CLASSICS TO GO

THE TRAMPLING OF THE LILIES

RAFAEL SABATINI

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PART I. THE OLD RULE

These are they
Who ride on the court gale, control its tides;

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Whose frown abases and whose smile exalts.
They shine like any rainbow—and, perchance,
Their colours are as transient.

   Old Play

CHAPTER I.

MONSIEUR THE SECRETARY

It was spring at Bellecour—the spring of 1789, a short three months before the fall of the Bastille came to give the nobles pause, and make them realise that these new philosophies, which so long they have derided, were by no means the idle vapours they had deemed them.

By the brook, plashing its glittering course through the park of Bellecour, wandered La Boulaye, his long, lean, figure clad with a sombreness that was out of harmony in that sunlit, vernal landscape. But the sad-hued coat belied that morning a heart that sang within his breast as joyously as any linnet of the woods through which he strayed. That he was garbed in black was but the outward indication of his clerkly office, for he was secretary to the most noble the Marquis de Fresnoy de Bellecour, and so clothed in the livery of the ink by which he lived. His face was pale and lean and thoughtful, but within his great, intelligent eyes there shone a light of new-born happiness. Under his arm he carried a volume of the new philosophies which Rousseau had lately given to the world, and which was contributing so vastly to the mighty change that was impending. But within his soul there dwelt in that hour no such musty subject as the metaphysical dreams of old Rousseau. His mood inclined little to the “Discourses upon the Origin of Inequality” which his elbow hugged to his side. Rather was it a mood of song and joy and things of light, and his mind was running on a string of rhymes which mentally he offered up to his divinity. A high-born lady was she, daughter to his lordly employer, the most noble Marquis of Bellecour. And he a secretary, a clerk! Aye, but a clerk with a great soul, a secretary with a

great belief in the things to come, which in that musty tome beneath his arm were dimly prophesied.

And as he roamed beside the brook, his feet treading the elastic, velvety turf, and crushing heedlessly late primrose and stray violet, his blood quickened by the soft spring breeze, fragrant with hawthorn and the smell of the moist brown earth, La Boulaye's happiness gathered strength from the joy that on that day of spring seemed to invest all Nature. An old-world song stole from his firm lips-at first timidly, like a thing abashed in new surroundings, then in bolder tones that echoed faintly through the trees

“Si le roi m'avait donne
Paris, sa grande ville,
Et qui'il me fallut quitter
L'amour de ma mie,
Je dirais au roi Louis
Reprenez votre Paris.
J'aime mieux ma mie, O gai!
J'aime mieux ma mie!”

How mercurial a thing is a lover's heart! Here was one whose habits were of solemnity and gloomy thought turned, so joyous that he could sing aloud, alone in the midst of sunny Nature, for no better reason than that Suzanne de Bellecour had yesternight smiled as—for some two minutes by the clock—she had stood speaking with him.

“Presumptuous that I am,” said he to the rivulet, to contradict himself the next moment. “But no; the times are changing. Soon we shall be equals all, as the good God made us, and—”

He paused, and smiled pensively. And as again the memory of her yesternight's kindness rose before him, his smile broadened; it became a laugh that went ringing down the glade, scaring a noisy thrush into silence and sending it flying in affright across the scintillant waters of the brook. Then that hearty laugh broke sharply off, as, behind him, the sweetest voice in all the world demanded the reason of this mad-sounding mirth.

La Boulaye's breath seemed in that instant to forsake him and he grew paler than Nature and the writer's desk had fashioned him. Awkwardly he turned and made her a deep bow.

“Mademoiselle! You—you see that you surprised me!” he faltered, like a fool. For how should he, whose only comrades had been books, have learnt to bear himself in the company of a woman, particularly when she belonged to the ranks of those whom—despite Rousseau and his other dear philosophers—he had been for years in the habit of accounting his betters?

“Why, then, I am glad, Monsieur, that I surprised you in so gay a humour—for, my faith, it is a rare enough thing.”

“True, lady,” said he foolishly, yet politely agreeing with her, “it is a rare thing.” And he sighed—“Helas!”

