

'Well, grandpapa,' said Valentine, kneeling before him, and pointing to Maximilian, 'I love him, and will be only his; were I compelled to marry another, I would destroy myself.'

The eyes of the paralytic expressed a multitude of tumultuous thoughts.

'You like M. Maximilian Morrel, do you not, grandpapa?' asked Valentine.

'Yes.'

'And you will protect us, who are your children, against the will of my father?'

Noirtier cast an intelligent glance at Morrel, as if to say, 'perhaps I may.'

Maximilian understood him.

'Mademoiselle,' said he, 'you have a sacred duty to fulfil in your deceased grandmother's room, will you allow me the honour of a few minutes' conversation with M. Noirtier?'

'That is it,' said the old man's eye. Then he looked anxiously at Valentine.

'Do you fear he will not understand?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, we have so often spoken of you, that he knows exactly how I talk to you.' Then turning to Maximilian, with an adorable smile; although shaded by sorrow,—'He knows everything I know,' said she.

Valentine arose, placed a chair for Morrel, requested Barrois not to admit anyone, and having tenderly embraced her grandfather, and sorrowfully taken leave of Morrel, she went away. To prove to Noirtier that he was in Valentine's confidence and knew all their secrets, Morrel took the dictionary, a pen, and some paper, and placed them all on a table where there was a light.

'But first,' said Morrel, 'allow me, sir, to tell you who I am, how much I love Mademoiselle Valentine, and what are my designs respecting her.'

Noirtier made a sign that he would listen.

It was an imposing sight to witness this old man, apparently a mere useless burden, becoming the sole protector, support, and adviser of the lovers who were both young, beautiful, and strong. His remarkably noble and austere expression struck Morrel, who began his story with trembling. He related the manner in which he had become acquainted with Valentine, and how he had loved her, and that Valentine, in her solitude and her misfortune, had accepted the offer of his devotion. He told him his birth,

his position, his fortune, and more than once, when he consulted the look of the paralytic, that look answered, 'That is good, proceed.'

'And now,' said Morrel, when he had finished the first part of his recital, 'now I have told you of my love and my hopes, may I inform you of my intentions?'

'Yes,' signified the old man.

'This was our resolution; a cabriolet was in waiting at the gate, in which I intended to carry off Valentine to my sister's house, to marry her, and to wait respectfully M. de Villefort's pardon.'

'No,' said Noirtier.

'We must not do so?'

'No.'

'You do not sanction our project?'

'No.'

'There is another way,' said Morrel. The old man's interrogative eye said, 'Which?'

'I will go,' continued Maximilian, 'I will seek M. Franz d'Épinay—I am happy to be able to mention this in Mademoiselle de Villefort's absence—and will conduct myself toward him so as to compel him to challenge me.' Noirtier's look continued to interrogate.

'You wish to know what I will do?'

'Yes.'

'I will find him, as I told you. I will tell him the ties which bind me to Mademoiselle Valentine; if he be a sensible man, he will prove it by renouncing of his own accord the hand of his betrothed, and will secure my friendship, and love until death; if he refuse, either through interest or ridiculous pride, after I have proved to him that he would be forcing my wife from me, that Valentine loves me, and will have no other, I will fight with him, give him every advantage, and I shall kill him, or he will kill me; if I am victorious, he will not marry Valentine, and if I die, I am very sure Valentine will not marry him.'

Noirtier watched, with indescribable pleasure, this noble and sincere countenance, on which every sentiment his tongue uttered was depicted, adding by the expression of his fine features all that coloring adds to a sound and faithful drawing.

Still, when Morrel had finished, he shut his eyes several times, which was his manner of saying 'No.'

'No?' said Morrel; 'you disapprove of this second project, as you did of the first?'

'I do,' signified the old man.

'But what then must be done?' asked Morrel. 'Madame de Saint-Méran's last request was, that the marriage might not be delayed; must I let things take their course?' Noirtier did not move. 'I understand,' said Morrel; 'I am to wait.'

'Yes.'

'But delay may ruin our plan, sir,' replied the young man. 'Alone, Valentine has no power; she will be compelled to submit. I am here almost miraculously, and can scarcely hope for so good an opportunity to occur again. Believe me, there are only the two plans I have proposed to you; forgive my vanity, and tell me which you prefer. Do you authorize Mademoiselle Valentine to intrust herself to my honour?'

