

Le Monsieur De La Petite Dame

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It was Madame who first entered the box, and Madame was bright with youthful bloom, bright with jewels, and, moreover, a beauty. She was a little creature, with childishly large eyes, a low, white forehead, reddish-brown hair, and Greek nose and mouth.

"Clearly," remarked the old lady in the box opposite, "not a Frenchwoman. Her youth is too girlish, and she has too petulant an air of indifference."

This old lady in the box opposite was that venerable and somewhat severe aristocrat, Madame de Castro, and having gazed for a moment or so a little disapprovingly at the new arrival, she turned her glasses to the young beauty's companion and uttered an exclamation.

It was at Monsieur she was looking now. Monsieur had followed his wife closely, bearing her fan and bouquet and wrap, and had silently seated himself a little behind her and in the shadow.

"Ciel!" cried Madame de Castro, "what an ugly little man!"

It was not an unnatural exclamation. Fate had not been so kind to the individual referred to as she might have been--in fact she had been definitely cruel. He was small of figure, insignificant, dark, and wore a patient sphynx-like air of gravity. He did not seem to speak or move, simply sat in the shadow holding his wife's belongings, apparently almost entirely unnoticed by her.

"I don't know him at all," said Madame de Castro; "though that is not to be wondered at, since I have exiled myself long enough to forget and be forgotten by half Paris. What is his name?"

The gentleman at her side--a distinguished-looking old young man, with a sarcastic smile--began with the smile, and ended with a half laugh.

"They call him," he replied, "Le Monsieur de la petite Dame. His name is Villefort."

"Le Monsieur de la petite Dame," repeated Madame, testily. "That is a title of new Paris--the Paris of your Americans and English. It is villainously ill-bred."

M. Renard's laugh receded into the smile again, and the smile became of double significance.

"True," he acquiesced, "but it is also villainously apropos. Look for yourself."

Madame did so, and her next query, after she had dropped her glass again, was a sharp one.

"Who is she--the wife?"

"She is what you are pleased to call one of our Americans! You know the class,"--with a little wave of the hand,--"rich, unconventional, comfortable people, who live well and dress well, and have an incomprehensibly naïve way of going to impossible places and doing impossible things by way of enjoyment. Our fair friend there, for instance, has probably been round the world upon several occasions, and is familiar with a number of places and objects of note fearful to contemplate. They came here as tourists, and became fascinated with European life. The most overwhelming punishment which could be inflicted upon that excellent woman, the mother, would be that she should be compelled to return to her New York, or Philadelphia, or Boston, whichever it may be."

"Humph!" commented Madame. "But you have not told me the name."

"Madame Villefort's? No, not yet. It was Trent--Mademoiselle Bertha Trent."

"She is not twenty yet," said Madame, in a queer, grumbling tone. "What did she marry that man for?"

"God knows," replied M. Renard, not too devoutly, "Paris does not."

For some reason best known to herself, Madame de Castro looked angry. She was a shrewd old person, with strong whims of her own, even at seventy. She quite glared at the pretty American from under her bushy eyebrows.

"Le Monsieur de la petite Dame!" she fumed. "I tell you it is low--low to give a man such names."

"Oh!" returned Renard, shrugging his shoulders, "we did not give it to him. It was an awkward servant who dubbed him so at first. She was new to her position, and forgot his name, and being asked who had arrived, stumbled upon this bon mot: 'Un monsieur, Madame--le monsieur de la petite dame,'-

-and, being repeated and tossed lightly from hand to hand, it has become at last an established witticism, albeit bandied under breath."

It was characteristic of the august De Castro that during the remainder of the evening's entertainment she should occupy herself more with her neighbors than with the opera. She aroused M. Renard to a secret ecstasy of mirth by the sharp steadiness of her observation of the inmates of the box opposite to them. She talked about them, too, in a tone not too well modulated, criticising the beautifully dressed little woman, her hair, her eyes, her Greek nose and mouth, and, more than all, her indifferent expression and her manner of leaning upon the edge of her box and staring at the stage as if she did not care for, and indeed scarcely saw, what was going on upon it.

"That is the way with your American beauties," she said. "They have no respect for things. Their people spoil them--their men especially. They consider themselves privileged to act as their whims direct. They have not the gentle timidity of Frenchwomen. What French girl would have the sang froid to sit in one of the best boxes of the Nouvelle Opéra and regard, with an actual air of ennui, such a performance as this? She does not hear a word that is sung."

"And we--do we hear?" bantered M. Renard.

"Pouf!" cried Madame. "We! We are world-dried and weather-beaten. We have not a worm-eaten emotion between us. I am seventy, and you, who are thirty-five, are the elder of the two. Bah! At that girl's age I had the heart of a dove."

"But that is long ago," murmured M. Renard, as if to himself. It was quite human that he should slightly resent being classed with an unamiable grenadier of seventy.

"Yes!" with considerable asperity. "Fifty years!" Then, with harsh voice and withered face melted suddenly into softness quite naïve, "Mon Dieu!" she said, "Fifty years since Arsène whispered into my ear at my first opera, that he saw tears in my eyes!"

It was at this instant that there appeared in the Villefort box a new figure,--that of a dark, slight young man of graceful movements,--in fact, a young man of intensely striking appearance. M. Villefort rose to receive him with serious courtesy, but the pretty American was not so gracious. Not until he had seated himself at her side and spoken to her did she turn her head and

permit her eyes simply to rest upon his face.

M. Renard smiled again.

"Enter," he remarked in a low tone,--"enter M. Ralph Edmondstone, the cousin of Madame."

