The Soil (La terre): A Realistic Novel

Émile Zola

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Opening pages

THE SOIL.

(LA TERRE.)

A REALISTIC NOVEL.

BY

ÉMILE ZOLA.

WITH A FRONTISPIECE DESIGNED BY H. GRAY.

LONDON:

VIZETELLY & Co. 16 HENRIETTA STREET, COVENT GARDEN.

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[Illustration: Hold your tongue or I strike. Am I not the master? *P. 27.*]

PART I.

PART I. — CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER I.

That morning Jean, with a seed-bag of blue linen tied round his waist, held its mouth open with his left hand, while with his right, at every three steps, he drew forth a handful of corn, and flung it broadcast. The rich soil clung to his heavy shoes, which left holes in the ground, as his body lurched regularly from side to side; and each time he threw you saw, amid the ever-flying yellow seed, the gleam of two red stripes on the sleeve of the old regimental jacket he was wearing out. He strode forward in solitary state; and behind him, to bury the grain, there slowly came a harrow, to which were harnessed two horses, driven by a waggoner, who cracked his whip over their ears in long, regular sweeps.

The patch of ground, scarcely an acre and a quarter in extent, was of such little importance that Monsieur Hourdequin, the master of La Borderie, had not cared to send the drill-plough, which was in use elsewhere. Jean, then journeying due north over the field, had the farm-buildings exactly in front of him, a mile and a quarter off. On reaching the end of the furrow, he raised his eyes with a vacant look as he paused for a moment to take breath.

Before him were the low farm walls, and a patch of old slate, isolated on the outskirts of the plain of La Beauce, which stretched towards Chartres. Under a dull, late October sky lay ten leagues of arable land, where, at that time of year, great ploughed squares of bare, rich, yellow soil alternated with green expanses of lucern and clover; there was here not a slope, not a tree; the plain extended into the dim distance, curving down beyond the horizon, which was level as at sea. Westward, a small wood just edged the sky with a band of russet. In the centre a road--the road from Châteaudun to Orleans--of chalk-like whiteness, stretched four

leagues straight ahead, displaying as it went a geometrical row of telegraph-posts. Nothing else but three or four wooden mills on log foundations, with their sails at rest; some villages forming islets of stone; and a distant steeple emerging from a depression in the landscape, the church itself being hidden among the gentle undulations of the wheat-fields.

Jean turned and lurched back again due south, his left hand holding the seed-bag, and his right slashing the air with an unbroken sheet of grain. He now had in front of him, quite near, and cutting trench-like through the plain, the narrow valley of the Aigre, beyond which the district of La Beauce resumed its unconfined course on to Orleans. Meadows and shady places could only be inferred from a range of tall poplars, the yellowish tops of which rose out of the dell, looking, as they just cleared the edge, like short bushes. Of the little village of Rognes, built upon the declivity, a few roofs only were in view, near the church, which raised on high its grey stone steeple, the dwelling-place of ancient families of ravens. And eastward, beyond the valley of the Loir,--where Cloyes, the chief town of the *canton*[1] nestled at two leagues' distance,--the far-off hills of Le Perche were visible, tinged with violet in the slate-grey light. There the old Dunois, now become the *arrondissement* of Châteaudun, lay between Le Perche and La Beauce, on the very frontier of the latter, at a spot which has obtained the name of Beauce the "Lousy," the soil there being less fertile. When Jean got to the end of the field, he stopped again, and glanced down along the stream of the Aigre, rippling bright and clear through the meadows, side by side with the road to Cloyes, which on that Saturday was furrowed by the carts of peasants going to market; then he turned up again.

And still, with the same step, with the same gesture, he set out north and returned south, wrapped in a living dust-cloud of seed; while, behind him the whip cracked and the harrow buried the germs, at the same quiet, contemplative rate. Heavy rains had retarded the autumn sowing; the

season's manuring had been done in August, and the deep-lying fallows, duly cleared of weeds, had long been ready for a fresh yield of corn, after the clover and oats of the triennial rotation. Now the farmers were urged on by fear of coming frost, which threatened after the storms. The weather had suddenly turned cold and gloomy: there was no breath of wind, and but a dull light was distributed over all this ocean of land. Seed was being sown on all sides; there was a sower to the left, three hundred yards away; another farther off to the right; others, and yet others, lost to sight in the receding vista of the level fields. They formed little black silhouettes, mere strokes which became slimmer and slimmer, till they vanished in the distance. All made the same gesture, as they strewed the seed, which the mind's eye still saw encircling them, as with a wave of life. It was like a quiver passing over the plain, even into the dim distance, where the scattered sowers could no longer be seen.

Jean was coming down for the last time when he perceived, approaching from Rognes, a large red and white cow, the halter of which was held by a young girl, almost a child. The little peasant-girl and the animal were coming along the path which skirted the valley at the top of the plateau; and, with his back turned to them, he had gone up and finished the field, when a sound of running, mingled with stifled cries, made him look round, just as he was untying his seed-bag to depart. It was the cow running away, galloping over a field of lucern, and followed by the girl, who was exhausting her strength in trying to keep it back. Fearing an accident, he shouted:

"Leave go; why don't thee?"

But she did nothing of the kind, only panting and abusing her cow in angry, frightened tones.

"Coliche! Would you, then, Coliche? Ah, you foul brute! Ah, you cursed beast!"

So far, running and leaping to the full extent of her little legs, she had managed to follow. But she stumbled, fell once, then rose only to fall again farther on; and from that point, the animal growing frantic, she was dragged along. Then she began to shriek, while her body left a furrow in the lucern.

"Leave go, in God's name!" Jean continued shouting. "Leave go, why don't thee?"

He shouted thus mechanically, out of fright; for he also had started running, grasping, at length, the situation. The rope had evidently got entangled round her waist, and was being more closely twined at each fresh effort. Fortunately he took a short cut across a ploughed field, and made for the cow with such speed that the frightened and perplexed animal stopped dead. Jean was already undoing the rope, and seating the girl upon the grass.

"Thou hast broken nothing?" he asked.

No; she had not so much as swooned. She stood up, felt herself all over, and coolly lifted her petticoats up to her thighs, to look at her knees, which smarted. Meanwhile, she was still so breathless that she could not speak.

"See, it's there it hurts me," she said at last. "All the same, I'm alive and kicking; there's nothing the matter. Oh! I was frightened. Over on the road there I was a regular jelly!"

And, examining the circle of red on her strained wrist, she moistened it with spittle and applied her lips to it; then, comforted and restored, she added with a deep sigh:

"She's not vicious, Coliche. Only since yesterday she has plagued us to death, because she's in heat. I'm taking her to the bull at La Borderie."

"At La Borderie?" repeated Jean. "That's capital; I'm going back there; I'll go with thee."

He still used the second person singular, treating her as a little urchin, so slight was she for her fourteen years of age. She, raising her chin, looked seriously at the big, ruddy, crop-haired, full-faced, regular-featured young fellow, whose twenty-nine years made him in her eyes an old man.

"Hullo! I know you. You are Corporal, the carpenter who stopped as farm-hand with Monsieur Hourdequin."

Hearing the nickname, which the peasants had given him, the young fellow smiled; and he contemplated her in turn, surprised to find her almost a woman so soon, with her little bust firm and taking shape, her oval face, her deep, black eyes; and full lips, fresh and rosy as ripening fruit. She was clad in a grey skirt and black woollen bodice; on her head there was a round cap; and she had a very dark skin, scorched and burnished by the sun.

"Why, thou'rt old Mouche's youngest!" cried he. "I didn't call thee to mind. Isn't that so? Thy sister was keeping company with Buteau last spring, when he worked with me at La Borderie?"

She replied simply:

"Yes, I'm Françoise. My sister Lise went with cousin Buteau, and is now six months with child. He's bolted; he's down Orgères way, at the farm of La Chamade."

"That's it," concluded Jean; "I have seen them together."

And they remained an instant mute, face to face; he smiling at having one evening surprised the two lovers behind a mill, she still sucking her bruised wrist, as if the moisture of her lips allayed its smarting; whilst, in an adjoining field, the cow quietly plucked tufts of lucern. The waggoner and the harrow had gone off by a roundabout way, to reach the road. Two

ravens, which kept wheeling round and round the steeple, were heard to caw. The three notes of the angelus rang through the still air.

"Hullo! Twelve o'clock already!" cried Jean. "Let's make haste!"

Then, noticing La Coliche in the field: "Eh, but thy cow is doing damage! Suppose any one saw her! Wait a bit, I'll make it lively for her!"

"Nay, let be," said Françoise, stopping him. "The plot is ours. Our folk own the whole bank as far as Rognes. We reach from here up to yonder; the next to that is uncle Fouan's; then comes aunt Grande's."

While indicating the patches she had led the cow back into the path. And not till then, when she again held her, fearlessly, by the rope, did she think of thanking the young fellow.

"Anyhow, I owe you a pretty debt of gratitude! Thanks, you know, thanks, very much!"

They had started walking along the narrow road which skirted the valley before cutting through the fields. The final peal of the angelus had just died away, the ravens alone kept on cawing. They trudged on behind the cow tugging at her rope, neither of the two conversing, for they had relapsed into the silence of rustics who travel for leagues, side by side, without exchanging a word. On their right their glance fell on a drill-plough, the horses of which turned close by them; the ploughman bade them good-day, and they answered him in the same sober tone. Down on their left, along the road to Cloyes, carts continued to file by, the market not opening till one o'clock. These vehicles jolted heavily along on their two wheels, like jumping insects, so diminished in the distance as to leave merely the white specks of the women's caps distinguishable.

"There's uncle Fouan and aunt Rose over there, on their way to the notary's," said Françoise, gazing at a conveyance the size of a nutshell, which sped along nearly a mile off.

She had a sailor's eye, the long sight of those bred in the country, trained in details, and capable of identifying man or beast even when they were but little moving specks afar off.

"Oh, yes; I've been told so," resumed Jean. "So it's settled that the old man divides his property among his daughter and two sons?"

"It's settled. They've all agreed to meet to-day at Monsieur Baillehache's."

She again watched the cart in its course, and then resumed:

"We don't care one way or the other; it won't make us any fatter or thinner. Only, on account of Buteau, sister thinks he'll marry her, perhaps, when he gets his share. He says one can't start housekeeping on nothing."

Jean laughed.

"Me and Buteau were pals, hang him! Oh, he don't think twice about telling girls lies! And he must have 'em, by hook or by crook; he gets at 'em by foul means, if they won't by fair."

"He's a pig, that's flat!" declared Françoise, peremptorily. "People have no business to play dirty tricks like that, putting their cousins in the family-way and then leaving 'em in the lurch."

But suddenly, in a fit of rage, she exclaimed:

"You wait, Coliche! I'll make you dance! There she is at it again; she's mad, the brute, when she gets that way."

She had violently jerked the cow back. At that spot the road left the edge of the plateau, and the cart disappeared from view, while they both continued their walk on the level, now having in front of them, and on either side, only the endless expanse of arable land. Between the fallows and the artificial meadows the path ran flat and bushless, terminating at the farm, which you might have thought within reach of the hand, but which kept receding under the ashen-grey sky. They had relapsed into silence again, no longer opening their mouths, as if impressed by the contemplative gloominess of La Beauce, so sad and yet so fruitful.

When they arrived, the large square yard of La Borderie, shut in on three sides by cow-sheds, sheep-cots, and barns, was deserted. But there immediately appeared upon the kitchen door-step a short, bold, pretty-looking young woman.

"How's this, Jean, you're not eating this morning?"

"I'm just going to, Madame Jacqueline."

Since the daughter of Cognet, the Rognes road-labourer,--*La Cognette*, as they called her when she washed up the farm dishes at twelve years of age--had been raised to the honours of servant-mistress, she despotically required that every one should treat her as a lady.

"Oh, it is you, Françoise," she resumed. "You've come for the bull. Well, you must wait. The neatherd is at Cloyes with Monsieur Hourdequin. But he'll be back; he ought to be here now."

And as Jean was making for the kitchen, she took him round the waist and fondled him smilingly, regardless of spectators, hungering, as it were, for love, and not satisfied with having the master.

Françoise, left alone, waited patiently, sitting on a stone bench in front of the manure-pit, which took up a third of the yard. She was listlessly watching a group of fowls, pecking and warming their feet in the broad

low layer of manure, which in the cold air began to steam with a slight bluish vapour. At the end of half-an-hour, when Jean re-appeared, finishing a slice of bread and butter, she had not stirred. He sat down near her, and as the cow fidgeted, lashed its tail and lowed, he finally said:

"It's tiresome he doesn't come back."

The girl shrugged her shoulders, as though to say that she was in no hurry. Then, after a fresh silence:

"So, Corporal, they call you Jean, and nothing else?"

"Why, no; Jean Macquart."

"And you don't belong to our part of the country?"

"No, I'm a Provençal, from Plassans, a town over yonder."

She had raised her eyes to examine him, surprised that any one could come from so far off.

"After Solferino," continued he, "eighteen months since, I came back from Italy with my discharge, and a fellow-soldier brought me here. Then, d'ye see, my old trade of carpenter no longer suited me, and, what with one thing and another, I stopped at the farm."

"Ah!" said she, simply, without taking her big, black eyes off him, "it's curious, all the same."

At that moment, as La Coliche gave a prolonged, despairing low of desire, a hoarse murmur came from the cow-house, the door of which was shut.

"Hullo!" cried Jean, "that brute of a Cæsar has heard her. Hark! he's talking inside there. Oh, he knows his business. You can't bring one of 'em into the yard but he smells her out, and knows what he's wanted for."

Then, breaking off:

"I say, the neatherd must have stopped with Monsieur Hourdequin. If thee liked, I would bring thee the bull, and thee needn't come back again. We could manage it all right by ourselves."

"Not half a bad idea," said Françoise, getting up.

As he opened the door of the cow-house, he paused to ask:

"Must thy animal be tied up?"

"Tied up? No, no! not worth while. She is quite ready; she won't so much as stir."

When the door was opened you saw, in two rows on either side of the central path, the thirty farm cows, some lying in the litter, others crunching the beets in their manger; and, from the corner where he stood, one of the bulls, a black Dutch, spotted with white, stretched out his head in anticipation of his task.

As soon as he was untied, he slowly emerged. Then stopping short, as though surprised by the fresh air and sunlight, he remained motionless for a minute, bracing himself up, his sinewy tail swinging, his neck inflated, his muzzle outstretched to sniff. La Coliche, without stirring, turned towards him her large, fixed eyes, and lowed more softly. Then he advanced, pressed against her, and laid his head on her hind-quarters, abruptly and roughly; with his tongue, which was hanging out, he put her tail aside, and licked her as far as the thighs; she letting him do as he pleased, and keeping quite still, save for a slight quivering of her skin. Jean and Françoise waited gravely, their arms hanging beside them.

When Cæsar was ready, he got upon La Coliche with a jerk, and with such weighty force as to shake the ground. She had not given way, and he compressed her flanks with his two feet. But she, a strapping animal from the Cotentin, was so tall, so broad for him, who was of a smaller breed,

that he could not reach. He was conscious of it, and made a vain effort to raise himself and to bring her nearer.

"He is too small," said Françoise.

"Yes, a little," said Jean. "But that don't matter; he'll do it all the same."

She shook her head in doubt; and, as Cæsar still fumbled about, and seemed to be getting exhausted, she came to a resolution.

"No, he must be helped," she said. "If he goes wrong, it'll be waste of time."

Calmly and carefully, as if bent on a serious piece of work, she had drawn near. Her intentness made the pupils of her eyes retreat, left her red lips half open, and kept her features motionless. Raising her arm with a sweep she aided the animal in his efforts, and he, gathering up his strength, speedily accomplished his purpose. It was done. Firmly, with the impassive fertility of land which is sown with seed the cow had unflinchingly received the fruitful stream of the male. Indeed, she had not even trembled at the shock; and he had already dropped again to the ground, shaking the earth once more.

Françoise having withdrawn her hand, remained with her arm in the air. Finally she lowered it, saying:

"That's all right."

"Yes, and neatly done," replied Jean, with an air of conviction, mingled with a good workman's satisfaction at seeing work well and expeditiously performed.

It did not occur to him to indulge in any of the spicy remarks with which the farm-servants used to chaff the girls who brought their cows for this purpose. The child seemed to consider it all so simple and necessary that there was, indeed, nothing to laugh at fairly. It was Nature.

However, Jacqueline had been standing at the door again for an instant or so, and with a chuckle which was habitual to her, she cried jestingly:

"Eh! poke your nose everywhere! So you hold the candle now!"

Jean having burst into a horse-laugh, Françoise suddenly flushed all over, quite confused; and to hide her embarrassment--while Cæsar returned of his own accord into the cow-house, and La Coliche munched a stalk of oats which had grown in the manure-pit--she dived into her pockets, fumbled about, eventually produced her handkerchief, untied the corner of it, in which she had wrapped up the two-franc fee, and said:

"Here! There's the money! And good day to you!"

She set out with her cow, and Jean took his bag again and followed her, telling Jacqueline that he was going to the Poteau field, according to the instructions issued by Monsieur Hourdequin, for the day.

"Good!" she replied. "The harrow ought to be there."

Then as the young man came up with the girl, and they went off in single file down the narrow path, she called out to them again, in her coarse, bantering voice:

"No danger, eh? If you lose yourselves together the chit knows her way about."

Behind them the farmyard was again deserted. Neither had laughed this time. They walked on slowly, and the only sound was that of their shoes striking against the stones. All that Jean noticed of Françoise was the nape of her child-like neck, over which curled some short black hair under her round cap. At last, after going some fifty paces:

"She does wrong to chaff others about the men," said Françoise, sedately. "I might have answered her----"

And turning towards the young fellow with a mischievous upward glance:

"It's true, isn't it, that she is false to Monsieur Hourdequin, just as if she were already his wife? You know as much about that, maybe, as most people."

His eyes fell, and he looked sheepish. "Lord! she does as she likes; it's her affair," he answered.

Françoise had turned her back and was pursuing her road.

"That's true enough. I was only in fun, because you're old enough to be my father, and because it's of no consequence one way or the other. But there's one thing, since Buteau played that dirty trick on my sister, I've taken an oath that I'd rather be cut in two than have a lover."

Jean bent his head, and they spoke no more. The little Poteau field lay at the bottom of the path, half way to Rognes. When the young fellow got there he stopped. The harrow was waiting for him, and a sack of seed had been emptied out into a furrow. He filled his bag, saying:

"Good-bye, then!"

"Good-bye," replied Françoise. "Thanks again!"

But, in sudden apprehension, he drew himself up and called out:

"I say! suppose La Coliche began again; shall I go with you all the way?"

She was already some distance off, but she turned round, and through the deep stillness of the country air came the sound of her calm, steady voice:

"No, no! There's no need, it's all right! She's got quite as much as she can carry!"

Jean, with his seed-bag at his waist, had started down the piece of plough land, with his ceaseless gesture of throwing the grain; he raised his eyes

and looked at Françoise diminishing in height among the fields, looking quite small behind her lazy cow, which was swinging heavily from side to side. When he turned up again, he ceased to see her; but, as he came back, there she was again, but smaller still, so slim as to seem like some new kind of dandelion, with her slight figure and her white cap. Thrice she dwindled thus; then, when he once more looked for her, she had apparently turned down by the church.

Two o'clock struck. The sky remained grey, dull, and cold, as if the sun were buried under spadefuls of ashes for weary months, till the spring-time returned. The dreariness of the clouds was relieved by one lighter patch towards Orleans, as if the sun were shining somewhere in that direction, leagues away; and against that glimmering patch the steeple of Rognes stood out, the village itself sloping down from view into the fold made by the valley of the Aigre. But on the north, towards Chartres, the level line of the horizon clearly separated the leaden uniformity of the waste sky from the endless vista of La Beauce, like an ink-stroke across a monochrome sketch. Since the mid-day meal, the number of sowers seemed to have increased. Now each patch of the little farm-lands had one to itself; they multiplied and teemed like black laborious ants roused to activity by some heavy piece of work, and straining every nerve over a mighty task, giant-like in size as compared with their littleness. And still you might descry, even in the most remote, the one persistent never-varying gesture; still did the pertinacious insect-like sowers wrestle with the vast earth, and become eventually the victors over space and life.

Till night-fall Jean sowed. After the Poteau field there were the Rigoles and the Quatre-Chemins. To and fro, to and fro, he paced the fields, with long, rhythmical steps, till the corn in his bag came to an end; while, in his wake, the seed strewed all the soil.

PART I. — CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER II.

The house of Maître Baillehache, notary at Cloyes, was situated in the Rue Grouaise, on the left hand going to Châteaudun. A little white, one-storey house it was, at the corner of which a bracket was riveted for the rope of the single lantern which lighted this broad, paved street, deserted during the week, but on Saturday nights crowded with a living tide of peasants coming to market. From afar might be seen the gleam of the two professional escutcheons against the chalk-like wall of the low buildings; and, behind, a narrow garden stretched down to the Loir.

On that Saturday, in the room which served as an office, and which looked out upon the street to the right of the entrance hall, the youngest clerk, a pale, wizened boy of fifteen, had drawn up one of the muslin curtains to see the people pass. The other two clerks--one old, corpulent, and very dirty; one younger, scraggy, and a hopeless victim to liver complaint--were writing at a double desk of ebonised deal, there being no other furniture except seven or eight chairs and a cast-iron stove, which was never lit till December, even if it snowed a month before. Rows of pigeon-holes decorated the walls, with greenish pasteboard boxes, broken at the corners and full to repletion with bundles of yellow papers, and the room was pervaded with an unwholesome smell of ink gone bad and dust-eaten documents.

However, seated side by side, two peasants, man and wife, were waiting in deep respect, like statues of Patience. So many papers, and, more than all, the gentlemen who wrote so fast, with their pens all scratching away at once, sobered them by evoking vague visions of law-suits and money. The woman, aged thirty-four, very dark, with a countenance which would have been pleasant but for a large nose, had her horny, toil-worn

hands crossed over her black cloth, velvet-edged body, and was scanning every corner with her keen eyes, evidently musing on the many title-deeds which reposed here. In the meanwhile the man, five years older, red-haired and stolid, in black trousers and a long, bran-new blue linen blouse, held his round felt hat on his knees, with not a spark of intelligence illuminating his broad, clean-shaven, terra-cotta-like face, which was perforated with two large eyes of porcelain blue, having a fixed stare that reminded one of a somnolent ox.

A door opened, and Maître Baillehache, who had just breakfasted with his brother-in-law, farmer Hourdequin, made his appearance; ruddy and fresh-complexioned despite his fifty-five years, with thick lips and crow's feet, which gave him a perpetually amused expression. He carried a double eye-glass, and had a lunatic habit of always pulling at his long, grizzled whiskers.

"Ah! it's you, Delhomme," said he. "So, old Fouan has consented to divide the property?"

The reply came from the woman.

"Yes, sure, Monsieur Baillehache. We have all made an appointment, so that we may come to an agreement, and that you may tell us how we are to proceed."

"Good, good, Fanny; we'll see about it. It's hardly more than one o'clock, we must wait for the others."

The notary stopped an instant to chat, asking about the price of corn, which had fallen during the last two months, and showing Delhomme the friendly consideration due to a farmer who owned fifty acres of land, and kept a servant and three cows. Then he returned to his inner room.

The clerks had not raised their heads, but were scratching away with their pens more vigorously than ever; and, once more, the Delhommes waited

motionless. Fanny had been a lucky girl to marry a respectable, rich lover without even getting into the family-way beforehand, she whose only expectations had been some seven or eight acres of land from old Fouan. Her husband, however, had not repented of his bargain, for he could not anywhere have found a more active or intelligent housekeeper. Hence he followed her lead in everything, being of a narrow mind, but so steady and straightforward as to be frequently selected as an umpire by the Rognes people.

At that moment the little clerk, who was looking out into the street, stifled a laugh behind his hand, and murmured to his old, corpulent, and very dirty neighbour: "Here's Hyacinthe the saint coming!"

Fanny bent down quickly to whisper to her husband: "Now, leave everything to me. I am fond enough of papa and mamma, but I won't have them rob us; and keep a sharp eye on Buteau and that rascal Hyacinthe."

She referred to her two brothers, having seen one of them approach as she looked out of the window: Hyacinthe, the elder, whom the whole neighbourhood knew as an idler and a drunkard, and who, at the close of his military service, after going through the Algerian campaigns, had taken to a vagabond life, refusing all regular work, and subsisting by poaching and pillage, as if he were still extortioner-in-ordinary among a terrified people of Bedouins.

A tall, strapping fellow came in, rejoicing in the brawny strength of his forty years; he had curly hair, and a pointed, long, unkempt beard, with the face of a saint laid waste, a saint sodden with strong drink, addicted to forcing girls, and to robbing folks on the highway. He had already got tipsy at Cloyes since the morning, and wore muddy trousers, a filthily-stained blouse, and a ragged cap stuck on the back of his neck. He was smoking a damp, black, pestilential halfpenny cigar. Yet, in the

depths of his fine liquid eyes lurked a spirit of fun free from ill-feeling, the open-heartedness of good-natured blackguardism.

"So father and mother haven't turned up yet?" he asked.

When the thin, jaundiced clerk responded testily by a shake of the head, he stared for an instant at the wall, while his cigar smouldered in his hand. He had not so much as glanced at his sister and his brother-in-law, who, themselves, did not appear to have seen him enter. Then, without a word, he left the room, and went to hang about on the pavement.

"Hyacinthe! Hyacinthe!" droned the little clerk, turning streetwards, and seeming to find infinite amusement in this name, which brought many a funny tale back to his memory.

Hardly five minutes had passed before the Fouans made their tardy appearance, two old folk of slow, prudential gait. The father, once very robust, now seventy years of age, had shrivelled and dwindled down under such hard work, such a keen land-hunger, that his form was bowed as if in a wild impulse to return to that earth which he had coveted and possessed. Nevertheless, in all save the legs, he was still hale and well-knit, with spruce little white mutton-chop whiskers, and the long family nose, which lent an air of keenness to his thin, leathery, deeply-wrinkled face. In his wake, following him as closely as his shadow, came his wife; shorter and stouter, swollen as if by an incipient dropsy, with a drab-coloured face perforated with round eyes, and a round mouth pursed up into an infinity of avaricious wrinkles. A household drudge, endowed with the docile, hard-working stupidity of a beast of burden, she had always stood in awe of the despotic authority of her husband.

"Ah, so it's you!" cried Fanny, getting up. Delhomme, also, had risen from his chair. Behind the old people, Hyacinthe had just lounged in

again without a word. Compressing the cigar end to put it out, he thrust the pestiferous stump into a pocket of his blouse.

"So we're here," said Fouan. "There's only Buteau missing. Never in time, never like other people, the beast!"

"I saw him in the market," asserted Hyacinthe in a husky voice due to drink. "He's coming."

Buteau, the younger son, owed his nickname to his pigheadedness, being always up in arms in obstinate defence of his own ideas, which were never those of anybody else. Even when an urchin, he had not been able to get on with his parents; and, later on, having drawn a lucky number in the conscription, he had run away from home to go into service, first at La Borderie, subsequently at La Chamade.

While his father was still grumbling, he skipped cheerfully into the room. In him, the large Fouan nose was flattened out, while the lower part of his face, the maxillaries, projected like the powerful jaws of a carnivorous beast. His temples retreated, all the upper part of his head was contracted, and, behind the boon-companion twinkle of his grey eyes, there lurked deceit and violence. He had inherited the brutish desires and tenacious grip of his father, aggravated by the narrow meanness of his mother. In every quarrel, whenever the two old people heaped reproaches upon his head, he replied: "You shouldn't have made me so!"

"Look here, it's five leagues from La Chamade to Cloyes," replied he to their complaints; "and besides, hang it all, I'm here at the same time as you. Oh, at me again, are you?"

They all disputed, shouted in shrill, high-pitched voices, and argued over their private matters exactly as if they had been at home. The clerks, disturbed, looked at them askance, till the tumult brought in the notary, who re-opened the door of his private office.

"You are all assembled? Then come in!"

This private office looked on to the garden, a narrow strip of ground running down to the Loir, the leafless poplars along which were visible in the distance. On the mantelpiece, between some packets of papers, there was a black marble clock; the furniture simply comprised the mahogany writing-table, a set of pasteboard boxes, and some chairs. Monsieur Baillehache at once installed himself at his writing-table, like a judge on the bench, while the peasants who had entered in a file hesitated and squinted at the chairs, feeling embarrassed as to where and how they were to sit down.

"Come, seat yourselves!" said the notary.

Then Fouan and Rose were pushed forward by the rest on to the two front chairs; Fanny and Delhomme got behind, also side by side; Buteau established himself in an isolated corner against the wall; while Hyacinthe alone remained standing, in front of the window, blocking out the light with his broad shoulders. The notary, out of patience, addressed him familiarly.

"Sit down, do, Hyacinthe!"

He had to broach the subject himself.

"So, Fouan, you have made up your mind to divide your property before your death, between your two sons and your daughter?"

The old man made no reply. The rest were as if frozen to stone; there was deep silence.

On his part, the notary, accustomed to such sluggishness, did not hurry himself. His office had been in his family two hundred and fifty years. Baillehache, son, had succeeded Baillehache, father, at Cloyes, the line being of ancient Beauceron extraction, and they had contracted from their rustic connection that ponderous reflectiveness, that artful

circumspection, which protract the most trivial debates with long pauses and irrelevant talk. Having taken up a penknife the notary began paring his nails.

"Haven't you? It would appear that you have made up your mind," he repeated at length, looking hard at the old man.

The latter turned, looked round at everybody, and then said, hesitatingly:

"Yes; that may be so, Monsieur Baillehache. I spoke to you about it at harvest-time. You told me to think it over; and I have thought it over, and I can see that it will have to come to that."

He explained the why and wherefore, in faltering phrases, interspersed with constant digressions. But there was one thing which he said nothing about, but which was obvious from the repressed emotion which choked his utterance--and that was the infinite distress, the smothered rancour, the rending asunder, as it were, of his whole frame, which he felt in parting with the property so eagerly coveted before his father's death, cultivated later on with the violent avidity of lust, and then added to, bit by bit, at the cost of the most sordid avarice. Such-and-such a plot represented months of bread and cheese, tireless winters, summers of scorching toil, with no other sustenance than a few gulps of water. He had loved the soil as it were a woman who kills, and for whose sake men are slain. No spouse, nor child, nor any human being; but the soil! However, being now stricken in years, he must hand his mistress over to his sons, as *his* father, maddened by his own impotence, had handed her over to him.

"You see, Monsieur Baillehache, one has to look at things as they are. My legs are not what they used to be; my arms are hardly better; and, of course, the land suffers accordingly. Things might still have gone on if one could have come to an understanding with one's children."

He glanced at Buteau and Hyacinthe, who made no sign, however; their eyes were looking into vacancy, as though they were a hundred miles away from him and his words.

"Well, am I to be expected to take strange people under our roof, to pick and steal? No, servants now-a-days cost too much; they eat one out of house and home. As for me, I am used up. This year, look you, I have hardly had the strength to cultivate a quarter of the nineteen *setiers*[2] I possess; just enough to provide corn for ourselves and fodder for the two cows. So, you understand, it's breaking my heart to see good land spoiled by lying idle. I had rather let everything go than look on at such sinful waste."

His voice faltered; his gestures were those of resigned anguish. Near him listened his submissive wife, crushed by more than half a century of obedience and toil.

"The other day," he continued, "Rose, while making her cheeses, fell into them head first. It wears me out only to jog to market. And then, we can't take the land away with us when we go. It must be given up--given up. After all, we have done enough work, and we want to die in peace. Don't we, Rose?"

"That's true enough; true as we sit here," said the old woman.

There fell a new and prolonged silence. The notary finished trimming his nails, and at last he put the knife back on his desk, saying:

"Yes, those are very good reasons; one is frequently forced to resolve on a deed of gift. I should add that it saves expense, for the legacy duties are heavier than those on the transference of property."

Buteau, despite his affectation of indifference, could not help exclaiming:

"Then it's true, Monsieur Baillehache?"

"Most certainly. You will save some hundreds of francs."

There was a flutter among the others; even Delhomme's countenance brightened, while the parents also shared in the general satisfaction. The moment they knew it was cheaper, the thing was as good as done.

"It remains for me to make the usual observations," continued the notary. "Many thoughtful persons condemn such transfers of property, and regard them as immoral, in that they tend to sever family ties. Deplorable instances might, in fact, be mentioned, children having sometimes behaved very badly, when their parents had stripped themselves of all."

The two sons and the daughter listened to him, open-mouthed, with trembling eyelids and quivering cheeks.

"Let papa keep everything himself, if those are his ideas," brusquely interrupted the very susceptible Fanny.

"We have always been dutiful," said Buteau.

"And we're not afraid of work," added Hyacinthe.

With a wave of his hand Maître Baillehache restored calm.

"Pray, let me finish! I know you are good children, and honest workers; and, in your case, there is not the slightest danger of your parents ever repenting of their resolution."

He spoke without a tinge of irony, repeating the conciliatory phrases which five-and-twenty years of professional practice had made smooth upon his tongue. However, the mother, although seeming not to understand, glanced with her small eyes from her daughter to her two sons. She had brought them up, without any show of fondness, amid the chill parsimony which reproaches the little ones with diminishing the household savings. She had a grudge against the younger son for having run away from home just when he was capable of earning wages; the

daughter she had never been able to get on with, encountering in her a strain too like her own, a robust activity made haughty and unyielding by the intermingled intelligence of the father; and her gaze only softened as it rested upon the elder son, the ruffian who took neither after her nor after her husband--the ill weed sprung none knew whence, and, perhaps, excused and favoured on that account.

Fouan also had looked at his children, one after the other, with an uneasy mistrust of the uses they might make of his property. The laziness of the drunkard was not so keen an anguish to him as the covetous yearning of the two others for possession. However, he bent his trembling head. What was the good of kicking against the pricks?

"The partition being thus resolved upon," resumed the notary, "the question becomes one of terms. Are you agreed upon the allowance which is to be paid?"

Everybody suddenly relapsed into mute rigidity. Their sun-burnt faces assumed a stony look, an air of impenetrable gravity, like that of diplomatists entering on the appraisement of an empire. Then they threw out tentative glances one to another, but nobody spoke. At last the father once more explained matters.

"No, Monsieur Baillehache, we have not entered on the subject; we were waiting till we met all together, here. But it's quite simple, isn't it? I have nineteen setiers, or, as people now say, nine hectares and a half (about twenty-three acres). So that, if I rented them out, it would come to nine hundred and fifty francs, at a hundred francs per hectare (two and a half acres)."

Buteau, the least patient, leapt from his chair.

"What! A hundred francs per hectare! Do you take us for fools, papa?"

And a preliminary discussion began on the question of figures. There was a setier of vineyard; that, certainly, would let for fifty francs. But would that price ever be got for the twelve setiers of plough-land, still less for the six setiers of natural meadow-land, the fields along the Aigre, the hay of which was worth nothing? The plough-land itself was hardly of good quality, especially at the end which edged the plateau, for the arable layer got thinner and thinner as it neared the valley.

"Come, come, papa," said Fanny, reproachfully, "you mustn't take an unfair advantage of us."

"It's worth a hundred francs a hectare," repeated the old man stubbornly, slapping his thigh. "I could let it out to-morrow at a hundred francs if I wanted to. And what's it worth to you, now? Just let's hear what it's worth to you?"

"It's worth sixty francs," said Buteau, but Fouan, greatly put out, sustained his price, and launched into fervent eulogy of his land--such fine land as it was, yielding wheat of itself--when Delhomme, silent till then, declared in his blunt, honest way: "It's worth eighty francs, not a copper more, and not a copper less."

The old man immediately calmed down.

"All right, say eighty. I don't mind making a sacrifice for my children."

Rose, twitching at a corner of his blouse, expressed in one word the outraged instincts of her mean nature--"No!"

Hyacinthe held himself aloof. Land had been no object to him since the five years he had spent in Algeria. He had but one aim: to get his share at once, whatever it might be, and to turn it into money. Accordingly, he went on swinging to and fro with an air of amused superiority.

"I said eighty," cried Fouan, "and eighty it is. I have always been a man of my word; I swear it. Nine hectares and a half, look you, come to seven

hundred and sixty francs, or, in round numbers, eight hundred. Well, the allowance shall be eight hundred francs, that's fair enough?"

Buteau burst into a violent fit of laughter, while Fanny protested by a shake of the head, as if dumbfounded. Monsieur Baillehache, who, since the discussion began, had been looking vacantly into the garden, again turned to his clients and seemed to listen, tugging in his lunatic way at his whiskers, and dreamily digesting the excellent meal he had just made.

This time the old man was right, it was fair. But the children, heated and possessed by the one idea of concluding the bargain on the lowest possible terms, grew absolutely ferocious, and haggled and cursed with the bad faith of yokels buying a pig.

"Eight hundred francs!" sneered Buteau. "Seems you want to live like gentle folks----Oh, indeed! Eight hundred francs, when you might live on four! Why not say at once that you want to gorge till you burst?"

Fouan had not yet lost his temper, considering the higgling natural, and simply facing the expected storm, himself excited, but making straight for the goal he had in view.

"Stop a bit! that's not all. Till the day of our death we keep the house and garden, of course. Then, as we shall no longer get anything from the crops, or have our two cows, we want every year a cask of wine and a hundred faggots; and every week eight quarts of milk, a dozen eggs, and three cheeses."

"Oh, papa!" groaned Fanny in piteous consternation. "Oh, papa!"

As for Buteau, he had done with discussion. He had sprung to his feet, and was striding brusquely to and fro; he had even jammed his cap on his head as if he were about to go. Hyacinthe also had likewise got up from his chair, disquieted by the idea that this fuss might prevent the partition

after all. Delhomme alone remained impassive, with his finger laid against his nose, in an attitude of deep thought and extreme boredom.

At this point Maître Baillehache felt it necessary to help matters forward a little. Rousing himself up, and fidgeting more energetically with his whiskers:

"You know, my friends," said he, "that wine, faggots, cheese, and eggs are customary."

But he was cut short by a volley of bitter phrases.

"Eggs with chickens inside, perhaps!"

"We don't drink our wine, do we? We sell it!"

"It's jolly convenient not to do a blasted thing and be made warm and comfortable, while your children are toiling and moiling!"

The notary, who had heard the same thing often enough before, continued unmoved:

"All that is no argument. Come, come, Hyacinthe, sit down, will you? You're keeping out the light; you're a perfect nuisance! So that's settled, isn't it, all of you? You will pay the dues in kind, because otherwise you would become a by-word. We have, therefore, only to discuss the amount of the allowance."

Delhomme at length indicated that he had something to say. Everybody having resumed his place, he began slowly, amid general attention:

"Excuse me; what the father asks seems fair: he might be allowed eight hundred francs on the ground that he could let the property for eight hundred francs--only we don't reckon like that on our side. He is not letting us the land, but giving it to us, and what we have to calculate is: how much do he and his wife require to live on? That is all. How much do they require to live on?"

"That is, certainly," chimed in the notary, "the usual basis of calculation."

Another endless dispute set in. The two old folks' lives were dissected, exposed, and discussed, need by need. Bread, vegetables, and meat were weighed out; clothing appraised, linen and woollen, to the utmost farthing; even such trivial luxuries as the father's tobacco--cut down, after interminable recriminations, from two sous a day to one--were not beneath notice. When people were beyond work, they ought to reduce their expenditure. The mother, again; could she not do without her black coffee? It was like their twelve-year-old dog, who ate, and ate, and made no return; he ought to have had a bullet put through his head long ago! The calculation was no sooner finished than it was begun all over again, on the chance of finding some other item to suppress: two shirts or six handkerchiefs in the year. And thus, by cutting closer and closer, by pinching and scraping in the paltriest matters, they got down to five hundred and fifty odd francs, which left the children in a state of uncontrollable agitation, for they had set their hearts upon not giving more than five hundred.

Fanny, however, was growing tired. She was not a bad sort, having more of the milk of human kindness than the men, and not yet having had her heart or her skin hardened by rough life in the open air. Accordingly she spoke of making an end of it, and resigned herself to some concessions. Hyacinthe, for his part, shrugged his shoulders, in a most liberal, not to say maudlin mood; ready to offer, out of his own share, any little balance which, be it remarked, he would never have paid.

"Come," asked the daughter, "shall we let it go at five hundred and fifty?"

"Right you are!" answered he. "The old 'uns must have a little pleasant time!"

The mother turned to her elder son with a smiling and yet almost tearful look of affection, while the father continued his contention with the

younger. He had only given way step by step, disputing every reduction, and making a stubborn stand on certain items. But, beneath his ostensibly cool pertinacity, his wrath rose high within him as he confronted the mad desire of his own flesh and blood to fatten on his flesh, and to drain his blood dry while he was yet alive. He forgot that he had thus fed upon his own father. His hands had begun to tremble; and he growled out:

"Ah, the rascals! To think that one has brought 'em up, and then they turn round and take the bread out of one's mouth! On my word, I'm sick of it. I'd rather be already rotting under ground. So there's no getting you to behave decently; you won't give more than five hundred and fifty?"

He was about to accept the sum, when his wife again twitched his blouse and whispered:

"No, no!"

"And that's not all," resumed Buteau, after a little hesitation. "How about the money you have saved up? If you've any money of your own you don't want ours, do you?"

He looked steadily at his father, having reserved this shot for the last. The old man had grown very pale.

"What money?" he asked.

"Why, the money invested; the money you hold bonds for."

Buteau, who only suspected the hoard, wanted to make sure. One evening, he had thought he saw his father take a little roll of papers from behind a looking-glass. The next day and the days following he had been on the watch, but nothing had turned up; the empty cavity alone remained.

Fouan's pallor now suddenly changed to a deep red as his torrent of wrath at length burst forth. He rose up, and shouted with a furious gesture:

"Great heaven! You go rummaging in my pockets now. I haven't a sou, a copper invested; you've cost too much for that, you brute. But, in any case, is it any business of yours? Am I not the master, the father?"

He seemed to grow taller in the re-assertion of his authority. For years everybody, wife and children alike, had quailed before him, under his rude despotism as chief of the family. If they fancied all that at an end, they made a mistake.

"Oh, papa!" began Buteau, with an attempt at a snigger.

"Hold your tongue, in God's name!" resumed the old man, with his hand still uplifted. "Hold your tongue, or I strike!"

The younger son stammered, and shrank into himself on his chair. He had felt the blow approaching and had raised his elbow to ward it off, seized once more with the terrors of infancy.

"And you, Hyacinthe, leave off smirking! And you, Fanny, look me in the face, if you dare! True as the sun's shining, I'll make it lively for some of you; see if I don't!"

He stood, threateningly, over them all. The mother shivered, as if apprehensive of stray buffets. The children neither stirred nor breathed, they were conquered and submissive.

"Understand, the allowance shall be six hundred francs; or else I shall sell my land and invest in an annuity. Yes, an annuity! All shall be spent, and you sha'n't come into a copper. Will you give the six hundred francs?"

"Why, papa," murmured Fanny, "we will give whatever you ask."

"Six hundred francs. Right!" said Delhomme.

"What suits the rest, suits me," declared Hyacinthe.

Buteau, setting his teeth viciously, gave the consent of silence. Fouan still held them in check, with the stern look of one accustomed to obedience. Finally, he sat down again, saying: "Good! Then we are agreed."

Maître Baillehache had begun to doze again, unconcernedly awaiting the issue of the quarrel. Now, opening his eyes, he brought the interview to a peaceful close.

"Well, then, as you're agreed, that's enough! Now I know the terms, I will draw up the deed. For your part, get the surveying done, portion out the lots, and tell the surveyor to forward me a note containing the description of the lots. Then, when you've drawn your numbers, all we shall have to do will be to write the number drawn against each name, and sign."

He had risen from his arm-chair to see them out. But they, hesitating, and reflecting, would not stir. Was it really over? Was nothing forgotten? Had they not made a bad bargain, which there was yet time, perhaps, to cancel?

Four o'clock struck; they had been there nearly three hours.

"Aren't you going?" said the notary to them at last. "There are others waiting."

He precipitated their decision by hustling them into the next room, where, indeed, a number of patient rustics were sitting still and rigid upon their chairs, while the small clerk watched a dog-fight out of the window, and the two others still drove their pens, sulkily and scratchily, over stamped paper.

Once outside, the family stood for a moment stock-still in the middle of the street.

"If you like," declared the father, "the measuring shall take place on the day after to-morrow--Monday."

They nodded assent, and went down the Rue Grouaise in scattered file.

Then, old Fouan and Rose, having turned down the Rue du Temple, towards the church, Fanny and Delhomme went off through the Rue Grande. Buteau had stopped on the Place Saint-Lubin, wondering if his father had a hidden hoard or not; and Hyacinthe, left by himself, relighted his cigar-end, and went into the Jolly Ploughman café.

PART I. — CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER III.

The Fouans house was the first in Rognes, on the high-road from Cloyes to Bazoches-le-Doyen, which passes through the village. On Monday, the old man was going out at seven o'clock in the morning to keep the appointment in front of the church, when, in the next doorway, he perceived his sister, "La Grande," who was already astir, despite her eighty years.

These Fouans had propagated and grown there for centuries, like some sturdy luxuriant vegetation. Serfs in the old times of the Rognes-Bouquevals--of whom not a trace survived save the few half-buried stones of a ruined château--they had been emancipated, it appeared, under Philip the Fair; becoming thenceforward landowners of an acre or so, which they had bought from the lord of the manor when in difficulties, and paid for with tears and blood at ten times the value. Then had set in the long struggle of four hundred years to defend and enlarge the property, in a frenzy of passion transmitted from father to son: odd corners were lost and bought back, the ownership was unremittingly called into question, the inheritances were subject to such a list of dues that they almost ate their own heads off; but in spite of all, both arable and plough-lands grew, bit by bit, in the ever-prevailing, stubborn craving for possession. Generations passed away, the lives of many men enriched the soil; but when the Revolution of '89 set its seal upon his rights, the Fouan of the time, Joseph Casimir, possessed about twenty-six acres, wrested in the course of four centuries from the old seignorial manor.

In '93, this Joseph Casimir was twenty-seven years of age, and on the day when what remained of the manor was declared national property and

sold in lots by auction, he yearned to acquire a few acres of it. The Rognes-Bouquevals, ruined and in debt, after letting the last tower of the château crumble into dust, had long since given up to their creditors the right of receiving the revenues of La Borderie, three quarters of which property lay fallow. In particular, adjacent to one of Fouan's bits of land there was a large field, on which he looked with the fierce covetousness of his race. But the harvest had been poor, and in the old pipkin behind his oven he had barely a hundred crowns saved up. Moreover, although it had momentarily occurred to him to borrow off a Cloyes money-lender, a distrustful prudence had stood in the way: he was afraid to touch these lands of the nobility; who knew whether they would not be claimed again later on? So it happened that, divided between desire and apprehension, he had the agony of seeing La Borderie bought at auction, field by field, and for a tenth of its value, by Isidore Hourdequin, a townsman of Châteaudun, formerly employed in the collection of excise duties.

Joseph Casimir Fouan, in his old age, had divided his twenty-six acres equally among his eldest child, Marianne, and his two sons, Louis and Michel; a younger daughter Laure, brought up to dressmaking and employed at Châteaudun, being indemnified in hard cash. But marriage destroyed this equality. While Marianne Fouan, surnamed "La Grande," wedded a neighbour, Antoine Péchard, with about twenty-two acres; Michael Fouan, surnamed "Mouche," encumbered himself with a sweetheart who only expected from her father two and a half acres of vineyard. On the other hand, Louis Fouan, joined in matrimony to Rose Maliverne, the heiress to fifteen acres, had acquired that total of twenty-three acres or so, which, in his turn, he was about to divide among his three children.

La Grande was respected and dreaded in the family, not for her advanced age, but for her fortune. Still very upright, tall, thin, wiry, and large-boned, she had the fleshless head of a bird of prey set on a long, shrivelled, blood-coloured neck. In her, the family nose curved into a

formidable beak; she had round fixed eyes, with not a trace of hair under the yellow silk handkerchief she always wore, though she possessed her full complement of teeth, and jaws that might have masticated flints. She never went out without her thornwood stick, which she held on high as she walked, only making use of it to strike animals and human beings. Left a widow at an early age, she had turned her one daughter out of doors, because the wretch had insisted, against her mother's will, on marrying a poor youth, Vincent Bouteroue; and even when this daughter and her husband had died of want, leaving behind them a grand-daughter and a grandson, Palmyre and Hilarion, aged respectively thirty-two and twenty-four, she had refused her forgiveness and let them starve to death, allowing no one so much as to remind her of their existence. Since her goodman's death she presided in person over the cultivation of her land; she had three cows, a pig, and a farm-hand, all fed out of a common trough; and she was obeyed by those about her with the most abject submission.

Fouan, seeing her on her threshold, had drawn near out of respect. She was ten years older than he, and he regarded her sternness, her avarice, her obstinate resolution to possess and to live, with an admiring deference, shared by the whole village.

"I was just wanting to tell you about it, La Grande," said he. "I have made up my mind, and am going up yonder to see about the division."

She made no reply, but tightened her grasp upon the stick which she was flourishing.

"The other night I wanted to ask your advice again, but I knocked and no one answered."

Then she broke out in shrill tones:

"Idiot! Advice, indeed! I gave you advice. The fool, the poltroon you must be to give your property up as long as you can get about. They

might have bled *me* to death, but, under the knife, I would still have refused. To see what belongs to one in the hands of others, to turn one's self out of doors for the benefit of rascally children.--No! No! No!"

"But," put in Fouan, "if you're incapable of farming, and the land suffers accordingly."

"Well, let it suffer. Rather than lose half an acre of it, I would go and watch the thistles grow every morning."

She drew herself up grimly, in her featherless, old vulture-like way, and, drumming on his shoulder with her stick, as if to impress her words upon him more deeply, she resumed:

"Listen, and mark me. When you have nothing and they have everything, your children will refuse you a mouthful of bread. You'll end with a beggar's wallet, like a road-tramp. And when that happens, don't come knocking at my door, for I give you fair warning, it'll be the worse for you. Would you like to know what I shall do, eh? Would you?"

He waited submissively, as behoved a younger brother; and she returned indoors, banging the door behind her and screaming:

"I shall do that! Die in a ditch!"

Fouan stood for an instant motionless before the closed door. Then, with a gesture of resigned decision, he went up the path leading to the Place de l'Église. On that very spot stood the old family residence of the Fouans, which, in the division of property, had fallen to his brother Michel, called Mouche; his own house, lower down along the road, had come to him from his wife Rose. Mouche, who had long been a widower, lived alone with his two daughters, Lise and Françoise, embittered by disappointments, still humiliated by his lowly marriage, and accusing his brother and sister, after forty years, of having cheated him when the allotments were drawn for. He was for ever telling the tale how the worst

lot had been left for him at the bottom of the hat; and, in the course of time, this seemed to have become true, for he proved so excellent at excuses and such a sluggard at work that his share lost half its value in his hands. "The man makes the land," as folks say in La Beauce.

That morning Mouche also was on the watch at his door when his brother came round the corner of the square. The division roused his spleen, reviving old grudges, although he had nothing to expect from it. However, to demonstrate his utter indifference, he, too, turned his back and shut the door with a slam.

Fouan had suddenly caught sight of Delhomme and Hyacinthe, who were waiting twenty yards apart from each other. He made for the former, while the latter made for him. The three, without speaking, scanned the path which skirted the edge of the plateau.

"There he is," said Hyacinthe, at last. "He" was Grosbois, the local surveyor, a peasant from Magnolles, a little village near Cloyes. His knowledge of reading and writing had ruined him. When summoned from Orgères to Beaugency, on surveying business, he used to leave to his wife the management of his property, and he had contracted during his constant pilgrimages such drunken habits that he was now never sober. Very stout, very sturdy for his sixty years, he had a broad red face budding all over into purple pimples; and, despite the early hour, he was, on the day in question, in a state of abominable intoxication, the result of a merry-making held the night before by some Montigny vine-growers in honour of a divided inheritance. But that mattered nothing: the tipsier he was, the clearer his brain. He never measured incorrectly, and never added up incorrectly. He was held in deference and honour, advisedly, for he had the reputation of being extremely spiteful.

"All here, eh?" said he. "Then come along."

A dirty, bedraggled urchin of twelve was in attendance, carrying the chain under his arm and the stand and the staves over his shoulder, while with his free hand he swung the square, which was in an old burst cardboard case.

They all set out without waiting for Buteau, whom they had just descried in the distance, standing still before the largest field of the holding. That field, some five acres in extent, was immediately adjacent to the one along which La Coliche had dragged Françoise a few days before. Buteau, thinking it useless to proceed further, had stopped there in a brown study. When the others arrived, they saw him stoop down, take up a handful of earth, and gradually filter it through his fingers, as though to estimate its weight and flavour.

"There," resumed Grosbois, taking a greasy memorandum-book from his pocket: "I have already drawn up an accurate little plan of each lot, as you asked me to do, Fouan. It now devolves upon us to divide the whole into three portions; and that, my children, we will do together, eh? Just tell me how you intend it to be done."

The day had worn on. A ripping wind was driving continuous masses of thick clouds across the pale sky; and La Beauce lay sullen and gloomy, lashed by the keen air. Yet not one of them seemed conscious of that breeze from the offing, which inflated their blouses and threatened to carry off their hats. Not one of the five, in holiday attire, as befitted the gravity of the occasion, spoke a word. As they stood on the confines of the field, amid the boundless expanse, their lineaments had a dreamy, frozen fixedness, the musing expression of mariners who live alone in large open spaces. La Beauce, flat and fertile, easily tilled but demanding continuous effort, has made the Beauceron calm and reflective, without passion save for the land itself.

"It'll all have to be divided into three," said Buteau at length.

Grosbois shook his head, and a discussion set in. An apostle of progress, by virtue of his connection with large farms, he occasionally went so far as to set himself up against his smaller clients, by condemning extreme subdivision. Would not the labour and cost of transport from place to place become a ruinous thing, when there were only odds and ends of land left that might be covered by a handkerchief? Was it farming at all, with paltry garden-plots on which it was impossible either to improve the system of crops or to introduce machinery? No: the only sensible thing to do was to make a mutual arrangement, not to adopt the murderous course of chopping a field up like so much pastry. If one of them would be content with the plough-land, another might manage with the meadows; the portions could eventually be equalised, and the distribution decided by lot.

Buteau, with the natural liveliness of youth, adopted a jocose tone. "And, with only some meadow-land, what shall I have to eat? Grass, I suppose? No, no; I want some of everything, hay for cow and horse, corn and grape for myself."

Fouan, who was listening, nodded assent. For generations, such had been the mode of partition; and fresh acquisitions, by marriage or otherwise, had subsequently swollen the plots anew.

Delhomme, passing rich with his fifty acres or so, had broader views; but he was in a conciliatory mood, and had indeed only come, in his wife's interest, to see that she was not cheated in the measurements. As for Hyacinthe, he had gone off in pursuit of a flight of larks, with his hands crammed full of pebbles. Whenever one of the birds, distressed by the wind, stopped still a couple of seconds in mid-air with quivering wings, he felled it to the ground with the skill of a savage. Three fell, and he thrust them bleeding into his pocket.

"Come, stop your talk, and let's have it cut up into three!" said the lively Buteau, addressing the surveyor familiarly; "and not into six, mind, for

you seem to me this morning to have both Chartres and Orleans in your eye at once."

Grosbois, feeling hurt, drew himself up with much dignity.

"When you've had as much to drink as I have, young shaver, see whether you can keep your eyes open at all. Which of you clever people would like to take the square instead of me?"

As no one ventured to take up the challenge, he called out harshly and triumphantly to the boy, who was rapt with admiration of Hyacinthe's pebble-shooting. The square duly installed on its stand, the stakes were being set up, when a new dispute arose over the method of dividing the field. The surveyor, supported by Fouan and Delhomme, wanted to divide the five acres into three strips parallel with the Aigre valley; while Buteau insisted on the strips being taken perpendicular to the valley, on the plea that the arable layer got thinner and thinner as it neared the slope. In this way every one would have his share of the worse end; whereas, in the other case, the third lot would be altogether of inferior quality.

But Fouan grew heated; swore that the depth was the same everywhere, and reminded them that the former partition between himself, Mouche, and La Grande had been made in the direction he indicated; in proof of which, Mouche's five acres lay adjacent to the third of the proposed lots. Delhomme, on his side, made a decisive remark: even admitting that the one lot was inferior, the owner would be benefited as soon as the authorities decided to open the road that was to skirt the field at that point.

"Oh, yes; I daresay!" cried Buteau. "The celebrated road from Rognes to Châteaudun, by way of La Borderie! And a jolly long time you'll have to wait for it!"

His importunity being, nevertheless, disregarded, he entered a protest from between his clenched teeth.

Hyacinthe himself had drawn near, and they were all absorbed in watching Grosbois trace out the lines of division. They kept a sharp eye on him, as if they suspected him of trying by unfair means to make one share half-an-inch bigger than the others. Three times did Delhomme put his eye to the slit in the square, to make quite sure that the line fairly intersected the stave. Hyacinthe swore at the "d----d youngster" because he did not hold the chain right. But Buteau, in particular, followed the process step by step, counting the feet, and going over the calculations again in his own way with trembling lips. With this consuming desire to possess, with the joy he felt at getting at last a grip of the land, his bitterness and sullen rage at not being able to keep the whole grew and grew. Those five acres, all of one piece, made such a fine field. He had insisted on the division, so that no one might have what he couldn't get; and yet the wholesale destruction drove him distracted. He again tried to find frivolous causes of quarrel.

Fouan, standing in a listless attitude, had been looking on at the dismemberment of his property without a word.

"It's finished!" said Grosbois. "And look at it how you will, you won't find a pound difference between the lots."

There were still, on the plateau, ten acres of plough-land divided into a dozen plots, none of which were much more than an acre in size. Indeed, one was only about a rood, and the surveyor having inquired, with a sneer, whether that also was to be sub-divided, a fresh dispute arose.

Buteau, with his instinctive gesture, had stooped down and taken up a handful of earth, which he raised to his face as if to try its flavour. A complacent wrinkling of his nose seemed to pronounce it better than all the rest; and, after gently filtering it through his fingers, he said that if

they left the lot to him it was all right, otherwise he insisted on a division. Delhomme and Hyacinthe angrily refused, and likewise wanted their share. Yes, yes! A third of a rood each; that was the only fair way. By sub-dividing every plot, they were sure that none of the three could have anything which the other two lacked.

"Come on to the vineyard," said Fouan, and as they turned towards the church, he threw a last glance over the vast plain, pausing for an instant to look at the distant buildings of La Borderie. Then, with a cry of inconsolable regret, alluding to the old lost opportunity of buying up the national property:

"Ah!" said he, "if father had only chosen, Grosbois, you would now be measuring all that!"

The two sons and the son-in-law turned sharply round, and there was a new halt and a lingering look at the seven hundred and fifty acres of the farm spread out before them.

"Ugh!" grunted Buteau, as he set off again: "Much good it does us, that story! It's always our fate to be the prey of the townsfolk."

Ten o'clock struck. The main part of the work was over. But they hastened their steps, for the wind had fallen, and a heavy dark cloud had just discharged itself of a premonitory shower. The various Rognes vineyards were situated beyond the church, on the hill-side which sloped down to the Aigre. In former times, the château had stood there with its grounds; and it was barely more than a century since the peasantry, encouraged by the success of the Montigny vineyards, near Cloyes, had decided to plant vines on this declivity, though it was specially adapted for the purpose by its Southern aspect and the steepness of its slope. The wine it yielded was thin but of a pleasantly acid taste, and resembled the minor Orléanais vintages. Each owner only secured a few casks, Delhomme, the wealthiest, possessing some seven acres of vine-land; the

rest of the country-side was entirely given up to cereals and plants for fodder.

They turned down behind the church, skirted the old ruined presbytery which had been turned into a lodging for the rural constable, and gained the narrow chequered patches. As they crossed a piece of stony ground, covered with shrubs, a shrill voice cried through a gap:

"Father, it's raining! and I've brought out my geese."

It was the voice of "La Trouille,"[3] Hyacinthe's daughter, a girl of twelve, thin and wiry like a holly branch, with fair towzled hair. Her large mouth had a twist to the left, her green eyes stared so boldly that she might have been taken for a boy, and her dress consisted of an old blouse of her father's, tied round her waist with some string. The reason everybody called her La Trouille--although she bore, by right, the fair name of Olympe--was that Hyacinthe, who used to yell at her from morning till night, could never say a word to her without adding:

"Just wait, you dirty troll, and I'll make it hot for you!"

He had begotten this wilding of a drab, whom he had picked up in a ditch after a fair, and whom he had installed in his den, to the great scandal of all Rognes. For nearly three years the household had been at sixes-and-sevens, and one harvest evening the baggage went off the way she came, in company with another man. The child, then scarcely weaned, had grown apace after the manner of ill weeds; and, as soon as she could walk, she got the meals ready for her father, whom she both dreaded and worshipped. Her chief passion, however, was for geese. At first she had only had two, male and female, stolen when quite young from behind a farm hedge. Then, thanks to her maternal care, the flock had increased, and she now possessed twenty birds, which she fed by pillage.

When La Trouille made her appearance, with her brazen, goat-like look, driving the geese before her with a stick, Hyacinthe flew into a temper.

"Be sure you're back for dinner, or else you'll catch it! And mind you keep the house carefully locked up, you dirty troll, for fear of robbers!"

Buteau sniggered, and even Delhomme and the others could not help laughing, they were so tickled at the idea of Hyacinthe being robbed. His house was a sight; an old cellar consisting of three walls crumbled to their original clay, a regular fox-hole, amid heaps of fallen stones and under a cluster of old lime-trees. It was all that remained of the château; and when our poaching friend, falling out with his father, had ensconced himself in this stony corner belonging to the village, he had had to close up the cellar by building a fourth wall of rough stones, in which he left two openings for window and door. The place was overgrown with brambles, and a large sweet briar hid the window. The country folk called it the Château.

A new deluge poured down. Luckily the acre or so of vineyard was close by, and the division into three was effected straightforwardly, without any new ground for a quarrel arising. There now only remained seven or eight acres of meadow down by the river side; but at this moment the rain became so heavy, and fell in such torrents, that the surveyor, passing the gate of a residence, suggested that they should go in.

"What if we took shelter for a minute at Monsieur Charles's?"

Fouan had come to a standstill, wavering, full of respect for his brother-in-law and sister, who had made their fortune, and lived in a retired way in this middle-class residence.

"No, no," he muttered; "they breakfast at twelve. It would disturb their arrangements."

But Monsieur Charles put in an appearance on his stone steps under the verandah, taking an interest in the fall of rain, and, on recognising them, he called out:

"Come in, come in, do!"

Then, as they were all dripping wet, he bade them go round and enter by the kitchen, where he joined them. He was a fine man of sixty-five summers, close-shaven, with heavy eyelids over his lack-lustre eyes, and the solemn, sallow face of a retired magistrate. He was clad in deep-blue swan-skin flannel, with furred shoes, and an ecclesiastical skull-cap, which he wore with the dignified air of one whose life had been spent in duties of delicacy and authority.

When, at the age of twenty-five, Laure Fouan, then a dressmaker in a shop at Châteaudun, married Charles Badeuil, the latter kept a little café in the Rue d'Angoulême. The young pair, ambitious, and eager to make a rapid fortune, soon left there for Chartres. But, at first, nothing succeeded with them; all they put their hands to came to grief. They vainly tried another eating-house, a restaurant, even a salt-fish shop; and they despaired of ever having a copper to call their own, when Monsieur Charles, being of an enterprising nature, had the idea of buying one of the "licensed houses" in the Rue aux Juifs, which had greatly declined, owing to an unsatisfactory staff and notorious uncleanliness. He took in the situation at a glance: the requirements of Chartres, and the void to be supplied in a large town which lacked a respectable establishment, abreast of modern progress as regards safety and comfort. Indeed, before two years had passed, Number 19, re-decorated, fitted with curtains and mirrors, and provided with a highly select staff, became so very favourably known that the number of women had to be increased to six. All the officers, all the public functionaries--in short, society in general--went nowhere else. This success was kept up, thanks to the strong right arm of Monsieur Charles and his unflagging paternal

administration; while Madame Charles proved herself extraordinarily active, keeping her eye on everything, letting nothing go to waste, and yet shrewd enough to overlook, when necessary, the petty larcenies of rich customers.

In less than twenty-five years the Badeuils saved three hundred thousand francs, and they then thought of fulfilling the dream of their lives: an idyllic old age, face to face with nature, amid trees, flowers, and birds. But they were kept two years longer by their inability to find a purchaser for Number 19 at the high price they valued it. And what a heartrending thing it was! An establishment furnished by themselves on the best scale, bringing in a larger income than a farm, and yet about to pass, perforce, into strange hands, in which, possibly, it would degenerate. On his settling in Chartres a daughter had been born to Monsieur Charles, by name Estelle, whom he sent to the nuns of the Visitation, at Châteaudun, when he moved into the Rue aux Juifs. In this devout, rigidly moral boarding school, he left the young girl till the age of twenty, to further purify her purity; sending her some distance off for her holidays, and keeping her in ignorance of the business in which he made his money. He only took her away on the day he wedded her to Hector Vaucogne, a young fellow employed on the local excise staff, whose excellent natural gifts were marred by extraordinary laziness. Estelle was close on thirty, and had a daughter, Elodie, aged seven, when, being at length acquainted with the facts by hearing that her father's business was in the market, she went to him of her own accord and asked him to give her the preference. Why should so safe and flourishing a business go out of the family? All was duly arranged. The Vaucognes took the place over, and the Badeuils, before a month had elapsed, had the fond satisfaction of ascertaining that their daughter, although brought up to other ideas, had turned out a first-rate manageress, which, happily, compensated for their son-in-law's supineness and lack of administrative power. They had lived in retirement at Rognes for five years, and had the supervision of their

grand-daughter, Elodie, who, in her turn, had been sent to the nuns of the Visitation at Châteaudun, there to be religiously trained in principles of the strictest morality.

When Monsieur Charles came into the kitchen, where a maid was whipping some eggs, while she kept her eye upon a pan of larks fizzing in butter, they all of them, even old Fouan and Delhomme, uncovered their heads, and seemed extremely flattered at shaking hands with him.

"Bless me!" said Grosbois, to make himself agreeable, "What a charming property this is of yours! And to think that you picked it up for a mere song. Oh, you artful dog, you!"

The other puffed himself out like a turkey-cock.

"A bargain, a windfall. We took a fancy to it, and, besides, Madame Charles had set her heart on ending her days in her own part of the country. As for me, where the heart is engaged I have always been indulgent."

Roseblanche, as the property had been christened, was the "folly" of a townsman of Cloyes, who had just laid out upon it nearly fifty thousand francs, when a fit of apoplexy struck him down before the paint was dry on the walls. The house, very trim, and situated on the slope of the plateau, stood in a garden of some seven acres, which reached down to the Aigre. In that out-of-the-way spot, on the confines of sombre Beauce, no purchaser could be found, and Monsieur Charles had got the place for twenty thousand francs. There he blissfully satisfied all his tastes, fishing the stream for superb trout and eels, making beloved collections of rose-trees and carnations, and keeping a large aviary full of wood warblers, which no one but himself tended. There the fond old pair ran through an income of twelve thousand francs, in a state of perfect happiness, which they looked upon as the rightful recompense of their thirty years of toil.

"Eh?" added Monsieur Charles. "At least people know who we are, here."

"Undoubtedly you are known," replied the surveyor. "Your money is sufficient recommendation."

All the rest assented.

"True; quite true."

Then Monsieur Charles bade the servant bring some glasses, he himself going into the cellar to fetch up two bottles of wine. With their noses turned towards the frying-pan, in which the larks were browning, they all sniffed the savoury smell, and solemnly drank, rolling the wine round in their mouths.

"Gracious! It don't come from this part of the country, I know! Capital!"

"Another drop. Your health!"

"Yours!"

As they laid down their glasses, Madame Charles, an estimable-looking matron of sixty-two, with snowy frontlets, made her appearance. In her the thick, large-nosed visage of the Fouans was of a pale, pink hue; hers was the calm, sweet, monastic complexion of an aged nun who had led a sequestered life. Clinging to her with awkward shyness followed Elodie, who was spending a two days' holiday at Rognes. Preyed upon by chlorosis, and over-tall for a girl of twelve, her flabby ugliness, and her thin, blanched hair bespoke an impoverished system; and she had been, moreover, kept in such restraint during her course of training for spotless maidenhood that she was half an imbecile.

"Ha! you here!" said Madame Charles, shaking hands with her brother and nephew, slowly and impressively, in token of the distance between them. Then, turning round, and giving no further heed to such fellows, she added:

"Come in, come in, Monsieur Patoir; the animal is here."

Patoir was the Cloyes veterinary--short, stout, full-blooded, and purple; with the aspect of a trooper, and wearing heavy moustaches. He had just driven up in a mud-splashed gig through the pelting rain.

"This poor darling," she went on, taking out of a warm oven a basket in which an old cat lay in the throes of death; "this poor darling was seized yesterday with a shivering fit, and it was then I wrote to you. Ah! he's not young; he is nearly fifteen. We had him ten years at Chartres, but last year my daughter had to get rid of him, and I brought him here because he misbehaved himself in every corner of the shop."

"Shop" was for Elodie's benefit, she being told that her parents kept a confectionery business, amid such a press of work, that they could not receive her there. The country-folk, however, did not even smile, for the expression was current in Rognes, where people said that "even Hourdequin's farm was not so profitable as Monsieur Charles's shop." The men stared at the shrivelled, old, yellow, mangy, miserable cat; the old cat who had purred in all the beds in the Rue aux Juifs, the cat stroked and fondled by the plump hands of five or six generations of women. Long had he been pampered and petted, the spoiled darling of the saloon and retiring-rooms, licking up unconsidered trifles of pomade, drinking the water in the toilet-glasses, a mute, abstracted spectator of what went on, seeing everything with his slender pupils set in gold.

"Monsieur Patoir, pray cure him," concluded Madame Charles.

The veterinary distended his eyelids, and screwed up his nose and mouth, all his bluff, coarse, bull-dog physiognomy being set in motion. And he cried:

"What? You've brought me all this way for *that*! I'll cure him for you! Tie a stone round his neck and chuck him into the water!"

Elodie burst into tears, and Madame Charles became purple in the face with indignation.

"Why, he stinks, this pet of yours! Keeping a horrid thing like that, to give the house cholera! Chuck the beast into the water!"

Nevertheless, the old lady being really angry, he eventually sat down at the table and grumblingly wrote out a prescription.

"Oh! all right, if you enjoy being plague-stricken. So long as I'm paid, what on earth can it matter to me? Look here; get this down his throat, a spoonful at a time, every hour; and here's another mixture for two baths, one this evening, the other to-morrow."

For the last instant or so Monsieur Charles had been restless feeling disconsolate at seeing the larks burn, while the maid, tired of beating up the omelette, stood idly by. So he briskly gave Patoir his six francs 'consulting fee, and urged the others to empty their glasses.

"Anyhow, the breakfast's got to be eaten. Ah! see you again soon. The rain has given over."

They left reluctantly, and the veterinary, getting into his rickety old trap, said once more:

"A cat that isn't worth the cord to chuck him into the water with! Well, that's just how it is, when people are well off!"

But all of them, even Buteau, who had grown pale with sullen envy, shook their heads in protest; and Delhomme the wise declared:

"Say what you will, people who have managed to put by an income of twelve thousand francs can't be either idlers or fools."

The veterinary had whipped up his horse, and the others made for the Aigre, through pathways now converted into torrents. They had got to the seven or eight acres of meadow that were to be divided, when the rain

came down again in a perfect deluge. But this time they stuck obstinately to the task, being desperately hungry, and anxious to get it over. Only one dispute delayed them, with reference to the third lot, which was treeless, whereas a copse happened to be distributed between the other two. However, all now seemed settled and sanctioned. The surveyor promised them he would forward the memoranda to the notary, to enable him to draw up the deed; and it was agreed to defer the drawing of the lots till the following Sunday, when it should take place at ten o'clock, at the father's house.

As they returned into Rognes, Hyacinthe jerked out an oath:

"Wait, wait, you dirty troll, and I'll make it pretty hot for you!"

By the grassy wayside, La Trouille was leisurely driving her geese under the muttering downpour. At the head of the dripping, delighted flock, walked the gander, and when he turned his big yellow beak to the right, all the other big yellow beaks went to the right too. The child, taking fright at her father's words, sped home to see to the dinner, followed by a file of long-necks, which were all stretched out in the rear of the outstretched neck of the gander.

PART I. — CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER IV.

The following Sunday happened to fall just on All Saints' Day, the first of November; and, on the stroke of nine, the Abbé Godard, who was priest of Bazoches-le-Doyen, with subordinate charge of the ancient parish of Rognes, reached the top of the slope which led down to the little bridge over the Aigre. Rognes, more important in days of yore, but now reduced to a population of barely three hundred souls, had had no priest of its own for years, and seemed completely indifferent to the fact, insomuch that the municipal council had lodged the rural constable in the half-ruined parsonage.

So, every Sunday, the Abbé Godard walked the two miles between Bazoches-le-Doyen and Rognes. Being stout and dumpy, with a neck red at the nape and so swollen at the throat as to tilt his head backward, he compelled himself to this exercise for the sake of his health. On this particular Sunday, finding himself late, he was puffing terribly, with his mouth wide open in his apoplectic face, the fat of which half smothered his small snub nose and tiny grey eyes; and, despite the livid, snow-laden sky, and the premature frost which had followed the storms of the week, he was swinging his hat in his hand, having bared the thick tangles of his grizzled, carroty hair.

The road made an abrupt descent, and on the left bank of the Aigre, before reaching the stone bridge, there were only a few houses, a sort of suburb, through which the Abbé rushed tempestuously. He did not even cast a glance, either up or down stream, on the slow, limpid river winding through the meadows amid clumps of willows and poplars. On the right bank began the village proper, a double row of frontages edging the high road, while others climbed at random up the slope; and just past the

bridge one found the municipal offices and the school, an old barn raised a floor higher and white-washed. For an instant the Abbé hesitated, and then craned his neck into the empty entrance-hall of the school. When he turned round, he cast a searching glance into two taverns facing him: the one having a neat shop-front, filled with flasks, and surmounted by a little yellow wooden sign bearing the inscription: *Macqueron, grocer,* in green letters; the other merely having its door decorated with a holly-branch, and displaying in black upon a roughly-whitened wall the words: *Lengaigne. Tobacco.* The priest was making up his mind to enter a steep lane between these two houses, a short ascent leading straight to the front of the church, when he caught sight of an old peasant and stopped.

"Aha! so it's you, Fouan. I'm in a hurry, but I wanted to see you. Tell me, what's doing? It's out of the question for your son, Buteau, to leave Lise in the plight she's in, with her figure unmistakably on the increase. She is one of the 'Handmaidens of the Virgin.' It's a disgrace, a disgrace!"

The old man listened, with an air of deferential politeness.

"Why, your reverence, what do you expect me to do, if Buteau holds out? And, besides, the lad's right, so far as that goes; he can't marry at his age on nothing."

"But there's a baby!"

"To be sure there is. Only the baby's not yet born, and one can never tell. That's just where it is: a baby's not an encouraging thing when you can't afford a shift for its back."

He made these remarks sagely, as became an old man who knew life. Then he added, in the same measured tone:

"Besides, an arrangement may, perhaps, be made. I am dividing my property. The lots will be drawn for presently, after mass. Then, when Buteau gets his share, he will, I hope, see about marrying his cousin."

"Good!" said the priest. "That's enough. Fouan, I rely upon you."

The pealing of a bell curtailed his speech, and he asked, apprehensively:

"That's the second bell, isn't it?"

"No, your reverence, the third."

"Good gracious! that brute of a Bécu at it again! Ringing without waiting for me!"

He cursed, and ran violently up the pathway. At the top he all but had a fit; he was puffing away like a blacksmith's bellows.

The bell rang on, while the ravens it had disturbed flew cawing round the steeple, a fifteenth-century spire, which bore witness to the ancient importance of Rognes. In front of the wide, open door a group of peasants were waiting, among whom the innkeeper, Lengaigne, a freethinker, was smoking his pipe. Farther on, against the churchyard wall, farmer Hourdequin, the mayor--a well-built man, with strongly-marked features--chatted with his assessor, the grocer Macqueron. When the priest had passed by with a salute, they all followed him, excepting Lengaigne, who ostentatiously turned his back, pulling at his pipe.

Inside the church, to the right of the porch, there was a man hanging on to a rope, which he still went on pulling.

"That'll do, Bécu!" said the Abbé Godard, beside himself. "I've told you twenty times to wait for me before you ring the third time."

The rural constable, who was also the bell-ringer, fell to his feet, aghast at his own disobedience. He was a little man of fifty, with the square,

bronzed physiognomy of an old soldier, grey moustache and goatee, and a rigid neck, seeming as if he were continually choked by a tight collar. Already very tipsy, he stood to attention, without venturing to excuse himself.

Moreover, the priest had already made off, and was crossing the nave, with a glance at the seats. There was a scanty attendance. On the left, he as yet saw only Delhomme, present in his capacity of municipal councillor. On the right, the women's side, there were at the most a dozen. He recognised Cœlina Macqueron, shrivelled, sinewy, and overbearing; Flore Lengaigne, buxom, mild, and good-humoured; and Bécu's good woman, a lanky, very dirty, dark brunette. But what put the finishing touch to his wrath was the behaviour of the "Handmaidens of the Virgin" in the front row. Françoise was there between two of her friends--the Macquerons' daughter, Berthe, a handsome brunette, brought up as a lady at Cloyes, and the Lengaignes' daughter, Suzanne, a fair, plain, bold-faced hussy, whom her parents were about to apprentice to a dressmaker at Châteaudun. All the three were indulging in unseemly laughter. And, beside them, poor Lise, plump and cheerful, faced the altar, exposing her scandalous condition to public comment.

Finally, the Abbé Godard was going into the sacristy, when he came across Delphin and Nénesse pushing each other about in play, whereas they were supposed to be getting the wine vases ready for mass. The first-named, Bécu's son, aged eleven, was a sun-burnt youngster, already well-knit, and just leaving school to become a ploughman; while Ernest, Delhomme's eldest, of the same age, fair, slim, and given to loafing, always carried a looking-glass in his pocket.

"Now, then, you mischievous imps," cried the priest, "do you think you're in a cow-shed?"

And turning towards a tall, thin, young man, whose sallow face bristled with a few light hairs, and who was arranging some books on the shelf of a cupboard, he added:

"Really, Monsieur Lequeu, you might keep them quiet when I am out of the way!"

This was the schoolmaster, a peasant's son, whose education had taught him to hate those of his own station. He resorted to violence with his boys, treating them like brute beasts, and cloaked Republican ideas under a scrupulously formal demeanour towards the priest and the mayor. He sang well in the choir, and even looked after the sacred books; but he had refused point-blank to ring the bell, in spite of custom, such a task being unworthy of a free man.

"I am not entrusted with maintaining order in church," he responded, dryly. "At my place, though, wouldn't I just box their ears!"

And as the Abbé, without answering, hastily shuffled into his alb and stole, he went on:

"Low mass, isn't it?"

"Yes, to be sure, and be quick! I've got to be at Bazoches by half-past ten for high mass."

M. Lequeu, who had taken an old missal from the cupboard, closed the latter and went out to place the book on the altar.

"Make haste, make haste," repeated the priest, hurrying Delphin and Nénesse.

And, still perspiring, still panting, with the chalice in his hand, he went back into the church and began the mass, at which the two urchins officiated with sly, quizzical side-looks. The church had but one aisle, with a vaulted, oak-panelled roof, falling to pieces through the obstinate

refusal of the municipal council to allow any funds. The rain dripped through the broken slates of the roofing, deep stains marked the advanced state of decay of the woodwork, and beyond the choir, shut off by a railing, a greenish leakage aloft disfigured the fresco of the apsis, cutting the figure of an Eternal Father, worshipped by angels, atwain.

When the priest turned, open armed, towards the congregation, he calmed down a bit on observing that some people had come in--the mayor, his assessor, some municipal councillors, old Fouan, and Clou the farrier, who played the trombone when there was a musical service. Lequeu had remained, with a stately air, in the front row. Bécu, although drunk, stood bolt upright in the background. On the women's side, especially, the seats had filled up, Fanny, Rose, La Grande, and others had come, so that the "Handmaidens of the Virgin," now poring over their books in an exemplary way, had had to crowd closer together. What particularly flattered the priest was to perceive Monsieur and Madame Charles, with their grand-daughter Elodie; he in a black frock-coat, she in a green silk dress, both of them solemn and splendiferous, setting a good example.

Nevertheless, he hurried over his mass, mangling the Latin and maiming the rites. In his address, not going into the pulpit, but sitting on a chair in the middle of the choir, he made a miserable exhibition of himself, lost the thread of his discourse, and gave up as hopeless the task of ever finding it again. Eloquence was not his strong point; he stumbled over his words, and hum'd and ha'd without ever being able to finish his sentences, which explained why his lordship the Bishop had overlooked him for twenty-five years in his little cure of Bazoches-le-Doyen. The rest of the service was vamped; the bell-ringing, during the elevation of the Host, sounded like electric signals gone mad, and the priest dismissed the congregation with an "*Ite missa est*," as smart as the crack of a whip.

The church was barely empty when the Abbé Godard re-appeared, with his hat hastily put on wrong side foremost. Before the door stood a group of women--Cœlina, Flore, and old mother Bécu--all much annoyed at having been raced along at that pace. It was making very light of them to give them no more on a high holiday.

"I say, your reverence," asked Cœlina, in her shrill voice, as she stopped him: "You've got a spite against us, packing us off just like a bundle of rags."

"Why, it's like this," he replied; "my own people are waiting for me. I can't be both at Bazoches and at Rognes. Get a priest of your own if you want high masses."

This was always a sore point between Rognes and the Abbé, the villagers insisting on special attention, and he strictly confining himself to what he was obliged to do for a village which refused to repair its church, and where, moreover, constant scandals discouraged him. Indicating the "Handmaidens of the Virgin," who were leaving together, he resumed:

"And, besides, is it decent to go through ceremonies with young folks who have no respect whatever for God's commandments?"

"You don't mean that for my girl, I hope?" asked Cœlina, between her teeth.

"Nor for mine, *I'm* sure?" added Flore.

Then he lost all patience and burst out:

"I mean it for those it concerns. It's as plain as a pike-staff. White dresses, indeed. A pretty thing! I never have a procession here without one of them being in the family way. No, no; you'd tire out God Almighty himself."

He left them; and Bécu's wife, who had remained silent, had to make peace between the two mothers, who, in considerable excitement, were heaping reproaches on each other on their daughters' account. But her peace-making was of such a bitterly insinuating character that the quarrel rose higher.

Oh yes! They would see how Berthe would turn out, with her velvet bodices and her piano! And Suzanne, what a first-rate idea to send her to the milliner's at Châteaudun, so that she might go the pace with the best of them!

The Abbé Godard was rushing off, when he came full upon Monsieur and Madame Charles. A broad, beaming smile overspread his face, and his hat performed a sweeping obeisance. Monsieur bowed majestically. Madame made her best curtsey. It was fated that the priest should never get off, for no sooner had he cleared the square than he was brought up by another chance encounter. This was with a tall woman of thirty, who looked quite fifty, with thin hair and a flat, flabby, bran-yellow face. Broken down and worn out by excessive exertion, she was staggering under the weight of a faggot of brushwood.

"Palmyre," he asked, "why didn't you come to mass on All Saints' Day? It's disgraceful."

"No doubt, your reverence," she groaned, "but what's to be done? My brother is cold, and we are freezing at home. So I've been picking up these along the hedges."

"La Grande is still as hard as ever, then?"

"Rather! She'd die before she'd chuck us a crust or a log."

In a dolorous voice she repeated her own and her brother's story: how their grandmother had turned them out of doors, how she had had to take refuge with her brother in an old deserted stable. Poor Hilarion, bandy

and hare-lipped, lacked intelligence; indeed, despite his twenty years of age, he was so idiotic that no one would give him employment. And so she was bringing herself to death's door in working for him, tending him with the impassioned care and untiring tenderness of a mother.

As the Abbé Godard listened to her, his coarse, perspiring face assumed a look of the purest kindness, his little angry eyes grew beautiful with charity, his large mouth took a sweetly sad expression. This formidable scold, always being whirled to and fro by gusts of wrath, was passionately devoted to the wretched, and gave them everything--his money, linen, and clothes. To such a point that in all La Beauce you would not find a priest with a rustier or a more extensively darned cassock.

He fumbled anxiously in his pockets, and slipped a five-franc piece into Palmyre's hand.

"Here! Put it away; I've none for anybody else. I shall have to talk again to La Grande, since she's so wicked."

This time he got clear off. Luckily, as he was puffing and blowing up the slope on the other side of the Aigre, the Bazoches butcher, on his way back, gave him a lift in his cart; and he all but vanished as he gained the level of the plain, jolting along with the dancing silhouette of his three-cornered hat alone standing out against the leaden sky.

Meantime the church square had emptied, and Fouan and Rose had just gone down home, where they found Grosbois already waiting. A little before ten, Delhomme and Hyacinthe arrived in their turn; but Buteau was waited for in vain till twelve.

The eccentric rascal never could be punctual. Doubtless he had stopped on the road somewhere to breakfast. It was proposed to go on without him; then, a vague fear inspired by his hot-headedness led to the decision that the lots should not be drawn for till two o'clock, after breakfast.

Grosbois, accepting a bit of bacon and a glass of wine from the Fouans, finished up one bottle, started on another, and relapsed into his usual state of intoxication.

Two o'clock, and still no Buteau appeared. So Hyacinthe, languishing for debauch, like the rest of the village, that Sunday feast-day, went lounging past Macqueron's. This succeeded: the door was flung open, and Bécu appeared shouting:

"Come along, you rascally baggage, and let me treat you to a glass."

Bécu had got stiffer still, assuming more and more dignity as his intoxication increased. A drunken, old-soldierly fellowship, a secret affection, drew him towards the poacher; but he avoided recognising him when he was on duty with his badge on his arm, being always on the point of catching him *flagrante delicto*, and struggling between duty and inclination. In the tavern, however, when he was tipsy, he stood him treat like a brother.

"Take a hand at piquet, eh?" said he; "and, by God, if the Bedouins bore us, we'll slit their ears for 'em!"

They installed themselves at a table, and played cards boisterously, while quart after quart of wine was served them.

Macqueron, with his fat, moustachioed face, sat huddled up in a corner, twiddling his thumbs. Since he had been gaining money by speculating in the light wines of Montigny, he had fallen into idle ways--hunting, fishing, and playing the gentleman; though he remained filthy and ragged, while his daughter Berthe flounced to and fro in silk. If his wife had heeded him they would have shut up shop, giving up both the grocery and the refreshment business; for he was growing conceited, and had dim ambitions, as yet unrecognised by himself. But she was ferociously eager for gain, and he, although concerning himself personally about nothing, was content to let her go on serving tipple, just

to annoy his neighbour Lengaigne, who kept the tobacco shop, and also dealt in drink. 'Twas a long-standing rivalry, ever smouldering, and ever ready to burst into a blaze.

Yet sometimes they were at peace for weeks together; and, as it happened, Lengaigne then came in with his son Victor, a tall, awkward youth, who was to draw for the conscription the next year. Lengaigne himself, a lanky, frozen-looking man, with a little owl's head set upon broad, brawny shoulders, had remained a peasant and tilled the soil, while his wife weighed out the tobacco and drew the wine. He derived a special importance from the fact that he was barber and hair-cutter to the whole village, an avocation which he had brought back from his regiment, and which he plied either at his shop, amid the eaters and drinkers, or else, if his customers preferred it, at their own homes.

"Well, this beard of yours, is it to be done to-day, my boy?" he asked, from the door.

"Bless me! Right you are, I told you to come," cried Macqueron. "This very moment, if you like."

He reached an old shaving-dish from its hook, and took some soap and warm water, while the other drew from his pocket a razor the size of a cutlass, which he set about sharpening on a strop fixed to the case. A squeaky voice now issued from the adjacent grocery department:

"I say," cried Cœlina, "are you going to mess the tables which people drink at? Well, then, you sha'n't! I won't have hair found in the glasses at *my* house."

This was an attack on the cleanliness of the rival tavern, where customers ate more hair than they drank genuine wine, she said.

"Sell your salt and pepper, and hold your row!" replied Macqueron, annoyed by this public curtain-lecture. Hyacinthe and Bécu tittered.

"An extinguisher for the good lady that!" They ordered of her a fresh quart of wine, which she brought in speechless fury. Then they shuffled the cards, and dashed them violently on to the table, as if to exasperate each other. Trump, trump, and trump!

Lengaigne had already lathered his customer, and was holding him by the nose, when Lequeu, the schoolmaster, pushed the door open.

"Good-day, everybody!"

He stood silently in front of the stove, warming his loins, while young Victor, stationed behind the players, became absorbed in watching their game.

"By the by," resumed Macqueron, taking advantage of a moment when Lengaigne was wiping the lather off the razor on to his shoulder, "just now, before mass, Monsieur Hourdequin spoke to me again about the road. Things must be settled some way or another."

The road in question was the famous one direct from Rognes to Châteaudun, which was to shorten the distance by about two leagues, for vehicles were now forced to pass through Cloyes. Of course, the farm was much interested in this new route, and to carry the point the mayor relied greatly on his assessor--himself interested in a speedy settlement. There was a question of facilitating the approach of vehicles to the church, which could now only be reached by goat-paths, and the projected line of route followed the steep lane that wound its narrow way between the two taverns. Only broaden that, and level down the ascent a bit, and the grocer's grounds--which would be by the road-side, and of easy access--would increase tenfold in value.

"Yes," he continued, "it would seem that the Government, before giving us any help, is waiting for us to vote something. That's so, isn't it? You are in it."

Lengaigne, who was a municipal councillor, but who had not as much as a square inch of garden behind his house, replied:

"I don't care a curse! What the deuce has your road to do with me?"

Then, making an attack on the other cheek, which he rasped as with a nutmeg-grater, he fell foul of the farm. These latter-day gentlefolks were even worse than the nobles of old. Why, they had kept everything to themselves in the distribution of the land, made laws merely for their own advantage, and they lived only on the distress of poor folks. The others listened, constrained, yet inwardly pleased by his temerity, for they had the peasant's immemorial, unconquerable hatred of the landowner.

"It's a good thing we are among ourselves," muttered Macqueron, glancing uneasily at the schoolmaster. "I am on the Government side. So is our deputy, Monsieur de Chédeville, who is, they say, a friend of the Emperor's."

Lengaigne began furiously shaking his razor.

"And that's another pretty rogue of a fellow! Oughtn't a rich man like him, possessing more than two thousand acres of land over there towards Orgères, oughtn't he to make you a present of your road, instead of trying to wring coppers out of the village? The low beast!"

The grocer, alarmed this time, protested. "No, no. He's very straightforward, and not proud. But for him you wouldn't have had your tobacco-counter. What would you say if he took it away from you again?"

Abruptly calming down, Lengaigne went on scraping the other's chin. He had lost his temper and gone too far; his wife was right in saying that his ideas would play him false. At that moment a quarrel was heard to threaten between Bécu and Hyacinthe. The former was in an

ill-tempered, pugnacious state of drunkenness, while the other, on the contrary, grim and overbearing though he was when sober, grew more and more maudlin with every glass of wine, subsiding into the genial meekness of a tipsy apostle. Add to this their radical difference of opinion: the poacher being a Republican--a Red, as people said--who boasted of having made the gentlefolks dance the rigadoon at Cloyes in '48; and the rural constable being a wild Bonapartist and worshipping the Emperor, with whom he pretended to be acquainted.

"I swear it! We had partaken of a red herring salad together, when he said to me: 'Not a word. I am the Emperor.' I knew him at a glance, because of his likeness on the five-franc pieces."

"Maybe! Anyhow, he's a low fellow, who beats his wife and never loved his mother!"

"Hold your tongue, in God's name! or I'll break your jaw for you!"

The quart bottle which Bécu was brandishing had to be taken from him; whilst Hyacinthe, with tearful eyes, sat awaiting the blow in cheerful resignation. Then they resumed their game, like brothers. Trump, trump, and trump!

Macqueron, rendered uneasy by the assumed indifference of the schoolmaster, finished by asking him:

"And you, Monsieur Lequeu, what do *you* say?"

Lequeu, who was warming his slender, sallow hands against the stove-pipe, smiled the bitter smile of a superior person who is compelled by his position to remain silent.

"I say nothing," he answered. "It's none of my business."

Macqueron soused his face in a basin of water, and while spluttering and wiping himself dry, replied:

"Well, mark my words! I mean to do something. If the road's voted, by God, I'll let 'em have my ground for nothing."

This declaration stupefied the audience. Even Hyacinthe and Bécu looked up, despite their intoxication. There was a pause. They gazed at Macqueron as if he had suddenly gone mad; and he, spurred on by the effect produced, yet with his hands trembling at the engagement he was taking, added:

"There'll be something like half an acre. The man who goes back on his word is a scoundrel! I've sworn it!"

Lengaigne departed with his son Victor, exasperated and disgusted by his neighbour's munificence. Land didn't cost him much, the way he robbed people.

Macqueron, despite the cold, now took his gun, and went out to see if he could come across a rabbit he had noticed in his vineyard the day before. In the tavern there only remained Lequeu--who spent his Sundays there without taking anything to drink--and the two gamblers, who were poring over their cards. Hours elapsed, while other peasants came and went.

Towards five o'clock the door was roughly pushed open, and Buteau appeared, followed by Jean. Immediately he saw Hyacinthe, he cried:

"I'd have wagered five francs. Don't you care a damn for anybody? We're waiting for you."

The drunkard, slobbering and merry, replied:

"That's a good 'un! I'm waiting for *you*. You've kept us hanging about since morning, and I think it cool of you to complain."

Buteau had stopped at La Borderie, where Jacqueline, whom, at the age of fifteen, he had knocked head over heels in the hay, had kept him to eat some hot buttered toast with Jean. Farmer Hourdequin having gone to

breakfast at Cloyes after mass, the two sparks had kept it up pretty late, and had only just reached the village in each other's company.

Meantime, Bécu yelled out that he would pay for the five quarts, but that the game was to stand over; while Hyacinthe, reluctantly unfixing himself from his chair, followed his brother, chuckling to himself, with his eyes swimming in mildness.

"Wait there," said Buteau to Jean, "and in half an hour come and pick me up. You know you dine with me at father's."

When the two brothers had entered the sitting-room of the Fouans' house, they found the company assembled in full. The father was standing up with bent head. The mother, seated near the table in the middle, was mechanically knitting. Opposite her was Grosbois, who had eaten and drunk so much as to be in a state of doze, with his eyes half-open; while, farther off, Fanny and Delhomme were waiting patiently on two low chairs. There were some unwonted articles in the smoky room, with its shabby old furniture and its utensils worn by scrubbing: a blank sheet of paper, an ink-bottle, and a pen stood on the table beside the surveyor's hat--a monumental, rusty-black hat with which he had trudged through rain and sunshine for ten years past. Night was falling, and through the narrow window came an expiring, murky glimmer, in which the flat brim and urn-like body of the hat loomed strangely.

Grosbois, always ready for business in spite of his intoxication, woke up and stammered out:

"Now we're right. I told you the deed was ready. I called yesterday at Monsieur Baillehache's, and he showed it me. Only the numbers of the lots are left blank after your names. So we will draw, and the notary need then only write in the lots and you can sign on Saturday at his place."

He roused himself and raised his voice: "Come, I will get the tickets ready."

Fouan's children abruptly approached, making no secret of their distrust. They watched Grosbois, and kept a sharp eye on his slightest movements, as on those of a conjuror capable of juggling away the shares. First he had cut the sheet of paper into three with his drink-sodden, shaking fingers; now he was writing the figures 1, 2, 3, and enormous, strongly-marked figures they were. The others watched his pen over his shoulders, the parents themselves nodding their satisfaction on seeing the impossibility of deception. The tickets were slowly folded up and thrown into the hat. A solemn stillness reigned.

At the expiration of two long minutes Grosbois exclaimed:

"Well, you must make up your minds. Who begins?"

No one stirred. The night deepened, and the hat seemed to grow larger in the gloom.

"By order of seniority, eh?" proposed the surveyor. "You begin, Hyacinthe, you're the eldest."

Hyacinthe, the amiable, came forward, but he lost his balance, and all but fell sprawling. He had violently shoved his fist into the hat as though with the purpose of extracting a mass of rock from it. When he had secured one of the tickets, he had to go to the window to see.

"Two!" cried he, evidently finding something exceedingly humorous in the figure, for he choked with laughter.

"Your turn, Fanny," now called Grosbois.

When Fanny had got her hand to the bottom, she did not hurry. She fumbled about, stirred the papers round, and seemed to weigh them one after the other.

"Picking and choosing's not allowed," said Buteau, savagely. He was suffocating with passion, and had turned pale on ascertaining the number drawn by his brother.

"Eh? Why not?" replied Fanny. "I'm not looking; surely I may feel."

"Get on," murmured the father; "there's nothing to choose between 'em; one's as heavy as the other."

At last she made up her mind, and ran to the window.

"One!"

"Well, then, Buteau has number three," resumed Fouan. "Draw it, my boy."

In the growing darkness they had not seen how the face of the young man changed. He burst out in wrath:

"Never, never!"

"What?"

"If you think I'm going to assent to this, you're wrong! The third lot, eh? The bad one! I told you over and over again that I wanted a different division. But you pooh-pooh'd me! Besides, can't I see through your trickery? Oughtn't the youngest to have drawn first? No, I won't draw, since there's been cheating!"

The parents gazed at his wild movements as he gesticulated and stamped about.

"My poor boy, you're going crazy," said Rose.

"Oh, yes, mamma, I know well enough you never liked me. You'd strip the skin off my back to give it to my brother. You'd all of you eat me alive."

Fouan sternly interrupted him. "Enough of this folly! Will you draw?"

"It'll have to be done all over again."

At this there was a general protest. Hyacinthe and Fanny clutched their papers as if a forcible attempt were being made upon them. Delhomme declared that the drawing had been fair, and Grosbois, much aggrieved, threatened to leave if his honesty were called in question.

"Then papa shall add a thousand francs to my share out of his hoard," said Buteau.

The old man, taken aback for an instant, stammered. Then he drew himself up and advanced threateningly.

"What's that you say? So you're anxious to get me assassinated, you brute? Raze the house to the ground and you won't find a copper. Take that paper, or, by God, you shall have nothing at all!"

Buteau, with a hardened and obstinate brow, did not quail before his father's raised fist.

"No!"

An awkward silence again fell. The huge hat was now an encumbrance and obstruction, with this solitary scrap of paper, which nobody would touch, inside it. The surveyor, to cut things short, advised the old man to draw it out himself. He did so, gravely, and went to the light to read it, as if the number were still unknown.

"Three! You've the third lot, d'ye hear? The deed is ready, and it's quite certain that Monsieur Baillehache won't alter it, for once done can't be undone. As you're sleeping here, I give you the night to think it over in. So that's done with. Let's say no more about it."

Buteau, wrapped in shadow, made no reply. The others noisily assented, while the mother at last made up her mind to light a candle so as to lay the cloth.

At that moment Jean, who was coming to meet his comrade, espied two intertwined shadows watching, from the dark deserted road, the progress of events at the Fouans. Feathery snow-flakes were beginning to flutter across the slate-grey sky.

"Oh, Monsieur Jean," said a soft voice, "how you frightened us!"

Then he recognised Françoise's long face and thick lips. She was nestling against her sister Lise, and had one arm round her waist, while she leant her head on her shoulder. The two sisters adored each other, and were always seen about like this, hanging on each other's neck. Lise taller, and of pleasant aspect, despite her large features and the incipient development of her whole plump person, bore her misfortune with equanimity.

"You were spying, eh?" Jean inquired gaily.

"Why, what's going on in there has an interest for me," replied Lise, freely and openly. "It's a point whether it will make Buteau come to a decision."

Françoise, with her other arm, had now caressingly encircled her sister's swollen figure.

"What a shame, the brute! When he's got some land, p'raps he'll be looking out for some one better off."

But Jean gave them hope. The drawing of the lots must have come to an end, and the rest was matter of arrangement. When he told them he was to sup at the old folks' house, Françoise added, as she turned away: "Well, we shall see you presently; we're going to the evening meeting."

He watched them disappear in the darkness. The snow was thickening and embroidering their mingled dresses with fine white down.

PART I. — CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER V.

At seven o'clock, after dinner, the Fouans, Buteau, and Jean went to share the cow-house with the two cows which Rose had decided to sell. The animals, fastened up at the farther end, near the trough, kept the closed shed warm with the powerful exhalation from their bodies and their litter; whereas the kitchen, containing only three meagre, smouldering logs, left there after the cooking, was already chilled by the early November frost. So, in the winter, the evening meeting was held in the cow-house, on the trampled earth, snugly and warmly, with no other preparation than carrying in a small round table and a dozen old chairs. Each neighbour brought a candle in rotation. Tall shadows flickered over the bare, dust-begrimed walls, reaching up to the cobwebs on the beams; and from the rear came the warm breath of the cattle, that lay and chewed the cud.

La Grande was the first to arrive, with a piece of knitting. She never brought a candle, presuming on her great age, and she was held in such awe that her brother dared not remind her of the custom. She forthwith took the best place, drew the candlestick towards her, and kept it to herself, on the score of her failing eyes. She had rested the stick, which never left her, against her chair. Glittering flakes of snow were melting on the bristles which stuck up over her fleshless, bird-like head.

"It's coming down?" asked Rose.

"It is," she replied in her curt tones. And setting straightway to work with her knitting, she compressed her thin lips, never prodigal of speech, and cast a searching glance at Jean and Buteau.

The others made their appearance behind her. First Fanny, her son, Nénesse--Delhomme never came to the meetings--then, almost

immediately, Lise and Françoise, who laughingly shook off the snow which covered them. The sight of Buteau made the former faintly blush. He looked at her unmoved.

"Been all right, Lise, since we last met?"

"Pretty well, thanks."

"Glad to hear it."

Palmyre, meanwhile, had stolen in through the half-open door, and she was shrinkingly placing herself as far as possible from her grandmother, the redoubtable La Grande, when a tumult outside made her start up. Furious stammerings, tears, laughter, and yells were heard.

"Those rascally children are at him again!" cried she.

She had made a spring forward, and opened the door again. With a bold rush, and growling like a lioness, she rescued her brother Hilarion from the mischievous clutches of La Trouille, Delphin, and Nénesse. The last-named had just joined the other two, who were hanging round the cripple and yelling. Hilarion, breathless and scared, shambled in on his twisted legs. His hare's lip made him dribble at the mouth. He stuttered unintelligibly, was decrepit-looking for his age, and brutishly hideous like the cretin that he was.

He was in a very spiteful mood, quite furious at not being able to catch and clout the urchins who were teasing him. Once more he complained that he had been pelted with a volley of snow-balls.

"Oh! what a story!" said La Trouille, with an air of surpassing innocence. "He's bitten my thumb; look!"

At this Hilarion all but choked in his struggle to get his words out; while Palmyre soothed him, and, wiping his face with her handkerchief, called him her darling boy.

"There, that'll do," said Fouan at length. "You ought to be pretty well able to prevent his catching you. Sit him down, anyhow, and let him keep quiet. Silence, you brute, or you'll be sent back home with a flea in your ear."

As the cripple continued to stutter, with the intention of putting himself in the right, La Grande, with her eyes flashing fire, seized her stick and brought it down on the table so sharply as to make every one jump. Palmyre and Hilarion collapsed in affright and stirred no more.

Then the evening began. The women, gathered round the single candle, knitted, spun, or did needlework, that they never so much as looked at. The men, stolid and taciturn, smoked in the rear, while the children pushed and pinched each other in a corner, amid suppressed giggling.

Sometimes they told stories: that of the Black Pig which guarded a treasure with a red key in its mouth; or that of the Orleans beast, which had a man's face and bat's wings, with hair down to the ground, two horns, and two tails (one to lay hold with and the other to kill with), which monster had devoured a Rouen traveller, of whom nothing remained but his hat and boots.

At other times they told tales about the wolves which, for centuries, had devastated La Beauce. In days of old, when La Beauce, now stripped and bare, had a few clumps of trees left out of its primeval forests, countless packs of wolves, urged by hunger, issued forth in winter time to prey upon the flocks. Women and children were devoured, and the old country-folk remembered how, in heavy falls of snow, the wolves would enter the towns. At Cloyes, they would be heard howling in the Place Saint-Georges; at Rognes, they would sniff round the imperfectly closed doors of the cow-houses and sheep-pens. Then came a succession of hackneyed anecdotes: of the miller surprised by five large wolves, and putting them to flight by lighting a match; of the little girl chased for two leagues by a she-wolf, and eaten up just at her own door, where she

tripped and fell; legends upon legends of wer-wolves, men changed to animals, who leaped upon the necks of belated travellers, and ran them to death.

But what froze the blood of the girls gathered round the slim candle, what made them take wildly to flight and scan the darkness apprehensively as they left the house, was the villany of the *Chauffeurs*,[4] the notorious Orgères band of sixty years ago, at the thought of which the whole country-side still trembled.

There were hundreds of them, tramps, beggars, deserters, spurious pedlars--men, women, and children, all living by robbery, murder, and debauchery. They were the descendants of the old armed and disciplined troops of brigands, and, taking advantage of the revolutionary disturbances, they laid formal siege to lonely houses, into which they burst like bomb-shells, breaking the doors in with battering-rams. When night came on, they issued forth like wolves from the forest of Dourdan and the copses of La Conie, the wooded lairs wherein they lurked; and, with the darkening shadows, terror fell upon the farmers of La Beauce, from Etampes to Châteaudun, and from Chartres to Orleans.

Of their many legendary atrocities, the one which was most popular at Rognes was the pillage of the Millouard farm, only a few leagues distant, in the Canton of Orgères. Beau-François, their noted chief, the successor of Fleur d'Epine, had with him that night his lieutenant, Rouge d'Auneau, Grand-Dragon, Breton-le-cul-sec, Lonjumeau, Sans-Pouce, and fifty others, all with blackened faces. First, they bayonetted into the cellar the farm people, the servants, the waggoners, and the shepherd. Then they "warmed" old Fousset, the farmer, whom they had kept by himself. Having stretched his feet over the glowing coals of the fireplace, they set his beard and all the hair on his body on fire with burning straw. Then they reverted to his feet, which they notched with the point of a knife for the flames to penetrate the better. At length the old man, having decided

to reveal where his money was, they let him go and carried off considerable booty. Fousset, who had strength enough to drag himself to a neighbouring house, did not die till later on. The tale invariably concluded with the trial and execution of the Chauffeurs at Chartres, after they had been betrayed by Borgne-le-Jouy. Eighteen long months were devoted to preparing the case against the prisoners, and in the meanwhile sixty-four of the latter died in prison of a plague brought on by their filthy habits. Still the trial before the Assize Court dealt with a hundred and fifteen accused, thirty-three of whom were contumacious; seven thousand eight hundred questions were submitted to the jury, and finally there were twenty-three condemnations to death. On the night after the execution, the headsmen of Chartres and Dreux had a fight over the criminals' clothes, beneath the scaffold still red with blood.

Fouan, in alluding to a murder Janville way, thus once more recounted the abominations done at the Millouard farm; and he had got as far as the song of complaint composed in prison by Rouge d'Auneau, when the women were alarmed by strange noises in the road--footsteps, struggles, and oaths. They grew pale, and listened in terrified expectation of seeing a gang of blackened men come in like bomb-shells. Buteau, however, bravely went and opened the door.

"Who goes there?"

He at last perceived Bécu and Hyacinthe, who, at the conclusion of a quarrel with Macqueron, had just left the tavern, carrying with them the cards and a candle to finish their game elsewhere. They were so tipsy, and the company had been so frightened, that every one began to laugh.

"Come in, anyhow, and mind you behave yourself," said Rose, smiling at her tall vagabond son. "Your children are here, you can take them back with you."

