

Captain Burle

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Chapter 1

The Swindle

It was nine o'clock. The little town of Vauchamp, dark and silent, had just retired to bed amid a chilly November rain. In the Rue des Recollets, one of the narrowest and most deserted streets of the district of Saint-Jean, a single window was still alight on the third floor of an old house, from whose damaged gutters torrents of water were falling into the street. Mme Burle was sitting up before a meager fire of vine stocks, while her little grandson Charles pored over his lessons by the pale light of a lamp.

The apartment, rented at one hundred and sixty francs per annum, consisted of four large rooms which it was absolutely impossible to keep warm during the winter. Mme Burle slept in the largest chamber, her son Captain and Quartermaster Burle occupying a somewhat smaller one overlooking the street, while little Charles had his iron cot at the farther end of a spacious drawing room with mildewed hangings, which was never used. The few pieces of furniture belonging to the captain and his mother, furniture of the massive style of the First Empire, dented and worn by continuous transit from one garrison town to another, almost disappeared from view beneath the lofty ceilings whence darkness fell. The flooring of red-colored tiles was cold and hard to the feet; before the chairs there were merely a few threadbare little rugs of poverty-stricken aspect, and athwart this desert all the winds of heaven blew through the disjointed doors and windows.

Near the fireplace sat Mme Burle, leaning back in her old yellow velvet armchair and watching the last vine branch smoke, with that stolid, blank stare of the aged who live within themselves. She would sit thus for whole days together, with her tall figure, her long stern face and her thin lips that never smiled. The widow of a colonel who had died just as he was on the point of becoming a general, the mother of a captain whom she had followed even in his campaigns, she had acquired a military stiffness of bearing and formed for herself a code of honor, duty and patriotism which kept her rigid, desiccated, as it were, by the stern application of discipline. She seldom, if ever, complained. When her son had become a widower after five years of married life she had undertaken the education of little Charles as a matter of course, performing her duties with the severity of a sergeant drilling recruits. She watched over the child, never tolerating the slightest waywardness or irregularity, but compelling him to sit up till midnight when his exercises were not finished, and sitting up herself until he had completed them. Under such implacable despotism Charles, whose constitution was delicate, grew up pale and thin, with beautiful eyes, inordinately large and clear, shining in his white, pinched face.

During the long hours of silence Mme Burle dwelt continuously upon one and the same idea: she had been disappointed in her son. This thought sufficed to occupy her mind, and under its influence she would live her whole life over again, from the birth of her son, whom she had pictured rising amid glory to the highest rank, till she came down to mean and narrow garrison life, the dull, monotonous existence of nowadays, that stranding in the post of a quartermaster, from which Burle would never rise and in which he seemed to

sink more and more heavily. And yet his first efforts had filled her with pride, and she had hoped to see her dreams realized. Burle had only just left Saint-Cyr when he distinguished himself at the battle of Solferino, where he had captured a whole battery of the enemy's artillery with merely a handful of men. For this feat he had won the cross; the papers had recorded his heroism, and he had become known as one of the bravest soldiers in the army. But gradually the hero had grown stout, embedded in flesh, timorous, lazy and satisfied. In 1870, still a captain, he had been made a prisoner in the first encounter, and he returned from Germany quite furious, swearing that he would never be caught fighting again, for it was too absurd. Being prevented from leaving the army, as he was incapable of embracing any other profession, he applied for and obtained the position of captain quartermaster, "a kennel," as he called it, "in which he would be left to kick the bucket in peace." That day Mme Burle experienced a great internal disruption. She felt that it was all over, and she ever afterward preserved a rigid attitude with tightened lips.

A blast of wind shook the Rue des Recollets and drove the rain angrily against the windowpanes. The old lady lifted her eyes from the smoking vine roots now dying out, to make sure that Charles was not falling asleep over his Latin exercise. This lad, twelve years of age, had become the old lady's supreme hope, the one human being in whom she centered her obstinate yearning for glory. At first she had hated him with all the loathing she had felt for his mother, a weak and pretty young lacemaker whom the captain had been foolish enough to marry when he found out that she would not listen to his passionate addresses on any other condition. Later on, when the mother had died and the father had begun to wallow in vice, Mme Burle dreamed again in presence of that little ailing child whom she found it so hard to rear. She wanted to see him robust, so that he might grow into the hero that Burle had declined to be, and for all her cold ruggedness she watched him anxiously, feeling his limbs and instilling courage into his soul. By degrees, blinded by her passionate desires, she imagined that she had at last found the man of the family. The boy, whose temperament was of a gentle, dreamy character, had a physical horror of soldiering, but as he lived in mortal dread of his grandmother and was extremely shy and submissive, he would echo all she said and resignedly express his intention of entering the army when he grew up.

Mme Burle observed that the exercise was not progressing. In fact, little Charles, overcome by the deafening noise of the storm, was dozing, albeit his pen was between his fingers and his eyes were staring at the paper. The old lady at once struck the edge of the table with her bony hand; whereupon the lad started, opened his dictionary and hurriedly began to turn over the leaves. Then, still preserving silence, his grandmother drew the vine roots together on the hearth and unsuccessfully attempted to rekindle the fire.

At the time when she had still believed in her son she had sacrificed her small income, which he had squandered in pursuits she dared not investigate. Even now he drained the household; all its resources went to the streets, and it was through him that she lived in penury, with empty rooms and cold kitchen. She never spoke to him of all those things, for with her sense of discipline he remained the master. Only at times she shuddered at the sudden fear that Burle might someday commit some foolish misdeed which would prevent Charles from entering the army.

She was rising up to fetch a fresh piece of wood in the kitchen when a fearful hurricane

fell upon the house, making the doors rattle, tearing off a shutter and whirling the water in the broken gutters like a spout against the window. In the midst of the uproar a ring at the bell startled the old lady. Who could it be at such an hour and in such weather? Burle never returned till after midnight, if he came home at all. However, she went to the door. An officer stood before her, dripping with rain and swearing savagely.

“Hell and thunder!” he growled. “What cursed weather!”

It was Major Laguitte, a brave old soldier who had served under Colonel Burle during Mme Burle’s palmy days. He had started in life as a drummer boy and, thanks to his courage rather than his intellect, had attained to the command of a battalion, when a painful infirmity—the contraction of the muscles of one of his thighs, due to a wound—obliged him to accept the post of major. He was slightly lame, but it would have been imprudent to tell him so, as he refused to own it.

“What, you, Major?” said Mme Burle with growing astonishment.

“Yes, thunder,” grumbled Laguitte, “and I must be confoundedly fond of you to roam the streets on such a night as this. One would think twice before sending even a parson out.”

He shook himself, and little rivulets fell from his huge boots onto the floor. Then he looked round him.

