richest, and softest in the world.

Though the touch had been of the slightest, Isabella turned and caught sight of the little girl’s action, at which she smiled maternally. Feeling herself under scrutiny, the child had suddenly adopted a foolish, childish expression indicating a merely idiotic stupor, with an instinctive grasp of mimicry that would have done honour to an actress consummate in the practice of her art, and, in a doleful voice, she said in her local patois: ‘It’s like the mantle of Our Lady on the altar!’

Then, lowering her eyelashes, the black fringes of which almost reached her cheekbones, she leant her shoulders against the back of the bench, clasped her hands, crossed her thumbs, and pretended to fall asleep as if overcome by fatigue.

Mionnette, the tall, haggard servant girl, entered to announce that supper was ready, and they moved to the adjoining room.

The actors did their best to honour Master Chirriguirri's cuisine, and, without coming upon the promised delicacies, nonetheless satisfied their hunger, and especially their thirst, in lengthy embraces of the almost deflated wineskin, which looked like a bagpipe from which the air has issued.

They were about to rise from the table when they heard dogs barking, and horses' hooves clattering near the inn. Three knocks on the door, executed with impatient authority, signalled a traveller unaccustomed to waiting. Mionnette rushed to the door, drew the latch, and a horseman, almost hurling the door in her face, entered amidst a whirlwind of dogs, who almost knocked the poor serving-maid over, and rushed about the room, leaping, frolicking, and rooting for leftovers amidst the abandoned plates, thereby in a moment performing with their tongues the work of three washers of dishes.

A few vigorous lashes of the whip, applied to their backs with no distinction between innocent and guilty, calmed their agitation as if by magic; the dogs took refuge beneath the benches, panting, with their tongues out, then laid their heads on their paws, or curled up into a ball. The horseman, his spurs clinking loudly, entered the room in which the actors were eating with the self-assurance of one who is always at home wherever he is. Chirriguirri followed him, beret in hand, with an obsequious and almost fearful air; he who was not, in truth, timid.

The cavalier, standing on the threshold of the room, lightly touched the edge of his felt hat, and gazed calmly at the circle of actors who returned his bow.

He appeared to be between thirty and thirty-five years of age; blond hair, curling in spirals, framed his sanguine and jovial head, whose pink tones were reddened by air and vigorous exercise. His gleaming eyes, a harsh blue in colour, lay flush with his head; his nose, slightly upturned at the tip, ended in a neatly-formed flat plane. Two small red moustaches, waxed at the tips, and bent to a hook-shape, twisted beneath the nose like commas, with the symmetry of a royal goatee (*fashionable in Louis XIII's reign*). Between the moustaches and the goatee beard blossomed a mouth whose slightly thin upper lip amended what might have appeared overly sensual as regards the lower one, wide, red and striated with perpendicular lines. The chin curved abruptly, and made the tuft of hair of the goatee stand forth prominently. His forehead, uncovered as he threw his felt hat onto a nearby stool, displayed a white and satiny tone, preserved as it usually was from the heat of the sun by the shadow of the brim, and indicated that this gentleman, before he had left the Court for the country, must have possessed a most delicate complexion. In short, his physiognomy was agreeable; one in which the gaiety of a free companion appropriately tempered the pride of a nobleman.

The newcomer's costume showed, by its elegance, that even in the depths of the provinces the Marquis, that being his title, had not broken off relations with the finest tailors, male or female.

His collar, of cutwork-lace, revealed his neck, and overlapped a lemon-coloured cloth coat decorated with silver braid, which was extremely short and allowed a river of fine linen to overflow between it and the breeches. The sleeves of this coat, or rather jacket, revealed the shirt to the elbows; the blue breeches, adorned with a sort of apron decorated with straw-coloured ribbon-loops, descended a little below the knee, where they plunged into soft leather boots complete with

silver spurs. A blue cloak, trimmed with silver, set on the corner of the shoulder and held in place by a piece of braiding, completed his costume, which was a little too bold perhaps for the season and the location, but which I will justify in a sentence: the Marquis had been following the hunt alongside the beautiful Yolande, and had dressed in his finest clothes, wishing to maintain his old reputation for brilliance, for he had been often admired on the Cours la Reine (*a promenade in Paris, created by Marie de Medici, and opened in 1618*) among the refined and debonaire crowd.

— ‘Some slops for my hounds, a peck of oats for my horse, bread and ham for me, and some leftovers for my huntsman,’ cried the Marquis, jovially, seating himself at the end of the table, near the Soubrette, who, seeing a handsome lord, and one so well-dressed, had cast him an incendiary glance, and a winning smile.

Master Chirriguirri placed a pewter plate, and a goblet, before the Marquis; the Soubrette, with the grace of a latter-day Hebe (*the cup-bearer to the gods in Greek mythology*), poured him a large glass of wine, which he swallowed in a single gulp. The first few minutes were devoted to quelling a huntsman’s hunger, the most ravenous of all, and equal in intensity to that which the Greeks called *boulimia* (*‘the hunger of an ox’*); after which the Marquis glanced around the table, and noticed among the actors, the Baron de Sigognac, seated near Isabella, whom he knew by sight, and whom he had noted as the hunt had passed the ox-cart.

Isabella smiled at the Baron, who was speaking to her in a low voice, with that vague, languid smile, a caress of the spirit, a testimony of sympathy rather than an expression of gaiety, which could not be mistaken by those who are accustomed somewhat to female facial expressions, experience which the Marquis had no lack of. The presence of Sigognac amongst the troupe of bohemians no longer inspired amazement, and the contempt which had previously been inspired in him by the poor Baron’s dilapidated gear diminished considerably. The Baron’s enterprise in following his beauty, seated in the chariot of Thespis, amidst comic or tragic adventures, seemed to him to bear witness to a gallant imagination, and a purposeful spirit. He made a gesture of awareness towards Sigognac to show him that he had recognised him, and understood his plan; but, as a true courtier he respected his incognito, and appeared to be concerned only with the Soubrette, to whom he offered compliments with supreme gallantry, in a manner half-genuine, and half-mocking, which she received with bursts of laughter that displayed her magnificent teeth and even the back of her throat.

The Marquis, eager to progress an affair that appeared so promising, thought fit to instantly declare himself as a man extremely fond of the theatre, and an excellent judge in matters of comedy. He complained of lacking in the provinces that source of pleasure, one which tended to exercise the intellect, refine the language, increase politeness, and perfect one’s manner, and, addressing the Tyrant who appeared to be the leader of the troupe, he asked him if his previous commitments prevented him from staging a few performances of the best plays in his repertoire at the Château de Bruyères where it would be easy to set up a theatre in the great hall or in the orangery.

The Tyrant, smiling, good-naturedly, into his large bristly beard, replied that nothing could be easier, and that his troupe, one of the most excellent in the province, was in the service of his lordship; from king to maid, he added with feigned good nature.

— ‘Excellent,’ replied the Marquis, ‘and as for the terms there will be no difficulty at all; you shall fix the amount yourself; one does not haggle with *Thalia (the Muse of Comedy)*, a muse highly regarded by Apollo, and as well-regarded at Court as in the city, or even the provinces, where folk are not as uncultivated as they pretend to believe in Paris.’

Having said this, the Marquis, after a significant knee-bump with the Soubrette, who displayed no alarm, left the table, pushed his felt hat down to his eyebrows, waved farewell to the company, and left amidst the yapping of his pack of hounds; he was riding on ahead to prepare for the actors’ reception at the château.

It was already growing late, and they needed to leave extremely early in the morning, since the Château de Bruyères was quite a distance away, and though a Barbary horse can readily cover a distance of nine or ten miles by the back roads, a heavily-loaded wagon, pulled along a large sandy road by already weary oxen, takes much longer.

The women, therefore, retired to a kind of loft, where bales of straw had been strewn on the floor for beds; while the men remained in the room, making the best of it on the benches and chairs.

Chapter IV: Scarecrows for the Birds

Let me now return to that little girl, whom I left asleep on the bench in a sleep too obviously deep not to be feigned. To me, her appearance seems rightly suspect, and the fierce desire with which her eyes fixed, wildly, on Isabella's pearl necklace demands that her actions are closely watched.

Indeed, as soon as the door had closed behind the actors, she slowly raised her long brown eyelids, cast her inquisitive gaze into every corner of the room, and once sure that none remained, let herself slide down from the edge of the bench onto her feet, stood up straight, tossed her hair back with a movement familiar to her, and went to the door, which she opened with no more noise than a shadow. She closed it again, with great caution, taking care that the latch did not fall too abruptly, then moved away, slowly, to the corner of a hedge round which she turned.

Certain, then, that she was out of sight of the house, she took to running, leaping over ditches of stagnant water, stepping over fallen fir-trees, and bounding over the heather like a doe with a pack of hounds after her. Her long locks of hair whipped her cheeks like black snakes, and sometimes, falling from her forehead, blocked her view; then, without slowing the rapidity of her pace, she pushed them back behind her ears with the palm of her hand, and made a gesture of rebellious impatience; but her agile feet seemed to need no visual guidance, so well did they know the way.

The scene about her, as far as could be discerned by the livid light of a half-hidden moon, bearing on its brow a cloud of black velvet, was particularly desolate and gloomy. A few fir-trees, whose notches cut for the purpose of extracting resin made them look like the ghosts of murdered trees, displayed their reddish wounds on the edge of a sandy path, whose whiteness the night could not eclipse. Beyond, on each side of the road, stretched the dark-violet heather, over which floated banks of greyish vapour to which the rays of the evening star gave an air of a spectral procession, well calculated to bring terror to superstitious souls, or those unaccustomed to the phenomena of Nature in these solitudes.

The child, doubtless accustomed to these phantasmagorias of the wasteland, paid no attention to them and continued her journey. She finally arrived at a kind of hillock crowned with a score or more of fir-trees which formed a kind of little wood. With singular agility, and betraying no fatigue, she climbed the rather steep escarpment and reached the summit of the mound. Standing on this rise, her eyes, to which the shadows seemed to offer no obstruction, searched about for a while, and, seeing only the solitary immensity, she put two of her fingers in her mouth and uttered, thrice, one of those whistles which the traveller, crossing the woods at night, never hears without a secret pang, even if he thinks it to have been produced by frightened owlets, or some other harmless creature.

A pause separated each of the three cries she gave, which otherwise might well have been taken for those of an osprey, buzzard, and owl respectively, so perfect was the imitation.

Soon a heap of leaves seemed to stir, arched its back, and shook itself like a sleeping animal on being roused; and a human form slowly rose up in front of the little girl.

— ‘It’s you, Chiquita,’ said the man. ‘What news? I wasn’t expecting you, so I took a nap.’

The man whom Chiquita’s calls had awakened was a strapping fellow, between twenty-five and thirty years of age, of medium height, thin, nervous, and apparently fit for all kinds of shady activities; in turn, a poacher, a dealer in contraband goods, a smuggler of salt (*to evade the ‘gabelle’, the salt-tax*), a thief, and a cutthroat; all honest industries which he practiced one after the other, or even all at once, as the occasion demanded.

A ray of moonlight falling on him from amidst the clouds, like the beam of light from a shielded lantern, highlighted him clearly against the dark background of the fir-trees, and would have allowed the spectator, if there had been one there, to examine his physiognomy, and his costume which displayed a characteristic picturesqueness. His face, swarthy and coppery like that of a Caribbean savage, made his eyes, like those of a bird of prey, and his extremely white teeth, the sharply pointed canines of which resembled the fangs of a young wolf, shine by contrast. A handkerchief encircled his forehead like the bandage on a wound, and compressed the tufts of thick, curly, rebellious hair, bristling in a crest on top of his head; a blue velvet waistcoat, discoloured by long use, and decorated with buttons each formed of a small coin soldered to a metal rod, enveloped his chest; linen breeches clad his thighs, and *alpargatas* (*espadrilles, rope-soled shoes*) tied with strips of fabric that crossed about his ankles, rendered his feet as well-shod and waterproof as those of a deer. This costume was completed by a broad red woollen belt extending from the hips to the armpits, and encircling his body several times. In the centre of his stomach, a lump indicated the villain’s pantry and treasury; and, if he had turned around, one could have seen on his back, protruding either side of his belt, an immense *navaja* (*a large knife with a folding blade*) from Valencia, one of those elongated *navajas* shaped like a fish, whose blade is fixed by rotating a copper ring, and bears on its steel as many red striations as the murders the brave fellow who owns the weapon has committed. I know not how many scarlet grooves Agostin’s *navaja* had, but from the look of the rascal it was reasonable, without demonstrating any lack of charity, to suppose them numerous.

This was the character whom Chiquita now met with, in secret.

— ‘Well! Chiquita,’ said Agostin, passing his roughened hand over the child’s head in a friendly gesture, ‘what saw you at Master Chirriguirri’s inn?’

— ‘A wagon-load of travellers came,’ replied the little girl, ‘five large trunks are stored in the shed, which all seemed quite heavy, because two men were needed to lift each one.’

— ‘Hmm!’ said Agostin. ‘Sometimes travellers weight their luggage to gain respect from hoteliers; such has been known.’

‘But,’ replied Chiquita, ‘the three young ladies who are with them have gold braid on their clothes. One of them, the prettiest, has around her neck a row of large white beads of a silvery colour, which shine in the light. Oh, it’s all very beautiful! Very splendid!’

— ‘Pearls, then! Fine,’ muttered the bandit between his teeth, ‘as long as they aren’t fake! They work glass so cleverly and tastefully at Murano (*the island in the Venetian lagoon famous for glass-making*), and the gallants, these days, have such loose morals!’

— ‘My noble Agostin,’ Chiquita continued, in a coaxing tone of voice, ‘if you cut the beautiful lady’s throat, you’ll give me the necklace, won’t you?’

— ‘Indeed, it would suit you, and go wonderfully well with your tousled hair, your rag of a shirt, and that canary-yellow skirt!’

— ‘I’ve kept watch for you often enough, and run hard to warn you, when the fog was rising, and the dew wet my poor bare feet. Did I ever make you wait for food in your hiding places, even when the fever made me croak like a heron at the edge of a marsh, and I could hardly drag myself through the thickets and brushwood?’

— ‘You are brave and loyal, yes,’ replied the robber, ‘but we do not have this necklace in our hands as yet. How many men were there?’

— ‘Oh! many. One big and strong, with a big beard in the middle of his face; one old, two thinnish ones, one of whom who looks like a fox, and another who seems like a gentleman, though his clothes are in poor condition.’

— ‘Six,’ said Agostin, thoughtfully, counting on his fingers. ‘Alas! That number would have caused me no problem before; but of my band I alone remain. Are they armed, Chiquita?’

— ‘The gentleman has his sword, and the taller of the thin ones his rapier.’

— ‘No pistols, no arquebus?’

— ‘None that I saw.’ Chiquita answered, ‘unless they left them in the cart, but if so Chirriguirri or Mionnette would have given me a sign.’

— ‘Come then, we’ll risk it, and set an ambush,’ said Agostin, decisively. ‘Five chests, gold embroidery, a pearl necklace. I’ve exercised my talents for less.’



'You are brave and loyal, yes,' replied the robber...'

The brigand and the little girl entered the fir-wood, and, having reached the most secret part of it, began to clear stones and armfuls of brushwood, until they had exposed five or six planks sprinkled with earth. Agostin lifted the planks, threw them aside, and descended the dark opening thus uncovered, up to his waist. Was it the entrance to some subterranean passage, or cavern, a brigand's customary retreat? A hiding-place where he kept stolen treasure? The ossuary in which he piled the corpses of his victims?

This last supposition would have seemed the most likely to the spectator, if there had been any other witnesses to the scene than the jackdaws perched among the fir-trees.

Agostin bent down, as though digging at the base of the hole, then stood up again, holding in his arms a human form of cadaverous rigidity, which he hurled, unceremoniously, over the edge of the hole. Chiquita showed no fear at this strange exhumation, and dragged the object, by its

feet, some distance from the hole, with greater force than her frail appearance would have allowed one to suppose. Agostin, continuing his lugubrious work, hauled from this Haceldama (*Akeldama, in Aramaic, or 'The Field of Blood' the name given the Potter's Field, purchased with Judas Iscariot's pieces of silver, see 'Matthew, 27:3-8'*) five more similar objects, which the little girl arranged beside the first, smiling like a young ghoul in a cemetery preparing for a feast. The open pit, the bandit drawing what appeared to be the remains of his victims from their repose, the little girl helping in this funereal task, all this beneath the black shadows of the fir-trees, composed a scene fit to inspire terror in the bravest.

The bandit took one of the mannequins, carried it to the crest of the escarpment, raised it, and made it stand upright by driving the stake to which its body was tied into the ground. Thus held, the figure mimicked the appearance of a living man amidst the shadows.

— 'Alas! To what have I been reduced by these unfortunate times,' cried Agostin, with a Saint Joseph's: 'Han!' (*'with an effort', 'Han!' being the traditional cry of woodcutters as they delivered a blow with the axe, and St. Joseph being the patron saint of carpenters and woodworkers*). 'Instead of a band of hardy rascals, handling their knives and arquebuses like elite soldiery, instead of those true companions in my solitary exploits, here are naught but tailor's dummies clothed in rags, scarecrows for travellers to shy at! This one is Matasierpes, the valiant Spaniard, my bosom friend, a charming fellow, who with his *navaja* traced crosses on the faces of *gabachos* (*strangers*) as neatly as if it were a brush dipped in rouge; a fine gentleman, moreover, as haughty as if he had sprung from Jupiter's own thigh (*as the god Dionysus was, in Greek myth*), offering his elbow to the ladies so they might descend from the coach, and robbing the bourgeoisie in a grandiose and royal manner! Here, like holy relics, are his cape, his *golilla* (*neckerchief*), and his sombrero with the crimson plume that I piously stole from the executioner, and with which I clothed the scarecrow who has taken the place of that young hero worthy of a better fate. Poor Matasierpes! It upset him to be hanged. Not that he cared about death, but as a nobleman, he claimed to have the right to be decapitated. Sadly, he did not keep his genealogy in his pocket, and had to expire perpendicularly.'

Returning to the pit, Agostin lifted another mannequin wearing a blue beret: 'This one is Isquibaival, a famous man, a valiant man, full of love for his work, though sometimes over-zealous, and too ready to massacre everyone in sight. Devil take it, one mustn't ruin the trade! Yet, he was never too greedy when it came to the spoils, forever happy with his share. He scorned gold and only loved blood; a brave nature! And what a fine attitude he displayed beneath the executioner's blows, when he was broken on the wheel, in the square at Orthez! Neither Regulus (*Marcus Atilius Regulus who returned, out of a sense of honour, to Carthage and certain death, having been sent, as a captive, to negotiate terms*) nor Saint Bartholomew (*who was flayed alive*) showed a better countenance when undergoing torture. He was your father, Chiquita, honour his memory and say a prayer for the repose of his soul.'

The little girl made the sign of the cross, and her lips moved as if whispering holy words.

The third scarecrow had a pot on its head, and made a clanging sound in Agostin's arms. An iron breastplate over its tattered buff coat gleamed dustily, the clasps rattling on its thigh-bones. The bandit polished the armour on his sleeve to restore its shine.

— 'A glint of metal blazing in the shadows sometimes inspires a salutary terror. One thinks one is dealing with out-of-work mercenaries. An old hand, this one! Working the highway as if on

the battlefield, with composure, method, and discipline. A pistol shot to the face robbed me of him. An irreparable loss! I would gladly avenge his death!

The fourth figure, draped in a cloak with a saw-tooth fringe, was honoured with a funeral oration as the others had been. The bandit he represented had yielded his soul under torture, not wanting, from modesty, to agree to his magnificent deeds, and refusing, with heroic constancy, to disclose the names of his comrades to an overly inquisitive judicial process.

The fifth scarecrow, representing Florizel of Bordeaux, obtained no eulogy from Agostin, but simply regret mingled with hopeful expectation. Florizel, the lightest set of fingers in the province as regards picking pockets on town bridges, had not swung in the gallows' chains like his less fortunate friends, to be washed by the rain, and pecked at by crows. He was travelling at the expense of the State, on the king's galleys, over the Ocean waves and the Mediterranean Sea. He was a mere rogue among those brigands, a fox running with a pack of wolves; but he had talent, and, once having perfected his skills in the school of the galleys, might well become an important figure; one does not achieve perfection at the first attempt. Agostin was waiting impatiently for this amiable character to escape from the oar and return to him.

Short and fat, wearing a smock encircled by a wide leather belt, and a wide-brimmed hat, the sixth mannequin was placed a little in front of the others like the leader of a squadron.

— 'You've earned the place of honour,' said Agostin, addressing the scarecrow, 'Patriarch of the Highway, Nestor of thieves, Ulysses of the tweezers and the hook, O mighty Lavidalotte, my guide and master, you who received me among the Knights of Darkness, and who, from the poor student that I was, formed a resourceful brigand. You taught me to speak scornfully, to disguise myself in twenty different ways, like the late Proteus (*the Greek sea-god who was a shape-shifter*) when he was in haste to evade folk; to pierce a knot in a plank, with my knife, at thirty paces; to snuff out a candle with a pistol-shot; to navigate keyholes like the north wind; to walk through dwellings unseen, as if I had a 'hand of glory' (*the dried and preserved left hand of a hanged man*) in my possession; to find the most abstruse hiding places, and without a hazel wand (*which diviners employ*)! How many fine precepts I have received from you, noble sir! How often you demonstrated to me, through eloquent and reasoned deduction, that our trade was made for fools! Why must it be that our stepmother Fortune caused you to starve to death in that cavern, whose exits were guarded, and which the officers of the law dared not enter? For none, however brave, care to confront the lion in his very lair; dying, he can still strike down five or six of his persecutors, with tooth or claw! Come, you whom I, though unworthy, have succeeded; command, with wisdom, this small, chimerical, inauspicious troop, these ghostly mannequins of the brave men I have lost, who, though deceased, will still fulfil their role, like the dead El Cid (*Rodrigo Díaz de Vinar, El Campeador, conqueror of Valencia, who supposedly led his troops into battle after being slain, his body being strapped to his horse*), as valiant men. Your spectral images, my glorious rogues, will be enough to rob those scoundrels.'

His work completed, the bandit stood on the roadside to judge the effect of his masquerade. The straw brigands looked sufficiently ferocious and terrifying, and an anxious eye is readily deceived amidst the nocturnal shadows, or the morning twilight, at one of those dubious hours when the old pollarded willows, with their stubby arms, take on the appearance of men shaking their fists, or brandishing cutlasses at the edges of ditches.

— ‘Agostin,’ said Chiquita, ‘you’ve forgotten to arm your mannequins!’

— ‘You’re right!’ the brigand replied. ‘What was I thinking of?’ ‘The greatest geniuses may be distracted; but the error can easily be repaired.’

And he placed at the end of those lifeless arms, old arquebus barrels, rusty swords, or even simple sticks held at the ready; with this arsenal, the squad at the edge of the embankment had a sufficiently formidable appearance.

— ‘Since the stretch of road from the village to where they will dine is a long one, they’ll probably leave at three in the morning; and when they pass our place of ambush, dawn will be breaking, a favourable time, since we need our troops to be neither too well-lit nor plunged in shadow. Daylight would betray our ploy; darkness would render them invisible. In the meantime, let’s have a nap. The creaking of the ungreased wheels of their wagon, a noise which drives even wolves to terrified flight, can be heard from afar, and will wake us. We who sleep with one eye open like cats, will soon be afoot.’

With this, Agostin stretched out on a patch of heather. Chiquita lay down beside him to take advantage of the Valencian *capa de muestra* (a cloak made from a colourful piece of fabric) that he had thrown over himself as a blanket, and to deliver a little warmth to her poor little limbs trembling with fever. She soon felt that warmth, her teeth stopped chattering, and she fell asleep. We must admit that in her childish dreams there were no beautiful pink cherubs with white wings fluttering about, no woolly sheep adorned with ribbons bleating away, no palaces made of sugar with candied angelica towers. No, Chiquita’s dream was of Isabella’s severed head, gripping the pearl necklace between its teeth, jumping about in chaotic fashion, and trying to tear it from the child’s outstretched hands. The dream agitated Chiquita, and Agostin, half awakened by her tremors, murmured amidst his snoring:

— ‘If you don’t keep still, I’ll roll you down the slope to wriggle about with the frogs.’

Chiquita, who knew Agostin to be a man of his word, believed him, and lay there motionless. The murmur of their regular breathing was soon the only sound betraying the presence of living beings in that gloomy solitude.

The brigand and his little accomplice were still drinking deeply from sleep’s black cup, amidst the moor, when the ox-driver, rapping on the floor with his goad, arrived to warn the actors that it was time to leave The Blue Sun tavern.

They arranged themselves as best they could aboard the wagon, seated on the trunks piled at various angles, the Tyrant comparing himself to Polyphemus sprawled on a mountain ridge, which did not prevent him from snoring, shortly, like a cantor; the women huddled at the back, beneath the awning, where the folded canvases of the stage-sets provided a sort of mattress, which proved comparatively soft. Despite the horrid creaking of the wheels, which sobbed, mewed, screeched, and rattled, everyone fell into troubled sleep interspersed with incoherent and bizarre dreams, where the noises the wagon made were transformed into the ululations of wild beasts or the cries of children with slit throats.

Sigognac, his mind agitated by the novelty of this adventure, and the tumult of bohemian life, so different from the cloistered silence of his castle, walked along beside the cart. He thought of the adorable grace of Isabella, whose beauty and modesty seemed more those of a nobly-born

young lady than an actress in a troupe of strolling players, and he pondered over how he might win her love, not suspecting that the thing was already done, and that the sweet creature, touched to the depths of her soul, was merely waiting for some event or other to give her heart to him, if he chose not to seek it. The timid Baron dreamed of a host of dangerous or romantic incidents, and of a devotion such as one only finds in books of chivalry, which might bring about the daunting confession of his affection, a confession the very thought of which made his throat constrict; and yet as regards that confession, the anticipation of which troubled him so much, the light in his eyes, the tremor in his voice, the half-stifled sighs, and awkward eagerness with which he approached Isabella, and the distracted replies he gave to the other actors, had already pronounced it in the clearest way. The young woman, though he had not uttered a word of love to her, was not deceived.

The dawn sky was beginning to lighten. A pale narrow band stretched above the horizon, outlining in black, quite distinctly, despite the distance, the chill expanse of heather clothing the plain, and even the tips of the grass-blades. A few puddles of water, touched by the rays of light, shone here and there like pieces of broken ice. A few slight sounds were heard, and curls of smoke rose in the still air, revealing from afar the resumption of human activity in the midst of this wasteland. Against the luminous heavens, soon tinged with pink, a strange shape loomed, which from a distance resembled a pair of compasses held by some surveyor measuring out the moor, his features not yet visible. It was in fact a shepherd, mounted on stilts, walking at a reaper's pace over the marshy and sandy tracts.

The spectacle was familiar to Sigognac, and he paid it little attention, yet however deeply lost in reverie he may have been, he could not help being intrigued by another sight, a small bright point which glittered amidst the, as yet, intensely dark shadows of the clump of fir-trees where we left Agostin and Chiquita. It could scarcely be a cluster of fireflies; the season when amorousness illuminates those phosphorescent glow-worms was several months past. Was it but one eye of a nocturnal bird shining, there being only a single luminous point apparent? The supposition did not satisfy Sigognac; he might though have considered the glow of a lighted arquebus fuse.

However, the wagon was drawing closer, and, as it approached the fir grove, Sigognac thought he could make out, on the edge of the escarpment, a row of strange beings planted as if in ambush, whose shapes were vaguely outlined by the first rays of the rising sun; yet, given their complete immobility, he took them for old tree stumps began to smile at his own unease, and chose not to wake the actors as he had at first thought to do.

The cart's wheels performed a few more revolutions. The bright spot on which Sigognac had kept his eyes fixed, now moved. A long fiery jet furrowed a billowing cloud of whitish smoke; a loud detonation was heard, and an arquebus ball flattened itself on the oxen's yoke, the beasts suddenly lurching to one side, dragging the wagon with them, which a pile of sand fortunately arrested at the edge of the ditch.

At the detonation, the resultant thud of the ball, and the motion of the wagon, the whole troop awoke with a start; the young women began to utter shrill cries. The old woman however, accustomed to such adventures, remained silent, prudently slipping two or three doubloons, tightly, into the gap between her stocking and the sole of her shoe.

Standing before the front of the cart, from which the actors were trying to descend, Agostin, his Valencian cape rolled over his arm, his knife in his fist, shouted in a thunderous voice: 'Your money or your life! All resistance is useless; at the merest sign of dissent, my men will fire on you!'



'Your money or your life!'

While the bandit was issuing his highwayman's ultimatum, the Baron, whose noble heart found the insolence displayed by the scoundrel intolerable, had calmly drawn his sword, and rushed upon him, his sword held high. Agostin swung his cape towards Sigognac's legs, and watched for an opportunity to hurl his knife. Pointing the *navaja* towards the latter's side, and flexing his arm with a swift movement, he drove the blade towards the Baron, who, as we know, was, happily, quite slender. A slight movement allowed him to avoid the deadly point; while the blade fell from the

brigand's hand, landing a few paces away. Agostin turned pale, since he was now unarmed, and knew that his troop of scarecrows could be of scant help to him. However, counting on the effect of surprise, he shouted: 'Fire! You men!' The actors, fearing to receive an arquebus ball, retreated for a moment and took refuge behind the wagon, where the women were squawking loudly like plucked jays. Sigognac himself, despite his courage, could not help lowering his head a little.

Chiquita, who had followed the whole scene with her eyes, hidden by a bush whose branches she pushed aside, on seeing the perilous situation of her friend, crawled like a snake over the dusty path, gathered the knife without anyone noticing her, and, springing up, threw the *navaja* to the bandit. No expression could be prouder or more savage than that which gleamed from the pallid face of the child; flashes of anger lit her dark eyes, her nostrils quivered like a kestrel's wings, her parted lips revealed two rows of ferocious teeth, gleaming like those in the jaws of a cornered animal. The whole of her slender frame breathed indomitable hatred and rebellion.

Agostin now swung the knife for a second time, and Baron de Sigognac might well have been felled at the very start of his adventure, if an iron hand had not seized the bandit's wrist at an opportune moment. This hand, squeezing like a vice, crushed the muscles and gripped the very bones, making the veins swell, and blood flow to the finger-ends. Agostin tried to free himself by desperately jerking his arm; he dared not turn round, since the Baron might stab him in the back, and continued to parry the latter's blows with his left arm, yet he felt that his captive hand would tear itself from his right arm if he persisted in trying to free it. The pain became so violent that his numbed fingers opened, and released the weapon.

It was the Tyrant who, passing behind Agostin, had rendered this prompt service to Sigognac. Suddenly he gave a cry: 'The Devil! Has a viper bitten me? I felt its fangs pierce me.'

Indeed, Chiquita was biting like a dog at the calf of his leg to force him to turn; the Tyrant, without letting go his hold of Agostin, shook the little girl off, and sent her flying ten paces down the path. Scapin, bending his long, articulated limbs like those of a grasshopper, stooped, gathered the folding-knife, closed it, and dropped it into his pocket.

During all this, the sun gradually rose above the horizon; a portion of its rose-red disc topped the line of moor, as the mannequins, beneath its revealing rays, gradually relinquished their human appearance.

— 'Ah! cried the Pedant, 'It seems that these gentlemen's arquebuses have misfired due to the damp night air. In any case, they are scarcely brave, for they leave their leader in the lurch, and no more move than did the god Terminus! (*Terminus was the Roman god of boundaries, whose bust in later architecture adorned ornamental boundary-stones*).

— 'And for a very good reason,' replied Captain Matamore, clambering up the embankment. 'They are men of straw, dressed in rags, armed with bits of iron, fellows who would be fine for keeping birds away from the cherries and grapes.'

With six blows from his foot, he sent the six grotesque puppets rolling amidst the road, and they sprawled in the dust with the mindlessly comical gestures of marionettes whose strings have been cut. Dislocated and crumpled, thus, the mannequins parodied, in a manner as laughable as it was sinister, half a dozen corpses laid low on the battlefield.

— ‘You may descend, ladies,’ the Baron said to the actresses, ‘there is nothing more to fear; the danger was wholly illusory.’

Dismayed by the ill-fated success of a ruse that had always worked well before, given the extent to which fear magnifies a threat, such is the cowardice of brigands that Agostin bowed his head with a piteous air. Near him stood Chiquita, anxious and haggard, yet furious as a bird of night surprised by the dawn. The bandit feared that these actors, who were numerous, would beat him, or worse still deliver him up to justice; but the farcical role played by the mannequins had left the whole company in a good mood, and they laughed fit to burst. Heartfelt laughter seldom associates with cruelty; it distinguishes man from wild creatures, and is, according to Homer, the prerogative of the immortal and blessed gods of Olympus who laugh to their heart’s content amid their endless days of leisure.

The Tyrant, therefore, who was kindly by nature, loosened his grip on Agostin, and still holding the bandit’s arm, said to him in a deeply tragic voice, whose tone he sometimes adopted even when speaking familiarly: ‘You clown, frightening these ladies so. For that you deserve to be hanged high, instantly; but if, as I believe, they will pardon you, for they are good souls, I shall not drag you before a magistrate. The role of a guard holds no appeal for me; nor do I wish to provide the gallows with its prey. And besides, your stratagem proved quite comical and picaresque. A fine trick for extorting gold from the cowardly bourgeoisie. As an actor skilled in ruse and subterfuge, I savour it, and your imaginativeness prompts me to show indulgence. You are no base and bestial thief, and it would be a shame, indeed, to cut short your fine career.’

— Alas! Agostin replied, ‘I’ve no choice but to beg mercy, and am more to be pitied than you think; none remains but myself, of a troop which was once as well-composed as yours; the executioner has taken my first, second, and third understudies; I perform the play alone on this stage which the highway presents, affecting various voices, and dressing mannequins to make folk think I’m the leader of a mighty band. Ah! It’s a melancholy fate! And then, few pass along this road, it’s so neglected, drowned in quagmires, tricky for those on foot, hard for horses and carriages; it runs from nowhere, and leads nowhere; but I’ve no means of winning a more lucrative territory. Even the least frequented road has its band of thieves. Those idlers who work, imagine that everything is rosy in a robber’s life; but there are many thorns. I long to be an honest man; but how can I present myself at the town-gate with a truculent face like mine, and in such wild and ragged attire! The dogs would bite my legs, and the officers grip my collar, if I only had one. And now my plan has failed, a well-thought-out, a carefully executed plan, which might have kept me alive for a month or more and yielded enough to buy a hat for poor Chiquita. I’ve no luck; I was born under a baleful star. Yesterday, I tightened my belt a notch, unable to dine. Your untimely bravery, stole the bread from my mouth, and since I failed to rob you, grant me alms at least.’

— ‘That’s only fair,’ replied the Tyrant, ‘we’ve prevented you pursuing your trade, so we owe you compensation. Here are two pieces of gold with which to drink our health.’

Isabella took a large roll of cloth from the wagon, and presented it to Chiquita. ‘Oh! It’s your necklace of white beads I want,’ cried the child, with a look of ardent longing. The actress undid the clasp, and placed the necklace around the neck of the distraught but delighted little thief. Chiquita silently rolled the white pearls in her tanned fingers, bending her head, and trying to view the necklace on her meagre breast, then she suddenly raised her head, shook her hair back, fixed her sparkling eyes on Isabella, and said in a deep and singular accent:

— ‘You’ve been good to me; I will never kill you!’

With a bound she leapt the ditch, and ran to a small mound where she sat down, contemplating her treasure.

As for Agostin, after saluting them, he picked up his mannequins one by one, dismantled them, and carried them back to the fir-grove, where he buried them again ready for another and better occasion. The wagon, which the drover had re-joined, for upon the detonation of the arquebus he had bravely fled, leaving his passengers to fend for themselves as they saw fit, now began moving forward, ponderously, again.

The Duenna removed the doubloons from her shoes, and secretly returned them to the depths of her purse.

— ‘You acted like the hero in a novel,’ said Isabella to Sigognac, ‘and under your protection we travel in safety; how bravely you confronted that bandit whom you must have thought supported by a well-armed band!’

— ‘The danger was very slight, it was barely a scuffle,’ the Baron, modestly, replied; ‘to defend you I’d cleave giants from skull to waist; I’d rout an entire army of Saracens; I’d fight, amidst whirlwinds of smoke and flame, ogres, *endriagos* (*monsters*) and dragons; I’d pierce enchanted forests, bound by magic spells; I’d descend like Aeneas to the Underworld, and without the golden bough (*see Virgil’s ‘Aeneid’, Book VI*). By the light of your lovely eyes, all would become easy for me, since your presence, even the mere thought of you, infuses me with a strength that’s superhuman.’

His rhetoric was perhaps a little exaggerated, and, as Pseudo-Longinus (*the unidentified author of ‘On the Sublime’ and major critic of literary style*) might have said, ‘Asiatically hyperbolic’, but it was sincere. Isabella did not doubt for a moment that Sigognac would accomplish in her honour all those fabulous deeds, worthy of Amadis of Gaul, Esplandián (*see the novel ‘Las Sergas de ‘Esplandián’, ‘The Adventures of Esplandián’, by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo*), or Florismart of Hyrcania (*‘Florismart’, and ‘The Prince of Hyrcania’ appear in the legends known as the Matter of France, derived from the chansons de geste concerning Charlemagne. Gautier here combines the two*). She was right; true feeling had dictated these embellishments to the Baron, who grew more enamoured with each passing hour. Love never finds adequate terms with which to fully express itself. Serafina, who had overheard Sigognac’s speech, could not help smiling, for every young woman readily finds ridiculous all protestations of love addressed to another, which, if their object were herself, would seem the most natural in the world. She had for a moment the idea of testing the power of her charms, and of disputing the possession of Sigognac with her friend; but the inclination was of brief duration. Without feeling any particular interest, Serafina told herself that beauty was a diamond that ought to be set in gold. She was the diamond, but the gold was missing, and the Baron was so dreadfully shabby that he could provide neither the setting nor the case. The grande coquette therefore kept in reserve the telling glance, reminding herself that such love affairs were only fit for ingénues, not for leading actresses, and resumed her detached and serene expression.

Silence gripped the wagon, and sleep was beginning to close the travellers’ eyelids, when the ox-driver called out: ‘Behold, the Château de Bruyères!’

Chapter V: At the Marquis' Château

In the clear morning light, the Château de Bruyères was seen to possess every advantage in the world. The Marquis' domain, situated at the edge of the moor, was cultivated ground, the infertile sand advancing its last pale waves as far as the walls of the park. Its air of prosperity, forming a perfect contrast with the bleakness of its surroundings, gladdened the eyes in a most pleasant manner as soon as one set foot there; it was like a Fortunate Isle (*one of the group of islands in the Atlantic Ocean, considered an earthly paradise in Greek myth*) amidst an ocean of desolation.

A sunken ditch, clad with a fine stone facing, defined the boundaries of the castle without hiding it. In the moat, bordered by green banks, the clear, bright water, its purity unmarred by aquatic weeds, testified to careful maintenance. To cross this moat, one navigated a stone and brick bridge, wide enough for two carriages to pass abreast, and furnished with a railed balustrade. The bridge ended at a magnificent wrought-iron gate, a true monument of ironwork that one would have thought fashioned with Vulcan's own hammer (*Vulcan was the blacksmith to the gods in Greek myth*). The gates hung on two quadrangular metal pillars, decorated with openwork, simulating an architectural order, and bearing an architrave, above which rose a mass of twisted foliage, from which in turn issued leafy stems and flowers, curved in symmetrical juxtaposition. At the centre of this ornamental mass gleamed the coat of arms of the Marquis, 'or' with a fess breasted and counter-breasted 'gules', with two 'wild men' as supporters (*i.e. his arms were a shield with a gold field, and a horizontal red band, the band's edges being 'breasted,' i.e. crenellated, and 'counter-breasted,' i.e. the crenellations on one side were offset from those on the other, the shield flanked by two savage figures*). On each exterior side of the gates, seated on *volute en accolades* (*scroll-like ornaments 'volute', flanking a central element, forming a bracket-like shape, an 'accolade'*) akin to the pen strokes that calligraphers trace on vellum, iron artichokes with sharp leaves bristled, intended to prevent agile marauders leaping from the bridge onto the inner platform via the corners of the gates. A few gilded flowers and ornaments, softening discreetly the severity of the metal, stripped this ironwork of its defensive aspect, leaving only the appearance of elegant richness. It was a well-nigh royal entrance, and when a valet in the marquis' livery opened the gates, the oxen drawing the wagon hesitated to move, as if dazzled by this magnificence, and ashamed of their own rusticity. It took a prick from the goad to decide them. Those brave, over-modest beasts knew not that the plough nurtures nobility.

Indeed, through such a gateway, only carriages with gilded trains, their bodies draped in velvet, their doors adorned with Venetian mirrors or Cordovan-leather mantlets, should enter; but the theatre has its privileges, and Thespis' chariot penetrates everywhere.

A sanded path, the width of that of the bridge, led to the château, through a garden, or parterre, planted according to the latest fashion. Rigorously trimmed boxwood outlined the borders, as if fringing a piece of damask, or rose in clipped forms of perfectly symmetrical greenery. The gardener's shears had not permitted one sprig to exceed another, and Nature, despite her rebelliousness, was obliged to act as a humble servant to art. In the middle of each partition, stood

a statue of a goddess or nymph in a mythological and gallant attitude, and in the Italianate Flemish style (*blending the formal symmetry and structure of the Italian Renaissance Garden with the parterres and geometric precision of the enclosed Flemish Garden design*). Sand, of varying hue, served as a ground for plant designs as regularly traced as if drawn on paper.

Halfway across the garden, a path of the same width crossed the first, not at right angles but ending at a circle whose centre was occupied by a pond decorated with a rockery, which served as a pedestal for a cherubic Triton blowing a crystal jet of water through the conch he held to his lips.

Along the sides of the beds were palisaded arbours, clipped short, which autumn was beginning to gild. Clever craftsmanship had formed the trees, which it would have been difficult now to recognise as such, into a portico, with arches which allowed glimpses, through their bays and other openings carefully arranged to please the eye, of the surrounding countryside.

Along the main path, yew trees, cut into alternating pyramids, balls, and vases, stretched into the distance, displaying their dark, evergreen foliage, as if standing in line, like a row of servants as the guests pass by.

All this magnificence amazed the poor actors in the highest degree, they who had rarely been admitted to such places. Serafina, eyeing its splendour out of the corner of her eye, promised herself to cut the feet from under the Soubrette and not allow the Marquis' love to stray; this Alcandre (*Alcandre was a pseudonym of Henri IV of France, noted for his love affairs, see François Malherbes' poems of 1605-1610, and François de Rosset's 'Histoires Tragiques', 1619*) seemed to her to belong by right to a grande coquette. Since when did the maid take precedence over the lady? The Soubrette, sure of her charms, which were denied by other women but acknowledged, without question, by men, already seemed to regard herself as victorious, and not without reason; she told herself that the Marquis had singled her out specifically, and that his sudden taste for the theatre had been prompted by a glance of hers, one fit to kill, and addressed directly to the heart. Isabella, who was not preoccupied by any ambitious aim, turned her head towards Sigognac seated behind her in the wagon, in which a fit of modesty had obliged him to take refuge, and with her vague and charming smile sought to dispel the Baron's involuntary melancholy. She felt that the contrast between the noble Château de Bruyères and the wretched Château de Sigognac could not but produce a painful impression on the soul of that poor gentleman, reduced by misfortune to involving himself in the adventures of a wagonload of wandering actors, and with her sweet womanly instinct, she dealt tenderly with that brave wounded heart, worthy in every way of better fortune.

In his head, the Tyrant was counting and recounting, like marbles in a bag, the number of pistoles he would demand in payment for the services of his troupe, adding a zero at each fresh count. Blazius, the Pedant, passing his Silenian tongue (*Silenus was the elderly, drunken companion and tutor to the god Dionysus, in Greek myth*) over his lips, thirsting with an unquenchable thirst, was thinking longingly of the hogsheads, barrels, and half-barrels of wine of the finest vintages that the castle cellars must contain. Leander, amending the somewhat compromised state of his wig with a small tortoiseshell comb, was wondering, with a flutter of his heart, if this fairy-tale dwelling housed a lady of the manor. A question of some importance! But the haughty and self-confident, though jovial, manner which the Marquis displayed tempered somewhat the bold advances which he had already allowed himself in his imagination.

Rebuilt under the previous reign, the Château de Bruyères presented itself, in perspective, at the end of the garden, and occupying almost the entire width of the latter. The style of its architecture was reminiscent of the Place Royale (*Place des Vosges*) in Paris. A large main building and two wings, set at right angles to enclose a formal courtyard (*cour d'honneur*) on three sides, presented a well-considered, even majestic layout, full of interest. The red brick walls, bordered by stone at their corners, highlighted the window frames, also carved from a fine white stone. Lintels of the same material emphasised the divisions of the three floors. On each window's keystone, a sculpted woman's face, with plump cheeks and a coquettishly adorned hairstyle, smiled with a good-humoured and welcoming air. Pot-bellied balusters supported the balconies. The clean, shining windows allowed ample curtains in rich fabrics to be partially seen, due to the glow of the rising sun which they reflected.

To break the line of the central building, the architect, a skilled pupil of Jacques Androuet du Cerceau (1510-1584), had designed a kind of projecting pavilion, more ornate than the rest of the building, and presenting the entrance door, accessed by a flight of steps. Four dual columns of rustic order, with alternating round and square bases, as seen in the paintings of Peter Paul Rubens, who was so frequently employed by Queen Marie de Medici, supported a cornice emblazoned, like the gate, with the coat of arms of the Marquis, and forming the platform of a large balcony with a stone balustrade, onto which opened the main window of the grand salon. Vermiculated split bosses adorned the jambs and the arch of the door, composed of two curiously carved and varnished leaves of oakwood, their fittings shining like silver or steel.

The tall roofs of delicately interlocking, semi-circular slates traced pleasantly regular lines against the clear sky, and were adorned, symmetrically, with large chimney stacks, carved on each side with trophies and other attributes. Every angle of these roofs of a purplish blue, lit happily in places by the sun, was embellished with a large bushy lead bouquet. Slight tendrils of smoke escaped from the chimneys, though it was early and the season did not yet strictly require fires to be lit, testifying to a happy, populous, and active household. In this 'Abbey of Thélème' (*see Rabelais 'Gargantua and Pantagruel', Book I: LII-LVII*) the kitchens were already awake. The gamekeepers, mounted on sturdy horses, brought their spoils for the day's meal; while the tenants brought provisions which were received by officers of the pantry. Footmen crossed the courtyard, on their way to deliver or execute their master's orders.

Nothing could be more cheerful to the eye than the appearance of this château, whose walls of new brick and stone seemed to possess the tints with which the cheeks bloom in a healthy face. It conveyed the idea of expanding prosperity, an estate yet in development, but not supported merely by the momentary riches which capricious Fortune, perched on her gilded turning wheel, chooses to distribute to her favourites of a day. Beneath all this new luxury, ancient wealth was apparent.

A little behind the château, on either side of the wings, arched tall, ancient trees, their crowns tinged with saffron hues, but whose lower foliage still retained vigorous foliage. Here was the park, stretching into the distance, vast, shady, and deep, attesting, nobly, to the foresight and wealth of the Marquis' ancestors. For riches can make buildings spring up swiftly, but cannot accelerate the growth of trees, whose branches gradually extend like those of the genealogical trees of the houses they cover and protect with their shade.



'Here was the park, stretching into the distance, vast, shady, and deep...'

Though the virtuous Sigognac had, surely, never felt envy's venomous teeth grip his honest heart, injecting that green venom which swiftly insinuates itself into the bloodstream, and, borne to the ends of the thinnest veins, completes the corruption of even the noblest characters in the world, he could not quite suppress a sigh at the thought that formerly the Sigognacs held precedence over the Bruyères, being of more ancient nobility and already known at the time of the First Crusade (1096-1099). This fresh, new, elegant castle, its tints of white and rose-red like those of the cheeks of a young girl, adorned with every refinement and displaying its magnificence, formed an unwittingly cruel and satirical contrast with his own poor dilapidated manor, collapsing, crumbling to ruin amidst silence and doomed to oblivion, a rats' nest, a perch of owls, a dwelling for spiders, ready to fall about the ears of its unfortunate master who had quit its threshold, in the end, so as not to be crushed beneath that fall. All the years of tedious misery that Sigognac had spent there seemed to parade before him like spectres, their hair soiled with ash, clad in grey livery,

arms dangling, in an attitude of profound despair, their mouths contracted by the rictus of a yawn. Without being envious of the man, he could not help but find the Marquis's state to be a most happy one.

The wagon's halt in front of the steps, roused Sigognac from his reverie, which had proved less than cheerful. He chased away the untimely, melancholic thoughts as best he could, absorbing, with a brave and manly effort a tear that was furtively rising at the corner of his eye, and jumped down, deliberately, to extend his hand to Isabella and the actresses, who were embarrassed by their skirts which billowed in the morning breeze.

The Marquis de Bruyères, who had noted the arrival of the troupe from afar, was standing on the castle steps, dressed in a tan velvet jacket and breeches, grey silk stockings, and white square-toed shoes, all gallantly trimmed with matching ribbons. He descended a few steps of the horseshoe-shaped stairs, playing the polite host who does not look too closely at the condition of his guests; moreover, the presence of the Baron de Sigognac in the troupe could, at a pinch, justify his condescension. He stopped at the third step, not deeming it fitting to descend further, and from there gave a friendly and welcoming wave of the hand to the actors.

At that moment the shrewd, and wicked, little Soubrette showed her face at the opening in the awning; a face which, highlighted against the dark background, sparkled with light, wit, and ardour. Her eyes and mouth flashed. She leant forward, half out of the wagon, her hands on the wooden crosspiece, revealing a little of her throat through the loose folds of her wimple, and as if waiting for someone to come to her aid. Sigognac, preoccupied with Isabella, paid no attention to the feigned embarrassment of the cunning hussy, who sent a bright, supplicating glance towards the Marquis.

The lord of Bruyères responded to her plea. He quickly descended the remaining steps of the staircase and approached the carriage to fulfil his duties as a *cavalier servente*, his arm outstretched, his foot advanced like a dancer. With a nimble and coquettish movement, like that of a young cat, the Soubrette darted to the edge of the wagon, hesitated for a moment, feigned to lose her balance, put her arm about the Marquis' neck and descended to the ground with the lightness of a feather, barely leaving the mark of her little bird-like feet on the well-raked sand.



'The Soubrette...put her arm about the Marquis' neck'

— 'Pardon me,' she said to the Marquis, feigning a confusion she was far from feeling, 'I thought I was about to fall and held onto the rim of your collar; when one feels oneself drowning or falling, one saves oneself however one can. A fall, moreover, is a serious matter and a bad omen for an actress.'

— 'Allow me to consider this little accident as a favour,' replied the lord of Bruyères, quite moved at having felt the young woman's palpitating breast cunningly pressed against his chest.

Serafina, her head half-turned over her shoulder, her pupils close to the outer corners of her eyes, had viewed this scene, enacted almost behind her, with the jealous perspicacity of a rival who misses nothing, and which equals the penetrative powers of all those hundred eyes Argus possessed (*Argus was the guardian of Io, in the Greek myth*). She could not refrain from biting her lip. Zerbina (for that was the name of the Soubrette), with that bold, familiar and forceful move, had

invited the Marquis' intimacy, and was, so to speak, being granted the honours of the castle to the detriment of those actresses who played the major and leading roles; an enormity of grandiose proportions, and subversive of the whole theatrical hierarchy! 'Damn her, that little peasant, she who needs a marquis to help her out of the cart,' Serafina muttered to herself, in a style hardly worthy of the affected and precious tone she adopted when speaking aloud; but spite, among women, readily uses the metaphors of the market and the docks, whether they are duchesses or grande coquettes.

— 'Jean,' said the Marquis to a servant who, at a gesture from his master, had approached, 'have this cart put away in the rear courtyard in front of the outbuildings, and have the stage decor and accessories it contains placed safely in some shed; tell them to take the trunks of these ladies and gentlemen to the rooms designated by the steward and grant them everything they may request. I intend them to be treated with respect and courtesy. Go.'

Having given his orders, the lord of Bruyères gravely re-ascended the steps, but not without having cast, before disappearing through the doorway, a libidinous glance towards Zerbina who was smiling at him in a delightful manner, far too welcoming in its nature as far as Donna Serafina, outraged by the impudence of the Soubrette, was concerned.

The oxcart, accompanied by the Tyrant, the Pedant, and Scapin, headed toward the rear courtyard and, with the help of the castle servants, a palace, a forest and a public square, in the form of three long rolls of aged canvas were soon extracted from the body of the wagon; they also removed a set of antique-style candlesticks intended for wedding-scenes, a gilded wooden cup, a tin dagger whose blade could be concealed in the handle, skeins of red thread intended to simulate blood from wounds, a flask of 'poison', an urn supposedly containing ashes, and other accessories essential to the denouements of tragic drama.

A comedy-troupe's cart contains a whole world. Indeed, is not the theatre life in a nutshell, the true microcosm that philosophers seek in their hermetic reveries? Does it not enclose within its circle the entirety of things, and the whole array of human fates, represented so vividly by the corresponding fictitious ones? Those piles of old, worn, and dusty clothes, stained with oil and tallow, trimmed with fake reddish gold, those orders of chivalry made of metal leaves and rhinestones, those ancient swords with copper scabbards and blunt iron blades, those helms and diadems of Greek or Roman form, are they not like the cast-off clothes of humanity in which the heroes of times long past are resurrected for a moment, by candlelight? A debased, bourgeois and prosaic mind would make little of those poor riches, those wretched treasures in which the poet is content to dress his fantasies, and which prove sufficient for him, aided by subtle lighting and the prestigious language of the gods, to enchant the most indifferent spectator.

The valets of the Marquis de Bruyères, like the lackeys of every noble house as insolent as their master, touched with their fingertips, and handled with an air of contempt, these theatrical accoutrements that they helped to store beneath the shed roof, arranging them according to the orders of the Tyrant, as manager of the troupe; they felt a little degraded to serve mere actors, but the Marquis had spoken; they were obliged to obey, for he was not tender with rebels, and showed himself to be of an Asian generosity as regards stirrup-leather.

With an air as respectful as if he had been dealing with real kings and true princesses, the steward came, keys in hand, to collect the actors, and lead them to their respective rooms. In the

left wing of the castle were the apartments and rooms set aside for visitors to Bruyères. To reach them, one climbed splendid staircases, with steps of polished white stone, navigated landings and passed well-appointed seats on which to rest; one followed long corridors paved in a black and white grid pattern, lit by a window at each end, and onto which opened the doors of the rooms designated according to the colours of their hangings, which were repeated in the curtains of the exterior door so that each guest could easily recognise their rooms. There was the yellow room, the red room, the green room, the blue room, the grey room, the beige room, the tapestry room, the Bohemian-leather room, the sylvan room, the frescoed room, and whatever other names you might wish to imagine, for if I were to give a longer enumeration it would prove far too tedious, and indicate the tapestry-loom more than the writing-desk.

All these rooms were very neatly furnished, and not only with necessary items, but also pleasing ones. To Zerbina, the Soubrette, fell the tapestry room, one of the most gallant, on account of the voluptuous cherubs and mythological figures with which the tapestries were decorated; Isabella was allocated the blue room, a colour becoming to blondes; the red was reserved for Serafina, and the beige one received the Duenna, as if matching the age of the lady in its sullen severity of tone. Sigognac was installed in the room hung with Bohemian leather not far from Isabella's door, a delicate attention of the Marquis; occupancy of this quite magnificent chamber was granted only to important guests, while the lord of the Château de Bruyères was eager to honour a man of birth especially one in company with strolling players, and to prove to him that he held him in high esteem, while respecting the mystery of his incognito. The rest of the troop, the Tyrant, the Pedant, Scapin, Captain Matamore and Leander, were distributed among the other apartments.

Sigognac, placed in possession of his lodgings, in which his little luggage had been deposited, and reflecting on the oddity of his situation, gazed, with a slightly bemused air, since he had never found himself in a like position, at the apartment he was to occupy during his stay at the castle. The walls, as the name of the room indicated, were covered with Bohemian leather embossed with fanciful flowers of extravagant foliage, delineating on a background of varnish their gilded corollas, scrolls, and leaves, illuminated with colours whose metallic reflections shone like real gold. The material was as rich as it was decorous, reaching to the cornice, above which the ceiling of dark oak was neatly divided into panels, lozenges, and coffers.

The window-curtains were of yellow and red brocatelle, echoing the walls, and the dominant colour of the flowers. This same brocatelle formed the upholstery of the bed, whose headboard stood against the wall, and whose legs extended into the room so as to form an alley on each side. The door panels and the furniture were of a similar fabric, and matching shades.

Square-backed chairs with spirally-turned legs, studded with gold nails and adorned with fringes, and armchairs with well-padded arms were placed along the walls, awaiting guests, with others well-placed near the fireplace for intimate talk. This fireplace, in grey and red-speckled Sarrancolin marble (*quarried near Sarrancolin, Gascony, in the foothills of the Pyrenees*) was tall, wide, and deep. A fire, delightful on that cool morning, blazed away appropriately, illuminating with its joyous reflections a plaque bearing the arms of the Marquis de Bruyères. Over the door, a small clock, depicting a pavilion, whose dome was its gong, indicated the time on a nielloed silver dial, with an openwork centre revealing the inner complexity of its movement.

A table, its legs twisted Solomonic columns, and covered with a Turkish rug, occupied the centre of the room. Before the window, a dresser tilted its bevelled Venetian mirror above a guipure tablecloth bearing an entire arsenal designed for gallant and captivating adornment.

Looking at himself in this bright mirror, curiously framed in tortoiseshell and metal, our poor Baron could not help but feel himself most ill-looking, and lamentably dishevelled. The elegance of the room, the novelty and freshness of the objects with which he was surrounded made the ridiculousness and dilapidation of his costume even more evident, a costume already unfashionable before the assassination of the late king (*Henri IV, in 1610*). A faint blush, despite his being alone, passed over the Baron's thin cheeks. Until then he had found his misery only deplorable, now it seemed to him grotesque, and for the first time he felt ashamed; a feeling that was hardly philosophical, though excusable in a young man.

Wishing to appear somewhat better dressed, Sigognac undid the bundle in which Pierre had enclosed the meagre rags his master owned. He unfolded the various pieces of clothing it contained, but found nothing to his liking. Either the doublet was too long, or the breeches too short. Patches, worn to the bare cord, marked the protrusions where elbows and knees offered greater exposure to friction. Between the disjointed pieces the seams yawned wide and showed their thready teeth. Where places had been darned, and more than once, the previous holes were covered with a complex wiry net like those on prison-cell view-holes or in the centre of Spanish doors. Faded by sunlight, air, and rain, the colours of these rags had become so indeterminate that a painter would have had difficulty in designating them by their proper name. His linen was hardly any better. Numerous washings had reduced it to a most tenuous state. Here were shadows of shirts rather than real ones. They looked as if they had been trimmed from the manor's cobwebs. To add insult to injury, rats, finding nothing in the pantry, had gnawed some of the those in better condition, spending as many days on snipping at them with their incisors as on any lace collar, an untimely effort that the poor Baron's wardrobe could well have done without.

This melancholy inspection absorbed Sigognac so much that he failed to hear a discreet knock at the door, the latter opening slightly, giving way first to the head, then the ample body of Monsieur Blazius, who entered the room with many an exaggerated, and servilely comic, or comically servile bow, denoting a half-true, half-feigned respect.

When the Pedant arrived, Sigognac was holding a shirt by both sleeves, and presenting it, full of holes as it was, and as unsolid as the rose window of a cathedral, to the light, while shaking his head with a sad air of discouragement.

— 'Damn me!' cried the Pedant, whose voice made the Baron shudder in surprise, 'That shirt has a valiant and triumphant air about it. It looks as if, while adorning the very breast of the god Mars, it has played a bold part in an assault on some fortress or other, so gloriously has it been perforated, pierced, nay riddled with musket-balls, bolts, darts, arrows, and other missiles. No need to be ashamed of it, Baron; those holes are mouths through which honour proclaims itself, while many a brand new piece of Frisian or Dutch canvas, pleated in the latest Court fashion, hides the infamies of some upstart, some extortionist, some simoniac scoundrel; why, several notable heroes, whose actions are recorded in immense detail in the history books, were none too well supplied with linen; witness Ulysses, that grave, prudent, and subtle character, who presented himself, veiled only in a handful of leaves, to the beautiful princess Nausicaa, as Homer tells us in his 'Odyssey'!

— ‘Sadly, my dear Blazius’, replied Sigognac, ‘I resemble that brave Greek, the lord of Ithaca, only in my lack of a decent shirt. My previous exploits scarcely compensate for my present poverty. Opportunity has been lacking to display my valour, and I doubt if I will ever be sung by the poets in dactylic hexameters. I confess that it angers me, I know not why, since one should not be ashamed of honest poverty, in appearing thus attired before this company. The Marquis de Bruyères recognised me well enough, though he chose not to show it, where he might have betrayed my secret.’

— ‘It is, indeed, most unfortunate,’ replied the Pedant, ‘but there’s a remedy for everything except death, as the proverb says. We poor actors, mere shades of human life, phantoms of folk of every kind, in default of the *reality* at least maintain the *appearance* of it, resembling that same as its reflection resembles an object. When we choose, thanks to our wardrobe which reflects our kingdom, patrimony and lordship, we take on the appearance of princes, noble barons, gentlemen of proud bearing and gallant mien. For a few hours, we equal in the gallantry of our accoutrements those who most pride themselves on such: the fops and dandies imitate our borrowed elegance, whose artifice they render real, substituting quality fabrics for serge, gold for tinsel, diamond for marcasite; the Theatre is a very school of manners, an academy of fashion. As the troupe’s costumier, I know how to turn a coward into a veritable Alexander, some poor devil recruited by chance into a rich lord, a servant-girl into a great lady, and if you are happy for me to do so, I will employ my efforts on your behalf. Since you have been willing to follow our vagabond path, then utilise our resources at least. Leave off this livery of melancholy and wretchedness that hides your natural advantages and inspires in you an unjustified mistrust of yourself. I have, in reserve, in a trunk, a perfectly clean, black velvet suit with fiery red ribbons, without a hint of theatrical dress, which could be worn by a courtier, since, these days, it is a common fancy among authors and poets to stage the events of the day, though the characters bear false names, which requires honest garb, not strolling players extravagantly disguised in antique or Romantic costume. I have the shirt, the silk-stockings, the shoes with bows, the coat, all the accessories of dress which seem cut expressly for you, as if in anticipation of the need. Nothing is lacking, not even a sword.’

— ‘Ah! That I have no need of,’ said Sigognac, with a haughty gesture in which all the pride of the nobleman whom no misfortune can overthrow, one more appeared. ‘I have my father’s own.’

— ‘Keep it safe,’ replied Blazius, ‘a sword is a faithful friend, a guardian of its master’s life and honour. It will not abandon him in disaster, peril, evil encounters, as do flatterers, the vile parasitic progeny of wealth. Our theatrical swords have neither edge nor point, for they only inflict feigned wounds of which one is instantly healed at the end of the play, and without ointment, lint, or theriac (*an ancient medicinal compound, employed as an antidote and panacea*). Yours will know how to defend you in case of need, as it already did when that bandit with his scarecrows attempted his ridiculous ambush on the highway. But allow me to bring you the rags I speak of, from the depths of the trunk that hides them; I long for the chrysalis to become a butterfly.’

Having spoken thus, with the grotesque hyperbole which was customary with him when speaking, and which derived from his theatrical role, the Pedant left the room, but soon returned carrying in his arms a largish package wrapped in cloth, which he respectfully placed on the table.

— ‘If you will accept an old comedic pedant as your valet,’ said Blazius, rubbing his hands with satisfaction, ‘I’ll render you an Andonis, and curl your hair in the most excellent manner

possible. Every lady will instantly dote upon you; for, without insulting your kitchen at Sigognac, you have fasted enough in your Tower of Hunger (*a reference to Ugolino's prison in Dante's 'Inferno', Cantos 32-33*) to possess the face of a man truly dying of love. Women only believe in passions that cause leanness; the pot-bellied fail to attract them, even with those golden chains attached to their mouths, symbols of eloquence, by means of which the nobility, bourgeoisie, and peasantry, hung on the lips of Ogmios, the Celtic Hercules. It is for this reason and no other that I have achieved but mediocre success with the fair sex, and have taken, early in life, to the blessed bottle, which does not demand so great a sacrifice, and welcomes fat men favourably, as casks of large capacity.'

Such is the manner in which the honest Blazius tried to raise Baron de Sigognac's spirits, while dressing him in fresh clothes, for the volubility of his tongue detracted not at all from the activity of his hands; and even at the risk of being annoyingly talkative, he preferred to dumbfound the young gentleman with a flood of words rather than leave him bowed down by painful reflection.

The Baron's toilette was soon completed, for the theatre, demanding rapid changes of costume, requires great dexterity on the part of actors as regards such metamorphoses. Blazius, pleased with his efforts, led Baron de Sigognac by the tip of his little finger, as one leads a young bride to the altar, before the Venetian mirror over the dressing-table, saying: 'Now, deign to cast a glance at your lordship.'

Sigognac viewed in the mirror an image that he at first took for that of someone else, so different was it from his own. He turned his head, involuntarily, and looked over his shoulder to see if there was someone behind him. The image imitated his movement. There was no longer any doubt, it was indeed himself: no longer the gaunt, sad, pitiful, well-nigh ridiculous Sigognac, in all his poverty, but a young, elegant, superb Sigognac, whose old clothes abandoned on the floor resembled those dull grey sheathes relinquished by caterpillars when, as butterflies with wings of gold, cinnabar, and lapis lazuli, they fly towards the sun. An unknown being, previously imprisoned in his sorry envelope, had emerged, suddenly, to shine amidst the clear light falling from the window, like a previously unseen statue whose veil has been removed at some public inauguration. Sigognac viewed himself as he had sometimes done in dream, as an actor in, and spectator of, an imaginary event, taking place at his castle restored and re-decorated by skilful yet invisible architects, in which he received an adored infant, who had arrived there on her white pony. A smile of glory and triumph fluttered for a few seconds like a purple glow on his pale lips, as the tint of youthfulness, buried so long beneath a weight of misfortune, reappeared on the surface of his handsome features.

Blazius, standing near the mirror, contemplated his work, stepping back to better enjoy the sight, like a painter who has added a last touch to a painting, with which he is finally satisfied.



'Blazius, The Pedant'

— 'If, as I hope, you take yourself to Court and thereby recover your estates, grant me, on retirement from the stage the government of your wardrobe,' he said, imitating the bow of a petitioner before the transformed Baron.

— 'I shall note your request,' replied Sigognac with a melancholy smile; 'you are, my dear Blazius, the first human being who has ever asked aught of me.'

— 'After dinner, which shall be served to us privately,' said the Pedant, 'we must pay the Marquis de Bruyères a visit, show him the list of plays in our repertoire, and discover from him in which part of the castle we must erect our stage. You shall be considered the poet of the troupe, for there is no shortage of fine minds in the provinces, who sometimes pursue Thalia's footsteps, in the hope of touching the heart of some actress or other; which is a very gallant thing and much to be praised. Isabella provides a pretty pretext, especially since she possesses wit herself, as well

as beauty, and virtue. Ingénues are often more naturally gifted in reality, than a frivolous and vain public supposes.’

Having said this, the Pedant withdrew, to attend to his own appearance, though he was not especially vain.

The handsome Leander, thinking of the imaginary chatelaine still, adorned himself as best he could, in hopes of advancing the impossible affair of which he was forever in pursuit, and which, according to Scapin, had never brought him anything but disappointment and the odd thrashing. As for the actresses, to whom the Marquis de Bruyères had gallantly sent a few pieces of silk fabric to enhance, if needs be, their theatrical costumes, I believe they had recourse to all those resources that art employs in order to adorn Nature, and to put themselves on a full war footing to the extent that the meagre wardrobe maintained by travelling actresses allowed them. These matters taken care of, they went to join the men in the room in which dinner was to be served.

Impatient by nature, the Marquis visited the actors at the table before the end of their meal; he would not allow them to rise to him, and when they had been given the means to wash their hands, he asked the Tyrant about their repertoire.

— ‘We perform all those of the late Alexandre Hardy (*who died in 1632*)’ replied the Tyrant in his cavernous voice, ‘as well as the *Pyramus* of Théophile de Viau (1621); the *Sylvie* (1626) of Jean Mairet, his *Chryséide and Arimand* (1625) and his *Sylvanire* (1631); *Les Follies de Cardenio* (1628) by Michel Pichou, his *Infidèle Confidente* (1629), and his *Filis de Scire* (1630); the *Lygdamon and Lydias* (1631) of Georges de Scudéry, and his *Trompeur Puni* (1633); *La Veuve* by Pierre Corneille (1632); *La Bague de l’Oubli* by Jean Rotrou (1635), and all the best that the finest minds of our day have produced.

— ‘For some years I have lived retired from the court, and so am not acquainted with the latest developments,’ said the Marquis modestly; ‘it would be difficult for me to pass judgment on so many excellent pieces, most of which are unknown to me; I think the most expedient thing would be to trust to your judgement, which, supported as it is by theory and practice, cannot fail to prove wise.’

— ‘We have often performed one particular play,’ replied the Tyrant, ‘which may have made little impression, but which, for theatrical effects, comic repartee, satire, and buffoonery, has always had the power to make most honest people laugh.’

— ‘Consider no other,’ said the Marquis de Bruyères, ‘and what is the name of this delightful masterpiece?’

— ‘*Les Rodomontades du Capitaine Matamore*’ (*‘Captain Matamore’s Rodomontades’, or ‘boasts’*).

— ‘A fine title, indeed! Tell me, does the Soubrette have a leading role?’ said the Marquis, glancing at Zerbina.

— ‘The most coquettish and naughtiest in the world, and Zerbina plays it to the utmost of her ability. It is her triumph. She has always made a noise in the part, and that without a claque of paid supporters planted in the audience.’

At this directorial compliment, Zerbina felt it her duty to blush a little, though it was hard for her to raise a spot of vermillion on those tanned cheeks. She was completely devoid of that inner

rouge, modesty. Amidst the clutter on her dressing table, there was no such pot of make-up. She lowered her eyes, which drew attention to the length of her black eyelashes, and she raised her hand as if to halt in passing those all-too flattering words, and the movement displayed a well-formed hand, though with a coquettishly crooked little-finger, and pink nails gleaming like agates, having been polished with powdered coral, and the exercise of a chamois leather.

Zerbina was charming in her way. Feigned modesty often adds flavour to genuine depravity; it pleases libertines, though they are seldom fooled by it, due to the piquancy provided by such a contrast. The Marquis regarded the Soubrette with an ardent but knowing eye, and showed the other women only the vague politeness of a well-bred man who has made his choice.'

— 'He has not inquired as to the role of grande coquette, thought Serafina, fuming with vexation; 'that's not fitting, and this lord, so rich in possessions, seems to me dreadfully lacking in wit, politeness, and good taste. He definitely has base inclinations. His time in the provinces has spoiled him, and his custom of courting village-girls and shepherdesses has robbed him of all delicacy.'

These reflections scarcely made the Serafina more amiable. Her regular, but somewhat hard features, which needed to be softened by the studied sweetness of a smile, and a flutter of the eyelids, in order to please, took on, when drawn, a sullen dryness. Doubtless she was more beautiful than Zerbina, but her beauty had something haughty, aggressive, and malicious about it. Love might have risked an assault; Caprice retreated in fear.

Thus, the Marquis withdrew without attempting the slightest of gallantries with Serafina, or Isabella, whom he regarded as being attached to the Baron de Sigognac. Before crossing the threshold, he said to the Tyrant: 'I have given orders for the orangery, which is the largest space in the castle, to be cleared, so as to leave room for the theatre; they have brought planks, trestles, tapestries, benches, and everything needed for an impromptu performance. Keep an eye on the workmen, who are unfamiliar with such work; deal with them as the commander of a galley does his crew. They will obey you as they would myself.'

The Tyrant, Blazius, and Scapin were led, by a valet, to the orangery. It was they who usually took care of the material arrangements. The hall was perfectly suited to a theatrical performance because of its oblong shape, which allowed the stage to be placed at one end, and armchairs, chairs, stools and benches to be arranged in rows in the vacant space, according to the rank of the spectators, and the honour that was to be bestowed upon them. The walls were painted with images of green trellises against a background of sky, simulating a rustic architecture with pillars, arches, niches, domes, and alcoves, all in correct perspective, and lightly garlanded with foliage and flowers to offset the monotony of the trellises' diamond-patterns and straight edges. The semi-domed ceiling presented a view of the heavens, streaked with a few white clouds and dotted with brightly-coloured birds, forming a decorative space that could not have been more appropriate for the new purpose to which it would be put.

A slightly sloping platform was erected on trestles at one end of the hall. Wooden racks intended to support the wings were erected on each side of this stage. Large pieces of tapestry, raised on taut ropes, were to serve as the proscenium curtains, which when opened, would hang to the right and left like the folds of a harlequin's cloak. A strip of toothed fabric, like the trim of a bed canopy, composed the frieze and completed the stage's frame.

While the theatre is under construction, let us turn our attention to the inhabitants of the château, about whom it would be right to supply some details. I forgot to mention that the Marquis de Bruyères was married; he remembered it so seldom himself that the omission may perhaps be forgiven. Amor, as one can well imagine, had not presided over their union. An equal number of noble estates, parcels of land that suited each other admirably, had decided it. After a very brief honeymoon, feeling little sympathy for one another, the Marquis and Marquise, being decent people, had not pursued impossible happiness in a relentlessly bourgeois manner. By tacit agreement, they had renounced the idea, and lived together, in amicable separation, in the most courteous way in the world and with all the freedom that decorum allows. Do not think from this comment, that the Marquise de Bruyères was an unattractive or unpleasant woman. What repels a husband can still delight a lover. Amor wears a blindfold, if Hymen does not. Besides, I am going to introduce you to her, so you may judge for yourself.

The Marquise lived in a separate apartment, which the Marquis never entered without being announced. I will commit the incongruous error that authors of all times have ever committed, and without uttering a word to the little page who would, in fact, have instantly run to warn the chambermaid, I will enter the bedroom, assured of disturbing no one, since he who writes a novel naturally wears on his finger the ring of Gyges, which renders him invisible.

Here was a vast room, high-ceilinged, and sumptuously decorated. Flemish tapestries, representing the doings of Apollo, covered the walls in warm, rich, soft hues. Crimson curtains of Indian damask hung in ample folds before the windows, and, where they were struck by a happy ray of light, took on a ruby-red translucency. The bed-cover was of the same fabric, the lengths of which, accentuated by braid, formed regular bands, shimmering with reflected light. A tasselled frieze, repeated on the dais, surrounded the canopy, adorned at the four corners with large plumes of crimson feathers. The body of the fireplace, surrounded by a tall rail, projected far into the room, and was visible to the ceiling. A large Venetian mirror, enriched by a crystalline frame, whose glittering hollows and angles were alive with multi-coloured gems, leant from the moulding into the room to meet one on entry. Resting on the twin firedogs, each formed of a series of vertical bulges and surmounted by an enormous ball of polished metal, a trio of logs, each of which could have served as the yule log at Christmas, burned with a crackling sound. The heat they spread was necessary, at that time of year, and in a room of that size.

Two cabinets of curious design, with lapis lazuli columns, pietra dura inlays, and secret drawers, into which the Marquis would not have dreamed of prying, even had he known how to open them, were symmetrically placed on each side of a dressing table in front of which Madame de Bruyères was seated, on one of those armchairs peculiar to the reign of Louis XIII, the back of which presents, at shoulder height to its occupant, a sort of padded board with an ornate border.

Behind the Marquise were two maids who were assisting her, one offering a pincushion and the other a box of 'mouches' (*small discs of black taffeta or velvet, employed as beauty spots*).

The Marquise, although she admitted to being only twenty-eight years old, might have already passed the age of thirty, a threshold women have such an innate reluctance to traverse, being far more dangerous to them than the Cape of Storms (*the Cape of Good Hope*) which terrifies sailors and pilots. By how many years? No one could say, not even the Marquise, so ingeniously had she introduced a certain vagueness to the relevant chronology. The most expert historians in the art of verifying dates would have drawn a blank.

Madame de Bruyères was a brunette, whose plumpness in late youth had lightened her complexion; the olive tones of her formerly thinner features, combated by the use of pearl white and talcum powder, had given way to a matte whiteness, a little sickly by day, but dazzling in candlelight. The oval of her face had become fuller due to the roundness of her cheeks, without however losing its nobility. The line from neck to chin was still quite delicate. The nose, perhaps a little too curved for feminine beauty, was not lacking in pride, and separated two level eyes, the colour of Spanish tobacco, to which her arched eyebrows quite far from the eyelids granted an air of astonishment.

Her abundant, black hair had just received its final touches from the hairdresser, whose task must have been quite complicated, judging by the quantity of curl papers that littered the carpet around the dressing table. A line of thin curls, twisted into heart-catchers (*kiss curls*), framed the forehead, and looped at the base of a mass of hair pulled back into a chignon, while two enormous, airy tufts, puffed up and crimped with brisk, rapid movements of the comb, gracefully adorned the cheeks. A cockade of ribbons trimmed with jet embellished the weighty loop tied at the nape of the neck. Her hair was one of the Marquise's greatest assets, being ample enough to be styled in every way, without resorting to the artifice of wigs and hairpieces, and for that reason she was happy to receive ladies and gentlemen at the hour when her women were tending her.

The nape of her neck conducted the eye via full and firm contours to her extremely white and plump shoulders, left uncovered by the cut of the bodice, in which two attractive dimples were to be found. Her breasts, brought together by her tight whalebone corset, formed those half-globes that poetic flatterers, creators of madrigals and sonnets, persist in naming 'hostile brothers', although they are often reconciled with one another, less fierce in this than the brothers of the 'Thebaid' (see Statius' epic poem, the brothers were Eteocles and Polynices).

A black silk cord, traversing a ruby heart, and supporting a small cross of precious stones, encircled the neck of the marquise, as if to combat the pagan sensuality awakened by the sight of her charms on display, and to defend from profane desire the opening of her bodice, poorly defended by a frail rampart of guipure lace.

Over a white satin skirt, Madame de Bruyères wore a dress of dark red silk, trimmed with black ribbons and jet beading, with cuffs or facings turned up like the gauntlets of men-at-arms.

Jeanne, one of the Marquise's ladies, presented her with the box of 'mouches', the last essential mark of fashion at that time, for any woman who prided herself on her elegance. Madame de Bruyères placed one at the corner of her mouth, and thought for a long time about where to attach the other, the one called the 'assassin', as the proudest and most courageous are attacked by it in a manner that they cannot resist. The lady's-maids, seeming to understand how serious the matter was, remained motionless, holding their breath so as not to disturb the coquettish musings of their mistress. Finally, the hesitant finger settled on the place, and a dot of taffeta like a black star in a whiteness of sky adorned the left breast, like a birthmark. Which pair of 'mouches' as much as declared, in bold hieroglyphics, that one could only reach the lips by travelling via the heart.

Satisfied with her appearance, after a last glance at the Venetian mirror over her dressing table, the Marquise rose, and took a few steps across the room; but, instantly changing her mind, since she had realised something was lacking, she returned, and took from a box a large watch, a Nuremberg egg, as such were then called, curiously enamelled in various colours, studded with

diamonds, and suspended from a chain ending in a hook which she fastened to her belt, beside a little hand mirror framed in silver gilt.

— ‘Madame looks beautiful today,’ said Jeanne in a coaxing voice; ‘her hair shows her to advantage, and her dress suits her perfectly.’

— ‘You think so?’ replied the Marquise, her speech trailing away in a distracted show of nonchalance. ‘On the contrary, I feel frighteningly ugly. I have dark circles under my eyes, and this colour makes me look fat. What if I were to wear black? What do you think, Jeanne? Black makes me look thinner.’

— ‘If madame wishes, I will set out her merle, or her plum-coloured, taffeta dress; it will take a matter of moments, but I fear madame will spoil a most successful toilette.’

— ‘It will be your fault, Jeanne, if I put Cupid to flight, and fail to attract all hearts tonight. Has the Marquis invited many to this charade?’

— ‘Several messengers have been sent. The company is sure to be numerous: people will come from all the surrounding châteaux. Opportunities for entertainment are so rare in the countryside!’

— ‘All too true,’ said the Marquise with a sigh; ‘people here live dreadfully frugal live as regards pleasure. And these actors, have you seen them, Jeanne? Are there any among them who are young, of good appearance and noble presence?’

— ‘I cannot say, Madame; these people have masks rather than faces; white lead, rouge, wigs make them appear brilliant in the candlelight, and quite different to normal. However, it seemed to me that there was one who is not too unhandsome, and adopts the air of a cavalier; he has white teeth, and rather well-shaped legs.’

— ‘He must play the Lover, Jeanne,’ said the Marquise; ‘the prettiest boy in the troupe is always chosen for the role, since it would be unfitting to utter sweet nothings equipped with a nose like a trumpet, or make knock-kneed declarations of affection.’

— ‘That would be most ugly, indeed,’ laughed the maid. ‘Husbands are as they are, but lovers must be without faults.’

— ‘Thus, I love these gallants of comedy, ever flowery in their speeches, experts in expressing beautiful sentiments, who swoon at the feet of a merciless woman, swear to high heaven, curse their ill-fortune, draw their swords to pierce their own breasts, breath fire and flame in a volcano of passion, and say such things as drive the coldest and most virtuous to ecstasy; their speeches touch my heart, most pleasantly, and they sometime seem as if addressing themselves to me. Often the lady’s severity renders even me impatient, and I scold her inwardly for forcing so perfect a lover as hers to languish and wither.’

— ‘It is because Madame has a kind soul,’ replied Jeanne, ‘and hates to see people suffer. As for me, I’m in a more ferocious mood, and it would amuse me to see the man die of love in earnest. Fine phrases don’t woo me.’

— ‘You should be more positive, Jeanne; your mind is a little too immersed in material things. You don’t read plays or novels as I do. Did you not tell me just now that the gallant in this troupe was a handsome fellow?’

— ‘The Marquise may judge for herself,’ said the maid, who was gazing out of the window. ‘There he is, crossing the courtyard, no doubt on his way to the orangery, where the stage is being erected.’

The Marquise approached the casement, and saw Leander walking slowly, with a thoughtful air, like a man absorbed by a deep passion. Just in case, he had affected that melancholy attitude by which women, divining some heartache needing consolation, seem to be attracted. Arriving beneath the balcony, he raised his head with a particular movement, which afforded his eyes a particular brightness, and fixed on the window a long, sad look, full of seeming despair at an impossible love, though also expressing the most lively and respectful admiration. Seeing the Marquise, whose forehead rested against the windowpane, he removed his hat so as to sweep the earth with its plume, and made one of those profound bows such as are made to queens and goddesses, and which mark the distance between the Empyrean and mere nothingness. Then he covered his head again, with a graceful gesture, and re-assumed the superb air of cavalier arrogance, which he had abjured, momentarily, at the feet of beauty. It was neat, precise, and well performed. A true lord, accustomed to the world, and familiar with Court life, could not have grasped such nuances any more clearly.

Flattered by this greeting, both discreet and courteous, in which he had rendered to her rank what was owed, and so effectively, the Marquise de Bruyères could not help but reply with a slight inclination of the head accompanied by an imperceptible smile.

These favourable signs did not escape Leander, and his natural conceit did not fail to exaggerate their significance. He did not doubt for a single instant that the Marquise was now in love with him, and his extravagant imagination began to build a whole chimerical romance around the fact. He would finally fulfil his lifelong dream, a romantic affair with a truly great lady, in a well-nigh princely castle, he, a poor provincial actor, full of talent of course, but one who had not yet played before the Court. Filled with this nonsense, he felt roused; his heart swelled, his chest expanded, and, the rehearsal over, he returned to his room to write a note in the most hyperbolic style, which he fully intended to send to the Marquise.

As all the roles in the play were known beforehand, as soon as the Marquis’ guests arrived, the performance of *Captain Matamore’s Rodomontades* could take place.

The orangery, transformed into a theatre, looked most charming. Clusters of candles, fixed to the walls in arms or sconces, cast a soft light, favourable to the women’s appearance, without losing the effect of the scene. Behind the spectators, on tiered planks, were placed the orange trees, whose foliage and fruit, heated by the warm atmosphere of the room, gave off a most sweet odour, mingling with the perfumes of musk, benzoin, amber and iris.

In the front row, next to the stage, in massive armchairs, sat Yolande de Foix, Duchess of Montalban; the Baroness d’Hagetmeau; the Marquise de Bruyères, and other ladies of quality, in dresses of a richness and elegance intended to be unsurpassed. Their attire was all velvet, satin, silver and gold cloth, guipure lace, twisted silver wire, diamond studs, turrets of pearls, gemmed earrings, and clusters of precious stones that sparkled in the candlelight shedding stray gleams; without mentioning the far more vivid sparks emitted by the diamonds of the ladies’ eyes. At Court itself, one could not have witnessed a more brilliant gathering.

If Yolande de Foix had not been there, several mortal goddesses would have caused Lord Paris to hesitate when charged with awarding the golden apple, but her presence rendered the struggle vain. Yet it was not the indulgent Venus she resembled, but rather savage Diana. The young chatelaine displayed a cruel beauty, an implacable grace, and a perfection sufficient to make men despair. Her face, fine and elongated, did not seem modelled from flesh, but carved from agate or onyx, so pure, elevated, and noble were its features. Her slender neck, flexible like that of a swan, flowed, in a virginal line, to shoulders still a little undeveloped and a youthful breast of a snowy whiteness, which appeared not to rise and fall with the beating of her heart. Her mouth, shaped like the huntress's bow, fired scornful darts even when she remained silent, and her blue eyes emitted chill gleams to trouble the aplomb of the boldest. Yet she was irresistibly attractive. Her whole person, glittering insolently, roused desire through the provocative challenge of the impossible. No man could view Yolande without falling in love with her, but to be loved by her was a dream that very few allowed themselves to nurture.

How was she dressed? It would take more composure than I possess to say. Her clothes floated around her body like a luminous cloud in which she alone was visible. We believe, however, that clusters of pearls mingled with the wavy locks of her blond hair, which shimmered like the rays of a halo.

Behind the women, and seated on stools and benches, were the noblemen and gentlemen, fathers, husbands, or brothers of these beauties. Some leaned gracefully over the backs of armchairs, murmuring some compliment or other in an indulgent ear, others fanned themselves with the plume of their felt hat, or, standing with one hand on their hip, planted in such a way as to show their fine figure, cast a satisfied glance over the assembly. A murmur of conversation hovered like a light mist above their heads, and the lengthy wait was starting to arouse impatience, when three solemn knocks sounded, and immediately silence reigned.

The curtains slowly parted, revealing a scene depicting a public square, a vague arena, convenient for the intrigues and encounters of simple comedy. It portrayed a crossroads, bordered by houses with pointed gables, projecting floors, small leaded windows, and chimneys from which naively-painted corkscrews of smoke escaped, rising to join the clouds in a painted sky, to which a broom had not been able to wholly restore its original limpidity. One of these houses, forming an angle of the two intersecting streets, which tried to penetrate the canvas by a desperate attempt at perspective, possessed a *working* door and window. The two wings which united at their summit in an expanse of air, here and there, mapped out in oil-paint, enjoyed the same advantage, moreover, and one of them displayed a balcony which could be reached by means of a ladder invisible to the spectator, an arrangement conducive to conversation, vigorous ascent, and Spanish-style abduction. Our little troupe's theatre therefore, as you can see, was quite well-engineered for the time. True, the set would have seemed a little childish and wayward to the connoisseur. The roof tiles of the painted houses, caught the eye by the liveliness of their red tones, the foliage of the trees planted in front of the houses was a most beautiful verdigris, and the blue of the sky displayed an improbable azure; but the whole thing gave adequate substance to the idea of a public square among the willing spectators.

A row of twenty-four carefully trimmed candles, unaccustomed to such an occasion, cast a strong light on all this honest decor. Their magnificent appearance caused a murmur of satisfaction among the audience.

The play opened with a quarrel between the good bourgeois Pandolfo and his daughter Isabella, who, under the pretext that she was in love with a young blond-haired suitor, refused, most obstinately, to marry Captain Matamore, with whom her father was taken, a resistance in which Zerbina, her maid, who had been well-paid by Leander, supported her tooth and nail. To the insults addressed to her by Pandolfo, the impudent maid, quick to retort, responded with a hundred witty replies, suggesting that he wed Matamore himself if he loved him so much. As for her, she would never allow her mistress to become the wife of that old fellow with the nasal voice, a scarecrow only good for planting in a vineyard. Furious, the good man, desiring to keep Isabella from her lover, urged Zerbina to make the girl return home; but while seemingly giving way to the old man's jabs, the latter yet held her ground with such elastic movements of her body, such mischievous twists of the hips, such a coquettish rustling of skirts, that a ballerina by profession could have done no better, and at each useless attempt on Pandolfo's part, she laughed aloud, without caring for appearances, and showing all thirty-two of her gleaming oriental pearls, which sparkled even more in the candlelight, in such a manner as would have raised the spirits of even that old melancholic Heraclitus. A diamantine glow shone in her eyes, kindled by a layer of rouge beneath each eyelid. The carmine brightened her lips, and her brand-new skirts, made with the taffeta given by the marquis, flashed with sudden shivers of light, and seemed to send out sparks.

The scene was applauded by the whole room, and the lord of Bruyères whispered to himself that he had shown good taste in singling out this pearl among maids.

A new personage then made his entrance, looking to the right and to the left, as if he feared being surprised. It was Leander, the *bête noire* of fathers, husbands, and guardians, the beloved of wives, daughters and wards; the Lover, in a word, the one dreamt of, awaited, and sought for, who must maintain the promise of the ideal; realise the chimerical worlds of poetry, theatre and the novel; be all youth, passion, and happiness, sharing none of the miseries of humanity; never hungry, thirsty, hot, cold, fearful, weary or ill, but always ready, night and day, to sigh, to coo his declarations of affection, to seduce duennas, to bribe ladies-in-waiting, to climb ladders, to bear a torch in the wind, in case of rivalry or surprise, and all this, while freshly-shaven, hair well-curled, in an elegant coat and a clean shirt, with an eye for appearances, and a heart-shaped mouth, like a waxwork hero! A dreadful profession the reward for which, the winning of every woman's love, is not overly excessive.

Finding Pandolfo, when he only expected to meet Isabella, Leander halted in a studied pose before the mirror, which he knew would highlight the advantages of his person: his weight resting on his left leg, his right slightly bent, one hand on the hilt of his sword, the other caressing his chin so as to make the famous *solitaire* on his finger shine, his eyes full of fire and languor, his mouth half-open in a faint smile that revealed the enamel of his teeth. He was really very handsome: his costume, refreshed with new ribbons, his shirt, of a dazzling whiteness, emerging betwixt doublet and breeches, his narrow high-heeled shoes, adorned with a large cockade, contributed to giving him the air of a perfect cavalier. Thus, he was completely successful with the ladies; even the scornful Yolande herself did not find him too ridiculous. Taking advantage of this moment of silence, Leander cast a seductive glance over the balustrade towards the Marquise, with a passionate, and supplicating expression which made her blush in spite of herself; then he turned a dull and distracted eye upon Isabella, as if to clearly mark the difference between real love and simulated love.

At the sight of Leander, Pandolfo's anger turned to exasperation. He escorted his daughter and her maid home, but not before Zerbina had slipped into her pocket a note from Leander addressed to Isabella, requesting a nocturnal rendezvous. The young man, who had followed the father, assured him in the most polite way in the world that his intentions were honest and aimed only at forging the most sacred of bonds, that he was of good birth, esteemed by the nobility, and with some credit at court, and that nothing, not even death, could lead him to relinquish Isabella, whom he loved more than life; a charming speech, to which the girl listened with delight, leaning from her balcony, and aiming pretty little signs of acquiescence at Leander. Despite this mellifluous display of eloquence, Pandolfo, with stubborn, nay senile, persistence, swore by all the gods that Captain Matamore would be his son-in-law, or he would force his daughter to enter a convent. Indeed, he was off, at once, to seek the notary and conclude the matter.

With Pandolfo distant, Leander implored the daughter, who was still at the window as the old man had locked the door tightly, to consent, so as to avoid such an extremity, to his abducting her, and conducting her to a hermit of his acquaintance, who had no qualms about marrying young couples hindered in love by the tyrannical will of their elders. To which the young lady replied, modestly, that while admitting that she was not insensitive to Leander's love, that one owed respect to those who gave one life, and that the hermit did not perhaps command the best qualifications as regards marriage; but she promised to resist as best she could, and, at all events, to enter the religious life rather than place her hand in that of Captain Matamore.

The lover withdrew to plan his next moves, with the help of a certain valet, a sly and witty character, as fertile in trickery, ruses and stratagems as Polyænus (*see 'Stratagems in War' by the second century Macedonian author*). He was to return in the evening and, from beneath the balcony, report to his mistress on the success of his enterprises.

Isabella closed her window, and Captain Matamore, made a spirited entrance as was his custom, his appearance, anticipated by the audience, produced a great effect. A favourite comedic character, he had the ability to make even the most morose of people smile.

Though nothing required so vigorous an action, Matamore, striding forward, his legs like the two arms of an open pair of compasses, and taking six-foot long paces, like a line of Horace (*the Roman poet, employed dactylic hexameter in his 'Satires', where each line contains six metrical feet*), reached the pool of light from the candles and planted himself there, in an arched, outrageous and provocative pose, as if he wished to defy the entire room. He twirled his moustaches, rolled his large eyes, made his nostrils quiver, and swelled tremendously, as if he were choking with anger at some insult deserving the destruction of the whole human race.

Matamore, on this solemn occasion, had retrieved, from the depths of his trunk, an almost new costume which he only wore for special performances, and whose lizard-like thinness further highlighted his comical strangeness and grotesquely Spanish air of pomposity. This costume consisted of a doublet shaped like a corselet, and striped with diagonal bands of alternate yellow and red which converged on a row of buttons, in the manner of heraldic chevrons. The points of the doublet hung very low on the stomach. The edges and armholes were trimmed with a prominent band in the same colours; stripes similar to those of the doublet described bizarre spirals around the sleeves and breeches, giving each of his arms and thighs a ridiculous appearance like that of a *mirliton* (*an onion-flute, or eunuch flute with a sound like that of a kazoo, often decorated with spirals in yellow and red*). If one were to dare to put red stockings on a cockerel, one would have some idea

of Captain Matamore's shins. Huge yellow pom-poms blossomed like cabbages on his red-slashed shoes; garters, their ends hanging, clasped his legs above the knee, which were as calf-less as the stilt-like legs of a heron. A ruff mounted on cardboard, whose starched folds formed a series of figure eights, encircled his neck and obliged him to raise his chin, an attitude conducive to the impertinent nature of the role. His headdress consisted of a sort of Henri IV felt-hat, turned up at one edge and adorned with red and white feathers. A cloak slashed to reflect the style known as 'crayfish-beard' (*slashed, cut or ripped upwards from the hem, the pieces hanging down and each like the tail of a crayfish*), of the same colours as the rest of the costume, floated behind his shoulders, draped in burlesque fashion over an immense rapier, whose point was elevated due to the weight of its basket hilt. At the end of this length of blade, which could have served as a skewer for half a score of Saracens, hung a rosette delicately worked in very fine archal wire (*brass wire covered in cotton thread*), signifying a spider's web, to provide visible proof of the scant use that Matamore made of this terrible implement of war. Those among the spectators who had good eyesight may even have distinguished the little metallic creature itself, suspended at the end of its thread in perfect tranquility, as if sure of never being disturbed in its work.

Matamore, followed by his valet Scapin, whom the former's rapier threatened to blind, paced the stage two or three times, clicking his heels, pulling his hat down to his eyebrows, and indulging in a hundred ridiculous pantomime gestures that made the spectators swoon with laughter; finally, he ceased, and, placing himself in front of the footlights, began a speech full of boasting, exaggeration, and rodomontades, of which what follows is the approximate content, and which might well have proved to scholars that the author of the play had read the *Miles Gloriosus* ('*The Braggart Captain*') of the Roman playwright Plautus, ancestor of the whole line of Matamores.



‘...the ability to make even the most morose of people smile’

— ‘For the moment, Scapin, I am willing to leave my killer-blade in her sheath, and leave to the doctors the task of populating the cemeteries for whom I am the great provider. When, as I did, one has dethroned the Sophy of Persia (*ruler of the Safavid Dynasty*), torn the Amorabaquin (*the Ottoman Sultan*) by his beard from amidst his camp, and slain with the other hand ten thousand infidel Turks, razed with one kick the ramparts of a hundred fortresses, defied fate, flayed chance, scorched misfortune, plucked like a gosling Jupiter’s eagle when it refused to descend to the field at my call, fearing me more than the Titans, outdone musket-fire with bolts of lightning, and disembowelled the sky with the tips of one’s moustache, it is certainly permissible to allow oneself a little pleasure and entertainment. Besides, the universe, now subjugated, no longer resists my onslaught, and Atropos informs me that, her scissors having been blunted cutting the many threads of fate that my *flamberge* (*long sword*) harvested, she has been obliged to send them to the knife-grinder. Therefore, Scapin, I must take my courage in both hands, call a truce to duels, wars,

massacres, devastation, the sacking of cities, hand-to-hand battles with giants, the destruction of monsters like to that which Theseus and Hercules achieved, wherein I customarily employ with ferocity my indomitable bravery. I choose to rest. Let Death catch his breath! And in what entertainment does Lord Mars, who is only a very little fellow next to me, spend his Sundays and holidays? In the white, doll-like arms of Lady Venus, who, as a goddess of excellent judgement, prefers men-at-arms to all others, being most disdainful of her lame and cuckold husband (*Vulcan*). Thus, I too am willing to condescend to appear as an earthling, and seeing that Cupid dared not risk firing his gold-tipped arrow against a valiant knight of my calibre, I have given him a small gesture of encouragement. So that his dart could penetrate this generous lion's heart of mine, I have stripped off my coat of mail, wrought of the rings gifted me by goddesses, empresses, queens, infantas, princesses and great ladies of all countries, my illustrious lovers, whose magical influence preserves me in my wildest temerities.'

— 'Which means,' said Scapin, who had apparently comprehended this dazzling tirade through a supreme mental effort, 'as far as my feeble understanding can grasp so admirable and eloquent a flow of rhetoric, so marvellously embellished with appropriate terms, and Asiatic metaphors, that your most valiant lordship has taken a keen fancy to some young girl of the city; that is that you are in love, like a mere mortal.'

— 'Indeed,' Matamore replied, nonchalantly, and with great good nature, 'you have plunged straight to the heart the matter, and are not lacking in intelligence for a servant. Yes, I suffer the infirmity of 'being in love'; but fear not that it will diminish my bravery. It is good for Samson to let himself be shorn, and for Hercules to twirl the distaff. Delilah would never have dared to touch my hair. Omphale would have bent to relieve me of my boots, and at the slightest sign of rebellion, I would have made her scrub the skin of the Nemean lion on her washing board like a Spanish cape. In my moments of leisure, this reflection struck me, humiliating for a heart as great as mine: true, I have conquered the human race, yet I have reduced it only by a half. Women, through their weakness, have escaped my rule. It would be unfitting to cut off their heads, hack off their arms and legs, and split them in two down to the waist, as I usually do with my male enemies. These are martial brutalities, which politeness rejects. The defeat of their hearts, the willing surrender of their souls, the sack of their virtue is enough for me. It is true that I have subdued a vaster number of them than the grains of sand on the shore, or the stars in the sky; that behind me I drag four chests full of billets-doux, love-letters, and missives, and that I sleep on a mattress stuffed with blonde, brown, red and chestnut curls, which even the most modest have sacrificed on my behalf. Hera herself made advances to me which I rejected because her immortality maintains her at a little too over-ripe an age, even though she does renew her virginity every year in the fount of Kanathos (*the spring at Nauplia in the Argolid*); but all such triumphs I count as defeats, desiring a laurel wreath lacking not a single leaf; else my brow would be dishonoured. The charming Isabella dares to resist me, and though I ever welcome audacity in a fight, I cannot tolerate her impertinence, and desire her to bring me, on a silver platter, the golden keys of her heart, and on her knees, dishevelled, to beg for mercy and grace. Go, call on the inhabitants to surrender. I grant them three minutes of reflection: while I wait, the hourglass will tremble in the hand of craven Time.'

And thereupon, Matamore took on an extravagantly angular pose, the ridiculousness of which was further emphasized by his excessive thinness.

The window, however, remained closed to the servant's scornful summons. Confident in the strength of the walls, confident that they would not be breached, the garrison, composed of Isabella and Zerbina, gave no sign of life. Matamore, who claimed to be surprised by nothing, was nevertheless astonished by this silence.

'Blood and fire! Earth and sky! Lightning and cannonades!' he cried, making the hair on his lip bristle like the whiskers of an angry cat. 'These scoundrels stir themselves no more than dead goats. Let them raise the flag of surrender, let them beat the drum, or I will raze the house with a flick of my wrist! It would serve her right if the cruel girl was crushed beneath the ruins. How, Scapin, my friend, do you explain this Hyrcanian and savage resistance to my charm which is, as we know, unrivalled on this earthly globe, and even on Olympus inhabited by the gods!'

— 'I can explain it quite naturally. A certain Leander doubtless less handsome than you, but then not every woman has a refined taste in men, has cultivated an alliance in the place; your valour leads you to attack a conquered fortress. You seduced the father; Leander has seduced the daughter. That is all.'

