

GUY DE MAUPASSANT

STRONG AS DEATH

Ги д. Мопассан

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PART I

CHAPTER I

A DUEL OF HEARTS

Broad daylight streamed down into the vast studio through a skylight in the ceiling, which showed a large square of dazzling blue, a bright vista of limitless heights of azure, across which passed flocks of birds in rapid flight. But the glad light of heaven hardly entered this severe room, with high ceilings and draped walls, before it began to grow soft and dim, to slumber among the hangings and die in the portieres, hardly penetrating to the dark corners where the gilded frames of portraits gleamed like flame. Peace and sleep seemed imprisoned there, the peace characteristic of an artist's dwelling, where the human soul has toiled. Within these walls, where thought abides, struggles, and becomes exhausted in its violent efforts, everything appears weary and overcome as soon as the energy of action is abated; all seems dead after the great crises of life, and the furniture, the hangings, and the portraits of great personages still unfinished on the canvases, all seem to rest as if the whole place had suffered the master's fatigue and had toiled with him, taking part in the daily renewal of his struggle. A vague, heavy odor of paint, turpentine, and tobacco was in the air, clinging to the rugs and chairs; and no sound broke the deep silence save the sharp short cries of the swallows that flitted above the open skylight, and the dull, ceaseless roar of Paris, hardly heard above the roofs. Nothing moved except a little cloud of smoke that rose intermittently toward the ceiling with every puff that Olivier Bertin, lying upon his divan, blew slowly from a cigarette between his lips.

With gaze lost in the distant sky, he tried to think of a new subject for a painting. What should he do? As yet he did not know. He was by no means resolute and sure of himself as an artist, but was of an uncertain, uneasy spirit, whose undecided inspiration ever hesitated among all the manifestations of art. Rich, illustrious, the gainer of all honors, he nevertheless remained, in these his later years, a man who did not know exactly toward what ideal he had been aiming. He had won the *Prix* of Rome, had been the defender of traditions, and had evoked, like so many others, the great scenes of history; then, modernizing his tendencies, he had painted living men, but in a way that showed the influence of classic memories. Intelligent, enthusiastic, a worker that clung to his changing dreams, in love with his art, which he knew to perfection, he had acquired, by reason of the delicacy of his mind, remarkable executive ability and great versatility, due in some degree to his hesitations and his experiments in all styles of his art. Perhaps, too, the sudden admiration of the world for his works, elegant, correct, and full of distinctions, influenced his nature and prevented him from becoming what he naturally might have been. Since the triumph of his first success, the desire to please always made him anxious, without his being conscious of it; it influenced his actions and weakened his convictions. This desire to please was apparent in him in many ways, and had contributed much to his glory.

His grace of manner, all his habits of life, the care he devoted to his person, his long-standing reputation for strength and agility as a swordsman and an equestrian, had added further attractions to his steadily growing fame. After his *Cleopatra*, the first picture that had made him illustrious, Paris suddenly became enamored of him, adopted him, made a pet of him; and all at once he became one of those brilliant, fashionable artists one meets in the Bois, for whose presence hostesses maneuver,

and whom the Institute welcomes thenceforth. He had entered it as a conqueror, with the approval of all Paris.

Thus Fortune had led him to the beginning of old age, coddling and caressing him.

Under the influence of the beautiful day, which he knew was glowing without, Bertin sought a poetic subject. He felt somewhat dreamy, however, after his breakfast and his cigarette; he pondered awhile, gazing into space, in fancy sketching rapidly against the blue sky the figures of graceful women in the Bois or on the sidewalk of a street, lovers by the water – all the pleasing fancies in which his thoughts reveled. The changing images stood out against the bright sky, vague and fleeting in the hallucination of his eye, while the swallows, darting through space in ceaseless flight, seemed trying to efface them as if with strokes of a pen.

He found nothing. All these half-seen visions resembled things that he had already done; all the women appeared to be the daughters or the sisters of those that had already been born of his artistic fancy; and the vague fear, that had haunted him for a year, that he had lost the power to create, had made the round of all subjects and exhausted his inspiration, outlined itself distinctly before this review of his work – this lack of power to dream anew, to discover the unknown.

He arose quietly to look among his unfinished sketches, hoping to find something that would inspire him with a new idea.

Still puffing at his cigarette, he proceeded to turn over the sketches, drawings, and rough drafts that he kept in a large old closet; but, soon becoming disgusted with this vain quest, and feeling depressed by the lassitude of his spirits, he tossed away his cigarette, whistled a popular street-song, bent down and picked up a heavy dumb-bell that lay under a chair. Having raised with the other hand a curtain that draped a mirror, which served him in judging the accuracy of a pose, in verifying his perspectives and testing the truth, he placed himself in front of it and began to swing the dumb-bell, meanwhile looking intently at himself.

He had been celebrated in the studios for his strength; then, in the gay world, for his good looks. But now the weight of years was making him heavy. Tall, with broad shoulders and full chest, he had acquired the protruding stomach of an old wrestler, although he kept up his fencing every day and rode his horse with assiduity. His head was still remarkable and as handsome as ever, although in a style different from that of his earlier days. His thick and short white hair set off the black eyes beneath heavy gray eyebrows, while his luxuriant moustache – the moustache of an old soldier – had remained quite dark, and it gave to his countenance a rare characteristic of energy and pride.

Standing before the mirror, with heels together and body erect, he went through the usual movements with the two iron balls, which he held out at the end of his muscular arm, watching with a complacent expression its evidence of quiet power.

But suddenly, in the glass, which reflected the whole studio, he saw one of the portieres move; then appeared a woman's head – only a head, peeping in. A voice behind him asked:

“Anyone here?”

“Present!” he responded promptly, turning around. Then, throwing his dumb-bell on the floor, he hastened toward the door with an appearance of youthful agility that was slightly affected.

A woman entered attired in a light summer costume. They shook hands.

“You were exercising, I see,” said the lady.

“Yes,” he replied; “I was playing peacock, and allowed myself to be surprised.”

The lady laughed, and continued:

“Your concierge's lodge was vacant, and as I know you are always alone at this hour I came up without being announced.”

He looked at her.

“Heavens, how beautiful you are! What chic!”

“Yes, I have a new frock. Do you think it pretty?”

“Charming, and perfectly harmonious. We can certainly say that nowadays it is possible to give expression to the lightest textiles.”

He walked around her, gently touching the material of the gown, adjusting its folds with the tips of his fingers, like a man that knows a woman’s toilet as the modiste knows it, having all his life employed his artist’s taste and his athlete’s muscles in depicting with slender brush changing and delicate fashions, in revealing feminine grace enclosed within a prison of velvet and silk, or hidden by snowy laces. He finished his scrutiny by declaring: “It is a great success, and it becomes you perfectly!”

The lady allowed herself to be admired, quite content to be pretty and to please him.

No longer in her first youth, but still beautiful, not very tall, somewhat plump, but with that freshness which lends to a woman of forty an appearance of having only just reached full maturity, she seemed like one of those roses that flourish for an indefinite time up to the moment when, in too full a bloom, they fall in an hour.

Beneath her blonde hair she possessed the shrewdness to preserve all the alert and youthful grace of those Parisian women who never grow old; who carry within themselves a surprising vital force, an indomitable power of resistance, and who remain for twenty years triumphant and indestructible, careful above all things of their bodies and ever watchful of their health.

She raised her veil and murmured:

“Well, you do not kiss me!”

“I have been smoking.”

“Pooh!” said the lady. Then, holding up her face, she added, “So much the worse!”

Their lips met.

He took her parasol and divested her of her spring jacket with the prompt, swift movement indicating familiarity with this service. As she seated herself on the divan, he asked with an air of interest:

“Is all going well with your husband?”

“Very well; he must be making a speech in the House at this very moment.”

“Ah! On what, pray?”

“Oh – no doubt on beets or on rape-seed oil, as usual!”

Her husband, the Comte de Guilleroy, deputy from the Eure, made a special study of all questions of agricultural interest.

Perceiving in one corner a sketch that she did not recognize, the lady walked across the studio, asking, “What is that?”

“A pastel that I have just begun – the portrait of the Princesse de Ponteve.”

“You know,” said the lady gravely, “that if you go back to painting portraits of women I shall close your studio. I know only too well to what that sort of thing leads!”

“Oh, but I do not make twice a portrait of Any!” was the answer.

“I hope not, indeed!”

She examined the newly begun pastel sketch with the air of a woman that understands the technic of art. She stepped back, advanced, made a shade of her hand, sought the place where the best light fell on the sketch, and finally expressed her satisfaction.

“It is very good. You succeed admirably with pastel work.”

“Do you think so?” murmured the flattered artist.

“Yes; it is a most delicate art, needing great distinction of style. It cannot be handled by masons in the art of painting.”

For twelve years the Countess had encouraged the painter’s leaning toward the distinguished in art, opposing his occasional return to the simplicity of realism; and, in consideration of the demands of fashionable modern elegance, she had tenderly urged him toward an ideal of grace that was slightly affected and artificial.

“What is the Princess like?” she asked.

He was compelled to give her all sorts of details – those minute details in which the jealous and subtle curiosity of women delights, passing from remarks upon her toilet to criticisms of her intelligence.

Suddenly she inquired: “Does she flirt with you?”

He laughed, and declared that she did not.

Then, putting both hands on the shoulders of the painter, the Countess gazed fixedly at him. The ardor of her questioning look caused a quiver in the pupils of her blue eyes, flecked with almost imperceptible black points, like tiny ink-spots.

Again she murmured: “Truly, now, she is not a flirt?”

“No, indeed, I assure you!”

“Well, I am quite reassured on another account,” said the Countess. “You never will love anyone but me now. It is all over for the others. It is too late, my poor dear!”

The painter experienced that slight painful emotion which touches the heart of middle-aged men when some one mentions their age; and he murmured: “To-day and to-morrow, as yesterday, there never has been in my life, and never will be, anyone but you, Any.”

She took him by the arm, and turning again toward the divan made him sit beside her.

“Of what were you thinking?” she asked.

“I am looking for a subject to paint.”

“What, pray?”

“I don’t know, you see, since I am still seeking it.”

“What have you been doing lately?”

