BOOK FIFTEENTH.--THE RUE DE L'HOMME ARME

CHAPTER I--A DRINKER IS A BABBLER

What are the convulsions of a city in comparison with the insurrections of the soul? Man is a depth still greater than the people. Jean Valjean at that very moment was the prey of a terrible upheaval. Every sort of gulf had opened again within him. He also was trembling, like Paris, on the brink of an obscure and formidable revolution. A few hours had sufficed to bring this about. His destiny and his conscience had suddenly been covered with gloom. Of him also, as well as of Paris, it might have been said: "Two principles are face to face. The white angel and the black angel are about to seize each other on the bridge of the abyss. Which of the two will hurl the other over? Who will carry the day?"

On the evening preceding this same 5th of June, Jean Valjean, accompanied by Cosette and Toussaint had installed himself in the Rue de l'Homme Arme. A change awaited him there.

Cosette had not quitted the Rue Plumet without making an effort at resistance. For the first time since they had lived side by side, Cosette's will and the will of Jean Valjean had proved to be distinct,

and had been in opposition, at least, if they had not clashed. There had been objections on one side and inflexibility on the other. The abrupt advice: "Leave your house," hurled at Jean Valjean by a stranger, had alarmed him to the extent of rendering him peremptory. He thought that he had been traced and followed. Cosette had been obliged to give way.

Both had arrived in the Rue de l'Homme Arme without opening their lips, and without uttering a word, each being absorbed in his own personal preoccupation; Jean Valjean so uneasy that he did not notice Cosette's sadness, Cosette so sad that she did not notice Jean Valjean's uneasiness.

Jean Valjean had taken Toussaint with him, a thing which he had never done in his previous absences. He perceived the possibility of not returning to the Rue Plumet, and he could neither leave Toussaint behind nor confide his secret to her. Besides, he felt that she was devoted and trustworthy. Treachery between master and servant begins in curiosity. Now Toussaint, as though she had been destined to be Jean Valjean's servant, was not curious. She stammered in her peasant dialect of Barneville: "I am made so; I do my work; the rest is no affair of mine."

In this departure from the Rue Plumet, which had been almost a flight, Jean Valjean had carried away nothing but the little embalmed valise, baptized by Cosette "the inseparable." Full trunks would have required porters, and porters are witnesses. A fiacre had been summoned to the door on the Rue de Babylone, and they had taken their departure.

It was with difficulty that Toussaint had obtained permission to pack up a little linen and clothes and a few toilet articles. Cosette had taken only her portfolio and her blotting-book.

Jean Valjean, with a view to augmenting the solitude and the mystery of this departure, had arranged to quit the pavilion of the Rue Plumet only at dusk, which had allowed Cosette time to write her note to Marius. They had arrived in the Rue de l'Homme Arme after night had fully fallen.

They had gone to bed in silence.

The lodgings in the Rue de l'Homme Arme were situated on a back court, on the second floor, and were composed of two sleeping-rooms, a dining-room and a kitchen adjoining the dining-room, with a garret where there was a folding-bed, and which fell to Toussaint's share. The dining-room was an antechamber as well, and separated the two bedrooms. The apartment was provided with all necessary utensils.

People re-acquire confidence as foolishly as they lose it; human nature is so constituted. Hardly had Jean Valjean reached the Rue de l'Homme Arme when his anxiety was lightened and by degrees dissipated. There are soothing spots which act in some sort mechanically on the mind. An obscure street, peaceable inhabitants. Jean Valjean experienced an indescribable contagion of tranquillity in that alley of ancient Paris,

which is so narrow that it is barred against carriages by a transverse beam placed on two posts, which is deaf and dumb in the midst of the clamorous city, dimly lighted at mid-day, and is, so to speak, incapable of emotions between two rows of lofty houses centuries old, which hold their peace like ancients as they are. There was a touch of stagnant oblivion in that street. Jean Valjean drew his breath once more there. How could he be found there?

His first care was to place the inseparable beside him.

He slept well. Night brings wisdom; we may add, night soothes. On the following morning he awoke in a mood that was almost gay. He thought the dining-room charming, though it was hideous, furnished with an old round table, a long sideboard surmounted by a slanting mirror, a dilapidated arm-chair, and several plain chairs which were encumbered with Toussaint's packages. In one of these packages Jean Valjean's uniform of a National Guard was visible through a rent.

