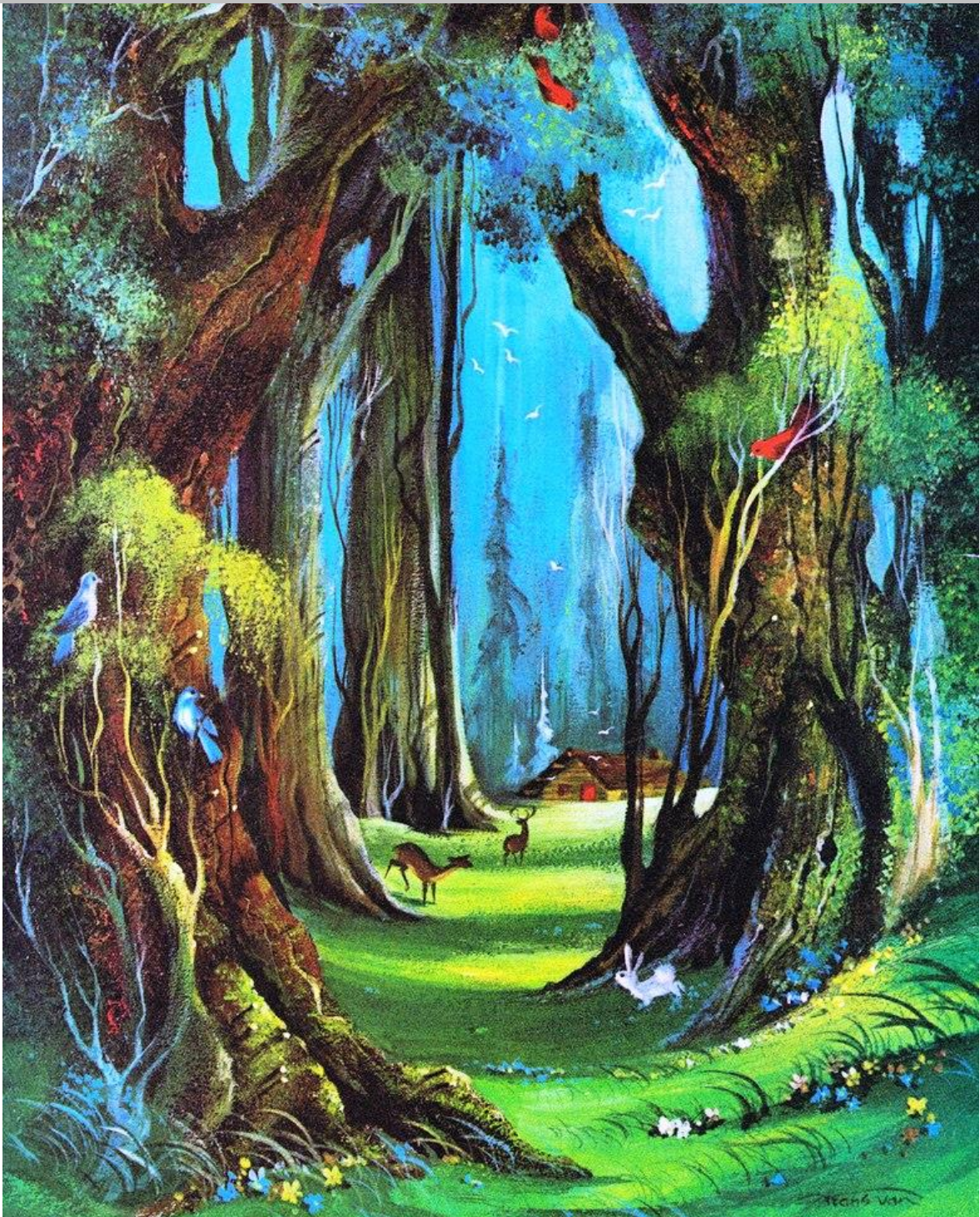


*When the doors of the world  
closed on them, those of  
heaven opened to them.*



Alphonse de Lamartine,<sup>1</sup> *Les Confidences*, Note XVII. This translation from the French, by Eugène Plunkett, was first published in New York by D. Appleton & Co., in 1849. Republished in: the *World's Great Romances*, under the title "Abbé Dumont's Mystery."<sup>2</sup> New York: Black's Readers Service Co., 1929; pp. 476-84. Title page illustration by Frans Van Lamsweerde; last page, by Yog Joshi.

