

# HONORÉ DE BALZAC

VENDETTA

Оноре де Бальзак

**Vendetta**

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## Vendetta

### CHAPTER I. PROLOGUE

In the year 1800, toward the close of October, a foreigner, accompanied by a woman and a little girl, was standing for a long time in front of the palace of the Tuileries, near the ruins of a house recently pulled down, at the point where in our day the wing begins which was intended to unite the chateau of Catherine de Medici with the Louvre of the Valois.

The man stood there with folded arms and a bowed head, which he sometimes raised to look alternately at the consular palace and at his wife, who was sitting near him on a stone. Though the woman seemed wholly occupied with the little girl of nine or ten years of age, whose long black hair she amused herself by handling, she lost not a single glance of those her companion cast on her. Some sentiment other than love united these two beings, and inspired with mutual anxiety their movements and their thoughts. Misery is, perhaps, the most powerful of all ties.

The stranger had one of those broad, serious heads, covered with thick hair, which we see so frequently in the pictures of the Caracci. The jet black of the hair was streaked with white. Though noble and proud, his features had a hardness which spoiled them. In spite of his evident strength, and his straight, erect figure, he looked to be over sixty years of age. His dilapidated clothes were those of a foreign country. Though the faded and once beautiful face of the wife betrayed the deepest sadness, she forced herself to smile, assuming a calm countenance whenever her husband looked at her.

The little girl was standing, though signs of weariness were on the youthful face, which was tanned by the sun. She had an Italian cast of countenance and bearing, large black eyes beneath their well arched brows, a native nobleness, and candid grace. More than one of those who passed them felt strongly moved by the mere aspect of this group, who made no effort to conceal a despair which seemed as deep as the expression of it was simple. But the flow of this fugitive sympathy, characteristic of Parisians, was dried immediately; for as soon as the stranger saw himself the object of attention, he looked at his observer with so savage an air that the boldest loungeur hurried his step as though he had trod upon a serpent.

After standing for some time undecided, the tall stranger suddenly passed his hand across his face to brush away, as it were, the thoughts that were ploughing furrows in it. He must have taken some desperate resolution. Casting a glance upon his wife and daughter, he drew a dagger from his breast and gave it to his companion, saying in Italian: —

“I will see if the Bonapartes remember us.”

Then he walked with a slow, determined step toward the entrance of the palace, where he was, naturally, stopped by a soldier of the consular guard, with whom he was not permitted a long discussion. Seeing this man's obstinate determination, the sentinel presented his bayonet in the form of an ultimatum. Chance willed that the guard was changed at that moment, and the corporal very obligingly pointed out to the stranger the spot where the commander of the post was standing.

“Let Bonaparte know that Bartolomeo di Piombo wishes to speak with him,” said the Italian to the captain on duty.

In vain the officer represented to Bartolomeo that he could not see the First Consul without having previously requested an audience in writing; the Italian insisted that the soldier should go to Bonaparte. The officer stated the rules of the post, and refused to comply with the order of this singular visitor. Bartolomeo frowned heavily, casting a terrible look at the captain, as if he made him responsible for the misfortunes that this refusal might occasion. Then he kept silence, folded his arms tightly across his breast, and took up his station under the portico which serves as an avenue

of communication between the garden and the court-yard of the Tuileries. Persons who will things intensely are very apt to be helped by chance. At the moment when Bartolomeo di Piombo seated himself on one of the stone posts which was near the entrance, a carriage drew up, from which Lucien Bonaparte, minister of the interior, issued.

“Ah, Loucian, it is lucky for me I have met you!” cried the stranger.

These words, said in the Corsican patois, stopped Lucien at the moment when he was springing under the portico. He looked at his compatriot, and recognized him. At the first word that Bartolomeo said in his ear, he took the Corsican away with him.