Hyacinthe and Bécu sat down on the ground near the cows, placed the candle between them, and went on with their game. "Trump, trump, and trump!" The conversation had changed; the others were now talking of the youths in the neighbourhood who had to draw in February for the conscription--Victor Lengaigne and two others. The women had grown grave, and spoke slowly and sadly.

"It's no joke," resumed Rose: "no joke for any one."

"War, war!" murmured Fouan. "Oh, the harm it does! It's simply destruction to culture. When the youths leave us, our best hands go, as is easily seen when work-time comes. And when they come back, why, they're altered, and their heart is no longer with the plough. Cholera even is better than war!"

Fanny left off knitting.

"I won't have Nénesse go," she declared. "Monsieur Baillehache explained a sort of lottery dodge to us. Several people club together, each of them lodging in his hands a sum of money, and those who have unlucky numbers are bought off."

"People must be well off to do that," said La Grande, drily.

Bécu had caught a stray word or so between two tricks.

"War! Heart alive!" said he. "There's nothing like it for making *men*! When you've not been in it, you can't know. There's nothing like taking shot and steel as they come! How about yonder, among the blackamoors?"

He winked his left eye, while Hyacinthe simpered knowingly. They had both served in Algeria, the rural constable in the early days of the conquest, the other more recently, at the time of the late revolts. Accordingly, in spite of the difference in period, they had some reminiscences in common; of Bedouins' ears cut off and strung into

chaplets; of oily-skinned Bedouin women seized behind hedges and corked up in every orifice. Hyacinthe, in particular, had a tale, which set the bellies of the peasants shaking with tempestuous laughter, a tale of a big lemon-coloured cow of a woman whom they had set a-running quite naked, with a pipe stuck in her.

"Zounds!" resumed Bécu, addressing Fanny: "You want Nénesse to grow up a girl, then? However, Delphin shall wear regimentals in no time, I promise you!"

The children had left off playing, and Delphin raised his hard bullet-like head, already even redolent of the soil.

"Sha'n't!" he said, bluntly and stubbornly.

"Hallo!" rejoined his father, "what's that? I shall have to teach you what bravery is, my traitor Frenchman."

"I won't go away; I'll stop at home."

The rural constable raised his hand, but was checked by Buteau.

"Let the child alone! He's right. Is he wanted? There are others. Why on earth should we be supposed to come into this world just to leave home and go and get our heads broken, on account of a lot of nonsense we don't care a copper about? I've never left the neighbourhood, and I'm none the worse for it."

He had, in fact, drawn a lucky number, and was a regular stay-at-home, attached to the land, and only acquainted with Orleans and Chartres, never having seen an inch beyond the flat horizon of La Beauce. He seemed to plume himself on having thus grown in his own soil, with the limited, lush energy of a tree. He had risen to his feet and the women were gazing at him.

"When they come back from serving their term, they're all so thin!" ventured Lise, in an undertone.

"And you, did you go far, corporal?" asked old Rose.

Jean was smoking in silence, like a contemplative young man who preferred listening. He slowly took his pipe out of his mouth.

"Yes, pretty far, one might say. But not to the Crimea. I was about to start when Sebastopol was taken. Later on, though, I was in Italy."

"And what's Italy like?"

The question seemed to perplex him. He hesitated, and ransacked his memory.

"Why, Italy's like home. There's farming there, and woods with rivers. It's the same everywhere."

"Then you fought?"

"Fought? Rather."

He had again begun to pull at his pipe, and did not hurry himself. Françoise, who had looked up, remained with her mouth half open, expecting a story. And, indeed, all of them were interested; La Grande herself thumped the table afresh to silence Hilarion, who was grunting, La Trouille having devised a little diversion by slyly sticking a pin into his arm.

"At Solferino 'twas warm work; yet, gracious! how it rained! I hadn't a dry thread on me; the water was running down my back and trickling into my shoes. Wet through we were, and no mistake!"

Everybody still waited, but he said no more about the battle. That was all he had seen of it. After a minute's silence, however, he resumed in his matter-of-course way:

"Goodness me! War isn't so bad as people think. The lot falls upon one, doesn't it? and one must do one's duty. I left the service because I liked other things better. But it may have its advantages for those who are sick of their trade, and who feel furious when the foe comes and tramples on us in France."

"It's a beastly thing, all the same," wound up old Fouan. "Each man ought to defend his own homestead, and nothing more."

A fresh silence fell. It was very warm, with a damp animal warmth, accentuated by the strong smell of the litter. One of the two cows got up and relieved herself, and the dung splashed down softly and rhythmically. From the gloom of the rafters came the melancholy chirp of a cricket, and along the walls the lissom fingers of the women, plying their knitting-needles, played in shadow to and fro, looking amid the darkness like gigantic spiders.

Palmyre, taking the snuffers to trim the candle with, snuffed it so low as to extinguish it. A tumult followed. The girls laughed, the children stuck their pin into poor Hilarion's buttocks; and the meeting would have been quite upset if the candle brought by Hyacinthe and Bécu, who were nodding over their cards, had not served to re-kindle the other one, despite its long wick, which had swollen at the top into a kind of red mushroom. Conscience-stricken at her awkwardness, Palmyre quaked like a naughty child in terror of the lash.

"Come," said Fouan, "who will read us a bit of this, to finish the evening? Corporal, *you* ought to read print very well, now!"

He had been to fetch a greasy little book, one of the books of Bonapartist propaganda with which the Empire had flooded the country-side. It had come out of a pedlar's pack, and was a violent onslaught upon the old monarchy: a dramatised history of the peasant before and since the

Revolution, with the lament-like title of "The Misfortune and Triumph of Jacques Bonhomme."

Jean had taken the book, and instantly, without waiting to be pressed, he began to read in a colourless, stumbling, schoolboy tone, heedless of punctuation. They listened to him devoutly.

He started with the free Gaul reduced to slavery by the Romans, and then vanquished by the Franks, who transformed slaves into serfs, by establishing the feudal system. Then began the protracted martyrdom of Jacques Bonhomme, tiller of the soil, slave-driven and worked to death, century after century. Many towns-people revolted, founding corporations and acquiring the right of citizenship, but the enthralled peasantry, isolated and dispossessed of everything, only managed to free themselves at a later period, buying their manhood and their liberty for money. And what a delusive liberty it was! They were overwhelmed by exorbitant and ruinous taxes; their rights of ownership were ceaselessly called into question, and the soil was burdened with so many charges as to leave one merely flints to feed upon! Next began the terrible enumeration of the impositions that lay so heavy on the poor peasant No one could draw up a full and accurate list, the taxes poured in so abundantly from king, bishop, and baron all at once. Three beasts of prey tore at the same carcase. The king had the poll-tax and tallage, the bishop the tithes, the baron laid a tax on everything, and turned everything into gold. The peasant had nothing left him to call his own--neither earth, water, fire, nor even the air he breathed. He paid for this, and he paid for that; paid to live, paid to die; paid for his contracts, flocks, business, and pleasure. Paid for having the rain-water from the ditches diverted on to his grounds; paid for the highway dust kicked up by his sheep in the drought of summer. Who ever could not pay was obliged to give his body and his time, taxable and taskable without limit; forced to till the soil, to garner and reap, to trim the vines, clean out the château moat, make and repair the roads. Then there were the dues in kind; and the manor mill,

oven, and wine-press, where he was forced to leave a quarter of his crop; and the imposition of watch and ward, which survived in money even after the demolition of the feudal keeps; and the imposition of shelter and purveyance, which, whenever the king or baron passed by, sacked the cottages, dragged mattresses and coverlets from beds, and drove the owner out of his house--lucky not to have his doors and windows torn from their fastenings if he were at all dilatory in turning out. But the most execrated imposition, the remembrance of which still rankled in the hamlets, was the salt-tax; with public store-houses for salt, and every family rated at a certain quantity, which they were, willy-nilly, compelled to purchase of the king; and the system of collection was so iniquitous and despotic that it roused France to rebellion and drowned her in blood.

"My father," interrupted Fouan, "saw the time when salt was ninepence a pound. Truly, times were hard."

Hyacinthe sniggered in his sleeve, and endeavoured to lay stress upon those indelicate rights to which the little book merely made a modest allusion.

"And how about the bridal rights, eh? My word! The baron popped his legs into the bride's bed on the wedding night; and----"

They silenced him. The girls, even Lise, notwithstanding her rotundity of form, had reddened deeply; while La Trouille and the two brats, with their eyes turned downwards, were stuffing their fists into their mouths to restrain their laughter. Hilarion drank in every word open-mouthed, as if he understood it all.

Jean went on. He had now got to the administration of justice, the three-fold justice of king, bishop, and lord, which racked the poor folk toiling on the glebe. There was common law, there was statute law, and, above all, there was the arbitrary right of might. No safeguard, no appeal

against the all-powerful sword. Even in the ages which followed, when equity put in a protest, judgeships were bought, and justice was sold. Worse still was the recruiting system: a blood-tax which, for a long time, was only levied upon the inferior rural classes. They fled into the woods, but were driven thence in chains, with musket-stocks, and enrolled like galley-slaves. Promotion was denied them. A younger son, nobly born, dealt in regiments as in goods he had paid for; sold the smaller posts to the highest bidder, and drove the rest of his human cattle to the shambles. Lastly came the hunting rights, rights of dove-cot and warren, which even now, although abolished, have left a fierce resentment in the peasant's heart. The chase was an hereditary madness: an old feudal prerogative authorising the lord to hunt here and everywhere, and punishing with death the vassal audacious enough to hunt over his own ground. It was the caging under the open sky of the free beast and bird for the pleasure of one man. It was the grouping of fields into hunting-captaincies ravaged by game, without it being lawful for the peasant to bring down so much as a sparrow.

"That's intelligible," muttered Bécu, who would have fired at a poacher as soon as at a rabbit.

Hyacinthe had pricked up his ears, now that the hunting question was dealt with, and he slily whistled, as if to say that game belonged to those who knew how to kill it.

"Ah! dear me!" said Rose, simply, fetching a deep sigh.

They all felt the need of similar relief. The reading was gradually bearing heavy upon them, with the oppressive weight of a ghost story. Nor did they always understand, which doubled their uneasiness. Things having gone on like that in olden times, might easily become the same again.

"Go on, poor Jacques Bonhomme," read Jean in his drawling, schoolboy way: "shedding your sweat and blood; you are not yet through your troubles."

And the peasant's Calvary was set forth. Everything was a source of suffering to him: mankind, the elements, his own self. Under the feudal system, when the nobles sallied forth to seek their prey, it was he who was hunted, tracked down, and made booty of. Every private war between lord and lord ruined if it did not slay him; his hut was burnt, his field laid waste. Later on came the "great companies,"--the worst of all the scourges that ever made our country districts desolate,--bands of adventurers at the beck and call of any one who would pay them; now for France, now against her, marking their passage with fire and sword, and leaving only bare earth behind them. The towns, thanks to their walls, might hold out, but the villages were swept away in that murderous madness which pervaded the centuries from end to end. There were centuries steeped in blood--centuries during which our unfortified districts never ceased to moan with pain: women were violated, children crushed to death, men hanged. Then, when war gave over, the king's tax collectors made provision for the continued torture of the poor; for the number and the magnitude of the taxes were nothing in comparison to the wonderful and fearful method of their collection. Villain-tax and salt-tax were farmed out; injustice presided over the distribution of all the impositions; armed troops extorted payment of treasury-dues in the same way as one might raise a contribution of war. Insomuch that scarcely any of the money ever reached the State coffers, being appropriated on its way, and dwindling more and more at every fresh pair of pilfering hands it passed through. Then famine interposed. The tyrannical folly of the law, causing the stagnation of commerce and preventing the free sale of grain, produced terrible dearths every ten years or so, whenever the season was too hot or the rains were too prolonged,--dearths which seemed chastisements of Heaven. A storm flushing the rivers, a dry

spring, the smallest cloud, the slightest sunbeam that marred the crops laid thousands of human beings low, involving agonies of starvation, a sudden and general rise of prices, and periods of awful anguish, during which men browsed like brute beasts on the grass of the ditches. After war and famine, fatal epidemics set in, and killed those whom the sword and hunger had spared. Corruption ever sprang forth anew from ignorance and uncleanliness: there was the great Black Death, whose gigantic spectre looms above the old time, mowing down with its sickle the wan, melancholy dwellers in the country districts.

Then his burden being greater than he could bear, Jacques Bonhomme revolted. Behind him lay centuries of terrified submission, his shoulders inured to the last, his spirit so crushed that he felt not his own degradation. It was possible to beat and beat him; to famish him, and rob him of all he had, without rousing him from the timid stupor into which he had sunk, pondering confused thoughts that signified nothing even to himself. But some last injustice, some last anguish, made him suddenly spring at his master's throat like a maddened, over-beaten domestic animal. So for ever, from century to century, the same exasperation bursts forth, and the Jacquerie arms the tillers of the soil with pitchfork and bill-hook, as soon as they have nothing left them but to die. There were the Christian "Bagandes" of Gaul, the "Pastoureaux" of the Crusades, and in later times the "Croquants" and "Nu-pieds" who fell upon the nobles and royal soldiers. After four hundred years the cry of the Jacques, in their pain and wrath, was again to sweep over the desolate fields, and make the masters quake in their castle strongholds. What if they once more became angry, they who had numbers on their side? What if they claimed their share of worldly joy? And the vision of old sweeps by: sturdy, half-clad, tattered hordes, mad with brutality and lust, spreading ruin and destruction, as they too had been ruined and destroyed, and violating in their turn the wives of others.

"Calm thyself, dweller in the fields," pursued Jean, in his placid, sedulous style, "for thy hour of triumph will soon strike from the clock of history."

Buteau had brusquely shrugged his shoulders. A pretty piece of work, revolting. To be laid hold of by gendarmes. Oh, yes! All the others, moreover, since the little book had begun to relate their forefathers' risings, had listened with downcast eyes, not venturing on the least gesture, but full of mistrust although at home. These were things no one ought to talk about openly; no one need know what they thought on the subject. Hyacinthe, having tried to interrupt, announcing that he would shortly be at the throats of more than one, Bécu violently declared that all Republicans were pigs, and Fouan had to silence them, solemnly, with the subdued gravity of an old man who knows a thing or two but won't speak. La Grande, while the other women seemed to become more interested than ever in their knitting, observed: "What one has one keeps"--a remark which did not appear to have any connection with what was being read. Françoise alone, her work dropping on her lap, gazed at Corporal, amazed at his reading so long without making a mistake.

"Ah, dear me! Dear me!" repeated Rose, sighing more deeply.

The style of the book changed. It became lyrical, and magniloquently celebrated the Revolution. 'Twas then, in the apotheosis of '89, that Jacques Bonhomme triumphed. After the taking of the Bastille, while the peasants burned the châteaux, the night of the 4th of August legalised the conquests of centuries by recognising the freedom of man and the equality of civil rights. "In one night, the ploughman had become the equal of the lord who, by virtue of his parchments, had drunk the peasant's sweat and devoured the fruits of his toilsome nights." Abolition of serfdom, of all the privileges of the nobles, of the ecclesiastical and manorial courts of justice; the re-purchase of vested rights, the equalisation of taxation, the admission of every citizen to all civil or military offices--so the list went on. The evils of the old life seemed to

vanish one by one. It was the hosanna of a new golden age dawning for the ploughman, who was made the subject of a whole pageful of eulogy, and hailed as king and foster-father of the world. He only was of importance: down on your knees before his holy plough! The horrors of '93 were stigmatised in burning words, and the book wound up with a high-flown panegyric on Napoleon, the child of the Revolution, who had succeeded in "extricating it from the grooves of License, to ensure the happiness of the rural districts."

"That's true!" from Bécu, as Jean turned to the last page.

"Yes, that's true," said old Fouan. "We had fine times of it, I can tell you, when I was young. I saw Napoleon once, at Chartres. I was twenty. We were free; we had land; it was first-rate! I mind how my father once said that he sowed coppers and reaped crowns. Then we had Louis XVIII., Charles X., and Louis Philippe. Things still went on; we had enough to eat, and couldn't complain. And now we've got Napoleon III., and things weren't so bad, either, up to last year. Only----"

He meant to break off, but the words forced their way.

"Only, what the odds does it make to Rose and me, their liberty and their equality? Are we any the fatter for it, after toiling and moiling for fifty years?"

Then, in a few slow and hesitating words, he unwittingly summed up the whole of this tale. The soil so long tilled for the lord's benefit by the cudgelled and naked slave, whose skin was not even his own--the soil, fertilised by his efforts, passionately loved and desired during close constant intimacy, like another man's wife, whom one tends, embraces, but must not possess--the soil, after centuries of such longing torment, at length taken full possession of, becoming one's own, a love-dalliance and life-spring. This desire of ages, this hope constantly delayed, explained the peasant's love for his field, his passion for land, for the utmost

quantity possible, for the loamy soil, palpable to the touch, and poiseable in the palm of the hand. And yet the indifference and ingratitude of this earth! Worship it as you would, it never warmed nor produced one grain the more. Too much rain rotted the seeds, hail ravaged the green wheat, a thunderstorm laid the stalks low, two months' drought shrivelled the ears: and what with devouring insects, nipping frosts, cattle plagues, and leprosies of noxious weeds, everything conspired to bring ruin; the struggle was a daily one, every mistake a danger, one's faculties were ever at full stretch. Surely he had never hung back; had worked body and soul, and had maddened to find his toil insufficient. He had withered his sinews, had withheld nothing of himself from this soil that, after having barely fed him, left him wretched, unsated, ashamed of his senile impotence, to seek the arms of another, without so much as a pitying thought for those poor bones of his that would soon be earth.

"And that's where it is!" went on the old fellow. "In youth we're always hard at it; and, having contrived with great difficulty to make both ends meet, we find ourselves old, and have to quit. Isn't it so, Rose?"

The mother bent her trembling head. Great heaven, yes! She, too, had worked harder than a man, for certain. Rising before the rest of the household, getting the meals, sweeping, scouring, wearing herself out over a thousand duties--the cows, the pigs, the baking--and always the last in bed. She must have had a strong constitution not to have broken down altogether, and her only reward was to have lived her life. One got nothing but wrinkles, and one was lucky if, after pinching and screwing, after going to bed in the dark and putting up with bread and water, one saved just enough to keep the wolf from the door in one's old age.

"All the same," resumed Fouan, "we mustn't complain. I've heard tell there are districts where the land gives a deal more trouble. Thus, in Le Perche, there's nought but flintstones. In La Beauce, the ground is still soft, and only wants good, steady work. But it's spoiling. It's certainly

less fertile than formerly, and fields that once gave crops of seven quarters now yield little more than five. And for a year past the prices have been going down. They say that corn is coming in from savage parts. There's some mischief brewing--a crisis, as they say. Is misfortune ever at an end? This universal suffrage, now, it don't bring meat to the pot, does it? The land tax weighs us down, they keep on taking our children away to fight. It's not a bit of use having revolutions, it's six of one and half a dozen of the other, and a peasant always remains a peasant."

The methodical Jean had been waiting to finish his reading. Silence being re-established, he went on softly:

"Happy husbandman, forsake not the village for the town; where everything--milk, meat, vegetables--must be bought, and where you would always spend more than necessary, because of the opportunities offered. Have you not fresh air and sunshine, healthy toil, and honest joys in the village? Rural life is peerless; far from gilded pomp, you enjoy true happiness; in proof thereof, do not the town artisans go for jaunts into the country, just as the tradesman's one dream is to seek retirement near you, culling flowers, eating fruit off the tree, and gambolling on the sward. Be sure, Jacques Bonhomme, that money is but a chimera. If your bosom be at peace, your fortune is made."

Jean's voice faltered. He was fain to repress his emotion, this big, tender-hearted, town-bred fellow, whose soul was touched by these pictures of rustic bliss. The others remained gloomy; the women bending over their needles, the men stolid and moody. Was the book making game of them? Money was the only desirable thing, and they were starving in penury. As the young fellow found this silence--heavy with suffering and spleen--rather oppressive, he ventured on a sage reflection:

"Anyhow, things would, perhaps, be better with education. People were wretched in former times because they knew nothing. Now-a-days we

know a little, and times are certainly easier. So the thing is to be taught thoroughly, and have schools of agriculture."

Fouan, an old fogey averse to new-fangled ways, interrupted him violently:

"Come, hang you and your science! The more a man knows the worse he gets on. I tell you the land gave a better yield fifty years ago! It gets angry at being worried so, and never gives more than it chooses, the beggar! Hasn't Monsieur Hourdequin run through his own weight in silver, pottering about with new inventions? No, no; a peasant is bound to remain a peasant, that's flat!"

Ten o'clock was striking, and after this conclusive remark, as weighty as the chop of an axe, Rose got up to fetch a pot of chestnuts, which she had left in the hot ashes in the kitchen. This was the usual treat on All Hallow E'en. She even brought two quarts of white wine to make the festival complete. Thenceforward stories were forgotten, the fun grew fast and furious, and nails and teeth alike were busy extracting the steaming boiled chestnuts from their husks.

La Grande at once pocketed her share, as she was slower at eating than the others. Bécu and Hyacinthe gulped theirs down, skin and all, pitching them into their mouths from a distance; while Palmyre, grown bold, cleaned hers with extreme care, and stuffed Hilarion with them, as if he were a fowl. As for the children, they "made pudding." La Trouille dug one tooth into the chestnut, and then squeezed it so as to cause a thin stream to spurt out, which Delphin and Nénesse licked up. This being very nice, Lise and Françoise decided to do the same. Then the candle was snuffed for the last time, and glasses were clinked to the good fellowship of all present. The heat had increased; a ruddy vapour rose from the liquid manure; the cricket chirped more loudly in the great shifting shadows of the rafters; and, so that the cows might join in the

festivities, they were given some husks, which they munched with a subdued and measured noise.

Finally, at half-past ten, the party broke up. First of all Fanny led Nénesse away. Then Hyacinthe and Bécu went out quarrelling, the outer cold bringing on a relapse of intoxication; and La Trouille and Delphin were soon heard sustaining their respective parents, prodding them and restoring them to the right path, as if they were restive animals forgetful of the way to the stables. Every time the door swung to, an icy gust blew in from the snow-white road. La Grande did not hurry at all, as she twisted her handkerchief round her neck and pulled on her mittens. Not a glance did she vouchsafe towards Palmyre and Hilarion, who slunk timidly away, shivering in their rags; but, eventually betaking herself back to her home, which was adjacent, she slammed the door violently after her. There only remained Françoise and Lise.

"I say, Corporal," asked Fouan, "you'll see them on their way as you go back to the farm, won't you? It's on your way."

Jean nodded assent, while the two girls were wrapping their shawls round their heads.

Buteau had got up and was pacing to and fro in the cow-house, grim, restless, and pre-occupied. Since the reading he had been silent, as if engrossed by the book's tales about the laboriously acquired land. Why not have the whole? A division had become intolerable to him. And there were other things besides confusedly jostling each other within his thick skull: wrath, pride, a dogged resolve to keep to his word, the exasperated craving of the man who would like, and yet will not, for fear of being taken advantage of. However, he abruptly came to a decision.

"I am going up to bed. Good-bye!" he said.

"How good-bye?"

"I shall start for La Chamade before daybreak. Good-bye, in case I don't see you again."

His father and mother, shoulder to shoulder, had planted themselves in front of him.

"Well, and your share?" said Fouan. "Do you accept it?"

Buteau walked as far as the door, then, turning round:

"No!" he replied.

The old peasant trembled in every limb. He drew himself up to his full height, and his ancient authority flashed forth for the last time.

"Very good. You are a wicked son. I shall give your brother and sister their shares, and shall let them farm yours; and when I die, I shall arrange for them to keep it. You shall have nothing. Be off with you!"

Buteau did not flinch from his rigid attitude. Then Rose, in her turn, tried to soothe him.

"Why, you are just as much cared for as the others, silly! You're only quarrelling with your bread and butter. Accept!"

"No!" And then off he went, going up to bed.

Outside, Lise and Françoise, aghast at the scene, walked a few steps in silence. They had again taken one another's waist, and their figures mingled, looking quite black against the snow which glimmered through the night. Jean, who followed them, also in silence, presently heard them crying. He then tried to cheer them up.

"Come, come, he'll think better of it; he'll say yes to-morrow."

"Ah, you don't know him!" cried Lise. "He'd be cut to pieces sooner than give way. No, no, it's all over!"

Then, despairingly, she added:

"What *shall* I do with his child?"

"Well, it'll have to come any way," murmured Françoise.

This made them laugh. But their spirits were too low, and they began to cry again.

When Jean had seen them to their door he made the best of his way across the plain. It had left off snowing; the sky was once more clear and bright; a wide, star-spangled, frosty sky it was, shedding a crystalline blue light; and La Beauce extended afar, quite white, and level and still like a sea of ice. Not a breath came from the distant horizon; he heard nothing but the tramp of his own thick shoes on the hard soil. 'Twas a deep calm, the peacefulness of the cold. All that Jean had read was whirling in his brain. He took off his cap to cool himself, feeling an oppression behind his ears, and wishing to escape from thought. The idea of that girl with child and her sister annoyed him too. The tramp of his thick shoes still rang out. Then a shooting-star started down the sky, furrowing it with fire in its silent flight.

Over there, the farm of La Borderie was vanishing from sight, hardly forming as much as a bump on the white expanse of snow; and as soon as Jean had entered the cross-path, he remembered the field he had sown in the vicinity some days before. Looking to the left, he recognised it under the winding-sheet that covered it. The layer of snow, of the lightness and purity of ermine, was a thin one, leaving the crests of the furrows apparent, and but imperfectly veiling the earth's benumbed limbs. How soundly must the seeds be sleeping! How deep a rest in those icy flanks until the warm morn, when the Spring sun would again awaken them to life!

PART II.

PART II. — CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER I.

It was four o'clock; the dawn was barely breaking: the pink dawn of early May. Under the glimmering sky the buildings of La Borderie still slept, half in gloom: three long buildings on three sides of the vast square yard, the sheep-cot at the end, the barns on the right, the cow-house, stable, and dwelling-house on the left. Closing the fourth side, the cart-entrance was shut, and secured by an iron bar. On the manure-pit a big solitary yellow cock sounded the reveille in brilliant, clarion tones. A second cock made answer, then a third, and thus the call was caught up and passed on from farm to farm throughout the length and breadth of La Beauce.

On that night, as on most other nights, Hourdequin had joined Jacqueline in her bedroom, a little servant's room that he had allowed her to embellish with flowered wall-paper, chintz curtains, and mahogany furniture. Despite her growing power, she had encountered violent opposition whenever she had made an attempt to share with him the room formerly occupied by his deceased wife, the conjugal chamber which he protected out of some remnant of respect. She was much hurt at this, understanding that she would never be the real mistress until she slept in the old oak bedstead with red cotton hangings.

Jacqueline awoke at early dawn and lay on her back, with her eyelids wide open, while the farmer was still snoring beside her. Amid the exciting warmth of the bed, her black eyes were still dreamy, and her nude, slim, girlish form was throbbing. Nevertheless, she hesitated; then, making up her mind, she lightly stepped across her master--moving so lightly and so deftly that he did not feel her--and noiselessly slipped on a petticoat with hands feverish with her sudden desire. However, as she happened to knock against a chair, he, in his turn, opened his eyes.

"Why, you're dressing! Where are you going?"

"I'm anxious about the bread, and am going to look at it."

Hourdequin dozed off again, mumbling, astonished at the excuse and with his brain at work amid his drowsiness. What an odd notion. The bread didn't need her at that time in the morning. And, goaded by a sharp suspicion, he all at once became wide awake. Amazed at seeing her no longer there, he gazed wanderingly round this servant's room, at his slippers, his pipe, and his razor. What! another freak of passion of that baggage for some farm hand? During the couple of minutes he needed to recover himself, he took a retrospect of the past.

His father, Isidore Hourdequin, was the descendant of an old peasant family of Cloyes, refined and raised to the middle classes in the sixteenth century. All of them had held posts in the salt-revenue: one had been granary-keeper at Chartres; another, controller at Châteaudun; and Isidore possessed some sixty thousand francs when, at twenty-six years of age, on being deprived of his office by the Revolution, he conceived the idea of making a fortune out of the thefts of those scoundrelly republicans who offered the national property for sale. He had an admirable knowledge of the district, he sniffed round, made calculations, and at last paid thirty thousand francs--a bare fifth of the true value--for the three hundred and seventy acres of La Borderie, which was all that remained of the ancient demesne of the Rognes-Bouquevals. Not a single peasant had dared to risk his crowns; only townsfolk, pettifoggers, and financiers derived profit from the Revolutionary proceedings. Besides, it was purely a speculation, for Isidore had no intention of encumbering himself with a farm. He reckoned confidently on selling it at its full value when the disturbances were over, and thus getting his money back five-fold. But the Directory came on, and the depreciation of property continued; so that he could not sell to the expected advantage. His land held him in its grasp, and he became its prisoner; insomuch that,

obstinately unwilling to let any of it go, he resolved to farm it himself, in the hope of thus at last realising his dreams of fortune. About this time he married the daughter of a neighbouring farmer who brought him a hundred and twenty acres, so that he now owned some five hundred; and it was thus that this townsman, sprung three centuries previously from a peasant stock, returned to tillage. To tillage on a large scale, however; to the landed aristocracy that had replaced the old all-powerful feudalism.

Alexander Hourdequin, his only son, was born in 1804. He had commenced his studies, discreditably enough, at the college of Châteaudun. He had a passion for land, and decided to return home and help his father, disappointing another dream of the latter, who, finding his fortune advance but slowly, would have liked to sell everything off and start his son in some liberal profession. The young man was twenty-seven, when, on the death of his father, he became master of La Borderie. He was a champion of new methods; his first care, in marrying, was to look out, not for property but for money, for, according to him, if the farm stagnated, the fault lay in lack of capital. The dower he desired, amounting to fifty thousand francs, was brought him by a sister of the notary, Baillehache, a ripe damsel, his senior by five years, extremely ugly, but good-tempered. Then began a long struggle between the farmer and his property; at first a prudent one, but gradually made feverish by mistakes: a struggle renewed every season, every day, which, without making him rich, enabled him to lead the broad life of a big full-blooded man, resolved to deny himself no gratification. For several years things went from bad to worse. His wife had presented him with two children: a boy who had enlisted out of distaste for farming, and who had been made a captain after Solferino; and a delicate, charming girl, the apple of his eye, and the heiress of La Borderie, now that his ungrateful son had become a soldier of fortune. But he lost his wife, and, two months later, his daughter. This was a terrible shock. The captain had left off coming to La Borderie save once a year, and the father all at once found himself

alone in the world, without a future, without the stimulus of working for his progeny. But bleed as the wound might internally, he remained outwardly erect, violent, and overbearing. Before the peasantry, who sneered at his machines, and longed for the fall of this middle-class man that presumed to dabble in their occupation, he stood firm. Besides, what could he do? He was ever the closer prisoner of his land. The accumulated labour, and the capital sunk, shut him in more tightly every day, and left him no possible outlet but through disaster.

Hourdequin, square shouldered, broad and florid in face, retaining no other token of middle-class refinement than his small hands, had always been despotically virile towards his female servants. Even in his wife's time he had ravished them all, as a mere matter-of-course, a thing of no further importance. If those daughters of poor peasants that take to dressmaking occasionally avoid a fall, not one of those that take service in farms escape man: servant or master. Madame Hourdequin was still alive when Jacqueline was engaged, out of charity, at La Borderie. Cognet, an old drunkard, used to beat her black and blue; and she was so wizened and scraggy that the bones of her body showed through her rags. Moreover, she was of such reputed ugliness that children used to hoot at her. She would have been taken for under twelve, though in reality she was then nearly eighteen. She helped the servant, and was employed in menial work--in washing up, sweeping the yard, and keeping the live-stock clean--and she became more and more grimy, as if dirt were a delight to her. After the death of the mistress, however, she seemed to get a bit cleaner. All the servants used to turn her up in the straw: not a man came to the farm without doing what he chose with her; and one day, as she went down with her master into the cellar, he also, though previously disdainful, tried to see what the ill-favoured slattern was like. But she resisted furiously, and scratched and bit him so effectually that he was obliged to let her go.

From that moment her fortune was made. She resisted for six months, and then yielded herself up, a little bit at a time. From the yard she rose to the kitchen as servant proper; next she engaged a girl as help; then, grown quite the lady, she had a maid of her own. Now the little scullion had become a stylish, pretty-looking girl, extremely dark, with a firm breast and strong supple limbs, such as develop in those previously made unduly thin by hardship. She became coquettish and extravagant, smothering herself with all sorts of scents, but retaining withal a leaven of uncleanliness. The people of Rognes, the neighbouring farmers, were none the less amazed at the intrigue. Was it actually possible that a man of substance should take a fancy to a wench like that, neither beautiful nor plump--in short, "La Cognette," the daughter of that drunkard Cognet, who might have been seen for the last twenty years breaking stones on the public highway! A fine papa-in-law! And a pretty piece of goods she was! The peasants did not even comprehend that this "piece of goods" was their vengeance, the revenge of the village upon the farm, of the wretched tiller of the soil upon the enriched townsman who had become a large landholder. Hourdequin, at his critical age of fifty-five, gradually became the slave of his fleshly desires, feeling physical need of Jacqueline, as one has the physical needs of hunger and thirst. When she chose to be especially agreeable, she would twine round him cat-like, and satiate him with unscrupulous, brazen shamelessness, such as courtezans do not venture upon; and for one of those hours he humbled himself and begged of her still to stay after quarrels and terrible spasms of resolution, in which he threatened to kick her out of doors.

Only the evening before he had all but struck her, at the close of a stormy attempt she had made to sleep in the bed where his wife had died; and she had refused his embraces all night, beating him away each time he approached; for, though she constantly indulged herself with the farm servants, she kept him on short commons, whetting his passion by abstinence so as to augment her power over him. And thus that morning,

in that moist room, in that tumbled bed where her presence still breathed, anger and desire again seized hold of him. He had long had scent of her many infidelities, and now he leapt out of bed, crying aloud: "The strumpet! If I only catch her!"

He dressed rapidly and went down stairs.

Jacqueline had flitted through the silent house in the first faint glimmer of dawn. As she crossed the yard she gave a start on seeing the old shepherd, Soulas, already up. But her desire was so strong that she paid no heed. So much the worse! She slipped past the stable, accommodating fifteen horses, where four of the farm waggoners slept, and made for the garret at the end where Jean had his bed--some straw and a coverlet, but no sheets. Embracing him in his sleep, closing his mouth with a kiss to stifle his cry of surprise, palpitating and out of breath, she whispered:

"It's me, you big stupid! Don't be alarmed. Quick, quick; let's make haste!"

But he took fright. He wouldn't, there, in his own bed, for fear of a surprise. The ladder of the loft was near there, however, so they climbed up, leaving the trap-door open, and fell amid the hay.

"Oh, you big stupid! you big stupid!" repeated Jacqueline in ecstacy, with her coo in the throat, which seemed to rise from her loins.

It was near upon two years since Jean Macquart had come to the farm. On leaving the army he had fallen in, at Bazoches-le-Doyen, with a fellow-soldier--a cabinetmaker like himself--at the house of whose father, a small village contractor and builder employing two or three hands, he had resumed his calling. But his heart was no longer in his work. Seven years of service had put his hand out of practice, and had so set him against the saw and plane that he seemed a different being. Formerly, at Plassans, he stayed hard at work on his wood, without aptitude for book-learning, just knowing the three R's, but yet very

reflective and very painstaking, resolved on making himself independent of his horrible family. Old Macquart kept him in leading-strings, appropriated his mistresses under his very eyes, and went every Saturday to the door of his workshop to rob him of his wages. Accordingly, when ill-usage and over-work had killed his mother, he followed the example of his sister Gervaise--who had just run off to Paris with a lover--and decamped, so as not to have to keep his vagabond father. Now he hardly knew himself again; not that he had grown lazy in his turn, but life in the army had enlarged his mind. Politics, for instance, which had once bored him, now absorbed him and led him to reason upon equality and fraternity; so that, what with habits of mouching, troublesome and indolent sentinel work, a sleepy life in barracks, and the wild rough-and-tumble of war, he had so changed that the tools dropped from his hands; he dreamt of his campaign in Italy; and a yearning for rest, a longing to stretch himself on the grass and forget everything, benumbed his efforts.

One morning his master installed him at La Borderie, to make some repairs. There was a good month's work, rooms to floor, doors and windows to be set right almost everywhere. Jean blissfully dragged the work on for six weeks. Meanwhile his master died, and the son, a married man, went off to set up shop in his wife's part of the country. Left at La Borderie, where rotting wood was always coming to light and needing attention, the cabinetmaker did several jobs on his own account; then, as the harvest was beginning, he lent a hand and stayed six weeks longer; so that, noting his zeal, and how kindly he took to agriculture, the farmer ended by keeping him altogether. In less than a year, the ex-artisan became a capital farm servant, carting, ploughing, sowing, reaping, and seeming to satisfy his desire for peace in the restfulness of agriculture. Away with saw and plane! His interest was somewhere else! He seemed born for a field life, with his sober, deliberate way, his love of systematic work, his ox-like temperament inherited from his mother. He started on

his new career delightedly with a relish for the country that peasants never know, a relish due to odds and ends of sentimental reading, and to notions of simplicity, virtue, and perfect bliss, such as are found in moral tales for children.

To tell the truth, another cause had kept him, and made him happy at the farm. While he was mending the doors, La Cognette had made a display of her charms amid his shavings. The temptation had, indeed, come from her, for she was attracted by the big fellow's sturdy limbs, and judged him, by his regular massive features, to be a man of virility. He yielded; and then continued as he had begun, dreading that he might be deemed a fool, and tormented, moreover, by a craving for the licentious hussy, who knew so well how to raise men's passions. At heart his native honesty made protest. It was dishonourable to dally with the sweetheart of M. Hourdequin, to whom he owed a debt of gratitude. Of course he adduced justifications: she wasn't the master's wife, but only his Poll, and as she played him false here, there, and everywhere, he might as well profit by it as let others do so. However, such excuses did not prevent his uneasiness from increasing in proportion as he saw the farmer grow more and more fascinated. No doubt it would not end well.

Among the hay Jean and Jacqueline were restraining their breath, when the former, whose ears were on the alert, heard the frame of the ladder creak. He leapt up, and, at the risk of his life, dropped down the opening that was used for throwing fodder down. Hourdequin's head just then appeared on the other side, on a level with the trap-door. He saw at the same glance the shadow of the retreating man, and the woman, still supine, with her legs in the air. Such a fury seized hold of him, that it never occurred to him to descend in pursuit of the gallant; but, with a buffet that would have felled an ox, he overturned Jacqueline, who was now getting up on to her knees again.

"Strumpet!" he shouted.

With a shriek of rage, she denied the evidence.

"It's false!"

He had to exercise all his powers of self-restraint to refrain from kicking her into a jelly.

"I saw it! Confess it's true, or I'll kill you."

"No, no, no! It's not true."

Then, when at length she had got upon her feet again, she grew insolent and irritating, resolved to bring her power into full play.

"Besides, what's it got to do with you?" she asked. "Am I your wife? As you don't choose that I should sleep in your bed, I'm free to lie where I like."

She spoke with her dove-like coo, as if in lascivious raillery.

"Come, move out of the way! Let me go down. I'll leave this evening."

"This instant!"

"No, this evening. Wait and think it over."

He was left quivering and beyond himself, not knowing on whom to vent his wrath. Though he no longer had the courage to turn her into the street forthwith, how gladly would he have kicked her gallant out of doors. But how was he to catch him now? He had gone straight up into the loft, guided by the open doors, without examining the beds; and when he got down again the four waggoners from the stable were dressing, as was Jean, in his garret. Which of the five had it been? One as likely as the other, and, perhaps, the whole lot, one after the other. Nevertheless, he hoped the man would betray himself. Then he gave his morning orders, sent nobody into the fields, and did not go out himself, but rambled about

the farm with clenched fists, scowling and hankering after somebody to knock down.

After the seven o'clock breakfast, this exasperated review of the master's set the whole household in a tremble. At La Borderie there were five hands for the five ploughs, three threshers, two cow-herds or yard-men, a shepherd, and a little swine-herd; in all, twelve servants, without counting the house-maid. Hourdequin began in the kitchen by abusing the latter, because she hadn't put the baking-shovels back in their places on the ceiling. Then he prowled into the two barns, one for oats, the other for wheat, the latter being of immense size, as large as a church, with doors five yards high; and he picked a quarrel with the threshers, whose flails, he said, cut up the straw too much. Then he went through the cow-house, and became furious at finding the thirty cows in good order, the central passage scoured, and the troughs clean. He did not know on what ground to fall foul of the cow-herds, till, glancing outside at the cisterns, which were also under their charge, he noticed that a discharge-pipe was stopped up by some sparrows' nests. As in all the Beauce farms, the rain-water from the slate roofs was here sedulously collected and conducted off by a complicated system of gutters. So he asked, roughly, if they meant to let him die of thirst for the benefit of the sparrows. But the storm finally burst on the waggoners. Although the litters of the fifteen horses in the stable were clean, he began by bawling out that it was disgusting to leave them in such filth. Then, ashamed of his own injustice, and the more exasperated, while paying a visit to the four sheds at the four corners of the farm buildings, where the implements were kept, he was delighted to find a plough with its handles broken. Then he regularly stormed. Did the five beggars amuse themselves by breaking his stock on purpose? He'd send the whole five of them about their business; yes, the whole five of them! He'd have no invidious distinctions! While he swore at them, his flashing eyes looked them through, expecting some paleness or quiver that would reveal the

traitor. Nobody flinched, however, and he left them with a wild gesture of despair.

On ending his inspection at the sheep-fold, it occurred to Hourdequin to cross-question the shepherd Soulas. This old fellow of sixty-five had been half-a-century at the farm, and had saved nothing by it, having been preyed upon by his wife, a drunkard and a drab, whom he had just had the happiness of laying beneath the sod. He was in dread lest his old age should presently entail his dismissal, and was hurriedly saving up the few coppers requisite to rescue him from want. Possibly the master might help him; but, then, there was no saying which might die first. And did they give money for tobacco and a nip? Besides, he had made an enemy of Jacqueline, whom he loathed with the jealous hatred of an old servant disgusted by the rapid advancement of such an upstart. Whenever she gave him orders, he was beside himself with rage, remembering how he had seen her in rags and filth. She would assuredly have dismissed him, if she had felt herself strong enough to do so; and this made him prudent. He wanted to keep his place, and shunned all conflict, no matter how sure he might be of his master's support.

The sheep-fold occupied the entire building at the end of the yard, a gallery eighty yards long, in which the eight hundred sheep of the farm were only separated by hurdles. On one side, the ewes, in various groups; on the other, the lambs; and farther on, the rams. Every two months the males, reared for sale, were castrated; while the females were kept to renew the flock of mothers, the oldest of which were sold off every year. The younger were served, at fixed times, by the rams, dishleys crossed with merinos, of superb strain, and stupid gentle aspect, with the heavy head and large rounded nose seen in men addicted to vice. Those entering the sheep-fold were choked by a strong smell, the ammoniacal exhalation from the litter: stale straw on which fresh straw was laid for three months running, the racks being fitted with hangers, so as to raise them as the manure-heap ascended. There was ventilation: the windows being wide,

and the floor of the loft above being formed of movable oaken beams, which were taken away as the fodder got less. It was said, however, that this living heat, this soft, warm, fermenting heap, was necessary to the proper growth of the sheep.

Hourdequin, pushing open one of the doors, caught sight of Jacqueline escaping by another. She, also, had thought uneasily of Soulas, feeling sure she had been watched with Jean; but the old man had remained impassive, seeming not to understand why she made herself so agreeable, contrary to her custom. The sight of the young woman leaving the sheep-fold, where she never went, aggravated the farmer's feverish uncertainty.

"Well, Soulas," asked he, "any news this morning?"

The shepherd, very tall and thin, with a long face intersected by wrinkles, and looking as though carved with a bill-hook out of a knot of oak, replied slowly:

"No, Monsieur Hourdequin, nothing whatever, except that the shearers are coming and will soon be at work."

The master chatted for a moment, so as not to seem to be questioning him. The sheep, who had been fed indoors since the first frosts of November, were to be let loose again towards mid-May, when the clover would be ready for them. As for the cows, they were seldom pastured until after the harvest. Yet this land of La Beauce, dry and devoid of natural herbage as it was, yielded good meat; and it was only through routine and laziness that the breeding of oxen was unknown there. Five or six pigs, even, were all that each farm fattened, for its own consumption.

Hourdequin with his hot hand stroked the soft and bright-eyed ewes who had run up with raised heads; while the lambs, pent up a little way off, surged against the hurdles, bleating.

"And so, Soulas, you saw nothing this morning?" he asked again, looking the shepherd full in the face.

The old fellow *had* seen, but what availed it to speak? His deceased wife, tippler and drab, had familiarised him with the vices of women and the folly of men. Very possibly La Cognette, although betrayed, would still hold her own, and then he would be made the scapegoat, so that an awkward witness might be got out of the way.

"Saw nothing, nothing at all!" he repeated, with dull eyes and stolid face.

When Hourdequin re-crossed the yard he noticed Jacqueline standing there, nervously straining her ears, in fear of what was being said in the sheep-fold. She was pretending to be busy with her poultry: six hundred head of hens, ducks, and pigeons, who were fluttering, chattering, and scratching on the manure-heap, amid a constant hurly-burly. She even relieved her feelings a bit by boxing the ears of the swine-herd, who had upset a bucket of water he was carrying to the pigs. But a single glance at the farmer reassured her. He knew nothing; the old man had held his tongue. Her insolence thus grew greater.

For instance, at the mid-day repast, she displayed a provoking gaiety. As the heavy work had not yet begun, they now only had four meals: bread-and-milk at seven, sopped toast at twelve, bread and cheese at four, soup and bacon at eight. They fed in the kitchen, a vast room, in which stretched a table flanked by two forms. Modern progress was only represented by a cast-iron stove, which took up a corner of the immense hearth. At the end the black mouth of the oven yawned; and along the smoky walls saucepans gleamed and old-fashioned utensils stood in neat rows. As the maid, a stout, plain girl, had baked that morning, a pleasant scent of hot bread rose from the open pan.

"So your stomach's not in working order to-day?" asked Jacqueline audaciously of Hourdequin, who came in last.

Since the death of his wife and daughter he sat at the same table as his servants, as in the good old times, so that he might not have to eat alone. He took a chair at one end, while the servant-mistress did the same at the other. There were fourteen of them, and the maid did the helping.

The farmer having sat down without replying, La Cognette talked of seeing to the food. This consisted of slices of toasted bread broken into a soup-tureen, moistened with wine, and sweetened with *ripopée*, an old Beauce word for treacle. She asked for a second spoonful of this; pretended to spoil the men, and vented jests that set the table in a roar. Each of her phrases had a double meaning, reminding them that she was leaving that night. There were bickerings and partings, and those who would never have another chance would regret not having dipped their fingers in the gravy for the last time. The shepherd ate on in his chuckle-headed way, while the master, impassive, also seemed not to understand. Jean, to avoid betraying himself, was obliged to laugh with the others, despite his uneasiness; for, to be sure, he deemed himself scarcely straightforward in all this.

After the meal, Hourdequin issued his orders for the afternoon. Out of doors, there were only a few little jobs to finish: the oats to be rolled, and the ploughing of the fallows to be completed, pending the time for cutting the lucern and clover. So he kept two men, Jean and another, to clean the hay-loft. He himself, now plunged into despondency, with his ears buzzing from the reaction of his blood, and very wretched, set out on the prowl, not knowing what occupation to try, to get rid of his vexation. The shearers having installed themselves under one of the sheds, in a corner of the yard, he took up his stand in front of them and watched them.

There were five sallow spindled-shanked fellows, squatting on the ground, with large shears of shining steel. The shepherd passed the ewes over, ranging them on the ground like so many skin bottles, with their

four feet tied together, and only just able to lift their heads and bleat. As soon as a shearer caught hold of one of them she became silent, and abandoned herself, blown out like a balloon by the thickness of her wool, which sweat and dust had coated with a hard black crust. Under the rapid shears, the animal came out from the fleece like a bare hand out of a dark glove, all pink and fresh, clad in the gleaming snowy inner wool. Held between the knees of a tall wizened man, one mother, set on her back, with her thighs apart, and her head erect and rigid, made exposure of her belly, which had the hidden whiteness, the quivering skin of an undressed person. The shearers earned three sous per head, and a good workman could shear twenty sheep a day.

Hourdequin, absorbed, was thinking that wool had fallen to eight sous a pound, and that he'd have to make haste and sell, or else it would get too dry, and lose in weight. The year before, congestion of the spleen had decimated the flocks of La Beauce. Everything was going from bad to worse; it meant ruin, bankruptcy, for grain had been falling more and more heavily every month. Once more a prey to agricultural worries, and feeling stifled in the yard, he left the farm and went to take a glance at his fields. His quarrels with La Cognette always ended thus. After swearing and clenching his fists, he gave way, oppressed by suffering, which was only relieved by the contemplation of the infinite green expanses of his wheat and oats.

Ah, how he loved that land of his! With a passion untainted by the keen avarice of the peasant; a sentimental, almost an intellectual, passion; for he felt her to be the common mother, who had given him his life and nourishment--to whom he would return. At first, when quite young, after being brought up upon her, his distaste for college, his impulse to burn his books and stop at the farm, had simply sprung from his free habits, his gay gallops over ploughed fields, his intoxicating open-air life amid the breezes of the plain. But later on, upon succeeding his father, he had loved the land like a lover; his love had ripened, as if he had

thenceforward taken her in lawful wedlock to make her fruitful. That tenderness had grown and grown, until he now devoted to her his time, his money, his whole life, as to a good and fertile wife, whose caprices, whose treason even, he would condone. Many a time he flew into a rage when she proved shrewish, when, too damp or too dry, she consumed the seed without yielding a harvest. Then, he began to doubt, and at length accused himself as if he were an impotent or unskilful bridegroom: the fault must have been his if a child had not been born to her. Since then he had been haunted by new methods, had plunged into every innovation, regretting that he had been so lazy at college, and that he had not studied at one of those agricultural schools that he and his father used to make fun of. How many futile attempts; how many experiments ending in failure! And the machines that his servants put out of order; the chemical manure adulterated by the dealers! La Borderie had swallowed up his whole fortune, it now hardly brought him in bread and cheese, and he was expecting the agricultural crisis to finish him off. No matter; he would remain the prisoner of his own soil, and would bury his bones within it, after having kept it for wife up to the very last.

On that day, as soon as he got out of doors, he remembered his son, the captain. The two of them together might have achieved something fine! But he dismissed from his thoughts the memory of the fool who preferred trailing a sword! He had no child now; he would end his days in solitude. Then his neighbours came into his mind, more especially the Coquarts, some landowners who cultivated their farm of Saint-Juste--father, mother, three sons, and two daughters; and who succeeded scarcely better than he did. At La Chamade, the farmer, being near the end of his lease, had left off manuring, letting the property go to rack and ruin. So it was. There was calamity everywhere. One had to work one's self to death, and not complain. Little by little, a soothing calm rose from the broad green fields he was skirting. Some light showers, in April, had brought on the fodder-crops beautifully. The purple clover transported

him with delight; he forgot everything else. Then as he was taking a short cut across some ploughed land, to have a look at the work of his two waggoners, the soil clung to his feet; he felt that it was rich and fertile, and it seemed to clasp and hold him back; taking him once more wholly to itself, while the virility, the vigour, the hey-day of his thirty years returned to him. Was not this the only wife for a man? Of what consequence were the whole set of Cognettes, plates out of which every one ate, and with which one might be well content, provided they were clean enough? This excuse, so consonant with his low craving for the baggage, crowned his gaiety. He walked for three hours, and jested with a girl--the servant of those very Coquarts--who was returning from Cloyes on a donkey, and showing her legs.

When Hourdequin went back to La Borderie, he noticed Jacqueline saying good-bye to the farm cats. There were always a troop of them; but whether a dozen, fifteen, or twenty, nobody precisely knew, for the she-cats used to litter in various odd nests of straw, and re-appear with trains of five or six kittens. Next, she went up to the kennels of Emperor and Massacre, the shepherd's two dogs; but they detested her, and growled.

The dinner, in spite of the farewells taken of the animals, went off just as on other days. The master ate and conversed as usual. And at the close of the day nothing more was said about anybody's departure. They all went to sleep, and darkness enwrapped the silent farm.

That very night, too, Jacqueline slept in the room of the late Madame Hourdequin: the state chamber, with its large bed in the depths of an alcove with red hangings. In this room there stood a wardrobe, a small round table, and an arm-chair of the Voltaire style; while above a little mahogany writing-table there hung some medals, framed under glass, and won by the farmer at agricultural competitions. When La Cognette in her chemise, had mounted on to the conjugal couch, she stretched herself

upon it, with her turtle-dove chuckle, spreading out her arms and legs as if to take possession of the entire bed.

On the morrow, when she fell on Jean's neck, he repulsed her. Things having now taken a serious turn, it wasn't proper, and he wouldn't consent any more.

PART II. — CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER II.

One evening, some days later, Jean was walking back from Cloyes when, a mile or so before reaching Rognes, he was astonished by the mode of progress of a peasant's cart which was going along, ahead of him. It seemed empty. No one sat on the driver's seat, and the horse, left to its own devices, was leisurely jogging back to its stable, being evidently well acquainted with the road. Accordingly, the young man quickly caught it up. He stopped it, and raised himself on tip-toe to look into the vehicle. A man was lying at the bottom--a short, fat old man of sixty, who had fallen backwards, and whose face was so purple that it appeared black.

Such was Jean's surprise that he began to talk aloud:

"Hallo, there! Is he asleep or drunk? Why, if it isn't old Mouche, the father of those two down yonder. Heavens! I think he's kicked the bucket! Well, well, here's a start!"

But, although laid low by a fit of apoplexy, Mouche still breathed, in a short and laboured way. So Jean raised his head and straightened him out; and then sat himself down in front and whipped up the horse, driving the dying man home at a round trot, for fear that he might slip through his fingers.

Just as he turned into the church-square, he perceived Françoise standing before her door. The sight of the young fellow in their cart, driving Coco, dumbfounded her.

"What's up?" she asked.

"Your father's not well."

"Where is he?"

"There. Look!"

She climbed up on the wheel and looked. For a moment she stood there, without seeming to understand, and staring stupidly at that purple face, half of which had been, as it were, wrenched downwards. The night was falling, and a great livid cloud, which turned the sky yellow, lit up the dying man as with the glow of a conflagration.

Then all at once, she burst into sobs, and ran out of sight to prepare her sister.

"Lise! Lise! Oh, my God!"

Jean, on remaining alone, hesitated. Still the old man could not be left lying in the cart. The basement of the house was three steps below ground, on the side of the square; and to descend into that dark hole seemed to him inconvenient. Then he bethought himself that, on the roadway side, to the left, another door opened level into the yard. It was a good-sized yard, enclosed by a quickset hedge; the turbid water of a pool took up two-thirds of it, and two-thirds of an acre of kitchen and fruit garden extended in the rear. Jean left Coco to himself, and the horse, of his own accord, entered and drew up before his stable, near the shed in which were the two cows.

Françoise and Lise ran up with tears and lamentations. The latter, confined four months previously, and now taken by surprise while suckling her infant, had, in her affright, kept him in her arms; and he howled too. Françoise again got on one wheel, while Lise climbed up on the other. Their lamentations grew deafening; and meantime Mouche, at the bottom of the cart, still kept up his laboured wheezing.

"Papa, answer; won't you? Say what's the matter. Oh, dear! what *is* the matter? Oh, dear! oh, dear! It's in your head, then, since you can't even speak? Papa, papa, do speak; do answer!"

"Come down. He'd better be got out of the trap," said Jean, sagely.

They gave no help, but only screamed the louder. Luckily a neighbour, Madame Frimat, came upon the scene, attracted by the noise. She was a tall, withered, bony old woman, who for two years had been nursing her paralytic husband, supporting him by cultivating in person, with the doggedness of a beast of burden, the single acre or so that they possessed. She was not at all put out, seeming to think the misadventure a matter of course, and she lent a helping hand as a man would have done. Jean took Mouche by the shoulders, and pulled him up until La Frimat was able to catch hold of his legs. Then they carried him into the house.

"Where's he to be put?" asked the old woman.

The two girls, who were following, had lost their wits, and did not know. Their father's room was a small one upstairs, partitioned off from the grain-loft, and it was almost out of the question to carry him up there. Downstairs there was the kitchen, and the large double-bedded room which he had given up to them. In the kitchen it was as dark as pitch. With their arms stiff with exertion, the young man and the old woman waited, not daring to take another step forward for fear of knocking against some piece of furniture.

"Come, something must be settled, anyhow."

Françoise at last lit a candle, and just then the wife of the rural constable, Madame Bécu came in; she had smelt disaster in the air, or had been warned by that occult agency which is wont to carry news through a village in no time.

"Why! what's amiss with the poor fellow?" said she. "Ah! I see; his blood has turned. Quick! Set him on a chair."

But Madame Frimat was of a different opinion. The idea of seating a man who could not hold himself upright! The thing to do was to stretch him on one of his daughters' beds. The discussion was growing keen, when Fanny came in with Nénesse. She had heard about it while buying some vermicelli at Macqueron's, and had come to see what there was to be seen; being at the same time somewhat affected on her cousins' account.

"Perhaps," she declared, "it's best to sit him down, so that the blood may run back."

And so Mouche was huddled on to a chair near the table, on which the candle was burning. His chin drooped upon his chest, his arms and legs hung limp. His left eye had been drawn open by the displacement of that side of his face, and one corner of his twisted mouth wheezed more than the other. Silence fell. Death was taking possession of the damp room, with its floor of trodden earth, its stained walls, and its large gloomy fireplace.

Jean still waited in perplexity, while the two girls and the three women dangled round the old fellow, looking at him.

"Hadn't I better go and fetch the doctor?" the young man ventured to ask.

Madame Bécu nodded her head, but no one else made any reply. If it were to be nothing after all, why incur the expense of a visit? And if it were really the end, what good could the doctor do?

"Vulnerary's a capital thing," said La Frimat.

"I've got some camphorated spirits," murmured Fanny.

"That's a good thing too," declared Madame Bécu.

Lise and Françoise, now in a state of stupor, listened and took no steps at all. The one was nursing her baby, Jules; the other was holding a glass full of water which her father would not drink. Fanny, however, bustled Nénesse, who was held spell-bound by the contorted visage of the dying man.

"Run home and tell them to give you the little bottle of camphorated spirits on the left in the wardrobe. D'ye hear? In the wardrobe on the left. And call at grandfather Fouan's, and at your aunt La Grande's. Tell them that uncle Mouche is taken very bad. Run, run quick!"

The urchin having bounded out of sight, the women continued their dissertations on the case. La Bécu knew a gentleman who had been saved by having the soles of his feet tickled for three hours. La Frimat, remembering that she had some linden-flowers left out of the pennyworth bought the previous winter for her good man, went and fetched it. She was coming back with the little bag, and Lise was lighting a fire, after handing her child to Françoise, when Nénesse re-appeared.

"Grandpapa Fouan had gone to bed. La Grande said that if uncle Mouche hadn't drunk so much he wouldn't have made himself so sick."

Fanny examined the bottle he handed her, and then cried:

"You fool! I told you on the left. You've brought me the Eau de Cologne."

"That's a good thing, too," said La Bécu.

They forced the old man to take a cup of linden-flower tea, by inserting the spoon between his clenched teeth. Then they rubbed his head with Eau de Cologne. And yet he didn't get any better: it was most discouraging. His face had become blacker still. They were obliged to hitch him up on the chair, for he was sinking down, and on the point of tumbling flat on the floor.

"Oh!" muttered Nénesse, who had gone to the door again, "it's going to rain like I don't know what. The sky's a funny sort of colour."

"Yes," said Jean, "I saw a villainous cloud gathering." And, as if brought back to his first idea: "It's no odds. I'll go and fetch the doctor if you like."

Lise and Françoise looked at each other, frightened and anxious. At last the second came to a resolution in the generous impulse of her youth.

"Yes, yes, Corporal. Go to Cloyes and fetch Monsieur Finet. It sha'n't be said that we didn't do our duty."

Coco, in the midst of the bustle, had not even been unharnessed, and Jean had only to jump into the cart. They heard the clink of iron, and the rumble of the wheels. Then La Frimat mentioned the priest; but the others signified by a gesture that enough trouble was already being taken in the matter. And Nénesse having proposed to walk the two miles or so to Bazoches-le-Doyen, his mother lost her temper. A likely thing that she was going to let him trot off on so threatening a night, with that dreadful rust-coloured sky! Besides, as the old man neither heard nor answered, one might as well knock up the priest to minister to a mile-stone.

Ten o'clock struck from the cuckoo-clock of painted wood. Here was a surprise! To think that they had been there more than two hours without effecting anything. But not one of them seemed inclined to stir, they were fascinated by the sight, and resolved to see it out. A ten-pound loaf lay on the bread-box, with a knife. First the girls, racked with hunger despite their anguish, mechanically cut themselves slices of bread, which they unconsciously ate, quite dry. Then the three women followed their example. The bread diminished, and one or the other of them was always cutting and munching. No other candle had been lighted; they omitted even to snuff the one that was burning; and it was not lively, sitting in

that poor, gloomy, bare, peasant room, and listening to the death-rattle of the form huddled together near the table.

All at once, half an hour after Jean's departure Mouche tumbled over and fell headlong to the floor. He no longer breathed; he was dead!

"What did I tell you? Only you insisted on sending for the doctor," remarked La Bécu, tartly.

Françoise and Lise, stupefied for a moment, burst out into fresh tears. With an instinctive impulse they had thrown themselves into each other's arms in their tender, sisterly adoration; and in broken phrases they repeated: "Oh, dear! We have only each other now. It's all over; there are only the two of us. What *will* become of us! Oh, dear!"

But the corpse could not be left on the floor. In a trice La Frimat and La Bécu did everything necessary. As they dared not carry the body, they went and drew a mattress off a bed, brought it, and stretched Mouche out upon it, covering him up to the chin with a sheet. Meanwhile Fanny lit the candles in two other candlesticks, and placed them on the floor in lieu of wax tapers on either side of the head. For the moment all was well, except that Mouche's left eye, although closed three times by one of the women with her thumb, persisted in opening again, and seemed to be looking at everybody from out of the distorted purple face, which contrasted so sharply with the whiteness of the linen.

Lise had determined to put Jules to bed, and the wake began. Three times did Fanny and La Bécu say they were going, as La Frimat had offered to stay the night with the young ones; but they did not go, continuing to talk in low tones, and glancing askance from time to time at the corpse, while Nénesse, who had got possession of the bottle of Eau de Cologne, finished it up by drenching his hands and hair with its contents.

As twelve o'clock struck, La Bécu raised her voice.

"And how about Monsieur Finet, I should like to know! Plenty of time he gives people to die in! More than two hours bringing him here from Cloyes!"

The door leading to the yard was open, and just then a great gust came in, and blew out the candles on either side of the corpse. This terrified them all, and as they re-lit the candles, the tempestuous blast returned with greater fury, while a prolonged howling arose and swelled in the dark depths of the country-side. It might have been the gallop of a devastating army approaching, so loudly did the branches crash, so deep was the wail of the riven fields. They had run to the doorway, and saw a coppery cloud whirl wildly across the livid sky. Suddenly there was a rattle, as it were, of musketry, and a rain of bullets fell lashing and rebounding at their feet.

A cry of ruin and desolation burst from their lips.

"Hail! Hail!"

Pale and aghast at the scourge above them, they stood there watching. It lasted barely six minutes. There were no thunder-claps; but great bluish flashes seemed incessantly to run along the ground in broad phosphoric furrows. The night was not now so gloomy: the hail stones lit it up with numberless pale streaks as if jets of glass had fallen. The noise became deafening: like a discharge of grape shot, like a train rushing at full speed over an endlessly thundering metal bridge. The wind blew furiously, and the obliquely falling stones slashed everything, accumulated and covered the soil with a layer of white.

"Hail! Oh, dear! What a misfortune! Look, look! Exactly like hen's eggs!"

They dared not venture into the yard to pick any up. The violence of the hurricane continued to increase; all the window-panes were broken; and the momentum was such that one hailstone cracked a jug, while others rolled as far as the dead man's mattress.

"There wouldn't be five to the pound," said Madame Bécu, poising them in her hand.

Fanny and La Frimat made a gesture of despair.

"Everything ruined! A massacre!"

It was over. The disastrous roar was heard rapidly passing away, and a death-like silence fell. The sky, in the rear of the cloud, had become as black as ink. A fine close rain streamed noiselessly down. Nothing was now distinguishable on the ground but the thick layer of hailstones: a gleaming sheet that had, as it were, a light of its own, the shimmer of infinite millions of night-lights.

Nénesse having rushed out of doors, returned with a perfect iceberg, an irregular jagged mass bigger than his fist: and La Frimat, who could no longer keep still, was unable to resist the temptation to go and see how things were.

"I'm going to fetch my lantern; I must know what the damage is," she said.

Fanny controlled herself a few minutes longer, prolonging her lamentations. Oh, what a piece of work! What destruction among the vegetables and fruit-trees! The wheat, oats, and barley were not high enough to have suffered much. But the vines! Ah, the vines! And, standing at the door, she peered into the thick, impenetrable night, and quivered in a fever of uncertainty, trying to estimate the mischief, exaggerating it, and imagining that she saw the land riddled with shot and its life oozing from the wounds.

"Hey! my pets," she said at last: "I'll borrow one of your lanterns and run over as far as our vines."

Then she lit one of the two lanterns and disappeared with Nénesse.

La Bécu, who had no land, didn't at heart care a fig. She fetched sighs and apostrophised Heaven, merely out of a habit she had of feebly moaning and melting into tears on all occasions. Nevertheless, curiosity continually took her to the door; and a lively interest fixed her there once for all as soon as she noticed that the village was starred all over with luminous points. Through a gap in the yard, between the cow-house and a shed, the eye could command the whole of Rognes. Doubtless, the hail-storm had awoke the peasants, and they were all seized with the same impatience to take a look at their fields, all too anxious to wait till daylight.

And indeed the lanterns came forth one by one, multiplying and flitting lightly to and fro, in so dense an opacity, that the arms that held them were merely conjectural. But La Bécu, always on the watch, knew the site of every house, and succeeded in putting a name to every lantern.

"There, now! That one's lit in La Grande's house, and that one's coming out of the Fouans', and over yonder it's Macqueron, and next door it's Lengaigne. Bless me, poor souls! it's heart-breaking. Well, so much the worse! I'm off to join them!"

Lise and Françoise remained alone with their father's corpse. The downpour of the rain continued; little moist breezes skimmed along the ground and guttered the candles. The door ought to have been shut, but neither of them thought of it, being themselves absorbed and agitated by the drama outside, despite the mourning in the house. It wasn't enough, then, to have Death at home? The good God was smashing up everything; one didn't so much as know if there would be a bit of bread left to eat.

"Poor father," murmured Françoise; "what a stew he would have been in! Better that he can't see it."

And, as her sister took up the second lantern, she added:

"Where are you going?"

"I'm thinking of the peas and beans. I'll be back directly."

Lise crossed the yard, through the driving rain, and went into the kitchen-garden. There was only Françoise left with the old man, and even she was standing at the doorway, keenly agitated by the flitting of the lantern to and fro. She thought she could hear complaints and sobs. Her heart was wrung.

"Hey! What is it?" she cried. "What's the matter?"

No voice replied, but the lantern ran to and fro more quickly, as if distracted.

"Tell me, are the beans cut down? And the peas, are they hurt? Gracious! And the fruit and salad stock?"

An exclamation of grief, which now distinctly reached her ears, decided her. She caught up her skirts and ran through the rain to join her sister. The dead man remained, deserted, in the empty kitchen, lying rigid under the sheet, between the two dull, smoky wicks. His left eye, still obstinately open, stared at the old joists of the ceiling.

What a ravage had laid that stretch of land desolate! What a lamentation arose from the scene of disaster, half visible in the flickering gleam of the lanterns. Lise and Françoise carried theirs hither and thither, though it was so wet with rain that scarcely any light passed through the panes; and they brought it close to the beds, confusedly distinguishing, in the narrow ring of light, the beans and peas cut down short, the lettuces so chopped and hacked that it was futile even to think of utilising the leaves. The trees, especially, had suffered. The smaller branches and the fruit had been cut off as with knives. The very trunks were splintered and bruised, and the sap was escaping through the holes in the bark. Farther on, among the vines, matters were worse: the lanterns swarmed and leaped,

as if maddened, amid groans and oaths. The stocks seemed to have been mown down, and bunches of blossom bestrewed the soil in company with shattered branches and spurs. Not only was the season's crop ruined, but the stems, stripped bare, would decay and die. No one felt the rain. A dog was howling murder, and women were bursting into tears, as on the brink of a grave. Macqueron and Lengaigne, in spite of their rivalry, were lighting each other, visiting each other's ground, and joining in ejaculations of dismay, as each new vision of ruin, wan and short-lived, met their gaze, and then faded again into shadow behind them. Although old Fouan now had no land of his own, he wanted to look on, waxing wroth. By degrees they all flew into a temper. To actually lose the fruit of a year's work in a quarter of an hour! Could it be possible? What had they done to be so punished? There was no security or justice; unreasoning scourges and caprices slew the world. La Grande, in a fury, abruptly picked up some pebbles, and flung them into the air to pierce the heaven she could not discern. And she blasphemously screamed out:

"Hey, up there! Can't you manage to leave us in peace?"

On the mattress in the kitchen, the deserted Mouche was still staring fixedly at the ceiling with his one eye, when two vehicles drew up at the door. Jean had at length brought Monsieur Finet, after waiting for him at his house during nearly three hours; and had returned in the cart, while the doctor had ordered out his gig.

The medical man, tall and thin, with a face jaundiced by stifled ambition, entered roughly. In his heart he loathed this peasant connection, which he held responsible for his mediocrity.

"What, no one here? Things have mended, then."

But perceiving the corpse: "No, too late! Didn't I tell you? I didn't want to come! It's always the same old game: they call me in when they're dead."

This useless summons in the middle of the night annoyed him; and Lise and Françoise, just then returning, put the finishing touch to his exasperation by apprising him that they had waited a couple of hours before sending for him.

"It's you that have killed him, sure enough. Eau de Cologne and linden-flower tea for a fit of apoplexy! How idiotic! And, what's more, no one keeping him company. It's pretty certain he won't see salvation."

"It's because of the hail, sir," stammered Lise, in tears.

Monsieur Finet became interested, and calmed down. Dear, dear! So there's been a hail-storm? By dint of living among the peasantry he had eventually caught their passions. Jean, also, had drawn near; and they both uttered exclamations of amazement, for, in coming from Cloyes, they had not seen a single hailstone. Some spared, and others, half a mile or so off, turned topsy-turvy! Really, what a piece of ill luck to have one's land in the damaged part of the country! Then, as Fanny returned, bringing back the lantern, La Bécu and La Frimat following her, and all the three launching out into grievous and interminable details of the harrowing things they had seen,--the doctor gravely declared:

"It's a calamity, a great calamity. There's no greater calamity for country-folk."

A muffled sound, a kind of bubbling noise, interrupted him. It came from the corpse, lying forgotten between the two candles. They all became silent, and the women crossed themselves.

PART II. — CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER III.

A month passed by. Old Fouan, appointed guardian to Françoise, who was entering on her fifteenth year, induced the two girls--his ward and Lise, who was the elder by ten years--to let all their land, excepting a strip of meadow, to cousin Delhomme, so that it might be properly cultivated and kept.

Now that the two girls were left alone in the house, without father or mother, they would have had to engage a servant, which would have been ruinous, on account of the increasing price of manual labour. Delhomme, moreover, was simply doing them a service, as he undertook to cancel the lease as soon as either of them married, and a division of the inheritance became necessary.

Lise and Françoise also sold their cousin their horse, which had now become useless, but they kept the two cows, La Coliche and La Rousse, as well as the donkey, Gédéon. Of course they likewise kept their patch of kitchen garden, which it became the province of the elder girl to keep in order, while the younger one looked after the live stock. To be sure, that made plenty of work; but they were hale and hearty, thank God! and would soon get through with it.

The first few weeks were very burdensome, for there was the damage of the hail-storm to be repaired, the soil to be tilled, the vegetables to be replanted. This it was that induced Jean to lend a helping hand. An intimacy had sprung up between him and the girls since the day he had brought their dying father home. The day after the burial he called and inquired after them. Next he came and chatted, growing gradually familiar and obliging, insomuch that one afternoon he took the spade out of Lise's hands to finish the digging of a bed. Thenceforth he devoted to

them, in a friendly way, the time that was not taken up by his work at the farm. He belonged to the house, to that old patriarchal house of the Fouans, built three centuries back by an ancestor, and honoured by the whole family with a sort of worship. When Mouche used to complain of having had the worst lot in the distribution of the property, accusing his brother and sister of having swindled him, they answered: "And how about the house? Hadn't he got the house?"

A poor, dilapidated house it was, settling down on its foundations, cracked and rickety, patched up everywhere with odds and ends of plank and plaster. It had obviously been originally constructed of rough stones and clay; subsequently, two walls had been rebuilt with mortar; and finally, towards the beginning of the century, the owners had reluctantly replaced the thatch with a roofing of small slates, now rotten. Thus it had lasted, and thus it still held out; sunk a yard deep in the earth, as all houses were built in the olden time, doubtless for the purpose of ensuring greater warmth. The inconvenience of it was that, in heavy storms, they were flooded with water; and it was of no avail to sweep the hardened soil that composed the cellar-like floor; there was always a remnant of mud in the corners.

The house had been planned, however, with particular artfulness, its back being turned towards the far-stretching northern plain of La Beauce, whence blew the terrible winter winds. On that side, in the kitchen, the only opening was a narrow window, barricaded by a shutter, on a level with the street; while on the southern side, one found the other windows and the door. The place suggested one of those fisher-huts on the sea-shore, which do not expose a single chink to the ocean waves. The winds of La Beauce had battered the house aslant, so that it bent forward like an old broken-backed hag.

Jean was soon familiar with every corner of it. He helped to clean up the room of the deceased; that corner cut off from the granary by a mere

plank partition, and containing nothing but an old chest full of straw serving as a bed, with a chair and a table. Downstairs he did not go beyond the kitchen, for he shrank from following the two sisters into their own room, where, as the door was always on the swing, one could see the double-bedded alcove, the large walnut wardrobe, and a superbly-carved round table, doubtless a relic formerly stolen from the château. There existed yet another room behind this, but it was so damp that the father had preferred to sleep upstairs. They were reluctant even to store potatoes in it, for they began immediately to germinate. They lived in the kitchen, a huge smoky room where, for three centuries, many generations of Fouans had succeeded each other. It was redolent of sustained toil and stinted food, of the constant efforts of people who, while working themselves to death, had just managed not to starve, never having a halfpenny more in December than they had in January. A door that opened flush into the cow-house brought the cattle into companionship with the occupants, and when that door was shut, the animals could still be seen and watched through a pane of glass let into the wall. Next there came the stable, where Gédéon now remained by himself; then a shed and a wood-house; and there was no need to go out of doors, for you entered every place in succession. Outside, the rains replenished the pond, which furnished them with water for the cattle and for domestic use. Every morning they had to go down to the Aigre to bring up drinking-water.

Jean felt happy there, without troubling his head to inquire what the attraction was. Lise, who gave him a good welcome, was as gay and buxom as ever. Nevertheless, she was already looking older than twenty-five; indeed, she was growing very plain, more especially since her confinement. But she had good stout arms, and applied herself to her work with such zest--bustling about, shouting, and laughing--that it was delightful to look at her. Jean treated her as a grown-up woman, and did not *thee* and *thou* her as he did Françoise, whose fifteen years made her

seem to him quite a mere child. The younger girl, whose good looks out-of-door life and hard work had not yet had time enough to spoil, retained her pretty, long face, with its slight, headstrong forehead, its dark, pensive eyes, and its thick lips, shaded by a precocious down. Although deemed a child, she was a woman also; and apt to conceive, as her sister used to say, without being tickled very closely. It was Lise who had brought her up, their mother being dead; and thence came their great fondness, active and noisy on the part of the elder sister, and passionate and restrained on that of the younger one.

Françoise was reputed to have a strong will of her own. Injustice exasperated her. When she had said: "This is mine, and that is yours," she would have gone to the scaffold rather than retract; and, putting everything else aside, she adored Lise, from a notion that such adoration was Lise's due. Withal, she was tractable and very good, free from bad thoughts, and only tormented by her early womanhood, which made her nerveless, slightly dainty, and lazy. One day she also began to address Jean in the second person singular, he being quite a middle-aged and kindly-natured friend, who was wont to draw her out, and sometimes tease her; telling falsehoods of malice aforethought, and defending injustice for the fun of seeing her choke with rage.

One Sunday afternoon in June, the heat already being intense, Lise was engaged in the kitchen garden, hoeing some peas and nipping them round. She had placed Jules under a plum-tree, where he had dozed off to sleep. The sun was beating straight down upon her, and she was puffing as she bent forward to pull up some weeds, when a voice came from behind the hedge:

"What, what! No rest even on Sunday?"

She had recognised the voice, and drew herself up, with red arms and a flushed face, but laughing through it all.

"No, indeed! The work doesn't do itself on a Sunday any more than on a week-day!"

It was Jean. He skirted the hedge, and came in through the yard.

"Let that alone; *I'll* soon polish off your work!"

However, she refused. She would soon have finished. And then, if she didn't do that, she would be doing something else. There was never a chance of being idle. Although she got up at four o'clock in the morning, and sat sewing till late in the evening by candlelight, she never got to the end of it all.

So as not to oppose her, Jean sat himself in the shade of the neighbouring plum-tree, being careful not to sit upon Jules. He watched Lise, stooping double again, and every now and then pulling down her petticoat, which kept working up behind and showing her fat legs; and then with her head close to the ground, she worked away with her arms without any fear of the rush of blood that swelled her neck.

"Lucky for you," he said, "that you're sturdily built!"

She took some pride in that, and laughed complacently without getting up. He laughed too, conscientiously admiring her, thinking her as strong and energetic as a man. No improper desire was suggested to him by her attitude, by her tense calves, by this woman on all fours, sweating and smelling like an animal in heat. He was simply thinking that with limbs like that one could get through a rare lot of work. It was quite certain that, in a household, a woman of that build would be worth as much as her husband.

No doubt some association of ideas worked in him, for he involuntarily blurted out a piece of news which he had resolved to keep to himself.

"I saw Buteau the day before yesterday."

Lise slowly rose up. But she had no time to question him, for Françoise--who had heard Jean's voice, and who, with her arms bare and white with milk, was now coming from the dairy at the further end of the cow-house--flew at once into quite a temper.

"Oh, you've seen him? The cad!"

Her antipathy had increased. She could never now hear her cousin mentioned without being stirred by one of her gusts of honest indignation, as if she had had a personal injury to avenge.

"Certainly he's a cad," declared Lise calmly; "but it don't do any good to say so at this time of day."

She had stuck her arms a-kimbo, and now in a serious voice she asked:

"And what's Buteau got to say for himself?"

"Why, nothing," replied Jean, with some embarrassment, sorry that he hadn't kept a quiet tongue in his head. "We spoke of his affairs, on account of his father giving out everywhere that he'll disinherit him. Buteau says there's no hurry about that, for the old man's hearty enough, and that, anyway, he don't care a curse."

"Does he know that Hyacinthe and Fanny have signed the deed, whether or no, and that they're both in possession of their shares?"

"Yes, he knows; and he knows, too, that old Fouan has let his son-in-law, Delhomme, the share that he, Buteau, wouldn't have. He knows, also, that Monsieur Baillehache was in such a fury that he took an oath he'd never again have the lots drawn for before seeing the papers signed. Oh, yes; he knows that it's all over."

"Ah! And he said nothing?"

"No, he said nothing."

Lise stooped down in silence, walked on a bit, pulling up some weeds and showing nothing save the full rotundity of her behind; then she turned her neck round, and added, with her head down: "It comes to this, Corporal, if you want to know, I shall have to keep Jules, and that'll be the end of it."

Jean, who had heretofore held out some hopes, nodded.

"Faith! you're perhaps right."

He glanced at Jules, whom he had forgotten. The brat still slept, swathed in his long-clothes, with his little motionless face bathed in light. That was the awkward part of it, that urchin! Otherwise, why shouldn't he have married Lise, now she was free? The idea came to him all at once, then and there, as he watched her working. Perhaps he loved her. Perhaps it was the pleasure of seeing her that brought him so much to the house. None the less was he surprised, not having desired her, not even having jested with her, as he had jested with Françoise, for instance. And, pat, as he raised his head, he saw the latter standing rigid and furious in the sunshine, with her eyes so strangely ablaze with passion that he was enlivened even in the agitation of his new discovery. Just then the sound of a trumpet, a strange topsy-turvy roll-call, rang out; and Lise, leaving her peas, exclaimed:

"Why, here comes Lambourdieu! I want to order a hood of him."

On the road, on the other side of the hedge, there appeared a dumpy little man, blowing a trumpet, and walking ahead of a long vehicle drawn by a grey horse. It was Lambourdieu, a shopkeeper from Cloyes, who had added, bit by bit, millinery, drapery, shoemaking, and even ironmongery to his novelty business. He went from village to village, within a radius of five or six leagues, with a regular bazaar. The peasants had ended by buying everything from him, from their saucepans to their wedding

clothes. His vehicle was made to open out and turn back, displaying rows of drawers, and enough goods to stock a whole shop.

When Lambourdieu had taken the order for the hood, he added:

"In the meantime you don't happen to want a fine silk handkerchief?"

So saying he drew out of a box some gorgeous red gold-patterned handkerchiefs, and swished them up and down in the sunlight.

"There you are! Three francs each! It's giving them away. Five francs for the pair!"

Lise and Françoise, to whom they had been handed over the hawthorn hedge, on which Jules's napkins were drying, hankered after them. But they were sensible girls; they had no need of them, and why spend money? They were indeed handing them back, when Jean suddenly made up his mind to take Lise, baby and all. So, in order to precipitate matters, he called out to the young woman:

"No, no! Keep it. I offer it you! Oh, you wouldn't pain me by refusing: it's out of pure friendship, to be sure!"

He had said nothing to Françoise, and as she still held out her handkerchief to the dealer, he glanced at her, and felt a pang of grief as he fancied he saw her cheek pale and her lips quiver with pain.

"You, too, stupid! Keep it. Nay, I insist. None of that self-will of yours!"

He struggled with the two sisters who laughingly defended themselves. Lambourdieu had already held out his hand, across the hedge, for his five francs. And away he went. The horse behind him started off with the long vehicle, and the hoarse flourishes of the trumpet died away as the road wound out of sight.

Jean had all at once taken it into his head to push matters on with Lise, and pop the question. But an accident prevented this. The stable-door had

no doubt been badly fastened, for suddenly they saw the donkey, Gédéon, valiantly chewing some carrot tops in the kitchen garden. This donkey, big, sturdy, and russet-coloured, with a large grey cross on his spine, was full of artfulness, and quite a wag in his way. He was very good at lifting latches with his mouth, was wont to fetch bread out of the kitchen, and by the style in which he wagged his long ears when he was reproached with his vices, it was obvious that he understood. As soon as he saw himself discovered he put on an indifferent, easy air; then, on being threatened and waved off, he moved away; only, instead of going back into the yard, he trotted along the walks to the bottom of the garden. Then a regular pursuit set in; and when Françoise had at length caught him, he drew himself together and huddled his head and legs against his body, as if to increase his weight, and make slower progress. He was impervious to everything, whether in the shape of kicks or blandishments. Indeed, Jean had to intervene, and hustle him from behind with his man's strength; for Gédéon, since he had been under the management of the two women, had conceived the most hearty contempt for them. Jules had awoke at the noise and was now howling. The opportunity for popping the question was altogether lost, and Jean had to leave without speaking.

A week went by. A great shyness had come upon the young man, who had now lost heart. Not that the transaction seemed to him disadvantageous; contrariwise, he had, on reflection, become more deeply conscious of its advantages. Each side could not do otherwise than gain. If he had nothing, she was encumbered with her infant. That equalised matters. This was no sordid calculation on his part. He argued as much for her happiness as for his own. Then, again, marriage, by taking him away from the farm, would rid him of Jacqueline, who still worried him, and to whom he still yielded out of fleshly weakness. So at last he made up his mind, and waited for an opportunity to declare

himself, conning the words he meant to say, for even regimental life had left him somewhat a ninny with women.

At last, one day at about four o'clock, he slipped away from the farm and went to Rognes, resolved to speak. This was the time when Françoise led her cows to evening pasture, and he had chosen it so as to be alone with Lise. But he was dismayed, at the outset, by a great annoyance. La Frimat was established there in her character of obliging neighbour, helping the younger woman to scald the linen in the kitchen.

The sisters had scoured it on the evening before, and since the morning the ash liquor, scented with orris root, had been boiling in a cauldron hanging from the pot-hook over a clear, poplar wood fire. With bare arms, and her skirts tucked up, Lise, with the aid of a yellow earthen jug, was drawing the water off and wetting the linen, with which the bucking-tub was filled--the sheets at the bottom, then the house-cloths, then the body linen, and, at the top of all, some other sheets. La Frimat was not of much use; but she stopped to gossip, allowing herself that recreation, and contenting herself, every now and then, with removing and emptying into the cauldron the pail which stood under the tub to catch the lye, that kept draining away.

Jean waited patiently, hoping she would leave. She did not do so, however; but went on talking of her poor paralytic husband, who could now only move one hand. It was a great affliction. They had never been well off; but, when he could still work, he rented land which he turned to account, whereas now she had a world of trouble to cultivate by herself the patch that was their own. She struggled her hardest; collecting horse dung from the roads as manure, for they kept no animals; tending her salad stock, beans, and peas, plant by plant; and watering even her three plum and two apricot trees. The result was that she made an enormous profit out of the ground; and started every Saturday for the Cloyes market, staggering under the burden of two tremendous baskets, without

reckoning the heavy vegetables which a neighbour conveyed for her in his cart. She rarely returned without two or three five-franc pieces, particularly in the fruit season. Her constant grievance was the lack of manure. Neither the horse dung, nor the sweepings from the few rabbits and hens she kept, made a sufficient supply. She had come at length to utilising the excrements of her old man and herself, that human manure so much despised, which provokes disgust even in the country. This had got abroad, and people chaffed her about it, and dubbed her Mother Caca--a nickname which did her a deal of harm at the market; she had seen shopkeepers' wives turn with aversion and disgust from her superb carrots and cabbages. Despite her great mildness, this set her beside herself with fury.

"Come, now, tell me--you, Corporal--is it reasonable? Isn't it permissible to use all that the good God has put in our way? And then to go and say that the dung of animals is cleaner! No; it's jealousy! Folks have a spite against me in Rognes, because the vegetables grow more vigorously on my ground. Tell me, Corporal, does it disgust you?"

Jean replied, in embarrassment: "Well, I don't find it exactly appetising. One ain't used to it. I daresay though, that it's only fancy."

This frankness threw the old woman into despair. Though she was not habitually a tale-bearer, she could not restrain her bitterness.

"Oh, that's it, is it? They've already set you against me. Ah, if you only knew how spiteful they are, if you had any idea of what they say about you!"

Then she let loose the gossip of Rognes about the young man. To begin with, they had execrated him because he was an artisan, and sawed and planed wood, instead of tilling the ground. Then, when he had taken to the plough, they had taxed him with taking the bread out of other people's mouths, by coming into a district that wasn't his own. Did any one know

where he came from? Hadn't he done some evil deed at home, that he didn't even dare to go back there? Then they spied upon his intercourse with La Cognette, and asserted that some fine night the two of them would administer a bowl of devil's broth to Hourdequin, and rob him.

"Oh, the blackguards!" muttered Jean, who became pale with indignation.

Lise, who was drawing a jugful of boiling lye from the cauldron, started laughing at the mention of La Cognette, a name she sometimes twitted him with in jest.

"And since I've begun, I'd better make an end of it," pursued La Frimat. "Well, there's no kind of abomination they don't talk about, since you began visiting here. Last week--wasn't it?--you presented them both with silk neckerchiefs, which they were seen wearing on Sunday at mass. The filthy beasts say that you go to bed with the two of them!"

This settled matters. Trembling, but resolute, Jean got up and said:

"Listen, my good woman. I will make reply in your presence, which shall not stand in my way. I will ask Lise if she will consent to my marrying her. You hear me ask, Lise? and if you say yes, you will make me very happy."

She was just then emptying her jug into the bucking-tub. She did not hurry, but finished carefully watering the linen. Then, with her arms bare and moist with steam, becoming quite grave, she looked him in the face.

"So you're in earnest?"

"Thoroughly in earnest."

She did not seem surprised. It was natural. Only she did not answer yes or no; there was evidently something on her mind which annoyed her.

"You needn't say no on account of La Cognette," resumed he, "because La Cognette----"

She cut him short with a gesture. She was well aware that all the larking at the farm was of no consequence.

"There is also the fact that I've absolutely nothing but my skin to bring you; whereas, you own this house and some land."

Again she waved her arm, as if to say that in her position, with a child, she agreed with him in thinking that things were evenly balanced.

"No, no! it's not that," she declared at length. "Only there's Buteau."

"But since he refuses?"

"That's certain. And now there's no sentiment in the matter, for he's behaved too badly. But, all the same, Buteau must be consulted."

Jean reflected for a good minute. Then, very sensibly, he replied:

"As you please. It's due to the child."

La Frimat, who was gravely emptying the pail of drainings into the cauldron, thought herself called upon to approve the step--albeit favourable to Jean, the honest fellow; he surely was neither pig-headed nor brutal--and she was delivering herself to this effect, when Françoise was heard outside, returning with the two cows.

"I say, Lise," she cried, "come and look. La Coliche has hurt her foot."

They all went out, and Lise, at the sight of the limping animal, with her left fore-foot bruised and bleeding, flew into a sharp passion--one of those surly bursts with which she used to sweep down upon her sister when the latter was little, and happened to be in fault.

"Another of your pieces of neglect, eh? You, no doubt, dropped off to sleep on the grass, the same as you did the other day?"

"I assure you I didn't. I don't know what she can have done. I tied her to the stake, and she must have caught her foot in the cord."

"Hold your tongue, liar and good-for-nothing! You'll get killing my cow some day."

Françoise's black eyes flashed fire. She was very pale, and indignantly stammered out:

"Your cow, your cow! You might, at least, say our cow."

"Our cow, indeed? A chit like you with a cow!"

"Yes, half of all that's here is mine. I've a right to take half and destroy it if it amuses me to do so!"

The two sisters stood facing each other, hostile and threatening. It was the first painful quarrel in the course of their long fondness. This question of *meum* and *tuum* left them both smarting: the one exasperated by the rebellion of her younger sister, the other obstinate and violent under a sense of injustice. The elder gave way, and went back into the kitchen, so as to restrain herself from boxing her sister's ears. When Françoise, having housed her cows, re-appeared, and went to the pan to cut herself a slice of bread, there was an awkward silence.

Lise, however, had calmed down. The sight of her sister's sullen resistance was now an annoyance to her, and she was the first to speak, thinking to make an end of it by an unexpected piece of news.

"Do you know," she asked, "Jean wants to marry me, and has proposed?"

Françoise, who was standing by the window eating her bread, remained indifferent, and did not even turn round.

"What odds does that make to me?"

"The odds it makes to you," replied Lise, "are that you'd have him for a brother-in-law, and I want to know if you'd like him?"

Françoise shrugged her shoulders.

"Like or dislike, him or Buteau, what's the good? So long as I don't have to sleep with him. Only, if you want to know, the whole thing is hardly decent."

And she went outside to finish her bread in the yard.

Jean, feeling rather uncomfortable, affected to laugh, as at the whims of a spoilt child; while La Frimat declared that in her young days a wench like that would have been whipped till the blood came. As for Lise, she remained a moment silent and serious, absorbed once more in her washing. Then she wound up by saying:

"Well, Corporal, we'll leave it like that. I don't say no, and I don't say yes. The hay-making is come: I shall see our people; I'll make inquiries, and find out how things stand. And then we'll settle something. Will that do?"

"That'll do!"

He held out his hand, and shook the one she gave him. From her whole person, steeped in warm steam, there exuded a true housewifely scent: a scent of wood-ash perfumed with orris.

PART II. — CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER IV.

For the last two days Jean had been driving the mowing-machine over the few acres of meadow belonging to La Borderie, on the banks of the Aigre. From daybreak till night the regular click of the blades had been heard, and that morning he was getting to the end. The last swaths were falling into line behind the wheels, forming a layer of fine, soft, pale-green herbage. The farm having no hay-making machine, he had been commissioned to engage two haymakers: Palmyre, who worked to the utmost of her strength and harder than a man; and Françoise, who had got herself engaged out of caprice, finding amusement in the occupation. Both of them had come with him at five o'clock, and, with their long forks, had laid out the *mulons*: little heaps of half-dried grass which had been gathered together over night, by way of protecting it from the night-dews. The sun had risen in a clear glowing sky cooled by a breeze. It was the very weather to make good hay in.

After breakfast, when Jean returned with his haymakers, the hay of the first acre mowed was finished. He felt it and found it dry and crisp.

"I say," cried he, "we'll give it just another turn, and to-night we'll begin the stacking."

Françoise, in a grey linen dress, had knotted over her head a blue handkerchief, one edge of which flapped on her neck, while two corners fluttered loosely over her cheeks, and shaded her face from the sun's brilliant rays. With a swing of her fork she took the grass and flung it up, while the wind blew out of it a kind of golden dust. As the blades fluttered, a strong subtle scent arose from them: the warm scent of cut grass and withered flowers. She had grown very hot, walking on amid the continuous fluttering, which put her in high spirits.

"Ah, my child," said Palmyre, in her doleful voice, "it's easy to see you're young. When night comes, you'll feel your arms stiff."

They were not alone, for all Rognes was mowing and making hay in the meadows around them. Delhomme had got there before daybreak, for the grass, when wet with dew, is tender to cut, like spongy bread; whereas it toughens in proportion as the sun grows hotter. At that moment, one distinctly heard its resistant whir under the scythe, which, held by Delhomme, swept restlessly to and fro. Nearer, in fact contiguous with the grass of the farm, there were two bits of land, belonging one to Macqueron and the other to Lengaigne. In the first, Berthe, in a genteel dress with little flounces, and a straw hat, had come in attendance on the haymakers, by way of recreation, but she was already tired, and remained leaning on her fork in the shade of a willow. In the other field, Victor, who was mowing for his father, had just sat down, and, with his anvil between his knees, was beating at his scythe. For ten minutes nothing had been distinguishable, amid the deep thrilling silence of the air, save the persistent hurried taps of the hammer on the steel.

Just then Françoise came near to Berthe.

"You've had enough of it, eh?" asked the former.

"More or less. I'm beginning to feel tired. You see, when one isn't used to it."

Then they chatted, whispering about Suzanne, Victor's sister, whom the Lengaignes had sent to a dressmaking establishment at Châteaudun, and who, after six months, had fled to Chartres to live "gay." It was said she had run off with a notary's clerk; and all the girls in Rognes whispered the scandal and speculated on the details. Living gay to them meant orgies of gooseberry syrup and Seltzer water, in the midst of a seething crowd of men, dozens of whom waited to court you, in Indian file, in the back shops of wine-sellers.

"Yes, my dear, that's how it is. Isn't she going it?"

Françoise, being younger, stared in stupefaction.

"Nice kind of amusement!" she said at last. "But unless she comes back the Lengaignes will be all alone, as Victor has been drawn for the conscription."

Berthe, who espoused her father's quarrel, shrugged her shoulders. A lot Lengaigne cared. His only regret was that the child hadn't stopped at home to be turned up, and so bring some custom to his shop. Hadn't an uncle of hers, an old man of forty, had her already, before she went to Châteaudun, one day when they were peeling carrots together. And, in a lower whisper, Berthe gave the exact words and circumstances. Françoise, bending double, was suffocated with laughter, it seemed so funny to her.

"Gracious goodness! How stupid to do things like that!"

Then resuming her work she withdrew, raising forkfuls of grass and shaking them in the sun. The persistent hammering on the steel was still heard. Some minutes later, as she came near to where the young man was sitting, she spoke to him.

"So you're going to be a soldier?"

"Oh, in October. Plenty of time yet; there's no hurry."

She struggled against her desire to question him about his sister, but she spoke of her despite herself.

"Is it true what they say, that Suzanne is now at Chartres?"

He, completely indifferent, made answer:

"I suppose so! She seems to enjoy it."

Then, in the distance, seeing Lequeu, the schoolmaster, who was seemingly strolling down by chance, he resumed:

"Hullo! There's somebody after the Macqueron girl. What did I tell you? He's stopping and poking his face into her hair. Get along with you, you old nincompoop! You may sniff round her, but you'll never get anything but the smell!"

Françoise began laughing again, and Victor pursued the family vendetta by falling foul of Berthe. No doubt the schoolmaster wasn't worth much: a bully who cuffed children, a sly-boots whose opinions nobody knew, capable of toadying the girl to get her father's money. But, then, Berthe was no better than she should be, with all her fine town-bred airs. It was no use her wearing flounced skirts and velvet bodices, and stuffing out her behind with table-napkins; the underneath was none the better. Quite the reverse, indeed, for she was up to snuff; she'd learnt more by being brought up at the Châteaudun school than by stopping at home to mind the cows. No fear of her getting herself let in for a child; she preferred to ruin her constitution in solitude.

"How do you mean?" asked Françoise, who did not understand.

He made a gesture, whereupon she became serious, and said, unreservedly:

"That's how it is, then, that she's always saying dirty things, and rubbing herself up against you."

Victor had begun beating his blade again; and, tapping between each phrase, he went on saying some very improper things about Berthe.

These set Françoise off into another fit of mirth; and she only calmed down, and went on hay-making, on seeing her sister Lise on the road coming towards the meadow. Lise went up to Jean, and explained that she had settled to go and see her uncle about Buteau. For the last three

days that step had been agreed upon between them, and she promised to come back and tell him the answer. When she went off, Victor was still tapping, and Françoise, Palmyre, and the other women were still flinging the grass in the dazzling light of the vast bright sky. Lequeu was very obligingly giving a lesson to Berthe, thrusting, raising, and lowering her fork as stiffly as a soldier at drill. Afar off, the mowers advanced unceasingly, with a constant, steady motion, swinging on their loins, and with their scythes perpetually sweeping to and fro.

For an instant Delhomme stopped and stood upright, towering above the others. From the cow-horn, full of water, that hung at his belt, he had taken his hone, and was sharpening his scythe with a bold, rapid gesture. Then he bent his back again, and the sharpened steel was heard whizzing still more keenly and bitingly over the meadow.

Lise had arrived at the Fouans' house. At first she was afraid there was no one at home, the place seemed so dead. Rose had parted with her two cows; the old man had just sold his horse; there were no signs of animals, no work, nothing stirring in the empty buildings and yard. Nevertheless the door yielded to her touch; and on entering the common room, which was gloomy and silent amid all the mirth out-of-doors, Lise found old Fouan standing up and finishing a bit of bread and cheese, while his wife was idly seated and looking at him.

"Good morning to you, aunt. Everything going on satisfactorily?"

"Why, yes!" answered the old woman, brightening up at the visit. "Now we are gentlefolks, we have only to take a holiday all day long."

Lise tried to make herself agreeable to her uncle too. "And the appetite's all right, it seems?" said she.

"Oh!" he answered, "it isn't that I'm hungry. Only it's something to do if one eats a bit now and then, it helps to pass the day."

He seemed so dull that Rose started off into an enthusiastic account of their happiness in not having to do any work. True enough, they had earned it well: it was not a bit too soon to see others running about while they lived on their income. Getting up late, twiddling their thumbs, not caring a pin for wind and weather, not having a single care--ah! it was a thorough change for them; it was perfectly heavenly. He, roused and exhilarated, joined in and improved upon her account. And yet, under all the forced joy, under the feverish exaggeration of their talk, there was plainly perceptible the profound tedium, the torture of idleness, that had racked these two old folks ever since their arms, suddenly becoming inert, had begun to get out of order by disuse, like old machinery thrown aside as waste iron.

At length Lise ventured on the subject of her visit.

"Uncle, they tell me that the other day you had a talk with Buteau."

"Buteau is a thorough beast!" cried Fouan, suddenly infuriated, and not giving her time to finish. "If he wasn't as pig-headed as a carroty-haired donkey, should I ever have had that bother with Fanny?"

This first disagreement with his children he had so far kept to himself, but, in his bitterness of heart, the allusion had now escaped him.

On entrusting Delhomme with Buteau's share, he had intended to rent it out at eighty francs a hectare, while Delhomme purposed simply paying a double allowance: two hundred francs for his own share, and two hundred for the other. That was fair, and the old man was the more angry because he had been in the wrong.

"What bother?" asked Lise. "Don't the Delhommes pay you?"

"Oh, yes!" replied Rose. "Every three months, at the stroke of twelve, the money is there on the table. Only there are ways and ways of paying, aren't there? And my old man, being sensitive, would like people to

behave at least decently. Whereas, since this worry about Buteau's share, Fanny comes to us with the same air as she would go to the process-server, as if she were being cheated."

"Yes," added the old man, "they do pay, and that's about all. I don't think that enough. There's a certain consideration due. Their money don't pay off everything, does it? We're mere creditors now, nothing more. And yet we're wrong to grumble. If they'd all of them pay."

He broke off, and an awkward silence fell. This allusion to Hyacinthe, who hadn't handed in a copper, but was mortgaging his share bit by bit, and getting drunk on the proceeds, wrung the heart of his mother, who was always impelled to defend that darling scamp of hers. She dreaded lest this other sore point should be laid bare, and so she hastily resumed:

"Don't go fretting yourself about trifles! What's the odds so long as we're happy? Enough's as good as a feast."

She had never opposed her husband like this before, and he looked at her fixedly.

"Your tongue runs too fast, old woman. I don't mind being happy, but I won't be worried."

She shrank into herself again, huddling lazily together on her chair while he finished his bread, rolling the last mouthful over and over to prolong the recreation. The dull room sank to sleep.

"I wanted to know," went on Lise, "what Buteau means to do with regard to me and his child? I haven't worried him much hitherto, but it's time to settle one way or the other."

The two old people uttered not a word. She then questioned the father pointedly.

"As you saw him, he must have mentioned me. What did he say?"

"Nothing. He never opened his lips on the subject. And, in fact, there's nothing to be said. The priest's pestering me to arrange things, as if anything could be arranged so long as the fellow refuses to accept his share."

Lise pondered in great perplexity.

"You think he'll accept some day?"

"It's still possible."

"And you think he'd marry me?"

"There's a chance of it."

"Then you'd recommend me to wait?"

"Why, that depends on yourself. Everybody acts as they feel."

She was silent, unwilling to speak of Jean's proposal, and not knowing how to get a definite answer. Finally she made a last effort.

"You can well understand that I'm sick of not knowing what to expect after all this time. I want a yes or a no. Suppose, uncle, *you* went and asked Buteau? Do!"

Fouan shrugged his shoulders.

"To begin with, I'll never speak to the skunk again. And then, my girl, how simple you are! Why make a stubborn fool like that say no, who'd always say no afterwards. Leave him free to say yes some day, if it's to his interest."

"To be sure!" concluded Rose, simply, once more the echo of her husband.

Lise could get nothing more definite out of them. She left them, shutting the door upon the room, which relapsed into its benumbed condition; and the house seemed empty once more.

In the meadows on the banks of the Aigre, Jean and his two haymakers had begun the first stack. It was Françoise who built it up. Placed on a heap in the centre, she disposed circularly around her the forkfuls of hay which the young man and Palmyre brought her. Little by little the stack grew bigger and higher, she being always in the midst, and filling up the hollow in which she stood with bundles of hay as soon as the wall around her rose up to her knees. The rick was now beginning to take shape. It was already more than two yards high, and Palmyre and Jean had to raise their forks on high. The work did not proceed without the accompaniment of loud laughter, inspired by the exhilaration of the open air, and by the jests bandied to and fro amid the sweet-scented hay. Françoise, whose handkerchief had slipped down off the back of her head, which was bare to the sun, and whose hair was in disarray and entangled with grass and withered flowers--was in the happiest of moods amid that growing pile in which she was plunged up to her thighs. She buried her bare arms in the mass; every bundle tossed up from below covered her with a shower of stalks; and at times she vanished from sight and pretended to come to grief among the eddies.

"Oh, good gracious! There's something pricking me!"

"Whereabouts?"

"Under my petticoats; up here."

"It's a spider. Hold hard! keep your legs together."

And the laughter grew louder, at improper jests that made them split their sides.

Delhomme, in the distance, was disturbed, and turned his head for an instant but without ceasing to ply his scythe. Oh, yes! a lot of work that little chit must be doing, playing like that! Now-a-days girls were spoiled, and only worked to amuse themselves. He went on, laying the swath low with hurried strokes, and leaving a clear wake behind him. The sun sank in the heavens, the mowers broadened the gaps they had made. Victor, although he had left off hammering his blade, evinced no particular haste; and as La Trouille went by with her geese, he slily slipped off, and ran to meet her under shelter of a thick line of willows that edged the stream.

"Aha!" cried Jean; "he prefers something else to mowing."

Françoise burst into a fresh guffaw.

"He's too old for her," said she.

"Too old! Listen, and you'll hear them."

Then he began to coo so funnily and successfully that Palmyre, holding her stomach as if she were griped by colic, said:

"What's come to that fellow Jean to-day? Isn't he funny?"

The forkfuls of grass were being flung up higher and higher, and the stack was steadily growing.

They joked about Lequeu and Berthe, who had eventually sat down. Most likely she was having herself tickled at a respectful distance with a straw. But let the schoolmaster set the pastry to bake as much as he liked, he wouldn't have the eating of it.

"Isn't he dirty!" repeated Palmyre, who couldn't laugh, and was consequently suffocating.

Then Jean chaffed her.

"Don't tell me that you've got to the age of thirty-two and never yet had to do with a young man!"

"Me! Never!"

"What! No young man ever caught hold of you? You've no lovers?"

"No, no."

She had grown quite pale and serious, with her long grief-stained face, already worn and stupefied by labour, and retaining only the clear, shallow, faithful eyes of a hound. Perchance she was recalling her miserable, friendless, loveless life, the existence of a beast of burden whipped back at night, heavy-eyed, to its stable. She had stopped short, and stood grasping her fork, with a far-away look towards the distant country-side, that she had never even seen.

There was a silence. Françoise was listening, motionless, at the top of the stack; while Jean, who had also stopped to take breath, went on with his banter, hesitating to say what was on the tip of his tongue. At length he resolved to speak out.

"Then it's all lies what they say about you and Hilarion?" he asked.

Palmyre's face suddenly turned from white to crimson, the rush of blood momentarily restoring her the aspect of her lost youth. She stammered with surprise and vexation, at a loss for the disclaimer she desired.

"Oh, the backbiters! Only to think of it!"

Françoise and Jean, with a resumption of noisy mirth, spoke both at once, pressed her hard, and flurried her. Why, in the ruined cow-shed, where Palmyre and Hilarion lodged, there was hardly any room to move about. Their mattresses lay touching on the floor; how easy it was to make a mistake in the dark!

"Come, it's true; confess it's true! Besides, it's well known."

Drawing herself up, Palmyre, quite bewildered, gave vent to her passion and pain:

"Well, and supposing that it were true," she exclaimed, "what the devil is it to you? The poor boy hasn't so happy a life as it is."

A couple of tears rolled down her cheeks, so wrung was she by her feeling of motherhood for the cripple. After earning him his bread, supposing she did accord him what others refused him, why it cost them nothing! With the darkened intellect of clod-like beings, these pariahs and outcasts of love would have been at a loss to relate how the thing had been brought about. An instinctive approach without deliberate consent, he stung by desire, she passively yielding to his purpose; thus it had begun. Then, too, there was the happiness of their feeling warmer, in that miserable hovel where they both shivered with the cold.

"She is right, what is it to us?" resumed Jean, in his grave, kindly way, touched to see her in such agitation. "It's their own concern and nobody else's."