**W**HEN SLEEP WOULD EXERT ITS INFLUENCE OVER US and begin to clog the words upon our lips, I would take up my gun, call my dog, and the Abbé Dumont would walk with me as far as the extremity of the meadow which terminated the valley of Bussières;<sup>3</sup> here we would shake hands. I would silently climb the stony hill, at one time in the light of soft summer nights; at another, through the humid shadows which were made still heavier by the thick mists of the beginning of autumn.

I would find the aged servant waiting for me, and twirling her distaff the while by the light of the brazen lamp which hung in the kitchen. I would retire to rest and awake on the morrow, to begin another day similar to the one that had passed.

That which increased my attachment to the poor curate of Bussières, was the cloud of melancholy which saddened his countenance. That shadow extinguished the last fires of youth in his glance, and lent a certain faint-hearted languor to his words and his voice, which was in harmony with my own languidness of mind. You could feel that there was a painful and smothered mystery hid beneath his disclosures. You could see that he never told you all that he had to say, and that a last secret always hovered round his lips, but never escaped from them.

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<sup>1</sup> Alphonse Marie Louis de Prat de Lamartine, Knight of Prat (21<sup>st</sup> October 1790 – 28<sup>th</sup> February 1869), distinguished French writer, poet and politician, instrumental in the foundation of the Second Republic and the continuation of the *Tricolore* as the flag of France.

Raised by his mother to respect animal life, Lamartine considered eating meat repugnant, saying "One does not have one heart for man and one for animals. One has a heart or one does not." He also said, "Brutality to an animal is cruelty to mankind — it is only the difference in the victim." His writings in *La chute d'un Ange* (1838) and *Les confidences* (1849) would be taken up by supporters of vegetarianism in the twentieth century.

During his term as a politician in the Second Republic, Lamartine led efforts that culminated in the abolition of slavery and the death penalty, as well as the enshrinement of the right to work and the short-lived national workshop programs. A political idealist who supported democracy and pacifism, Lamartine's moderate stance on most issues caused many of his followers to desert him. He was an unsuccessful candidate in the presidential election of 10<sup>th</sup> December 1848. He subsequently retired from politics and dedicated himself to literature.

<sup>2</sup> Lamartine's childhood tutor. He says: «Ce curé-la était le curé de Bussières, cet abbé Dumont qui m'a servi de type dans le poème de Jocelyn, et qui devint mon ami plus tard. Il n'avait pas la piété de ma mère, mais il avait l'enthousiasme de sa vertu.» (Lamartine, *Nouvelles Confidences*, Livre premier, chapitre XLII)

Cf. <https://www.atramenta.net/lire/oeuvre11798-chapitre-8.html>

<sup>3</sup> [Saône-et-Loire]

I never attempted to wrest that mystery from him; he would not have intrusted it to me. Between a confession of that nature and the most friendly intimacy with a young man of my age, arose the barrier of the sacred proprieties of his holy office. But the whisperings of the gossips of the village began to reveal to me some confused rumours; and, at a later day, I was made acquainted with that sorrowful mystery in all its details. Here it is:



**a**T THE TIME WHEN PERSECUTION drove the bishop of Mâcon from his palace and confined him in a dungeon, the Abbé Dumont was nothing more a young and handsome secretary; returned to the dwelling of the aged curate of Busnières, who had taken his oath of adherence to the Constitution. He mingled with the world, and with the ascendancy which his face, his courage, and his mind gave him, participated in the various movements opinion which agitated the youth of Mâcon and Lyons at the downfall of monarchy. In the beginning of the Republic he made himself particularly notorious by his antipathy to the Jacobins and his boldness in opposing them. During the Reign of Terror he was tracked as a royalist, and he finally enrolled himself in those secret bands of young royalists which were spreading in every direction, and which formed a chain from the Cévennes mountains to the environs of Lyons.

