

# HONORÉ DE BALZAC

THE JEALOUSIES OF A  
COUNTRY TOWN

Оноре де Бальзак

**The Jealousies of a Country Town**

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**де Бальзак О.**

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# Honoré de Balzac

## The Jealousies of a Country Town

### INTRODUCTION

The two stories of */Les Rivalites/* are more closely connected than it was always Balzac's habit to connect the tales which he united under a common heading. Not only are both devoted to the society of Alençon – a town and neighborhood to which he had evidently strong, though it is not clearly known what, attractions – not only is the Chevalier de Valois a notable figure in each; but the community, imparted by the elaborate study of the old */noblesse/* in each case, is even greater than either of these ties could give. Indeed, if instead of */Les Rivalites/* the author had chosen some label indicating the study of the */noblesse qui s'en va/*, it might almost have been preferable. He did not, however; and though in a man who so constantly changed his titles and his arrangements the actual ones are not excessively authoritative, they have authority.

*/La Vieille Fille/*, despite a certain tone of levity – which, to do Balzac justice, is not common with him, and which is rather hard upon the poor heroine – is one of the best and liveliest things he ever did. The opening picture of the Chevalier, though, like other things of its author's, especially in his overtures, liable to the charge of being elaborated a little too much, is one of the very best things of its kind, and is a sort of */locus classicus/* for its subject. The whole picture of country town society is about as good as it can be; and the only blot that I know is to be found in the sentimental Athanase, who is not quite within Balzac's province, extensive as that province is. If we compare Mr. Augustus Moddle, we shall see one of the not too numerous instances in which Dickens has a clear advantage over Balzac; and if it be retorted that Balzac's object was not to present a merely ridiculous object, the rejoinder is not very far to seek. Such a character, with such a fate as Balzac has assigned to him, must be either humorously grotesque or unfeignedly pathetic, and Balzac has not quite made Athanase either.

He is, however, if he is a failure, about the only failure in the book, and he is atoned for by a whole bundle of successes. Of the Chevalier, little more need be said. Balzac, it must be remembered, was the oldest novelist of distinct genius who had the opportunity of delineating the survivors of the */ancien regime/* from the life, and directly. It is certain – even if we hesitate at believing him quite so familiar with all the classes of higher society from the */Faubourg/* downwards, as he would have us believe him – that he saw something of most of them, and his genius was unquestionably of the kind to which a mere thumbnail study, a mere passing view, suffices for the acquisition of a thorough working knowledge of the object. In this case the Chevalier has served, and not improperly served, as the original of a thousand after-studies. His rival, less carefully projected, is also perhaps a little less alive. Again, Balzac was old enough to have foregathered with many men of the Revolution. But the most characteristic of them were not long-lived, the "little window" and other things having had a bad effect on them; and most of those who survived had, by the time he was old enough to take much notice, gone through metamorphoses of Bonapartism, Constitutional Liberalism, and what not. But still du Bousquier */is/* alive, as well as all the minor assistants and spectators in the battle for the old maid's hand. Suzanne, that tactful and graceless Suzanne to whom we are introduced first of all, is very much alive; and for all her gracelessness, not at all disagreeable. I am only sorry that she sold the counterfeit presentment of the Princess Goritzka after all.

*/Le Cabinet des Antiques/*, in its Alençon scenes, is a worthy pendant to */La Vieille Fille/*. The old-world honor of the Marquis d'Esgrignon, the thankless sacrifices of Armande, the */prisca fides/* of Maître Chesnel, present pictures for which, out of Balzac, we can look only in Jules Sandeau, and which in Sandeau, though they are presented with a more poetical touch, have less masterly outline

than here. One takes – or, at least, I take – less interest in the ignoble intrigues of the other side, except in so far as they menace the fortunes of a worthy house unworthily represented. Victurnien d'Esgrignon, like his companion Savinien de Portendure (who, however, is, in every respect, a very much better fellow), does not argue in Balzac any high opinion of the /fils de famille/. He is, in fact, an extremely feeble youth, who does not seem to have got much real satisfaction out of the escapades, for which he risked not merely his family's fortune, but his own honor, and who would seem to have been a rake, not from natural taste and spirit and relish, but because it seemed to him to be the proper thing to be. But the beginnings of the fortune of the aspiring and intriguing Camusots are admirably painted; and Madame de Maufrigneuse, that rather doubtful divinity, who appears so frequently in Balzac, here acts the /*dea ex machina*/ with considerable effect. And we end well (as we generally do when Blondet, whom Balzac seems more than once to adopt as mask, is the narrator), in the last glimpse of Mlle. Armande left alone with the remains of her beauty, the ruins of everything dear to her – and God.

These two stories were written at no long interval, yet, for some reason or other, Balzac did not at once unite them. /*La Vieille Fille*/ first appeared in November and December 1836 in the /*Presse*/, and was inserted next year in the /*Scenes de la Vie de Province*/. It had three chapter divisions. The second part did not appear all at once. Its first installment, under the general title, came out in the /*Chronique de Paris*/ even before the /*Vieille Fille*/ appeared in March 1836; the completion was not published (under the title of /*Les Rivalites en Province*/) till the autumn of 1838, when the /*Constitutionnel*/ served as its vehicle. There were eight chapter divisions in this latter. The whole of the /*Cabinet*/ was published in book form (with /*Gambara*/ to follow it) in 1839. There were some changes here; and the divisions were abolished when the whole book in 1844 entered the /*Comedie*/. One of the greatest mistakes which, in my humble judgment, the organizers of the /*edition definitive*/ have made, is their adoption of Balzac's never executed separation of the pair and deletion of the excellent joint-title /*Les Rivalites*/.

*George Saintsbury*

**I**  
**AN OLD MAID**

**BY**

**HONORE DE BALZAC**

**Translated By**

**Katharine Prescott Wormeley**

## DEDICATION

To Monsieur Eugene-Auguste-Georges-Louis Midy de la Greneraye Surville,  
Royal Engineer of the Ponts at Chausses.