“I particularly want to see Burle. Is the lazy beggar already in bed?”

“No, he is not in yet,” said the old woman in her harsh voice.

The major looked furious, and, raising his voice, he shouted: “What, not at home? But in that case they hoaxed me at the cafe, Melanie’s establishment, you know. I went there, and a maid grinned at me, saying that the captain had gone home to bed. Curse the girl! I suspected as much and felt like pulling her ears!”

After this outburst he became somewhat calmer, stamping about the room in an undecided way, withal seeming greatly disturbed. Mme Burle looked at him attentively.

“Is it the captain personally whom you want to see?” she said at last.

“Yes,” he answered.

“Can I not tell him what you have to say?”

“No.”

She did not insist but remained standing without taking her eyes off the major, who did not seem able to make up his mind to leave. Finally in a fresh burst of rage he exclaimed with an oath: “It can’t be helped. As I am here you may as well know—after all, it is, perhaps, best.”

He sat down before the chimney piece, stretching out his muddy boots as if a bright fire had been burning. Mme Burle was about to resume her own seat when she remarked that Charles, overcome by fatigue, had dropped his head between the open pages of his dictionary. The arrival of the major had at first interested him, but, seeing that he remained unnoticed, he had been unable to struggle against his sleepiness. His grandmother turned toward the table to slap his frail little hands, whitening in the lamplight, when Laguitte

stopped her.

“No-no!” he said. “Let the poor little man sleep. I haven’t got anything funny to say. There’s no need for him to hear me.”

The old lady sat down in her armchair; deep silence reigned, and they looked at one another.

“Well, yes,” said the major at last, punctuating his words with an angry motion of his chin, “he has been and done it; that hound Burle has been and done it!”

Not a muscle of Mme Burle’s face moved, but she became livid, and her figure stiffened. Then the major continued: “I had my doubts. I had intended mentioning the subject to you. Burle was spending too much money, and he had an idiotic look which I did not fancy. Thunder and lightning! What a fool a man must be to behave so filthily!”

Then he thumped his knee furiously with his clenched fist and seemed to choke with indignation. The old woman put the straightforward question:

“He has stolen?”

“You can’t have an idea of it. You see, I never examined his accounts; I approved and signed them. You know how those things are managed. However, just before the inspection-as the colonel is a crotchety old maniac-I said to Burle: ‘I say, old man, look to your accounts; I am answerable, you know,’ and then I felt perfectly secure. Well, about a month ago, as he seemed queer and some nasty stories were circulating, I peered a little closer into the books and potted over the entries. I thought everything looked straight and very well kept-”

At this point he stopped, convulsed by such a fit of rage that he had to relieve himself by a volley of appalling oaths. Finally he resumed: “It isn’t the swindle that angers me; it is his disgusting behavior to me. He has gammoned me, Madame Burle. By God! Does he take me for an old fool?”

“So he stole?” the mother again questioned.

“This evening,” continued the major more quietly, “I had just finished my dinner when Gagneux came in-you know Gagneux, the butcher at the corner of the Place aux Herbes? Another dirty beast who got the meat contract and makes our men eat all the diseased cow flesh in the neighborhood! Well, I received him like a dog, and then he let it all out-blurted out the whole thing, and a pretty mess it is! It appears that Burle only paid him in driblets and had got himself into a muddle-a confusion of figures which the devil himself couldn’t disentangle. In short, Burle owes the butcher two thousand francs, and Gagneux threatens that he’ll inform the colonel if he is not paid. To make matters worse, Burle, just to blind me, handed me every week a forged receipt which he had squarely signed with Gagneux’s name. To think he did that to me, his old friend! Ah, curse him!”

With increasing profanity the major rose to his feet, shook his fist at the ceiling and then fell back in his chair. Mme Burle again repeated: “He has stolen. It was inevitable.”

Then without a word of judgment or condemnation she added simply: “Two thousand francs-we have not got them. There are barely thirty francs in the house.”

“I expected as much,” said Laguitte. “And do you know where all the money goes? Why, Melanie gets it—yes, Melanie, a creature who has turned Burle into a perfect fool. Ah, those women! Those fiendish women! I always said they would do for him! I cannot conceive what he is made of! He is only five years younger than I am, and yet he is as mad as ever. What a woman hunter he is!”

Another long silence followed. Outside the rain was increasing in violence, and throughout the sleepy little town one could hear the crashing of slates and chimney pots as they were dashed by the blast onto the pavements of the streets.

“Come,” suddenly said the major, rising, “my stopping here won’t mend matters. I have warned you—and now I’m off.”

“What is to be done? To whom can we apply?” muttered the old woman drearily.

“Don’t give way—we must consider. If I only had the two thousand francs—but you know that I am not rich.”

The major stopped short in confusion. This old bachelor, wifeless and childless, spent his pay in drink and gambled away at *ecarte* whatever money his cognac and absinthe left in his pocket. Despite that, however, he was scrupulously honest from a sense of discipline.

“Never mind,” he added as he reached the threshold. “I’ll begin by stirring him up. I shall move heaven and earth! What! Burle, Colonel Burle’s son, condemned for theft! That cannot be! I would sooner burn down the town. Now, thunder and lightning, don’t worry; it is far more annoying for me than for you.”

He shook the old lady’s hand roughly and vanished into the shadows of the staircase, while she held the lamp aloft to light the way. When she returned and replaced the lamp on the table she stood for a moment motionless in front of Charles, who was still asleep with his face lying on the dictionary. His pale cheeks and long fair hair made him look like a girl, and she gazed at him dreamily, a shade of tenderness passing over her harsh countenance. But it was only a passing emotion; her features regained their look of cold, obstinate determination, and, giving the youngster a sharp rap on his little hand, she said:

“Charles—your lessons.”

The boy awoke, dazed and shivering, and again rapidly turned over the leaves. At the same moment Major Laguitte, slamming the house door behind him, received on his head a quantity of water falling from the gutters above, whereupon he began to swear in so loud a voice that he could be heard above the storm. And after that no sound broke upon the pelting downpour save the slight rustle of the boy’s pen traveling over the paper. Mme Burle had resumed her seat near the chimney piece, still rigid, with her eyes fixed on the dead embers, preserving, indeed, her habitual attitude and absorbed in her one idea.

Chapter 2

The Cafe

The Cafe de Paris, kept by Melanie Cartier, a widow, was situated on the Place du Palais, a large irregular square planted with meager, dusty elm trees. The place was so well known in Vauchamp that it was customary to say, "Are you coming to Melanie's?" At the farther end of the first room, which was a spacious one, there was another called "the divan," a narrow apartment having sham leather benches placed against the walls, while at each corner there stood a marble-topped table. The widow, deserting her seat in the front room, where she left her little servant Phrosine, spent her evenings in the inner apartment, ministering to a few customers, the usual frequenters of the place, those who were currently styled "the gentlemen of the divan." When a man belonged to that set it was as if he had a label on his back; he was spoken of with smiles of mingled contempt and envy.

