

GUY DE MAUPASSANT

YVETTE

Ги д. Мопассан

Yvette

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CHAPTER I

THE INITIATION OF SAVAL

As they were leaving the Cafe Riche, Jean de Servigny said to Leon Saval: "If you don't object, let us walk. The weather is too fine to take a cab."

His friend answered: "I would like nothing better."

Jean replied: "It is hardly eleven o'clock. We shall arrive much before midnight, so let us go slowly."

A restless crowd was moving along the boulevard, that throng peculiar to summer nights, drinking, chatting, and flowing like a river, filled with a sense of comfort and joy. Here and there a cafe threw a flood of light upon a knot of patrons drinking at little tables on the sidewalk, which were covered with bottles and glasses, hindering the passing of the hurrying multitude. On the pavement the cabs with their red, blue, or green lights dashed by, showing for a second, in the glimmer, the thin shadow of the horse, the raised profile of the coachman, and the dark box of the carriage. The cabs of the Urbaine Company made clear and rapid spots when their yellow panels were struck by the light.

The two friends walked with slow steps, cigars in their mouths, in evening dress and overcoats on their arms, with a flower in their buttonholes, and their hats a trifle on one side, as men will carelessly wear them sometimes, after they have dined well and the air is mild.

They had been linked together since their college days by a close, devoted, and firm affection. Jean de Servigny, small, slender, a trifle bald, rather frail, with elegance of mien, curled mustache, bright eyes, and fine lips, was a man who seemed born and bred upon the boulevard. He was tireless in spite of his languid air, strong in spite of his pallor, one of those slight Parisians to whom gymnastic exercise, fencing, cold shower and hot baths give a nervous, artificial strength. He was known by his marriage as well as by his wit, his fortune, his connections, and by that sociability, amiability, and fashionable gallantry peculiar to certain men.

A true Parisian, furthermore, light, sceptical, changeable, captivating, energetic, and irresolute, capable of everything and of nothing; selfish by principle and generous on occasion, he lived moderately upon his income, and amused himself with hygiene. Indifferent and passionate, he gave himself rein and drew back constantly, impelled by conflicting instincts, yielding to all, and then obeying, in the end, his own shrewd man-about-town judgment, whose weather-vane logic consisted in following the wind and drawing profit from circumstances without taking the trouble to originate them.

His companion, Leon Saval, rich also, was one of those superb and colossal figures who make women turn around in the streets to look at them. He gave the idea of a statue turned into a man, a type of a race, like those sculptured forms which are sent to the Salons. Too handsome, too tall, too big, too strong, he sinned a little from the excess of everything, the excess of his qualities. He had on hand countless affairs of passion.

As they reached the Vaudeville theater, he asked: "Have you warned that lady that you are going to take me to her house to see her?"

Servigny began to laugh: "Forewarn the Marquise Obardi! Do you warn an omnibus driver that you shall enter his stage at the corner of the boulevard?"

Saval, a little perplexed, inquired: "What sort of person is this lady?"

His friend replied: "An upstart, a charming hussy, who came from no one knows where, who made her appearance one day, nobody knows how, among the adventuresses of Paris, knowing perfectly well how to take care of herself. Besides, what difference does it make to us? They say that her real name, her maiden name – for she still has every claim to the title of maiden except that of innocence – is Octavia Bardin, from which she constructs the name Obardi by prefixing the first letter of her first name and dropping the last letter of the last name."

"Moreover, she is a lovable woman, and you, from your physique, are inevitably bound to become her lover. Hercules is not introduced into Messalina's home without making some disturbance. Nevertheless I make bold to add that if there is free entrance to this house, just as there is in bazaars, you are not exactly compelled to buy what is for sale. Love and cards are on the programme, but nobody compels you to take up with either. And the exit is as free as the entrance."

"She settled down in the Etoile district, a suspicious neighborhood, three years ago, and opened her drawing-room to that froth of the continents which comes to Paris to practice its various formidable and criminal talents."

