

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

THE VICAR OF TOURS

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DEDICATION

To David, Sculptor:

The permanence of the work on which I inscribe your name – twice made illustrious in this century – is very problematical; whereas you have graven mine in bronze which survives nations – if only in their coins. The day may come when numismatists, discovering amid the ashes of Paris existences perpetuated by you, will wonder at the number of heads crowned in your atelier and endeavour to find in them new dynasties. To you, this divine privilege; to me, gratitude.

De Balzac.

I

Early in the autumn of 1826 the Abbe Birotteau, the principal personage of this history, was overtaken by a shower of rain as he returned home from a friend's house, where he had been passing the evening. He therefore crossed, as quickly as his corpulence would allow, the deserted little square called "The Cloister," which lies directly behind the chancel of the cathedral of Saint-Gatien at Tours.

The Abbe Birotteau, a short little man, apoplectic in constitution and about sixty years old, had already gone through several attacks of gout. Now, among the petty miseries of human life the one for which the worthy priest felt the deepest aversion was the sudden sprinkling of his shoes, adorned with silver buckles, and the wetting of their soles. Notwithstanding the woollen socks in which at all seasons he enveloped his feet with the extreme care that ecclesiastics take of themselves, he was apt at such times to get them a little damp, and the next day gout was sure to give him certain infallible proofs of constancy. Nevertheless, as the pavement of the Cloister was likely to be dry, and as the abbe had won three francs ten sous in his rubber with Madame de Listomere, he bore the rain resignedly from the middle of the place de l'Archeveche, where it began to come down in earnest. Besides, he was fondling his chimera, — a desire already twelve years old, the desire of a priest, a desire

formed anew every evening and now, apparently, very near accomplishment; in short, he had wrapped himself so completely in the fur cape of a canon that he did not feel the inclemency of the weather. During the evening several of the company who habitually gathered at Madame de Listomere's had almost guaranteed to him his nomination to the office of canon (then vacant in the metropolitan Chapter of Saint-Gatien), assuring him that no one deserved such promotion as he, whose rights, long overlooked, were indisputable.

If he had lost the rubber, if he had heard that his rival, the Abbe Poirel, was named canon, the worthy man would have thought the rain extremely chilling; he might even have thought ill of life. But it so chanced that he was in one of those rare moments when happy inward sensations make a man oblivious of discomfort. In hastening his steps he obeyed a more mechanical impulse, and truth (so essential in a history of manners and morals) compels us to say that he was thinking of neither rain nor gout.

In former days there was in the Cloister, on the side towards the Grand'Rue, a cluster of houses forming a Close and belonging to the cathedral, where several of the dignitaries of the Chapter lived. After the confiscation of ecclesiastical property the town had turned the passage through this close into a narrow street, called the Rue de la Psalette, by which pedestrians passed from the Cloister to the Grand'Rue. The name of this street, proves clearly enough that the precentor and his pupils and those

connected with the choir formerly lived there. The other side, the left side, of the street is occupied by a single house, the walls of which are overshadowed by the buttresses of Saint-Gatien, which have their base in the narrow little garden of the house, leaving it doubtful whether the cathedral was built before or after this venerable dwelling. An archaeologist examining the arabesques, the shape of the windows, the arch of the door, the whole exterior of the house, now mellow with age, would see at once that it had always been a part of the magnificent edifice with which it is blended.

An antiquary (had there been one at Tours, – one of the least literary towns in all France) would even discover, where the narrow street enters the Cloister, several vestiges of an old arcade, which formerly made a portico to these ecclesiastical dwellings, and was, no doubt, harmonious in style with the general character of the architecture.

The house of which we speak, standing on the north side of the cathedral, was always in the shadow thrown by that vast edifice, on which time had cast its dingy mantle, marked its furrows, and shed its chill humidity, its lichen, mosses, and rank herbs. The darkened dwelling was wrapped in silence, broken only by the bells, by the chanting of the offices heard through the windows of the church, by the call of the jackdaws nesting in the belfries. The region is a desert of stones, a solitude with a character of its own, an arid spot, which could only be inhabited by beings who had either attained to absolute nullity, or were gifted with some

abnormal strength of soul. The house in question had always been occupied by abbes, and it belonged to an old maid named Mademoiselle Gamard. Though the property had been bought from the national domain under the Reign of Terror by the father of Mademoiselle Gamard, no one objected under the Restoration to the old maid's retaining it, because she took priests to board and was very devout; it may be that religious persons gave her credit for the intention of leaving the property to the Chapter.

