HONORÉ DE BALZAC

A START IN LIFE

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I. THAT WHICH WAS LACKING TO PIERROTIN'S HAPPINESS

Railroads, in a future not far distant, must force certain industries to disappear forever, and modify several others, more especially those relating to the different modes of transportation in use around Paris. Therefore the persons and things which are the elements of this Scene will soon give to it the character of an archaeological work. Our nephews ought to be enchanted to learn the social material of an epoch which they will call the "olden time." The picturesque "coucous" which stood on the Place de la Concorde, encumbering the Cours-la-Reine, – coucous which had flourished for a century, and were still numerous in 1830, scarcely exist in 1842, unless on the occasion of some attractive suburban solemnity, like that of the Grandes Eaux of Versailles. In 1820, the various celebrated places called the "Environs of Paris" did not all possess a regular stage-coach service.

Nevertheless, the Touchards, father and son, had acquired a monopoly of travel and transportation to all the populous

towns within a radius of forty-five miles; and their enterprise constituted a fine establishment in the rue du Faubourg-Saint-Denis. In spite of their long-standing rights, in spite, too, of their efforts, their capital, and all the advantages of a powerful centralization, the Touchard coaches ("messageries") found terrible competition in the coucous for all points with a circumference of fifteen or twenty miles. The passion of the Parisian for the country is such that local enterprise could successfully compete with the Lesser Stage company, – Petites Messageries, the name given to the Touchard enterprise to distinguish it from that of the Grandes Messageries of the rue Montmartre. At the time of which we write, the Touchard success was stimulating speculators. For every small locality in the neighborhood of Paris there sprang up schemes of beautiful, rapid, and commodious vehicles, departing and arriving in Paris at fixed hours, which produced, naturally, a fierce competition. Beaten on the long distances of twelve to eighteen miles, the coucou came down to shorter trips, and so lived on for several years. At last, however, it succumbed to omnibuses, which demonstrated the possibility of carrying eighteen persons in a vehicle drawn by two horses. To-day the coucous – if by chance any of those birds of ponderous flight still linger in the second-hand carriage-shops – might be made, as to its structure and arrangement, the subject of learned researches comparable to those of Cuvier on the animals discovered in the chalk pits of Montmartre.

These petty enterprises, which had struggled since 1822 against the Touchards, usually found a strong foothold in the good-will and sympathy of the inhabitants of the districts which they served. The person undertaking the business as proprietor and conductor was nearly always an inn-keeper along the route, to whom the beings, things, and interests with which he had to do were all familiar. He could execute commissions intelligently; he never asked as much for his little stages, and therefore obtained more custom than the Touchard coaches. He managed to elude the necessity of a custom-house permit. If need were, he was willing to infringe the law as to the number of passengers he might carry. In short, he possessed the affection of the masses; and thus it happened that whenever a rival came upon the same route, if his days for running were not the same as those of the coucou, travellers would put off their journey to make it with their long-tried coachman, although his vehicle and his horses might be in a far from reassuring condition.

One of the lines which the Touchards, father and son, endeavored to monopolize, and the one most stoutly disputed (as indeed it still is), is that of Paris to Beaumont-sur-Oise, – a line extremely profitable, for three rival enterprises worked it in 1822. In vain the Touchards lowered their price; in vain they constructed better coaches and started oftener. Competition still continued, so productive is a line on which are little towns like Saint-Denis and Saint-Brice, and villages like Pierrefitte, Groslay, Ecouen, Poncelles, Moisselles, Monsoult, Maffliers,

Franconville, Presles, Nointel, Nerville, etc. The Touchard coaches finally extended their route to Chambly; but competition followed. To-day the Toulouse, a rival enterprise, goes as far as Beauvais.

Along this route, which is that toward England, there lies a road which turns off at a place well-named, in view of its topography, The Cave, and leads through a most delightful valley in the basin of the Oise to the little town of Isle-Adam, doubly celebrated as the cradle of the family, now extinct, of Isle-Adam, and also as the former residence of the Bourbon-Contis. Isle-Adam is a little town flanked by two large villages, Nogent and Parmain, both remarkable for splendid quarries, which have furnished material for many of the finest buildings in modern Paris and in foreign lands, – for the base and capital of the columns of the Brussels theatre are of Nogent stone. Though remarkable for its beautiful sites, for the famous chateaux which princes, monks, and designers have built, such as Cassan, Stors, Le Val, Nointel, Persan, etc., this region had escaped competition in 1822, and was reached by two coaches only, working more or less in harmony.

This exception to the rule of rivalry was founded on reasons that are easy to understand. From the Cave, the point on the route to England where a paved road (due to the luxury of the Princes of Conti) turned off to Isle-Adam, the distance is six miles. No speculating enterprise would make such a detour, for Isle-Adam was the terminus of the road, which did not go

beyond it. Of late years, another road has been made between the valley of Montmorency and the valley of the Oise; but in 1822 the only road which led to Isle-Adam was the paved highway of the Princes of Conti. Pierrotin and his colleague reigned, therefore, from Paris to Isle-Adam, beloved by every one along the way. Pierrotin's vehicle, together with that of his comrade, and Pierrotin himself, were so well known that even the inhabitants on the main road as far as the Cave were in the habit of using them; for there was always better chance of a seat to be had than in the Beaumont coaches, which were almost always full. Pierrotin and his competitor were on the best of terms. When the former started from Isle-Adam, the latter was returning from Paris, and vice versa.

It is unnecessary to speak of the rival. Pierrotin possessed the sympathies of his region; besides, he is the only one of the two who appears in this veracious narrative. Let it suffice you to know that the two coach proprietors lived under a good understanding, rivalled each other loyally, and obtained customers by honorable proceedings. In Paris they used, for economy's sake, the same yard, hotel, and stable, the same coach-house, office, and clerk. This detail is alone sufficient to show that Pierrotin and his competitor were, as the popular saying is, "good dough." The hotel at which they put up in Paris, at the corner of the rue d'Enghien, is still there, and is called the "Lion d'Argent." The proprietor of the establishment, which from time immemorial had lodged coachmen and coaches, drove himself for the great

company of Daumartin, which was so firmly established that its neighbors, the Touchards, whose place of business was directly opposite, never dreamed of starting a rival coach on the Daumartin line.

Though the departures for Isle-Adam professed to take place at a fixed hour, Pierrotin and his co-rival practised an indulgence in that respect which won for them the grateful affection of the country-people, and also violent remonstrances on the part of strangers accustomed to the regularity of the great lines of public conveyances. But the two conductors of these vehicles, which were half diligence, half coucou, were invariably defended by their regular customers. The afternoon departure at four o'clock usually lagged on till half-past, while that of the morning, fixed for eight o'clock, was seldom known to take place before nine. In this respect, however, the system was elastic. In summer, that golden period for the coaching business, the rule of departure, rigorous toward strangers, was often relaxed for country customers. This method not infrequently enabled Pierrotin to pocket two fares for one place, if a countryman came early and wanted a seat already booked and paid for by some "bird of passage" who was, unluckily for himself, a little late. Such elasticity will certainly not commend itself to purists in morality; but Pierrotin and his colleague justified it on the varied grounds of "hard times," of their losses during the winter months, of the necessity of soon getting better coaches, and of the duty of keeping exactly to the rules written on the tariff, copies of which

were, however, never shown, unless some chance traveller was obstinate enough to demand it.

Pierrotin, a man about forty years of age, was already the father of a family. Released from the cavalry on the great disbandment of 1815, the worthy fellow had succeeded his father, who for many years had driven a coucou of capricious flight between Paris and Isle-Adam. Having married the daughter of a small inn-keeper, he enlarged his business, made it a regular service, and became noted for his intelligence and a certain military precision. Active and decided in his ways, Pierrotin (the name seems to have been a sobriquet) contrived to give, by the vivacity of his countenance, an expression of sly shrewdness to his ruddy and weather-stained visage which suggested wit. He was not without that facility of speech which is acquired chiefly through "seeing life" and other countries. His voice, by dint of talking to his horses and shouting "Gare!" was rough; but he managed to tone it down with the bourgeois. His clothing, like that of all coachmen of the second class, consisted of stout boots, heavy with nails, made at Isle-Adam, trousers of bottle-green velveteen, waistcoat of the same, over which he wore, while exercising his functions, a blue blouse, ornamented on the collar, shoulder-straps and cuffs, with many-colored embroidery. A cap with a visor covered his head. His military career had left in Pierrotin's manners and customs a great respect for all social superiority, and a habit of obedience to persons of the upper classes; and though he never willingly

mingled with the lesser bourgeoisie, he always respected women in whatever station of life they belonged. Nevertheless, by dint of "trundling the world," – one of his own expressions, – he had come to look upon those he conveyed as so many walking parcels, who required less care than the inanimate ones, – the essential object of a coaching business.