Mme Cartier had become a widow when she was five and twenty. Her husband, a wheelwright, who on the death of an uncle had amazed Vauchamp by taking the Cafe de Paris, had one fine day brought her back with him from Montpellier, where he was wont to repair twice a year to purchase liqueurs. As he was stocking his establishment he selected, together with divers beverages, a woman of the sort he wanted-of an engaging aspect and apt to stimulate the trade of the house. It was never known where he had picked her up, but he married her after trying her in the cafe during six months or so. Opinions were divided in Vauchamp as to her merits, some folks declaring that she was superb, while others asserted that she looked like a drum-major. She was a tall woman with large features and coarse hair falling low over her forehead. However, everyone agreed that she knew very well how to fool the sterner sex. She had fine eyes and was wont to fix them with a bold stare on the gentlemen of the divan, who colored and became like wax in her hands. She also had the reputation of possessing a wonderfully fine figure, and southerners appreciate a statuesque style of beauty.

Cartier had died in a singular way. Rumor hinted at a conjugal quarrel, a kick, producing some internal tumor. Whatever may have been the truth, Melanie found herself encumbered with the cafe, which was far from doing a prosperous business. Her husband had wasted his uncle's inheritance in drinking his own absinthe and wearing out the cloth of his own billiard table. For a while it was believed that the widow would have to sell out, but she liked the life and the establishment just as it was. If she could secure a few customers the bigger room might remain deserted. So she limited herself to repapering the divan in white and gold and recovering the benches. She began by entertaining a chemist. Then a vermicelli maker, a lawyer and a retired magistrate put in an appearance; and thus it was that the cafe remained open, although the waiter did not receive twenty orders a day. No objections were raised by the authorities, as appearances were kept up; and, indeed, it was not deemed advisable to interfere, for some respectable folks might have been worried.

Of an evening five or six well-to-do citizens would enter the front room and play at

dominoes there. Although Cartier was dead and the Cafe de Paris had got a queer name, they saw nothing and kept up their old habits. In course of time, the waiter having nothing to do, Melanie dismissed him and made Phrosine light the solitary gas burner in the corner where the domino players congregated. Occasionally a party of young men, attracted by the gossip that circulated through the town, would come in, wildly excited and laughing loudly and awkwardly. But they were received there with icy dignity. As a rule they did not even see the widow, and even if she happened to be present she treated them with withering disdain, so that they withdrew, stammering and confused. Melanie was too astute to indulge in any compromising whims. While the front room remained obscure, save in the corner where the few townsfolk rattled their dominoes, she personally waited on the gentlemen of the divan, showing herself amiable without being free, merely venturing in moments of familiarity to lean on the shoulder of one or another of them, the better to watch a skillfully played game of ecarte.

One evening the gentlemen of the divan, who had ended by tolerating each other's presence, experienced a disagreeable surprise on finding Captain Burle at home there. He had casually entered the cafe that same morning to get a glass of vermouth, so it seemed, and he had found Melanie there. They had conversed, and in the evening when he returned Phrosine immediately showed him to the inner room.

Two days later Burle reigned there supreme; still he had not frightened the chemist, the vermicelli maker, the lawyer or the retired magistrate away. The captain, who was short and dumpy, worshiped tall, plump women. In his regiment he had been nicknamed "Petticoat Burle" on account of his constant philandering. Whenever the officers, and even the privates, met some monstrous-looking creature, some giantess puffed out with fat, whether she were in velvet or in rags, they would invariably exclaim, "There goes one to Petticoat Burle's taste!" Thus Melanie, with her opulent presence, quite conquered him. He was lost-quite wrecked. In less than a fortnight he had fallen to vacuous imbecility. With much the expression of a whipped hound in the tiny sunken eyes which lighted up his bloated face, he was incessantly watching the widow in mute adoration before her masculine features and stubby hair. For fear that he might be dismissed, he put up with the presence of the other gentlemen of the divan and spent his pay in the place down to the last copper. A sergeant reviewed the situation in one sentence: "Petticoat Burle is done for; he's a buried man!"

It was nearly ten o'clock when Major Laguitte furiously flung the door of the cafe open. For a moment those inside could see the deluged square transformed into a dark sea of liquid mud, bubbling under the terrible downpour. The major, now soaked to the skin and leaving a stream behind him, strode up to the small counter where Phrosine was reading a novel.

"You little wretch," he yelled, "you have dared to gammon an officer; you deserve-"

And then he lifted his hand as if to deal a blow such as would have felled an ox. The little maid shrank back, terrified, while the amazed domino players looked, openmouthed. However, the major did not linger there-he pushed the divan door open and appeared before Melanie and Burle just as the widow was playfully making the captain sip his grog in small spoonfuls, as if she were feeding a pet canary. Only the ex-magistrate and the chemist had come that evening, and they had retired early in a melancholy frame of mind.

Then Melanie, being in want of three hundred francs for the morrow, had taken advantage of the opportunity to cajole the captain.

“Come.” she said, “open your mouth; ain’t it nice, you greedy piggy-wiggy?”

Burle, flushing scarlet, with glazed eyes and sunken figure, was sucking the spoon with an air of intense enjoyment.

“Good heavens!” roared the major from the threshold. “You now play tricks on me, do you? I’m sent to the roundabout and told that you never came here, and yet all the while here you are, addling your silly brains.”

Burle shuddered, pushing the grog away, while Melanie stepped angrily in front of him as if to shield him with her portly figure, but Laguitte looked at her with that quiet, resolute expression well known to women who are familiar with bodily chastisement.

“Leave us,” he said curtly.

She hesitated for the space of a second. She almost felt the gust of the expected blow, and then, white with rage, she joined Phrosine in the outer room.

When the two men were alone Major Laguitte walked up to Burle, looked at him and, slightly stooping, yelled into his face these two words: “You pig!”

The captain, quite dazed, endeavored to retort, but he had not time to do so.

“Silence!” resumed the major. “You have bamboozled a friend. You palmed off on me a lot of forged receipts which might have sent both of us to the gallows. Do you call that proper behavior? Is that the sort of trick to play a friend of thirty years’ standing?”

Burle, who had fallen back in his chair, was livid; his limbs shook as if with ague. Meanwhile the major, striding up and down and striking the tables wildly with his fists, continued: “So you have become a thief like the veriest scribbling cur of a clerk, and all for the sake of that creature here! If at least you had stolen for your mother’s sake it would have been honorable! But, curse it, to play tricks and bring the money into this shanty is what I cannot understand! Tell me-what are you made of at your age to go to the dogs as you are going all for the sake of a creature like a grenadier!”

