

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

PIERRETTE

Оноре де Бальзак

Pierrette

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Honoré de Balzac

Pierrette

DEDICATION

To Mademoiselle Anna Hanska:

Dear Child, – You, the joy of the household, you, whose pink or white pelerine flutters in summer among the groves of Wierszchownia like a will-o'-the-wisp, followed by the tender eyes of your father and your mother, – how can I dedicate to *you* a story full of melancholy? And yet, ought not sorrows to be spoken of to a young girl idolized as you are, since the day may come when your sweet hands will be called to minister to them? It is so difficult, Anna, to find in the history of our manners and morals a subject that is worthy of your eyes, that no choice has been left me; but perhaps you will be made to feel how fortunate your fate is when you read the story sent to you by

Your old friend,

De Balzac.

I. THE LORRAINS

At the dawn of an October day in 1827 a young fellow about sixteen years of age, whose clothing proclaimed what modern phraseology so insolently calls a proletary, was standing in a small square of Lower Provins. At that early hour he could examine without being observed the various houses surrounding the open space, which was oblong in form. The mills along the river were already working; the whirr of their wheels, repeated by the echoes of the Upper Town in the keen air and sparkling clearness of the early morning, only intensified the general silence so that the wheels of a diligence could be heard a league away along the highroad. The two longest sides of the square, separated by an avenue of lindens, were built in the simple style which expresses so well the peaceful and matter-of-fact life of the bourgeoisie. No signs of commerce were to be seen; on the other hand, the luxurious porte-cocheres of the rich were few, and those few turned seldom on their hinges, excepting that of Monsieur Martener, a physician, whose profession obliged him to keep a cabriolet, and to use it. A few of the house-fronts were covered by grape vines, others by roses climbing to the second-story windows, through which they wafted the fragrance of their scattered bunches. One end of the square enters the main street of the Lower Town, the gardens of which reach to the bank of one of the two rivers which water the valley of Provins. The other end of the square enters a street which runs parallel to the main street.

At the latter, which was also the quietest end of the square, the young workman recognized the house of which he was in search, which showed a front of white stone grooved in lines to represent courses, windows with closed gray blinds, and slender iron balconies decorated with rosettes painted yellow. Above the ground floor and the first floor were three dormer windows projecting from a slate roof; on the peak of the central one was a new weather-vane. This modern innovation represented a hunter in the attitude of shooting a hare. The front door was reached by three stone steps. On one side of this door a leaden pipe discharged the sink-water into a small street-gutter, showing the whereabouts of the kitchen. On the other side were two windows, carefully closed by gray shutters in which were heart-shaped openings cut to admit the light; these windows seemed to be those of the dining-room. In the elevation gained by the three steps were vent-holes to the cellar, closed by painted iron shutters fantastically cut in open-work. Everything was new. In this repaired and restored house, the fresh-colored look of which contrasted with the time-worn exteriors of all the other houses, an observer would instantly perceive the paltry taste and perfect self-satisfaction of the retired petty shopkeeper.

The young man looked at these details with an expression of pleasure that seemed to have something rather sad in it; his eyes roved from the kitchen to the roof, with a motion that showed a deliberate purpose. The rosy glow of the rising sun fell on a calico curtain at one of the garret windows, the others being without that luxury. As he caught sight of it the young fellow's face brightened gaily. He stepped back a little way, leaned against a linden, and sang, in the drawling tone peculiar to the west of France, the following Breton ditty, published by Bruguere, a composer to whom we are indebted for many charming melodies. In Brittany, the young villagers sing this song to all newly-married couples on their wedding-day: —

“We’ve come to wish you happiness in marriage,
To m’sieur your husband
As well as to you:

“You have just been bound, madam’ la mariee,
With bonds of gold
That only death unbinds:

“You will go no more to balls or gay assemblies;
You must stay at home
While we shall go.

“Have you thought well how you are pledged to be
True to your spouse,
And love him like yourself?

“Receive these flowers our hands do now present you;
Alas! your fleeting honors
Will fade as they.”

This native air (as sweet as that adapted by Chateaubriand to *Ma soeur, te souvient-il encore*), sung in this little town of the Brie district, must have been to the ears of a Breton maiden the touchstone of imperious memories, so faithfully does it picture the manners and customs, the surroundings and the heartiness of her noble old land, where a sort of melancholy reigns, hardly to be defined; caused, perhaps, by the aspect of life in Brittany, which is deeply touching. This power of awakening a world of grave and sweet and tender memories by a familiar and sometimes lively ditty, is the privilege of those popular songs which are the superstitions of music, – if we may use the word “superstition” as signifying all that remains after the ruin of a people, all that survives their revolutions.

As he finished the first couple, the singer, who never took his eyes from the attic curtain, saw no signs of life. While he sang the second, the curtain stirred. When the words “Receive these flowers” were sung, a youthful face appeared; a white hand cautiously opened the casement, and a girl made a sign with her head to the singer as he ended with the melancholy thought of the simple verses, – “Alas! your fleeting honors will fade as they.”

To her the young workman suddenly showed, drawing it from within his jacket, a yellow flower, very common in Brittany, and sometimes to be found in La Brie (where, however, it is rare), – the furze, or broom.

“Is it really you, Brigaut?” said the girl, in a low voice.

“Yes, Pierrette, yes. I am in Paris. I have started to make my way; but I’m ready to settle here, near you.”

Just then the fastening of a window creaked in a room on the first floor, directly below Pierrette’s attic. The girl showed the utmost terror, and said to Brigaut, quickly: —

“Run away!”

The lad jumped like a frightened frog to a bend in the street caused by the projection of a mill just where the square opens into the main thoroughfare; but in spite of his agility his hob-nailed shoes echoed on the stones with a sound easily distinguished from the music of the mill, and no doubt heard by the person who opened the window.

That person was a woman. No man would have torn himself from the comfort of a morning nap to listen to a minstrel in a jacket; none but a maid awakes to songs of love. Not only was this woman a maid, but she was an old maid. When she had opened her blinds with the furtive motion of the bat, she looked in all directions, but saw nothing, and only heard, faintly, the flying footfalls of the lad. Can there be anything more dreadful than the matutinal apparition of an ugly old maid at her window? Of all the grotesque sights which amuse the eyes of travellers in country towns, that is the most unpleasant. It is too repulsive to laugh at. This particular old maid, whose ear was so keen, was denuded of all the adventitious aids, of whatever kind, which she employed as embellishments; her false front and her collarette were lacking; she wore that horrible little bag of black silk on which

old women insist on covering their skulls, and it was now revealed beneath the night-cap which had been pushed aside in sleep. This rumpled condition gave a menacing expression to the head, such as painters bestow on witches. The temples, ears, and nape of the neck, were disclosed in all their withered horror, – the wrinkles being marked in scarlet lines that contrasted with the would-be white of the bed-gown which was tied round her neck by a narrow tape. The gaping of this garment revealed a breast to be likened only to that of an old peasant woman who cares nothing about her personal ugliness. The fleshless arm was like a stick on which a bit of stuff was hung. Seen at her window, this spinster seemed tall from the length and angularity of her face, which recalled the exaggerated proportions of certain Swiss heads. The character of their countenance – the features being marked by a total want of harmony – was that of hardness in the lines, sharpness in the tones; while an unfeeling spirit, pervading all, would have filled a physiognomist with disgust. These characteristics, fully visible at this moment, were usually modified in public by a sort of commercial smile, – a bourgeois smirk which mimicked good-humor; so that persons meeting with this old maid might very well take her for a kindly woman. She owned the house on shares with her brother. The brother, by-the-bye, was sleeping so tranquilly in his own chamber that the orchestra of the Opera-house could not have awakened him, wonderful as its diapason is said to be.