As for Cosette, she had had Toussaint take some broth to her room, and did not make her appearance until evening.

About five o'clock, Toussaint, who was going and coming and busying herself with the tiny establishment, set on the table a cold chicken, which Cosette, out of deference to her father, consented to glance at.

That done, Cosette, under the pretext of an obstinate sick headache,

had bade Jean Valjean good night and had shut herself up in her chamber. Jean Valjean had eaten a wing of the chicken with a good appetite, and with his elbows on the table, having gradually recovered his serenity, had regained possession of his sense of security.

While he was discussing this modest dinner, he had, twice or thrice, noticed in a confused way, Toussaint's stammering words as she said to him: "Monsieur, there is something going on, they are fighting in Paris." But absorbed in a throng of inward calculations, he had paid no heed to it. To tell the truth, he had not heard her. He rose and began to pace from the door to the window and from the window to the door, growing ever more serene.

With this calm, Cosette, his sole anxiety, recurred to his thoughts. Not that he was troubled by this headache, a little nervous crisis, a young girl's fit of sulks, the cloud of a moment, there would be nothing left of it in a day or two; but he meditated on the future, and, as was his habit, he thought of it with pleasure. After all, he saw no obstacle to their happy life resuming its course. At certain hours, everything seems impossible, at others everything appears easy; Jean Valjean was in the midst of one of these good hours. They generally succeed the bad ones, as day follows night, by virtue of that law of succession and of contrast which lies at the very foundation of nature, and which superficial minds call antithesis. In this peaceful street where he had taken refuge, Jean Valjean got rid of all that had been troubling him for some time past. This very fact, that he had seen many shadows, made

him begin to perceive a little azure. To have quitted the Rue Plumet without complications or incidents was one good step already accomplished. Perhaps it would be wise to go abroad, if only for a few months, and to set out for London. Well, they would go. What difference did it make to him whether he was in France or in England, provided he had Cosette beside him? Cosette was his nation. Cosette sufficed for his happiness; the idea that he, perhaps, did not suffice for Cosette's happiness, that idea which had formerly been the cause of his fever and sleeplessness, did not even present itself to his mind. He was in a state of collapse from all his past sufferings, and he was fully entered on optimism. Cosette was by his side, she seemed to be his; an optical illusion which every one has experienced. He arranged in his own mind, with all sorts of felicitous devices, his departure for England with Cosette, and he beheld his felicity reconstituted wherever he pleased, in the perspective of his revery.

As he paced to and fro with long strides, his glance suddenly encountered something strange.

In the inclined mirror facing him which surmounted the sideboard, he saw the four lines which follow:--

"My dearest, alas! my father insists on our setting out immediately. We shall be this evening in the Rue de l'Homme Arme, No. 7. In a week we shall be in England. COSETTE. June 4th."

Jean Valjean halted, perfectly haggard.

Cosette on her arrival had placed her blotting-book on the sideboard in front of the mirror, and, utterly absorbed in her agony of grief, had forgotten it and left it there, without even observing that she had left it wide open, and open at precisely the page on which she had laid to dry the four lines which she had penned, and which she had given in charge of the young workman in the Rue Plumet. The writing had been printed off on the blotter.

The mirror reflected the writing.

The result was, what is called in geometry, the symmetrical image; so that the writing, reversed on the blotter, was righted in the mirror and presented its natural appearance; and Jean Valjean had beneath his eyes the letter written by Cosette to Marius on the preceding evening.

It was simple and withering.

Jean Valjean stepped up to the mirror. He read the four lines again, but he did not believe them. They produced on him the effect of appearing in a flash of lightning. It was a hallucination, it was impossible. It was not so.

Little by little, his perceptions became more precise; he looked at Cosette's blotting-book, and the consciousness of the reality returned

to him. He caught up the blotter and said: "It comes from there." He feverishly examined the four lines imprinted on the blotter, the reversal of the letters converted into an odd scrawl, and he saw no sense in it. Then he said to himself: "But this signifies nothing; there is nothing written here." And he drew a long breath with inexpressible relief. Who has not experienced those foolish joys in horrible instants? The soul does not surrender to despair until it has exhausted all illusions.

