



***JEAN-EUGÈNE
ROBERT-HOUDIN***

A woman with dark hair, wearing a blue and white patterned dress, is captured in a backbend pose on a wooden pier. She is looking upwards with her arms extended. The background is a soft, warm sunset sky with a building visible in the distance.

***MEMOIRS
OF ROBERT-
HOUDIN,
AMBASSADOR,
AUTHOR AND
CONJURER***

***JEAN-EUGÈNE
ROBERT-HOUDIN***

A woman in a patterned dress is captured mid-air, performing a backflip against a vibrant sunset sky. The background shows a wooden pier and a small building in the distance. The overall scene is dynamic and evocative.

***MEMOIRS
OF ROBERT-
HOUDIN,
AMBASSADOR,
AUTHOR AND
CONJURER***

Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin

Memoirs of Robert-Houdin, ambassador, author and conjurer

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SAINT GERVAIS, NEAR BLOIS,
September, 1858.

EIGHT o'clock has just struck: my wife and children are by my side. I have spent one of those pleasant days which tranquillity, work, and study can alone secure.—With no regret for the past, with no fear for the future, I am—I am not afraid to say it—as happy as man can be.

And yet, at each vibration of this mysterious hour, my pulse starts, my temples throb, and I can scarce breathe, so much do I feel the want of air and motion. I can reply to no questions, so thoroughly am I lost in a strange and delirious reverie.

Shall I confess to you, reader? And why not? for this electrical effect is not of a nature to be easily understood by you.

The reason for my emotion being extreme at this moment is, that, during my professional career, eight o'clock was the moment when I must appear before the public. Then, with my eye eagerly fixed on the hole in the curtain, I surveyed with intense pleasure the crowd that flocked in to see me. Then, as now, my heart beat, for I was proud and happy of such success.

At times, too, a doubt, a feeling of uneasiness, would be mingled with my pleasure. "Heavens!" I would say to myself, in terror, "am I so sure of myself as to deserve such anxiety to see me?"

But, soon reassured by the past, I waited with greater calmness the signal for the curtain to draw up. I then walked on the stage: I was near the foot-lights, before my judges—but no, I err—before my kind spectators, whose applause I was in hopes to gain.

Do you now understand, reader, all the reminiscences this hour evokes in me, and the solemn feeling that continually occurs to me when the clock strikes?

These emotions and souvenirs are not at all painful to me: on the contrary, I summon them up with pleasure. At times I even mentally transport myself to my stage, in order to prolong them. There, as before, I ring the bell, the curtain rises, I see my audience again, and, under the charm of this sweet illusion, I delight in telling them the most interesting episodes of my professional life. I tell them how a man learns his real vocation, how the struggle with difficulties of every nature begins, how, in fact——

But why should I not convert this fiction into a reality? Could I not, each evening when the clock strikes eight, continue my performances under another form? My public shall be the reader, and my stage a book.

This idea pleases me: I accept it with joy, and immediately give way to the sweet illusion. Already I fancy myself in the presence of spectators whose kindness encourages me. I imagine they are waiting for me—they are listening eagerly.

Without further hesitation I begin.

ROBERT-HOUDIN.

MEMOIRS
OF
ROBERT-HOUDIN.

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CHAPTER I.

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My Birth and Parentage—My Home—The Lessons of Colonel Bernard—Paternal Ambition—My first Mechanical Attempts—Had I but a Rat!—A Prisoner's Industry—The Abbé Larivière—My Word of Honor—Farewell to my darling Tools.

IN conformity with the traditional custom which expects every man who writes his memoirs—or not to use too strong language, his confessions—to display his patent of gentility, I commence by stating to my readers, with a certain degree of pride, that I was born at Blois, the birthplace of Louis XII., surnamed the “Father of his People,” and of Denis Papin, the illustrious inventor of the steam-engine.

So much for my native town. As for my family, it would only appear natural, regard being had to the art to which I devoted my life, that I should display in my family tree the name of Robert *le Diable*, or of some mediæval sorcerer; but, being the very slave of truth, I will content myself with stating that my father was a watchmaker.

