

ÉMILE ZOLA

THE LADIES'
PARADISE

ЭМИЛЬ ЗОЛЯ

The Ladies' Paradise

«Public Domain»

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Émile Zola

The Ladies' Paradise / A Realistic Novel, The Sequel to «Piping Hot!»

CHAPTER I

DENISE had walked from the Saint-Lazare railway station, where a Cherbourg train had landed her and her two brothers, after a night passed on the hard seat of a third-class carriage. She was leading Pépé by the hand, and Jean was following her, all three fatigued after the journey, frightened and lost in this vast Paris, their eyes on every street name, asking at every corner the way to the Rue de la Michodière, where their uncle Baudu lived. But on arriving in the Place Gaillon, the young girl stopped short, astonished.

“Oh! look there, Jean,” said she; and they stood still, nestling close to one another, all dressed in black, wearing the old mourning bought at their father’s death. She, rather puny for her twenty years, was carrying a small parcel; on the other side, her little brother, five years old, was clinging to her arm; while behind her, the big brother, a strapping youth of sixteen, was standing empty-handed.

“Well,” said she, after a pause, “that *is* a shop!”

They were at the corner of the Rue de la Michodière and the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, in front of a draper’s shop, which displayed a wealth of colour in the soft October light. Eight o’clock was striking at the church of Saint-Roch; not many people were about, only a few clerks on their way to business, and housewives doing their morning shopping. Before the door, two shopmen, mounted on a step-ladder, were hanging up some woollen goods, whilst in a window in the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin another young man, kneeling with his back to the pavement, was delicately plaiting a piece of blue silk. In the shop, where there were as yet no customers, there was a buzz as of a swarm of bees at work.

“By Jove!” said Jean, “this beats Valognes. Yours wasn’t such a fine shop.”

Denise shook her head. She had spent two years there, at Cornaille’s, the principal draper’s in the town, and this shop, encountered so suddenly – this, to her, enormous place, made her heart swell, and kept her excited, interested, and oblivious of everything else. The high plate-glass door, facing the Place Gaillon, reached the first storey, amidst a complication of ornaments covered with gilding. Two allegorical figures, representing two laughing, bare-breasted women, unrolled the scroll bearing the sign, “The Ladies’ Paradise.” The establishment extended along the Rue de la Michodière and the Rue Neuve-Saint Augustin, and comprised, beside the corner house, four others – two on the right and two on the left, bought and fitted up recently. It seemed to her an endless extension, with its display on the ground floor, and the plate-glass windows, through which could be seen the whole length of the counters. Upstairs a young lady, dressed all in silk, was sharpening a pencil, while two others, beside her, were unfolding some velvet mantles.

“The Ladies’ Paradise,” read Jean, with the tender laugh of a handsome youth who had already had an adventure with a woman. “That must draw the customers – eh?”

But Denise was absorbed by the display at the principal entrance. There she saw, in the open street, on the very pavement, a mountain of cheap goods – bargains, placed there to tempt the passers-by, and attract attention. Hanging from above were pieces of woollen and cloth goods, merinoes, cheviots, and tweeds, floating like flags; the neutral, slate, navy-blue, and olive-green tints being relieved by the large white price-tickets. Close by, round the doorway, were hanging strips of fur, narrow bands for dress trimmings, fine Siberian squirrel-skin, spotless snowy swansdown, rabbit-skin imitation ermine and imitation sable. Below, on shelves and on tables, amidst a pile of remnants,

appeared an immense quantity of hosiery almost given away; knitted woollen gloves, neckerchiefs, women's hoods, waistcoats, a winter show in all colours, striped, dyed, and variegated, with here and there a flaming patch of red. Denise saw some tartan at nine sous, some strips of American vison at a franc, and some mittens at five sous. There appeared to be an immense clearance sale going on; the establishment seemed bursting with goods, blocking up the pavement with the surplus.

Uncle Baudu was forgotten. Pépé himself, clinging tightly to his sister's hand, opened his big eyes in wonder. A vehicle coming up, forced them to quit the road-way, and they turned up the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin mechanically, following the shop windows and stopping at each fresh display. At first they were captivated by a complicated arrangement: above, a number of umbrellas, laid obliquely, seemed to form a rustic roof; beneath these a quantity of silk stockings, hung on rods, showed the roundness of the calves, some covered with rosebuds, others of all colours, black open-worked, red with embroidered corners, and flesh colour, the silky grain of which made them look as soft as a fair woman's skin; and at the bottom of all, a symmetrical array of gloves, with their taper fingers and narrow palms, and that rigid virgin grace which characterises such feminine articles before they are worn. But the last window especially attracted their attention. It was an exhibition of silks, satins, and velvets, arranged so as to produce, by a skilful artistic arrangement of colours, the most delicious shades imaginable. At the top were the velvets, from a deep black to a milky white: lower down, the satins – pink, blue, fading away into shades of a wondrous delicacy; still lower down were the silks, of all the colours of the rainbow, pieces set up in the form of shells, others folded as if round a pretty figure, arranged in a life-like natural manner by the clever fingers of the window dressers. Between each motive, between each coloured phrase of the display, ran a discreet accompaniment, a slight puffy ring of cream-coloured silk. At each end were piled up enormous bales of the silk of which the house had made a specialty, the “Paris Paradise” and the “Golden Grain,” two exceptional articles destined to work a revolution in that branch of commerce.

“Oh, that silk at five francs twelve sous!” murmured Denise, astonished at the “Paris Paradise.”

Jean began to get tired. He stopped a passer-by. “Which is the Rue de la Michodiere, please, sir?”

On hearing that it was the first on the right they all turned back, making the tour of the establishment. But just as she was entering the street, Denise was attracted by a window in which ladies' dresses were displayed. At Cornaille's that was her department, but she had never seen anything like this, and remained rooted to the spot with admiration. At the back a large sash of Bruges lace, of considerable value, was spread out like an altar-veil, with its two white wings extended; there were flounces of Alençon point, grouped in garlands; then from the top to the bottom fluttered, like a fall of snow, a cloud of lace of every description – Malines, Honiton, Valenciennes, Brussels, and Venetian-point. On each side the heavy columns were draped with cloth, making the background appear still more distant. And the dresses were in this sort of chapel raised to the worship of woman's beauty and grace. Occupying the centre was a magnificent article, a velvet mantle, trimmed with silver fox; on one side a silk cape lined with miniver, on the other a cloth cloak edged with cocks' plumes; and last of all, opera cloaks in white cashmere and white silk trimmed with swansdown or chenille. There was something for all tastes, from the opera cloaks at twenty-nine francs to the velvet mantle marked up at eighteen hundred. The well-rounded neck and graceful figures of the dummies exaggerated the slimness of the waist, the absent head being replaced by a large price-ticket pinned on the neck; whilst the mirrors, cleverly arranged on each side of the window, reflected and multiplied the forms without end, peopling the street with these beautiful women for sale, each bearing a price in big figures in the place of a head.

“How stunning they are!” murmured Jean, finding no other words to express his emotion.

This time he himself had become motionless, his mouth open. All this female luxury turned him rosy with pleasure. He had a girl's beauty – a beauty he seemed to have stolen from his sister – a lovely skin, curly hair, lips and eyes overflowing with tenderness. By his side Denise, in her astonishment,

appeared thinner still, with her rather long face and large mouth, fading complexion, and light hair. Pépé, also fair, in the way of most children, clung closer to her, as if wanting to be caressed, troubled and delighted at the sight of the beautiful ladies in the window. They looked so strange, so charming, on the pavement, those three fair ones, poorly dressed in black – the sad-looking young girl between the pretty child and the handsome youth – that the passers-by looked back smilingly.

For several minutes a stout man with grey hair and a large yellow face, standing at a shop-door on the other side of the street, had been looking at them. He was standing there with bloodshot eyes and contracted mouth, beside himself with rage at the display made by The Ladies' Paradise, when the sight of the young girl and her brothers completed his exasperation. What were those three simpletons doing there, gaping in front of the cheap-jack's parade?

“What about uncle?” asked Denise, suddenly, as if just waking up.

“We are in the Rue de la Michodière,” said Jean. “He must live somewhere about here.”

They raised their heads and looked round. Just in front of them, above the stout man, they perceived a green sign-board bearing in yellow letters, discoloured by the rain: “The Old Elbeuf. Cloths, Flannels. Baudu, late Hauchecorne.” The house, coated with an ancient rusty white-wash, quite flat and unadorned, amidst the mansions in the Louis XIV. style which surrounded it, had only three front windows, and these windows, square, without shutters, were simply ornamented by a handrail and two iron bars in the form of a cross. But amidst all this nudity, what struck Denise the most, her eyes full of the light airy windows at The Ladies' Paradise, was the ground-floor shop, crushed by the ceiling, surmounted by a very low storey with half-moon windows, of a prison-like appearance. The wainscoting, of a bottle-green hue, which time had tinted with ochre and bitumen, encircled, right and left, two deep windows, black and dusty, in which the heaped-up goods could hardly be seen. The open door seemed to lead into the darkness and dampness of a cellar.

“That's the house,” said Jean.

“Well, we must go in,” declared Denise. “Come on, Pépé.”

They appeared, however, somewhat troubled, as if seized with fear. When their father died, carried off by the same fever which had, a month previous, killed their mother, their uncle Baudu, in the emotion which followed this double mourning, had written to Denise, assuring her there would always be a place for her in his house whenever she would like to come to Paris. But this was nearly a year ago, and the young girl was now sorry to have left Valognes in a moment of temper without informing her uncle. The latter did not know them, never having set foot in Valognes since the day he left, as a boy, to enter as junior in the drapery establishment kept by Hauchecorne, whose daughter he afterwards married.

“Monsieur Baudu?” asked Denise, deciding at last to speak to the stout man who was still eyeing them, surprised at their appearance.

“That's me,” replied he.

Denise blushed and stammered out: “Oh, I'm so pleased! I am Denise. This is Jean, and this is Pépé. You see we have come, uncle.”

Baudu seemed amazed. His big eyes rolled in his yellow face; he spoke slowly and with difficulty. He was evidently far from thinking of this family which suddenly dropped down on him.

“What – what, you here?” repeated he several times. “But you were at Valognes. Why aren't you at Valognes?”

With her sweet but rather faltering voice she then explained that since the death of her father, who had spent everything in his dye-works, she had acted as a mother to the two children, but the little she earned at Cornaille's did not suffice to keep the three of them. Jean worked at a cabinetmaker's, a repairer of old furniture, but didn't earn a sou. However, he had got to like the business, and had learned to carve in wood very well. One day, having found a piece of ivory, he amused himself by carving a head, which a gentleman staying in the town had seen and admired, and it was this

gentleman who had persuaded them to leave Valognes, promising to find a place in Paris for Jean with an ivory-carver.

“So you see, uncle,” continued Denise, “Jean will commence his apprenticeship at his new master’s to-morrow. They ask no premium, and will board and lodge him. I felt sure Pépé and I could manage very well. We can’t be worse off than we were at Valognes.”

She said nothing about Jean’s love affair, of certain letters written to the daughter of a nobleman living in the town, of kisses exchanged over a wall – in fact, quite a scandal which had determined her leaving. And she was especially anxious to be in Paris, to be able to look after her brother, feeling quite a mother’s tender anxiety for this gay and handsome youth, whom all the women adored. Uncle Baudu couldn’t get over it, and continued his questions. However, when he heard her speaking of her brothers in this way he became much kinder.

“So your father has left you nothing,” said he. “I certainly thought there was still something left. Ah! how many times did I write advising him not to take that dye-work! A good-hearted fellow, but no head for business! And you’ve been obliged to keep and look after these two youngsters since?”

His bilious face had become clearer, his eyes were not so bloodshot as when he was glaring at The Ladies’ Paradise. Suddenly he noticed that he was blocking up the doorway.

“Well,” said he, “come in, now you’re here. Come in, no use hanging about gaping at a parcel of rubbish.”

And after having darted a last look of anger at The Ladies’ Paradise, he made way for the children by entering the shop and calling his wife and daughter.

“Elizabeth, Geneviève, come down; here’s company for you!”

But Denise and the two boys hesitated before the darkness of the shop. Blinded by the clear light of the street, they could hardly see. Feeling their way with their feet with an instinctive fear of encountering some treacherous step, and clinging still closer together from this vague fear, the child continuing to hold the young girl’s skirts, and the big boy behind, they made their entry with a smiling, anxious grace. The clear morning light described the dark profile of their mourning clothes; an oblique ray of sunshine gilded their fair hair.

“Come in, come in,” repeated Baudu.

In a few brief sentences he explained the matter to his wife and daughter. The first was a little woman, eaten up with anaemia, quite white – white hair, white eyes, white lips. Geneviève, in whom her mother’s degenerateness appeared stronger still, had the debilitated, colourless appearance of a plant reared in the shade. However, her magnificent black hair, thick and heavy, marvellously vigorous for such a weak, poor soil, gave her a sad charm.

“Come in,” said both the women in their turn; “you are welcome.”

And they made Denise sit down behind a counter. Pépé immediately jumped up on his sister’s lap, whilst Jean leant against some wood-work beside her. Looking round the shop the new-comers began to take courage, their eyes getting used to the obscurity. Now they could see it, with its low and smoky ceiling, oaken counters bright with use, and old-fashioned drawers with strong iron fittings. Bales of goods reached to the beams above; the smell of linen and dyed stuffs – a sharp chemical smell – seemed intensified by the humidity of the floor. At the further end two young men and a young woman were putting away pieces of white flannel.

“Perhaps this young gentleman would like to take something?” said Madame Baudu, smiling at Pépé.

“No, thanks,” replied Denise, “we had a cup of milk in a café opposite the station.” And as Geneviève looked at the small parcel she had laid down, she added: “I left our box there too.”

She blushed, feeling that she ought not to have dropped down on her friends in this way. Even as she was leaving Valognes, she had been full of regrets and fears; that was why she had left the box, and given the children their breakfast.

“Come, come,” said Baudu suddenly, “let’s come to an understanding. ’Tis true I wrote to you, but that’s a year ago, and since then business hasn’t been flourishing, I can assure you, my girl.”

He stopped, choked with an emotion he did not wish to show. Madame Baudu and Geneviève, with a resigned look, had cast their eyes down.

“Oh,” continued he, “it’s a crisis which will pass, no doubt, but I have reduced my staff; there are only three here now, and this is not the moment to engage a fourth. In short, my dear girl, I cannot take you as I promised.”

Denise listened, and turned very pale. He dwelt upon the subject, adding: “It would do no good, either to you or to me.

“All right, uncle,” replied she with a painful effort, “I’ll try and manage all the same.”

The Baudus were not bad sort of people. But they complained of never having had any luck. When their business was flourishing, they had had to bring up five sons, of whom three had died before attaining the age of twenty; the fourth had gone wrong, and the fifth had just left for Mexico, as a captain. Genevieve was the only one left at home. But this large family had cost a great deal of money, and Baudu had made things worse by buying a great lumbering country house, at Rambouillet, near his wife’s father’s place. Thus, a sharp, sour feeling was springing up in the honest old tradesman’s breast.

“You might have warned us,” resumed he, gradually getting angry at his own harshness. “You could have written; I should have told you to stay at Valognes. When I heard of your father’s death I said what is right on such occasions, but you drop down on us without a word of warning. It’s very awkward.”

He raised his voice, and that relieved him. His wife and daughter still kept their eyes on the ground, like submissive persons who would never think of interfering. However, whilst Jean had turned pale, Denise had hugged the terrified Pépé to her bosom. She dropped hot tears of disappointment.

“All right, uncle,” she said, “we’ll go away.”

At that he stopped, an awkward silence ensued. Then he resumed in a harsh tone: “I don’t mean to turn you out. As you are here you must stay the night; to-morrow we will see.”

Then Madame Baudu and Genevieve understood they were free to arrange matters. There was no need to trouble about Jean, as he was to commence his apprenticeship the next day. As for Pépé, he would be well looked after by Madame Gras, an old lady living in the Rue des Orties, who boarded and lodged young children for forty francs a month. Denise said she had sufficient to pay for the first month, and as for herself they could soon find her a situation in the neighbourhood, no doubt.

“Wasn’t Vinçard wanting a saleswoman?” asked Genevieve.

“Of course!” cried Baudu; “we’ll go and see him after lunch. Nothing like striking the iron while it’s hot.”

Not a customer had been in to interrupt this family discussion; the shop remained dark and empty. At the other end, the two young men and the young women were still working, talking in a low hissing tone amongst themselves. However, three ladies arrived, and Denise was left alone for a moment. She kissed Pépé with a swelling heart, at the thought of their approaching separation. The child, affectionate as a kitten, hid his head without saying a word. When Madame Baudu and Geneviève returned, they remarked how quiet he was. Denise assured them he never made any more noise than that, remaining for days together without speaking, living on kisses and caresses. Until lunch-time the three women sat and talked about children, housekeeping, life in Paris and life in the country, in short, vague sentences, like relations feeling rather awkward through not knowing one another very well. Jean had gone to the shop-door, and stood there watching the passing crowd and smiling at the pretty girls. At ten o’clock a servant appeared. As a rule the cloth was laid for Baudu, Genevieve, and the first-hand. A second lunch was served at eleven o’clock for Madame Baudu, the other young man, and the young woman.

“Come to lunch!” called out the draper, turning towards his niece.

And as all sat ready in the narrow dining-room behind the shop, he called the first-hand who had not come.

“Colomban!”

The young man apologised, having wished to finish arranging the flannels. He was a big, stout fellow of twenty-five, heavy and freckled, with an honest face, large weak mouth, and cunning eyes.

“There’s a time for everything,” said Baudu, solidly seated before a piece of cold veal, which he was carving with a master’s skill and prudence, weighing each piece at a glance to within an ounce.

He served everybody, and even cut up the bread. Denise had placed Pépé near her to see that he ate properly. But the dark close room made her feel uncomfortable. She thought it so small, after the large well-lighted rooms she had been accustomed to in the country. A single window opened on a small back-yard, which communicated with the street by a dark alley along the side of the house. And this yard, sodden and filthy, was like the bottom of a well into which a glimmer of light had fallen. In the winter they were obliged to keep the gas burning all day long. When the weather enabled them to do without gas it was duller still. Denise was several seconds before her eyes got sufficiently used to the light to distinguish the food on her plate.

“That young chap has a good appetite,” remarked Baudu, observing that Jean had finished his veal. “If he works as well as he eats, he’ll make a fine fellow. But you, my girl, you don’t eat. And, I say, now we can talk a bit, tell us why you didn’t get married at Valognes?”

Denise almost dropped the glass she had in her hand. “Oh! uncle – get married! How can you think of it? And the little ones!”

She was forced to laugh, it seemed to her such a strange idea. Besides, what man would care to have her – a girl without a sou, no fatter than a lath, and not at all pretty? No, no, she would never marry, she had quite enough children with her two brothers.

“You are wrong,” said her uncle; “a woman always needs a man. If you had found an honest young fellow, you wouldn’t have dropped on to the Paris pavement, you and your brothers, like a family of gipsies.”

He stopped, to divide with a parsimony full of justice, a dish of bacon and potatoes which the servant brought in. Then, pointing to Geneviève and Colomban with his spoon, he added: “Those two will be married next spring, if we have a good winter season.”

