madness. You will be very kind to me, will you not, Morrel, to make me forget my sorrow in leaving her thus? I think it is kept a secret from grandpapa Noirtier, that the contract is to be signed this evening.

Morrel went also to the notary, who confirmed the news that the contract was to be signed that evening. Then he went to call on Monte Cristo and heard still more. Franz had been to announce the ceremony, and Madame de Villefort had also written to beg the count to excuse her not inviting him; the death of M. de Saint-Méran and the dangerous illness of his widow would cast a gloom over the meeting which she would regret should be shared by the count whom she wished every happiness.

The day before Franz had been presented to Madame de Saint-Méran, who had left her bed to receive him, but had been obliged to return to it immediately after.

It is easy to suppose that Morrel's agitation would not escape the count's penetrating eye. Monte Cristo was more affectionate than ever,—indeed, his manner was so kind that several times Morrel was on the point of telling him all. But he recalled the promise he had made to Valentine, and kept his secret.

The young man read Valentine's letter twenty times in the course of the day. It was her first, and on what an occasion! Each time he read it he renewed his vow to make her happy. How great is the power of a woman who has made so courageous a resolution! What devotion does she deserve from him for whom she has sacrificed everything! How ought she really to be supremely loved! She becomes at once a queen and a wife, and it is impossible to thank and love her sufficiently.

Morrel longed intensely for the moment when he should hear Valentine say, 'Here I am, Maximilian; come and help me.' He had arranged everything for her escape; two ladders were hidden in the clover-field; a cabriolet was ordered for Maximilian alone, without a servant, without lights; at the turning of the first street they would light the lamps, as it would be foolish to attract the notice of the police by too many precautions. Occasionally he shuddered; he thought of the moment when, from the top of that wall, he should protect the descent of his dear Valentine, pressing in his arms for the first time her of whom he had yet only kissed the delicate hand.

When the afternoon arrived and he felt that the hour was drawing near, he wished for solitude, his agitation was extreme; a simple question from a friend would have irritated him. He shut himself in his room, and tried to read, but his eye glanced over the page without understanding a word, and he threw away the book, and for the second time sat down to sketch his plan, the ladders and the fence.

At length the hour drew near. Never did a man deeply in love allow the clocks to go on peacefully. Morrel tormented his so effectually that they struck eight at half-past six. He then said, 'It is time to start; the signature was indeed fixed to take place at nine o'clock, but perhaps Valentine will not wait for that.' Consequently, Morrel, having left the Rue Meslay at half-past eight by his timepiece, entered the clover-field while the clock of Saint-Philippe-du-Roule was striking eight. The horse and cabriolet were concealed behind a small ruin, where Morrel had often waited.

The night gradually drew on, and the foliage in the garden assumed a deeper hue. Then Morrel came out from his hiding-place with a beating heart, and looked through the small opening in the gate; there was yet no one to be seen.

The clock struck half-past eight, and still another half-hour was passed in waiting, while Morrel walked to and fro, and gazed more and more frequently through the opening. The garden became darker still, but in the darkness he looked in vain for the white dress, and in the silence he vainly listened for the sound of footsteps. The house, which was discernible through the trees, remained in darkness, and gave no indication that so important an event as the signature of a marriage-contract was going on. Morrel looked at his watch, which wanted a quarter to ten; but soon the same clock he had already heard strike two or three times rectified the error by striking half-past nine.

This was already half an hour past the time Valentine had fixed. It was a terrible moment for the young man. The slightest rustling of the foliage, the least whistling of the wind, attracted his attention, and drew the perspiration to his brow; then he tremblingly fixed his ladder, and, not to lose a moment, placed his foot on the first step. Amidst all these alternations of hope and fear, the clock struck ten. 'It is impossible,' said Maximilian, 'that the signing of a contract should occupy so long a time without unex-

pected interruptions. I have weighed all the chances, calculated the time required for all the forms; something must have happened.'

And then he walked rapidly to and fro, and pressed his burning forehead against the fence. Had Valentine fainted? or had she been discovered and stopped in her flight? These were the only obstacles which appeared possible to the young man.

The idea that her strength had failed her in attempting to escape, and that she had fainted in one of the paths, was the one that most impressed itself upon his mind. 'In that case,' said he, 'I should lose her, and by my own fault.' He dwelt on this idea for a moment, then it appeared reality. He even thought he could perceive something on the ground at a distance; he ventured to call, and it seemed to him that the wind wafted back an almost inarticulate sigh.