Though he did not rise to the elevation of the Berthouds and the Breguets, my father was reputed to be very skilful in his profession. In fact, I am only displaying our hereditary modesty when I say that my father's talents were confined to a single art; for, in truth, nature had adapted him for various branches of mechanics, and the activity of his mind led him to try them all with equal ardor. An excellent engraver, a jeweller of the greatest taste, he at the same time could carve the arm or leg for some fractured

statuette, restore the enamel on any time-worn porcelain, or even repair musical snuff-boxes, which were very fashionable in those days. The skill he evinced in these varied arts at length procured him a most numerous body of customers; but, unfortunately, he was wont to make any repairs not strictly connected with his own business for the mere pleasure.

In this house, which I may almost term artistic, and in the midst of tools and implements in which I was destined to take so lively an interest, I was born and educated. I possess an excellent memory, still, though my reminiscences date back so far, I cannot remember the day of my birth. I have learned since, however, that it was the 6th of December, 1805. I am inclined to believe that I came into the world with a file or a hammer in my hand, for, from my earliest youth, those implements were my toys and delight: I learned how to use them as other children learn to walk and talk. I need not say that my excellent mother had frequently to wipe away the young mechanic's tears, when the hammer, badly directed, struck my fingers. As for my father, he laughed at these slight accidents, and said, jokingly, that it was a capital way of driving my profession into me, and that, as I was a wonderful lad, I could not but become an extraordinary workman. I do not pretend that I ever realized the paternal predictions, but it is certain that I have ever felt an irresistible inclination for mechanism.

How often, in my infantile dreams, did a benevolent fairy open before me the door of a mysterious El Dorado, where tools of every description were piled up. The delight which these dreams produced on me, were the same as any other

child feels when his fancy summons up before him a fantastic country where the houses are made of chocolate, the stones of sugar candy, and the men of gingerbread. It is difficult to understand this fever for tools; the mechanic, the artist adores them, and would ruin himself to obtain them. Tools, in fact, are to him what a MS. is to the archæologist, a coin to the antiquary, or a pack of cards to a gambler: in a word they are the implements by which a ruling passion is fed.

By the time I was eight years of age I had furnished proofs of my ability, partly through the kindness of an excellent neighbor, and partly through a dangerous illness, when my forced idleness gave me leisure to exercise my natural dexterity. This neighbor, M. Bernard, was a colonel on half-pay. Having been a prisoner for many years, he had learned how to make an infinity of toys, which he taught me as an amusement, and I profited so well by his lessons, that in a very short time I could equal my master. I fancy I can still see and hear this old soldier, when, passing his hand over his heavy grey moustache, he exclaimed with energetic satisfaction, "Why, the young scamp can do anything he likes." This compliment flattered my childish vanity, and I redoubled my efforts to deserve it.

With my illness my pleasures ended; I was sent to school, and from that time I had few opportunities for indulging in my favorite tasks. Still, on my holidays, I used to return to my father's workshop with delight, and, yet, I must have been a great torment to that excellent parent. Owing to my want of skill, I now and then broke some tool, and although I might try to conceal it, the blame was generally laid on me,

and, as a punishment, I was forbidden to enter the workshop. But it was of no use attempting to keep me from my hobby; the prohibition had to be continually renewed. Hence it was thought advisable to attack the evil at the root, and I must be sent away from home.

Although my father liked his trade, experience had taught him that a watchmaker rarely makes a fortune in a country town; in his paternal ambition he, therefore, dreamed a more brilliant destiny for me, and he formed the determination of giving me a liberal education, for which I shall always feel grateful to him. He sent me to college at Orleans. I was then eleven years of age.

Let who will sing the praises of school life; for my own part I can safely state, that, though I was not averse from study, the happiest day I spent in our monastic seminary was that on which I left it for good. However, once entered, I accepted my lot with resignation, and became in a short time a perfect schoolboy. In my play hours my time was well employed, for I spent the greater portion of it in making pieces of mechanism. Thus I made snares, gins, and mouse-traps, their excellent arrangement, and perhaps the dainty bait as well, producing me a great number of prisoners.

