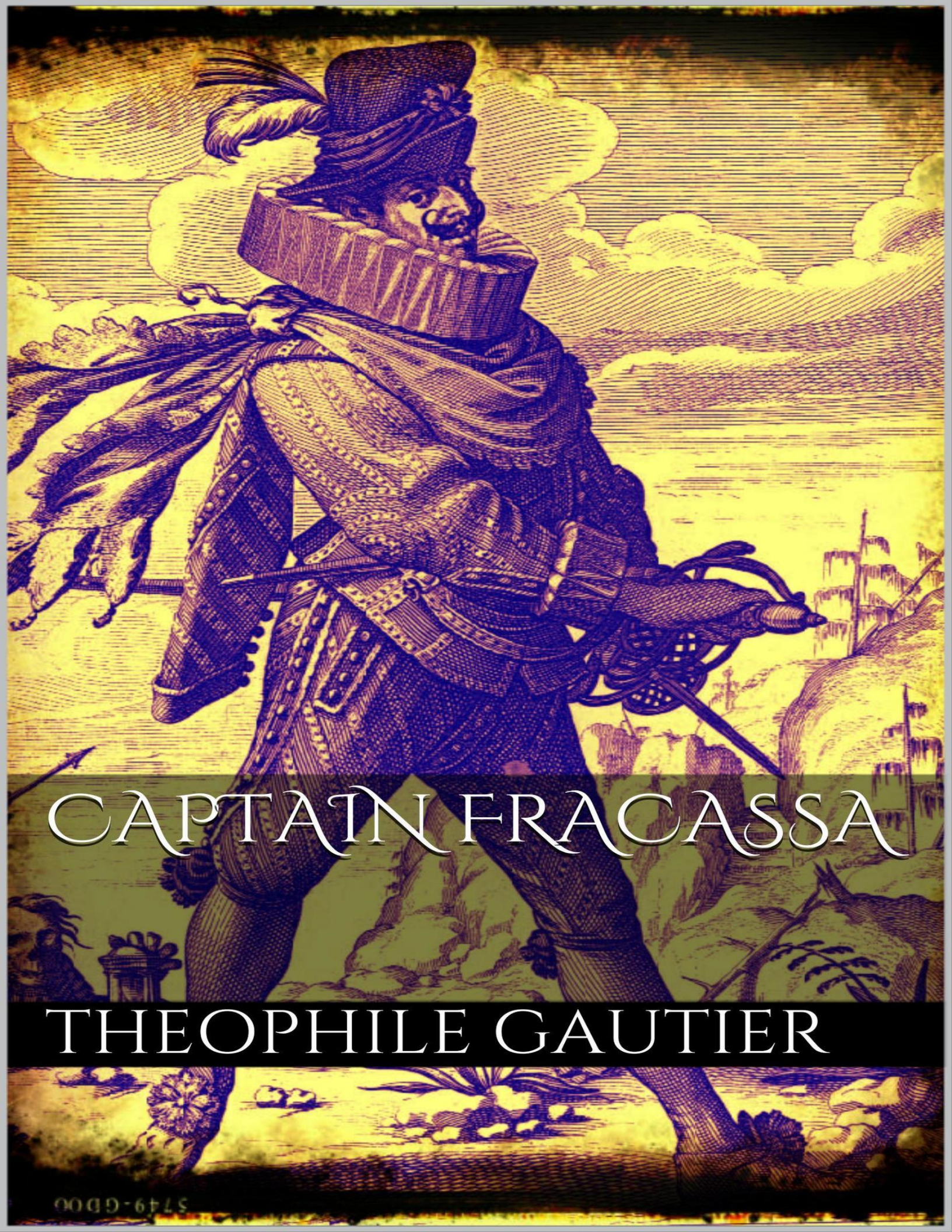
CAPTAIN FRACASSA
THEOPHILE GAUTIER

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CHAPTER I. CASTLE MISERY

Upon the southern slope of one of those barren hills that rise abruptly here and there in the desolate expanse of the Landes, in South-western France, stood, in the reign of Louis XIII, a gentleman's residence, such as abound in Gascony, and which the country people dignify by the name of chateau.

Two tall towers, with extinguisher tops, mounted guard at the angles of the mansion, and gave it rather a feudal air. The deep grooves upon its facade betrayed the former existence of a draw-bridge, rendered unnecessary now by the filling up of the moat, while the towers were draped for more than half their height with a most luxuriant growth of ivy, whose deep, rich green contrasted happily with the ancient gray walls.

A traveller, seeing from afar the steep pointed roof and lofty towers standing out against the sky, above the furze and heather that crowned the hill-top, would have pronounced it a rather imposing chateau—the residence probably of some provincial magnate; but as he drew near would have quickly found reason to change his opinion. The road which led to it from the highway was entirely overgrown with moss and weeds, save a narrow pathway in the centre, though two deep ruts, full of water, and inhabited by a numerous family of frogs, bore mute witness to the fact that carriages had once passed that way.

The roof, of dark red tiles, was disfigured by many large, leprous-looking, yellow patches, while in some places the

decayed rafters had given way, leaving formidable gaps. The numerous weather-cocks that surmounted the towers and chimneys were so rusted that they could no longer budge an inch, and pointed persistently in various directions. The high dormer windows were partially closed by old wooden shutters, warped, split, and in every stage of dilapidation; broken stones filled up the loop-holes and openings in the towers; of the twelve large windows in the front of the house, eight were boarded up; the remaining four had small diamond-shaped panes of thick, greenish glass, fitting so loosely in their leaden frames that they shook and rattled at every breath of wind; between these windows a great deal of the stucco had fallen off, leaving the rough wall exposed to view.