— 'Leander, do you say! Ah, repeat not that execrable, and execrated name, or I will, in vile rage, unfix the sun, eclipse the moon, and, gripping Earth by the poles of its axle-tree, shake it, so as to create a diluvial cataclysm like those which afflicted Noah and Ogyges (*mythological ruler of ancient Greece*)! To pay court to Isabella, the lady of my affections, and beneath my nose! You damnable seducer, you shifty ruffian, you libertine in monk's dress, where are you, so I may slit your nostrils, carve crosses on your face, skewer you, lard you, pound you, crush you, disembowel you, trample on you, kindle you on a pyre, and scatter your ashes? Should you appear at the height of my fury, the thunderous breath from my nostrils would be enough to send you beyond the stars to face the elemental fires; I would hurl you so high you would never descend. I myself shudder at the thought of what evil and disaster such audacity would bring upon mere humans straggling in my wake. I could find no punishment worthy of the crime that would fail to destroy the planet at the same time. Leander, the rival of Matamore! By Mahound and Tervagant! Words rebel, refusing to express so great an enormity. They resist being joined together; they howl when one takes them by the collar to haul them together, for they know they would have to deal with me if they allowed themselves that license. Now and henceforth, Leander — oh my tongue, pardon me for forcing you to pronounce that infamous name — may consider himself deceased, and may order his own monument from the stonemason, if I prove magnanimous enough to grant him the honour of burial.'

— 'By Dian's blood,' cried the valet, 'how apt! Here's Leander himself, crossing the square, with measured step. You can tell him what he has perpetrated, the meeting of two such proud brave suitors, will grant us a magnificent spectacle; for I will not hide from you that, among the fencing masters and officers of the city, this gentleman has the reputation of being a fine fighting man. Draw your blade; as for myself, I'll keep watch while you are deep in combat, for fear lest the guards disturb you.'

— 'The mere sparks from our swords will put them to flight; they will not dare, the scoundrels, to enter the sphere of blood and flame. Stay close, my good Scapin; for if, by chance, I am sadly wounded by some blow, you will be there to receive me in your arms,' replied Matamore, who courted interruption during his duels.

— ‘Stand before him, bravely,’ said the servant, pushing his master on, ‘and block his path.’

Lacking a means of retreat, Matamore pulled his felt hat down over his eyes, twirled his moustache, put his hand on the hilt of his immense rapier, and advanced towards Leander, whom he scanned as insolently as he could; yet it was pure bravado, for one could hear his teeth chattering, and see his thin legs shaking and trembling like reeds in the north wind. He had but one hope left: to intimidate Leander with loud shouts, menaces, and rodomontades; hares often hide beneath lion-skins.

— ‘Sir, know you not that I am Captain Matamore, belonging to the famous house of Cuerno de Cornazan, and allied to the no less illustrious Escobombardon de la Papirontonda family? I am descended from Antaeus through the female line.’

— ‘You may be descended from the moon herself, for all I care,’ replied Leander, with a disdainful shrug of the shoulders; ‘what matters such nonsense to me?’

— ‘Head and belly, sir! It will matter to you, in a moment; there is yet time, quit this place, and I will spare you. Your youth stirs my pity. Look at me closely. I am the terror of the universe, companion to the Grim Reaper, patron of gravediggers; wherever I pass, tombstones rise. My very shadow hardly dares follow me, so ready am I to lead on to danger. If I enter, it is through a breach; if I leave, it is through a triumphal arch; if I advance, it is to cleave; if I retreat, it is to shatter; if I lie down, it is my enemy whom I stretch on the meadow; if I cross a river, it is a river of blood, and the arches of the bridge over which I cross are wrought of the ribs of my adversaries. I race, with joy, through the midst of mêlées, killing, chopping, massacring, cutting and thrusting, piercing with the point. I hurl horses and riders into the air; I snap the bones of elephants like straws. In assaults I scale walls, with a pair of awls in my hands, and plunge my arm into the cannons’ mouths to relieve them of cannonballs. The passing breath of my sword alone overturns battalions like sheaves on the threshing-floor. When Mars meets me on the battlefield, he flees, for fear I will knock him down, God of War though he may be; in sum, my valour is so great, the terror I inspire is such, that until now, the apothecary of Death, I have only viewed the bravest of the brave from behind.’

— ‘Well, now you see one before you!’ cried Leander, dealing one of Captain Matamore’s cheeks an enormous slap, the comedic echo of which echoed from the back wall. The poor devil spun around, almost falling; however, a second slap, no less vigorously applied than the first, but to the other cheek, set him back on his feet.

During this scene, Isabella and Zerbina had reappeared on the balcony. The mischievous maid was holding her sides with laughter, while her mistress signalled in a friendly manner to Leander. From the far end of the square, came Pandolfo, accompanied by the notary, who, from behind his spread fingers, his eyes wide with surprise, watched Leander strike Captain Matamore.

— ‘Crocodiles’ teeth, and rhinoceroses’ horns!’ shouted Captain Matamore, ‘Your grave lies open, you brigand, you scamp, you poltroon, and into it I’ll send you. You’d have been better off tweaking tigers’ whiskers, or snakes’ tails in the forests of India. To annoy Matamore! The Devil, with his pitchfork, wouldn’t risk it. I’d dispossess him of Hell, and seize his Proserpine. Come, my slayer, my blade, come to the light, show yourself in the air, shine in the sun, and let your lightning find its sheath in the belly of this reckless fool. I thirst for his blood, his guts, his marrow; I’ll draw his soul through his teeth.’

As he said this, Matamore, with tensed muscles, rolling eyes, and clicking tongue, appeared to be making the most prodigious efforts to extract the rebellious sword from its sheath. He was sweating with agony, but the prudent blade preferred to stay indoors that day, no doubt so as not to tarnish its polished steel in the humid air.

Tired of his comical contortions, Leander, administering a kick, sent Captain Matamore flying to the other end of the stage, and then withdrew after greeting Isabella with exquisite grace.

Matamore, landing on his back, waved his slender limbs like a grasshopper turned upside down. When, with the help of his servant and Pandolfo, he had risen to his feet, and was quite sure that Leander had departed, he cried out in a breathless voice, as if filled with rage:

— ‘Scapin, come bind me with iron bands; I’ll die of fury, I’ll burst like a bomb! And you, perfidious blade, who betray your master at the supreme moment, is this how you reward me for having watered you with the blood of the proudest captains, and the most valiant duellists! I don’t know why I refrain from shattering you into a thousand pieces on my knee, like the coward, perjurer, and felon you are; but you doubtless wish me to understand that the true warrior should remain in the breach, and not lose himself in Capuas (*Capua was the Roman city in Campania which defected to Hannibal, and where he idled away his time in luxury*) of love. Indeed, this week I have failed to rout even a single army, I have fought neither monsters nor dragons, nor have I supplied Death with his ration of corpses, and my blade has rusted with the shameful rust of idleness! Before my sweetheart’s very eyes, this cowardly fool taunts, insults and provokes me. A profound lesson! A philosophical parable! A moral apologue! Henceforth, I shall slay two or three men before lunch, to be sure that my rapier is freely. Let me remember that!’

— ‘Leander would be obliged to return,’ said Scapin, ‘if we could but pull this formidable steel from its scabbard?’

With Matamore, bracing himself against a paving stone, Scapin heaving at the basket hilt, Pandolfo pulling on the valet, and the notary on Pandolfo, the blade yielded, after a few tugs, to the efforts of the three, who fell to one side, all four limbs in the air, while Captain Matamore fell to the other, his legs twisted, still holding the scabbard of the duelling-sword in his hands.

Rising at once, he retrieved the rapier from Scapin, and cried emphatically: ‘Now Leander is done for; he has but one recourse to escape death: to emigrate to some distant planet. Should he sink to the heart of the earth, I will drag him to the surface and pierce him with my sword, unless I change him to stone with my Medusan eye.’

Despite Matamore’s failure, the obstinate old father, Pandolfo, still harboured no doubts as to the heroism of the captain, and he persisted in his ludicrous plan of wedding this magnificent lord to his daughter. Isabella began to cry, proclaiming that she preferred the convent to such a marriage; Zerbina defended the handsome Leander as best she could, and swore by her virtue, a fine oath indeed, that no such marriage would take place. Matamore attributed his chilly reception to an excess of modesty; well-bred women, not liking to display their passion. Besides, he had not yet paid her court, he had not revealed himself in all his glory, imitating in this fashion the discretion of Jupiter towards Semele, whose fate, for having wished to see her divine lover in all the brilliance of his power, was to be consumed by flames, and reduced to a little pile of ash.

Without heeding him further, the two women returned to the house. Matamore, priding himself on gallantry, had his valet fetch a guitar, set his foot on a convenient post, and began to tickle the belly of the instrument and with it imitate laughter. Then he applied himself to meowing a couplet, in the Andalusian dialect, to accompany a *seguidilla*, with such bizarre shifts of tone, such strange sounds from his throat, such impossibly high notes, that it sounded like Raminagrobis serenading beneath the White Cat's balcony (*Raminagrobis is a name coined by Rabelais given to an old cat in La Fontaine's fable 'Le Chat, la Belette, et le Petit Lapin', while the White Cat of fairy tale was an enchanted princess*).

A can of water poured over him by Zerbina, maliciously, on the pretext of watering the balcony flowers, failed to quench his musical ardour.

— 'These are doubtless tears of tenderness fallen from Isabella's beautiful eyes,' cried Matamore; 'in myself, the hero is complemented by the virtuoso, for I handle the lyre as brilliantly as the sword.'

Unfortunately for him, Leander, who was prowling nearby, reappeared, roused by the noise of this serenade, and, refusing to permit this scoundrel to make music beneath his mistress' balcony, snatched the guitar from the hands of Captain Matamore, who was stupefied with fear. Then he struck him a blow on the head with it, a blow so weighty that the belly of the instrument burst, and Captain Matamore, his head poking through, remained caught at the neck as in a Chinese cangue (*mobile pillory*). Leander, maintaining his hold on the neck of the guitar, began to drag poor Matamore to and fro, with sudden jerks, knocking him against the wings, and drawing him near the candles till he was scorched, a scene as ridiculous as it was amusing. Having entertained himself royally, Leander suddenly let go of Matamore, who fell prone. Judge how the unfortunate Matamore looked in this posture, while seemingly wearing a frying-pan for a collar.



‘...Leander suddenly let go of Matamore who fell prone.’

His misery did not end there. Leander’s valet, with his well-known fertility of imagination, had plotted a stratagem to prevent the marriage of the captain and Isabella. By arrangement, a certain Doralice, very coquettish and bold, appeared, accompanied by a sword-wielding brother, represented by the Tyrant, displaying his most ferocious air, and carrying, beneath his arm, two long rapiers that formed a rather terrifying-looking St. Andrew’s cross. The young lady complained of having been compromised by the said Matamore, then abandoned in favour of Isabella, Pandolfo’s daughter, an outrage that demanded bloody reparation.

— ‘Despatch this cut-throat swiftly,’ said Pandolfo to his future son-in-law, ‘it will be a mere game for you, your incomparable valour having been a match for a whole camp of Saracens.’

Matamore after a thousand entertaining antics, reluctantly placed himself on guard, though he trembled like an aspen, but the swordsman, Doralice's brother, knocked the sword from his hand, at the first clash of steel, and beat him with the flat of his rapier until he begged for mercy.

To complete this nonsense, Dame Leonarda, dressed as a Spanish duenna, appeared, mopping her owl eyes with a large handkerchief, and heaving sighs sufficient to split rocks, while waving beneath Pandolfo's nose a promise of marriage inscribed with Matamore's signature, which had been counterfeited. A new storm of blows rained down on the wretch convicted of such profound perfidiousness, and he was condemned unanimously to marry Leonarda as punishment for his boasting, rodomontades, and cowardice. Pandolfo, disgusted with Matamore, saw no further obstacle to granting his daughter's hand to Leander, who had proved a most accomplished gentleman.

This farce, enlivened by the actors' performances, was warmly applauded. The men found the Soubrette charming, the women did justice to Isabella's modest grace, and Matamore received praise from all; no better a physique could ever be applied to the role, no emphasis more grotesque, no gestures more fanciful, nor more unexpected. Leander was admired by the fair ladies, though judged a little conceited by the cavaliers. This was the effect he usually produced, and, to tell the truth, he sought no other, preoccupied more with his appearance than his talent. Serafina's beauty did not lack admirers, and more than one young gentleman, at the risk of displeasing his beautiful neighbour, swore on his moustache that she was an adorable girl.

Sigognac, hidden behind one of the wings, had enjoyed Isabella's performance, with delight, though he had sometimes felt inwardly jealous of the tender voice she assumed, when responding to Leander, not being yet accustomed to that feigned theatrical love which often hides deep aversion and true enmity. When the play was over, he complimented the young actress with a constrained air, which she noticed, and the cause of which she had no trouble guessing.

— 'You play the role of a lover admirably, Isabella, and one could even be deceived by it.'

— 'Is that not my task,' the girl replied, smilingly, 'and did not the director of the troupe hire me precisely for that reason?'

— 'No doubt,' answered Sigognac, 'but how sincerely you seemed to love this fop, whose only talent is to show his teeth like a dog being teased, stretch his calf-muscles, and show off his beautiful legs!'

— 'The role demanded it; should I have stood there like a tree-stump, with an ungainly stance, and surly expression? Have I not, moreover, displayed the modesty of a well-born person? If I have failed in that, tell me, and I will amend my behaviour.'

— 'Oh! No, you did not. You appeared a modest young lady, carefully brought up in the practice of good manners, and one could not fault your acting, so just, so true, so restrained, that it imitated, to the point of deception, Nature herself.'

— 'My dear Baron, the lights are being quenched. The company has withdrawn, and we are will find ourselves in darkness. Place this cloak over my shoulders, and show me to my room, if you will.'

Sigognac performed his new role as the *cortejador* (*suitor*) to an actress without too much awkwardness, though his hands were trembling a little, and they both left the room, where none remained.

The orangery was located some distance from the château a little to its left, in a large clump of trees. The facade seen from that side was no less magnificent than from the other. As the parkland was at a lower level than the parterre, it was reached via a terrace, adorned with a staircase with pot-bellied balusters separated at intervals by pedestals supporting white and blue earthenware vases, containing shrubs and flowers, the last of the season.

This double-railed staircase, projecting from the terrace's retaining wall made of large brick panels framed in stone, descended to the ground beyond. The arrangement appeared most majestic.

It might have been about nine in the evening. The moon had risen. A light mist like silver gauze, while softening the contours of objects, did not prevent their being discerned. The façade of the castle was clearly visible, some of its windows illuminated with a red glow, while certain panes, struck by moonlight, sparkled like the scales on a fish. In this light, the pink tones of the brickwork took on the softest of lilac hues; the stonework, pearly-grey ones. From the new slate of the roofs, pale reflections gleamed as from polished steel, and the black teeth of the battlements stood out against a milkily transparent sky. Drops of light fell on the leaves of shrubs, splashed over the enamel of vases, and studded the lawn that stretched in front of the terrace with scattered diamonds. If one gazed into the distance, a spectacle no less enchanting, one saw the paths of the park disappearing, like the Paradisial landscapes of Jan Breughel the Elder, into azure mists and depths, at whose far end silvery gleams sometimes shone, emanating from some marble statue or fountain.

Isabella and Sigognac ascended the staircase and, charmed by the beauty of the night, took a few turns about the terrace before returning to their rooms. As the place was open, and in sight of the castle, the modesty of the young actress conceived little alarm at this nocturnal stroll. Besides, the shyness of the Baron reassured her, and although her role was that of an ingénue, she knew enough about matters of love not to be unaware that a characteristic of genuine passion is respect.



'...Isabella and Sigognac ascended the staircase.'

Sigognac had made no formal confession of his love for her, but she felt herself loved by him, and feared no harmful action on his part as regards her virtue.

With that charming sense of embarrassment that marks the beginning of love, the young couple, walking arm in arm in the moonlight, in the deserted park, had said only the most insignificant things in the world to each other. Anyone who had spied on them would have been surprised to hear only vague remarks, idle reflections, banal questions and answers. But if the words betrayed no mystery, the trembling of the voices, the accents full of feeling, the silences, the sighs, the low and confidential tone of the conversation, revealed the preoccupations of their souls.

Yolande's apartment, next to that of the Marquise, overlooked the park, and after her women had undressed her, as the beautiful young girl was gazing, distractedly, through the window at the

moon, shining above the tall trees, she saw Isabella and Sigognac on the terrace walking with no other companions than their shadows.

Though the disdainful Yolande, proud as a goddess as she was, assuredly had nothing but contempt for the poor Baron Sigognac, in front of whom, as a dazzling figure in a whirl of noise and light, she passed sometimes, while hunting, and whom lately she had even almost insulted, it nonetheless displeased her to see him beneath her window, beside a young woman to whom he was doubtless speaking of love. She could not accept that he could so easily shake off her influence. He should rather be dying, silently, for her.

She went to bed in somewhat of a bad mood, and found difficulty in falling asleep; the amorous pair filled her thoughts.

Sigognac escorted Isabella back to her room, but as he was about to return to his own, saw, at the end of the corridor, a mysterious figure draped in a cloak, the colour of the wall behind, the hem of which, thrown over his shoulder, hid his face up to his eyes; a pulled-down hat concealed his forehead, and made it impossible to distinguish his features any more than if he had been masked. On seeing Isabella and the Baron, the figure had pressed as close as possible against the wall; it was not one of the actors, who had already retired to their lodgings. The Tyrant was taller, the Pedant fatter, Leander slimmer; it appeared to be neither Scapin nor Captain Matamore, who was recognised everywhere due to his excessive thinness which no coat could conceal.

Not wishing to appear over-curious or bother the stranger, Sigognac hurried to cross the threshold of his room, not without noting, however, that the door of the tapestry room which Zerbina occupied remained discreetly ajar, as if waiting for a visitor who did not wish to be detected.

Once he was inside, an imperceptible creaking of shoes, and the faint sound of a bolt being carefully drawn to, told him that the prowler, so carefully wrapped in his cloak, had reached safety.

An hour or so later, Leander opened his door very quietly, looked to see if the corridor was deserted, and, treading lightly like a gypsy performing the egg dance (*Egg dances involve dancing amidst eggs without breaking them, often as part of Easter celebrations, but are not specifically a Romani tradition*), reached the staircase, descended it more cautiously and silently than a ghost wandering a haunted castle, followed the wall, taking advantage of the shadows, and headed towards the park towards a grove, or green space, whose centre was occupied by a statue of Amor, with a finger discreetly pressed to his lips. At this spot, no doubt designated in advance, Leander halted, and set himself to wait.

I have said that Leander, interpreting as to his advantage the smile with which the Marquise had acknowledged the greeting he had directed towards her, had dared to write a letter to the Mistress of Bruyères, which Jeanne, seduced by a few pistoles, was commissioned to place, secretly, on her mistress' dressing table.

This letter, which I have copied, so as to give the reader an idea of the style Leander employed in the seduction of great ladies, a task in which he excelled, ran as follows:

— 'Madame, or rather Goddess of Beauty, blame your incomparable charms alone for the misfortune they now bring upon you. They force me, by their brilliance, to emerge from the shadows in which I would have remained buried, and approach their light, just as dolphins rise

from the depths of the ocean to that cast by the fishermen's lanterns, even though they find death there, on being pierced mercilessly by the sharp lance-heads of the harpoons. I know only too well that I too will redden the waves with my blood, but as I cannot live like this, it is all the same to me if I die. It is a strange show of audacity to harbour such a pretension, reserved only for demigods, that of receiving the fatal blow from your hand alone. I take the risk, for, being desperate indeed, nothing worse can plague me, and I prefer your wrath to your contempt or disdain. To deliver the coup de grace, one must look upon the victim, and thus, in expiring due to your cruelty, I shall obtain the sovereign sweetness of having been perceived. Yes, I love you, Madame, and if it is a crime, I repent of it not. God suffers to be adored; the stars endure the admiration of the humblest shepherd; it is the fate of a supreme perfection like yours to be capable of being loved only by inferiors, for such perfection has no equal on Earth: and scarcely in the heavens. I am, alas, no more than a poor provincial actor, but even were I a duke or a prince, blessed with all the gifts of fortune, my head would not touch your feet on high, and between your splendour and my nothingness the distance would still be that which lies between the peak and the abyss. To gather a heart, you will ever be obliged to stoop. Mine is, I dare say, Madame, as proud as it is tender, and whoever chose not to reject it would find within the most ardent love, the most perfect delicacy, the most absolute respect, and a boundless devotion. Besides, if such happiness were to befall me, your indulgence would not be obliged perhaps to stoop as low as it imagines. Although reduced, by adverse fate and the jealous enmity of a great man, to this extremity of hiding myself on the stage beneath the disguise of various roles, I am not of a birth to be ashamed of. If I dared to break the vow of secrecy imposed on me for reasons of state, it would be seen that illustrious blood flows in my veins. Whoever loved me would not go astray. But I have already said too much. I will always be merely the humblest and most prostrate of your servants, even if, by one of those acts of recognition which resolve tragic dramas, all were to greet me as the son of a king. Let a sign, the very slightest of signs, allow me to understand that my boldness has not aroused in you too disdainful an anger, and I will expire without regret, scorched by your eyes, on the pyre of my love.'

What would the Marquise's reply have been to this burning epistle, which had been employed several times previously, perhaps? One would have to know the feminine heart thoroughly to be certain. Unfortunately, the letter failed to arrive at its address. Infatuated with great ladies, Leander did not look to the maids and was not sufficiently gallant towards them. A matter in which he was in error, since they may exercise a deal of influence over the wishes of their mistresses. If the pistoles had been supported by a few kisses, and mischievous embraces, Jeanne's self-esteem in her role as a chambermaid, which was equal to that of a queen, would have been exercised more zealously and faithfully, by her fulfilling the commission.

As it was, she was holding Leander's letter in her hand in a careless manner, when she encountered the Marquis who asked her, by way of acknowledgement, not being by nature a curious husband, what the paper might be that she was carrying thus.

— 'Oh! Nothing much,' she replied, 'it is a letter from Monsieur Leander to the Marquise.'

— 'From Leander, the Lover of this comedy troupe, the one who played the gallant in *Captain Matamore's Rodomontades*! What can he be writing about to my wife? No doubt he seeks some kind of reward.'

— ‘That’s not it, I think,’ replied the malicious girl, ‘for, as he handed me the note, he sighed and rolled the whites of his eyes like a swooning lover.’

— ‘Give the letter, to me,’ said the Marquis, ‘and I will answer it. Say nothing to the Marquise. These buffoons are sometimes impertinent, and, spoiled by the indulgence we show them, know not how to keep their place.’

Indeed, the Marquis, who liked to divert himself, replied to Leander in the same style in large and noble handwriting, on paper smelling of musk, the whole sealed with scented Spanish wax and a fanciful coat of arms, to better entertain the poor fellow in his amorous delusion.

When Leander returned to his room after the performance, he found on his dressing table, in the most obvious of places, a letter placed there by a mysterious hand and bearing this inscription: ‘To Monsieur Leander.’ He opened it, trembling with happiness, and read the following:

— ‘As you rightly declare, though too eloquently for my peace of mind, goddesses can only love mortals. At eleven o’clock, when all on Earth is asleep, Diana, no longer fearing the indiscreet gaze of human beings, will leave the heavens and descend to seek the shepherd Endymion. Not on Mount Latmos (*as in Greek myth*), but in the park, at the foot of the statue of Amor, the discreet, where the handsome shepherd will take care to slumber with closed eyes to protect the modesty of the immortal goddess, who will appear without her retinue of nymphs, wrapped in a cloud, and stripped of her silver rays.’

I leave the reader to imagine what wild joy flooded Leander’s heart upon reading this note, which surpassed his most extravagant hopes. He poured a bottle of perfume over his hair and hands, chewed a piece of mace to freshen his breath, brushed his teeth, twisted the tips of his curls to make them curlier still, and took himself to the park and the spot indicated, where, in order to relate all this, we have left him waiting.

The feverish effort of doing so, and also the nocturnal chill caused him to shiver anxiously. He shuddered at the fall of a leaf, and strained his ears at the slightest noise, his sense of hearing trained to catch the whisper of the stage prompter in an instant. The sand squeaking beneath his feet, seemed to make a vast noise that must surely be heard from the castle. In spite of himself, a sacred dread of the woods invaded his thoughts, and the tall black trees troubled his imagination. He was not afraid exactly, but his thoughts had taken rather a gloomy turn. The Marquise was a little late; Diana was leaving Endymion with his feet steeped in the dew for far too long. At a particular moment, he thought he heard a dead branch crack beneath rather a heavy step. It could scarcely be that of his goddess. Goddesses glide along a ray of light, and reach the ground without bending the tip of a single blade of grass.

‘If the Marquise does not hasten, instead of a passionate lover, she will find but a frozen shadow,’ thought Leander; ‘this waiting-about, where one merely broods inwardly, does little for Cytherean gallantry.’ He was at this point in his reflections when four giant shadows, emerging from the trees and from behind the statue’s pedestal, approached him in a concerted movement. Two of these shadows, cast by the bodies of a pair of mighty rascals, lackeys in the service of the Marquis de Bruyères, seized the actor’s arms, and held them like those of a captive being bound, while the other two began to beat him, rhythmically. The blows rang on his back like hammers on an anvil. Not wanting to attract people by his cries, and make his misfortune known, the poor man bore his pain heroically. Mucius Scevola (*Gaius Mucius Cordus, known by his later cognomen Scaevola*,

famous for his bravery, in 508 BC, during the war between Rome and Clusium), showed no more composed a countenance with his fist in the fire, than Leander beneath their blows.

The punishment over, the four executioners released their victim, bowed low, and withdrew without saying a word.

What a shameful downfall! Icarus (*who, according to the Greek myth, flew too near the sun on wings made by his father Daedalus*), plunging from the heights of heaven, made no steeper a one. Bruised, broken, crushed, Leander, hobbling back to the château, back bent, and rubbing his ribs; but his vanity was so great that the idea of having been hoaxed did not come to him. His self-esteem found it more expedient to give the adventure a tragic turn. He told himself that, without doubt, the Marquise, spied on by a jealous husband, had been followed, kidnapped before arriving at the rendezvous, and forced, with a dagger at her throat, to confess everything. He pictured her on her knees, dishevelled, begging mercy of the Marquis who was furious with anger, and, while shedding tears in abundance, promising to resist more vigorously in future such surprises aimed at her heart. Even though he was sore from the beating, Leander pitied her for having placed herself in such danger on account of himself, not suspecting that she was wholly ignorant of the proceedings, and was at that hour resting very peacefully between her Holland linen sheets, bathed in sandalwood and cinnamon.

As he navigated the corridor, Leander was annoyed to see Scapin, peering through the gap in a half-open door, and sneering maliciously. He straightened himself as best he could, but the wicked fellow was not fooled.

The next day, the troop made their preparations for departure. The oxcart was abandoned as too slow, and the Tyrant, well paid by the Marquis, hired a large four-horse wagon to carry the troupe and their luggage. Leander and Zerbina rose late, for reasons that need not be further explained; one of the two had a doleful and pitiful expression, though he tried to put a brave face on it, while the other beamed with ambition satisfied. She even showed herself to be a kind princess to her companions, and the Duenna, a serious move this, drew closer to her with a flattering obsequiousness she had never shown before. Scapin, who missed nothing, noticed that Zerbina's trunk had doubled in weight through some magic spell or other. Serafina bit her lips, murmuring the word: 'Creature!' which the Soubrette pretended not to hear, content for the moment with having humiliated the grande coquette.

At last, the cart moved off, and they left the hospitable Château de Bruyères, a fact which all regretted, except Leander.



‘...They left the hospitable Château de Bruyères.’

The Tyrant was thinking of the pistoles he had received; the Pedant, of the excellent wine he had drunk, in large quantities; Matamore, of the applause he had received; Zerbina, of the pieces of taffeta, gold necklaces and other gifts she had received; while Sigognac and Isabella thought only of their love, and, happy to be together, stole not a single glance, not even for one last time, at the blue roofs and vermillion walls of the castle on the horizon.

The End of Part I of Gautier’s ‘Le Capitaine Fracasse’

Part II: Chapters VI-X

Chapter VI: The Result of a Snowstorm

As one might imagine, the actors were highly satisfied with their stay at the Château de Bruyères. Such windfalls did not often come their way in that nomadic life; the Tyrant had doled out to each their share of the fee, and their fingers' affectionate titillations stirred a few pistoles in the depths of pockets often accustomed to serve as inns for the devil. Zerbina, radiating a restrained, mysterious joy, accepted, with good humour, her comrades' mocking comments as to the power of her charms. She triumphed, and thereby enraged Serafina. Only Leander, still quite exhausted from the nocturnal beating he had received, seemed reluctant to share in the general gaiety, though he affected a smile, even if it was only that of a dog, at the tips of his teeth, so to speak. His movements were constrained, and the jolts the carriage experienced sometimes forced a significant grimace from him. When he judged that no one was looking, he rubbed his shoulders and arms with his palms; concealed manoeuvres which might have deceived the other actors, but failed to escape the inquisitive, and sarcastic eyes of Scapin, always on the lookout for misadventures on the part of Leander, whose conceit was particularly unbearable to him.

The collision of a wheel with a rather large stone, which the wagon-driver had failed to see, made the gallant fellow utter an 'Ouch!' of anguish and pain, whereupon Scapin began a little speech, under the pretence of pitying him.

— 'My poor Leander, why are you moaning and lamenting so? You seem as worn out as the Knight of the Woeful Countenance (*Don Quixote*) when he capered naked in the Sierra Morena as a love-penance (see *Cervantes' Don Quixote*, Chapter XXV), in imitation of Amadis of Gaul on the Rock of the Hermitage (see '*Amadis de Gaula*', revised and published by *Garcí Rodríguez de Montalvo*, 1508, Chapter 3). You act as if your bed was made of sticks, and not soft mattresses with sheets, quilts, and pillows, a bed in short more likely to break limbs than grant them rest, so downtrodden are you, so sickly your complexion, and so blackened your eyes. From all this, it appears that Morpheus failed to visit you last night.'

— 'Morpheus may have lingered in his cave, but that little god Cupid is a prowler who needs no lantern to locate a door in a corridor,' replied Leander, hoping to divert the suspicions of his enemy Scapin.

— 'I am a mere valet in Comedy,' Scapin replied, 'and have no experience as regards matters of gallantry. I myself have never made love to beautiful women; but I know enough to be aware that the god Cupid, according to the poets and writers of romances, uses his arrows on those he wishes to cause distress, and not thumps from his bow.'

— ‘What on earth do you mean,’ Leander hastened to interrupt, worried by the turn the conversation was taking, ‘by such subtlety, and mythological reference?’

— ‘Not a thing, except that you have there on your neck, a little above your collarbone, though you try to hide it with your handkerchief, a black mark which tomorrow will be blue, the day after that green, and then yellow, until it fades to leave the natural colour behind, a mark which looks devilishly like the authentic signature of a blow from a stick, as if writ on calfskin or vellum, if you prefer that image.’

— ‘Doubtless,’ replied Leander, whose pallid complexion had turned red up to the tips of his ears, ‘some dead beauty, in love with me during her life, must have kissed me in dream while I slept. The kisses of the dead leave bruises on the flesh, as all know, which astonish us when we wake.’

— ‘This dead, and somewhat fantastical, beauty, arrives at just at the right moment,’ replied Scapin; ‘but I would have sworn that vigorous kiss was applied by lips of wood.’

— ‘Wicked mocker, and jester that you are,’ said Leander, ‘you infringe on my sense of modesty. I attributed to the dead, modestly, what might be more aptly claimed by the living. Unlearned and rustic as you affect to be, you have surely heard of such pretty signs, spots, bruises, and teeth-marks; traces of the playful frolics that lovers are accustomed to indulge in together?’

— ‘*Memorem dente labris notum*’, interrupted the Pedant, happy to quote Horace (*the usual mark of tooth on lip*’, see the ‘Odes’ Book I, 13).

— ‘The explanation appears rational,’ replied Scapin, ‘and is supported by suitable authorities. Yet the mark is of such a length, that this nocturnal beauty, dead or alive, must have had in her mouth the single tooth which the Phorkyads (*in Greek mythology*) lent each other in turn.’

Leander, filled with fury, wanted to hurl himself at Scapin, and punish him, but the pain from the beating, which his sore ribs still felt so keenly as did his back striped like a zebra, was such that he seated himself again, postponing his revenge until a more fitting time. The Tyrant and the Pedant, accustomed to these quarrels, which amused them, encouraged the pair to reconcile. Scapin promised never to allude to the matter. ‘I will absent,’ he said, ‘from my discourse, all mention of wood in any of its forms, whether cut-logs, estate-trees, bed-frames, or even heartwood.’

During this interesting altercation, the cart rumbled on, and they shortly arrived at a crossroads. A crude wooden cross, split by the sun and rain, supporting a Christ whose one arm had detached itself from his body and, attached only by a rusty nail, hung sinisterly, occupied a grassy mound, and marked the junction of the roads.

A pair of men, leading a trio of mules, had halted at the crossroads, seemingly waiting for someone to pass by. One of the mules, as if impatient at standing still, shook its head, which was adorned with pompoms and tassels of every colour and a silvery frisson of bells. Although leather blinkers embroidered with studs prevented it from looking to right or left, it had sensed the approach of the wagon; the anxious twitching of its long ears testified to its curiosity, its curling lips revealing its teeth.

— ‘The Colonel is pricking her ears, and showing her gums,’ said one of the men. ‘Their cart must be near, now.’

Indeed, the actors' wagon quickly reached the crossroads. Zerbina, seated at the front of the cart, glanced swiftly at the men and animals whose presence in this place seemed not to surprise her.

— 'By God! There's gallant equipage,' said the Tyrant, 'and fine Spanish mules that will cover fifteen or twenty leagues a day. If we had mules like that, we'd soon reach Paris or thereabouts. But who the Devil are they waiting for? Doubtless it's a relay arranged for some lord or other.'

— 'No,' answered the Duenna, 'that lead-mule is saddled with blanket and cushion as if for a woman.'

— 'Then,' said the Tyrant, 'it's a kidnap they plan, for those two squires in grey livery seem very suspicious.'

— 'Perhaps it is,' replied Zerbina with a smile, an equivocal expression on her face.

— 'Is the lady they seek among us?' said Scapin, as one of the two squires approached the wagon, as if wishing to parley before resorting to violence.

— 'Oh! Why ask?' added Serafina, casting a disdainful glance at the Soubrette, which the latter sustained with quiet impudence: 'There are those who willingly leap into the arms of their captors.'

— 'It's not everybody who can be kidnapped so,' replied the Soubrette; 'the wish is not enough, one also needs prior agreement.'

The conversation had reached this point, when the squire, signalling to the wagon-driver to rein in his horses, asked, beret in hand, if Mademoiselle Zerbina was not in the carriage.

Zerbina, lively and nimble as a snake, poked her little brown head out of the awning, and answered the question herself; then she jumped to the ground.

— 'Mademoiselle, I am at your command,' said the squire in a gallant and respectful tone.

The Soubrette puffed out her skirts, ran her finger around her bodice, as if to give some ease to her chest, and, turning towards the actors, deliberately gave them this little speech:

— 'My dear comrades, forgive me if I must leave you like this. Sometimes passing Fortune demands one seizes the lock of hair she presents to one's eyes, in so opportune a manner that it would be pure foolishness not to grasp it with both hands; for the chance once lost is gone forever. Her face, which until now had only shown itself to me as sullen and gloomy, grants me a graceful smile. I shall profit by her goodwill, doubtless fleeting. In my humble role of maid, I could only aspire to a Mascarilla (*a thieving valet in Italian comedy*) or a Scapin. Only the valets court me, while their masters make love to the Lucindas, the Leonoras, and the Isabellas; the lords hardly deign, as they pass, to seize my face and plant a kiss on my cheek, as they slip a silver half-louis into the pocket of my apron. I have found a mortal of finer taste, who considers that, off-stage, the maid is as good as the mistress, and as the role of Zerbina does not require too absolute a show of virtue, I judged it unnecessary to drive that gallant man to despair whom my departure greatly annoyed. Come then, let me unload my trunks from the back of the cart, and receive my farewells. I will meet you some day or other in Paris, for I am an actress at heart, and could never be unfaithful to the theatre for very long.'

The men took Zerbina's trunks, and balanced them carefully on the pack mules; the Soubrette, aided by the squire who held her foot, jumped on the Colonel's back as lightly as if she had studied

the art in some equestrian academy, then striking her heel against the flank of her mount, set off, giving a little wave of her hand to her comrades.

— ‘Good luck, Zerbina,’ shouted the members of the troupe, all except Serafina, who held a grudge against her.

— ‘Her departure is unfortunate,’ said the Tyrant, ‘I would have liked to retain the services of that excellent maid; but she gave no other commitment to us than mere whim. We will have to amend the role of maid to duenna or chaperone in our performances, though somewhat less pleasing to the eye than a roguish face; but Dame Leonarda has a sense of comedy, and knows the art thoroughly. We shall manage all the same.’

The wagon set off again at a pace somewhat faster than that of the previous oxcart. It crossed a stretch of countryside that contrasted in appearance with the physiognomy of the moorland they had navigated. White tracts of sand had been replaced by reddish soil providing more nourishment for vegetation. Stone houses, announcing a degree of prosperity, appeared here and there, surrounded by gardens enclosed by hedges already stripped of leaves, in which the fruit of the wild roses, their rosehips, were turning red, while the sloe berries were turning blue. At the edge of the road, trees of fine stature raised their vigorous trunks, stretching out strong branches, whose yellow spoils littered the surrounding grass or fled at the whim of the breeze before Isabella and Sigognac, who, tired of the cramped pose they were obliged to maintain in the wagon, were relaxing by walking a little. Matamore had taken the lead, and in the red glow of evening could be seen on the crest of the hill, his frail skeleton a dark silhouette, which, from a distance, seemed as if skewered on his rapier.



‘Matamore had taken the lead...’

— ‘How is it,’ Sigognac said to Isabella as he walked, ‘that you, who have all the manners of a young lady of high lineage, as is seen by the modesty of your conduct, your sober language, and fine choice of words, are thus attached to this wandering troupe of actors, good people, no doubt, but not of the same ilk as yourself?’

— ‘Please do not think,’ Isabella replied, ‘however gracious I may appear, that I am some unfortunate queen or princess driven from her kingdom, and reduced to the sad condition of earning her living on the stage. My story is quite a simple one, and since I have aroused your curiosity somewhat, I will tell you something of my life. Far from having been brought to the state I am in by some fatal catastrophe, some unheard-of disaster or romantic adventure, I was born so, being, as they say, a child of the theatre. Thespis’ chariot was my birthplace, and my travelling home. My mother, who played tragic princesses on the stage, was a most beautiful woman. She

took her roles seriously, and even off-stage would hear only of kings, princes, dukes, and other grand folk, treating her tinsel crown and gilded wooden sceptre as if they were real. When she exited to the wings, she trailed the false velvet of her dresses so majestically one would have thought it a river of purple, or the train of a royal mantle. Being proud then, she stubbornly closed her ears to the confessions, requests, and promises of those lovers who always flutter around actresses like moths around a flame. One evening, in her dressing room, when some blond boy sought to take liberties with her, she even rose, and cried out, as if she were Tomyris, queen of Scythia: 'Guards! Let him be seized!', in so sovereign, disdainful, and solemn a tone that the young gallant, completely speechless, shrank back in fear, not daring to advance his suit. Now, this unusual show of pride, and the constant rebuffs meted out by an actress, one of a tribe always suspected of loose morals, having come to the attention of a noble and powerful prince, were thought by him to show good taste, and he said to himself that contempt for the common and profane could only proceed from a generous soul. As his rank in society matched that of a queen in the theatre, in her eyes, he was received in a gentler manner and with less fierce a frown. He was young, handsome, spoke well, was insistent, and possessed the great advantage of being nobly-born. What more can I say? On that occasion the queen did not call for her guards, and you see in me the fruit of their beautiful love.'

— 'That,' said Sigognac, gallantly, 'perfectly explains the unparalleled grace you command. Princely blood flows in your veins. I might have guessed!'

— 'The affair,' Isabella continued, 'lasted longer than theatrical intrigues usually do. The prince found in my mother a fidelity that stemmed as much from pride as from love, but which never wavered. Unfortunately, matters of state intervened; he was involved in wars or embassies abroad. An illustrious marriage, which he delayed as long as he could, was negotiated in his name by his family. He had to yield, as he had no right to disrupt, because of a lover's whim, an ancestral line, established as far back as Charlemagne, or end that lineage in himself. My mother was offered quite large sums of money to soften the rupture which had become necessary, protect her from want, and provide for my upbringing and education. But she would hear none of it, saying that she would never accept the purse without the heart, and that she preferred that the prince be indebted to her rather than she be indebted to him; for she had given him, in her extreme generosity, what he could never repay. 'Nothing before, nothing after,' such was her motto. So, she continued her role as a tragic princess, but with a heavy heart, and languished till her death, which was not long in arriving. I was then a little girl of eight years old; I played children, and cupids, and other little roles appropriate to my age and intelligence. The death of my mother caused me grief beyond my years, and I remember I had to be whipped one time when I was forced to play one of Medea's children. Yet the pain was soothed by the cajoling of the actors and actresses who pampered me as best they could, and as if by chance, always placed some treats in my little basket. The Pedant, who was part of our troupe, and seemed to me then just as old and wrinkled as he is today, took an interest in me, teaching me about recitation, harmony, and poetic metre, ways of speaking and listening, poses, gestures, facial expressions congruent with speech, and all the secrets of the art in which he excels, although only a provincial actor, for he possesses learning, having been a schoolteacher, though expelled for incorrigible drunkenness. Amidst the apparent disorder of a vagabond life, I remained pure and innocent, for to my companions who had seen me in the cradle, I was a sister or a daughter, and as for the gallants I knew how to keep them at an appropriate

distance, by adopting a cold, reserved, and discreet manner, so maintaining, off-stage, my role as an ingénue, without hypocrisy or false modesty.’

Thus, as they walked, Isabella told the charmed Sigognac the story of her life and adventures.

— ‘And the name of this nobleman,’ said Sigognac, ‘do you know it, or is it forgotten?’

— ‘It might be dangerous for my peace of mind to repeat it,’ replied Isabella, ‘but it has remained engraved in my memory.’

— ‘Is there any evidence of his affair with your mother?’

— ‘I have a decorative shield with his coat of arms,’ said Isabella, ‘it is the only valuable gift of his that my mother kept, because of its noble and heraldic significance which offset in her mind the notion of material value, and if it would interest you, I will show it to you some day.’

It would be too tedious to follow the Chariot of Comedy yard by yard, especially since the journey was made in a short space of time, without the occurrence of any adventure worth remembering. I will therefore skip a few days, and join the troupe again near Poitiers. The receipts had been insubstantial, and hard times were upon them. The Marquis de Bruyères payment had finally been exhausted, as well as Sigognac’s pistoles, his sense of delicacy obliging him to relieve, to the extent of his meagre resources, his comrades in distress. The chariot, drawn by four vigorous beasts at the start, was now dragged forward by a single horse, and what a horse! A wretched nag who seemed to have been fed on barrel-hoops, instead of hay and oats, so prominent were his ribs. His hip-bones pierced the skin, and the relaxed muscles of his thighs were outlined by large flabby wrinkles; bony growths, spavins, swelled his legs bristling with long hair. On his withers, due to the pressure of a collar whose padding had vanished, bloodstained scratches were ever more vivid, and marks of the whip scarred the bruised flanks of the poor creature. His face was a complete poem of melancholy and suffering. Behind his eyes, one would have thought the deep sockets had been hollowed out with a scalpel. His bluish orbs had the dull, resigned, reflective look of an overworked animal. The result of those careless and useless blows, was sadly visible there, and a snap of the reins could no longer draw a spark of life from him. His tremulous ears, one of which was split at the tip, hung piteously on either side of his brow and, with their oscillations, punctuated the uneven rhythm of his progress. The threads of a lock of mane, turned from white to yellow, were entangled in the headpiece, the leather of which was badly worn due to the bony protuberances of the cheeks, highlighted by their meagreness. The cartilages of the nostrils oozed moisture from laboured breathing, and the worn jaws pouted in sullen lips.

On his white coat, speckled with red, sweat had traced streaks like those with which rain makes on plastered walls, agglutinated the flakes of hair beneath his belly, stained his lower limbs, and made a pitiful cement of his droppings. Nothing could be more lamentable to see, and the horse Death rides in the Book of Revelation would have seemed a dashing beast, fit to parade at equestrian displays, beside this pitiful and disastrous animal whose shoulders seemed to become more disjointed at every step, and who, with painful gaze, seemed to invoke the crowning mercy of the knacker’s final blow. The temperature falling rapidly, he walked amidst the steam rising from his flanks and nostrils.

There were now only three women in the cart. The men went on foot so as not to overload the wagon, which it was not difficult for them to keep up with, and even outpace. With only

unpleasant thoughts to express, they remained silent, and walked in solitary fashion, wrapping themselves in their cloaks as best they could.

Sigognac, well-nigh discouraged, wondered if he would not have done better to remain in the dilapidated castle of his fathers, even if he died of hunger there beside his crude coat of arms, in silence and solitude, than wander the roads with these bohemians.

He thought of brave Pierre, of Bayard, Miraut, and Beelzebub, his faithful companions in that tedious existence. His heart sank regardless, and a nervous spasm rose from his chest to his throat, the kind which usually resolves itself in tears; but a glance at Isabella, seated on the front of the wagon, and wrapped tightly in her cloak, strengthened his courage. The young woman smiled at him; she did not seem upset by their state of misery; her mind was content; what did the sufferings and fatigues of the body matter?

The landscape which they traversed was hardly likely to dispel his melancholy. In the foreground withered the convulsive skeletons of old elm trees, tormented, twisted, lopped, whose black branches like capricious filaments were highlighted against a low sky, yellowish-grey in colour, and dense with snow, which allowed only a livid light to filter through; in the middle-distance, stretched plains devoid of cultivation, bordered near the horizon by bare hills, or lines of russet-hued woods. From time to time, a cottage like a chalky stain, sending upwards a slight spiral of smoke, appeared between the close mesh of twigs that constituted its fencing. The ravine created by a gutter furrowed the earth with a long scar. In spring, this countryside, dressed in verdure, might have seemed pleasant; but, clad in the grey livery of winter, it appeared merely monotonous, impoverished, and sad. From time to time, a farmhand, or an old woman bent beneath a bundle of dead wood, passed by, haggard-looking and ragged, who, far from animating this desert, on the contrary accentuated its solitude. Magpies, hopping over the brown earth, their tails sticking from their rumps like closed fans, seemed to be its true inhabitants. They chattered at the sight of the wagon as if communicating their thoughts about the actors, and danced in front of them in a derisory way, like the wicked, heartless birds they are, insensitive to the misery of the poor world.

A bitter breeze whistled about the troupe, plastering their thin capes to their bodies, and slapping their faces with its chapped fingers. Snowflakes soon mingled with the whirlwinds of air, rising, falling, criss-crossing each other without reaching the ground, or lodging anywhere, so strong were the gusts. They became so densely crowded that they formed a kind of white fog a few steps from the blinded pedestrians. Through this silvery swarming cloud, the nearest objects lost their true appearance, or were no longer distinguishable.

— ‘It seems,’ said the Pedant, who was walking behind the cart to shelter himself a little, ‘that the heavenly housekeeper is plucking geese up there and shaking the down from her apron all over us. Their flesh would please me more, and I would be man enough to eat it even without lemon or spices.’

— ‘Even without salt,’ added the Tyrant, ‘for my stomach no longer recalls that omelette whose eggs chirped when they were broken on the edge of the pan, and which I swallowed under the sarcastic and fallacious title of breakfast, despite the little beaks that bristled within it.’

Sigognac had also taken refuge behind the wagon, and the Pedant said to him: 'This is dreadful weather, Monsieur le Baron, and I regret your having to share our bad fortune, yet this is but a temporary reversal, and though we are not progressing swiftly, we are nonetheless nearing Paris.'

— 'I was not raised to a life of comfort,' replied Sigognac, 'so I am scarcely one to be troubled by a few snowflakes. It is these poor women whom I pity, obliged, despite their gender, to endure fatigue and privations like country cart-drivers.'

— 'They have been accustomed to do so for a long while, and what would be challenging for ladies of quality, or bourgeois women, no longer seems painful to them.'

The storm was intensifying. Driven by the wind, the snow blew like white smoke, skimming the ground, and only halting when it was blocked by some obstacle, the slope of a hill, a pile of scree, a hedge, or the bank of a ditch. There, it piled up prodigiously quickly, overflowing in a cascade on the other side of the temporary dike. At other times it formed spirals like a hurricane, and rose in whirls to the sky, to descend again creating heaped masses which the storm immediately dispersed. A few minutes had been long enough for it to powder Isabella, Serafina and Leonarda with its whiteness, beneath the fluttering canvas of the cart, though they had taken refuge at the very back, sheltered by a wall of luggage.

Stunned by the whiplash from this driven snow and air, the horse was barely able to advance. He was panting, his flanks were heaving, and his hooves slipped at every step. The Tyrant took him by the bridle and, walking beside him, supported him somewhat with hand and arm. The Pedant, Sigognac, and Scapin pushed against the wheels. Leander cracked the whip to excite the poor beast: to strike him would have been pure cruelty. As for Matamore, he had lagged somewhat behind, for he was so light in weight, given his phenomenal leanness, that the wind prevented his moving forward, though he grasped a stone in each hand, and had filled his pockets with pebbles for ballast.

The snowstorm, far from abating, raged more furiously, driving onwards the mass of white flakes which was agitated with a thousand eddies like the foaming crests of an ocean wave. The gale waxed so furious that the actors were forced, though they were in haste to reach the village, to halt the wagon, and steer it away from the wind. The poor nag could stand it no longer; his legs stiffened; shivers ran over his steaming skin bathed in sweat. One more effort, and he would have fallen dead; already a drop of blood was pearling in his nostrils, widely dilated due to the pressure on his chest, and glassy gleams traversed the orbs of his eyes.

In the dark it is easy to imagine terrible things. Darkness readily prompts dread, but the horror of whiteness is less generally appreciated. However, nothing could have felt more sinister than the situation our poor actors were in, pale with hunger, blue with cold, blinded by snow, and lost somewhere on the road, amidst the dizzying whirlwind of icy grains enveloping them on every side. They huddled beneath the tarpaulin to allow the snowstorm to pass, pressing against each other to benefit from one another's warmth. At last, the gusts faded, and the snow, suspended in the air, fell less tumultuously to the ground. As far as the eye could see, the countryside had disappeared beneath a silvery shroud.

— 'Where's Matamore,' said Blazius; 'has the storm perchance blown him as high as the moon?'

— ‘Indeed,’ added the Tyrant, ‘I don’t see him. He may be huddled beneath our scenery in the depths of the cart. Hey! Braggart! Shake a leg if you’re slumbering there, and answer the call.’

Matamore spoke not a word. No human shape stirred beneath the heap of old canvas.

— ‘Ho there! Braggart!’ the Tyrant bellowed repeatedly, in his loudest tragedian’s voice, and in a tone that would have awakened the Seven Sleepers, and their dog, in that cave of theirs.

— ‘We’ve not seen him, for a while,’ said the actresses, ‘blinded as we were by whirling snow, but we were not much concerned by his absence, thinking he was but a few steps from the wagon.’

— ‘Lord!’ said Blazius, ‘This is odd! I hope nothing serious has happened.’

— ‘Doubtless he took shelter behind some tree trunk during the worst of the storm,’ said Sigognac, ‘and will soon rejoin us.’

They decided to wait a few minutes, before setting out in search of him. Nothing could be seen on the road, though against the background whiteness, even if it was twilight, a human form should have been readily visible even at a considerable distance. Night, which descends so swiftly after the few brief hours of December daylight, had fallen, but without bringing with it complete darkness. The glimmer of snow fought with the shadows, and by a strange visual reversal it seemed as if what light there was shone from the ground. The horizon betrayed itself as a line of white, and was still apparent in the far distance. The forms of the darkened trees, powdered with snow, appeared in outline like those arboreal patterns with which the frost coats window panes and, from time to time, snowflakes, shaken from some branch or other, fell like the silver tears adorning funeral palls, from the shadowy canopy. It was a spectacle full of melancholy; a dog began to howl like a lost soul, as if to give voice to the desolation of the landscape and express the heartbreaking desolation of the scene. Sometimes it seems that Nature, growing weary of silence, confides her secret sorrows to the moans of the wind, or the lamentations of some creature.

How lugubrious, in the silence of the night, is such desperate barking which ends in a moan, and which seems to be provoked by the passage of spectres invisible to the human eye! The instinct of the beast, in communion with the soul of things, senses impending misfortune, and deplores it before it is known. There is in such a howling interspersed with sobs, a terror of the future, the anguish of death, and a voice of dismay provoked by the supernatural. The most steadfastly courageous cannot hear it without being moved, and the cry makes the hair on one’s flesh stand on end, like the passage of that spirit of which Job speaks (*see Job 4:15*).

The barking, at first distant, drew nearer, and they eventually distinguished in the midst of the plain, seated on its rear in the snow, a large black dog, muzzle raised to the heavens, seemingly whining this gargled lament.

— ‘Something has happened to our poor comrade,’ cried the Tyrant. ‘That cursed beast is howling as if for the dead.’

The women, their hearts heavy with a sinister foreboding, made the sign of the cross, most devoutly. Isabella, virtuously, murmured the beginning of a prayer.

— ‘We must search for him without further delay,’ said Blazius, ‘bearing the lantern; its light will serve as his guide, his pole star, if he has strayed from the road, and wandered into the fields; for amidst such snow which has shrouded the highway in white, it is easy to go astray.’

A flint was struck, and the candle-end, in the belly of the lantern, once lit, cast a bright enough light through its panes made of thin horn to be seen from afar.

The Tyrant, Blazius, and Sigognac set out on their quest. Scapin and Leander remained to guard the wagon and reassure the women, who were increasingly concerned about the whole venture. To add to the gloom of the scene, the black dog was still howling desperately, and the wind driving its aerial chariot over the countryside with a dull murmur, as if bearing souls on a journey.

The storm had so stirred the snow as to erase all traces, or at least to render imprints uncertain. Darkness made the search difficult, and when Blazius angled the lantern towards the ground, he sometimes found the Tyrant's large hollow footprints moulded in the white dust, but never those of Matamore, which, had he come that far, being no heavier than that of a bird, would scarcely have marked it.

They walked thus for half a mile or more, raising the lantern to attract the attention of the lost actor, shouting at the top of their lungs: 'Matamore! Matamore! Matamore!'

This cry, similar to that which the ancients addressed to the deceased's corpse before leaving the place of burial, was met with silence, or some bird flew in fear, chirping with a sudden flutter of wings, to lose itself deeper in the night. Sometimes an owl, offended by the light, hooted in a lamentable manner. Finally, Sigognac, who had keen eyesight, thought he could make out amidst the shadows, at the foot of a tree, a figure of phantasmal appearance, strangely stiff, and sinisterly motionless. He warned his companions, who hastened with him in that direction.

It was, indeed, poor Matamore. His back was leaning against the tree, and his long legs were stretched on the ground, half-concealed under a covering of snow. His long rapier, which he never removed, formed an odd angle with his torso, a thing which would have appeared laughable in any other circumstance. He moved no more than a tree-stump does, as his comrades approached. Troubled by his motionless attitude, Blazius directed the beam of light onto Matamore's face, and almost let the lantern fall, so much terror did the sight cause him.



'It was, indeed, poor Matamore.'

The mask, thus illuminated, no longer displayed the colours of life. It was pale as wax. The nose, pinched at the sides by Death's gnarled fingers, gleamed like a cuttlefish bone; the skin was stretched taut over the temples. Snowflakes had caught on the eyebrows and eyelashes, and the dilated staring eyes looked like orbs of glass. At each end of the whiskers glittered an icicle whose weight made the hair curve downwards. The stamp of eternal silence sealed those lips from which so many joyous boasts had flown, and the skull, sculpted in all its leanness, was already apparent beneath that pallid face, in which the habit of grimacing had dug terrifying comedic folds, which the corpse retained, for it is one of the miserable results of such a life, that such actors lack gravity even in death.

Still harbouring a degree of hope, the Tyrant tried to raise Matamore's hand, but the arm already stiff, fell back again, solidly, with a noise like a puppet's wooden arm the string to which

has snapped. The poor devil had left the theatre of life for that of the after-world. However, unable to accept that he was dead, the Tyrant asked Blazius if he had not his flask about him. The Pedant never parted with that precious piece of equipment. There were still a few drops of wine left in its depths, and he introduced its neck between the Braggart's violet lips; but the teeth remained stubbornly clenched, and the liquor spurted out in red drops from the corners of the mouth. Vital breath had forever abandoned the frail clay, for the slightest sign of it would have produced visible steam in that chill air.

— 'Don't torment his poor remains,' said Sigognac, 'don't you see that he's dead?'

— 'Alas! Yes,' replied Blazius, 'as dead as Cheops beneath his Great Pyramid. No doubt, stunned by the snowstorm and unable to fight its fury, he halted beneath this tree, and as he had not two ounces of flesh on his bones, his marrow will soon have frozen. In order to make an impression on the Paris stage, he reduced his ration every day, and was thinner from fasting than a greyhound after the race. Poor Braggart, now you are safe from the malice, the beating, kicks, and blows which your role obliged you to suffer! No one will laugh in your face again.'

— 'What shall we do with his body?' interrupted the Tyrant. 'We cannot leave him here on the edge of this ditch to be torn to pieces by wolves, dogs, and carrion birds, though there is little flesh for even the worms to dine on.'

— 'No, indeed,' said Blazius; 'he was a good and loyal comrade, and since he is light enough, you take his head, I'll take his feet, and we'll carry him to the cart. Tomorrow at daylight we'll bury him in some corner as decently as possible; for, to us histrions, our stepmother of a Church closes the gates of the cemetery, and refuses us the blessing of resting in holy ground. We must rot on the gallows, as dead dogs or horses rot, after entertaining the decent people all our lives. You, Monsieur Baron, you will lead us, and hold the lamp.'

Sigognac nodded his agreement. The two actors bent down and cleared the snow that already cloaked Matamore like a premature shroud, lifted the slender corpse which weighed less than that of a child, and set off preceded by the Baron, who directed the lantern beam in front of them to light the way.

Fortunately, no one was passing by the road at that hour, for it would have appeared a somewhat frightening and mysterious spectacle to the traveller, this funereal group, lit strangely by the reddish rays of the lantern, and casting long, deformed shadows on the white expanse of snow behind them. The thought that some crime or deed of witchcraft was afoot, would doubtless have come to them.

The black dog, as if its role as a crier of doom was over, had ceased its howling. A deathly silence reigned over the distant countryside, for snow has the property of muffling all sound.

For some time Scapin, Leander, and the actresses had been aware of the reddened beam of the little lantern swinging from Sigognac's hand, casting sudden light on objects and drawing them forth from the shadows in strange or formidable guise till they vanished into the darkness once more. Revealed and hidden, alternately, by this wavering light, the Tyrant and Blazius, linked by the horizontal corpse of poor Matamore, like two words joined by a hyphen, took on an enigmatically lugubrious appearance. Scapin and Leander, moved by anxious curiosity, went to meet the procession.

— ‘Well! What’s this?’ said the valet, once he had reached his comrades. ‘Is Matamore ill that you carry him like this, as stiff as if he’d swallowed his rapier?’

— ‘He’s not ill,’ replied Blazius, ‘indeed, he now enjoys permanent health. Gout, fever, catarrh, gallstones, can no longer afflict him.’

— ‘Then, he’s dead!’ cried Scapin in a tone indicating painful surprise, as he leant over the corpse’s face.

— ‘Very dead, in fact as dead as can be, if there are degrees of that state, for added to the natural chill of death is that of the frost,’ replied Blazius in a troubled voice that betrayed more emotion than the words suggested.

— ‘He has lived his life, as the prince’s companion always declares, in the last act of a tragedy!’ added the Tyrant. ‘But relieve us of this burden a little, if you please. It’s your turn. We have carried our dear comrade far enough without hope of pay or reward.’

Scapin replaced the Tyrant, Leander took over from Blazius, though an undertaker’s work was scarcely to his liking, and the procession resumed its march. In a few minutes, they reached the wagon which had halted in the middle of the road. Despite the cold, Isabella and Serafina had jumped down from the cart, where the Duenna alone still crouched, her owl eyes open wide. At the sight of Matamore, pale, stiff, and frozen, his face a motionless mask through which the spirit no longer looked forth, the actresses uttered cries of terror and pain. Two tears even sprang from Isabella’s clear eyes, which promptly froze in the harsh nocturnal breeze. Her beautiful hands, red with cold, were clasped together, devoutly, and a fervent prayer for the man, who had so suddenly been swallowed by the trap-door of eternity, rose on wings of faith into the depths of the dark sky.

What was to be done? Their situation was still troublesome. The village where they were to sleep was still four or five miles distant, and when they reached it all the house-doors would have been locked a long time ago and the countryfolk would be asleep; on the other hand, they could not remain in the middle of the road, in the snow, without wood to light a fire, or food to comfort themselves, in the sinister and gloomy company of a corpse, waiting for dawn, which does not break till very late at that time of year.

They decided to advance. The hour’s rest, and a bag of oats Scapin had provided, had restored a little of his vigour to the poor, weary old horse. He seemed refreshed and capable of doing what was required. Matamore’s corpse was placed in the depths of the cart, beneath a piece of canvas. The actresses, not without a certain shudder of fear, seated themselves at the front of the wagon, for death makes a spectre of the friend with whom one was talking but a few hours ago, and he who once amused you now frightens you like a ghost or a monster.

The men walked, Scapin lighting the way with the lantern whose candle had been renewed, the Tyrant holding the horse’s bridle to prevent it from straying. They progressed quite slowly, for the route was difficult; however, after two hours they began to distinguish, at the foot of a fairly steep descent, the first of the village’s houses. The snow had added white sheets to the roofs, which highlighted them, despite it still being night, against the dark background of the sky. Hearing the cart’s iron wheels clanking from afar, the dogs, once disturbed, made a row, and their barking woke others on isolated farms, deep in the countryside. It was a concert of howls, some muffled,

others loud, with solo flights, responses, and choruses in which all the canine inhabitants of the neighbourhood took part. Thus, when the cart arrived there, the village was fully awake. More than one head wrapped in a nightcap showed itself at a skylight, or framed in the upper leaf of a half-open door, which made it easier for the Pedant to seek, audibly, lodgings for the troupe. The inn was pointed out to him, or at least the house that served as one, the village being little frequented by travellers, who usually journeyed on farther. This inn was at the other end of the village, and the poor nag had to drag the cart for a little longer; but he smelt the stable, and with a supreme effort, his hooves, tore sparks from the pebbles beneath the layer of snow. There was no mistaking the house; a branch of holly, not unlike those used to sprinkle holy water, hung over the door, and Scapin, raising his lantern, noted the presence of that hospitable symbol. The Tyrant drummed his heavy fists on the door, and soon a clatter of wooden shoes descending a staircase was heard within. A ray of reddish light filtered through the cracks in the wood. The door opened, and an old woman, sheltering, with a wrinkled hand that seemed alight, the flickering flame of a taper, appeared in all the horror of her indelicate negligee. Her two hands being fully occupied, she held between her teeth or rather between her gums, the edges of her coarse linen smock, with the modest intention of hiding from libertine eyes charms that would have made the he-goat at a Witches' Sabbath flee in terror. She led the actors to the kitchen, planted the candle on the table, rummaged through the ashes of the hearth to awaken some slumbering embers, and soon set a handful of brushwood to crackling; then she ascended to her room to put on a petticoat and a jacket. A fat boy, rubbing his eyes with filthy hands, went to open the gate to the courtyard, led in the cart, removed the horse's harness, and stabled the poor beast.

— 'We cannot, however, leave poor Matamore in the carriage, like the body of a deer borne back from the hunt,' said Blazius, the Pedant, 'the farmyard dogs would worry at him. He has been baptised, after all; and we must hold a wake over him like the good Christian he was.'

The body of the deceased actor was lifted out, laid out on the table, and covered respectfully with a cloak. Beneath the fabric, the rigidity of death was sculpted in great folds, and the sharp profile of the face was outlined, perhaps more frighteningly so, than if it had been uncovered. Thus, when the innkeeper returned, she almost fell backward with fright at the sight of the corpse which she took to be that of some man the actors had murdered. She held out her aged trembling hands, and began begging the Tyrant, whom she judged to be the leader of the troupe, not to have her slain, promising him absolute secrecy, even under torture. Isabella reassured her, and told her in a few words what had happened. Then the old woman went off to fetch two more candles, and arranged them at the dead man's head and foot, offering to keep watch with Dame Leonarda, for she had often dealt with the village dead, and knew what had to be performed as regards those sad offices.

These arrangements made, the actors retired to another room, where, with appetites little whetted by the gloomy scenes they had encountered, and touched by the loss of the brave Matamore, they ate only half-heartedly. For perhaps the first time in his life, although the wine was good, Blazius left his glass half-full, forgetting to drink. He must have been heartbroken, indeed, for he was one of those drinkers who wished to be buried beneath the barrel's tap, so the wine would drip into their mouths, and would have risen from the coffin to cry 'Santé!' over a brimming glass of red.

Isabella and Serafina arranged a pallet for themselves in the next room. The men lay down on bales of straw which the stable boy brought. They all slept badly, their slumber interrupted by painful dreams, and rose early, for it was time to proceed with Matamore's funeral.

For lack of a burial cloth, Leonarda and the hostess had wrapped him in a scrap of old scenery representing a forest, a shroud worthy of an actor, akin to a military coat if a soldier's corpse had been involved. Some remnants of green paint simulated, on the worn canvas, wreaths and foliage, and gave the effect of a scattering of greenery to honour the body, which was stitched and bundled up like an Egyptian mummy.

A board set on two poles, the ends of which were held by the Tyrant, Blazius, Scapin, and Leander, formed the bier. A large black velvet robe, studded with stars and half-moon shaped spangles, employed for the roles of pontiff or necromancer, served as a decent enough funeral pall.

Organised thus, the procession left by a back door opening onto the fields, to avoid the glances and gossip of the curious, so as to reach a vacant lot that the hostess had designated as a serviceable burial plot for Matamore, and one which none would query, the custom being to dispose there of animals that had died of disease; a place unworthy and unsuitable for human remains, mortal clay modelled in the likeness of God above, but the rules of religion are strict, and an excommunicated histrion cannot be buried in holy ground, unless he has renounced the theatre, its works, and its pomp, which was not Matamore's case.

Grey-eyed morning was awake, and was descending the hill slopes with snow underfoot. A cold light spread over the plain, whose whiteness made the pale tint of the sky appear livid. Astonished by the sudden appearance of the procession, which was preceded by neither cross nor priest, and was not on the path that led to the church, a group of countrymen on their way to gather wood halted, and looked askance at the actors, suspecting them of being heretics, sorcerers, or protestants, but nevertheless dared say nothing. Finally, they arrived at a fairly open spot, and the stable boy, who was carrying a spade with which to dig the grave, said that they would do well to stop there. Animal carcasses half-covered with snow littered the ground all about. Equine skeletons, anatomised by vultures and crows, stretched out long, emaciated heads with hollow eye-sockets, at the end of a row of vertebrae, their ribs laid open and stripped of flesh, like the ribs of a fan from which the paper has been torn away. Touches of snow, as if fancifully placed, added to the horror of this charnel-house spectacle by emphasising the projections and articulation of the bones. These spectral creatures seemed those that demons and ghouls ride in their Sabbath cavalcades.

The actors laid the body on the ground, and the boy began to dig vigorously throwing black clods of earth onto the snow, a particularly gloomy scene, as it seemed to the living that the poor deceased, even though he felt nothing, would be colder still on his first night in a grave amidst the frost.

The Tyrant relieved the boy, and the pit was rapidly deepened. It already gaped wide enough to swallow the lean corpse in a single bite, when the gathered peasants began to shout 'Huguenots' and made as if to attack the actors. A few stones were even thrown, which happily hit no one. Enraged by this rabble, Sigognac raised his sword and ran at the scoundrels, striking them with the flat of his blade, and threatening them with the point. At the sound of the altercation, the Tyrant

had leapt from the grave, seized one of the poles from the bier, and was flailing the backs of those who had been knocked down by the Baron's impetuous rush. The troupe dispersed, shouting and cursing, and Matamore's funeral rites were then completed.



'Matamore's Funeral.'

Lying at the bottom of the hole, the body, sewn into its sylvan canvas, looked more like an arquebus wrapped in green serge, buried so as hide it, than like a human corpse to be interred. When the first shovelfuls pattered down over the meagre remains of the actor, the Pedant, deeply moved, and unable to hold back the tear that fell from the tip of his reddened nose into the pit, like a pearl issuing from the heart, sighed in a doleful voice, by way of a funeral oration, this sentence which was all the eulogy and myriologue (*an improvised Greek lament*) uttered there: 'Alas! poor Matamore!'

The honest Pedant, in speaking so, little suspected that he was imitating the words of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, as he handled the skull of the former court jester, Yorick, in Shakespeare's tragedy.

In a short while the grave was filled. The Tyrant scattered snow over it to conceal the spot, for fear that some insult might be visited on the corpse. This task completed: 'Now,' he said, 'let us leave the place quickly, as we have no more to do here, and return to the inn. Let us hitch up the cart, and take to the open road; for these rascals, if they return in strength, might well assail us. Your sword, and my fists would not suffice. A host of pygmies can overcome a giant, while victory

over them would be inglorious, and of scant benefit to us. Even if we disembowelled a half-dozen of these rascals, our loss would be no less, while their death would place us in a difficult position. There would be a lamentation of widows, and a wailing of orphans, which are tiresome and pitiful things that lawyers take advantage of to influence the judge.'

The advice was sound, and was followed. An hour later, the reckoning settled, the wagon was on its way once more.

Chapter VII: In Which This Novel Justifies its Title

At first, they progressed as quickly as the old horse's strength, restored by a good night's stay in the stable, and the state of the road, covered with the snow that had fallen the day before, allowed. The country folk challenged by Sigognac and the Tyrant might return to the attack in greater numbers, and it was a matter of putting enough space between themselves and the village to render pursuit useless. Five long miles were travelled in silence, for Matamore's sad end added funereal thoughts to the melancholy of their situation. Their sole reflection was that one fine day they too might be buried on the side of the road, among the carcasses, and abandoned to remorseless desecration. The wagon, continuing its journey meanwhile, symbolised life, which ever advances without concern for those who fail to maintain the pace, and are left behind, dead or dying, in the ditch. A symbol merely renders the hidden meaning more visible, and Blazius, whose tongue was itching, began to moralise on the theme with many quotations, apophthegms, and maxims that he had memorised in his role as a pedant.

The Tyrant listened silently, with a sullen air. His thoughts were elsewhere, such that Blazius, noticing his comrade's distracted expression, asked him what he was thinking.

— 'I am thinking,' replied the Tyrant, 'of Milo of Croton, who with a blow of his fist slew an ox, and ate it in a single day. The exploit pleases me, and I feel capable of repeating it.'

— 'Unfortunately, the ox is lacking,' said Scapin, entering the conversation.

— 'Indeed,' replied the Tyrant, 'I possess only the fist, and the stomach, for it. Oh, blessed are ostriches who live on pebbles, shards, gaiter-buttons, knife-handles, belt-buckles, and other victuals indigestible to humans. At this very moment, I could even swallow our theatre props. It seems to me that, in digging the hole for poor Matamore, I dug one deep in myself so wide, long, and profound, that nothing can fill it. The ancients were most wise, who followed funerals with a meal, with abundant meat and copious wine, for the greater glory of the dead and the better health of the living. I wish, right now, I could perform that philosophical rite so suitable for drying tears.'

— 'In other words,' said Blazius, 'you desire to eat, you gluttonous ogre. Polyphemus, Gargantua, you disgust me.'

— 'And you, like sand or a sponge, you long to drink,' replied the Tyrant. 'You funnel, you siphon, you wineskin, nay wine-barrel, you excite my pity.'

— 'How sweet and profitable a fusion of our two passions would be!' said Scapin with a conciliatory air. 'Here, by the side of the road is a small coppice wonderfully suited to a halt. We could divert the wagon to the spot, and if there are still some provisions left, lunch as best we can, sheltered from the north wind behind a natural screen. The stop will allow the horse time to rest, and permit us to converse, while nibbling a morsel, about the course of action to be taken as regards the troupe's future, which seems to me devilishly hazy.'

— ‘Your speech is golden, friend Scapin,’ said the Pedant, ‘and we shall indeed exhume from the entrails of the knapsack, which is flatter alas and more deflated than the purse of the prodigal son, a few remnants, the remains of the splendour of former times; pie-crusts, ham-bones, sausage-skins, and scraps of bread. There are still two or three flasks of wine in the chest, the last of a valiant troop. With all that, we can not only stave off but satisfy our hunger and thirst. What a pity that the soil of this inhospitable canton is not like the clay with which certain natives of South America weight their stomachs when their hunting and fishing fails!’ (*In the Peruvian and Bolivian Andes, a type of clay called ‘chaco’ or ‘pasa’ is eaten, to counter toxins*)

The wagon’s course was diverted; it halted amidst the thicket; and the horse once unharnessed began to search beneath the snow for a few scant patches of grass which he tore at with his long yellow teeth. A carpet was spread in an open place. The actors sat around this improvised tablecloth in the Turkish fashion, and Blazius symmetrically arranged the leftovers taken from the carriage, as if it were a bounteous feast.

— ‘Oh, what a beautiful sight,’ cried the Tyrant, in delight. ‘A prince’s butler could not have arranged things better. Though you are a wonderful Pedant, Blazius, your true vocation is that of victualler.’

— ‘I did harbour such an ambition, but adverse fortune thwarted it,’ replied the Pedant modestly. ‘Above all, little bellies, don’t go throwing yourselves at the food greedily. Chew slowly, and with care. Besides, I shall ration the fare, as is done by sailors on rafts after shipwrecks. To you, Tyrant, this ham bone from which a shred of flesh still hangs. With your strong teeth you will crack it open, and philosophically extract the marrow. To you, ladies, this pâté base coated with stuffing in its corners, and basted internally with a very substantial layer of lard. It is a delicate, tasty, and nutritious dish that will make you desire no other. To you, Baron de Sigognac, this piece of sausage; just be careful not to swallow the string tying the skin tight like a purse. It must be set aside for supper, for dinner is an indigestible, excessive and superfluous meal that we may do without. Leander, Scapin and I will be content with this venerable piece of cheese, scowling and bearded like a hermit in his cave. As for the bread, those who find it too hard will have the option of dipping it in water, and removing the crust to carve toothpicks. For the wine, everyone is entitled to a goblet, and as sommelier I ask you to lick your fingernails, so that none is lost.’

Sigognac had long been accustomed to this more than Spanish frugality, and had consumed, in his Castle of Misery, more than one meal whose crumbs the mice would have been embarrassed to nibble, for he himself had played the mouse. However, he could not help admiring the good humour and comic verve of the Pedant, who found something amusing where others would have moaned like calves, and groaned like cattle. What concerned him was Isabella’s state. A marble-like pallor covered her cheeks, and, in the intervals between bites, her teeth chattered like castanets with a feverish movement that she tried in vain to repress. Her thin clothes protected her poorly against the bitter cold, and Sigognac, sitting near her, threw half of his cape over her shoulders, although she resisted, drawing her close to his body to warm her and transfer a little of his vital heat. Isabella warmed herself at this kindly hearth, and a faint blush of modesty appeared on her face.

While the actors were eating, a rather singular noise was heard, to which they paid no attention, at first, taking it to be the effect of the wind whistling through the bare branches of the coppice.

Soon the noise became more distinct. It was a sort of hoarse, strident hiss, both non-human and angry, the nature of which was difficult to explain. The women showed a degree of fear.

— ‘If it’s a snake,’ cried Serafina, ‘I will die, so much do those dreadful things inspire my aversion!’

— ‘In these temperatures,’ said Leander, ‘snakes are numbed and, rigid as sticks, they sleep in the depths of their lairs.’

— ‘Leander is right,’ said the Pedant, ‘it must be something else; some creature that haunts groves, that our presence frightens or disturbs. Let’s not interrupt our meal.’

At the sound of this hissing, Scapin had pricked his fox-like ears, which, despite being red with cold, were nonetheless sharp of hearing, and he looked closely in the direction from which it came. Blades of grass rustled as they moved, as if at the passage of some animal. Scapin signalled to the actors to remain motionless, and soon a magnificent gander, neck outstretched, head held high, and waddling with majestic stupidity on his broad webbed feet emerged from the thicket. Two geese, his wives, followed him, trustingly and naively.

— ‘Here’s a roast offering itself up to the spit,’ said Scapin in a low voice, ‘one which heaven, touched by our pangs of starvation, has sent us most opportunely.’

The cunning fellow rose, moved away from the troupe, and executed a semicircle so light-footedly that the snow emitted never a creak beneath his feet. The gander’s attention was fixed on the group of actors whom he looked at with mistrust mingled with curiosity, and whose presence in this usually deserted place, lacked an explanation as far as his limited brain was concerned. Seeing him fully occupied in his contemplation, the histrion, who seemed to be accustomed to such marauding, approached the gander from behind, and flung his cape over him with a movement so precise, so dexterous, and so rapid, that the action lasted less time than it takes to describe it.

Once it was hooded, he rushed upon the bird, and seized it by the neck beneath his cape, which the fluttering wings of the poor, suffocating animal would quickly have sent flying. Scapin, in this pose, resembled that much-admired ancient group called *The Child with a Goose* (a Hellenistic sculpture, attributed to Boethus of Chalcidion; see the Roman copy in marble of the bronze original, in the Louvre). Soon the gander, strangled, ceased to struggle. Its head bowed limply in Scapin’s clenched fist. Its wings no longer jerked. Its orange morocco-leather booted feet stretched out with a final quiver. It was dead. The geese, its widows, fearing a similar fate, gave a lamentable cluck by way of funeral oration, and returned to the woods.

— ‘Bravo, Scapin, a clever move,’ exclaimed the Tyrant, ‘and as good as any you execute on the stage. Geese are harder to surprise than Gerontes (*the French version of Pantalone, a commedia dell’arte character*) or Truffaldino (*a character likewise derived from Harlequin*), being by nature very vigilant and on their guard, as appears from the story where we find that the geese of the Roman Capitol sensed the nocturnal approach of the Gauls, and thus saved Rome (*in 390BC, according to the legend*). Master goose here, has saved us, in another way, it is true, but one no less providential.’

The goose was bled and plucked by old Leonarda. While she was tearing away its down as best she could, Blazius, the Tyrant, and Leander, plunged into the thicket, gathered pieces of wood, shook off the snow, and piled it in a dry place. Scapin used his knife to carve a stick, stripping it

of bark, to serve as a spit. Two forked branches cut short above the knot were planted in the ground as its supports. Thanks to a handful of straw taken from the cart, to which the spark from a flint was applied, the fire was soon alight, and glowing cheerfully, tinting the skewered gosling red, and reviving, with its invigorating warmth, the troupe seated in a circle round the improvised hearth.

Scapin, with a modest air, as befitted the hero of the situation, stood stock still, eyes lowered, his expression softened, turning the goose from time to time, which, in the heat from the embers, took on a beautiful golden colour, very appetising to witness, and gave off an odour of such succulence that it would have made Bonaventure- Catalagironne (*General of the Franciscan Order, and one of the negotiators of the Peace of Vervins, 1598*) fall into ecstasy, who, in all the great city of Paris, admired nothing so much as the rotisseries of the Rue aux Oües (*'Street of the Geese', later corrupted to Rue Aux Ours: see Henri Sauval's 'Histoire et Recherches des Antiquites de la Ville de Paris, 1724, Volume II, Book II, page 142*), and the Rue de la Huchette.

The Tyrant had risen, and was walking about briskly to distract himself and thereby avoid, he said, the temptation to throw himself upon the half-cooked roast, and swallow it spit and all. Blazius was at the cart, extracting from a trunk a large pewter dish used for feasts on stage. The goose was solemnly placed upon it, and around it, beneath the attentions of the knife, spread a blood-stained juice with a most delicious aroma.

The bird was butchered into equal portions, and lunch began anew. This time it was no longer an imaginary or illusory feast. No one, since hunger silenced every conscience, expressed any qualms about Scapin's actions. The Pedant, who was a fastidious man as regards cuisine, apologised for the lack of slices of bitter orange to seat the goose on, which is an obligatory and regular addition, but was forgiven wholeheartedly for this culinary solecism.

— 'Now that we are sated,' said the Tyrant, wiping his beard with his hand, 'it would be appropriate to consider what to do. There are barely three or four pistoles left in the purse, and my job as treasurer is very close to becoming a sinecure. Our troupe has lost two valuable members, Zerlina and Captain Matamore, nor can we act a comedy in the open air for the amusement of crows, rooks, and magpies. They would decline to pay for their seats, lacking cash, with the possible exception of the magpies, who, it is said, steal coins, jewels, spoons, and tumblers. But it would be unwise to count on such takings. With a horse of the Apocalypse dying between the shafts of our cart, it is quite impossible to reach Poitiers in under two days. Which is most tragic, because by then we risk dying of hunger or cold beside some ditch. Geese don't emerge from the bushes every day to be roasted.'

— 'You explain the evil of our situation very eloquently,' said the Pedant, 'but fail to suggest a remedy.'

— 'I think,' replied the Tyrant, 'that we should stop at the first village we come across; work in the fields is over. It is the season of long nocturnal vigils. They will gladly let us lodge in some barn or stable. Scapin will rattle the box in front of the doors, and promise an extraordinary and magnificent spectacle to the astonished rustics with the offer of their paying for their seats in kind. A chicken, a joint of ham or beef, a jug of wine, will entitle them to a seat at the front. For them to secure one in the second row, we'll accept a brace of pigeons, a dozen eggs, an armful of vegetables, a loaf of bread, or any other similar victuals. Country folk, stingy with money, are

seldom stingy with provisions, which they have in store, and which cost them nothing, being supplied by good Mother Nature. Though this will not fill our purse, it will assuage our appetites, a vital matter, since the whole economy and health of the body politic depends on the stomach, as Menenius wisely remarked (*Agrippa Menenius Lanatus, was a Roman consul in 503 BC. In 494/3 he reputedly used a Greek parable of the limbs refusing to feed the stomach to convince the plebs of the futility of secession, see Livy 'Ab Urbe Condita' 2. 32. 8*). Then there will be little difficulty in our reaching Poitiers, where I know an innkeeper who will grant us credit.'

— 'But what play can we perform,' said Scapin, 'if the village folk gather at the time appointed? Our repertoire is highly varied. Tragedy or tragicomedy would be pure Hebrew to these rustics, ignorant of history and fable, who have no grasp of the beauty of the French language. We need some good, joyous farce, sprinkled not with Attic salt but with the coarse variety, with plenty of beatings, kicks in the backside, clownish tumbles, and buffoonish Italian-style scurrilities. *Captain Matamore's Rodomontades* would have been marvellously suitable. Sadly, Matamore has lived his life, and will deliver his tirades now only in the lines he left behind.'

When Scapin had finished, Sigognac signalled with his hand that he wished to speak. A slight blush, a flow of blood sent by yielding though noble pride from the heart to the face, coloured his features, despite the bitter assault of the north wind. The actors remained silent and expectant.

— 'Though I lack the talent of poor Matamore, I am almost as thin as he was. I will act his role, and replace him as best I can. I am your comrade, and wish to be so completely. Also, I am ashamed to profit from your good fortune yet prove useless to you in adversity. Besides, who in the world cares about the Sigognacs? My manor crumbles in ruins over the tomb of my ancestors. Oblivion cloaks our once glorious name, and ivy erases the coat of arms on our deserted porch. Perhaps one day those three storks which adorn it will shake their silvery wings joyously, and life and happiness will return to that sad hovel, where my youth, devoid of hope, was being wasted. Instead, you who held out your hand to me and urged me to leave that vault, please accept me, frankly, as one of your own. My name shall no longer be Sigognac.'

Isabella placed her hand on the Baron's arm as if to interrupt him; but Sigognac paid no attention to the young girl's pleading expression and continued:

— 'I shall roll up my title-deed to the baronetcy, and hide it at the bottom of my trunk, like a garment that's no longer worn. Please don't address me by it again. Let us see if, in disguise, I will be recognised by Fortune. Thus, I succeed Matamore, and will adopt as my nom de guerre: Captain Fracasse!'

— 'Long live Captain Fracasse!' shouted the whole troupe, in acceptance. 'Let applause greet him everywhere!'

His decision, which had astonished the actors at first, was not as sudden as it seemed. Sigognac had already been thinking of it for a long while. He had blushed at behaving in a parasitic manner towards these honest performers who had shared their own resources with him so generously, without ever making him feel that his presence was inconvenient, and he judged it less unworthy of a gentleman to act on stage and bravely earn his share than accept it as an idler, like alms or a stipend. The thought of returning to Sigognac had indeed presented itself to him, but he had rejected the idea as cowardly and shameful. It is not in times of defeat that a soldier should retire from service. Besides, even if he had sought to leave, his love for Isabella would have held him

back, and moreover, though he was not given to fantasising, he glimpsed in vague perspective all sorts of intriguing adventures, reversals, and strokes of fortune, which he would have had to renounce in confining himself to his manor house.

Matters thus settled, the horse was hitched to the wagon, and they set off again. Their excellent meal had revived the whole troupe, and all except the Duenna and Serafina, who were unwilling to walk, followed the carriage on foot, thus relieving the poor nag. Isabella leaned on Sigognac's arm, turning her tender eyes, furtively, towards him on occasion, not doubting that it was for love of her that he had taken the decision to become an actor, something so inimical to the pride of a well-born person. She would have liked to reproach him, but felt she lacked the strength to scold him for a proof of devotion that she would have prevented him from granting if she could have foreseen it, for she was one of those women who ignore their own interests when they love, and only pursue those of their beloved. After a while, finding herself becoming a little weary, she remounted the carriage and curled up under a blanket next to the Duenna.

On either side of the road, a whitened and deserted countryside stretched as far as the eye could see; with no sign of a town, village, or hamlet.

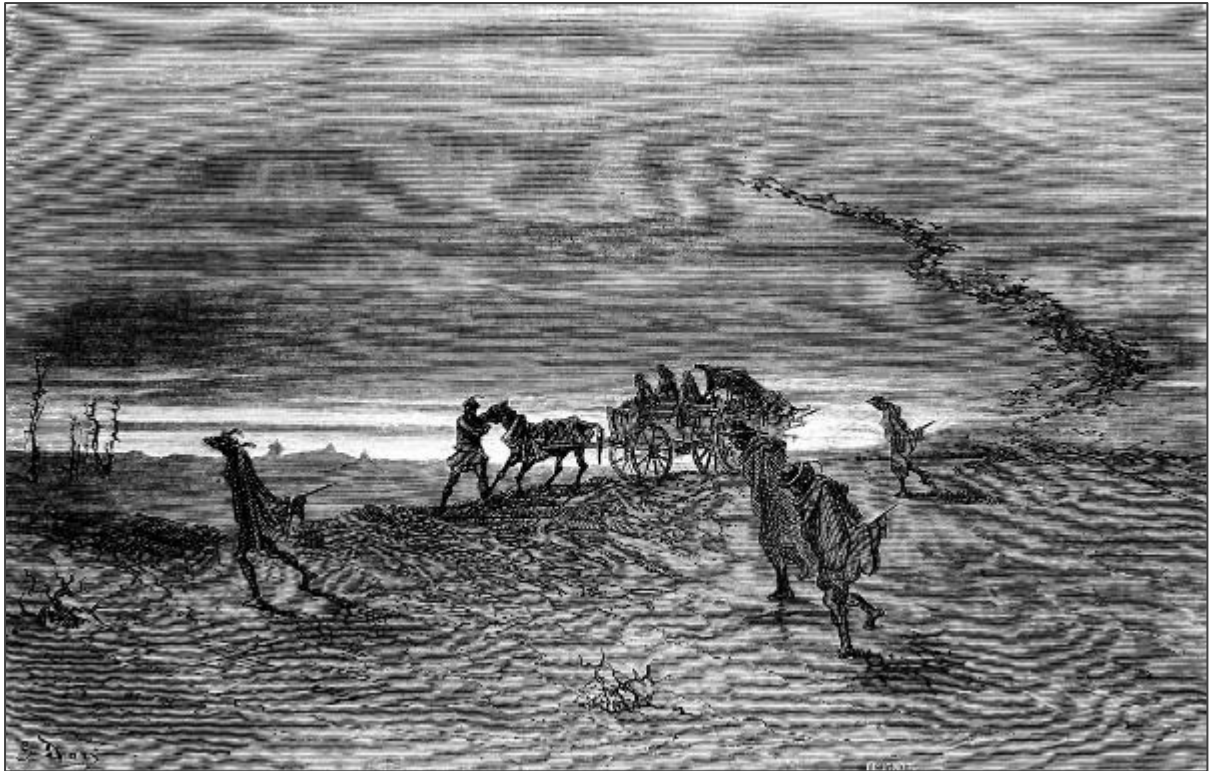
— 'There goes our chance of a good showing,' said the Pedant, after having gazed around at the horizon, 'theatre-goers scarcely seem to be flocking to us in large numbers, and that recipe involving salt-pork, poultry, and bunches of onions, with which the Tyrant whetted our appetites seems to me to be quite compromised. Not even a smoking chimney in sight. Not one traitor of a rooster revealing a steeple below, as far as the eye can see.'

— 'Have a little patience, Blazius,' replied the Tyrant, 'dwellings pollute the air, and it is most healthy to space the villages widely.'

— 'Well, as regards that, the inhabitants round here have nothing to fear from epidemics, whether of the bubonic plague, termed the Black Death, or sweating sickness, or malignant and confluent smallpox, all of which, according to the medical men, arise from overcrowding. I'm afraid, if this continues, that our Captain Fracasse won't be making his debut anytime soon.'

While he was speaking, the day was rapidly fading, and beneath a thick curtain of leaden cloud one could barely distinguish the faint reddish glow that marked the place where the sun was setting, tired of illuminating the livid, gloomy landscape dotted with crows.

An icy wind had hardened and glazed the snow. The poor old horse advanced with extreme difficulty; on the least slope his hooves slipped, and though he planted his scarred legs like stakes, and tried to sink onto his lean rump, the momentum of the carriage pushed him forward, despite Scapin, who was walking beside him, supporting him by gripping the bridle.



‘The poor old horse advanced with extreme difficulty.’

Despite the cold, streams of sweat trickled over the horse’s gaunt ribs, and down his weak limbs, sweat beaten to a white foam by the friction of the harness. His lungs panted like the bellows of a forge. Vague terror dilated his bluish eyes, which seemed fixed on something spectral before him, and now and then he sought to turn away as if obstructed by some invisible obstacle. His swaying, tottering frame struck against one shaft, then the other. He raised his head, revealing his gums, then lowered it as if he wished to bite at the snow. His hour had come; he was dying though as yet still upright like the brave horse he was. Finally, he fell, and with a weak defensive kick against death, lay on his side, never to rise again.

Frightened by this sudden shock, which almost spilled them to the ground, the women began to cry out in distress. The actors rushed to their aid, and soon freed them. Leonarda and Serafina were uninjured, but the violence of the shock and the fright had caused Isabella to faint, and Sigognac lifted her, unconscious and inert, in his arms, while Scapin, bending, felt the ears of the horse, which lay flat on the ground like a paper cut-out.

— ‘He’s quite dead,’ said Scapin, raising himself again with a discouraged air. ‘The ears have lost their heat, and the pulse in the vein there is no longer beating.’

— ‘We shall be obliged,’ cried Leander piteously, ‘to harness ourselves to ropes, like beasts of burden or sailors hauling a boat, and pull our own cart. Oh! Curse the fancy I pursued of becoming an actor!’

— ‘What a time to moan and lament!’ roared the Tyrant, irritated by this untimely jeremiad, ‘let us instead consider, more manfully, as fellows whom fortune can never confound, what should

be done, and firstly let us see if our good Isabella is seriously harmed; but no, here, she is opening her eyes again, and regaining her senses, thanks to the care of Sigognac, and Dame Leonarda. Therefore, let the troupe divide into two parties. One shall remain near the wagon with the women, and the other traverse the countryside in search of help. We cannot like the Russians, accustomed to Scythian frosts, winter here until dawn, our rumps in the snow. We lack the furs for that, and morning would find us crippled, frozen and white with frost, like candied fruit. Come, Captain Fracasse, Leander and you Scapin, who are the lightest, and have swift feet like Achilles the son of Peleus. On your way! Run like lithe cats and find us reinforcements quickly. Blazius and I will stand sentry, meanwhile, beside the luggage.'

The trio, so designated, prepared to leave, though the darkness augured ill for their expedition, for the night was as black as the mouth of an oven, and only the reflected glow from the snow allowed them to find their way; but darkness, though it eclipses objects, reveals any signs of light, and a small reddish star was seen to twinkle at the foot of a hill some considerable distance from the road.

— 'Here,' said the Pedant, 'is the star of our salvation, a terrestrial star as pleasant to lost travellers as the polar star to sailors *in periculo maris* ('*in danger on the sea*'). This star, with its benign rays, is some candle or lamp set beside a window; which supposes a well-sealed and warm room forming part of a house inhabited by human and civilised beings rather than by savage Laestrygonians (*man-eating giants in Greek mythology, see Homer's 'Odyssey'*). Doubtless, there is a bright fire blazing in the chimney, and over this fire a pot in which a rich soup is cooking; oh, pleasant imagining, at which fancy licks its lips, whose thirst I shall quench, in ideal manner, with two or three bottles seized from behind the wood-pile, and draped in ancient style with cobwebs!'

— 'You ramble, my dear old Blazius,' said the Tyrant, 'and the cold, freezing your brain beneath that bald pate, has set mirages flickering before your eyes. However, there is this truth in your delirium, that a light supposes an inhabited house. This alters our plan of campaign. We shall all make for this beacon of salvation. It is hardly likely that thieves will pass tonight on this deserted road to steal our canvas forest, public square, or living room. Let us each take our clothes. The packages are not very heavy. We shall return tomorrow to reclaim the cart. Besides, I am beginning to suffer from cold, and can no longer feel the tip of my nose.'

The actors set off, Isabella leaning on Sigognac's arm, Leander supporting Serafina, Scapin leading the Duenna and Blazius, with the Tyrant as the vanguard. They cut across the fields, straight towards the light, sometimes obstructed by a bush or a ditch, and sinking into the snow up to their knees.



'They cut across the fields...'

Finally, after more than one fall, the troupe reached a large walled building, with a carriage door, which seemed to belong to a farm, as far as could be judged through the shadows. Amidst the dark wall, a lamp within illuminated a square frame, containing the panes of a little window whose shutter was not yet closed.

Sensing the approach of strangers, the watchdogs began to stir and raise their cries. They could be heard, in the silence of the night, running, leaping, and fretting behind the wall. Footsteps and human voices mingled with their row. Soon the whole farm was awake.

— 'Stay there, the rest of you, and keep your distance,' said the Pedant, 'our numbers might frighten these good people who could take us for a band of rogues seeking to invade their rustic home. As I am old and have a fatherly and good-natured air, I alone will knock at the door, and begin negotiations. They will not be afraid of me.'

This wise advice was followed. Blazius rapped, with his knuckles, on the door. It opened slightly, then flew wide. From where they were standing, feet in the snow, the actors witnessed an inexplicable, and surprising spectacle. After a few words had been exchanged inaudible to the actors, the Pedant and the farmer, who had raised his lamp to illuminate the face of the man who had disturbed him, began, to gesticulate in a strange manner, and embrace one another, as is customary on recognising a fellow thespian.

Encouraged by this reception, which they scarcely comprehended, but which, based on the warmth of the pantomime, they judged to be cordial and favourable, the actors approached timidly, assuming a pitiful and modest demeanour, as befits travellers in distress seeking hospitality.

— ‘You, others,’ cried the Pedant in a joyful voice, ‘approach without fear; we are at the house of a child of the theatre, a darling of Thespis, a favourite of Thalia the Muse of Comedy, in a word at the house of the famous Bellombre, formerly so applauded by the court and the city, not to mention the provinces. You all know his remarkable reputation. Bless the good fortune that has led us to this philosophical retreat where a hero of the theatre now rests on his laurels.’

— ‘Enter, ladies and gentlemen,’ said Bellombre, advancing toward the actors with courteous grace, and presenting himself as one who has not forgotten his fine manners beneath his rustic clothes. ‘The cold night wind could harm your precious throats, and however modest my dwelling may be, you will always be better off within than in the open air.’

As one might imagine, Blazius’ companions did not need asking twice, and entered the farmhouse, delighted by this stroke of luck, which, however, was only extraordinary in the timeliness of the encounter. Blazius had been part of a troupe that included Bellombre, and as their roles did not put them in competition, they appreciated each other and had become good friends, thanks to a shared taste for the divine bottle. Bellombre, whom a troubled life had born into the theatre, had retired from it, having inherited the farm and its outbuildings on his father’s death. The roles he played demanded a youthful appearance, and he had not been sorry to quit the stage before the wrinkles on his brow caused his dismissal. He was thought to have died long ago, and old aficionados chided young actors by recalling their memories of his performances.

The room which the actors entered was quite large and, as in most farmhouses, served both as a bedroom and a kitchen. A fireplace with a broad hood, whose mantel was adorned with a sloping piece of green serge, now yellowed, occupied one of the walls. A rounded brick arch in the brown varnished wall indicated the mouth of the oven, which was currently covered by a sheet of metal. On enormous iron firedogs, the hollow half-globes of which could contain a good-sized bowl, four or five enormous logs, or rather tree-trunks, burned with a cheerful crackle. The glow of this fine fire lit the room with such a vivid glow that the light of the lamp was rendered needless; the reflections of the flames from the walls picked out, amidst the shadows, a bed, of Gothic form, veiled by curtains, while their gleams, flickering over the darkened beams of the ceiling, cast long shadows in strange designs at the feet of the table placed in the middle of the room, and raised sudden glimmers from the protruding dishes and utensils arranged on the sideboard or hanging on the walls.

In the corner near the window, two or three volumes thrown on a carved wooden pedestal table showed that the master of the house had not quite reverted to the peasantry, and that he occupied his leisure hours in the long winter evenings with reading, recalling thus his former profession.

Heated by the warm atmosphere, and his hospitable welcome, the whole troupe felt a profound sense of well-being. The pink colours of life reappeared on their pale faces and lips chapped by cold. Gaiety lit their previously dull eyes, and hope raised its head once more. The shifty, lame, teasing deity, named Misfortune, was finally tired of persecuting the wandering company, and, appeased no doubt by the death of Matamore, rested content with her meagre prey.

Bellombre had called to his servants, who set the table with plates and large-bellied drinking pots, to the great jubilation of Blazius, parched from birth, whose thirst was always aroused, even in the nocturnal hours.

— ‘You see,’ he said to the Tyrant, ‘how logical my prediction deduced from the presence of the little red light has proved. My suppositions were neither mirages nor phantoms. Dense steam rises, and swirls from this soup abundantly adorned with cabbages, turnips, and other vegetables. Clear red wine, newly-drawn, sparkles in these jugs crowned with pink foam. The fire blazes all the brighter because it is cold outside. And, what is more, we have as our guest the great, the illustrious, the never-sufficiently-praised Bellombre, the cream of actors past, present, and future, without wishing to belittle the talents of any present.’

— ‘Our happiness would be complete if poor Matamore were here,’ sighed Isabella.

— ‘What evil has happened to him?’ asked Bellombre, who knew Matamore by reputation.

The Tyrant told him the tragic adventure of the captain who remained in the snow.

— ‘Without this happy encounter with an old and brave comrade, our lives would have been hanging by a thread by dawn,’ said Blazius. We would have been found quite frozen, like sailors in the Cimmerian darkness and frost.’

— ‘That would indeed have been a pity,’ Bellombre continued, glancing at Isabella and Serafina, gallantly; ‘but surely these young goddesses would undoubtedly have melted the snow, and thawed Nature, with the fire in their eyes.’

— ‘You attribute too much power to them,’ replied Serafina; ‘they would have been incapable of warming even a single heart in that gloomy and icy darkness. Tears due to the cold would have extinguished the flames of amorousness there.’

While eating supper, Blazius informed Bellombre of the state of the troupe. The latter seemed not at all surprised.

— ‘Theatrical Fortune is even more feminine and capricious than worldly Fortune,’ he replied; ‘her wheel turns so quickly it barely stands still for a moment. But if the players often descend, they are led to ascend again with a light and deft movement, and soon regain their balance. Tomorrow, I will send men with plough-horses to recover your wagon, and we will set up a theatre in the barn. Not far from the farm, there’s a largish village that will provide us with an audience. And if the takings are insufficient, in the depths of my old leather purse lie a few pistoles of better quality than the tokens for the play, for, by Apollo, I will not leave my old Blazius and his friends in the lurch.’

— ‘I see,’ said the Pedant, ‘that you are still the same generous Bellombre, and that you have not grown rusty in your rural and bucolic occupation.’

— ‘No,’ replied Bellombre, ‘for while cultivating my land I refuse to allow my brain to lie fallow; I reread the old authors, in the corner of this fireplace, my feet on the andirons, and leaf through the plays of the great minds of the day that I can procure in the depths of exile. I study, as a pastime, the roles that would have suited me, and realise that I only triumphed as a fop, at the time when my role won applause, because of a sonorous voice, a gallant bearing, and a fine pair of legs. Then I had no real understanding of the art, and performed everything without reflection, like a crow knocking a line of walnuts over. The public’s ignorance ensured my success.’

— ‘Only the great Bellombre could speak thus of himself,’ said the Tyrant courteously.

— ‘Art is long, life is short,’ continued the former actor, ‘especially for the comedian obliged to express his ideas by means of his own person. I was gaining in skill, but acquiring a belly, a ridiculous thing in my role as a dark handsome fellow, a tragic lover. I declined to wait until two extras were obliged to raise me by my arms again whenever the situation demanded I throw myself on my knees before the princess to declare my love, a declaration punctuated with asthmatic hiccups, and the rolling of tearful eyes. I seized the opportunity presented by inheritance, and retired at the peak of my glory, not wishing to imitate those stubborn folk who are chased from the stage in a shower of apple-cores, orange-peel, and hard-boiled eggs.’

— ‘You were wise to do so, Bellombre,’ said Blazius, ‘even though your retirement was premature and you could have trodden the boards for another ten years.’

