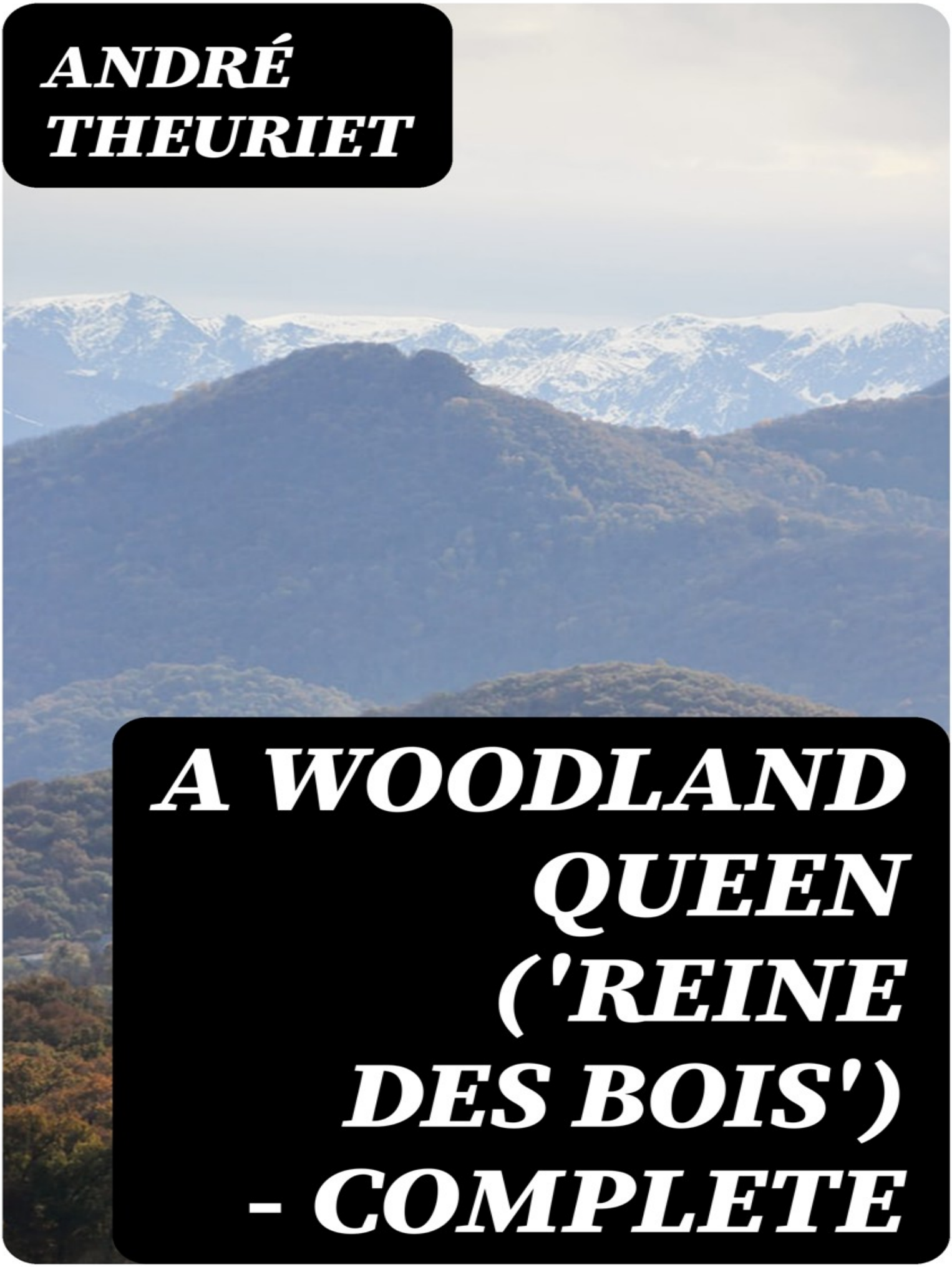
