JULES MICHELET

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How the Author was led to the Study of Nature.

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To my faithful friend, the Public, who has listened to me for so long a period without disfavour, I owe a confession of the peculiar circumstances which, while not leading me altogether astray from history, have induced me to devote myself to the natural sciences.

The book which I now publish may be described as the offspring of the domestic circle and the home fireside. It is from our hours of rest, our afternoon conversations, our winter readings, our summer gossips, that this book, if it be a book, has been gradually evolved.

Two studious persons, naturally reunited after a day's toil, put together their gleanings, and refreshed their hearts by this closing evening feast.

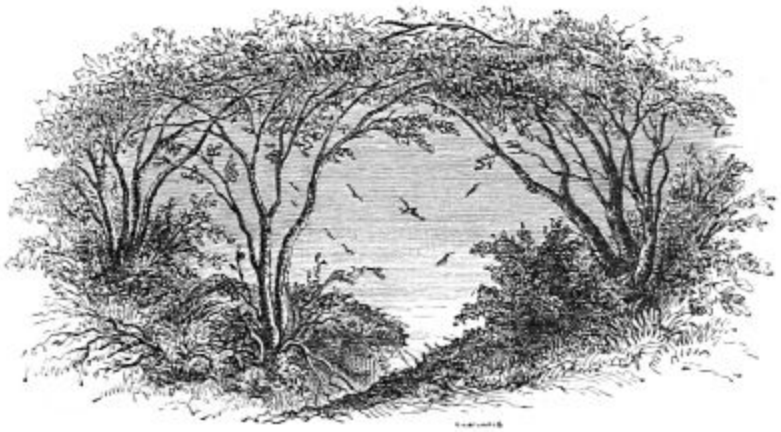
Am I saying that we have had no other assistance? To make such a statement would be unjust, ungrateful. The domesticated swallows which lodged under our roof mingled in our conversation. The homely robin, fluttering around me, interjected his tender notes, and sometimes the nightingale suspended it by her solemn music.

The burden of the time, life, labour, the violent fluctuations of our era, the dispersion of a world of intelligence in which we lived, and to which nothing has succeeded, weighed heavily upon me. The arduous toils of history found occasional relaxation in friendly instruction. These pauses, however, are only periods of silence. Where shall we seek repose or moral invigoration, if not of nature?

The mighty eighteenth century, which included a thousand years of struggle, rested at its setting on the amiable and consoling, though scientifically feeble book of Bernardin de St. Pierre.[1] It ended with that pathetic speech of Ramond's: "So many irreparable losses lamented in the bosom of nature!"

We, whatever we had lost, asked of solitude something more than tears, something more than the dittany[2] which softens wounded hearts. We sought in it a panacea for continual progress, a draught from inexhaustible fountains, a new strength, and—wings.

This work, whatever its character, possesses at least the distinction of having entered upon life under the usual conditions of existence. It results from the intimate communion of two souls; and is in all things itself uniform and harmonious because the offspring of two different principles.



Of the two souls to which it owes its existence, one was the more powerfully attracted to natural studies by the fact that, in a certain sense, it had been born among them, and had ever preserved their fragrance and sweet savour. The other was so much the more strongly impelled towards them because it had always been separated by circumstances, and detained in the rugged ways of human history.

History never releases its slave. He who has once drunk of its sharp strong wine will drink thereof till his death. I could not wrench myself from it even in days of suffering. When the sorrows of the past blended with those of the present, and when on the ruins of our fortunes I inscribed "ninety-three," my health might fail, but not my soul, my will. All day I applied myself to this last duty, and pressed forward among the thorns. In the evening I listened—at first not without effort—to the peaceful narrative of some naturalist or traveller. I listened and I admired, unable as yet to console myself, or to escape from my thoughts, but, at all events, keeping them under control, and preventing any anxieties and any mental storms from disturbing this innocent tranquillity.

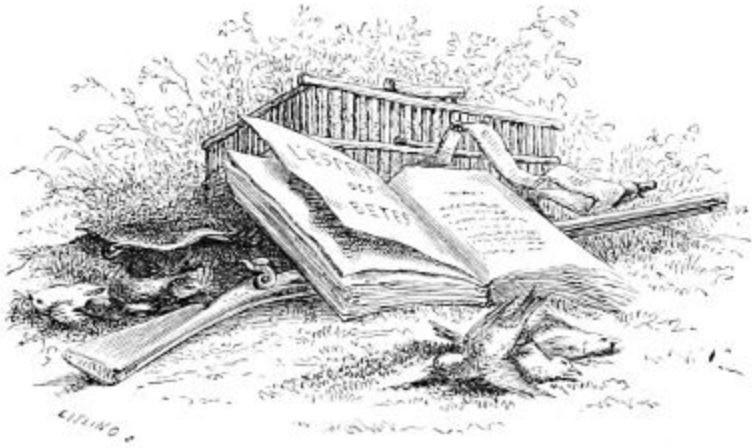
Not that I was insensible to the sublime legends of those heroic men whose labours and enterprise have so largely benefited humanity. The great national patriots whose history I was relating were the nearest of kindred to these cosmopolitan patriots, these citizens of the world.

For myself, I had long hailed, with all my heart, the great French Revolution which had occurred in the Natural Sciences—the era of Lamarck and of Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, [3] so fertile in method, the mighty restorers of all science. With what happiness I traced their features in their legitimate sons—those ingenious children who have inherited their intellect!

At their head let me name the amiable and original author of the "Monde des Oiseaux,"[4] whom the world has long recognized as one of the most solid, if not also the most amusing, of naturalists. I shall refer to him more than

once; but I hasten, on the threshold of my book, to pay this preliminary homage to a truly great observer, who, in all that concerns his own observations, is as weighty, as *special*, as Wilson or Audubon.

He has wronged himself by saying that, in his noble work, "he has only sought a pretext for a discourse on man." On the contrary, numerous pages demonstrate that, apart from all analogy, he has loved and studied the Bird for its own sake. And it is for this reason that he has surrounded it with so many legends, with such vivid and profound personifications. Each bird which Toussenel treats of is now, and will for ever remain, a person.



Nevertheless, the book now before the reader starts from a point of view which differs in all things from that of our illustrious master.

A point of view by no means contrary, yet symmetrically opposed, to his.

For I, as much as possible, seeking only the bird *in* the bird, avoid the human analogy. With the exception of two chapters, I have written as if only the bird existed, as if man had never been.

Man! we have already met with him sufficiently often in other places. Here, on the contrary, we have sought an *alibi* from the human world, from the profound solitude and desolation of ancient days.

Man could not have lived without the bird, which alone could save him from the insect and the reptile; but the bird had lived without man.

Man or no man, the eagle had reigned on his Alpine throne. The swallow would not the less have performed her yearly migration. The frigate bird,[5] unseen by human eyes, had still hovered over the lonely ocean-waters. Without waiting for human listeners, and with all the greater security, the nightingale had still chanted in the forest his sublime hymn. And for whom? For her whom he loves, for his offspring, for the woodlands, and, finally, for himself, his most fastidious auditor.

Another difference between this book and that of Toussenel's is, that, harmonious as he is, and a disciple of the gentle Fourier, he is not the less a *sportsman*. In every page the military calling of the Lorraine is clearly visible.