Indeed, Bellombre, although tanned by the country air, had maintained his good looks; his eyes, accustomed to expressing passion, became animated and filled with light amidst the heat of conversation. His nostrils wide and well-formed, flared. His lips, when they parted, revealed a set of teeth that would have been the pride of any coquette. His dimpled chin lifted proudly; abundant hair, in which a very few streaks of silver shone, played in thick curls down to his shoulders. He was still a most handsome man.

Blazius and the Tyrant continued to drink in company with Bellombre. The actresses retired to a separate room, where the servants had lit a large fire in the hearth. Sigognac, Leander, and Scapin lay down in a corner of the stable on a few forkfuls of fresh straw, well-defended against the cold by the breathing of the animals, and a coverlet of horse blankets.

While some drink and others sleep, let us return to the abandoned cart, and see what has become of it.

The horse still lay between the shafts. Its legs had stiffened like stakes, and its head lay flat on the ground among the strands of its mane, on which the sweat had frozen to ice crystals in the cold nocturnal wind. The visible socket in which a glassy eye was embedded had deepened further, and the thin cheek seemed as if it had been the subject of a dissection.

Dawn was breaking; the winter sun showed one leaden-white half of its disk between two long bands of cloud and shed its pale light on the livid landscape, in which the trees’ skeletons were outlined in lines of funereal black. Amidst the whiteness of the snow a few crows hopped, guided by their sense of smell, and cautiously approached the dead creature, fearing danger, an ambush, or a trap, since the motionless, dark mass of the wagon alarmed them, and they cawed to each other, in the croaks that constituted their language, that this object could well hide a hunter on watch, a crow not proving so ill an addition to a stew. They advanced, hop by hop, feverish with longing; then retreated, in fear, performing a sort of bizarre pavane. A bolder one broke from the swarm, shook its heavy wings two or three times, left the ground, and alighted on the horse’s head. It was already bending its beak to prick at and consume the corpse’s eyes when it suddenly desisted and ruffled its feathers, seeming to listen.

A heavy step crunched the snow far off on the road, and this noise, which the human ear might not have caught, resonated distinctly, so as to be detected by the crow’s keen sense of hearing. The danger not being pressing, the black-hued bird chose not to leave the spot, but kept a lookout. The step drew nearer, and soon the vague form of a man, bearing something in his arms, appeared

through the morning mist. The crow thought it prudent to withdraw, and took flight, uttering a lengthy croak to warn its companions of the danger.

The whole mob flew towards the neighbouring trees, uttering hoarse, shrill cries. The man reached the wagon, and, surprised at encountering in the middle of the road, a driverless cart harnessed to an animal which, like Roland's mare (*see the epic poem 'La Chanson de Roland'*), had the chief fault of being dead, he stopped, casting a furtive and circumspect glance around him.

To examine the scene more closely, he set his burden on the ground. The burden stood by itself, and began to walk, for it was a little girl of about nine years old, whose long cloak, when she was folded over her companion's shoulder, could have been taken for a leather bag or a satchel. Black, feverish eyes shone with a dark flame beneath the folds of the fabric which she wore as a headdress, eyes remarkably like Chiquita's. A string of pearls showed as scattered points of light in the tawny shadow of her neck, and rags, twisted into cords, forming a contrast with that luxurious item, were wrapped around her bare legs.

It was, indeed, Chiquita herself, and her companion was none other than Agostin, the bandit of the mannequins' ambush: weary of exercising his noble profession on empty roads, he was on his way to Paris where all manner of talents find employment, walking by night and hiding by day, as do all creatures that are about murder or plunder. The little girl, exhausted with fatigue and seized by the cold, had been unable to advance further, despite her vast courage, and Agostin, seeking shelter, carried her as Homer and Belisarius are said to have carried their guides, with this difference that Agostin was not blind, but on the contrary possessed the eyes of a lynx, which, according to Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historia, Book XXVIII, xxxii, 122*) has the clearest eyesight of all four-legged animals, and according to later writers can see through walls.

— 'What means this?' said Agostin to Chiquita. 'It is usually we who confront wagons, and now a wagon confronts us. Let us take care lest it's full of travellers who demand our purse or our lives.'

— 'There's no one here,' replied Chiquita, who had poked her head beneath the cart's awning.

— 'Maybe they've left something behind,' the bandit replied; 'we'll search it.' And, rummaging in the folds of his belt, he brought out a flint, tinder, and a spill; having procured a flame, he lit a dark-lantern that he always carried with him for his nocturnal explorations, since daylight had not yet flooded the shadowy interior of the carriage. Chiquita, whose hope of spoils had made her forget her fatigue, slipped into the carriage, directing the beam of light onto the packages with which it was cluttered; but she saw only old painted canvases, props made of cardboard, and a few rags of no value.

— 'Search thoroughly, my dear Chiquita,' said the bandit, keeping watch, 'examine the pouches and bags hanging at the sides.'

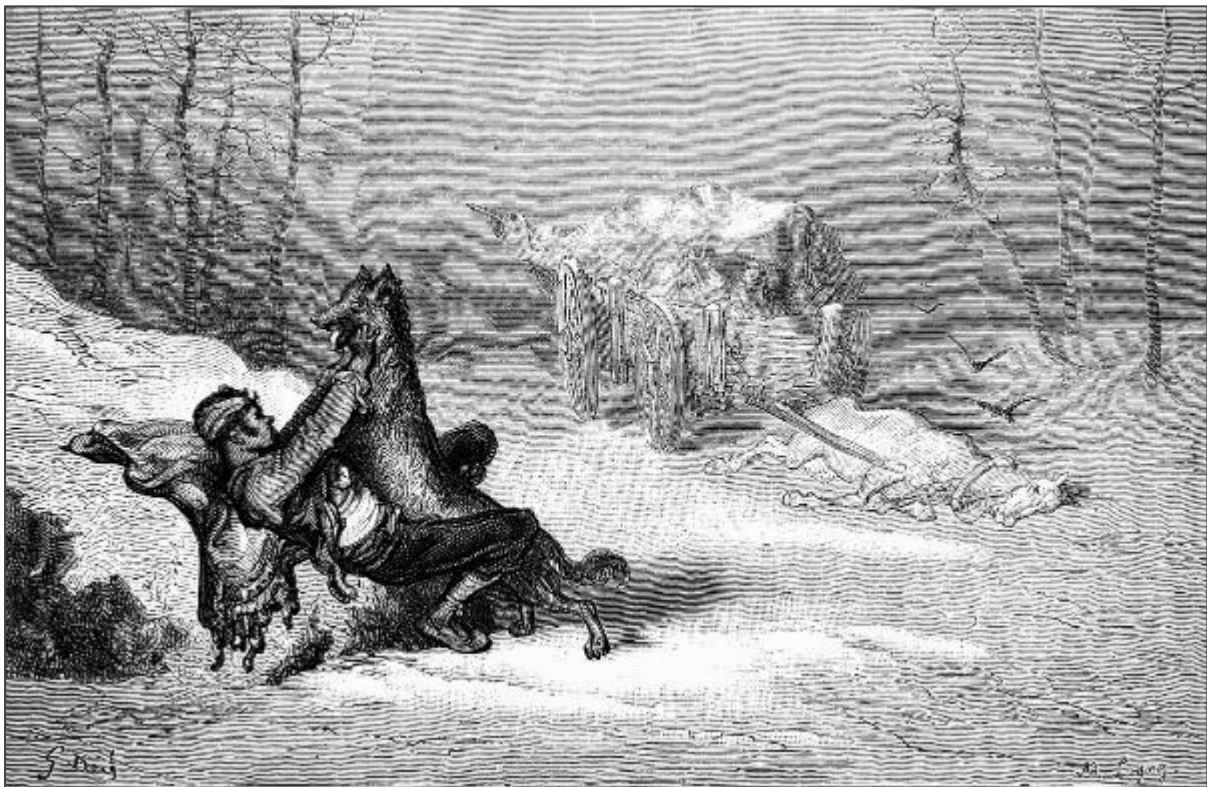
— 'There's nothing, nothing at all worth taking. 'Oh, Wait! Here's a bag that clinks with a sound of metal.'

— 'Hand it to me, quickly,' said Agostin, 'and bring the lantern closer so I can examine the find. By Lucifer's horns and tail! We're dogged by misfortune! I'd hoped for gold coins, and these are only gilded tokens, made of copper or lead. We'll take advantage of this encounter to rest a little, at least, sheltered from the north wind by the cart's canopy. Your poor, dear, blood-stained

feet can no longer bear you, so rough is the road, and so long the journey. Beneath the canvas, you can sleep for an hour or two. I'll keep watch, and if there's any alarm, we can leave quickly.'

Chiquita huddled as best she could in the back of the cart, pulling the old canvas stage-sets over herself to provide a little warmth, and soon fell asleep. Agostin remained at the front, his folding knife, the blade open, beside him and within reach of his hand, observing his surroundings with that piercing gaze of the bandit from whose observation nothing suspicious escapes. The deepest of silences reigned in the solitary countryside. On the slopes of the distant hills, touches of snow could be seen, gleaming in the pale rays of dawn, like spectral mirages, or marble tombs in a cemetery. But all maintained the most reassuring immobility. Agostin, despite his will and his iron constitution, felt sleep descending. Several times already his eyes had closed, and he had opened them abruptly with a determined air; objects began to blur beneath his drooping eyelids, and he was losing consciousness when, in his vague and incoherent dreamlike state, it seemed that a damp, warm breath traversed his face. He woke; and his eyes, as they opened, met two phosphorescent pupils.

— 'Wolves don't eat each other, my friend,' the bandit murmured, 'your jaws aren't strong enough to bite me.' And with a movement quicker than thought, he clasped the creature's throat with his left hand, and with his right, grasping the knife, he plunged it into the visitor's heart as far as the handle.



'Wolves don't eat each other, my friend.'

However, Agostin, despite his victory, judged the place unsafe, and woke Chiquita who showed no fear at the sight of the dead wolf, lying on the road.

— ‘We’re better on our feet,’ said the brigand, ‘this carcass attracts the wolves, rabid with hunger in snowy weather when there’s little to eat. I can kill a few as I did this one; but they may come by the dozen, and if I fell asleep, it would be unpleasant to wake in the belly of some carnivorous beast. If I were eaten, they’d make short work of you, little wimp, with your tender flesh. Come, let’s depart as fast as we can. The carcass will keep them busy. You can walk now, can you?’

— ‘Yes,’ said Chiquita, who was no spoiled child wrapped in cotton-wool, ‘that little sleep has restored my strength. My dear Agostin, you’ll no longer be obliged to carry an awkward bundle. And if my feet refuse to bear me,’ she added wildly, ‘you can cut my throat with that great knife, drop me in the ditch, and I’ll thank you.’

The Lord of the Mannequins and the little girl walked on swiftly, and after a few minutes were lost in the shadows. Reassured by their departure, the crows flew down from the nearby trees, swooped on the dead nag, and began to feast on the carrion. Two or three wolves soon arrived to take their share of the free meal, untroubled by the wingbeats, croaks, and beaks of their coal-black companions. In a few hours, such was their hunger, both quadrupeds and fowls, that the horse, cleaned to the bone, a skeleton in the morning light, appeared as if prepared by a veterinary surgeon. Only the tail and the hooves remained.

The Tyrant arrived with a farmhand, once it was broad daylight, to retrieve the cart. He kicked at the half-gnawed carcass of the wolf, and viewed between the shafts, still harnessed, the skeleton of the poor beast, which neither fang nor beak had seriously damaged. The bag of tokens, their counterfeit money for stage use, was scattered over the road, and the snow showed clearly-moulded prints, some large, some small, which led to the cart and then away again.

— ‘It would seem,’ said the Tyrant, ‘that Thespis’ chariot received visits of more than one sort last night. O happy accident, which obliged us to interrupt our odyssey, I cannot bless you too much! Thanks to you, we have avoided both the four-legged wolves and the two-legged, no less dangerous, if not more so. What a treat the tender flesh of our girls, Isabella and Serafina, would have been to them, not to mention our tough old skins!’

While the Tyrant mused in this way, Bellombre’s servant freed the cart, and harnessed the horse he had led behind him, though the animal balked at the skeleton’s terrifying appearance, and the smell of the savage wolf whose blood stained the snow.

The cart was housed beneath a shed roof, in the farmyard. Nothing was missing, and in fact there was something added: a small knife, one of those made in Albacete, which had fallen from Chiquita’s pocket during her short sleep, and which bore on its sharp blade this menacing motto in Spanish:

‘Cuando esta vivora pica,
No hay remedio en la botica’

‘When the toothed viper bites home,
For its wound, there’s no remedy known’

This mysterious discovery greatly intrigued the Tyrant, and Isabella, who was quite superstitious and readily saw omens, good or bad, in such little incidents, that went unnoticed by others or were of no value in their eyes, fell into a reverie. The young woman knew Castilian like all those with some education at that time, and the threatening nature of the inscription did not escape her.

Scapin had left for the village, dressed in his beautiful pink-and-white striped costume, his large ruff duly starched and pressed in folds, his toque over his eyes, his cape on the corner of his shoulder, while displaying a superb and triumphant air. He walked, raising his knees, in an automatic and rhythmic movement that strongly smacked of the soldier; indeed, Scapin had been just such before he had become an actor. When he reached the church square, already escorted by a few rascals amazed by his odd attire, he adjusted his toque, planted his feet, and, attacking the donkey’s hide with his drumsticks, produced a drum-roll so brief, so masterful, so imperative, that a like performance would serve to awaken the dead every bit as effectively as the trumpet of the Last Judgment. Imagine the effect it had on the living. All the windows and doors opened as if on a spring, simultaneously. Faces appeared at them, aiming interrogative, bewildered glances at the square. A second drum-roll, like the crack of musket fire, yielding a bass note like thunder, soon emptied the houses, in which only the sick, the bedridden, and women in labour remained. After a few minutes, the entire village had gathered together, forming a large circle around Scapin. To better engage his audience, the wily fellow executed several drum-rolls and counter-rolls in such a lively, accurate, and dextrous manner that the sticks seemed to vanish due to the rapidity of their employment, though his wrists seemed barely to move. As soon as he saw the wide-open mouths of the good villagers affect the O shape which, according to the old masters, in their sketchbooks, is the supreme expression of astonishment, he suddenly ceased his uproar; then, after a short silence, he began in a yelping voice, whose intonations he varied fancifully, this emphatic and comedic harangue:

— ‘This very evening, a unique opportunity! A grand spectacle! An extraordinary performance! The illustrious actors of the ambulatory troupe directed by Master Herod, who have had the honour of playing before crowned heads and princes of the blood, and are now passing through this region, will give, on this single occasion, since they are expected in Paris at the Court’s insistence, a wonderfully amusing and comic piece, entitled *The Rodomontades of Captain Fracasse*! With new costumes, original scenes, and regular beatings with a stick, it is the most entertaining in the world. At the end of the show, Mademoiselle Serafina will dance the Moresca, augmented by passepieds, twists and turns, and cabrioles in the latest style, accompanying herself on the tambourine, which she plays better than any gitana in Spain. It will be most pleasant to watch. This performance will take place in Monsieur Bellombre’s barn, arranged for the purpose, and abundantly furnished with benches and lighting. Working for glory rather than profit, we will accept not only money, but also food and provisions on the part of those who lack the former. Spread the word!’

Having finished his speech, Scapin drummed so furiously, by way of peroration, that the windows of the church shook in their networks of lead, and several dogs scattered howling, more frightened than if they had had tin pans tied to their tails.

At the farm, the actors, aided by Bellombre and his servants, had already finished work. At the back of the barn, planks laid over barrels formed the stage. Three or four benches borrowed from the cabaret served as seats; and, at that price, were not required to be padded or covered with velvet. The spiders were responsible for the ceiling decorations, and their webs like large rosettes linked one beam to another. What upholsterer, even one to the Court, could have produced a finer, more delicate, and airily elaborate hanging, even though it were in Chinese brocade? Those hanging nets of silk resembled armorial banners seen in the chapter rooms of royal and chivalric orders. A noble spectacle for anyone who chose to exercise their imagination more fully.

The oxen and cows, whose beds of straw had been removed, surprised by the unusual commotion, often turned their heads from their mangers to cast their gaze towards the theatre where the actors were bustling about, rehearsing the play, so as to show Sigognac his entrances and exits.

— ‘My debut on stage,’ said the Baron, laughing, ‘has cattle and calves as audience; it would be enough to diminish my self-esteem, if I possessed any.’

— ‘Nor will this be the last time you will have such an audience,’ replied Bellombre, ‘there are always imbeciles and husbands in the auditorium.’

For a novice, Sigognac’s acting was not at all bad, and he was felt to be a quick learner. He had a good voice, a sound memory, and an adequately informed imagination, literary-wise, to add to his role those lines which arise spontaneously in a scene, and give liveliness to the performance. The pantomime bothered him more, frequently involving blows from a stick, which sparked his indignation, even though they were only applied with a roll of painted canvas filled with tow; his comrades, aware of his sensibility, spared him as much as possible, and yet he became angered in spite of himself, displaying dreadful grimaces, terrific frowns, and severe looks. Then, suddenly remembering the nature of his role, he would suddenly take on a humble, fearful, and cowardly expression.

Bellombre, who was looking at him with the close and perceptive attention of an expert with long experience, a master of the acting profession, called to him from his seat: ‘Beware of restraining those natural movements of yours; they are very effective, and will produce a new interpretation of the Braggart. If you cease to experience angry outbursts and furious indignation, feign them through artifice: Fracasse, who is the character you have to create, for he who adopts another’s interpretation is never anything but second-rate, longs to be brave; he admires courage, valiant deeds please him, and he is indignant towards himself for being such a coward. Far from danger, he dreams only of heroic exploits, vast superhuman enterprises; but, when peril comes, his overly-vivid imagination presents a plethora of painful wounds, the bony face of Death, and his heart fails him; he rebels at first at the idea of letting himself be beaten, and rage fills his stomach, but the first blow shatters his resolve. This approach to the role is superior than that of staggering about, with staring eyes and grimaces more ape-like than human, by which inferior actors solicit laughter from the audience but forego artistry.’

Sigognac followed Bellombre's advice, and shaped his performance according to this idea so effectively that the actors applauded him, and predicted his success.

The performance was to take place at four in the afternoon. An hour before, Sigognac donned Matamore's costume which Leonarda had enlarged by removing the padding previously necessitated by the deceased's successive losses of weight.

As he slipped into this disguise, the Baron said to himself that it would have been doubtless more glorious to dress himself in leather and iron like his ancestors than disguise himself as an actor to represent a coward, he who was a truly valiant man capable of heroic deeds and exploits; but adverse fortune had reduced him to this unfortunate extremity, and he had no other means of subsistence.

The people were already gathering, and crowding into the barn. A few lanterns hanging from the beams supporting the roof cast a reddish light on all those brown, blond, and greying heads, among which appeared a few white women's head-dresses.

Other lanterns had been placed as footlights at the front of stage, since care had to be taken not to set fire to the straw and hay.

The play began, and was listened to attentively. Behind the actors, for the back of the stage was not lit, their large, bizarre-looking shadows were projected, which seemed to be parodying the actors, imitating all their movements in disjointed, fantastical ways; but these grotesque details went unnoticed by the naive spectators, entirely occupied with the workings of the comedy, and the performances of the characters, whom they considered to be real.

A few cows, the tumult prevented from sleeping, watched the scene with those large eyes which Homer celebrated in a laudatory epithet marking Hera's beauty (*βοῶπις*, *cow-eyed*, *Iliad* 1.551*etc.*) and even a calf, at a moment full of interest, uttered a lamentable moan which did not destroy the robust illusion as regards those fine countrymen, but which made the actors on stage well-nigh burst out laughing.

Captain Fracasse was applauded several times, since he fulfilled his role well, without his feeling, before this unsophisticated audience, the emotion he would have felt if playing to more critical and literate spectators. Besides, he was certain that, among these peasants, no one knew him. The other actors, were clapped vigorously, and repeatedly, by those calloused hands, which refused to spare themselves, and in a most intelligent manner, according to Bellombre.

Serafina performed her Maresca with voluptuous pride, and arched and provocative poses, interspersed with supple leaps, rapid foot movements, and all sorts of flourishes that would have made even persons of quality and courtiers swoon with delight. She was especially charming when, waving her tambourine above her head, she made the copper discs rattle, or when, rubbing her thumb against its yellowish-brown skin, she drew a dull hum from it with as much dexterity as a professional *tocador de pandereta*.

Meanwhile, the old ancestral portraits, lining the walls in the dilapidated manor of Sigognac, took on a more forbidding and sullen air than usual. The warriors heaved sighs that lifted their iron breastplates, and nodded their heads melancholically; the dowagers pouted disdainfully over their fluted ruffs, and stiffened themselves in their whalebone bodies and farthingales. Low, slow,

toneless voices, shadowy voices, escaped their painted lips, murmuring: 'The last of the Sigognacs has, alas, gone astray!'

In the kitchen there, seated, sadly, between Beelzebub and Miraut, who fixed long, questioning glances on him, Pierre was musing, saying to himself: 'Where is my poor master now...?' and a tear, licked at by the aged dog, rolled down the old servant's tanned cheek.

Chapter VIII: Matters Become Complicated

The day after the performance, Bellombre took Blazius aside and, loosening the cords of a large leather purse, poured out, as if from a horn of plenty, a hundred gleaming pistoles which he arranged in a pile to the great admiration of the Pedant, who remained with a contemplative expression before the treasure on show, rolling his eyes full of pecuniary covetousness.

With a superb gesture, Bellombre gathered the pistoles, in one fell swoop, and placed them in the palm of his old friend's hand: 'You will doubtless be aware' he said, 'that I would not do this to mock your need, as the gods tormented Tantalus. Take the money without hesitation. I will gift it to you, or lend it, if your pride is troubled by the idea of accepting it from an old comrade. Money is the nourisher of war, love, and the theatre. Besides, these coins, being shaped so as to roll about, find it tedious to do no more than lie flat in the depths of this purse where, in time, they would become coated in rust, dust, and mould. I spend little here, living in a rustic manner and suckling at the breast of Nature, nurse to Humanity. So, I shall not miss these.'

Finding nothing to reply to his rhetoric, Blazius pocketed the pistoles, and gave Bellombre a cordial embrace. The Pedant's wall eye shone more moistly than usual amidst the blinking of his eyelids. The light bathed a tear, and the efforts the old actor made to hide this sympathetic pearl caused the most comical movements of his bushy eyebrows. Sometimes they rose to the middle of his forehead among a reflux of pleated wrinkles, sometimes they lowered to well-nigh veil his gaze. These manoeuvres did not, however, prevent the tear from detaching itself and rolling down a nose heated to a cherry red by the previous day's libations, on the surface of which it evaporated.

The wind of ill fortune that had enveloped the troupe had most definitely fallen. The takings from the performance, together with Bellombre's pistoles, made quite a tidy sum, for the provisions offered in payment were intermixed with a certain quantity of coins, and Thespis' chariot, so lacking in the past, was now generously provisioned. To ensure that nothing was done by halves, the generous Bellombre lent the actors two sturdy plough-horses, soundly harnessed, with painted collars, and bells that jingled most pleasantly in accompanying the firm, regular step of those brave beasts.

Our actors, thus heartened, made a vigorous entry into Poitiers, not perhaps as magnificent as that of Alexander the Great into Babylon, but still quite majestic. The boy who was to return the horses stood at their head and moderated their progress, since they quickened their pace on smelling, from afar, the warm odours of the stable. The wheels rumbled through the winding streets of the city, over the rough paving, while the horseshoes clanged with a cheerful noise that drew folk to the windows and the inn doors; to call for those doors to be opened, the driver executed a joyful musket-round of whiplashes, to which the animals responded with shuddering movements that set the chimes of their bells ringing.

Their approach lacked the piteous, miserable, and furtive manner in which such actors had formerly arrived at the gloomiest of dens. Thus, the hotelier of the *Armes de France* understood, from this triumph of an uproar, that the newcomers were in funds, and ran himself to attend on the wagon.

The *Hôtel des Armes de France* was the finest inn in Poitiers and the one in which well-born and wealthy travellers often stayed. The courtyard into which the wagon entered had a most pleasant air. It was surrounded by clean buildings, adorned on all four sides with a covered balcony or corridor supported on iron brackets, a convenient arrangement allowing access to the rooms whose windows overlooked the courtyard, and facilitating the service of the footmen.

At the end of the courtyard an archway opened, giving passage to the outbuildings, kitchens, stables, and sheds. An air of prosperity reigned over all this. Recently plastered, the walls were bright to the eye; the wood of the banisters, and balusters of the gallery showed not a speck of dust. New roof tiles, of a bright red hue, whose grooves still retained a few thin streaks of snow, shone gaily in the winter sun. From the chimneys spiralled auspicious smoke. At the foot of the steps, his cap in his hand, stood the innkeeper, Master Bilot, a strapping fellow of ample corpulence, the triple folds of his chin a witness to the excellence of his kitchen, and the beautiful purple hue of his face to that of his cellar, a face which seemed to have been scoured with blackberry-juice like that of Silenus, that old drunkard who was tutor to Bacchus (*the wine-god Dionysus of Greek myth*). A smile that stretched from ear to ear puffed out his plump cheeks, and enveloped his mocking eyes, the outer corners of which vanished into crow's feet, and a host of mischievous wrinkles. He was so fresh, so fat, so ruddy, so tasty, so perfectly cooked, that he made you want to set him on a spit, and eat him drenched in his own juices!



‘The Innkeeper, Master Bilot.’

When he saw the Tyrant, whom he had known for a long time, and who always paid well, his good humour redoubled, since actors attract a crowd, and the youth of the city go to great lengths as regards snacks, feasts, suppers and other meals, to treat the actresses and win the good graces of those coquettes with sweets, fine wines, sugared almonds, jams, and other such little delicacies.

— ‘What good fortune brings you here, Master Herod?’ said the innkeeper: ‘It’s a long time since you were seen at the *Armes de France*.’

— ‘That’s true,’ replied the Tyrant, ‘but one shouldn’t always perform one’s antics in the same place. The spectators end up knowing all one’s tricks, and repeat them themselves. A brief absence is necessary. The largely-forgotten is as good as what’s new. Are any of the nobility in Poitiers at this time?’

— ‘Many, Master Herod, the hunting season is over, and they have little to do. One can’t always be eating and drinking. You’ll gather an audience.’

— ‘Then,’ said the Tyrant, ‘bring us the keys to eight of your rooms, lift three or four capons from the spit, remove from behind the woodpile a dozen bottles of that little wine that you know of, and spread the rumour throughout the city: that Master Herod’s illustrious troupe has arrived at the *Armes de France* with a new repertoire, and proposes to give several performances.’

While the Tyrant and the innkeeper were conversing in this way, the actors had descended from the carriage. The servants at the inn took their luggage, and carried it to the designated rooms. Isabella’s was a little apart from the others, the nearer ones being occupied. This distance did not displease the modest young woman, who was sometimes embarrassed by the bohemian promiscuity which the wandering life of an actress forced her to adopt.

Soon the whole town, thanks to the eloquence of Master Bilot, knew that the actors had arrived, and would perform plays penned by the finest minds of the time, and as well as they were done in Paris, if not better. The gallants and aficionados inquired about the beauty of the actresses, turning up the tips of their moustaches in a glorious manner, with a quite ridiculous air of conceit. Bilot, accompanying his words with significant grimaces, uttered discreet and mysterious answers calculated to turn the brains, and excite the curiosity of these young calves.

Isabella, having arranged her clothes on the shelves of the wardrobe, which, with an uneven bed, a table with twisted legs, two armchairs, and a wooden chest, formed the furniture of her room, attended to those matters of her toilette requiring the attention of a delicate young woman, after a long journey undertaken in the company of men. She spread out her long hair, finer than silk, untangled it, combed it, poured a few drops of essence of bergamot onto it, and tied it back, with thin blue ribbons of a colour most becoming to her pale rose complexion. Then she changed her linen. Anyone who had viewed her so would have thought they saw a nymph of Diana’s entourage, having laid her clothes on the bank, preparing to set her foot in the water, in some wooded valley of Greece. But only for an instant. A jealous cloud of white suddenly cloaked her pale nudity, for Isabella was chaste and prudish even in solitude. Then she put on a grey dress, adorned with blue embellishments, and looking at herself in the mirror, smiled with that smile that the least coquettish of women grants herself when she finds herself dressed to her advantage.

Under the influence of the milder temperature, the snow had melted and only a trace remained in the places exposed to the north wind. A ray of sunshine shone. Isabella could not resist the temptation of opening the window and poking her pretty nose outside for a moment, to examine the view revealed from her room; a whim all the more innocent because the window opened onto a deserted alley, formed on one side by the inn and on the other by a length of garden wall over which the bare tops of trees protruded. Her gaze plunged to the garden and followed the outline of a flowerbed marked by a box hedge; at the far end stood a mansion whose blackened walls attested to its antiquity.

Two cavaliers were walking beside the hedge, both young and well-looking, but not equal in rank, judging by the deference one showed the other, holding back a little, and yielding precedence at the end of the path whenever it was necessary to retrace their steps. Of this amicable couple, the first I will call Orestes, and the other Pylades. since we do not yet know their real names. Orestes might have been between twenty and twenty-two years of age. He had a pale complexion,

and jet-black eyes and hair. His doublet of brown velvet emphasized his supple, slender figure: a short cloak of the same colour and material as the doublet, edged with a triple line of gold braid, hung from his shoulder, held by a cord whose tassels rested on his chest; soft boots of pale Russian leather shod his feet, which more than one woman might have envied for their smallness and their raised arches, further emphasised by the high heel of the boot. From the bold ease of his movements, and his proud assuredness of bearing, one might surmise that he was a great lord, sure of being well received everywhere, and before whom life opened free of obstacles. Pylades, red of hair and beard, and dressed in black from head to toe, lacked by a long way the same triumphant certainty of mien, though he was quite a handsome person in his own right.

— ‘I tell you, my dear fellow, that Corisande bores me,’ said Orestes, retracing his steps to the end of the path and continuing the conversation that had been under way before Isabella opened her window, ‘I have had my door barred to her, and I shall return that portrait of her which is as gloomy as her person, along with her letters which are even more tedious than her conversation.’

— ‘Yet Corisande loves you,’ objected Pylades, quietly.

— ‘What matter, if I don’t love her?’ Orestes replied with a touch of passion. ‘That’s exactly the point! Do I owe a charitable show of love to every fellow, every maid who has the fancy to fall in love with me? I am too good to them. I give in to those swooning carp’s eyes, those whining tones, those sighs and lamentations, and I end up being hoodwinked, muttering all the while about my own good-naturedness and cowardice. From now on I will adopt a Hyrcanian ferocity, be cold as Hippolytus, and hide from women, like Joseph in the Bible. Clever the Potiphar who shall sink her claws into the border of my cloak! I declare myself, from now on, a misogynist, that is to say, an enemy of the petticoat, whether it be of silk or taffeta. To the Devil with duchesses and courtesans, bourgeois women, and shepherdesses! Whoever says the word ‘woman’ speaks of irritation, disappointment, gloomy adventures. I hate them from head to toe, and I will confine myself to chastity like a young monk in a hood. That cursed Corisande has disgusted me with her sex forever. I renounce them all...’

Orestes had reached this point in his speech when, raising his head as if to call heaven to witness his resolution, he happened to see Isabella at the window. He nudged his companion with his elbow and said: ‘Note over there, at that window, fresh as the Dawn on its eastern balcony, that adorable and delightful creature who seems more like a deity than a woman, with her ash-brown hair, her clear face, and sweet eyes. How graceful she is, leaning like that a little forward, which shows off to advantage, under the gauze of her chemise, the curves of her ivory throat! I imagine here to be of the finest character, unlike other females. Her mind must be modest, amiable and polite, her manner pleasant and charming!’

— ‘A plague on you!’ replied Pylades, laughing, ‘what good eyesight you must have to see all that from here! I see nothing, except a woman at her window, quite a nice one to tell the truth, but who doubtless lacks the incomparable perfections with which you so liberally endow her.’

— ‘Oh! I love her already, and deeply. I am smitten with her; I must possess her, and shall, even if I have to use the most subtle inventions, empty my coffers, and kill a hundred rivals to do so.’

— ‘Come, come, sir knight, don’t get so heated in your armour," said Pylades, ‘you’ll end up with pleurisy. And what has become of that fine hatred of the sex that you displayed so boastfully just now? The first pretty face was enough to put it to flight.’

— ‘When I spoke and cursed in that way, I knew not that this angel of beauty existed, and all that I said was naught but a damnable blasphemy, a pure and monstrous heresy, that I beg Venus, goddess of love, to forgive.’

— ‘She will do so, no doubt, for she is indulgent to all mad lovers whose banner you are worthy to bear.’

— ‘I will open the campaign,’ said Orestes, ‘and declare war courteously on my beautiful enemy.’

With that, he stopped, fixed his gaze directly on Isabella, removed, in a manner as gallant as it was respectful, his felt hat, the long feather of which swept the ground, and sent a kiss with his fingertips in the direction of the window.

The young actress, on seeing his action, assumed a cold and composed air as if to make the insolent man understand that he was quite mistaken, closed the window, and drew the curtain.

— ‘Now Aurora is hidden by a cloud,’ said Pylades, ‘which bodes ill for the rest of the day.’

— ‘On the contrary, I regard it as a favourable sign that this beauty has withdrawn. When the soldier hides behind the battlements of the tower, it means the besieger’s arrow has struck home. She is winged, I tell you, and the kiss I signalled will force her to think of me all night, if only to insult me, and accuse me of effrontery, a fault that never displeases women. There is something between me and the stranger now. A very thin thread, true, but I will strengthen it so as to make a rope to climb to the infant’s balcony.’

— ‘You are very well versed in the theory and stratagems of love,’ said Pylades respectfully.

— ‘I am sometimes touched by it,’ replied Orestes, ‘and now let us return, for the beauty once frightened will not reappear soon. This evening, I’ll send my spies out into the field.’ And the two friends slowly climbed the steps of the old mansion, and disappeared.

Now let me return to our actors. Not far from the inn was a racquet-court wonderfully suited to being employed as a theatre. The actors rented it, and a master-carpenter from the town, under the direction of the Tyrant, soon adapted it to its new purpose. A glazier-painter, who dabbled in daubing signs, and emblazoning coats of arms on the sides of carriages, refreshed the tired and faded decorations, and even painted new ones with some success. The room where the racquet-players changed, was arranged as a foyer for the actors, with screens surrounding the actresses’ area, forming a kind of dressing-room for the whole troupe. All the best seats were reserved in advance, and the takings promised to be excellent.

— ‘What a pity,’ said the Tyrant to Blazius, while listing the plays it would be suitable to perform, ‘what a pity that we lack Zerbina! A Soubrette is, in truth, the grain of salt, the *mica salis*, the spice of comedy. Her sparkling gaiety lights up the stage: she vivifies slow passages, and encourages laughter in those who are uncertain, by flashing her thirty-two pearls surrounded by bright carmine. By means of her chatter, impertinence, and lasciviousness, she emphasises the more modest mannerisms, gentle speech, and cooing tones of the Lover. The trenchant colours

of her bold skirts amuse the eye, and she may reveal, as far as her garter, or almost, a slender leg in a red stocking with gold trim, a perspective pleasing to young and old alike, especially to the old whose dormant salaciousness she awakens.'

— 'Indeed,' replied Blazius, 'the Soubrette is a precious condiment, a whole boxful even, that adds spice to the insipid comedies of the day. But we must do without her. Neither Isabella nor Serafina can fill the role. Besides, we need a Lover and a Grande Coquette. The Devil take that Marquis de Bruyères who has snatched our pearl from us, that phoenix wholly unique, that paragon of maids, in the person of the incomparable Zerbina!'

The conversation between the two had reached this point when a silvery chiming of bells was heard in front of the inn door; soon lively, rhythmic hoofbeats clattered on the pavement of the courtyard, and the pair, leaning on the balustrade of the gallery where they had been talking, saw three mules harnessed in the Spanish style, with plumes on their heads, embroidered decorations, tufts of wool, clusters of bells, and saddled with striped blankets. All very neat and magnificent, and in no way suggestive of hired beasts.

On the first was mounted a rogue of a footman, in grey livery, with a hunting knife at his belt and an arquebus across his saddle-bow, maintaining the insolent air of a great lord, who, if dressed otherwise than as a servant, might well have passed for his master. He was leading, by a rope twisted around his arm, the second mule burdened with two enormous bundles, balanced on each side of the pack-saddle, and covered with a Valencian patterned cape.

The third mule, finer and more stylish even than the other two, bore a young woman warmly wrapped in a fur-trimmed coat, and wearing a grey felt hat with a red feather pulled down over her eyes.

— 'Does this procession not remind you of something?' said Blazius to the Tyrant, 'I think this is not the first time I have heard those same bells chime.'

—By Saint Alipantin! (*a coinage of Rabelais*, see '*Gargantua and Pantagruel*', Book 2:VI) replied the Tyrant, these same mules were employed in the kidnap of Zerbina at the crossroads of La Croix. Speak of the wolf...'

— '...and one sees its tail, or in this case feather,' Blazius interrupted; 'oh, thrice-fortunate day, worthy of being marked in red! It is indeed Senora Zerbina herself; see how she leaps from her mount with that mischievous turn of the hips which belongs only to her, and throws her mantle over the footman's arm. There, she is doffing her felt hat, and shaking her hair as a bird does its feathers. Let's go and welcome her, taking the steps four at a time.'

Blazius and the Tyrant rushed down to the courtyard, and met Zerbina at the foot of the stair. The joyful girl leapt at the Pedant's neck and, clasping his head, cried out, her words suiting the action: 'I must clasp you and kiss your old face, with all my heart, just as if you were a pretty youth, my joy is so great at seeing you again. Don't be jealous, Herod, you Tyrant, and don't frown with those great dark eyebrows, as if you were going to order the Massacre of the Innocents. I shall kiss you too. I began with Blazius because he's the uglier.'

Zerbina executed her promise, faithfully, for she was a girl of her word, and was full of integrity in her own way. Giving a hand to each of the two actors, she ascended to the gallery where Master

Bilot had prepared a room for her. As soon as she entered, she threw herself into an armchair, and began to breathe heavily like someone relieved of a great weight.

— ‘You’ve no idea,’ she said to the two actors, after a moment’s silence, ‘the pleasure I feel at being with you again; but don’t think it’s because I’m in love with your ugly old mugs marred by white lead and rouge. I love no one, thank God! My joy is due to returning to my element, for one’s always unhappy out of it. Birds are no more suited to water than fish to air; the former drown, while the latter suffocate. I’m an actress by nature, and the atmosphere of the theatre suits me. There, alone, I can breathe at ease; smoke-laden candles smell better to me than civet, benzoin, ambergris, musk or Spanish leather. That aroma backstage is like balm to my nose. Sunlight bores me; real life seems dull. I need invented lovers to serve me, and the world of romantic adventures present in comedies to absorb my energies. Once the poets no longer lend me their voices, I fall silent. So, I’m returning to my role. I hope you’ve not hired anyone to replace me. Nor shall I accept it, by the way. If it is the case, my claws will soon be at the little slut’s face; I’ll break her front teeth on the edge of the platform. When someone encroaches on my area of privilege, I can be as mean as the Devil.’

— ‘There’s no need for carnage,’ said the Tyrant, ‘we have no Soubrette. It was Leonarda who played your role, in an aged and duenna-like manner, a rather sad and gloomy metamorphosis, to which necessity condemned us. If by means of one of those magic ointments of which Apuleius speaks (*see ‘The Golden Ass’, Book 3*) you had just now transformed yourself into a bird, and, perched on the edge of the roof, had listened to the conversation I was holding with Blazius, you would have had a rare thing happen to you, that of hearing our praise of you delivered in a lyrical, Pindaric, and dithyrambic manner.’

— ‘Good,’ replied Zerbina, ‘I see that you are still the good companions of yesteryear, and that you missed your little Zerbinetta.’

Some lads from the inn, now entered the room and left packages, boxes, and cases there, which the actress inspected and opened, in the presence of her two comrades, employing several little keys on a silver ring.

They contained beautiful clothes, fine linen, guipure lace, jewels, pieces of velvet and Chinese satin: a whole trousseau as bold as it was rich. There was, in addition, a deep, wide and heavy leather bag, stuffed to the mouth with cash, the cord of which Zerbina untied, and whose contents she poured onto the table. It resembled the River Pactolus (*the Sart Çayı, Turkey, whose waters yielded gold in ancient times*), only in coinage. The Soubrette plunged her small brown hands into the pile of gold, like a winnower into a heap of wheat, raised all that her cupped palms could contain, then opened them and let the gold louis fall back in a shining shower, greater than that by which Danaë, daughter of Acrisius, was seduced in her brazen tower (*by Zeus, so disguised*). Zerbina’s eyes sparkled as brightly as the coins, her nostrils flared, and a nervous laugh revealed her white teeth.

— ‘Serafina would burst with rage if she saw me with such riches,’ said the Soubrette to Herod and Blazius, ‘I’m showing them to you to prove that it’s not poverty that draws me back to the fold, but pure love of the art. As for you, my old friends, if you’re low-spirited, you can plunge your hands in there, and take as much as your fingers can hold, and even use your thumbs, German style.’

The actors thanked her for her generosity, saying they needed nothing.

— ‘Well!’ said Zerbina: ‘Save it for another time; I’ll keep the coins in my coffer like a faithful treasurer.’

— ‘So, you’ve abandoned the poor marquis,’ said Blazius with exaggerated solemnity, ‘not being one to be abandoned by a lover yourself. You’re unsuited to the role of Ariadne (*who was abandoned by Dionysus, in Greek myth*), but that of Circe (*a sorceress in Homer’s ‘Odyssey’*) fits. Still, he was a fine nobleman, well-made, with a manner learned at Court, witty and worthy in every way of being loved longer.’

— ‘My intention,’ replied Zerbina, ‘is to keep him like a ring on my finger, and the most precious gem in my jewellery case. I’ve not abandoned him, and if I have left him, it was merely so that he would follow.’

— ‘*Fugax sequax, sequax fugax,*’ resumed the Pedant, ‘those four Latin words with their cabalistic consonance, seeming like the croaking of those amphibians in Aristophanes’ *The Frogs*, contain the marrow of all theories of love, and may serve as a rule of conduct for both the male and the female sex.’

— ‘And what does your Latin mean, old Pedant?’ said Zerbina. ‘You neglect to translate it, forgetting that not everyone has been like you, a schoolteacher and a distributor of canings.’

— ‘It could be translated,’ replied Blazius, ‘by a versicle, or a couplet if you will, in this manner:

Flee him, he’ll pursue you;

Follow, and he’ll flee you.’

— ‘That,’ said Zerbina, laughing, ‘is real poetry, fit for a *mirliton* or those sugared pastry-cones they stick into biscuits. It should be sung to the tune of *Robin et Robine*.’

And the mad creature began to sing the Pedant’s verse at full throat, in a voice so clear, so silvery, so pearly, it was a pleasure to hear her. She accompanied her song with such expressive looks, sometimes laughing, sometimes angry, that the pursuit and retreat of two lovers was perfectly portrayed, the one inflamed, the other disdainful. When she had given full rein to her frolics, she calmed down, and became more serious.

— ‘Hear my tale. On the Marquis’ orders, this valet and his mule boy, who gathered me up at the crossroads of La Croix, led me to a little fort, or hunting lodge, that he owns, deep in one of his woods, a place most secluded and difficult to discover, unless you know it exists, since it’s hidden behind a dark row of fir trees. It is there that this good lord goes to indulge in debauchery with some friends of his, free companions. You can shout ‘A Toast!’ and ‘Santé!’ without anyone hearing, other than an old servant who renews the wine-jars. It is also there that he hides his mistresses and his amorous fantasies. There’s a bright, clean apartment, wallpapered with Flemish woodland scenes, and furnished with a curtained bed, ancient but large, soft, and well-adorned with pillows and cushions; a set of clothes in which nothing is lacking essential to any woman, though she be a duchess: combs, sponges, bottles of essence, opiates, boxes for *mouches* (*beauty-spots*), lip-rouge, almond-paste; with armchairs, dining-chairs, and folding-chairs padded to perfection, and Turkish carpets everywhere, so thick that one can fall without hurting oneself. This

secret retreat occupies the second floor of the pavilion. I say secret, because from the outside it is impossible to suspect its magnificence. Time has blackened the walls, which would fall to ruin without the ivy that embraces and supports them. Passing before the castle one would think it uninhabited; in the evening, the shutters and window-curtains prevent the candle-light and fire-light from being seen.'

— 'That would prove a fine setting for the fifth act of a tragi-comedy,' interrupted the Tyrant. 'The actors could slit one another's throats at leisure in such a place.'

— 'Your custom of playing tragic roles,' said Zerbina, 'has clouded your judgement. On the contrary, it's a very joyful dwelling, for the Marquis is anything but fierce.'

— 'Continue your tale, Zerbina,' said Blazius with an impatient gesture.

— 'When I arrived at this château in the wilds,' continued Zerbina, 'I could not help but feel a certain apprehension. I had no reason to fear for my virtue, yet, for an instant, I had the idea that the Marquis wished to imprison me in a dungeon of some kind, from which he might drag me, capriciously, now and then, to serve his whims. I've no taste for dungeons with barred air-vents, nor could I endure captivity, even were I to be the favourite Sultana of His Highness the Mighty Sultan; but I said to myself, I'm a Soubrette by trade, and have, in my life, aided so many Isabellas, Leonoras, and Doralices to escape that I know how to find a ruse by which to do so myself, if they do seek to detain me. A miracle it would be if some jealous fellow could keep Zerbina a prisoner! So, I entered, bravely, and was surprised, in the most pleasant way in the world, to see that this sullen dwelling, which grimaced at passers-by, smiled at its guests. Dilapidation reigned outside, luxury within. A good fire blazed in the fireplace. The light of the pink candles was mirrored in their polished holders, and on the table, with its wealth of crystal glass, silverware, and plate, a supper as abundant as it was delicious was served. On the edge of the bed, carelessly scattered lengths of fabric reflected light from their crumpled folds. Jewels set out on the dressing-table, bracelets, necklaces, earrings, shed wild gleams, and gave off sudden flashes of gold. I felt completely reassured. A young country maid, opened the door, offered me her services, and relieved me of my travelling dress so as to don a more suitable one which already hung in the wardrobe. Soon the Marquis arrived. He found me charming in my white taffeta silk negligee aflame with cerise, and swore indeed he loved me madly. We had supper, and at whatever cost to my modesty I must admit I was dazzling. I felt a devilish spirit within me; witty sallies flew, our encounters occurred, amidst bursts of sparkling laughter; it was a display of enthusiasm, verve, joyous fury, that none could imagine. It was enough to make the dead dance, and set ablaze the ashes of old King Priam of Troy. The dazzled, fascinated, and intoxicated Marquis called me now an angel and now a demon; he proposed to murder his wife and marry me. The dear man! He would have done as he said, but I refused to allow it, saying that such killings were insipid, bourgeois, common things. I cannot believe that Lais of Corinth, or the beautiful Imperia Cognati of Rome, or Madame Vannoza who was mistress to a Pope (*Giovanna 'Vannozza' dei Cattanei was mistress to Cardinal Rodrigo de Borgia, later Pope Alexander VI*), ever enlivened the midnight hour as charmingly. Things continued like this for several days. Little by little, however, the Marquis became dreamier, he seemed to be seeking something of which he was not aware, but which he lacked. He went out riding a few times, and even invited two or three friends to visit, as if to amuse himself. Knowing he was vain, I dressed to advantage and redoubled my kindness, grace, and coquettishness before these squires who had never before been at such a gathering: at dessert,

employing pieces of a broken china plate as castanets, I executed a saraband so wild, so lascivious, so frenzied, it would have guaranteed the damnation of a saint. Arms swaying above my head, legs gleaming like lightning amidst a whirl of skirts, hips shaking more than quicksilver does, back arched to touch the parquet floor with my shoulders, breasts quivering, ablaze with glances and smiles to set fire to an audience if ever I chose to dance so on stage. The Marquis beamed, and gloried in it all, proud as a king to have such a mistress; but next day he was gloomy, languid, idle. I tried my strongest potions. Alas, they no longer had power over him. His state of mind seemed to astonish even himself. Sometimes he looked at me attentively as if contemplating, beneath my features, a resemblance to some other person. Had he acquired me, I thought to myself, merely to embody a memory, and remind him of a lost love? No, I answered, such melancholic fantasies are not in his nature. Such reveries are suited to bilious hypochondriacs, not joyful folk with rosy cheeks and reddened ears.'

— 'Was it satiety, perhaps,' said Blazius, 'for one wearies even of ambrosia in the end, and the gods descend to earth, to taste the coarse bread mortals eat.'

— 'Remember, Master Fool,' replied Zerbina, giving the Pedant a little slap on the fingers, 'that no one ever tires of me, you told me so a moment ago.'

— 'Forgive me, Zerbina, and tell us what the Marquis' dreamy mood was all about; I am dying to hear.'

— 'Finally,' resumed the Soubrette, 'by dint of much reflection I comprehended what was distressing the Marquis, and marring his happiness. I discovered the worm in the rose that this sybarite sighed over on his couch of voluptuousness. He possessed the woman, but regretted the actress. The brilliant scene that the footlights reveal, the make-up, the costumes, the variety and activity the play demands had vanished, as the artificial splendour of the stage fades when the lights are quenched. By retreating to the wings, I had lost part of my charm for him. All that remained to him was Zerbina; while what he loved in me was Lisette, Marton, Marinette, the lightning-flash of a smile, the glance of an eye, the quick retort, the provocative look, the whimsical poise, the longing and admiration shown by the public. He was searching, in my everyday face, for my theatrical face, because we actresses, when we are not ugly, possess two forms of beauty, one created and the other natural; a mask, and a set of features. Often it is the mask that is preferred, even if the features are attractive. What the Marquis wanted was the Soubrette he had seen in the *Rodomontades of Captain Matamore*, of whom I myself represented only a part. The whim that attracts certain men to actresses is much less sensual than one thinks. It is a passion of the mind rather than the body. They believe they are reaching the ideal by embracing the reality, yet the image they are pursuing eludes them; an actress is like a painting that needs be contemplated from a distance, and in the right light. If you approach too near, the glamour dissipates. Then, I myself was beginning to feel bored. I had often wished to be loved by a nobleman, to wear expensive clothes, to live without cares in the lap of luxury, and I'd often cursed the harsh fate that forced me to wander from town to town, travelling by cart, sweating in the summer, freezing in the winter, to fulfil my role as a travelling player. I awaited an opportunity to put an end to that wretched life, not suspecting that it was my true life, my *raison d'être*, my talent, my claim to poetry, my charm, and my particular lustre. Without the rays of art that gild me a little, I would be nothing more than a vulgar scamp like so many others. Thalia, the virgin goddess, protects me by dressing me in her livery, and the verses the poets write, coals of fire touching my lips, cleanse them of more than

one lascivious little kiss. My stay in the Marquis' pavilion enlightened me. I understood that this brave gentleman was not only in love with my eyes, teeth, and skin, but also with that little spark that glows in me and wins me applause. One fine morning I told him quite clearly that I wished to resume my travels, since it did not suit me to remain the mistress of a noble lord forever: that the first woman who came along could perform the role as well, and that he must graciously grant me leave, while adding however that I loved him very much, and was most grateful for his kindness. The Marquis seemed surprised at first, but not angry, and after reflecting for a while, he said: "What will you do, my darling?" I replied: "Overtake Herod's troupe on the way, or join them in Paris if they are already there. I wish to resume my role of Soubrette; it has been a long time since I made a fool of Gerontes (*equivalent to Pantalone in the commedia dell'arte*)."

This made the Marquis laugh. "Well," he said, "employ the team of mules that I am placing at your disposal, and I will follow shortly. I have some business which requires my presence at court, and which I have neglected, and besides I have been rusting away in the provinces for too long. You will allow me to applaud your performances, and if I tap on your dressing-room, you will open to me, I hope." I adopted a coy, little air, but not one to make him despair. "Ah! Monsieur le Marquis, what do you seek from me." In short, after the most tender of farewells, I mounted my mule, and here I am at the *Armes de France*.'

— 'But,' said Herod, in a doubtful tone, 'if the Marquis failed to appear, you'd be utterly floored.'

This idea seemed so ludicrous to Zerbina that she leant back in her armchair and burst into laughter, clutching her sides. 'The Marquis fail to appear!' she cried, when she had regained her composure. 'You may book his apartment in advance. My only fear was that in his ardour he might have arrived before me. Come, now! You doubt my charms, Tyrant, as foolish as your namesake is cruel. Tragedy is definitely rendering you stupid. You used to have more wit than that.'

Leander and Scapin, who had learned of Zerbina's arrival from the servants, entered the room and welcomed her. Soon Dame Leonarda appeared, her owlish eyes blazing at the sight of the gold and jewels scattered on the table. She displayed the vilest obsequiousness towards Zerbina. Isabella also appeared, and the Soubrette graciously presented her with a length of taffeta. Serafina alone remained in her own room. After the blow to her self-esteem, she had been unable to forgive her rival with regard to the Marquis' inexplicable preference.

Zerbina was told that Matamore had frozen to death on the way, but that he had been replaced in the company by the Baron de Sigognac, who had taken as his stage-name the title, most appropriate to the role, of Captain Fracasse.

— 'It will be a great honour for me to act alongside a gentleman whose ancestors fought in the Crusades,' said Zerbina, 'and I shall try not to let respect dampen my enthusiasm. Happily, I am now accustomed to people of quality.'

At that moment, Sigognac entered the room. Zerbina curtsied so as to make her skirts puff out amply, and gave him a beautiful, well-executed, and ceremoniously courtly bow.

— 'This,' she said, 'is for Monsieur Baron de Sigognac, and this for Captain Fracasse, my comrade,' she added, kissing him warmly on both cheeks, which well-nigh disconcerted Sigognac, unaccustomed as yet to such theatrical liberties, and also disturbed by Isabella's presence.

Zerbina's return allowed for a pleasantly varied repertoire, and the whole troupe, with the exception of Serafina, could not have been more pleased to see her again.

Now we have seen her comfortably settled in her room, surrounded by her cheerful companions, let us enquire after Orestes and Pylades, whom we left as they were returning home following their walk in the garden.

Orestes, that is to say the young Duke of Vallombreuse, for such was his title, ate only the slightest amounts and more than once neglected the glass that the footman had re-filled, so preoccupied was his imagination with the beautiful woman seen at the window. The Chevalier de Vidalinc, his confidant, tried in vain to distract him; Vallombreuse only replied in monosyllables to the friendly jokes of his Pylades.

As soon as the dessert was removed, the knight addressed the duke:

— 'The briefest follies are the best; so that you may cease thinking about this beauty, it is simply a matter of ensuring your possession of her. She will soon be in Corisande's situation. You are like those hunters who love only the pursuit of game and, once the quarry is slain, scarcely care to retrieve it. I will go organise a hunt so as to drive the bird to your nets.'

— 'No,' Vallombreuse replied, 'I'll do so myself; as you said, it is the chase alone that amuses me, and I would follow the least creature of fur or feathers to the ends of the earth, from hide to hide, until I fell dead of exhaustion. Don't deny me that pleasure. Oh! If I had the good fortune to find a woman who resisted my advances, I think I should adore her, but there are none on this earthly globe.'

— 'If one did not know of your triumphs,' said Vidalinc, 'one might accuse you of conceit on this subject, but your caskets full of love-letters, portraits, ribbon-bows, dried-flowers, locks of black, blonde and red hair, and such other tokens of love, clearly show that you are modest in speaking thus. Perhaps you will find what you seek, for the lady at the window seems to me wise, modest, and wonderfully cold.'

— 'We shall see. Master Bilot talks freely; he listens also, and knows much of the people who stay at his inn. Let us go and drink a bottle of wine from the Canary Islands with him. I shall encourage him to talk, and he will tell us of this princess and her wanderings.'

A few minutes later, the two young men entered the *Armes de France* and asked for Master Bilot. The worthy innkeeper, knowing the status of his guests, led them himself to a well-kept ground-floor room where a bright, sparkling fire blazed in the fireplace, beneath a broad mantelpiece. He took from the sommelier's hands a bottle, grey with dust, and covered with cobwebs, removed its wax cover with infinite caution, extracted the stubborn cork from the neck, smoothly, and with a hand as firm as if it had been cast in bronze, and poured a thread of liquid as blond as topaz into the spiral-stemmed Venetian glassware held out to him by the duke and the knight. In performing this cupbearer's task, Bilot affected a religious gravity; one would have said he was a priest of Bacchus officiating at, and celebrating, the mysteries of the divine bottle; all he lacked was a crown of ivy, or vine leaves. This ceremonial served to increase the value of the wine he served, which was truly very good, and more worthy of a royal table than of a tavern.

He was about to leave them, when Vallombreuse stopped him on the threshold with an intimate wink. 'Master Bilot,' he said to him, 'take a glass from the dresser, and drink a glass of this wine to my health.'

The tone admitted no reply, and besides Bilot was not one to be asked twice as regards helping a guest to consume the treasures of his cellar. He raised his glass, with a bow, and drained the contents down to the last drop.

— 'A fine wine,' he said with a contented click of his tongue against the roof of his mouth, then stood with his hand resting on the edge of the table, his eyes fixed on the duke, waiting to know what was required of him.

— 'Do you have many guests at your inn,' asked Vallombreuse, 'and of what nature?' Bilot was about to reply, but the young duke forestalled the innkeeper's words and continued. 'What is the point of trifling with an old miscreant like you? Who is the woman who occupies that room the window of which overlooks the alley opposite the Vallombreuse mansion, the third window from the corner of the wall? Answer quickly, and you shall have a gold piece for every syllable.'

— 'At that price,' said Bilot with a hearty laugh, 'I would be virtuous indeed were I to employ the laconic style so esteemed by the ancients. However, as I am entirely devoted to Your Lordship, I will utter a single name: Isabella!'

— 'Isabella! A charming and romantic name,' said Vallombreuse, but do not employ such Spartan restraint. Be verbose, and tell us in detail all you know of this infanta.'

— 'I will comply with Your Lordship's orders,' replied Master Bilot, bowing. 'My cellar, my kitchen, my very tongue, are at his disposal. Isabella is an actress who belongs to the troupe of Master Herod, currently lodged at my *Hôtel des Armes de France*.'

— 'An actress,' said the young duke, with an air of disappointment, 'I would have taken her, from her discreet and reserved air, for a lady of quality, or a wealthy member of the bourgeoisie rather than a wandering player.'

— 'One might well be deceived,' continued Bilot, 'for the young lady has very elevated manners. She plays the role of an ingénue on the stage, and continues to do so in reality. Her virtue, although at risk for she is pretty, has suffered no breach, and she would have the right to wear a virginal crown. None knows better how to turn away a lover with precise and cold politeness, in a manner that leaves him no hope.'

— 'I admire such,' said Vallombreuse. 'I hate nothing more than undefended bastions, strongholds that beat the drums for parley, and seek to capitulate even before the assault has been ordered.'

— 'It will take more than a single captain to take that citadel,' said Bilot, 'though you be a bold and brilliant soldier and one little accustomed to encountering resistance, since this fortress is guarded by a sentinel vigilant in defence of true love.'

— 'So, she has a lover, this wise Isabella!' cried the young duke in a tone both triumphant and dejected, for on the one hand he had had little belief in female virtue, yet on the other it annoyed him to learn that he had a rival.

— ‘I said love, not lover,’ the innkeeper continued with respectful insistence. ‘They are not the same thing. Your Lordship is too experienced in matters of gallantry not to appreciate the difference, though it may appear subtle. A woman who has taken a lover may well take more, as the song says, but a woman who has but one love is impossible, or at least very difficult, to conquer. She already possesses what you offer her.’

— ‘You discourse on the matter,’ said Vallombreuse, ‘as if you had studied the courts of love, and Petrarch’s sonnets. I thought you were only learned as regards sauces and wine. And who is the object of this platonic tenderness?’

— ‘An actor, a member of the troupe,’ replied Bilot, ‘whom I could readily imagine acts merely out of love, because he lacks, it seems to me, the appearance of a common player.’

— ‘Well,’ said the Chevalier de Vidalinc to his friend, ‘you should be pleased. Unforeseen obstacles present themselves here. A virtuous actress is not someone you encounter every day, and such an affair is what you seek. It will grant you relief from grand ladies and courtesans.’

— ‘Are you certain,’ continued the young duke, pursuing his own thoughts, ‘that this chaste Isabella grants no audiences to this fellow, whom I already detest with all my soul?’

— ‘It’s clear that you know her not,’ Master Bilot continued. ‘She is like the ermine that would rather die than accept a spot on its white coat. When the play demands a kiss, you will see her blush beneath her rouge and even wipe her cheek with the back of her hand.’

— ‘Long live the proud, fierce, mare who rebels against the mounting block!’ cried the duke. ‘I whip her so well she’s obliged to walk, amble, trot, gallop, and bow to my will.’

— ‘You will achieve nothing in that manner, Monsieur le Duc, allow me to say,’ said Master Bilot, performing a bow marked by the deepest humility, as befits an inferior who contradicts a superior separated from him by so many rungs on the social ladder.

— ‘Not if I sent her, in a beautiful shagreen case, a few pendants adorned with large pearls, a gold necklace with several strands and clasps, set with precious stones, or a bracelet in the shape of a snake with two large balas rubies for eyes!’

— ‘She would simply return your gifts, and reply that you probably take her for someone else. She is not that way inclined like most of her companions, and her eyes, a rare thing for a woman, fail to light at the sight of gems. She looks at the most finely-set diamonds as if they were but medlars in straw.’

— ‘What a strange and whimsical specimen of the female sex!’ cried the Duke of Vallombreuse, quite astonished. ‘No doubt she seeks to marry this rascal of hers, who must be abundantly endowed with wealth, given this pretence at wisdom. These creatures sometimes have a whim to achieve high rank, and sit amidst gatherings of prudish women, their eyes lowered in modesty, and with a “touch me not” air.’

— ‘Marry her,’ Vidalinc laughed, ‘if there’s no other way. The title of duchess renders human even the surliest of women.’

— ‘Enough! Enough!’ cried Vallombreuse. ‘Let’s not advance too swiftly; let us first negotiate. Let us find some stratagem for approaching this beauty that won’t frighten her away.’

— ‘That is easier than making her love you,’ said Master Bilot. ‘This evening at the racquet-court there is a rehearsal of the play that is to be performed tomorrow. A few aficionados from the town will be admitted, and you have only to declare your presence for the door to open to you. Besides, I will have a word with Master Herod about it, who is a great friend of mine and will refuse me nothing; but, according to my scant knowledge, you would do better to address your wishes to Mademoiselle Serafina, who is no less pretty than Isabella and whose vanity would have prompted her to swoon with pleasure at your mission.’

— ‘It is the thought of Isabella that intoxicates me,’ said the duke, in a dry little tone that he knew how to deploy admirably, and which cut short the conversation, ‘Isabella and no one else, Master Bilot,’ and, plunging his hand into his pocket, he carelessly scattered a trail of gold pieces across the table, ‘take your payment for the wine, and keep the change.’

The innkeeper gathered the louis punctiliously, and dropped them one after another into the depths of his purse. The two gentlemen rose, pushed their felt hats over their eyebrows, threw their coats over a shoulder, and left the room. Vallombreuse took several turns in the alley, raising his eyes each time he passed in front of the sacred window, but it was in vain. Isabella, now on her guard, did not show herself. The curtain was drawn, and one might have thought the room empty. Tired of lingering in this deserted alley, in a chilly north wind, a situation to which he was unaccustomed, the Duke of Vallombreuse bored by his idle sojourn, returned home, grumbling at the impertinent prudishness of a woman self-assured enough to make a young and handsome duke languish so. He even thought, with some complacency, of the good Corisande, formerly so disdained, but his pride soon whispered in his ear that he need only make an appearance to triumph like Caesar. As for his rival, if he bothered him too much, he would hire a few soldiers, or cut-throats, to eliminate him; his dignity would not allow him to challenge such a rascal.

Though Vallombreuse had not seen Isabella withdraw to the rear of her apartment, yet, during his period of loitering in the alley, a jealous eye had spied on her through the panes of another window, that of Sigognac, whom the manner and behaviour of the personage below greatly displeased. Ten times the Baron was tempted to descend and attack the gallant with drawn sword, but restrained himself. There was nothing sufficiently offensive in the act of walking beside a wall to justify such aggression, which would have been considered mad and ridiculous. Such an outburst might harm Isabella’s reputation, she being completely innocent of those glances raised always towards the same place. He promised himself, however, to keep a close eye on the gallant, and engraved his features in his memory so as to recognise him if needed.

Herod had chosen for the next day’s performance, drummed up, and announced to the whole town, *Ligdamon and Lydias, or the Resemblance* (1631), a tragicomedy by Georges de Scudéry, a gentleman who, after having served in the Guards, had quit the sword for the pen, and wielded the one no less skilfully than the other, and *The Rodomontades of Captain Fracasse*, in which Sigognac was to make his debut before the public, having only acted previously for calves, horned-cattle, and country folk, in Bellombre’s barn. All the actors were well-occupied learning their roles; the play by Monsieur de Scudéry had just debuted, and was unknown to them. Pre-occupied, though chattering like monkeys while reciting their parts, they walked about the gallery, sometimes muttering, sometimes emitting loud vocal bursts. Anyone who had seen them would have taken them for folk who had taken leave of their senses. They stopped short, and set out again, with great strides, waving their arms like disjointed windmills. Leander especially, who was to play

Ligdamon, tried various poses, and effects and struggled like a demon in a font of holy water. He was counting on this role to realise his dream of inspiring love in some great lady and take his revenge for the blows he had received at the Château de Bruyères, blows that had remained in his memory even longer than on his back. His role, that of a languid and lovesick lover, expressing fine feelings at the feet of an inhuman woman, in rather well-turned verse, lent itself to winks of the eye, sighs, pallor and all sorts of touching affectations, in which Monsieur Leander, one of the best Lovers in the provinces despite his pretensions and his ridiculousness, mainly excelled.

Sigognac, to whom Blazius had appointed himself teacher, studied in his room with the ageing actor, and was shaping himself to master the difficult art of the theatre. The character-type he represented, in his extravagantly exaggerated role, was far from natural, and yet it was necessary that behind the exaggeration one felt a degree of truth, and so discovered the man behind the mask. Blazius gave him advice in that regard, and taught him to begin in a simple and true tone, to arrive at more fanciful intonations, or else to return to ordinary diction after uttering the lively cries of a plucked peacock, for there is no character thus affected who is always so. Moreover, this unevenness is characteristic of lunatics, and troubled minds; it is also evident in their deranged gestures which do not quite correspond to the words they utter, a mismatch from which the skilful artist can derive comic effects. Blazius was of the opinion that Sigognac should adopt the half-mask, that is to say, one concealing the forehead to the nose, to retain the traditional appearance of his character, and combine the fantastic and the real in his visage, a great advantage in such kinds of roles, half-false, half-true, being generalised caricatures of humanity which do not repel the observer as would an accurate portrait. In the hands of the talentless actor, such a role may be only an insipid buffoonery suitable for entertaining the crowd, and making decent people shrug their shoulders, but a skilful player can introduce natural traits, and represent life better than if they were uniformly present.

The idea of the half-mask pleased Sigognac greatly. The mask would preserve his incognito, and give him the courage to face the crowd. Its thin cardboard would act like a helmet with a lowered visor, through which he would speak with a ghostly voice. For the face is the person himself, the body is nameless, and the face that is concealed cannot be known or recognised: this arrangement reconciled his respect for his ancestors with the necessities of his role. He would no longer expose himself to the footlights in a material and direct manner. He would be only the unknown mind bringing to life a man-sized marionette, *nervis alienis mobile lignum* ('a wooden figure moved by another's hand': see Horace 'Satires' Book II.7, line 81); only he inhabited the interior of the puppet instead of pulling its strings externally. His dignity would suffer nothing from such an activity.

Blazius, who was very fond of Sigognac, shaped the mask himself in such a way as to give Sigognac a theatrical appearance completely different from his everyday physiognomy. A raised nose, studded with warts and as red at the tip as a cherry, circumflex eyebrows the hairs curling back into a comma, a moustache with pointed tips curved like the horns of the moon, made the regular features of the young baron unrecognisable; the mask, arranged like a chamfron (*a horse's defensive headpiece*), only covered the forehead and the nasal protuberance, but the whole appearance of his face was altered.

They attended the rehearsal, which was in costume so that the general effect could be clearly considered. In order not to cross the city during Lent, the actors had stored their costumes in the

racquet-court and the actresses were accommodating themselves in the room we described previously. The people of rank, gallants, and beaux of the place had striven to enter this temple or rather sacristy of Thalia, where the priestesses of the Muse donned their ornaments to celebrate the mysteries. Now they were all crowding around the actresses. Some held out mirrors to them, others brought the candles closer so that they could see better. One gave his opinion on the position of a knotted ribbon, a second held out a box of powder; another, less bold, remained seated on a chest, swinging his legs, without saying a word, while twirling his moustache to keep countenance.

Each actress had, thus, her circle of courtiers whose greedy eyes sought each chance betrayal amid the hazards of the toilette. Sometimes it was a dressing gown slipping down, to reveal, opportunely, a back gleaming like marble; sometimes a half-globe of snow or ivory growing impatient with the rigours of the corset, preferring to rest in a nest of lace; or else a beautiful arm rising to adjust a curl of hair, displaying itself naked to the shoulder. I will leave the reader to imagine the verses, madrigals, compliments, and mythological insipidities drawn from these provincials at the sight of such treasures; Zerbina laughed like a madwoman at their nonsense; Serafina, owing to vanity more than literary appreciation, delighted in them; Isabella alone declined to listen, and beneath the gaze of all those men adorned herself in a modest manner, refusing in polite but cold tones those gentlemen's offers of service.

Vallombreuse, followed by his friend Vidalinc, had taken care not to miss this opportunity of seeing Isabella. He found her even prettier close to than from afar, and his passion increased accordingly. The young duke had indulged himself for the occasion, and indeed was admirably handsome. He wore a magnificent costume of white satin, ruffled and embellished with ornaments and cherry-red bows attached by diamond studs. Showers of fine linen and lace overflowed from the sleeves of his doublet; a richly-worked scarf of silvery cloth supported his sword; a white felt hat with an incarnadine feather swung from his hand, imprisoned in a Frangipani-perfumed glove (*the perfume was first produced by the Renaissance family named Frangipani, in Rome, and created by mixing 'orris' or iris root, spices, civet and musk. The scented 'plumeria' plant was named after the perfume.*)

His long, black hair, in thin ringlets, curled along his perfectly oval cheeks, highlighting their warm pallor. Beneath his fine moustache, his lips shone red like pomegranates, and his eyes sparkled between the dense fringes of his eyelashes. His white neck, rounded like a marble column, supported his head proudly, emerging freely from a turned-down collar of the most expensive Venetian needle-lace.

Yet there was something unpleasant in all this perfection. His features, so fine, pure, and noble, were marred by an inhuman expression, if one may use that term. Evidently the pains and pleasures of others had little effect on the bearer of that pitilessly beautiful face. He ought and did believe himself to be of a unique species.

Vallombreuse had silently placed himself close to Isabella's dressing table, his arm resting on the frame of the mirror so that the eyes of the actress, obliged to consult the glass at every moment, would often encounter him. It was a clever manoeuvre, excellent tactics which would doubtless have succeeded with anyone other than our ingénue. He wished, before speaking, to strike a blow by means of his beauty, his haughty air, and his magnificence.

Isabella, who recognised the daring young man from the alley-way, and who was embarrassed by this imperious gaze, maintained the utmost reserve, and refused to allow her gaze to deviate from the mirror. She seemed not to have noticed that one of the most handsome noblemen in France was standing before her, but Isabella was a singular girl. Bored by this pose, Vallombreuse abruptly made up his mind, and spoke to the actress:

— ‘Mademoiselle, are you not she who will play Silvie in Monsieur de Scudéry’s *Ligdamon and Lydias*?’

— ‘Indeed, sir,’ replied Isabella, who could not avoid his cunningly banal question.

— ‘Never has a role been better filled,’ Vallombreuse continued. ‘If it is a poor one, you will render it fine; if it is fine, you will make it excellent. Happy are the poets who entrust their verses to those beautiful lips!’

Such vague compliments were not beyond the gallantries that polite people usually address to actresses, and Isabella was obliged to accept them, thanking the duke with a slight inclination of the head.

Sigognac, having finished dressing in the racquet-court dressing-room reserved for actors, returned to the actresses’ room, with Blazius in attendance, to wait for the rehearsal to start. He was masked and had already fastened the belt of the large rapier with its weighty basket-hilt, and tipped with a cobweb, inherited from poor Matamore. His scarlet cape, shredded below in crayfish-tail shapes, fluttered oddly over his shoulders, and the tip of his sword was elevated behind. To conform to the spirit of his role, he walked with his hip set forward and strode with legs separated like a compass, and an outrageous and provocative air, as befits a Captain Fracasse.

— ‘You look very well,’ Isabella told him, as she came to greet him, ‘never did a Spanish captain look more superbly arrogant.’

The Duke of Vallombreuse looked down his nose, with a most disdainful haughtiness, at this newcomer to whom the young actress spoke in so sweet a tone: this apparently was the scoundrel she was said to be in love with, he told himself, all riled with spite, unable to conceive that a woman could hesitate for a moment between the young and splendid Duke of Vallombreuse, and this ridiculous player.

However, he feigned not to notice that Sigognac was there. He treated the man like a piece of furniture. For him, Sigognac was not a human being but a thing, and he behaved, in that baron’s presence, with the same freedom as if he had been alone, brooding over Isabella, with inflamed glances that rested on the nape of her throat left uncovered by the opening of her blouse.

Isabella, confused, felt herself blushing, in spite of herself, under this insolently fixed gaze, which seemed hot as a jet of molten lead, and hurried to finish her toilette so as to escape it, all the more so as she saw Sigognac’s hand furiously and convulsively tightening on the pommel of his rapier.

She placed a beauty spot at the corner of her lip, and pretended to rise so as to go on stage, as the Tyrant, in his bull-like bellow, had already shouted, several times: ‘Ladies, are you ready?’

— ‘Pardon me, mademoiselle,’ said the duke; ‘you forgot to employ the *assassin*.’ And Vallombreuse, dipping a finger into the box of *mouches* on the dressing-table, pulled out a small black taffeta star.

— ‘Allow me,’ he continued, ‘to place it here, close to your breast; it will enhance its whiteness and appear like a natural mole.’

The action accompanied the speech so closely that Isabella, startled by his presumption, barely had time to lean back in her chair to avoid the insolent contact; but the duke was not one of those who were easily intimidated, and his finger to which the *mouche* had attached itself was about to brush the young actress’s throat when an iron hand fell upon his arm, and held it as if in a vice.

The Duke of Vallombreuse, transported with rage, turned his head and saw Captain Fracasse standing in a pose that had nothing to do with his comedic role of a coward.

— ‘Monsieur le Duc,’ said Fracasse, still gripping Vallombreuse’s wrist, ‘mademoiselle places her beauty spots herself. She needs no one’s services.’

Having said this, he released the young lord’s arm, whose first impulse was to seek the hilt of his sword. At that moment Vallombreuse, despite his beauty, exhibited an expression more dreadful and formidable than that of Medusa. His face was of a frightful pallor and his black eyebrows drooped over bloodshot eyes. The purple of his lips took on a violet colour and whitened with foam; his nostrils palpitated as if breathing slaughter. He rushed toward Sigognac, who did not flinch an inch and awaited the assault, but, suddenly, he stopped. A sudden reflection extinguished, like a shower of icy water, his boiling frenzy. His features returned to their place; his natural colour returned to him, he had completely regained possession of himself, and his face expressed the most glacial disdain, the most supreme contempt that one human creature can show another. He had just reflected on the fact that his adversary was not nobly-born and that he had almost committed himself to fight an actor. All his ancestral pride revolted at the idea. The insult from one so low could not touch him; does one fight with the mud that splashes one? However, it was not in his nature to leave an offence unpunished from whatever source it came, and, approaching Sigognac, he said to him: ‘Fool, I shall have your bones broken by my lackeys!’

— ‘Be careful, my lord,’ replied Sigognac in the calmest of tones, and with the most detached air in the world, ‘be careful, I have hard bones on which their sticks will shatter like glass. I only allow myself to be struck in comedies.’

— ‘However insolent you may be, scoundrel, I will not grant you the honour of fighting you myself. That is an ambition that surpasses your merits,’ said Vallombreuse.

— ‘That we shall see, duke,’ replied Sigognac. ‘Perhaps, having less pride, I shall beat you with my own hands.’

— ‘I don’t answer to a mere mask,’ said the duke, taking Vidalinc’s arm as he approached.

— ‘I will reveal my face at the appropriate time and place,’ Sigognac continued, ‘and I believe it will prove even more inimical to you than my false nose. But let us stop there. I can hear the bell ringing, and I would run the risk of missing my entrance if I delayed any longer.’

The actors admired his courage, but, knowing the Baron’s lineage, were not as astonished by it as the other spectators of this scene, who were stunned at such audacity. Isabella’s emotion had

been so strong that her rouge had flaked from her, and Zerbina, seeing the deathly pallor that conquered her cheeks, felt obliged to apply an inch of rouge to them. She could hardly stand on her legs, and if the Soubrette had not supported her elbow, she would have fallen to the boards as she emerged on-stage. To be the object of a quarrel was deeply disagreeable to the sweet, good, and modest Isabella, who feared nothing so much as the noise and clamour that surrounds a beautiful woman, her reputation forever losing by it; moreover, though resolved not to yield to him, she loved Sigognac tenderly, and the thought of an ambush, or at least a duel, to which he was exposed, troubled her more than one could say.

Despite this incident, the rehearsal proceeded at full speed, the real emotions of life being unable to distract the actors from their fictitious passions. Isabella herself acted very well, though her heart was full of care. As for Fracasse, excited by the quarrel, he sparkled with verve. Zerbina surpassed herself. Each of her lines aroused laughter and brought a prolonged clapping of hands. From one corner of the orchestra seats came pre-eminent bursts of applause which did not cease till the last, and whose enthusiastic persistence finally attracted Zerbina's attention.

The Soubrette, feigning a genuine move, advanced near the footlights, stretched out her neck with the motion of a curious bird poking its head from between the leaves, looked out into the room and discovered the Marquis de Bruyères, crimson with delight, whose eyes, sparkling with desire, blazed like garnets. He had found the Lisette, the Marton, the Colombina of his dreams! He was in heaven.

— 'The Marquis has arrived,' Zerbina said quietly to Blazius, who was playing Pandolfo, in a pause before her cue, in the tight-lipped voice actors adopt when they are conversing between themselves on stage and do not wish to be heard by the audience; 'see how jubilant he is, how radiant, how passionate! He is restless, and were it not for his sense of shame, he would leap the rail and kiss me in front of everyone! Ah! Monsieur de Bruyères, you like soubrettes. Well then! We'll fricassee some for you with salt, pepper and nutmeg.'

From this point in the play, Zerbina acted for all she was worth, and with furious verve. She seemed luminous with gaiety, wit, and ardour. The Marquis understood that he could no longer do without this spiciness. All the other women with whom he had been in good graces, and whom he compared in memory to Zerbina, now seemed to him dull, boring, and insipid.

The play by Monsieur de Scudéry, which followed, was pleasing, though less amusing, and Leander, entrusted with the role of Ligdamon, was charming; but since we are familiar with the talent of our actors, let us leave them to their own affairs, and follow the Duke of Vallombreuse and his friend Vidalinc.

Outraged by that scene in which he had lacked advantage, the young duke had returned to the Hôtel Vallombreuse with his confidant, meditating a thousand plans for revenge; the mildest would involve nothing less than having the insolent captain beaten to the point of being left for dead in the public square.

Vidalinc attempted in vain to calm him; the duke wrung his hands in rage, and ran about the room like a madman, punching the armchairs which fell, comically, on their backs, overturning the tables, and causing other damage, while venting his fury; finally, he seized a Japanese vase, and hurled it to the floor, where it shattered into a thousand pieces.

— ‘Ah!’ he cried, ‘I long to break this fellow like the vase, trample him underfoot, and sweep the remains into the gutter! A wretch who dares to come between me and the object of my desire! If he were a gentleman, I would fight him with sword, dagger, pistol, on foot, or on horseback, until I had set my foot on his breast and spat in the face of his corpse!’

— ‘Perhaps he is one,’ said Vidalinc. ‘I would certainly believe it given his self-assurance. Master Bilot spoke of a nobleman who had engaged himself for love, and whom Isabella looked upon favourably. This must be he, if one is to judge by his jealousy and the infanta’s air of confusion.’

— ‘Do you think so?’ Vallombreuse continued, ‘A person of rank to mingle with these minstrels, to climb the trestles, smear himself with rouge, receive blows to the nose, and kicks to the behind! No, that is quite impossible.’

— ‘Jupiter transformed himself into a beast, even a husband, so as to enjoy mortal women,’ replied Vidalinc, ‘a greater debasement with regard to an Olympian god’s majesty than acting is with regard to the dignity of a nobleman.’

— ‘No matter,’ said the duke, ringing a bell to summon a servant, ‘I will first punish the buffoon, and punish the man later, should there be one behind that ridiculous mask.’

— ‘Should there be one! Never doubt it,’ resumed Vallombreuse’s friend; ‘his eyes glittered, under those false eyebrows, and despite his cardboard nose smeared with cinnabar, he had a majestic and threatening air, a difficult thing to accomplish in such attire.’

— ‘So much the better,’ said Vallombreuse, ‘my avenging blade will not strike the air, but a manly breast will encounter its blows.’

The servant entered, bowed low, and in perfect stillness awaited his master’s orders.

— ‘Rouse Basque, Azolan, Mérindol and Labriche, if they are resting, and tell them to arm themselves with stout clubs and wait for a certain Captain Fracasse at the exit of the racquet-court, in which Herod’s actors are performing. Have them assault him, beat him, and leave him on the ground, but without causing his death; otherwise, people might think me afraid of him! I’ll take care of the aftermath. While they are beating him, let them shout: “With the compliments of the Duke of Vallombreuse,” so he cannot brush off the insult.’

This commission, though of a fierce and truculent nature, seemed no great surprise to the lackey, who withdrew, assuring the duke that his orders would be executed immediately.

— ‘I find it annoying,’ said Vidalinc, when the servant had retired, ‘that you should treat the buffoon in this way, who, after all, has shown courage above his station. Do you wish me, under some pretext or other, to pick a quarrel with him, and kill him? All blood is red when it is shed, even though it is often said that the blood of noblemen is blue. I am of good and ancient stock, though not of such high rank as yours, while my delicacy is not such as to refuse to commit to fight. Say the word, and I’ll go. This captain seems to me more worthy of the sword than the stave.’

— ‘I must thank you,’ replied the duke, ‘for an offer which demonstrates the perfect fidelity with which you support my interests, but I cannot accept. The scoundrel dared to touch me. It is fitting that he should atone ignominiously for his crime. If he is a gentleman, he will find a means to convey his challenge to me. I always answer when a sword is in question.’

— ‘As you please,’ said Vidalinc, resting his lower limbs on a footstool, like a man who sees no other course than to let things go their own way. ‘Incidentally, this Serafina is quite charming! I paid her a few compliments, and I’ve already arranged a rendezvous. Master Bilot was right.’

The duke and his friend, falling silent again, awaited the return of the guards.

Chapter IX: Swords, Sticks, and Other Goings-On.

The rehearsal was over. Having retired to their dressing-rooms, the actors changed into their street clothes. Sigognac did the same, but, expecting an attack, retained Matamore's sword. It was a fine old Spanish blade, quite as long as a day without food, with a wrought iron basket-guard that closely protected the wrist, and which, wielded by a man of courage, could parry blows and deliver stout if not fatal ones, as its tip and edge were blunted according to the custom of the theatre, but it was quite sufficient for the servants whom the duke had charged with executing his vengeance.

Herod, a robust companion with broad shoulders, had with him the stick he used to prod the lads charged with raising the curtains, and with this club of sorts, which he wielded as if it were made of straw, he promised himself to deal with any marauder who might attack Sigognac, it not being in his character to leave his friends to face danger alone.

— 'Captain,' he said to the Baron, once they were in the street, 'leave the females to go on before us, under the guardianship of Leander and Blazius, since their screams would deafen us: the former is a mere coward, as shy in appearing as the moon; the other is old, and his lack of strength would betray his courage. Scapin will stay with us, he can trip folk up better than anyone, and in less than a minute will have a couple of rascals stretched on their backs, flat as pancakes, should they attack us; in any case, my stick is at the service of your rapier.'

— 'Thank you, brave Herod,' replied Sigognac, 'the offer is not to be refused, but let us prepare for being attacked unexpectedly. Let us march one behind the other, at a certain distance, down the centre of the street; any rogues posted there, in the shadow of the wall, will have to advance to reach us, and we will have time to see them coming. Here, let me draw my sword; you, brandish your stick, and let Scapin stretch his sinews to render them supple.'

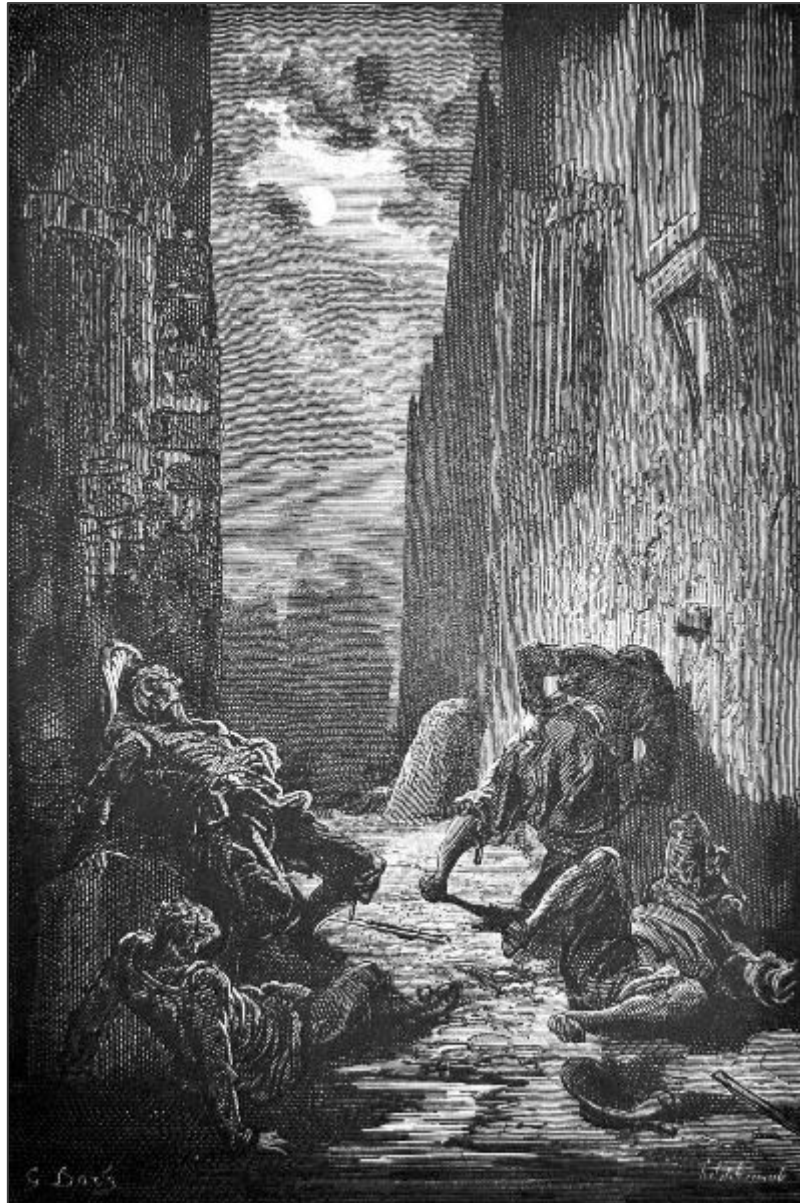
Sigognac led the little column, and they advanced cautiously down the alley that led from the racquet-court to the *Armes de France*. It was dark, winding, unevenly paved, and wonderfully suited to an ambush. Porch roofs projected above it, doubling the depth of the shadows, and giving shelter to attackers. No light filtered from the slumbering houses, and there was no moon that night.

Basque, Azolan, Labriche, and Mérindol, the young duke's retainers, had been waiting for more than half an hour for Captain Fracasse to pass by, since he could not return to his inn by any other route. Azolan and Basque had crouched in a doorway on one side of the street; Mérindol and Labriche, hidden against the wall, had taken up positions just opposite, so as to bring their sticks to bear on Sigognac, like the hammers of the Cyclopes on their anvil. The passage of the group of women led by Blazius and Leander had alerted them to the fact that Fracasse could not be far behind, and they stood piously, their fingers curled around their clubs, ready to carry out their task, without suspecting that they were going to have to deal with tough combatants, since the poets,

actors, and bourgeoisie for whom the great deigned to order a beating, customarily received such without opposing it, and were content to bend their backs beneath the blows.

Though the night was dark, Sigognac, whose eyesight was sharp, had noted some moments ago the four lanky men lying in wait. He stopped, and made as if to turn back. This feint caused the cut-throats, who thought their prey might escape, to quit their hiding-places and race after the captain. Azolan rushed forward first, while all four shouted: 'Death to Captain Fracasse! And the compliments of monseigneur, the duke!' Sigognac had wrapped his coat about his left arm several times, forming, in that manner, a sort of impenetrable sleeve; with this sleeve, he parried the blow from the club that Azolan dealt him, and with his rapier struck the latter so violent a blow in the chest that the wretch collapsed in the gutter his breastbone shattered, his feet in the air, and his hat in the mud. If the point had not been dulled, the blade would have passed through his body, and emerged between his shoulder-blades. Basque, despite his companion's misfortune, advanced bravely, but a furious blow from the flat of Sigognac's sword landing on his head, shattered the dome of his iron cap, such that he saw three dozen candles flare in that night blacker than pitch. Herod's club, meanwhile shattered Merindol's stave, who, finding himself disarmed, ran for his life, but not without having his back beaten and bruised by that formidable piece of wood, quick though he was to take flight. Scapin's effort went as follows: he seized Labriche by the body, with such a swift and agile movement that the latter, half-suffocated, could make little use of his club; then, holding Labriche back with his left arm while thrusting him forward with his right, so as to crack the vertebrae, he knocked him off-balance, with a sharp, sinewy, tripping movement, as sudden as the release of a crossbow spring, which sent the man rolling over the pavement, ten paces further on. Labriche's neck struck a stone, and the shock was so severe that the executor of Vallombreuse's vengeance lay unconscious on the battlefield, and as good as dead.

The street was now clear, and the actors victorious. Azolan and Basque, crawling on their hands and knees, tried to reach shelter to recover their senses. Labriche lay like a drunkard in the gutter. Méridol, less grievously wounded, had taken to his heels, doubtless so that he at least would survive the disaster and be able to tell the tale.



'The street was now clear, and the actors victorious.'

However, as Mérindol approached the Hôtel Vallombreuse, he slowed his pace, for he was about to face the wrath of the young duke, no less formidable than Herod's club. At this thought, sweat trickled down his brow, and he no longer felt the pain in his dislocated shoulder, from which hung an arm as inert and limp as an empty sleeve.

He had scarcely reached the mansion when the duke, impatient to know the success of the altercation, sent for him. Mérindol appeared with a troubled and embarrassed countenance, for he was suffering greatly from the pain of his shoulder. Beneath his tanned complexion lay a greenish pallor, and drops of fine sweat beaded his forehead. Motionless and unspeaking, he stood at the threshold of the room, waiting for a word of encouragement or a question from the duke, who remained silent.

— ‘Well,’ said the Chevalier de Vidalinc, seeing that Vallombreuse was simply gazing fiercely at Mérindol, ‘what news do you bring? Ill news, no doubt, for you scarcely show a look of triumph.’

— ‘Monsieur le Duc,’ replied Mérindol, ‘should not doubt our zeal in carrying out his orders; but this time fortune has served our valour badly.’

— ‘How so?’ said the duke with an angry movement, ‘Could not four of you manage to defeat that clown’

‘That clown,’ replied Mérindol, ‘exceeds in vigour and courage the mythical Hercules. He rushed upon us so furiously that, turning from assailed to assailant, and in no time at all, he laid Azolan and Basque on the floor. Under his blows they fell like those little lines of Capuchin monks cut and folded from playing cards, and yet they are tough fellows. Labriche was brought down by another actor, by means of a clever wrestling trick, and his neck now knows how hard the pavement of Poitiers is. I myself had my stick broken under Monsieur Herod’s club, and my shoulder is so damaged I’ll not be able to use my arm for a fortnight.’

— ‘You’re nothing but cattle, scoundrels, idle ruffians, without loyalty, or courage!’ cried the outraged Duke of Vallombreuse, in a fury. ‘An old woman would put you to flight with her distaff. I did wrong in saving you from the galleys, or the gallows! I would do better to have honest people in my service: they would be neither more useless nor more cowardly! Since sticks proved insufficient, swords will be necessary!’

— ‘My lord,’ Mérindol continued, ‘ordered a beating, not an assassination. We would not have dared to take it upon ourselves to exceed his orders.’

— ‘There you are,’ said Vidalinc, laughing, ‘a formal, precise, and conscientious rascal. I like such candour in regard to their ambush; what say you? This little affair is coming together in quite a romantic manner, which must please you, Vallombreuse, since ease of encounter repels you while obstacles charm you. For an actress, Isabella seems to me to be most difficult of approach; she lives in a tower without a drawbridge, and guarded, as in tales of chivalry, by dragons breathing fire and flame. But here is our routed army returning.’

Indeed, Azolan, Basque, and Labriche, the latter having recovered from his fainting spell, appeared at the door of the salon, holding out supplicating hands to the duke. They were livid, haggard, stained with blood and dirt, though without other injuries than their bruises, except that the violence of the blows they had received had caused their noses to bleed, and reddish patches of gore hideously spotted the yellow leather of their buff

armour.

— ‘Back to your kennels, you scoundrels!’ cried the duke, who proved less than tender at the sight of his crippled troop. ‘Why I don’t have you lashed with stirrup-leathers for your imbecility and cowardice, I’ve no idea; my surgeon will examine you, and tell me if the blows you claim to apologise for are of consequence, otherwise I will have you flayed alive like the eels of Melun (*see Rabelais’ ‘Gargantua and Pantagruel’ Book 1: XLVII*). Away with you!’

The defeated squad took this for granted, and departed with a show of agility, so much terror did the young duke inspire in these swordsmen, men of rope and the sack, who were, moreover, less than timid by nature.

When these poor devils had withdrawn, Vallombreuse threw himself on a pile of cushions, and maintained a silence that Vidalinc respected. Stormy thoughts followed one another, in the former's brain, like black clouds driven by a wild wind over a stormy sky. He longed to set fire to the inn, kidnap Isabella, slay this Captain Fracasse, and hurl the entire troupe of actors into the river. For the first time in his life, he encountered real resistance! He had commanded a thing to be done which had failed! A player had defied him! His own people had fled after being beaten by a theatrical 'captain'! His pride revolted at the idea, and he fell into a sort of stupor. Was it possible, then, that he was facing opposition from this fellow? Then he reflected on the fact that, despite being clad in a magnificent costume studded with diamonds, adorned with all his grace, and in all the splendour of his rank and beauty, he had been unable to obtain a favourable glance from a mere girl, a travelling actress, a puppet exposed every evening to the whistles of the first idler, he whom princesses welcomed with a smile on their lips, for whom duchesses swooned with love, and who had never encountered cruelty from a woman. He ground his teeth with rage, and his clenched fist tore at the splendid white satin doublet he had not yet doffed, as if he wanted to punish it for having supported him so poorly in his plan of seduction.

Finally, he rose abruptly, made a sign of farewell to his friend Vidalinc, and withdrew, without touching the supper which had been served to him, to his bedroom where sleep came not to draw the damask curtains of his bed.

Vidalinc, who was happy in the company of his thoughts of Serafina, ignored the fact that he was eating supper alone, and dined with a hearty appetite. Lulled by voluptuous fantasies in which the young actress was ever-present, he slept soundly until the morning.

When Sigognac, Herod, and Scapin returned to the inn, they found the other actors in a state of great alarm. The cries of 'Death to Captain Fracasse!' and the sound of the brawl, had reached the ears of Isabella and her comrades, piercing the silence of the night. The young girl had almost fainted, and if it had not been for Blazius supporting her elbow, she would have sunk to her knees. Pale as wax, and trembling, she waited at the threshold of her room for news. At the sight of Sigognac unharmed, she gave a weak cry, raised her arms to the sky, and let them fall around the young man's neck, hiding her face against his shoulder with an adorably modest motion; but, swiftly controlling her emotion, she soon freed herself from this embrace, stepped back a few steps, and resumed her usual reserve.

— 'You are unhurt, at least!' she said in her sweetest voice. 'How I would have grieved if, because of me, the slightest harm had come to you! But, how imprudent! To brave this duke, so handsome and so wicked, who has the look and pride of Lucifer, on behalf of a poor girl like me! It was not sensible, Sigognac; since you are now an actor like us, you must know how to endure certain shows of insolence.'

— 'I would never tolerate an insult', replied Sigognac, 'uttered in my presence, to the adorable Isabella, even though I only bear the mask of a captain.'

— 'Well said, Captain,' said Herod, 'well said and better done! Good heavens! What vicious thrusts! It was a good thing for those rascals that the late Matamore's sword lacks an edge, or you would have split them from skull to heel, as knights errant once slew Saracens and enchanters.'

— 'Your stave did as well as my rapier,' replied Sigognac, returning Herod's compliment, 'and your conscience must be clear, for these were no innocents you set about in this affair.'

— ‘No indeed!’ replied the Tyrant, with a square foot of a smile, in his broad black beard. ‘They were the finest flower of the penal colonies, true gallows material!’

— ‘Such work as theirs, indeed, is scarcely carried out by the most honest of people,’ said Sigognac, ‘but let us not neglect to celebrate, as is fitting, the heroic valour of the glorious Scapin, who fought and won without weapons other than those provided by nature.’

Scapin, playing the buffoon, arched his back, as if swollen with praise, placed his hand on his heart, lowered his eyes, and executed a comical bow expressing profound modesty.

— ‘I longed to accompany you,’ said Blazius; ‘but our leader thinks me too aged, and I’m no use anymore except with a glass in my hand in a drinking contest.’

Having uttered these remarks, as it was getting late, the actors withdrew, each to their own room, with the exception of Sigognac, who took a few more turns in the gallery, as if meditating a plan: the actor was avenged, but the gentleman was not. Should he doff the mask that ensured his incognito, reveal his true name, create a scene, and perhaps draw the anger of the young duke upon his comrades? Common prudence said no, but honour said yes. The Baron could not resist that imperious voice, and headed towards Zerbina’s room.

He tapped softly at the door, which opened a little, and then swung wide when he spoke his name. A bright light illuminated the room; rich holders laden with pink candles had been set on a table covered with a damask tablecloth with symmetrical folds, where a delicate supper was steaming, served in expensive crockery. A brace of partridges armoured with a gilded rasher of bacon lay at the centre of a circle of orange-slices; a chicken dish (*‘blanc-manger’, from which the pudding later developed*) and a *quenelle* (*an oval-shaped dumpling*) of creamed fish, a masterpiece by Master Bilot, accompanied them. In a crystal-glass bottle speckled with gold florets a ruby-coloured wine sparkled, and, in a similar bottle, one of a topaz hue. Two places were set, and as Sigognac entered, Zerbina was offering a brimming glass of red to the Marquis de Bruyères, whose eyes were ablaze with a double intoxication, for never had the clever maid been more seductive, while on the other hand the Marquis adhered to the doctrine that without Ceres and Bacchus (*the Roman deities of food and drink, respectively*) Venus would languish.

Zerbina nodded graciously to Sigognac, a nod in which the actress’s familiarity with regards to a comrade, and the woman’s respect for the gentleman were skillfully blended.

— ‘It is most pleasant of you,’ said the Marquis de Bruyères, ‘to surprise us in our love nest. I hope that, without fearing to disturb our tête-à-tête, you will dine with us. Jacques, set a place for monsieur.’

— ‘I shall accept your gracious invitation,’ said Sigognac, ‘not that I am hungry, but I would not wish to disturb your meal, and nothing is more unpleasant to the appetite than a guest who does not eat.’

The Baron seated himself in the armchair that Jacques brought forward for him, opposite the Marquis and next to Zerbina. The Marquis detached a partridge-wing for him and filled his glass without question, like the man of quality that he was, for he suspected that a serious matter had driven the Baron, usually so private and reserved, to join them.

— ‘Do you like this wine, or prefer the white?’ asked the Marquis. ‘I take both, so as not to inspire jealousy.’

— ‘I am sober by nature and habit,’ said Sigognac, ‘and temper the drink of Bacchus, with that of the Naiads (*water-nymphs*), as the ancients said. Red wine is fine for me; but it’s not for the sake of a banquet that I have committed the indiscretion of entering your retreat at this incongruous hour, Marquis, I have come to request a service of you, that one gentleman cannot refuse another. Mademoiselle Zerbina will doubtless have told you that in the actresses’ dressing room, the Duke of Vallombreuse wished to place his hand on Isabella’s breast, on the pretext of planting a beauty-spot there, an unworthy, lascivious, and crude action, which was not justified by any coquetry or advance on the part of that young person, who is as wise as she is modest, and for whom I profess perfect esteem.’

— ‘She deserves it,’ said Zerbina, ‘and, though a woman, as her companion I could not speak ill of her even if I sought to.’

— ‘I arrested,’ continued Sigognac, ‘the arm of the duke, whose anger overflowed in the form of threats and invective to which I responded with mocking composure, protected by my Matamore mask. He threatened to have me beaten by his lackeys; and indeed, just now, as I was returning to the *Hôtel des Armes de France*, by way of a dark alley, four scoundrels set upon me. With a few blows of the flat of my sword, I did justice to two of these rascals; Herod and Scapin accommodated the other two, in lively fashion. Though the duke may imagine he is dealing with no more than a poor actor, yet there is a gentleman beneath the skin of this actor, and such an outrage cannot go unpunished. You know me, Marquis; though until now you have respected my incognito, you know who my ancestors were, and can certify that the line of the Sigognacs has been a noble one for a thousand years, free of all misalliance, and that none who have borne that name ever suffered a stain on their coat of arms.’