I had built for them a charming open cage, in which I had fixed up a miniature gymnastic machinery. My prisoners, while taking their ease, set in motion a variety of machines, which caused a most agreeable surprise. One of my inventions more especially attracted the admiration of my comrades; it was a method of raising water by means of a pump made almost entirely of quills. A mouse, harnessed like a horse, was intended to set this Lilliputian machine in

motion by the muscular strength of its legs; but, unfortunately, my docile animal, though perfectly willing, could not overcome the resistance of the cog-wheels, and I was forced, to my great regret, to lend it a hand.

“Ah! if I only had a rat!” I said to myself, in my disappointment, “how famously it would work!” A rat! But how to get one? That appeared to me an insurmountable difficulty, but, after all, it was not so. One day, having been caught in the act of breaking bounds by a monitor, I was awarded twelve hours’ imprisonment. This punishment, which I suffered for the first time, produced a violent effect on me: but in the midst of the sorrowful reflections inspired by the solitude, an idea dissipated my melancholy thoughts by offering a famous suggestion.

I knew that at nightfall the rats used to come from an adjacent church into the cell where I was confined, to regale on the bread-crumbs left by prisoners. It was a capital opportunity to obtain one of the animals I required; and as I would not let it slip, I straight-way set about inventing a rat-trap. My only materials were a pitcher holding water, and, consequently, my ideas were confined exclusively to this. I, therefore, made the following arrangement.

I began by emptying my pitcher; then, after putting in a piece of bread, I laid it down so that the orifice was on a level with the ground. My object was to attract the victim by this dainty into the trap. A brick which I dug up would serve to close the opening, but as it was impossible for me in the darkness to notice the exact moment for cutting off the prisoner’s retreat, I laid near the bread a piece of paper which would rustle as the rat passed over it.

As soon as night set in, I crouched close to my pitcher, and, holding the brick in my hand, I awaited with feverish anxiety the arrival of my guests. The pleasure I anticipated from the capture must have been excessive to overcome my timidity when I heard the first leaps of my savage visitors. I confess that the antics they performed round my legs occasioned me great nervousness, for I knew not how far the voracity of these intrepid rodents might extend; still, I kept my ground, not making the slightest movement, through fear of compromising the success of my scheme, and was prepared to offer the assailants a vigorous resistance in case of an attack.

More than an hour passed in vain expectation, and I was beginning to despair of the success of my trap, when I fancied I heard the slight sound I hoped for as a signal. I laid the brick on the mouth of the pitcher directly, and raised it up; the shrill cries inside convinced me of my success, and I began a pæan of triumph, both to celebrate my victory and to frighten away my prisoner's comrades. The porter, when he came to release me, helped me to master my rat by fastening a piece of twine to one of his hind legs, and burdened with my precious booty, I proceeded to the dormitory, where masters and pupils had been asleep for a long time. I was glad enough to sleep too, but a difficulty presented itself—how should I bestow my prisoner?

At length a bright idea occurred to me, fully worthy of a schoolboy: it was to thrust the rat headforemost into one of my shoes. After fastening the twine to the leg of my bed, I pushed the shoe into one of my stockings, and placed the whole in the leg of my trousers. This being accomplished, I

believed I could go to bed without the slightest cause for apprehension. The next morning, at five exactly, the inspector took a turn through the dormitory to arouse the sleepers.

“Dress yourself directly,” he said, in that amiable voice peculiar to gentlemen who have risen too soon.

I proceeded to obey but I was fated to dire disgrace: the rat I had packed away so carefully, not finding its quarters airy enough, had thought proper to gnaw through my shoe, my stocking, and my trouser, and was taking the air through this improvised window. Fortunately, it had not cut through the retaining string, so the rest was a trifle.

