

HARLAND HENRY, FEUILLET  
OCTAVE

**THE ROMANCE  
OF A POOR  
YOUNG MAN**

**Henry Harland**  
**Octave Feuillet**  
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**Poor Young Man**

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*The Romance of a Poor Young Man:*

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# Octave Feuillet

## The Romance of a Poor Young Man

### OCTAVE FEUILLET'S NOVELS

To be serious seriously is the way of mediocrity. To be serious gaily is not such an easy matter. To look on at the pantomime of things, and to see, neatly separated, tragedy here, comedy opposite – to miss the perpetual dissolution and resolution of the one into and out of the other – is inevitable when eyes are purblind. *Diis aliter visum*. Olympus laughs because it perceives so many capital reasons for pulling a long face; and half the time pulls a long face simply to keep from laughing. I imagine it is in some measure the Olympian manner of seeing which explains the gay seriousness of the work of Octave Feuillet.

Octave Feuillet possesses to an altogether remarkable degree the art of being serious not only gaily, but charmingly. This, to begin with, places him and his stories in a particular atmosphere; and, if we consider it, I think we shall recognise that atmosphere as something very like the old familiar atmosphere of the fairy-tale. At any rate, there is a delicate, a fanciful symbolism in Feuillet's work, which breathes a fragrance unmistakably

reminiscent of the enchanted forest. For an instance, one may recall the chapter in *Un Mariage dans le Monde* which relates the escapade of Lionel and his betrothed on the day before their wedding. A conventional mother, busy with preparations for the ceremony, intrusts her daughter to the chaperonage of an old aunt, who is, we might suppose, exactly the person for the office. But old aunts are sometimes wonderfully made; sometimes they keep the most unlooked-for surprises up those capacious old-fashioned sleeves of theirs. This one was a fairy godmother in disguise, and, I suspect, a pupil of the grimly-benevolent Blackstick. With good-humoured cynicism, she remarks that the happiest period of even the happiest married life is the day before it begins, and she advises her young charges to make the most of it – chases them, indeed, from her presence. "Be off with you, my children! Come, be off with you at once!" They escape to the park, where they romp like a pair of truant school-children. That is all; but in Feuillet's hands it becomes a fairy idyl. It serves, besides, the symbolic purpose of striking at the outset the note of joyousness which he means to repeat at the end, though the book is one that threatens, almost to the last page, to end on a note of despair. For *Un Mariage dans le Monde*, if far from being the most successful of Feuillet's novels, exhibits, none the less, some of his cleverest craftsmanship. He hoodwinks us into the fear that he meditates disaster, only pleasantly, genially, at the right moment, to disappoint us with the denouement we could have wished.

Feuillet's geniality, for that matter, runs through all his books, and is one of the vital principles of his talent. It is never the flaccid geniality, the amiability, of the undiscerning person; it is, rather, the wise and alert geniality of the benign magician, who is sometimes constrained to weave black spells, because that is a part of the game, and in the day's work, as it were, but who puts his heart only into the weaving of spells that are rose-coloured. This is perhaps why Feuillet's nice people nearly always take flesh and live and breathe, his horrid people hardly ever – another resemblance, by-the-bye, between him and the writer of fairy-tales. The nice women, with their high-bred lovers, who step so daintily through his pages, to the flutter of perfumed fans and the rustle of fine silks, are as convincing as the palpitably convincing princesses of Hans Andersen and Grimm; but Feuillet's villains and adventuresses, like the ogres and the witches we never very heartily believe in, are, for the most part, the merest stereotypes of vice and wickedness, always artificial, too often a trifle absurd.

In *Monsieur de Camors*, for example, we have an elaborate study of a man who has determined to live by the succinct principle, "Evil, be thou my good" – a succinct enough principle, in all conscience, though Feuillet requires a lengthy chapter and a suicide to enunciate it. The idea, if not original, might, in some hands, lend itself to interesting development; but not so in Feuillet's. From the threshold we feel that he is handicapped by his theme. It hangs round his neck like the mill-stone of the adage; it checks his artistic impulses, obscures his artistic

instincts. The quips and cranks, the wreathed smiles, of Feuillet the humourist, were out of place in a stupendous epopée of this sort; so, for the sake of a psychological abstraction, which hasn't even the poor merit of novelty, we must look on ruefully, while our merryman, divested of cap and bells, prosés to the end of his four sad hundred pages. There are novelists who must work with an abstraction, who can see their characters and their incidents only as they illustrate an abstraction; and these also achieve their effects and earn their rewards. But Feuillet belongs in a different galley. A handful of human nature, a pleasing countryside, and Paris in the distance – these are his materials. The philosophy and the plot may come as they will, and it really doesn't much matter if they never come at all. To give Feuillet a subject is to attach a chain and ball to his pen. He is never so debonair, so sympathetic, so satisfying a writer, as when he has something just short of nothing to write about.

In *Monsieur de Camors* he has a tremendous deal to write about; his subject weighs his pen to the earth. The result is a book that's a monstrosity, and a protagonist who's a monster. Louis de Camors is as truly a monster as any green dragon that ever spat fire or stole king's daughters (though by no means so exciting a monster), and he hasn't even the virtue of being a monster that hangs together. For, while we are asked to think of him as destitute of natural affections, he is at the same time shown to us as the fond idolater of his wife, his wife's mother, and his son. On his son's account, indeed, he goes so far as to

spend a long cold night in a damp and uncomfortable wood, only to be dismissed in the morning without the embrace, in the hope of gaining which he has violated his philosophy and taken the chances of rheumatism. Altogether, a man devoid of affections, who loves his son, his wife, and his mother-in-law, may be regarded as doing pretty well. Again (since we are on the chapter of inconsistencies), in that dreary and pompous letter written to Louis by his father, which expounds the text of what becomes the son's rule of conduct, he is gravely charged to fling religion and morality out of the window, but to cherish "honour" as it were his life. "It is clear that a materialist can't be a saint, but he can be a gentleman, and that is something," complacently writes the elder Comte de Camors. Louis, however, though he makes loud acts of faith in this inexpensive gospel, never hesitates to betray his friend, to seduce the wife of his benefactor, nor to marry an unsuspecting child, who loves him, for the sheer purpose of screening an intrigue with "another lady," which he still intends to carry on. Feuillet, perhaps, saves his face by heaping upon this impossible being's head all the punishments that are poetically due to crime, but he doesn't save *Monsieur de Camors*. It is a dismal volume, uncommonly hard to read. And yet – art will out; and dismal as it is, it presents to us one of Feuillet's most captivating women, Louis de Camors' ingenuous little wife. Listen to her artless pronouncement upon Monsieur's evangel of "honour." "Mon Dieu," she says, "I'm not sure, but it seems to me that honour apart from morality is nothing very

great, and that morality apart from religion is nothing at all. It's like a chain: honour hangs in the last link, like a flower; but when the chain is broken, the flower falls with the rest."

If, however, Feuillet's villains are failures, his adventuresses and bad women are grotesquer failures still. And no wonder. His reluctance to fashion an ugly thing out of material that would, in the natural course of his impressions, suggest to him none but ideas of beauty, is quite enough to account for it. Octave Feuillet is too much a gentleman, too much a *preux chevalier*, to be able to get any intellectual understanding of a bad woman; the actual operations of a bad woman's soul are things he can get no "realizing sense" of. So he dresses up a marionette, which shall do all the wicked feminine things his game necessitates, which shall plot and poison, wreck the innocent heroine's happiness, attitudinize as a fiend in woman's clothing, and even, at a pinch, die a violent death, but which shall never let us forget that it is stuffed with saw-dust and moved by strings. Madame de Campvallou, Sabine Tallevaut, Mademoiselle H elouin, even Julia de Tr eoeur – the more they change, the more they are the same: sister-puppets, dolls carved from a common parent-block, to be dragged through their appointed careers of improbable naughtiness. You can recognise them at once by their haunting likeness to the proud beauties of the hair-dresser's window. They are always statuesque, always cold, reserved, mysterious, serpentlike, goddesslike – everything, in fine, that bad women of flesh and blood are not. Octave Feuillet, the wit and the man

of the world, knows this as well as we do; and knowing it, he tries, by verbal fire-works, to make us forget it. "She charms me – she reminds me of a sorceress," says some one of Sabine Tallevaut. "Do you notice, she walks without a sound? Her feet scarcely touch the earth – she walks like a somnambulist-like Lady Macbeth." It is the old trick, the traditional *boniment* of the showman; but not all the *boniments* in Feuillet's sack can make us believe in Sabine Tallevaut.