— ‘Baron de Sigognac,’ replied the Marquis de Bruyères, giving his guest his true name for the first time, ‘I will witness, on my honour before whomever you wish, to the antiquity and nobility of your race. Palamedes de Sigognac performed marvellous deeds on the First Crusade, to which he led a hundred lances, in a vessel equipped at his own expense. This was at a time when many of the nobles who are so proud of themselves today were not even squires. He was a great friend of Hugues de Bruyères, my ancestor, and the two shared the same tent as brothers in arms.’

At these glorious memories, Sigognac raised his head; he felt the soul of his ancestors palpitating within him, and Zerbina, who was contemplating him, was surprised by the singular, and so to speak internal, beauty which illuminated like a flame the Baron’s customarily sad countenance. ‘These nobles,’ said the Soubrette to herself, ‘seem as if they had sprung from Jupiter’s own thigh; at the slightest word, their pride rises in the stirrups, and they are unable to swallow an insult as the lower orders must. It’s all one, but if the Baron looked at me with those eyes, I would be happy to commit an infidelity to the Marquis in his favour. This little Sigognac blazes with heroism.’

— ‘So, since such is your opinion of my family,’ said the Baron to the Marquis, ‘will you challenge the Duke of Vallombreuse in my name, and bear my challenge to him?’

— ‘I shall,’ replied the Marquis, in a serious and measured tone that contrasted with his usual carefree attitude, ‘and what is more, I place my sword at your service as your second. Tomorrow, I will present myself at the Hôtel Vallombreuse. The young Duke, though he is at fault for displaying insolence, has no lack of courage, and will not hide behind his dignity, as soon as he

learns your true rank. But enough of this. Let us not bore Zerbina any longer with our male quarrels. I see her purple lips twitching, despite her polite nature; and it is surely laughter, and not tiredness that leads her to display those pearls behind her lips. Come, Zerbina, recover your cheerfulness and pour the Baron a glass.'

The Soubrette obeyed with as much grace as dexterity. Hebe pouring out nectar could have done so no better. Everything this girl did, she did well.

Nothing more on the matter was said during the rest of the supper. The conversation turned to Zerbina's performance, the Marquis showering her with compliments, to which Sigognac was able to add his own without complacency or gallantry, for the Soubrette had indeed shown incomparable wit, verve, and talent. They also spoke of the verses of Monsieur de Scudéry, one of the finest playwrights of the time, which the Marquis found perfect, though slightly soporific, preferring *The Rodomontades of Captain Fracasse* to *Ligdamon and Lydias*. He was a man of taste, the Marquis!

As soon as he could do so, Sigognac took his leave, and retired to his room, locking the door. Then he took an old sword, his father's, which he carried with him like a faithful friend, from a serge case that he had wrapped round it for fear of rust. He drew it slowly from the scabbard, and respectfully kissed the hilt. It was a beautiful weapon, richly-worked, though without superfluous ornamentation, a weapon for combat and not for the parade-ground. On the bluish steel blade, etched with a few thin lines of gold, was imprinted the mark of one of the most famous swordsmiths of Toledo. Sigognac took a woollen cloth and passed it several times over the steel to restore its full brilliance. He felt the edge and the point with his finger and, pressing the sword against the door, bent the blade almost to his wrist to test its flexibility. The noble weapon valiantly withstood these tests, and showed that it would not betray its man, in the field. Animated by the gleam of polished steel, and gripping the hilt firmly in his hand, Sigognac began to lunge at the wall, and found that he had forgotten none of the lessons that Pierre, a former assistant to a fencing master, had taught him during his long periods of leisure at the Castle of Misery.

These exercises, which he had performed with his old servant, for want of being able to attend the fencing academy as would have been proper for a young gentleman, had developed his strength, improved his muscularity, and increased his natural suppleness. Having little else to do, he had acquired a sort of passion for fencing and had studied the noble art in depth; though he still believed himself to be only a learner, he had long since become a master, and it often happened that, during the practice sessions they performed together, he flecked with a bluish dot the yellow leather breastplate with which Pierre protected his chest. It is true that, in his modesty, he said to himself that the good Pierre deliberately allowed himself to be hit, so as not to discourage him with endlessly invincible parries. He was mistaken in this: the old servant had hidden none of the secrets of his art from his beloved pupil. For years he had drummed home the principles of combat, though Sigognac sometimes testified to the tedium of these exercises so long repeated, until the young Baron possessed a solidity in attack and defence equal to that of his master, while his youth gave him more flexibility and speed; also his eyesight was better, so that Pierre, though knowing a riposte for any move, failed to deflect the Baron's blade as frequently as before. Such defeats, which would have embittered an ordinary fencing-master, since these professional gladiators do not willingly allow themselves to be overcome, even by their dearest companions,

delighted the old servant and filled his heart with pride, though he hid his joy, for fear that the Baron, believing that he had reached the goal and won the palm, would neglect his studies.

Thus, in that century of sensitivity to points of honour, of nostril-splitting braggards (*an allusion to the boastful young lords of Henri III's court*), of folk who planted their right-hips firmly, of duellists and swordsmen who frequented the fencing-halls of the Spanish and Neapolitan masters to learn Jarnac's backhand stroke (*first exhibited in France, in a famous duel in 1547, by Guy Chabot de Saint-Gelais, later the second Baron de Jarnac*) our young Baron, who had never left his castle except to chase, behind Miraut's tail, a scrawny hare in the heather, found himself to be, without being aware of it, one of the finest blades of the day, and capable of measuring himself with the most famous swordsmen. Perhaps he did lack the insolent elegance, deliberate pose, and provocative boasting of this or that gentleman renowned for his prowess in the field, but skilful indeed would have been the blade capable of penetrating the tight circle guarded by his blade.

Pleased with himself, and with the sword, which he placed near his bedside, Sigognac soon fell asleep in perfect security, just as if he had not instructed the Marquis de Bruyères to provoke the powerful Duke of Vallombreuse to a duel.



'The Baron de Sigognac and the Marquis de Briyères.'

Isabella was unable to sleep: she understood that Sigognac would not leave things as they were, and feared the consequences of the quarrel as regards her friend, yet there was no question of her intervening between the combatants. Matters of honour were sacred in those days, and no woman would have thought of interrupting or disturbing the resolution of their grievances.

At about nine in the morning, the Marquis, already fully dressed, went to find Sigognac in his room, and settle with him the terms of the duel, while the Baron wished him to take, in case of any show of incredulity or refusal on the part of the duke, the old charters, the ancient parchments from which hung large wax seals on silk ribbons, the diplomas, worn at every fold and initialled with royal signatures whose ink had yellowed, the genealogical tree its copious branches burdened with labels, all the documents in short which attested to the nobility of the Sigognacs. These illustrious papers, whose indecipherable Gothic script would have required spectacles and the

scholarship of a Benedictine for their decipherment, were piously wrapped in a piece of crimson taffeta whose faded colour had taken on a yellowish tint. One might have thought it a fragment of the banner which once went before the hundred lances of Baron Palamedes de Sigognac, when encountering the Saracen army.

— ‘I do not believe it necessary,’ said the Marquis, ‘in this instance, to prove your lineage as if before a herald at arms; my word, which no one has ever doubted, will suffice. However, as it may be that the Duke of Vallombreuse, through exaggerated disdain and foolish presumption, pretends to see in you only Captain Fracasse, a hired actor for Monsieur Herod, I will take the documents, which my valet will carry, in case they need to be produced.’

— ‘You must do what you think is appropriate,’ replied Sigognac, ‘I trust your wisdom, and I place my honour in your hands.’

— ‘It shall not perish,’ replied Monsieur de Bruyères, ‘be sure of it, and we shall prevail over this outrageous duke whose haughty manners more than shock me. A baron’s *tortil* (*a circle of gold wreathed with a string of small silver balls called ‘pearls’*), and a marquis’ coronet (*with four ‘strawberry leaves’ alternating with four ‘pearls’*), are well worth the points of a ducal crown (*with its eight ‘strawberry leaves’*) if the lineages are ancient and free of all admixture. But enough talk, we must act. Words for women, actions for men, and a stain on one’s honour is only cleansed with blood, as the Spaniards say.’

Thereupon the Marquis called his valet, handed him the bundle of papers, and left the inn to go to the Hôtel de Vallombreuse to carry out his mission.

It was not yet light, and at the ducal mansion, agitated and angered by the events of the previous day, the duke had fallen asleep only very late at night. Thus, when the Marquis de Bruyères told Vallombreuse’s valet to announce him to his master, the scoundrel’s eyes widened at the enormity of the request. Wake the Duke! Enter his room before he rang! It would have been as good as entering the cage of a Barbary lion, or an Indian tiger. The duke, even when he went to bed in a good mood, never woke in a gracious one.

— ‘Monsieur, you had better wait,’ said the footman, trembling at the thought of such audacity, ‘or return later. My lord has not yet called me, and I dare not take it upon myself...’

— ‘Announce the Marquis de Bruyères,’ cried Zerbina’s admirer, in a voice in which anger was beginning to resonate, or I’ll charge the door, and let myself in; I must speak to your master immediately with regard to an important matter of honour.’

— ‘Ah! Monsieur is here to issue a challenge?’ said the valet, suddenly softening. ‘Why did you not say so at once? I will go and carry your name to his lordship; he retired to bed yesterday in so fierce a mood that he will be charmed to be awakened by a quarrel, and be given a pretext for fighting.’

And the footman, with a resolute air, entered the apartment after asking the Marquis to be kind enough to wait a few minutes.

At the sound of the door opening and closing, Vallombreuse, who had been resting with one eye open, woke completely, and with so sudden a start that the wood of the bed creaked, sat upright, and looked about him for something to throw at the valet’s head.

— ‘May the Devil skewer with his horns the triple-fool who interrupts my sleep!’ he cried in an irritated voice. ‘Did I not order you to stay away until you were called? I will have my major-domo give you a hundred lashes with a stirrup leather for disobeying me. How am I to sleep now? I feared for a moment that it was the all too tender Corisande!’

— ‘My lord,’ replied the footman, grovelling, ‘may have me beaten to death if it suits him, but if I dare to transgress his orders, it is not without good reason. The Marquis de Bruyères is here, and wishes to speak to the duke on a matter of honour, or so I understand. The duke has never hidden himself away on such occasions, and has always received such visits.’

— ‘The Marquis de Bruyères!’ said the duke, ‘do I have any quarrel with him? I don’t recall one; and besides, it’s many a day since I last spoke to him. Perhaps he thinks I sought to whisper the name Zerbina to him, for lovers always imagine that one desires the object of their affection. Come, Picard, hand me my dressing-gown and draw the bed-curtains, so that no one can view the disorder. We must not keep this brave Marquis waiting.’

Picard presented the duke with a magnificent Venetian gown which he took from a wardrobe, and whose gold background was decorated with large velvet-black flowers; Vallombreuse tightening the cord about his hips, so as to display his slender waist, seated himself in an armchair, assumed an air of indifference, and said to the footman: ‘Now show him in.’

— ‘Monsieur le Marquis de Bruyères,’ said Picard, opening the double doors.

— ‘Good morning, Marquis,’ said the young Duke of Vallombreuse, half rising from his armchair, ‘and welcome, whatever the matter that brings you here. Picard, pull a chair forward for the gentleman. Excuse me if I receive you in this untidy room, and in early morning undress; do not take it as a lack of civility, but as a sign of eagerness.’

— ‘You pique my curiosity,’ replied Vallombreuse; ‘I cannot think what this urgent matter might be.’

— ‘Doubtless, Monsieur le Duc,’ said the Marquis de Bruyères, ‘you have forgotten certain events of yesterday evening. Such minor details are not designed to be engraved in your memory. So, I will aid your recollection, if you will allow me. In the actresses’ dressing-room, you deigned to honour with special attention a young person who plays the ingénue: Isabella, I believe. And in a jesting manner that, for my part, I do not find blameworthy, you wished to place a beauty-spot on her breast. This action, which I will not mention further, greatly shocked an actor, Captain Fracasse, who had the audacity to obstruct your hand.’

— ‘Marquis, you are the most faithful and conscientious of historiographers,’ Vallombreuse interrupted. ‘All this is true in every detail, and, to complete the anecdote, I promised this rascal, as insolent as a nobleman, a beating, a punishment appropriate to a scoundrel of his kind.’

— ‘There is no great harm in having a comedic actor or a literary scoundrel beaten, a fellow with whom one is displeased,’ said the Marquis with an air of perfect indifference, ‘such fellows are not worth the canes that are broken on their backs; but here the case is different. Behind the name Captain Fracasse, who, moreover, thrashed your men in a fine manner, stands Baron de Sigognac, a gentleman of old stock, indeed of the finest nobility in Gascony. No one has anything ill to say of him.’

— ‘What the Devil is he doing among this troupe of minstrels?’ replied the young Duke of Vallombreuse, toying with the cord of his dressing-gown. ‘How was I to suspect a Sigognac beneath his grotesque attire and behind his false nose smeared with carmine?’

— ‘As for your first question,’ said the Marquis, ‘I will answer it in a word. Between us, I believe the Baron is very much in love with Isabella; unable to persuade her to stay at his castle, he has joined the acting troupe to follow his love. You cannot find his gallant pursuit in bad taste, since the lady of his thoughts excites your fancy also.’

— ‘True, I admit. But you will agree that I could not have guessed the situation, and that Captain Fracasse’s action was impertinent.

— ‘Impertinent from an actor,’ continued M. de Bruyères, ‘but perfectly natural from a gentleman jealous of his mistress. Therefore, Captain Fracasse doffs his mask, and appears, as Baron de Sigognac, to propose through myself a duel, and asks you to explain the insult you offered him.’

— ‘But who knows,’ said Vallombreuse, ‘if this so-called Sigognac, who plays the Braggard in a company of jesters, is not some low-level intriguer usurping a respected name to gain the honour of having his blade touched by my sword?’

— ‘My dear Duke,’ replied the Marquis de Bruyères, in a dignified tone, ‘I would not serve as a witness and second to one who was lowly born. I know the Baron de Sigognac personally, whose château is only a few miles from my own estate. I vouch for him. Besides, if you still doubted his quality, I have here all the documents necessary to assuage your scruples. Will you allow me to call my footman who is waiting in the antechamber, and will hand you the parchments?’

— ‘There is no need,’ replied Vallombreuse. ‘Your word is enough for me; I accept the duel. Monsieur the Chevalier de Vidalinc, my friend, will be my second. Please arrange matters with him. Any weapons or conditions are acceptable to me. I shall not be displeased to discover whether the Baron de Sigognac knows how to parry sword blows as well as Captain Fracasse does those from staves. The charming Isabella shall crown the winner of the tournament, as in the heyday of chivalry. But allow me to withdraw. Monsieur de Vidalinc, who occupies an apartment in the hotel, will descend, and you can agree with him the place, weapons, and hour. On that, *beso a vuestra merced la mano, caballero* (‘I kiss your grace’s hand, sir’).

With this, the Duke of Vallombreuse bowed to the Marquis de Bruyères with studied courtesy, lifted a heavy tapestry over a doorway, and exited.

A few moments later, the Chevalier de Vidalinc arrived to join the Marquis; the terms and conditions were soon settled. The sword, the natural weapon of gentlemen, was chosen, and the meeting was set for the following day, Sigognac not wishing, if he were to be wounded or slain, to miss that afternoon’s performance already announced to the whole city. The meeting was arranged at a certain place outside the walls, in a meadow much appreciated by the duellists of Poitiers for its solitariness, firm ground, and natural convenience.

The Marquis de Bruyères returned to the *Armes de France* and reported his mission to Sigognac, who thanked him warmly for having arranged things so well, for he had taken to heart the insolent and libertine looks of the young duke towards Isabella.

The play was to begin at three, and since morning the town crier had been walking the streets beating the drum, and announcing the performance, as soon as a circle of onlookers had gathered around him. The rascal had the lungs of a Stentor (*a Greek herald during the Trojan War, renowned for his loud voice, see Homer's 'Iliad' V 783*), and his voice, accustomed to promulgating edicts, gave the titles of the plays, and the names of the actors, an emphatic resonance the most majestic in all the world. The window-panes of the houses trembled, and the glasses rattled in unison on the tables within. He also exhibited a mechanical way of moving his chin while pronouncing his sentences that made him look like a Nuremberg nutcracker, delighting all the urchins. The attention of eyes was no less solicited than that of ears, and those who had not heard the announcement could see displayed at the busiest crossroads, on the walls of the racquet-court, and against the gate of the *Armes de France*, large posters on which, in skilfully-alternating red and black capital letters, appeared *Ligdamon and Lydias*, and *The Rodomontades of Captain Fracasse*, drawn with a brush by Scapin, the calligrapher of the troupe. These posters were arranged in lapidary style, in the Roman manner, and the most fastidious would have found nothing to criticise in them.

A servant from the inn, dressed as the theatre-doorman, with a half-green half-yellow coat, a wide shoulder-belt supporting a sword in a clasp, a broad-brimmed felt hat pulled down over his eyes and topped with a long feather fit to sweep the cobwebs from the ceiling, held back the crowd at the door, which he barred with a length of rope, not allowing anyone to enter unless they had acknowledged the silver tray on a table beside him, that is to say, paid the price of their seat, or at least shown an entry ticket in the agreed form. In vain, various young clerks, schoolboys, pages, and lackeys tried to enter illegally, and slip beneath the formidable rope obstructing them, for the vigilant watchdog pushed them back into the street, where some fell in the gutter with their legs flailing, a subject of great hilarity to the others, who burst out laughing, and held their sides to see them rise stinking of filth and stained with mud.

The ladies arrived in sedan-chairs the shafts of which were gripped by sturdy countrymen racing along bearing their light loads. Various men who came on horseback or by mule threw the bridles of their mounts to footmen posted there for the purpose. Two or three coaches with reddened gilding and faded paint, freed from the coach-house on this important occasion, approached the door, at the fastest pace the heavy horses could manage, and out of them emerged, as from Noah's Ark, all sorts of provincial creatures of heterogeneous appearance, dressed in clothes fashionable under the late king. However, these coaches, dilapidated though they were, did not fail to make an impression on the crowd that had gathered in haste to see the gentry arrive, and lined up one next to the other in the square, these carriages produced a quite decent effect.

Soon the hall was so full that it was impossible to move. On each side of the stage, armchairs had been placed for the distinguished personages; something, certainly, detrimental to the theatrical illusion and to the actors' performance, but which custom prevented from seeming merely ridiculous. The young Duke of Vallombreuse, in black velvet trimmed with jet, and awash with lace, appeared beside his friend the Chevalier de Vidalinc, who was dressed in a charming costume of lavender-coloured satin enhanced with gold. As for the Marquis de Bruyères, so as to be free to applaud Zerbina without compromising himself too greatly, he had taken a seat in the orchestra stalls close to the violins.

Boxes, fashioned out of fir-planks, and covered with serge and old Flemish tapestry, had been erected at the sides of the room, the middle of which formed the parterre, where the petty-

bourgeoisie, shopkeepers, attorney's clerks, apprentices, and schoolchildren, and the lackeys and other scoundrels stood.

In the boxes, puffing out their skirts and toying with the openings of their bodices to better show off the fullness of their white breasts, the women were as superbly adorned as their provincial wardrobe, a little behind the fashions of the court, allowed. But wealth advantageously replaced elegance, at least to the untrained eyes of the Poitevin public. There were large, fine family diamonds to be seen which, despite being set in old, tarnished settings, were nonetheless valuable; antique lace, a little yellow, it is true, but of considerable value still; long chains of twenty-four-carat gold, heavy and precious, though of ancient workmanship; brocades and silks bequeathed by grandmothers, such as are no longer woven in Venice or Lyon. There were even charming, fresh, alert and rosy, faces, which would have been highly prized in Saint-Germain and Paris, despite their somewhat too innocent and naive physiognomy.

Some of these ladies, doubtless not wishing to be recognised, had retained their domino-masks, which did not prevent the jesters in the stalls from naming them, and recounting their more or less scandalous adventures. However, alone in a box with a woman who appeared to be her attendant, one lady, masked more heavily than the others, and standing a little further back so that the light would not fall on her, thwarted the sagacity of the curious. A veil of black lace, tied under the chin, covered her head preventing anyone from discerning the colour of her hair. The rest of her clothing, of rich material, but dark in colour, blended into the shadows into which she shrank, unlike the other women, who sought the candlelight so as to impress. Sometimes she even raised to the level of her eyes, as if to protect them from the over-bright lights, a fan of black feathers, in the centre of which was set a small mirror which she refrained from consulting.

The violins, playing a refrain, drew the stage to the general attention once more, and no one paid further attention to this mysterious beauty, who might have been taken for Calderón's *dama tapada* ('veiled lady', see his play *La Dama Duende* 1629).

They began with *Ligdamon and Lydias*. The scenery, representing a green and leafy landscape, carpeted with moss, watered by clear fountains, and ending in the distance in a range of azure mountains, favourably disposed the public towards the play by means of its pleasing appearance. Leander, who played Ligdamon, was dressed in a reddish-purple costume enhanced with green embroidery in pastoral fashion. His hair twisted in curls over the nape of his neck, where a ribbon tied it in the most gallant fashion. A lightly-folded ruff revealed a neck as white as a woman's. His beard, shaved as closely as possible, coloured his cheeks and chin with an imperceptible bluish tint and made them appear velvety like peach blossom, a comparison made even more exact by the fresh vermilion of the patches of rouge spread discreetly over the cheekbones. His teeth, brightened by the contrasting carmine of his lips, and polished to excess, sparkled like pearls on a bed of bran. A stroke of Indian ink had regularised the tip of each of his eyebrows, and another line of extreme thinness, bordering his eyelids, lent the whites of his eyes an extraordinary brilliance.

A murmur of satisfaction ran through the assembly: the women leaned towards each other, whispering, and a young woman, recently out of the convent, could not help saying with a naivety that earned her a reprimand from her mother: 'He is charming!'

The little girl's candour, expressed the secret thoughts of more experienced women, even perhaps of her own mother. She turned bright red at the remonstrance, said no more, and kept her eyes fixed on the tip of her corsage, not however without raising them furtively when she was not being watched.

But the most moved of all was, without doubt, the masked lady. The rapid palpitation of her breast, which raised her lace, the slight trembling of the fan in her hand, the pose she had adopted, leaning on the edge of her box so as not to miss any of the spectacle, would have betrayed the interest she had in Leander, if anyone had taken the leisure to observe her. Fortunately, all eyes were turned towards the stage, which gave her time to recover.

Ligdamon, as everyone knows, for there is no one who is unaware of the work of the illustrious Georges de Scudéry, opens the scene with a very touching and pathetic monologue, in which Sylvie's rejected lover raises the important question of how he will end an existence that the rigour of his beloved renders unbearable. Will he choose, with which to end his sad days, the rope or the sword? Will he throw himself from the summit of a rock? Will he plunge into the river, and drown his ardour beneath the waves? He hesitates on the verge of suicide not knowing what to do. A vague element of hope, which abandons lovers only at the last resort, restrains him from dying. Perhaps the inhuman woman will soften, or allow herself to be softened by his steadfast adoration? It must be admitted that Leander delivered this tirade like the consummate actor he was, with the most touching alternations of languor and despair in the world. He made his voice tremble like someone stifled by grief, and who, while speaking, can barely contain his sobs and tears. When he heaved a sigh, he seemed to breathe it from the depths of his soul, and he complained of the cruelties of his lover in a tone so sweet, so tender, so submissive, so penetrating, that all the women in the room were furious with the wicked and barbaric Sylvie, claiming that in her place they would not have been so savagely fierce as to drive to despair, perhaps to death, a shepherd of such merit.

At the end of this tirade, while being applauded until the benches broke, Leander looked around at the women in the room, lingering on those who seemed to him to be titled; for, despite many disappointments, he did not abandon his dream of being loved, for his beauty and his talent as an actor, by some great lady. He saw more than one lovely eye shining with a tear, more than one white breast that palpitated with emotion. His vanity was satisfied, though he was scarcely surprised. Success never astonishes an actor; but his curiosity was keenly excited by the *dama tapada* who stood half-concealed in her box. Her air of mystery hinted at the possibility of an affair. Leander immediately divined that beneath her mask lay a passion that decorum was obliged to restrain, and he cast a burning glance towards the stranger, to show her that she had been understood.

The dart landed, and the lady gave Leander an imperceptible nod, as if to thank him for his insight. A rapport was established, and from then on, when the action of the play permitted it, glances were exchanged between the box and the stage. Leander excelled at these sorts of manoeuvres, and knew how to direct his voice and launch an amorous tirade in such a way that a member of the audience might believe he was speaking to her alone.

On Sylvie's entrance, she being played by Serafina, the Chevalier de Vidalinc did not fail to applaud, and the Duke of Vallombreuse, wishing to favour his friend's choice, deigned to bring together three or four times the palms of his white hands, the fingers of which were laden with rings with sparkling gems. Serafina bowed a half-curtsey to the knight and the duke, and prepared

to commence that pretty dialogue with Ligdamon, which connoisseurs judge one of the most touching passages of the play.

As required by the role of Sylvie, Serafina took a few steps across the stage, with a preoccupied and thoughtful air, prompting Ligdamon's advances towards her, after the line:

‘À ce coup je vous prend dedans la rêverie.’

‘Tis now I shall woo you, lost in your reverie.’

Her nonchalant attitude was most graceful, her head slightly bent, one arm hanging loose, and the other resting on her belt. Her dress was a watery-green glazed with silver, and trimmed with black velvet bows. She had a few wildflowers pinned in her hair, as if her hand had picked them in her distraction, and set them there without thinking. This head-dress, moreover, became her marvellously, far better than diamonds would have done, though that was scarcely her opinion, but her role had forced her to maintain good taste, and not adorn a shepherdess like a princess. She spoke, in a most charming manner, all those poetic and flowery phrases about roses, zephyrs, the height of the woods, and the song of the birds, by means of which Sylvie deliberately prevents Ligdamon from speaking to her of his love, although the lover finds in every image the beauty employs a symbol of love and a means of returning to the idea that obsesses him.

Throughout this scene, Leander, while Sylvie was speaking, found the means to elicit a few sighs from the mysterious woman, and did the like till the end of the play, which terminated to the sound of applause. It is pointless to say more of a work that is now accessible to all in print. Leander's success was complete, and all expressed surprise that an actor of such merit had not yet appeared before the Court. Serafina also had her partisans, and her wounded vanity was consoled by her conquest of the Chevalier de Vidalinc, who, if his fortune was not the equal of that of the Marquis de Bruyères, was young, fashionable, and on the verge of success.

After *Ligdamon and Lydias*, *The Rodomontades of Captain Fracasse* was performed, which had its usual effect, and raised immense peals of laughter. Sigognac, well-mentored by Blazius, and served by a natural talent, was most delightfully extravagant in the role of the captain. Zerbina seemed bathed in light, she sparkled so much, and the marquis, beside himself, applauded her like a madman. The uproar he was making even attracted the attention of the masked lady. She shrugged her shoulders slightly and, beneath her velvet mask, the corners of her lips lifted in an ironic smile. As for Isabella, the presence of the Duke of Vallombreuse, seated to the right of the stage, caused her a certain unease which would have been visible to the audience if she had been a less experienced actress. She feared some insolent action on his part, some outrageous mark of disapproval. But her fear was not realised. The duke made no effort to disconcert her with a gaze too fixed or too free; he even applauded her decently and with reserve when her performance deserved it. Yet, when some situation in the play resulted in Captain Fracasse having his nose tweaked, his ears flicked, and receiving blows from a stick, a singular expression of quiet disdain was painted on the young duke's features. His lip curled proudly, as though he had murmured in a low voice: ‘Fie, then!’ But he displayed none of the feelings that might be agitating him internally,

and maintained an indolent and superb pose throughout the spectacle. Though violent by nature, the Duke of Vallombreuse, his fury having passed, was too much of a gentleman to allow himself to neglect the laws of courtesy as regards an adversary with whom he was to fight the next day: till then hostilities were suspended, and it was as if a truce had been ordained from above.

The masked lady had withdrawn a little before the end of the second play, to avoid being caught up in the crowd, and to return unseen to the sedan chair that awaited her a few yards from the racquet-court. Her disappearance greatly intrigued Leander, who, from a corner of the wings, observed the audience, and followed the movements of the mysterious woman.

Hastily throwing a cloak over his costume of a shepherd of Lignon (*see the character 'Lysis' in Charles Sorel's 'Le Berger Extravagant', 1627*), Leander rushed to the stage door to follow the unknown woman. The frail thread that bound them would break if he failed to act swiftly. The lady, having emerged from the shadows for a moment, would return to them forever, and the affair, barely instigated, would be aborted. Although he hurried until he found himself out of breath, Leander, when he arrived outside the racquet-court, saw about him only dark houses and deep alleyways, in which a few lanterns flickered, carried by servants escorting their masters, and the reflections of which shimmered in the puddles left by the rain. The chaise, borne away by vigorous porters, had already turned the corner of a street that hid it from the gaze of the impassioned Leander.

— 'How stupid I am,' he said to himself, with that frankness one sometimes employs towards oneself in moments of despair. 'I should have left after the first play, dressed normally, and waited for my unknown at the front of the theatre, whether she stayed to see *The Rodomontades of Captain Fracasse* or no. Oh! Idiot, scoundrel! A great lady, for she certainly is one, is making eyes at you, and swooning beneath her mask on seeing you act, and yet you lack the sense to run after her? You deserve to have no finer mistresses in this life than frivolous fools, drabs, servant girls, or country maids with hands calloused from wielding a broom.'

Leander had reached this point in his internal harangue, when a sort of little page, dressed in brown un-braided livery wearing a hat pulled down over his eyes, suddenly rose up before him like an apparition, and said to him in a childish voice that he tried to deepen to disguise it:

— 'Are you Monsieur Leander, the one who played the shepherd Ligdamon in Monsieur de Scudéry's play?'

— 'That is indeed myself,' replied Leander. 'What do you want with me, and what can I do to serve you?'

— 'Oh! My thanks,' said the page, 'but I desire nothing from you; I am only charged to repeat a word or two to you, if you are disposed to hear them, a few words from a masked lady.'

— 'From a masked lady?' cried Leander, 'Oh! Speak them at once! I am dying of impatience!'

— 'Here they are word for word,' said the page: 'If Ligdamon is as brave as he is gallant, he has only to be at the church at midnight: a carriage will await him; let him ascend and take a drive.'



'Here they are word for word, said the page.'

Before the astonished Leander had time to reply, the page had disappeared, leaving Leander quite perplexed as to what he should do. Though his heart leapt with joy at the thought of his good fortune, his shoulders shuddered at the memory of the beating he had received in a certain park, at the foot of the statue of Cupid the Discreet. Was this yet another trap set for his vanity by some rude fellow jealous of his charms? Would he find, at the place of rendezvous, some frenzied husband, sword in hand, ready to beat him, and cut his throat? These reflections eroded his enthusiasm prodigiously, for, as we have said, Leander feared nothing, except like Panurge (*in Rabelais' 'Gargantua and Pantagruel'*) blows, and death. However, if he failed to take advantage of the favourable and romantic opportunity that presented itself, she would perhaps never appear again, and with her the dream of his life would vanish, a dream that had cost him so much in ointments, cosmetics, linen, and courage. Moreover, the beautiful stranger, if he did not go, would suspect him of cowardice, something too horrible to think of, which should instil a brave heart in the most

lily-livered of cowards. This thought, unbearable as it was, determined Leander's course of action. 'And yet,' he said to himself, 'what if this beauty, on whose behalf I am about to expose myself to the danger of having my bones broken, and being thrown into some dungeon, were to prove but a dowager plastered with rouge and white lead, and owning to false hair and teeth? There is no shortage of these hot old women, these ghouls of love who, unlike the ghouls of the cemetery, like to feed on living flesh. No, no; she is young and full of charm, I am sure of it. What I saw of her neck and throat was white, round, appetising, and promised wonders as regards the rest! Yes, I shall certainly go! I shall ascend the carriage. A carriage, indeed! Nothing is nobler or more stylish!

Having made this decision, Leander returned to the *Armes de France*, barely touched the actors' supper, and retired to his room where he indulged himself as best he could, sparing neither the fine linen with openwork embroidery, nor the orris-root powder, nor the musk. He also took a dagger and a sword, though they scarcely suited the occasion, but an armed lover always commands more respect from jealous troublemakers. Then he pulled his hat down over his eyes, wrapped himself in a dark-coloured coat in the Spanish style, and slipped out of the hotel on tiptoe, having had the good fortune not to be seen by the malicious Scapin, who was snoring away in his little box of a room at the other end of the gallery.

The streets had been deserted for a long time, as Poitiers went to bed early. Leander met not a living soul, except for a few scrawny cats prowling in a melancholy manner, that vanished like shadows beneath some badly-fitting door, or through a cellar window, at the sound of his footsteps. Our gallant emerged onto the church square as the last stroke of midnight struck sending the owls fleeing from the old tower at the mournful sound. The sinister vibration of the bell in the midst of the nocturnal silence roused a deep, religious horror in Leander's anxious soul. It seemed to him that he heard his own death-knell. For a moment he was on the point of turning back and retiring to lie, prudent and alone, between the sheets, instead of chasing adventure in the night; but he found the carriage waiting at the designated place, and the little page, the messenger of the masked lady, standing on the step, holding the door open. There was no opportunity to retreat, for few people have the courage to be cowards in front of witnesses. Leander had been seen by the child, and the coachman; he therefore advanced with a deliberate air that was inwardly belied by the nervous beating of his heart, and climbed into the carriage with the apparent intrepidity of a Galaor (*the brother of 'Amadis of Gaul', and a model knight, in the Portuguese chivalric romance of that name*).

No sooner had Leander seated himself than the coachman whipped up his horses, who broke into a brisk trot. A deep darkness reigned in the carriage; besides the fact that it was night, leather screens covered the windows, and prevented anything outside being seen. The page remained standing on the step, and Leander could not engage in conversation with him, or gain the slightest insight from him. He seemed, moreover, quite laconic, and little disposed to say what he knew, if anything. Our actor felt the cushions, which were of velvet adorned with ornamental tufts; he felt a thick carpet beneath his feet, and he inhaled a faint scent of amber given off by the fabric of the interior trim, a testimony to elegance and refinement. It was indeed to the home of a person of quality that this carriage was conveying him so mysteriously! He tried to orient himself, but knew little of Poitiers; however, it seemed to him, after a while, that the noise of the wheels no longer echoed from the walls, and that the carriage was no longer running over paving-stones. They were driving out of the city, and into the countryside, toward some retreat suitable for love or murder,

Leander thought, with a slight shudder, placing his hand on his dagger's hilt, as if some bloodthirsty husband or ferocious brother were seated opposite him in the shadows.

At last, the carriage halted. The little page opened the carriage-door; Leander descended, and found himself facing a high blackish wall which seemed to him to form the perimeter of some park or garden. Soon he distinguished a portal whose cracked, browned, and moss-covered wood made him at first mistake it for part of the stone wall. The page pressed hard on one of the rusty nails which held the planks together, and the door half-opened.

—'Give me your hand,' said the page, 'so I may guide you; it is too dark for you to find your way through this labyrinth of trees.'

Leander obeyed, and the pair walked for a few minutes through a wood that was still quite dense, though bared of leaves, the remnants of which crunched beneath their feet, by winter. The wood was succeeded by flowerbeds marked out by box hedges, and adorned with yew trees trimmed into pyramids which, in the darkness, took on the vague appearance of ghosts, or men on sentry duty, which was even more frightening to the fearful actor. Having navigated the flowerbeds, Leander and his guide climbed a ramp to a terrace on which stood a pavilion of rustic order topped with a dome and adorned with fiery vases in stone at its corners. These details were observed by our gallant thanks to the vague light which the night sky always provides in open places. The pavilion would have appeared uninhabited, if a faint redness filtered by a thick damask curtain had not empurpled one of the windows highlighting its embrasure against the dark mass of the wall.

It was doubtless behind this curtain that the masked lady was waiting, and feeling moved, for, in these amorous escapades, women risk their reputation, and sometimes their lives, just as much as gallants, should their husbands learn of the matter and happen to be in a brutal mood. But at that moment Leander was no longer afraid; pride assuaged hid all danger from him. The carriage, the page, the garden, the pavilion, all suggested an affair involving some great lady, and an intrigue woven in a manner that possessed nothing bourgeois about it. He was in heaven, and his feet scarcely touched the ground. He longed for that mocking rogue Scapin to see him in all his glory and triumph.

The page pushed open a large glass door and withdrew, leaving Leander alone in the pavilion, which had been furnished with great taste and magnificence. The vault formed by the dome represented a bright turquoise-blue sky, across which floated small pink clouds, and fluttering Cupids in various graceful attitudes. A tapestry decorated with scenes borrowed from that novel by Honoré d'Urfé, *L'Astrée*, softly covered the walls. Cabinets inlaid with Florentine *pietra dura*, red-velvet armchairs with tassels, a table covered with a Turkish carpet, and Chinese vases, full of flowers despite the season, showed clearly enough that the mistress of the house was rich and of noble lineage. Black marble arms, springing from gilded sleeves, formed candelabras, and shed the light of their candles over all this magnificence. Dazzled by these splendours, Leander did not, at first, notice that there was no one in the room; he took off his coat, which he placed with his felt hat on a folding chair, gave a new twist to one of his curls, whose arrangement was compromised, in front of a Venetian mirror, adopted the most graceful pose in his repertoire, and said to himself, as he looked about him:

— ‘But where is the deity of the place? I see the temple, but not the idol. When will she appear from her cloud and reveal herself as a true goddess by her deportment, according to Virgil’s expression?’ (See *‘Aeneid’* I, 405 *‘et vera incessu patuit dea’*)

Leander had reached this point in his gallant soliloquy when the leaf of a door, in crimson Indian damask, moved, opening a passage for the masked lady, the admirer of Ligdamon. She still wore her black velvet mask, which troubled our actor.

— ‘Is she ugly?’ he thought, ‘this liking for masks alarms me.’ His fear was short-lived, for the lady, advancing to the centre of the room where Leander was standing respectfully, undid her domino mask and threw it on the table, revealing by the candlelight a regular and pleasant face in which shone two beautiful eyes the colour of Spanish tobacco, inflamed with passion, and in which a well-furnished mouth smiled, cherry-red with a small cleft in the lower lip. Around this face, curled opulent clusters of brown hair which hung down over rounded white shoulders and even ventured to kiss the outline of a certain pair of half-globes, whose palpitations were betrayed by the quivering of the lace which veiled them.

— ‘Madame la Marquise de Bruyères!’ cried Leander, surprised to the utmost degree, and somewhat perturbed as he recalled the memory of that beating, ‘Is this possible? Am I the victim of some dream? Dare I believe in this unexpected happiness?’

— ‘You are not mistaken, my friend,’ came her reply, ‘I am indeed Madame de Bruyères, and I hope that your heart recognises me as your eyes do.’

— ‘Oh! Your image is there engraved in lines of fire,’ replied Leander with a penetrating tone, ‘I have only to look within myself to view it, adorned with every grace and perfection.’

— ‘I thank you,’ said the Marquise, ‘for having retained so fair a memory of me. It proves a refined and generous soul. You must have thought me cruel, ungrateful, and false. Alas! My vulnerable heart is only too tender, and I was far from being insensitive to the passion you showed. Your letter, given to a disloyal servant, fell into the Marquis’ hands. He penned the reply you received, which deceived you. Later, Monsieur de Bruyères, laughing at what he called a fine jest, made me read this missive, in which the most pure and lively love shone forth, but in a perfectly ridiculous manner. But it did not achieve the effect he hoped for. The feelings I had for you only increased, and I resolved to reward you for the trouble you have endured for me. Knowing my husband was busy with his new conquest, I came to Poitiers; hidden beneath this mask, I heard you express a fictitious love so beautifully that I longed to see if you would be as eloquent when speaking on your own behalf.’

— ‘Madame,’ said Leander, kneeling on a cushion at the feet of the Marquise, who had let herself fall into an armchair, as if exhausted by the effort that the confession she had just made had cost her, in terms of her modesty, ‘Madame, or rather my queen and deity, how can mere words, counterfeit flames, conceits coldly imagined by nail-biting poets, idle sighs uttered at the feet of an actress smeared with rouge, whose distracted gaze wanders over the audience, be compared to words springing from the soul, fire that burns the marrow, hyperboles of passion for which the whole universe could not provide images brilliant enough to honour its goddess, or the impulses of a heart that longs to leap from the breast which contains it, to serve as a cushion at the feet of the adored object? If you deign to find, heavenly marquise, that I express love with warmth on the stage, it is because I have never loved an actress, for my thoughts always rise

beyond, towards a perfect ideal, some beautiful, noble, and wise lady like yourself, and it is she alone that I love, beneath the names of Silvie, Doralice and Isabella, who are merely her phantoms.'

As he said this, Leander, too good an actor to forget that action must accompany delivery, leant over the hand that the Marquise proffered, and covered it with ardent kisses. The Marquise let her long, white, ring-laden fingers wander through the actor's silky, perfumed hair, and gazed, half-leaning back in her armchair, at the little winged Cupids on the turquoise-blue ceiling.

Suddenly the marquise pushed Leander away and stood up, staggering.

— 'Oh! Finish what you have begun,' she whispered in a panting, breathless voice, 'do so, Leander, for your kisses are burning me, and driving me mad!'

And, leaning her hand on the wall, she reached the doorway, through which she had entered and raised the curtain, the folds of which closed behind her, and Leander, who had approached to support her.

A winter dawn was freezing his reddened fingers when Leander, well wrapped in his cloak and half-asleep in the corner of the carriage, was returned to the Porte de Poitiers. Having lifted the corner of his cloak to reconnoitre the scene, he saw from afar the Marquis de Bruyères walking beside Sigognac, and heading towards the place set for the duel. Leander drew back the leather curtain so as not to be seen by the Marquis, whom the carriage almost brushed against. The smile of vengeance sated wandered over his lips. The blows with the stick had been repaid!

The spot chosen for the duel was sheltered from the wind by a length of wall, which had the benefit of hiding the combatants from travellers passing on the road. The ground was firm, well-trodden, without stones, clods, or tufts of grass that could encumber the feet, and offered every proper facility for cutting throats, as performed between people of honour.

The Duke of Vallombreuse and the Chevalier Vidalinc, followed by a barber-surgeon, were not late in arriving. The four gentlemen greeted each other with haughty courtesy, and cold politeness, as befits well-bred people about to fight to the death. A complete insouciance was evident on the face of the young Duke, who was perfectly brave and, moreover, certain of his skill. Sigognac was no less cheerful, though it was his first duel. The Marquis de Bruyères was satisfied with his degree of composure and augured well from it.

Vallombreuse doffed his coat and felt hat, and undid his doublet, manoeuvres which were imitated point by point by Sigognac. The Marquis and the Chevalier, in turn, measured the combatants' swords. They were of equal length. Each man occupied his ground, received his sword, and took up position *en garde*.

— 'Begin, gentlemen, and act like men of courage,' said the Marquis.

— 'Your exhortation is redundant,' said the Chevalier de Vidalinc; 'they will fight like lions. It will be superb.'



'The Duel.'

Vallombreuse, who, deep down, could not help but despise Sigognac a little, imagining that he was encountering but a weak adversary, was surprised when he casually countered the Baron's steel, to find a supple though firm blade that thwarted his own with admirable ease. He paid closer attention, and tried a few feints that were immediately divined. Through the slightest gap he left, Sigognac's point advanced, requiring a prompt parry. Vallombreuse risked an attack; his sword, driven aside by a clever riposte, left him uncovered and, if he had not suddenly leaned back, he would have been struck full in the chest. For the duke, the nature of the contest was changing. He had thought he could direct it at will, and after a few passes, wound Sigognac as he wanted by means of the famous stroke that until then had always succeeded. Not only was he no longer able to attack at will, but he needed all his skill to defend himself. Though he endeavoured to remain cool, anger gained on him; he felt himself becoming nervous and feverish, while Sigognac, impassive, seemed, by his impeccable guard, to take pleasure in irritating him.

— ‘Shall we do nothing while our friends are fighting?’ said the Chevalier de Vidalinc to the Marquis de Bruyères. ‘It is very cold this morning; let us exercise a little, if only to warm ourselves.’

— ‘Most gladly,’ said the Marquis, ‘it will stretch our legs.’

Vidalinc was superior to the Marquis de Bruyères in fencing, and after a few thrusts, knocked the sword from his hand with a quick, sharp flick of the wrist. As no hard feelings existed between them, they ceased by mutual consent, and their attention turned back to Sigognac and Vallombreuse.

The duke, pressed hard by the Baron’s controlled efforts, had already broken away several times. He was tiring, and his breathing was becoming ragged. From time to time, a bluish spark would spring from the swiftly meshed irons, but the riposte would weaken on attack, and give way. Sigognac, who, after tiring his adversary, stood firm and lunged, forever forced the duke to retreat.

The Chevalier de Vidalinc was very pale, and was beginning to fear for his friend. It was obvious, in the eyes of those familiar with fencing, that the entire advantage belonged to Sigognac.

— ‘Why on earth,’ murmured Vidalinc, ‘does Vallombreuse not try the move that Girolamo of Naples taught him, and that this Gascon probably has no knowledge of?’

As if reading his friend’s thoughts, the young duke tried to execute the famous stroke, but just as he was about to strike as if with a whip, Sigognac anticipated him, and delivered a lunge so precise that it passed straight through the duke’s forearm. The pain of the wound caused the duke’s fingers to open, and his sword fell to the ground.

Sigognac, with perfect courtesy, halted immediately, though he could have repeated the blow without transgressing the duelling convention, which did not require him to stop when first blood was drawn. He pressed the point of his blade to the ground, placed his left hand on his hip, and appeared to await his opponent’s wishes. But Vallombreuse, to whom, at a gesture of acquiescence from Sigognac, Vidalinc handed his sword, could not hold it and signalled that he had had enough.

Whereupon Sigognac and the Marquis de Bruyères bowed to the Duke of Vallombreuse and the Chevalier de Vidalinc in the politest manner possible, and returned to the town.

Chapter X: A Face at the Window

His wound, though it would prevent him from wielding a sword for a few weeks, was not dangerous; the blade had only pierced the flesh, without damaging any nerve, vein or artery. His wound certainly caused him pain, but his pride bled much more. Also, the slight contractions that, due to the pain, the young duke's dark eyebrows occasionally underwent were accompanied by an expression of cold rage, and the hand on his good arm scratched at the velvet of the sedan chair with clenched fingers. Often, during the journey, he bent his pale head to reprimand the porters, who nevertheless walked at their most even pace, even seeking out ways to avoid the slightest jolt, which did not prevent the wounded man from calling them boors, and promising them a dose of stirrup-leather, for tossing him about, he said, like a basket of salad.

On arriving home, he refused to retire to bed, and lay down, resting against the cushions, on a chaise longue, his feet covered with a quilted silk coverlet brought to him by Picard, the valet, who was very surprised and perplexed to see his master return in a state of distress, a situation which was not common, given the young duke's skill in fencing.

Seated on a folding chair next to his friend, the Chevalier de Vidalinc offered him, every quarter of an hour, a spoonful of cordial prescribed by the surgeon. Vallombreuse remained silent, but it was clear that a dull anger was boiling within him, despite the calmness he affected. Finally, his anger boiled over in these violent words:

— 'Can you comprehend, Vidalinc, how this lean, plucked stork, having flown from the tower of its ruined castle so as to avoid dying of hunger, can have pierced me with its long beak? I, who have measured myself with the finest blades of the day, and who have always returned from the field without a scratch, leaving behind, on the contrary, my swooning and eye-rolling opponent in the arms of his witnesses?'

— 'The most fortunate and skilful have just such strokes of bad luck,' Vidalinc replied, sententiously. 'Dame Fortune's face is not always the same; sometimes she smiles, sometimes she pouts. Until now, you have had no reason to complain of her treatment of you, she who has cherished you in her lap like her dearest child.'

— 'Yet, is it not shameful,' Vallombreuse continued, growing increasingly animated, 'that this ridiculous puppet, this grotesque squire, who receives insults and beatings, on stage, in ignoble farces, should have overcome the hitherto undefeated Duke of Vallombreuse? He must be a professional gladiator dressed in the skin of a mountebank.'

— 'You know his true rank, for which the Marquis de Bruyères vouches,' said Vidalinc. 'However, his unparalleled skill with the sword astonishes me; it surpasses that of those experts known to me. Neither Girolamo nor Paraguant, the famed fencing masters, possess a tighter defence. I observed it well in this encounter, and our most famous duellists would blanch. It took

all your skill, and the Neapolitan's advice, not to be more seriously hurt. Your defeat is still a victory. Marcilly and Duportal, who pride themselves on their abilities, and are amongst the best blades in the city, would undoubtedly have been left on the field given such an opponent.'

— 'I cannot wait for my wound to heal,' the duke continued after a moment's silence, 'so I can provoke him again, and take my revenge.'

— 'That would be a risky undertaking, and one I would not advise you to contemplate,' said the Chevalier. You may be left with some residual weakness in your arm that would diminish your chances of victory. This Sigognac is a formidable antagonist, with whom you should not fight needlessly. He now knows your strength, and the assurance that this initial advantage grants him will double his own. Honour is satisfied; the encounter was serious enough. Leave it at that.'

Vallombreuse felt, inwardly, the justice of this reasoning. He had studied the art of fencing, in which he believed he excelled, sufficiently enough to understand that his blade, however skillfully wielded by himself, would not reach Sigognac's chest, defended by that impenetrable guard against which all his efforts had proved in vain. He admitted, to himself, the fact of the Baron's astonishing superiority, though it aroused his indignation. He was even forced to concede in a whisper that the Baron, not seeking to kill him, had merely inflicted a wound that had put him out of action. This magnanimity, which would have annoyed a far less haughty character, irritated his pride and roused a poisonous resentment. To be defeated! The very idea oppressed him. He apparently accepted his friend's advice, but from the fierce, dark look on his face one could have guessed that some secret plan of revenge was already taking shape in his brain, a plan that needed only to be nurtured by his resentment in order to be executed.

— 'I shall cut a fine figure before Isabella now,' he said, forcing a smile, but a bitter smile it was, given his wounded arm had been pierced by her lover. Cupid the invalid cuts a poor figure beside the Graces.

— 'Forget that ungrateful girl,' said Vidalinc. 'After all, she could not have foreseen that a duke would fall for her on whim. Take back that pretty Corisande who loves you with all her soul, and cries for hours at your door like a spurned lap-dog.'

— 'Don't mention her name, Vidalinc,' cried the duke, 'if you wish us to remain friends. Such fawning affection, that no amount of insult can repel, disgusts and exasperates me. I need haughty coldness, rebellious pride, impregnable virtue! How adorable and charming she seems to me, this disdainful Isabella! How grateful I am to her for scorning my love, which would doubtless have already vanished if it had been received! Certainly, she must possess no base and common soul, to refuse, in her situation, the advances of a lord whose attentions flatter her and who is not unhandsome as regards his person, if the ladies of the town are to be believed. There enters into my passion for her a feeling of esteem that I am not accustomed to experiencing towards women; but how to rid the scene of this damnable gentleman, this Sigognac, who's enough to confound the Devil himself?'

— 'That won't be easy,' said Vidalinc, 'now that he's on his guard. But even if one could dispose of him, Isabella is nonetheless in love with him, and you know, better than any, having suffered it many times, how stubborn women's feelings are.'

— ‘Oh! If I could kill the Baron,’ Vallombreuse continued, not being convinced by the Chevalier’s arguments, ‘I would soon conquer the maid, despite her prudish and virtuous air. No one is forgotten more quickly than a dead lover.’

Such was not the Chevalier de Vidalinc’s opinion, but he thought it inappropriate to enter into an argument on the subject which might well have further soured Vallombreuse’s irritable mood.

— ‘Heal first, and later we will see; this conversation is tiring you. Try to rest, and not worry so; the surgeon would scold me and accuse me of being a bad nurse if I failed to recommend peace of mind as well as of body.’ The wounded man, yielding to this observation, fell silent, closed his eyes and soon fell asleep.

Sigognac and the Marquis de Bruyères had quietly returned to the *Hôtel des Armes de France*, where, like discreet gentlemen, they said nothing about the duel; but the walls, which are said to have ears, also have eyes: they observe at least as well as they hear. In this seemingly solitary place, more than one inquisitive eye was spying on the progress of the combat. Provincial idleness gives rise to many of those invisible or little-noticed flies that hover about in places where something is likely to occur, and which quickly buzz away, to spread the news everywhere. By lunchtime, all of Poitiers already knew that the Duke of Vallombreuse had been wounded in an encounter with an unknown adversary. Sigognac, living in retirement at the hotel, had shown the public only his mask and not his face. This mystery aroused local curiosity greatly, and imaginations worked busily to discover the name of the victor. It is pointless to report the bizarre suppositions that were made. Each individual laboriously constructed their own, supporting their idea with the most frivolous and ridiculous inferences, but no one harboured the incongruous notion that the triumph belonged to Captain Fracasse, who had acted on stage so amusingly the previous day. A duel between a lord of this quality and an actor would have seemed too enormous and monstrous a thing to surmise. Several members of the upper ranks of society sent word to the Vallombreuse hotel hoping to receive news of the duke, or obtain some clue given the servants’ usual indiscretion; but the servants remained as silent as the mutes in the Seraglio for the good reason that they knew nothing, and so had nothing to say.

Vallombrosa, due to his wealth, stature, good looks, and success with women, excited many a jealous hatred which dared not be manifested openly, while his defeat satisfied a malign longing to hear of his failure. It was the first defeat he had suffered, and all those whom his arrogance had offended rejoiced at this blow to the tenderest region of his self-esteem. They did not cease to talk, though they had not witnessed it, of the bravery, skill and noble appearance of his adversary. The ladies, who all possessed more or less cause to complain about the young duke’s actions towards them, for he was one of those people who sacrifice others, their thoughtless whims defiling the altar on which they have burned incense, felt full of enthusiasm for the one who avenged their secret affronts. They would have gladly crowned him with laurel and myrtle: we except from the number the tender Corisande, who thought she would go mad at the news, wept publicly, and, at the risk of the harshest rebuffs, attempted to force her way in to see the duke nonetheless. He was too well-guarded for that, though the Chevalier de Vidalinc, gentler and more merciful, with great difficulty was able to reassure the lady, who was far too sensitive to the misfortunes of that ingrate.

However, as nothing in this terrestrial, sublunary globe can remain hidden, it was learned from Master Bilot, who had it from Jacques, the Marquis’ valet, who had been present at the conversation between Sigognac and his master at Zerbina’s supper, that the unknown hero,

conqueror of the young Duke of Vallombreuse, was without a doubt Captain Fracasse, or rather a baron engaged for amorous reasons to Herod's traveling troupe. As for his name, Jacques had forgotten it. It was a name that ended in 'gnac', a common final syllable in Gascony, but he was sure of the rank.

This story, true despite its romantic flavour, was most successful in Poitiers. People were interested in this brave and skilful gentleman, and when Captain Fracasse appeared on stage, prolonged applause testified, even before he had opened his mouth, to the favour in which he was held. Ladies, among the highest and most fashionable, did not hesitate to wave their handkerchiefs. There was also louder than usual applause for Isabella, which almost embarrassed the young lady and brought to her cheeks, beneath the rouge, the natural blush of modesty. Without interrupting her role, she responded to these marks of favour with a modest curtsy and a graceful inclination of the head.

Herod rubbed his hands with joy, and his broad, pale face beamed like a full moon, for the takings were superb and the purse was in danger of bursting due to a plethora of coins, everyone wishing to see the famous Captain Fracasse, actor and gentleman, who was not afraid of sticks or swords, and who, a valiant champion of beauty, was not afraid to measure himself against a duke, the terror of the bravest. Blazius, for his part, did not augur well from this triumph; he feared, not without reason, the vindictiveness of Vallombreuse, who would find a way to take his revenge, and play some nasty trick on the troupe. Earthenware pots, he said, should avoid, even if they had not been broken at the first shock, further collision with iron pots, metal being harder than clay. Whereupon Herod, confident in the support of Sigognac and the Marquis, called him a poltroon, and a snivelling coward.

If the Baron had not been sincere in his love for Isabella, he could easily have been disloyal to her more than once, for more than one beauty smiled at him with a most tender air, despite his extravagant costume, his cardboard nose illumined with cinnabar, and his ridiculous role which scarcely lent itself to romantic illusion. Even Leander's success was compromised. In vain he flaunted his looks, puffed himself up like a pigeon, twirled the curls of his wig with his fingers, showed his solitaire ring, and displayed his teeth with mouth wide open; it no longer produced the desired effect, and he would have been furious with vexation, if the *dama tapada* had not been at her post, gazing at him, and responding to the winks he gave her with little flutters of her fan on the edge of the box and other signs of amorous intelligence. His recent good fortune poured balm on this minor wound to his self-esteem, and the pleasures that night promised consoled him for not being the star of the performance.

The actors returned to the inn, and Sigognac escorted Isabella to her room, where the young actress, contrary to her usual custom, permitted him to enter. The chambermaid lit a candle, put more wood on the fire, and discreetly withdrew. When the door had closed, Isabella took Sigognac's hand, which she squeezed with more force than one would have expected from those frail and delicate fingers, and in a tone of voice altered by emotion, she said to him:

'Swear you won't fight over me again. Swear it, if you love me as you say you do.'

— 'That's an oath I could not fulfil,' said the Baron; 'if some audacious person dared to disrespect you. I would certainly punish him as I must, were he a duke, or even a prince.'

— ‘Remember,’ Isabella continued, ‘that I am only a poor actress, exposed to the affronts of the first comer. The opinion of the world, too justified, alas, by the mores of the theatre, is that every actress is also a courtesan. When a woman sets foot on stage, she belongs to the public; eager glances examine her charms, scrutinise her beauty, and the male imagination seizes upon her as a mistress. Men, because they know her, believe they are known to her, and, if they are admitted backstage, astonish her modesty with abrupt confessions of love she has not provoked. Is she prudent? Her virtue is taken for pure pretence, or self-interested calculation. These are things that must be endured since they cannot be changed. From now on, trust me to repel, with a reserved demeanour, a brief word, a cold air, the impertinence of the noblemen, the gallants, and fops of all species who bend over my dressing table, or tap with their combs, between acts, at the door of my dressing room. A sharp tap with a busk on fingers that are wandering too freely is better than a blow from your rapier.’

— ‘Permit me to believe, my charming Isabella,’ said Sigognac, ‘that the sword of a gallant man may defend the busk of an honest woman, and do not deprive me of the role of being your knight and champion.’

Isabella still held Sigognac’s hand, and fixed on him her blue eyes, in a caressing manner, with a silent supplication desired to extract the desired oath; but the Baron paid no attention, being as intractable as a hidalgo as regards a point of honour, and he would have braved a thousand deaths rather than suffer anyone to disrespect his mistress; he wished Isabella, on the stage, to be as esteemed as a duchess in the salon.

— ‘Come now,’ said the young actress, ‘promise me that you will not expose yourself like that again for a frivolous reason. Oh, with what anxiety and anguish I awaited your return! I knew that you were going to fight this duke, of whom everyone speaks with terror. Zerbina told me everything. Wicked man that you are, to torment my heart like this! You men! You hardly think of a poor woman when your pride is at stake; you go about deaf, blind, and ferocious, without hearing her sobs, without seeing her tears. Do you not know that if you had been killed, I would have died?’

Tears gleamed in Isabella’s eyes at the mere thought of the danger Sigognac had run, and the nervous trembling in her voice showed that the gentle creature spoke the truth.

Touched more than one could say by this sincere passion, Baron de Sigognac, wrapping his free hand around Isabella’s waist, drew her to his heart without resistance from her, and his lips brushed the young woman’s bowed forehead, while feeling the effects of her panting breath against his chest.

They remained silent for a few minutes, in an ecstasy that a less respectful lover than Sigognac would undoubtedly have taken advantage of, but he was loath to abuse the chaste abandonment her emotion had produced.

— ‘Console yourself, dear Isabella,’ he said in a tender and cheerful voice, ‘I am not dead, and I have even wounded my opponent, even though he is considered a competent duellist.’

— ‘I know that you have a brave heart and a firm hand,’ Isabella continued, ‘and I love you, and am not afraid to tell you so, certain that you will respect my openness, and not take advantage of it. When I saw you so sad and so abandoned in that gloomy castle where your youth was fading,

I felt a sad and tender pity for you. Happiness does not seduce me; its brightness renders me fearful. If happy and fortunate, you would have frightened me. During that walk in the garden, when you pushed aside the brambles, you picked for me a small wild rose, the only gift you could give me; I let a tear fall on it before putting it in my bosom, and, silently, I gave you my soul in exchange.'

Hearing these sweet words, Sigognac desired to kiss the beautiful lips that had spoken them; but Isabella freed herself from his embrace, without a show of prudishness but with the modest firmness that a gallant man should not thwart.

— 'Yes, I love you,' she continued, 'but not like other women; my goal is your glory, not my pleasure. I am quite willing to be thought your mistress; it is the only reason that might excuse your presence among this troupe of strolling players. What do malicious remarks matter, provided that I retain my self-esteem and know myself to be virtuous? A stain on my honour would kill me. It is doubtless the noble blood in my veins that inspires such pride. Quite ridiculous, is it not, in an actress, but I am made that way.'

Though shy, Sigognac was young. These charming confessions, which would have meant nothing to a fop, filled him with a delightful intoxication, and troubled him to the highest degree. A deep blush rose to his cheeks, usually so pale; it seemed to him that flames were passing before his eyes; his ears were ringing and he felt the palpitations of his heart even in his throat. Certainly, he did not doubt Isabella's virtue, but he believed that a little audacity would triumph over her scruples; he had heard it said that a lover's moment once past never returns. The young girl was there before him in all the glory of her beauty, radiant, luminous so to speak, a visible soul, an angel standing on the threshold of the paradise of love; he took a step towards her, and clasped her in his arms with convulsive ardour.

Isabella did not attempt to struggle; but, leaning back to avoid the young man's kisses, she fixed on him a look full of reproach and pain. From her beautiful blue eyes sprang pure tears, true pearls of chastity, which rolled suddenly down her marred cheeks to Sigognac's lips; a suppressed sob swelled in her chest, and her whole body sank as if she were about to faint.

The distraught Baron placed her on an armchair and, kneeling before her, took her hands which she had abandoned to him, imploring her forgiveness, apologising for his youthful ardour, for a moment of vertigo which he repented of and which he would expiate by the most perfect submission.

— 'You have pained me greatly,' Isabella said, at last, with a sigh. 'I had so much confidence in your delicacy! My confession of love should have been enough for you, and you should have understood by my very frankness that I was resolved not to yield. I had thought you would let me love you as I wished, without disturbing my tenderness with vulgar transports. You have robbed me of confidence; it is not that I doubt your word, but I no longer dare listen to my heart. Yet it was so sweet to see you, to hear you, to follow your thoughts in your eyes! It was your sorrow that I wished to share, leaving pleasure to others. Among all these coarse libertines, these dissolute men, here is one, I said to myself, who believes in modesty, and knows how to respect what he loves. I had dreamt, I, a girl from the world of the theatre, constantly pursued by odious gallantry, of witnessing pure affection. I only asked to lead you to the threshold of happiness and then return to the depths of obscurity. Surely that was not too demanding.'

— ‘Adorable Isabella, every word you say,’ cried Sigognac, ‘makes me feel my unworthiness more; I have misunderstood your angelic heart; I should have kissed the traces of your footsteps. But fear nothing more from me; the husband would know how to restrain the passions of the lover. I have only my name, it is as pure and spotless as you yourself are. I offer it to you if you deign to accept it.’

Sigognac was still kneeling before Isabella: at these words the young girl bent down towards him, and, taking his head with a movement of delirious passion, she printed a quick kiss on the Baron’s lips; then, rising, she took a few steps into the room.

— ‘You will be my wife?’ asked Sigognac, intoxicated by the touch of that mouth as fresh as a flower, as ardent as a flame.

— ‘Never, never,’ replied Isabella with extraordinary exaltation; ‘I will show myself worthy of such an honour by refusing it. Oh, my friend, in what an ocean of heavenly rapture my soul swims! You esteem me then? You would dare to lead me, your head held high, into those rooms where the portraits of your ancestors hang, into that chapel where your mother’s tomb stands! I might suffer without fear the gaze of the dead who know everything, and my brow not seem unworthy of the virginal crown!’

— ‘What!’ cried the Baron, ‘you say you love me, yet you will accept me neither as a lover nor a husband?’

— ‘You have offered me your name, that is enough for me. I return it to you, after holding it to my heart for a minute. For a moment I was your wife, and shall never be another’s. While I embraced you, I said ‘yes’ inwardly. But I have no right to such happiness on earth. For you, dear friend, it would be a great mistake to embarrass your fate with a poor actress like me, who would always be reproached for her life on the stage, however honourable and pure she might be. The cold and composed expressions with which the great ladies would welcome me would cause you to suffer, and yet you could not challenge malicious women to a duel. You are the last of a noble race, and it is your duty to rebuild your House, brought down by adverse fate. When, with a tender glance, I persuaded you to leave your château, you were thinking of love and gallantry: that was quite natural; I, anticipating the future, was thinking of something quite different. I saw you returning from court, in magnificent attire, with some fine mission to execute. Sigognac would regain its former lustre; in thought I tore the ivy from the walls, re-roofed the old towers, repaired the broken walls, replaced the glass in the windows, re-gilded the symbolic storks faded from your coat of arms, and, having led you to the border of your domain, vanished, stifling a sigh.’

— ‘Your dream will come true, noble Isabella, but not as you say, for the outcome would be too sad. It is you who will be the first, your hand in mine, to cross that threshold from which ill fortune and abandonment will have disappeared.’

— ‘No, no, it will be some beautiful, rich and noble heiress, worthy of you in every way, whom you can show proudly to your friends, and of whom none will say with a spiteful smile: ‘I whistled at, or applauded, her in such and such a place.’

— ‘It is cruel of you to be so adorable and so perfect while driving me to despair,’ said Sigognac; ‘to open the gates of heaven and close them again; nothing could be more barbaric. But I will alter your resolution.’

— ‘Do not even try,’ Isabella continued, with gentle firmness, ‘it is immutable. I would despise myself if I renounced it. Be content, then, with the purest, truest, most devoted love that ever filled a woman’s heart, but don’t pretend things can be otherwise. Is it so painful,’ she added, smiling, ‘to be adored by an ingénue whom many have had the bad taste to find charming? Vallombreuse himself would be proud of such worship!’

— ‘To give oneself, and yet refuse oneself so completely, to mingle in the same cup this sweetness and bitterness, this honey and gall, only you are capable of such perversity.’

— ‘Yes, I am a strange girl,’ Isabella continued, ‘I take after my mother in that; but you must see me as I am. If you insist on pursuing me, I know how to hide in some retreat where you will never find me. So, let it be agreed; and since it is getting late, return to your room, and adapt this text, so I may play a role that suits neither my figure nor my character, in the play we are soon to perform. I am your little friend, be my grand poet.’

As she said this, Isabella took from the bottom of a drawer a scroll tied with a pink ribbon, which she handed to Baron de Sigognac.

— ‘Now kiss me and go,’ she said, offering him her cheek. ‘You will labour on my behalf, and all work deserves its reward.’

Back in his room, it took Sigognac a good while to recover from the emotion this scene had caused him. He was at once desolate and delighted, radiant and gloomy, in heaven and in hell. He laughed and wept, prey to the most tumultuous and contradictory feelings; the joy of being loved by such a beautiful person, with such a noble heart, made him exult, yet the certainty of never obtaining anything from her threw him into a deep depression. Little by little the mad waves of feeling subsided, and calm was restored. His thoughts returned, one by one, to Isabella’s words, and that portrait of the château of Sigognac renewed, which she had evoked, presented itself to his heated imagination in the most vivid and striking of colours.

It awakened all his feelings for it, as if in a dream. The castle’s facade shone white in the sunlight, and the newly-gilded weathervanes gleamed against the blue sky. Peter, dressed in rich livery, stood between Miraut and Beelzebub beneath the armorial gate, awaiting his master. From chimneys long unused rose curls of smoke, showing that the castle was populated by numerous servants and abundance had returned there.

He saw himself dressed in a suit as gallant as it was magnificent, whose embroidery shimmered and fluttered, leading Isabella, who wore a princess’s costume emblazoned with a coat of arms whose emblems and colours seemed those of one of the greatest houses in France, to the manor of his ancestors. A coronet gleamed on her brow, but the young woman seemed no different. She retained her tender, modest air, and held in her hand the little rose, that gift from Sigognac, which had lost none of its freshness, and, as she walked, she breathed in its perfume.

As the young couple approached the castle, an old man of the most venerable and majestic appearance, on whose chest glittered the ribbons and medals of several orders, and whose physiognomy was completely unknown to Sigognac, advanced a few steps from the porch as if to welcome them. But what surprised the Baron greatly was that near the old man stood a young man of the proudest appearance whose features he could not at first clearly distinguish, but who soon

revealed himself to be the Duke of Vallombreuse. The young man smiled at him in a friendly manner, and no longer possessed his haughty expression.

His tenants shouted: 'Long live Isabella, long live Sigognac!' with demonstrations of the liveliest joy. Above the tumultuous cheers of the crowd, a hunting-horn was heard; then from the middle of a thicket an Amazon emerged into the clearing, whipping her rebellious palfrey, an Amazon whose features closely resembled those of Yolande. She stroked her horse's neck with her hand, reined it in, to achieve a more moderate pace, and passed slowly in front of the manor. In spite of himself, Sigognac's eyes followed the superb huntress whose velvet skirt swelled like a bird's wing, but the more he looked at her, the more his vision paled and faded. She seemed composed of diaphanous shadows, and through her almost erased contours various details of the landscape could be distinguished. Yolande faded like a confused memory before Isabella's reality. True love dissipated the first dreams of adolescence.

Indeed, in that ruined manor, where his eyes had nothing to feast on but the spectacle of desolation and misery, the Baron had lived, gloomy, somnolent, well-nigh inanimate, more like a shadow than a man, until the day of his first encounter with Yolande de Foix while hunting on the deserted moor. He had previously seen only country women tanned by the sun, or mud-stained shepherdesses, female personages rather than women. He retained from that vision of her a dazzlement like those who stare too long at the sun. Always, dancing before his eyes, even when he closed them, he saw that radiant figure which seemed to him to belong to another sphere. Yolande, it is true, was incomparably beautiful and born to fascinate more worldly people than a poor squire riding a lean pony, and dressed in his father's over-large clothes. And, given the smile provoked by his grotesque attire, Sigognac had felt how ridiculous it would be for him to entertain the slightest hope regarding that insolent beauty. He avoided Yolande, or managed to view her, himself unnoticed behind some hedge or tree trunk, riding along some track she was accustomed to take with her retinue of gallants, all of whom, in his self-contempt, he found cruelly handsome, marvellously dressed, and superbly amiable. On those days, his heart was filled with bitter sadness, and he returned to the château, pale, defeated, dejected, like a man wasted from some illness, and he remained silent for hours on end, sitting, chin in hand, in a corner of the hearth.

Isabella's appearance at the castle had given a purpose to that vague desire for love that torments youth and leads it, in its idleness, to cling to phantoms. The grace, the sweetness, the modesty of the young actress had touched Sigognac in the tenderest part of his soul, and he truly loved her very much. She had healed the wound inflicted by Yolande's contempt.

Sigognac, after giving himself over to these phantasmagorical reveries, scolded himself for his laziness and managed, not without difficulty, to focus his attention on the text that Isabella had entrusted to him, in order for him to revise various passages. He deleted certain verses which did not suit the physiognomy of the young actress, and added certain others; he rewrote the lover's declaration of affection, deeming it cold, pretentious, stiff, and obscure and bombastic in style. The speech he substituted was, certainly, more natural, more passionate, warmer; he addressed it, in thought, to Isabella herself.

This effort consumed a considerable part of the night, but he completed it to his advantage and satisfaction, and was rewarded the next day with a gracious smile from Isabella, who at once set about learning the lines that her poet, as she called him, had composed. Neither Alexandre Hardy nor Tristan l'Hermite could have bettered them.

At the evening performance, the crowd was even larger than the previous day, and the doorman was almost stifled by the press of spectators who all wished to enter the theatre at the same time, fearing, though they had paid, that they would not find a place. The reputation of Captain Fracasse, victor over Vallombreuse, grew hourly and took on chimerical and fabulous proportions; as if he had been attributed with performing the Labours of Hercules and possessing the prowess of the Twelve Peers of the Round Table. Some young gentlemen, enemies of the duke, spoke of seeking the friendship of this valiant gladiator, and inviting him to carouse with them at the tavern, at six pistoles (*the Louis d'Or, worth ten livres*) apiece. More than one lady had intended to write a billet-doux, of a gallant turn of phrase, aimed at him, and had thrown five or six ill-written drafts into the fire. In short, he was in fashion. People swore by him. He cared little for this success, which dragged him from the obscurity in which he would have wished to remain, but it was impossible for him to escape what he was obliged to endure; though for a moment, he had the fancy to slip away, and not appear on stage. The idea of the despair that the Tyrant would feel, still amazed at the enormous takings from their performances, prevented him from doing so. Should not these honest actors, who had helped him in his misery, benefit from the unexpected vogue he now enjoyed? So, resigning himself to his role, he adopted his mask, buckled his belt, draped his cape over his shoulder, and waited to be called on-stage.

The profits being good, and the house full, Herod, being a generous director, had doubled the lighting, so that the room shone with a brilliance as vivid as a Court spectacle. In the hope of seducing Captain Fracasse, the ladies of the city had taken up arms, as they say in Rome, *in fiocchi* (*in full glory, 'ribbons' and all*). Not a single diamond remained in its case, and a weight of gems shone and sparkled on breasts more or less pale, on heads more or less shapely, but wholly animated by a lively desire to please.

Only one box was still empty, the best placed, the most prominent in the hall, and curious eyes turned in that direction. The lack of enthusiasm of those who had rented it astonished the gentlemen and bourgeois of Poitiers, who had been at their posts for more than an hour. Herod, half-opening the curtain, seemed to be waiting for these disdainful people to arrive before giving the three sacramental knocks to open the proceedings, for nothing is so wretched in the theatre as the late and endlessly-annoying entrance of spectators, who scrape their seats, settle noisily, and divert attention from the play.

It was as the curtain rose, that a young woman took her place in the box, while beside her a lord of venerable and patriarchal appearance seated himself with difficulty. Long white hair, the tips of which curled into silvery ringlets, fell from the old gentleman's still well-furnished temples, while the top of his head revealed a skull of ivory tones. These locks accompanied cheeks pockmarked with violent colours which witnessed to a habit of living in the open air, and perhaps a Rabelaisian cultivation of the divine bottle. The eyebrows, still black and very bushy, shaded eyes whose vivacity had not been extinguished by age, and which still sparkled at times amidst their circles of brown wrinkles. Moustachios and a royal beard, to which one could have applied that epithet of *grifaigne* (*imposing, redoubtable*) that the old *romans de gestes* (*epics of chivalry*) invariably attribute to Charlemagne's beard, bristled and bracketed his sensual mouth with its prominent lips, while a double-chin joined the face to a plump neck, though his general appearance might have seemed quite commonplace without his clothes which elevated all, and confirmed the gentleman's rank. A collar, in Venetian needle lace, overlapped his jacket of gold brocade, while his overflowing shirt,

of a dazzling whiteness, raised by a rather prominent abdomen, covered the belt of a pair of breeches in tan velvet; a cape of the same colour, braided with gold, and carelessly doffed, was draped over the back of his seat. It was easy to surmise in this elderly fellow an uncle and chaperon, reduced to the state of a duenna, by a niece much adored in spite of her whims; one might have seen in them, she, slender and light, he, heavy and sullen, a Diana leading on a leash an old, semi-retired lion who would have preferred to sleep in his den than be paraded around the world, but who nevertheless resigns himself to it.



'A young woman took her place in the box...'

The young girl's costume proved by its elegance the wealth and rank of she who wore it. A dress of glaucous green, of that shade which only the most self-assured of blondes can wear,

highlighted the snowy whiteness of a chastely-revealed bosom, and a collar of alabastrine transparency sprang, like the pistil from a flower's corolla, from a starched and openwork ruff. The skirt, of silver cloth, was glazed with light, and bright points marked the pearls that bordered the dress and bodice. The hair, full of rays, twisted into small curls on the forehead and temples, resembled living gold; It merited twenty sonnets in its praise full of Italian *concetti* (*conceits*) and Spanish *agudezas* (*flashes of wit*). The entire room was already dazzled by this beauty, though she had not yet removed her mask, but what could be seen of her answered for the rest; the pure and delicate chin, the perfect lines of the mouth whose raspberry tones almost reached to dark velvet, the elongated, graceful, refined oval of the face, the ideal perfection of a charming ear one might have thought chiselled from agate by Benvenuto Cellini, sufficiently attested to enviable charms even the goddesses might have envied.

Soon, doubtless inconvenienced by the heat of the room or perhaps generously wishing to favour mortals with a sight of which they were hardly worthy, the young deity removed the odious mask which had eclipsed half her splendour. Then her charming eyes could be viewed, whose translucent pupils shone like lazulite between long lashes of burnished gold, as well as her nose, half-Greek, half-aquiline, and her cheeks tinged with an imperceptible carmine which would have made the complexion of the freshest rose appear earthy. It was Yolande de Foix. The female jealousy, felt by all those women threatened at their moment of success, and reduced to a state of comparative ugliness, or agedness, had recognised her before she had fully unmasked herself.

Calmly overlooking the room, in which she had caused a sensation, Yolande leaned on the edge of the box, her hand pressed to her cheek in a pose which would have made the reputation of a sculptor and carver of images, if such a workman, whether Greek or Roman, could have invented a pose of such distracted grace and natural elegance.

— 'Above all, uncle, don't fall asleep,' she said in a quiet voice to the old lord, who immediately opened his eyes wide, and sat upright. It would not be kind to me, and would be contrary to the laws of ancient gallantry that you always praise.'

— 'Be calm, niece. When the stuff and nonsense spouted by these clowns, whose affairs interest me very little, bores me too greatly, I will look at you, and suddenly my eyes will be as clear as those of a basilisk.'

While Yolande and her uncle were talking, Captain Fracasse, striding, one leg outstretched before the other like a pair of compasses, advanced to the footlights, rolling his eyes furiously and making the most outrageous and presumptuous faces in the world.

Frantic applause erupted from all sides at the entrance of this favourite actor, and attention was momentarily diverted from Yolande. Certainly, Sigognac was not vain, his pride as a gentleman revolting at the profession of acting to which necessity had driven him. However, I would not wish to deny that his self-esteem was somewhat enhanced by this warm and noisy approval. The fame of actors, gladiators, and buffoons, occasionally provoked jealousy in those high-ranking Romans, Caesars and emperors, masters of the world, who did not disdain to seek, in the circus or on the stage, to be crowned as singers, mimes, wrestlers, or charioteers, when they already had so many others to bear on their heads, witness Nero, to speak of the most notorious.

When the applause ceased, Captain Fracasse looked around the room with that gaze that an actor never fails to cast abroad, to check that the benches are well-filled, and to divine the

joyful or hostile mood of the audience on which he bases his performance, allowing or refusing liberties to be taken.

Suddenly the Baron was dazzled; the footlights became suns, then seemed to turn dark against a luminous background. The heads of the spectators, whom he viewed, confusedly, at his feet, melted into a kind of formless mist. A burning sweat, immediately icy, drenched him from the roots of his hair to his heels. His legs, as if made of cotton, bent beneath him, and the floor of the theatre seemed to rise to his waist. His dry, parched mouth lacked saliva; an iron yoke gripped his throat as the Spanish garotte does that of criminal, and the words he was about to pronounce flew, frightened, tumultuous, clashing, and tangled like birds fleeing from an opened cage, from his brain. Coolness, composure, the contents of his memory, all vanished at once. It was as if an invisible thunderbolt had struck him, and he almost fell dead, his nose in the lighted candles. He had recognised Yolande de Foix, tranquil and radiant in the box, fixing her beautiful Persian eyes upon him!

Oh, the shame, the irritation! What an evil turn of fate! A setback too great for so noble a soul! To be caught, in grotesque attire, performing this base and unworthy function of entertaining the rabble with clownish grimaces, by a lady so haughty, so arrogant, so disdainful, before whom, to humble and lower her pride, one would wish to execute only magnanimous, heroic, and superhuman deeds! And to be unable to slip away, vanish, engulf oneself in the bowels of the earth! Sigognac had for a moment the idea of fleeing, of launching himself through the canvas backcloth, forcing a hole in it by employing his head like a ballista; but his foot-soles felt like lead, as if clad in those weighted boots which it is said that certain runners use in their exercises to strengthen themselves, feeling lighter afterwards; he was unable to detach his feet from the floor, and remained there, bewildered, gaping, stupid, to the great astonishment of Scapin, who, thinking that Captain Fracasse had forgotten his lines, whispered to him, in a low voice, the first words of his tirade.

The audience thought that the actor, before commencing, sought a second round of applause, and began to clap their hands, stamp their feet, and make the most triumphant uproar that had ever been heard in a theatre. This gave Sigognac time to regain his senses. With a supreme effort of will, he regained possession of his faculties violently: 'Let me at least find glory in my infamy,' he thought to himself, steadying himself on his feet; 'the only thing lacking to complete my humiliation would be to be hissed at, and receive a hail of raw apples and hard-boiled eggs, in her presence. Perhaps she will not recognise me in this ignoble mask. Who would suppose a Sigognac beneath this literate monkey's costume, mottled in yellow and red! Come now, courage, to the rescue! Let me act the role to the full. If I play well, she'll applaud me. It would certainly be a fine triumph, for she is beyond proud!'

Sigognac pursued these thoughts in less time than it has taken me to write them, the pen's rapidity being unable to match that of the mind, while he delivered his grand tirade with such singular outbursts, such unexpected variations in intonation, such a frenzied comic fury, that the audience burst into applause, and Yolande herself, though she testified that she took no liking to such farces, could not help smiling. Her uncle, the plump Commander, was perfectly awake, and struck the palms of his gouty hands together in satisfaction. The unfortunate Sigognac in his despair, through his exaggerated manner of acting, excessive clowning, and the mad boastfulness of his role, seemed to wish to mock himself, and embrace his derisory fate in the extreme; he cast

at his own feet his dignity, nobility, self-respect, and the memory of his ancestors; and stamped on them with delirious and ferocious joy! 'You must be pleased, adverse Fortune, for I am quite humiliated, sunk deep in abject wretchedness,' he thought while enduring the customary flicks, thumps, and kicks, 'you rendered me miserable! Now you make me appear ridiculous! You force me, by a cowardly trick, to dishonour myself before this haughty woman! What more do you wish?'

Now and then, he felt so angered he straightened his back beneath Leander's baton, with such a formidable and dangerous air, that the latter recoiled in fear; but, recovering, with a sudden start, the spirit of his role, he trembled all over, his teeth chattered, his legs faltered, and, to the great pleasure of the spectators, he gave every sign of the most cowardly cravenness.

These extravagances, which would have seemed ridiculous in a less charged role than that of Matamore, were attributed by the public to actor's verve, he having entered fully into the part, and did not fail to produce a good effect. Isabella alone had guessed what was troubling the Baron: namely, the presence in the room of that insolent huntress whose features had remained only too vivid in her memory. While playing her role, she slyly turned her eyes towards the box where, with the disdainful and tranquil pride of self-assured perfection, the haughty beauty whom, in her humility, she did not dare call her rival, was enthroned. She found it bitter-sweet to observe, covertly, that inescapable air of superiority, and told herself that no woman could compete in charms against such a goddess. Such sovereign qualities allowed her to comprehend the insane love that is sometimes excited in scoundrels among the masses, by the peerless grace of some young queen, appearing at a triumph or public ceremony, a love that is accompanied by madness, prison, and torture.

As for Sigognac, he had promised himself not to look at Yolande, for fear of being seized by a sudden transport, and, losing his self-control, commit publicly some bizarre escapade which would dishonour him. He tried, on the contrary, to calm himself by keeping his gaze fixed, whenever his role permitted, on the sweet and virtuous Isabella. Her charming face, imbued with a slight sadness, attributable to the unhappy tyranny of the father who, in the comedy, wished to marry her against her will, gave his soul a little peace; Isabella's love consoled him for the contempt previously displayed by Yolande. He regained his self-esteem, and found the strength to complete the performance.

His torment finally came to an end. The play concluded, and when, having returned to the wings, Sigognac, who was suffocating, undid his mask, his comrades were struck by the strange alteration of his features. He was livid, and let himself fall well-nigh lifeless, onto a bench that was close by. Seeing him near to fainting, Blazius brought him a flask of wine, saying that nothing was as effective in such circumstances as a swig or two of the best. Sigognac signed that he only wanted water.

— 'A reprehensible regime,' cried the Pedant, 'a serious dietary error; water is only fit for frogs, fish, and teal, not human beings; in the best pharmacies, one should find carafes of wine inscribed: "Medicine, for external use." I would die an instant living death were I to swallow a drop of this insipid liquid.'

Blazius' reasoning did not prevent the Baron from swallowing a whole jug of water. The coolness of the beverage restored him completely, and he began to look around him with less alarm.

— ‘You acted the part in admirably fantastic style,’ said Herod, approaching the captain, ‘but you must not indulge too often in that degree of effort. Such ardour would soon consume you. The actor’s art is to control himself and present only the appearance of things. He must be cold when scorching the boards, and remain calm in the midst of the greatest fury. Never has an actor so vividly represented the exaggerations, impertinence, and madness of Matamore, and if you could repeat those improvised effects, you would win the prize for comedy, above all others.’

— ‘Is it then the case,’ replied the Baron bitterly, ‘that I acted the part well? I felt myself to be a clown, a complete buffoon, when my head poked through the guitar Leander shattered on my skull.’

— ‘Truly,’ the Tyrant continued, ‘you had the most farcical, wild, and comical expression imaginable. Even Mademoiselle Yolande de Foix, that lovely person, so proud, so noble, so serious, deigned to smile. I saw it clearly.’

— ‘It is a great honour for me,’ said Sigognac, whose cheeks suddenly flushed, ‘to have entertained that beauty.’

— ‘Pardon me,’ said the Tyrant, noticing this blush. ‘Such success, which intoxicates us, humble professional minstrels, must be a matter of indifference to a person of your quality, far above applause, illustrious even.’

— ‘You did not offend me, dear Herod,’ said Sigognac, holding out his hand to the Tyrant; ‘one must seek to do well in everything one does. But I could not help thinking that youth promised greater triumphs.’

Isabella, who was dressed for the second play, passed Sigognac and, before going on-stage, gave him a consoling and angelic look, so full of tenderness, sympathy, and affection, that he forgot Yolande, utterly, and no longer felt unhappy. Here was a divine balm that healed the wound to his pride, at least for the moment, since such wounds ever reopen and bleed.

The Marquis de Bruyères was at his post, and however busy he had been applauding Zerbina during the performance, he did not fail to go and greet Yolande, whom he knew and whose hunt he sometimes followed. He told her, without naming the Baron, of the duel between Captain Fracasse and the Duke of Vallombreuse, the details of which he knew better than any, having acted as witness for one of the two adversaries.

— ‘You are being discreet,’ replied Yolande, ‘I divined instantly that Captain Fracasse was none other than the Baron de Sigognac. Did I not see him leave his owl’s nest in the company of that little scamp, that gypsy girl who plays the ingénue in so sugary a manner,’ she added with a slightly forced laugh, ‘and was it not he, at your château, amongst the actors? From his foolish expression I would not have believed such a perfect buffoon could be so brave a companion.’

While talking with Yolande, the Marquis looked around the auditorium, the various aspects of which were more visible than from the seat he usually occupied, close to the violins, the better to follow Zerbina’s performance. His attention was drawn to the masked lady whom he had not seen till then, since, seated in the front row, he invariably turned his back on the audience, not wishing to be noticed unduly. Although she was as if buried beneath her black lace, he thought he recognised in the figure and attitude of this mysterious beauty something that vaguely reminded him of the Marquise, his wife. ‘Nonsense!’ he said, rebuking himself, ‘she will doubtless be at the

Château de Bruyères, where I left her.’ However, he noticed a rather large diamond ring, which the marquise was in the habit of wearing, glittering on the lady’s finger, since she was resting her hand, coquettishly, on the edge of the box, as if in compensation for not showing her face. The sight of it troubled his imagination, and, intending to ascertain the facts, he took leave of Yolande and the aged lord, with a somewhat abrupt show of civility, yet not so promptly as to find, when he reached his destination, the nest lacking the bird. The lady, alarmed, had fled. This left him most perplexed and disappointed, though he was the philosophical kind of husband. ‘Could she be in love with this Leander?’ he murmured. ‘Happily, I had the fop flogged in advance, and so am even on that score.’ The thought restored his serenity, and he went backstage to find the Soubrette, who was already surprised not to see him there, and received him with the feigned bad humour which such women employ to irritate men.

After the performance, Leander, concerned that the Marquise had suddenly disappeared in the middle of the show, made for the church square and the place where the page was due to meet him with the carriage. He found the page all alone, who then handed him a letter accompanied by a small, very heavy box, and disappeared so swiftly into the shadows that the actor might well have doubted the reality of the apparition if he had not the letter and the package in his hands. Calling a footman, who was passing with a lantern in order to collect his master from some neighbouring house, Leander broke the seal with a hasty and trembling hand, and, bringing the paper close to the light that the valet held at nose height, he read the following lines:

— ‘Dear Leander, I fear my husband recognised me at the play, despite my mask; he was staring so intently at my box that I withdrew in haste to avoid being surprised. Prudence, so inimical to love, dictates that we should not see each other tonight in the pavilion. You might be spied on, followed, perhaps killed, not to mention the danger I myself might run. While waiting for a happier and more convenient opportunity, please wear the triple-linked gold chain my page will give you. May it remind you, each time you place it about your neck, of one who will never forget you, and will always love you.

She who, for you, is simply Marie.”

— ‘Alas! My fine romance is over,’ said Leander to himself, giving some coins to the footman whose lantern he had borrowed; ‘what a pity! Ah! My charming Marchioness, how I would have loved you, endlessly,’ he continued when the valet had left, ‘but the Fates, jealous of my happiness, will not permit it; rest assured, madame, I will not compromise you through ardent and indiscreet displays of affection. Your pitiless brute of a husband would cause me untold grief by plunging his sword into your white breast. No, no, let there be no savage slaughter, more suited to a tragedy than to a life together. Even though my heart bleeds, I shall not strive to see you again, but will rest content with kissing this chain, heavier and less fragile than the one that united us for but a moment. How much might it be worth? A thousand ducats at least, judging by its weight! How right I am to love only the greatest of ladies! Doing so possesses no drawback other than the blows from a stick, and those from a sword, that one risks in such a service. In short, the affair has ended beautifully, let me not complain.’ And desirous of seeing his gold chain gleam and shimmer in the light, he made his way to the *Armes de France* with quite a firm step for a lover who has just received his quittance.

Meanwhile, Isabella, on returning to her room, had found a casket placed in the centre of the table, so as to oblige even the most distracted eye to observe it. A folded piece of paper had been

placed beneath one of the corners of the box which surely contained items of value, for it was already a jewel in itself. The paper was unsealed and contained these words, penned in shaky, ill-formed handwriting like that produced by a hand lacking strength: 'For Isabella.'

A flush of indignation rose to the actress' cheeks at the sight of the gift, which might have troubled one even more virtuous. Without opening the casket, contrary to customary feminine curiosity, she summoned Master Bilot, who was not yet in bed, since he was preparing supper for some noblemen, and instructed him to remove the box and return it to its rightful owner, for she would not suffer it in her possession a moment longer.

The innkeeper expressed astonishment, and swore by all that was holy, an oath as solemn to him as the Styx to the Olympians, that he knew not who had placed the box there, though he suspected its provenance. In truth, it was Dame Leonarda, to whom the duke had addressed himself, thinking that an old woman often succeeds where the Devil fails, who had secretly placed the casket of jewels on the table, in Isabella's absence. But, in agreeing to this, the devious matron had promised what she could not deliver, presuming too much on the corrupting power of precious stones, and gold, which act only on baser souls.



'Dame Leonarda.'

— 'Dispose of it,' Isabella told Master Bilot, forcefully. 'Return that infamous box to whomever sent it, and above all, speak not a word to the captain; for though my conduct is in no way reprehensible, he might fly into a rage and cause a scandal that would damage my reputation.'

Master Bilot admired the disinterestedness of the young actress, who had not thought even to look at jewels that might turn a duchess' head, and had dismissed them disdainfully, as if they were sugared-almonds made of plaster, or hollow walnut-shells, and, as he withdrew, he gave her a most respectful bow, as though addressing royalty, so much did her display of virtue surprise him.

Isabella, restless, feverish, opened the window, once Master Bilot had departed, to quench, in the cool of the night, her fiery cheeks and brow. Through the tree-branches, a light shone from the black facade of the Vallombreuse hotel, doubtless the lodgings of the young wounded duke. The alley seemed deserted. However, Isabella, with the acute hearing of an actress accustomed to

catching the prompter's whisper on the fly, thought she heard a low voice saying: 'She is not yet abed.'

Intrigued by this, she leant forward a little, and thought she could distinguish amidst the shadows, at the foot of the wall, two human forms wrapped in cloaks, and standing, motionless, like stone statues on a church porch; at the other end of the alley, despite the darkness, her eyes, dilated with fear, discovered a third phantom who seemed to be keeping guard.

Feeling they were being watched, the enigmatic beings disappeared or hid themselves more carefully, for Isabella could no longer distinguish or hear anything. Tired of playing sentry, believing she had been the victim of a nocturnal illusion, she gently closed her window, slid home the bolt on her door, set the light down near her bed, and turned in, with a vague anxiety that could not be calmed by the exercise of reason. Yet, what had she to fear in an inn full of people, two steps from her friends, in a room well and duly locked and triple-locked? What connection could these shadows, glimpsed at the foot of the wall, have to her? Doubtless they were thieves, awaiting some victim or other, who had been troubled by the light from her window.

All this was logical, but failed to reassure her: an anxious presentiment gripped her breast. If she had not feared being mocked, she would have risen, and taken refuge with a companion, but Zerbina was not alone, Serafina had little love for her, and the duenna roused an instinctive repugnance in her. She therefore remained a prey to inexpressible terrors.

The slightest creak of the woodwork, the slightest flicker of the candle whose un-snuffed wick was topped with a black cap of burnt wax, made her shudder and bury herself beneath the covers, for fear of seeing a monstrous form in a dark corner; then she would regain courage, inspecting the apartment with her eyes, in which nothing suspicious or supernatural seemed present.

At the top of one of the walls was a bull's-eye window, free of glass, which was doubtless originally intended to light the dark chamber. This circular opening, set in the greyish wall, was faintly visible, like the enormous black pupil of a cyclopean eye, and seemed to be spying on the young woman's actions. Isabella could not help staring fixedly at this deep, dark hole, its pair of inset iron bars forming a cross moline. There was it seemed nothing to fear from that quarter; yet, for a moment, Isabella thought she saw two human eyes shining in the shadowy depths.

But, shortly, a dark-skinned head, with long, tousled black hair appeared at one of the narrow openings formed by the intersection of the bars; a thin arm followed, then the shoulders passed through, constrained by the rough edges of the iron, and a little girl, clinging with her hand to the rim of the opening, stretched her puny body as far as she could over the drop, and let herself fall to the floor, with less noise than a feather or a snowflake touching the ground.



‘A little girl, clinging with her hand to the rim of the opening.’

Seeing Isabella immobile, petrified, and stunned with terror, the child believed her to be asleep, and when she approached the bed to make sure that it was a deep slumber, extreme surprise appeared on her dark-hued face.

— ‘The lady with the necklace!’ she said to herself, touching the pearls that rustled on her own thin, brown neck, ‘The lady with the necklace!’

For her part, Isabella, half-scared to death, had recognised the little girl she had seen at the *Auberge du Soleil Bleu*, and on the road to Bruyères accompanied by Agostin. She tried to call for help, but the child put her hand over Isabella’s mouth.

— ‘Don’t cry out, you’re not in any danger; Chiquita said she would never slit the neck of the lady who gave her the pearls she had set out to steal.’

— ‘But what are you doing here, unhappy child?’ said Isabella, regaining some composure at the sight of this weak, feeble being who could surely not be very formidable, and who, besides, showed a certain strange wild gratitude towards her.

— ‘I’m here to draw the bolt you slide to every night,’ resumed Chiquita in the calmest of tones, as if in no doubt regarding the legitimacy of her actions: ‘I was chosen for this because I’m thin as a snake, and agile. There are hardly any holes through which I cannot pass.’

— ‘And why did they want you to do so? To rob me?’

— ‘Oh no,’ Chiquita replied disdainfully, ‘it was so the men could enter the room and carry you off.’

— ‘My God, I am lost,’ cried Isabella, groaning and clasping her hands.

— ‘No,’ said Chiquita, ‘since I’ll leave the bolt as it is. They would never dare force the door, it would make too much noise, someone would come and catch them; they are not so stupid!’

— ‘But I would have screamed, I would have clung to the walls, I would have been heard.’

— ‘A gag stifles all screams,’ said Chiquita with the pride of an artist explaining a secret of their trade to the ignorant. ‘A blanket rolled around the body prevents movement. It’s all very easy. The stable-hand was won over, and he opened the back door.’

— ‘Who has hatched this odious plot?’ said the poor actress, quite terrified by the danger she had been in.

— ‘It was some lord who gave the money, oh, so much money! Just like that, handfuls!’ replied Chiquita, her eyes shining with a fierce and greedy glint. ‘But it matters not, you gave me the pearls as a gift; I’ll tell the others that you were awake, that there was a man in your room, and that it was nothing but a missed opportunity. They’ll go away. Let me look at you; you are beautiful, and I love you, yes, very much, almost as much as Agostin. Ah!’ she cried, noticing the knife found in the cart lying on the table. ‘You found the knife I lost, my father’s knife. Keep it, it’s a good blade.’

‘When the toothed viper bites home,
For its wound, there’s no remedy known.’

You see, you turn the ferrule like this, and then you strike like this; from beneath, then the iron sinks in better. Wear it in your bodice, and when rogues trouble you, thrust home, and slit their stomachs!’ And the little girl commented on her words with matching gestures.

This lesson with the knife, given at night, in so strange a situation, by the haggard, half-mad little thief, produced on Isabella the effect of one of those nightmares that one tries in vain to dispel.

— ‘Hold the knife in your hand like this, with your fingers closed. Nothing will harm you. Now I’m leaving. Goodbye, remember Chiquita!’

Agostin’s little accomplice dragged a chair close to the wall, climbed upon it, and, raising herself on tiptoes, grasped the bars; then she bent herself into an arc, pushing her feet against the wall,

gave a wiry leap, and so reached the edge of the bull's-eye window, through which she disappeared, murmuring in a sort of vague prose-song: 'Chiquita climbs through the holes in the wall, dances on the edge of the bars, and the shards of glass without any harm. Clever the one that can catch her!'

Isabella waited impatiently for daybreak, unable to close her eyes, so agitating had this strange event proved; but the night hours that remained were peaceful.

Yet, when the young girl descended to the dining room, her companions were struck by her pallor and the mottled circles round her eyes. They pressed her with questions, and she recounted her nocturnal adventure. Sigognac, furious, spoke of nothing less than ransacking the house of the Duke of Vallombreuse, to whom he attributed, without hesitation, this wicked attempt.

— 'It seems to me,' said Blazius, 'that it would be a good idea to roll up our scenery, and go and lose ourselves, or rather save ourselves, in the great ocean of Paris. Our good-fortune is waning.'

The actors concurred, and their departure was set for the following day.

The End of Part II of Gautier's 'Le Capitaine Fracasse'

Part III: Chapters XI-XV

Chapter XI: The Pont-Neuf

It would make for a long and tedious narrative if I were to follow the Chariot of Comedy step by step to the great city of Paris; nothing that deserves to be recounted occurred on the journey. Our actors possessed a well-lined purse and progressed briskly, being able to hire horses, and pay their way. The troupe halted at Tours and Orléans to deliver a few performances whose takings satisfied Herod, more sensitive in his capacity as manager and cashier to monetary success than the others. Blazius began to reassert himself, and laugh at the terrors that Vallombreuse's vindictiveness had inspired in him. Meanwhile Isabella still trembled at the thought of the unsuccessful abduction attempt, and although at the various inns she shared a room with Zerbina, she more than once, in dream, thought she saw the wild and haggard face of Chiquita emerging from that black opening, with a show of white teeth. Frightened by the vision, she would wake screaming, and her companion had difficulty calming her. Without otherwise displaying concern, Sigognac slept in the nearest room, his sword under his head and fully dressed, in case of some nocturnal altercation. During the day, he usually walked on foot, ahead of the wagon, as a scout, especially when bushes, coppices, sections of walls or ruined cottages near the road might have served as a place for an ambush. If he saw a group of travellers of suspicious appearance, he would fall back to the cart where the Tyrant, Scapin, Blazius, and Leander represented a respectable garrison, though of the latter two one was old and the other as timid as a hare. At other times, like an experienced general who knows how to detect the enemy's feints, he remained in the rearguard, since the danger might just as easily come from that direction. But his precautions were redundant and proved supererogatory. No attack came to surprise the troop, either because the Duke had not had time to organise one, or because he had relinquished the idea, or because the pain of his wound had damped his courage.

Although it was winter, the season was not too harsh. Being well-fed, and having taken care to buy warm clothes thicker than the serge of theatrical coats, the actors suffered little from the cold, and the north wind caused no other inconvenience than to make the young actresses' cheeks appear a little more vivid than usual, sometimes even extending to their delicate noses. These winter roses, though a little out of place, did not suit them too badly, for well-nigh everything suits pretty women. As for Dame Leonarda, her complexion, created by forty years of the Duenna's rouge, was unalterable. A north wind, and a north wind only, rendered it paler.