He was obliged to tell her of all the visits he had received, about all the dinners and soirees he had attended, and to repeat all the conversations and chit-chat. Both were really interested in all these futile and familiar details of fashionable life. The little rivalries, the flirtations, either well known or suspected, the judgments, a thousand times heard and repeated, upon the same persons, the same events and opinions, were bearing away and drowning both their minds in that troubled and agitated stream called Parisian life. Knowing everyone in all classes of society, he as an artist to whom all doors were open, she as the elegant wife of a Conservative deputy, they were experts in that sport of brilliant French chatter, amiably satirical, banal, brilliant but futile, with a certain shibboleth which gives a particular and greatly envied reputation to those whose tongues have become supple in this sort of malicious small talk.

“When are you coming to dine?” she asked suddenly.

“Whenever you wish. Name your day.”

“Friday. I shall have the Duchesse de Mortemain, the Corbelles, and Musadieu, in honor of my daughter’s return – she is coming this evening. But do not speak of it, my friend. It is a secret.”

“Oh, yes, I accept. I shall be charmed to see Annette again. I have not seen her in three years.”

“Yes, that is true. Three years!”

Though Annette, in her earliest years, had been brought up in Paris in her parents’ home, she had become the object of the last and passionate affection of her grandmother, Madame Paradin, who, almost blind, lived all the year round on her son-in-law’s estate at the castle of Roncieres, on the Eure. Little by little, the old lady had kept the child with her more and more, and as the De Guilleroy’s passed almost half their time in this domain, to which a variety of interests, agricultural and political, called them frequently, it ended in taking the little girl to Paris on occasional visits, for she herself preferred the free and active life of the country to the cloistered life of the city.

For three years she had not visited Paris even once, the Countess having preferred to keep her entirely away from it, in order that a new taste for its gaieties should not be awakened in her before the day fixed for her debut in society. Madame de Guilleroy had given her in the country two governesses, with unexceptionable diplomas, and had visited her mother and her daughter more

frequently than before. Moreover, Annette's sojourn at the castle was rendered almost necessary by the presence of the old lady.

Formerly, Olivier Bertin had passed six weeks or two months at Roncieres every year; but in the past three years rheumatism had sent him to watering-places at some distance, which had so much revived his love for Paris that after his return he could not bring himself to leave it.

As a matter of custom, the young girl should not have returned home until autumn, but her father had suddenly conceived a plan for her marriage, and sent for her that she might meet immediately the Marquis de Farandal, to whom he wished her to be betrothed. But this plan was kept quite secret, and Madame de Guilleroy had told only Olivier Bertin of it, in strict confidence.

"Then your husband's idea is quite decided upon?" said he at last.

"Yes; I even think it a very happy idea."

Then they talked of other things.

She returned to the subject of painting, and wished to make him decide to paint a Christ. He opposed the suggestion, thinking that there was already enough of them in the world; but she persisted, and grew impatient in her argument.

"Oh, if I knew how to draw I would show you my thought: it should be very new, very bold. They are taking him down from the cross, and the man who has detached the hands has let drop the whole upper part of the body. It has fallen upon the crowd below, and they lift up their arms to receive and sustain it. Do you understand?"

Yes, he understood; he even thought the conception quite original; but he held himself as belonging to the modern style, and as his fair friend reclined upon the divan, with one daintily-shod foot peeping out, giving to the eye the sensation of flesh gleaming through the almost transparent stocking, he said: "Ah, that is what I should paint! That is life – a woman's foot at the edge of her skirt! Into that subject one may put everything – truth, desire, poetry. Nothing is more graceful or more charming than a woman's foot; and what mystery it suggests: the hidden limb, lost yet imagined beneath its veiling folds of drapery!"

Sitting on the floor, *a la Turque*, he seized her shoe and drew it off, and the foot, coming out of its leather sheath, moved about quickly, like a little animal surprised at being set free.

"Isn't that elegant, distinguished, and material – more material than the hand? Show me your hand, Any!"

She wore long gloves reaching to the elbow. In order to remove one she took it by the upper edge and slipped it down quickly, turning it inside out, as one would skin a snake. The arm appeared, white, plump, round, so suddenly bared as to produce an idea of complete and bold nudity.

She gave him her hand, which drooped from her wrist. The rings sparkled on her white fingers, and the narrow pink nails seemed like amorous claws protruding at the tips of that little feminine paw.

Olivier Bertin handled it tenderly and admiringly. He played with the fingers as if they were live toys, while saying:

"What a strange thing! What a strange thing! What a pretty little member, intelligent and adroit, which executes whatever one wills – books, laces, houses, pyramids, locomotives, pastry, or caresses, which last is its pleasantest function."

He drew off the rings one by one, and as the wedding-ring fell in its turn, he murmured smilingly:

"The law! Let us salute it!"

"Nonsense!" said the Countess, slightly wounded.

Bertin had always been inclined to satirical banter, that tendency of the French to mingle irony with the most serious sentiments, and he had often unintentionally made her sad, without knowing how to understand the subtle distinctions of women, or to discern the border of sacred ground, as he himself said. Above all things it vexed her whenever he alluded with a touch of familiar lightness

to their attachment, which was an affair of such long standing that he declared it the most beautiful example of love in the nineteenth century. After a silence, she inquired:

“Will you take Annette and me to the varnishing-day reception?”

“Certainly.”

Then she asked him about the best pictures to be shown in the next exposition, which was to open in a fortnight.

Suddenly, however, she appeared to recollect something she had forgotten.

“Come, give me my shoe,” she said. “I am going now.”

He was playing dreamily with the light shoe, turning it over abstractedly in his hands. He leaned over, kissed the foot, which appeared to float between the skirt and the rug, and which, a little chilled by the air, no longer moved restlessly about; then he slipped on the shoe, and Madame de Guilleroy, rising, approached the table, on which were scattered papers, open letters, old and recent, beside a painter’s inkstand, in which the ink had dried. She looked at it all with curiosity, touched the papers, and lifted them to look underneath.

Bertin approached her, saying:

“You will disarrange my disorder.”

Without replying to this, she inquired:

“Who is the gentleman that wishes to buy your *Baigneuses*?”

“An American whom I do not know.”

“Have you come to an agreement about the *Chanteuse des rues*?”

“Yes. Ten thousand.”

“You did well. It was pretty, but not exceptional. Good-by, dear.”

She presented her cheek, which he brushed with a calm kiss; then she disappeared through the portieres, saying in an undertone:

“Friday – eight o’clock. I do not wish you to go with me to the door – you know that very well. Good-by!”

When she had gone he first lighted another cigarette, then he began to pace slowly to and fro in his studio. All the past of this liaison unrolled itself before him. He recalled all its details, now long remote, sought them and put them together, interested in this solitary pursuit of reminiscences.

It was at the moment when he had just risen like a star on the horizon of artistic Paris, when the painters were monopolizing the favor of the public, and had built up a quarter with magnificent dwellings, earned by a few strokes of the brush.

After his return from Rome, in 1864, he had lived for some years without success or renown; then suddenly, in 1868, he exhibited his *Cleopatra*, and in a few days was being praised to the skies by both critics and public.

In 1872, after the war, and after the death of Henri Regnault had made for all his brethren, a sort of pedestal of glory, a *Jocaste* a bold subject, classed Bertin among the daring, although his wisely original execution made him acceptable even to the Academicians. In 1873 his first medal placed him beyond competition with his *Juive d’Alger*, which he exhibited on his return from a trip to Africa, and a portrait of the Princesse de Salia, in 1874, made him considered by the fashionable world the first portrait painter of his day. From that time he became the favorite painter of Parisian women of that class, the most skilful and ingenious interpreter of their grace, their bearing, and their nature. In a few months all the distinguished women in Paris solicited the favor of being reproduced by his brush. He was hard to please, and made them pay well for that favor.

After he had become the rage, and was received everywhere as a man of the world he saw one day, at the Duchesse de Mortemain’s house, a young woman in deep mourning, who was just leaving as he entered, and who, in this chance meeting in a doorway, dazzled him with a charming vision of grace and elegance.

On inquiring her name, he learned that she was the Comtesse de Guilleroy, wife of a Normandy country squire, agriculturist and deputy; that she was in mourning for her husband's father; and that she was very intellectual, greatly admired, and much sought after.

Struck by the apparition that had delighted his artist's eye, he said:

"Ah, there is some one whose portrait I should paint willingly!"

This remark was repeated to the young Countess the next day; and that evening Bertin received a little blue-tinted note, delicately perfumed, in a small, regular handwriting, slanting a little from left to right, which said:

"MONSIEUR:

"The Duchesse de Mortemain, who has just left my house, has assured me that you would be disposed to make, from my poor face, one of your masterpieces. I would entrust it to you willingly if I were certain that you did not speak idly, and that you really see in me something that you could reproduce and idealize.

"Accept, Monsieur, my sincere regards.

"ANNE DE GUILLEROY."

He answered this note, asking when he might present himself at the Countess's house, and was very simply invited to breakfast on the following Monday.

It was on the first floor of a large and luxurious modern house in the Boulevard Malesherbes. Traversing a large salon with blue silk walls, framed in white and gold, the painter was shown into a sort of boudoir hung with tapestries of the last century, light and coquettish, those tapestries *a la Watteau*, with their dainty coloring and graceful figures, which seem to have been designed and executed by workmen dreaming of love.

He had just seated himself when the Countess appeared. She walked so lightly that he had not heard her coming through the next room, and was surprised when he saw her. She extended her hand in graceful welcome.

"And so it is true," said she, "that you really wish to paint my portrait?"

"I shall be very happy to do so, Madame."

Her close-fitting black gown made her look very slender and gave her a youthful appearance though a grave air, which was belied, however, by her smiling face, lighted up by her bright golden hair. The Count entered, leading by the hand a little six-year-old girl.

Madame de Guilleroy presented him, saying, "My husband."

The Count was rather short, and wore no moustache; his cheeks were hollow, darkened under the skin by his close-shaven beard. He had somewhat the appearance of a priest or an actor; his hair was long and was tossed back carelessly; his manner was polished, and around the mouth two large circular lines extended from the cheeks to the chin, seeming to have been acquired from the habit of speaking in public.