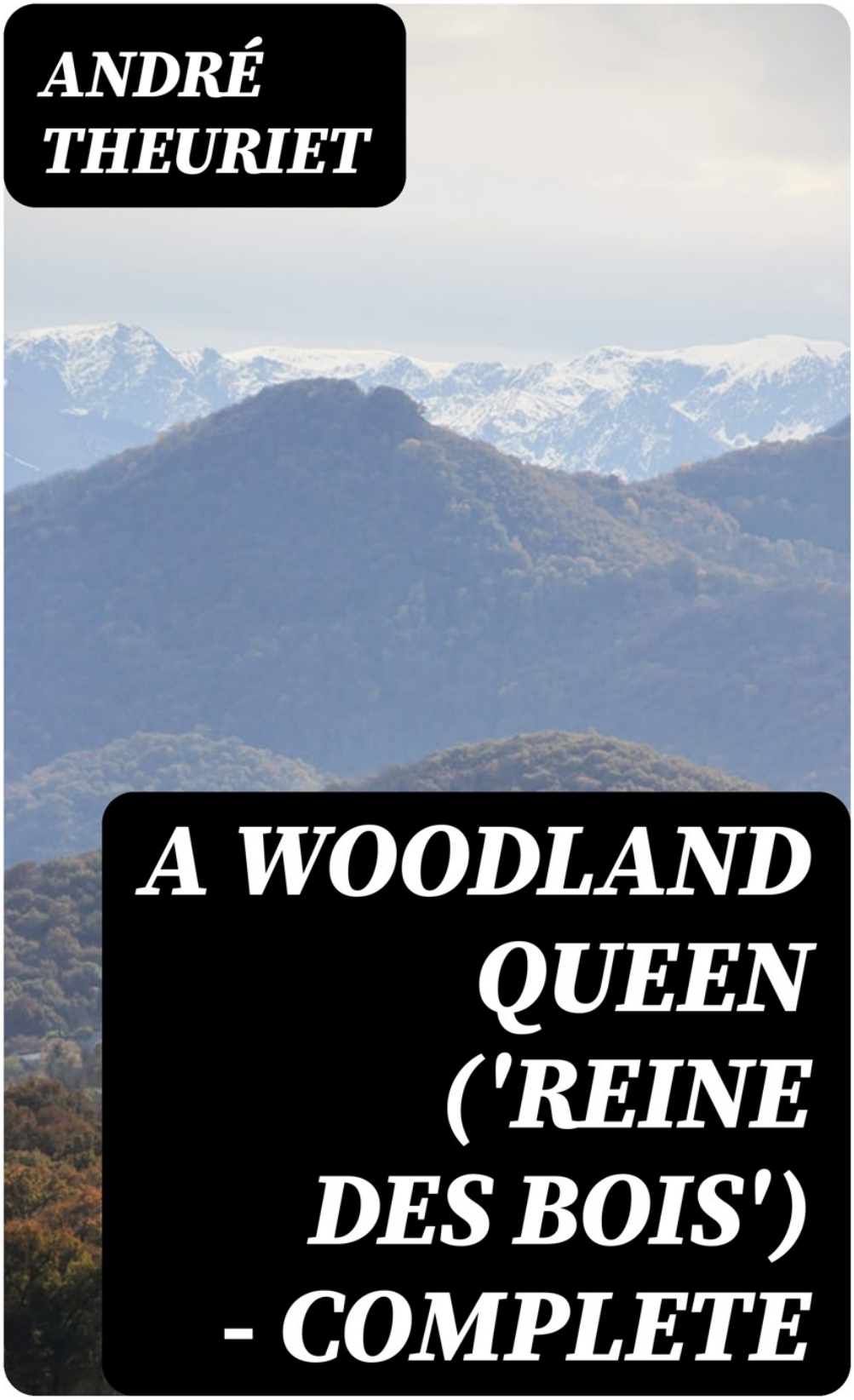


