HONORÉ DE BALZAC

FERRAGUS, CHIEF OF THE DÉVORANTS

Оноре де Бальзак

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Содержание

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PREFACE

Thirteen men were banded together in Paris under the Empire, all imbued with one and the same sentiment, all gifted with sufficient energy to be faithful to the same thought, with sufficient honor among themselves never to betray one another even if their interests clashed; and sufficiently wily and politic to conceal the sacred ties that united them, sufficiently strong to maintain themselves above the law, bold enough to undertake all things, and fortunate enough to succeed, nearly always, in their undertakings; having run the greatest dangers, but keeping silence if defeated; inaccessible to fear; trembling neither before princes, nor executioners, not even before innocence; accepting each other for such as they were, without social prejudices, – criminals, no doubt, but certainly remarkable through certain of the qualities that make great men, and recruiting their number only among men of mark. That nothing might be lacking to the sombre and mysterious poesy of their history, these Thirteen men have remained to this day unknown; though all have realized the most chimerical ideas that the fantastic power falsely attributed to the Manfreds, the Fausts, and the Melmoths can suggest to the imagination. To-day, they are broken up, or, at least, dispersed; they have peaceably put their necks once more under the yoke of civil law, just as Morgan, that Achilles among pirates, transformed himself from a buccaneering scourge to a quiet colonist, and spent, without remorse, around his domestic hearth the millions gathered in blood by the lurid light of flames and slaughter.

Since the death of Napoleon, circumstances, about which the author must keep silence, have still farther dissolved the original bond of this secret society, always extraordinary, sometimes sinister, as though it lived in the blackest pages of Mrs. Radcliffe. A somewhat strange permission to relate in his own way a few of the adventures of these men (while respecting certain susceptibilities) has only recently been given to him by one of those anonymous heroes to whom all society was once occultly subjected. In this permission the writer fancied he detected a vague desire for personal celebrity.

This man, apparently still young, with fair hair and blue eyes, whose sweet, clear voice seemed to denote a feminine soul, was pale of face and mysterious in manner; he conversed affably, declared himself not more than forty years of age, and apparently belonged to the very highest social classes. The name which he assumed must have been fictitious; his person was unknown in society. Who was he? That, no one has ever known.

Perhaps, in confiding to the author the extraordinary matters which he related to him, this mysterious person may have wished to see them in a manner reproduced, and thus enjoy the emotions they were certain to bring to the hearts of the masses, – a feeling analogous to that of Macpherson when the name of his creation Ossian was transcribed into all languages. That was certainly, for the Scotch lawyer, one of the keenest, or at any rate the rarest, sensations a man could give himself. Is it not the incognito of genius? To write the “Itinerary from Paris to Jerusalem” is to take a share in the human glory of a single epoch; but to endow his native land with another Homer, was not that usurping the work of God?

The author knows too well the laws of narration to be ignorant of the pledges this short preface is contracting for him; but he also knows enough of the history of the *Thirteen* to be certain that his present tale will never be thought below the interest inspired by this programme. Dramas steeped in blood, comedies filled with terror, romantic tales through which rolled heads mysteriously decapitated, have been confided to him. If readers were not surfeited with horrors served up to them of late in cold blood, he might reveal the calm atrocities, the surpassing tragedies concealed under family life. But he chooses in preference gentler events, – those where scenes of purity succeed the

tempests of passion; where woman is radiant with virtue and beauty. To the honor of the *Thirteen* be it said that there are such scenes in their history, which may have the honor of being some day published as a foil of tales to listeners, – that race apart from others, so curiously energetic, and so interesting in spite of its crimes.

An author ought to be above converting his tale, when the tale is true, into a species of surprise-game, and of taking his readers, as certain novellists do, through many volumes and from cellar to cellar, to show them the dry bones of a dead body, and tell them, by way of conclusion, that *that* is what has frightened them behind doors, hidden in the arras, or in cellars where the dead man was buried and forgotten. In spite of his aversion for prefaces, the author feels bound to place the following statement at the head of this narrative. Ferragus is a first episode which clings by invisible links to the "History of the *Thirteen*," whose power, naturally acquired, can alone explain certain acts and agencies which would otherwise seem supernatural. Although it is permissible in tellers of tales to have a sort of literary coquetry in becoming historians, they ought to renounce the benefit that may accrue from an odd or fantastic title – on which certain slight successes have been won in the present day. Consequently, the author will now explain, succinctly, the reasons that obliged him to select a title to his book which seems at first sight unnatural.

Ferragus is, according to ancient custom, a name taken by the chief or Grand Master of the Devorants. On the day of their election these chiefs continue whichever of the dynasties of their Order they are most in sympathy with, precisely as the Popes do, on their accession, in connection with pontifical dynasties. Thus the Devorants have "Trempe-la Soupe IX.," "Ferragus XXII.," "Tutanus XIII.," "Masche-Fer IV.," just as the Church has Clement XIV., Gregory VII., Julius II., Alexander VI., etc.

Now, then, who are the Devorants? "Devorant" is the name of one of those tribes of "Companions" that issued in ancient times from the great mystical association formed among the workers of Christianity to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem. Companionism (to coin a word) still exists in France among the people. Its traditions, powerful over minds that are not enlightened, and over men not educated enough to cast aside an oath, might serve the ends of formidable enterprises if some rough-hewn genius were to seize hold of these diverse associations. All the instruments of this Companionism are well-nigh blind. From town to town there has existed from time immemorial, for the use of Companions, an "Obade," – a sort of halting-place, kept by a "Mother," an old woman, half-gypsy, with nothing to lose, knowing everything that happens in her neighborhood, and devoted, either from fear or habit, to the tribe, whose straggling members she feeds and lodges. This people, ever moving and changing, though controlled by immutable customs, has its eyes everywhere, executes, without judging it, a WILL, – for the oldest Companion still belongs to an era when men had faith. Moreover, the whole body professes doctrines that are sufficiently true and sufficiently mysterious to electrify into a sort of tribal loyalty all adepts whenever they obtain even a slight development. The attachment of the Companions to their laws is so passionate that the diverse tribes will fight sanguinary battles with each other in defence of some question of principle.