Besides, another circumstance took up their attention. Hyacinthe had just come down from the Château, the old cellar in which he dwelt amid the brushwood, half-way up the hill; and from the top of the road he was calling for La Trouille with all his might, cursing and bawling out that his drab of a daughter had disappeared two hours ago, without troubling her head about their evening meal.

"Your daughter," cried Jean to him, "is under the willows with Victor."

Hyacinthe raised both his hands to heaven.

"Oh, the cursed troll! Bringing dishonour upon me! I'll go and fetch my whip."

He then ran back again to fetch the large horse-whip he kept hung up behind his door for use on these occasions.

La Trouille must have heard him, for there was a prolonged rustling under the leaves, as of some one escaping; and, two minutes later, Victor carelessly strolled back. He examined his scythe, and finally returned to his work. When Jean called over to him to ask if he had got the stomach-ache, he replied:

"Rather!"

The rick was now nearly completed, more than four yards high, solid, and rounded into bee-hive shape. Palmyre flung up the last trusses with her long thin arms; and Françoise, standing on the apex, seemed to grow taller against the pale sky, lit up by the pink glow of the setting sun. She was now quite out of breath, quite tremulous after her exertion, bathed in perspiration, with her hair clinging to her skin. Her bodice was open, showing her firm little bosom, while her skirt had burst its fastenings and was slipping down from her haunches.

"Oh, dear! How high it is! I'm getting giddy," she said; and then she laughed shiveringly, and hesitated; not venturing to descend, but merely stretching out her foot and instantly drawing it back again.

"No, it's too high. Go and get a ladder," she added.

"Sit down, stupid, why don't you!" said Jean. "Slide down."

"No, no! I'm afraid; I can't!"

There were shouts of encouragement, and some free jesting.

Not on her stomach; that would make it swell! On her croup, provided she had no chilblains there! He, standing below, was getting excited as he looked up at the legs of the girl, gradually feeling exasperated to see her so high out of reach, and unconsciously seized with a virile desire to get close to her and embrace her.

"Don't I tell you you won't do yourself any damage," he called. "Roll down; you'll fall into my arms."

"No, no!"

He had stationed himself in front of the rick, and spread out his arms, displaying his chest that she might throw herself upon it. When she suddenly came to a decision, and, shutting her eyes, let herself go, her fall down the slippery side of the stack was so smart that she knocked him over and got somehow a-straddle round his ribs. She lay on the ground, with her petticoats up, choking with laughter and spluttering out that she wasn't hurt. On feeling her burning and perspiring form against his face, he had seized her in his arms. Her powerful feminine odour, the strong smell of the hay and the fresh air, intoxicated him, stiffening all his sinews with a sudden mad desire. Then, too, there was something else; a hitherto unknown passion for this child, now bursting into strength; a sentimental and sensual fondness which had originated long back, increasing with their frolicsome, hearty laughter, and ending in this longing to clasp her there upon the grass.

"Oh, Jean, don't! You're breaking my bones!"

She still laughed, thinking him in play. He, catching sight of Palmyre's saucer-like eyes, started up shivering, with the wild aspect of a drunkard sobered by the view of a yawning chasm. What was this? It was not Lise he wanted, but this chit! The thought of Lise's flesh in contact with his own had never so much as quickened his heart; whilst all his blood rose and suffocated him at the mere idea of kissing Françoise. Now he knew why he was so fond of visiting and helping the two sisters. Yet the child was so young that he was ashamed and in despair.

Lise was just then coming back from the Fouans. On the road she had reflected. She would have preferred Buteau, because, after all, he was the

father of her baby. The old folks were right; why push things on? The day Buteau said no there would still be Jean to say yes.

She accosted the latter without delay.

"No answer; uncle knows nothing. Let us wait."

Still distraught and quivering, Jean stared at her without comprehending. Then he remembered: the marriage, the infant, Buteau's consent, the whole arrangement that, two hours earlier, he had considered advantageous for her and for himself. He hastened to reply:

"Yes, yes, let us wait. That'll be best."

Night was drawing in. One star already shone in the violet sky. In the growing twilight, the dim round outlines of the first stacks--protuberances on the smooth expanse of meadow--were all that was distinguishable. But the odours from the warm earth rose in greater strength amid the calm air: sounds were heard more distinctly, more prolonged and more musically limpid. Voices of men and women, faint laughter, mingled with the snort of an animal, the clink of an implement; while some mowers, growing pertinacious over a strip of meadow, went on unremittingly with their task, the broad regular whizz of the scythe still resounding, although the work was no longer visible.

PART II. — CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER V.

Two years had passed in this active monotonous country life; and, with the fated return of the season, Rognes had lived its eternal round of the same toils, the same slumbers.

There stood on the road, down by the corner where the school was, a fountain of spring water, to which all the women came to get their drinking-water, the houses being furnished with nothing but pools, for the use of cattle and for watering purposes. At six o'clock in the evening the fountain was the head-quarters of the district Gazette. The least events were echoed there; and there the villagers indulged in endless commentaries upon the leg of mutton that some of their neighbours had eaten for dinner, and the daughter of such-a-one who had been in the family-way since Candlemas. For two years the same gossip had run its course with the seasons, ever renewed and never new; always children born too soon, men drunk, women beaten; a great deal of work resulting in a great deal of wretchedness. There had happened so many things, and yet nothing at all.

The Fouans, the distribution of whose property had made a sensation, were vegetating so sleepily as to be forgotten. Things had remained at the same pass: Buteau still stubborn, and still not married to the elder Mouche girl, who was rearing her child. It was the same with Jean, who had been accused of sleeping with Lise. Perhaps he didn't; but then, why was he always hanging about the house of the two sisters? That seemed suspicious. Then there were days when the fountain-time would have been dull, but for the rivalry of Cœlina Macqueron and Flore Lengaigne, whom La Bécu continually set at each other, while pretending to reconcile them. Then, amid a deep calm, there had just broken upon them

two big events--the coming elections, and the celebrated question of the road from Rognes to Châteaudun. These involved a mighty blast of gossip. The full pitchers remained standing in a row; the women could never get away. One Saturday evening, indeed, there had almost been a fight.

Now, the very next day, M. de Chédeville, the late deputy, was breakfasting at Hourdequin's farm of La Borderie. He was doing his canvassing, and wanted to get on the right side of Hourdequin, who had great influence with the peasantry of the district; albeit that, thanks to his position as official candidate, he, Chédeville, was nearly certain to be re-elected. He had once been to Compiègne, and the whole district spoke of him as "the Emperor's friend." That was enough. He was chosen, as if he had spent a night at the Tuileries. This M. de Chédeville was an ex-beau; he had been the pink of fashion under Louis Philippe, retaining Orleanist tendencies in his heart of hearts, and he had ruined himself on women. He now only possessed his farm of La Chamade, near Orgères, where he never set foot save at election time. Not only was he disgusted by the falling value of farm property, but he had been seized late in life with political ambition, with a vague notion of restoring his fortunes by practical statesmanship. Tall, and still elegant, with laced bust and dyed hair, he led a reformed life, though his eyes still sparkled at the glimpse of a petticoat, and he was preparing--so he gave out--some important speeches on agricultural questions.

The night before, Hourdequin had had a violent quarrel with Jacqueline, who wanted to be present at the breakfast.

"You and your deputy, indeed! D'ye think I should eat your deputy? So you're ashamed of me?" said she.

But he held out. Only two places were laid, and she was sulking, despite the gallant air of M. de Chédeville, who, perceiving her, had drawn his

own conclusions, and couldn't keep his eyes off the kitchen, whither she had retired in injured dignity.

The breakfast was drawing to a close. An Aigre trout after an omelette, and some roast pigeons.

"The fatal thing," said M. de Chédeville, "is that commercial freedom which the Emperor had gone crazy about. No doubt things went on well after the treaties of 1867, and every one marvelled. But to-day the real effects are being felt. See how prices have fallen everywhere. I am for Protection; we must defend ourselves against the foreigner."

Hourdequin, lolling back in his chair and ceasing to eat, spoke slowly and dreamily:

"Wheat, which is at fifty-two francs a quarter, costs forty-six to produce. If it falls any lower it means ruin. And every year, folks say, America is increasing her exportation of cereals. We are threatened with a regular glut of the market. What will become of us, then? See here! I've always been in favour of progress, science, and liberty. Well, I'm shaken in my creed, upon my word. Yes, indeed. We can't starve to death; let's have Protection."

He returned to the wing of his pigeon, and went on:

"You're aware that your antagonist, Monsieur Rochefontaine, the owner of the building works at Châteaudun, is a violent Free-trader?"

They chatted for a moment about this candidate, who employed from a thousand to twelve hundred workmen: a tall, intelligent, energetic fellow, opulent to boot, and greatly inclined to serve the Empire, but so hurt at not having secured the prefect's support, that he insisted on standing as an independent candidate. He had no chance, however; the country electors treating him as a public foe the moment he ceased to be on the strongest side.

"Lord!" resumed M. de Chédeville: "there's only one thing he wants: bread to be low, so that he may pay his hands more cheaply."

The farmer who had been about to pour himself out a glass of claret set the bottle on the table again.

"That's the dreadful part of it!" cried he. "On the one hand, there are ourselves, the peasants, who want to sell our grain at a remunerative price; and, on the other, there's the manufacturer, who drives prices down to lessen wages. It's war to the knife; and how's it to end? Come!"

In truth, here was the burning question of the hour: the antagonism that strains the framework of society. This question was far beyond the ex-beau, who contented himself with nodding his head, and making an evasive gesture.

Hourdequin, having filled his glass to the brim, emptied it at a draught.

"It can't end. If the peasant makes a profit out of his corn, the artisan starves; if the artisan feeds well, the peasant dies. What then? I don't know. Let's feed on one another!"

With both his elbows on the table, fairly launched, he relieved his feelings in a violent way. His secret disdain for this absentee landlord, who knew nothing of the land he lived by, betrayed itself by a certain ironical tremor in his voice.

"You've asked me for facts for your speeches. Well, to begin with: it's your own fault if La Chamade doesn't pay. The farmer you've got there is taking things easy, because his lease is expiring, and he suspects your intention of raising the rent. You're never seen; so people snap their fingers at you and rob you. Nothing more natural. Then there's a simpler reason for your ruin: we're all being ruined. La Beauce--fertile La Beauce, our nurse and mother--is worked out!"

So he went on. For instance, in his young days, Le Perche, on the other side of the Loir, was a poor ill-cultivated country, almost grainless, the inhabitants of which used to come to Cloyes, Châteaudun, and Bonneval, and hire themselves out at harvest-time. Now-a-days, thanks to the continued rise in price of manual labour, it was Le Perche that prospered, and would soon outstrip La Beauce; without taking into account that it was growing rich on live stock. For the markets of Mondoubleau, Saint-Calais, and Courtalain supplied the open districts with horses, oxen, and swine. La Beauce only lived thanks to her sheep. Two years earlier, when congestion of the spleen had decimated the flocks, she had gone through a terrible crisis, so much so, that if the plague had continued, she would never have survived.

Then he entered on his own struggles, his own story; his twenty years' battle with the land, which had left him poorer than before. He had always lacked capital. He had not been able to improve certain fields as he would have wished. Marling, alone, was inexpensive, yet no one but him had given any attention to it. It was the same with the manures. No one used aught but farm manure, which was insufficient. All his neighbours scoffed at his trying chemical manures, the inferior quality of which, however, often justified the mockers. As for the rotation of crops, he had been bound to conform to the custom of the country, and use the triennial system without fallows, now that the plan of artificial meadows and the culture of hoed plants was extending. Only one machine, the threshing-machine, was beginning to find acceptance. Such was the deadly, inevitable, numbing influence of routine; and if he, progressive and intelligent, felt that influence, what must it be for the hard-headed peasantry hostile to all improvement? A peasant would starve sooner than take a handful of earth from his field and carry it for analysis to a chemist, who could tell him what it contained in excess and in what it was deficient; the manure it required, and the crops best adapted to it. No; the peasant was always receiving from the soil, and never dreaming

of restoring anything; acquainted with no manure but that of his two cows and his horse, of which he was very thrifty. The rest was left to chance; the seed thrown into any kind of soil, and left to germinate at random; and heaven was blasphemed if it never germinated at all. Whenever the peasant's eyes became opened, and he decided to devote himself to a rational and scientific system, the produce would be doubled. Till then, ignorant and headstrong, without a ha'porth of progress in him, he would go on murdering the soil. And thus it was that La Beauce--the ancient granary of France, flat and arid, with nothing but her corn--was gradually wasting away through exhaustion; weary of being bled at every vein, and of nurturing a race of blockheads.

"Ah! Every blasted thing is failing!" he cried, brutally. "Our sons will see the bankruptcy of the soil. Are you aware that our peasants, who once used to save up their coppers to buy a bit of land they had hungered after for years, are now buying stocks and shares--Spanish, Portuguese, even Mexican? And they wouldn't risk fifty francs to improve an acre. They have lost confidence. The parents go round and round in a circle of routine like foundered animals; the sons and daughters think of nothing but letting the cows run loose, and sprucing themselves up to gad off into town. And the worst of it is that education--that famous education, don't you know? that was going to put everything straight--favours this exodus, this depopulation of the country, by inspiring the children with silly vanity and false ideas of comfort. See here, now. At Rognes they've a schoolmaster, that Lequeu, a fellow broken loose from the plough and eaten up with spite against the land he just missed cultivating. Well, how can you expect him to reconcile his boys to their lot, when he treats them every day like savages, like brute beasts, and sends them back to the paternal dung-heap with a scholar's contempt. The remedy, good heavens! The assured remedy would be to have other schools--a practical system of teaching, graduated courses of agriculture. There's a fact for

you. I insist upon that. It is there, in those schools perhaps, that salvation lies, if there's yet time."

M. de Chédeville, pre-occupied, and feeling thoroughly uncomfortable under this mighty avalanche of facts, hastened to reply:

"No doubt, no doubt."

Then as the servant brought in the dessert--a cream cheese and some fruit--leaving the kitchen door wide open, he caught sight of Jacqueline's pretty profile. He bent forward, winked, and fidgeted, to attract that amiable personage's attention; and then resumed, in the mellow tones of his old lady-killing days:

"You don't tell me anything about the small holdings."

He set forth the current notions--the small proprietorships created in '89, favoured by the law, destined to regenerate agriculture; in short, everybody a landowner, and each man devoting his intellect and energies to the cultivation of his scrap of land.

"Stuff and nonsense!" declared Hourdequin. "To begin with, the petty landowners existed before '89, and in almost as large a proportion. And in the next place, there's a good deal to be said on both sides about cutting up the soil."

With his elbows again on the table, eating some cherries and spitting out the stones, he now entered into details. In La Beauce the petty landowners, those who inherited less than fifty acres, were in the proportion of eighty per cent. For some time almost all the day labourers--those who worked on the farms--had been buying bits of land, fragments of large demesnes, and cultivating them at odd moments. That was certainly an excellent plan, for the labourer was thus at once bound to the soil. It might be added in favour of the system of petty holdings that it developed worthier, more self-reliant, and better educated men.

Finally, it conduced to a comparatively larger yield, the produce also being of better quality; for the owner exerted himself to the utmost, and tended his crop minutely. But how many inconveniences there were on the other hand! First, this superiority in yield and quality was due to excessive work. The parents and children toiled to death in order to live. Indeed, it was this exhausting, ungrateful labour that was finally depopulating the rural districts. Next, with the subdivision of the soil there was increased transport, which spoilt the roads and augmented the cost of production, besides leading to waste of time. It was impossible to employ machinery on the smaller holdings, on which, moreover, the triennial rotation was necessary. This was certainly unscientific, for it was unreasonable to demand two successive crops of cereals, oats, and wheat. In short, extreme subdivision of the soil seemed so surely to portend danger, that, after having encouraged it by law just after the Revolution--for fear of seeing the large domains formed again--the State had now begun to facilitate transfers by diminishing the charges thereon.

"Mark this," he continued, "a strife has set in, and is growing in acrimony, between the larger and smaller landowners. Some, like me, favour the system of large holdings, because they seem more in accord with science and progress, with the increased use of machinery, and the circulation of large sums of money. Others, on the contrary, only believe in individual effort, and praise the system of small holdings; dreaming of cultivation on the most minute scale; a system in which every one would produce his own manure, look after his own quarter of an acre, sort out his seeds one by one, allotting the required soil to each kind, and then raise each plant by itself under glass. Which of the two will get the upper hand? Hang me if I've any idea! I am well aware, as I told you just now, that every year large ruined farms are dropping to pieces in my neighbourhood, and falling into the hands of gangs, and that the system of small holdings is gaining ground. I know, moreover, at Rognes, a very curious instance of an old woman who derives quite a comfortable

subsistence for herself and her husband from less than an acre of land. They nickname her Mother Caca, because she doesn't shrink from emptying the contents of her own and her husband's chamber vase on to her vegetables, as is the custom of the Chinese, so it would seem. But that is hardly better than gardening. I can't picture cereals growing in beds like turnips; and if, for a peasant to be independent, he produced something of everything, what would become of our Beaucerons--who have only their wheat to rely upon--when our Beauce has been cut up like a chess-board? However, if one lives long enough, one will see which will triumph in the future--the system of large holdings or that of small ones."

At this point he broke off and shouted: "Are we going to have that coffee to-day or to-morrow?"

Then, lighting his pipe, he resumed: "Unless both be killed at once, and that's what folks are in a fair way of doing. Mark this, agriculture is on its last legs, and will die if some one doesn't come to its assistance. Everything is crushing it down--taxes, foreign competition, the continued rise in the cost of manual labour, the drain of money which goes to manufacturing undertakings, and stocks and shares. To be sure, there are no end of promises abroad. Every one is lavish of them--the prefects, the ministers, the Emperor. But the dust rises on the roads, and nothing is seen coming. Shall I tell you the strict truth? Now-a-days, a cultivator who holds on either wastes his own money or other people's. It's all right for me, because I have a few coppers laid by. But I know people who borrow money at five per cent., while their land does not yield them so much as three. The collapse is fatally ahead. A peasant who borrows is a ruined man. He will infallibly be stripped of everything--to his last shirt.

"Only last week one of my neighbours was evicted, the parents and their four children being flung into the street, after the lawyers had robbed them of their live stock, their land, and their house. And yet for years and

years people have been promising us the establishment of an agricultural loan-company which would lend money at a reasonable rate of interest. I only wish they may get it! All this disgusts even good workers, who have come to such a pass that they think twice even before getting their wives into the family way. No, thanks! What! another mouth to feed--another starveling born to wretchedness! When there isn't bread enough for all, no more children are born and the nation perishes."

Monsieur de Chédeville, who was quite disconcerted, ventured on an uneasy smile, and murmured: "You don't look on the bright side of things."

"That is true, there are times when I feel inclined to let everything go hang," replied Hourdequin gaily. "And no wonder; these troubles have been going on now for thirty years. I don't know why I have persisted. I ought to have sold everything off, and taken to something else. One reason with me, no doubt, was force of habit; and then there is the hope that things will mend, and then--why not confess it?--a passionate fondness for the occupation. When once this cursed land gets hold of you, it doesn't let go in a hurry. Look here! Look at that ornament on that table. It is foolish of me, perhaps, but when I look at it I feel consoled."

He stretched out his hand and pointed to a silver cup, protected from the flies by a piece of muslin. It was a reward of merit gained in an agricultural competition.

These competitions, in which he triumphed, were the whetstone of his vanity and one of the causes of his obstinacy.

In spite of the obvious weariness of his guest, he dallied over his coffee, and was pouring some brandy into his cup for the third time when, drawing out his watch, he suddenly started up: "Goodness! It's two o'clock, and I am due at a meeting of the Municipal Council. It's about a

road. We are quite willing to pay half the money, but we should like to obtain a subsidy from the State for the other half."

Monsieur de Chédeville had risen from his chair, delighted at being set free.

"In that matter I can be of service to you," he said. "I'll get your subsidy for you. Shall I take you to Rognes in my gig since you are pressed for time?"

"Just the thing!" replied Hourdequin, and he went out to see to the harnessing of the conveyance, which had remained in the yard.

When he came back the deputy was no longer in the room, but eventually he perceived him in the kitchen. No doubt he had pushed the door open; and he was standing there smiling in front of the radiant Jacqueline, and complimenting her at such close quarters that their faces nearly touched. Having sniffed each other, they had summed each other up, and told each other so by unmistakable glances.

When Monsieur de Chédeville had got into his gig again, La Cognette held Hourdequin back for a minute to whisper in his ear:

"He is nicer than you are. He doesn't think that I am only fit to be hidden away."

On the road, while the vehicle was rolling along between the wheat fields, the farmer returned to his one pre-occupation, the soil. He now volunteered manuscript notes and figures, for he had kept accounts for some years. In the whole of La Beauce there were not three people who did as much, and the small landowners, the peasants, shrugged their shoulders at the idea, and did not even understand it. Nevertheless, one's situation could only be made clear by accounts, which indicated what products had proved profitable and what had entailed a loss. Moreover, accounts gave one the cost price, and thus indicated on what terms one

ought to sell. At Hourdequin's, every servant, every animal, every field, every tool even, had a page to itself, with debit and credit columns, so that he was constantly enlightened as to the success or failure of his operations.

"At all events," said he, with his hoarse laugh, "I know how I am ruining myself." Then he broke off to indulge in a muttered curse. During the last few minutes, as the vehicle rolled along, he had been trying to make out what was going on by the road-side some distance off. Although it was Sunday, he had sent a recently-purchased hay-making machine, on a new system, to turn a cutting of lucern, which required immediate attention. The farm-hand, being off his guard, and not recognising his master in this strange vehicle approaching, was making fun of the machine in company with three peasants whom he had stopped on the way. "There," said he, "that's a nice old tin-pot thing. It creaks like an old pulley, breaks the grass to bits, and poisons it. On my word, three sheep have already died of it."

The peasants, meanwhile, sneered and examined the hay-making machine as if it were some strange, spiteful animal. One of them even said: "All these things are devilish inventions to ruin poor folks. What will our wives do when people are able to make hay without them?"

"A precious lot the masters care about that," resumed the farm-hand, launching out a kick at the machine. "Ugh! you beast!"

Hourdequin had heard him, and popping his head and shoulders out of the vehicle, he shouted: "Go back to the farm, Zéphyrin, get your wages, and take yourself off."

The farm-hand stood stupefied, while the three peasants went off, indulging in insulting laughter and loudly audible jests.

"There," said Hourdequin, throwing himself back on the seat. "You saw them. That's the state in which they are. One might imagine that

improved machinery burnt their fingers. Besides, they treat me as if I were a townsman. They take less trouble with my land than with other people's, saying that I can afford to pay higher prices; and they are supported by my neighbours, who accuse me of getting the country folk into idle ways. They even assert that if there were many like me, the farmers would no longer be able to get their work done as they used to."

The gig now reached the foot of the hill, and was entering Rognes by the Bazoches-le-Doyen road, when the deputy perceived the Abbé Godard coming out of Macqueron's shop, where he had breakfasted that morning after mass. Monsieur de Chédeville's election worries once more took possession of him, and he asked: "How about the religious feeling in our country districts?"

"Oh! there's an outward show, but nothing at the bottom of it," carelessly replied Hourdequin, who certainly made no outward show himself. He stopped at the tavern kept by Macqueron, who was standing at the door with the priest, and he introduced his assessor, who was wearing a greasy old overcoat. Cœlina, looking very neat in her print dress, ran up, pushing forward her daughter Berthe, the pride of the family, who was genteelly clad in a silk dress, with narrow mauve stripes.

Meanwhile, the village, which had been in a dead-alive state, as if every one had been made lazy by so fine a Sunday, woke up in its surprise at this unusual visit. Peasants appeared on the thresholds, and children peeped out from behind their mothers' skirts. At the Lengaignes' especially there was much hurrying to and fro, and the husband was craning his head out, with his razor in his hand, while his wife, Flore, stopped weighing twopenny worth of tobacco to press her face against the window-pane, both of them being extremely vexed at seeing the gentleman get down at their rival's door. Little by little people came round, and a crowd collected, the whole of Rognes being by this time aware of the important event.

Addressing the deputy, Macqueron, who was flushed and embarrassed, exclaimed: "This is, indeed, an honour, sir."

But Monsieur de Chédeville was not listening to him, being enchanted with the pretty face of Berthe, who, with her bright eyes, surrounded by slight bluish rings, was staring at him boldly. Her mother was saying how old she was and where she had been to school; while she herself, smiling and curtseying, invited the gentleman to condescend to walk in.

"Why, certainly, my dear child!" he exclaimed.

Meanwhile the Abbé Godard, button-holing Hourdequin, was begging him once more to persuade the Municipal Council to vote some funds, so that Rognes might at length have a priest of its own. He returned to this subject every six months, giving his reasons--the strain it was upon him, and the constant quarrels he used to have with the village; not to mention that the service itself suffered. "Don't say no!" he added, quickly, seeing the farmer make an evasive gesture. "Speak about it, all the same; I will await the reply."

Then just as Monsieur de Chédeville was on the point of following Berthe, he pushed forward and stopped him in his stubborn, genial way.

"Excuse me, sir," he began. "But the poor church here is in such a state! I want to show it to you, and you must get it repaired for me. No one listens to me. Come, come, I implore you!"

Very much annoyed, the ex-beau was resisting, when Hourdequin, on learning from Macqueron that several of the councillors were already at the municipal offices, where they had been waiting half-an hour, said unceremoniously: "That's the thing! Go and see the church. You will kill time like that until I have done, and then you can take me back home." Monsieur de Chédeville was thus obliged to follow the priest. The crowd had now become larger, and several people started off, dogging his steps.

They had grown bolder, too, and everybody was thinking of asking him for something.

When Hourdequin and Macqueron had gone upstairs into the room where the council met, they found three councillors there--Delhomme and two others. The apartment, a moderately large white-washed room, had no other furniture than a long deal table and twelve straw-bottomed chairs. Between the two windows, from which one overlooked the road, there was a cupboard in which the archives were kept, mingled with sundry official documents, while on shelves round the wall there were piles of canvas fire-buckets, the gift of a gentleman, which they did not know where to put, and which proved a useless encumbrance, as they had no fire-engine.

"Gentlemen," said Hourdequin, politely, "I ask your pardon. I have had Monsieur de Chédeville breakfasting with me."

No one moved a muscle; and it was impossible to say whether they accepted this excuse. From the windows they had certainly seen the deputy arrive, and they were also interested in the coming election. But it was not politic for them to commit themselves.

"The devil!" now cried the farmer. "There are only five of us. We shall not be able to come to any decision."

Fortunately, Lengaigne came in. At first he had resolved not to attend the meeting, as the question of the road did not interest him, and he had even hoped that his absence would hamper the voting. Later on, the arrival of Monsieur de Chédeville throwing him into a fever of curiosity, he had decided to go upstairs to find out all about it.

"Good! There are six of us now, and we shall be able to vote," cried the mayor.

Lequeu--who acted as secretary--having made his appearance, with a snappish, surly air, and with the minute-book under his arm, there was no further impediment in the way of opening the meeting. Delhomme, however, had begun to whisper to his neighbour, Clou, the farrier, a tall, withered fellow, very dark. As the others began to listen to them, they suddenly became silent. One name had, however, been caught--that of the independent candidate, Monsieur Rochefontaine--and then the rest of them, after sounding each other, fell with a word, a sneer, or a simple grimace upon this candidate, whom nobody even knew. They were on the side of order; in favour of keeping things as they were, and of remaining submissive to the authorities who ensured the sale of produce. Did that gentleman think himself stronger than the Government? Did he imagine that he could raise corn to eighty-eight francs a quarter? It was bold, indeed, for a man without a vestige of support to send out circulars and promise more butter than bread. They ended by dubbing him an adventurer and a rogue, who went on the stump through the villages for the sake of robbing them of their votes, just as he would have robbed them of their coppers. Hourdequin--who might have explained to them that Monsieur Rochefontaine, a free-trader, really shared the Emperor's ideas--wilfully let Macqueron display his Bonapartist zeal, and Delhomme propound his opinion in his strong, limited, common-sense way; while Lengaigne, whose official position kept his mouth shut, sat growling in a corner, inaudibly repeating his vague Republican views. Although Monsieur de Chédeville had not once been mentioned, he was alluded to in every sentence that was uttered; they all grovelled, as it were, before his title of official candidate.

"Come, gentlemen," resumed the mayor; "suppose we commence."

He had seated himself at the table in his presidential broad-backed arm-chair.

The assessor was the only one who sat down by his side. Two of the councillors remained standing upright, and two leaned upon a window-sill. Lequeu had handed the mayor a sheet of paper, and whispered in his ear. Then he left the room in a dignified way. "Gentlemen," said Hourdequin, "here is a letter addressed to us by the schoolmaster."

It was read aloud, and proved to be a request for an increase of thirty francs in the master's yearly salary, the application being based upon the energy he displayed. Every face had grown dark. They were always very close with the public money, as if it came out of their own pockets, especially in the matter of the school. There was not even a discussion; they refused the application point-blank.

"Good! we'll tell him to wait. The young man is in too much of a hurry. And now let's deal with this matter of the road."

"Beg pardon!" interrupted Macqueron, "I want to say a word or two about church matters."

Hourdequin, surprised, now understood why the Abbé Godard had breakfasted with the innkeeper. What ambition was urging the latter to push himself to the front like this? However, his propositions met with the same fate as the schoolmaster's request. It was in vain he argued that they were rich enough to pay for a priest of their own, and that it was scarcely respectable to have to put up with the leavings of Bazoches-le-Doyen. They all shrugged their shoulders, and asked if the Mass would be any better for it. No, no! They would have to repair the parsonage; it would cost too much to have a priest to themselves, and half an hour of the other's time each Sunday was sufficient.

The mayor, hurt by his assessor taking matters into his own hands, concluded: "There is no need for any change. The council has already decided. Now about our road. We must make an end of it. Delhomme,

pray have the goodness to call in Monsieur Lequeu. Does the fellow imagine that we are going to discuss his letter all day long?"

Lequeu, who had been waiting on the stairs, came in gravely, and as they did not apprise him of the fate of his request, he remained snappish and restless, swelling with covert insult. What a contemptible set of men these peasants were! However, he had to take the map of the road out of the cupboard and spread it out on the table.

The council knew the map well. It had been hanging about for years. But none the less they all approached, elbowing one another, and deliberating once more. The mayor enumerated the advantages which Rognes would derive. The gentleness of the slope would allow vehicles to drive up to the church. Then two leagues would be gained on the road to Châteaudun, which now passed through Cloyes. And the village would only have to pay the cost of some two miles of the road, their Blangy neighbours having already voted the remaining bit, as far as the junction with the highway from Châteaudun to Orleans. They listened to him with their eyes fixed steadfastly on the paper, and never opening their mouths. What had especially prevented the plan from coming to a head was the indemnity question. Every one saw a fortune to be made out of this road, and was anxious to know if one of his fields would be required, and if he would be able to sell it to the village at the rate of a hundred francs a perch. But supposing their own fields were not encroached upon, why on earth should they vote for the enrichment of others? A deal they cared about the gentle slope or the shorter route! Their horses would have to pull a bit harder, that was all!

So Hourdequin had no need to make them talk to learn their opinions. *He* only desired the road so eagerly because it would run past the farm and several of his fields. In the same way Macqueron and Delhomme, whose land would border the road, were in favour of the vote. That made three; but neither Clou nor the other councillor had any interest in the question;

and as for Lengaigne, he was violently opposed to the project, having in the first place nothing to gain by it, and being also aggrieved that his rival, the assessor, should reap any advantage by it. If Clou and the doubtful one voted on the wrong side there would be three against three, so Hourdequin became anxious. At last the discussion began.

"What's the good? what's the good of it?" repeated Lengaigne. "We've a road already, haven't we? It's just the pleasure of spending money, taking it out of Jean's pocket to put it in Pierre's. Now, there's you! You promised to give your ground up for nothing!"

This was a slap at Macqueron, who, bitterly regretting his fit of generosity, gave the lie direct.

"I never promised anything! Who told you that?"

"Who? Why, confound it! you did! Before people, too! Why, Monsieur Lequeu was there, he can tell us. Wasn't it so, Monsieur Lequeu?"

The schoolmaster, angered at not being told his fate, made a coarse gesture of contempt. What were their beastly disputes to him?

"Oh, all right!" resumed Lengaigne. "If people can't be open and honest, we'd better live in the woods! No, no, I'll have nothing to do with your road! A piece of jobbery!"

Seeing that matters were taking a nasty turn, the mayor hastened to interpose.

"That's all rubbish. We haven't to enter into private questions. It's the public interest, the interest of all, that ought to be our leading guide."

"Quite so," said Delhomme, "The new road will be of great service to the whole place. Only we must be certain of our ground. The prefect keeps on saying to us: 'Vote a sum of money, and then we will see what the

Government will do for you.' Now, if it didn't do anything at all, what's the good of our wasting our time voting?"

Hourdequin thought this the moment to publish the great piece of news he was holding in reserve.

"Talking of that, gentlemen, I have to tell you that Monsieur de Chédeville engages to get a subsidy representing half the expenses from the Government. You know he is the Emperor's friend. He will only have to speak to him about us at dessert."

Lengaigne himself was moved at this. All the faces had assumed a beatifical expression, as if the Host were passing. In any case the re-election of the deputy was secured. The Emperor's friend was the man for them, the man who had access to the fountain-head of office and wealth--the known, honourable, powerful master! Nothing passed, however, but some noddings of the head. These things were self-evident. Why mention them?

Still Hourdequin was disquieted by the non-committal policy of Clou. He got up and glanced outside; and perceiving the rural constable, he bade him go for old Loiseau and bring him in alive or dead. This Loiseau was an old deaf peasant, appointed a member of the council by way of a joke; he never attended its meetings, because they set his head in a whirl, so he declared. His son worked at La Borderie, and he was entirely devoted to the mayor. Accordingly, on his appearance, the latter merely shouted into one of his ears that it was about the road. Each of them was already awkwardly filling up his voting paper, poring over the writing with outstretched elbows, to prevent the others from reading it. Then they proceeded to vote the half of the outlay, placing their papers in a little tin receptacle like a poor-box. The majority was superb. There were six votes for, and only one against--that of Lengaigne. That beast Clou had voted right. The meeting was dissolved, after every one had signed the minute-book, which the schoolmaster had previously prepared, leaving

the result of the vote blank. Then they all went away moodily, without a farewell word or the pressure of a hand, dropping off one by one on the stairs.

"Oh, I forgot!" said Hourdequin, coming back to Lequeu, who was still waiting. "Your request for an increase of salary is rejected. The council is of opinion that too much money is already spent on the school."

"A set of beasts!" cried the young man, green with fury, when he was alone. "Go and live in your pig-sties!"

The meeting had lasted two hours. In front of the municipal offices Hourdequin picked up Monsieur de Chédeville, who was just come back from his visits round the village. To begin with, the priest had not spared him a single one of the church dilapidations--the cracked roof, the broken windows, the bare walls. Then, as he was at length making his escape from the vestry, which wanted repainting, the inhabitants, quite emboldened, fought for him, each one trying to bear him away, to hear some complaint, or to grant some favour. One had dragged him off to the village pond, which was not cleaned out for want of money; another pointed out a spot on the bank of the Aigre where he wanted a wash-house built; a third pressed for the widening of the road in front of his door, so that his cart could turn round; there was even an old woman who, having pushed the deputy into her cottage, showed him her swollen legs, and asked him whether he didn't know of a remedy in Paris. Flustered and breathless, he smiled, made himself pleasant, and kept on promising. Oh, he was a good sort, and affable to the poor!

"Well, shall we go?" asked Hourdequin. "They are waiting for me at the farm."

Just then Cœlina and her daughter Berthe ran out again to beg Monsieur de Chédeville to come in for a moment; and that gentleman would have gladly done so, for he had at length found breathing-space, and was

gratified to renew his acquaintance with the pretty, bright, dissipated eyes of the young lady.

"No, no!" resumed the farmer, "we haven't time. Some other occasion."

He then bundled him back into the gig; while to a question from the waiting priest he answered that the council had taken no steps in the matter of the parish service. The driver whipped forward his horse, and the vehicle spun off through the midst of the friendly and delighted village. The priest alone was furious, as he set off to walk his two miles from Rognes to Bazoches-le-Doyen.

A fortnight later Monsieur de Chédeville was elected by a large majority, and towards the end of August he had redeemed his promise--the subsidy was granted for the opening of the new road, and the work was immediately put in hand.

On the evening when the first stroke of the pick-axe was given the thin and dark Cœlina stood at the fountain listening to La Bécu, who, with her lanky arms intertwined under her apron, was talking at endless length. For the last week the meetings at the fountain had been revolutionised by this mighty question of the road. The constant topic was the money paid as an indemnity to So-and-so, and the slanderous rage of the rest. Every day La Bécu kept Cœlina posted as to what Flore Lengaigne said; not, of course, to provoke dissension, but, contrariwise, to induce them to explain themselves, that being the surest way of bringing them to an harmonious understanding. Women were standing round, forgetful and listless, with their pitchers full beside them.

"Well, so she said, just like that, that it was all arranged between the assessor and the mayor how they could best swindle in the matter of the ground. And she also said that your husband was double-tongued."

At this moment Flore came out of her house with her pitcher in her hand. When she had got there, fat and flabby, Cœlina, with her arms a-kimbo,

shrewish and virtuous, broke out into vile abuse, falling upon her in fine style, flinging in her teeth her hussy of a daughter, and taxing her with behaving improperly with her customers. The other, dragging along her slippers trodden down at heel, confined herself to repeating, in a whimpering tone:

"There's a baggage for you! There's a baggage for you!"

La Bécu then threw herself between them, and tried to make them kiss each other; which all but resulted in their tearing one another's hair out. Then she let fly a piece of news.

"I say! Talking of that, you know that the Mouche girls are going to get five hundred francs?"

"You don't say so!"

The quarrel was at once forgotten. They all crowded up amid the pitchers.

Certainly! The road up there on the plateau skirted the field belonging to the Mouche girls, and cut five hundred yards off it. At a franc the yard, that made five hundred francs; and the ground that bordered the road would be enhanced in value. It was, indeed, a piece of luck.

"In that case," said Flore, "Lise has become a capital match, child and all. That big simpleton Corporal has been wide awake, all the same, in sticking out."

"Unless," added Cœlina, spitefully, "unless Buteau comes back again. His share, too, is finely improved by the road."

At this moment La Bécu turned round and nudged them.

"'Sh! Be quiet!"

Lise was coming up, gaily swinging her pitcher. Then the procession past the fountain resumed its course.

PART II. — CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VI.

Having got rid of La Rousse, who was too fat and no longer calved, Lise and Françoise had resolved to go that Saturday to Cloyes market to buy another cow, Jean offering to drive them there in one of the farm carts. He had kept his afternoon free, and the master had given him permission to take the vehicle, on account of the rumours which were current concerning the young fellow's betrothal to the elder girl. The marriage was, in fact, decided on; or, at least, Jean had promised to lay the question in person before Buteau during the following week. The matter needed settlement; one or the other of them must marry the girl.

So they started off at about one o'clock, he in front with Lise, and Françoise by herself on the other seat. From time to time he turned round and smiled at the younger girl, whose knees were in warm contact with his loins. 'Twas a great pity that she was fifteen years younger than he; and although, after much reflection and many deferments, he had resigned himself to his marriage with the elder girl, it was, no doubt, the idea of living as a relative near Françoise that really influenced him. And then, how many things we do out of passivity, without knowing why, except that we did once determine to do them.

As they entered Cloyes, Jean applied the brake and urged the horse down the steep declivity near the burying-ground. As he came out at the intersection of the Rue Grande and the Rue Grouaise, intending to put up at "The Jolly Ploughman" hostelry, he pointed abruptly to the back of a man who was going along the latter street.

"Hallo! That looks like Buteau," he said.

"It is Buteau," declared Lise.

"No doubt he's going to Monsieur Baillehache's. Does he mean to accept his share of the land?"

Jean smacked his whip with a laugh.

"There's no knowing," he said. "He's a deep one!"

Although Buteau had recognised them a good way off, he made no sign. He went trudging on, with his back bent; and they both watched him out of sight, thinking to themselves that possibly they would have an opportunity for an explanation on reaching the courtyard of "The Jolly Ploughman." Françoise, who had remained silent, got down first by one of the wheels. The yard was already full of unharnessed vehicles, resting on their shafts, and the old buildings of the inn were buzzing with life.

"Now, are we going there?" asked Jean on his return from the stable, whither he had been with his horse.

"Certainly, at once."

When outside, however, instead of making straight for the cattle-market--which stood on the Place Saint-Georges--by taking the Rue du Temple, the young man and the girls hung about and sauntered down the Rue Grande, through the vegetable and fruit-sellers who lined the street on either side. He wore a silk cap, and a large blue blouse over black cloth trousers; while the girls, likewise in holiday clothes, with their hair done up close under their little round caps, wore dresses to match each other--a dark-coloured woollen bodice above an iron-grey skirt, relieved by a large cotton apron with narrow pink stripes. They did not link arms, but walked in Indian file, their hands swinging loosely amid the jostling of the crowd. There was a crush of servants and ladies in front of the squatting peasant-women, who, on arriving with one or two baskets apiece, had set them down on the ground and opened them. They recognised La Frimat, whose hands were blue with having carried her load from Rognes, and who had a little of everything in her two

overflowing baskets--some salad, beans, plums, and even three live rabbits. An old man, alongside, had just emptied out a cart-load of potatoes, which he was selling by the bushel. Two women, mother and daughter--the latter a notorious street-walker, named Norine--had exposed on a rickety table some cod, salt herrings, and bloaters, the mere remnants of barrels, the strong brine of which made one's throat smart. The Rue Grande, so deserted on the other days of the week, despite its handsome shops--its chemist's, its ironmonger's, and, above all, its emporium of Parisian novelties, Lambourdieu's bazaar--proved too narrow every Saturday; the shops being crammed full, the vehicles blocked, and the roadway fairly choked by the encroachments of the market-women.

Lise and Françoise, followed by Jean, worked their way as far as the poultry-market, in the Rue Beaudonnière, whither the farmers had sent vast crates, in which cocks were crowing, and from which the necks of affrighted ducks protruded. Chickens, dead and plucked, were ranged in deep layers inside numerous packing-cases. Here also one saw some more peasant-women, each of whom had brought her four or five pounds of butter, her two dozen eggs, and her cheeses--large dry ones, small rich ones, and others of a greyish tinge, which had been moistened with wine, and had a pronounced pungent flavour. Others had come with two pairs of fowls tied by their feet. Ladies were haggling, and a large consignment of eggs had caused a crowd to cluster in front of an inn--"The Poulterer's Meeting House." It so happened that Palmyre was among the men who were unloading the eggs. Indeed, on Saturdays, when there was a dearth of work at Rognes, she hired out her services at Cloyes, carrying burdens which made her stagger.

"There's no denying she earns her livelihood!" remarked Jean.

The crowd was now growing denser and denser. Vehicles still poured in by the Mondoubleau road, defiling over the bridge at a jog trot. On either

hand stretched the gentle curves of the Loir, running flush with the meadows, and embanked on the left with the town gardens, whose lilacs and laburnums drooped down to the water's edge. There was a bark-mill, clicking noisily up stream, together with a large flour-mill--a huge building, whitened by a constant stream of meal from the blowers on the roof.

"Well!" said Jean again, "are we going there?"

"Yes, yes."

Then they retraced their steps up the Rue Grande, stopping once more on the Place Saint-Lubin, opposite the municipal offices, where the corn-market was held. Lengaigne, who had brought four sacks, was standing there with his hands in his pockets. In the middle of a ring of silent, downcast peasants, Hourdequin was angrily holding forth. A rise had been looked for; but even the current price--eighteen francs--was unsteady, and a final fall of five sous was apprehended. Macqueron went by with his daughter Berthe on his arm; he in a badly-cleaned overcoat, and she dressed in muslin, with a bunch of roses in her hat.

As Lise and Françoise, after turning down the Rue du Temple, were skirting Saint-George's Church, against which the hawkers installed themselves with haberdashery, ironmongery, and parcels of stuffs, they ejaculated: "Oh, there's aunt Rose."

And, indeed, it was the old woman. Fanny had come instead of Delhomme to deliver some oats, and had brought her mother in the cart, just to give her an outing. They were both waiting in front of the movable stall of a knife-grinder, to whom the old woman had given her scissors. For thirty years past he had ground them.

"Hallo! It's you!" said Fanny, as she turned round; and on perceiving Jean, she added: "So you're out for an airing?"

But when Rose and Fanny found out that the cousins were going to buy a cow, to supply the place of La Rousse, they grew interested and joined them, the oats having been already delivered.

The young man, left to himself, now walked behind the four women, who formed an open line, all abreast; and thus they turned on to the Place Saint-Georges.

This was a huge square, more than a hundred yards each way, stretching behind the apsis of the church, which overshadowed it with its old and lofty clock-tower of ruddy stone. Avenues of leafy limes enclosed the four sides, along two of which, moreover, there extended some chains riveted to stone posts, while on the other two sides there were long bars of wood, to which the animals were tethered. On this side of the open space, which fronted some gardens, the grass was growing as in an open meadow; but the opposite side, which was flanked by two roads and bordered by various inns--"The Saint-George," "The Root," and "The Jolly Reapers"--was downtrodden, hardened, and white with dust, which the wind blew to and fro.

Lise and Françoise, followed by the others, had some difficulty in making their way across the centre of the Place, where the crowd was congregated. Amid the confused mass of blouses of all shades, from the bright blue of new linen to the pale blue of twenty washings, nothing could be seen of the women save the round white spots of their little caps. A few ladies were bearing glistening silk parasols hither and thither. Laughter and sudden shouts were heard, mingling at last with the mighty animate murmur, upon which now and then there broke the neigh of a horse or the lowing of a cow. A donkey also set a-braying lustily.

"This way," said Lise, turning her head. The horses were at the far end, tethered to the bar, their coats bare and quivering, and with a cord knotted to their necks and tails. On the left, the cows were almost all loose, and were led to and fro by the vendors, who wished to show them

off better. Groups of people stopped and looked at them; and hereabouts there was no laughter and but little talking, merely a few scattered words now and then.

The four women at once fell into contemplation of a black and white Cotentine cow, which was offered for sale by a man and his wife. The latter, dark-complexioned and stubborn-looking, stood holding the animal in front; the man being in the rear, motionless and uncommunicative. The scrutiny lasted ten minutes, and was solemn and exhaustive; but not a word or a glance was exchanged. They moved on, and stationed themselves similarly in front of a second cow twenty paces off. This was a huge one, quite black, and was offered for sale by a young and pretty-looking girl, almost a child, who held a hazel-rod in her hand. Then followed seven more halts, as long and as silent as the previous ones, till the line of animals for sale was exhausted. Finally the four women went back to the first cow, and again became absorbed in contemplation.

This time, however, it was a more serious matter. Drawn up in a line, they pierced the Cotentine cow through and through with their keen, concentrated gaze. On her side, also, the woman who wished to sell it had said nothing, and her glance was elsewhere, as if she had not seen them come back and draw up in line.

At last Fanny bent down and whispered a brief remark to Lise about the animal. Old Rose and Françoise also exchanged impressions in a whisper. Then they relapsed into silence and immobility, and the scrutiny was continued.

"How much?" Lise suddenly asked.

"Four hundred francs," replied the peasant woman.

They affected to be driven away by this, and as they were looking for Jean they were surprised to find him behind them with Buteau, the two

chatting together like old friends. Buteau had come from La Chamade to buy a porker, and was negotiating for one on the spot. The pigs, which were in a movable pen at the back-end of the vehicle that had brought them, were biting one another and deafening the air with their squeals.

"Will you take twenty francs?" asked Buteau.

"No; thirty!"

"Fiddle! Go to bed with 'em!"

Bluff and merry, he went up to the women; accosting his mother, his sister, and his two cousins just as radiantly as if he had only left them on the previous day. They also were undisturbed, and seemed to have forgotten the two years of bickering and ill-feeling. The mother alone, who had been apprised of the first encounter in the Rue Grouaise, watched him out of her puckered eyes; trying to gather why he had been to the notary's. But of this there was no indication on his face, and neither of them said a word on the subject.

"So, cousin," he went on, "you're after buying a cow? Jean told me. Well, there's one over there, something like an animal! The sturdiest in the market!"

He then pointed to the identical black and white Cotentine cow.

"Four hundred francs!" said Françoise. "Thank you for nothing."

"Four hundred francs for *you*, my little dear!" said he, tapping her jocularly on the back.

She fired up, however, and returned his tap, angry and resentfully.

"Just you let me alone, will you? I don't play with men."

He made merrier still at this, and turned to Lise, who had remained serious and rather pale.

"And you? Will you let me have a hand in it? I wager I'll get it for three hundred. Will you bet five francs?"

"All right; if you like to have a try, you may."

Rose and Fanny nodded approval. They knew this ferocious fellow of old; a stubborn bargainer he was, an impudent liar and swindler, selling things at three times their value, and getting everything for a mere song. So the women let him go to the fore with Jean, while they hung back in the rear, so that he might not seem to belong to their party.

The crowd was growing denser around the cattle. The groups of loungers were leaving the sunny central space for the side avenues, where they strolled continually to and fro; the blue of their blouses darkened by the shadow of the lime-trees, and their ruddy countenances tinged with green by the reflection of the swaying patches of leaves. However, no one was as yet making purchases; not a sale had taken place, although the market had been open for more than an hour. The purchasers and vendors were taking time for consideration, and were warily scrutinising each other askance. In front of the cows there were now more people sauntering along and making prolonged halts. Overhead, the sound of a riot was borne past on the wings of the warm breeze. It was caused by two horses, tied side by side, who were rearing, biting each other, neighing furiously, and pawing the pavement with their hoofs. There was a fright, and some women fled, while quiet was restored by a shower of blows from a whip, crackling like a discharge of firearms, and accompanied by oaths. Then in the clearance made by the panic, a flock of pigeons alighted on the ground, and hurried along picking oats from the dung.

"Well, gammer! what's your price?" Buteau asked the peasant-woman.

The latter, who had observed the manœuvres of the party, repeated calmly: "Four hundred francs."

At first he treated the matter lightly, and joked, addressing the man, who was still standing silent and apart:

"I say, old 'un! is your good-woman thrown in at that price?"

During his banter, however, he made a close examination of the cow, and found it constituted as a good milker should be--with a wiry head, slender horns, and big eyes; the belly well-developed and streaked with large veins; the limbs inclining to slimness; the tail thin, and set very high. Stooping down, he assured himself of the length of the udders and the elasticity of the teats, which were regularly defined in position and well pierced. Then, resting one hand on the animal, he began bargaining, while he mechanically felt the bones of the crupper.

"Four hundred francs, eh? You're joking! Will you take three hundred?"

Meanwhile, with his hand he was verifying the strength and proper arrangement of the bones. Then he let his fingers slip between the thighs, to the part where the bare skin, of a fine saffron colour, bespoke an abundance of milk.

"Three hundred francs. Is it agreed?"

"No; four hundred," replied the peasant-woman.

He then turned away. When he came back, she decided to speak.

"She's a first-rate animal, indeed, in all points. She'll be two years old come Trinity Sunday, and she'll calve in a fortnight. She'd surely be just the thing for you."

"Three hundred francs," he repeated.

Then, as he was retreating, she glanced at her husband and called out:

"Here! So that I may get back, say three hundred and fifty, and have done with it."

He had stopped short, and now he began to run the cow down. She wasn't firmly set; her loins were weak; in short, she had been an ailing animal, and would have to be kept for a couple of years at a loss. Then he asserted that she was lame, which was not true. He lied for lying's sake, with obvious bad faith, hoping to irritate the woman and make her lose her head. But she only shrugged her shoulders.

"Three hundred francs."

"No; three hundred and fifty."

This time she let him go off. He rejoined the women; told them that the bait was taking, and that they must bargain for some other animal. So the party took their stand in front of the large black cow, held by the pretty girl. For this beast, as it happened, just three hundred francs were asked, and Buteau affected not to think that dear. He began to praise the cow, and then abruptly turned back to the other one.

"It's settled, then, that I take my money elsewhere?" he asked.

"Why, if it were only possible, but it isn't! You must nerve yourself a bit."

Then, leaning down and taking a full handful of udder, the woman added:

"See how plump and pretty!"

He did not assent, however; but said again:

"Three hundred francs."

"No, three hundred and fifty."

Negotiations seemed broken off. Buteau had taken Jean's arm, in definite token that he had let the matter drop. The women rejoined them, in a state of excitement, they being of opinion that the cow was worth the three hundred and fifty francs. Françoise, in particular, who was pleased with

the animal, talked of giving that price. But Buteau grew vexed; why should one be swindled like that? And for nearly an hour he held out, amid the anxiety of his cousins, who trembled whenever a purchaser stopped in front of the animal. Neither did he cease to watch it out of the corner of his eye; but it was the right game to play; it was necessary one should hold out. Nobody would certainly be so ready as that to part with his money; they would soon see if any one were fool enough to pay more than three hundred francs. And, in point of fact, the money was not forthcoming, albeit the market was drawing to its close.

Some horses were now being tried along the road. One, all white, was showing his paces, urged on by the guttural shouts of a man holding the halter and running by his side; while Patoir, the chubby and florid veterinary, stood looking on beside the purchaser in a corner of the square, with both hands in his pockets, and giving advice aloud. The inns hummed busily with a constant stream of drinkers, going in and out, away and back again, amid endless discussions and bargainings. The bustle and tumult were now at their full height, and one could not hear one's-self speak. A calf, that had lost its mother, lowed incessantly. Some black griffons and large yellow water-spaniels ran howling away from among the crowd, with crushed paws. Occasional lulls would occur, in which nothing was audible save the croaking of a flock of ravens who were wheeling round the church steeple. Penetrating through the warm smell of the cattle there came a strong stench of burnt horn, a nuisance due to a neighbouring farriery, where some peasants were availing themselves of the opportunity to have their animals shod.

"Hi! Three hundred?" repeated the unwearied Buteau, as he drew near the peasant woman again.

"No. Three hundred and fifty."

As there was another purchaser standing by, also bargaining, Buteau seized the cow by her jaws and forced them open to look at her teeth.

Then he let go of them with a grimace. At that moment the cow began to relieve herself, and the dung fell soft. He followed it with his eyes, and made a worse grimace than before. The purchaser, a tall thin fellow, was influenced, and went away.

"I'll have nothing more to do with her," said Buteau. "She's got curdled blood."

This time the woman committed the mistake of losing her temper, which was what he wanted. She abused him, and he retorted with a flood of filth. People gathered round and laughed. The husband still stood motionless behind the woman. At last he slightly nudged her, and she abruptly cried:

"Will you take her at three hundred and twenty francs?"

"No, three hundred."

He was going off once more, when she called him back in a choking voice.

"Well, then, you brute, take her! But, by God! if I had to go through it all again, I'd slap your face first!"

She was beside herself, and quivering with rage. He laughed noisily, added some gallant speeches, and offered to sleep with her for the balance.

Lise had immediately come up. She took the woman aside and paid her the three hundred francs behind a tree. Françoise had already got hold of the cow, but Jean had to push the creature behind, for she refused to budge. They had been trotting backwards and forwards for a couple of hours, Rose and Fanny having silently and untiringly awaited the end. Finally, on taking their departure, and searching for Buteau, who had vanished, they found him hail-fellow-well-met with the pig-dealer. He had just got his porker for twenty francs; and, in paying, he counted his

money out first in his pocket, then produced the exact sum, and counted it again in his half-closed hand. It was quite a job to get the pig into the sack which he had brought under his blouse. The rotten canvas burst, and the paws of the animal came through, as well as its snout. In this condition Buteau shouldered his burden, and carried the beast off, kicking, grunting, and squealing with alarm.

"I say, Lise, how about those five francs I won?"

She gave them to him, for fun, not expecting that he would take them. But he did take them, and put them out of sight in no time. Then they all made their way slowly towards "The Jolly Ploughman."

The market was at an end. Money was gleaming in the sunlight and chinking on the tables of the wine-shops. At the last moment everything was hurried to a conclusion. In the corner of the Place Saint-Georges there only remained a few animals unsold. Little by little, the crowd had ebbed away towards the Rue Grande, where the vegetable and fruit-sellers were clearing the roadway and carrying off their empty baskets. In a similar way there was nothing left at the poultry market save straw and feathers. The carts were already starting off again. Vehicles were being harnessed in the inn-yards; horses' reins, knotted to the pavement-rings, were being untied. Along all the roads, on every side, wheels were rolling, and blue blouses were blown about by the wind as the vehicles jolted over the pavement.

Lengaigne went by in this fashion, trotting on his little black pony, having turned his journey to account by buying a scythe. Macqueron and his daughter Berthe were still lingering in the shops. As for La Frimat, she went back on foot, laden as when she started, for she was carrying back her basket full of horse-dung, which she had picked up on the road. Among the gilding at the chemist's in the Rue Grande, Palmyre had been waiting half-an-hour to have a draught made up for her brother, who had been ill for a week past--some vile drug it was, that took one franc out of

the couple she had so laboriously earned. But what made the Mouche girls and their party hasten their sauntering steps was the sight of Hyacinthe, staggering along very drunk, and taking up all the street. They presumed that he had got another loan that day by mortgaging his last bit of land. He was chuckling to himself, and some five-franc pieces were jingling in his capacious pockets.

On arriving at "The Jolly Ploughman," Buteau said, simply and bluffly:

"So you're off? Look here, Lise, why not stop with your sister and have something to eat?"

She was surprised, and as she turned towards Jean, he added:

"Jean can stop too. I shall be very pleased if he will."

Rose and Fanny exchanged glances. The lad had certainly some idea in his head. Had he decided on marriage after going to the notary's to accept? The expression of his face still gave no clue. No matter! They ought not to hamper the course of things.

"Very good, then. You stay here and I'll go on with mother," said Fanny. "We are expected."

Françoise, who had never let go of the cow, now drily remarked: "I am going too."

She persisted in doing so. She always felt on thorns at the inn, she said, and she wanted to take her animal away at once. They had to give way, she made herself so disagreeable; and accordingly, as soon as the horse had been put to, the cow was tied behind the cart, and the three women got up.

Not till that moment did Rose, who expected a confession from her son, venture to ask him:

"You have no message for your father?"

"No, none," replied Buteau.

She looked him full in the face and pressed him: "There's no news, then?"

"If there is, you'll know it all in good time."

Fanny flicked the horse, which set off leisurely, while the cow behind, stretching out her neck, allowed herself to be dragged along. Lise was left between Buteau and Jean.

At six o'clock the three of them sat down at a table in a dining-room of the inn, communicating with the café. Buteau, without any one knowing whether he was standing treat or not, had gone into the kitchen and ordered an omelette and a rabbit. Meantime, Lise had urged Jean to have an explanation with him, so as to bring matters to an end, and save a journey. However, they had got through the omelette, and were eating the rabbit, without the young fellow, who was ill at ease, having as yet taken any steps. Neither did the other seem to have the thing at all on his mind. He ate heartily, laughed from ear to ear, and in a friendly way nudged his cousin and his companion with his knee under the table. Then they talked on more serious topics: of the new Rognes road; and although not a word was spoken about the five hundred francs' compensation, or the increased value of the land, these weighty considerations underlay all that was said. At last Buteau returned to his jests, and began clinking glasses; while into his grey eyes there visibly passed the idea of this piece of good business--this old flame he might marry, whose field, adjacent to his own, had almost doubled in value.

"Good Lord!" cried he, "aren't we to have any coffee?"

"Three coffees!" ordered Jean.

Another hour passed in sipping, and the decanter of brandy was exhausted without Buteau declaring himself. He advanced and retired, and spun matters out, just in the same way as he had haggled for the cow.

The thing was as good as settled; but, all the same, a certain amount of consideration was necessary. At last he turned abruptly to Lise and said to her:

"Why haven't you brought the child?"

She began to laugh, understanding this time that the affair was clenched. Then she gave him a slap, feeling pleased and indulgent, and confined herself to replying:

"Isn't this Buteau a horrid fellow?"

That was all. He laughed too. The marriage was decided.

Jean, hitherto embarrassed, now seemed relieved, and became gay. At last he even spoke right out.

"You have done well, you know, to return; I was about to step into your shoes."

"Yes, so I was told. Oh, I wasn't uneasy; you would, no doubt, have given me warning!"

"Why, certainly! The more so as it's better it should be you, on account of the child. That's what we always said, didn't we, Lise?"

"Always. That's the simple truth!"

The faces of all three melted into tenderness. They fraternised; especially Jean, who was free from jealousy, and felt astonished at finding himself helping on this marriage. He called for some beer, Buteau having shouted that, good Lord! they'd have something more to drink. With their elbows on the table, seated on each side of Lise, they now chatted about the recent rains which had beaten down the corn.

In the adjacent room, used as a café, Hyacinthe, seated at the same table as an old peasant, who was drunk like himself, was kicking up an

intolerable row. For that matter, nobody there could speak without shouting. There they sat, in blouses, drinking, smoking, and spitting amid the ruddy smoke of the lamps; and Hyacinthe's brazen, deafening voice was ever the loudest of all. He was playing "chouine," and a quarrel had just arisen anent the last trick between him and his companion, who stuck to his winnings with an air of calm obstinacy. He appeared, however, to be in the wrong. There was no settling it, and Hyacinthe, infuriated at last, yelled so loudly that the landlord interfered. Then he got up and went from table to table, with maudlin persistence, taking his hand with him to lay the point before the other customers. He bored everybody; and finally, beginning to shout again, he returned to the old man, who, with the imperturbability of injustice, bore the abuse like a stoic.

"Poltroon! Ne'er-do-weel! Just come outside, and see how I'll pitch into you!" shouted Hyacinthe.

Then he abruptly resumed his chair facing the other, and coolly said:

"I know a game. But you must bet. Will you?"

He had taken out a handful of fifteen or twenty five-franc pieces, and piled them up in front of him.

"That's the thing. You do the same."

The old man, feeling interested, took out his purse without a word, and set up an equal pile.

"Then I take one from your heap. Now look!"

He seized the coin, put it gravely on his tongue as if it had been a wafer, and swallowed it at a gulp.

"Now, it's your turn. Take one of mine. And the one who eats the most of the other's money, keeps it. That's the game!"

The old man, whose eyes were wide open with surprise, agreed to the suggestion, and with some difficulty he caused one coin to disappear. However, Hyacinthe, while crying out that there was no hurry, gulped down the crowns like so many plums. At the fifth one he swallowed, a rumour ran round the café, and a circle of people collected, petrified with admiration. What a throat the beggar must have, to stick money down his gizzard like that! The old man was swallowing his fourth coin, when he tumbled backwards, black in the face, choking and gurgling. For a moment they thought him dead. Hyacinthe had risen up, quite comfortable and wearing a bantering air. He, for his part, had ten of the coins in his stomach, so that there was a balance of thirty francs to his credit.

Buteau feeling anxious, and fearing he might be compromised if the old man did not recover, had left the table and given orders for the horses to be put to. As he stared vaguely at the walls, without saying a word about paying, although the invitation had come from him, Jean settled the bill. This capped Buteau's good spirits; and in the yard, where the two vehicles were waiting, he took his companion by the shoulders, saying:

"I expect you to come, you know. The wedding will take place in three weeks' time. I've been to the notary's and signed the deed; all the papers will be ready."

Then, helping Lise into his own cart: "Now then, up!" he added, "I'll see you back. I'll drive through Rognes, it won't be much farther."

Jean returned in his vehicle by himself. He considered this natural, and followed the others. Cloyes had relapsed into its death-like lethargy and was now asleep, lighted only by the yellow stars of the street lamps. Of the hubbub of the market nothing remained save the staggering, belated steps of some drunken peasant. The road stretched afar in deep darkness. Jean, however, did at last descry the other vehicle which was conveying the affianced pair. Better so, he thought; all was as it should be. And he

whistled loudly, freshened up by the night air, and feeling free and cheery.

PART II. — CHAPTER VII.

CHAPTER VII.

Once more had the hay-making time come round, with a blue scorching sky, cooled by occasional breezes. The marriage had been fixed for Midsummer-Day, which fell that year on a Saturday.

The Fouans had enjoined upon Buteau to begin the invitations with La Grande, who was the oldest of the family. Like a rich and dreaded queen, she required to be treated with respect. Accordingly, one evening, Buteau and Lise, rigged out in their Sunday clothes, went to beg her to attend the wedding ceremony, and afterwards the dinner, which was to take place at the bride's house.

When they arrived, La Grande was knitting in the kitchen by herself; and, without checking the play of her needles, she gazed at them fixedly, and let them explain their errand, and repeat the same phrases twice over. At last, in her shrill voice:

"The wedding? Nay, nay, certainly not!" said she. "What should I find to do at a wedding? Such things are only for those who amuse themselves."

They had seen her parchment face light up at the thought of the junketing that would cost her nothing, and they were convinced that she would accept. But it was always customary to press her a great deal.

"Oh, but, aunt! Really it couldn't go off without you," they said.

"No, no! It's not for folk like me. How am I to find the time, and get the clothes I should want. It's always an expense. People can get on very well without going to weddings."

They had to repeat the invitation a dozen times before she eventually said, sulkily:

"All right; since I can't get out of it, I'll go. But I wouldn't put myself out for anybody but you."

Then, seeing that they did not leave, she battled with herself; for, in such a case as the present one, a glass of wine was usually offered. Making up her mind, she at last went down into the cellar, although there was already an open bottle upstairs. However, the fact was she kept for these occasions a remnant of wine which had turned, and which she could not drink, it was so sour. She called it "the gnat destroyer." Having filled two glasses, she fixed her nephew and niece with so full an eye that they were obliged to drain them without blenching, for fear of giving offence. They left her with their throats burning.

The same evening, Buteau and Lise repaired to Roseblanche, where Monsieur Charles lived, arriving there in the midst of a tragic occurrence.

Monsieur Charles was in his garden, in a state of great agitation. No doubt some violent emotion had come upon him just as he was trimming a climbing rose-tree, for he had his pruning scissors in his hand, and the ladder was still resting against the wall. Controlling himself, however, he showed them into the drawing-room, where Elodie was embroidering with her modest air.

"So you're marrying each other in a week's time. That's quite right, my children," he said. "But we can't be of your party, for Madame Charles is at Chartres, and won't be back for a fortnight."

So saying, he raised his heavy eyelids to glance at the young girl, and then resumed:

"At busy times, during the large fairs, Madame Charles goes over there to lend her daughter a helping hand. Business has its exigencies, you know,

and there are days when they are overwhelmed with work at the shop. True, Estelle has taken over the management; but her mother is of great use to her, the more so as our son-in-law Vaucogne certainly doesn't do much. And besides, Madame Charles is glad to see the house again. No wonder! We've left thirty years of our lives there, and that counts for something!"

He was growing sentimental, and his eyes moistened as he vaguely gazed, as it were, into that past of theirs. It was true. In her dainty, snug retirement, full of flowers, birds, and sunshine, his wife was often seized with home-sickness for the little house in the Rue aux Juifs. Whenever she shut her eyes, a vision of old Chartres, sloping down from the Place de la Cathédrale to the banks of the Eure, rose up before her. She saw herself, on her arrival, threading the Rue de la Pie, and the Rue Porte-Cendreuse; then, in the Rue des Ecuyers, she took the shortest cut down the Tertre du Pied-Plat, where just at the bottom--at the corner of the Rue aux Juifs and the Rue de la Planche-aux-Carpes, Number 19 came into sight, with its white frontage and its green shutters, which were always closed. The two streets which it overlooked were wretched ones, and during thirty years she had beheld their miserable hovels and squalid inhabitants, with the gutter in the middle running with filthy water. But, then, how many weeks and months she had spent at home there, in the darkened rooms, without even crossing the threshold! She was still proud of the divans and mirrors of the drawing-room, of the bedding and the mahogany of the sleeping apartments, of all the chaste and comfortable luxury--their creation, their handiwork, to which they owed their fortune. A melancholy faintness came over her at the recollection of certain private corners, the clinging perfume of the toilet-waters, the peculiar scent of the whole house, which she had retained about her own person like a lingering regret. Thus she looked forward to all the periods of heavy work, and set out radiant and joyful, after receiving from her

grand-daughter two hearty kisses, which she promised to give mamma that evening in the confectionery shop.

"How disappointing! How disappointing!" said Buteau, really vexed at the idea of Monsieur and Madame Charles not coming to the wedding. "But suppose our cousin wrote to aunt to come back?"

Elodie, who was in her fifteenth year, thin-haired, and so poor-blooded that the fresh air of the country seemed to make her more anæmical still, raised her puffy, chlorotic, virginal face:

"Oh, no!" she murmured, "grandmamma told me the sweetmeats would be sure to keep her more than a fortnight. She is to bring me back a bag of them, if I'm good."

This was a pious fraud. At each journey she was brought some sweetmeats, which, she believed, had been manufactured at her parents' place.

"Well!" proposed Lise at length, "come without her, uncle, and bring the girl."

Monsieur Charles was not listening, however, having relapsed into an agitated state. He was going to the window, seemingly on the look-out for some one, and was swallowing a rising burst of anger. Unable to contain himself any further, he dismissed the young girl with a word.

"Go away and play for a minute or two, my darling," he said.

Then, when she had left--being accustomed to be sent away while grown-up people talked--he took his stand in the middle of the room and folded his arms, while his full, yellow-tinted, respectable face--very like that of a retired magistrate--quivered with indignation.

"Would you believe it? Such an abominable thing! I was trimming my rose-tree, and I had got on to the highest rung of the ladder, and was

bending mechanically over the wall, when what do I see? Honorine, my maid Honorine, with a man, at their dirty tricks! At the foot of my wall, too, the swine, the swine!"

He was choking, and began to pace up and down, with noble maledictory gestures.

"I'm waiting for her to pack her off, the disreputable hussy! We can't keep one. They're always put into the family-way. Regularly, at the end of six months, they become a perfect sight, and there's no having them in a respectable family. And now this one, caught in the act! Ah! the end of the world is come; there are no bounds to debauchery now-a-days!"

Buteau and Lise, who were astounded, joined, out of deference, in his indignation.

"Certainly, it's not proper; not at all proper--oh, no!"

He set himself in front of them once more.

"And just fancy Elodie climbing up that ladder, and coming on a scene like that! She, so innocent, who knows nothing at all, over whose very thoughts we watch! On my honour, it makes one shiver! What a shock, if Madame Charles were here!"

At that very moment, glancing out of the window, he perceived the child, who had set her foot on the lowest rung of the ladder, out of mere curiosity. He rushed forward and called out, in an agonised voice, as if he had seen her on the brink of a precipice:

"Elodie! Elodie! Come down; go away for the love of Heaven!"

Then his legs gave way, and he sank into an arm-chair, continuing to lament over the immorality of servants. Had he not come upon one in the kitchen showing the child what the posteriors of fowls were like? He had quite enough worry as it was to keep her clear of the grossness of the

peasantry, and the cynicism of animals; and he lost heart altogether to find a constant hot-bed of immorality in his own house.

"There she is coming in," he said, sharply. "You shall see."

He rang the bell, and having by an effort recovered his calm dignity, he received Honorine seated, and in solemn fashion.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "pack up your box and leave at once. You shall be paid a week's wages in lieu of notice."

The servant, a skinny, insignificant chit of a thing, of humble and shame-faced aspect, attempted to explain, stammering out excuses.

"It's no use. All I can do for you is not to hand you over to the authorities for indecent behaviour."

Then she turned upon him.

"Oh, so it's because I omitted to pay the fee."

He rose from his seat, tall and upright, and dismissed her with a majestic gesture, his finger pointing to the door. When she had gone he relieved his feelings coarsely.

"The idea of a strumpet like that bringing dishonour on my house."

"Ah, sure, she's one; that she is!" repeated Lise and Buteau, complaisantly.

The latter thereupon resumed:

"Then it's settled, isn't it, uncle? You'll come with the child?"

Monsieur Charles was still quivering. Feeling anxious, he had gone to look at himself in the glass, and was returning satisfied.

"Where? Oh, to be sure, to your wedding. It's the right thing to do, my children, to marry. Rely on me. I will be there; but I don't promise to

bring Elodie, because, you know, people are a little free at weddings. I turned the baggage out pretty sharp, eh? I won't put up with women annoying me. Good-bye, rely on my coming."

The Delhommes, whom Buteau and Lise next invited, also accepted, after the usual refusal and insistence. Hyacinthe was the only one of the family that remained to be invited. But, in sooth, he had become unbearable, being on bad terms with everybody, and bringing all his people into discredit by playing the lowest pranks. So it was decided to put him on one side, though apprehensions were entertained that he would revenge himself in some abominable manner.

Rognes was on the tip-toe of expectation. This marriage, so long deferred, was quite an event. Hourdequin, the mayor, took the trouble to officiate in person at the civil ceremony; but when asked to attend the evening repast, he excused himself, as he was obliged to pass that very night at Chartres on account of a law-suit. Still, he promised that Madame Jacqueline should come, as they had the politeness to invite her also. For a moment, moreover, they had thought of inviting the Abbé Godard, by way of having some superior kind of person with them; but, as soon as the wedding was even mentioned, the priest lost his temper, because it was fixed for Midsummer-Day. He had to officiate that day at high mass, established by foundation, at Bazoches-le-Doyen, so how could he be expected to come to Rognes in the morning? However, the women--Lise, Rose, and Fanny--became obstinate, and he finished by giving way. He came at mid-day in such a passion that he flung their mass at their heads, as it were, and left them smarting under a deep sense of injury.

After discussion, it had been resolved that the wedding should take place quietly among the family, on account of the bride's position--with a child now nearly three years old. They had been, however, to the Cloyes pastry-cook to order a pie and some dessert, on which they determined to

spare no expense, so as to show people that they could make the money fly on proper occasions. As at the marriage of the eldest daughter of the Bordiers--some rich farmers at Mailleville--they were to have a regular wedding-cake, two ice creams, four sweet dishes, and some little tarts. At home, some meat soup would be provided, together with chitterlings, four stewed chickens, four rabbits, also stewed, and some roast beef and veal. And all this for fifteen or twenty people--they did not know the exact number. If there were any food left after the repast, they would finish it up on the morrow.

The sky, which had been a little dull in the morning, had cleared, and the day was drawing to its close, amid cheerful warmth and glow. The covers had been set in the middle of the spacious kitchen, right in front of the fireplace and the oven, where meats were roasting, and pots boiling over large fires. This made the room so hot that the two windows and the door were left wide open, and the sweet, penetrating scent of new-mown hay came in.

Since the day before, the Mouche girls had had the assistance of Rose and Fanny. There was a sensation when the pastry-cook's cart made its appearance at three o'clock, bringing all the women in the village to their doors. The dessert was at once laid out on the table to see how it looked. Just then La Grande arrived, before the time. She sat down, clasped her stick between her knees, and never once took her hard eyes off the food. She questioned whether it wasn't sinful to go to such an expense. She herself, however, had eaten nothing all the morning, so that she might be able to do full justice to the feast.

The men--Buteau, Jean who had been the former's "best-man," old Fouan, Delhomme and his son Nénesse--all in frock-coats, black trousers, and tall silk hats, that nothing would induce them to part with, were playing at pitch and toss in the yard. Monsieur Charles came by himself, having on the day before conducted Elodie to her boarding

school at Châteaudun; and, without joining in the game, he took an interest in it and made some judicious suggestions.

At six o'clock, when all was ready, Jacqueline had to be waited for. The women now let down their skirts, which they had pinned up, so that the stove might not soil them. Lise was in blue, Françoise in pink; hard-coloured, old-fashioned silks which Lambourdieu had sold to them at double their value, passing them off as the latest Parisian novelty. Old Madame Fouan had looked out the violet poplin which she had paraded for forty years at all the country weddings, and Fanny, dressed in green, wore all her jewels; her watch and chain, a brooch, rings in her ears and on her fingers. Every minute one of the women would go out on to the road and run as far as the church corner to see whether the lady from the farm was not in sight. The sauces were burning, and the soup, which had unfortunately been served, was getting cold in the plates. At length there was a shout:

"There she is! There she is!"

The gig appeared, and Jacqueline leapt lightly out. She looked charming, having had the good taste to set off her attractions by a simple white cretonne dress with red spots. There were no jewels about her bare skin, save some little brilliants in her ears: a present from Hourdequin, which had set the neighbouring farms in a ferment. They were surprised that she did not dismiss the farm-hand who had brought her, when they had helped him to stable the vehicle. He was a kind of giant, named Tron, with white skin, red hair, and a child-like look. He came from Le Perche, and had been at La Borderie for a fortnight as yard-helper.

"Tron remains, you know," said she gaily. "He'll see me home."

In La Beauce, people are not partial to the Percherons, whom they accuse of being false and sly. Glances were exchanged. This, then, was La

Cognette's last fancy, this big brute! However, Buteau, who had been very agreeable and jocular since the morning, replied:

"Certainly he can stop! It's enough that he comes with you."

Lise having given the word to begin, they sat down to table, with a deal of bustle and noisy talk. There were three chairs short, so they ran and fetched two stools, with their straw seats worn through, and laid a plank across them. Spoons were already briskly rattling against the plates. The soup was cold, and covered with congealed bubbles of fat. They didn't mind that, however. Old Fouan made the remark that it would get warm in their bellies, an idea which provoked tempestuous laughter. From that moment the scene was one of gluttonous massacre: the chickens, rabbits, meats appeared and vanished in succession, amid a gruesome sound of munching. Although very temperate at their own homes, they stuffed till they almost burst when visiting. La Grande did not speak, in order to eat the more, and she kept at it with never-resting jaws; it was indeed frightful to see how much her lean, shrivelled, octogenarian stomach could engulf, without so much as swelling. It had been settled that, for the look of the thing, Françoise and Fanny should see to the guests, so that the bride might not have to get up; but she could not keep still; she left her chair every instant, tucking up her sleeves, and giving her best attention to the pouring out of a sauce, or the dishing of a joint. In a short time, however, the whole table took a share in the waiting, and some one was always on his legs, cutting bread or trying to get hold of a dish. Buteau, who had taken charge of the wine, no longer sufficed as butler, though to save himself the trouble of corking and uncorking bottles he had simply put a cask on tap. However he could not get any time to eat, and at last Jean had to relieve him and replenish the pitchers. Delhomme, seated at his ease, declared in his sagacious way that there must be plenty of liquor if one didn't want to be stifled. When the pie, which was as broad as a cart wheel, was served there was a thrill, the force-meat balls making a deep impression. Monsieur Charles carried his politeness so far

as to swear upon his honour that he had never seen a finer one at Chartres. At this point, old Fouan, in high feather, sparkled once more.

"I say," he remarked, "if a fellow had any chaps on his buttocks, he could cure them by sticking that on behind."

On hearing this the table went into fits, especially Jacqueline, who laughed till she cried. She stuttered out some emendatory remarks, which were lost amid her laughter.

The bridal pair faced each other, Buteau being between his mother and La Grande, and Lise between old Fouan and Monsieur Charles. The other guests were disposed according to their own fancy; Jacqueline beside Tron, who watched her with his soft, stupid eyes: Jean near Françoise, and only separated from her by little Jules, upon whom both of them had engaged to keep an eye. However, on the appearance of the pie, the child displayed such strong symptoms of indigestion that the bride had to go and put him to bed. Then Jean and Françoise were brought side by side. She was very lively, deeply flushed by the heat of the large fire on the hearth, and over-excited, albeit tired to death. He was attentive, and wished to get up and help her; but she broke away, having moreover to hold her own against Buteau, who, being much given to teasing when in a pleasant mood, had made a set at her from the beginning of the feast. He pinched her whenever she went by, whereupon she retorted with a furious slap; and then she would get up again on some pretext or other, as if fascinated and anxious to be pinched again and to slap him in return. She complained that her hips were black and blue.

"Stop where you are, then!" repeated Jean.

"Oh, no!" cried she, "he mustn't think he's my master too, simply because he's married Lise."

They had lighted six tallow candles as soon as it was dark, and the meal had been in progress for three hours, when at length, towards ten o'clock,

an onslaught was made on the dessert. From that point, coffee was drunk; not one or two cups, but large bowlfuls of it, without stopping. The fun grew more pointed. Coffee gave one vigour, it was said, and was excellent for the men who took too much sleep. Every time a married guest swallowed a spoonful the others split their sides laughing.

"You've very good cause to take some," said Fanny to Delhomme. She was very merry, that evening, the feast having drawn her out of her habitual reserve.

Her husband reddened, and to excuse himself roundly declared that it was due to over-work; whereupon their son Nénesse laughed from ear to ear, amid the burst of shouts and the thigh-slapping provoked by this conjugal revelation. However, the lad had eaten so much that he seemed to be bursting. Soon he vanished, and he was not seen again till the party broke up, when he was found slumbering in company with the two cows.

La Grande was the one who held out the longest. At midnight she was hard at work on the tartlets, in mute despair at being unable to finish them. The bowls of cream had been cleaned out, the crumbs of the cake swept up; with the freedom of increasing tipsiness, with bodices unhooked and trouser buttons undone, they split up into little knots, and chatted round the table, which was greasy with sauce, and stained with spilt wine. Songs had been started, but had come to nothing; except that old Rose, with a maudlin expression of countenance, went on humming some past century ribaldry, a reminiscence of her young days, to which she kept time by nodding her head. They were also too few to dance. Besides the men preferred to tipple brandy and smoke their pipes, the ashes of which they shook out over the table-cloth. In a corner, Fanny and Delhomme, with Jean and Tron before them, were reckoning up, within a halfpenny, the pecuniary position and expectations of the bride and bridegroom. This went on interminably. Every square inch was appraised. They knew every fortune in Rognes, even to the value of the

linen possessed by each household. At the other end of the table, Jacqueline had buttonholed Monsieur Charles, whom she was contemplating with a winning smile, her pretty, wicked eyes aflame with curiosity. She questioned him.

"So Chartres is a queer place, eh? There's a gay life to be led there?"

He answered her by praising the town circuit: a line of promenades planted with old trees, which encompass Chartres with shade. In the lower part especially, along the banks of the Eure, the boulevards were very cool in summer. Then there was the cathedral. He expatiated on this edifice, being a well-informed man with great respect for religion. Yes, it was one of the finest buildings; but it had become too vast for the present times of weak Christianity, and was almost always empty, in the midst of its deserted square, which the devout alone crossed on week-days. He had realised the desolation of the place one Sunday when he had gone in casually while the vesper service was taking place. You shivered with the cold inside, and you could hardly see on account of the stained glass; so that all he could eventually descry were two little girls' schools, lost in the space like a handful of ants, and singing under the vaulted roof in shrill, fife-like voices. It was truly heartrending that the churches should be thus abandoned for the drinking-shops.

Jacqueline, who was astonished to hear him say all this, continued to stare at him steadily, with the same smile. At last to attain her object, she had to murmur:

"But tell me now, the Chartres women----"

He understood, and grew very grave, but he unbosomed himself, under the expansive influence of the general intoxication. She, flushed and tittering, rubbed up against him as if to penetrate that mystery of a rush of men, night after night. But it was not what she imagined. He told her about the hard work of it, for, in his cups, he was wont to be melancholy

and paternal. Then he grew more animated, when she told him that she had amused herself one day by taking a look at the front of the Châteaudun night-house, at the corner of the Rue Dairgnon and the Rue Loiseau: a little dilapidated house it was, with its shutters closed and rotting. Behind, in a neglected garden, there was a large silvered globe of glass reflecting the house; while, in front of the dormer-window of the topmost floor, turned into a pigeon-house, some pigeons were flying and cooing in the sunshine. On that day, too, some children were playing on the door-step, and she had heard the words of command resounding over the wall of the adjacent cavalry barracks. He, interrupting her, grew angry. Yes, yes! He knew the place: two disgusting used-up women, and not even any mirrors downstairs. It was these dens that brought disgrace on the profession.

"But what can you expect in a sub-prefecture?" he added at length, calming down, with the philosophical tolerance of a superior person.

It was now one in the morning, and it was suggested that they should go to bed. When people had had a baby, there wasn't much use (was there?) in making a fuss about getting under the blankets together. It was the same with the old practical jokes--unpinning the bedstead, and popping scratching hair, or toys that squeaked when they were squeezed, between the sheets, and so on. All that, in this case, would have come the day after the fair. The best thing to do was to drink a parting cup, and then say good-night.

At that moment, however, Lise and Fanny shrieked. Through the open window a liberal shower of cow's dung had just been thrown, and both women's dresses were splashed from top to bottom, and ruined. What swine had done that? They ran out and looked over the square, along the road, and behind the hedge. Nobody. However, they all agreed that this was Hyacinthe's revenge for not having been invited.

The Fouans and Delhomme set out, and Monsieur Charles too. La Grande made a tour of the table, to see whether there was anything left; and finally made up her mind to go, after observing to Jean that the Buteaus would die in a ditch. Her firm, sharp step, and the measured tap of her stick, were heard down the road in the distance; while the others, all very tipsy, went staggering over the stones.

As Tron was putting the horse to the gig for Madame Jacqueline, she, already with one foot on the step, turned round and asked:

"You're not going back with us, are you, Jean?"

The young fellow, who was preparing to get in, changed his mind, glad enough to leave her to Tron, since she seemed to wish it. He watched her cuddling up against the tall figure of her new gallant, and could not help laughing when the vehicle was out of sight. He would walk back, he thought. But first, pending the departure of the others, he went and sat down for an instant on the stone bench in the yard, near Françoise, who had installed herself there, being overcome with both the heat and fatigue. The Buteaus were already in their room, and she had promised to fasten everything up before going to bed herself.

"Ah! it's pleasant here," she sighed, after five long minutes of silence.

Then quietude fell again, calm and majestic. The cool, delicious night was spangled with stars. The scent of the hay was borne so strong from the meadows of the Aigre that its balmy fragrance seemed like the perfume of flowers.

"Ah, yes! it's pleasant," repeated Jean, at length. "It does the heart good."

She made no reply, however, and he saw that she was asleep. She slid down, resting upon his shoulder, and then he stopped there an hour longer, meditating in a confused manner. Evil thoughts came to him, but

died away. She was too young. It seemed to him that, by waiting, she alone would become older and get to be nearer his age.

"I say, Françoise, we'd better go to bed!" he exclaimed at last. "We might catch something out here."

She started out of her sleep.

"Dear, yes! we shall be better abed. Till we meet again, Jean!"

"Till we meet again, Françoise!"

PART III.

PART III. — CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER I.

So at last Buteau had got his share, that land he had so ardently coveted, and yet refused during more than two years and a half, in a fury compounded of longing, rancour, and obstinacy. He himself did not know why he had been so stubborn, yearning at heart to sign the deed, fearing he might be tricked, and unable to console himself for not having secured the whole inheritance, the nineteen acres now mutilated and scattered. Since his acceptance, however, a great passion had been satisfied, the brutal joy of possession; and that joy was doubled by the thought that his sister and brother were now the swindled parties, that his holding was worth more since the new road ran by his field. He never met them without a sly chuckle, and winks that said:

"All the same, I've taken them in!"

And that was not all. He triumphed also by his long-deferred marriage, by the five acres adjoining his own field which Lise had brought him. The thought that the sisters' property must be divided did not occur to him; or, if it did, he looked upon it as something so far distant that he hoped in the interval to hit upon some scheme of evasion. Counting Françoise's share, he had eight acres of plough land, eight of meadow, and about five of vineyard, and he would stick to them. He would part with his skin first. Above all, he would never let any one cut up the piece of ground which bordered the road, and that now comprised nearly six acres. Neither his sister nor his brother had a field like it. He talked of it in inflated terms, bursting with pride. A year passed by, and this first year of possession was bliss to Buteau. Never when he had hired himself out to others had he ploughed so deeply into the bowels of the earth. It was his; he wanted to penetrate and fructify its inmost parts. At night he used

to come in exhausted, with his plough-share gleaming like silver. In March he harrowed his wheat; in April his oats; taking minute care, and throwing himself heart and soul into the task. When all the work in the fields was done, he returned to them just the same; lover-like, to gaze at them. He walked round, stooping and picking up handfuls of soil with his old gesture; delighting to crush the rich clods, and let them filter through his fingers; and feeling supremely happy if he found them neither too dry nor too damp, with a fine smell suggestive of growing bread.

Thus La Beauce spread her verdure before him, from November to July, from the moment when the green tips first emerged to that when the lofty stalks turned yellow. Wishing to have the country under his eye without leaving the house, he unbarred the kitchen window--the rear one, that looked out on the plain--and there he used to station himself and survey ten leagues of country: an immense broad bare expanse, stretching under the vaulted skies. Not a single tree; nothing but the telegraph posts of the Châteaudun and Orleans road, running on unswervingly till they were lost to sight. At first there was a greenish, scarcely perceptible shade, peeping just above the soil of the large squares of brown earth. Then this soft green strengthened into velvet stretches, almost uniform in tint. Then, as the stems grew taller and thicker, each plant developed its own tinge of colour. He distinguished from afar the yellowish green of the wheat, the bluish green of the oats, the greyish green of the barley; infinite expanses of ground spread out in all directions, amid glowing patches of crimson trifolium. It was the time when La Beauce is fair and young, thus clothed about with spring, and smooth and cool to the eye in her monotony. The stalks grew taller; and there was then one deep, rolling, boundless sea of cereals. At morn, in the fine weather, a pink mist used to rise. As the sun climbed in the limpid atmosphere a breeze would blow in large regular puffs, furrowing the fields with a swell that started on the horizon, and rolled along till it died away in the opposite direction. As the plants swayed, their colour became paler; a moiré-like

effect--waterings of the shade of old gold--rippled over the wheat; the oats took a bluish hue; while the barley quivered with violet lights. Undulation continually succeeded undulation; a ceaseless ebb would set in under the winds from the offing. When evening fell, the fronts of distant buildings, brightly lit, showed like white sails; steeples looked like masts, uprising behind folds in the surface of the plain. It grew cold; the gloom enhanced the damp and the murmuring character of the ocean-like prospect; a distant plantation became indistinct, and looked like the dim coast-line of some continent.

In the bad weather, also, Buteau gazed out over La Beauce, thus spread out at his feet, just as the fisher gazes from his cliff over the raging sea, when the tempest is robbing him of his livelihood. He saw a violent storm; a dark cloud shedding a livid, leaden light, and red flashes glowing over the grass-tips amid claps of thunder. He saw a waterspout come from more than six leagues away; at first a thin, tawny cloud twisted like a rope, then a howling mass galloping on like a monster; then, as it passed away, the crops could be seen torn up, and everything trampled upon, broken, and razed along a track two miles wide. His own fields had escaped, and he pitied the disasters of others with inward chuckles of delight. As the wheat grew, his enjoyment increased. A grey islet formed by a village had disappeared on the horizon behind the rising level of verdure. There only remained the roofs of La Borderie which, in their turn, were submerged. A mill, with its sails, remained alone like a waif. On all sides there was corn--an encroaching, overflowing sea of corn, covering the earth with its immensity of verdure.

"God a' mercy!" said he, every evening, as he sat down to table; "if the summer's not too dry, we shall never be at a loss for bread."

The Buteaus had established themselves in their new home. The married pair had taken the large room downstairs, and Françoise, above them, put up with a little room, formerly occupied by old Mouche, which had been

scoured and furnished with a fold-up bedstead, an old chest of drawers, a table and two chairs. She still busied herself with her cows, and led much the same life as of old. However, although all was outwardly calm, there was a dormant source of disagreement: that question of dividing the property between the two sisters, which had remained in abeyance. On the day after the marriage of the elder girl, old Fouan, as guardian of the younger one, had pressed for the division of the property, so as to avoid all unpleasantness in the future. But Buteau had protested. What was the good? Françoise was too young; she didn't want her land. Wasn't everything just as before? She lived with her sister still, she was boarded and clothed. In short, she certainly could have no cause of complaint. At all these reasons the old man shook his head. No one knew what might happen, the best thing to do was to settle everything in due form; and the girl herself was anxious to know what her share would consist of, though that point being settled she was ready to leave it in charge of her brother-in-law. The latter, however, had his own way, by means of his genial, obstinate, humbugging bluffness. Nothing further was said, and he proclaimed everywhere what a happy, charming, domestic mode of life theirs was.

"There's nothing like having a good understanding with one another!" said he.

In point of fact there had not been any quarrel between the two sisters, nor any domestic disagreement during the first ten months; but then matters gradually became unpleasant. It started with displays of bad temper. There were fits of sulking, and at last loud words were exchanged; and, beneath it all, the fermenting question of "mine" and "thine" was at its ravaging work, gradually destroying affection.

Certainly Lise and Françoise no longer loved one another as tenderly as of old. No one now met them with their arms round each other's waists, walking out in the gloaming wrapped in the same shawl. A separation

had come between them; a coolness was growing up. Since there had been a man in the house, it seemed to Françoise that her sister had been taken from her. She who once had shared everything with Lise, had no share in this man; and he had thus become a something foreign, an obstacle shutting her out from the heart in which she had lived alone. All this, moreover, had a material side. She used to leave without kissing her elder sister when Buteau did so, feeling as shocked as if some one had drunk out of her glass. In matters of ownership, she kept to her childish notions with passionate earnestness. "This is mine, that is yours;" and, as her sister belonged thenceforward to another, she let her go. But she wanted what was her own, one-half of the land and of the house.

This wrath of hers was also caused by another matter which she herself could not have explained. There had, so far, been nothing to disturb her in the house, where love scenes had been unknown, a chill having fallen upon the place when old Mouche became a widower. But now it was inhabited by a brutal man with the instincts of his sex, who had always been in the habit of running after the girls in the fields, and whose unrestrained dalliance with her sister, which she was obliged to be cognisant of, made her feel alike disgusted and exasperated. During the daytime she preferred to go out, and let them indulge in their dirty tricks unrestrained. In the evening, if they began laughing on getting up from table, she called to them to wait till she had finished washing up the dishes. And then she rushed madly to her room, slamming the doors and muttering insults: "The beasts! The beasts!" between her clenched teeth. In spite of all, she still fancied that she could hear what was going on below her, downstairs. With her head buried in the pillow, and with the sheets drawn up to her eyes, she grew hot and feverish; her hearing and her sight were haunted by hallucinations, and her revolting puberty made her suffer.

The worst of it was that Buteau, seeing so much of her attention given to these matters, used to chaff her about them by way of a joke. Goodness

gracious! what next? What would she say when she had to go through the same thing herself? Lise, too, used to laugh, seeing nothing whatever wrong about it; and then Buteau would explain his ideas on the subject. The pleasure cost nothing, and it was perfectly lawful to indulge in it. But no children; no, no! No more of them! There was always too much of that sort of thing before marriage; people were so stupid. Thus little Jules had made his appearance, for instance; a confounded nuisance, which had to be put up with all the same. But when folks were married, they sobered down. He'd rather be a capon than have any more children. A likely thing! Bringing another mouth into a house where there wasn't too much to eat as it was! And so he kept constantly on the alert with regard to his wife, who was so plump, the hussy! that she'd get in the family-way in a trice if he'd only let her. He'd be glad to reap as much corn as the full womb of the earth could be made to yield; but no babies! They had done with children for ever!

Amidst these constant details, this copulation that rustled audibly near her, as it were, Françoise's agitation kept increasing. Folks asserted that her temper was changing; and she did yield to inexplicable moods which abruptly changed: first merry, then sad, and then surly and spiteful. In the morning she watched Buteau with a black look, whenever he unceremoniously crossed the kitchen, half undressed. Quarrels, too, broke out between herself and her sister about the most trivial matters--a cup that she had just broken, for instance. Wasn't the cup hers as well, half of it at all events? Couldn't she break half of everything, if she liked? On these questions of ownership their disputes always became most bitter, entailing grudges that lasted days and days.

The worst of it was that Buteau himself became subject to odious fits of temper. The land was suffering from a terrible drought, not a drop of rain having fallen for six weeks; and he would come in with his fists clenched, made ill by the sight of the spoilt crops--the stunted barley, the shrivelled oats, and the wheat, which was already scorched up before

coming into ear. He actually suffered as if he had been part of the crops themselves; his stomach shrank, his limbs were racked with cramps, he dwindled and pined away with anxiety and anger. In this state he, one morning, came to loggerheads with Françoise for the first time. It was hot, and after washing at the well, he had left part of his shirt hanging out behind. As he was sitting down to eat his soup, Françoise, on coming forward to help him, observed it. Then she burst out, reddening all over:

"Tuck your shirt in, do! It's disgusting!"

He was in a bad humour already, and now flew into a passion.

"God's truth! Haven't you done picking me to pieces yet? Don't look, if it offends you. One would think you had some lewd fancy in your head from the way you jaw about it!"

She reddened still more, and began to stammer; while Lise injudiciously added:

"He's right. You end by plaguing one. Go elsewhere if one can't be at home in one's own house."

"Quite so; I will go elsewhere," said Françoise savagely, banging the door after her as she went out.

But on the following day Buteau was once more pleasant, conciliatory, and jocular. During the night the sky had clouded over, and for twelve hours a fine, warm, penetrating rain had fallen; one of those summer rains that freshen up the country. He had opened the window, which looked on to the plain, and since daybreak he had stood at it with his hands in his pockets, radiant, and watching the stream pour down, while he repeated:

"Now we're gentlefolks, since the blessed God is doing our work for us. Ah! thunder and blazes! The days spent like this, idling about, are a lot better than those when one wears oneself out for no return."

The rain still came streaming down slowly, softly, and endlessly. He could hear thirsting, riverless, and springless La Beauce drinking this water. 'Twas one vast murmur, a universal gurgling, full of comfort. Everything absorbed the moisture, everything bloomed anew under the shower. The wheat was regaining its youthful healthfulness; it was sturdy and upright now, bearing on high the ears which would swell mightily and burst with meal. Buteau, like the soil, like the wheat, drank in at every pore, feeling cheerful, refreshed, and restored to health, ever returning to his post at the window, and shouting:

"Go on, go on! It's like five-franc pieces falling."

Suddenly he heard some one open the door, and on turning round he was surprised to recognise old Fouan.

"Why, father! You've been frog hunting, then?"

The old man, after a struggle with a large blue umbrella, came in, leaving his wooden shoes on the threshold.

"Something like a watering!" said he, simply. "We wanted it."

During the year that had elapsed since the partition had been finally concluded, signed, and registered, he had had but one occupation: that of visiting his old fields. He was always to be met prowling round them with a deal of interest, grave or gay, according to the state of the crops; yelling at his children if things went wrong, and declaring that it was their fault if matters were at a standstill. This rain had enlivened him also.

"And so," resumed Buteau, "you've looked in to see us as you were passing by."

Françoise, hitherto silent, now came forward and said distinctly:

"No: it was I who begged uncle to come."

Lise, who was standing by the table shelling peas, left off and waited motionless, a harsh expression suddenly coming over her face. Buteau, who had at first clenched his fists, resumed his genial air, having determined not to lose his temper.

"Yes," explained the old man, slowly, "the child spoke to me yesterday. You see now how right I was when I wanted to have matters settled at the outset. To each his own. There's nothing in that for any one to get angry about; on the contrary, it prevents quarrels. It's now high time to make an end of it. She has a right, hasn't she? to know exactly how she stands. Otherwise I should be to blame. So we'll fix a day, and go together to Monsieur Baillehache's."

Lise could hold out no longer.

"Why don't she send for the gendarmes? Good Heavens! one would suppose she was being robbed. What if I were to go about and tell everybody what a filthy beast she is, and that there's no knowing where to take hold of her?"

Françoise was about to reply in the same strain, when Buteau, who had playfully caught her up from behind, cried out:

"A pack of nonsense! People may badger each other, but they love each other all the same, eh? A nice thing it would be if sisters fell out!"

The girl had shaken herself free, and the quarrel was about to continue, when Buteau raised a joyous shout on seeing the door again open:

"Jean! Sopping wet! Why, he's a regular poodle!"

Jean, who had run over from the farm, as he often did, had merely thrown a sack over his shoulders for protection; and he was wet through--dripping, steaming, and laughing good-humouredly through it all. While he was shaking himself, Buteau, returning to his window, grew more and more expansive at the sight of the steady, endless downpour.

"Oh, how it's coming down! What a blessing! My! it's quite a game to see it come down like that!"

Then, turning back, he said to Jean:

"You come pat. These two were tearing each other's eyes out. Françoise wants the property divided, so that she may leave us."

"What? That child!" cried Jean, amazed.

His desire had become a violent hidden passion, and the only satisfaction he had was to see her in this house, where he was received as a friend. He would have proposed for her half a score of times already, if he had not so keenly felt the disparity in their ages. It was in vain that he had waited; the fifteen years' difference had not been spanned. In the country, a great difference of age is reckoned such an obstacle, that nobody--not she herself, nor her sister, nor even her brother-in-law--seemed to imagine he could ever fix his thoughts on her. And this was why Buteau received him so cordially, without any fear of the consequences.

"You may well say child!" said he, paternally shrugging his shoulders.

But Françoise, standing rigidly erect, with her eyes on the ground, proved obstinate.

"I want my share."

"It would be the wisest thing," murmured old Fouan.

Then Jean gently took hold of her wrists, and drew her towards him. Holding her thus, his hands quivering at the contact of her flesh, he addressed her in his kind voice, which faltered as he besought her to remain. Where could she go? Into service with some strangers at Cloyes or Châteaudun? Was she not better off in the house where she had grown up, amid people who loved her? She listened to him, and she also softened; for although she scarcely thought of him as a lover, she was

wont to obey him readily, chiefly out of regard for him and a little from fear, thinking him a very serious person.

"I want my share," she repeated, beginning to give way, "but I don't say that I shall go away."

"Why, stupid!" interposed Buteau, "what on earth would you do with your share if you stay? Everything is as much yours as it is your sister's or mine. What do you want the half for? Pooh! it's enough to send one into fits! Harkee, the day you marry the property shall be divided."

Jean's eyes, which were fixed on her, fell, as if his heart had failed him.

"You hear? On your wedding day."

She felt oppressed, and made no reply.

"And now, my little Françoise, go and kiss your sister. That'll be much better."

Lise, the buxom matron, was still good-hearted in her gay, noisy way, and she wept when Françoise fell on her neck, Buteau, delighted at having postponed the evil day, cried out that, God's mercy! they would have a drink. He fetched five glasses, uncorked one bottle, and went back to fetch another. Old Fouan's bronzed face had flushed as he explained that he was in favour of order and duty. They all drank, women and men alike, to the health of every one present.

"Wine's a good thing," said Buteau, slapping down his glass, "but, say what you like, that falling water's a deal better. Just look at it! There it goes, and there it goes again. Isn't it glorious?"

Crowding to the windows, with radiant faces, and in a sort of religious ecstacy, they all watched the warm, slow, endless rain stream down, as though beneath this beneficent water they had seen the tall green corn visibly growing.

PART III. — CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER II.

One day that summer old Rose, who had suffered from swooning fits, and whose legs were failing her, sent for her grand-niece, Palmyre, to clean the house. Fouan had gone out to prowl round the fields, as usual; and while the wretched creature, drenched with water, was scrubbing with all her might, the other woman followed her about, step by step, both of them going over the same eternal old gossip.

They began with Palmyre's misfortunes, for her brother Hilarion had taken to beating her. The soft-witted cripple had grown malicious; and, as he did not know how strong he was with his fists, which were capable of pulverising stones, she was in terror of her life whenever he seized hold of her. Still she wouldn't have any interference; and when anybody came she sent them away, managing to appease the young fellow by dint of the infinite fondness which she entertained for him. The other week there had been a scandal, which all Rognes was still talking about: such a fight that the neighbours had run in, and had found him behaving abominably.

"Tell me, my child," asked Rose, to elicit some confidential revelation, "what was the brute doing?"

Palmyre, ceasing to scrub, and squatting in her dripping rags, flew into a passion without giving an answer.

"Is it any business of those folks I should like to know? What do they want to come spying in our house for? We don't rob any one."

"Well, well!" resumed the old woman, "all the same, if you do as people say, it's a very dreadful thing."

For an instant the poor creature remained silent; and an expression of suffering came over her features as her eyes vacantly stared afar. Then, bending down once more, she mumbled, with the to-and-fro movement of her skinny arms breaking in upon her words:

"I don't know about it being so very dreadful. The priest sent for me, to say that we both of us should go to hell. Not that poor darling, anyhow. 'A natural, your reverence,' says I to him 'a mere child with no more sense than a babe three days old, and who'd have died if I hadn't fed him--and perhaps it'd have been better for him if he had?' It's my affair alone, isn't it? The day he strangles me, in one of the fits of rage such as have lately come over him, I shall see fast enough whether the blessed God'll forgive me."

Seeing that she would not obtain any fresh particulars, Rose, who had long known the truth, sagely concluded: "Sure enough, things must be one way or the other. But put it as you like, it's not a life you're leading, my girl."

Then she lamented that everybody had their misfortunes. The miseries, now, that she and her husband had gone through, since they'd been kind enough to strip themselves for their children's benefit! Once started on this topic she never stopped. It was an eternal subject of complaint with her.

"Deary me! One can get used to disrespect. When one's children are swine, they're swine, and that's all about it. But if they'd only pay their allowance--"

Then she explained, for the twentieth time, that Delhomme alone brought his fifty francs every quarter, and punctual, too, to the tick! Buteau was always in arrears, and haggled over coppers. Thus, although the money was ten days overdue, she was still awaiting payment. He had promised to pay up that very night. As for Hyacinthe, that was a simpler matter. He

didn't pay anything; they never saw the colour of his money. And he'd actually had the cheek to send La Trouille that morning to borrow five francs, to enable her to make some broth for him as he was very ill. Oh, yes! they all knew what *he* suffered from--a spark in his inside! And so the wench had been sent to the right-about in no time, with orders to tell her father that if he didn't bring his fifty francs that night, like his brother Buteau, he should have the lawyer after him.

"Just to frighten him, you know, for the poor boy's not bad at heart, after all," added Rose, whose partiality for the elder son had already softened her.

At night-fall, Fouan having come in to his dinner, she began again at table while he bent silently over his food. Could it be possible that, out of their six hundred francs, they should only get two hundred from Delhomme, scarcely a hundred from Buteau, and nothing at all from the other? That made just half the allowance. And the scamps had signed at the notary's; it was set down in black and white, and was under the charge of the law! But a vast deal their children cared about the law!

To every complaint Palmyre, who was scouring the tiled floor of the kitchen in the dark, made the same answer, which sounded like a refrain of misery.

"Sure enough, we've all of us got our troubles; they bring us to the grave!"

Rose was at length deciding to light the candle when La Grande came in with her knitting. During the summer there was no evening meeting; but, to avoid using even a candle-end, she was wont to spend an hour at her brother's before groping her way to bed in the darkness. She established herself forthwith; and Palmyre, who had still the pots and pans to scour, breathed not a word more, over-awed by the sight of her grandmother.

"If you want any hot water, my girl," said Rose, "undo a faggot."

Then she contained herself for a moment, and forced herself to talk of other matters. In La Grande's presence the Fouans avoided complaining, knowing how pleased she was whenever she heard them regret having parted with their property. But passion was too much for Rose, and finally she spoke again:

"And you may as well put on the whole faggot at once, if they call that a faggot, indeed! Merely some dead twigs and hedge-clippings! Fanny must certainly scrape the floor of her wood-house to send us rotten stuff like that!"

Fouan, who had remained at table, with his glass full, then broke the silence in which he had seemingly wished to enwrap himself.

"God a' mercy!" he shouted. "Haven't we had enough of your faggots? They're muck, and we know it! But what's to be said, pray, of the beastly dregs that Delhomme gives me for wine?"

He raised his glass to the candle and glanced at it.

"Eh? What the devil has he put into it? It's worse even than the rinsings of casks. And he's the honest one! The two others would let us die o' thirst, before they'd go and fetch us even a bottle of water from the river."

At length he made up his mind to drink his wine at a gulp. But he spat violently afterwards.

"Ugh! the poison! P'raps it's to kill me right off."