Such was the patriarchal custom of the house. The founder, Aristide Finet, had given his daughter, Désirée to his firsthand, Hauchecorne; he, Baudu, who had arrived in the Rue de la Michodière with seven francs in his pocket, had married old Hauchecorne’s daughter, Elizabeth; and he intended, in his turn, to hand over Geneviève and the business to Colomban as soon as trade should improve. If he thus delayed a marriage, decided on for three years past, it was by a scruple, an obstinate probity. He had received the business in a prosperous state, and did not wish to pass it on to his son-in-law less patronised or in a worse position than when he took it. Baudu continued, introducing Colomban, who came from Rambouillet, the same place as Madame Baudu’s father; in fact they were distant cousins. A hard-working fellow, who for ten years had slaved in the shop, fairly earning his promotions! Besides, he was far from being a nobody; he had for father that noted toper, Colomban, a veterinary surgeon, known all over the department of Seine-et-Oise, an artist in his line, but so fond of the flowing bowl that he was ruining himself.

“Thank heaven!” said the draper in conclusion, “if the father drinks and runs after the women, the son has learnt the value of money here.”

Whilst he was speaking Denise was examining Genevieve and Colomban. They sat close together at table, but remained very quiet, without a blush or a smile. From the day of his entry the young man had counted on this marriage. He had passed through the various stages: junior, counter-hand, etc., and had at last gained admittance into the confidence and pleasures of the family circle, all this patiently, and leading a clock-work style of life, looking upon this marriage with Geneviève as

an excellent, convenient arrangement. The certainty of having her prevented him feeling any desire for her. And the young girl had also got to love him, but with the gravity of her reserved nature, and a real deep passion of which she herself was not aware, in her regular, monotonous daily life.

“Quite right, if they like each other, and can do it,” said Denise, smiling, considering it her duty to make herself agreeable.

“Yes, it always finishes like that,” declared Colomban, who had not spoken a word before, masticating slowly.

Geneviève, after giving him a long look, said in her turn: “When people understand each other, the rest comes naturally.”

Their tenderness had sprung up in this gloomy house of old Paris like a flower in a cellar. For ten years she had known no one but him, living by his side, behind the same bales of cloth, amidst the darkness of the shop; morning and evening they found themselves elbow to elbow in the narrow dining-room, so damp and dull. They could not have been more concealed, more utterly lost had they been in the country, in the woods. But a doubt, a jealous fear, began to suggest itself to the young girl, that she had given her hand, for ever, amidst this abetting solitude through sheer emptiness of heart and mental weariness.

However, Denise, having remarked a growing anxiety in the look Geneviève cast at Colomban, good-naturedly replied: “Oh! when people are in love they always understand each other.”

But Baudu kept a sharp eye on the table. He had distributed slices of Brie cheese, and, as a treat for the visitors, he called for a second dessert, a pot of red-currant jam, a liberality which seemed to surprise Colomban. Pépé, who up to then had been very good, behaved rather badly at the sight of the jam; whilst Jean, all attention during the conversation about Genevieve’s marriage, was taking stock of the latter, whom he thought too weak, too pale, comparing her in his own mind to a little white rabbit with black ears and pink eyes.

“We’ve chatted enough, and must now make room for the others,” said the draper, giving the signal to rise from table. “Just because we’ve had a treat is no reason why we should want too much of it.”

Madame Baudu, the other shopman, and the young lady then came and took their places at the table. Denise, left alone again, sat near the door waiting for her uncle to take her to Vinçard’s.. Pépé was playing at her feet, whilst Jean had resumed his post of observation at the door. She sat there for nearly an hour, taking an interest in what was going on around her. Now and again a few customers came in; a lady, then two others appeared, the shop retaining its musty odour, its half light, by which the old-fashioned business, good-natured and simple, seemed to be weeping at its desertion. But what most interested Denise was The Ladies’ Paradise opposite, the windows of which she could see through the open door. The sky remained clouded, a sort of humid softness warmed the air, notwithstanding the season; and in this clear light, in which there was, as it were, a hazy diffusion of sunshine, the great shop seemed alive and in full activity.

Denise began to feel as if she were watching a machine working at full pressure, communicating its movement even as far as the windows. They were no longer the cold windows she had seen in the early morning; they seemed to be warm and vibrating from the activity within. There was a crowd before them, groups of women pushing and squeezing, devouring the finery with longing, covetous eyes. And the stuffs became animated in this passionate atmosphere: the laces fluttered, drooped, and concealed the depths of the shop with a troubling air of mystery; even the lengths of cloth, thick and heavy, exhaled a tempting odour, while the cloaks threw out their folds over the dummies, which assumed a soul, and the great velvet mantle particularly, expanded, supple and warm, as if on real fleshly shoulders, with a heaving of the bosom and a trembling of the hips. But the furnace-like glow which the house exhaled came above all from the sale, the crush at the counters, that could be felt behind the walls. There was the continual roaring of the machine at work, the marshalling of the customers, bewildered amidst the piles of goods, and finally pushed along to the pay-desk. And

all that went on in an orderly manner, with mechanical regularity, quite a nation of women passing through the force and logic of this wonderful commercial machine.

Denise had felt herself being tempted all day. She was bewildered and attracted by this shop, to her so vast, in which she saw more people in an hour than she had seen at Cornaille's in six months; and there was mingled with her desire to enter it a vague sense of danger which rendered the seduction complete. At the same time her uncle's shop made her feel ill at ease; she felt an unreasonable disdain, an instinctive repugnance for this cold, icy place, the home of old-fashioned trading. All her sensations – her anxious entry, her friends' cold reception, the dull lunch eaten in a prison-like atmosphere, her waiting amidst the sleepy solitude of this old house doomed to a speedy decay – all these sensations reproduced themselves in her mind under the form of a dumb protestation, a passionate longing for life and light. And notwithstanding her really tender heart, her eyes turned to The Ladies' Paradise, as if the saleswoman within her felt the need to go and warm herself at the glow of this immense business.

“Plenty of customers over there!” was the remark that escaped her.

But she regretted her words on seeing the Baudus near her. Madame Baudu, who had finished her lunch, was standing up, quite white, with her pale eyes fixed on the monster; every time she caught sight of this place, a mute, blank despair swelled her heart, and filled her eyes with scalding tears. As for Geneviève, she was anxiously watching Colomban, who, not supposing he was being observed, stood in ecstasy, looking at the handsome young saleswomen in the dress department opposite, the counter being visible through the first floor window. Baudu, his anger rising, merely said:

“All is not gold that glitters. Patience!”

The thought of his family evidently kept back the flood of rancour which was rising in his throat. A feeling of pride prevented him displaying his temper before these children, only that morning arrived. At last the draper made an effort, and tore himself away from the spectacle of the sale opposite.

“Well!” resumed he, “we'll go and see Vinçard. These situations are soon snatched up; it might be too late tomorrow.”

But before going out he ordered the junior to go to the station and fetch Denise's box. Madame Baudu, to whom the young girl had confided Pépé, decided to run over and see Madame Gras, to arrange about the child. Jean promised his sister not to stir from the shop.

“It's two minutes' walk,” explained Baudu as they went down the Rue Gaillon; “Vinçard has a silk business, and still does a fair trade. Of course he suffers, like every one else, but he's an artful fellow, who makes both ends meet by his miserly ways. I fancy, though, he wants to retire, on account of his rheumatics.”

The shop was in the Rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs, near, the Passage Choiseul. It was clean and light, well fitted up in the modern style, but rather small, and contained but a poor stock. They found Vinçard in consultation with two gentlemen.

“Never mind us,” called out the draper; “we are in no hurry; we can wait.” And returning to the door he whispered to Denise: “The thin fellow is at The Paradise, second in the silk department, and the stout man is a silk manufacturer from Lyons.”

Denise gathered that Vinçard was trying to sell his business to Robineau of The Paradise. He was giving his word of honour in a frank open way, with the facility of a man who could take any number of oaths without the slightest trouble. According to his account, the business was a golden one; and in the splendour of his rude health he interrupted himself to whine and complain of those infernal pains which prevented him stopping and making his fortune. But Robineau, nervous and tormented, interrupted him impatiently. He knew what a crisis the trade was passing through, and named a silk warehouse already ruined by The Paradise. Vinçard, inflamed, raised his voice.

“No wonder! The fall of that great booby of a Vabre was certain. His wife spent everything he earned. Besides, we are more than five hundred yards away, whilst Vabre was almost next door to The Paradise.”

Gaujean, the silk manufacturer, then chimed in, and their voices fell again. He accused the big establishments of ruining French manufacture; three or four laid down the law, reigning like masters over the market; and he gave it as his opinion that the only way of fighting them was to favour the small traders; above all, those who dealt in special classes of goods, to whom the future belonged. Therefore he offered Robineau plenty of credit.

“See how you have been treated at The Paradise,” said he. “No notice taken of your long service. You had the promise of the first-hand’s place long ago, when Bouthemont, an outsider without any claim, came in and got it at once.”

Robineau was still smarting under this injustice. However, he hesitated to start on his own account, explaining that the money came from his wife, a legacy of sixty thousand francs she had just inherited, and he was full of scruples regarding this sum, saying that he would rather cut off his right hand than compromise her money in a doubtful affair.

“No,” said he, “I haven’t made up my mind; give me time to think over it. We’ll have another talk about it.”

“As you like,” replied Vinçard, concealing his disappointment under a smiling countenance. “It’s to my interest not to sell; and were it not for my rheumatics – ”

And returning to the middle of the shop, he asked: “What can I do for you, Monsieur Baudu?”

The draper, who had been listening with one ear, introduced Denise, told him as much as he thought necessary of her story, adding that she had two years’ country experience.

“And as I have heard you are wanting a good saleswoman – ”

Vinçard affected to be awfully sorry. “What an unfortunate thing!” said he. “I have, indeed, been looking for a saleswoman all the week; but I’ve just engaged one – not two hours ago.”

A silence ensued. Denise seemed disheartened. Robineau, who was looking at her with interest, probably inspired with pity by her poor appearance, ventured to say:

“I know they’re wanting a young person at our place, in the ready-made dress department.”

Baudu could not help crying out fervently: “At your place? Never!”

Then he stopped, embarrassed. Denise had turned very red; she would never dare enter that great place, and yet the idea of being there filled her with pride.

“Why not?” asked Robineau, surprised. “It would be a good opening for the young lady. I advise her to go and see Madame. Aurélie, the first-hand, to-morrow. The worst that can happen to her is not to be accepted.”

The draper, to conceal his inward revolt, began to talk vaguely. He knew Madame Aurélie, or, at least, her husband, Lhomme, the cashier, a stout man, who had had his right arm severed by an omnibus. Then turning suddenly to Denise, he added: “However, that’s her business. She can do as she likes.”

And he went out, after having said “good-day” to Gaujean and Robineau. Vinçard went with him as far as the door, reiterating his regrets. The young girl had remained in the middle of the shop, intimidated, desirous of asking Robineau for further particulars. But not daring to, she in her turn bowed, and simply said: “Thank you, sir.”

On the way back Baudu said nothing to his niece, but walked very fast, forcing her to run to keep up with him, as if carried away by his reflections. Arrived in the Rue de la Michodière, he was going into his shop, when a neighbouring shopkeeper, standing at his door, called him.

Denise stopped and waited.

“What is it, old Bourras?” asked the draper.

Bourras was a tall old man, with a prophet’s head, bearded and hairy, and piercing eyes under thick and bushy eyebrows. He kept an umbrella and walking-stick shop, did repairs, and even carved

handles, which had won for him an artistic celebrity in the neighbourhood. Denise glanced at the shop-window, where the umbrellas and sticks were arranged in straight lines. But on raising her eyes she was astonished at the appearance of the house, a hovel squeezed between The Ladies' Paradise and a large building of the Louis XIV. style, sprung up one hardly knew how, in this narrow space, crushed by its two low storeys. Had it not been for the support on each side it must have fallen; the slates were old and rotten, and the two-windowed front was cracked and covered with stains, which ran down in long rusty lines over the worm-eaten sign-board.

“You know he’s written to my landlord, offering to buy the house?” said Bourras, looking steadily at the draper with his fiery eyes.

Baudu became paler still, and bent his shoulders. There was a silence, during which the two men remained face to face, looking very serious.

“Must be prepared for anything now,” murmured Baudu at last.

Bourras then got angry, shaking his hair and flowing board. “Let him buy the house, he’ll have to pay four times the value for it! But I swear that as long as I live he shall not touch a stone of it. My lease has twelve years to run yet. We shall see! we shall see!”

It was a declaration of war. Bourras looked towards The Ladies' Paradise, which neither had directly named. Baudu shook his head in silence, and then crossed the street to his shop, his legs almost failing under him. “Ah! good Lord! ah! good Lord!” he kept repeating.

Denise, who had heard all, followed her uncle. Madame Baudu had just come back with Pépé, whom Madame Gras had agreed to receive at anytime. But Jean had disappeared, and this made his sister anxious. When he returned with a flushed face, talking in an animated way of the boulevards, she looked at him with such a sad expression that he blushed with shame. The box had arrived, and it was arranged that they should sleep in the attic.

“How did you get on at Vinçard’s?” asked Madame Baudu, suddenly.

The draper related his useless errand, adding that Denise had heard of a situation; and, pointing to The Ladies' Paradise with a scornful gesture, he cried out: “There – in there!”

The whole family felt wounded at the idea. The first dinner was at five o’clock. Denise and the two children took their places, with Baudu, Geneviève, and Colomban. A single jet of gas lighted and warmed the little dining-room, reeking with the smell of hot food. The meal passed off in silence, but at dessert Madame Baudu, who could not rest anywhere, left the shop, and came and sat down near Denise. And then the storm, kept back all day, broke out, every one feeling a certain relief in abusing the monster.

“It’s your business, you can do as you like,” repeated Baudu. “We don’t want to influence you. But if you only knew what sort of place it is –” And he commenced to relate, in broken sentences, the history of this Octave Mouret. Wonderful luck! A fellow who had come up from the South of France with the amiable audacity of an adventurer; no sooner arrived than he commenced to distinguish himself by all sorts of disgraceful pranks with the ladies; had figured in an affair, which was still the talk of the neighbourhood; and to crown all, had suddenly and mysteriously made the conquest of Madame Hédouin, who brought him The Ladies' Paradise as a marriage portion.

“Poor Caroline!” interrupted Madame Baudu. “We were distantly related. If she had lived things would be different. She wouldn’t have let them ruin us like this. And he’s the man who killed her. Yes, that very building! One morning, when visiting the works, she fell down a hole, and three days after she died. A fine, strong, healthy woman, who had never known what illness was! There’s some of her blood in the foundation of that house.”

She pointed to the establishment opposite with her pale and trembling hand. Denise, listening as to a fairy tale, slightly shuddered; the sense of fear which had mingled with the temptation she had felt since the morning, was caused perhaps by the presence of this woman’s blood, which she fancied she could see in the red mortar of the basement.

“It seems as if it brought him good luck,” added Madame Baudu, without mentioning Mouret by name.

But the draper shrugged his shoulders, disdainingly these old women’s tales, and resumed his story, explaining the situation commercially. The Ladies’ Paradise was founded in 1822 by two brothers, named Deleuze. On the death of the elder, his daughter, Caroline, married the son of a linen manufacturer, Charles Hédouin; and, later on, becoming a widow, she married Mouret. She thus brought him a half share of the business. Three months after the marriage, the second brother Deleuze died childless; so that when Caroline met her death, Mouret became sole heir, sole proprietor of The Ladies’ Paradise. Wonderful luck!

“A sharp fellow, a dangerous busybody, who will overthrow the whole neighborhood if allowed to!” continued Baudu. “I fancy that Caroline, a rather romantic woman, must have been carried away by the gentleman’s extravagant ideas. In short, he persuaded her to buy the house on the left, then the one on the right; and he himself, on becoming his own master, bought two others; so that the establishment has continued to grow – extending in such a way that it now threatens to swallow us all up!”

He was addressing Denise, but was really speaking more to himself, feeling a feverish longing to go over this history which haunted him continually. At home he was always angry, always violent, clenching his fists as if longing to go for somebody. Madame Baudu ceased to interfere, sitting motionless on her chair; Genevieve and Colomban, their eyes cast down, were picking up and eating the crumbs off the table, just for the sake of something to do. It was so warm, so stuffy in the small room, that Pépé was sleeping with his head on the table, and even Jean’s eyes were closing.

“Wait a bit!” resumed Baudu, seized with a sudden fit of anger, “such jokers always go to smash! Mouret is hard-pushed just now; I know that for a fact. He’s been forced to spend all his savings on his mania for extensions and advertisements. Moreover, in order to raise money, he has induced most of his shop-people to invest all they possess with him. So that he hasn’t a sou to help himself with now; and, unless a miracle be worked, and he treble his sales, as he hopes to do, you’ll see what a crash there’ll be! Ah! I’m not ill-natured, but that day I’ll illuminate my shop-front, on my word of honour!”

And he went on in a revengeful voice; one would have thought that the fall of The Ladies’ Paradise was to restore the dignity and prestige of compromised business. Had any one ever seen such a thing? A draper’s shop selling everything! Why not call it a bazaar at once? And the employees! a nice set they were too – a lot of puppies, who did their work like porters at a railway station, treating goods and customers like so many parcels; leaving the shop or getting the sack at a moment’s notice. No affection, no manners, no taste! And all at once he quoted Colomban as an example of a good tradesman, brought up in the old school, knowing how long it took to learn all the cunning and tricks of the trade. The art was not to sell a large quantity, but to sell dear. Colomban could say how he had been treated, carefully looked after, his washing and mending done, nursed in illness, considered as one of the family – loved, in fact!

“Of course,” repeated Colomban, after every statement the governor made.

“Ah, you’re the last of the old stock,” Baudu ended by declaring. “After you’re gone there’ll be none left. You are my sole consolation, for if they call all this sort of thing business I give up, I would rather clear out.”

Geneviève, her head on one side, as if her thick hair were too heavy for her pale forehead, was watching the smiling shopman; and in her look there was a suspicion, a wish to see whether Colomban, stricken with remorse, would not blush at all this praise. But, like a fellow up to every trick of the old trade, he preserved his quiet manner, his good-natured and cunning look. However, Baudu still went on, louder than ever, condemning the people opposite, calling them a pack of savages, murdering each other in their struggle for existence, destroying all family ties. And he mentioned some country neighbours, the Lhommes – mother, father, and son – all employed in the infernal shop, people without any home life, always out, leading a comfortless, savage existence, never dining at

home except on Sunday, feeding all the week at restaurants, hotels, anywhere. Certainly his dining-room wasn't too large nor too well-lighted; but it was part of their home, and the family had grown up affectionately about the domestic hearth. Whilst speaking his eyes wandered about the room; and he shuddered at the unavowed idea that the savages might one day, if they, succeeded in ruining his trade, turn him out of this house where he was so comfortable with his wife and child. Notwithstanding the assurance with which he predicted the utter downfall of his rivals, he was really terrified, feeling that the neighbourhood was being gradually invaded and devoured.

"I don't want to disgust you," resumed he, trying to calm himself; "if you think it to your interest to go there, I shall be the first to say, 'go.'"

"I am sure of that, uncle," murmured Denise, bewildered, all this excitement rendering her more and more desirous of entering The Ladies' Paradise.

He had put his elbows on the table, and was staring at her so hard that she felt uneasy. "But look here," resumed he; "you who know the business, do you think it right that a simple draper's shop should sell everything? Formerly, when trade was trade, drapers sold nothing but drapery. Now they are doing their best to snap up every branch and ruin their neighbours. The whole neighbourhood complains of it, for every small tradesman is beginning to suffer terribly. This Mouret is ruining them. Bédoré and his sister, who keep the hosiery shop in the Rue Gaillon, have already lost half their customers; Mademoiselle Tatin, at the under-linen warehouse in the Passage Choiseul, has been obliged to lower her prices, to be able to sell at all. And the effects of this scourge, this pest, are felt as far as the Rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs, where I hear that Vanpouille Brothers, the furriers, cannot hold out much longer. Drapers selling fur goods – what a farce! another of Mouret's ideas!"