He held the blotter in his hand and contemplated it in stupid delight, almost ready to laugh at the hallucination of which he had been the dupe. All at once his eyes fell upon the mirror again, and again he beheld the vision. There were the four lines outlined with inexorable clearness. This time it was no mirage. The recurrence of a vision is a reality; it was palpable, it was the writing restored in the mirror. He understood.

Jean Valjean tottered, dropped the blotter, and fell into the old arm-chair beside the buffet, with drooping head, and glassy eyes, in utter bewilderment. He told himself that it was plain, that the light of the world had been eclipsed forever, and that Cosette had written that to some one. Then he heard his soul, which had become terrible once more, give vent to a dull roar in the gloom. Try then the effect of taking from the lion the dog which he has in his cage!

Strange and sad to say, at that very moment, Marius had not yet received

Cosette's letter; chance had treacherously carried it to Jean Valjean before delivering it to Marius. Up to that day, Jean Valjean had not been vanquished by trial. He had been subjected to fearful proofs; no violence of bad fortune had been spared him; the ferocity of fate, armed with all vindictiveness and all social scorn, had taken him for her prey and had raged against him. He had accepted every extremity when it had been necessary; he had sacrificed his inviolability as a reformed man, had yielded up his liberty, risked his head, lost everything, suffered everything, and he had remained disinterested and stoical to such a point that he might have been thought to be absent from himself like a martyr. His conscience inured to every assault of destiny, might have appeared to be forever impregnable. Well, any one who had beheld his spiritual self would have been obliged to concede that it weakened at that moment. It was because, of all the tortures which he had undergone in the course of this long inquisition to which destiny had doomed him, this was the most terrible. Never had such pincers seized him hitherto. He felt the mysterious stirring of all his latent sensibilities. He felt the plucking at the strange chord. Alas! the supreme trial, let us say rather, the only trial, is the loss of the beloved being.

Poor old Jean Valjean certainly did not love Cosette otherwise than as a father; but we have already remarked, above, that into this paternity the widowhood of his life had introduced all the shades of love; he loved Cosette as his daughter, and he loved her as his mother, and he loved her as his sister; and, as he had never had either a woman to love or a wife, as nature is a creditor who accepts no protest, that

sentiment also, the most impossible to lose, was mingled with the rest, vague, ignorant, pure with the purity of blindness, unconscious, celestial, angelic, divine; less like a sentiment than like an instinct, less like an instinct than like an imperceptible and invisible but real attraction; and love, properly speaking, was, in his immense tenderness for Cosette, like the thread of gold in the mountain, concealed and virgin.

Let the reader recall the situation of heart which we have already indicated. No marriage was possible between them; not even that of souls; and yet, it is certain that their destinies were wedded. With the exception of Cosette, that is to say, with the exception of a childhood, Jean Valjean had never, in the whole of his long life, known anything of that which may be loved. The passions and loves which succeed each other had not produced in him those successive green growths, tender green or dark green, which can be seen in foliage which passes through the winter and in men who pass fifty. In short, and we have insisted on it more than once, all this interior fusion, all this whole, of which the sum total was a lofty virtue, ended in rendering Jean Valjean a father to Cosette. A strange father, forged from the grandfather, the son, the brother, and the husband, that existed in Jean Valjean; a father in whom there was included even a mother; a father who loved Cosette and adored her, and who held that child as his light, his home, his family, his country, his paradise.

Thus when he saw that the end had absolutely come, that she was escaping

from him, that she was slipping from his hands, that she was gliding from him, like a cloud, like water, when he had before his eyes this crushing proof: "another is the goal of her heart, another is the wish of her life; there is a dearest one, I am no longer anything but her father, I no longer exist"; when he could no longer doubt, when he said to himself: "She is going away from me!" the grief which he felt surpassed the bounds of possibility. To have done all that he had done for the purpose of ending like this! And the very idea of being nothing! Then, as we have just said, a quiver of revolt ran through him from head to foot. He felt, even in the very roots of his hair, the immense reawakening of egotism, and the I in this man's abyss howled.