Happily for our present public safety, when a Devorant is ambitious, he builds houses, lays by his money, and leaves the Order. There is many a curious thing to tell about the "Compagnons du Devoir" [Companions of the Duty], the rivals of the Devorants, and about the different sects of working-men, their usages, their fraternity, and the bond existing between them and the free-masons. But such details would be out of place here. The author must, however, add that under the old monarchy it was not an unknown thing to find a "Trempe-la-Soupe" enslaved to the king sentenced for a hundred and one years to the galleys, but ruling his tribe from there, religiously consulted by it, and when he escaped from his galley, certain of help, succor, and respect, wherever he might be. To see its grand master at the galleys is, to the faithful tribe, only one of those misfortunes for which providence is responsible, and which does not release the Devorants from obeying a power created by them to be above them. It is but the passing exile of their legitimate king, always a king for them.

Thus we see the romantic prestige attaching to the name of Ferragus and to that of the Devorants completely dissipated.

As for the *Thirteen*, they were all men of the stamp of Trelawney, Lord Byron's friend, who was, they say, the original of his "Corsair." They were all fatalists, men of nerve and poesy, weary of leading flat and empty lives, driven toward Asiatic enjoyments by forces all the more excessive because, long dormant, they awoke furious. One of them, after re-reading "Venice Preserved," and admiring the sublime union of Pierre and Jaffier, began to reflect on the virtues shown by men who are outlawed by society, on the honesty of galley-slaves, the faithfulness of thieves among each other, the privileges of exorbitant power which such men know how to win by concentrating all ideas into a single will. He saw that Man is greater than men. He concluded that society ought to belong wholly to those distinguished beings who, to natural intelligence, acquired wisdom, and fortune, add a fanaticism hot enough to fuse into one casting these different forces. That done, their occult power, vast in action and in intensity, against which the social order would be helpless, would cast down all obstacles, blast all other wills, and give to each the devilish power of all. This world apart within the world, hostile to the world, admitting none of the world's ideas, not recognizing any law, not submitting to any conscience but that of necessity, obedient to a devotion only, acting with every faculty for a single associate when one of their number asked for the assistance of all, – this life of filibusters in lemon kid gloves and cabriolets; this intimate union of superior beings, cold and sarcastic, smiling and cursing in the midst of a false and puerile society; this certainty of forcing all things to serve an end, of plotting a vengeance that could not fail of living in thirteen hearts; this happiness of nurturing a secret hatred in the face of men, and of being always in arms against this; this ability to withdraw to the sanctuary of self with one idea more than even the most remarkable of men could have, – this religion of pleasure and egotism cast so strong a spell over Thirteen men that they revived the society of Jesuits to the profit of the devil.

It was horrible and stupendous; but the compact was made, and it lasted precisely because it appeared to be so impossible.

There was, therefore, in Paris a brotherhood of *Thirteen*, who belonged to each other absolutely, but ignored themselves as absolutely before the world. At night they met, like conspirators, hiding no thought, disposing each and all of a common fortune, like that of the Old Man of the Mountain; having their feet in all salons, their hands in all money-boxes, and making all things serve their purpose or their fancy without scruple. No chief commanded them; no one member could arrogate to himself that power. The most eager passion, the most exacting circumstance, alone had the right to pass first. They were Thirteen unknown kings, – but true kings, more than ordinary kings and judges and executioners, – men who, having made themselves wings to roam through society from depth to height, disdained to be anything in the social sphere because they could be all. If the present writer ever learns the reasons of their abdication of this power, he will take occasion to tell them.[1]

Now, with this brief explanation, he may be allowed to begin the tale of certain episodes in the history of the *Thirteen*, which have more particularly attracted him by the Parisian flavor of their details and the whimsicality of their contrasts.

[1] See Theophile Gautier's account of the society of the "Cheval Rouge." Memoir of Balzac. Roberts Brothers, Boston.

CHAPTER I. MADAME JULES

Certain streets in Paris are as degraded as a man covered with infamy; also, there are noble streets, streets simply respectable, young streets on the morality of which the public has not yet formed an opinion; also cut-throat streets, streets older than the age of the oldest dowagers, estimable streets, streets always clean, streets always dirty, working, laboring, and mercantile streets. In short, the streets of Paris have every human quality, and impress us, by what we must call their physiognomy, with certain ideas against which we are defenceless. There are, for instance, streets of a bad neighborhood in which you could not be induced to live, and streets where you would willingly take up your abode. Some streets, like the rue Montmartre, have a charming head, and end in a fish's tail. The rue de la Paix is a wide street, a fine street, yet it wakens none of those gracefully noble thoughts which come to an impressible mind in the middle of the rue Royale, and it certainly lacks the majesty which reigns in the Place Vendome.

If you walk the streets of the Ile Saint-Louis, do not seek the reason of the nervous sadness that lays hold upon you save in the solitude of the spot, the gloomy look of the houses, and the great deserted mansions. This island, the ghost of *fermiers-generaux*, is the Venice of Paris. The Place de la Bourse is voluble, busy, degraded; it is never fine except by moonlight at two in the morning. By day it is Paris epitomized; by night it is a dream of Greece. The rue Traversiere-Saint-Honore – is not that a villainous street? Look at the wretched little houses with two windows on a floor, where vice, crime, and misery abound. The narrow streets exposed to the north, where the sun never comes more than three or four times a year, are the cut-throat streets which murder with impunity; the authorities of the present day do not meddle with them; but in former times the Parliament might perhaps have summoned the lieutenant of police and reprimanded him for the state of things; and it would, at least, have issued some decree against such streets, as it once did against the wigs of the Chapter of Beauvais. And yet Monsieur Benoiston de Chateauneuf has proved that the mortality of these streets is double that of others! To sum up such theories by a single example: is not the rue Fromentin both murderous and profligate!