The old maid stretched her neck out of the window, twisted it, and raised her cold, pale-blue little eyes, with their short lashes set in lids that were always rather swollen, to the attic window, endeavoring to see Pierrette. Perceiving the uselessness of that attempt, she retreated into her room with a movement like that of a tortoise which draws in its head after protruding it from its carapace. The blinds were then closed, and the silence of the street was unbroken except by peasants coming in from the country, or very early persons moving about.

When there is an old maid in a house, watch-dogs are unnecessary; not the slightest event can occur that she does not see and comment upon and pursue to its utmost consequences. The foregoing trifling circumstance was therefore destined to give rise to grave suppositions, and to open the way for one of those obscure dramas which take place in families, and are none the less terrible because they are secret, – if, indeed, we may apply the word “drama” to such domestic occurrences.

Pierrette did not go back to bed. To her, Brigaut’s arrival was an immense event. During the night – that Eden of the wretched – she escaped the vexations and fault-findings she bore during the day. Like the hero of a ballad, German or Russian, I forget which, her sleep seemed to her the happy life; her waking hours a bad dream. She had just had her only pleasurable waking in three years. The memories of her childhood had sung their melodious ditties in her soul. The first couplet was heard in a dream; the second made her spring out of bed; at the third, she doubted her ears, – the sorrowful are all disciples of Saint Thomas; but when the fourth was sung, standing in her night-gown with bare feet by the window, she recognized Brigaut, the companion of her childhood. Ah, yes! it was truly the well-known square jacket with the bobtails, the pockets of which stuck out at the hips, – the jacket of blue cloth which is classic in Brittany; there, too, were the waistcoat of printed cotton, the linen shirt fastened by a gold heart, the large rolling collar, the earrings, the stout shoes, the trousers of blue-gray drilling unevenly colored by the various lengths of the warp, – in short, all those humble, strong, and durable things which make the apparel of the Breton peasantry. The big buttons of white horn which fastened the jacket made the girl’s heart beat. When she saw the bunch of broom her eyes filled with tears; then a dreadful fear drove back into her heart the happy memories that were budding there. She thought her cousin sleeping in the room beneath her might have heard the noise she made in jumping out of bed and running to the window. The fear was just; the old maid was coming, and she made Brigaut the terrified sign which the lad obeyed without the least understanding it. Such instinctive submission to a girl’s bidding shows one of those innocent and absolute affections which appear from century to century on this earth, where they blossom, like the aloes of Isola Bella, twice or thrice in a hundred years. Whoever had seen the lad as he ran away would have loved the ingenuous chivalry of his most ingenuous feeling.

Jacques Brigaut was worthy of Pierrette Lorrain, who was just fifteen. Two children! Pierrette could not keep from crying as she watched his flight in the terror her gesture had conveyed to him. Then she sat down in a shabby armchair placed before a little table above which hung a mirror. She rested her elbows on the table, put her head in her hands, and sat thinking for an hour, calling to memory the Marais, the village of Pen-Hoel, the perilous voyages on a pond in a boat untied for her from an old willow by little Jacques; then the old faces of her grandfather and grandmother, the sufferings of her mother, and the handsome face of Major Brigaut, – in short, the whole of her careless childhood. It was all a dream, a luminous joy on the gloomy background of the present.

Her beautiful chestnut hair escaped in disorder from her cap, rumpled in sleep, – a cambric cap with ruffles, which she had made herself. On each side of her forehead were little ringlets escaping from gray curl-papers. From the back of her head hung a heavy braid of hair that was half unplaited. The excessive whiteness of her face betrayed that terrible malady of girlhood which goes by the name of chlorosis, deprives the body of its natural colors, destroys the appetite, and shows a disordered state of the organism. The waxy tones were in all the visible parts of her flesh. The neck and shoulders explained by their blanched paleness the wasted arms, flung forward and crossed upon the table. Her feet seemed enervated, shrunken from illness. Her night-gown came only to her knees and showed the flaccid muscles, the blue veins, the impoverished flesh of the legs. The cold, to which she paid no heed, turned her lips violet, and a sad smile, drawing up the corners of a sensitive mouth, showed teeth that were white as ivory and quite small, – pretty, transparent teeth, in keeping with the delicate ears, the rather sharp but dainty nose, and the general outline of her face, which, in spite of its roundness, was lovely. All the animation of this charming face was in the eyes, the iris of which, brown like Spanish tobacco and flecked with black, shone with golden reflections round pupils that were brilliant and intense. Pierrette was made to be gay, but she was sad. Her lost gaiety was still to be seen in the vivacious forms of the eye, in the ingenuous grace of her brow, in the smooth curve of her chin. The long eyelashes lay upon the cheek-bones, made prominent by suffering. The paleness of her face, which was unnaturally white, made the lines and all the details infinitely pure. The ear alone was a little masterpiece of modelling, – in marble, you might say. Pierrette suffered in many ways. Perhaps you would like to know her history, and this is it.

Pierrette's mother was a Demoiselle Auffray of Provins, half-sister by the father's side of Madame Rogron, mother of the present owners of the house.

Monsieur Auffray, her husband, had married at the age of eighteen; his second marriage took place when he was nearly sixty-nine. By the first, he had an only daughter, very plain, who was married at sixteen to an innkeeper of Provins named Rogron.

By his second marriage the worthy Auffray had another daughter; but this one was charming. There was, of course, an enormous difference in the ages of these daughters; the one by the first marriage was fifty years old when the second child was born. By this time the eldest, Madame Rogron, had two grown-up children.

The youngest daughter of the old man was married at eighteen to a man of her choice, a Breton officer named Lorrain, captain in the Imperial Guard. Love often makes a man ambitious. The captain, anxious to rise to a colonelcy, exchanged into a line regiment. While he, then a major, and his wife enjoyed themselves in Paris on the allowance made to them by Monsieur and Madame Auffray, or scoured Germany at the beck and call of the Emperor's battles and truces, old Auffray himself (formerly a grocer) died, at the age of eighty-eight, without having found time to make a will. His property was administered by his daughter, Madame Rogron, and her husband so completely in their own interests that nothing remained for the old man's widow beyond the house she lived in on the little square, and a few acres of land. This widow, the mother of Madame Lorrain, was only thirty-eight at the time of her husband's death. Like many widows, she came to the unwise decision of remarrying. She sold the house and land to her step-daughter, Madame Rogron, and married a young physician named Neraud, who wasted her whole fortune. She died of grief and misery two years later.

Thus the share of her father's property which ought to have come to Madame Lorrain disappeared almost entirely, being reduced to the small sum of eight thousand francs. Major Lorrain was killed at the battle of Montereau, leaving his wife, then twenty-one years of age, with a little daughter of fourteen months, and no other means than the pension to which she was entitled and an eventual inheritance from her late husband's parents, Monsieur and Madame Lorrain, retail shopkeepers at Pen-Hoel, a village in the Vendee, situated in that part of it which is called the Marais. These Lorrains, grandfather and grandmother of Pierrette Lorrain, sold wood for building purposes, slates, tiles, pantiles, pipes, etc. Their business, either from their own incapacity or through ill-luck, did badly, and gave them scarcely enough to live on. The failure of the well-known firm of Collinet at Nantes, caused by the events of 1814 which led to a sudden fall in colonial products, deprived them of twenty-four thousand francs which they had just deposited with that house.