There is such a thing as the sudden giving way of the inward subsoil. A despairing certainty does not make its way into a man without thrusting aside and breaking certain profound elements which, in some cases, are the very man himself. Grief, when it attains this shape, is a headlong flight of all the forces of the conscience. These are fatal crises. Few among us emerge from them still like ourselves and firm in duty. When the limit of endurance is overstepped, the most imperturbable virtue is disconcerted. Jean Valjean took the blotter again, and convinced himself afresh; he remained bowed and as though petrified and with staring eyes, over those four unobjectionable lines; and there arose within him such a cloud that one might have thought that everything in this soul was crumbling away.

He examined this revelation, athwart the exaggerations of revery, with

an apparent and terrifying calmness, for it is a fearful thing when a man's calmness reaches the coldness of the statue.

He measured the terrible step which his destiny had taken without his having a suspicion of the fact; he recalled his fears of the preceding summer, so foolishly dissipated; he recognized the precipice, it was still the same; only, Jean Valjean was no longer on the brink, he was at the bottom of it.

The unprecedented and heart-rending thing about it was that he had fallen without perceiving it. All the light of his life had departed, while he still fancied that he beheld the sun.

His instinct did not hesitate. He put together certain circumstances, certain dates, certain blushes and certain pallors on Cosette's part, and he said to himself: "It is he."

The divination of despair is a sort of mysterious bow which never misses its aim. He struck Marius with his first conjecture. He did not know the name, but he found the man instantly. He distinctly perceived, in the background of the implacable conjuration of his memories, the unknown prowler of the Luxembourg, that wretched seeker of love adventures, that idler of romance, that idiot, that coward, for it is cowardly to come and make eyes at young girls who have beside them a father who loves them.

After he had thoroughly verified the fact that this young man was at the bottom of this situation, and that everything proceeded from that quarter, he, Jean Valjean, the regenerated man, the man who had so labored over his soul, the man who had made so many efforts to resolve all life, all misery, and all unhappiness into love, looked into his own breast and there beheld a spectre, Hate.

Great griefs contain something of dejection. They discourage one with existence. The man into whom they enter feels something within him withdraw from him. In his youth, their visits are lugubrious; later on they are sinister. Alas, if despair is a fearful thing when the blood is hot, when the hair is black, when the head is erect on the body like the flame on the torch, when the roll of destiny still retains its full thickness, when the heart, full of desirable love, still possesses beats which can be returned to it, when one has time for redress, when all women and all smiles and all the future and all the horizon are before one, when the force of life is complete, what is it in old age, when the years hasten on, growing ever paler, to that twilight hour when one begins to behold the stars of the tomb?

While he was meditating, Toussaint entered. Jean Valjean rose and asked her:--

"In what quarter is it? Do you know?"

Toussaint was struck dumb, and could only answer him:--

"What is it, sir?"

Jean Valjean began again: "Did you not tell me that just now that there is fighting going on?"

"Ah! yes, sir," replied Toussaint. "It is in the direction of Saint-Merry."

There is a mechanical movement which comes to us, unconsciously, from the most profound depths of our thought. It was, no doubt, under the impulse of a movement of this sort, and of which he was hardly conscious, that Jean Valjean, five minutes later, found himself in the street.

Bareheaded, he sat upon the stone post at the door of his house. He seemed to be listening.

Night had come.

CHAPTER II--THE STREET URCHIN AN ENEMY OF LIGHT

How long did he remain thus? What was the ebb and flow of this tragic meditation? Did he straighten up? Did he remain bowed? Had he been bent to breaking? Could he still rise and regain his footing in his conscience upon something solid? He probably would not have been able to tell himself.

The street was deserted. A few uneasy bourgeois, who were rapidly returning home, hardly saw him. Each one for himself in times of peril. The lamp-lighter came as usual to light the lantern which was situated precisely opposite the door of No. 7, and then went away. Jean Valjean would not have appeared like a living man to any one who had examined him in that shadow. He sat there on the post of his door, motionless as a form of ice. There is congealment in despair. The alarm bells and a vague and stormy uproar were audible. In the midst of all these convulsions of the bell mingled with the revolt, the clock of Saint-Paul struck eleven, gravely and without haste; for the tocsin is man; the hour is God. The passage of the hour produced no effect on Jean Valjean; Jean Valjean did not stir. Still, at about that moment, a brusque report burst forth in the direction of the Halles, a second yet more violent followed; it was probably that attack on the barricade in the Rue de la Chanvrerie which we have just seen repulsed by Marius. At this double discharge, whose fury seemed augmented by the stupor of the night, Jean Valjean started; he rose, turning towards the quarter whence the noise proceeded; then he fell back upon the post again, folded his arms, and

his head slowly sank on his bosom again.