Warned by the general movement which, since the Peace, was revolutionizing his calling, Pierrotin would not allow himself to be outdone by the progress of new lights. Since the beginning of the summer season he had talked much of a certain large coach, ordered from Farry, Breilmann, and Company, the best makers of diligences, – a purchase necessitated by an increasing influx of travellers. Pierrotin's present establishment consisted of two vehicles. One, which served in winter, and the only one he reported to the tax-gatherer, was the coucou which he inherited from his father. The rounded flanks of this vehicle allowed him to put six travellers on two seats, of metallic hardness in spite of the yellow Utrecht velvet with which they were covered. These seats were separated by a wooden bar inserted in the sides of the carriage at the height of the travellers' shoulders, which could be placed or removed at will. This bar, specially covered with velvet (Pierrotin called it "a back"), was the despair of the passengers, from the great difficulty they found in placing and removing it. If the "back" was difficult and even painful to handle, that was nothing to the suffering caused to the omoplates when the bar was in place. But when it was left to lie loose across the coach,

it made both ingress and egress extremely perilous, especially to women.

Though each seat of this vehicle, with rounded sides like those of a pregnant woman, could rightfully carry only three passengers, it was not uncommon to see eight persons on the two seats jammed together like herrings in a barrel. Pierrotin declared that the travellers were far more comfortable in a solid, immovable mass; whereas when only three were on a seat they banged each other perpetually, and ran much risk of injuring their hats against the roof by the violent jolting of the roads. In front of the vehicle was a wooden bench where Pierrotin sat, on which three travellers could perch; when there, they went, as everybody knows, by the name of "rabbits." On certain trips Pierrotin placed four rabbits on the bench, and sat himself at the side, on a sort of box placed below the body of the coach as a foot-rest for the rabbits, which was always full of straw, or of packages that feared no damage. The body of this particular coucou was painted yellow, embellished along the top with a band of barber's blue, on which could be read, on the sides, in silvery white letters, "Isle-Adam, Paris," and across the back, "Line to Isle-Adam."

Our descendants will be mightily mistaken if they fancy that thirteen persons including Pierrotin were all that this vehicle could carry. On great occasions it could take three more in a square compartment covered with an awning, where the trunks, cases, and packages were piled; but the prudent Pierrotin only

allowed his regular customers to sit there, and even they were not allowed to get in until at some distance beyond the "barriere." The occupants of the "hen-roost" (the name given by conductors to this section of their vehicles) were made to get down outside of every village or town where there was a post of gendarmerie; the overloading forbidden by law, "for the safety of passengers," being too obvious to allow the gendarme on duty – always a friend to Pierrotin – to avoid the necessity of reporting this flagrant violation of the ordinances. Thus on certain Saturday nights and Monday mornings, Pierrotin's coucou "trundled" fifteen travellers; but on such occasions, in order to drag it along, he gave his stout old horse, called Rougeot, a mate in the person of a little beast no bigger than a pony, about whose merits he had much to say. This little horse was a mare named Bichette; she ate little, she was spirited, she was indefatigable, she was worth her weight in gold.

"My wife wouldn't give her for that fat lazybones of a Rougeot!" cried Pierrotin, when some traveller would joke him about his epitome of a horse.

The difference between this vehicle and the other consisted chiefly in the fact that the other was on four wheels. This coach, of comical construction, called the "four-wheel-coach," held seventeen travellers, though it was bound not to carry more than fourteen. It rumbled so noisily that the inhabitants of Isle-Adam frequently said, "Here comes Pierrotin!" when he was scarcely out of the forest which crowns the slope of the valley. It was

divided into two lobes, so to speak: one, called the "interior," contained six passengers on two seats; the other, a sort of cabriolet constructed in front, was called the "coupe." This coupe was closed in with very inconvenient and fantastic glass sashes, a description of which would take too much space to allow of its being given here. The four-wheeled coach was surmounted by a hooded "imperial," into which Pierrotin managed to poke six passengers; this space was inclosed by leather curtains. Pierrotin himself sat on an almost invisible seat perched just below the sashes of the coupe.

The master of the establishment paid the tax which was levied upon all public conveyances on his coucou only, which was rated to carry six persons; and he took out a special permit each time that he drove the four-wheeler. This may seem extraordinary in these days, but when the tax on vehicles was first imposed, it was done very timidly, and such deceptions were easily practised by the coach proprietors, always pleased to "faire la queue" (cheat of their dues) the government officials, to use the argot of their vocabulary. Gradually the greedy Treasury became severe; it forced all public conveyances not to roll unless they carried two certificates, – one showing that they had been weighed, the other that their taxes were duly paid. All things have their salad days, even the Treasury; and in 1822 those days still lasted. Often in summer, the "four-wheel-coach," and the coucou journeyed together, carrying between them thirty-two passengers, though Pierrotin was only paying a tax on six. On these specially lucky

days the convoy started from the faubourg Saint-Denis at half-past four o'clock in the afternoon, and arrived gallantly at Isle-Adam by ten at night. Proud of this service, which necessitated the hire of an extra horse, Pierrotin was wont to say: —

"We went at a fine pace!"

But in order to do the twenty-seven miles in five hours with his caravan, he was forced to omit certain stoppages along the road, – at Saint-Brice, Moisselles, and La Cave.

The hotel du Lion d'Argent occupies a piece of land which is very deep for its width. Though its frontage has only three or four windows on the faubourg Saint-Denis, the building extends back through a long court-yard, at the end of which are the stables, forming a large house standing close against the division wall of the adjoining property. The entrance is through a sort of passage-way beneath the floor of the second story, in which two or three coaches had room to stand. In 1822 the offices of all the lines of coaches which started from the Lion d'Argent were kept by the wife of the inn-keeper, who had as many books as there were lines. She received the fares, booked the passengers, and stowed away, good-naturedly, in her vast kitchen the various packages and parcels to be transported. Travellers were satisfied with this easy-going, patriarchal system. If they arrived too soon, they seated themselves beneath the hood of the huge kitchen chimney, or stood within the passage-way, or crossed to the Cafe de l'Echiquier, which forms the corner of the street so named.

In the early days of the autumn of 1822, on a Saturday

morning, Pierrotin was standing, with his hands thrust into his pockets through the apertures of his blouse, beneath the porte-cochere of the Lion d'Argent, whence he could see, diagonally, the kitchen of the inn, and through the long court-yard to the stables, which were defined in black at the end of it. Daumartin's diligence had just started, plunging heavily after those of the Touchards. It was past eight o'clock. Under the enormous porch or passage, above which could be read on a long sign, "Hotel du Lion d'Argent," stood the stablemen and porters of the coaching-lines watching the lively start of the vehicles which deceives so many travellers, making them believe that the horses will be kept to that vigorous gait.

"Shall I harness up, master?" asked Pierrotin's hostler, when there was nothing more to be seen along the road.

"It is a quarter-past eight, and I don't see any travellers," replied Pierrotin. "Where have they poked themselves? Yes, harness up all the same. And there are no parcels either! Twenty good Gods! a fine day like this, and I've only four booked! A pretty state of things for a Saturday! It is always the same when you want money! A dog's life, and a dog's business!"

"If you had more, where would you put them? There's nothing left but the cabriolet," said the hostler, intending to soothe Pierrotin.

"You forget the new coach!" cried Pierrotin.

"Have you really got it?" asked the man, laughing, and showing a set of teeth as white and broad as almonds.

"You old good-for-nothing! It starts to-morrow, I tell you; and I want at least eighteen passengers for it."

"Ha, ha! a fine affair; it'll warm up the road," said the hostler.

"A coach like that which runs to Beaumont, hey? Flaming! painted red and gold to make Touchard burst with envy! It takes three horses! I have bought a mate for Rougeot, and Bichette will go finely in unicorn. Come, harness up!" added Pierrotin, glancing out towards the street, and stuffing the tobacco into his clay pipe. "I see a lady and lad over there with packages under their arms; they are coming to the Lion d'Argent, for they've turned a deaf ear to the coucous. Tiens, tiens! seems to me I know that lady for an old customer."