One can recognise Feuillet's bad women, too, by the uncanny influence they immediately cast upon his men. "More taciturn than ever, absent, strange, as if she were meditating some profound design, all at once she seemed to wake; she lifted her long lashes, let her blue eyes wander here and there, and suddenly looked straight at Camors, who was conscious of a thrill" – that is how Mme. de Campvallon does it, and the fact is conclusive, so far as her moral character is in question. None of Feuillet's good women would ever dream of making a man "thrill" at her first encounter with him. But Feuillet's bad women will stop at nothing. Julia de Trécoeur takes her own step-father, a middle-aged, plain, stout, prosaic country gentleman, and throws him into a paroxysm that has to be expressed in this wise: "It was a mad intoxication, which the savour of guilt only intensified. Duty, loyalty, honour, whatsoever presented itself as an obstacle to his passion, did but exasperate its fury. The pagan Venus had bitten him in the heart, and injected her poisons. A vision of Julia's fatal beauty was present without surcease, in his burning

brain, before his troubled eyes. Avidly, in spite of himself, he drank in her languors, her perfumes, her breath."

*Julia de Trécoeur* has sometimes been called Feuillet's masterpiece. One eminent critic remarks that in writing it Feuillet "dived into the vast ocean of human nature, and brought up a pearl." Well, there are pearls and pearls; there are real pearls and artificial pearls; there are white pearls and black pearls. It might seem to some of us that *Julia de Trécoeur* is an artificial black one. Frankly, as a piece of literature, the novel is just in three words a fairly good melodrama. Julia herself is the proper melodramatic heroine. Her beauty is "fatal," her passions are ungovernable, and she dearly loves a scene. Now she contemplates retirement into a convent, now matrimony, now a leap from the cliffs; and each change of mood is inevitably the occasion for much ranting and much attitudinizing. Her history is a fairly good melodrama. That it is not a tip-top melodrama is due to the circumstance that Feuillet was too intelligent a man to be able to make it so. He can't keep out his wit; and every now and again his melodrama forgets itself, and becomes sane comedy. He can't keep out his touches of things simple and human; the high-flown, unhuman remainder suffers from the contrast.

Why, one wonders, with his flair for the subtleties of the normal, with his genius for extracting their charm from trifles, why should Feuillet have turned his hand to melodrama at all? Is it partly because he lived in and wrote for a highly melodramatic period – "the dear, good days of the dear, bad

Second Empire"? Partly, too, no doubt, because, as some one has said, the artist can never forgive, though he can easily forget, his limitations. Like the comic actor who will not be happy till he has appeared as Hamlet, the novelist, also, will cherish his unreasoning aspirations. And then, melodrama is achieved before you know it. Any incident that is not in itself essentially *undramatic* will become melodramatic, when you try to treat it, it will become forced and stagey, if dramatic incidents are not the spontaneous issue of your talent. Dramatic incidents are far from being the spontaneous issue of Feuillet's talent; they are its changelings. His talent is all preoccupied in fathering children of a quite opposite complexion. Style, suavity, elegance, sentiment, colour, atmosphere – these are Feuillet's preoccupations. Action, incident, are, when necessary, necessary evils. So his action, when he is at his best, loiters, saunters, or even stops dead-still; until suddenly he remembers that, after all, his story must some time reach its period, and that something really must happen to advance it. Thereupon, hurriedly, perfunctorily, carelessly, he "knocks off" a few pages of incident – of incident fast and furious – which will, as likely as not, read like the prompt-book of a play at the Adelphi.

That absurd Sabine Tallevaut, whose feet scarcely touch the earth, with poison in her hand and adultery in her heart, is the one disfigurement upon what might otherwise have been Feuillet's most nearly perfect picture. In spite of her, *La Morte* remains a work of exquisite and tender beauty; and I'm not sure whether

Aliette de Vaudricourt isn't the very queen of all his women. If Feuillet was too much a gentleman to be able to paint a bad woman, he was too much a man not to revel in painting a charming one. As we pass through his gallery of delightful heroines, from Aliette de Vaudricourt to Clothilde de Lucan, to Mme. de Télec, Marie FitzGerald, "Miss Mary" de Camors, Marguerite Laroque, even to Jeanne de Maurescamp, we can feel the man's admiration pulsing in every stroke of the artist's brush. He takes the woman's point of view, espouses her side of the quarrel, offers himself as her champion wherever he finds that a champion is needed. And he sticks to his allegiance even after, as in the case of Jeanne de Maurescamp, she might seem to have forfeited her claim to it. Of Jeanne he can still bring himself to say, at the end of *L'Histoire d'une Parisienne*: "Decidedly, this angel had become a monster; but the lesson of her too-true story is, that, in the moral order, no one is born a monster. God makes no monsters. It is man who makes them."

In this instance, however, Feuillet is, perhaps, rather the apologist than the champion. His contention is that Jeanne was by nature virtuous, and that her virtue has been destroyed by the stupidity and the brutality of her ill-chosen husband. But Feuillet has too fine and too judicious a wit to insist upon the note of strenuousness. Seeing the woman's point of view, he sees its humours as well as its pathos. Admitting that men for the most part are grossly unworthy of her, and that woman has infinitely the worst of it in the arrangements of society, admitting and

deploring it, he doesn't profess to know how to set it right; he has no practical reform to preach. His business is to divert us, and, if he must be serious, to be serious gaily and charmingly. And perhaps he is most serious, not when composing an epitaph for Jeanne de Maurescamp, but when he is lightly saying (in the person of the Comtesse Jules): "Always remember, my poor dear, that women are born to suffer – and men to be suffered."

Charmingly serious himself, Feuillet's heroines likewise are always serious, in their different charming ways. They may be wilful and capricious, like Marguerite Laroque, or fond of the excitements of the world, like Mme. de Rias, or wise in their generation, like Mme. de la Veyle, but they are always womanly and human at the red-ripe of the heart, and they are almost always religious. A sceptic, scepticlike, Feuillet utterly discountenances scepticism in woman. Even his most recusant of masculine unbelievers, the Vicomte de Vaudricourt, proclaims his preference for a pious wife. "Not, of course," he says, "that I exaggerate the moral guarantees offered by piety, or that I mistake it for a synonym of virtue. But still it is certain that with women the idea of duty is rarely dissociated from religious ideas. Because religion doesn't keep all of them straight, it is an error to conclude that it keeps none of them straight; and it's always well to be on the safe side." Elsewhere Feuillet gives us his notion of the moral outlook of the woman who is not religious. Evil for her, he tells us, ceases to be evil, and becomes simply *inconvenance*. 'Tis a very mannish, a very Frenchmannish, way of viewing the

thing.

One has sometimes heard it maintained that only women can reveal themselves with perfect grace in a form so intimate as letters or a diary; that a man's hand is apt to be too heavy, his manner too self-conscious. Perhaps it is Feuillet's sympathy with women that has made him the dab he is at this womanly art. In *La Morte*, for instance, we learn vastly more of Bernard's character from his diary than we should from thrice the number of pages of third-personal exposition. The letters from Marie to her mother, in *Monsieur de Camors*, furnish the single element of relief in that lugubrious composition. Even those that pass between Rias and Mme. de Lorris, in *Un Mariage dans le Monde*— though their subject-matter is sufficiently depressing, though the man is an egotistical cad, and the great lady who is giving him her help and pity ought rather to despise and spurn him — are exceedingly good and natural letters; and the letter from Mme. de Rias to Kévern, which ends the book, is a very jewel of a letter. But it is in the diary of his poor young man that Feuillet's command of the first person singular attains its most completely satisfying results.