As a testimony to the affection of his brother-in-law,

*De Balzac*



## AN OLD MAID

### CHAPTER I ONE OF MANY CHEVALIERS DE VALOIS

Most persons have encountered, in certain provinces in France, a number of Chevaliers de Valois. One lived in Normandy, another at Bourges, a third (with whom we have here to do) flourished in Alencon, and doubtless the South possesses others. The number of the Valesian tribe is, however, of no consequence to the present tale. All these chevaliers, among whom were doubtless some who were Valois as Louis XIV. was Bourbon, knew so little of one another that it was not advisable to speak to one about the others. They were all willing to leave the Bourbons in tranquil possession of the throne of France; for it was too plainly established that Henri IV. became king for want of a male heir in the first Orleans branch called the Valois. If there are any Valois, they descend from Charles de Valois, Duc d'Angouleme, son of Charles IX. and Marie Touchet, the male line from whom ended, until proof to the contrary be produced, in the person of the Abbe de Rothelin. The Valois-Saint-Remy, who descended from Henri II., also came to an end in the famous Lamothe-Valois implicated in the affair of the Diamond Necklace.

Each of these many chevaliers, if we may believe reports, was, like the Chevalier of Alencon, an old gentleman, tall, thin, withered, and moneyless. He of Bourges had emigrated; he of Touraine hid himself; he of Alencon fought in La Vendee and "chouanized" somewhat. The youth of the latter was spent in Paris, where the Revolution overtook him when thirty years of age in the midst of his conquests and gallantries.

The Chevalier de Valois of Alencon was accepted by the highest aristocracy of the province as a genuine Valois; and he distinguished himself, like the rest of his homonyms, by excellent manners, which proved him a man of society. He dined out every day, and played cards every evening. He was thought witty, thanks to his foible for relating a quantity of anecdotes on the reign of Louis XV. and the beginnings of the Revolution. When these tales were heard for the first time, they were held to be well narrated. He had, moreover, the great merit of not repeating his personal bons mots and of never speaking of his love-affairs, though his smiles and his airs and graces were delightfully indiscreet. The worthy gentleman used his privilege as a Voltairean noble to stay away from mass; and great indulgence was shown to his irreligion because of his devotion to the royal cause. One of his particular graces was the air and manner (imitated, no doubt, from Mole) with which he took snuff from a gold box adorned with the portrait of the Princess Goritza, – a charming Hungarian, celebrated for her beauty in the last years of the reign of Louis XV. Having been attached during his youth to that illustrious stranger, he still mentioned her with emotion. For her sake he had fought a duel with Monsieur de Lauzun.

The chevalier, now fifty-eight years of age, owned to only fifty; and he might well allow himself that innocent deception, for, among the other advantages granted to fair thin persons, he managed to preserve the still youthful figure which saves men as well as women from an appearance of old age. Yes, remember this: all of life, or rather all the elegance that expresses life, is in the figure. Among the chevalier's other possessions must be counted an enormous nose with which nature had endowed him. This nose vigorously divided a pale face into two sections which seemed to have no knowledge of each other, for one side would redden under the process of digestion, while the other continued white. This fact is worthy of remark at a period when physiology is so busy with the human heart. The incandescence, so to call it, was on the left side. Though his long slim legs, supporting a lank body, and his pallid skin, were not indicative of health, Monsieur de Valois ate like an ogre and declared he had a malady called in the provinces "hot liver," perhaps to excuse his monstrous

appetite. The circumstance of his singular flush confirmed this declaration; but in a region where repasts are developed on the line of thirty or forty dishes and last four hours, the chevalier's stomach would seem to have been a blessing bestowed by Providence on the good town of Alencon. According to certain doctors, heat on the left side denotes a prodigal heart. The chevalier's gallantries confirmed this scientific assertion, the responsibility for which does not rest, fortunately, on the historian.

In spite of these symptoms, Monsieur de Valois' constitution was vigorous, consequently long-lived. If his liver "heated," to use an old-fashioned word, his heart was not less inflammable. His face was wrinkled and his hair silvered; but an intelligent observer would have recognized at once the stigmata of passion and the furrows of pleasure which appeared in the crow's-feet and the marches-du-palais, so prized at the court of Cythera. Everything about this dainty chevalier bespoke the "ladies' man." He was so minute in his ablutions that his cheeks were a pleasure to look upon; they seemed to have been laved in some miraculous water. The part of his skull which his hair refused to cover shone like ivory. His eyebrows, like his hair, affected youth by the care and regularity with which they were combed. His skin, already white, seemed to have been extra-whitened by some secret compound. Without using perfumes, the chevalier exhaled a certain fragrance of youth, that refreshed the atmosphere. His hands, which were those of a gentleman, and were cared for like the hands of a pretty woman, attracted the eye to their rosy, well-shaped nails. In short, had it not been for his magisterial and stupendous nose, the chevalier might have been thought a trifle too dainty.

We must here compel ourselves to spoil this portrait by the avowal of a littleness. The chevalier put cotton in his ears, and wore, appended to them, two little ear-rings representing negroes' heads in diamonds, of admirable workmanship. He clung to these singular appendages, explaining that since his ears had been bored he had ceased to have headaches (he had had headaches). We do not present the chevalier as an accomplished man; but surely we can pardon, in an old celibate whose heart sends so much blood to his left cheek, these adorable qualities, founded, perhaps, on some sublime secret history.

Besides, the Chevalier de Valois redeemed those negroes' heads by so many other graces that society felt itself sufficiently compensated. He really took such immense trouble to conceal his age and give pleasure to his friends. In the first place, we must call attention to the extreme care he gave to his linen, the only distinction that well-bred men can nowadays exhibit in their clothes. The linen of the chevalier was invariably of a fineness and whiteness that were truly aristocratic. As for his coat, though remarkable for its cleanliness, it was always half worn-out, but without spots or creases. The preservation of that garment was something marvellous to those who noticed the chevalier's high-bred indifference to its shabbiness. He did not go so far as to scrape the seams with glass, – a refinement invented by the Prince of Wales; but he did practice the rudiments of English elegance with a personal satisfaction little understood by the people of Alencon. The world owes a great deal to persons who take such pains to please it. In this there is certainly some accomplishment of that most difficult precept of the Gospel about rendering good for evil. This freshness of ablution and all the other little cares harmonized charmingly with the blue eyes, the ivory teeth, and the blond person of the old chevalier.

The only blemish was that this retired Adonis had nothing manly about him; he seemed to be employing this toilet varnish to hide the ruins occasioned by the military service of gallantry only. But we must hasten to add that his voice produced what might be called an antithesis to his blond delicacy. Unless you adopted the opinion of certain observers of the human heart, and thought that the chevalier had the voice of his nose, his organ of speech would have amazed you by its full and redundant sound. Without possessing the volume of classical bass voices, the tone of it was pleasing from a slightly muffled quality like that of an English bugle, which is firm and sweet, strong but velvety.