Murat, Lannes, and Rapp were at that moment in the cabinet of the First Consul. As Lucien entered, followed by a man so singular in appearance as Piombo, the conversation ceased. Lucien took Napoleon by the arm and led him into the recess of a window. After exchanging a few words with his brother, the First Consul made a sign with his hand, which Murat and Lannes obeyed by retiring. Rapp pretended not to have seen it, in order to remain where he was. Bonaparte then spoke to him sharply, and the aide-de-camp, with evident unwillingness, left the room. The First Consul, who listened for Rapp’s step in the adjoining salon, opened the door suddenly, and found his aide-de-camp close to the wall of the cabinet.

“Do you choose not to understand me?” said the First Consul. “I wish to be alone with my compatriot.”

“A Corsican!” replied the aide-de-camp. “I distrust those fellows too much to – ”

The First Consul could not restrain a smile as he pushed his faithful officer by the shoulders.

“Well, what has brought you here, my poor Bartolomeo?” said Napoleon.

“To ask asylum and protection from you, if you are a true Corsican,” replied Bartolomeo, roughly.

“What ill fortune drove you from the island? You were the richest, the most – ”

“I have killed all the Portas,” replied the Corsican, in a deep voice, frowning heavily.

The First Consul took two steps backward in surprise.

“Do you mean to betray me?” cried Bartolomeo, with a darkling look at Bonaparte. “Do you know that there are still four Piombos in Corsica?”

Lucien took an arm of his compatriot and shook it.

“Did you come here to threaten the savior of France?” he said.

Bonaparte made a sign to Lucien, who kept silence. Then he looked at Piombo and said: —

“Why did you kill the Portas?”

“We had made friends,” replied the man; “the Barbantis reconciled us. The day after we had drunk together to drown our quarrels, I left home because I had business at Bastia. The Portas remained in my house, and set fire to my vineyard at Longone. They killed my son Gregorio. My daughter Ginevra and my wife, having taken the sacrament that morning, escaped; the Virgin protected them. When I returned I found no house; my feet were in its ashes as I searched for it. Suddenly they struck against the body of Gregorio; I recognized him in the moonlight. ‘The Portas have dealt me this blow,’ I said; and, forthwith, I went to the woods, and there I called together all the men whom I had ever served, – do you hear me, Bonaparte? – and we marched to the vineyard of the Portas. We got there at five in the morning; at seven they were all before God. Giacomo declares that Eliza Vanni saved a child, Luigi. But I myself bound him to his bed before setting fire to the house. I have left the island with my wife and child without being able to discover whether, indeed, Luigi Porta is alive.”

Bonaparte looked with curiosity at Bartolomeo, but without surprise.

“How many were there?” asked Lucien.

“Seven,” replied Piombo. “All of them were your persecutors in the olden times.”

These words roused no expression of hatred on the part of the two brothers.

“Ha! you are no longer Corsicans!” cried Piombo, with a sort of despair. “Farewell. In other days I protected you,” he added, in a reproachful tone. “Without me, your mother would never have reached Marseille,” he said, addressing himself to Bonaparte, who was silent and thoughtful, his elbow resting on a mantel-shelf.

“As a matter of duty, Piombo,” said Napoleon at last, “I cannot take you under my wing. I have become the leader of a great nation; I command the Republic; I am bound to execute the laws.”

“Ha! ha!” said Bartolomeo, scornfully.

“But I can shut my eyes,” continued Bonaparte. “The tradition of the Vendetta will long prevent the reign of law in Corsica,” he added, as if speaking to himself. “But it *must* be destroyed, at any cost.”

Bonaparte was silent for a few moments, and Lucien made a sign to Piombo not to speak. The Corsican was swaying his head from right to left in deep disapproval.

“Live here, in Paris,” resumed the First Consul, addressing Bartolomeo; “we will know nothing of this affair. I will cause your property in Corsica to be bought, to give you enough to live on for the present. Later, before long, we will think of you. But, remember, no more vendetta! There are no woods here to fly to. If you play with daggers, you must expect no mercy. Here, the law protects all citizens; and no one is allowed to do justice for himself.”

“He has made himself the head of a singular nation,” said Bartolomeo, taking Lucien’s hand and pressing it. “But you have both recognized me in misfortune, and I am yours, henceforth, for life or death. You may dispose as you will of the Piombos.”

