She listened, panting, overwhelmed, crushed; her eye alone lived, and glared horribly.

'Do you understand me?' he said. 'I am going down there to pronounce the sentence of death against a murderer. If I find you alive on my return, you shall sleep tonight in the conciergerie.'

Madame de Villefort sighed; her nerves gave way, and she sunk on the carpet. The king's attorney seemed to experience a sensation of pity; he looked upon her less severely, and, bowing to her, said slowly:

'Farewell, madame, farewell!'

That farewell struck Madame de Villefort like the executioner's knife. She fainted. The procureur went out, after having double-locked the door.

Chapter CIX

The Assizes

THE Benedetto affair, as it was called at the Palais, and by people in general, had produced a tremendous sensation. Frequenting the Café de Paris, the Boulevard de Gand, and the Bois de Boulogne, during his brief career of splendour, the false Cavalcanti had formed a host of acquaintances. The papers had related his various adventures, both as the man of fashion and the galley-slave; and as everyone who had been personally acquainted with Prince Andrea Cavalcanti experienced a lively curiosity in his fate, they all determined to spare no trouble in endeavouring to witness the trial of M. Benedetto for the murder of his comrade in chains.

In the eyes of many, Benedetto appeared, if not a victim to, at least an instance of, the fallibility of the law. M. Cavalcanti, his father, had been seen in Paris, and it was expected that he would re-appear to claim the illustrious outcast. Many, also, who were not aware of the circumstances attending his withdrawal from Paris, were struck with the worthy appearance, the gentlemanly bearing, and the knowledge of the world displayed by the old patrician, who certainly played the nobleman very well, so long as he said nothing, and made no arithmetical calculations.

As for the accused himself, many remembered him as being so amiable, so handsome, and so liberal, that they chose to think him the victim of some conspiracy, since in this world large fortunes frequently excite the malevolence and jealousy of some unknown enemy.

Everyone, therefore, ran to the court; some to witness the sight, others to comment upon it. From seven o'clock in the morning a crowd was stationed at the iron gates, and an hour before the trial commenced the hall was full of the privileged. Before the entrance of the magistrates,

and indeed frequently afterwards, a court of justice, on days when some especial trial is to take place, resembles a drawing-room where many persons recognize each other and converse if they can do so without losing their seats; or, if they are separated by too great a number of lawyers, communicate by signs.

It was one of the magnificent autumn days which make amends for a short summer; the clouds which M. de Villefort had perceived at sunrise had all disappeared as if by magic, and one of the softest and most brilliant days of September shone forth in all its splendour.

Beauchamp, one of the kings of the press, and therefore claiming the right of a throne everywhere, was eying everybody through his monocle. He perceived Château-Renaud and Debray, who had just gained the good graces of a sergeant-at-arms, and who had persuaded the latter to let them stand before, instead of behind him, as they ought to have done. The worthy sergeant had recognized the minister's secretary and the millionnaire, and, by way of paying extra attention to his noble neighbours, promised to keep their places while they paid a visit to Beauchamp.

'Well,' said Beauchamp, 'we shall see our friend!'

'Yes, indeed!' replied Debray. 'That worthy prince. Deuce take those Italian princes!'

'A man, too, who could boast of Dante for a genealogist, and could reckon back to the *Divina Comedia*.'

'A nobility of the rope!' said Château-Renaud phlegmatically.

'He will be condemned, will he not?' asked Debray of Beauchamp.

'My dear fellow, I think we should ask you that question; you know such news much better than we do. Did you see the president at the minister's last night?'

'Yes.'

'What did he say?'

'Something which will surprise you.'

'Oh, make haste and tell me, then; it is a long time since that has happened.'

'Well, he told me that Benedetto, who is considered a serpent of subtlety and a giant of cunning, is really but a very commonplace, silly rascal, and altogether unworthy of the experiments that will be made on his phrenological organs after his death.'

'For what you have just said.'

'What did I say? Oh, my brain whirls; I no longer understand anything. Oh, my God, my God!'