The chevalier had repudiated the ridiculous costume still preserved by certain monarchical old men; he had frankly modernized himself. He was always seen in a maroon-colored coat with gilt buttons, half-tight breeches of poulte-de-soie with gold buckles, a white waistcoat without embroidery,

and a tight cravat showing no shirt-collar, – a last vestige of the old French costume which he did not renounce, perhaps, because it enabled him to show a neck like that of the sleekest abbe. His shoes were noticeable for their square buckles, a style of which the present generation has no knowledge; these buckles were fastened to a square of polished black leather. The chevalier allowed two watch-chains to hang parallel to each other from each of his waistcoat pockets, – another vestige of the eighteenth century, which the Incroyables had not disdained to use under the Directory. This transition costume, uniting as it did two centuries, was worn by the chevalier with the high-bred grace of an old French marquis, the secret of which is lost to France since the day when Fleury, Mole's last pupil, vanished.

The private life of this old bachelor was apparently open to all eyes, though in fact it was quite mysterious. He lived in a lodging that was modest, to say the best of it, in the rue du Cours, on the second floor of a house belonging to Madame Lardot, the best and busiest washerwoman in the town. This circumstance will explain the excessive nicety of his linen. Ill-luck would have it that the day came when Alencon was guilty of believing that the chevalier had not always comported himself as a gentleman should, and that in fact he was secretly married in his old age to a certain Cesarine, – the mother of a child which had had the impertinence to come into the world without being called for.

"He had given his hand," as a certain Monsieur du Bousquier remarked, "to the person who had long had him under irons."

This horrible calumny embittered the last days of the dainty chevalier all the more because, as the present Scene will show, he had lost a hope long cherished to which he had made many sacrifices.

Madame Lardot leased to the chevalier two rooms on the second floor of her house, for the modest sum of one hundred francs a year. The worthy gentleman dined out every day, returning only in time to go to bed. His sole expense therefore was for breakfast, invariably composed of a cup of chocolate, with bread and butter and fruits in their season. He made no fire except in the coldest winter, and then only enough to get up by. Between eleven and four o'clock he walked about, went to read the papers, and paid visits. From the time of his settling in Alencon he had nobly admitted his poverty, saying that his whole fortune consisted in an annuity of six hundred francs a year, the sole remains of his former opulence, – a property which obliged him to see his man of business (who held the annuity papers) quarterly. In truth, one of the Alencon bankers paid him every three months one hundred and fifty francs, sent down by Monsieur Bordin of Paris, the last of the /procureurs du Chatelet/. Every one knew these details because the chevalier exacted the utmost secrecy from the persons to whom he first confided them.

Monsieur de Valois gathered the fruit of his misfortunes. His place at table was laid in all the most distinguished houses in Alencon, and he was bidden to all soirees. His talents as a card-player, a narrator, an amiable man of the highest breeding, were so well known and appreciated that parties would have seemed a failure if the dainty connoisseur was absent. Masters of houses and their wives felt the need of his approving grimace. When a young woman heard the chevalier say at a ball, "You are delightfully well-dressed!" she was more pleased at such praise than she would have been at mortifying a rival. Monsieur de Valois was the only man who could perfectly pronounce certain phrases of the olden time. The words, "my heart," "my jewel," "my little pet," "my queen," and the amorous diminutives of 1770, had a grace that was quite irresistible when they came from his lips. In short, the chevalier had the privilege of superlatives. His compliments, of which he was stingy, won the good graces of all the old women; he made himself agreeable to every one, even to the officials of the government, from whom he wanted nothing. His behavior at cards had a lofty distinction which everybody noticed: he never complained; he praised his adversaries when they lost; he did not rebuke or teach his partners by showing them how they ought to have played. When, in the course of a deal, those sickening dissertations on the game would take place, the chevalier invariably drew out his snuff-box with a gesture that was worthy of Mole, looked at the Princess Goritzza, raised the cover with dignity, shook, sifted, massed the snuff, and gathered his pinch, so that by the time the cards were dealt he had decorated both nostrils and replaced the princess in his waistcoat pocket, – always on

his left side. A gentleman of the "good" century (in distinction from the "grand" century) could alone have invented that compromise between contemptuous silence and a sarcasm which might not have been understood. He accepted poor players and knew how to make the best of them. His delightful equability of temper made many persons say, —

"I do admire the Chevalier de Valois!"

His conversation, his manners, seemed bland, like his person. He endeavored to shock neither man nor woman. Indulgent to defects both physical and mental, he listened patiently (by the help of the Princess Goritza) to the many dull people who related to him the petty miseries of provincial life, — an egg ill-boiled for breakfast, coffee with feathered cream, burlesque details about health, disturbed sleep, dreams, visits. The chevalier could call up a languishing look, he could take on a classic attitude to feign compassion, which made him a most valuable listener; he could put in an "Ah!" and a "Bah!" and a "What DID you do?" with charming appropriateness. He died without any one suspecting him of even an allusion to the tender passages of his romance with the Princess Goritza. Has any one ever reflected on the service a dead sentiment can do to society; how love may become both social and useful? This will serve to explain why, in spite of his constant winning at play (he never left a salon without carrying off with him about six francs), the old chevalier remained the spoilt darling of the town. His losses — which, by the bye, he always proclaimed, were very rare.

All who know him declare that they have never met, not even in the Egyptian museum at Turin, so agreeable a mummy. In no country in the world did parasitism ever take on so pleasant a form. Never did selfishness of a most concentrated kind appear less forth-putting, less offensive, than in this old gentleman; it stood him in place of devoted friendship. If some one asked Monsieur de Valois to do him a little service which might have discommoded him, that some one did not part from the worthy chevalier without being truly enchanted with him, and quite convinced that he either could not do the service demanded, or that he should injure the affair if he meddled in it.