"I don't remember just how I went to her house. I went as we all go, because there is card playing, because the women are compliant, and the men dishonest. I love that social mob of buccaneers with decorations of all sorts of orders, all titled, and all entirely unknown at their embassies, except to the spies. They are always dragging in the subject of honor, quoting the list of their ancestors on the slightest provocation, and telling the story of their life at every opportunity, braggarts, liars, sharpers, dangerous as their cards, false as their names, brave because they have to be, like the assassins who can not pluck their victims except by exposing their own lives. In a word, it is the aristocracy of the bagnio."

"I like them. They are interesting to fathom and to know, amusing to listen to, often witty, never commonplace as the ordinary French guests. Their women are always pretty, with a little flavor of foreign knavery, with the mystery of their past existence, half of which, perhaps, spent in a House of Correction. They generally have fine eyes and glorious hair, the true physique of the profession, an intoxicating grace, a seductiveness which drives men to folly, an unwholesome, irresistible charm! They conquer like the highwaymen of old. They are rapacious creatures; true birds of prey. I like them, too."

"The Marquise Obardi is one of the type of these elegant good-for-nothings. Ripe and pretty, with a feline charm, you can see that she is vicious to the marrow. Everybody has a good time at her house, with cards, dancing, and suppers; in fact there is everything which goes to make up the pleasures of fashionable society life."

"Have you ever been or are you now her lover?" Leon Saval asked.

"I have not been her lover, I am not now, and I never shall be. I only go to the house to see her daughter."

"Ah! She has a daughter, then?"

"A daughter! A marvel, my dear man. She is the principal attraction of the den to-day. Tall, magnificent, just ripe, eighteen years old, as fair as her mother is dark, always merry, always ready for an entertainment, always laughing, and ready to dance like mad. Who will be the lucky man, to capture her, or who has already done so? Nobody can tell that. She has ten of us in her train, all hoping."

"Such a daughter in the hands of a woman like the Marquise is a fortune. And they play the game together, the two charmers. No one knows just what they are planning. Perhaps they are waiting for a better bargain than I should prove. But I tell you that I shall close the bargain if I ever get a chance."

"That girl Yvette absolutely baffles me, moreover. She is a mystery. If she is not the most complete monster of astuteness and perversity that I have ever seen, she certainly is the most marvelous phenomenon of innocence that can be imagined. She lives in that atmosphere of infamy with a calm and triumphing ease which is either wonderfully profligate or entirely artless. Strange

scion of an adventuress, cast upon the muck-heap of that set, like a magnificent plant nurtured upon corruption, or rather like the daughter of some noble race, of some great artist, or of some grand lord, of some prince or dethroned king, tossed some evening into her mother's arms, nobody can make out what she is nor what she thinks. But you are going to see her."

Saval began to laugh and said: "You are in love with her."

"No. I am on the list, which is not precisely the same thing. I will introduce you to my most serious rivals. But the chances are in my favor. I am in the lead, and some little distinction is shown to me."

"You are in love," Saval repeated.

"No. She disquiets me, seduces and disturbs me, attracts and frightens me away. I mistrust her as I would a trap, and I long for her as I long for a sherbet when I am thirsty. I yield to her charm, and I only approach her with the apprehension that I would feel concerning a man who was known to be a skillful thief. To her presence I have an irrational impulse toward belief in her possible purity and a very reasonable mistrust of her not less probable trickery. I feel myself in contact with an abnormal being, beyond the pale of natural laws, an exquisite or detestable creature – I don't know which."

For the third time Saval said: "I tell you that you are in love. You speak of her with the magniloquence of a poet and the feeling of a troubadour. Come, search your heart, and confess."

Servigny walked a few steps without answering. Then he replied:

"That is possible, after all. In any case, she fills my mind almost continually. Yes, perhaps I am in love. I dream about her too much. I think of her when I am asleep and when I awake – that is surely a grave indication. Her face follows me, accompanies me ceaselessly, ever before me, around me, with me. Is this love, this physical infatuation? Her features are so stamped upon my vision that I see her the moment I shut my eyes. My heart beats quickly every time I look at her, I don't deny it."