He thanked the painter with a flourish of phrases that betrayed the orator. He had wished for a long time to have a portrait of his wife, and certainly he would have chosen M. Olivier Bertin, had he not feared a refusal, for he well knew that the painter was overwhelmed with orders.

It was arranged, then, with much ceremony on both sides, that the Count should accompany the Countess to the studio the next day. He asked, however, whether it would not be better to wait, because of the Countess's deep mourning; but the painter declared that he wished to translate the first impression she had made upon him, and the striking contrast of her animated, delicate head, luminous under the golden hair, with the austere black of her garments.

She came, then, the following day, with her husband, and afterward with her daughter, whom the artist seated before a table covered with picture-books.

Olivier Bertin, following his usual custom, showed himself very reserved. Fashionable women made him a little uneasy, for he hardly knew them. He supposed them to be at once immoral and shallow, hypocritical and dangerous, futile and embarrassing. Among the women of the demi-monde

he had had some passing adventures due to his renown, his lively wit, his elegant and athletic figure, and his dark and animated face. He preferred them, too; he liked their free ways and frank speech, accustomed as he was to the gay and easy manners of the studios and green-rooms he frequented. He went into the fashionable world for the glory of it, but his heart was not in it; he enjoyed it through his vanity, received congratulations and commissions, and played the gallant before charming ladies who flattered him, but never paid court to any. As he did not allow himself to indulge in daring pleasantries and spicy jests in their society, he thought them all prudes, and himself was considered as having good taste. Whenever one of them came to pose at his studio, he felt, in spite of any advances she might make to please him, that disparity of rank which prevents any real unity between artists and fashionable people, no matter how much they may be thrown together. Behind the smiles and the admiration which among women are always a little artificial, he felt the indefinable mental reserve of the being that judges itself of superior essence. This brought about in him an abnormal feeling of pride, which showed itself in a bearing of haughty respect, dissembling the vanity of the parvenu who is treated as an equal by princes and princesses, who owes to his talent the honor accorded to others by their birth. It was said of him with slight surprise: "He is really very well bred!" This surprise, although it flattered him, also wounded him, for it indicated a certain social barrier.

The admirable and ceremonious gravity of the painter a little annoyed Madame de Guilleroy, who could find nothing to say to this man, so cold, yet with a reputation for cleverness.

After settling her little daughter, she would come and sit in an armchair near the newly begun sketch, and tried, according to the artist's recommendation, to give some expression to her physiognomy.

In the midst of the fourth sitting, he suddenly ceased painting and inquired:

"What amuses you more than anything else in life?"

She appeared somewhat embarrassed.

"Why, I hardly know. Why this question?"

"I need a happy thought in those eyes, and I have not seen it yet."

"Well, try to make me talk; I like very much to chat."

"Are you gay?"

"Very gay."

"Well, then, let us chat, Madame."

He had said "Let us chat, Madame," in a very grave tone; then, resuming his painting, he touched upon a variety of subjects, seeking something on which their minds could meet. They began by exchanging observations on the people that both knew; then they talked of themselves – always the most agreeable and fascinating subject for a chat.

When they met again the next day they felt more at ease, and Bertin, noting that he pleased and amused her, began to relate some of the details of his artist life, allowing himself to give free scope to his reminiscences, in a fanciful way that was peculiar to him.

Accustomed to the dignified presence of the literary lights of the salons, the Countess was surprised by this almost wild gaiety, which said unusual things quite frankly, enlivening them with irony; and presently she began to answer in the same way, with a grace at once daring and delicate.

In a week's time she had conquered and charmed him by her good humor, frankness, and simplicity. He had entirely forgotten his prejudices against fashionable women, and would willingly have declared that they alone had charm and fascination. As he painted, standing before his canvas, advancing and retreating, with the movements of a man fighting, he allowed his fancy to flow freely, as if he had known for a long time this pretty woman, blond and black, made of sunlight and mourning, seated before him, laughing and listening, answering him gaily with so much animation that she lost her pose every moment.

Sometimes he would move far away from her, closing one eye, leaning over for a searching study of his model's pose; then he would draw very near to her to note the slightest shadows of her

face, to catch the most fleeting expression, to seize and reproduce that which is in a woman's face beyond its more outward appearance; that emanation of ideal beauty, that reflection of something indescribable, that personal and intimate charm peculiar to each, which causes her to be loved to distraction by one and not by another.

One afternoon the little girl advanced, and, planting herself before the canvas, inquired with childish gravity:

“That is mamma, isn't it?”

The artist took her in his arms to kiss her, flattered by that naïve homage to the resemblance of his work.

Another day, when she had been very quiet, they suddenly heard her say, in a sad little voice:

“Mamma, I am so tired of this!”

The painter was so touched by this first complaint that he ordered a shopful of toys to be brought to the studio the following day.

Little Annette, astonished, pleased, and always thoughtful, put them in order with great care, that she might play with them one after another, according to the desire of the moment. From the date of this gift, she loved the painter as little children love, with that caressing, animal-like affection which makes them so sweet and captivating.

Madame de Guilleroy began to take pleasure in the sittings. She was almost without amusement or occupation that winter, as she was in mourning; so that, for lack of society and entertainments, her chief interest was within the walls of Bertin's studio.

She was the daughter of a rich and hospitable Parisian merchant, who had died several years earlier, and of his ailing wife, whose lack of health kept her in bed six months out of the twelve, and while still very young she had become a perfect hostess, knowing how to receive, to smile, to chat, to estimate character, and how to adapt herself to everyone; thus she early became quite at her ease in society, and was always far-seeing and compliant. When the Count de Guilleroy was presented to her as her betrothed, she understood at once the advantages to be gained by such a marriage, and, like a sensible girl, admitted them without constraint, knowing well that one cannot have everything and that in every situation we must strike a balance between good and bad.

Launched in the world, much sought because of her beauty and brilliance, she was admired and courted by many men without ever feeling the least quickening of her heart, which was as reasonable as her mind.

She possessed a touch of coquetry, however, which was nevertheless prudent and aggressive enough never to allow an affair to go too far. Compliments pleased her, awakened desires, fed her vanity, provided she might seem to ignore them; and when she had received for a whole evening the incense of this sort of homage, she slept quietly, as a woman who has accomplished her mission on earth. This existence, which lasted seven years, did not weary her nor seem monotonous, for she adored the incessant excitement of society, but sometimes she felt that she desired something different. The men of her world, political advocates, financiers, or wealthy idlers, amused her as actors might; she did not take them too seriously, although she appreciated their functions, their stations, and their titles.

The painter pleased her at first because such a man was entirely a novelty to her. She found the studio a very amusing place, laughed gaily, felt that she, too, was clever, and felt grateful to him for the pleasure she took in the sittings. He pleased her, too, because he was handsome, strong, and famous, no woman, whatever she may pretend, being indifferent to physical beauty and glory. Flattered at having been admired by this expert, and disposed, on her side, to think well of him, she had discovered in him an alert and cultivated mind, delicacy, fancy, the true charm of intelligence, and an eloquence of expression that seemed to illumine whatever he said.

A rapid friendship sprang up between them, and the hand-clasp exchanged every day as she entered seemed more and more to express something of the feeling in their hearts.

Then, without deliberate design, with no definite determination, she felt within her heart a growing desire to fascinate him, and yielded to it. She had foreseen nothing, planned nothing; she was only coquettish with added grace, as a woman always is toward a man who pleases her more than all others; and in her manner with him, in her glances and smiles, was that seductive charm that diffuses itself around a woman in whose breast has awakened a need of being loved.

She said flattering things to him which meant "I find you very agreeable, Monsieur;" and she made him talk at length in order to show him, by her attention, how much he aroused her interest. He would cease to paint and sit beside her; and in that mental exaltation due to an intense desire to please, he had crises of poetry, of gaiety or of philosophy, according to his state of mind that day.

She was merry when he was gay; when he became profound she tried to follow his discourse, though she did not always succeed; and when her mind wandered to other things, she appeared to listen with so perfect an air of comprehension and such apparent enjoyment of this initiation, that he felt his spirit exalted in noting her attention to his words, and was touched to have discovered a soul so delicate, open, and docile, into which thought fell like a seed.

The portrait progressed, and was likely to be good, for the painter had reached the state of emotion that is necessary in order to discover all the qualities of the model, and to express them with that convincing ardor which is the inspiration of true artists.

Leaning toward her, watching every movement of her face, all the tints of her flesh, every shadow of her skin, all the expression and the translucence of her eyes, every secret of her physiognomy, he had become saturated with her personality as a sponge absorbs water; and, in transferring to canvas that emanation of disturbing charm which his eye seized, and which flowed like a wave from his thought to his brush, he was overcome and intoxicated by it, as if he had drunk deep of the beauty of woman.

She felt that he was drawn toward her, and was amused by this game, this victory that was becoming more and more certain, animating even her own heart.

A new feeling gave fresh piquancy to her existence, awaking in her a mysterious joy. When she heard him spoken of her heart throbbed faster, and she longed to say – a longing that never passed her lips – "He is in love with me!" She was glad when people praised his talent, and perhaps was even more pleased when she heard him called handsome. When she was alone, thinking of him, with no indiscreet babble to annoy her, she really imagined that in him she had found merely a good friend, one that would always remain content with a cordial hand-clasp.

Often, in the midst of a sitting, he would suddenly put down his palette on the stool and take little Annette in his arms, kissing her tenderly on her hair, and his eyes, while gazing at the mother, said, "It is you, not the child, that I kiss in this way."

Occasionally Madame de Guilleroy did not bring her daughter, but came alone. On these days he worked very little, and the time was spent in talking.

One afternoon she was late. It was a cold day toward the end of February. Olivier had come in early, as was now his habit whenever she had an appointment with him, for he always hoped she would arrive before the usual hour. While waiting he paced to and fro, smoking, and asking himself the question that he was surprised to find himself asking for the hundredth time that week: "Am I in love?" He did not know, never having been really in love. He had had his caprices, certainly, some of which had lasted a long time, but never had he mistaken them for love. To-day he was astonished at the emotion that possessed him.

Did he love her? He hardly desired her, certainly, never having dreamed of the possibility of possessing her. Heretofore, as soon as a woman attracted him he had desired to make a conquest of her, and had held out his hand toward her as if to gather fruit, but without feeling his heart affected profoundly by either her presence or her absence.