To explain the problematic existence of the chevalier, the historian, whom Truth, that cruel wanton, grasps by the throat, is compelled to say that after the "glorious" sad days of July, Alencon discovered that the chevalier's nightly winnings amounted to about one hundred and fifty francs every three months; and that the clever old nobleman had had the pluck to send to himself his annuity in order not to appear in the eyes of a community, which loves the main chance, to be entirely without resources. Many of his friends (he was by that time dead, you will please remark) have contested mordicus this curious fact, declaring it to be a fable, and upholding the Chevalier de Valois as a respectable and worthy gentleman whom the liberals calumniated. Luckily for shrewd players, there are people to be found among the spectators who will always sustain them. Ashamed of having to defend a piece of wrong-doing, they stoutly deny it. Do not accuse them of wilful infatuation; such men have a sense of their dignity; governments set them the example of a virtue which consists in burying their dead without chanting the Misere of their defeats. If the chevalier did allow himself this bit of shrewd practice, — which, by the bye, would have won him the regard of the Chevalier de Gramont, a smile from the Baron de Foeneste, a shake of the hand from the Marquis de Moncade, — was he any the less that amiable guest, that witty talker, that imperturbable card-player, that famous teller of anecdotes, in whom all Alencon took delight? Besides, in what way was this action, which is certainly within the rights of a man's own will, — in what way was it contrary to the ethics of a gentleman? When so many persons are forced to pay annuities to others, what more natural than to pay one to his own best friend? But Laius is dead —

To return to the period of which we are writing: after about fifteen years of this way of life the chevalier had amassed ten thousand and some odd hundred francs. On the return of the Bourbons, one of his old friends, the Marquis de Pombreton, formerly lieutenant in the Black mousquetaires, returned to him — so he said — twelve hundred pistoles which he had lent to the marquis for the purpose of emigrating. This event made a sensation; it was used later to refute the sarcasms of the "Constitutionnel," on the method employed by some emigres in paying their debts. When this noble

act of the Marquis de Pombreton was lauded before the chevalier, the good man reddened even to his right cheek. Every one rejoiced frankly at this windfall for Monsieur de Valois, who went about consulting moneyed people as to the safest manner of investing this fragment of his past opulence. Confiding in the future of the Restoration, he finally placed his money on the Grand-Livre at the moment when the funds were at fifty-six francs and twenty-five centimes. Messieurs de Lenoncourt, de Navarreins, de Verneuil, de Fontaine, and La Billardiere, to whom he was known, he said, obtained for him, from the king's privy purse, a pension of three hundred francs, and sent him, moreover, the cross of Saint-Louis. Never was it known positively by what means the old chevalier obtained these two solemn consecrations of his title and merits. But one thing is certain; the cross of Saint-Louis authorized him to take the rank of retired colonel in view of his service in the Catholic armies of the West.

Besides his fiction of an annuity, about which no one at the present time knew anything, the chevalier really had, therefore, a bona fide income of a thousand francs. But in spite of this bettering of his circumstances, he made no change in his life, manners, or appearance, except that the red ribbon made a fine effect on his maroon-colored coat, and completed, so to speak, the physiognomy of a gentleman. After 1802, the chevalier sealed his letters with a very old seal, ill-engraved to be sure, by which the Casterans, the d'Esgrignons, the Troisvilles were enabled to see that he bore: / Party of France, two cottises gemelled gules, and gules, five mascles or, placed end to end; on a chief sable, a cross argent/. For crest, a knight's helmet. For motto: "Valeo." Bearing such noble arms, the so-called bastard of the Valois had the right to get into all the royal carriages of the world.

Many persons envied the quiet existence of this old bachelor, spent on whist, boston, backgammon, reversi, and piquet, all well played, on dinners well digested, snuff gracefully inhaled, and tranquil walks about the town. Nearly all Alencon believed this life to be exempt from ambitions and serious interests; but no man has a life as simple as envious neighbors attribute to him. You will find in the most out-of-the way villages human mollusks, creatures apparently dead, who have passions for lepidoptera or for conchology, let us say, – beings who will give themselves infinite pains about moths, butterflies, or the concha Veneris. Not only did the chevalier have his own particular shells, but he cherished an ambitious desire which he pursued with a craft so profound as to be worthy of Sixtus the Fifth: he wanted to marry a certain rich old maid, with the intention, no doubt, of making her a stepping-stone by which to reach the more elevated regions of the court. There, then, lay the secret of his royal bearing and of his residence in Alencon.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **SUSANNAH AND THE ELDERS**

On a Wednesday morning, early, toward the middle of spring, in the year 16, – such was his mode of reckoning, – at the moment when the chevalier was putting on his old green-flowered damask dressing-gown, he heard, despite the cotton in his ears, the light step of a young girl who was running up the stairway. Presently three taps were discreetly struck upon the door; then, without waiting for any response, a handsome girl slipped like an eel into the room occupied by the old bachelor.

"Ah! is it you, Suzanne?" said the Chevalier de Valois, without discontinuing his occupation, which was that of stropping his razor. "What have you come for, my dear little jewel of mischief?"

"I have come to tell you something which may perhaps give you as much pleasure as pain?"

"Is it anything about Cesarine?"

"Cesarine! much I care about your Cesarine!" she said with a saucy air, half serious, half indifferent.

This charming Suzanne, whose present comical performance was to exercise a great influence in the principal personages of our history, was a work-girl at Madame Lardot's. One word here on the topography of the house. The wash-rooms occupied the whole of the ground floor. The little

courtyard was used to hang out on wire cords embroidered handkerchiefs, collarets, capes, cuffs, frilled shirts, cravats, laces, embroidered dresses, – in short, all the fine linen of the best families of the town. The chevalier assumed to know from the number of her capes in the wash how the love-affairs of the wife of the prefect were going on. Though he guessed much from observations of this kind, the chevalier was discretion itself; he was never betrayed into an epigram (he had plenty of wit) which might have closed to him an agreeable salon. You are therefore to consider Monsieur de Valois as a man of superior manners, whose talents, like those of many others, were lost in a narrow sphere. Only – for, after all, he was a man – he permitted himself certain penetrating glances which could make some women tremble; although they all loved him heartily as soon as they discovered the depth of his discretion and the sympathy that he felt for their little weaknesses.

The head woman, Madame Lardot's factotum, an old maid of forty-six, hideous to behold, lived on the opposite side of the passage to the chevalier. Above them were the attics where the linen was dried in winter. Each apartment had two rooms, – one lighted from the street, the other from the courtyard. Beneath the chevalier's room there lived a paralytic, Madame Lardot's grandfather, an old buccaneer named Grevin, who had served under Admiral Simeuse in India, and was now stone-deaf. As for Madame Lardot, who occupied the other lodging on the first floor, she had so great a weakness for persons of condition that she may well have been thought blind to the ways of the chevalier. To her, Monsieur de Valois was a despotic monarch who did right in all things. Had any of her workwomen been guilty of a happiness attributed to the chevalier she would have said, "He is so lovable!" Thus, though the house was of glass, like all provincial houses, it was discreet as a robber's cave.