He was daring and venturesome; and conformity of opinion, as well as chances of association and the dangers of civil war, made him form an intimacy with the son of an aged noble of Forez.<sup>1</sup> The chateau of that family was situated in a wild valley, on a steep hillock. It was a hotbed of conspiracy, and the headquarters of the royalist youth of the neighbourhood. The old lord had lost his wife at the commencement of the Revolution. At her death, she had left him four daughters, who had hardly passed through the age of adolescence. These young girls — reared without a mother, without a governess, in the chateau of an old man, who was hunter and a soldier, and whose character was singular and eccentric, while his mind was illiterate and uncultivated — had none of the attributes of their sex but extreme beauty, simplicity, and grace, united to all the vividness of feeling and all the imprudence of their age.

Their father had accustomed them, from their earliest childhood, to be his companions at table, in the midst of his guests of every description, and to ride horses, handle guns, and follow him to the chase, which was the principal occupation of his life. It is easy to credit that such a charming court always assembled around such an old man, in peace or war, at the feast or in the chase, naturally attracted youth, courage, and love to the chateau of \* \* \* .

The Abbé Dumont, in the garb of a warrior and hunter, young, handsome, agile, dexterous, eloquent, hailed by the father, welcomed by his friend the son, agreeable to the young girls by the elegance of his manners and the superiority of his mind, became the most assiduous skainsmate<sup>2</sup> at the chateau. It may be said that he was a

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<sup>1</sup> ]Today, part of the Haute-Loire and Puy-de-Dôme départements.]

<sup>2</sup> [A companion.]

member of the family and an additional brother to the young girls. In one of the high turrets of the donjon, he occupied a chamber which overlooked the whole country, and from which could be seen a great extent of the only road which led to the castle. As he was appointed to give notice of the approach of the gendarmes or patrols of the National Guard, he watched over the security of the doors and kept in order the arsenal, which was always well stocked with loaded guns and pistols, and which even contained two mounted culverins, with which the Count de \* \* \* was determined to do execution upon the republicans, should they risk themselves in those gorges.

At the chateau, their time was occupied in receiving and despatching disguised messengers who linked the superstitious and counter-revolutionary spirit of those mountains with the emigrants in Savoy and the conspirators in Lyons; in scouring the woods on foot and on horseback for game; in practising the use of arms; in defying the Jacobins of the neighbouring towns, who were constantly denouncing that *den* of aristocrats, but who did not dare to disperse it; in playing and dancing with the youth of the chateaux in the neighbourhood, who were attracted thither by the united charms of opinion, adventure, and pleasure.

Although the young ladies mingled in all this commotion, and although they were left entirely to the exercise of their own prudence, there was nothing like impropriety or licentiousness in their intercourse with their guests, between whom and themselves, however, there existed mutual preferences, tastes, and attractions. The memory of their mother and the knowledge of their own peril, seemed to protect them better than the most rigid vigilance could have done. They were simple, but innocent; like the daughters of the peasants who were their vassals, they were free from suspicion and prudery, but not devoid of watchfulness over themselves and of the dignity of their sex and their instincts.

The two oldest had become attached, and were betrothed to two young noblemen of the South; the third was impatiently awaiting the time when the convents should be reopened in order to devote herself to God, her only thought. Tranquil in the midst of all that agitation, cold in that hotbed of love and enthusiasm, she managed her father's household affairs like a matron of twenty. The fourth had hardly reached her sixteenth year. She was the favourite of her father and sisters.

The admiration which was felt for her as a young girl was mingled with that cheerful complacency with which children are always treated. Her beauty, which was more attractive than dazzling, was the blooming of a loving soul which allows itself to be gazed upon and inhaled through the features, the eyes, and the smile. The further you plunged into it, the more of tenderness, innocence, and goodness you discovered in it. From the impression which she made on me — as I saw her a great many years afterwards, when the dust of life and her tears had doubtless robbed that face of the freshness and the dawn of adolescence — it was easy to recall that ravishing reminiscence of sixteen.