"You've often started empty, and arrived full," said his porter, still by way of consolation.

"But no parcels! Twenty good Gods! What a fate!"

And Pierrotin sat down on one of the huge stone posts which protected the walls of the building from the wheels of the coaches; but he did so with an anxious, reflective air that was not habitual with him.

This conversation, apparently insignificant, had stirred up cruel anxieties which were slumbering in his breast. What could there be to trouble the heart of Pierrotin in a fine new coach? To shine upon "the road," to rival the Touchards, to magnify his own line, to carry passengers who would compliment him on the conveniences due to the progress of coach-building, instead of having to listen to perpetual complaints of his "sabots" (tires of

enormous width), – such was Pierrotin's laudable ambition; but, carried away with the desire to outstrip his comrade on the line, hoping that the latter might some day retire and leave to him alone the transportation to Isle-Adam, he had gone too far. The coach was indeed ordered from Barry, Breilmann, and Company, coach-builders, who had just substituted square English springs for those called "swan-necks," and other old-fashioned French contrivances. But these hard and distrustful manufacturers would only deliver over the diligence in return for coin. Not particularly pleased to build a vehicle which would be difficult to sell if it remained upon their hands, these long-headed dealers declined to undertake it at all until Pierrotin had made a preliminary payment of two thousand francs. To satisfy this precautionary demand, Pierrotin had exhausted all his resources and all his credit. His wife, his father-in-law, and his friends had bled. This superb diligence he had been to see the evening before at the painter's; all it needed now was to be set a-rolling, but to make it roll, payment in full must, alas! be made.

Now, a thousand francs were lacking to Pierrotin, and where to get them he did not know. He was in debt to the master of the Lion d'Argent; he was in danger of his losing his two thousand francs already paid to the coach-builder, not counting five hundred for the mate to Rougeot, and three hundred for new harnesses, on which he had a three-months' credit. Driven by the fury of despair and the madness of vanity, he had just openly declared that the new coach was to start on the morrow.

By offering fifteen hundred francs, instead of the two thousand five hundred still due, he was in hopes that the softened carriage-builders would give him his coach. But after a few moments' meditation, his feelings led him to cry out aloud: —

"No! they're dogs! harpies! Suppose I appeal to Monsieur Moreau, the steward at Presles? he is such a kind man," thought Pierrotin, struck with a new idea. "Perhaps he would take my note for six months."

At this moment a footman in livery, carrying a leather portmanteau and coming from the Touchard establishment, where he had gone too late to secure places as far as Chambly, came up and said: —

"Are you Pierrotin?"

"Say on," replied Pierrotin.

"If you would wait a quarter of an hour, you could take my master. If not, I'll carry back the portmanteau and try to find some other conveyance."

"I'll wait two, three quarters, and throw a little in besides, my lad," said Pierrotin, eyeing the pretty leather trunk, well buckled, and bearing a brass plate with a coat of arms.

"Very good; then take this," said the valet, ridding his shoulder of the trunk, which Pierrotin lifted, weighed, and examined.

"Here," he said to his porter, "wrap it up carefully in soft hay and put it in the boot. There's no name upon it," he added.

"Monseigneur's arms are there," replied the valet.

"Monseigneur! Come and take a glass," said Pierrotin,

nodding toward the Cafe de l'Echiquier, whither he conducted the valet. "Waiter, two absinthes!" he said, as he entered. "Who is your master? and where is he going? I have never seen you before," said Pierrotin to the valet as they touched glasses.

"There's a good reason for that," said the footman. "My master only goes into your parts about once a year, and then in his own carriage. He prefers the valley d'Orge, where he has the most beautiful park in the neighborhood of Paris, a perfect Versailles, a family estate of which he bears the name. Don't you know Monsieur Moreau?"

"The steward of Presles?"

"Yes. Monsieur le Comte is going down to spend a couple of days with him."

"Ha! then I'm to carry Monsieur le Comte de Serizy!" cried the coach-proprietor.

"Yes, my land, neither more nor less. But listen! here's a special order. If you have any of the country neighbors in your coach you are not to call him Monsieur le comte; he wants to travel 'en cognito,' and told me to be sure to say he would pay a handsome pourboire if he was not recognized."

"So! Has this secret journey anything to do with the affair which Pere Leger, the farmer at the Moulineaux, came to Paris the other day to settle?"

"I don't know," replied the valet, "but the fat's in the fire. Last night I was sent to the stable to order the Daumont carriage to be ready to go to Presles at seven this morning. But when seven

o'clock came, Monsieur le comte countermanded it. Augustin, his valet de chambre, attributes the change to the visit of a lady who called last night, and again this morning, – he thought she came from the country."

"Could she have told him anything against Monsieur Moreau? – the best of men, the most honest of men, a king of men, hey! He might have made a deal more than he has out of his position, if he'd chosen; I can tell you that."

"Then he was foolish," answered the valet, sententiously.

"Is Monsieur le Serizy going to live at Presles at last?" asked Pierrotin; "for you know they have just repaired and refurnished the chateau. Do you think it is true he has already spent two hundred thousand francs upon it?"

"If you or I had half what he has spent upon it, you and I would be rich bourgeois. If Madame la comtesse goes there – ha! I tell you what! no more ease and comfort for the Moreaus," said the valet, with an air of mystery.

"He's a worthy man, Monsieur Moreau," remarked Pierrotin, thinking of the thousand francs he wanted to get from the steward. "He is a man who makes others work, but he doesn't cheapen what they do; and he gets all he can out of the land – for his master. Honest man! He often comes to Paris and gives me a good fee: he has lots of errands for me to do in Paris; sometimes three or four packages a day, – either from monsieur or madame. My bill for cartage alone comes to fifty francs a month, more or less. If madame does set up to be somebody, she's fond of her

children; and it is I who fetch them from school and take them back; and each time she gives me five francs, – a real great lady couldn't do better than that. And every time I have any one in the coach belonging to them or going to see them, I'm allowed to drive up to the chateau, – that's all right, isn't it?"

"They say Monsieur Moreau wasn't worth three thousand francs when Monsieur le comte made him steward of Presles," said the valet.

"Well, since 1806, there's seventeen years, and the man ought to have made something at any rate."

"True," said the valet, nodding. "Anyway, masters are very annoying; and I hope, for Moreau's sake, that he has made butter for his bread."

"I have often been to your house in the rue de la Chaussee d'Antin to carry baskets of game," said Pierrotin, "but I've never had the advantage, so far of seeing either monsieur or madame."

"Monsieur le comte is a good man," said the footman, confidentially. "But if he insists on your helping to keep up his cognito there's something in the wind. At any rate, so we think at the house; or else, why should he countermand the Daumont, – why travel in a coucou? A peer of France might afford to hire a cabriolet to himself, one would think."

"A cabriolet would cost him forty francs to go there and back; for let me tell you, if you don't know it, that road was only made for squirrels, – up-hill and down, down-hill and up!" said Pierrotin. "Peer of France or bourgeois, they are all looking

after the main chance, and saving their money. If this journey concerns Monsieur Moreau, faith, I'd be sorry any harm should come to him! Twenty good Gods! hadn't I better find some way of warning him? – for he's a truly good man, a kind man, a king of men, hey!"

"Pooh! Monsieur le comte thinks everything of Monsieur Moreau," replied the valet. "But let me give you a bit of good advice. Every man for himself in this world. We have enough to do to take care of ourselves. Do what Monsieur le comte asks you to do, and all the more because there's no trifling with him. Besides, to tell the truth, the count is generous. If you oblige him so far," said the valet, pointing half-way down his little finger, "he'll send you on as far as that," stretching out his arm to its full length.

This wise reflection, and the action that enforced it, had the effect, coming from a man who stood as high as second valet to the Comte de Serizy, of cooling the ardor of Pierrotin for the steward of Presles.

"Well, adieu, Monsieur Pierrotin," said the valet.

A glance rapidly cast on the life of the Comte de Serizy, and on that of his steward, is here necessary in order to fully understand the little drama now about to take place in Pierrotin's vehicle.

CHAPTER II. THE STEWARD IN DANGER

Monsieur Huguet de Serisy descends in a direct line from the famous president Huguet, ennobled under Francois I.