ANDRÉ THEURIET

A WOODLAND QUEEN ('REINE DES BOIS') - COMPLETE



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A WOODLAND QUEEN ('REINE DES BOIS') - COMPLETE

André Theuriet

A Woodland Queen ('Reine des Bois') — Complete

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A WOODLAND QUEEN

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CHAPTER I. THE UNFINISHED WILL

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Toward the middle of October, about the time of the beechnut harvest, M. Eustache Destourbet, justice of the Peace of Auberive, accompanied by his clerk, Etienne Seurrot, left his home at Abbatiale, in order to repair to the Chateau of Vivey, where he was to take part in removing the seals on some property whose owner had deceased.

At that period, 1857, the canton of Auberive, which stretches its massive forests like a thick wall between the level plain of Langres and the ancient Chatillonais, had but one main road of communication: that from Langres to Bar-sur-Aube. The almost parallel adjacent route, from Auberive to Vivey, was not then in existence; and in order to reach this last commune, or hamlet, the traveller had to follow a narrow grass-bordered path, leading through the forest up the hill of Charboniere, from the summit of which was seen that intermingling of narrow gorges and wooded heights which is so characteristic of this mountainous region. On all sides were indented horizons of trees, among which a few, of more dominant height, projected their sharp outlines against the sky; in the distance were rocky steeps, with here and there a clump of brambles, down which trickled slender rivulets; still farther, like little islands, half submerged in a sea of foliage, were pastures of tender green dotted with juniper bushes, almost black in their density, and fields of rye struggling painfully through the stony soil—the entire scene presenting a picture of mingled wildness and cultivation, aridity and luxuriant freshness.

Justice Destourbet, having strong, wiry limbs, ascended cheerily the steep mountain-path. His tall, spare figure, always in advance of his companion, was visible through the tender green of the young oaks, clothed in a brown coat, a black cravat, and a very high hat, which the justice, who loved correctness in details, thought it his duty to don whenever called upon to perform his judicial functions. The clerk, Seurrot, more obese, and of maturer age, protuberant in front, and somewhat curved in the back, dragged heavily behind, perspiring and out of breath, trying to keep up with his patron, who, now and then seized with compassion, would come to a halt and wait for his subordinate.

“I trust,” said Destourbet, after one of these intervals which enabled the clerk to walk by his side, “I trust we shall find Maitre Arbillot down there; we shall have need of his services in looking over and filing the papers of the deceased.”

“Yes, Monsieur,” answered Seurrot, “the notary will meet us at the chateau; he went to Praslay to find out from his associates whether Monsieur de Buxieres had not left a will in his keeping. In my humble opinion, that is hardly likely; for the deceased had great confidence in Maitre Arbillot, and it seems strange that he should choose to confide his testamentary intentions to a rival notary.”

“Well,” observed the justice, “perhaps when the seals are raised, we may discover an autograph will in some corner of a drawer.”

“It is to be hoped so, Monsieur,” replied Seurrot; “I wish it with all my heart, for the sake of Claudet Sejournant, for he

is a good fellow, although on the sinister bar of the escutcheon, and a right jolly companion."

"Yes; and a marvellous good shot," interrupted the justice. "I recognize all that; but even if he had a hundred other good qualities, the grand chasserot, as they call him here, will be on the wrong side of the hedge if Monsieur de Buxieres has unfortunately died intestate. In the eye of the law, as you are doubtless aware, a natural child, who has not been acknowledged, is looked upon as a stranger."

"Monsieur de Buxieres always treated Claudet as his own son, and every one knew that he so considered him."

"Possibly, but if the law were to keep count of all such cases, there would be no end to their labors; especially in all questions of the 'cujus'. Odouart de Buxieres was a terribly wild fellow, and they say that these old beech-trees of Vivey forest could tell many a tale of his exploits."

"He, he!" assented the clerk, laughing slyly, and showing his toothless gums, "there is some truth in that. The deceased had the devil in his boots. He could see neither a deer nor a pretty girl without flying in pursuit. Ah, yes! Many a trick has he played them—talk of your miracles, forsooth! —well, Claudet was his favorite, and Monsieur de Buxieres has told me, over and over again, that he would make him his heir, and I shall be very much astonished if we do not find a will."

"Seurrot, my friend," replied the justice, calmly, "you are too experienced not to know that our country folks dread nothing so much as testifying to their last wishes—to make a will, to them, is to put one foot into the grave. They will not call in the priest or the notary until the very last

moment, and very often they delay until it is too late. Now, as the deceased was at heart a rustic, I fear greatly that he did not carry his intentions into execution."

"That would be a pity—for the chateau, the lands, and the entire fortune would go to an heir of whom Monsieur Odouart never had taken account—to one of the younger branch of Buxieres, whom he had never seen, having quarrelled with the family."

"A cousin, I believe," said the justice.

"Yes, a Monsieur Julien de Buxieres, who is employed by the Government at Nancy."

"In fact, then, and until we receive more ample information, he is, for us, the sole legitimate heir. Has he been notified?"

"Yes, Monsieur. He has even sent his power of attorney to Monsieur Arbillot's clerk."

"So much the better," said M. Destourbet, "in that case, we can proceed regularly without delay."