"So I am in love with her, but in a queer fashion. I have the strongest desire for her, and yet the idea of making her my wife would seem to me a folly, a piece of stupidity, a monstrous thing: And I have a little fear of her, as well, the fear which a bird feels over which a hawk is hovering."

"And again I am jealous of her, jealous of all of which I am ignorant in her incomprehensible heart. I am always wondering: 'Is she a charming youngster or a wretched jade?' She says things that would make an army shudder; but so does a parrot. She is at times so indiscreet and yet modest that I am forced to believe in her spotless purity, and again so incredibly artless that I must suspect that she has never been chaste. She allures me, excites me, like a woman of a certain category, and at the same time acts like an impeccable virgin. She seems to love me and yet makes fun of me; she deports herself in public as if she were my mistress and treats me in private as if I were her brother or footman."

"There are times when I fancy that she has as many lovers as her mother. And at other times I imagine that she suspects absolutely nothing of that sort of life, you understand. Furthermore, she is a great novel reader. I am at present, while awaiting something better, her book purveyor. She calls me her 'librarian.' Every week the New Book Store sends her, on my orders, everything new that has appeared, and I believe that she reads everything at random. It must make a strange sort of mixture in her head."

"That kind of literary hasty-pudding accounts perhaps for some of the girl's peculiar ways. When a young woman looks at existence through the medium of fifteen thousand novels, she must see it in a strange light, and construct queer ideas about matters and things in general. As for me, I am waiting. It is certain at any rate that I never have had for any other woman the devotion which I have had for her. And still it is quite certain that I shall never marry her. So if she has had numbers, I shall swell the number. And if she has not, I shall take the first ticket, just as I would do for a street car."

"The case is very simple. Of course, she will never marry. Who in the world would marry the Marquise Obardi's daughter, the child of Octavia Bardin? Nobody, for a thousand reasons. Where

would they ever find a husband for her? In society? Never. The mother's house is a sort of liberty-hall whose patronage is attracted by the daughter. Girls don't get married under those conditions."

"Would she find a husband among the trades-people? Still less would that be possible. And besides the Marquise is not the woman to make a bad bargain; she will give Yvette only to a man of high position, and that man she will never discover."

"Then perhaps she will look among the common people. Still less likely. There is no solution of the problem, then. This young lady belongs neither to society, nor to the tradesmen's class, nor to the common people, and she can never enter any of these ranks by marriage."

"She belongs through her mother, her birth, her education, her inheritance, her manners, and her customs, to the vortex of the most rapid life of Paris. She can never escape it, save by becoming a nun, which is not at all probable with her manners and tastes. She has only one possible career, a life of pleasure. She will come to it sooner or later, if indeed she has not already begun to tread its primrose path. She cannot escape her fate. From being a young girl she will take the inevitable step, quite simply. And I would like to be the pivot of this transformation."

"I am waiting. There are many lovers. You will see among them a Frenchman, Monsieur de Belvigne; a Russian, called Prince Kravalow, and an Italian, Chevalier Valreali, who have all announced their candidacies and who are consequently maneuvering to the best of their ability. In addition to these there are several freebooters of less importance. The Marquise waits and watches. But I think that she has views about me. She knows that I am very rich, and she makes less of the others."

"Her drawing-room is, moreover, the most astounding that I know of, in such, exhibitions. You even meet very decent men there, like ourselves. As for the women, she has culled the best there is from the basket of pickpockets. Nobody knows where she found them. It is a set apart from Bohemia, apart from everything. She has had one inspiration showing genius, and that is the knack of selecting especially those adventuresses who have children, generally girls. So that a fool might believe that in her house he was among respectable women!" They had reached the avenue of the Champs-Élysées. A gentle breeze softly stirred the leaves and touched the faces of passers-by, like the breaths of a giant fan, waving somewhere in the sky. Silent shadows wandered beneath the trees; others, on benches, made a dark spot. And these shadows spoke very low, as if they were telling each other important or shameful secrets.