*Le Roman d'un Jeune Homme Pauvre* is a tale of youth, for the young; and the eldest of us may count himself still young if he can still enjoy it. Here we have romance pure and simple, a thing of glamour all compact; and the danger-line that so definitely separates romance from absurdity, yet leaves them so perilously near together, is never crossed. The action passes in the country, and in the most delectable sort of country at that — the country of

the appreciative and imaginative cit. Before all things a Parisian, Feuillet is never particularly happy in presenting Paris. His Paris is correct enough in architecture and topography, no doubt; but the spirit of Paris, the whatever it is which makes Paris Paris, and not merely a large town, somehow evades him. Possibly he knew his Paris too well; familiarity had bred a kind of inability to see, to focus, a kind of "staleness." Anyhow, it is when he gets away from Paris that he wakes to the opportuneness and the opportunities of scenic backgrounds. His eye, "stale" to town, is now all eagerness, all freshness. Impressions of beauty crowd upon him. He sees the country as it is doubtful whether the countryman ever sees it – the countryman who has been surfeited with it, who has long since forgotten its first magical effect. He brings to the country the sensitiveness which is the product of the city's heat and strife. Dew and wild flowers, the green of grass and trees, the music of birds, the flutter of their wings, the pure air, the wide prospects, the changing lights – it is to the appreciative and imaginative townsman that these speak their finest message.

But Feuillet is more than a townsman: he is a teller of fairy-tales. To him the country is a free playground for his fancy. There beautiful ladies and gallant knights have nothing to do but to love and to sing; and there, without destroying our illusion, he can leave them to live happily forever after. The Brittany, in which Maxime and Marguerite meet and misunderstand and woo and wed, is not that northwestern corner of France that

one can reach in a few hours by steamer from Southampton; it is a Brittany of fairy woods and streams and castles, that never was, save in the poet's dream. For if others of Feuillet's novels have been only in part fairy-tales, or only rather like fairy-tales, the *Romance of a Poor Young Man* is a fairy-tale wholly and absolutely. The personages of the story are the invariable personages of the fairy-tale: the prince disguised as a wood-cutter, in the Marquis de Champcey disguised as a farm-bailiff; the haughty princess, who will not love, yet loves despite her will, and is rewarded by the wood-cutter's appearing in all the prince's splendour at the proper time, in Marguerite Laroque; the bad prince and the bad princess, in M. de Bévallon and Mlle. Hélouin; the good magician, in M. Laubépin; and the delightfulest of conceivable fairy godmothers, in Mlle. de Porhoët. And the progress of the story is the wonted progress of the fairy-tale. There is hardship, but it is overcome; there are perils, but they are turned; misconceptions, but they are cleared up. There are empty pockets, but there is the bag of gold waiting to fill them. The marvellous never shocks our credulity, the longest-armed coincidences seem the most natural happenings in the world. We are not in the least surprised when, at the right moment, the bag of gold appears at Maxime's feet, enabling him to marry; it is the foregone consequence of his having a fairy godmother. We don't even raise the eyebrow of doubt when the Laroques contemplate relinquishing their fortune to the poor, so that Marguerite may come to her lover empty-handed; that is the accepted device of

the fairy-tale for administering to the proud princess her well-deserved humiliation. In one small detail only does the fairy-tale teller lose himself, and let the novelist supplant him; that is where he implies that the bad prince and princess, after their wicked wiles had been discovered, took the train to Paris. They did nothing of the sort. They were turned into blocks of stone, and condemned to look on at the happiness of the good prince and princess from the terrace of the Château de Laroque.

But it must not be supposed, because the personages of the *Romance of a Poor Young Man* are fairy-tale personages, that therefore they are not human personages. It is, on the contrary, the humanity of its personages that makes your fairy-tale interesting. You stick to human men and women, you merely more or less improve the conditions of their existence, you merely revise and amend a little the laws of the external universe – an easy thing to do, in spite of the unthinking people who prate of those laws as immutable. Then the fun consists in seeing how human nature will persist and react. Surely none of Feuillet's heroines is more engagingly human than Marguerite Laroque. It is true that we see her only through the eyes of a chronicler who happens to be infatuated with her, but we know what discount to allow for that. We are confident from her first entrance that if, as we hope, our poor young man's head is screwed on as poor young men's heads should be, Marguerite will turn it. We learn that she is capricious, therefore Maxime will be constant; that she is proud, therefore, in all humility, he will be prouder; that she is

humble, therefore, in all pride, he will humble himself at her feet. But antecedent to all this, and just because his ostensible business in Brittany is the management of the Laroques' estate, no one needs to warn us that his real business will be the conquest of the Laroques' daughter. We can foresee with half an eye that the affairs of the estate are affairs which our disguised marquis will conscientiously neglect. Indeed, Mme. Laroque herself seems to have been haunted by something of the same premonition. What does she say to the sous-préfet? "Mon Dieu, ne m'en parlez pas; il-y-a là un mystère inconcevable. Nous pensons que c'est quelque prince déguisé... Entre nous, mon cher sous-préfet, je crois bien que c'est un très-mauvais intendant, mais vraiment c'est un homme très-agréable."

She might have added "un homme très-digne." For if we have a fault to find with Maxime, it is that he seems just possibly a thought too "digne." But that is a fault common to so many men in fiction. French novelists, like English lady novelists, are terribly apt to make their men too "digne" – when they don't make them too unspeakably *indigne*. Maxime, however, we mustn't forget, is his own portraitist, and we'll hope in this detail the portrait errs. For the rest, we are content to accept it as he paints it. He is a poor young man, but he is also a fairy prince. Therefore he can vaunt himself as an ordinary poor young man could hardly do with taste. He can perform and narrate his prodigies of skill and valour without offending. He can rescue an enormous Newfoundland dog from a raging torrent, for example, with the greatest ease

in the world, an exploit you or I might have found ticklish, and he can tell us of it afterward, a proceeding you or I might have shrunk from as vainglorious. For Maxime is a fairy prince; the dog belongs to the fairy princess; and the bad prince, the rival, who is standing by, doesn't know how to swim. Again, with splendid indifference, he can accomplish and record his leap from the Tour d' Elven to save the fairy princess from a situation that might, in Fairyland, have compromised her; hadn't the princess unjustly impugned his honour, and insinuated that the situation was one he had deliberately brought to pass? "Monsieur le Marquis de Champcey, y a t-il eu beaucoup de lâches dans votre famille avant vous?" superbly demands Marguerite; and we can see her kindling eye, the scornful curl of her lip, we can hear the disdainful tremor of her voice. Maxime would be a poor-spirited poor young man, indeed, if, after that, he should hesitate to jump. And he has his immediate compensation. "Maxime! Maxime!" cries the haughty princess, now all remorse, "par grâce, par pitié! au nom du bon Dieu, parlez-moi! pardonnez-moi!" So that, though the prince goes away with a broken arm, the lover carries exultancy in his heart.

Is Maxime perhaps just a thought too "digne," also, in his relations with his little sister – when he visits her at school, for instance, and promises to convey the bread she cannot eat to some deserving beggar? At the moment he is the most deserving beggar he chances to know of, but he is resolved to keep his beggary a secret from Héléne. "Cher Maxime," says she, "a

bientôt, n'est-ce pas? Tu me diras si tu as rencontré un pauvre, si tu lui as donné mon pain, et s'il l'a trouvé bon." And Maxime, in his journal: "Oui, Héléne, j'ai rencontré un pauvre, et je lui ai donné ton pain, qu'il a emporté comme une proie dans sa mansarde solitaire, et il l'a trouvé bon; mais c'était un pauvre sans courage, car il a pleuré en dévorant l'aumône de tes petites mains bien-aimées. Je te dirai tout cela, Héléne, car il est bon que tu saches qu'il y a sur la terre des souffrances plus sérieuses que tes souffrances d'enfant: je te dirai tout, excepté le nom du pauvre." It certainly *is* "digne," isn't it? Is it a trifle too much so? Isn't it a trifle priggish, a trifle preachy? Is it within the limits of pure pathos? Or does it just cross the line? I don't know.

I am rather inclined to think that Maxime is at his best – at once most human and most fairy princelike – in his relations with the pre-eminently human fairy Porhoët. He is entirely human, and weak, and nice, when he blurts out to her the secret of his high birth. Hadn't she just been boasting of her own, and invidiously citing Monsieur l'intendant as a typical plebeian? "En ce qui me concerne, mademoiselle," he has the human weakness to retort, "vous vous trompez, car ma famille a eu l'honneur d'être alliée à la vôtre, et réciproquement." He remains human and weak throughout the somewhat embarrassing explanations that are bound to follow; and if, in their subsequent proceedings, after she has adopted him as "mon cousin," he will still from time to time become a trifle priggish and a trifle preachy, we must remember that mortal man, in the hands of a French novelist, has

to choose between that and a career of profligacy.