Above the grand old entrance door, whose massive stone frame and lintel retained traces of rich ornamentation, almost obliterated by time and neglect, was sculptured a coat of arms, now so defaced that the most accomplished adept in heraldry would not be able to decipher it. Only one leaf of the great double door was ever opened now, for not many guests were received or entertained at the chateau in these days of its decadence. Swallows had built their nests in every available nook about it, and but for a slender thread of smoke rising spirally from a chimney at the back of this dismal, half-ruined mansion, the traveller would have surely believed it to be uninhabited. This was the only sign of life visible about the whole place, like the little cloud upon the mirror from the breath of a dying man, which alone gives evidence that he still lives.

Upon pushing open the practicable leaf of the great worm-eaten door, which yielded reluctantly, and creaked dolefully as it turned upon its rusty hinges, the curious visitor entered a sort of portico, more ancient than the rest of the building, with fine, large columns of bluish granite, and a lofty vaulted roof. At the point of intersection of the arches was a stone shield, bearing the same coat of arms that was

sculptured over the entrance without. This one was in somewhat better preservation than the other, and seemed to bear something resembling three golden storks (cigognes) on an azure field; though it was so much in shadow, and so faded and dingy, that it was impossible to make it out clearly. Fastened to the wall, at a convenient height from the ground, were great iron extinguishers, blackened by the smoke from torches in long by-gone years, and also iron rings, to which the guests' horses were made fast in the olden times, when the castle was in its glory. The dust that lay thick upon them now showed that it was long since they had been made use of.

From this portico—whence a door on either side opened into the main building; one leading into a long suite of apartments on the ground floor, and the other into what had probably been a guard-room—the explorer passed into an interior court, dismal, damp, and bare. In the corners nettles and various rank weeds were growing riotously amid the great heaps of rubbish fallen from the crumbling cornice high above, and grass had sprung up everywhere in the crevices of the stone pavement. Opposite the entrance a flight of dilapidated, shaky steps, with a heavy stone balustrade, led down into a neglected garden, which was gradually becoming a perfect thicket. Excepting in one small bed, where a few cabbages were growing, there was no attempt at cultivation, and nature had reasserted her rights everywhere else in this abandoned spot, taking, apparently, a fierce delight in effacing all traces of man's labour. The fruit trees threw out irregular branches without fear of the pruning knife; the box, intended to form a narrow border to the curiously shaped flower-beds and grass-plots, had grown up unchecked into huge, bushy shrubs, while a great variety of sturdy weeds had usurped the places formerly devoted to choice plants and beautiful, fragrant flowers. Brambles, bristling with sharp thorns, which had thrown their long, straggling arms across the

paths, caught and tried to hold back any bold adventurer who attempted to penetrate into the mysterious depths of this desolate wilderness. Solitude is averse to being surprised in dishabille, and surrounds herself with all sorts of defensive obstacles.

However, the courageous explorer who persisted in following the ancient, overgrown alley, and was not to be daunted by formidable briers that tore his hands and clothing, nor low-hanging, closely interlaced branches that struck him smart blows in the face as he forced his way through them, would have reached at last a sort of rocky niche, fancifully arranged as a grotto. Besides the masses of ivy, iris and gladiolus, that had been carefully planted long ago in the interstices of the rock, it was draped with a profusion of graceful wild vines and feathery ferns, which half-veiled the marble statue, representing some mythological divinity, that still stood in this lonely retreat. It must have been intended for Flora or Pomona, but now there were tufts of repulsive, venomous-looking mushrooms in the pretty, graceful, little basket on her arm, instead of the sculptured fruit or flowers that should have filled it. Although her nose was broken, and her fair body disfigured by many dark stains, and overgrown in part with clinging mosses, it could still plainly be seen that she had once been very lovely. At her feet was a marble basin, shaped like a shell, half full of discoloured, stagnant water; the lion's head just above it, now almost entirely concealed by a thick curtain of leaves, no longer poured forth the sparkling stream that used to fall into it with a musical murmur. This little grotto, with its fountain and statue, bore witness to former wealth; and also to the aesthetic taste of some long-dead owner of the domain. The marble goddess was in the Florentine style of the Renaissance, and probably the work of one of those Italian sculptors who followed in the train of del Rosso or Primaticcio, when they came to France at the bidding of that generous patron of the arts, Francis I;

which time was also, apparently, the epoch of the greatest prosperity of this noble family, now so utterly fallen into decay.

Behind the grotto rose a high wall, built of stone, crumbling and mouldy now, but still bearing some broken remains of trellis-work, evidently intended to be covered with creepers that would entirely conceal the wall itself with a rich tapestry of verdure. This was the limit of the garden; beyond stretched the wide expanse of the sandy, barren Landes, flecked here and there with patches of scanty heather, and scattered groves of pine trees.

Turning back towards the chateau it became apparent that this side of it was even more neglected and ruinous than the one we have already described; the recent poverty-stricken owners having tried to keep up appearances as far as possible, and concentrated their efforts upon the front of their dilapidated abode. In the stable, where were stalls for twenty horses, a miserable, old, white pony stood at an empty manger, nibbling disconsolately at a scanty truss of hay, and frequently turning his sunken, lack-lustre eyes expectantly towards the door. In front of an extensive kennel, where the lord of the manor used to keep a whole pack of hounds, a single dog, pathetically thin, lay sleeping tranquilly and soundly, apparently so accustomed to the unbroken solitude of the place that he had abandoned all habits of watchfulness.