“YOU gamble-” stammered the captain.

“Yes, I do-curse it!” thundered the major, lashed into still greater fury by this remark. “And I am a pitiful rogue to do so, because it swallows up all my pay and doesn’t redound to the honor of the French army. However, I don’t steal. Kill yourself, if it pleases you; starve your mother and the boy, but respect the regimental cashbox and don’t drag your friends down with you.”

He stopped. Burle was sitting there with fixed eyes and a stupid air. Nothing was heard for a moment save the clatter of the major’s heels.

“And not a single copper,” he continued aggressively. “Can you picture yourself between two gendarmes, eh?”

He then grew a little calmer, caught hold of Burle’s wrists and forced him to rise.

“Come!” he said gruffly. “Something must be done at once, for I cannot go to bed with

this affair on my mind-I have an idea.”

In the front room Melanie and Phrosine were talking eagerly in low voices. When the widow saw the two men leaving the divan she moved toward Burle and said coaxingly: “What, are you going already, Captain?”

“Yes, he’s going,” brutally answered Laguitte, “and I don’t intend to let him set foot here again.”

The little maid felt frightened and pulled her mistress back by the skirt of her dress; in doing so she imprudently murmured the word “drunkard” and thereby brought down the slap which the major’s hand had been itching to deal for some time past. Both women having stooped, however, the blow only fell on Phrosine’s back hair, flattening her cap and breaking her comb. The domino players were indignant.

“Let’s cut it,” shouted Laguitte, and he pushed Burle on the pavement. “If I remained I should smash everyone in the place.”

To cross the square they had to wade up to their ankles in mud. The rain, driven by the wind, poured off their faces. The captain walked on in silence, while the major kept on reproaching him with his cowardice and its disastrous consequences. Wasn’t it sweet weather for tramping the streets? If he hadn’t been such an idiot they would both be warmly tucked in bed instead of paddling about in the mud. Then he spoke of Gagneux—a scoundrel whose diseased meat had on three separate occasions made the whole regiment ill. In a week, however, the contract would come to an end, and the fiend himself would not get it renewed.

“It rests with me,” the major grumbled. “I can select whomsoever I choose, and I’d rather cut off my right arm than put that poisoner in the way of earning another copper.”

Just then he slipped into a gutter and, half choked by a string of oaths, he gasped:

“You understand-I am going to rout up Gagneux. You must stop outside while I go in. I must know what the rascal is up to and if he’ll dare to carry out his threat of informing the colonel tomorrow. A butcher—curse him! The idea of compromising oneself with a butcher! Ah, you aren’t over-proud, and I shall never forgive you for all this.”

They had now reached the Place aux Herbes. Gagneux’s house was quite dark, but Laguitte knocked so loudly that he was eventually admitted. Burle remained alone in the dense obscurity and did not even attempt to seek any shelter. He stood at a corner of the market under the pelting rain, his head filled with a loud buzzing noise which prevented him from thinking. He did not feel impatient, for he was unconscious of the flight of time. He stood there looking at the house, which, with its closed door and windows, seemed quite lifeless. When at the end of an hour the major came out again it appeared to the captain as if he had only just gone in.

Laguitte was so grimly mute that Burle did not venture to question him. For a moment they sought each other, groping about in the dark; then they resumed their walk through the somber streets, where the water rolled as in the bed of a torrent. They moved on in silence side by side, the major being so abstracted that he even forgot to swear. However, as they again crossed the Place du Palais, at the sight of the Cafe de Paris, which was still lit up, he dropped his hand on Burle’s shoulder and said, “If you ever re-enter that hole I-”

“No fear!” answered the captain without letting his friend finish his sentence.

Then he stretched out his hand.

“No, no,” said Laguitte, “I’ll see you home; I’ll at least make sure that you’ll sleep in your bed tonight.”

They went on, and as they ascended the Rue des Recollets they slackened their pace. When the captain’s door was reached and Burle had taken out his latchkey he ventured to ask:

“Well?”

“Well,” answered the major gruffly, “I am as dirty a rogue as you are. Yes! I have done a scurrilous thing. The fiend take you! Our soldiers will eat carrion for three months longer.”

Then he explained that Gagneux, the disgusting Gagneux, had a horribly level head and that he had persuaded him-the major-to strike a bargain. He would refrain from informing the colonel, and he would even make a present of the two thousand francs and replace the forged receipts by genuine ones, on condition that the major bound himself to renew the meat contract. It was a settled thing.

“Ah,” continued Laguitte, “calculate what profits the brute must make out of the meat to part with such a sum as two thousand francs.”

Burle, choking with emotion, grasped his old friend’s hands, stammering confused words of thanks. The vileness of the action committed for his sake brought tears into his eyes.

“I never did such a thing before,” growled Laguitte, “but I was driven to it. Curse it, to think that I haven’t those two thousand francs in my drawer! It is enough to make one hate cards. It is my own fault. I am not worth much; only, mark my words, don’t begin again, for, curse it-I shan’t.”

The captain embraced him, and when he had entered the house the major stood a moment before the closed door to make certain that he had gone upstairs to bed. Then as midnight was striking and the rain was still belaboring the dark town, he slowly turned homeward. The thought of his men almost broke his heart, and, stopping short, he said aloud in a voice full of compassion:

“Poor devils! what a lot of cow beef they’ll have to swallow for those two thousand francs!”

Chapter 3

Again?

The regiment was altogether nonplused: Petticoat Burle had quarreled with Melanie. When a week had elapsed it became a proved and undeniable fact; the captain no longer set foot inside the Cafe de Paris, where the chemist, it was averred, once more reigned in his stead, to the profound sorrow of the retired magistrate. An even more incredible statement was that Captain Burle led the life of a recluse in the Rue des Recollets. He was becoming a reformed character; he spent his evenings at his own fireside, hearing little Charles repeat his lessons. His mother, who had never breathed a word to him of his manipulations with Gagneux, maintained her old severity of demeanor as she sat opposite to him in her armchair, but her looks seemed to imply that she believed him reclaimed.

A fortnight later Major Laguitte came one evening to invite himself to dinner. He felt some awkwardness at the prospect of meeting Burle again, not on his own account but because he dreaded awakening painful memories. However, as the captain was mending his ways he wished to shake hands and break a crust with him. He thought this would please his old friend.

When Laguitte arrived Burle was in his room, so it was the old lady who received the major. The latter, after announcing that he had come to have a plate of soup with them, added, lowering his voice:

“Well, how goes it?”

“It is all right,” answered the old lady.

“Nothing queer?”