And she rose, with her hair dishevelled, and her lips foaming.

'Have you answered the question I put to you on entering the room?—where do you keep the poison you generally use, madame?'

Madame de Villefort raised her arms to heaven, and convulsively struck one hand against the other.

'No, no,' she vociferated, 'no, you cannot wish that!'

'What I do not wish, madame, is that you should perish on the scaffold. Do you understand?' asked Villefort.

'Oh, mercy, mercy, monsieur!'

'What I require is, that justice be done. I am on the earth to punish, madame,' he added, with a flaming glance; 'any other woman, were it the queen herself, I would send to the executioner; but to you I shall be merciful. To you I will say, "Have you not, madame, put aside some of the surest, deadliest, most speedy poison?"'

'Oh, pardon me, sir; let me live!'

'She is cowardly,' said Villefort.

'Reflect that I am your wife!'

'You are a poisoner.'

'In the name of Heaven!'

'No!'

'In the name of the love you once bore me!'

'No, no!'

'In the name of our child! Ah, for the sake of our child, let me live!'

'No, no, no, I tell you; one day, if I allow you to live, you will perhaps kill him, as you have the others!'

'I?—I kill my boy?' cried the distracted mother, rushing toward Villefort; 'I kill my son? Ha, ha, ha!' and a frightful, demoniac laugh finished the sentence, which was lost in a hoarse rattle.

Madame de Villefort fell at her husband's feet. He approached her.

'Think of it, madame,' he said; 'if, on my return, justice has not been satisfied, I will denounce you with my own mouth, and arrest you with my own hands!'

'Can you be a coward?' continued Villefort, with increasing excitement, 'you, who could count, one by one, the minutes of four death agonies? *You*, who have arranged your infernal plans, and removed the beverages with a talent and precision almost miraculous? Have you, then, who have calculated everything with such nicety, have you forgotten to calculate one thing—I mean where the revelation of your crimes will lead you to? Oh, it is impossible—you must have saved some surer, more subtle and deadly poison than any other, that you might escape the punishment that you deserve. You have done this—I hope so, at least.'

Madame de Villefort stretched out her hands, and fell on her knees.

'I understand,' he said, 'you confess; but a confession made to the judges, a confession made at the last moment, extorted when the crime cannot be denied, diminishes not the punishment inflicted on the guilty!'

'The punishment?' exclaimed Madame de Villefort, 'the punishment, monsieur? Twice you have pronounced that word!'

'Certainly. Did you hope to escape it because you were four times guilty? Did you think the punishment would be withheld because you are the wife of him who pronounces it?—No, madame, no; the scaffold awaits the poisoner, whoever she may be, unless, as I just said, the poisoner has taken the precaution of keeping for herself a few drops of her deadliest poison.'

Madame de Villefort uttered a wild cry, and a hideous and uncontrollable terror spread over her distorted features.

'Oh, do not fear the scaffold, madame,' said the magistrate; 'I will not dishonor you, since that would be dishonor to myself; no, if you have heard me distinctly, you will understand that you are not to die on the scaffold.'

'No, I do not understand; what do you mean?' stammered the unhappy woman, completely overwhelmed.

'I mean that the wife of the first magistrate in the capital shall not, by her infamy, soil an unblemished name; that she shall not, with one blow, dishonor her husband and her child.'

'No, no—oh, no!'

'Well, madame, it will be a laudable action on your part, and I will thank you for it!'

'You will thank me—for what?'

'Bah,' said Beauchamp, 'he played the prince very well.'

'Yes, for you who detest those unhappy princes, Beauchamp, and are always delighted to find fault with them; but not for me, who discover a gentleman by instinct, and who scent out an aristocratic family like a very bloodhound of heraldry.'

'Then you never believed in the principality?'

'Yes.—in the principality, but not in the prince.'

'Not so bad,' said Beauchamp; 'still, I assure you, he passed very well with many people; I saw him at the ministers' houses.'