Entering the chateau the visitor found himself in a broad and lofty hall, containing a grand old staircase, with a richly carved, wooden balustrade—a good deal broken and defaced now, like everything else in this doleful Castle Misery. The walls had been elaborately frescoed, representing colossal figures of Hercules supporting brackets upon which rested the heavily ornamented cornice. Springing from it fantastic vines climbed upward on the arched ceiling, and above them the blue sky, faded and dingy, was grotesquely variegated with dark spots,

caused by the water filtering through from the dilapidated roof. Between the oft-repeated figures of Hercules were frescoed niches, wherein heads of Roman emperors and other illustrious historical characters had been depicted in glowing tints; but all were so vague and dim now that they were but the ghosts of pictures, which should be described with the shadows of words—ordinary terms are too substantial to apply to them. The very echoes in this deserted hall seemed startled and amazed as they repeated and multiplied the unwonted sound of footsteps.

A door near the head of the first flight of stairs opened into what had evidently been the great banqueting hall in the old days when sumptuous repasts and numerous guests were not uncommon things in the chateau. A huge beam divided the lofty ceiling into two compartments, which were crossed at regular intervals by smaller joists, richly carved, and retaining some traces of gilding. The spaces between had been originally of a deep blue tint, almost lost now under the thick coating of dust and spiders' webs that no housemaid's mop ever invaded. Above the grand old chimney-piece was a noble stag's head, with huge, spreading antlers, and on the walls hung rows of ancient family portraits, so faded and mouldy now that most of the faces had a ghastly hue, and at night, by the dim, flickering lamp-light, they looked like a company of spectres. Nothing in the world is sadder than a collection of old portraits hanging thus, neglected and forgotten, in deserted halls—representations, half obliterated themselves, of forms and faces long since returned to dust. Yet these painted phantoms were most appropriate inhabitants of this desolate abode; real living people would have seemed out of place in the death-stricken house.

In the middle of the room stood an immense dining-table of dark, polished wood, much worm-eaten, and gradually falling into decay. Two tall buffets, elaborately carved and ornamented, stood on opposite sides of the room, with only

a few odd pieces of Palissy ware, representing lizards, crabs, and shell-fish, reposing on shiny green leaves, and two or three delicate wine-glasses of quaint patterns remaining upon the shelves where gold and silver plate used to glitter in rich profusion, as was the mode in France. The handsome old chairs, with their high, carved backs and faded velvet cushions, that had been so firm and luxurious once, were tottering and insecure; but it mattered little, since no one ever came to sit in them now round the festive board, and they stood against the wall in prim order, under the rows of family portraits.

A smaller room opened out of this one, hung round with faded, moth-eaten tapestry. In one corner stood a large bed, with four tall, twisted columns and long, ample curtains of rich brocade, which had been delicate green and white, but now were of a dingy, yellowish hue, and cut completely through from top to bottom in every fold. An ebony table, with some pretty gilded ornaments still clinging to it, a mirror dim with age, and two large arm-chairs, covered with worn and faded embroidery, that had been wrought by the fair fingers of some noble dame long since dead and forgotten, completed the furniture of this dismal chamber.

In these two rooms were the latticed windows seen in the front of the chateau, and over them still hung long sweeping curtains, so tattered and moth-eaten that they were almost falling to pieces. Profound silence reigned here, unbroken save by occasional scurrying and squeaking of mice behind the wainscot, the gnawing of rats in the wall, or the ticking of the death-watch.

From the tapestried chamber a door opened into a long suite of deserted rooms, which were lofty and of noble proportions, but devoid of furniture, and given up to dust, spiders, and rats. The apartments on the floor above them were the home of great numbers of bats, owls, and jackdaws, who found ready ingress through the large holes

in the roof. Every evening they flew forth in flocks, with much flapping of wings, and weird, melancholy cries and shrieks, in search of the food not to be found in the immediate vicinity of this forlorn mansion.

The apartments on the ground floor contained nothing but a few bundles of straw, a heap of corn-cobs, and some antiquated gardening implements. In one of them, however, was a rude bed, covered with a single, coarse blanket; presumably that of the only domestic remaining in the whole establishment.

It was from the kitchen chimney that the little spiral of smoke escaped which was seen from without. A few sticks were burning in the wide, old-fashioned fireplace, but the flames looked pale under the bright light that streamed down upon them through the broad, straight flue. The pot that hung from the clumsy iron crane was boiling sleepily, and if the curious visitor could have peeped into it he would have seen that the little cabbage bed in the garden had contributed of its produce to the pot-au-feu. An old black cat was sitting as close to the fire as he could without singeing his whiskers, and gravely watching the simmering pot with longing eyes. His ears had been closely cropped, and he had not a vestige of a tail, so that he looked like one of those grotesque Japanese chimeras that everybody is familiar with. Upon the table, near at hand, a white plate, a tin drinking cup, and a china dish, bearing the family arms stamped in blue, were neatly arranged, evidently in readiness for somebody's supper. For a long time the cat remained perfectly motionless, intently watching the pot which had almost ceased to boil as the fire got low, and the silence continued unbroken; but at last a slow, heavy step was heard approaching from without, and presently the door opened to admit an old man, who looked half peasant, half gentleman's servant. The black cat immediately quitted his place by the fire and went to meet him; rubbing himself against the newcomer's legs, arching his back and purring