But the inspector did not regard matters in the same light as I did. The capture of a rat and the injury to my clothes were considered further aggravations of my previous offence, and he sent in a lengthy report to the head-master. I was obliged to appear before the latter dressed in the clothes that bore the proof of my offence, and, by an unlucky coincidence, shoe, stocking and trouser were all injured on the same leg. The Abbé Larivière (our head-master) managed the college with truly paternal care; ever just, and prone by nature to forgiveness, he was adored by his pupils, and to be out of favor with him was regarded as the severest punishment.

“Well, Robert,” he said to me, looking kindly over the spectacles which bridged the end of his nose, “I understand you have been guilty of grave faults. Come, tell me the whole truth.”

I possessed at that time a quality which, I trust, I have not lost since, and that is extreme frankness. I gave the

Abbé a full account of my misdeeds, and my sincerity gained me pardon. The head-master, after a vain attempt to repress it, burst into a loud fit of laughter, on hearing the catastrophe of my adventures. Still, he ended his gentle lecture in the following words:

“I will not scold you any more, Robert. I believe in your repentance: twelve hours’ confinement are sufficient punishment, and I grant you your release. I will do more: though you are very young, I will treat you as a man—of honor, though—you understand me? You will pledge me your word not only that you will not commit your old faults again, but, as your passion for mechanics makes you often neglect your lessons, you must promise to give up your tools, and devote yourself henceforth to study.”

“Oh yes, sir, I give you my word,” I exclaimed, moved to tears by such unexpected indulgence; “and I can assure you, you will never repent having put faith in my promise.”

I made up my mind to keep my pledge, although I was fully aware of all the difficulties, which were so many stumbling-blocks in that path of virtue I wished to follow. Much trouble, I had too, at first, in withstanding the jests and sarcasms of the idler of my comrades, who, in order to hide their own bad conduct, strove to make all weak characters their accomplices. Still, I broke with them all. Sharpest pang of all, though, was the sacrifice I made in burning my vessels—that is, in putting aside my cages and their contents; I even forgot my tools, and thus, free from all external distraction, I devoted myself entirely to my Greek and Latin studies.

The praise I received from the Abbé Larivière, who prided himself in having noticed in me the stuff for an excellent scholar, rewarded me for this sublime effort, and I may say I became, thenceforth, one of the most studious and attentive lads in the college. At times, I certainly regretted my tools and my darling machinery, but recollecting my promise to the head-master, I held firm against all temptation. All I allowed myself was to set down by stealth on paper a few ideas that occurred to me, though I did not know whether I should ever have a chance to put them in practice.

At length the moment arrived for my leaving college; my studies were completed—I was eighteen years of age.

CHAPTER II.

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A Country Idler—Dr. Carlosbach, Conjuror and Professor of Mystification—The Sand-bag and the Stirrup Trick—I turn Lawyer's Clerk, and the Minutes appear to me very long—A small Automaton—A respectful Protest—I mount a Step in the Office—A Machine of Porter's Power—The Acrobatic Canaries—Monsieur Roger's Remonstrances—My Father decides that I shall follow my bent.

IN the story I have just narrated, only simple events were noticeable—hardly worthy, perhaps, of a man who has often passed for a sorcerer—but grant me a few pages' patience, reader, as an introduction to my artistic life, and what you seek in my book will be displayed before your eager gaze. You will know how a magician is produced, and you will learn that the tree whence my magic staff was cut was only that of persevering labor, often bedewed by the sweat of my brow: soon, too, when you come to witness my labors and my anxious hours of expectation, you will be able to appreciate the cost of a reputation in my mysterious art.

On leaving college, I at first enjoyed all the liberty I had been deprived of for so many years. The power of going right or left, of speaking or remaining silent, as I listed, of getting up sooner or later, according to my fancy, was an earthly paradise for a collegian. I enjoyed this ineffable pleasure to the fullest extent: thus, in the morning—although habit made me wake at five—when the clock announced that once so dreaded hour, I burst into a loud laugh, and offered ferocious challenges to any number of invisible superintendents; then, satisfied by this slight retrospective vengeance, I went to sleep again till breakfast. After that meal I went out to indulge in a pleasant lounge

about the streets; and I preferred walking in the public promenades, for thus I had better chances of finding something to attract my attention. In a word, not an event happened which I did not know, and I was the real amateur “penny-a-liner” of my native town.