His companion asked no questions, but he proceeded, returning to his light and airy tone:--

"M. Ralph Edmondstone is a genius," he said. "He is an artist, he is a poet, he is also a writer of subtile prose. His sonnets to Euphrasie--in the day of Euphrasie--awakened the admiration of the sternest critics: they were so tender, so full of purest fire! Some of the same critics also could scarcely choose between these and his songs to Aglæ in her day, or Camille in hers. He is a young man of fine fancies, and possesses the amiable quality of being invariably passionately in earnest. As he was serious in his sentiments yesterday, so he will be to-morrow, so he is to-day."

"To-day!" echoed Madame de Castro. "Nonsense!"

Madame Villefort did not seem to talk much. It was M. Ralph Edmondstone who conversed, and that, too, with so much of the charm of animation that it was pleasurable even to be a mere looker-on.

One involuntarily strained one's ears to catch a sentence,--he was so eagerly absorbed, so full of rapid, gracefully unconscious and unconventional gesture.

"I wonder what he is saying?" Madame de Castro was once betrayed into exclaiming.

"Something metaphysical, about a poem, or a passage of music, or a picture,--or perhaps his soul," returned M. Renard. "His soul is his strong point,--he pets it and wonders at it. He puts it through its paces. And yet, singularly enough, he is never ridiculous--only fanciful and naïve. It is his soul which so fascinates women."

Whether this last was true of other women or not, Madame Villefort scarcely appeared fascinated. As she listened, her eyes still rested upon his eager mobile face, but with a peculiar expression,--an expression of critical attention, and yet one which somehow detracted from her look of youth, as if she weighed his words as they fell from his lips and classified them,

without any touch of the enthusiasm which stirred within himself.

Suddenly she rose from her seat and addressed her husband, who immediately rose also. Then she spoke to M. Edmondstone, and without more ado, the three left the box,--the young beauty, a little oddly, rather followed than accompanied by her companions,--at the recognition of which circumstance Madame de Castro uttered a series of sharp ejaculations of disapproval.

"Bah! Bah!" she cried. "She is too young for such airs!--as if she were Madame l'Impératrice herself! Take me to my carriage. I am tired also."

Crossing the pavement with M. Renard, they passed the carriage of the Villeforts. Before its open door stood M. Villefort and Edmondstone, and the younger man, with bared head, bent forward speaking to his cousin.

"If I come to-morrow," he was saying, "you will be at home, Bertha?"

"Yes."

"Then, good-night,"--holding out his hand,--"only I wish so that you would go to the Aylmers instead of home. That protégée of Mrs. Aylmer's--the little singing girl--would touch your heart with her voice. On hearing her, one thinks at once of some shy wild bird high in a clear sky,--far enough above earth to have forgotten to be timid."

"Yes," came quietly from the darkness within the carriage; "but I am too tired to care about voices just now. Good-night, Ralph!"

M. Renard's reply of "God knows, Paris does not," to Madame de Castro's query as to why Madame Villefort had married her husband, contained an element of truth, and yet there were numbers of Parisian-Americans, more especially the young, well-looking, and masculine, who at the time the marriage had taken place had been ready enough with sardonic explanations.

"There are women who are avaricious enough to sell their souls," they cried; "and the maternal Trent is one of them. The girl is only to blame for allowing herself to be bullied into the match."

"But the weak place in this argument," said M. Renard, "is, that the people are too rich to be greatly influenced by money. If there had been a title,--but there was no title."

Neither did Bertha Trent comport herself like a cowed creature. She took her place in society as Madame Villefort in such a manner as could give rise to no comment whatever; only one or two of the restless inquisitive wondered if they had not been, mistaken in her. She was, as I have said already, a childishly small and slight creature,--the kind of woman to touch one with suggestions of helplessness and lack of will; and yet, notwithstanding this, a celebrated artist--a shrewd, worldly-wise old fellow--who had painted her portrait, had complained that he was not satisfied with it because he had not done justice to "the obstinate endurance in her eye."

It was to her cousin, Ralph Edmondstone, he had said this with some degree of testiness, and Edmondstone had smiled and answered:--

"What! have you found that out? Few people do."

At the time of the marriage Edmondstone had been in Rome singeing his wings in the light of the eyes of a certain Marchesa who was his latest poetic passion. She was not his first fancy, nor would she be his last, but she had power enough for the time being to have satisfied the most exacting of women.

He was at his banker's when he heard the news spoken of as the latest item from American Paris, and his start and exclamation of disgust drew forth some cynical after-comment from men who envied him.

"Who?" he said, with indiscreet impatience. "That undersized sphynx of a Villefort? Faugh!"

But insignificant though he might be, it was M. Villefort who had won, and if he was nothing more, he was at least a faithful attendant. Henceforth, those who saw his wife invariably saw him also,--driving with her in her carriage, riding with her courageously if ungracefully, standing or seated near her in the shadow of her box at the Nouvelle Opéra, silent, impassive, grave, noticeable only through the contrast he afforded to her girlish beauty and bloom.

"Always there!" commented a sharp American belle of mature years, "like an ugly little conscience."

Edmondstone's first meeting with his cousin after his return to Paris was accidental. He had rather put off visiting her, and one night, entering a crowded room, he found himself standing behind a girl's light figure and

staring at an abundance of reddish-brown hair. When, almost immediately the pretty head to which this hair belonged turned with a slow, yet involuntary-looking movement toward him, he felt that he became excited without knowing why.

"Ah, Bertha!" he exclaimed.

She smiled a little and held out her hand, and he immediately became conscious of M. Villefort being quite near and regarding him seriously.

It was the perverseness of fate that he should find in Bertha Villefort even more than he had once seen in Bertha Trent, and there had been a time when he had seen a great deal in Bertha Trent. In the Trent household he had been a great favorite. No social evening or family festivity had seemed complete without his presence. The very children had felt that they had a claim upon his good-humor, and his tendency to break forth into whimsical frolic. Good Mrs. Trent had been wont to scold him and gossip with him. He had read his sonnets and metaphysical articles to Bertha, and occasionally to the rest; in fact, his footing in the family was familiar and firmly established. But since her marriage Bertha had become a little incomprehensible, and on that account a little more interesting. He was sure she had developed, but could not make out in what direction. He found occasion to reproach her sometimes with the changes he found in her.