"You can't imagine what a collection of fictitious titles are met in this lair," said Servigny, "By the way, I shall present you by the name of Count Saval; plain Saval would not do at all."

"Oh, no, indeed!" cried his friend; "I would not have anyone think me capable of borrowing a title, even for an evening, even among those people. Ah, no!"

Servigny began to laugh.

"How stupid you are! Why, in that set they call me the Duke de Servigny. I don't know how nor why. But at any rate the Duke de Servigny I am and shall remain, without complaining or protesting. It does not worry me. I should have no footing there whatever without a title."

But Saval would not be convinced.

"Well, you are of rank, and so you may remain. But, as for me, no. I shall be the only common person in the drawing-room. So much the worse, or, so much the better. It will be my mark of distinction and superiority."

Servigny was obstinate.

"I tell you that it is not possible. Why, it would almost seem monstrous. You would have the effect of a ragman at a meeting of emperors. Let me do as I like. I shall introduce you as the Vice-Roi du 'Haut-Mississippi,' and no one will be at all astonished. When a man takes on greatness, he can't take too much."

"Once more, no, I do not wish it."

"Very well, have your way. But, in fact, I am very foolish to try to convince you. I defy you to get in without some one giving you a title, just as they give a bunch of violets to the ladies at the entrance to certain stores."

They turned to the right in the Rue de Barrie, mounted one flight of stairs in a fine modern house, and gave their overcoats and canes into the hands of four servants in knee-breeches. A warm odor, as of a festival assembly, filled the air, an odor of flowers, perfumes, and women; and a composed and continuous murmur came from the adjoining rooms, which were filled with people.

A kind of master of ceremonies, tall, erect, wide of girth, serious, his face framed in white whiskers, approached the newcomers, asking with a short and haughty bow: "Whom shall I announce?"

"Monsieur Saval," Servigny replied.

Then with a loud voice, the man opening the door cried out to the crowd of guests:

"Monsieur the Duke de Servigny."

"Monsieur the Baron Saval."

The first drawing-room was filled with women. The first thing which attracted attention was the display of bare shoulders, above a flood of brilliant gowns.

The mistress of the house who stood talking with three friends, turned and came forward with a majestic step, with grace in her mien and a smile on her lips. Her forehead was narrow and very low, and was covered with a mass of glossy black hair, encroaching a little upon the temples.

She was tall, a trifle too large, a little too stout, over ripe, but very pretty, with a heavy, warm, potent beauty. Beneath that mass of hair, full of dreams and smiles, rendering her mysteriously captivating, were enormous black eyes. Her nose was a little narrow, her mouth large and infinitely seductive, made to speak and to conquer.

Her greatest charm was in her voice. It came from that mouth as water from a spring, so natural, so light, so well modulated, so clear, that there was a physical pleasure in listening to it. It was a joy for the ear to hear the flexible words flow with the grace of a babbling brook, and it was a joy for the eyes to see those pretty lips, a trifle too red, open as the words rippled forth.

She gave one hand to Servigny, who kissed it, and dropping her fan on its little gold chain, she gave the other to Saval, saying to him: "You are welcome, Baron, all the Duke's friends are at home here."

Then she fixed her brilliant eyes upon the Colossus who had just been introduced to her. She had just the slightest down on her upper lip, a suspicion of a mustache, which seemed darker when she spoke. There was a pleasant odor about her, pervading, intoxicating, some perfume of America or of the Indies. Other people came in, marquesses, counts or princes. She said to Servigny, with the graciousness of a mother: "You will find my daughter in the other parlor. Have a good time, gentlemen, the house is yours."

And she left them to go to those who had come later, throwing at Saval that smiling and fleeting glance which women use to show that they are pleased. Servigny grasped his friend's arm.