The arrival of their daughter-in-law was therefore welcome to them. Her pension of eight hundred francs was a handsome income at Pen-Hoel. The eight thousand francs which the widow's half-brother and sister Rogron sent to her from her father's estate (after a multitude of legal formalities) were placed by her in the Lorrains' business, they giving her a mortgage on a little house which they owned at Nantes, let for three hundred francs, and barely worth ten thousand.

Madame Lorrain the younger, Pierrette's mother, died in 1819. The child of old Auffray and his young wife was small, delicate, and weakly; the damp climate of the Marais did not agree with her. But her husband's family persuaded her, in order to keep her with them, that in no other quarter of the world could she find a more healthy region. She was so petted and tenderly cared for that her death, when it came, brought nothing but honor to the old Lorrains.

Some persons declared that Brigaut, an old Vendeen, one of those men of iron who served under Charette, under Mercier, under the Marquis de Montauran, and the Baron du Guenic, in the wars against the Republic, counted for a good deal in the willingness of the younger Madame Lorrain to remain in the Marais. If it were so, his soul must have been a truly loving and devoted one. All Pen-Hoel saw him – he was called respectfully Major Brigaut, the grade he had held in the Catholic army – spending his days and his evenings in the Lorrains' parlor, beside the window of the imperial major. Toward the last, the curate of Pen-Hoel made certain representations to old Madame Lorrain, begging her to persuade her daughter-in-law to marry Brigaut, and promising to have the major appointed justice of peace for the canton of Pen-Hoel, through the influence of the Vicomte de Kergarouet. The death of the poor young woman put an end to the matter.

Pierrette was left in charge of her grandparents who owed her four hundred francs a year, interest on the little property placed in their hands. This small sum was now applied to her maintenance. The old people, who were growing less and less fit for business, soon found themselves confronted by an active and capable competitor, against whom they said hard things, all the while doing nothing to defeat him. Major Brigaut, their friend and adviser, died six months after his friend, the younger Madame Lorrain, – perhaps of grief, perhaps of his wounds, of which he had received twenty-seven.

Like a sound merchant, the competitor set about ruining his adversaries in order to get rid of all rivalry. With his connivance, the Lorrains borrowed money on notes, which they were unable to meet, and which drove them in their old days into bankruptcy. Pierrette's claim upon the house in Nantes was superseded by the legal rights of her grandmother, who enforced them to secure the daily bread of her poor husband. The house was sold for nine thousand five hundred francs, of which one thousand five hundred went for costs. The remaining eight thousand came to Madame Lorain, who lived upon the income of them in a sort of almshouse at Nantes, like that of Sainte-Perine in Paris, called Saint-Jacques, where the two old people had bed and board for a humble payment.

As it was impossible to keep Pierrette, their ruined little granddaughter, with them, the old Lorrains bethought themselves of her uncle and aunt Rogron, in Provins, to whom they wrote. These Rogrons were dead. The letter might, therefore, have easily been lost; but if anything here below can

take the place of Providence, it is the post. Postal spirit, incomparably above public spirit, exceeds in brilliancy of resource and invention the ablest romance-writers. When the post gets hold of a letter, worth, to it, from three to ten sous, and does not immediately know where to find the person to whom that letter is addressed, it displays a financial anxiety only to be met with in very pertinacious creditors. The post goes and comes and ferrets through all the eighty-six departments. Difficulties only arouse the genius of the clerks, who may really be called men-of-letters, and who set about to search for that unknown human being with as much ardor as the mathematicians of the Bureau give to longitudes. They literally ransack the whole kingdom. At the first ray of hope all the post-offices in Paris are alert. Sometimes the receiver of a missing letter is amazed at the network of scrawled directions which covers both back and front of the missive, – glorious vouchers for the administrative persistency with which the post has been at work. If a man undertook what the post accomplishes, he would lose ten thousand francs in travel, time, and money, to recover ten sous. The letter of the old Lorrains, addressed to Monsieur Rogron of Provins (who had then been dead a year) was conveyed by the post in due time to Monsieur Rogron, son of the deceased, a mercer in the rue Saint-Denis in Paris. And this is where the postal spirit obtains its greatest triumph. An heir is always more or less anxious to know if he has picked up every scrap of his inheritance, if he has not overlooked a credit, or a trunk of old clothes. The Treasury knows that. A letter addressed to the late Rogron at Provins was certain to pique the curiosity of Rogron, Jr., or Mademoiselle Rogron, the heirs in Paris. Out of that human interest the Treasury was able to earn sixty centimes.

These Rogrons, toward whom the old Lorrains, though dreading to part with their dear little granddaughter, stretched their supplicating hands, became, in this way, and most unexpectedly, the masters of Pierrette's destiny. It is therefore indispensable to explain both their antecedents and their character.

II. THE ROGRONS

Pere Rogron, that innkeeper of Provins to whom old Auffray had married his daughter by his first wife, was an individual with an inflamed face, a veiny nose, and cheeks on which Bacchus had drawn his scarlet and bulbous vine-marks. Though short, fat, and pot-bellied, with stout legs and thick hands, he was gifted with the shrewdness of the Swiss innkeepers, whom he resembled. Certainly he was not handsome, and his wife looked like him. Never was a couple better matched. Rogron liked good living and to be waited upon by pretty girls. He belonged to the class of egoists whose behavior is brutal; he gave way to his vices and did their will openly in the face of Israel. Grasping, selfish, without decency, and always gratifying his own fancies, he devoured his earnings until the day when his teeth failed him. Selfishness stayed by him. In his old days he sold his inn, collected (as we have seen) all he could of his late father-in-law's property, and went to live in the little house in the square of Provins, bought for a trifle from the widow of old Auffray, Pierrette's grandmother.

Rogron and his wife had about two thousand francs a year from twenty-seven lots of land in the neighborhood of Provins, and from the sale of their inn for twenty thousand. Old Auffray's house, though out of repair, was inhabited just as it was by the Rogrons, – old rats like wrack and ruin. Rogron himself took to horticulture and spent his savings in enlarging the garden; he carried it to the river's edge between two walls and built a sort of stone embankment across the end, where aquatic nature, left to herself, displayed the charms of her flora.

In the early years of their marriage the Rogrons had a son and a daughter, both hideous; for such human beings degenerate. Put out to nurse at a low price, these luckless children came home in due time, after the worst of village training, – allowed to cry for hours after their wet-nurse, who worked in the fields, leaving them shut up to scream for her in one of those damp, dark, low rooms which serve as homes for the French peasantry. Treated thus, the features of the children coarsened; their voices grew harsh; they mortified their mother's vanity, and that made her strive to correct their bad habits by a sternness which the severity of their father converted through comparison to kindness. As a general thing, they were left to run loose about the stables and courtyards of the inn, or the streets of the town; sometimes they were whipped; sometimes they were sent, to get rid of them, to their grandfather Auffray, who did not like them. The injustice the Rogrons declared the old man did to their children, justified them to their own minds in taking the greater part of "the old scoundrel's" property. However, Rogron did send his son to school, and did buy him a man, one of his own cartmen, to save him from the conscription. As soon as his daughter, Sylvie, was thirteen, he sent her to Paris, to make her way as apprentice in a shop. Two years later he despatched his son, Jerome-Denis, to the same career. When his friends the carriers and those who frequented the inn, asked him what he meant to do with his children, Pere Rogron explained his system with a conciseness which, in view of that of most fathers, had the merit of frankness.