My book, on the contrary, is a book of peace, written specifically in hatred of sport.

Hunt the eagle and the lion, if you will; but do not hunt the weak.

The devout faith which we cherish at heart, and which we teach in these pages, is, that man will peaceably subdue the whole earth, when he shall gradually perceive that every adopted animal, accustomed to a domesticated life, or at least to that degree of friendship or neighbourliness of which its nature is capable, will be a hundred times more useful to him than if he had simply cut its throat.

Man will not be truly man—we return to this topic at the close of our volume—until he shall labour seriously to accomplish the mission which the earth expects of him:

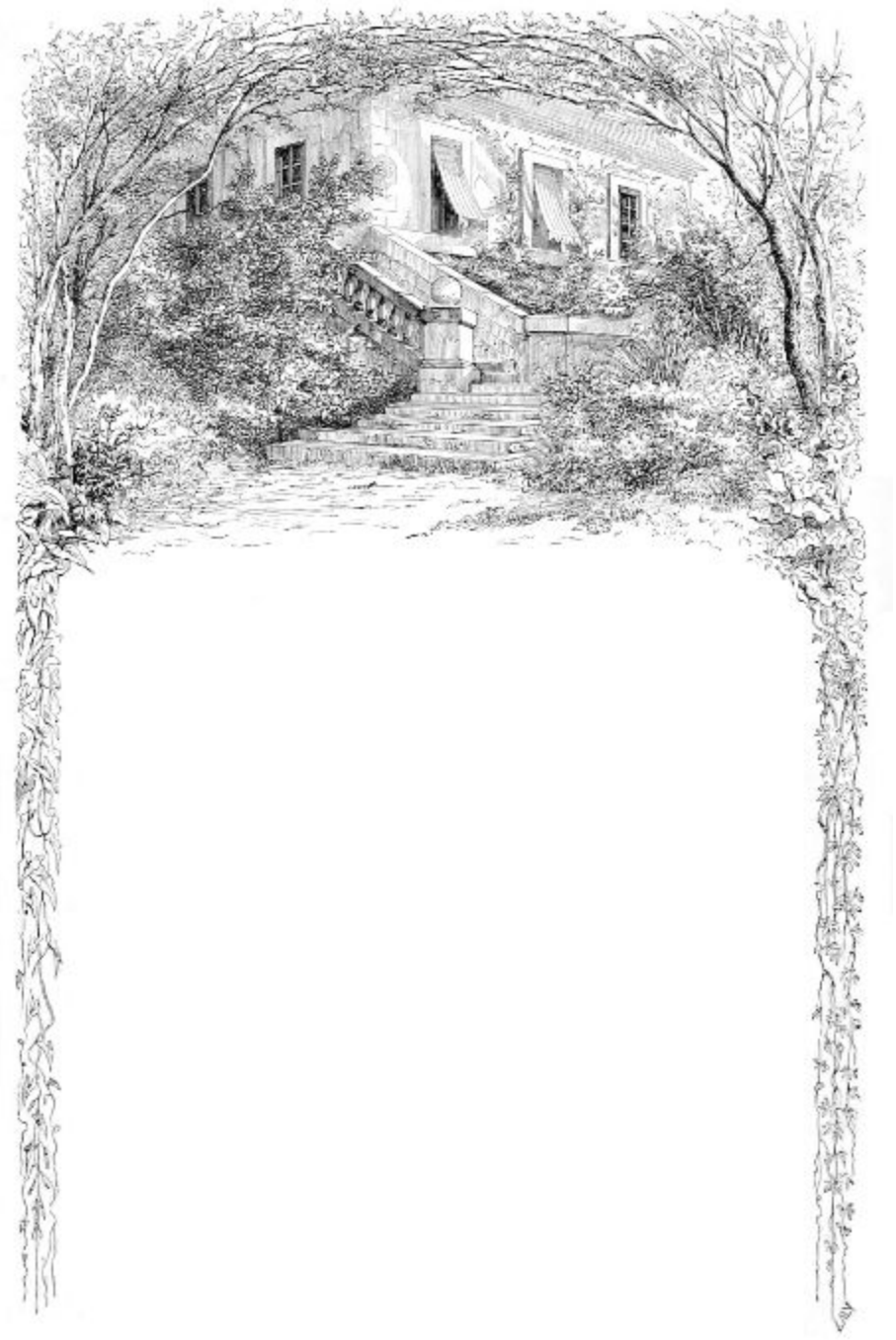
The pacification and harmonious communion of all living nature.

"A woman's dreams!" you exclaim. What matters that?

Since a woman's heart breathes in this book, I see no reason to reject the reproach. We accept it as an eulogy. Patience and gentleness, tenderness and pity, and maternal warmth—these are the things which beget, preserve, develop a living creation.

May this, in due time, become not a book, but a reality! Then, haply, it shall prove suggestive, and others derive from it their inspiration.

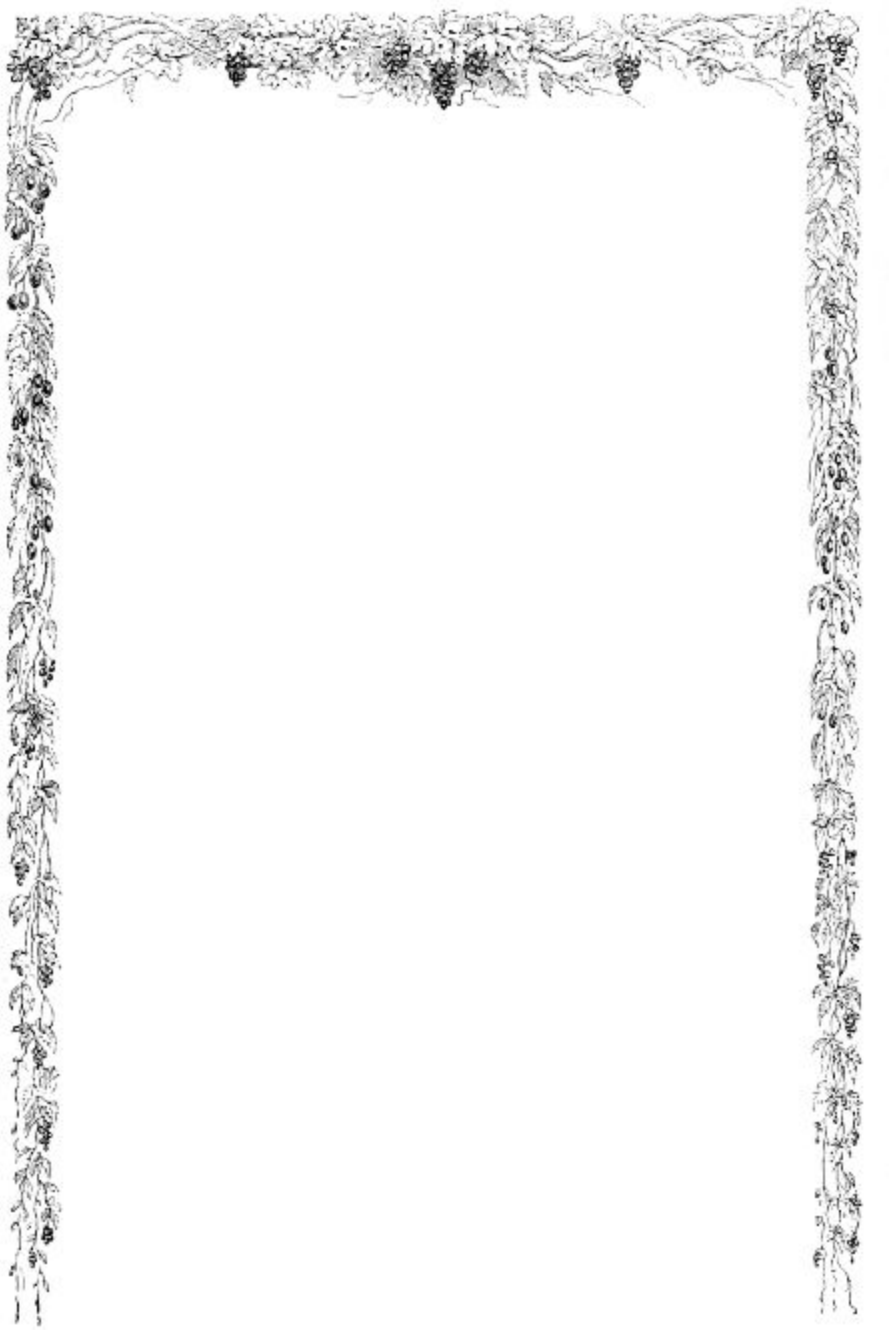
The reader, *au reste*, will better understand the character of the work, if he will take the trouble to read the few pages which follow, and which I transcribe word for word. [The succeeding section, as the reader will perceive, is written by Madame Michelet.]