While thus conversing, they had traversed the forest, and emerged on the hill overlooking Vivey. From the border line where they stood, they could discover, between the half-denuded branches of the line of aspens, the sinuous, deepset gorge, in which the Aubette wound its tortuous way, at the extremity of which the village lay embanked against an almost upright wall of thicket and pointed rocks. On the west this narrow defile was closed by a mill, standing like a sentinel on guard, in its uniform of solid gray; on each side of the river a verdant line of meadow led the eye gradually toward the clump of ancient and lofty ash-trees, behind which rose the Buxieres domicile. This magnificent

grove of trees, and a monumental fence of cast-iron, were the only excuse for giving the title of chateau to a very commonplace structure, of which the main body presented bare, whitewashed walls, flanked by two small towers on turrets shaped like extinguishers, and otherwise resembling very ordinary pigeon-houses.

This chateau, or rather country squire’s residence, had belonged to the Odouart de Buxieres for more than two centuries. Before the Revolution, Christophe de Buxieres, grandfather of the last proprietor, had owned a large portion of Vivey, besides several forges in operation on the Aube and Aubette rivers. He had had three children: one daughter, who had embraced religion as a vocation; Claude Antoine, the elder son, to whom he left his entire fortune, and Julien Abdon, the younger, officer in the regiment of Rohan Soubise, with whom he was not on good terms. After emigrating and serving in Conde’s army, the younger Buxieres had returned to France during the Restoration, had married, and been appointed special receiver in a small town in southern France. But since his return, he had not resumed relations with his elder brother, whom he accused of having defrauded him of his rights. The older one had married also, one of the Rochetaillee family; he had had but one son, Claude Odouart de Buxieres, whose recent decease had brought about the visit of the Justice of Auberive and his clerk.

Claude de Buxieres had lived all his life at Vivey. Inheriting from his father and grandfather flourishing health and a robust constitution, he had also from them strong love for his native territory, a passion for the chase, and a horror

of the constraint and decorum exacted by worldly obligations. He was a spoiled child, brought up by a weak-minded mother and a preceptor without authority, who had succeeded in imparting to him only the most elementary amount of instruction, and he had, from a very early age, taken his own pleasure as his sole rule of life. He lived side by side with peasants and poachers, and had himself become a regular country yeoman, wearing a blouse, dining at the wine-shop, and taking more pleasure in speaking the mountain patois than his own native French. The untimely death of his father, killed by an awkward huntsman while following the hounds, had emancipated him at the age of twenty years. From this period he lived his life freely, as he understood it; always in the open air, without hindrance of any sort, and entirely unrestrained.

Nothing was exaggerated in the stories told concerning him. He was a handsome fellow, jovial and dashing in his ways, and lavish with his money, so he met with few rebuffs. Married women, maids, widows, any peasant girl of attractive form or feature, all had had to resist his advances, and with more than one the resistance had been very slight. It was no false report which affirmed that he had peopled the district with his illegitimate progeny. He was not hard to please, either; strawberry-pickers, shepherd-girls, wood-pilers, day-workers, all were equally charming in his sight; he sought only youth, health, and a kindly disposition.

Marriage would have been the only safeguard for him; but aside from the fact that his reputation of reckless huntsman and general scapegrace naturally kept aloof the daughters of the nobles, and even the Langarian middle

classes, he dreaded more than anything else in the world the monotonous regularity of conjugal life. He did not care to be restricted always to the same dishes—preferring, as he said, his meat sometimes roast, sometimes boiled, or even fried, according to his humor and his appetite.

Nevertheless, about the time that Claude de Buxieres attained his thirty-sixth year, it was noticed that he had a more settled air, and that his habits were becoming more sedentary. The chase was still his favorite pastime, but he frequented less places of questionable repute, seldom slept away from home, and seemed to take greater pleasure in remaining under his own roof. The cause of this change was ascribed by some to the advance of years creeping over him; others, more perspicacious, verified a curious coincidence between the entrance of a new servant in the chateau and the sudden good behavior of Claude.

This girl, a native of Aprey, named Manette Sejournant, was not, strictly speaking, a beauty, but she had magnificent blonde hair, gray, caressing eyes, and a silvery, musical voice. Well built, supple as an adder, modest and prudish in mien, she knew how to wait upon and cosset her master, accustoming him by imperceptible degrees to prefer the cuisine of the chateau to that of the wine-shops. After a while, by dint of making her merits appreciated, and her presence continually desired, she became the mistress of Odouart de Buxieres, whom she managed to retain by proving herself immeasurably superior, both in culinary skill and in sentiment, to the class of females from whom he had hitherto been seeking his creature comforts.