At last the half-hour struck. It was impossible to wait longer, his temples throbbed violently, his eyes were growing dim; he passed one leg over the wall, and in a moment leaped down on the other side. He was on Villefort's premises—had arrived there by scaling the wall. What might be the consequences? However, he had not ventured thus far to draw back. He followed a short distance close under the wall, then crossed a path, hid entered a clump of trees. In a moment he had passed through them, and could see the house distinctly. Then Morrel saw that he had been right in believing that the house was not illuminated. Instead of lights at every window, as is customary on days of ceremony, he saw only a gray mass, which was veiled also by a cloud, which at that moment obscured the moon's feeble light. A light moved rapidly from time to time past three windows of the second floor. These three windows were in Madame de Saint-Méran's room. Another remained motionless behind some red curtains which were in Madame de Villefort's bedroom. Morrel guessed all this. So many times, in order to follow Valentine in thought at every hour in the day, had he made her describe the whole house, that without having seen it he knew it all.

This darkness and silence alarmed Morrel still more than Valentine's absence had done. Almost mad with grief, and determined to venture everything in order to see Valentine once more, and be certain of the misfortune he feared, Morrel gained the edge of the clump of trees, and was going to pass as quickly as possible through the flower-garden, when

'My adored Valentine, words cannot express one half of my satisfaction.'

Valentine had approached, or rather, had placed her lips so near the fence, that they nearly touched those of Morrel, which were pressed against the other side of the cold and inexorable barrier.

'Adieu, then, till we meet again,' said Valentine, tearing herself away. 'I shall hear from you?'

'Yes.'

'Thanks, thanks, dear love, adieu!'

The sound of a kiss was heard, and Valentine fled through the avenue. Morrel listened to catch the last sound of her dress brushing the branches, and of her footstep on the gravel, then raised his eyes with an ineffable smile of thankfulness to heaven for being permitted to be thus loved, and then also disappeared.

The young man returned home and waited all the evening and all the next day without getting any message. It was only on the following day, at about ten o'clock in the morning, as he was starting to call on M. Deschamps, the notary, that he received from the postman a small billet, which he knew to be from Valentine, although he had not before seen her writing. It was to this effect:

> Tears, entreaties, prayers, have availed me nothing. Yesterday, for two hours, I was at the church of Saint-Philippe-du-Roule, and for two hours I prayed most fervently. Heaven is as inflexible as man, and the signature of the contract is fixed for this evening at nine o'clock. I have but one promise and but one heart to give; that promise is pledged to you, that heart is also yours. This evening, then, at a quarter to nine at the gate.
>
> Your betrothed,
>
> VALENTINE DE VILLEFORT.
>
> P.S. My poor grandmother gets worse and worse; yesterday her fever amounted to delirium; today her delirium is almost

curse me—he is inflexible—he will never pardon me. Now listen to me, Maximilian; if by artifice, by entreaty, by accident—in short, if by any means I can delay this marriage, will you wait?'

'Yes, I promise you, as faithfully as you have promised me that this horrible marriage shall not take place, and that if you are dragged before a magistrate or a priest, you will refuse.'

'I promise you by all that is most sacred to me in the world, namely, by my mother.'

'We will wait, then,' said Morrel.

'Yes, we will wait,' replied Valentine, who revived at these words; 'there are so many things which may save unhappy beings such as we are.'

'I rely on you, Valentine,' said Morrel; 'all you do will be well done; only if they disregard your prayers, if your father and Madame de Saint-Méran insist that M. d'Épinay should be called tomorrow to sign the contract— '

'Then you have my promise, Maximilian.'

'Instead of signing— '

'I will go to you, and we will fly; but from this moment until then, let us not tempt Providence, let us not see each other. It is a miracle, it is a providence that we have not been discovered. If we were surprised, if it were known that we met thus, we should have no further resource.'

'You are right, Valentine; but how shall I ascertain?'

'From the notary, M. Deschamps.'

'I know him.'

'And for myself—I will write to you, depend on me. I dread this marriage, Maximilian, as much as you.'

'Thank you, my adored Valentine, thank you; that is enough. When once I know the hour, I will hasten to this spot, you can easily get over this fence with my assistance, a carriage will await us at the gate, in which you will accompany me to my sister's; there living, retired or mingling in society, as you wish, we shall be enabled to use our power to resist oppression, and not suffer ourselves to be put to death like sheep, which only defend themselves by sighs.'