These observations, incomprehensible out of Paris, will doubtless be understood by musing men of thought and poesy and pleasure, who know, while rambling about Paris, how to harvest the mass of floating interests which may be gathered at all hours within her walls; to them Paris is the most delightful and varied of monsters: here, a pretty woman; farther on, a haggard pauper; here, new as the coinage of a new reign; there, in this corner, elegant as a fashionable woman. A monster, moreover, complete! Its garrets, as it were, a head full of knowledge and genius; its first storeys stomachs repleted; its shops, actual feet, where the busy ambulating crowds are moving. Ah! what an ever-active life the monster leads! Hardly has the last vibration of the last carriage coming from a ball ceased at its heart before its arms are moving at the barriers and it shakes itself slowly into motion. Doors open; turning on their hinges like the membrane of some huge lobster, invisibly manipulated by thirty thousand men or women, of whom each individual occupies a space of six square feet, but has a kitchen, a workshop, a bed, children, a garden, little light to see by, but must see all. Imperceptibly, the articulations begin to crack; motion communicates itself; the street speaks. By mid-day, all is alive; the chimneys smoke, the monster eats; then he roars, and his thousand paws begin to ramp. Splendid spectacle! But, O Paris! he who has not admired your gloomy passages, your gleams and flashes of light, your deep and silent *cul-de-sacs*, who has not listened to your murmurings between midnight and two in the morning, knows nothing as yet of your true poesy, nor of your broad and fantastic contrasts.

There are a few amateurs who never go their way heedlessly; who savor their Paris, so to speak; who know its physiognomy so well that they see every wart, and pimple, and redness. To others, Paris is always that monstrous marvel, that amazing assemblage of activities, of schemes, of thoughts; the

city of a hundred thousand tales, the head of the universe. But to those few, Paris is sad or gay, ugly or beautiful, living or dead; to them Paris is a creature; every man, every fraction of a house is a lobe of the cellular tissue of that great courtesan whose head and heart and fantastic customs they know so well. These men are lovers of Paris; they lift their noses at such or such a corner of a street, certain that they can see the face of a clock; they tell a friend whose tobacco-pouch is empty, "Go down that passage and turn to the left; there's a tobacconist next door to a confectioner, where there's a pretty girl." Rambling about Paris is, to these poets, a costly luxury. How can they help spending precious minutes before the dramas, disasters, faces, and picturesque events which meet us everywhere amid this heaving queen of cities, clothed in posters, – who has, nevertheless, not a single clean corner, so complying is she to the vices of the French nation! Who has not chanced to leave his home early in the morning, intending to go to some extremity of Paris, and found himself unable to get away from the centre of it by the dinner-hour? Such a man will know how to excuse this vagabondizing start upon our tale; which, however, we here sum up in an observation both useful and novel, as far as any observation can be novel in Paris, where there is nothing new, – not even the statue erected yesterday, on which some young gamin has already scribbled his name.

Well, then! there are streets, or ends of streets, there are houses, unknown for the most part to persons of social distinction, to which a woman of that class cannot go without causing cruel and very wounding things to be thought of her. Whether the woman be rich and has a carriage, whether she is on foot, or is disguised, if she enters one of these Parisian defiles at any hour of the day, she compromises her reputation as a virtuous woman. If, by chance, she is there at nine in the evening the conjectures that an observer permits himself to make upon her may prove fearful in their consequences. But if the woman is young and pretty, if she enters a house in one of those streets, if the house has a long, dark, damp, and evil-smelling passage-way, at the end of which flickers the pallid gleam of an oil lamp, and if beneath that gleam appears the horrid face of a withered old woman with fleshless fingers, ah, then! and we say it in the interests of young and pretty women, that woman is lost. She is at the mercy of the first man of her acquaintance who sees her in that Parisian slough. There is more than one street in Paris where such a meeting may lead to a frightful drama, a bloody drama of death and love, a drama of the modern school.

Unhappily, this scene, this modern drama itself, will be comprehended by only a small number of persons; and it is a pity to tell the tale to a public which cannot enter into its local merit. But who can flatter himself that he will ever be understood? We all die unknown – 'tis the saying of women and of authors.

At half-past eight o'clock one evening, in the rue Pagevin, in the days when that street had no wall which did not echo some infamous word, and was, in the direction of the rue Soly, the narrowest and most impassable street in Paris (not excepting the least frequented corner of the most deserted street), – at the beginning of the month of February about thirteen years ago, a young man, by one of those chances which come but once in life, turned the corner of the rue Pagevin to enter the rue des Vieux-Augustins, close to the rue Soly. There, this young man, who lived himself in the rue de Bourbon, saw in a woman near whom he had been unconsciously walking, a vague resemblance to the prettiest woman in Paris; a chaste and delightful person, with whom he was secretly and passionately in love, – a love without hope; she was married. In a moment his heart leaped, an intolerable heat surged from his centre and flowed through all his veins; his back turned cold, the skin of his head crept. He loved, he was young, he knew Paris; and his knowledge did not permit him to be ignorant of all there was of possible infamy in an elegant, rich, young, and beautiful woman walking there, alone, with a furtively criminal step. *She* in that mud! at that hour!

The love that this young man felt for that woman may seem romantic, and all the more so because he was an officer in the Royal Guard. If he had been in the infantry, the affair might have seemed more likely; but, as an officer of rank in the cavalry, he belonged to that French arm which demands rapidity in its conquests and derives as much vanity from its amorous exploits as from its

dashing uniform. But the passion of this officer was a true love, and many young hearts will think it noble. He loved this woman because she was virtuous; he loved her virtue, her modest grace, her imposing saintliness, as the dearest treasures of his hidden passion. This woman was indeed worthy to inspire one of those platonic loves which are found, like flowers amid bloody ruins, in the history of the middle-ages; worthy to be the hidden principle of all the actions of a young man's life; a love as high, as pure as the skies when blue; a love without hope and to which men bind themselves because it can never deceive; a love that is prodigal of unchecked enjoyment, especially at an age when the heart is ardent, the imagination keen, and the eyes of a man see very clearly.