"When they are old enough to understand me I shall give 'em a kick and say: 'Go and make your own way in the world!'" he replied, emptying his glass and wiping his lips with the back of his hand. Then he winked at his questioner with a knowing look. "Hey! hey! they are no greater fools than I was," he added. "My father gave me three kicks; I shall only give them one; he put one louis into my hand; I shall put ten in theirs, therefore they'll be better off than I was. That's the way to do. After I'm gone, what's left will be theirs. The notaries can find them and give it to them. What nonsense to bother one's self about children. Mine owe me their life. I've fed them, and I don't ask anything from them, – I call that quits, hey, neighbor? I began as a cartman, but that didn't prevent me marrying the daughter of that old scoundrel Auffray."

Sylvie Rogron was sent (with six hundred francs for her board) as apprentice to certain shopkeepers originally from Provins and now settled in Paris in the rue Saint-Denis. Two years later she was "at par," as they say; she earned her own living; at any rate her parents paid nothing for

her. That is what is called being “at par” in the rue Saint-Denis. Sylvie had a salary of four hundred francs. At nineteen years of age she was independent. At twenty, she was the second demoiselle in the Maison Julliard, wholesale silk dealers at the “Chinese Worm” rue Saint-Denis. The history of the sister was that of the brother. Young Jerome-Denis Rogron entered the establishment of one of the largest wholesale mercers in the same street, the Maison Guepin, at the “Three Distaffs.” When Sylvie Rogron, aged twenty-one, had risen to be forewoman at a thousand francs a year Jerome-Denis, with even better luck, was head-clerk at eighteen, with a salary of twelve hundred francs.

Brother and sister met on Sundays and fete-days, which they passed in economical amusements; they dined out of Paris, and went to Saint-Cloud, Meudon, Belleville, or Vincennes. Towards the close of the year 1815 they clubbed their savings, amounting to about twenty thousand francs, earned by the sweat of their brows, and bought of Madame Guenee the property and good-will of her celebrated shop, the “Family Sister,” one of the largest retail establishments in the quarter. Sylvie kept the books and did the writing. Jerome-Denis was master and head-clerk both. In 1821, after five years’ experience, competition became so fierce that it was all the brother and sister could do to carry on the business and maintain its reputation.

Though Sylvie was at this time scarcely forty, her natural ugliness, combined with hard work and a certain crabbed look (caused as much by the conformation of her features as by her cares), made her seem like a woman of fifty. At thirty-eight Jerome Rogron presented to the eyes of his customers the silliest face that ever looked over a counter. His retreating forehead, flattened by fatigue, was marked by three long wrinkles. His grizzled hair, cut close, expressed in some indefinable way the stupidity of a cold-blooded animal. The glance of his bluish eyes had neither flame nor thought in it. His round, flat face excited no sympathy, nor even a laugh on the lips of those who might be examining the varieties of the Parisian species; on the contrary, it saddened them. He was, like his father, short and fat, but his figure lacked the latter’s brutal obesity, and showed, instead, an almost ridiculous debility. His father’s high color was changed in him to the livid flabbiness peculiar to persons who live in close back-shops, or in those railed cages called counting-rooms, forever tying up bundles, receiving and making change, snarling at the clerks, and repeating the same old speeches to customers.

The small amount of brains possessed by the brother and sister had been wholly absorbed in maintaining their business, in getting and keeping money, and in learning the special laws and usages of the Parisian market. Thread, needles, ribbons, pins, buttons, tailors’ furnishings, in short, the enormous quantity of things which go to make up a mercer’s stock, had taken all their capacity. Outside of their business they knew absolutely nothing; they were even ignorant of Paris. To them the great city was merely a region spreading around the Rue Saint-Denis. Their narrow natures could see no field except the shop. They were clever enough in nagging their clerks and their young women and in proving them to blame. Their happiness lay in seeing all hands busy at the counters, exhibiting the merchandise, and folding it up again. When they heard the six or eight voices of the young men and women glibly gabbling the consecrated phrases by which clerks reply to the remarks of customers, the day was fine to them, the weather beautiful! But on the really fine days, when the blue of the heavens brightened all Paris, and the Parisians walked about to enjoy themselves and cared for no “goods” but those they carried on their back, the day was overcast to the Rogrons. “Bad weather for sales,” said that pair of imbeciles.

The skill with which Rogron could tie up a parcel made him an object of admiration to all his apprentices. He could fold and tie and see all that happened in the street and in the farthest recesses of the shop by the time he handed the parcel to his customer with a “Here it is, madame; *nothing else to-day?*” But the poor fool would have been ruined without his sister. Sylvie had common-sense and a genius for trade. She advised her brother in their purchases and would pitilessly send him to remote parts of France to save a trifle of cost. The shrewdness which all women more or less possess, not being employed in the service of her heart, had drifted into that of speculation. A business to pay for, – that thought was the mainspring which kept the machine going and gave it an infernal activity.

Rogron was really only head-clerk; he understood nothing of his business as a whole; self-interest, that great motor of the mind, had failed in his case to instruct him. He was often aghast when his sister ordered some article to be sold below cost, foreseeing the end of its fashion; later he admired her idiotically for her cleverness. He reasoned neither ill nor well; he was simply incapable of reasoning at all; but he had the sense to subordinate himself to his sister, and he did so from a consideration that was outside of the business. "She is my elder," he said. Perhaps an existence like his, always solitary, reduced to the satisfaction of mere needs, deprived of money and all pleasures in youth, may explain to physiologists and thinkers the clownish expression of the face, the feebleness of mind, the vacant silliness of the man. His sister had steadily prevented him from marrying, afraid perhaps to lose her power over him, and seeing only a source of expense and injury in some woman who would certainly be younger and undoubtedly less ugly than herself.

Silliness has two ways of comporting itself; it talks, or is silent. Silent silliness can be borne; but Rogron's silliness was loquacious. The man had a habit of chattering to his clerks, explaining the minutiae of the business, and ornamenting his talk with those flat jokes which may be called the "chaff" of shopkeeping. Rogron, listened to, of course, by his subordinates and perfectly satisfied with himself, had come at last into possession of a phraseology of his own. This chatterer believed himself an orator. The necessity of explaining to customers what they want, of guessing at their desires, and giving them desires for what they do not want, exercises the tongue of all retail shopkeepers. The petty dealer acquires the faculty of uttering words and sentences in which there is absolutely no meaning, but which have a marked success. He explains to his customers matters of manufacture that they know nothing of; that alone gives him a passing superiority over them; but take him away from his thousand and one explanations about his thousand and one articles, and he is, relatively to thought, like a fish out of water in the sun.