With these words his Corsican brow unbent, and he looked about him in satisfaction.

“You are not badly off here,” he said, smiling, as if he meant to lodge there himself. “You are all in red, like a cardinal.”

“Your success depends upon yourself; you can have a palace, also,” said Bonaparte, watching his compatriot with a keen eye. “It will often happen that I shall need some faithful friend in whom I can confide.”

A sigh of joy heaved the vast chest of the Corsican, who held out his hand to the First Consul, saying: —

“The Corsican is in you still.”

Bonaparte smiled. He looked in silence at the man who brought, as it were, a waft of air from his own land, — from that isle where he had been so miraculously saved from the hatred of the “English party”; the land he was never to see again. He made a sign to his brother, who then took Piombo away. Lucien inquired with interest as to the financial condition of the former protector of their family. Piombo took him to a window and showed him his wife and Ginevra, seated on a heap of stones.

“We came from Fontainebleau on foot; we have not a single penny,” he said.

Lucien gave his purse to his compatriot, telling him to come to him the next day, that arrangements might be made to secure the comfort of the family. The value of Piombo’s property in Corsica, if sold, would scarcely maintain him honorably in Paris.

Fifteen years elapsed between the time of Piombo’s arrival with his family in Paris and the following event, which would be scarcely intelligible to the reader without this narrative of the foregoing circumstances.

## CHAPTER II. THE STUDIO

Servin, one of our most distinguished artists, was the first to conceive of the idea of opening a studio for young girls who wished to take lessons in painting.

About forty years of age, a man of the purest morals, entirely given up to his art, he had married from inclination the dowerless daughter of a general. At first the mothers of his pupils bought their daughters themselves to the studio; then they were satisfied to send them alone, after knowing the master's principles and the pains he took to deserve their confidence.

It was the artist's intention to take no pupils but young ladies belonging to rich families of good position, in order to meet with no complaints as to the composition of his classes. He even refused to take girls who wished to become artists; for to them he would have been obliged to give certain instructions without which no talent could advance in the profession. Little by little his prudence and the ability with which he initiated his pupils into his art, the certainty each mother felt that her daughter was in company with none but well-bred young girls, and the fact of the artist's marriage, gave him an excellent reputation as a teacher in society. When a young girl wished to learn to draw, and her mother asked advice of her friends, the answer was, invariably: "Send her to Servin's."

Servin became, therefore, for feminine art, a specialty; like Herbault for bonnets, Leroy for gowns, and Chevet for eatables. It was recognized that a young woman who had taken lessons from Servin was capable of judging the paintings of the Musee conclusively, of making a striking portrait, copying an ancient master, or painting a genre picture. The artist thus sufficed for the educational needs of the aristocracy. But in spite of these relations with the best families in Paris, he was independent and patriotic, and he maintained among them that easy, brilliant, half-ironical tone, and that freedom of judgment which characterize painters.

He had carried his scrupulous precaution into the arrangements of the locality where his pupils studied. The entrance to the attic above his apartments was walled up. To reach this retreat, as sacred as a harem, it was necessary to go up a small spiral staircase made within his own rooms. The studio, occupying nearly the whole attic floor under the roof, presented to the eye those vast proportions which surprise inquirers when, after attaining sixty feet above the ground-floor, they expect to find an artist squeezed into a gutter.

This gallery, so to speak, was profusely lighted from above, through enormous panes of glass furnished with those green linen shades by means of which all artists arrange the light. A quantity of caricatures, heads drawn at a stroke, either in color or with the point of a knife, on walls painted in a dark gray, proved that, barring a difference in expression, the most distinguished young girls have as much fun and folly in their minds as men. A small stove with a large pipe, which described a fearful zigzag before it reached the upper regions of the roof, was the necessary and infallible ornament of the room. A shelf ran round the walls, on which were models in plaster, heterogeneously placed, most of them covered with gray dust. Here and there, above this shelf, a head of Niobe, hanging to a nail, presented her pose of woe; a Venus smiled; a hand thrust itself forward like that of a pauper asking alms; a few "ecorches," yellowed by smoke, looked like limbs snatched over-night from a graveyard; besides these objects, pictures, drawings, lay figures, frames without paintings, and paintings without frames gave to this irregular apartment that studio physiognomy which is distinguished for its singular jumble of ornament and bareness, poverty and riches, care and neglect. The vast receptacle of an "atelier," where all seems small, even man, has something of the air of an Opera "coulisse"; here lie ancient garments, gilded armor, fragments of stuffs, machinery. And yet there is something mysteriously grand, like thought, in it; genius and death are there; Diana and Apollo beside a skull or skeleton, beauty and destruction, poesy and reality, colors glowing in the shadows, often a whole drama, motionless and silent. Strange symbol of an artist's head!