"I was born in the country, where I have passed two-thirds of my life-time. I feel myself constantly recalled to it, both by the charm of early habits, by natural sensibilities, and also, undoubtedly, by the dear memories of my father, who bred me among its shades, and was the object of my life's worship.

"Owing to my mother's illness, I was nursed for a considerable period by some honest peasants, who loved me as their own child. I was, in truth, their daughter; and my brothers, struck by my rustic ways, called me *the Shepherdess*.

"My father resided at no great distance from the town, in a very pleasant mansion, which he had purchased, built, and surrounded by plantations, in the hope that the charms of the spot might console his young wife for the sublime American nature she had recently quitted. The house, well exposed on the east and south, saw the morning sun rise on a vine-clad slope, and turn, before its meridian heats, towards the remote summits of the Pyrenees, which were visible in clear weather. The young elm-trees of our own France, mingled with American acacias, rose-laurels, and young cypresses, interrupted its full flood of light, and transmitted to us a softened radiance.



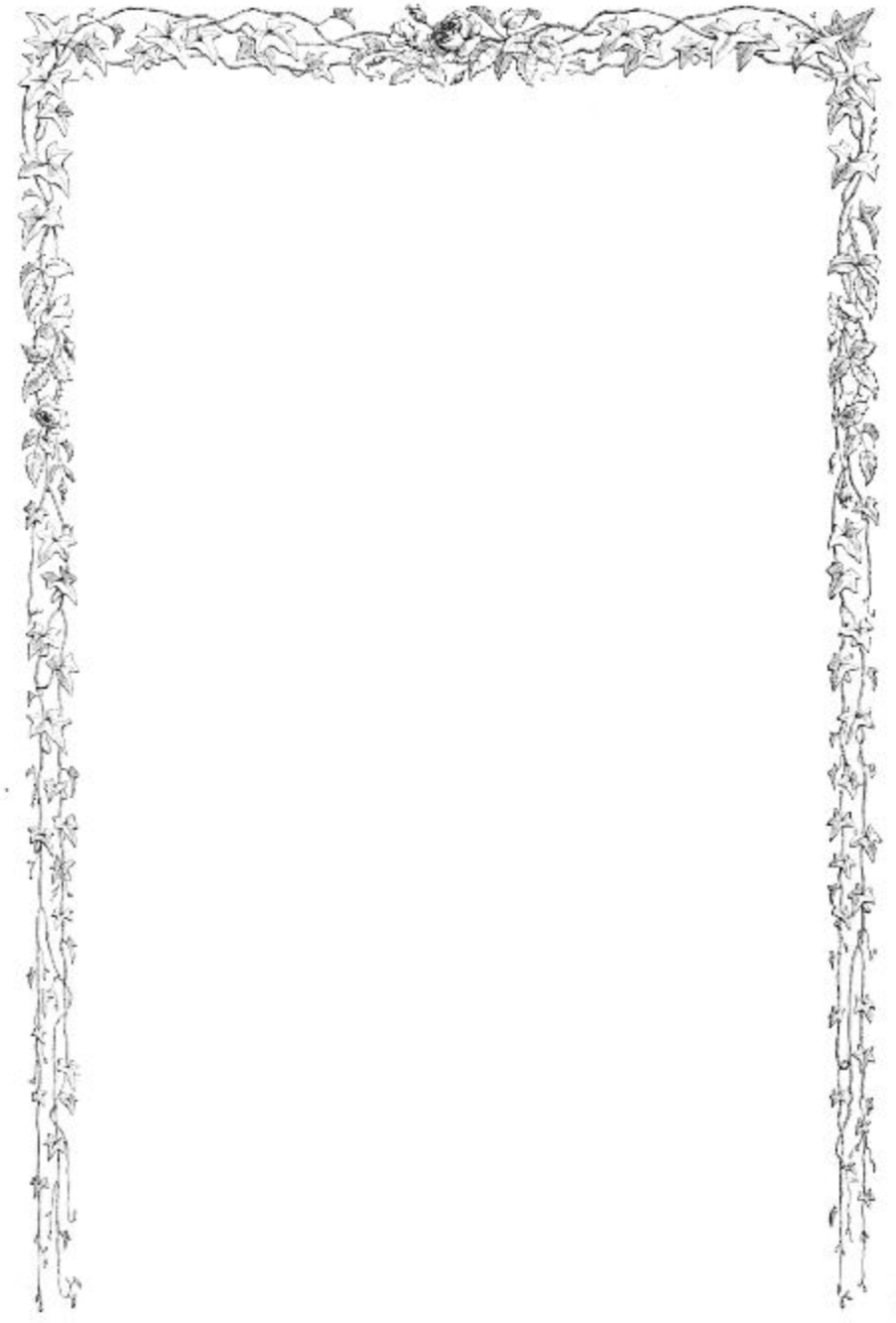
"On our right, a thicket of oaks, inclosed with a dense hedge, sheltered us from the north, and from the keen wind of the Cantal. Far away, on the left, swept the green meadows and the corn-fields. Through the broom, and in the shade of some tall trees, flowed a brooklet—a thin thread of

limpid water, defined against the evening horizon by a small belt of haze which ran along its border.

"The climate is intermediate. In the valley, which is that of the Tarn, and which shares the mildness of the Garonne and the severity of Auvergne, we find none of those southern products common everywhere around Bordeaux. But the mulberry, and the melting perfumed peach, the juicy grape, the sugared fig, and the melon, growing in the open air, testify that we are in the south. Fruits superabounded with us; one portion of the estate was an immense vineyard.