Rogron and Sylvie, two mechanisms baptized by mistake, did not possess, latent or active, the feelings which give life to the heart. Their natures were shrivelled and harsh, hardened by toil, by privation, by the remembrance of their sufferings during a long and cruel apprenticeship to life. Neither of them complained of their trials. They were not so much implacable as impracticable in their dealings with others in misfortune. To them, virtue, honor, loyalty, all human sentiments consisted solely in the payment of their bills. Irritable and irritating, without feelings, and sordid in their economy, the brother and sister bore a dreadful reputation among the other merchants of the rue Saint-Denis. Had it not been for their connection with Provins, where they went three or four times a year, when they could close the shop for a day or two, they would have had no clerks or young women. But old Rogron, their father, sent them all the unfortunate young people of his neighborhood, whose parents wished to start them in business in Paris. He obtained these apprentices by boasting, out of vanity, of his son's success. Parents, attracted by the prospect of their children being well-trained and closely watched, and also, by the hope of their succeeding, eventually, to the business, sent whichever child was most in the way at home to the care of the brother and sister. But no sooner had the clerks or the young women found a way of escape from that dreadful establishment than they fled, with rejoicings that increased the already bad name of the Rogrons. New victims were supplied yearly by the indefatigable old father.

From the time she was fifteen, Sylvie Rogron, trained to the simpering of a saleswoman, had two faces, – the amiable face of the seller, the natural face of a sour spinster. Her acquired countenance was a marvellous bit of mimicry. She was all smiles. Her voice, soft and wheedling, gave a commercial charm to business. Her real face was that we have already seen projecting from the half-opened blinds; the mere sight of her would have put to flight the most resolute Cossack of 1815, much as that horde were said to like all kinds of Frenchwomen.

When the letter from the Lorrains reached the brother and sister, they were in mourning for their father, from whom they inherited the house which had been as good as stolen from Pierrette's grandmother, also certain lands bought by their father, and certain moneys acquired by usurious loans

and mortgages to the peasantry, whose bits of ground the old drunkard expected to possess. The yearly taking of stock was just over. The price of the "Family Sister" had, at last, been paid in full. The Rogrons owned about sixty thousand francs' worth of merchandise, forty thousand in a bank or in their cash-box, and the value of their business. Sitting on a bench covered with striped-green Utrecht velvet placed in a square recess just behind their private counter (the counter of their forewoman being similar and directly opposite) the brother and sister consulted as to what they should do. All retail shopkeepers aspire to become members of the bourgeoisie. By selling the good-will of their business, the pair would have over a hundred and fifty thousand francs, not counting the inheritance from their father. By placing their present available property in the public Funds, they would each obtain about four thousand francs a year, and by taking the proceeds of their business, when sold, they could repair and improve the house they inherited from their father, which would thus be a good investment. They could then go and live in a house of their own in Provins. Their forewoman was the daughter of a rich farmer at Donnemarie, burdened with nine children, to whom he had endeavored to give a good start in life, being aware that at his death his property, divided into nine parts, would be but little for any one of them. In five years, however, the man had lost seven children, – a fact which made the forewoman so interesting that Rogron had tried, unsuccessfully, to get her to marry him; but she showed an aversion for her master which baffled his manoeuvres. Besides, Mademoiselle Sylvie was not in favor of the match; in fact, she steadily opposed her brother's marriage, and sought, instead, to make the shrewd young woman their successor.

No passing observer can form the least idea of the cryptogramic existence of a certain class of shopkeepers; he looks at them and asks himself, "On what, and why, do they live? whence have they come? where do they go?" He is lost in such questions, but finds no answer to them. To discover the false seed of poesy which lies in those heads and fructifies in those lives, it is necessary to dig into them; and when we do that we soon come to a thin subsoil beneath the surface. The Parisian shopkeeper nurtures his soul on some hope or other, more or less attainable, without which he would doubtless perish. One dreams of building or managing a theatre; another longs for the honors of mayoralty; this one desires a country-house, ten miles from Paris with a so-called "park," which he will adorn with statues of tinted plaster and fountains which squirt mere threads of water, but on which he will spend a mint of money; others, again, dream of distinction and a high grade in the National Guard. Provins, that terrestrial paradise, filled the brother and sister with the fanatical longings which all the lovely towns of France inspire in their inhabitants. Let us say it to the glory of La Champagne, this love is warranted. Provins, one of the most charming towns in all France, rivals Frangistan and the valley of Cashmere; not only does it contain the poesy of Saadi, the Persian Homer, but it offers many pharmaceutical treasures to medical science. The crusades brought roses from Jericho to this enchanting valley, where by chance they gained new charms while losing none of their colors. The Provins roses are known the world over. But Provins is not only the French Persia, it is also Baden, Aix, Cheltenham, – for it has medicinal springs. This was the spot which appeared from time to time before the eyes of the two shopkeepers in the muddy regions of Saint-Denis.

After crossing the gray plains which lie between La Ferte-Gaucher and Provins, a desert and yet productive, a desert of wheat, you reach a hill. Suddenly you behold at your feet a town watered by two rivers; at the feet of the rock on which you stand stretches a verdant valley, full of enchanting lines and fugitive horizons. If you come from Paris you will pass through the whole length of Provins on the everlasting highroad of France, which here skirts the hillside and is encumbered with beggars and blind men, who will follow you with their pitiful voices while you try to examine the unexpected picturesqueness of the region. If you come from Troyes you will approach the town on the valley side. The chateau, the old town, and its former ramparts are terraced on the hillside, the new town is below. They go by the names of Upper and Lower Provins. The upper is an airy town with steep streets commanding fine views, surrounded by sunken road-ways and ravines filled with chestnut trees which gash the sides of the hill with their deep gulleys. The upper town is silent, clean, solemn,

surmounted by the imposing ruins of the old chateau. The lower is a town of mills, watered by the Voulzie and the Durtain, two rivers of Brie, narrow, sluggish, and deep; a town of inns, shops, retired merchants; filled with diligences, travelling-carriages, and waggons. The two towns, or rather this town with its historical memories, its melancholy ruins, the gaiety of its valley, the romantic charm of its ravines filled with tangled shrubbery and wildflowers, its rivers banked with gardens, excites the love of all its children, who do as the Auvergnats, the Savoyards, in fact, all French folks do, namely, leave Provins to make their fortunes, and always return. "Die in one's form," the proverb made for hares and faithful souls, seems also the motto of a Provins native.

Thus the two Rogrons thought constantly of their dear Provins. While Jerome sold his thread he saw the Upper town; as he piled up the cards on which were buttons he contemplated the valley; when he rolled and unrolled his ribbons he followed the shining rivers. Looking up at his shelves he saw the ravines where he had often escaped his father's anger and gone a-nutting or gathering blackberries. But the little square in the Lower town was the chief object of his thoughts; he imagined how he could improve his house: he dreamed of a new front, new bedrooms, a salon, a billiard-room, a dining-room, and the kitchen garden out of which he would make an English pleasure-ground, with lawns, grottos, fountains, and statuary. The bedrooms at present occupied by the brother and sister, on the second floor of a house with three windows front and six storeys high in the rue Saint-Denis, were furnished with the merest necessities, yet no one in Paris had finer furniture than they – in fancy. When Jerome walked the streets he stopped short, struck with admiration at the handsome things in the upholsterers' windows, and at the draperies he coveted for his house. When he came home he would say to his sister: "I found in such a shop, such and such a piece of furniture that will just do for the salon." The next day he would buy another piece, and another, and so on. He rejected, the following month, the articles of the months before. The Budget itself, could not have paid for his architectural schemes. He wanted everything he saw, but abandoned each thing for the last thing. When he saw the balconies of new houses, when he studied external ornamentation, he thought all such things, mouldings, carvings, etc., out of place in Paris. "Ah!" he would say, "those fine things would look much better at Provins." When he stood on his doorstep leaning against the lintel, digesting his morning meal, with a vacant eye, the mercer was gazing at the house of his fancy gilded by the sun of his dream; he walked in his garden; he heard the jet from his fountain falling in pearly drops upon a slab of limestone; he played on his own billiard-table; he gathered his own flowers.