He resumed his gloomy dialogue with himself.

All at once, he raised his eyes; some one was walking in the street, he heard steps near him. He looked, and by the light of the lanterns, in the direction of the street which ran into the Rue-aux-Archives, he perceived a young, livid, and beaming face.

Gavroche had just arrived in the Rue l'Homme Arme.

Gavroche was staring into the air, apparently in search of something. He saw Jean Valjean perfectly well but he took no notice of him.

Gavroche after staring into the air, stared below; he raised himself on tiptoe, and felt of the doors and windows of the ground floor; they were all shut, bolted, and padlocked. After having authenticated the fronts of five or six barricaded houses in this manner, the urchin shrugged his shoulders, and took himself to task in these terms:--

"Pardi!"

Then he began to stare into the air again.

Jean Valjean, who, an instant previously, in his then state of mind, would not have spoken to or even answered any one, felt irresistibly

impelled to accost that child.

"What is the matter with you, my little fellow?" he said.

"The matter with me is that I am hungry," replied Gavroche frankly. And he added: "Little fellow yourself."

Jean Valjean fumbled in his fob and pulled out a five-franc piece.

But Gavroche, who was of the wagtail species, and who skipped vivaciously from one gesture to another, had just picked up a stone. He had caught sight of the lantern.

"See here," said he, "you still have your lanterns here. You are disobeying the regulations, my friend. This is disorderly. Smash that for me."

And he flung the stone at the lantern, whose broken glass fell with such a clatter that the bourgeois in hiding behind their curtains in the opposite house cried: "There is 'Ninety-three' come again."

The lantern oscillated violently, and went out. The street had suddenly become black.

"That's right, old street," ejaculated Gavroche, "put on your night-cap."

And turning to Jean Valjean:--

"What do you call that gigantic monument that you have there at the end of the street? It's the Archives, isn't it? I must crumble up those big stupids of pillars a bit and make a nice barricade out of them."

Jean Valjean stepped up to Gavroche.

"Poor creature," he said in a low tone, and speaking to himself, "he is hungry."

And he laid the hundred-sou piece in his hand.

Gavroche raised his face, astonished at the size of this sou; he stared at it in the darkness, and the whiteness of the big sou dazzled him. He knew five-franc pieces by hearsay; their reputation was agreeable to him; he was delighted to see one close to. He said:--

"Let us contemplate the tiger."

He gazed at it for several minutes in ecstasy; then, turning to Jean Valjean, he held out the coin to him, and said majestically to him:--

"Bourgeois, I prefer to smash lanterns. Take back your ferocious beast. You can't bribe me. That has got five claws; but it doesn't scratch me."

"Have you a mother?" asked Jean Valjean.

Gavroche replied:--

"More than you have, perhaps."

"Well," returned Jean Valjean, "keep the money for your mother!"

Gavroche was touched. Moreover, he had just noticed that the man who was addressing him had no hat, and this inspired him with confidence.

"Truly," said he, "so it wasn't to keep me from breaking the lanterns?"

"Break whatever you please."

"You're a fine man," said Gavroche.

And he put the five-franc piece into one of his pockets.

His confidence having increased, he added:--

"Do you belong in this street?"

"Yes, why?"

"Can you tell me where No. 7 is?"

"What do you want with No. 7?"

Here the child paused, he feared that he had said too much; he thrust his nails energetically into his hair and contented himself with replying:--

"Ah! Here it is."

An idea flashed through Jean Valjean's mind. Anguish does have these gleams. He said to the lad:--

"Are you the person who is bringing a letter that I am expecting?"

"You?" said Gavroche. "You are not a woman."

"The letter is for Mademoiselle Cosette, is it not?"

"Cosette," muttered Gavroche. "Yes, I believe that is the queer name."

"Well," resumed Jean Valjean, "I am the person to whom you are to deliver the letter. Give it here."

"In that case, you must know that I was sent from the barricade."

"Of course," said Jean Valjean.

Gavroche engulfed his hand in another of his pockets and drew out a paper folded in four.

Then he made the military salute.

"Respect for despatches," said he. "It comes from the Provisional Government."