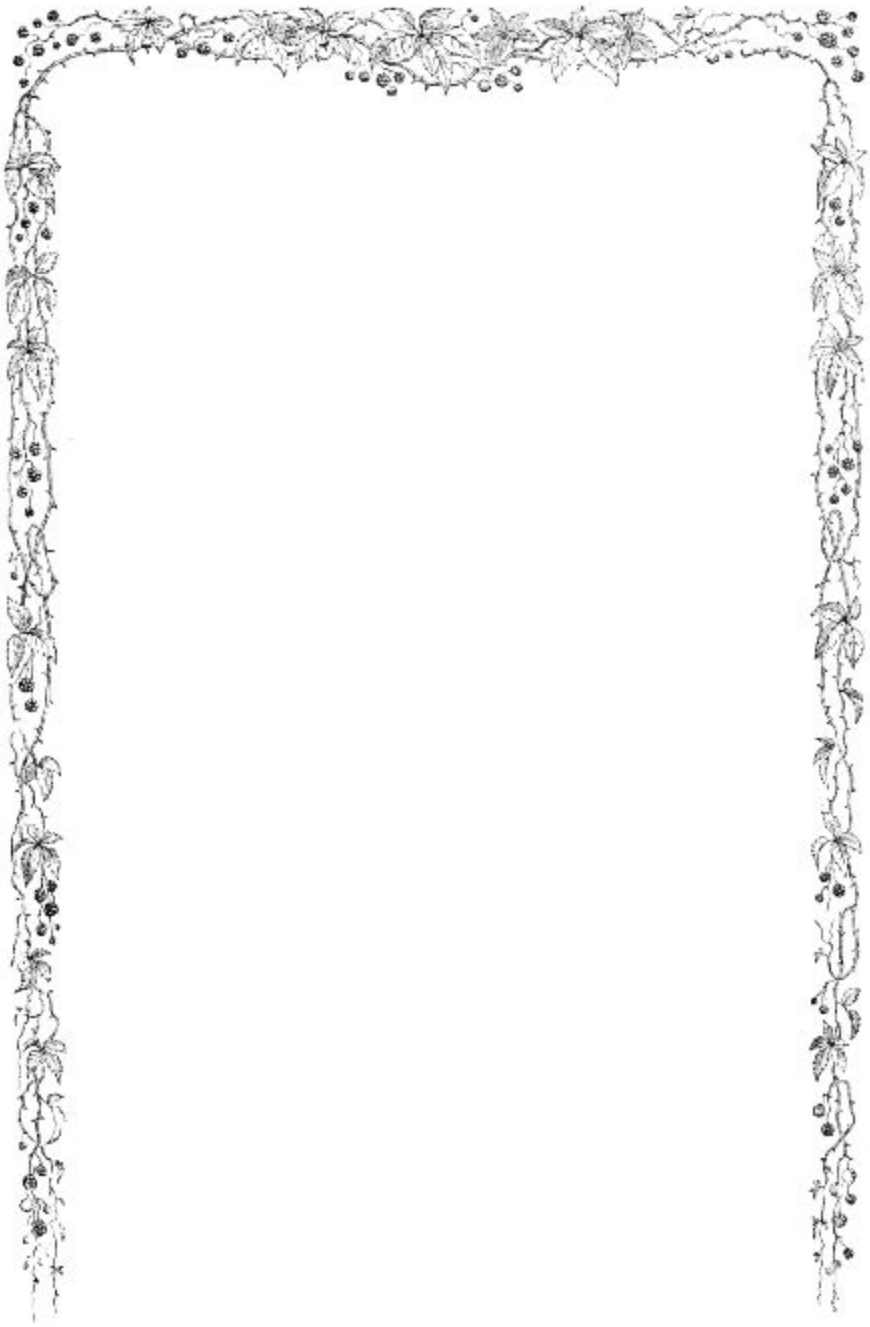
"Memory vividly recalls to me all the charms of this locality, and its varied character. It was never otherwise than grave and melancholy in itself, and it impressed these feelings on all about it. My father, though lively and agreeable, was a man already aged, and of uncertain health. My mother, young, beautiful, austere, had the queenly bearing of the North American, with a prudence and an active economy very rare in Creoles. The estate which we occupied formerly belonged to a Protestant family, and after passing through many hands before it fell into ours, still retained the graves of its ancient owners—simple hillocks of turf, where the proscribed had enshrined their dead under a thick grove of oaks. I need hardly say, that these trees and these tombs, consecrated by their very oblivion, were religiously respected by my father. Each grave was marked out by rose-bushes, which his own hands had planted. These sweet odours, these bright blossoms, concealed the gloom of death, while suffering, nevertheless, something of its melancholy to remain. Thither, then, we

were drawn, and as it were in spite of ourselves, at evening time. Overcome by emotion, we often mourned over the departed; and, at each falling star, exclaimed, 'It is a soul which passes!'[6]



"In this living country-side, among alternate joys and pains, I lived for ten years—from four to fourteen. I had no

comrades. My sister, five years older than myself, was the companion of my mother when I was still but a little girl. My brothers, numerous enough to play among themselves without my help, often left me all alone in the hours of recreation. If they ran off to the fields, I could only follow them with my eyes. I passed, then, many solitary hours in wandering near the house, and in the long garden alleys. There I acquired, in spite of a natural vivacity, habits of contemplation. At the bottom of my dreams I began to feel the Infinite: I had glimpses of God, of the paternal divinity of nature, which regards with equal tenderness the blade of grass and the star. In this I found the chief source of consolation; nay, more, let me say, of happiness.