At the moment when this history begins, a brilliant July sun was illuminating the studio, and two rays striking athwart it lengthwise, traced diaphanous gold lines in which the dust was shimmering. A dozen easels raised their sharp points like masts in a port. Several young girls were animating the scene by the variety of their expressions, their attitudes, and the differences in their toilets. The strong shadows cast by the green serge curtains, arranged according to the needs of each easel, produced a multitude of contrasts, and the piquant effects of light and shade. This group was the prettiest of all the pictures in the studio.

A fair young girl, very simply dressed, sat at some distance from her companions, working bravely and seeming to be in dread of some mishap. No one looked at her, or spoke to her; she was much the prettiest, the most modest, and, apparently, the least rich among them. Two principal groups, distinctly separated from each other, showed the presence of two sets or cliques, two minds even here, in this studio, where one might suppose that rank and fortune would be forgotten.

But, however that might be, these young girls, sitting or standing, in the midst of their color-boxes, playing with their brushes or preparing them, handling their dazzling palettes, painting, laughing, talking, singing, absolutely natural, and exhibiting their real selves, composed a spectacle unknown to man. One of them, proud, haughty, capricious, with black hair and beautiful hands, was casting the flame of her glance here and there at random; another, light-hearted and gay, a smile upon her lips, with chestnut hair and delicate white hands, was a typical French virgin, thoughtless, and without hidden thoughts, living her natural real life; a third was dreamy, melancholy, pale, bending her head like a drooping flower; her neighbor, on the contrary, tall, indolent, with Asiatic habits, long eyes, moist and black, said but little, and reflected, glancing covertly at the head of Antinous.

Among them, like the “jocoso” of a Spanish play, full of wit and epigrammatic sallies, another girl was watching the rest with a comprehensive glance, making them laugh, and tossing up her head, too lively and arch not to be pretty. She appeared to rule the first group of girls, who were the daughters of bankers, notaries, and merchants, – all rich, but aware of the imperceptible though cutting slights which another group belonging to the aristocracy put upon them. The latter were led by the daughter of one of the King’s ushers, a little creature, as silly as she was vain, proud of being the daughter of a man with “an office at court.” She was a girl who always pretended to understand the remarks of the master at the first word, and seemed to do her work as a favor to him. She used an eyeglass, came very much dressed, and always late, and entreated her companions to speak low.

In this second group were several girls with exquisite figures and distinguished features, but there was little in their glance or expression that was simple and candid. Though their attitudes were elegant and their movements graceful, their faces lacked frankness; it was easy to see that they belonged to a world where polite manners form the character from early youth, and the abuse of social pleasures destroys sentiment and develops egotism.

But when the whole class was here assembled, childlike heads were seen among this bevy of young girls, ravishingly pure and virgin, faces with lips half-opened, through which shone spotless teeth, and on which a virgin smile was flickering. The studio then resembled not a studio, but a group of angels seated on a cloud in ether.

By mid-day, on this occasion, Servin had not appeared. For some days past he had spent most of his time in a studio which he kept elsewhere, where he was giving the last touches to a picture for the Exposition. All of a sudden Mademoiselle Amelie Thirion, the leader of the aristocrats, began to speak in a low voice, and very earnestly, to her neighbor. A great silence fell on the group of patricians, and the commercial party, surprised, were equally silent, trying to discover the subject of this earnest conference. The secret of the young *ultras* was soon revealed.