At that the laughter leapt from her young lips, and turned him hot and cold as he stood awkwardly before her.

“I see that we shall have you sad at the thought of how rare is happiness, you that but a moment back were—or so it seemed—so joyous. Or is it that my coming has overcast the sky of your good humour?” she demanded archly.

He blushed like a school-girl, and strenuously protested that it was not so. In his haste he fell headlong into the sin of hastiness—as was but natural—and said perhaps too much.

“Your coming, Mademoiselle?” he echoed. “Nay but even had I been sad, your coming must have dispelled my melancholy as the coming of the sun dispels the mist upon the mountains.”

“A poet?” She mocked him playfully, with a toss of black curls and a distracting glance of eyes blue as the heavens above them. “A poet, Monsieur, and I never suspected it, for all that I held you a great scholar. My father says you are.”

“Are we not all poets at some season of our lives?” quoth he, for growing accustomed to her presence—ravished by it, indeed—his courage was returning fast and urging him beyond the limits of discretion.

“And in what season may this rhyming fancy touch us?” she asked. “Enlighten me, Monsieur.”

He smiled, responsive to her merry mood, and his courage ever swelling under the suasion of it, he answered her in a fearless, daring fashion that was oddly unlike his wont. But then, he was that day a man transformed.

“It comes, Mademoiselle, upon some spring morning such as this—for is not spring the mating season, and have not poets sung of it, inspired and conquered by it? It comes in the April of life, when in our hearts we bear the first fragrant bud of what shall anon blossom into a glorious summer bloom red as is Love's livery and perfumed beyond all else that God has set on earth for man's delight and thankfulness.”

The intensity with which he spoke, and the essence of the speech itself, left her a moment dumb with wonder and with an incomprehensible consternation, born of some intuition not yet understood.

“And so, Monsieur, the Secretary,” said she at last, a nervous laugh quivering in her first words, “from all this wondrous verbiage I am to take it that you love?”

“Aye, that I love, dear lady,” he cried, his eyes so intent upon her that her glance grew timid and fell before them. And then, a second later, she could have screamed aloud in apprehension, for the book of Jean Jacques Rousseau lay tumbled in the grass where he had flung it, even as he flung himself upon his knees before her. “You may take it indeed that I love—that I love you, Mademoiselle.”

The audacious words being spoken, his courage oozed away and anti-climax, followed. He paled and trembled, yet

he knelt on until she should bid him rise, and furtively he watched her face. He saw it darken; he saw the brows knit; he noted the quickening breath, and in all these signs he read his doom before she uttered it.

“Monsieur, monsieur,” she answered him, and sad was her tone, “to what lengths do you urge this springtime folly? Have you forgotten so your station—yes, and mine—that because I talk with you and laugh with you, and am kind to you, you must presume to speak to me in this fashion? What answer shall I make you, Monsieur—for I am not so cruel that I can answer you as you deserve.”

An odd thing indeed was La Boulaye's courage. An instant ago he had felt a very coward, and had quivered, appalled by the audacity of his own words. Now that she assailed him thus, and taxed him with that same audacity, the blood of anger rushed to his face—anger of the quality that has its source in shame. In a second he was on his feet before her, towering to the full of his lean height. The words came from him in a hot stream, which for reckless passion by far outvied his erstwhile amatory address.

“My station?” he cried, throwing wide his arms. “What fault lies in my station? I am a secretary, a scholar, and so, by academic right, a gentleman. Nay, Mademoiselle, never laugh; do not mock me yet. In what do you find me less a man than any of the vapid caperers that fill your father's salon? Is not my shape as good? Are not my arms as strong, my hands as deft, my wits as keen, and my soul as true? Aye,” he pursued with another wild wave of his long arms, “my attributes have all these virtues, and yet you scorn me—you scorn me because of my station, so you say!”