Desire for Madame de Guilleroy hardly occurred to him; it seemed to be hidden, crouching behind another and more powerful feeling, which was still uncertain and hardly awakened. Olivier

had believed that love began with reveries and with poetic exaltations. But his feeling, on the contrary, seemed to come from an indefinable emotion, more physical than mental. He was nervous and restless, as if under the shadow of threatening illness, though nothing painful entered into this fever of the blood which by contagion stirred his mind also. He was quite aware that Madame de Guilleroy was the cause of his agitation; that it was due to the memories she left him and to the expectation of her return. He did not feel drawn to her by an impulse of his whole being, but he felt her always near him, as if she never had left him; she left to him something of herself when she departed – something subtle and inexpressible. What was it? Was it love? He probed deep in his heart in order to see, to understand. He thought her charming, but she was not at all the type of ideal woman that his blind hope had created. Whoever calls upon love has foreseen the moral traits and physical charms of her who will enslave him; and Madame de Guilleroy, although she pleased him infinitely, did not appear to him to be that woman.

But why did she thus occupy his thought, above all others, in a way so different, so unceasing? Had he simply fallen into the trap set by her coquetry, which he had long before understood, and, circumvented by his own methods, was he now under the influence of that special fascination which gives to women the desire to please?

He paced here and there, sat down, sprang up, lighted cigarettes and threw them away, and his eyes every instant looked at the clock, whose hands moved toward the usual hour in slow, unhurried fashion.

Several times already he had almost raised the convex glass over the two golden arrows turning so slowly, in order to push the larger one on toward the figure it was approaching so lazily. It seemed to him that this would suffice to make the door open, and that the expected one would appear, deceived and brought to him by this ruse. Then he smiled at this childish, persistent, and unreasonable desire.

At last he asked himself this question: “Could I become her lover?” This idea seemed strange to him, indeed hardly to be realized or even pursued, because of the complications it might bring into his life. Yet she pleased him very much, and he concluded: “Decidedly I am in a very strange state of mind.”

The clock struck, and this reminder of the hour made him start, striking on his nerves rather than his soul. He awaited her with that impatience which delay increases from second to second. She was always prompt, so that before ten minutes should pass he would see her enter. When the ten minutes had elapsed, he felt anxious, as at the approach of some grief, then irritated because she had made him lose time; finally, he realized that if she failed to come it would cause him actual suffering. What should he do? Should he wait for her? No; he would go out, so that if, by chance, she should arrive very late, she would find the studio empty.

He would go out, but when? What latitude should he allow her? Would it not be better to remain and to make her comprehend, by a few coldly polite words, that he was not one to be kept waiting. And suppose she did not come? Then he would receive a despatch, a card, a servant or a messenger. If she did not come, what should he do? It would be a day lost; he could not work. Then? Well, then he would go to seek news of her, for see her he must!

It was quite true; he felt a profound, tormenting, harassing necessity for seeing her. What did it mean? Was it love? But he felt no mental exaltation, no intoxication of the senses; it awakened no reverie of the soul, when he realized that if she did not come that day he should suffer keenly.

The door-bell rang on the stairway of the little hotel, and Olivier Bertin suddenly found himself somewhat breathless, then so joyous that he executed a pirouette and flung his cigarette high in the air. She entered; she was alone! Immediately he was seized with a great audacity.

“Do you know what I asked myself while waiting for you?”

“No, indeed, I do not.”

“I asked myself whether I were not in love with you?”

“In love with me? You must be mad!”

But she smiled, and her smile said: That is very pretty; I am glad to hear it! However, she said: “You are not serious, of course; why do you make such a jest?”

“On the contrary, I am absolutely serious,” he replied. “I do not declare that I am in love with you; but I ask myself whether I am not well on the way to become so.”

“What has made you think so?”

“My emotion when you are not here; my happiness when you arrive.”

She seated herself.

“Oh, don’t disturb yourself over anything so trifling! As long as you sleep well and have an appetite for dinner, there will be no danger!”

He began to laugh.

“And if I lose my sleep and no longer eat?”

“Let me know of it.”

“And then?”

“I will allow you to recover yourself in peace.”

“A thousand thanks!”

And on the theme of this uncertain love they spun theories and fancies all the afternoon. The same thing occurred on several successive days. Accepting his statement as a sort of jest, of no real importance, she would say gaily on entering: “Well, how goes your love to-day?”

He would reply lightly, yet with perfect seriousness, telling her of the progress of his malady, in all its intimate details, and of the depth of the tenderness that had been born and was daily increasing. He analyzed himself minutely before her, hour by hour, since their separation the evening before, with the air of a professor giving a lecture; and she listened with interest, a little moved, and somewhat disturbed by this story which seemed that in a book of which she was the heroine. When he had enumerated, in his gallant and easy manner, all the anxieties of which he had become the prey, his voice sometimes trembled in expressing by a word, or only by an intonation, the tender aching of his heart.

And she persisted in questioning him, vibrating with curiosity, her eyes fixed upon him, her ear eager for those things that are disturbing to know but charming to hear.

Sometimes when he approached her to alter a pose he would seize her hand and try to kiss it. With a swift movement she would draw away her fingers from his lips, saying, with a slight frown:

“Come, come – work!”

He would begin his work again, but within five minutes she would ask some adroit question that led him back to the sole topic that interested them.

By this time she began to feel some fear deep in her heart. She longed to be loved – but not too much! Sure of not being led away, she yet feared to allow him to venture too far, thereby losing him, since then she would be compelled to drive him to despair after seeming to encourage him. Yet, should it become necessary to renounce this tender and delicate friendship, this stream of pleasant converse which rippled along bearing nuggets of love like a river whose sand is full of gold, it would cause her great sorrow – a grief that would be heart-breaking.

When she set out from her own home to go to the painter’s studio, a wave of joy, warm and penetrating, overflowed her spirit, making it light and happy. As she laid her hand on Olivier’s bell, her breast throbbed with impatience, and the stair-carpet seemed the softest her feet ever had pressed. But Bertin became gloomy, a little nervous, often irritable. He had his moments of impatience, soon repressed, but frequently recurring.

One day, when she had just entered, he sat down beside her instead of beginning to paint, saying:

“Madame, you can no longer ignore the fact that what I have said is not a jest, and that I love you madly.”

Troubled by this beginning and seeing that the dreaded crisis had arrived, she tried to stop him, but he listened to her no longer. Emotion overflowed his heart, and she must hear him, pale,

trembling, and anxious as she listened. He spoke a long time, demanding nothing, tenderly, sadly, with despairing resignation; and she allowed him to take her hands, which he kept in his. He was kneeling before her without her taking any notice of his attitude, and with a far-away look upon his face he begged her not to work him any harm. What harm? She did not understand nor try to understand, overcome by the cruel grief of seeing him suffer, yet that grief was almost happiness. Suddenly she saw tears in his eyes and was so deeply moved that she exclaimed: "Oh!" – ready to embrace him as one embraces a crying child. He repeated in a very soft tone: "There, there! I suffer too much;" then, suddenly, won by his sorrow, by the contagion of tears, she sobbed, her nerves quivering, her arms trembling, ready to open.

When she felt herself suddenly clasped in his embrace and kissed passionately on the lips, she wished to cry out, to struggle, to repulse him; but she judged herself lost, for she consented while resisting, she yielded even while she struggled, pressing him to her as she cried: "No, no, I will not!"

Then she was overcome with the emotion of that moment; she hid her face in her hands, then she suddenly sprang to her feet, caught up her hat which had fallen to the floor, put it on her head and rushed away, in spite of the supplications of Olivier, who held a fold of her skirt.

As soon as she was in the street, she had a desire to sit down on the curbstone, her limbs were so exhausted and powerless. A cab was passing; she called to it and said to the driver: "Drive slowly, and take me wherever you like." She threw herself into the carriage, closed the door, sank back in one corner, feeling herself alone behind the raised windows – alone to think.

For some minutes she heard only the sound of the wheels and the jarring of the cab. She looked at the houses, the pedestrians, people in cabs and omnibuses, with a blank gaze that saw nothing; she thought of nothing, as if she were giving herself time, granting herself a respite before daring to reflect upon what had happened.

Then, as she had a practical mind and was not lacking in courage, she said to herself: "I am a lost woman!" For some time she remained under that feeling of certainty that irreparable misfortune had befallen her, horror-struck, like a man fallen from a roof, knowing that his legs are broken but dreading to prove it to himself.

But, instead of feeling overwhelmed by the anticipation of suffering, her heart remained calm and peaceful after this catastrophe; it beat slowly, softly, after the fall that had terrified her soul, and seemed to take no part in the perturbation of her mind.

She repeated aloud, as if to understand and convince herself: "Yes, I am a lost woman." No echo of suffering responded from her heart to this cry of her conscience.

She allowed herself to be soothed for some time by the movement of the carriage, putting off a little longer the necessity of facing this cruel situation. No, she did not suffer. She was afraid to think, that was all; she feared to know, to comprehend, and to reflect; on the contrary, in that mysterious and impenetrable being created within us by the incessant struggle between our desires and our will, she felt an indescribable peace.

After perhaps half an hour of this strange repose, understanding at last that the despair she had invoked would not come, she shook off her torpor and murmured: "It is strange: I am hardly sorry even!"

Then she began to reproach herself. Anger awakened within her against her own blindness and her weakness. How had she not foreseen this, not comprehended that the hour for that struggle must come; that this man was so dear to her as to render her cowardly, and that sometimes in the purest hearts desire arises like a gust of wind, carrying the will before it?

But, after she had judged and reprimanded herself severely, she asked herself what would happen next?

Her first resolve was to break with the painter and never to see him again. Hardly had she formed this resolution before a thousand reasons sprang up as quickly to combat it. How could

she explain such a break? What should she say to her husband? Would not the suspected truth be whispered, then spread abroad?

Would it not be better, for the sake of appearances, to act, with Olivier Bertin himself, the hypocritical comedy of indifference and forgetfulness, to show him that she had effaced that moment from her memory and from her life?

But could she do it? Would she have the audacity to appear to recollect nothing, to assume a look of indignant astonishment in saying: “What would you with me?” to the man with whom she had actually shared that swift and ardent emotion?

