

"I never could have believed, nephew, that you would have turned my child's head! What would your mother say were she alive to see this?"

Why did not my uncle turn away from me? Was he looking at me or elsewhere? What else was there to see? I do not know if the fault was great, but the judge was cruel. And my judge grew bigger, like a Titan, like a wall between me and Irinel. In my ears there rang what I am convinced was the sentence he had secretly passed on me: "What a depraved youth! The old are passing away, and with them disappear the old moral ideas!"

I was ready to sink under my chair. My uncle said to me:

"Iorgu, you have not had any coffee. It seems to me you are not well, are you?"

What irony! Were his words more gentle than before? Useless thought! I understood him. God defend you from a good man who disapproves of you. It's bad enough to feel oneself guilty before a good and upright man.

Why was punishment for mankind invented? Punishment is the reward of sin. I could have wished that my uncle would pronounce his sentence of punishment. But no, he has taken me prisoner, he has judged me and, instead of punishing me, he stoops to give me coffee and two rolls. In all my life I had never experienced a greater agony.

No doubt he had seen us walking silently together, not gaily as we used to do. He understood why Irinel stayed in the house on one or two Sundays. Of course he knew why I did not go to sleep till early dawn, and who knows, he might have heard me calling in my dreams:

"Irinel, Irinel, I love you! Do you love me?"

What would my uncle think of his daughter married to his sister's son? It would mean asking for a dispensation. Would it not be turning such a religious man into an object of derision in his old age? And for what reason? Just through the caprice of a boy whom he had brought up and cared for.

Irinel and I had grown up together more like brother and sister than cousins! If there had only been a question of the civil right! But the laws of the Church! How could one trample them underfoot?

Throughout the week, early in the morning, at night and through the day, at meals and during school hours, this thought occupied my mind!

"It is impossible! It is impossible! I wonder that I did not see that sooner."

About six o'clock on Saturday our old carriage turned into the courtyard; inside was my uncle and by him sat Irinel. From the oak steps of the veranda I watched the white hair and the golden curls and, scarcely able to control my tears, I said to myself: "It is impossible."

Irinel sprang from the carriage and came up to me. She was happy. We kissed each other, but, believe me, she seemed to kiss in the air.

"What's the matter, Iorgu? You are very pale. You are thinner, or does it only seem so to me?"

Before I could answer her my uncle hastened, hastened to say:

"I don't know what's the matter with Iorgu. It seems to me he is ill, but he will not say so."

Oh! Oh! You don't know what is the matter with me, uncle? You don't