Strange, weird, inconceivable effects may be met with at night in Paris. Only those who have amused themselves by watching those effects have any idea how fantastic a woman may appear there at dusk. At times the creature whom you are following, by accident or design, seems to you light and slender; the stockings, if they are white, make you fancy that the legs must be slim and elegant; the figure though wrapped in a shawl, or concealed by a pelisse, defines itself gracefully and seductively among the shadows; anon, the uncertain gleam thrown from a shop-window or a street lamp bestows a fleeting lustre, nearly always deceptive, on the unknown woman, and fires the imagination, carrying it far beyond the truth. The senses then bestir themselves; everything takes color and animation; the woman appears in an altogether novel aspect; her person becomes beautiful. Behold! she is not a woman, she is a demon, a siren, who is drawing you by magnetic attraction to some respectable house, where the worthy *bourgeoise*, frightened by your threatening step and the clack of your boots, shuts the door in your face without looking at you.

A vacillating gleam, thrown from the shop-window of a shoemaker, suddenly illuminated from the waist down the figure of the woman who was before the young man. Ah! surely, *she* alone had that swaying figure; she alone knew the secret of that chaste gait which innocently set into relief the many beauties of that attractive form. Yes, that was the shawl, and that the velvet bonnet which she wore in the mornings. On her gray silk stockings not a spot, on her shoes not a splash. The shawl held tightly round the bust disclosed, vaguely, its charming lines; and the young man, who had often seen those shoulders at a ball, knew well the treasures that the shawl concealed. By the way a Parisian woman wraps a shawl around her, and the way she lifts her feet in the street, a man of intelligence in such studies can divine the secret of her mysterious errand. There is something, I know not what, of quivering buoyancy in the person, in the gait; the woman seems to weigh less; she steps, or rather, she glides like a star, and floats onward led by a thought which exhales from the folds and motion of her dress. The young man hastened his step, passed the woman, and then turned back to look at her. Pst! she had disappeared into a passage-way, the grated door of which and its bell still rattled and sounded. The young man walked back to the alley and saw the woman reach the farther end, where she began to mount – not without receiving the obsequious bow of an old portress – a winding staircase, the lower steps of which were strongly lighted; she went up buoyantly, eagerly, as though impatient.

"Impatient for what?" said the young man to himself, drawing back to lean against a wooden railing on the other side of the street. He gazed, unhappy man, at the different storeys of the house, with the keen attention of a detective searching for a conspirator.

It was one of those houses of which there are thousands in Paris, ignoble, vulgar, narrow, yellowish in tone, with four storeys and three windows on each floor. The outer blinds of the first floor were closed. Where was she going? The young man fancied he heard the tinkle of a bell on the second floor. As if in answer to it, a light began to move in a room with two windows strongly illuminated, which presently lit up the third window, evidently that of a first room, either the salon or the dining-room of the apartment. Instantly the outline of a woman's bonnet showed vaguely on the window, and a door between the two rooms must have closed, for the first was dark again, while the two other windows resumed their ruddy glow. At this moment a voice said, "Hi, there!" and the young man was conscious of a blow on his shoulder.

"Why don't you pay attention?" said the rough voice of a workman, carrying a plank on his shoulder. The man passed on. He was the voice of Providence saying to the watcher: "What are you meddling with? Think of your own duty; and leave these Parisians to their own affairs."

The young man crossed his arms; then, as no one beheld him, he suffered tears of rage to flow down his cheeks unchecked. At last the sight of the shadows moving behind the lighted windows gave him such pain that he looked elsewhere and noticed a hackney-coach, standing against a wall in the upper part of the rue des Vieux-Augustins, at a place where there was neither the door of a house, nor the light of a shop-window.

Was it she? Was it not she? Life or death to a lover! This lover waited. He stood there during a century of twenty minutes. After that the woman came down, and he then recognized her as the one whom he secretly loved. Nevertheless, he wanted still to doubt. She went to the hackney-coach, and got into it.

"The house will always be there and I can search it later," thought the young man, following the carriage at a run, to solve his last doubts; and soon he did so.

The carriage stopped in the rue de Richelieu before a shop for artificial flowers, close to the rue de Menars. The lady got out, entered the shop, sent out the money to pay the coachman, and presently left the shop herself, on foot, after buying a bunch of marabouts. Marabouts for her black hair! The officer beheld her, through the window-panes, placing the feathers to her head to see the effect, and he fancied he could hear the conversation between herself and the shop-woman.

"Oh! madame, nothing is more suitable for brunettes: brunettes have something a little too strongly marked in their lines, and marabouts give them just that *flow* which they lack. Madame la Duchesse de Langeais says they give a woman something vague, Ossianic, and very high-bred."

"Very good; send them to me at once."

Then the lady turned quickly toward the rue de Menars, and entered her own house. When the door closed on her, the young lover, having lost his hopes, and worse, far worse, his dearest beliefs, walked through the streets like a drunken man, and presently found himself in his own room without knowing how he came there. He flung himself into an arm-chair, put his head in his hands and his feet on the andirons, drying his boots until he burned them. It was an awful moment, – one of those moments in human life when the character is moulded, and the future conduct of the best of men depends on the good or evil fortune of his first action. Providence or fatality? – choose which you will.

This young man belonged to a good family, whose nobility was not very ancient; but there are so few really old families in these days, that all men of rank are ancient without dispute. His grandfather had bought the office of counsellor to the Parliament of Paris, where he afterwards became president. His sons, each provided with a handsome fortune, entered the army, and through their marriages became attached to the court. The Revolution swept the family away; but one old dowager, too obstinate to emigrate, was left; she was put in prison, threatened with death, but was saved by the 9th Thermidor and recovered her property. When the proper time came, about the year 1804, she recalled her grandson to France. Auguste de Maulincour, the only scion of the Carbonnon de Maulincour, was brought up by the good dowager with the triple care of a mother, a woman of rank, and an obstinate dowager. When the Restoration came, the young man, then eighteen years of age, entered the Maison-Rouge, followed the princes to Ghent, was made an officer in the body-guard, left it to serve in the line, but was recalled later to the Royal Guard, where, at twenty-three years of age, he found himself major of a cavalry regiment, – a splendid position, due to his grandmother, who had played her cards well to obtain it, in spite of his youth. This double biography is a compendium of the general and special history, barring variations, of all the noble families who emigrated having debts and property, dowagers and tact.