A born confidant to all the little intrigues of the work-rooms, the chevalier never passed the door, which usually stood open, without giving something to his little ducks, – chocolate, bonbons, ribbons, laces, gilt crosses, and such like trifles adored by grisettes; consequently, the kind old gentleman was adored in return. Women have an instinct which enables them to divine the men who love them, who like to be near them, and exact no payment for gallantries. In this respect women have the instinct of dogs, who in a mixed company will go straight to the man to whom animals are sacred.

The poor Chevalier de Valois retained from his former life the need of bestowing gallant protection, a quality of the seigneurs of other days. Faithful to the system of the "petite maison," he liked to enrich women, – the only beings who know how to receive, because they can always return. But the poor chevalier could no longer ruin himself for a mistress. Instead of the choicest bonbons wrapped in bank-bills, he gallantly presented paper-bags full of toffee. Let us say to the glory of Alencon that the toffee was accepted with more joy than la Duthe ever showed at a gilt service or a fine equipage offered by the Comte d'Artois. All these grisettes fully understood the fallen majesty of the Chevalier de Valois, and they kept their private familiarities with him a profound secret for his sake. If they were questioned about him in certain houses when they carried home the linen, they always spoke respectfully of the chevalier, and made him out older than he really was; they talked of him as a most respectable monsieur, whose life was a flower of sanctity; but once in their own regions they perched on his shoulders like so many parrots. He liked to be told the secrets which washerwomen discover in the bosom of households, and day after day these girls would tell him the cancans which were going the round of Alencon. He called them his "petticoat gazettes," his "talking feuilletons." Never did Monsieur de Sartines have spies more intelligent and less expensive, or minions who showed more honor while displaying their rascality of mind. So it may be said that in the mornings, while breakfasting, the chevalier usually amused himself as much as the saints in heaven.

Suzanne was one of his favorites, a clever, ambitious girl, made of the stuff of a Sophie Arnold, and handsome withal, as the handsomest courtesan invited by Titian to pose on black velvet for a model of Venus; although her face, fine about the eyes and forehead, degenerated, lower down, into commonness of outline. Hers was a Norman beauty, fresh, high-colored, redundant, the flesh of Rubens covering the muscles of the Farnese Hercules, and not the slender articulations of the Venus de' Medici, Apollo's graceful consort.

"Well, my child, tell me your great or your little adventure, whatever it is."

The particular point about the chevalier which would have made him noticeable from Paris to Peking, was the gentle paternity of his manner to grisettes. They reminded him of the illustrious operatic queens of his early days, whose celebrity was European during a good third of the eighteenth century. It is certain that the old gentleman, who had lived in days gone by with that feminine nation now as much forgotten as many other great things, – like the Jesuits, the Buccaneers, the Abbés, and the Farmers-General, – had acquired an irresistible good-humor, a kindly ease, a *laissez-aller* devoid of egotism, the self-effacement of Jupiter with Alcmena, of the king intending to be duped, who casts his thunderbolts to the devil, wants his Olympus full of follies, little suppers, feminine profusions – but with Juno out of the way, be it understood.

In spite of his old green damask dressing-gown and the bareness of the room in which he sat, where the floor was covered with a shabby tapestry in place of carpet, and the walls were hung with tavern-paper presenting the profiles of Louis XVI. and members of his family, traced among the branches of a weeping willow with other sentimentalities invented by royalism during the Terror, – in spite of his ruins, the chevalier, trimming his beard before a shabby old toilet-table, draped with trumpery lace, exhaled an essence of the eighteenth century. All the libertine graces of his youth reappeared; he seemed to have the wealth of three hundred thousand francs of debt, while his vis-à-vis waited before the door. He was grand, – like Berthier on the retreat from Moscow, issuing orders to an army that existed no longer.

"Monsieur le chevalier," replied Suzanne, drolly, "seems to me I needn't tell you anything; you've only to look."

And Suzanne presented a side view of herself which gave a sort of lawyer's comment to her words. The chevalier, who, you must know, was a sly old bird, lowered his right eye on the grisette, still holding the razor at his throat, and pretended to understand.

"Well, well, my little duck, we'll talk about that presently. But you are rather previous, it seems to me."

"Why, Monsieur le chevalier, ought I to wait until my mother beats me and Madame Lardot turns me off? If I don't get away soon to Paris, I shall never be able to marry here, where men are so ridiculous."

"It can't be helped, my dear; society is changing; women are just as much victims to the present state of things as the nobility themselves. After political overturn comes the overturn of morals. Alas! before long woman won't exist" (he took out the cotton-wool to arrange his ears): "she'll lose everything by rushing into sentiment; she'll wring her nerves; good-bye to all the good little pleasures of our time, desired without shame, accepted without nonsense." (He polished up the little negroes' heads.) "Women had hysterics in those days to get their ends, but now" (he began to laugh) "their vapors end in charcoal. In short, marriage" (here he picked up his pincers to remove a hair) "will become a thing intolerable; whereas it used to be so gay in my day! The reigns of Louis XIV. and Louis XV. – remember this, my child – said farewell to the finest manners and morals ever known to the world."

"But, Monsieur le chevalier," said the grisette, "the matter now concerns the morals and honor of your poor little Suzanne, and I hope you won't abandon her."

"Abandon her!" cried the chevalier, finishing his hair; "I'd sooner abandon my own name."

"Ah!" exclaimed Suzanne.

"Now, listen to me, you little mischief," said the chevalier, sitting down on a huge sofa, formerly called a duchesse, which Madame Lardot had been at some pains to find for him.

He drew the magnificent Suzanne before him, holding her legs between his knees. She let him do as he liked, although in the street she was offish enough to other men, refusing their familiarities partly from decorum and partly for contempt for their commonness. She now stood audaciously in front of the chevalier, who, having fathomed in his day many other mysteries in minds that were far

more wily, took in the situation at a single glance. He knew very well that no young girl would joke about a real dishonor; but he took good care not to knock over the pretty scaffolding of her lie as he touched it.