"Give it to me," said Jean Valjean.

Gavroche held the paper elevated above his head.

"Don't go and fancy it's a love letter. It is for a woman, but it's for the people. We men fight and we respect the fair sex. We are not as they are in fine society, where there are lions who send chickens[55] to camels."

"Give it to me."

"After all," continued Gavroche, "you have the air of an honest man."

"Give it to me quick."

"Catch hold of it."

And he handed the paper to Jean Valjean.

"And make haste, Monsieur What's-your-name, for Mamselle Cosette is waiting."

Gavroche was satisfied with himself for having produced this remark.

Jean Valjean began again:--

"Is it to Saint-Merry that the answer is to be sent?"

"There you are making some of those bits of pastry vulgarly called brioches [blunders]. This letter comes from the barricade of the Rue de la Chanvrerie, and I'm going back there. Good evening, citizen."

That said, Gavroche took himself off, or, to describe it more exactly, fluttered away in the direction whence he had come with a flight like that of an escaped bird. He plunged back into the gloom as though he made a hole in it, with the rigid rapidity of a projectile; the alley of l'Homme Arme became silent and solitary once more; in a twinkling, that strange child, who had about him something of the shadow and of the dream, had buried himself in the mists of the rows of black houses, and was lost there, like smoke in the dark; and one might have thought that he had dissipated and vanished, had there not taken place, a few minutes after his disappearance, a startling shiver of glass, and had not the

magnificent crash of a lantern rattling down on the pavement once more abruptly awakened the indignant bourgeois. It was Gavroche upon his way through the Rue du Chaume.

CHAPTER III--WHILE COSETTE AND TOUSSAINT ARE ASLEEP

Jean Valjean went into the house with Marius' letter.

He groped his way up the stairs, as pleased with the darkness as an owl who grips his prey, opened and shut his door softly, listened to see whether he could hear any noise,--made sure that, to all appearances, Cosette and Toussaint were asleep, and plunged three or four matches into the bottle of the Fumade lighter before he could evoke a spark, so greatly did his hand tremble. What he had just done smacked of theft. At last the candle was lighted; he leaned his elbows on the table, unfolded the paper, and read.

In violent emotions, one does not read, one flings to the earth, so to speak, the paper which one holds, one clutches it like a victim, one crushes it, one digs into it the nails of one's wrath, or of one's joy; one hastens to the end, one leaps to the beginning; attention is at fever heat; it takes up in the gross, as it were, the essential points; it seizes on one point, and the rest disappears. In Marius' note to Cosette, Jean Valjean saw only these words:--

"I die. When thou readest this, my soul will be near thee."

In the presence of these two lines, he was horribly dazzled; he remained for a moment, crushed, as it were, by the change of emotion which was taking place within him, he stared at Marius' note with a sort of

intoxicated amazement, he had before his eyes that splendor, the death of a hated individual.

He uttered a frightful cry of inward joy. So it was all over. The catastrophe had arrived sooner than he had dared to hope. The being who obstructed his destiny was disappearing. That man had taken himself off of his own accord, freely, willingly. This man was going to his death, and he, Jean Valjean, had had no hand in the matter, and it was through no fault of his. Perhaps, even, he is already dead. Here his fever entered into calculations. No, he is not dead yet. The letter had evidently been intended for Cosette to read on the following morning; after the two discharges that were heard between eleven o'clock and midnight, nothing more has taken place; the barricade will not be attacked seriously until daybreak; but that makes no difference, from the moment when "that man" is concerned in this war, he is lost; he is caught in the gearing. Jean Valjean felt himself delivered. So he was about to find himself alone with Cosette once more. The rivalry would cease; the future was beginning again. He had but to keep this note in his pocket. Cosette would never know what had become of that man. All that there requires to be done is to let things take their own course. This man cannot escape. If he is not already dead, it is certain that he is about to die. What good fortune!

Having said all this to himself, he became gloomy.

Then he went down stairs and woke up the porter.

About an hour later, Jean Valjean went out in the complete costume of a National Guard, and with his arms. The porter had easily found in the neighborhood the wherewithal to complete his equipment. He had a loaded gun and a cartridge-box filled with cartridges.

He strode off in the direction of the markets.

CHAPTER IV--GAVROCHE'S EXCESS OF ZEAL

In the meantime, Gavroche had had an adventure.