How she had angered him! All the pent-up gall of years against the supercilia of the class from which she sprang surged in that moment to his lips. He bethought him now of the thousand humiliations his proud spirit had suffered at their hands when he noted the disdain with which they

addressed him, speaking to him—because he was compelled to carve his living with a quill—as though he were less than mire. It was not so much against her scorn of him that he voiced his bitter grievance, but against the entire noblesse of France, which denied him the right to carry a high head because he had not been born of Madame la Duchesse, Madame la Marquise, or Madame la Comtesse. All the great thoughts of a wondrous transformation, which had been sown in him by the revolutionary philosophers he had devoured with such appreciation, welled up now, and such scraps of that infinity of thought as could find utterance he cast before the woman who had scorned him for his station. Presumptuous he had accounted himself—but only until she had found him so. By that the presumption, it seemed, had been lifted from him, and he held that what he had said to her of the love he bore her was no more than by virtue of his manhood he had the right to say.

She drew back before him, and shrank in some measure of fear, for he looked very fierce. Moreover, he had said things which professed him a revolutionist, and the revolutionists, whilst being a class which she had been taught to despise and scorn, dealt, she knew, in a violence which it might be ill to excite.

“Monsieur,” she faltered, and with her hand she clutched at her riding-habit of green velvet, as if preparing to depart, “you are not yourself. I am beyond measure desolated that you should have so spoken to me. We have been good friends, M. La Boulaye. Let us forget this scene. Shall we?” Her tones grew seductively conciliatory.

La Boulaye half turned from her, and his smouldering eye fell upon “The Discourses” lying on the grass. He stooped and picked up the volume. The act might have seemed symbolical. For a moment he had cast aside his creed to woo a woman, and now that she had denied him he

returned to Rousseau, and gathered up the tome almost in penitence at his momentary defection.

“I am quite myself, Mademoiselle,” he answered quietly. His cheeks were flushed, but beyond that, his excitement seemed to have withered. “It is you who yesternight, for one brief moment and again to-day—were not yourself, and to that you owe it that I have spoken to you as I have done.”

Between these two it would seem as the humour of the one waned, that of the other waxed. Her glance kindled anew at his last words.

“I?” she echoed. “I was not myself? What are you saying, Monsieur the Secretary?”

“Last night, and again just now, you were so kind, you—you smiled so sweetly—”

“Mon Dieu!” she exclaimed, angrily interrupting him. “See what you are for all your high-sounding vaunts of yourself and your attributes! A woman may not smile upon you, may not say one kind word to you, but you must imagine you have made a conquest. Ma foi, you and yours do not deserve to be treated as anything but vassals. When we show you a kindness, see how you abuse it. We extend to you our little finger and you instantly lay claim to the whole arm. Because last night I permitted myself to exchange a jest with you, because I chance to be kind to you again to-day, you repay me with insults!”

“Stop!” he cried, rousing himself once more. “That is too much to say, Mademoiselle. To tell a woman that you love her is never to insult her. To be loved is never to be slighted. Upon the meanest of His creatures it is enjoined to love the same God whom the King loves, and there is no insult to God in professing love for Him. Would you make a woman more than that?”

“Monsieur, you put questions I have no mind to answer; you suggest a discussion I have no inclination to pursue. For

you and me let it suffice that I account myself affronted by your words, your tone, and your manner. You drive me to say these things; by your insistence you compel me to be harsh. We will end this matter here and now, Monsieur, and I will ask you to understand that I never wish it reopened, else shall I be forced to seek protection at the hands of my father or my brother."

"You may seek it now, Suzanne," quoth a voice from the thicket at her back, a voice which came to startle both of them though in different ways. Before they had recovered from their surprise the Marquis de Bellecour stood before them. He was a tall man of some fifty years of age, but so powerful of frame and so scrupulous in dress that he might have conveyed an impression of more youth. His face, though handsome in a high-bred way, was puffed and of an unhealthy yellow. But the eyes were as keen as the mouth was voluptuous, and in his carefully dressed black hair there were few strands of grey.

He came slowly forward, and his lowering glance wandered from his daughter to his secretary in inquiry. At last—

"Well?" he demanded. "What is the matter?"