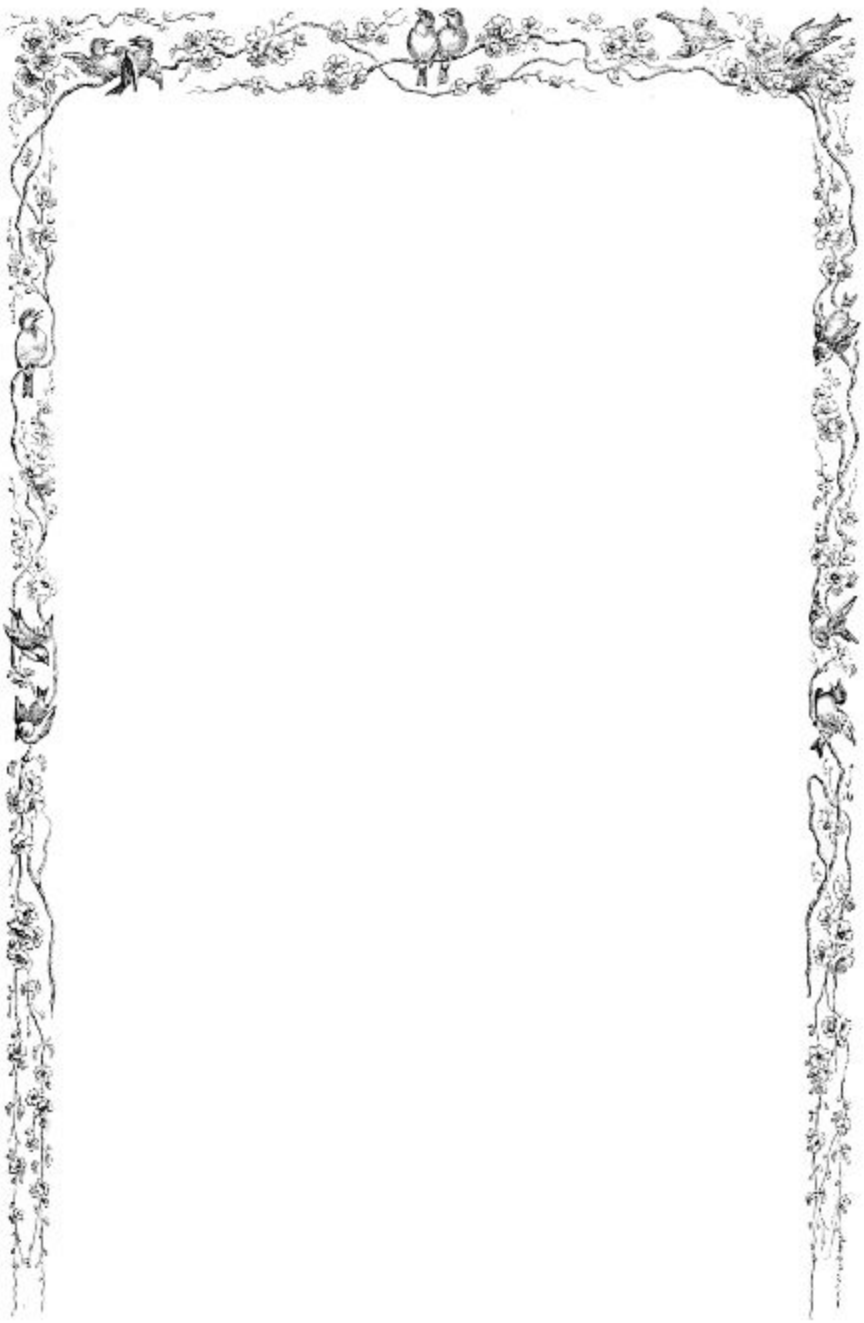


"Our abode would have offered to an observant mind a very agreeable field of study. All creatures under its benevolent protection seemed to find an asylum. We had a fine fish-pond near the house, but no dove-cot; for my parents could not endure the idea of dooming creatures to slavery whose life is all movement and freedom. Dogs, cats,

rabbits, guinea-pigs, lived together in concord. The tame chickens, the pigeons, followed my mother everywhere, and fed from her hand. The sparrows built their nests among us; the swallows even brooded under our barns; they flew into our very chambers, and returned with each succeeding spring to the shelter of our roof.

"How often, too, have I found, in the goldfinches' nests torn from our cypress-trees by rude autumnal winds, fragments of my summer-robes buried in the sand! Beloved birds, which I then sheltered all unwittingly in a fold of my vestment, ye have to-day a surer shelter in my heart, but ye know it not!

"Our nightingales, less domesticated, wove their nests in the lonely hedge-rows; but, confident of a generous welcome, they came to our threshold a hundred times a-day, and besought from my mother, for themselves and their family, the silk-worms which had perished.

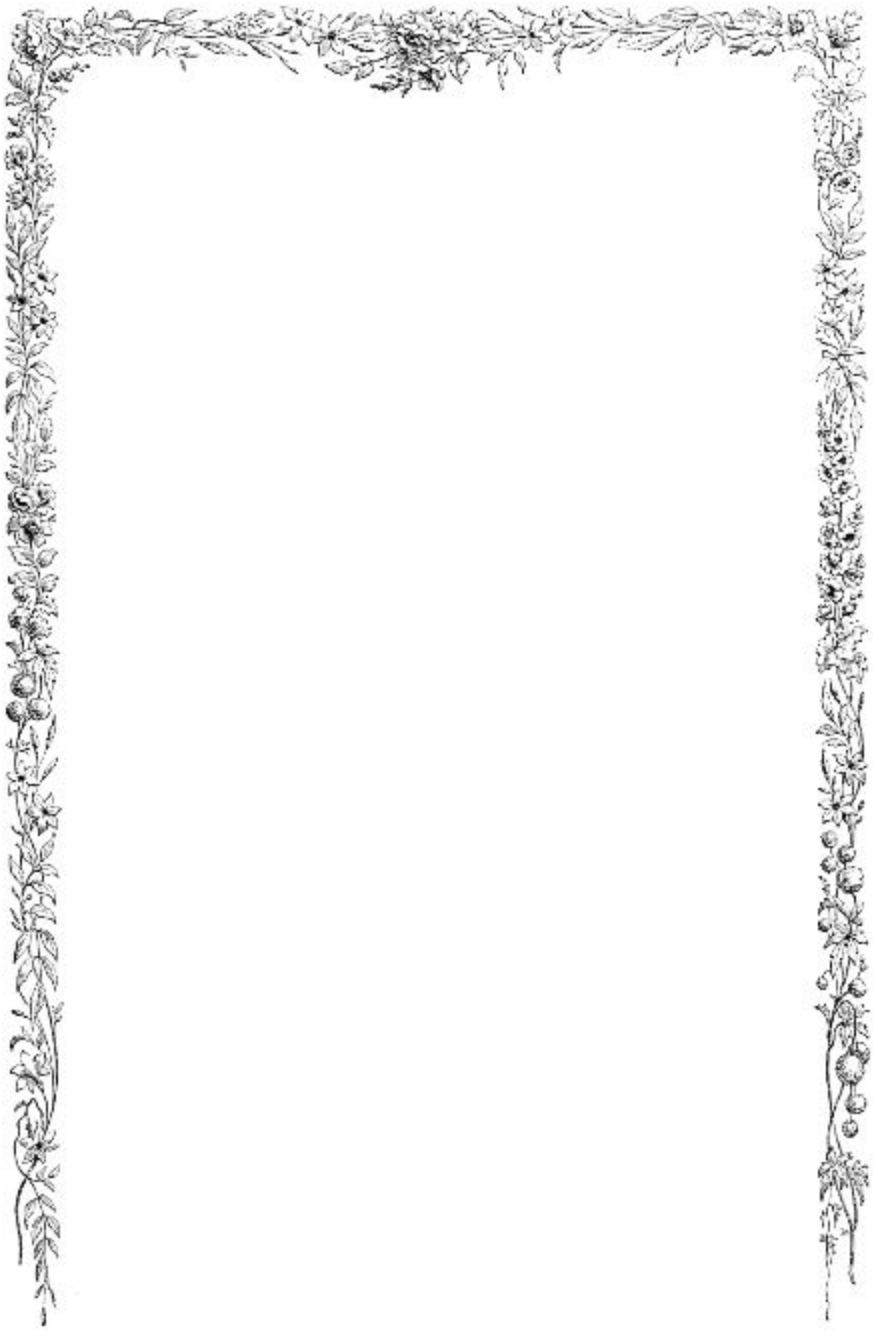


"In the depths of the wood the woodpecker laboured obstinately at the venerable trunks; one might hear him at his task when all other sounds had ceased. We listened in trembling silence to the mysterious blows of that indefatigable workman mingling with the owl's slow and lamentable voice.