"There are times when I hardly know you," he would say, "you are so finely orthodox and well controlled. It was not so with you once, Bertha. Don't--don't become that terrible thing, a fine lady, and worse still, a fine lady who is désillusionnée"

It baffled him that she never appeared much moved, by his charges. Certainly she lived the life of a "fine lady,"--a brilliant life, a luxurious one, a life full of polite dissipation. Once, when in a tenderly fraternal mood, he reproached her with this also, she laughed at him frankly.

"It is absinthe," she said. "It is my absinthe at least, and who does not drink a little absinthe--of one kind or another?"

He was sincerely convinced that from this moment he understood and had the right to pity and watch over her. He went oftener to see her. In her presence he studied her closely, absent he brooded over her. He became impatiently intolerant of M. Villefort, and prone to condemn him, he scarcely knew for what.

"He has no dignity--no perception," was his parental decision. "He has not even the delicacy to love her, or he would have the tenderness to sacrifice his own feelings and leave her to herself. I could do it for a woman I loved."

But M. Villefort was always there,--gravely carrying the shawls, picking up handkerchiefs, and making himself useful.

"Imbécile!" muttered M. Renard under cover of his smile and his mustache, as he stood near his venerable patroness the first time she met the Villeforts.

"Blockhead!" stealthily ejaculated that amiable aristocrat. But though she looked grimly at M. Villefort, M. Renard was uncomfortably uncertain that it was he to whom she referred.

"Go and bring them to me," she commanded, "Go and bring them to me before some one else engages them. I want to talk to that girl."

It was astonishing how agreeable she made herself to her victims when she had fairly entrapped them. Bertha hesitated a little before accepting her offer of a seat at her side, but once seated she found herself oddly amused. When Madame de Castro chose to rake the embers of her seventy years, many a lively coal discovered itself among the ashes.

Seeing the two women together, Edmondstone shuddered in fastidious protest.

"How could you laugh at that detestable old woman?" he exclaimed on encountering Bertha later in the evening. "I wonder that M. Villefort would permit her to talk to you. She is a wicked, cynical creature, who has the hardihood to laugh at her sins instead of repenting of them."

"Perhaps that is the reason she is so amusing," said Bertha.

Edmondstone answered her with gentle mournfulness.

"What!" he said. "Have you begun to say such things? You too, Bertha"--

The laugh with which she stopped him was both light and hard.

"Where is M. Villefort?" she asked. "I have actually not seen him for fifteen minutes. Is it possible that Madame de Castro has fascinated him into forgetting me?"

Edmondstone went to his hotel that night in a melancholy mood. He even lay awake to think what a dreary mistake his cousin's marriage was. She had been such a tender and easily swayed little soul as a girl, and now it really seemed as if she was hardening into a woman of the world. In the old times he had been wont to try his sonnets upon Bertha as a musician tries his chords upon his most delicate instrument. Even now he remembered certain fine, sensitive expressions of hers which had thrilled him beyond measure.

"How could she marry such a fellow as that--how could she?" he groaned. "What does it mean? It must mean something."

He was pale and heavy-eyed when he wandered round to the Villeforts' the following morning. M. Villefort was sitting with Bertha and reading aloud. He stopped to receive their visitor punctiliously and inquire after his health.

"M. Edmondstone cannot have slept well," he remarked.

"I did not sleep at all," Edmondstone answered, "and naturally have a headache."

Bertha pointed to a wide lounge of the pouf order.

"Then go to sleep now," she said; "M. Villefort will read. When I have a headache he often reads me to sleep, and I am always better on awaking."

Involuntarily Edmondstone half frowned. Absurdly enough, he resented in secret this amiability on the part of M. Villefort toward his own wife. He was quite prepared to be severe upon the reading, but was surprised to be compelled to acknowledge that M. Villefort read wondrously well, and positively with hints of delicate perception. His voice was full and yet subtly flexible. Edmondstone tried to protest against this also, but uselessly. Finally he was soothed, and from being fretfully wide-awake suddenly passed into sleep as Bertha had commanded. How long his slumber lasted he could not have told. All at once he found himself aroused and wide-awake as ever. His headache had departed; his every sense seemed to have gained keenness. M. Villefort's voice had ceased, and for a few seconds utter, dead silence reigned. Then he heard the fire crackling, and shortly afterward a strange, startling sound--a sharp, gasping sob!

The pang which seized upon him was strong indeed. In one moment he seemed to learn a thousand things by intuition--to comprehend her, himself,

the past. Before he moved he knew that Villefort was not in the room, and he had caught a side glimpse of the pretty blue of Bertha's dress.

But he had not imagined the face he saw when he turned his head to look at her. She sat in a rigid attitude, leaning against the high cushioned back of her chair, her hands clasped above her head. She stared at the fire with eyes wide and strained with the agony of tears unshed, and amid the rush of all other emotions he was peculiarly conscious of being touched by the minor one of his recognition of her look of extreme youth--the look which had been wont to touch people in the girl, Bertha Trent. He had meant to speak clearly, but his voice was only a loud whisper when he sprang up, uttering her name.

"Bertha! Bertha! Bertha!" as he flung himself upon his knees at her side.

Her answer was an actual cry, and yet it reached no higher pitch than his own intense whisper.

"I thought you were asleep?"

Her hands fell and he caught them. His sad impassioned face bowed itself upon her palms.

"I am awake, Bertha," he groaned. "I am awake--at last."

She regarded him with a piteous, pitying glance. She knew him with a keener, sadder knowledge than he would ever comprehend; but she did not under-estimate the depth of his misery at this one overwhelming moment. He was awake indeed and saw what he had lost.