Finally, around four in the evening, they arrived at a place very near to the great city, on the banks of the Bièvre, where one crosses the culvert that joins the Seine, that illustrious river whose waters have the honour of bathing the palace of our kings, and many another building renowned

throughout the world. The smoke disgorged from the house chimneys masked the horizon with a broad cloud of half-transparent red mist, behind which the sun was setting, dull red and stripped of its rays. Against this half-lit background, the silhouettes of the private and public buildings, and churches, embraced by the view from that point, were outlined in purplish grey. On the other side of the river, beyond the Île Louviers (*no longer an island*), the bastion of the Arsenal, and the Couvent des Célestins, could be seen, and in front to the left, the tip of the island of Notre-Dame. Once past the Porte Saint-Bernard (*on the left bank, not extant*), the spectacle was magnificent. Notre-Dame appeared in full view, the apse, with its flying buttresses resembling gigantic fish ribs and its sharp spire, planted above the intersection of the naves, fronting the two square towers. Other, humbler bell-towers, rising above the roofs of churches and chapels themselves buried amidst the crowd of houses, lifted into the clear band of sky, but the cathedral especially drew the gaze of Sigognac, who had never seen Paris, and was astonished by the building's grandeur.

The movement of the carriages laden with various goods, the tumultuous mass of horsemen and pedestrians traversing the banks of the river, and the streets that led from it, into which the wagon sometimes entered so as to take the shortest route, and the cries of the crowd dazzled and stunned him, being accustomed to the vast solitude of the moors, and the deathly silence of his old and dilapidated castle. It seemed to him as if a millstone was turning in his head, and he felt himself to be staggering like a drunken man. Soon the beautifully crafted needle of the Sainte-Chapelle soared above the roofs of the Palais de la Cité (*including the extant Palais de Justice*), penetrated by the last glimmers of sunset. The lamps now being lit pricked the dark facades of the houses with red dots, and the river reflected these glimmers stretching like serpents of fire over its black waters.

Soon, the church and cloister of the Grands-Augustins appeared amidst the shadows along the quayside, and on the platform of the Pont-Neuf, Sigognac saw to his right the outline of the equestrian statue of Henry IV, visible despite the growing darkness; but the wagon turned the corner of the Rue Dauphine (*created in 1607*) piercing the convent grounds, and the rider and horse swiftly vanished.

There was at the top of the Rue Dauphine, near the gate of that name, a vast hostelry where embassies from strange and unknown lands sometimes stayed. This inn could receive numerous companies of travellers at a moment's notice. Horses and mules were always sure to find hay in the racks, and their owners never lacked for beds. It was this hostelry that Herod had chosen, as a propitious place for his theatrical troupe to lodge.



‘The Hostelry on the Rue Dauphine.’

The brilliant condition of his purse allowed this luxury; a useful luxury, moreover, because it elevated the troupe’s standing by showing that it was not composed of vagabonds, swindlers and debauched people, forced by poverty into this unfortunate profession of provincial histrions, but rather of brave actors whose talents brought them an honest income, which is it seems possible, for the reasons given by Pierre de Corneille, in his play *L’Illusion Comique* (of 1636, see *Alcandre’s* speech at the end of Act V).

The kitchen the actors entered, while waiting for their rooms to be prepared, was large enough to accommodate, comfortably, a dinner for Gargantua or Pantagruel. At the rear of the immense fireplace, whose opening was as red and flaming as the mouth of Hell is represented in *La Grande Diablerie de Doué*, whole tree-trunks were burning (Rabelais mentions the *Diableries* which took place at Doué-la-Fontaine, Maine et Loire, and elsewhere, in ‘Gargantua and Pantagruel’, see Book 3: III, Book 4: XIII, and Book IV: LII. These were parodies of the *Mysteries of the Passion*, which had led to the banning of the *Mystery plays* in 1548). On several spits, one above the other, turned by a dog struggling like a creature possessed inside a wheel, strings of geese, pullets, and capons were turning golden, sides of beef were roasting, loins of veal were browning, not to mention partridges, snipe, quail, and other small game. A scullion, half-cooked himself and dripping with sweat though he was wearing no more than a simple canvas jacket, was basting these victuals, plunging his spoon into the dripping pan again, as soon as he had poured out its contents: a real Danaidean labour, since the liquid collected was forever released.

Around a long oak table, covered with dishes being prepared, a whole world of anatomists, cooks, and sauce-makers, busied themselves, from whose hands their assistants received the

larded, trussed, spiced cuts, to carry them to the stoves which, incandescent with embers and crackling with sparks, resembled Vulcan's forges more than culinary ovens, the boys looking like Cyclopes through the fiery mist. Along the walls shone a formidable battery of red-copper and brass cookware: cauldrons, saucepans of all sizes, fish-kettles for cooking leviathans in court-bouillon broth, pastry moulds fashioned into dungeons, domes, little temples, and Saracenic helmets and turbans, in short, all the offensive and defensive weapons that the arsenal of the god of Gastronomy contains.

Every moment some sturdy servant girl, with plump, ruddy cheeks like those the Flemish painters depicted in their art, would arrive from the pantry, carrying baskets full of provisions on head or hip.

— 'Pass me the nutmeg!' some cook cried — 'A little cinnamon!' cried another — 'The four spices over here!' — 'Fill the salt shaker! Cloves! Bay leaves!' — 'A strip of bacon, if you please, sliced thin!' — 'Fire up this stove; it's cooling! And damp the other, it's too hot, everything will burn like chestnuts left in the pan!' — 'Pour some liquid into this puree!' — 'Thin out this butter and flour, it's thickening!' — 'Beat these egg whites, as fiercely as 'Père Fouettard' (*who on Saint Nicholas Day, 6th December, dispenses beatings to naughty children*), they're not foaming enough!' — 'Sprinkle breadcrumbs on that hock of ham! Draw that gosling from the spit, it's ready! Five or six more turns for that chicken! Quick, quick, take the beef away! It should be rare. But leave the veal and the chickens:

Raw chicken, and ill-cooked veal,
Gift the graveyard worms a meal.

Remember that, you rascal. Not everyone can roast well. It's a gift from heaven. Take this soup to the princess at table six. Who asked for the quail gratin? Quickly, ready this saddle of spiced hare!' Thus, amidst a cheerful tumult, alimentary exchanges and culinary rants criss-crossed, justifying their title better than the icy words Panurge handed out at the melting of the Frozen Sea (*see Rabelais' Gargantua and Pantagruel, Book IV: LVII*), for they all related to some dish, condiment, or delicacy.

Herod, Blazius, and Scapin, who were gourmands, and devoutly greedy like cats, licked their lips at this delivery of exceedingly plump, succulent, and well-fed eloquence, which they said they highly preferred to that of Isocrates, Demosthenes, Aeschines, Hortensius, or Cicero, and other such chatterers whose sentences were nothing but hollow bones lacking in marrow juice. 'I have a longing' said Blazius, 'to kiss, and on both cheeks, that fat cook, as large and pot-bellied as a monk, who rules all these saucepans with such a superb air. Never was a captain more admirable under fire!'

At the very moment a servant came to inform the actors that their rooms were ready, a traveller entered the kitchen, and approached the fireplace. He was a man of about thirty, tall, thin, vigorous, with an unpleasant, though regular, physiognomy. The light from the hearth endowed his profile with a fiery edge, while the rest of his face was bathed in shadow. Its luminous touch emphasised a somewhat prominently arched eyebrow sheltering a hard and scrutinising eye, a nose of aquiline

curvature whose tip curved back to form a hooked beak above a thick moustache, and a very thin lower lip which merged abruptly with a short, squat chin as if nature had lacked the material to complete the face. The lean neck, exposed by a flap of starched batiste, revealed in its thinness that protruding cartilage that old wives claim to be a piece of the fatal apple remaining in Adam's throat, which some of his descendants have not yet swallowed. His costume consisted of a doublet of iron-grey cloth beneath a buff jacket, brown breeches, and felt boots, reaching above the knee and folding in spiral layers about his legs. Numerous specks of mud, some dry, others still fresh, indicated a long journey, and the spurs, reddened with blackish blood, said that, to reach the end of it, the rider had been forced to savagely wound the flanks of his weary mount. A long rapier, whose wrought iron basket-hilt must have weighed more than a pound, hung from a wide leather belt fastened by a copper buckle clinched about the man's thin spine. A dark-coloured cloak and hat, both of which he had thrown onto a bench, completed the account of his attire. It would have been difficult to determine to what class the newcomer belonged. He was neither a merchant, nor a bourgeois, nor a soldier. The most plausible supposition would have placed him in the category of those poor gentlemen or minor noblemen who become servants to some great man and attach themselves to his company.

Sigognac, who was not a man of the kitchen like Herod or Blazius, and therefore not absorbed in contemplation of those magnificent victuals, looked with a certain curiosity at this tall fellow whose physiognomy seemed somehow familiar to him, though he could not remember where or when he had encountered it. In vain he summoned up his memories, but failed to find what he was searching for. However, he felt, confusedly, that this was not the first time he had found himself in contact with this enigmatic personage who, little concerned about the former's inquisitive examination of his features, of which he seemed to be aware, turned his back completely upon the room and leant towards the fireplace under the guise of warming his hands more effectively.

As his memory provided him with nothing precise, and any longer insistence might have given rise to a useless quarrel, the Baron followed the actors, who took possession of their respective lodgings, and after having made a brief toilette, gathered in a lower room where supper was served, which they celebrated being hungry and thirsty people. Blazius, clicked his tongue, proclaimed the wine good, and poured himself numerous full glasses, without forgetting those of his comrades, for he was not one of those selfish drinkers who worship Bacchus alone; he loved to drink with others almost as much as drinking by himself; the Tyrant and Scapin granted him the opportunity; Leander feared, by indulging in too frequent libations, that he might impair the whiteness of his complexion, while adorning his nose with those bumps and pimples unsuitable as ornaments for a lover. As for the Baron, the long periods of abstinence suffered at the castle of Sigognac had developed in him a habitual Castilian sobriety which he was able to forego only with difficulty. He too was preoccupied with the character glimpsed in the kitchen, whom he found to be suspicious without being able to say why, since nothing was more natural than the arrival of a traveller at a well-stocked inn.

The meal was a cheerful one. Enlivened by wine and good food, joyful at being, at last, in Paris, the Eldorado of all people with ambitions to fulfil, and imbued with a warm glow, so pleasant after long hours spent in the cold wagon, the actors indulged in the wildest hopes. They rivalled in their opinion the troupes of the Hôtel de Bourgogne (*the first permanent theatre in Paris, built in 1548 on the*

ruins of the palace of the dukes of Burgundy, on the Rue Mauconseil, later the Rue Étienne Marcel, and home to the Comédiens du Roi, from 1628) and the Théâtre du Marais (on the Vieille Rue du Temple, founded 1634). They saw themselves applauded, feted, summoned to court, able to commission plays from the finest minds of the time, treating poets as mere scribblers, invited to feasts by great lords, and riding in carriages. Leander dreamed of the most elevated conquests, and it was even uncertain if he would consent not to seduce the queen. Though he had drunk nothing, he was intoxicated with vanity. Since his affair with the Marquise de Bruyères, he believed himself utterly irresistible, and his self-esteem knew no bounds. Serafina promised herself that she would remain faithful to the Chevalier de Vidalinc only until the day a finer, and more eligible, suitor presented himself. As for Zerbina, she had her marquis who was soon to join her, and no further ambition. Dame Leonarda, being excluded by reason of her age, and able only to serve as a messenger, like Iris (*female messenger to the Greek gods, embodied by the rainbow*), found these trivialities unamusing, and failed to waste a single bite of the dinner before her. Blazius loaded her plate and filled her goblet to the brim with comical rapidity, a jest that the old woman accepted with good grace.

Isabella, who had long since stopped eating, absentmindedly rolled a ball of bread-crumbs between her fingers, shaping it into a dove and rested her eyes, bathed in chaste love and angelic tenderness, on her dear Sigognac, seated at the other end of the table. The warmth of the room had brought a delicate blush to her cheeks, which had recently been somewhat pale from the fatigue of the journey. She looked adorably beautiful like that, and if the young Duke of Vallombreuse had been able to see her at that moment, his emotions would have been exasperated to the point of rage.

For his part, Sigognac contemplated Isabella with respectful admiration; the beautiful feelings expressed by this charming girl touched him as much as the attractions with which she was abundantly endowed, and he regretted that, through excess of delicacy, she had refused him as a husband.

When supper was over, the women withdrew, along with Leander and the Baron, leaving the trio of accomplished drunkards to finally empty the bottles, a procedure which seemed far too meticulous to the servant in charge of serving drinks, but a thoroughness for which a solid silver coin consoled him.



‘...The women withdrew...leaving the trio of accomplished drunkards.’

— ‘Barricade yourself in your chamber,’ said Sigognac, escorting Isabella to the door of her room. ‘There are so many strangers in these inns one cannot take too many precautions.’

— ‘Fear not, dear Baron,’ replied the young actress, ‘my door is locked with a triple lock that would secure a prison-cell. There is a bolt as long as my arm as well; the window is barred, and there is no hole like a bull’s-eye in the wall gazing out of its dark pupil. Travellers often have valuables that might tempt thieves’ greed, so the rooms in hostelries are always hermetically sealed. Never has a fairy-tale princess threatened with a spell been safer in her tower guarded by dragons.’

— ‘Sometimes,’ replied Sigognac, ‘enchantment is not needed, and the enemy enters without the use of charms, incantations, or conjurations.’

— ‘Because the princess,’ Isabella replied, smiling, ‘chose to favour that enemy through her own curiosity or amorous complicity, wearying of being so secluded, even though it was for her own good; which is not my case. Therefore, since I am not afraid, I who am by nature as timid as a doe at the sound of the hunting-horn and the baying of hounds, you should be reassured, you who are equal in courage to Alexander or Caesar. Sleep soundly.’

And as a sign of farewell, she extended to Sigognac’s lips a soft and slender hand whose whiteness she knew how to preserve as well as any duchess, by the use of talcum-powder, cucumber cream, and gloves treated with a preparation. Once she was within, Sigognac heard the key turn in the lock, the latch slide home, and the bolt creak in its slot in the most reassuring way; yet, as he reached the threshold of his own room, he saw the shadow of a man, cast by the light from the lantern that illuminated the corridor, pass along the wall, a man whom he had not heard approaching and whose body almost brushed against his. Sigognac turned his head quickly. It was the stranger from the kitchen, doubtless on his way to the lodgings that the host had assigned him. All quite normal. However, the Baron, feigning not to locate the keyhole at once, followed this mysterious personage, whose appearance strangely preoccupied him, with his eyes, until a bend in the corridor hid him from view. A door closing, with a noise that the silence descending on the inn made more perceptible, informed him that the stranger had located his room, and that he was lodged in a region of the inn quite distant from his own.

Not desirous of sleeping, Sigognac began to write a letter to the brave Pierre, which he had promised to do on his arrival in Paris. He took care to form the characters very distinctly, for the faithful servant was no great scholar and could hardly make out anything other than block letters. The epistle was worded thus:

‘My good Pierre, here I am at last in Paris, where, it is said, I shall make my fortune and re-establish my ruined House, though to tell the truth I hardly see the means. However, some fortunate opportunity may bring me closer to the Court, and if I succeed in speaking to the king, from whom all grace emanates, the services rendered by my ancestors to his predecessors will doubtless be taken into account. His Majesty will surely not allow a noble family that rendered itself destitute in the wars to become extinct in so miserable a manner. In the meantime, for lack of other resources, I am acting on the stage, and have, by this trade, earned a few pistoles, a share of which I will send you as soon as I have found a secure method. I would perhaps have done better to enlist as a soldier in some company, but I had no wish to constrain my freedom, and besides, however poor he may be, obeying orders is repugnant to someone whose ancestors issued them, and who has never accepted such from anyone. And then solitude has made me somewhat wild and untameable. The only notable adventure I have had during this long journey was a duel with a certain very unpleasant duke, though a fine swordsman, from which I emerged to my glory, thanks to your excellent teaching. My blade passed straight through his arm, and nothing would have been easier than to lay him dead on the field, since his skill in parrying scarcely matched his skill in lunging, he being more fiery than prudent, and less firm than nimble. Several times he left himself undefended, and I could have dispatched him with one of those inexorable strokes that you taught me with such patience during those long bouts we mounted in the basement room at Sigognac, the only one whose floor was solid enough for us to maintain our footing, so as to kill time, stretch our arms, and gain sleep through fatigue. Your pupil does you honour, and I have grown greatly in general esteem after this victory which in truth was all too easy. It seems that I

am decidedly a fine blade, a first-rate swordsman. But let us leave that subject. I often think, despite the distractions of this new life, of the poor old castle whose ruins crumble above the tombs of my family, and where I spent my sad youth. From a distance, it no longer seems as ugly or gloomy to me; there are even moments when I wander, in thought, through those deserted rooms, gazing at the yellowed portraits which, for so long, were my only company, and causing a shard of glass fallen from a collapsed window to crackle underfoot; the reverie brings me a sort of melancholic pleasure. It would give me great joy, too, to see again your good old face, browned by the sun, light at the sight of me in a cordial smile. And, why should I blush to say it? I would like to hear the purring of Beelzebub, the barking of Miraut, and the neighing of that poor Bayard, who gathered his last strength to carry me along, though I was scarcely heavy. Those who are unfortunate, and whom men abandon, give a part of their soul to those creatures, more faithful than they, whom misfortune fails to scare away. Do those brave creatures who loved me still live, and do they seem to recall me, and miss me? Are you able, in that miserable dwelling, to at least prevent them from dying of hunger, by tossing them a few morsels from your own meagre fare? Try to stay alive all of you until I return, whether rich or poor, happy or desperate, to share my fortune or my desolation with you, and end together, as the fates decide, in the place where we have suffered together. If I must be the last of the Sigognacs, may God's will be done! There is still an empty place for me in the ancestral vault.

Baron de Sigognac.'

The Baron sealed this letter with a ring, the only jewel he had inherited from his father, which bore the three storks on an azure field engraved upon it; he penned the address, and placed the letter in a wallet to be sent when some courier or other left for Gascony. From the castle of Sigognac, to which his thoughts of Pierre had transported him, his mind returned to Paris, and his present situation. Though the hour was late, he heard around him the dull, vague murmur of a great city which, like the ocean, is never silent even when it seems at rest. It was the hooves of a horse, the rumble of a carriage dying away in the distance, the song of a late drunkard, the clatter of rapiers against each other, the cry of a passer-by assailed by the thieves of the Pont-Neuf, the howl of a lost dog or some other indistinct noise. Among these sounds, Sigognac thought he could distinguish the footsteps of a booted man walking the corridor, cautiously, as if seeking not to be heard. He extinguished his candle, so the light would not give him away, and, half-opening his door, saw, in the depths of the corridor, an individual carefully wrapped in a dark-coloured cape, who was heading for the room of that unknown traveller whose appearance had seemed so suspicious. A few moments later, another companion, whose shoes creaked, though he tried to lighten his tread, took the same path as the first. Half an hour had not passed when a third fellow, possessed of a rather truculent air, appeared beneath the wavering light of the lantern, which was about to die, and entered the corridor. He was armed like the other two, a long sword lifting the border of his cloak behind. The shadow cast over his face by the rim of a felt hat with a black feather made it impossible to distinguish his features.

This procession of ruffians seemed strange and untimely to Sigognac, and the group of four recalled the ambush of which he had almost been the victim in the alley at Poitiers, on leaving the theatre after his quarrel with the Duke of Vallombreuse. His awareness was roused, and he

recognised in the man who had intrigued him in the kitchen the scoundrel whose previous assault could have been fatal to him if he had not been expecting the like. It was indeed that same fellow with his hat sloped down to his shoulders, who had rolled about, legs and arms in the air, beneath the blows that Captain Fracasse had bravely administered to him with the flat of his sword. The others must have been his companions, valiantly routed by Herod and Scapin. What chance, or rather what plot, had brought them together at the inn where the troupe had taken up its quarters, and on the very evening of his arrival? They must have followed his journey step by step. Sigognac had watched the road diligently; but how is one to perceive an adversary in a cavalier who passes with an indifferent air, and pursuing his way, barely throws you the vague glance that any encounter excites when travelling? What was certain was that the hatred towards himself, and the love of the young duke for Isabella, were undimmed, and the duke was seeking to satisfy both. His vengeance was aimed at catching Isabella and Sigognac in the same net. Exceptionally brave by nature, the Baron felt no fear, on his own account, of these hired rascals' mission, whom a waft of his good blade would put to flight, and who would prove no more courageous with the sword than the stick; but he feared some subtle and cowardly move against the young actress. He therefore took his precautions accordingly, and resolved not to rest. Lighting all the candles in his room, he opened his door so that a flood of light projected onto the opposite wall of the corridor, at the very point where Isabella's door stood; then he seated himself quietly after drawing his sword and dagger, so as to be ready if anything untoward occurred. He waited for a long time without noting anything. Two o'clock had already struck on the carillon of La Samaritaine (*the pumping station built 1602-8*) and on the clock nearer the Grands-Augustins, when a slight rustling was heard, and soon, against the illuminated area of wall, appeared the first individual, uncertain, hesitant, and possessed of a very sheepish air, who was indeed none other than Mérindol, one of the Duke of Vallombreuse's swordsmen. Sigognac stood at the threshold, sword in hand, ready for attack or defence, with a face so heroic, so proud and so triumphant, that Mérindol passed without saying a word, lowering his head.



'Sigognac stood at the threshold...'

The other three, approaching in line, and surprised by the sudden flood of light, in the centre of which stood the Baron simmering quietly, slipped away as nimbly as they could, and the last one dropped a crowbar, no doubt intended to force open Captain Fracasse's door while he slept. The Baron bid them farewell with a derisory gesture, and soon the noise of horses clattering from the stable could be heard in the courtyard. The four rogues, their attempt having failed, scampered off at full speed.

At breakfast, Herod addressed Sigognac. 'Captain, does not curiosity compel you to go and tour this city, one of the principal ones in this world, and of which so many stories are told? If it is agreeable to you, I will serve as your guide and pilot, knowing from long experience, having navigated them in my adolescence, the reefs, shoals, shallows, Euripi (*the Euripus Strait separates Euboea in the Aegean Sea from Boeotia in mainland Greece*), Charybdises and Scyllae (*Charybdis and Scylla*

were two sea-monsters, in Greek mythology, located on opposite sides of the Strait of Messina) of this sea, perilous to foreigners and provincials. I will be your Palinurus (*Aeneas' helmsman in Virgil's 'Aeneid'*), but will not permit myself to fall head-first into the waves, like he of whom Virgil speaks. We are well placed to view the spectacle, the Pont-Neuf being to Paris what the Sacred Way (*the Appian Way*) was to Rome, the thoroughfare, meeting-place and peripatetic gallery of news-writers, innocents, poets, swindlers, thieves, entertainers, courtesans, gentlemen, bourgeoisie, soldiers, and people of all ranks.'

— 'Your proposal pleases me greatly, brave Herod,' replied Sigognac, 'but warn Scapin that he is to remain at the hotel, and with his fox's eye observe anyone who appears whose status is unclear. He must not leave Isabella undefended. Vallombreuse's vengeance-seekers prowl around us, seeking to devour us. Last night I saw those four marauders again, whom we accommodated so fully in the alley at Poitiers. Their plan was, I imagine, to force my door, surprise me in my sleep, and do me an ill deed. As I was awake in fear of an abduction of our young friend, their plan failed, and, finding themselves discovered, they fled in haste, their horses having been fully saddled in the stable under the pretext that they wished to leave early in the morning.'

— 'I doubt,' replied the Tyrant, 'that they will dare attempt anything by day. Help would arrive at the slightest call, and they will still be reeling from their disappointment. Scapin, Blazius and Leander will be enough of a force to guard Isabella till we return. But for fear of some quarrel or altercation in the streets, I will bear my sword in support of yours if necessary.'

Having said this, the Tyrant buckled a belt, supporting a long and solid rapier, about his ample belly. He threw over the corner of his shoulder a short cape that would not hinder his movements, and he sloped his red-feathered felt hat over his eyebrows; for one must beware, when crossing bridges, of the north-west wind or *galerie*, which soon blows a hat into the river, to the great delight of pages, footmen, and urchins. Such was the reason given by Herod for his defensive head-dress, though, in truth, it was because the honest actor thought it might perhaps do harm thereafter to Sigognac the gentleman to have been seen in public with a histrion. That is why he hid his face as much as possible which he deemed too well known to the people.

At the corner of Rue Dauphine, Herod pointed out to Sigognac, beneath the porch of the Convent of the Grands-Augustins, those folk who hastened to buy meat seized from the butchers on proscribed days, and so obtain a cut at a lower price. He also showed him the newsmen, discussing, among themselves, the destinies of kingdoms, rearranging borders at will, dividing empires, and reporting item by item the speeches the ministers had made when alone in their offices. There were gazettes, libels, satirical writings, and other small pamphlets being peddled from beneath various cloaks. All these odd people possessed haggard faces, a wild air, and worn clothing.

— 'Let us not wait,' said Herod, 'to listen to their never-ending nonsense; unless, however, you wish to know the latest edict of the Persian Sophy, or the ceremonial employed at the court of Prester John. Let us advance a few steps and enjoy one of the most beautiful spectacles in the universe, one the theatre cannot present by means of its scenic effects.'

Indeed, the perspective which unfolded before the eyes of Sigognac and his guide, as they crossed the bridge thrown over the river, had not then, and still has, no rival in the world. The foreground was formed by the bridge itself with its graceful half-moon bastions set above the

piers. The Pont-Neuf was not burdened, like the Pont au Change and the Pont Saint-Michel, with two rows of tall houses. The great monarch who completed it (*Henri IV, in 1606*) had not wanted feeble and gloomy buildings to obstruct the view of the sumptuous palace (*the Tuileries Palace, destroyed by fire, in 1871, during the Commune*) in which our kings reside, and which can be seen from this point in all its glory.

On the platform forming the tip of the island, the good king, with the calm air of a Marcus Aurelius, rode his bronze mount atop a pedestal on which at each corner leaned a bronze captive, twisting in his bonds (*The extant equestrian statue was unveiled in 1613, the captives in 1618, later destroyed in 1792*). A wrought iron grille, with rich volutes surrounded it, to protect its base from the undue familiarity and irreverence of the people; since, on occasion, after clambering over the grille, various rascals ventured to mount behind the debonair monarch, especially on days of royal entry to the city, or interesting executions. The severe tone of the bronze stood out strongly against the misty air, and the backcloth of distant hills that could be seen beyond the Pont Rouge (*Built around 1632, and located near the present-day Pont Royal, it linked the St-Germain quarter to the Tuileries. It was washed away in 1684.*)

On the left bank, above the houses, rose the spire of the old Romanesque church, Saint-Germain des Prés, and the high roofs of the Hôtel de Nevers, a grand palace still unfinished (*not extant, later the Hôtel de Guénégaud then the Hôtel de Conti, it was located on the Quai de Nevers, now the Quai de Conti, on the site of the present day Hôtel des Monnaies, the Mint*). A little further on, the tower (*the Tour de Nesle*), an ancient remnant of the Hôtel de Nesle, dipped its feet in the river, amidst a heap of rubble, and though long since in a state of ruin, still maintained a proud attitude against the horizon. Beyond, stretched La Grenouillère, and amidst a vague azure mist one could distinguish at the edge of the sky the three crosses planted at the top of the hill of Calvary, Mont Valérien (*Suresnes*).

The Louvre, in all its splendour, occupied the right bank, illuminated and gilded by a cheerful shaft of sunlight, more luminous than warm, like a winter sun, but which gave a singular relief to the details of its architecture, both noble and rich. The long gallery joining the Louvre to the Tuileries, a marvellous arrangement allowing the king to be, whenever he pleased, either in his good city or in the countryside, displayed its nonpareil beauties, fine sculptures, historiated cornices, vermiculated bossages, columns and pilasters equalling the efforts of the most skilful Greek and Roman architects.

From the corner where the balcony of Charles IX stands, the building in its retreat, gave way to gardens and parasitic constructions, mushrooms sprouting at the foot of the old edifice. On the quay, culverts rounded their arches, and a little further downstream than the Tour de Nesle stood a courtyard, the remains of the old Louvre of Charles V, flanking the gatehouse (*the Tour de Bois*) built between the river and the palace. These two old towers, coupled in the Gothic fashion, facing each other diagonally, contributed not a little to the pleasantness of the perspective. They recalled the time of feudalism, and held their place amidst the new and more tasteful architecture, like an antique pulpit or a curiously crafted old oak dresser amidst modern furniture plated with silver and gilding. These relics of vanished centuries grant cities a respectable appearance, and we should take care they are not allowed to disappear.

At the far end of the Tuileries Gardens, where the city terminated, one could see the Porte de la Conférence (*not extant, it stood on the right bank, part of Louis XIII's wall*), and along the river, beyond

the gardens, the trees of the Cours-la-Reine, a favourite promenade of courtesans and people of quality, who frequented it to display their carriages.

The two banks, of which I have just drawn a quick sketch, framed like two wings the animated scene presented by the river furrowed by boats crossing from shore to shore, obstructed by others moored together near the bank, some loaded with hay, some with wood or other goods. Near the quay, at the foot of the Louvre, the royal galliots (*galley*s) attracted the eye with their sculpted and gilded ornaments, and their flags in the colours of France.

Looking back towards the bridge, one could see above the sharp peaks of the houses, like cards leaning against one another, the steeples of Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois. Having sufficiently contemplated this view, Herod led Sigognac to La Samaritaine (*the hydraulic pump, established downstream of the second arch of the Pont-Neuf, on the right bank, began operation in 1608. The facade, topped by a campanile, was decorated with a high relief representing Christ and the Samaritan woman at the well, and the building was swiftly named 'La Samaritaine'*)

— 'Even though it is a meeting place for simpletons who stand there for long periods of time waiting for the brass bell-ringer to strike the hour on the clock, one must go there, and do as the others do. A little idleness does not go amiss as regards a newly arrived traveller. It would be more boorish than wise to despise and rebuff, in an over-scrupulous manner, that which charms the people.'

It was in these terms that the Tyrant excused himself to his companion as they stood at the foot of the facade of the little building which housed the hydraulic pump, waiting for the clock's hand to set the joyous chime in motion, and gazing at the gilded-lead Jesus speaking to the Samaritan woman leaning on the edge of the well; the astronomical dial with its zodiac and its ebony discs marking the course of the sun and the moon; the masked face emitting the water drawn from the river; the sheathed Hercules supporting the whole mass of decoration; and the hollow statue serving as a weather-vane like that of Fortune on the Dogana in Venice, or the Giraldis on the Giralda bell-tower in Seville.

The tip of the hour-hand finally reaching the number ten, the bells began to ring most joyously, their thin, silvery or brassy tones playing a sarabande; the bell-ringer raised his brazen arm, and the hammer descended on the bell as many times as there were hours to strike. This mechanism, ingeniously devised by the Fleming, Jean Lintlaër, greatly amused Sigognac, who, though naturally intelligent, was experiencing much that he did not know, having never left his manor house amidst the moors.

— 'Now,' said Herod, 'let us turn in the other direction; upstream, the view is not quite so magnificent. The houses on the Pont au Change obstruct it too much. The buildings on the Quai de la Mégisserie (*which stretches from the Pont au Change to the Pont Neuf*) are worthless; however, the Saint-Jacques tower, the Saint-Médéric (*the church of Saint Merri, on Rue Saint Martin*) bell-tower, and those distant church spires clearly proclaim the great city. Meanwhile, on l'Île du Palais, (*l'Île de la Cité*) along the quay beside the river, those regular red-brick houses, linked by bonds of white stone, have a monumental appearance which is happily completed by the old Clock Tower (*the Tour de l'Horloge*) topped with its candle-snuffer roof, which often pierces the mist alone. The Place Dauphine, its triangle extending beyond the bronze statue of Henri IV, and allowing a view of the Palace gates, can be ranked among the most orderly and cleanest. See how the spire of the

Sainte-Chapelle, that church on two levels, so famous for its treasure and its relics, dominates the high slate roofs nearby most gracefully, pierced as they are with ornamented dormer vents, and which still shine with a brand new splendour, for these houses were not built long ago, and in my childhood I played hopscotch on the land they occupy; thanks to the munificence of our kings, Paris is becoming more beautiful every day, and is greatly admired by foreigners, who, upon returning to their own countries, tell of her wonders, while finding her improved, enlarged and well-nigh new on every visit.'

— 'What astonishes me,' replied Sigognac, 'even more than the grandeur, wealth, and sumptuousness of the buildings, both public and private, is the streets, squares, and bridges amidst which an infinite number of people swarm and teem, like ants whose anthill has been overturned, and who race about wildly, here and there, in a manner whose purpose one cannot suspect. It is strange to think that among the individuals who make up this inexhaustible multitude, each has a room, a bed good or bad, and eats almost every day, without which they would die of starvation. What a prodigious pile of provisions, how many herds of oxen, barrels of flour and of wine are needed to feed all these people piled up in the one place, while on our moors one scarcely meets a single inhabitant, now and then!'

Indeed, the crowd of people circulating on the Pont-Neuf was more than large enough to surprise a provincial. In the middle of the roadway, carriages with two or four horses followed or passed each other, some freshly painted and gilded, upholstered in velvet with mirrors in the doors, and gently swaying on their springs, attended by footmen at the rear, and driven by coachmen with crimson faces, in full livery, who could barely restrain, amidst the crowd, the impatience of their teams; others less brilliant, with tarnished paint, leather curtains, and taut springs, were drawn by far more docile horses whose ardour had to be roused by the whip, and who announced the lesser wealth of their masters. In the former, behind the windows, one could see magnificently dressed courtiers, and coquettishly attired ladies; in the latter, those of lesser means, doctors and other serious-looking people. Amidst all this, carts passed, loaded with stone, wood or barrels, and driven by brutal carters whose difficulties in doing so led them to deny their God with frenzied energy. Our cavaliers tried to force a passage through this moving maze of wagons, unable to avoid on occasion finding their boots scraped and muddied by a wheel-hub. Sedan chairs, some owned by their masters, others hired, attempted to keep to the edges of the current, so as not to be swept away by it, skirting the parapets of the bridge as much as possible. A herd of oxen chanced to pass, and the disorder was then at its height. The horned beasts, and by that I do not mean any married bipeds who were then crossing the Pont-Neuf, but rather the oxen, swung to and fro, lowering their heads, frightened, harassed by the dogs, and beaten by the drivers. At the sight of them the horses, also fearful, stampeded or reared. Passers-by ran for their lives, for fear of being gored, while the dogs, slipping between the legs of those less agile, upset their centre of gravity, and caused them to fall flat as pancakes. A lady, painted and speckled with beauty-spots, and trimmed with jet and flame-coloured ribbons, who looked like a priestess of Venus in search of adventure, even stumbled from her high-arched pattens and fell flat on her back, without hurting herself, 'as if accustomed to such falls', the jokers who gave her a hand to help her up, did not fail to say. At another time, a company of soldiers on its way to some post, standards unfurled and drummer at the head, passed by, and it was necessary that the crowd make way for these Sons of Mars unaccustomed to encountering any resistance.

— ‘All this,’ said Herod to Sigognac, who was absorbed by the spectacle, ‘is merely commonplace. Let us try to pierce the crowd, and attain those places where the eccentrics of the Pont-Neuf are to be found, extravagant, entertaining figures whom it is good to examine more closely. No other city but Paris produces such heterogeneous ones. They flourish amidst its paving stones like weeds, or rather, like deformed and monstrous fungi for which no soil is as well suited as this black mud. Ah! Look, here, as I speak, comes the Périgourdin, Du Maillet, called ‘the muddy poet’, who is paying court to the bronze king on his horse. Some claim he is an ape escaped from some menagerie; others that he is one of the camels brought back by Monsieur de Nevers (*Charles I Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua and Montferrat, who was also titled Charles III, Duke of Nevers, had laid claim to the throne of Constantinople. He died in 1637*). The problem has not yet been resolved: I consider him to be human, given his madness, arrogance, and uncleanness. Monkeys groom themselves, seek out the insects amidst their fur, and eat them, out of revenge and retaliation; he takes no such care of himself; camels cleanse and sprinkle themselves with dust as if it were iris powder; they have several stomachs and chew their food; which this fellow cannot do, for his crop is always as empty as his head. Toss him a coin; he will take it, grumbling and cursing you. He is therefore a man indeed, since he is mad, dirty and ungrateful.’



'Ah! Look, here, as I speak, comes the Périgourdin, Du Maillet.'

Sigognac took a silver coin from his purse and proffered it to the poet, who, lost in a deep reverie, as these folk of feeble brains, and fantastical moods commonly are, failed at first to see the Baron standing before him. He finally did so and, emerging from his empty meditation, took the coin with a wild and abrupt gesture and plunged it into his pocket, muttering a few vague insults, then, the demon of verse taking hold of him again, he began to grind his lips, roll his eyes, and grimace in at least as curious a manner as those grotesque masks (*replaced by copies and dispersed*) sculpted by Germain Pilon (1525-1590) beneath the cornice of the Pont-Neuf, accompanying the whole with movements of the fingers to mark the feet of the verse he was murmuring between his teeth, which made him look like a man playing Morra (*a finger game*) and delighted the rascals gathered in a circle around him.

This poet, it must be said, was more singularly attired than the Mardi Gras effigy, when it is taken to be burned on Ash Wednesday, or one of those mannequins raised in orchards or vineyards to frighten away greedy birds. One would have said, on seeing him, that the bell-ringer of the Samaritaine, the little Moor of the Marché-Neuf (*a former market on the Île de la Cité*) and the Jacquemart of Saint-Paul (*in the Marais*) had visited a second-hand shop and left their clothes there to provide his garb. An old felt hat, scorched by the sun, washed by the rain, girded with a greasy cord, topped, by way of a plume with a moth-eaten cockerel's feather, and more comparable to an apothecary's filtering-bag than a piece of human head-gear, hung down over his eyebrows, forcing him to raise his head to see, for his eyes were almost hidden under its flabby and filthy rim. His doublet, of an indescribable fabric and colour seemed in a better mood than himself, since the comical garment was gaping openly, at every seam, and appeared bursting with laughter, and due to old age too, having doubtless existed for more years than Methuselah. A strip of frieze cloth served as his belt and baldric and supported, as a sword, a fencing foil shorn of its button whose point dug, like a ploughshare, into the pavement behind him. Breeches made of the yellow satin which had once adorned the masked dancers in some ballet scene, were swallowed by boots, one an oyster fisherman's, of black leather, the other of white Russian leather with a knee-pad, this latter with a flat sole, the other, which was equipped with a spur, an arched and peeling sole which would have long since departed its boot without the help of a piece of string twisted several around the foot like the bands of an antique buskin. A red goat-skin coat, which every season found at its post, completed his attire, which would have shamed an apple-picker from Perche, and of which our poet seemed not a little proud. Beneath the folds of the coat, next to the pommel of the sword doubtless charged with protecting him, a stick of bread showed its nose.

Further on, in one of the bastions set above each pier, stood a blind man, accompanied by a fat female companion who served as his eyes, and bawled out boisterous couplets or, in a comically lugubrious tone, intoned a lament on the life, crimes and death of some famous criminal. In another place, a charlatan, dressed in a red serge costume, was struggling, with a pair of pliers for extracting teeth in his hand, on a platform adorned with garlands of canine, incisor, and molar teeth threaded on brass wires. He delivered a speech to the gathered onlookers in which he undertook to remove without any pain (to himself) the most stubborn and deeply-rooted stumps, with a stroke of a sabre or a pistol, at the patient's discretion, unless, however, they preferred to be operated on by ordinary means. 'I don't pull them...' he cried, in a screeching voice, 'I pluck them! Come now, let any of you who has bad teeth enter the circle without fear, and I will cure him instantly!'



‘...I will cure him instantly!’

A sort of boor, whose swollen cheek showed that he was suffering from an abscess, came and seated himself on the chair, and the operator plunged his formidable pair of polished-steel pliers into his mouth. The unfortunate man, instead of holding onto the arms of the chair, followed the trajectory of his tooth, which was separated from him with great difficulty, raising himself more than two feet in the air, which greatly amused the crowd. A sudden jerk ended his torment, and the operator brandished his bloody trophy above their heads!

During this grotesque scene, a monkey attached to the platform by a chain riveted to a leather belt which encircled his kidneys, imitated, comically, the patient’s cries, gestures and contortions.

This ridiculous spectacle did not detain Herod and Sigognac for long, who were more inclined to stop before the sellers of newspapers (*Theophraste Renaudot, a Protestant physician and protégé of Cardinal Richelieu, founded the first weekly newspaper in France, La Gazette, in 1631*), and second-hand

books, installed on the parapets. The Tyrant pointed out to his companion a ragged beggar who had settled himself before the bridge, against the solid cornice, his crutch and bowl beside him, and who from there, raising his arm, thrust his filthy hat beneath the noses of those bending over to leaf through a book, or watch the flow of the river, so that, if they chose, they could throw into it a copper or two, or even a silver tester, or more still if they wished, for he refused nothing, being quite capable of passing off a counterfeit coin.

— ‘In our country,’ said Sigognac, ‘only swallows haunt the ledges; here it’s men!’

— ‘You call this fellow a man!’ said Herod. ‘That’s most polite, though as Christians, we should not despise any. Besides, all kinds of people cross this bridge, perhaps even honest ones, since we ourselves are here. According to the proverb, one cannot cross it without meeting a monk, a white horse, and a whore. Here is a friar hurrying along, his sandals clicking; the white horse is not far off; there, look, in front of you, by God; that nag, who is curveting as if between the training-posts. All that’s missing is the whore. We won’t have long to wait. Instead of one, here come three, bare-throated, painted like carriage-wheels, and laughing affectedly to show their teeth. The proverb proves true.’



'You call this fellow a man!' said Herod.'

Suddenly a tumult was heard at the far end of the bridge, and the crowd ran towards the noise. Four swordsmen were fencing on the platform at the foot of the statue, as the freest and most open place. They shouted: *'Death! Death!'* and pretended to charge furiously. But theirs were only simulated thrusts, restrained and courteous thrusts as in comedy duels, from which, whether killed or wounded, no one ever dies. They fought two against two, and seemed animated by extreme rage, pushing aside the swords which their companions interposed in attempts to separate them. This feigned quarrel was intended to drum up a gathering so that the thieves and cut-purses could carry out their trade, amidst the crowd, with complete ease. Indeed, more than one curious person who had entered the group with a fine coat lined with panne (*fabric worked like velvet*) over his shoulder, and a well-lined pocket, left the place in a plain doublet, having spent his money without knowing it. The swordsmen, who had never quarrelled at all, being as thick as thieves, which indeed they were, at a fair, soon reconciled, and shook hands with great affectations of loyalty, declaring

honour satisfied. Which was not difficult; the honour of such scoundrels lacking any great points of delicacy.

Sigognac, on Herod's advice, had not approached the combatants too closely, so could only see them vaguely through the gaps left by the heads and shoulders of the onlookers. However, he thought he recognised in these four rogues the men whose mysterious movements he had observed the previous night at the inn on Rue Dauphine, and he communicated his suspicion to Herod. But the swordsmen had already slipped away, prudently, in the crowd, and were now harder to find than a needle in a haystack.

— 'It's conceivable,' said Herod, 'that their quarrel was only a ruse to draw you to them, for it may well be that we are being followed by emissaries of the Duke of Vallombreuse. One of the swordsmen would have pretended to be embarrassed or shocked by your presence, and, without giving you time to draw his sword, he would have struck you some murderous blow, seemingly inadvertently, and, if necessary, his comrades would have finished you off. The whole thing would have been attributed to a chance encounter and a brawl. In such altercations, the one who receives the blows retains them. Premeditation and a subsequent ambush cannot be proven.'

— 'I find it hard to believe,' replied the generous Sigognac, 'that a gentleman could be capable of such baseness as to have his rival assassinated by swordsmen. If he was not satisfied by our first encounter, I am ready to cross swords with him again, until the death of one or the other of us ensues. That is how things are done between men of honour.'

— 'Doubtless,' replied Herod, 'but the duke well knows, however enraged and proud he may be, that the outcome of the fight could not fail to be fatal to him. He has tasted your blade, and felt its point. Believe me, he holds a diabolical grudge following his defeat, and will not be delicate about the means of taking revenge.'

— 'If he disdains the sword, let us fight on horseback with pistols,' said Sigognac. 'He'll be unable then to employ my strength in fencing as an excuse.'

While talking in this manner, the two companions reached the Quai de l'École (*the name is not extant, it ran from the Pont-Neuf to the Place du Louvre*), and there a carriage almost crushed Sigognac, even though he moved aside promptly. His slim build prevented him from being flattened against the wall, so close was the carriage to him, though there was plenty of room on the other side and the coachman, by directing his horses a little that way, could have avoided this passer-by whom he seemed to be assailing. The windows of this carriage were raised, and the interior curtains drawn; but whoever had pulled them aside would have revealed a magnificently dressed nobleman, his arm supported by a wide strip of black taffeta arranged as a sash. Despite the light within, reddened by passing through the closed curtains, he himself was pale, and the thin arches of his black eyebrows were prominent against the matt white of his face. His teeth, purer than pearls, had bitten his lower lip until it bled, and his thin moustache, stiffened with wax, bristled with feverish contractions, like that of a tiger scenting its prey. He was quite handsome, but his physiognomy displayed such a cruel expression that it was more likely to inspire fear than admiration, at least at that moment, when evil and hateful passions distorted it. In this portrait, sketched while lifting the curtain of the carriage passing at full speed, the reader has undoubtedly recognised the young Duke of Vallombreuse.

— ‘Another failure,’ he cried, as the carriage carried him along the Tuileries towards the Porte de la Conférence. ‘I promised my coachman twenty-five louis if he was clever enough to trap that damned Sigognac and crush him against a post as if by accident. My star is definitely fading; this little country squire is getting the better of me. Isabella adores him, and hates me. He has beaten my men; he has wounded me. Though he seems invulnerable as if protected by some amulet, he must die, or I shall forego my name, and my title of duke.’

— ‘Hmm!’ said Herod, drawing a deep breath from his chest, ‘the horses drawing that carriage seem to have the same temper as Diomedes’ horses (*in Greek myth*), which hunted men, tore them to pieces, and fed on their flesh. You are not hurt, at least? That unfortunate coachman saw you quite plainly, and I’d wager our best takings that he was seeking to kill you, deliberately setting his team against you, as part of some private design of revenge. I’m certain of it. Did you notice if there was a coat of arms painted on the door? As a gentleman, you are familiar with the noble science of heraldry, and the coats of arms of the principal families are familiar to you.’

— ‘I couldn’t say,’ replied Sigognac. ‘Even a herald at arms, in that situation, would have failed to discern the enamels and colours of a shield, much less its field and divisions, its emblems and devices. I had far too much to do, in avoiding the wheels, to see if it was decorated with guardant or issuant lions, birds or martlets, gold bezants or plain roundels, crosses clechées or vivrées, or any other designs.’

— ‘That is unfortunate,’ replied Herod, ‘such an observation would have set us on the right trail, and helped us perhaps to discover the thread of this dark intrigue; for it is evident that someone is trying to rid themselves of you, *quibuscumque viis* (*by one means or another*), as the Pedant, Blazius, would say in his Latin. Though proof is lacking, I should not be at all surprised if this carriage belonged to the Duke of Vallombreuse, who wished to give himself the pleasure of driving his chariot over the body of his enemy.’

— ‘What mean you by that, Master Herod?’ cried Sigognac. ‘That would be a base, infamous, and villainous action, all too unworthy of a gentleman of a great house, such as this Vallombreuse is, after all. Besides, did we not leave him in his hotel at Poitiers, rather unwell from his wound? How could he already be in Paris, when we only arrived yesterday?’

— ‘Did we not stop at Orléans and Tours, where we gave performances, a period long enough for him to have been able, with the carriages at his disposal, to follow us, and even arrive in advance of us? As for his wound, treated by the most excellent doctors, it will have closed and healed quickly. It was not, moreover, of a nature dangerous enough to prevent a young and vigorous man from travelling at his ease in a carriage or litter. You must therefore, my dear Captain, be on your guard, because they are plotting some kind of blow, *à la Jarnac*, against you, or to ambush and slay you, disguising it as some kind of accident. Your death would leave Isabella defenceless in the face of the duke’s schemes. Can we, poor actors, stand up to such a powerful lord? If it is questionable whether Vallombreuse can be in Paris as yet, his emissaries, at least, are acting in his stead here, since this night past, if you had not kept watch, while armed, roused by a valid suspicion, they would have cheerfully slit your throat in your room.’

The reasons given by Herod were too plausible to be questioned further; therefore, the Baron merely replied with a sign of assent, and placed his hand on the hilt of his sword, which he half-drew, in order to make sure that it moved smoothly, as regards the scabbard.

While talking, the two companions had passed beyond the Louvre and the Tuileries, and had reached the Porte de la Conférence, which led to the Cours-la-Reine, when they saw before them a great whirlwind of dust amidst which weapons glinted, and cuirasses gleamed. They stood aside to let the cavalry squadron go by, which preceded the king's carriage, returning from Saint-Germain to the Louvre. They could see within, since the windows were lowered and the curtains drawn back, doubtless so that the people could contemplate to their heart's content their monarch and the arbiter of their destinies, a pale phantom, dressed in black, with a blue ribbon on his chest, as motionless as a wax effigy. Long brown hair framed that lifeless face, its saddened expression one of incurable ennui, a Spanish boredom, à la Philip II, such as only the Escorial could concoct in its silence and solitude. It seemed as if the eyes reflected nothing; no desire, no thought, no expression of will appearing to enliven them. A profound disgust with life had slackened the lower lip, which drooped morosely in a sort of sulky pout. A pair of thin, white hands rested on the knees, in the manner of certain Egyptian statues. However, there was still a royal aura surrounding this gloomy figure which personified France, and in which the generous blood of Henry IV had congealed.

The carriage passed in a flare of light, followed by a large body of horsemen bringing up the rear. Sigognac was plunged in reverie on seeing this apparition. In his naivety, he had pictured the king as a supernatural being, radiant and powerful, shining amidst a sun formed of gold and precious stones, proud, splendid, triumphant, greater, stronger, and more beautiful, than all; and yet he had seen nothing more than a sad, puny, bored, sickly figure, poor in appearance, in a dark costume like a suit of mourning, who seemed not to notice the outside world, occupied as he was by some gloomy thought. 'What!' he said to himself. 'Here is the king himself, the person in whom so many millions of men are summed up, who sits atop the pyramid, and towards whom so many hands stretch out from below, in supplication; who silences the cannons or makes them roar, elevates or demotes, punishes or rewards, pardoning, if he so wishes, when justice proclaims the death sentence; he who can change a destiny with a word! If his gaze fell upon me, I would soar from poverty to riches, from weakness to power; previously unknown, I would thereafter flourish, hailed and flattered by all. The ruined turrets of Sigognac would rise proudly once more; estates would be added to my diminished patrimony. I would be the lord of hill and plain! Yet how could he ever come to know of me, buried in this human anthill teeming distantly at his feet, and which he neglects to view? And even if he did see me, what sympathy could there be between us?'

These reflections, and many others that would take too long to recount, occupied Sigognac, as he walked, in silence, beside his companion. Herod respected his reverie, amusing himself by watching the carriages come and go. Eventually, he pointed out to the Baron that it was nearly noon, and that it was time to follow the compass needle that pointed towards the culinary pole, nothing being worse than a cold dinner except a re-heated one.

Sigognac yielded to this peremptory reasoning, and they returned to their inn. Nothing unusual had occurred in their absence. Only two hours had passed. Isabella, seated quietly at the table in front of a bowl of soup, its contents starred with more eyes than Argus' body, welcomed her friend with her customary sweet smile and extended her white hand. The actors asked him playful questions, or expressed their curiosity, about his excursion through the city, asking if he still had with him his coat, handkerchief, and purse. To which Sigognac cheerfully replied in the affirmative.

This amiable chatter soon made him forget his gloomy preoccupation, and he wondered whether he was not merely the dupe of an obsessive imagination that foresaw danger everywhere.

His instinct was correct, however, and his enemies, despite their aborted attempts, had not renounced their shadowy plans. Mérindol, threatened by the duke with a return to the galleys from which he had rescued him, if he did not overcome Sigognac, decided to request the help of a brave friend of his, to whom no enterprise was repugnant, however hazardous it might be, as long as it was well paid. He did not feel strong enough himself to defeat the Baron, who, moreover would recognise him, which rendered an attack on him difficult to achieve, since he was now on his guard.

Mérindol therefore went in search of this swordsman who dwelt in the Place du Marché-Neuf, near the Petit-Pont (*rebuilt many times, the current bridge dates from 1852*), an area populated mainly by swordsmen, rogues, thieves, and other folk of ill repute.

Noticing among the tall black houses, which leant on one another like drunkards afraid of falling, one blacker, more dilapidated, more leprous than the others, whose windows, overflowing with filthy rags, resembled slashed bellies leaking their entrails, he entered the dark alley which served as the entrance to this cavern. Soon the daylight from the street was lost, and Mérindol, feeling the wall, as sweaty and slimy as if snails had glued themselves to it and left their trails behind, sought in the shadows the rope that served as a banister for the staircase, a rope which one might have thought had been detached from the gallows, coated as it was with human grease. He hoisted himself up this miller's ladder as best he could, stumbling at every step over the bumps and callouses formed on each step by the ancient mud piled there, layer on layer, since the days when Paris was called Lutetia (*the Gallo-Roman town of the Parisii, which preceded the later city*).

However, as Mérindol advanced in his perilous ascent, the darkness became less intense. A pale light filtered through the opaque yellow panes of the fixed windows intended to light the staircase, and which looked out onto a courtyard as dark and deep as a mineshaft. Finally, he arrived at the top floor, half suffocated by the mephitic vapours exhaled by the leading. A trio of doors opened onto the landing whose dirty plaster ceiling was embellished with obscene arabesques, curlicues, and more-than-Rabelaisian flourishes traced by the candle-smoke; frescoes well worthy of such a hovel.

One of these doors was ajar. Mérindol pushed it open with a kick, not wanting to touch it with his hand, and entered, without further ceremony, the only room constituting the palace of the swordsman Jacquemin Lampourde.

Acrid smoke so stung his eyes and throat that he began to cough like a cat that had swallowed a feather while devouring a bird, and it was a good two minutes before he could speak. Taking advantage of the open door, the smoke spread onto the landing, and the fog becoming less thick, the visitor was able to discern, more or less, the interior of the room.

This den deserves special description, because it is doubtful whether the honest reader has ever set foot in such a hovel, and therefore may be unable to imagine its destitute state.

The place consisted of four walls on which infiltrations from the roof had drawn islands and rivers unknown to any geographical map. In places within reach, the successive tenants of the hovel had amused themselves by engraving with a knife their names, incongruous, baroque, or

hideous, following that urge which drives the most obscure to leave a trace of their passage through this world. To these names was often attached a woman's name, Iris of the Crossroads, surmounted by a heart pierced by an arrow like a fishbone. Others, more artistic, had attempted, with a piece of coal removed from the ashes, to sketch some grotesque profile, a pipe between its teeth, or a hanged man with protruding tongue frolicking on the arm of the gallows.

On the edge of the chimney, where pieces of a stolen bundle of wood were smoking and spurting, a world of bizarre objects was piled in the dust: a bottle with a half-consumed candle, the tallow of which had run in wide sheets over the glass, stuck in its neck, a true torch of the prodigal son and the drunkard; a trictrac cup (*trictrac is a points-scoring game with similarities to backgammon*), three lead-dice (*often made from spent musket balls*), Robert Beinières' manual for players at lansquenet (*the card game*), a bundle of old pipe-ends, a stoneware pot for tobacco, a slipper containing a toothless comb, a dark lantern its lens as round as the pupil of a nocturnal bird, bundles of keys, doubtless false for there were no drawers in the room to lock or unlock, a moustache-curler, a corner of a mirror, its silver plate scratched as if by the claws of the Devil, in which only one eye at a time was visible, if slenderer than those of Juno, whom Homer calls Βοῶπις (*cow-eyed*), and a thousand other trinkets tedious to describe.

Opposite the fireplace, on a section of wall less damp than the rest, and covered with a hanging of green serge, shone a bundle of carefully polished swords, tempered, tested, and bearing on their steel the marks of the most famous armourers of Spain and Italy. There were double-edged blades, triangular blades, blades hollowed in the middle to allow the blood to drain; daggers with large basket-hilts, cutlasses, daggers, stilettos and other expensive weapons whose richness made a singular contrast with the dilapidation of the den. Not a speck of rust, not a speck of dust soiled them; they were the tools of the killer, and could not have been better maintained in a princely arsenal, rubbed with oil as they were, sponged with wool, and preserved in their original state. One would have said they came fresh from the forge. In them Lampourde, so careless about everything else, invested his self-esteem and they were his absorbing interest. This professionalism, when one thought of the trade he practiced, took on a dreadful character, and over those well-polished pierces of metal a reddish play of the light seemed to flicker.

There were no seats in the room, and one was free to stand upright, unless one preferred to employ, so as to spare the soles of one's shoes, an old battered basket, a trunk, or the lute-case lying in a corner.

The table consisted of a shutter placed on two trestles. It also served as a bed. After having caroused, the master of the house would lie down on it, and, taking the corner of the tablecloth, which was none other than the tail of his coat, the upper portion of which he had sold to line his stomach, he would turn towards the wall so as to avoid seeing the empty bottles, a singularly melancholic spectacle for a drunkard.

It was in this position that Mérindol found our Jacquemin Lampourde, who was snoring like an organ-pipe, though all the clocks in the vicinity had struck four in the afternoon.

An enormous venison pie, which showed in its vermilion ruins the marks of pistachios, and was more than half-devoured, lay disembowelled on the floor, like a corpse left behind by wolves in the depths of a wood, surrounded by a fabulous number of flasks from which the soul had been

extracted, and which were now nothing more than the ghosts of bottles, hollow apparitions good only for broken glass.

A companion, whom Mérindol had not at first seen, was sleeping, fists outstretched, beneath the table, still holding in his teeth the broken stem of a pipe, the bowl of which stuffed with tobacco had fallen to the ground, and which, in his drunkenness, he had forgotten to light.

— ‘Hey there, Lampourde!’ cried Vallombreuse’s officer, ‘enough of this sleeping; don’t look at me with those eyes, rounder than marbles. I’m no commissioner or agent come to fetch you to the Châtelet (*The Grand Châtelet was a fortress on the right bank of the Seine, on the site of the current Place du Châtelet; with a court and police headquarters, and a number of prisons.*) The matter is important: try to rescue your reason sunk to the bottom of the glass, and pay attention.’

The person thus summoned rose, with the slowness of the newly awakened, sat up, stretched out his long arms, the fists of which almost touched the two walls of the room, opened an immense mouth toothed with sharp fangs, and, clicking his jaws, gave a formidable yawn, like that of a bored lion, accompanied by inarticulate, guttural clucking noises.

Jacquemin Lampourde was no Adonis, though he claimed to be favoured by women as greatly as many another, and even, according to him, by the noblest and best-placed. His great height, of which he took pride, his thin, heron-like legs, his bony spine, his chest reddened with drink which was visible at that moment through his half-open shirt, and his monkey-like arms long enough for him to tie his garters almost without bending, scarcely made for a pleasing physique; as for his face, a prodigious nose, reminiscent of that of Cyrano de Bergerac, the pretext for so many historic duels, occupied the most important place. But Lampourde consoled himself with the popular axiom: ‘A large nose never spoiled a face.’ The pupils of his eyes, though still clouded with drunkenness and sleep, displayed cold flashes of steel announcing courage and resolution. On his gaunt cheeks two or three perpendicular furrows, like sword-strokes, that were scarcely love-bites, traced their rigid lines. A mop of intricately tangled black hair rained about this physiognomy fit to be sculpted on a violin neck, which, however, none chose to mock, so disturbing, mocking and ferocious was his expression.

— ‘May the plague take the creature that comes to disturb my joys, and muddy my Anacreontic dreams! I was happy; the most beautiful princess on earth greeted me graciously. You’ve driven her away!’

— ‘Enough of your nonsense,’ cried Mérindol, impatiently, ‘lend an ear, and your attention, for a moment or two.’

— ‘I never listen to anyone when I’m drunk,’ Lampourde replied majestically, propping himself on his elbow. ‘Besides, I have funds, ample funds. Last night we robbed an English lord decked out with pistoles; I’m eating and drinking my share. But a game or two of lansquenet, and it will soon be gone. So, tonight, to serious business. Meet me at midnight at the centre of the Pont-Neuf, by the foot of the statue of the bronze horse. I shall be there, fresh, clear, alert, in full possession of my faculties. We will tune our flutes, and agree on my share, which should be considerable, for I like to believe that no one bothers a brave man like me for the sake of base rascality, insignificant theft, or petty peccadilloes. Decidedly, theft bores me; I only commit murders now; it’s nobler. We are leonine carnivores, not predatory beasts. If it’s a matter of killing,

I'm your man, and even then, the victim must be allowed to defend himself. My victims are so cowardly sometimes, it disgusts me. A little resistance heartens the work.'



'If it's a matter of killing, I'm your man...'

— 'Oh! Have no fear on that score,' replied Mérindol with a wicked smile. 'You'll find an opponent to address.'

— 'So much the better,' replied Lampourde, 'it's been long since I've fought with someone of a skill to equal mine. But that's enough. On that note, goodnight, and allow me to sleep.'

Once Mérindol had departed, Jacquemin Lampourde attempted to rest, but in vain. Sleep, once interrupted, failed to return. The swordsman rose, shook his companion, roughly, who was still

snoring beneath the table, and the pair went off to a gambling den where lansquenet and basset (both card games involving a banker) were played.



‘...The pair went off to a gambling den where lansquenet and basset were played.’

The participants were drunkards, swordsmen, rogues, lackeys, clerks, and a few naive bourgeois brought there by loose women, poor pigeons destined to be plucked alive. One heard only the sound of dice rolling about in their cup, and the rustle of cards being shuffled, for the players were customarily silent, except, in the event of a loss, when they emitted a few blasphemous interjections. After his luck alternating between good and bad, a vacuum, which Nature and Man especially abhor, occupied Lampourde’s purse. He wanted to play on account, but that was not common currency in the place, where the players, on receiving their winnings, bit hard on the coins to prove the louis were not gilded lead, nor the silver testers made of the tin from which spoons were cast. He was forced to withdraw naked as an infant Saint John, having entered like a great lord, brandishing a pistol in each hand!

— ‘Ah!’ he sighed, as the fresh air of the street struck his face, and restored his composure. ‘Well, I’m rid of it now; strange how wealth intoxicates and stupefies me! I’m no longer surprised at tax-farmers who buy their right so dearly. Now I’m penniless, my spirit is roused; ideas buzz in my brain like bees round a hive. From Laridon I become César again! (*The kitchen-dog and the hunting-bound, respectively, in Jean La Fontaine’s fable ‘L’Éducation’ Book VIII: 24*) But now the mechanical bell-

ringer of the Samaritaine is striking twelve; Mérindol will be waiting for me in front of the bronze king.' And he headed towards the Pont-Neuf.

Mérindol was at his post, idly watching his shadow in the moonlight. The two swordsmen, having looked around to see if anyone might hear them, nonetheless spoke in low voices for quite some time. What they said, I know not, but, as he parted from the Duke of Vallombreuse's agent, Lampourde jingled gold coins in his pocket with an impudent air that showed how much he was feared on the Pont-Neuf.



'Now I'm penniless, my spirit is roused...'

Chapter XII: The Crowned Radish

As he left Mérindol, Jacquemin Lampourde was gnawed by uncertainty, and when he reached the end of the Pont-Neuf, he stopped and remained perplexed for some time, like Buridan's donkey between the pail of water and the pile of hay, or, if that comparison pleases you not, like a piece of iron between two magnets of equal strength. On the one hand, lansquenet exerted an imperious pull on him, with its distant clink of gold coins; on the other, the tavern presented itself no less seductively, with its chiming tankards. An embarrassing alternative! Though theologians assert that free will is man's finest prerogative, Lampourde, mastered by these two irresistible attractions, for he was equally a gambler and a drunkard, really knew not what to decide. He took three paces towards the gambling den; but the pot-bellied bottles, covered with dust, draped in cobwebs, and topped with a red wax helmet-like seal, appeared to his imagination in such a vivid light that he took three paces towards the tavern. Then the game, in fantasy, rattled its cup full of lead dice in his ears, and fanned out before his eyes a semicircle of bevelled cards, mottled like a peacock's tail, an enchanting vision that nailed his feet to the ground.

— 'Come now! Am I to stand here like a statue?' the swordsman admonished himself, impatient with his own tergiversation. 'I must look like an idiot gazing at a flight of coquecigrues (*imaginary creatures, see Rabelais*), with a bewildered and quizzical expression. Damn it! What if I went neither to the tavern nor the gambling den, but paid a visit to my goddess, my Iris, the peerless beauty who holds me in her net? But perhaps, at this hour, she may be occupied at some ball or nocturnal feast, and away from home. And besides, voluptuousness lessens one's courage, and the greatest captains have repented of having given themselves to womanising too much. Witness Hercules and his Deianira, Samson and Delilah, Mark Antony and Cleopatra, not to mention many others whose names I forget, for a deal of water has flowed under the bridge since I was in school. So, let me renounce that lascivious and enervating fantasy. And yet, how to choose between those two former objects of attraction? Whoever selects one exposes himself to regret as regards the other.'

While spending time on this monologue, Jacquemin Lampourde, his hands buried in his pockets, his chin resting on his ruff causing his goatee to curl upwards, seemed to be sending down roots between the paving stones and turning into a statue, as happens to more than one character in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Suddenly he gave such a start that a bourgeois out late, who was passing by, was alarmed and quickened his pace, believing that he was about to be attacked and robbed at the very least. Lampourde had no intention of assailing this simpleton, whom in his distracted reverie he did not even notice; for a brilliant idea had just crossed his mind. His uncertainty was over.

He swiftly pulled a doubloon from his pocket, and tossed it in the air, saying: 'Heads for the tavern, tails for lansquenet!'

The coin spun around several times and, falling to the ground under its own weight, landed on a paving stone, its gold disc gleaming in the silvery rays shed by the moon, which at that moment was free of clouds. The swordsman knelt to decipher this oracle delivered by chance. The coin had answered the question posed in precise fashion. Bacchus had triumphed over Fortuna.

— ‘Very well, I’ll get drunk,’ said Lampourde, dropping the doubloon, which he wiped clean of mud, into his purse as deep as the abyss, destined to swallow up many things, and with long strides, headed towards the *Crowned Radish* tavern, the usual sanctuary reserved for his libations to the god of the vine. The *Crowned Radish* had the advantage for Lampourde of being situated at the corner of the Marché-Neuf, a stone’s throw from his dwelling, which he could return to, though zigzagging somewhat, when he had drunk enough to fill him from the soles of his boots to his Adam’s-apple.

It was the most abominable hole imaginable. Squat pillars, coated in a lurid, wine-like red, supported the enormous beam that served for a frieze, on the rough surface of which appeared certain shapes indicative of ancient carvings half-erased by time. Gazing attentively, one could make out a tangle of vine leaves and branches, amidst which monkeys were frolicking, pulling foxes by their tails. On the keystone of the door was painted an enormous naked radish, topped by green leaves, and adorned with a gold crown, the whole much eroded, which for generations of drinkers had served as the tavern’s sign and designation.

The bays formed by the space between the pillars were covered, at that moment, by shutters with heavy ironwork capable of supporting a seat, but not so hermetically sealed that they prevented rays of reddish light filtering through to the outside, and the dull murmur of singing and quarrelling to escape; these gleams of light, reflecting from the pavement’s muddy mirror, produced a strange effect the picturesque aspect of which Lampourde was impervious to, but which indicated to him that a large company still occupied the *Crowned Radish*.

Striking the door with the pommel of his sword, the swordsman, made himself recognised as a regular of the house by the rhythm of the blows he struck, and the door opened slightly to allow him passage.

The room in which the drinkers stood had the look of a cavern. It was low, and the main beam that crossed the ceiling, having buckled due to the settling of the upper floors, seemed ready to break, though it was strong enough to support a belfry, much like the tower of Pisa, or the Asinelli tower in Bologna, which always lean and never fall. Smoke from the candles and the customers’ pipes had turned the ceiling as black as the inside of those fireplaces where red herrings, bottarga (*salted, cured fish-roe pouches*), and hams are prepared. Formerly, the walls had been painted red, and framed with vine shoots and twigs, by the brush of some Italian artist who had arrived in France in the wake of Catherine de Medici. The paint at the top of the walls was in a decent state of preservation, though much darkened, and resembling patchy congealed blood more than the joyful scarlet hue with which it must have shone in its prime. Humidity, friction from the backs of the customers, and the filthy heads of hair that had leaned on them, had spoiled or erased the whole of the lower part, where the plaster appeared dirty, scratched and bare. Formerly the tavern had been more generally popular; but, little by little, the courtiers and captains, their moral scruples becoming more delicate, had been replaced by gamblers, swindlers, cut-purses, and cut-throats, a whole clientele of dangerous rogues who had placed their revolting imprint on the hole, and turned a cheerful tavern into a sinister den. A wooden staircase, leading to a gallery onto which opened

the doors of small rooms so low that one could only enter them by drawing in one's head and horns like a snail, occupied the wall facing the entrance. Under the stairwell, in the shadows, a few casks, some full, others empty, were arranged in a symmetry more pleasing to the drunkard than any other form of ornamentation. In the fireplace, with a large hood, bundles of small branches were blazing, the ends of which fell, burning, to the floor, that being tiled with old bricks, was not at risk. The fire was reflected from and illuminated the counter made of tin placed opposite, at which the innkeeper reigned behind a rampart of pots, pint-glasses, bottles and jugs. Its bright glow, outdoing the yellow halos of the candles that crackled amidst the smoke, set the drinkers' shadows dancing along the walls, in the form of caricatures, with extravagant noses, pointed chins, tufts of hair like Riquet (*see Charles Perrault's version of the fairytale 'Riquet à la houppe' in his 'Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé', 1697*), deformed in a manner as bizarre as in the *Songes Drolatiques de Pantagruel*, published under the name of Master Alcofribas Nasier (*an anagram of François Rabelais. 'The Droll Dreams' are a series of a hundred and twenty engraved phantasmagoria published by Richard Breton in 1565 and probably created by François Desprez*). This Black Sabbath of silhouettes, swarming behind the real figures, seemed to mock them, in witty parody. The dive's regulars sat on benches, leaning on tables the wood of which, slashed and scored, adorned with names engraved with knives, and burned-in tattoos, was greasy with spilt sauce and wines; while the sleeves that wiped at them, being soiled for the most part, some even being pierced at the elbow, merely compromised the flesh of the arms they were supposed to cover. Awakened by the din of the tavern, two or three hens, feathered Lazaruses, who at this hour should have been seated on their perches, had slipped into the room by a door communicating with the courtyard, and were pecking, beneath the feet and between the legs of the drinkers, at the crumbs that had fallen from the feast.



'The Crowned Radish.'

When Jacquemin Lampourde entered, the air of the establishment was filled with triumphant uproar. Brawny fellows, holding out their empty pots, were banging on the tables with fists that could have killed an ox, making the tallow candles, in their iron holders, rattle. Others shouted 'A Toast', or 'Your Health!' while raising theirs. All this was accompanied by a Bacchanalian song, shouted in chorus by voices as lamentably out of tune as dogs howling at the moon, the clinking of knives on the sides of glasses, and the clatter of plates rotated like millstones. The drinkers assailed the modesty of the serving-girls, who, arms raised above the crowd, carried platters of steaming victuals, and were unable to defend themselves against these gallant assaults, being more anxious to preserve the food than their virtue. Some of the clients were smoking long Dutch pipes, and amusing themselves by blowing smoke through their nostrils.

The crowd was not only comprised of men, the fair sex was also represented, by some rather ugly specimens; for vice sometimes possesses no better a mask than virtue. These Phyllises, to whom the first-comer, in exchange for a coin, could play the Thyrsis or Tityrus (*see Virgil's Eclogues*), walked about in pairs, stopping at the tables, and drank like familiar doves from each other's cup. These copious gulps, combined with the warmth of the place, turned their cheeks crimson under the brick-red rouge with which they were painted, so that they looked like idols covered with double layers of paint. False or real hair, twisted into heart-shaped curls, was plastered on foreheads shining with white lead; or, waved with an iron, extended in spirals down to their breasts which were largely uncovered and powdered white, though not without some small vein of azure drawn on their false whiteness. Their attire affected a dainty and gallant bravura. It was nothing but ribbons, feathers, embroidery, braid, studs, and aiguillettes, all in bright colours; yet it was easy to see that this luxury, adopted for show, was scarcely real, and their clothes second-hand: their pearls were only blown glass, the gold jewels copper, the silk dresses old skirts turned inside-out and re-dyed; but their elegance, though of a lowly quality, was enough to dazzle the drunken eyes of the companions gathered in that den. As for their perfume, if those ladies failed to smell of roses, they smelled of musk like a polecat's burrow, it being the only odour strong enough to overcome the foul exhalations of that slum, and which by comparison seemed sweeter than balm, ambrosia, or benzoin. Sometimes a 'cavalier' heated by lust and drink would pull one of these not very shy beauties onto his knee, whisper in her ear, and plant a large kiss on her cheek, Anacreontic propositions were received with affected laughter and a 'no' that assented, then, pairs were seen to ascend the staircase, the man with his arm around the woman's waist, the woman holding onto the banister and making childish gestures, for even in the most abandoned debauchery a woman still retains some semblance of modesty. Others descended, the men with muddled expressions, while the Amaryllis of the pair would fluff up her skirt with the most detached air in the world.

Lampourde, long accustomed to these scenes which, moreover, seemed natural to him, paid no attention to the picture of which I have just drawn a quick sketch. Seated at a table, his back against the wall, he gazed with an eye full of tenderness and desire at a bottle of Canary Island wine that a serving-girl had just brought, an ancient and commendable bottle, extracted from behind the faggots and the heap of barrels, reserved for experienced gluttons and drinkers. Although the swordsman was alone, two glasses had been placed on the table, for his horror of the solitary ingestion of liquor was well known, and at any moment a drinking companion might appear. While waiting for this chance guest, Lampourde slowly raised, to the height of his eyes,

the glass, with a tapered leg, its bowl shaped like a small bindweed flower, in which, glittering with a luminous point of light, shone the blond and genial liqueur. Then, having satisfied the sense of sight by admiring its warm colour, a burnt topaz, he passed on to the sense of smell, and, stirring the wine with a gentle shake that set it rotating a little, he inhaled its aroma with nostrils as wide as the pits of a heraldic dolphin. There remained the sense of taste. The papillae of the palate, suitably excited, were impregnated with a mouthful of this nectar; the tongue ran it around the lips and finally sent it to the throat with an approving clap. Thus, Master Jacquemin Lampourde, by means of a single glass, flattered three of the five senses that man possesses, which was the work of a consummate epicurean extracting the pleasurable sensation that such things provide to the last drop of juice, and veritable quintessence. He might have yet claimed that touch and hearing could share the enjoyment: touch, through the polish, clarity and shape of the crystalline glass; hearing, through the music, vibration, and perfect harmony that is produced when striking it with the back of a blade or running one's wet finger in a circular motion on the edge of the glass. But such are the nonsensical and fantastic paradoxes, of an over-subtle refinement, demonstrating nothing, through wishing to demonstrate too much, except the vicious refinement of this scoundrel.

Our swordsman had been there for but a few minutes when the door of the tavern opened a crack; a man, dressed in black from head to toe, with not a trace of white but his collar and a flow of linen that hung over his stomach between his jacket and his breeches, made his appearance in the establishment. Some half-unravelled jet embroidery showed an ineffectual inclination to embellish the dilapidated state of his costume, the cut of which, however, betrayed a remnant of former elegance.

This character possessed a face the peculiarity of which was its pallid whiteness, as if it had been sprinkled with flour, combined with a nose as red as a burning coal. Small purple fibrils veined it, and testified to an assiduous cult for the Divine Bottle. The calculation of how many barrels of wine and flasks of brandy were needed to bring it to that intensity of erubescence would have troubled the imagination. This bizarre mask resembled a cheese into which a cherry had been stuck. To complete the portrait, two apple-pips in place of eyes, and a thin gash representing a mouth as narrow as that of a money-box will suffice. Such was Malartic, the bosom friend, the Pylades (*Orestes' companion, in Greek myth*), the Euryalus (*the companion of Nisus in Virgil's 'Aeneid'*), the *fidus Achates* (*'faithful Achates', companion of Aeneas in the 'Aeneid'*) of Jacquemin Lampourde; he was scarcely handsome, but his qualities more than made up for these minor physical inconveniences. After Jacquemin, for whom he professed the deepest admiration, he was the finest swordsman in Paris. In chess, he toppled the king with a delight that none dared find insolent; he drank deep without ever appearing drunk, and though he was not known to possess a tailor, he was better supplied with coats than the best-dressed courtier. Moreover, a delicate man in his own way, possessing in full the probity of the haunters of taverns, capable of risking death to support a comrade, and of enduring the strappado without a murmur, or the boot, the rack, even water-torture the most unpleasant of all for a drinker of his calibre, rather than compromise his peers by an indiscreet word. A most charming fellow in that way! Moreover, he enjoyed general esteem in the sphere where his trade was practiced.

Malartic advanced straight to Lampourde's table, took a stool, sat down opposite his friend, silently seized the full glass that seemed to be waiting for him, and emptied it in a gulp. His system

differed from Jacquemin's, but was no less effective, as the cardinal purple of his nose proved. At the end of the session, the two friends counted the same number of chalk marks on the innkeeper's slate, and good Father Bacchus, astride the barrel, smiled at them without preference, as if at two devotees of different faiths, but equal fervour. One hurried his mass, the other made it last; but still the mass was said.

Lampourde, who knew his companion's habits, filled his glass several times to the brim. This manoeuvre required the appearance of a second bottle, which, like the first, quickly ran dry; it was followed by a third, which held out a little longer, and made a little more fuss in surrendering. After which, to catch their breath, the two swordsmen called for pipes, and commenced sending up to the ceiling, through the condensing fog above their heads, long corkscrews of smoke, like those spirals children add to the chimneys of the houses they scribble in their school books, and notebooks. After a certain number of puffs, inhaled and exhaled, they seemed to vanish, like the gods of Homer and Virgil, behind a cloud in which Malartic's nose blazed alone like a red meteor.

Enveloped in this mist, the two companions, isolated from the other drinkers, began a conversation that it would have been dangerous for the head of the city-watch to overhear. Happily, *The Crowned Radish* was a safe place, no guard would have dared venture there, and the cellar trapdoor would have opened beneath the feet of any sergeant bold enough to enter that lair. He would only have emerged in chopped-up form like a pile of minced meat.

— 'How's business,' Lampourde asked of Malartic, in the tone of a merchant inquiring about the price of goods, 'given it's the low season? The king holds court in Saint-Germain, to which the courtiers follow him. Most damaging to trade; there are now only bourgeoisie, and people with little or nothing, left in Paris.'

— 'Tell me!' Malartic replied. 'It's an indignity. The other evening, I stopped a rather good-looking fellow on the Pont-Neuf. I asked him for his purse or his life. He threw me his purse; there were only three or four silver sixpences within, and the coat he left me was but serge with false gold braid. Instead of being the thief, I was the one who was robbed. In the gambling dens, you'll only meet footmen, attorneys' clerks, or precocious children who have taken a few pistoles from their father's drawer to try their luck. Two deals of the cards, or three throws of the dice, and all's over. It's outrageous to display one's talents for such a meagre result! The Lucindas, the Dorimènes, the Cidalises, usually so helpful to us warriors, refuse to pay our bills, even though we beat them soundly, on the pretext that since the court is no longer here, they receive neither places at dinner nor gifts, and are obliged to pawn their clothes in order to live. If it weren't for a jealous old bastard who employs me to thump his wife's lovers, I'd barely have earned enough this month to drink water, a necessity to which no destitution will force me, an upright death seeming a hundred times sweeter. I have not been offered the least ambush, the slightest kidnapping, the smallest assassination. What times these are, by God! Hatreds wane, grudges go to waste, the feeling of revenge is lost; insults are forgotten as well as kindnesses; the bourgeois century is enervating us, and society is becoming so bland it disgusts me.'

— 'The good times are over,' replied Jacquemin Lampourde. 'In the past, a great man would have taken us, as courageous fellows, into his service. We would have helped him with his affairs, and secret tasks; now we must work for the public. However, there are still some decent opportunities.'

And as he said these words he shook some gold coins in his pocket. This melodious ringing made Malartic's eye sparkle strangely; but soon his gaze returned to its usual placid expression, a comrade's wealth being a sacred thing, and he contented himself with heaving a sigh which could be translated by the words: 'You lucky dog, you!'

— 'I think I'll be able to find you some work soon,' Lampourde continued, 'since you're not idle given a task, and are quick to roll up your sleeves when it comes to delivering a thrust, or discharging a pistol. A man of order, you carry out the orders handed to you within the time required, and you take the risk of discovery upon yourself. I'm surprised that Fortune hasn't descended from her glass globe and tapped at your door; it's true that, with the bad taste common to women, the drab favours a bunch of dandies and idiots to the detriment of folk of merit. While we wait for the hussy's whims to turn in your direction, let's spend the time drinking, *papaliter* (*like the Pope*), till the cork on our shoe-soles swells.'

This philosophical resolution was undeniably too reasonable for Jacquemin's companion to raise the slightest objection. The two swordsmen filled their pipes, and refilled their glasses, leaning on the table like people settling in comfortably, who wish none to disturb their tranquility.

They were, however, disturbed. In the corner of the room, a murmur of voices rose from a group surrounding two men who were agreeing the terms of a bet between them, regarding the impossibility of the one believing something claimed by the other unless he saw it with his own eyes.

The group opened itself to observation. Malartic and Lampourde, their attention aroused, saw a man of medium height, but singularly alert and vigorous in appearance, his face tanned like a Spanish Moor, his hair tied with a handkerchief, who was dressed in a brown pea-coat which, when opened, revealed a buff jerkin and brown breeches adorned at the seam with a row of copper buttons in the shape of bells. A wide red woollen belt cinched his waist, and from it he had taken out a Valencian *navaja* (*a long, folding knife*) which, when opened, was the length of a sabre. He squeezed the catch, tested the point with his fingertip, and seemed satisfied with this examination, for he said to his adversary: 'I'm ready,' and then, with a guttural accent, hissed an odd name unknown to the clients of *The Crowned Radish*, but which has already figured more than once in these pages: 'Chiquita! Chiquita!'

At the second cry, a thin, haggard little girl, asleep in a dark corner, rid herself of the cape she had carefully wrapped about her, which made her look like a bundle of rags, and advanced towards Agostin, for it was he, and, fixing on the bandit her large sparkling eyes, further enlivened by a halo of bistre, said to him in a deep, serious voice which contrasted with her puny appearance:

— 'Master, what do you wish? Here I am, ready to obey, here as on the moor, for you are brave and your *navaja* shows many red stripes (*marking acts of murder*).' Chiquita said these words in Euskara, or Basque dialect, as unintelligible to the French as High German, Hebrew, or Chinese.

Agostin took Chiquita by the hand, and had her stand against the door, ordering her to remain motionless. The little girl, accustomed to this display, showed neither fear nor surprise; she remained there, her arms dangling, looking straight ahead, with perfect serenity, while Agostin, placing himself at the other end of the room, one foot forward, the other back, raised the long knife whose handle rested on his forearm.



'The little girl, accustomed to this display, showed neither fear nor surprise...'

A double row of onlookers formed a sort of hedged alley from Agostin to Chiquita, and those rogues with a prominent stomach drew it in, holding their breath for fear that it might be over the line. Their noses, like the pipe of an alembic, retreated cautiously, so as not to be sliced off in mid-air.

Then Agostin's arm, uncoiling like a spring, sent a flash of lightning through the air, and the formidable weapon planted itself in the door just above Chiquita's head, without cutting away a hair, and with such precision that it seemed as if it had wanted to ascertain her precise height.

As the *navaja* whizzed past, the spectators could not help but lower their eyes; but the girl's densely-fringed eyelashes barely fluttered. The bandit's skill excited a murmur of admiration among this exacting audience. Even the adversary who had doubted the blow possible clapped his hands enthusiastically.

Agostin retrieved the still-vibrating knife, returned to his post, and this time ran the blade between Chiquita's impassive arm and her body. If the point had deviated three or four inches, it would have pierced her heart. Though the onlookers cried it proof enough, Agostin repeated the experiment on the other side of her body to show that his skill was no accident.

Chiquita, filled with pride by this applause, which was as much in praise of her courage as Agostin's dexterity, glanced about her with a look of triumph; her swollen nostrils drew in the air forcefully, and her teeth, pristine as those of a young wild creature, shone in her half-open mouth

with a ferocious whiteness. The brightness of those teeth, and the phosphorescent gleam of her pupils, formed a triangle of luminous points in her dark face, tanned by the open air, illuminating it. Her unkempt hair was twined around her forehead and cheeks in long black snakes, restrained a little by a crimson ribbon that her rebellious curls overflowed and concealed, here and there. Round her neck, tawnier than Cordoba leather, the necklace of pearls she had received from Isabella shone like a string of milk-white beads. As for her costume, it was altered, if not improved. Chiquita no longer wore the canary-yellow skirt embroidered with a parrot, which would have given her an altogether too strange and remarkable appearance in Paris. She had on a short, dark blue dress with small pleats gathered at the hips, and a sort of jacket or vest made of black *barragan* (*a twill weave*), fastened at the base of the chest with a trio of buttons made of horn. Her feet, accustomed to treading flowering and fragrant heather, were shod in shoes much too large for her, as the cobbler had been unable to find any in his shop small enough. The luxury of her footwear seemed to bother her; but it had been necessary to make this concession to the cold Parisian mud. She was just as wild as she had been at the *Auberge du Soleil Bleu*, yet one could see that a greater number of thoughts were passing through her untutored mind, and, in the child, hints of the young girl were already appearing. She had seen many things since leaving the moor, and her naive imagination still experienced a kind of dazzlement.

She returned to the corner she had been occupying and, wrapping herself in her mantle, resumed her interrupted sleep. The fellow who had lost the bet paid his five pistoles, the amount of the stake, to Chiquita's companion. The latter slipped the coins into his belt, and sat down again at his table in front of the half-emptied jug, which he finished slowly, for, having no fixed lodging, he preferred to stay at the tavern than sleep beneath the arch of a bridge or a convent porch, while waiting for daylight so slow to appear at that time of year. This was also the case of several other poor devils who snored with closed fists, some on the benches, others below, rolled up in their capes for a blanket. It was a comical spectacle to see all these boots lined up on the floor like the feet of corpses after a battle. A battle, indeed, after which those wounded by Bacchus, piteously mocked by their more robust companions, staggered to some obscure corner, and, their heads resting against the wall, emptied their bladders, pouring forth wine instead of blood.

— 'By the Sainct San Breguoy (*'Sacred blood of God'*, see *Rabelais, 'Gargantua and Pantagruel'*, Book 3: *XVIII*),' Lampourde said to Malartic, 'here's a fellow who isn't one-armed, and whom I'll make a note of so I can find him again if necessary for tricky operations. That knife-throw from a distance would work better against subjects who approach aggressively than a pistol-shot which creates fire, smoke, and a loud noise and seemingly summons the aid of the guards.'

— 'Yes, indeed,' replied Malartic, 'a fine piece of work and properly executed; but if you miss your aim, you're disarmed and left for a fool. For me, what charmed me about the affair and showed courage under fire was the young girl's bravery. That shrimp! She hasn't two ounces of flesh on her bones, yet lodged in the narrow cage of that thin chest is the true heart of a lioness, or an ancient heroine. She pleases me, moreover, with her large, soot-black, feverish eyes, and her quietly haggard expression. In the midst of these bustards and shelducks, these geese and other farmyard birds, she seems like a young falcon in a henhouse. I know a thing or two about women, and I can judge the flower by the bud. La Chiquita, as that swarthy rascal calls her, will be a fine girl in two to three years' time...'

— ‘Or a thief,’ murmured Jacquemin Lampourde, philosophically. ‘Unless fate reconciles the two extremes by making this *morena*, as the Spaniards say, the mistress of both a rogue and a prince. It has been known, and it’s not always the prince that they love the most, such are the mischievous and wayward fancies of such maids. But let us leave these superfluous subjects, and turn to serious matters. I may need, before long, some brave men of all stripes for an undertaking that has been proposed to me, which won’t require a journey as long as that the Argonauts made in pursuit of the Golden Fleece.’

— ‘A splendid fleece!’ said Malartic, his nose in his glass, the wine of which seemed to sizzle and boil on contact with that burning coal.

— ‘It’s a somewhat complicated and risky business,’ continued the swordsman. ‘I am charged with eliminating a certain Captain Fracasse, a comic-actor by trade, who is apparently interfering with the love affairs of a very great lord. For that task, I alone would be sufficient; but there is also the matter of organising the abduction of the damsel loved by both the grandee and the actor; the latter’s friends will defend her and seek to prevent her kidnapping; let us draw up a list of reliable and unscrupulous comrades. What think you of Piquenterre?’

— ‘An excellent fellow!’ replied Malartic, ‘but we can’t count on him. He’s swinging to and fro at Montfaucon (*the public gallows, sited near the modern Place du Colonel Fabien*), on the end of an iron chain, waiting for his carcass, torn to pieces by crows, to fall into the gallows pit, and join the bones of the comrades who preceded him.’

— ‘So that’s why no one has seen him for some time,’ said Lampourde with the greatest composure in the world. ‘What a life is ours! One evening, you are quietly carousing with a friend in a well-known tavern; you each go your separate ways and attend to your own affairs, and a week later, when you ask: ‘What’s become of so-and-so?’, they tell you: ‘He’s hanged.’

— ‘Alas, that’s how it is,’ sighed Lampourde’s friend, assuming a tragically elegiac or elegiacally tragic pose: ‘as François Malherbe said in his poem *Consolation*, addressed to Monsieur Duperrier:

But *he* was of this world, where the finest of things
Meet the worst of fates.

(See Malherbe’s poem of 1599, lines 13-14; Malartic replaces ‘*she*’ with ‘*he*’)

— ‘Let us not indulge in effeminate whining,’ said the swordsman. ‘Let us show a manly and stoic courage and continue to march through life, hats pulled down to the brow, and fists on hips, defying the gallows which, after all, apart from a small matter of honour, are scarcely more formidable than the cannon-fire, trebuchets, culverins and bombards which soldiers and captains must face, without mentioning musketeers and bladed weapons. In the absence of Piquenterre, who must now be in glory next to the good thief, let’s have Cornebœuf. He’s a stout, vigorous fellow, good for heavy work.’

— ‘Cornebœuf,’ replied Malartic, ‘is currently on a voyage along the Barbary coast under the command of Cadet la Perle (*Henri de Lorraine, Count of Harcourt, 1601-1666, so nicknamed for the pearl*

he wore in his ear). The king holds our friend in such special esteem that he has had him emblazoned with a fleur-de-lis on his shoulder so that he might be found anywhere were he to be lost. But, Piedgris, for example, and Tordgueule, La Râpée and Bringuénarilles are free and *a la disposición de usted* ('at your service')

— 'Those names will do me; they belong to brave men, and you shall speak to them when the time is right. On that note, let us finish this quarter of a bottle, and remove ourselves from here. The place is beginning to smell more mephitic than Lake Avernus, over which birds cannot fly without falling dead from the malignancy of its exhalations. It smells of armpits, sweaty feet, stale flesh, and grease. The fresh night air will do us good. By the way, where do you sleep tonight?'

— 'I have not yet sent my quartermaster ahead to prepare my lodgings,' replied Malartic, 'so my tent is not yet pitched; I could try the Hôtel de la Limace, but I have a bill there that's as long as my sword, and nothing is more unpleasant upon waking than to view the sullen face of an aged host who grumbles at the slightest fresh expense and demands his due, waving a handful of bills above his head as Jupiter did his thunderbolt. The sudden appearance of the police would be a less gloomy thing as far as I'm concerned.'

— 'Purely the effect of nerves, an understandable weakness, for every great man has his own,' said Lampourde sententiously, 'but since you are reluctant to present yourself at the Limace, and the Hôtel de la Belle-Étoile (*the open air, at night*) is a little too chilly this winter, I offer you the ancient hospitality of my airy hovel and half my trestle-bed.'

— 'I accept,' replied Malartic, with heartfelt gratitude. 'O thrice and four times happy is the mortal who has Lares and Penates (*Roman household gods, whose statues stood before the hearth*), and can seat the friend of his heart at his hearth!'"

Jacquemin Lampourde had fulfilled the promise he had made to himself after the oracular coin's answer in favour of the tavern. He was as drunk as a thrush at the grape harvest; but no one was master of his drink like Lampourde. He ruled the wine, not the wine him. Yet when he rose, it seemed to him that his legs weighed like lead and sank into the floor. With a vigorous kick he unlocked his heavy limbs, and walked resolutely towards the door, head held high, and all of a piece. Malartic followed him with a fairly firm step, for nothing could add to his usual state of intoxication. Plunge a sponge saturated with water into the sea, and it will not absorb another drop. Such was Malartic, with this difference, that for him the liquid was not water, but the pure juice of the grape. The exit of the two comrades was therefore achieved without incident, and they managed to hoist themselves up to Lampourde's attic by means of the Jacob's ladder which led from the street, though angels they were not.

At that hour, the tavern presented a ridiculous and lamentable appearance. The fire was going out in the hearth. The candles, which had not been snuffed, were drunken, their wicks swaying like large black mushrooms. Stalactites of tallow dripped down the candlesticks, where they froze as they cooled. The smoke from the pipes, the mist from the customers' breath, and the steam from the food had gathered near the ceiling into a thick fog; to clean the floor, covered with debris and mud, a river would have needed to flow over it, as in the Augean stables (*one of Heracles' Twelve Labours, in Greek myth*). The tables were strewn with leftovers, carcasses, and ham-bones that looked as if they had been torn to pieces by the fangs of starving mastiffs. Here and there a remnant of wine leaked from a pitcher overturned during the tumult engendered by some quarrel or other, the

drops of which, falling into the ruby-red pool they had formed, looked like drops of blood from a severed head dripping into a basin; the sound of the falling drops, intermittent but regular, punctuated the drunkards' snores like the tick of a clock.

The little Moor of the Marché-Neuf struck four o'clock. The innkeeper, who had dozed off, his head resting on his outstretched arms, awoke, looked inquisitively around the room, and, seeing that trade had slackened, called his lads and said to them: 'It's late; they've ceased drinking; so, sweep away these rogues and whores with the peelings!' The boys brandished their brooms, scattered the contents of a few buckets of water, and in less than five minutes, with a deal of pushing and shoving, the tavern was emptied into the street.



'At that hour the tavern presented a ridiculous and lamentable appearance.'

Chapter XIII: A Dual Assault

The Duke of Vallombreuse was not a man to neglect his love affairs any more than his revenge. If he mortally hated Sigognac, he harboured, for Isabella, one of those furious passions that are, in haughty and violent souls unaccustomed to resistance, intensified by the challenge of the impossible. Triumphant over the actress became the dominant thought of his life; spoiled by the easy victories he had won in his career as a gallant, he failed to comprehend his defeat, and often, seized by sudden astonishment in deep reverie, amidst conversation, while walking, or during visits to the theatre or to church, the city or the Court, he said to himself: 'How can it be that she loves me not?'

It was indeed a thing difficult to understand for a man who lacked all belief in female virtue, and even less in that of actresses. He wondered if Isabella's coldness was not a concerted effort to obtain more from him, nothing kindling desire like feigned modesty, and a touch-me-not air. However, the disdainful manner in which she had sent away the box of jewellery placed in her room by Leonarda was abundant proof of her not being one of those women who bargain in order to sell themselves more dearly. Richer ornaments still would have produced no better an effect. Since Isabella did not even open the casket, what use was it that it contained pearls and diamonds to tempt a queen? Epistolary love could not touch her either, however elegantly and passionately the young duke's secretaries might have portrayed their master's affections. She refused to open, much less read, the letters. Thus, prose or verse, tirades and sonnets would fail to woo her. Besides, such languid means, good for cooler fellows, did not suit Vallombreuse's enterprising character. He summoned Dame Leonarda, with whom he had never ceased to maintain a secret correspondence, it being always good to have a spy in the camp, even if it seems impregnable; now and then the garrison relax, and a postern may be swiftly opened, through which the enemy can insinuate himself.

Leonarda was introduced, by a hidden staircase, to the duke's private chamber, where he received only his most intimate friends, and faithful servants. It was an oblong room, clad in wood panelling, with fluted pilasters of the Ionic order, whose interspaces were occupied by oval frames, in a luxurious and exuberant style, carved in solid wood, which appeared to hang from the cornice, decorated with ribbons and gilded love-knots of ingenious complexity, in high relief. These medallions contained, in the mythological disguise of Floras, Venuses, Graces, Dianas hunting, and woodland nymphs, portraits of the young duke's mistresses, dressed in ancient Grecian fashion, this one showing an alabaster throat, that one a lathe-turned leg, another dimpled shoulders, another more secret charms, all with such subtle artifice, that one might have said the paintings owed more to the artist's imagination than real life. The most prudish of them had posed for these paintings however which were by Simon Vouet (1590-1649), a famous artist of the time, believing they were performing a unique favour to the duke, not imagining that they were being added to his gallery.

On the panelled ceiling, Venus was depicted at her toilette. After having been dressed by her nymphs, the goddess gazed at herself, out of the corner of her eye, in a mirror presented to her by a large, independently drawn, Cupid, to whom the artist had given the features of the duke, but it was clear that her attention was directed more to Love than the mirror. Cabinets inlaid with Florentine pietra dura, crammed with love-letters, braids of hair, bracelets, rings, and other testaments to forgotten passion; a table of the same material where bouquets of brightly coloured flowers were incised on a black marble background, courted by butterflies winged with precious stones; armchairs with carved ebony legs covered with a salmon-coloured brocatelle fabric with silver motifs; and a thick Smyrna carpet on which perhaps Sultanas had seated themselves, brought from Constantinople by the French ambassador; composed the furnishings, as rich as they were voluptuous, of this retreat, which Vallombreuse preferred to the state apartments, and which he usually inhabited.

The duke gestured condescendingly to Leonarda, and indicated a place for her to sit. Leonarda was the ideal of a Duenna, and all this fresh, youthful luxury further emphasised her yellowed old-wax like complexion and her repulsive ugliness. Her black costume with jet-black trimmings, and her swept-back head-dress gave her at first a severe and respectable appearance; but the equivocal smile that played amidst the hairs shading the corners of her lips, the hypocritically lustful look in her eyes rimmed with brown wrinkles; the base, greedy, and servile expression of her countenance soon undeceived, and told one that here was no Dame Pernelle (*a prudish woman, see e.g. Molière's 'Tartuffe'*), but a Dame Macette (*a witch, see e.g. Octave Béliard's 'Sorcières, Reveurs et Démoniaques', 1920*), one of those who bathe young girls for the Sabbath, and who ride on Saturdays with a broom between their legs.

— ‘Dame Leonarda,’ said the duke, breaking the silence, ‘I have summoned you because I know you are a person most expert in the ways of love, having practiced them in your youth and served them in your maturity, in order to consult with you on the means of seducing this fierce Isabella. A duenna who was once young herself must know all the rubrics.’

— ‘Monsieur le Duc,’ replied the old actress with an air of humility, ‘does great honour to my feeble knowledge, but cannot doubt my eagerness to please him in every way.’

— ‘I have no doubt of it,’ Vallombreuse said casually; ‘but, nonetheless, the affair has scarcely progressed. What of this ungracious beauty? Is she still as infatuated with her Sigognac?’

— ‘Youth,’ replied Dame Leonarda, heaving a sigh, ‘forever displays these strange and inexplicable fits of stubbornness. Isabella, moreover, does not seem to be made of ordinary clay. No temptation sways her; in the Earthly Paradise she’d not have listened to the Serpent.’

— ‘How then,’ cried the duke, with a burst of anger, ‘has this damned Sigognac made himself heard by an ear so deaf to the words of others? Does he possess some philtre, some amulet, some talisman?’

— ‘No, my lord; he was simply unhappy, and for these tender, romantic, and proud female souls, to console another is the greatest happiness they know; they prefer to give rather than receive, while pity, eyes moistened by tears, opens the door to love. Such is the case with Isabella.’

— ‘You tell me things from another world; to be lean, obscure, pitiful, shabby, poor, ridiculous, these are, according to you, reasons to be loved! The Court ladies would laugh at such a doctrine.’

— ‘Indeed, it is not common, fortunately, and few women are seen to fall for such. Your Lordship has come upon an exception.’

— ‘But it’s enough to drive one mad with rage, to think that this squire succeeds where I fail, and in the arms of his mistress mocks my disappointment.’

— ‘Your Lordship may spare yourself that annoyance. Sigognac does not enjoy his love in the sense that Monsieur the Duke understands. Isabella has not relinquished her virtue. The tenderness of these perfect lovers, although lively, is entirely platonic, and they rest content with a few kisses on the hand or the brow. That is why such love persists; if sated, it would die of itself.’

— ‘Dame Leonarda, are you quite sure of this? Is it to be credited that they live together so chastely, amidst the licentiousness of the theatre and their travels, sleeping beneath the same roof, dining at the same table, constantly brought together by the necessities of rehearsals and stage performance? They must needs be angels.’

— ‘Isabella is certainly an angel, and wholly lacks the pride that caused Lucifer to fall from heaven. As for Sigognac, he blindly obeys his mistress, and accepts every sacrifice she imposes on him.’

— ‘If that’s so,’ said Vallombreuse, ‘what can you work on my behalf? Come, search a secret drawer of your box of tricks for some ancient and invincible stratagem, some glorious trick, some intricately worked machination that will hand me the victory; you know that gold and silver are as nothing to me.’ And he plunged his hand, whiter than, and as delicate as, a woman’s, into a cup wrought by Benvenuto Cellini, on a table near him, which was full of gold coins. At the sight of them, chiming with a persuasive clink, the owl eyes of the Duenna lit with greed, piercing the swarthy leather of her dead face like two luminous holes. She seemed to think deeply and remained silent for a few moments. Vallombreuse waited impatiently for the result of this reverie; finally, the old woman spoke again.