It is by his *Roman d'un Jeune Homme Pauvre* that Feuillet is most widely known outside of France; it is by this book that he will "live," if he is to live. Certainly it is his freshest, his sincerest, his most consistently agreeable book.

HENRY HARLAND.

# BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Octave Feuillet was born at Saint-Lô, in the department of the Manche, on the 11th of August, 1821. His father, who belonged to one of the oldest Norman families, was secretary-general to the prefect, and a little later, in the revolution of 1830, played a prominent part in politics. A hereditary nervousness, amounting finally to a disease, alone prevented him, according to Guizot, from being given a portfolio in the new ministry. Octave inherited his father's excessive sensibility, although in later years he held it more under control. After the death of his mother, which occurred as he was developing in boyhood, he became so melancholy that, at the advice of the physicians, he was sent to a school in Paris, where his health gradually became re-established; afterward, at the Collège de Louis-le-Grand, he greatly distinguished himself as a scholar. It was his father's design to prepare him for the diplomatic career, but already the desire to write had awakened itself in him. When the moment came for choosing a profession, Octave timidly confessed his determination to make literature his business in life; the irascible old gentleman at Saint-Lô turned him out of the house, and cut off his allowance. He returned to Paris, and for three years had a hard struggle with poverty. During this time, under the encouragement of the great actor Bocage, Octave Feuillet brought out three dramas, "Échec et Mat,"

"Palma," and "La Vieillesse de Richelieu," under the pseudonym of "Désiré Hazard." These were successful, and the playwright's father forgave and welcomed him back to his favour. Octave remained in Paris, actively engaged in literary work, mainly dramatic, but gradually in the line of prose fiction also. In 1846 he published his novel of "Polichinelle," followed in 1848 by "Onesta," in 1849 by "Redemption" and in 1850 by "Bellah." None of these are remembered among Octave Feuillet's best works, but he was gaining skill and care in composition. In 1850, however, he was suddenly summoned home to Saint-Lô by the increased melancholy of his father, who could no longer safely be left alone in the gloomy ancestral mansion which he refused to leave. Octave, with resignation, determined to sacrifice his life to the care of his father, and in this piety he was supported by his charming cousin, Valérie Feuillet, a very accomplished and devoted woman, whom he married in 1851. For eight years they shared this painful exile, the father of Octave scarcely permitting them to leave his sight, and refusing every other species of society. Strangely enough, this imprisonment was not unfavourable to the novelist's genius; the books he wrote during this period – "Dalila," "La Petite Comtesse" (1856), "Le Village," and finally "Le Roman d'un Jeune Homme Pauvre" (1858) – being not only far superior to what he had previously published, but among the very finest of all his works. By a grim coincidence, on almost the only occasion on which Octave Feuillet ventured to absent himself for a day or

two, to be present at the performance of his "Roman d'un Jeune Homme Pauvre," when it was dramatized in 1858, the father suddenly died while the son was in Paris. This was a great shock to Feuillet, who bitterly and unjustly condemned himself. He was now, however, free, and, with his wife and children, he returned to Paris. He was now very successful, and soon became a figure at Compiègne and in the great world. In 1862 he published "Sibylle," and was elected a member of the French Academy. A great favourite of the Emperor and Empress, he was tempted to combine the social life at Court with the labours of literature. His health began to suffer from the strain, and, to recover, he retired again to Saint-Lô, where he lived, not in the home of his ancestors, but in a little house above the ramparts, called Les Paillers; for the future he spent only the winter months in Paris. His novels became fewer, but not less carefully prepared; he enjoyed a veritable triumph with "Monsieur de Camors" in 1867. Next year he was appointed Royal Librarian at Fontainebleau, an office which he held till the fall of the Empire. He then retired to Les Paillers again, where he had written "Julia de Trécoeur" in 1867. The end of his life was troubled by domestic bereavement and loss of health; he hurried restlessly from place to place, a prey to constant nervous agitation. His later writings were numerous, but had not the vitality of those previously mentioned. Octave Feuillet died in Paris, December 28, 1890, and was succeeded at the French Academy by Pierre Loti. Octave was the type of a sensitive, somewhat melancholy fine gentleman; he was

very elegant in manners, reserved and ceremonious in society, where he held himself somewhat remote in the radiance of his delicate wit; but within the bosom of his family he was tenderly and almost pathetically demonstrative. The least criticism was torture to him, and it is said that when his comedy of "La Belle au Bois Dormant" was hissed off the boards of the Vaudeville in 1865, for three weeks afterward the life of Feuillet was in danger. Fortunately, however, for a "fiery particle" so sensitive, the greater part of his career was one continuous triumph.

*E.G.*

# THE ROMANCE OF A POOR YOUNG MAN

## Sursum corda!

*PARIS, April 25, 185-.*

The second evening I have passed in this miserable room, staring gloomily at the bare hearth, hearing the dull monotone of the street, and feeling more lonely, more forsaken, and nearer to despair in the heart of this great city than a ship-wrecked man shivering on a broken plank in mid-ocean.

I have done with cowardice. I will look my destiny in the face till it loses its spectral air. I will open my sorrowful heart to the one confidant whose pity will not hurt, to that pale last friend who looks back at me from the glass. I will write down my thoughts and my life, not in trivial and childish detail, but without serious omissions, and above all without lies. I shall love my journal; it will be a brotherly echo to cheat my loneliness, and at the same time a second conscience warning me not to allow anything to enter into my life which I dare not write down calmly with my own hand.

Now, with sad eagerness I search the past for the facts and

incidents which should have long since enlightened me, had not filial respect, habit, and the indifference of a happy idler blinded me. I understand now my mother's deep and constant melancholy; I understand her distaste for society, and why she wore that plain, unvaried dress which sometimes called forth sarcasms, sometimes wrath from my father. – "You look like a servant," he would say to her.

I could not but be conscious that our family life was broken by more serious quarrels, though I was never an actual witness of them. All I heard were my father's sharp and imperious tones, the murmur of a pleading voice, and stifled sobs. These outbursts I attributed to my father's violent and fruitless attempts to revive in my mother the taste for the elegant and brilliant life which she had once enjoyed as much as becomes a virtuous woman, but into which she now accompanied my father with a repugnance that grew stronger every day. After such crises, my father nearly always ran off to buy some costly trinket which my mother found in her table-napkin at dinner, and never wore. One day in the middle of winter she received a large box of rare flowers from Paris; she thanked my father warmly, but directly he had left the room, I saw her slightly raise her shoulders and look up to heaven with an expression of hopeless despair.

During my childhood and early youth I had a great respect for my father, but not much affection. Indeed, throughout this period I saw only the sombre side of his character – the one side that showed itself in domestic life, for which he was not fitted. Later,

when I was old enough to go out with him, I was surprised and charmed to find in him a person perfectly new to me. It seemed as if, in our old family house, he felt himself constrained by some fatal spell; once beyond its doors, his forehead cleared, his chest expanded, and he was young again. "Now, Maxime," he would cry, "now for a gallop!" And joyously we would rush along. His shouts of youthful pleasure, his enthusiasm, his fantastic wit, his bursts of feeling, charmed my young heart, and I longed to bring something of all this back to my poor mother, forgotten in her corner at home. I began to love my father; and when I saw all the sympathetic qualities of his brilliant nature displayed in all the functions of social life – at hunts and races, balls and dinners – my fondness for him became an actual admiration. A perfect horseman, a dazzling talker, a bold gambler, daring and open-handed, he became for me the finished type of manly grace and chivalrous nobility. Indeed, he would speak of himself – smiling with some bitterness – as the last of the gentlemen.

Such was my father in society; but as soon as he returned to his home my mother and I saw only a restless, morose, and violent old man.

My father's outbursts to a creature so sweet and delicate as my mother would certainly have revolted me had they not been followed by the quick returns of tenderness and the redoubled attentions I have mentioned. Justified in my eyes by these proofs of penitence, my father seemed to be only a naturally kind, warm-hearted man sometimes irritated beyond endurance by

an obstinate and systematic opposition to all his tastes and preferences. I thought my mother was suffering from some nervous derangement. My father gave me to understand so, though, and as I thought very properly, he only referred to this subject with great reserve.

I could not understand what were my mother's feelings towards my father; they were – for me – beyond analysis or definition. Sometimes a strange severity glittered in the looks she fixed on him; but it was only a flash, and the next moment her beautiful soft eyes and her unchanged face showed nothing but tender devotion and passionate submission.