"If you could but have borne with me a little longer," he said. "If I had only not been so shallow and so blind. If you could but have borne with me a little longer!"

"If I could but have borne with myself a little longer," she answered. "If I could but have borne a little longer with my poor, base pride! Because I suffered myself, I have made another suffer too."

He knew she spoke of M. Villefort, and the thought jarred upon him.

"He does not suffer," he said. "He is not of the fibre to feel pain."

And he wondered why she shrank from him a little and answered with a sad

bitterness:--

"Are you sure? You did not know that!"--

"Forgive me," he said brokenly, the face he lifted, haggard with his unhappiness. "Forgive me, for I have lost so much."

She wasted few words and no tears. The force and suddenness of his emotion and her own had overborne her into this strange unmeant confession; but her mood was unlike his,--it was merely receptive. She listened to his unavailing regrets, but told him little of her own past.

"It does not matter," she said drearily. "It is all over. Let it rest. The pain of to-day and tomorrow is enough for us. We have borne yesterday; why should we want it back again?"

And when they parted she said only one thing of the future:--

"There is no need that we should talk. There is nothing for us beyond this point. We can only go back. We must try to forget--and be satisfied with our absinthe."

Instead of returning to his hotel, Edmondstone found his way to the Champs Élysées, and finally to the Bois. He was too wretched to have any purpose in his wanderings. He walked rapidly, looking straight before him and seeing nobody. He scarcely understood his own fierce emotions. Hitherto his fancies had brought him a vague rapture; now he experienced absolute anguish. Every past experience had become trivial. What happiness is so keen as one's briefest pain? As he walked he lived again the days he had thrown away. He remembered a thousand old, yet new, phases of Bertha's girlhood. He thought of times when she had touched or irritated or pleased him. When he had left Paris for Rome she had not bidden him good-by. Jenny, her younger sister, had told him that she was not well.

"If I had seen her then," he cried inwardly, "I might have read her heart--and my own."

M. Renard, riding a very tall horse in the Bois, passed him and raised his eyebrows at the sight of his pallor and his fagged yet excited look.

"There will be a new sonnet," he said to himself. "A sonnet to Despair, or Melancholy, or Loss."

Afterward, when society became a little restive and eager, M. Renard looked on with sardonic interest.

"That happy man, M. Villefort," he said to Madame de Castro, "is a good soul--a good soul. He has no small jealous follies," and his smile was scarcely a pleasant thing to see.

"There is nothing for us beyond this past," Bertha had said, and Edmondstone had agreed with her hopelessly.

But he could not quite break away. Sometimes for a week the Villeforts missed him, and then again they saw him every day. He spent his mornings with them, joined them in their drives, at their opera-box, or at the entertainments of their friends. He also fell into his old place in the Trent household, and listened with a vague effort at interest to Mrs. Trent's maternal gossip about the boys' college expenses, Bertha's household, and Jenny's approaching social *début*. He was continually full of a feverish longing to hear of Bertha,--to hear her name spoken, her *ingoings* and *out-comings* discussed, her looks, her belongings.

"The fact is," said Mrs. Trent, as the winter advanced, "I am anxious about Bertha. She does not look strong. I don't know why I have not seen it before, but all at once I found out yesterday that she is really thin. She was always slight and even a little fragile, but now she is actually thin. One can see the little bones in her wrists and fingers. Her rings and her bracelets slip about quite loosely."

"And talking of being thin, mother," cried Jenny, who was a frank, bright sixteen-year-old, "look at cousin Ralph himself. He has little hollows in his cheeks, and his eyes are as much too big as Bertha's. Is the sword wearing out the scabbard, Ralph? That is what they always say about geniuses, you know."

"Ralph has not looked well for some time," said Mrs. Trent. "As for Bertha, I think I shall scold her a little, and M. Villefort too. She has been living too exciting a life. She is out continually. She must stay at home more and rest. It is rest she needs."

"If you tell Arthur that Bertha looks ill"--began Jenny.

Edmondstone turned toward her sharply. "Arthur!" he repeated. "Who is Arthur?"

Mrs. Trent answered with a comfortable laugh.

"It is M. Villefort's name," she said, "though none of us call him Arthur but Jenny. Jenny and he are great friends."

"I like him better than any one else," said Jenny stoutly. "And I wish to set a good example to Bertha, who never calls him anything but M. Villefort, which is absurd. Just as if they had been introduced to each other about a week ago."

"I always hear him address her as Madame Villefort," reflected Edmondstone, somewhat gloomily.

"Oh yes!" answered Jenny, "that is his French way of studying her fancies. He would consider it taking an unpardonable liberty to call her 'Bertha,' since she only favors him with 'M. Villefort.' I said to him only the other day, 'Arthur, you are the oddest couple! You're so grand and well-behaved, I cannot imagine you scolding Bertha a little, and I have never seen you kiss her since you were married.' I was half frightened after I had said it. He started as if he had been shot, and turned as pale as death. I really felt as if I had done something frightfully improper."

"The French are so different from the Americans," said Mrs. Trent, "particularly those of M. Villefort's class. They are beautifully punctilious, but I don't call it quite comfortable, you know."

Her mother was not the only person who noticed a change in Bertha Villefort. Before long it was a change so marked that all who saw her observed it. She had become painfully frail and slight. Her face looked too finely cut, her eyes had shadowy hollows under them, and were always bright with a feverish excitement.

"What is the matter with your wife?" demanded Madame de Castro of M. Villefort. Since their first meeting she had never loosened her hold upon the husband and wife, and had particularly cultivated Bertha.

There was no change in the expression of M. Villefort, but he was strangely pallid as he made his reply.

"It is impossible for me to explain, Madame."

"She is absolutely attenuated," cried Madame» "She is like a spirit. Take her to the country--to Normandy--to the sea--somewhere! She will die if there is

not a change. At twenty, one should be as plump as a young capon."