This family bears: party per pale or and sable, an orle counterchanged and two lozenges counterchanged, with: “i, semper melius eris,” – a motto which, together with the two distaffs taken as supporters, proves the modesty of the burgher families in the days when the Orders held their allotted places in the State; and the naivete of our ancient customs by the pun on “eris,” which word, combined with the “i” at the beginning and the final “s” in “melius,” forms the name (Serisy) of the estate from which the family take their title.

The father of the present count was president of a parliament before the Revolution. He himself a councillor of State at the Grand Council of 1787, when he was only twenty-two years of age, was even then distinguished for his admirable memoranda on delicate diplomatic matters. He did not emigrate during the Revolution, and spent that period on his estate of Serizy near Arpajon, where the respect in which his father was held protected him from all danger. After spending several years in taking care of the old president, who died in 1794, he was elected about that time to the Council of the Five Hundred, and accepted

those legislative functions to divert his mind from his grief. After the 18th Brumaire, Monsieur de Serizy became, like so many other of the old parliamentary families, an object of the First Consul's blandishment. He was appointed to the Council of State, and received one of the most disorganized departments of the government to reconstruct. This scion of an old historical family proved to be a very active wheel in the grand and magnificent organization which we owe to Napoleon.

The councillor of State was soon called from his particular administration to a ministry. Created count and senator by the Emperor, he was made proconsul to two kingdoms in succession. In 1806, when forty years of age, he married the sister of the ci-devant Marquis de Ronquerolles, the widow at twenty of Gaubert, one of the most illustrious of the Republican generals, who left her his whole property. This marriage, a suitable one in point of rank, doubled the already considerable fortune of the Comte de Serizy, who became through his wife the brother-in-law of the ci-devant Marquis de Rouvre, made count and chamberlain by the Emperor.

In 1814, weary with constant toil, the Comte de Serizy, whose shattered health required rest, resigned all his posts, left the department at the head of which the Emperor had placed him, and came to Paris, where Napoleon was compelled by the evidence of his eyes to admit that the count's illness was a valid excuse, though at first that *unfatiguable* master, who gave no heed to the fatigue of others, was disposed to consider Monsieur

de Serizy's action as a defection. Though the senator was never in disgrace, he was supposed to have reason to complain of Napoleon. Consequently, when the Bourbons returned, Louis XVIII., whom Monsieur de Serizy held to be his legitimate sovereign, treated the senator, now a peer of France, with the utmost confidence, placed him in charge of his private affairs, and appointed him one of his cabinet ministers. On the 20th of March, Monsieur de Serizy did not go to Ghent. He informed Napoleon that he remained faithful to the house of Bourbon; would not accept his peerage during the Hundred Days, and passed that period on his estate at Serizy.

After the second fall of the Emperor, he became once more a privy-councillor, was appointed vice-president of the Council of State, and liquidator, on behalf of France, of claims and indemnities demanded by foreign powers. Without personal assumption, without ambition even, he possessed great influence in public affairs. Nothing of importance was done without consulting him; but he never went to court, and was seldom seen in his own salons. This noble life, devoting itself from its very beginning to work, had ended by becoming a life of incessant toil. The count rose at all seasons by four o'clock in the morning, and worked till mid-day, attended to his functions as peer of France and vice-president of the Council of State in the afternoons, and went to bed at nine o'clock. In recognition of such labor, the King had made him a knight of his various Orders. Monsieur de Serizy had long worn the grand cross of the

Legion of honor; he also had the orders of the Golden Fleece, of Saint-Andrew of Russia, that of the Prussian Eagle, and nearly all the lesser Orders of the courts of Europe. No man was less obvious, or more useful in the political world than he. It is easy to understand that the world's honor, the fuss and feathers of public favor, the glories of success were indifferent to a man of this stamp; but no one, unless a priest, ever comes to life of this kind without some serious underlying reason. His conduct had its cause, and a cruel one.

In love with his wife before he married her, this passion had lasted through all the secret unhappiness of his marriage with a widow, – a woman mistress of herself before as well as after her second marriage, and who used her liberty all the more freely because her husband treated her with the indulgence of a mother for a spoilt child. His constant toil served him as shield and buckler against pangs of heart which he silenced with the care that diplomatists give to the keeping of secrets. He knew, moreover, how ridiculous was jealousy in the eyes of a society that would never have believed in the conjugal passion of an old statesman. How happened it that from the earliest days of his marriage his wife so fascinated him? Why did he suffer without resistance? How was it that he dared not resist? Why did he let the years go by and still hope on? By what means did this young and pretty and clever woman hold him in bondage?

The answer to all these questions would require a long history, which would injure our present tale. Let us only remark here

that the constant toil and grief of the count had unfortunately contributed not a little to deprive him of personal advantages very necessary to a man who attempts to struggle against dangerous comparisons. In fact, the most cruel of the count's secret sorrows was that of causing repugnance to his wife by a malady of the skin resulting solely from excessive labor. Kind, and always considerate of the countess, he allowed her to be mistress of herself and her home. She received all Paris; she went into the country; she returned from it precisely as though she were still a widow. He took care of her fortune and supplied her luxury as a steward might have done. The countess had the utmost respect for her husband. She even admired his turn of mind; she knew how to make him happy by approbation; she could do what she pleased with him by simply going to his study and talking for an hour with him. Like the great seigneurs of the olden time, the count protected his wife so loyally that a single word of disrespect said of her would have been to him an unpardonable injury. The world admired him for this; and Madame de Serizy owed much to it. Any other woman, even though she came of a family as distinguished as the Ronquerolles, might have found herself degraded in public opinion. The countess was ungrateful, but she mingled a charm with her ingratitude. From time to time she shed a balm upon the wounds of her husband's heart.

Let us now explain the meaning of this sudden journey, and the incognito maintained by a minister of State.

A rich farmer of Beaumont-sur-Oise, named Leger, leased

and cultivated a farm, the fields of which projected into and greatly injured the magnificent estate of the Comte de Serizy, called Presles. This farm belonged to a burgher of Beaumont-sur-Oise, named Margueron. The lease made to Leger in 1799, at a time when the great advance of agriculture was not foreseen, was about to expire, and the owner of the farm refused all offers from Leger to renew the lease. For some time past, Monsieur de Serizy, wishing to rid himself of the annoyances and petty disputes caused by the inclosure of these fields within his land, had desired to buy the farm, having heard that Monsieur Margueron's chief ambition was to have his only son, then a mere tax-gatherer, made special collector of finances at Beaumont. The farmer, who knew he could sell the fields piecemeal to the count at a high price, was ready to pay Margueron even more than he expected from the count.

Thus matters stood when, two days earlier than that of which we write, Monsieur de Serizy, anxious to end the matter, sent for his notary, Alexandre Crottat, and his lawyer, Derville, to examine into all the circumstances of the affair. Though Derville and Crottat threw some doubt on the zeal of the count's steward (a disturbing letter from whom had led to the consultation), Monsieur de Serizy defended Moreau, who, he said, had served him faithfully for seventeen years.

"Very well!" said Derville, "then I advise your Excellency to go to Presles yourself, and invite this Margueron to dinner. Crottat will send his head-clerk with a deed of sale drawn up,

leaving only the necessary lines for description of property and titles in blank. Your Excellency should take with you part of the purchase money in a check on the Bank of France, not forgetting the appointment of the son to the collectorship. If you don't settle the thing at once that farm will slip through your fingers. You don't know, Monsieur le comte, the trickery of these peasants. Peasants against diplomat, and the diplomat succumbs."

Crottat agreed in this advice, which the count, if we may judge by the valet's statements to Pierrotin, had adopted. The preceding evening he had sent Moreau a line by the diligence to Beaumont, telling him to invite Margueron to dinner in order that they might then and there close the purchase of the farm of Moulineaux.

Before this matter came up, the count had already ordered the chateau of Presles to be restored and refurnished, and for the last year, Grindot, an architect then in fashion, was in the habit of making a weekly visit. So, while concluding his purchase of the farm, Monsieur de Serizy also intended to examine the work of restoration and the effect of the new furniture. He intended all this to be a surprise to his wife when he brought her to Presles, and with this idea in his mind, he had put some personal pride and self-love into the work. How came it therefore that the count, who intended in the evening to drive to Presles openly in his own carriage, should be starting early the next morning incognito in Pierrotin's coucou?