"It is nothing, Monsieur," his daughter answered him. "A trifling affair 'twixt M. la Boulaye and me, with which I will not trouble you."

"It is not nothing, my lord," cried La Boulaye, his voice vibrating oddly. "It is that I love your daughter and that I have told her of it." He was in a very daring mood that morning.

The Marquis glanced at him in dull amazement. Then a flush crept into his sallow cheeks and mounted to his brow. An inarticulate grunt came from his thick lips.

"Canaille!" he exclaimed, through set teeth. "Can you have presumed so far?"

He carried a riding-switch, and he seemed to grasp it now in a manner peculiarly menacing. But La Boulaye was nothing daunted. Lost he already accounted himself, and on the strength of the logic that if a man must hang, a sheep as well as a lamb may be the cause of it, he took what chances the time afforded him to pile up his debt.

“There is neither insolence nor presumption in what I have done,” he answered, giving back the Marquis look for look and scowl for scowl. “You deem it so because I am the secretary to the Marquis de Bellecour and she is the daughter of that same Marquis. But these are no more than the fortuitous circumstances in which we chance to find ourselves. That she is a woman must take rank before the fact that she is your daughter, and that I am a man must take rank before the fact that I am your secretary. Not, then, as your secretary speaking to your daughter have I told this lady that I love her, but as a man speaking to a woman. To utter that should be—nay, is—the right of every man; to hear it should be honouring to every woman worthy of the name. In a primitive condition—”

“A thousand devils!” blazed the Marquis, unable longer to contain himself. “Am I to have my ears offended by this braying? Miserable scum, you shall be taught what is due to your betters.”

His whip cracked suddenly, and the lash leapt serpentlike into the air, to descend and coil itself about La Boulaye's head and face. A cry broke from the young man, as much of pain as of surprise, and as the lash was drawn back, he clapped his hands to his seared face. But again he felt it, cutting him now across the hand with which he had masked himself. With a maddened roar he sprang upon his aggressor. In height he was the equal of the Marquis, but in weight he seemed to be scarce more than the half of his opponent's. Yet a nervous strength dwelt unsuspected in those lean arms and steely wrists.

Mademoiselle stood by looking on, with parted lips and eyes that were intent and anxious. She saw that figure, spare and lithe as a greyhound, leap suddenly upon her father, and the next instant the whip was in the secretary's hands, and he sprang back from the nobleman, who stood white and quivering with rage, and perhaps, too, with some dismay.

“That I do not break it across your back, M. le Marquis, said the young man,” as he snapped the whip on his knee, “you may thank your years.” With that he flung the two pieces wide into the sunlit waters of the brook. “But I will have satisfaction, Monsieur. I will take payment for this.” And he pointed to the weal that disfigured his face.

“Satisfaction?” roared the Marquis, hoarse in his passion. “Would you demand satisfaction of me, animal?”

“No,” answered the young man, with a wry smile. “Your years again protect you. But you have a son, and if by to-morrow it should come to pass that you have a son no more, you may account yourself, through this”—and again he pointed to the weal—“his murderer.”

“Do you mean that you would seek to cross swords with the Vicomte?” gasped the nobleman, in an unbelief so great that it gained the ascendency over his anger.

“That is what I mean, Monsieur. In practice he has often done so. He shall do so for once in actual earnest.”

“Fool!” was the contemptuous answer, more coldly delivered now, for the Marquis was getting himself in hand. “If you come near Bellecour again, if you are so much as found within the grounds of the park, I'll have you beaten to death by my grooms for your presumption. Keep you the memory of that promise in mind, Sir Secretary, and let it warn you to avoid Bellecour, as you would a plague-house. Come, Suzanne,” he said, turning abruptly to his daughter,

“Enough of this delightful morning have we already wasted on this canaille.”

With that he offered her his wrist, and so, without so much as another glance at La Boulaye, she took her departure.