"And gloves," added Madame Baudu; "isn't it monstrous? He has even dared to add a glove department! Yesterday, as I was going along the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, I saw Quinette, the glover, at his door, looking so downcast that I hadn't the heart to ask him how business was going."

"And umbrellas," resumed Baudu; "that's the climax! Bourras feels sure that Mouret simply wants to ruin him; for, in short, where's the rhyme between umbrellas and drapery? But Bourras is firm on his legs, and won't allow himself to be beggared. We shall see some fun one of these days."

He spoke of other tradesmen, passing the whole neighbourhood in review. Now and again he let slip a confession. If Vinçard wanted to sell it was time for the rest to pack up, for Vinçard was like the rats who leave a house when it threatens to fall in. Then, immediately after, he contradicted himself, alluded to an alliance, an understanding between the small tradesmen in order to fight the colossus. He hesitated an instant before speaking of himself, his hands shaking, and his mouth twitching in a nervous manner. At last he made up his mind.

"As for myself, I can't complain as yet. Of course he has done me harm, the scoundrel! But up to the present he only keeps ladies' cloths, light stuffs for dresses and heavier goods for mantles. People still come to me for men's goods, velvets for shooting suits, cloths for liveries, without speaking of flannels and serges, of which I defy him to show as good an assortment. But he thinks to annoy me by planting his cloth department right in front of my door. You've seen his display, haven't you? He always places his finest made-up goods there, surrounded by a framework of various cloths – a cheap-jack parade to tempt the women. Upon my word, I should be ashamed to use such means! The Old Elbeuf has been known for nearly a hundred years, and has no need for such at its door. As long as I live, it shall remain as I took it, with a few samples on each side, and nothing more!"

The whole family was affected. Geneviève ventured to make a remark after a silence:

"You know, papa, our customers know and like us. We mustn't lose heart Madame Desforges and Madame de Boves have been to-day, and I am expecting Madame Marty for some flannel."

"I," declared Colomban, "I took an order from Madame Bourdelais yesterday. 'Tis true she spoke of an English cheviot marked up opposite ten sous cheaper than ours, and the same stuff, it appears."

“Fancy,” murmured Madame Baudu in her weak voice, “we knew that house when it was scarcely larger than a handkerchief! Yes, my dear Denise, when the Deleuzes started it, it had only one window in the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin; and such a tiny one, in which there was barely room for a couple of pieces of print and two or three pieces of calico. There was no room to turn round in the shop, it was so small. At that time The Old Elbeuf, after sixty years’ trading, was as you see it now. Ah! all that has greatly changed!”

She shook her head; the drama of her whole life was expressed in these few words. Born in the old house, she loved every part of it, living only for it and by it; and, formerly proud of this house, the finest, the best patronised in the neighbourhood, she had had the daily grief of seeing the rival establishment gradually growing in importance, at first disdained, then equal to theirs, and finally towering above it, and threatening all the rest. This was for her a continual, open sore; she was slowly dying from sheer grief at seeing The Old Elbeuf humiliated, though still living, as if by the force of impulse, like a machine wound up. But she felt that the death of the shop would be hers as well, and that she would never survive the closing of it.

There was a painful silence. Baudu was softly beating a tattoo with his fingers on the American cloth on the table. He experienced a sort of lassitude, almost a regret at having relieved his feelings once more in this way. In fact, the whole family felt the effects of his despondency, and could not help ruminating on the bitter story. They never had had any luck. The children had been educated and started in the world, fortune was beginning to smile on them, when suddenly this competition sprang up and ruined their hopes. There was, also, the house at Rambouillet, that country house to which he had been dreaming of retiring for the last ten years – a bargain, he thought; but it had turned out to be an old building always wanting repairs, and which he had let to people who never paid any rent. His last profits were swallowed up by the place – the only folly he had committed in his honest, upright career as a tradesman, obstinately attached to the old ways.

“Come, come!” said he, suddenly, “we must make room for the others. Enough of this useless talk!”

It was like an awakening. The gas hissed, in the dead and stifling air of the small room. They all jumped up, breaking the melancholy silence. However, Pépé was sleeping so soundly that they laid him on some bales of cloth. Jean had already returned to the street door yawning.

“In short,” repeated Baudu to his niece, “you can do as you like. We have explained the matter to you, that’s all. You know your own business best.”

He looked at her sharply, waiting for a decisive answer. Denise, whom these stories had inspired with a still greater longing to enter The Ladies’ Paradise, instead of turning her from it, preserved her quiet gentle demeanour with a Norman obstinacy. She simply replied: “We shall see, uncle.”

And she spoke of going to bed early with the children, for they were all three very tired. But it had only just struck six, so she decided to stay in the shop a little longer. Night had come on, and she found the street quite dark, enveloped in a fine close rain, which had been falling since sunset. She was surprised. A few minutes had sufficed to fill the street with small pools, a stream of dirty water was running along the gutters, the pavement was thick with a sticky black mud; and through the beating rain she saw nothing but a confused stream of umbrellas, pushing, swinging along in the gloom like great black wings. She started back at first, feeling very cold, oppressed at heart by the badly-lighted shop, very dismal at this hour of the day. A damp breeze, the breath of the old quarter, came in from the street; it seemed that the rain, streaming from the umbrellas, was running right into the shop, that the pavement with its mud and its puddles extended all over the place, putting the finishing touches to the mouldiness of the old shop front, white with saltpetre. It was quite a vision of old Paris, damp and uncomfortable, which made her shiver, astonished and heart-broken to find the great city so cold and so ugly.

But opposite, the gas-lamps were being lighted all along the frontage of The Ladies’ Paradise. She moved nearer, again attracted and, as it were, warmed by this wealth of illumination. The machine

was still roaring, active as ever, hissing forth its last clouds of steam; whilst the salesmen were folding up the stuffs, and the cashiers counting up the receipts. It was, as seen through the hazy windows, a vague swarming of lights, a confused factory-like interior. Behind the curtain of falling rain, this apparition, distant and confused, assumed the appearance of a giant furnace-house, where the black shadows of the firemen could be seen passing by the red glare of the furnaces. The displays in the windows became indistinct also; one could only distinguish the snowy lace, heightened in its whiteness by the ground glass globes of a row of gas jets, and against this chapel-like background the ready-made goods stood out vigorously, the velvet mantle trimmed with silver fox threw into relief the curved profile of a headless woman running through the rain to some entertainment in the unknown of the shades of the Paris night.

Denise, yielding to the seduction, had gone to the door, heedless of the raindrops falling on her. At this hour, The Ladies' Paradise, with its furnace-like brilliancy, entirely conquered her. In the great metropolis, black and silent, beneath the rain – in this Paris, to which she was a stranger, it shone out like a lighthouse, and seemed to be of itself the life and light of the city. She dreamed of her future there, working hard to bring up the children, and of other things besides – she hardly knew what – far-off things, the desire and the fear of which made her tremble. The idea of this woman who had met her death amidst the foundations came back to her; she felt afraid, she thought she saw the lights bleeding; then, the whiteness of the lace quieting her, a vague hope sprang up in her heart, quite a certainty of happiness; whilst the fine rain, blowing on her, cooled her hands, and calmed her after the excitement of her journey.

“It's Bourras,” said a voice behind her.

She leant forward, and perceived the umbrella-maker, motionless before the window containing the ingenious display of umbrellas and walking-sticks. The old man had slipped up there in the dark, to feast his eyes on the triumphant show; and so great was his grief that he was unconscious of the rain which was beating on his bare head, and trickling off his white hair.

“How stupid he is, he'll make himself ill,” resumed the voice.

Turning round, Denise found the Baudus behind her again. Though they thought Bourras so stupid, they were obliged, against their will, to return to this spectacle which was breaking their hearts. Genevieve, very pale, had noticed that Colomban was watching the shadows of the saleswomen pass to and fro on the first floor opposite; and, whilst Baudu was choking with suppressed rancour, Madame Baudu was silently weeping.

“You'll go and see to-morrow, won't you, Denise?” asked the draper, tormented with uncertainty, but feeling that his niece was conquered like the rest.

She hesitated, then gently replied: “Yes, uncle, unless it pains you too much.”

CHAPTER II

The next morning, at half-past seven, Denise was outside The Ladies' Paradise, wishing to call there before taking Jean to his new place, which was a long way off, at the top of the Faubourg du Temple. But, accustomed to early hours, she had arrived too soon; the shop was hardly opened, and, afraid of looking ridiculous, full of timidity, she walked up and down the Place Gaillon for a moment.

The cold wind that blew had already dried the pavement. Shopmen were hurriedly turning out of every street in the neighbourhood, their coat-collars turned up, and their hands in their pockets, taken unawares by this first chill of winter. Most of them hurried along alone, and disappeared in the depths of the warehouse, without addressing a word or look to their colleagues marching along by their side. Others were walking in twos and threes, talking fast, and taking up the whole of the pavement; while they all threw away with a similar gesture, their cigarette or cigar before crossing the threshold.

Denise noticed that several of these gentlemen took stock of her in passing. This increased her timidity; she felt quite unable to follow them, and resolved to wait till they had all entered before going in, blushing at the idea of being elbowed at the door by all these men. But the stream continued, so to escape their looks, she took a walk round. When she returned to the principal entrance, she found a tall young man, pale and awkward, who appeared to be waiting as she was.

"I beg your pardon, mademoiselle," he finished by stammering out, "but perhaps you belong to the establishment?"

She was so troubled at hearing a stranger address her in this way that she did not reply at first.

"The fact is," he continued, getting more confused than ever, "I thought of asking them to engage me, and you might have given me a little information."

He was as timid as she was, and had probably risked speaking to her because he felt she was trembling like himself.

"I would with pleasure, sir," replied she at last "But I'm no better off than you are; I'm just going to apply myself."

"Ah, very good," said he, quite out of countenance.

And they blushed violently, their two timidities remaining face to face for a moment, affected by the similarity of their positions, not daring, however, to wish each other success openly. Then, as they said nothing further, and became more and more uncomfortable, they separated awkwardly, and recommenced their waiting, one on either side, a few steps apart.

The shopmen continued to arrive, and Denise could now hear them joking as they passed, casting side glances towards her. Her confusion increased at finding herself exposed to this unpleasant ordeal, and she had decided to take half an hour's walk in the neighbourhood, when the sight of a young man coming rapidly through the Rue Port-Mahon, detained her for a moment. He was evidently the manager of a department, she thought, for the others raised their hats to him. He was tall, with a clear skin and carefully trimmed beard; and he had eyes the colour of old gold, of a velvety softness, which he fixed on her for a moment as he crossed the street. He already entered the shop, indifferent that she remained motionless, quite upset by his look, filled with a singular emotion, in which there was more uneasiness than pleasure. She began to feel really afraid, and, to give herself time to collect her courage somewhat, she walked slowly down the Rue Gaillon, and then along the Rue Saint-Roch.

It was better than a manager of a department, it was Octave Mouret in person. He had not been to bed, for after having spent the evening at a stockbroker's, he had gone to supper with a friend and two women, picked up behind the scenes of a small theatre. His tightly buttoned overcoat concealed a dress suit and white tie. He quickly ran upstairs, performed his toilet, changed, and entered his office, quite ready for work, with beaming eyes, and complexion as fresh as if he had had ten hours' sleep. The spacious office, furnished in old oak and hung with green rep, had for sole ornament the

portrait of that Madame Hédouin, who was still the talk of the neighbourhood. Since her death Octave thought of her with a tender regret, showing himself grateful to the memory of her, who, by marrying him, had made his fortune. And before commencing to sign the drafts laid on his desk, he bestowed the contented smile of a happy man on the portrait. Was it not always before her that he returned to work, after his young widower's escapades, every time he issued from the alcoves where his craving for amusement attracted him?

There was a knock, and without waiting, a young man entered, a tall, thin fellow, with thin lips and a sharp nose, very gentlemanly and correct in his appearance, with his smooth hair already showing signs of turning grey. Mouret raised his eyes, then continuing to sign, said:

"I hope you slept well, Bourdoncle?"

"Very well, thanks," replied the young man, walking about as if quite at home.

Bourdoncle, the son of a poor farmer near Limoges, had started at The Ladies' Paradise at the same time as Mouret, when it only occupied the corner of the Place Gaillon. Very intelligent, very active, it seemed as if he ought to have easily supplanted his comrade, who was not so steady, and who had, besides various other faults, a careless manner and too many intrigues with women; but he lacked that touch of genius possessed by the impassioned Southerner, and had not his audacity, his winning grace. Besides, by a wise instinct, he had always, from the first, bowed before him, obedient and without a struggle; and when Mouret advised his people to put all their money into the business, Bourdoncle was one of the first to respond, even investing the proceeds of an unexpected legacy left him by an aunt; and little by little, after passing through the various grades, salesman, second, and then first-hand in the silk department, he had become one of the governor's most cherished and influential lieutenants, one of the six persons who assisted Mouret to govern The Ladies' Paradise – something like a privy council under an absolute king. Each one watched over a department. Bourdoncle exercised a general control.

"And you," resumed he, familiarly, "have you slept well?" When Mouret replied that he had not been to bed, he shook his head, murmuring: "Bad habits."

"Why?" replied the other, gaily. "I'm not so tired as you are, my dear fellow. You are half asleep now, you lead too quiet a life. Take a little amusement, that'll wake you up a bit."

This was their constant friendly dispute. Bourdoncle had, at the commencement, beaten his mistresses, because, said he, they prevented him sleeping. Now he professed to hate women, having, no doubt, chance love affairs of which he said nothing, so small was the place they occupied in his life; he contented himself with encouraging the extravagance of his lady customers, feeling the greatest disdain for their frivolity, which led them to ruin themselves in stupid gewgaws. Mouret, on the contrary, affected to worship them, remained before them delighted and cajoling, continually carried away by fresh love-affairs; and this served as an advertisement for his business. One would have said that he enveloped all the women in the same caress, the better to bewilder them and keep them at his mercy.

"I saw Madame Desforges last night," said he; "she was looking delicious at the ball."

"But it wasn't with her that you went to supper, was it?" asked the other.

Mouret protested. "Oh! no, she's very virtuous, my dear fellow. I went to supper with little Héloïse, of the Folly. Stupid as a donkey, but so comical!"

He took another bundle of drafts and went on signing. Bourdoncle continued to walk about. He went and took a look through the lofty plate-glass windows, into the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, then returned, saying: "You know they'll have their revenge."

"Who?" asked Mouret, who had lost the thread of the conversation.

"Why, the women."

At this, Mouret became merrier still, displaying, beneath his sensual, adorative manner, his really brutal character. With a shrug of the shoulders he seemed to declare he would throw them all over, like so many empty sacks, when they had finished helping him to make his fortune. Bourdoncle

obstinately repeated, in his cold way: "They will have their revenge; there will be one who will avenge all the others. It's bound to be."

"No fear," cried Mouret, exaggerating his Southern accent. "That one isn't born yet, my boy. And if she comes, you know –"

He had raised his penholder, brandishing it and pointing it in the air, as if he would have liked to stab some invisible heart with a knife. Bourdoncle resumed walking, bowing as usual before the superiority of the governor, whose genius, though faulty, had always got the better of him. He, so clear-headed, logical and passionless, incapable of falling, had yet to learn the feminine character of success, Paris yielding herself with a kiss to the boldest.

A silence reigned, broken only by Mouret's pen. Then, in reply to his brief questions, Bourdoncle gave him the particulars of the great sale of winter novelties, which was to commence the following Monday. This was an important affair, and the house was risking its fortune in it; for the rumour had some foundation, Mouret was throwing himself into speculation like a poet, with such ostentation, such a determination to attain the colossal, that everything seemed bound to give way under him. It was quite a new style of doing business, an apparent commercial recklessness which had formerly made Madame Hédouin anxious, and which even now, notwithstanding the first successes, quite dismayed those who had capital in the business. They blamed the governor in secret for going too quick; accused him of having enlarged the establishment to a dangerous extent, before making sure of a sufficient increase of custom; above all, they trembled on seeing him put all the capital into one venture, filling the place with a pile of goods without leaving a sou in the reserve fund. Thus, for this sale, after the heavy sums paid to the builders, the whole capital was out, and it was once more a question of victory or death. And he, in the midst of all this excitement, preserved a triumphant gaiety, a certainty of gaining millions, like a man worshipped by the women, and who cannot be betrayed. When Bourdoncle ventured to express certain fears with reference to the too great development given to several not very productive departments, he broke out into a laugh full of confidence, and exclaimed:

"No fear! my dear fellow, the place is too small!"

The other appeared dumbfounded, seized with a fear he no longer attempted to conceal. The house too small! a draper's shop having nineteen departments, and four hundred and three employees!

"Of course," resumed Mouret, "we shall be obliged to enlarge our premises before another eighteen months. I'm seriously thinking about the matter. Last night Madame Desforges promised to introduce me to some one. In short, we'll talk it over when the idea is ripe."

And having finished signing his drafts, he got up, and tapped his lieutenant on the shoulder in a friendly manner, but the latter could not get over his astonishment. The fright felt by the prudent people around him amused Mouret. In one of his fits of brusque frankness with which he sometimes overwhelmed his familiars, he declared he was at heart a bigger Jew than all the Jews in the world; he took after his father, whom he resembled physically and morally, a fellow who knew the value of money; and, if his mother had given him that particle of nervous fantasy, why it was, perhaps, the principal element of his luck, for he felt the invincible force of his daring reckless grace.

"You know very well that we'll stand by you to the last," Bourdoncle finished by saying.

Before going down into the various departments to give their usual look round, they settled certain other details. They examined the specimen of a little book of account forms, which Mouret had just invented for use at the counters. Having remarked that the old-fashioned goods, the dead stock, went off all the more rapidly when the commission given to the employees was high, he had based on this observation a new system. In future he intended to interest his people in the sale of all goods, giving them a commission on the smallest piece of stuff, the slightest article sold: a system which had caused a revolution in the drapery trade, creating between the salespeople a struggle for existence of which the proprietor reaped the benefit. This struggle formed his favourite method, the principle of organisation he constantly applied. He excited his employees' passions, pitted one against

the other, allowed the strongest to swallow up the weakest, fattening on this interested struggle. The specimen book was approved of; at the top of the two forms – the one retained, and the one torn off – were the particulars of the department and the salesman's number; then there were columns on both for the measurement, description of the articles sold, and the price; the salesman simply signed the bill before handing it to the cashier. In this way an easy account was kept, it sufficed to compare the bills delivered by the cashier's department to the clearing-house with the salesmen's counterfoils. Every week the latter would receive their commission, and that without the least possibility of any error.

“We sha'n't be robbed so much,” remarked Bourdoncle, with satisfaction. “A very good idea of yours.”

“And I thought of something else last night,” explained Mouret. “Yes, my dear fellow, at the supper. I should like to give the clearing-house clerks a trifle for every error found in checking. You can understand that we shall then be certain they won't pass any, for they would rather invent some.”

He began to laugh, whilst the other looked at him in admiration. This new application of the struggle for existence delighted Mouret; he had a real genius for administrative business, and dreamed of organising the house, so as to play upon the selfish instincts of his employees, for the complete and quiet satisfaction of his own appetites. He often said that to make people do their best, and even to keep them fairly honest, it was necessary to excite their selfish desires first.

“Well, let's go downstairs,” resumed Mouret. “We must look after this sale. The silk arrived yesterday, I believe, and Bouthemont must be getting it in now.”