'No.'

'Do you prefer I should seek M. d'Épinay?'

'No.'

'Whence then will come the help we need—from chance?' resumed Morrel.

'No.'

'From you?'

'Yes.'

'You thoroughly understand me, sir? Pardon my eagerness, for my life depends on your answer. Will our help come from you?'

'Yes.'

'You are sure of it?'

'Yes.' There was so much firmness in the look which gave this answer, no one could, at any rate, doubt his will, if they did his power.

'Oh, thank you a thousand times! But how, unless a miracle should restore your speech, your gesture, your movement, how can you, chained to that armchair, dumb and motionless, oppose this marriage?' A smile lit up the old man's face, a strange smile of the eyes in a paralysed face.

'Then I must wait?' asked the young man.

'Yes.'

'Yes.'

'Can you mean it, Valentine?'

'I have long wished it; he is my only remaining friend and we both need his help,—come.'

'Be careful, Valentine,' said Morrel, hesitating to comply with the young girl's wishes; 'I now see my error—I acted like a madman in coming in here. Are you sure you are more reasonable?'

'Yes,' said Valentine; 'and I have but one scruple,—that of leaving my dear grandmother's remains, which I had undertaken to watch.'

'Valentine,' said Morrel, 'death is in itself sacred.'

'Yes,' said Valentine; 'besides, it will not be for long.'

She then crossed the corridor, and led the way down a narrow staircase to M. Noirtier's room; Morrel followed her on tiptoe; at the door they found the old servant.

'Barrois,' said Valentine, 'shut the door, and let no one come in.' She passed first.

Noirtier, seated in his chair, and listening to every sound, was watching the door; he saw Valentine, and his eye brightened. There was something grave and solemn in the approach of the young girl which struck the old man, and immediately his bright eye began to interrogate.

'Dear grandfather,' said she hurriedly, 'you know poor grandamma died an hour since, and now I have no friend in the world but you.'

His expressive eyes evinced the greatest tenderness.

'To you alone, then, may I confide my sorrows and my hopes?'

The paralytic motioned 'Yes.'

Valentine took Maximilian's hand.

'Look attentively, then, at this gentleman.'

The old man fixed his scrutinizing gaze with slight astonishment on Morrel.

'It is M. Maximilian Morrel,' said she; 'the son of that good merchant of Marseilles, whom you doubtless recollect.'

'Yes,' said the old man.

'He brings an irreproachable name, which Maximilian is likely to render glorious, since at thirty years of age he is a captain, an officer of the Legion of honour.'

The old man signified that he recollected him.

'Your servants,' said he, 'who were repeating the whole of the sorrowful story; from them I learned it all.'

'But it was risking the failure of our plan to come up here, love.'

'Forgive me,' replied Morrel; 'I will go away.'

'No,' said Valentine, 'you might meet someone; stay.'

'But if anyone should come here—'

The young girl shook her head. 'No one will come,' said she; 'do not fear, there is our safeguard,' pointing to the bed.

'But what has become of M. d'Épinay?' replied Morrel. 'M. Franz arrived to sign the contract just as my dear grandmother was dying.'

'Alas,' said Morrel with a feeling of selfish joy; for he thought this death would cause the wedding to be postponed indefinitely.

'But what redoubles my sorrow,' continued the young girl, as if this feeling was to receive its immediate punishment, 'is that the poor old lady, on her death-bed, requested that the marriage might take place as soon as possible; she also, thinking to protect me, was acting against me.'

'Hark!' said Morrel. They both listened; steps were distinctly heard in the corridor and on the stairs.

'It is my father, who has just left his study.'

'To accompany the doctor to the door,' added Morrel.

'How do you know it is the doctor?' asked Valentine, astonished.

'I imagined it must be,' said Morrel.

Valentine looked at the young man; they heard the street door close, then M. de Villefort locked the garden door, and returned upstairs. He stopped a moment in the anteroom, as if hesitating whether to turn to his own apartment or into Madame de Saint-Méran's; Morrel concealed himself behind a door; Valentine remained motionless, grief seeming to deprive her of all fear. M. de Villefort passed on to his own room.