loudly; testifying his joy in every way possible to him.
"Well, well, Beelzebub," said the old man, bending down and stroking him affectionately, "are you really so glad to see me? Yes, I know you are, and it pleases me, old fellow, so it does. We are so lonely here, my poor young master and I, that even the welcome of a dumb beast is not to be despised. They do say that you have no soul, Beelzebub, but you certainly do love us, and understand most times what we say to you too." These greetings exchanged, Beelzebub led the way back to the fire, and then with beseeching eyes, looking alternately from the face of his friend to the pot-au-feu, seemed mutely begging for his share of its contents. Poor Beelzebub was growing so old that he could no longer catch as many rats and mice as his appetite craved, and he was evidently very hungry.
Pierre, that was the old servant's name, threw more wood on the smouldering fire, and then sat down on a settle in the chimney corner, inviting his companion—who had to wait still for his supper as patiently as he might—to take a seat beside him. The firelight shone full upon the old man's honest, weather-beaten face, the few scattered locks of snow-white hair escaping from under his dark blue woollen cap, his thick, black eyebrows and deep wrinkles. He had the usual characteristics of the Basque race; a long face, hooked nose, and dark, gipsy-like complexion. He wore a sort of livery, which was so old and threadbare that it would be impossible to make out its original colour, and his stiff, soldier-like carriage and movements proclaimed that he had at some time in his life served in a military capacity.
"The young master is late to-night," he muttered to himself, as the daylight faded. "What possible pleasure can he find in these long, solitary rambles over the dunes? It is true though that it is so dreary here, in this lonely, dismal house, that any other place is preferable."
At this moment a joyous barking was heard without, the old pony in the stable stamped and whinnied, and the cat

jumped down from his place beside Pierre and trotted off towards the door with great alacrity. In an instant the latch was lifted, and the old servant rose, taking off his woollen cap respectfully, as his master came into the kitchen. He was preceded by the poor old dog, trying to jump up on him, but falling back every time without being able to reach his face, and Beelzebub seemed to welcome them both—showing no evidence of the antipathy usually existing between the feline and canine races; on the contrary, receiving Miraut with marks of affection which were fully reciprocated.

The Baron de Sigognac, for it was indeed the lord of the manor who now entered, was a young man of five or six and twenty; though at first sight he seemed much older, because of the deep gravity, even sadness, of his demeanour; the feeling of utter powerlessness which poverty brings having effectually chased away all the natural piety and light-heartedness of youth. Dark circles surrounded his sunken eyes, his cheeks were hollow, his mustache drooped in a sorrowful curve over his sad mouth. His long black hair was negligently pushed back from his pale face, and showed a want of care remarkable in a young man who was strikingly handsome, despite his doleful desponding expression. The constant pressure of a crushing grief had drawn sorrowful lines in a countenance that a little animation would have rendered charming. All the elasticity and hopefulness natural to his age seemed to have been lost in his useless struggles against an unhappy fate. Though his frame was lithe, vigorous, and admirably proportioned, all his movements were slow and apathetic, like those of an old man. His gestures were entirely devoid of animation, his whole expression inert, and it was evidently a matter of perfect indifference to him where he might chance to find himself at home, in his dismal chateau, or abroad in the desolate Landes.

He had on an old gray felt hat, much too large for him, with

a dingy, shabby feather, that drooped as if it felt heartily ashamed of itself, and the miserable condition to which it was reduced. A broad collar of guipure lace, ragged in many places, was turned down over a just-au-corps, which had been cut for a taller and much stouter man than the slender, young baron. The sleeves of his doublet were so long that they fell over his hands, which were small and shapely, and there were large iron spurs on the clumsy, old-fashioned riding-boots he wore. These shabby, antiquated clothes had belonged to his father; they were made according to the fashion that prevailed during the preceding reign; and the poor young nobleman, whose appearance in them was both ridiculous and touching, might have been taken for one of his own ancestors. Although he tenderly cherished his father's memory, and tears often came into his eyes as he put on these garments that had seemed actually a part of him, yet it was not from choice that young de Sigognac availed himself of the paternal wardrobe. Unfortunately he had no other clothes, save those of his boyhood, long ago outgrown, and so he was thankful to have these, distasteful as they could not fail to be to him. The peasants, who had been accustomed to hold them in respect when worn by their old seignior, did not think it strange or absurd to see them on his youthful successor; just as they did not seem to notice or be aware of the half-ruined condition of the chateau. It had come so gradually that they were thoroughly used to it, and took it as a matter of course. The Baron de Sigognac, though poverty-stricken and forlorn, was still in their eyes the noble lord of the manor; the decadence of the family did not strike them at all as it would a stranger; and yet it was a grotesquely melancholy sight to see the poor young nobleman pass by, in his shabby old clothes, on his miserable old pony, and followed by his forlorn old dog. The baron sat down in silence at the table prepared for him, having recognised Pierre's respectful salute by a

kindly gesture. The old servant immediately busied himself in serving his master's frugal supper; first pouring the hot soup—which was of that kind, popular among the poor peasantry of Gascony, called "garbure"—upon some bread cut into small pieces in an earthen basin, which he set before the baron; then, fetching from the cupboard a dish of bacon, cold, and cooked in Gascon fashion, he placed that also upon the table, and had nothing else to add to this meagre repast. The baron ate it slowly, with an absent air, while Miraut and Beelzebub, one on each side of him, received their full share from his kind hand.

The supper finished, he fell into a deep reverie. Miraut had laid his head caressingly upon his master's knee, and looked up into his face with loving, intelligent eyes, somewhat dimmed by age, but still seeming to understand his thoughts and sympathize with his sadness. Beelzebub purred loudly meantime, and occasionally mewed plaintively to attract his attention, while Pierre stood in a respectful attitude, cap in hand, at a little distance, motionless as a statue, waiting patiently until his master's wandering thoughts should return. By this time the darkness had fallen, and the flickering radiance from the few sticks blazing in the great fireplace made strange effects of light and shade in the spacious old kitchen. It was a sad picture; this last scion of a noble race, formerly rich and powerful, left wandering like an uneasy ghost in the castle of his ancestors, with but one faithful old servant remaining to him of the numerous retinue of the olden times; one poor old dog, half starved, and gray with age, where used to be a pack of thirty hounds; one miserable, superannuated pony in the stable where twenty horses had been wont to stand; and one old cat to beg for caresses from his hand.