The Abbe Birotteau was making his way to this house, where he had lived for the last two years. His apartment had been (as was now the canonry) an object of envy and his "hoc erat in votis" for a dozen years. To be Mademoiselle Gamard's boarder and to become a canon were the two great desires of his life; in fact they do present accurately the ambition of a priest, who, considering himself on the highroad to eternity, can wish for nothing in this world but good lodging, good food, clean garments, shoes with silver buckles, a sufficiency of things for the needs of the animal, and a canonry to satisfy self-love, that inexpressible sentiment which follows us, they say, into the presence of God, – for there are grades among the saints. But the covetous desire for the apartment which the Abbe Birotteau was now inhabiting (a very harmless desire in the eyes of worldly people) had been to the abbe nothing less than a passion, a passion full of obstacles, and, like more guilty passions, full of hopes, pleasures, and remorse.

The interior arrangements of the house did not allow Mademoiselle Gamard to take more than two lodgers. Now, for

about twelve years before the day when Birotteau went to live with her she had undertaken to keep in health and contentment two priests; namely, Monsieur l'Abbe Troubert and Monsieur l'Abbe Chapeloud. The Abbe Troubert still lived. The Abbe Chapeloud was dead; and Birotteau had stepped into his place.

The late Abbe Chapeloud, in life a canon of Saint-Gatien, had been an intimate friend of the Abbe Birotteau. Every time that the latter paid a visit to the canon he had constantly admired the apartment, the furniture and the library. Out of this admiration grew the desire to possess these beautiful things. It had been impossible for the Abbe Birotteau to stifle this desire; though it often made him suffer terribly when he reflected that the death of his best friend could alone satisfy his secret covetousness, which increased as time went on. The Abbe Chapeloud and his friend Birotteau were not rich. Both were sons of peasants; and their slender savings had been spent in the mere costs of living during the disastrous years of the Revolution. When Napoleon restored the Catholic worship the Abbe Chapeloud was appointed canon of the cathedral and Birotteau was made vicar of it. Chapeloud then went to board with Mademoiselle Gamard. When Birotteau first came to visit his friend, he thought the arrangement of the rooms excellent, but he noticed nothing more. The outset of this concupiscence of chattels was very like that of a true passion, which often begins, in a young man, with cold admiration for a woman whom he ends in loving forever.

The apartment, reached by a stone staircase, was on the side

of the house that faced south. The Abbe Troubert occupied the ground-floor, and Mademoiselle Gamard the first floor of the main building, looking on the street. When Chapeloud took possession of his rooms they were bare of furniture, and the ceilings were blackened with smoke. The stone mantelpieces, which were very badly cut, had never been painted. At first, the only furniture the poor canon could put in was a bed, a table, a few chairs, and the books he possessed. The apartment was like a beautiful woman in rags. But two or three years later, an old lady having left the Abbe Chapeloud two thousand francs, he spent that sum on the purchase of an oak bookcase, the relic of a chateau pulled down by the Bande Noire, the carving of which deserved the admiration of all artists. The abbe made the purchase less because it was very cheap than because the dimensions of the bookcase exactly fitted the space it was to fill in his gallery. His savings enabled him to renovate the whole gallery, which up to this time had been neglected and shabby. The floor was carefully waxed, the ceiling whitened, the wood-work painted to resemble the grain and knots of oak. A long table in ebony and two cabinets by Boulle completed the decoration, and gave to this gallery a certain air that was full of character. In the course of two years the liberality of devout persons, and legacies, though small ones, from pious penitents, filled the shelves of the bookcase, till then half empty. Moreover, Chapeloud's uncle, an old Oratorian, had left him his collection in folio of the Fathers of the Church, and several other important works that were precious

to a priest.