Amelie rose, took an easel which stood near hers, carried it to a distance from the noble group, and placed it close to a board partition which separated the studio from the extreme end of the attic, where all broken casts, defaced canvases and the winter supply of wood were kept. Amelie’s action caused a murmur of surprise, which did not prevent her from accomplishing the change by rolling

hastily to the side of the easel the stool, the box of colors, and even the picture by Prudhon, which the absent pupil was copying. After this coup d'état the Right began to work in silence, but the Left discoursed at length.

“What will Mademoiselle Piombo say to that?” asked a young girl of Mademoiselle Matilde Roguin, the lively oracle of the banking group.

“She’s not a girl to say anything,” was the reply; “but fifty years hence she’ll remember the insult as if it were done to her the night before, and revenge it cruelly. She is a person that I, for one, don’t want to be at war with.”

“The slight these young ladies mean to put upon her is all the more unkind,” said another young girl, “because yesterday, Mademoiselle Ginevra was very sad. Her father, they say, has just resigned. They ought not to add to her trouble, for she was very considerate of them during the Hundred Days. Never did she say a word to wound them. On the contrary, she avoided politics. But I think our *ultras* are acting more from jealousy than from party spite.”

“I have a great mind to go and get Mademoiselle Piombo’s easel and place it next to mine,” said Matilde Roguin. She rose, but second thoughts made her sit down again.

“With a character like hers,” she said, “one can’t tell how she would take a civility; better wait events.”

“Ecco la,” said the young girl with the black eyes, languidly.

The steps of a person coming up the narrow stairway sounded through the studio. The words: “Here she comes!” passed from mouth to mouth, and then the most absolute silence reigned.

To understand the importance of the ostracism imposed by the act of Amelie Thirion, it is necessary to add that this scene took place toward the end of the month of July, 1815. The second return of the Bourbons had shaken many friendships which had held firm under the first Restoration. At this moment families, almost all divided in opinion, were renewing many of the deplorable scenes which stain the history of all countries in times of civil or religious wars. Children, young girls, old men shared the monarchical fever to which the country was then a victim. Discord glided beneath all roofs; distrust dyed with its gloomy colors the words and the actions of the most intimate friends.

Ginevra Piombo loved Napoleon to idolatry; how, then, could she hate him? The emperor was her compatriot and the benefactor of her father. The Baron di Piombo was among those of Napoleon’s devoted servants who had co-operated most effectually in the return from Elba. Incapable of denying his political faith, anxious even to confess it, the old baron remained in Paris in the midst of his enemies. Ginevra Piombo was all the more open to condemnation because she made no secret of the grief which the second Restoration caused to her family. The only tears she had so far shed in life were drawn from her by the twofold news of Napoleon’s captivity on the “Bellerophon,” and Labedoyere’s arrest.

The girls of the aristocratic group of pupils belonged to the most devoted royalist families in Paris. It would be difficult to give an idea of the exaggerations prevalent at this epoch, and of the horror inspired by the Bonapartists. However insignificant and petty Amelie’s action may now seem to be, it was at that time a very natural expression of the prevailing hatred. Ginevra Piombo, one of Servin’s first pupils, had occupied the place that was now taken from her since the first day of her coming to the studio. The aristocratic circle had gradually surrounded her. To drive her from a place that in some sense belonged to her was not only to insult her, but to cause her a species of artistic pain; for all artists have a spot of predilection where they work.

Nevertheless, political prejudice was not the chief influence on the conduct of the Right clique of the studio. Ginevra, much the ablest of Servin’s pupils, was an object of intense jealousy. The master testified as much admiration for the talents as for the character of his favorite pupil, who served as a conclusion to all his comparisons. In fact, without any one being able to explain the ascendancy which this young girl obtained over all who came in contact with her, she exercised over the little world around her a prestige not unlike that of Bonaparte upon his soldiers.