My mother had been married at fifteen, and I was nearly twenty-two when my sister, my poor H  l  ne, was born. One morning soon afterwards my father came out of my mother's room looking anxious. He signed to me to follow him into the garden.

"Maxime," he said, after walking in silence for a little, "your mother gets stranger and stranger."

"She is so ill just now, father."

"Yes, of course. But now she has the oddest fancy: she wants you to study law."

"Law! What! Does my mother want me, at my age, with my birth and position, to sit among school-boys on the forms of a college classroom? It is absurd."

"So I think," said my father dryly, "but your mother is ill, and – there's no more to be said."

I was a young puppy then, puffed up by my name, my importance, and my little drawing-room successes; but I was sound at heart, and I worshipped my mother, with whom I had lived for twenty years in the closest intimacy possible between two human souls. I hastened to assure her of my obedience; she thanked me with a sad smile and made me kiss my sister who was sleeping on her lap.

We lived about a mile and a half from Grenoble, so I could attend the law classes at the university without leaving home. Day by day my mother followed my progress with such intense and persistent interest that I could not help thinking that she had some stronger motive than the fancy of an invalid; that perhaps my father's hatred and contempt for the practical and tedious side of life might have brought about a certain embarrassment in our affairs which, my mother thought, a knowledge of law and a business training would enable me to put right. This explanation did not satisfy me. No doubt my father had often complained bitterly of our losses during the Revolution, but his complaints had long ceased, and I had never thought them well-founded, because, as far as I could see, our position was in every way satisfactory.

We lived near Grenoble in our hereditary château, which was famous in our country as an aristocratic and lordly dwelling. My father and I have often shot or hunted for a whole day without going off our own land or out of our own woods. Our stables were vast, and filled with expensive horses of which my father was

very fond and very proud. Besides, we had a town-house in Paris on the Boulevard des Capucines, where comfortable quarters were always reserved for occasional visits. And nothing in our ordinary way of living could suggest either a small income or close management. Even as regards the table, my father insisted upon a particular degree of delicacy and refinement.

My mother's health declined almost imperceptibly. In time there came an alteration in her disposition. The mouth which, at all events in my presence, had spoken only kind words, grew bitter and aggressive. Every step I took beyond the house provoked a sarcasm. My father was not spared, and bore these attacks with a patience that seemed to me exemplary, but he got more and more into the habit of living away from home. He told me that he must have distraction and amusement. He always wanted me to go with him, and my love of pleasure, and the eagerness of youth, and, to speak truly, my lack of moral courage, made me obey him too readily.

In September, 185-, there were some races near the château, and several of my father's horses were to run. We started early and lunched on the course. About the middle of the day, as I was riding by the course watching the fortunes of a race, one of our men came up and said he had been looking for me for more than half an hour. He added that my father had already been sent for and had gone back to my mother at the château, and that he wanted me to follow him at once.

"But what in Heaven's name is the matter?"

"I think madame is worse," said the servant.

I set off like a madman.

When I reached home my sister was playing on the lawn in the middle of the great, silent courtyard. As I dismounted, she ran up to embrace me, and said, with an air of importance and mystery that was almost joyful:

"The curé has come."

I did not, however, perceive any unusual animation in the house, nor any signs of disorder or alarm. I went rapidly up the staircase, and had passed through the boudoir which communicated with my mother's room, when the door opened softly, and my father appeared. I stopped in front of him; he was very pale, and his lips were trembling.

"Maxime," he said, without looking at me, "your mother is asking for you."

I wished to question him, but he checked me with a gesture, and walked hurriedly towards a window, as if to look out. I entered. My mother lay half-reclining in an easy-chair, one of her arms hanging limply over the side. Again I saw on her face, now as white as wax, the exquisite sweetness and delicate grace which lately had been driven away by suffering. Already the Angel of Eternal Rest was casting the shadow of his wing over that peaceful brow. I fell upon my knees; she half-opened her eyes, raised her drooping head with an effort, and enveloped me in a long, loving look. Then, in a voice which was scarcely more than a broken sigh, she slowly spoke these words:

"Poor child! ... I am worn out, you see! Do not weep. You have deserted me a little lately, but I have been so trying. We shall meet again, Maxime, and we shall understand one another, my son. I can't say any more... Remind your father of his promise to me... And you, Maxime, be strong in the battle of life, and forgive the weak."

She seemed to be exhausted, and stopped for a moment. Then, raising a finger with difficulty, and looking at me fixedly, she said: "Your sister!"

Her livid eyelids closed; then suddenly she opened them, and threw out her arms with a rigid and sinister gesture. I uttered a cry; my father came quickly, and, with heartrending sobs, pressed the poor martyr's body to his bosom.

Some weeks later, at the formal request of my father, who said that he was obeying the last wishes of her whom we mourned, I left France, and began that wandering life which I have led nearly up to this day. During a year's absence my heart, becoming more affectionate as the selfish frenzy of youth burnt out, urged me to return and renew my life at its source, between my mother's tomb and my sister's cradle. But my father had fixed the duration of my travels, and he had not brought me up to treat his wishes lightly. He wrote to me affectionately, though briefly, showing no desire to hasten my return. So I was the more alarmed when I arrived at Marseilles, two months ago, and found several letters from him, all feverishly begging me to return at once.

It was on a sombre February evening, that I saw once more the

massive walls of our ancient house standing out against the light veil of snow that lay upon the country. A sharp north wind blew in icy gusts; flakes of frozen sleet dropped like dead leaves from the trees of the avenue, and struck the wet soil with a faint and plaintive sound. As I entered the court a shadow, which I took to be my father's, fell upon a window of the large drawing-room on the ground floor – a room which had not been used during my mother's last days. I hurried on, and my father, seeing me, gave a hoarse cry, then opened his arms to me, and I felt his heart beating wildly against my own.

"Thou art frozen, my poor child," he said, much against his habit, for he seldom addressed me in the second person. "Warm thyself, warm thyself. This is a cold room, but I prefer it now; at least one can breathe here."

"Are you well, father?"

"Pretty well, as you see."

Leaving me by the fireplace, he resumed his walk across the vast *salon*, dimly lighted by two or three candles. I seemed to have interrupt this walk of his. This strange welcome alarmed me. I looked at my father in dull surprise.

"Have you seen my horses?" he said suddenly, without stopping.

"But, father –"

"Ah, yes, of course, you've only just come." After a silence he continued. "Maxime," he said, "I have something to tell you."

"I'm listening, father."

He did not seem to hear me, but walked about a little, and kept on repeating, "I have something to tell you, my son." At last he sighed deeply, passed his hand across his forehead, and sitting down suddenly, signed to me to take a seat opposite to him. Then, as if he wanted to speak and had not the courage to do so, his eyes rested on mine, and I read in them an expression of suffering, humility, and supplication that in a man so proud as my father touched me deeply. Whatever the faults he found it so hard to confess, I felt from the bottom of my heart that he was fully pardoned.

Suddenly his eyes, which had never left mine, were fixed in an astonished stare, vague and terrible. His hand stiffened on my arm; he raised himself in his chair, then drooped, and in an instant fell heavily on the floor. He was dead.

The heart does not reason or calculate. That is its glory. In a moment I had divined everything. One minute had been enough to show me all at once, and without a word of explanation – in a burst of irresistible light, the fatal truth which a thousand things daily repeated under my eyes had never made me suspect. Ruin was here, in this house, over my head. Yet I do not think that I should have mourned my father more sincerely or more bitterly if he had left me loaded with benefits. With my regret and my deep sorrow there was mingled a pity, strangely poignant in that it was the pity of a son for his father. That beseeching, humbled, hopeless look haunted me. Bitterly I regretted that I had not been able to speak a word of consolation to that heart before it broke!