The secretary remained where they had left him, pale of face—saving the fortuitous crimson mark which the whip had cut—and very sick at heart. The heat of the moment being spent, he had leisure to contemplate his plight. A scorned lover, a beaten man, a dismissed secretary! He looked sorrowfully upon his volume of “The Discourses,” and for the first time a doubt crossed his mind touching the wisdom of old Jean Jacques. Was there would there ever be any remedy for such a condition of things as now prevailed?

Already the trees had hidden the Marquis and his daughter from La Boulaye's sight. The young revolutionist felt weary and lonely—dear God, how lonely! neither kith nor kin had he, and of late all the interest of his life—saving always that absorbed by Jean Jacques—had lain in watching Suzanne de Bellecour, and in loving her silently and distantly. Now that little crumb of comfort was to be his no more, he was to go away from Bellecour, away from the sight of her for all time. And he loved her, loved her, loved her!

He tossed his arms to Heaven with a great sigh that was a sob almost, then he passed his hands over his face, and as they came in contact with the swollen ridge that scored it, love faded from his mind, and vindictiveness came to fill its room.

“But for this,” he cried aloud. “I shall take payment—aye, as there is a God!”

Then turning, and with “The Discourses” held tightly to his side, he moved slowly away, following the course of the gleaming waters.

CHAPTER II.

LORDS OF LIFE AND DEATH

One friend did La Boulaye count in the village of Bellecour. This was old Duhamel, the schoolmaster, an eccentric pedant and a fellow-worshipper of the immortal Jean Jacques. It was to him that La Boulaye now repaired intent upon seeking counsel touching a future that wore that morning a singularly gloomy outlook.

He found Duhamel's door open, and he stepped across the threshold into the chief room of the house. But there he paused, and hesitated. The chamber was crowded with people in holiday attire, and the centre of attraction was a well-set-up peasant with a happy, sun-tanned face, whose golden locks were covered by a huge round hat decked with a score of gaily-coloured ribbons.

At sight of him La Boulaye remembered that it was Charlot's wedding-day. Popular amongst the women by virtue of his comeliness, and respected by the men by virtue of his strength, Charlot Tardivet was a general favourite of the countryside, and here, in the room of old Duhamel, the schoolmaster, was half the village gathered to do him honour upon his wedding morn. It was like Duhamel, who, in fatherliness towards the villagers, went near out-rivalling M. le Cure, to throw open his house for the assembling of Charlot's friends, and La Boulaye was touched by this fresh sign of kindliness from a man whose good heart he had not lacked occasion to observe and appreciate. But it came to the secretary that there was no place for him in this happy assemblage. His advent would, probably, but serve to cast a gloom upon them, considering the conditions under which he came, with the signs of violence upon his face to remind

them of the lords of life and death who dwelt at the Chateau up yonder. And such a reminder must fall upon them as does the reminder of some overhanging evil clutch suddenly at our hearts in happy moments of forgetfulness. To let them be happy that day, to leave their feasts free of a death's head, La Boulaye would have withdrawn had he not already been too late. Duhamel had espied him, and the little, wizened old man came hurrying forward, his horn-rimmed spectacles perched on the very end of his nose, his keen little eyes beaming with delight and welcome.

“Ah, Caron, you are very choicely come,” he cried, holding out both hands to La Boulaye. “You shall embrace our happy Hercules yonder, and wish him joy of the wedded life he has the audacity to exploit.” Then, as he espied the crimson ridge across the secretary's countenance, “Mon Dieu!” he exclaimed, “what have you done to yourself, Caron?”

“Pish! It is nothing,” answered La Boulaye hurriedly, and would have had the subject dismissed, but that one of the onlooking peasants swore by the memory of some long-dead saint that it was the cut of a whip. Duhamel's eyes kindled and his parchment-like skin was puckered into a hundred evil wrinkles.

“Who did it, Caron?” he demanded.

“Since you insist, old master,” answered the secretary, still endeavouring to make light of it, “learn that is the lord Marquis's signature to his order of my dismissal from his service.”

“The dog!” ejaculated the school-master.

“Sh! let it be. Perhaps I braved him overmuch. I will tell you of it when these good folks have gone. Do not let us cast a gloom over their happiness, old master. And now to embrace this good Charlot.”