Madame la Baronne de Maulincour had a friend in the old Vidame de Pamiers, formerly a commander of the Knights of Malta. This was one of those undying friendships founded on sexagenary ties which nothing can weaken, because at the bottom of such intimacies there are certain

secrets of the human heart, delightful to guess at when we have the time, insipid to explain in twenty words, and which might make the text of a work in four volumes as amusing as the Doyen de Killerine, – a work about which young men talk and judge without having read it.

Auguste de Maulincour belonged therefore to the faubourg Saint-Germain through his grandmother and the vidame, and it sufficed him to date back two centuries to take the tone and opinions of those who assume to go back to Clovis. This young man, pale, slender, and delicate in appearance, a man of honor and true courage, who would fight a duel for a yes or a no, had never yet fought upon a battle-field, though he wore in his button-hole the cross of the Legion of honor. He was, as you perceive, one of the blunders of the Restoration, perhaps the most excusable of them. The youth of those days was the youth of no epoch. It came between the memories of the Empire and those of the Emigration, between the old traditions of the court and the conscientious education of the *bourgeoisie*; between religion and fancy-balls; between two political faiths, between Louis XVIII., who saw only the present, and Charles X., who looked too far into the future; it was moreover bound to accept the will of the king, though the king was deceiving and tricking it. This unfortunate youth, blind and yet clear-sighted, was counted as nothing by old men jealously keeping the reins of the State in their feeble hands, while the monarchy could have been saved by their retirement and the accession of this Young France, which the old doctrinaires, the *emigres* of the Restoration, still speak of slightingly. Auguste de Maulincour was a victim to the ideas which weighed in those days upon French youth, and we must here explain why.

The Vidame de Pamiers was still, at sixty-seven years of age, a very brilliant man, having seen much and lived much; a good talker, a man of honor and a gallant man, but who held as to women the most detestable opinions; he loved them, and he despised them. *Their* honor! *their* feelings! Ta-ra-ra, rubbish and shams! When he was with them, he believed in them, the ci-devant “monstre”; he never contradicted them, and he made them shine. But among his male friends, when the topic of the sex came up, he laid down the principle that to deceive women, and to carry on several intrigues at once, should be the occupation of those young men who were so misguided as to wish to meddle in the affairs of the State. It is sad to have to sketch so hackneyed a portrait, for has it not figured everywhere and become, literally, as threadbare as that of a grenadier of the Empire? But the vidame had an influence on Monsieur de Maulincour’s destiny which obliges us to preserve his portrait; he lectured the young man after his fashion, and did his best to convert him to the doctrines of the great age of gallantry.

The dowager, a tender-hearted, pious woman, sitting between God and her vidame, a model of grace and sweetness, but gifted with that well-bred persistency which triumphs in the long run, had longed to preserve for her grandson the beautiful illusions of life, and had therefore brought him up in the highest principles; she instilled into him her own delicacy of feeling and made him, to outward appearance, a timid man, if not a fool. The sensibilities of the young fellow, preserved pure, were not worn by contact without; he remained so chaste, so scrupulous, that he was keenly offended by actions and maxims to which the world attached no consequence. Ashamed of this susceptibility, he forced himself to conceal it under a false hardihood; but he suffered in secret, all the while scoffing with others at the things he reverenced.

It came to pass that he was deceived; because, in accordance with a not uncommon whim of destiny, he, a man of gentle melancholy, and spiritual in love, encountered in the object of his first passion a woman who held in horror all German sentimentalism. The young man, in consequence, distrusted himself, became dreamy, absorbed in his griefs, complaining of not being understood. Then, as we desire all the more violently the things we find difficult to obtain, he continued to adore women with that ingenuous tenderness and feline delicacy the secret of which belongs to women themselves, who may, perhaps, prefer to keep the monopoly of it. In point of fact, though women of the world complain of the way men love them, they have little liking themselves for those whose soul is half feminine. Their own superiority consists in making men believe they are their inferiors

in love; therefore they will readily leave a lover if he is inexperienced enough to rob them of those fears with which they seek to deck themselves, those delightful tortures of feigned jealousy, those troubles of hope betrayed, those futile expectations, – in short, the whole procession of their feminine miseries. They hold Sir Charles Grandison in horror. What can be more contrary to their nature than a tranquil, perfect love? They want emotions; happiness without storms is not happiness to them. Women with souls that are strong enough to bring infinitude into love are angelic exceptions; they are among women what noble geniuses are among men. Their great passions are rare as masterpieces. Below the level of such love come compromises, conventions, passing and contemptible irritations, as in all things petty and perishable.

Amid the hidden disasters of his heart, and while he was still seeking the woman who could comprehend him (a search which, let us remark in passing, is one of the amorous follies of our epoch), Auguste met, in the rank of society that was farthest from his own, in the secondary sphere of money, where banking holds the first place, a perfect being, one of those women who have I know not what about them that is saintly and sacred, – women who inspire such reverence that love has need of the help of a long familiarity to declare itself.

Auguste then gave himself up wholly to the delights of the deepest and most moving of passions, to a love that was purely adoring. Innumerable repressed desires there were, shadows of passion so vague yet so profound, so fugitive and yet so actual, that one scarcely knows to what we may compare them. They are like perfumes, or clouds, or rays of the sun, or shadows, or whatever there is in nature that shines for a moment and disappears, that springs to life and dies, leaving in the heart long echoes of emotion. When the soul is young enough to nurture melancholy and far-off hope, to find in woman more than a woman, is it not the greatest happiness that can befall a man when he loves enough to feel more joy in touching a gloved hand, or a lock of hair, in listening to a word, in casting a single look, than in all the ardor of possession given by happy love? Thus it is that rejected persons, those rebuffed by fate, the ugly and unfortunate, lovers unrevealed, women and timid men, alone know the treasures contained in the voice of the beloved. Taking their source and their element from the soul itself, the vibrations of the air, charged with passion, put our hearts so powerfully into communion, carrying thought between them so lucidly, and being, above all, so incapable of falsehood, that a single inflection of a voice is often a revelation. What enchantments the intonations of a tender voice can bestow upon the heart of a poet! What ideas they awaken! What freshness they shed there! Love is in the voice before the glance avows it. Auguste, poet after the manner of lovers (there are poets who feel, and poets who express; the first are the happiest), Auguste had tasted all these early joys, so vast, so fecund. SHE possessed the most winning organ that the most artful woman of the world could have desired in order to deceive at her ease; *she* had that silvery voice which is soft to the ear, and ringing only for the heart which it stirs and troubles, caresses and subjugates.