Wildly I called to him who could no longer hear me, "I forgive you, I forgive you." My God, what moments were these! As far as I have been able to guess, my mother, when she was dying, had made my father promise to sell the greater part of his property; to pay off the whole of the enormous debt he had incurred by spending every year a third more than his income, and to live solely and strictly on what he had left. My father had tried to keep to this engagement; he had sold the timber and part of the estate, but finding himself master of a considerable capital, he had applied only a small portion of it to the discharge of his debts, and had attempted to restore our fortunes by staking the remainder in the hateful chances of the Stock Exchange. He had thus completed his ruin. I have not yet sounded the depths of the abyss in which we are engulfed. A week after my father's death I was taken seriously ill, and after two months of suffering I was only just able to leave my ancient home on the day that a stranger took possession of it. Fortunately an old friend of my mother's, who lives at Paris, and who formerly acted as notary to our family, has come to my help. He has offered to undertake the work of liquidation which to my inexperienced judgment seemed beset with unconquerable difficulties. I left the whole business to him, and I presume that now his work is completed. I went to his house directly I arrived yesterday; he was in the country, and will not return till to-morrow.

These have been two cruel days; uncertainty is the worst of all evils, because it is the only one that necessarily stops the

springs of action and checks our courage. I should have been very much surprised if, ten years ago, any one had told me that the old notary, whose formal language and stiff politeness so much amused my father and me, would one day be the oracle from whom I should await the supreme sentence of my destiny.

I do my best to guard against excessive hopes; I have calculated approximately that, after paying all the debts, we should have a hundred and twenty to a hundred and fifty thousand francs left. A fortune of five millions should leave so much salvage at least. I intend to take ten thousand francs and seek my fortune in the new States of America; the rest I shall resign to my sister.

Enough of writing for to-night. Recalling such memories is a mournful occupation. Nevertheless, I feel that it has made me calmer. Work is surely a sacred law, since even the lightest task discharged brings a certain contentment and serenity. Yet man does not love work; he cannot fail to see its good effects; he tastes them every day, and blesses them, and each day he comes to his work with the same reluctance. I think that is a singular and mysterious contradiction, as if in toil we felt at once a chastisement, and the divine and fatherly hand of the chastiser.

*Thursday*

When I woke this morning a letter from old M. Laubépin was brought to me. He invited me to dinner and apologized for taking such a liberty. He said nothing about my affairs. I augured unfavourably from this silence.

In the meantime I fetched my sister from her convent, and

took her about Paris. The child knows nothing of our ruin. In the course of the day she had some rather expensive fancies. She provided herself liberally with gloves, pink note-paper, bonbons for her friends, delicate scents, special soaps, and tiny pencils, all very necessary useful things, but not as necessary as a dinner. May she never have to realize this!

At six o'clock I was at M. Laubépin's in the Rue Cassette. I do not know our old friend's age, but to-day I found him looking just the same as ever – tall and thin, with a little stoop, untidy white hair, and piercing eyes under bushy black eyebrows – altogether a face at once strong and subtle. I recognised the unvarying costume, the old-fashioned black coat, the professional white cravat, the family diamond in the shirt-frill – in short, all the outward signs of a serious, methodical, and conservative nature. The old gentleman was waiting for me at the open door of his little *salon*. After making me a low bow, he took my hand lightly between two of his fingers and conducted me to a homely looking old lady who was standing by the fire-place.

"The Marquis de Champcey d'Hauterive!" said M. Laubépin, in his strong, rich, and emphatic voice, and turning quickly to me, added in a humbler tone, "Mme. Laubépin!"

We sat down. An awkward silence ensued. I had expected an immediate explanation of my position. Seeing that this was to be postponed, I assumed at once that it was unfavourable, an assumption confirmed by the discreet and compassionate glances with which Mme. Laubépin furtively honoured me. As

for M. Laubépin, he observed me with a remarkable attention not altogether kindly. My father, I remember, always maintained that at the bottom of his heart and under his respectful manner the ceremonious old scrivener had a little of *bourgeois* democratic and even Jacobin leaven. It seemed to me that this leaven was working just now, and that the old man found some satisfaction for his secret antipathies in the spectacle of a gentleman under torture. In spite of my real depression, I began to talk at once, trying to appear quite unconcerned.

"So, M. Laubépin," I said, "you've left the Place des Petits-Pères, the dear old Place. How could you bring yourself to do it? I would never have believed it of you."

"*Mon Dieu*, marquis," replied M. Laubépin, "I must admit that it is an infidelity unbecoming at my age; but in giving up the practice I had to give up my chambers as well, for one can't carry off a notary's plate as one can a sign-board."

"But you still undertake some business?"

"Yes, in a friendly way, marquis. Some of the honourable families, the important families, whose confidence I have had the good fortune to secure in the course of forty-five years of practice, are still glad, especially in situations of unusual delicacy, to have the benefit of my experience, and I believe I may say they rarely regret having followed my advice."

As M. Laubépin finished this testimonial to his own merits, an old servant came in and announced that dinner was served. It was my privilege to conduct Mme. Laubépin into the adjacent

dining-room. Throughout the meal the conversation never rose above the most ordinary commonplaces. M. Laubépin continued to look at me in the same penetrating and ambiguous manner, while Mme. Laubépin offered me each dish in the mournful and compassionate tone we use at the bedside of an invalid. In time we left the table, and the old notary took me into his study, where coffee was served immediately. He made me sit down, and standing before the fireplace, began:

"Marquis," he said, "you have done me the honour of intrusting to me the administration of the estate of your father, the late Marquis de Champcey d'Hauterive. Yesterday I was about to write to you, when I learned of your arrival in Paris. This enables me to convey to you, *vivâ voce*, the result of my zeal and of my action."

"I foresee, M. Laubépin, that the result is not favourable."

"Marquis, it is not favourable, and you will need all your courage to bear it. But it is my rule to proceed methodically. – In the year 1820 Mlle. Louise Héléne Dugald Delatouche d'Erouville was sought in marriage by Charles-Christian Odiot, Marquis de Champcey d'Hauterive. A tradition a century old had placed the management of the Dugald Delatouche affairs in my hands, and I was further permitted a respectful intimacy with the young heiress of the house. I thought it my duty, therefore, to oppose her infatuation by every argument in my power and to dissuade her from this deplorable alliance. I say deplorable alliance without reference to M. de Champcey's fortune, which

was nearly equal to that of Mlle. Delatouche, though even at this time he had mortgaged it to some extent. I say so because I knew his character and temperament, which were in the main hereditary. Under the fascinating and chivalrous manner common to all of his race I saw clearly the heedless obstinacy, the incurable irresponsibility, the mania for pleasure, and, finally, the pitiless selfishness."

"Sir," I interrupted sharply, "my father's memory is sacred to me, and so it must be to every one who speaks of him in my presence."

"Sir," replied the old man with a sudden and violent emotion, "I respect that sentiment, but when I speak of your father I find it hard to forget that he was the man who killed your mother, that heroic child, that saint, that angel!"

I had risen in great agitation. M. Laubépin, who had taken a few steps across the room, seized my arm. "Forgive me, young man," he said to me. "I loved your mother and wept for her. You must forgive me." Then returning to the fire-place, he continued in his usual solemn tone:

"I had the honour and the pain of drawing up your mother's marriage contract.

"In spite of my remonstrance, the strict settlement of her property upon herself had not been adopted, and it was only with much difficulty that I got included in the deed a protective clause by which about a third of your mother's estate could not be sold, except with her consent duly and legally authenticated. A useless

precaution, marquis; I might call it the cruel precaution of an ill-advised friendship. This fatal clause brought most intolerable sufferings to the very person whose peace it was intended to secure. I refer to the disputes and quarrels and wrangles the echo of which must sometimes have reached your ears, and in which, bit by bit, your mother's last heritage – her children's bread – was torn from her!"

"Spare me, M. Laubépin!"

"I obey... I will speak only of the present. Directly I was honoured with your confidence, marquis, my first duty was to advise you not to accept the encumbered estate unless after paying all liabilities."

"Such a course seemed to cast a slur on my father's memory, and I could not adopt it."

M. Laubépin darted one of his inquisitorial glances at me, and continued:

"You are apparently aware that by not having availed yourself of this perfectly legal method, you became responsible for all liabilities, even if they exceed the value of the estate itself. And that, it is my painful duty to tell you, is the case in the present instance. You will see by these documents that after getting exceptionally favourable terms for the town-house, you and your sister are still indebted to your father's creditors to the amount of forty-five thousand francs."

I was utterly stunned by this news, which far exceeded my worst apprehensions. For a minute I stared at the clock without

seeing the hour it marked, and listened dazed to the monotonous sound of the pendulum.

"Now," continued M. Laubépin, after a silence, "the moment has come to tell you, marquis, that your mother, in view of contingencies which are unfortunately realized to-day, deposited with me some jewels which are valued at about fifty thousand francs. To exempt this small sum, now your sole resource, from the claims of the creditors of the estate, we can, I believe, make use of the legal resource which I shall have the honour of submitting to you."