Though inwardly burning with curiosity and boiling with indignation, Duhamel permitted himself to be guided by La

Boulaye, and for the moment allowed the matter to rest. La Boulaye himself laughingly set aside the many questions with which they pressed him. He drank the health of the bride-elect—who was not yet of the party—and he pledged the happiness of the pair. He embraced Charlot, and even went so far as to urge upon him, out of his own scanty store, a louis d'or with which to buy Marie a trinket in memory of him.

Then presently came one with the announcement that M. le Cure was waiting, and in answer to that reminder that there was a ceremony to be gone through, Charlot and his friends flung out of the house in joyous confusion, and went their way with laughter and jest to the little church of St. Ildefonse.

“We will follow presently—M. la Boulaye and I—Charlot,” Duhamel had said, as the sturdy bridegroom was departing. “We shall be there to shake Madame by the hand and wish her joy of you.”

When at last they were alone in the schoolmaster's room, the old man turned to La Boulaye, the very embodiment of a note of interrogation. The secretary told him all that had passed. He reddened slightly when it came to speaking of his love for Mlle. de Bellecour, but he realised that if he would have guidance he must withhold nothing from his friend.

Duhamel's face grew dark as the young man spoke, and his eyes became sad and very thoughtful.

“Alas!” he sighed, when La Boulaye had ended. “What shall I say to you, my friend? The time is not yet for such as we—you and I—to speak of love for a daughter of the Seigneurie. It is coming, I doubt it not. All things have their climax, and France is tending swiftly to the climax of her serfdom. Very soon we shall have the crisis, this fire that is already smouldering, will leap into a great blaze, that shall

lick the old regime as completely from the face of history as though it had never been. A new condition of things will spring up, of that I am convinced. Does not history afford us many instances? And what is history but the repetition of events under similar circumstances with different peoples. It will come in France, and it will come soon, for it is very direly needed."

"I know, I know, old master," broke in La Boulaye; "but how shall all this help me? For all that I have the welfare of France at heart, it weighs little with me at the moment by comparison with my own affairs. What am I to do, Duhamel? How am I to take payment for this?" And he pressed his finger to his seared cheek.

"Wait," said the old man impressively. "That is the moral you might have drawn from what I have said. Be patient. I promise you your patience shall not be overtaxed. To-day they say that you presume; that you are not one of them—although, by my soul, you have as good an air as any nobleman in France." And he eyed the lean height of the secretary with a glance of such pride as a father might take in a well-grown son.

Elegant of figure, La Boulaye was no less elegant in dress, for all that, from head to foot—saving the silver buckles on his shoes and the unpretentious lace at throat and wrists—he was dressed in the black that his office demanded. His countenance, too, though cast in a mould of thoughtfulness that bordered on the melancholy, bore a lofty stamp that might have passed for birth and breeding, and this was enhanced by the careful dressing of his black unpowdered hair, gathered into a club by a broad ribbon of black silk.

"But what shall waiting avail me?" cried the young man, with some impatience. "What am I to do in the meantime?"

"Go to Amiens," said the other. "You have learning, you have eloquence, you have a presence and an excellent

address. For success no better attributes could be yours." He approached the secretary, and instinctively lowered his voice. "We have a little club there—a sort of succursal to the Jacobins. We are numerous, but we have no very shining member yet. Come with me, and I will nominate you. Beginning thus, I promise you that you shall presently become a man of prominence in Picardy. Anon we may send you to Paris to represent us in the States-General. Then, when the change comes, who shall say to what heights it may not be yours to leap?"

"I will think of it," answered La Boulaye cordially, "and not a doubt of it but that I will come. I did not know that you had gone so far—"

"Sh! You know now. Let that suffice. It is not good to talk of these things just yet."

"But in the meantime," La Boulaye persisted, "what of this?" And again he pointed to his cheek.

"Why, let it heal, boy."

"I promised the Marquis that I would demand satisfaction of his son, and I am tempted to do so and risk the consequences."