Sylvie, on the other hand, was thinking so deeply, pen in hand, that she forgot to scold the clerks; she was receiving the bourgeoisie of Provins, she was looking at herself in the mirrors of her salon, and admiring the beauties of a marvellous cap. The brother and sister began to think the atmosphere of the rue Saint-Denis unhealthy, and the smell of the mud in the markets made them long for the fragrance of the Provins roses. They were the victims of a genuine nostalgia, and also of a monomania, frustrated at present by the necessity of selling their tapes and bobbins before they could leave Paris. The promised land of the valley of Provins attracted these Hebrews all the more because they had really suffered, and for a long time, as they crossed breathlessly the sandy wastes of a mercer's business.

The Lorrains' letter reached them in the midst of meditations inspired by this glorious future. They knew scarcely anything about their cousin, Pierrette Lorrain. Their father got possession of the Auffray property after they left home, and the old man said little to any one of his business affairs. They hardly remembered their aunt Lorrain. It took an hour of genealogical discussion before they made her out to be the younger sister of their own mother by the second marriage of their grandfather Auffray. It immediately struck them that this second marriage had been fatally injurious to their interests by dividing the Auffray property between two daughters. In times past they had heard their father, who was given to sneering, complain of it.

The brother and sister considered the application of the Lorrains from the point of view of such reminiscences, which were not at all favorable for Pierrette. To take charge of an orphan, a girl,

a cousin, who might become their legal heir in case neither of them married, – this was a matter that needed discussion. The question was considered and debated under all its aspects. In the first place, they had never seen Pierrette. Then, what a trouble it would be to have a young girl to look after. Wouldn't it commit them to some obligations towards her? Could they send the girl away if they did not like her? Besides, wouldn't they have to marry her? and if Jerome found a yoke-mate among the heiresses of Provins they ought to keep all their property for his children. A yokemate for Jerome, according to Sylvie, meant a stupid, rich and ugly girl who would let herself be governed. They decided to refuse the Lorrain request. Sylvie agreed to write the answer. Business being rather urgent just then she delayed writing, and the forewoman coming forward with an offer for the stock and good-will of the "Family Sister," which the brother and sister accepted, the matter went entirely out of the old maid's mind.

Sylvie Rogron and her brother departed for Provins four years before the time when the coming of Brigaut threw such excitement into Pierrette's life. But the doings of the pair after their arrival at Provins are as necessary to relate as their life in Paris; for Provins was destined to be not less fatal to Pierrette than the commercial antecedents of her cousins!

III. PATHOLOGY OF RETIRED MERCERS

When the petty shopkeeper who has come to Paris from the provinces returns to the provinces from Paris he brings with him a few ideas; then he loses them in the habits and ways of provincial life into which he plunges, and his reforming notions leave him. From this there do result, however, certain trifling, slow, successive changes by which Paris scratches the surface of the provincial towns. This process marks the transition of the ex-shopkeeper into the substantial bourgeois, but it acts like an illness upon him. No retail shopkeeper can pass with impunity from his perpetual chatter into dead silence, from his Parisian activity to the stillness of provincial life. When these worthy persons have laid by property they spend a portion of it on some desire over which they have long brooded and into which they now turn their remaining impulses, no longer restrained by force of will. Those who have not been nursing a fixed idea either travel or rush into the political interests of their municipality. Others take to hunting or fishing and torment their farmers or tenants; others again become usurers or stock-jobbers. As for the scheme of the Rogrons, brother and sister, we know what that was; they had to satisfy an imperious desire to handle the trowel and remodel their old house into a charming new one.

This fixed idea produced upon the square of Lower Provins the front of the building which Brigaut had been examining; also the interior arrangements of the house and its handsome furniture. The contractor did not drive a nail without consulting the owners, without requiring them to sign the plans and specifications, without explaining to them at full length and in every detail the nature of each article under discussion, where it was manufactured, and what were its various prices. As to the choicer things, each, they were told, had been used by Monsieur Tiphaine, or Madame Julliard, or Monsieur the mayor, the notables of the place. The idea of having things done as the rich bourgeois of Provins did them carried the day for the contractor.

“Oh, if Monsieur Garceland has it in his house, put it in,” said Mademoiselle Rogron. “It must be all right; his taste is good.”

“Sylvie, see, he wants us to have ovolos in the cornice of the corridor.”

“Do you call those ovolos?”

“Yes, mademoiselle.”

“What an odd name! I never heard it before.”

“But you have seen the thing?”

“Yes.”

“Do you understand Latin?”

“No.”

“Well, it means eggs – from the Latin *ovum*.”

“What queer fellows you are, you architects!” cried Rogron. “It is stepping on egg-shells to deal with you.”

“Shall we paint the corridor?” asked the builder.

“Good heavens, no!” cried Sylvie. “That would be five hundred francs more!”

“Oh, but the salon and the staircase are too pretty not to have the corridor decorated too,” said the man. “That little Madame Lesourd had hers painted last year.”

“And now, her husband, as king’s attorney, is obliged to leave Provins.”

“Ah, he’ll be chief justice some of these days,” said the builder.

“How about Monsieur Tiphaine?”

“Monsieur Tiphaine? he’s got a pretty wife and is sure to get on. He’ll go to Paris. Shall we paint the corridor?”

“Yes, yes,” said Rogron. “The Lesourds must be made to see that we are as good as they.”

The first year after the Rogrons returned to Provins was entirely taken up by such discussions, by the pleasure of watching the workmen, by the surprise occasioned to the townspeople and the replies to questions of all kinds which resulted therefrom, and also by the attempts made by Sylvie and her brother to be socially intimate with the principal families of Provins.

The Rogrons had never gone into any society; they had never left their shop, knowing absolutely no one in Paris, and now they were athirst for the pleasures of social life. On their arrival in Provins they found their former masters in Paris (long since returned to the provinces), Monsieur and Madame Julliard, lately of the “Chinese Worm,” their children and grandchildren; the Guepin family, or rather the Guepin clan, the youngest scion of which now kept the “Three Distaffs”; and thirdly, Madame Guenee from whom they had purchased the “Family Sister,” and whose three daughters were married and settled in Provins. These three races, Julliard, Guepin, and Guenee, had spread through the town like dog-grass through a lawn. The mayor, Monsieur Garceland, was the son-in-law of Monsieur Guepin; the curate, Abbe Peroux, was own brother to Madame Julliard; the judge, Monsieur Tiphaine junior, was brother to Madame Guenee, who signed herself “*nee* Tiphaine.”