"It was my highest ambition to have a bird all to myself—a turtle-dove. Those of my mother's—so familiar, so plaintive, so tenderly resigned at breeding-time—attracted me strongly towards them. If a young girl feels like a mother for the doll which she dresses, how much more so for a living creature which responds to her caresses! I would have given everything for this treasure. But it was not to be so; and the dove was not my first love.

"The first was a flower, whose name I do not know.

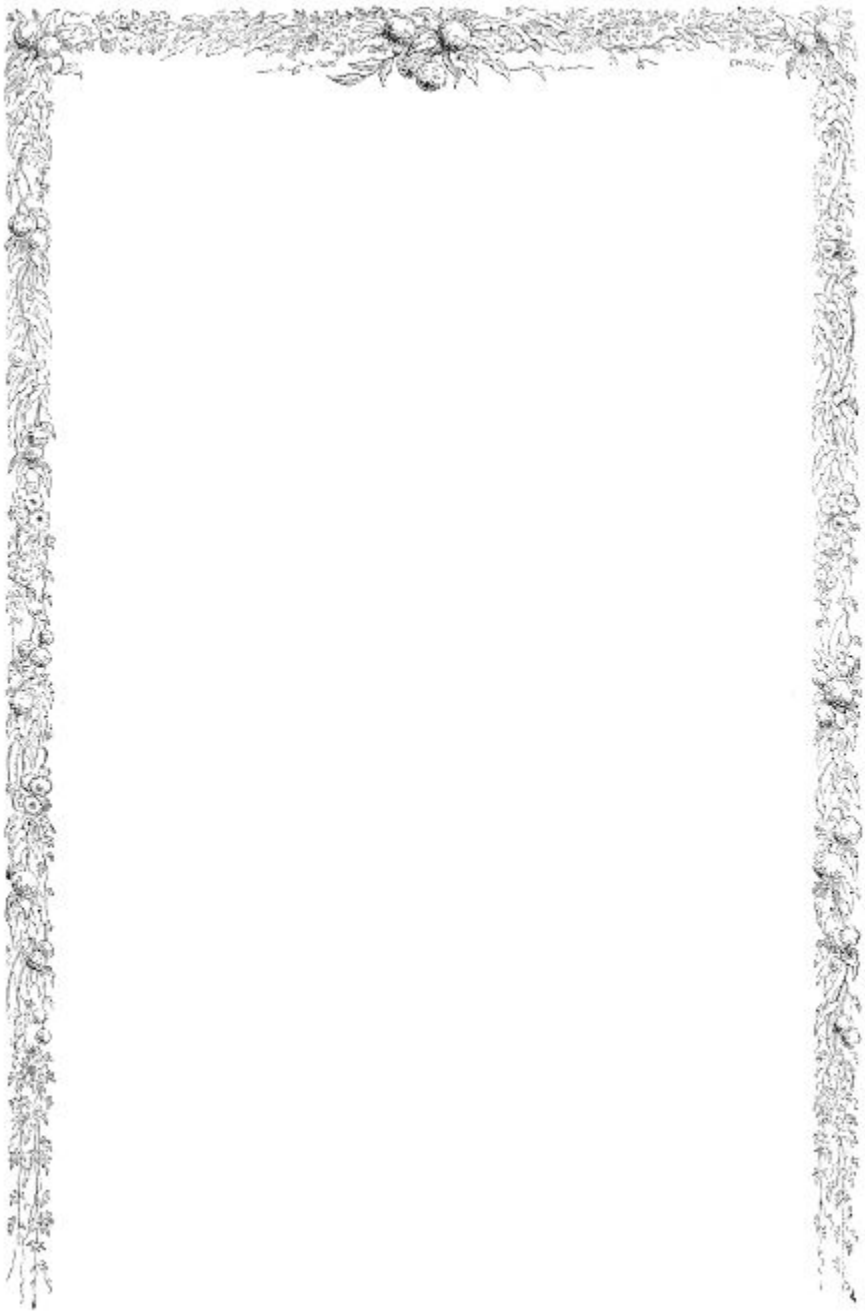
"I had a small garden, situated under an enormous fig-tree, whose humid shades rendered useless all my cultivation. Feeling very sad and sorely discouraged, I descried one morning, on a pale-green stem, a beautiful little golden blossom. Very little, trembling at the lightest breath, its feeble stalk issued from a small basin excavated by the rains. Seeing it there, and always trembling, I supposed it was cold, and provided it with a canopy of leaves. How shall I express the transports which this discovery awakened? I alone knew of its existence; I alone possessed it. All day we could do nothing but gaze at each other. In the evening I glided to its side, my heart full of emotion. We spoke little, for fear of betraying ourselves. But ah! what tender kisses before the last adieu! These joys endured but three days. One afternoon my flower folded itself up slowly, never again to re-open. There was an end to its love.



"I kept to myself my keen regret, as I had kept my happiness. No other flower could have consoled me; a life more full of life was needed to restore the freedom of my soul.

"Every year my good nurse came to see me, invariably bringing some little present. On one occasion, with a

mysterious air, she said to me, 'Put thy hand in my basket.' I did so, expecting to find some fruit, but felt a silken fur, and something trembling. Ah! it is a rabbit! Seizing it, I ran in all directions to announce the news. I hugged the poor animal with a convulsive joy, which nearly proved fatal to it. My head was troubled with giddiness. I could not eat. My sleep was disturbed by painful dreams. I saw my rabbit dying; I was unable to move a single step to succour it. Oh! how beautiful it was, my rabbit, with its pink nose, and its fur as polished as a mirror! Its large pearled ears, which were constantly in motion, its fantastic gambols, had, I confess, a share of my admiration. As soon as the morning dawned, I escaped from my mother's bed to visit my favourite, and carry it a green leaf or two. There it sat, and gravely ate the leaves, casting upon me protracted glances, which I thought full of affection; then, erecting itself on its hind paws, it turned to the sun its little snow-white belly, and sleeked its fine whiskers with marvellous dexterity.