Matters went on in this fashion for a year or so, until Manette went on a three months' vacation. When she reappeared at the chateau, she brought with her an infant, six weeks old, which she declared was the child of a sister, lately deceased, but which bore a strange likeness to Claude. However, nobody made remarks, especially as M. de Buxieres, after he had been drinking a little, took no pains to hide his paternity. He himself held the little fellow at the baptismal font, and later, consigned him to the care of the Abbe Pernot, the curate of Vivey, who prepared the little Claudet for his first communion, at the same time that he instructed him in reading, writing, and the first four rules of arithmetic. As soon as the lad reached his fifteenth year, Claude put a gun into his hands, and took him hunting with him. Under the teaching of M. de Buxieres, Claudet did honor to his master, and soon became such an expert that he could give points to all the huntsmen of the canton. None could equal him in tracing a dog; he knew all the passes, by-paths, and enclosures of the forest; swooped down upon the game with the keen scent and the velocity of a bird of prey, and never was known to miss his mark. Thus it was that the country people surnamed him the 'grand chasserot', the term which we here apply to the sparrow-hawk. Besides all these advantages, he was handsome, alert, straight, and well made, dark-haired and olive-skinned, like all the Buxieres; he had his mother's caressing glance, but also the overhanging eyelids and somewhat stern expression of his father, from whom he inherited also a passionate temperament, and a spirit averse to all kinds of restraint. They were fond of him throughout the country, and M. de

Buxieres, who felt his youth renewed in him, was very proud of his adroitness and his good looks. He would invite him to his pleasure parties, and make him sit at his own table, and confided unhesitatingly all his secrets to him. In short, Claudet, finding himself quite at home at the chateau, naturally considered himself as one of the family. There was but one formality wanting to that end: recognizance according to law. At certain favorable times, Manette Sejournant would gently urge M. de Buxieres to have the situation legally authorized, to which he would invariably reply, from a natural dislike to taking legal advisers into his confidence:

“Don’t worry about anything; I have no direct heir, and Claudet will have all my fortune; my will and testament will be worth more to him than a legal acknowledgment.”

He would refer so often and so decidedly to his settled intention of making Claudet his sole heir, that Manette, who knew very little about what was required in such cases, considered the matter already secure. She continued in unsuspecting serenity until Claude de Buxieres, in his sixty-second year, died suddenly from a stroke of apoplexy.

The will, which was to insure Claudet’s future prospects, and to which the deceased had so often alluded, did it really exist? Neither Manette nor the grand chasserot had been able to obtain any certain knowledge in the matter, the hasty search for it after the decease having been suddenly interrupted by the arrival of the mayor of Vivey; and by the proceedings of the justice of the peace. The seals being once imposed, there was no means, in the absence of a verified will, of ascertaining on whom the inheritance

devolved, until the opening of the inventory; and thus the Sejournants awaited with feverish anxiety the return of the justice of the peace and his bailiff.

M. Destourbet and Stephen Seurrot pushed open a small door to the right of the main gateway, passed rapidly under the arched canopy of beeches, the leaves of which, just touched by the first frost, were already falling from the branches, and, stamping their muddy feet on the outer steps, advanced into the vestibule. The wide corridor, flagged with black-and-white pavement, presented a cheerless aspect of bare walls discolored by damp, and adorned alternately by stags' heads and family portraits in a crumbling state of decay. The floor was thus divided: on the right, the dining-room and the kitchen; on the left, drawing-room and a billiard-hall. A stone staircase, built in one of the turrets, led to the upper floors. Only one of these rooms, the kitchen, which the justice and his bailiff entered, was occupied by the household. A cold light, equally diffused in all directions, and falling from a large window, facing north across the gardens, allowed every detail of the apartment to be seen clearly; opposite the door of entrance, the tall chimney-place, with its deep embrasure, gave ample shelter to the notary, who installed himself upon a stool and lighted his pipe at one of the embers, while his principal clerk sat at the long table, itemizing the objects contained in the inventory.

In the opposite angle of the chimney-place, a lad of twenty-four years, no other than Claudet, called by the friendly nickname of the grand chasserot, kept company with the notary, while he toyed, in an absent fashion, with

the silky ears of a spaniel, whose fluffy little head lay in his lap. Behind him, Manette Sejournant stood putting away her shawl and prayerbook in a closet. A mass had been said in the morning at the church, for the repose of the soul of the late Claude de Buxieres, and mother and son had donned their Sunday garments to assist at the ceremony.