Here a few words on the life of the steward Moreau become indispensable.

Moreau, steward of the state of Presles, was the son of a provincial attorney who became during the Revolution syndic-attorney at Versailles. In that position, Moreau the father had been the means of almost saving both the lives and property of the Serizys, father and son. Citizen Moreau belonged to the Danton party; Robespierre, implacable in his hatreds, pursued him, discovered him, and finally had him executed at Versailles. Moreau the son, heir to the doctrines and friendships of his father, was concerned in one of the conspiracies which assailed the First Consul on his accession to power. At this crisis, Monsieur de Serizy, anxious to pay his debt of gratitude, enabled Moreau, lying under sentence of death, to make his escape; in 1804 he asked for his pardon, obtained it, offered him first a place in his government office, and finally took him as private secretary for his own affairs.

Some time after the marriage of his patron Moreau fell in love with the countess's waiting-woman and married her. To avoid the annoyances of the false position in which this marriage placed him (more than one example of which could be seen at the imperial court), Moreau asked the count to give him the management of the Presles estate, where his wife could play the lady in a country region, and neither of them would be made to suffer from wounded self-love. The count wanted a trustworthy man at Presles, for his wife preferred Serizy, an estate only fifteen miles from Paris. For three or four years Moreau had held the key of the count's affairs; he was intelligent, and before the

Revolution he had studied law in his father's office; so Monsieur de Serizy granted his request.

"You can never advance in life," he said to Moreau, "for you have broken your neck; but you can be happy, and I will take care that you are so."

He gave Moreau a salary of three thousand francs and his residence in a charming lodge near the chateau, all the wood he needed from the timber that was cut on the estate, oats, hay, and straw for two horses, and a right to whatever he wanted of the produce of the gardens. A sub-prefect is not as well provided for.

During the first eight years of his stewardship, Moreau managed the estate conscientiously; he took an interest in it. The count, coming down now and then to examine the property, pass judgment on what had been done, and decide on new purchases, was struck with Moreau's evident loyalty, and showed his satisfaction by liberal gifts.

But after the birth of Moreau's third child, a daughter, he felt himself so securely settled in all his comforts at Presles that he ceased to attribute to Monsieur de Serizy those enormous advantages. About the year 1816, the steward, who until then had only taken what he needed for his own use from the estate, accepted a sum of twenty-five thousand francs from a wood-merchant as an inducement to lease to the latter, for twelve years, the cutting of all the timber. Moreau argued this: he could have no pension; he was the father of a family; the count really owed him that sum as a gift after ten years' management; already the

legitimate possessor of sixty thousand francs in savings, if he added this sum to that, he could buy a farm worth a hundred and twenty-five thousand francs in Champagne, a township just above Isle-Adam, on the right bank of the Oise. Political events prevented both the count and the neighboring country-people from becoming aware of this investment, which was made in the name of Madame Moreau, who was understood to have inherited property from an aunt of her father.

As soon as the steward had tasted the delightful fruit of the possession of the property, he began, all the while maintaining toward the world an appearance of the utmost integrity, to lose no occasion of increasing his fortune clandestinely; the interests of his three children served as a poultice to the wounds of his honor. Nevertheless, we ought in justice to say that while he accepted casks of wine, and took care of himself in all the purchases that he made for the count, yet according to the terms of the Code he remained an honest man, and no proof could have been found to justify an accusation against him. According to the jurisprudence of the least thieving cook in Paris, he shared with the count in the profits due to his own capable management. This manner of swelling his fortune was simply a case of conscience, that was all. Alert, and thoroughly understanding the count's interests, Moreau watched for opportunities to make good purchases all the more eagerly, because he gained a larger percentage on them. Presles returned a revenue of seventy thousand francs net. It was a saying of the country-side for a circuit of thirty miles: —

"Monsieur de Serizy has a second self in Moreau."

Being a prudent man, Moreau invested yearly, after 1817, both his profits and his salary on the Grand Livre, piling up his heap with the utmost secrecy. He often refused proposals on the plea of want of money; and he played the poor man so successfully with the count that the latter gave him the means to send both his sons to the school Henri IV. At the present moment Moreau was worth one hundred and twenty thousand francs of capital invested in the Consolidated thirds, now paying five per cent, and quoted at eighty francs. These carefully hidden one hundred and twenty thousand francs, and his farm at Champagne, enlarged by subsequent purchases, amounted to a fortune of about two hundred and eighty thousand francs, giving him an income of some sixteen thousand.

Such was the position of the steward at the time when the Comte de Serizy desired to purchase the farm of Moulineaux, – the ownership of which was indispensable to his comfort. This farm consisted of ninety-six parcels of land bordering the estate of Presles, and frequently running into it, producing the most annoying discussions as to the trimming of hedges and ditches and the cutting of trees. Any other than a cabinet minister would probably have had scores of lawsuits on his hands. Pere Leger only wished to buy the property in order to sell to the count at a handsome advance. In order to secure the exorbitant sum on which his mind was set, the farmer had long endeavored to come to an understanding with Moreau. Impelled by circumstances, he

had, only three days before this critical Sunday, had a talk with the steward in the open field, and proved to him clearly that he (Moreau) could make the count invest his money at two and a half per cent, and thus appear to serve his patron's interests, while he himself pocketed forty thousand francs which Leger offered him to bring about the transaction.

"I tell you what," said the steward to his wife, as he went to bed that night, "if I make fifty thousand francs out of the Moulineaux affair, – and I certainly shall, for the count will give me ten thousand as a fee, – we'll retire to Isle-Adam and live in the Pavillon de Nogent."

This "pavillon" was a charming place, originally built by the Prince de Conti for a mistress, and in it every convenience and luxury had been placed.

"That will suit me," said his wife. "The Dutchman who lives there has put it in good order, and now that he is obliged to return to India, he would probably let us have it for thirty thousand francs."

"We shall be close to Champagne," said Moreau. "I am in hopes of buying the farm and mill of Mours for a hundred thousand francs. That would give us ten thousand a year in rentals. Nogent is one of the most delightful residences in the valley; and we should still have an income of ten thousand from the Grand-Livre."

"But why don't you ask for the post of juge-de-paix at Isle-Adam? That would give us influence, and fifteen hundred a year

salary."

"Well, I did think of it."

With these plans in mind, Moreau, as soon as he heard from the count that he was coming to Presles, and wished him to invite Margueron to dinner on Saturday, sent off an express to the count's head-valet, inclosing a letter to his master, which the messenger failed to deliver before Monsieur de Serizy retired at his usually early hour. Augustin, however, placed it, according to custom in such cases, on his master's desk. In this letter Moreau begged the count not to trouble himself to come down, but to trust entirely to him. He added that Margueron was no longer willing to sell the whole in one block, and talked of cutting the farm up into a number of smaller lots. It was necessary to circumvent this plan, and perhaps, added Moreau, it might be best to employ a third party to make the purchase.

Everybody has enemies in this life. Now the steward and his wife had wounded the feelings of a retired army officer, Monsieur de Reybert, and his wife, who were living near Presles. From speeches like pin-pricks, matters had advanced to dagger-thrusts. Monsieur de Reybert breathed vengeance. He was determined to make Moreau lose his situation and gain it himself. The two ideas were twins. Thus the proceedings of the steward, spied upon for two years, were no secret to Reybert. The same conveyance that took Moreau's letter to the count conveyed Madame de Reybert, whom her husband despatched to Paris. There she asked with such earnestness to see the count that

although she was sent away at nine o'clock, he having then gone to bed, she was ushered into his study the next morning at seven.

"Monsieur," she said to the cabinet-minister, "we are incapable, my husband and I, of writing anonymous letters, therefore I have come to see you in person. I am Madame de Reybert, nee de Corroy. My husband is a retired officer, with a pension of six hundred francs, and we live at Presles, where your steward has offered us insult after insult, although we are persons of good station. Monsieur de Reybert, who is not an intriguing man, far from it, is a captain of artillery, retired in 1816, having served twenty years, – always at a distance from the Emperor, Monsieur le comte. You know of course how difficult it is for soldiers who are not under the eye of their master to obtain promotion, – not counting that the integrity and frankness of Monsieur de Reybert were displeasing to his superiors. My husband has watched your steward for the last three years, being aware of his dishonesty and intending to have him lose his place. We are, as you see, quite frank with you. Moreau has made us his enemies, and we have watched him. I have come to tell you that you are being tricked in the purchase of the Moulineaux farm. They mean to get an extra hundred thousand francs out of you, which are to be divided between the notary, the farmer Leger, and Moreau. You have written Moreau to invite Margueron, and you are going to Presles to-day; but Margueron will be ill, and Leger is so certain of buying the farm that he is now in Paris to draw the money. If we have enlightened you as to what is going

on, and if you want an upright steward you will take my husband; though noble, he will serve you as he has served the State. Your steward has made a fortune of two hundred and fifty thousand francs out of his place; he is not to be pitied therefore."