After that Fouan and Rose gave way to their rancour, and, casting all restraint aside, relieved their aching hearts. There was a perfect litany of recriminations, each in turn exposing his or her wrongs. Take, for instance, the ten quarts of milk per week. To begin with, they only got six; and then what milk it was! Although it didn't pass through the priest's hands it must be real Christian milk, judging by the way it was baptised! The same with the eggs. They must have been specially ordered of the

fowls, for such little ones could never have been found in all the Cloyes markets. They were regular curiosities, and so grudgingly given, that they had time enough to go bad on the way. As for the cheeses! Cheeses indeed! Rose was doubled up with colic every time she ate any. She ran to fetch one, insisting on Palmyre's tasting it. Well, wasn't it horrible? Didn't this demand redress? They must put flour into it, and perhaps plaster as well. Then Fouan struck in, lamenting that he was cut down to a sou's worth of tobacco per day; and Rose immediately regretted her black coffee which she had had to give up. Finally, both together, they taxed their children with the death of their decrepit old dog, which they had drowned the day before, because he cost them too much to keep.

"I gave them everything," cried the old fellow; "and the scamps don't care a damn about me. It'll kill us for certain--it makes us so wild to be left in such wretchedness!"

At length they became silent, and La Grande, who had not unclosed her lips, looked from one to the other with her round, evil, bird-of-prey-like eyes.

"Serve you right!" said she.

Just at that moment, however, Buteau came in. Palmyre, having finished her work, took advantage of the opening of the door to slip out and make her escape, with the fifteen sous which Rose had just put into her hand. Buteau stood motionless in the middle of the room, maintaining the prudent silence of the peasant, who will never be the first to speak. A couple of minutes elapsed, and then the father was forced to open the discussion.

"So you've made up your mind. That's fortunate. We've had plenty of time to wait for you during these last ten days."

The son swayed carelessly from side to side, and eventually said: "One can't do more than one can. Every one knows how his bread bakes."

"Possibly. But if things were to go on at that rate, you'd be eating your bread while we starved. You signed, and you ought to pay up on the right day."

Seeing his father's ill-humour, Buteau began to laugh.

"If I'm too late, you know, I can go back. It's not so nice to have to pay as it is. Some don't pay at all."

This allusion to Hyacinthe disquieted Rose, who, not daring to interfere, confined herself to twitching her husband's jacket. He had made a gesture of anger, but checked himself.

"Good. Hand over your fifty francs. I've drawn out the receipt."

Buteau leisurely fumbled in his clothes. He had glanced in a vexed way at La Grande, and seemed put out by her presence. She dropped her knitting, and glared at him in expectation of seeing the money produced. The parents, too, had drawn near, and never took their eyes off the young fellow's hand. Under the stare of those three pairs of eyes, he reluctantly drew out his first five-franc piece.

"One," said he, laying it down on the table. Others followed, more and more slowly. He went on counting them aloud, in faltering tones. After producing the fifth he stopped, and had to make an exhaustive search to find another; then he shouted loudly and emphatically:

"And six!"

The Fouans still waited, but nothing more came.

"What, six?" the father said at last. "There ought to be ten. Are you making fun of us? Last quarter, forty francs; and only thirty this time."

Buteau immediately assumed a whining tone. Nothing prospered. Wheat had fallen still lower, the oats were wretched. There was even a swelling

on his horse's stomach, and he had had to send twice for Monsieur Patoir. In short, he was ruined, and he didn't know how to make both ends meet.

"That's no concern of mine," repeated the old man furiously. "Hand over the fifty francs, or I'll summons you!"

He grew cooler, however, as it occurred to him to accept the six coins on account; and he spoke of making out a fresh receipt.

"Then you will give me the twenty francs next week? I'll put that on the paper."

Buteau, however, had immediately snatched up the money lying on the table.

"No, no! None of that! We must be quits. Leave the receipt as it is, or I'm off. Likely thing! It wouldn't be worth while my pinching and screwing if I were still to be in your debt."

Then there was a terrible scene. Both father and son held out stubbornly, untiringly repeating the same phrases; the one exasperated at not having pocketed the money in the first instance, the other clutching it firmly, and determined not to give it up again without having the receipt in full. Once more the mother had to twitch her husband's jacket, and once more he gave way.

"There, you confounded thief; there's the paper! You ought to have it smacked on your jaw! Hand over the money."

The transfer was made from fist to fist, and Buteau, having played the comedy out, began to laugh. He went off, pleasant and contented, wishing the company a very good evening. Fouan, who looked exhausted, had sat down at the table; and La Grande, before resuming her knitting, shrugged her shoulders and shouted in his face:

"You stupid fool!"

Silence ensued. Then the door re-opened, and Hyacinthe came in. Having been informed by La Trouille that his brother was to pay that night, he had watched him on the road, and had waited for him to leave before presenting himself in his turn. His mild expression was simply due to the maudlin effects of dissipation over-night. From the doorway, his glance fell straight on the six five-franc pieces which Fouan had been imprudent enough to leave on the table.

"Ah, it's Hyacinthe," exclaimed Rose, pleased to see him.

"Yes, it's me. Hope I see you all well!"

He came forward, with his eyes riveted on the white coins, which glistened like so many moons in the candle light. His father, who had turned his head, observed his look, and perceived the money with a start of disquietude. He clapped a plate over the coins to hide them, but it was too late.

"Infernal fool I was!" thought he, irritated at his own carelessness. "La Grande is right."

Then, aloud, and coarsely: "You do well to come and pay us, for as true as that candle's shining, I'd have sent the lawyer to you to-morrow."

"Yes, La Trouille told me so," groaned Hyacinthe very humbly: "and so I put myself about to come, because you surely can't wish my death, do you? Pay, good Lord! what's one to pay with, when one hasn't even bread enough to live on? We've sold everything--oh! I'm not kidding; come and see for yourself if you think I'm kidding. There are now no sheets on the beds, no more furniture, no nothing! And on the top of that, I'm ill."

A guffaw of incredulity interrupted him. He went on without heeding:

"Perhaps it doesn't show much, but, all the same, there's something wrong in my inside. I cough, I feel that I'm going. If I could only get some broth! But when one can't even get broth, one kicks the bucket, eh?

That's true enough. To be sure I'd pay you if I had the money. Tell me where there is any, and I will give you some, and boil a bit of beef to begin with. It's now a fortnight since I tasted meat, indeed it is! on my honour."

Rose began to be affected, while Fouan got more angry.

"You've turned everything into drink, you good-for-nothing vagabond. So much the worse for you! You've pledged all that fine land that had been in the family for years and years! Yes, you've been on the spree for months, you and your daughter; and if it's finished now, well, go and die."

Hyacinthe hesitated no longer, but sobbed.

"It isn't fatherly to say that. Only unnatural people cast off their children. It's because I'm good-hearted that I shall come to grief. If you hadn't any money one could make allowances! But when a father has the cash, does he refuse alms to a son? I shall go and beg at other people's houses; and a nice thing that'll be--a very nice thing indeed!"

At every phrase, jerked out amid his tears, he made the old man tremble by casting side-long glances at the plate. Then, pretending to suffocate, he screamed in a deafening way as if he were having his throat cut.

Rose, who was quite upset and vanquished by his sobs, clasped her hands in supplication to Fouan.

"Come, husband."

But he, struggling with himself, and still refusing, cut her short.

"No, no, he's only making fools of us. Will you hold your tongue, you brute? Is there any sense in howling like that? The neighbours will come in. You're making us ill."

This only made the sot increase his clamour, as he bellowed out:

"I haven't told you. But the lawyer is coming to-morrow to put in an execution for a bill I gave Lambourdieu. I'm a swine; I disgrace you; I must put an end to it. Pig that I am, and I deserve to be soused in the Aigre for good. If I only had thirty francs!"

Fouan, tried beyond endurance, and overcome by the scene, started at the mention of thirty francs. He removed the plate. What good was it, when the scamp saw the money and counted it through the china?

"You want the whole. In God's name, is that reasonable? Look here! You're driving us distracted. Take half, and go; and don't let us see you again."

Hyacinthe, suddenly cured, apparently took counsel with himself. Then he declared:

"No, fifteen francs is too little; it would be of no use. Call it twenty, and I'll leave you."

Then, when he'd got the four five-franc pieces, he made them all laugh by relating what a trick he had played Bécu, with some imitation bottom lines so placed in the reserved part of the Aigre that the rural constable had tumbled into the water while trying to get them out. At last he went away, after getting himself offered a glass of the bad wine sent by Delhomme, whom he called a dirty scoundrel to dare send such stuff to a father.

"He's a pleasant fellow, anyhow!" said Rose, when the door had shut behind him.

La Grande had risen, and was folding up her knitting, prior to leaving. She stared at her sister-in-law and then at her brother; and finally in her turn she went out after screaming, in a fit of passion long suppressed:

"Not a copper, you infernal fools! Never ask me for a copper, never!"

Outside, she met Buteau, who was returning from Macqueron's, having been astonished to see Hyacinthe come in there, looking very lively, and rattling a pocketful of crowns. He had at once smelt a rat.

"Oh, yes! The rascal's making off with your money. Ah, what a night of it he'll make! and what an ass he'll think you are!"

Buteau, beside himself, knocked with both fists at the Fouans' door. If they hadn't let him in he would have broken it down. The old folks were already going to bed. The mother had taken off her cap and her dress, and was in her petticoat, with her grey hair falling over her temples. When they decided to open the door, he burst in upon them, shouting in a stifled voice:

"My money! My money!"

They recoiled in fear and bewilderment, not understanding him as yet.

"Do you suppose I half-kill myself for that scoundrel, my brother? So he's to do nothing, and I'm to provide for him! Oh, no! Oh, no!"

Fouan tried to deny it, but Buteau coarsely interrupted him.

"What's that? Oh, you're going to lie, now! I tell you he's got my money. I smelt it; I heard it rattling in the blackguard's pocket! My money, that I sweated for, and that he's going to spend in tipple! If it's not so, show it me! Show me the coins, if you have them still. I know them; I can tell them. Show me the coins!"

He stubbornly repeated this phrase a score of times, as if applying the spur to his anger. He got to thumping the table with his fist, demanding the coins on the spot, at once, swearing that he did not want to take them back, but simply to see them. Then, as the old folks shook and stammered, he burst out furiously:

"He's got them; that's clear! Hell and thunder, if I ever bring you another copper! One might bleed one's-self for you; but I'd sooner cut off my arms than keep that sodden cur!"

At last, however, the father also got into a passion.

"Now then, haven't you about finished," said he. "Is it any business of yours what we do? The money's my own, and I can do what I like with it."

"What's that you say?" retorted Buteau, going up to him, pale and with clenched fists. "So you expect me to give up everything. Well, then, I tell you it's simply filthy--yes, filthy--to get money out of your children, when you have certainly enough to live on. Oh! it's no use your denying it! You've got a hoard in there, I know!"

The startled old man was struggling wildly, his voice and arms both failing him, with nought of his old authority left to turn his son out.

"No, no; there's not a copper. Will you go off?"

"Suppose I look! Suppose I look!" repeated Buteau, already opening some drawers and tapping the walls.

Rose, terrified, and dreading an encounter between father and son, hung on the latter's shoulder, and faltered:

"You unfortunate fellow, do you want to kill us?"

Turning sharply upon her, he seized her by the wrists, and shouted in her face, regardless of her poor, grey, worn, and weary head:

"It's all your fault! It was you that gave the money to Hyacinthe. You never liked me, you old hag!"

With these words he gave her so rough a push that, uttering a faint cry, she fell swooning in a heap against the wall. He looked at her for an

instant as she reclined there, huddled up like a bundle of rags, and then madly rushed out, slamming the door and swearing.

The next day Rose could not leave her bed. Doctor Finet was called in, and returned three times, without being able to afford her any relief. At his third visit, finding her in extremity, he took Fouan aside, and asked as a favour to be allowed to write out the burial certificate, and leave it. This plan, which he generally adopted for distant hamlets, would save him a journey. Nevertheless, Rose survived for thirty-six hours longer. The doctor, when questioned, had replied that she was dying of old age and over-work: that the end was bound to come when the body was worn out. But in Rognes, where the story was known, all the folks said that she had died of "curdled blood," meaning apoplexy. There were a great many people at the funeral, and Buteau and the rest of the family behaved with great decorum.

When the grave had been filled up, old Fouan went back alone to the house where the two of them had lived and suffered for fifty years. He ate a bit of bread and cheese standing. Then he prowled through the empty buildings and garden, not knowing what occupation would enable him to get rid of his grief. He had nothing more to do now, so he went up to his old fields on the plateau to see if the wheat were growing.

PART III. — CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER III.

For a whole year Fouan lived in this fashion, silent and alone, in the empty house. He was ever to be found there on his legs, roaming hither and thither with trembling hands and doing nothing. He would stay for hours in front of the mouldy troughs in the cow-house; and then he would turn and station himself at the door of the empty barn, as if riveted there in profound reverie. The garden still gave him some occupation; but he was growing weaker, and stooped more and more, as though the soil were recalling him little by little to herself. Twice had he been picked up lying face downwards among his young salads.

Since those twenty francs had been given to Hyacinthe, Delhomme alone paid his share of the allowance. Buteau stubbornly refused a single copper, declaring he would rather go into a court of law than see his money pass into the pockets of his disreputable brother. The latter did, indeed, from time to time, wring some alms from his father, whom his tearful heroics prostrated.

Then it was that Delhomme, seeing the old man's growing distress, his enfeeblement and forlornness, conceived the notion of taking him into his own home. Why should not Fouan sell the house and live at his daughter's? He would want for nothing there; and they would no longer have to pay him the two hundred francs' allowance. The next day Buteau, having heard of this offer, hastened to make a similar one, with an elaborate display of filial affection. Money to fling away--no, no, indeed! But if it were merely a question of caring for his father, why the latter could come and eat and sleep and enjoy himself. At bottom, no doubt, Buteau's idea must have been that his sister was only trying to get hold of the old man with the intention of grabbing the suppositious hoard. Yet

even he was beginning to doubt the existence of that money, which he had hunted after in vain. And he was in two minds--offering his father a shelter out of pride, expecting that the old man would refuse, and yet exasperated at the notion that he might accept Delhomme's hospitality. Fouan, on his side, displayed great repugnance, almost dread, as regards both proposals. No, no! Better dry bread in his own house than roast meat at other people's; it was less bitter. He had lived there and there he would die.

So things went on till mid-July--Saint Henri's day, which was the patronal feast-day of Rognes. A travelling ball-room, under canvas, was usually set up in the meadows of the Aigre; and on the road, in front of the municipal offices, there were three stalls, one kept by a cheap-jack, who sold everything down to ribbons; a shooting-gallery, and a game of turn-about, at which sticks of barley-sugar could be won. That day Monsieur Baillehache, who was breakfasting at La Borderie, profited by the occasion to go and have a chat with Delhomme, who begged him to accompany him to Fouan's, and persuade the old man to listen to reason. Since Rose's death the notary also had advised Fouan to take up his abode with his daughter and sell the house, which was now uselessly large. It was worth some three thousand francs; and he, the notary, even offered to take care of the money and to pay Fouan the interest on it in little sums, according to his humble wants.

They found the old fellow in his customary bewilderment, trudging about at random in a state of stupor, in front of a heap of wood, which he wanted to saw up without having the strength to do so. That morning his poor hands shook even more than usual, for on the night before he had undergone a terrible onslaught from Hyacinthe, who, to get hold of twenty francs, in view of the morrow's festivity, had brought all his resources into play, bellowing maddeningly, crawling on the ground, and threatening to kill himself with a knife which he had purposely concealed

up his sleeve. At this the old man had given the twenty francs, as he at once confessed, with an air of anguish, to the notary.

"Tell me, would you do otherwise? I'm dead beat, dead beat!"

So Monsieur Baillehache took advantage of the circumstance.

"I've not come to talk about all that," said he. "You can't keep on like this. You won't even have your own skin left you. At your age it isn't prudent to live alone; and if you don't want to be eaten alive, you must listen to your daughter. Sell this place and go and live with her!"

"Ah! so that's your advice, too?" muttered Fouan.

He glanced askance at Delhomme, who affected to hold himself aloof. However, remarking the old man's look of distrust, he spoke out.

"You know, father," he began, "that I say nothing, because you perhaps imagine that I have some selfish object in inviting you. Good gracious, no! You'll give us extra work at home, but then it annoys me to see you so uncomfortably situated when you might be living at ease."

"Well, well," replied the old fellow, "we must think it over. As soon as I make up my mind, I'll be sure and let you know."

Neither his son-in-law nor the notary could get anything more out of him. He complained of being bustled. His authority, which had gradually died out, just lingered in this obstinacy of old age--this obstinacy which made him regardless even of his own comfort and well-being. In addition to his vague dread at the idea of no longer having a house of his own--a dread which was by no means unnatural, seeing how much he already suffered from having no land left him--he said "no," because they all wanted to make him say "yes." The brutes had something to gain by it, then? Well, he would say "yes" when he chose to do so, and not before.

On the evening before, Hyacinthe having been weak enough in his rapture to show La Trouille his four five-franc pieces, had gone to sleep clutching them in his hand, for on the last occasion the minx had stolen one from under his bolster, taking advantage of the fact that he had come home drunk to assert that he must have lost it out of doors. On awaking he had a fright, the coins having escaped from his grasp during his sleep; but he found them again, quite warm, under his buttocks, and was then thrilled with a mighty joy. His mouth was already watering at the thought of how he would spend the cash at Lengaigne's. It was the village fête, and no one with any decency would go back home at night-time with any change left in his pocket. During the morning La Trouille vainly coaxed her father to give her one of the five-franc pieces, just a little one, she said; but he repulsed her, and was not even grateful for the stolen eggs with which she made him an omelette. No, no! It didn't suffice that she was fond of her father; money was made for men. Then in a fit of wrath she put on her blue poplin dress--a present dating from the period of plenty--saying that she, too, was going to enjoy herself. She hadn't got twenty yards from the door when she turned round and called out:

"Father, father, look!"

Her hand was raised, and she displayed between the tips of her slender fingers a five-franc piece which shone like a sun.

Hyacinthe fancied that he had been robbed, and, growing pale, he fumbled in his pockets. But the twenty francs were there all right. The hussy must have sold some of her geese, and the dodge striking him as funny, he chuckled paternally and let her go.

He was only strict on one point: morality; and it was on that account that, half-an-hour later, he fell into a violent passion. He also was going out, and was on the point of fastening the door, when a peasant, in holiday garb, passing along on the road below, hailed him.

"Hyacinthe, ahoy! Hyacinthe!"

"What is it?"

"I have just seen your daughter."

"What of it?"

"Well, there's a fellow with her."

"Whereabouts are they?"

"In the ditch over there, at the corner of Guillaume's field."

On hearing this Hyacinthe raised both hands furiously to heaven.

"All right; thanks," said he to the peasant. "I'll fetch my whip. The dirty drab! Bringing dishonour on me like this, indeed!"

Having returned into his house, he took down from behind the door, on the left, a long horse-whip which he only used on these occasions; then with the whip under his arm he set out, creeping past the bushes as if after some game, so as to come upon the guilty couple unawares.

When, however, he turned round the bend of the road, Nénesse, who was keeping watch on a heap of stones, caught sight of him. It was Delphin who was with La Trouille. The two were taking turns, the one acting as outpost while the other amused himself.

"Look out!" cried Nénesse; "here's Hyacinthe."

He had seen the whip, and he started off across country like a hare.

La Trouille and Delphin were in the grassy ditch. What a nuisance! So here was her father coming! Still she had her wits sufficiently about her to hand Delphin her five-franc piece.

"Look here," said she, "hide this somewhere. You can give it me back again. Quick, cut away, hang you!"

Hyacinthe came up like a hurricane, shaking the ground as he ran, and brandishing his whip, which smacked with a sound like that of crackling flames.

"Oh, you foul drab, you!" he shouted; "I'll rouse you!"

He was so infuriated, on recognising the rural constable's son, that he missed the lad, as the latter scuttled off on all fours through the brambles. La Trouille, hampered by her petticoats, could neither escape nor plead innocence. A lash of the whip soon set her upright, and brought her out of the ditch. Then the sport began.

"Take that, you dirty troll! See if that won't quiet you!"

La Trouille, without saying a word, accustomed to these races, leapt away like a goat. Her father's usual tactics were to bring her back home like that, and then lock her up. So she tried to make her escape towards the plain, hoping to tire him out; and on this occasion she all but succeeded, thanks to a chance encounter. For the last moment or so, Monsieur Charles and Elodie, whom he was taking to the fête, had been standing there stock-still, in the middle of the road. They had seen everything; the young girl staring wide with innocent stupefaction, the father red with shame and bursting with indignation. The worst was that as that shameless hussy La Trouille recognised him she tried to obtain his protection. He repulsed her, but the whip was within range, and, to avoid it, she took to dodging round her uncle and cousin; while her father swore more loudly than ever, coarsely reproaching her with her misbehaviour. Meantime he also dodged round Monsieur Charles, and launched forth a volley of lashes, with all his might. Monsieur Charles, dumbfounded and aghast at being thus encircled, could only bury Elodie's face in his waistcoat, so that she might not see or hear anything. To such an extent did he lose his wits, that he himself became very coarse.

"Now, then, you dirty troll, will you leave me alone? Whoever cursed me with such a family in this strumpets' country?"

As soon as La Trouille was dislodged she felt that she was lost. One lash of the whip, which curled round her up to her arm-pits, made her spin like a top; another knocked her down, and dragged out a wisp of her hair. After that, brought back into the right road, her only idea was to get home as sharply as possible. She leapt over the hedges, cleared the ditches, and cut across the vineyards, without fear of impalement on the stakes. However, her little legs could no longer hold out; the lashes still rained down upon her round shoulders, upon her loins, indeed over all her precocious flesh. Not that she cared a straw; she had got to think it rather amusing to be tickled so hard. With a nervous laugh she finally leapt into the house, and took refuge in a corner, where the big whip could no longer reach her.

"Hand over your five francs," said the father, "by way of penalty."

She swore that she had lost them while running home, whereupon he sniggered incredulously, and rummaged her all over. Finding nothing, he flew into a passion again.

"What! So you've given them to your gallant! You blessed fool! You amuse them, and then you pay them!"

After that he went off in a towering rage, locking her in, and calling out that she should stay there all by herself till the next day, as he didn't mean to return.

La Trouille, when once he had gone off, made an inspection of her body, which was just striped with two or three weals. Then she put her hair straight, and tidied her dress. Finally, she calmly undid the lock--a trick at which she had grown extremely skilful--and bolted off, without even taking the trouble to refasten the door. Nicely robbed the robbers would find themselves, if any came! She knew where to find Nénesse and

Delphin again: in a copse beside the Aigre. They were, indeed, waiting for her there; and now it was her cousin Nénesse's turn. He had three francs with him, the other threepence. She had got her money back, and she decided good-naturedly that they would spend the whole lot together. They returned to the fair, and she set them a-shooting for macaroons, after buying herself a big bow of red satin, which she stuck in her hair.

Meanwhile, on arriving at Lengaigne's, Hyacinthe fell in with Bécu, who had his official badge fastened on to a new blouse. The scamp apostrophised the constable vehemently.

"Look here, you! You've a pretty way of going your rounds! D'you know where I found your swine of a boy?"

"Where?"

"Why, with my daughter! I'll write to the prefect and have you cashiered, you swine's father--swine, yourself!"

This made Bécu fire up.

"Daughter, indeed! Why, she's always flourishing her legs in the air--and so now she's led Delphin astray? Hell and thunder! I'll send the gendarmes after her!"

"Just try it on, you thief!"

Then the two snarled in each other's faces, till, all at once, the strain was relaxed, and their fury dropped.

"We must have an explanation; let's go in and liquor," said Hyacinthe.

"I haven't a copper," replied Bécu.

Then the other merrily produced his first five-franc piece, tossed it in the air, and stuck it in his eye.

"Well, shall we spend it, you gay dog? Come along, my buck! It's my turn now; you've paid often enough."

They went into Lengaigne's, chuckling for joy, and slapping each other affectionately on the back. Lengaigne had had an idea that year. As the owner of the strolling ball-room refused to come and pitch his tent in the village, disgusted at not having cleared his expenses the year before, the innkeeper had daringly made a ball-room of his barn, which adjoined his tavern, with its front door communicating with the road. He had even made another doorway in the party-wall, so that ball-room and tavern communicated. This idea had brought him the custom of the whole village, and his rival, Macqueron, was furious at having his house empty.

"Two quarts at once; one for each of us!" yelled Hyacinthe.

As Flore, bewildered and radiant at sight of the throng of people, was attending to his order, he noticed that his arrival had interrupted Lengaigne, who had been reading a letter aloud, standing amid a group of peasants. On being questioned, the taverner replied, with a deal of dignity that, it was a letter sent by his son Victor from the regiment.

"Ah, indeed, the rascal!" said Bécu, becoming interested. "And what does he say? You must begin it again for us."

So Lengaigne read it over again.

"My Dear Parents,--This is to tell you that we have been here at Lille in Flanders for a month, less seven days. The country's not bad except for the dearness of the wine, for which we have to pay as much as eightpence a quart."

In all the four closely-written pages there was hardly anything else. The same detail recurred with infinite monotony, spun out into lengthened phrases. However, they all expressed surprise each time that the price of the wine was mentioned. So there were parts like that! How horrid! In the

last lines of the letter came an attempt at spongeing: a request for twelve francs to replace a lost pair of shoes.

"Ah, the rascal!" repeated the rural constable. "Something like a fellow that, good God."

After the first two quarts, Hyacinthe asked for two more: bottled wine, at a franc apiece, paying as he was served so as to create astonishment, and rapping his money on the table, in a way that revolutionised the tavern. When the first five-franc piece had been expended in drink, he pulled out a second one, screwed it into his eye, as before, and cried out that there was plenty more where that one had come from. So the afternoon slipped by, amid a bustle of drinkers passing in and out, and increasing tipsiness. Dull and sedate though they were on work-days, they were now all yelling, thumping, and spitting vehemently. It occurred to one tall thin fellow to get shaved, and Lengaigne sat him down forthwith in the midst of them, and scraped his skin so roughly, that the razor was heard going over the leathery integument as if at work on a scalded pig. A second took the first one's place; 'twas fine sport. And how the tongues wagged! There was Macqueron, now, who didn't dare show himself outside. Wasn't it this fool of an assessor's own fault if the usual ball hadn't come? Arrangements might have been made. But, sure enough, he preferred voting roads, and getting three times as much money for his land as it was worth. This allusion provoked a tempest of laughter. Fat Flore, whose triumph the day was to be, kept neglecting her customers to run to the door, bursting into insolent mirth, whenever she saw Cœlina's jaundiced visage behind the opposite window-panes.

"Cigars! Madame Lengaigne," thundered Hyacinthe at last. "Expensive ones, mind! Penny each!"

As night was falling, and the petroleum lamps were being lit, Madame Bécu came in to look for her husband. But he had started on a monstrous game at cards.

"Are you coming?" she said; "it's past eight. You must have some dinner."

He stared at her with tipsy majesty.

"Go to blazes!" he replied.

Then Hyacinthe displayed intense delight. "Madame Bécu," said he, "I invite you. Eh? Yes, we'll just peck a bit, between the three of us. D'ye hear there, mistress? Give us your best: some ham, some rabbit, and dessert. And don't be anxious. Just look here. Attention!"

He then pretended to fumble himself all over. Then he suddenly produced his third coin, and held it up.

"Cuckoo! Aha, there it is!"

Everybody was doubled up with laughter, and one fat man all but suffocated. That rascal Hyacinthe was thundering funny! And some of them, by way of a joke, felt him from head to foot, as if he had had crowns all over him.

"I say, La Bécu," he repeated a dozen times over while he was eating, "if Bécu don't mind, we'll sleep together? What do you say?"

She was very dirty, not having known, she said, that she should stop at the fête; and she laughed, did this dark pole-cat of a woman, wiry and rusty like an old needle; while Hyacinthe, without further delay, grabbed hold of her legs under the table. Meantime the husband, blind drunk, dribbled and chuckled, shouting out that two men would be none too many for the hussy.

It was ten o'clock when the ball began. Through the communicating doorway the four lamps, fastened by iron wires to the beams, could be seen blazing. Clou, the farrier, was there with his trombone, as well as the nephew of a Bazoches-le-Doyen rope-maker, who played the violin.

The admission was free, but you paid two sous for each dance you joined in. The beaten soil underfoot had just been watered, on account of the dust. Whenever the instruments left off playing, the sharp, regular detonations of the neighbouring shooting-gallery could be heard. The road, usually so gloomy, was all ablaze with the reflectors of the two other booths; the trinket stall glittered with gildings, while the turn-about was bedecked with mirrors and hung with red curtains like a chapel.

"Hallo! Why, there's my little daughter!" cried Hyacinthe, with swimming eyes.

So it was. La Trouille was just coming into the ball, attended by Delphin and Nénesse; and the father did not seem at all surprised to see her there, although he had locked her in. She not merely had the red bunch of ribbons flaunting in her hair, for round her neck there was now a heavy imitation coral necklace, formed of beads of sealing-wax, which showed blood-red against her dark skin. All three of them, moreover, tired of rambling about in front of the booths, were dull and sticky with sweetmeats, of which they had eaten more than they could digest. Delphin, who was only happy when out and about in all the hidden nooks of the country-side, wore a blouse, and his shaggy round savage-like head was bare. Nénesse, on the other hand, already yearning after the refinements of town life, was clad in a suit of dittos bought at Lambourdieu's, one of those scant outfits turned out wholesale by cheap Paris clothiers; and he wore a round felt hat, to mark his contempt of the village, which he looked down upon.

"Petty!" called Hyacinthe. "Little daughter, come and taste this. First-rate, ain't it?"

He let her drink out of his glass, while Madame Bécu asked Delphin sternly:

"What have you done with your cap?"

"Lost it."

"Lost it? Come here, and and I'll cuff you!" But Bécu interposed, chuckling complacently at the recollection of his son's precocious gallantries.

"Let him be! He's getting a big boy now. And so, you scum of the earth, you've been amusing yourselves together? Ah! the lickerish dog."

"Go and play," concluded Hyacinthe paternally. "And mind you're to be good."

"They're as drunk as pigs," said Nénesse, with an air of disgust, as he went back to the ball-room.

La Trouille laughed.

"I should just think so! I quite expected it. That's why they're so amiable."

The dancing was getting lively. The explosive blasts of Clou's trombone, which smothered the faint music of the little fiddle, were all that could be heard. The ground, watered over copiously, was turning to mud under the thick-soled boots of the dancers; and presently, from all the shaken petticoats, from the jackets and bodices that grew moist under the arm-pits with broad stains of sweat, there uprose a strong goat-like smell, accentuated by the smoky acridity of the lamps. Between two quadrilles, a sensation was created by the arrival of Berthe, Macqueron's daughter, arrayed in a foulard dress, exactly like those that the tax-collector's young ladies had worn at Cloyes, on Saint Lubin's day. Could her parents have given her leave to come? Or had she slipped out behind their backs? It was observable that she danced all the time with the son of a wheelwright, whom her father had forbidden her to speak to, on account of a family quarrel. Jests were bandied about. Apparently she was no longer content with her pernicious solitary habits.

Hyacinthe, tipsy as he was, had, for the last moment or so, noticed that beast Lequeu, stationed beside the communicating doorway, and watching Berthe as she curvetted about in her gallant's arms. He could not restrain himself.

"I say, Monsieur Lequeu," he exclaimed, "you're not leading your sweetheart out?"

"What sweetheart?" asked the schoolmaster, green with bile.

"Why, the pretty dark-ringed eyes, over there!"

Lequeu, furious at having been detected, turned his back, and stood motionless, in one of those haughty spells of silence in which he enwrapped himself, out of prudence and disdain. Lengaigne having come forward, Hyacinthe buttonholed him. "Aha! he had given that paper-stainer over there one for his nob! Rich girls for him, indeed! Not that Berthe was such a catch, for she had a peculiar physical defect." Being now thoroughly aflame, he swore to the truth of his assertion. It was current talk from Cloyes to Châteaudun. Stupefied by this information, the others craned over to look at Berthe, making slight grimaces of repugnance whenever her white skirts came flying round that way, in the course of the dance.

"You old rogue," resumed Hyacinthe, beginning to address Lengaigne familiarly, "your girl's all right."

"Rather!" replied the taverner, complacently.

Suzanne was now in Paris, in the swell set, people said. Lengaigne, acting discreetly, used to hint at a good situation she had there. Meanwhile peasants still kept coming in, and a farmer having asked after Victor, the letter was produced again. "My dear Parents,--This is to tell you that we have been here, at Lille in Flanders ..." They all listened anew; even people who had already heard the letter read five or six times

over, gathered round again. Not really eightpence a quart? Yes, really; eightpence!

"A beastly country!" repeated Bécu. At that moment Jean made his appearance; at once going to glance into the ball-room, as if he were looking for some one. Then he returned looking disappointed and uneasy. For the last two months he had not dared to pay such frequent visits to Buteau, for he felt that the latter was cool, not to say hostile. Doubtless he, Jean, had ill-concealed his feelings for Françoise, the growing affection which now fevered him, and his comrade had noticed it. It must have displeased him, interfering with his plans.

"Good evening," said Jean, drawing near a table where Fouan and Delhomme were drinking a bottle of beer.

"Will you join us, Corporal?" said Delhomme, politely.

Jean accepted; and after clinking glasses:

"Funny thing Buteau hasn't turned up," he said.

"Here he is, pat!" said Fouan.

And, indeed, Buteau now came in, but all by himself, and Jean's face grew still darker. The other strolled round the tavern, shaking hands; then, on reaching his father and brother-in-law's table, he stood there, refusing to sit down or to take anything.

"Lise and Françoise don't dance, then?" Jean finally asked, in a faltering voice.

Buteau looked at him hard out of his little grey eyes.

"Françoise has gone to bed," he replied; "it's the best place for young folks."

An incident near them now attracted their attention, and cut the conversation short. It was Hyacinthe at loggerheads with Flore, whom he had asked for a quart of rum to make some punch, and who refused to bring it.

"No! No more! You're drunk enough."

"Hallo! what's that she's saying? Do you fancy that I sha'n't pay? Why, I'll buy up your whole shanty, if you like. I've merely to blow my nose. Here! Look at this!"

He had concealed his fourth five-franc piece in his hand; and now pinching his nose with his fingers, he blew it loudly, and apparently drew out the coin, which he then paraded round like a monstrance.

"That's what I blow from my nose, when I've got a cold!"

A round of applause shook the walls, and Flore, quite vanquished, brought the quart of rum and some sugar. Next a salad-bowl was wanted, and then the scamp took possession of the whole room, stirring the punch, with his elbows squarely set, while his red face was lighted up by the glow of the flames, which increased the heat of the atmosphere, already densely befogged by the lamps and pipes. Buteau, exasperated at sight of the money, suddenly broke out:

"You thundering swine, aren't you ashamed of tippling away like that with the money you rob our father of?"

The other adopted a low-comedy tone.

"Oh, it's you, young 'un! I suppose it's your empty stomach that makes you talk such rot!"

"I tell you, you're a dirty beast, and you'll finish at the galleys. To begin with, it was you that killed our mother with grief."

The sot rattled his spoon and stirred up a tempest of flame in the salad-bowl, while he split his sides with laughter.

"Right you are; go on. Sure enough it was me--supposing it wasn't you!"

"And I tell you further that spendthrifts of your kidney don't deserve that the corn should grow. Only to think that our property--yes, all that land that the old folks took so much trouble to leave us--has been pledged by you, and handed over to others. You dirty blackguard, what have you done with the land?"

At this Hyacinthe was roused. His punch went out, and he settled himself, leaning back in his chair, seeing that all the drinkers were silently listening, to judge between him and his brother.

"The land!" he yelled: "why, what the deuce does the land care for you? You're its slave, it robs you of your enjoyments, your strength, your life! You idiot! And it doesn't so much as make you rich! While I, who fold my arms and despise it, confining myself to giving it a kick or two, why, I, you see, am independent and can wet my whistle! Oh, you confounded simpleton!"

The peasants laughed again, while Buteau, surprised by the roughness of the attack, could only mutter:

"A good-for-nothing lazy lout; who does no work and boasts of it."

"Land, indeed! A lot of humbug!" resumed Hyacinthe, now thoroughly aroused. "Well, you *must* be an ancient, if you still believe in humbug like that! Does it exist, this land? It's mine, it's yours, it's nobody's. Wasn't it once the old 'uns? And hadn't he to cut it up to give it to us? And won't you cut it up for your young 'uns? Very well, then! It comes and goes, increases and diminishes--diminishes especially; for there you are, a fine gentleman with your seven or eight acres, when father had over twenty. I got disgusted with my share. It was too little, so I blued the

lot. And, besides, I like sound investments, and, look'ee! young 'un, land's shaky! I would not put a copper into it. It's bad business, and there's an ugly catastrophe at hand that'll wipe you all out. Bankruptcy! A set of blockheads!"

A death-like silence gradually spread through the tavern. No one laughed now. The anxious faces of the peasants were turned towards this tall ruffian, who, in his cups, poured out the muddled contents of his brain--the confused ideas that he had formed as an Algerian campaigner, as a hanger-about-town, and tavern politician. What was paramount in him was the old leaven of '48, the humanitarian communistic views of one who still worshipped at the shrine of '89.

"Liberty, equality, fraternity!" he shouted. "We must hark back to the Revolution. We were swindled in the division of property; the gentlefolks have taken everything, and, by God, they shall be forced to give it back. Isn't one man as good as another? Is it fair, for instance, such a lot of land held by that ass at La Borderie, while I've got none? I want my rights; I want my share; everybody shall have his share."

Bécu, who was too drunk to uphold the principle of authority, approved without understanding. Still, he had a gleam of sense left, and imposed certain limitations.

"That's so, that's so," said he; "but the king's the king, and what is mine isn't yours."

A murmur of approbation ran round, and Buteau took his revenge.

"Don't listen to him; he's only fit to kill!"

There was a fresh burst of laughter, and Hyacinthe, losing all control, stood up, wildly shaking his fists in the air.

"Just you wait a bit. I'll talk to you, you cursed coward! You're in fine feather now, because you've got the mayor, the assessor, and that

twopenny-halfpenny deputy on your side! You lick his boots, and you are fool enough to think that he's a power and will help you to sell your corn. Well, I, who have nothing to sell, I don't care a fig for you or your mayor, assessor, deputy, or gendarmes! To-morrow, it'll be our turn to be the stronger; and it won't be me alone, it'll be all the poor devils who are starving to death. Ay, and it'll be you, too; you, I say! when you've got tired of keeping the gentlefolks, without having so much as a crust of bread to eat yourselves. A pretty plight they'll be in, the landowners. They'll have their jaws broken, and the land'll be free for any one to take. D'ye hear, young 'un? I'll take that land of yours and ---- on it!"

"You just try it on, and I'll shoot you down like a dog!" shouted Buteau, so wild with rage that he went out, slamming the door after him.

Lequeu, having listened with a reserved air, had already left, unwilling, as an official, to compromise himself any further. Fouan and Delhomme, with their faces over their liquor, breathed not a word; feeling ashamed, and knowing that if they interposed the sot would only shout the louder. The peasants at the surrounding tables were eventually getting angry. What! Their property wasn't their own? It would be taken from them? And, growling, they were about to pummel the communist soundly and turn him out, when Jean rose up. He had not taken his eyes off the speaker, or missed one of his words, as he sat there listening with a serious face, as if seeking what justice might underlie these things that shocked him.

"Hyacinthe," said he quietly, "you'd better hold your tongue. It's not the sort of thing to say; and if by any chance you are right, you're not very clever to put yourself so in the wrong."

So wise a remark from so cool a speaker calmed Hyacinthe instantaneously. He fell back in his chair, declaring that, after all, he didn't care a fig. He then began larking again: kissed Madame Bécu, whose husband was asleep with his head on the table, and finished up the

punch, drinking out of the salad-bowl. The laughter had recommenced, amid the dense smoke, and he was voted a funny fellow, all the same.

At the far end of the barn, the dancing was still going on. Clou was still smothering the squeaky notes of the little fiddle with his thunderous blasts of trombone accompaniment. Sweat drained off the bodies of the dancers, and exhaled amid the ruddy smoke of the lamps. La Trouille, whirling about in turn in the arms of Nénesse and Delphin, was conspicuous by her red bow. Berthe, too, was still there, faithful to her gallant and dancing with no one else. In a corner, some young men whom she had cast off were tittering together. Oh, well; if that great gawky was willing, she did right to stick to him; there were plenty of others who, for all her money, would have certainly thought twice before marrying her.

"Let's go home to bed," said Fouan at last to Jean and Delhomme.

Outside, when Jean had left them, the old man walked on in silence, apparently pondering over all he had just heard. Then, abruptly, as if that had decided him, he turned to his son-in-law.

"I'll sell the shanty and come and live with you. That's settled. Good-bye!"

He went slowly home. His heart was heavy; as his boots stumbled over the dark road, a terrible sadness made him stagger like a drunken man. As it was, he had no land, and he would soon have no house. It seemed to him that people were already sawing down the old rafters and pulling off the slates from over his head. He now had not the shelter of a single stone left him; he was like a beggar wandering along the roads, by day and night, unceasingly; and when it rained, the chill, never-ending downpour would fall upon his head.

PART III. — CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER IV.

The bright August sun had been climbing the horizon since five o'clock, and La Beauce displayed its ripe grain under the glowing sky. Since the last summer showers, the green, ever-growing expanse had little by little turned yellow. It was now a tawny sea of fire, that seemed to reflect the flaming atmosphere: a sea that gleamed and swelled at the least breath of wind. Nothing but corn; corn to infinity, without a glimpse of house or tree! Now and then in the heat of the day, a leaden calm enwrapped the ears, while a fruitful odour rose smoking from the soil. The period of gestation was finishing; it could be realised that the swelling seed was bursting from the womb in warm, heavy grain. At sight of this mighty plain, this giant harvest, one felt uneasy as to whether man, with his insect-like form, so small amid such immensity, would ever be able to get through it.

During the last week, at La Borderie, Hourdequin, having finished his barley, had been engaged upon his wheat. During the previous year his reaping-machine had got out of order; and, discouraged by his servants' hostility, and having himself grown doubtful as to the efficacy of machinery, he had had to provide himself with a staff of reapers since Ascension Day. According to custom, he had hired them at Mondoubleau, in Le Perche. There was the foreman, a tall, lean fellow, five other reapers, and six pickers-up, four of them women and two of them girls. A cart had brought them to Cloyes, where a conveyance from the farm had gone to fetch them. Everybody slept in the sheep-cot--empty at that time of year--the girls, women, and men being all huddled together pell-mell in the straw, half-undressed on account of the great heat.

This was the season when Jacqueline had the most trouble. The sunrise and sunset decided the work of the day or the morrow. They shook off their fleas at three in the morning, and returned to their straw at about ten at night. She always had to be up the first, for the four o'clock soup; just as she went to bed the last, after serving the heavy nine o'clock meal of bacon, beef, and cabbage. Between these two meals there were three others; bread and cheese at eight, soup again at twelve, a sop of milk by way of a snack in the afternoon. In all, five meals, copiously washed down with cider and wine, for the harvesters, who work hard, are exacting as regards their food. However, she merely laughed, as if stimulated by her duties. She was lithe like a cat, with sinews of iron, and her resistance to fatigue was all the more surprising, on account of her amours with that big lubber Tron, whose soft flesh whetted her appetites. She had made him her creature, and she took him into the barns, the hay-loft, and even the sheep-cot, now that the shepherd, whose espionage she feared, passed the night out-of-doors with his sheep. And withal she became more supple and active. Hourdequin neither saw nor heard anything. He was in his harvest fever, something out of the common, the great annual crisis of his passion for the soil. His brain became on fire, his heart beat fast, and his flesh quivered at sight of the ripe, falling grain.

The nights were so sultry that year, that sometimes Jean could not stay in the loft, where he slept, near the stable. He preferred to stretch himself, with all his clothes on, on the pavement of the yard. It was not merely the intolerable living heat of the horses, and the exhalations from their litter, that drove him outside; but sleeplessness, the ever-present image of Françoise, the constant idea of her coming, of his seizing her, and devouring her with his embraces. Now that Jacqueline, being busy elsewhere, left him to himself, his affection for the young girl turned into a madness of longing. Scores of times, while he suffered at night-time, in a state of semi-somnolence, he swore that he would go the next day and win her; but, on rising up, as soon as he had dipped his head into a bucket

of cold water, he thought it disgusting: he was too old for her. And then the next night the torture began again. When the harvesters arrived, he recognised among them a woman, now married to one of the reapers, with whom he had been familiar two years before, while she was yet a girl. One evening he slipped into the sheep-cot, and pulled her by the feet as she lay between her husband and her brother, who were both snoring open-mouthed. She got up and came to him, and they lay silently together in the sultry darkness on the trodden soil which, although it had been raked over, still retained, from the winter sojourn of the sheep, so keen an ammoniacal odour as to bring tears into one's eyes. During the three weeks that the reapers were there, he came back to the sheep-cot every night.

After the second week in August, the work made progress. The reapers had started with the northern fields, and were working down towards those which bordered the valley of the Aigre. The immense stretch of corn fell sheaf by sheaf. Every cut of the scythe told, leaving a circular incision. The puny insects, seemingly lost amid their gigantic task, came forth from it in triumph. Behind them, as they slowly marched onward in line, the razed ground re-appeared, bristling with stubble, over which trampled the pickers-up, bending down It was the season when there was the most gaiety about the vast sad solitude of La Beauce, now full of people and animated by the constant motion of labourers, carts, and horses. As far as the eye could reach, there were parties advancing with the same slant progress, with the same swinging of their arms; some so near that the swish of the steel was audible, others extending in black streaks, like ants, as far as the edge of the sky. On all sides gaps were appearing, as though the plain were a piece of cloth wearing into holes all over. Shred by shred, amid the ant-like activity, La Beauce was stripped of her court mantle formed of cloth-of-gold, her sole summer adornment, the loss of which left her desolate and naked. During the last days of the harvest, the heat was overpowering, especially one day when Jean near

the Buteaus' land, and, with his cart and pair, was removing some sheaves to a field of the farm where a large stack, six and twenty feet high, was to be built with some three thousand trusses. The stubble was splitting atwain with the drought, and the heat scorched the motionless wheat which was still standing. The latter seemed as if it were itself flaming with visible fire, in the quivering of the sun-rays. Not the shelter of a leaf; no shadow on the ground save the scanty ones of the toilers. Perspiring since the morning under this blazing sky, Jean had been loading and unloading his cart, without saying a word, simply glancing at each journey towards the field where Françoise, bending double, was slowly gathering behind the reaping Buteau.

Buteau had had to take Palmyre to help him; for Françoise did not suffice, and he could not rely on Lise, who had been in the family way for the last eight months. This had exasperated him. After all the precautions he had taken, how could it possibly have happened? He used to jostle his wife about, accusing her of having done it on purpose, and complaining lugubriously for hours together, as if some destitute wretch or stray animal were coming to eat him out of house and home. Although eight months had gone by, he never noticed Lise's condition without abusing it. Curse the thing! A goose was not so stupid! It was the ruin of the household!

That morning she had come to help in the gathering; but he had sent her back, furious with her heavy, clumsy movements. She was to return, however, with the four o'clock snack.

"Good God!" said Buteau, who was bent on finishing a bit of ground; "My back's baked, and my tongue's a perfect chip."

Then he straightened himself; his sockless feet were thrust into thick shoes, and he wore nothing but a shirt and canvas smock, the former hanging half out of the open smock and showing the hair of his sweating chest down to the navel.

"I must have another drink!" said he.

Then he took from under his jacket on the ground a quart bottle of cider, which he had sheltered there. At last, having swallowed two mouthfuls of the tepid drink, he thought of the girl.

"Aren't you thirsty?"

"Yes."

Françoise took a deep draught from the bottle without repugnance. While she bent backward, with her loins curved, and her rounded bust straining the thin material of her dress, he looked at her askance. She also was dripping with moisture, in a print dress half undone, the body being unhooked at the top and showing her white flesh. Under the blue handkerchief with which she had covered her head and neck, her eyes seemed very large in her quiet face, glowing with the heat.

Without another word Buteau, with his hips swinging, resumed his work, felling a swath with every stroke of his scythe, the swish of which kept time to his tread. Stooping down again, she followed him, carrying in her right hand her sickle, which she made use of to gather up each armful of corn from among the thistles. At every three steps she laid the wheat regularly in bundles. Whenever he straightened himself, just long enough to pass the back of his hand over his brow, and saw Françoise too far in the rear, stooping, with her head quite close to the ground, in the position of an expectant animal, he called out to her in a husky voice, his tongue seemingly getting drier than ever:

"Now, then, lazybones! You ought to know better than to fool away your time like that!"

In the adjacent field, where for three days the straw of the bundles had been drying, Palmyre was engaged in binding the sheaves. He did not watch *her*; for, contrary to the usual practice, he had arranged to pay her

per hundred sheaves, on the pretext that she was old and worn out, and had lost her strength, so that he should lose if he paid her by time--at the rate of a franc and a-half per day, which was what the younger women earned. Even to secure this piecework she had had to implore him; and he had taken advantage of her position, assuming the resigned air of a Christian performing a work of charity. The poor creature collected three or four bundles--as many as her shrivelled arms could hold--and then tightly tied the sheaf with a band she had prepared. This work, so fatiguing that it is usually reserved for the men, was exhausting her. Her breast was crushed by the constant loads it had to sustain; her arms were strained by dint of embracing such massive bundles, and tugging at the bands of straw. She had brought with her in the morning a bottle, which she went and filled every hour or so at a neighbouring stagnant, poisonous pool; and she drank greedily of the water, in spite of the diarrhœa, which had torn her to pieces since the beginning of the hot weather, her health being already ruined by over-work.

The azure of the sky had grown pale, as if it were whitened by the heat; and burning coals seemed to fall from the sun, now glowing more fiercely than ever. It was the oppressive noontide hour of the siesta. Delhomme and his party, who had been stacking some sheaves near by--four below, and one to roof the others in with--had already disappeared, and were all lying down in some hollow. For an instant longer old Fouan could be seen, still standing up. He had sold his house a fortnight previously, since when he had been living with his son-in-law, following the harvest-work with all the feverishness of yore. In his turn, he soon felt obliged to lie down, and also disappeared from view. There was nothing remaining against the blank horizon, or the blazing background of the stubble, save the withered figure of La Grande, who was examining a tall stack which her people had begun to erect among a little tribe of smaller ones already partially pulled to pieces. She seemed like a tree hardened by age, with nothing to fear from the sun, as, without

a drop of perspiration on her, she stood there bolt upright, feeling sternly indignant with the sleepers.

"Pish! My skin's absolutely crackling," said Buteau at last.

And, turning to Françoise:

"Let's sleep a bit!"

He looked round him for a little shade, but found none. The sun was beating down perpendicularly, and there was not so much as a bush to shelter them. At last he noticed that at the end of the field, in a sort of little ditch, some wheat which was still standing threw a brown streak of shadow.

"Hullo there, Palmyre!" cried he. "Don't you follow our example?"

She was fifty paces off, and replied in a stifled voice, which reached them like a whisper:

"No, no! I haven't time."

She was now the only worker left in all the glowing plain. If she didn't take her franc-and-a-half home with her at night-time, Hilarion would beat her; for he no longer confined himself to his accustomed ill-usage, but robbed her as well, that he might have money to buy brandy with. However, her strength was now forsaking her. Her flat figure, planed straight like a plank by sheer hard work, creaked as if it were about to snap at every fresh sheaf she picked up and bound. With ashen face, worn like some old copper coin, seemingly sixty years of age though actually but thirty-five, she let the burning sun drink up her life-blood in the despairing efforts she made, like a beast of burden about to fall and perish.

Buteau and Françoise had stretched themselves side by side. They were steaming with sweat, now that they had ceased to move about, and they

lay in silence with closed eyes. A leaden slumber instantly weighed them down; they slept for an hour; and the perspiration poured unceasingly from their limbs in the motionless, heavy, furnace-like atmosphere. When Françoise opened her eyes again, she saw Buteau lying on his side, watching her with the jaundiced look that had disturbed her for some time past. She re-closed her eyelids, and pretended to go to sleep again. Without his having yet spoken to her, she knew well enough that he desired her, now that she had grown up, and was quite a woman. The idea maddened her. Would he dare, the swine! he whom she heard rioting with her sister every night? Never before had his lustful manner so exasperated her. Would he dare? And she awaited his addresses, unconsciously wishing for them, but resolved, if he touched her, to strangle him.

As she closed her eyes Buteau suddenly seized hold of her.

"You swine! you swine!" she stammered, repulsing him.

He chuckled with a wild look, and whispered:

"Stupid! Keep still! I tell you they're asleep; no one is looking."

At that moment, Palmyre's wan and agonised face appeared above the corn. She had turned round at the noise. But she didn't count, any more than if a cow had lifted up its muzzle. And, indeed, she returned, with indifference, to her sheaves. The cracking of her loins was again heard at each effort she made.

"Stupid," said Buteau. "Lise won't know."

At the mention of her sister, Françoise, who was on the eve of giving way, nerved herself for renewed resistance. From that moment she remained firm, beating him with her fists and kicking him with her bare legs. Was he hers, this fellow? Did he think she wanted some one else's leavings?

"Go and find my sister, you pig!" she exclaimed. And then she gave him such a kick in a tender part that he was forced to let her go, pushing her away so brutally that she had to stifle a cry of pain.

It was high time that the scene should finish, for Buteau, when he got up, perceived Lise returning with the snack. He walked on to meet her, and engaged her in talk, so as to allow Françoise the time to tidy her dress. The idea that she was going to tell everything made him regret not having stunned her with a kick. However, she said nothing, but sat down amid the bundles of wheat with a stubborn and insolent air. He had resumed his reaping, but she still stayed there idly, like a princess.

"What is it?" asked Lise, tired with her journey, and sitting down as well: "you're not working?"

"No, it bores me," replied Françoise, savagely.

Then Buteau, afraid to storm at her, fell foul of his wife. What was she up to, stretched out there like a sow, warming her belly in the sun? And a sweet thing, indeed, it was. A fine pumpkin to set out to ripen. At that phrase she began to laugh with all her old buxom gaiety. Maybe it was true that the warmth ripened the little one and brought it on; and so, under the flaming heavens, she rounded her huge figure, which seemed like the protuberance of some germ rising from the fruitful soil. But he did not laugh. He brutally made her get up, and insisted on her helping him. Inconvenienced by her condition, she was fain to kneel down, picking up the ears of corn with a side-long movement, and panting as she laboured on.

"As you're doing nothing," she said to her sister, "you might at least go back home and make the soup."

Françoise went off without a word. Although the heat was still stifling La Beauce had again assumed an aspect of activity. The little black specks of harvesters re-appeared, swarming to infinity. Delhomme was once

more reaping with his two men, while La Grande, watching the growth of her stack, was leaning on her stick, quite prepared to bring it across the face of any idler. Fouan also went to have a look at the stack; next he again became absorbed in his son-in-law's work; and then he wandered retrospectively and regretfully to and fro, with heavy gait. Françoise, with her head still dizzy from the shock she had experienced, was going along the new road, when a voice called to her:

"Come along. This way!"

It was Jean, half hidden behind the sheaves which he had been carting from the neighbouring fields since the morning. He had just unloaded his waggon once more; and the two horses were waiting motionless in the sunshine. The erection of the large stack would not be begun till the morrow, and he had merely piled up some heaps, three walls which enclosed, as it were, a room; a deep snug nest of straw.

"Come along!" he said. "It's me!"

Françoise mechanically complied with the request. She did not even think of glancing back. Had she turned round, she would have noticed Buteau craning forward, surprised to see her leaving the road.

Jean now began jestingly:

"It's proud you're getting, to go by without giving a good-day to your friends!"

"Why, you're so hidden," she replied, "that you can't be seen."

Then he complained of the cold shoulder that the Buteaus now always turned upon him. But she was not composed enough to talk of that; she remained silent, or only let a brief word fall now and then. She had spontaneously dropped upon the straw, at the far end of the nook, as though she were thoroughly tired out. Her head was full of one thing, the attack of that man over yonder at the edge of the field; his hot hands, of

which she still felt the powerful grip; his masculine approach, that she still seemed to expect, breathing short, in an anguish of desire, against which she struggled. She closed her eyes, choking.

Then Jean spoke no more. Seeing her thus, supine and yielding, the blood pulsed strongly through his veins. He had not calculated on this encounter, and he still held back, thinking that it would be a shame to take advantage of such a child. But the loud beating of his heart upset him. He had so long desired her! A vision of possession drove him frantic, as during his feverish nights. He lay down near her, contenting himself first with one of her hands, and then with both hands; which he crushed between his own, without so much as venturing to raise them to his lips. She did not draw them away, but re-opened her dreamy, heavy-lidded eyes, and looked at him without a smile, without any sign of shame, her face nervously strained. It was this mute, almost painful look of hers that all at once urged him to brutality. He made a dash, and seized her like the other.

"No, no," she faltered; "I entreat you."

But she made no defence. She only gave a cry of pain. It seemed as if the ground were giving way beneath her, and in her dizziness consciousness failed her.

When she re-opened her eyes, without saying a word, without making a movement, after remaining for a moment in a state of stupor, the thought of the other one came back to her. Jean, on his side, was displeased. Why had she yielded? She could not love a veteran like him! And he also remained motionless, aghast. Finally, with a discontented gesture, he tried to think of something to say, and failed. Embarrassed still further, he resolved to kiss her; but she at once recoiled, unwilling that he should touch her again.

"I must go," he muttered. "You stay here."

She made no answer, but stared vaguely up at the sky.

"Won't you? Come, wait five minutes, so that you mayn't be seen coming away at the same time as me."

Then she decided to open her lips.

"All right, be off!"

That was all. He smacked his whip, swore at his horses, and with his head bent trudged away by the side of his cart.

Meanwhile, Buteau's astonishment at Françoise's disappearance behind the sheaves continued; and when he saw Jean make off, he had a suspicion of the truth. Without confiding in Lise, he crept off like a wary hunter, and finally leapt full into the midst of the nook of straw. Françoise had not stirred, in the torpor that benumbed her; she was still gazing vaguely upwards.

"Oh, you strumpet! So that vagabond's your lover, and I'm only good to be kicked! Great God! We'll soon see about that."

He had already got hold of her; and she plainly realised by his heated look that he intended to take advantage of the opportunity. As soon as she again felt his burning hands, she once more resisted. Now that he was there, she no longer regretted or wanted him. Her whole nature revolted rancorously and jealously against him, albeit she was herself unconscious of the freaks of her will.

"Will you let me go, you swine!" she said. "I'll bite you!"

For the second time he had to leave go of her. He spluttered with fury, enraged at the thought that she yielded to another.

"Oh, I had a notion that there was something between you two," he said. "I ought to have kicked him out a long time ago, you hussy!"

Then he gave vent to a flood of filth. She, although maddened on her own side, remained stiff and pale, affecting perfect calmness, and replying curtly to all his dirty speeches:

"What's it got to do with you? Can't I do what I like?"

"Very well. Then I shall turn you out of the house immediately we get back! I shall tell Lise how I found you, and you may go and do as you like elsewhere."

He was now pushing her in front of him towards the field where his wife was waiting.

"Tell Lise!" said Françoise. "What do I care? I shall go away if I choose."

"If you choose! Oh, indeed! We shall see about that. You'll be kicked out, neck and crop!"

By way of taking a short cut, he was driving her across the field which had hitherto belonged in common to her sister and herself, and the partition of which he had always postponed. Suddenly he was seized with consternation. A new idea had just flashed like lightning through his mind. It had occurred to him that if he turned her away this field would be cut in two, and that she would take half of it, and perhaps give it to her gallant. The thought froze him, and both nipped his lust and wrath. No; that would be folly. He must not let everything go because a girl had baulked him for once. There was plenty of sport to be had any day; but if a fellow once got hold of some land, the thing was to stick to it.

He said nothing more, but slackened his pace, feeling puzzled as to how he might recall his violent words before he reached his wife. At length he made up his mind.

"Well, I'm not fond of making mischief," he said; "it's your seeming disgust of me that annoys me so. Otherwise, I hardly care to vex Lise, situated as she is."

She fancied that he, too, was afraid of being exposed.

"You may be sure of one thing," she answered; "if you speak, I shall do the same."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of that," he resumed, coolly and quietly. "I shall say you are lying, in revenge, because I caught you." Then, as they were getting near, he concluded, quickly: "So it shan't go any further. We must both of us talk it over some other time."

Lise, however, was beginning to feel surprised, unable to understand why Françoise was coming back with Buteau like that. He was explaining that the lazy thing had been sulking behind a hay-stack, down yonder, when suddenly a harsh cry interrupted him, and the matter was forgotten.

"What's that? Who screamed?"

It was a weird cry, a long screaming sigh, like the death-gasp of an animal having its throat cut. It rose up and died away amid the pitiless glare of the sun.

"Eh? What is it? A horse surely, with its bones broken!"

They turned round, and saw Palmyre still standing in the next field, amid the bundles of wheat. With her failing arms, she was pressing against her shrivelled bosom one last sheaf, which she was striving to bind. But, raising a fresh cry of agony, and letting the whole lot fall, she spun round and fell prone among the corn, struck down by the sun that had been scorching her for the last twelve hours.

Lise and Françoise ran up, Buteau following at a more careless pace; while everybody from the surrounding fields came forward: the Delhommes, Fouan, who was strolling about there, and La Grande, who was scattering the stones with the ferule of her stick.

"What's the matter?"

"Palmyre in a fit."

"I saw her fall from over there."

"Good Heavens!"

All of them stood round and watched her, not venturing too near, however, for they were struck with that mysterious awe which disease always inspires in the peasantry. She was stretched, face upwards, on the ground, with her arms extended as if she had been crucified on that earth, which, by the hard toil it exacted, had worn her out so soon, and was now killing her. Some vessel must have broken, for a streamlet of blood flowed from her mouth. Still, she was dying more from exhaustion, brought on by toil such as would have over-tasked a beast. A withered, shrunken thing she looked among the stubble, a mere fleshless, sexless bit of frippery, exhaling a last faint gasp amid the rich, fertile harvest.

La Grande, the grandmother who had renounced her and never spoke to her, at last came forward, saying:

"I really think she's dead." Then she prodded her with her stick. The body, with its eyes glaring vacantly in the brilliant light, and its mouth gaping as if to inhale boundless breezes, did not stir. On the chin the thread of blood was clotting. Then the grandmother added:

"Sure enough she's dead; better so, than to live at the expense of others."

They all stood motionless and aghast. Could anybody venture to touch her, without summoning the mayor? At first they spoke in whispers; then they began to shout again, to make themselves heard.

"I'll go and fetch my ladder from over yonder against the stack," said Delhomme eventually. "It'll serve as a stretcher. It's a bad thing to leave a corpse on the ground."

When he came back with the ladder, and they wanted to take some sheaves to make a bed for the body, Buteau grumbled.

"You shall have your corn back," they said.

"I should just hope so, indeed!" he answered.

Lise, a little ashamed of this meanness, added two bundles as a pillow, and Palmyre was laid upon the ladder, while Françoise, in a sort of dream, bewildered by this death, which had occurred so soon after her own adventure, could not take her eyes off the corpse. At sight of it she felt saddened, and, above all, she was astonished that that thing could ever have been a woman. She remained on guard with Fouan, pending the removal; and the old man said nothing either, though he seemed to think that those who died were very fortunate.

At sunset, when they all went home, two men came and took the stretcher away. The burden was not a heavy one, and there was hardly need of a relay. However, some others were in attendance, and quite a procession was formed. They cut across the field, to avoid a bend in the road. The corpse was stiffening on the sheaves, and some ears fell down behind the head, and swayed to and fro at each jolt of the bearers' measured tread.

In the sky above there now only remained the heat that had accumulated during the day, a ruddy heat that weighed heavily in the blue air. On the horizon, on the other side of the Loir valley, the sun, steeped in vapour, now cast over La Beauce a sheet of yellow rays on a level with the ground. Everything seemed tinged with the fine golden glow of the fair harvest evening. Such corn as was still standing displayed egrets of rosy flame, the stubble ends bristled with a ruddy gleam, and afar, projecting in all directions above the level, tawny sea, the stacks rose up one behind the other, apparently growing preposterously large. On the one side they seemed to be in flames, while on the other they were already black, casting shadows that stretched from end to end of the vast plain.

A solemn stillness fell, broken only by the song of a lark far aloft. None of the worn-out toilers spoke; they followed the corpse with bent heads, as resignedly as a flock of sheep. And there was no sound save a slight creaking of the ladder as the dead woman rocked to and fro on the way back through the ripe corn.

That night, Hourdequin paid off his harvesters, who had finished the work they had bargained to do. The men went away with a hundred and twenty francs a-piece, the women with sixty, for their month's work. It had been a good season; not too much corn blown down, to jag the scythe, nor a single storm during the cutting. Accordingly, it was amid loud acclamations that the foreman, at the head of his party of men, presented the harvest-home sheaf, with its ears woven cross-wise, to Jacqueline, who was looked upon as mistress of the household. The "Ripane," the traditional farewell meal, was very merry. Three legs of mutton and five rabbits were eaten, and the liquor circulated till so late into the night that they all went to bed more or less tipsy. Jacqueline, herself intoxicated, all but let herself be caught by Hourdequin while she was hanging round Tron's neck. Jean, quite dazed, had flung himself on the straw in his garret. Despite his fatigue, he could not sleep, for the image of Françoise had returned and tormented him. This surprised--in fact, it almost angered--him. He had had such little pleasure with the girl, after spending so many nights longing for her! He had subsequently felt so forlorn, that he had been inclined to vow that he would have nothing more to do with her. And yet now, scarcely was he lying down, when, evoked by carnal lust, she again uprose before his mind, and he again yearned for her as before. What had transpired had only whetted his fleshly appetite. How could he manage to see her again? Where could he clasp her on the morrow, during the following days, for ever? Suddenly a rustling made him start. A woman was nestling near him; it was the picker-up from Le Perche, who was astonished that he had not joined her on this last night. At first he repulsed her; but, finally, he stifled her with

his embraces; and it seemed to him that she was that other one whom he would have crushed likewise, clinging, clinging, till they swooned.

At the same moment, Françoise, starting from her slumber, got up, and, longing for air, opened the dormer-window of her room. She had just dreamed of fellows fighting, and of dogs tearing down the door below. When the air had cooled her a little, her mind again ran upon the two men--the one who wanted her, and the other who had taken her. This was the limit of her reflections: the thought simply revolved in her mind, without her giving it any consideration or coming to any decision. Something at last caught her ear. It had not been a dream, then? A dog was howling, afar off, on the banks of the Aigre. Then she remembered: it was Hilarion, who, since night-fall, had been howling over Palmyre's corpse. They had tried to drive him away, but he had clung and bitten, refusing to leave the remains of his sister, his wife, his all in all; and he howled endlessly, with a howling that filled the night.

For a long time Françoise listened, shuddering.

PART III. — CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER V.

"I only hope La Coliche won't calve at the same time as me!" repeated Lise every morning.

Lost in thought she stood in the cow-house, gazing at the cow, whose belly was distended beyond measure. Never had any animal swollen to such an extent. She looked round as a barrel on her shrunken shanks. The nine months fell exactly on Saint-Fiacre's Day, for Françoise had been careful to note the date on which she had taken her to the bull. Lise, on her side, was unfortunately by no means certain, that is within a few days. Still the child would certainly be born somewhere about Saint-Fiacre's Day, perhaps on the day before, perhaps on the day after. So she repeated, forlornly:

"I only hope La Coliche won't calve at the same time as me! A pretty job that'd be! Yes, good gracious! We should be in a nice pickle!"

La Coliche, who had been ten years in the house, was greatly spoilt. She had come to be considered as one of the family. The Buteaus nestled near her in winter time, having no other firing than the warm exhalation from her flanks. She in return, displayed great affection, particularly towards Françoise, whom she could never see without a tender feeling moistening her large eyes. She would lick her with her rough tongue till the blood came; or seizing her skirt between her teeth she would pull her near, so as to have her all to herself. Accordingly she was taken great care of, now that her calving time drew near: warm mashes, excursions out at the best times of the day,--in fact, she met with hourly attention. All this was not merely due to their fondness for her; they remembered the five hundred francs she represented, as well as the milk, butter, and cheese she gave; quite a fortune, which would be lost in losing her.

A fortnight had elapsed since the harvest. Françoise had resumed her every-day life in the household, as though nothing had occurred between her and Buteau. He seemed to have forgotten; and she herself was glad to avoid thinking of these matters, which disturbed her. Jean, whom she had met and warned, had not called again. He used to watch for her beside the hedges, and implore her to slip out and meet him in the evening in ditches which he particularised. But she refused, in alarm, concealing her coldness under an assumption of great prudence. Later on, she said, when she wouldn't be so much wanted at home. One evening when he surprised her going down to Macqueron's to buy some sugar, she obstinately refused to accompany him behind the church; and talked to him the whole time about La Coliche, about her bones which were giving way, and her hind-quarters which were opening: sure signs, which made him remark that the time could not now be far off.

And now, just on Saint-Fiacre's Eve, Lise was seized with severe pains, as she went into the cow-house after dinner with her sister to look at the cow, who, with her thighs drawn apart by the swelling of her womb, was also in pain, lowing softly.

"What did I say?" cried Lise, furiously. "A nice mess we're in now."

Towards ten o'clock, Buteau, annoyed at nothing having happened, decided to go to bed, leaving Lise and Françoise obstinately remaining in the cow-house beside La Coliche, whose pains seemed to be increasing. They both began to feel uneasy. No progress was made, although, as far as the bones were concerned, the labour seemed at an end. There was the passage, so why did not the calf come out? They stroked the animal, encouraged her, and brought her dainties--sugar, which she refused, with her head bent and her croup profoundly agitated. At midnight, Lise, who had hitherto been writhing and groaning, found herself suddenly relieved. In her case it had only been a false alarm; some wandering pains. But she was convinced that she had driven it back, just as she would have

repressed a need of nature. The whole night through she and her sister sat up with La Coliche, nursing her carefully, and even applying fomentations of hot rags; while Rougette, the other cow, the one last bought at Cloyes market, astonished by the lighted candles, watched their movements with her large, bluish, drowsy eyes.

At dawn of day, Françoise, seeing that nothing had yet come off, decided to run over and fetch their neighbour La Frimat, who was renowned for her knowledge, having assisted so many cows that people readily had recourse to her in ticklish cases, so as to avoid sending for the veterinary. On her arrival she made a grimace.

"She don't look well," she muttered. "How long has it been like this?"

"Why, for twelve hours."

She kept on walking round the animal, poking her nose everywhere, and alarming the other two with her dissatisfied grimaces and the way she jerked her chin.

When Buteau came in from the fields to breakfast, he also took fright, and talked of sending for Patoir, albeit shuddering at the idea of the expense.

"A veterinary!" said La Frimat tartly, "to kill her, hey? Old Saucisse's animal died before his very eyes. No! See here. I'll open the bladder, and *I'll* look after your calf for you!"

"Why," remarked Françoise, "Monsieur Patoir says the bladder shouldn't be opened. He says that the water inside is a help."

La Frimat shrugged her shoulders in exasperation. Patoir was an ass! Then she slit open the pocket with a pair of scissors. For a moment La Coliche breathed more easily, and the old woman triumphed. Lise and Françoise watched her with anxiously quivering eyelids, as she tried to

ascertain the posture of the calf. Buteau himself, who had not gone back into the fields, waited breathless and still.

"I can feel the feet," she muttered, "but not the head. It's a bad sign when you can't feel the head."

"Better not bustle her," said La Frimat, sagely; "it'll come all right by-and-bye."

* * * * *

It was now three o'clock. They waited till seven. Nothing happened, however, and the house was a perfect hell. On the one hand, Lise, obstinately remaining on an old chair, was writhing and groaning; on the other, La Coliche was lowing incessantly amid shiverings and sweatings, which grew more and more serious. Rougette, the second cow, also began to low with fright. Françoise was at her wits' end, and Buteau kept swearing and bawling alternately. At last La Coliche, her strength failing her, fell on to her side, and lay stretched out upon the straw panting pitiably.

"We sha'n't get the brute!" declared Buteau; "and the mother will die as well!"

Françoise clasped her hands entreatingly.

"Do go and fetch Monsieur Patoir! Cost what it may, go and fetch Monsieur Patoir!"

Buteau had grown gloomy. Then, after a final struggle with himself, he got out the cart without saying a word.

La Frimat, who affected to pay no further heed to the cow since the veterinary had again been mentioned, was now getting anxious about Lise. The old woman was also good at accouchements; all the neighbourhood had passed through her hands. She seemed uneasy, and

did not conceal her apprehensions from La Bécu, who called Buteau back as he was putting the horse to.

"Look here! Your wife's not well. Suppose you bring back a doctor at the same time?"

He stood mute and staring. What? Another of 'em to be coddled! Not likely that he was going to pay for everybody!

"No, no!" cried Lise, in an interval between two throes. "I shall be all right. We can't be throwing money into the gutter like that!"

Buteau hastily whipped up his horse, and the cart on its way to Cloyes vanished amid the falling shades of night.

When Patoir at last arrived, two hours later, everything was in the same state: La Coliche lay groaning on her side, and Lise, writhing like a worm, was half falling off her chair. Things had lasted thus for twenty-four hours.

"Which is my patient, hey?" asked the veterinary, who was of a jovial disposition.

And addressing Lise familiarly:

"Then, if it's not you, my fat beauty, please put yourself to bed. You want it badly."

She made no answer, nor did she go. He was already examining the cow.

"Heavens! she's in a wretched state, this beast of yours. You always come for me too late, you clumsy wretches!"

They all listened to him with a respectful, despondent, hang-dog look; that is, all of them excepting La Frimat, who screwed up her lips in high disdain. Patoir, taking off his coat and turning up his shirt sleeves, proceeded to make an elaborate examination.

"Of course," he resumed, after an instant's pause, "it's exactly as I thought. Let me tell you, my children, it's all up with this calf of yours. I've no wish to cut my fingers against his teeth, in turning him round. Besides, I shouldn't get him out any the more if I did so, and I should certainly damage the mother."

Françoise burst into sobs.

"Monsieur Patoir," said she, "I implore you, save our cow. Poor Coliche! she's so fond of me!"

Both Lise, sallow with a fit of griping, and Buteau, in rude health, so unfeeling as they were regarding the woes of others, now lamented and softened, making the same supplication.

"Save our cow, our old cow that has given us such good milk for years and years," they begged in chorus. "Pray save her, Monsieur Patoir."

"Well, one thing must be clearly understood: I shall be forced to cut up the calf."

"Who cares a curse for the calf? Save our cow, Monsieur Patoir, save her!"

Then the veterinary, who had brought a large blue apron with him, borrowed a pair of canvas trousers. Stripping himself quite naked in a corner, behind Rougette, he slipped on the trousers, and then tied the apron round his loins. When he re-appeared in this scanty costume, with his genial bull-dog face and his fat and dumpy figure, La Coliche lifted her head and, no doubt from astonishment, ceased to complain. However, no one even smiled, so wrung with anxiety was every heart.

"Light some candles!" said Patoir.

He set four on the ground, and then lay down flat on his stomach in the straw, behind the cow, who was now unable to get up. For a moment he

remained flat, examining her. Near by he had placed a little box, and, having raised himself on his elbow, he was taking a bistoury out of it, when a husky groan startled him, and he at once assumed a sitting posture.

"What, still there, my stout matron? Well, I thought that couldn't be the cow!"

It was Lise, seized with the final pangs.

"For goodness sake go and get your business over in your own room, and leave me to do mine here! It disturbs me; it acts on my nerves, 'pon my honour it does, to hear you straining behind me. Come, come! It's not common sense! Take her away, the rest of you!"

La Frimat and La Bécu decided to take her each by an arm and lead her to her room. She surrendered herself, no longer having the strength to resist. But on crossing the kitchen, where a solitary candle was burning, she asked to have all the doors left open, with the idea that she would thus not be so far off. La Frimat had already prepared the bed of anguish according to rural custom--a simple sheet spread out in the middle of the room over a truss of straw, and three chairs turned down. Lise squatted down and stretched herself, with her back against one chair and one leg against each of the others. She was not even undressed.

Buteau and Françoise had remained in the cow-house to light Patoir; they squatted on their heels, each holding a candle, while the veterinary, again stretched out on his stomach, cut a section round the left ham with his bistoury. He loosened the skin, and then pulled at the calf's shoulder, which came away. Françoise, pale and faint, dropped her candle and fled with a shriek.

"My poor old Coliche," she exclaimed; "I won't see it! I won't see it!"

Thereupon Patoir lost his temper, the more so as he had to rise up and extinguish an incipient conflagration, caused by the fall of Françoise's candle among the straw.

"Drat the wench! She might be a princess, with her nerves. She'd smoke us like so many hams," he remarked in a peevish tone.

Françoise had run and flung herself on a chair in the room where her sister was being confined. The latter's exposure did not disturb her. It seemed a mere matter of course, after what she had just seen. She waved from her memory that vision of living severed flesh, and gave a stammering account of what was being done to the cow.

"It's sure to go wrong; I must go back," said Lise suddenly; and despite her sufferings, she made an effort to get up from among the three chairs. But La Frimat and La Bécu grew angry, and held her down.

"Good heavens! will you keep still! What on earth possesses you?" exclaimed La Frimat.

"So as to keep you quiet," said La Bécu, "I'll go myself and bring you the news."

From that moment La Bécu did nothing but run to and fro between the room and the cow-house. To save continually making the journey, she at last shouted out her report from the kitchen. The veterinary was still busily occupied with his nasty, troublesome job, and he emerged from it disgustingly filthy from head to foot.

"It's all right, Lise," exclaimed La Bécu; "don't be uneasy. We've got the other shoulder, and it will soon be all over now."

Lise saluted each phase of the operation with a heartrending sigh; and no one knew whether the lament was for herself or for the calf. There was not the slightest cessation of her travail, and she seemed to be seized with inconsolable despair.

"Oh, dear, how unlucky! Oh, dear, how unlucky to lose such a fine calf!"

Françoise likewise lamented, and the regrets they all expressed grew so aggressive, so full of implied hostility, that Patoir felt hurt. He hurried to them, stopping, however, outside the door, for decency's sake.

"I say! I give you warning. Just remember that you implored me to save your cow. I know you so well, you beggars. Now, don't you go about telling everybody that I killed your calf."

"That's right enough, right enough," muttered Buteau, going back with him into the cow-house. "All the same, it was you that cut it up."

As Lise lay prostrate among the three chairs, a kind of billow passed over her. Françoise, who in her desolation had so far seen nothing, became quite thunderstruck.

"A little more patience," said La Frimat. "It'll soon be all right."

Françoise, on her part, shook herself free from the fascination of the sight, and feeling embarrassed, went and took her sister's hand.

"My poor Lise," she said affectionately, "what great trouble you're in!"

"Oh, yes, yes! And no one pities me. If I only had some pity! Oh, dear! It's beginning again. Won't it *ever* be born?"

This kind of talk might have gone on for a considerable time, but some exclamations were heard in the cow-house. They came from Patoir, who, astonished to find La Coliche still quivering and moaning, had suspected the presence of a second calf. And, indeed, there was one. Buteau ran into his wife's room carrying the little animal, which hung its astonished head in a tipsy-like way.

Amid the general acclamations at the sight, Lise broke into an endless, irresistible peal of mad laughter, stuttering:

"Oh, how funny it looks! Oh! it's too bad to make me laugh like this! Oh, dear! Oh! oh! how I am suffering! No, no! don't make me laugh any more: I've had enough!"

The climax was at length reached.

"It's a girl," declared La Frimat.

"No, no!" said Lise, who felt disappointed, "I don't want one: I want a boy."

* * * * *

Patoir went away, after two quarts of sweetened wine had been given to La Coliche. La Frimat undressed Lise and put her to bed, while La Bécu, assisted by Françoise, cleared away the straw and swept up the room. In ten minutes' time all was in order. No one would have had any idea that a confinement had just taken place, except for the constant mewling of the baby, who was being washed in warm water. However, after being swathed, the infant gradually became quiet; while the mother, now utterly prostrate, fell into a leaden sleep, and lay with her face congested, almost black, between the thick brownish sheets.

Towards midnight, when the two neighbours had left, Françoise told Buteau that he had better go up into the hay-loft to sleep. She had laid a mattress on the floor, and meant to stay there for the night, so as not to leave her sister alone. He made no answer, but finished his pipe in silence. All was quiet, save for the heavy breathing of the sleeping Lise.

As Françoise was kneeling on her mattress, at the very foot of the bed, in a darkened corner, Buteau, still silent, suddenly came up behind her and laid her flat. She turned her head, and instantly grasped the situation, from the look of his drawn, flushed face. He was at it again; he had not relinquished his purpose, and, presumably, the longing was a violent one, since he attacked her thus beside his wife, and just after occurrences

which were scarcely of an engaging kind. Françoise repulsed and overturned him, however, and then there was a suppressed, panting struggle.

With a snigger, and in a choking voice, he said:

"Come, come! Why should you mind? I'm equal to taking on the two of you."

He knew her well, and felt sure she would not scream. Nor did she. She resisted without a word, too proud to call to her sister, unwilling to acquaint any one, even Lise, with her business. He was stifling her, however, and seemed on the point of succeeding.

"It'll be so convenient, as we're living together, and shall be always with each other," he said.

But suddenly he gave a cry of pain. She had silently dug her nails into his neck. Then he grew mad, and spoke of Jean, saying:

"Don't think you'll marry him, that blackguard fellow of yours. Never, so long as you're under age."

As he was now doing her brutal violence, she kicked him so vigorously that he howled aloud. Then he bounded up in alarm, looking anxiously towards the bed. His wife was sleeping so soundly, however, that she had not stirred. Nevertheless, he went off, with a terrible threatening gesture.

When Françoise had stretched herself on the mattress, amid the deep stillness of the room, she lay there with her eyes open. She would never let him have his way, that she wouldn't, even although she herself were perchance desirous. And she felt astonished at it all; for the idea that she might marry Jean had never yet occurred to her.

PART III. — CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VI.

Jean had been engaged for a couple of days in some fields which Hourdequin owned near Rognes, and where he had set up a steam threshing-machine, hired from a Châteaudun engine-builder, who sent it about from Bonneval to Cloyes. With his cart and his two horses, the young man brought the sheaves from the surrounding ricks, and then took the grain to the farm; while the machine, puffing away from morning till night, scattered golden dust in the sunlight, and filled the country-side with a terrific, incessant snorting.

Jean was not well, and was ransacking his brains as to how he might best recover possession of Françoise. A month had already gone by since he had clasped her, on that very spot, among the wheat which they were now threshing; and since then she had always escaped from him, apprehensively. He began to despair of renewing the intercourse; and yet his desire was increasing, becoming an all-absorbing, maddening passion. As he drove his horses, he wondered why he should not go to the Buteaus and roundly ask for Françoise's hand. There had been no open definitive rupture between them. He still bade them good-day as he passed, and, if he did not call on them, it was solely because he was influenced by the disquietude of guilt. As soon as this idea of marriage occurred to him, as the only means of getting the girl back, he persuaded himself that it was the path of duty, and that he should be acting dishonourably if he did not marry her. The next morning, however, when he returned to the machine, he was seized with fear; and he would never have dared to risk the step had he not seen Buteau and Françoise set off together for the fields. He then bethought himself that Lise had always been favourable to him, and that, with her, he would possess more

confidence. So he slipped away for a few moments, leaving his horses in charge of a fellow-servant.

"Why, Jean!" cried Lise, sturdily up and about again after her confinement; "no one ever sees you now. What's up?"

He made some excuses, and then, with the brusqueness of shy people, he hurriedly broached the subject, in such an awkward way, however, that at first it was open for her to think that he was making her a declaration. For he reminded her that he had loved her, and that he would willingly have taken her to wife. However, he at once added:

"And that's why I'd all the same marry Françoise if she were given me."

Lise stared at him in such astonishment that he began to stammer:

"Oh, I'm well aware that it can't be settled straight off. I only wanted to talk to you about it!"

"Well, it takes me by surprise," she replied at length, "because I hardly expected such a thing, on account of your ages. First of all, we must know what Françoise thinks."

He had come formally resolved to tell the whole tale, thus hoping to make the marriage inevitable. But at the last moment a scruple restrained him. If Françoise had not confessed to her sister, if no one knew anything about it, had he the right to speak? He was discouraged, and felt ridiculous, on account of his thirty-three years of age.

"Most certainly," he muttered, "she should be consulted. Nobody would force her."

Lise, however, having once got over her astonishment, looked at him as genially as ever. Evidently the idea did not displease her. She was even quite gracious.

"It shall be as she chooses, Jean. I'm not like Buteau, who thinks her too young. She's getting on for eighteen, and she has the build for two men, let alone one. And, besides, love is all very well between sister and sister, of course; but now that she's a woman, I'd rather have a servant under orders in her place. If she says yes, take her! You're a good sort, and the old cocks are often the best."

She had been unable to restrain these words of complaint anent the gradual estrangement which was irresistibly increasing between herself and her younger sister: that hostility, aggravated by little daily jars, a secret leaven of jealousy and hatred which had been doing its stealthy work ever since a man had come into the house with his will and his lust.

Jean, in his delight, kissed Lise warmly on both cheeks.

"It happens that we're just christening the baby," she added, "and we shall have the family to dinner this evening. I invite you, and you shall make your proposal to old Fouan, who's the guardian, that is if Françoise will have you."

"Agreed!" cried he. "I'll see you to-night!"

He rapidly strode back to his horses, and drove them all day long, making his whip resound with clacks which rang out like gun-shots on the morning of a fête.

The Buteaus were, indeed, having their child baptised after a deal of delay. First of all, Lise had insisted on waiting till she was quite strong and well again, wishing to join in the feast. Next--on ambitious thoughts intent--she had obstinately resolved to have Monsieur and Madame Charles for godfather and godmother, and they having condescendingly consented, it had been necessary to wait for Madame Charles, who had just started for Chartres to lend a helping hand in her daughter's establishment, for as it was now the time of the September fair, the house in the Rue aux Juifs was always full. However, as Lise had told Jean, the

christening was to be simply a family gathering, with Fouan, La Grande, the Delhommes, and the godparents.

At the last moment there had been serious difficulties with the Abbé Godard, who was now incessantly at loggerheads with Rognes. So long as he had cherished the hope that the Municipal Council would indulge in the luxury of a priest of its own, he had been content to bear his troubles patiently: such as the four miles or so which he had to walk for each mass, and the vexatious demands which this irreligious village made upon him. But he could now no longer deceive himself with false hopes. Every year the council regularly refused to repair the parsonage. Hourdequin, the mayor, declared that the expenses were already too heavy; and Macqueron, the assessor, alone paid court to the priesthood, in furtherance of certain hidden ambitious designs. So the Abbé Godard, no longer having any reason to keep on good terms with Rognes, became severe in his treatment of the village, and only vouchsafed it the strictest minimum of worship. He did not treat the inhabitants to any extra prayers, or any display of tapers and incense for amusement's sake. He was always quarrelling with the women of the village. In June there had been quite a pitched battle on the subject of the first communion. Five children--two little girls and three boys--had been attending his catechism class on Sundays after mass, and to avoid having to return to confess them, he insisted on their coming to him at Bazoches-le-Doyen. Thereupon a first sedition arose among the women. A pretty thing, indeed! Three-quarters of a league to go there, and the same distance back! Who was to know what might happen, with boys and girls running about together? Next, there was a terrible storm when he refused point-blank to celebrate the full ceremony at Rognes: high mass, with singing, and so forth. He intended to hold this celebration in his own parish, whither the five children were free to repair, if they wished to do so. For a whole fortnight the women raved with fury round the fountain. What! He christened them, married them, and buried them in their own

village, and now he wouldn't give them a decent communion! He was obstinate, however, and merely officiated at low mass, dismissing the five communicants without even a blossom or an oremus by way of consolation. When the women, vexed even to tears at seeing such a paltry ceremony, entreated him to have vespers sung in the afternoon, he flew into a passion! Nothing of the kind! He gave them their due. They would have had high mass, vespers, and everything else at Bazoches if their obstinacy had not made them rebel even against the blessed God Himself! After this quarrel a rupture seemed imminent between the Abbé Godard and Rognes, and the least jar would certainly bring about a catastrophe.

When Lise went to see the priest about the christening of her baby, he talked of fixing it for the Sunday, after mass. But she begged of him to return on the Tuesday at two o'clock, for the godmother would not return from Chartres till the morning of that day; and he eventually consented, recommending the party to be punctual, for he was determined, he cried, that he would not wait a second.

On the Tuesday, at two o'clock precisely, the Abbé Godard reached the church, panting from his journey, and damp owing to a sudden shower. No one had yet arrived. There was only Hilarion, who, at the entrance of the nave, was engaged in clearing up a corner of the baptistery, encumbered with fragments of old flag-stones, which had always been seen there. Since the death of his sister, the cripple had lived on public charity, and it had occurred to the priest, who used to slip odd francs into the poor fellow's hand from time to time, to employ him on this work of clearance, which had been resolved upon scores of times but always deferred. For a few moments he interested himself in watching Hilarion's task. Then he was taken with a first fit of anger.

"Good gracious! are they making a fool of me? It's already ten minutes past two," he exclaimed.

Then, as he looked at the Buteaus' silent, sleepy-looking house across the square, he noticed the rural constable waiting under the porch, and smoking his pipe.

"Ring the bell, Bécu!" he cried; "that'll bring the sluggards along."

So Bécu, who was very drunk, as usual, hung on to the bell-rope, while the priest went to put on his surplice. He had drawn up the entry in the register on the previous Sunday, and he intended to perform the ceremony by himself, without the help of the choir-children, who brought him to the verge of distraction. When all was ready, he again became impatient. Ten minutes more had elapsed, and the bell still rang out, with exasperating persistence, amid the deep silence of the deserted village.

"What on earth are they about? They ought to have some one at their backs with a stick!" said the priest.

At last he saw La Grande come forth from the Buteaus' house, walking along in her spiteful, old-queen-like way, dry and upright, like a thistle, despite her eighty-five years.

A great worry was distracting the family. All the guests were there, excepting the godmother, who had been vainly awaited since the morning. Monsieur Charles, quite dumbfounded, declared over and over again that it was most surprising, that he had received a letter only the night before, and that Madame Charles, who was detained perhaps at Cloyes, would certainly arrive in a minute or two. Lise, anxious, and knowing that the priest was not over-fond of waiting, finally took it into her head to despatch La Grande to him, so as to keep him patient.

"What's the meaning of this?" he asked her, from a distance. "Are we going to begin to-day or to-morrow? Perhaps you think that God Almighty is at your beck and call?"

"In a moment, your reverence; in a moment," replied the old woman, with her impassive calmness.

Hilarion was just then bringing out the last fragments of the flag-stones, and he went by carrying an immense block against his stomach. He swayed from side to side on his crooked shanks, but he did not bend, being as firmly set as a rock, with muscles strong enough to have carried an ox. His hare-lip was dribbling, but not a drop of sweat moistened his hardened skin.

The Abbé Godard, provoked by La Grande's equanimity, fell upon her at once.

"Look here, La Grande," said he, "now that I've got hold of *you*, is it charitable of you, who are so well off, to let your only grandson beg his bread along the roads?"

"The mother disobeyed me; the child is nothing to me," she answered harshly.

"Well, I've given you fair warning, and I tell you again that if you're so hard-hearted as that you'll go to Hell. He would have starved to death the other day but for what I gave him, and now I'm obliged to invent a job for him."

On hearing the word "Hell" La Grande slightly smiled. As she herself said, she knew too much about it: the poor folks' Hell was on this earth. The sight of Hilarion carrying paving-stones set her thinking, however, far more than the priest's threats did. She was surprised; she would never have imagined that he was so strong, with his jacket-sleeve shanks.

"If it's work he wants," she replied at last, "I daresay he can be found some."

"His proper place is with you. Take him, La Grande," said the priest.

"We'll see. Let him come to-morrow."

Hilarion, who had understood, began to tremble to such a degree that he all but crushed his feet as he dropped his last slab. As he went off he cast a furtive glance on his grandmother, like a whipped, terrified, submissive animal.

Another half-hour went by. Bécu, tired of ringing, was smoking his pipe once more in the sunshine. La Grande remained there, silent and imperturbable, as if her mere presence sufficed as a mark of respect to the priest; while the latter, whose exasperation was on the increase, kept running every instant to the church door to cast a fiery look across the empty square towards the Buteaus' house.

"Ring, Bécu, why don't you!" he shouted all at once. "If they're not here in three minutes' time, I'm off!"

Then as the bell pealed out madly once more, and set the aged ravens a-fluttering and a-cawing, the Buteaus and their party were seen to leave the house one by one and cross the square. Lise was in consternation; the godmother had still not arrived, and so they settled to stroll quietly over to the church, in hopes that perhaps that would bring her a little quicker. But they were only a hundred yards away, and the Abbé Godard at once began to hurry them up.

"I say, you know, are you trying to make a fool of me?" he called. "I consult your convenience, and in return I'm kept waiting an hour! Make haste! Make haste!"

Then he pushed them all towards the baptistery: the mother carrying her newly-born child, the father, grandfather Fouan, uncle Delhomme, aunt Fanny, and even Monsieur Charles, who, in his black frock-coat, looked very dignified as a godparent.

"Your reverence," said Buteau, with an exaggerated air of humility, in which a sniggering slyness lurked, "if you would only be so good as to wait a tiny bit longer----"

"Wait! What for?"

"Why, for the godmother, your reverence!"

The Abbé Godard became so red that apoplexy seemed imminent. Half suffocating, he stuttered out:

"Get somebody else!"

They all looked at each other. Delhomme and Fanny shook their heads; and Fouan declared:

"Impossible. It would be bad breeding."

"A thousand pardons, your reverence," said Monsieur Charles, who thought that it devolved upon him as a person of good breeding to explain matters; "it's partly our fault, but not quite. My wife had expressly written me that she would be back this morning. She's at Chartres."

The Abbé Godard started, and, losing all control, breaking all bounds, he shouted:

"At *Chartres*! At Chartres, indeed! I regret for your sake that you have a finger in this pie, Monsieur Charles. But the thing sha'n't go on. No, no! I won't put up with it any longer!"

Then he burst forth:

"No one here cares what outrage he offers God in my person; I get a fresh buffet every time I come to Rognes. I've threatened long enough, and now I'll do it. I leave to-day, and I will never return. Tell your mayor that, and find a priest and pay him, if you want one. I'll speak to the bishop,

and tell him who you are; I'm sure he will approve of my course. We'll soon see who'll get the worst of it. You shall live priestless, like brute beasts."

They were all staring at him curiously, with the inward indifference of practical folk who no longer feared the God of wrath and chastisement. What was the use of quaking and prostrating themselves, and purchasing forgiveness, when the very idea of the devil now made them smile, and when they had ceased to believe that the wind, the hail, and the thunder were controlled by an avenging Master? It was certainly waste of time. It was better for them to keep their respect for the Government gendarmes, who held the reins of power.

Despite their assumed air of deferential gravity, the Abbé Godard saw that Buteau was sniggering, that La Grande was disdainful, and that even Delhomme and Fouan were perfectly unmoved; and this loss of influence completed the rupture.

"I'm perfectly aware that your cows have more religion than you have," said he. "Well, good-bye! Dip your barbarian child into the pond, and christen it like that!"

Then he ran away and tore off his surplice, crossed the church again, and bolted in such a whirl of wrath that the christening party, thus left in the lurch, could not even get in a word, but stood open-mouthed and open-eyed.

The worst of it was that at that very moment, as the Abbé Godard was going down Macqueron's new street, they saw a covered cart coming up the high-road--a cart containing Madame Charles and Elodie. The former explained that she had stopped at Châteaudun to kiss the child, who had been granted a two days' holiday. She seemed extremely sorry for the delay, and declared that she had not even gone on to Roseblanche with her trunk.

"Some one must run after the priest," said Lise; "it's only dogs that are left unchristened."

Buteau ran off, and was heard trotting down Macqueron's street. But the Abbé Godard had got a good start; and Buteau crossed the bridge and mounted the slope, only catching sight of the priest when he reached the crest of it, just where the road turned.

"Your reverence, your reverence!"

At last the priest turned round and waited.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The godmother's there. Christening isn't a thing to refuse one."

For an instant the Abbé stood motionless. Then he came back down the hill behind the peasant, at the same furious pace; and thus they re-entered the church without exchanging another word. The ceremony was hurried through. The priest mangled the godparents' *Credo*, anointed the child, applied the salt, and poured out the water, all with the same violence. He had soon got to the signing of the register.

"Your reverence," now said Madame Charles, "I've a box of sweetmeats for you, but it's in my trunk."

He thanked her in dumb-show and went off, after turning to them all once more and repeating:

"Good-bye, again!"

The Buteaus and their party, breathless at having been carried along at such a pace, watched him as he disappeared at the corner of the square, with his black cassock flying behind him. All the villagers were in the fields; there were merely a few urchins about, on the chance of obtaining some plaster-of-Paris sweetmeats. Amid the deep silence one only heard the distant snorting of the steam thrasher, which never rested.

On re-entering the Buteaus' house, at the door of which the cart with the trunk was waiting, they all agreed to have a little something to drink, and then to separate until dinner in the evening. It was now only four o'clock, so what would they have done in each other's company till seven? Then, when the glasses and the two quarts of wine were set out on the kitchen table, Madame Charles absolutely insisted on having her trunk got down, so as to make her presents there and then. Opening the trunk, she first took out the baby's dress and cap--which came somewhat behind time--and next six boxes of sweetmeats, which she gave to the mother.

"Do these come from mamma's confectionery shop?" asked Elodie, who was looking at them.

For a second Madame Charles felt embarrassed. Then she calmly replied:

"No, my darling; your mother does not keep this kind."

And, turning towards Lise, she added: "I thought of you, too, in the matter of linen. There is nothing so useful in a house as old linen; so I asked my daughter for some, and ransacked all her drawers."

Hearing linen mentioned, everybody had drawn near--La Grande, the Delhommes, and Fouan himself. Gathering in a ring round the trunk, they watched the old lady unpack a whole lot of rags, all clean and white, and exhaling, despite the washing, a persistent odour of musk. First came some fine linen sheets, in tatters; then a quantity of chemises, all slit down, with the lace palpably torn off.

Madame Charles unfolded the things, shook them out, and explained:

"The sheets are not new. They've been quite five years in use; and in time, what with friction and so on, they wear out. You see that they've all a large hole in the middle, but the edges are still good, and a host of things may be cut out of them."

They all stuck their noses into the sheets, and felt them, with approving nods, particularly the women--La Grande and Fanny, whose pinched-up lips were expressive of suppressed envy. Buteau was indulging in silent laughter, tickled by certain jocular ideas which he kept to himself, for propriety's sake; while Fouan and Delhomme testified by their extreme gravity to the respect they felt for linen, which was the only wealth, worth calling so, next to land.

"As for the chemises," resumed Madame Charles, unfolding them in their turn, "see for yourselves. They're not worn at all. Lots of slits in them, no doubt! They're torn to ruination! And as they can't always be sewn up again, because that would make thick seams, and look a little paltry, why, they're thrown away for old linen. But they'll come in handy for you, Lise--"

"Why, I'll wear them," cried the peasant woman. "It makes no odds to me to wear a mended chemise."

"As for me," declared Buteau, with a sly wink, "I shall be glad enough if you'll make me some handkerchiefs out of them."

This set them laughing undisguisedly. Little Elodie, who had not taken her eyes off a single sheet or chemise, now cried out:

"Oh, what a funny smell! How strong! Was all that linen mamma's?"

Madame Charles did not hesitate a moment.

"Why, certainly, darling. That is, it's the linen of her shop-girls. A lot of girls are wanted in business, I can tell you!"

As soon as Lise had put the whole lot away in her wardrobe, with Françoise's help, they clinked glasses and drank the health of the baby, whom the godmother had christened Laure, after herself. Then they tarried for a moment, lost in conversation; and Monsieur Charles, sitting on the trunk, was heard questioning Madame Charles, without waiting to

get her alone, so great, indeed, was his impatience to hear how things were going on over yonder. It was still a passion with him; his head was always running upon the house so energetically established in days gone by, and so deeply regretted since! The news was not good. True enough, their daughter Estelle had a hand and a head; but their son-in-law Vaucogne, that milksop Achilles, did not give her proper support. He spent the whole day smoking his pipe, and let everything go to rack and ruin. The curtains of No. 3 were stained, the mirror in the small red drawing-room was cracked, the water-jugs and basins were chipped all over the house; and he never so much as raised a finger. And a man's arm was so necessary to ensure due respect for one's goods and chattels! At every fresh piece of damage thus brought under his notice, Monsieur Charles fetched a sigh, and became paler. One last grievance, communicated in a whisper, finished him off.

"Lastly, he himself goes upstairs with that stout woman of No. 5--"

"What's that you say?"

"Oh, I'm sure of it; I've seen them."

Monsieur Charles, who was quivering, clenched his fists in a burst of exasperated indignation.

"The wretch! Disgracing himself in that way! That beats everything!"

With a gesture, Madame Charles silenced him, for Elodie was coming back from the yard, where she had been to see the hens. Another quart bottle was drained, and the trunk was again placed in the cart, which Monsieur and Madame Charles followed on foot as far as their house. All the others also went off to give a glance indoors while awaiting the feast.

As soon as Buteau was alone, feeling dissatisfied with this waste of an afternoon, he took off his jacket and set to work threshing in the paved corner of the yard; he wanted a sack of corn for the morrow. However, he

soon got tired of threshing alone. To warm him to his work he needed the cadence of two flails, keeping time together. So he called to Françoise, who frequently helped him in this work, as her loins were strong, and her arms as hard-set as a young man's. In spite of the slowness and the fatigue of this primitive method of threshing, Buteau had always refused to buy a machine, saying, like all petty landowners, that he preferred to thresh at a time just the quantity he needed.

"Hallo, Françoise! Are you coming?" he called.

Lise, who was leaning over some veal stewing with carrots, after commissioning her sister to look after a loin of roast-pork, wanted to prevent the girl obeying. But Buteau, who was not in the best of temper, threatened them both with a hiding.

"You cursed females! I'll smack your saucepans across your heads for you! One may well sweat for one's bread when you'd go and fry the whole house, to gobble it down with other people!"

Françoise, who had already slipped on a working dress for fear of getting her best clothes stained, was obliged to follow him. She took a flail with handle and flap of cornel wood, secured together with leather buckles. It was her own, polished by friction, and closely bound with string to prevent its slipping. Swinging it round over her head with both hands she brought it down on the wheat, striking the latter smartly with the whole length of the flap. She went on without stopping, raising the flail very high, turning it as upon a hinge, and then banging it down again with the mechanical, rhythmical movement of a blacksmith; while Buteau, opposite her, swung his flail in alternation. They soon became hot. The rhythm was accelerated, and nothing could now be seen but the flying flaps, rebounding every time and whirling behind their necks like birds tied by the feet.

After ten minutes or so, Buteau gave a slight cry. The flails stopped, and he turned the sheaf round, whereupon the flails started again. At the end of another ten minutes he ordered a new pause, and laid the sheaf open. It had to pass thus six times under the flaps before the grain was fully separated from the ears, and the straw could be tied up. Sheaf succeeded sheaf, and for two hours the regular noise of the flails pervaded the house, though above it, in the distance, there arose the prolonged snorting of the steam-thresher.

Françoise's cheeks were now flushed and her wrists swollen, and from all her glowing skin there emanated a kind of flame that quivered visibly in the air. Her open lips were panting. Bits of straw had become entangled in the loose locks of her hair. At every stroke, as she raised the flail, her right knee stretched her petticoat, her hip and bosom expanded, straining her dress, while the contour of her well-set frame showed roughly through the fabric. A button flew off her bodice, and Buteau saw her white skin beneath the sun-burnt line of her neck--an eminence of flesh that kept rising with the swing of her arms in the powerful play of the shoulder-muscles. This seemed to excite him still more; and the flails still fell, while the grain leapt and fell like hail under the panting strokes of the coupled threshers.

At a quarter to seven, at close of day, Fouan and the Delhommes presented themselves.

"We must finish this," shouted Buteau to them, without stopping. "Keep it up, Françoise!"

She stuck to it, striking still harder in the enthusiasm prompted by the labour and noise. And thus it was that Jean found them when he in his turn arrived. He felt a spasm of jealousy, and looked at them as if he had surprised them together. Busy with this warm work, each striking true in turn, both perspiring, so heated and so disarranged, they seemed to be engaged in some other more private business than that of threshing

wheat. Perhaps Françoise, who was going at it so zealously, had the same idea, for she suddenly stopped short in embarrassment. Then Buteau, turning round, remained motionless for an instant, with surprise and wrath.

"What do *you* want here?" he cried.

Lise was just then coming out to meet Fouan and the Delhommes. She drew near in their company, and cried in her sprightly way:

"Ah, yes! I forgot to tell you. I saw Jean this morning and asked him to come in to-night."

Her husband's face was so terribly inflamed that she added, by way of apology:

"I've a notion, Fouan, that he has a request to make of you."

"What about?" said the old man. Jean flushed and stammered, feeling very vexed that the matter should be broached so abruptly and publicly. However, Buteau violently cut him short, the smiling look which his wife cast upon Françoise having sufficed to enlighten him.

"Do you come here to make a laughing-stock of us? She's not for the likes of you, you ugly bird!"

This brutal reception gave Jean back his courage. He turned his back and addressed the old man.

"This is the matter, Fouan. It's a very simple thing. As you are Françoise's guardian, I ought to apply to you for her, oughtn't I? Well, if she will have me, I'll have her. I ask her in marriage."

Françoise, who was still holding her flail, dropped it in amazement, She ought to have expected this; but she had not imagined that Jean would venture to propose for her in such a fashion all at once. Why had he not spoken to her about it first? It flurried her; she could not have told

whether she was trembling with hope or fear. Vibrating from her recent toil, her bosom heaving under her unfastened bodice, she remained there between the two men, glowing with such a rush of blood that they felt the heat radiate even to where they stood.

Buteau did not allow Fouan time to answer. He went on in growing fury:

"What? You dare ask that. An old man of thirty-three marry a child of eighteen. Merely fifteen years difference! Isn't it monstrous? Fancy giving young chickens to a fellow with a dirty hide like yours!"

Jean was beginning to lose his temper.

"What's it got to do with you," he replied, "if she likes me and I like her?"

And he turned towards Françoise for her to pronounce. But she stood there startled and rigid, without seeming to understand. She could not say no, but she did not say yes. Buteau, moreover, was glaring at her so murderously as to make the yes stick in her throat. If she married, he would lose her and the land as well. The sudden thought of this result put a finishing touch to his wrath.

"Come, papa; come, Delhomme. Doesn't it revolt you; this child to that old brute, who doesn't even belong to our part of the country, and who comes from God knows where, after traipsing about here, there, and everywhere? A carpenter who failed in his calling and turned peasant, because he had some disgraceful affair to keep secret, of course."

All his hatred of the town artisan burst forth.

"And what then? If I like her and she likes me!" repeated Jean, restraining himself, and resolving, out of courtesy, to let her be the first to relate their story. "Come, Françoise, say something."

"Why, that's true!" cried Lise, carried away by the desire to see her sister married, and thus get rid of her: "what have you to do with it, Buteau, if

they agree? She doesn't need your consent, and it's very good of her not to send you about your business. You're getting a perfect nuisance!"

Buteau clearly realised that the matter would be arranged, if the girl were to speak. He especially dreaded that the marriage would be considered reasonable if the past connection were made public. Just then La Grande came into the yard, followed by Monsieur and Madame Charles, who were returning with Elodie. Buteau beckoned them to approach without yet knowing what he would say. Then an idea struck him, and with his face swollen and shaking his fist at his wife and sister-in-law, he yelled out:

"You cursed cows! Yes, cows, trolls, both of you! If you want to know the truth, I sleep with the pair of them! and that's why they think they can make a fool of me! With the pair of them, I tell you! Strumpets that they are!"

These words came in a volley full in the faces of Monsieur and Madame Charles, who both stood there open-mouthed. Madame Charles made a rush as if to shield the listening Elodie. Then, pushing her towards the kitchen garden, she cried in a very loud voice:

"Come and see the salads, come and see the cabbages! Oh, such fine cabbages!"

