THE MERCHANT OF ST MALO.

The great Catholic Feast of the Assumption on the 15th of August happening to fall on a Sunday, and the weather being superb, the usually dull and dirty town of St Malo assumed an aspect of unusual joyance and brilliancy. The clear chiming of the cathedral and church bells, the animated strains of several military bands, the chanting of priests and acolytes at the head of numerous processions of young girls, dressed in white, garlanded with flowers, and bearing lighted tapers in their hands, passing slowly along, to make their first communion, through buzzing crowds of admiring spectators, a large number of whom shone in the glory of regimentals, either of the Line or National Guard—produced a singularly gay and imposing effect: and one would have supposed, that some sparkles of pleasurable emotion must have been excited in the saddest minds within reach of the exultant *carillon* of the streets. Not so, however. The fierce disquietude of M. Paul Fontanes, the prosperous and rising, if not as yet decidedly eminent merchant of the Rue Dupetit-Thouars, was exasperated thereby, not soothed, as he nervously tore open and glanced through a heap of correspondence brought him that morning by the American mail. 'Curse the distracting din!' he savagely exclaimed, as a more than usually joyous burst of military music mingled with and seemed to sharpen the serpent-accents of a letter he had just opened. 'It is impossible to comprehend what one reads.' An exaggeration, at the very least, M. Paul Fontanes! Say the undulations of the music do assist in zigzagging the lines before you, their purport is plain enough even to your throbbing eyeballs—plain and frightful—as ruin! bankruptcy—*fraudulent* bankruptcy, which, according to a definition of the Code Napoleon, consists in recklessly trading beyond your means; and the punishment which may be awarded for that offence—oh, it is easy to see you hear that also distinctly enough through all the din and bustle of the streets—is—the galleys!

The history of M. Paul Fontanes up to this period of his life—he was in his thirty-second year—may be very briefly sketched. He was the only much-indulged son of a cautious painstaking father, to whose property and business he had a few years previously succeeded. The property consisted chiefly of about 80,000 francs, in cash and *rentes*, and the business was a profitable connection with the Mauritius, in consignments of colonial products, for sale in France. Fontanes *fils* had not, unfortunately, been long his own master, when his sanguine temperament, and anxiety to become speedily rich, induced him not only to enlarge greatly his sphere of commercial action, but to change entirely its character, by shipping large quantities of French goods to the American markets, for speculative sale, at his own risk. He had been for some time tolerably successful; but fortune had of late proved adverse; and in the letters now before him, he read the disastrous results of his last and boldest speculation in silks and brandies, upon which an immense loss had been sustained; and he knew himself to be irretrievably insolvent, to the extent of at least 100,000 francs. 'In about six weeks,' he murmured, after a feverish glance at his private bill-book, and tearing open another letter, 'the mass of my acceptances for those goods, which the remittances will scarcely more than half cover, fall due, and I shall—— Ha! what is this?' The blood rushed swiftly back to M. Paul Fontanes's pallid features as he ran over, in a hurried trembling sort of confidential whisper to himself, the lines which had suddenly caught his attention:—'With reference to your inquiries concerning M. Jerome Bougainville, of Louisiana, we have to inform you, that that gentleman died suddenly on the 18th ult. at New Orleans of fever, after having taken his passage for Europe per the *Columbia* packet-ship, bound for Havre-de-Grace. By the next mail, we shall be able to forward an attested copy of the deceased's will, by which the bulk of his property—over twenty-seven thousand pounds realised, and temporarily lodged by deceased in the St Louis bank, where it of course still remains is bequeathed to his niece, Eugenie Bougainville, eldest daughter of the Sieur Edouard Bougainville, formerly captain in the 17th Carabiniers, for whom you are interested; burdened only by a pension of two hundred a year to the said Edouard Bougainville, with remainder to his daughters by a second marriage. We shall be glad to act for the aforesaid legatee; and if furnished with properly attested powers, and official proof of identity, there will be no difficulty in the way of the immediate transmission of the money, through such channel as may be advised.—Your obedient servants,

SMITH & GREEN. New Orleans.'

M. Fontanes read this letter over and over again each time with increasing palpitation of tone, before he seemed to have thoroughly mastered its meaning. 'Twenty-seven thousand pounds sterling!' he presently exclaimed; nearly seven hundred thousand francs! Grand Dieu!—can it be possible! And to Eugenie Bougainville, the daughter of a beggar or thereabout—indebted to me something about a thousand francs, which he can only pay by miserable dribblets of instalments, always in arrear! If the devil, now, would only help me to the possession of this———— Well?'

Henri Jomard, a frank intelligent-looking young man, in holiday attire, after tapping gently at the door, had entered the room, probably mistaking the loud soliquizing tones of M. Fontanes for permission to do so. He was that gentleman's principal clerk.