"That will not be necessary, M. Laubépin. I am only too glad to be able, through this unexpected means, to pay my father's debts in full, and I beg you to devote it to that purpose."

Laubépin bowed slightly.

"As you wish, marquis," he said, "but I must point out to you that when this deduction has been made, the joint fortune of Mlle. Hélène and yourself will consist of something like four or five thousand livres, which, at the present rate of interest, will give you an income of two hundred and twenty-five francs. That being so, may I venture to ask in a confidential, friendly, and respectful way whether you have thought of any way of providing for your own existence and for that of your ward and sister? And, generally, what your plans are?"

"I tell you frankly I have none. Whatever plans I may have had are quite impossible in the state of destitution to which I am now reduced. If I were alone in the world I should enlist, but I have

my sister, and I cannot endure the thought of seeing the poor child subjected to toil and privations. She is happy in the convent and young enough to stay there some years longer. I would gladly accept any employment which would enable me, by the strictest personal economy, to pay her expenses each year and provide for her dowry in the future."

Laubépin looked hard at me.

"At your age, marquis, you must not expect," he replied, "to achieve that praiseworthy object by entering the slow ranks of public officials and governmental functionaries. You require an appointment which will assure you from the outset a yearly revenue of five or six thousand francs. And I must also tell you that this desideratum is not, in the present state of our social organization, to be obtained by simply holding out your hand. Happily, I am in a position to make some propositions to you which are likely to modify your present situation immediately and without much trouble."

M. Laubépin fixed his eyes on me more penetratingly than ever.

"In the first place, marquis," he went on, "I am the mouthpiece of a clever, rich, and influential speculator. This personage has originated an idea for an important undertaking, the nature of which will be explained to you at a later period. Its success largely depends on the co-operation of the aristocracy of this country. He believes that an old and illustrious name like yours, marquis, appearing among the originators of the enterprise, would have

great weight with the special public to whom the prospectus will be addressed. In return for this service, he engages to hand over to you a certain number of fully paid-up shares, which are now valued at ten thousand francs, and which will be worth two or three times that amount when the affair is well launched. In addition, he – "

"That is enough, M. Laubépin. Such infamies are unworthy of the trouble you take in mentioning them."

For a moment I saw his eyes flash and sparkle. The stiff folds in his face relaxed as he smiled faintly.

"If you do not approve of this proposition, marquis," he said unctuously, "neither do I. However, I thought it was my duty to submit it for your consideration. Here is another, which, perhaps, will please you more, and which is really more attractive. One of my oldest clients is a worthy merchant who has lately retired from business, and now passes his life with an only and much-loved daughter, in the quiet enjoyment of an *aurea mediocritas* of twenty-five thousand francs a year. Two or three days ago my client's daughter, by some accident, heard of your position. I thought it right – indeed, to speak frankly, I was at some trouble – to ascertain that the young lady would not hesitate for a moment to accept the title of Marquise de Champcey. Her appearance is agreeable, and she has many excellent qualities. Her father approves. I await only a word from you, marquis, to tell you the name and residence of this interesting family."

"M. Laubépin, this quite decides me; from to-morrow I shall

cease to use a title which is ridiculous for one in my position, and which, it seems, makes me the object of the most paltry intrigues. My family name is Odier, and henceforth I shall use no other. And now, though I recognise gratefully the keen interest in my welfare which has induced you to be the channel of such remarkable propositions, I must beg you to spare me any others of a like character."

"In that case, marquis, I have absolutely nothing more to tell you," said M. Laubépin, and, as if suddenly taken with a fit of joviality, he rubbed his hands together with a noise like the crackling of parchment.

"You are a difficult man to place, M. Maxime," he added, smiling. "Oh, very difficult! It is remarkable that I should not have already noticed your striking likeness to your mother, particularly your eyes and your smile ... but we must not digress; and, since you are resolved to maintain yourself by honest work, may I ask what are your talents and qualifications?"

"My education, monsieur, was naturally that of a man destined for a life of wealth and ease. However, I have studied law, and am nominally a barrister."

"A barrister! The devil you are! But the name is not enough. At the bar, more than in any other career, everything depends on personal effort; and now – let us see – do you speak well, marquis?"

"So badly that I believe I am incapable of putting two sentences together in public."

"H'm! Scarcely what one could call a heaven-born orator. You must try something else; but the matter requires more careful consideration. I see you are tired, marquis. Here are your papers, which you can examine at your leisure. I have the honour to wish you farewell. Allow me to light you down. A moment – am I to await your further instructions before applying the value of those jewels to the payment of your creditors?"

"Oh, by no means. But I should wish you rather to deduct a just remuneration for your kind exertions."

We had reached the landing of the staircase; M. Laubépin, who stooped a little as he walked, sharply straightened himself.

"So far as your creditors are concerned," he said, "you may count upon my obedience, marquis. As to me, I was your mother's friend, and I beg humbly but earnestly that her son will treat me as a friend."

I gave my hand to the old gentleman; he shook it warmly and we parted.

Back in the little room I now occupy, under the roof of the *hôtel*, which is mine no longer, I wished to convince myself that the full knowledge of my misery had not depressed me to a degree unworthy of a man. So I have sat down to write an account of this decisive day of my life, endeavouring to preserve exactly the phraseology of the old notary, a mixture of stiffness and courtesy, of mistrust and kind feeling, which more than once made me smile, though my heart was bleeding.

I am face to face with poverty. Not the haughty, hidden,

and poetic poverty that among forests and deserts and savannas fired my imagination, but actual misery, need, dependence, humiliation, and something worse even – the poverty of the rich man who has fallen; poverty in a decent coat; the poverty that hides its ungloved hands from the former friends it passes in the street. Come, brother, courage, courage...!

*Monday, April 27th.*

For five days I have been waiting in vain for news of M. Laubépin. I had counted considerably on the interest that he had appeared to feel in me. His experience, his business connections, and the number of people he knows, would enable him to be of service to me. I was ready to take all necessary steps under his direction, but, left to myself, I do not know which way to turn. I thought he was one of the men who promise little and do much. I am afraid that I have been mistaken. This morning I determined to go to his house on the pretext of returning the papers he had given me, after verifying their dreary exactitude. I was told that he had gone to enjoy a taste of country life at some château in the heart of Brittany. He would be away two or three days longer. I was completely taken aback. I had not only the pain of finding indifference and desertion where I had looked for the readiness of devoted friendship, I had, in addition, the bitter disappointment of returning, as I went, with an empty purse. I had, in fact, intended to ask M. Laubépin to advance me some money from the three or four thousand francs due to us after full payment of our debts. In vain have I lived like an anchorite

since came to Paris. The small sum I had reserved for my journey is completely exhausted – so completely that, after making a truly pastoral breakfast this morning —*castanceæ molles et pressicopia lactis*— I was obliged to have recourse to a kind of trickery for my dinner to-night. I will make melancholy record of it here.

The less one has had for breakfast, the more one wants for dinner. I had felt all the force of this axiom long before the sun had finished its course. Among the strollers whom the mild air had attracted to the Tuileries this afternoon to watch the first smiles of spring playing on the faces of the marble fauns, the observant might have noted a young man of irreproachable appearance who seemed to study the awakening of nature with extraordinary interest. Not satisfied with devouring the fresh verdure with his eyes, he would furtively detach the young, appetizing shoots and the half-opened leaves from their stems, and put them to his lips with the curiosity of a botanist. I convinced myself in this way that this form of nourishment, suggested by accounts of shipwrecks, is of very little value. Still, I enriched my experience with some interesting discoveries: for instance, I know now that the foliage of the chestnut has an exceedingly bitter taste; that the rose is not unpleasant; that the lime is oily and rather agreeable; the lilac pungent – and I believe unwholesome.

Meditating on these discoveries, I walked towards Hélène's convent. I found the parlour as crowded as a hive, and I was more than usually bewildered by the tumultuous confidences of

the young bees. Hélène arrived, her hair in disorder, her cheeks flushed, her eyes red and sparkling. In her hand she had a piece of bread as long as her arm. As she embraced me in an absent way, I asked:

"Well, little girl, what is the matter? You've been crying."

"No, Maxime, no, it's nothing."