Buteau invented fresh details as he went on, relating that when one had had her share it was the other one's turn; using the coarsest terms, and venting a flood of sewerage in unutterably beastly words. Lise, in sheer astonishment at this sudden fit, simply shrugged her shoulders, repeating:

"He's mad! It isn't possible otherwise. He's mad!"

"Tell him he lies!" cried Jean to Françoise.

"Most certainly he lies!" said the girl, composedly.

"Oh, I lie?" resumed Buteau. "Oh! And it isn't true what happened between us at harvest-time? I'll pretty soon bring you under, the two of you, strumpets that you are!"

This rabid audacity paralysed and astounded Jean. Could he now explain what had happened between himself and Françoise? It seemed to him that it would be foul to do so, particularly as she did not give him any assistance. The others--the Delhommes, Fouan, and La Grande--remained reserved. They had not seemed surprised; and they evidently thought that, if the fellow did sleep with the two of them, he could dispose of them as he chose. When a man has his rights, he asserts them.

From that moment, Buteau felt himself victorious in the might of his undisputed possession. He turned towards Jean and cried:

"And you, just you come here again worrying me in my household. To begin with, you'll be off pretty sharp. Eh? you won't? Wait, wait a bit."

He picked up his flail, and whirled the flap round. Jean only just had time to catch up the other one--Françoise's--to defend himself with. There were shrieks, and some attempt to interpose; but the antagonists were so terrible, that everyone recoiled. With the long handles of the flails, blows could be dealt at several yards; so that the yard was soon left clear. Jean and Buteau remained alone in the middle, at a distance from one another, enlarging the circle of their twirls. They no longer spoke but kept their teeth clenched. No sound was heard but the sharp smack of the pieces of wood at each exchange of blows.

Buteau had launched the first one, and Jean, still stooping, would have had his head split open, had he not leapt backwards. By a quick contraction of his muscles, he at once raised his flail, and brought it down in the same style as a thresher crushing grain. But the other was also striking; and the two flaps met, and swung back upon their straps like

wounded birds swooping wildly. Thrice there was the same shock. Each time the flaps whirled and whizzed through the air, and they all but fell and split the skulls they threatened. The contest could not be of long duration, for the first blow must be a mortal one.

Delhomme and Fouan, however, were rushing forward, when the women shrieked. Jean had rolled over in the straw, Buteau having treacherously aimed a whip-like blow, which swept along the ground, and, although fortunately deadened, reached his opponent's legs. Jean got up again without letting go of his flail, which he brandished with a fury increased tenfold by pain. The flap made a wide sweep and fell on the right, while the other was expecting it on the left. A fraction of an inch nearer and Buteau's brains would have been dashed out. As it was, his ear was grazed, and the blow coming down obliquely fell full on his arm, which was sharply broken atwain. The bone was heard to snap as if it had been breaking glass. Buteau's hand fell limply down, dropping the flail it was holding.

"The murderer!" yelled Buteau, "he's killed me!"

Jean, with a haggard face and blood-shot eyes, also dropped his weapon. He glanced round at them all for a moment, as if stupefied by the sudden turn that things had taken, and then limped away with a wild gesture of despair.

When he had turned the corner of the house, going towards the plain, he espied La Trouille, who had witnessed the fight over the garden hedge. She was still chuckling over it, having come there to prowl around the christening party, to which neither she nor her father had been invited. What fun it would all be for Hyacinthe--this little family fête and his brother's broken arm! She was wriggling as if she were being tickled, and nearly fell over backwards, so highly was she amused.

"Oh, Corporal, what a whack!" she cried. "The bone gave such a crack! It *was* fun!"

He made no answer, but slackened his pace with a dejected air. She followed him, whistling to her geese, which she had taken with her, so as to have a pretext for eavesdropping behind the walls. Jean returned mechanically to the threshing-machine, which was still in action, though the day was waning. He thought to himself that it was all over; that he could never go back to the Buteaus, that they would never give him Françoise. What folly it was! Ten minutes had sufficed: an unsought quarrel, and so unlucky a blow, just when everything was in such trim! And now, never, never more! The snorting of the machine amid the twilight was prolonged like a great cry of distress.

Another encounter just then occurred. At the corner of a cross road La Trouille's geese, which she was taking back home, found themselves face to face with old Saucisse's geese on their way down to the village, unaccompanied. The two ganders, in the van, pulled up short, resting on one leg, with their large yellow beaks turned towards each other. All the beaks of each flock turned simultaneously in the same direction as the leaders', and the geese's bodies were inclined to the same side. For an instant perfect immobility was preserved. It was like an armed reconnaissance; two patrols exchanging watch-words. Then one of the ganders, with round, contented eyes, went straight on, while the other bore to the left; and each troop filed off behind its own leader, going about its business with the same uniform waddling gait.

PART IV.

PART IV. — CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER I.

After the shearing and the sale of the lambs in May, Soulas, the shepherd, had removed the sheep from La Borderie. Nearly four hundred head there were, which he led away without any other assistance than that of the little swine-herd Firmin, and his two formidable dogs, Emperor and Massacre. Until August the flocks grazed in the fallows amongst the clover and lucern, or in the waste-lands along the roads; and barely three weeks had now elapsed since he had turned them out into the stubble, immediately after the harvest, in the last blazing days of September.

This was the terrible season of the year. The fields of La Beauce lay stripped and desolate and bare, without a single fleck of green about them. The torrid summer, and the complete absence of all moisture, had dried up the splitting soil, and almost all signs of vegetation had disappeared. There was nothing left save a tangle of dead grass, and the hard bristles of the stubble-fields, which stretched out their mournful, bare nudity as far as the eye could reach, making all the plain look as though some giant conflagration had swept from horizon to horizon. The soil still seemed to be giving out a yellowish glow, a weird, threatening light, livid like that of a storm. Everything looked yellow, a frightfully mournful yellow; the baked earth, the stubble, and the high-roads and by-paths, rutted and torn up by passing wheels. The slightest breeze set clouds of dust flying, and covering the banks and hedges as with cinders. The blue sky and the blazing sun only seemed to render the scene of desolation still more mournful.

Upon that particular day there was a high wind, blowing in quick, warm puffs, which brought along heavy, scudding clouds; and when the sun shone fully out, his rays seemed to burn the skin like red-hot iron. Ever

since early morning, Soulas had been expecting a supply of water for himself and his flock--water which was to be brought to him from the farm--for the stubble lands where he found himself lay to the north of Rognes, far away from any pond. In the grazing ground, between the light, movable hurdles secured with staves the sheep were lying on their bellies, panting and breathing only with difficulty; while the two dogs, stretched at full length outside the hurdles, were also panting, with their tongues lolling out of their mouths. The shepherd, to protect himself from the wind and to procure a little shade, was seated, leaning against a little hut raised on two wheels--a narrow box which served him for bed, and wardrobe, and pantry--and which he pushed along at every change of the grazing ground.

At noon, however, when the sun shone down perpendicularly, Soulas rose to his feet again, and scanned the distance to ascertain if he could see Firmin returning from the farm, where he had sent him to find out why the water did not come.

At last the little swine-herd made his appearance.

"They'll be here soon," he cried. "They had no horses this morning."

"You silly little fool, haven't you brought a bottle of water for us to drink ourselves?"

"Oh, dear, I never thought about it."

Soulas struck out a swinging blow with his closed fist, which the lad avoided by jumping aside. Then the shepherd began to swear, but he decided that he would eat without drinking, although he was almost choked with thirst. By his orders, Firmin warily took out of the hut some bread a week old, some shrivelled walnuts, and some dry cheese. Then they both sat down to eat, intently watched by the two dogs, who came and sat down in front of them, getting a crust tossed to them now and then, so hard that it cracked between their teeth as if it had been a bone.

In spite of his seventy years, the old man got as quickly through his food with his gums as the youngster did with his teeth. Soulas was still straight and upright, flexible and tough like a thornwood stick. Time seemed merely to have scored furrows in his face, which was gnarled like a tree trunk beneath a tangle of faded hair, now the colour of earth.

The little swine-herd did not manage to escape his cuffing, for just as he was about to stow the remains of the bread and cheese inside the hut, and was no longer suspecting an attack, Soulas gave him a thumping whack which sent him rolling into the shelter-place.

"There, you silly little fool," cried the old man; "take and drink that, till the water comes!"

Two o'clock arrived without there being a sign of anybody coming. The heat had gone on increasing, and was well-nigh intolerable amid the complete calms which suddenly set in. Then, every now and again the breeze would rise and sweep up the powdery soil in little wheeling whirlwinds which seemed composed of blinding, suffocating smoke, and terribly enhanced the pangs of thirst.

At last the shepherd, who bore his sufferings with stoical, uncomplaining patience, gave a grunt of satisfaction.

"Thank heaven!" he exclaimed; "they've come none too soon."

Two carts, which in the distance looked scarcely bigger than a man's fist, had now at length made their appearance on the line where the plain intersected the horizon. In the first one, which was driven by Jean, Soulas had distinctly recognised the barrel of water. The second one, which Tron was in charge of, was loaded with sacks of corn, which were being taken to the mill, whose lofty wooden carcass could be seen some five hundred yards away. This second cart came to a standstill on the road, and Tron accompanied Jean through the stubble-fields up to the sheep-fold, under

pretence of lending him a hand with the water, but really for the sake of idling and indulging in a few minutes' gossip.

"Do they want us all to die of thirst?" cried the shepherd.

The sheep, also having sniffed the water, had sprung up in eager tumult, and were now pressing against the hurdles, craning out their heads, and bleating plaintively.

"Patience! patience!" replied Jean; "there's something here to make you tipsy."

The men now quickly put the trough into position, and filled it by the aid of a wooden spout. Some of the water ran over, and the two dogs lapped it up eagerly, while the shepherd and the little swine-herd, too thirsty to wait any longer, drank greedily out of the trough. Then the whole flock swarmed up to it, and the air was filled with the flowing murmur of refreshing water, and the gurgling sound of animals and men swallowing it, and splashing and drenching themselves with it in delight.

"Now," said Soulas, who had become quite cheery again, "you would be doing me a kindness if you would help me to move the pens."

Jean and Tron both helped him. The hurdles were constantly moved over the surface of the far-spreading stubble, never being kept for more than two or three days in the same position, just sufficient time to enable the sheep to crop down the stray vegetation. This system, moreover, had the advantage of gradually manuring the land, patch by patch. While the shepherd, assisted by his dogs, looked after the sheep, the two men and the little swine-herd pulled up the stakes and carried the hurdles some fifty yards further on. Then they again fixed them so as to enclose a vast square, into which the animals rushed of their own accord before it was quite completed.

Despite his great age, Soulas was already propelling his wheeled hut towards the fold.

"What's the matter with Jean?" he presently asked. "One would say he was burying God Almighty!"

Jean only shook his head sadly. He had been very gloomy ever since he believed that he had lost Françoise.

"Ah! there's some woman in the matter, I expect," continued the old man. "The confounded hussies, they ought all to have their necks wrung!"

Thereupon the giant-limbed Tron began to laugh with an innocent air.

"Ah!" he said, "it's only those who are past everything that say that."

"Do you mean to say that I am past everything?" exclaimed the shepherd, contemptuously. "When did you find that out? But there's one wench, my lad, whom it's best for you not to touch, or you may be sure that matters will have a bad ending."

This allusion to Tron's connection with Madame Jacqueline made the farm-hand blush up to his ears. Soulas had caught them together one morning in the barn behind some sacks of oats; and in his detestation of the ex-scullerymaid, who was now so stern and harsh towards her old pals, he had, after much deliberation, determined to open his master's eyes as to her conduct. However, at his first word, the farmer had looked at him with so angry an expression that he had said no more, resolving to remain silent, unless La Cognette forced him to extreme measures by bringing about his dismissal. The consequence was that they were now living together in a state of hostility: Soulas dreading that he might be turned away like a broken-down old beast of burden, and Jacqueline biding her time till her influence became sufficiently consolidated to induce Hourdequin, who was attached to his shepherd, to dismiss him. Throughout La Beauce nobody understood the art of sheep-grazing better

than Soulas did. His flocks were well-fed and there was neither loss nor waste, the fields being clean shaved from one end to the other, without a blade of grass being left behind.

The old man, possessed by the propensity for talking which often leads those who live solitary lives to take any opportunity of unbosoming themselves, now continued:

"Ah, if my jade of a wife, before she managed to kill herself, hadn't put all my brass down her throat as fast as I earned it, I'd have taken myself off the farm of my own accord before now, so as to get away from the sight of so much beastliness. That Cognette has made a lot more money by her face than with her hands, and it's her looks, not her deserts, that have gained her her present position! Just to think of the master letting her lie in his dead wife's bed, and being so infatuated with her that he has ended by taking his meals alone with her, just as though she were his lawful wife! She'll turn us all out of the place, neck and crop, at the first opportunity, and the master himself into the bargain. A filthy sow who has wallowed with every dirty hog!"

At every sentence spoken by the old man, Tron clenched his fists more tightly. He was brimming over with suppressed rage, which was rendered the more terrible by his giant-like strength.

"There that will do!" he cried; "you'd better just shut up. If you hadn't got into your dotage, I'd have knocked you down before now. There's more decency in her little finger than there is in the whole of your old carcass."

Soulas, however, only shrugged his shoulders jeeringly at the other's threat; and, though he scarcely ever laughed, he now broke out into a sharp grating giggle, which seemed to come from some mechanism rusted by disuse.

"You great simpleton, you! You're as foolish and gullible as she's cunning! Oh, yes, she'll swear hard enough to her virginity! Why, I tell

you that all the country-side has had to deal with her! She was scarcely fourteen when she and old Mathias, a hunch-back who's dead now, came together in the stable; then later on, as she was kneading the dough, she had to do with that little scamp Guillaume, the swine-herd, who's in the army now, and who found her alone in the kitchen; and she's been with every farm-labourer that's ever come into the neighbourhood, in every sort of place imaginable, in every hole and corner, as is very well known all over the place. Oh! you haven't far to seek, if you want to tax her with it. I myself saw a fellow belonging to these parts with her in the hay-loft one morning not long ago."

He broke out into a fresh giggle, and the side-long glance which he cast at Jean seemed to make the latter very uneasy. He had been fidgeting about in silence ever since the conversation had turned upon Jacqueline.

"It'll be bad for any one whom I find touching her now," growled Tron, as angry as a dog who has had its bone snatched from it. "I'll spoil his appetite for him!"

Soulas gazed at the fellow for a moment, surprised by this show of brutish jealousy.

"Well, that's your own affair, my lad," he drily said in conclusion, and then he relapsed into one of his fits of contemplative silence.

Tron finally returned to the cart which he was driving to the mill, while Jean remained for a few minutes longer with the shepherd to help him to hammer down some of the hurdle stakes. The old man, noticing his silence and gloomy appearance, began to question him.

"I trust it isn't La Cognette that's upsetting your heart?" he said.

The young fellow shook his head energetically in sign of denial.

"Is it some other wench, then? Who is it, for I don't remember having seen you with any one?"

Jean glanced at old Soulas, and bethought himself that the counsel of old men was often valuable in matters of this sort. He also felt a longing to unbosom himself, and so he told him the whole story, how he had possessed Françoise, and how he was hopeless of ever seeing her again since the fight with Buteau. He had even been afraid for a time, he said, that the latter would prosecute him on account of his broken arm, which still prevented his doing any work, though it was now half-way well again. Buteau, however, had probably thought it more prudent to keep the law from spying into his concerns.

"You have had to do with Françoise, then?" said the old shepherd.

"Yes, once."

The old man reflected with a grave look, and finally continued:

"You had better tell old Fouan all about it; perhaps he will give her to you."

Jean heard this with astonishment. He had never thought of such a simple plan. The fold was now complete, and he went away, saying that he would go and see old Fouan that very evening. As he plodded along behind his empty cart, Soulas resumed his everlasting watch, his thin, erect figure standing out like a greyish bar against the flat expanse of the plain. The little swine-herd was lying down between the two dogs in the shadow of the movable hut. The wind had suddenly dropped, and the storm clouds had rolled away towards the east. It was as hot as ever, and the sun was blazing in a sky of unflecked blue.

That evening Jean left his work an hour earlier than usual, and went to the Delhommes' to see old Fouan before dinner. As he was going down the hill-side, he caught sight of the Delhommes amongst their vines, where they were stripping off the leaves, so as to expose the fruit to the sun. There had been some heavy rains during the closing quarter of the moon, and the grapes were ripening badly, so that it was necessary to

take every advantage of the late sunshine. As the old man was not there with his children, Jean quickened his steps, in the hope of being able to speak to him alone--a course which he much preferred. The Delhommes' house was at the other end of Rognes, across the bridge; it was a little farm, which had recently received various additions in the shape of barns and out-houses, and the buildings now formed three irregular blocks, enclosing a fairly large yard. The latter was swept every morning, and even the dunghills were kept in a state of the greatest neatness.

"Good day, Father Fouan!" Jean shouted to the old man from the road, in a somewhat tremulous voice.

Fouan was sitting in the yard with his stick between his legs. His head was bent down, and he was so absorbed in his thoughts that he did not hear Jean's greeting. A second shout, however, made him raise his eyes, and presently he recognised who was addressing him.

"Ah, is it you, Corporal?" said he. "Are you coming to see us?"

His greeting was so pleasant and so destitute of spite that the young man went into the yard. He did not, however, dare to speak immediately on the subject which had brought him there. His courage failed him at the thought of openly confessing his intercourse with Françoise. They talked together of the fine weather, and the good it would do the grapes. If they only had another week of sunshine the wine would be excellent.

"What a happy man you must be!" said Jean, wishing to make himself agreeable. "There isn't such another fortunate fellow in the whole country-side."

"Yes, indeed."

"And such children, too, as you've got! You'd have a long way to go before you found better!"

"Yes, yes, indeed; but every one has his troubles, you know."

The old man seemed to have grown gloomy. Since he had taken up his abode with the Delhommes, Buteau had no longer paid him his share of the allowance, saying that he did not want his sister to profit by his money. Hyacinthe had never given him a copper from the outset, and Delhomme, now that he boarded and lodged with him, had discontinued all payments. It was not, however, the want of pocket-money that troubled the old man, for he received from Monsieur Baillehache a hundred and fifty francs a year, just twelve francs and a-half per month, the interest on the sum realised by the sale of his house. With this he was quite able to pay for all his little luxuries, his daily allowance of tobacco, his drop of brandy at Lengaigne's, and his cup of coffee at the Macquerons'. Fanny, who was a very careful house-wife, never took any coffee or brandy out of her cupboard unless some one were ill. However, despite the fact that he had the means of taking his pleasure away from home, and wanted for nothing in his daughter's house, the old man felt aggrieved and seemed to live in a constant state of discontent.

"Ah, yes, indeed," said Jean, unwittingly putting his finger on Fouan's sore place, "when one lives with other folks, it isn't quite the same as being in one's own house."

"You're quite right there. Quite right!" replied the old man in a grumpy voice.

Then he rose from his seat, as though he felt a yearning impulse to assert his independence.

"Let us go and have a glass together," he said. "I dare say that I may offer that much to a friend!"

As he was entering the house, however, his courage began to ebb.

"Wipe your feet, Corporal," he said, "for they prate so much, you know, about their cleanliness and tidiness."

Jean went inside with an awkward gait, intending to make a clean breast of what he had to say before the others came back. He was surprised by the trim order of the kitchen. The pans were gleaming brightly, and there was not a speck of dust on the furniture, while the flooring was quite worn with the amount of scrubbing it had received. Some cabbage-soup of the day before stood warming by the side of a cinder-piled fire.

"Here's your good health!" said the old man, who had taken a couple of glasses and a partially emptied bottle from the side-board.

His hand trembled slightly as he drained his glass, as if he felt an uneasy alarm about what he was doing. As he put the glass down with the air of a man who has risked everything, he abruptly exclaimed:

"Would you believe, now, that Fanny has never once spoken to me since the day before yesterday, just because I spat? Spat, indeed, just as though every one didn't spit! I spit, of course, when I feel so inclined! One had better have done with it altogether than be worried in this way!"

Then filling his glass a second time, and delighted at having found some one to whom he could pour out his complaints, he eased his mind, never giving Jean an opportunity to get in a word. His troubles, however, did not appear to be very grievous ones, and were born chiefly of the angry indignation of an old man, to whose feelings and faults but little toleration was accorded, and upon whom his children were trying to force a mode of life different from what he had been accustomed to. However, he was as much affected by his grievances, slight though they were, as he could have been by actual cruelty and harsh treatment. A remark repeated in too loud a tone was as hard for him to bear as a blow would have been; and his daughter made matters still worse by her excessive touchiness, which seemed to find an offence and insulting intention in every little sentence which she could twist into an equivocal meaning. The result of all this was that the relations between father and daughter were becoming more and more strained and embittered every

day. She who formerly, prior to the division of the property, had certainly been the kindlier hearted of the children, was now degenerating into a cross-grained shrew, subjecting the old man to perfect persecution, constantly following him about with her broom and duster, and finding fault with him both for what he did and for what he omitted to do. Without being subjected to actual cruelty, Fouan was kept in moral torture, over which he silently moaned in any quiet corner he could find.

"You must try to take it easily," repeated Jean, at each of the old man's complaints. "An understanding can always be arrived at with a little patience."

Fouan, however, who had just lighted a candle, now became angrily excited.

"No, no, I've had quite enough of it!" he cried. "Ah, if I'd only known what was in store for me here! It would have been better for me if I had died when I sold my house! But they are very much mistaken if they think they're going to keep me here! I'd rather go and break stones on the road."

He was almost choking with emotion, and he was obliged to sit down. Jean profited by the opportunity to speak out:

"I say, I wanted to see you," he began, "about what took place the other day. I have regretted it very much, but I was obliged to defend myself--wasn't I?--since an attack was made upon me. All the same, it was agreed between me and Françoise. But at present you are the only person who can put things straight. If you would go to Buteau's, you could explain matters to them."

The old man became very grave. He wagged his chin, and seemed embarrassed as to what he should say; however, the return of Fanny and her husband spared him the necessity of replying. The Delhommes showed no surprise at finding Jean in their house; they gave him their

customary cordial welcome. Fanny, however, had immediately caught sight of the bottle and the two glasses on the table. She removed them, and went to get a duster. Then she spoke to her father for the first time for forty-eight hours. "Father," she said, "you know that I won't have that kind of thing."

Fouan rose up, trembling with indignation at this public rebuke.

"At me again! Am I not even at liberty to offer a glass of wine to a friend? Go and lock your precious wine up! I'll drink water for the future!"

Fanny was now dreadfully put out by being thus charged with avarice.

"You can drink the house dry and burst yourself, if it gives you any pleasure to do so," she exclaimed, quite pale with anger; "but I won't have my table marked with your sticky glasses, just as though the place were a tavern."

The tears sprang to the old man's eyes.

"A little less anxiety about appearances, and a little more affection, would become you better, my daughter," he said.

Then, while Fanny was vigorously wiping the table, he went and stood in front of the window, and painfully overcome by his bitter thoughts, looked out into the dark night, which had now fallen.

Delhomme had avoided openly taking any part in the incident, but he had, by his silence, supported his wife's firm attitude. He would not allow Jean to go away before he had finished the bottle of wine with him, pouring the remaining contents into some glasses which Fanny brought to them on plates. She now began, in low tones, to defend her conduct.

"You've no idea of the trouble that old folks are. They're full of all sorts of whims and bad habits, and would rather die than be corrected. There's

nothing really bad about my father; he's not strong enough for anything of that kind now; but I'd rather have to look after four cows than one old man."

Jean and Delhomme nodded their heads in acquiescence. However, Fanny's further remarks were interrupted by the sudden entrance of Nénesse, dressed in town-fashion in a fancy-patterned coat and trousers, bought ready-made at Lambourdieu's, and with a little hard-felt hat on his head. His long hairless neck, his blue eyes, and his pretty soft face, gave him a rather girlish look, as he stood there swaying from side to side. He had always had a horror of the soil, and he was leaving the next morning for Chartres, where he was going to take service in a restaurant where public balls were given. His parents had for a long time offered a strenuous opposition to his desertion of agriculture, but at last the mother on being coaxed had persuaded the father to consent. Since the morning Nénesse had been larking with his friends in the village, by way of bidding them good-bye.

He seemed surprised for a moment at finding a stranger in the room; but throwing off his hesitation, he exclaimed:

"I say, mother, I'm going to stand them a dinner at Macqueron's. I shall want some money."

Fanny looked at him keenly, and opened her lips to refuse his request. But she was so vain that Jean's presence checked her words. Their son might surely spend a score of francs without ruining them! And thereupon she left the room, stiffly and silently.

"Have you got any one with you?" Nénesse's father asked.

He had caught sight of a shadow by the door; and on taking a step forward, he recognised the young man who had remained outside.

"Oh! it's Delphin. Come in, my lad."

Delphin ventured into the room, excusing himself as he made his greetings. He was wearing a blue blouse and heavy field-boots. He had no tie round his neck, and his face was brown from exposure to the hot sun.

"Well," continued Delhomme, who had a high opinion of the lad, "will you be setting off for Chartres one of these days?"

Delphin opened his eyes widely, and then energetically exclaimed:

"Oh! Curse it all! No, I should be suffocated in the place."

The father cast a side-long glance at his son, and then Delphin, coming to the rescue of his friend, continued:

"It's all very well for Nénesse to go there, as he looks so well when he's dressed up, and can play the cornet."

Delhomme smiled, for he was very proud of his son's skill with the cornet. Fanny now returned with a handful of two-franc pieces. She slowly counted out ten of them into Nénesse's palm. All the coins were quite white from having been kept beneath a heap of corn. She never trusted her money to her wardrobe, but hid it away in small sums in odd corners all over the house, underneath the corn, or the coals, or the sand; the consequence being that when she paid the coins away they were sometimes one colour, and sometimes another, white, black, or yellow.

"It will do, all the same," said Nénesse, by way of thanks. "Now, Delphin, are you coming?"

Then the two young fellows went off together, and their merry laughter could be heard dying away in the distance.

Jean now emptied his glass, seeing that old Fouan, who had kept aloof during the whole of the last scene, had left the window to go out into the

yard. Then he said good-bye to the Delhommes, and went out in his turn, finding the old man standing alone in the black night.

"Now, Fouan," said Jean, "will you go to Buteau's and arrange about my having Françoise? You are the master, and you have only got to say the word."

"I cannot, I cannot," replied the old man in the darkness, with a jerky voice.

Then he broke out excitedly, and unbosomed himself of his brooding wrath. He had done with the Delhommes, he declared, and in the morning he would go to live with Buteau, who had offered to give him a home. Even if his son beat him, he would prefer that to being gradually tortured to death by his daughter's pin-thrusts.

This new obstacle exasperated Jean, and he spoke out bluntly:

"I must tell you, Monsieur Fouan, that Françoise and I have been together."

The old peasant uttered a simple exclamation: "Ah!" Then, after a moment's reflection, he added: "We had better wait. By-and-bye we'll see what can be done."

Fanny now appeared at the door, and called to her father to come in, as the soup was ready.

"Stick your soup behind!" shouted the old man, turning round to her. "I'm going to bed."

And, indeed, he went upstairs to bed, with an empty stomach, and boiling over with anger.

Jean walked slowly away from the farm, so absorbed in his vexation that he found himself in the level plain again without being conscious of the road he was taking. The blue-black sky gleamed with stars, and the night

was close and hot. The immobility of the atmosphere told of the approach of a storm now passing afar, and the reflection of lightning could be seen towards the east. As Jean raised his head he caught sight on his left hand of hundreds of phosphorescent eyes gleaming like candles, and turning towards him at the sound of his steps. It was the sheep in the pen, alongside of which he was now passing. Then he heard Soulas ask in his drawling voice: "Well, my lad?"

The dogs, who were lying on the ground, had not stirred, for they had scented that Jean belonged to the farm. The little swine-herd, driven from the wheeled hut by the excessive heat, was sleeping in a furrow; the shepherd standing quite alone on the cropped plain, which was now enveloped in night.

"Well, my lad, have you settled it?"

"He says," replied Jean, without even stopping, "that if she's in the family-way he'll see."

He had already stridden past the pen, when old Soulas's response reached him, sounding solemnly in the deep silence.

"That's true. You must wait."

Jean continued on his way. La Beauce lay stretched around him, buried in a leaden sleep; and there was an overwhelming sense of the silent desolation of the scorched stubble and the baked, parched soil in the burnt smell that floated in the air, and in the chirrup of the crickets which sounded like the cracking of embers among ashes. Nothing but the dim forms of the ricks rose above the melancholy nakedness of the plain; but every twenty seconds or so, low on the horizon, the lightning flashed in violet streaks of mournful aspect, which swiftly disappeared.

PART IV. — CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER II.

The next morning Fouan took up his abode with the Buteaus. The removal of his belongings did not give him any trouble, as they merely consisted of a couple of bundles of clothes, which he carried himself in two journeys. It was in vain that the Delhommes tried to bring about an explanation; he went off without replying to them.

At Buteau's house he was given the big room on the ground-floor--behind the kitchen--which had hitherto merely been used for the storage of potatoes and beet-root for the cows. This room, unfortunately, was only lighted by a small window, some six or seven feet from the ground, and it was always as dim as a cellar. Then, too, the floor of hardened soil, the heaps of vegetables, and the rubbish that had been tossed into the corners gave rise to a copious moisture, which trickled down the bare plaster of the walls. The Buteaus, besides, left everything just as it was, and merely cleared out a corner for an iron bed, a chair, and a deal table. The old man, however, seemed quite delighted.

Buteau now felt very triumphant. Ever since Fouan had been living with the Delhommes he had been mad with jealousy, for he knew very well what would be said in Rognes. It would be reported from mouth to mouth that it made no difference to the Delhommes having to keep their father; but the Buteaus, poor folks, had barely sufficient for themselves. So now, during the earlier time of Fouan's stay with him, he plied him with food in the hope of fattening him, and thus proving to the neighbourhood that there was no scarcity in his house. Then, too, there were the hundred and fifty francs a year, the proceeds of the sale of the house, which he felt sure the old man would leave to the one who looked after him and took care of him. Moreover, he reflected, now that Delhomme had no longer

to support his father, he would doubtless begin to pay his share of the allowance again, two hundred francs a year, and in this expectation he was not disappointed. Buteau had reckoned upon getting these two hundred francs, he had calculated everything, and he flattered himself that he would get the credit of being a good and dutiful son without it costing him anything, besides having the prospect of reaping a substantial reward later on; to say nothing of the secret hoard which, so he still suspected, the old man must possess, though he had never been able to make certain on the point.

For Fouan the change was a perfect honeymoon. He was feasted and shown to the neighbours. Didn't he look plump and well? the Buteaus asked. There were no signs of wasting or decline about him, were there? The little ones, Laure and Jules, were always playing with him, keeping him amused and delighted. But what, perhaps, pleased him most was the liberty to indulge himself in his elderly whims and ways, and to comport himself as he liked in the greater freedom of this household. Though Lise was a good and cleanly house-wife, she lacked Fanny's precise tendencies and susceptibilities, and the old man was allowed to spit wherever he liked, to go out and come in as the fancy seized him, and to eat every minute if he chose, prompted by that spirit of the peasant who cannot pass a loaf without cutting a thick slice off it. Three months passed away in this pleasant fashion. It was now December; and although the severe frosts froze the water in the old man's jug at the foot of his bed, still he made no complaints. When it thawed, the moisture soaked through the walls of his room, and ran down them in dripping streams; but he seemed to take all this as a matter of course; he had been brought up in the midst of similar discomforts. So long as he had his tobacco and coffee, and was not badgered and worried, he declared he needed nothing more.

Matters began to cloud over, however. One fine, sunny morning, Fouan, on going back to his bedroom to get his pipe--the others imagined that he

had already left the house--found Buteau there struggling to get the better of Françoise. The girl, who was strenuously resisting him, without, however, saying a word, pulled herself together and left the room, after taking the beet-root which she had come to get for the cows. The old man, on being left face to face with his son, became angry.

"You filthy swine, to be going after that girl, with your wife only a yard or two away!" he cried. "And it wasn't she who wanted you either; I could see her wrestling with you!"

Buteau, however, who was still panting and flushed, received the old man's remonstrances very badly.

"Why do you come poking your nose into everything?" he retorted. "You'd better shut your eyes and hold your jaw, or you'll find it the worse for you."

Since Lise's confinement, and the fight with Jean, Buteau had been hotly pursuing Françoise again. He had waited till his arm was strong, and now all over the house he systematically made onslaughts on the girl, feeling sure that if he could but once overcome her she would belong to him in future as much as he wished. Was not this the best way of preventing the marriage, and of keeping both the girl and her land? His passion for the two became intermingled, as it were; his resolute determination to retain the land, and not to part with what was in his possession, being blended with his unsated sexual lust, now exasperated by resistance. His wife was becoming enormously stout, a perfect heap of flesh, and she was still suckling, with Laure constantly hanging at her breasts; whereas the other one, the little sister-in-law, exhaled a most appetising odour; her bosom, moreover, being firm and elastic like the udder of a young heifer. He didn't turn up his nose at either of them, by the way; in fact, he wanted to have them both, the one soft and flabby, and the other firmly built; both of them were attractive in their different styles. He considered himself quite a good enough cock to have two hens, and he dreamt of leading a

pasha-like life, petted, caressed, and glutted with enjoyment. Why shouldn't he marry both sisters, if he could get them to consent to his doing so? It seemed to him to be the best way of keeping things pleasant, and of avoiding a division of the property, which he dreaded as much as though he were threatened with having one of his limbs wrenched off.

Now, whenever he and Françoise found themselves alone for a moment, whether in the stable or the kitchen or anywhere else, it mattered not where, there was a sudden attack and defence; Buteau rushing upon the girl, and the girl striking him. It was always the same short, sharp struggle; the man seizing Françoise firmly round the waist, and the girl, with clenched teeth and savage eyes, forcing him to let go his hold by striking him with full force with her clenched fist. Not a word was spoken by either; there was no sound but that of their hot breath, a sort of stifled panting, the deadened stir of a struggle. Then Buteau would with difficulty restrain a cry of pain, while the girl straightened her clothes and limped away, feeling bruised and sore. These scenes took place when Lise was in the next room, and sometimes even when she was in the same room, with her back turned to them while she arranged some linen in the wardrobe. It was as though the wife's presence excited the husband; he being at the same time certain of the girl's proud and resolute silence.

Quarrels, however, had broken out since old Fouan had seen them among the potatoes. He had bluntly told Lise everything that he had seen, so that she might prevent her husband from making any further attempt upon his sister-in-law. Then Lise, after shouting to her father to mind his own business, angrily attacked her younger sister. She had only herself to blame, she cried, for enticing the men on, and what had happened to her was only what was to be expected; all the men were swine. In the evening, however, Lise made such a scene with Buteau that she came out of her room the next morning with her eye bunged up and blackened by a heavy blow which he had dealt her with his fist during the discussion.

After that there was constant quarrelling going on. There were always two of the inmates of the house trying to bite each other's heads off, the husband and wife, or the husband and his sister-in-law, or else the two sisters, even if they were not all three engaged in devouring one another.

Then it was that the slowly and unconsciously-developed hatred between Lise and Françoise became truly bitter. Their whilom tender affection for each other gave place to a savage feeling, which kept them irritated with one another from morning till night. The real and only cause of it all was this man, Buteau, who was like some poisonous leaven. Françoise, quite upset by his perpetual onslaughts, would have succumbed long previously if her will had not shielded her against desire each time he touched her. Her obstinate notions of abstract justice, her resolute determination neither to give up what was her own nor to take what was another's, brought her no little trouble. She was angry with herself for feeling jealous and execrating her sister for possessing this man, rather than have shared whom she herself would have died. When he pursued her, she angrily retaliated by spitting upon him, and sent him back, befouled with her saliva, to his wife. To do this seemed in some way to soothe her struggling desires: it was as though she had spat in her sister's face in her envious contempt, for the pleasure in which she had no share. Lise, on the other hand, was free from jealousy, feeling quite certain that Buteau had merely bragged in asserting that he enjoyed both of them--not that she believed him incapable of such a thing, but she was convinced that her sister was too proud to yield. The only grudge she felt against Françoise was that, owing to her persistent rejection of Buteau's advances, the whole house was becoming a hell upon earth. The fatter she grew, the more complacent she seemed to become, taking a lively delight in existence, and egotistically craving for pleasant, easy surroundings. It seemed to her the height of folly that her husband and sister should go on quarrelling like that, marring the sweetness of life,

when they really had everything that was necessary for their happiness. The girl's perverse disposition was the sole cause of all the trouble.

Every night when she went to bed she exclaimed to Buteau:

"It's all my sister! But if she causes me any more annoyance, I'll have her turned out of the house!"

This course, however, would by no means have suited Buteau.

"A fine notion, indeed! Why, we should have all the country-side crying shame on us! What a plague you women are! I shall have to duck you both in the pond till you can live together in harmony."

Two months more passed away, and Lise, who was so upset, might have sugared her coffee twice, as she said, without finding it to her palate. She divined whenever her sister had repelled some fresh onslaught of her husband's, for she then had a further experience of his angry ill-temper, and she now lived in constant dread of these repeated repulses, feeling anxious whenever she caught sight of him creeping up slily behind Françoise's skirts, and making sure that when he came back again he would be in a violent temper, breaking everything that came in his way, and making the whole house wretched. These were hateful days to her, and she could not forgive the obstinate wench for not restoring tranquillity.

One day matters reached a terrible pitch. Buteau, who had gone down into the cellar with Françoise to draw some cider, came up again so harshly repulsed, and in a state of such raging anger, that for the merest trifle, just because his soup was too hot, he hurled his plate against the wall, and then rushed out of the room, after knocking Lise down with a blow that would almost have killed an ox.

Crying and bleeding, she struggled on to her feet again, with her cheek sadly swollen, and at once fell foul of her sister.

"You dirty drab!" she cried, "go to bed with him, and have done with it! I'm sick to death of it all; and if you persist in being obstinate, simply to make him beat me, I'll run away!"

Françoise listened to her, quite pale and horrified.

"As true as God hears me, I'd rather do that," continued Lise. "Perhaps he'd leave us in peace then!"

She fell down on a chair, and began to sob spasmodically. Her fat body, which had now begun to shrink, bespoke her recklessness, her one desire for quiet happiness, even at the cost of sharing her husband with another. She would still keep a share of him herself, and would have all that was necessary. People, she thought, had foolish ideas on these matters. A husband was not like a loaf, that was consumed at each bit one ate. Ought they not to agree amongst themselves, and live together in a friendly fashion?

"Come, now, why won't you?" she asked.

Choked with disgust, Françoise could only cry, angrily:

"You are more disgusting than he is!"

Then she, too, went away to sob in the cow-house, where La Coliche gazed at her with her big, sad eyes. What roused her indignation was not so much the thing itself as the complaisant part she herself was to play--to surrender herself just for the sake of securing peace and quietness in the house. If Buteau had been her own husband, she thought she would never have consented to give up the least bit of him. Her bitter feeling against her sister turned into one of scorn and contempt, and she vowed to herself that she would be flayed alive rather than give way.

Her life now became still more embittered than before. She became the general drudge of the house, the beast of burden that came in for everybody's kicks and buffetings. She was reduced to the level of a hired

servant overburdened with work, and continually rated, and thumped, and ill-treated. Lise would not permit her a single hour's leisure; but made her rise before daylight, and kept her up so late at night that the poor girl often fell asleep without having enough strength left her to undress herself. Buteau took a malicious pleasure in torturing her by his familiarities, slapping her on the loins, pinching her thighs, and falling upon her with all sorts of savage caresses, which left her bleeding, and with her eyes full of tears, but as obstinately silent as ever. Buteau himself laughed, and derived some little satisfaction whenever he saw the girl growing faint, and with difficulty refraining from crying out from sheer pain. Her body was sadly discoloured and disfigured with bruises and scratches. In her sister's presence she especially forced herself to repress every sign of suffering, and to comport herself as though a man's hands were not actually fingering her flesh. Sometimes, however, she could not altogether control herself, but replied to Buteau's attacks by a swinging blow. Then there would be a general engagement. Buteau would belabour Françoise; while Lise, under the pretence of separating them, would assail them both with vigorous kicks from her heavy boots. Little Laure and her big brother Jules yelled at the top of their voices, and all the dogs about the premises began to bark, arousing the pity of the neighbours for Françoise. "Ah, poor girl!" they used to say; "she must have rare pluck to remain in such a place!"

Her remaining with the Buteaus was, indeed, the standing wonder of all Rognes. Why didn't she run away? the neighbours asked of each other. The knowing ones shook their heads; the girl was not of age, she still had another eighteen months to wait. To run away would be to her own disadvantage, for she could not take her property with her, and she showed her sense by remaining. Ah! if Fouan, her guardian, had only supported her cause? But he himself hadn't too easy a life with his son-in-law; he had his own peace and quietness to look after, and, for the sake of his own comforts, was obliged to stand aloof. The girl, moreover,

with her independence and self-reliance, had forbidden him to interfere in her affairs.

Every outbreak now ended in the same way.

"Off you go at once! Clear out with you!"

"Oh, yes, that's just what you'd like! Once I was foolish, and wanted to go away; whereas now you may kill me if you choose, but you won't get me to go. I shall stop here, and wait for what belongs to me. I want the land and the house, and I mean to have them, too; every inch and every stone!"

For the first few months Buteau's great fear had been that Françoise might prove to be with child. He had counted the days since he had caught her and Jean together among the corn, and he kept casting anxious, side-long glances at the girl, for the arrival of a baby would have spoilt everything by necessitating his sister-in-law's marriage. The girl herself was quite easy about the matter; but when she noticed the manifest interest that Buteau showed in her figure, she took a pleasure in puffing herself out, in order to deceive him. And whenever he seized hold of her, she always imagined that he was measuring her with his big fingers, the consequence of which was that she ended by saying to him, with a defiant air:

"Ah, there's one coming, and growing fast enough!"

One day she even folded up some towels and wrapped them round her. But in the evening there was almost a massacre. A feeling of terror now seized her at the murderous glances which her brother-in-law cast at her; she felt quite sure that if she had really been with child the brutal fellow would have struck her some foul blow in the hope of killing her. So she discontinued her acting.

"Go and get yourself a baby!" said Buteau one day to her, with a leer.

"If I haven't got one, it's because I don't choose," she replied, angrily, turning pale.

This was quite true. She obstinately rejected Jean's advances. Buteau, however, was none the less noisily triumphant, and he now began to abuse the girl's lover. A fine sort of a man he must be! he cried. Why, he must be rotten! He might be able to break people's arms by cowardly tricks, but he hadn't backbone enough about him to put a girl in the family-way! After that he began to overwhelm Françoise with sarcastic allusions to Jean, and indulged in filthy jokes about her own person.

When Jean heard of Buteau's remarks about himself he threatened to go and break his jaw. He was constantly haunting Françoise, and beseeching her to yield again. He'd soon let them see, he said, if he couldn't get a child, and a big one, too! His lustful desire was now heightened by anger. But the girl was always ready with some fresh reason for putting him off. She had no great dislike for him, it is true, she simply had no desire for him, that was all; and, indeed, she must have been completely free from all desire whatever not to have given way and surrendered herself when she fell into his arms behind a hedge, still flushed and angered by one of Buteau's onslaughts. Oh, the filthy swine! She always spoke of him as a filthy swine, boiling over with passion and excitement; but growing suddenly cold and calm again when Jean tried to profit by the opportunity. "No, no!" she cried. She felt ashamed at the thought of it. One day, when he pressed her very closely, she told him that he must wait a little longer, till the evening of their wedding-day. This was the first time that she had said anything that could be interpreted into an engagement, for she had hitherto always avoided giving Jean a definite answer when he asked her to be his wife. After that it was taken for granted that he should marry her, but not until she was of age, and became entitled to her property, in a position to demand the rendering of accounts. This, Jean now felt, was the most prudent course: he advised the girl to be as patient as she could in the meantime, and he ceased to

worry her with his importunities, except at times when the idea of a spree was strong within him. Françoise, feeling easy and tranquil at the thought of a promise which was not to be redeemed for a long time, contented herself by grasping his hands so as to make him desist, and gazing at him with her pretty, beseeching eyes, the look of which seemed to say that she did not wish to risk having a child unless its father was her husband.

Though Buteau had now satisfied himself that she was not in the family-way, he was seized with a fresh fear that she might become so if she saw anything more of Jean. He was still greatly bothered about the latter, for folks told him on all sides that Jean had vowed he would get Françoise with child. So Buteau now exercised unremitting surveillance over his sister-in-law from morning till night, forcing her to work every single minute of the day, keeping her near-by under threat of a hiding, just as though she had been some beast of burden which could not be trusted to itself for a moment. This was a great torture for the girl. Either her brother-in-law or her sister was continually behind her, and she could not so much as go to the yard without being followed by a spying eye. At night they locked her up in her bedroom; one evening, after a quarrel, she even found the shutter of her little window secured by a padlock. In spite of all their strict surveillance, however, she managed now and then to make her escape, and upon her return there were very violent scenes, the girl having to submit to the most disgusting questions, and sometimes even to examinations of her person, Buteau seizing hold of her by the shoulders while his wife partially undressed her and scrutinized her. All this brought her upon easier terms with Jean, and she made several appointments with him, taking a pleasure in thwarting her tormentors. She might even have yielded to her lover, if she had known that Buteau and Lise were hiding behind them watching. At all events, she again repeated her promise, that come what might, she would certainly be his in time; and she swore to him in the most solemn way that Buteau had lied when he boasted that he slept with both the sisters. He had said that,

she continued, from mere braggartism, and in the hope of bringing about a state of affairs which did not exist. Jean, who had previously been much tormented on this score, was quite satisfied with Françoise's explanation, and felt much easier in mind. As they parted they kissed each other affectionately; and from this time forward the girl took the young man for her confidant and adviser, trying to see him as often as possible, and doing nothing without his sanction and approbation; while he, on his side, now made no further attempts upon her, but treated her like a comrade whose interests were identical with his own.

Every time now that she ran to meet him behind a wall, the conversation was of a similar kind. The girl excitedly tore open her bodice or pulled up her sleeves.

"See!" she exclaimed; "just look where that swine has been pinching me again!"

Then Jean would look at her flesh, remaining quite calm and unimpassioned.

"He shall be made to pay for it! You must show it to the women about here. But don't try to do anything to avenge yourself just at present. By-and-bye we will have justice, when we have got the power on our side."

"And that sister of mine," continued Françoise, "stands by and watches him. Only yesterday, when he sprang upon me, instead of throwing a pail of cold water over him, she never stirred."

"Your sister will have a bad time of it yet with this scoundrel. You needn't be afraid. He can't force you, so long as you refuse to let him have you, and you can get over all the rest. If we keep united, we shall beat him."

Although old Fouan did his best to steer clear of the quarrels, he was always made to suffer from them. If he remained in the house and tried to keep silent he was straightway forced into the row; and if he went out he found himself upon his return in the midst of a scene of confusion, his mere appearance often sufficing to rekindle the flame again. So far, he had never had any real physical suffering, but there now commenced a season of privations, of scantily-doled food, and a suppression of all his little indulgences. The old man was no longer stuffed with grub, as had been the case at first; every time that he cut too thick a slice of bread he was assailed with abuse. What a bottomless pit his belly was! they cried. The less he did, the more he stuffed and swilled! Every quarter, when he went to Cloyes to receive from Monsieur Baillehache the interest on the money realised by the sale of his house, he was strictly watched, and his pockets were emptied on his return. Françoise was reduced to pilfering her sister's coppers to buy him a little tobacco, for she herself was kept equally destitute of pocket-money. The old man also felt very uncomfortable in the damp room where he slept, now that he had broken one of the panes in the window, the aperture having merely been stuffed with straw to save the expense of a new piece of glass. Oh, those beastly children! he moaned; they were all equally barbarous! He growled and grumbled from morning till night, and bitterly regretted having left the Delhommes, sick at heart at now finding himself so much worse off than before. However, he concealed his feelings as far as possible, and it was only his involuntary exclamations that testified to their existence, for he knew that Fanny had asserted that he would return and ask her on his knees to take him back again. That remark made it impossible for him to return; it would sear his heart for ever, like a bar of iron that he could never remove. He would rather die of hunger and indignation with the Buteaus, so he told himself, than return and humble himself before the Delhommes.

One day as Fouan was returning from Cloyes, where he had been to receive his dividends from the notary, he sat down to rest on the slope of a dry ditch. Hyacinthe, who happened to be prowling about the neighbourhood examining the rabbit holes, observed the old man deeply absorbed in counting a number of five-franc pieces in his handkerchief. He immediately stooped down and crawled along in silence till he got close up to his father. As he lay there, concealed from sight, he was much surprised to see Fouan carefully knotting up a considerable sum of money, as much, probably, as eighty francs. Hyacinthe's eyes glistened at the sight, and his wolfish teeth were bared in a quiet smile. The idea of a secret hoard at once returned to his mind. The old man evidently had some secret investments, the dividends of which he received every quarter, taking advantage of his visits to Monsieur Baillehache to do so without any one being the wiser.

Hyacinthe's first impulse was to put on a piteous air and beg for twenty francs. On second thoughts, however, this seemed too paltry a scheme, and, thinking of a better plan, he glided away as noiselessly as he had come, with all the sinuous suppleness of a snake. Thus Fouan, who had now set off again, did not feel the least suspicion when, a hundred yards further on, he met his son, who seemed merely to be on his way back to Rognes. They walked on together and talked. The father fell foul of the Buteaus, who were destitute of all human feeling, and whom he accused of starving him to death. Then the son, with a filial, sympathetic air, his eyes damp with emotion, offered to rescue his father from these wretches by taking him to live in his own house. Why shouldn't he come? he asked. There was no worrying or hardship there; they led a merry life from morning till night. La Trouille cooked for two now, and she could just as easily cook for three. And fine cookery hers was whenever there was any money.

Astonished by his son's offer, and overcome with a feeling of vague uneasiness, Fouan shook his head in token of refusal. No, no, indeed. At

his age a man could not flit about in that sort of way from one house to another, changing his mode of life every year.

"Very well, father; but think the matter over. I am quite sincere in my offer. My place will always be open to you. When you have had enough of those filthy scamps, come and live with me."

Hyacinthe then went off, perplexed and wondering, asking himself how his father spent his income, for he unquestionably had one. A heap of money like that coming in four times a year must amount to a nice sum--at least three hundred francs. If he did not spend the cash he must be hoarding it up somewhere. It was clearly a matter to be investigated. It must be a really magnificent hoard by this time!

That day--a mild, damp October day it was--when Fouan returned home, Buteau claimed the thirty-seven francs and a-half which the old man had received, as was usual, every quarter since the sale of his house. It had been agreed that Buteau should receive this money, as well as the two hundred francs paid yearly by the Delhommes, on account of the old man's board and lodging. That day, however, a couple of five-franc pieces had got mixed up with those which the old man had secured in his handkerchief; and when, after turning out his pockets, he only produced twenty-seven francs and a-half, his son burst into a violent fit of rage, treating him as though he were a thief, and accusing him of having frittered away the missing ten francs in drink and disgraceful dissipation. The old father, in a state of great consternation, and keeping his hand upon his handkerchief, full of alarm lest it should be examined, stammered out excuses, and swore that he must have lost the money in pulling out his handkerchief to blow his nose. Again the house was topsy-turvy until night.

What had put Buteau into such a savage temper was, that while bringing his harrow back he had seen Jean and Françoise hurrying away behind a wall. The girl, who had gone out on the pretence of getting some grass

for her cows, had not yet returned, for she knew what kind of reception awaited her. The night was already falling, and Buteau, in a furious rage, went out every minute into the yard, and even on to the road, to see if the hussy were coming back. He swore at the top of his voice, and poured out a torrent of filthy language, without observing old Fouan, who was sitting on the stone bench, calming himself after the row, and enjoying the warm softness of the air, which made that sunny October like a spring month.

The sound of clogs was now heard coming up the slope, and Françoise made her appearance, bending double, for her shoulders were laden with an enormous bundle of grass, which she had tied up in an old cloth. She was panting and perspiring, almost hidden beneath her burden.

"So here you are, you filthy hussy!" cried Buteau. "You'll soon find out your mistake if you imagine you can make a fool of me, and go off with your lover for a couple of hours at a stretch, when there's work to be done here!"

Then he knocked her over on to the bundle of grass, which had fallen down, and threw himself upon her, just as Lise came out of the house to rave, in her turn, at the girl.

"Ah, you dirty jade," she cried, "let me get at you and I'll kick you. Have you no shame at all?"

Buteau had already firmly seized hold of the girl by her petticoats. His outbursts of rage always turned into sharp desire. While he attacked her he growled, nearly choking, with his face empurpled and swollen by the rush of blood.

"You damned cat!" he sputtered out, "I'll have my turn now! Heaven's lightning sha'n't prevent me!"

Then there began a furious struggle. Old Fouan could not see very well in the darkness, but he was able to observe that Lise was standing there,

looking on, without making any attempt to interfere, while her husband struggled and fought with Françoise, over whom he sprawled. In the end, however, the girl managed to shake him off.

"You swine! You filthy swine!" she cried, in a panting voice, "you haven't succeeded, and you never shall--no, never! never!"

Then she strode up to Lise and addressed her in taunting triumph. Her sister was just silencing her by a heavy blow on the mouth, when old Fouan, having sprung up from his seat, quite disgusted and horrified at what he had seen, rushed forward, brandishing his stick.

"You filthy brutes, both of you!" he cried; "can't you leave the girl alone? There's been more than enough of this!"

Lights were now seen in the neighbouring houses. All these goings-on were beginning to make people feel anxious, so Buteau hurriedly drove his father and Françoise into the kitchen, where the candlelight showed Laure and Jules crouching in a corner, where they had taken refuge in their terror. Lise also had come in, bewildered and silent ever since the old man had issued out of the darkness. Fouan now addressed himself to her again.

"It was too revolting on your part," he said. "I saw you looking on!"

Buteau now brought down his fist on the table with all his strength.

"Silence!" he cried; "the matter's done with. I'll smash the next one who says another word about it!"

"And if I choose to speak," demanded Fouan, in a quavering voice, "will you smash me?"

"You as soon as another. I'm quite sick of you!"

Françoise bravely came forward between the two men.

"I beg of you not to interfere, uncle. You have seen that I am able to take care of myself."

The old man, however, pushed her aside.

"Leave me alone. At present you are not concerned. It is my business now. Ah, you would smash me, would you, villain?" he cried, raising his stick. "You had better take care that I don't chastise *you*!"

But Buteau quickly snatched the old man's stick from him, and tossed it under the dresser. Then, with a wicked look in his leering eyes, he planted himself straight in front of Fouan, and spoke to him cheek-by-jowl.

"Will you just leave me alone, eh? Do you think I mean to tolerate your airs? No, no. Just look at me if you want to know who I am."

Both the men stood silently confronting each other for a moment or two, glaring fiercely, as though they hoped to cow each other by their glance. The son, since the division of the property, had grown stouter and stood more solidly on his legs, and his jaws seemed to project further from his bull-dog-shaped skull, with its narrow, retreating brow; while the father, worn out by his sixty years of toil, had shrunk still further, his stoop increasing slightly day by day. His loins seemed broken, and his body bent forward towards the ground. His huge nose was the only feature which retained its pristine shape and proportions.

"Who you are?" retorted Fouan. "I know it only too well. I begot you."

Buteau sniggered.

"Ah, you shouldn't have done so!" he replied. "Everybody his turn. There's your blood in me, you know, and I hate to be interfered with. So once more I tell you, leave me alone, or it will be worse for you!"

"For yourself, you mean. I never spoke to *my* father in such a way."

"Oh, come now, that's a stiff 'un! Why, you would have killed your father if he hadn't died before you had time!"

"You lie, you filthy swine! And, by the Lord God, you shall unsay that this very minute!"

Françoise, for the second time, now tried to interpose; and Lise herself, terrified by this fresh outbreak, made a similar effort. But the two men thrust the women aside, and confronted each other, breathing violently in each other's faces, as they stood there, father against son, boiling over with that spirit of overweening despotism which the one had bequeathed to the other.

Fouan wanted to exalt himself by attempting to regain his old absolute supremacy as head of the family. For half a century, in the days when he still retained his property and authority, his wife, his children, and his cattle had trembled at his word.

"Say that you have lied, you filthy swine; say that you have lied, or I will make you dance, as surely as that candle is burning there!"

Raising his hand, he threatened his son with that gesture which had once made all his family sink to the ground.

"Say that you have lied!"

Whenever Buteau in his younger days had felt a buffet coming he had raised his elbow to shield himself, his teeth chattering the while; but now he merely shrugged his shoulders with an air of insolent contempt.

"You are vastly mistaken. You imagine that you frighten me," he said. "It was all very well when you were the master to treat us like that!"

"I am the master--the father!"

"Nonsense, you old joker; you are nothing at all. Ah, so you won't leave me alone, won't you?"

Then seeing that the old man's unsteady arm was descending to deal a blow, he seized hold of it, and crushed it in his rough grasp.

"What a pig-headed fellow you are!" he cried. "Can't you get it into that old noddle of yours that no one cares a fig about you now? Do you suppose that you are good for anything at all? You are so much expense, and that's all! When a man has outlived his time, and passed his land over to others, he ought to be content with chewing his grub quietly, and keep from being a nuisance to other folks."

He shook his father to emphasise what he was saying; and then, giving the old man a final shake, he hurled him backwards, trembling and quaking, upon a chair near the window. And there the old man remained, half choking, for a moment, conquered and humiliated by the complete loss of his old authority. It was all over with him. He counted for nothing at all, now that he had stripped himself of his property.

Complete silence reigned in the kitchen, and all remained in embarrassed inactivity. The children had scarcely dared to breathe for fear of receiving a cuffing. Presently, however, work was begun again as if nothing unusual had happened.

"Is that grass going to be left out in the yard?" asked Lise.

"I'll go and put it in the cow-house," replied Françoise.

When she had returned, and after they had dined, Buteau, who was quite incorrigible, thrust his hand into her bodice, to hunt for a flea which she said was biting her. She no longer showed any signs of annoyance, and, indeed, she joked about it.

Fouan had never moved, but still remained stiff and silent in his dark corner. Two big tears were rolling down his cheeks. He called to mind the evening when he had broken with the Delhommes; and now again on this evening he experienced the same bitterness and humiliation at

finding himself no longer the master; the same anger which had then made him obstinately refuse to eat. They had called to him three times, but he refused to join in the meal. Presently he sprang up, and went off to his bedroom. The next morning, as soon as it was light, he left the Buteaus, to take up his quarters with Hyacinthe.

PART IV. — CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER III.

Hyacinthe was a very windy individual, and he was constantly going off in explosions, which kept the house in a lively state, for he never allowed one of these reports to pass without indulging in some facetious jest. He had a contempt for your timid little reports, suppressed as much as possible, and sounding as though they were ashamed of themselves. He himself never let off aught but loud detonations, crisp and crackling, like gun shots; and every time, as he raised his leg with a gesture of self-satisfied complacency, he summoned his daughter in a tone of urgent command and with an air of serious gravity.

"Come here, you troll, come here at once!"

As soon as the girl hurried forward, the explosion was allowed to take place, going off with such a sharp vibrating report that La Trouille quite started at the noise it made.

"Quick, run after it and catch it, and see if it's come out straight!"

At other times when she approached him, he would give her his hand.

"Pull hard, now, you jade! Make it go off with a good crack!"

Then, when the explosion took place with all the sputter and row of a tightly jammed charge, he exclaimed:

"Ah, that's a hard one! but I'm much obliged to you all the same."

Then at other times he would hold an imaginary gun to his shoulder and pretend to take aim carefully; and when the explosion had taken place, he would cry out:

"Run off and retrieve, you lazy bitch!"

La Trouille used to laugh till she fell down on her buttocks, almost choked. It was a continual fresh and ever increasing merriment. Used as she was to the sport, the final explosion, with its comical eruptive noisiness, never failed to shake her with laughter. Oh, what a funny fellow he was, this father of hers! Sometimes he would talk of a lodger who had fallen into arrears with his rent, and whom he was obliged to eject; at other times he would turn round with an air of surprise, and bow gravely, as though the table had wished him good-morning; and at others he would trumpet out a series of salutes for his reverence the priest, his worship the mayor, and the ladies. It seemed almost, as though the fellow's belly was a sort of musical-box, from which he could extract any sound he chose; and one day, when the company at The Jolly Ploughman at Cloyes wagered a glass that he could not let off six discharges one after another, he victoriously won the bet. This accomplishment of his had become a source of honour and glory. La Trouille was quite proud of him; and, as soon as ever he raised his leg, she began to wriggle. She was constantly admiring him, and his prowess inspired her with mingled consternation and affection.

On the very evening of the day when old Fouan took up his quarters at the Château, as the old burrow in which the poacher buried himself was called, at the very first meal which the girl served to her father and grandfather, standing behind them in the respectful attitude of a servant, there were loud and merry explosions. The old man had given his son five francs, and a pleasant odour spread about--that of the kidney-beans and veal and onions, which the girl knew so well how to cook. As she was bringing in the beans she almost broke the dish in her excitement. For, before sitting down to table, Hyacinthe let off three sharp, regular reports.

"The salute for the feast!" he exclaimed. "Now we can begin!"

Then, bracing himself up, he gave vent to a fourth single discharge, very loud and odoriferous.

"That's for those brutes, the Buteaus!" he cried. "Let them stuff it down their throats!"

Fouan, who had maintained a gloomy demeanour ever since his arrival, now suddenly broke out into a snigger, and signified his approbation by nodding his head. This seemed to have put him at his ease. He, too, in his time, had been noted as a joker, and his children had grown up quietly at home in the midst of the paternal bombardments. He rested his elbows on the table, and gave himself up to a pleasant feeling of enjoyable comfort as he sat opposite that hulking rascal Hyacinthe, who gazed at him in return with his damp eyes and his air of jovial scampishness.

"Ah! God Almighty, dad. We'll enjoy ourselves. You shall see my dodge. I'll undertake to make you merry. Will you be any better off when you're underground with the moles, for having denied yourself a tit-bit up here?"

Though he had been a sober man all his life, Fouan, who now felt a craving to drown his worries, replied in the same strain:

"Well, yes, indeed, it's better to eat up everything rather than leave any for the others. Here's your good health, my lad!"

La Trouille now served the veal and onions. There was a momentary silence, and Hyacinthe, to prevent the conversation dropping, let fly a prolonged flourish, which passed through the straw seat of his chair with all the varied modulations of a human cry. Then he immediately turned to his daughter with a gravely interrogative air.

"What did you say?" he asked her.

She could make no reply, but was obliged to sit down and hold her sides. She was still more upset, however, by some final facetiousness between

the father and son, after the veal and the cheese had been cleared away, and they began to smoke and help themselves to the bottle of brandy which had been placed on the table. They sat silently for some time, boozy with drink.

Presently, Hyacinthe slowly raised his leg, and let off a loud explosion. Then looking towards the door:

"Come in!" he cried.

Fouan, who felt himself challenged, and who had for a long time past been regretting his loss of form, now once more regained the accomplishment of his youthful days, and, raising his leg, he also broke out into a noisy explosion.

"Here I come!" he exclaimed.

Then they both clapped their hands, slobbering and laughing. They enjoyed it immensely. But it was too much for La Trouille, who had fallen down on the floor, and was so shaken with wild spasms of laughter that she, too, gave vent to a slight explosion, but soft and musical, like a note from a fife in comparison with the sonorous, organ-like sounds of the two men.

Hyacinthe sprang up with an air of indignant protest, and stretched out his arm with a tragical gesture of authority:

"Out of the room with you, you dirty sow. Out of the room at once, you stink-pot! I'll teach you to show proper respect to your father and grandfather!"

He had never tolerated this familiarity on her part. It was only for people of a certain age. He cleared the air as it were with his outstretched hand, and pretended to be nearly choked by the little flute-like sound. His own, and his father's, he said, only smelt of gunpowder. Then, as the culprit, who had turned very red, and was quite upset by her forgetfulness of

etiquette, hung back and showed a disinclination to leave, he, himself, cast her out of the room with an energetic shove.

"Go and shake your petticoats, you filthy sow, and don't venture in here again for another hour, till you've got yourself well ventilated!" said he.

That day was the commencement of a careless life full of jovial merriment. The girl's bedroom was given up to the grandfather. It was one of the divisions of the old cellar, cut off by a wooden partition. La Trouille herself, relinquishing her room with the greatest willingness, now took up her quarters at the far end of the cellar, in an excavation in the rock, which led, so the local legends said, into some immense subterranean caverns which had been blocked up by land-slips. Unfortunately this fox-hole of a Château was getting more deeply buried every winter by the action of the heavy rains, which flowed down the steep slope of the hill and swept the earth and pebbles along with them. The old ruin, with its ancient foundations and rough repairs, would have disappeared altogether if the aged lime-trees that had been planted over it had not kept the stones together by their thick, spreading roots. However, when the spring-time came round it was a charmingly fresh little spot, a kind of grotto lying hid beneath a tangle of briars and hawthorns. The sweet-briar that grew in front of the window was starred over with pink blossoms, and the door was wreathed with a drapery of wild honey-suckle, which had to be lifted like a curtain before one could enter the place.

It was by no means every evening that La Trouille was called upon to cook kidney beans and veal and onions. This only happened when the old man had been induced to part with a five-franc piece. Hyacinthe never attempted to obtain the money by any show of force or harshness; he worked upon his father's love of good living and his paternal feelings to despoil him of his money. There was always a good deal of feasting at the commencement of each month, when Fouan received his sixteen

francs' allowance from the Delhommes; and every quarter, when the notary paid him his dividend of thirty-seven francs and a-half, there was the most uproarious junketing. At first the old man, clinging to his ingrained habits of parsimony, would only hand out half a franc at a time, expecting that amount to last for a long while; but, by-and-bye, he gradually surrendered himself to his scamp of a son, who flattered him and wheedled him, and sometimes so worked upon his feelings by his extraordinary stories that he was dissolved in tears, and easily prevailed upon to part with two and three francs. He, too, then took to stuffing himself with food, saying that it was best to enjoy one's-self while one could.

In justice to Hyacinthe, however, it must be said that he fairly divided everything with the old man; and, if he robbed him, he also kept him amused. The lazy fellow, with his knavishness, was, at all events, a better sort than Buteau, and indeed he often boasted to that effect. At first, when his belly was delighted with fat living, he dropped all thought even about his father's supposed hoard, and did not make the least attempt to discover anything concerning it. Old Fouan was quite free to do as he pleased so long as he cheerfully provided the means for their festive junketings. It was only during the second fortnight of the month, when the old man's pockets were quite empty, that his son indulged in speculations as to where the money of which he had caught a glimpse could be hidden away. He could not get hold of a copper of it. He grumbled at La Trouille who served him dish after dish of potatoes without butter; and, as he felt a painful void in his belly, he reflected that it was really most idiotic for them to remain on such short commons simply for the sake of hoarding up some money. It would certainly be necessary to unearth that hoard some day and have a fling with it.

Still, even on the evenings when he had fared most wretchedly, and when he felt utterly weary and tired out, he bravely struggled against circumstances, and was as genial and hilarious as if he had just made an

excellent dinner: restoring the general gaiety by a cannonade of heavy guns.

"There, that's for the turnips, La Trouille, and that's for the butter!" he cried.

Fouan, too, kept brisk and cheerful even during those painful times--the last days of the month--for the daughter and the father then scoured the country for the means of keeping the pot boiling, and the old man, who was gradually induced to join them, ended by employing his time in the same way. He had become angry when he first saw La Trouille come home with a fowl which she had fished up from over a wall with a piece of looped string; but on a second occasion she made him shake with laughter by attaching a hook baited with some meat to the end of a string, which she concealed among the branches of a tree, allowing the baited hook to dangle down in front of a troop of ducks who were taking a walk. One of them suddenly rushed forward, and swallowed meat, hook, and string at a bolt. Then it immediately rose in the air, being sharply pulled up by the girl, before it was able to utter a single quack. This was not a very honest proceeding certainly; but they argued that animals which lived out-of-doors belonged to those who could catch them, and that so long as one did not steal money, one's honesty could not be impeached. From that time the old man took some interest in the adventures of the young marauder, who performed some scarcely credible feats, such as stealing a sack of potatoes and then getting the owner of them to help her to carry them home; milking cows out at pasture into a bottle; and sinking the laundresses' linen to the bottom of the Aigre by loading it with stones, and then going and fishing it up again during the night.

She was continually to be met on the roads, her geese affording her a pretext for her perpetual wanderings, and she would sit for hours on the slope of a ditch on the look-out for an opportunity, with a sleepy, innocent air, as though she had not a thought in the world beyond

attending to her geese. She often even made use of these latter as watch-dogs, the gander giving her notice, by his hissing, of the inopportune approach of any one who might surprise her at work. She was now eighteen years old, but she was scarcely any taller than she had been at twelve; being still as slight and supple as a hazel-branch, with her kid-like head, her green eyes, and her large mouth, twisted towards the left. Her little, childish bosom had grown hard beneath her father's old blouses, without in any way developing. She was more like a boy than a girl, and seemed to care about nothing save her geese. However, although she scoffed contemptuously at men, this did not prevent her, when she got larking with some lad of her own age, from ending with a little amatory amusement, almost as a matter of course, for it seemed to her quite natural, and no consequences ever followed. She was lucky enough to keep clear of the tramps and vagrants that passed along the roads, for grown-up men, finding nothing tempting about her, left her alone. As her grandfather said, amused and won over by her quaint ways, apart from the fact that she was given to thieving and didn't care much about decency, she was a rum sort of girl, more decorous and less disreputable than might have been expected.

Fouan found especial amusement in accompanying Hyacinthe in his prowling rambles about the fields. Every peasant, even the most honest, is at heart a poacher, and the old man took a deep interest in the setting of snares, and the laying of lines, and in all the various other ingenious devices of this campaign of ruses, this continual warfare carried on against gamekeepers and gendarmes. As soon as the laced hats and yellow shoulder belts of the latter were seen emerging from a lane and making their way through a corn field, the father and son, lying on some sloping bank, pretended to be asleep. Presently, however the son would creep on his hands and knees along the ditch, and take up his traps; while the father, with his honest elderly countenance, would keep a careful watch on the receding hats and shoulder belts.

There were some splendid trout in the Aigre, which they sold for forty and fifty sous apiece to a dealer at Châteaudun, but the fish were so artful that it was necessary for the men to lie flat on their stomachs on the grass watching them for hours. They often, too, sallied out as far as the Loir, from whose slimy bed some very fine eels were to be obtained. When his lines brought him nothing, Hyacinthe had a very simple plan for securing a haul. During the night he plundered the fish-preserves of the river-side residents. Fishing, however, he only indulged in as an occasional amusement; the pursuit of game was his absorbing passion. He ravaged the neighbourhood for miles around, and no prey was too humble for him. He would snare quails as well as partridges, and even starlings as well as larks. He seldom fired a gun, for the report of firearms carried too far over a level expanse. There was not a single covey of partridges that ever rose from the clover and lucern without his recognising it, and he knew perfectly well when and where he could easily lay his hands upon the young birds, drowsy with sleep and soaked with the night-dew. He was extremely clever in liming twigs for the capture of larks and quails, and he hurled stones with a deadly aim at the dense flocks of starlings which the high winds of autumn brought into the district. For twenty years past he had been exterminating the game of the neighbourhood, and there was now scarcely a rabbit to be seen amongst the brushwood about the Aigre, a fact which extremely angered the local sportsmen. It was only the hares that escaped him. There were very few of them, however, and what there were scampered safe from his pursuit over the open country, where it was too risky to follow them. He smacked his lips at the thought of the few hares which were to be found on the La Borderie land, and every now and then he risked being sent to gaol, by sending one rolling over with a shot from his gun. When Fouan saw him going out with his gun, he always refused to accompany him. It was too hazardous and foolish, he said; he would certainly get caught one day or other.

And caught he did get, as was only natural. Farmer Hourdequin, exasperated by the destruction of his game, had given the most stringent orders to Bécu, and the latter annoyed at never being able to catch any one, had determined to pass his nights on a stack and keep watch. One morning, just at daybreak, the report of a gun, the flame of which flashed in front of his face, awoke him with a start. It was Hyacinthe, on the look-out behind the stack, who had just killed a hare at short range.

"Ah, God Almighty! it's you, is it?" cried the rural constable, seizing hold of the gun which the other had laid down so as to pick up the hare. "Ah! you scamp, I ought to have guessed it was you!"

They were boon companions at the taverns, but in the fields they could not meet without danger; the one being constantly on the point of arresting the other, and the latter being determined to wring his neck.

"Well, yes, it's I!" replied Hyacinthe; "and I don't care a fig for you. Come, give me my gun back!"

Bécu was already regretting his capture. He generally turned to the right whenever he saw Hyacinthe on his left. What was the good of having a bother with a friend? he used to say. But this time his duty was evident, and it was impossible for him to close his eyes. And, besides, when a man is taken red-handed, the least that can be expected of him is to be civil!

"Your gun, you scamp! No, I'm going to keep that and take it to the mayor. Now, you be quiet, and don't try to play any of your tricks, or I'll let you have the other barrel in your guts!"

Hyacinthe, deprived of his gun and in a great rage, thought for a moment of making a spring at the other's throat. However, when he saw him directing his steps towards the village, he followed him quietly, still holding the hare dangling from his hand. The two men walked on for nearly a mile without speaking, but casting fierce furtive glances at each

other. A violent scene seemed inevitable every moment, though both of them were regretting what had happened more and more acutely every minute. How unfortunate it was that they had come across each other in that way!

As they passed behind the church, at a couple of steps from the Château, the poacher made a last effort.

"I say, old fellow, don't be stupid; come inside, and have a glass."

"No, I must go and lay an information," replied the rural constable stiffly.

He was obstinate, like an old soldier whose orders are his only law. However, he stopped, and, as his companion took hold of his arm and tried to induce him to come with him, he ended by saying:

"Well, if you've got pen and ink, it will make no difference, I don't care where the statement is drawn up, whether in your house or elsewhere, so long as it is drawn up somewhere."

When Bécu arrived at Hyacinthe's abode, the sun was just rising. Old Fouan, who was already smoking his pipe at the door, guessed what had happened, and began to feel very uncomfortable, the more so, as matters assumed a serious aspect. Some ink and a rusty old pen were hunted up, and the constable, spreading out his elbows, and assuming an air of deep thought, began to rack his brains for suitable phrases. In the meantime, La Trouille, at a word from her father, brought a quart of wine and three glasses; and by the time Bécu had got to his fifth line, he accepted a bumper feeling exhausted by his struggle with the complicated statement of facts. Then the situation gradually became less strained. A second quart of wine was produced, and then a third. Two hours later, the three men were talking together in loud and friendly voices. They were all very drunk, and they had quite forgotten the incident of the morning.

"You blessed cuckold!" suddenly cried Hyacinthe to Bécu, "you know that I do as I like with your wife."

This was quite true. Since the day of the local fête he had tumbled Bécu's wife in quiet corners, looking upon her as an elderly person with whom no particular show of delicacy was necessary. Bécu, however, whose wine had made him irritable, now lost his temper. Although he was able to tolerate the poacher's relations with his wife when he was sober, the mention of them wounded his feelings when he was drunk.

"You filthy swine!" he bellowed out, brandishing an empty bottle.

Then he hurled the bottle, which broke against the wall, just missing Hyacinthe, who went on with his maudlin chatter, smiling a weak, tipsy smile. To appease the cuckold, they settled to remain there together, and eat the hare at once. Whenever La Trouille cooked a "civet," a pleasant odour spread from one end of Rognes to the other. It was a rough sort of feast, which lasted all day. They were still at table, sucking the bones, when darkness closed in. Then they lighted a couple of candles, and still sat on. Fouan found a couple of two-franc pieces, and sent the girl off to buy a quart of brandy. The men were still sipping their liquor after the whole village had fallen asleep. As Hyacinthe's fumbling fingers were groping about for something with which he could light his pipe, they came across the unfinished report, which was lying on the corner of the table, stained with wine and gravy.

"Ah, it's true, we ought to get this finished!" he stammered out, his belly shaking with tipsy laughter.

As he looked at the paper he tried to think of some facetious trick by which he might show his deep contempt both for the report and the law. Then he suddenly raised his leg, and, slipping the paper underneath him, he let off on the face of it a heavy, sonorous discharge, one of those explosions which, he used to say, came from a tightly-loaded mortar.

"There, it's signed for you now!"

They all began to laugh merrily, even Bécu himself. There was no dullness that night at the Château!

It was about this time that Hyacinthe made a friend. As he went to hide one evening in a ditch till the gendarmes he had espied passed by, he found it already occupied by another man, who, like himself, was desirous of escaping observation. They began to talk. The stranger seemed a pleasant fellow. His name, he said, was Leroi, but he was generally known as Canon. He was a journeyman carpenter, and had left Paris some two years before on account of certain little incidents in his career which had had troublesome consequences, preferring to live in the country, and to wander from village to village, staying a week here and a week there, and going about to the different farms to offer his services whenever patrons were scarce. Trade, he said, was shocking bad just now, and he had taken to begging on the high roads as he tramped along. He had been living on stolen vegetables and fruit, hustled about from pillar to post, and was only too happy whenever he was able to get a night's lodging behind a hay-rick.

It must be said, however, that his appearance was not calculated to inspire any confidence. His clothes were all in rags, and he was very dirty and very ugly, bearing evident marks of a life of wretchedness and vice. His face, fringed with a scanty growth of hair, was so fleshless and pallid that the women shut their doors and windows at the mere sight of him. What was worse, however, than his appearance was his conversation. He talked about cutting the throats of all the rich folks, and of having, some fine day, a glut of licentious pleasure with the wives and wine of other people. He let fall all kinds of threats in a tragic voice, clenching his fist, and launching out into wild revolutionary theories which he had picked up in the slums of Paris. He ranted, for instance, in the most virulent language about the rights of the people, and their coming enforcement,

his flood of words quite frightening and dazing the peasants who heard him. During the last two years the inhabitants of the farms had been accustomed to see him make his appearance at night-fall asking for a corner and a bundle of straw for a bed. When he sat down by the fire he quite froze every one's blood by his terrible words. Then the next morning he went off, to re-appear again a week later on, at the same gloomy twilight hour, and with the same prophecies of approaching ruin and death. And it was because his gloomy and uncanny appearance about the neighbourhood caused so much fear, and excited so much angry indignation, that he was now always sent about his business as soon as possible.

He and Hyacinthe, however, took to each other at once.

"Ah," cried the latter, "what a mistake I made in not cutting every throat in Cloyes in '48! Come along, old fellow, and let's have a glass together!"

He then took Canon off to the Château, where he made him sleep that night, inspired with more and more respectful admiration for the tramp the longer he listened to him. He considered him to be a man of superior mind, one who knew what he was talking about, with his plans for reorganising society at a single swoop. Two days afterwards, Canon went away. A fortnight later, however, he appeared again in the twilight, and after that he constantly dropped in at the Château--eating and sleeping there as though he were at home, and swearing each time he came that the well-to-do classes would be swept clean out of existence before another six weeks had gone by. One night when the father was out poaching, Canon made an attempt to ravish the daughter; but La Trouille, scarlet with shame and boiling over with indignation, scratched him and bit him so severely that he was obliged to let her go.

Fouan was no fonder of Canon than La Trouille was. He accused him of being an idle good-for-nothing, and of trying to bring about a state of general rapine and bloodshed; and, whenever the vagrant was in the

house, the old man grew quite gloomy and silent, and went out of doors to smoke his pipe. There was another matter, too, which was disturbing his life again, and causing an increased disagreement between himself and his son, indisposing him for all his former hilarious merriment. Hitherto Hyacinthe, in parting with his share of the land, had never disposed of it to any one save his brother Buteau or his brother-in-law Delhomme, to whom indeed he had sold the greater portion, a little bit at a time. Fouan had always given his signature, as was necessary, without saying a word in opposition. So long as the land remained in the family, he had no objection to its being sold. But now a troublesome question arose about the last field, upon which the poacher had borrowed money. The mortgagee was threatening to put it up to auction, as he had not received a copper of the interest that had been agreed upon. Monsieur Baillehache had been consulted, and had declared that the field would have to be sold, and sold at once, if they did not wish to be ruined by law costs. Buteau and Delhomme, unfortunately, refused to buy it, being angrily indignant with the old man for allowing himself to be preyed upon by that rascal his elder son; indeed they had sternly resolved to do nothing for him as long as he remained where he was. The consequence was that the field was now to be sold by order of the authorities; writs and stamped paper were already flying about. It would be the first piece of land that had gone out of the family. The old man could get no sleep at nights for thinking of it. This land which his father and grandfather had looked at with such longing eyes, and had worked so hard to obtain; this land which, when acquired, had been guarded as jealously as a wife, was now being frittered away in law-costs, passing into the possession of another, some neighbour, for half its value! The old man groaned with rage, and he was so heart-broken that he sobbed like a child. Oh, that scamp of a poacher!

There were now several terrible scenes between the father and son. The latter, however, never replied, but allowed his father to exhaust himself

in reproaches and lamentations. The old man would stand there vociferating and unburdening himself of his wrathful indignation in the most tragic fashion.

"Yes, you are a murderer! It is just as though you had taken up a knife and sliced off a bit of my flesh! Such a splendid field as it is! There isn't a finer anywhere! A field where anything will grow by just being planted! What a poor miserable creature you must be to allow it to go to another! Ah, good heavens, to another! The very thought of it going to an outsider makes my blood turn! And it's all caused by your cursed drunkenness! You have drunk the land away, you filthy, swilling swine!"

Then, as the old man almost choked with anger, and nearly sank down from sheer exhaustion, his son quickly answered:

"It's really very foolish of you, dad, to worry yourself in this way. Fly at me as much as you like, if it relieves you in any way at all; but you really ought to take things more philosophically. One can't eat the land, you know! You'd pull a very wry face if any one served you with a dish of soil, wouldn't you? I've borrowed money on it, because five-franc pieces are the crop it best suits me to raise on it. If there's a surplus of a few crowns, we'll drink them! That's the sensible way to look at things. We shall have more than enough of the soil when we're dead!"

On one point, however, father and son were perfectly in accord, and that point was their common detestation of Vimeux the bailiff--a shabby little fellow who was entrusted with the discharge of such duties as his colleague of Cloyes refused to undertake, and who had ventured one evening to come and leave a formal notification of judgment at the Château. Vimeux was a very dirty-looking little creature, a bundle of yellow beard and whiskers, from the midst of which there peered forth a red nose and a pair of bleared eyes. He was always dressed in shabby-genteel fashion--a tall hat, black trousers, and a frock-coat, but these garments were most shockingly worn and stained. He was

notorious in the neighbourhood on account of the terrible thrashings he had received from the peasants every time that he had been compelled to serve them with unpleasant documents in places distant from all help and succour. Stories were told about sticks being broken over his shoulders, of his being ducked in ponds, of his being pursued for a couple of miles and kept running at full speed by the continued application of pitchforks; and of a certain sound thrashing that had been administered to him by a mother and her daughter, after his trousers had previously been let down.

On the evening when Vimeux paid his visit to the Château. Hyacinthe was just entering the house with his gun. Old Fouan was sitting on the trunk of a tree smoking his pipe and watching the bailiff's approach.

"See the disgrace you are bringing upon us, you rascal!" the old man growled to his son.

"Just you wait a moment!" returned the poacher.

Vimeux, on catching sight of the gun, came to a standstill some thirty yards away. The whole of his dirty, shabby, black-clothed person quaked with fear.

"Monsieur Hyacinthe," he began in a weak, quavering voice, "I have come about the business you are aware of. I leave this here. Good evening."

He then laid the official document on a stone, and was already hastily retiring, when the poacher called out to him:

"Do you want me to come and teach you politeness, you confounded paper-stainer? Just be good enough to bring that paper to me!"

Then, as the wretched man stood speechless and rooted to the ground with terror, daring neither to advance nor to retreat an inch, the poacher took aim at him with his gun.

"I'll just send you a little bit of lead," he cried, "if you don't make haste and do what I tell you. Look sharp now, take up your paper, and bring it here! Oh, you must come nearer than that; and nearer than that. Hurry along now, you miserable eunuch, or I shall fire!"

Frozen and pale with terror, the bailiff tottered along on his short legs. He cast an imploring glance at old Fouan. But the latter went on quietly smoking his pipe, meditating savagely anent the expenses attaching to the law, and full of bitter rancour against the man who, in the eyes of the peasantry, personified them.

"Come along, or I shall fire! There, that's better now; you have managed to get here at last. Now, give me your paper. No, not in that way, with the tips of your fingers as though you were reluctant to part with it. Give me it politely and cordially. There, that's very nicely done!"

Vimeux, paralysed with fright at the sight of the grinning poacher, stood blinking his eyes and shaking in his shoes at thought of the blow or cuff which he felt sure was coming.

"Now then, turn round!"

The poor fellow knew only too well what this meant, and he remained stock-still, nervously twitching his posterior.

"Turn round, or I'll come and turn you myself!"

The luckless bailiff felt that he could do nothing but submit to his fate; and with a pitiably wretched air he turned himself round, and presented to view his poor little fleshless posterior, as shrunken as that of a half-starved tom-cat. Then the poacher, taking a vigorous spring, brought his foot to bear full on the centre of Vimeux's buttocks, and with such energy that he sent the luckless bailiff reeling over on to his nose fully four yards away. The poor fellow painfully struggled on to his feet again,

and bolted off in a state of abject terror as he heard the poacher yelling after him:

"Look out! I'm going to fire!"

Hyacinthe had indeed raised his gun to his shoulder, but he then contented himself with lifting his leg and letting off such a violent explosion that Vimeux, terrified by the report, fell headlong on to the ground again. This time his black hat fell off, and rolled away amongst the stones. He ran after it, picked it up, and then bolted off faster than before, pursued by a constant cannonade from the poacher, and a jeering accompaniment of noisy laughter which drove the wretched fellow quite crazy. Careering wildly down the slope, looking like some hopping insect, he had got a hundred yards away, but the echoes still repeated the sound of the fusillade. In fact, all the country-side reverberated with it, and there was a final terrific discharge just as the bailiff, who, in the distance, now looked about the size of an ant, disappeared into Rognes. La Trouille, who had hastened out on hearing the noise, lay down on the ground, holding her sides and clucking like a hen; while old Fouan took his pipe out of his mouth so that he might laugh more at his ease.

The following week it was necessary for the old man to make up his mind to give his signature, so that the land might be sold. Monsieur Baillehache had found a purchaser, and it seemed most prudent to follow his advice. It was consequently settled that the father and son should go to Cloyes on the third Saturday in September, the eve of Saint Lubin's Day, which was one of the two fêtes of the town. The old man relied upon getting rid of his son in the midst of the holiday-makers and going to fetch the dividends of his hidden investment, as he had done since July. They were to make the journey both ways on foot.

As Fouan and Hyacinthe were standing before the closed barrier at the level-crossing just outside Cloyes, waiting for a train to pass, they were joined by Buteau and Lise, who drove up in their cart. A violent quarrel

immediately broke out between the two brothers, and they hurled volleys of filthy abuse at each other till the gate was opened; Buteau, as his horse carried him away down the hill on the other side, even turned round, his blouse puffed out by the wind, and hurled behind him a volley of insults which he would have done better to keep to himself.

"Go along with you, you worthless fellow, I am supporting your father!" roared Hyacinthe with all his might, making a speaking-trumpet of his two hands.

Fouan felt very unhappy when he reached Monsieur Baillehache's office in the Rue Grouaise, and the more so as it was full of clients, people who were taking advantage of market-day to transact their business. The old man and his son had to wait for nearly two hours. The scene recalled to Fouan's mind that Saturday when he had decided upon the division of the property. It would have been better if he had hanged himself rather than done that. When the notary at last received them, and the signature had to be affixed, the old man took out his spectacles and wiped them; but his tearful eyes fogged the glasses, and his hand trembled so much that it was necessary to place his fingers on the very spot where he was to inscribe his name, which he proceeded to do, making a lot of blots. It tried him so much that he was now perspiring and trembling, and glancing about him in dazed confusion, just as though he had been undergoing a surgical operation, as if he were a man who, after having a leg amputated, looks about him for the severed limb. Monsieur Baillehache administered a severe lecture to Hyacinthe, and then dismissed them both with a dissertation upon the law. The division of property, so he declared, was immoral, and it would certainly be one day made illegal, to prevent it from over-riding the system of inheritance.

After leaving the notary's, Fouan contrived to give his son the slip in the crowd in the Rue Grande, just by the door of "The Jolly Ploughman." Hyacinthe, indeed, played into his father's hands, and quietly smiled to

himself, for he felt quite sure what the old man's purpose was. Fouan at once made his way to the Rue Beaudonnière, where, in a bright-looking house, with a courtyard and garden, lived Monsieur Hardy, the tax-collector, a stout, jovial person, with a florid face and a carefully-trimmed black beard. He was greatly feared by the peasants, who accused him of upsetting them with his threats. He received his visitors in a narrow office, cut atwain by a balustrade, on one side of which he himself sat, while those who came to see him remained on the other. There were frequently a dozen people there at once, standing crowded together. At the present moment, however, Buteau, who had just come in, happened to be the only person there.

Buteau could never make up his mind to pay his taxes promptly and at once. When he received the demand-note in March he got into a bad temper for a week, and stormed angrily, and in turn, at the land-tax, the head-tax, the tax on personal property, and that on doors and windows. His greatest wrath, however, was poured out upon the growing increase in the total amount, which got more and more every year. Then he waited till he was served with a free summons. This gave him an additional week. Then he paid a twelfth part of the taxes every month, whenever he went to market; and every month all the old torture of mind began over again. He felt quite ill on the eve of paying an instalment, and he went off with his money in as miserable a frame of mind as though he were going to execution. Oh, that damnable government! It robbed everybody!

"Ah, is that you?" Monsieur Hardy exclaimed, cheerily, at sight of him. "I'm glad to see you here, for I was just going to put you to the expense of a summons!"

"That would have capped the business!" snarled Buteau. "But you must understand that I'm not going to pay those six francs increase on the property-tax. It's really most unjust!"

The collector began to laugh.

"What, are you going to begin all that discussion over again? It is always the same old story every month. I have already explained to you that it is obvious that the planting of your meadow by the Aigre must have increased your income. Oh, we know very well what we are about, I can assure you!"

Buteau, however, boiled over with angry remonstrances. His income was increasing in a pretty sort of way, forsooth! His meadow had once measured a couple of acres, but the river had altered its course and robbed him of a great slice of his land, and yet he still was forced to pay the tax on two acres! Was that justice?

Monsieur Hardy quietly replied that he had nothing to do with the survey, and that Buteau must get that altered if he wanted his tax lowered. Then, under the pretence of explaining details to him, he overwhelmed him with a flood of figures and technical terms which were completely unintelligible to an outsider.

"Well, it makes no difference to me whether you pay or not," he said in conclusion, with a bantering smile; "I shall merely have to send the bailiff to you if you don't."

Frightened and abashed, Buteau now quickly cooled down; recognising that, as might lay on his opponent's side, there was no other course for him but to yield. However, the fear which forced him to yield only increased his long-standing spite against the vaguely understood and complicated system of rule to which he was forced to bend--the government--its courts and the staff of officials, all loafing gentlefolks, as he was wont to say. Very reluctantly he drew out his purse with trembling fingers. He had received a large number of coppers in the market, and he fingered every coin before letting go his hold of it. He counted the sum three times over, paying it all in coppers; and the size of the pile gave an additional wrench to his heart-strings. With sad and

troubled eyes he was watching the collector put the money away in the safe, when old Fouan made his appearance.

The old man had not recognised his son from behind, and he was seized with consternation when Buteau turned round.

"Ah, how do you do, Monsieur Hardy?" he then stammered in confusion. "I was passing by, and I thought I'd just come in and wish you good morning. I don't often get a chance of seeing you now."

Buteau, however, was not deceived. He said good morning, and went away as though he were in a hurry, but five minutes later he returned again, to ask some question which he pretended he had forgotten before; and he did this just as the collector was handing Fouan his quarter's dividend, seventy-five francs, in five-franc pieces. Buteau's eyes glittered, but he pretended not to notice what was going on; indeed he carefully avoided looking at his father, and affected not to have seen the old man throw his handkerchief over the coins, and then fish for them, and thrust them down to the bottom of his pocket. This time they both left together: Fouan greatly distressed in mind and casting suspicious glances at his son, while Buteau was in an excellent humour and manifested a sudden renewal of affection for his father. He kept close to him, and insisted upon taking him off with him in his cart, in which, indeed, he drove him to "The Jolly Ploughman," where they found Hyacinthe in company of little Sabot, a vine-dresser from Brinqueville, a well-known facetious character, who, like his companion, was windy enough to keep a mill turning. Just now, upon meeting, they had wagered ten quarts of wine as to which of them could blow out the greater number of candles. Several friends, laughing noisily and manifesting great enthusiasm, had accompanied them into a room at the back of the premises. A circle had been formed, and one of the rivals was placed on the right and the other on the left, ready to commence operations. Each of them had his own special candle, and just then little Sabot had succeeded

in extinguishing the flame ten times, whereas Hyacinthe had scored only nine times, having once failed in producing the necessary amount of wind. He appeared annoyed; his reputation was at stake. It would never do for Rognes to be beaten by Brinqueville! So he blew as never blacksmith's bellows had blown--Nine! ten! eleven! twelve! The drummer from Cloyes, who had been appointed to re-light the candle, was himself almost blown away. Little Sabot, who had with difficulty extinguished his tenth candle, was now quite exhausted, but his opponent triumphantly blew out another couple, which he bade the drummer light for a final demonstration; and, when they were lighted, they burned with a bright yellow flame, the colour of gold, which rose up like the sun in its glory.

"What a wonderful chap he is!" the spectators cried. "What guts he has got! He ought to have a medal!"

The company shouted and laughed and cheered till they almost split their throats. They felt a good deal of real admiration and envy, for a man must be very solidly built to be able to contain so much wind, and to discharge it just as he pleased. They spent the next two hours in drinking the ten quarts of wine, and nothing else was discussed but the feat they had just witnessed.

While his brother was fastening up his trousers again, Buteau gave him a friendly slap across the buttocks, and this victory, so pleasing to the family pride, seemed to have put them on the best terms again with each other. Old Fouan related, in the most sprightly fashion, a story of his youthful days, of the time when the Cossacks were in La Beauce. One of them had gone to sleep on the bank of the Aigre with his mouth open, and Fouan recounted how he had so freely discharged himself thereinto that he had buried the sleeping man's face up to the hair.

The market was now drawing to a close, and the company separated, all very drunk.

Buteau took Fouan and Hyacinthe off with him in his cart, and Lise, to whom her husband had whispered a word or two, made herself very pleasant and agreeable. They all petted the father, and made a great fuss with him; and there was no more quarrelling. The elder son, who was now getting sober again, was deep in thought. He felt sure that the reason why his younger brother was manifesting such unusual amiability was that he, also, had discovered the secret payments made by the collector. And then he sadly reflected that even if his scamp of a brother had hitherto had the delicacy to refrain from plundering his father's hoard, he certainly would never be weak enough to let it fall into any one else's hands. He determined, however, that as the family were now on good terms together once more, he would diplomatically, and without showing any signs of vexation, make a full inquiry into this important matter. When Rognes was reached, and the old man asked to be set down, the two brothers sprang out of the gig, and rivalled each other in their demonstrations of respect and affection.

"Lean on me, father."

"Give me your hand, father."

They then carefully assisted him out of the trap, and the old man remained standing between them, full of uneasy consternation, for he now felt sadly certain that they had discovered his secret.

"What has come over you all?" he asked. "Why you seem to have suddenly grown very fond of me?"

Their amiability, indeed, quite frightened him. He would rather have seen them comporting themselves as usual towards him--rough and harsh, and wanting in respect. He foresaw a world of trouble in store for him, now that they knew of his secret hoard; and he returned to the Château in a very distressful state of mind.

It happened that Canon, who had not made his appearance for the last two months, was now there, sitting on a stone and waiting for Hyacinthe's return. As soon as he caught sight of him, he called out:

"There's that daughter of yours in Couillard's wood, and there's a man with her."

The father almost exploded with rage and indignation, and the blood rushed angrily to his face.

"The lewd hussy," he said, "to disgrace me in that way!"

He took down a big carter's whip which was hanging behind the door, and then hurried off down the stony bank to the little wood. La Trouille's geese, however, kept guard over her like faithful watch-dogs, when she was up to her pranks. The gander immediately sniffed the father's approach, and darted forward, followed by the whole flock. Raising his wings and stretching out his neck, the male bird broke out into a continuous, menacing hiss, while the rest of the flock, forming into line of battle, also stretched out their necks, and opened their great yellow beaks, ready to bite. The poacher cracked his whip at them, and the sound of a hasty retreat then became audible behind the bushes. La Trouille had heard the warning, and had made her escape.

When Hyacinthe restored the whip to its place, he seemed overcome by a deep philosophical sadness. It might be that his daughter's persistent lewdness filled him with pity for human passions, or it might merely be the natural reaction after his triumphant hilariousness at Cloyes. Shaking his rough scampish-looking head:

"Bah!" he cried to Canon, "it isn't worth that much!"

And then, raising his leg over the valley that was now buried in shadow, he let off a violent and contemptuous detonation, as though he wished to overwhelm the neighbourhood.

PART IV. — CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER IV.

It was now early in October. The vintage was about to commence; a week of merry joviality, during which such families as had fallen out were in the habit of getting reconciled over pots of new wine. For a whole week Rognes stunk of grapes, such a quantity of which was eaten that the women were pulling up their petticoats and the men letting down their trousers behind every hedge; while the lovers, with juice-stained faces, kissed each other greedily amid the vines. The evil of all this was that the men got drunk and the girls in the family-way.

On the morning after his return from Cloyes, Hyacinthe duly began to hunt for his father's hoard; for in accordance with all probability the old man did not carry his money and vouchers about with him; he must hide them away in some secret corner. But although La Trouille assisted her father in his search, they turned the house topsy-turvy without any result, and this despite their cunning and practice in marauding. It was not until the following week that the poacher, chancing to remove from a shelf a cracked earthenware pan, which was no longer used, discovered therein, beneath some lentils, a packet of papers very carefully enclosed in a piece of gum-covered canvas which had been torn out of an old hat. There was not a single coin, however. The cash must be hidden somewhere else, and there must be a pretty pile of it, the poacher reflected, for his father had spent nothing for the last five years. There was the scrip there, however, representing three hundred francs a year in five per cent. Rente. As Hyacinthe was counting the bonds and examining them, a piece of stamped paper, covered with large handwriting, fell from the packet, and the perusal of this document quite stupefied the poacher. The murder was out now! He had discovered where all the money had gone!

It was the most amazing story possible. A month after the old man had divided his property among his children he had fallen ill; brooding sadly over the fact that he had now absolutely nothing of his own, not even so much as a handful of corn. He could not go on living in this way, he moaned to himself; and it was then that he was guilty of a sad piece of folly--folly as infatuated as that of those lustful old men who spend their last coppers in secretly stealing back to some drab who has gone into other keeping. Despite all his earlier shrewdness, Fouan had allowed himself to be completely gulled by that cunning old sharper, Saucisse. That earth-hunger, that furious desire for possession which feverishly racks the bodies of all the old peasants who have spent their lives on the soil, had so completely mastered him, that he had entered into a written agreement with Saucisse to pay him fifteen sous every day as long as he lived, on condition that he, Saucisse, left him upon his death an acre and a quarter of land. A pretty bargain this, considering that Fouan was seventy-six, and that Saucisse was ten years younger. As some justification, however, of Fouan's conduct, it should be said that Saucisse had been crafty enough to take to his bed just before the bargain was struck; and he had coughed so distressingly, seeming so near the point of death, that Fouan, goaded on by his covetousness, and thinking himself the craftier of the two, had eagerly pressed for the completion of the agreement. The moral to be drawn was, that it was preferable to take on with a wench rather than sign an agreement; for the payment of the daily fifteen sous had now been going on for five years, and the more Fouan paid, the more lustful he grew, and the more passionately he yearned for the land. What! after cutting himself free from all the weary bondage of the soil, when he had nothing more to do than to spend the remainder of his days in peaceful tranquillity, watching others wearing themselves out in tending the ungrateful earth, he had once more returned to her, so that she might finish him off. No, really, wisdom was seldom to be found among men, either young or old.

For a moment Hyacinthe felt inclined to appropriate both the scrip and the agreement, but his courage failed him. Such a deed would have necessitated flight. Then, full of angry disappointment, he placed the papers under the lentils again, at the bottom of the pan. His exasperation was so great that he could not hold his tongue. The next day all Rognes knew of the agreement with old Saucisse, and the daily payment of fifteen sous for an acre and a quarter of poor land that was not certainly worth three thousand francs. In five years nearly fourteen hundred francs had been paid, and if the old rascal lived for another five years, he would be pretty certain to keep both the field and its value. Old Fouan was plentifully chaffed about his bargain, as was natural. Since he had divested himself of all his property, he had been unceremoniously passed by on the roads, but now he was again saluted and addressed deferentially since it was known that he had an invested income, and might possibly come in for some landed estate.

His own family seemed especially revolutionised by the discovery. Fanny, who had previously been on very cold terms with her father, annoyed at his having gone to live with his disreputable elder son instead of returning to her house, now brought him some linen--some old shirts of her husband's. She was actuated less by motives of self-interest than by an unconscious respect for the head of the family, who once more acquired some importance, as he was in the possession of property. Her father, however, was very hard and unbending, and he could not refrain from alluding to that cutting speech of hers as to his begging on his knees to be taken back again. He had never forgotten it; and, on receiving Fanny, he exclaimed: "So it is you, then, who are coming on your knees to get me back?" The young woman took this rebuff very badly, and when she got home again she wept with shame and anger. She was touchy to an extreme; a look sometimes sufficed to wound her; and honest, hard-working, and well-to-do though she was, she had fallen out with almost all the country-side. After that, Delhomme undertook to pay

the old man's allowance, for Fanny swore that she would never speak a word to him again.

As for Buteau, he quite astonished everybody one day by making his appearance at the Château, coming, so he said, to pay a little visit to his father. Hyacinthe sniggered, brought out the brandy bottle, and they had a glass together. But his sneering surprise turned into absolute amazement when he saw his brother produce two five-franc pieces and lay them down on the table.

"We must settle accounts, father," said Buteau. "Here is the last quarter's allowance."

Ah! the scamp! he had never paid his father a copper for years past, and now to do this he must have designs upon him. He was no doubt offering him this money in the hope of getting him to return to his house. The truth is, that as Fouan reached out his hand to take up the coins, Buteau pushed it aside and hastily picked up the money himself.

"What I mean is, that I want you to know I have the cash all ready. I will take care of it, and you will know where to find it whenever you want it."

Hyacinthe began to scent mischief and grow annoyed.

"I say," he began, "if you want to get father away from me----"

"What! you're not jealous, are you?" Buteau laughingly replied. "Don't you think, now, that it would be more natural if father stayed a week with me, and then a week with you, and so on? Eh? suppose you cut yourself in two, dad! Well, here's your health in the meantime!"

Before taking his leave, he invited them to come and assist at the vintaging the next day, and he promised that they should stuff their bellies full of grapes. Indeed, he made himself so pleasant and agreeable, that the other two confessed that although he was a great rascal he was nevertheless an agreeable fellow; of course, providing that one didn't let

him take one in. Then they willingly accompanied him part of his way home.

Just as they reached the bottom of the hill they met Monsieur and Madame Charles, accompanied by Elodie, who were returning to Roseblanche, after a walk along the bank of the Aigre. They were all three of them in mourning for Madame Estelle, as the girl's mother was called. She had died in July, from over-exertion; indeed, every time that the grandmother had returned from Chartres she had always reported that her poor daughter was killing herself, such a deal of trouble did she take to maintain the reputation of the establishment in the Rue aux Juifs, with which her worthless husband occupied himself less and less. Keen, indeed, had been Monsieur Charles's emotion at the funeral, to which he had not dared to take the young girl, who had only been informed of her bereavement when her mother had already lain for three days in the grave. Great also had been Monsieur Charles's heart-pangs when, for the first time for many years, he had again gazed upon Number 19, that house at the corner of the Rue de la Planche-aux-Carpes, with its yellow-washed front and closed green shutters; that house which had been the work of his life, and which he now found hung with black drapery, the little door standing open, and the passage barred by the coffin, standing between four lighted tapers.

He was deeply touched by the manner in which the whole neighbourhood shared in his grief. The ceremony passed off in the most satisfactory manner. When the coffin was brought out of the passage into the street, all the women of the neighbourhood crossed themselves, and the funeral procession made its way to the church amidst signs of general mourning. The five women of the house were there in dark dresses, and comported themselves with an air of decorum, as was generally remarked that evening in Chartres; and one of them even shed tears at the grave-side. In that matter, indeed, Monsieur Charles had every reason for satisfaction, but how he had suffered the next morning when he had a chat with his

son-in-law, Hector Vaucogne, and visited the house. It had already lost all its brilliancy, and the many laxities which he noticed, laxities which would never have been tolerated in his own time, fully indicated the absence of masculine authority. He observed, however, with pleasure that the decorous behaviour of the five women at the funeral had created such a favourable impression in the town that the establishment remained full all the week. Upon leaving Number 19, full of uneasy thoughts, he gave Hector plainly to understand that, now poor Estelle was no longer there to look after affairs, it was his duty to reform and settle down seriously to the business of life, if he did not wish his daughter's fortune to be lost.

Buteau, on seeing the Charles family, at once invited them to come to the vintage, but they declined on account of their mourning. Their faces were very sad, and they spoke and moved about in a weary, heart-broken fashion; they could not be prevailed upon to promise anything further than just to go and taste the new wine.

"It will be a little change for this poor darling," said Madame Charles; "and she has so few amusements here, since we took her away from school. She's seventeen, you know, now, and we couldn't keep her there always."

Elodie listened with downcast eyes, blushing shyly. She had grown very tall and slim, as pale as a lily vegetating in the shade.

"And what are you going to do with this tall young lady?" Buteau asked.

The girl's blushes deepened; and her grandmother replied:

"Ah! that I can scarcely tell you. We shall leave her perfectly free to follow her own inclinations."

Meanwhile Fouan had taken Monsieur Charles aside.

"Is he looking after the business?" he asked with an air of interest.

Monsieur Charles shrugged his shoulders, and assumed an aggrieved air.

"Ah, that's just what is troubling us so much. I saw a person from Chartres this morning. It's very sad! The house is done for! The supervision is so wretched that fights go on in the passages, and fellows actually walk away without paying."

Then he crossed his arms and drew a long breath to ease himself of a new worry which had been stifling him, by reason of its enormity, ever since the morning. "And would you believe it," he resumed, "the reprobate goes to the café, now? Going to a café, indeed, when there is one in his own house!"

"He must be daft, then!" fiercely exclaimed Hyacinthe, who had been listening.

They now relapsed into silence, for Madame Charles and Elodie were drawing near with Buteau. They were speaking of the dear departed, and the young girl remarked how sad it made her that she had not been able to kiss her poor mother.

"But it seems she died so suddenly," she added, with her innocent air, "and they were so busy in the shop----"

"Yes, making confectionery for some christening parties," hastily interrupted Madame Charles, with a side-long glance, full of meaning, at the others.

Not one of them smiled. They all preserved a gravely sympathetic air. The girl had bent her gaze upon a ring she was wearing, and she kissed it, with her eyes full of tears.

"This is all I have that belonged to her," she said. "Grandmother took it from her finger and brought it and put it on mine. She wore it for twenty years, and I shall keep it all my life."

It was an old wedding-ring, of common make, that had once been engine-turned, but it was now so worn that nearly all the turning had disappeared. Its aspect seemed to tell that the hand on which it had grown so thin had never recoiled from any task or duty, but had been ever active and energetic, washing glasses and pots, making beds, rubbing, cleaning, dusting, and leaving no corner untouched. This ring, indeed, seemed to tell so much, and it had left particles of its gold in so many scenes of the past, that the men gazed at it with earnest eyes in silent emotion.