Claudet appeared ill at ease in his black, tightly buttoned suit, and kept his eyes with their heavy lids steadily bent upon the head of the animal. To all the notary's questions, he replied only by monosyllables, passing his fingers every now and then through his bushy brown locks, and twining them in his forked beard, a sure indication with him of preoccupation and bad humor.

Manette had acquired with years an amount of embonpoint which detracted materially from the supple and undulating beauty which had so captivated Claude de Buxieres. The imprisonment of a tight corset caused undue development of the bust at the expense of her neck and throat, which seemed disproportionately short and thick. Her cheeks had lost their gracious curves and her double chin was more pronounced. All that remained of her former attractions were the caressing glance of her eye, tresses still golden and abundant, especially as seen under the close cap of black net, white teeth, and a voice that had lost nothing of its insinuating sweetness.

As the justice and his bailiff entered, Maitre Arbillot, and a petulant little man with squirrel-like eyes and a small moustache, arose quickly.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," he cried. "I was anxiously expecting you—if you are willing, we will begin our work at

once, for at this season night comes on quickly.”

“At your orders, Maitre Arbillot,” replied the justice, laying his hat down carefully on the window-sill; “we shall draw out the formula for raising the seals. By the way, has no will yet been found?”

“None to my knowledge. It is quite clear to me that the deceased made no testament, none at least before a notary.”

“But,” objected M. Destourbet, “he may have executed a holograph testament.”

“It is certain, gentlemen,” interrupted Manette, with her soft, plaintive voice, “that our dear gentleman did not go without putting his affairs in order. ‘Manette,’ said he, not more than two weeks ago; ‘I do not intend you shall be worried, neither you nor Claudet, when I am no longer here. All shall be arranged to your satisfaction.’ Oh! he certainly must have put down his last wishes on paper. Look well around, gentlemen; you will find a will in some drawer or other.”

While she applied her handkerchief ostentatiously to her nose and wiped her eyes, the justice exchanged glances with the notary.

“Maitre Arbillot, you think doubtless with me, that we ought to begin operations by examining the furniture of the bedroom?”

The notary inclined his head, and notified his chief clerk to remove his papers to the first floor.

“Show us the way, Madame,” said the justice to the housekeeper; and the quartet of men of the law followed Manette, carrying with them a huge bunch of keys.

Claudet had risen from his seat when the justice arrived. As the party moved onward, he followed hesitatingly, and then halted, uncertain how to decide between the desire to assist in the search and the fear of intruding. The notary, noticing his hesitation; called to him:

“Come, you also, Claudet, are not you one of the guardians of the seals?”

And they wended their silent way, up the winding staircase of the turret. The high, dark silhouette of Manette headed the procession; then followed the justice, carefully choosing his foothold on the well-worn stairs, the asthmatic old bailiff, breathing short and hard, the notary, beating his foot impatiently every time that Seurrot stopped to take breath, and finally the principal clerk and Claudet.

Manette, opening noiselessly the door of the deceased’s room, entered, as if it were a church, the somewhat stifling apartment. Then she threw open the shutters, and the afternoon sun revealed an interior decorated and furnished in the style of the close of the eighteenth century. An inlaid secretary, with white marble top and copper fittings, stood near the bed, of which the coverings had been removed, showing the mattresses piled up under a down bed covered with blue-and-white check.

As soon as the door was closed, the clerk settled himself at the table with his packet of stamped paper, and began to run over, in a low, rapid voice, the preliminaries of the inventory. In this confused murmuring some fragments of phrases would occasionally strike the ear: “Chateau of Vivey —deceased the eighth of October last—at the requisition of Marie-Julien de Buxieres, comptroller of direct contributions

at Nancy—styling himself heir to Claude Odouart de Buxieres, his cousin-german by blood—”

This last phrase elicited from Claudet a sudden movement of surprise.

“The inventory,” explained Maitre Arbillot, “is drawn up at the requisition of the only heir named, to whom we must make application, if necessary, for the property left by the deceased.”

There was a moment of silence, interrupted by a plaintive sigh from Manette Sejournant and afterward by the tearing sound of the sealed bands across the bureau, the drawers and pigeonholes of which were promptly ransacked by the justice and his assistant.