And this woman went by night to the rue Soly through the rue Pagevin! and her furtive apparition in an infamous house had just destroyed the grandest of passions! The vidame's logic triumphed.

"If she is betraying her husband we will avenge ourselves," said Auguste.

There was still faith in that "if." The philosophic doubt of Descartes is a politeness with which we should always honor virtue. Ten o'clock sounded. The Baron de Maulincour remembered that this woman was going to a ball that evening at a house to which he had access. He dressed, went there, and searched for her through all the salons. The mistress of the house, Madame de Nucingen, seeing him thus occupied, said: —

"You are looking for Madame Jules; but she has not yet come."

"Good evening, dear," said a voice.

Auguste and Madame de Nucingen turned round. Madame Jules had arrived, dressed in white, looking simple and noble, wearing in her hair the marabouts the young baron had seen her choose in the flower-shop. That voice of love now pierced his heart. Had he won the slightest right to be jealous

of her he would have petrified her then and there by saying the words, “Rue Soly!” But if he, an alien to her life, had said those words in her ear a thousand times, Madame Jules would have asked him in astonishment what he meant. He looked at her stupidly.

For those sarcastic persons who scoff at all things it may be a great amusement to detect the secret of a woman, to know that her chastity is a lie, that her calm face hides some anxious thought, that under that pure brow is a dreadful drama. But there are other souls to whom the sight is saddening; and many of those who laugh in public, when withdrawn into themselves and alone with their conscience, curse the world while they despise the woman. Such was the case with Auguste de Maulincour, as he stood there in presence of Madame Jules. Singular situation! There was no other relation between them than that which social life establishes between persons who exchange a few words seven or eight times in the course of a winter, and yet he was calling her to account on behalf of a happiness unknown to her; he was judging her, without letting her know of his accusation.

Many young men find themselves thus in despair at having broken forever with a woman adored in secret, condemned and despised in secret. There are many hidden monologues told to the walls of some solitary lodging; storms roused and calmed without ever leaving the depths of hearts; amazing scenes of the moral world, for which a painter is wanted. Madame Jules sat down, leaving her husband to make a turn around the salon. After she was seated she seemed uneasy, and, while talking with her neighbor, she kept a furtive eye on Monsieur Jules Desmarets, her husband, a broker chiefly employed by the Baron de Nucingen. The following is the history of their home life.

Monsieur Desmarets was, five years before his marriage, in a broker’s office, with no other means than the meagre salary of a clerk. But he was a man to whom misfortune had early taught the truths of life, and he followed the strait path with the tenacity of an insect making for its nest; he was one of those dogged young men who feign death before an obstacle and wear out everybody’s patience with their own beetle-like perseverance. Thus, young as he was, he had all the republican virtue of poor peoples; he was sober, saving of his time, an enemy to pleasure. He waited. Nature had given him the immense advantage of an agreeable exterior. His calm, pure brow, the shape of his placid, but expressive face, his simple manners, – all revealed in him a laborious and resigned existence, that lofty personal dignity which is imposing to others, and the secret nobility of heart which can meet all events. His modesty inspired a sort of respect in those who knew him. Solitary in the midst of Paris, he knew the social world only by glimpses during the brief moments which he spent in his patron’s salon on holidays.

There were passions in this young man, as in most of the men who live in that way, of amazing profundity, – passions too vast to be drawn into petty incidents. His want of means compelled him to lead an ascetic life, and he conquered his fancies by hard work. After paling all day over figures, he found his recreation in striving obstinately to acquire that wide general knowledge so necessary in these days to every man who wants to make his mark, whether in society, or in commerce, at the bar, or in politics or literature. The only peril these fine souls have to fear comes from their own uprightness. They see some poor girl; they love her; they marry her, and wear out their lives in a struggle between poverty and love. The noblest ambition is quenched perforce by the household account-book. Jules Desmarets went headlong into this peril.

He met one evening at his patron’s house a girl of the rarest beauty. Unfortunate men who are deprived of affection, and who consume the finest hours of youth in work and study, alone know the rapid ravages that passion makes in their lonely, misconceived hearts. They are so certain of loving truly, all their forces are concentrated so quickly on the object of their love, that they receive, while beside her, the most delightful sensations, when, as often happens, they inspire none at all. Nothing is more flattering to a woman’s egotism than to divine this passion, apparently immovable, and these emotions so deep that they have needed a great length of time to reach the human surface. These poor men, anchorites in the midst of Paris, have all the enjoyments of anchorites; and may sometimes

succumb to temptations. But, more often deceived, betrayed, and misunderstood, they are rarely able to gather the sweet fruits of a love which, to them, is like a flower dropped from heaven.

One smile from his wife, a single inflection of her voice sufficed to make Jules Desmarets conceive a passion which was boundless. Happily, the concentrated fire of that secret passion revealed itself artlessly to the woman who inspired it. These two beings then loved each other religiously. To express all in a word, they clasped hands without shame before the eyes of the world and went their way like two children, brother and sister, passing serenely through a crowd where all made way for them and admired them.

The young girl was in one of those unfortunate positions which human selfishness entails upon children. She had no civil status; her name of "Clemence" and her age were recorded only by a notary public. As for her fortune, that was small indeed. Jules Desmarets was a happy man on hearing these particulars. If Clemence had belonged to an opulent family, he might have despaired of obtaining her; but she was only the poor child of love, the fruit of some terrible adulterous passion; and they were married. Then began for Jules Desmarets a series of fortunate events. Every one envied his happiness; and henceforth talked only of his luck, without recalling either his virtues or his courage.

Some days after their marriage, the mother of Clemence, who passed in society for her godmother, told Jules Desmarets to buy the office and good-will of a broker, promising to provide him with the necessary capital. In those days, such offices could still be bought at a modest price. That evening, in the salon as it happened of his patron, a wealthy capitalist proposed, on the recommendation of the mother, a very advantageous transaction for Jules Desmarets, and the next day the happy clerk was able to buy out his patron. In four years Desmarets became one of the most prosperous men in his business; new clients increased the number his predecessor had left to him; he inspired confidence in all; and it was impossible for him not to feel, by the way business came to him, that some hidden influence, due to his mother-in-law, or to Providence, was secretly protecting him.