"When you have worn it away as much as your mother did," said Monsieur Charles, choking with a sudden spasm of grief, "you will have really deserved a rest. If it could speak, it could tell you that money is earned by hard work and orderly habits."

Elodie burst into tears, and pressed the ring to her lips again.

"I want you, you know, to be married with this ring when we find you a husband," said Madame Charles. The mention of marriage, however, was too much for the sorrowing girl, and she was so overcome with confusion that she threw herself wildly on her grandmother's breast, and hid her face out of sight.

"Come, now, don't be so shy and nervous, my little pet," said Madame Charles, smiling, and trying to calm the girl. "You must get accustomed to the idea: there's nothing dreadful about it. You may be quite sure that I wouldn't say anything improper before you. Your cousin Buteau asked just now what we were going to do with you. Well, we shall begin by marrying you. Come, now, dear, look up, and don't rub your face against my shawl like that. It will make your skin quite red and inflamed."

Then she added in a low tone, speaking to the others, with an air of profound satisfaction:

"What an innocent darling she is! She is guilelessness itself!"

"Ah, if we hadn't this dear angel," said Monsieur Charles, "we should be quite overcome with trouble--on account of the matter I mentioned to you. By the way, with all this worry my roses and pinks have suffered this year; and I can't tell what has gone wrong with my aviary, but all my birds are ailing. I have only found a little consolation in fishing; yesterday I caught a trout weighing three pounds. One ought to do one's best to be happy when one is in the country, don't you think so?"

Then they parted, Monsieur and Madame Charles renewing their promise to go and taste the new wine. Fouan, Buteau, and Hyacinthe walked on a few yards in silence, and then the old man gave utterance to what they were all three thinking.

"Well," he exclaimed, "the youngster who gets her with the house will be a lucky fellow!"

Bécu, who with the office of rural constable combined that of public drummer, had duly beaten his instrument by way of proclaiming the commencement of the vintage; and on the Monday morning the whole country-side was in a state of excitement, for every inhabitant had his vines, and not a single family would on any account have missed going to the slopes of the Aigre that day. The excitement of the village had, however, been brought to a climax by the fact that the new priest--for Rognes had at last allowed itself the luxury of a priest--had arrived on the previous evening at night-fall. Owing to the darkness he had only been indistinctly seen. The tongues of the villagers were consequently wagging most energetically, and the more so as the circumstances attending the priest's arrival were somewhat peculiar.

For some months after his quarrel with the inhabitants of Rognes, the Abbé Godard had persistently refused to set foot in the village. He only baptized, confessed, and married those who came to seek his services at Bazoches-le-Doyen. If any one had died at Rognes, they would doubtless have crumbled away waiting for him; though this point was never clearly

settled, for no one took it into his head to die during this great quarrel. The priest had declared to his lordship the bishop that he would rather be dismissed than carry the blessed sacrament into such a region of abomination, where he was so badly treated by an utterly reprobate population of adulterers and drunkards, who, moreover, were sure of everlasting damnation, since they worshipped only the devil! And his lordship, apparently, agreed with the Abbé, for he allowed things to go on as they were till the rebellious flock showed signs of contrition.

Rognes was, consequently, without a priest; there was no mass, no anything, and the place was in a perfectly heathenish condition. At first some of the villagers felt a little surprise; but, then, things went on much as usual, in spite of all this. It neither rained more nor blew more than it had done before, and the village was saving a considerable sum of money, as it had no priest to pay. Then the villagers began to ask themselves whether it would not be as well to do without a priest altogether, as one did not really seem indispensable, and experience already proved that the crops did not suffer, and that they themselves did not die any faster owing to the absence of a pastor. Many of them professed themselves of this opinion--not only the wild scamps, like Lengaigne, but some steady, practical men of sound common-sense like Delhomme. Many others, however, on the other hand, were annoyed at not having a priest. It was not that they were more religious than the others, or more inclined to believe in the Divinity, but the fact of having no priest seemed to indicate that the village was either too poor or too miserly to pay for one. The villagers of Magnolles, only two hundred and eighty in number, ten fewer than the inhabitants of Rognes, supported a priest, and threw the fact at their neighbours' heads in such a provokingly scornful fashion that it led to blows. Then, too, the women clung to their old customs, and there was not one of them who would have consented to be married or buried without the services of a priest. The men themselves had occasionally gone to church, because every one went there. In short,

there had always been a priest, and there must be one now, though they reserved to themselves perfect liberty of thought and action.

The municipal council was naturally called upon to deal with the question. Hourdequin, the mayor, who although he did not observe the practices of the faith still favoured religion as an instrument of government, made a political mistake in not taking any part in the contest, from a conciliatory desire not to show any bias in the official position which he held. The village was poor, said one party, so what was the use of burdening it with the expense--a considerable one for its small resources--which would be incurred in repairing the parsonage? Moreover, it was still hoped that the Abbé Godard would be induced to return. At last it came about that Macqueron, the assessor, who had formerly been a determined enemy of the cloth, placed himself at the head of the band of malcontents, who felt humiliated at not having a priest in the village. From that moment Macqueron must have entertained a desire to overthrow the mayor in view of taking his place. It was said, too, that he had become the agent of Monsieur Rochefontaine, the manufacturer of Châteaudun, who was again going to oppose Monsieur de Chédeville at the approaching elections. Hourdequin, whose farm demanded his close attention at that moment, and who was weary of his work, showed but little interest in the meetings of the council, letting his assessor take whatever steps he pleased; and the latter quickly won over the whole council to his views, and persuaded the members to vote the necessary funds for the establishment of a parish. Since Macqueron had contrived to get paid for that piece of land which had been required for the new road, and which he had formerly promised to give up gratuitously, he had been secretly called a sharper by the councillors, but in his presence they manifested great respect for him. Lengaigne alone protested against the vote, which, so he declared, would hand the village over to the Jesuits. Bécu, too, grumbled at it, for he had been turned out of the parsonage and garden, and had been housed in a tumble-down old

cottage. For a month workmen had been employed renewing the plaster, putting in fresh panes of glass, and replacing the broken slates; and thus it came about that a priest had at last been able to install himself in the little house, which had been newly white-washed for his reception.

At early dawn the carts began to start for the vineyards, each of them carrying four or five large casks called *gueulebées*, and having one end knocked out. The girls and women sat in the carts among the baskets, while the men accompanied them on foot, whipping the horses forward. There was a perfect procession, and conversations were carried on from cart to cart amidst a general uproar of laughter and shouting.

Lengaigne's cart followed immediately behind the Macquerons', and, thanks to this, Flore and Cœlina, who had not spoken to each other for six months past, made friends again. Flore was accompanied by Bécu's wife, and Cœlina by her daughter Berthe. Their conversation immediately turned upon the subject of the new priest, and, amid the tramp of the horses, a flow of words rose up into the sharp air of the early morning.

"I caught a glimpse of him as he was getting his luggage down."

"Indeed! and what sort of a man is he?"

"Well, it was so dark I could scarcely see, but he seemed very tall and thin, and not strong; with a face as though he kept Lent perpetually. He seemed about thirty, with a very gentle expression."

"I hear that he comes from Auvergne, from the mountains where the folks are buried in snow for two-thirds of the year."

"How awful! Well, it will be a pleasant change for him to come here."

"Yes, indeed! You know, I suppose, that he is called Madeleine?"

"No. Madeline?"

"Madeline, Madeleine. Well, at all events, it isn't a man's name."

"I daresay he'll come and see us in the vineyards. Macqueron promised that he would bring him."

"Ah! Well, we must watch for him."

The carts drew up at the foot of the hill-side, along the road that skirted the Aigre. Presently in every little vineyard the women were busily at work amid the lines of stakes, bending down and cutting off the grapes with which they filled their baskets. The men had enough to do in emptying the women's baskets into their own, which they carried on their backs and emptied into the open casks. When all the casks of a cart were full, the vehicle was driven off; its load was discharged into the vat, and then the casks were brought back to be filled again.

There was such a heavy dew that morning that the dresses of the women were speedily soaked through. Fortunately, however, the weather was very fine, and the sun soon dried them again. There had been no rain for three weeks, and the grapes, about which the greatest fears had been entertained, had suddenly ripened and sweetened. Thus they were all in high spirits that fine morning, grinning and bawling, and indulging in most indelicate jokes which made the girls wriggle.

"How conceited that Cœlina used to be about her Berthe's delicate complexion!" said Flore to Madame Bécu, standing up and looking at Madame Macqueron in the adjoining vineyard; "why, the girl's face is now getting dreadfully yellow and shrunken."

"Yes," replied Madame Bécu, "that comes of not marrying the girl! They were wrong not to give her to the wheelwright's son. And they tell me, indeed, that she has done herself harm by bad habits."

Then bending double she went on cutting off the bunches.

"All that, however," she presently continued, "does not prevent the schoolmaster from being constantly about the place."

"Oh, that Lequeu," cried Flore; "he would grope with his nose in the mud if he thought he could pick up a copper or two! See, there he is coming to help them, the stupid fool!"

Then they relapsed into silence. Victor, who had returned from his regiment barely a fortnight before, was taking their baskets and emptying them into the one which Delphin carried on his back. That cunning snake, Lengaigne, had hired Delphin for the vintage, pretending that his own presence was necessary at the shop. The youngster, who had never left Rognes, gaped with amazement at sight of Victor, who had assumed a swaggering, rollicking manner; being, moreover, wonderfully altered in appearance, with his moustache and his little tuft of beard, his bumptious ways, and his forage-cap, which he still made a point of wearing. However, he was sorely mistaken if he thought that he was an object of envy to his companion; all his stories of barrack-life, and his exaggerated lying tales of merry-making, and girls, and drinking bouts, were quite thrown away. The young peasant shook his head in dazed stupefaction, and without feeling in the least attracted. To leave his nook would be paying too high a price for all those fine pleasures, he thought. He had already twice refused to go and make his fortune in a restaurant at Chartres with Nénesse.

"But when are you going to be a soldier, you whipper-snapper?" Victor asked.

"What? I a soldier! No, no! I shall draw a lucky number!"

The contemptuous Victor could not get any other answer from him. What a coward, he thought, was this big hulking fellow with the build of a Cossack! As he talked he went on emptying the women's baskets into the one which Delphin carried, and the young peasant did not so much as bend under the load. Then Victor pointed to Berthe, and joked about her in such a way that Delphin burst out into a fit of laughter, the basket on his back being almost capsized. As he went down the hill and emptied the

grapes into one of the casks, he could still be heard almost choking with merriment.

In the Macquerons' vineyard, Berthe still continued to play the fine lady, using little scissors, instead of a bill-hook, to cut off the bunches, showing herself also nervously afraid of thorns and wasps, and expressing great alarm because her thin shoes, quite saturated with dew, did not dry again. Although she detested Lequeu, she tolerated his attentions, feeling flattered by the courtship of the only educated man present. Presently he took out his handkerchief to wipe the girl's shoes; but just then an unexpected apparition attracted their attention.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Berthe, "did you ever see such a dress? I heard that she had arrived yesterday evening, at the same time as the priest."

It was Suzanne, the Lengaignes' daughter, who had unexpectedly ventured to visit her native village, after leading a wild life in Paris for three years. She had reached home the previous evening, and had lingered late in bed, letting her mother and brother set out for the vineyard, and resolving to join them there later on, and appear in the midst of the peasants in such a showy toilet as would quite overwhelm them with admiration. And she certainly did create an immense sensation; for she had donned a blue silk dress of so bright a hue that the blue of the sky looked quite pale and faded. As she stood in full relief amid the dark green of the vines, bathed in a flood of sunshine, she looked a real swell--something wonderful. She immediately began to talk and laugh loudly, nibbling at the grapes, which she held up in the air and then dropped into her mouth. She joked with Delphin and her brother Victor, who seemed very proud of her, and she excited the wondering admiration of her mother and Madame Bécu, who, leaving off their work, gazed at her with damp, straining eyes. The vintagers in the more distant vineyards joined in the general admiration; work was stopped, and every

eye was turned upon the girl, who had grown and improved out of all recognition. People had once thought her plain, but now she looked really appetising, no doubt on account of the way in which she brought her little fair locks of hair over her phiz. The result of this inquisitive examination was a great feeling of deference for this plump girl attired in such costly raiment, and with such a smiling face, betokening prosperity.

Cœlina, turning quite yellow with bile, and biting her lips, burst out angrily before her daughter Berthe and Lequeu.

"My gracious, what a swell! Flore tells every one she meets that her daughter has servants and a carriage in Paris. And I daresay it's true, too, for she must be making a deal of money to be able to deck her body out in that way!"

"Oh, those ne'er-do-wells!" said Lequeu, who wanted to make himself agreeable. "Every one knows how they get their money!"

"What does it matter how they get it," retorted Cœlina bitterly, "so long as they do get it?"

Just at this moment Suzanne, who had caught sight of Berthe, and had recognised in her one of her old companions among the Handmaidens of the Virgin, came up to her.

"Good morning. How are you?" she said very politely.

She scanned her with a scrutinising glance, and noticed her faded complexion. Then, rejoicing in the soft richness of her own milky flesh, she suddenly exclaimed, breaking out into a laugh:

"Everything's going on all right, I hope?"

"Quite so, thank you," replied Berthe, annoyed, and feeling quite crushed.

The Lengaignes were the heroes of the day, and the Macquerons felt that their noses were put out of joint. Cœlina angrily compared the sallow scrawniness of her daughter, whose face was already wrinkled, with the sleek and rosy beauty of the other girl. Was it just that that hussy, who gave herself up to men from morning till night, should look so fresh and bright, when a virtuous maiden grew as faded and wan in her lonely bed as if she had had three confinements? No, indeed, virtue went unrewarded, and it wasn't worth while for a girl to remain living an honest life with her parents! All the vintage parties greeted Suzanne enthusiastically. She kissed the children who had grown taller, and she stirred the old folks' hearts by reminding them of the past. What does it matter what one may be, as long as one has succeeded and is independent of other people's patronage? And Suzanne, said the peasants, showed that she had a good heart by not despising her family, and by coming back to see her old friends now that she had grown rich.

At the first stroke of noon they all sat down to eat their bread and cheese. On a line with the tops of the stakes you saw rows of women's heads covered with blue kerchiefs. None of them had any appetite, however, for they had been stuffing themselves with grapes ever since daybreak. Their throats were sticky with the sugary juice; their bellies, as round and swollen as barrels, rumbled with the purgative effects of what they had swallowed. Already at every minute some girl or other was obliged to retire behind a hedge. The others naturally laughed, and the men got up and guffawed jocosely as the girls went past them. It was a scene of general merriment, quite free from all constraint.

They were just finishing their bread and cheese when Macqueron came in sight on the road at the foot of the hill-side, accompanied by the Abbé Madeline. Then Suzanne was abruptly forgotten, and all eyes were turned upon the priest. To tell the truth, he did not create a very favourable impression. He was as lank as a pike-staff, and gloomy and ascetic-looking. However, he bowed in front of each vineyard, and said a

pleasant word or two to every one, so that the peasants ended by finding him very polite and gentle. He evidently hadn't got any will of his own; they meant to make him do as they pleased. It would be easier to deal with him than with that cross-grained, cantankerous Abbé Godard! As he passed on, they joked and grew merry again behind his back. Soon he reached the top of the hill, and then, a prey to vague fear and gloomy melancholy, he stood motionless, gazing upon the vast grey plain of La Beauce. The big bright eyes of this mountain-born priest filled with tears as he thought of the narrow hill-bound landscapes of the gorges of Auvergne.

Buteau's vines were close to him. Lise and Françoise were gathering the grapes, while Hyacinthe, who had not failed to bring his father with him, had already got tipsy with the grape juice which he had swallowed while pretending to empty the small baskets into the large ones. The grapes were fermenting inside him, puffing him out with such a volume of gas that it sought escape from every aperture. The presence of the priest, too, seemed to excite him.

"You dirty brute!" Buteau cried to him, "can't you at least wait till his reverence has gone away?"

Hyacinthe, however, would not submit to the reprimand; assuming the air of a man who could be as refined as he chose, he replied:

"I'm not doing it on his account; I'm doing it to please myself."

Old Fouan had sat down on the ground, tired, but rejoicing in the lovely weather and the fine vintage. He was grinning maliciously at the thought that La Grande, whose vines were on the adjoining plot, had come to wish him good-day. She, like the others, had begun to treat him with respect, now that she had learnt that he still had some money of his own. However, she had turned away from him abruptly, having caught sight of her grandson, Hilarion, greedily taking advantage of her absence to stuff

himself with grapes. She promptly administered a hiding to him with her stick. The gluttonous pig! he ate more than he put in the basket!

"Ah, that aunt. What a lot of people will be pleased when she's under ground," exclaimed Buteau, as he came and sat down for a moment by his father's side by way of paying court to him. "It's a crying shame that she should abuse the poor innocent in that way, for if he's as strong as a donkey, he's also quite as stupid."

Then he began to fall foul of the Delhommes, whose vines were down below, skirting the road. They had the finest vineyard in the neighbourhood, some seven acres all in one plot, and it took a good half-score hands to get in the crop. The carefully tended vines produced larger bunches than any of the neighbours' vineyards, a fact of which they were so proud that they affected to keep their own party quite distinct from the others, even disdaining to smile at the sudden colics which sent the girls in the adjoining plots scuttling behind the hedges. They were too much afraid of their legs, Buteau hinted, to care to climb up the hill to greet their old father, and so they pretended not to be aware of his presence there. Then he began to abuse Delhomme as a clumsy, cross-grained ass, who put on all sorts of airs, pretending to be industrious and just; and Fanny, too, was a shrew, losing her temper over the merest trifles, and demanding worship as though she were a saint. She remained quite unconscious of all the wrong she did to others!

"The truth is, father," Buteau continued, "that I've always been fond of you, whereas my brother and sister--Ah! I've always regretted that we parted for a mere nothing."

He then began to throw the blame of what had taken place upon Françoise, whose head, he said, had been turned by Jean. However, she had become steady now, he continued. If she showed any nonsense, he would cool her blood by ducking her in the horse-pond.

"Come, now, father, let bye-gones be forgotten. Why shouldn't you come back to us? Will you?"

Old Fouan remained discreetly silent. He had been expecting the offer which his younger son now made; but he was unwilling to give a definite reply either one way or the other, not feeling at all certain as to his best course.

Buteau assured himself that his brother was at the other end of the vineyard, and then resumed:

"It's hardly fit for you to stay with that scamp Hyacinthe. You'll probably be found there murdered one of these days. Now, if you'll come back to me, I'll board and lodge you, and pay you the allowance as well."

The old man raised his eyes in amazement; and as he still remained silent, his son determined to overwhelm him with his lavish offers.

"And I will take care that you have all your little luxuries, your coffee, and your glass, and your four sous' worth of tobacco; everything you wish for, in fact."

It was too tempting, and the old man began to feel alarmed. Certainly, things were getting bad at Hyacinthe's, but what if there should be a repetition of the old goings-on when he got back to the Buteaus' again?

"Well, we must see," was all he said; and then he got up, anxious to bring the conversation to a close.

The vintaging lasted until night-fall; the carts incessantly carrying off the grape-laden casks, and bringing them back empty. Under the wide expanse of rosy sky, among the vines gilded by the setting sun, the flitting of the baskets, large and small, became brisker, each worker being excited by the intoxicating effects of all these grapes that were carried to and fro. Berthe now had a misfortune. She was seized with such a sharp and sudden attack of colic that she was not able to run off,

and her mother and Lequeu were obliged to form a rampart round her with their bodies, while she relieved herself amongst the stakes. The vintagers in the adjoining plot observed what was happening, and Victor and Delphin wanted to take her some paper. But Flore and Madame Bécu restrained them, saying that there were limits which only ill-bred persons would out-step.

At last they all set off home again. The Delhommes led the way; La Grande forced Hilarion to help the horse in pulling the cart along; and the Lengaignes and the Macquerons fraternised together in a maudlin, tipsy tenderness which made them forget their rivalry. What attracted most attention on the return home was the mutual politeness of the Abbé Madeline and Suzanne. The priest, seeing how well the girl was dressed, took her for a lady, and they walked along side by side, the Abbé showing her every attention, while she put on her sweetest manners, and inquired at what time mass was celebrated on Sunday. Behind them came Hyacinthe, who, in his hatred of priests, recommenced his disgusting tricks, determined in his tipsy obstinacy to have a spree. At every five yards he lifted up his leg and let fly. That hussy Suzanne bit her lips to keep from laughing, while the priest pretended not to hear; and gravely exchanging pious remarks they walked on behind the file of vintage carts, escorted by this disgusting music.

At last, as they were nearing Rognes, Buteau and Fouan, who felt quite ashamed of Hyacinthe, made an attempt to silence him. But he still persisted in continuing his tricks, and protested that his reverence was quite under a mistake if he felt in any way hurt.

"Don't I tell you that I mean no offence to any one, and that I am simply doing it for my own amusement?" he repeated.

The following week the Buteaus invited their friends to come and taste the new wine. Monsieur and Madame Charles, Fouan, Hyacinthe, and some four or five others were to meet at seven o'clock and partake of

some leg of mutton, nuts, and cheese--a real repast, in fact. During the day Buteau had barrelled his wine. There were six casks of it, full to the bung. Some of his neighbours, however, were not so far advanced in their operations. One of them, who was still vintaging, had been hard at work all the morning treading his grapes in a state of complete nudity; another, armed with a bar, was watching the fermentation, and beating down the stalks and skins that rose to the surface of the bubbling must; a third, who had a press, squeezed the grape skins in it, and then threw them into his yard in a reeking heap. Scenes like these were going on in every house; and from the burning vats, the streaming presses, the overflowing casks, indeed from all Rognes there arose the fumes of the wine, which were so strong as to suffice to make every one intoxicated.

Just before leaving the Château that day, Fouan was seized with a vague presentiment, which induced him to remove his papers from their hiding-place beneath the lentils in the pan. He thought it as well to conceal them about his person, for he fancied he had detected Hyacinthe and La Trouille looking up into the air with a meaning expression. They all three set out, and arrived at the Buteaus' house at the same time as Monsieur and Madame Charles.

The full moon was so large and bright that it gave almost as much light as the sun; and as Fouan entered the yard, where one could have seen well enough to pick up a pin, he observed that Gédéon, the donkey, was in the outhouse, with his head inside a bucket. Fouan was not much surprised to see him at liberty, for he was a very cunning fellow, and frequently raised the latch with his mouth. The bucket, however, excited the old man's curiosity, and, going up to it, he recognised it as one of the buckets used in the cellar, which had contained some wine from the press, left after Buteau had finished filling the casks. That cursed Gédéon was emptying it.

"Look sharp here, Buteau!" called the old man. "Here's this donkey of yours up to fine tricks!"

Buteau appeared at the kitchen door.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Gédéon's swilled all the wine up!"

Amid this shouting, the donkey quietly finished sucking up the liquor. He had probably been at work for the last quarter of an hour, for the bucket held some four or five gallons. Every drop of the wine had been drunk, and Gédéon's belly was as round as a bottle, and seemed on the point of bursting. When at last he raised his head, his tipsy nose was dripping with wine, and there was a red line across it, just under his eyes, showing how far he had dipped his phiz into the liquor.

"Oh, the brute!" roared Buteau, rushing up; "it's just like his tricks. There never was a creature so full of vice."

Generally, when Gédéon heard himself reproached for his vices, he assumed an air of contemptuous indifference, and leisurely spread out his broad ears; but to-day he seemed completely intoxicated, and lost to all sense of respect, for he positively sniggered as he wagged his head about, thus shamelessly expressing the enjoyment he had derived from his debauchery. He stumbled when his master gave him a violent shove, and would have fallen if Fouan had not propped him up with his shoulder.

"The damned pig is dead drunk!" cried Buteau.

"'Drunk as an ass!' This is the moment to apply the proverb," remarked Hyacinthe, who grinned merrily as he gazed at the animal with sympathetic admiration. "A bucketful at a draught! What a magnificent swallow!"

Buteau, however, saw nothing to laugh about; neither did Lise nor Françoise, who had now hurried up, attracted by the noise. To begin with, there was the loss of the wine; and more than that, there was the confusion into which the disgraceful conduct of the donkey threw them in presence of Monsieur and Madame Charles. These latter were already biting their lips on account of Elodie. To make matters worse, chance would have it that Suzanne and Berthe, who had been taking a stroll together, had met the Abbé Madeline just by the door, and the three of them had stopped there, and were looking on waiting for the finish. A pretty business this, under the eyes of all these fine folks!

"Shove him along, father!" whispered Buteau. "We must get him back into the stable as quickly as possible!"

Fouan shoved, but Gédéon, finding himself very happy and comfortable where he was, declined to stir. He showed no malice, only a good-humoured tipsy perversity. There was a merry jocular glance in his eye, and his dripping mouth seemed twisted into a smile. He made himself as heavy as he could, and reeled about on his outstretched legs, pulling himself together again after every shove, as though he looked upon the whole business as some merry game. Buteau, however, intervened, and shoved the donkey in his turn, whereupon Gédéon turned a summersault, with his four feet in the air; rolling about on his back and braying so loudly that he seemed not to care a curse for all the people looking at him.

"Ah, you foul, good-for-nothing brute!" roared Buteau, assailing the animal with a shower of kicks. "I'll teach you to put yourself into this condition!"

Hyacinthe, full of indulgence for the intoxicated donkey, now interposed.

"Come, come," he exclaimed, "since the brute is drunk, it's no use lecturing him, for he can't understand you. You had much better help him back to his stable."

Monsieur and Madame Charles had drawn on one side, quite shocked by the shameless conduct of the donkey; while Elodie, blushing as deeply as though she had been forced to look upon some indecent spectacle, turned her head away. The group at the door, the priest, Suzanne, and Berthe assumed an attitude of silent protestation. Several neighbours now came up and began to sneer noisily. Lise and Françoise almost wept from shame.

Buteau, however, screwing down his rage, endeavoured with the help of Fouan and Hyacinthe, to get Gédéon on his legs again. This was no easy matter, for the tipsy brute, with the bucketful of wine in his belly, seemed to weigh as much as five hundred thousand devils. As soon as they had raised him on one side he fell down again on the other; and at last the three men got quite exhausted by trying to shove him up, and supporting him with their knees and elbows. Finally they had managed to get him on to his feet again, and even succeeded in forcing him a few steps forward, when he suddenly stumbled and fell over backwards. The whole yard had to be crossed to reach the stable. What was to be done?

"Ten thousand devils take him!" cried the three men, as they examined him from every point of view, quite at a loss as to how they should next proceed.

It then occurred to Hyacinthe to prop the animal up against the side of the shed, and then push him along, keeping him propped up against the wall of the house, till the stable was reached. This plan succeeded very well at first, although the animal got sadly scratched and grazed by the rough wall plaster. The misfortune was that presently this scratching and grazing became more than the brute could bear, and, suddenly wrenching

himself free from the hands that were holding him to the wall, he reared up and pranced about.

Old Fouan was almost knocked down.

"Stop him! stop him!" yelled the two brothers.

Then in the dazzling brightness of the moonlight Gédéon was to be seen galloping about the yard in frantic zig-zags, with his two huge ears swaying wildly. The men had shaken his belly too violently, and the poor brute now felt very ill. A tremendous preliminary retch brought him to a standstill, and he almost toppled over. Then he tried to set off again, but his legs stiffened and he stood rooted to the ground. He stretched out his neck, and his flanks were shaken by violent spasms. Finally, reeling about like a drunken man striving to relieve himself, and reaching his head forward at every effort, he vomited a perfect river of red fluid, a furious torrent that flowed on as far as the pond.

A ringing chorus of laughter resounded from the door, where some peasants were clustering together; while the Abbé Madeline, who had a weak stomach, turned very pale between Suzanne and Berthe, who led him away with indignant protestations. The offended demeanour of Monsieur and Madame Charles plainly proclaimed that the exhibition of a donkey in such a condition as this was a breach of all decorum, and even of the simple politeness due to passers-by. Elodie, in weeping consternation, threw her arms round her grandmother's neck, asking if the animal were going to die. It was in vain that Monsieur Charles cried out: "Stop! stop!" in the old imperious tone of a master accustomed to be obeyed, the wretched brute went on bringing up this ruddy stream till the whole yard was full of it. Then he slipped down and began to wallow about in the mess, with his legs widely separated, and in such an indecent posture that no tipsy man, lying across a footway, could ever have presented a more disgusting sight to passing spectators. It really seemed as though the brute were purposely doing all he could to disgrace his

master. The spectacle was really too dreadful, and Lise and Françoise, covering their eyes with their hands, fled for refuge into the house.

"There! there! we've had enough of this! Carry him away!"

Indeed, nothing else could be done, for Gédéon, who had become as limp as a wet rag, and very drowsy, was fast falling asleep. Buteau went off to get a stretcher, and six men helped him to lift the ass on to it. Then they carried the animal away; his legs hanging down, his head dangling about, and already snoring so noisily that it seemed as though he were braying, and still jeering contemptuously at everybody.

This adventure naturally threw a cloud over the commencement of the feast; but the party quickly recovered their spirits, and they ended by partaking so freely of the new wine that, towards eleven o'clock, they were all in much the same condition as the donkey. Every moment or so one of them found it necessary to retire into the yard.

Old Fouan was very merry; and he reflected that it might really be advisable for him to come and reside again with his younger son, for the wine promised to be excellent that year. He was obliged to leave the room in his turn, and was thinking the matter over, outside in the dark night, when he was startled to hear Buteau and Lise, who had come out immediately after him, quarrelling as they squatted down, side by side, against the wall. The husband was reproaching his wife for not showing herself sufficiently affectionate towards his father. The fool she was, said he, why she ought to wheedle and coax the old chap so as to get him back into the house again; and then they could lay their hands on his hoard. The old man, suddenly sobered and quite cold, felt at his pockets to make sure that he had not been robbed of his bonds; and when, after the parting embraces all round he again reached the Château, he had firmly resolved not to change his quarters.

That very night, however, he beheld a sight which froze his blood. He saw La Trouille in her chemise steal into his room, which was lighted up by the bright moon, and prowl about, carefully searching his blouse and his trousers, and even looking under his chamber-vase. It was evident that Hyacinthe, having missed the papers which had been removed from their hiding-place under the lentils, had sent his daughter to try and find them.

After that Fouan felt unable to remain any longer in bed; his brain was too excited. So he got up and opened the window. The night was now dark, and an odour of wine streamed up from Rognes, mingled with the stench of all the filth beside the walls, over which folks had stridden for a week past. What should he do? Where should he go? As for his bonds, he would never again let them leave his own possession. He would sew them to his skin. Then, as the wind swept the strong odour into his face, he thought of Gédéon. A donkey had a splendid constitution and no mistake, he said to himself; it could get ten times as drunk as a man without coming to any great harm. But what was he to do himself? Robbed in his younger son's house, robbed in his elder son's house; there really seemed no choice. The best thing seemed to be to remain at the Château, and keep his eyes open, and wait. Every bone in his old body was shaking.

PART IV. — CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER V.

The months glided along; winter passed away, and then the spring. At Rognes matters went on in the same old way; whole years were necessary for the accomplishment of any really perceptible change in that weary, dull life of work and toil, which began afresh with every returning day. In July, amid the burning heat of the blazing sun, the approaching elections threw the village into a state of excitement. This time they were invested with a peculiar interest, and the canvassing visits of the candidates were eagerly discussed and anxiously awaited.

On the morning of the Sunday for which the arrival of Monsieur Rochefontaine, the contractor of Châteaudun, had been promised, there was a terrible scene at the Buteaus' between Lise and Françoise, showing that hostility can go on smouldering invisibly beneath an outward appearance of calmness till it breaks out with unquenchable violence. The last slender bond of union between the sisters, which had always been strained almost to breaking, though constantly knotted again, had at last become so slight, worn away by perpetual quarrelling, that this time it snapped atwain, beyond all hope of repair. And the immediate cause of this final rupture was the merest trifle in the world.

As Françoise was bringing her cows home that morning she stopped to have a moment's chat with Jean, whom she met in front of the church. It must be confessed that she did so purposely, stopping just in front of the Buteaus' house, with the express intention of irritating them.

"When you want to see your men," Lise cried angrily to her as she returned into the house, "be good enough to choose some other place than just under our windows!"

Buteau was standing by mending a bill-hook and listening.

"My men!" retorted Françoise. "I see too many men here. And there's one fellow, let me tell you, whom I could see if I wanted, not under the window, but in this very house, the swine that he is!"

This allusion to Buteau made Lise wild with anger. For a long time past she had been consumed with an absorbing desire to turn her sister out of doors, so that the house might become peaceful; and this even at the risk of a law-suit, and having to surrender half the land. It was her persistence in this respect that led her husband to beat her, for he was quite opposed to her scheme, hoping to trick the girl out of her land somehow, and also to succeed in getting possession of her person. The wife was exasperated at no longer being mistress in her own house, and showed a peculiar kind of jealousy. While she was quite ready to let her husband forcibly possess himself of the girl for the sake of making an end of the matter, yet, at the same time, it enraged her to see him lusting so hotly after this chit, whom she hated for her youth, her firm-fleshed bosom, and the roundness of her arms, that showed so plumply whenever her sleeves were rolled up. She would have liked to stand by and see her husband foul and wreck all these alluring charms, and she would gladly have helped him. Indeed, the mere fact of sharing her husband with her sister would not have caused her any trouble. Her anguish of mind arose from their rivalry, which was growing even more bitter and rancorous, and the consciousness that her sister was prettier than herself, and thus capable of stimulating her husband's hot desires.

"You drab!" she screamed, "it is you who lead him on! If you weren't always leering at him he wouldn't be for ever running after you. You nasty slut!"

Françoise turned quite pale. This slander was more than she could bear. And quietly, but with deliberate animosity, she replied:

"We've had quite enough of this. It is time there was an end of it. Wait another fortnight, and I'll no longer annoy you with my presence. Yes, in another fortnight I shall be twenty-one, and then I'll take myself off."

"Ah, you're longing to be of age, are you, so that you can worry us, eh? Well, you hussy, there's no fortnight about the matter; off you go this very moment."

"Very well, I'm quite agreeable. Macqueron wants a girl, and I'm sure he'll take me. Good day."

Thereupon Françoise went off without another word. Buteau then threw down the bill-hook which he had been sharpening, and rushed forward in the hope of restoring peace between the two women by the administration of a couple of whacking cuffs. But he was too late, and he could only vent his angry exasperation by dealing a blow at his wife, from whose nose the blood began to stream. The devil take all the women! What he had feared and struggled against so long had come to pass. The girl had taken flight, and now there was a heap of dirty troubles in store for him. He saw in his mind's eye both the girl and the land scampering away from him.

"I'll go to Macqueron's this afternoon," he roared. "She'll have to come back, even if I have to kick her here all the way."

Macqueron's house was in a state of great excitement that Sunday, for one of the candidates, Monsieur Rochefontaine, the proprietor of the building works at Châteaudun, was expected there. Since the last election Monsieur de Chédeville had fallen into disfavour on account, some people said, of his ostentatious friendship with certain members of the Orleanist party; while others asserted that it was owing to his having offended the Tuileries by a scandalous intrigue with the wife of one of the ushers of the Chamber of Deputies, who was quite infatuated about him, despite his age. However this might be, the patronage of the prefect

had certainly been withdrawn from the retiring deputy and conferred upon Monsieur Rochefontaine, the former candidate of the Opposition, whose establishment had just been visited by one of the ministers. Monsieur Rochefontaine had also written a pamphlet on Free Trade, which had been very favourably noticed by the Emperor. As for Monsieur de Chédeville, annoyed at being discarded in this way, he persisted in his candidature, being particularly desirous of retaining his position as deputy, since it enabled him to dabble in financial jobbery. The rental of La Chamade was no longer sufficient for his needs, the place being mortgaged, and in a half-ruined condition. Thus, by a singular chance, the situation of affairs had been reversed--the landowner had become the independent candidate, while the contractor enjoyed the patronage of the Government.

Although Hourdequin was mayor of Rognes he still remained faithful to Monsieur de Chédeville, and had made up his mind not only to ignore any instructions he might receive from official sources, but even to work openly for his candidate's cause, should that be necessary. At first he felt that it was not a manly or honourable thing to veer round like a weather-cock at the slightest breath from the prefect's lips; and then, as this was a struggle between a Protectionist and a Free-trader, he became convinced that, in the present crisis of agricultural affairs, his interests would be better forwarded by the former. The annoyance which Jacqueline caused him, added to the cares and anxieties of his farm, had prevented him for some time past from devoting himself to the duties of his mayoralty. Being always engaged in watching the lascivious wench who, with the luck that so often attaches to wrongdoing, managed to satisfy with impunity her lustful hankering after Iron's brawny manhood, the mayor left his assessor, Macqueron, to attend to current affairs. Consequently, when he again returned to preside over the council, instigated thereto by the personal interest he took in the election, he was astonished to find it rebellious, in fact stiffly hostile.

This was the outcome of Macqueron's underhand intriguing, which, prosecuted with all a copper-skin's craft and wiliness, was at last approaching an issue. Ambition had come to this enriched peasant, who had relapsed into a state of complete idleness, and who dragged himself about dirty and slovenly amid all his gentlemanly leisure, which really bored him to death. And this ambition now formed the one pleasure of his existence. Why should not he himself be mayor? Since that idea had first dawned upon his mind, he had striven to undermine Hourdequin's position, working upon the ingrained, deep-rooted, though perhaps unconscious hatred that all the natives of Rognes in former times had entertained for their lords, and that they now felt for the son of the townsman who to-day possessed the land. Of course he had got it for nothing! It had been nothing more nor less than a robbery at the time of the Revolution. Poor peasants never had such luck. It was only your scamps and scoundrels who managed to fill their pockets in this way. And there were pretty goings-on, too, at La Borderie with the master's infatuation for that hussy La Cognette, in spite of her amours with all the farm-hands.

Talk of this kind was now freely indulged in in the neighbourhood, arousing indignation even among those who would not have hesitated to sell their own daughters to prostitution, or even to commit incest with them themselves, if they had seen their way to profit by so doing. The members of the municipal council said at last that a townsman ought to exercise his thievish and wanton propensities amongst his fellows, and that a peasant-community ought to have a peasant-mayor.

It was in a matter concerning the election that Hourdequin, to his great surprise, first became aware of the council's hostility towards himself. When he began to speak of Monsieur de Chédeville, all the councillors sat as expressionless as so many wooden images. Macqueron, seeing that the mayor meant to keep faithful to the old deputy, had realised that this would be the best question on which he could fight the battle, and it

seemed to him to afford an excellent chance of overthrowing his opponent. Overflowing with zeal, he had set himself on the prefect's side in favour of Monsieur Rochefontaine; loudly asserting that he was doing his duty as became a loyal assessor, and that all honest folks were bound to support the Government. This profession of faith was quite sufficient, and he was under no necessity of indoctrinating the members of the council, for in their fear of the broom they were always on the side of the broom-stick, resolved upon supporting the established powers, so that things might remain unaltered and the price of corn be kept high. These were the views of Delhomme, who had such a reputation for justice and integrity, and he won Clou and others over to his side. It was their duty, he said, to support the Emperor's nominee, for the Emperor knew what he was about and studied the country's interests. The fact that Lengaigne, exasperated to find Macqueron invested with such importance, was Hourdequin's only supporter, ended by fully compromising the mayor. Calumnies soon began to be bandied about, and the farmer was accused of being a "Red," and of holding the same views as the blackguards who wanted a republic, in the hope of exterminating the peasantry. So persistently, indeed, were these reports circulated, that the Abbé Madeline took alarm, and, believing that he owed his cure to the assessor, listened to his talk and worked for Monsieur Rochefontaine, although the bishop himself still supported Monsieur de Chédeville.

A final blow now destroyed every remaining vestige of the mayor's influence. It was reported that, when the famous direct road between Rognes and Châteaudun was opened, Hourdequin had put half of the subvention voted for the highway into his own pocket. How he had been able to do such a thing no one could explain; but this only made the matter more mysterious and abominable. When Macqueron was questioned on the subject, he assumed an air of confusion and reserve, like a man who is compelled to keep silent out of a regard for certain proprieties. The truth was that he himself had set the story afloat, in the

hope of making his own action in the matter--the gratuitous offer of his land, followed by its sale for three times its value--appear in a more favourable light. The whole village was upset, and the municipal council became divided into two parties, one comprising the assessor and all the councillors excepting Lengaigne, while the other was composed of Lengaigne with the mayor, who at this juncture grasped the gravity of the situation for the first time.

A fortnight previously Macqueron had expressly journeyed to Châteaudun for the purpose of prostrating himself before Monsieur Rochefontaine. He had besought him to stay at no other house but his own, if he should condescend to visit Rognes. And this was the reason why the innkeeper, that particular Sunday morning, incessantly went out on to the road on the look-out for the arrival of the candidate. He had forewarned Delhomme, and Clou, and a few other members of the municipal council, and they were emptying a bottle of wine to get the time over. Old Fouan and Bécu were also of the party, playing cards, as well as the schoolmaster, Lequeu, who pretended that he never took anything to drink, and who was deep in the perusal of a newspaper he had brought with him. The assessor was annoyed, however, by the presence of a couple of other customers, Hyacinthe and his friend Canon, the vagabond working-man, who were sitting there opposite to each other gossipping over a bottle of brandy. Macqueron kept casting furtive glances at them, seeking for some excuse to turn them out, but in vain, for the scamps, contrary to their usual wont, were not shouting. They simply seemed to be deriding every one else. Three o'clock struck, and Monsieur Rochefontaine, who had promised to come at about two, had not yet arrived.

"Cœlina!" suddenly cried Macqueron to his wife, "did you bring up the Bordeaux, as I told you just now?"

Cœlina, who was looking after the customers, expressed by a gesture her sorrow for her forgetfulness, whereupon her husband himself rushed off to the cellar. In the next room, where the haberdashery business was carried on, and the door of which was always kept open, Berthe was playing the fine lady, and showing some pink ribbons to three peasant girls; while Françoise, who had already settled down to her new duties, was dusting the drawers with a feather broom, despite the fact that it was Sunday. The assessor, glad of any opportunity that ministered to his craving for authority, had at once taken the girl into his house, flattered by the fact of her seeking his protection. His wife happened to be in want of an assistant, and he undertook to board and lodge Françoise until he could bring about a reconciliation between her and the Buteaus. The girl swore that she would kill herself if she were taken back to their house by force.

A landau, drawn by two superb Percheron horses, now suddenly halted before the door, and Monsieur Rochefontaine, who was its only occupant, alighted, surprised and hurt that there was no one to receive him. He was hesitating about entering the tavern when Macqueron came up from the cellar, holding a bottle in each hand. The sight of the candidate overwhelmed him with confusion and despair. He was at a loss how to get rid of his bottles, and he stammered out:

"Oh, sir, how very unfortunate! I have been waiting for you for two hours without stirring, and then directly I go down into the cellar for a moment you arrive! And it was altogether on your account that I went, too! Will you have a glass of wine, Mr. Deputy?"

Monsieur Rochefontaine, who was as yet only a candidate, and who ought to have been touched by the poor devil's evident trouble, now seemed only the more put out. He was a tall fellow, barely twenty-eight years of age, with closely-cropped hair and squarely-cut beard, and carefully, though not elegantly dressed. His manner was cold and abrupt;

he spoke in a curt, imperious style, and everything about him told of one who was accustomed to command, and of the state of obedience in which he kept the twelve hundred workmen employed in his works. He seemed determined to drive these peasants along as with a whip.

Cœlina and Berthe had darted forward, the latter's bright eyes glistening boldly beneath their reddened lids.

"Please do us the honour of coming in, sir," she said.

The candidate, however, surveying her with a quick glance, had at once estimated her at her worth. Still he entered the house, but refused to sit down, remaining standing.

"Here are some of our friends of the council," said Macqueron, who was beginning to recover his equanimity. "They are delighted to make your acquaintance, I'm sure. Are you not, gentlemen?"

Delhomme, Clou, and the others had risen from their seats, thunderstruck by Monsieur Rochefontaine's stiff demeanour. Their feeling of deference became one of the deepest respect, that awe and cringing humility which every manifestation of superior power and authority awoke in them. In the profoundest silence they listened to what the deputy had decided to tell them; the theories which he held in common with the Emperor, and more especially his ideas about national progress, to which he owed the Government's favour, in preference to the former deputy, whose opinions were condemned. Then he began to promise them new roads, railways, and canals; yes, a canal which would traverse La Beauce, and at last slake the thirst which had been parching it up for centuries. The peasants listened to him in stupefaction. What was he talking about? Water through their fields! He went on for some time longer, and then concluded by threatening those who voted wrongly with the severity of the Government and bad seasons. His listeners looked at one another.

Here, indeed, was a man who could make them tremble, and whom it would be well to have for a friend.

"Of course, of course!" Macqueron kept repeating after each of the candidate's sentences, though, at the same time, he felt a little uneasy at his stern manner.

Bécu, however, wagged his chin energetically in approval of this military kind of speech; and old Fouan, with his eyes wide open, seemed to be declaring that here, indeed, was a man! Lequeu, who usually preserved such an impassible demeanour, had grown very red, though it was impossible to guess whether he felt pleased or angered. It was only different with those two scamps, Hyacinthe and his friend Canon, whose faces plainly expressed contempt, and who felt so vastly superior to their neighbours that they sniggered and shrugged their shoulders.

As soon as Monsieur Rochefontaine had finished speaking, he turned towards the door. The assessor was overwhelmed with despair.

"What, sir, won't you do us the honour of taking a glass of wine?" he cried.

"No, thank you; I am already very late. They are expecting me at Magnolles, at Bazoches, and at a score of other places. Good day!"

Then he was gone. Berthe made no attempt to accompany him to the door. In fact, on returning into the haberdashery shop, she exclaimed to Françoise:

"What an impolite fellow. If I were a man I'd vote for the other one!"

Monsieur Rochefontaine had just got into his landau again, when the cracking of a whip caused him to look round. It was Hourdequin coming up in his modest gig, driven by Jean. The farmer had only heard by chance of the candidate's visit to Rognes, one of his waggoners having met the landau on the road; and he had immediately hastened off to meet

the foe face to face, feeling all the more uneasy as for the last week he had been vainly trying to persuade Monsieur de Chédeville to put in an appearance. The old beau was doubtless tied-fast to some woman's apron-strings, probably those of the pretty wife of the usher of the Chamber.

"Ah, so it's you?" the farmer cried cheerily to Monsieur Rochefontaine. "I didn't know that you had already commenced your campaign."

The two vehicles were drawn up alongside of each other. Neither of the two men got down, but, after bending forward and shaking hands, they settled themselves in their seats, and in this position conversed together for a few minutes. They were acquainted with each other, having occasionally met at breakfast at the house of the mayor of Châteaudun.

"You are opposing me, then?" suddenly asked Monsieur Rochefontaine, in his curt way.

Hourdequin, who, from his position as mayor, did not care to display his opposition to the Government candidate too openly, lost countenance for a moment, seeing that Monsieur Rochefontaine was so well informed.

However, he was by no means deficient in sturdy courage, and he replied in a light and pleasant tone, so as to give a friendly appearance to his explanation:

"Oh, I don't oppose any one. I look after myself; and the man who will protect me is the man for me. Here's corn fallen to forty-six francs the quarter, just what it costs me to produce it. One may just as well starve without giving one's-self the trouble to work!"

The other at once burst out excitedly:

"Oh, I understand; it's Protection you want, isn't it? A tax, a prohibitive duty on foreign wheat, so that French corn may go up to double its present price. Then you'd have France in a state of starvation, the four

pound loaf at a franc, and all the poor folks dying from hunger! How dare you, a man of progress, advocate such a monstrous state of affairs?"

"A man of progress, a man of progress," repeated Hourdequin in his cheery, pleasant fashion. "Yes, certainly, I'm a man of progress, but I have to pay so dearly for progress that I soon shan't be able to afford myself the luxury any longer. Machinery, chemical manures, and all the other new contrivances are all very fine things in their way, I've no doubt, and it's very easy to argue in their favour, but there's just this fault about them, that, in spite of all the logic in the world, they are bringing us to ruin."

"Because you are too impatient, and because you expect science to give you immediate and complete results, and because you grow so discouraged by the necessary preliminary experiments that you even doubt what has been formally proved, and finally fall back into a condition of denying everything."

"Possibly that may be so. I may have only been making experiments. Well, suppose the Government decorates me for what I have already done, and lets some other folks continue the course!"

Hourdequin burst out into a hearty laugh at his own jocoseness, which he seemed to think quite conclusive.

"You wish the working-man to die of hunger, then?" Monsieur Rochefontaine sharply continued.

"Excuse me, I wish the peasant to be able to live."

"But I, who employ twelve hundred hands, can't raise their wages without becoming bankrupt. If corn rose to ninety francs, my workmen would die off like so many flies."

"Well, do you suppose that I don't employ men? With corn at forty-six francs we have to go with empty stomachs, and poor fellows are lying

starving at the bottom of every ditch all over the country-side." Then he added, laughingly:

"Well, every one argues from his own point of view. If I sell you bread at a low price, it is the soil of France that goes into bankruptcy; and if I sell you it at a high price, I can understand very well that the cost of workmanship will go up, and the price of manufactured goods increase, such as my clothes, tools, and the hundred other things that I require. Ah, it's a pretty mess, and we shall end some day by ruining each other all round!"

The two men, the farmer and the manufacturer, the Protectionist and the Free-trader, looked in each other's faces, the one with a sly good-humoured smile, the other with an unflinchingly hostile expression. They furnished a complete example of the modern war of economics, each taking his stand on the struggle for existence.

"The peasant will certainly be compelled to supply the workman with food," said Monsieur Rochefontaine at last.

"To be able to do that," retorted Hourdequin, "he himself must first have something to eat."

Then he sprang down from his gig, and Monsieur Rochefontaine flung the name of some village to his coachman. Macqueron, annoyed that his friends of the council, standing at the door, had heard this conversation, now again proposed that they should all have a glass together, but the candidate once more refused, and without shaking hands with any one, threw himself back in his landau, while the two tall Percheron horses started off at a rattling trot.

Lengaigne, standing at his door on the other side of the road, where he had been setting a razor, had witnessed the whole scene. He now broke into a peal of jeering laughter, and, after a filthy expression, cried out to his neighbour:

"So you had all your trouble for nothing?"

Hourdequin, however, had gone into the tavern, and had accepted a glass of wine; and as soon as Jean had secured the horse to one of the shutters, he followed his master. Françoise quietly beckoned to him to come into the haberdashery shop, and then told him of her departure, and of all that had led to it. The young man was so affected by the girl's story, and so afraid of doing something before the company that might compromise her, that he at once returned into the tavern and sat down on a form, after simply saying that they must see each other again to come to some understanding.

"Well, confound it all," cried Hourdequin, putting down his glass, "you must have pretty stiff digestions if you vote for that youngster!"

His conversation with Monsieur Rochefontaine had decided him to oppose him openly at all risks. He spared him no longer, but compared him with Monsieur de Chédeville, that worthy gentleman who showed no fine airs amongst the peasantry, but was glad to be able to render them any service he could. He was a genuine and true-hearted old-fashioned French nobleman, indeed; while that tall piece of stand-offishness, that mushroom millionaire, looked down at them contemptuously from the height of his grandeur, and even refused to drink a glass of the wine of the district, fearing, no doubt, that it might poison him. It surely wasn't possible that they meant to support him; nobody changed a good sound horse for a blind one.

"What fault have you got to find with Monsieur de Chédeville?" he continued. "For years past he has been your deputy, and has always looked after your interests. And now you desert him for a man whom you looked upon as a scoundrel at the last elections, when the Government opposed him. Confound it all, what are you thinking about?"

Macqueron, who did not want to engage in a direct contest with the mayor, pretended to be busy helping his wife. All the peasants had listened to Hourdequin in stolid silence, without their faces giving the slightest clue as to their secret thoughts. It was Delhomme who answered at last:

"We didn't know him then."

"Ah, but you know him now, this fine fellow! You heard him say that he wanted to see corn cheap, and that he would vote for the importation of foreign corn to bring down the price of our own. I have already explained to you that that means complete ruin for us. After that, you surely can't be such fools as to believe in the fine promises he makes you. When he has once got your votes, you'll soon find him turning round and laughing at you."

A vague smile played over Delhomme's tanned face, and all the latent cunning of his narrow intelligence showed itself in the few sentences which he now slowly spoke.

"He said what he said, and we believe what we believe. He or another--does it much matter? We've only one wish, and that is that the Government should be strong enough so that people may do their business quietly; and the best way of ensuring that is surely to send the Government the deputy it asks for, isn't it? It's enough for us that this gentleman from Châteaudun is the Emperor's friend."

On hearing this last remark Hourdequin felt bewildered. Why, Monsieur de Chédeville himself had been the Emperor's friend at the last election! Oh! the miserable race of serfs that ever belonged to the master who chastised and fed it! To-day, as ever, these fellows were still full of the hereditary humility and egotism, seeing nothing and caring for nothing beyond their meal that day.

"Well," he shouted, "I swear to you by all that's sacred that on the day this Rochefontaine is elected I will send in my resignation. Do they take me for a mere puppet, to say black to-day and white to-morrow? Why, if those blackguards of republicans were at the Tuileries, you'd be on their side, you would indeed!"

Macqueron's eyes glistened brightly. The mayor had just decreed his own fall, for the undertaking which he had given would, in his present state of unpopularity, suffice to make all the country-side vote against Monsieur de Chédeville.

Just at that moment Hyacinthe, who was sitting unnoticed in his corner with his friend Canon, burst into such a loud titter that all eyes were turned upon him. Leaning his elbows on the table, resting his chin in his hands, and grinning contemptuously as he gazed round at the assembled peasants, he cried out:

"A pack of poltroons! a pack of poltroons!"

Just at that moment Buteau came in. In crossing the threshold, his quick eye caught sight of Françoise in the haberdashery shop, and of Jean, sitting against the wall, listening and waiting for his master. Good! the girl and her lover were there, and now they'd see something!

"Ah, here comes my brother, the greatest poltroon of the lot!" exclaimed Hyacinthe.

Threatening expressions were now heard, and the peasants were about to turn their slanderer out of the tavern, when Leroi, otherwise Canon, raised his hoarse voice, which had ranted at all the Socialistic meetings in Paris.

"Hold your jaw, my fine fellow, they're not such fools as they look. Listen to me, now, you other chaps, you peasants. What would you say if a notice should be stuck up on the door of the municipal office, printed in

big letters, and containing this announcement: 'Revolutionary Commune of Paris. First: All taxes are abolished. Second: Military service is abolished.' Well, what would you say to that, you earth-grubbers?"

Canon's words produced such an extraordinary effect that Delhomme, Fouan, Clou, and even Bécu himself sat gaping blankly, with widely staring eyes. Lequeu let his paper fall; Hourdequin, who was leaving the room, came back again; and Buteau, forgetting all about Françoise, sat down on a corner of the table. They all gazed at the ragged fellow, the vagabond tramp who was the terror of the districts he passed through, and who lived upon extorted alms and what he could steal. Only the previous week he had been expelled from La Borderie, where he had appeared in the gloaming like a spectre. It was owing to this that he was now staying with Hyacinthe, pending a fresh disappearance.

"Ah, I see that such an announcement would be welcome," Canon continued gaily.

"Indeed it would!" confessed Buteau. "It was only yesterday that I took a lot of money to the collector again. There's no end to those taxes! The authorities seem to want the very skin off one's body!"

"And what a blessing it would be," exclaimed Delhomme, "if one were not forced to see one's sons marched off! It's costing me a pretty penny, I can tell you, to get my Nénesse exempted."

"And then, if you don't pay," added Fouan, "they take your lads from you and have them shot!"

Canon nodded his head, and grinned in triumph.

"Well, you see that after all those earth-grubbers are not quite such fools as you thought!" he said to Hyacinthe.

Then, turning to the others, he continued:

"They are always telling us that you are Conservatives, and that you wouldn't allow any change. But it's conservative of your own interests that you are, isn't it? You'll let us work, and you'll help in anything to your own advantage. You'd be prepared to do a good deal, wouldn't you, for the sake of keeping your money and your children? Of course you would, or you'd be a set of arrant blockheads."

No one was drinking now, and an uneasy expression began to appear on the peasants' heavy faces. Canon continued his address, revelling beforehand in the effect which he was going to produce.

"And that's why I'm at ease. I've known all about your feelings since you've driven me away from your doors with stones. As that stout gentleman here said, you will all rally to our side, to us, the Reds and the Communists, when we are installed at the Tuileries."

"No, no! indeed no!" cried Buteau, Delhomme, and the others, all at once.

Hourdequin, who had been listening attentively, shrugged his shoulders.

"You're wasting your breath, my good fellow," he said.

Canon, however, still smiled with the confident expression of a believer, and leaning back against the wall, he rubbed first one shoulder and then the other with an air of quiet satisfaction. Then he began to tell them all about the coming revolution, vague mysterious hints of which had been wafted from farm to farm, alarming both masters and servants. Their comrades in Paris, he said, would commence by forcibly assuming the reins of government. There would not be much difficulty about that, and it would not be necessary to shoot as many people as might, perhaps, be expected; all the big bazaar would topple down at the least touch; it was so thoroughly rotten. Then, as soon as they had gained supreme power, they would abolish all payment of rent and confiscate all large fortunes, so that that all the money, as well as all the machinery and plant, would

come into possession of the nation. Then they would reorganise society upon an entirely new basis, making it one vast financial, industrial, and commercial house of business, in which each would have his fair share of work and comfort. In the country districts matters would be still simpler. They would commence by turning out the landowners and taking possession of the soil!

"You'd better try it on!" interrupted Hourdequin. "You'll find yourself received with pitchforks! The poorest little landowner in the country wouldn't let you carry off a handful of his soil!"

"Have I said a word about touching poor folks?" replied Canon, blandly. "No, we are not such fools as to quarrel with the small owners. No, no, we shall not touch the land of the poor fellows who are making a starvation livelihood out of a few acres. It's only the plump gentlemen like yourself, with their four and five hundred acres, who grow rich by the sweat of their labourers, whose possessions we shall confiscate. Ah, confound it, I don't fancy you'll find any of your neighbours coming to your defence with their pitchforks. They'd be only too glad to see you stripped."

Macqueron broke out into a loud laugh, as though he looked upon the whole matter as a joke, and the others followed his example. The farmer turned somewhat pale, feeling that the old hereditary hatred still abode in the peasants' breasts. The scoundrel was right. Every one of all these peasants, even the honestest of them, would help to plunder him of La Borderie.

"But in my case now," asked Buteau, gravely; "I own about a score of acres, shall I be allowed to keep them?"

"By all means, my friend; but later on when you see the results attained in the national farms around you you will certainly come of your own accord, without the least solicitation, and add your own land to them. We

shall do everything on a large scale, with the command of great capital, and all the resources of art and science at our disposal. But that's a matter I don't know so much about. You ought to hear some of the people up in Paris relate how it is that agriculture is hopeless if carried on upon any other basis than this. Yes, you'll come and offer your land of your own accord."

Buteau's face now wore an expression of profound incredulity. He no longer understood Canon, still he felt reassured at being told that he would not be forced to give up anything. As for Hourdequin, his curiosity was excited upon hearing Canon hazily hold forth on the subject of this great scheme of national farming, and he once more lent an attentive ear. The others awaited the finish as if they had been at the theatre. Lequeu, whose pallid face kept flushing crimson, had twice opened his mouth as though he were going to interpose a remark, but each time, like a prudent man, he had withheld it.

"And what is my share to be?" suddenly exclaimed Hyacinthe. "Every one must have his share! Liberty, equality, and fraternity!"

Canon at once lost his temper, and raised his hand as though he were going to strike his friend.

"Hold your row with your liberty, and equality, and fraternity! Does any one need to be free? No, freedom's a farce. You want the gentlefolks to put us into their pockets again, eh? No, no, people must be forced into being happy, whether they will or no! And as for equality and fraternity, would you ever consent to being the equal and the brother of a bailiff? No, no; it was by believing nonsense of that kind that the Republicans of '48 made fools of themselves!"

Hyacinthe, quite at a loss, simply declared that he was in favour of the great Revolution.

"Hold your tongue; you rile me!" cried Canon. "That's your tune, eh? A nice pack of lies always being drummed into our ears! Can that ridiculous farce be compared for a single moment with what we mean to do? You'll see it all when the people are the masters; and it won't be very long coming, all's cracking, and I'll promise you that this century of ours will finish up in a very much prettier fashion than the last one did. There'll be such a sweeping clean-out as has never yet been witnessed!"

All the company shuddered, and even that sot Hyacinthe drew back, alarmed and disgusted at hearing that they were not all to be brothers. Jean, who had hitherto been interested in what was going on, also made a gesture of repulsion. Canon, however, had sprung to his feet, with his eyes glistening, while his face seemed bathed in a prophetic ecstasy.

"And it must come," he cried; "it's fated. It can no more help happening than a stone thrown up in the air can help falling down. And we shall have no more twaddling priests, and stories of another world, and right and justice, things which no one has ever seen any more than they've seen God. No, the only thing we shall concern ourselves about is being perfectly happy. Ah! my fine fellow, we shall arrange matters so that every one shall have the greatest amount of enjoyment with the least possible amount of work. We shall make machinery work for us, and four hours' daily superintendence of it will be the most that will be required. It may be that in time we shall have absolutely nothing to do, and be able to fold our arms in complete idleness. And everywhere there'll be a glut of pleasure; and all our desires will be pampered and satisfied. Yes, there will be meat, and wine, and women galore, and we shall be able to take treble the quantity of pleasure that we can take now, for we shall be stronger and healthier. There will be no more poverty, no more invalids, no more old folks, thanks to our improved organisation, our easier life, our perfect hospitals, and comfortable free homes. It will be an absolute Paradise! All the science in the world will be called into use for our pleasure! And life will then be real enjoyment!"

Buteau, fairly carried away, brought his fist down upon the table with a bang as he shouted:

"No more taxes! no more conscription! no more worries of any sort! nothing but pleasure! Yes, I'm quite willing to sign that programme."

"Certainly," observed Delhomme, sagaciously. "A man would be his own enemy not to sign it."

Fouan also expressed his approval, as did Macqueron, Clou, and the others. Bécu, who, with his authoritative principles, was quite stupefied and overcome, stepped up to Hourdequin, and asked him in a whisper if he ought not to take this blackguard who attacked the Emperor to the lock-up. The farmer, however, calmed him by shrugging his shoulders. Happiness! Ah, yes, they now dreamed of winning it through science, as they had previously dreamed of winning it through right and justice! Perhaps the new theory might be the more logical, but anyway it was not likely to bear the expected fruit yet awhile! The farmer then again prepared to leave, and called to Jean, who was still absorbed in the discussion, but just at that moment Lequeu suddenly yielded to his eager longing to join in the debate. He had for some time past been choking with suppressed rage.

"Take care," he burst out in his shrill voice, "take care that you are not all killed before this fine state of affairs comes off; killed by hunger, or by the bullets of the gendarmes, if starvation should make you refractory----"

The others looked at him without understanding him.

"Nothing can be more certain," he continued, "if corn continues to be imported from America, in a hundred years from now there won't be a single peasant left in all France. Do you think that our land can contend with yonder one? Long before we have had time to put these new plans in

practice, the foreigners will have inundated us with grain. I have read a book which tells all about it. You fellows are all doomed----"

In his angry excitement, he suddenly became aware that all the scared faces were turned towards him; and he did not even finish the sentence he was uttering, but making an angry gesture, pretended to bury himself in his newspaper again.

"The American corn will certainly do for you all," exclaimed Canon, "unless the people take possession of the large holdings."

"And I," said Hourdequin in conclusion, "I tell you again that this American corn must not be allowed to enter the country. And now go and vote for Monsieur Rochefontaine if you are tired of having me for your mayor, and want to see corn at forty-three francs."

He then mounted into his gig, followed by Jean, who exchanged a meaning glance with Françoise. As the young man whipped the horse on, he said to his master:

"It doesn't do to think too much about all those affairs, they would drive one crazy."

Hourdequin signified his approval by nodding his head.

In the tavern, Macqueron was now talking in a low but animated tone with Delhomme, while Canon, who had once more assumed an air of supercilious scorn for everybody, finished the brandy, and ridiculed the snubbed Hyacinthe, dubbing him "Miss Ninety-three." Buteau, waking up from a reverie, now suddenly noticed that Jean had gone away, and he was surprised to see Françoise still standing at the door of the room, where she and Berthe had come to listen to what was going on. He felt annoyed with himself for having wasted his time over politics, when he had serious business on hand. Those wretched politics seemed able to make a man forget everything else. He now entered into a long

conversation with Cœlina, who ultimately prevented him from making an immediate scandal. It would be much preferable, she said, if Françoise returned to his house of her own accord, when they had succeeded in calming her. Then he went off, threatening, however, that he would return to fetch the girl with a rope and a stick, if the Macquerons did not prevail upon her to come back.

On the following Sunday Monsieur Rochefontaine was elected deputy; and Hourdequin having sent in his resignation to the prefect, to avoid being dismissed, Macqueron at last became mayor, and almost burst through the skin in his insolent triumph.

PART IV. — CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VI.

The week passed away, and Françoise still persisted in her refusal to return to her sister's house. There was a terrible scene one day on the road. Buteau, who was dragging the girl away by the hair, was obliged to let go on having his thumb severely bitten. Macqueron then became so alarmed that he turned the girl out of his house, saying that as he was the representative of the law he could not encourage her in her rebellion.

La Grande happened to be passing at the time, and she took Françoise home with her. The old woman was now eighty-eight years of age, but she never thought about dying except as a means of bequeathing to her heirs the worry of endless litigation in reference to her fortune. She had made an extraordinarily complicated will, mixing everything up with absolute delight; and, under the pretext of wronging no one, she had left such directions as would compel the heirs to devour one another. She had done this quite deliberately, feeling a satisfaction in the thought that although she could not take her property with her to the grave, she would at any rate go off with the consolation of having done her very best to set all her relations by the ears. Nothing gave her more pleasure than to see them quarrelling with one another, and this it was that prompted her to take her niece into her own house. Her natural stinginess made her hesitate just for a moment, but she came to a decision at the thought that she would get a large amount of work out of the girl in return for a small amount of food. That very evening, in fact, she made her wash the whole house. When Buteau made his appearance, she stood up and confronted him with her wicked-looking old nose which resembled the beak of some aged bird of prey; and he who had talked of smashing everything at the Macquerons' here began to tremble and stammer, too much paralyzed by

the fear of losing his share of La Grande's property to dare to engage in a struggle with her.

"I want Françoise here," she said, "and I mean to keep her, since she is not comfortable with you. Besides, she is of age now, and you have certain accounts to render her. We shall have to talk about them."

Buteau went off in a furious frame of mind, alarmed at the trouble and annoyance which he realised were in store for him.

Just a week afterwards, indeed, about the middle of August, Françoise at last came of age. She was now her own mistress. By her change of residence, however, she had done little more than change her troubles, for she, also, trembled before her aunt, and was nearly killed by over-work in this cold, parsimoniously-managed house, where everything had to be made shiny without any expenditure upon soap or brushes. Cold water and elbow-grease had to suffice for everything. One day the girl almost got her head cut open by a blow from her aunt's stick, merely for forgetting herself so far as to give the fowls some grain.

Several of the neighbours said that, in her anxiety to spare her horse, La Grande harnessed her grandson Hilarion to the plough; and, even if that was an exaggeration, there was no doubt but that she did treat the lad like a beast of burden, beating him and almost killing him with work, abusing of his great strength to such a degree that he sank down quite worn out with exhaustion, and feeding him so miserably, with mere crusts and leavings, just as though he were a pig, that he was always on the verge of starvation, as well as being stupefied with fear. When Françoise discovered that she was meant to make up the second horse in the pair, her one thought was of how she might get away from the house; and then it was that she suddenly determined to marry.

She was simply prompted by the wish to finish with it all. With her ingrained and obstinate ideas of justice, ideas which even in her

childhood had caused her no little trouble, she would rather have killed herself than have gone back to her sister's. She wanted nothing but justice, she told herself, and she despised herself for having submitted so long. She now made no reference to the swinish Buteau; it was only of her sister that she spoke harshly, saying that if it had not been for her they could still have continued living all together. Now that this rupture had taken place between them, a rupture which could never be healed, she only lived to obtain her property, her share in the inheritance. The thought of this worried her from morning to night, and she went wild on account of the endless formalities that would have to be gone through. What was the good of them all? This is mine! that is yours! Why couldn't the whole thing be settled in a couple of minutes? It could only be, she declared, because every one was in league to rob her. She suspected the whole family, and came to the conclusion that her only means of extricating herself from this predicament was to take a husband.

Jean, certainly, had not got an inch of land, and he was fifteen years her senior. But then no one else had asked for her, and perhaps no one else would have dared to take her, from fear of Buteau, who was so generally dreaded in Rognes that no one cared to have him for an adversary. Then, too, she and Jean had had to do with each other once; though this fact was not of much importance, since it had had no consequences. On the other hand, he was gentle, and kindly, and straightforward. Why not take him, since there was no one else she cared about, and as her only object in marrying was to get some one to defend her interests and to do what she could to enrage Buteau? Yes, she, too, would have a man of her own!

Jean still retained a great affection for her, although with time his lustful desire to possess her had greatly quieted down. But he still adhered to her, and looked upon himself as engaged to her by reason of the promises they had exchanged. He had waited patiently till she was of age, without harassing her to depart from the waiting course she had determined upon, and he had even restrained her from acting in any way against her own

interests while she remained at her sister's. As a result, there was now every reason why all honourable people should be on her side. And, although he blamed her for the tempestuous way in which she had left the Buteaus, he repeated that she now had the game in her hands. Whenever she chose to speak of the other matter he should be ready and willing to hear her.

Their marriage was agreed upon in this wise, one evening when he had come to meet her behind La Grande's cow-house. There was a rotten old gate there, opening into a court, and they were leaning against it, he outside and she inside, with the stream of liquid manure from the stable trickling between their feet.

The girl was the first to refer to the subject.

"If you're still of the same mind, Corporal, I'm willing to consent now," she said, looking him straight in the eyes.

He returned her look, and replied slowly:

"I've not said anything to you about it lately, because it would have seemed as if I wanted your property. But you are right all the same. Now's the time."

Then there was a pause. Jean had laid his hand upon the girl's, which was resting upon the gate. Then he resumed: "You mustn't let any of the neighbours' gossip about La Cognette trouble you. It's three years and more since I even touched her."

"And you," she exclaimed, "you mustn't worry yourself about Buteau. The swine brags everywhere that he has had to do with me. Perhaps you believe it?"

"Everybody in the neighbourhood believes it," Jean murmured, evading a direct reply.

Then, seeing that she was still looking at him, he continued:

"Well, yes, I did believe it. I knew the scoundrel so well, that I didn't see how you could possibly have prevented him."

"Oh, he tried often enough, and I suffered dreadfully at his hands; but if I swear to you that he never gained his ends, will you believe me?"

"Yes, I believe you."

Then, in token of his pleasure, he closed his fingers round her hand, and kept it pressed in his own as he stood with his arm resting on the gate. Noticing that the dribbling stream from the stable was wetting his boots, he set his legs apart.

"You seemed to stick on there so persistently," he continued, "that it almost appeared as though you enjoyed his buffetings."

The girl felt ill at ease, and her frank, straightforward gaze was lowered.

"And the more so," he added, "as you wouldn't have anything more to do with me. Well, it's all the better now, isn't it? That baby I so wanted still remains to come. It's altogether more respectable, too."

He stopped to tell her that she was standing in the dirty stream.

"Take care; you are wetting your feet."

She took them out of the slush, and then observed:

"We are agreed about it, then?"

"Yes, we are agreed. Choose any time you like."

They did not even kiss each other, but just shook hands across the gate like a couple of friends. Then they went off in opposite directions.

When Françoise informed her aunt that same evening of her intention to marry Jean, explaining to her her need of a husband to assist her in

recovering her property, La Grande at first made no reply. She sat stiffly in her chair with her eyes widely opened, calculating the loss and gain and pleasure which she was likely to derive from the marriage, and it was only the next day that she expressed her approval of it. She had been thinking the matter over all night long as she lay on her straw mattress, for she slept very little now, and would lie with open eyes till day dawned, plotting how she might make things disagreeable for the different members of her family. This marriage seemed to her to be so pregnant with unpleasant consequences for everybody, that she longed to see it come off with quite a youthful feverishness. She could already foresee even the smallest among the numerous vexations which would arise from it, and she was scheming how she might embitter them, and render them as fatal as possible. She was so pleased, indeed, that she told her niece that she would take the whole matter upon herself for affection's sake. She emphasised the word by a terrible shake of her stick. Since the others had cast the girl off, she would take the place of her mother, and folks would see how she managed matters.

As a first step, La Grande summoned her brother Fouan to talk to him about the accounts of the guardianship. The old man, however, could not give her any information. It wasn't his doing, he said, that he had been appointed guardian, and as Monsieur Baillehache had managed everything, he ought to be applied to. Moreover, when he discovered that the old woman was bent upon annoying the Buteaus, he affected still greater bewilderment. Age, and the consciousness of his weakness, filled him with uneasy alarm for himself; he felt that he was at everybody's mercy. Why should he quarrel with the Buteaus? He had twice almost made up his mind to return to them after nights of quaking fear, during which he had seen Hyacinthe and La Trouille ferreting about his room, and even thrusting their bare arms under his bolster, trying to rob him of his papers. He felt quite convinced that he would be murdered some night or other at the Château if he did not escape from it.

La Grande, being unable to glean anything from him, dismissed him in a state of great alarm, shouting out that he should be prosecuted if he had tampered with the girl's property. Then she attacked Delhomme, as a member of the family council, and gave him such a fright that he went home ill, Fanny coming at once to tell the old woman that they would prefer paying money down to being worried with law-suits. La Grande chuckled. The game was beginning to be very amusing!

The question she now set herself to solve was whether the division of the property should be pressed forward as the next step, or whether the marriage should take place first. She pondered over it for two nights, and pronounced in favour of an immediate marriage. Françoise, married to Jean and claiming her share of the property, assisted by her husband, would anger the Buteaus extremely. She then hurried things forward, seeming to regain the nimble activity of youth, and she busied herself about obtaining the necessary documents on behalf of Françoise, and made Jean give her his. Then she made all the arrangements both for the civil and religious weddings, and her eagerness even carried her so far that she advanced the necessary money, taking care, however, to obtain in exchange for it a receipt signed by both Jean and Françoise--a receipt in which the sum advanced was doubled by way of providing for the interest. The glasses of wine which she was forced to offer to the guests during the preparations wrenched her heart-strings more than anything else, but as she was provided with her vinegary liquid, her "gnat destroyer," folks were not pressing in this respect. She decided that there should be no wedding feast on account of the divided state of the family. After the mass they would merely just swallow a glass of the "gnat destroyer," by way of drinking the health of the newly-married pair.

Monsieur and Madame Charles, who were invited, excused themselves on the ground that they were greatly worried on account of their son-in-law, Vaucogne. Fouan, who was in a most uneasy state of mind, went off to bed, and sent a message saying that he was ill. The only

relation present was Delhomme, who consented to act as one of Françoise's witnesses, to mark the esteem which he felt for that steady fellow, Jean. The latter, on his side, only brought his witnesses--his master, Hourdequin, and one of the farm-hands, a companion. Rognes was topsy-turvy, and at every doorway people watched for this wedding, which had been so energetically pushed forward, and which seemed likely to provoke so much quarrelling and fighting.

At the ceremony at the municipal offices Macqueron, inflated with self-importance, went through the formalities, in presence of the ex-mayor, in an exaggerated manner. At the church there was a painful incident. The Abbé Madeline fainted while he was saying mass. He was not feeling well. He regretted his native mountains since he had begun to live in flat La Beauce, and he was extremely distressed by the indifference of his new parishioners for religion, and so upset by the continued chattering and squabbling of the women, that he no longer dared even to threaten them with hell. They had realised that he was of a yielding disposition, and they took advantage of this to tyrannise over him even in religious matters. However, Cœlina, and Flore, and all the other women present at the ceremony, expressed extreme sorrow for his having fallen with his nose against the altar, and they declared that it was an omen of misfortune and approaching death for the bride and bridegroom.

It had been settled that Françoise should continue to live at La Grande's till she had received her share of the property; for, with her characteristic determination, she had quite made up her mind that she would have the house. So what was the good of taking one elsewhere just for a fortnight or so? Jean, who was to retain his post as waggoner at the farm, would in the meantime join her every evening. Their wedding night was a very sad and stupid one, though they were glad to be at last together. When Jean took his wife in his arms, she began to sob so violently that she almost choked: not that he used the least roughness towards her; on the contrary,

he treated her with the utmost gentleness. In reply to his questions she told him, still sobbing bitterly, that she had no complaint to make against him, but that she could not help crying, though she did not know why she was doing so. Such a wedding night as this was not calculated to make a man very ardent. Though he embraced her and held her clasped in his arms, a feeling of troubled constraint seemed to have come between them. Apart from that they got on very well together, and being unable to sleep, they spent the remainder of the night in speculating as to how their affairs would progress, when they got hold of the house and land.

The next morning Françoise was anxious to demand her share of the property. But La Grande now showed no great hurry to have the matter settled. She wanted to make her spiteful enjoyment last as long as possible, bleeding her relations by slow degrees with pin-thrusts; and then, again, she profited too much by the services of Françoise and her husband, who paid the rent of the bedroom by two hours' work every evening, to be anxious to see them leave her and establish themselves in a house of their own.

It was necessary, however, to ask the Buteaus how they proposed to divide the property. La Grande, on behalf of her niece, claimed the house, half the arable land, and half the meadow, foregoing the half of the vineyard as a set-off against the house, estimating it as being of the same value. It was a very fair proposal, and if matters had been thus arranged in a friendly way, a recourse to the law, which always retains a good slice of everything it gets hold of, would have been avoided. Buteau, whom La Grande's arrival had revolutionised--he was forced to be respectful with her on account of her money--dared not listen any longer, but rushed out of the room, afraid lest he might so far forget his own interests as to strike the old woman.

Lise who was left alone with her, and whose ears were red with anger, stammered out:

"The house, indeed! She wants the house, does she? this heartless hussy, this good-for-nothing who has got married without even coming to see me! Well, aunt, you can tell her from me that if ever she gets this house it will only be because I'm dead!"

La Grande remained perfectly calm.

"All right, all right, my child. There's no occasion to get excited. You also want the house. Well, you have an equal right to it. We will see what is to be done."

For the next three days the old woman went backwards and forwards from one sister to the other, reporting to each of them all the abuse which the other had indulged in, and exasperating them to such a degree that both of them almost took to their beds. La Grande, unwearying in her embassies, impressed upon them how great her affection for them was, and what an amount of gratitude they owed her for undertaking this unpleasant task. It was finally settled that the land should be divided between the two sisters, but that the house, the furniture, and the live stock should be sold, since they could not agree about them. Both the sisters swore that they would buy the house, even if they had to part with their last chemise to do it.

So Grosbois came to survey the land and divide it into two lots. There were two and a half acres of meadow land, about the same amount of vineyard, and about five acres of plough land. It was this latter that Buteau, since his marriage, had been so determined to retain, for it adjoined a field of his own which he had obtained from his father, and the two plots together made up a parcel of between seven and eight acres, such as no other peasant in all Rognes possessed. He was, consequently, full of bitter wrath when he saw Grosbois setting up his square and sticking his poles into the ground. La Grande was there superintending, but Jean had thought it best not to be present, fearing that there might be a fight if he came. As it was, there was an angry discussion. Buteau

wanted the line of division to be drawn parallel to the valley of the Aigre, so that his wife's share might still adjoin his own field; while La Grande, on the other hand, insisted that the line should be drawn perpendicularly, asserting that this was the way in which the family property had always been divided for centuries past. The old woman won the day, and Buteau clenched his fists and almost choked with suppressed rage.

"Curse it! Why, if the first lot falls to me," he blurted out, "my land will be cut up into two pieces. There will be this piece in one place, and my own field in another."

"Well, my lad," rejoined the old woman, "you must draw the lot that suits you best."

For a month past Buteau had been in a state of the angriest excitement. In the first place, Françoise was escaping him. He had become quite ill with longing desire, now that he was no longer able to seize hold of the girl as he had been wont to do, and to obstinately hope on that he would succeed in effecting his purpose some day or other. And, now that she was married, the thought that another man could do as he pleased with her, ended by putting him in a perfect fever. And then this other man was now trying to get his land into his possession, too. He felt that he would as soon lose a limb. The girl he might, perhaps, have, but not the land; the land which he, Buteau, had always looked upon as his own, and with which he had sworn never to part! He began to indulge in the most bloodthirsty thoughts, and ransacked his brains for some method by which he might be able to keep the land, dreaming vaguely of murders and acts of violence, which only his terror of the gendarmes prevented him from committing.

At last a meeting was arranged at Monsieur Baillehache's office, at which Buteau and Lise, for the first time since the marriage, again found themselves in the presence of Françoise and Jean, whom La Grande had accompanied for the pleasure of the thing, and under the pretext of seeing

that nothing wrong was done. The five of them went into the private office in silence, comporting themselves stiffly. The Buteaus seated themselves on the right. On the left, Jean remained standing behind Françoise's chair, as though to express that he was not of the meeting, but had simply come to support his wife. The aunt, tall and scrawny, sat down in the middle, turning her round eyes and her hawk-like beak first on one couple and then on the other with a satisfied air. The two sisters did not even appear to know each other. They sat there with a hard expression on their faces, without exchanging a single word or look. The men, however, had given one another a rapid glance, gleaming and penetrating like a dagger thrust.

"Now, my friends," said Monsieur Baillehache, who remained calm amid all these expressions of murderous hate, "we are first of all going to finish with the division of the land, upon which subject we are now quite agreed."

He then made them affix their signatures forthwith. The parchment was already engrossed, blanks being left after the names of the parties for the description of the various parcels, and they all had to sign before the lots were drawn, which ceremony was immediately proceeded with, in order to prevent any trouble.

Françoise, having drawn number two, number one was, of course, left for Lise, and Buteau's face turned quite purple from the angry surging of his blood. Luck was always against him! Here was his land cut atwain, and this hussy and her man had their share between his two parcels!

"The devil take and confound them all!" he growled from between his clenched teeth.

The notary requested him to restrain his feelings till he got into the street again.

"This will cut up our land," remarked Lise, without turning towards her sister. "Perhaps we might be able to make an exchange. It would suit us better, and be to no one's disadvantage."

"No!" said Françoise, drily.

La Grande nodded her approval. It would bring bad luck to interfere with the ruling of chance. The result of the drawing made the old woman gay. As for Jean, who was still standing behind his wife, he seemed so determined to hold himself aloof from the proceedings that he had not moved, and his face was a perfect blank.

"Come now, let us finish with it all," said the notary.

The two sisters had, by common consent, deputed him to arrange for the sale of the house and furniture and live stock. The sale was advertised to take place in his office on the second Sunday in the month, and the conditions of the sale stated that the purchaser could have the right of entering into possession on the same day. When the sale was over, the notary would at once proceed to balance accounts between the two co-heiresses. The different parties concerned signified their approval of all this by silently nodding their heads.

Just at this moment, however, Fouan, who had been summoned to attend the meeting as Françoise's guardian, was introduced by a clerk, who prevented Hyacinthe from coming in at the same time, on account of his intoxicated condition. Although more than a month had elapsed since Françoise had attained her majority, the accounts of the guardianship had not yet been rendered; and this fact tended to complicate matters. It was necessary for the accounts to be passed before the old man could be released from his responsibility. He looked first at one party, and then at the other, straining his little eyes, and trembling with increasing fear lest he should find himself compromised and given up to justice.

An abstract of the accounts had been prepared, and it was read by the notary. They all listened to it attentively, full of uneasy anxiety, since they could not completely understand, and fearing that if they let a word pass unheard that very word would somehow bring them into trouble.

"Have you any observations to make, any of you?" asked the notary when he had finished reading the abstract.

They all looked bewildered. What observations? Perhaps they had forgotten something, and were allowing themselves to be robbed.

"Excuse me," La Grande suddenly interposed, "but this by no means suits Françoise. My brother must be intentionally shutting his eyes if he can't see that the girl's being defrauded."

"I! what? eh?" stammered Fouan. "I haven't taken a copper of hers, so help me God!"

"I say that Françoise, since her sister's marriage, now nearly five years ago, has been employed as her servant, and that she is entitled to wages."

Buteau sprang up from his seat at this unexpected demand, and Lise almost choked with anger.

"Wages!" she cried; "wages to a sister! That is too ridiculous!"

Monsieur Baillehache hushed them, and declared that the girl was perfectly entitled to claim wages if she chose to do so.

"Yes, I do claim them," said Françoise; "I wish to have everything that is my due."

"But then you must take all her food into account!" cried Buteau, wild with excitement. "She makes short work with bread and meat! Just you feel her, and say if you think that she's got as fat as that on air!"

"And then there's her linen and dresses!" Lise added furiously; "and her washing! Why, she used to sweat so much that she'd soil a chemise in a couple of days."

"If I sweated like that," replied Françoise, with annoyance, "it was because I worked so hard."

"Sweat dries and doesn't soil," interposed La Grande, curtly.

Monsieur Baillehache again intervened. He told them that a debtor and creditor account would have to be drawn up, the wages on one side and the board and lodging and other expenses on the other. Then he took a pen, and made an attempt to draw up a statement from the information they gave him. It was a terrible business. Françoise, backed up by La Grande, showed herself very exacting, setting a high price upon her services, and detailing at length all that she had done while she was with the Buteaus: her work in the household, and with the cows, and out in the fields, where her brother-in-law had made her labour like a man. The exasperated Buteaus, on the other hand, swelled out the list of expenses as much as possible, counting up every meal, telling lies about the girl's clothes, and claiming even the money which had been spent in presents for her on fête-days. But, despite all they could do, they found themselves with a balance of a hundred and eighty-six francs against them. Their hands trembled and their eyes blazed as they tried to think of something else that they might charge for.

The statement was about to be passed when Buteau suddenly cried out:

"Stop a moment. There's the doctor. He came twice when she was out of sorts; that makes another six francs."

La Grande was by no means inclined to let the others enjoy this victory undisturbed, and she stirred up old Fouan to make him recollect how many days' work the girl had done on the farm while he was living in the house. Was it five days or six, at a franc and a half the day? Françoise

cried six, and Lise cried five, hurling the words at each other's heads as though they had been stones. The distracted old man now supported one and then the other, tapping his forehead with his fists. Françoise, however, carried the day, and there was now a balance to her credit of a hundred and eighty-nine francs.

"Well, is everything included now?" asked the notary.

Buteau seemed quite crushed and overwhelmed with this ever-increasing liability, and no longer struggling, he sat there hoping that affairs had now seen their worst.

"I'll take off my shirt if they want it," he groaned in a doleful voice.

La Grande, however, had kept a last terrible bolt in reserve. It was a very important and simple matter, which everybody seemed to have forgotten.

"And then there's the five hundred francs compensation for the road up yonder."

Buteau now sprang wildly to his feet, his eyes projecting out of his head, and his mouth wide open. He could say nothing, however; no discussion was possible. He had received the money, and was bound to hand half of it over. For a moment he ransacked his brains for something to say, but he could not think of anything at all; and in the wild anger that was rising and making his head throb, he suddenly rushed forward at Jean.

"You filthy blackguard!" he cried, "it is you who killed our friendship! If it hadn't been for you, we should still have all been living together in peace and quiet!"

Jean, who had very sensibly preserved silence, was now forced to assume an attitude of defence.

"Keep off!" he said, "or I'll strike."

Françoise and Lise had hastily sprung up and planted themselves in front of their respective husbands, their faces swollen by their gradually accumulating hatred, and their nails outstretched and ready to tear each other's faces. A general engagement, which neither Fouan nor La Grande seemed inclined to prevent, would certainly have taken place, and caps and hair would soon have been flying about, if the notary had not thrown off his professional calmness.

"Confound it all!" he cried, "wait till you've got outside. It's disgusting that you can't settle your accounts without fighting!"

Then as the quivering antagonists quieted down, he added: "You are now agreed, I think, eh? Well, I will have the accounts made out in proper form, and then, when they have been signed, we will proceed to the sale of the house, and get the whole matter done with. Now you can go, and mind you are careful. Folly sometimes turns out very expensive!"

This remark finished pacifying them. As they were leaving, however, Hyacinthe, who had been waiting outside for his father, attacked the whole family, and roared out that it was a foul shame to involve a poor old man in their dirty business for the sake of robbing him, no doubt; and then, as his drunkenness made him affectionate, he took his father away, as he had brought him, in a cart, bedded with straw, which he had borrowed from a neighbour. The Buteaus went off on one side, while La Grande pushed Jean and Françoise towards "The Jolly Ploughman," where she had herself treated to some black coffee. She was radiant.

"At any rate I've had a good laugh!" she exclaimed, as she put the remains of the sugar into her pocket.

La Grande had another idea that same day. When she got back to Rognes, she hurried off to make an arrangement with old Saucisse, who had once been a lover of hers, so folks declared. The Buteaus having threatened to bid against Françoise for the house, even though it cost them all they

possessed, it had occurred to her that if Saucisse bid on Françoise's behalf the others might not have any suspicions, but let him secure the house; he was their neighbour and might very well wish to enlarge his premises. In consideration of a present the old man immediately consented to do as he was asked.

On the second Sunday of the month, when the sale came off, matters turned out just as La Grande had foreseen. Once more the Buteaus were seated on one side of Monsieur Baillehache's office, and Françoise and Jean and La Grande on the other. There were also various other people there, some peasants, who had come with a vague idea of bidding, if things went very cheaply. After four or five bids from Lise and Françoise, the house stood at three thousand five hundred francs, which was just about its value. When they got to three thousand eight hundred, Françoise stopped. Then old Saucisse came upon the scene, pushed the bidding up to four thousand francs, and then on to an additional five hundred. The Buteaus looked at each other in consternation. They felt as though they could really go no higher; the thought of such a large sum of money quite froze their blood. Lise, however, let herself be carried away as far as five thousand francs; but then the old man quite crushed her by immediately bidding five thousand two hundred. That settled the business, and the house was knocked down to him for the five thousand two hundred francs. The Buteaus sniggered. It would be very pleasant to handle their share of this big sum of money, now that Françoise and her filthy blackguard of a husband had failed to get the house.

However, when Lise, upon her return to Rognes, once more entered the old house where she had been born and where she had hitherto lived, she burst into tears. Buteau, also, was dreadfully cut up and down-hearted, and he relieved his feelings by falling foul of his wife; swearing that if he had had his own way he would have parted with the last hair on his head rather than have let the house go. But your heartless women, he cried, refused to open their purses, except it were for self-indulgence. In this,

however, he was lying, for it was he himself who had held Lise back. Then they got to blows. Ah! The poor old patrimonial abode of the Fouans, built by an ancestor three hundred years previously, and now crazy and cracked, mended and patched in every part, sunken and thrown forward by the sweeping winds of La Beauce! To think that the family had lived in it for three hundred years, that they had grown to love it and honour it as a holy relic, and that it was counted as a leading item in the inheritances! Buteau, at the thought of losing it, knocked his wife down with a back-hander, and when she struggled up again she kicked him so violently that she nearly broke his leg.

On the evening of the next day matters were even worse--the thunderbolt fell. Old Saucisse had gone in the morning to complete the sale, and by noon all Rognes knew that he had bought the house on behalf of Françoise, with her husband's authorisation; and not only the house, but the furniture also, and Gédéon and La Coliche. There was a howl of anguish and distress at the Buteaus', as though lightning had stricken them. Husband and wife threw themselves upon the ground, and roared and wept in their wild despair at finding themselves defeated, outwitted, by that hussy of a girl. What maddened them, perhaps, more than anything else, was the knowledge that the whole village was laughing at them for their lack of penetration. To be fooled in this way, and turned out of their own house by such a trick! No, indeed, it was too much! They would not submit to it!

When La Grande presented herself the same evening on Françoise's behalf, and politely inquired of Buteau when it would be convenient for him to give up possession, he thrust her out of the house, casting all prudence to the winds and only making use of a foul expression.

The old woman went off chuckling, simply remarking that she would send the bailiff. The next day, indeed, Vimeux, with a pale, uneasy face, and looking more pitiable than usual, came up the street and gently

knocked at the door, anxiously watched by all the gossips in the neighbouring houses. No notice was taken of his knock, and he gave a louder one, and even summoned up enough courage to call out and explain that he had come to serve a notice to quit. Then the window of the garret was opened, and a voice roared out the same foul word as had been addressed to La Grande; while the contents of a chamber utensil were flung upon Vimeux, who, soaked from head to foot, had to go off without serving the notice. For a whole month Rognes roared over his adventure.

La Grande, however, now immediately went off to Châteaudun with Jean, to consult a lawyer. The latter explained to her that at least five days would be necessary before the Buteaus could be ejected. Complaint would have to be formally laid; then an order would have to be obtained from the presiding judge; this order would then have to be registered, and then the ejectment would take place, the bailiff being assisted by the gendarmes, if necessary. La Grande tried hard to get matters settled a day sooner, and when she returned to Rognes--it was then Tuesday--she told every one that on the Saturday evening the Buteaus would be turned into the street at the point of the sword like thieves, if they did not voluntarily take themselves off in the meantime.

When this was repeated to Buteau, he made a threatening gesture and told every one he met that he would never leave the house alive, and that the soldiers would have to break down the walls before they dragged him out. His fury acquired such an extravagant character that the whole neighbourhood was at a loss to know whether he was pretending to be mad, or really was so. He passed wildly along the roads, standing in the front of his cart, and keeping his horse at the gallop, without replying when he was spoken to or warning the foot passengers. He was met at nights, too, how in one part of the neighbourhood, now in another, returning from nobody knew where, possibly from seeing the fiend. One man who had ventured up to him had received a heavy cut from his whip.

He spread terror abroad, and the whole village was soon constantly on the look-out. One morning it was seen that he had barricaded the house, and terrible cries were heard from behind the closed doors, piteous howls in which the neighbours fancied they could distinguish the voices of Lise and her two children, Laure and Jules. The whole neighbourhood was revolutionised, and took counsel together as to what should be done; with the result that an old peasant risked his life by raising a ladder to one of the windows, in view of climbing up to see what was going on inside. Buteau, however, opened the window, and overturned both the ladder and the old man, the latter almost having his legs broken. Couldn't a chap be left alone in his own house? Buteau roared as he shook his fists, and he threatened to murder everybody if they made any further attempt to interfere with him. Lise also appeared with her two children, and gave utterance to a flood of virulent language, abusing her neighbours for poking their noses into what did not concern them. After that no one dared to make any further attempt at interference; but the general alarm increased at every fresh outburst, and people shuddered as they listened to the dreadful uproar. The more cynical fellows thought that Buteau was only acting, but others swore that he had gone off his nut, and that some terrible result would ensue. The truth, however, was never known.

On the Friday, the day before the Buteaus were to be ejected, another scene caused great emotion. Buteau, having met his father near the church, began to cry like a calf, kneeling down on the ground in front of the old man, and asking pardon of him for all his previous misconduct. It was probably owing to that, he said, that his present troubles had come upon him. He besought his father to return to live with him, seeming to think that this alone could put fortune again on his side. Fouan, worried by all this braying, and amazed by his son's seeming repentance, promised to entertain the proposal some day, when all the family worries were over.

At last the Saturday arrived. Buteau's excitement had gone on increasing, and from morn to night he was ever harnessing and unharnessing his horse again without the slightest reason. Folks fled out of the way when they saw him driving furiously along, full of consternation at the sight of all this aimless rushing about. At about eight o'clock on the Saturday morning Buteau once more put his horse between the shafts, but did not leave his premises. He took up his stand at the door, calling out to every one who passed by, sniggering and sobbing and yelling out his troubles in coarse language. Oh, it was a nice thing, wasn't it? to be made a fool of by a young hussy who'd been his keep for the last five years! Yes, she was a strumpet, and so was his wife! Yes, a couple of fine strumpets, who fought together as to which of them he should belong. He continued harping upon this lie, inventing all kinds of nasty details out of spite and revengeful bitterness. Lise having come to the door, there was another atrocious scene between them. Buteau thrashed her in sight of everybody, and then sent her back again, limp and subdued, while he himself felt relieved by the hiding he had given her. He still remained at the door on the look-out for the agents of the law, which he jeered at and reviled. Had the law stopped on the way to make a beast of herself? he cried. At last, no longer expecting the bailiff, he became triumphant.

It was not till four o'clock that Vimeux made his appearance, accompanied by a couple of gendarmes. Buteau turned pale, and hastily closed the yard door. Possibly he had believed that matters would never be pushed to an extremity. A death-like silence fell upon the house. Protected by armed men, Vimeux was now quite insolent, and knocked at the door with his two fists. No answer was vouchsafed. Then the gendarmes came forward and made the old door shake with the butts of their guns. A crowd of men, women, and children had followed them; all Rognes was there, waiting to see the siege. Then suddenly the door was thrown open again, and Buteau was seen, standing in the front of his cart,

and lashing his horse forward. He came out at a gallop, right into the midst of the assembled crowd.

"I'm going to drown myself! I'm going to drown myself!" he bellowed out amid the cries of alarm.

It was all up, and he was going to make an end of it by hurling himself and his horse and cart into the Aigre!

"Look out, there," he shouted; "I'm going to drown myself!"

Fright dispersed the inquisitive folks, as Buteau lashed his whip and the cart rushed wildly out. However, just as he was going to dash down the slope, at the risk of smashing the wheels of the vehicle, several men ran forward to arrest his course. The obstinate fool was quite capable of making the plunge, they cried, just for the sake of annoying people! They caught him up, but there was a struggle; while some sprang to the horse's head others had to climb into the cart. When they led him back to the house again, he clenched his teeth and stiffened his whole body, but said not a single word, letting fate take its course, with no other protest save the silence of impotent anger.

La Grande now made her appearance with Françoise and Jean, whom she was bringing to take possession of the house. Buteau contented himself with staring at them with the sombre gaze with which he now watched the completion of his misfortune. Lise, however, began to cry out and struggle, as though she were mad. The gendarmes had ordered her to take what belonged to her and quit the premises. There was nothing left for her but to obey, since her husband was poltroon enough, she cried, to stand by without striking a blow in her defence. With her arms a-kimbo, she began to abuse him.

"You craven! to stand by and allow us to be turned into the street in this way! You haven't got any pluck, eh? Why don't you hit the swine! Get out of my sight, you coward! You're no man!"

As she went on yelling all this in his face, exasperated by his quiescent demeanour, he at last gave her such a violent shove that she moaned. However, he still persisted in his silence, and merely glowered at her with his sombre eyes.

"Come now, look sharp," cried Vimeux, triumphantly, "We shan't go away till you have given up the keys to the new owners."

Lise thereupon began to remove her goods in a wild paroxysm of rage. During the last three days she and Buteau had already transferred a great many things, tools and implements, and the larger domestic utensils, to the house of their neighbour, La Frimat. It was indeed evident that they had really anticipated the ejection, for they had made arrangements with the old woman to have the use of her house till they had time to settle down again. The place was too big for La Frimat, who merely retained the bedroom to which her paralysed husband was confined.

As the furniture and live-stock had been sold together with the house, Lise merely had to remove her linen, her mattresses, and a few other trifling articles. Everything was tossed out of the door and windows into the middle of the yard, while the two little ones yelled as though they thought that their last day had come, Laure clinging to her mother's skirts, while Jules, who had tumbled down, was wallowing in the midst of the ejected property. As Buteau made no attempt to assist his wife, the gendarmes, like good fellows, began to place the bundles in the cart, which was still standing in front of the door.

However, the row commenced all over again when Lise caught sight of Françoise and Jean, standing beside La Grande. She rushed forward and gave free flow to all her accumulated wrath and spite.

"Ah, you filthy cat, you've come to look on with your tom, have you? Yes, feast your eyes on our trouble! It's just as though you were drinking our blood! You thief! you thief! you thief!"

She almost choked as she shouted this last word, which she hurled again at her sister every time she came out into the yard with some fresh burden. Françoise did not reply. She was very pale, her lips were closely pressed together, and her eyes seemed to be on fire. But soon she assumed an air of suspicious watchfulness, and gazed at everything that was brought out, as though she wished to make sure that nothing belonging to herself was taken away. Presently her eye fell upon a kitchen-stool which had been included in the sale.

"That belongs to me," she exclaimed in a rough voice.

"Belongs to you, does it?" replied her sister; "go and fetch it, then!" and she hurled the stool into the pond.

The house was at last evacuated. Buteau took hold of the horse's bridle, while Lise picked up her two children, her two last bundles, Jules in her right arm and Laure in the left. Then, as she finally left her home, she stepped up to Françoise and spat in her face.

"There! take that for yourself!"

Her sister immediately spat back at her.

"And you take that!"

After these farewell words, the offspring of their bitter hatred, Lise and Françoise slowly wiped their faces, without taking their eyes off one another. They were sundered for ever now; there was henceforth nothing in common between them save their kindred blood, which surged with such hot hate.

Finally, Buteau opened his mouth again to roar out the order to start, which he coupled with a threatening gesture in the direction of the house.

"It won't be long before we come back again!"

La Grande followed them to see the end of it all; and, indeed, now that the Buteaus were completely overthrown, she resolved to turn against Françoise and Jean, who had left her so speedily, and whom she already found much too happy together. For a long time the villagers continued standing about in groups, talking to each other in undertones. Françoise and Jean had entered the empty house.

While the Buteaus were unloading their bundles at La Frimat's they were amazed to see old Fouan appear. With a frightened look, and glancing behind him as though he was afraid of being pursued, he asked: "Is there a corner here for me? I have come to sleep here."

He had just fled in terror from Hyacinthe's. For a long time past whenever he awoke during the night he always saw that bony creature La Trouille prowling in her chemise about his room, searching for the papers, which he had now taken the precaution to conceal out-of-doors in a hole in a rock, which he had stopped up with earth. The girl was sent on this errand by her father on account of her light suppleness, and she glided about with bare feet just like a snake, insinuating herself everywhere, between the chairs and under the bed. She evinced the greatest enthusiasm in the search, feeling certain that the old man placed the papers somewhere about his person when he dressed himself, and exasperated that she could not discover where he hid them on going to bed. She had convinced herself that he did not put them in the bed itself, for she had felt everywhere with her slender arm, with such skilful dexterity that Fouan had scarcely known that she had touched him. On that particular day, however, soon after breakfast, he had had a fainting fit, falling against the table in a state of unconsciousness; and, as he came to himself again, still so overcome that he kept his eyes closed, he realised that he was lying on the ground near where he had fallen, and he could feel that Hyacinthe and La Trouille were undressing him. Instead of doing what they could to bring him round, the wretches had had but one idea, that of at once profiting by the fit to search him. La Trouille

manifested an angry roughness in her search, not going about it in her wonted gentle manner, but pulling roughly at his jacket and trousers, and even examining every corner of his flesh to make sure that he had not concealed his treasure there. She turned him round, and then, stretching out his limbs, she searched him as though she were ransacking some old bag. Nothing! Where could he have hidden the papers? It was enough to make one cut him open and look inside!

The old man was in such terror lest he should be murdered if he moved that he still feigned unconsciousness, and kept his eyes closed and his legs and arms rigid. But as soon as he found himself free again he fled, firmly resolved never to spend another night at the Château.

"Tell me, can you give me a corner?" he asked again.

Buteau's spirits seemed to revive at his father's unexpected return. It was money that was coming back.

"Certainly I can, dad! We'll squeeze together to find a corner for you. It will bring us luck, too. Ah, I should be a rich man, if merely a good heart were needed to make one so!"

Françoise and Jean had slowly entered the empty house. The night was closing in, and the rooms lay silent in the mournful, fading light. Everything there was very old. This patrimonial roof had sheltered the toil and wretchedness of three centuries, and there was an air of solemnity about the place such as dwells in the gloom of an ancient village church. The doors were still standing open. It seemed as though a storm of wind had blown through the house; the chairs lay overturned on the ground amid the general chaos of the removal. The place looked as though it were dead.

Françoise slowly went over it, examining every corner. Vague recollections and confused sensations awoke in her as she proceeded. In that spot she had played as a child. It was in the kitchen, near that table,

that her father had died. As she stood in the bedroom, in front of the bed stripped of its mattress, she thought of Lise and Buteau, and of the nights when they had embraced each other so vigorously that she could hear the sound of their panting breath through the ceiling. Was she even now to be tormented by them? She felt as though Buteau were still there. Here he had seized hold of her one night, and she had bitten him. And here again, too, and here. There was not a corner in the whole house that did not suggest some painful recollection.

Then as Françoise turned round, she started at seeing Jean. What was this stranger doing in the house? There was an air of constraint about him, as though he were on a visit, and did not like to take the liberty of touching anything. She felt overwhelmed with a feeling of solitude, and grew sick at heart to find that her victory had not made her more joyful. She had fancied she would enter the house, full of happiness, triumphant in the thought of having ejected her sister; but now the house afforded her no pleasure, and her heart was heavy and ill at ease. Perhaps it was the dying day that was filling her with melancholy!

When the night had quite fallen, she and her husband were still wandering from one room to another in the darkness, without having had the courage even to light a candle.

Presently, however, a noise brought them back into the kitchen, and they became merry on recognising Gédéon, who had effected an entrance after his usual custom, and had his head inside the side-board, which had been left open. Close by, inside the stable, they could hear old La Coliche lowing.

Then Jean, taking Françoise in his arms, kissed her tenderly, as though to say that, despite everything, they would be happy.

PART V.

PART V. — CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER I.

Prior to the ploughing, La Beauce, stretched beneath the grey, damp, November sky, was hidden from sight by a covering of manure. Carts were lumbering along the country roads, piled up with old straw litter, which filled the air with a smoky vapour; it was as though the vehicles were bearing a supply of heat to the soil. Little piles of litter from cattle-sheds and stables rose up over certain fields like surging waves, while on other patches the manure had already been spread out, and soiled the land with a dingy flood. In this mass of fermenting dung the rich fertility of the coming spring lay brooding; the decomposed matter was returning to the universal womb, and life would once more spring from death. From end to end of the vast plain the air reeked with the strong odour of the dung, which by-and-bye would bring forth bread for men.

One afternoon Jean was taking a heavy load of manure to his plot of land on the plateau. It was a month since he and Françoise had taken up their abode in the old house, and they had now dropped into the monotonous, though busy, routine of country life. As Jean approached his field he espied Buteau in the adjoining plot, with a pitchfork in his hand, engaged in spreading out the manure which had been placed there in heaps the previous week. The two men cast side-long glances at each other. Being neighbouring owners, they frequently met and worked in close proximity to each other. Buteau greatly suffered; for the loss of Françoise's share, torn from his seven-acre plot, had left him with two detached parcels, one on the right and one on the left of Françoise's strip, and he constantly had to make circuits to get to one parcel from the other. The two men never said a word to each other. The chance was that some day a quarrel would

break out between them, and then they would murder each other with their pitchforks.

Jean now commenced to discharge his load of manure. He had mounted on to the top of it; and, buried in it up to his hips, he was throwing it down with his pitchfork, when Hourdequin passed by, having been engaged in a round of inspection all the morning. He had retained a kindly recollection of his servant, and he stopped to speak to him. His form seemed to have aged, and his face was worn with the anxiety which his farm and other matters were causing him.

"Why have you never tried phosphates, Jean?" he asked.

Then, without waiting for a reply, he went on talking for a long time, as though he were trying to drown his thoughts. The true solution of successful agriculture, he said, was to be looked for in these various natural and artificial manures. He himself had tried everything, and had just passed through that craze for manures which sometimes seizes hold of farmers like a fever. He had tried all manner of things, one after another; grass, leaves, the refuse of pressed grapes, rape and colza oil-cake, crushed bones, flesh cooked and pounded, blood desiccated and reduced to a powder; and it was a source of vexation to him that the absence of any slaughterhouse in the neighbourhood prevented him from trying the effects of blood in a liquid state. He was now using road-scrapings, the scourings of ditches, the cinders and ashes from stoves, and especially scraps of waste wool, having purchased the sweepings of a woollen manufactory at Châteaudun. His theory was that everything that came from the soil was a proper material to return to it. He had great pits filled with compost at the rear of his farm, and in them he stowed all the refuse of the whole neighbourhood, whatever he could get hold of, even offal and putrifying carcasses picked out of stagnant ponds and elsewhere. It was all golden, he said.