At last the baron roused himself, and signed to Pierre that he wished to retire to his own chamber; whereupon the servant lighted a pine knot at the fire, and preceded his

master up the stairs, Miraut and Beelzebub accompanying them. The smoky, flaring light of the torch made the faded figures on the wall seem to waver and move as they passed through the hall and up the broad staircase, and gave a strange, weird expression to the family portraits that looked down upon this little procession as it moved by below them. When they reached the tapestried chamber Pierre lighted a little copper lamp, and then bade the baron good-night, followed by Miraut as he retraced his steps to the kitchen; but Beelzebub, being a privileged character, remained, and curled himself up comfortably in one of the old arm-chairs, while his master threw himself listlessly into the other, in utter despair at the thought of his miserable loneliness, and aimless, hopeless life. If the chamber seemed dreary and forlorn by day, it was far more so by night. The faded figures in the tapestry had an uncanny look; especially one, a hunter, who might have passed for an assassin, just taking aim at his victim. The smile on his startlingly red lips, in reality only a self-satisfied smirk, was fairly devilish in that light, and his ghastly face horribly life-like. The lamp burned dimly in the damp heavy air, the wind sighed and moaned along the corridors, and strange, frightful sounds came from the deserted chambers close at hand. The storm that had long been threatening had come at last, and large, heavy rain-drops were driven violently against the window-panes by gusts of wind that made them rattle loudly in their leaden frames. Sometimes it seemed as if the whole sash would give way before the fiercer blasts, as though a giant had set his knee against it, and was striving to force an entrance. Now and again, when the wind lulled for a moment while it gathered strength for a fresh assault, the horrid shriek of an owl would be heard above the dashing of the rain that was falling in torrents.

The master of this dismal mansion paid little attention to this lugubrious symphony, but Beelzebub was very uneasy,

starting up at every sound, and peering into the shadowy corners of the room, as if he could see there something invisible to human eyes. The baron took up a little book that was lying upon the table, glanced at the familiar arms stamped upon its tarnished cover, and opening it, began to read in a listless, absent way. His eyes followed the smooth rhythm of Ronsard's ardent love-songs and stately sonnets, but his thoughts were wandering far afield, and he soon threw the book from him with an impatient gesture, and began slowly unfastening his garments, with the air of a man who is not sleepy, but only goes to bed because he does not know what else to do with himself, and has perhaps a faint hope of forgetting his troubles in the embrace of Morpheus, most blessed of all the gods. The sand runs so slowly in the hour-glass on a dark, stormy night, in a half-ruined castle, ten leagues away from any living soul.

The poor young baron, only surviving representative of an ancient and noble house, had much indeed to make him melancholy and despondent. His ancestors had worked their own ruin, and that of their descendants, in various ways. Some by gambling, some in the army, some by undue prodigality in living—in order that they might shine at court—so that each generation had left the estate more and more diminished. The fiefs, the farms, the land surrounding the chateau itself, all had been sold, one after the other, and the last baron, after desperate efforts to retrieve the fallen fortunes of the family—efforts which came too late, for it is useless to try to stop the leaks after the vessel has gone down—had left his son nothing but this half-ruined chateau and the few acres of barren land immediately around it. The unfortunate child had been born and brought up in poverty. His mother had died young, broken-hearted at the wretched prospects of her only son; so that he could not even remember her sweet caresses and tender, loving care. His father had been very stern with

him; punishing him severely for the most trivial offences; yet he would have been glad now even of his sharp rebukes, so terribly lonely had he been for the last four years; ever since his father was laid in the family vault. His youthful pride would not allow him to associate with the noblesse of the province without the accessories suitable to his rank, though he would have been received with open arms by them, so his solitude was never invaded. Those who knew his circumstances respected as well as pitied the poor, proud young baron, while many of the former friends of the family believed that it was extinct; which indeed it inevitably would be, with this its only remaining scion, if things went on much longer as they had been going for many years past.

The baron had not yet removed a single garment when his attention was attracted by the strange uneasiness of Beelzebub, who finally jumped down from his arm-chair, went straight to one of the windows, and raising himself on his hind legs put his fore-paws on the casing and stared out into the thick darkness, where it was impossible to distinguish anything but the driving rain. A loud howl from Miraut at the same moment proclaimed that he too was aroused, and that something very unusual must be going on in the vicinity of the chateau, ordinarily as quiet as the grave. Miraut kept up persistently a furious barking, and the baron gave up all idea of going to bed. He hastily readjusted his dress, so that he might be in readiness for whatever should happen, and feeling a little excited at this novel commotion.

"What can be the matter with poor old Miraut? He usually sleeps from sunset to sunrise without making a sound, save his snores. Can it be that a wolf is prowling about the place?" said the young man to himself, as he buckled the belt of his sword round his slender waist. A formidable weapon it was, that sword, with long blade, and heavy iron scabbard.

At that moment three loud knocks upon the great outer door resounded through the house. Who could possibly have strayed here at this hour, so far from the travelled roads, and in this tempest that was making night horrible without? No such thing had occurred within the baron's recollection. What could it portend?

CHAPTER II. THE CHARIOT OF THESPIS

The Baron de Sigognac went down the broad staircase without a moment's delay to answer this mysterious summons, protecting with his hand the feeble flame of the small lamp he carried from the many draughts that threatened to blow it out. The light, shining through his slender fingers, gave them a rosy tinge, so that he merited the epithet applied by Homer, the immortal bard, to the laughing, beautiful Aurora, even though he advanced through the thick darkness with his usual melancholy mien, and followed by a black cat, instead of preceding the glorious god of day.