At the end of the third year Clemence lost her godmother. By that time Monsieur Jules (so called to distinguish him from an elder brother, whom he had set up as a notary in Paris) possessed an income from invested property of two hundred thousand francs. There was not in all Paris another instance of the domestic happiness enjoyed by this couple. For five years their exceptional love had been troubled by only one event, – a calumny for which Monsieur Jules exacted vengeance. One of his former comrades attributed to Madame Jules the fortune of her husband, explaining that it came from a high protection dearly paid for. The man who uttered the calumny was killed in the duel that followed it.

The profound passion of this couple, which survived marriage, obtained a great success in society, though some women were annoyed by it. The charming household was respected; everybody feted it. Monsieur and Madame Jules were sincerely liked, perhaps because there is nothing more delightful to see than happy people; but they never stayed long at any festivity. They slipped away early, as impatient to regain their nest as wandering pigeons. This nest was a large and beautiful mansion in the rue de Menars, where a true feeling for art tempered the luxury which the financial world continues, traditionally, to display. Here the happy pair received their society magnificently, although the obligations of social life suited them but little.

Nevertheless, Jules submitted to the demands of the world, knowing that, sooner or later, a family has need of it; but he and his wife felt themselves, in its midst, like green-house plants in a tempest. With a delicacy that was very natural, Jules had concealed from his wife the calumny and the death of the calumniator. Madame Jules, herself, was inclined, through her sensitive and artistic nature, to desire luxury. In spite of the terrible lesson of the duel, some imprudent women whispered to each other that Madame Jules must sometimes be pressed for money. They often found her more elegantly dressed in her own home than when she went into society. She loved to adorn herself to please her husband, wishing to show him that to her he was more than any social life. A true love, a pure love, above all, a happy love! Jules, always a lover, and more in love as time went by, was happy

in all things beside his wife, even in her caprices; in fact, he would have been uneasy if she had none, thinking it a symptom of some illness.

Auguste de Maulincour had the personal misfortune of running against this passion, and falling in love with the wife beyond recovery. Nevertheless, though he carried in his heart so intense a love, he was not ridiculous; he complied with all the demands of society, and of military manners and customs. And yet his face wore constantly, even though he might be drinking a glass of champagne, that dreamy look, that air of silently despising life, that nebulous expression which belongs, though for other reasons, to *blases* men, – men dissatisfied with hollow lives. To love without hope, to be disgusted with life, constitute, in these days, a social position. The enterprise of winning the heart of a sovereign might give, perhaps, more hope than a love rashly conceived for a happy woman. Therefore Maulincour had sufficient reason to be grave and gloomy. A queen has the vanity of her power; the height of her elevation protects her. But a pious *bourgeoise* is like a hedgehog, or an oyster, in its rough wrappings.

At this moment the young officer was beside his unconscious mistress, who certainly was unaware that she was doubly faithless. Madame Jules was seated, in a naive attitude, like the least artful woman in existence, soft and gentle, full of a majestic serenity. What an abyss is human nature! Before beginning a conversation, the baron looked alternately at the wife and at the husband. How many were the reflections he made! He recomposed the "Night Thoughts" of Young in a second. And yet the music was sounding through the salons, the light was pouring from a thousand candles. It was a banker's ball, – one of those insolent festivals by means of which the world of solid gold endeavored to sneer at the gold-embossed salons where the faubourg Saint-Germain met and laughed, not foreseeing the day when the bank would invade the Luxembourg and take its seat upon the throne. The conspirators were now dancing, indifferent to coming bankruptcies, whether of Power or of the Bank. The gilded salons of the Baron de Nucingen were gay with that peculiar animation that the world of Paris, apparently joyous at any rate, gives to its fetes. There, men of talent communicate their wit to fools, and fools communicate that air of enjoyment that characterizes them. By means of this exchange all is liveliness. But a ball in Paris always resembles fireworks to a certain extent; wit, coquetry, and pleasure sparkle and go out like rockets. The next day all present have forgotten their wit, their coquetry, their pleasure.

"Ah!" thought Auguste, by way of conclusion, "women are what the vidame says they are. Certainly all those dancing here are less irreproachable actually than Madame Jules appears to be, and yet Madame Jules went to the rue Soly!"

The rue Soly was like an illness to him; the very word shrivelled his heart.

"Madame, do you ever dance?" he said to her.

"This is the third time you have asked me that question this winter," she answered, smiling.

"But perhaps you have never answered it."

"That is true."

"I knew very well that you were false, like other women."

Madame Jules continued to smile.

"Listen, monsieur," she said; "if I told you the real reason, you would think it ridiculous. I do not think it false to abstain from telling things that the world would laugh at."

"All secrets demand, in order to be told, a friendship of which I am no doubt unworthy, madame. But you cannot have any but noble secrets; do you think me capable of jesting on noble things?"

"Yes," she said, "you, like all the rest, laugh at our purest sentiments; you calumniate them. Besides, I have no secrets. I have the right to love my husband in the face of all the world, and I say so, – I am proud of it; and if you laugh at me when I tell you that I dance only with him, I shall have a bad opinion of your heart."

"Have you never danced since your marriage with any one but your husband?"

"Never. His arm is the only one on which I have leaned; I have never felt the touch of another man."

"Has your physician never felt your pulse?"

"Now you are laughing at me."

"No, madame, I admire you, because I comprehend you. But you let a man hear your voice, you let yourself be seen, you – in short, you permit our eyes to admire you – "

"Ah!" she said, interrupting him, "that is one of my griefs. Yes, I wish it were possible for a married woman to live secluded with her husband, as a mistress lives with her lover, for then – "

"Then why were you, two hours ago, on foot, disguised, in the rue Soly?"

"The rue Soly, where is that?"

And her pure voice gave no sign of any emotion; no feature of her face quivered; she did not blush; she remained calm.