Many of these incidents afforded very slight interest; one day, however, I witnessed a scene which produced a lasting effect upon me. One after-dinner, while walking along the side of the Loire, engaged with the thoughts suggested by the falling autumn leaves, I was aroused from my reverie by the sound of a trumpet, evidently blown by a practised performer. It may be easily supposed that I was not the last to obey this startling summons, and a few other idlers also formed a circle round the performer.

He was a tall fellow with a quick eye, a sunburnt face, long and crispy hair, and he stemmed his fist in his side, while he held his head impudently high. His costume, though rather “loud,” was still cleanly, and announced a man who probably had “some hay in his boots,” to use a favorite phrase of gentlemen in the same profession. He wore a maroon-colored frock-coat, trimmed with large silver frogs, while round his neck was a black silk cravat, the two ends being passed through a jewelled ring, which a millionaire would not have disdained—had it not unfortunately been paste. He wore no waistcoat, but his shirt was remarkably white, and on it glistened a heavy mosaic chain, with a collection of appendages, whose metallic sound loudly announced his every movement.

I had ample time to make these observations, for as the audience collected but slowly, the stranger continued his

trumpet overture for a quarter of an hour; at length, when an average crowd had assembled, the trumpet made way for the human voice. The artist laid the instrument on the ground, and walked round majestically to form a ring; then, stopping, he passed his hand through his hair, and began his address. Being little used to this charlatanism in the streets, I regarded the man with confiding admiration and determined not to lose a word of his address.

“Gentlemen,” he commenced, in a firm and sonorous voice, “pray hear me. I am *not* what I seem to be; I may say more, I am what I do not seem to be. Yes, gentlemen, yes—confess it—you take me for one of those scurvy beggars who want to draw a few halfpence from your generosity. Well, you may undeceive yourselves. Though you see me on this spot to-day, I tell you that I have only come here for the relief of suffering humanity in general, then for your welfare in particular, as well as for your amusement.”

Here the orator, whose accent plainly showed that he came from the banks of the Garonne, passed his hand once more through his hair, raised his head, sucked his lips, and, assuming an air of majestic dignity, continued:

“I will tell you presently who I am, and you will be able to estimate me at my true value; in the mean while allow me to offer you a slight specimen of my skill.”

The artist, having then formed the circle afresh, placed before him a small table, on which he arranged three tin goblets, so well polished that they might have been taken for silver; after which he fastened round his waist a red cotton velvet bag, into which he thrust his hands for some

minutes—doubtlessly to prepare the tricks he intended to display—and the performance commenced.

During a long series of tricks, the nutmegs, at first invisible, appeared at the finger ends of the conjuror; then, they passed through the cups, under the table, into a spectator's pockets, and finally emerged, to the general delight, from the nose of a young looker-on. The latter took the matter quite seriously, and half killed himself with sneezing, to see whether a few more spice balls might not be left in his brain. The address with which these tricks were done, and the apparent simplicity of the operator in the execution of these ingenious artifices, produced the most perfect illusion—at least, as far as I was concerned.

It was the first time I had ever witnessed such a sight: I was stupefied, astounded! The man who could perform such marvels at his will seemed to me a superhuman being; hence I saw him put aside his cups with considerable regret. The audience seemed equally charmed; the artist perceived it, and took advantage of it, by making a sign that he had a few more words to say. Then, resting his hand on the table, he proceeded:

“Ladies and gentlemen! I was very pleased to notice the kind attention you devoted to my tricks, and I thank you for it” (here the conjuror bowed to the ground); “and, as I am anxious to prove that you have not to deal with an ungrateful person, I will attempt to repay in full the satisfaction you have made me feel. Deign to listen to me for a moment.