"I am afraid the consequences will be the only satisfaction that you will get. In fact, they will be anticipations rather than consequences, for they'll never let you near the boy."

"I know not that," he answered. "The lad is more generous than his sire, and if I were to send him word that I have been affronted, he might consent to meet me. For the rest, I could kill him blindfolded," he added, with a shrug.

"Bloodthirsty animal!" rejoined Duhamel. "Unnatural tutor! Do you forget that you were the boy's preceptor?"

With that Duhamel carried the argument into new fields, and showed La Boulaye that to avenge upon the young Vicomte the insults received at the hands of the old Marquis was hardly a worthy method of taking vengeance. At last he

won him to his way, and it was settled that on the morrow La Boulaye should journey with him to Amiens.

“But, Caron, we are forgetting our friend Charlot and his bride,” he broke off suddenly. “Come, boy; the ceremony will be at an end by this.”

He took La Boulaye by the arm, and led him out and down the street to the open space opposite St. Ildefonse. The wedding-party was streaming out through the door of the little church into the warm sunshine of that April morning. In the churchyard they formed into a procession of happy be-ribboned and nosegayed men and women—the young preceding, the old following, the bridal couple. Two by two they came, and the air rang with their laughter and joyous chatter. Then another sound arose, and if the secretary and the pedagogue could have guessed of what that beating of hoofs was to be the prelude, they had scarce smiled so easily as they watched the approaching cortege.

From a side street there now emerged a gaily apparelled cavalcade. At its head rode the Marquis de Bellecour, the Vicomte, and a half-dozen other gentlemen, followed by, perhaps, a dozen lacqueys. It was a hunting party that was making its way across the village to the open country beyond. The bridal procession crossing their path caused them to draw rein, and to wait until it should have passed—which argued a very condescending humour, for it would not have been out of keeping with their habits to have ridden headlong through it. Their presence cast a restraint upon the peasants. The jests were silenced, the laughter hushed, and like a flight of pigeons under the eye of the hawk, they scurried past the Seigneurie, and some of them prayed God that they might be suffered to pass indeed.

Bellecour eyed them in cold disdain, until presently Charlot and his bride were abreast of him. Then his eye seemed to take life and his sallow face to kindle into expression. He leant lightly from the saddle.

“Stay!” he commanded coldly, and as they came to a halt, daring not to disobey him—“approach, girl,” he added.

Charlot's brows grew black. He looked up at the Marquis, but if his glance was sullen and threatening, it was also not free from fear. Marie obeyed, with eyes downcast and a heightened colour. If she conjectured at all why they had been stopped, it was but to conclude that M. le Marquis was about to offer her some mark of appreciation. Uneasiness, in her dear innocence, she knew none.

“What is your name, child?” inquired the Marquis more gently.

“It was Marie Michelin, Monseigneur,” she made answer timidly. “But it has just been changed to Marie Tardivet.”

“You have just been wed, eh?”

“We are on our way from church, Monseigneur.”

“C'est ca,” he murmured, as if to himself, and his eyes taking such stock of her as made Charlot burn to tear him from his horse. Then, in a kindly, fatherly voice, he added: “My felicitations, Marie; may you be a happy wife and a happier mother.”

“Merci, Monseigneur,” she murmured, with crimson cheeks, whilst Charlot breathed once more, and from his heart gave thanks to Heaven, believing the interview at an end. But he went too fast.

“Do you know, Marie, that you are a very comely child?” quoth the Marquis, in tones which made the bridegroom's blood run cold.

Some in that noble company nudged one another, and one there was who burst into a loud guffaw.

“Charlot has often told me so,” she laughed, all unsuspicious.

The Marquis moved on his horse that he might bend lower. With his forefinger he uptilted her chin, and now, as

she met his glance thus at close quarters, an unaccountable fear took possession of her, and the colour died out of her plump cheeks.

“Yes,” said Bellecour, with a smile, “this Tardivet has good taste. My congratulations, to him. We must find you a wedding gift, little woman,” he continued more briskly. “It is an ancient and honoured custom that is falling somewhat into neglect. Go up to the Chateau with Blaise and Jean there. This good Tardivet must curb his impatience until to-morrow.”