"I will pilot you," said he. "In this parlor where we now are, women, the temples of the fleshly, fresh or otherwise. Bargains as good as new, even better, for sale or on lease. At the right, gaming, the temple of money. You understand all about that. At the lower end, dancing, the temple of innocence, the sanctuary, the market for young girls. They are shown off there in every light. Even legitimate marriages are tolerated. It is the future, the hope, of our evenings. And the most curious part of this museum of moral diseases are these young girls whose souls are out of joint, just like the limbs of the little clowns born of mountebanks. Come and look at them."

He bowed, right and left, courteously, a compliment on his lips, sweeping each low-gowned woman whom he knew with the look of an expert.

The musicians, at the end of the second parlor, were playing a waltz; and the two friends stopped at the door to look at them. A score of couples were whirling-the men with a serious expression,

and the women with a fixed smile on their lips. They displayed a good deal of shoulder, like their mothers; and the bodices of some were only held in place by a slender ribbon, disclosing at times more than is generally shown.

Suddenly from the end of the room a tall girl darted forward, gliding through the crowd, brushing against the dancers, and holding her long train in her left hand. She ran with quick little steps as women do in crowds, and called out: "Ah! How is Muscade? How do you do, Muscade?"

Her features wore an expression of the bloom of life, the illumination of happiness. Her white flesh seemed to shine, the golden-white flesh which goes with red hair. The mass of her tresses, twisted on her head, fiery, flaming locks, nestled against her supple neck, which was still a little thin.

She seemed to move just as her mother was made to speak, so natural, noble, and simple were her gestures. A person felt a moral joy and physical pleasure in seeing her walk, stir about, bend her head, or lift her arm. "Ah! Muscade, how do you do, Muscade?" she repeated.

Servigny shook her hand violently, as he would a man's, and said: "Mademoiselle Yvette, my friend, Baron Saval."

"Good evening, Monsieur. Are you always as tall as that?"

Servigny replied in that bantering tone which he always used with her, in order to conceal his mistrust and his uncertainty:

"No, Mam'zelle. He has put on his greatest dimensions to please your mother, who loves a colossus."

And the young girl remarked with a comic seriousness: "Very well But when you come to see me you must diminish a little if you please. I prefer the medium height. Now Muscade has just the proportions which I like."

And she gave her hand to the newcomer. Then she asked: "Do you dance, Muscade? Come, let us waltz." Without replying, with a quick movement, passionately, Servigny clasped her waist and they disappeared with the fury of a whirlwind.

They danced more rapidly than any of the others, whirled and whirled, and turned madly, so close together that they seemed but one, and with the form erect, the legs almost motionless, as if some invisible mechanism, concealed beneath their feet, caused them to twirl. They appeared tireless. The other dancers stopped from time to time. They still danced on, alone. They seemed not to know where they were nor what they were doing, as if, they had gone far away from the ball, in an ecstasy. The musicians continued to play, with their looks fixed upon this mad couple; all the guests gazed at them, and when finally they did stop dancing, everyone applauded them.

She was a little flushed, with strange eyes, ardent and timid, less daring than a moment before, troubled eyes, blue, yet with a pupil so black that they seemed hardly natural. Servigny appeared giddy. He leaned against a door to regain his composure.

"You have no head, my poor Muscade, I am steadier than you," said Yvette to Servigny. He smiled nervously, and devoured her with a look. His animal feelings revealed themselves in his eyes and in the curl of his lips. She stood beside him looking down, and her bosom rose and fell in short gasps as he looked at her.

Then she said softly: "Really, there are times when you are like a tiger about to spring upon his prey. Come, give me your arm, and let us find your friend."

Silently he offered her his arm and they went down the long drawing-room together.

Saval was not alone, for the Marquise Obardi had rejoined him. She conversed with him on ordinary and fashionable subjects with a seductiveness in her tones which intoxicated him. And, looking at her with his mental eye, it seemed to him that her lips, uttered words far different from those which they formed. When she saw Servigny her face immediately lighted up, and turning toward him she said:

"You know, my dear Duke, that I have just leased a villa at Bougival for two months, and I count upon your coming to see me there, and upon your friend also. Listen. We take possession

next Monday, and shall expect both of you to dinner the following Saturday. We shall keep you over Sunday."