“I promised to tell you what I am; I will now satisfy you.”
(Sudden change of countenance, and evidence of great self-

esteem.) “You behold in me the celebrated Dr. Carlosbach: the composition of my name reveals to you my Anglo-Francisco-Germanic origin. To praise myself would be like painting the lily; I will, therefore, content myself with saying that I possess an enormous talent, and that my astounding reputation can only be equalled by my modesty. Elected, by acclamation, member of the most illustrious learned societies through the whole world, I incline before their judgment, which proclaims the superiority of my skill in the grand art of curing the human race.”

This address, as strange as it was emphatic, was delivered with imperturbable assurance; still I fancied I noticed a twitching of the lips, that revealed the grand doctor’s ill-restrained desire to laugh. For all that, I listened attentively to his discourse.

“But, gentlemen,” he added, “I have said sufficient of myself; it is time to speak of my works. Learn then, that I am the inventor of the Vermifuge Balsam, whose sovereign efficaciousness is indisputable. Yes, gentlemen, the worm, that enemy of the human race—the worm, the destroyer of everything existing—the worm, that obstinate preyer on the living and the dead, is at length conquered by my science; a drop, an atom of this precious liquor is sufficient to expel this fearful parasite for ever.

“And, gentlemen, such is the virtue of my marvellous balsam, that it not only delivers man from this frightful calamity during life, but his body has nothing to fear after death. Taking my balsam is a mode of embalming one’s body prior to death; man is thus rendered immortal. Ah! gentlemen, were you but acquainted with all the virtues of

my sublime discovery, you would rush upon me and tear it from me; but, as that would be illegal, I check myself in time.”

The orator, in fact, stopped, and dried his brow with one hand, while with the other he motioned to the crowd that he had not yet ended his discourse. A great number of the audience were already striving to approach the learned doctor; Carlosbach, however, did not appear to notice it, and, reassuming his dramatic posture, he continued as follows:

“But, you will ask me, what can be the price of such a treasure? can we be rich enough to purchase it? The moment has now arrived, gentlemen, to make you understand the full extent of my disinterestedness. This balsam, in the discovery of which I have worn away my days—this balsam, which sovereigns have purchased at the price of their crown—this balsam, in short, which is beyond all price—well, I make you a present of it!”

At these unexpected words, the crowd, panting with emotion, lifted up its eager arms, and implored the generosity of the doctor. But, what shameful deception! Carlosbach—the celebrated Dr. Carlosbach—this benefactor of humanity, suddenly altered his tone, and burst into an Homeric shout of laughter. The arms fell down spontaneously; the audience looked vacantly into each other’s faces. At length one laughed. The contagion spread, and soon everybody was following the conjurer’s example. He was the first to stop, and demanded silence:

“Gentlemen!” he then said, in a perfectly respectful tone, “do not be angry with me for the little trick I have played

you; I wished thus to put you on your guard against those charlatans who daily deceive you, just as I have done myself. I am no doctor, but simply a conjurer, professor of mystification, and author of a book, in which you will find, in addition to the discourse I have just delivered, the description of a great number of conjuring tricks. Would you like to learn the art of amusing yourself in society? For sixpence you may satisfy your curiosity.”

The conjurer produced from a box an enormous packet of books; then, going round the crowd, he soon disposed of his wares, thanks to the interest his talent had excited. The exhibition was over, and I returned home with my head full of a world of unknown sensations.

It will be readily supposed that I purchased one of these precious volumes. I hastened to examine it; but the false doctor continued his system of mystification in it, and despite all my good will, I could not understand one of the tricks he pretended to explain. However, I had the famous speech I have just quoted, as some sort of consolation.

I made up my mind to lay the book aside and think no more of it; but the marvels it announced returned to my mind every moment. “O Carlosbach!” I said in my modest ambition, “if I possessed your talent, how happy I should feel!” and, filled with this idea, I decided on taking lessons of the learned professor. Unfortunately, this determination was arrived at too late. When I proceeded to his lodgings, I learned that the conjuror had resorted to his own tricks, and had left his inn the previous evening, forgetting to pay the princely score he had run up. The innkeeper gave me the

account of this last mystification on the part of the professor.