The aristocracy of the studio had for some days past resolved upon the fall of this queen, but no one had, as yet, ventured to openly avoid the Bonapartist. Mademoiselle Thirion's act was, therefore, a decisive stroke, intended by her to force the others into becoming, openly, the accomplices of her hatred. Though Ginevra was sincerely loved by several of these royalists, nearly all of whom were indoctrinated at home with their political ideas, they decided, with the tactics peculiar to women, that they should do best to keep themselves aloof from the quarrel.

On Ginevra's arrival she was received, as we have said, in profound silence. Of all the young women who had, so far, come to Servin's studio, she was the handsomest, the tallest, and the best made. Her carriage and demeanor had a character of nobility and grace which commanded respect. Her face, instinct with intelligence, seemed to radiate light, so inspired was it with the enthusiasm peculiar to Corsicans, – which does not, however, preclude calmness. Her long hair and her black eyes and lashes expressed passion; the corners of her mouth, too softly defined, and the lips, a trifle too marked, gave signs of that kindliness which strong beings derive from the consciousness of their strength.

By a singular caprice of nature, the charm of her face was, in some degree, contradicted by a marble forehead, on which lay an almost savage pride, and from which seemed to emanate the moral instincts of a Corsican. In that was the only link between herself and her native land. All the rest of her person, her simplicity, the easy grace of her Lombard beauty, was so seductive that it was difficult for those who looked at her to give her pain. She inspired such keen attraction that her old father caused her, as matter of precaution, to be accompanied to and from the studio. The only defect of this truly poetic creature came from the very power of a beauty so fully developed; she looked a woman. Marriage she had refused out of love to her father and mother, feeling herself necessary to the comfort of their old age. Her taste for painting took the place of the passions and interests which usually absorb her sex.

“You are very silent to-day, mesdemoiselles,” she said, after advancing a little way among her companions. “Good-morning, my little Laure,” she added, in a soft, caressing voice, approaching the young girl who was painting apart from the rest. “That head is strong, – the flesh tints a little too rosy, but the drawing is excellent.”

Laure raised her head and looked tenderly at Ginevra; their faces beamed with the expression of a mutual affection. A faint smile brightened the lips of the young Italian, who seemed thoughtful, and walked slowly to her easel, glancing carelessly at the drawings and paintings on her way, and bidding good-morning to each of the young girls of the first group, not observing the unusual curiosity excited by her presence. She was like a queen in the midst of her court; she paid no attention to the profound silence that reigned among the patricians, and passed before their camp without pronouncing a single word. Her absorption seemed so great that she sat down before her easel, opened her color-box, took up her brushes, drew on her brown sleeves, arranged her apron, looked at her picture, examined her palette, without, apparently, thinking of what she was doing. All heads in the group of the bourgeois were turned toward her. If the young ladies in the Thirion camp did not show their impatience with the same frankness, their sidelong glances were none the less directed on Ginevra.

“She hasn't noticed it!” said Mademoiselle Roguin.

At this instant Ginevra abandoned the meditative attitude in which she had been contemplating her canvas, and turned her head toward the group of aristocrats. She measured, at a glance, the distance that now separated her from them; but she said nothing.

“It hasn't occurred to her that they meant to insult her,” said Matilde; “she neither colored nor turned pale. How vexed these girls will be if she likes her new place as well as the old! You are out of bounds, mademoiselle,” she added, aloud, addressing Ginevra.

The Italian pretended not to hear; perhaps she really did not hear. She rose abruptly; walked with a certain deliberation along the side of the partition which separated the adjoining closet from the studio, and seemed to be examining the sash through which her light came, – giving so much

importance to it that she mounted a chair to raise the green serge, which intercepted the light, much higher. Reaching that height, her eye was on a level with a slight opening in the partition, the real object of her efforts, for the glance that she cast through it can be compared only to that of a miser discovering Aladdin's treasure. Then she sprang down hastily and returned to her place, changed the position of her picture, pretended to be still dissatisfied with the light, pushed a table close to the partition, on which she placed a chair, climbed lightly to the summit of this erection, and again looked through the crevice. She cast but one glance into the space beyond, which was lighted through a skylight; but what she saw produced so strong an effect upon her that she tottered.