“Absolutely nothing. Never away-in bed at nine-and looking quite happy.”

“Ah, confound it,” replied the major, “I knew very well he only wanted a shaking. He has some heart left, the dog!”

When Burle appeared he almost crushed the major’s hands in his grasp, and standing before the fire, waiting for the dinner, they conversed peacefully, honestly, together, extolling the charms of home life. The captain vowed he wouldn’t exchange his home for a kingdom and declared that when he had removed his braces, put on his slippers and settled himself in his armchair, no king was fit to hold a candle to him. The major assented and examined him. At all events his virtuous conduct had not made him any thinner; he still looked bloated; his eyes were bleared, and his mouth was heavy. He seemed to be half asleep as he repeated mechanically: “Home life! There’s nothing like home life, nothing in the world!”

“No doubt,” said the major; “still, one mustn’t exaggerate-take a little exercise and come to the cafe now and then.”

“To the cafe, why?” asked Burle. “Do I lack anything here? No, no, I remain at home.”

When Charles had laid his books aside Laguitte was surprised to see a maid come in to lay the cloth.

“So you keep a servant now,” he remarked to Mme Burle.

“I had to get one,” she answered with a sigh. “My legs are not what they used to be, and the household was going to rack and ruin. Fortunately Cabrol let me have his daughter. You know old Cabrol, who sweeps the market? He did not know what to do with Rose-I am teaching her how to work.”

Just then the girl left the room.

“How old is she?” asked the major.

“Barely seventeen. She is stupid and dirty, but I only give her ten francs a month, and she eats nothing but soup.”

When Rose returned with an armful of plates Laguitte, though he did not care about women, began to scrutinize her and was amazed at seeing so ugly a creature. She was very short, very dark and slightly deformed, with a face like an ape's: a flat nose, a huge mouth and narrow greenish eyes. Her broad back and long arms gave her an appearance of great strength.

“What a snout!” said Laguitte, laughing, when the maid had again left the room to fetch the cruets.

“Never mind,” said Burle carelessly, “she is very obliging and does all one asks her. She suits us well enough as a scullion.”

The dinner was very pleasant. It consisted of boiled beef and mutton hash. Charles was encouraged to relate some stories of his school, and Mme Burle repeatedly asked him the same question: “Don't you want to be a soldier?” A faint smile hovered over the child's wan lips as he answered with the frightened obedience of a trained dog, “Oh yes, Grandmother.” Captain Burle, with his elbows on the table, was masticating slowly with an absent-minded expression. The big room was getting warmer; the single lamp placed on the table left the corners in vague gloom. There was a certain amount of heavy comfort, the familiar intimacy of penurious people who do not change their plates at every course but become joyously excited at the unexpected appearance of a bowl of whipped egg cream at the close of the meal.

Rose, whose heavy tread shook the floor as she paced round the table, had not yet opened her mouth. At last she stopped behind the captain's chair and asked in a gruff voice: “Cheese, sir?”

Burle started. “What, eh? Oh yes-cheese. Hold the plate tight.”

He cut a piece of Gruyere, the girl watching him the while with her narrow eyes. Laguitte laughed; Rose's unparalleled ugliness amused him immensely. He whispered in the captain's ear, “She is ripping! There never was such a nose and such a mouth! You ought to send her to the colonel's someday as a curiosity. It would amuse him to see her.”

More and more struck by this phenomenal ugliness, the major felt a paternal desire to examine the girl more closely.

“Come here,” he said, “I want some cheese too.”

She brought the plate, and Laguitte, sticking the knife in the Gruyere, stared at her, grinning the while because he discovered that she had one nostril broader than the other. Rose gravely allowed herself to be looked at, waiting till the gentleman had done laughing.

She removed the cloth and disappeared. Burle immediately went to sleep in the chimney corner while the major and Mme Burle began to chat. Charles had returned to his exercises. Quietude fell from the loft ceiling; the quietude of a middle-class household gathered in concord around their fireside. At nine o'clock Burle woke up, yawned and announced that he was going off to bed; he apologized but declared that he could not keep his eyes open. Half an hour later, when the major took his leave, Mme Burle vainly called for Rose to light him downstairs; the girl must have gone up to her room; she was, indeed, a regular hen, snoring the round of the clock without waking.

“No need to disturb anybody,” said Laguitte on the landing; “my legs are not much better than yours, but if I get hold of the banisters I shan't break any bones. Now, my dear lady, I leave you happy; your troubles are ended at last. I watched Burle closely, and I'll take my oath that he's guileless as a child. Dash it-after all, it was high time for Petticoat Burle to reform; he was going downhill fast.”

The major went away fully satisfied with the house and its inmates; the walls were of glass and could harbor no equivocal conduct. What particularly delighted him in his friend's return to virtue was that it absolved him from the obligation of verifying the accounts. Nothing was more distasteful to him than the inspection of a number of ledgers, and as long as Burle kept steady, he-Laguitte-could smoke his pipe in peace and sign the books in all confidence. However, he continued to keep one eye open for a little while longer and found the receipts genuine, the entries correct, the columns admirably balanced. A month later he contented himself with glancing at the receipts and running his eye over the totals. Then one morning, without the slightest suspicion of there being anything wrong, simply because he had lit a second pipe and had nothing to do, he carelessly added up a row of figures and fancied that he detected an error of thirteen francs. The balance seemed perfectly correct, and yet he was not mistaken; the total outlay was thirteen francs more than the various sums for which receipts were furnished. It looked queer, but he said nothing to Burle, just making up his mind to examine the next accounts closely. On the following week he detected a fresh error of nineteen francs, and then, suddenly becoming alarmed, he shut himself up with the books and spent a wretched morning poring over them, perspiring, swearing and feeling as if his very skull were bursting with the figures. At every page he discovered thefts of a few francs-the most miserable petty thefts-ten, eight, eleven francs, latterly, three and four; and, indeed, there was one column showing that Burle had pilfered just one franc and a half. For two months, however, he had been steadily robbing the cashbox, and by comparing dates the major found to his disgust that the famous lesson respecting Gagneux had only kept him straight for one week! This last discovery infuriated Laguitte, who struck the books with his clenched fists, yelling through a shower of oaths:

“This is more abominable still! At least there was some pluck about those forged receipts of Gagneux. But this time he is as contemptible as a cook charging twopence

extra for her cabbages. Powers of hell! To pilfer a franc and a half and clap it in his pocket! Hasn't the brute got any pride then? Couldn't he run away with the safe or play the fool with actresses?"

The pitiful meanness of these pilferings revolted the major, and, moreover, he was enraged at having been duped a second time, deceived by the simple, stupid dodge of falsified additions. He rose at last and paced his office for a whole hour, growling aloud.