Bourdoncle followed him. The receiving office was on the basement floor, in the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin. There, on a level with the pavement, was a kind of glazed cage, where the vans discharged the goods. They were weighed, and then slipped down a rapid slide, its oak and iron work shining, brightened by the chafing of goods and cases. Everything entered by this yawning trap; it was a continual swallowing up, a fall of goods, causing a roaring like that of a cataract. At the approach of big sale times especially, the slide carried down a perpetual stream of Lyons silks, English woollens, Flemish linens, Alsatian calicoes, and Rouen printed goods; and the vans were sometimes obliged to wait their turn along the street; the bales running down produced the peculiar noise made by a stone thrown into deep water.

Mouret stopped a moment before the slide, which was in full activity. Rows of cases were going down of themselves, falling like rain from some upper stream. Then some huge bales appeared, toppling over in their descent like so many pebbles. Mouret looked on, without saying a word. But this wealth of goods rushing in at the rate of thousands of francs a minute, made his eyes glisten. He had never before had such a clear, definite idea of the struggle he was engaged in. Here was this mountain of goods that he had to launch to the four corners of Paris. He did not open his mouth, continuing his inspection.

By the grey light penetrating the air-holes, a squad of men were receiving the goods, whilst others were undoing and opening the cases and bales in presence of the managers of different departments. A dockyard agitation filled this cellar, this basement, where wrought-iron pillars supported the arches, and the bare walls of which were cemented.

“Have you got all there, Bouthemont?” asked Mouret, going up to a broad-shouldered young fellow who was checking the contents of a case.

“Yes, everything seems all right,” replied he; “but the counting will take me all the morning.”

The manager was glancing at the invoice every now and then, standing up before a large counter on which one of his salesmen was laying, one by one, the pieces of silk he was taking from the case. Behind them ran other counters, also encumbered with goods that a small army of shopmen were examining. It was a general unpacking, an apparent confusion of stuffs, examined, turned over, and marked, amidst a buzz of voices.

Bouthemont, a celebrity in the trade, had a round, jolly face, a coal-black beard, and fine hazel eyes. Born at Montpellier, noisy, too fond of company, he was not much good for the sales, but for

buying he had not his equal. Sent to Paris by his father, who kept a draper's shop in his native town, he had absolutely refused to return when the old fellow thought he ought to know enough to succeed him in his business; and from that moment a rivalry sprung up between father and son, the former, all for his little country business, shocked to see a simple shopman earning three times as much as he did himself, the latter joking at the old man's routine, chinking his money, and throwing the whole house into confusion at every flying visit he paid. Like the other managers, Bouthemont drew, besides his three thousand francs regular pay, a commission on the sales. Montpèllier, surprised and respectful, whispered that young Bouthemont had made fifteen thousand francs the year before, and that that was only a beginning – people prophesied to the exasperated father that this figure would certainly increase.

Bourdoncle had taken up one of the pieces of silk, and was examining the grain with the eye of a connoisseur. It was a faille with a blue and silver selvage, the famous Paris Paradise, with which Mouret hoped to strike a decisive blow.

"It is really very good," observed Bourdoncle.

"And the effect it produces is better than its real quality," said Bouthemont. "Dumonteil is the only one capable of manufacturing such stuff. Last journey when I fell out with Gaujean, the latter was willing to set a hundred looms to work on this pattern, but he asked five sous a yard more."

Nearly every month Bouthemont went to Lyons, staying there days together, living at the best hotels, with orders to treat the manufacturers with open purse. He enjoyed, moreover, a perfect liberty, and bought what he liked, provided that he increased the yearly business of his department in a certain proportion, settled beforehand; and it was on this proportion that his commission was based. In short, his position at The Ladies' Paradise, like that of all the managers, was that of a special tradesman, in a grouping of various businesses, a sort of vast trading city.

"So," resumed he, "it's decided we mark it five francs twelve sous? It's barely the cost price, you know."

"Yes, yes, five francs twelve sous," said Mouret, quickly; "and if I were alone, I'd sell it at a loss."

The manager laughed heartily. "Oh! I don't mind, that will just suit me; it will treble the sale, and as my only interest is to attain heavy receipts – "

But Bourdoncle remained very grave, biting his lips. He drew his commission on the total profits, and it did not suit him to lower the prices. Part of his business was to exercise a control over the prices fixed upon, to prevent Bouthemont selling at too small a profit in order to increase the sales. Moreover, his former anxiety reappeared in the presence of these advertising combinations which he did not understand. He ventured to show his repugnance by saying:

"If we sell it at five francs twelve sous, it will be like selling it at a loss, as we must allow for our expenses, which are considerable. It would fetch seven francs anywhere."

At this Mouret got angry. He struck the silk with his open hand, crying out excitedly: "I know that, that's why I want to give it to our customers. Really, my dear fellow, you'll never understand women's ways. Don't you see they'll be crazy after this silk?"

"No doubt," interrupted the other, obstinately, "and the more they buy, the more we shall lose."

"We shall lose a few sous on the stuff, very likely. What matters, if in return we attract all the women here, and keep them at our mercy, excited by the sight of our goods, emptying their purses without thinking? The principal thing, my dear fellow, is to inflame them, and for that you must have one article which flatters them – which causes a sensation. Afterwards, you can sell the other articles as dear as anywhere else, they'll still think yours the cheapest. For instance, our Golden Grain, that taffeta at seven francs and a half, sold everywhere at that price, will go down as an extraordinary bargain, and suffice to make up for the loss on the Paris Paradise. You'll see, you'll see!"

He became quite eloquent.

"Don't you understand? In a week's time from to-day I want the Paris Paradise to make a revolution in the market. It's our master-stroke, which will save us, and get our name up. Nothing

else will be talked of; the blue and silver selvage will be known from one end of France to the other. And you'll hear the furious complaints of our competitors. The small traders will lose another wing by it; they'll be done for, all those rheumatic old brokers shivering in their cellars!"

The shopmen checking the goods round about were listening and smiling. He liked to talk in this way without contradiction. Bourdoncle yielded once more. However, the case was empty, two men were opening another.

"It's the manufacturers who are not exactly pleased," said Bouthemont. "At Lyons they are all furious with you, they pretend that your cheap trading is ruining them. You are aware that Gaujean has positively declared war against me. Yes, he has sworn to give the little houses longer credit, rather than accept my prices."

Mouret shrugged his shoulders. "If Gaujean doesn't look sharp," replied he, "Gaujean will be flooded. What do they complain of? We pay ready money and we take all they can make; it's strange if they can't work cheaper at that rate. Besides, the public gets the benefit, and that's everything."

The shopman was emptying the second case, whilst Bouthemont was checking the pieces by the invoice. Another shopman, at the end of the counter, was marking them in plain figures, and the checking finished, the invoice, signed by the manager, had to be sent to the chief cashier's office. Mouret continued looking at this work for a moment, at all this activity round this unpacking of goods which threatened to drown the basement; then, without adding a word, with the air of a captain satisfied with his troops, he went away, followed by Bourdoncle.

They slowly crossed the basement floor. The air-holes placed at intervals admitted a pale light; while in the dark corners, and along the narrow corridors, gas was constantly burning. In these corridors were situated the reserves, large vaults closed with iron railings, containing the surplus goods of each department. Mouret glanced in passing at the heating apparatus, to be lighted on the Monday for the first time, and at the post of firemen guarding a giant gas-meter enclosed in an iron cage. The kitchen and dining-rooms, old cellars turned into habitable apartments, were on the left at the corner of the Place Gaillon. At last he arrived at the delivery department, right at the other end of the basement floor. The parcels not taken away by the customers were sent down there, sorted on tables, placed in compartments each representing a district of Paris; then sent up by a large staircase opening just opposite The Old Elbeuf, to the vans standing alongside the pavement. In the mechanical working of The Ladies' Paradise, this staircase in the Rue de la Michodière disgorged without ceasing the goods swallowed up by the slide in the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, after they had passed through the mechanism of the counters up above.

"Campion," said Mouret to the delivery manager, a retired sergeant with a thin face, "why weren't six pairs of sheets, bought by a lady yesterday about two o'clock, delivered in the evening?"

"Where does the lady live?" asked the employee..

"In the Rue de Rivoli, at the corner of the Rue d'Alger – Madame Desforges."

At this early hour the sorting tables were bare, the compartment only contained a few parcels left over night Whilst Campion was searching amongst these packets, after having consulted a list, Bourdoncle was looking at Mouret, thinking that this wonderful fellow knew everything, thought of everything, even when at the supper-tables of restaurants or in the alcoves of his mistresses. At last Campion discovered the error; the cashier's department had given a wrong number, and the parcel had come back.

"What is the number of the pay-desk that debited that?" asked Mouret: "No. 10, you say?" And turning towards his lieutenant, he added: "No. 10; that's Albert, isn't it? We'll just say two words to him."

But before starting on their tour round the shops, he wanted to go up to the postal order department, which occupied several rooms on the second floor. It was there that all the provincial and foreign orders arrived; and he went up every morning to see the correspondence. For two years this correspondence had been increasing daily. At first occupying only about ten clerks, it now required

more than thirty. Some opened the letters, others read them, seated at both sides of the same table; others again classed them, giving each one a running number, which was repeated on a pigeon-hole. Then when the letters had been distributed to the different departments and the latter had delivered the articles, these articles were put in the pigeon-holes as they arrived, according to the running numbers. There was then nothing to do but to check and tie them up, which was done in a neighbouring room by a squad of workmen who were nailing and tying up from morning to night.

Mouret put his usual question: "How many letters this morning, Levasseur?"

"Five hundred and thirty-four, sir," replied the chief clerk. "After the commencement of Monday's sale, I'm afraid we sha'n't have enough hands. Yesterday we were driven very hard."

Bourdoncle expressed his satisfaction by a nod of the head. He had not reckoned on five hundred and thirty-four letters on a Tuesday. Round the table, the clerks continued opening and reading the letters amidst a noise of rustling paper, whilst the going and coming of the various articles commenced before the pigeon-holes. It was one of the most complicated and important departments of the establishment, one in which there was a continual rush, for, strictly speaking, all the orders received in the morning ought to be sent off the same evening.

"You shall have more hands if you want them," replied Mouret, who had seen at a glance that the work was well done. "You know that when there's work to be done we never refuse the men."

Up above, under the roof, were the small bedrooms for the saleswomen. But he went downstairs again and entered the chief cashier's office, which was near his own. It was a room with a glazed wicket, and contained an enormous safe, fixed in the wall. Two cashiers there centralised the receipts which Lhomme, the chief cashier at the counters, brought in every evening; they also settled the current expenses, paid the manufacturers, the staff, all the crowd of people who lived by the house. The cashiers' office communicated with another, full of green cardboard boxes, where ten clerks checked the invoices. Then came another office, the clearing-house: six young men bending over black desks, having behind them quite a collection of registers, were getting up the discount accounts of the salesmen, by checking the debit notes. This work, which was new to them, did not get on very well.

Mouret and Bourdoncle had crossed the cashiers' office and the invoice room. When they passed through the other office the young men, who were laughing and joking, started up in surprise. Mouret, without reprimanding them, explained the system of the little bonus he thought of giving them for each error discovered in the debit notes; and when he went out the clerks left off laughing, as if they had been whipped, and commenced working in earnest, looking up the errors.

On the ground-floor, occupied by the shops, Mouret went straight to the pay-desk No. 10, where Albert Lhomme was cleaning his nails, waiting for customers. People regularly spoke of "the Lhomme dynasty," since Madame Aurélie, firsthand at the dress department, after having helped her husband on to the post of chief cashier, had managed to get a pay desk for her son, a tall fellow, pale and vicious, who couldn't stop anywhere, and who caused her an immense deal of anxiety. But on reaching the young man, Mouret kept in the background, not wishing to render himself unpopular by performing a policeman's duty, and retaining from policy and taste his part of amiable god. He nudged Bourdoncle gently with his elbow – Bourdoncle, the infallible man, that model of exactitude, whom he generally charged with the work of reprimanding.

"Monsieur Albert," said the latter, severely, "you have taken another address wrong; the parcel has come back. It's unbearable!"

The cashier, thinking it his duty to defend himself, called as a witness the messenger who had tied up the packet. This messenger, named Joseph, also belonged to the Lhomme dynasty, for he was Albert's foster brother, and owed his place to Madame Aurelie's influence. As the young man wanted to make him say it was the customer's mistake, Joseph stuttered, twisted the shaggy beard that ornamented his scarred face, struggling between his old soldier's conscience and gratitude towards his protectors.

“Let Joseph alone,” Bourdoncle exclaimed at last, “and don’t say any more. Ah! it’s a lucky thing for you that we are mindful of your mother’s good services!”

But at this moment Lhomme came running up. From his office near the door he could see his son’s pay-desk, which was in the glove department. Quite white-haired already, deadened by his sedentary life, he had a flabby, colourless face, as if worn out by the reflection of the money he was continually handling. His amputated arm did not at all incommode him in this work, and it was quite a curiosity to see him verify the receipts, so rapidly did the notes and coins slip through his left one, the only one he had. Son of a tax-collector at Chablis, he had come to Paris as a clerk in the office of a merchant of the Port-aux-Vins. Then, whilst lodging in the Rue Cuvier, he married the daughter of his doorkeeper, a small tailor, an Alsatian; and from that day he had bowed submissively before his wife, whose commercial ability filled him with respect. She earned more than twelve thousand francs a year in the dress department, whilst he only drew a fixed salary of five thousand francs. And the deference he felt for a woman bringing such sums into the home was extended to the son, who also belonged to her.

“What’s the matter?” murmured he; “is Albert in fault?”

Then, according to his custom, Mouret appeared on the scene, to play the part of good-natured prince. When Bour-doncle had made himself feared, he looked after his own popularity.

“Nothing of consequence!” murmured he. “My dear Lhomme, your son Albert is a careless fellow, who should take an example from you.” Then, changing the subject, showing himself more amiable than ever, he continued; “And that concert the other day – did you get a good seat?”

A blush overspread the white cheeks of the old cashier. Music was his only vice, a vice which he indulged in solitarily, frequenting the theatres, the concerts, the rehearsals. Notwithstanding the loss of his arm, he played on the French horn, thanks to an ingenious system of keys; and as Madame Lhomme detested noise, he wrapped up his instrument in cloth in the evening, delighted all the same, in the highest degree, with the strangely dull sounds he drew from it. In the forced irregularity of their domestic life he had made himself an oasis of this music – that and the cash-box, he knew of nothing else, beyond the admiration he felt for his wife.

“A very good seat,” replied he, with sparkling eyes. “You are really too kind, sir.”

Mouret, who enjoyed a personal pleasure in satisfying other people’s passions, sometimes gave Lhomme the tickets forced on him by the lady patronesses of such entertainments, and he completed the old man’s delight by saying:

“Ah, Beethoven! ah, Mozart! What music!” And without waiting for a reply, he went off, rejoining Bourdoncle, already on his tour of inspection through the departments.

In the central hall, an inner courtyard with a glass roof formed the silk department. Both went along the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, occupied by the linen department, from one end to the other. Nothing unusual striking them, they passed on through the crowd of respectful assistants. They then turned into the cotton and hosiery departments, where the same order reigned. But in the department devoted to woollens, occupying the gallery which ran through to the Rue de la Michodière, Bourdoncle resumed the character of executioner, on observing a young man, seated on the counter, looking knocked up after a night passed without sleep. And this young man, named Liénard, son of a rich Angers draper, bowed his head beneath the reprimand, fearing nothing in his idle, careless life of pleasure except to be recalled by his father. The reprimands now began to shower down, and the gallery of the Rue de la Michodière received the full force of the storm. In the drapery department a salesman, a fresh hand, who slept in the house, had come in after eleven o’clock; in the haberdashery department, the second counterman had just allowed himself to be caught downstairs smoking a cigarette. But the tempest burst with especial violence in the glove department, on the head of one of the rare Parisians in the house, handsome Mignot, as they called him, the illegitimate son of a music-mistress: his crime was having caused a scandal in the dining-room by complaining of the food. As

there were three tables, one at half-past nine, one at half-past ten, and another at half-past eleven, he wished to explain that belonging to the third table, he always had the leavings, the worst of everything.

“What! the food not good?” asked Mouret, naïvely, opening his mouth at last.

He only gave the head cook, a terrible Auvergnat, a franc and a half a head per day, out of which this man still managed to make a good profit; and the food was really execrable. But Bourdoncle shrugged his shoulders: a cook who had four hundred luncheons and four hundred dinners to serve, even in three series, had no time to waste on the refinements of his art.

“Never mind,” said the governor, good-naturedly, “I wish all our employees to have good, abundant food. I’ll speak to the cook.” And Mignot’s complaint was shelved.

Then returning to their point of departure, standing up near the door, amidst the umbrellas and neckties, Mouret and Bourdoncle received the report of one of the four inspectors, charged with the superintendence of the establishment. Old Jouve, a retired captain, decorated at Constantine, a fine-looking man still, with his big sensual nose and majestic baldness, having drawn their attention to a salesman, who, in reply to a simple remonstrance on his part, had called him “an old humbug,” the salesman was immediately discharged.

However, the shop was still without customers, except a few housewives of the neighbourhood who were going through the almost deserted galleries. At the door the time-keeper had just closed his book, and was making out a separate list of the late comers. The salesmen were taking possession of their departments, which had been swept and brushed by the messengers before their arrival. Each young man hung up his hat and great-coat as he arrived, stifling a yawn, still half asleep. Some exchanged a few words, gazed about the shop and seemed to be pulling themselves together ready for another day’s work; others were leisurely removing the green baize with which they had covered the goods over night, after having folded them up; and the piles of stuffs appeared symmetrically arranged, the whole shop was in a clean and orderly state, brilliant in the morning gaiety, waiting for the rush of business to come and obstruct it, and, as it were, narrow it by the unpacking and display of linen, cloth, silk, and lace.

In the bright light of the central hall, two young men were talking in a low voice at the silk counter. One, short and charming, well set, and with a pink skin, was endeavouring to blend the colours of some silks for indoor show. His name was Hutin, his father kept a café at Yvetot, and he had managed after eighteen months’ service to become one of the principal salesmen, thanks to a natural flexibility of character, a continual flow of caressing flattery, under which was concealed a furious rage for business, grasping everything, devouring everybody, even without hunger, just for the pleasure of the thing.

“Look here, Favier, I should have struck him if I had been in your place, honour bright!” said he to the other, a tall bilious fellow with a dry and yellow skin, who was born at Besançon of a family of weavers, and who, without the least grace, concealed under a cold exterior a disquieting will.

“It does no good to strike people,” murmured he, phlegmatically; “better wait.”

They were both speaking of Robineau, who was looking after the shopmen during the manager’s absence downstairs. Hutin was secretly undermining Robineau, whose place he coveted. He had already, to wound him and make him leave, introduced Bouthemont to fill the vacancy of manager which had been promised to Robineau. However, the latter stood firm, and it was now an hourly battle. Hutin dreamed of setting the whole department against him, to hound him out by means of ill-will and vexations. At the same time he went to work craftily, exciting Favier especially, who stood next to him as salesman, and who appeared to allow himself to be led on, but with certain brusque reserves, in which could be felt quite a private campaign carried on in silence.

“Hush! seventeen!” said he, quickly, to his colleague, to warn him by this peculiar cry of the approach of Mouret and Bourdoncle.

These latter were continuing their inspection by traversing the hall. They stopped to ask Robineau for an explanation with regard to a stock of velvets of which the boxes were encumbering a table. And as the latter replied that there wasn't enough room:

"I told you so, Bourdoncle," cried out Mouret, smiling; "the place is already too small. We shall soon have to knock down the walls as far as the Rue de Choiseul. You'll see what a crush there'll be next Monday."