She neither had the languidness of the pale daughters of the North, nor the burning glow of a child of the South, nor the melancholy of an English woman, nor the majesty of an Italian woman; her features, in which grace of expression predominated over purity of form — her pleasing mouth, her small nose, her chestnut hair and eyes —

rather reminded you of a village bride — somewhat scorched by the rays of the sun and the glances of the young men — when she has clothed herself in her wedding garments and sheds around as she enters church, a shudder which delights but which does not intimidate.

She unconsciously became attached to that young adventurer, her brother's friend, who was nearer her own age than any of the other strangers who frequented the chateau. In those days, the mere quality of royalist gave those who fought and suffered for the same opinions a certain familiarity in the houses of the nobility where they were received as companions in arms.

The young man was well read. In consequence of this he was chosen by the father to give lessons in reading, writing, and religion, to the young girl. She looked upon him as a brother who was somewhat more advanced in life than herself. He was answerable for her during the perilous excursions which she made with her father and sisters to hunt the wild boar in the mountains; he was the one who adjusted the bridle and fastened the girth of her horse, who loaded her gun, who carried that gun slung across his shoulders, who aided her to overleap the ravines and torrents, who plunged into the thickets and brought her the game which she shot, who wrapped her in his cloak to protect her from the rain or snow. Such frequent and complete intimacy between a sensitive and ardent young man, and a young girl whose childhood each was imperceptibly changing into adolescence and charms, could hardly fail of awakening in their bosoms, almost without their knowledge, a first and involuntary attachment. There is no snare more dangerous for two pure than that which is prepared by habit and veiled by innocence. They had both fallen into it ere either of them had suspected it. Time and circumstances were soon to make them aware of this.

The Revolutionary Committee of the town of \* \* \* was aware of the plots which were brewing with impunity at the chateau of \* \* \*. The indignation of the Committee was aroused against the neighbouring municipalities, which were either unable or afraid to disperse that nest of conspirators. It resolved to extinguish that counter-revolutionary brand, which threatened to inflame the whole country. It secretly formed a column of gendarmes, light artillery, and national guards. These troops marched all night, in order to arrive beneath the walls of the castle before daybreak, and take the inhabitants by surprise.

There was no means of escape from the chateau, which had been completely surrounded during the slumbers of its inmates. The commander of the republican forces summoned the Count de \* \* \* to open the gates. He was constrained to obey. Orders of arrest had been drawn up in advance against the Count and all the principal members of the family — even the women. They had to surrender themselves as prisoners. The old lord, his brother, son, guests, domestics, and three eldest daughters, were thrown into carts to be taken to the prisons of Lyons. The escutcheons and arms of the castle, including the two culverins, bound round with branches of oak, were dragged as trophies behind the carts into which the prisoners had been thrust. Of all this household, free and peaceful on the eve, the only ones who were not led into captivity, were their constant guest and the Count's youngest daughter.

The young man, who had been awakened in his turret-chamber by the clash of arms and the tramp of horses in the outer court, had hastily dressed and armed himself, and descended to the armoury to sell his life as dearly as possible, in the defence of his hosts and friends. It was too late. All the doors of the castle were in the hands of the National Guards. The commander of the column had already entered the Count's room with the gendarmes, where he was busily engaged placing the public seal on the aged nobleman's papers. On the stairs, the young man met the Count's daughters, who were descending to their father's chamber to be by his side and share his fate.

"Save our sister," hurriedly said the three eldest to him; "we are resolved to follow our father everywhere — to the dungeon, or even to the scaffold; but she, she is a mere child, she has not the right to dispose of her life; hide her from the wretches who guard the doors. — Here is gold! — You will find her in our room, where we have dressed her in male attire. You know the secret passages. God will watch over you. Take her into the Cévennes, to the house of our aged aunt, who is the only relative we have in the wide world; she will receive her, and be a second mother to her. Farewell!"

The stranger followed these instructions to the letter, happy to be the guardian of such a trust and to follow commands which were in such strict conformity with his own inclinations.