'Yes,' said Valentine, 'I will now acknowledge you are right, Maximilian; and now are you satisfied with your betrothal?' said the young girl sorrowfully.

the sound of a voice, still at some distance, but which was borne upon the wind, reached him. At this sound, as he was already partially exposed to view, he stepped back and concealed himself completely, remaining perfectly motionless.

He had formed his resolution. If it was Valentine alone, he would speak as she passed; if she was accompanied, and he could not speak, still he should see her, and know that she was safe; if they were strangers, he would listen to their conversation, and might understand something of this hitherto incomprehensible mystery.

The moon had just then escaped from behind the cloud which had concealed it, and Morrel saw Villefort come out upon the steps, followed by a gentleman in black. They descended, and advanced towards the clump of trees, and Morrel soon recognized the other gentleman as Doctor d'Avrigny. The young man, seeing them approach, drew back mechanically, until he found himself stopped by a sycamore-tree in the centre of the clump; there he was compelled to remain. Soon the two gentlemen stopped also.

'Ah, my dear doctor,' said the procureur, 'Heaven declares itself against my house! What a dreadful death—what a blow! Seek not to console me; alas, nothing can alleviate so great a sorrow—the wound is too deep and too fresh! Dead, dead!'

The cold sweat sprang to the young man's brow, and his teeth chattered. Who could be dead in that house, which Villefort himself had called accursed?

'My dear M. de Villefort,' replied the doctor, with a tone which redoubled the terror of the young man, 'I have not led you here to console you; on the contrary— '

'What can you mean?' asked the procureur, alarmed.

'I mean that behind the misfortune which has just happened to you, there is another, perhaps, still greater.'

'Can it be possible?' murmured Villefort, clasping his hands. 'What are you going to tell me?'

'Are we quite alone, my friend?'

'Yes, quite; but why all these precautions?'

'Because I have a terrible secret to communicate to you,' said the doctor. 'Let us sit down.'

Villefort fell, rather than seated himself. The doctor stood before him, with one hand placed on his shoulder. Morrel, horrified, supported his head with one hand, and with the other pressed his heart, lest its beatings should be heard. 'Dead, dead!' repeated he within himself; and he felt as if he were also dying.

'Speak, doctor—I am listening,' said Villefort; 'strike—I am prepared for everything!'

'Madame de Saint-Méran was, doubtless, advancing in years, but she enjoyed excellent health.' Morrel began again to breathe freely, which he had not done during the last ten minutes.

'Grief has consumed her,' said Villefort—'yes, grief, doctor! After living forty years with the marquis— '

'It is not grief, my dear Villefort,' said the doctor; 'grief may kill, although it rarely does, and never in a day, never in an hour, never in ten minutes.' Villefort answered nothing, he simply raised his head, which had been cast down before, and looked at the doctor with amazement.

'Were you present during the last struggle?' asked M. d'Avrigny.

'I was,' replied the procureur; 'you begged me not to leave.'

'Did you notice the symptoms of the disease to which Madame de Saint-Méran has fallen a victim?'

'I did. Madame de Saint-Méran had three successive attacks, at intervals of some minutes, each one more serious than the former. When you arrived, Madame de Saint-Méran had already been panting for breath some minutes; she then had a fit, which I took to be simply a nervous attack, and it was only when I saw her raise herself in the bed, and her limbs and neck appear stiffened, that I became really alarmed. Then I understood from your countenance there was more to fear than I had thought. This crisis past, I endeavoured to catch your eye, but could not. You held her hand—you were feeling her pulse—and the second fit came on before you had turned towards me. This was more terrible than the first; the same nervous movements were repeated, and the mouth contracted and turned purple.'

'And at the third she expired.'

'At the end of the first attack I discovered symptoms of tetanus; you confirmed my opinion.'

'Yes, before others,' replied the doctor; 'but now we are alone— '

'No, on my honour,' said Maximilian; 'but that will not affect you. You have done your duty, and your conscience will be at rest.'

Valentine fell on her knees, and pressed her almost bursting heart. 'Maximilian,' said she, 'Maximilian, my friend, my brother on earth, my true husband in heaven, I entreat you, do as I do, live in suffering; perhaps we may one day be united.'

'Adieu, Valentine,' repeated Morrel.