Perfectly serene and tranquil Yvette smiled, saying with a decision which swept away hesitation on his part:

"Of course Muscade will come to dinner on Saturday. We have only to ask him, for he and I intend to commit a lot of follies in the country."

He thought he divined the birth of a promise in her smile, and in her voice he heard what he thought was invitation.

Then the Marquise turned her big, black eyes upon Saval: "And you will, of course, come, Baron?"

With a smile that forbade doubt, he bent toward her, saying, "I shall be only too charmed, Madame."

Then Yvette murmured with malice that was either naive or traitorous: "We will set all the world by the ears down there, won't we, Muscade, and make my regiment of admirers fairly mad." And with a look, she pointed out a group of men who were looking at them from a little distance.

Said Servigny to her: "As many follies as YOU may please, Mam'zelle."

In speaking to Yvette, Servigny never used the word "Mademoiselle," by reason of his close and long intimacy with her.

Then Saval asked: "Why does Mademoiselle always call my friend Servigny 'Muscade'?"

Yvette assumed a very frank air and said:

"I will tell you: It is because he always slips through my hands. Now I think I have him, and then I find I have not."

The Marquise, with her eyes upon Saval, arid evidently preoccupied, said in a careless tone: "You children are very funny."

But Yvette bridled up: "I do not intend to be funny; I am simply frank. Muscade pleases me, and is always deserting me, and that is what annoys me."

Servigny bowed profoundly, saying: "I will never leave you any more, Mam'zelle, neither day nor night." She made a gesture of horror:

"My goodness! no – what do you mean? You are all right during the day, but at night you might embarrass me."

With an air of impertinence he asked: "And why?"

Yvette responded calmly and audaciously, "Because you would not look well en deshabille."

The Marquise, without appearing at all disturbed, said: "What extraordinary subjects for conversation. One would think that you were not at all ignorant of such things."

And Servigny jokingly added: "That is also my opinion, Marquise."

Yvette turned her eyes upon him, and in a haughty, yet wounded, tone said: "You are becoming very vulgar – just as you have been several times lately." And turning quickly she appealed to an individual standing by:

"Chevalier, come and defend me from insult."

A thin, brown man, with an easy carriage, came forward.

"Who is the culprit?" said he, with a constrained smile.

Yvette pointed out Servigny with a nod of her head:

"There he is, but I like him better than I do you, because he is less of a bore."

The Chevalier Valreali bowed:

"I do what I can, Mademoiselle. I may have less ability, but not less devotion."

A gentleman came forward, tall and stout, with gray whiskers, saying in loud tones: "Mademoiselle Yvette, I am your most devoted slave."

Yvette cried: "Ah, Monsieur de Belvigne." Then turning toward Saval, she introduced him.

"My last adorer – big, fat, rich, and stupid. Those are the kind I like. A veritable drum-major – but of the table d'hôte. But see, you are still bigger than he. How shall I nickname you? Good! I have it. I shall call you 'M. Colossus of Rhodes, Junior,' from the Colossus who certainly was your father. But you two ought to have very interesting things to say to each other up there, above the heads of us all – so, by-bye."

And she left them quickly, going to the orchestra to make the musicians strike up a quadrille.

Madame Obardi seemed preoccupied. In a soft voice she said to Servigny:

"You are always teasing her. You will warp her character and bring out many bad traits."

Servigny replies: "Why, haven't you finished her education?"

She appeared not to understand, and continued talking in a friendly way. But she noticed a solemn looking man, wearing a perfect constellation of crosses and orders, standing near her, and she ran to him:

"Ah Prince, Prince, what good fortune!"

Servigny took Saval's arm and drew him away:

"That is the latest serious suitor, Prince Kravalow. Isn't she superb?"

"To my mind they are both superb. The mother would suffice for me perfectly," answered Saval.

Servigny nodded and said: "At your disposal, my dear boy."

The dancers elbowed them aside, as they were forming for a quadrille.

"Now let us go and see the sharpers," said Servigny. And they entered the gambling-room.