The count thanked Madame de Reybert coldly, bestowing upon her the holy-water of courts, for he despised backbiting; but for all that, he remembered Derville's doubts, and felt inwardly shaken. Just then he saw his steward's letter and read it. In its assurances of devotion and its respectful reproaches for the distrust implied in wishing to negotiate the purchase for himself, he read the truth.

"Corruption has come to him with fortune, – as it always does!" he said to himself.

The count then made several inquiries of Madame de Reybert, less to obtain information than to gain time to observe her; and he wrote a short note to his notary telling him not to send his head-clerk to Presles as requested, but to come there himself in time for dinner.

"Though Monsieur le comte," said Madame de Reybert in conclusion, "may have judged me unfavorably for the step I have taken unknown to my husband, he ought to be convinced that we have obtained this information about his steward in a natural and honorable manner; the most sensitive conscience cannot take exception to it."

So saying, Madame de Reybert, nee de Corroy, stood erect as a pike-staff. She presented to the rapid investigation of the count

a face seamed with the small-pox like a colander with holes, a flat, spare figure, two light and eager eyes, fair hair plastered down upon an anxious forehead, a small drawn-bonnet of faded green taffetas lined with pink, a white gown with violet spots, and leather shoes. The count recognized the wife of some poor, half-pay captain, a puritan, subscribing no doubt to the "Courrier Francais," earnest in virtue, but aware of the comfort of a good situation and eagerly coveting it.

"You say your husband has a pension of six hundred francs," he said, replying to his own thoughts, and not to the remark Madame de Reybert had just made.

"Yes, monsieur."

"You were born a Corroy?"

"Yes, monsieur, – a noble family of Metz, where my husband belongs."

"In what regiment did Monsieur de Reybert serve?"

"The 7th artillery."

"Good!" said the count, writing down the number.

He had thought at one time of giving the management of the estate to some retired army officer, about whom he could obtain exact information from the minister of war.

"Madame," he resumed, ringing for his valet, "return to Presles, this afternoon with my notary, who is going down there for dinner, and to whom I have recommended you. Here is his address. I am going myself secretly to Presles, and will send for Monsieur de Reybert to come and speak to me."

It will thus be seen that Monsieur de Serizy's journey by a public conveyance, and the injunction conveyed by the valet to conceal his name and rank had not unnecessarily alarmed Pierrotin. That worthy had just forebodings of a danger which was about to swoop down upon one of his best customers.

CHAPTER III. THE TRAVELLERS

As Pierrotin issued from the Cafe de l'Echiquier, after treating the valet, he saw in the gate-way of the Lion d'Argent the lady and the young man in whom his perspicacity at once detected customers, for the lady with outstretched neck and anxious face was evidently looking for him. She was dressed in a black-silk gown that was dyed, a brown bonnet, an old French cashmere shawl, raw-silk stockings, and low shoes; and in her hand she carried a straw bag and a blue umbrella. This woman, who had once been beautiful, seemed to be about forty years of age; but her blue eyes, deprived of the fire which happiness puts there, told plainly that she had long renounced the world. Her dress, as well as her whole air and demeanor, indicated a mother wholly devoted to her household and her son. If the strings of her bonnet were faded, the shape betrayed that it was several years old. The shawl was fastened by a broken needle converted into a pin by a bead of sealing-wax. She was waiting impatiently for Pierrotin, wishing to recommend to his special care her son, who was doubtless travelling for the first time, and with whom she had come to the coach-office as much from doubt of his ability as from maternal affection.

This mother was in every way completed by the son, so that the son would not be understood without the mother. If the mother condemned herself to mended gloves, the son wore an olive-

green coat with sleeves too short for him, proving that he had grown, and might grow still more, like other adults of eighteen or nineteen years of age. The blue trousers, mended by his mother, presented to the eye a brighter patch of color when the coat-tails maliciously parted behind him.

"Don't rub your gloves that way, you'll spoil them," she was saying as Pierrotin appeared. "Is this the conductor? Ah! Pierrotin, is it you?" she exclaimed, leaving her son and taking the coachman apart a few steps.

"I hope you're well, Madame Clapart," he replied, with an air that expressed both respect and familiarity.

"Yes, Pierrotin, very well. Please take good care of my Oscar; he is travelling alone for the first time."

"Oh! so he is going alone to Monsieur Moreau!" cried Pierrotin, for the purpose of finding out whether he were really going there.

"Yes," said the mother.

"Then Madame Moreau is willing?" returned Pierrotin, with a sly look.

"Ah!" said the mother, "it will not be all roses for him, poor child! But his future absolutely requires that I should send him."

This answer struck Pierrotin, who hesitated to confide his fears for the steward to Madame Clapart, while she, on her part, was afraid of injuring her boy if she asked Pierrotin for a care which might have transformed him into a mentor. During this short deliberation, which was ostensibly covered by a few

phrases as to the weather, the journey, and the stopping-places along the road, we will ourselves explain what were the ties that united Madame Clapart with Pierrotin, and authorized the two confidential remarks which they have just exchanged.

Often – that is to say, three or four times a month – Pierrotin, on his way to Paris, would find the steward on the road near La Cave. As soon as the vehicle came up, Moreau would sign to a gardener, who, with Pierrotin's help, would put upon the coach either one or two baskets containing the fruits and vegetables of the season, chickens, eggs, butter, and game. The steward always paid the carriage and Pierrotin's fee, adding the money necessary to pay the toll at the barriere, if the baskets contained anything dutiable. These baskets, hampers, or packages, were never directed to any one. On the first occasion, which served for all others, the steward had given Madame Clapart's address by word of mouth to the discreet Pierrotin, requesting him never to deliver to others the precious packages. Pierrotin, impressed with the idea of an intrigue between the steward and some pretty girl, had gone as directed to number 7 rue de la Cerisaie, in the Arsenal quarter, and had there found the Madame Clapart just portrayed, instead of the young and beautiful creature he expected to find.

The drivers of public conveyances and carriers are called by their business to enter many homes, and to be cognizant of many secrets; but social accident, that sub-providence, having willed that they be without education and devoid of the talent of

observation, it follows that they are not dangerous. Nevertheless, at the end of a few months, Pierrotin was puzzled to explain the exact relations of Monsieur Moreau and Madame Clapart from what he saw of the household in the rue de la Cerisaie. Though lodgings were not dear at that time in the Arsenal quarter, Madame Clapart lived on a third floor at the end of a court-yard, in a house which was formerly that of a great family, in the days when the higher nobility of the kingdom lived on the ancient site of the Palais des Tournelles and the hotel Saint-Paul. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, the great seigneurs divided among themselves these vast spaces, once occupied by the gardens of the kings of France, as indicated by the present names of the streets, – Cerisaie, Beautreillis, des Lions, etc. Madame Clapart's apartment, which was panelled throughout with ancient carvings, consisted of three connecting rooms, a dining-room, salon, and bedroom. Above it was the kitchen, and a bedroom for Oscar. Opposite to the entrance, on what is called in Paris "le carre," – that is, the square landing, – was the door of a back room, opening, on every floor, into a sort of tower built of rough stone, in which was also the well for the staircase. This was the room in which Moreau slept whenever he went to Paris.

Pierrotin had seen in the first room, where he deposited the hampers, six wooden chairs with straw seats, a table, and a sideboard; at the windows, discolored curtains. Later, when he entered the salon, he noticed some old Empire furniture, now shabby; but only as much as all proprietors exact to secure their

rent. Pierrotin judged of the bedroom by the salon and dining-room. The wood-work, painted coarsely of a reddish white, which thickened and blurred the mouldings and figurines, far from being ornamental, was distressing to the eye. The floors, never waxed, were of that gray tone we see in boarding-schools. When Pierrotin came upon Monsieur and Madame Clapart at their meals he saw that their china, glass, and all other little articles betrayed the utmost poverty; and yet, though the chipped and mended dishes and tureens were those of the poorest families and provoked pity, the forks and spoons were of silver.