"This gives me his measure. Even if I were to thresh him to a jelly every morning he would still drop a couple of coins into his pocket every afternoon. But where can he spend it all? He is never seen abroad; he goes to bed at nine, and everything looks so clean and proper over there. Can the brute have vices that nobody knows of?"

He returned to the desk, added up the subtracted money and found a total of five hundred and forty-five francs. Where was this deficiency to come from? The inspection was close at hand, and if the crotchety colonel should take it into his head to examine a single page, the murder would be out and Burle would be done for.

This idea froze the major, who left off cursing, picturing Mme Burle erect and despairing, and at the same time he felt his heart swell with personal grief and shame.

"Well," he muttered, "I must first of all look into the rogue's business; I will act afterward."

As he walked over to Burle's office he caught sight of a skirt vanishing through the doorway. Fancying that he had a clue to the mystery, he slipped up quietly and listened and speedily recognized Melanie's shrill voice. She was complaining of the gentlemen of the divan. She had signed a promissory note which she was unable to meet; the bailiffs were in the house, and all her goods would be sold. The captain, however, barely replied to her. He alleged that he had no money, whereupon she burst into tears and began to coax him. But her blandishments were apparently ineffectual, for Burle's husky voice could be heard repeating, "Impossible! Impossible!" And finally the widow withdrew in a towering passion. The major, amazed at the turn affairs were taking, waited a few moments longer before entering the office, where Burle had remained alone. He found him very calm, and despite his furious inclination to call him names he also remained calm, determined to begin by finding out the exact truth.

The office certainly did not look like a swindler's den. A cane-seated chair, covered with an honest leather cushion, stood before the captain's desk, and in a corner there was the locked safe. Summer was coming on, and the song of a canary sounded through the open window. The apartment was very neat and tidy, redolent of old papers, and altogether its appearance inspired one with confidence.

"Wasn't it Melanie who was leaving here as I came along?" asked Laguitte.

Burle shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes," he mumbled. "She has been dunning me for two hundred francs, but she can't screw ten out of me-not even tenpence."

"Indeed!" said the major, just to try him. "I heard that you had made up with her."

"I? Certainly not. I have done with the likes of her for good."

Laguitte went away, feeling greatly perplexed. Where had the five hundred and forty-five francs gone? Had the idiot taken to drinking or gambling? He decided to pay Burle a surprise visit that very evening at his own house, and maybe by questioning his mother he might learn something. However, during the afternoon his leg became very painful; latterly he had been feeling in ill-health, and he had to use a stick so as not to limp too outrageously. This stick grieved him sorely, and he declared with angry despair that he was now no better than a pensioner. However, toward the evening, making a strong effort, he pulled himself out of his armchair and, leaning heavily on his stick, dragged himself through the darkness to the Rue des Recollets, which he reached about nine o'clock. The street door was still unlocked, and on going up he stood panting on the third landing, when he heard voices on the upper floor. One of these voices was Burle's, so he fancied, and out of curiosity he ascended another flight of stairs. Then at the end of a passage on the left he saw a ray of light coming from a door which stood ajar. As the creaking of his boots resounded, this door was sharply closed, and he found himself in the dark.

"Some cook going to bed!" he muttered angrily. "I'm a fool."

All the same he groped his way as gently as possible to the door and listened. Two people were talking in the room, and he stood aghast, for it was Burle and that fright Rose! Then he listened, and the conversation he heard left him no doubt of the awful truth. For a moment he lifted his stick as if to beat down the door. Then he shuddered and, staggering back, leaned against the wall. His legs were trembling under him, while in the darkness of the staircase he brandished his stick as if it had been a saber.

What was to be done? After his first moment of passion there had come thoughts of the poor old lady below. And these made him hesitate. It was all over with the captain now; when a man sank as low as that he was hardly worth the few shovelfuls of earth that are thrown over carrion to prevent them from polluting the atmosphere. Whatever might be said of Burle, however much one might try to shame him, he would assuredly begin the next day. Ah, heavens, to think of it! The money! The honor of the army! The name of Burle, that respected name, dragged through the mire! By all that was holy this could and should not be!

Presently the major softened. If he had only possessed five hundred and forty-five francs! But he had not got such an amount. On the previous day he had drunk too much cognac, just like a mere sub, and had lost shockingly at cards. It served him right—he ought to have known better! And if he was so lame he richly deserved it too; by rights, in fact, his leg ought to be much worse.

At last he crept downstairs and rang at the bell of Mme Burle's flat. Five minutes elapsed, and then the old lady appeared.

"I beg your pardon for keeping you waiting," she said; "I thought that dormouse Rose was still about. I must go and shake her."

But the major detained her.

"Where is Burle?" he asked.

"Oh, he has been snoring since nine o'clock. Would you like to knock at his door?"

"No, no, I only wanted to have a chat with you."

In the parlor Charles sat at his usual place, having just finished his exercises. He looked terrified, and his poor little white hands were tremulous. In point of fact, his grandmother, before sending him to bed, was wont to read some martial stories aloud so as to develop the latent family heroism in his bosom. That night she had selected the episode of the Vengeur, the man-of-war freighted with dying heroes and sinking into the sea. The child, while listening, had become almost hysterical, and his head was racked as with some ghastly nightmare.

Mme Burle asked the major to let her finish the perusal. "Long live the republic!" She solemnly closed the volume. Charles was as white as a sheet.

"You see," said the old lady, "the duty of every French soldier is to die for his country."

"Yes, Grandmother."

Then the lad kissed her on the forehead and, shivering with fear, went to bed in his big room, where the faintest creak of the paneling threw him into a cold sweat.

The major had listened with a grave face. Yes, by heavens! Honor was honor, and he would never permit that wretched Burle to disgrace the old woman and the boy! As the lad was so devoted to the military profession, it was necessary that he should be able to enter Saint-Cyr with his head erect.

When Mme Burle took up the lamp to show the major out, she passed the door of the captain's room, and stopped short, surprised to see the key outside, which was a most unusual occurrence.

"Do go in," she said to Laguitte; "it is bad for him to sleep so much."

And before he could interpose she had opened the door and stood transfixed on finding the room empty. Laguitte turned crimson and looked so foolish that she suddenly understood everything, enlightened by the sudden recollection of several little incidents to which she had previously attached no importance.

"You knew it-you knew it!" she stammered. "Why was I not told? Oh, my God, to think of it! Ah, he has been stealing again-I feel it!"

She remained erect, white and rigid. Then she added in a harsh voice:

"Look you-I wish he were dead!"

Laguitte caught hold of both her hands, which for a moment he kept tightly clasped in his own. Then he left her hurriedly, for he felt a lump rising in his throat and tears coming to his eyes. Ah, by all the powers, this time his mind was quite made up.