"We slander ourselves," he said with inimitable craft; "we are as virtuous as that beautiful biblical girl whose name we bear; we can always marry as we please, but we are thirsty for Paris, where charming creatures – and we are no fool – get rich without trouble. We want to go and see if the great capital of pleasures hasn't some young Chevalier de Valois in store for us, with a carriage, diamonds, an opera-box, and so forth. Russians, Austrians, Britons, have millions on which we have an eye. Besides, we are patriotic; we want to help France in getting back her money from the pockets of those gentry. Hey! hey! my dear little devil's duck! it isn't a bad plan. The world you live in may cry out a bit, but success justifies all things. The worst thing in this world, my dear, is to be without money; that's our disease, yours and mine. Now inasmuch as we have plenty of wit, we thought it would be a good thing to parade our dear little honor, or dishonor, to catch an old boy; but that old boy, my dear heart, knows the Alpha and Omega of female tricks, – which means that you could easier put salt on a sparrow's tail than to make me believe I have anything to do with your little affair. Go to Paris, my dear; go at the cost of an old celibate, I won't prevent it; in fact, I'll help you, for an old bachelor, Suzanne, is the natural money-box of a young girl. But don't drag me into the matter. Listen, my queen, you who know life pretty well; you would me great harm and give me much pain, – harm, because you would prevent my marriage in a town where people cling to morality; pain, because if you are in trouble (which I deny, you sly puss!) I haven't a penny to get you out of it. I'm as poor as a church mouse; you know that, my dear. Ah! if I marry Mademoiselle Cormon, if I am once more rich, of course I would prefer you to Cesarine. You've always seemed to me as fine as the gold they gild on lead; you were made to be the love of a great seigneur. I think you so clever that the trick you are trying to play off on me doesn't surprise me one bit; I expected it. You are flinging the scabbard after the sword, and that's daring for a girl. It takes nerve and superior ideas to do it, my angel, and therefore you have won my respectful esteem."

"Monsieur le chevalier, I assure you, you are mistaken, and – "

She colored, and did not dare to say more. The chevalier, with a single glance, had guessed and fathomed her whole plan.

"Yes, yes! I understand: you want me to believe it," he said. "Well! I do believe it. But take my advice: go to Monsieur du Bousquier. Haven't you taken linen there for the last six or eight months? I'm not asking what went on between you; but I know the man: he has immense conceit; he is an old bachelor, and very rich; and he only spends a quarter of a comfortable income. If you are as clever as I suppose, you can go to Paris at his expense. There, run along, my little doe; go and twist him round your finger. Only, mind this: be as supple as silk; at every word take a double turn round him and make a knot. He is a man to fear scandal, and if he has given you a chance to put him in the pillory – in short, understand; threaten him with the ladies of the Maternity Hospital. Besides, he's ambitious. A man succeeds through his wife, and you are handsome and clever enough to make the fortune of a husband. Hey! the mischief! you could hold your own against all the court ladies."

Suzanne, whose mind took in at a flash the chevalier's last words, was eager to run off to du Bousquier, but, not wishing to depart too abruptly, she questioned the chevalier about Paris, all the while helping him to dress. The chevalier, however, divined her desire to be off, and favored it by asking her to tell Cesarine to bring up his chocolate, which Madame Lardot made for him every morning. Suzanne then slipped away to her new victim, whose biography must here be given.

Born of an old Alençon family, du Bousquier was a cross between the bourgeois and the country squire. Finding himself without means on the death of his father, he went, like other ruined provincials, to Paris. On the breaking out of the Revolution he took part in public affairs. In spite of revolutionary principles, which made a hobby of republican honesty, the management of public business in those days was by no means clean. A political spy, a stock-jobber, a contractor, a man who



confiscated in collusion with the syndic of a commune the property of emigres in order to sell them and buy them in, a minister, and a general were all equally engaged in public business. From 1793 to 1799 du Bousquier was commissary of provisions to the French armies. He lived in a magnificent hotel and was one of the matadors of finance, did business with Ouvrard, kept open house, and led the scandalous life of the period, – the life of a Cincinnatus, on sacks of corn harvested without trouble, stolen rations, "little houses" full of mistresses, in which were given splendid fetes to the Directors of the Republic.

The citizen du Bousquier was one of Barras' familiars; he was on the best of terms with Fouché, stood very well with Bernadotte, and fully expected to become a minister by throwing himself into the party which secretly caballed against Bonaparte until Marengo. If it had not been for Kellermann's charge and Desaix's death, du Bousquier would probably have become a minister. He was one of the chief assistances of that secret government whom Napoleon's luck sent behind the scenes in 1793. (See "An Historical Mystery.") The unexpected victory of Marengo was the defeat of that party who actually had their proclamations printed to return to the principles of the Montagne in case the First Consul succumbed.

Convinced of the impossibility of Bonaparte's triumph, du Bousquier staked the greater part of his property on a fall in the Funds, and kept two couriers on the field of battle. The first started for Paris when Melas' victory was certain; the second, starting four hours later, brought the news of the defeat of the Austrians. Du Bousquier cursed Kellermann and Desaix; he dared not curse Bonaparte, who might owe him millions. This alternative of millions to be earned and present ruin staring him in the face, deprived the purveyor of most of his faculties: he became nearly imbecile for several days; the man had so abused his health by excesses that when the thunderbolt fell upon him he had no strength to resist. The payment of his bills against the Exchequer gave him some hopes for the future, but, in spite of all efforts to ingratiate himself, Napoleon's hatred to the contractors who had speculated on his defeat made itself felt; du Bousquier was left without a sou. The immorality of his private life, his intimacy with Barras and Bernadotte, displeased the First Consul even more than his manoeuvres at the Bourse, and he struck du Bousquier's name from the list of the government contractors.

Out of all his past opulence du Bousquier saved only twelve hundred francs a year from an investment in the Grand Livre, which he had happened to place there by pure caprice, and which saved him from penury. A man ruined by the First Consul interested the town of Alençon, to which he now returned, where royalism was secretly dominant. Du Bousquier, furious against Bonaparte, relating stories against him of his meanness, of Josephine's improprieties, and all the other scandalous anecdotes of the last ten years, was well received.

About this time, when he was somewhere between forty and fifty, du Bousquier's appearance was that of a bachelor of thirty-six, of medium height, plump as a purveyor, proud of his vigorous calves, with a strongly marked countenance, a flattened nose, the nostrils garnished with hair, black eyes with thick lashes, from which darted shrewd glances like those of Monsieur de Talleyrand, though somewhat dulled. He still wore republican whiskers and his hair very long; his hands, adorned with bunches of hair on each knuckle, showed the power of his muscular system in their prominent blue veins. He had the chest of the Farnese Hercules, and shoulders fit to carry the stocks. Such shoulders are seen nowadays only at Tortoni's. This wealth of masculine vigor counted for much in du Bousquier's relations with others. And yet in him, as in the chevalier, symptoms appeared which contrasted oddly with the general aspect of their persons. The late purveyor had not the voice of his muscles. We do not mean that his voice was a mere thread, such as we sometimes hear issuing from the mouth of these walruses; on the contrary, it was a strong voice, but stifled, an idea of which can be given only by comparing it with the noise of a saw cutting into soft and moistened wood, – the voice of a worn-out speculator.