Monsieur Clapart, clothed in a shabby surtout, his feet in broken slippers, always wore green spectacles, and exhibited, whenever he removed his shabby cap of a bygone period, a pointed skull, from the top of which trailed a few dirty filaments which even a poet could scarcely call hair. This man, of wan complexion, seemed timorous, but withal tyrannical.

In this dreary apartment, which faced the north and had no other outlook than to a vine on the opposite wall and a well in the corner of the yard, Madame Clapart bore herself with the airs of a queen, and moved like a woman unaccustomed to go anywhere on foot. Often, while thanking Pierrotin, she gave him glances which would have touched to pity an intelligent observer; from time to time she would slip a twelve-sous piece into his hand, and then her voice was charming. Pierrotin had never seen Oscar, for the reason that the boy was always in school at the time his business took him to the house.

Here is the sad story which Pierrotin could never have discovered, even by asking for information, as he sometimes did, from the portress of the house; for that individual knew nothing beyond the fact that the Claparts paid a rent of two hundred and fifty francs a year, had no servant but a charwoman who came daily for a few hours in the morning, that Madame Clapart did some of her smaller washing herself, and paid the postage on her letters daily, being apparently unable to let the sum accumulate.

There does not exist, or rather, there seldom exists, a criminal who is wholly criminal. Neither do we ever meet with a dishonest nature which is completely dishonest. It is possible for a man to cheat his master to his own advantage, or rake in for himself alone all the hay in the manger, but, even while laying up capital by actions more or less illicit, there are few men who never do good ones. If only from self-love, curiosity, or by way of variety, or by chance, every man has his moment of beneficence; he may call it his error, he may never do it again, but he sacrifices to Goodness, as the most surly man sacrifices to the Graces once or twice in his life. If Moreau's faults can ever be excused, it might be on the score of his persistent kindness in succoring a woman of whose favors he had once been proud, and in whose house he was hidden when in peril of his life.

This woman, celebrated under the Directory for her liaison with one of the five kings of that reign, married, through that all-powerful protection, a purveyor who was making his millions out of the government, and whom Napoleon ruined in 1802. This

man, named Husson, became insane through his sudden fall from opulence to poverty; he flung himself into the Seine, leaving the beautiful Madame Husson pregnant. Moreau, very intimately allied with Madame Husson, was at that time condemned to death; he was unable therefore to marry the widow, being forced to leave France. Madame Husson, then twenty-two years old, married in her deep distress a government clerk named Clapart, aged twenty-seven, who was said to be a rising man. At that period of our history, government clerks were apt to become persons of importance; for Napoleon was ever on the lookout for capacity. But Clapart, though endowed by nature with a certain coarse beauty, proved to have no intelligence. Thinking Madame Husson very rich, he feigned a great passion for her, and was simply saddled with the impossibility of satisfying either then or in the future the wants she had acquired in a life of opulence. He filled, very poorly, a place in the Treasury that gave him a salary of eighteen hundred francs; which was all the new household had to live on. When Moreau returned to France as the secretary of the Comte de Serizy he heard of Madame Husson's pitiable condition, and he was able, before his own marriage, to get her an appointment as head-waiting-woman to Madame Mere, the Emperor's mother. But in spite of that powerful protection Clapart was never promoted; his incapacity was too apparent.

Ruined in 1815 by the fall of the Empire, the brilliant Aspasia of the Directory had no other resources than Clapart's salary of twelve hundred francs from a clerkship obtained for him through

the Comte de Serizy. Moreau, the only protector of a woman whom he had known in possession of millions, obtained a half-scholarship for her son, Oscar Husson, at the school of Henri IV.; and he sent her regularly, by Pierrotin, such supplies from the estate at Presles as he could decently offer to a household in distress.

Oscar was the whole life and all the future of his mother. The poor woman could now be reproached with no other fault than her exaggerated tenderness for her boy, – the bete-noire of his step-father. Oscar was, unfortunately, endowed by nature with a foolishness his mother did not perceive, in spite of the step-father's sarcasms. This foolishness – or, to speak more specifically, this overweening conceit – so troubled Monsieur Moreau that he begged Madame Clapart to send the boy down to him for a month that he might study his character, and find out what career he was fit for. Moreau was really thinking of some day proposing Oscar to the count as his successor.

But to give to the devil and to God what respectively belongs to them, perhaps it would be well to show the causes of Oscar Husson's silly self-conceit, premising that he was born in the household of Madame Mere. During his early childhood his eyes were dazzled by imperial splendors. His pliant imagination retained the impression of those gorgeous scenes, and nursed the images of a golden time of pleasure in hopes of recovering them. The natural boastfulness of school-boys (possessed of a desire to outshine their mates) resting on these memories of his

childhood was developed in him beyond all measure. It may also have been that his mother at home dwelt too fondly on the days when she herself was a queen in Directorial Paris. At any rate, Oscar, who was now leaving school, had been made to bear many humiliations which the paying pupils put upon those who hold scholarships, unless the scholars are able to impose respect by superior physical ability.

This mixture of former splendor now departed, of beauty gone, of blind maternal love, of sufferings heroically borne, made the mother one of those pathetic figures which catch the eye of many an observer in Paris.

Incapable, naturally, of understanding the real attachment of Moreau to this woman, or that of the woman for the man she had saved in 1797, now her only friend, Pierrotin did not think it best to communicate the suspicion that had entered his head as to some danger which was threatening Moreau. The valet's speech, "We have enough to do in this world to look after ourselves," returned to his mind, and with it came that sentiment of obedience to what he called the "chefs de file," – the front-rank men in war, and men of rank in peace. Besides, just now Pierrotin's head was as full of his own stings as there are five-franc pieces in a thousand francs. So that the "Very good, madame," "Certainly, madame," with which he replied to the poor mother, to whom a trip of twenty miles appeared a journey, showed plainly that he desired to get away from her useless and prolix instructions.

"You will be sure to place the packages so that they cannot get wet if the weather should happen to change."

"I've a hood," replied Pierrotin. "Besides, see, madame, with what care they are being placed."

"Oscar, don't stay more than two weeks, no matter how much they may ask you," continued Madame Clapart, returning to her son. "You can't please Madame Moreau, whatever you do; besides, you must be home by the end of September. We are to go to Belleville, you know, to your uncle Cardot."

"Yes, mamma."

"Above all," she said, in a low voice, "be sure never to speak about servants; keep thinking all the time that Madame Moreau was once a waiting-maid."

"Yes, mamma."

Oscar, like all youths whose vanity is excessively ticklish, seemed annoyed at being lectured on the threshold of the Lion d'Argent.

"Well, now good-bye, mamma. We shall start soon; there's the horse all harnessed."

The mother, forgetting that she was in the open street, embraced her Oscar, and said, smiling, as she took a little roll from her basket: —

"Tiens! you were forgetting your roll and the chocolate! My child, once more, I repeat, don't take anything at the inns; they'd make you pay for the slightest thing ten times what it is worth."

Oscar would fain have seen his mother farther off as she

stuffed the bread and chocolate into his pocket. The scene had two witnesses, – two young men a few years older than Oscar, better dressed than he, without a mother hanging on to them, whose actions, dress, and ways all betokened that complete independence which is the one desire of a lad still tied to his mother's apron-strings.

"He said *mamma*!" cried one of the new-comers, laughing.

The words reached Oscar's ears and drove him to say, "Good-bye, mother!" in a tone of terrible impatience.

Let us admit that Madame Clapart spoke too loudly, and seemed to wish to show to those around them her tenderness for the boy.

"What is the matter with you, Oscar?" asked the poor hurt woman. "I don't know what to make of you," she added in a severe tone, fancying herself able to inspire him with respect, – a great mistake made by those who spoil their children. "Listen, my Oscar," she said, resuming at once her tender voice, "you have a propensity to talk, and to tell all you know, and all that you don't know; and you do it to show off, with the foolish vanity of a mere lad. Now, I repeat, endeavor to keep your tongue in check. You are not sufficiently advanced in life, my treasure, to be able to judge of the persons with whom you may be thrown; and there is nothing more dangerous than to talk in public conveyances. Besides, in a diligence well-bred persons always keep silence."