Birotteau, more and more surprised by the successive improvements of the gallery, once so bare, came by degrees to a condition of involuntary envy. He wished he could possess that apartment, so thoroughly in keeping with the gravity of ecclesiastical life. The passion increased from day to day. Working, sometimes for days together, in this retreat, the vicar could appreciate the silence and the peace that reigned there. During the following year the Abbe Chapeloud turned a small room into an oratory, which his pious friends took pleasure in beautifying. Still later, another lady gave the canon a set of furniture for his bedroom, the covering of which she had embroidered under the eyes of the worthy man without his ever suspecting its destination. The bedroom then had the same effect upon the vicar that the gallery had long had; it dazzled him. Lastly, about three years before the Abbe Chapeloud's death, he completed the comfort of his apartment by decorating the salon. Though the furniture was plainly covered in red Utrecht velvet, it fascinated Birotteau. From the day when the canon's friend first laid eyes on the red damask curtains, the mahogany furniture, the Aubusson carpet which adorned the vast room, then lately painted, his envy of Chapeloud's apartment became a monomania hidden within his breast. To live there, to sleep in that bed with the silk curtains where the canon slept, to have all Chapeloud's comforts about him, would be, Birotteau felt, complete happiness; he saw nothing beyond it. All the envy, all

the ambition which the things of this world give birth to in the hearts of other men concentrated themselves for Birotteau in the deep and secret longing he felt for an apartment like that which the Abbe Chapeloud had created for himself. When his friend fell ill he went to him out of true affection; but all the same, when he first heard of his illness, and when he sat by his bed to keep him company, there arose in the depths of his consciousness, in spite of himself, a crowd of thoughts the simple formula of which was always, "If Chapeloud dies I can have this apartment." And yet – Birotteau having an excellent heart, contracted ideas, and a limited mind – he did not go so far as to think of means by which to make his friend bequeath to him the library and the furniture.

The Abbe Chapeloud, an amiable, indulgent egoist, fathomed his friend's desires – not a difficult thing to do – and forgave them; which may seem less easy to a priest; but it must be remembered that the vicar, whose friendship was faithful, did not fail to take a daily walk with his friend along their usual path in the Mail de Tours, never once depriving him of an instant of the time devoted for over twenty years to that exercise. Birotteau, who regarded his secret wishes as crimes, would have been capable, out of contrition, of the utmost devotion to his friend. The latter paid his debt of gratitude for a friendship so ingenuously sincere by saying, a few days before his death, as the vicar sat by him reading the "Quotidienne" aloud: "This time you will certainly get the apartment. I feel it is all over with me now."

Accordingly, it was found that the Abbe Chapeloud had left

his library and all his furniture to his friend Birotteau. The possession of these things, so keenly desired, and the prospect of being taken to board by Mademoiselle Gamard, certainly did allay the grief which Birotteau felt at the death of his friend the canon. He might not have been willing to resuscitate him; but he mourned him. For several days he was like Gargantus, who, when his wife died in giving birth to Pantagruel, did not know whether to rejoice at the birth of a son or grieve at having buried his good Babette, and therefore cheated himself by rejoicing at the death of his wife, and deploring the advent of Pantagruel.

The Abbe Birotteau spent the first days of his mourning in verifying the books in *his* library, in making use of *his* furniture, in examining the whole of his inheritance, saying in a tone which, unfortunately, was not noted at the time, "Poor Chapeloud!" His joy and his grief so completely absorbed him that he felt no pain when he found that the office of canon, in which the late Chapeloud had hoped his friend Birotteau might succeed him, was given to another. Mademoiselle Gamard having cheerfully agreed to take the vicar to board, the latter was thenceforth a participator in all those felicities of material comfort of which the deceased canon had been wont to boast.

Incalculable they were! According to the Abbe Chapeloud none of the priests who inhabited the city of Tours, not even the archbishop, had ever been the object of such minute and delicate attentions as those bestowed by Mademoiselle Gamard on her two lodgers. The first words the canon said to his friend

when they met for their walk on the Mail referred usually to the succulent dinner he had just eaten; and it was a very rare thing if during the walks of each week he did not say at least fourteen times, “That excellent spinster certainly has a vocation for serving ecclesiastics.”