He turned in his saddle, and beckoning the two servants he had named, he bade Marie to mount behind Blaise.

She drew back now, her cheeks white as those of the dead. With a wild terror in her eyes she turned to Charlot, who stood the very picture of anguish and impotent rage. In the cortege, where but a few moments ago all had been laughter, a sob or two sounded now from some of the women.

“By my faith,” laughed Bellecour contemptuously eyeing their dejection, “you have more the air of a burial than a bridal party.”

“Mercy my lord!” cried the agonised voice of Charlot, as, distraught with grief, he flung himself before the Marquis.

“Who seeks to harm you, fool?” was Bellecour's half-derisive rejoinder.

“Do not take her from me, my lord,” the young man pleaded piteously.

“She shall return to-morrow, booby,” answered the noble. “Out of the way!”

But Charlot was obstinate. The Marquis might be claiming no more than by ancient law was the due of the Seigneur, but Charlot was by no means minded to submit in craven acquiescence to that brutal, barbarous law.

“My lord,” he cried, “you shall not take her. She is my wife. She belongs to me. You shall not take her!”

He caught hold of the Marquis's bridle with such a strength and angry will that the horse was forced to back before him.

“Insolent clod!” exclaimed Bellecour, with an angry laugh and a sharp, downward blow of the butt of his whip upon the peasant's head. Charlot's hand grew nerveless and released the bridle as he sank stunned to the ground. Bellecour touched his horse with the spur and rode over the prostrate fellow with no more concern than had he been a dog's carcase. “Blaise, see to the girl,” he called over his shoulder, adding to his company: “Come, messieurs, we have wasted time enough.”

Not a hand was raised to stay him, not a word of protest uttered, as the nobles rode by, laughing, and chatting among themselves, with the utmost unconcern of the tragedy that was being enacted.

Like a flock of frightened sheep the peasants stood huddled together and watched them go. In the same inaction—for all that not a little grief was blent with the terror on their countenances—they stood by and allowed Blaise to lift the half-swooning girl to the withers of his horse. No reply had they to the coarse jest with which he and his fellow-servant rode off. But La Boulaye, who, from the point where he and Duhamel had halted, had observed the whole scene from its inception, turned now a livid face upon his companion.

“Shall such things be?” he cried passionately. “Merciful God! Are we men, Duhamel, and do we permit such things to take place?”

The old pedagogue shrugged his shoulders in despair. His face was heavily scored by sorrow.

“Helas!” he sighed. “Are they not masters of all that they may take? The Marquis goes no further than is by ancient law allowed his class. It is the law needs altering, my friend, and then the men will alter. Meanwhile, behold them—lords of life and death.”

“Lords of hell are they!” blazed the young revolutionist. “That is where they belong, whence they are come, and whither they shall return. Poltroons!” he cried, shaking his fist at the group of cowed peasants that surrounded the prostrate Charlot “Sheep! Worthless clods! The nobles do well to despise you, for, by my faith, you invite nothing but contempt, you that will suffer rape and murder to be done under your eyes, and never do more than look scared encouragement upon your ravishers!”

“Blame not these poor wretches, Caron,” sighed the old man. “They dare not raise a hand.”

“Then, pardieu! here, at least, is one who does dare,” he cried furiously, as from the breast pocket of his coat he drew a pistol.

Blaise, with the girl across the withers of his horse, was approaching them, followed by Jean.

“What would you do?” cried the old man fearfully, setting a restraining hand upon La Boulaye's sleeve. But Caron shook himself free.

“This,” was all he answered, and simultaneously, he levelled his pistol and fired at Blaise.

Shot through the head, the servant collapsed forward; then, as the horse reared and started off at a gallop, he toppled sideways and fell. The girl went down with him and lay in the road whilst he was dragged along, his head bumping horribly on the stones as faster and faster went the frightened horse.

With a shout that may have been either anger or dismay Jean reined in his horse, and sat for a second hesitating