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In the castle of \* \* \* there was a subterranean passage — similar to those which were to be found in all the fortified dwellings of the middle ages — which began in the vaults beneath the principal tower, passed under the terrace, and, terminating at a postern, descended by a flight of three or four hundred steps to the foot of the steep hillock on which the chateau was built. There, an iron gate, similar to the wicket of a dungeon, practised in a fissure in the rock, opened upon the vast meadows surrounded by woods which formed the bed of the river and the valley.

The existence of this gate, which was never used, was not known to the republicans. The inhabitants of the castle were the only ones who knew where its key was kept, to be used only in extreme emergencies. The young man possessed himself of the key, returned to the chamber of the weeping maiden, conducted her through the gloomy passage, opened the wicket, and, gliding from willow to willow along the bed of the torrent, succeeded in reaching the woods with his sacred charge.

The moment that he found himself in the well-known paths of these forests, armed with two guns, his own and that of his companion, and furnished with gold and ammunition, he bade defiance to all mankind. With the devotedness of a slave and the tender care of a father, he led the maiden — who looked like his younger brother — across fields, from thicket to thicket, and from road to road, to the outskirts of the little town in which lived the aunt of Mademoiselle de \* \* \* .

Their hunter's attire precluded the necessity of assigning any reason for the care with which they avoided the high-roads and the villages on their route. On the other hand, the connivance of the royalist and religious peasants of those mountains had

accustomed them to respect the secret of those flights and disguises which were so frequent in that section of the country.

Nevertheless, before entering the little town of \* \* \* , where greater vigilance was doubtless exercised, the young man thought it best to warn the aunt Mademoiselle de \* \* \* of the approach of her young niece, and to ask her under what name and disguise, and at what hour he should conduct the maiden to her house.

He despatched a lad to the town with a note for that lady. After the lapse of a few hours, during which the thought of their approaching separation had caused the tears of his companion to flow incessantly, he saw the boy return with the very note which he had written. The aunt herself had been arrested and conveyed by gendarmes to Nîmes. The house was closed: the poor child thus shut out of the only asylum which could have sheltered her at her journey's end. At the bottom of their souls, the two fugitives were more astonished than afflicted by this unexpected blow. The thought of an early and eternal separation appalled them more than dared to acknowledge even to their hearts. Fate united them. Even though they reproached it, they adored it.

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They deliberated a moment on the course that they should adopt. They, naturally, and without any previous understanding, settled upon the course that should separate them at the latest day possible. The young outlaw could not return to the house of the curate of Bussières, without exposing himself to instant arrest and his benefactor to certain ruin; there was not a single house in the Forez in which the young might have found an asylum which not been closed by the Reign of Terror, and whose owners themselves had not been proscribed. They resolved to turn back in the direction of the castle of \* \* \* and ask for shelter in the cottages of some of the hospitable peasants who were yet attached to their old lord, and who inhabited the neighbouring mountains.

They returned by short marches. They knocked one night at the door of a poor woman — the widow of a maker of wooden shoes — who had been the young girl's nurse, and whose tenderness, gratitude, and devotedness were surety for her fidelity. The lonely hut, situated on the plateau of one of the highest mountains, in a gloomy glade surrounded by beech woods, was inaccessible to any one save the wood-cutters and huntsmen of the neighbouring hamlets. Small, low, sunk in the hollow of a ravine; covered with moss-grown thatch, which almost touched the earth and whose colour was hardly distinguishable from that of the *steppes* themselves, it looked from below like a part of the grey rocks against which the poor shoemaker had built it. A little column of bluish smoke which shot up, each morning and evening, in the midst of the white trunks of the beech-trees, was the only sign that indicated that there was a human habitation there, or that some charcoal-burner had lighted his fire of green wood beneath his nomad hut.

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Within these walls, built of angular blocks of dark granite and black slate, and spotted by the rain, there was only one small room, in which the poor woman and her children slept. The hearth was formed by a large unhewn stone on which smoked a fire of broom.<sup>1</sup> Alongside of the hut stood a stable which was somewhat larger than the room, and beneath whose roof was a sort of loft, made of interwoven branches, in which hay and straw were stowed for winter use. A she-ass, two goats, and a few sheep entered here in the evening, driven by little children, under whose care they were sent to pasture.