“Just think,” the canon would say to Birotteau, “that for twelve consecutive years nothing has ever been amiss, – linen in perfect order, bands, albs, surplices; I find everything in its place, always in sufficient quantity, and smelling of orris-root. My furniture is rubbed and kept so bright that I don’t know when I have seen any dust – did you ever see a speck of it in my rooms? Then the firewood is so well selected. The least little things are excellent. In fact, Mademoiselle Gamard keeps an incessant watch over my wants. I can’t remember having rung twice for anything – no matter what – in ten years. That’s what I call living! I never have to look for a single thing, not even my slippers. Always a good fire, always a good dinner. Once the bellows annoyed me, the nozzle was choked up; but I only mentioned it once, and the next day Mademoiselle gave me a very pretty pair, also those nice tongs you see me mend the fire with.”

For all answer Birotteau would say, “Smelling of orris-root!” That “smelling of orris-root” always affected him. The canon’s remarks revealed ideal joys to the poor vicar, whose bands and albs were the plague of his life, for he was totally devoid of method and often forgot to order his dinner. Therefore, if he saw Mademoiselle Gamard at Saint-Gatien while saying mass or

taking round the plate, he never failed to give her a kindly and benevolent look, – such a look as Saint Teresa might have cast to heaven.

Though the comforts which all creatures desire, and for which he had so often longed, thus fell to his share, the Abbe Birotteau, like the rest of the world, found it difficult, even for a priest, to live without something to hanker for. Consequently, for the last eighteen months he had replaced his two satisfied passions by an ardent longing for a canonry. The title of Canon had become to him very much what a peerage is to a plebeian minister. The prospect of an appointment, hopes of which had just been held out to him at Madame de Listomere's, so completely turned his head that he did not observe until he reached his own door that he had left his umbrella behind him. Perhaps, even then, if the rain were not falling in torrents he might not have missed it, so absorbed was he in the pleasure of going over and over in his mind what had been said to him on the subject of his promotion by the company at Madame de Listomere's, – an old lady with whom he spent every Wednesday evening.

The vicar rang loudly, as if to let the servant know she was not to keep him waiting. Then he stood close to the door to avoid, if he could, getting showered; but the drip from the roof fell precisely on the toes of his shoes, and the wind blew gusts of rain into his face that were much like a shower-bath. Having calculated the time necessary for the woman to leave the kitchen and pull the string of the outer door, he rang again, this time in

a manner that resulted in a very significant peal of the bell.

“They can’t be out,” he said to himself, not hearing any movement on the premises.

Again he rang, producing a sound that echoed sharply through the house and was taken up and repeated by all the echoes of the cathedral, so that no one could avoid waking up at the remonstrating racket. Accordingly, in a few moments, he heard, not without some pleasure in his wrath, the wooden shoes of the servant-woman clacking along the paved path which led to the outer door. But even then the discomforts of the gouty old gentleman were not so quickly over as he hoped. Instead of pulling the string, Marianne was obliged to turn the lock of the door with its heavy key, and pull back all the bolts.

“Why did you let me ring three times in such weather?” said the vicar.

“But, monsieur, don’t you see the door was locked? We have all been in bed ever so long; it struck a quarter to eleven some time ago. Mademoiselle must have thought you were in.”

“You saw me go out, yourself. Besides, Mademoiselle knows very well I always go to Madame de Listomere’s on Wednesday evening.”

“I only did as Mademoiselle told me, monsieur.”

These words struck the vicar a blow, which he felt the more because his late reverie had made him completely happy. He said nothing and followed Marianne towards the kitchen to get his candlestick, which he supposed had been left there as usual. But

instead of entering the kitchen Marianne went on to his own apartments, and there the vicar beheld his candlestick on a table close to the door of the red salon, in a sort of antechamber formed by the landing of the staircase, which the late canon had inclosed with a glass partition. Mute with amazement, he entered his bedroom hastily, found no fire, and called to Marianne, who had not had time to get downstairs.

“You have not lighted the fire!” he said.

“Beg pardon, Monsieur l’abbe, I did,” she said; “it must have gone out.”

Birotteau looked again at the hearth, and felt convinced that the fire had been out since morning.

“I must dry my feet,” he said. “Make the fire.”