A few days after this, Jenny Trent ran in upon Bertha as she lay upon a lounge, holding an open book, but with closed eyes. She had come to spend the morning, she announced. She wanted to talk--about people, about her dress, about her first ball which was to come off shortly.

"And Arthur says"--she began.

Bertha turned her head almost as Edmondstone had done.

"Arthur!" she repeated. For the second time Jenny felt a little embarrassed.

"I mean M. Villefort," she said, hesitantly.

She quite forgot what she had been going to say, and for a moment or so regarded the fire quite gravely. But naturally this could not last long. She soon began to talk again, and it was not many minutes before she found M. Villefort in her path once more.

"I never thought I could like a Frenchman so much," she said, in all enthusiastic good faith. "At first, you know," with an apologetic half laugh, "I wondered why you had not taken an American instead, when there were so many to choose from, but now I understand it. What beautiful tender things he can say, Bertha, and yet not seem in the least sentimental. Everything comes so simply right from the bottom of his heart. Just think what he said to me yesterday when he brought me those flowers. He helps me with mine, and it is odd how things will cheer up and grow for him, I said to him, 'Arthur, how is it that no flower ever fails you?' and he answered in the gentlest quiet way, 'Perhaps because I never fail them. Flowers are like people,--one must love and be true to them, not only to-day and to-morrow, but every day--every hour--always.' And he says such things so often. That is why I am so fond of him."

As she received no reply, she turned toward the lounge. Bertha lay upon it motionless and silent,--only a large tear trembled on her cheek. Jenny sprung up, shocked and checked, and went to her.

"Oh, Bertha!" she cried, "how thoughtless I am to tire you so, you poor little soul! Is it true that you are so weak as all that? I heard mamma and Arthur talking about it, but I scarcely believed it. They said you must go to Normandy and be nursed."

"I don't want to go to Normandy," said Bertha, "I--I am too tired. I only want to lie still and rest. I have been out too much."

Her voice, however, was so softly weak that in the most natural manner Jenny was subdued into shedding a few tears also, and kissed her fervently.

"Oh, Bertha!" she said, "you must do anything--anything that will make you well--if it is only for Arthur's sake. He loves you so--so terribly."

Whereupon Bertha laughed a little hysterically. "Does he," she said, "love me so 'terribly'? Poor M. Villefort?"

She did not go to Normandy, however, and still went into society, though not as much as had been her habit. When she spent her evenings at home, some of her own family generally spent them with her, and M. Villefort or Edmondstone read aloud or talked.

In fact, Edmondstone came oftener than ever. His anxiety and unhappiness grew upon him, and made him moody, irritable, and morbid.

One night, when M. Villefort had left them alone together for a short time, he sprang from his chair and came to her couch, shaken with suppressed emotion.

"That man is killing you!" he exclaimed. "You are dying by inches! I cannot bear it!"

"It is not he who is killing me," she answered; and then M. Villefort returned to the room with the book he had been in search of.

In this case Edmondstone's passion took new phases. He wrote no sonnets, painted no pictures. He neglected his work, and spent his idle hours in rambling here and there in a gloomy, unsociable fashion.

"He looks," said M. Renard, "as if his soul had been playing him some evil trick."

He had at first complained that Bertha had taken a capricious fancy to Madame de Castro, but in course of time he found his way to the old woman's salon too, though it must be confessed that Madame herself never showed him any great favor. But this he did not care for. He only cared to sit in the same room with Bertha, and watch her every movement with a miserable tenderness.

One night, after regarding him cynically for some time, Madame broke out to Bertha with small ceremony:--

"What a fool that young man is!" she exclaimed. "He sits and fairly devours you with his eyes. It is bad taste to show such an insane passion for a married woman."

It seemed as if Bertha lost at once her breath and every drop of blood in her body, for she had neither breath nor color when she turned and looked Madame de Castro in the face.

"Madame," she said, "if you repeat that to me, you will never see me again--never!"

Upon which Madame snapped her up with some anger at being so rebuked for her frankness.

"Then it is worse than I thought," she said.

It was weeks before she saw her young friend again. Indeed, it required some clever diplomacy to heal the breach made, and even in her most amusing and affectionate moods, she often felt afterward that she was treated with a reserve which held her at arm's length.

By the time the horse-chestnuts bloomed pink and white on the Avenue des Champs Élysées, there were few people in the Trent and Villefort circles who had not their opinions on the subject of Madame Villefort and her cousin.

There was a mixture of French and American gossip and comment, frank satire, or secret remark. But to her credit be it spoken, Madame de Castro held grim silence, and checked a rumor occasionally with such amiable ferocity as was not without its good effect.

The pink and white blossoms were already beginning to strew themselves at the feet of the pedestrians, when one morning M. Villefort presented himself to Madame, and discovered her sitting alone in the strangest of moods.

"I thought I might have the pleasure of driving home with Madame Villefort. My servant informed me that I should find her here."

Madame de Castro pointed to a chair.

"Sit down," she commanded.

M. Villefort obeyed her in some secret but well-concealed amazement. He saw that she was under the influence of some unusual excitement. Her false front was pushed fantastically away, her rouge and powder were rubbed off in patches, her face looked set and hard. Her first words were abominably blunt.

"M. Villefort," she said, "do you know what your acquaintances call you?"

A deep red rose slowly to his face, but he did not answer.

"Do you know that you are designated by them by an absurd title--that they call you in ridicule 'Le Monsieur de la petite Dame?' Do you know that?"

His look was incomprehensible, but he bowed gravely.

"Madame," he answered, "since others have heard the title so often, it is but natural that I myself should have heard it more than once."

She regarded him in angry amazement. She was even roused to rapping upon the floor with her gold-headed cane.

"Does it not affect you?" she cried. "Does it not move you to indignation?"