'My God,' said Valentine, raising both her hands to heaven with a sublime expression, 'I have done my utmost to remain a submissive daughter; I have begged, entreated, implored; he has regarded neither my prayers, my entreaties, nor my tears. It is done,' cried she, wiping away her tears, and resuming her firmness, 'I am resolved not to die of remorse, but rather of shame. Live, Maximilian, and I will be yours. Say when shall it be? Speak, command, I will obey.'

Morrel, who had already gone some few steps away, again returned, and pale with joy extended both hands towards Valentine through the opening.

'Valentine,' said he, 'dear Valentine, you must not speak thus—rather let me die. Why should I obtain you by violence, if our love is mutual? Is it from mere humanity you bid me live? I would then rather die.'

'Truly,' murmured Valentine, 'who on this earth cares for me, if he does not? Who has consoled me in my sorrow but he? On whom do my hopes rest? On whom does my bleeding heart repose? On him, on him, always on him! Yes, you are right, Maximilian, I will follow you. I will leave the paternal home, I will give up all. Oh, ungrateful girl that I am,' cried Valentine, sobbing, 'I will give up all, even my dear old grandfather, whom I had nearly forgotten.'

'No,' said Maximilian, 'you shall not leave him. M. Noirtier has evinced, you say, a kind feeling towards me. Well, before you leave, tell him all; his consent would be your justification in God's sight. As soon as we are married, he shall come and live with us, instead of one child, he shall have two. You have told me how you talk to him and how he answers you; I shall very soon learn that language by signs, Valentine, and I promise you solemnly, that instead of despair, it is happiness that awaits us.'

'Oh, see, Maximilian, see the power you have over me, you almost make me believe you; and yet, what you tell me is madness, for my father will

your two families that you should be united. I have no enmity against M. Franz, and promise you the punishment shall not fall on him.'

'On whom, then!—on me?'

'On you? Valentine! Oh, Heaven forbid! Woman is sacred; the woman one loves is holy.'

'On yourself, then, unhappy man; on yourself?'

'I am the only guilty person, am I not?' said Maximilian.

'Maximilian!' said Valentine, 'Maximilian, come back, I entreat you!'

He drew near with his sweet smile, and but for his paleness one might have thought him in his usual happy mood.

'Listen, my dear, my adored Valentine,' said he in his melodious and grave tone; 'those who, like us, have never had a thought for which we need blush before the world, such may read each other's hearts. I never was romantic, and am no melancholy hero. I imitate neither Manfred nor Anthony; but without words, protestations, or vows, my life has entwined itself with yours; you leave me, and you are right in doing so,—I repeat it, you are right; but in losing you, I lose my life. The moment you leave me, Valentine, I am alone in the world. My sister is happily married; her husband is only my brother-in-law, that is, a man whom the ties of social life alone attach to me; no one then longer needs my useless life. This is what I shall do; I will wait until the very moment you are married, for I will not lose the shadow of one of those unexpected chances which are sometimes reserved for us, since M. Franz may, after all, die before that time, a thunderbolt may fall even on the altar as you approach it,—nothing appears impossible to one condemned to die, and miracles appear quite reasonable when his escape from death is concerned. I will, then, wait until the last moment, and when my misery is certain, irremediable, hopeless, I will write a confidential letter to my brother-in-law, another to the prefect of police, to acquaint them with my intention, and at the corner of some wood, on the brink of some abyss, on the bank of some river, I will put an end to my existence, as certainly as I am the son of the most honest man who ever lived in France.' Valentine trembled convulsively; she loosened her hold of the gate, her arms fell by her side, and two large tears rolled down her cheeks. The young man stood before her, sorrowful and resolute.

'Oh, for pity's sake,' said she, 'you will live, will you not?'

'What are you going to say? Oh, spare me!'

'That the symptoms of tetanus and poisoning by vegetable substances are the same.'

M. de Villefort started from his seat, then in a moment fell down again, silent and motionless. Morrel knew not if he were dreaming or awake.

'Listen,' said the doctor; 'I know the full importance of the statement I have just made, and the disposition of the man to whom I have made it.'

'Do you speak to me as a magistrate or as a friend?' asked Villefort.

'As a friend, and only as a friend, at this moment. The similarity in the symptoms of tetanus and poisoning by vegetable substances is so great, that were I obliged to affirm by oath what I have now stated, I should hesitate; I therefore repeat to you, I speak not to a magistrate, but to a friend. And to that friend I say, "During the three-quarters of an hour that the struggle continued, I watched the convulsions and the death of Madame de Saint-Méran, and am thoroughly convinced that not only did her death proceed from poison, but I could also specify the poison."'