Marianne obeyed with the haste of a person who wants to get back to her night’s rest. While looking about him for his slippers, which were not in the middle of his bedside carpet as usual, the abbe took mental notes of the state of Marianne’s dress, which convinced him that she had not got out of bed to open the door as she said she had. He then recollected that for the last two weeks he had been deprived of various little attentions which for eighteen months had made life sweet to him. Now, as the nature of narrow minds induces them to study trifles, Birotteau plunged suddenly into deep meditation on these four circumstances, imperceptible in their meaning to others, but to him indicative of four catastrophes. The total loss of his happiness was evidently foreshadowed in the neglect to place his

slippers, in Marianne's falsehood about the fire, in the unusual removal of his candlestick to the table of the antechamber, and in the evident intention to keep him waiting in the rain.

When the fire was burning on the hearth, and the lamp was lighted, and Marianne had departed without saying, as usual, "Does Monsieur want anything more?" the Abbe Birotteau let himself fall gently into the wide and handsome easy-chair of his late friend; but there was something mournful in the movement with which he dropped upon it. The good soul was crushed by a presentiment of coming calamity. His eyes roved successively to the handsome tall clock, the bureau, curtains, chairs, carpets, to the stately bed, the basin of holy-water, the crucifix, to a Virgin by Valentin, a Christ by Lebrun, – in short, to all the accessories of this cherished room, while his face expressed the anguish of the tenderest farewell that a lover ever took of his first mistress, or an old man of his lately planted trees. The vicar had just perceived, somewhat late it is true, the signs of a dumb persecution instituted against him for the last three months by Mademoiselle Gamard, whose evil intentions would doubtless have been fathomed much sooner by a more intelligent man. Old maids have a special talent for accentuating the words and actions which their dislikes suggest to them. They scratch like cats. They not only wound but they take pleasure in wounding, and in making their victim see that he is wounded. A man of the world would never have allowed himself to be scratched twice; the good abbe, on the contrary, had taken several blows from

those sharp claws before he could be brought to believe in any evil intention.

But when he did perceive it, he set to work, with the inquisitorial sagacity which priests acquire by directing consciences and burrowing into the nothings of the confessional, to establish, as though it were a matter of religious controversy, the following proposition: “Admitting that Mademoiselle Gamard did not remember it was Madame de Listomere’s evening, and that Marianne did think I was home, and did really forget to make my fire, it is impossible, inasmuch as I myself took down my candlestick this morning, that Mademoiselle Gamard, seeing it in her salon, could have supposed I had gone to bed. Ergo, Mademoiselle Gamard intended that I should stand out in the rain, and, by carrying my candlestick upstairs, she meant to make me understand it. What does it all mean?” he said aloud, roused by the gravity of these circumstances, and rising as he spoke to take off his damp clothes, get into his dressing-gown, and do up his head for the night. Then he returned from the bed to the fireplace, gesticulating, and launching forth in various tones the following sentences, all of which ended in a high falsetto key, like notes of interjection:

“What the deuce have I done to her? Why is she angry with me? Marianne did *not* forget my fire! Mademoiselle told her not to light it! I must be a child if I can’t see, from the tone and manner she has been taking to me, that I’ve done something to displease her. Nothing like it ever happened to Chapeloud! I can’t

live in the midst of such torments as – At my age – ”

He went to bed hoping that the morrow might enlighten him on the causes of the dislike which threatened to destroy forever the happiness he had now enjoyed two years after wishing for it so long. Alas! the secret reasons for the inimical feelings Mademoiselle Gamard bore to the luckless abbe were fated to remain eternally unknown to him, – not that they were difficult to fathom, but simply because he lacked the good faith and candor by which great souls and scoundrels look within and judge themselves. A man of genius or a trickster says to himself, “I did wrong.” Self-interest and native talent are the only infallible and lucid guides. Now the Abbe Birotteau, whose goodness amounted to stupidity, whose knowledge was only, as it were, plastered on him by dint of study, who had no experience whatever of the world and its ways, who lived between the mass and the confessional, chiefly occupied in dealing the most trivial matters of conscience in his capacity of confessor to all the schools in town and to a few noble souls who rightly appreciated him, – the Abbe Birotteau must be regarded as a great child, to whom most of the practices of social life were utterly unknown. And yet, the natural selfishness of all human beings, reinforced by the selfishness peculiar to the priesthood and that of the narrow life of the provinces had insensibly, and unknown to himself, developed within him. If any one had felt enough interest in the good man to probe his spirit and prove to him that in the numerous petty details of his life and in the minute