She reflected a long time, and decided that any other solution was impossible.

She would go to him courageously the next day, and make him understand as soon as she could what she desired him to do. She must not use a word, an allusion, a look, that could recall to him that moment of shame.

After he had suffered – for assuredly he would have his share of suffering, as a loyal and upright man – he would remain in future that which he had been up to the present.

As soon as this new resolution was formed, she gave her address to the coachman and returned home, profoundly depressed, with a desire to take to her bed, to see no one, to sleep and forget. Having shut herself up in her room, she remained there until the dinner hour, lying on a couch, benumbed, not wishing to agitate herself longer with that thought so full of danger.

She descended at the exact hour, astonished to find herself so calm, and awaited her husband with her ordinary demeanor. He appeared, carrying their little one in his arms; she pressed his hand and kissed the child, and felt no pang of anguish.

Monsieur de Guilleroy inquired what she had been doing. She replied indifferently that she had been posing, as usual.

“And the portrait – is it good?” he asked.

“It is coming on very well.”

He spoke of his own affairs, in his turn; he enjoyed talking, while dining, of the sitting of the Chamber, and of the discussion of the proposed law on the adulteration of food-stuffs.

This rather tiresome talk, which she usually endured amiably, now irritated her, and made her look with closer attention at the man who was vulgarly loquacious in his interest in such things; but she smiled as she listened, and replied pleasantly, more gracious even than usual, more indulgent toward these banalities. As she looked at him she thought: “I have deceived him! He is my husband, and I have deceived him! How strange it is! Nothing can change that fact, nothing can obliterate it! I closed my eyes. I submitted for a few seconds, a few seconds only, to a man’s kisses, and I am no longer a virtuous woman. A few seconds in my life – seconds that never can be effaced – have brought into it that little irreparable fact, so grave, so short, a crime, the most shameful one for a woman – and yet I feel no despair! If anyone had told me that yesterday, I should not have believed it. If anyone had convinced me that it would indeed come to pass, I should have thought instantly of the terrible remorse that would fill my heart to-day.”

Monsieur de Guilleroy went out after dinner, as he did almost every evening. Then the Countess took her little daughter on her lap, weeping over her and kissing her; the tears she shed were sincere, coming from her conscience, not from her heart.

But she slept very little. Amid the darkness of her room, she tormented herself afresh as to the dangers of the attitude toward the painter that she purposed to assume; she dreaded the interview that must take place the following day, and the things that he must say to her, looking her in the face meanwhile.

She arose early, but remained lying on her couch all the morning, forcing herself to foresee what it was she had to fear and what she must say in reply, in order to be ready for any surprise.

She went out early, that she might yet think while walking.

He hardly expected her, and had been asking himself, since the evening before, what he should do when he met her.

After her hasty departure – that flight which he had not dared to oppose – he had remained alone, still listening, although she was already far away, for the sound of her step, the rustle of her skirt, and the closing of the door, touched by the timid hand of his goddess.

He remained standing, full of deep, ardent, intoxicating joy. He had won her, *her!* That had passed between them! Was it possible? After the surprise of this triumph, he gloated over it, and, to realize it more keenly, he sat down and almost lay at full length on the divan where he had made her yield to him.

He remained there a long time, full of the thought that she was his mistress, and that between them, between the woman he had so much desired and himself, had been tied in a few moments that mysterious bond which secretly links two beings to each other. He retained in his still quivering body the piercingly sweet remembrance of that wild, fleeting moment when their lips had met, when their beings had united and mingled, thrilling together with the deepest emotion of life.

He did not go out that evening, in order to live over again that rapturous moment; he retired early, his heart vibrating with happiness. He had hardly awakened the next morning before he asked himself what he should do. To a *cocotte* or an actress he would have sent flowers or even a jewel; but he was tortured with perplexity before this new situation.

He wished to express, in delicate and charming terms, the gratitude of his soul, his ecstasy of mad tenderness, his offer of a devotion that should be eternal; but in order to intimate all these passionate and high-souled thoughts he could find only set phrases, commonplace expressions, vulgar and puerile.

Assuredly, he must write – but what? He scribbled, erased, tore up and began anew twenty letters, all of which seemed to him insulting, odious, ridiculous.

He gave up the idea of writing, therefore, and decided to go to see her, as soon as the hour for the sitting had passed, for he felt very sure that she would not come.

Shutting himself up in his studio, he stood in mental exaltation before the portrait, his lips longing to press themselves on the painting, whereon something of herself was fixed; and again and again he looked out of the window into the street. Every gown he saw in the distance made his heart throb quickly. Twenty times he believed that he saw her; then when the approaching woman had passed he sat down again, as if overcome by a deception.

Suddenly he saw her, doubted, then took his opera-glass, recognized her, and, dizzy with violent emotion, sat down once more to await her.

When she entered he threw himself on his knees and tried to take her hands, but she drew them away abruptly, and, as he remained at her feet, filled with anguish, his eyes raised to hers, she said haughtily:

“What are you doing, Monsieur? I do not understand that attitude.”

“Oh, Madame, I entreat you – ”

She interrupted him harshly:

“Rise! You are ridiculous!”

He rose, dazed, and murmured:

“What is the matter? Do not treat me in this way – I love you!”

Then, in a few short, dry phrases, she signified her wishes, and decreed the situation.

“I do not understand what you wish to say. Never speak to me of your love, or I shall leave this studio never to return. If you forget for a single moment this condition of my presence here, you never will see me again.”

He looked at her, crushed by this unexpected harshness; then he understood, and murmured:

“I shall obey, Madame.”

“Very well,” she rejoined; “I expected that of you! Now work, for you are long in finishing that portrait.”

He took up his palette and began to paint, but his hand trembled, his troubled eyes looked without seeing; he felt a desire to weep, so deeply wounded was his heart.

He tried to talk to her; she barely answered him. When he attempted to pay her some little compliment on her color, she cut him short in a tone so brusque that he felt suddenly one of those furies of a lover that change tenderness to hatred. Through soul and body he felt a nervous shock, and in a moment he detested her. Yes, yes, that was, indeed, woman! She, too, was like all the others! Why not? She, too, was false, changeable, and weak, like all of them. She had attracted him, seduced him with girlish ruses, trying to overcome him without intending to give him anything in return, enticing him only to refuse him, employing toward him all the tricks of cowardly coquettes who seem always on the point of yielding so long as the man who cringes like a dog before them dares not carry out his desire.

But the situation was the worse for her, after all; he had taken her, he had overcome her. She might try to wash away that fact and answer him insolently; she could efface nothing, and he – he would forget it! Indeed, it would have been a fine bit of folly to embarrass himself with this sort of mistress, who would eat into his artist life with the capricious teeth of a pretty woman.

He felt a desire to whistle, as he did in the presence of his models, but realized that his nerve was giving way and feared to commit some stupidity. He cut short the sitting under pretense of having an appointment. When they bowed at parting they felt themselves farther apart than the day they first met at the Duchesse de Mortemain’s.

As soon as she had gone, he took his hat and topcoat and went out. A cold sun, in a misty blue sky, threw over the city a pale, depressing, unreal light.

After he had walked a long time, with rapid and irritated step, elbowing the passers-by that he need not deviate from a straight line, his great fury against her began to change into sadness and regret. After he had repeated to himself all the reproaches he had poured upon her, he remembered, as he looked at the women that passed him, how pretty and charming she was. Like many others who do not admit it, he had always been waiting to meet the “impossible she,” to find the rare, unique, poetic and passionate being, the dream of whom hovers over our hearts. Had he not almost found it? Was it not she who might have given him this almost impossible happiness? Why, then, is it true that nothing is realized? Why can one seize nothing of that which he pursues, or can succeed only in grasping a phantom, which renders still more grievous this pursuit of illusions?

He was no longer resentful toward her; it was life itself that made him bitter. Now that he was able to reason, he asked himself what cause for anger he had against her? With what could he reproach her, after all? – with being amiable, kind, and gracious toward him, while she herself might well reproach him for having behaved like a villain!

He returned home full of sadness. He would have liked to ask her pardon, to devote himself to her, to make her forget; and he pondered as to how he might enable her to comprehend that henceforth, until death, he would be obedient to all her wishes.

The next day she arrived, accompanied by her daughter, with a smile so sad, an expression so pathetic, that the painter fancied he could see in those poor blue eyes, that had always been so merry, all the pain, all the remorse, all the desolation of that womanly heart. He was moved to pity, and, in order that she might forget, he showed toward her with delicate reserve the most thoughtful attentions. She acknowledged them with gentleness and kindness, with the weary and languid manner of a woman who suffers.

And he, looking at her, seized again with a mad dream of loving and of being loved, asked himself why she was not more indignant at his conduct, how she could still come to his studio, listen to him and answer him, with that memory between them.

Since she could bear to see him again, however, could endure to hear his voice, having always in her mind the one thought which she could not escape, it must be that this thought had not become intolerable to her. When a woman hates the man who has conquered her thus, she cannot remain in his presence without showing her hatred, but that man never can remain wholly indifferent to her. She must either detest him or pardon him. And when she pardons that transgression, she is not far from love!

While he painted slowly, he arrived at this conclusion by small arguments, precise, clear, and sure; he now felt himself strong, steady, and master of the situation. He had only to be prudent, patient, devoted, and one day or another she would again be his.

He knew how to wait. In order to reassure her and to conquer her once more, he practised ruses in his turn; he assumed a tenderness restrained by apparent remorse, hesitating attentions, and indifferent attitudes. Tranquil in the certainty of approaching happiness, what did it matter whether it arrived a little sooner, a little later? He even experienced a strange, subtle pleasure in delay, in watching her, and saying to himself, "She is afraid!" as he saw her coming always with her child.

He felt that between them a slow work of reconciliation was going on, and thought that in the Countess's eyes was something strange: constraint, a sweet sadness, that appeal of a struggling soul, of a faltering will, which seems to say: "But – conquer me, then!"

After a while she came alone once more, reassured by his reserve. Then he treated her as a friend, a comrade; he talked to her of his life, his plans, his art, as to a brother.