Carlosbach had arrived at his house with two trunks of unequal size and very heavy; on the larger of them was painted "Conjuring Apparatus," on the other, "Clothing." The conjuror, who stated that he had received various invitations to perform at the adjacent châteaux, had set off the evening before to fulfil one of these engagements. He had only taken with him one of his trunks, that containing the apparatus; and it was supposed he had left the other in his room as a security for the bill he had run up. The next day the host, surprised at finding his lodger still absent, thought it advisable to place his traps in some safe place. He, therefore, went into his bedroom; but the two trunks had disappeared, and in their place was an enormous bag filled with sand, on which was written:

THE MYSTIFYING BAG.

THE STIRRUP TRICK.

I continued for some time longer to enjoy the contemplative life I had been pursuing; but at last satiety assailed me, and I was quite surprised one day at finding myself wearied of this life of idleness. My father, like a man who could read the human heart, had awaited this moment to talk seriously with me; he, therefore, took me aside one morning, and said, without further preface, in a kindly voice:

"My good boy, you have now quitted college with a sound education, and I have allowed you to enjoy fully the liberty for which you seemed to aspire. But you must see this is not sufficient for a livelihood; you must now enter on

the world resolutely, and apply your parts to the profession you wish to embrace. That profession it is now time to choose; you have doubtlessly some inclination, some bias, and you must let me know it; speak, then, and you will find me inclined to second your views.”

Although my father had frequently expressed his fears lest I should follow his trade, I thought, after these remarks, he had changed his mind, and I joyfully said:

“Of course I have an inclination, and you cannot be ignorant of it, for it is of very old standing. You know I never wished to be other than—“

My father guessed my thoughts, and would not allow me to finish.

“I see,” he objected, “that you did not understand me, and I must explain my meaning more clearly. My desire is for you to choose a profession more lucrative than my own. Consider, it would be unreasonable to bury the ten years’ schooling for which I made such heavy sacrifices in my shop; remember, too, that, after thirty-five years’ hard work, I have been hardly able to save sufficient provision for my old age. Then, pray, change your resolution, and give up your mania for making a ‘parcel of filings.’”

My father, in this, merely followed the idea of many parents, who can only see the disagreeable side of their own trade. To this prejudice, I must allow, he added the praiseworthy ambition of the head of a family desirous that his son should rise a step higher on the social ladder than himself.

As I was utterly ignorant of all other professions or trades save that of a mechanic, I was unable to appreciate

them, or consequently select one; hence I remained dumb. In vain did my father try to draw an answer from me by explaining the advantages I should derive from being a surgeon or chemist, a barrister or a solicitor. I could only repeat that I placed implicit confidence in his wisdom and experience. This self-denial and passive obedience appeared to touch him; I noticed it, and wishing to make a final attack on his determination, I said to him:

“Before making up my mind to any decided choice of profession, allow me to offer one observation. Are you sure that it is your trade which is impossible of extension, or is it owing to the smallness of the town in which you have carried it on? Let me follow my own bent, I beseech you, and when I have become a good workman by your instruction, I will go to Paris and make a fortune there; I feel quite convinced I can do so.”

Fearing lest he might give way, my father tried to cut the conversation short by evading a reply to my objection.

“As you leave it to me,” he said, “I advise you to become a solicitor; with your natural parts, aided by application and good conduct, I am certain you will make your way famously.”

Two days later I was installed in one of the best offices at Blois, and, owing to my caligraphy, I was employed as a copying clerk, and in engrossing from morning till night, though rarely understanding what I was writing. My readers can readily guess that this mechanical work could not long satisfy the turn of my mind; pens, ink, and paper were most unsuitable articles to carry out the inventive ideas which continually occurred to me. Fortunately, at that period, steel

pens were unknown; hence I had a resource in making my pens, to which I devoted the best part of my time. This simple fact will suffice to give an idea of the deep spleen which weighed upon me like a coating of lead, and I should have certainly fallen ill, had I not found more attractive employment.