"Take care, Mademoiselle Ginevra, you'll fall!" cried Laure.

All the young girls gazed at the imprudent climber, and the fear of their coming to her gave her courage; she recovered her equilibrium, and replied, as she balanced herself on the shaking chair: —

"Pooh! it is more solid than a throne!"

She then secured the curtain and came down, pushed the chair and table as far as possible from the partition, returned to her easel, and seemed to be arranging it to suit the volume of light she had now thrown upon it. Her picture, however, was not in her mind, which was wholly bent on getting as near as possible to the closet, against the door of which she finally settled herself. Then she began to prepare her palette in the deepest silence. Sitting there, she could hear, distinctly, a sound which had strongly excited her curiosity the evening before, and had whirled her young imagination across vast fields of conjecture. She recognized the firm and regular breathing of a man whom she had just seen asleep. Her curiosity was satisfied beyond her expectations, but at the same time she felt saddled by an immense responsibility. Through the opening in the wall she had seen the Imperial eagle; and upon the flock bed, faintly lighted from above, lay the form of an officer of the Guard. She guessed all. Servin was hiding a proscribed man!

She now trembled lest any of her companions should come near here to examine her picture, when the regular breathing or some deeper breath might reveal to them, as it had to her, the presence of this political victim. She resolved to keep her place beside that door, trusting to her wits to baffle all dangerous chances that might arise.

"Better that I should be here," thought she, "to prevent some luckless accident, than leave that poor man at the mercy of a heedless betrayal."

This was the secret of the indifference which Ginevra had apparently shown to the removal of her easel. She was inwardly enchanted, because the change had enabled her to gratify her curiosity in a natural manner; besides, at this moment, she was too keenly preoccupied to perceive the reason of her removal.

Nothing is more mortifying to young girls, or, indeed, to all the world, than to see a piece of mischief, an insult, or a biting speech, miss its effect through the contempt or the indifference of the intended victim. It seems as if hatred to an enemy grows in proportion to the height that enemy is raised above us. Ginevra's behavior was an enigma to all her companions; her friends and enemies were equally surprised; for the former claimed for her all good qualities, except that of forgiveness of injuries. Though, of course, the occasions for displaying that vice of nature were seldom afforded to Ginevra in the life of a studio, still, the specimens she had now and then given of her vindictive disposition had left a strong impression on the minds of her companions.

After many conjectures, Mademoiselle Roguin came to the conclusion that the Italian's silence showed a grandeur of soul beyond all praise; and the banking circle, inspired by her, formed a project to humiliate the aristocracy. They succeeded in that aim by a fire of sarcasms which presently brought down the pride of the Right coterie.

Madame Servin's arrival put a stop to the struggle. With the shrewdness that usually accompanies malice, Amelie Thirion had noticed, analyzed, and mentally commented on the extreme preoccupation of Ginevra's mind, which prevented her from even hearing the bitterly polite war of words of which she was the object. The vengeance Mademoiselle Roguin and her companions were

inflicting on Mademoiselle Thirion and her group had, therefore, the fatal effect of driving the young *ultras* to search for the cause of the silence so obstinately maintained by Ginevra di Piombo. The beautiful Italian became the centre of all glances, and she was henceforth watched by friends and foes alike.

It is very difficult to hide even a slight emotion or sentiment from fifteen inquisitive and unoccupied young girls, whose wits and mischief ask for nothing better than secrets to guess, schemes to create or baffle, and who know how to find too many interpretations for each gesture, glance, and word, to fail in discovering the right one.

At this moment, however, the presence of Madame Servin produced an interlude in the drama thus played below the surface in these various young hearts, the sentiments, ideas, and progress of which were expressed by phrases that were almost allegorical, by mischievous glances, by gestures, by silence even, more intelligible than words. As soon as Madame Servin entered the studio, her eyes turned to the door near which Ginevra was seated. Under present circumstances the fact of this glance was not lost. Though at first none of the pupils took notice of it, Mademoiselle Thirion recollected it later, and it explained to her the doubt, fear, and mystery which now gave something wild and frightened to Madame Servin's eyes.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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