The queen of the town was the beautiful Madame Tiphaine junior, only daughter of Madame Roguin, the rich wife of a former notary in Paris, whose name was never mentioned. Clever, delicate, and pretty, married in the provinces to please her mother, who for special reasons did not want her with her, and took her from a convent only a few days before the wedding, Melanie Tiphaine considered herself an exile in Provins, where she behaved to admiration. Handsomely dowered, she still had hopes. As for Monsieur Tiphaine, his old father had made to his eldest daughter Madame Guenee such advances on her inheritance that an estate worth eight thousand francs a year, situated within fifteen miles of Provins, was to come wholly to him. Consequently the Tiphaines would possess, sooner or later, some forty thousand francs a year, and were not “badly off,” as they say. The one overwhelming desire of the beautiful Madame Tiphaine was to get Monsieur Tiphaine elected deputy. As deputy he would become a judge in Paris; and she was firmly resolved to push him up into the Royal courts. For these reasons she tickled all vanities and strove to please all parties; and – what is far more difficult – she succeeded. Twice a week she received the bourgeoisie of Provins at her house in the Upper town. This intelligent young woman of twenty had not as yet made a single blunder or misstep on the slippery path she had taken. She gratified everybody’s self-love, and petted their hobbies; serious with the serious, a girl with girls, instinctively a mother with mothers, gay with young wives and disposed to help them, gracious to all, – in short, a pearl, a treasure, the pride of Provins. She had never yet said a word of her intentions and wishes, but all the electors of Provins were awaiting the time when their dear Monsieur Tiphaine had reached the required age for nomination. Every man in the place, certain of his own talents, regarded the future deputy as his particular friend, his protector. Of course, Monsieur Tiphaine would attain to honors; he would be Keeper of the Seals, and then, what wouldn’t he do for Provins!

Such were the pleasant means by which Madame Tiphaine had come to rule over the little town. Madame Guenee, Monsieur Tiphaine’s sister, after having married her eldest daughter to Monsieur Lesourd, prosecuting attorney, her second to Monsieur Martener, the doctor, and the third to Monsieur Auffray, the notary, had herself married Monsieur Galardon, the collector. Mother and daughters all considered Monsieur Tiphaine as the richest and ablest man in the family. The prosecuting attorney had the strongest interest in sending his uncle to Paris, expecting to step into his shoes as judge of the local court of Provins. The four ladies formed a sort of court round Madame Tiphaine, whose ideas and advice they followed on all occasions. Monsieur Julliard, the eldest son of the old merchant, who had married the only daughter of a rich farmer, set up a sudden, secret, and disinterested passion for Madame Tiphaine, that angel descended from the Parisian skies. The clever Melanie, too clever to involve herself with Julliard, but quite capable of keeping him in the condition of Amadis and making the most of his folly, advised him to start a journal, intending herself to play the part of Egeria. For the last two years, therefore, Julliard, possessed by his romantic passion, had

published the said newspaper, called the “Bee-hive,” which contained articles literary, archaeological, and medical, written in the family. The advertisements paid expenses. The subscriptions, two hundred in all, made the profits. Every now and then melancholy verses, totally incomprehensible in La Brie, appeared, addressed, “TO HER!!!” with three exclamation marks. The clan Julliard was thus united to the other clans, and the salon of Madame Tiphaine became, naturally, the first in the town. The few aristocrats who lived in Provins were, of course, apart, and formed a single salon in the Upper town, at the house of the old Comtesse de Breautey.

During the first six months of their transplantation, the Rogrons, favored by their former acquaintance with several of these people, were received, first by Madame Julliard the elder, and by the former Madame Guenee, now Madame Galardon (from whom they had bought their business), and next, after a good deal of difficulty, by Madame Tiphaine. All parties wished to study the Rogrons before admitting them. It was difficult, of course, to keep out merchants of the rue Saint-Denis, originally from Provins, who had returned to the town to spend their fortunes. Still, the object of all society is to amalgamate persons of equal wealth, education, manners, customs, accomplishments, and character. Now the Guepins, Guenees, and Julliards had a better position among the bourgeoisie than the Rogrons, whose father had been held in contempt on account of his private life, and his conduct in the matter of the Auffray property, – the facts of which were known to the notary Auffray, Madame Galardon’s son-in-law.

In the social life of these people, to which Madame Tiphaine had given a certain tone of elegance, all was homogeneous; the component parts understood each other, knew each other’s characters, and behaved and conversed in a manner that was agreeable to all. The Rogrons flattered themselves that being received by Monsieur Garceland, the mayor, they would soon be on good terms with all the best families in the town. Sylvie applied herself to learn boston. Rogron, incapable of playing a game, twirled his thumbs and had nothing to say except to discourse on his new house. Words seemed to choke him; he would get up, try to speak, become frightened, and sit down again, with comical distortion of the lips. Sylvie naively betrayed her natural self at cards. Sharp, irritable, whining when she lost, insolent when she won, nagging and quarrelsome, she annoyed her partners as much as her adversaries, and became the scourge of society. And yet, possessed by a silly, unconcealed ambition, Rogron and his sister were bent on playing a part in the society of a little town already in possession of a close corporation of twelve allied families. Allowing that the restoration of their house had cost them thirty thousand francs, the brother and sister possessed between them at least ten thousand francs a year. This they considered wealth, and with it they endeavored to impress society, which immediately took the measure of their vulgarity, crass ignorance, and foolish envy. On the evening when they were presented to the beautiful Madame Tiphaine, who had already eyed them at Madame Garceland’s and at Madame Julliard the elder’s, the queen of the town remarked to Julliard junior, who stayed a few moments after the rest of the company to talk with her and her husband: —

“You all seem to be taken with those Rogrons.”

“No, no,” said Amadis, “they bore my mother and annoy my wife. When Mademoiselle Sylvie was apprenticed, thirty years ago, to my father, none of them could endure her.”

“I have a great mind,” said Madame Tiphaine, putting her pretty foot on the bar of the fender, “to make it understood that my salon is not an inn.”

Julliard raised his eyes to the ceiling, as if to say, “Good heavens? what wit, what intellect!”

“I wish my society to be select; and it certainly will not be if I admit those Rogrons.”

“They have neither heart, nor mind, nor manners”; said Monsieur Tiphaine. “If, after selling thread for twenty years, as my sister did for example – ”

“Your sister, my dear,” said his wife in a parenthesis, “cannot be out of place in any salon.”

“ – if,” he continued, “people are stupid enough not to throw off the shop and polish their manners, if they don’t know any better than to mistake the Counts of Champagne for the *accounts* of a wine-shop, as Rogron did this evening, they had better, in my opinion, stay at home.”

“They are simply impudent,” said Julliard. “To hear them talk you would suppose there was no other handsome house in Provins but theirs. They want to crush us; and after all, they have hardly enough to live on.”

“If it was only the brother,” said Madame Tiphaine, “one might put up with him; he is not so aggressive. Give him a Chinese puzzle and he will stay in a corner quietly enough; it would take him a whole winter to find it out. But Mademoiselle Sylvie, with that voice like a hoarse hyena and those lobster-claws of hands! Don’t repeat all this, Julliard.”

When Julliard had departed the little woman said to her husband: —

“I have aborigines enough whom I am forced to receive; these two will fairly kill me. With your permission, I shall deprive myself of their society.”

“You are mistress in your own house,” replied he; “but that will make enemies. The Rogrons will fling themselves into the opposition, which hitherto has had no real strength in Provins. That Rogron is already intimate with Baron Gouraud and the lawyer Vinet.”

“Then,” said Melanie, laughing, “they will do you some service. Where there are no opponents, there is no triumph. A liberal conspiracy, an illegal cabal, a struggle of any kind, will bring you into the foreground.”

The justice looked at his young wife with a sort of alarmed admiration.

The next day it was whispered about that the Rogrons had not altogether succeeded in Madame Tiphaine’s salon. That lady’s speech about an inn was immensely admired. It was a whole month before she returned Mademoiselle Sylvie’s visit. Insolence of this kind is very much noticed in the provinces.