— ‘If I can’t possess her soul, perhaps I can deliver her body to you. A wax impression of a key, an exact copy, and a strong narcotic would do the trick.’

— ‘None of that,’ interrupted the duke, unable to resist a tremor of disgust. ‘What! Possess a sleeping woman, an inert body, a veritable corpse, a statue without consciousness, will, or memory! To acquire a mistress who, on waking, would look at me with astonished eyes as if emerging from a dream, and immediately resume her aversion towards me in favour of love for another! To live a nightmare, a lustful dream one forgets in the morning! I would never sink so low.’

— ‘Your Lordship is right,’ said Leonarda, ‘possession is worthless without consent, and I only proposed the expedient being at my wit’s end. Nor do I like these shadowy methods, and these drinks that smell of the poisoner’s pharmacopoeia. But why, being as handsome as Adonis, Venus’ favourite, splendid in your attire, rich, powerful at Court, with everything that pleases women, do you not simply pay court to Isabella?’

— ‘Yes, by God, the old woman’s right,’ cried Vallombreuse, casting a complacent glance at a Venetian mirror supported by two sculpted cupids balanced on a golden spire in such a way that the glass tilted and straightened at will, so one could view oneself more comfortably therein. ‘Isabella may be cold and virtuous, but she is not blind, and Nature has not proved so vile a stepmother to me that my presence inspires horror. Her impression of me must always be that of

a statue or a painting that one admires, even if one does not love it, but which draws the eye, and charms with its symmetry and pleasing colours. And then I will speak to her of those things which women cannot resist, with looks which melt icy hearts, and whose fire, let it be said without conceit, has set ablaze the most hyperborean and chilly beauties of the Court; this actress, moreover, has pride, and the pursuit of a duke can only flatter her pride. I will support her at the theatre, and will gather a coterie in her favour. It will be a miracle then if she still thinks of that little Sigognac, whom I shall know how to dispose of.'

— 'Has Monsieur le Duc anything more to ask of me?' said Dame Leonarda, who had risen and remained with her hands crossed on her belt in a posture of respectful expectation.

— 'No, you may withdraw,' Vallombreuse replied, 'but first take these (and he held out a handful of gold louis to her), it is not your fault if some of Herod's troupe adhere to extreme modesty.'

The old woman thanked the young nobleman, and retreated to the door, accustomed to doing so by her theatrical roles, and without getting her feet tangled in her skirts. Once there, she spun round, as if dizzied, and swiftly descended the depths of the staircase. Left alone, Vallombreuse rang for his valet to come and dress him.

— 'Now, Picard,' said the duke, 'you must surpass yourself, and produce me a winning toilette; I wish to be more handsome than the Duke of Buckingham in his attempts to please Anne of Austria (*Louis XIII's queen, whom Buckingham pursued*). If I return empty-handed from my chase after this beauty, you'll receive a leathering, for I have no defect or ill feature that requires artificial disguise.'

— 'Your Lordship has the best figure in the world,' replied Picard, 'and thus Art has only to reveal Nature in all her splendour. If the Duke would be pleased to sit before the mirror, and remain motionless for a few minutes, I will arrange his hair and adorn him in such a way that he will encounter no rejection.'

Having said these words, Picard dipped some curling irons into a silver bowl in which, covered with ashes, olive pits produced a gentle heat like that of Spanish braziers, and when the instrument was sufficiently hot, which he tested by bringing them close to his cheek, he began to pinch the ends of those fine ebony curls whose suppleness asked nothing better than to twist them, charmingly, in spirals.

When the Duke of Vallombreuse's hair was done, and a cosmetic with a sweet scent, more fragrant than balm, had fixed his fine moustaches in a Cupid's bow, the valet, satisfied with his work, leant back a little to contemplate it, like an artist gazing, one eye closed, at the last touch added to his painting.

— 'Which outfit does the duke wish to wear today? If I were to risk an opinion before a personage who scarcely needs one, I would recommend to His Lordship the black velvet suit with satin slashes, and tufts of the same colour, silk stockings and a simple Ragusa (*Sicilian lace*) collar. Brocades, brocaded satins, gold and silver cloth, and precious stones might, by an untimely brightness, distract the gaze which should be directed solely to the face of the gentleman, whose charms were never more irresistible; black will highlight the delicate pallor which is a mark of his injury, and endow him with additional interest.

— ‘The fellow has good taste, and knows how to flatter like a courtier,’ Vallombreuse murmured to himself. ‘Yes, black will suit me well! Isabella, moreover, is not a woman to be dazzled by gold brocade and diamond buttons. ‘Picard,’ he continued, aloud, ‘hand me the doublet and velvet breeches, and bring me my burnished steel sword. Then, tell La Ramée to have the horses put to the carriage, all four bays, and quickly. I wish to leave in a quarter of an hour.’

Picard immediately disappeared to carry out his master’s orders. Vallombreuse, while waiting for the carriage, paced up and down the room, casting an interrogative glance at the Venetian mirror each time he passed, which, contrary to the custom of mirrors, gave him a flattering answer to each question.

— ‘This nobody would needs be incredibly haughty, morose, and disdainful not to fall madly in love with me on the instant, despite her pretence to virtue and her platonic affection for Sigognac. Yes, my dear, as Selene was driven, despite her coldness, to kiss her Endymion, you will soon appear in one of those oval frames, painted as Nature formed you. You will take your place among those deities who were, at first, no less prudish, fierce, and Hyrcanian than yourself, and who are certainly greater ladies than you will ever be. Your defeat will not be lacking to my glory for long; know, my little actress, that nothing can obstruct the will of a Vallombreuse. *Frango nec frangor* (‘I break, I am not broken’), such is my motto!’

A footman arrived, to announce that the carriage was ready. The distance between the Rue des Tournelles, where the Duke of Vallombreuse lived, and the Rue Dauphine, was soon covered at a trot by four vigorous Mecklenburgers, driven by a coachman from a noble house, who would not have yielded the upper hand to a prince of the blood, and who insolently cut across all the other carriages. However bold and self-assured the duke appeared during the journey he could not help feeling a certain emotion quite rare in him. The uncertainty of how he would be received by the disdainful Isabella made his heart beat a little faster than usual. The emotions he experienced were quite opposite in nature. They ranged from hatred to love, according to whether he imagined the young actress rebellious or docile to his wishes.

When his handsome gilded carriage, drawn by expensive horses and overburdened by footmen in Vallombreuse livery, entered the courtyard of the inn on the Rue Dauphine, whose doors opened wide to receive it, the innkeeper, cap in hand, rushed rather than descended from the top of the steps to meet this magnificent visitor and learn his wishes.

Despite the innkeeper’s haste, Vallombreuse, leaping from the carriage to the ground without the aid of the footboard, had already advanced towards the staircase with rapid steps. The innkeeper’s forehead, as he bowed low, almost struck his knees. The young duke, in that shrill, curt voice which was his customary tone when passion agitated him, cried:

— ‘Mademoiselle Isabella lodges here. I wish to see her. Is she home at this hour? There is no need to inform her of my visit. Just have your footman accompany me to her door.’ The innkeeper answered these questions with respectful inclinations of the head, and added:

— ‘My lord, leave to me the glory of conducting you myself; such an honour is not fit for a rogue of a servant. The master of the house barely suffices.’

— ‘As you wish,’ said Vallombreuse with haughty nonchalance, ‘but hurry; already people are standing at the windows, and leaning out to look at me as if I were that Grand Turk, the Amorabaquin.’

— ‘I shall go ahead of you, to show you the way,’ said the innkeeper, holding his cap pressed to his heart with both hands.

Having climbed the stairs, the duke and his guide entered the long corridor onto which doors opened like those in a convent cloister. Arriving in front of Isabella’s room, the host halted and said:

— ‘Who shall I have the honour of announcing?’

— ‘You can leave now,’ replied Vallombreuse, putting his hand on the door, ‘I will announce myself.’

Isabella, seated by the window in a tall chair, in her morning-coat, her feet nonchalantly stretched out on a tapestried stool, was studying the role she was to act in the new play. With her eyes closed, so as not to see the words written in her notebook, she repeated in a low voice, as a schoolboy might his lesson, the dozen verses she had just read several times. The light from the window, outlining the smooth contour of her profile, raised golden sparks in the little crimped wispy hairs on the nape of her neck, and made the translucent mother-of-pearl of her teeth gleam in her half-open mouth. Reflections tempered with their silvery glow the deep shadow bathing her flesh and clothes, which would otherwise have appeared over-dark, and produced that magical effect so sought after by painters, which they term ‘chiaroscuro’. The young woman, thus posed, formed a charming picture, which would only have needed to be copied by a skilful hand to become the honour and the pearl of any gallery.

Believing that the chambermaid had entered to carry out her tasks, Isabella had not raised her long eyelids whose lashes, traversed by the light, resembled threads of gold, and continued dreamily and drowsily to recite her lines, in mechanical fashion, as one counts a rosary, almost without thought. She suspected nothing, moreover, given it was broad daylight, the inn full of people, and she so close to her comrades, being unaware that Vallombreuse was in Paris. The attempts against Sigognac had not been renewed, and the young actress, somewhat timid as she was, had begun to regain her confidence a little. Her coldness, she felt, had doubtless discouraged the whims of the young duke, of whom at that moment she was thinking no more than of Prester John, or the Emperor of China.

Vallombreuse had advanced to the middle of the room, pausing his approach and holding his breath, so as not to disturb this graceful picture which he contemplated with readily-conceivable rapture. While waiting for Isabella to raise her eyes and notice him, he had dropped to one knee, and held his felt hat, the feather of which swept the floor, in one hand, while he pressed the other to his heart, his pose being one of that respect owed to a queen.

If the young actress was beautiful, Vallombreuse, it must be admitted, was no less handsome; the light shone fully upon his face, which was perfectly regular, like that of a young Greek god turned into a duke since the fall of Olympus. At that moment, the love and admiration painted thereon had caused the imperiously cruel expression sometimes, regrettably, seen there, to vanish. His eyes emitted fire, his mouth seemed luminous; a sort of reddened glow rose from his heart to

his pallid cheeks. Bluish gleams passed over his curly hair, lustrous with pomade, like the glitter of daylight on polished jet. His neck, at once delicate yet robust, took on the whiteness of marble. Illuminated by passion, he radiated, he sparkled, and one clearly understood how a duke formed in such a way could never admit the idea that a goddess, a queen, let alone a lowly actress, could resist his presence.

Finally, Isabella turned her head and saw the Duke of Vallombreuse kneeling six paces from her. Had Perseus held up to her face the mask of Medusa, reflected in his shield, grimacing agonisingly amidst a wreath of serpents, she could have felt no greater stupor. She remained frozen, petrified, her eyes dilated with terror, her mouth half-open and her throat dry, unable to move or utter a cry. A deathly pallor spread over her features, her back was covered with cold sweat; she thought she was going to faint; but by a prodigious effort of will, she recalled herself to her senses so as not to remain exposed to the advances of this reckless man.

— ‘Do I inspire such insurmountable horror in you,’ said Vallombreuse, without rising from his kneeling position, and in the gentlest of voices, ‘that the mere sight of me produces such an effect? An African monster emerging from its cave, with crimson mouth, bared teeth, and arched claws, would certainly have frightened you less. My entry, I admit, was a little sudden and unexpected; but you must blame my passion for the incivilities it causes. To see you, I dared your wrath, and, at the risk of displeasing you, I place my humble, suppliant heart at your feet.’



'Do I inspire such insurmountable horror in you...'

— 'Please, rise, sir,' said the young actress, 'this pose does not suit you. I am only a poor provincial actress, and my feeble charms scarcely merit such a conquest. Forget your passing whim and take your pleas elsewhere which so many women would be happy to grant. Do not make queens, duchesses, and marquises jealous on my account.'

— 'And what do all those women matter to me,' Vallombreuse said impetuously, rising to his feet, 'if it is your pride that I admire, if your rigour possesses more charm in my eyes than others favour, if your spirit intoxicates me, if your modesty excites my passion to the point of delirium, if I must have you love me or die! Fear nothing,' he added, seeing that Isabella was opening the window as if to leap from it, if he were to resort to any form of violence, 'I ask nothing, other than that you suffer my presence, that you allow me to pay court to you and seek to soften your heart towards me, as the most respectful of lovers do.'

— ‘Spare me your vain pursuit,’ replied Isabella, ‘and I will feel towards you, though love be absent, boundless gratitude.’

— ‘You have neither father, husband, nor lover,’ said Vallombreuse, ‘who could object to a gallant man seeking you out, and attempting to please you. My homage is no insult. Why reject me? Oh, you do not know what a splendid life would open before you if you would consent to receive me. Faery enchantments would pale beside the effects my loving imagination would create to please you. You would walk like a goddess amidst the clouds. Your feet would tread only azure and light. The horn of plenty would spread its treasures before your feet. Your wishes would scarcely have time to be born, ere I would surprise them in your eyes, and anticipate them. The world would fade like a dream, in the distance, and soaring, amidst the sun’s rays, we would ascend towards Olympus more joyful, more inspired, more intoxicated than Cupid and Psyche (*see Apuleius’ The Golden Ass*). Come, Isabella, turn not your head away like this, forego this deathly silence, do not drive to despair one who would do anything, except renounce himself and his passion.’

— ‘This passion, of which any other would be proud,’ replied Isabella modestly, ‘I cannot share. If the virtue I profess to esteem more than life were not opposed to it, I would still decline so dangerous an honour.’

— ‘Look on me favourably,’ Vallombreuse continued, ‘and I will make you an object of envy to the greatest and highest in rank. To another woman I might say: take what you please, ransack drawers filled with diamonds and pearls, raid my castles, my lands, my mansions, plunge your arms to the shoulders in the depths of my coffers, dress your servants in clothes rich enough for princes, have the horses that draw your carriage shod with fine silver, and ride like a queen; dazzle Paris, which, moreover, is rarely surprised. All such offerings are too crude for a soul of your stamp. Yet this glory may touch you, to have reduced and conquered Vallombreuse, to lead him captive behind your triumphal chariot, to call the one who has never obeyed another, and whom no chains could hold, your servant and slave.’

— ‘The prisoner would be too illustrious for me to constrain,’ said the young actress, ‘nor would I wish to rob you of a liberty so precious!’

Till then the Duke of Vallombreuse had curbed his natural violence, and forced himself to adopt a feigned gentleness, but Isabella’s firm yet respectful resistance made his anger boil over. He felt love for another behind this show of virtue, and his anger was augmented by his jealousy. He took a few steps toward the young girl, who put her hand on the window’s ironwork. His features were contracted, he bit his lips, and a look of malice reappeared on his face.

— ‘Say rather,’ he continued in a broken voice, ‘that you are mad for Sigognac! That is the reason for this display of virtue. What is it about that fortunate mortal that charms you so? Am I not handsomer, nobler, richer, as young, as witty, as amorous as he?’

— ‘He has at least one quality you lack: that of respecting what he loves,’ replied Isabella.

— ‘Because his love for you is too feeble,’ cried Vallombreuse, taking Isabella in his arms, as she strove towards the window, and, caught in the embrace of this audacious man, uttered a weak cry.

At that very moment the door swung open. The Tyrant, with outrageous bows and curtseys, entered the room, and advanced towards Isabella, whom Vallombreuse immediately released, in a profound rage at being thus interrupted in his amorous exploits.



'At that very moment the door swung open.'

— 'Pardon me, mademoiselle,' said the Tyrant, casting a sideways glance at the duke, 'I did not know you were in such fine company; but all the clocks have sounded the hour of our rehearsal, and we are only waiting for you to begin.'

Indeed, through the half-open door one could see the Pedant, Scapin, Leander, and Zerbina, who offered Isabella a reassuring means to defend her threatened modesty. The Duke conceived, for a moment, the idea of falling sword in hand upon this rabble and dispersing them, but that

would create a vain scandal; by killing or wounding two or three of these buffoons he would hardly further his affair: besides, their blood was too base for him to dip his noble blade therein, he therefore restrained himself, and parting with icy politeness from Isabella, who, trembling from head to foot, had approached her friends, he left the room, though on the threshold he turned, made a sign with his hand, and said: 'Farewell, mademoiselle!': a straightforward enough sentence certainly, but one which took on a threatening and terrible significance given the tone of voice in which it was pronounced. Vallombreuse's face, so charming before, had resumed an expression of diabolical perversity; Isabella could not help shuddering, though the presence of the actors protected her from assault. She felt the mortal anguish of the dove over whom the kite traces ever closer circles in the air.

Vallombreuse returned to his carriage, followed by the innkeeper, who hovered behind uttering troubled expressions of superfluous politeness, and soon the rumble of wheels indicated that the dangerous visitor had finally left.

Now, here is how the aid that arrived in so timely a manner for Isabella's rescue is to be explained. The arrival of the Duke of Vallombreuse in a gilded carriage at the hotel on the Rue Dauphine had produced a murmur of astonishment and interest throughout the inn, which soon reached the ears of the Tyrant, who, like Isabella, was busy studying his lines in his room. In the absence of Sigognac, who had been detained at the theatre, being fitted for a new costume, brave Master Herod, knowing of Vallombreuse's ill intentions, had promised himself to keep a close eye on things, and with his ear pressed to the keyhole, had listened, with a praiseworthy show of indiscretion, to that perilous conversation, only to intervene when the scene became too heated. His prudence had thus saved Isabella's virtue from the outrageous endeavours of the wicked and perverse duke.

It was to be a stormy day. Lampourde, as you will recall, had been instructed by M  rindol to dispatch Captain Fracasse; so, the swordsman, watching out for an opportunity to attack, was waiting on the esplanade, where the bronze statue of the king stands, for Sigognac in returning to the inn, would necessarily have to go via the Pont-Neuf. Jacquemin had already been there for over an hour, blowing on his fingers so as not to find them numb at the point of action, and stamping the ground to warm his feet. The weather was cold, and the sun was setting behind the Pont Rouge (*later rebuilt as the Pont Royal*) beyond the Tuileries, in crimson clouds. Twilight was falling rapidly, and already passers-by were becoming scarce.

At last, Sigognac appeared, walking with hurried step, for a vague anxiety was stirring within him as regarded Isabella, and he was hastening to return to the inn. Due to his haste, he failed to see Lampourde who, seizing the edge of Sigognac's cloak, pulled at it with such a sharp and abrupt movement that the cord broke. In the blink of an eye, Sigognac found himself reduced to a simple doublet. Without trying to dispute possession of his cloak with his assailant, whom he at first mistook for a common thief, he drew his sword, and with lightning speed, took up a defensive stance. For his part, Lampourde had been no less swift in showing his own weapon. He was pleased with his opponent's readiness, and said to himself: 'We are about to enjoy a little fun.' The blades engaged. After a few false strokes on both sides, Lampourde tried a thrust which was immediately thwarted: 'A fine parry,' he thought, 'this young man has the makings.'

Sigognac caught the swordsman's blade on his own, and delivered a flank attack, which the latter parried with a bodily retreat, all the while admiring his adversary's blow for its perfection, and academic precision.

— 'This for you,' he cried, and his sword described a glittering arc, but met that of Sigognac, already in position once more.

Seeking to evade the other's guard, the blades linked by their tips turned about each other, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, malice and prudence conjoined, which proved the skill of the two combatants.

— 'Do you know, sir,' said Lampourde, no longer able to contain his admiration for a defence, so sure, so tightly maintained, and so correct, 'do you know that you display superb style!'

— 'At your service,' replied Sigognac, thrusting hard at his opponent, who, with the flick of a wrist as taut as a crossbow's trigger, deflected it with the pommel of his sword.

— 'A magnificent stroke,' said the swordsman, growing more and more enthusiastic, 'a marvellous blow! Logically, I should be dead. I am in the wrong; my parry was a chance parry, irregular, wild, good at most to avoid being skewered in an extreme case. I almost blush to have employed it with a fine duellist like yourself.'

All these phrases were interspersed with the clash of steel, parries in quarte, in tierce, in demi-cercles; coupés; and dégagés, which increased Lampourde's esteem for Sigognac. The swordsman valued nothing in the world but fencing, and his judgement of people was determined according to their skill in arms. Sigognac took on considerable proportions in his eyes.

— 'Would it be an indiscretion, sir, to ask you the name of your master? Girolamo, Paragantes, or Côte-d'Acier would be proud of such a pupil.'

— 'I had only an old soldier named Pierre as a teacher,' replied Sigognac, amused by this odd conversation, 'here, try this; it's one of his favourite strokes.' And the baron lunged.

— 'The Devil!' cried Lampourde, stepping back a foot or so. 'I was almost hit; the point slipped beneath my arm. In broad daylight you would have pierced me, but you are not yet accustomed to twilight and nocturnal duels which require the eyes of a cat. No matter! It was well done, well planned, well executed. Now, pay close attention, I am not out to surprise you. I am going to try my ultimate move on you, the result of my studies, the *nec plus ultra* of my method, the sum of my experience. Until now, this infallible sword thrust has always killed its man. If you parry it, I will teach it to you. It is all I have to leave, and I will bequeath it to you; otherwise, I shall take its sublime secret to the grave, for I have not yet met anyone capable of performing it, except you, you admirable young man! But perhaps you would like to rest a little and catch your breath?'

As he spoke these words, Jacquemin Lampourde lowered the tip of his sword. Sigognac did the same, and in a few moments the duel recommenced.

After a number of passes, Sigognac, who knew all the fencing tricks, sensed, from particular actions of Lampourde, whose blade evaded his with dazzling speed, that the famous thrust was about to strike his chest. Indeed, the swordsman suddenly flattened himself, as if he were falling forward, and the Baron no longer saw an opponent before him, but a lightning flash wrapped in a

whistling sound, which reached his body so quickly that he only had time to respond with a demi-cercle which severed Lampourde's blade neatly.

— 'If the rest of my sword's not lodged in your belly,' Lampourde said to Sigognac, straightening up and waving the part that remained in his hand, 'you are a great man, a hero, a god!'

— 'No,' replied Sigognac, 'I am untouched, and if I wished could nail you against the wall like an owl; but that is counter to my natural generosity, and besides, you have amused me in an odd way.'

— 'Baron, allow me to declare myself, from now on, your admirer, your dog, your slave. I was paid to kill you. I even received an advance which I consumed. It matters not! I'll steal, to refund the money.' With this, he gathered up Sigognac's coat, placed it back on the latter's shoulders, in the manner of an officious valet, bowed to him deeply and departed.

Both the Duke of Vallombreuse's assaults had failed.



'...The swordsman suddenly flattened himself...'

Chapter XIV: Lampourde's Delicacy

One can easily imagine the duke's fury after the defeat he had suffered thanks to Isabella's virtue, so opportunely defended by the intervention of the actors. When he returned to the hotel, the look on his face, which was pale with a cold rage, made his servants' teeth chatter, and their palms to sweat in their anxiety, since his natural cruelty, when exasperated, gave way to Neronian outbursts at the expense of the first unfortunate person who crossed his path. The Duke of Vallombreuse was no easy-going nobleman, even when he was in a good mood; but when angry, it would have been better to meet a fasting tiger face to face, on a bridge over a torrent. Each door that was opened before him he slammed shut with such force that it almost flew from its hinges, and the gilding of its decorations flew off in large flakes.

Arriving at his room, he threw his felt hat to the floor so roughly that it remained flattened and the bristling feather broke away cleanly. To give vent to his fury, he freed his chest of his doublet, without attending to the diamond buttons which scattered right and left over the parquet floor, like grey peas on a drum-head. The lace of his shirt was soon reduced, beneath the nervous twitching of his fingers, to nothing more than frayed lint, and with a kick he sent an armchair, he had encountered in his angry wanderings, flying, legs in the air, for he attacked even inanimate objects.

— "The impudent creature!" he cried as he paced about in extreme agitation, "I'll have her dragged away by the guards, whipped and her head shaved, and then thrown into the ditch, from which she'll emerge, bound for the hospital or a convent for repentant girls. It would not be difficult for me to obtain the decree; but no, her constancy would only be strengthened by such punishment, and her love for Sigognac would increase along with all the hatred she seems to bear towards me. It's pointless; what then can be done?" And he continued his frantic course from one end of the room to the other like a wild beast in a cage, without tiring of his impotent rage.

While he was struggling thus, paying little or no attention to the flight of the hours, which pass at their own pace whether we are calm or furious, night fell, and Picard, although he had not been summoned, took it upon himself to enter and light the candles, not wishing to leave his master to nurse his melancholy in darkness, the mother of black moods.

Indeed, as if the lights of the candelabra had illuminated his intellect, Vallombreuse, distracted by his love for Isabella, suddenly recalled his hatred of Sigognac.

— "But how is it that this unhappy gentleman has not yet been dispatched?" he said, stopping short. "Indeed, I gave Mérindol the formal order to do away with him himself, or employ a more skilful and braver swordsman than he, if he was not sufficient for the task! "End the creature, end its venom," (*a French proverb*) whatever Vidalinc may say. With Sigognac eliminated, Isabella will be at my mercy, trembling with terror, and freed from a loyalty henceforth without an object. No doubt she is denying the scoundrel with the idea of having him marry her, and that is why she

indulges in these antics of Hyrcanian modesty and impregnable virtue, rejecting the love of the handsomest of dukes as if he were an itinerant beggar. Once rid of him, all will soon be set to rights, and, in any case, I shall be avenged on an arrogant and outrageous fellow, who wounded my arm, and whom I ever find an obstacle between me and my desire. Now, let us have Mérindol before the court, and see how things stand.'

Mérindol, summoned by Picard, appeared before the duke, paler than a thief about to be hanged, his temples beaded with sweat, his throat dry and his tongue cleaving to his palate; it would have been useful to him, at that moment of anguish, to have held a pebble in his mouth like Demosthenes, the Athenian orator (*see Plutarch's 'Lives'*), who also harangued the sea to strengthen his voice (*apocryphally*), so as to produce saliva, facilitate pronunciation, and improve his eloquence, especially since the young lord's face was more tempestuous than that of any ocean or assembly of the people in the Agora. The unfortunate fellow, making an effort to stand upright on his hocks, and staggering as if he were inebriated, though he had not drunk sufficient since morning to drown a fly, turned his hat about in front of his chest in a state of idiotic confusion, not daring to raise his eyes to his master whose glances he felt descend upon him like alternate showers of hot coals and ice.

— 'Well then, you dumb creature,' said Vallombreuse abruptly, 'are you going to stand there for long with that fateful expression on your face, as if you already had the rope round your neck, which you indeed deserve, even more for your cowardice and clumsiness than your misdeeds?'

— 'I was waiting for my lord's command,' said Mérindol, trying to smile. 'Monsieur le Duc knows that I am utterly devoted to him, 'till the last'; I permit myself that little jest because of the gracious allusion that has just been made...'

— 'Yes, yes,' interrupted the duke, 'but did I not charge you with clearing away that cursed Sigognac who bothers me, and obstructs my path? You have failed, for I saw clearly from Isabella's joy and serenity that the scoundrel must still be breathing, and that I have not, in fact, been obeyed. Truly, what is the point of retaining swordsmen in my pay, if I'm to be served like this! Should you not, without my needing to speak, divine my feelings from the flash of an eye, the flutter of an eyelash, and silently kill any who displease me? But you are only good for assailing the kitchen, and your heart is in slaughtering chickens. Continue like this, and I'll hand you all over to the executioner who awaits you, abject scoundrels that you are, timid rascals, clumsy assassins, naught but the shameful scum of the penal colonies!'

— 'I see, with a degree of pain,' objected Mérindol in a humble and penetrating tone, 'that Monsieur le Duc is unaware of the zeal, and, dare I say, skill of his loyal servants. This Sigognac is not one of those ordinary items of prey one tracks down, and slays after a short while hunting them. At a first encounter, he almost split my head from cap to chin, and if he had wielded more than a theatre foil, blunted and dulled, I'd have been done for. Our second ambush found him on his guard, and so ready to fight that I was forced, as well as my comrades, to slip away without risking a vain struggle from which he would have been rescued, and which would have caused an unhappy scandal. Now he knows my face, and I can in no way approach him without his immediately putting his hand to the hilt of his rapier. I was therefore obliged to search out a swordsman friend of mine, the best blade in the city, who is watching for him and will dispatch him, under the pretext of robbing him, at the first twilight or nocturnal opportunity without the

name of Monsieur le Duc being mentioned in all this, as it would be if the blow were dealt by those who belong to His Lordship.'

— 'The plan is not a bad one,' Vallombreuse replied casually, softening his tone, 'and perhaps it is better that things happen so. But are you sure of the courage and skill of this swordsman? It takes a brave man to defeat Sigognac, who, I confess, though I hate him, is no coward, since he dared to measure himself against me.'

— 'Oh!' replied Mérindol with an air of importance, and certainty, 'Jacquemin Lampourde is a hero... who has strayed. He surpasses the Achilles of fable, and the Alexander of history. He is not without reproach, but he is fearless.'

Picard, who had been prowling around the room for several minutes, finding Vallombreuse's mood somewhat calmer, could no longer avoid informing him that a man of rather odd appearance was without, urgently demanding to speak to him about something of import.

— 'Admit the fellow,' replied the duke; 'but woe to him if he bothers me with nonsense. I'll have him whipped so hard he'll lose his skin.'

The valet departed to fetch the new visitor, and Mérindol was about to withdraw discreetly, when the entrance of the newcomer nailed his feet to the floor. There was indeed cause to remain, he being stupefied with astonishment, for the man Picard led before Vallombreuse was none other than Mérindol's friend Jacquemin Lampourde, in person. His unexpected presence in such a place suggested that some unforeseen and singular event had occurred. Mérindol was thus quite anxious on witnessing the appearance, thus, without intermediary, in front of his master, of this secondary agent, this subordinate mechanic whose task should have been accomplished in the shadows.

Jacquemin Lampourde, however, did not seem disconcerted in the least; for as soon as he entered, he gave Mérindol a friendly wink, then halted a few steps from the duke, receiving full in the face the light of the candles which brought out the details of his characteristic mask. His forehead, on which the habitual pressure of his felt hat had traced a transverse reddish line, like the scar of a wound, showed, by the beads of sweat, which had not yet dried, that the swordsman had been walking quickly, or had just engaged in violent exercise; his eyes, a bluish-grey mixed with metallic reflections, fixed themselves on those of the young duke with a calm impudence which made Mérindol shudder. As for his nose, whose shadow covered one whole cheek, as the shadow of Mount Etna covers a large part of Sicily, that promontory of flesh dividing, in a grotesque manner, his strange and monstrous profile, was gilded at the tip by a bright ray of light that made it gleam. His moustache, coated with a coarse cosmetic, resembled a skewer drawn above his upper lip, and his royal goatee curled like an upside-down comma. All this made up the most heterogeneous physiognomy in the world, one of those that Jacques Callot loved to sketch with his original and lively burin.

His costume consisted of a buff doublet, grey breeches, and a scarlet cloak whose gold braid appeared to have recently come unstitched, as indicated by stripes of a fresher colour visible against the slightly faded background of the fabric. His heavy basket-hilted sword hung from a wide belt embroidered with copper, which encircled the scoundrel's slender but robust waist. An inexplicable detail singularly preoccupied Mérindol: Lampourde's arm, emerging from under his cloak like a holder springing from a panelled wall to support a candle, held in his fist a purse whose plump belly announced a respectable sum in coinage. This gesture of offering money, instead of

taking it, was so far outside the physical and moral habits of Master Jacquemin that the swordsman performed it with an emphatic solemnity, and a stiff awkwardness, which was quite laughable. Then, the idea which struck Mérindol that Jacquemin Lampourde approached the Duke of Vallombreuse as if he sought to pay him for some service, was so monstrously beyond the pale of probability that his eyes widened as did his mouth, which, according to painters and physiognomists, is the proper expression of extreme surprise.

— ‘Well, scoundrel,’ said the duke, when he had considered this gift-bearing personage long enough, ‘do you wish to donate alms to me by any chance, in placing this purse under my nose with that long arm of yours, that one might take for that of a banner?’

— ‘Firstly, Monsieur le Duc’ said the swordsman, after giving the long wrinkles like sabre cuts that marked his cheeks, and the corners of his mouth, a sort of nervous quiver, ‘with all due respect to Your Highness, I am no scoundrel. My name is Jacquemin Lampourde, a swordsman. My profession is honourable; no manual labour, trade or other industry has degraded me. I have not even, in deepest misfortune, taken to blowing glass, an occupation that does not smack of the gentleman, since there is danger in it, and commoners never willingly face death. I kill for a living, at the risk of my own skin and my neck, for I always work alone, and I always pre-warn whomever I attack, having myself a horror of treachery and cowardice. What could be more noble? So, withdraw the epithet of scoundrel, if you please, which I can only accept as a friendly jest; it outrages too noticeably the ticklish delicacy attached to my self-esteem.’

— ‘Very well, Master Jacquemin Lampourde, since you insist upon it,’ replied the Duke of Vallombreuse, who was amused in spite of himself by the odd formality of this lanky fellow, so firmly posed before him, ‘now explain your presence in my house, a purse in your hand, and you shaking it like a fool his sceptre, or a leper his clapper.’

Jacquemin, satisfied with this concession to his susceptibility, inclined his head while maintaining his upright pose, and made his felt hat perform several passes which constituted, in his opinion, a salute mixing the manly freedom of a soldier with the suppleness of a courtier.

— ‘Here’s the thing, Monsieur le Duc: I received an advance from Mérindol to do away with a certain Sigognac, called Captain Fracasse. Due to circumstances beyond my control, I was unable to fulfil this task, and as I maintain probity in my dealings, I return to their rightful owner the monies I failed to earn.’

As he said these words, he placed, the purse on a corner of a fine table inlaid with Florentine pietra dura, with a gesture that was not lacking in dignity,

— ‘There you have them,’ said Vallombreuse, ‘these braggarts, good enough to feature in comedies, these breakers of open-doors, these soldiers of Herod whose valour is displayed against suckling children, and who flee when the victim bares his teeth, these donkeys covered as if with lion-skin whose roar is a bray. Come, admit it in all honesty: Sigognac frightened you.’

— ‘Jacquemin Lampourde has never known fear,’ resumed the swordsman in a tone which, despite his grotesque appearance, was not devoid of nobility, that is to say without Spanish or Gascon boastfulness or bragging, ‘in no fight has the adversary seen the shape of my back; I am unknown as regards my rear, and incognito, may be as hunchbacked as Aesop was (*according to tradition*). Those who have appreciated my work know that simple tasks disgust me, while danger

pleases, in which I swim like a fish in water. I attacked the Sigognac *secundum artem* (*according to practice*), with one of my finest blades, Toledan blades, forged by Alonso de Sahagún the Elder (*a famous sixteenth-century swordsmith*)

— ‘What occurred,’ asked the young duke, ‘in this duel where you seem not to have gained the advantage sine you’re here to return the sum?’

— ‘Both in single combat and in encounters and assaults, against one or more, I have laid thirty-seven men on the ground who failed to recover, ignoring those who were crippled, or more or less seriously injured. But Sigognac’s guard is as unassailable as a brazen tower. I employed all the resources of the art of fencing against him: feints, surprises, disengagements, retreats, unusual strokes; his parries and ripostes repelled each attack, and with what firmness combined with speed! What audacity tempered with prudence! What magnificent composure! What imperturbable mastery! He is not a mere mortal; he is a god with a sword in his hand. At the risk of being skewered, I enjoyed his fine, correct, and superior style. I had before me a partner worthy of my skill; yet as it was necessary to end, after having prolonged the fight as much as possible to gain time, my admiration of his brilliant method, I seized my opportunity, and risked the Neapolitan’s secret weapon, which I alone possess in all the world, since Girolamo is now dead, and bequeathed it to me as a legacy. No one but myself, moreover, is capable of executing it in all its perfection, on which its success depends. I carried it out so well, and so thoroughly, that Girolamo himself could not have done better (*Girolamo Cavalcabo, from Bologna not Naples, was fencing instructor to the young Louis XIII*). Well! That devil of a Captain Fracasse, as he is called, parried the thrust with dazzling speed, and so firm a counter-stroke that he left me with nothing but the stub of my sword, which I struggled to employ, like an old woman threatening a child with a spoon. Look, here is what he did to my Sahagún sword.’

Thereupon Jacquemin Lampourde pulled from its scabbard a pitiful section of rapier bearing Sahagún’s authentic crowned ‘S’ as its mark, and showed the duke the clean break in the gleaming blade.

— ‘Was that not a prodigious blow,’ continued the swordsman, ‘one that could have been struck by Roland’s blade *Durendal*, Oliver’s *Hauteclaire*, El Cid’s *Tizona*, or the unnamed sword of Amadis in ‘Amadis de Gaula’? Killing Captain Fracasse is beyond my talents; I admit it, in all modesty. The thrust I delivered had until then been parried in the worst manner of all, with the body. Whoever suffered it found an extra buttonhole in his doublet through which his soul fled. Furthermore, like all brave men, this captain was generous: he held me at the end of his sword, I myself quite stunned and speechless with disappointment, and he could have skewered me, like an ortolan, just by stretching out his arm. He refrained from doing so, which was very delicate on the part of a gentleman attacked at dusk, in the middle of the Pont-Neuf. I owe him my life, and even if it is not worth much in my position, I am bound to him by gratitude. I will undertake nothing more against him, and his life is sacred as far as I am concerned. Besides, even if I possessed the means, I would have scruples about harming or destroying such a fine swordsman, especially since they are rare in this age of vulgar ironmongers, where one holds a sword like a broom-handle. That is why I have come to warn Monsieur the Duke that he can no longer count on me. Perhaps I might have kept the coins as compensation for my risk and the peril involved; but my conscience was against it.’

— ‘By all the devils, keep the payment,’ said Vallombreuse in a tone that admitted no reply, ‘or I’ll have you thrown through the window, open or not, and your money with you. Never have I met with so scrupulous a rogue. You, Mérindol, would be incapable of so fine a trait, quite the example to youth.’

Noting that the swordsman hesitated, he added: ‘I give you those pistoles to drink to my health.’

— ‘That, Monsieur le Duc, will be done, and religiously,’ replied Lampourde, ‘however, I think His Lordship will not be displeased if I play at lansquenet with a few.’ With that, he took a step toward the table, stretched out his bony arm, seized the purse with the dexterity of a magician, and made it vanish as if by magic into the depths of his pocket, where it struck, with a metallic clang, a dice box, and a deck of cards in a tin. It was easy to see that this gesture was much more natural to him than the other had been, with so much ease did he execute it.

— ‘I am withdrawing from this business of Sigognac,’ said Lampourde, ‘but it will be taken up, if it suits Your Lordship, by my *alter ego*, the Chevalier Malartic, to whom one can entrust the most hazardous undertakings, so skilful is he. He has both a head that conceives and a hand that executes. He possesses, moreover, a mind quite free from prejudice and superstition. I sketched out a plan of sorts for the abduction of the actress whom you do the honour of taking an interest in, which he will complete with the perfection and attention to detail which characterise his style. More than one playwright applauded in the theatre for the mechanics of his dramas, should consult Malartic’s efforts, as regards the subtlety of his plots, the inventiveness of his stratagems, the play of character. Mérindol, who knows him, will vouch for his rare qualities. Certainly, the Duke could not choose better, and it is a true gift that I am making him. But I would not wish to abuse His Lordship’s patience any further. When he has decided, he only needs have one of his men draw a cross in chalk on the left pillar in *The Crowned Radish*. Malartic will understand and, duly disguised, will attend the Hôtel Vallombreuse to receive his final orders, and reach an agreement.’

This triumphant speech completed, Master Jacquemin Lampourde made his felt hat reverse the movements it had described on his greeting the duke at the beginning of the interview, pushing it down on his head, and lowering the brim over his eyes, and left the room with a measured and majestic stride, satisfied with his eloquence and bearing before so great a lord.

This bizarre apparition, less strange, however, in that century of refined honour and swordplay than it would have been at any other time, had amused and interested the young Duke of Vallombreuse. Jacquemin Lampourde’s character, full of originality, the man proving honest in his own way, did not displease him; he even forgave him for his failure to kill Sigognac. Since the Baron had defeated this professional swordsman, it was because he was truly invincible, and the shame of having been wounded by him was thus less painful to his self-esteem. Then, however wild Vallombreuse was, the action of having Sigognac assassinated seemed to him enormous, not because of any tenderness, or pang of conscience, but because his enemy was a gentleman, while he would have had no qualms at all about slaughtering half a dozen bourgeois who had bothered him, the blood of such people having no more worth in his eyes than the water in the fountains. He would have preferred to dispatch his rival himself, if it had not been for Sigognac’s superiority in fencing, a superiority of which his arm, barely healed, retained the memory, and which did not allow him to risk a new duel or chance an armed attack. His thoughts therefore turned to the abduction of Isabella, which appealed to him more due to the amorous perspectives it opened to

his imagination. He had no doubt that the young actress, once separated from Sigognac and his comrades, would become more human and sensitive to the charms of so handsome a lord, on whom the highest ladies of the court doted. Vallombreuse's conceit was unashamed, for never had such been better founded. His charms justified all his pretensions, and his most impertinent boasts were simple truths. Also, despite the failure of his encounter with Isabella, it seemed to the young duke illogical, absurd, incredible and outrageous for her not to love him.

— 'Let me hold her for a few days,' he said to himself, 'in a retreat from which she cannot escape, and I will know how to subdue her. I will be so gallant, passionate, and persuasive, that she will soon feel astonishment at having held a grudge against me for so long. I will see her become troubled, change colour, lower those long eyelids at the sight of me, and when I have her in my arms, she will lean her head on my shoulder to hide her modesty and confusion. With a kiss, she will tell me she has always loved me, and that her resistance was only a means to inflame me more, or was merely the apprehension and timidity shown by a mortal pursued by a god, or some other such charming and delightful phrase, among those that women know how to employ in their encounters, even the most chaste. But when I possess her, body and soul, ah, it is then that I will take revenge for her former rebuffs!

Chapter XV: Malartic at Work

If the Duke's anger had proved fierce on returning home, the Baron's proved no less so on his learning of Vallombreuse's escapade directed against Isabella. The Tyrant and Blazius were obliged to engage in lengthy arguments to prevent him from rushing to the nobleman's mansion with the aim of provoking him to a duel that he would certainly have refused, for Sigognac being neither the brother, nor the husband, nor the acknowledged lover of the actress, had no right to demand an explanation for an act that, moreover, was excusable in itself. In France, men have always been free to court beautiful women. The swordsman's attack on the Pont-Neuf was, certainly, far less legitimate; but though it was likely that the idea originated with the duke, how was one to ascertain what obscure thread linked this man of the sack and the rope, to that magnificent lord? And, even supposing that it could be discovered, how could the link be proven, and from whom could one seek justice for these cowardly attacks? In the eyes of the world, Sigognac, his rank concealed, was a vile actor, a low-class buffoon whom a gentleman like Vallombreuse could, at his whim, if he angered or hindered him in any way, have beaten, imprisoned or killed, without anyone finding the duke at fault. Isabella's honest resistance, would have seemed ridiculous and that of a prude; the virtue of actresses being doubted by many an incredulous Thomas and sceptical Pyrrho. There was therefore no way to openly attack the duke, which enraged Sigognac, who recognised, despite himself, the truth of the reasons given by Herod and the Pedant for playing dead, but with eyes open, and ears attentive; for this damned lord, handsome as an angel and wicked as the Devil, would certainly not abandon his enterprise, though it had failed so far at every stage. A gentle look from Isabella, who took Sigognac's trembling hands in her white ones, urging him to subdue his courage for love of her, completely pacified the Baron, and things resumed their customary course.

The troupe's debut had been a great success. Isabella's modest grace, the Soubrette's sparkling verve, Serafina's elegant coquetry, Captain Fracasse's superb extravagance, the Tyrant's majestic emphasis, Leander's white teeth and pink gums, the Pedant's grotesque bonhomie, Scapin's cunning wit, and the Duenna's comedic perfection produced the same effect in Paris as in the provinces; all they lacked, having won the approval of the city, was that of the Court, where the most tasteful and discerning people were to be found; there was even talk of summoning them to Saint-Germain, as the king, on hearing the rumours, wanted to see them; which greatly delighted Herod, the company's leader and treasurer. Often people of quality asked them to perform at their mansion, on the occasion of some celebration or feast, the ladies being curious to see these actors who outshone those of the Hôtel de Bourgogne (*on the Rue Mauconseil, now the Rue Étienne Marcel; from 1628, the Comédiens du Roi were the resident company*) and the troupe of the Marais (*the Théâtre du Marais was founded in 1634 and housed in a converted racquet-court, the Jeu de Paume des 'Marets', on the Vieille Rue du Temple*)

So, Herod was not surprised, accustomed as he was to such requests, when one fine morning, at the inn on the Rue Dauphine, a steward or major-domo appeared, with the venerable appearance

of one of those servants grown old in the service of great houses, who asked to speak to him on behalf of his master, the Count of Pommereuil, on theatrical business.

This major-domo, dressed in black velvet from head to toe, wore a chain of gold ducats around his neck, silk stockings, and shoes with large cockades, square at the toe, and a little loose, as befitted an old man who sometimes suffered from gout. A white collar spread its flaps over the black of the doublet, and enhanced the complexion of his face, swarthy from the fresh country air, on which his eyebrows, moustaches, and goatee beard stood out like touches of snow on an ancient sculpture. His long, greyish-white hair fell to his shoulders and rendered him the most patriarchal and honest of physiognomies. He was surely one of those stewards whose line is now lost, who looked after their master's fortune more fiercely than their own, remonstrated against foolish spending and, in times of setbacks, contributed their meagre savings to support the family that had nourished them in its prosperity.

Herod was most admiring of the fine air of loyalty possessed by this steward, who, having greeted him, addressed him courteously:

— 'Are you indeed that Herod who governs, with a hand as firm as Apollo's, the Muses' troupe, that excellent company whose fame has already spread throughout the city, and even beyond its walls; for it has reached to the depths of the domain where my master lives.'

— 'It is I who have that honour,' replied Herod, making the most graceful bow that his forbidding and tragic expression would allow.

— 'The Count of Pommereuil,' the old man continued, 'would greatly like to entertain some important guests of his by offering them a theatrical performance at his château. He thinks there to be no finer troupe than yours to fulfil that purpose, and sent me to ask if it would be possible for you to give such a performance at his estate, which is only a few leagues from here. The Count, my master, is a great nobleman who spares no expense, and who wishes to acquire your illustrious company at any cost.'

— 'I would do anything to please so gallant a gentleman,' replied the Tyrant, 'though it is difficult for us to leave Paris, even for a few days, at the height of our popularity.'

— 'Three days would suffice,' said the major-domo, 'one for the journey, one for the performance, and the last for your return. There is a fully equipped theatre at the castle where you will only have to set out your scenery; moreover, here are one hundred pistoles which the Count of Pommereuil has asked me to place in your hands for any small travel expenses; you will receive the same after the performance, and the actresses will no doubt be given presents of rings, pins, or bracelets, which feminine coquetry always appreciates.'

Matching his actions to his words, the Count of Pommereuil's steward drew from his pocket a large, heavy purse, dropsical with coinage, tilted it, and poured onto the table a hundred fine new crowns of the most attractive brightness.

The Tyrant gazed at these coins, scattered one on top of another, with an air of satisfaction, stroking his broad black beard. When he had contemplated them long enough, he gathered them, arranged them in a pile, and then threw them into his pocket with a gesture of acquiescence.

— 'So then,' said the steward, 'you accept, and I may tell my master that you will answer his request.'

— ‘I am at His Lordship’s disposal, along with all my companions,’ replied Herod, ‘now designate the day on which the performance and the play that the Count desires are to take place, so that we may organise the necessary costumes and accessories.’

— ‘It would be excellent,’ replied the steward, ‘if it were Thursday, for my master’s impatience is great; as for the play, he leaves the choice to your taste and convenience.’

— ‘*L’Illusion Comique*,’ said Herod, ‘by a young author from Normandy (*Pierre Corneille, who was born in Rouen; the play dates from 1636*) who promises a lot, is the newest and most popular thing at the moment.’

— ‘Let it be *L’Illusion Comique*: his verse is not bad, and there is a superb role for Matamore.’

— ‘Now all that remains is to describe, in a precise manner so that we cannot go astray, the location of the estate and its château, and the route we must follow to reach it.’

The steward of the Count of Pommereuil gave such exact and detailed information that it would have sufficed for a blind man, only able to feel the ground with his staff; but doubtless fearing that the actor, once on the road, would no longer remember his instructions clearly, those variants on ‘go straight ahead, then right, then left,’ he added: ‘Do not burden your memory, full of the finest verses of our best poets, with such vulgar and prosaic details; I will send a lackey, who will serve as your guide.’

The matter thus concluded, the old man withdrew with a fulsome bow, which Herod graciously returned, and which, following the actor’s response, the steward repeated by bowing even lower. They looked like two parentheses suffering from Saint Vitus’ dance, wriggling towards each other. Not wishing to be defeated in this contest in politeness, the Tyrant descended the stairs, crossed the courtyard, and halted only on the threshold, from where he addressed a final bow to the steward: his back convex, his chest as concave as his belly allowed, his arms dangling, and his head almost touching the ground.

If Herod had kept the Count of Pommereuil’s steward in sight till the latter had reached the end of the street, he might, perchance, have noticed that, contrary to the laws of perspective, the steward’s height increased in inverse proportion to his distance from him. His bent back straightened, the senile trembling in his hands disappeared, and from the liveliness of his gait he did not seem at all gouty; but Herod had already entered the house and saw none of this.

On Wednesday morning, as the lads from the inn were loading the scenery and luggage onto a cart, hired by the Tyrant for the transport of the troupe and drawn by two strong horses, a tall, rascal of a footman in very clean livery, riding a Percheron, appeared at the door of the inn, cracking his whip in order to hasten the departure of the actors and act as their courier. The women, who were always lazy, and slow to rise and dress, even though they were actresses accustomed to dressing and undressing in the blink of an eye when costume changes required it, finally left their rooms and arranged themselves as comfortably as possible on the straw-stuffed cushions of the benches hung from the insides of the cart. The Samaritaine’s little bell-ringer was pounding away, signalling eight o’clock, when the heavy wagon started to move. In less than half an hour, they had passed the Porte Saint-Antoine, and the Bastille its cluster of towers mirrored in the black waters of the moat. They then crossed the suburbs, the misted crops dotted with small houses, and journeyed through the countryside in the direction of Vincennes, the keep visible in

the distance behind a light gauze of bluish vapour, a remnant of the nocturnal humidity dissipating in the sun's rays, like artillery smoke dispersed by the wind.

Quite soon, for the horses were fresh and travelling at a good pace, they reached the old fortress whose Gothic defences still made a good show though they were no longer able to resist cannons or bombards. The golden crescents which surmounted the minarets of the chapel, which is said to have been designed by Pierre de Montreuil and Raymond du Temple, shone joyfully above the ramparts as if they were proud to stand beside the cross, the sign of redemption. Then, after admiring that monument of the ancient splendour of our kings for a few minutes, they entered the wood, where, amidst the thickets and saplings, rose some majestic old oaks, undoubtedly contemporary with the one beneath which Saint Louis (*Louis IX*) dispensed justice, an occupation very becoming to a monarch.

As the road was hardly ever used, the rabbits, frolicking about, or running their paws over their whiskers, were surprised by the arrival of the cart, since it moved with little noise, the ground being soft and frequently carpeted with grass. They scampered off as if the dogs were after them; to the actors' amusement. Further on, a roe deer in utter fright, crossed the road, and they followed its flight through the leafless trees for a while. Sigognac was especially taken with these things, having been raised and nurtured in the countryside. It delighted him to see fields, bushes, woods, and wild creatures, a spectacle of which he had been deprived since he had lodged in the city, where one sees only houses, muddy streets, smoking chimneys, the work of men, and not the work of God. He would have felt ennui there, indeed, if he had not had the company of that sweet woman, whose eyes contained enough azure to replace that of the sky.

As they left the woods, a small hill presented itself. Sigognac said to Isabella: 'Dear soul, while the coach slowly climbs this slope, might it not be convenient for you to descend, place your hand on my arm, and take a few steps? It will warm your feet, and stretch your legs. The road is level, and the weather is fine; clear, cool and crisp, but not too cold.'

The young actress accepted Sigognac's offer, and, placing the tips of her fingers on the hand he offered her, jumped lightly to the ground. It was a way of granting her lover an innocent tête-à-tête that her modesty would have refused in the solitude of a closed room. They walked sometimes, almost elevated by their love, skimming the ground like birds, sometimes stopping at each step to contemplate each other, and enjoy being together, side by side, arms entwined and gazing deep into each other's eyes. Sigognac told Isabella how much he loved her; this sentence, which he had repeated more than a score of times, seemed to the young woman as new as Adam's employment of it must have seemed on trying out the verb the day after Eve's creation. As she was the most delicate and disinterested person in the world in matters of feeling, she tried by means of petty vexations and loving denials to contain within the limits of friendship a love that she did not wish to fully reward, judging it harmful to the Baron's future.

But these pretty debates and disputes only served to increase Sigognac's love, who at that moment was thinking of the disdainful Yolande de Foix no more than if she had never existed.

— 'Whatever you do, darling,' he said to his beloved, 'you will not succeed in exhausting my constancy. If necessary, I will wait till your scruples have dissipated of their own accord, till your beautiful golden hair has changed to silver.'

— ‘Oh! I will be a true cure for love, then, being ugly enough to frighten the proudest gallant,’ Isabella replied; I would be afraid of punishing your fidelity by rewarding it so.’

— ‘Even at sixty years of age, you will retain your charm like the beautiful old lady of François Maynard’s poem (*see his ode, ‘La Belle Vieille’, his collected works were published in 1646*),’ Sigognac replied gallantly, ‘since your beauty derives from the soul, which is immortal.’

— ‘All the same,’ the young woman continued, ‘you would have been truly taken in, if I took you at your word, and promised you my hand but only when I am fifty years old. Still,’ she continued, regaining her seriousness, ‘let us cease this banter; you know my resolution, be content to be loved more than any mortal has ever been since hearts have beaten on this earth.’

— ‘I should rest content with so charming a confession, I agree; but, as my love is infinite, it cannot suffer the slightest barrier. God may well tell the sea: “You shall go no further,” and be obeyed. A passion such as mine knows no shore, and like the tide always rises, even though with your heavenly voice you say to it: ‘Stop there.’

— ‘Sigognac, you are angering me with such things,’ said Isabella, giving the Baron a little pout more graceful than the most charming smile; for, in spite of herself, her soul was flooded with joy at these protestations of a love that no coldness could repel.

They walked a few steps without speaking; Sigognac, by insisting further, was afraid of displeasing the one he loved more than his life. Suddenly Isabella abruptly left his hand and, giving a childish cry, ran towards the edge of the road with the lightness of a doe. At the side of a ditch, at the foot of an oak tree, among the dry leaves piled there by winter, she had noticed a violet, the first of the year, surely, for it was still only February; she knelt down, parted the dead leaves and blades of grass, delicately, cut the frail stem with her fingernail and returned with the little flower, happier than if she had found a clasp of jewels amidst the moss, forgotten by some princess.

— ‘See how charming it is,’ she said, showing it to Sigognac, ‘with its leaves barely unfolded in these first rays of sunshine.’

— ‘It was scarcely the sun,’ Sigognac replied, ‘but your gaze that made it bloom. Its flower is exactly the colour of your eyes.’

— ‘Its odour fails to spread far because it’s cold,’ Isabella continued, putting the chilly flower in her bodice. After a few minutes she retrieved it, inhaled the scent for a long time, and handed it to Sigognac, after furtively placing a kiss on it.

— ‘How sweet it smells now! The warmth of my breast makes it exhale the perfume of its little timid, modest flowery soul.’

— ‘You have perfumed it,’ replied Sigognac, raising the violet to his lips and garnering Isabella’s kiss; ‘this delicate, sweet scent has nothing earthly about it.’

— ‘Ah! the villain,’ said Isabella, ‘I give him a scented flower in a friendly manner, and there he is, sharpening *concetti* in the style of Giambattista Marino (*the Neapolitan poet, 1569-1625*), as if, instead of being here on the path, he was flirting in an alleyway with some notorious woman full of affectation. There’s no way to restrain him; to every word, even the simplest in the world, he responds with a compliment!’

However, despite her apparent disdain, the young actress probably did not hold it against Sigognac, because she took his arm again, and perhaps even leant on it a little more than her gait, usually so light, and the path, as smooth as that in a garden, required. Which proves that the purest virtue is not insensitive to praise, and that modesty itself rewards flattery.

The cart began to slowly ascend a quite steep slope, at the foot of which a few cottages squatted, as if to save themselves the trouble of climbing higher. The country-folk who lived there were tending to the fields, and the only figures seen at the side of the road were a blind man accompanied by a young boy, who had remained there, doubtless to beg alms of the travellers.

The blind man, who seemed burdened by the years, was intoning, in a nasal tone, a kind of lament, in which he deplored his blindness and implored the charity of passers-by, promising them his prayers, and guaranteeing them paradise in return for their kindness. For some time, his melancholy voice had filled the ears of Isabella and Sigognac, an unwelcome and annoying buzzing behind their sweet and loving conversation, and even the Baron was growing impatient; for, when a nightingale is singing close by, it's tiresome to hear a crow croaking in a corner.



'...A blind man accompanied by a young boy.'

As they neared the old man, the latter, alerted by his guide, redoubled his moans and supplications. To excite their pity, and gain their largesse, he shook a wooden bowl, with a jerky movement, in which clinked a few deniers, liards (*worth three deniers*), pieces of silver, and other small change. A rag surrounded his head, and over his back, curved like the arch of a bridge, was thrown a large, very rough and very heavy brown wool blanket, full of holes, made more for a beast of burden than a Christian, and which he had doubtless inherited from some mule that had died from glanders or scabies. His upturned eyes showed white, and on that brown and wrinkled face produced a hideous effect; the lower part of his face was buried in a long grey beard, worthy of a Capuchin friar or a hermit, which fell to his navel, like a hairy form of the antipodes. Of his whole body, only his hands were visible, emerging trembling from the opening of his cloak to shake his begging bowl. As a sign of piety and submission to the decrees of providence, the blind

man had been kneeling on a meagre pile of straw, more beaten-down and rotten than Job's ancient dunghill. The compassionate, before this human rag, could only shudder; almsgivers threw their offerings at him, and turned their heads away in pity.

The child, standing beside the blind man, had a fierce and haggard expression. His face was half-veiled by long locks of black hair that hung down his cheeks. An old, battered hat, much too large for him, found beside some boundary stone or other, plunged the top of his face in shadow, leaving only the chin visible, and the mouth, whose teeth shone with a sinister whiteness in the light. A kind of loose coat of coarse patched canvas formed his entire garment, and outlined a thin and sinewy body, not without elegance despite its wretchedness. His delicate feet, lacking shoes or stockings, had been reddened by contact with the cold ground.

Isabella was touched by the sight of this sorry pair, combining the misfortune of old age and childhood, and she halted before the blind man, who was reciting his prayers with ever-increasing volubility, seconded by the shrill voice of his guide, and searched for her purse so as to give the beggar a silver coin. But she could not find her purse, and, turning to Sigognac, asked him to lend her a tester or two, to which the Baron readily agreed, though the blind man, and his lament, displeased him somewhat. Being a gallant man, so as to prevent Isabella from approaching the fellow, he approached himself, and placed a coin in the begging bowl.

Instead of thanking Sigognac for his alms, the beggar straightened from his bent posture, and to Isabella's great horror, opening his arms like a vulture flapping its wings to take flight, he unfurled the large brown cloak which had seemed to burden him, dragged it from his shoulder, and threw it, with a movement like that of a fisherman casting his net into a pond or a river, such that the heavy material spread like a cloud over Sigognac's head, covering it, and falling heavily over his body, the edges being weighted like those of a net, depriving him at the same time of his sight, his breathing, and the use of his hands and feet.

The young actress, petrified with terror, sought to scream, flee, call for help, but before she could utter a sound, felt herself lifted from the ground with extreme agility. The old blind man, who had become, in a minute, youthful and sighted, by a miracle more infernal than celestial, had seized her beneath the arms, while the young boy supported her legs. Silently, they carried her off the path, and halted behind a shack, where a masked man on a sturdy horse was waiting.

Two other fellows, also on horseback, masked and armed to the teeth, stood behind a wall that prevented them from being seen from the road, ready to come to the aid of the first, if necessary.

Isabella, more than half-dead with fright, was seated on the saddle-bow, covered with a cloak folded several times so as to form a sort of cushion. The rider wrapped a leather strap round her waist, loosely enough to encircle her at the height of her loins and, having arranged matters thus, with a rapidity and dexterity proving long practice in such hazardous abductions, he gave his horse the spur, which sprang forward, and set off at a pace that proved the dual load hardly weighed on it: it is true the young actress was quite light.

All this happened in a shorter time than it takes to write. Sigognac struggled under the heavy cloak of the false blind man, like a retiarius (*a Roman gladiator who fought with net, trident, and dagger*) entangled in his adversary's net. He raged, deeming it an ambush planned by Vallombreuse so as to abduct Isabella, and nigh-on exhausted himself with the effort. Happily, the idea came to him

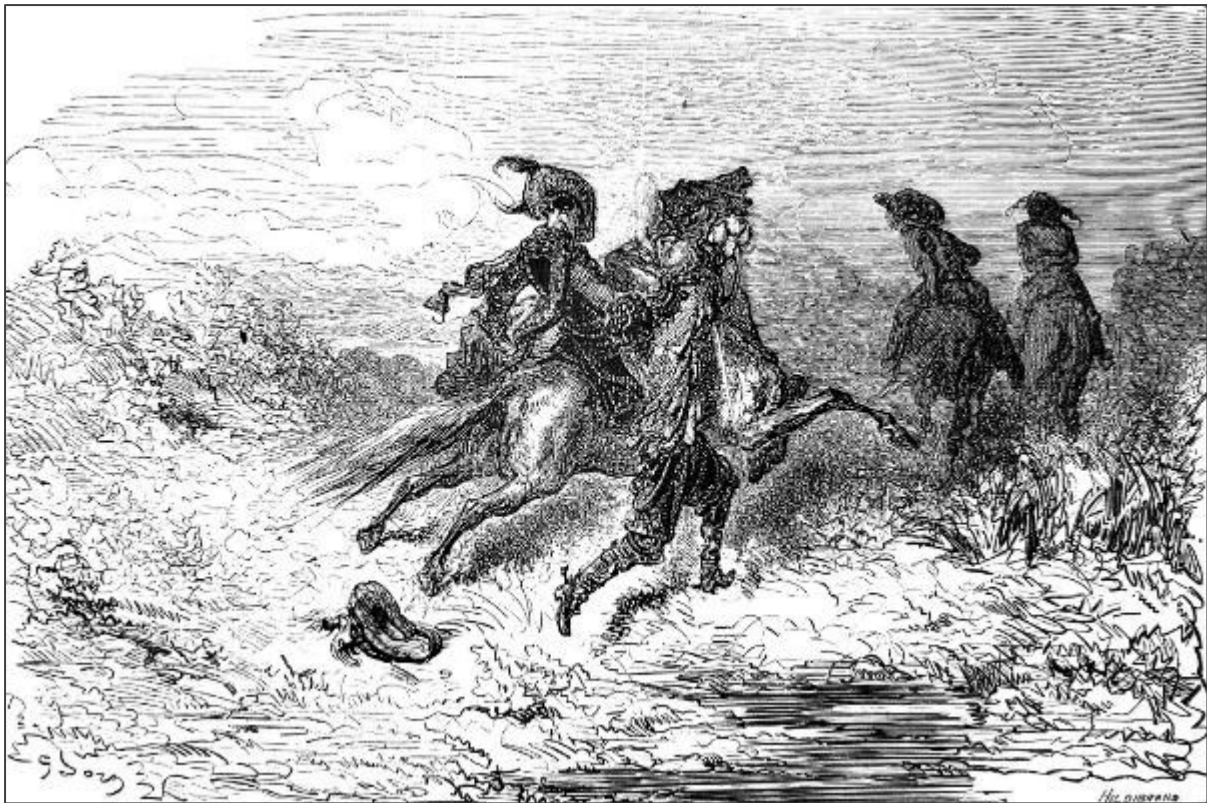
to draw his dagger, and slit the thick fabric that weighed him down like those leaden copes worn by the damned in Dante's *Inferno* (see *Canto XXIII*).

With two or three strokes, he escaped his prison; like an unhooded falcon, scanned the countryside with a swift, piercing gaze; and saw Isabella's kidnappers cutting across the fields, seemingly trying to reach a small clump of trees not far from there. As for the blind man and the child, they had vanished, having hidden themselves in some ditch or under a bush. But it was not that vile pair that Sigognac sought. Throwing off his cloak, which would have hindered him, he launched himself in pursuit of the scoundrels with desperate fury. The Baron was alert, well-built, made for running, and, in his youth, had often competed against the most agile children of the village. The kidnappers, turning around in their saddles, saw the distance between them and the Baron diminishing, and one of them even fired a pistol shot at him, to deter his pursuit. But he missed his aim, for Sigognac, still in flight, dodged to right and left, so as not to be hit. The rider who was carrying Isabella tried to take the lead, leaving it to his rearguard to deal with Sigognac, but the young woman placed on the saddle did not allow him to guide his mount as he would have liked, struggling and turning herself about, while trying to slide to the ground.

Sigognac was drawing closer and closer, the terrain no longer being favourable to horses. He had unsheathed his sword, without slowing down, which he held high; but he was on foot, alone, against three well-mounted men, and his breath was beginning to fail him; he made a prodigious effort, and in two or three bounds reached the horsemen who were aiding the kidnapper's escape. To avoid wasting time fighting them, he jabbed, two or three times with the point of his rapier, the rumps of their mounts, hoping that goaded in that way, the horses would bolt. Indeed, maddened by pain, they reared, kicked and, taking the bit in their teeth, however hard their riders tried to restrain them, they gained the upper hand, and began to gallop as if the Devil were carrying them off, disregarding ditches or obstacles, such that in a moment they were out of sight.

Panting, his face bathed in sweat, his mouth dry, believing every minute that his heart would burst in his chest, Sigognac finally reached the masked man who was holding Isabella across the withers of his mount. The young woman was shouting: 'Save me, Sigognac, save me!'

— 'I am here,' the Baron rasped in a fitful, panting voice, and with his left hand he clung to the strap that bound Isabella to the brigand. He tried to pull the man down, running alongside the horse and clambering higher, like those leapers from steed to steed whom the Romans called *desultores*. But the rider was clenching his knees, and it would have been as easy to unscrew the torso of a centaur as to tear him from his saddle; at the same time, the fellow was searching with his heels for the belly of his beast to spur it onwards, and try to shake off Sigognac, whom he could not grapple with, since his hands were busy holding the bridle and clasping Isabella. The horse, thus reigned back and hindered, was losing speed, which allowed Sigognac to catch his breath a little; he even took advantage of the slight pause to try to stab his opponent; but his fear of injuring Isabella amidst these tumultuous efforts rendered the blow too feeble.



‘I’m here,’ the Baron rasped.

The rider, letting go of the reins for a moment, took a knife from his jacket and cut the strap to which Sigognac was clinging desperately; then he plunged the star-shaped rowels of his spurs, making the blood spurt, into the flanks of the poor animal which galloped forward with irresistible speed. The leather strap remained in Sigognac’s hand, who, no longer supported, and surprised by the feint, fell painfully on his back. Though he rose with agility and gathered his sword which had rolled four paces away, this short interval was long enough for the rider to gain an advantage that the Baron could not hope to counter, tired as he was by the unequal struggle and furious pace. However, hearing Isabella’s cries diminishing with distance, he set off again in pursuit of the kidnapper; a useless but great-hearted effort to thwart the abduction of his love! But he was losing ground considerably, and the rider had already reached the wood whose mass, though devoid of leaves, was sufficient, as regarded the tangle of its trunks and branches, to mask the direction the bandit had taken.

Though furious, and pained at the outrage, Sigognac was forced to halt, leaving his beloved Isabella in the clutches of this demon; unable to rescue her even with the help of Herod and Scapin who, at the sound of pistol fire, had leapt from the cart, suspecting some altercation, mishap or ambush, though the rogue of a lackey tried to hold them back.

In a few short, jerky words, Sigognac informed them of Isabella’s abduction, and all that had occurred.

— ‘Vallombreuse’s hand is apparent in this,’ said Herod. ‘Did he learn of our trip to the Château de Pommereuil, and therefore set this ambush for us? Or was that a mere charade, for

which I received an advance only as a stratagem intended to lure us from the city where such actions are difficult and dangerous to perpetrate? In that case, the scoundrel who played the venerable butler is the finest actor I have ever seen. I would have sworn that the fellow was the innocent steward of a good house, full of virtues and qualities. But now there are three of us, let us search this grove in all directions, to find at least some indication of our Isabella's whereabouts, she whom I love, Tyrant as I am, more than my own poor life and limbs. Alas! I fear that innocent butterfly will be caught in the toils of a monstrous spider who will slay her before we can disentangle her from its all too well-crafted web.'

— 'I'll squash it,' cried Sigognac, striking the ground with his heel as if he were crushing the spider beneath his boot, 'I'll crush the poisonous beast!'

The terrible expression on his usually calm and gentle countenance showed that this was not an empty boast and that he would do just as he said.

— 'Well,' said Herod, 'without wasting more words, let's enter the wood, and beat it. Our prey cannot be far, as yet.'

Indeed, on the opposite side of the grove Sigognac and the actors were traversing, a carriage, its curtains drawn, was racing along with all the speed that a musketry-volley of whiplashes could draw from four post horses, despite the undergrowth that hampered their legs, and the saplings that whipped their faces. The two riders whose mounts Sigognac had jabbed were galloping beside the carriage doors, having succeeded in calming the steeds, one of them leading the masked man's horse by the bridle; since their companion had entered the carriage no doubt to prevent Isabella from lifting the blinds to call for help, or even attempting to leap to the ground at the risk of her life.

Unless one possessed the seven-league boots that Tom Thumb so cunningly stole from the Ogre (*see Perrault's fairytale 'Le Petit Poucet', 1697*), it would have been foolish to run after a carriage driven at such a pace, and so well defended. All that Sigognac and his comrades could do was observe the direction which the group were taking, a slight clue indeed as regards locating Isabella. The Baron attempted to follow the wheel-tracks, but the weather was dry, and the treads had left only light marks on the hard ground; even then, the marks soon became confused with the furrows made by other carriages and carts that had passed on the road during the previous few days. Arriving at a crossroads, where the track divided into several branches, the Baron completely lost the trail, and remained more embarrassed than Hercules between Voluptuousness and Virtue (*see the parable attributed to Prodicus of Ceos and known from Xenophon, also Dürer's engraving, Hercules at the Crossroads, of 1498*). He was forced to retrace his steps, as a false judgment might have led him further from his goal. The little troupe therefore returned, sadly, to the cart where the other actors were waiting with some concern, anxious for clarification of the whole mystery.

As soon as the affair had commenced, the lackey driving the cart had increased its speed, so as to deprive Sigognac of the actors' assistance, though they had shouted at him to stop; and, when the Tyrant and Scapin had dismounted despite him on hearing the pistol volley, he had leapt down and, crossing the ditch, headed out to join his accomplices, seemingly caring little whether the comedy troupe reached the castle of Pommereuil thereafter, or no, if indeed that castle existed: a matter doubtful at least, after what had just happened.

Herod asked an old woman who was walking in their direction with a bundle of sticks on her back, if they were very far from Pommereuil: to which the old woman replied that she knew of no estate, town or château of that name, for several leagues around, although she had, since her childhood, being now seventy years of age, scoured the whole surrounding country, her occupation being to beg, and seek a wretched living by the wayside.

It was more than obvious that the whole tale was a feint, planned by wicked and devious rogues, for the benefit of some great man in love with Isabella, who must surely be Vallombreuse, because it had taken a number of people and a substantial amount of money to carry out the complex plot.

The wagon returned to Paris; but Sigognac, Herod and Scapin remained, intending to rent horses in some nearby village, which would allow them to search for and pursue the kidnappers more effectively.

Isabella, after the Baron's defeat, had been borne to a clearing in the woods and transferred to a second carriage, in less than three or four minutes though she struggled as best she could; then the carriage had driven away, wheels thundering, as, those of Salmoneus' chariot are said to have thundered, intentionally, when he drove over the bridge of brass he had built. Opposite her sat, respectfully, the masked man who had borne her away on his saddle.

At a movement she made to put her head out the window, the man reached out his arm and held her back. Her struggles were in vain, against that iron hand. Isabella fell back, and began to cry out, hoping to be heard by some passerby.

— 'Mademoiselle, please, calm yourself,' said her mysterious captor, with the most exquisite politeness. 'Do not force me to use physical constraint against such a charming and adorable person. No one means you any harm, perhaps even a great deal of good. Do not persist in useless rebellion: if you show yourself to be wise, I will maintain the greatest respect for you; a captive queen could not be treated better; but if you act like a demoness, if you struggle and cry out for aid, which will not appear, I have the means to subdue you. This will render you mute, and this other ensure that you remain calm.'

And the man took from his pocket a most artistically-formed gag, and a long silk cord rolled into a ball.

— 'It would be barbaric,' he continued, 'to adapt this kind of muzzle or bridle to such a fresh, pink, mellifluous mouth; bracelets of cord would also be most unsuited, you must admit, to those charming and delicate wrists made to wear gold bracelets studded with diamonds.'

The young actress, angry and desolate though she was, yielded to these reasons, which were indeed good. Physical resistance would serve no purpose. Isabella therefore took refuge in the corner of the carriage, and remained silent. But sighs swelled her breast, and tears from her beautiful eyes wet her pale cheeks, as raindrops might the petals of a white rose. She thought of the threat to her virtue, and of Sigognac's despair.

— 'Her nervous crisis,' thought the masked man, 'is followed by a crisis of weeping; things follow their customary course. So much the better, it would have bothered me to act brutally as regards this amiable girl.'

Crouched in her corner, Isabella occasionally cast a fearful glance towards her guard, who noticed this and said to her in a voice that he tried to render gentle, though its tones were naturally hoarse: 'You have nothing to fear from me, mademoiselle, I am a gallant man, and will undertake nothing that displeases you. If fortune had favoured me with more of her riches, I would certainly not have abducted you for the benefit of another, honest, beautiful and full of talent as you are; but the rigours of fate sometimes preclude delicacy, and require somewhat bizarre deeds.'

— 'So, you confess,' said Isabella, 'that you were bribed to kidnap me, in this infamous, abusive and cruel manner!'

— 'After the actions I have performed,' replied the man in the mask, in the most tranquil tone, 'it would be quite idle to deny it. There are, on the streets of Paris, a certain number of philosophers, like myself, lacking passions of our own, who take an interest in those of others, for pay, and render them in a position to satisfy them by lending them our spirit, courage, wits, and arms; but to change the subject, how charming you were in the recent comedy! You acted the confession scene with a grace unlike any other. I applauded you to the fullest. The pair of hands that clapped like washerwomen's paddles, were mine!'

— 'I say to you, in reply: forego these inappropriate remarks and compliments. Where are you leading me like this, against my will, and in spite of all law and propriety?'

— 'I cannot tell you, and besides, it would be completely useless for me to do so; we are bound to secrecy like confessors or doctors; the most absolute discretion is indispensable in these hidden, perilous, and fanciful affairs, conducted by masked and anonymous shadows. Often, for greater security, we are not allowed to know who directs our actions, nor do they know us.'

— 'So, you know not the hand behind this outrageous and guilty act; the kidnapping of a young girl from her companions, on a highway?'

— 'Whether I do or no, it comes to the same thing, since awareness of my duty seals my mouth. Look among your lovers for the most ardent and the most maltreated. It will undoubtedly be him.'

Seeing that she would get nothing from him, Isabella said no more to her guard. Besides, she had no doubt that Vallombreuse was the author of the deed: the threatening way in which he had spoken, from the threshold of the door, those words: 'Farewell, mademoiselle!' during his visit to the Rue Dauphine, had remained engraved in her memory, and with a man of that stamp, so furious in his desires, so intense in his wishes, that simple sentence did not bode well. This conviction increased the poor actress's apprehension, who turned pale, thinking of the assaults that her modesty would have to endure, from this haughty lord, more wounded by the blow to his pride than by love. She hoped that Sigognac, full of courage, would come to her aid. But would her faithful and valiant friend succeed in discovering her in time, in the obscure retreat to which her captors were bearing her? 'At any rate,' she said to herself, 'if this evil duke wishes to confront me, I have Chiquita's knife in my bodice, and can sacrifice my life for the sake of my honour.' This resolution, once taken, restored her tranquility somewhat.

The carriage had been rolling along at the same pace for two hours or so, without stopping except for a few minutes to change horses at a relay station arranged in advance. As the drawn curtains hid the view, Isabella was unable to guess in what direction she was being taken. Though

she did not know that countryside, if she had been able to look outside, she might have oriented herself somewhat by the sun; but she was being borne away in secrecy towards the unknown.

The carriage wheels, in clanking over the iron cross-beams of a drawbridge, warned Isabella that the journey had ended. Indeed, the carriage halted, the door opened, and the masked man offered his hand to the young actress so she might descend.

She glanced around, and found herself in a large square courtyard formed by four brick buildings, whose vermilion colour had been altered by time to a dark and gloomy hue. Long, narrow windows pierced the interior facades, and behind their greenish panes closed shutters could be seen, indicating that the rooms which they fronted had been uninhabited for a length of time. A border of moss surrounded each paving stone in the courtyard, and near the foot of each wall a few patches of grasses had grown. At the bottom of the steps, a pair of Egyptian-style sphinxes, on pedestals, stretched out blunt claws, and patches of the yellow and grey leprosy that clings to old stone mottled their rounded rumps. Though imbued with that melancholy air granted to dwellings by the absence of their master, the château, which was unknown to her, still possessed a pleasant appearance and suggested an active owner. It was deserted, but not abandoned, and no sign of dilapidation was visible. The body was intact; only the soul was missing.

The masked man handed Isabella over to a sort of footman in grey livery. The footman took the lead as they ascending a vast staircase, whose ornate banister was fashioned in scrolls and arabesques of ironwork, fashionable under the former reign, and led her to an apartment that must once have seemed the *ne plus ultra* of luxury, and whose faded richness still challenged modern elegance. Old oak panelling covered the walls of the first room, its architecture displaying pilasters, cornices, and frames decorated with sculpted foliage, and containing Flemish tapestries. In the second chamber, also panelled in oak, but with more elaborate ornamentation and enhanced with gilding, paintings, which replaced the tapestries, presented allegories whose significance was somewhat difficult to discover beneath the residues of candle-smoke, and layers of yellow varnish; their shadows had darkened, and only the lighter areas were still distinguishable. These figures of divinities, nymphs and heroes, half-emerging from the shadows, and only perceptible as regards their luminous portions, produced a singular effect and, at eve, in the wavering light of a lamp, roused a degree of fear. The bed occupied a deep alcove and was draped in a quilt embroidered in petit-point, and striped with bands of velvet; the whole was quite magnificent, though muted in tone. A few threads of gold and silver gleamed amidst the faded silk and wool, and the crushed fabric once red in hue shone with a bluish tone. A finely-carved dressing table's tilted Venetian mirror revealed to Isabella the pallor of her features, and the degree to which they seemed altered. A large fire, indicating that the young actress was expected, burned in the fireplace, a vast monument supported by sheathed herms, and adorned with volutes, consoles, garlands, and ornaments of a somewhat heavy richness, in the middle of which was enshrined a portrait of a man whose expression struck Isabella greatly. The figure seemed not unknown to her; in the way one remembers on waking one of those forms seen in a dream which, failing to vanish with the dream, dogs one's thoughts for a long time afterwards. The face was pallid, with dark eyes, ruddy lips, and brown hair, and bore the proud expression of an individual of about forty years of age, full of nobility. A cuirass of burnished steel, decorated with lines of nielloed gold, which a white scarf traversed, covered the chest. Despite her anxiety, and the legitimate fear that her situation inspired in her, Isabella could not help gazing at this portrait, her eyes returning to it as if fascinated.

There was in the face a resemblance to that of Vallombreuse; but the expression was so unlike his that the connection seemed tenuous and was lost.

She was deep in her reverie when the footman in grey livery, who had disappeared for a few moments, returned with two servants carrying a small table with a single place setting, and said to the captive: 'Mademoiselle is served.' One of the servants silently moved forward an armchair, the other uncovered a soup tureen, a piece of ancient and massive silverware, and from it rose a whirl of fragrant smoke announcing a succulent broth.

Isabella, in spite of the grief her adventure had evoked, felt a hunger for which she reproached herself, as if Nature had lost its right to command her; the idea that these dishes perhaps contained some narcotic which would leave her defenceless to assault restrained her, and she pushed away the plate into which she had already plunged her spoon.

The footman in grey livery, seeming to sense her apprehension, tasted the wine, the water, and all the dishes placed on the table before offering them to Isabella. The prisoner, somewhat reassured, drank a mouthful of broth, ate a mouthful of bread, sucked on the wing of a chicken, and, this light repast finished, as the emotions of the day had given her a fever, she brought her armchair closer to the fire and remained thus for some time, her elbow on the arm of her chair, her chin in her hand, and her mind lost in vague and painful reverie.

She then rose, and went to the window to see what the view revealed. There was no grille, no iron-bars, nor anything reminiscent of a prison. But leaning out, she saw, at the foot of the wall, the green and stagnant water of a deep moat which surrounded the château. The drawbridge over which the carriage had passed was raised, and unless one could swim the moat, any means of communication with the outside world was impossible. Even then, it would have been difficult to climb the moat's steep stone revetment. As for any sight of the horizon, an avenue, formed of ancient trees planted about the building, provided a complete screen. From the windows, one could see only intertwined branches, which, even bare of leaves, hid the château's surroundings. It was necessary to renounce all hope of escape or deliverance, and to await events in a state of nervous anxiety worse to endure perhaps than the most dreadful of catastrophes.

Poor Isabella shuddered at the slightest noise. The murmur of water from the moat, the sighing of the wind, the creaking emitted by the woodwork, and the crackling of the fire, made cold sweat break out on her back. Every moment she expected the opening of a door, the movement of a panel, which would reveal a secret corridor, from the dark depths of which *something* would emerge, man or ghost. The actual appearance of a spectral form would even perhaps have frightened her less. As the twilight deepened, her terror increased; and when a tall footman entered, carrying a torch laden with candles, she almost fainted.

While Isabella trembled with fear in her solitary apartment, her captors, were carousing happily in a lower room, for they were to remain at the château as a sort of garrison, in case of an attack upon it by Sigognac and his friends. They all drank like sponges, but one of them in particular displayed a remarkable power of ingestion. It was the fellow who had borne Isabella with him on his horse and, since he had removed his mask, all were free to contemplate his face, pale as cheese, from which a red fiery nose projected. From this cherry-hued appendage, the reader may recognise the presence, there, of Lampourde's friend, Malartic.

The End of Part III of Gautier's 'Le Capitaine Fracasse'

Part IV: Chapters XVI-XXII

Chapter XVI: Vallombreuse

Isabella, left alone in that unfamiliar room whence danger might arise at any moment in mysterious form, felt her heart oppressed by an inexpressible anguish, even though her wandering life had given her more courage than was common. Yet there was nothing sinister about the place, with its old yet well-maintained luxury. The flames danced cheerfully about the enormous logs in the hearth; the candles shed a bright light which, penetrating to the smallest corners, chased away her fearful imaginings along with the shadows. A gentle warmth reigned within, and everything invited a comfortable feeling of well-being. The paintings in the panels were too well-lit to take on any stranger an aspect, and the portrait in its ornamental frame above the fireplace, which Isabella had first noticed, lacked that fixed gaze, seen on the faces in certain pictures, which seems to follow one so frighteningly. Rather, the figure seemed to smile with a quiet, protective kindness, like the image of a saint one might invoke in times of danger. All this collection of tranquil, reassuring, and hospitable things failed to calm Isabella's nerves, still quivering like the strings of a guitar that have just been plucked; her glance wandered, anxiously and furtively, about her, since she wished to look but feared to look, while her over-agitated senses tried to interpret, amidst the profound stillness of the night, those imperceptible noises which are the voice of silence, and which terrified her. Lord knows what formidable meanings she attributed to them! Soon her uneasiness became so great that she resolved to quit the room, despite it being so well-lit, warm, and comfortable, and venture into the corridors of the château, at the risk of some dubious encounter, in search of some obscure exit, or a place of refuge. After checking that the doors of her room were not locked, she took, from the side-table, the lamp that the footman had left there for the night and, sheltering it with her hand, set out.

First of all, she located the staircase, with its intricate ironwork banisters, which she had climbed, escorted by the servant; she descended, thinking, rightly, that no exit favourable to her escape existed on the first floor. At the foot of the stairs, in the vestibule, she perceived a large double door, one knob of which she turned. That side of the door opened before her, with a creaking of wood and a grinding of hinges, the noise of which seemed to her equal to that of thunder, though it was scarcely audible three paces away. The dim light of the lamp, whose wick gave off a crackling sound in the damp air of this apartment long-sealed, revealed, or rather offered the young actress, a glimpse of, a vast room, in no way dilapidated, but possessing the deadened feel of a place no longer used; large oak benches leaned against the walls covered with figured tapestries; trophies, formed of coats of arms, gauntlets, swords, and shields, lit by the sudden gleams of candlelight, hung there. A heavy table, on massive legs, with which the young woman

almost collided, occupied the centre of the room; she circumnavigated it, but imagine her terror when, on approaching the door which faced the entrance and gave access to a further room, she encountered two figures armed from head to toe, motionless as sentinels, placed on each side of the doorway, their gauntlets crossed on the hilts of large swords whose points had been driven into the floor: the grilles of their helmets represented the faces of hideous birds, the holes simulated their eyes, and the nosepieces their beaks; on the crests, iron plates chiselled to represent feathers bristled like roused and palpitating wings; the lower part of the breastplate, gleaming luminously, bulged in a strange manner, as if swollen by full lungs beneath; from each knee and elbow pad protruded a point of steel curved like an eagle's claw, and the ends of each sabaton (*steel shoe*) also extended in a claw. In the flickering light of the lamp, which trembled in Isabella's hand, these two iron phantoms took on a truly frightening appearance, well-calculated to alarm the most courageous. Also, poor Isabella's heart was beating so hard that she could hear it throb, and feel the tremors in her throat. One may well believe she regretted having left the room on this adventurous nocturnal expedition. However, as the warriors were motionless, though her presence was obvious, nor made any attempt to brandish their swords to block her path, she approached one of them, and held the lamp beneath its nose. The man-at-arms was not at all troubled and, completely insensible, maintained his pose. Isabella, emboldened, and suspecting the truth, raised the visor which, once open, revealed only a void full of shadow, like a helm on a coat of arms. The two sentries were simply suits of curiously-wrought German armour, arranged on mannequin bodies. But the illusion was indeed credible for a poor captive wandering at night in a solitary castle, so much do these metallic shells like militaristic statues, modelled on the human body, recall its form even when empty, and render it more formidable with their rigid projections, and articulated joints. Isabella, despite her situation, could not help but smile on recognising her error, and like the heroes of chivalric romances, when, by means of a talisman, they have broken the spell that binds an enchanted palace, she bravely entered the second room, no longer concerned by the twin guards thus reduced to impotence.

The chamber was a vast dining room, as evidenced by tall carved-oak dressers on which valuable objects shone dimly: ewers, salt-cellars, spice-boxes, goblets, vases with swollen bellies, great silver or silver-gilt platters resembling shields or chariot wheels, and Bohemian and Venetian glassware, in slender and capricious forms, which, caught by the light, displayed gleams of green, red, and blue. Square-backed chairs arranged around the table seemed to be awaiting guests who never arrived, or, at night, might seat a host of shadowy diners. Cordovan leather, embossed with gold and patterned with flowers, stretched over the oak panelling that covered the walls to half-height, lit up here and there with tawny reflections as the lamp passed over them, adding to the darkness a warm, sombre richness. Isabella, glanced at this aged magnificence and hastened to cross the room to a third door.

The room she now entered, which seemed to be the main salon, was larger than the others, already spacious. The light of the lamp failed to illuminate its depths, and its feeble rays were lost a few steps in front of Isabella, the yellowish threads shining like sunlight in fog. Despite its paleness, the light pierced the shadows sufficiently to render the darkness frightening, and highlight contorted figures, vague sketches of things whose forms fear and imagination completed. Ghosts draped themselves in curtain-folds; the armchairs seemed to seat spectres, and monstrous shapes crouched in the darkest corners, hideously curled upon themselves, or clinging there by bat-like claws.

Quelling these imaginary terrors, Isabella continued on her way, and saw at the rear of the room a lordly canopy topped with feathers, decorated with coats of arms, whose blazons it would have been difficult to decipher, and surmounting a throne-like armchair placed on a platform covered with carpeting, which was reached by three steps.



'Quelling these imaginary terrors, Isabella continued on her way...'

All this, bathed, confused, drowned in shadow, betrayed only by a few reflections, took on a fierce, colossal and mysterious grandeur. The chair seemed as if presiding over a gathering of spirits, and it would not have required a great effort of the imagination to see a dark angel with long black wings seated therein.

Isabella quickened her pace, and, despite her lightness, the creaking of her shoes seemed dreadfully loud amidst the silence. The fourth room was a bedroom partly occupied by an enormous bed whose curtains, made of dark-red Indian damask, fell heavily from the frame. At its side, the silver crucifix above an ebony prie-dieu shimmered. A curtained bed, even in daylight, is somehow disturbing. One wonders what lies behind those drawn hangings; but at night, in an abandoned room, a closely-draped one is frightening indeed. It may hide a sleeper, a corpse, even a living being lying in wait. Isabella thought she heard behind the curtains the deep, intermittent, rhythmic breathing of a sleeping person; was it illusion or reality? Eager to make sure, she dared to push aside the folds of red fabric and allowed the beam of her lamp to fall on the empty bed.

A library followed the bedroom. In cupboards surmounted by the busts of poets, philosophers, and historians, who observed Isabella with large blank eyes, were shelved numerous volumes, in some disorder, their spines labelled with numbers and titles, the gilding of which was illuminated by the passage of her lamp. At this point, she reached a corner of the building and emerged into a long gallery occupying a different facade of the courtyard. Here, family portraits followed one another in chronological order. A row of windows faced the wall on which these paintings hung in frames of reddened old-gold. Shutters, each pierced at the top with an oval hole, covered these windows, and the arrangement produced at that moment a singular effect. The moon had risen, and its rays pierced these holes painting its light on the opposite wall; sometimes the bluish patch illuminated the face of a portrait and adorned it with a pallid mask. Beneath the magical glow, the painting then took on an alarming life, all the more so because, the body remaining in shadow, the head with its silvery pallor seemed to spring from its frame, as if carved in solid relief, to watch Isabella pass by. Others, which only the lamplight reached, maintained, beneath the yellowed varnish, their solemn, and dead attitude, yet it seemed that, through their dark eyes, the ancestral souls looked out on the world, as if through openings formed expressly for that purpose, and they were not the least sinister effigies in the collection.

It was for Isabella, courageous as she was, as brave an action to traverse this gallery, lined with threatening figures, as for a soldier to march in step before a firing squad. A cold sweat soaked her chemise between her shoulders as, anguished, she felt that these phantoms in breastplates and doublets adorned with orders of chivalry, and these dowagers with high ruffs and outsized farthingales, were descending from their frames behind her, and following, funereally, in procession. She even thought she could hear vague footsteps brushing, almost imperceptibly, the parquet floor at her heels. Finally, she reached the end of the long corridor and came to a glass door which opened onto the courtyard; she opened it, not without bruising her fingers on the old rusty key which turned with difficulty in the lock, and after having taken care to hide her lamp, so as to find it if and when she retraced her steps, she left the gallery, that place of terror and nocturnal phantoms.

At the sight of the open sky, in which a few stars, not quite eclipsed by the white light of the moon, glittered with a silvery scintillation, Isabella felt profound and delicious joy, as if she were returning from death to life; it seemed to her that God now looked down on her from his firmament, whereas he might well have forgotten her when she was lost in the intense darkness, under those obscure ceilings, amidst that maze of rooms and corridors. Though her situation was in no way improved, an immense weight had lifted from her breast. She continued her explorations, but the courtyard was enclosed on all sides like the inner court of a fortress, with the

exception of a postern, or brick arch, doubtless opening onto the moat, for Isabella, leaning cautiously over it, felt a cool dampness, like that above deep water, rise to her face with a gust of air, and she heard the faint murmur of waves lapping at the base of the moat's wall. It was probable that the castle's kitchens were supplied from this moat; but to reach the far side, a boat would be needed, housed no doubt at the foot of the rampart, in some shed beyond Isabella's reach.

Escape was therefore as impossible on this side as on the others. This explained her relative freedom. Her cage was open, but only like those of exotic birds transported by sea, which, as we know, are obliged to return to perch on the mast after a brief excursion, since the nearest land is still so far away that their wings would cease to bear them before they could reach it. The moat round the castle acted the role of the ocean round a ship.

In a corner of the courtyard, a reddish glow filtered through the shutters of a ground-floor room, and, amidst the nocturnal silence, a vague murmur emanated from its shadowy angle. Isabella moved towards the light and the associated sounds, stirred by a feeling of curiosity readily comprehended; she applied her eye to these shutters, less hermetically sealed than the rest, and was easily able to see what was happening inside the room.

Around a table lit by a three-pronged lamp, which was suspended from the ceiling by a copper chain, a group of rogues of fierce and truculent mien were banqueting, among whom Isabella, though she had only seen them masked, easily recognised the men who had participated in her abduction. They were Piedgris, Tordgueule, La Râpée and Bringuénarilles, whose forms suited their charming names. The light falling from above made their foreheads shine, plunged their eyes into shadow, outlined the bridges of their noses, and clung to their extravagant moustaches, so as to exaggerate still further the savagery of those heads which scarcely needed to be illuminated to appear frightening. A little further away, at the end of the table, was seated, like some provincial brigand who could not compete with Parisian swordsmen, Agostin, free of the wig and false beard which had served him well when playing the part of the blind man. In the place of honour sat Malartic, unanimously elected king of the feast. His face was even paler and his nose redder than usual; a phenomenon which could be explained by the number of empty bottles arranged on the sideboard, like corpses borne from battle, and by the number of full bottles which the sommelier placed in front of him with tireless agility.

Isabella could only make out a few words, amidst the confused conversation of the drinkers, the meaning of which most often escaped her; since they were terms employed in the gambling dens, taverns, and fencing halls, sometimes even hideous slang terms borrowed from the dictionary of the Court of Miracles (*the slum district in Paris populated by beggars whose ailments miraculously vanished when not begging*) where the languages of Egypt and Bohemia are spoken. She found nothing in these fellows' speeches that enlightened her as to her fate, and somewhat overcome by the cold, she was about to withdraw when Malartic, to obtain silence, struck the table a frightful blow, that made the bottles reel as if they too were inebriated, and the glasses clink together with a crystalline ringing yielding the notes *do, mi, so, ti*. The toppers, drunk though they were, jumped half a foot in the air on their benches, and their faces turned, instantly, towards Malartic.

Taking advantage of this respite from the noise, Malartic rose, and lifting his glass, the wine glowing in the light like the gem set in a ring, said: 'Friends, listen to this song I've composed, for I employ the lyre as well as the sword; tis a Bacchic song as befits a true drunkard. Fish, that drink

water, are mute; if they drank wine, they would sing. So, let us show that we are human with a melody to accompany our drinking session.'

— 'The song! The song!' cried Bringuénarilles, la Râpée, Tordgueule and Piedgris, unable to comprehend such subtle dialectic.

Malartic cleared his throat, with a vigorous 'Hem!' or two, and, with all the manners of a singer summoned to the king's chamber, he intoned, in a voice which, though a little hoarse, was not lacking in pitch, the following verses:

'To Bacchus, that drunkard divine,
All shout "Drink!" and sing, as one:
"Long live the pure juice of the wine,
Trampled from the fruit of the vine!
And long live the ruby liquor won!"

Priests of the vine and grape are we,
The hue of the vintage, now, we bear.
The bottle holds the crimson we see,
With which the grape dyes you and me,
And pricks our noses, here and there.

Shame on him who sips clear water
Instead of downing the purest wine,
Let him bow down to jug and pitcher!
Or be changed to a frog forever,
And splash in the mud, no friend of mine!

The song was greeted with cries of joy, and Tordgueule, who prided himself on poetry, did not hesitate to proclaim Malartic the emulator of Saint-Amant (*Antoine Girard de Saint-Amant, 1594-1661, noted for his Bacchanalian songs*) an opinion which proved the degree to which drunkenness had swayed his judgement. A glass of red, full to the brim, was raised by each in honour of the singer, and as the glasses were emptied, they each poured out the last drop onto a fingernail, conscientiously, to show they had done so. This round finished off the weakest of the band; La Râpée slid under the table, where he acted as a mattress for Bringuénarilles, Piedgris and Tordgueule, who being more robust, merely let their heads fall forward, and fell asleep with their crossed arms for pillows. As for Malartic, he sat upright in his chair, cup in hand, eyes wide open and nose glowing so bright a red that it seemed to be shedding sparks like iron from the forge; he

repeated, mechanically with the solemn stupor of contained drunkenness, and without anyone joining him in the chorus:

‘To Bacchus, that drunkard divine,
All shout “Drink!” and sing, as one.’

Disgusted by this spectacle, Isabella took her eye from the gap in the shutters, and continued her investigations, which soon found her beneath the vault in which hung the chains and counterweights of the castle’s raised drawbridge. There was no hope of setting the heavy mechanism in motion, and, as it was necessary to lower the bridge to leave, the courtyard having no other exit, the captive had to abandon all plans of escape. She returned to collect her lamp from where she had left it, by the door to the portrait gallery, which she traversed this time with less terror, since she now knew its cause, fear being increased by the unknown. She crossed the library, swiftly, the hall of honour, and all the rooms she had explored with anxious caution. It seemed laughable to her to have been so frightened by the suits of armour, and she climbed the stairs she had descended with a deliberate step, holding her breath, and on tiptoe, for fear of awakening the slightest echo from the silent walls.

But what was her terror when, at the threshold of her room, she perceived a figure seated by the corner of the hearth! It was certainly no ghost, since the light of the candles, and the rays from the fire illuminated it in a way too clearly for her to be mistaken; it was a slender and delicate figure, indeed, but very much alive, as attested by two large black eyes of a wild brilliance, lacking the dull gaze of a spectre, which fixed themselves on Isabella framed in the doorway, with a compelling calmness. Long brown hair, swept back, allowed one to see in all its details an olive-coloured face, with finely sculpted features, and a youthful and lively leanness, the half-open mouth revealing a set of teeth of dazzling whiteness. The hands, tanned by the open air, but charmingly formed, crossed over the chest, showed nails paler than the fingers. The figure’s bare feet did not reach the ground, the legs being too short to reach the parquet floor from the armchair’s seat. Through a gap in the coarse linen shirt, beads of a pearl necklace shone vaguely.

From this last detail, Chiquita was immediately identifiable. It was she, in fact, dressed not as a girl but as a boy still, having adopted that disguise to play the deceitful role of the blind man’s guide. This outfit, composed of a chemise and wide breeches, did not become her badly; for she was at that age when the person’s gender is not always obvious.

Recognising the strange creature, Isabella at once recovered from the emotion this unexpected apparition had caused her. Chiquita was not in herself very formidable, and besides, she seemed to profess, towards the young actress, a sort of confused and unmerited gratitude, which she had displayed in her own way in their last encounter.

Chiquita, while gazing at Isabella, murmured in a low voice the prose-song she had hummed in a wild tone, as she passed through the bull’s-eye window, during that first attempted kidnapping at *Les Armes de France*: ‘Chiquita climbs through the holes in the wall, dances on the edge of the bars...’

— ‘Do you still have the knife,’ said this strange creature to Isabella as she approached the fireplace, ‘the knife with three red stripes?’

— ‘Yes, Chiquita,’ replied the young woman, ‘I keep it here, between my blouse and my bodice. But why the question? Is my life in danger?’

— ‘A knife,’ said the little girl, whose eyes shone with a fierce light, ‘a knife is a faithful friend; it does not betray its owner, if its owner allows it to drink; for knives are thirsty.’

— ‘You frighten me, you wicked child,’ replied Isabella, troubled by those extravagantly sinister words, which, given the position in which she found herself, might contain a useful warning.

— ‘Sharpen the point on the marble fireplace,’ continued Chiquita, ‘and strop the blade on your leather shoe.’

— ‘Why are you telling me all this?’ said the actress, looking very pale.

— ‘No reason; but whoever wishes to defend themselves should ready their weapons, that’s all.’

These strange and fierce phrases worried Isabella, and yet, on the other hand, Chiquita’s presence in her room reassured her. The little girl seemed to bear her a sort of affection which, though based on an idle whim of her own, was nonetheless real. ‘I will never kill you!’ Chiquita had said; and, in her savage mind, it was a solemn promise, a pact of alliance which she would not fail to keep. Isabella was the only human being who, after Agostin, had shown her sympathy. She had received from her the first jewel by which her childish coquetry had been pleased, and, still too young to be jealous, she naively admired the beauty of the young actress. That sweet face exercised a seduction over her, who until then had seen only haggard and ferocious expressions harbouring thoughts of rebellion, plunder or murder.

— ‘How is it that you’re here?’ Isabella asked Chiquita after a moment of silence. ‘Are you tasked with guarding me?’

— ‘No,’ Chiquita replied: ‘I came alone; the light of the lamp and the fire guided me. I was bored, stuck in a corner while those fellows drank bottle after bottle. I am so small, young, and thin, that no one pays any more attention to me than to a cat asleep under the table. At the height of their din, I slipped away. The odours of wine and meat repel me, accustomed as I am to the scent of the heather and resinous pine trees.’

— ‘And weren’t you afraid to wander without a candle, through these long dark corridors, these vast rooms full of darkness?’

— ‘Chiquita knows no fear. Her eyes see amidst shadows. Her feet walk there without stumbling. If she meets an owl, the owl shuts its eyes, and the bat folds its wings when she approaches. The ghosts step aside to let her pass or they retreat. The night is her friend, and hides from her none of its mysteries. Chiquita knows the owl’s nest, the thief’s hiding place, the murdered man’s grave, the places haunted by spectres; but never speaks of them in daylight.’