And respecting the coming sale, for which they were preparing at every counter, he asked Robineau further questions and gave him various orders. But for several minutes, and without having stopped talking, he had been watching Hutin, who was contrasting the silks – blue, grey, and yellow – drawing back to judge of the harmony of the tones. Suddenly he interfered:

"But why are you endeavouring to please the eyes? Don't be afraid; blind them. Look! red, green, yellow."

He had taken the pieces, throwing them together, crushing them, producing an excessively fast effect. Every one allowed the governor to be the best displayer in Paris, of a regular revolutionary stamp, who had founded the brutal and colossal school in the science of displaying. He delighted in a tumbling of stuffs, as if they had fallen from the crowded shelves by chance, making them glow with the most ardent colours, lighting each other up by the contrast, declaring that the customers ought to have sore eyes on going out of the shop. Hutin, who belonged, on the contrary, to the classic school, in which symmetry and harmony of colour were cherished, looked at him lighting up this fire of stuff on a table, not venturing on the least criticism, but biting his lip with the pout of an artist whose convictions are wounded by such a debauch.

"There!" exclaimed Mouret when he had finished. "Leave it; you'll see if it doesn't fetch the women on Monday."

Just as he rejoined Bourdoncle and Robineau, there arrived a woman, who remained stock-still, suffocated before this show. It was Denise, who, having waited for nearly an hour in the street, the prey to a violent attack of timidity, had at last decided to go in. But she was so beside herself with bashfulness that she mistook the clearest directions; and the shopmen, of whom she had stutteringly asked for Madame Aurélie, directed her in vain to the lower staircase; she thanked them, and turned to the left if they told her to turn to the right; so that for the last ten minutes she had been wandering about the ground-floor, going from department to department, amidst the ill-natured curiosity and ill-tempered indifference of the salesmen. She longed to run away, and was at the same time retained by a wish to stop and admire. She felt herself lost, she, so little, in this monster place, in this machine at rest, trembling for fear she should be caught in the movement with which the walls already began to shake. And the thought of The Old Elbeuf, black and narrow, increased the immensity of this vast establishment, presenting it to her as bathed in light, like a city with its monuments, squares, and streets, in which it seemed impossible that she should ever find her way.

However, she had not dared to risk herself in the silk hall, the high glass roof, luxurious counters, and cathedral-like air of which frightened her. Then when she did venture in, to escape the shopmen in the linen department, who were grinning, she had stumbled right on to Mouret's display; and, notwithstanding her fright, the woman was aroused within her, her cheeks suddenly became red, and she forgot everything in looking at the glow of these silks.

"Hullo!" said Hutin in Favier's ear; "there's the girl we saw in the Place Gaillon."

Mouret, whilst affecting to listen to Bourdoncle and Robineau, was at heart flattered by the startled look of this poor girl, as a marchioness might be by the brutal desire of a passing drayman. But Denise had raised her eyes, and her confusion increased at the sight of this young man, whom she took for a manager. She thought he was looking at her severely. Then not knowing how to get away, quite lost, she applied to the nearest shopman, who happened to be Favier.

"Madame Aurélie, please?"

But Favier, who was disagreeable, contented himself with replying sharply: "First floor."

And Denise, longing to escape the looks of all these men, thanked him, and had again turned her back to the stairs she ought to have mounted, when Hutin, yielding naturally to his instinct of gallantry, stopped her with his most amiable salesman's smile, "No – this way, mademoiselle; if you don't mind."

And he even went with her a little way to the foot of the staircase on the left-hand side of the hall under the gallery. There he bowed, smiling tenderly, as he smiled at all women.

"When you get upstairs turn to the left. The dress department is straight in front."

This caressing politeness affected Denise deeply. It was like a brotherly hand extended to her; she raised her eyes and looked at Hutin, and everything in him touched her – his handsome face, his looks which dissolved her fears, and his voice which seemed to her of a consoling softness. Her heart swelled with gratitude, and she bestowed her friendship in the few disjointed words her emotion allowed her to utter.

"Really, sir, you are too kind. Pray don't trouble to come any further. Thank you very much."

Hutin had already rejoined Favier, to whom he coarsely whispered: "What a bag of bones – eh?"

Upstairs the young girl suddenly found herself in the midst of the dress department. It was a vast room, with high carved oak cupboards all round, and clear glass windows looking on to the Rue de la Michodière. Five or six women in silk dresses, looking very coquettish with their frizzed chignons and crinolines drawn back, were moving about, talking. One, tall and thin, with a long head, having a runaway-horse appearance, was leaning against a cupboard, as if already knocked up with fatigue.

"Madame Aurélie?" inquired Denise.

The saleswoman looked at her without replying, with an air of disdain for her shabby dress, then turning to one of her friends, a short girl with a sickly white skin and an innocent and disgusted appearance, she asked: "Mademoiselle Vadon, do you know where Madame Aurélie is?"

The young girl, who was arranging some mantles according to their sizes, did not even take the trouble to raise her head. "No, Mademoiselle Prunaire, I don't know at all," replied she in a mincing tone.

A silence ensued. Denise stood still, and no one took any further notice of her. However, after waiting a moment, she ventured to put another question: "Do you think Madame Aurélie will be back soon?"

The second-hand, a thin, ugly woman, whom she had not noticed before, a widow with a projecting jaw-bone and coarse hair, cried out from a cupboard, where she was checking some tickets: "You'd better wait if you want to speak to Madame Aurélie herself." And, addressing another saleswoman, she added: "Isn't she downstairs?"

"No, Madame Frédéric, I don't think so," replied the young lady. "She said nothing before going, so she can't be far off."

Denise, thus instructed, remained standing. There were several chairs for the customers; but as they had not told her to sit down, she did not dare to take one, although she felt ready to drop with fatigue. All these ladies had evidently put her down as an applicant for the vacancy, and they were taking stock of her, pulling her to pieces ill-naturedly, with the secret hostility of people at table who do not like to close up to make room for hungry outsiders. Her confusion increased; she crossed the room quietly and looked out of the window into the street, just for something to do. Opposite, The Old Elbeuf, with its rusty front and lifeless windows, appeared to her so ugly, so miserable, seen thus from amidst the luxury and life of her present standpoint, that a sort of remorse filled her already swollen heart with grief.

"I say," whispered tall Prunaire to little Vadon, "have you seen her boots?"

"And her dress!" murmured the other.

With her eyes still towards the street, Denise felt herself being devoured. But she was not angry; she did not think them handsome, neither the tall one with her carrotty chignon falling over her horse-like neck, nor the little one with her sour milk complexion, which gave her flat and, as

it were, boneless face a flabby appearance. Clara Primaire, daughter of a clogmaker in the forest of Vilet, debauched by the footmen at the Château de Mareuil, where the countess engaged her as needlewoman, had come later on from a shop at Langres, and was avenging herself in Paris on the men for the kicks with which her father had regaled her when at home. Marguerite Vadon, born at Grenoble, where her parents kept a linen shop, had been obliged to come to The Ladies' Paradise to conceal an accident she had met with – a brat which had made its appearance one day. She was a well-conducted girl, and intended to return to Grenoble to take charge of her parents' shop, and marry a cousin who was waiting for her.

“Well,” resumed Clara, in a low voice, “there’s a girl who won’t do much good here!”

But they stopped talking. A woman of about forty-five came in. It was Madame Aurélie, very stout, tightly laced in her black silk dress, the body of which, strained over her massive shoulders and full bust, shone like a piece of armour. She had, under very dark folds of hair, great fixed eyes, a severe mouth, and large and rather drooping cheeks; and in the majesty of her position as first-hand, her face assumed the bombast of a puffy mask of Cæsar, “Mademoiselle Vadon,” said she, in an irritated voice, “you didn’t return the pattern of that mantle to the workroom yesterday, it seems?”

“There was an alteration to make, madame,” replied the saleswoman, “so Madame Frédéric kept it.”

The second-hand then took the pattern out of a cupboard, and the explanation continued. Every one gave way to Madame Aurélie, when she thought it necessary to assert her authority. Very vain, even going so far as not to wish to be called by her real name, Lhomme, which annoyed her, and to deny her father’s humble position, always referring to him as a regularly established tailor, she was only gracious towards those young ladies who showed themselves flexible and caressing, bowing down in admiration before her. Some time previously, whilst she was trying to establish herself in a shop of her own, her temper had become sour, continually thwarted by the worst of luck, exasperated to feel herself born to fortune and to encounter nothing but a series of catastrophes; and now, even after her success at The Ladies' Paradise, where she earned twelve thousand francs a year, it seemed that she still nourished a secret spite against every one, and she was very hard with beginners, as life had shown itself hard for her at first.

“That will do!” said she, sharply; “you are no more reasonable than the others, Madame Frédéric. Let the alteration be made immediately.”

During this explanation, Denise had ceased to look into the street. She had no doubt this was Madame Aurélie; but, frightened at her sharp voice, she remained standing, still waiting. The two saleswomen, delighted to have set their two superiors at variance, had returned to their work with an air of profound indifference. A few minutes elapsed, nobody being charitable enough to draw the young girl from her uncomfortable position. At last, Madame Aurélie herself perceived her, and astonished to see her standing there without moving, asked her what she wanted.

“Madame Aurélie, please.”

“I am Madame Aurélie.”

Denise’s mouth became dry and parched, and her hands cold; she felt some such fear as when she was a child and trembled at the thought of being whipped. She stammered out her request, but was obliged to repeat it to make herself understood. Madame Aurélie looked at her with her great fixed eyes, not a line of her imperial mask deigning to relax, “How old are you?”

“Twenty, madame.”

“What, twenty years old? you don’t look sixteen!”

The saleswomen again raised their heads. Denise hastened to add: “Oh, I’m very strong!”

Madame Aurélie shrugged her broad shoulders, then coldly declared: “Well! I don’t mind entering your name. We enter the names of all those who apply. Mademoiselle Prunaire, give me the book.”

But the book could not be found; Jouve, the inspector had probably got it. As tall Clara was going to fetch it, Mouret arrived, still followed by Bourdoncle. They had made the tour of the other departments – the lace, the shawls, the furs, the furniture, the under-linen, and were winding up with the dresses. Madame Aurélie left Denise a moment to speak to them about an order for some cloaks she thought of giving to one of the large Paris houses; as a rule, she bought direct, and on her own responsibility; but, for important purchases, she preferred consulting the chiefs of the house. Bourdoncle then related her son Albert's latest act of carelessness, which seemed to fill her with despair. That boy would kill her; his father, although not a man of talent, was at least well-conducted, careful, and honest. All this dynasty of Lhommes, of which she was the acknowledged head, very often caused her a great deal of trouble. However, Mouret, surprised to see Denise again, bent down to ask Madame Aurélie what the young lady was doing there; and, when the first-hand replied that she was applying for a saleswoman's situation, Bourdoncle, with his disdain for women, seemed suffocated at this pretension.

“You don't mean it,” murmured he; “it must be a joke, she's too ugly!”

“The fact is, there's nothing handsome about her,” said Mouret, not daring to defend her, although still moved by the rapture she had displayed downstairs before his arrangement of silks.

But the book having been brought in, Madame Aurélie returned to Denise, who had certainly not made a favourable impression. She looked very clean in her thin black woollen dress; the question of shabbiness was of no importance, as the house furnished a uniform, the regulation silk dress; but she appeared rather weak and puny, and had a melancholy face. Without insisting on handsome girls, one liked them to be of agreeable appearance for the sale rooms. And beneath the gaze of all these ladies and gentlemen who were studying her, weighing her like farmers would a horse at a fair, Denise completely lost countenance.

“Your name?” asked Madame Aurélie, at the end of a counter, pen in hand, ready to write.

“Denise Baudu, madame.”

“Your age?”

“Twenty years and four months.” And she repeated, risking a glance at Mouret, at this supposed manager, whom she met everywhere and whose presence troubled her so: “I don't look like it, but I am really very strong.”

They smiled. Bourdoncle showed evident signs of impatience; her remark fell, moreover, amidst a most discouraging silence.

“What house have you been in, in Paris?” resumed Madame Aurélie.

“I've just arrived from Valognes.”

This was a fresh disaster. As a rule, The Ladies' Paradise only took saleswomen with a year's experience in one of the small houses in Paris. Denise thought all was lost; and, had it not been for the children, had she not been obliged to work for them, she would have closed this useless interview and left the place. “Where were you at Valognes?”

“At Cornaille's.”

“I know him – good house,” remarked Mouret.

It was very rarely that he interfered in the engagement of the employees, the manager of each department being responsible for his staff. But with his delicate appreciation of women, he divined in this young girl a hidden charm, a wealth of grace, and tenderness of which she herself was ignorant. The good name enjoyed by the house in which the candidate had started was of great importance, often deciding the question in his or her favour. Madame Aurélie continued, in a kinder tone: “And why did you leave Cornaille's?”

“For family reasons,” replied Denise, turning scarlet “We have lost our parents, I have been obliged to follow my brothers. Here is a certificate.”

It was excellent Her hopes were reviving, when another question troubled her.

“Have you any other references in Paris? Where do you live?”

“At my uncle’s,” murmured she, hesitating about naming him, fearing they would never take the niece of a competitor. “At my uncle Baudu’s, opposite.”

At this, Mouret interfered a second time. “What! are you Baudu’s niece? Is it Baudu who sent you here?”

“Oh! no, sir!”

And she could not help laughing, the idea appeared to her so singular. It was a transfiguration; she became quite rosy, and the smile round her rather large mouth lighted up her whole face. Her grey eyes sparkled with a tender flame, her cheeks filled with delicious dimples, and even her light hair seemed to partake of the frank and courageous gaiety that pervaded her whole being.

“Why, she’s really pretty,” whispered Mouret to Bourdoncle.

The partner refused to admit it, with a gesture of annoyance. Clara bit her lips, and Marguerite turned away; but Madame Aurélie seemed won over, and encouraged Mouret with a nod when he resumed: “Your uncle was wrong not to bring you; his recommendation sufficed. They say he has a grudge against us. We are people of more liberal minds, and if he can’t find employment for his niece in his house, why we will show him that she has only to knock at our door to be received. Just tell him I still like him very much, and that he must blame, not me, but the new style of business. Tell him, too, that he will ruin himself if he insists on keeping to his ridiculous old-fashioned ways.”

Denise turned quite white again. It was Mouret; no one had mentioned his name, but he had revealed himself, and now she guessed who it was, she understood why this young man had caused her such emotion in the street, in the silk department, and again now. This emotion, which she could not analyse, pressed on her heart more and more, like a too-heavy weight. All the stories related by her uncle came back to her, increasing Mouret’s importance, surrounding him with a sort of halo, making of him the master of the terrible machine by whose wheels she had felt herself being seized all the morning. And, behind his handsome face, well-trimmed beard, and eyes of the colour of old gold, she beheld the dead woman, that Madame Hédouin, whose blood had helped to cement the stones of the house. The shiver she had felt the previous night again seized her; and she thought she was merely afraid of him.

Meanwhile, Madame Aurélie had closed the book. She only wanted one saleswoman, and she already had ten applications. But she was too anxious to please the governor to hesitate for a moment. However, the application would follow its course, Jouve, the inspector, would go and make enquiries, send in his report, and then she would come to a decision.

“Very good, mademoiselle,” said she majestically, to preserve her authority; “we will write to you.”

Denise stood there, unable to move for a moment, hardly knowing how to take her leave in the midst of all these people. At last she thanked Madame Aurélie, and on passing by Mouret and Bourdoncle, she bowed. These gentlemen, occupied in examining the pattern of a mantle with Madame Frédéric, did not take the slightest notice. Clara looked in a vexed way towards Marguerite, as if to predict that the new comer would not have a very pleasant time of it in the place. Denise doubtless felt this indifference and rancour behind her, for she went downstairs with the same troubled feeling she had on going up, asking herself whether she ought to be sorry or glad to have come. Could she count on having the situation? She did not even know that, her uncomfortable state having prevented her understanding clearly. Of all her sensations, two remained and gradually effaced all the others – the emotion, almost the fear, inspired in her by Mouret, and Hutin’s amiability, the only pleasure she had enjoyed the whole morning, a souvenir of charming sweetness which filled her with gratitude. When she crossed the shop to go out she looked for the young man, happy at the idea of thanking him again with her eyes; and she was very sorry not to see him.

“Well, mademoiselle, have you succeeded?” asked a timid voice, as she at last stood on the pavement outside. She turned round and recognised the tall, awkward young fellow who had spoken

to her in the morning. He also had just come out of The Ladies' Paradise, appearing more frightened than she did, still bewildered with the examination he had just passed through.

“I really don't know yet, sir,” replied she.

“You're like me, then. What a way of looking at and talking to you they have in there – eh? I'm applying for a place in the lace department I was at Crèvecoeur's in the Rue du Mail.”

They were once more standing facing each other; and, not knowing how to take leave, they commenced to blush. Then the young man, just for something to say in the excess of his timidity, ventured to ask in his good-natured, awkward way: “What is your name, mademoiselle?”

“Denise Baudu.”

“My name is Henri Deloche.”

Now they smiled, and, yielding to the fraternity of their positions, shook each other by the hand.

“Good luck!”

“Yes, good luck!”

CHAPTER III

Every Saturday, between four and six, Madame Desforges offered a cup of tea and a few cakes to those friends who were kind enough to visit her. She occupied the third floor of a house at the corner of the Rue de Rivoli and the Rue d'Alger; and the windows of both drawing-rooms overlooked the Tuileries Gardens. This Saturday, just as a footman was about to introduce him into the principal drawing-room, Mouret perceived from the anteroom, through an open door, Madame Desforges, who was crossing the little drawing-room. She stopped on seeing him, and he went in that way, bowing to her with a ceremonious air. But when the footman had closed the door, he quickly seized the young woman's hand, and tenderly kissed it.

"Take care, I have company!" she said, in a low voice, glancing towards the door of the larger room. "I've just been to fetch this fan to show them," and she playfully tapped him on the face with the tip of the fan. She was dark, rather stout, with big jealous eyes.

But he still held her hand and asked: "Will he come?"

"Certainly," replied she. "I have his promise."

Both of them referred to Baron Hartmann, director of the Credit Immobilier. Madame Desforges, daughter of a Councillor of State, was the widow of a stock-broker, who had left her a fortune, denied by some, exaggerated by others. Even during her husband's lifetime people said she had shown herself grateful towards Baron Hartmann, whose financial tips had proved very useful to them; and later on, after her husband's death, the acquaintance had probably continued, but always discreetly, without imprudence or display; for she never courted notoriety in any way, and was received everywhere in the upper-middle classes amongst whom she was born. Even at this time, when the passion of the banker, a sceptical, crafty man, had subsided into a simple paternal affection, if she permitted herself certain lovers whom he tolerated, she displayed in these treasons of the heart such a delicate reserve and tact, a knowledge of the world so adroitly applied, that appearances were saved, and no one would have ventured to openly express any doubt as to her conduct. Having met Mouret at a mutual friend's, she had at first detested him; but she had yielded to him later on, as if carried away by the violent love with which he attacked her, and since he had commenced to approach Baron Hartmann through her, she had gradually got to love him with a real profound tenderness, adoring him with the violence of a woman already thirty-five, although only acknowledging twenty-nine, and in despair at feeling him younger than herself, trembling lest she should lose him.

"Does he know about it?"

"No, you'll explain the affair to him yourself," she replied.

She looked at him, thinking that he couldn't know anything or he would not employ her in this way with the baron, affecting to consider him simply as an old friend of hers. But he still held her hand, he called her his good Henriette, and she felt her heart melting. Silently she presented her lips, pressed them to his, then whispered: "Oh, they're waiting for me. Come in behind me."