During the evening which Sylvie had spent at Madame Tiphaine’s a disagreeable scene occurred between herself and old Madame Julliard while playing boston, apropos of a trick which Sylvie declared the old lady had made her lose on purpose; for the old maid, who liked to trip others, could never endure the same game on herself. The next time she was invited out the mistress took care to make up the card-tables before she arrived; so that Sylvie was reduced to wandering from table to table as an onlooker, the players glancing at her with scornful eyes. At Madame Julliard senior’s house, they played whist, a game Sylvie did not know.

The old maid at last understood that she was under a ban; but she had no conception of the reason of it. She fancied herself an object of jealousy to all these persons. After a time she and her brother received no invitations, but they still persisted in paying evening visits. Satirical persons made fun of them, – not spitefully, but amusingly; inveigling them to talk absurdly about the eggs in their cornice, and their wonderful cellar of wine, the like of which was not in Provins.

Before long the Rogron house was completely finished, and the brother and sister then resolved to give several sumptuous dinners, as much to return the civilities they had received as to exhibit their luxury. The invited guests accepted from curiosity only. The first dinner was given to the leading personages of the town; to Monsieur and Madame Tiphaine, with whom, however the Rogrons had never dined; to Monsieur and Madame Julliard, senior and junior; to Monsieur Lesourd, Monsieur le cure, and Monsieur and Madame Galardon. It was one of those interminable provincial dinners, where you sit at table from five to nine o’clock. Madame Tiphaine had introduced into Provins the Parisian custom of taking leave as soon as coffee had been served. On this occasion she had company at home and was anxious to get away. The Rogrons accompanied her husband and herself to the street door, and when they returned to the salon, disconcerted at not being able to keep their chief guests, the rest of the party were preparing to imitate Madame Tiphaine’s fashion with cruel provincial promptness.

“They won’t see our salon lighted up,” said Sylvie, “and that’s the show of the house.”

The Rogrons had counted on surprising their guests. It was the first time any one had been admitted to the now celebrated house, and the company assembled at Madame Tiphaine's was eagerly awaiting her opinion of the marvels of the "Rogron palace."

"Well!" cried little Madame Martener, "you've seen the Louvre; tell us all about it."

"All? Well, it would be like the dinner, – not much."

"But do describe it."

"Well, to begin with, that front door, the gilded grating of which we have all admired," said Madame Tiphaine, "opens upon a long corridor which divides the house unequally; on the right side there is one window, on the other, two. At the garden end, the corridor opens with a glass door upon a portico with steps to the lawn, where there's a sun dial and a plaster statue of Spartacus, painted to imitate bronze. Behind the kitchen, the builder has put the staircase, and a sort of larder which we are spared the sight of. The staircase, painted to imitate black marble with yellow veins, turns upon itself like those you see in cafes leading from the ground-floor to the entresol. The balustrade, of walnut with brass ornaments and dangerously slight, was pointed out to us as one of the seven wonders of the world. The cellar stairs run under it. On the other side of the corridor is the dining-room, which communicates by folding-doors with a salon of equal size, the windows of which look on the garden."

"Dear me, is there no ante-chamber?" asked Madame Auffray.

"The corridor, full of draughts, answers for an ante-chamber," replied Madame Tiphaine. "Our friends have had, they assured us, the eminently national, liberal, constitutional, and patriotic feeling to use none but French woods in the house; so the floor in the dining-room is chestnut, the sideboards, tables, and chairs, of the same. White calico window-curtains, with red borders, are held back by vulgar red straps; these magnificent draperies run on wooden curtain rods ending in brass lion's-paws. Above one of the sideboards hangs a dial suspended by a sort of napkin in gilded bronze, – an idea that seemed to please the Rogrons hugely. They tried to make me admire the invention; all I could manage to say was that if it was ever proper to wrap a napkin round a dial it was certainly in a dining-room. On the sideboard were two huge lamps like those on the counter of a restaurant. Above the other sideboard hung a barometer, excessively ornate, which seems to play a great part in their existence; Rogron gazed at it as he might at his future wife. Between the two windows is a white porcelain stove in a niche overloaded with ornament. The walls glow with a magnificent paper, crimson and gold, such as you see in the same restaurants, where, no doubt, the Rogrons chose it. Dinner was served on white and gold china, with a dessert service of light blue with green flowers, but they showed us another service in earthenware for everyday use. Opposite to each sideboard was a large cupboard containing linen. All was clean, new, and horribly sharp in tone. However, I admit the dining-room; it has some character, though disagreeable; it represents that of the masters of the house. But there is no enduring the five engravings that hang on the walls; the Minister of the Interior ought really to frame a law against them. One was Poniatowski jumping into the Elster; the others, Napoleon pointing a cannon, the defence at Clichy, and the two Mazepas, all in gilt frames of the vulgarest description, – fit to carry off the prize of disgust. Oh! how much I prefer Madame Julliard's pastels of fruit, those excellent Louis XV. pastels, which are in keeping with the old dining-room and its gray panels, – defaced by age, it is true, but they possess the true provincial characteristics that go well with old family silver, precious china, and our simple habits. The provinces are provinces; they are only ridiculous when they mimic Paris. I prefer this old salon of my husband's forefathers, with its heavy curtains of green and white damask, the Louis XV. mantelpiece, the twisted pier-glasses, the old mirrors with their beaded mouldings, and the venerable card tables. Yes, I prefer my old Sevres vases in royal blue, mounted on copper, my clock with those impossible flowers, that rococco chandelier, and the tapestried furniture, to all the finery of the Rogron salon."

"What is the salon like?" said Monsieur Martener, delighted with the praise the handsome Parisian bestowed so adroitly on the provinces.

"As for the salon, it is all red, – the red Mademoiselle Sylvie turns when she loses at cards."

“Sylvan-red,” said Monsieur Tiphaine, whose sparkling saying long remained in the vocabulary of Provins.

“Window-curtains, red; furniture, red; mantelpiece, red, veined yellow, candelabra and clock ditto mounted on bronze, common and heavy in design, – Roman standards with Greek foliage! Above the clock is that inevitable good-natured lion which looks at you with a simper, the lion of ornamentation, with a big ball under his feet, symbol of the decorative lion, who passes his life holding a black ball, – exactly like a deputy of the Left. Perhaps it is meant as a constitutional myth. The face of the clock is curious. The glass over the chimney is framed in that new fashion of applied mouldings which is so trumpery and vulgar. From the ceiling hangs a chandelier carefully wrapped in green muslin, and rightly too, for it is in the worst taste, the sharpest tint of bronze with hideous ornaments. The walls are covered with a red flock paper to imitate velvet enclosed in panels, each panel decorated with a chromo-lithograph in one of those frames festooned with stucco flowers to represent wood-carving. The furniture, in cashmere and elm-wood, consists, with classic uniformity, of two sofas, two easy-chairs, two armchairs, and six common chairs. A vase in alabaster, called a la Medicis, kept under glass stands on a table between the windows; before the windows, which are draped with magnificent red silk curtains and lace curtains under them, are card-tables. The carpet is Aubusson, and you may be sure the Rogrons did not fail to lay hands on that most vulgar of patterns, large flowers on a red ground. The room looks as if no one ever lived there; there are no books, no engravings, none of those little knick-knacks we all have lying about,” added Madame Tiphaine, glancing at her own table covered with fashionable trifles, albums, and little presents given to her by friends; “and there are no flowers, – it is all cold and barren, like Mademoiselle Sylvie herself. Buffon says the style is the man, and certainly salons have styles of their own.”

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