'Now,' said Valentine, 'you can neither go out by the front door nor by the garden.'

Morrel looked at her with astonishment.

'There is but one way left you that is safe,' said she; 'it is through my grandfather's room.' She rose. 'Come,' she added.

'Where?' asked Maximilian.

'To my grandfather's room.'

'I in M. Noirrier's apartment?'

'But the contract?' The same smile returned. 'Will you assure me it shall not be signed?'

'Yes,' said Noirrier.

'The contract shall not be signed!' cried Morrel. 'Oh, pardon me, sir; I can scarcely realize so great a happiness. Will they not sign it?'

'No,' said the paralytic. Notwithstanding that assurance, Morrel still hesitated. This promise of an impotent old man was so strange that, instead of being the result of the power of his will, it might emanate from enfeebled organs. Is it not natural that the madman, ignorant of his folly, should attempt things beyond his power? The weak man talks of burdens he can raise, the timid of giants he can confront, the poor of treasures he spends, the most humble peasant, in the height of his pride, calls himself Jupiter. Whether Noirrier understood the young man's indecision, or whether he had not full confidence in his docility, he looked uneasily at him.

'What do you wish, sir?' asked Morrel; 'that I should renew my promise of remaining tranquil?' Noirrier's eye remained fixed and firm, as if to imply that a promise did not suffice; then it passed from his face to his hands.

'Shall I swear to you, sir?' asked Maximilian.

'Yes,' said the paralytic with the same solemnity. Morrel understood that the old man attached great importance to an oath. He extended his hand.

'I swear to you, on my honour,' said he, 'to await your decision respecting the course I am to pursue with M. d'Épinay.'

'That is right,' said the old man.

'Now,' said Morrel, 'do you wish me to retire?'

'Yes.'

'Without seeing Mademoiselle Valentine?'

'Yes.'

Morrel made a sign that he was ready to obey. 'But,' said he, 'first allow me to embrace you as your daughter did just now.' Noirrier's expression could not be understood. The young man pressed his lips on the same spot, on the old man's forehead, where Valentine's had been. Then he bowed a second time and retired.

He found outside the door the old servant, to whom Valentine had given directions. Morrel was conducted along a dark passage, which led to a little door opening on the garden, soon found the spot where he had entered, with the assistance of the shrubs gained the top of the wall, and by his ladder was in an instant in the clover-field where his cabriolet was still waiting for him. He got in it, and thoroughly wearied by so many emotions, arrived about midnight in the Rue Meslay, threw himself on his bed and slept soundly.

way, a sob indicated the direction he was to take. He turned back, a door partly open enabled him to see his road, and to hear the voice of one in sorrow. He pushed the door open and entered. At the other end of the room, under a white sheet which covered it, lay the corpse, still more alarming to Morrel since the account he had so unexpectedly overheard. By its side, on her knees, and with her head buried in the cushion of an easy-chair, was Valentine, trembling and sobbing, her hands extended above her head, clasped and stiff. She had turned from the window, which remained open, and was praying in accents that would have affected the most unfeeling; her words were rapid, incoherent, unintelligible, for the burning weight of grief almost stopped her utterance.

The moon shining through the open blinds made the lamp appear to burn paler, and cast a sepulchral hue over the whole scene. Morrel could not resist this; he was not exemplary for piety, he was not easily impressed, but Valentine suffering, weeping, wringing her hands before him, was more than he could bear in silence. He sighed, and whispered a name, and the head bathed in tears and pressed on the velvet cushion of the chair—a head like that of a Magdalen by Correggio—was raised and turned towards him. Valentine perceived him without betraying the least surprise. A heart overwhelmed with one great grief is insensible to minor emotions. Morrel held out his hand to her. Valentine, as her only apology for not having met him, pointed to the corpse under the sheet, and began to sob again.

Neither dared for some time to speak in that room. They hesitated to break the silence which death seemed to impose; at length Valentine ventured.

‘My friend,’ said she, ‘how came you here? Alas, I would say you are welcome, had not death opened the way for you into this house.’