'Ah, yes,' said Château-Renaud. 'The idea of thinking ministers understand anything about princes!'

'There is something in what you have just said,' said Beauchamp, laughing.

'But,' said Debray to Beauchamp, 'if I spoke to the president, *you* must have been with the procureur.'

'It was an impossibility; for the last week M. de Villefort has secluded himself. It is natural enough; this strange chain of domestic afflictions, followed by the no less strange death of his daughter— '

'Strange? What do you mean, Beauchamp?'

'Oh, yes; do you pretend that all this has been unobserved at the minister's?' said Beauchamp, placing his eye-glass in his eye, where he tried to make it remain.

'My dear sir,' said Château-Renaud, 'allow me to tell you that you do not understand that manœuvre with the eye-glass half so well as Debray. Give him a lesson, Debray.'

'Stay,' said Beauchamp, 'surely I am not deceived.'

'What is it?'

'It is she!'

'Whom do you mean?'

'They said she had left.'

'Mademoiselle Eugénie?' said Château-Renaud; 'has she returned?'

'No, but her mother.'

'Madame Danglars? Nonsense! Impossible!' said Château-Renaud; 'only ten days after the flight of her daughter, and three days from the bankruptcy of her husband?'

Debray coloured slightly, and followed with his eyes the direction of Beauchamp's glance.

'Come,' he said, 'it is only a veiled lady, some foreign princess, perhaps the mother of Cavalcanti. But you were just speaking on a very interesting topic, Beauchamp.'

'I?'

'Yes; you were telling us about the extraordinary death of Valentine.'

'Ah, yes, so I was. But how is it that Madame de Villefort is not here?'

'Poor, dear woman,' said Debray, 'she is no doubt occupied in distilling balm for the hospitals, or in making cosmetics for herself or friends. Do you know she spends two or three thousand crowns a year in this amusement? But I wonder she is not here. I should have been pleased to see her, for I like her very much.'

'And I hate her,' said Château-Renaud.

'Why?'

'I do not know. Why do we love? Why do we hate? I detest her, from antipathy.'

'Or, rather, by instinct.'

'Perhaps so. But to return to what you were saying, Beauchamp.'

'Well, do you know why they die so multitudinously at M. de Villefort's?'

'"Multitudinously" is good,' said Château-Renaud.

'My good fellow, you'll find the word in Saint-Simon.'

'But the thing itself is at M. de Villefort's; but let's get back to the subject.'

'Talking of that,' said Debray, 'Madame was making inquiries about that house, which for the last three months has been hung with black.'

'Who is Madame?' asked Château-Renaud.

'The minister's wife, *pardieu!*'

'Oh, your pardon! I never visit ministers; I leave that to the princes.'

'Really, you were only before sparkling, but now you are brilliant; take compassion on us, or, like Jupiter, you will wither us up.'

'I will not speak again,' said Château-Renaud; 'pray have compassion upon me, and do not take up every word I say.'

And, in her first paroxysm of terror, she had raised herself from the sofa, in the next, stronger very likely than the other, she fell down again on the cushions.

'I asked you,' continued Villefort, in a perfectly calm tone, 'where you conceal the poison by the aid of which you have killed my father-in-law, M. de Saint-Méran, my mother-in-law, Madame de Saint-Méran, Barrois, and my daughter Valentine.'

'Ah, sir,' exclaimed Madame de Villefort, clasping her hands, 'what do you say?'

'It is not for you to interrogate, but to answer.'

'Is it to the judge or to the husband?' stammered Madame de Villefort.

'To the judge—to the judge, madame!' It was terrible to behold the frightful pallor of that woman, the anguish of her look, the trembling of her whole frame.

'Ah, sir,' she muttered, 'ah, sir,' and this was all.