As she uttered these strange words, Chiquita’s eyes shone with a supernatural brilliance. One might surmise that her spirit, exalted by solitude, believed itself to possess magical powers. The scenes of robbery and murder with which her childhood had been filled had exerted a strong

influence on her ardent, uncultivated and feverish imagination. Her voice full of conviction had its effect on Isabella, who looked at her with superstitious apprehension.

— ‘I prefer,’ continued the girl, ‘to stay here, near the fire, beside you. You are beautiful, and I like to look at you; you resemble the good Virgin whom I saw shining on the altar; but only from a distance, for they chased me from the church, and set the dogs on me, on the pretext that my hair was unkempt, and my canary-yellow petticoat would make the faithful mock me. How white your hand is! Mine, set beside it, looks like a monkey’s paw. Your hair is as fine as silk; my mop bristles like a bush. Oh! I am very ugly, am I not?’

— ‘No, my little one,’ replied Isabella, touched in spite of herself by this naive burst of admiration, ‘you have your beauty too; you only need to be tidied a little to be the prettiest of girls.’

— ‘Do you think so? I’ll steal some nice clothes, so as to look well, and then Agostin will love me.’

This idea lit the child’s tawny face with a rosy glow, and for a few minutes she remained as if lost in a delightful and profound reverie.

— ‘Do you know where we are?’ Isabella asked, when Chiquita raised her eyelids, fringed with long black eyelashes that she had lowered for a moment.

— ‘In a castle belonging to the lord who has heaps of gold, and who wished to have you kidnapped in Poitiers. I had but to pull back the bolt, and it was done. But you had given me the pearl necklace, and I had no wish to cause you pain.’

— ‘Yet this time you helped to carry me off,’ said Isabella; ‘you don’t love me anymore, handing me over to my enemies thus?’

— ‘Agostin so ordered; it was necessary to obey. Besides, someone else would have acted as guide to the blind man, and I could not have entered the castle with you. Here, perhaps I can be of some use. I am courageous, agile, and strong, though small, and I would not see anyone hurt you.’

— ‘Is this castle where I am being held prisoner far from Paris?’ said the young woman, drawing Chiquita against her knee: ‘have you heard any of these men say its name?’

— ‘Yes, Tordgueule said the place was called...what was it again?’ murmured the girl, scratching her head in embarrassment.

— ‘Try to remember, my child,’ said Isabella, caressing Chiquita’s brown cheeks with her hand. The latter blushed with pleasure at this caress, for no one had ever shown her such attention.

— ‘I think it is Vall-om-breuse,’ replied Chiquita, syllable by syllable, as if listening to an inner echo. ‘Yes, Vallombreuse, I’m sure of it now; the very name of the lord your friend Captain Fracasse wounded in a duel. He would have done better to kill him. That duke is very wicked, though he scatters handfuls of gold about as a sower throws grain. You hate him, don’t you? And you would be very happy if you could manage to escape him.’

— ‘Oh, yes! But that’s impossible,’ said the young actress: ‘a deep moat surrounds the castle, and the drawbridge is closed. Any escape is impracticable.’

— ‘Chiquita laughs at gates, locks, walls, moats. Chiquita can leave the most secure prison at will, and fly to the moon before the astonished eyes of a jailer. If she wishes, before the sun rises, the captain will know where the one he seeks is hidden.’

Isabella feared, on hearing these incoherent sentences, that madness troubled Chiquita’s weak brain; but the child’s countenance was so perfectly calm, her eyes held so lucid a look, and the sound of her voice such an accent of conviction, that the supposition was inadmissible; surely this strange creature possessed some part of the almost magical powers which she attributed to herself.

As if to convince Isabella that she was not boasting, Chiquita said: ‘I will leave in a moment; let me think how to find a way; don’t speak, hold your breath; the slightest noise distracts me; I must listen to the Spirits.’

Chiquita tilted her head, put her hand over her eyes to isolate herself, remained deathly still for a while, then she raised her head, opened the window, climbed onto the sill, and gazed into the darkness with profound intensity. The dark water of the moat, stirred by the night breeze, lapped at the foot of the wall.

— ‘Will she, truly, take flight like a bat?’ the young actress said to herself, following Chiquita’s every movement with an attentive eye.

Opposite the window, on the far side of the moat, stood a large tree, several hundred years old, whose main branches extended almost horizontally, half over the ground, half over the water of the moat; but the end of the longest branch was eight or ten feet short of the castle wall. It was on this tree that Chiquita’s plan for escape was based. She retreated to the room, took from one of her pockets a very fine, tightly-coiled cord woven of horsehair, measuring twelve yards or more, and unrolled it, methodically, on the floor; took from another pocket a sort of iron hook which she attached to the rope; then she approached the window, and cast the hook into the branches of the tree. At the first attempt the iron failed to bite and, along with the rope, it fell back, clattering on the stones of the wall. On the second try, the hook’s claw pierced the bark, and Chiquita pulled the rope towards her, asking Isabella to pull on it with all her weight. The hanging branch gave way as much as the flexibility of the trunk allowed, and its tip drew five or six feet closer to the window. Then Chiquita tied the cord to the window’s ironwork with a knot that would not slip and, raising her wiry body with singular agility, she hung from the rope with both hands, and by shifting her wrists soon reached the branch which she straddled as soon as she felt its solidity beneath her.

— ‘Now undo the knot, so I can pull it towards me,’ she said to the prisoner in a low but distinct voice, ‘unless you feel like following me; but fear would fill your head, and vertigo drag at your feet and make you fall into the water. Farewell! I’m off to Paris, but I’ll be back soon. One moves swiftly by moonlight.’

Isabel obeyed, and the branch, no longer restrained, resumed its usual position, bearing Chiquita to the other side of the ditch. In less than a minute, using her knees and hands, she found herself at the bottom of the trunk, on firm ground, and soon the captive saw her move away at a quick pace and disappear into the bluish shadows of the night.

Everything that had just happened seemed like a dream to Isabella. In a kind of stupor, having not yet closed the window, she gazed at the motionless tree, the black outlines of whose skeleton

were outlined against the milky grey of a cloud penetrated by a diffuse light from the moon's disc which it half hid. She shuddered at seeing how frail at its tip the branch was to which the courageous and light-hearted Chiquita had not feared to confide herself. She was moved by the thought of the attachment shown by this poor, wild and wretched being whose eyes were so beautiful, luminous and passionate, the eyes of a woman in a child's face, and who showed so much gratitude for that paltry gift of hers. As the cool air seized her, and made her pearly teeth chatter feverishly, she closed the window, drew back the curtains, and settled herself in an armchair by the fire, her feet resting on the copper spheres of the andirons.

She had barely seated herself when the butler entered, followed by the same two servants as before carrying a small table covered with a rich, fringed tablecloth, on which a supper was served, no less fine and delicious than the dinner. A few minutes earlier, the entrance of these footmen would have thwarted Chiquita's escape. Isabel, still agitated by that moving scene, left the dishes placed before her untouched, and signalled that they should be taken away. But the butler had a plate of blancmanges and marzipans placed near the bed; he also spread a robe, nightcap, and nightgown, all trimmed with lace and of the finest design, on an armchair. Enormous logs were thrown onto the crumbling embers, and the candles were renewed. This done, the butler told Isabel that if she needed a maid to assist her, one would be sent to her. The young actress having made a gesture of dismissal, the butler left, with the most respectful bow in the world.

Once the butler and the footmen had withdrawn, Isabella, having thrown the robe over her shoulders, went to bed fully-dressed without getting between the sheets, so as to be ready to rise quickly in case of an alarm. She took Chiquita's knife from her bodice, opened it, locked the ferrule, and placed it near her within reach of her hand. These precautions taken, she lowered her long eyelids desiring to sleep, but sleep was hard to come by. The events of the day had agitated Isabella's nerves, and the apprehensions of the night were hardly designed to calm them. Besides, those ancient châteaux, no longer inhabited, have, during the dark hours, singular physiognomies; it seems that some being or other has been disturbed, that an invisible guest retreats at one's approach, into some secret corridor hidden in the walls. All sorts of small, inexplicable noises occur, unexpectedly. A piece of furniture creaks, a deathly hand seems to strike the woodwork sharply, a rat passes behind the curtain, a log riddled with woodworm bursts in the fire like a roasted chestnut and wakes one from a trance just as one is about to doze off. This is what happened to the young prisoner; she would sit up, frightened, open her eyes, look around the room, and, seeing nothing unusual, would rest her head on the pillow again. However, sleep finally overcame her, isolating her from the real world, the rumours from which no longer reached her. Vallombreuse, if he had been there, would have been free to pursue his reckless amorous enterprises; for fatigue had overcome modesty. Fortunately for Isabella, the young duke had not yet arrived at the château. Did he no longer care about his prey, now prisoned in his lair, and had the possibility of satisfying his whim quenched it? Not at all; the will of that handsome and wicked duke was more tenacious than ever, especially the will to do evil; for he felt, apart from voluptuousness, a certain perverse pleasure in flouting all divine or human law; but, so as to divert suspicion, on the very day of the abduction he had shown himself at Saint-Germain, had paid court to the king, followed the hunt, and, unemotionally, spoken to several people. That evening, he had gambled and openly lost sums that would have been significant for someone less wealthy. He had seemed in a charming mood, especially after a confidant had entered with a sombre face, bowed,

and handed him a letter. His need to establish, in the event of an investigation, an incontestable alibi had safeguarded Isabella's virtue that night.

After a slumber punctuated by strange dreams, in which sometimes she saw Chiquita running, waving her arms like wings, in front of Captain Fracasse on horseback, and sometimes the Duke of Vallombreuse with blazing eyes full of love or hatred, Isabella awoke and was surprised at how long she had slept. The candles had burned down to their sockets, the logs had been consumed, and a cheerful shaft of sunlight, penetrating the gap in the curtains, played freely over her bed, uninvited. The return of light was a great relief to the young woman. Her position, no doubt, was scarcely improved; but the danger was no longer magnified by the illusory fears that night and the unknown arouse in the steadiest minds. However, her joy was not long-lasting, for a creaking of chains was heard; the drawbridge was lowered: the sounds of the wheels of a carriage drawn at a brisk pace echoed from the bridge's platform, rumbled beneath the vault like a dull thunder, and died away in the inner courtyard.

Who could be entering in so haughty and magisterial a manner if not the lord of the place, the Duke of Vallombreuse himself? Isabella felt from these sounds, warning the dove of the hawk's presence though as yet he was invisible, that it was indeed the enemy, and none other. Her beautiful cheeks became pale as virgin wax, and her poor little heart began to beat wildly behind the fortress of her bodice, though without thought of surrender. Soon, making an effort to calm herself, the brave girl gathered her wits and prepared to defend herself. 'If only,' she said to herself, 'Chiquita arrives in time, and brings help'; and her eyes involuntarily turned towards the portrait medallion above the fireplace: 'O you, who have such a good and noble air, protect me against the insolence and perversity of your descendant. Let not this place in which your image shines witness my dishonour!'

After an hour, which the young duke had spent repairing the disorder that a quick journey always brings to a toilette, the butler entered Isabella's chamber, and, ceremoniously, asked her if she would receive the Duke of Vallombreuse.

— 'I am but a prisoner,' replied the young woman with dignity. 'My answer is no freer than my person, and this request, which would be polite in an ordinary situation, is only derisory in the state I in which I find myself. I have no means of preventing Monsieur the Duke from entering this room which I cannot leave. I do not accept his visit; I submit to it. It is a case of force-majeure. Let him enter if he pleases, at this hour or at another: it is all the same to me. Go and repeat my words to him.'

The butler bowed, retreated backwards towards the door, for he had been instructed to show the greatest respect towards Isabella, and disappeared to inform his master that 'Mademoiselle' agreed to receive him. After a few moments the butler reappeared, and announced the Duke of Vallombreuse.

Isabella had half-risen from her armchair, into which emotion made her retreat, covered with a deathly pallor. Vallombreuse advanced towards her, hat in hand, in an attitude of the deepest respect. As he saw her start at his approach, he stopped in the middle of the room, bowed to the young actress, and said to her in that voice which he knew how to sweeten so as to seduce:

— 'If my presence is too odious to the charming Isabella at the moment, and she requires some time to become accustomed to the idea of seeing me, I will withdraw. She is my prisoner, but I am no less her slave.'

— 'Such courtesies arrive tardily,' replied Isabella, 'after the violence you have employed against me.'

— 'That is the result,' the duke continued, 'of driving people to the limit with too fierce a show of virtue. Denied hope, they resort to extreme measures, knowing that such cannot worsen their situation. If you had been willing to allow me to pay court to you, and shown some indulgence to my suit, I would have remained among the ranks of your adorers, trying, by dint of delicate gallantry, amorous magnificence, chivalrous devotion, ardent and restrained passion, to slowly soften your rebellious heart. I would have inspired you, if not with love, at least with that tender pity which sometimes precedes it and inspires it. In the long run, perhaps, your coldness would have seemed unjust, for nothing would have induced me to wrong you.'

— 'If you had employed honest means,' said Isabella, 'I would have pitied a love that I could not share, since my heart could never yield itself, and at least I would not have been forced to hate you, a feeling that is not familiar to my soul, and which it is painful for me to experience.'

— 'Then, you hate me so greatly?' said the Duke of Vallombreuse, his voice quivering with spite. 'Yet I have not deserved it. My wrongs towards you, if any, derive from my passion alone; and what woman, however chaste and virtuous she may be, seriously resents in a gallant man the effect that her charms have produced on him despite herself?'

— 'Certainly, there is no reason for aversion when the lover keeps himself within the bounds of respect, and sighs away with discreet timidity. The most prudish can bear it; but when his insolent impatience gives way at the outset to the last excess, and proceeds by way of ambush, kidnapping, and sequestration, as you have not feared to proceed, there is no other possible feeling than unconquerable repugnance. Any soul, though the least haughty and proud, rebels when one tries to force it. Love, which is a divine thing, cannot be commanded or extorted. It arises where it wishes.'

— 'So, unconquerable repugnance, is all I may expect from you,' replied Vallombreuse, whose cheeks had grown pale and who had bitten his lips more than once as Isabella spoke to him with that gentle firmness which was the natural tone of that young person, as sensible as she was amiable.

— 'You have a way to regain my esteem and win my friendship. Grant me the freedom you have robbed me of. Have me borne by carriage to my anxious companions who do not know what has become of me, and are desperately searching for me, in mortal fear. Let me resume my humble life as an actress before this venture, from which my honour would suffer if it became known amongst a public astonished by my absence.'

— 'What misfortune,' cried the duke, 'that you should ask me for the one thing I cannot give you without betraying myself! If you desired but an empire, a throne, I would grant it; a star, I would go and seek it for you, by mounting into the heavens. But you wish me to open the door of this cage to which you would never return once you had left. Impossible! I find that you love me so little that I have no other way to see you other than to imprison you. Whatever the cost to my

pride, I employ that means; for I can no more do without your presence than a plant can do without the light. My mind turns to you as to its sun, and it is as night for me where you are not. If what I have risked is a crime, I must at least profit by it, for you would refuse to forgive, whatever you say. Here, at least, I hold you, I surround you, I envelop your hatred with my love, I breathe on your cold icy wastes the warm breath of my passion. Your eyes are forced to reflect my image, your ears to hear the sound of my voice. Something of myself insinuates itself into your soul despite you; I act upon you, if only by the terror I cause you, for the sound of my footsteps in the antechamber made you shudder. And then, this captivity separates you from that person you regret, and whom I abhor for having seduced the heart that should have been mine. My jealousy, sated, revolves around this small happiness, and will not risk it by granting you a freedom you would use against me.'

— 'And how long,' said the young woman, 'do you intend to hold me in seclusion, acting like a Barbary corsair not a Christian lord?'

— 'Until you love me, or tell me so, which amounts to the same thing,' replied the young duke with perfect seriousness, and the most assured air in the world. Then he bowed, most graciously, to Isabella, and made his exit, smoothly, like a true courtier whom no situation embarrasses.

Half an hour later, a footman brought her a bouquet, an assemblage of the rarest flowers, of blended colours and perfumes; though, all were rare at that time of year, and it had taken all the talent of the gardeners and the artificial climate of the greenhouses to induce these charming daughters of Flora to bloom so early. The stem of the bouquet was clasped by a magnificent bracelet, worthy of a queen. Among the flowers, a sheet of white paper folded in two attracted her eye. Isabella opened it roughly, for in her situation, these small details of gallantry no longer had the significance they would have had if she had been free.

It was a note from Vallombreuse, written in the following terms, in bold handwriting consistent with the character of its author. The prisoner recognised the hand that had written 'For Isabella' on the jewellery box left in her room in Poitiers:

— 'Dear Isabella, I send you these few flowers, although I am certain they will be poorly received. Coming from me, their freshness and novelty will find small favour in the face of your unparalleled rigor. But, whatever their fate, and even if you only choose to cast them from the window as a sign of your vast disdain, they will force, by your very anger, your mind to pause for a moment, if only to curse the one who declares himself, in spite of everything, your stubborn admirer.

Vallombreuse.'

This elegant note of gallantry, which nonetheless revealed in he who had written it a formidable tenacity, which nothing could dispel, produced, in part, the effect that the duke had promised himself. Isabella held it in her hand with a gloomy air, and the figure of Vallombreuse presented itself to her mind in a diabolical manner. The perfumes of the flowers, most of them not native to France, placed near her, on the pedestal table, by the footman, were enhanced by the room's warmth, and their exotic aromas spread through the air, powerful and dizzying. Isabella took them, and placed them in the antechamber, without removing the diamond bracelet which surrounded the stems, fearing that the flowers were impregnated with some subtle philtre, narcotic, or aphrodisiac, calculated to trouble her reason. Never were lovely blooms mistreated more, and yet

Isabella loved such things greatly; but she feared that if she were to keep them, the duke's conceit would take advantage of the fact; and besides, these plants with their bizarre shapes, strange colours, and perfumes unknown to her, lacked the modest charm of common flowers; their proud beauty recalled that of Vallombreuse, and resembled him too much.

She had barely set the forbidden bouquet on a sideboard in the next room, and seated herself once more in her armchair, when a chambermaid appeared to assist her in dressing. This girl, quite pretty, very pale, and with a sad and gentle air, was somehow inert in manner, seemingly subdued by secret terror, or a dreaded influence. She offered her services to Isabella, almost without looking at her, and in a toneless voice as if she feared being heard by the walls themselves. At an affirmative sign from Isabella, she combed the latter's blond hair, which was in disarray following the violence of the previous evening, and the nervous anxieties of the night, tied her silky curls with velvet bows, and relinquished her work like a hairdresser who knows her trade. She then took from a wardrobe, set in the wall, several dresses of rare richness and elegance, which seemed tailored to Isabella's measurements, but which the young actress refused, even though hers was faded and wrinkled, since she would have appeared to be wearing the Duke's livery, and her formal intention was to accept nothing from him, even if her captivity were to last longer than she hoped.

The chambermaid did not insist, and respected her whim, since condemned persons are allowed to do what they wish within the confines of their prison. It was also as if she avoided becoming intimate with her temporary mistress, for fear of taking an unnecessary interest in her. She reduced herself as much as possible to the state of an automaton. Isabella, who thought she might gain some insight from her, understood that it was superfluous to question her, and abandoned herself to her silent attentions, not without a kind of dread.

When the maid had retired, dinner appeared, and despite the sadness of her situation, Isabella did honour to it; nature imperiously demands its rights even in the most delicate of people. This refreshment gave her the strength she sorely needed, her own being exhausted by her emotions and the assaults upon her. With her mind a little calmer, the prisoner began to think of Sigognac, who had behaved so valiantly, and though alone would have snatched her from her kidnappers, if he had not lost time unravelling himself from the cloak thrown over him by the blind traitor. He must surely have heard news by now, and there was no doubt that he would rush to the defence of the one he loved more than his life. At the thought of the dangers to which he was about to expose himself in this perilous undertaking, for the duke was not a man to let go of his prey without resistance, Isabella's breast swelled with a sigh and a tear rose from her heart to her eyes; she blamed herself for being the cause of such conflict, and almost cursed her own beauty, as the origin of this evil. However, she was modest, and had not sought, out of coquetry, to excite the passions around her, as many actresses, and even great ladies or members of the bourgeoisie do.

She was lost in reverie, when a brief but sharp knock sounded at the window, a pane of which was starred, as if it had been struck by a hailstone. Isabella approached the window, and saw Chiquita, in the tree opposite her, who signalled mysteriously to her to open the window, while swinging the cord equipped with that iron claw. The actress understood the child's intention, obeyed her gesture, and the device, thrown with a sure hand, bit into the balcony support. Chiquita tied the other end of the rope to the branch, and hung from it as she had the day before: but she was scarcely halfway across, when the knot came undone, to Isabella's great fright, and the rope detached itself from the tree. Instead of falling into the green waters of the moat, as might have

been feared, Chiquita, whose presence of mind was untroubled by the accident, if it was one, swung forward on the rope fastened to the balcony by the iron claw, and hung flat against the wall of the castle, beneath the window, which she soon reached, employing her hands and feet pressed hard against the stone. Then she climbed over the balcony, and leapt down lightly into the room. Seeing Isabella quite pale, and almost fainting, she said, with a smile:

— ‘You were scared; you thought Chiquita would join the frogs in the ditch. I only tied a slipknot about the branch so I could pull the rope towards me. At the end of that black line, thin and brown as I am, I must have looked like a spider climbing back up its thread.’

— ‘Little one,’ said Isabella, kissing Chiquita on the forehead, ‘you are a dear, brave and courageous child.’

— ‘I found your friends, they were looking for you; but without Chiquita, they would never have discovered your retreat. The captain was pacing back and forth like a lion; his hair was steaming, his eyes flashing. He set me on his saddlebow, and now he is hidden in a small wood not far from the castle with his comrades. They dare not show themselves. Tonight, as soon as darkness falls, they will attempt your rescue; there will be sword thrusts and pistol volleys. It will be superb. Nothing is as fine as men fighting; but don’t be scared or scream. A woman’s screams would lessen their courage. If you wish, I’ll stay with you to reassure you.’

— ‘Worry not, Chiquita, I’ll not trouble with foolish fears the brave friends who risk their lives to save me.’

— ‘That’s good’ the girl continued; ‘defend yourself if you need to, until this evening, with the knife I gave you. The blow must be struck from below, upwards. Don’t forget. As for me, we must not be seen together, so I’m off to seek some place where I can sleep. Above all, don’t look out of the window, it might arouse suspicion by suggesting you’re waiting for help from that quarter. Then they’d conduct a search around the castle and discover your friends. The attempt would be a failure, and you would remain in the power of this Vallombreuse whom you hate.’

— ‘I’ll not go near the window, I promise you,’ replied Isabella, ‘however curious I might feel.’

Reassured on that important point, Chiquita disappeared and went to join the swordsmen in the lower room who, drowned in drink, and weighed down like beasts by sleep, had not even noticed her absence. She leant against the wall, clasped her hands on her breast, which was her favourite position, closed her eyes and was soon asleep; for her doe’s feet had travelled more than twenty miles the previous night, between Vallombreuse and Paris. The return on horseback, at a pace she was unaccustomed to, had perhaps tired her more. Although her wiry body had the strength of steel, she was exhausted, and her sleep was so profound that she seemed dead.

— ‘How prone to sleep children are!’ said Malartic, who had finally awakened. ‘In spite of our bacchanal, she takes a nap! Hey! You amiable brutes, try standing on your hind legs, go to the courtyard, and each of you pour a bucket of cold water over his head. The Circe named Drunkenness has made pigs of you (*see Homer’s Odyssey, Book X*); turn yourselves back into men again by means of that baptism, and then we’ll do the rounds and see if anything is planned on behalf of this beauty, with whose guardianship and defence Lord Vallombreuse has entrusted us.’

The swordsmen rose, heavily, and departed, in order to comply with the wise instructions of their leader, though not without wandering a little between the table and the door. When they had

more or less regained their wits, Malartic, taking Tordgueule, Piedgris and La Râpée, with him, went towards the postern, and unbolted the padlock which held the chain mooring the boat to the water-door of the kitchen. The boat, driven forward by a pole, after cleaving the glaucous mantle of duckweed, soon landed at a narrow staircase cut into the embankment of the moat.

— ‘You stay here,’ Malartic said to La Râpée, once his men had clambered up, ‘and guard the boat, in case the enemy tries to seize it, and enter. Besides, you don’t look too firm on your feet. The rest of us will patrol around and beat the bushes a little, to make the birds fly away.’

Malartic, followed by his two acolytes, circled about the château for more than an hour, without encountering anything suspicious. On returning to their starting point, he found La Râpée asleep, standing, but leaning against a tree.

— ‘If we were regular troops,’ he said, waking him with a blow of his fist, ‘I’d have you shot for napping on sentry duty, something contrary to all good martial discipline; but since we are not, I pardon you and only sentence you to drink a pint of water.’

— ‘I’d rather have a pair of bullets in my brain than a pint of water in my stomach,’ replied the drunkard.

— ‘A fine answer,’ said Malartic, ‘and worthy of a Plutarchan hero. Your fault is forgiven, go unpunished, but sin no more.’

The patrol returned, and the boat was carefully moored and padlocked, with all the precautions customary in a stronghold. Satisfied with his inspection, Malartic said to himself: ‘If the charming Isabella can escape, or the valiant Captain Fracasse enter, for both cases have been foreseen, may my nose turn white and my cheeks red.’

Left alone, Isabella had opened a volume of Monsieur Honoré d’Urfé’s *L’Astrée*, which was lying forgotten on a console table. She tried to focus her thoughts on her reading. But her eyes, alone, followed the lines mechanically. Her mind flew far from the pages, unable to identify for a moment with its now-outdated shepherdesses. Bored, she threw down the volume, and folded her arms, awaiting events. By dint of conjecturing, she had grown tired of the process, and without trying to guess how Sigognac would deliver her, she counted on the absolute devotion of that gallant fellow.

Evening came. The footmen lit the candles, and soon the butler appeared announcing a visit from the Duke of Vallombreuse. He entered on the heels of his valet, and greeted his captive with the most perfect courtesy. He was, in truth, supremely handsome and elegant. His charming face was fit to inspire love in every unprejudiced heart. A jacket of pearl-grey satin, crimson-velvet breeches, pale-leather cauldron boots trimmed with lace, and a silver-brocade sash supporting a sword with a jewelled pommel, highlighted the advantages of his person wondrously well, and it required all of Isabella’s virtue and constancy not to be impressed by his appearance.

— ‘I visit you, my adorable Isabella,’ he said, seating himself in an armchair close to the young woman, ‘to see if I will be better received than my bouquet; I am not so conceited as to believe so, but I wish you to become accustomed to my presence. Tomorrow, a fresh bouquet and a further visit.’

— ‘Both your bouquets and your visits will prove useless,’ Isabella replied, ‘it may seem impolite to say so, but my sincerity leaves you no hope.’

— ‘Well,’ said the duke, with a gesture of haughty indifference, ‘I shall forego all hope, and be content with the reality. You do not know, poor child, what Vallombreuse is, you who try to resist him. Never has a desire unfulfilled entered his soul; he pursues what he longs for, and nothing can sway or divert him: neither tears nor supplications, nor cries, nor corpses, nor smoking ruins obstructing his path; a universal collapse would not surprise him, for on the ruins of the world he would fulfil his whim. Be not the woman impossible of approach, who swells his passion, imprudently encouraging the tiger to scent the presence of the lamb, then driving him away.’



‘Both your bouquets and your visits will prove useless.’

Isabella was frightened by the change in Vallombreuse’s expression as he spoke these words. His gracious look had vanished. Nothing remained but cold malice, and implacable resolution.

With an instinctive movement, Isabella drew back her chair, and reached up to feel Chiquita's knife at her bosom. Vallombreuse moved his chair closer, without affectation. Controlling his anger, he had already reassumed that charming, playful, and tender air which had hitherto proved irresistible.

— 'Accommodate yourself to what is; cease to look back towards a life that must henceforth appear but a forgotten dream. Forego this obstinate and fanciful loyalty to a love languishing and unworthy of you, and reflect that in the eyes of the world you will be mine from henceforth. Consider above all that I adore you with a passion, a frenzy, a delirium no woman has ever before inspired in me. Seek not to escape the flames that envelop you, an inescapable will that nothing can deflect. Like cold metal thrown into the crucible in which molten iron is already seething, your indifferent self, drowned by my passion, will melt, and amalgamate therein. Whatever the future, you must love me, either willingly, or through force, because that is my wish, because you are young and beautiful, and I am young and handsome. Resist, you may, but, despite your struggles, you will fail to free yourself from the arms that close about you. Therefore, resistance is merely ungracious, since it will but prove in vain. Resign yourself, with grace and a smile; is it so great a misfortune, after all, to be loved, and desperately so, by the Duke of Vallombreuse? A misfortune that would render more than one person happy.'

While he was speaking with that warm ardour that conquers a woman's reason, and overcomes her modesty, but which on this occasion had scant effect, Isabella, attentive to the slightest noise without, from whence her deliverance must come, thought she heard a small, almost imperceptible noise on the far side of the moat. It sounded dull, and rhythmic, like the sound of repeated efforts directed, cautiously, against some obstacle. Fearing that Vallombreuse would note it, the young woman replied in such a way as to wound the proud conceit of the young duke. She preferred him in a state of irritation to one of amorous affection, and preferred his outbursts to his tenderness. She hoped, moreover, by quarrelling with him, to prevent him from hearing.

— 'Such happiness, she said, 'would shame me, one that I would escape by death if I lacked all other means. You will never gain anything from me but my corpse. You fill me with indifference; I hate you for your outrageous, violent, and infamous conduct. Yes, I love Sigognac, whom you have sought, several times, to assassinate, have you not?' The furtive sounds had continued, and Isabella, no longer sparing herself, had raised her voice to hide them.

At these audacious words, Vallombreuse turned pale with rage, his eyes flashed viperous glances; a light foam frothed at the corners of his lips; he convulsively raised his hand to the hilt of his sword. The idea of killing Isabella had flashed through his mind; but, by a prodigious effort of will, he restrained himself and began to laugh, in a shrill, fraught tone, as he advanced towards the young actress.

— 'By all the devils,' he cried, 'you please me so; when you insult me, your eyes take on a particular brightness, your complexion a supernatural radiance; your beauty is redoubled. You do well to speak frankly. Restraint bores me. Ah! You love Sigognac! So much the better! It will be sweeter still, for me to possess you. What a pleasure to kiss those lips that say: 'I abhor you!' Far more stimulating than the eternal and insipid 'I love you,' with which women so disgust us.'

Fearful of Vallombreuse's resolution, Isabella rose, and slid Chiquita's knife from her corset.

— 'Excellent!' said the duke, seeing the young woman armed, her dagger already freed. 'If you knew anything of Roman history, my dear, you would recall that Lucretia used her dagger only

after the attempt on her by Sextus, the son of Tarquinius Superbus. That example from antiquity is a good one to follow.'

And as indifferent to the blade as he would have been to a bee's sting, he advanced on Isabella, seizing her in his arms before she had time to raise the knife.

At that very moment, a crack was heard, followed promptly by a loud crash, and the window, as if it had suffered a blow from the knee of a giant, fell, midst a din of pulverised glass, into the room, as a mass of branches, catapulted downward and forward to act as a flying bridge, penetrated loudly.

Here was the tree's crown that had facilitated Chiquita's exit and re-entry. The trunk, sawn through by Sigognac and his comrades, had yielded to the law of gravity. Spanning the water, its fall had been so directed as to link the bank of the moat to Isabella's window.

Vallombreuse, surprised by this sudden irruption, which cut short his assault, released the young actress and, sword in hand, stood ready to receive the first person who presented himself.

Chiquita, who had entered on tiptoe, light as a shadow, pulled Isabella by the sleeve, and said to her: 'Take shelter behind this piece of furniture, the dance is about to begin.'

The girl was speaking no less than the truth, for a flurry of shots rang out in the nocturnal silence. The garrison had discovered the attack.

Chapter XVII: The Amethyst Ring

Climbing the steps four at a time, Malartic, Bringuénarilles, Piedgris and Tordgueule rushed to Isabella's room to bring aid to Vallombreuse, and defend him, while La Râpée, Mérindol and the Duke's usual swordsmen, whom he had brought with him, used the boat to cross the moat so as to attempt a sortie, and take the enemy in the rear. A clever strategy, worthy of a sound army general!

The tree's top branches, blocking the window-opening which was quite narrow, extended almost to the middle of the room; it was therefore impossible to present a sufficiently wide front to the enemy. Malartic lined up with Piedgris against the wall, on one side, and ordered Tordgueule and Bringuénarilles to the other, so that they would avoid the initial fury of the attack, and possess a greater advantage. Before entering the room, it was therefore necessary to pierce this menacing line of soldiers waiting with sword in one hand and pistol in the other. All had replaced their masks, for none of those honest people cared to be recognised in case the affair turned out badly, and they made for rather a frightening sight, that quartet of faces clad in black, motionless, and silent as ghosts.

— 'Withdraw, or conceal yourself,' Malartic murmured in a low voice to Vallombreuse, 'it is needless for you to be seen in this encounter.'

— 'What matter?' replied the young duke. 'I fear no one in the world, and those who have seen me will not live to speak of it,' he added, waving his sword in a threatening manner.

— 'At least take Isabella, the Helen of this new Trojan War, to another room, since a stray bullet might spoil your plan, which would be a shame.'

The Duke, finding the advice judicious, advanced towards Isabella, who was sheltering with Chiquita behind an oak chest, and seized her in his arms, though she clung with clenched fingers to the sculpted projections on its sides, and vigorously resisted Vallombreuse's efforts; the virtuous girl, overcoming her timidity, preferred to remain on the battlefield, exposed to bullets, and sword-thrusts which at worst could only end her life, to being alone with Vallombreuse, protected from the fight, but exposed to an assault which would shame her honour.

— 'No, no, leave me,' she cried, struggling, and desperately gripping the doorframe, for she knew Sigognac could not be far away. At last, the duke, having succeeded in half-opening the door, was about to drag Isabella into the next room, when the young woman freed herself from his hands, and ran towards the window; but Vallombreuse caught hold of her again, lifted her from the ground, and bore her to the rear of the apartment.

— 'Save me,' she cried, in a weak voice, feeling at the end of her strength, 'save me, Sigognac!'

A rustling amidst the tree-branches was heard, a loud voice that seemed to fall from heaven cried: 'Here I am!' and, a dark shadow passed swiftly between the twin pairs of swordsmen, driven

by such momentum, that it was already in the middle of the room, when four pistol shots rang out almost simultaneously. Clouds of smoke spread in dense patches that for a few seconds hid the result of this quadruple fire. When they had dissipated a little, the swordsmen saw Sigognac, or, to be more accurate, Captain Fracasse, since they only knew him by that name, standing upright, sword in hand, and with no harm done, but the feather in his felt hat trimmed, the discharge from their wheel-lock pistols not having been achieved swiftly enough, nor his foes able to aim accurately enough, for their bullets to find him in a passage as unexpected as it was rapid. But Isabella and Vallombreuse were no longer there. The duke had taken advantage of the tumult to carry off his half-fainting prey. A solid and bolted door, stood between the poor actress and her generous defender, already hindered by the quartet on hand. Happily, Chiquita, lively and supple as a snake, seeking to be of use to Isabella, had slipped through the half-open door, in the footsteps of the Duke, who, amidst the chaos of violent action, and the crackle of firearms, failed to notice her, especially since she instantly hid in a dark corner of the vast room, which was only dimly lit by a lamp placed on a sideboard.

— ‘You wretches,’ cried Sigognac, ‘where is Isabella? I heard her voice just now.’

— ‘We are not her keepers,’ replied Malartic with the greatest composure in the world, ‘nor are we cut out to play the role of duenna.’

With that, he fell upon the Baron with sword raised high, the latter countering him in fine style. Malartic was not an adversary to be disdained; he was considered, after Lampourde, the most skilful gladiator in Paris, but he was not a strong enough swordsman to fight with Sigognac for long.

— ‘Guard the window, while I deal with this fellow,’ he shouted, as he fought, addressing Piedgris, Tordgueule and Bringuenarilles, who were hastily reloading their pistols.

At the same moment, a new assailant burst into the room. It was Scapin, whose former professions, of acrobat and soldier, had developed in him a singular facility for this sort of siege warfare. With a quick glance, he saw that the swordsmen’s hands were occupied in reloading their weapons with powder and bullets, while they had laid their swords beside them; as swift as lightning, he took advantage of that moment of uncertainty in the ranks of his enemies, astonished by his sudden entrance, to gather their rapiers and hurl them through the window; then he ran towards Bringuenarilles, seized him by the body, and employing his foe as a shield, he thrust him before him, turning him so as to present his face to the muzzles of the pistols pointed at him.

— ‘By all the devils, don’t shoot,’ cried Bringuenarilles, half-suffocated by Scapin’s wiry arms, ‘don’t shoot. You’ll strike my chest or my head, and it would go hard to be slain by my comrades.’

So as not to give Tordgueule and Piedgris the opportunity of firing at his rear, Scapin prudently backed against the wall, using Bringuenarilles as a defence; and, in order to spoil their aim, shoved the swordsman here and there, who, though his feet sometimes touched the ground, failed to regain fresh strength as Antaeus did (*in the Greek myth*).

The manoeuvre was most judicious; for Piedgris, who thought little of Bringuenarilles, and cared not a straw about killing a man, even if he was his companion, aimed at Scapin’s head, who was a fraction taller than the swordsman before him; the shot sped true, but the actor had bent forward, raising Bringuenarilles to protect himself, and the bullet pierced the woodwork, after

striking the latter and removing the ear of the poor devil, who began to shout: 'I'm killed! I'm killed!' with a vigour that proved him very much alive.

Scapin, who was in no mood to wait for a second pistol shot, knowing full well that the bullet might pass through the body of Bringuénarilles if the latter fell sacrifice to his merciless comrades, and could still wound him grievously, now employed the wounded man as a projectile, and thrust him so roughly against Tordgueule, who was advancing, with the barrel of his weapon lowered, that the pistol slipped from Tordgueule's hand, while that swordsman rolled hither and thither on the floor beside his comrade, whose blood spurted in his face and blinded him. The fall had been so sudden that he remained stunned and bruised for several minutes, which gave Scapin time to kick the pistol under a piece of furniture, and raise his dagger to meet Piedgris, who was charging at him furiously, poniard in hand, enraged at having missed his shot.

Scapin bent down and, with his left hand, seized Piedgris' wrist, and forced the arm that held the dagger upwards, while with his right hand, gripping his own knife, he dealt his enemy a blow that would certainly have slain him, had it not been for the thickness of his buff leather vest. The blade sliced it open and pierced the flesh, but was deflected by a rib. Although it was neither mortal, nor even dangerous, the wound surprised Piedgris and made him stagger; so that the actor, giving the arm he still held a sudden jerk, had no difficulty in knocking his enemy down, the latter already having collapsed on one knee. As an extra precaution, he hammered at his opponent's head with his heel to make him stay completely still.

While all this was occurring, Sigognac, possessed of the cold fury of one whose profound knowledge of the art was at the service of great courage, was fencing with Malartic. He parried all the swordsman's strokes, and had already grazed his arm, as evidenced by a sudden flush of crimson on Malartic's sleeve. The latter, feeling that, if the fight continued, he was lost, resolved to make a supreme effort, and lunged fiercely, so as to deliver a direct blow to Sigognac. The two blades clashed with so sharp and rapid a movement that the shock caused sparks to fly; but the Baron's sword, gripped in a fist of iron, drove aside the other's arched sword. The point passed beneath Captain Fracasse's armpit, scratching the fabric of his doublet without piercing. Malartic rose; but, before he could readopt his defensive stance, Sigognac knocked the rapier from his hand, placed his foot upon it, and raising his blade to Malartic's throat, cried: 'Surrender, or die!'

At this critical juncture, a solid figure, striding through the litter of branches, entered the heart of the battle, and the newcomer, seeing Malartic's compromised position, said, in a tone of authority: 'You may yield, without dishonour, to this valiant man; he has your life at the point of his sword. You have done your duty, loyally; consider yourself a prisoner of war.'

Then, turning to Sigognac: 'Trust to his word,' he said, 'he is a gallant fellow in his own way, and will not attempt anything against you from here on.'

Malartic nodded, and the Baron lowered the point of his formidable rapier. As for the swordsman, he picked up his weapon with a rather pitiful air, replaced it in its scabbard, and seated himself silently in an armchair, where he clasped his handkerchief around his arm, on which the red blotch was widening.



‘...A solid figure, striding through the litter of branches...’

— ‘As for these others, who, if not dead, are more or less wounded,’ said Jacquemin Lampourde (for it was he), ‘it is best to make sure of them; we will, if you please, tie their legs as they do poultry borne upside down to market. Else they might leap up and bite, if only at our heels. They are pure scoundrels capable of pretending to be hors de combat, in order to spare their skin, which is however of little account.’

And, bending over the bodies lying on the floor, he pulled from his breeches various pieces of thin rope and with marvellous dexterity lashed together the feet and hands of Tordgueule, who pretended to resist, of Bringuénarilles, who began to utter cries like a lively plucked jay, and even of Piedgris, though the latter reacted no more than a corpse, the livid pallor of which he possessed

If the reader is surprised to behold Lampourde among the besiegers, I reply that the swordsman was possessed of a fanatical admiration for Sigognac, whose fine fencing style had so

charmed him in their encounter on the Pont-Neuf, and that he had placed his services at the disposal of the captain; services which were not to be disdained in such difficult and perilous circumstances. It often happened, moreover, that in these hazardous enterprises, erstwhile comrades, being paid by opposing interests, met, with torch or dagger in hand, without it causing an issue.

Let it not be forgotten that La Râpée, Agostin, Mérindol, Azolan and Labriche, at the beginning of the attack, had left the castle, crossing over by boat, in order to create a diversion and fall upon the enemy's rear. They had skirted the moat, silently, and arrived at the place where, detached from its base, the large tree-trunk crossed the water, serving both as a flying bridge, and a ladder for the liberators of the young actress. The noble Herod, as one may well imagine, had not failed to offer his services, brave as he was, to Sigognac, whom he prized highly and whom he would have followed to the very gates of Hell, even if it had not been dearest Isabella, beloved by the whole company, and by himself in particular, who was to be rescued. If he was not visible at the height of the battle, it was in no way due to cowardice; for he possessed as great a store of courage as the captain, even though he was merely an actor. He had straddled the tree, like the others, raising himself on his hands and arms, and shuffling forward at the expense of his breeches, the seat of which was frayed from the rough bark. In front of him, as best he could, slid the doorman of the comedy troupe, a determined fellow accustomed to using his fists, and countering the pressure of the crowd. The doorman, having reached the part where the branches forked, seized hold of a substantial one, and continued his ascent; but, having reached the same region, Herod, endowed with the corpulence of a Goliath, excellent for his role as Tyrant, but ill-suited to climbing, felt the branch bend beneath him, and crack in a disturbing way. He looked down and glimpsed in the shadows, about thirty feet below, the black waters of the moat. The prospect gave him thought, and he scrambled onto a more solid piece of wood, capable of supporting his body.

— 'Hmml' he reflected, silently, 'As wise for an elephant to dance on a spider's thread as for me to risk my life on twigs a sparrow could bend. They might look fine to a lover, a Scapin, or some other agile creature obliged by their role to remain slim. A king and tyrant of comedy, more given to the table than to the ladies, I possess no such frivolous, acrobatic, tightrope-walking skill. If I make but one more move to go to the Captain's aid, who must certainly need it, since I comprehend, from the pistol shots and the hammering of sword-blades, that the matter waxes hot, I will surely fall into that Stygian water, thick and black as ink, green with slimy plants, teeming with frogs and toads, sink into the mud up to my head, and meet an inglorious death, a fetid fate, a miserable and utterly profitless end, for I will have grieved the enemy not all. There is no shame in retreating. Courage here can do nothing. If I were Achilles, Roland or El Cid, I could not bring aid, weighing as I do two hundred and forty pounds and some ounces, and seated on a branch as thin as my little finger. It is no longer a matter of heroism but of physics. So, about-face; I will find a surreptitious way to enter the fortress, and prove useful to this brave Baron, who must presently doubt my friendship, if he has time to think of anyone or anything.'

This monologue completed, at the speed of thought, a hundred times more rapidly than audible speech, to which however the good Homer grants the epithet of 'winged', Herod turned about on his wooden horse, that is to say on the tree-trunk, and began a cautious descent. Suddenly, he halted. A slight noise, as of knees scraping against the bark, and the sound of a man's breath, who was striving to climb, reached his ear, and though the night was dark and even more so in the

shadow of the castle, he thought he could distinguish a vague form raising a hump on the straight body of the tree. So as not to be seen, he bent low, flattened himself as much as his majestic belly allowed, and, motionless and holding his breath, allowed the figure to approach. He raised his head a little after a minute or two, and finding the adversary quite close to him, suddenly straightened, and presented his broad face to the traitor who had thought to surprise him and strike him in the back. In order not to burden his hands occupied with climbing, Mérindol, the leader of the attack, bore his knife between his teeth, which, amidst the shadows, gave him the appearance of possessing a prodigious moustache. Herod, with his strong grip, seized the man's neck, and squeezed his throat in such a way, that Mérindol, feeling as if he were caught in a noose, opened his mouth to catch a breath letting his knife fall, which plunged into the moat. As the pressure on his throat continued, his knees loosened, his fluttering arms made some convulsive movements; and soon the sound of a heavy fall echoed in the darkness, and the water in the moat splashed as high as Herod's feet.

— 'As for him,' said the Tyrant to himself, 'if he has not suffocated, he will drown. Alternatives which are a pleasant thought. But let me continue this perilous descent.'



‘...The sound of a heavy fall echoed in the darkness...’

He advanced a few feet further. A small bluish spark flickered a short distance away, betraying itself as the fuse of a wheel-lock pistol being lit; the wheel as it spun gave a sharp click, a flash of light pierced the darkness, a report was heard, and a bullet passed two or three inches above Herod, who had ducked as soon as he saw the flare of the discharge, and had drawn his head into his shoulders like a tortoise into its shell, a move which had served him well.

— ‘Thrice be cuckolded!’ growled a hoarse voice, which was none other than that of La Râpée, ‘I missed my aim.’

— ‘By a good way, my lad,’ cried Herod, ‘I’m plump enough; you must be a poor shot indeed; but take this!’

And the Tyrant raised a club attached to his wrist by a leather cord, an ignoble weapon perhaps, but one which he handled with admirable dexterity, having, during his theatrical tours, trained with the stick-fighters of Rouen (*popular in Normandy and particularly Rouen, stick-fighting developed into the military art and sport of Canne de Combat, refined in the nineteenth century*). The club met the blade the swordsman had drawn from its scabbard, after returning the useless pistol back in his belt, and shattered the sword like glass, so that nothing remained but the hilt in La Râpée's fist. The end of the club even reached his shoulder, and raised a bruise, fairly slight in truth, the force of the blow having been broken.

The pair of enemies, finding themselves face to face, for the one was still descending while the other was trying to climb, grasped each other by the arms, and tried to hurl one another into the black abyss of the moat yawning beneath them. Though La Râpée was a villain full of skill and vigour, a mass like that of the Tyrant was not easy to shake. It was like trying to uproot a tower. Herod had interlaced his feet beneath the trunk of the tree, and held on as if with riveted crampons. La Râpée, squeezed in Herod's arms, no less muscular than those of Hercules, sweated and panted as he sought to breathe. Almost flattened against the Tyrant's broad chest, he pressed his hands against his opponent's shoulders, to escape that formidable embrace. With a clever feint, Herod loosened his grip a little, and the swordsman rose up, sucking in a large, deep gulp of air. Then Herod suddenly released him, caught him lower down at the waist, and, raising him in the air, forced him from his feet. Now the Tyrant had only to release his hold to send La Râpée plunging through the duckweed covering the moat. Herod opened his hands wide and the swordsman fell; but he was a nimble, and vigorous fellow, as we have said, and with his clenched fingers, he clutched at the tree, his body hanging suspended over the abyss, as he sought to clasp the trunk with his legs and feet. He failed, and remained extended like a capital I, his arm straining to hold the weight of his body. His fingers, since he was unwilling to let go, dug into the bark like iron claws, and the sinews of his hand were taut to the point of snapping, like the strings of a violin whose tuning-pegs are tightened too far. In daylight, one would have seen blood spurt from his bluish nails.

His situation was scarcely pleasant. Hanging by one arm, stretched horribly by the weight of his body, La Râpée, in addition to physical suffering, experienced the dizzying horror of falling, as well as the power of attraction inspired by the abyss. His dilated eyes stared fixedly into the dark depths below; he felt a sharp ringing in his ears that pierced his brain and made his temples throb; he felt a desire to let himself fall, which almost overcame the perennial instinct for self-preservation: he knew not how to swim, and the moat seemed likely to prove his tomb.

Despite his fierce air, and overbearing eyebrows, Herod, deep down, was good-natured. He felt sorry for this poor devil, who had been dangling in the air for a few minutes which must have seemed to him as long as eternity, and whose anguish and agony were excruciating. Leaning over the tree trunk, he said to La Râpée:

— 'You rogue, swear on your life in the next world, for your life here belongs to me, to relinquish the fight and I'll unfasten you from the gallows from which you hang like the wicked thief you are.'

— 'I swear,' rasped the exhausted La Râpée in a hollow voice: 'but hurry, please, I'm failing.'

With Herculean strength, Herod seized the villain's arm and, thanks to his prodigious grip, pulled the man onto the tree where he placed him as if on horseback in front of him, handling him with as much ease as a rag doll.

Although La Râpée was no weakling subject to faints, he was almost swooning when the actor pulled him from the abyss, into which, without that mighty arm supporting him, he would have fallen, an inert mass.

— 'I have no smelling-salts to rouse you, nor feathers to burn beneath your nose,' the Tyrant told him, searching his pockets; 'but here is a cordial that will restore you; it is pure brandy from Hendaye (*in the Basque country, on the right bank of the River Bidasoa, marking the Franco-Spanish border*), and the quintessence of sunlight.' And he applied the neck of the bottle to the lips of the failing swordsman.

— 'Come, suck on this milk; two or three more mouthfuls and you'll be as lively as a merlin when unhooded.' The warming liquor soon had an effect on the swordsman, who thanked Herod with a gesture of his hand, and waved his numb arm about to restore its flexibility.

— 'Move!' Herod added, turning La Râpée about so that he was seated astride the trunk, but facing in the opposite direction.

La Râpée, slid forward, and the Tyrant followed. Arriving at the foot of the tree, with Herod behind him, the swordsman saw a group on sentry duty, at the edge of the moat, composed of Agostin, Azolan and Basque. 'Friend!' La Râpée called to them in a loud voice and, turning his head, said in a low voice to the actor: 'Don't say a word, and stay at my heels.'

Once they were on firm ground, he approached Azolan and whispered the password in his ear. Then he added: 'This comrade and I are injured, and we are going to withdraw to one side to wash our wounds and bandage them.'

Azolan nodded. Nothing could be more natural than this tale. La Râpée and the Tyrant moved away. When they were under the cover of the trees which, though leafless, were sufficient to hide them, aided by the darkness of night, the swordsman said to Herod: 'You have, most generously, granted me my life. I've saved you from death, for these three fellows would have overcome you. I've paid my debt, but don't consider myself quits; if you ever need me, you'll find me. Now go about your business. Go that way, I'll go this.'

Herod, left alone, continued to follow the path, glancing through the trees at the accursed castle which, to his great regret, he had been unable to enter. No light shone from the windows, except on the side of the assault, and the rest of the manor was buried in shadow and silence. However, on the opposite facade, the rising moon was beginning to cast a soft glow, glazing the violet slates of the roof with silver. The nascent light allowed him to make out a man on sentry duty, his shadow falling across a small esplanade at the edge of the moat. It was Labriche, who was guarding the boat in which Mérindol, La Râpée, Azolan, and Agostin had crossed the water.

This sight gave Herod thought. 'What the devil can the fellow be doing all alone in this deserted place while his comrades are wielding their knives? No doubt for fear of surprise, or to ensure their retreat, he's guarding some secret passage, some hidden postern through which, perhaps, after stunning him with a blow to the head with my club, I'll be able to penetrate this wretched castle and show Sigognac I've not forgotten him.'

Reasoning in this manner, Herod, paused his steps, then, making no more noise than if his soles had been made of felt, approached the sentry with that quiet, feline slowness with which large men are often endowed. When he was within range, he struck him a blow on the head sufficient to incapacitate, but not to kill, the recipient. As we have seen, Herod was not a cruel man, in general, and had no wish to slay the sinner.



'Herod...approached the sentry...'

Labriche, as surprised as if lightning had struck him on a clear day, fell with his limbs in the air, then ceased to move, as the force of the blow had stunned him, and made him swoon. Herod advanced to the parapet of the moat and saw that where a narrow gap in the railing appeared a diagonal staircase ended, cut into the wall of the moat, and leading to the bottom, or at least to the level of the water lapping its last steps. The Tyrant descended cautiously and, on feeling his foot enter the water, stopped, trying to pierce the darkness with his gaze. He soon made out the shape of the boat moored in the shadow of the wall, and drew it towards him by means of the chain that tied it to the foot of the steps. Freeing it from the chain was a trivial exercise for the robust tragedian, and he entered the boat, which his weight set rocking. When the oscillations had subsided, and his balance was restored, Herod gently worked the single oar at the stern that served both as means of propulsion and a rudder. The boat, yielding to the impulse, soon emerged from the area in shadow to enter an arc of light, where moonlight trembled in icy scales on the oily water. The pale light revealed to Herod, a small staircase, at the foot of the château, beneath a

brick arcade. He landed, and climbing the vaulted steps, arrived without hindrance at the inner courtyard, which was completely deserted at that time.

— ‘So here I am at the heart of the castle,’ Herod said to himself, rubbing his hands together; ‘my courage enjoys a firmer footing on these wide, well-cemented slabs, than on that leafy parrot’s perch from which I descended. Now, let me but find my bearings, and join my comrades.’

He noted the steps guarded by the pair of stone sphinxes and judged, wisely, that this architectural entrance led to the richest rooms of the mansion, where Vallombreuse had doubtless imprisoned the young actress and where the battle in defence of that lady was to be fought, a Helen without a Menelaus, but with more virtue than usual, especially in Paris. The sphinxes made no attempt to raise their claws to stop him as he passed by.

Victory seemed to rest with the assailants. Bringuenarilles, Tordgueule, and Piedgris lay on the floor like calves on straw. Malartic, the leader of the band, had been disarmed. But in reality, the victors were captives. The door of the room, locked on the outside, stood between them and the object of their mission, and this door, made of thick oak, adorned with elegant polished steel fittings, seemed an insurmountable obstacle to people who possessed neither axes nor pliers to break it down. Sigognac, Lampourde, and Scapin, leaning their shoulders against the panels, tried to force it, but it held firm, and their combined strength proved insufficient.



'Victory seemed to rest with the assailants.'

— 'We could set fire to it,' said Sigognac, in despair, 'there are burning logs in the hearth.'

— 'It would take too long,' replied Lampourde, 'oak burns slowly; let us rather lift this chest and employ it as a sort of battering ram capable of shattering this over-bearing obstruction.'

His idea was put into effect, and the curious piece of furniture, worked with delicate carvings, seized roughly and swung with force, struck the solid panels, but without success other than to scratch the polish, and shear off a pretty, and charmingly carved, head of an angel or cupid which formed one of its corners. The Baron was furious, brooding over the fact that Vallombreuse had left, taking Isabella with him, despite the young girl's desperate resistance.

Suddenly, a loud noise was heard. The branches that had blocked the window vanished, and the tree fell into the waters of the moat with a crash, mingled with human cries, those of the

troupe's porter who had been stopped in his tracks, the trunk he was on no longer offering him passage. Azolan, Agostin, and Basque had had the brilliant idea of pushing the tree into the water in order to cut off the besiegers' retreat.

— 'If we can't demolish this door,' said Lampourde, 'we'll be caught like rats in a trap. Damn the carpenters of old who worked so thoroughly! I'll try and chisel out the wood round the lock with my dagger to release it, since it's shut so tightly. We must get free of here at all costs; we no longer have the resource of clinging to that tree-trunk like the bears to theirs, in the moat (*the bear-pit, the Bärengraben*), in Berne.'

Lampourde was about to set to work on the lock, when a slight creaking sound, like that of a key turning, sounded, and the door, which they had attacked in vain, opened of its own accord.

— 'Who is the good angel,' cried Sigognac, 'who comes to our aid in this way? And by what miracle does the door give way of itself, after having resisted so long?'

— 'Neither angel nor miracle,' answered Chiquita, 'emerging from behind the door, and fixing her calm and mysterious gaze on the Baron.'

— 'Where is Isabella?' cried Sigognac, scanning the room dimly lit by the flickering glow of a small lamp. He could not see her at first. The Duke of Vallombreuse, surprised by the sudden opening of the door, had backed into a corner, placing the young actress, half-fainting with terror and fatigue, behind him; she had collapsed to her knees, her head resting against the wall, her hair unbound and floating about her face, her clothes in disorder, the press-studs of her bodice broken, so desperately had she writhed in the arms of her captor, who, feeling his prey about to escape him, had tried, in vain, to steal a few lascivious kisses, like a faun pursued, dragging a young nymph into the depths of the woods.

— 'She is here,' said Chiquita, 'in that corner, behind Vallombreuse; but to rescue the woman, you must first kill the man.'

— 'Have no fear, he shall die,' cried Sigognac, advancing, sword levelled, straight towards the young duke, who had already taken up a defensive stance.

— 'That remains to be seen, Captain Fracasse, champion of the gypsies,' replied the young duke with an air of perfect disdain.

Their blades engaged, and followed each other, turning about one another with that cautious slowness which skilled fencers bring to the deadliest fights. Vallombreuse was not unequal in strength to Sigognac; but he had, as befitted a man of his quality, spent many hours in the academies, wet more than one shirt in the fencing-halls, and learned from the finest fencing-masters. His sword was therefore not held like a broom, as Lampourde disdainfully said of the clumsy blades-men who, according to him, dishonoured the profession. Knowing how formidable his adversary was, the young duke was on the defensive, parrying blows and delivering none. He hoped to exhaust Sigognac, already tired by the attack on the castle and his duel with Malartic, the Duke having heard the clash of swords behind the door. However, while eluding the Baron's sword, his left hand searched at his chest for a small silver whistle suspended by a chain. When he found it, he raised it to his lips and drew forth a high-pitched and prolonged sound. This movement looked to cost him dearly; the Baron's sword almost nailed his hand to his mouth; but the point, raised in a somewhat late riposte, only grazed the thumb. Vallombreuse resumed his

guard. He cast wild glances like those of a *jettatore* (*a caster of the evil eye*), or a basilisk, which possess the power to slay; the corners of his mouth were twisted in a smile of diabolical wickedness, he radiated self-assured ferocity, and without leaving himself unguarded he advanced on Sigognac, thrusting at him, though his moves were always parried.

Malartic, Lampourde, and Scapin watched, with keen interest and admiration this contest on which the fate of the whole battle depended, the leaders of the two opposing parties now fighting hand to hand. Scapin had even brought torches from the other room so that the rivals could see more clearly. A touching display of thoughtfulness!

— ‘The little duke is not doing so badly,’ said Lampourde, as an impartial assessor of merit. ‘I would not have believed him capable of such a defence; but if he lunges, he is lost. Captain Fracasse has a longer arm than he. Ah! The Devil, that demi-cercle parry was not tight enough. What did I tell you? His enemy’s sword has passed through the opening. Vallombreuse is hit; no, he made a most opportune retreat.’

At the same instant a tumultuous noise of approaching footsteps was heard. A panel in the wainscoting was thrown open with a crash, and five or six armed footmen rushed impetuously into the room.

— ‘Take the woman away,’ Vallombreuse shouted to them, ‘and attack these rascals. I’ll take care of the captain,’ and he ran at the latter with raised sword.

The irruption of these marauders surprised Sigognac. He relaxed his guard a little; for he was following with his eyes the completely unconscious Isabella, whom two footmen, protected by the duke, were dragging towards the staircase, and in consequence Vallombreuse’s sword grazed his wrist. Brought back to the seriousness of the situation by this graze, he drove at the duke with a full-bore thrust which struck the duke above the collarbone and saw him stagger.

Meanwhile, Lampourde and Scapin received the lackeys in fine style; Lampourde speared them with his long rapier, like rats, and Scapin hammered their heads with the butt of a pistol he had retrieved. Seeing their master wounded and leaning against the wall, resting on the hilt of his sword, his face covered with a pale pallor, those wretched scoundrels, weak in spirit and courage, abandoned the fight, and took to flight. It is true that Vallombreuse was unloved by his servants, to whom he behaved like a tyrant rather than a master, and whom he brutalised with mad ferocity.

— ‘To me, you scoundrels! To me,’ he sighed in a feeble voice. ‘Will you leave your duke thus, without help or succour?’

While these incidents were taking place, Herod, as we have said, was ascending, with as brisk a step as his corpulence would allow, the grand staircase, lit, since Vallombreuse’s arrival at the castle, by a large, and highly ornate lantern suspended from a cable of twined silk. He reached the landing of the first floor, at the very moment when Isabella, dishevelled, pale, and inert, was being carried off like a corpse, by the footmen. He believed that due to her virtuous resistance the young duke had killed her, or had her killed, and, exasperated to a fury by this idea, he fell with great blows of his sword on the marauders, who, surprised by this sudden aggression against which they could not defend themselves, and having their hands restrained, dropped their prey and scampered off as if the devil had been on their tail. Herod, bending down, raised Isabella, rested her head on his knee, laid his hand on her heart and made sure it was still beating. He saw that she appeared to

have no injury, and was beginning to sigh weakly, like a person whose consciousness is gradually returning.

In this posture, he was soon joined by Sigognac, who had dispatched Vallombreuse, with that furious thrust so admired by Lampourde. The Baron knelt beside his friend, took her hands and in a voice that Isabella heard vaguely as if from the depths of a dream, he said to her: 'Gather yourself, dear soul, and fear no more. You are in the arms of your friends; no one can harm you now.'

Although she had not yet opened her eyes, a languid smile appeared on Isabella's discoloured lips, and her pale fingers, damp with the cold sweat of her swoon, imperceptibly clasped Sigognac's hand. Lampourde looked with a tender air at this touching group, for displays of gallantry interested him, and he claimed to greater knowledge than others where matters of the heart were concerned.

Suddenly, an imperious horn-blast shattered the silence that had succeeded the tumult of battle. After a few moments it was repeated, with strident and prolonged fury. It was the call of a master who must be obeyed. A rattling of chains was heard. A dull thud indicated the lowering of the drawbridge; a whirl of wheels thundered beneath the vaulted entrance, and suddenly, through the windows of the staircase, blazed the red glow of torches scattered throughout the courtyard. The door of the vestibule turned noisily upon its hinges, and hurried footsteps sounded in the echoing stairwell.

Soon four footmen in full livery appeared, carrying lighted wax candles with that impassive air and silent eagerness possessed by valets of a great house. Behind them rode a man of noble appearance, dressed from head to toe in black velvet trimmed with jet. An order, one of those reserved for kings and princes, or bestowed only upon the most illustrious of personages, shone on his chest, against the dark background fabric. Arriving at the landing, the footmen lined up like statues, against the wall, holding torches in their hands, without a single flutter of their eyelids, without a single twitch of their muscles, indicating, in any way, that they saw the rather singular spectacle before their eyes. Their master had not yet spoken; they therefore could have no opinion as regards the scene.

The black-clad lord stopped on the landing. Although age had wrinkled his forehead and cheeks, yellowed his complexion, and whitened his hair, he could still be recognised as the original of the portrait that had caught Isabella's eye, in her distress, and whom she had implored as seemingly a friendly figure. It was the prince, the father of Vallombreuse. The son held a duchy, while waiting for the natural order of succession to appoint him in turn head of the family.

At the sight of Isabella, who was being supported by Herod and Sigognac, and whose bloodless pallor gave her a deathly appearance, the prince raised his arms to heaven with a sigh. 'I have arrived too late,' he said, 'despite my diligence,' and he bent down towards the young actress, taking her inert hand.

On the ring-finger of this hand, which was as white as if sculpted in alabaster, shone a ring, the bezel of which was a large amethyst. The old lord seemed strangely troubled at the sight. He took the ring from Isabella's finger with a convulsive trembling, signalled to one of the torch-bearing footmen to approach, and by the brighter light of the wax candle deciphered the coat of

arms engraved on the stone, holding the ring close to the light and then moving it away to better grasp the details with his weak eyesight.

Sigognac, Herod and Lampourde anxiously followed the prince's wild gestures and change of countenance at the sight of this jewel, which he seemed to know well, and which he turned over and over in his hands, as if unable to bring himself to accept a painful idea.

— 'Where is Vallombreuse,' he called, finally, in a thunderous voice, 'where is that monster unworthy of my name?'

He had recognised the ring, beyond any doubt, the ring adorned with a fanciful coat of arms with which he had formerly sealed the notes he wrote to Cornelia, Isabella's mother. 'How did this ring come to be on the finger of this young actress carried off by Vallombreuse, and from whom did she obtain it? Could she be Cornelia's daughter,' the prince said to himself, 'and mine? The profession of actress that she practices, her age, her face, which reveals some of her mother's features softened, everything concurs to make me believe it. Then it is his own sister that this damned libertine was pursuing, his love is incestuous. Oh! I am cruelly punished for my previous error.'

Isabella finally opened her eyes, and her first glance fell upon the prince holding the ring he had taken from her finger. It seemed to her that she had seen his face before, but young as yet, lacking white hair and this grey beard. He looked like an aged copy of the portrait hanging above the fireplace. A feeling of deep veneration invaded Isabella's heart. She also saw beside her the brave Sigognac, and the good Herod, both safe and sound, and the nightmare of the struggle replaced by the security of deliverance. She had nothing more to fear for her friends, or for herself. Half-rising, she bowed her head before the prince, who contemplated her with passionate attention, and seemed to seek in the young girl's features a resemblance to a face once beloved.

— 'From whom, mademoiselle, did you obtain this ring which recalls certain memories? Have you had it in your possession for long?' said the old lord in a moved voice.

— 'Since I was a child, and it is the only inheritance I received from my mother,' Isabella replied.

— 'And who was your mother? What rank had she?' said the prince with renewed interest.

— 'Her name was Cornelia,' Isabella replied, quietly, 'and she was a poor provincial actress who played tragic queens and princesses in the troupe I still belong to.'

— 'Cornelia! No doubt then,' said the troubled prince, 'yes, it is indeed she'; but, controlling his emotion, he resumed a calm and majestic air, and said to Isabella: 'Allow me to retain this ring. I will return it to you when needed.'

— 'It is fine for it to rest in your Lordship's hands,' replied the young actress, in whom, amidst the hazy memories of childhood, there was a glimpse of a figure that, when very small, she had seen leaning towards her cradle.

— 'Gentlemen,' said the prince, fixing his firm and clear gaze on Sigognac and his companions, 'in any other circumstance I might find your armed presence in my castle strange; but I know the motive that made you invade this hitherto sacred dwelling. Violence calls for violence, and justifies

it. I will close my eyes to what has just occurred. But where is the Duke of Vallombreuse, that degenerate son who dishonours my old age?’

At that very moment, as if he had responded to his father’s call, Vallombreuse appeared, on the threshold of the room, supported by Malartic; he was deathly pale, and his clenched hand clutched a handkerchief to his chest. He was walking, but as ghosts walk however, without raising his feet. A fierce determination, the effort of which granted his features the immobility of a marble mask, and the voice of his father whom, depraved as he himself had become, he still feared, were the only things that held him upright. He had hoped to hide his wound from his father. He bit his lips to keep from crying out, and swallowed the bloody foam that rose at the corners of his mouth; he even doffed his hat to the prince, despite the excruciating pain caused by raising his arm, and remained thus bare-headed and silent.

— ‘Sir,’ said the prince, ‘your escapades are beyond bounds, and your behaviour such that I shall be forced to implore the king on your behalf, for the favour of either a dungeon or perpetual exile. Abduction, sequestration, rape are no longer gallantry, and if I could forgive you the errors of licentious youth, I can never excuse coldly meditated crime. Do you know, monster,’ he continued, approaching Vallombreuse and speaking in his ear so as to be heard by no other, ‘do you know who this young girl is, this Isabella, whom you have abducted in spite of her virtuous resistance? She is — your sister!’

— ‘Then, may she replace the son you are about to lose!’ replied Vallombreuse, overcome by a faintness that brought the sweat of agony to light on his livid face. ‘But I am not as guilty as you believe. Isabella is pure, I attest it in the name of the God before whom I am about to appear. Those on the point of death are not wont to lie, and one should accept the word of a dying gentleman.’

This sentence was spoken in a voice loud enough to be heard by all. Isabella turned her beautiful eyes, wet with tears, towards Sigognac, and saw on the face of that perfect lover that he had not needed this attestation *in extremis* of Vallombreuse, to believe in the virtue of the one he loved.

— ‘But what ails you?’ said the prince, extending his hand towards the young duke, who was tottering despite Malartic’s support.

— ‘Nothing, father,’ Vallombreuse replied in a barely articulate voice, ‘nothing... I am dying,’ and he fell, on his back, on the flagstones of the landing, without Malartic being able to prevent it.

— ‘He has not fallen on his face,’ said Jacquemin Lampourde sententially. ‘It’s merely a swoon; he may yet recover. We swordsmen know more about these things than surgeons and apothecaries.’



‘...He fell, on his back, on the flagstones of the landing...’

— ‘A doctor! A doctor!’ cried the prince at the sight of his son, forgetting his anger. ‘Perhaps there is still some hope. A fortune to he who saves him, the last scion of a noble race! Come! What are you doing here? Run, hasten!’

Two of the impassive footmen, whose torches lit the scene, detached themselves, in the blink of an eye, from the wall, and sped away to carry out their master’s orders. Other servants, lifted Vallombreuse, with every imaginable precaution, and, on his father’s orders, carried him to his apartment, where they laid him on his bed.

The old lord followed this lamentable procession with a look in which pain had already quenched criticism. He saw his race ended in this son, simultaneously loved and hated, whose vices he forgot at this moment, recalling only his brilliant qualities. A profound melancholy invaded him, and he remained awhile plunged in a silence that all respected.

Isabella, completely recovered from her faint, stood, eyes lowered, near to Sigognac and Herod, while modestly adjusting the disorder of her clothes. Lampourde and Scapin, a little behind, faded into the background like statues, and, in the doorway, could be glimpsed the faces, full of curiosity, of the swordsmen who had taken part in the fight, anxious about their fate since they feared being sent to the galleys, or the gallows, for having helped Vallombreuse in his evil ventures.

Finally, the prince broke this embarrassed silence, and said: ‘Leave the château at once, all you who have placed your swords at the service of my son’s evil passions. I am too much of a gentleman to act as judge and executioner. Fly, vanish, return to your lairs. Justice will know how to find you there.’

Their dismissal was less than gracious; but it would have been out of place to show too fierce a resentment. The swordsmen, whom Lampourde had set free at the beginning of this scene, withdrew, without asking for what they were owed, along with Malartic their leader.

When they had withdrawn, Vallombreuse's father took Isabella by the hand, and drawing her forth from the group in which she had sheltered, made her stand near him, saying: 'Stay here, mademoiselle; your place is now at my side. A daughter, at least, is restored to me, though his actions have lost me a son,' and he wiped away the tear which, in spite of himself, had overspilled his eyelid. Then, turning towards Sigognac with a gesture of incomparable nobility, he added: 'Sir, you may leave with your companions. Isabella has nothing to fear from her father, and this castle will be her home henceforth. Now that her lineage is known, it is not appropriate for my daughter to return to Paris. It seems I have paid dearly enough for this revelation. I thank you, sir, even though it has cost me all hope of the male line being perpetuated, for having prevented my son performing a shameful action, nay, perpetrating an abominable crime! I would rather my coat of arms was stained with blood, and not mud. Since Vallombreuse's actions proved infamous, you did well to kill him; You behaved as a true gentleman, and I am assured that you are such, in protecting weakness, innocence, and virtue. It was your right. The honour of a daughter saved redeems the death of her brother. That is what reason tells me; but my paternal heart murmurs against it, and unjust ideas of revenge could seize me which I might prove unable to control. Disappear, I will order no pursuit, and will seek to forget that it was your blade that rigorous necessity directed to my son's breast!'

— 'My lord,' replied Sigognac in a tone of the deepest respect, 'I acknowledge the father's grief to the extent that I would, without saying a word, accept the vilest, most bitter condemnation on his part, though in this fatal conflict my loyalty deserves no reproach. I will not seek to justify myself in your eyes, since that would be to accuse the unfortunate Duke of Vallombreuse; but know that I did not seek him out, that he threw himself in my path and that I did everything, in more than one encounter, to spare him. Here, it was his blind fury that drove him onto my blade. I leave in your hands Isabella, who is dearer to me than life, and I withdraw, forever desolate over this melancholy victory, a defeat, in truth, for me, since it destroys my happiness. Ah! How much better it would have been if I had been killed, a victim instead of a murderer!'

Thereupon, Sigognac bowed to the prince, and, giving Isabella a long look full of love and regret, descended the stairs, followed by Scapin and Lampourde, not without turning his head more than once, to view again the young girl leaning against the railing for fear of fainting, raising her handkerchief to her tearful eyes. Was it the death of her brother or the departure of Sigognac that she wept over? I imagine it was due to Sigognac's departure, the aversion that Vallombreuse had inspired in her not having changed to tenderness, as yet, at the sudden revelation of kinship. At least the Baron, modest though he was, judged it so, and, the human heart being a strange thing, he went away consoled by the tears of the one he loved.

Sigognac and his troop crossed the drawbridge, and while skirting the moat on their way to retrieve their horses from the small wood where they had left them, they heard a plaintive voice rising from the moat at the very spot where the fallen tree lay. It was the theatre porter, who had been unable to free himself from the tangle of branches, and was crying piteously for help, his head alone above the water, and he at risk of swallowing that insipid liquid which he hated more than the bitterest medicine, every time he opened his mouth to call for help. Scapin, who being

the most agile and lithe of body, ventured out onto the tree trunk and soon fished the porter out, who was dripping with water and aquatic weed. The horses had not moved from cover, and soon mounted by their riders, happily took the road back to Paris.

— ‘What think you of all these events, Monsieur le Baron?’ Herod asked Sigognac, who was riding close beside him. ‘It seemed like the ending to a tragicomedy. Who could have expected, in the midst of the fight, the entrance of the noble father preceded by torches, arriving to put a stop to the excessive antics of his son? And his recognition of Isabella by means of the ring, an emblazoned seal? Have we not seen it before on the stage? After all, since the theatre is an image of life, life must resemble it as the original does its portrait. I had always heard it said in the troupe that Isabella was of noble birth. Blazius and Leonarda even remembered having seen the prince before, when still only a duke, at the time he was paying court to Cornelia. Leonarda more than once urged the young girl to seek out her father; but she, gentle and modest by nature, did nothing of the sort, not wishing to impose herself on a family that might well have rejected her, and remained content with her modest lot.’

— ‘Yes, I was aware of that,’ replied Sigognac. ‘Without attaching undue importance to her illustrious origin, Isabella told me her mother’s story, and spoke of the ring. One might surmise, moreover, from the delicacy of feeling professed by that amiable girl, that there was noble blood in her veins. I would have guessed it even if she hadn’t told me. Her fine, chaste and pure beauty revealed her lineage. Thus, my love for her has always been mixed with timidity and respect, though actresses are customarily open to gallantry. But the fatality of that damned Vallombreuse turning out to be none other than her brother! There is now the shadow of a corpse between she and I, a stream of blood separates us, and yet I could only save her honour by this death. Unhappy man that I am! I myself have created the obstacle on which my love must be shattered, and killed my own hope with the sword that defended my treasure. To preserve what I love, I have lost it forever. How dare I present myself, hands red with blood, to an Isabella dressed in mourning? Alas, the blood, I shed for her own defence, was her own brother’s! Even if she were to forgive me, and view me without horror, the prince who now has rights over her as a father, will deny and curse the murderer of his son. Oh! I was born under a malevolent star.’

— ‘All this is doubtless most lamentable,’ replied Herod, ‘yet the affairs of El Cid and Chimène were even more tangled, as we may see in the play by Pierre de Corneille, and still, after many struggles twixt love and duty, those same affairs were settled amicably, in the end, though not without some antitheses and *agudezas* (*moments of intensity*) which may seem a little forced, being in the Spanish style, but produce a good effect on the stage. Vallombreuse was only Isabella’s half-brother. They were not born of the same mother, and only for a few brief moments knew each other to be related, which must greatly diminish any feelings of resentment. And besides, our young friend hated, like the plague, that madman, who pursued her with violent and scandalous intent. The prince himself was scarcely pleased with a son as ferocious as Nero, as dissolute as Elagabalus, as perverse as Satan, and who would have been marked for the gallows twenty times, were it not for his status as a duke. So, despair not. Things may turn out better than you think.’

— ‘God willing, my good Herod,’ replied Sigognac, ‘but in the nature of things I foresee unhappiness. Ill luck dogs me; some evil faery presided over my birth. It would have been better had I been killed, since, given her father’s presence, Isabella’s virtue would have been preserved without the death of Vallombreuse, and then, if I must confess all, I know not what secret horror

penetrated, icy cold, to the marrow of my bones, on seeing that handsome young man so full of life, fire and passion, suddenly fall, stiff, cold and pale, at my feet. Herod, the death of a human being is a most serious thing, and though I have no remorse, having committed no crime, I still see Vallombreuse lying there, his hair flowing over the marble staircase, and that red stain on his chest.'

— 'That is but a bad dream,' said Herod, 'you did nothing wrong in slaying him. Your conscience may rest easy. A short gallop will dispel these scruples that are due to feverish action, and the chill of night. What we must consider is the need to leave Paris promptly, and reach some retreat while the affair is forgotten. The death of Vallombreuse will cause a stir at court, and in the city, however much care is taken to conceal it. And, even if he was scarcely loved, someone may challenge you. Now, without further discussion, let us spur our mounts and devour the ribbon of road that stretches before us, tiresome and greyish, between twin rows of trees like broomsticks under the cold light of this moon.'

The horses, urged on, adopted a livelier pace; but while the two comrades are journeying, let us return to the castle, as quiet now as it was noisy a while ago, and enter the room where the servants had left Vallombreuse. A branched candlestick, placed on a pedestal table, lit the chamber, its rays falling upon the bed of the young duke, motionless as a corpse, and seeming even paler against the crimson background of the curtains, and the reddish gleam of the silk coverlet. Ebony panelling, inlaid with copper, rose to the height of a man, and served as a base for a high-warp tapestry representing the story of Medea and Jason, filled with scenes of murder and sinister magic. Here, Medea was seen cutting Pelias into pieces, under the pretext of rejuvenating him, like Aeson. There, a jealous woman and unnatural mother, she was displayed slaughtering her children. On another panel, she was fleeing, intoxicated with vengeance, in her chariot drawn by fire-spouting dragons. Certainly, the tapestry was rich and beautiful, and from the hand of a craftsman; but these ferocious scenes from mythology had something lugubrious and cruel about them, betraying a fierce nature in the one who had chosen them. At the foot of the bed, the raised curtains revealed Jason fighting the monstrous brazen bulls, defenders of the golden fleece, and one might have thought Vallombreuse, lying inanimate beneath them, one of their victims.

Clothes of the most sumptuous elegance, tried on, and then disdained, were scattered here and there on the chairs, and in a large Japanese vase, adorned with blue and red designs, set on a table, of ebony like all the furniture in the room, a magnificent bouquet of the rarest flowers bowed, designed to replace the one Isabella had refused, but which had not reached its destination due to the unexpected attack on the castle. These superb flowers in full bloom, still fresh, and testimony to a gallant intent, contrasted strangely with the body stretched motionless, such that a moralist would have found there enough matter to philosophise to their heart's content.

The prince, seated in an armchair beside the bed, gazed dully at this face as white as the lace pillow into which it had sunk. Its very pallor rendered the features purer and even more delicate. All that life can imprint of vulgarity on a human face had disappeared leaving a marble-like serenity, and never had Vallombreuse been more beautiful. No breath seemed to escape from the half-open lips, whose pomegranate hue had given way to the violet of death. Contemplating this handsome form that would soon dissolve, the prince forgot that a demonic soul had recently departed it, and thought sadly of the noble name that the past centuries had bequeathed to them, and which future centuries would not know. It was more than the death of his son that he deplored, it was the death

of his House: a grief unknown to the bourgeoisie and to commoners. He held Vallombreuse's icy hand between his own, and feeling a little warmth, thought it not his own, and yielded to illusory hope.

Isabella stood at the foot of the bed, her hands clasped, praying to God with all the fervour of her soul for this brother whose death she had caused, in all innocence, and who was paying with his life for the crime of having loved too much, a crime that women readily forgive, especially when they themselves are its object.

— 'And the doctor is not yet here!' said the prince impatiently. 'Perhaps there is still some remedy.'

As he said these words, the door opened and the surgeon appeared, accompanied by a student carrying the instruments of the profession. After a slight bow, and without saying a word, the former went straight to the bed where the young duke lay, felt his pulse, placed his hand on the chest, and gave a sign of discouragement. However, to render his judgment scientifically certain, he took a small polished steel mirror from his pocket, and held it up to Vallombreuse's lips, then examined the mirror carefully; a light mist had formed on the surface of the metal and was tarnishing it. The doctor, astonished, repeated his experiment. The steel was again misted. Isabella and the prince anxiously followed the actions of the surgeon, whose face had somewhat brightened.

— 'Life is not completely extinguished,' he said at last, turning to the prince, and wiping the mirror; 'the wounded man still breathes, and as long as death has not laid its finger on a man, there is hope. But, nevertheless, do not give yourself over to a premature joy which would later render your grief more bitter. I have said that Monsieur le Duc de Vallombreuse has not breathed his last; that is all. From there to restoring him to health, is a great distance. Now I will examine his wound, which perhaps is not mortal since it did not immediately kill him.'

— 'You need not stay, Isabella,' said the father. 'Such sights are too tragic and distressing for a young girl. You will be informed of the doctor's verdict when he has completed his examination.'

The young girl withdrew, preceded by a footman who led her to another apartment, the one she occupied still being in disorder, having been ransacked during the struggle which had taken place there.

With the help of his student, the surgeon undid Vallombreuse's doublet, tore off the shirt, and revealed a chest as white as ivory, in which a narrow, triangular wound, studded with a few drops of blood, was visible. The wound had bled little. The effusion had been internal. The servant of Aesculapius (*the ancient Greek god of medicine*) opened the edges of the wound and probed it. A slight shudder contracted the face of the patient, whose eyes remained closed, and who moved no more than a statue on a tomb in the family chapel.

— 'Good,' said the surgeon, observing this painful contraction; 'he is suffering therefore he is alive. This sensitivity is a favourable omen.'

— 'Will he recover?' said the prince. 'If you save him, I will make you rich, I will grant all your wishes; whatever you ask for, you shall have.'

— 'Ah! Let us not speculate so,' said the doctor. 'I cannot answer for anything as yet; the blade passed through the top of the right lung. The case is serious, very serious. However, as the subject

is young, healthy, vigorous, built, if not for this cursed wound, to live a hundred years, it is possible that he will survive, barring any unforeseen complications: there are examples of recovery in such situations. Nature grants the young great resources! The sap of life, still mounting, quickly repairs losses, and amends the damage! With suction cups and a little surgery, I will try to clear the chest of all the blood that has accumulated internally, and would have ended up suffocating Monsieur le Duc, if he had not fortunately fallen into the hands of a man of science, a rare occurrence in these villages and castles far from Paris. Come, you scoundrel,' he continued, addressing his pupil, 'instead of gazing at me like a clock face with those big round eyes, roll up the bandages, and fold the compresses, so I can attend to the first dressing.'

When the operation was over, the surgeon said to the prince: 'My lord, please order camp beds to be set up for us in a corner of this room, and a light snack for us, as my student and I will take turns watching over the Duke of Vallombreuse. It is important that I am here, attending to each symptom, combating it if it is unfavourable, aiding it if it proves the opposite. Have confidence in me, my lord, and believe that all that human science can attempt in order to deny death, will be done, with the correct balance of boldness and prudence. Return to your apartments. I will answer for the life of your son... until tomorrow.'

Somewhat calmed by this assurance, the prince withdrew to his chambers, where every hour a footman appeared bringing him news of the young duke's condition.

In the new lodgings assigned to her, Isabella found the same chambermaid, previously gloomy and fierce, waiting to undress her; only the expression of her countenance had changed completely. Her eyes shone with a singular brilliance, and the radiance of hatred satisfied illuminated her pale face. Vengeance, having arrived at last for some unknown outrage, silently nursed in cold impotent rage, had transformed the mute spectre into a living woman. She arranged Isabella's beautiful hair with ill-disguised pleasure, helped the young girl's arms into the sleeves of her nightgown complacently, knelt to take off her shoes, and appeared as thoughtful as she had been surly. Her lips, so well-sealed until recently, brimmed with questions. But Isabella, preoccupied with the tumultuous events of the evening, paid her scant attention, nor did she note the twitching of the maid's eyebrows and air of irritation when a servant appeared, to say that all hope was not lost for the duke. At this news, the joy disappeared from her dark face, illuminated for a moment, and she resumed her gloomy attitude until the moment when her mistress dismissed her with a kind gesture.

Lying in a soft bed, well-made to serve as an altar to Morpheus, and yet which sleep was in no hurry to visit, Isabella tried to understand the feelings inspired in her by this sudden reversal of destiny. Only yesterday she had been merely a poor actress, with no other name than that by which the posters at the corners of crossroads designated her. Today, a nobleman recognised her as his daughter, a humble flower on one of the grafts to that powerful genealogical tree whose roots plunged so far into the past, and which bore on each branch an illustrious man, a hero! The prince so venerable, and whose only superiors were crowned heads, was her father. The dread Duke of Vallombreuse, so handsome despite his perversity, from admirer was become brother, and if he survived, his passion would doubtless fade to a pure and calm friendship. This castle, formerly her prison, had become her dwelling; she was at home there, and the servants obeyed her with a respect that was no longer constrained or simulated. All the dreams that the wildest ambition could have nurtured, fate had taken it upon itself to accomplish for her, and almost without her participation.

From what seemed to be her ruin, her fortunes had emerged radiant, improbable, beyond all expectation.

Filled, thus, with happiness, Isabella was surprised not to feel greater joy; her soul needed to accustom itself to this new order of ideas. Perhaps, even without fully realising it, she regretted her life on the stage; but what dominated everything was the idea of Sigognac. Did this change in her position distance her, or bring her closer to, that lover so perfect, so devoted, so courageous? Poor, she had refused him as a husband for fear of hindering his fortune; rich, it would be her dearest duty to offer him her hand. The acknowledged daughter of a prince could well become the Baronne de Sigognac. Yet the Baron had, most likely, ended Vallombreuse's life. Their hands could not join over a grave. If the young duke failed to succumb, perhaps he would retain from his wound, and above all his defeat, for his pride was more sensitive than his flesh, a long-lasting resentment. The prince, for his part, was capable, however good and generous he was, of looking unfavourably on the man who had almost deprived him of a son; he might well desire another alliance for Isabella; yet, inwardly, the young girl promised herself that she would be faithful to that love born when she was merely an actress, and to enter a religious order, rather than accept a duke, a marquis, a count, her suitor being as handsome as the day, and as gifted as a prince in fairy tales.

Satisfied with this resolution, she was about to fall asleep, when a slight noise made her open her eyes again, and she saw Chiquita, standing at the foot of the bed, gazing at her in silence with a meditative air.

— 'What do you want, dear child?' Isabella said to her in her sweetest voice. 'You haven't departed with the others? If you wish to stay near me, I will retain you, for you have done me much service.'

— 'I love you greatly,' replied Chiquita, 'but I cannot stay, as long as Agostin lives. The blades of Albacete say: *'Soy de un dueño,'* which means: 'I have only one master,' a beautiful saying worthy of loyal steel. Yet I have one wish. If you think that I've repaid you for the pearl necklace, kiss me. I have never been kissed. It must feel fine!'

— 'Oh, with all my heart!' said Isabella, taking the child's head in her hands, and kissing her brown cheeks, which blushed with emotion.

— 'Now, farewell!' said Chiquita, who had regained her usual calm.

She was about to leave as she had entered, when she noticed on the table that knife, the use of which she had taught the young actress so that she might defend herself against Vallombreuse's assaults, and said to Isabella: 'Return my knife to me, you won't need it anymore.' Then she disappeared.

Chapter XVIII: En Famille

The surgeon had given his assurance that Vallombreuse would live till the following day. His promise had been kept. That morning, upon entering the disordered room, where bloody linen lay scattered on the tables, he found his young patient still breathing. His eyelids were half-open, revealing a dull, glassy gaze full of the vague terror of annihilation. Through the mist of his swoons, the gaunt mask of death had appeared to him, and at times, his eyes, resting on a fixed point, seemed to discern some terrifying object invisible to others. To escape this hallucination, he would lower his long eyelashes, whose black fringes brought out the pallor of his cheeks, which were invaded by waxen tones, and would hold them stubbornly closed. Then the vision would vanish, and his face would take on a less alarmed expression, and on opening them he was once more able to see about him. Slowly his soul returned from limbo, and his heart, to the doctor's attentive ear, began to murmur again with faint beats, weak pulsations, muffled testimonies of life, which only science could hear. The half-open lips revealed the whiteness of the teeth and simulated a languid smile, sadder than the contractions of suffering, for it was the one that the approach of eternal rest brings to human mouths: however, some light crimson nuances mingled with the violet tints and showed that the blood was gradually resuming its course.

Standing at the bedside of the wounded man, Master Laurent the surgeon observed these symptoms, so difficult to interpret, with a deep and perceptive attention. Master Laurent was an educated man who, to be as well-known as he deserved to be, had only lacked the right connections until now. His talent had only been exercised *in anima vili* (*on some humble creature*), and he had cured peasants, petty bourgeois, soldiers, clerks, prosecutors and other more minor officers of justice, whose life or death won him scant applause or blame. He therefore attached enormous importance to the cure of the young duke. His self-esteem and his ambition were equally at stake in this duel that he was maintaining against death. To preserve the glory of his triumph intact, he had told the prince, who wished to summon the most famous doctors from Paris, that he alone would suffice for the task, and that nothing was more serious than a sudden change of treatment where such a wound was concerned.

— 'No, he will not die,' he said to himself, while examining the young duke, 'he lacks the 'Hippocratic face' (*the facial expression associated with approaching death, first described by Hippocrates*), his limbs retain their suppleness, and he has borne well that dawn anguish which intensifies illness and signifies a fatal crisis. Besides, he must live, his salvation is my fortune. I will tear him from the bony clasp of the grim reaper, this handsome young man, heir to a noble race! The sculptors will have to wait a long time before carving his marble tomb. It is he who will drag me away from this village where I vegetate. Let us first try, at the risk of causing a fever, to restore a little strength to him with an energy-granting cordial.'

Opening his own medicine box, since his *famulus* (*assistant*), who had watched for part of the night, was sleeping on an improvised camp-bed, he brought forth several small bottles containing

variously-coloured essences some red as rubies, others green as emeralds, some golden yellow, others of a diamantine translucency. Abbreviated Latin labels, cabalistic formulae as far as the uninformed were concerned, were stuck to the crystalline bottles. Master Laurent, though self-assured, re-read the titles of the vials he had set aside, several times; held up their contents to the light, taking advantage of the rays of the rising sun which filtered through the curtains; weighed the quantities he took from each bottle in a silver test tube whose capacity he knew; and composed of the whole a potion, according to a recipe, the secret of which was his alone.

The mixture prepared, he woke his famulus and ordered him to raise Vallombreuse's head a little, then he parted the patient's teeth, by means of a thin spatula, and managed to introduce between their double row of pearls the thin neck of the bottle. A few drops of the liquid reached the young duke's palate, and their acrid and powerful flavour made his motionless features contract slightly. A mouthful descended into the chest, soon followed by another, and the entire dose, to the great satisfaction of the doctor, was absorbed without too much difficulty. As Vallombreuse drank, an imperceptible flush rose to his cheekbones; a warm glow shone in his eyes, and his inert hand, stretched out on the sheet, attempted to move. He heaved a sigh and looked around him, like someone waking from a dream, with a gaze to which intelligence was returning.

— 'The stakes were high,' Master Laurent said to himself. 'This medicine is a potion that may kill or restore. It has restored. Aesculapius, Hygieia (*goddess of health and daughter to Aesculapius/Asclepius god of medicine*), and Hippocrates (*c460-c375 BC, the Greek physician and philosopher*) be blessed!'

At that moment, a cautious hand drew back the tapestry covering the doorway, and beneath the raised fold appeared the venerable head of the prince, tired and aged more by the anguish of that terrible night than by ten years of painful life. 'Well, Master Laurent?' he murmured in an anxious voice. The surgeon placed his finger on his lips, and with the other hand pointed to Vallombreuse, slightly raised on the pillow, and no longer possessing the aspect of a cadaver; for the potion had warmed and revived him with its heat.

Master Laurent, with that light step customary to those who care for the sick, approached the prince, at the threshold of the door, and, taking him a little aside, said to him: 'You see, my lord, that the condition of your son, far from having worsened, is noticeably improved. Without doubt, he is not yet saved; but, unless there is an unforeseen complication, which I am doing my best to prevent, I think that he will survive and will be able to continue his glorious destiny as if he had never been injured.'

A lively feeling of paternal joy lit up the prince's face, but, as he advanced towards the room to embrace his son, Master Laurent respectfully placed his hand on his sleeve, and stopped him: 'Allow me, prince, to oppose the fulfilment of this very natural desire; doctors are often irritating, but medicine has its rigors like no other. Please, do not enter the duke's room. Your beloved and feared presence could, in the weakened state in which he finds himself, provoke a dangerous crisis. Any emotion would be fatal to him, and would be capable of breaking the very fragile thread, by which he is attached to life through my efforts. In a few days, his wound being on the way to healing, and his strength returning little by little, you may, at your ease and without risk to him, enjoy the pleasure of a visit.'

The prince, reassured, yielding to the surgeon's rational plea, withdrew to his apartment, where he occupied himself with reading, piously, until the stroke of noon, at which time the major-domo came to inform him 'that Monseigneur's dinner was served.'

— 'Please ask the Countess Isabella de Lineuil, my daughter — for such is the title she will bear henceforth — to descend to dinner,' said the prince to the butler, who hastened to obey his order.

Isabella crossed the antechamber containing the suits of armour, which had been the cause of nocturnal terror previously, and found the room not at all gloomy during the day. Clear light fell from the high windows, no longer darkened by closed shutters. The atmosphere within had been refreshed. Bundles of juniper and sweet-smelling wood, burning brightly in the fireplace, had dispelled the stench of mould. Due to its master's presence, life had returned to this dead chamber.

The dining room no longer looked the same. The table, which the day before had seemed set for a spectral feast, was now covered by a rich tablecloth, the creased folds of which formed symmetrical squares, and looked perfectly fresh, with its old shallow-bottomed chased tableware, emblazoned with coats of arms, its Bohemian crystal-ware speckled with gold, its spiral-footed Venetian glasses, and its spice-jars and dishes from which rose fragrant fumes.

Huge logs set on andirons consisting of large, stacked globes of polished metal, spilled broad swirls of flame, mingled with cheerful crackling sparks, over a plaque bearing the prince's coat of arms, spreading a gentle warmth throughout the vast room. The metalwork of the dressers, the gilded and silvered varnish of the Cordoban leather hangings, gave back reflections, and reddish gleams from the hearth, despite the brightness of the day.

When Isabella entered, the prince was already in his chair, the high back of which formed a sort of canopy. Behind him stood two footmen in full livery. The young girl addressed her father with a modest curtsy that had no suggestion of the stage, and of which any great lady would have approved. A servant brought a seat forward for her, and, without too much embarrassment, she took the place opposite the prince which he indicated with his hand.

The soup served, the squire carved on a buffet table the various meats brought to him from the table, and which the servants then returned after dissection.

A footman poured Isabella a glass of wine, though she, being the reserved and sober person she was, only drank once it had been mixed with water. Overwhelmed by the events of the previous day and night, dazed and troubled by the sudden change in her fortunes, concerned for her brother who had been so grievously wounded, and perplexed about the fate of her beloved Sigognac, she only touched minute portions of the food placed before her.

— 'You scarcely eat or drink, Countess,' the prince said to her, 'so please accept this partridge wing.'

At this title of countess, pronounced in a friendly yet serious voice, Isabella turned her beautiful, astonished blue eyes towards the prince with a timidly questioning look.

— 'Yes, Comtesse de Lineuil; it is the title of an estate that I give you, because the name Isabella, charming as it is, is not suited to my daughter without some accompaniment.'

Isabella, yielding to the impetuous impulse of her heart, rose, passed to the other side of the table, and kneeling beside the prince, took his hand and kissed it in recognition of this attention.

— ‘Rise, my daughter,’ the prince continued with a tender air, ‘and resume your place. What I am doing is but right. Destiny alone prevented me from effecting it sooner, and this dreadful encounter which has brought us all together, has something about it which suggests the hand of heaven. Your virtue prevented a great crime from being committed, and I love you for that, even if it should cost me my son’s life. But God will save him, so that he may repent of having assaulted a person of the purest innocence. Master Laurent gave me hope, and at the threshold from which I contemplated him in his bed, Vallombreuse did not appear to me to have on his brow the seal of death that we warriors well know how to recognise.’

Water was brought, in a magnificent silver-gilt ewer, and the prince, after casting away his towel, entered the drawing-room, into which, at his sign, Isabella followed. The old lord sat beside the fireplace, a sculptured feature that rose to the ceiling, while she seated herself beside him on a folding chair. As the footmen had withdrawn, the prince took Isabella’s hand in his own, and contemplated for some time and in silence, this daughter so strangely rediscovered. His eyes expressed joy mingled with sadness. For, despite the doctor’s assurances, Vallombreuse’s life still hung by a thread. Happy on one account, he was unhappy on the other; but Isabella’s charming face soon dissipated this painful feeling, and the prince spoke to the new countess as follows:

— ‘Doubtless, dear daughter, amidst these events, which have brought us together in a strange, romantic and almost supernatural manner, you must have wondered why, during all the length of time which has elapsed since your childhood till this day, I have not sought you out, and why it has been left to chance alone to restore the lost child to the neglectful father. That would be to misunderstand my depth of feeling, and you have such a virtuous soul, that surely the answer must have soon occurred to you. Your mother Cornelia, as you are aware, was of an arrogant and proud character; she treated everything with extraordinary passion, and when high propriety, I would almost say reasons of state, forced me to separate from her, much against my will, so as to marry at the command of one whose orders none resist, she, outraged, full of anger and resentment, obstinately refused everything which could ameliorate her situation, and ensure your future. Land, mansions, a generous annuity, money, jewels, she rejected all with massive disdain. This disinterestedness, which indeed I admired, found me no less stubborn, and I deposited the monies and securities she refused with a trustworthy person, so that she could receive them again...in the event that her views changed. But she persisted in her refusal, and, changing her name, joined another troupe with whom she toured the provinces, avoiding Paris, and the places where I resided. I soon lost track of her, especially since the king, my master, entrusted me with embassies and delicate missions that kept me abroad for a long time. When I returned, through confidants as reliable as they were intelligent, who had questioned actors from the various theatres and heard gossip, I learned that Cornelia had died several months earlier. As for the child, no one had heard of her, and no one knew what had become of her. The perpetual travel of these comedy troupes, and the noms-de-guerre adopted by the actors who comprise them, which they often change out of necessity or whim, rendered such a search intensely difficult for one who could not execute it himself. The faint clues that might guide an interested party often go unrecognised by agents motivated only by greed. I was indeed informed of a few little girls amidst these troupes; but the details of their birth did not correspond to yours. Sometimes candidates were offered by mothers

who were not greatly concerned about retaining their own children, and I had to be on my guard against such tricks. The sum I had deposited had not been touched. Obviously, the spiteful Cornelia had wished to conceal her daughter from me, and so take here revenge. I might have indeed believed you dead, yet a secret instinct told me that you lived. I remembered how sweet and charming you were in your cradle, and how with your little pink fingers you pulled at my moustache, black then, when I bent to kiss you. The birth of my son had revived this memory instead of extinguishing it. I thought, on seeing him, raised in the bosom of luxury, covered in ribbons and lace like a royal child, possessing jewels for rattles that would have represented a fortune to many an honest family, that perhaps, at that moment, you, my daughter, scantily clad in faded theatrical finery, were suffering from cold and hunger aboard some wagon, or in some barn open to all the winds. If she yet lives, I told myself, some manager of a theatrical troupe is doubtless mistreating her, and beating her. Suspended from a wire, she plays the role, half-dead with fear, of a cupid or little sprite, borne aloft in mechanised flight. Her barely-restrained tears flow, furrowing the coarse rouge with which someone has smeared her pale cheeks, or else, trembling with emotion, she stammers, amidst the smoke of the footlight candles, a few lines from a childish role, her errors in reciting which have already earned her many a slap. And I repented of not having, from the day of her birth, taken the child from the mother; but then I believed maternal love to bind eternally. Later, I was tormented in other ways. In that wandering and dissolute life, how many assaults must the modesty of one as beautiful as she promised to be, not have to suffer, from the likes of these libertines who are drawn to actresses like moths to the flame, and my face flushed at the thought that my blood, which runs in your veins, might be subjected to such outrage. Many a time, affecting more taste than I had for comedy, I attended the theatre, trying to discover amidst the ingenues some young person of the age you would be and with the beauty I supposed you to have. But I saw only armoured and painted faces, and the effrontery of the courtesan behind the grimaces of some 'innocent'. None of them could be you.