They could hear voices issuing from the principal drawingroom, deadened by the heavy curtains. She pushed the door, leaving its two folds open, and handed the fan to one of the four ladies who were seated in the middle of the room.

"There it is," said she; "I didn't know exactly where it was. My maid would never have found it." And she added in her cheerful way: "Come in, Monsieur Mouret, come through the little drawing-room; it will be less solemn."

Mouret bowed to the ladies whom he knew. The drawingroom, with its flowered brocatel Louis XVI. furniture, gilded bronzes and large green plants, had a tender feminine air, notwithstanding the height of the ceiling; and through the two windows could be seen the chestnut trees in the Tuileries Gardens, their leaves blowing about in the October wind.

"But it isn't at all bad, this Chantilly!" exclaimed Madame Bourdelais, who had taken the fan.

She was a short fair woman of thirty, with a delicate nose and sparkling eyes, an old school-fellow of Henriette's, and who had married a chief clerk in the Treasury. Of an old middle-class family, she managed her household and three children with a rare activity and good grace, and an exquisite knowledge of practical life.

"And you paid twenty-five francs for it?" resumed she, examining each mesh of the lace. "At Luc, I think you said, to a country woman? No, it isn't dear; but you had to get it mounted, hadn't you?"

"Of course," replied Madame Desforges. "The mounting cost me two hundred francs."

Madame Bourdelais began to laugh. And that was what Henriette called a bargain! Two hundred francs for a plain ivory mount, with a monogram! And that for a simple piece of Chantilly, over which she had saved five francs, perhaps. Similar fans could be had ready, mounted for a hundred and twenty francs, and she named a shop in the Rue Poissonnière.

However, the fan was handed round to all the ladies. Madame Guibal barely glanced at it. She was a tall, thin woman, with red hair, and a face full of indifference, in which her grey eyes, occasionally penetrating her unconcerned air, cast the terrible gleams of selfishness. She was never seen out with her husband, a barrister well-known at the Palais de Justice, who led, it was said, a pretty free life, dividing himself between his law business and his pleasures.

"Oh," murmured she, passing the fan to Madame de Boves, "I've scarcely bought one in my life. One always receives too many of such things."

The countess replied with delicate malice: "You are fortunate, my dear, in having a gallant husband." And bending over to her daughter, a tall girl of twenty, she added: "Just look at the monogram, Blanche. What pretty work! It's the monogram that must have increased the price like that."

Madame de Boves had just turned forty. She was a superb woman, with the neck of a goddess, a large regular face, and big sleepy eyes, whom her husband, Inspector-General of the Stud, had married for her beauty. She appeared quite moved by the delicacy of the monogram, as if seized with a desire the emotion of which made her turn pale, and turning round suddenly, she continued: "Give us your opinion, Monsieur Mouret. Is it too dear – two hundred francs for this mount?"

Mouret had remained standing in the midst of the five women, smiling, taking an interest in what interested them. He picked up the fan, examined it, and was about to give his opinion, when the footman opened the door and announced:

"Madame Marty."

And there entered a thin, ugly woman, ravaged with the small-pox, dressed with a complicated elegance. She was of uncertain age, her thirty-five years appearing sometimes equal to thirty, and sometimes to forty, according to the intensity of the nervous fever which agitated her. A red leather bag, which she had not let go, hung from her right hand.

"Dear madame," said she to Henriette, "excuse me bringing my bag. Just fancy, as I was coming along I went into The Paradise, and as I have again been very extravagant, I did not like to leave it in my cab for fear of being robbed." But having perceived Mouret, she resumed laughingly: "Ah! sir, I didn't mean to give you an advertisement, for I didn't know you were here. But you really have some extraordinary fine lace just now."

This turned the attention from the fan, which the young man laid on the table. The ladies were all anxious to see what Madame Marty had bought. She was known to be very extravagant, totally unable to resist temptation, strict in her conduct and incapable of yielding to a lover, but weak and cowardly, easily conquered before the least bit of finery. Daughter of a city clerk, she was ruining her husband, a master at the Lycée Bonaparte, who was obliged to double his salary of six thousand francs a year by giving private lessons, in order to meet the constantly increasing household expenses. She did not open her bag, but held it tight on her lap, and commenced to talk about her daughter Valentine, fourteen years old, one of her dearest coquetries, for she dressed her like herself, with all the fashionable novelties of which she submitted to the irresistible seduction.

“You know,” she said, “they are making dresses trimmed with a narrow lace for young girls this winter. So when I saw a very pretty Valenciennes – ”

And she at last decided to open her bag. The ladies were stretching out their necks, when, in the midst of the silence, the door-bell was heard.

“It’s my husband,” stammered Madame Marty, very confused. “He promised to fetch me on leaving the Lycée Bonaparte.”

She quickly shut the bag again, and put it under her chair with an instinctive movement. All the ladies set up a laugh. This made her blush for her precipitation, and she put the bag on her knees again, explaining that men never understood, and that they need not know.

“Monsieur de Boves, Monsieur de Vallagnosc,” announced the footman.

It was quite a surprise. Madame de Boves herself did not expect her husband. The latter, a fine man, wearing a moustache and an imperial with the military correctness so much liked at the Tuileries, kissed the hand of Madame Desforges, whom he had known as a young girl at her father’s. And he made way to allow his companion, a tall, pale fellow, of an aristocratic poverty of blood, to make his bow to the lady of the house. But the conversation had hardly recommenced when two exclamations were heard:

“What! Is that you, Paul?”

“Why, Octave!”

Mouret and Vallagnosc then shook hands, much to Madame Desforges’s surprise. They knew each other, then? Of course, they had grown up side by side at the college at Plassans, and it was quite by chance they had not met at her house before. However, with their hands still united, they went into the little drawing-room, just as the servant brought in the tea, a china service on a silver waiter, which he placed near Madame Desforges, on a small round marble table with a light copper mounting. The ladies drew up and began talking louder, all speaking at once, producing a cross-fire of short disjointed sentences; whilst Monsieur de Boves, standing up behind them, put in an occasional word with the gallantry of a handsome functionary. The vast room, so prettily and cheerfully furnished, became merrier still with these gossiping voices, and the frequent laughter.

“Ah! Paul, old boy,” repeated Mouret.

He was seated near Vallagnosc, on a sofa. And alone in the little drawing-room, very coquettish with its pretty silk hangings, out of hearing of the ladies, and not even seeing them, except through the open door, the two old friends commenced grinning, examining each other’s looks, exchanging slaps on the knees. Their whole youthful career was recalled, the old college at Plassans, with its two courtyards, its damp classrooms, and the dining-room in which they had consumed so much cod-fish, and the dormitories where the pillows used to fly from bed to bed as soon as the monitor began to snore. Paul, belonging to an old parliamentary family, noble, poor, and proud, was a good scholar, always at the top of his class, continually held up as an example by the master, who prophesied for him a brilliant future; whilst Octave remained at the bottom, stuck amongst the dunces, fat and jolly, indulging in all sorts of pleasures outside. Notwithstanding the difference in their characters, a fast friendship had rendered them inseparable, until their final examinations, which they passed, the one with honours, the other in a passable manner after two vexatious trials. Then they went out into the world, and had now met again, after ten years, already changed and looking older.

“Well,” said Mouret, “what’s become of you?”

“Nothing at all,” replied the other.

Vallagnosc, in the joy of their meeting, retained his tired and disenchanted air; and as his friend, astonished, insisted, saying: “But you must do something. What do you do?”

“Nothing,” replied he.

Octave commenced to laugh. Nothing! that wasn’t enough. Little by little he succeeded in drawing Paul out to tell his story. It was the usual story of penniless younger sons, who think themselves obliged by their birth to choose a liberal profession, burying themselves in a sort of vain

mediocrity, happy to escape starvation, notwithstanding their numerous degrees. He had studied law by a sort of family tradition; and had since remained a burden on his widowed mother, who even then hardly knew how to dispose of her two daughters. Having at last got quite ashamed, he left the three women to vegetate on the remnants of their fortune, and accepted an appointment in the Ministry of the Interior, where he buried himself like a mole in its hole.

“What do you get there?” resumed Mouret.

“Three thousand francs.”

“But that’s pitiful pay! Ah! old man, I’m really sorry for you. What! a clever fellow like you, who floored all of us! And they only give you three thousand francs a year, after having already ground you down for five years! No, it isn’t right!” He interrupted himself, and returned to his own doings. “As for me, I made them a humble bow. You know what I’m doing?”

“Yes,” said Vallagnosc, “I heard you were in business. You’ve got that big place in the Place Gaillon, haven’t you?”

“That’s it. Counter-jumper, my boy!”

Mouret raised his head, again slapped him on the knee, and repeated, with the solid gaiety of a fellow who did not blush for the trade by which he was making his fortune:

“Counter-jumper, and no mistake! You remember, no doubt, I didn’t bite much at their machines, although at heart I never thought myself duller than the others. When I took my degree, just to please the family, I could have become a barrister or a doctor quite as easily as any of my school-fellows, but those trades frightened me. I saw so many who were starving at them that I just threw them over without the least regret, and pitched head-first into business.”

Vallagnosc smiled with an awkward air, and ultimately said: “It’s very certain your degree can’t be much good to you for selling calico.”

“Well!” replied Mouret, joyously, “all I ask is, that it shall not stand in my way, and you know, when one has been stupid enough to burden one’s self with it, it is difficult to get rid of it. One goes at a tortoise’s pace through life, whilst those who are bare-footed run like madmen.” Then, noticing that his friend seemed troubled, he took his hand in his, and continued: “Come, come, I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but confess that your degrees have not satisfied any of your wants. Do you know that my manager in the silk department will draw more than twelve thousand francs this year. Just so! a fellow of very clear intelligence, whose knowledge is confined to spelling, and the first four rules. The ordinary salesmen in my place make from three to four thousand francs a year, more than you can earn yourself; and their education was not so expensive as yours, nor were they launched into the world with a written promise to conquer it. Of course, it is not everything to make money; but between the poor devils possessed of a smattering of science who now block up the liberal professions, without earning enough to keep themselves from starving, and the practical fellows armed for life’s struggle, knowing every branch of their trade, by Jove! I don’t hesitate a moment, I’m for the latter against the former, I think they thoroughly understand the age they live in!”

His voice had become impassioned. Henriette, who was pouring out the tea, turned her head. When he caught her smile, at the further end of the large drawing-room, and saw the other ladies were listening, he was the first to make merry over his own big phrases.

“In short, old man, every counter-jumper who commences, has, at the present day, a chance of becoming a millionaire.”

Vallagnosc threw himself back on the sofa indolently, half-closing his eyes in a fatigued and disdainful attitude, in which a suspicion of affectation was added to his real hereditary exhaustion.

“Bah!” murmured he, “life isn’t worth all that trouble. There is nothing worth living for.” And as Mouret, shocked, looked at him with an air of surprise, he added: “Everything happens and nothing happens; one may as well stay with one’s arms folded.”

He then explained his pessimism – the mediocrities and the abortions of existence. For a time he had thought of literature, but his intercourse with certain poets had filled him with universal despair.

He always arrived at the conclusion that all effort was useless, every hour equally weary and empty, and the world incurably stupid and dull. All enjoyment was a failure, and there was no pleasure in wrong-doing even.

“Just tell me, do you enjoy life yourself?” asked he at last.

Mouret was now in a state of astonished indignation, and exclaimed: “What? Do I enjoy myself? What are you talking about? Why, of course I do, my boy, and even when things give way, for then I am furious at hearing them cracking. I am a passionate fellow myself, and don’t take life quietly; that’s what interests me in it perhaps.” He glanced towards the drawing-room, and lowered his voice. “Oh! there are some women who’ve bothered me awfully, I must confess. But when I’ve got hold of one, I keep her. She doesn’t always escape me, and then I take my share, I assure you. But it is not so much the women, for to speak truly, I don’t care a hang for them; it’s the wish to act – to create, in short. You have an idea; you fight for it, you hammer it into people’s heads, and you see it grow and triumph. Ah! yes, my boy, I enjoy life!”

All the joy of action, all the gaiety of existence, resounded in these words. He repeated that he went with the times. Really, a man must be badly constituted, have his brain and limbs out of order, to refuse to work in an age of such vast undertakings, when the entire century was pressing forward with giant strides. And he laughed at the despairing ones, the disgusted ones, the pessimists, all those weak, sickly members of our budding sciences, who assumed the weeping airs of poets, or the mincing ways of sceptics, amidst the immense activity of the present day. A fine part to play, proper and intelligent, that of yawning before other people’s labour!

“That’s my only pleasure, yawning in other’s faces,” said Vallagnosc, smiling with his cold look.

At this Mouret’s passion subsided, and he became affectionate again. “Ah, Paul, you’re not changed. Just as paradoxical as ever! However, we’ve not met to quarrel. Each one has his own ideas, fortunately. But you must come and see my machine at work; you’ll see it isn’t a bad idea. Come, what news? Your mother and sisters are quite well, I hope? And weren’t you supposed to get married at Plassans, about six months ago?”

A sudden movement made by Vallagnosc stopped him; and as the former was looking round the drawing-room with an anxious expression, Mouret also turned round, and noticed that Mademoiselle de Boves was closely watching them. Blanche, tall and stout, resembled her mother; but her face was already puffed out, her large, coarse features swollen with unhealthy fat. Paul, in reply to a discreet question, intimated that nothing was yet settled; perhaps nothing would be settled. He had made the young person’s acquaintance at Madame Desforges’s, where he had visited a good deal last winter, but where he very rarely came now, which explained why he had not met Octave there sooner. In their turn, the De Boves invited him, and he was especially fond of the father, a very amiable man, formerly well known about town, who had retired into his present position. On the other hand, no money. Madame de Boves having brought her husband nothing but her Juno-like beauty as a marriage portion, the family were living poorly on the last mortgaged farm, to which modest revenue was added, fortunately, the nine thousand francs a year drawn by the count as Inspector-General of the Stud. And the ladies, mother and daughter, kept very short of money by him, impoverished by tender escapades outside, were sometimes reduced to turning their dresses themselves.

“In that case, why marry?” was Mouret’s simple question.

“Well! I can’t go on like this for ever,” said Vallagnosc, with a weary movement of the eyelids. “Besides, there are certain expectations; we are waiting the death of an aunt.”

However, Mouret still kept his eye on Monsieur de Boves, who, seated next to Madame Guibal, was most attentive, and laughing tenderly like a man on an amorous campaign; he turned to his friend with such a significant twinkle of the eye that the latter added:

“Not that one. At least not yet. The misfortune is, that his duty calls him to the four corners of France, to the breeding dépôts, so that he has continual pretexts for absenting himself. Last month,

whilst his wife supposed him to be at Perpignan, he was living at an hotel, in an out-of-the-way neighbourhood, with a music-mistress.”

There ensued a pause. Then the young man, who was also watching the count's gallantries towards Madame Guibal, resumed in a low tone: “Really, I think you are right. The more so as the dear lady is not exactly a saint, if all they say is true. There's a very amusing story about her and an officer. But just look at him! Isn't he comical, magnetising her with his eyes? The old-fashioned gallantry, my dear fellow! I adore that man, and if I marry his daughter, he can safely say it's for his sake!”

Mouret laughed, greatly amused. He questioned Vallagnosc again, and when he found that the first idea of a marriage between him and Blanche came from Madame Desforges, he thought the story better still. That good Henriette took a widow's delight in marrying people, so much so, that when she had provided for the girls, she sometimes allowed their fathers to choose friends from her company; but all so naturally, with such a good grace, that no one ever found any food for scandal. And Mouret, who loved her with the love of an active, busy man, accustomed to reducing his tenderness to figures, forgot all his calculations of captivation, and felt for her a comrade's friendship.

At that moment she appeared at the door of the little drawing-room, followed by a gentleman, about sixty years old, whose entry had not been observed by the two friends. Occasionally the ladies' voices became sharper, accompanied by the tinkling of the small spoons in the china cups; and there was heard, from time to time, in the interval of a short silence, the noise of a saucer laid down too roughly on the marble table. A sudden gleam of the setting sun, which had just emerged from behind a thick cloud, gilded the top of the chestnut-trees in the gardens, and streamed through the windows in a red, golden flame, the fire of which lighted up the brocatel and brass-work of the furniture.

“This way, my dear baron,” said Madame Desforges. “Allow me to introduce Monsieur Octave Mouret, who is longing to express the admiration he feels for you.” And turning round towards Octave, she added: “Baron Hartmann.”

A smile played on the old man's lips. He was a short, vigorous man, with a large Alsatian head, and a heavy face, which lighted up with a gleam of intelligence at the slightest curl of his mouth, the slightest movement of his eyelids. For the last fortnight he had resisted Henriette's wish that he should consent to this interview; not that he felt any immoderate jealousy, accepting, like a man of the world, his position of father; but because it was the third friend Henriette had introduced to him, and he was afraid of becoming ridiculous at last. So that on approaching Octave he put on the discreet smile of a rich protector, who, if good enough to show himself charming, does not consent to be a dupe.

“Oh! sir,” said Mouret, with his Southern enthusiasm, “the Credit Immobiliers last operation was really astonishing! You cannot think how happy and proud I am to know you.”

“Too kind, sir, too kind,” repeated the baron, still smiling.

Henriette looked at them with her clear eyes without any awkwardness, standing between the two, lifting her head, going from one to the other; and, in her lace dress, which revealed her delicate neck and wrists, she appeared delighted to see them so friendly together.

“Gentlemen,” said she at last, “I leave you to your conversation.” Then, turning towards Paul, who had got up, she resumed: “Will you accept of a cup of tea, Monsieur de Vallagnosc?”

“With pleasure, madame,” and they both returned to the drawing-room.

Mouret resumed his place on the sofa, when Baron Hartmann had sat down; the young man then broke out in praise of the Credit Immobiliers operations. From that he went on to the subject so near his heart, speaking of the new thoroughfare, of the lengthening of the Rue Reaumur, of which they were going to open a section under the name of the Rue du Dix-Décembre, between the Place de la Bourse and the Place de l'Opera. It had been declared a work of public utility eighteen months previously; the expropriation jury had just been appointed. The whole neighbourhood was excited about this new opening, anxiously awaiting the commencement of the work, taking an interest in the condemned houses. Mouret had been waiting three years for this work – first, in the expectation of an increase of business; secondly, with certain schemes of enlargement which he dared not openly avow,

so extensive were his ideas. As the Rue du Dix-Décembre was to cut through the Rue de Choiseul and the Rue de la Michodière, he saw The Ladies' Paradise invading the whole block, surrounded by these streets and the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin; he already imagined it with a princely frontage in the new thoroughfare, lord and master of the conquered city. Hence his strong desire to make Baron Hartmann's acquaintance, when he learnt that the Crédit Immobilier had made a contract with the authorities to open and build the Rue du Dix-Décembre, on condition that they received the frontage ground on each side of the street.

"Really," repeated he, trying to assume a naïve look, "you'll hand over the street ready made, with sewers, pavements, and gas lamps. And the frontage ground will suffice to compensate you. Oh! it's curious, very curious!"

At last he came to the delicate point. He was aware that the Crédit Immobilier was buying up the houses which surrounded The Ladies' Paradise, not only those which were to fall under the demolisher's hands, but the others as well, those which were to remain standing; and he suspected the project of some future establishment. He was very anxious about the enlargements of which he continued to extend the dream, seized with fear at the idea of one day clashing with a powerful company, owning property which they certainly would not part with. It was precisely this fear which had decided him to establish a connection immediately between himself and the baron – the amiable connection of a woman, so powerful between men of a gallant nature. No doubt he could have seen the financier in his office, and talked over the affair in question at his ease; but he felt himself stronger in Henriette's house; he knew how much the mutual possession of a mistress serves to render men pliable and tender. To be both near her, within the beloved perfume of her presence, to have her ready to convince them with a smile, seemed to him a certainty of success.