"What! you did not go up to the second floor of a house in the rue des Vieux-Augustins at the corner of the rue Soly? You did not have a hackney-coach waiting near by? You did not return in it to the flower-shop in the rue Richelieu, where you bought the feathers that are now in your hair?"

"I did not leave my house this evening."

As she uttered that lie she was smiling and imperturbable; she played with her fan; but if any one had passed a hand down her back they would, perhaps, have found it moist. At that instant Auguste remembered the instructions of the vidame.

"Then it was some one who strangely resembled you," he said, with a credulous air.

"Monsieur," she replied, "if you are capable of following a woman and detecting her secrets, you will allow me to say that it is a wrong, a very wrong thing, and I do you the honor to say that I disbelieve you."

The baron turned away, placed himself before the fireplace and seemed thoughtful. He bent his head; but his eyes were covertly fixed on Madame Jules, who, not remembering the reflections in the mirror, cast two or three glances at him that were full of terror. Presently she made a sign to her husband and rising took his arm to walk about the salon. As she passed before Monsieur de Maulincour, who at that moment was speaking to a friend, he said in a loud voice, as if in reply to a remark: "That woman will certainly not sleep quietly this night." Madame Jules stopped, gave him an imposing look which expressed contempt, and continued her way, unaware that another look, if surprised by her husband, might endanger not only her happiness but the lives of two men. Auguste, frantic with anger, which he tried to smother in the depths of his soul, presently left the house, swearing to penetrate to the heart of the mystery. Before leaving, he sought Madame Jules, to look at her again; but she had disappeared.

What a drama cast into that young head so eminently romantic, like all who have not known love in the wide extent which they give to it. He adored Madame Jules under a new aspect; he loved her now with the fury of jealousy and the frenzied anguish of hope. Unfaithful to her husband, the woman became common. Auguste could now give himself up to the joys of successful love, and his imagination opened to him a career of pleasures. Yes, he had lost the angel, but he had found the most delightful of demons. He went to bed, building castles in the air, excusing Madame Jules by some romantic fiction in which he did not believe. He resolved to devote himself wholly, from that day forth, to a search for the causes, motives, and keynote of this mystery. It was a tale to read, or better still, a drama to be played, in which he had a part.

CHAPTER II. FERRAGUS

A fine thing is the task of a spy, when performed for one's own benefit and in the interests of a passion. Is it not giving ourselves the pleasure of a thief and a rascal while continuing honest men? But there is another side to it; we must resign ourselves to boil with anger, to roar with impatience, to freeze our feet in the mud, to be numbed, and roasted, and torn by false hopes. We must go, on the faith of a mere indication, to a vague object, miss our end, curse our luck, improvise to ourselves elegies, dithyrambics, exclaim idiotically before inoffensive pedestrians who observe us, knock over old apple-women and their baskets, run hither and thither, stand on guard beneath a window, make a thousand suppositions. But, after all, it is a chase, a hunt; a hunt in Paris, a hunt with all its chances, minus dogs and guns and the tally-ho! Nothing compares with it but the life of gamblers. But it needs a heart big with love and vengeance to ambush itself in Paris, like a tiger waiting to spring upon its prey, and to enjoy the chances and contingencies of Paris, by adding one special interest to the many that abound there. But for this we need a many-sided soul – for must we not live in a thousand passions, a thousand sentiments?

Auguste de Maulincour flung himself into this ardent existence passionately, for he felt all its pleasures and all its misery. He went disguised about Paris, watching at the corners of the rue Pagevin and the rue des Vieux-Augustins. He hurried like a hunter from the rue de Menars to the rue Soly, and back from the rue Soly to the rue de Menars, without obtaining either the vengeance or the knowledge which would punish or reward such cares, such efforts, such wiles. But he had not yet reached that impatience which wrings our very entrails and makes us sweat; he roamed in hope, believing that Madame Jules would only refrain for a few days from revisiting the place where she knew she had been detected. He devoted the first days therefore, to a careful study of the secrets of the street. A novice at such work, he dared not question either the porter or the shoemaker of the house to which Madame Jules had gone; but he managed to obtain a post of observation in a house directly opposite to the mysterious apartment. He studied the ground, trying to reconcile the conflicting demands of prudence, impatience, love, and secrecy.

Early in the month of March, while busy with plans by which he expected to strike a decisive blow, he left his post about four in the afternoon, after one of those patient watches from which he had learned nothing. He was on his way to his own house whither a matter relating to his military service called him, when he was overtaken in the rue Coquilliere by one of those heavy showers which instantly flood the gutters, while each drop of rain rings loudly in the puddles of the roadway. A pedestrian under these circumstances is forced to stop short and take refuge in a shop or cafe if he is rich enough to pay for the forced hospitality, or, if in poorer circumstances, under a *porte-cochere*, that haven of paupers or shabbily dressed persons. Why have none of our painters ever attempted to reproduce the physiognomies of a swarm of Parisians, grouped, under stress of weather, in the damp *porte-cochere* of a building? First, there's the musing philosophical pedestrian, who observes with interest all he sees, – whether it be the stripes made by the rain on the gray background of the atmosphere (a species of chasing not unlike the capricious threads of spun glass), or the whirl of white water which the wind is driving like a luminous dust along the roofs, or the fitful disgorgements of the gutter-pipes, sparkling and foaming; in short, the thousand nothings to be admired and studied with delight by loungers, in spite of the porter's broom which pretends to be sweeping out the gateway. Then there's the talkative refugee, who complains and converses with the porter while he rests on his broom like a grenadier on his musket; or the pauper wayfarer, curled against the wall indifferent to the condition of his rags, long used, alas, to contact with the streets; or the learned pedestrian who studies, spells, and reads the posters on the walls without finishing them; or the smiling pedestrian who makes fun of others to whom some street fatality has happened, who laughs at the muddy women, and makes grimaces at those of either sex who are looking from the windows; and the silent being who gazes

from floor to floor; and the working-man, armed with a satchel or a paper bundle, who is estimating the rain as a profit or loss; and the good-natured fugitive, who arrives like a shot exclaiming, “Ah! what weather, messieurs, what weather!” and bows to every one; and, finally, the true *bourgeois*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.