The nurse, who had long since been informed of the catastrophe at the castle — the imprisonment of the Count, and the disappearance of the young girl that she had so dearly loved — burst into tears when she recognised her foster-child beneath her male attire. She gave her mistress her own bed, at the foot of which she spread a couch of broom for herself; she carried the beds of the little children into the stable which was warmed by the breath of the flock, and gave the stranger a few thick fleeces with which to protect himself from the cold in the hayloft.

After settling matters in this way, she set out before the break of day and trudged to the most distant borough in the mountains, to purchase some white bread, wine, cheese, and a few chickens for the nurture of her guests. She took the precaution to buy these things in different villages, through fear of arousing suspicion by an outlay which was disproportionate to her means and her habits. Before mid-day, she had again climbed the mountain, emptied her wallets upon the floor, and spread the cloth for the repast of the strangers.

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The nurse had given orders to her children not to go further than a certain distance from the hut, and not to talk with the mountain shepherds about the two hunters who had brought plenty, joy, and the blessing of God into their dwelling. The children, proud to be the repositories and the guardians of a mystery, obeyed their mother faithfully. No one in the whole country suspected that the shoemaker's humble hut — which was buried in leaves in summer, and in fog and snow in winter — contained within its walls a whole world of happiness, love, and faithfulness. If I thus describe this hut, it is because I visited it, at another period of my life, during a journey which I took to the during South.

No one can either know, invent, or describe all the feelings that agitated the hearts of that youthful couple — who were thus brought together by solitude, necessity, and mutual attraction — during the year which was made too long by the terror which reigned without, but which was too short, perhaps, for the words of love and trust which were uttered within. Not a syllable of these conversations and confessions ever went further than the walls of the hut, the lilacs in the garden, the bed of the torrent, or the beech-trees in the forest. The life of those two young hermits never escaped beyond those precincts. They only sallied forth at night, with their loaded guns on their arms, to stretch their limbs which were fatigued by repose; to take long nocturnal rambles through unfrequented paths; to breathe the perfume of the sweet-scented broom; to cull the Alpine flowers by the light of the summer moon; or to seat

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<sup>1</sup> [*Calluna vulgaris*, comon heather.]



themselves side by side on the moss-grown slope of a concave rock, whence their eyes plunged into the valley of \* \* \* , and rested upon the deserted castle, or wandered as far as the vast horizon of blue which, like a deep sea, stretched above the Rhine and extended as far as the snows of the Italian Alps.

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Who can accuse them without first accusing their destiny? In that forced association, who can say what undefined limit between respect and adoration, or between virtue and love, bounded the feeling which those two children nourished towards each another? God's eye alone could have seen it. The eye of man is dimmed and dazzled and moistened when it rests on the mystery of such a situation! If fault there was, man can only see it through the tears which, as he condemns, wash out fault and absolve the faulty. — The doors of the world closed upon them, those of heaven opened to them; the pressure of proscription weighing upon their hearts and driving them, despite themselves, into each other's arms; the similarity of age, costume, and feeling; the equal innocence or ignorance of danger; the difference of station forgotten obliterated in that complete estrangement from the world; the uncertainty of whether society, with its prejudices and distinctions, would ever be open to them again; the haste to take advantage of the freedom which they were in momentary danger of losing, and which they enjoyed as a stolen pleasure; the shortness of life at a time when no one knew whether a morrow would ever dawn; that darkness of night which breeds intimacy; that light of the moon which inebriates the eye and bewilders the heart; their double captivity in the nurse's dwelling — a captivity which left their thoughts no possible diversion which offered no interruption to their intercourse; finally, that elevated, narrow, and almost inaccessible part of space which appeared to them as an aërial isle suspended between the earth, which they could see at a distance beneath their feet, and the sky, which they beheld so near above their heads — everything concurred to drive them into each other's arms, and bind them by all the ties of their souls in a moral union; to force them to search each other's heart for that life which had shrunk from around them, and, as it were, faded from their sight: — a life that thus became double at the very moment when they were threatened with its loss, and which only had solitude for its scene of action and contemplation for its food.