'You do not answer, madame!' exclaimed the terrible interrogator. Then he added, with a smile yet more terrible than his anger, 'It is true, then; you do not deny it!' She moved forward. 'And you cannot deny it!' added Villefort, extending his hand toward her, as though to seize her in the name of justice. 'You have accomplished these different crimes with impudent address, but which could only deceive those whose affections for you blinded them. Since the death of Madame de Saint-Méran, I have known that a poisoner lived in my house. M. d'Avrigny warned me of it. After the death of Barrois my suspicions were directed towards an angel,—those suspicions which, even when there is no crime, are always alive in my heart; but after the death of Valentine, there has been no doubt in my mind, madame, and not only in mine, but in those of others; thus your crime, known by two persons, suspected by many, will soon become public, and, as I told you just now, you no longer speak to the husband, but to the judge.' The young woman hid her face in her hands.

'Oh, sir,' she stammered, 'I beseech you, do not believe appearances.'

'Are you, then, a coward?' cried Villefort, in a contemptuous voice. 'But I have always observed that poisoners were cowards. Can you be a coward, you, who have had the courage to witness the death of two old men and a young girl murdered by you?'

'Sir! sir!'

go out, her bonnet was placed beside her on a chair, and her gloves were on her hands.

'Ah, here you are, monsieur,' she said in her naturally calm voice; 'but how pale you are! Have you been working all night? Why did you not come down to breakfast? Well, will you take me, or shall I take Edward?'

Madame de Villefort had multiplied her questions in order to gain one answer, but to all her inquiries M. de Villefort remained mute and cold as a statue.

'Edward,' said Villefort, fixing an imperious glance on the child, 'go and play in the drawing-room, my dear; I wish to speak to your mamma.'

Madame de Villefort shuddered at the sight of that cold countenance, that resolute tone, and the awfully strange preliminaries. Edward raised his head, looked at his mother, and then, finding that she did not confirm the order, began cutting off the heads of his leaden soldiers.

'Edward,' cried M. de Villefort, so harshly that the child started up from the floor, 'do you hear me?—Go!'

The child, unaccustomed to such treatment, arose, pale and trembling; it would be difficult to say whether his emotion were caused by fear or passion. His father went up to him, took him in his arms, and kissed his forehead.

'Go,' he said: 'go, my child.' Edward ran out.

M. de Villefort went to the door, which he closed behind the child, and bolted.

'Dear me!' said the young woman, endeavouring to read her husband's inmost thoughts, while a smile passed over her countenance which froze the impassibility of Villefort; 'what is the matter?'

'Madame, where do you keep the poison you generally use?' said the magistrate, without any introduction, placing himself between his wife and the door.

Madame de Villefort must have experienced something of the sensation of a bird which, looking up, sees the murderous trap closing over its head.

A hoarse, broken tone, which was neither a cry nor a sigh, escaped from her, while she became deadly pale.

'Monsieur,' she said, 'I—I do not understand you.'

'Come, let us endeavour to get to the end of our story, Beauchamp; I told you that yesterday Madame made inquiries of me upon the subject; enlighten me, and I will then communicate my information to her.'

'Well, gentlemen, the reason people die so multitudinously (I like the word) at M. de Villefort's is that there is an assassin in the house!'

The two young men shuddered, for the same idea had more than once occurred to them.

'And who is the assassin;' they asked together.

'Young Edward!' A burst of laughter from the auditors did not in the least disconcert the speaker, who continued,—'Yes, gentlemen; Edward, the infant phenomenon, who is quite an adept in the art of killing.'

'You are jesting.'

'Not at all. I yesterday engaged a servant, who had just left M. de Villefort—I intend sending him away tomorrow, for he eats so enormously, to make up for the fast imposed upon him by his terror in that house. Well, now listen.'

'We are listening.'

'It appears the dear child has obtained possession of a bottle containing some drug, which he every now and then uses against those who have displeased him. First, M. and Madame de Saint-Méran incurred his displeasure, so he poured out three drops of his elixir—three drops were sufficient; then followed Barrois, the old servant of M. Noirtier, who sometimes rebuffed this little wretch—he therefore received the same quantity of the elixir; the same happened to Valentine, of whom he was jealous; he gave her the same dose as the others, and all was over for her as well as the rest.'