Gavroche, after having conscientiously stoned the lantern in the Rue du Chaume, entered the Rue des Vielles-Haudriettes, and not seeing "even a cat" there, he thought the opportunity a good one to strike up all the song of which he was capable. His march, far from being retarded by his singing, was accelerated by it. He began to sow along the sleeping or terrified houses these incendiary couplets:--

"L'oiseau medit dans les charmilles,
Et pretend qu'hier Atala
Avec un Russe s'en alla.
Ou vont les belles filles,
Lon la.

"Mon ami Pierrot, tu babilles,
Parce que l'autre jour Mila
Cogna sa vitre et m'appela,
Ou vont les belles filles,
Lon la.

"Les drolesses sont fort gentilles,
Leur poison qui m'ensorcela
Griserait Monsieur Orfila.

Ou vont les belles filles,

Lon la.

"J'aime l'amour et les bisbilles,

J'aime Agnes, j'aime Pamela,

Lisa en m'allumant se brula.

Ou vont les belles filles,

Lon la.

"Jadis, quand je vis les mantilles

De Suzette et de Zeila,

Mon ame aleurs plis se mela,

Ou vont les belles filles,

Lon la.

"Amour, quand dans l'ombre ou tu brilles,

Tu coiffes de roses Lola,

Je me damnerais pour cela.

Ou vont les belles filles,

Lon la.

"Jeanne a ton miroir tu t'habilles!

Mon coeur un beau jour s'envola.

Je crois que c'est Jeanne qui l'a.

Ou vont les belles filles,

Lon la.

"Le soir, en sortant des quadrilles,
Je montre aux etoiles Stella,
Et je leur dis: 'Regardez-la.'
Ou vont les belles filles,
Lon la."[56]

Gavroche, as he sang, was lavish of his pantomime. Gesture is the strong point of the refrain. His face, an inexhaustible repertory of masks, produced grimaces more convulsing and more fantastic than the rents of a cloth torn in a high gale. Unfortunately, as he was alone, and as it was night, this was neither seen nor even visible. Such wastes of riches do occur.

All at once, he stopped short.

"Let us interrupt the romance," said he.

His feline eye had just descried, in the recess of a carriage door, what is called in painting, an ensemble, that is to say, a person and a thing; the thing was a hand-cart, the person was a man from Auvergene who was sleeping therein.

The shafts of the cart rested on the pavement, and the Auvergnat's head was supported against the front of the cart. His body was coiled up on this inclined plane and his feet touched the ground.

Gavroche, with his experience of the things of this world, recognized a drunken man. He was some corner errand-man who had drunk too much and was sleeping too much.

"There now," thought Gavroche, "that's what the summer nights are good for. We'll take the cart for the Republic, and leave the Auvergnat for the Monarchy."

His mind had just been illuminated by this flash of light:--

"How bully that cart would look on our barricade!"

The Auvergnat was snoring.

Gavroche gently tugged at the cart from behind, and at the Auvergnat from the front, that is to say, by the feet, and at the expiration of another minute the imperturbable Auvergnat was reposing flat on the pavement.

The cart was free.

Gavroche, habituated to facing the unexpected in all quarters, had everything about him. He fumbled in one of his pockets, and pulled from it a scrap of paper and a bit of red pencil filched from some carpenter.

He wrote:--

"French Republic."

"Received thy cart."

And he signed it: "GAVROCHE."

That done, he put the paper in the pocket of the still snoring Auvergnat's velvet vest, seized the cart shafts in both hands, and set off in the direction of the Halles, pushing the cart before him at a hard gallop with a glorious and triumphant uproar.

This was perilous. There was a post at the Royal Printing Establishment. Gavroche did not think of this. This post was occupied by the National Guards of the suburbs. The squad began to wake up, and heads were raised from camp beds. Two street lanterns broken in succession, that ditty sung at the top of the lungs. This was a great deal for those cowardly streets, which desire to go to sleep at sunset, and which put the extinguisher on their candles at such an early hour. For the last hour, that boy had been creating an uproar in that peaceable arrondissement, the uproar of a fly in a bottle. The sergeant of the banlieue lent an ear. He waited. He was a prudent man.

The mad rattle of the cart, filled to overflowing the possible measure of waiting, and decided the sergeant to make a reconnaisance.