Setting down his lamp in a sheltered corner, he proceeded to take down the massive bar that secured the door, cautiously opened the practicable leaf, and found himself face to face with a man, upon whom the light of the lamp shone sufficiently to show rather a grotesque figure, standing uncovered in the pelting rain. His head was bald and shining, with a few locks of gray hair clustering about the temples. A jolly red nose, bulbous in form, a small pair of twinkling, roguish eyes, looking out from under bushy, jet-black eyebrows, flabby cheeks, over which was spread a network of purplish fibres, full, sensual lips, and a scanty, straggling beard, that scarcely covered the short, round chin, made up a physiognomy worthy to serve as the model for a Silenus; for it was plainly that of a wine-bibber and bon vivant. Yet a certain expression of good humour and

kindness, almost of gentleness, redeemed what would otherwise have been a repulsive face. The comical little wrinkles gathering about the eyes, and the merry upward turn of the comers of the mouth, showed a disposition to smile as he met the inquiring gaze of the young baron, but he only bowed repeatedly and profoundly, with exaggerated politeness and respect.

This extraordinary pantomime finished, with a grand flourish, the burlesque personage, still standing uncovered in the pouring rain, anticipated the question upon de Sigognac's lips, and began at once the following address, in an emphatic and declamatory tone:

"I pray you deign to excuse, noble seignior, my having come thus to knock at the gates of your castle in person at this untimely hour, without sending a page or a courier in advance, to announce my approach in a suitable manner. Necessity knows no law, and forces the most polished personages to be guilty of gross breaches of etiquette at times."

"What is it you want?" interrupted the baron, in rather a peremptory tone, annoyed by the absurd address of this strange old creature, whose sanity he began to doubt.

"Hospitality, most noble seignior; hospitality for myself and my comrades—princes and princesses, heroes and beauties, men of letters and great captains, pretty waiting-maids and honest valets, who travel through the provinces from town to town in the chariot of Thespis, drawn by oxen, as in the ancient times. This chariot is now hopelessly stuck in the mud only a stone's throw from your castle, my noble lord."

"If I understand aright what you say," answered the baron, "you are a strolling band of players, and have lost your way. Though my house is sadly dilapidated, and I cannot offer you more than mere shelter, you are heartily welcome to that, and will be better off within here than exposed to the fury of this wild storm."

The pedant—for such seemed to be his character in the troupe—bowed his acknowledgments.

During this colloquy, Pierre, awakened by Miraut's loud barking, had risen and joined his master at the door. As soon as he was informed of what had occurred, he lighted a lantern, and with the baron set forth, under the guidance of the droll old actor, to find and rescue the chariot in distress. When they reached it Leander and Matamore were tugging vainly at the wheels, while his majesty, the king, pricked up the weary oxen with the point of his dagger. The actresses, wrapped in their cloaks and seated in the rude chariot, were in despair, and much frightened as well—wet and weary too, poor things. This most welcome re-enforcement inspired all with fresh courage, and, guided by Pierre's suggestions, they soon succeeded in getting the unwieldy vehicle out of the quagmire and into the road leading to the chateau, which was speedily reached, and the huge equipage safely piloted through the grand portico into the interior court. The oxen were at once taken from before it and led into the stable, while the actresses followed de Sigognac up to the ancient banqueting hall, which was the most habitable room in the chateau. Pierre brought some wood, and soon had a bright fire blazing cheerily in the great fireplace. It was needed, although but the beginning of September and the weather still warm, to dry the dripping garments of the company; and besides, the air was so damp and chilly in this long disused apartment that the genial warmth and glow of the fire were welcome to all.

Although the strolling comedians were accustomed to find themselves in all sorts of odd, strange lodgings in the course of their wanderings, they now looked with astonishment at their extraordinary surroundings; being careful, however, like well-bred people, not to manifest too plainly the surprise they could not help feeling.

"I regret very much that I cannot offer you a supper," said their young host, when all had assembled round the fire, "but my larder is so bare that a mouse could not find enough for a meal in it. I live quite alone in this house with my faithful old Pierre; never visited by anybody; and you can plainly perceive, without my telling you, that plenty does not abound here."

"Never mind that, noble seignior," answered Blazius, the pedant, "for though on the stage we may sit down to mock repasts—pasteboard fowls and wooden bottles—we are careful to provide ourselves with more substantial and savoury viands in real life. As quartermaster of the troupe I always have in reserve a Bayonne ham, a game pasty, or something, of that sort, with at least a dozen bottles of good old Bordeaux."

"Bravo, sir pedant," cried Leander, "do you go forthwith and fetch in the provisions; and if his lordship will permit, and deign to join us, we will have our little feast here. The ladies will set the table for us meanwhile I am sure."

The baron graciously nodded his assent, being in truth so amazed at the whole proceeding that he could not easily have found words just then; and he followed with wondering and admiring eyes the graceful movements of Serafina and Isabelle, who, quitting their seats by the fire, proceeded to arrange upon the worn but snow-white cloth that Pierre had spread on the ancient dining-table, the plates and other necessary articles that the old servant brought forth from the recesses of the carved buffets. The pedant quickly came back, carrying a large basket in each hand, and with a triumphant air placed a huge pasty of most tempting appearance in the middle of the table. To this he added a large smoked tongue, some slices of rosy Bayonne ham, and six bottles of wine.