Chapter 4

Inspection

The regimental inspection was to take place at the end of the month. The major had ten days before him. On the very next morning, however, he crawled, limping, as far as the Cafe de Paris, where he ordered some beer. Melanie grew pale when she saw him enter, and it was with a lively recollection of a certain slap that Phrosine hastened to serve him. The major seemed very calm, however; he called for a second chair to rest his bad leg upon and drank his beer quietly like any other thirsty man. He had sat there for about an hour when he saw two officers crossing the Place du Palais-Morandot, who commanded one of the battalions of the regiment, and Captain Doucet. Thereupon he excitedly waved his cane and shouted: "Come in and have a glass of beer with me!"

The officers dared not refuse, but when the maid had brought the beer Morandot said to the major: "So you patronize this place now?"

"Yes-the beer is good."

Captain Doucet winked and asked archly: "Do you belong to the divan, Major?"

Laguitte chuckled but did not answer. Then the others began to chaff him about Melanie, and he took their remarks good-naturedly, simply shrugging his shoulders. The widow was undoubtedly a fine woman, however much people might talk. Some of those who disparaged her would, in reality, be only too pleased to win her good graces. Then turning to the little counter and assuming an engaging air, he shouted:

"Three more glasses, madame."

Melanie was so taken aback that she rose and brought the beer herself. The major detained her at the table and forgot himself so far as to softly pat the hand which she had carelessly placed on the back of a chair. Used as she was to alternate brutality and flattery, she immediately became confident, believing in a sudden whim of gallantry on the part of the "old wreck," as she was wont to style the major when talking with Phrosine. Doucet and Morandot looked at each other in surprise. Was the major actually stepping into Petticoat Burle's shoes? The regiment would be convulsed if that were the case.

Suddenly, however, Laguitte, who kept his eye on the square, gave a start.

"Hallo, there's Burle!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, it is his time," explained Phrosine. "The captain passes every afternoon on his way from the office."

In spite of his lameness the major had risen to his feet, pushing aside the chairs as he called out: "Burle! I say-come along and have a glass."

The captain, quite aghast and unable to understand why Laguitte was at the widow's, advanced mechanically. He was so perplexed that he again hesitated at the door.

“Another glass of beer,” ordered the major, and then turning to Burle, he added, “What’s the matter with you? Come in. Are you afraid of being eaten alive?”

The captain took a seat, and an awkward pause followed. Melanie, who brought the beer with trembling hands, dreaded some scene which might result in the closing of her establishment. The major’s gallantry made her uneasy, and she endeavored to slip away, but he invited her to drink with them, and before she could refuse he had ordered Phrosine to bring a liqueur glass of anisette, doing so with as much coolness as if he had been master of the house. Melanie was thus compelled to sit down between the captain and Laguitte, who exclaimed aggressively: “I WILL have ladies respected. We are French officers! Let us drink Madame’s health!”

Burle, with his eyes fixed on his glass, smiled in an embarrassed way. The two officers, shocked at the proceedings, had already tried to get off. Fortunately the cafe was deserted, save that the domino players were having their afternoon game. At every fresh oath which came from the major they glanced around, scandalized by such an unusual accession of customers and ready to threaten Melanie that they would leave her for the Cafe de la Gare if the soldiery was going to invade her place like flies that buzzed about, attracted by the stickiness of the tables which Phrosine scoured only on Saturdays. She was now reclining behind the counter, already reading a novel again.

“How’s this-you are not drinking with Madame?” roughly said the major to Burle. “Be civil at least!”

Then as Doucet and Morandot were again preparing to leave, he stopped them.

“Why can’t you wait? We’ll go together. It is only this brute who never knows how to behave himself.”

The two officers looked surprised at the major’s sudden bad temper. Melanie attempted to restore peace and with a light laugh placed her hands on the arms of both men. However, Laguitte disengaged himself.

“No,” he roared, “leave me alone. Why does he refuse to chink glasses with you? I shall not allow you to be insulted-do you hear? I am quite sick of him.”

Burle, paling under the insult, turned slightly and said to Morandot, “What does this mean? He calls me in here to insult me. Is he drunk?”

With a wild oath the major rose on his trembling legs and struck the captain’s cheek with his open hand. Melanie dived and thus escaped one half of the smack. An appalling uproar ensued. Phrosine screamed behind the counter as if she herself had received the blow; the domino players also entrenched themselves behind their table in fear lest the soldiers should draw their swords and massacre them. However, Doucet and Morandot pinioned the captain to prevent him from springing at the major’s throat and forcibly let him to the door. When they got him outside they succeeded in quieting him a little by repeating that Laguitte was quite in the wrong. They would lay the affair before the colonel, having witnessed it, and the colonel would give his decision. As soon as they had got Burle away they returned to the cafe where they found Laguitte in reality greatly disturbed, with tears in his eyes but affecting stolid indifference and slowly finishing his beer.

“Listen, Major,” began Morandot, “that was very wrong on your part. The captain is your inferior in rank, and you know that he won’t be allowed to fight you.”

“That remains to be seen,” answered the major.

“But how has he offended you? He never uttered a word. Two old comrades too; it is absurd.”

The major made a vague gesture. “No matter. He annoyed me.”

He could never be made to say anything else. Nothing more as to his motive was ever known. All the same, the scandal was a terrible one. The regiment was inclined to believe that Melanie, incensed by the captain’s defection, had contrived to entrap the major, telling him some abominable stories and prevailing upon him to insult and strike Burle publicly. Who would have thought it of that old foggy Laguitte, who professed to be a woman hater? they said. So he, too, had been caught at last. Despite the general indignation against Melanie, this adventure made her very conspicuous, and her establishment soon drove a flourishing business.

On the following day the colonel summoned the major and the captain into his presence. He censured them sternly, accusing them of disgracing their uniform by frequenting unseemly haunts. What resolution had they come to, he asked, as he could not authorize them to fight? This same question had occupied the whole regiment for the last twenty-four hours. Apologies were unacceptable on account of the blow, but as Laguitte was almost unable to stand, it was hoped that, should the colonel insist upon it, some reconciliation might be patched up.

“Come,” said the colonel, “will you accept me as arbitrator?”

“I beg your pardon, Colonel,” interrupted the major; “I have brought you my resignation. Here it is. That settles everything. Please name the day for the duel.”

Burle looked at Laguitte in amazement, and the colonel thought it his duty to protest.

“This is a most serious step, Major,” he began. “Two years more and you would be entitled to your full pension.”

But again did Laguitte cut him short, saying gruffly, “That is my own affair.”

“Oh, certainly! Well, I will send in your resignation, and as soon as it is accepted I will fix a day for the duel.”