"There's a whole band of them there!" said he, "let us proceed gently."

It was clear that the hydra of anarchy had emerged from its box and that it was stalking abroad through the quarter.

And the sergeant ventured out of the post with cautious tread.

All at once, Gavroche, pushing his cart in front of him, and at the very moment when he was about to turn into the Rue des Vielles-Haudriettes, found himself face to face with a uniform, a shako, a plume, and a gun.

For the second time, he stopped short.

"Hullo," said he, "it's him. Good day, public order."

Gavroche's amazement was always brief and speedily thawed.

"Where are you going, you rascal?" shouted the sergeant.

"Citizen," retorted Gavroche, "I haven't called you 'bourgeois' yet. Why do you insult me?"

"Where are you going, you rogue?"

"Monsieur," retorted Gavroche, "perhaps you were a man of wit yesterday,

but you have degenerated this morning."

"I ask you where are you going, you villain?"

Gavroche replied:--

"You speak prettily. Really, no one would suppose you as old as you are. You ought to sell all your hair at a hundred francs apiece. That would yield you five hundred francs."

"Where are you going? Where are you going? Where are you going, bandit?"

Gavroche retorted again:--

"What villainous words! You must wipe your mouth better the first time that they give you suck."

The sergeant lowered his bayonet.

"Will you tell me where you are going, you wretch?"

"General," said Gavroche "I'm on my way to look for a doctor for my wife who is in labor."

"To arms!" shouted the sergeant.

The master-stroke of strong men consists in saving themselves by the very means that have ruined them; Gavroche took in the whole situation at a glance. It was the cart which had told against him, it was the cart's place to protect him.

At the moment when the sergeant was on the point of making his descent on Gavroche, the cart, converted into a projectile and launched with all the latter's might, rolled down upon him furiously, and the sergeant, struck full in the stomach, tumbled over backwards into the gutter while his gun went off in the air.

The men of the post had rushed out pell-mell at the sergeant's shout; the shot brought on a general random discharge, after which they reloaded their weapons and began again.

This blind-man's-buff musketry lasted for a quarter of an hour and killed several panes of glass.

In the meanwhile, Gavroche, who had retraced his steps at full speed, halted five or six streets distant and seated himself, panting, on the stone post which forms the corner of the Enfants-Rouges.

He listened.

After panting for a few minutes, he turned in the direction where the fusillade was raging, lifted his left hand to a level with his nose and

thrust it forward three times, as he slapped the back of his head with his right hand; an imperious gesture in which Parisian street-urchindom has condensed French irony, and which is evidently efficacious, since it has already lasted half a century.

This gayety was troubled by one bitter reflection.

"Yes," said he, "I'm splitting with laughter, I'm twisting with delight, I abound in joy, but I'm losing my way, I shall have to take a roundabout way. If I only reach the barricade in season!"

Thereupon he set out again on a run.

And as he ran:--

"Ah, by the way, where was I?" said he.

And he resumed his ditty, as he plunged rapidly through the streets, and this is what died away in the gloom:--

"Mais il reste encore des bastilles,
Et je vais mettre le hola
Dans l'orde public que voila.
Ou vont les belles filles,
Lon la.

"Quelqu'un veut-il jouer aux quilles?
Tout l'ancien monde s'ecroula
Quand la grosse boule roula.
Ou vont les belles filles,
Lon la.

"Vieux bon peuple, a coups de bequilles,
Cassons ce Louvre ou s'etala
La monarchie en falbala.
Ou vont les belles filles,
Lon la.

"Nous en avons force les grilles,
Le roi Charles-Dix ce jour la,
Tenait mal et se decolla.
Ou vont les belles filles,
Lon la."[57]

The post's recourse to arms was not without result. The cart was conquered, the drunken man was taken prisoner. The first was put in the pound, the second was later on somewhat harassed before the councils of war as an accomplice. The public ministry of the day proved its indefatigable zeal in the defence of society, in this instance.

Gavroche's adventure, which has lingered as a tradition in the quarters of the Temple, is one of the most terrible souvenirs of the elderly

bourgeois of the Marais, and is entitled in their memories: "The nocturnal attack by the post of the Royal Printing Establishment."

[THE END OF VOLUME IV. "SAINT DENIS"]