The two young men, who seemed to have walked to the farther end of the establishment, here returned, making their boot-heels

tap upon the paved passage of the porte-cochere. They might have heard the whole of this maternal homily. So, in order to rid himself of his mother, Oscar had recourse to an heroic measure, which proved how vanity stimulates the intellect.

"Mamma," he said, "you are standing in a draught, and you may take cold. Besides, I am going to get into the coach."

The lad must have touched some tender spot, for his mother caught him to her bosom, kissed him as if he were starting upon a long journey, and went with him to the vehicle with tears in her eyes.

"Don't forget to give five francs to the servants when you come away," she said; "write me three times at least during the fifteen days; behave properly, and remember all that I have told you. You have linen enough; don't send any to the wash. And above all, remember Monsieur Moreau's kindness; mind him as you would a father, and follow his advice."

As he got into the coach, Oscar's blue woollen stockings became visible, through the action of his trousers which drew up suddenly, also the new patch in the said trousers was seen, through the parting of his coat-tails. The smiles of the two young men, on whom these signs of an honorable indigence were not lost, were so many fresh wounds to the lad's vanity.

"The first place was engaged for Oscar," said the mother to Pierrotin. "Take the back seat," she said to the boy, looking fondly at him with a loving smile.

Oh! how Oscar regretted that trouble and sorrow had

destroyed his mother's beauty, and that poverty and self-sacrifice prevented her from being better dressed! One of the young men, the one who wore top-boots and spurs, nudged the other to make him take notice of Oscar's mother, and the other twirled his moustache with a gesture which signified, —

"Rather pretty figure!"

"How shall I ever get rid of mamma?" thought Oscar.

"What's the matter?" asked Madame Clapart.

Oscar pretended not to hear, the monster! Perhaps Madame Clapart was lacking in tact under the circumstances; but all absorbing sentiments have so much egotism!

"Georges, do you like children when travelling?" asked one young man of the other.

"Yes, my good Amaury, if they are weaned, and are named Oscar, and have chocolate."

These speeches were uttered in half-tones to allow Oscar to hear them or not hear them as he chose; his countenance was to be the weather-gauge by which the other young traveller could judge how much fun he might be able to get out of the lad during the journey. Oscar chose not to hear. He looked to see if his mother, who weighed upon him like a nightmare, was still there, for he felt that she loved him too well to leave him so quickly. Not only did he involuntarily compare the dress of his travelling companion with his own, but he felt that his mother's toilet counted for much in the smiles of the two young men.

"If they would only take themselves off!" he said to himself.

Instead of that, Amaury remarked to Georges, giving a tap with his cane to the heavy wheel of the coucou:

"And so, my friend, you are really going to trust your future to this fragile bark?"

"I must," replied Georges, in a tone of fatalism.

Oscar gave a sigh as he remarked the jaunty manner in which his companion's hat was stuck on one ear for the purpose of showing a magnificent head of blond hair beautifully brushed and curled; while he, by order of his step-father, had his black hair cut like a clothes-brush across the forehead, and clipped, like a soldier's, close to the head. The face of the vain lad was round and chubby and bright with the hues of health, while that of his fellow-traveller was long, and delicate, and pale. The forehead of the latter was broad, and his chest filled out a waistcoat of cashmere pattern. As Oscar admired the tight-fitting iron-gray trousers and the overcoat with its frogs and olives clasping the waist, it seemed to him that this romantic-looking stranger, gifted with such advantages, insulted him by his superiority, just as an ugly woman feels injured by the mere sight of a pretty one. The click of the stranger's boot-heels offended his taste and echoed in his heart. He felt as hampered by his own clothes (made no doubt at home out of those of his step-father) as that envied young man seemed at ease in his.

"That fellow must have heaps of francs in his trousers pocket," thought Oscar.

The young man turned round. What were Oscar's feelings

on beholding a gold chain round his neck, at the end of which no doubt was a gold watch! From that moment the young man assumed, in Oscar's eyes, the proportions of a personage.

Living in the rue de la Cerisaie since 1815, taken to and from school by his step-father, Oscar had no other points of comparison since his adolescence than the poverty-stricken household of his mother. Brought up strictly, by Moreau's advice, he seldom went to the theatre, and then to nothing better than the Ambigu-Comique, where his eyes could see little elegance, if indeed the eyes of a child riveted on a melodrama were likely to examine the audience. His step-father still wore, after the fashion of the Empire, his watch in the fob of his trousers, from which there depended over his abdomen a heavy gold chain, ending in a bunch of heterogeneous ornaments, seals, and a watch-key with a round top and flat sides, on which was a landscape in mosaic. Oscar, who considered that old-fashioned finery as the "ne plus ultra" of adornment, was bewildered by the present revelation of superior and negligent elegance. The young man exhibited, offensively, a pair of spotless gloves, and seemed to wish to dazzle Oscar by twirling with much grace a gold-headed switch cane.

Oscar had reached that last quarter of adolescence when little things cause immense joys and immense miseries, – a period when youth prefers misfortune to a ridiculous suit of clothes, and caring nothing for the real interests of life, torments itself about frivolities, about neckcloths, and the passionate desire to appear

a man. Then the young fellow swells himself out; his swagger is all the more portentous because it is exercised on nothings. Yet if he envies a fool who is elegantly dressed, he is also capable of enthusiasm over talent, and of genuine admiration for genius. Such defects as these, when they have no root in the heart, prove only the exuberance of sap, – the richness of the youthful imagination. That a lad of nineteen, an only child, kept severely at home by poverty, adored by a mother who put upon herself all privations for his sake, should be moved to envy by a young man of twenty-two in a frogged surtout-coat silk-lined, a waist-coat of fancy cashmere, and a cravat slipped through a ring of the worse taste, is nothing more than a peccadillo committed in all ranks of social life by inferiors who envy those that seem beyond them. Men of genius themselves succumb to this primitive passion. Did not Rousseau admire Ventura and Bacle?

But Oscar passed from peccadillo to evil feelings. He felt humiliated; he was angry with the youth he envied, and there rose in his heart a secret desire to show openly that he himself was as good as the object of his envy.

The two young fellows continued to walk up and own from the gate to the stables, and from the stables to the gate. Each time they turned they looked at Oscar curled up in his corner of the coucou. Oscar, persuaded that their jokes and laughter concerned himself, affected the utmost indifference. He began to hum the chorus of a song lately brought into vogue by the liberals, which ended with the words, "'Tis Voltaire's fault, 'tis Rousseau's fault."

"Tiens! perhaps he is one of the chorus at the Opera," said Amaury.

This exasperated Oscar, who bounded up, pulled out the wooden "back," and called to Pierrotin: —

"When do we start?"

"Presently," said that functionary, who was standing, whip in hand, and gazing toward the rue d'Enghien.

At this moment the scene was enlivened by the arrival of a young man accompanied by a true "gamin," who was followed by a porter dragging a hand-cart. The young man came up to Pierrotin and spoke to him confidentially, on which the latter nodded his head, and called to his own porter. The man ran out and helped to unload the little hand-cart, which contained, besides two trunks, buckets, brushes, boxes of singular shape, and an infinity of packages and utensils which the youngest of the new-comers, who had climbed into the imperial, stowed away with such celerity that Oscar, who happened to be smiling at his mother, now standing on the other side of the street, saw none of the paraphernalia which might have revealed to him the profession of his new travelling companion.

The gamin, who must have been sixteen years of age, wore a gray blouse buckled round his waist by a polished leather belt. His cap, jauntily perched on the side of his head, seemed the sign of a merry nature, and so did the picturesque disorder of the curly brown hair which fell upon his shoulders. A black-silk cravat drew a line round his very white neck, and added to the vivacity

of his bright gray eyes. The animation of his brown and rosy face, the moulding of his rather large lips, the ears detached from his head, his slightly turned-up nose, – in fact, all the details of his face proclaimed the lively spirit of a Figaro, and the careless gayety of youth, while the vivacity of his gesture and his mocking eye revealed an intellect already developed by the practice of a profession adopted very early in life. As he had already some claims to personal value, this child, made man by Art or by vocation, seemed indifferent to the question of costume; for he looked at his boots, which had not been polished, with a quizzical air, and searched for the spots on his brown Holland trousers less to remove them than to see their effect.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.