Deluded by this attitude, she assumed joyfully the part of counselor, flattered that he distinguished her thus above other women, and convinced that his talent would gain in delicacy through this intellectual intimacy. But, from consulting her and showing deference to her, he caused her to pass naturally from the functions of a counselor to the sacred office of inspirer. She found it charming to use her influence thus over the great man, and almost consented that he should love her as an artist, since it was she that gave him inspiration for his work!

It was one evening, after a long talk about the loves of illustrious painters, that she let herself glide into his arms. She rested there this time, without trying to escape, and gave him back his kisses.

She felt no remorse now, only the vague consciousness of a fall; and to stifle the reproaches of her reason she attributed it to fatality.

Drawn toward him by her virgin heart and her empty soul, the flesh overcome by the slow domination of caresses, little by little she attached herself to him, as do all tender women who love for the first time.

With Olivier it was a crisis of acute love, sensuous and poetic. It seemed to him sometimes that one day he had taken flight, with hands extended, and that he had been able to clasp in full embrace that winged and magnificent dream which is always hovering over our hopes.

He had finished the Countess's portrait, the best, certainly, that he ever had painted, for he had discovered and crystallized that inexpressible something which a painter seldom succeeds in unveiling – that reflection, that mystery, that physiognomy of the soul, which passes intangibly across a face.

Months rolled by, then years, which hardly loosened the tie that united the Comtesse de Guilleroy and the painter, Olivier Bertin. With him it was no longer the exaltation of the beginning, but a calm, deep affection, a sort of loving friendship that had become a habit.

With her, on the contrary, the passionate, persistent attachment of certain women who give themselves to a man wholly and forever was always growing. Honest and straight in adulterous love as they might have been in marriage, they devote themselves to a single object with a tenderness from which nothing can turn them. Not only do they love the lover, but they wish to love him, and, with eyes on him alone, they so fill their hearts with thoughts of him that nothing strange can thenceforth enter there. They have bound their lives resolutely, as one who knows how to swim, yet wishes to die, ties his hands together before leaping from a high bridge into the water.

But from the moment when the Countess had yielded, she was assailed by fears for Bertin's constancy. Nothing held him but his masculine will, his caprice, his passing fancy for a woman he had met one day just as he had already met so many others! She realized that he was so free, so susceptible to temptation – he who lived without duties, habits, or scruples, like all men! He was handsome, celebrated, much sought after, having, to respond to his easily awakened desires, fashionable women, whose modesty is so fragile, women of the demi-monde of the theater, prodigal of their favors with such men as he. One of them, some evening after supper, might follow him and please him, take him and keep him.

Thus she lived in terror of losing him, watching his manner, his attitudes, startled by a word, full of anguish when he admired another woman, praised the charm of her countenance or her grace of bearing. All of which she was ignorant in his life made her tremble, and all of which she was cognizant alarmed her. At each of their meetings she questioned him ingeniously, without his perceiving it, in order to make him express his opinion on the people he had seen, the houses where he had dined, in short, the lightest expression of his mind. As soon as she fancied she detected the influence of some other person, she combated it with prodigious astuteness and innumerable resources.

Oh, how often did she suspect those brief intrigues, without depth, lasting perhaps a week or two, from time to time, which come into the life of every prominent artist!

She had, as it were, an intuition of danger, even before she detected the awakening of a new desire in Olivier, by the look of triumph in his eyes, the expression of a man when swayed by a gallant fancy.

Then she would suffer; her sleep would be tortured by doubts. In order to surprise him, she would appear suddenly in his studio, without giving him notice of her coming, put questions that seemed naïve, tested his tenderness while listening to his thoughts, as we test while listening to detect hidden illness in the body. She would weep as soon as she found herself sure that some one would take him from her this time, robbing her of that love to which she clung so passionately because she had staked upon it all her will, her strength of affection, all her hopes and dreams.

Then, when she saw that he came back to her, after these brief diversions, she experienced, as she drew close to him again, took possession of him as of something lost and found, a deep, silent happiness which sometimes, when she passed a church, urged her to go in and thank God.

Her preoccupation in ever making herself pleasing to him above all others, and of guarding him against all others, had made her whole life become a combat interrupted by coquetry. She had ceaselessly struggled for him, and before him, with her grace, her beauty and elegance. She wished that wherever he went he should hear her praised for her charm, her taste, her wit, and her toilets. She wished to please others for his sake, and to attract them so that he should be both proud and jealous of her. And every time that she succeeded in arousing his jealousy, after making him suffer a little, she allowed him the triumph of winning her back, which revived his love in exciting his vanity. Then, realizing that it was always possible for a man to meet in society a woman whose physical charm would be greater than her own, being a novelty, she resorted to other means: she flattered and spoiled him. Discreetly but continuously she heaped praises upon him; she soothed him with admiration and enveloped him in flattery, so that he might find all other friendship, all other love, even, a little cold and incomplete, and that if others also loved him he would perceive at last that she alone of them all understood him.

She made the two drawing-rooms in her house, which he entered so often, a place as attractive to the pride of the artist as to the heart of the man, the place in all Paris where he liked best to come, because there all his cravings were satisfied at the same time.

Not only did she learn to discover all his tastes, in order that, while gratifying them in her own house, she might give him a feeling of well-being that nothing could replace, but she knew how to create new tastes, to arouse appetites of all kinds, material and intellectual, habits of little attentions,

of affections, of adoration and flattery! She tried to charm his eye with elegance, his sense of smell with perfumes, and his taste with delicate food.

But when she had planted in the soul and in the senses of a selfish bachelor a multitude of petty, tyrannical needs, when she had become quite certain that no mistress would trouble herself as she did to watch over and maintain them, in order to surround him with all the little pleasures of life, she suddenly feared, as she saw him disgusted with his own home, always complaining of his solitary life, and, being unable to come into her home except under all the restraints imposed by society, going to the club, seeking every means to soften his lonely lot – she feared lest he thought of marriage.

On some days she suffered so much from all these anxieties that she longed for old age, to have an end of this anguish and rest in a cooler and calmer affection.

Years passed, however, without disuniting them. The chain wherewith she had attached him to her was heavy, and she made new links as the old ones wore away. But, always solicitous, she watched over the painter's heart as one guards a child crossing a street full of vehicles, and day by day she lived in expectation of the unknown danger, the dread of which always hung over her.

The Count, without suspicion or jealousy, found this intimacy of his wife with a famous and popular artist a perfectly natural thing. Through continually meeting, the two men, becoming accustomed to each other, finally became excellent friends.

CHAPTER II

TWIN ROSES FROM A SINGLE STEM

When Bertin entered, on Friday evening, the house of his friend, where he was to dine in honor of the return of Antoinette de Guilleroy, he found in the little Louis XV salon only Monsieur de Musadieu, who had just arrived.

He was a clever old man, who perhaps might have become of some importance, and who now could not console himself for not having attained to something worth while.

He had once been a commissioner of the imperial museums, and had found means to get himself reappointed Inspector of Fine Arts under the Republic, which did not prevent him from being, above all else, the friend of princes, of all the princes, princesses, and duchesses of European aristocracy, and the sworn protector of artists of all sorts. He was endowed with an alert mind and quick perceptions, with great facility of speech that enabled him to say agreeably the most ordinary things, with a suppleness of thought that put him at ease in any society, and a subtle diplomatic scent that gave him the power to judge men at first sight; and he strolled from salon to salon, morning and evening, with his enlightened, useless, and gossiping activity.

Apt at everything, as he appeared, he would talk on any subject with an air of convincing competence and familiarity that made him greatly appreciated by fashionable women, whom he served as a sort of traveling bazaar of erudition. As a matter of fact, he knew many things without ever having read any but the most indispensable books; but he stood very well with the five Academies, with all the savants, writers, and learned specialists, to whom he listened with clever discernment. He knew how to forget at once explanations that were too technical or were useless to him, remembered the others very well, and lent to the information thus gleaned an easy, clear, and good-natured rendering that made them as readily comprehensible as the popular presentation of scientific facts. He gave the impression of being a veritable storehouse of ideas, one of those vast places wherein one never finds rare objects but discovers a multiplicity of cheap productions of all kinds and from all sources, from household utensils to the popular instruments for physical culture or for domestic surgery.

The painters, with whom his official functions brought him in continual contact, made sport of him but feared him. He rendered them some services, however, helped them to sell pictures, brought them in contact with fashionable persons, and enjoyed presenting them, protecting them, launching them. He seemed to devote himself to a mysterious function of fusing the fashionable and the artistic worlds, pluming himself on his intimate acquaintance with these, and of his familiar footing with those, on breakfasting with the Prince of Wales, on his way through Paris, or dining, the same evening, with Paul Adelmant, Olivier Bertin, and Amaury Maldant.

Bertin, who liked him well enough, found him amusing, and said of him: "He is the encyclopedia of Jules Verne, bound in ass's skin!"

The two men shook hands and began to talk of the political situation and the rumors of war, which Musadieu thought alarming, for evident reasons which he explained very well, Germany having every interest in crushing us and in hastening that moment for which M. de Bismarck had been waiting eighteen years; while Olivier Bertin proved by irrefutable argument that these fears were chimerical, it being impossible for Germany to be foolish enough to risk her conquest in an always doubtful venture, or for the Chancellor to be imprudent enough to risk, in the latter years of his life, his achievements and his glory at a single blow.

M. de Musadieu, however, seemed to know something of which he did not wish to speak. Furthermore, he had seen a Minister that morning and had met the Grand Duke Vladimir, returning from Cannes, the evening before.

The artist was unconvinced by this, and with quiet irony expressed doubt of the knowledge of even the best informed. Behind all these rumors was the influence of the Bourse! Bismarck alone might have a settled opinion on the subject.

M. de Guilleroy entered, shook hands warmly, excusing himself in unctuous words for having left them alone.

“And you, my dear Deputy,” asked the painter, “what do you think of these rumors of war?”