"Haven't you bought the old Hôtel Duvillard, that old building next to mine?" he asked suddenly.

The baron hesitated a moment, and then denied it. But Mouret looked in his face and smiled, playing, from that moment, the part of a good young man, open-hearted, simple, and straightforward in business.

"Look here, baron," said he, "as I have the unexpected honour of meeting you, I must make a confession. Oh, I don't ask you any of your secrets, but I am going to entrust you with mine, certain that I couldn't place them in wiser hands. Besides, I want your advice. I have long wished to call and see you, but dared not do so."

He did make his confession, he related his start, not even concealing the financial crisis through which he was passing in the midst of his triumph. Everything was brought up, the successive enlargements, the profits continually put back into the business, the sums brought by his employees, the house risking its existence at every fresh sale, in which the entire capital was staked, as it were, on a single throw of the dice. However, it was not money he wanted, for he had a fanatic's faith in his customers; his ambition ran higher; he proposed to the baron a partnership, into which the Crédit Immobilier should bring the colossal palace he saw in his dreams, whilst he, for his part, would give his genius and the business already created. The estate could be valued, nothing appeared to him easier to realise.

"What are you going to do with your land and buildings?" asked he, persistently. "You have a plan, no doubt. But I'm quite certain your idea is not so good as mine. Think of that. We build a gallery on the ground, we pull down or re-arrange the houses, and we open the most extensive establishment in Paris – a bazaar which will bring in millions." And he let slip the fervent heartfelt exclamation: "Ah! if I could only do without you! But you get hold of everything now. Besides, I shall never have the necessary capital. Come, we must come to an understanding. It would be a crime not to do so."

"How you go ahead, my dear sir!" Baron Hartmann contented himself with replying. "What an imagination!"

He shook his head, and continued to smile, determined not to return confidence for confidence. The intention of the Crédit Immobilier was to create in the Rue du Dix-Décembre a rival to the

Grand Hôtel, a luxurious establishment, the central position of which would attract foreigners. At the same time, as the hôtel was only to occupy a certain, frontage, the baron could also have entertained Mouret's idea, and treated for the rest of the block of houses, occupying a vast surface. But he had already advanced funds to two of Henriette's friends, and he was getting tired of his position as complacent protector. Besides, notwithstanding his passion for activity, which prompted him to open his purse to every fellow of intelligence and courage, Mouret's commercial genius astonished more than captivated him. Was it not a fanciful, imprudent operation, this gigantic shop? Would he not risk a certain failure in thus enlarging out of all bounds the drapery trade? In short, he didn't believe in it; he refused.

"No doubt the idea is attractive, but it's a poet's idea. Where would you find the customers to fill such a cathedral?" Mouret looked at him for a moment silently, as if stupefied at his refusal. Was it possible? – a man of such foresight, who smelt money at no matter what depth! And suddenly, with an extremely eloquent gesture, he pointed to the ladies in the drawing-room and exclaimed: "There are my customers!" The sun was going down, the golden-red flame was now but a pale light, dying away in a farewell gleam on the silk of the hangings and the panels of the furniture. At this approach of twilight, an intimacy bathed the large room in a sweet softness. While Monsieur de Boves and Paul de Vallagnosc were talking near one of the windows, their eyes wandering far away into the gardens, the ladies had closed up, forming in the middle of the room a narrow circle of petticoats, from which issued sounds of laughter, whispered words, ardent questions and replies, all the passion felt by woman for expenditure and finery. They were talking about dress, and Madame de Boves was describing a costume she had seen at a ball.

"First of all, a mauve silk skirt, then over that flounces of old Alençon lace, twelve inches deep."

"Oh! is it possible!" exclaimed Madame Marty. "Some women are fortunate!"

Baron Hartmann, who had followed Mouret's gesture, was looking at the ladies through the door, which was wide open. He was listening to them with one ear, whilst the young man, inflamed by the desire to convince him, went deeper into the question, explaining the mechanism of the new style of drapery business. This branch of commerce was now based on a rapid and continual turning over of the capital, which it was necessary to turn into goods as often as possible in the same year. Thus, that year his capital, which only amounted to five hundred thousand francs, had been turned over four times, and had thus produced business to the amount of two millions. But this was a mere trifle, which could be increased tenfold, for later on he certainly hoped to turn over the capital fifteen or twenty times in certain departments.

"You will understand, baron, that the whole system lies in this. It is very simple, but it had to be found out. We don't want a very large working capital; our sole effort is to get rid as quickly as possible of our stock to replace it by another, which will give our capital as many times its interest. In this way we can content ourselves with a very small profit; as our general expenses amount to the enormous figure of sixteen per cent., and as we seldom make more than twenty per cent, on our goods, it is only a net profit of four per cent at most; but this will finish by bringing in millions when we can operate on considerable quantities of goods incessantly renewed. You follow me, don't you? nothing can be clearer."

The baron shook his head again. He who had entertained the boldest combinations, of whom people still quoted the daring flights at the time of the introduction of gas, still remained uneasy and obstinate.

"I quite understand," said he; "you sell cheap to sell a quantity, and you sell a quantity to sell cheap. But you must sell, and I repeat my former question: Whom will you sell to? How do you hope to keep up such a colossal sale?"

The sudden burst of a voice, coming from the drawing-room, cut short Mouret's explanation. It was Madame Guibal, who was saying she would have preferred the flounces of old Alençon down the front only.

“But, my dear,” said Madame de Boves, “the front was covered with it as well. I never saw anything richer.”

“Ah, that’s a good idea,” resumed Madame Desforges, “I’ve got several yards of Alençon somewhere; I must look them up for a trimming.”

And the voices fell again, becoming nothing but a murmur. Prices were quoted, quite a traffic stirred up their desires, the ladies were buying lace by the mile.

“Why!” said Mouret, when he could speak, “we can sell what we like when we know how to sell! There lies our triumph.”

And with his southern spirit, he showed the new business at work in warm, glowing phrases which evoked whole pictures. First came the wonderful power of the piling up of the goods, all accumulated at one point, sustaining and pushing each other, never any stand-still, the article of the season always on hand; and from counter to counter the customer found herself seized, buying here the material, further on the cotton, elsewhere the mantle, everything necessary to complete her dress in fact, then falling into unforeseen purchases, yielding to her longing for the useless and the pretty. He then went on to sing the praises of the plain figure system. The great revolution in the business sprung from this fortunate inspiration. If the old-fashioned small shops were dying out it was because they could not struggle against the low prices guaranteed by the tickets. The competition was now going on under the very eyes of the public; a look into the windows enabled them to contrast the prices; every shop was lowering its rates, contenting itself with the smallest possible profit; no cheating, no stroke of fortune prepared long beforehand on an article sold at double its value, but current operations, a regular percentage on all goods, success depending solely on the orderly working of a sale all the larger from the fact of its being carried on in broad daylight. Was it not an astonishing creation? It was causing a revolution in the market, transforming Paris, for it was made of woman’s flesh and blood.

“I have the women, I don’t care a hang for the rest!” said Mouret, in a brutal confession which passion snatched from him.

At this cry Baron Hartmann appeared moved. His smile lost its touch of irony; he looked at the young man, won over gradually by his confidence, feeling a growing tenderness for him.

“Hush!” murmured he, paternally, “they will hear you.”

But the ladies were now all speaking at once, so excited that they weren’t even listening to each other. Madame de Boves was finishing the description of a dinner-dress; a mauve silk tunic, draped and caught up by bows of lace; the bodice cut very low, with more bows of lace on the shoulders.

“You’ll see,” said she. “I am having a bodice made like it, with some satin – ”

“I,” interrupted Madame Bourdelais, “I wanted some velvet. Oh! such a bargain!”

Madame Marty asked: “How much for the silk?”

And off they started again, all together. Madame Guibal, Henriette, and Blanche were measuring, cutting out, and making up. It was a pillage of material, a ransacking of all the shops, an appetite for luxury which expended itself in toilettes longed for and dreamed of – such a happiness to find themselves in an atmosphere of finery, that they lived buried in it, as in the warm air necessary to their existence.

Mouret, however, had glanced towards the other drawingroom, and in a few phrases whispered into the baron’s ear, as if he were confiding to him one of those amorous secrets that men sometimes risk among themselves, he finished explaining the mechanism of modern commerce. And, above the facts already given, right at the summit, appeared the exploitation of woman. Everything depended on that, the capital incessantly renewed, the system of piling up goods, the cheapness which attracts, the marking in plain figures which tranquilises. It was for woman that all the establishments were struggling in wild competition; it was woman that they were continually catching in the snare of their bargains, after bewildering her with their displays. They had awakened new desires in her flesh; they were an immense temptation, before which she succumbed fatally, yielding at first to reasonable purchases of useful articles for the household, then tempted by their coquetry, then devoured. In

increasing their business tenfold, in popularising luxury, they became a terrible spending agency, ravaging the households, working up the fashionable folly of the hour, always dearer. And if woman reigned in their shops like a queen, cajoled, flattered, overwhelmed with attentions, she was an amorous one, on whom her subjects traffic, and who pays with a drop of her blood each fresh caprice. Through the very gracefulness of his gallantry, Mouret thus allowed to appear the brutality of a Jew, selling woman by the pound. He raised a temple to her, had her covered with incense by a legion of shopmen, created the rite of a new religion, thinking of nothing but her, continually seeking to imagine more powerful seductions; and, behind her back, when he had emptied her purse and shattered her nerves, he was full of the secret scorn of a man to whom a woman had just been stupid enough to yield herself.

“Once have the women on your side,” whispered he to the baron, and laughing boldly, “you could sell the very world.” Now the baron understood. A few sentences had sufficed, he guessed the rest, and such a gallant exploitation inflamed him, stirring up in him the memory of his past life of pleasure. His eyes twinkled in a knowing way, and he ended by looking with an air of admiration at the inventor of this machine for devouring the women. It was really clever. He made the same remark as Bourdoncle, suggested to him by his long experience: “You know they’ll make you suffer for it.”

But Mouret shrugged his shoulders in a movement of overwhelming disdain. They all belonged to him, were his property, and he belonged to none of them. After having drawn from them his fortune and his pleasure, he intended to throw them all over for those who might still find their account in them. It was the rational, cold disdain of a Southerner and a speculator.

“Well! my dear baron,” asked he in conclusion, “will you join me? Does this affair appear possible to you?”

The baron, half conquered, did not wish, however, to engage himself yet. A doubt remained beneath the charm which was gradually operating on him. He was going to reply in an evasive manner, when a pressing call from the ladies spared him the trouble. Voices were repeating, amidst silvery laughter: “Monsieur Mouret! Monsieur Mouret!” And as the latter, annoyed at being interrupted, pretended not to hear, Madame de Boves, who had just got up, came as far as the door of the little drawing-room.

“You are wanted, Monsieur Mouret. It isn’t very gallant of you to bury yourself in a corner to talk over business.”

He then decided to go, with an apparent good grace, an air of rapture which astonished the baron. Both rose up and passed into the other drawing-room.

“But I am quite at your service, ladies,” said he on entering, a smile on his lips.

He was greeted with a burst of triumph. He was obliged to go further forward; the ladies made room for him in their midst. The sun had just gone down behind the trees in the gardens, the day was departing, a fine shadow was gradually invading the vast apartment. It was the tender hour of twilight, that minute of discreet voluptuousness in the Parisian houses, between the dying brightness of the street and the lighting of the lamps downstairs. Monsieur de Boves and Vallagnosc, still standing up before a window, threw a shadow on the carpet: whilst, motionless in the last gleam of light which came in by the other window, Monsieur Marty, who had quietly entered, and whom the conversation of these ladies about dress had completely confused, placed his poor profile, a frock-coat, scanty but clean, his face pale and wan from teaching.

“Is your sale still fixed for next Monday?” Madame Marty was just asking.

“Certainly, madame,” replied Mouret, in a soft, sweet voice, an actor’s voice, which he assumed when speaking to women.

Henriette then intervened. “We are all going, you know. They say you are preparing wonders.”

“Oh! wonders!” murmured he, with an air of modest fatuity. “I simply try to deserve your patronage.”

But they pressed him with questions: Madame Bourdelais, Madame Guibal, Blanche even wanted to know.

“Come, give us some details,” repeated Madame de Boves, persistently. “You are making us die of curiosity.”

And they were surrounding him, when Henriette observed that he had not even taken a cup of tea. It was distressing. Four of them set about serving him, but on condition that he would answer them afterwards. Henriette poured it out, Madame Marty held the cup, whilst Madame de Boves and Madame Bourdelais contended for the honour of sweetening it. Then, when he had declined to sit down, and commenced to drink his tea slowly, standing up in the midst of them, they all approached, imprisoning him in the narrow circle of their skirts; and with their heads raised, their eyes sparkling, they sat there smiling at him.

“Your silk, your Paris Paradise, that all the papers are taking about?” resumed Madame Marty, impatiently.

“Oh!” replied he, “an extraordinary article, coarse-grained, supple and strong. You’ll see it, ladies, and you’ll see it nowhere else, for we have bought the exclusive right of it.”

“Really! a fine silk at five francs twelve sous!” said Madame Bourdelais, enthusiastic. “One cannot credit it.”

Ever since the advertisement had appeared, this silk had occupied a considerable place in their daily life. They talked of it, promising themselves some of it, worked up with desire and doubt. And, beneath the gossiping curiosity with which they overwhelmed the young man, there appeared their various temperaments as buyers.

Madame Marty, carried away by her rage for spending, took everything at The Ladies’ Paradise, without choosing, just as the articles appeared; Madame Guibal walked about the shop for hours without ever buying anything, happy and satisfied to simply feast her eyes; Madame de Boves, short of money, always tortured by some immoderate wish, nourished a feeling of rancour against the goods she could not carry away; Madame Bourdelais, with the sharp eye of a careful practical housewife, made straight for the bargains, using the big establishments with such a clever housewife’s skill that she saved a heap of money; and lastly, Henriette, who, very elegant, only procured certain articles there, such as gloves, hosiery, and her coarser linen.

“We have other stuffs of astonishing cheapness and richness,” continued Mouret, with his musical voice. “For instance, I recommend you our Golden Grain, a taffeta of incomparable brilliancy. In the fancy silks there are some charming lines, designs chosen from among thousands by our buyer: and in velvets you will find an exceedingly rich collection of shades. I warn you that cloth will be greatly worn this year; you’ll see our checks and our chevots.”

They had ceased to interrupt him, and narrowed the circle, their mouths half open with a vague smile, their eager faces close to his, as in a sudden rush of their whole being towards the tempter. Their eyes grew dim, a slight shudder ran through them. All this time he retained his calm, conquering air, amidst the intoxicating perfumes which their hair exhaled; and between each sentence he continued to sip a little of his tea, the aroma of which cooled those sharper odours, in which there was a particle of the savage. Before a captivating grace so thoroughly master of itself, strong enough to play with woman in this way without being overcome by the intoxication which she exhales, Baron Hartmann, who had not ceased to look at him, felt his admiration increasing.

“So cloth will be worn?” resumed Madame Marty, whose ravished face sparkled with coquettish passion.

Madame Bourdelais, who kept a cool look-out, said, in her turn: “Your sale of remnants takes place on Thursday, doesn’t it? I shall wait. I have all my little ones to clothe.” And turning her delicate blonde head towards the mistress of the house: “Sauveur is still your dressmaker, I suppose?”

“Yes,” replied Henriette, “Sauveur is very dear, but she is the only one in Paris who knows how to make a bodice. Besides, Monsieur Mouret may say what he likes, she has the prettiest designs, designs that are not seen anywhere else. I can’t bear to see my dresses on every woman’s back.”

Mouret smiled discreetly at first. Then he intimated that Madame Sauveur bought her material at his shop; no doubt she went to the manufacturers direct for certain designs of which she acquired the sole right of sale; but for all black silks, for instance, she watched for The Paradise bargains, laying in a considerable stock, which she disposed of at double and treble the price she gave.

“Thus I am quite sure her buyers will snap up all our Paris Paradise. Why should she go to the manufacturers and pay dearer for this silk than she would at my place? On my word of honour, we shall sell it at a loss.”

This was a decisive blow for the ladies. The idea of getting goods below cost price awoke in them all the greed felt by women, whose enjoyment as buyers is doubled when they think they are robbing the tradesman. He knew them to be incapable of resisting anything cheap.

“But we sell everything for nothing!” exclaimed he gaily, taking up Madame Desforges’s fan, which was behind him on the table. “For instance, here’s this fan. I don’t know what it cost.”

“The Chantilly lace was twenty-five francs, and the mounting cost two hundred,” said Henriette.

“Well, the Chantilly isn’t dear. However, we have the same at eighteen francs; as for the mount, my dear madame, it’s a shameful robbery. I should not dare to sell one like it for more than ninety francs.”

“Just what I said!” exclaimed Madame Bourdelais.

“Ninety francs!” murmured Madame de Boves; “one must be very poor indeed to go without one at that price.”

She had taken up the fan, and was again examining it with her daughter Blanche; and, on her large regular face, in her big sleepy eyes, there arose an expression of the suppressed and despairing longing of a caprice in which she could not indulge. The fan once more went the round of the ladies, amidst various remarks and exclamations. Monsieur de Boves and Vallagnosc, however, had left the window. Whilst the former had returned to his place behind Madame Guibal, the charms of whose bust he was admiring, with his correct and superior air, the young man was leaning over Blanche, endeavouring to find something agreeable to say.

“Don’t you think it rather gloomy, mademoiselle, this white mount and black lace?”

“Oh,” replied she, gravely, not a blush colouring her inflated cheeks, “I once saw one made of mother-of-pearl and white lace. Something truly virginal!”

Monsieur de Boves, who had doubtless observed the heartbroken, longing looks with which his wife was following the fan, at last added his word to the conversation. “These flimsy things don’t last long, they soon break,” said he.

“Of course they do!” declared Madame Guibal, with an air of indifference. “I’m tired of having mine mended.”

For several minutes, Madame Marty, excited by the conversation, was feverishly turning her red leather bag about on her lap, for she had not yet been able to show her purchases. She was burning to display them, with a sort of sensual desire; and, suddenly forgetting her husband’s presence, she took out a few yards of narrow lace wound on a piece of cardboard.

“It’s the Valenciennes for my daughter,” said she. “It’s an inch and a half wide. Isn’t it delicious? One franc eighteen sous.”

The lace was passed from hand to hand. The ladies were astonished. Mouret assured them he sold these little trimmings at cost price. However, Madame Marty had closed the bag, as if to conceal certain things she could not show. But after the success obtained by the Valenciennes she was unable to resist the temptation of taking out a handkerchief.

“There was this handkerchief as well. Real Brussels, my dear. Oh! a bargain! Twenty francs!”

And after that the bag became inexhaustible, she blushed with pleasure, a modesty like that of a woman undressing herself made her appear more charming and embarrassed at each fresh article she took out. There was a Spanish blonde-lace cravat, thirty francs: she didn't want it, but the shopman had sworn it was the last, and that in future the price would be raised. Next came a Chantilly veil: rather dear, fifty francs; if she didn't wear it she could make it do for her daughter.

"Really, lace is so pretty!" repeated she with her nervous laugh. "Once I'm inside I could buy everything."

"And this?" asked Madame de Boves, taking up and examining a remnant of Maltese lace.

"That," replied she, "is for an insertion. There are twenty-six yards – a franc the yard. Just fancy!"