"That, Madame," he replied, "can only be my affair. My friends will allow me my emotions at least."

Then she left her chair and began to walk up and down, striking the carpet hard with her cane at every step.

"You are a strange man," she remarked.

Suddenly, however, when just on the point of starting upon a fresh tour, she wheeled about and addressed him sharply.

"I respect you," she said; "and because I respect you, I will do you a good turn."

She made no pretense at endeavoring to soften the blow she was about to bestow. She drew forth from her dress a letter, the mere sight of which seemed to goad her to a mysterious excitement.

"See," she cried; "it was M. Ralph Edmondstone who wrote this,--it was to Madame Villefort it was written. It means ruin and dishonor. I offer it to you to read."

M. Villefort rose and laid his hand upon his chair to steady himself.

"Madame," he answered, "I will not touch it."

She struck herself upon her withered breast.

"Behold me!" she said. "Me! I am seventy years old! Good God! seventy! I am a bad old woman, and it is said I do not repent of my sins. I, too, have been a beautiful young girl. I, too, had my first lover. I, too, married a man who had not won my heart. It does not matter that the husband was worthy and the lover was not,--one learns that too late. My fate was what your wife's will be if you will not sacrifice your pride and save her."

"Pride!" he echoed in a bitter, hollow voice. "My pride, Madame!"

She went on without noticing him:--

"They have been here this morning--both of them. He followed her, as he always does. He had a desperate look which warned me. Afterward I found the note upon the floor. Now will you read it?"

"Good God!" he cried, as he fell into his chair again, his brow sinking into his hands.

"I have read it," said Madame, with a tragic gesture, "and I choose to place one stumbling-block in the path that would lead her to an old age like mine. I do not like your Americans; but I have sometimes seen in her girl's face a proud, heroic endurance of the misery she has brought upon herself, and it has moved me. And this let ter--you should read it, to see how such a man can plead. It is a passionate cry of despair--it is a poem in itself. I, myself, read it with sobs in my throat and tears in my eyes. 'If you love me!--if you have ever loved me!' he cries, 'for God's sake!--for love's sake!--if there is love on earth--if there is a God in heaven, you will not let me implore you in vain!' And his prayer is that she will leave Paris with him tonight--. to-night! There! Monsieur, I have done. Behold the letter! Take it or leave it, as you please." And she flung it upon the floor at his feet.

She paused a moment, wondering what he would do.

He bent down and picked the letter up.

"I will take it," he said.

All at once he had become calm, and when he rose and uttered his last words to her, there was upon his face a faint smile.

"I, too," he said,--"I, too, Madame, suffer from a mad and hopeless passion, and thus can comprehend the bitterness of M. Edmondstone's pangs. I, too, would implore in the name of love and God,--if I might, but I may not." And so he took his departure.

Until evening Bertha did not see him. The afternoon she spent alone and in writing letters, and having completed and sealed the last, she went to her couch and tried to sleep. One entering the room, as she lay upon the violet cushions, her hands at her sides, her eyes closed, might well have been shocked. Her spotless pallor, the fine sharpness of her face, the shadows under her eyes, her motionlessness, would have excused the momentary feeling. But she was up and dressed for dinner when M. Villefort presented himself. Spring though it was, she was attired in a high, close dress of black velvet, and he found her almost cowering over the open fire-place. Strangely enough, too, she fancied that when she looked up at him she saw him shiver, as if he were struck with a slight chill also.

"You should not wear that," he said, with a half smile at her gown.

"Why?" she asked.

"It makes you so white--so much like a too early lily. But--but perhaps you thought of going out?"

"No," she answered; "not to-night."

He came quite close to her.

"If you are not too greatly fatigued," he said, "it would give me happiness to take you with me on my errand to your mother's house. I must carry there my little birthday gift to your sister," smiling again.

An expression of embarrassment showed itself upon her face.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "to think that I had forgotten it! She will feel as if I did not care for her at all."

She seemed for the moment quite unhappy.

"Let me see what you have chosen."

He drew from his pocket a case and opened it.

"Oh," she cried, "how pretty and how suitable for a girl!"

They were the prettiest, most airy set of pearls imaginable.

She sat and looked at them for a few seconds thoughtfully, and then handed them back.

"You are very good, and Jenny will be in ecstasies," she said.

"It is a happiness to me to give her pleasure," he returned. "I feel great tenderness for her. She is not like the young girls I have known. Her innocence is of a frank and noble quality, which is better than ignorance. One could not bear that the slightest shadow of sin or pain should fall upon her. The atmosphere surrounding her is so bright with pure happiness and the courage of youth."

Involuntarily he held out his hand.

"Will you"--he began. His voice fell and broke. "Will you go with me?" he ended.

He saw that she was troubled.

"Now?" she faltered.

"Yes--now."

There was a peculiar pause,--a moment, as it seemed to him, of breathless silence. This silence she broke by her rising slowly from her seat.

"Yes," she responded, "I will go. Why should I not?"

It was midnight when they left the Trents', and Jenny stood upon the threshold, a bright figure in a setting of brightness, and kissed her hand to them as they went down the steps.

"I hope you will be better to-morrow, Arthur," she said.

He turned quickly to look up at her.

"I?"

"Yes. You look so tired. I might say haggard, if it was polite."

"It would not be polite," said Bertha, "so don't say it. Good-night, Jenny!"

But when they were seated in the carriage she glanced at her husband's face.

"Are you unwell?" she asked.

He passed his hand quickly across his forehead.

"A little fatigued," he replied. "It is nothing. To-morrow--to-morrow it will be all over."

And so silence fell upon them.

As they entered the drawing-room a clock chimed the half hour.

"So late as that!" exclaimed Bertha, and sank into a chair with a faint laugh.

"Why, to-day is over," she said. "It is to-morrow."

M. Villefort had approached a side table. Upon it lay a peculiar-looking oblong box.

"Ah," he said, softly, "they have arrived."