'Why, what nonsense are you telling us?' said Château-Renaud.

'Yes, it is an extraordinary story,' said Beauchamp; 'is it not?'

'It is absurd,' said Debray.

'Ah,' said Beauchamp, 'you doubt me? Well, you can ask my servant, or rather him who will no longer be my servant tomorrow, it was the talk of the house.'

'And this elixir, where is it? what is it?'

'The child conceals it.'

'But where did he find it?'

'In his mother's laboratory.'

'Does his mother then, keep poisons in her laboratory?'

'How can I tell? You are questioning me like a king's attorney. I only repeat what I have been told, and like my informant I can do no more. The poor devil would eat nothing, from fear.'

'It is incredible!'

'No, my dear fellow, it is not at all incredible. You saw the child pass through the Rue Richelieu last year, who amused himself with killing his brothers and sisters by sticking pins in their ears while they slept. The generation who follow us are very precocious.'

'Come, Beauchamp,' said Château-Renaud, 'I will bet anything you do not believe a word of all you have been telling us. But I do not see the Count of Monte Cristo here.'

'He is worn out,' said Debray; 'besides, he could not well appear in public, since he has been the dupe of the Cavalcanti, who, it appears, presented themselves to him with false letters of credit, and cheated him out of 100,000 francs upon the hypothesis of this principality.'

'By the way, M. de Château-Renaud,' asked Beauchamp, 'how is Morrel?'

'*Ma foi*, I have called three times without once seeing him. Still, his sister did not seem uneasy, and told me that though she had not seen him for two or three days, she was sure he was well.'

'Ah, now I think of it, the Count of Monte Cristo cannot appear in the hall,' said Beauchamp.

'Why not?'

'Because he is an actor in the drama.'

'Has he assassinated anyone, then?'

'No, on the contrary, they wished to assassinate him. You know that it was in leaving his house that M. de Caderousse was murdered by his friend Benedetto. You know that the famous waistcoat was found in his house, containing the letter which stopped the signature of the marriage-contract. Do you see the waistcoat? There it is, all blood-stained, on the desk, as a testimony of the crime.'

'Ah, very good.'

'Hush, gentlemen, here is the court; let us go back to our places.'

then rose, and paced his room with a smile it would have been terrible to witness. The chocolate was inoffensive, for M. de Villefort felt no effects.

The breakfast-hour arrived, but M. de Villefort was not at table. The valet re-entered.

'Madame de Villefort wishes to remind you, sir,' he said, 'that eleven o'clock has just struck, and that the trial commences at twelve.'

'Well,' said Villefort, 'what then?'

'Madame de Villefort is dressed; she is quite ready, and wishes to know if she is to accompany you, sir?'

'Where to?'

'To the Palais.'

'What to do?'

'My mistress wishes much to be present at the trial.'

'Ah,' said Villefort, with a startling accent; 'does she wish that?'

The servant drew back and said, 'If you wish to go alone, sir, I will go and tell my mistress.'

Villefort remained silent for a moment, and dented his pale cheeks with his nails.

'Tell your mistress,' he at length answered, 'that I wish to speak to her, and I beg she will wait for me in her own room.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then come to dress and shave me.'

'Directly, sir.'

The valet re-appeared almost instantly, and, having shaved his master, assisted him to dress entirely in black. When he had finished, he said:

'My mistress said she should expect you, sir, as soon as you had finished dressing.'

'I am going to her.'

And Villefort, with his papers under his arm and hat in hand, directed his steps toward the apartment of his wife.

At the door he paused for a moment to wipe his damp, pale brow. He then entered the room. Madame de Villefort was sitting on an ottoman and impatiently turning over the leaves of some newspapers and pamphlets which young Edward, by way of amusing himself, was tearing to pieces before his mother could finish reading them. She was dressed to

and he found his fingers as damp and purple as though they had been dipped in blood.