M. de Guilleroy launched into a discourse. As a member of the Chamber, he knew more of the subject than anyone else, though he held an opinion differing from that of most of his colleagues. No, he did not believe in the probability of an approaching conflict, unless it should be provoked by French turbulence and by the rodomontades of the self-styled patriots of the League. And he painted Bismarck’s portrait in striking colors, a portrait a la Saint-Simon. The man Bismarck was one that no one wished to understand, because one always lends to others his own ways of thinking, and credits them with a readiness to do that which he would do were he placed in their situation. M. de Bismarck was not a false and lying diplomatist, but frank and brutal, always loudly proclaiming the truth and announcing his intentions. “I want peace!” said he. That was true; he wanted peace, nothing but peace, and everything had proved it in a blinding fashion for eighteen years; everything – his arguments, his alliances, that union of peoples banded together against our impetuosity. M. de Guilleroy concluded in a tone of profound conviction: “He is a great man, a very great man, who desires peace, but who has faith only in menaces and violent means as the way to obtain it. In short, gentlemen, a great barbarian.”

“He that wishes the end must take the means,” M. de Musadieu replied. “I will grant you willingly that he adores peace if you will concede to me that he always wishes to make war in order to obtain it. But that is an indisputable and phenomenal truth: In this world war is made only to obtain peace!”

A servant announced: “Madame la Duchesse de Mortemain.”

Between the folding-doors appeared a tall, large woman, who entered with an air of authority. Guilleroy hastened to meet her, and kissed her hand, saying:

“How do you do, Duchess?”

The other two men saluted her with a certain distinguished familiarity, for the Duchess’s manner was both cordial and abrupt.

She was the widow of General the Duc de Mortemain, mother of an only daughter married to the Prince de Salia; daughter of the Marquis de Farandal, of high family and royally rich, and received at her mansion in the Rue de Varenne all the celebrities of the world, who met and complimented one another there. No Highness passed through Paris without dining at her table; no man could attract public attention that she did not immediately wish to know him. She must see him, make him talk to her, form her own judgment of him. This amused her greatly, lent interest to life, and fed the flame of imperious yet kindly curiosity that burned within her.

She had hardly seated herself when the same servant announced:

“Monsieur le Baron and Madame la Baronne de Corbelle.”

They were young; the Baron was bald and fat, the Baroness was slender, elegant, and very dark.

This couple occupied a peculiar situation in the French aristocracy due solely to a scrupulous choice of connections. Belonging to the polite world, but without value or talent, moved in all their actions by an immoderate love of that which is select, correct, and distinguished; by dint of visiting only the most princely houses, of professing their royalist sentiments, pious and correct to a supreme degree; by respecting all that should be respected, by condemning all that should be condemned, by never being mistaken on a point of worldly dogma or hesitating over a detail of etiquette, they had succeeded in passing in the eyes of many for the finest flower of high life. Their opinion formed a sort of code of correct form and their presence in a house gave it a true title of distinction.

The Corbelles were relatives of the Comte de Guilleroy.

“Well,” said the Duchess in astonishment, “and your wife?”

“One instant, one little instant,” pleaded the Count. “There is a surprise: she is just about to come.”

When Madame de Guilleroy, as the bride of a month, had entered society, she was presented to the Duchesse de Mortemain, who loved her immediately, adopted her, and patronized her.

For twenty years this friendship never had diminished, and when the Duchess said, “*Ma petite*,” one still heard in her voice the tenderness of that sudden and persistent affection. It was at her house that the painter and the Countess had happened to meet.

Musadiou approached the group. “Has the Duchess been to see the exposition of the Intemperates?” he inquired.

“No; what is that?”

“A group of new artists, impressionists in a state of intoxication. Two of them are very fine.”

The great lady murmured, with disdain: “I do not like the jests of those gentlemen.”

Authoritative, brusque, barely tolerating any other opinion than her own, and founding hers solely on the consciousness of her social station, considering, without being able to give a good reason for it, that artists and learned men were merely intelligent mercenaries charged by God to amuse society or to render service to it, she had no other basis for her judgments than the degree of astonishment or of pleasure she experienced at the sight of a thing, the reading of a book, or the recital of a discovery.

Tall, stout, heavy, red, with a loud voice, she passed as having the air of a great lady because nothing embarrassed her; she dared to say anything and patronized the whole world, including dethroned princes, with her receptions in their honor, and even the Almighty by her generosity to the clergy and her gifts to the churches.

“Does the Duchess know,” Musadiou continued, “that they say the assassin of Marie Lambourg has been arrested?”

Her interest was awakened at once.

“No, tell me about it,” she replied.

He narrated the details. Musadiou was tall and very thin; he wore a white waistcoat and little diamond shirt-studs; he spoke without gestures, with a correct air which allowed him to say the daring things which he took delight in uttering. He was very near-sighted, and appeared, notwithstanding his eye-glass, never to see anyone; and when he sat down his whole frame seemed to accommodate itself to the shape of the chair. His figure seemed to shrink into folds, as if his spinal column were made of rubber; his legs, crossed one over the other, looked like two rolled ribbons, and his long arms, resting on the arms of the chair, allowed to droop his pale hands with interminable fingers. His hair and moustache, artistically dyed, with a few white locks cleverly forgotten, were a subject of frequent jests.

While he was explaining to the Duchess that the jewels of the murdered prostitute had been given as a present by the suspected murderer to another girl of the same stamp, the door of the large drawing-room opened wide once more, and two blond women in white lace, a creamy Mechlin, resembling each other like two sisters of different ages, the one a little too mature, the other a little too young, one a trifle too plump, the other a shade too slender, advanced, clasping each other round the waist and smiling.

The guests exclaimed and applauded. No one, except Olivier Bertin, knew of Annette de Guilleroy’s return, and the appearance of the young girl beside her mother, who at a little distance seemed almost as fresh and even more beautiful – for, like a flower in full bloom, she had not ceased to be brilliant, while the child, hardly budding, was only beginning to be pretty – made both appear charming.

The Duchess, delighted, clapped her hands, exclaiming: “Heavens! How charming and amusing they are, standing beside each other! Look, Monsieur de Musadiou, how much they resemble each other!”

The two were compared, and two opinions were formed. According to Musadiou, the Corbelles, and the Comte de Guilleroy, the Countess and her daughter resembled each other only in coloring, in the hair, and above all in the eyes, which were exactly alike, both showing tiny black points, like minute drops of ink, on the blue iris. But it was their opinion that when the young girl should have become a woman they would no longer resemble each other.

According to the Duchess, on the contrary, and also Olivier Bertin, they were similar in all respects, and only the difference in age made them appear unlike.

“How much she has changed in three years!” said the painter. “I should not have recognized her, and I don’t dare to *tutoyer* the young lady!”

The Countess laughed. “The idea! I should like to hear you say ‘you’ to Annette!”

The young girl, whose future gay audacity was already apparent under an air of timid playfulness, replied: “It is I who shall not dare to say ‘thou’ to Monsieur Bertin.”

Her mother smiled.

“Yes, continue the old habit – I will allow you to do so,” she said. “You will soon renew your acquaintance with him.”

But Annette shook her head.

“No, no, it would embarrass me,” she said.

The Duchess embraced her, and examined her with all the interest of a connoisseur.

“Look me in the face, my child,” she said. “Yes, you have exactly the same expression as your mother; you won’t be so bad by-and-by, when you have acquired more polish. And you must grow a little plumper – not very much, but a little. You are very thin.”

“Oh, don’t say that!” exclaimed the Countess.

“Why not?”

“It is so nice to be slender. I intend to reduce myself at once.”

But Madame de Mortemain took offense, forgetting in her anger the presence of a young girl.

“Oh, of course, you are all in favor of bones, because you can dress them better than flesh. For my part, I belong to the generation of fat women! To-day is the day of thin ones. They make me think of the lean kine of Egypt. I cannot understand how men can admire your skeletons. In my time they demanded more!”

She subsided amid the smiles of the company, but added, turning to Annette:

“Look at your mamma, little one; she does very well; she has attained the happy medium – imitate her.”

They passed into the dining-room. After they were seated, Musadiou resumed the discussion.

“For my part, I say that men should be thin, because they are formed for exercises that require address and agility, incompatible with corpulency. But the women’s case is a little different. Don’t you think so, Corbelle?”

Corbelle was perplexed, the Duchess being stout and his own wife more than slender. But the Baroness came to the rescue of her husband, and resolutely declared herself in favor of slimness. The year before that, she declared, she had been obliged to struggle with the beginning of *embonpoint*, over which she soon triumphed.

“Tell us how you did it,” demanded Madame de Guilleroy.

The Baroness explained the method employed by all the fashionable women of the day. One must never drink while eating; but an hour after the repast a cup of tea may be taken, boiling hot. This method succeeded with everyone. She cited astonishing cases of fat women who in three months had become more slender than the blade of a knife. The Duchess exclaimed in exasperation:

“Good gracious, how stupid to torture oneself like that! You like nothing any more – nothing – not even champagne. Bertin, as an artist, what do you think of this folly?”

“*Mon Dieu*, Madame, I am a painter and I simply arrange the drapery, so it is all the same to me. If I were a sculptor I might complain.”

“But as a man, which do you prefer?”

“I? Oh, a certain rounded slimness – what my cook calls a nice little corn-fed chicken. It is not fat, but plump and delicate.”

The comparison caused a laugh; but the incredulous Countess looked at her daughter and murmured:

“No, it is very much better to be thin; slender women never grow old.”

This point also was discussed by the company; and all agreed that a very fat person should not grow thin too rapidly.

This observation gave place to a review of women known in society and to new discussions on their grace, their chic and beauty. Musadieu pronounced the blonde Marquise de Lochrist incomparably charming, while Bertin esteemed as a beauty Madame Mandeliere, with her brunette complexion, low brow, her dusky eyes and somewhat large mouth, in which her teeth seemed to sparkle.

He was seated beside the young girl, and said suddenly, turning to her:

“Listen to me, Nanette. Everything that we have just been saying you will hear repeated at least once a week until you are old. In a week you will know all that society thinks about politics, women, plays, and all the rest of it. Only an occasional change of names will be necessary – names of persons and titles of works. When you have heard us all express and defend our opinions, you will quietly choose your own among those that one must have, and then you need never trouble yourself to think of anything more, never. You will only have to rest in that opinion.”

The young girl, without replying, turned upon him her mischievous eyes, wherein sparkled youthful intelligence, restrained, but ready to escape.

But the Duchess and Musadieu, who played with ideas as one tosses a ball, without perceiving that they continually exchanged the same ones, protested in the name of thought and of human activity.

