



EXTERIOR OF A CONFECTIONER'S SHOP AT CHRISTMAS, IN MADRID.

according to you? Is this a marriage-settlement or a will? You forget that Mme. Laroque is living, that her father is living, that you are marrying, sir, and not inheriting—not yet, sir; a little patience, what in the name of fate!

“At these words Mlle. Marguerite rose. ‘Enough of this, M. Laubépin,’ she said; ‘throw that dead into the fire. Mother, have monsieur’s presents returned to him.’ And she left the room with the step of an insulted queen. Mme. Laroque followed her. At the same time I hurled the dead into the fireplace.”

“‘Sir,’ said M. de Bévellan, in a threatening tone, ‘that is a manoeuvre of which I well know the secret!’”

“‘Sir, I will tell it you,’ I replied. ‘A young lady, who respects herself with a just pride, had conceived a fear that your attentions were addressed only to her fortune; she has no longer any doubt of it. I have the honour to wish you good-day.’”

“Thereupon, my friend, I went to join the two ladies, who actually threw their arms round my neck! A quarter of an hour later M. de Bévellan left the chateau with my colleague from Rennes. His departure and disgrace had the inevitable effect of unloosing against him all the servants’ tongues, and his shameless intrigue with Mlle. Héloïse soon came to light. That young lady, already for some time an object of suspicion on other accounts, tendered the resignation of her situation, and it was not refused her. It is unnecessary to add that the ladies have secured an honourable livelihood for her. Well, my boy, what have you to say to all that? You are not in great pain, surely? You are as pale as a corpse.”

The truth is, that this unexpected news stirred up so many emotions, both happy and painful, in my breast, that I felt on the point of losing consciousness.

M. Laubépin, who is to go away at daybreak to-morrow, came again this evening to say good-bye to me. After a few embarrassed words on both sides, he said, “Come now, my dear child, I will not question you as to what is going on here; but if you should happen to need confidential advice, I would ask you to come first to me.”

In truth I could not unburden myself to a more friendly or more trusty heart. I gave the worthy old man a detailed account of all the circumstances

since my coming to the chateau, that have marked my intercourse with Mlle. Marguerite. I even read him some pages of this journal, to give to him a more exact idea of the character of this intercourse, and also of the state of my mind. Except only the secret that I had discovered the day before in M. Laroque’s archives, I hid nothing from him.

When I had ended, M. Laubépin, whose forehead had for a moment looked very thoughtful, spoke in his turn—“It is useless to disguise from you, my friend,” he said, “that, in sending you here, I looked forward to a union between you and Mlle. Laroque. At first everything succeeded as well as I could wish. Your two hearts, which, in my opinion, are worthy of each other, could not meet without understanding each other; but that strange event, on the romantic theatre of Elven tower, completely disconcerts me, I confess. What in the name of fate! my friend, to jump down from the window, at the risk of breaking your neck, was quite sufficient proof, allow me to tell you, of your disinterestedness; it was very superfluous to add to that honourable and delicate proceeding a solemn oath never to marry the poor child, unless under conditions that are absolutely impossible to expect. I boast myself to be a man of resources, but I acknowledge myself entirely incapable of giving you two hundred thousand francs a year, or of taking them away from Mlle. Laroque!”

“Well, sir, advise me. I have more confidence in you than in myself, for I feel that my reduced circumstances, always liable to breed a suspicious temper, may have irritated to an excess the sensitiveness of my honour. Speak. Do you authorise me to forget the indiscreet, but still solemn oath, which is now all, I believe, that separates me from the happiness you dreamed of for your adopted son?”

M. Laubépin rose; his thick eyebrows contracted over his eyes, he paced the room with long strides for several minutes; then, stopping before me and grasping my hand strongly, he said: “Young man, it is true I love you as my own child; but should your heart break, and mine after it, I will not tamper with my principles. It is better to go too far than to stop short in honour; and of oaths, all that are not exacted at the point of the knife, or at the muzzle of the pistol, ought either not to be taken, or ought to be observed. That is my opinion.”

“And mine too. I will go with you to-morrow.”

“No, Maxime, stay here some time longer. I do not believe in miracles, but I believe in God, who seldom lets us perish by our virtues. Let us give Providence some delay. I know that I am asking you for a great effort of courage, but I ask it formally of your friendship. If, in a month, you do not hear from me, well, you can then go.”

He embraced me, and left me with tranquillity in my conscience and desolation in my soul.

(To be continued.)

A CHRISTMAS SCENE IN MADRID.

The last days of December, devoted as they always are, in Spain and elsewhere, to presents and friendly visits, completely change the ordinary aspect of the sombre old city of Madrid. Everybody knows that the approach of Christmas produces some preparations amongst ourselves; but the effect is in no degree comparable to that which is occasioned by the eve of Christmas in the Spanish capital. All the world of Madrid is giving and receiving Christmas-boxes and New Year’s gifts; the Place Mayor, the street of Alcalá, all the confectioners and pastry-cooks’ shops, are resplendent, and for eight days the profusion of fruits, and the gay decorations everywhere displayed, render Madrid a kind of fairy paradise. Fluttering everywhere, like so many gay butterflies, are the picturesquely-attired fops and idlers of Spain; and everywhere are also to be seen the beauties of Spain, with their graceful mantillas cast around them with that coquettish art which no women in the world know how to practise so well. Here are they with their fans all in a flutter; here they are casting such glances as slay the most inveterate bachelors; and here are beggars, too, and provincials, with their ample cloaks and slouched hats, looking like stage brigands; and here are soldiers in blazing uniforms, and the *habitués* of the circus, a very motley group, all bent on keeping Christmas, and all listening with Spanish gravity to the gaily-attired confectioner eulogising the sweets he has for sale. Such a scene is that which is shown in the above engraving, representing the outside of a confectioner’s shop in the street of Alcalá.