Odouart de Buxieres had not been much of a scribe. A double Liege almanac, a memorandum-book, in which he had entered the money received from the sale of his wood and the dates of the payments made by his farmers; a daybook, in which he had made careful note of the number of head of game killed each day—that was all the bureau contained.

“Let us examine another piece of furniture,” murmured the justice.

Manette and Claudet remained unmoved. They apparently knew the reason why none but insignificant papers had been found in the drawers, for their features expressed neither surprise nor disappointment.

Another search through a high chest of drawers with large copper handles was equally unprofitable. Then they attacked the secretary, and after the key had been turned twice in the noisy lock, the lid went slowly down. The

countenances of both mother and son, hitherto so unconcerned, underwent a slight but anxious change. The bailiff continued his scrupulous search of each drawer under the watchful eye of the justice, finding nothing but documents of mediocre importance; old titles to property, bundles of letters, tradesmen’s bills, etc. Suddenly, at the opening of the last drawer, a significant “Ah!” from Stephen Seurrot drew round him the heads of the justice and the notary, and made Manette and Claudet, standing at the foot of the bed, start with expectation. On the dark ground of a rosewood box lay a sheet of white paper, on which was written:

“This is my testament.”

With the compression of lip and significant shake of the head of a physician about to take in hand a hopeless case of illness, the justice made known to his two neighbors the text of the sheet of paper, on which Claude Odouart de Buxieres had written, in his coarse, ill-regulated hand, the following lines:

“Not knowing my collateral heirs, and caring nothing about them, I give and bequeath all my goods and chattels __”

The testator had stopped there, either because he thought it better, before going any further, to consult some legal authority more experienced than himself, or because he had been interrupted in his labor and had deferred completing this testifying of his last will until some future opportunity.

M. Destourbet, after once more reading aloud this unfinished sentence, exclaimed:

“Monsieur de Buxieres did not finish—it is much to be regretted!”

“My God! is it possible?” interrupted the housekeeper; “you think, then, Monsieur justice, that Claudet does not inherit anything?”

“According to my idea,” replied he, “we have here only a scrap of unimportant paper; the name of the legatee is not indicated, and even were it indicated, the testament would still be without force, being neither dated nor signed.”

“But perhaps Monsieur de Buxieres made another?”

“I think not; I am more inclined to suppose that he did not have time to complete the arrangements that he wished to make, and the proof lies in the very existence of this incomplete document in the only piece of furniture in which he kept his papers.” Then, turning toward the notary and the bailiff: “You are doubtless, gentlemen, of the same opinion as myself; it will be wise, therefore, to defer raising the remainder of the seals until the arrival of the legal heir. Maitre Arbillot, Monsieur Julien de Buxieres must be notified, and asked to be here in Vivey as soon as possible.”

“I will write this evening,” said the notary; “in the meanwhile, the keeping of the seals will be continued by Claudet Sejournant.”

The justice inclined his head to Manette, who was standing, pale and motionless, at the foot of the bed; stunned by the unexpected announcement; the bailiff and the chief clerk, after gathering up their papers, shook hands sympathizingly with Claudet.

“I am grieved to the heart, my dear fellow,” said the notary, in his turn, “at what has happened! It is hard to

swallow, but you will always keep a courageous heart, and be able to rise to the top; besides, even if, legally, you own nothing here, this unfinished testament of Monsieur de Buxieres will constitute a moral title in your favor, and I trust that the heir will have enough justice and right feeling to treat you properly."

"I want nothing from him!" muttered Claudet, between his teeth; then, leaving his mother to attend to the rest of the legal fraternity, he went hastily to his room, next that of the deceased, tore off his dress-coat, slipped on a hunting-coat, put on his gaiters, donned his old felt hat, and descended to the kitchen, where Manette was sitting, huddled up in front of the embers, weeping and bewailing her fate.

Since she had become housekeeper and mistress of the Buxieres household, she had adopted a more polished speech and a more purely French mode of expression, but in this moment of discouragement and despair the rude dialect of her native country rose to her lips, and in her own patois she inveighed against the deceased:

"Ah! the bad man, the mean man! Didn't I tell him, time and again, that he would leave us in trouble! Where can we seek our bread this late in the day? We shall have to beg in the streets!"

"Hush! hush! mother," interrupted Claudet, sternly, placing his hand on her shoulder, "it does not mend matters to give way like that. Calm thyself—so long as I have hands on the ends of my arms, we never shall be beggars. But I must go out—I need air."