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Were they sufficiently prudent, young as they were, to foresee the eternal temptations of their solitude? Were they sufficiently strong to resist them when they experienced them? Did they love one another as brother and sister? Did they promise one another more tender names? — Who can answer? I have been intimately acquainted with both of them. Neither the one nor the other ever confessed anything with regard to that year of adventure. Whenever they met, however, many years afterwards, they never looked at one another in the presence of strangers. A sudden cloud of mingled red and white would spread itself over their countenances, as if some phantom of past days, which we could not see, had passed before their eyes and cast its magical reflection upon their features. Was it affection badly smothered? — passion kindled again beneath the ashes by a breath? — indifference agitated by remembrance? — regret? — or remorse? Who can peer into two sealed hearts and read characters

which have been obliterated by torrents of tears, and which are only visible to the eye of God?

More than one year passed thus. Then the Reign of Terror became less severe in that section of the country. The prisons were thrown open. The old Count and his three daughters re-entered their ruined castle. The nurse led the youngest daughter back to her father's arms. The stranger was the last to leave those mountains.

He returned to the vicarage of Bussières, sad, and apparently twenty years older. His character had attained the maturity of ten additional years in a few short months. He followed the chase with greater assiduity than before, in the company of my father and the noblemen of the country. He would sometimes absent himself, however, for several days, and go on distant journeys whose object was unknown to everyone. On his return, he would say that his dogs had put him upon the track of some roebucks, and that in order not to lose them he had been obliged to follow. And rumour said that no change had taken place at the chateau of \* \* \* , in the other county, unless it was that the guest who had disappeared no longer visited its owners as of yore. The latter continued to lead the life of hunting, feasting, and seigneurial hospitality, which they had led during the Revolution.

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As to the poor nurse, she still dwelt in the lonely hut upon the mountain. She had an orphan to rear along with her own children. This child wore linen that was finer than that which was made in the mountains. In his hands he often had toys which looked as though they had been purchased in the town. Whenever the poor woman was asked why this distinction was made, and who was the owner of that orphan, she always answered that she had found him beneath a beech-tree, near the spring, as she was going to fetch water one morning, and that a peddler who trafficked on those mountains sometimes brought him white linen, and toys of ivory and coral. That charity had made her rich. I have known this orphan. He was the child of proscription, and he had its sadness in his soul and upon his features.

Five or six years afterwards, the Count's youngest daughter was married to an old man, who was the most gentle and the most indulgent of fathers to her. She devoted herself to the care of his declining years. He took her with him to a little town in the South, in which he lived. The young companion of her exile, who, until then, had been wavering between the world and the church, suddenly put an end to his irresolution when he heard of the young girl's marriage. He saw nothing more in life that was worthy of a regret. He gave it up without any effort. He entered a seminary without casting a look behind him. Then he went and shut himself up for a few weeks with his former patron, the bishop of Mâcon, who at last been liberated and who was ending his days, in the midst of poverty and infirmities, in the house of one of his faithful servants, within a few feet of what had formerly been his episcopal palace. The bishop invested him with holy orders. He returned to discharge the humble duties of the vicarage of Bussières. He continued them, as I have said, until the death of the curate, to whom he succeeded.

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**DOWN TO EARTH SERIES**  
**THE DOORS OF HEAVEN OPENED TO THEM**

Such was the hidden part of man's life, a life which chance see to have placed alongside of my own as a mournful and tender consonance with the precocious disenchantment of my youth — a bitter smile of resignation above an abyss of painful sensibility, burning recollections, smouldering love, and restrained tears. It was the transparency of all these things in his demeanour, in his physiognomy, in his silence, and in his accent, no doubt which attached me to him. Had he been happy and faultless, I would not have loved him as I did. There is a degree of pity in all our friendships. Misfortune has an attraction for certain souls. The cement of our heart is mixed with tears, and nearly all our deep affections have their beginning in some sorrowful emotion!