'Can it be possible?'

'The symptoms are marked, do you see?—sleep broken by nervous spasms, excitation of the brain, torpor of the nerve centres. Madame de Saint-Méran succumbed to a powerful dose of brucine or of strychnine, which by some mistake, perhaps, has been given to her.'

Villefort seized the doctor's hand.

'Oh, it is impossible,' said he, 'I must be dreaming! It is frightful to hear such things from such a man as you! Tell me, I entreat you, my dear doctor, that you may be deceived.'

'Doubtless I may, but— '

'But?'

'But I do not think so.'

'Have pity on me doctor! So many dreadful things have happened to me lately that I am on the verge of madness.'

'Has anyone besides me seen Madame de Saint-Méran?'

'No.'

'Has anything been sent for from a chemist's that I have not examined?'

'Nothing.'

'Had Madame de Saint-Méran any enemies?'

'Not to my knowledge.'

'Would her death affect anyone's interest?'

'It could not indeed, my daughter is her only heiress—Valentine alone. Oh, if such a thought could present itself, I would stab myself to punish my heart for having for one instant harbored it.'

'Indeed, my dear friend,' said M. d'Avrigny, 'I would not accuse anyone; I speak only of an accident, you understand,—of a mistake,—but whether accident or mistake, the fact is there; it is on my conscience and compels me to speak aloud to you. Make inquiry.'

'Of whom?—how?—of what?'

'May not Barrois, the old servant, have made a mistake, and have given Madame de Saint-Méran a dose prepared for his master?'

'For my father?'

'Yes.'

'But how could a dose prepared for M. Noirtier poison Madame de Saint-Méran?'

'Nothing is more simple. You know poisons become remedies in certain diseases, of which paralysis is one. For instance, having tried every other remedy to restore movement and speech to M. Noirtier, I resolved to try one last means, and for three months I have been giving him brucine; so that in the last dose I ordered for him there were six grains. This quantity, which is perfectly safe to administer to the paralysed frame of M. Noirtier, which has become gradually accustomed to it, would be sufficient to kill another person.'

'My dear doctor, there is no communication between M. Noirtier's apartment and that of Madame de Saint-Méran, and Barrois never entered my mother-in-law's room. In short, doctor although I know you to be the most conscientious man in the world, and although I place the utmost reliance in you, I want, notwithstanding my conviction, to believe this axiom, *errare humanum est*.'

'Is there one of my brethren in whom you have equal confidence with myself?'

'Why do you ask me that?—what do you wish?'

'Send for him; I will tell him what I have seen, and we will consult together, and examine the body.'

'And you will find traces of poison?'

occurrence for a gambler to lose not only what he possesses but also what he has not.'

Morrel pronounced these words with perfect calmness; Valentine looked at him a moment with her large, scrutinizing eyes, endeavouring not to let Morrel discover the grief which struggled in her heart.

'But, in a word, what are you going to do?' asked she.

'I am going to have the honour of taking my leave of you, mademoiselle, solemnly assuring you that I wish your life may be so calm, so happy, and so fully occupied, that there may be no place for me even in your memory.'

'Oh!' murmured Valentine.

'Adieu, Valentine, adieu!' said Morrel, bowing.

'Where are you going?' cried the young girl, extending her hand through the opening, and seizing Maximilian by his coat, for she understood from her own agitated feelings that her lover's calmness could not be real; 'where are you going?'

'I am going, that I may not bring fresh trouble into your family: and to set an example which every honest and devoted man, situated as I am, may follow.'

'Before you leave me, tell me what you are going to do, Maximilian.' The young man smiled sorrowfully.

'Speak, speak!' said Valentine; 'I entreat you.'

'Has your resolution changed, Valentine?'

'It cannot change, unhappy man; you know it must not!' cried the young girl.

'Then adieu, Valentine!'

Valentine shook the gate with a strength of which she could not have been supposed to be possessed, as Morrel was going away, and passing both her hands through the opening, she clasped and wrung them. 'I must know what you mean to do!' said she. 'Where are you going?'

'Oh, fear not,' said Maximilian, stopping at a short distance, 'I do not intend to render another man responsible for the rigorous fate reserved for me. Another might threaten to seek M. Franz, to provoke him, and to fight with him; all that would be folly. What has M. Franz to do with it? He saw me this morning for the first time, and has already forgotten he has seen me. He did not even know I existed when it was arranged by