"What are they?" Bertha asked.

He was bending over the box to open it, and did not turn toward her, as he replied:--

"It is a gift for a young friend of mine,--a brace of pistols. He has before him a long journey in the East, and he is young enough to have a fancy for firearms."

He was still examining the weapons when Bertha crossed the room on her way up-stairs, and she paused an instant to look at them.

"They are very handsome," she said. "One could almost wear them as ornaments."

"But they would have too threatening a look," he answered, lightly.

As he raised his eyes they met hers. She half started backward, moved by a new sense of the haggardness of his face.

"You are ill!" she exclaimed. "You are as colorless as marble."

"And you, too," he returned, still with the same tender lightness. "Let us hope that our 'to-morrow' will find us both better, and you say it is tomorrow now. Good-night!"

She went away without saying more. Weary as she was, she knew there was no sleep for her, and after dismissing her maid, she threw herself upon the lounge before the bedroom fire and lay there. To-night she felt as if her life had reached its climax. She burst into a passion of tears.

"Jenny! Jenny!" she cried, "how I envy--how I envy you!"

The recollection of Jenny shining in her pretty gala dress, and delighting in her birthday presents, and everybody else's pride and affection, filled her with a morbid misery and terror. She covered her face with her hands as she thought of it.

"Once," she panted, "as I looked at her tonight, for a moment I almost hated her. Am I so bad as that?--am I?"

Scarcely two seconds afterward she had sprung to her feet and was standing by the side of her couch, her heart beating with a rapid throb of fright, her limbs trembling. A strange sound had fallen suddenly upon the perfect silence of the night--a sound loud, hard, and sharp--the report of a pistol! What dread seized her she knew not. She was across the room and had wrenched the door open in an instant, then with flying feet down the corridor and the staircase. But half-way down the stairs she began to cry out aloud, "Arthur! Arthur!" not conscious of her own voice--"Arthur, what is it?" The door of the drawing-room flew open before the fierce stroke of her palm.

M. Villefort stood where she had left him; but while his left hand supported his weight against the table, his right was thrust into his breast. One of the

pistols lay at his feet.

She thought it was Death's self that confronted her in his face, but he spoke to her, trying faintly to smile.

"Do not come in," he said, "I have met with--an accident. It is nothing. Do not come in. A servant----"

His last recollection was of her white face and white draperies as he fell, and somehow, dizzy, sick, and faint as he was, he seemed to hear her calling out, in a voice strangely like Jenny's, "Arthur! Arthur!"

In less than half an hour the whole house was astir. Upstairs physicians were with the wounded man, downstairs Mrs. Trent talked and wept over her daughter, after the manner of all good women. She was fairly terrified by Bertha's strange shudderings, quick, strained breath, and dilated eyes. She felt as if she could not reach her--as if she hardly made herself heard.

"You must calm yourself, Bertha," she would say. "Try to calm yourself. We must hope for the best. Oh, how could it have happened!"

It was in the midst of this that a servant entered with a letter, which he handed to his mistress. The envelope bore upon it nothing but her own name.

She looked at it with a bewildered expression.

"For me?" she said.

"It fell from Monsieur's pocket as we carried him upstairs," replied the man.

"Don't mind it now, Bertha," said her mother, "Ah, poor M. Villefort!"

But Bertha had opened it mechanically and was reading it

At first it seemed as if it must have been written in a language she did not understand; but after the first few sentences a change appeared. Her breath came and went more quickly than before--a kind of horror grew in her eyes. At the last she uttered a low, struggling cry. The paper was crushed in her hand, she cast one glance around the room as if in bewildering search for refuge, and flung herself upon her mother's breast.

"Save me, mother!" she said. "Help me! If he dies now, I shall go mad!"

Afterward, in telling her story at home, good Mrs. Trent almost broke down.

"Oh, Jenny!" she said. "Just to think of the poor fellow's having had it in his pocket then! Of course I did not see it, but one can fancy that it was something kind and tender,--perhaps some little surprise he had planned for her. It seemed as if she could not bear it."

M. Villefort's accident was the subject of discussion for many days. He had purchased a wonderful pair of pistols as a gift for a young friend. How it had happened that one had been loaded none knew; it was just possible that he had been seized with the whim to load it himself--at all events, it had gone off in his hands. An inch--nay, half an inch--to the right, and Madame Villefort, who flew downstairs at the sound of the report, would only have found a dead man at her feet.

"Ma foi!" said M. Renard, repressing his smile; "this is difficult for Monsieur, but it may leave 'la petite Dame' at liberty."

Madame de Castro flew at him with flashing eyes.

"Silence!" she said, "if you would not have me strike you with my cane." And she looked as if she were capable of doing it.

Upon his sick-bed M. Villefort was continually haunted by an apparition--an apparition of a white face and white draperies, such as he had seen as he fell. Sometimes it was here, sometimes there, sometimes near him, and sometimes indistinct and far away. Sometimes he called out to it and tried to extend his arms; again he lay and watched, it murmuring gentle words, and smiling mournfully.

Mrs. Trent and the doctor were in despair. Madame Villefort obstinately refused to be forced from her husband's room. There were times when they thought she might sink and die there herself. She would not even leave it when they obliged her to sleep. Having been slight and frail from ill health before, she became absolutely attenuated. Soon all her beauty would be gone.

"Do you know," said Mrs. Trent to her husband, "I have found out that she always carries that letter in her breast? I see her put her hand to it in the strangest way a dozen times a day."

One night, awakening from a long sleep to a clearer mental consciousness

than usual, M. Villefort found his apparition standing over him.

She stood with one hand clinched upon her breast, and she spoke to him.

"Arthur!" she said,--"Arthur, do you know me?"

He answered her, "Yes."

She slipped down upon her knees, and held up in her hand a letter crushed and broken.