I had therefore, sadly, relinquished the hope of finding this girl again whose presence would have brightened my old age; the princess my wife, who died after three years of marriage, had given me no other child than Vallombreuse, who, by his unbridled character, caused me much pain. A few days ago, being at Saint-Germain with the king, attending to the duties of my office, I heard some courtiers speak favourably of Herod's troupe, and what they said of it gave rise to a desire in me to attend a performance of these actors, the finest who had come from the provinces to Paris for a long time. A certain Isabella was especially praised for her correct, demure, yet natural acting, full of a naive grace. This role of ingenue that she rendered so well in the theatre, she maintained, it was said, in the city, and the most spiteful tongues were silent regarding her virtue. Agitated by a secret presentiment, I went to the room in which the actors were reciting, and saw you act to general applause. Your air of an honest young person, your timid and modest manner, the sound of your voice so fresh and silvery, all this troubled my soul in a strange way. It is impossible, even for the eye of a father, to recognise in a beautiful girl of twenty a child he has not seen since the cradle, and especially by candlelight, amidst the glare of the theatre; but it seemed to me that if some whim of fortune had thrust a girl of quality onto the stage, she would possess that reserved and discreet air of keeping the other actors at a distance, that air of distinction which makes all say: 'How comes she here?' In the same play there appeared a Pedant whose drunken face was not unknown to me. The years had in no way altered his grotesque features, and I remembered that he had already played the part of Pantalone and of other ridiculous old men in

the company in which Cornelia had acted. I know not why my imagination conceived a connection between you and this Pedant, once your mother's comrade. Reason insisted in vain that this actor could well have taken employment in this particular troupe, without it meaning that you were present; yet it seemed to me that he held in his hands the end of the mysterious thread by which I might be guided through the dark maze of past events. So, I resolved to question him, and would have done so if, when I sent to the inn on the rue Dauphine, I had not been told that Herod's troupe had left to give a performance in a château on the outskirts of Paris. I would have waited until the actors returned, if a courageous servant had not come to warn me, fearing some unpleasant encounter, that the Duke of Vallombreuse, madly in love with an actress named Isabella, who resisted virtuously and determinedly, had planned to kidnap her during this proposed theatrical engagement, having employed a squad of hired swordsmen, a scheme certain to involve undue violence, and easily capable of ending badly, the young girl being accompanied by friends who were not themselves unarmed. The suspicion I had concerning your birth caused in me, given this warning, a disturbance of mind strange to conceive. I shuddered at the idea of a criminal passion which would be transformed into a monstrous and incestuous one, if my presentiment did not deceive me, since you were, if all proved true, Vallombreuse's own sister. I learned that the kidnappers were to transport you to this castle, and travelled here, with all speed. You had already been freed, without your honour having suffered, and the amethyst ring confirmed what my inner voice told me at first sight of you.'

— 'Believe me, my lord and father,' replied Isabella, 'when I say that I have never condemned your actions. Accustomed from childhood to the itinerant life of an actress, I accepted my fate readily, knowing and dreaming of no other. The little I knew of the world gave me to understand that it would be ungracious to wish to enter an illustrious family, when for doubtless powerful reasons I had been abandoned to obscurity and oblivion. Vague memories of my mother inspired pride in me, on occasions, and I said to myself, noting the disdainful air that great ladies adopt towards actresses: 'I too am of noble race!' But these momentary thoughts soon dissipated, and I retained only an invincible respect for myself. For nothing in the world would I have sullied the pure blood that flowed in my veins. The licence of the wings, and the unwelcome attentions to which actresses are subjected, even those who are less than beautiful, inspired only disgust. I lived in the world of theatre almost as in a convent, for one can be virtuous anywhere, if one desires to be so. The Pedant acted like a father towards me, and certainly Herod would have broken the bones of anyone who had dared to touch me with his finger, or even spoken too freely to me. Although they may only be actors, they are fine people, and I commend them to you if they should ever find themselves in need. It is in large part owing to them, that I am able to present my brow to your lips without blushing, and call myself your daughter. My only regret is having been the innocent cause of the misfortune that has happened to the duke, your son, and I would have wished to enter your family under better auspices.'

— 'You have nothing to reproach yourself for, my dear daughter, you could not have anticipated these events which occurred suddenly, due to a combination of circumstances, and which one would might find romantic if one encountered them in literature, while my joy at seeing you again, a daughter as worthy of our name as if you had not lived a hazardous and wandering life in a profession less orderly than normal, soothes the pain which the unfortunate injury of my son has brought me. Whether he survives or succumbs, I cannot cast blame on you. Besides, your virtue saved him from a crime. So, let us speak of that no more. But who was that bold young man

among your liberators, who seemed to lead the attack, and who wounded Vallombreuse? An actor, no doubt, though he seemed to me to possess a noble air, and much courage.'

— 'Yes, father,' replied Isabella, her cheeks displaying a faint and modest blush, 'he is an actor. But if I may be permitted to betray a secret, which is no longer unknown to Monsieur le Duc, I tell you that Captain Fracasse, so-called, for such is his role in the troupe, hides behind his mask a noble face, and beneath his stage name that of an illustrious House.'

— 'Indeed,' replied the prince, 'I believe I have heard something to that effect. It would have been astonishing to me if some mere actor had attempted, so recklessly, to thwart a Duke of Vallombreuse, and enter into a duel with him. It takes noble blood to show such audacity. I consider that only a gentleman can defeat a gentleman, just as a diamond can only be scored by another diamond.'

The prince's aristocratic vanity was consoled by knowing that his son had not been hurt by someone of low rank. Things were thus returning to the social norm. The combat became a duel between people of equal status, and the motive was clear; propriety was not offended by the encounter.

— 'And what is the name of this valiant champion,' the prince continued, 'this brave knight and defender of innocence?'

— 'The Baron de Sigognac,' replied Isabella, her voice trembling slightly, 'I fearlessly offer his name to your generosity. You are too just to pursue him on account of an unfortunate victory he deploras.'

— 'Sigognac,' said the prince, 'I thought the line was extinct. Is the family not from Gascony?'

— 'Yes, father, his château is located near Dax'.

— 'That is so. The Sigognacs have a 'speaking' coat-of-arms; they bear three golden storks on an azure field, ordered two above and one below (*'stork', in French, is 'cigogne'; in a 'speaking' coat-of-arms the emblem reveals the name of the House*). Their nobility is very ancient. Palamedes de Sigognac figured gloriously in the first crusade. One Raimbaud de Sigognac, doubtless the father of your Sigognac, was a great friend and companion of Henri IV in his youth, but he did not follow him to court; for his affairs, it is said, were tangled, and then, one gained little more than blows by following the Béarnais (*Henri IV, also King of Navarre, was born in Pau, in the Béarn region*).'

— 'So tangled, that our troupe, forced one rainy night to seek shelter, found the son in a ruined turret fit only for owls to dwell in, where his youth was wasting away, and we tore him from his Castle of Misery, fearing that he would die there of hunger, pride and melancholy; I have never seen misfortune more valiantly borne.'

— 'Poverty is no crime,' said the prince, 'and any noble house that has not failed in honour may rise again. Why, in his situation, did the Baron de Sigognac not turn to one of his father's old comrades-in-arms, or even to the king, the natural protector of all true gentlemen?'

— 'Misfortune makes one timid, however brave one may be,' replied Isabella, 'and self-esteem constrains even the boldest. By joining us, the Baron hoped to meet with a favourable opportunity in Paris, which has not occurred. In order not to be a burden to us, he has replaced one of our

comrades who died on our travels, and as the role is played hidden by a mask, he did not consider it compromised his dignity.'

— 'Beneath your theatrical disguises, without being a sorcerer, I can well surmise something of a love affair,' said the prince, smiling with a knowing kindness: 'but that is none of my business; I know your virtue well enough, and am not alarmed at a few discreet sighs uttered for your benefit. Besides, I have not been your father long enough to allow myself to lecture you.'

While he spoke thus, Isabella fixed on the prince her large blue eyes, in which shone the purest innocence and the most perfect loyalty. The pink tint with which the name of Sigognac had coloured her lovely face had dissipated; her countenance offered no sign of shame or embarrassment. The gaze of a father, the gaze of heaven itself, would have found nothing reprehensible in her heart.

The conversation had reached this point when Master Laurent's assistant was announced; he brought a favourable report on Vallombreuse's health. The wounded man's condition was as satisfactory as could be; after the potion a crisis had occurred, the outcome of which was a happy one, and the doctor now answered for the young duke's life. His recovery was simply a matter of time.

A few days later, Vallombreuse, propped up in his bed by a few pillows, and wearing a shirt with a Venetian lace collar, his hair parted and tidy, received a visit from his faithful friend the Chevalier de Vidalinc, whom he had not till then been allowed to see. The prince was seated beside his son, gazing with profound paternal joy at his pale and emaciated face, which no longer displayed any alarming symptoms. Colour had returned to his lips, and the spark of life was bright in his eyes. Isabella was standing by the bedside. The young duke held her hand between his slender fingers, bluish-white like those of invalids who have been hidden from sunlight and the open air for some time. As he was forbidden to speak except in monosyllables, he showed his sympathy thus to one who had been the involuntary cause of his injury, and made her understand how wholeheartedly he regretted the fact. The brother had replaced the lover, and the illness, in quenching his ardour, had contributed not a little to that challenging transition. Isabella was now to him the Comtesse de Lineuil, and no longer the actress of Herod's troupe. He acknowledged Vidalinc in a friendly manner, and for a moment removed his hand from his sister's, so as to offer it to him. This was all the doctor allowed at that time.

After two or three weeks, Vallombreuse, strengthened by a light diet, was able to spend a few hours on a chaise-longue and enjoy the air from an open window, through which a balsamic breath of spring entered. Isabella often kept him company and read to him, a function for which her former profession as an actress made her marvellously suited, due to her ability to sustain her voice and vary her intonation appropriately.

One day, having finished one chapter, she was about to begin another, whose heading she had already read, when the Duke of Vallombreuse signed to her to set down the book, and said:

— 'Dear sister, these adventures are the most entertaining in the world, and the author can be counted among the wittiest people at Court, and his works are the talk of the city, but I confess I prefer your charming conversation to being read to. I would not have believed I could gain so much despite losing all hope. The brother is in a better relation to you than the lover; rigorous as you were to the one, and gentle as you are to the other. I find in these tranquil sentiments a charm

of which I had no suspicion. You reveal to me a whole unknown side of womankind. Carried away by ardent passion, pursuing the pleasure that beauty promised, exalting and irritating myself with the obstacles presented, I was like that ferocious hunter of legend whom nothing could halt; I saw only my prey in the beloved object. The idea of her resistance seemed impossible to me. The word virtue made me shrug, and I can say without conceit, to the only one who refused to yield to me, that I had many reasons for disbelieving its existence. My mother died when I was only three years old; you were not here, and I was ignorant of all that is pure, tender, and delicate in the female soul. I saw you; an irresistible empathy, in which the unknown tie of family doubtless played a part, drew me towards you; and for the first time a feeling of esteem mingled in my heart with love. Your character, while driving me to despair, pleased me. I approved of the modest and polite firmness with which you rejected my homage. The more you rejected me, the more I found you worthy. Anger and admiration followed one another within me, and sometimes reigned together. Even in my most violent fury, I always respected you. I sensed the angel in the woman, and felt the ascendancy of a celestial purity. Now I am happy, for I have from you precisely what I desired from you without knowing it, an affection free from earthly alloy, unalterable, eternal; I finally possess a kindred soul.'

— 'Yes, dear brother,' replied Isabella, 'you do possess it, and it gives me great joy to be able to tell you so. You have in me a devoted sister who will love you doubly for the time we have lost, especially if, as you promised, you moderate those passions which alarm our father, and only allow what is excellent in you to appear.'

— 'Behold the lovely preacher,' said Vallombreuse, smiling, 'it is true that I am a very great monster, but I will amend myself, if not for the love of virtue, at least so as not to see my older sister assume a severe air at some new escapade of mine. Yet I fear that I shall always represent wildness, as you will forever represent reason.'

— 'If you compliment me so,' said Isabella with an air of menace, 'I shall take up my book again, and you will have to listen to the whole story the Barbary corsair is going to relate, in the cabin of his galley, to the incomparable Princess Amenaïde, his captive, who is seated on gold brocaded pillows.'

— 'I do not deserve such harsh punishment. Even if I seem merely talkative, I desire to talk. That cursed doctor has placed a seal of silence on my lips for so long he has made me look like a statue of Harpocrates! (*The ancient Egyptian deity 'Horus the Child', depicted as a young boy with a finger to his lips*)

— 'But are you not afraid of tiring yourself? Your wound has barely healed. Master Laurent recommended that I read to you so that while listening you can spare your chest.'

— 'Master Laurent knows nothing, and merely wishes to emphasise his continuing importance. My lungs operate with the same ease as before. I feel perfectly well, and I have the urge to ride a horse, and go for a gallop in the woods.'

— 'It would be better to make conversation; the danger would surely be less.'

— 'I shall soon be back on my feet, my sister, and I will present you to the world to which your rank summons you, and in which your perfect beauty will not fail to bring many admirers to your feet, from among whom the Comtesse de Lineuil may choose a husband.'

— ‘I have no desire to wed, and believe me, these are not the words of some young girl who would be sorry to be taken at her word. I have given my hand in marriage enough times, in the last acts of various plays, not to be in any great hurry to do so in real life. I dream of no sweeter existence than to remain near the prince and you.’

— ‘A father and a brother do not always suffice, even for the most unattached person in the world. Such tender relations do not occupy the whole heart.’

— ‘They will mine, however, and if they should fail me someday, I will enter some religious order.’

— ‘That would be taking self-denial to the extreme. Does not the Chevalier de Vidalinc seem to you to have all that is required to render him the perfect husband?’

— ‘No doubt he does. The woman he marries will truly be able to call herself happy; but however charming your friend may be, my dear Vallombreuse, I will never be that woman.’

— ‘The Chevalier de Vidalinc is red-haired, and perhaps like our King Louis XIII, you dislike that colour, which is much-prized by painters, however. But let us not speak of Vidalinc anymore. What do you think of the Marquis de l’Estang, who visited the other day to inquire after me, and did not take his eyes off you for the duration of his visit? He was so amazed by your grace, so dazzled by your peerless beauty, that he entangled himself in compliments and did nothing but stammer. His timidity aside, which should find an excuse in your eyes since you were the cause of it, he is an accomplished cavalier. He is handsome, young, of noble birth and great fortune. He would suit you very well.’

— ‘Since I now have the honour of belonging to your illustrious family,’ replied Isabella, ‘a little impatient with his banter, ‘too much humility would not become me. I will not say, therefore, that I regard myself as unworthy of such a union; but should the Marquis de l’Estang ask my father for my hand, I would refuse. I have already told you, brother, I do not wish to marry, and you know it well, you who torment me in this way.’

— ‘Oh! What a wild virginal temper you display, my sister! Diana was no wilder in the forests and valleys of Haemus (*northern Thrace*). Yet, if we are to believe the mythological tales, Endymion found favour in her eyes (*Diana in her role of moon-goddess therefore equated here to Selene*). You are angry because I propose, while chattering away, some suitable matches for you; if these displease you, we will discover others.’

— ‘I am not angry, brother; but you are definitely talking far too much for an invalid, and I shall have Master Laurent scold you. You shan’t have your chicken wing for supper.’

— ‘So be it; I’ll remain silent,’ said Vallombreuse with an air of submission, ‘but believe me, you will only be married by my hand.’

To avenge her brother’s stubborn mockery, Isabella began the story of the Barbary corsair in a high, vibrant voice that drowned out Vallombreuse’s.

— ‘My father, the Duke of Fossombrone, was walking with my mother, one of the most beautiful women, if not the most beautiful, in the Duchy of Genoa, on the shore of the Mediterranean, to which the staircase belonging to a superb villa he occupied during the summer descended, when the pirates of Algiers, concealed behind some rocks, rushed upon him;

triumphed by sheer numbers over his desperate resistance; left him for dead; and bore the Duchess, then pregnant with myself despite her cries, to their boat, which sped away driven by vigorous strokes of the oars, and reached their captain's galley sheltered in a cove. Presented to the Bey, my mother pleased him and became his favourite...'

Vallombreuse, to thwart Isabella's intent, closed his eyes and, during this passage full of interest, pretended to fall asleep. This slumber which Vallombreuse had at first feigned soon became real, and the young girl, seeing her brother asleep, withdrew on tiptoe.

Their conversation, which had seemed to indicate a hostile plan on the part of the duke, troubled Isabella despite herself. Did Vallombreuse, perhaps, retain a secret grudge against Sigognac though he had not yet spoken his name since the attack on the castle, seeking to create, by urging her to marry elsewhere, an insurmountable obstacle between the Baron and his sister? Or did he simply wish to know if the feelings of the actress, transformed into the countess, had changed, and not merely her fortune? Isabella could answer neither of these two questions that her reverie alternately posed. Since she was Vallombreuse's sister, the rivalry between Sigognac and the young duke should have ceased of itself; yet, on the other hand, it was difficult to suppose that the latter, so haughty, so proud and so vindictive, had forgotten the shame of a first defeat, and especially that of the second. Although the situation had altered, Vallombreuse, in his heart, must always hate Sigognac. Even if he had enough greatness of soul to forgive him, generosity did not demand that he love him or admit him into his family. It was necessary to renounce the hope of a reconciliation. The prince, moreover, would never view with pleasure one who had endangered his son's life. These reflections brought about, in Isabella's mind, a melancholy that she tried in vain to rid herself of. As long as she had considered herself, a mere actress, an obstacle to Sigognac's fortune, she had rejected all idea of union with him; but now that an unexpected stroke of fate had granted her all the standing one could wish for, she would have liked to reward, with the gift of her hand, the one who had sought it when she was despised and poor. She found it somewhat base not to share her prosperity with the companion of her former poverty. But she could do no more than maintain an unalterable loyalty to him, for she dared not speak in his favour either to the prince or to Vallombreuse.

Soon the young duke was well enough to be able to dine at table with his father and sister; at these meals he displayed a respectful deference towards the prince, and a thoughtful and delicate tenderness towards Isabella, and thereby showed that he had, despite his apparent frivolity, a more refined mind than one would have supposed in a young man given to pursuing women, duelling, and indulging in every manner of dissipation. Isabella joined, modestly in these conversations, and the little she said was so just, subtle and timely, that the prince was amazed, all the more so because the young girl, with perfect tact, avoided preciosity and pedantry.

Vallombreuse, now fully recovered, suggested a horse-ride in the park, to his sister, and the two young people rode along a stretch of path, whose hundred-year-old trees arched to form a vault, an impenetrable obstacle to the sun's rays. The duke had regained all his beauty, Isabella was charming, and never had a more graceful couple ridden side by side. Except that the young man's face expressed gaiety, and the young girl's melancholy. Sometimes Vallombreuse's sallies drew a vague, weak smile from her, then she fell back into a languid reverie; but her brother seemed not to notice her sadness, and redoubled his enthusiasm. 'Oh! How good it is to be alive', he cried. 'One has no idea of the pleasure there is in the simple act of breathing! Never have the trees

seemed so green to me, the sky so blue, the flowers so fragrant! It is as if I were born but yesterday, and am viewing Nature for the very first time. When I think that I could be lying in a marble tomb, and yet am riding beside my dear sister, I feel at ease! My wound no longer causes me pain, and I think we can risk a little gallop to return to the castle where the prince is doubtless bored with waiting for us.'

Despite Isabella's ever-cautious warnings, Vallombreuse spurred the flanks of his mount, and the two horses set off at a fairly brisk pace. At the foot of the steps, as he lifted his sister from the saddle, the young duke said to her: 'Now I am well, I shall obtain permission to depart for a while.'

— 'What! So, you wish to leave us, the moment you are healed, you wicked fellow?'

— 'Yes, indeed, for I need to go on a visit for a few days,' Vallombreuse replied casually.

In fact, the very next morning he rode out, after taking leave of the prince who did not oppose the venture, saying to Isabella in a strange, enigmatic tone: 'Farewell, little sister, I think you will be pleased with me!'



'...The two horses set off at a fairly brisk pace.'

Chapter XIX: Nettles and Spiders' Webs

Sigognac had resolved to follow Herod's advice, which seemed sensible, and, since nothing now attached him deeply to the troupe, Isabella having been transformed from an actress to a great lady, he chose to vanish for a while, and plunge again into oblivion, until the resentment against him caused by the likely death of Vallombreuse had subsided. So after having said, and not without emotion, his farewells to the brave actors who had proven to be such good comrades, Sigognac left Paris, mounted on a sturdy horse and with his pockets suitably lined with pistoles, his share of the takings. By stages, he made his way to his own, dilapidated, manor house; for, after the storm, the bird always returns to its nest, even if it is only formed of sticks and old straw. It was the only place in which he could take refuge, and in his despair, he felt a sort of pleasure in returning to the poverty-stricken estate of his ancestors, which, he thought, he might perhaps have done better not to leave. Indeed, his fortune had hardly improved, and this latest adventure could only harm him. 'Come now,' he said to himself as he rode, 'I was predestined to die of hunger and boredom between those ruined walls, under that roof that lets in the rain like a sieve. No one escapes their fate and I will fulfil mine: I shall be the last of the Sigognacs.'

There is little point in describing his journey in detail, which occupied about twenty days, and was not brightened by any interesting encounters. Suffice it to say that, one fine evening, Sigognac saw from afar the turrets of his castle, illuminated by the setting sun, highlighted clearly against the violet background of the horizon. A trick of the light made them appear closer than they really were, and in one of the few panes of the facade, a ray of sunlight produced a reddish scintillation of the most vivid brilliance. It looked like a monstrous garnet.



‘...One fine evening, Sigognac saw from afar the turrets of his castle...’

The sight caused the Baron a strange emotion; certainly, he had suffered greatly in that ruined castle, and yet upon returning to it he felt the emotions that rise on meeting again with an old friend whose absence has made one forget his many faults. Poor, obscure, solitary, he had spent his days there, but not without some private moments of sweetness; for youth can never be entirely unhappy. The most discouraged of us still possess their dreams and hopes. Habitual melancholy ends up revealing a charm of its own, and one regrets certain times of sadness more than those of certain joy.

Sigognac spurred his horse to quicken its pace, and so arrive before nightfall. The sun having almost set, with only a thin segment of its indented disk visible above the brown line traced by the moor on the horizon, the window’s red glow had faded, and the manor house was now nothing more than a grey patch almost merging with the shadows; but Sigognac knew the road well, and he turned onto the track, once frequented, now deserted, which led to the château. Branches of overgrown hedgerow whipped his boots, and his horse’s feet scattered fallen autumn apples lying amidst the dew-drenched grass; the faint, distant sound of a lone dog, barking as if to relieve its boredom, could be heard in the deep silence of the countryside. Sigognac halted his mount to listen better. He thought he recognised Miraut’s hoarse voice. Soon the barking grew louder, and changed into a repeated and joyful yelp, interrupted by a panting run; Miraut had scented his master, and was running with all the speed his old paws could deliver. The Baron whistled in a certain way, and after a few minutes, the brave and obedient dog burst impetuously through a gap in the hedge, howling, sobbing, uttering almost human cries. Though out of breath and panting, he leapt at the horse’s face, tried to climb the saddle to reach his master, and gave the most extravagant displays of canine joy that any animal of his species has ever shown. Argus himself

recognising Ulysses, who was accompanied by Eumaeus the swineherd (*see Homer's 'Odyssey' XVII, 290*), was no more moved than Miraut. Sigognac bent down and stroked his head to calm this excess of devotion.

Satisfied with this welcome, and wishing to bring the good news to the inhabitants of the castle, that is to say to Pierre, Bayard and Beelzebub, Miraut set off like a shot, and began to bark in such a way in front of the old servant sitting in the kitchen, that the latter understood that something extraordinary was happening.

— ‘Has the young master returned?’ said Pierre, rising and following Miraut, who was pulling him along by the hem of his coat. As night had fallen, Pierre lit a piece of resinous wood in place of a candle, at the hearth over which his frugal supper was cooking, the reddish smoke and sparks from which, soon illuminated Sigognac and his horse at the entrance to the path.

— ‘It is you, Monsieur le Baron,’ cried Pierre joyfully at the sight of his master. ‘Honest Miraut has already told me so, in his own canine tongue; for we are so alone here that animals and people speaking only among themselves end up understanding one another. However, not having been informed of your return, I feared I was mistaken. Expected or not, welcome to your domain; we will try to celebrate your arrival as best we may.’

— ‘Yes, it is I myself, my good Pierre, and Miraut told you no lie; myself, indeed, and if not richer, at least safe and sound; come, walk ahead, with your burning torch, and let us go in.’

Pierre, pushed back the old door, though not without effort, and Baron de Sigognac passed beneath the portal, fantastically lit by the torch. In its light, the three storks sculpted on the coat of arms on the vault seemed to come to life and flutter their wings as if they wished to greet the return of the last offspring of the family they had symbolised for so many centuries. A prolonged neighing like a bugle was heard. It was Bayard, who from the depths of his stable had sensed his master and brought forth from his old asthmatic lungs, and aged throat, this resounding fanfare!

— ‘Well, well, I hear you, my poor Bayard,’ said Sigognac, dismounting and throwing the reins to Pierre; ‘I am about to greet you.’ And he was heading towards the stable when he almost fell: a blackish mass was tangled between his legs, mewling, purring, and arching its back. It was Beelzebub expressing his joy with all the means that nature has given to the feline race; Sigognac took him in his arms, and raised him to the height of his face. The tomcat was at the height of happiness; his round eyes lit with phosphoric gleams; nervous tremors made him open and close his paws, advancing and retracting his nails. He almost choked from purring so hard, and with desperate passion thrust his nose, black and grainy as a truffle, against Sigognac’s moustache. After having stroked him awhile, for he did not disdain these testimonies of affection from humble friends, the Baron gently put Beelzebub down, and it was Bayard’s turn, whom he caressed, several times, patting his neck and rump with the flat of his hand. The good creature rested his head on his master’s shoulder, pawed the ground with his hoof, and even attempted a frisky curvet. He politely accepted the presence of the saddle-horse nearby, feeling sure of Sigognac’s affection, and perhaps satisfied to enter into a relationship with one of his own species, something that had not happened for a long time.

— ‘Now I’ve responded to this welcome from the animals,’ said Sigognac to Pierre, ‘it might not be a bad idea to visit the kitchen and see what your pantry contains. I ate a poor breakfast this morning, and have had no dinner at all, wishing to reach the end of my journey before nightfall.

In Paris, I have somewhat lost my sober habits, and will not be sorry to have supper, even if it is only a scrap.'

— 'Master, there's some leftover pancake (*miasson*), a little bacon, and some goat's cheese; coarse, rustic delicacies that you might not find edible now you've tasted haute cuisine. If they don't flatter the palate, they will at least prevent you from dying of hunger.'

— 'That's all a man can ask of his food,' replied Sigognac, 'and I am not scornful, as you might think, of the simple foods that sustained my youth and rendered me healthy, alert, and vigorous; serve your pancake, your bacon, and your cheese with the pride of a butler serving a peacock, complete with spread tail, on a gold platter.'

Reassured, Pierre hastily covered the table, where Sigognac usually took his meagre meal, with a plain but clean cloth; he placed the cup and the stoneware pot full of acidic pomace, symmetrically, on either side of the slice of pancake, and stood behind his master like a butler serving a prince. According to the ancient ceremonial, Miraut, seated himself on the right, behind him, while Beelzebub, crouching on the left, gazed with ecstasy at the Baron de Sigognac, and followed the journeys that his hand made from the dish to his mouth, and from his mouth to the dish, in the expectation of the morsels that he threw to them, impartially.

This strange scene was lit by shards of resinous wood that Pierre planted on iron pins inside the fireplace, so that the smoke would not spread into the room. It was so exact a repetition of the scene described at the beginning of this story, that the Baron, struck by the resemblance, imagined he had dreamt meanwhile, and had never left the castle.

Time, which in Paris had flowed so swiftly, and eventfully, seemed to have stopped at the Château de Sigognac. The slumbering hours had not bothered to turn their dusty sandglass. All was in its place. The spiders still hung in the corners of the windows, in their greyish hammocks, waiting for the improbable arrival of a fly. Some had even become discouraged, and failed to mend their webs, no longer having enough sustenance to draw thread from their bellies; on the white ashes of the hearth, a coal that seemingly had failed to burn away since the Baron's departure gave off a thin wisp of smoke, like that of a pipe about to fail; but the nettles and hemlocks in the courtyard had grown, while the grass that framed the paving stones was taller, and a tree branch, formerly reaching only as far as the kitchen window, now pushed a leafy spray through the remains of a broken pane. That was all that seemed different.

In spite of himself, Sigognac felt himself yielding to the atmosphere of the old castle. His old thoughts came flooding back to him; and he lost himself in silent reverie, a fact which Pierre respected, and that Miraut and Beelzebub dared not disturb by seeking untimely caresses. All that had happened now seemed to him nothing more than some tale he had read in a book, the vague memory of which remained in his mind. Captain Fracasse, already half-erased, appeared to him, as if in the far distance, as nothing more than a pale ghost, that had once emanated, and was now forever detached, from himself. His duel with Vallombreuse he only recalled in the form of a strange event, to which his will had remained foreign. None of the actions accomplished during that time, seemed to him his own, and his return to the castle had broken the thread that connected him to that life. Only his love for Isabella had not vanished, and he found it still alive in his heart, yet more as an aspiration of the soul than a real passion, since the one who was its object could no longer belong to him. He understood that the wheels of his chariot, launched for a moment on

another track, had fallen back into their fatal ruts, and he resigned himself to the situation with a calm dejection. Only, he blamed himself, for having harboured a few traces of hope and illusion. Why on earth do the ill-starred seek to be happy? What foolishness!

However, he managed to shake off this torpor, and seeing Pierre's timid but questioning look told his worthy servant, briefly, the main facts of interest regarding his adventures. Listening to the account of his pupil's two duels with Vallombreuse, the good fellow, proud to have trained such a disciple, beamed with joy, and simulated against the wall, using a stick, the blows that Sigognac described.

— 'Alas, my brave Pierre!' said the Baron with a sigh: 'You showed me, all too well, those secrets of the art of fencing of which none have more knowledge than yourself. That victory has done for me, and returned me, for a long time, perhaps forever, to this poor and wretched manor. Such is my luck that a triumph ruins me, and worsens my affairs instead of furthering them. It would have been better if I'd been wounded, or even slain in that unfortunate encounter.'

— 'The Sigognacs,' said the old servant, sententiously, 'are always undefeated. Whatever happens, master, I am glad you killed this Vallombreuse. It will have been done correctly, I am sure, and that is all that is necessary. What objection can a man have to dying from a fine sword blow, while on guard?'

— 'None, certainly,' replied Sigognac, who was amused by the old fencing master's philosophy as regards summary justice, 'but I feel a little tired. Light the lamp and show me to my room.'

Pierre obeyed. The Baron, preceded by his servant and followed by the dog and the cat, slowly climbed the old staircase with its worn and faded frescoes. The increasingly-pale, sheathed figures of Hercules were barely supporting the false cornice whose weight seemed to crush them. They desperately flexed their depleted muscles, and yet had been unable to prevent some plaster slabs from coming loose from the wall. The Roman emperors were hardly better, and though they affected in their niches the airs of victors and braggarts, they had lost here, a crown or a sceptre; there, the purple of their robes. The painted trellis on the vaulted ceiling had been penetrated in many places, and the winter rains, filtering through the cracks, had drawn new Americas, alongside the old continents and islands, previously depicted.

This decay, to which Sigognac, before leaving his manor house, had not been particularly sensitive, struck him forcibly, and induced in him, as he ascended, a deep melancholy. He saw in it the inevitable and fatal decline of his race, and said to himself: 'If this vault could feel pity for the family it has sheltered until now, it would collapse, and crush me on the spot!' Arriving at the door of his apartments, he took the lamp from Pierre, whom he thanked and dismissed, not wanting him to see his emotion.

Sigognac slowly crossed the first room where the actors had taken their supper a few months ago. The memory of that joyous scene rendered it even gloomier. Having been disturbed for a moment, the silence seemed to settle once more, ever sadder, deeper, and more formidable. In this tomb, a rat wearing down its incisors in gnawing the woodwork, produced strange echoes. Lit by the weak light of the lamp, the portraits, leaning from their faded gold frames as if from balconies, were disturbing. One would have said that they wanted to leave their shadowy backgrounds, and descend to greet this unfortunate scion. A spectral life animated those ancient effigies: their painted lips seemed to move, murmuring words that the soul heard, if not the ear; their eyes rose sadly to

the ceiling and, on their varnished cheeks, the sweat of humidity condensed into large drops which the light illuminated like tears. The spirits of his ancestors wandered, surely, about their images, which represented the terrestrial forms they had once animated, and Sigognac felt their invisible presence in the secret depths of this dreadful half-darkness. All those figures in cuirasses, or farthingales, had a pitiful and desolate air. Only the last portrait, that of Sigognac's mother, seemed to smile. The light fell precisely on its surface, and, whether the more recent date of its creation, and the hand of a finer artist, created the illusion, or whether in fact the soul of the dead woman chose, for a moment, to grant the image life, the portrait had an air of warm and confiding tenderness, which astonished Sigognac and which he took for a favourable omen, since the expression on her face had always seemed melancholy to him before.

Finally, Sigognac reached his room, and placed the lamp on the small table, beside the volume of Ronsard still lying there, which he had been reading when the actors came knocking at the door of the manor that night. The piece of paper, with the rough draft of his unfinished sonnet, riddled with erasures, was still in the same place. The bed, which had not been remade, still bore the imprint of the last person who had lain there. Isabella's head had rested on that pillow, the confidant of many a dream!

At the thought, Sigognac felt his heart tortured, almost voluptuously, by a pleasing pain, if one can join together those two words, opposite in nature. His imagination presented, vividly, the charms of that adorable girl; while his reason spoke to him, in an importunate and sorrowful voice, saying that Isabella was forever lost to him, and yet it seemed to him that he saw, in a phantasmagoria of loving images, that pure and charming face between the folds of the half-open curtains, like that of a chaste wife awaiting the return of her husband.

To put an end to such visions, which eroded his courage, he undressed and lay down, kissing the place formerly occupied by Isabella; but, despite his fatigue, sleep was slow to arrive, and his eyes wandered for more than an hour about the dilapidated room, sometimes following some strange effect of moonlight on the frosted windows, sometimes gazing with unconscious fixity at the hunter of wild duck amidst his forest of blue and yellow trees, the subject of the ancient tapestry.

Though the master was awake, Beelzebub slept, curled up at Sigognac's feet, snoring as in the tale of Muhammad's cat (*Muezza*) asleep on the Prophet's sleeve (*He was said to have cut off the sleeve to avoid disturbing the cat, though the story is unsupported by any hadith*). The creature's profound tranquility finally influenced the man's mind, and the young Baron entered the land of dreams.

When dawn came, Sigognac was struck, even more than he had been the day before, by the dilapidated state of the château. Daylight is pitiless where ancient ruins and other objects are concerned; it reveals their poverty-stricken appearance most cruelly, every wrinkle, stain, discoloration, every patch of dust or mould; amidst the darkness, Night, being more merciful, softens everything with her friendly shadows, as with the edge of her veil she wipes away the traces of tears. The castle's rooms, that once seemed so vast, looked small to him now, and left him surprised at how large they had loomed in his memory; but he soon regained the measure of his manor, and returned to his former life, as if donning an old coat that one has removed in order to wear a new one for a while; he felt at ease in this worn garment, its folds formed by reason of his habits. His day was arranged thus. He would say a short prayer in the ruined chapel where his ancestors lay buried, clear the brambles from some broken tomb, hurry through a frugal meal,

practice his fencing with Pierre, mount Bayard or the saddle-horse he had retained, and, after a long excursion, return to the house, silent and gloomy as before; then he would have supper between Beelzebub and Miraut and go to bed, leafing through, in order to help him fall asleep, one of the mismatched volumes, read a hundred times before, from the library ravaged by starving rats. As you can see, nothing survived of the brilliant Captain Fracasse, the bold rival of Vallombreuse; Sigognac had indeed become, once again, lord of the Castle of Misery.

One day he visited the garden which he had shown to the two young actresses. It was more uncultivated, disordered, and overgrown with weeds than ever; however, the briar-rose, which had provided a bloom for Isabella and a bud for Serafina, so that it could not be said that two ladies emerged from a flower garden without being in some way adorned, seemed on this occasion, as on the other, to bear itself with honour. On the same branch, two charming little roses were blooming, their fragile petals open to the morning, and still retaining at heart two or three pearls of dew.

The sight moved Sigognac particularly, given the memory it aroused in him. He remembered Isabella saying: 'During that walk in the garden, when you pushed aside the brambles, you picked for me a small wild rose, the only gift you could give me; I let a tear fall on it before putting it in my bosom, and, silently, I gave you my soul in exchange.'

He took the rose, inhaled its scent, passionately, and touched his lips to the leaves, imagining that they were her lips, no less sweet, roseate, and fragrant. Since he had parted from Isabella, he had thought of nothing but her, and he understood how indispensable she was to his life. During the first days, the dizziness of all those accumulated adventures, the stupor of those reversals of fortune, and the forced distractions of the journey, had prevented him from realising the true state of his soul. But, having returned to a state of solitude, calm, and silence, he found Isabella again the subject of all his reveries. She filled his head and heart. Meanwhile, the very image of Yolande had faded like a light vapour. He did not even ask himself if he had ever loved that proud beauty: he no longer thought about her. 'And yet Isabella loves me,' he said to himself, after having recapitulated for the hundredth time all the obstacles which opposed his happiness.

Two or three months had passed in this manner, and Sigognac was in his room, one day, seeking the final rhyme for a sonnet in praise of his beloved, when Pierre came to announce that a gentleman was there who wished to speak to him.

— 'A gentleman wishes to speak to me?' said Sigognac. 'Are you dreaming, or is he in error? No one in the world has anything to say to me; however, given the rarity of the event, introduce this singular mortal. What is his name, at least?'

— 'He would not say, claiming that his name would tell you nothing,' Pierre replied, opening the double doors.

On the threshold appeared a handsome young man, dressed in an elegant riding costume of hazelnut-coloured cloth, trimmed with green, wearing grey felt boots with silver spurs attached, and holding in his hand a wide-brimmed hat adorned with a long green feather, which allowed his proud, delicate, and charming head to be seen in full, the regular features of which, worthy of an antique statue, more than one woman might have envied.

This accomplished horseman did not seem to make a pleasant impression on Sigognac, for he turned slightly pale, and with a leap ran to his sword hanging at the head of the bed, drew it from its scabbard, and placed himself on guard.

— ‘In the Lord’s name, Monsieur le Duc, I thought I had killed you! Is it you, or your shade, that appears before me like this?’

— ‘It is I, Hannibal de Vallombreuse,’ replied the young duke, ‘I myself, in the flesh, and in no way deceased; but sheathe that rapier as swiftly as possible. We have already fought twice. That is surely enough. The proverb says that things when repeated are pleasing, but on the third occasion they become tiresome. I do not come here as your enemy. If I have a few minor peccadilloes to reproach myself with in regard to yourself, you have certainly had your revenge. Therefore, I think, we are both quits. To prove my good intention, here is a commission, signed by the king, which grants you a regiment. My father and I reminded His Majesty of the attachment of the Sigognacs to his royal ancestors. I wished to bring you the good news in person; and now, since I am your guest, have a suitable neck wrung, and set on the spit what you wish; but, for God’s sake, give me something to eat. The inns on this road are a disaster, and my carriage, stuck in the sand some distance from here, contains my provisions.’

— ‘I greatly fear, Monsieur le Duc, that my dinner will seem to you no better than a form of revenge,’ replied Sigognac with a courteous smile; ‘but do not attribute the poor fare you’ll experience to any spite on my part. Your frank and cordial conduct has touched my soul in its tenderest part, and you will have no more devoted a friend than I henceforth. Though you have little need of my services, they are entirely yours. Come, Pierre, find some chickens, eggs, and other meat, and try to feed, as best you can, this lord who is dying of hunger, and is not like us accustomed to it!’

Pierre pocketed some of the pistoles his master had sent to him, and which he had not yet touched, mounted the saddle-horse, and rode at full speed to the nearest village in search of provisions. He found a couple of chickens, a side of ham, a flask of old wine, and at the home of the local priest, whom he persuaded, not without some difficulty, to hand it to him, a duck-liver pâté, a delicacy worthy of appearing on the table of a bishop or a prince.

After an hour he returned, entrusted the task of turning the spit to a tall, gaunt, ragged girl he had met on the way, and sent on to the castle, and set the table in the portrait room, choosing from the earthenware in the sideboards those that had only a chip or a star, since there was no silverware to consider the last piece having been melted down long ago. This done, he came to announce to his master that ‘the gentlemen are served.’

Vallombreuse and Sigognac sat opposite each other on the least lame pair of the six chairs, and the young duke, who was amused by his unusual situation, attacked the dishes, obtained and prepared by Pierre with some difficulty, with an amusing ferocity of appetite. After devouring a whole chicken, which, to be fair, seemed to have died of scabies, he sank his fine white teeth, joyfully, into a pink slice of the Bayonne ham, and left not a morsel behind, as they say. He proclaimed duck-liver a delightful, nay exquisite, and ambrosial food, and found that a little goat’s cheese, speckled and veined with green, was an excellent rouser of thirst. He praised the wine, too, which was old and of good vintage, and which blushed a beautiful purple in the old Venetian glasses. He was in such a good mood, that he almost burst out laughing at Pierre’s surprised and

terrified expression, on hearing his master call this living man, reputed to be dead, 'Monsieur le Duc de Vallombreuse.' While holding his own as best he could with the young duke, Sigognac was still astonished to find him in his home, leaning familiarly on the table; this elegant and proud lord, once his rival in love, whom he had twice held at the end of his sword, and who had tried several times to have him dispatched by his men.

The Duke of Vallombreuse understood the Baron's thoughts without the latter expressing them, and when the old servant had withdrawn, after placing on the table a generous flask of wine and two glasses smaller than the rest, with which to taste the precious liqueur, the duke ran the tip of his fine moustache between his fingers, and said to the Baron with amiable frankness:

— 'I can see, my dear Sigognac, despite all your politeness, that my visit seems somewhat strange and sudden to you. You are doubtless saying to yourself: "How is it that this Vallombreuse, so haughty, so arrogant, so imperious, has turned from being the tiger that he was to a lamb, that a shepherdess might lead at the end of a ribbon?"



'The Duke of Vallombreuse understood the Baron's thoughts...'

Well, during the six weeks that I remained nailed to my bed, I reflected in a manner that the bravest may allow themselves in the face of eternity; for death is nothing to we gentlemen, who lose our lives with an elegance that the bourgeoisie will never imitate. I felt the frivolity of many things, and promised myself, if I survived, to behave differently. The love that Isabella inspired in me had changed to a pure and sacred friendship, and I no longer had reason to hate you. You were

no longer my rival. A brother cannot be jealous as regards his sister. I felt grateful to you for the respectful tenderness that you unfailingly showed towards her when she was still in a situation that encourages licentiousness. You were the first to guess the charming soul beneath the actress's disguise. A poor man, you offered a despised woman the greatest wealth that a nobleman can possess, the name of his ancestors. She therefore belongs to you, now that she is illustrious and rich. Isabella's lover must be the husband of the Comtesse de Lineuil.'

— 'But, replied Sigognac, she always stubbornly refused me even when, being poor, she could do naught but believe in my absolute disinterestedness.'

— 'With supreme delicacy, angelic sensitivity, and in a spirit of pure self-sacrifice, because she feared to hinder your fate, and harm your fortune; but this recognition of her true rank has reversed the situation.'

— 'Yes, for I am now the one who would be a hindrance to her high position. Do I have the right to prove less devoted than she?'

— 'Do you still love my sister?' said the Duke of Vallombreuse in a serious tone. 'As her brother, I have the right to ask that question, I think.'

— 'With all my soul, with all my heart, with my very life,' replied Sigognac, 'as much and more than ever a man has loved a woman on this earth, where nothing is perfect, except Isabella.'

— 'In that case, sir, as Captain of Musketeers, soon to be Governor of the Province, have your horse saddled and ride with me to Vallombreuse, so that I can formally present you to the prince, my father, and to the Comtesse de Lineuil, my sister. Isabella has first refused to marry the Chevalier de Vidalinc, and then the Marquis de l'Estang, two very handsome young men, I must say; but I believe that, without being pressed unduly, she may well accept the Baron de Sigognac.'

Next day, the Duke and the Baron riding side by side took the road to Paris.

Chapter XX: Chiquita's Declaration of Love

A dense crowd filled the Place de Grève (*The place of public execution, renamed the Place de l'Hôtel-de-Ville after 1802*), despite the still quite early hour marked by the clock-face of the Hôtel de Ville. The great roofs of Dominico Boccador's building (*Dominico da Cortona; the Hôtel de Ville de Paris he designed was destroyed during the Commune of 24 May 1871*) loomed, a purplish-grey against the milky white sky. Their cold shadows stretched to the middle of the square, enveloping a sinister wooden frame, one or two feet higher than the level of foreheads, and smeared with red bloodstains. A few heads appeared at the windows of the houses now and then, and immediately vanished, on seeing that the spectacle had not yet begun. An old woman even showed her wrinkled face at a skylight in the turret located at the corner of the square, from which, so tradition has it, Marguerite (*Marguerite de Valois, wife of Henri IV*) contemplated the torture of Joseph de La Môle and Annibal de Coconas (*executed following the failure of the Malcontents Conspiracy, or Vincennes Plot, of 1574*): she having changed, disastrously, in the eyes of the public, from a beautiful queen to an ugly witch! A child, hoisting himself up with great difficulty, had suspended himself from the stone cross planted at the edge of the slope leading down to the river, holding on, with his arms looped over the crosspiece and his knees and legs claspings the shaft, in a pose as painful as that of the unrepentant thief (*at the Crucifixion*), but which he would not have abandoned for a pastry, or an apple tart. From there, he could view interesting details of the scaffold, the wheel for the condemned, the ropes to tie the wretch, and the iron bar to break his bones; all things worthy of examination.

However, if any among the spectators had taken it into their heads to study this child, perched on high, with a more attentive eye, they would have detected in the expression of the face a feeling other than that of vulgar curiosity. It was not the savage lure of witnessing an execution that had attracted this young being, a creature of swarthy complexion, large eyes ringed with brown, gleaming teeth and long black hair, whose tanned hands gripped the stone crosspiece. The delicacy of the features even seemed to indicate a sex other than that revealed by the clothes, but none looked in that direction, for all eyes turned, instinctively, towards the scaffold, or the platform onto which the condemned man would emerge.

Among the crowd appeared a few familiar faces; a red nose in the centre of a pale face designated Malartic, and enough of the hooked profile of Jacquemin Lampourde was visible, above the collar of a coat thrown over his shoulder in the Spanish style, for there to be no doubt as to his identity. Though he wore his hat pulled down to his eyebrows, in order to hide the absence of the ear severed by Piedgris' bullet, it was easy to identify Bringuénarilles as that great rascal seated on a boundary stone, and smoking a long Dutch pipe to pass the time. Piedgris was chatting with Tordgueule, and, on the steps of the Hôtel de Ville, several regulars of the *Crowned Radish* strolled, in peripatetic fashion, talking about this and that. The Place de Grève, where, sooner or later, they were inevitably destined to end up themselves, exercised a singular fascination for murderers, swordsmen and thieves. That sinister place, instead of repelling them, attracted them. They circled

about it, first tracing wide arcs, then narrower ones, until they fell into it; they liked to gaze at the gallows on which they would hang, avidly contemplated its dread configuration, and learned from the grimaces of the condemned to familiarise themselves with the manner of their death; a result quite contrary to the idea promulgated by justice, which was to deter villains from crime by the sight of the torment involved in the executions.

What further explains the influx of scoundrels on such days was that the protagonist of the tragedy was always a relative, an acquaintance, or, often, an accomplice. They came to see their cousin hanged, a close friend beaten to death, or the gallant man whose counterfeit money was being passed around boiled alive. To miss such an event would have seemed impolite. For a condemned man, it was pleasant to have an audience of folk well-known to him around his scaffold. It sustained him, and rekindled his energy. None wished to appear afraid, in front of appreciators of true merit, and pride came to the aid of suffering. Thus surrounded, by his friends, a man who might have displayed cowardice if he were terminated, incognito, in the depths of some cellar or other, died like a Roman.

Seven o'clock struck. The execution was not to take place until eight. So, Jacquemin Lampourde, hearing the clock chime, said to Malartic: 'You see we would have had time to drink another bottle; but you are always impatient and restless. Why not return to the *Crowned Radish*? I'm bored hanging around, marking time. Is seeing a poor devil broken on the wheel worth such a long wait? The method of torture is insipid, bourgeois, commonplace. If it were a fine quartering tied to four horses, each mounted by an archer from the provost court, or pincers and red-hot iron tongs, or an application of boiling pitch or molten lead, something ingeniously contrived and savagely painful, doing honour to the judge's imagination or the executioner's skill; why then, I wouldn't say a word. For the love of art, I would stay; but, for so little!'

— 'You are wrong about the wheel,' Malartic replied, sententiously, rubbing his nose, which was more crimson than ever, 'the wheel has its finer points.'

— 'One can't argue against personal taste. Each to his own particular pleasure, as a very famous Roman author says, whose name I've forgotten, (*see Cicero's 'Suum cuique pulchrum est'; 'Tusculan Disputations' Book V:23.63*), my memory readily retaining only those of great captains. The wheel pleases you; I will not contradict you on the matter, and so keep you company till the end. Agree, however, that a beheading performed with a damascened blade, with a groove above filled with quicksilver to give it weight, requires clear sight, vigour, and dexterity, and presents a spectacle as noble as it is attractive.'

— 'Yes, no doubt, but it goes by too quickly, it's a mere lightning-flash; and besides, beheading is reserved for the gentry. Placing their heads on the block is one of their privileges. As far as common punishments go, the wheel seems to me to outweigh hanging, which is good for minor criminals at most. Agostin is more than a simple thief. He deserves something better than the rope, and justice has shown him the consideration he deserves.'

— 'You've always had a soft spot for Agostin, probably because of Chiquita, whose oddity stirred your libertine's eye; I fail to share your admiration for a bandit, more suited to working the roads and the mountain gorges, as a *salteador* (*highwayman*), than operating with requisite delicacy at the heart of a civilised city. He is ignorant of the refinements of our art. His manner is harsh, wild, provincial. At the slightest obstacle he draws a knife and kills carelessly, and savagely. Cutting the

Gordian knot is scarcely untying it, whatever Alexander the Great may have thought (*see Plutarch's Life of Alexander* 18.3). Moreover, he fails to employ the sword; which lacks nobility.'

— 'Agostin's specialty is the *navaja*, the long-bladed weapon of his homeland; he has not, like us, rattled the boards in the fencing halls for years. But his style has a flavour of the unexpected, of boldness and originality. His poniard when launched combines the grace of ballistics with the discreet certainty of a bladed weapon. The subject is struck, at twenty paces, without a sound. I regret very much that his career has been interrupted so soon. He worked well, and with the courage of a lion.'

— 'Well, I' replied Jacquemin Lampourde, 'am all for the academic method. Without formality, everything is lost. Before I attack, I tap my man on the shoulder, and give him time to present guard; he can then defend himself if he wishes. It is a duel, and no longer a murder. I am a swordsman, not an assassin. It is true that my profound knowledge of fencing grants me a greater chance, and my arm is well-nigh infallible; but knowledge of the art is not cheating. I claim his purse, watch, jewels, and the dead man's coat; others would do it in my place. Since the trouble is mine, it is fitting that the profit is also. Whatever you assert, this work with the knife is repugnant to me; it is fine in the countryside, and with people of low rank.'

— 'Ah! Jacquemin Lampourde, you are a stickler for principles; you will never budge; however, a little originality never goes amiss where art is concerned.'

— 'I would accept a learned, complex, and pleasing originality; but this fierce and impulsive brutality irritates me. Besides, Agostin is intoxicated by blood, and, in his wild intoxication, he strikes at random. It is a weakness. When one drinks from the cup of murder that may cause dizziness, one must have a strong head. Thus, in that house he entered recently in order to steal cash, he killed the husband who had woken, but also the wife who was asleep; a superfluous murder, excessively cruel and ungallant. Women should only be killed if they scream, and it is far better simply to gag them, even then; for, if one is caught, such carnage arouses resentment in the judges, and the people, and one is viewed as a monster.'

— 'You speak like Saint John Chrysostom, he of the golden tongue,' replied Malartic, 'in such a masterly and peremptory manner that I can find no answer; but what will become of poor Chiquita?'

Jacquemin Lampourde and Malartic were philosophising in this manner, when a carriage exiting the quayside appeared in the square, causing waves and eddies amidst the crowd. The horses stamped their hooves without being able to progress, sometimes striking people's feet, leading to angry conversations, mixed with insults, between the crowd and the lackeys.

The pedestrians thus trampled upon would have attacked the carriage with a will if the ducal arms emblazoned on the door panels had not inspired a species of terror in them, though they were people who respected little. Soon the crowd was so dense that the carriage was forced to halt in the middle of the square, where from a distance the coachman, motionless on his seat, seemed to be perched on a sea of heads. To drive forward, and clear a path, would have necessitated crushing too many of the rabble, and this rabble, who were at home in the Place de Grève, would perhaps have resisted being pushed around.

— ‘These rascals are waiting for an execution, and will not leave the field clear till the condemned man is dispatched,’ said a handsome and magnificently dressed young man, to his friend, who was also very handsome, but wearing a more modest costume, seated next to him in the back of the carriage. ‘To the Devil with the idiot who is about to be broken on the wheel, at the very time when we are crossing the Place de Grève! Couldn’t he have delayed till tomorrow?’

— ‘Believe me,’ his friend replied, ‘he desires nothing more, since the incident will prove even more unfortunate for him than for us.’

— ‘The best we can do, my dear Sigognac, is to resign ourselves to turning our heads the other way, should the spectacle disgust us, a difficult thing to do, however, when something dreadful is happening nearby; witness Saint Augustine’s friend Alypius, who opened his eyes in the Circus to watch the gladiators, persuaded to do so by the roar of the crowd (*see Saint Augustine’s ‘Confessions’, Book VI, viii*), though he had promised himself to keep them closed.’

— ‘In any case, we shall not have long to wait,’ replied Sigognac, ‘look there, Vallombreuse; the crowd is parting in front of the condemned man’s cart.’

Indeed, a cart, drawn by a nag that one of the slaughterhouses at Montfaucon had long been awaiting, was now advancing, surrounded by a few mounted archers, to the sound of its old iron wheels and, passing through the groups of onlookers, headed towards the scaffold. On a plank between the sides sat Agostin, next to a white-bearded Capuchin who held up to the former’s lips a yellow copper crucifix, polished by the kisses of people about to die though still in good health. The bandit’s hair was wrapped in a kerchief, the knotted ends of which hung down behind his neck. A coarse linen shirt and old serge breeches comprised his entire costume. He was dressed for the scaffold; a brief journey. The executioner had already taken the condemned man’s clothes, as was his right, and had left him only these rags, quite sufficient to die in. A series of ropes, the ends of which were held by the executioner, placed at the back of the cart so that the patient could not see them, held Agostin, while allowing him apparent freedom. A servant to the executioner, sitting on a shaft of the cart at one side, held the reins, and whipped the bony nag with all his might.

— ‘Well,’ said Sigognac, eyeing the scene from the carriage, ‘if it is not the bandit who once stopped me on the highway, at the head of his troop of scarecrows. I told you that story as we passed the place where it happened.’

— ‘So, I recall,’ said Vallombreuse, ‘and I laughed heartily; but it seems that the rascal has indulged in more serious exploits since then. Ambition has ruined him; however, he puts a good face on it.’

Agostin, a little pale despite his naturally tanned complexion, was gazing around the crowd in a preoccupied manner, seeming to search for someone in particular. As he passed the stone cross, he saw the young child perched there, as described at the start of this chapter, having remained in place.

At this sight, a flash of joy shone in his eyes, a faint smile parted his lips, and he gave an imperceptible nod, both a farewell and a testament, and said in a low voice, ‘Chiquita!’

— ‘My son, what name did you just pronounce?’ said the Capuchin, waving his crucifix. ‘It sounded like a woman’s name: some gipsy, no doubt, or some girl intoxicated by the flesh. Think instead of your salvation; you have one foot on the threshold of eternity.’

— ‘Yes, father, and though I have black hair, you with your white hair will soon be younger than I. Every turn of the wheel towards that scaffold is ageing me ten years.’

— ‘For a brigand from the provinces, who ought to be intimidated by dying before a crowd of Parisians,’ said Jacquemin Lampourde, who had approached the scaffold, by elbowing his way through the onlookers and idlers, ‘this Agostin is behaving rather well; he does not appear defeated, nor does he display, in anticipation, the cadaverous expression of the condemned. His head is not tossing about; he holds it high and straight; as a sign of courage, he stares fixedly at the fatal machinery. If my experience does not deceive me, he will meet a proper and decent end, without whining, without struggling, and without seeking to confess so as to gain time.’

— ‘Oh! There’s no danger of that,’ said Malartic, ‘he suffered himself to be tortured with eight wedges rather than open his mouth, and betray a comrade.’

The cart, during these brief exchanges, had arrived at the foot of the scaffold, whose steps Agostin slowly mounted, preceded by the attendant, supported by the Capuchin, and followed by the executioner. In less than a minute he was spreadeagled, and tied firmly to the wheel by the executioner’s assistants. The executioner, having thrown his crimson cloak, embroidered with a border of white braid, over his shoulder, had rolled up his sleeve, so that his arm was freer, and was bending down to pick up his deadly iron bar.

The supreme moment had arrived. An anxious curiosity oppressed the breasts of the spectators. Lampourde and Malartic had adopted serious expressions; Bringuénarilles no longer inhaled the smoke from his pipe, which he had removed from his lips. Tordgueule, feeling that a similar fate was approaching him, had adopted a melancholy and dreamy air. Suddenly, a certain quivering motion stirred amidst the crowd. The child clinging to the cross had let herself sink to the ground, and, slithering like a snake through the onlookers, had reached the scaffold, whose steps she climbed in two bounds, presenting to the astonished executioner, who was already raising his iron bar, a pale, gleaming, and sublime figure, alight with such resolution that he stopped in spite of himself, and held back the blow about to descend.

— ‘Away, child,’ cried the executioner, ‘or my bar will break your head.’

But Chiquita paid no attention. Careless of death, she bent over Agostin, kissed his forehead and whispered, ‘I love you.’ Then, with a movement quicker than lightning, she plunged the dagger she had reclaimed from Isabella deep into his heart. The blow was struck with so firm a hand that death was almost instantaneous, Agostin barely had time to breathe his word of thanks.

‘When the toothed viper bites home,
For its wound, there’s no remedy known’

the child murmured, with a burst of wild, mad laughter, as she fled from the scaffold, where the executioner, astonished by the event, and uncertain whether it was his role to shatter the bones of a corpse, was lowering his iron bar, now rendered useless.



‘...Agostin barely had time to breathe his word of thanks.’

— ‘Well done, Chiquita, well done!’ Malartic, who had recognised her in her boyish clothes, could not help shouting.

Lampourde, Bringuénarilles, Piedgris, Tordgueule, and the friends of the *Crowned Radish*, amazed by her action, arranged themselves in a dense hedge, so as to prevent the soldiers from pursuing the girl. The arguments, and the pushing and shoving, mingled with blows, which this feigned embarrassment gave rise to, gave Chiquita time to reach Vallombreuse’s carriage, which had halted at the corner of the square. She climbed onto the step, and, holding onto the door with both hands, having recognised Sigognac, said to him in a panting voice: ‘I saved Isabella, now save me.’

Vallombreuse, who was greatly interested in this strange scene, shouted to the coachman: ‘Drive hard, and, if needs be, over the backs of this rabble.’ But the coachman had no need to crush anyone. The crowd opened, eagerly, before the carriage, and closed again, at once, to obstruct the soldiers sluggish in pursuit.

A few minutes later, the carriage reached the Porte Saint-Antoine, and, as the rumour of such a recent event could not have travelled so far, Vallombreuse ordered the coachman to moderate his speed, since a carriage moving at such a pace would have seemed, quite rightly, suspicious. Once past the suburbs, he made Chiquita enter the carriage. She seated herself on a cushion, without saying a word, opposite Sigognac. Beneath the calmest of expressions, she was in the grip of extreme exaltation. Not a muscle in her face moved, but a flood of red had flushed her cheeks, ordinarily so pale, and granted her large, motionless eyes, which seemingly stared without seeing, a supernatural brightness. A sort of transfiguration had taken place in the girl. Her violent effort had broken the chrysalis of childhood in which the young girl had as yet lingered. In plunging her knife into Agostin's heart, she had at the same time breached her own. Her love was born from Agostin's death; the strange, almost asexual being, half-child, half-elf, that had existed till then, no longer did so. She was a woman now, and her passion, blossoming in a moment, was to be eternal. A kiss, a stab, such was indeed Chiquita's love.

The carriage was still moving, and the great slate roofs of the castle could already be seen looming behind the trees. Vallombreuse said to Sigognac: 'You shall come to my apartment, and adjust your toilette a little there, before I present you to my sister, who is unaware of my journey or your arrival. I have myself arranged this dramatic turn of events, which I hope will produce the best of effects. Lower the curtain on your side so you are not seen, and the surprise is complete. But what shall we do with this little demon?'

— 'Command,' said Chiquita, who, despite her deep reverie, had heard Vallombreuse's words, 'command that I be taken to Madame Isabella; let her be the arbiter of my fate.'

With curtains drawn, the carriage entered the courtyard of honour. Vallombreuse took Sigognac by the arm and led him to his apartment, after ordering a footman to take Chiquita to the Comtesse de Lineuil.

At the sight of Chiquita, Isabella put down the book, she was reading and looked at the young girl with a questioning expression.

Chiquita remained motionless and silent until the servant had withdrawn. Then, with a sort of singular solemnity, she advanced towards Isabella, took the latter's hand and said:

— 'The knife, I have left in Agostin's heart. I no longer have a master, and yet I feel the need to devote myself to someone. Beside Agostin, who is now dead, it is you I love most in the world. You gave me the pearl necklace and you kissed me. Will you have me as a slave, a dog, a familiar? Give me but a black rag to wear, in mourning for my love; I will sleep across your threshold; I shall not bother you at all. When you want me, you can summon me like this' —she gave a whistle — 'and I will appear at once. Will you?'

Isabella, in response, drew Chiquita to her heart, touched her forehead with her lips, and simply accepted this soul that now gave itself to her.

Chapter XXI: Hymenaios, O Hymenaios!

Isabella, accustomed to Chiquita's strange and enigmatic ways, had not questioned her, reserving the right to ask for an explanation when that strange girl was calmer. She saw some dreadful history in all this; but the poor child had rendered her such services that, in this clearly desperate situation, she was received without inquiry.

After entrusting her to a chambermaid, she resumed her interrupted reading, though the book held little interest for her. After a few pages, her mind no longer following the lines, she placed the bookmark between the pages and set the volume back on the table amidst some needlework she had begun. Her head resting on her hand, her gaze lost in space, she yielded to the usual tenor of her reverie: 'What has become of Sigognac' she asked herself, 'does he still think of me, does he still love me? No doubt he has returned to his wretched castle, and, believing my brother dead, dares show no sign of life. That imagined obstacle prevents him. Else, he would surely have tried to see me again; he would have written to me, at the very least. Perhaps the idea that I am now a wealthy candidate for marriage has stolen his courage. If he has forgot me! No! No! That's impossible. I should have sent word to him that Vallombreuse was cured of his wound; but it is not becoming for a well-born young lady to prompt a distant lover to reappear in that manner: it offends all feminine delicacy. I often wonder if it would not have been better for me to remain the humble actress that I was. I would at least see him every day, and, sure of my virtue as well as of his respect, savour in peace the sweetness of being loved. Despite my father's touching affection, I feel sad and lonely in this magnificent castle; if Vallombreuse were here, even his company might distract me; but his absence is a prolonged one, and I puzzle in vain over the meaning of that sentence he uttered with a smile on leaving: 'Farewell, little sister, I think you will be pleased with me!' Sometimes, I think I may understand, yet have no wish to dwell on the thought; the disappointment would be too painful. If it were true, ah, I would be wild with joy!'

The Comtesse de Lineuil, it being perhaps a little too bold to term Isabella the prince's 'legitimated' daughter, had reached this point in her interior monologue when a senior attendant appeared and asked if the countess would receive the Duke of Vallombreuse, who had just arrived from a journey and wished to greet her.

— 'Admit him at once,' replied the countess, 'his visit will give me the greatest pleasure.'

Five or six minutes had scarcely passed when the young duke entered the drawing-room, displaying a clear complexion, a lively eye, and a confident and light step, and with that glorious manner which he had possessed prior to being wounded; he threw his feathered hat onto an armchair, and took his sister's hand, which he brought to his lips in a manner as respectful as it was tender.

— 'Dear Isabella, I stayed away longer than I would have liked; it has proved a great deprivation not to see you, having become accustomed to your presence; yet I thought of you, in

a brotherly manner, during my journey, and the hope of pleasing you compensated me, somewhat, for your absence.'

— 'The greatest pleasure you could have given me,' replied Isabella, 'would have been to remain at the castle close to myself and your father, and not, with your wound barely healed, chase some whim or other.'

— 'Was I wounded?' said Vallombreuse, laughing. 'Well, if it is remembered, it is scarcely so. I have never felt better, and the little excursion has done me a deal of good. The saddle is better for my health than a chaise longue. But you, good sister, I find you a little thin and pale; have you been plagued by ennui? The castle is hardly cheerful, and solitude is not suitable for young girls. Reading, and embroidery, prove melancholy pastimes in the end, and there are moments when the wisest person, tired of gazing out of the window at the green waters of the moat, would prefer to view the face of a handsome horseman.'

— 'How annoyingly playful you are, my dear brother, and how you like to tease me, seeking to rid me of my sadness by talking nonsense! Did I not have the company of the prince, so kind and paternal, and full of instructive and wise words?'

— 'Without doubt, our worthy father is the most accomplished of gentlemen, prudent in counsel, bold in action, a perfect courtier when with the king, a great lord in his own home, and learned and eloquent in all sorts of sciences; but the amusement he provides is of a grave sort, and I do not wish my dear sister to waste her youth in a solemn and gloomy manner. Since you had no wish to receive the Chevalier de Vidalinc or the Marquis de l'Estang, I set out in search of a suitor for you, and, in my travels, I have found just the thing for you: a charming, perfect, nay, ideal husband, whom you will adore, I am sure.'

— 'It is cruel of you, Vallombreuse, to persecute me with these jests. You are not unaware, my wicked brother, that I have no wish to marry. I could not give my hand without my heart, and my heart is no longer mine.'

— 'You will soon change your mind when I introduce the husband I have chosen for you.'

— 'Never, never,' replied Isabella, her voice altered by emotion, 'I will be faithful to a most dear memory, for I do not think that your intention is to force my will.'

— 'No! No! I am no tyrant. I only ask you not to reject my protégé before you have seen him.'

Without waiting for his sister's consent, Vallombreuse rose and entered the room next door. He returned immediately, bringing Sigognac, whose heart was beating fast. The two young men, arm in arm, remained poised for a while on the threshold, hoping that Isabella would turn her eyes in their direction, but she lowered them modestly, while thinking of this friend of hers whom she did not suspect was so close to her.

Vallombreuse, finding she was paying no attention to them, and had resumed her reverie, advanced a few steps towards his sister, leading the Baron by the fingertips as one leads a lady to a dance, and made a ceremonious bow which Sigognac repeated. Except that Vallombreuse was smiling, and Sigognac pale. Brave in dealing with men, he was timid before women, like all generous hearts.

— ‘Comtesse de Lineuil,’ said Vallombreuse in a slightly emphatic tone, as if deliberately flouting etiquette, ‘allow me to introduce to you one of my good friends, whom I hope you will welcome: the Baron de Sigognac.’

At his utterance of the name, while taking this to be another of her brother’s jests, Isabella nevertheless shuddered, and cast a quick glance at the newcomer. Recognising that Vallombreuse had not deceived her, she felt an extraordinary emotion. At first, she turned completely white, the blood rushing to her heart; then, the reaction succeeding, a pleasing blush covered her forehead, cheeks, and what could be glimpsed of her breast under the pink cloud of her gorget. Without saying a word, she rose and threw herself on Vallombreuse’s neck, hiding her head against the young duke’s shoulder. Two or three sobs shook the graceful body of the young girl, and a few tears wet the velvet of the doublet where she rested her head. With this pretty movement, so modest and so feminine, Isabella showed all the delicacy of her soul. She thanked Vallombreuse, whose kind ingenuity she now understood, and, unable to embrace her lover, embraced her brother.

When he thought she was calm enough, Vallombreuse gently freed himself from Isabella’s embrace, and, pushing away the hands with which she veiled her face to hide her tears, he said to her: ‘Dear sister, let us see your charming face for a moment, or my protégé will believe that you have an insurmountable aversion to him.’

Isabella obeyed and turned towards Sigognac her beautiful eyes lit with a heavenly joy, despite the brilliant pearls that still trembled beneath her long eyelashes: she held out to him a lovely hand, on which the Baron, bowing, pressed the tenderest of kisses. The sensation well-nigh overwhelmed the heart of the young girl, who almost fainted; but one soon recovers from such rare emotion.

— ‘Well, was I not right,’ said Vallombreuse, ‘to claim that you would welcome the suitor of my choice? It is sometimes good to be stubborn in one’s whims. If I had not been as stubborn as you were resolute, dear Sigognac would have left for his manor house without having seen you, and that would have been a pity, you must admit.’

— ‘I agree, dear brother; you have shown in all this an adorable streak of kindness. You alone could, in these circumstances, effect a reconciliation, since you alone had suffered injury.’

— ‘Yes, indeed’ Sigognac responded, ‘the Duke of Vallombreuse has revealed his great and generous soul; he has put aside a cause for resentment that might have been thought legitimate, and has come to me with an open hand, and his heart on his sleeve. For the harm I have done him, he is taking noble revenge, by imposing on me a debt of eternal gratitude, a slight burden, which I will bear with joy until death.’

— ‘Don’t speak of that, my dear Baron,’ replied Vallombreuse, ‘you would have done as much in my place. Two valiant men always end up understanding each other; swords once joined bind souls, and sooner or later we were destined to be friends, like Theseus and Pirithous (*see Plutarch’s Life of Theseus et al*), Nisus and Euryale (*see Virgil’s ‘Aeneid’, Book IX*), or Pythias and Damon (*see Cicero, De Officiis 3.43-46*); but don’t concern yourself with me. Instead, tell my sister how much you missed her, and thought of her, in that castle of Sigognac, where I nonetheless had one of the best meals of my life, though you claim that the rule is to die of hunger there.’

— ‘I too dined well there,’ said Isabella, smiling, ‘and it has left a pleasant memory.’

— ‘It seems,’ replied Sigognac, ‘that all have attended Belshazzar’s feast in that house of famine; but I blush not at the poverty which happily has earned a measure of your interest, dear Isabella; I bless it; I owe it everything.’

— ‘I think,’ said Vallombreuse, ‘that I should go and greet my father, and inform him of your arrival, which he is little expecting, I admit. Oh, countess, is it quite certain that you accept the Baron de Sigognac as your husband? I would not wish to make a wrong move. You accept him? That is good. Then I can withdraw: engaged couples sometimes have to say most innocent things to each other, which a brother’s presence would hamper. I leave you to each other, certain that you will thank me, and besides, the profession of duenna is not my business. Farewell; I will soon return to lead Sigognac to the prince.’

After saying these words with a casual air, the young duke donned his hat and exited, leaving these immaculate lovers to themselves. However pleasant his company was, his absence was even more so.

Sigognac approached Isabella and took her hand, which she did not withdraw. For a few minutes the young couple looked at each other with rapt eyes. Such silences are more eloquent than words. Deprived for so long of the pleasure of seeing each other, Isabella and Sigognac were wholly absorbed; at last, the Baron said to his young mistress:

— ‘I hardly dare believe in such happiness. Oh, what a strange fate is mine! You loved me because I was poor and unhappy, and what was to mark my complete ruin proves the cause of my good fortune. A troupe of actors contained an angel of beauty and virtue; an armed attack has brought me a friend; and your kidnapping made you known to a father who had searched for you in vain; all this because a cart went astray on the moors one dark night.’

— ‘We were meant to love each other; it was written in the stars. Soulmates end by finding one another if they but wait. I felt, at the Château de Sigognac, that my destiny was about to be fulfilled; at the sight of you, my heart, which no gallant had been able to touch, was stirred. Your timidity achieved more than all their audacity, and from that moment I resolved to belong only to you, or to God.’

— ‘And yet, cruel one, you refused me your hand, when I asked for it on my knees: I know that it was out of generosity; but it was a harsh generosity.’

— ‘I will amend that as best I can, dear Baron, and here is that hand, and my heart, which you already possessed. The Comtesse de Lineuil is not obliged to display the same scruples as poor Isabella once did. I had only one fear, that you would no longer seek me, out of pride. But, in renouncing me, would you, truly, have remained unmarried? Would you have remained faithful to me, even without hope? Did thoughts of me occupy yours when Vallombreuse went to pluck you from your manor?’

— ‘Dear Isabella, during the day, I had not a single idea that did not involve you, and in the evening, laying my head on the pillow once brushed by your pure brow, I begged the deities that preside over dreams to show me your charming image in imagination’s mirror.’

— ‘And did those good deities grant your prayers often?’

— ‘They never once disappointed my expectations, and only morning caused you to vanish through the gate of ivory (*that of false dreams, see Homer’s ‘Odyssey’, XIX, 560–569*). Oh, the days seemed very long to me, and I would have liked to sleep forever!’

— ‘I have seen you many a night. Our loving souls met in the same dream. But God be praised, here we are, reunited for a long time, I hope forever. The prince, with whom Vallombreuse must be acting in concord, for my brother would not have lightly engaged you in this matter, will, doubtless, receive your request with favour. On several occasions, he has spoken of you, to me, in glowing terms, while giving me a singular look which troubled me extremely, and whose meaning I did not dare to understand at the time, Vallombreuse having not yet said that he renounced his hatred against you.’

At that moment the young duke returned and told Sigognac that the prince was awaiting him.

Sigognac rose, bowed to Isabella, and followed Vallombreuse through several apartments, at the far end of which lay the prince’s bedroom. The old lord, dressed in black, and decorated with his many orders, was seated near the window, in a large armchair, behind a table covered with a Turkish rug, and laden with papers and books. His pose, despite his affable air, was perfectly composed, like that of a man awaiting a formal visit. The light, gliding over his forehead in satiny gleams, made a few loose hairs shine like silver threads, amidst the curls the valet’s comb had arranged on his temples. His gaze was gentle, firm, and clear, and time that had left traces of its passage on this noble face had granted him in majesty what it had robbed him of in beauty. At the sight of the prince, even if he had not been dressed in the insignia of his rank, it was impossible not to feel a degree of veneration. The most uneducated and fiercest would have recognised in him a truly great lord. The prince rose from his chair to respond to Sigognac’s greeting and signalled that he should be seated.

— ‘Father,’ said Vallombreuse, ‘I present to you the Baron de Sigognac, once my rival, now my friend, and soon to be my relative if you consent. I owe it to him to espouse virtue, which is no small obligation. The Baron respectfully comes to make a request, which I would be very pleased to see you grant.’

The prince made a gesture of acquiescence as if to encourage Sigognac to speak.

Prompted in this manner, the Baron rose, bowed and said: ‘Prince, I ask you for the hand of Madame la Comtesse Isabella de Lineuil, your daughter.’

As if to give himself time to reflect, the old lord remained silent for a few moments, then he replied: ‘Baron de Sigognac, I accept your request, and consent to this marriage insofar as my paternal will is in accordance with the good pleasure of my daughter, whom I do not intend to compel in any way. I have no wish to play the tyrant, and it is, ultimately, for the Comtesse de Lineuil to decide the matter. She must be consulted. The fancies of young people are sometimes odd.’ The prince said these words with the sly wit and subtle smile of the courtier, as if he had not known for a long time that Isabella loved Sigognac but owed it to his dignity as a father to appear ignorant of the fact, while letting it be seen that he had no doubt whatsoever of the reality.

He continued after a pause: ‘Vallombreuse, go and find your sister, because without her, truly, I cannot grant the Baron de Sigognac an answer.’

Vallombreuse disappeared, and soon returned with Isabella, who felt more dead than alive. Despite her brother's assurances, she could not yet believe in such happiness; her throbbing breasts heaved beneath her bodice, the colour had left her cheeks, and her knees felt as though they were giving way beneath her. The prince drew her close to him, and she was forced, so much was she trembling, to lean against the arm of the chair to keep from falling to the floor.'

— 'My daughter,' said the prince, 'here is a gentleman who does you the honour of asking for your hand. I would welcome this union with joy; for he is of ancient race, of spotless reputation, and he seems to me to meet all the desirable conditions. He suits me; but would he please you? Blonde heads do not always judge in the same manner as grey heads. Search your heart, examine your soul, and say if you accept Monsieur le Baron de Sigognac as your husband. Take your time; in such a serious matter, there must be no haste.'

The prince's kind and cordial smile made it clear that he was but jesting. So, Isabella, emboldened, put her arms around her father's neck and said to him in an adorably coaxing voice: 'There is no need for me to reflect for long. Since the Baron de Sigognac pleases you, my lord and father, I will confess with free and honest frankness that I have loved him ever since I saw him, and I have never desired another husband. To obey you will be my greatest happiness.'

— 'Well, then, join hands and kiss as a sign of your engagement,' said the Duke of Vallombreuse, cheerfully. 'The story ends better than one might have expected, given its fraught beginning. When shall the wedding be?'

— 'It will take the costumiers a good eight days for the tailors and seamstresses to cut and sew the fabrics, and the carriage-makers as long to prepare the carriages,' said the prince, 'Meanwhile, Isabella, here you will find the details of your dowry: the county of Lineuil, to which you are entitled, and which yields fifty thousand crowns a year, with its woods, meadows, ponds, and arable land (and he handed her a bundle of papers). As for you, Sigognac, here is the royal decree naming you provincial governor. No one is better suited to the position than yourself.'

Towards the end of this scene Vallombreuse disappeared, but soon reappeared followed by a footman carrying a box wrapped in a red velvet cloth.

— 'My sister,' he said to the young bride, 'here is my wedding gift,' and he presented her with the box. On the lid was written: 'For Isabella.' It was the jewel case he had once offered to the actress, and which she had virtuously refused. 'You must accept it this time,' he added with a charming smile, 'so as to prevent these diamonds of magnificent water, and these pearls of perfect lustre, from meeting a sorry end. Thus, they will remain as pure as yourself!'

Isabella, smiling, took from it a necklace, which she placed about her neck, to show that she led no grudge against those beautiful gems. Then she arranged a triple row of pearls, around her white arm, and hung a pair of rich pendants from her ears.

What more is there to say? The eight days expired, the chaplain of Vallombreuse united Isabella and Sigognac, to whom the Marquis de Bruyères served as witness, in the chapel of the château, flowery with bouquets, and sparkling with candles. Musicians, commissioned by the young duke, sang, with voices that seemed to descend from heaven, and rise towards it, a Palestrina motet. Sigognac was radiant, Isabella adorable beneath her long white veil, and never, unless one knew it, would one have suspected that this lovely person, so noble and at the same time so modest, had

appeared in comedy, only acting the princess, in the glare of the footlights. Sigognac, now superbly dressed, a provincial governor, and captain of musketeers, bore little relation to the unfortunate gentleman whose misery was described at the start of this tale.

After a splendid dinner attended by the Prince, Vallombreuse, the Marquis de Bruyères, the Chevalier de Vidalinc, the Count de l'Estang and a number of virtuous ladies who were friends of the family, the two newlyweds disappeared; but we must leave them on the threshold of the bridal chamber, murmuring in a low voice: 'Hymenaios, O Hymenaios!' in the ancient manner (*Hymenaios was the ancient Greek god of marriage*). The mysteries of happiness must be respected, and besides, Isabella was so modest that she would have died of shame if someone had indiscreetly removed a pin from her bodice.

Chapter XXII: Epilogue – The Castle of Happiness

It should not be thought that good Isabella, having become Baroness of Sigognac, had forgotten, in her grandeur, her brave comrades, those of Herod's troupe. Unable to invite them to her wedding as their situation no longer matched her own, she had given them each a gift, offered with such charming grace that its value was doubled. Until the departure of the company, she often went to see them act, applauding them appropriately, as one who understood the business. For the new Baroness did not hide the fact that she had once been an actress, an excellent way of scotching the desire of evil tongues to gossip, as they would not have failed to do had she made a secret of the matter. Moreover, the illustrious line, from which she was born, imposed silence on all, and her modesty soon won the hearts of all, even those of the women, who concurred in finding her as great a lady as any at Court. King Louis XIII, having heard all about Isabella's adventures, praised her highly for her wisdom, and showed particular esteem to Sigognac for his restraint, disapproving, as the chaste monarch he was, of bold and unruly young people. Vallombreuse had notoriously changed his ways, in the company of his brother-in-law, and the prince was overjoyed. The young couple thus led a charming life, ever more in love with each other, without experiencing that satiety of happiness which spoils the most beautiful of existences. However, for some time now, Isabella seemed animated by a mysterious burst of activity. She had secret conferences with her steward: an architect came to see her who submitted plans; sculptors and painters had received orders from her, and had left for an unknown destination. All this, in complicity with Vallombreuse who seemed to be aware of the answer to this riddle, was kept secret from Sigognac.

One fine morning, after several months had passed, doubtless those necessary for the accomplishment of her project, Isabella said to Sigognac, as if the sudden idea had crossed her mind: 'My dear lord, do you never think of your poor Château de Sigognac, and do you not long to see again the cradle of our love?'

— 'I am not so ungrateful, and indeed have thought of it more than once; but I did not dare to engage you on the journey, not knowing if it would be to your taste. I would not have allowed myself to tear you away from the delights of the Court of which you are now the ornament, to drag you off to a ruined castle, the abode of rats and owls, which I nevertheless prefer to the richest palaces, as being the age-old home of my ancestors, and the place where I saw you for the first time, a place forever sacred that I would gladly mark with an altar.'

— 'As for me,' Isabella continued, 'I have often wondered if the briar-rose in the garden still bears its blooms.'

— 'It does,' said Sigognac, 'I would swear to it; those rustic shrubs are perennial, and besides, having been touched by your hand, it must surely always produce flowers, even in solitude.'

— ‘Unlike ordinary husbands,’ the Baroness de Sigognac replied, laughing, ‘you are more gallant after marriage than before, and you utter compliments to your wife as if to a mistress. Since your desire accords with my whim, would you be happy to travel there this week? The season is fine, the intense heat has passed, and we will have a pleasant journey. Vallombreuse will accompany us, and I will take Chiquita, who will be pleased to see her native county again.’

Preparations were soon made. They departed. The journey was swift and delightful, Vallombreuse having arranged relays of horses in advance, and after a few days they arrived at the place where the path leading to the Sigognac manor branched from the main road. It may have been two in the afternoon, and the sun shone brightly.

As the carriage turned so as to enter the drive, and the château suddenly came in sight, Sigognac seemed dazed; he no longer recognised his surroundings, altered from those familiar to his memory. The road now levelled was no longer full of ruts. The hedges now pruned allowed the traveller to pass by without scratching him with their thorns. The trees, artfully trimmed, cast a decent shade, and their arches framed a completely fresh view.

Instead of the sad and lamentable ruin whose description the reader will remember, there rose, beneath the cheerful rays of sunlight, a brand-new castle, resembling the old one only as a son resembles his father. Nothing had been changed with regard to its form. It still presented the same architectural layout; only, in a few months, it had become several centuries younger. The fallen stones had been reset. The slender, white turrets, topped with a pretty slate roof displayed their symmetry, standing proudly like feudal guardians, forming the four corners of the castle, and raising their gilded weathervanes into the azure sky. A roof decorated with an elegant metal crest had replaced the old part-collapsed roof of leprous, mossy tiles. At the windows, unobstructed by the old planking, shone new panes of glass framed in lead, forming circles and lozenges; and not a single crack yawned wide on the completely restored facade. A superb oak door, supported by rich ironwork, closed the porch that had been fronted by those two old, worm-eaten leaves, with their faded paint. On the keystone of the archway, amidst its mantling reshaped by a skilfully-wielded chisel, shone the coat of arms of the Sigognacs, three storks on an azure field, with their noble motto, once erased, now perfectly legible, in gold letters: *Alta petunt* (*‘They seek the heights’*).

Sigognac remained silent for a few minutes, contemplating the wondrous sight, then he turned to Isabella and said: ‘It is to you, gracious faery, that I owe this transformation of my home. You only had to touch it with your wand to restore its splendour, beauty, and youthfulness. I am infinitely grateful to you for this surprise; it is charming and delightful, like everything you instigate. Without my having said anything, you have guessed the secret wish of my soul.’

— ‘You should also thank a certain enchanter who helped me greatly in the matter,’ Isabella replied, pointing to Vallombreuse seated in a corner of the carriage. The Baron shook the young duke’s hand.

During this conversation, the vehicle had arrived at a formal court in front of the castle, whose red brick chimneys sent large swirls of white smoke into the sky, indicating that important guests were expected.

Pierre, in a fine new livery, stood on the threshold of the door, which he pushed open as the carriage approached and deposited the Baron, Baroness, and Duke at the base of the stairs. Eight

or ten footmen, lined up in a row on the steps, bowed low to the new masters as yet unknown to them.

Skilled painters had restored the lost colours of the wall frescoes. The set of sheathed Hercules now supported the false cornice with an air of ease, due to their ostentatious musculature in the Florentine style. The Roman emperors basked in vivid purple. Infiltrations of rain no longer created geographical additions to the map covering the vault due to patches of damp, and the simulated trelliswork revealed a cloudless sky.

A like metamorphosis was evident everywhere. The woodwork and parquet floors had been redone. New furniture, of a similar shape, replaced the old. All that Sigognac remembered was rejuvenated, not rendered obsolete. The verdant Flanders tapestry with the duck-hunter still adorned his room, but a skilful cleaning had revived its hues. The bed was the same, except that a patient woodcarver had repaired the punctures due to woodworm, replaced the missing noses and fingers of the figures on the frieze, amended the gaps in the foliage, restored the rough ornamentation to its borders, and recovered the ancient item of furniture's original integrity. A green and white brocatelle of the same design as its predecessor hung between the spirals of the twisted columns, which had been waxed and polished till they shone.

Isabella, out of delicacy, had not wished to indulge in inappropriate luxury, a thing always easy to do when one has wealth at one's disposal; but she had thought of charming the soul of her tenderly-beloved husband, by renewing his childhood impressions, but stripped of misery and sadness. Everything seemed cheerful in this manor house, so melancholy before. Even the portraits of the ancestors, cleaned of their grime, brightened, and varnished, smiled, in their gilt frames, with a youthful air. The surly dowagers, the prudish canonesses, no longer pouted at Isabella, as they once had, she having been elevated from actress to baroness; they welcomed her as a member of the family.

In the courtyard, there was no longer a mass of nettles, hemlocks, and the other weeds that dampness, solitude, and neglect encourage. The paving stones, re-set with mortar, no longer had that mildewed border that indicates abandoned houses. Through their clear panes, the windows of various rooms, whose doors had once been boarded up, revealed curtains in rich fabrics, showing that they were ready to receive guests.

They descended to the garden by a flight of steps whose firm, moss-free slabs no longer swayed under overconfident feet. At the foot of the ramp and precious preserved, the wild rosebush flourished that had offered its rose to the young actress, on that morning of Sigognac's departure. It still bore one bloom, which Isabella picked and placed in her bosom, seeing in it a happy omen of enduring love. The gardener had been at work no less than the architect; thanks to his shears, order had been restored to this virgin forest. No longer did straggling branches block the paths, nor brushwood flourish its sharp thorns; one could pass through without parting with portions of one's clothing. The trees had resumed their roles of providing bowers and arbours. The clipped boxwood hedges framed compartments filled with all the flowers that Flora's basket held. At the end of the garden, Pomona, cured of leprosy, displayed her white, goddess-like nudity. A skillfully-attached marble nose had restored her Greek profile. In her basket could be seen sculpted fruit, not poisonous mushrooms. The lion's muzzle now vomited abundant, clear water into its basin. Climbing plants, with swaying bell-shapes in every colour and hanging tendrils, which ascended a sturdy green-painted trellis, hid the boundary wall in picturesque manner, and gave a pleasantly

rustic air to the rock-bound cave serving as a niche for the statue. Never, even in its heyday, had the château and its garden been furnished with such richness and taste. The splendour of the Château de Sigognac, so long eclipsed, now shone in all its glory!

Sigognac, astonished and delighted as if walking in a dream, pressed Isabella's arm to his heart and allowed tender tears to flow, shamelessly, down his cheeks.

— 'Now that we have seen everything here,' said Isabella, 'we must visit the estate that I have purchased secretly, in order to recreate the ancient barony of Sigognac as it was, or almost as it was. Allow me to go, and don my riding habit. I will not be long, since my first trade involved habitual and rapid changes of costume. Meanwhile, choose your mounts, and have them saddled.'

Vallombreuse led Sigognac to the stables, previously deserted, where ten fine horses, in separate oak stalls, were trampling the straw matting. Their firm, polished rumps shone with a satiny glow, and, on hearing visitors approaching, the noble beasts turned their intelligent eyes towards them. A sudden neigh burst forth; it was honest Bayard recognising his master, and greeting him in his own way; this old servant, whom Isabella had been careful not to part with, occupied the warmest and most comfortable place at the end of the row. His manger was full of ground oats, so that his worn teeth would not have the trouble of grinding them; while between his forelegs slept his comrade Miraut, who uncurled, and came to lick the Baron's hand. As for Beelzebub, if he had not appeared previously, it was not his little loving cat's heart that was to blame, but the prudent instinct of his species, having been frightened by all the commotion in a place that had formerly been so singularly quiet. Hidden in an attic, he had waited for night before rendering his dues to his beloved master.

The Baron, having patted Bayard, chose a fine chestnut, which was immediately taken out of the stable; the duke took a Spanish genet with a curving neck, worthy of carrying an infanta, and for the Baroness, a charming white palfrey with a silvery-looking coat, saddled in a rich green velvet.

Soon Isabella appeared, dressed in the most gallant Amazonian costume in the world, which showed her slim and shapely figure to advantage. Her blue velvet jacket was trimmed with buttons, frogging, and silver braid, its tails hanging over a long skirt of pearl-gray satin. Her headdress consisted of a man's hat in white felt, adorned with a curly blue feather, extending to her neck behind. So that a gallop would fail to disturb her hair, the young woman's blond tresses were held by an azure net with small silver pearls, to charming and coquettish effect.

Dressed so, Isabella was adorable, and before her, the haughtiest beauties of the court would have been forced to lower their flags. This cavalier's riding-habit revealed, in the normally modest and gracious baroness, a proud side, that spoke of her illustrious origins. She was Isabella sill, but the daughter of a prince also, the sister of a duke, and the wife of a gentleman whose nobility dated back to before the Crusades. Vallombreuse noted this, and could not help but say: 'Sister, how grand you look today! Hippolyte, Queen of the Amazons, was certainly no more superb or glorious!'

Isabella, her foot supported by Sigognac, sprang lightly into the saddle; the Duke and the Baron mounted their steeds, and the cavalcade emerged onto the courtyard square, where it joined the Marquis de Bruyères and a few gentlemen from the neighborhood, who had come to pay their compliment to the newlyweds. The hosts wished to return to the house, as politeness demanded,

but the visitors insisted that they would not dare be so irritating as to interrupt a ride that had already commenced, and turned their horses to accompany the young couple and the Duc de Vallombreuse.

The party, swelled by five or six squires in gala dress, who had dressed as bravely as they could manage, took on a ceremonial and magnificent air. It was a truly regal procession. They progressed, following a newly-maintained path, through green meadows, fields which freshly-cultivated enjoyed renewed fertility, past farms once again in full production, and alongside skilfully-landscaped woodland. All this belonged to Sigognac. The moor, and its purple heather, seemed to have receded far from the castle.

As they passed through a grove of fir trees on the edge of the Baron's estate, the barking of dogs was heard, and Yolande de Foix appeared, followed by her uncle the commander, and one or two gallants. The path was narrow and the two troops of riders brushed past each other in opposite directions, though each tried to make room for the other. Yolande, whose horse was pawing and rearing, brushed Isabella's skirt with her own. Vexation flushed her cheeks and, angered, she sought for some insult, but Isabella had a soul above feminine vanity; the idea of avenging herself for the disdainful look that Yolande had once granted her accompanied by the slur: 'gypsy,' almost in this very same place, failed to even cross her mind; she thought that her triumph as a rival had wounded, if not the heart, at least the pride of Yolande, and with a dignified, modest and graceful air she greeted this Mademoiselle de Foix, who was obliged, though it annoyed her intensely, to respond with a slight inclination of the head. The Baron de Sigognac with a detached and calm air, granted her a perfectly respectful salute, while Yolande failed to stir in the eyes of her ex-adorer a single spark of the old flame. She whipped her horse, and set off at a gallop, at the head of her little troop.

— 'By Venus and all the Cupids,' Vallombreuse said gaily to the Marquis de Bruyères, beside whom he was riding, 'that is a lovely girl, but she looks devilishly fierce and surly! What looks she hurled at my sister! They were like so many blows with a stiletto.'

— 'When one has been the queen of a county,' replied the Marquis, 'one is not pleased to be dethroned, and victory definitely remains with Madame la Baronne de Sigognac.'

The cavalcade returned to the castle. A sumptuous meal, served in the room where the poor Baron had once made the actors dine on their own provisions, his pantry being bare, awaited the guests, who were charmed by its fine formal array. Rich silverware adorned with the Sigognac coat of arms sparkled on a damask tablecloth, which displayed, in its weave, amongst other decoration, the heraldic storks. The few pieces of the old dinner service that were not wholly unfit for purpose had been religiously polished, and mixed with the recent ones, so that its luxury might not appear too new, and so that the old House of Sigognac might contribute a little to the splendour of the new. They sat down to dine. Isabella's place was the same one she had occupied on that famous night that had changed the Baron's fate. The thought was in her mind, and in Sigognac's too, for the couple exchanged lovers' smiles, softened by memory, and bright with hope. Near the credenza on which the squire was carving the meat, stood a man of athletic height, with a broad pale face, bordered by a thick brown beard, dressed in black velvet and wearing a silver chain around his neck, who, from time to time, gave orders to the footmen with a majestic air. While near a sideboard laden with bottles, pot-bellied or slender, some wrapped in braided esparto-grass, according to their provenance, a pale face, sporting a Rabelaisian nose flowered with pimples,

cheeks painted by vintage wine, and adorned with small odd-shaped eyes full of mischief and surmounted by circumflex eyebrows, bustled about with great activity, despite a few senile tremors. Sigognac, glancing in that direction by chance, recognised in the first of the pair the tragedian Herod, and in the second the grotesque form of Blazius. Isabella, observing that her husband had noted their presence, whispered to him that, in order to shelter these good people henceforth from the miseries of theatrical life, she had made one her steward and the other Sigognac's sommelier, very light roles not requiring much in the way of effort; a move which the Baron agreed with, approving of his wife's decisions.

The meal was proceeding at full speed, and the bottles, busily replaced by Blazius, were doing the rounds one after the other without interruption, when Sigognac felt a head resting on one of his knees, and sharp claws on the other plucking at him in a familiar way. Miraut and Beelzebub had taken advantage of a half-open door, slipped into the room and, despite the fear inspired in them by the splendid, and numerous, gathering, now came to claim a share of the feast from their master. Sigognac took care not to repel these humble friends of his misery, amidst his new-found wealth; he patted Miraut, scratched Beelzebub's thinly-furred head, and gave them both an abundant portion of tasty morsels. The crumbs this time consisted of strips of bacon that had seasoned the pâté, leftover partridge, filleted fish, and other succulent dishes. Beelzebub was greedy, and, with his claws kept demanding some new scrap, without tiring the unfailing patience of Sigognac, whom this voracity amused. Finally, swollen like a wineskin, walking with bowed legs, barely able to purr, the old black cat withdrew to the room lined with Flanders tapestries, and curled up in his accustomed place, to digest the copious refecton.

Vallombreuse chatted with the Marquis de Bruyères, while the squires never tired of toasting the couple with red wine, to which Sigognac, sober by nature and habit, responded by dipping his lips to his glass, which was always full, since he never emptied it. Finally, the squires, their heads reeling, rose unsteadily from the table, and with a little help from the servants, gained the apartments that had been prepared for them.

Isabella, on the pretext of being fatigued, had retired during the dessert course. Chiquita, promoted to the role of chambermaid, had dressed her for the night, with that silent activity which characterised her service. Chiquita was now a beautiful girl. Her complexion, no longer tanned by the inclemency of the seasons, had lightened, while retaining that vivacious and vibrant hue which painters greatly admire. Her hair, which had become acquainted with the comb, was tied back, neatly, by means of a red ribbon whose ends floated above the nape of her brown neck; at her throat, was still to be seen the string of pearls given to her by Isabella, and which, for this strange girl, was the visible sign of her voluntary servitude, one which only death could break. Her dress was black which she wore in mourning for her unique past love. Her mistress had not thwarted her in this whim. Chiquita, having nothing more to do in the room, withdrew, after kissing Isabella's hand, as she never failed to do every evening.

When Sigognac returned to the room where he had spent so many sad and lonely nights, listening, while the minutes as long as hours passed by, to the wind moaning its lament behind the old tapestry, he saw, by the light of a Chinese lantern suspended from the ceiling, between the green and white brocatelle curtains, Isabella's pretty head leaning towards him with a chaste and delightful smile. It was the complete realisation of his dream, when, having lost all hope, believing

himself separated forever from Isabella, he had looked at the empty bed in profound melancholy. Decidedly, Fate organised things well!

Towards morning, Beelzebub, overcome by a strange agitation, left the armchair where he had spent the night, and climbed with difficulty onto the bed. Arriving there, he bumped his nose against the hand of his still sleeping master, and attempted a purr that greatly resembled a rattle. Sigognac awoke and saw Beelzebub looking at him as if he were imploring human help, his large, glazed green eyes, dilated beyond measure already half-extinguished. His fur had lost its glossy shine, and was sticking together as if wet with the sweat of agony; he trembled and made extreme efforts to stand on his paws. His whole attitude proclaimed the vision of something dreadful. Finally, he fell on his side, was shaken by some convulsive movements, uttered a sob like the cry of a man whose throat has been cut, and stiffened, as if invisible hands were stretching his limbs. He was dead. This funereal howl broke the young woman's slumber.

— 'Poor Beelzebub,' she said, on seeing the cat's dead body, 'he has endured the Château de Sigognac's misery, yet will not now experience its prosperity!'

Beelzebub, it should be admitted, died a victim of his intemperance. Over-eating had done away with him. His famished stomach was not accustomed to such rich food. His death affected Sigognac more than one can say. He had never thought of animals as mere machines, and attributed souls and minds to the creatures, of a nature more limited than those of human beings, but capable nevertheless of intelligence and feeling. This opinion, moreover, is shared by all who, having lived for a long time in solitude in the company of a dog, cat, or other animal, have had the leisure to observe their companion, and establish a close relationship. So, with a moist eye and a heart filled with sadness, he carefully wrapped poor Beelzebub in a scrap of cloth, to bury him that evening, an action which would perhaps have seemed ridiculous and sacrilegious to ordinary folk.

When night fell, Sigognac took a spade, a lantern, and Beelzebub's corpse, stiff in its silk shroud. He descended to the garden and began to dig the earth at the foot of the briar-rose bush, by the light of the lantern, whose rays stirred the insects, and attracted the moths that came to beat on its pane of horn with their dusty wings. The weather was dark. Barely a sliver of moon could be seen through the gaps in layers of ink-black cloud, and the scene possessed more solemnity than a cat's funeral seemed to deserve. Sigognac continued digging, for he wished to bury Beelzebub deep enough that no other creature would come and dig him up. Suddenly the blade of his spade struck something as hard as flint. The Baron thought it, indeed, a stone, and redoubled his efforts; but the blows sounded strangely, and failed to advance his labours. Sigognac brought the lantern closer, to illuminate the obstacle, and saw, not without some surprise, the lid of a kind of oak chest, bound with thick rusty iron but still quite solid; he freed the box by digging the earth from round it, and, using his spade as a lever, he managed to hoist the mysterious casket, despite its considerable weight, to the edge of the hole, and slide it onto the surface. He placed Beelzebub in the void left by the box, and filled the grave.

This task completed, he attempted to carry his find up to the castle, but the load was too heavy for one man, even a vigorous one, and Sigognac went to seek the faithful Pierre, to aid him. The servant and the master each took hold of an end of the chest, and bore it to the castle, bending under the burden.

Pierre broke the lock, with an axe, and the lid, springing open, revealed a considerable mass of gold coins: ounces, quadruples, sequins, genovinos, portugalesers, ducats, cruzades, angelots, and other coins of various denominations and countries, none of which were current. Ancient jewels enriched with precious stones were mingled with the gold. At the bottom of the chest, once emptied, Sigognac found a sealed parchment bearing the Sigognac coat of arms, though damp had erased the writing. The seal alone was barely visible still, and, letter by letter, the Baron deciphered these words: 'Raymond de Sigognac.' The name was that of one of his ancestors, who had departed to fight in a war from which he had never returned, leaving the mystery of his death or disappearance unexplained. He had but the one young son, and as he was about to embark on a dangerous expedition, had buried his treasure, confiding its secret only to some trustworthy individual, who was probably surprised by death before he could reveal the hiding place to the legitimate heir. From this Raymond, the decline of the house of Sigognac, once rich and powerful, began. Such, at least, was the tale that the Baron's imagination conjured from such feeble clues; but what was not in question was that the treasure belonged to him. He summoned Isabella and showed her the display of all this gold.

— 'Beelzebub has proven, without doubt,' said the Baron, 'to be the benevolent spirit of my Château de Sigognac. In dying, he leaves me wealthy, and departs now that my angel has arrived. He was, in truth, left with nothing more to do, for you yourself have brought me happiness.'

The End of Part IV and of Gautier's 'Le Capitaine Fracasse'