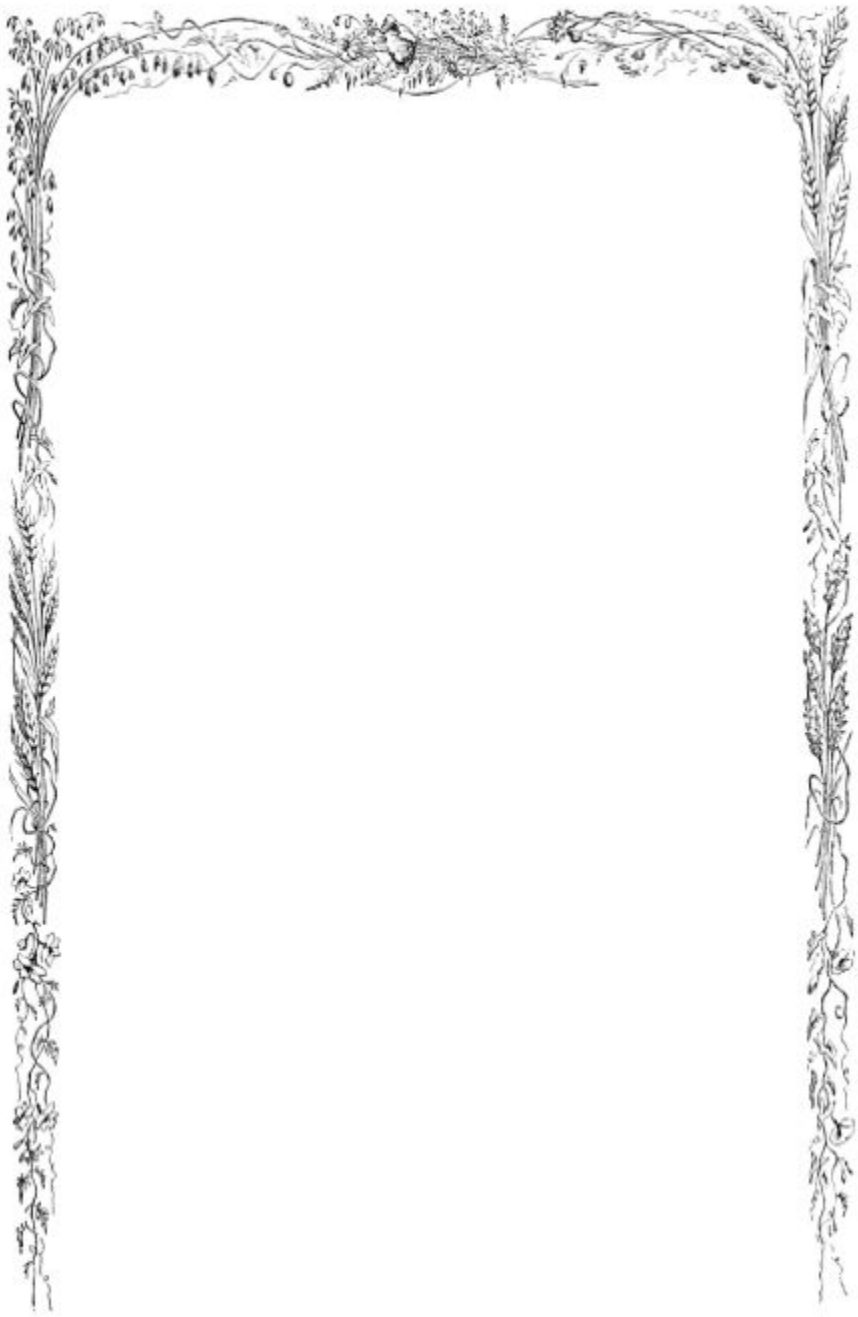


"Nevertheless, slander was busy in its detraction; its face was too small, said its enemies, and it was very gluttonous. To-day, I might subscribe to these assertions; but at seven years of age I fought for the honour of my rabbit! Alas! there was no need to make it the subject of dispute, it lived so short a time. One Sunday, my mother having set out for the

town with my sister and eldest brother, we were wandering —we, the little ones—in the enclosure, when a sudden report broke over our heads. A strange cry, like an infant's first moan, followed it close at hand. My rabbit had been wounded by a flash of fire. The unfortunate beast had transgressed beyond the vineyard-hedge, and a neighbour, having nothing better to do, had amused himself with shooting at it.

"I was in time to see it rise up, bleeding. So great was my grief that I almost choked, utterly unable to sob out a single word. But for my father, who received me in his arms, and by gentle words gave my full heart relief, I should have fainted. My limbs yielded under me. Pardon the tears which this recollection still calls forth.

"For the first time, and in early youth, I had a revelation of death, abandonment, desolation. The house, the garden, appeared to me empty and bare. Do not laugh: my grief was bitter, and all the deeper because concentrated in myself.

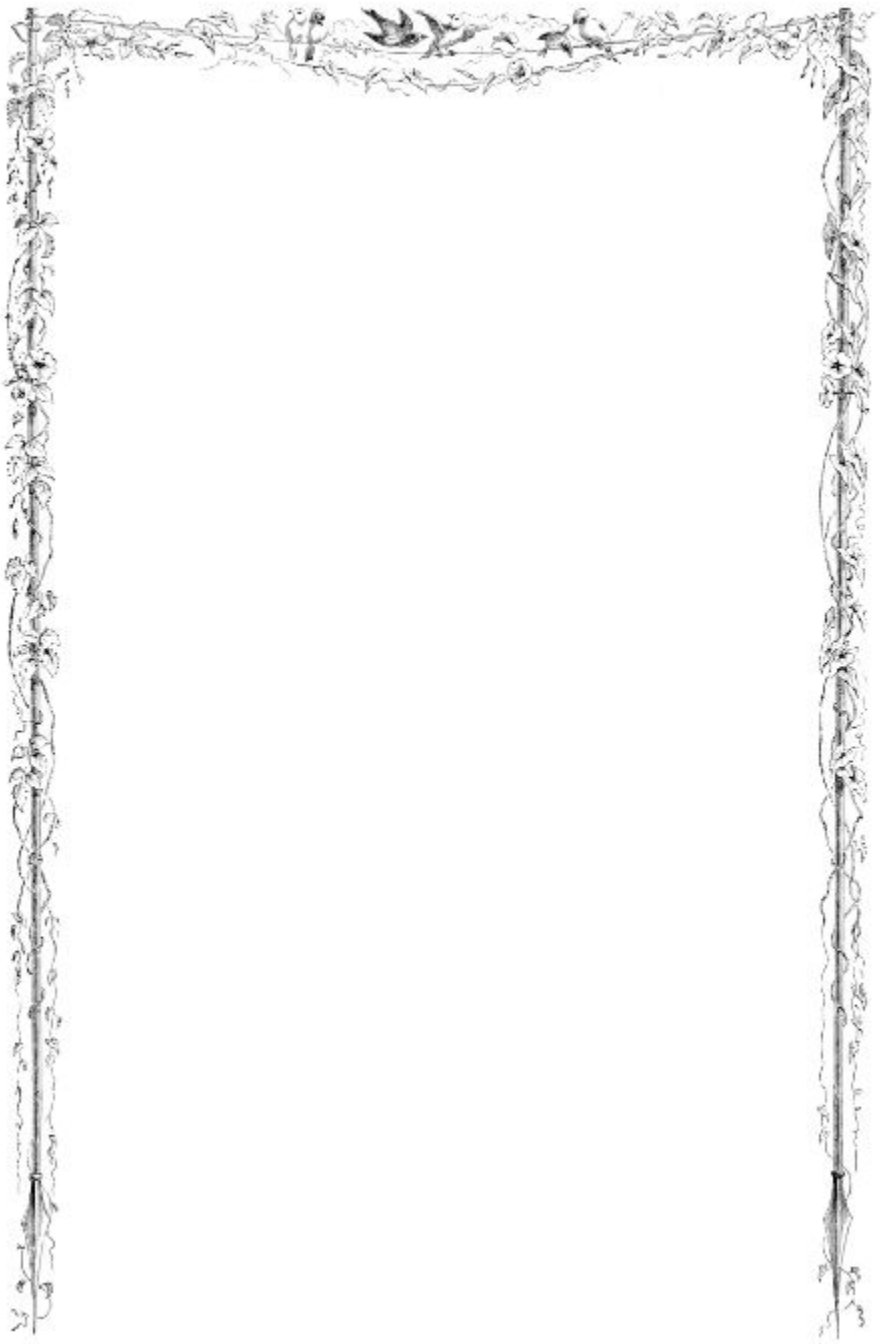


"Thenceforth, having learned the meaning of death, I began to watch my father with wistful eyes. I saw, not without terror, that his face was very pale and his hair white. He would quit us; he would go 'whither the village-bell summoned him,' to use his oft-repeated phrase. I had not the strength to conceal my thoughts. Sometimes I flung

my arms around his neck, exclaiming: 'Papa, do not die! oh, never die!' He embraced me, without replying; but his fine large black eyes were troubled as they gazed on me.