"Try to keep your mind clear while you listen to me," she implored. "Try--try! I must tell you, or I shall die. I am not the bad woman you think me. I never had read it--I had not seen it. I think he must have been mad. Once I loved him, but he killed my love himself. I could not have been bad like that, Jenny!--mother!--Arthur! believe me! believe me!"

In this supreme moment of her anguish and shame she forgot all else. She stretched forth her hands, panting.

"Believe me! It is true! Try to understand! Some one is coming! Say one word before it is too late!"

"I understand," he whispered, "and I believe." He made a weak effort to touch her hand, but failed. He thought that perhaps it was the chill and numbness of death which stole over him and held him bound. When the nurse, whose footsteps they had heard, entered, she found him lying with glazed eyes, and Madame Villefort fallen in a swoon at the bedside.

And yet, from this time forward the outside world began to hear that his case was not so hopeless after all.

"Villefort will possibly recover," it was said at first; then, "Villefort improves, it seems;" and, at last, "Villefort is out of danger Who would have thought it?"

Nobody, however, could say that Madame had kept pace with her husband. When Monsieur was sufficiently strong to travel, and was advised to do so, there were grave doubts as to the propriety of his wife's accompanying him.

But she would not listen to those doubts.

"I will not stay in Paris," she said to her mother. "I want to be free from it,

and Jenny has promised to go with us."

They were to go into Normandy, and the day before their departure Ralph Edmondstone came to bid them good-bye.

Of the three he was by far the most haggard figure, and when Bertha came down to meet him in the empty drawing-room, he became a wretched figure with a broken, hopeless air, For a few seconds Bertha did not speak, but stood a pace or two away looking at him. It seemed, in truth, as she waited there in her dark, nun-like dress, that nearly all her beauty had left her. There remained only her large sad eyes and pretty hair, and the touching look of extreme youth. In her hand she held the crushed letter.

"See!" she said at last, holding this out to him. "I am not so bad--so bad as that."

He caught it from her hand and tore it into fragments. He was stabbed through and through with shame and remorse. After all, his love had been strong enough here, and his comprehension keen enough to have made him repent in the dust of the earth, in his first calm hour, the insult he had put upon her.

"Forgive me!" he cried; "oh, forgive me!"

The few steps between them might have been a myriad of miles.

"I did love you--long ago," she said; "but you never thought of me. You did not understand me then--nor afterward. All this winter my love has been dying a hard death. You tried to keep it alive, but--you did not understand. You only humiliated and tortured me--And I knew that if I had loved you more, you would have loved me less. See!" holding up her thin hand, "I have been worn out in the struggle between my unhappiness and remorse and you."

"You do not know what love is!" he burst forth, stung into swift resentment.

A quick sob broke from her.

"Yes I do." she answered. "I--I have seen it"

"You mean M. Villefort!" he cried in desperate jealous misery. "You think that he----"

She pointed to the scattered fragments of the letter.

"He had that in his pocket when he fell," she said, "He thought that I had read it. If I had been your wife, and you had thought so, would you have thought that I was worth trying to save--as he tried to save me?"

"What!" he exclaimed, shamefacedly. "Has he seen it?"

"Yes," she answered, with another sob, which might have been an echo of the first. "And that is the worst of all."

There was a pause, during which he looked down at the floor, and even trembled a little.

"I have done you more wrong than I thought," he said.

"Yes," she replied; "a thousand-fold more."

It seemed as if there might have been more to say, but it was not said.

In a little while he roused himself with an effort.

"I am not a villain!" he said. "I can do one thing. I can go to Villefort--if you care."

She did not speak. So he moved slowly away until he reached the door. With his hand upon the handle he turned and looked back at her.

"Oh, it is good-bye--good-bye!" he almost groaned.

"Yes."

He could not help it--few men could have done so. His expression was almost fierce as he spoke his next words.

"And you will love him--yes, you will love him."

"No," she answered, with bitter pain. "I am not worthy."

It was a year or more before the Villeforts were seen in Paris again, and Jenny enjoyed her wanderings with them wondrously. In fact, she was the

leading member of the party. She took them where she chose,--to queer places, to ugly places, to impossible places, but never from first to last to any place where there were not, or at least had not been, Americans as absurdly erratic as themselves.

The winter before their return they were at Genoa, among other places; and it was at Genoa that one morning, on opening a drawer, Bertha came upon an oblong box, the sight of which made her start backward and put her hand to her beating side. M. Villefort approached her hurriedly. An instant later, however, he started also and shut the drawer.

"Come away," he said, taking her hand gently. "Do not remain here."

But he was pale, too, and his hand was unsteady. He led her to the window and made her sit down.

"Pardon me," he said. "I should not have left them there."

"You did not send them to your friend?" she faltered.

"No."

He stood for a moment or so, and looked out of the window at the blue sea which melted into the blue sky, at the blue sky which bent itself into the blue sea, at the white sails flecking the deep azure, at the waves hurrying in to break upon the sand.

"That"--he said at length, tremulously, and with pale lips--"that was false."

"Was false!" she echoed.

"Yes," hoarsely, "it was false. There was no such friend. It was a lie--they were meant only for myself."

She uttered a low cry of anguish and dread.

"Ah, mon Dieu!" he said. "You could not know. I understood all, and had been silent. I was nothing--a jest--'le Monsieur de la petite Dame,' as they said,--only that. I swore that I would save you. When I bade you adieu that night, I thought it was my last farewell. There was no accident. Yes--there was one. I did not die, as I had intended. My hand was not steady enough. And since then----"

She rose up, crying out to him as she had done on that terrible night--

"Arthur! Arthur!"

He came closer to her.

"Is it true," he said,--"is it true that my prayers have not been in vain? Is it true that at last--at last, you have learned--have learned----"

She stretched forth her arms to him.

"It is true!" she cried. "Yes, it is true!--it is true!"