The unexpected turn that events had taken startled the regiment. What possessed that lunatic major to persist in cutting the throat of his old comrade Burle? The officers again discussed Melanie; they even began to dream of her. There must surely be something wonderful about her since she had completely fascinated two such tough old veterans and brought them to a deadly feud. Morandot, having met Laguitte, did not disguise his concern. If he-the major-was not killed, what would he live upon? He had no fortune, and the pension to which his cross of the Legion of Honor entitled him, with the half of a full regimental pension which he would obtain on resigning, would barely find him in bread. While Morandot was thus speaking Laguitte simply stared before him with his round eyes, persevering in the dumb obstinacy born of his narrow mind; and when his companion tried to question him regarding his hatred for Burle, he simply made the same vague gesture as

before and once again repeated:

“He annoyed me; so much the worse.”

Every morning at mess and at the canteen the first words were: “Has the acceptance of the major’s resignation arrived?” The duel was impatiently expected and ardently discussed. The majority believed that Laguitte would be run through the body in three seconds, for it was madness for a man to fight with a paralyzed leg which did not even allow him to stand upright. A few, however, shook their heads. Laguitte had never been a marvel of intellect, that was true; for the last twenty years, indeed, he had been held up as an example of stupidity, but there had been a time when he was known as the best fencer of the regiment, and although he had begun as a drummer he had won his epaulets as the commander of a battalion by the sanguine bravery of a man who is quite unconscious of danger. On the other hand, Burle fenced indifferently and passed for a poltroon. However, they would soon know what to think.

Meanwhile the excitement became more and more intense as the acceptance of Laguitte’s resignation was so long in coming. The major was unmistakably the most anxious and upset of everybody. A week had passed by, and the general inspection would commence two days later. Nothing, however, had come as yet. He shuddered at the thought that he had, perhaps, struck his old friend and sent in his resignation all in vain, without delaying the exposure for a single minute. He had in reality reasoned thus: If he himself were killed he would not have the worry of witnessing the scandal, and if he killed Burle, as he expected to do, the affair would undoubtedly be hushed up. Thus he would save the honor of the army, and the little chap would be able to get in at Saint-Cyr. Ah, why wouldn’t those wretched scribblers at the War Office hurry up a bit? The major could not keep still but was forever wandering about before the post office, stopping the estafettes and questioning the colonel’s orderly to find out if the acceptance had arrived. He lost his sleep and, careless as to people’s remarks, he leaned more and more heavily on his stick, hobbling about with no attempt to steady his gait.

On the day before that fixed for the inspection he was, as usual, on his way to the colonel’s quarters when he paused, startled, to see Mme Burle (who was taking Charles to school) a few paces ahead of him. He had not met her since the scene at the Cafe de Paris, for she had remained in seclusion at home. Unmanned at thus meeting her, he stepped down to leave the whole sidewalk free. Neither he nor the old lady bowed, and the little boy lifted his large inquisitive eyes in mute surprise. Mme Burle, cold and erect, brushed past the major without the least sign of emotion or recognition. When she had passed he looked after her with an expression of stupefied compassion.

“Confound it, I am no longer a man,” he growled, dashing away a tear.

When he arrived at the colonel’s quarters a captain in attendance greeted him with the words: “It’s all right at last. The papers have come.”

“Ah!” murmured Laguitte, growing very pale.

And again he beheld the old lady walking on, relentlessly rigid and holding the little boy’s hand. What! He had longed so eagerly for those papers for eight days past, and now when the scraps had come he felt his brain on fire and his heart lacerated.

The duel took place on the morrow, in the barrack yard behind a low wall. The air was keen, the sun shining brightly. Laguitte had almost to be carried to the ground; one of his seconds supported him on one side, while on the other he leaned heavily, on his stick. Burle looked half asleep; his face was puffy with unhealthy fat, as if he had spent a night of debauchery. Not a word was spoken. They were all anxious to have it over.

Captain Doucet crossed the swords of the two adversaries and then drew back, saying: "Set to, gentlemen."

Burle was the first to attack; he wanted to test Laguitte's strength and ascertain what he had to expect. For the last ten days the encounter had seemed to him a ghastly nightmare which he could not fathom. At times a hideous suspicion assailed him, but he put it aside with terror, for it meant death, and he refused to believe that a friend could play him such a trick, even to set things right. Besides, Laguitte's leg reassured him; he would prick the major on the shoulder, and then all would be over.

During well-nigh a couple of minutes the swords clashed, and then the captain lunged, but the major, recovering his old suppleness of wrist, parried in a masterly style, and if he had returned the attack Burle would have been pierced through. The captain now fell back; he was livid, for he felt that he was at the mercy of the man who had just spared him. At last he understood that this was an execution.

Laguitte, squarely poised on his infirm legs and seemingly turned to stone, stood waiting. The two men looked at each other fixedly. In Burle's blurred eyes there arose a supplication—a prayer for pardon. He knew why he was going to die, and like a child he promised not to transgress again. But the major's eyes remained implacable; honor had spoken, and he silenced his emotion and his pity.

"Let it end," he muttered between his teeth.

Then it was he who attacked. Like a flash of lightning his sword flamed, flying from right to left, and then with a resistless thrust it pierced the breast of the captain, who fell like a log without even a groan.

Laguitte had released his hold upon his sword and stood gazing at that poor old rascal Burle, who was stretched upon his back with his fat stomach bulging out.

"Oh, my God! My God!" repeated the major furiously and despairingly, and then he began to swear.

They led him away, and, both his legs failing him, he had to be supported on either side, for he could not even use his stick.

Two months later the ex-major was crawling slowly along in the sunlight down a lonely street of Vauchamp, when he again found himself face to face with Mme Burle and little Charles. They were both in deep mourning. He tried to avoid them, but he now only walked with difficulty, and they advanced straight upon him without hurrying or slackening their steps. Charles still had the same gentle, girlish, frightened face, and Mme Burle retained her stern, rigid demeanor, looking even harsher than ever.

As Laguitte shrank into the corner of a doorway to leave the whole street to them, she abruptly stopped in front of him and stretched out her hand. He hesitated and then took it

and pressed it, but he trembled so violently that he made the old lady's arm shake. They exchanged glances in silence.

“Charles,” said the boy's grandmother at last, “shake hands with the major.” The boy obeyed without understanding. The major, who was very pale, barely ventured to touch the child's frail fingers; then, feeling that he ought to speak, he stammered out: “You still intend to send him to Saint-Cyr?”

“Of course, when he is old enough,” answered Mme Burle.

But during the following week Charles was carried off by typhoid fever. One evening his grandmother had again read him the story of the Vengeur to make him bold, and in the night he had become delirious. The poor little fellow died of fright.