"Well, what is it? Now tell me..."

In a lower tone she said:

"Oh, I am very miserable, dear Maxime!"

"Really? Tell me all about it while you eat your bread."

"Oh, I shall certainly not eat my bread. I am too miserable to eat. You know Lucy – Lucy Campbell, my dearest friend. Well, we've quarrelled completely."

"Oh, *mon Dieu!* Don't worry, darling, you'll make it up. It will be all right, dear."

"Oh, Maxime, that's impossible. It was such a serious quarrel. It was nothing at first, but you know one gets excited and loses one's head. Listen, Maxime! We were playing battledore, and Lucy made a mistake about the score. I was six hundred and eighty, and she was only six hundred and fifteen, and she declared she was six hundred and sixty-five! You must say that was a little too bad. Of course I said my figure was right, and she said hers was. 'Well, mademoiselle,' I said to her, 'let us ask these young ladies. I appeal to them.' 'No, mademoiselle,' she replied, 'I am sure I am right, and you don't play fair.' 'And – and you, mademoiselle,' I said to her – 'you are a liar!' 'Very well,

mademoiselle,' she said then, 'I despise you too much to answer you.' Just at that moment Sister Sainte-Félix came up, which was a good thing, for I am sure I should have hit her. Now, you know what happened. Can we possibly make it up? No, it is impossible; it would be cowardly. But I can't tell you how I suffer. I don't believe there's any one in the world so miserable as I am."

"Yes, dear, it's difficult to imagine anything more distressing; but it seems to me that you partly brought it on yourself, for it was you who used the most offensive word. Tell me, is Lucy in the parlour?"

"Yes, there she is, in the corner."

With a dignified and careful movement of her head she indicated a very fair little girl. Her cheeks, too, were flushed, and her eyes were red. Apparently she was giving an account of the drama, which Sister Sainte-Félix had so fortunately interrupted, to an old lady who was listening attentively.

Mlle. Lucy, while she talked with an earnestness appropriate to the subject, kept looking furtively at Hélène and me.

"Dear child," I said to Hélène, "do you trust me?"

"Yes, Maxime, I trust you very much."

"In that case I will tell you what to do. Go very gently behind Mlle. Lucy's chair; take her head in your hands – like this, when she is not looking – and kiss her on both cheeks – like this, with all your might – and then you will see what she will do in her turn."

For a second or two Hélène seemed to hesitate; then she set

off at a great rate, fell like a thunder-clap on Mlle. Campbell, but nevertheless gave her the sweetest of surprises. The two young sufferers, at last eternally united, mingled their tears in a touching group, while the respectable old Mrs. Campbell blew her nose with a noise as of a bagpipe.

Hélène came back to me radiant.

"Well, dear," I said, "I hope you're going to eat your bread now."

"Oh, no! I can't, Maxime. I am too much excited, and – besides, I must tell you – to-day a new pupil came and gave us quite a feast of meringues, éclairs, and chocolate-creams, and I am not a bit hungry. And I am in a great difficulty about it, because when we're not hungry we have to put our bread back in the basket, and in my trouble I forgot, and I shall be punished. But, Maxime, as we're crossing the court when you go, I shall try to drop it down the cellar without any one seeing.

"What, little sister!" I said, colouring a little, "you are going to waste that large piece of bread?"

"It isn't good of me I know, because, perhaps, there are poor people who would be very glad of it, aren't there, Maxime?"

"There certainly are, dear."

"But what do you want me to do? The poor people don't come in here."

"Look here, Hélène, give me the bread, and I'll give it in your name to the first poor man I meet. Will you?"

"Oh, yes!"

The bell rang for school. I broke the bread in two and hid the pieces shamefacedly in my great coat pockets.

"Dear Maxime," said my sister, "you'll come again soon, won't you? Then you'll tell me whether you met a poor man and gave him my bread, and whether he liked it? Good-bye, Maxime."

"Yes, H  l  ne, I met a poor man and gave him your bread, which he seized and carried off to his solitary garret, and he liked it. But this poor man had not courage, for he wept as he ate the food that had come from your dear little hands. I will tell you all this, H  l  ne, because it is good for you to know that there are sufferings more serious than your childish woes. I will tell you everything, except the name of the poor man."

*Tuesday, April 28th.*

At nine o'clock this morning I called at M. Laub  pin's in the vague hope that he might have returned earlier than he intended, but he is not expected until to-morrow. I thought at once of seeing Mme. Laub  pin and explaining the awkward position I was placed in through her husband's absence. While I hesitated in a conflict of shame and necessity, the old servant, alarmed, perhaps, by my hungry gaze, settled the question by suddenly shutting the door. I made up my mind hereupon to fast until the next day. After all, I said to myself, a day's abstinence does not kill one. If this showed an excessive pride, at all events I was the only one to suffer, and consequently it concerned no one but myself. I accordingly made my way to the Sorbonne, where I attended several lectures, trying to fill up my corporeal vacuum

by spiritual sustenance. But when this resource came to an end I found it had been quite inadequate. And I had an attack of nervous irritation which I tried to calm by walking. It was a cold, misty day. As I crossed the Pont des Saints-Pères I stopped for a minute in spite of myself. Leaning on the parapet, I watched the troubled water rushing under the arches. I know not what unholy thoughts shot through my worn and weakened brain. I saw in the gloomiest colours a future of ceaseless struggle, of dependence, and of humiliation, which I was approaching by the dark gate of hunger; I felt a profound and utter disgust of life; it seemed impossible to me under such conditions. At the same time a flame of fierce and brutal anger leaped up in me. Dazed and reeling, I hung over the void, and saw all the river glittering with sparks of fire.

I will not say, as is usual, God would not have it so. I hate these cant phrases, and I dare to say *I* would not. God has made us free, and if ever before I had doubted it, this supreme moment – when soul and body, courage and cowardice, good and evil, held mortal combat within me – would have swept my doubts away forever.

Master of myself again, those terrible waves only suggested an innocent, and rather absurd longing to quench the thirst that tortured me. I soon remembered that I should find much purer water in my room at home. I went quickly towards the *hôtel*, imagining that the most delicious pleasures awaited me there. With pathetic childishness I delighted in this glorious device, and wondered I had not thought of it sooner. On the boulevard I

suddenly came face to face with Gaston de Vaux, whom I had not seen for two years. After a moment's hesitation he stopped, grasped my hand cordially, said a word or two about my travels, and left me hurriedly. But he turned back.

"My friend," he said to me, "you must allow me to let you share a piece of good luck I've just had. I have put my hand on a treasure; I have got some cigars which cost me two francs each, but really they are beyond price. Here's one; you must tell me how you like it. *An revoir*, old man!"

Wearily I mounted the six flights to my room, and trembling with emotion, I seized my friendly water-bottle and swallowed the contents in small mouthfuls. Afterward I lighted my friend's cigar, and smiled encouragement at myself in the glass. Feeling that movement and the distraction of the streets were good for me, I went out again directly. Opening my door, I was surprised and annoyed to see the wife of the concierge of the *hôtel* standing in the narrow corridor. My sudden appearance seemed to disconcert her. This woman had formerly been in my mother's service, and had become a favourite with her, and when she married, my mother had given her the profitable post she still held. For some days I had an idea that she was watching me, and now, having nearly caught her in the act, I asked her roughly what she wanted.

"Oh, nothing, M. Maxime, nothing," she replied, much confused. "I was seeing to the gas."

I shrugged my shoulders and went away.

Night was falling, so I could walk about in the more frequented places without being fearful of awkward recognitions. I was obliged to throw away my cigar – it made me feel sick. My promenade lasted two or three hours, and painful hours they were. There is something peculiarly poignant in feeling oneself attacked, in the midst of the brilliance and plenty of civilization, by the scourge of savage life – hunger. It brings you near to madness. It's a tiger springing at your throat in the middle of the boulevards.

I made some original reflections. Hunger, after all, is not an empty word. There actually is a complaint of that name, and there are human beings who endure nearly every day what through a mere accident I am suffering for once in my life. And how many have their misery embittered by troubles which I am spared! I know that the one being in the world whom I love is sheltered from such sufferings as mine. But how many cannot suffer alone; how many must hear the heart-rending cry of nature repeated on beloved lips that ask for food; how many for whom pale women and unsmiling children are waiting in bare cold rooms! Poor creatures! Blessed be holy charity!

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