duties of his daily existence he was essentially lacking in the self-sacrifice he professed, he would have punished and mortified himself in good faith. But those whom we offend by such unconscious selfishness pay little heed to our real innocence; what they want is vengeance, and they take it. Thus it happened that Birotteau, weak brother that he was, was made to undergo the decrees of that great distributive Justice which goes about compelling the world to execute its judgments, – called by ninnies “the misfortunes of life.”

There was this difference between the late Chapeloud and the vicar, – one was a shrewd and clever egoist, the other a simple-minded and clumsy one. When the canon went to board with Mademoiselle Gamard he knew exactly how to judge of his landlady’s character. The confessional had taught him to understand the bitterness that the sense of being kept outside the social pale puts into the heart of an old maid; he therefore calculated his own treatment of Mademoiselle Gamard very wisely. She was then about thirty-eight years old, and still retained a few pretensions, which, in well-behaved persons of her condition, change, rather later, into strong personal self-esteem. The canon saw plainly that to live comfortably with his landlady he must pay her invariably the same attentions and be more infallible than the pope himself. To compass this result, he allowed no points of contact between himself and her except those that politeness demanded, and those which necessarily exist between two persons living under the same roof. Thus,

though he and the Abbe Troubert took their regular three meals a day, he avoided the family breakfast by inducing Mademoiselle Gamard to send his coffee to his own room. He also avoided the annoyance of supper by taking tea in the houses of friends with whom he spent his evenings. In this way he seldom saw his landlady except at dinner; but he always came down to that meal a few minutes in advance of the hour. During this visit of courtesy, as it may be called, he talked to her, for the twelve years he had lived under her roof, on nearly the same topics, receiving from her the same answers. How she had slept, her breakfast, the trivial domestic events, her looks, her health, the weather, the time the church services had lasted, the incidents of the mass, the health of such or such a priest, – these were the subjects of their daily conversation. During dinner he invariably paid her certain indirect compliments; the fish had an excellent flavor; the seasoning of a sauce was delicious; Mademoiselle Gamard's capacities and virtues as mistress of a household were great. He was sure of flattering the old maid's vanity by praising the skill with which she made or prepared her preserves and pickles and pates and other gastronomical inventions. To cap all, the wily canon never left his landlady's yellow salon after dinner without remarking that there was no house in Tours where he could get such good coffee as that he had just imbibed.

Thanks to this thorough understanding of Mademoiselle Gamard's character, and to the science of existence which he had put in practice for the last twelve years, no matter of discussion

on the internal arrangements of the household had ever come up between them. The Abbe Chapeloud had taken note of the spinster's angles, asperities, and crabbedness, and had so arranged his avoidance of her that he obtained without the least difficulty all the concessions that were necessary to the happiness and tranquility of his life. The result was that Mademoiselle Gamard frequently remarked to her friends and acquaintances that the Abbe Chapeloud was a very amiable man, extremely easy to live with, and a fine mind.

As to her other lodger, the Abbe Troubert, she said absolutely nothing about him. Completely involved in the round of her life, like a satellite in the orbit of a planet, Troubert was to her a sort of intermediary creature between the individuals of the human species and those of the canine species; he was classed in her heart next, but directly before, the place intended for friends but now occupied by a fat and wheezy pug which she tenderly loved. She ruled Troubert completely, and the intermingling of their interests was so obvious that many persons of her social sphere believed that the Abbe Troubert had designs on the old maid's property, and was binding her to him unawares with infinite patience, and really directing her while he seemed to be obeying without ever letting her perceive in him the slightest wish on his part to govern her.