"I was attached to him by a thousand ties, by a thousand intimate relations. I was the daughter of his mature age, of his shattered health, of his affections. I had not that happy equilibrium which his other children derived from my mother. My father was transmitted in me (*passé en moi*). He said so himself: 'How I feel that thou art my daughter!'

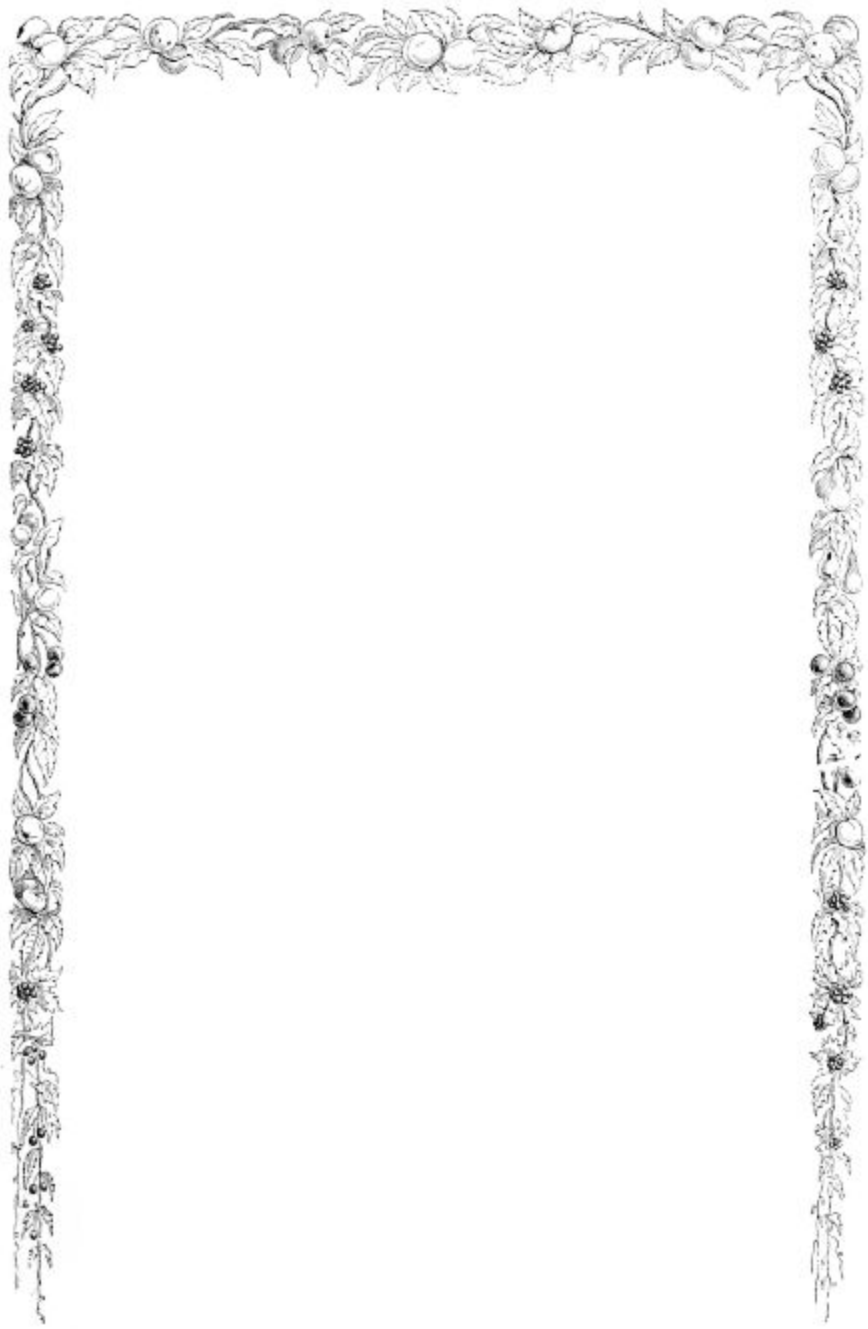
"Years and life's trials had deprived him of nothing; to his last hour he retained the vivacity, the aspirations, and even the charm of youth. Every one felt it without being able to account for it, and all flocked around him of their own accord—women, children, men. I still see him in his little study, seated before his small black table, relating his Odyssey, his long journeys in America, his life in the colonies; one never grew weary of his stories. A maiden of twenty years, in the last stage of a pulmonary disease, heard him shortly before her end: she would fain have listened to him always; implored him to visit her, for while he was discoursing she forgot her sufferings and her decay, even the approach of death.



"This charm I speak of was not that of a clever talker only; it was due to the great goodness so plainly visible in him. The trials, the life of adventure and misfortune, which harden so many hearts, had, on the contrary, but softened his. No man in this generation—a generation so much agitated, tossed to and fro by so many waves—had

undergone such painful experiences. His father, an Auvergnat, the principal of a college, then *juge consulaire* in our most southern city, and finally summoned to the Assembly of Notables in '88, had all the hard austerity of his country and his functions, of the school and the tribunals. The education of that era was cruel, a perpetual chastisement; the more wit, the more character, the more strength, the more did this education tend to shatter them, to break them down. My father, of a delicate and tender nature, could never have survived it, and only escaped by flying to America, where one of his brothers had previously established himself. A change of linen was his only fortune, except his youth, his confidence, his golden dreams of freedom. Thenceforth he always cherished a peculiar tenderness for that land of liberty; he often revisited it, and earnestly wished to die there.

"Called by the needs of business to St. Domingo, he was present in that island at the great crisis of the reign of Toussaint L'Ouverture. This truly extraordinary man, who up to his fiftieth year had been a slave, who comprehended and foresaw everything, did not know how to write, or to give expression to his ideas. His genius succeeded better in great actions than in fine speeches. He lacked a hand, a pen, and more—the young bold heart which shall teach the hero the heroic language, the words in harmony with the moment and the situation. Toussaint, at his age, could only utter this noble appeal: 'The First of the Blacks to the First of the Whites!'[7] Permit me to doubt if it were his. At least, if he conceived it, it was my father who gave expression to the idea.



"He loved my father warmly; he perceived his frankness, and he trusted him—he, so profoundly mistrustful, dumb with his long slavery, and secret as the tomb! But who can die without having one day unlocked his heart? It was my father's misfortune that at certain moments Toussaint broke his silence, and made him the confidant of dangerous mysteries. Thenceforth, all was over; he became afraid of