In speaking of the white bread and wine the eyes of the sick man glistened; but what could be done? The soldiers had neither money nor watches. Salvette, it is true, keeps a note for forty francs in the lining of his coat, but it was reserved for the day when they should become free and the first halt they should make at a French tavern.

Bernadou, however, is so ill! Who knows whether he will ever start on the way home? And since here is a Christmas that they can still enjoy together, is it not best to profit by it?

Then, without saying anything to his comrade, Salvette removed the money from its hiding-place; and when the old Jew came on his usual morning rounds in the halls, after a long debate and discussions in a low tone, he slipped into his hand the piece of paper,—ragged and yellow, smelling of powder, and stained with blood. From that moment Salvette assumed an air of mystery. He rubbed his hands together and laughed to himself when he looked at Bernadou. Now, as evening approached, he was on the watch, his face pressed against the glass, until he saw old Augustus Cahn arrive, all out of breath, with the little basket on his arm.

III.

The solemn midnight, which sounded from all the bells of the city, fell mournfully on the hearing of the wounded. The hospital was silent, lighted only by the night lamps suspended from the ceiling. Tall shadows floated aimlessly across the bare walls, and hovered over the beds with a perpetual to and fro movement that seemed like the oppressed breathing of the sufferers stretched upon them. At times a dreamer spoke aloud or sighed in his sleep, while from the street below arose a vague murmur of steps and voices mingled in the cold and resonant air. One could feel the beginning of the celebration of the holy festival disturbing the hour of rest, and arousing in the lifeless city the dim rays of lanterns and the glimmering of the church windows.

"Are you asleep, Bernadou?"

Very softly on the little table near the bed of his friend Salvette placed a bottle of Lune wine and a Christmas loaf of white bread, in which the branch of holly was planted upright. The sick man opened his eyes. By the uncertain light of the lamps, and the white reflection from the roofs where the moon shone upon the snow, this improvised Christmas seemed like a dream.

"Come, wake up, comrade; don't let them say that we let the day go by without greeting it with a drop of claret."

Salvette raised him with the care of a mother, filled the goblets and cut the bread, and pledged him and talked to him of Provence.

Little by little Bernadou became attentive and animated. The wine also brought its memories; with the childishness of an invalid he wished Salvette to sing to him. His friend asked nothing better. "Which do you want, Les Trois Rois or St. Joseph w'a dit?" "I had rather have the 'Bergers,' Salvette. It is the one they sing at home."

In an undertone, with his head within the curtains, Salvette commenced to hum the air. All at once in the last couplet, where after the shepherds have brought their offering to Jesus in the stable, dismissing them with a gracious air, Joseph says,

"Bergers,
Prenez votre congé."

Bernadou fell back heavily on his pillow. His friend thinking that he was asleep called him and grasped his shoulder. But the wounded man remained motionless, and the branch of holly across the white sheet seemed already the green palm to be placed upon the shroud of the dead.

Salvette understood; then weeping a little, and confused by the suddenness of his great grief, he took up again in the silence the gay refrain of Provence,—

"Bergers,
Prenez votre congé."