‘Valentine,’ said Morrel with a trembling voice, ‘I had waited since half-past eight, and did not see you come; I became uneasy, leaped the wall, found my way through the garden, when voices conversing about the fatal event—’

‘What voices?’ asked Valentine. Morrel shuddered as he thought of the conversation of the doctor and M. de Villefort, and he thought he could see through the sheet the extended hands, the stiff neck, and the purple lips.

As he thought thus, he looked alternately at the window with red curtains and the three windows with white curtains. The light had almost disappeared from the former; doubtless Madame de Villefort had just put out her lamp, and the nightlamp alone reflected its dull light on the window. At the extremity of the building, on the contrary, he saw one of the three windows open. A wax-light placed on the mantle-piece threw some of its pale rays without, and a shadow was seen for one moment on the balcony. Morrel shuddered; he thought he heard a sob.

It cannot be wondered at that his mind, generally so courageous, but now disturbed by the two strongest human passions, love and fear, was weakened even to the indulgence of superstitious thoughts. Although it was impossible that Valentine should see him, hidden as he was, he thought he heard the shadow at the window call him; his disturbed mind told him so. This double error became an irresistible reality, and by one of the incomprehensible transports of youth, he bounded from his hiding-place, and with two strides, at the risk of being seen, at the risk of alarming Valentine, at the risk of being discovered by some exclamation which might escape the young girl, he crossed the flower-garden, which by the light of the moon resembled a large white lake, and having passed the rows of orange-trees which extended in front of the house, he reached the step, ran quickly up and pushed the door, which opened without offering any resistance.

Valentine had not seen him. Her eyes, raised towards heaven, were watching a silvery cloud gliding over the azure, its form that of a shadow mounting towards heaven. Her poetic and excited mind pictured it as the soul of her grandmother.

Meanwhile, Morrel had traversed the anteroom and found the staircase, which, being carpeted, prevented his approach being heard, and he had regained that degree of confidence that the presence of M. de Villefort even would not have alarmed him. He was quite prepared for any such encounter. He would at once approach Valentine's father and acknowledge all, begging Villefort to pardon and sanction the love which united two fond and loving hearts. Morrel was mad.

Happily he did not meet anyone. Now, especially, did he find the description Valentine had given of the interior of the house useful to him; he arrived safely at the top of the staircase, and while he was feeling his

‘No, I did not say of poison, but we can prove what was the state of the body; we shall discover the cause of her sudden death, and we shall say, “Dear Villefort, if this thing has been caused by negligence, watch over your servants; if from hatred, watch your enemies.”’

‘What do you propose to me, d’Avrigny?’ said Villefort in despair; ‘so soon as another is admitted into our secret, an inquest will become necessary; and an inquest in my house—impossible! Still,’ continued the procureur, looking at the doctor with uneasiness, ‘if you wish it—if you demand it, why then it shall be done. But, doctor, you see me already so grieved—how can I introduce into my house so much scandal, after so much sorrow? My wife and my daughter would die of it! And I, doctor—you know a man does not arrive at the post I occupy—one has not been king’s attorney twenty-five years without having amassed a tolerable number of enemies; mine are numerous. Let this affair be talked of, it will be a triumph for them, which will make them rejoice, and cover me with shame. Pardon me, doctor, these worldly ideas; were you a priest I should not dare tell you that, but you are a man, and you know mankind. Doctor, pray recall your words; you have said nothing, have you?’

‘My dear M. de Villefort,’ replied the doctor, ‘my first duty is to humanity. I would have saved Madame de Saint-Méran, if science could have done it; but she is dead and my duty regards the living. Let us bury this terrible secret in the deepest recesses of our hearts; I am willing, if anyone should suspect this, that my silence on the subject should be imputed to my ignorance. Meanwhile, sir, watch always—watch carefully, for perhaps the evil may not stop here. And when you have found the culprit, if you find him, I will say to you, “You are a magistrate, do as you will!”’

‘I thank you, doctor,’ said Villefort with indescribable joy; ‘I never had a better friend than you.’ And, as if he feared Doctor d’Avrigny would recall his promise, he hurried him towards the house.

When they were gone, Morrel ventured out from under the trees, and the moon shone upon his face, which was so pale it might have been taken for that of a ghost.

‘I am manifestly protected in a most wonderful, but most terrible manner,’ said he; ‘but Valentine, poor girl, how will she bear so much sorrow?’