He opened the window; a bright yellow streak crossed the sky, and seemed to divide in half the poplars, which stood out in black relief on the horizon. In the clover-fields beyond the chestnut-trees, a lark was mounting up to heaven, while pouring out her clear morning song. The damps of the dew bathed the head of Villefort, and refreshed his memory.

'Today,' he said with an effort,—'today the man who holds the blade of justice must strike wherever there is guilt.'

Involuntarily his eyes wandered towards the window of Noirtier's room, where he had seen him the preceding night. The curtain was drawn, and yet the image of his father was so vivid to his mind that he addressed the closed window as though it had been open, and as if through the opening he had beheld the menacing old man.

'Yes,' he murmured,—'yes, be satisfied.'

His head dropped upon his chest, and in this position he paced his study; then he threw himself, dressed as he was, upon a sofa, less to sleep than to rest his limbs, cramped with cold and study. By degrees everyone awoke. Villefort, from his study, heard the successive noises which accompany the life of a house,—the opening and shutting of doors, the ringing of Madame de Villefort's bell, to summon the waiting-maid, mingled with the first shouts of the child, who rose full of the enjoyment of his age. Villefort also rang; his new valet brought him the papers, and with them a cup of chocolate.

'What are you bringing me?' said he.

'A cup of chocolate.'

'I did not ask for it. Who has paid me this attention?'

'My mistress, sir. She said you would have to speak a great deal in the murder case, and that you should take something to keep up your strength;' and the valet placed the cup on the table nearest to the sofa, which was, like all the rest, covered with papers.

The valet then left the room. Villefort looked for an instant with a gloomy expression, then, suddenly, taking it up with a nervous motion, he swallowed its contents at one draught. It might have been thought that he hoped the beverage would be mortal, and that he sought for death to deliver him from a duty which he would rather die than fulfil. He

A noise was heard in the hall; the sergeant called his two patrons with an energetic 'hem!' and the door-keeper appearing, called out with that shrill voice peculiar to his order, ever since the days of Beaumarchais:

'The court, gentlemen!'

Villefort became pale; he understood the old man's meaning.

Noirtier continued to look at the same object, but suddenly his glance was transferred from the wife to the husband, and Villefort himself had to submit to the searching investigation of eyes, which, while changing their direction and even their language, had lost none of their menacing expression. Madame de Villefort, unconscious of the passions that exhausted their fire over her head, at that moment held her son's ball, and was making signs to him to reclaim it with a kiss. Edward begged for a long while, the maternal kiss probably not offering sufficient recompense for the trouble he must take to obtain it; however at length he decided, leaped out of the window into a cluster of heliotropes and daisies, and ran to his mother, his forehead streaming with perspiration. Madame de Villefort wiped his forehead, pressed her lips upon it, and sent him back with the ball in one hand and some bonbons in the other.

Villefort, drawn by an irresistible attraction, like that of the bird to the serpent, walked towards the house. As he approached it, Noirtier's gaze followed him, and his eyes appeared of such a fiery brightness that Villefort felt them pierce to the depths of his heart. In that earnest look might be read a deep reproach, as well as a terrible menace. Then Noirtier raised his eyes to heaven, as though to remind his son of a forgotten oath.

'It is well, sir,' replied Villefort from below,—'it is well; have patience but one day longer; what I have said I will do.'

Noirtier seemed to be calmed by these words, and turned his eyes with indifference to the other side. Villefort violently unbuttoned his greatcoat, which seemed to strangle him, and passing his livid hand across his forehead, entered his study.

The night was cold and still; the family had all retired to rest but Villefort, who alone remained up, and worked till five o'clock in the morning, reviewing the last interrogatories made the night before by the examining magistrates, compiling the depositions of the witnesses, and putting the finishing stroke to the deed of accusation, which was one of the most energetic and best conceived of any he had yet delivered.

The next day, Monday, was the first sitting of the assizes. The morning dawned dull and gloomy, and Villefort saw the dim gray light shine upon the lines he had traced in red ink. The magistrate had slept for a short time while the lamp sent forth its final struggles; its flickerings awoke him,