When the Abbe Chapeloud died, the old maid, who desired a lodger with quiet ways, naturally thought of the vicar. Before the canon's will was made known she had meditated offering

his rooms to the Abbe Troubert, who was not very comfortable on the ground-floor. But when the Abbe Birotteau, on receiving his legacy, came to settle in writing the terms of his board she saw he was so in love with the apartment, for which he might now admit his long cherished desires, that she dared not propose the exchange, and accordingly sacrificed her sentiments of friendship to the demands of self-interest. But in order to console her beloved canon, Mademoiselle took up the large white Chateau-Renaud bricks that made the floors of his apartment and replaced them by wooden floors laid in "point de Hongrie." She also rebuilt a smoky chimney.

For twelve years the Abbe Birotteau had seen his friend Chapeloud in that house without ever giving a thought to the motive of the canon's extreme circumspection in his relations to Mademoiselle Gamard. When he came himself to live with that saintly woman he was in the condition of a lover on the point of being made happy. Even if he had not been by nature purblind of intellect, his eyes were too dazzled by his new happiness to allow him to judge of the landlady, or to reflect on the limits which he ought to impose on their daily intercourse. Mademoiselle Gamard, seen from afar and through the prism of those material felicities which the vicar dreamed of enjoying in her house, seemed to him a perfect being, a faultless Christian, essentially charitable, the woman of the Gospel, the wise virgin, adorned by all those humble and modest virtues which shed celestial fragrance upon life.

So, with the enthusiasm of one who attains an object long desired, with the candor of a child, and the blundering foolishness of an old man utterly without worldly experience, he fell into the life of Mademoiselle Gamard precisely as a fly is caught in a spider's web. The first day that he went to dine and sleep at the house he was detained in the salon after dinner, partly to make his landlady's acquaintance, but chiefly by that inexplicable embarrassment which often assails timid people and makes them fear to seem impolite by breaking off a conversation in order to take leave. Consequently he remained there the whole evening. Then a friend of his, a certain Mademoiselle Salomon de Villenoix, came to see him, and this gave Mademoiselle Gamard the happiness of forming a card-table; so that when the vicar went to bed he felt that he had passed a very agreeable evening. Knowing Mademoiselle Gamard and the Abbe Troubert but slightly, he saw only the superficial aspects of their characters; few persons bare their defects at once, they generally take on a becoming veneer.

The worthy abbe was thus led to suggest to himself the charming plan of devoting all his evenings to Mademoiselle Gamard, instead of spending them, as Chapeloud had done, elsewhere. The old maid had for years been possessed by a desire which grew stronger day by day. This desire, often formed by old persons and even by pretty women, had become in Mademoiselle Gamard's soul as ardent a longing as that of Birotteau for Chapeloud's apartment; and it was strengthened by all those

feelings of pride, egotism, envy, and vanity which pre-exist in the breasts of worldly people.

This history is of all time; it suffices to widen slightly the narrow circle in which these personages are about to act to find the coefficient reasons of events which take place in the very highest spheres of social life.

Mademoiselle Gamard spent her evenings by rotation in six or eight different houses. Whether it was that she disliked being obliged to go out to seek society, and considered that at her age she had a right to expect some return; or that her pride was wounded at receiving no company in her house; or that her self-love craved the compliments she saw her various hostesses receive, – certain it is that her whole ambition was to make her salon a centre towards which a given number of persons should nightly make their way with pleasure. One morning as she left Saint-Gatien, after Birotteau and his friend Mademoiselle Salomon had spent a few evenings with her and with the faithful and patient Troubert, she said to certain of her good friends whom she met at the church door, and whose slave she had hitherto considered herself, that those who wished to see her could certainly come once a week to her house, where she had friends enough to make a card-table; she could not leave the Abbe Birotteau; Mademoiselle Salomon had not missed a single evening that week; she was devoted to friends; and – et cetera, et cetera. Her speech was all the more humbly haughty and softly persuasive because Mademoiselle Salomon de Villenoix

belonged to the most aristocratic society in Tours. For though Mademoiselle Salomon came to Mademoiselle Gamard's house solely out of friendship for the vicar, the old maid triumphed in receiving her, and saw that, thanks to Birotteau, she was on the point of succeeding in her great desire to form a circle as numerous and as agreeable as those of Madame de Listomere, Mademoiselle Merlin de la Blottiere, and other devout ladies who were in the habit of receiving the pious and ecclesiastical society of Tours.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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