"But," said Madame Bourdelais, surprised, "what are you going to do with it?"

"I'm sure I don't know. But it was such a funny pattern!"

At this moment she raised her eyes and perceived her terrified husband in front of her. He had turned paler than usual, his whole person expressed the patient, resigned anguish of a man assisting, powerless, at the reckless expenditure of his salary, so dearly earned. Every fresh bit of lace was for him a disaster; bitter days of teaching swallowed up, long journeys to pupils through the mud devoured, the continued effort of his life resulting in a secret misery, the hell of a necessitous household. Before the increasing wildness of his look, she wanted to catch up the veil, the cravat, and the handkerchief, moving her feverish hands about, repeating with forced laughter: "You'll get me a scolding from my husband. I assure you, my dear, I've been very reasonable; for there was a fine piece of point at five hundred francs, oh! a marvel!"

"Why didn't you buy it?" asked Madame Guibal, calmly. "Monsieur Marty is the most gallant of men."

The poor professor was obliged to bow and say his wife was perfectly welcome. But the idea of this point at five hundred francs was like a lump of ice dripping down his back; and as Mouret was just at that moment affirming that the new shops increased the comfort of the middle-class households, he glared at him with a terrible expression, the flash of hatred of a timid man who would have throttled him had he dared.

But the ladies had still kept hold of the bits of lace, fascinated, intoxicated. The pieces were unrolled, passed from one to the other, drawing the admirers closer still, holding them in the delicate meshes. On their laps there was a continual caress of this tissue, so miraculously fine, and amidst which their culpable fingers fondly lingered. They still kept Mouret a close prisoner, overwhelming him with fresh questions. As the day continued to decline, he was now and again obliged to bend his head, grazing their hair with his beard, to examine a stitch, or indicate a design. But in this soft voluptuousness of twilight, in the midst of this warm feminine atmosphere, Mouret still remained their master beneath the rapture he affected. He seemed, to be a woman himself, they felt themselves penetrated and overcome by this delicate sense of their secret that he possessed, and they abandoned themselves, captivated; whilst he, certain from that moment to have them at his mercy, appeared, brutally triumphing over them, the despotic monarch of dress.

"Oh, Monsieur Mouret!" stammered they, in low, hysterical voices, in the gloom of the drawing-room.

The last rays of the setting sun were dying away on the brass-work of the furniture. The laces alone retained a snowy reflex on the dark dresses of the ladies, of which the confused group seemed to surround the young man with a vague appearance of kneeling, worshipping women. A light still shone on the side of the silver teapot, a short flame like that of a night-light, burning in an alcove warmed by the perfume of the tea. But suddenly the servant entered with two lamps, and the charm was destroyed. The drawing-room became light and cheerful. Madame Marty was putting her lace in her little bag, Madame de Boves was eating a sponge cake, whilst Henriette who had got up, was talking in a half-whisper to the baron, near one of the windows.

“He’s a charming fellow,” said the baron.

“Isn’t he?” exclaimed she, with the involuntary cry of a woman in love.

He smiled, and looked at her with a paternal indulgence. This was the first time he had seen her so completely conquered; and, too proud to suffer from it, he experienced nothing but a feeling of compassion on seeing her in the hands of this handsome fellow, so tender and yet so cold-hearted. He thought he ought to warn her, and murmured in a joking tone: “Take care, my dear, or he’ll eat you all up.”

A flash of jealousy lighted up Henriette’s eyes. Perhaps she understood Mouret had simply made use of her to get at the baron; and she determined to render him mad with passion, he whose hurried style of making love had the easy charm of a song thrown to the four winds of heaven. “Oh,” said she, affecting to joke in her turn, “the lamb always finishes up by eating the wolf.”

The baron, greatly amused, encouraged, her with a nod. Could she be the woman who was to avenge all the others?

When Mouret, after having reminded Vallagnosc that he wanted to show him his machine at work, came up to take his leave, the baron retained him near the window opposite the gardens, now buried in darkness. He yielded at last to the seduction; his confidence had come on seeing him in the midst of these ladies. Both conversed for a moment in a low tone, then the banker said: “Well, I’ll look into the affair. It’s settled if your Monday’s sale proves as important as you expect.”

They shook hands, and Mouret, delighted, took his leave, for he did not enjoy his dinner unless he went and gave a look at the day’s receipts at The Ladies’ Paradise.

“Well, Bourdoncle!” cried out Mouret, “are you trembling still?”

He had returned to his favourite position at the top of the stairs of the first floor, against the balustrade; and, in the presence of the massacre of stuffs which was spread out under him, he indulged in a victorious laugh. His fears of the morning, that moment of unpardonable weakness which nobody would ever know of, inspired him with a greater desire to triumph. The battle was definitely won, the small tradespeople of the neighbourhood were done for, and Baron Hartmann was conquered, with his millions and his land. Whilst he was looking at the cashiers bending over their ledgers, adding up long columns of figures, whilst he was listening to the sound of the gold, falling from their fingers into the metal bowls, he already saw The Ladies’ Paradise growing beyond all bounds, enlarging its hall and prolonging its galleries as far as the Rue du Dix-Décembre.

“And now are you convinced, Bourdoncle,” he resumed, “that the house is really too small? We could have sold twice as much.”

Bourdoncle humbled himself, enraptured, moreover, to find himself in the wrong. But a new spectacle rendered them grave. As was the custom every evening, Lhomme, the chief cashier, had just collected the receipts from each pay-desk; after having added them up, he usually posted up the total amount after placing the paper on which it was written on his file. He then took the receipts up to the chief cashier’s office, in a leather case and in bags, according to the nature of the cash. On this occasion the gold and silver predominated, and he was slowly walking upstairs, carrying three enormous bags. Deprived of his right arm, cut off at the elbow, he clasped them in his left arm against his breast, holding one up with his chin to prevent it slipping. His heavy breathing could be heard at a distance, he passed along, staggering and superb, amidst the respectful shopmen.

“How much, Lhomme?” asked Mouret.

“Eighty thousand seven hundred and forty-two francs two sous,” replied the cashier.

A joyous laugh stirred up The Ladies’ Paradise. The amount ran through the establishment. It was the highest figure ever attained in one day by a draper’s shop.

That evening, when Denise went up to bed, she was obliged to lean against the partition in the corridor under the zinc roof. When in her room, and with the door closed, she fell down on the bed; her feet pained her so much. For a long time she continued to look with a stupid air at the dressing-table, the wardrobe, all the hotel-like nudity. This, then, was where she was going to live; and her first

day tormented her – an abominable, endless day. She would never have the courage to go through another. Then she perceived she was dressed in silk; and this uniform depressed her. She was childish enough, before unpacking her box, to put on her old woollen dress, which hung on the back of a chair. But when she was once more dressed in this poor garment of hers, a painful emotion choked her; the sobs which she had kept back all day burst forth suddenly in a flood of hot tears. She fell back on the bed, weeping at the thought of the two children, and she wept on, without feeling to have the strength to take off her boots, completely overcome with fatigue and grief.

CHAPTER V

The next day Denise had scarcely been downstairs half an hour, when Madame Aurélie said to her in her sharp voice: "You are wanted at the directorate, mademoiselle."

The young girl found Mouret alone, in the large office hung with green repp. He had suddenly remembered the "unkempt girl," as Bourdoncle called her; and he, who usually detested the part of fault-finder, had had the idea of sending for her and waking her up a bit, if she were still dressed in the style of a country wench. The previous day, notwithstanding his pleasantry, he had experienced, in Madame Desforges's presence, a feeling of wounded vanity, on seeing the elegance of one of his saleswomen discussed. He felt a confused sentiment, a mixture of sympathy and anger.

"We have engaged you, mademoiselle," commenced he, "out of regard for your uncle, and you must not put us under the sad necessity –"

But he stopped. Opposite him, on the other side of the desk, stood Denise, upright, serious, and pale. Her silk dress was no longer too big for her, but fitted tight round her pretty figure, displaying the pure lines of her virgin shoulders; and if her hair, knotted in thick tresses, still appeared untidy, she tried at least to keep it in order. After having gone to sleep with her clothes on, her eyes red with weeping, the young girl had felt ashamed of this attack of nervous sensibility on waking up about four o'clock, and she had immediately set about taking in her dress. She had spent an hour before the small looking-glass, combing her hair, without being able to reduce it as she would have liked to.

"Ah! thank heavens!" said Mouret, "you look better this morning. But there's still that dreadful hair!" He rose from his seat and went up to her to try and smooth it down in the same familiar way Madame Aurélie had attempted to do it the previous day. "There! just tuck that in behind your ear. The chignon is too high."

She did not speak, but let him continue to arrange her hair; notwithstanding her vow to be strong, she had arrived at the office full of misgivings, certain that she had been sent for to be informed of her dismissal. And Mouret's evident kindness did not reassure her; she still felt afraid of him, feeling when near him that uneasiness which she attributed to a natural anxiety in the presence of a powerful man on whom her fate depended. When he saw her so trembling under his hands, which were grazing her neck, he was sorry for his movement of good-nature, for he feared above all to lose his authority.

"In short, mademoiselle," resumed he, once more placing the desk between himself and her, "try and look to your appearance. You are no longer at Valognes; study our Parisian young ladies. If your uncle's name has sufficed to gain your admittance to our house, I feel sure you will carry out what your person seemed to promise to me. Unfortunately, everybody here is not of my opinion. Let this be a warning to you. Don't make me tell a falsehood."

He treated her like a child, with more pity than kindness, his curiosity in matters feminine simply awakened by the troubling, womanly charm which he felt springing up in this poor and awkward child. And she, whilst he was lecturing her, having suddenly perceived Madame Hedouin's portrait – the handsome regular face smiling gravely in the gold frame – felt herself shivering again, notwithstanding the encouraging words he addressed to her. This was the dead lady, she whom people accused him of having killed, in order to found the house with the blood of her body.

Mouret was still speaking. "Now you may go," said he at last, sitting down and taking up his pen. She went away, heaving a deep sigh of relief.

From that day forward, Denise displayed her great courage. Beneath these rare attacks of sensitiveness, a strong sense of reason was constantly working, quite a feeling of bravery at finding herself weak and alone, a cheerful determination to carry out her self-imposed task. She made very little noise, but went straight ahead to her goal, with an invincible sweetness, overcoming all obstacles, and that simply and naturally, for such was her real character.

At first she had to surmount the terrible fatigues of the department. The parcels of garments tired her arms, so much so that during the first six weeks she cried with pain when she turned over at night, bent almost double, her shoulders bruised. But she suffered still more from her shoes, thick shoes brought from Valognes, want of money preventing her replacing them with light boots. Always on her feet, trotting about from morning to night, scolded if seen leaning for a moment against any support, her feet became swollen, little feet, like those of a child, which seemed ground up in these torturing bluchers; her heels throbbed with fever, the soles were covered with blisters, the skin of which chafed off and stuck to the stocking. She felt her entire frame shattered, her limbs and organs contracted by the lassitude of her legs, the certain sudden weaknesses incident to her sex betraying themselves by the paleness of her flesh. And she, so thin, so frail, resisted courageously, whilst a great many saleswomen around her were obliged to quit the business, attacked with special maladies. Her good grace in suffering, her valiant obstinacy maintained her, smiling and upright, when she felt ready to give way, thoroughly worn out and exhausted by work to which men would have succumbed.

Another torment was to have the whole department against her. To the physical martyrdom there was added the secret persecution of her comrades. Two months of patience and gentleness had not disarmed them. She was constantly exposed to wounding remarks, cruel inventions, a series of slights which cut her to the heart, in her longing for affection. They had joked for a long time over her unfortunate first appearance; the words “clogs” and “numbskull” circulated. Those who missed a sale were sent to Valognes; she passed, in short, for the fool of the place. Then, when she revealed herself later on as a remarkable saleswoman, well up in the mechanism of the house, the young ladies arranged together so as never to leave her a good customer. Marguerite and Clara pursued her with an instinctive hatred, closing up the ranks in order not to be swallowed up by this new comer, whom they really feared in spite of their affectation of disdain. As for Madame Aurélie, she was hurt by the proud reserve displayed by the young girl, who did not hover round her skirts with an air of caressing admiration; she therefore abandoned Denise to the rancour of her favourites, to the favoured ones of her court, who were always on their knees, engaged in feeding her with a continual flattery, which her large authoritative person needed to make it blossom forth. For a while, the second-hand, Madame Frédéric, appeared not to enter into the conspiracy, but this must have been by inadvertence, for she showed herself equally harsh the moment she saw to what annoyances her good-nature was likely to expose her. Then the abandonment became complete, they all made a butt of the “unkempt girl,” who lived in an hourly struggle, only managing by the greatest courage to hold her own in the department.

Such was her life now. She had to smile, look brave and gracious in a silk dress which did not belong to her, although dying with fatigue, badly fed, badly treated, under the continual menace of a brutal dismissal. Her room was her only refuge, the only place where she could abandon herself to the luxury of a cry, when she had suffered too much during the day. But a terrible coldness fell from the zinc roof, covered with the December snow; she was obliged to nestle in her iron bedstead, throw all her clothes over her, and weep under the counterpane to prevent the frost chapping her face. Mouret never spoke to her now. When she caught Bourdoncle's severe looks during business hours she trembled, for she felt in him a born enemy who would not forgive her the slightest fault. And amidst this general hostility, Jouve the inspector's strange friendliness astonished her. If he met her in any out-of-the-way corner he smiled at her, made some amiable remark; twice he had saved her from being reprimanded without any show of gratitude on her part, for she was more troubled than touched by his protection.

One evening, after dinner, as the young ladies were setting the cupboards in order, Joseph came and informed Denise that a young man wanted her below. She went down, feeling very anxious.

“Hullo!” said Clara, “the ‘unkempt girl’ has got a young man.”

“He must be hard up for a sweetheart,” declared Marguerite.

Downstairs, at the door, Denise found her brother Jean. She had formally prohibited him from coming to the shop in this way, as it looked very bad. But she did not dare to scold him, so excited did he appear, bareheaded, out of breath through running from the Faubourg du Temple.

“Have you got ten francs?” stammered he. “Give me ten francs, or I’m a lost man.”

The young rascal looked so comical, with his flowing locks and handsome girlish face, launching out with this melodramatic phrase, that she could have smiled had it not been for the anguish which this demand for money caused her.

“What! ten francs?” she murmured. “Whatever’s the matter?”

He blushed, and explained that he had met a friend’s sister. Denise stopped him, feeling embarrassed, not wishing to know any more about it. Twice already had he rushed in to obtain similar loans, but the first time it was only twenty-five sous, and the next thirty. He was always getting mixed up with women.

“I can’t give you ten francs,” resumed she. “Pépé’s board isn’t paid yet, and I’ve only just the money. I shall have hardly enough to buy a pair of boots, which I want badly. You really are not reasonable, Jean. It’s too bad of you.”

“Well, I’m lost,” repeated he, with a tragical gesture. “Just listen, little sister; she’s a tall, dark girl; we went to the café with her brother. I never thought the drinks – ”

She had to interrupt him again, and as tears were coming into his eyes, she took out her purse and slipped a ten-franc piece into his hand. He at once set up a laugh.

“I was sure – But my word of honour! never again! A fellow would have to be a regular scamp.”

And he ran off, after having kissed his sister, like a madman. The fellows in the shop seemed astonished.

That night Denise did not sleep much. Since her entry in *The Ladies’ Paradise*, money had been her cruel anxiety. She was still a probationer, without salary; the young ladies in the department frequently prevented her from selling, and she just managed to pay Pépé’s board and lodging, thanks to the unimportant customers they were good enough to leave her. It was a time of black misery – misery in a silk dress. She was often obliged to spend the night repairing her small stack of clothes, darning her linen, mending her chemises as if they had been lace; without mentioning the patches she put on her boots, as cleverly as any bootmaker could have done. She even risked washing things in her hand basin. But her old woollen dress was an especial cause of anxiety to her; she had no other, and was forced to put it on every evening when she quitted the uniform silk, and this wore it terribly; a spot on it gave her the fever, the least tear was a catastrophe. And she had nothing, not a sou, not even enough to buy the trifling articles which a woman always wants; she had been obliged to wait a fortnight to renew her stock of needles and cotton. Thus it was a real disaster when Jean, with his love affairs, dropped down all at once and pillaged her purse. A franc-piece taken away caused a gulf which she did not know how to fill up. As for finding ten francs on the morrow it was not to be thought of for a moment. The whole night she slept an uncomfortable sleep, haunted by the nightmare, in which she saw Pépé thrown into the street, whilst she was turning over the flagstones with her bruised fingers to see if there were not some money underneath.

It happened that the next day she had to play the part of the well-dressed girl. Some well-known customers came in, and Madame Aurélie called her several times in order that she should show off the new styles. And whilst she was posing there, with the stiff graces of a fashion-plate, she was thinking of Pépé’s board and lodging, which she had promised to pay that evening. She could very well do without boots for another month; but even on adding the thirty francs she had left to the four francs which she had saved sou by sou, that would never make more than thirty-four francs, and where was she to find six francs to complete the sum? It was an anguish in which her heart failed her.

“You will notice the shoulders are free,” Madame Aurélie was saying. “It’s very fashionable and very convenient. The young person can fold her arms.”

“Oh! easily,” replied Denise, who continued to smile amiably. “One can’t feel it. I am sure you will like it, madame.”

She now blamed herself for having gone to fetch Pépé from Madame Gras’s, the previous Sunday, to take him for a walk in the Champs-Elysées. The poor child so seldom went out with her! But she had had to buy some gingerbread and a little spade, and then take him to see Punch and Judy, and that had mounted at once to twenty-nine sous. Really Jean could not think much about the little one, or he would not be so foolish. Afterwards, everything fell upon her shoulders.

“Of course, if it does not suit you, madame – ” resumed the first-hand. “Just put this cloak on, mademoiselle, so that the lady may judge.”

And Denise walked slowly round, with the cloak on, saying: “This is warmer. It’s this year’s fashion.”

And she continued to torture herself, behind her professional good graces, until the evening, to know where she was to find this money. The young ladies, who were very busy, had left her an important sale; but it was only Tuesday, and she had four days to wait before drawing any money. After dinner she decided to postpone her visit to Madame Gras till the next day. She would excuse herself, say she had been detained, and before then she would have the six francs, perhaps.

As Denise avoided the slightest expense, she went to bed early. What could she do in the streets, with her unsociableness, still frightened by the big city in which she only knew the streets near the shop? After having ventured as far as the Palais-Royal, to get a little fresh air, she would quickly return, lock herself in her room and set about sewing or washing.

It was, along the corridor of the bed-rooms, a barrack-like promiscuity – girls, who were often not very tidy, a gossiping over dirty water and dirty linen, quite a disagreeable feeling, which manifested itself in frequent quarrels and continual reconciliations. They were, moreover, prohibited from going up to their rooms in the day-time; they did not live there, but merely slept there at night, not going up till the last minute, leaving again in the morning still half asleep, hardly awakened by a rapid wash; and this gust of wind which was continually sweeping through the corridor, the fatigue of the thirteen hours’ work which threw them on their beds thoroughly worn out, changed this upper part of the house into an inn traversed by the tired ill-temper of a host of travellers. Denise had no friend. Of all the young ladies, one alone, Pauline Cugnot, showed her a certain tenderness; and the ready-made and under-clothing departments being close to one another, and in open war, the sympathy between the two saleswomen had hitherto been confined to a few rare words hastily exchanged. Pauline occupied a neighbouring room, to the right of Denise’s; but as she disappeared immediately after dinner and only returned at eleven o’clock, the latter only heard her get into bed, without ever meeting her after business hours.

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