Around each table stood a group of men, looking on. There was very little conversation. At times the clink of gold coins, tossed upon the green cloth or hastily seized, added its sound to the murmur of the players, just as if the money was putting in its word among the human voices.

All the men were decorated with various orders, and odd ribbons, and they all wore the same severe expression, with different countenances. The especially distinguishing feature was the beard.

The stiff American with his horseshoe, the haughty Englishman with his fan-beard open on his breast, the Spaniard with his black fleece reaching to the eyes, the Roman with that huge mustache which Italy copied from Victor Emmanuel, the Austrian with his whiskers and shaved chin, a Russian general whose lip seemed armed with two twisted lances, and a Frenchman with a dainty mustache, displayed the fancies of all the barbers in the world.

"You won't join the game?" asked Servigny.

"No, shall you?"

"Not now. If you are ready to go, we will come back some quieter day. There are too many people here to-day, and we can't do anything."

"Well, let us go."

And they disappeared behind a door-curtain into the hall. As soon as they were in the street Servigny asked: "Well, what do you think of it?"

"It certainly is interesting, but I fancy the women's side of it more than the men's."

"Indeed! Those women are the best of the tribe for us. Don't you find that you breathe the odor of love among them, just as you scent the perfumes at a hairdresser's?"

"Really such houses are the place for one to go. And what experts, my dear fellow! What artists! Have you ever eaten bakers' cakes? They look well, but they amount to nothing. The man who bakes them only knows how to make bread. Well! the love of a woman in ordinary society always reminds me of these bake-shop trifles, while the love you find at houses like the Marquise Obardi's, don't you see, is the real sweetmeat. Oh! they know how to make cakes, these charming pastry-cooks. Only you pay five sous, at their shops, for what costs two sous elsewhere."

"Who is the master of the house just now?" asked Saval.

Servigny shrugged his shoulders, signifying his ignorance.

"I don't know, the latest one known was an English peer, but he left three months ago. At present she must live off the common herd, or the gambling, perhaps, and on the gamblers, for she has her

caprices. But tell me, it is understood that we dine with her on Saturday at Bougival, is it not? People are more free in the country, and I shall succeed in finding out what ideas Yvette has in her head!"

"I should like nothing better," replied Saval. "I have nothing to do that day."

Passing down through the Champs-Élysées, under the steps they disturbed a couple making love on one of the benches, and Servigny muttered: "What foolishness and what a serious matter at the same time! How commonplace and amusing love is, always the same and always different! And the beggar who gives his sweetheart twenty sous gets as much return as I would for ten thousand francs from some Obardi, no younger and no less stupid perhaps than this nondescript. What nonsense!"

He said nothing for a few minutes; then he began again: "All the same, it would be good to become Yvette's first lover. Oh! for that I would give – "

He did not add what he would give, and Saval said good night to him as they reached the corner of the Rue Royale.

CHAPTER II

BOUGIVAL AND LOVE

They had set the table on the veranda which overlooked the river. The Printemps villa, leased by the Marquise Obardi, was halfway up this hill, just at the corner of the Seine, which turned before the garden wall, flowing toward Marly.

Opposite the residence, the island of Croissy formed a horizon of tall trees, a mass of verdure, and they could see a long stretch of the big river as far as the floating cafe of La Grenouillere hidden beneath the foliage.

The evening fell, one of those calm evenings at the waterside, full of color yet soft, one of those peaceful evenings which produces a sensation of pleasure. No breath of air stirred the branches, no shiver of wind ruffled the smooth clear surface of the Seine. It was not too warm, it was mild – good weather to live in. The grateful coolness of the banks of the Seine rose toward a serene sky.

The sun disappeared behind the trees to shine on other lands, and one seemed to absorb the serenity of the already sleeping earth, to inhale, in the peace of space, the life of the infinite.

As they left the drawing-room to seat themselves at the table everyone was joyous. A softened gaiety filled their hearts, they felt that it would be so delightful to dine there in the country, with that great river and that twilight for a setting, breathing that pure and fragrant air.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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