"I have sometimes had very good results with phosphates," he remarked to Jean.

"But one gets so dreadfully cheated," Jean replied.

"Yes, certainly, if you buy from chance agents who are trying to do a small business in the country. At each market there ought to be a chemical expert who understands these artificial manures, which it is so difficult to get unadulterated. The future lies in them, I'm sure, but before that future comes I'm afraid we shall all be done up. We must have courage, however, and be content to suffer for the sake of others."

The stench of the dung which Jean was moving seemed to have somewhat revived the farmer's spirits. He revelled in it, and inhaled it with a sense of vigorous enjoyment, as though he smelt in it the procreative elements of the soil.

"No doubt," he resumed after a pause, "nothing has yet been discovered which equals farmyard manure; but one never can get a sufficient quantity of it. And then the men just toss it on to the ground. They don't know how to prepare it or how to manipulate it. See, now, that dung of yours has been burnt by the sun; you don't keep it covered."

Then he launched out into invectives against routine, when Jean confessed that he still made use of Buteau's old dung-hole in front of the cow-house. For some years past he himself, he said, had introduced layers of soil and turf into his pits, and had set up a system of pipes to convey the slops of the kitchen, with the urine of the family and cattle, and indeed all the drainings of the farm, down to a reservoir; and twice a week the dung-hill was watered with this liquid-manure. Now-a-days he even carefully saved and utilised all the contents of the privies.

"It is downright folly," he exclaimed, "to waste the good things that God gives us! For a long time I had scruples of delicacy about it, just as the peasants have. But old Mother Caca converted me. You know old Mother

Caca, don't you? She's a neighbour of yours. Well, it was she alone who went about matters in the right way; and the cabbage over whose roots she used to empty her slops was the king of cabbages, both in size and flavour, and it was so simply on account of what the old woman did."

Jean laughed as he jumped down from his cart, which was now empty, then he began to divide his manure into little heaps. Hourdequin walked on after him, amid the warm reek which floated round them.

"The yearly refuse of Paris alone would be sufficient to fertilise some seventy thousand acres," said the farmer. "It has all been properly calculated. And yet this is all wasted! There is only just a small quantity of dried night-soil utilised. Just think of it; seventy thousand acres! Ah, if we could only have it here, it would cover all La Beauce, and then you would see the wheat grow!"

He embraced the whole level extent of La Beauce in a sweeping gesture; and in his enthusiasm he mentally beheld all Paris pouring out its fertilising flood of human manure over the spreading tract. Streamlets were trickling along in all directions, overflowing the fields as the sea of sewage mounted higher and higher beneath the glowing sun, sped onward by a breeze which wafted the odour far and wide. The great city was restoring to the soil the life it had received from it. The earth slowly absorbed the fertilising tide, and from the glutted and fattened soil there burst forth great teeming harvests of white bread.

"We should want boats in that case," remarked Jean, who was at once amused and disgusted by the novel idea of submerging the land beneath a sea of sewage.

Just at that moment the sound of a voice made him turn his head, and he was astonished to see Lise in her light cart, which was drawn up at the side of the road. She was shouting to Buteau at the top of her voice:

"I'm just off to Cloyes to fetch Monsieur Finet. Your father has fallen down in a fit in his bedroom. I'm afraid he's dying. You'd better go home and see to him."

Then, without waiting for a reply, she whipped her horse forward, and rattled along the straight road, disappearing out of sight in the distance.

Buteau leisurely continued spreading out his last heaps of manure, growling to himself as he did so. His father ill; here was a nuisance! Very likely it was all a sham, just to get himself coddled and pampered! Then he put on his jacket again, as the thought struck him that after all something serious must be the matter with the old man, since his wife had of her own accord decided to go to the expense of a doctor.

"Now, there's a fellow who's stingy with his manure!" observed Hourdequin, looking with interest at the dung in the adjoining field. "A niggardly peasant has niggardly land. Ah, he's a wretched scamp, and you will do well to beware of him, especially after the worries you've had with him. How can you expect things to prosper when there are so many scoundrels and lewd hussies in the land? There are far too many, far too many!"

Then, saddened once more, he went off in the direction of La Borderie, just as Buteau, with his slouching gait, had got back to Rognes. Jean, left to himself, went on with his work, piling up at every ten yards or so a fresh heap of the manure, from which an ammoniacal vapour was rising in still greater force. Other heaps were smoking in the distance, blurring the line of the horizon with a fine bluish mist. All La Beauce would lie warm and odorous until the coming frosts.

The Buteaus were still quartered at La Frimat's, occupying the whole of her house, except the back room on the ground-floor, which she reserved for herself and her paralytic husband. As for a long time past she had had neither a horse in her stable nor any cows in her cow-house, her tenants

had placed their own animals there. They found themselves rather cramped for room on the whole, and they chiefly regretted the loss of their kitchen-garden and orchard; for La Frimat naturally retained her acre or so of ground for her own use, especially as by desperately hard work she managed to get out of this strip of land just sufficient to support her old husband and provide him with a few luxuries. This want of a kitchen-garden would of itself have sufficed to make the Buteaus move to other quarters, had they not perceived that their proximity was a source of much annoyance to Françoise. There was only a wall between the grounds of the two houses, and the Buteaus used to declare, in loud tones, on purpose to be overheard, that they were only just staying at La Frimat's for a time, for they would certainly return to their old home very soon. As this was a matter of certainty, what was the use of troubling themselves with another removal? They never condescended to explain by what means their return to their old home was to be effected, and it was this calm assurance, this persistent expression of certainty on their part, based upon she knew not what, that sent Françoise almost wild, and quite spoilt her pleasure at finding herself mistress of the house. Then, too, Lise occasionally reared a ladder against the shed, and mounted it, to assail her sister with coarse abuse. Ever since the accounts had been balanced between them at Monsieur Baillehache's office, she had accused her sister of robbing her, and she was never weary of hurling the most abominable accusations from one yard to the other.

When Buteau at last reached the house, he found old Fouan lying on the bed in the little closet which he occupied behind the kitchen, under the staircase leading to the loft. The two children, Jules and Laure, the former of whom was now eight years of age, while the latter was three, had been left to watch him; and they were amusing themselves with making streams of water on the floor by pouring out the contents of their grandfather's jug.

"Well, what's the matter, eh?" asked Buteau, standing in front of the bed.

Fouan had recovered consciousness. His widely opened eyes slowly turned towards his son, and fixed their stare upon him, but his head remained quite motionless, and he looked as though he were petrified.

"Come, now, dad, none of your jokes! I'm too busy for them," said Buteau. "You mustn't go off the hooks to-day."

Then, as Jules and Laure had now managed to break the jug, he gave them a couple of cuffs which set them howling. The old man's eyes were still staring, widely open, with the pupils enlarged and rigid. If he could not express himself more intelligibly than that, thought Buteau, there was nothing more to be done at present. They must wait and see what the doctor said. He now regretted having come away from the field, and he began to chop some wood in front of the kitchen, for the sake of doing something.

Lise returned almost immediately with Monsieur Finet, who made a lengthy examination of the ailing man, the Buteaus awaiting the result with an uneasy air. The old man's death would have been a release to them, if he had been carried off at once; but, if he were to linger on for a long time they might incur heavy expenses, and then again, if he died before they had succeeded in possessing themselves of his hoard, Fanny and Hyacinthe, as they foresaw, would give them a deal of trouble. The doctor's silence served to increase their uneasiness, and when he took a seat in the kitchen to write out a prescription, they determined to question him.

"Is it anything serious, then? Will it last a week? Dear me, what a lot you are writing down for him? What can it all be?"

Monsieur Finet made no reply. He was accustomed to be questioned in this way by the peasantry, who lost their heads in the presence of illness, and he treated them like so many animals, refraining from entering into conversation with them. He had great experience with common-place

complaints, and generally saved his patients, being perhaps more successful in dealing with them than a man of greater science would have been. However, the mediocrity to which he accused the peasants of having reduced him made him harsh and stern towards them. This only served to increase their deference, despite the doubts they continually entertained as to the efficacy of his draughts. Would it be worth the money it cost? That was the question always uppermost in their minds.

"Do you think, then," asked Buteau, alarmed by the sight of the page of writing, "that all that will make him better?"

The doctor merely shrugged his shoulders. Then he again returned to the sick man's bedside, feeling interested in the case, and surprised to notice symptoms of fever after this slight attack of cerebral congestion. Keeping his eyes fixed upon his watch, he again counted the beats of the old man's pulse, without trying to extract the slightest information from him. Meantime Fouan continued staring at him with his stupefied air.

"It will be a three weeks' business," said the doctor as he went away. "I will come again to-morrow. Don't be surprised if he's off his nut to-night."

Three weeks! The Buteaus had had ears for those words only, and they were full of consternation. What a pile of money it would cost them if there would be a pageful of medicine every night! And what made matters worse was that Buteau now had to get into the cart and drive off to the druggist's at Cloyes. It was a Saturday, and when La Frimat returned from selling her vegetables she found Lise sitting alone, and feeling so miserable that she could do nothing. The old woman expressed the bitterest grief when she heard what had happened. She never had any luck! she cried. If it had happened some other day, when she had been at home, she might at least have profited by the doctor's presence to consult him about her husband.

The news had already spread through Rognes, for the impudent La Trouille had called at the house, which she would not leave without touching her grandfather's hand, so that she might return and tell Hyacinthe that the old man was not dead. Then, after this shameless slut, La Grande made her appearance, evidently sent by Fanny. She planted herself by the side of her brother's bed, and formed her opinion of his condition by the appearance of his eyes, just as she judged the eels from the Aigre; and she went away with a perk of her nose, as though to say that he would certainly get over it this time. The family now took matters easily. What was the good of troubling themselves, as the old man would in all probability recover?

The house was topsy-turvy up to midnight. Buteau had returned in an execrable temper. There were mustard-plasters for the old man's legs, a draught to be taken every hour, and a purgative, in case he seemed better, for the morning. La Frimat proffered her assistance, but, at ten o'clock, growing drowsy, and not feeling much interested in the matter, she went to bed. Buteau, who wanted to do the same, tried to hustle Lise off. What was the good of their staying there? he cried. They couldn't do the old man any good by just looking at him!

Fouan was now rambling in his talk, speaking inconsequentially in loud tones. He appeared to imagine that he was out in the fields, hard at work, as in the far-off days of his youthful vigour. Lise, whom these reminiscences of the past affected with an uneasy disquietude, as though her uncle were already buried and was now restlessly wandering on the earth again, was about to follow her husband, who was undressing himself, when she stopped to put away the old man's clothes which were still lying on a chair. She carefully shook them, after having made a lengthy examination of the pockets, in which she found nothing but some string and a damaged knife. As she next proceeded to hang them up in the cupboard, she suddenly caught sight of a little bundle of papers in the middle of a shelf, right in front of her eyes. Her heart gave a great leap.

Here was the secret treasure! the treasure which had been so anxiously sought for during the last month in all sorts of extraordinary places, and which was now openly presented to her sight as if to invite her to take it! It was evident that the old man had just been going to transfer it to some fresh hiding-place when he was seized by the fit.

"Buteau! Buteau!" she called in so stifled a voice that her husband at once ran to her in his shirt, imagining that his father was dying.

For a moment he, too, remained choking with amazement. Then a wild delight took possession of them both, and taking hold of each other's hands they jumped about opposite each other like a couple of goats, forgetting all about the sick man, who was now lying with his eyes shut and his head seemingly riveted to the pillow. He was still rambling on, spasmodically, in his delirium. Just now he fancied that he was ploughing.

"Come, now, get along, you brute! Confound it all, there's a great piece of flint, and it won't yield! The handles are getting broken, and I shall have to buy new ones. Get along, you brute, get along!"

"Hush!" murmured Lise, turning round with a startled air.

"Stuff!" retorted Buteau. "You don't suppose he understands, do you? Can't you hear him drivelling?"

They now both seated themselves near the bed, for their sudden shock of delight left their legs quite weak and tremulous.

"No one can ever say that we hunted about for it," Lise observed, "for, as God is my witness, I wasn't thinking about his money at all! It tumbled into my hand. Let us see what there is."

Buteau had already unfolded the papers, and was reckoning them up aloud.

"Two hundred and thirty, and seventy; that's just three hundred altogether. That's exactly what I reckoned it at before, when I saw him draw fifteen five-franc pieces for the quarter's interest at the tax-collector's. Doesn't it seem funny, now, that these shabby bits of paper are just as good as real money?"

Lise again hushed him, alarmed by a sudden snigger from the old man, who now seemed to be imagining that he was engaged in reaping the famous harvest in Charles X.'s time, which was so plentiful that there was not room enough in which to garner it all.

"What a lot! what a lot! Did ever any one see such a harvest? What a lot! what a lot!"

His choking laugh sounded like a death-rattle; and his delight must have been altogether internal, for not a trace of it appeared on his rigid face.

"Oh, it's only some of his crazy thoughts that he's sniggering about," Buteau remarked, shrugging his shoulders.

There was now an interval of silence, during which the husband and wife looked at the papers, absorbed in thought.

"Well, what are we to do with them?" Lise murmured, presently. "Oughtn't we to put them back again?"

Buteau made an energetic gesture of refusal.

"Oh, yes, indeed, we must put them back again," his wife protested. "He will look for them, and he will make an outcry if he doesn't find them, and then we shall have a fine row with our swinish relatives."

She now checked herself for the third time, startled by hearing her father sobbing. He seemed to be a prey to some bitter, hopeless grief, for his sobs sounded as though they came from the very depths of his soul. It

was impossible to guess what was troubling him, for he only moaned out in a voice that gradually grew more hollow:

"It's all over--all over--all over."

"And do you suppose," Buteau now exclaimed violently, "that I am going to leave these papers in the possession of that old chap who's off his nut, for him to burn them or tear them up? No, indeed."

"Yes, that is perhaps true," murmured Lise.

"Come, now, we've had quite enough of the matter; let's go to bed. If he asks for the papers, I'll make it my business to reply to him; and the others had better not try to worry me!"

They now went off to bed, after concealing the papers under the marble top of an old chest of drawers, which seemed to them to be a safer hiding-place than one of the drawers themselves, even if they were kept locked. The old man was left alone, without a candle, for fear of fire, and he continued sobbing and talking deliriously all through the night.

On the morrow Monsieur Finet found him calmer, and altogether better than he had expected. Ah, those old plough horses had their souls well riveted to their bodies! he exclaimed. The fever which he had feared did not seem likely now. He prescribed steel, quinine, and other expensive drugs, filling the Buteaus with renewed consternation; and, as he was leaving, he had a struggle with La Frimat, who had been on the watch for him.

"My good woman," he said, "I have already told you that there is really no difference between your husband and this block of stone. I can't put life into stones, can I? You must know very well what the end will be; and the sooner the better both for him and for you."

He then whipped up his horse, and the old woman sank down on to the block of stone in a flood of tears. It was already a weary long time, a

dozen years and more, that she had been burdened with the support of her husband, and her strength was failing her with advancing age. She was afraid, indeed, that ere long she would be too weak to cultivate her patch of ground: but all the same, it upset her to think that she might soon lose the infirm old man, who had become like her child, whom she lifted and dressed and undressed and pampered with dainties. Even the unparalysed arm which he had hitherto been able to use was now growing so stiff that she herself was obliged to put his pipe into his mouth.

At the end of a week Monsieur Finet was astonished to find Fouan on his legs again. He was still very feeble, but he was obstinately bent on getting about, saying that the best way to keep from dying was to be determined not to die. Buteau sniggered behind the doctor's back with a contemptuous grin, for he had tossed all the prescriptions, after the second one, aside, declaring that the best way was to let the complaint feed on itself till it was exhausted. On market-day, however, Lise had been weak enough to bring back with her from the town a draught, which had been prescribed on the previous evening; and when the doctor paid his last visit on the Monday Buteau told him that the old man had nearly had a relapse.

"I don't know what it was they put into the bottle you ordered, but it made him dreadfully sick," he said.

That day, in the evening, Fouan at last spoke on the subject nearest his heart. Ever since he had left his bed he had been prowling about the house with an air of anxiety, with his mind quite blank as to where he had deposited his papers. He ferreted and searched everywhere, and made desperate efforts to remember where he had put them. Then, at last, a vague recollection dawned upon him. Perhaps he had not hidden them away anywhere, but had left them lying on the shelf. But, then again, supposing he was mistaken in his fears, supposing no one had taken the papers, was it advisable to give the alarm, and confess to the existence of

this money, which it had cost him such a struggle in the past to get together, and concerning which he had ever since maintained the most determined silence? For two days he struggled on against contending emotions--the despair with which the sudden disappearance of his money filled him, and the fear of the consequences of indiscreetly opening his mouth. Gradually, however, a clear recollection of matters returned to him, and he remembered having placed the packet of papers on the shelf on the morning of his attack, pending an opportunity to slip them into a chink in the rafters of the ceiling, which he had just discovered as he lay on his bed gazing into the air. Plundered and desperate, he now unbosomed himself.

They had just finished their evening meal. Lise was putting the plates away, and Buteau, who had been watching his father with leering eyes ever since the day he had left his bed, expected the outbreak, and was swinging himself on his chair, thinking that the explosion was now really coming off, for the old fellow seemed so very wretched and excited. He was not mistaken, for Fouan, who had been persistently tottering about the room on his shaky legs, now suddenly halted in front of his son.

"Where are the papers?" he demanded of him in a hoarse voice, and the words almost seemed to choke him.

Buteau opened his eyes widely, with an expression of profound surprise, as though he failed to understand.

"Eh? what? What do you say? Papers! what papers?"

"My money!" roared the old man, bracing himself to his full height, and assuming a threatening expression.

"Your money! What, have you still got some money left? Why, you swore that we had cost you so much that you hadn't a copper to call your own. Oh, you cunning old chap, so you really have some money."

He was still swinging about on his chair, sniggering and highly amused, triumphant at having had such a good scent, for he had been the first to suspect the existence of the treasure.

Fouan trembled in every limb.

"Give it back to me!"

"Give it back to you? I haven't got your money! Why, I don't even know where it is!"

"You have robbed me of it. Give it back to me, or I swear that I will make you give it up by force."

And, in spite of his great age, he seized Buteau by the shoulders and shook him. The son now sprang up from his chair and seized hold of his father in turn. But it was not to shake him, but simply to roar out in his face:

"Yes, I've got it, and I mean to keep it. I'm going to take care of it for you, you crazy old stupid, with your rambling wits. It was high time, too, that I did take the papers, for you were going to tear them up. He wanted to tear them, didn't he, Lise?"

"Oh, yes, as sure as I'm here! He didn't know a bit what he was doing."

Fouan was overwhelmed with consternation upon hearing this. Could it really be true that he was going mad, since he could recollect nothing of what had taken place? Supposing he had really wanted to destroy the papers, just like a child playing with pictures, in that case he could no longer be good for anything, and was only fit to be killed! He was now quite broken down, and all his courage and strength left him; he could merely stammer out tearfully:

"Give them back to me!"

"No!"

"Give them me, since I'm all right again now."

"No, no, indeed! you'd only wipe yourself with them, or use them to light your pipe!"

After that the Buteaus obstinately persisted in their refusal to surrender the papers. They spoke, about them quite openly to their neighbours, and they gave an exciting account of how they had arrived just in time to snatch them from the old man's hands when he was about to tear them up. One evening they even showed La Frimat a rent in one of the documents. Surely no one, they protested, could blame them for preventing such a misfortune, for the money would have been destroyed and lost to everybody. The neighbours publicly expressed their approval of the Buteaus' conduct, though they privately suspected them of lying. Hyacinthe was in a terrible rage. To think that the treasure which it had been impossible for him to find in his own house should have been so speedily discovered by the others! One day, indeed, he had actually held it in his hands, and had been fool enough not to stick to it! He swore to himself that he would call his brother to account when the old man died. Fanny, too, said that the money would have to be divided. The Buteaus did not say the contrary, but, of course, the old man might recover possession, or give the bonds away by deed.

As for Fouan, he poured the story of his wrongs into the ears of everybody he came across, waylaying every one he could, and bemoaning his piteous lot to them. In this way, one morning, he went into his niece's yard to pour out his troubles to Françoise and Jean.

Françoise was helping her husband to load a cart with manure. While the latter stood in the dung-hole and threw the manure into the vehicle with his pitchfork, Françoise, standing aloft, trampled it down with her feet to compress it.

The old man stood leaning on his stick in front of them, and began bewailing his sad fate.

"I'm dreadfully harassed about this money of mine, you know, which they have taken from me and won't give me back. What should you do if you were in my place?"

Françoise let him repeat the question three times before she said anything in reply. She was annoyed at his coming to talk to her in this way, and received him coldly, being anxious to avoid all cause of quarrel with the Buteaus.

"Well, uncle," she answered at last, "it's really no business of ours, you know. We are only too glad to have finished with our own troubles."

Then turning her back upon him, she continued treading down the dung which rose around her up to her thighs. As her husband went on tossing up forkful after forkful, she all but vanished amid the steamy smoke from the disturbed manure, and yet she felt at ease, with her heart in the right place, amid the asphyxiating fumes.

"I'm not mad; that can be seen, can't it?" Fouan continued, not seeming to have heard Françoise. "They ought to give me back my money. Do you and Jean, now, think me capable of destroying it?"

Neither Françoise nor Jean said a word.

"I should, indeed, have to be mad to do that, and I'm not mad--you and your husband could bear witness to that, couldn't you?"

Françoise now suddenly braced herself up, standing on the top of the loaded cart. She looked very tall and sturdy and vigorous, almost as if she had sprung into life and grown up there where she was standing, and as if that scent of rich fecundity had emanated from herself. As she stood there with her hands resting on her hips, and her bosom swelling roundly, she looked a real woman.

"There, there, uncle, that's enough!" she said. "I've told you already that we don't want to have anything to do with all that squabbling. And, while we are on the subject, perhaps you would do as well not to come here again."

"Do you mean to cast me off, then?" asked the old man, trembling as he spoke.

Jean now thought it time to interpose.

"No; but we don't want to be mixed up in any quarrels. There would be a three days' row if they were to see you here. Every one has his own peace and quietness to look after, you know."

Fouan stood motionless, gazing at them one after the other out of his poor dim eyes. Then he went away.

"If ever I want any help," he said, "it is clear I shall have to look somewhere else for it."

They allowed him to go away, though they felt uneasy and troubled. They were not yet evil-hearted. But what could they do? They could not have helped him by interfering in the matter, and their own peace and quietness would have been ruined to no purpose. While Jean went off to get his whip, Françoise carefully collected the fallen straws with a shovel and threw them on to the cart.

The next day there was a violent scene between Fouan and Buteau. Every day, indeed, there were bitter passages between them about the papers, the old man doggedly repeating his "Give me them back again!" and the son refusing to do so, with his "Hold your row, and let me alone!" But matters had gradually grown more serious, especially since the old man had set about trying to discover where his son had hidden the bonds. He now, in his turn, prowled inquisitively about the whole house, examining drawers and closets, and tapping against the walls to see if he could

discover any hollow place. His eyes were continually straying from one spot to another, in the one fixed idea that had seized hold of him; and as soon as ever he found himself free from observation, he got rid of the children and recommenced his search, with all the eagerness of some young scapegrace who flies off to make love to the servant-maid as soon as his parents are out of the way. That day, however, Buteau returned home unexpectedly, and found Fouan stretched on the floor on his stomach, with his nose under the chest of drawers, trying to ascertain if there were any possible hiding-place there. The sight almost put Buteau beside himself, for his father was unpleasantly warm in his scent now. What he was seeking below was hidden away above, sealed down, as it were, by the heavy weight of the marble slab.

"You confounded old addle-pate; so you are playing the snake now? Get up at once!"

He dragged his father by the legs, and then set him on his feet again with a vigorous pull.

"Haven't you got tired of thrusting your eye into every little hole and cranny? I'm getting quite weary of seeing you poking about in every chink and crevice in the house."

Fouan, annoyed at having been discovered, looked his son in the eyes, and cried in a sudden burst of anger:

"Give them back to me!"

"Hold your jaw!" roared Buteau in his face.

"Well, I'm made too wretched here. I shall go away."

"All right! Off you go, then, and a pleasant journey to you! And if ever you come back here you'll show that you've got no spirit!"

As he spoke, he seized his father by the arm, and thrust him out of the house.

PART V. — CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER II.

Fouan made his way down the hill. His anger speedily evaporated, and when he reached the bottom and gained the high-road he stopped short, feeling dazed and confused at finding himself in the open with nowhere to go to. The church clock struck three, and the damp wind of the grey November afternoon blew piercingly cold. The old man shivered; it had all taken place so quickly that he had not even been able to pick up his hat. Fortunately, however, he had his stick with him. For a moment or two he began to walk on towards Cloyes. Then he asked himself where he was going to in that direction, and he turned round and made his way back towards Rognes, with his usual dragging gait. As he reached the Macquerons', he felt inclined to go in and have a glass. He searched his pockets, but he could not find a copper, and he felt ashamed to show himself, fearing that they might have already heard of what had happened. He fancied that Lengaigne, who was standing at his door, was watching him with that suspicious glance which is given to some disreputable tramp; and Lequeu, who was looking out of one of the school windows, did not even nod to him. It was easily understood; he was once more an object of contempt to every one, now that he was again without any means, now that he had been stripped anew, and this time to the very skin.

When he reached the Aigre, he leant his back for a moment or two against the parapet of the bridge. The thought of the night that was now closing in filled him with uneasiness. Where could he sleep? He had not the least shelter to turn to. The Bécus' dog passed by, and the old man looked at it with envy; that dog, at any rate, knew that its kennel and bed of straw were awaiting it. He tried to think of some refuge, but his brain was confused, and his outburst of anger had exhausted him and made him

drowsy. His eyelids closed heavily, as he tried to recall some sheltered corner where he would be protected from the cold. Then his mind seemed to become the prey of a night-mare, and he saw all the country-side revolving before him, bare, and swept by the gusts of wind. However, with sudden energy, he shook himself, and tried to throw off his drowsiness. He must not lose heart in this way. Folks would never let a man of his age die with cold out-of-doors.

He now mechanically crossed the bridge, and found himself opposite the Delhommes' little farm. Immediately he caught sight of the house he turned aside and went round to the back, so that no one should see him. There he halted again, leaning against the wall of the cow-house, in which he heard his daughter Fanny's voice. Had he had any thought of returning to her? The old man himself could not have answered this question; his feet had mechanically carried him there. In his mind's eye he could see the inside of the house as plainly as if he had entered it: the kitchen on the left, and his old bedroom on the first floor, at the end of the hay-loft. His former spite was fading away; and his legs shook so with emotion that he would have fallen to the ground had he not had the support of the wall. For a long time he remained there like this, with his back resting against the house-side. Fanny was still talking inside the cow-house, but he could not distinguish what she was saying. Perhaps it was this muffled sound of his daughter's words that stirred up the old man's heart. She seemed to be scolding a servant, for her voice grew louder, and Fouan finally heard her addressing such cutting remarks, in a harsh, stern voice, to the unfortunate servant girl, that the latter burst out into tears. These words affected the old man painfully; all his feelings of emotion vanished, and he sternly braced himself up, feeling convinced that if he had pushed open the door, his daughter would have received him with the same harsh tones. He could again hear her saying: "Oh, my father will return and ask us, on his knees, to take him back again." That never-forgotten speech of hers had, like a knife, irretrievably severed

every bond between them. No, no! Sooner die of hunger and sleep at the bottom of a ditch than see her triumphing over him with her haughty assumption of perfect irreproachableness! At this thought he removed his back from the wall, and painfully went on his way.

To avoid following the road, Fouan, who believed that every one was watching for him, went up the right bank of the Aigre, beyond the bridge, and soon found himself in the midst of the vineyards. His intention was to reach the plateau without having to go through the village. He was obliged, however, to pass near the Château, where his legs now seemed to carry him instinctively like those of some old horse going to the stable where he has been accustomed to eat his oats. The ascent up the hill made him pant, and he sat down to get his breath back, and began to think. Certainly if he were to go inside and say to Hyacinthe: "I am going to appeal to the law; help me against Buteau," the scamp would receive him with an explosion of welcome, and they would spend an evening of jovial riot together.

From where he was sitting he could hear the sound of merriment; proceeding, no doubt, from some tipsy debauch which would be prolonged till morning. Attracted by the sound, and already feeling a void in his stomach, he approached nearer, and recognised Canon's voice, together with the smell of some stewed beans, those beans which La Trouille knew so well how to cook whenever her father wanted to celebrate the arrival of his friend. Why shouldn't he, Fouan, go in and join the two scamps in their merry-making? He could hear them warmly disputing amid the clouds of smoke from their pipes, and apparently so gorged with wine that he positively envied them. A sharp explosion from Hyacinthe stirred the old man with emotion, and he had already reached out his hand towards the door when La Trouille's shrill laughter paralysed him. She was now the object of his fear, and in his mind's eye he could still see her, scrawny and clad in her chemise, stealthily approaching him like a snake, and warily feeling him and making him

her prey. What good would it do even if the father did assist him to recover his money? The daughter would be there to strip him of it again.

Suddenly the door of the Château was thrown open, and the girl appeared and cast a glance outside, having fancied she could hear something. The old man just had time to throw himself behind the bushes; and, as he made his escape, he could see La Trouille's green eyes glistening in the gloaming.

When Fouan gained the open plain he experienced a sort of relief in finding himself quite alone, able to die without interference and observation. For a long time he walked on at random, now going straight before him, and then turning aside, without any reason or plan whatever. The night had now fully fallen, and the icy wind scourged him bitterly. Every now and then, as some fierce gust swept past him, he was obliged to turn his back to it, his breath quite failing him, and his few white hairs bristling upright on his head. Six o'clock struck; all Rognes must now be at table. His stomach and his legs began to feel faint, and he was obliged to slacken his pace. At last he set off in the direction of La Borderie, and then, after making a sudden turn, he was surprised to find himself again on the edge of the valley of the Aigre.

Between a couple of squalls, a violent lashing shower poured down. The old man was soaked to the skin, but he still walked on, encountering two other downfalls, and at last he shivered with cold and weariness. Presently, without knowing how he got there, he found himself in the open square by the church, in front of the old family house of the Fouans, where Françoise and Jean now dwelt. But no, he could not seek a refuge there! They had driven him away! The rain now began to pour down again in such heavy torrents that he began to lose all heart. He stepped up to the Buteaus' door and peeped into the kitchen, whence streamed the odour of cabbage soup. All his poor trembling body was longing to submit and return: a physical craving for food and warmth was urging

him to enter. But amid the noise of people eating, he could distinguish some words.

"Well, what if father doesn't come back?" Lise was asking.

"Oh, don't bother about him," replied Buteau; "he's too fond of his belly not to come back when he feels hungry."

Treading as silently as possible, Fouan now glided away, fearing lest he should be seen stealing back like a beaten dog for a bone. He was nearly choked with shame and humiliation, and fiercely resolved that he would go away and die in some corner. They should see if he was so fond of his belly! He made his way down the hill again, and then let himself sink upon the trunk of one of the felled elm-trees on the grass in front of Clou's farriery. His legs could carry him no further, and he lost all hope in the black loneliness of the road. Every one was indoors, and the houses were all so closely shuttered on account of the bad weather that it seemed as though there were not a living soul in all the neighbourhood. The heavy shower had had the effect of laying the wind, and the rain soon streamed down perpendicularly in ceaseless torrents. The old man felt too weak even to get up and look about for a shed or stack to shelter him. Utterly stupefied by misery and exhaustion he continued to sit perfectly motionless, his stick between his legs, and his bare head washed by the rain. He had resigned himself to his fate. When a man has neither children nor home nor anything, he must tighten his trouser strap and sleep out of doors. Nine o'clock struck, and then ten. The rain came down still more violently, soaking the old man's bones through and through. Then some lanterns gleamed through the darkness, flitting hastily away; the evening gatherings were breaking up. Fouan started on recognising La Grande, who was probably returning from the Delhommes', where she had been spending the evening for the sake of saving her own candle. Then he got up with a painful effort that made his limbs crack and followed her; but she had entered her house before he could overtake her.

When he stood before the closed door, he hesitated and his courage fell. At last, however, he ventured to knock, impelled by his utter wretchedness.

He had come at an unfortunate time, for La Grande was in a frightfully bad temper, the result of an unfortunate affair which had upset her during the previous week. One evening, when she was alone with her grandson Hilarion, it had occurred to her that she might as well employ his strong arms in chopping some wood before he went off to sleep; and, as the lad set about the work somewhat languidly, she remained in the wood-house, abusing him. So far, this brutish, distorted fellow, as strong as a bull, had, in his abject fear of his grandmother, allowed her to abuse his brawny muscles without even a glance of rebellion. For some, few days past, however, he had been looking rather dangerous, and had begun to quiver beneath the weight of his excessive tasks, flushing hotly with surging blood. To excite him, La Grande unwisely struck him across the back of his neck with her stick. As she did so, he let the cleaver fall, and glared at her. This seeming rebellion drove the old woman almost wild, and she rained a shower of blows upon the lad's flanks and hips. Then Hilarion suddenly rushed at her, and she expected, in fear and trembling, that he was going to strangle her or kick her to death.

But this was not his intention. He had, perforce, practised too much abstinence since the death of Palmyre, and his anger turned into sexual rage. Brute-like, he recognised neither relationship nor age, nothing but her sex, in this old grandmother of eighty-nine, whose body was as dry as a stick, and who had barely anything of the woman about her. However, she was still strong and vigorous, and able to defend herself, and she scratched and fought, till at last managing to lay hold of the cleaver, she split her grandson's skull open with a heavy blow. The neighbours ran up on hearing her cries, and she related to them all that had happened. She was all but overcome, she said; little more, and the villain would have succeeded in violating her. Hilarion did not die till the next morning. The

magistrate came to make an investigation; then there was the funeral, and all sorts of other worries, from which the old woman had now outwardly recovered, though at heart the ingratitude of the world had deeply wounded her, and she had firmly resolved never to help any member of her family.

Fouan knocked at the door timorously, and it was not till he had done so a third time that La Grande heard him. Then coming to the door, she asked:

"Who's there?"

"It's I."

"Who's that?"

"I, your brother!"

She had, doubtless, recognised his voice at once, but she delayed matters, and questioned him just for the sake of making him speak. After a pause, she asked him again:

"What do you want?"

The old man trembled, but made no reply. Then La Grande roughly threw the door open; and as the old man was about to enter, she barred the way with her scrawny arms, and forced him to remain outside in the pouring rain which was still relentlessly streaming down.

"I know very well what you want," she exclaimed. "I heard all about you to-night. You have been idiot enough to let them strip you again; you haven't even had wit enough to keep the money you had hidden away! And now you want me to take you in, eh?"

Then, seeing the old man trying to excuse himself, and stammering explanations, she burst out violently:

"Didn't I warn you over and over again? Times and times I told you what a fool you were making of yourself by giving up your land! But now you are finding out the truth of my words, turned out of doors by those scamps your children, and wandering about in the night like a tramp, like a beggar that hasn't even got a stone to lay his head upon!"

Stretching out his hands he burst into tears, and tried to push La Grande's arms aside, and force his way into the house, despite her. But she firmly held her ground, and finished saying what she had upon her mind.

"No, no, indeed! Go and beg a shelter from those who have stripped you! I owe you nothing! The rest of the family would only accuse me of interfering in their affairs again. But apart from all that, you have given up your property, and I will never forgive you for it!"

Then, bracing herself up and exposing her withered neck, she glared fiercely at him with her round, hawk-like eyes, and slammed the door violently in his face.

"It serves you right--go and die on the road."

Fouan remained standing stiffly outside the pitiless door. The rain was still streaming down with monotonous persistence. Presently he turned away and stepped once more into the inky darkness which the slow, icy downpour from the heavens was flooding.

Where did he go? He could never quite recollect. His feet stumbled in the puddles, and he groped about with his hands to avoid running against the trees and walls. He no longer reflected, he no longer recognised anything: this little village, every stone of which he knew so well, seemed like some unknown and far-off terrible spot, where he was a stranger, lost, unable to find his way. He turned to the left, but, fearing lest he should fall into some hole or other, he turned round again to the right; then he stopped altogether, trembling all over, finding danger at every turn. Presently he discovered a railing, and he followed it till it brought him to

a little door, which opened at his touch. Then the ground seemed to slip away beneath his feet, and he rolled down into some sort of a hole. Here, at any rate, he felt more comfortable, for he was sheltered from the rain and the place was warm. A grunt soon warned him, however, that he had a pig for a neighbour, and the disturbed animal, thinking that some food had arrived, was already poking its snout into his ribs. Fouan began to struggle with it, but he felt so weak that he made all haste to escape, for fear he might be devoured. Still he could go no further, and he let himself drop down outside the door, huddling himself up closely against it so that the projecting roof might shelter him from the rain. Heavy drops, however, still continued to soak his legs, and icy gusts of wind seemed to freeze his saturated clothes to his body. He envied the pig, and would have returned to it, if he had not heard it gnawing at the door behind his back and snorting ravenously.

In the early dawn Fouan awoke from the painful somnolence into which he had sunk. A feeling of shame again took possession of him, as he told himself that his story must be the common talk of the neighbourhood, and that every one knew he was a pauper tramping the roads. A man stripped of everything could not hope for either justice or pity. He kept himself well under the hedges as he walked along, in the constant fear of seeing some window open and being recognised by some early-rising woman in his miserable condition as a poor old outcast. The rain was still falling, and when he reached the plain he concealed himself in a rick. He spent the whole day in gliding from one place of concealment to another, in such a state of alarm, indeed, that, when he had lain in any one hiding-place for a couple of hours, he felt sure that he was about to be discovered, and crept out and concealed himself somewhere else. The one thought that now racked his brain was whether it would take him a long time to die in this way. He was now not suffering so much from cold, but he was tortured with hunger, and he said to himself that it was from hunger that he would die. He might perhaps have to live through

another night and another day! Still he did not waver; he would rather stay and perish where he was than return to the Buteaus.

But as the darkness again began to close in, he was seized with an agonising terror at the thought of having to spend another night out in the ceaseless deluge of rain. His bones were beginning to shiver with cold again, and an intolerable aching hunger was gnawing at his stomach. When the sky grew black and dark, he felt as though he were being drowned and swept away into the streaming gloom. His mind grew confused and blank, and his feet carried him along mechanically. A purely animal instinct was shaping his course, and thus it happened that, without any conscious intention of doing so, he found himself once more in the kitchen of the Buteaus' house, the door of which he had opened.

Buteau and Lise were just finishing the remains of the previous day's cabbage-soup. Upon hearing the door open the husband turned his head and looked at Fouan, who stood in silence, wrapped in the steam from his saturated clothes. For a long time the son thus looked at his father without saying anything. Then he broke out into a snigger:

"Ah, I knew quite well that you'd show you'd got no spirit!"

The old man, standing bolt upright, and seeming as though rooted to the ground, answered not a word.

"Well, all the same, give him some grub, wife, since it's hunger that has brought him back!"

Lise had already risen and brought a plateful of the soup. Fouan took it and sat down apart from the others on a stool, as though he declined to join his children at table. He began to swallow the soup ravenously, his whole body trembling with the violence of his hunger. Buteau now leisurely finished his meal, and then began to sway about on his chair, making darts with his knife at scraps of cheese, and then putting them

into his mouth. He was watching the old man's ravenous appetite with interest, and followed the movements of his spoon with a mocking leer.

"Your walk in the fresh air seems to have given you a rare appetite," said he. "But you mustn't take these strolls every day you know; it would come in much too expensive!"

The old man still went on gulping down the soup, with a hoarse sound in his throat as he swallowed it; however, he did not say a word.

"A nice old gentleman you are, to stay out all night in this way," his son continued. "You've been after the girls, I bet; and it's they who've emptied you so, eh?"

Still there came no reply. Fouan persisted in his dogged silence, making no sound except such as resulted from his greedy gulping.

"Don't you hear that I'm talking to you?" Buteau at last shouted in irritation. "You might at any rate have the politeness to answer me?"

Fouan, however, still kept his blank gaze fixed on the soup. It seemed as though he neither heard nor saw, but was miles away in his isolation. It was as if he wished to imply that he had merely returned to eat, and that, although his belly was in the kitchen, his heart was there no longer. He now energetically began to scrape the bottom of his plate with his spoon, so as to lose nothing of the soup.

At last, Lise, affected by the sight of such keen hunger, interposed.

"Let him alone," she said, "since it pleases him to play the dummy."

"I'm not going to have him playing the fool with me again!" retorted Buteau angrily. "I've had quite sufficient of that already. Let to-day be a lesson to you, you pig-headed old fool! If you give me any more of your nonsense, I shall leave you to starve out on the road!"

Fouan, having now quite finished his soup, rose painfully from his seat, and, still maintaining his unbroken silence--a sepulchral silence that seemed to grow ever more oppressive--turned his back and dragged himself under the staircase to his bed, on which he threw himself without undressing. Somnolence seemed to descend on him like a thunderbolt. He was sound asleep in a moment, wrapped in a leaden slumber. Lise, who stepped up to look at him, came back and told her husband that he looked as though he were dead. Buteau, however, after going to see him, shrugged his shoulders. Dead, indeed! did fellows like him die like that? Only he must have knocked about to be in such a state. When they came to look at him the next morning, he did not appear to have moved, and he slept on throughout the day and the following night, and only awoke once more the second morning, after remaining annihilated, as it were, for thirty-six hours.

"Ah, there you are again at last!" cried Buteau with a snigger. "I was beginning to think that you meant to go on sleeping for ever, and would never want anything more to eat."

The old man neither looked at him nor spoke to him, but went out and sat down on the road to breathe the fresh air.

From this time forth Fouan isolated himself in moody silence. He seemed to have forgotten all about the papers which Buteau had refused to restore to him. At any rate, he never spoke about them and never attempted to discover where they were; perhaps feeling indifferent about them, but certainly resigned. His rupture with the Buteaus seemed complete, and he persisted in maintaining his dogged silence, as though he were a creature cut off from all others, and entombed. Nowhere, under no circumstances, no matter what might be his need, did he ever speak a word to the Buteaus. He shared in the common existence of the household; he slept there, ate there, saw his son and daughter-in-law, and elbowed them from morning till night, but he never gave them a look or a

word; it was as if he had been blind and dumb, as if he were a ghost abiding amongst living beings. Buteau and Lise soon grew tired of worrying him without getting even a sigh in answer, and they left him alone in his obstinate silence. They both ceased to speak to him and to look at him. They began to consider him merely as a piece of peripatetic furniture, and at last they grew perfectly unconscious of his presence. The horse and the two cows were of more account than he was.

In the whole house Fouan had but one friend, little Jules, who was now completing his ninth year. Laure, who was four years old, looked at him with the same harsh gaze as her parents did, and wriggled out of his arms, conducting herself, indeed, as though she were full of bitter indignation against one who ate but did no work. Jules, however, delighted in being with the old man, and got on wonderfully well with him. He was, as it were, the last link uniting Fouan to the others, and he became his messenger and mouthpiece. Whenever a definite yes or no became absolutely necessary Lise sent the lad to the old man, who, for him alone, consented to break his silence. Fouan being neglected, the lad played the part of a little servant-maid, helped him to make his bed of a morning, and carried him his allowance of soup, which the old man ate near the window, resting the plate upon his knees, for he had refused to resume his place at the table. Then the two played together, and the old man, delighted when he met the lad out-of-doors, took hold of his hand and went off with him for a long ramble. Upon occasions like these Fouan made up for his long silences, and poured forth so much chatter that he almost dazed his little companion, though he could no longer speak without difficulty. He seemed to be losing the use of his tongue, now that he had ceased to employ it. But the aged grandfather who stammered, and the lad who had no ideas beyond birds' nests and blackberries, got on remarkably well together. The old man taught his grandson how to lime twigs, and made him a little cage to keep crickets in. The lad's frail hand was now his only support along the roads of La Beauce, where he no

longer had either land or relatives left him; and thanks to Jules he felt some pleasure in living a little longer.

In point of fact, however, it was as if Fouan had been struck out of the list of the living. Buteau took his place and acted in his name, received his money and gave receipts for it, upon the pretext that his father no longer possessed his wits. The interest on the money derived from the sale of the old man's house, amounting to a hundred and fifty francs a year, was paid by Monsieur Baillehache direct to Buteau, whose only difficulty had been with Delhomme, the latter refusing to pay the annuity of two hundred francs to any one excepting his father-in-law, and insisting upon the old man's presence to receive it. As soon, however, as Delhomme's back was turned, Buteau took possession of the cash. He thus received three hundred and fifty francs a year, but he used to say in a whining voice that he had to add as much more to it, and even more than that, to defray the expense of his father's keep. He never referred to the scrip he had appropriated. That was quite safe, and they could all settle about it later on. He alleged that the dividends were exhausted in keeping up the payments to old Saucisse, fifteen sous every day, for the purchase of the acre and a quarter of land. He protested that it would never do to let this agreement break through, now that so much money had been paid under it. There was a report, however, that old Saucisse, under the pressure of some violent threat, had consented to annul the agreement, and to hand Buteau half the money he had received under it, a thousand francs out of two thousand; and the fact that the old scamp held his tongue was accounted for by his fear of letting his neighbours know too much of his affairs, and by his unwillingness to confess that he, also, had been worsted in his turn. Buteau had, indeed, realised that Fouan would die the first, for he was now so infirm that he could scarcely stand upright; had he received a cuffing he would probably have fallen to the ground powerless ever to rise again.

A year passed away, and yet Fouan was still alive, although he was growing weaker every day. He was no longer the neat old peasant of yore, with a clean-shaven face, and dressed in a clean new blouse and black trousers. His big bony nose, which appeared to be stretching forward towards the ground, seemed to be the only feature left in his withered, fleshless face. His stoop had increased slightly every year, and by this time he was almost bent double; he now only had to take the final somersault which would land him in his grave. He dragged himself along by the aid of two thick sticks, his face half covered by a long, dirty white beard, his body clad in the soiled and ragged cast-off clothes of his son; and he was in such an unpleasantly neglected condition that he looked quite repugnant in the full light of day, resembling one of those tattered old tramps to whom passers-by give a wide berth. In the wreck only the animal part of his nature survived, with the mere instinct of living. A feeling of ravenous hunger always made him fall keenly on his soup, and he was never satisfied; he stuffed himself with bread when he happened to be alone in the house, and he even stole Jules's bread and butter from him, unless the lad resisted. In consequence of his predatory habits, the Buteaus reduced his quantity of food at meal-times, and they even took advantage of the situation to under-feed him, pretending that he stuffed himself till he nearly burst.

Buteau accused him of having ruined himself during his stay at the Château with Hyacinthe, and this accusation was well founded, for this whilom sober, self-stinting peasant, who had once lived upon bread and water, had there fallen into ways of dissipation, contracting a taste for meat and brandy, so that he now suffered at being deprived of them. Vicious habits quickly take hold of a man, even when it is a son who debauches his father. The wine disappeared so rapidly that Lise was obliged to lock it up; and, on the days when any meat soup was being cooked, little Laure was set to mount guard over it. Since the old man had run into debt with Lengaigne for a cup of coffee, both Lengaigne and the

Macquerons had been warned by Buteau that he would not pay them if they supplied his father on credit. The old man still maintained his tragic silence, but sometimes when his plate was not quite full, or when the wine was removed without any being given to him, he fixed his bleared eyes upon his son in a prolonged stare, in the impotent rage of his ravenous craving. Did they want him to die of starvation? he seemed to be asking.

"Oh, you may stare at me as hard as you like!" Buteau used to say, "but do you imagine I'm going to pamper brutes that do nothing? Those who like meat ought to earn it, you miserable old greedy-guts! You ought to be ashamed of yourself for going in for dissipation at your time of life!"

Though Fouan's obstinate pride had prevented him returning to the Delhommes', for he brooded unforgetfully over his daughter's stinging remark, he tolerated every indignity from the Buteaus, their cutting speeches, and even their blows. He no longer thought about his other children, but surrendered himself in utter weariness, without any idea of making his escape from it all. He would be no better off anywhere else, so what was the good of troubling himself to move? When Fanny met him she passed by stiffly, having sworn that she would not be the first to speak. Hyacinthe, who was more good-natured, though he had borne his father a grudge for some time on account of the shabby fashion in which he had left the Château, amused himself one evening by making the old man abominably drunk at Macqueron's, and then leaving him in this condition outside Buteau's door. There was a dreadful scene; the house was upset; Lise was obliged to wash the kitchen out, and Buteau swore that if such a thing occurred again he would make his father sleep on the dung-heap, so that the old man got afraid, and became so suspicious of his elder son that he no longer dared to accept his offers of refreshments. He often saw La Trouille with her geese while he was sitting out of doors at the road side. The girl would stop and examine him with her little eyes, and even talk to him for a moment or two, while her geese waited behind

her, standing on one leg and poking out their necks. One morning, however, the old man discovered that she had stolen his handkerchief, and from that time forth whenever he caught sight of her in the distance he shook his sticks at her threateningly, as if to drive her away. She made sport of him and amused herself by setting her geese at him, only going off when some passer-by threatened to cuff her if she did not leave her grandfather in peace.

So far Fouan had been able to walk, and this had been a source of much consolation to him, for he still took an interest in the soil, and constantly re-visited his old property, just as some worn-out old rakes haunt the presence of their former mistresses. He wandered slowly along the roads with his crazy old gait, and remained standing for hours at the edge of a field, supporting himself on his two sticks. Then he would drag himself to another field, and again become absorbed in motionless contemplation, looking like some gnarled old tree growing there, and withered by age. His dim eyes were no longer capable of distinguishing clearly between oats and wheat and rye. Everything seemed blurred and fogged to him, and even his recollections of the past were dim and confused. This field, he fancied, had yielded so many bushels in such a year, but he kept confounding dates and figures. He was constantly possessed by one bitter, haunting thought. The soil which he had so yearned for, and which he had won and possessed, the soil to which for sixty long years he had devoted everything--his limbs, his heart, his very life--this ungrateful soil had passed into the arms of another lover, for whom it now brought forth plentifully without reserving aught for him. A deep sadness overwhelmed him at the thought that it knew him no longer, that he retained not a particle of it, nothing even of what it had produced, neither a copper nor a mouthful of bread. And now he would soon have to die and rot away beneath it, beneath that fickle indifferent soil which would drain fresh youth from his old bones! It had really not been worth his while to wear himself out with hard toil and labour when this was the

end of it all--utter penury and infirmity! Whenever he had thus made the round of his old fields, he returned home and threw himself on his bed, so overwhelmed that he could not even be heard breathing.

He was deprived of this last interest he took in life when he lost the use of his legs. It soon became so painful to him to walk about that he scarcely went beyond the village. There were three favourite spots where he was fond of sitting on fine days--the logs in front of Clou's farriery, the bridge over the Aigre, and a stone bench near the school. He tottered slowly from one to another of these halting-places, taking nearly an hour to go a couple of hundred yards, and dragging his wooden shoes after him as though they were heavy carts, as he shambled painfully along in the crazy wreck of his frame. Wrapt in oblivious abstraction, he frequently sat on the end of a log for a whole afternoon, huddled up, and feasting on the sunshine. His eyes were open, but he remained motionless in a kind of drowsy stupefaction. Passers-by no longer took any notice of him, for he had ceased to be a living creature, he was merely a thing. Even his pipe had become a burden to him, and he had almost ceased to smoke. The pressure of the stem upon his gums pained him, and the labour of filling and lighting quite exhausted him. His one desire was to sit perfectly motionless, for as soon as he stirred, even in the full warmth of the noon-day sun, he felt frozen and began to shiver. His power of will and his authority had already perished, and he was now in the last stage of decrepitude, leading a mere animal life, like some old brute suffering amid abandonment from the fact of having once led the life of a human being. However, he made no complaints, realising that a foundered horse, though it may once have worked well, is sent to the knacker's as soon as it makes no return for the oats it consumes. Old folk, in a like way, are good for nothing, and are only a source of expense, so the sooner they are out of the way the better. He himself had wished for his father's death; and now if his children, in their turn, impatiently awaited his own, it neither surprised nor hurt him. It was natural that this should be the case.

If ever a neighbour cried out to him: "Well, Fouan, you still manage to keep alive!" he would mumble out: "Ah, yes, dying is a wearily long business, but it isn't the want of the will that keeps me from it."

He only spoke the truth, with the stoicism of the peasant, who accepts death without a murmur, and even desires it when he is stripped of everything, and the soil calls him back to her.

But there was still another grief in store for him. Jules cast him off, instigated thereto by Laure. Whenever the girl saw her brother with their grandfather she seemed jealous, and with her eyes fiercely glistening she would call him angrily away. The old man was a nuisance, she said; it was much more amusing for them to play together. If her brother did not at once go off with her, she hung on to his shoulder and pulled him away. Then she made herself so agreeable that the lad forgot the little household services which he had hitherto rendered his grandfather. And by degrees Laure completely won Jules over to her side, like a real woman who has set her mind upon a conquest.

One evening Fouan had gone to wait for Jules in front of the school, feeling so tired that he wished for the lad's hand to help him up the hill. Laure, however, came out with her brother, and when the old man's trembling fingers sought the lad's, she burst out into a sneering laugh.

"There he is boring you again!" said she. "Leave him to see after himself." Then, turning to the other children, she added: "Isn't he a sawny to let himself be plagued in this way?"

Jules blushed at the sound of his schoolfellows' jeers, and, wishing to show what a man he was, he jumped aside, repeating his sister's expression to the old companion of his walks:

"You plague me!"

Dismayed, and with tears filling his troubled eyes, Fouan stumbled as though the ground failed him, like the little hand that had been withdrawn. The jeering laughter increased, and Laure made Jules dance with her round the old man, singing the childish rhyme:

"He shall fall on the ground, and there he shall lie, And whoever shall help him, shall eat his bread dry!"

Fouan, half fainting, was nearly two hours in getting home, so feebly did he drag his feet along. This was the last blow. The lad ceased bringing him his soup and making his bed, the palliasse of which was now not turned once a month. Without even this urchin to talk to, the old man buried himself in absolute silence, and his isolation became complete. Never did he speak a word about anything to any one.

PART V. — CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER III.

The winter ploughing had commenced, and Jean, that cold grey February afternoon, had just arrived with his plough at his big patch of ground on the plain, where he still had a good couple of hours' work before him. It was a strip at the edge of the field that he was going to plough, intending to sow it with a new variety of Scotch wheat, a course which had been recommended by his old master, Hourdequin, who had moreover promised him several bushels of seed-corn.

Jean at once set to work, beginning at the spot where he had left off on the previous day; and, putting his plough into position and grasping hold of the arms, he started his horse, shouting in a gruff voice:

"Gee woh! Gee woh!"

Violent rains, coming after excessive heat, had so stiffened the clayey soil that it was with great difficulty that the plough-share and coulter broke off the strips of earth through which they cut. The heavy clods could be heard grating against the mould-board as the latter turned them over, burying the manure with which the field was covered. Every now and then a stone or some other obstacle gave the plough a sudden shock.

"Gee woh! Gee woh!" cried Jean, as grasping the handles with his outstretched arms he guided the plough so correctly that the furrows were as straight as if they had been traced out by rule and line. Meanwhile his horse, keeping its head down and burying its hoofs in the soil, drew the plough forward with a steady regular motion. Whenever the implement got clogged, Jean jerked off the earth and weeds, and then it glided on again, leaving the rich soil behind it upraised, quivering and trembling, as though alive, and with its very entrails exposed.

He reached the end of the furrow, and then turned round and commenced a new one. Presently he became affected by a sort of intoxication due to the strong odour exhaled by the disturbed soil, an odour suggestive of damp recesses where the seed would germinate. His slow monotonous gait and his fixed gaze completed his feeling of dazed abstraction. He would never succeed in becoming a genuine peasant, he thought. He was not a native of the soil, and he still retained the feelings of a town-bred workman, of a trooper who had served through the campaign in Italy; and things that the peasants could not see or feel were very visible and apparent to him--the great mournful peacefulness of the plain and the deep breathing of the soil beneath the sunshine and the showers. He had always had visions of retiring into the peace of the country, but how foolish he must have been to imagine that it was only necessary to lay down the gun and the plane and to grasp hold of the plough to satisfy his taste for tranquillity! Though the soil might be peaceful and kindly to those that loved it, the villages that clung to it like nests of vermin, full of human insects that preyed upon its flesh, sufficed to dishonour and pollute it. He could remember no sufferings in his previous life equal to those which he had endured since his arrival at La Borderie, now a long time ago.

Being obliged to raise the arms a little in order to ease the plough, a slight unevenness in the furrow annoyed him, and he began to display still greater care in guiding his horse.

"Gee woh! Gee woh!"

Yes, indeed, what troubles he had gone through during these last ten years! First, there was his long period of waiting for Françoise, and then his warfare with the Buteaus. Not a day had passed without some painful event or without some angry words. And now that he had got Françoise, now that they had been married for a couple of years, could he say that he was at last happy? Though he himself still loved her, he had divined that

she did not love him, and that she never would love him as he wished to be loved, unreservedly, with her whole heart and soul. They lived together in peaceful harmony, indeed, and they were prospering in their work and saving money. But that was not everything. He could feel that she was cold and reserved, and occupied by other thoughts than of himself when he held her in his arms. She was now five months gone with child, but even this fact had not brought the husband and wife into closer sympathy; and Jean felt more and more the feeling which he had first experienced on the day they had taken possession of their house, the feeling that his wife still looked upon him as a stranger, a native of another country, born no one knew where; a man whose thoughts were not those of the villagers of Rognes; who seemed to her to be even differently made, and who could never be really united with her, even though he was the father of the child she bore within her.

After her marriage, Françoise, in her exasperation against the Buteaus, had brought a piece of stamped paper from Cloyes, one Saturday, with the intention of making a will and leaving everything that belonged to her to her husband, for she had been told that the house and the land would revert to her sister supposing she died without issue, and that her husband would not be able to claim anything save the furniture and cash. Subsequently, however, she seemed to have thought better of the matter, for the sheet of stamped paper still lay in a drawer quite white. This had been a source of much secret pain to Jean, not from any mercenary feeling, but because he looked upon his wife's remissness as implying a want of affection for himself. But, indeed, it mattered nothing, now that a youngster was coming into the world! What would be the use of making a will under those circumstances? And yet despite such reflections as these, his heart felt very heavy whenever he opened the drawer and saw the piece of stamped paper which had now become useless.

Jean stopped ploughing to give his horse a little breathing-time, and the sharp, frosty wind enabled him to shake off his abstraction. He slowly let

his gaze wander to the blank horizon, over the immense plain, where, far away in the distance, other ploughs were at work, looking blurred and hazy in the dull grey atmosphere. He was now surprised to perceive old Fouan, who had come from Rognes along the new road, in compliance with one of those instinctive cravings which he still experienced at times, to look once more at some field or other. On catching sight of him, Jean lowered his head, and for a moment or two concentrated his gaze upon the gaping furrow and the eviscerated soil at his feet. It was firm and yellow beneath the surface, the upturned clods seemingly revealing young and healthy earth, while the manure was buried in a bed of rich fecundity. As Jean gazed downwards, his thoughts grew confused and strangely intermingled. How odd it seemed that one should have to grub up the soil in this way to get bread! What a source of worry it was that he was not loved by Françoise! Then came more vague reflections about other matters, about the growth of the crops, about his little one who would soon be born, and about all the toil which folks underwent, often without being any the happier for it.

Then he grasped the arms of the plough again, and shouted his deep-toned cry:

"Gee woh! Gee woh!"

He was just finishing his ploughing when Delhomme, who was returning on foot from a neighbouring farm, stopped to call to him from the edge of the field.

"Hallo! Corporal, have you heard the news? We're going to have war it seems."

Jean left go of his plough and drew himself up, surprised to feel such a shock at his heart.

"War! How's that?" he asked.

"With the Prussians, so they say. It is all in the newspapers."

With a fixed gaze Jean pictured Italy, the battles fought there, and all the carnage from which he had been fortunate enough to escape without a single wound. Then his most ardent wish had been to live a quiet life in some peaceful nook, but now these few words shouted from the roadway by a passer-by, this thought of war, had sufficed to send his blood surging hotly through his veins!

"Ah, well, if the Prussians are making game of us," said he, "we can't let ourselves be flouted by them!"

Delhomme, however, looked upon the matter differently. He shook his head gravely, and declared that it would be the ruination of the country districts if the Cossacks came back again, as in Napoleon's time. Fighting did no one any good. It would be much better to try to arrange affairs peaceably.

"I say this," he added, "in the interests of others, for I have just been depositing some money with Monsieur Baillehache, so that, whatever happens, Nénesse, who has to draw in the conscription to-morrow, won't have to join the ranks."

"Ah, yes, and it's the same with me," said Jean, who had now calmed down. "I've served my time, and owe them nothing further, and I'm married, too; so, whether they go to war or not, it won't make any difference to me. Ah! so it's to be with the Prussians this time! Well, we shall give them a good hiding, just as we did the Austrians, and then there'll be an end of the matter."

"Good evening, Corporal!"

"Good evening!"

Then Delhomme went on his way again. Presently he stopped to tell the news to some one else; and then, further on, he told it a third time, and so

the report of the threatened approach of war quickly flew across La Beauce, through the mournful greyish atmosphere.

Jean having finished his ploughing, determined to go at once to La Borderie, to get the seed-corn which had been promised to him. He took the horse out of the plough, and sprang on to its back, leaving the plough in a corner of the field. As he was riding off, he again thought of Fouan and looked round for him, but could not see him. He thereupon concluded that the old man had taken shelter from the cold behind a rick of straw which was standing in Buteau's field.

When Jean arrived at La Borderie, and had tethered his horse, he called without eliciting any response. Everybody appeared to be at work away from the house. However, he went into the kitchen and stamped on the floor with his feet, and presently heard Jacqueline's voice proceeding from the cellar where the dairy was. Access to it was obtained through a trap-door opening at the foot of the staircase, and so awkwardly placed that an accident was always being feared.

"Who's there?" she called.

Jean had squatted down on the top step of the steep little staircase, and she recognised him from below.

"Ah! so it's you, Corporal?"

He, too, could now see Jacqueline in the semi-darkness of the dairy, which was lighted merely by a grating in the wall. She was busily working among the bowls and the pans, from which the whey was dripping slowly into a stone trough. Her sleeves were rolled back as far as her arm-pits, and her arms were white with cream.

"Well, why don't you come down? You're not afraid of me, are you?"

She addressed him in the same familiar manner as of yore, and she laughed in her old enticing way. Jean, however, felt ill at ease, and did not move.

"I've come for the seed-corn," he said, "that the master promised me."

"Oh yes, I know. Wait a moment, and I'll come up."

When she emerged into the full light, Jean saw that she was looking very fresh and glowing; and her bare, white arms exhaled a pleasant odour of milk. She looked at him with her pretty, mischievous eyes, and ended by asking, in a bantering way:

"Well, aren't you going to kiss me? There's no reason that you should get stiff and unpleasant just because you're married."

Then he kissed her, trying to make the sounding salutes which he imprinted on both her cheeks seem mere marks of friendship. But her presence disturbed him, and recollections of the past sent his blood thrilling through his veins. He had never felt like this with his wife, although he loved her so much.

"Come along," now continued Jacqueline, "and I'll show you the seed-corn. Every one is out, even the servant-girl is away at market."

She crossed the yard, and then, entering the barn, stepped behind a pile of sacks. The seed was lying there in a heap on some boards. Jean had followed her, feeling somewhat disturbed at finding himself alone with her in this dim, out-of-the-way spot. He now suddenly began to affect a deep interest in the seed-corn, which was of a fine new Scotch variety.

"How big the grains are!" said he.

Jacqueline, however, began to speak in her cooing tones, and quickly brought him to a subject which had greater interest for her.

"Your wife is in the family-way, eh? Tell me, now, does she make herself as pleasant with you as I did?"

Jean turned very red, and Jacqueline took a malicious delight in seeing him thus disturbed. Presently some sudden reflection cast a gloom over her face.

"I've had a good many troubles, you know," she continued, "but, happily, they are all over now, and they have ended to my advantage."

The fact was that Hourdequin's son, Léon, the captain, who had not been seen at La Borderie for years past, had one day suddenly arrived there. He had observed, that same night, that Jacqueline occupied his mother's bedroom, and this had led him to make inquiries, whereupon he speedily learnt exactly how matters stood. For a little while Jacqueline trembled with uneasy alarm, for she had formed the ambitious design of marrying Hourdequin, and thus securing the reversion of the farm. The captain, however, played his cards too clumsily. He wanted to extricate his father from Jacqueline's meshes by letting himself be surprised in bed with the young woman. But he showed his hand too openly, and Jacqueline affected airs of the nicest virtue, screaming, weeping, and declaring to Hourdequin that she would leave the house at once, since she was no longer treated with respect in it. Then there was a terrible scene between the two men. The son tried to open his father's eyes, but this only made matters worse; and two hours later the captain left the house again, exclaiming, as he crossed the threshold, that he would rather lose everything than acquiesce in the present state of affairs, and that if he ever returned, it would only be to kick the hussy out of doors.

Jacqueline, in her triumph, now made the mistake of imagining that she merely had to ask for her own terms. She declared to Hourdequin that after such treatment, with which, indeed, the whole country-side was ringing, she would be compelled to leave him unless he made her his wife. She even began to pack her boxes. The farmer, however, upset by

his quarrel with his son, rendered all the more angry by a secret consciousness that he was in the wrong, and a feeling of sorrowing regret for all that had occurred, gave her a couple of such vigorous cuffs as almost shook the life out of her. And then she said nothing more about going away, realising that she had been in too great a hurry. Still, she was now absolute mistress of the house, openly sleeping in the conjugal bedroom, taking her meals alone with Hourdequin, giving orders to the servants, regulating the expenses, keeping the keys of the safe, and behaving so despotically that the farmer always consulted her before taking any step. He was failing and ageing quickly, and Jacqueline trusted that she would be able to overcome his last scruples and induce him to marry her when she had quite exhausted his remaining manhood. In the meantime, as he had sworn to disinherit his son, she used all her wiles to induce him to make a will in her favour; and she already looked upon herself as the owner of the farm, for she had succeeded in wringing a promise from Hourdequin that he would leave it to her.

"If I've been knocking myself up for years past," she said to Jean, "it certainly hasn't been out of love for his good looks."

Jean could not restrain a laugh. While speaking Jacqueline had been plunging her bare arms again and again into the heap of corn, covering her skin with a soft floury powder. Jean looked at her, and suddenly gave utterance to a question which he speedily regretted.

"And are you as thick as ever with Tron?"

Jacqueline gave no sign of being offended. She spoke quite frankly, as to an old friend.

"Oh, I'm very fond of him, the great stupid fellow; but he's really very unreasonable. He's so dreadfully jealous, and we have terrible scenes together sometimes. The master's the only one he'll tolerate, and I really

believe that he comes sometimes at nights and listens at the door, to find out whether we are sleeping or not."

Jean laughed again; but Jacqueline seemed to consider it no laughing matter. She felt a vague fear of that big fellow Tron, who was cunning and treacherous, like all the men of Le Perche, she said. He had threatened to strangle her if she proved unfaithful to him; and consequently she now consorted with him in fear and trembling, despite the charm that his huge limbs had for her. She herself was so slim that this big fellow could have crushed her between his thumb and fingers.

At last, shrugging her shoulders with a pretty air, as much as to say that she had conquered others quite as difficult to manage, she continued:

"We used to get on better with one another than that, eh, Corporal?"

Still keeping her merry eyes fixed upon him, she began to pound the corn again; while Jean fell a victim to her charms once more, forgetting all about his departure from La Borderie, his marriage, and the child that was soon to be born to him. He seized hold of her wrists under the corn, and then slipped his hands up her arms, all velvety with flour, till they reached her white child-like breast, to which her habits of debauchery seemed to have imparted a firmer plumpness. This was what she had been wishing to bring about ever since she had caught sight of him at the mouth of the trap-door; and she felt an additional malicious joy in taking him from another woman, and that woman his lawful wife, and proving that it was still herself that he loved best. He had already seized her in his arms and thrown her down, panting and cooing, upon the heap of corn, when the shepherd Soulas, with his tall fleshless figure, emerged from behind the sacks, coughing loudly and spitting. Jacqueline hastily sprang to her feet, while Jean panted and stammered out:

"Oh, this is it, is it? Well, I'll come back presently and take fifteen bushels of it. What splendid stuff it is, isn't it?"

Jacqueline, bursting with anger, fixed her eyes on the shepherd, who showed no signs of going away.

"It is really past all bearing!" she muttered between her clenched teeth. "Whenever I think I am alone, he always contrives to turn up and haunt me! But I'll have him sent off about his business!"

Jean, who had now recovered his calmness, hastily left the barn, and went to unfasten his horse, without paying any attention to the signs of Jacqueline, who would have concealed him in the conjugal bed-chamber itself rather than have foregone her desire. Anxious to make his escape, Jean said that he would return the next day, and he was setting off on foot, leading his horse by the bridle, when Soulas, who had gone outside to wait for him, intercepted him at the gate.

"So she's got even you back into her meshes again! Well, at any rate just tell her to keep her tongue quiet, if she doesn't want to set mine wagging. Ah, there will be a pretty business, by-and-bye, you'll see!"

Jean, however, passed on his way with a rough gesture, refusing to mix himself up any further in the matter. He was full of shame; annoyed at the thought of what he had so nearly done. He had believed that he really loved Françoise, and yet he had never felt one of these impetuous thrills of desire for her! Could it be that he really loved Jacqueline more than his wife? Had a passion for the hussy been smouldering within him all this time? All the past woke up within him into fresh life, and he was angered at himself to feel that he would certainly return to Jacqueline in spite of all his desire to the contrary. Then he excitedly sprang on to his horse and galloped off, so as to get back to Rognes as soon as possible.

That same afternoon it happened that Françoise had gone to cut a bundle of lucern for her cows. It was generally her task to do this, and she settled to do it on that particular afternoon as she relied on finding her husband in the field, ploughing. She did not care to trust herself there alone, for

fear she might come across the Buteaus, who, in their anger at no longer having the whole field to themselves, were perpetually seeking any excuse for a violent quarrel. She took a scythe with her, and counted upon the horse for bringing back the bundle of lucern. As she neared the field, she was surprised not to see her husband there, though she had not warned him of her intention to come. The plough was still there, but where could Jean have gone? She felt still more nervous when she observed Buteau and Lise standing at the edge of the field, shaking their arms with a show of anger. She fancied that they had just stopped for a moment on their way back from some neighbouring village, for they were wearing their Sunday clothes, and had no appearance of being engaged in work. For a moment she felt inclined to turn back and make her escape. Then she felt indignant at her own alarm; surely she was not going to be afraid of cutting lucern on her own land! So she continued to walk forward at the same pace, and carrying the scythe on her shoulder.

As a matter of fact, whenever Françoise met Buteau, and especially when he was alone, she was always overcome with nervous confusion. For two years she had not spoken a single word to him, but she never could see him without her whole body being thrilled with emotion. This emotion might be caused by anger, or it might be the result of some very different feeling. Several times she had seen him in front of her on this same road when she had been going up to her plot of lucern; and he would turn his head round two or three times and glance at her with his yellow-streaked grey eyes. Then she would feel a slight thrill pass through her body, and would quicken her steps in spite of all her efforts not to do so; while Buteau, on the other hand, would slacken his pace, and so she would find herself compelled to pass him, and, as she did so, their eyes would meet just for a second. Then she was troubled with the disturbing but pleasant consciousness that he was just behind her; and she felt enervated and scarcely able to continue walking. The last time they had met in this way, she had been so overcome that she had fallen down at full length in an

attempt to jump from the road into her patch of lucern; and Buteau had nearly burst with laughter at the sight.

That evening, when Buteau maliciously told his wife of her sister's tumble, they glanced at each other with gleaming eyes in which the same thought was expressed. If the hussy had killed herself and her unborn child her husband would take nothing, and the land and house would return to themselves! They had learnt from La Grande the story of the postponed will, which had now become unnecessary on account of Françoise's condition. But they never had any luck! There was no chance of fortune putting both mother and child out of their way at a single stroke! They returned to the subject as they went to bed, and talked about the death of Françoise and her unborn baby merely for the sake of talking. Talking of folks' death doesn't kill them; still, if Françoise, now, really died without an heir, what a stroke of luck it would be! What a heavenly retribution! In the bitterness of her hate, Lise actually swore that her sister was no longer her sister, and that she would willingly hold her head on the block if that was all that was wanted to enable them to return to their own house, from which the wicked drab had so treacherously evicted them.

Buteau was not quite so vindictive, and he declared, that he would be sufficiently pleased for the present if the youngster were to perish before it was born. Françoise's condition was a source of much irritation to him, for the birth of a child would destroy all his obstinately entertained hopes, and definitely deprive him of the property. As the husband and wife got into bed together, and Lise blew out the candle, she broke out into a peculiar little laugh, and said that, so long as a youngster had not actually come into the world, it could easily be prevented from making its appearance. After lying silent for some time in the darkness, Buteau asked his wife what she meant. Then cuddling close up to his side, and holding her mouth to his ear, she made a very singular confession. Last month, she said, she had been troubled to find herself in the family way

again, and so, without saying anything about it to him, she had gone off to consult La Sapin, an old woman living at Magnolles, who had the reputation of being a witch. A pretty reception he'd have given her if she had told him how matters stood. La Sapin, however, had quickly put everything right. It was a very simple affair.

Buteau listened to his wife without showing either approval or disapproval, and his satisfaction at what had occurred could only be gathered from the joking way in which he observed that Lise should have brought the prescription away with her for Françoise's advantage. Lise, too, seemed merry, and, grasping her husband closely in her arms, she whispered to him that La Sapin had taught her something else, oh, such a funny trick! What was it? asked Buteau. Well, a man could undo what a man had done, replied Lise. He had only got to make the sign of the cross on a woman three times and say an *Ave* backwards, and if there were a little one, it would disappear immediately. Buteau began to laugh, and they both affected incredulity, but they still retained so much of the ancient superstition of their race, that they were privately inclined to believe what they pretended to disbelieve. Indeed, everybody knew that the old witch of Magnolles had turned a cow into a weasel, and had brought a dead man to life again. Surely it must be true if she said it was! The idea made Buteau grin. Would it really be effectual? Stay, now, why shouldn't he really try it on Françoise, suggested Lise, he and she knew all about each other? Buteau, however, now protested against this allegation, as his wife, showing signs of jealousy, began to pinch and thump him; and they presently fell asleep in one another's arms.

Ever since that night they had been haunted by the thought of the child that was coming into the world to deprive them of the house and land for ever; and they never met the younger sister without immediately glancing at her condition. Thus as they now saw her coming up the road, on this afternoon when she wanted to cut some lucern, they took her measure with their eyes, and were quite startled to notice how swiftly matters

were advancing, and how little time there was left in which to take any steps.

"The devil take him," cried Buteau, going forward to examine the furrows; "the blackguard has filched off a good foot of our land! It's as plain as possible; see, there's the boundary-stone!"

Françoise had continued to approach with leisurely, easy steps, concealing her feeling of uneasy alarm. She now understood the cause of the Buteaus' angry gestures. Jean's plough must have sliced off a strip of their land. Disputes were continually arising on this score, and not a month passed without some quarrel taking place as to the boundary-line. Blows and litigation seemed likely to be the inevitable result.

"You are trespassing on our land," cried Buteau, raising his voice, "and I shall prosecute you!"

The young woman, however, stepped up to her patch of lucern, without even turning her head.

"Don't you hear us?" now screamed Lise, in a towering rage. "Come and look at the boundary-stone for yourself, if you think we're liars! You'll have to make good the damage!"

Her sister's persistent silence and contemptuous air now so thoroughly enraged her that she lost all control over herself, and rushed up to her, clenching her fists.

"So you think you can flout us as you please, do you, hussy? I am your elder sister, and I'll teach you to treat me with proper respect; and I'll make you go down on your knees and beg my pardon for all your impertinence to me!"

She was now standing in front of Françoise, mad with hate and anger, hesitating whether she should kill her sister with her fists, or whether she should kick her to death or knock out her brains with a stone.

"Down on your knees, hussy, down on your knees!"

Still persisting in her silence, Françoise now spat in her sister's face, just as she had done on the evening of the ejectment. Lise then broke out into a roar, but Buteau immediately interposed, and thrust her violently aside.

"Get away!" he said; "this is my business."

Ah, yes, she would gladly get away, and leave him to settle the matter. He was at perfect liberty to wring her sister's neck or break her back; he might cut her up and give her flesh to the dogs, or he might make her his drab; and, so far from trying to prevent him, she would do all she could to help him. She now braced herself up and glanced round her, keeping watch so that no one should come and interfere with whatever her husband chose to do. The vast grey plain stretched out beneath the gloomy sky, and not a single human being was in view.

"Now's the time! There's no one in sight!"

Buteau then stepped up to Françoise; and, as the young woman saw him advancing with stern-set face and stiff-braced arms, she thought he was going to thrash her. She still held her scythe, but she began to tremble, and Buteau seizing hold of the implement by the handle, tore it from her and tossed it into the lucern. Her only means of escaping him was by stepping backwards. She continued doing so till she reached the adjoining field, making for the rick which stood there, as though she hoped to use it in some way as a protecting rampart. Buteau followed her up quite leisurely; and he, on his part, seemed to be wishing to drive her towards the rick. His arms were slightly extended, and his face was broadened by a silent grin which disclosed his gums. Suddenly it flashed upon Françoise that he did not mean to thrash her. No, it was something very different that he meant; that something which she had so long refused him. She now began to tremble still more violently, and she felt as though all her strength were failing her; she who had always so

valiantly resisted and belaboured him, and sworn that he should never gain his ends! But she was no longer the high-spirited girl she had been; she had just completed her twenty-third year, on Saint Martin's Day, and she was now a woman, with the fresh bloom already taken off her by hard work, though her lips were still red and her eyes as big as crown-pieces. She felt such a sensation of flushed languor that her limbs seemed quite enervated and lifeless.

Buteau, still continuing to force her backwards, at last spoke in a deep, excited voice.

"You know very well that all is not over between us. This time I mean to succeed!"

He had now managed to bring her to a stand against the rick; and he abruptly took her by the shoulders and threw her upon her back. Dazed and enervated though she was, for a moment or two she began to struggle and fight, instinctively prompted thereto by her old habits of resistance. Buteau, however, dodged her kicks.

"What difference can it make to you, you silly idiot?" said he. "You needn't be afraid!"

Françoise now burst into tears, and seemed taken with a sort of fit. Though she made no further effort to defend herself, she was so violently shaken by nervous contortions that Buteau could not succeed in his purpose. His anger at being thus foiled maddened him, and, turning towards his wife, he cried out:

"You damned helpless idiot, what are you standing staring there for. Come and help me!"

Lise had remained standing bolt upright some ten yards away, without ever stirring; now scanning the distance to see if any one was coming, and now glancing at Françoise and Buteau, without any sign of feeling on

her face. When her husband called her, she did not evince the slightest hesitation, but strode up to him, and seizing hold of her sister, she sat down upon her as heavily as if she wanted to crush her. Finally Buteau proved victorious. He was just rising when old Fouan popped out his head from behind the rick, where he had sought shelter from the cold. The old man had seen all, and it evidently frightened him, for he at once concealed himself behind the straw again.

Buteau having risen to his feet, Lise looked at him keenly. In his eagerness he had forgotten all about the three signs of the cross, and the *Ave* repeated backwards. His wife stood frenzied with wild indignation. It was merely for his own pleasure that he done the deed!

Françoise, however, left him no time for explanations. For a moment she had remained lying motionless on the ground, as though she had fainted beneath a sensation such as she had never before experienced. The truth had suddenly dawned upon her. She loved Buteau! She never had, and never would, love any other. This discovery filled her with shame, and she was angered against herself at finding how false she was to her own ingrained ideas of justice. A man who did not belong to her! A man who belonged to that sister whom she now so hated! The only man in the world whom she could not possess without being false to her own oath!

Springing wildly to her feet, with her hair dishevelled and her clothes all disarranged, she spat out the anger that was raging within her in spasmodic bursts of abuse.

"You filthy swine! Yes, both of you! you're both filthy swine! You have ruined and destroyed me! People have been guillotined for doing less than you've done! I will tell Jean, you filthy swine, and he'll settle your accounts for you!"

Buteau shrugged his shoulders, and smiled his leering smile. He felt immensely satisfied, now that he had at last succeeded in gaining his ends.

"Nonsense, my dear! You were dying for it!"

This bantering speech had the effect of completing Lise's exasperation, and she vented all her rising anger against her husband upon her sister.

"It's quite true, you drab; I saw you!" she shouted. "I always said that all my troubles came from you! Will you dare to say now that you didn't debauch my husband, yes, debauch him directly after we were married, when you were only a child whom I still whipped?"

She now manifested the most violent jealousy, a jealousy which appeared somewhat singular after all the complacence she had recently shown. If Françoise had never been born, she thought, she herself would never have had to share either property or husband! She hated her sister for being younger and fresher and more attractive than herself.

"You're a liar!" cried Françoise, wild with anger. "You know that you are lying!"

"A liar, am I? You'll tell me, I suppose, that you didn't pursue him even into the cellar?"

"I! indeed! I'd a deal to do with it, hadn't I? You cow! you helped him! Yes, and you'd have broken my back, if you could! You must either be a filthy pimp, or else you wanted to murder me, you dirty drab!"

Lise replied by a violent blow, which so maddened Françoise that she threw herself wildly upon her sister. Buteau stood sniggering with his hands in his pockets, and made no attempt to interfere, like a self-satisfied cock watching a couple of hens quarrelling for him. The two women continued fighting savagely, tearing each other's caps off, their faces clawed and bleeding, and their hands eagerly seeking any spot

where they might tear and rend. In scuffling and wrestling they returned to the patch of lucern, and Lise suddenly broke out into a loud roar, for Françoise had driven her nails deeply into her neck Then, losing all self-control, the idea of murdering her sister occurred to her. She had caught sight of the scythe lying on her left hand. The handle had fallen across a clump of thistles, and the blade was sticking point upwards in the air. Like a flash of lightning she hurled Françoise on to the gleaming steel with all her force. The unfortunate young woman tottered and fell, uttering a terrible shriek. The blade of the scythe had pierced her side.

"Good God! good God!" stammered Buteau.

It was all over. A single second had settled it all; the irreparable had been accomplished. Lise, dazed at seeing her wish so quickly realised, stood watching her sister's severed dress as it reddened with a stream of blood. Had the blade penetrated deeply enough to cut the little one, that the blood flowed so plentifully? she wondered.

Old Fouan's pale face again peeped forth from behind the rick. He had seen everything, and was perfectly stupefied.

Françoise lay quite still, and Buteau, who had stepped up to her, dared not touch her. A gust of wind now darted over the field, and filled him with a wild terror.

"She is dead! In God's name, let us bolt!"

He seized hold of Lise's hand, and they flew along the deserted road as though they were possessed. The low, gloomy sky seemed as though it was about to fall down upon their heads, and behind them the sound of their galloping feet raised echoes which sounded as though a crowd of people were in hot pursuit of them. They both ran wildly on over the cropped and naked plain; Buteau, with his blouse swelling about him in the wind, and Lise, with her hair all loose and dishevelled, carrying her

cap in her hand. And as they ran they both kept repeating the same words, panting like hunted animals:

"She is dead! In God's name, let us bolt!"

Their strides grew longer, and soon they could not articulate distinctly; still, as they fled wildly on, they gave vent to panting exclamations which kept time, as it were, with their bounds:

"Dead! good God! Dead! good God! Dead! good God!"

Then they disappeared from sight.

Some minutes later, when Jean trotted up on his horse, he was filled with terrible consternation.

"What--what has happened?" he cried.

Françoise had opened her eyes, but still lay rigidly motionless. She gazed at Jean for a long time with her great troubled eyes, but she said nothing. Her mind seemed to be far away, absorbed in thought.

"You are wounded! You are bleeding! Speak to me, I beseech you!"

Then he turned to old Fouan, who had at length ventured to approach.

"You were here? Tell me what has happened!"

Then Françoise spoke, but very slowly, as though she were thinking of what she should say.

"I came to cut some grass--I fell on to my scythe--it went into me here. Oh, it's all over with me!"

Her eyes sought those of Fouan, telling him, and him alone, other things--things that only her own family should know. Dazed as was the old man, he seemed to comprehend her meaning.

"Yes, that is what happened," he said; "she fell and wounded herself. I was there, and saw it."

Jean galloped off to Rognes for a stretcher to carry his wife home. She lost consciousness again on the journey, and they never expected to get her to the house alive.

PART V. — CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER IV.

It happened that on the following day, Sunday, the young men of Rognes were to go to Cloyes for the conscription-ballot; and as La Grande and La Frimat, who had hurried up to the house in the dusk, were undressing Françoise and putting her to bed with the utmost care, the roll of the drum could be heard on the road below, sounding to the poor folks like a knell amid the mournful gloom.

Jean, who was quite off his head with troubled anxiety, had just set off to fetch Doctor Finet, when near the church he met Patoir, the veterinary surgeon, on his way to attend old Saucisse's cow. He forcibly dragged him into the house to see the ailing woman, in spite of his unwillingness to go. But when Patoir saw the hideous wound, he point-blank refused to interfere in the case. What good could he do? Death was plainly written there! Two hours later, when Jean came back with Monsieur Finet, the surgeon made a gesture of hopeless despair. Nothing could be done beyond administering anæsthetics for the sake of deadening the pain. The five months' pregnancy seriously complicated the case; and the unborn child could be felt moving within its mother's wounded body, dying indeed of its mother's death. Before the doctor went away, he dressed the wound as best he could, and, although he promised to return in the morning, he warned Jean that his wife would most probably pass away during the night. She lived through it, however, and she was still lingering on, when, towards nine o'clock in the morning, the drum began to beat again, summoning the young men to meet in front of the municipal offices.

All through the night the flood-gates of heaven had been open, and Jean had listened to a pouring deluge of rain as he sat watching in his wife's

room, stupefied with troubled grief, and with his eyes full of big tears. The roll of the drum sounded as though it were muffled as he heard it in the close, damp air of the morning. The rain had now ceased, but the sky was still of a leaden grey.

For a long time the drum-beating continued. The drummer was a new one, a nephew of Macqueron's, who had just left the service, and he beat his drum as though he were leading a regiment into action. All Rognes was in a state of anxiety, for the rumours of approaching war, that had lately been circulated, had greatly increased the emotion which always attended the conscription-balloting. The prospect of being at once marched off to be shot by the Prussians was not an alluring one. There were nine young men of the neighbourhood to ballot upon this occasion, probably a larger number than had ever before been known. Among them were Nénesse and Delphin, once so inseparable, but severed of late owing to the former having taken a situation in a restaurant at Chartres. On the previous evening Nénesse had gone to sleep at his father's farm. When Delphin saw him he scarcely knew him, he was so changed; dressed quite like a gentleman, with a cane and a silk hat, and a blue scarf clasped by a ring. He now had his clothes made to order by a tailor, and cracked jokes about Lambourdieu's ready-made suits. His neck was still scrawny and long, and absolutely devoid of hair on the nape. Delphin, on the other hand, had grown massive and sturdy; his limbs were heavy, like his movements, and his face was tanned and baked by the sun. He had grown up like some vigorous plant in that beloved soil to which he was so firmly rooted. However, he and Nénesse immediately renewed their broken chumship, and were as good comrades as ever. After spending a part of the night with each other, they appeared arm-in-arm the next morning in front of the municipal offices, in obedience to the persistent summons of the drum.

A number of the relations of the nine young men were gathered there. Delhomme and Fanny, proud of their son's distinguished appearance,

wished to be present to see him off, though they felt no anxiety, as they had provided for his exemption. Bécu, wearing his constabular badge of office, threatened to cuff his wife because she began to cry. What was she blubbering for? he asked. Wasn't Delphin fit to serve his country with credit? The lad, however, would be sure to escape, and draw a lucky number. When at last the nine young fellows were all got together, a feat which it took a good hour to accomplish, Lequeu handed them the banner. Then they began to discuss who should carry it. The general rule was to choose the tallest and most vigorous of the number, and so it was agreed that Delphin should carry it. He seemed very nervous and timid, in spite of his big fists, shy at finding himself mixed up in matters which he did not understand. He seemed to find the long pole awkward to manage, and then it might conduct him to misfortune, he reflected sorrowfully.

At the two corners of the street, Flore and Cœlina were giving a final sweep to their respective public parlours, in view of being ready for the evening. Macqueron was looking out of his door with a sorrowful countenance; then Lengaigne appeared at his, with a sniggering grin on his face. He was in a very triumphant frame of mind just then, for the excise-officers had recently seized four casks of wine which they had found concealed beneath one of his rival's wood-stacks. Macqueron, it was said, would be dismissed from his mayoralty in consequence, and every one felt quite sure that the anonymous letter which had led to the wine being discovered had emanated from Lengaigne. To make matters worse, Macqueron had another trouble on his shoulders. His daughter Berthe had so compromised herself with the wheelwright's son, whom he had previously refused as a son-in-law, that he was now constrained to let him have her. For the last week the gossips at the fountain had talked of nothing save the daughter's marriage and the prosecution of the father. It was certain that the latter would at least be fined; and it was by no means unlikely that he would be sent to gaol. And so the mayor, seeing his

neighbour's insulting grin, retired again, feeling painfully conscious that every one else was also sniggering at him.

Delphin had now grasped the banner, and the drum sounded the march. Nénesse fell into position, and the other seven took up their places behind him. They formed quite a little troop as they filed along over the level road. A swarm of children ran forward with them, and Delhomme, Fanny, Bécu, and several other relatives accompanied them to the end of the village. Freed of her husband, Madame Bécu hurried away and slipped furtively into the church. Then, glancing around and finding that she was quite alone, she fell down on her knees, though, as a rule, she was by no means addicted to displays of devotion, and burst into tears, while beseeching the good God to grant her son a lucky number. She remained for more than an hour stammering out this heartfelt prayer. Far away, towards Cloyes, the banner was gradually fading from sight in the distance, and the rolling of the drum was lost in space.

It was nearly ten o'clock when Doctor Finet made his appearance again, and he seemed surprised to find Françoise still alive. He had quite expected that he would merely have to give the certificate for her burial. He shook his head as he examined the wound. Ever since the previous evening, not having an idea of the real facts, he had been pondering over the story that had been told to him in connection with the wound. He now desired to have the whole narrative repeated to him; and he could not yet understand how the unfortunate young woman had managed to fall in such a disastrous fashion. He finally took his leave, indignant at Françoise's culpable clumsiness, and annoyed at having to pay yet another visit to certify the death.

Jean still remained in a state of mournful gloom, watching intently over Françoise, who closed her eyes in persistent muteness as soon as she ever caught her husband's questioning glance. He divined that some lie or other had been told him, and that his wife was hiding something from

him. In the early morning he had escaped for a little time, and had run up to the lucern field to see if he could discover anything. But he could learn nothing definite from his inspection. The footmarks had been nearly effaced by the heavy rain which had fallen during the night, but he discovered a corner where the lucern seemed to have been beaten down, and he concluded that this was the spot where Françoise had fallen. After the surgeon had gone away, Jean again sat down by the side of the dying woman's bed. He was now quite alone with her, for La Frimat had gone off to breakfast, and La Grande had been obliged to return home for a moment to see that things were not going wrong in her absence.

"Are you in pain?" Jean asked his wife.

Françoise closed her eyes tightly, and made no reply.

"Tell me, now, aren't you concealing something from me?"

If it had not been for her weak and painful breathing one might have supposed that Françoise was already dead. Ever since the previous evening she had been lying on her back, silent and in the same position, as though incapable of either motion or speech. She was burning with fever, but all her power of will seemed to offer a determined resistance to the approach of delirium, so acute was her fear of letting anything escape her. She had always possessed a strongly-marked character, full of obstinate determination; doing nothing like other people, and giving utterance to ideas which filled everybody who heard her with amazement. Loyalty to her family was probably actuating her now, a loyalty which over-rode all feeling of hatred and craving for vengeance. What good would vengeance do her, now that she was dying? There were matters which were best buried with one's self, shut up in the spot where they had been born; matters which must never, no never, be disclosed for a stranger's enlightenment; and Jean was a stranger, whom she had never been really able to love with genuine love. It was perhaps in punishment

for having given him her hand that she was never to bring into the world the undeveloped child quickening within her.

Ever since Jean had seen his wife brought home in a dying condition, his thoughts had been harping on the unmade will. All through the night he had kept thinking that, if she died intestate, he would be entitled to nothing, save half of the furniture and the money--a hundred and twenty-seven francs locked up in the drawer. He loved Françoise dearly, and he would have made any sacrifice to keep her; but the thought that, together with his wife, he would also lose the house and land, still further increased his grief. As yet, he had not dared to say a word on the subject: it seemed so hard-hearted, and then there had always been other people in the room. But at last, seeing that he would never be able to glean any further information as to the manner in which the accident had happened, he determined to tackle this other matter.

"Are there any arrangements that you would like to make?" he asked.

It did not seem as though Françoise heard him. Her eyes were closed, and her face was quite expressionless.

"If anything happened to you, you know, your sister would take everything. The paper is still there in the drawer."

He brought the sheet of stamped paper to her, and then continued, in a voice that grew more and more embarrassed:

"Would you like me to help you? Are you strong enough to write, do you think? I'm not thinking about myself; but I only fancied that you wouldn't like those folks who have treated you so badly to have anything you left behind."

Françoise's eyelids trembled slightly, proving to Jean that she had heard him. So she must still be averse to making a will! He was quite astounded; he could not understand it at all. Probably Françoise, herself,

could not have explained why she persisted in thus lying like a corpse, before the time had come for her to be boxed-up within four boards. But the land and the house did not belong to this man, who had come athwart her life like some mere passer-by. She owed him nothing; the child would go away with herself. By what right should the property be taken away from the family? Her obstinate, childish ideas of justice protested against such a thing. This is mine, that is yours; let us each take our own and say good-bye! However, other thoughts besides these were vaguely floating through her mind. Her sister Lise seemed far away from her--lost in the distance--and it was Buteau alone who seemed really present to her; Buteau whom, in spite of all his ill-treatment, she pardoned and loved and longed for.

Jean was getting vexed. The desire for the soil was now gaining hold of him, too, and embittering his mind. He raised Françoise in bed, and attempted to get her into a sitting position and to put a pen between her fingers.

"Come now," he said, "see if you can't manage it. You can't like those scamps better than me, and want them to have everything!"

Then Françoise at last opened her eyes, and the look that she turned upon Jean quite stupefied him. She knew that she was going to die, and her big, widely-opened eyes were full of hopeless despair. Why was he torturing her like this? they seemed to say. She could not, and she would not! Besides, it was her own affair. A low moan of pain was the only sound that escaped her lips. Then she fell back again, her eyelids closed, and her head lay rigid and motionless on the pillow.

Ashamed of his unkind persistence, Jean now felt so miserable and confused that he was still standing there with the sheet of stamped paper in his hand when La Grande came back into the room. She saw it, and knew what it meant; and at once took Jean aside to inquire if Françoise had made a will. He stammered out that he had just been going to conceal

the paper to prevent any one bothering his wife about it, a course which La Grande seemed to approve of, for she was on the Buteaus' side, foreseeing all kinds of rows and abominable scenes if they succeeded in inheriting the property. Then, seating herself in front of the table, and recommencing her knitting, she continued:

"Well, no one will find himself wronged by me, I'm sure, when I'm taken away. My will has been made long ago. Every one is remembered, and I should think I was acting very wrongly if I showed an unfair preference for any one. None of my children are forgotten, as they will see for themselves one of these days."

She recited this formula daily to one or another member of her family, and she made a point of repeating it by the death-bed of her relatives. Every time she delivered herself of it, she chuckled in secret at the thought of that famous will of hers which would set the whole family by the ears when she was gone. She had been careful that it should not contain a single clause that was not pregnant with a law-suit.

"What a pity it is," she added, "that one can't take one's property with one! But, since one can't, others must needs have the enjoyment of it."

La Frimat now returned, sat down at the other side of the table, opposite to La Grande, and also began to knit. So the afternoon glided away. The two old women sat quietly gossipping with each other, while Jean, who could not settle in any one place, kept walking up and down, perpetually leaving the room and then returning in a state of feverish restlessness. The doctor' had said that there was nothing to be done, and so they did nothing.

At last, La Frimat began expressing her regret that Sourdeau, the bone-setter at Bazoches, who was equally expert in the treatment of wounds, had not been sent for. He just said a few words and then breathed over his patients, and then the wounds closed up at once.

"Oh, he's a splendid fellow!" exclaimed La Grande in a respectful way. "It was he who put the Lorillon's breast-bone right. Old Lorillon's breast-bone, you know, fell out of its place, and hung down and pressed so heavily on his stomach that he almost died from exhaustion. Then, to make matters worse, the old woman caught the dreadful complaint as well: for, as you know, it is contagious. Presently they all had it, the daughter, the son-in-law, and their three children. They would certainly all have died of it if they had not sent for Sourdeau, who put everything right again by just rubbing their bellies with a tortoise-shell comb."

The other old woman confirmed every detail of this story with a wag of the head. It was all well known, and there was no doubt about it. Then she herself adduced another fact in support of Sourdeau's skill.

"It was Sourdeau, too, who cured the Budin's little girl of fever by just cutting a live pigeon in two and applying it to her head."

Then she turned to Jean, who was standing quite dazed by the bedside.

"If I were you," she said, "I should send for him. It's perhaps not too late, even now."

Jean, however, answered merely with an angry gesture. His town-breeding prevented him from believing such stories. The two women then went on gossipping together for a long time, telling each other of various quaint remedies, such as placing parsley beneath one's bed to cure lumbago, or keeping three acorns in one's pocket in the case of inflammation, or drinking a glass of water which had been exposed to the moon in view of getting rid of wind.

"Well, if you're not going to send for Sourdeau," La Frimat abruptly exclaimed, "at any rate you'd better send for his reverence the priest."

Jean again replied by an angry gesture, and La Grande compressed her lips tightly.

"What good would his reverence do?"

"What good would he do? Why, he would bring the blessed sacrament, and there's some comfort in that, sometimes."

La Grande shrugged her shoulders, as though to express that now-a-days no one believed in such old-fashioned ideas.

"Besides," she added, after a pause, "the priest wouldn't come. He is ill. Madame Bécu told me just now that he is going away in a carriage on Wednesday, as the doctor says that he will certainly die if he remains in Rognes."

As a matter of fact, the Abbé Madeline's health had gradually been getting worse during the two years and a-half that he had been stationed at Rognes. A feeling of home-sickness, a broken-hearted longing for his native mountains of Auvergne had been preying upon him with increasing severity every day he had spent in that flat land of La Beauce, where the sight of the far-spreading boundless plain filled his heart with despondent melancholy. Not a tree nor a rock was to be seen; and instead of rushing cascades of foaming water, there were only stagnant pools. The priest's eyes lost their brightness, and he grew more fleshless than ever, till people said that he was going off in a consumption. Yet he might still have been reconciled to remaining there if he could have derived any consolation from the women of his parish. But it was just the other way. Coming, as he did, from a pious and faithful flock, his timid soul was overwhelmed with grief and consternation at finding himself in so irreligious a parish, where only the merest outward forms of the faith were complied with. The women deafened and dazed him with their screaming and quarrelling, and so abused his yielding nature that they practically took the religious direction of the place into their own hands: while he, a man full of scrupulous sensitiveness, and constantly afraid of involuntarily falling into sin, stood by in silent consternation. But there was a final blow in store for him. On Christmas day, one of the

hand-maidens of the Virgin had been seized with the pangs of labour while in church. Since then the priest had been getting worse and worse, and now he was going to be carried back, in a dying condition, to Auvergne.

"So, then, we're without a priest again?" exclaimed La Frimat. "I wonder if the Abbé Godard would come back to us."

"Ah, the surly fellow!" cried La Grande; "he would burst with spite if he had to come!"

The sudden arrival of Fanny made them silent. She was the only member of her family who had come to see Françoise on the previous evening, and she had now returned to ascertain how she was getting on. Jean pointed to his wife with his trembling hand. The room was hushed in sympathetic silence, and Fanny lowered her voice to inquire if the dying woman had asked for her sister. No, they said, she had never opened her mouth on the subject; it was just as if Lise had not existed. Forsooth, it was very strange, for death is death, all previous quarrelling notwithstanding; and when should peace be made if not ere the final departure?

La Grande now expressed the opinion that Françoise should be questioned on the subject. She got up from her seat, and stooped over the dying woman.

"Tell me, my dear," she said, "wouldn't you like to see Lise?"

But Françoise lay perfectly still; she gave no other sign than a scarcely perceptible quiver of her closed eyelids.

"She is perhaps expecting us to bring her. I'll go for her."

Then, still keeping her eyes closed, and turning her head on the pillow, Françoise softly said "No." Jean desired that her wishes should be respected, and the three women sat down again. They now began to feel

astonished that Lise did not come of her own accord; but there was often a great amount of obstinate feeling shown in families, they reflected.

"What endless troubles one has!" Fanny now exclaimed with a sigh. "Ever since this morning, I've been nearly worried to death over this balloting; and yet really I've no cause for worry, since I know very well that Nénesse won't be taken from us."

"Ah! yes, indeed," murmured La Frimat; "but one can't help feeling anxious and excited, all the same."

Once again the dying woman was entirely forgotten, and the gossips began to talk about luck and chance, about the young men who would be marched off, and about those who would remain. It was now three o'clock, and although the party was not expected back till five o'clock at the earliest, reports of what had happened were already circulating in the village, wafted over from Cloyes, no one knew how, by that species of serial telegraphy which flies from village to village. The Briquets' son had drawn No. 13, so there was no chance of his escaping! The Couillots' son, on the other hand, had drawn No. 106, and that was certainly a safe number! However, nothing positive seemed to be known about the others. There was only a lot of contradictory reports, which tended to increase the excitement. Nobody appeared to know how Delphin and Nénesse had fared.

"My heart is palpitating dreadfully," exclaimed Fanny. "How stupid of me!"

Then they called out to Madame Bécu, who happened to be passing. She had been to the church again, and was now wandering backwards and forwards like a disembodied spirit. Her trouble was so great that she did not even stop to talk.

"I can't contain myself any longer; I'm going to meet them!" said she.

Jean was standing in front of the window, gazing vaguely out of it, and paying no attention to the women's talk. Several times since the morning he had seen old Fouan prowling round the house with his dragging gait. He now suddenly caught sight of him again, pressing his face against one of the panes of glass, and trying to make out what was going on inside the room. Jean thereupon opened the window, and the old man, looking quite stupefied, began to ask in stammering tones how Françoise was. Very bad, Jean told him; in fact, it was all over with her. Then Fouan thrust his head in at the open window, and stood gazing at Françoise for such a long time that it almost seemed as though he were unable to go away. When Fanny and La Grande saw him, they returned to their previous idea of sending for Lise. But when they tried to get the old fellow to fetch her, he shivered with alarm and made his escape. He muttered and repeated over and over again:

"No, no; impossible, impossible!"

Jean seemed struck by the old man's appearance of terror; however, the women let the matter drop. After all, it only concerned the two sisters, and it was no business of theirs to force them to see and kiss each other. At this moment a sound was heard, feeble at first, and like the droning of a big fly; then it grew louder and louder, rolling along like a gust of wind breaking among trees.

Fanny leaped up excitedly.

"The drum!" she cried. "Here they come! Good evening!"

And thereupon she hurried away, without even giving her cousin a last kiss.

La Grande and La Frimat also left the room and went to look out at the door. Only Françoise and Jean were left: the wife still persisting in her obstinate silence and rigidity, hearing, perhaps, everything that was said, but wishing to die, like some wild animal earthed-up at the bottom of its

burrow; the husband standing in front of the open window, racked by uncertainty, and overwhelmed by a troubled grief to which everything seemed to contribute. Ah, that drum! how the sound of it vibrated and echoed through his whole being. And as its roll broke ceaselessly through the air, with his grief of to-day there mingled recollections of the past, of barracks and battles, and of the dog's life led by poor wretches who had neither wife nor child to love them!

As soon as the banner came into sight, far away in the distance, on the flat level road looking grey and dingy in the fading light of the evening, a swarm of children scampered off to meet the conscripts, and a group of relatives posted themselves just at the entrance to the village. The nine young men and the drummer were already very drunk, and as they came along in the mournful evening light, decorated with tri-coloured ribbons, and the greater part of them having numbers pinned upon their hats, they bellowed out a warlike chorus. As they approached the village, they roared out the words of their song louder than ever, and by way of brag, marched forward with a swaggering air.

Delphin was still carrying the banner; but he was holding it on his shoulder, as though it were some troublesome rag of which he could not conceive the use. He came along wearily, with a gloomy expression on his face, and did not join in the singing of the others. There was no number pinned on his cap. As soon as Madame Bécu caught sight of him, she rushed forward in a tremble, at the risk of being overturned by the advancing band of conscripts.

"Well?" she cried.

But Delphin angrily thrust her aside without slackening his pace.

"Get out of the way, and don't bother me!"

Bécu himself had also stepped forward, as full of anxiety as his wife; but when he heard his son's surly words, he did not dare to say anything; and,

as his wife broke out sobbing, it was all he could do to restrain his own tears, despite all his patriotic enthusiasm.

"It's of no use talking about it! He's been drawn!"

They now both lagged behind on the deserted road, and slowly and sadly returned to the village--the husband thinking of the hard life he had endured in the past as a soldier, and the wife swelling with wrath against the God to whom she had twice prayed, and who had not hearkened to her.

Nénesse was wearing a magnificent number "214" on his cap, daubed in red and blue paint. This was one of the highest numbers, and the young fellow was triumphing in his luck, brandishing his cane and keeping the time as he led the wild chorus of his comrades. When Fanny saw the number, instead of rejoicing, she broke out into a cry of deep regret. Ah! if they could only have foreseen this they would never have invested those thousand francs in Monsieur Baillehache's lottery to ensure their son's exemption! Still, although the young man was thus ensured against being taken from them, his mother and father both embraced him as if he had just escaped from some great peril. But he hastily exclaimed:

"Do leave me alone! and don't worry me in this way!"

The little troop continued on its tipsy, riotous march through the wildly excited village. The young men's relations dared not venture upon any further questions or demonstrations, as it was clear that they would only meet with an angry repulse. All the young fellows seemed to have come back in the same surly frame of mind, both those who had been taken and those who had escaped. But, anyway, they would not have been able to give a clear account of what had happened, for their eyes were projecting wildly from their heads, and they were as drunk and noisy as though they had all been at some uproarious merry-making. While one little fellow who had been taken, was facetiously trumpeting with his nose, two others

who would almost certainly escape came along with pale faces and downcast eyes. Still, if the wildly excited drummer at their head had led them down into the depths of the Aigre, they would all have followed impetuously in his train.

When they at length halted in front of the municipal offices, Delphin gave up the banner.

"There, thank heaven; I've had enough of that damned thing which has brought me nothing but ill-luck!" he said.

Then he seized hold of Nénesse's arm, and dragged him off with him, while the rest of the party invaded Lengaigne's tavern, where they were joined by their relations and friends, who at last succeeded in learning what had happened. Macqueron meanwhile looked out from his door, heart-sore at the brisk business his rival was doing.

"Come along," said Delphin to Nénesse in a sharp, curt way, as though he were forming some determined resolution. "I want to show you something."