Beelzebub watched these interesting preparations from a distance with eager eyes, but was too much afraid of all these strangers to approach and claim a share of the good

things on the table. The poor beast was so accustomed to solitude and quiet, never seeing any one beyond his beloved master and Pierre, that he was horribly frightened at the sudden irruption of these noisy newcomers.

Finding the feeble light of the baron's small lamp rather dim, Matamore bad gone out to the chariot and brought back two showy candelabra, which ordinarily did duty on the stage. They each held several candles, which, in addition to the warm radiance from the blazing fire, made quite a brilliant illumination in this room, so lately dark, cheerless, and deserted. It had become warm and comfortable by this time; its family portraits and tarnished splendour looked their best in the bright, soft light, which had chased away the dark shadows and given a new beauty to everything it fell upon; the whole place was metamorphosed; a festive air prevailed, and the ancient banqueting hall once more resounded with cheery voices and gay laughter.

The poor young baron, to whom all this had been intensely disagreeable at first, became aware of a strange feeling of comfort and pleasure stealing over him, to which, after a short struggle, he finally yielded himself entirely. Isabelle, Serafina, even the pretty soubrette, seemed to him, unaccustomed as he was to feminine beauty and grace, like goddesses come down from Mount Olympus, rather than mere ordinary mortals. They were all very pretty, and well fitted to turn heads far more experienced than his. The whole thing was like a delightful dream to him; he almost doubted the evidence of his own senses, and every few minutes found himself dreading the awakening, and the vanishing of the entrancing vision.

When all was ready de Sigognac led Isabelle and Serafina to the table, placing one on each side of him, with the pretty soubrette opposite. Mme. Leonarde, the duenna of the troupe, sat beside the pedant, Leander, Matamore, his majesty the tyrant, and Scapin finding places for

themselves. The youthful host was now able to study the faces of his guests at his ease, as they sat round the table in the full light of the candles burning upon it in the two theatrical candelabra. He turned his attention to the ladies first, and it perhaps will not be out of place to give a little sketch of them here, while the pedant attacks the gigantic game pasty.

Serafina, the "leading lady" of the troupe, was a handsome young woman of four or five and twenty, who had quite a grand air, and was as dignified and graceful withal as any veritable noble dame who shone at the court of his most gracious majesty, Louis XIII. She had an oval face, slightly aquiline nose, large gray eyes, bright red lips—the under one full and pouting, like a ripe cherry—-a very fair complexion, with a beautiful colour in her cheeks when she was animated or excited, and rich masses of dark brown hair most becomingly arranged. She wore a round felt hat, with the wide rim turned up at one side, and trimmed with long, floating plumes. A broad lace collar was turned down over her dark green velvet dress, which was elaborately braided, and fitted closely to a fine, well-developed figure. A long, black silk scarf was worn negligently around her shapely shoulders and although both velvet and silk were old and dingy, and the feathers in her hat wet and limp, they were still very effective, and she looked like a young queen who had strayed away from her realm; the freshness and radiant beauty of her face more than made up for the shabbiness of her dress, and de Sigognac was fairly dazzled by her many charms.

Isabelle was much more youthful than Serafina, as was requisite for her role of ingenuous young girl, and far more simply dressed. She had a sweet, almost childlike face, beautiful, silky, chestnut hair, with golden lights in it, dark, sweeping lashes veiling her large, soft eyes, a little rosebud of a mouth, and an air of modesty and purity that was evidently natural to her—not assumed. A gray silk gown,

simply made, showed to advantage her slender, graceful form, which seemed far too fragile to endure the hardships inseparable from the wandering life she was leading. A high Elizabethan ruff made a most becoming frame for her sweet, delicately tinted, young face, and her only ornament was a string of pearl beads, clasped round her slender, white neck. Though her beauty was less striking at first sight than Serafina's, it was of a higher order: not dazzling like hers, but surpassingly lovely in its exquisite purity and freshness, and promising to eclipse the other's more showy charms, when the half-opened bud should have expanded into the full-blown flower.

The soubrette was like a beautiful Gipsy, with a clear, dark complexion, rich, mantling colour in her velvety cheeks, intensely black hair—long, thick, and wavy—great, flashing, brown eyes, and rather a large mouth, with ripe, red lips, and dazzling white teeth—one's very beau-ideal of a bewitching, intriguing waiting-maid, and one that might be a dangerous rival to any but a surpassingly lovely and fascinating mistress. She was one of the beauties that women are not apt to admire, but men rave about and run after the world over. She wore a fantastic costume of blue and yellow, which was odd, piquant, and becoming, and seemed fully conscious of her own charms.

Mme. Leonarde, the "noble mother" of the troupe dressed all in black, like a Spanish duenna, was portly of figure, with a heavy, very pale face, double chin, and intensely black eyes, that had a crafty, slightly malicious expression. She had been upon the stage from her early childhood, passing through all the different phases, and was an actress of decided talent, often still winning enthusiastic applause at the expense of younger and more attractive women, who were inclined to think her something of an old sorceress.

So much for the feminine element. The principal roles were all represented; and if occasionally a re-enforcement was

required, they could almost always pick up some provincial actress, or even an amateur, at a pinch. The actors were five in number: The pedant, already described, who rejoiced in the name of Blazitis; Leander; Herode, the tragic tyrant; Matamore, the bully; and Scapin, the intriguing valet.