In spite of the claims which the enmity of the First Consul gave Monsieur du Bousquier to enter the royalist society of the province, he was not received in the seven or eight families who composed the faubourg Saint-Germain of Alencon, among whom the Chevalier de Valois was welcome. He had offered himself in marriage, through her notary, to Mademoiselle Armande, sister of the most distinguished noble in the town; to which offer he received a refusal. He consoled himself as best he could in the society of a dozen rich families, former manufacturers of the old point d'Alencon, owners of pastures and cattle, or merchants doing a wholesale business in linen, among whom, as he hoped, he might find a wealthy wife. In fact, all his hopes now converged to the perspective of a fortunate marriage. He was not without a certain financial ability, which many persons used to their profit. Like a ruined gambler who advises neophytes, he pointed out enterprises and speculations, together with the means and chances of conducting them. He was thought a good administrator, and it was often a question of making him mayor of Alencon; but the memory of his underhand jobbery still clung to him, and he was never received at the prefecture. All the succeeding governments, even that of the Hundred Days, refused to appoint him mayor of Alencon, – a place he coveted, which, could he have had it, would, he thought, have won him the hand of a certain old maid on whom his matrimonial views now turned.

Du Bousquier's aversion to the Imperial government had thrown him at first into the royalist circles of Alencon, where he remained in spite of the rebuffs he received there; but when, after the first return of the Bourbons, he was still excluded from the prefecture, that mortification inspired him with a hatred as deep as it was secret against the royalists. He now returned to his old opinions, and became the leader of the liberal party in Alencon, the invisible manipulator of elections, and did immense harm to the Restoration by the cleverness of his underhand proceedings and the perfidy of his outward behavior. Du Bousquier, like all those who live by their heads only, carried on his hatreds with the quiet tranquillity of a rivulet, feeble apparently, but inexhaustible. His hatred was that of a negro, so peaceful that it deceived the enemy. His vengeance, brooded over for fifteen years, was as yet satisfied by no victory, not even that of July, 1830.

It was not without some private intention that the Chevalier de Valois had turned Suzanne's designs upon Monsieur du Bousquier. The liberal and the royalist had mutually divined each other in spite of the wide dissimulation with which they hid their common hope from the rest of the town. The two old bachelors were secretly rivals. Each had formed a plan to marry the Demoiselle Cormon, whom Monsieur de Valois had mentioned to Suzanne. Both, ensconced in their idea and wearing the armor of apparent indifference, awaited the moment when some lucky chance might deliver the old maid over to them. Thus, if the two old bachelors had not been kept asunder by the two political systems of which they each offered a living expression, their private rivalry would still have made them enemies. Epochs put their mark on men. These two individuals proved the truth of that axiom by the opposing historic tints that were visible in their faces, in their conversation, in their ideas, and in their clothes. One, abrupt, energetic, with loud, brusque manners, curt, rude speech, dark in tone, in hair, in look, terrible apparently, in reality as impotent as an insurrection, represented the republic admirably. The other, gentle and polished, elegant and nice, attaining his ends by the slow and infallible means of diplomacy, faithful to good taste, was the express image of the old courtier regime.

The two enemies met nearly every evening on the same ground. The war was courteous and benign on the side of the chevalier; but du Bousquier showed less ceremony on his, though still preserving the outward appearances demanded by society, for he did not wish to be driven from the place. They themselves fully understood each other; but in spite of the shrewd observation which provincials bestow on the petty interests of their own little centre, no one in the town suspected the rivalry of these two men. Monsieur le Chevalier de Valois occupied a vantage-ground: he had never asked for the hand of Mademoiselle Cormon; whereas du Bousquier, who entered the lists soon after his rejection by the most distinguished family in the place, had been refused. But the chevalier

believed that his rival had still such strong chances of success that he dealt him this coup de Jarnac with a blade (namely, Suzanne) that was finely tempered for the purpose. The chevalier had cast his plummet-line into the waters of du Bousquier; and, as we shall see by the sequel, he was not mistaken in any of his conjectures.

Suzanne tripped with a light foot from the rue du Cours, by the rue de la Porte de Seez and the rue du Bercaill, to the rue du Cygne, where, about five years earlier, du Bousquier had bought a little house built of gray Jura stone, which is something between Breton slate and Norman granite. There he established himself more comfortably than any householder in town; for he had managed to preserve certain furniture and decorations from the days of his splendor. But provincial manners and morals obscured, little by little, the rays of this fallen Sardanapalus; these vestiges of his former luxury now produced the effect of a glass chandelier in a barn. Harmony, that bond of all work, human or divine, was lacking in great things as well as in little ones. The stairs, up which everybody mounted without wiping their feet, were never polished; the walls, painted by some wretched artisan of the neighborhood, were a terror to the eye; the stone mantel-piece, ill-carved, "swore" with the handsome clock, which was further degraded by the company of contemptible candlesticks. Like the period which du Bousquier himself represented, the house was a jumble of dirt and magnificence. Being considered a man of leisure, du Bousquier led the same parasite life as the chevalier; and he who does not spend his income is always rich. His only servant was a sort of Jocrisse, a lad of the neighborhood, rather a ninny, trained slowly and with difficulty to du Bousquier's requirements. His master had taught him, as he might an orang-outang, to rub the floors, dust the furniture, black his boots, brush his coats, and bring a lantern to guide him home at night if the weather were cloudy, and clogs if it rained. Like many other human beings, this lad hadn't stuff enough in him for more than one vice; he was a glutton. Often, when du Bousquier went to a grand dinner, he would take Rene to wait at table; on such occasions he made him take off his blue cotton jacket, with its big pockets hanging round his hips, and always bulging with handkerchiefs, clasp-knives, fruits, or a handful of nuts, and forced him to put on a regulation coat. Rene would then stuff his fill with the other servants. This duty, which du Bousquier had turned into a reward, won him the most absolute discretion from the Breton servant.

"You here, mademoiselle!" said Rene to Suzanne when she entered; "'t'isn't your day. We haven't any linen for the wash, tell Madame Lardot."

