

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

STUDY OF A WOMAN

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Study of a Woman

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Honoré de Balzac

Study of a Woman

STUDY OF A WOMAN

The Marquise de Listomere is one of those young women who have been brought up in the spirit of the Restoration. She has principles, she fasts, takes the sacrament, and goes to balls and operas very elegantly dressed; her confessor permits her to combine the mundane with sanctity. Always in conformity with the Church and with the world, she presents a living image of the present day, which seems to have taken the word "legality" for its motto. The conduct of the marquise shows precisely enough religious devotion to attain under a new Maintenon to the gloomy piety of the last days of Louis XIV., and enough worldliness to adopt the habits of gallantry of the first years of that reign, should it ever be revived. At the present moment she is strictly virtuous from policy, possibly from inclination. Married for the last seven years to the Marquis de Listomere, one of those deputies who expect a peerage, she may also consider that such conduct will promote the ambitions of her family. Some women are reserving their opinion of her until the moment when Monsieur de Listomere becomes a peer of France, when she herself will be thirty-six years of age, – a period of life when most women discover that they are the dupes of social laws.

The marquis is a rather insignificant man. He stands well at court; his good qualities are as negative as his defects; the former can no more make him a reputation for virtue than the latter can give him the sort of glamor cast by vice. As deputy, he never speaks, but he votes RIGHT. He behaves in his own home as he does in the Chamber. Consequently, he is held to be one of the best husbands in France. Though not susceptible of lively interest, he never scolds, unless, to be sure, he is kept waiting. His friends have named him "dull weather," – aptly enough, for there is neither clear light nor total darkness about him. He is like all the ministers who have succeeded one another in France since the Charter. A woman with principles could not have fallen into better hands. It is certainly a great thing for a virtuous woman to have married a man incapable of follies.

Occasionally some fops have been sufficiently impertinent to press the hand of the marquise while dancing with her. They gained nothing in return but contemptuous glances; all were made to feel the shock of that insulting indifference which, like a spring frost, destroys the germs of flattering hopes. Beaux, wits, and fops, men whose sentiments are fed by sucking their canes, those of a great name, or a great fame, those of the highest or the lowest rank in her own world, they all blanch before her. She has conquered the right to converse as long and as often as she chooses with the men who seem to her agreeable, without being entered on the tablets of gossip. Certain coquettish women are capable of following a plan of this kind for seven years in order to gratify their fancies later; but to suppose any such reservations in the Marquise de Listomere would be to calumniate her.

I have had the happiness of knowing this phoenix. She talks well; I know how to listen; consequently I please her, and I go to her parties. That, in fact, was the object of my ambition.

Neither plain nor pretty, Madame de Listomere has white teeth, a dazzling skin, and very red lips; she is tall and well-made; her foot is small and slender, and she does not put it forth; her eyes, far from being dulled like those of so many Parisian women, have a gentle glow which becomes quite magical if, by chance, she is animated. A soul is then divined behind that rather indefinite form. If she takes an interest in the conversation she displays a grace which is otherwise buried beneath the precautions of cold demeanor, and then she is charming. She does not seek success, but she obtains it. We find that for which we do not seek: that saying is so often true that some day it will be turned into a proverb. It is, in fact, the moral of this adventure, which I should not allow myself to tell if it were not echoing at the present moment through all the salons of Paris.

The Marquise de Listomere danced, about a month ago, with a young man as modest as he is lively, full of good qualities, but exhibiting, chiefly, his defects. He is ardent, but he laughs at ardor; he has talent, and he hides it; he plays the learned man with aristocrats, and the aristocrat with learned men. Eugene de Rastignac is one of those extremely clever young men who try all things, and seem to sound others to discover what the future has in store. While awaiting the age of ambition, he scoffs at everything; he has grace and originality, two rare qualities because the one is apt to exclude the other. On this occasion he talked for nearly half an hour with madame de Listomere, without any predetermined idea of pleasing her. As they followed the caprices of conversation, which, beginning with the opera of "Guillaume Tell," had reached the topic of the duties of women, he looked at the marquise, more than once, in a manner that embarrassed her; then he left her and did not speak to her again for the rest of the evening. He danced, played at ecarte, lost some money, and went home to bed. I have the honor to assure you that the affair happened precisely thus. I add nothing, and I suppress nothing.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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