Leander, the romantic, irresistible, young lover—darling of the ladies—was a tall, fine-looking fellow of about thirty, though apparently much more youthful, thanks to the assiduous care he bestowed on his handsome person. His slightly curly, black hair was worn long, so that he might often have occasion to push it back from his forehead, with a hand as white and delicate as a woman's, upon one of whose taper fingers sparkled an enormous diamond—a great deal too big to be real. He was rather fancifully dressed, and always falling into such graceful, languishing attitudes as he thought would be admired by the fair sex, whose devoted slave he was. This Adonis never for one moment laid aside his role. He punctuated his sentences with sighs, even when speaking of the most indifferent matters, and assumed all sorts of preposterous airs and graces, to the secret amusement of his companions. But he had great success among the ladies, who all flattered him and declared he was charming, until they had turned his head completely; and it was his firm belief that he was irresistibly fascinating.

The tyrant was the most good-natured, easy-going creature imaginable; but, strangely enough, gifted by nature with all the external signs of ferocity. With his tall, burly frame, very dark skin, immensely thick, shaggy eyebrows, black as jet, crinkly, bushy hair of the same hue, and long beard, that grew far up on his cheeks, he was a very formidable, fierce-looking fellow; and when he spoke, his loud, deep voice made everything ring again. He affected great dignity, and filled his role to perfection.

Matamore was as different as possible, painfully thin—scarcely more than mere skin and bones—a living skeleton with a large hooked nose, set in a long, narrow face, a huge mustache turned up at the ends, and flashing, black eyes. His excessively tall, lank figure was so emaciated that it was like a caricature of a man. The swaggering air suitable to his part had become habitual with him, and he walked always with immense strides, head well thrown back, and hand on the pommel of the huge sword he was never seen without.

As to Scapin, he looked more like a fox than anything else, and had a most villainous countenance; yet he was a good enough fellow in reality.

The painter has a great advantage over the writer, in that he can so present the group on his canvas that one glance suffices to take in the whole picture, with the lights and shadows, attitudes, costumes, and details of every kind, which are sadly wanting in our description—too long, though so imperfect—of the party gathered thus unexpectedly round our young baron's table. The beginning of the repast was very silent, until the most urgent demands of hunger had been satisfied. Poor de Sigognac, who had never perhaps at any one time had as much to eat as he wanted since he was weaned, attacked the tempting viands with an appetite and ardour quite new to him; and that too despite his great desire to appear interesting and romantic in the eyes of the beautiful young women between whom he was seated. The pedant, very much amused at the boyish eagerness and enjoyment of his youthful host, quietly heaped choice bits upon his plate, and watched their rapid disappearance with beaming satisfaction. Beelzebub had at last plucked up courage and crept softly under the table to his master, making his presence known by a quick tapping with his fore-paws upon the baron's knees; his claims were at once recognised, and he feasted to his heart's content on the savoury morsels quietly

thrown down to him. Poor old Miraut, who had followed Pierre into the room, was not neglected either, and had his full share of the good things that found their way to his master's plate.

By this time there was a good deal of laughing and talking round the festive board. The baron, though very timid, and much embarrassed, had ventured to enter into conversation with his fair neighbours. The pedant and the tyrant were loudly discussing the respective merits of tragedy and comedy. Leander, like Narcissus of old, was complacently admiring his own charms as reflected in a little pocket mirror he always had about him. Strange to say he was not a suitor of either Serafina's or Isabelle's; fortunately for them he aimed higher, and was always hoping that some grand lady, who saw him on the stage, would fall violently in love with him, and shower all sorts of favours upon him. He was in the habit of boasting that he had had many delightful adventures of the kind, which Scapin persistently denied, declaring that to his certain knowledge they had never taken place, save in the aspiring lover's own vivid imagination. The exasperating valet, malicious as a monkey, took the greatest delight in tormenting poor Leander, and never lost an opportunity; so now, seeing him absorbed in self-admiration, he immediately attacked him, and soon had made him furious. The quarrel grew loud and violent, and Leander was heard declaring that he could produce a large chest crammed full of love letters, written to him by various high and titled ladies; whereupon everybody laughed uproariously, while Serafina said to de Sigognac that she for one did not admire their taste, and Isabelle silently looked her disgust. The baron meantime was more and more charmed with this sweet, dainty young girl, and though he was too shy to address any high-flown compliments to her, according to the fashion of the day, his eyes spoke eloquently for him. She was not at all displeased at his ardent glances, and

smiled radiantly and encouragingly upon him, thereby unconsciously making poor Matamore, who was secretly enamoured of her, desperately unhappy, though he well knew that his passion was an utterly hopeless one. A more skilful and audacious lover would have pushed his advantage, but our poor young hero had not learned courtly manners nor assurance in his isolated chateau, and, though he lacked neither wit nor learning, it must be confessed that at this moment he did appear lamentably stupid.

All the bottles having been scrupulously emptied, the pedant turned the last one of the half dozen upside down, so that every drop might run out; which significant action was noted and understood by Matamore, who lost no time in bringing in a fresh supply from the chariot. The baron began to feel the wine a little in his head, being entirely unaccustomed to it, yet he could not resist drinking once again to the health of the ladies. The pedant and the tyrant drank like old topers, who can absorb any amount of liquor —be it wine, or something stronger—without becoming actually intoxicated. Matamore was very abstemious, both in eating and drinking, and could have lived like the impoverished Spanish hidalgo, who dines on three olives and sups on an air upon his mandoline. There was a reason for his extreme frugality; he feared that if he ate and drank like other people he might lose his phenomenal thinness, which was of inestimable value to him in a professional point of view. If he should be so unfortunate as to gain flesh, his attractions would diminish in an inverse ratio, so he starved himself almost to death, and was constantly seen anxiously examining the buckle of his belt, to make sure that he had not increased in girth since his last meal. Voluntary Tantalus, he scarcely allowed himself enough to keep life in his attenuated frame, and if he had but fasted as carefully from motives of piety he would have been a full-fledged saint.