Then Bertin attempted to show how the intelligence of fashionable people, even the brightest of them, is without value, foundation, or weight; how slight is the basis of their beliefs, how feeble and indifferent is their interest in intellectual things, how fickle and questionable are their tastes.

Warmed by one of those spasms of indignation, half real, half assumed, aroused at first by a desire to be eloquent, and urged on by the sudden prompting of a clear judgment, ordinarily obscured by an easy-going nature, he showed how those persons whose sole occupation in life is to pay visits and dine in town find themselves becoming, by an irresistible fatality, light and graceful but utterly trivial beings, vaguely agitated by superficial cares, beliefs, and appetites.

He showed that none of that class has either depth, ardor, or sincerity; that, their intellectual culture being slight and their erudition a simple varnish, they must remain, in short, manikins who produce the effect and make the gesture of the enlightened beings that they are not. He proved that, the frail roots of their instincts having been nourished on conventionalities instead of realities, they love nothing sincerely, that even the luxury of their existence is a satisfaction of vanity and not the gratification of a refined bodily necessity, for usually their table is indifferent, their wines are bad and very dear.

They live, as he said, beside everything, but see nothing and study nothing; they are near science, of which they are ignorant; nature, at which they do not know how to look; outside of true happiness, for they are powerless to enjoy it; outside of the beauty of the world and the beauty of art, of which they chatter without having really discovered it, or even believing in it, for they are ignorant of the

intoxication of tasting the joys of life and of intelligence. They are incapable of attaching themselves in anything to that degree that existence is illumined by the happiness of comprehending it.

The Baron de Corbelle thought that it was his duty to come to the defense of society. This he did with inconsistent and irrefutable arguments, which melt before reason as snow before the fire, yet which cannot be disproved – the absurd and triumphant arguments of a country curate who would demonstrate the existence of God. In concluding, he compared fashionable people to race-horses, which, in truth, are good for nothing, but which are the glory of the equine race.

Bertin, irritated by this adversary, preserved a politely disdainful silence. But suddenly the Baron's imbecilities exasperated him, and, interrupting him adroitly, he recounted the life of a man of fashion from his rising to his going to rest, without omitting anything. All the details, cleverly described, made up an irresistibly amusing silhouette. Once could see the fine gentleman dressed by his valet, first expressing a few general ideas to the hairdresser that came to shave him; then, when taking his morning stroll, inquiring of the grooms about the health of the horses; then trotting through the avenues of the Bois, caring only about saluting and being saluted; then breakfasting opposite his wife, who in her turn had been out in her coupe, speaking to her only to enumerate the names of the persons he had met that morning; then passing from drawing-room to drawing-room until evening, refreshing his intelligence by contact with others of his circle, dining with a prince, where the affairs of Europe were discussed, and finishing the evening behind the scenes at the Opera, where his timid pretensions at being a gay dog were innocently satisfied by the appearance of being surrounded by naughtiness.

The picture was so true, although its satire wounded no one present, that laughter ran around the table.

The Duchess, shaken by the suppressed merriment of fat persons, relieved herself by discreet chuckles.

“Really, you are too funny!” she said at last; “you will make me die of laughter.”

Bertin replied, with some excitement:

“Oh, Madame, in the polite world one does not die of laughter! One hardly laughs, even. We have sufficient amiability, as a matter of good taste, to pretend to be amused and appear to laugh. The grimace is imitated well enough, but the real thing is never done. Go to the theaters of the common people – there you will see laughter. Go among the *bourgeoisie*, when they are amusing themselves; you will see them laugh to suffocation. Go to the soldiers' quarters, you will see men choking, their eyes full of tears, doubled up on their beds over the jokes of some funny fellow. But in our drawing-rooms we never laugh. I tell you that we simulate everything, even laughter.”

Musadieu interrupted him:

“Permit me to say that you are very severe. It seems to me that you yourself, my dear fellow, do not wholly despise this society at which you rail so bitterly.”

Bertin smiled.

“I? I love it!” he declared.

“But then – ”

“I despise myself a little, as a mongrel of doubtful race.”

“All that sort of talk is nothing but a pose,” said the Duchess.

And, as he denied having any intention of posing, she cut short the discussion by declaring that all artists try to make people believe that chalk is cheese.

The conversation then became general, touching upon everything, ordinary and pleasant, friendly and critical, and, as the dinner was drawing toward its end, the Countess suddenly exclaimed, pointing to the full glasses of wine that were ranged before her plate:

“Well, you see that I have drunk nothing, nothing, not a drop! We shall see whether I shall not grow thin!”

The Duchess, furious, tried to make her swallow some mineral water, but in vain; then she exclaimed:

“Oh, the little simpleton! That daughter of hers will turn her head. I beg of you, Guilleroy, prevent your wife from committing this folly.”

The Count, who was explaining to Musadieu the system of a threshing-machine invented in America, had not been listening.

“What folly, Duchess?”

“The folly of wishing to grow thin.”

The Count looked at his wife with an expression of kindly indifference.

“I never have formed the habit of opposing her,” he replied.

The Countess had risen, taking the arm of her neighbor; the Count offered his to the Duchess, and they passed into the large drawing-room, the boudoir at the end being reserved for use in the daytime.

It was a vast and well lighted room. On the four walls the large and beautiful panels of pale blue silk, of antique pattern, framed in white and gold, took on under the light of the lamps and the chandelier a moonlight softness and brightness. In the center of the principal one, the portrait of the Countess by Olivier Bertin seemed to inhabit, to animate the apartment. It had a look of being at home there, mingling with the air of the salon its youthful smile, the grace of its pose, the bright charm of its golden hair. It had become almost a custom, a sort of polite ceremony, like making the sign of the cross on entering a church, to compliment the model on the work of the painter whenever anyone stood before it.

Musadieu never failed to do this. His opinion as a connoisseur commissioned by the State having the value of that of an official expert, he regarded it as his duty to affirm often, with conviction, the superiority of that painting.

“Indeed,” said he, “that is the most beautiful modern portrait I know. There is prodigious life in it.”

The Comte de Guilleroy, who, through hearing this portrait continually praised, had acquired a rooted conviction that he possessed a masterpiece, approached to join him, and for a minute or two they lavished upon the portrait all the art technicalities of the day in praise of the apparent qualities of the work, and also of those that were suggested.

All eyes were lifted toward the portrait, apparently in a rapture of admiration, and Olivier Bertin, accustomed to these eulogies, to which he paid hardly more attention than to questions about his health when meeting some one in the street, nevertheless adjusted the reflector lamp placed before the portrait in order to illumine it, the servant having carelessly set it a little on one side.

Then they seated themselves, and as the Count approached the Duchess, she said to him:

“I believe that my nephew is coming here for me, and to ask you for a cup of tea.”

Their wishes, for some time, had been mutually understood and agreed, without either side ever having exchanged confidences or even hints.

The Marquis de Farandal, who was the brother of the Duchesse de Mortemain, after almost ruining himself at the gaming table, had died of the effects of a fall from his horse, leaving a widow and a son. This young man, now nearly twenty-eight years of age, was one of the most popular leaders of the cotillion in Europe, for he was sometimes requested to go to Vienna or to London to crown in the waltz some princely ball. Although possessing very small means, he remained, through his social station, his family, his name, and his almost royal connections, one of the most popular and envied men in Paris.

It was necessary to give a solid foundation to this glory of his youth, and after a rich, a very rich marriage, to replace social triumphs by political success. As soon as the Marquis should become a deputy, he would become also, by that attainment alone, one of the props of the future throne, one of the counselors of the King, one of the leaders of the party.

The Duchess, who was well informed, knew the amount of the enormous fortune of the Comte de Guilleroy, a prudent hoarder of money, who lived in a simple apartment when he was quite able to live like a great lord in one of the handsomest mansions of Paris. She knew about his always successful speculations, his subtle scent as a financier, his share in the most fruitful schemes of the past ten years, and she had cherished the idea of marrying her nephew to the daughter of the Norman deputy, to whom this marriage would give an immense influence in the aristocratic society of the princely circle. Guilleroy, who had made a rich marriage, and had thereby increased a large personal fortune, now nursed other ambitions.

He had faith in the return of the King, and wished, when that event should come, to be so situated as to derive from it the largest personal profit.

As a simple deputy, he did not cut a prominent figure. As a father-in-law of the Marquis of Farandal, whose ancestors had been the faithful and chosen familiars of the royal house of France, he might rise to the first rank.

The friendship of the Duchess for his wife lent to this union an element of intimacy that was very precious; and, for fear some other young girl might appear who would please the Marquis, he had brought about the return of his own daughter in order to hasten events.

Madame de Mortemain, foreseeing and divining his plans, lent him her silent complicity; and on that very day, although she had not been informed of the sudden return of the young girl, she had made an appointment with her nephew to meet her at the Guilleroy's, so that he might gradually become accustomed to visit that house frequently.

For the first time, the Count and the Duchess spoke of their mutual desires in veiled terms; and when they parted, a treaty of alliance had been concluded.

At the other end of the room everyone was laughing at a story M. de Musadiou was telling to the Baroness de Corbelle about the presentation of a negro ambassador to the President of the Republic, when the Marquis de Farandal was announced.

He appeared in the doorway and paused. With a quick and familiar gesture, he placed a monocle on his right eye and left it there, as if to reconnoiter the room he was about to enter, but perhaps to give those that were already there the time to see him and to observe his entrance. Then by an imperceptible movement of cheek and eyebrow, he allowed to drop the bit of glass at the end of a black silk hair, and advanced quickly toward Madame de Guilleroy, whose extended hand he kissed, bowing very low. He saluted his aunt likewise, then shook hands with the rest of the company, going from one to another with easy elegance of manner.

He was a tall fellow, with a red moustache, and was already slightly bald, with the figure of an officer and the gait of an English sportsman. It was evident, at first sight of him, that all his limbs were better exercised than his head, and that he cared only for such occupations as developed strength and physical activity. He had some education, however, for he had learned, and was learning every day, by much mental effort, a great deal that would be useful to him to know later: history, studying dates unweariedly, but mistaking the lesson to be learned from facts and the elementary notions of political economy necessary to a deputy, the A B C of sociology for the use of the ruling classes.

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