Among the mechanical curiosities entrusted to my father for repair, I had noticed a snuff-box, on the top of which a small piece of mechanism attracted my entire attention. The top of the box represented a landscape. On pressing a spring, a hare made its appearance, and went towards a tuft of grass, which it began to crop; soon after a sportsman emerged from a thicket accompanied by a pointer. The miniature Nimrod stopped at the sight of the game, shouldered his gun and fired; a noise indicative of the explosion of a fire-arm was heard, and the hare, apparently wounded, disappeared in the thicket, pursued by the dog.

This pretty piece of mechanism excited my desires in an eminent degree, but I could not hope to possess it, as the owner, in addition to the value he attached to it, had no reason to dispose of it, and, besides, my pecuniary means were insufficient. As I could not make the article my own, I determined, at least, to keep it in remembrance, and drew a careful plan of it without my father's knowledge. This only more inflamed my desires, and I began to ask myself whether I could not make an exact copy of it.

Seeing no extreme difficulty in this, I rose at daybreak each morning, and, going down to my father's workshop, I worked till the hour when he used to begin work. Then I rearranged the tools exactly as I had found them, locked up

my work carefully, and proceeded to my office. The joy I experienced in finding my mechanism act was only equalled by the pleasure I felt in presenting it to my father, as an indirect and respectful protest against the determination he had formed as to my choice of a trade. I had some difficulty in persuading him that I had not been assisted by any one in my work, but when at last I removed his doubts, he could not refrain from complimenting me.

“It is a pity,” he said, thoughtfully, “that you cannot profit by your turn for mechanism; but,” he added, suddenly, as if seeking to dispel an idea that troubled him, “you had better take no pride in your skill, for it may injure your prospects.”

For more than a year I performed the duties of amateur—that is, unpaid clerk—and I was then offered a situation by a country solicitor as second clerk, with a small salary. I accepted this unexpected promotion very readily; but, once installed in my new duties, I found that my employer had deceived me as to their range. The situation I occupied was that of office-boy, having to run on errands, for the first and only clerk could more than attend to the business. I certainly earned some money: it was the first I had gained by my own labor, and this consideration gilded the pill, which was rather bitter to my pride. Besides, M. Roger (such was my new master’s name) was certainly the best fellow in the world. His manner, full of kindness and sympathy, had attracted me the first time I saw him, and I may add that his behavior towards me was most agreeable during the time I remained in his office.

This gentleman, the personification of probity, possessed the confidence of the Duc d’Avaray, whose estate he

managed, and being full of zeal for his noble client's business, he devoted more attention to it than to his office. At Avaray legal business was very scarce, and we had hardly enough to fill up our time. For my own part, I had many leisure hours, which my kind master enabled me to employ by placing his library at my service. I had the good fortune to find in it Linnæus's Treaty on Botany, and I learned the rudiments of that science.

The study of botany required time, and I could only devote to it the hours prior to the office opening. Unfortunately, I had become a tremendous sleeper—I hardly know how—and I could not manage to get up before eight o'clock. I resolved to conquer this obstinate somnolency, and I invented a waking apparatus, which, from its originality, deserves honorable mention here.

The room I occupied formed a portion of the Château d'Avaray, and was situated over an archway, closed by a heavy gate. Having noticed that the porter opened this gate, which led into the gardens, every morning, the idea occurred to me of profiting by this circumstance to institute an energetic alarm. This is how I managed it. When I went to bed, I fastened to one of my legs the end of a cord, which, passing through my half-opened window, was attached to the upper part of the iron gate. When the porter pushed the gate open, he dragged me, when least expecting it, to the middle of my bedroom. Thus violently roused from sleep, I tried to hold on by the bed-clothes; but the more I resisted, the more did the pitiless porter push on his side, and I at length woke up to hear him always abusing the hinges, which he determined to oil before the day was