Nénesse allowed himself to be taken off. They would have time to come back and drink afterwards. The noisy drum had ceased to din their ears, and they felt a sensation of pleasant quiet and repose, as they strolled off together along the now deserted road which was growing grey in the falling darkness. As Delphin walked on in silence, buried in reflections which could scarcely be pleasant ones, Nénesse began to talk to him about a very important matter. A couple of days previously, at Chartres, having obtained a few hours' liberty from his employer, he had gone up to the Rue aux Juifs, and had there learnt that Vaucogne, Monsieur Charles's son-in-law, wanted to dispose of his business. He was too unsteady to be able to make it pay, and he was robbed right and left by the women. But what a business it might become, and what profits might be reaped if it were in the hands of an energetic, steady-going young

fellow, with a shrewd head and strong willing arms, and already with some experience of the trade! His idea was to frighten Monsieur and Madame Charles into the belief that Number 19 was in great danger of being suppressed by the police in consequence of the immoral proceedings that habitually took place there, and thus prevail upon them to let him have the place for a mere song. Ah, that would be much better than grubbing the soil! Why, he could be a gentlemen at once!

Delphin was listening in a very absent-minded fashion; in fact, he was busy with his own thoughts, from which he woke up with a start, as his companion gave him a sly poke in the ribs.

"Some folks are born to be lucky," he murmured. "You were sent into the world to be a pride to your mother."

Then he relapsed into silence again, and Nénesse, as though he had quite settled matters in his own mind, began to explain the improvements he would make at Number 19, if his parents would advance him the necessary money. He was perhaps a little young, he allowed, but he felt a genuine vocation for the business.

He now caught sight of La Trouille gliding up towards them along the gloomy road, on her way, probably, to some amatory assignation or other; and wishing to show his easy manner with women, he gave her a smart slap as she went past. La Trouille at once returned it, but then recognising the two young men, she exclaimed:

"Hallo, is it you? How you have grown!"

She laughed merrily, at thought, no doubt, of their sprees in earlier days. Of the three, she had changed the least; and, despite her one and twenty years, she still looked a mere chit of a girl, being as slight and supple as a poplar shoot, with a bosom as undeveloped as a child's. The meeting seemed to please her, and she kissed the two young men one after the other; she would even have been quite willing to proceed to further

lengths if they had suggested it, by way of marking her pleasure at seeing them again, just as men clink glasses together when they meet after a separation.

"I've got something to tell you," said Nénesse jokingly. "I'm very likely going to take Charles's shop. Will you come and have a situation there?"

Then the girl abruptly ceased laughing, and was overcome with emotion, bursting into tears. The surrounding darkness seemed to lay hold of her, and she disappeared from sight, sobbing out like a broken-hearted child:

"Oh, how beastly! how beastly! I sha'n't love you any more!"

Delphin had remained silent, and with an abstracted air he now resumed his course.

"But where is it you are taking me?" Nénesse finally asked. "What is this strange thing you want to show me?"

"Come along, and you will see by-and-bye."

He then hastened his steps, and left the high-road to make a short cut through the vines to the house in which the rural constable had been lodged by the authorities since the parsonage had been given up to the priest! He lived there with his father; and he at once conducted his companion into the kitchen, where he lighted a candle, seeming pleased to find that his parents had not yet returned home.

"We'll have a glass together," he exclaimed, placing a bottle and a couple of glasses on the table.

When he had swallowed some of the wine, he smacked his tongue, and then continued:

"I want to tell you that if these fools think they are going to keep me, simply because I have drawn a bad number, they are mightily mistaken. When uncle Michel died, I was obliged to go and stay three days at

Orleans, and it nearly killed me, I was so miserable at being away from home. I daresay you think it very foolish of me, but I can't help it. The feeling is stronger than I am; and away from home I am like a tree torn up by the roots. And now they want to take me off and send me to the devil, to all sorts of places that I've never even heard the name of! Ah, well, they'll find out their mistake presently!"

Nénesse, who had often heard him prate in this strain before, shrugged his shoulders, and replied:

"It is very easy to talk, but you'll have to go, all the same. The gendarmes would soon march you off, you know."

Without making any reply, Delphin turned aside, and with his left hand took hold of a small hatchet hanging against the wall, and used for chopping firewood. Then, without any hesitation he calmly laid the fore-finger of his right hand upon the edge of the table, and, with a smart blow of the hatchet, completely severed it.

"There, that's what I wanted to show you!" he said. "I want you to be able to tell the others that I have done what a coward would scarcely do."

"You maniac!" cried Nénesse, quite overcome with the sight of what Delphin had done. "You have crippled yourself for life!"

"I scoff at them all! Let the gendarmes come as soon as they like! I'm quite certain now that I sha'n't be forced away!"

Then he picked up the severed finger and tossed it into the wood fire. After shaking his bleeding hand, he roughly wrapped his handkerchief round it, fastening it tightly with a piece of string so as to stop the flow of blood.

"Well, this needn't prevent us finishing the bottle before we join the others," said he. "Here's to your health!"

"And here's to yours!"

By this time there was so much noise and so much tobacco-smoke in Lengaigne's public-room that it was impossible to see one another or to hear even one's-self speak. Besides the young fellows who had just returned from balloting, there was a crowd of idlers. Hyacinthe and his friend Canon were there, busily engaged in making old Fouan drunk, the three of them sitting round a bottle of brandy. Bécu, whom his son's bad luck, combined with the large amount of drink he had swallowed, had quite overcome, was snoring noisily, with his head on one of the tables. Delhomme and Clou were there, too, playing a game of piquet, and also sat there Lequeu, with his nose buried in a book which he was pretending to read in spite of all the surrounding uproar.

A fight among the women had served to increase the general excitement. It had occurred in this way: Flore having gone to the fountain to fill her pitcher with water, there met Cœlina who, bursting with hatred and jealousy, threw herself upon her, clawing her furiously with her nails, and accusing her of being bribed by the excise officers to betray her neighbours. Macqueron and Lengaigne, who had rushed up, very nearly came to blows themselves; the former swearing that he would contrive to have the latter caught while he was damping his tobacco, and the latter sarcastically asking the former when they might expect to hear of his resignation. A crowd gathered, everybody mingling in the quarrel for the mere pleasure of shaking their fists and hearing themselves shout; and a general murderous engagement seemed at one time inevitable. This was averted, however, and the incident ended, but not without leaving a feeling of unsatisfied anger, and a longing to come to blows.

A passage between Victor, Lengaigne's son, and the conscripts almost brought about an explosion. The former having served his time in the army was swaggering before all the young fellows, shouting louder than the loudest of them, and goading them on into making all sorts of idiotic

wagers; such as emptying a bottle of wine by holding it in the air and pouring its contents down their throats, or sucking the contents of a glass up through their nostrils, without touching it with their mouths. Suddenly, as some reference was made to the Macquerons, and the approaching marriage of their daughter Berthe, young Couillot began to snigger and titter out the old jokes about the girl. They would be able now, he said, to ask the husband all about her, on the day after the wedding. They had heard such a deal about her, that it would really be satisfactory to get at the truth!

Victor thereupon caused intense surprise by a show of angry warmth. Hitherto he had been one of those who most persistently attacked the girl, whereas now he shouted out:

"There, we've heard quite enough about it now. She has everything that the others have. She has!"

This assertion provoked a loud clamour. Victor had seen, then? She had been his mistress, eh? While vigorously denying the truth of this accusation, and striking his breast with his fists, he adhered to his recent statement, whereupon young Couillot, who was very drunk, violently contradicted him, though he knew absolutely nothing about the matter. In point of fact, he was simply actuated by pig-headed perversity. Victor bellowed out that he had once said the same as Couillot, and that, if he now said differently, it certainly wasn't for love of the Macquerons! It was because the truth is the truth! And then he fell upon the conscript, whose friends were obliged to drag him from his grasp.

"Say as I say, damn you, or I'll wring your neck!"

In spite of Victor's violence, however, several of the company still retained their doubts on the subject. No one could understand his hot outburst of anger, for he generally showed himself very hard towards women, and he had publicly repudiated his sister, whom her impure

amours, so it was said, had now landed in an hospital. That foul Suzanne! Ah! she did well to keep her tainted carcase away from them!

Flore now brought up fresh supplies of wine, but glasses were chinked in vain; the atmosphere was still heavy with a brooding storm of angry abuse and violence. No one had any idea of going off to dine. Drinking keeps folk from getting hungry. The conscripts at last began to troll out a patriotic song, accompanying it with such heavy blows upon the tables that the flames of the three petroleum lamps flickered wildly, and emitted puffs of acrid smoke. The atmosphere was getting unbearable, and Delhomme and Clou opened the window behind them. Just at that moment Buteau entered the room and glided into a corner. His face did not wear its usual air of braggart self-assertion. Indeed there was a look of uneasy anxiety in his little eyes, and he glanced at the company one after another, as though he were trying to read their thoughts. He had doubtless come to listen to the gossip, in view of discovering whether any of his neighbours entertained any suspicion of him. He had felt quite unable to stay any longer at home, where he had shut himself up since the previous evening without stirring out. The presence of Hyacinthe and Canon seemed to produce a deep effect upon him; so much so, indeed, that he refrained from quarrelling with them for making old Fouan drunk. For a long time he sat gazing earnestly at Delhomme. But it was Bécu, sleeping on amid all the surrounding uproar, who more than any one else seemed to exercise his thoughts. Was the rural constable really asleep, or was he only artfully pretending to be so? Buteau nudged him with his elbow, and felt somewhat relieved on discovering that he was slobbering all over his sleeve. He then concentrated his attention upon the schoolmaster, upon whose face he fancied he could detect a most extraordinary expression. Why was he looking so different from what he usually did?

As a matter of fact, Lequeu, although pretending to be absorbed in his book, was shaken by sudden starts, with his features contracted by a

rising fit of anger. The conscripts, with their songs and idiotic merriment, seemed to be completely upsetting him.

"The infernal brutes!" he muttered, still managing to restrain himself.

For some months past his position in the village had been growing very uncomfortable. He had always been rough and harsh with the children, and he was given to sending them off home to the paternal dung-heap with a box on the ears. But latterly he had grown still more violent, and there had been a nasty business about a little girl's ear which he had slit with a blow from a ruler. Several of the children's parents had then written, asking that he might be removed. Now, too, Berthe Macqueron's approaching marriage destroyed a long-standing hope of his, annihilating the edifice he had been mentally constructing for years past. It came upon him like a thunderbolt. Oh, those hateful peasants! a foul brood that denied him its daughters, and was about to get him turned adrift merely on account of a little hussy's ear!

He now suddenly tapped the book he was holding, just as though he were in his class-room, and cried out to the conscripts:

"For goodness' sake, let us have a little less noise! You seem to think it would be very amusing to have your brains blown out by the Prussians!"

The company turned their eyes upon him in amazement. Amusing? No there was certainly nothing amusing in that idea! Delhomme observed, however, that every one was bound to defend his own homestead and soil, and that if ever the Prussians came to La Beauce they would find that the Beaucerons were no cowards. But as to being sent off to fight for other folks' fields! No, there was certainly nothing amusing about that!

Just then Delphin now made his appearance, accompanied by Nénesse. His face was greatly flushed, and his eyes were glistening feverishly. He had heard Delhomme's remark, and, as he seated himself at one of the tables with the conscripts, he shouted out:

"Yes, if the Prussians show their faces here, we'll make mince-meat of them pretty sharp!"

The handkerchief secured round his hand attracted attention, and inquiries were made as to what was the matter. Oh, nothing at all! he said; he had merely cut himself. Then, bringing down his other fist with such violence as to make the table rattle, he ordered a bottle of wine.

Canon and Hyacinthe were looking at the young fellows, not with any show of anger, but rather with an air of condescending pity. To be so happy, the conscripts must certainly be very young and idiotic.
By-and-bye, Canon, who was now very drunk, grew maudlin over his theories for the reorganisation of future happiness. Resting his chin on his hands, he spoke as follows:

"War, confound it! Ah! it's time we became the masters! You all know my scheme; no more military service, no more taxes; everybody's appetites and desires completely satisfied with the least possible amount of work. You approved of the plan yourselves, and declared that a man must be his own enemy not to approve of it. And it will soon be realised; the day is fast approaching when you will be able to retain your money and your children, providing you only rally to our side."

Hyacinthe was just nodding his approval, when Lequeu, quite unable to restrain himself any longer, burst out violently:

"Shut up, you infernal buffoon, with your earthly paradise and your precious schemes of forcing every one to be happy in spite of themselves! It's all a preposterous lie! Could such a state of affairs possibly exist among us? We are too rotten and polluted. Before such things could happen, some wild, savage crew--Cossacks or Chinese--would have to come and make a clean sweep of us."

This outburst on the part of the schoolmaster created such a feeling of amazement that every voice was hushed, and complete silence reigned in

the room. What next? This cold-blooded, sneaking fellow, who had never allowed any one to have the least inkling of his private opinions, had at last spoken out! They all listened to him attentively, especially Buteau, who anxiously waited for the rest of his discourse, as though what he was going to say might have some sort of connection with the subject that was uppermost in his mind.

The smoke had cleared off, thanks to the open window, and the soft, damp, evening air had streamed into the room, reminding one of the peacefulness of the slumbering country outside. The schoolmaster, bursting the bonds of timid reserve which had restrained him for ten years, no longer caring for anything, cast all decorum of speech to the winds, smarting under the blow that had wrecked his means of livelihood, and letting off all the accumulated hatred which was choking him.

"Do you think that the people about here are bigger fools than their own calves, that you come telling them that roasted larks will fall from the sky into their mouths? Before any such scheme as yours becomes practicable, the earth itself will have been annihilated."

Canon, who had never yet come across his match, visibly quailed before the schoolmaster's violent onslaught. He made an attempt to fall back upon his stories about his friends in Paris, repeating their theories of all the land reverting to the State, which would organise enormous farms, conducted on strictly scientific principles. However, Lequeu cut him short.

"Yes, I know all about that nonsense! But, long before you get a chance of trying your fine system of agriculture, all our French soil will have disappeared, submerged beneath a deluge of corn from America. Listen now for a moment: this little book that I have been reading again supplies a lot of particulars on the subject which will entirely bear me out. I said

so, once before. Yes, indeed, our peasants may take themselves off to bed, for the candle is burnt out."

Then, in the tone of voice in which he was wont to give a lesson to his pupils, he proceeded to speak about the corn supplies of America. There were mighty plains over there, he told them, as large as kingdoms, in the midst of which La Beauce would be quite lost, like a mere clod of earth. The soil, too, was so fertile that, instead of having to manure it, it was necessary to drain off its exuberant richness by a preliminary crop; but, in spite of that, two full crops were harvested every year. There were farms of seventy thousand acres in extent, divided into sections, which were again cut up into sub-sections, each section being under the supervision of a steward, and each sub-section under the direction of a foreman. They were provided with houses for the men, stables for the cattle, sheds for the tools, and other buildings where all the cooking was carried on. There were whole battalions of farm-servants, who were hired at spring-time, and organised just like campaigning armies--boarded, lodged, and physicked, and then paid off in the autumn. The furrows ploughed and sown there were miles in length, and there were spreading seas of ripening corn, the limits of which extended far out of sight. Men were merely employed there as supervisors, all the actual work being done by machinery. There were double-ploughs, furnished with deep-cutting discs; sowing-machines, weeding-machines, reaping-machines, and locomotive threshing-machines, that also stacked the straw. There were ploughmen who were skilful engineers, and squads of workmen who followed every machine on horseback, always ready to dismount and tighten a screw, or change a bolt, or hammer a bar. The soil was, in fact, like a sort of bank, managed by financiers. It was treated systematically, and cropped smooth and close to the very surface, yielding to impersonal and mechanical science ten times as much as it offered to men's loving arms.

"And can you hope to carry on the struggle," he continued, "with your twopenny-halfpenny tools?--you who are so ignorant, so entirely without ambition, and who are quite contented to go grubbing on in the same old way as your forefathers? Ah! you are already sunk up to your bellies in the corn from over the sea, and it is still rising about you, for the ships are ever bringing larger quantities of it over. Wait a little longer and you will find it up to your shoulders; then it will reach your mouths, and then the flood will close over your heads! A flood! aye, a torrent--a wild deluge that will sweep you all away!"

The peasants opened their eyes widely, quite panic-stricken by the thought of this inundation of foreign corn. They were already suffering distress; were they really going to be altogether drowned and swept away, as the schoolmaster said? They took his metaphors very literally. Would Rognes, their fields, and the whole of La Beauce be swallowed up?

"No, never!" cried Delhomme, choking with emotion. "The Government will protect us."

"A pretty protector, indeed, the Government will be!" Lequeu resumed, contemptuously. "It will need all its time to protect itself! You behaved most ridiculously in electing Monsieur Rochefontaine. The master of La Borderie, at any rate, behaved consistently in supporting Monsieur de Chédeville. However, after all, whether you have the one or the other, it is only putting the same plaster on a wooden leg. No Chamber would ever dare to impose a duty high enough. Protection cannot save you; you are doomed beyond all redemption!"

There was now a noisy outbreak, and all the peasants began to speak at once. Couldn't something be done to stop the disastrous influx of this foreign corn? They would sink the ships in the docks, and shoot the fellows who brought the corn over! Their voices quivered with emotion, and they almost seemed inclined to burst into tears, and stretch out their

hands and pray that they might be saved from all this abundance--from this cheap bread which threatened to ruin the country. The schoolmaster grinned with malicious satisfaction, and told them that nobody had ever heard of such ideas as now possessed them. Their previous fears had always been of famine--that they would not have corn enough; and surely it must now be all u.p. with them since they felt afraid of having too much! He was growing quite intoxicated with his own eloquence, and he shouted above the furious cries of protest:

"You are a perishing and worn-out race. Your imbecile love of the soil has eaten you up. Yes, you are each the slave of a patch of ground, which has so narrowed your minds that, for the sake of it, you would murder your fellows! For centuries past you have been wedded to the soil, and it has always betrayed you! Look at America! There the agriculturist is master of the soil. He isn't bound to it by any family ties, any sentimental considerations; as soon as one plot is exhausted, he goes further on and takes another. If he hears that more fertile plains have been discovered some three hundred leagues away, he moves his tent and goes off there. Thanks to his machines, he has only to will and do. He is free, and he's growing rich; while you are slaves, and are dying of starvation!"

Buteau's face had grown pale, for Lequeu had looked at him when speaking of murder. He tried to appear quite unconcerned, however.

"Well, we are as we are," he said. "What is the good of our troubling ourselves, since you yourself say that it will be all to no purpose?"

Delhomme signified his approval of this, and every one began to laugh: Lengaigne, Clou, Fouan, even Delphin and the conscripts, who derived a certain amount of amusement from what was going on, as they hoped it would lead to blows. Canon and Hyacinthe, annoyed at seeing "inky fingers," as they called the schoolmaster, shout louder than themselves, also affected to snigger merrily. They were even inclined to side with the peasants.

"It's folly to quarrel," said Canon, shrugging his shoulders. "What is wanted is organisation."

Lequeu made a gesture of hot anger.

"I've no patience to hear such folly talked! I am for making a clean sweep of everything!"

His face was quite livid, and he flung these words in their faces as though he wished to knock them down with them.

"You pitiful cowards!" he cried. "Yes, you're all of you cowards, you peasants! To think you are more numerous and stronger, and yet that you let yourselves be devoured by the middle-class townsfolk and the workmen! I've but one regret, and that is that my father and mother were peasants. Perhaps that is the reason why you fill me with such disgust. There is nothing to prevent you becoming the masters. But you won't combine together. You keep yourselves isolated from each other, full of suspicion and ignorance, and you exhaust all your knavery in preying upon one another. What is it that you are concealing beneath the surface of your stagnant water? for you are like stagnant pools which men believe to be deep, though they would not drown a cat! To think that you should be such a mighty, undeveloped force, a force which might mould the future, and yet you lie about as inert as logs of wood! And what makes it all the more exasperating is that you have ceased to believe in what the priests tell you. If there be no God, what is it that holds you back? As long as you stood in fear of hell, one could understand that you continued to grovel on your bellies; but now, rush forward! pillage everything! burn everything! As a commencement, it will perhaps be simpler for you to go on strike. You have all got some savings, and you could hold out as long as would be necessary. Cultivate the ground for yourselves, don't carry anything to market, not a single sack of corn, not a single bushel of potatoes! Let Paris starve! That's the way to set to work."

A gust of cold air, wafted from the distant blackness of the night, had rushed in through the open window. The flames of the lamps were shooting up very high. No one now attempted to interrupt the excited speaker, despite the abuse that he lavished upon everybody.

He now banged his book down on a table, making the glasses jingle, and proceeded to finish his oration:

"I have told you all that; but still I am quite easy about the future. Cowards you may be now, but when the proper time comes I know that you will be the fellows to make a clean sweep of everything. It has been so more than once before, and it will be so once again. Wait till misery and hunger send you rushing down upon the towns like so many wolves! Very likely the occasion will arise anent this corn which is being brought from over the sea. When there has been too much of it there won't be enough of it, and then there will be scarcity and famine again. It is always for the sake of corn that men rise up in rebellion and slay each other! Yes, let the towns be burned down and razed to the ground, the villages deserted, the fields uncultivated, over-run with brambles, and watered with streams of blood; then perhaps they will hereafter bring forth bread for those who are born into the world when we are gone!"

Lequeu now violently tore the door open and disappeared. A yell from the stupefied peasants followed him. The scoundrel! He wanted bleeding! A man who had always been so pacific and quiet! Surely he must be going mad! Delhomme, who had quite lost his habitual placidity, declared his intention of writing to the prefect, and the others pressed him to do so. However, it was Hyacinthe, with his '89 and his humanitarian motto of "Liberty, equality, and fraternity," and Canon, with his schemes for the compulsory and scientific reorganisation of society, who appeared the most indignant. They sat there with pale faces, exasperated at not having been able to find a word to say in reply, and now expressing themselves in much stronger terms than the peasants did; bellowing out,

in fact, that a fellow of that sort ought to be guillotined. Buteau, upon hearing the orator demand so much blood--flowing streams of blood to which he seemed to point with his finger--had risen from his seat in trembling alarm, his head wagging involuntarily from nervous excitement, just as though he were signifying approval of what was being said. Then he glided along the wall, casting furtive glances to make sure that he was not being followed, and on reaching the door, he, too, disappeared.

The conscripts now reverted to their uproarious merriment again. They were bellowing loudly, and insisting upon Flore cooking them some sausages, when Nénesse suddenly hustled them aside and sprang over a bench to reach Delphin, who had just fainted away, with his face lying on the table. The poor fellow was as white as a sheet. His handkerchief, which had slipped off his wounded hand, was covered with crimson stains. The conscripts yelled into Bécu's ear, for he was still hard asleep; but at last he awoke, and gazed at his son's mutilated hand. He knew what it meant, for, seizing hold of a bottle, he brandished it as if anxious to kill the lad. Then, as he led him, tottering, away, he could be heard indulging in noisy oaths, amid which he burst into tears.

Hourdequin, having heard of Françoise's accident while he was dining, repaired to Rognes that evening, prompted by his kindly feeling for Jean, to inquire how the young woman was getting on. Setting out on foot, he smoked his pipe as he walked along through the black darkness, brooding over his troubles and vexations amid the unbroken silence of the night. Feeling at last somewhat calmer, and wishing to prolong his walk, he went down the hill before calling at his old servant's house. When he reached the foot of the declivity, the sound of Lequeu's voice, which streamed forth from the open window of the tavern, penetrating the darkness of the surrounding country, made him halt, and he remained listening for a long time, standing motionless in the gloom. When he at length began to ascend the hill again, the schoolmaster's voice followed

him, and even when he reached Jean's house, he could still hear it, sounding weaker, and seemingly shriller in the distance, but still as sharply incisive as the keen edge of a knife.

Jean was standing at his door, leaning against the wall. He had not been able to remain any longer at Françoise's bedside. He felt suffocated there, and altogether too miserable.

"Well, my poor fellow," Hourdequin now asked, "how is your wife?"

The unhappy man broke into a gesture of despair.

"Ah, sir, she's dying!"

Then neither of them said another word; and the deep silence around them was only broken by the distant sound of Lequeu's voice, which still persistently rang out.

The farmer could not help listening, despite himself, and presently he angrily exclaimed:

"Do you hear that fellow ranting? How awful such talk as that sounds when one's in trouble!"

The sound of the schoolmaster's fulminating voice, combined with the proximity of Françoise in her death-agony, again revived the farmer's anguish of heart. The soil which he loved so dearly, loved with a sentimental passion, nay, almost with an intellectual one, had well nigh completed his ruin this last harvest. His fortune had all been drained away, and soon La Borderie would not even provide him with bare sustenance. Nothing seemed to do any good there--neither hard work, nor new systems, nor manures, nor machines. He habitually ascribed his failure to insufficient capital; but in his own mind he had some doubts about this, for ruin seemed to be general. The Robiquets had just been ejected by the bailiffs from La Chamade, and the Coquarts had been compelled to sell their farm of Saint-Juste. He himself could see no way

of breaking his bonds; he had never more completely felt himself the prisoner of his land, and every day the money he spent and the labour he bestowed seemed to chain him more tightly to it. The final catastrophe, which would put an end to the antagonism of centuries between the small landowners and the large ones by annihilating them both, was now rapidly approaching. This was the advent of the predicted time; corn had fallen below fifty-six francs the quarter, so that it was being sold at a loss; and social transformations, stronger than the will of men, were bringing about the bankruptcy of the soil.

Stung with the consciousness of his ruin, Hourdequin now suddenly expressed approval of what Lequeu was saying.

"Deuce take it all, he's right! Let everything go to smash and all of us perish, and the whole soil be covered with weeds and brambles, since our race is decayed and the land exhausted!"

Then, referring to Jacqueline, he added:

"However, thank God, there is another complaint that will make an end of me before all that comes off!"

Inside the house La Grande and La Frimat could be heard walking about and muttering to each other. Jean, who was still leaning against the wall, shivered as he heard them. Then he returned into the house, and found that all was over. Françoise was dead; she had probably passed away some time previously. She had never opened her eyes again; and had kept her lips sealed, carrying away with her the secret she was so anxious to conceal. La Grande had only just discovered that she was dead by touching her. With her white shrunken face, on which there rested a resolute expression, she looked as though she were sleeping. Jean stood at the foot of the bed and stared at her, dazed and stupefied with confused thoughts, with the grief he felt at losing her, with the surprise caused him by the fact that she had refused to make a will, and with a vague

sensation that a part of his existence was now shivered to pieces, and gone for ever.

Just at that moment, as Hourdequin, still gloomy and down-hearted, took his leave with a silent grasp of the hand, Jean saw a shadowy form flit away from the window and dart hastily along the road into the darkness. He fancied it was some prowling dog; but in reality it was Buteau, who had been spying through the window, to watch for Françoise's death, and who was now hastening to announce the news to Lise.

PART V. — CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER V.

Early the next day, as Françoise's body was being placed in the coffin, which was resting upon two chairs in the middle of the bedroom, Jean was overcome with surprise and indignation at seeing Lise and Buteau enter the house, one behind the other. His first impulse was to summarily eject these stony-hearted relatives, who had not come to give Françoise a last kiss ere she died, but who lost no time in coming as soon as the coffin-lid had been screwed down over her, as though they now felt free from all fear of finding themselves face to face with her. However, the other members of the family who were present, Fanny and La Grande, restrained him. It would bring bad luck, they said, to begin quarrelling round a corpse. Besides, what good would it do? Lise could not be prevented from atoning for her previous vindictiveness by keeping watch over her sister's remains.

The Buteaus had reckoned upon the respect due to the presence of a dead body in the house, and they took advantage of it to install themselves in their old home once more. They made no actual profession of taking possession of the place, but still they did take possession of it, in a quiet easy way, and as though it were quite a matter of course that, as Françoise was no longer there, they themselves should return. True, her body was there, but it was packed ready for its final departure, and was really of no more account than a piece of furniture. Lise, after sitting down for some time with the others, so far forgot all sense of decency as to get up and examine the drawers and cupboards to satisfy herself that their contents had not been removed during her absence. Buteau had gone off to look at the stable and cow-house, as though he were already quite at home, and were just giving a glance round to see that everything was all right. By evening they both appeared quite settled again on the

premises, and the only thing that caused them any inconvenience was the coffin, which still blocked up the bedroom. However, there was merely another night to wait; the room would be quite at their disposal early the next day.

Jean kept wandering restlessly up and down, looking dazed and confused, and seemingly quite at a loss as to what to do with himself. At first the house, and the furniture, and Françoise's body had seemed to belong to him; but, as the time glided by, they appeared to sever their connection with him and to pass away to others. By the time night closed in, every one had ceased to speak to him, and his presence in the place was merely just tolerated. Never before had he felt so painfully conscious of being a stranger in the village, of being quite alone, of not having a single kindred fellow-creature among all these folks, who were related to each other and fully agreed on the question of his own expulsion. Even his poor dead wife no longer seemed to belong to him; in fact, Fanny sent him away from the bedroom, where he wished to stay and watch over the body, saying that there were quite sufficient people for that purpose already. He had for some time refused to go, and finally, annoyed at Fanny's persistence, he had resolved to take possession of the money in the drawer--the hundred and twenty-seven francs--so as to make sure that they wouldn't fly away. Lise had seen them on opening the drawer, together with the sheet of stamped paper which had never been used, and the sight of the latter had led to her holding a whispered conversation with La Grande. The result of this chat had been to make her feel quite easy in mind, for she had definitely learnt that there was no will, and that the house was really her own again. Jean, however, had made up his mind that, at any rate, she should not have the money; amid his vague apprehensions as regards the morrow, he determined that he would at least keep that for himself; and after taking possession of it, he passed the night on a chair.

The funeral took place on the following morning, at nine o'clock. The Abbé Madeline, who was leaving Rognes that same evening, was just able to say the mass and accompany the body to the grave; but when he reached it he fainted, and they were obliged to carry him away. Monsieur and Madame Charles were present, together with Delhomme and Nénesse. It was a very respectable funeral, though nothing out of the way. Jean shed tears, and Buteau also wiped his eyes, but they were quite dry. At the last moment Lise had declared that her legs felt as though they were giving way beneath her, and that she was too weak to accompany her sister's body to the grave. She had consequently remained alone in the house, while La Grande, Fanny, La Frimat, Madame Bécu, and other female friends attended the funeral. On returning from the graveyard all the company lingered in the open square in front of the church, in anticipation of a scene which they had been expecting since the previous evening.

So far the two men, Jean and Buteau, had avoided even glancing at each other, fearing lest some violent outbreak might ensue in presence of the corpse ere it was barely cold. They, however, now both directed their steps towards the house with the same resolute gait; and they kept glancing aside at each other. Jean had at once understood why Lise had not come to the funeral. She had stayed away in order to get her effects into the house again--in a rough sort of fashion, at any rate. An hour had sufficed for the purpose, for she had been hard at work tossing her bundles over La Frimat's wall, and wheeling round anything that was breakable. Finally, she had dragged Laure and Jules into the yard, administering a cuff a-piece to them, and there they were already fighting, while old Fouan, whom she had also hustled inside, sat panting on the stone bench. The house was reconquered.

"Where are you going?" Buteau suddenly asked, stopping Jean in front of the gate.

"I'm going home."

"Home! home, indeed! Where is your home? It certainly isn't here! This is my house."

Lise had rushed up, and resting her hands upon her hips, she now began to yell, exhibiting even more offensive insolence than her husband.

"Eh? what? What does he want, the rotten blackguard? He's been poisoning my poor sister long enough; that's quite clear, or she would never have died of her accident. And she showed pretty plainly what she thought of him by not leaving him anything. Knock him over, Buteau! Don't let him come inside, or he'll give us all some beastly illness!"

Jean, although he was boiling over with indignation at this virulent attack, still attempted to reason with her.

"I know very well," he said, "that the house and land revert to you; but half of the furniture and live stock belong to me."

"Half, indeed! You've got a lot of cheek, you have!" cried Lise, interrupting him. "You foul stink-pot, how dare you claim half of anything, you who didn't even bring a broken comb into the place? You merely came here with the shirt on your back! So you want to fatten yourself and get rich by preying on women, eh? That's a dirty, swinish game."

Buteau backed her up, and, with a sweeping gesture across the threshold, he cried out:

"She's telling the truth! Look sharp! You came with your jacket and breeches, and you've got them on, so take yourself off with 'em! Nobody wants to deprive you of them!"

The other members of the family, especially the women, Fanny and La Grande, who were standing in a group some thirty yards away, seemed

by their silence to approve of Buteau's conduct. Jean, turning pale at the insults which were offered him, and stung to the quick by the accusation of mercenary scheming, now broke out into an angry retort:

"Very well, so you are bent upon making a disturbance, eh? I insist upon entering, for I have still the right of possession, as the formal partition has not yet been made. Then I shall at once go and fetch Monsieur Baillehache, who will put everything under seal, and appoint me guardian. The house is mine for the present, and it is for you to take yourselves off."

He now stepped up to Lise with such a threatening air that she retreated from the doorway. Buteau, however, rushed upon him, and a struggle ensued, the two men reeling into the middle of the kitchen. There another violent discussion followed as to which of the two parties should be ejected--the husband, or the sister and brother-in-law.

"Show me the document which makes the house yours!" cried Jean.

"Documents, indeed! It's quite sufficient that we have the right to it!"

"Very well, then, if you've the right to it, why don't you come and enforce your right with the bailiff and the gendarmes, as we did?"

"We want no bailiffs and gendarmes! It's only swindling scoundrels who have to go to them for help. An honest man can manage his affairs for himself."

Jean was bending over the table and clinging to it. He had resolved not to leave, bent on proving that he was the stronger of the two, and determined not to part with the house where his wife had just died, and where, it seemed to him, the only happy part of his life had been spent. Buteau, at the other side of the table, was also determined not to give up the house which he had just reconquered, and he resolved to bring the matter to a speedy issue.

"The long and the short of it," he cried, "is that we've had enough of you."

Then he rushed round the table at Jean, but the latter, catching hold of a chair and hurling it at his adversary's legs, tripped him up; then, as he was about to take refuge in the adjoining room, meaning to barricade himself inside it, Lise suddenly bethought herself of the money, the hundred and twenty-seven francs which she had observed in the drawer. Fancying that Jean was hastening to secure them, she rushed on before him and pulled the drawer open. At once she burst into a howl of angry disappointment.

"The money's gone! The cursed scamp has stolen the money during the night!"

It was all over with Jean now that the onslaught was directed against his pockets. He cried out that the money belonged to him, and that he would go into a full account of everything, and that they would owe him money in addition to this cash. But the Buteaus would not listen to him, and Lise rushed upon him, pummelling him even more violently than her husband. He was dislodged from the room by a furious onset, and hustled back into the kitchen, round which the three of them wildly revolved, writhing and struggling together in confusion, and dashing against the furniture in their gyrations. By dint of kicking, Jean managed to rid himself of Lise. She soon fell upon him again, however, and dug her nails into his neck, while Buteau, making a vigorous spring, threw him flat on the road outside. Then blocking up the door, the husband and wife bellowed out:

"You thief! you've stolen our money! You thief! you thief!"

Jean picked himself up, and stammering from pain and anger replied:

"All right, I shall go to the magistrate at Châteaudun, and he will see that I am reinstated in my home. And I shall bring an action against you for damages. You'll see me again soon!"

With a parting gesture of menace, he then took himself off, mounting the hill towards the plain. When the other members of the family had seen that matters were coming to blows, they had prudently retired, feeling a wholesome fear of possible legal proceedings.

The Buteaus now broke out into a wild yell of victory. At last they had succeeded in flinging the usurping alien into the street! And they had regained possession of the house! Ah, they had often said that they would have it back, and now they had got it again! The thought that they were once more in possession of the old patrimonial dwelling-place, built so long ago by an ancestor, filled them with such mad delight that they rushed wildly through the rooms, yelling for the mere pleasure of doing so. The children, Laure and Jules, rushed up, and began tapping an old frying-pan. Old Fouan alone remained quiet; he was still sitting on the stone bench, whence he gravely watched the others, with troubled, mournful eyes.

However, Buteau suddenly checked his display of delight and exclaimed:

"God in heaven! he's sloped off up the hill! He may have gone to wreak his spite on the land!"

It was an idiotic fear, but it quite upset him. The thought of the soil returned to him; a sensation of uneasiness mingling with the consciousness of ownership. The soil! Ah, his love for it was more deeply rooted in his vitals even than his love of the house! That strip of land on the hill would fill up the gap between his two mutilated plots; and he would again have his field of seven acres, that fine stretch of land, of which even Delhomme did not possess the equal! Buteau trembled with emotion from head to foot. It was as though he had just regained some dearly beloved mistress whom he had thought lost for ever. With a mad fear that Jean might somehow have carried the land off, wondering whether it might not have already disappeared, seized, too, with an eager

desire to view it again, he lost his head and set off running, muttering that he could never feel easy till he knew for certain.

Jean had indeed gone up the hill in order to avoid passing through the village, and on reaching the plateau he had instinctively followed the road towards La Borderie. When Buteau caught sight of him, he was just passing the plot of plough-land, but he did not stop, he merely gave it a glance of mingled sadness and distrust, as though he were mentally accusing it of having brought him into misfortune; for a memory of the past, of the day when he had first spoken to Françoise, had just brought the tears to his eyes. Was it not here, while she was still a romping girl, that La Coliche had dragged her into the lucern? He strode on with downcast head and slackened steps, and Buteau, who was anxiously watching him, suspecting that he was bent upon some malicious piece of revenge, now walked up to the field. For a long time he stood gazing at it. Yes, it was still there, and it seemed just the same as usual, quite unharmed. His heart heaved wildly, and yearned towards it in the delight he felt at again possessing it--this time for ever. He squatted down on his knees, and took up a clod in his hands, crushing it, sniffing it, and then letting it filter through his fingers. Yes, it was his own now! Then he turned homewards again, singing, as though the scent of the soil had intoxicated him.

Jean still tramped on with downcast eyes, without being conscious as to whether his feet were carrying him. His first impulse had been to run to Cloyes to see Monsieur Baillehache, and take steps for getting reinstated in the house. Then his feeling of anger had calmed down. Even if he went back to-day, he would have to leave again to-morrow; so why shouldn't he make up his mind to swallow his wrathful grief and acquiesce in the inevitable? Those wretches, too, had really spoken the truth. He had gone to the house as a poor man, and as a poor man he was leaving it. But what sent a pang through his heart more than aught else, and finally decided him to submit, was the reflection that Françoise's last wish must have

been to let things follow this course, since she had not bequeathed her property to him. So he abandoned the idea of taking immediate steps; and by-and-bye as he walked on, whenever his anger rekindled afresh, he merely swore to himself that he would drag the Buteaus into court to recover his half-share of the personal property to which he was entitled as the dead woman's husband. They should see that he wouldn't let himself be fleeced like a sheep!

As he raised his eyes, he was surprised to find himself opposite La Borderie. Prompted by an instinct of which he had been scarcely conscious in his grief, he had made his way to the farm as to a place of refuge. Indeed, if he remained in the neighbourhood, this was the place to find work and food and lodging. Hourdequin had always held him in esteem, and he was sure of being well received.

However, the sight of La Cognette in the distance, flying wildly across the yard, thrilled him with an uneasy feeling of disquietude. Eleven o'clock was striking as he arrived, and some hours earlier a frightful catastrophe had happened. That morning, on coming down before the servant-girl, La Cognette had found the cellar trap-door--that trap-door situated so dangerously near the staircase--open, and Hourdequin lying below quite dead, with his back broken against the edge of a step. The young woman shrieked, the servants rushed up, and the whole place was overwhelmed with panic. The farmer's body was now lying on a mattress in the dining-room, while Jacqueline was in the kitchen fairly off her nut, with her face distorted but tearless.

As soon as Jean entered, she broke out, relieving herself in a choking voice:

"I said it would be so! and I tried to get the trap altered! But who could it be that left it open? I'm positive it was closed last night when I went upstairs to bed. I've been racking my head all the morning in trying to make it out."

"The master came down before you did, then?" asked Jean, quite stupefied by the accident.

"Yes, it was scarcely light, and I was asleep; I fancied I heard some one calling from downstairs, but I may have dreamt it. He frequently got up in this way and went downstairs without a light to see the servants as soon as they turned out. He could not see that the trap was open, and he fell. But who can have left it open? Oh, this will be the death of me, it will!"

Jean had felt a passing suspicion, but he at once thrust it away from him. Jacqueline could have no possible interest in Hourdequin's death, and her grief was evidently sincere.

"It is a terrible misfortune," he murmured.

"Yes, indeed; a terrible misfortune for me, a terrible one!"

Then she fell down on a chair, completely overcome, as though the very walls were toppling over upon her. The master, whose legitimate wife she had so confidently reckoned on becoming! The master, who had sworn to leave her everything in his will! And now he was dead, dead before he had had time to sign a single paper! She would not even get any wages; the son would come back and kick her out of the house as he had threatened to do! She would have nothing but the few ornaments and the clothes she wore! It was ruin, disastrous and complete!

But what Jacqueline omitted to mention, the matter, indeed, having entirely slipped from her mind in her present trouble, was the dismissal of Soulas, the shepherd, which she had succeeded in effecting on the previous evening. Exasperated at finding him always at her elbow, playing the spy upon her, she accused him of being too old, and no longer competent to perform his duties. The farmer, although he did not agree with this statement, yielded to her wishes; for he was now completely under her domination, content to purchase her goodwill by slave-like

submission. Soulas looked his master keenly in the face with his pale eyes as he was dismissed with kindly words and promises for the future, and then he slowly began to relieve his mind anent the hussy who had brought about his discharge. He accused her of dissolute behaviour with Tron and a score of others. He gave full particulars, mentioning the places where she and Tron had met, and declaring that their shameless amours were matter of common notoriety--to such a degree, indeed, that folks said that the master was content to take the servant's leavings, as it was impossible he could be so blind as not to see what was going on. The farmer, overwhelmed with distress and consternation at what he heard, vainly attempted to stop the old man, preferring to remain in ignorance, and fearful of being compelled to turn the young woman out of the house; but Soulas persisted in finishing his indictment, and did not stop until he had specified each separate occasion upon which he had found the two together. Then he felt somewhat soothed and easier in his mind, having at last unburdened himself of his long pent up wrath and spite. Jacqueline knew nothing of this, for Hourdequin had at once rushed into the fields, fearing lest he should strangle her if he came across her in his present mood. When he returned to the house he quietly dismissed Tron, upon the pretext that the young fellow left the yard in a filthily dirty condition. Upon hearing of this, Jacqueline certainly had some suspicions; but she did not venture to plead in the cowherd's favour, contenting herself by obtaining permission that he should remain another night on the premises, and trusting that she would be able to arrange matters in the morning, so that he might stay on. At present the thought of all this had faded away in the presence of that stroke of fate which had shattered the castle in the air so laboriously erected during the last ten years.

Jean was quite alone with her in the kitchen when Tron came in. She had not seen the latter since the previous evening. The other servants, unoccupied and anxious, were wandering about the farm. When she now

perceived the big, strapping fellow, with his pinky face, she broke out into a cry--occasioned by the suspicious sort of way in which he came in.

"It is you who opened the trap!" she screamed, and then she suddenly understood the whole matter; Tron meanwhile standing by, with pale face, staring eyes, and open, trembling lips.

"It was you who opened the trap, and then called to him to come down, so that he might break his neck!"

Jean started back, quite overcome by what he had just heard. In the violence of their passionate agitation neither of the others seemed to notice his presence. With his head lowered Tron sullenly confessed the crime.

"Yes," he said, "I did it. He had dismissed me, and I should never have seen you again, and that was more than I could bear. And then I thought that if he were to die we should be free."

Jacqueline listened to him, erect and rigid, her whole body in a state of acute nervous tension. He went on complacently, revealing the thoughts that had sprung up in his savage breast, the fierce jealousy of a servant against his master, and the treacherous plan which he had formed to secure unshared possession of the woman he loved.

"I felt sure that you would be pleased when it was over," said he; "I didn't mention it to you beforehand, because I didn't want to cause you any worry. But now that he's out of the way, I've come to take you off. We'll go away together and get married."

Jacqueline, wild with anger, now broke out in a harsh voice:

"Marry you! But I don't love you! I won't have you! Ah! so you killed him to get me? You must be even a greater fool than I thought you were! To act so stupidly before he had married me, before he had made his will! You have ruined me! You have taken the bread out of my mouth. It

is my back, mine, that you have broken! Can you understand that much, now, you idiotic brute? And you imagine that I will go away with you? Why, you must take me for an arrant fool!"

Tron heard her in gaping amazement, quite stupefied by this unexpected reception.

"Just because I've joked with you," she continued, "and we've had a little amusement, you imagine that I'm going to let myself be bored by you all the days of my life? Marry you, indeed! No, no, if ever I take a husband, I'll choose a sharper fellow than you are! Come, get out of my sight! It makes me ill to look at you! I detest you, and I won't have you! Be off!"

Tron quivered with rage. What! So he had committed murder for nothing? No, no, she belonged to him, and he would seize her by the throat and carry her off.

"You are a stuck-up, conceited drab!" he growled; "but you'll come with me all the same. If you don't, I shall settle your hash as I settled his!"

La Cognette stepped towards him, clenching her fists.

"Try it on, you murderer!"

Tron was very strong and broad and tall, while Jacqueline was weak and slight and delicately made. However, it was he who started back, so threatening did she look, with her teeth ready to bite and her eyes gleaming like daggers.

"It's all over," she resumed; "take yourself off! I would rather never see a man again than allow you to touch me now. Be off--be off--be off!"

Then Tron went out, stepping backwards like some wild beast giving way to fear, and deferring vengeance.

"Dead or alive, I'll have you!" he blurted out threateningly.

Jacqueline watched him leave the farm, heaving a sigh of relief. Then as she turned round, quivering all over, she did not seem at all surprised to see Jean; but, in an outburst of frankness, exclaimed:

"Ah, the villain! I would have him marched off by the gendarmes, if I weren't afraid that they would lock me up with him."

Jean was frozen with horror by what he had just heard, and could not find a word to say. The young woman, too, now underwent a nervous reaction. She seemed to be suffocating, and fell into Jean's arms, sobbing and wailing that she was very wretched--oh, so very wretched and miserable! Her tears continued to flow in streams down her face; she seemed craving for sympathy and love, and clung to Jean as though she were yearning for him to take her away and protect her. The young man was beginning to feel very uncomfortable, when the dead farmer's brother-in-law, Monsieur Baillehache, who had been fetched by one of the farm-servants, sprang out of his gig in the yard. Jacqueline at once rushed off to him and paraded her despair.

Jean, making his escape from the kitchen, presently found himself again on the bare plain beneath a rainy March sky. But he scarcely knew where he was, being completely upset by the tragedy of Hourdequin's death, which added another pang to all his troubles. However, he had his own load of worry to bear, and, despite his sorrow for his old master's fate, he quickened his steps, thinking of his own interests. It was no business of his to hand La Cognette and her lover over to justice. The authorities ought to open their eyes. Twice he turned round, fancying he heard some one shouting after him, and vaguely feeling as though he were an accomplice in the murder. It was only when he reached the outskirts of Rognes that he again breathed freely; he said to himself that the farmer's death was the result of his own sin; and he pondered anent that great truth that men would be much happier if there were no women in the world.

His mind reverted to Françoise, and a big lump seemed to rise in his throat and nearly choke him.

When he found himself in the village again he recollected that he had gone to the farm to seek work. He now began to feel very uneasy, and racked his brains as to whom he could next apply to. Then it struck him that Monsieur Charles had been looking out for a gardener recently. Why should he not go and offer his services? He was still, in a way, somewhat of the family, and perhaps that might be a recommendation. So he hastened off in the direction of Roseblanche.

It was one o'clock, and Monsieur and Madame Charles were just finishing their late breakfast as the servant introduced him. Elodie was pouring out the black coffee, and Monsieur Charles, making his cousin sit down, asked him to take a cup. Jean accepted it; he had eaten nothing since the previous evening, and his stomach felt very drawn. The coffee would do him good. Now that he found himself sitting at table with this well-to-do family, he could not bring himself to ask point-blank for the gardener's place. He must wait for an opportunity. As Madame Charles began to sympathise with him and to bewail poor Françoise's death, he felt very melancholy and depressed again. The family evidently believed that he had come to say good-bye to them.

The servant soon came into the room again to say that the Delhommes, father and son, had called; and Jean was quite forgotten.

"Show them in here, and bring two more cups," said Monsieur Charles.

It had been a somewhat exciting morning altogether for the Charleses. Nénesse had accompanied them to Roseblanche after the funeral, and, while Madame Charles and Elodie went into the house, he had detained the husband and openly proposed to purchase Number 19, providing they could agree as to terms. According to his account, the house, which he knew very well, would only fetch a miserable price if it went into the

market. Vaucogne, he said, would not get five thousand francs for it, so greatly had it depreciated in value under his management. A complete change would have to be made in every particular. The furniture was shabby and rickety, and the staff had been so badly chosen and was so unsatisfactory that even the soldiers were deserting the place. He went on for a whole hour running down the house in this fashion, quite bewildering his uncle, and amazing him by his acute shrewdness and bargaining powers, and by the extraordinary business talent he showed for one so young. Ah, here was a capital young fellow! thought Monsieur Charles; one with a sharp eye and a ready hand. Nénesse concluded by saying that he would come again after breakfast with his father, so that they might talk the matter over seriously.

On getting indoors, Monsieur Charles informed his wife of what had occurred, and she expressed great astonishment at the young man's ability. If only their son-in-law, Vaucogne, had had but half his capacity! They would have to be careful as to what they were about, if they wished to avoid getting the worst of the bargain with this young fellow. It was Elodie's dowry that was at stake. Mingled, however, with the fear they felt, there was a strong sympathy with Nénesse, and a keen desire to see Number 19 in the hands of a clever, energetic master, who would restore it to its old position, even although this entailed a loss upon themselves. And so, when the Delhommes made their appearance, both Monsieur and Madame Charles greeted them in the most cordial fashion.

"You'll have some coffee won't you? Elodie, pass the sugar."

Jean had pushed his chair back, and they were now all seated round the table. Delhomme, with his expressionless, freshly-shaven, tanned face, sat perfectly silent, maintaining a diplomatic reserve; while Nénesse in his smartest clothes, his patent leather boots, gold-flowered waistcoat and mauve neckerchief, seemed quite at his ease, and smiled in his most

winning way. As the blushing Elodie handed him the sugar-basin, he looked into her eyes and sought for some pretty compliment to pay her.

"Your lumps of sugar are very large, cousin," he said.

The girl's blushes deepened, and she could not find anything to reply, being utterly confused by the amiable young fellow's words.

Nénesse, like the artful scamp he was, had only disclosed one-half of his scheme in the morning. Since he had seen Elodie at the funeral, he had suddenly widened his plans. He would not only obtain Number 19, he wanted the girl as well; that would simplify matters. In the first place, he would get the business for nothing, for he would only take Elodie with the house as her dowry; and, then, even allowing that this declining business was the only dowry he got with her in the immediate present, she would later on inherit all Monsieur and Madame Charles's property, a fortune in itself. It was for these reasons that he had brought his father with him, resolved to make his proposal without delay.

For a moment or two they talked about the weather, which was very mild for that time of year. The pear-trees were looking well, but would the bloom set? As they finished their coffee, the conversation began to flag.

"My dear," Monsieur Charles now said abruptly to Elodie, "suppose you go and take a turn in the garden."

He was anxious to get her out of the room, so that he might make his bargain with the Delhommes.

However Nénesse interposed: "Excuse me, uncle," said he, "but I should be much obliged if you would kindly allow my cousin to remain. There is a matter which interests me deeply that I want to speak to you about; and it's always better--don't you think so?--to settle matters at once than to return to them two or three times."

Then rising from his seat, he proceeded to make his proposal like a well-mannered young man.

"I wish to tell you that it would make me very happy to have my cousin for my wife, if you would consent to it, and if she would also."

This declaration caused great surprise. Elodie was so overwhelmed with confusion that she sprang up from her seat and threw herself on Madame Charles's breast, in such a thrill of speechless bashfulness that she blushed to her very ears. Her grandmother exerted herself to calm her.

"Come, come, my little puss, this is really foolish of you!" said she. "Be reasonable, my dear. Your cousin won't eat you because he wants to marry you. I'm sure he said nothing that wasn't very nice and proper. Come, look at him, and don't be foolish."

Nothing, however, that her grandmother said could induce Elodie to show her face again.

"Upon my word, my lad," Monsieur Charles now said, "your proposal has taken me altogether by surprise. Perhaps it would have been better if you had spoken to me privately about it, for you see how very sensitive our darling is. But, whatever happens, you may satisfy yourself that you possess my esteem and respect, for you seem to me a good and industrious young fellow."

Delhomme, whose face had hitherto remained a perfect blank, now allowed three words to escape him:

"That he is!"

Then Jean felt called upon to say something polite, and so he added:

"Ah! yes, indeed!"

Monsieur Charles was recovering his composure, and he had already come to the conclusion that Nénesse would be no bad match for his

grand-daughter. He was young, well mannered, active, and the only son of comfortably-situated parents. Thus Elodie could hardly do better. And so, after exchanging a glance with Madame Charles, he continued:

"You will understand, of course, that my wife and I say neither yes nor no. We shall leave it entirely with Elodie. We shall not in any way constrain her. We shall leave her perfectly at liberty to please herself."

Then Nénesse gallantly renewed his proposal to his cousin.

"My dear cousin," he began, "will you confer upon me the happiness and the honour----"

The girl's face was still buried in her grandmother's bosom, but she did not allow her cousin to complete his sentence; she accepted him at once by an energetic nod of her head, which she repeated three times, burying her face still more deeply out of sight. She seemed to gain courage by not looking at anything. The company sat in silence, quite astonished by the girl's hurry to consent. Could she be in love with this young man whom she had so seldom seen? Or was it that she was anxious for a husband, no matter whom, so long as he was a good-looking fellow?

Madame Charles smiled, and kissed the girl's hair.

"My poor little darling!" she said; "my poor little darling!"

"Very well," exclaimed Monsieur Charles, "since she is satisfied, we are."

Then a sudden reflection saddened him. His heavy eyelids drooped, and an expression of regret passed over his countenance.

"Of course, my good lad," he said, "we shall now abandon the other scheme which you proposed to me this morning."

Nénesse seemed overcome with astonishment.

"Why?" said he.

"What? Why? Why, because--because--well, you surely know why! You may be sure that we didn't leave the child with the Sisters of the Visitation till twenty years of age to--well, in short, it is quite impossible!"

He winked his eyes and twisted his mouth in his attempts to make himself understood without saying too much. To think of the girl being in the Rue aux Juifs! a young lady who had received such an education! a maiden of such absolute purity, brought up in complete ignorance of evil, and carefully screened from its slightest breath!

"Excuse me," exclaimed Nénesse, bluntly, "but that won't suit me at all. I am taking a wife because I wish to settle down to work, and I want both my cousin and the business----"

"The confectionery business!" exclaimed Madame Charles.

She then began to discuss the question more openly, though they continued to call the establishment the confectionery shop. For instance, was it reasonable that the confectionery business should be given up? The young man and his father persisted in claiming it as Elodie's dowry. They could not allow it to be relinquished, they said; it would certainly prove a handsome fortune in the future; and they called upon Jean to support them in their assertions, which he did by wagging his chin. At last they all spoke at once, and they were quickly forgetting all their previous caution, going into details and calling things by their real names, then suddenly an unexpected incident reduced them to silence.

Elodie had at last gradually raised her head from her grandmother's bosom; and she was now standing up, looking like some tall lily that had grown in a shady corner, with her chlorotic white face, her pale eyes and colourless hair. She gazed at the others for a moment, and then said very quietly:

"My cousin is right; the business ought not to be given up."

"Oh! my darling, if you only knew----" Madame Charles began to stammer in confusion.

"I do know," Elodie interrupted. "Victorine, the maid whom you sent away on account of the men, told me all about it long ago. Yes, I know all about it, and I have thought it well over, and I am quite convinced that it must not be given up."

Monsieur and Madame Charles were perfectly stupefied They opened their eyes, and sat staring at the girl in a state of amazement. What! She knew all about Number 19, what was done there, and what was sold there; she knew all about it, and yet spoke of it in this calm, placid fashion! Ah, blessed innocence! it is too pure to see harm in anything!

"It must certainly not be given up," she repeated with increasing decision. "It is too good and profitable a business for that. And then, too, a house which you established yourselves, and where you worked so hard, could you think of allowing it to go out of the family?"

Monsieur Charles was completely bewildered. An indescribable thrill shot up from his heart and seemed to choke him. He rose up from his seat, reeled and tottered, and then supported himself upon Madame Charles, who was also standing trembling and feeling suffocated. They both of them seemed to look upon the girl's offer as a sacrifice, and called, out in distracted tones:

"Oh darling, darling, it cannot be; it really cannot be."

Elodie's eyes were growing moist, and she kissed her mother's old wedding-ring which she wore upon her finger, that wedding-ring which had grown so thin owing to hard work.

"Yes, yes," she resumed, "let me follow my own inclination. I want to follow in my mother's steps. What she did, I can do. There is no

dishonour in it, for you did it yourselves. The idea affords me great pleasure, I assure you. And you will see how I'll help my cousin, and how we will raise the house between us. Ah! you don't know me, but I will show you what I can do!"

This outburst carried the day. Monsieur and Madame Charles, overwhelmed with deep emotion, burst into tears, and sobbed like a couple of children. Although they had certainly brought Elodie up with very different intentions, still what was to be done when the instinct of her blood spoke out like that? They recognised in it the accents of a genuine vocation. It had been the same with Estelle. She, too, had led a secluded life with the Sisters of the Visitation, had been kept in perfect ignorance of the world, and instructed in the principles of the most rigid morality; but in spite of everything she had become an excellent woman of business. It was clear that education went for naught; it was natural sentiment which settled everything. However, the Charles's emotion deepened, and the tears which fell from their eyes streamed yet more copiously at the glorious thought that Number 19, their own creation, their very flesh, so to say, was about to be saved from ruin. Their work would still be continued there by Elodie and Nénesse with all the fresh energy of youth. They already saw the house restored to its former glory, established once more in public favour, with the same brilliant reputation as it had possessed in the palmiest days of their own reign.

As soon as Monsieur Charles was able to speak, he clasped his grand-daughter in his arms. "Your father has been the cause of much anxiety to us," he said, "but you, my angel, will console us for everything!"

Madame Charles also strained the girl to her breast, and they all three of them stood in one another's arms, mingling their tears.

"Then we may consider everything settled now?" asked Nénesse, who was anxious to have matters definitely decided.

"Yes, quite settled."

Delhomme was now radiant, like a father delighted at having set his son up in life in an unhoped-for manner. He began to shuffle about as though he felt called upon to make some observation, and, indeed, at last he delivered himself in these words:

"Well, if there's never any regret on your side, I'm sure there'll never be any on ours. There's no need to wish the young people good luck. That always attends honest hard work."

Then they all sat down again in view of quietly talking over details.

Jean now felt conscious that he was in the way. He had been greatly embarrassed at finding himself amid the previous emotional, tearful outbursts, and he would have made his escape much sooner had he known how to do so. He now summoned up his courage to take Monsieur Charles aside, and speak to him about the gardener's place. But Monsieur Charles's dignified face assumed a severe expression. A relation of his own holding a situation in his service! No, no, that would never do! A relation was never a profitable servant; it was impossible to treat him with necessary severity. Besides, the situation had been promised to another person on the previous day. Jean, therefore, took his leave, while Elodie was saying, in her soft voice, that if her father made himself disagreeable she would undertake to bring him to reason.

When Jean got outside the house he walked on slowly, quite at a loss as to where he should now turn in search of work. Out of the hundred and twenty-seven francs he had already paid for his wife's funeral, for the cross at the head of the grave, and for the railings round it, barely half of the money was left, but this would still keep him some time, and then he would see what happened. He was not afraid of poverty and hard work; his only anxiety arose from his unwillingness to leave Rognes on account of the legal proceedings he was contemplating. Three o'clock struck, then

four, and then five. For a long time he continued wandering about the country, his brain full of confused ideas, his thoughts now dwelling upon La Borderie, and now upon the Charles family. Everywhere it was the same story, money and women; they seemed to over-ride everything else. Consequently there was little to wonder at in the fact that his own misfortunes arose from the same sources. At last he began to feel weak and faint, and bethought himself that as yet he had not had anything to eat; so he set off in the direction of the village, resolving to take up his quarters with the Lengaignes, who let lodgings. However, as he crossed the open square in front of the church, the sight of the house from which he had been expelled in the morning rekindled an angry glow in his veins. Why should he let those knavish wretches keep his frock-coat and two pairs of trousers? They were his own, and he would have them, even at the risk of coming to blows again.

It was growing dark when Jean entered the yard, and he was scarcely able to distinguish old Fouan, who was sitting on the stone bench. However, as he reached the door leading to the kitchen, in which a candle was burning, Buteau caught sight of him and sprang forward to bar his passage.

"God in heaven! you here again! What do you want?"

"I want my two pairs of trousers and my frock-coat."

A frightful quarrel now ensued. Jean doggedly insisted on getting his things out of the drawer; while Buteau, who had seized a bill-hook, swore that he would cut his throat if he crossed the threshold. At last Lise's voice sounded from inside.

"Let him have his rags!" she cried. "You'd never think of touching the rotten fellow's clothes yourself."

The two men now relapsed into silence, and Jean was standing waiting, when all at once old Fouan, who was still sitting on the stone bench

behind his back, gave utterance to the alarm which was troubling his dazed brain.

"Make your escape," he stammered in his husky voice, "or they'll bleed you as they bled the little one."

This was a terrible revelation. Jean understood everything now--both the cause of Françoise's death and that of her obstinate silence. He had had his suspicions before, but now he no longer doubted but what she had remained silent in order to save her relatives from the guillotine. An icy chill froze him; he felt terrified, and he was incapable of either speech or motion when Lise, through the open doorway, hurled his trousers and coat in his face.

"There, take your filthy things! They stink so vilely that they'd have given us all some disease if they'd stayed any longer in the house!"

Jean picked them up and went off. However, when he got out of the yard, and once more found himself on the high-road, he turned round and shook his fists at the house, shouting out a single word which reverberated in the surrounding silence: "Murderers!"

Then he disappeared in the black darkness.

Buteau was standing in a state of terrified consternation, for he had heard what old Fouan had growled out, and Jean's word had penetrated his heart like a bullet. What was in store for him? Would the gendarmes be down upon him, now when he had just fancied that the secret of Françoise's death would be buried for ever with her in her coffin? When he had seen her lowered into her grave in the morning he had begun to breathe freely again, and yet now it was evident that the old fellow knew everything! Was it possible that he had been shamming idiocy for the sake of playing the spy upon them? This last thought completed Buteau's terrified alarm, and he was so completely upset when he went back into the house that he left half of his plateful of soup untouched. Lise, to

whom he had told what had happened, shivered and trembled, and could eat no more than he did.

They had looked forward to keeping high festival upon this their first night in the reconquered house, but it was a night of abominable unhappiness. They had put Laure and Jules to bed on a mattress in front of the chest of drawers, pending an opportunity to arrange other accommodation; and the children were still wide awake when they themselves got into bed, after blowing out the candle. But they could not sleep, they tossed about as though they were on a red-hot gridiron. At last they began to talk to each other in muttered tones. Oh, what a burden the old man had become, now that he had fallen into his dotage! It was really more than they could bear, such an expense he was! No one could believe the quantity of bread he swallowed! And then, too, he was so greedy, seizing the meat in his fingers, and spilling the wine on his beard, and making such a dirty mess of himself that one felt ill merely on looking at him. Besides all that, he was constantly going about with his trousers disarranged; a sad ending for a man who had once been as cleanly and as respectable as any of his fellows. Really, since he seemed determined not to go off of his own accord, it made one feel inclined to make an end of him with a pick-axe.

"When one thinks that a breath would blow him over!" muttered Buteau. "Ah! I really believe that he sticks on just for the sake of annoying us! Those gibbering old idiots, the less good they are the more closely they hug on to life! I don't believe he will ever die, ever!"

Then Lise, lying on her back, replied:

"It's a pity he came here. He'll feel too comfortable, and be inclined to take a fresh lease of life. If I had been a praying woman I should have prayed that he might not be allowed to pass a single night in the house."

Neither of them spoke of the real source of their anxiety, of the old man's knowledge of their secret, and the possibility of his betraying them, even without meaning to do so. That was the bother. Although he was an expense and a nuisance, and prevented them from enjoying the dividends of the stolen scrip at their ease, they had still put up with his presence for a long time. But now that a word from him might endanger their necks, all limits of toleration were past. Something definite would have to de done.

"I'll go and see if he's asleep," said Lise abruptly.

She lighted the candle, and then, making sure that Laure and Jules were soundly slumbering, she glided in her night-dress into the room where the beet-root was stored, and where the old man's iron bed had again been placed. When she came back she was shivering with cold, her feet half frozen by passing over the tiled floor. She buried herself beneath the bed-clothes, and pressed closely against her husband, who clasped her in his arms to warm her.

"Well?"

"Yes, he's asleep; but his breath's very faint, and his mouth is gaping open like a fish's."

They now both remained quiet for a time, but, in spite of their silence, they could read each other's thoughts. The old man seemed constantly on the point of choking, so it would be an easy matter to suffocate him altogether. A handkerchief, or even a hand, held over his mouth, and then they would be freed from him. And really it would be a kindness to the old man himself. He would be better off quietly asleep in the graveyard, than living on, a source of pain and discomfort to himself as well as others.

Buteau's and Lise's blood was flowing hotly, as though some burning desire had just thrilled them. Suddenly the former sprang out of the bed on to the tiled floor.

"I'll go and have a look at him, too," he said.

He then went off with the candle, which had been left standing on the edge of the chest of drawers, while Lise held her breath and listened, her eyes staring widely open in the dark. The minutes glided by, and no sound came from the adjoining room. After a time, however, she heard Buteau's feet pattering gently back again; he had left the light in the old man's room, and was so overcome with excitement that he could not prevent himself from panting. He stepped up to the bed, felt about in the dark for his wife, and then whispered in her ear:

"You come too! I daren't do it alone!"

Lise got up and followed her husband; both of them groping their way forwards with their hands to avoid coming into collision with anything. They no longer felt cold; even their night-dresses were too hot for them. The candle was standing on the floor, in a corner of the old man's room, but it afforded sufficient light for them to see him lying on his back. His head had fallen off the pillow, and he was lying there so rigidly, and looked so emaciated with age, that one might have thought he was already dead, had it not been for the struggling, painful breathing from his gaping mouth. His teeth had all gone, and his lips were turned inwards, round what merely looked like a black hole, a hole over which the husband and wife now stooped, as though they were trying to ascertain how much life still remained at the bottom of it. For a long time they stood looking at it, side by side, with their hips touching one another. Their arms felt limp and nerveless. It was such an easy and yet such a perilous matter to take something and stop up that black hole with it. They went away and then came back again. Their parched tongues could not have pronounced a single word; it was only their eyes that

spoke. Lise pointed out the pillow to her husband with a glance. That would do. What was he waiting for? But Buteau's eyes blinked nervously, and he thrust his wife into his place. Then Lise, in her impatient irritation, suddenly seized the pillow, and clapped it down on the old man's face.

"You miserable coward! Must you always leave everything for your wife to do?" she gasped.

Buteau now sprang forward and pressed upon the pillow with the whole weight of his body, while Lise, mounting on to the bed, sat on it, forcing down her huge swollen buttocks. They were both pressing and sprawling over Fouan's body, crushing it beneath their fists and shoulders and legs. At first the old man had started violently, and when his legs were flattened down there came a sound like that of the snapping of springs. Now he was wriggling about like a fish on dry land; but all this was soon over. As they pressed him down they could feel his struggles ceasing and his life ebbing away. Eventually there came a prolonged quiver, then the last spasm, and finally it was all over; he lay there as inert as a log, as limp as an old rag.

"There, I think we've done it now," muttered Buteau, quite out of breath.

Lise, who was still squatting all of a heap on the bed, ceased pressing, and remained quite still to ascertain if the old man stirred.

"Yes, it's done," she soon said. "There isn't a sign of life about him."

Then she slipped off the bed and removed the pillow. But at the sight presented to their view they both broke out into a groan of terror.

"God in heaven! he's quite black! We shall be found out!"

It would, indeed, be impossible to assert that the old man had put himself into such a condition. In their impetuosity the Buteaus had pressed so violently that his nose was jammed into his mouth, and his face was as

black as a negro's. At this sight it seemed to them as if the ground were giving way beneath them, and they already fancied they could hear the foot-falls of the gendarmes, the clanking of manacles, and the descent of the blade of the guillotine. They were filled with terrible regret as they gazed upon their clumsy piece of work. What could be done? It was of no use washing the old man's face; that would not whiten it. Presently the terror with which his sooty appearance inspired them gave them an idea.

"Suppose we set him alight," murmured Lise.

Buteau felt relieved at this suggestion, and drew a heavy breath.

"Capital! and we'll say he did it himself."

Then, as the thought of the scrip flashed through his mind, he clapped his hands, and his face brightened up with a triumphant smile.

"God in heaven!" he cried, "we'll make them believe that he burnt the papers as well as himself, and then we shan't have to give any account of them."

He now turned to take up the candle; but Lise, who was afraid of incurring too much danger, would not let him set the bed on fire with it. There were some straw-bands behind some beet-root in a corner of the room, and she took one of these, lighted it, and then applied it to the old man's long white hair and beard. There was a strong smell and sputtering like that of burning grease. Suddenly Lise and Buteau recoiled in terrified stupefaction, as though some cold, ghostly hand had seized them by the hair. Tortured into life by the frightful agony of burning, the old man, who had not been effectually suffocated, had just opened his eyes; and now, as he lay there with his hideous blackened face, his great nose battered and broken, and his hair and beard burnt away, he gazed at them with a fearful look of mingled pain and hatred. Then all his face seemed to fall into utter blankness, and he died.

Quite wild with terror, Buteau had just burst out into an awful groan when he heard some screams at the door. They came from the two children, Laure and Jules, who had been awakened by the noise. Attracted by the light of the burning straw, they had hurried along in their night-dresses to the open door, whence they had seen all. They shrieked with terror.

"You cursed little vermin!" roared Buteau, dashing at them; "if you say a word to anybody, I'll murder you! Take that to remind you of what I say."

With these words he gave them each such a violent cuff that they rolled over on the floor. They picked themselves up, however, without shedding a tear, and rushed off to their mattress, where they remained without daring to move.

Buteau, who was determined to make an end of the matter, now set fire to the palliasse in spite of his wife's protestations. Fortunately the room was so damp that the straw burnt very slowly, giving out, however, such a dense and copious smoke, that they were nearly suffocated, and had to open the window. Then the flames shot up higher and licked the ceiling. The old man's body began to crackle amid the blaze, and the room was filled with an intolerable stench of burning flesh. The old house would certainly have taken fire, and burnt away like a stack, if the straw had not begun to smoke again owing to the melting of the body. Nothing now remained on the cross-ribs of the iron bedstead save the half-calcined, disfigured, unrecognisable corpse. Only a small corner of the palliasse had remained unburnt, and a mere scrap of sheeting hung over the edge of the bed.

"Let us be off!" said Lise, who had begun to shiver again, despite the excessive heat.

"Wait a moment," replied Buteau; "we must arrange things properly."

He then placed a chair by the bedside, and upset the old man's candlestick at the foot of it, to make it appear as though it had fallen upon the palliasse. Then he was crafty enough to throw some scraps of lighted paper on the floor. When the ashes were discovered, he intended to say that the old man had found his papers again on the previous evening, and had secured possession of them.

"There, that will do!" repeated Lise. "Now let us go to bed."

They then hurried away, jostling each other in their haste, and plunged into their bed, which was now quite cold. Daylight began to dawn, but still they lay awake, unable to get to sleep. They did not speak to each other, but kept starting and quivering, and could hear their hearts beating wildly. They had left the door of the adjoining room open, and the thought of it disturbed them greatly; however, the idea of getting up and shutting it was still more distasteful and disquieting. At last they dozed off, still clinging closely to each other.

A few hours later the neighbours rushed up on hearing Buteau's wild calls. La Frimat and the other woman noticed the fallen candle, the charred remains of the palliasse, and the ashes of the scraps of paper. Then they all exclaimed that they had always felt sure that this would happen some day or other. They declared they had prophesied a score of times that the old man would do it in his dotage! The Buteaus might be very thankful that the whole house hadn't been burnt down at the same time!

PART V. — CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VI.

Two days afterwards, on the very morning on which old Fouan was to be buried, Jean, tired from having remained in bed for hours without being able to sleep, woke up very late in the little room which he occupied at Lengaigne's. He had not yet been to Châteaudun to initiate proceedings against the Buteaus, though his intention to do so was the only thing that still kept him at Rognes. Each evening, however, he deferred the matter till the next day, feeling increasing hesitation about it, as his anger gradually calmed down. It was a prolonged mental struggle which had just kept him awake half the night, tossing feverishly about in his bed, and full of doubt as to what course he had best take.

Oh! those Buteaus, he thought, what murderous brutes, what abominable assassins they were! Some honest man ought to have their heads lopped off. As soon as he heard of old Fouan's death, he guessed how it had been brought about. The villains, he felt sure of it, had burnt the old man alive to prevent him from blabbing. Françoise! Fouan! the murder of the one had forced them to murder the other. Whose turn would it be next? Most likely his own, he thought; for they knew that he possessed their secret, and they would certainly send a bullet into him from some quiet corner of the road if he persisted in remaining in the neighbourhood. Had he not better denounce them at once? He made up his mind that he would. He would lay an information against them as soon as he got up. Then he began to hesitate again, feeling considerable timidity as to embarking upon a serious proceeding like this. He would be called as a witness, and he felt afraid lest he might be made to suffer as much as the very criminals themselves. Why should he create fresh troubles and anxieties for himself? This, as he acknowledged, was a cowardly way of looking at matters, but he found an excuse for his silence in the reflection that by

holding his tongue he would be obeying Françoise's last wishes. A score of times that night he came to a decision, and then a score of times he cast that decision aside, till he felt quite ill from thinking of this duty from which he recoiled.

It was nearly nine o'clock when he sprang out of bed, and plunged his head into a basin of cold water. He now suddenly came to a resolution. He would neither lay an information, nor would he take any steps to initiate proceedings for the recovery of his share of the furniture. The game was not worth the candle. A feeling of proud independence had restored his mind to perfect calmness; he would claim nothing from those swindling wretches; henceforth he would have nothing to do with them. He had no further concern in them, and he would leave them to prey upon themselves. If they would only contrive to make an end of one another all round, it would be a good riddance for everybody. He flushed with anger as he thought of what he had suffered and endured during the ten years he had spent in Rognes; and yet he had been so happy in the thought of leaving the army, after the Italian war; so happy in ceasing to handle the sabre and slay his fellow-men! Still, ever since his discharge, he had been living amid filth, surrounded by savages. At the period of his marriage he had had troubles enough, but he had fallen upon even worse times now; the villains had taken to robbery and murder. Ah, they were savage wolves, let loose over that peaceful, far-reaching plain. For his own part, he had had quite enough of it! These devouring wild beasts had spoilt the country for him! What would be the good of hunting down just a couple of them--a male and his female--when the whole pack ought to be destroyed? No; he preferred to go away.

At that moment his eyes happened to light upon a newspaper which he had brought up with him from the public room on the previous evening. He had been interested in an article on the approaching war, for alarming rumours had been in circulation for several days past, and the martial feeling, which he thought extinct within him, had suddenly sprung up

into fresh glowing life at the report of a coming call to arms. His last lingering hesitation to leave Rognes, his doubts as to where he should go, were all utterly and entirely swept away as by a rushing blast of wind. Yes, he would go and fight; he would enlist! He had certainly paid the debt he owed his country; but when a man has no occupation left, when life is full of wearisome cares, and when one is angered by the persecution of one's enemies, the best plan is still to fall upon them boldly. This determination eased his feelings and thrilled him with stern joy. As he dressed himself, he whistled the bugle-march that had resounded when they advanced to battle in Italy. Mankind was really too hateful and abominable, and he found a great consolation in the thought of demolishing some of the Prussians. Since he had not found peace in this country nook, where the peasant folk drank each other's blood, he might just as well return to the carnage of the battlefield. The more of the foe he slew, the redder would the soil be, and the more would he feel avenged for all the hardship and trouble with which men had visited him.

When he came downstairs he ate the two eggs and the rasher of bacon which Flore served him. Then he called Lengaigne and paid his score.

"Are you going to leave us, Corporal?" asked the landlord.

"Yes."

"But you'll be coming back again, won't you?"

"No."

Lengaigne looked at him in amazement, but he kept his reflections to himself. So the great booby was going to give up all his rights!

"What are you thinking of doing now? Do you mean to turn carpenter again?"

"No; soldier."

Upon hearing this, Lengaigne opened his eyes in still greater amazement, and could no longer restrain a smile of contempt. What a fool the man must be!

Jean had already started on his way to Cloyes, when a last thrill of feeling made him check his steps and turn up the hill. He felt that he could not leave Rognes without saying good-bye to Françoise's grave. There was also another desire which he wished to satisfy: to gaze once more upon the mighty plain, that mournful La Beauce, which he had learned to love during his long solitary hours of toil.

The graveyard stretched behind the church, enclosed by a crumbling wall so low that, when one stood amid the tombs, a clear view could be obtained from horizon to horizon. A pale March sun was shining coldly in the sky, which was veiled by a soft, white, fleecy haze, scarcely showing a patch of blue. Beneath the softly smiling heavens, La Beauce, still torpid from the winter frosts, seemed to lie half-dozing and half-awake, basking in sweet indolence. The distant fields, bathed in a suffused light, were already green with the wheat, oats, and rye sown during the autumn. In those plough-lands that remained bare, the spring sowing had recently been commenced. All around men could be seen striding over the rich soil scattering their seed with the same uniform gesture. The grains could be distinctly perceived falling like a flashing gilded stream from the hands of the nearer sowers. Then with the increasing distance the figures of the sowers seemed to dwindle in size till they were altogether lost to sight, and as the seed streamed around them it looked like some mere vibration of light. For leagues around, in every direction, the life-germs of the coming summer were raining down amid the sunshine.

Jean stood in front of Françoise's grave. It was half-way along a row of other graves, and an open one beside it was waiting to receive old Fouan's body. The graveyard was over-run with a rank growth of weeds,

for the municipal council had never consented to grant the rural constable fifty francs to make it neat and trim. Wooden crosses and railings were rotting away, and only a few mouldering stones still stood in position. The charm of this lonely nook, however, lay in its very condition of neglect, in its profound tranquillity, which was only broken by the croaking of the ancient crows which wheeled around the church steeple. Here the villagers slept their last sleep in perfect peace and oblivion. Jean, amid the death-like stillness, dropped into a reverie, gazing at the vast expanse of La Beauce and the seed grains which permeated it as with a thrill of life. But at last he was aroused, hearing the bell toll slowly, first three times, then twice more, and finally break into a continuous clanging. The bearers were lifting Fouan's coffin, and were bringing it towards the graveyard.

The bandy-legged gravedigger came limping along to see that the grave was all right.

"Isn't it too small?" asked Jean, who still tarried, his heart softening with a desire to see the last of the old man.

"Not it," replied the bandy-legged sexton. "They could get four like him into it. That roasting has brought down his size."

On the evening following upon Fouan's death, the Buteaus had awaited the arrival of Doctor Finet with great trepidation. But the surgeon had signed the burial certificate at once, his only thought being to get away again as soon as possible, he came, looked at the body, and then angrily railed at the stupidity of country-folks in leaving an addle-pated old man with a lighted candle. If he felt any suspicions, he wisely kept them to himself. This father had been so obstinate in living on, that maybe he had deserved to be roasted a bit. Besides, he (Finet) had seen so many strange things that a matter like this seemed of no great account. In his callous indifference, born of mingled contempt and bitterness, he merely shrugged his shoulders--a scampish, bad lot those peasants! thought he.

Relieved upon this point, the Buteaus then had to prepare themselves to meet their relatives and allay any possible suspicions. As soon as La Grande presented herself they burst into tears, thinking that this would have a good effect. The old woman looked at them with surprise, and thought to herself that they were really over-acting their part in crying so much. However, she had merely come for the sake of something to do, for she had no claim upon any of the old man's property. The real danger began when Fanny and Delhomme arrived. The latter had just been nominated mayor in place of Macqueron, and his wife was almost bursting with pride. She had kept her oath, and her father had died without any reconciliation on her part. Indeed, with her extreme susceptibility, she even yet felt hurt by his conduct, and she showed this by standing with dry eyes in front of the corpse. However, if *she* shed no tears, there was withal a sound of loud sobbing. This arose when Hyacinthe arrived, very drunk, and overflowing with the tender emotion which he found at the bottom of his bottle. He quite saturated the corpse with his tears, and bellowed out that he had received a blow from which he would never recover.

In the kitchen Lise had set out a row of glasses and bottles of wine; and a general discussion ensued. It was at once agreed that the hundred and fifty francs a year arising from the sale of the house were outside the debate, for it had always been understood that this sum should be retained by those who looked after the old man during his last days. But then there was the secret hoard, the three hundred francs a year that were derived from the scrip of which they had all now heard. Buteau thereupon related his story, stating how his father had discovered the papers underneath the marble slab on the top of the chest of drawers, and how, while examining them at night, he must have set his hair on fire. The ashes of the papers had been found lying on the floor, as La Frimat and La Bécu could testify. As he told his story the others scrutinised him keenly, but this in no way confused him, and he smote his breast with his

hands and swore by the light of day that he was speaking the truth. He could see that the family had their suspicions, but he cared nothing about that so long as they did not worry him, and he kept the money. Fanny, however, with her impetuous outspokenness, unbosomed herself of her surmises, and angrily assailed Buteau and Lise as thieves and murderers. Yes, they had burned her father and robbed him! That was plain to everybody's eyes! The Buteaus replied with a flood of abuse and equally abominable accusations against herself. She and her husband, they cried, had plotted to destroy the old man, who had nearly perished from taking some poisoned soup that had been given him in his daughter's house. They, the Buteaus, would be able to tell a great deal if anything was said about them!

Hyacinthe had again begun to cry and bellow lugubriously on hearing that such awful crimes were possible. God in heaven! his poor father! Could it be possible that there were sons wicked enough to roast their father? La Grande, whose eyes were glistening brightly, let a few words drop whenever the contending parties seemed getting out of breath, and her remarks at once set them going at each other again. Delhomme, feeling uneasy at the aspect of affairs, at last went and closed the doors and windows. He had his official position to think of; and, besides, he was always in favour of settling matters quietly. He now protested that such accusations were most unseemly. A pretty reputation the family would get if the neighbours should hear what was going on! The law would poke its nose into the matter, and possibly the good ones would lose more than the bad ones. No, when there were scamps in a family, the best plan was to leave them to their villany, in the hope that it would end by destroying them. All the others sat in silence. Delhomme was right. There was nothing to be got by washing their dirty linen before the magistrates. Moreover, Buteau terrified the others. This scoundrel was quite capable of ruining them. At the bottom of their silent acquiescence in the murder and robbery there lay that feeling which makes the

peasantry the accomplices of poachers, of the men who kill gamekeepers; in fact, of all that class of lawless rustics who are saved from being given up to justice by the fear they inspire in those who are fully cognisant of their crimes.

La Grande remained to have some coffee and to spend the evening with the Buteaus, while the others trooped off in a blunt, unceremonious fashion, expressive of their contempt. The Buteaus, however, did not care a straw about that, so long as they kept the money and had the certainty of not being worried any further. Lise raised her voice again to its wonted pitch, and Buteau, resolving to do things properly, ordered the coffin, and went to the churchyard to examine the place where the grave was to be dug.

The peasants of Rognes felt a great dislike to resting after their death by the side of those whom they had hated while alive; but, as the graves were dug in regular rows, it was altogether a matter of luck where each one was buried; and whenever, as chance had it, two enemies died immediately one after the other, the authorities experienced great embarrassment, for the family of the one who had died the latest often talked quite seriously of keeping his body above ground rather than let it lie by the side of a person whom he had detested. Now, it happened that when Macqueron was mayor he had abused his official position to purchase for his grave a plot of ground which would certainly not have been assigned to him in the regular course of affairs. Unfortunately, too, this strip of ground adjoined the grave in which Lengaigne's father was buried, and in which Lengaigne had reserved room for himself. Ever since Macqueron had purchased his plot, his rival's indignation had known no end, his long-standing enmity becoming more rancorous than ever. The thought that his body would lie rotting beside that scoundrel's would embitter the rest of his existence.

Buteau was filled with the same angry feeling when he went to inspect the grave which chance had allotted to his father. Françoise would lie on old Fouan's left-hand, which was right and proper enough; but, as ill-luck would have it, in the adjoining row of graves, and just in front of the one where Fouan was to be buried, there was the grave of old Saucisse's deceased wife, in which Saucisse had reserved room for himself also. The result was that, whenever the old scamp died, he would lie with his feet close to Fouan's skull. Could this idea be tolerated for a moment? Here were two old men, who had detested each other ever since that dishonourable business about the daily payments of fifteen sous for the reversion of an acre of ground, and the greater rascal of the two--the one who had tricked the other--was to go dancing on his head through all eternity! Why, if the family were so unfeeling as to submit to such an arrangement, old Fouan's bones would turn in their coffin and struggle with those of old Saucisse! Boiling over with rebellious indignation, Buteau now angrily rushed off to the municipal offices and attacked Delhomme, trying to force him to take advantage of his official position to assign another grave to old Fouan. But his brother-in-law refused to depart from the established usage, dwelling upon the deplorable example of Macqueron and Lengaigne. Buteau then called him a coward, accused him of being bribed, and finally roared out in the middle of the road that he himself was the only dutiful and affectionate son, since the rest of the family didn't care a straw whether the old man rested peacefully in his grave or not. Drawing the whole village to the door-steps in his progress, he went off home in a state of furious indignation.

Another matter, and one of more importance than this question of the grave, had just been causing Delhomme great embarrassment. The Abbé Madeline had gone away a couple of days previously, and Rognes was once more without a priest. The experiment of keeping one of their own within the village had, on the whole, turned out so unsatisfactorily that the municipal council had voted in favour of withdrawing the grant, and

returning to the previous state of affairs, the services being performed by the priest of Bazoches-le-Doyen. The Abbé Godard, however, despite the bishop's remonstrances, had sworn that he would never celebrate the blessed sacrament in the place, and, in his exasperation at the departure of his colleague, he accused the villagers of having half-murdered the poor fellow for the sole purpose of forcing him--Godard--to return among them. He had already declared that, although Bécu might ring the bell for mass from morning till night, he would not come, when Fouan's sudden death complicated matters, and brought the situation to a crisis. A funeral is not like a mass, and cannot be indefinitely postponed. With some little mischievous satisfaction at the turn affairs had taken, Delhomme now went to see the priest at Bazoches. As soon as the Abbé Godard perceived him his face assumed a wrathful expression, and, without giving the mayor time to open his mouth, he cried out that nothing would make him come, he would rather lose his place! When he learnt that his presence was required for a funeral, he lost the power of articulation through very rage. Those pagans died on purpose. They fancied that by doing so they would force him to come to them! Well, they might bury themselves, for he didn't mean to help them up to heaven!

Delhomme quietly waited till the priest's first ebullition of anger was exhausted, and then began to argue with him. The Church, he said, did not refuse the last sprinkling of holy water to any one; and a corpse could not be kept indefinitely in the house. Then he tried more personal arguments; the dead man was his father-in-law, the father-in-law of the mayor of Rognes. Come, now, shouldn't they say to-morrow at ten o'clock? No! no! no! cried the Abbé Godard, blustering and almost choking in his wrath, and Delhomme had to go away without being able to make him yield, though he hoped that he would think better of it before morning.

"I tell you that I won't come," the priest shouted at him for the last time from his door. "Don't ring the bell, for I tell you I won't come; no, a thousand times no!"

The next morning, however, Bécu received the mayor's orders to ring the bell at ten o'clock. They would see what would happen. Everything was ready at the Buteaus' for the funeral; the body had been placed in the coffin on the previous evening under the experienced eyes of La Grande. The room, too, had been washed, and the only trace left of the fire was the old man's corpse screwed down ready for interment.

The bell was tolling, and the family had met together in front of the house, waiting for the removal of the body, when the Abbé Godard was seen hurrying along up the street, quite out of breath from running, and so flushed and furious that he held his hat in his hand, half afraid lest he should fall down in a fit. Without looking at any one he dashed into the church, immediately re-appearing again in his surplice, followed by two choir-boys, one of whom carried the cross, and the other the vessel of holy water. Then he rapidly proceeded to mutter over the corpse, and, without troubling himself as to whether the bearers were following him with the coffin, he returned to the church, where he began to say mass at a furious pace. Clou and his trombone and the two choristers quite lost their breath in their attempts to keep up with him. In the front row were the members of the family, Buteau and Lise, Fanny and Delhomme, Hyacinthe and La Grande. Monsieur Charles also honoured the funeral with his presence, but Madame Charles had been at Chartres for the last two days with Elodie and Nénesse. As for La Trouille, just as she was on the point of starting for the ceremony, she discovered that three of her geese were missing, and she rushed off to search for them. Behind Lise stood the two children, Laure and Jules, comporting themselves very decorously, with their arms crossed, and an expression of deep gravity on their widely-opened eyes. The other seats were crowded with acquaintances, women for the most part, including La Frimat, La Bécu,

Cœlina, Flore, and many others, making up such a gathering as the family might well be proud of. As the priest turned to the congregation, he threw his arms open with such a terribly threatening expression that it looked as though he were going to cuff them all. Bécu, who was very drunk, was still tugging at the bell.

Altogether it was a very satisfactory mass, though solemnised somewhat hurriedly. The congregation, however, showed no signs of vexation, and they even smiled secretly at the Abbé's anger, which they quite excused, for it was only natural that he should be a little sulky over his defeat, just as they themselves felt elated at the victory of their village. An expression of sly satisfaction beamed on all their countenances. They had forced him to celebrate the blessed sacrament amongst them, though in reality they cared nothing at all about it.

When the mass was over, the aspersorium was passed from hand to hand, and then the procession reformed. First came the cross and the chanters, then Clou and his trombone, then the priest, choking from his breathless haste, next the body carried by four peasants, then the family, and finally the crowd of acquaintances. Bécu had now commenced to tug so energetically at the bell that the crows flew off from the steeple, croaking in distress. The funeral party reached the graveyard at once; they had only to turn the corner of the church. The chants and music broke out into fuller sound amid the hushed silence, beneath the vapoury sun which imparted warmth to the quivering peacefulness of the weeds and grass. When the coffin appeared in the open air, it seemed so small that every one looked at it in surprise. Jean, who was still standing by the grave, was painfully affected by the sight. Ah, poor old man! to be so emaciated by age, so shrunken owing to the wretchedness of his life, that he had room enough to lie completely in that mere toy-box! that mere pretence of a coffin! But little room would he want for his grave, and but a very slight incumbrance would he be to the soil, that mighty mother earth, whom he had so passionately loved.

As the coffin was laid down by the edge of the yawning grave, Jean's eyes followed it, and then strayed further away, over the little wall, sweeping La Beauce from end to end. Again he beheld the sowers stretching away into the far distance ceaselessly swinging their arms, while the seed streamed over the gaping furrows.

When the Buteaus caught sight of Jean, they exchanged an uneasy glance. Could the scoundrel be waiting there with the intention of creating some disturbance? They would never be able to sleep at ease as long as he remained in Rognes! The boy who carried the cross had just planted it at the foot of the grave, and now the Abbé Godard, standing in front of the coffin which was lying on the grass, hurriedly repeated the last prayers. The spectators' attention was, however, diverted on noticing that Macqueron and Lengaigne, who had arrived late, were gazing intently towards the plain. Every one now turned to look in the same direction, and noticed a thick cloud of smoke rolling up into the sky. It seemed to come from La Borderie; probably some stacks behind the farm had caught fire.

"*Ego sum*--" exclaimed the priest in a tone of fury: and then the funeral-party again turned towards him, fixing their eyes once more upon the coffin; Monsieur Charles alone was inattentive, continuing a whispered conversation with Delhomme. He had that morning received from Madame Charles a letter which filled him with delight. During the four-and-twenty hours she had been in Chartres, Elodie had shown herself in the most surprising light, displaying as much energy and shrewdness as even Nénesse himself. She had got the better of her father, and was already in possession of the house. Ah, she had the proper gifts, a ready hand and a sharp eye! Monsieur Charles was quite overcome with emotion as he thought of the happy old age that was now in store for him at Roseblanche, where his rose-trees and his carnations had never looked better than they were doing now; and it seemed to him, too, that

his birds had quite recovered their health during the last few days, for they sang again so sweetly as to stir his very soul.

"*Amen*!" now cried the boy who was carrying the vessel of holy water.

Then the Abbé Godard, in his angry voice, immediately commenced the psalm:

"*De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine*----"

And as he continued, Hyacinthe, who had taken Fanny aside, began to abuse the Buteaus again.

"If only I hadn't been so drunk the other day," he began. "But really it isn't possible, you know; we can't submit to be robbed in this way."

"Yes, there's no doubt but what we are being robbed," murmured Fanny.

"Those two wretches have got the scrip, that's quite certain," her brother continued. "They've been enjoying the dividends for a long time past; they settled it all with old Saucisse, I know that for a fact. God in heaven! aren't we going to take proceedings against them?"

On hearing this Fanny started back, and shook her head energetically.

"No, no," she said; "I certainly sha'n't. I've got quite enough on my hands as it is. But you can, if you like."

Hyacinthe, in his turn, now made a gesture of alarm and refusal. As he couldn't get his sister to interfere, he didn't care to come into close contact with the law; his own antecedents worried him.

"Oh, no, no! I can't do anything," said he. "People have a spite against me. Never mind, even if we don't send them to gaol, we at least have the satisfaction of knowing that we can carry our heads erect."

La Grande, who was listening, watched him as he drew himself up with an air of unsullied integrity. She had always considered him a simpleton,

blackguard though he was, and she felt quite vexed that such a great big fellow didn't go and smash everything in his brother's house to compel him to give him his share. Then, with a desire to make game of the brother and sister, she abruptly launched out into her customary statement, without any preliminaries.

"Ah, well, you'll never find me wronging any one. My will's been made a long time past, and every one will get a fair share. I couldn't die with an easy mind if I had shown an unfair preference for any one. Hyacinthe is down in it, and you, too, Fanny. I'm ninety years old now, and the day will soon come. Yes, it will come indeed."

However, she did not believe a word of it; she had made up her mind that she would never die, such was her obstinate determination to stick to her property. She would see all her relations buried. Here was another one, her brother, whom she was seeing being put away. The whole affair, the carrying of the corpse, the open grave, the final ceremony, all seemed matters which concerned her neighbours, and not herself. Tall and fleshless, with her stick under her arm, she stood firmly erect amid the graves, without showing the slightest sign of emotion, merely exhibiting a feeling of curiosity in her neighbours' shrinking from death.

The priest was now sputtering out the last verse of the psalm.

"*Et ipse redimet Israel ex omnibus iniquitatibus ejus.*"

Then he took the sprinkler out of the holy water vessel and shook it over the coffin, exclaiming in a louder tone:

"*Requiescat in pace.*"

"*Amen,*" responded the two boys.

Then the coffin was let down into the grave. The gravedigger had already slipped the ropes under it, and a couple of men amply sufficed to lower it, for the old man's corpse didn't weigh more that that of a little child. The

funeral party now passed in procession in front of the grave, and the sprinkler again passed from hand to hand, every one shaking it crossways over the coffin.

Jean, who now stepped up, received the aspersorium from the hands of Monsieur Charles, and his eyes sought the bottom of the grave. He was rather dazzled, as he had gazed so long upon the far-stretching plain of La Beauce, watching the sowers as they sowed the bread of the future, from one end of the expanse to the other, and dwindled away in the suffused light of the vaporous horizon. However, down in the depths of the soil Jean could distinguish the coffin, looking still smaller than before, with its narrow lid of pale corn-yellow pinewood. The clods of rich earth were falling over it and gradually concealing it from view; and now there was only a pale glimmering patch to be seen, looking like a handful of the corn which the sowers were scattering in the furrows over yonder. He shook the sprinkler, and then handed it to Hyacinthe.

"Your reverence! your reverence!" Delhomme now called, running after the priest, who, as the service was over, was striding off with a furious gait, forgetting all about the boys.

"Well, what is it now?" asked the priest.

"I only wanted to thank you for your kindness in coming. I suppose we may have the bell rung for mass at ten o'clock on Sunday, as usual, eh?"

The priest looked at him keenly without making any reply, and Delhomme hastily added:

"By the way, there's a poor old woman who is very ill, and absolutely alone, and she hasn't got a farthing either--Rosalie, the chair-mender; you know her, don't you? I have sent her some food, but I can't do everything."

The Abbé Godard's features lost their stern expression, and a thrill of charity swept away his wrath. He began fumbling in his pockets, but could only find seven coppers.

"Lend me ten francs," said he. "I'll give you them back on Sunday. Good-bye till Sunday, then."

Then he rushed on again, in a fresh burst of haste. Although it was quite certain that the good God whom they had forced him to bring amongst them would send all these cursed villagers to roast in hell, still, that was no reason why they should be left in too great suffering and tribulation in this life.

When Delhomme joined the others, he found himself in the midst of a violent quarrel. For some time the funeral party had stood quietly watching the sexton shovelling the soil on to the coffin. Presently, however, chance having brought Macqueron and Lengaigne close together beside the grave, the latter began to abuse the former on the subject of the plots. The family group, which had just been going away, thereupon remained to listen, and soon took an excited interest in the war of words, to which the sound of the falling soil furnished a muffled, regular accompaniment.

"You had no right to do it!" cried Lengaigne. "Your being mayor made no difference at all! You ought to have followed the row! You only shove yourself close up to my father to annoy me. Confound it all! You haven't gained your ends yet, I can tell you!"

"Aren't you going to shut up!" replied Macqueron. "I have paid for the plot, and it's my own property. And when my time comes, it won't be a foul swine like you who will prevent me from being laid there."

The two men had stepped apart, and each was now standing by his own plot, the few feet of earth where they would some day sleep their long sleep.

"But, you confounded villain, can you stomach the thought that we shall be lying there, shoulder to shoulder, like a couple of bosom friends? As for me, it makes my blood boil to think of it! To think that, after being enemies all our lives, we shall patch up a peace down there, and lie quietly side by side! No, no, indeed! No patching up, no forgetting for me!"

"Ah, well, I don't care a curse! You can blow yourself out with rage till you burst, if you like, but I've too much contempt for you to trouble myself about knowing whether your carcass will rot near mine or not!"

This scornful reply capped Lengaigne's exasperation; and he blurted out that if he lived the longer, he'd come in the night and dig up Macqueron's bones and toss them outside the graveyard, rather than submit to lie beside them. Macqueron sniggered, and said he should like to see him do it; and then the women joined in the fray, that dark, skinny wench, Cœlina, making an angry attack upon her husband.

"You are acting shamefully!" she cried. "I told you so before. You don't seem to have any feelings! However, I can tell you this, unless you make a change, you may lie in your hole by yourself. I shall have myself taken somewhere else, for I'll never consent to let my bones be poisoned by that drab there!"

As she spoke she jerked her chin in the direction of Flore; but the latter was not going to submit to this abuse.

"You'd be no very pleasant neighbour yourself!" she retorted, in a drawling, whining tone. "Make yourself quite easy, my dear; I don't intend to let your bones give the disease to mine."

"Eh, what? What disease?"

"Oh, you know what disease very well!"

La Bécu and La Frimat were now obliged to interpose and separate the two women.

"Come, come," urged the former, "you won't lie together since you are both of the same way of thinking. Every one is at liberty to choose her own company."

La Frimat expressed her acquiescence in this.

"It's only natural," she said. "I'm sure that when my old man's time comes I'd rather keep him in the house with me than let him lie alongside of old Couillot, with whom he had differences once on a time."

The tears welled to her eyes as she thought that her paralytic husband would probably pass away before the week was over. She had fallen with him on the previous evening as she was trying to put him to bed, and whenever he departed she wouldn't be long in following him.

It was at this moment that Delhomme came up, and Lengaigne at once appealed to him.

"Now, then," said he, "folks say you are a just man; well, will you allow such injustice? Now that you are mayor, you can make this scamp turn out of here and take his place in the regular order."

Macqueron shrugged his shoulders, and Delhomme proceeded to explain that as he had paid his money the plot belonged to him. The matter was settled now, and there was an end of it. Buteau, who had hitherto quieted himself by force, then lost his head and rushed into the fray. All the members of the family should have maintained a decorous bearing as the clods of soil were still falling with heavy thuds upon the old man's coffin; however, Buteau's indignation was too great to be restrained.

"Ah! curse it, you're mightily mistaken if you expect to find any proper feeling in that fellow!" he cried to Lengaigne, as he pointed to Delhomme. "He let his own father be buried by the side of a thief!"

This remark caused a general explosion, the different members of the family taking part in the row. Fanny supported her husband, saying that the real mistake lay in not having purchased a plot for their father at the time when their mother Rose died; he might have laid close to her. Thereupon Hyacinthe and La Grande assailed Delhomme with abuse, also expressing their disgust at old Fouan's proximity to Saucisse, a most inhuman proceeding admitting of no excuse whatever. Monsieur Charles was of the same opinion, but expressed himself more moderately.

They were now all wrangling and shouting at once. Buteau, however, managed to make himself heard above the others, as he roared out: "Yes, their very bones will struggle under the ground to attack each other again!"

The whole company, relatives, friends, and acquaintances, eagerly seized hold of this phrase. Yes, that was the truth! Their very bones would continue the fight underground. When they were buried, the Fouans would still pursue each other with that savage animosity which they had mutually manifested during life. Lengaigne and Macqueron would go on bickering and quarrelling till they had quite rotted; and the women, Cœlina, Flore, and La Bécu, would still attack each other with their tongues and claws. It was the universal opinion in Rognes that foes in life could never rest peacefully together when they were buried. The hatred between them never perished; it lasted beyond life right away to the end of time. In this sunny graveyard, beneath the rank growth of grass and weeds, a savage, timeless warfare was waging between coffin and coffin, just such a warfare as was now being waged by these living mortals who were grouped together amid the graves, clenching their fists and reviling one another. However, a shout from Jean separated the adversaries, and made them turn their heads: "La Borderie is on fire!"

Doubt was no longer possible. The flames were leaping up from the roof, quivering and paling in the light of day. A dense cloud of ruddy smoke

was gently rolling away towards the north. Then La Trouille came into sight, running hastily from the direction of the farm. While hunting for her geese she had noticed the first sparks, and she had stood gloating over the spectacle till the idea of telling the others of the sight occurred to her, whereupon she set off at a run. Jumping astride the low wall, she cried out in her childish voice:

"Oh, isn't it just blazing? That big beast Tron came back and set it on fire in three different places--in the barn, in the stables, and in the kitchen. They caught him just as he was setting the straw alight, and the waggoners nearly killed him. The horses and the cows and the sheep are all roasting! Oh, you should hear the noise they're making! You never heard such a row!"

Her green eyes glistened, and she laughed as she continued:

"Oh, and there's La Cognette! She's been ill, you know, ever since the master died, and they had forgotten her in her bed. She was already getting singed, and she'd only just time to cut and run in her shift. Oh, it was a rare sight to see her prancing about in the open fields with her bare legs. She hopped and skipped along, and the folks shouted out, 'hou! hou!' as she passed them. They're not very fond of her, you know, and one old man said: 'She's come out just as she went in, with only a shift on her back!'"

At this point a fresh thrill of merriment made the girl wriggle with laughter.

"*Do* come! it's such a lark! I'm off back again."

Then she sprang down from the wall, and ran as fast as her legs could carry her in the direction of the blazing farm.

Monsieur Charles, Delhomme, Macqueron, and nearly all the peasants followed her; while the women, with La Grande at their head, also left

the graveyard for the road, so as to get a better view. Buteau and Lise had stayed behind, and the latter detained Lengaigne, being anxious to question him about Jean, without appearing to show too much interest in him. Had he found some work, she asked, as he was lodging in the neighbourhood? When the innkeeper replied that he was going away to re-enlist, both Buteau and Lise, feeling vastly relieved, broke out into the same exclamation:

"What a fool he must be!"

So this troublesome bother was at an end, and they would be able to live happily again! They cast a last glance at Fouan's grave, which the sexton had now almost filled up; and as the two children lingered behind to watch, their mother called them.

"Come along, Jules and Laure, come along! Mind you're good children, now, and do what you're told, or the man will come and put you in the earth too."

The Buteaus then went off, pushing Laure and Jules in front of them. The children, who knew the truth, looked very grave and earnest with their big solemn black eyes.

Jean and Hyacinthe were now the only ones left in the graveyard. The latter just watched the fire from a distance, disdaining to hurry off like the others. As he stood, quite motionless between two graves, he seemed to be absorbed in some visionary dream, and his sad, dissipated face expressed the mournful melancholy that lies at the end of every system of philosophy. Perhaps he was thinking that existence glides away and vanishes like smoke! And as serious meditation always had an exciting effect on him, he ended by giving vent to three detonations.

"God in heaven!" exclaimed the drunken Bécu, as he passed through the graveyard on his way to the fire, "if this wind continues, we may expect a downfall of dung!"

"Yes, indeed," replied Hyacinthe; and hurrying off he disappeared round the wall.

Jean was now alone. Away in the distance some huge whirling clouds of black smoke were rising from the ruins of La Borderie, casting shadows over the fields and the scattered sowers, who were still plodding backwards and forwards, making the same monotonous gestures. Then Jean's eyes slowly wandered back to the ground at his feet, and he gazed at the mounds of fresh soil beneath which Françoise and old Fouan were sleeping. His anger of the morning and his disgust for people and circumstances had vanished in a feeling of profound calm. In spite of himself he felt full of restfulness and hope; maybe it was owing to the warm sunshine.

Ah, yes, his master Hourdequin had had any amount of worry with all those new inventions; he had never reaped much advantage from his machines and artificial manures, and other scientific devices. And then La Cognette had come to finish him off; he was now asleep in the graveyard, and nothing remained of the farm, the very ashes of which the wind was now sweeping away. But what did it matter after all? Walls might be burned down, but the soil could not be burned. Earth, Mother earth, would always be there ready to nourish all who cast their seed upon her bosom. She had time enough before her, and space in plenty, and even now she yielded corn, and would yield still more when men knew how to treat her.

It was the same with the stories of the revolutionists--those political cataclysms which were predicted. The soil, it was said, would pass into other hands, and the harvests of other countries would swamp our own, till our land was over-run with brambles. Well, and what then? Is it within any one's power to harm the soil? It will always be there for any one who may be obliged to till it to escape dying from hunger. And even if weeds were to cover its surface for years together, that would be a rest

for it, and it would grow young and fertile again. The soil cares nothing about our quarrels; this mighty toiler, ever absorbed in her workings, troubles herself no more about man than about a swarm of ants.

Jean had had his share of grief and trouble, pain and rebellion. And now Françoise was slain, Fouan was slain, the wicked seemed triumphant, the foul and sanguinary vermin of the villages were able to pollute and prey upon the soil. Ah, but who can tell? The frost which sears the crops, the hail which breaks them, the deluge which beats them down, are all perhaps necessary, and so it may be that blood and tears are equally essential to the world's progress. What does our unhappiness weigh in the great system of the stars and the sun? We only gain our bread by dint of a terrible daily struggle The soil alone remains fixed and imperishable, the mother from whom we all spring, and to whom we must all return; she whom her children love so keenly that they sin for her sake; she who utilises everything, even our crimes and our wretchedness, for purposes of creation, in view of attaining her own secret, mysterious ends.

For a long time some such confused, ill-formulated reverie as this rolled vaguely through Jean's mind as he lingered in the graveyard; but suddenly a trumpet sounded in the distance, the trumpet of the firemen of Bazoches-le-Doyen, who were arriving too late at the double-quick. Then, hearing the clarion-call, Jean drew himself up. It was like warfare passing by amid smoke; warfare with its horses, its cannons, and its clamorous carnage! Ah! confound it, since he no longer had the heart to till the old soil of France, he would defend it from invaders!

He was going off, when for a last time he turned his eyes from the two grassless graves to the endless plough-lands of La Beauce filled with sowers, all making the same ceaseless gesture. Mid corpses and seeds, sustenance was springing from the soil.