'Pardon, monsieur,' said Henri Jomard in respectful deprecation of his employer's loud and angry 'Well?' 'Pardon, monsieur, but Mademoiselle Bougainville'———

'How!—what!'

'Mademoiselle Bougainville,' repeated Jomard, 'having accompanied her youngest sister Marie from Plaisance to receive her first communion, is desirous to see you, though not precisely a day for the transaction of business, to make a payment on account of the debt due by Monsieur Bougainville. Shall I ask her to come in?'

An assenting gesture was immediately followed by Mademoiselle Bougainville's entrance. She presented herself with the graceful ease and *aplomb* which usually distinguishes a well-educated Frenchwoman, and said she had brought monsieur a hundred francs, in part liquidation of her father's debt. M. Fontanes took the small canvas *sac*, poured the silver upon the table, seemed to count it with his eye for a moment, and scrawled an acknowledgment. The shaking of his hand, which could scarcely hold the pen, shewed that his recent agitation had increased, rather than subsided.

'Monsieur has heard nothing, I fear,' said Eugenie Bougainville as she placed the paper in her reticule, 'in answer to the inquiries he has so kindly made relative to my uncle Monsieur Jerome Bougainville?'

'Nothing, mademoiselle,' was the quick reply; 'that is,' added M. Fontanes, as if recollecting himself, and glancing towards a number of unopened letters—that is, nothing in either of the letters from America I have yet opened. Should, however, there be any intelligence concerning him in those I have not read, it shall be immediately forwarded to Monsieur Bougainville.'

Mademoiselle Bougainville sighed, courtesied her acknowledgments, and left the office, escorted by Henri Jomard. They had hardly gained the street when the clerk was recalled.

'Tell Mademoiselle Bougainville,' said M. Fontanes, 'that if I have anything of importance to communicate, I shall do myself the pleasure of riding over to Plaisance this afternoon for that purpose. I suppose there would be no doubt of finding Monsieur Bougainville at home?'

'Assuredly not, monsieur. It is his youngest daughter Marie's *jour-de-fete*, and we shall of course have a dance; therefore'——

'We!' echoed M. Fontanes with quick interrogation.

'Yes—that is, Euge——Mademoiselle Bougainville,' stammered Henri Jomard. 'Being an intimate friend of my sister, I naturally accompany her when she pays a visit to Plaisance; and thus'——

'I understand. You may go, and do not forget to deliver my message.' M. Paul Fontanes rose and locked the door the instant it closed after his clerk, as if determined not to be again interrupted and was soon profoundly meditating upon the probable and possible consequences of the day's American advices; the charming face and figure he had just seen helping, we may be sure, to colour and direct his train of thought.

The result of his reflections was to take an unusually early dinner, dress himself with great care, mount his horse, and ride off in the direction of Plaisance—a small farmstead, seven miles distant from St Malo, on the road to Avranches. When about half-way, he turned off to visit a M. Messeroy, an old and intimate acquaintance. He was fortunately not only at home, but without company; and host and visitor gradually warming into eloquence over M. Messeroy's excellent wine, upon the current topics of the day, the splendour of the weather, and of the morning's religious ceremonies, the improved tone of the markets, and of commercial affairs generally, M. Fontanes took occasion, after a time, to remark in an off-hand careless sort of way, that his late American speculations had been attended with a success so much beyond his expectations, and they were sufficiently sanguine, that he had half a mind to try and make a bargain for Plaisance, if it was still in the market. Plaisance *was* in the market, as M. Paul Fontanes well knew; and after much disputing and haggling, M. Fontanes agreed to become its purchaser at the somewhat extravagant price of 45,000 francs, upon condition of possession within one month, and especially that it should be concealed from the world that he had entered into any negotiation for the farm till after its present tenant, M. Bougainville, had been ejected.

'Bougainville,' said M. Fontanes, 'is a good fellow enough, and, spite of his poverty and unluckiness, is much respected. I should not, therefore, like to have it said that I had sought to deprive him of a home.'

'Rest satisfied on that point, my dear Fontanes,' replied M. Messeroy. 'Bougainville is so much behind with his rent, that I was determined he should turn out at St Michel, or at anyrate at Christmas. But why do you purchase a house? Ho! ho! Maitre Paul; you are going to be married, are you? I half guessed so from the first. Well, courage! It is a fate which overtakes the best and wisest of us; and here's the lady's health, whoever she may be.'

'With all my heart! And do not forget that what is as serious as a wedding or funeral, is hat, to-morrow by ten o'clock, I shall lodged five thousand francs in your hands as a pledge of the completion of the bargain upon my part, if you do not fail on yours.'

'I'll take care of that, you may depend. *Au revoir*, then, if you will go: at ten to-morrow.'

M. Fontanes regained the high-road, and tottered leisurely along towards M. Bougainville's. As he neared Plaisance, the bridle-path, winding round at a considerable elevation from the level of the house, gave to view the smooth green-sward in its front, upon which still fell the rays of the fast westering sun in large patches of golden light, or broken into tremulous light and shadow by the tall fruit-trees that partially enclosed it. The sisters Bougainville, and a number of young friends, were dancing thereon to the music of Henri Jomard's flute; and several aged guests, amongst whom the Sieur Bougainville was conspicuous by his thin white hairs, erect military bearing, and the glittering cross upon his breast, were looking on, and, the male portion of them, smoking, in apparently measureless content.

'Quite an Arcadian scene!' mentally sneered M. Paul Fontanes. 'Who would believe, now, that an abode of such rustic simplicity contains almost as grim a skeleton as mine does! Well, we must contrive that they destroy each other, and then Monsieur Bougainville and I may sleep sounder than either of us has of late.'

The dance was arrested as M. Fontanes approached and respectfully saluted M. Bougainville, with whom he almost immediately withdrew into the house. They were absent about ten minutes only; and as, upon their reappearance, the countenance of the veteran wore its usual aspect of calm impassibility, dancing was resumed with increased spirit, and after a time was joined in by M. Fontanes, with Eugenie Bougainville for a partner. Respectful, subdued, yet ardent admiration—admiration surprised at itself, as it were, has seldom been more adroitly displayed than by that gentleman upon this occasion; and whether the consciousness thereof, betrayed by Eugenie's tell-tale blushes, was pleasurable or otherwise, it would have been difficult for a spectator to determine. Poor Henri Jomard—whose flute, momently becoming weaker and more uncertain, was at last superseded by a volunteer violin—sat apart from the gay dancers, partially concealed from observation by his anxious and sympathising sister. Eugenie, however, must have noticed his agitation, for never had her voice and manner revealed so much of womanly tenderness as on parting with him at the close of that sad and omnious evening.

'Eugenie,' said M. Bougainville after all in the house but themselves had retired to rest, 'I have ill news for thee. Thy uncle Jerome, whose address Monsieur Fontanes's agent had no difficulty, after all, in ascertaining, gruffly told the messenger who delivered the letter that it would receive no answer.'

'Helas!' sighed Eugenie, 'I feared so; and he was our last resource;'

'Our position is embarrassing,' said the father, with an unsuccessful effort to assume a more cheerful tone. 'The harvest has been a bad one; but things will not always turn out like that. Thy uncle has disappointed me, Eugenie,' he added after an interval of melancholy silence; 'but what, after all, could be expected of a man who left France to avoid the conscription?'

'Nay, father, let us be just. Have I not heard you say that Uncle Jerome was betrayed in his affections by a faithless woman?'

'Tut, my girl!' rejoined M. Bougainville, with a levity of tone contradicted by the keen scrutiny of his look, which was, however, baffled by the growing darkness of the room. 'Love-wounds are rose-brier scratches merely—a momentary smart, that neither hinders nor controls one's march through the rough wilderness of life. I have been pretty familiar with the flashes which herald real wounds and death, and they did not leap from maidens' eyes.'

'I am glad to hear,' softly murmured Eugenie, 'that heart-griefs are so fugitive with men. Good-night, dear father.'

'Good-night, Eugenie,' said the veteran, embracing her with tenderness; 'and be not too much cast down. The guardian-angel is never forgetful of a gentle and pious child like thee.'

Before noon on the following day, the stock, farming-implements, and furniture at Plaisance were sequestrated by 'justice' at the instance of Pierre Messeroy, *Ecuyer*, for arrears of rent; and M. Bougainville was at the same time served with notice to quit, according to one of the covenants of his *bail*, by which right to retain possession was forfeited by default of rent-payment. 'Diable! but this is serious—terrible,' murmured the old soldier; 'and unless I can obtain a loan of'—— M. Bougainville checked himself, and after a time added, addressing his dismayed and weeping family: 'I shall set off at once for St Malo. Courage, my children! It is upon the darkest hour of night that the new day breaks. Perhaps my old friend, Bertin the notary, may be able to assist us in this strait.'

M. Bougainville did not return home till about ten o'clock in the evening. The family were in bed, with the exception of Eugenie, whose anxiety was deepened by the pale excitement of her father's countenance.

'Eugenie, my girl,' he said, after a few unsuccessful whiffs at the pipe she presented him with, 'come nearer to me; I would speak with thee.'

'I am listening, father,' said Eugenie, seating herself behind her father.

'Bertin cannot assist us, but—— Eugenie, it is necessary, above all, that we should be frank and open with each other. Henri Jomard loves thee; there can be no doubt of that. He is a well-principled brave lad, of fair prospects too, and the son of a brave father, who fell by my side at Eylau. There is no one with whom I would more readily trust thy happiness. But thou hast never, I think, shewn any open decided preference for him?'

'Never—by *words*.'

M. Bougainville winced, but went on to say: 'That being so, I may tell thee that Monsieur Paul Fontanes—— Ah! the name shocks thee—I will speak of him and his offers no more'

'Yes, yes, dear father,' murmured Eugenie. 'It was a sudden, a slight pain; that is all. Go on—speak!'

'As thou wilt. Monsieur Fontanes, then, solicits thee in marriage. If his proposal is accepted, he will pay all thy father's debts, purchase Plaisance of that tiger-hearted Messeroy, and settle it upon thee beyond his own control.' Eugenie did not answer, and M. Bougainville added, after a few moments' silence: 'The case stands thus. Eugenie, Monsieur Fontanes is rich, generous, young, well-looking, of irreproachable character, and it is plain loves thee deeply. I doubt not, therefore, that after a time, thou wouldst be a happy wife; but it is for thee to decide; and my blessing, beloved Eugenie, is on thy choice, whether for acceptance or refusal.'

'For acceptance, thou!' replied Eugenie in a low voice, the firmness of which surprised as much as it pleased M. Bougainville; 'but with this change in the terms of the pur—of the contract—that Plaisance be settled not upon me, but upon you, Francoise, and Narie.'

M. Bougainville was charmed with this ready acquiescence; and when Eugenie made no objection to M. Fontanes's request, that the marriage should be celebrated without delay, he almost persuaded himself that he had been mistaken with respect to the sentiments she entertained towards Henri Jomard. That pleasing illusion would have been dispelled had he known that Eugenie passed that night on her knees, weeping, at first with convulsive but gradually calming grief, before the crucifix in her bedroom.

The civil marriage was arranged to take place on the following Thursday, the conditions of settlement to be signed at the office of the notary Bertin, on the previous evening. These arrangements, at M Fontanes's urgent request, Eugenie remaining entirely passive, were kept scrupously secret; and so successfully, that even Henri Jomard had no suspicion of what was going on, till the Wednesday morning, when he chanced to overhear some disjointed sentences of a conversation between M. Fontanes and the notary's clerk, who had called at the Rue Dupetit-Thouars, which terminated by M. Fontanes saying in a low voice: 'Tell Monsieur Bertin I will send him the required particulars in writing before two o'clock.' Astonished and indignant at what he apprehended the partially overheard colloquy to mean, he, as soon as possible, invented an excuse for going out, and hastened to impart the dire discovery to his sister Adele, who, however, proved obstinately incredulous. His interpretation of the sentences he had imperfectly caught was, she persisted, that of an unreasoning jealousy. M. Fontanes had, her brother knew, a pecuniary transaction with M. Bougainville, and it was no doubt with reference to that the two were to meet at the notary's as the conversation seemed to intimate. Somewhat calmed by this consolatory construction of the menacing words, Henri returned to his employment. There was no one in the clerks' office, and M. Fontanes was busy writing in his private room. Something presently occurred which rendered it necessary that Henri should speak with him; and as he did so, his eye fell upon a small pile of letters enclosed and directed, but not sealed, of which the topmost one was addressed to 'M. Bertin, Notaire-public. Numera 9, Rue Sabloniere.' Instantly the criminal thought, which only his excessive mental agitation could in the least excuse, suggested itself, that if he could obtain a moment's possession of that letter before it was sealed, the doubts which half distracted him would be one way or the other set at rest; and the possibility of effecting his object kept him for the next ten minutes in a state of feverish restlessness. The chance at length presented itself. The presence of M. Fontanes was required in a distant part of the warehouse; and his back was hardly turned, before Henri Jomard darted into the private *cabinet*, seized the top letter of the pile, and extricated the enclosure from the envelope. Confusion! A glance at the address shewed him he had mistaken the letter, the envelope in his hand being addressed to Messrs Smith and Creen, New Orleans. Had he but unfolded the enclosure, what a discovery awaited him! Unfortunately, he threw it impatiently upon the table, and seized the next upon the pile, which was that he sought. Could he believe his eyes? 'M. Fontanes, upon reflection, acquiesced in the change proposed by M. Bertin in the marriage-contract, and would be at the notary's office punctually at five o'clock to meet M. and Mademoiselle Bougainville.' Henri Jomard had hardly perused these lines, when the step of M. Fontanes was heard approaching. He hurriedly thrust the letters into their respective envelopes, replaced them on the letter-pile, and had barely regained the curtained concealment of the clerks' office when the mer-