"Old stupid!" said Suzanne, laughing.

The pretty girl went upstairs, leaving Rene to finish his porringer of buckwheat in boiled milk. Du Bousquier, still in bed, was revolving in his mind his plans of fortune; for ambition was all that was left to him, as to other men who have sucked dry the orange of pleasure. Ambition and play are inexhaustible; in a well-organized man the passions which proceed from the brain will always survive the passions of the heart.

"Here am I," said Suzanne, sitting down on the bed and jangling the curtain-rings back along the rod with despotic vehemence.

"Quesaco, my charmer?" said the old bachelor, sitting up in bed.

"Monsieur," said Suzanne, gravely, "you must be astonished to see me here at this hour; but I find myself in a condition which obliges me not to care for what people may say about it."

"What does all that mean?" said du Bousquier, crossing his arms.

"Don't you understand me?" said Suzanne. "I know," she continued, making a pretty little face, "how ridiculous it is in a poor girl to come and nag at a man for what he thinks a mere nothing. But if you really knew me, monsieur, if you knew all that I am capable of for a man who would attach himself to me as much as I'm attached to you, you would never repent having married me. Of course it isn't here, in Alencon, that I should be of service to you; but if we went to Paris, you would see where I could lead a man with your mind and your capacities; and just at this time too, when they are remaking the government from top to toe. So – between ourselves, be it said – /is/

what has happened a misfortune? Isn't it rather a piece of luck, which will pay you well? Who and what are you working for now?"

"For myself, of course!" cried du Bousquier, brutally.

"Monster! you'll never be a father!" said Suzanne, giving a tone of prophetic malediction to the words.

"Come, don't talk nonsense, Suzanne," replied du Bousquier; "I really think I am still dreaming."

"How much more reality do you want?" cried Suzanne, standing up.

Du Bousquier rubbed his cotton night-cap to the top of his head with a rotatory motion, which plainly indicated the tremendous fermentation of his ideas.

"He actually believes it!" thought Suzanne, "and he's flattered.

Heaven! how easy it is to gull men!"

"Suzanne, what the devil must I do? It is so extraordinary – I, who thought – The fact is that – No, no, it can't be – "

"What? you can't marry me?"

"Oh! as for that, no; I have engagements."

"With Mademoiselle Armande or Mademoiselle Cormon, who have both refused you? Listen to me, Monsieur du Bousquier, my honor doesn't need gendarmes to drag you to the mayor's office. I sha'n't lack for husbands, thank goodness! and I don't want a man who can't appreciate what I'm worth. But some day you'll repent of the way you are behaving; for I tell you now that nothing on earth, neither gold nor silver, will induce me to return the good thing that belongs to you, if you refuse to accept it to-day."

"But, Suzanne, are you sure?"

"Oh, monsieur!" cried the grisette, wrapping her virtue round her, "what do you take me for? I don't remind you of the promises you made me, which have ruined a poor young girl whose only blame was to have as much ambition as love."

Du Bousquier was torn with conflicting sentiments, joy, distrust, calculation. He had long determined to marry Mademoiselle Cormon; for the Charter, on which he had just been ruminating, offered to his ambition, through the half of her property, the political career of a deputy. Besides, his marriage with the old maid would put him socially so high in the town that he would have great influence. Consequently, the storm upraised by that malicious Suzanne drove him into the wildest embarrassment. Without this secret scheme, he would have married Suzanne without hesitation. In which case, he could openly assume the leadership of the liberal party in Alençon. After such a marriage he would, of course, renounce the best society and take up with the bourgeois class of tradesmen, rich manufacturers and graziers, who would certainly carry him in triumph as their candidate. Du Bousquier already foresaw the Left side.

This solemn deliberation he did not conceal; he rubbed his hands over his head, displacing the cap which covered its disastrous baldness. Suzanne, meantime, like all those persons who succeed beyond their hopes, was silent and amazed. To hide her astonishment, she assumed the melancholy pose of an injured girl at the mercy of her seducer; inwardly she was laughing like a grisette at her clever trick.

"My dear child," said du Bousquier at length, "I'm not to be taken in with such /bosh/, not I!"

Such was the curt remark which ended du Bousquier's meditation. He plumed himself on belonging to the class of cynical philosophers who could never be "taken in" by women, – putting them, one and all, unto the same category, as /suspicious/. These strong-minded persons are usually weak men who have a special catechism in the matter of womenkind. To them the whole sex, from queens of France to milliners, are essentially depraved, licentious, intriguing, not a little rascally, fundamentally deceitful, and incapable of thought about anything but trifles. To them, women are evil-doing queens, who must be allowed to dance and sing and laugh as they please; they see nothing

sacred or saintly in them, nor anything grand; to them there is no poetry in the senses, only gross sensuality. Where such jurisprudence prevails, if a woman is not perpetually tyrannized over, she reduces the man to the condition of a slave. Under this aspect du Bousquier was again the antithesis of the chevalier. When he made his final remark, he flung his night-cap to the foot of the bed, as Pope Gregory did the taper when he fulminated an excommunication; Suzanne then learned for the first time that du Bousquier wore a toupet covering his bald spot.

"Please to remember, Monsieur du Bousquier," she replied majestically, "that in coming here to tell you of this matter I have done my duty; remember that I have offered you my hand, and asked for yours; but remember also that I behaved with the dignity of a woman who respects herself. I have not abased myself to weep like a silly fool; I have not insisted; I have not tormented you. You now know my situation. You must see that I cannot stay in Alençon: my mother would beat me, and Madame Lardot rides a hobby of principles; she'll turn me off. Poor work-girl that I am, must I go to the hospital? must I beg my bread? No! I'd rather throw myself into the Brillante or the Sarthe. But isn't it better that I should go to Paris? My mother could find an excuse to send me there, – an uncle who wants me, or a dying aunt, or a lady who sends for me. But I must have some money for the journey and for – you know what."

This extraordinary piece of news was far more startling to du Bousquier than to the Chevalier de Valois. Suzanne's fiction introduced such confusion into the ideas of the old bachelor that he was literally incapable of sober reflection. Without this agitation and without his inward delight (for vanity is a swindler which never fails of its dupe), he would certainly have reflected that, supposing it were true, a girl like Suzanne, whose heart was not yet spoiled, would have died a thousand deaths before beginning a discussion of this kind and asking for money.

"Will you really go to Paris, then?" he said.

A flash of gayety lighted Suzanne's gray eyes as she heard these words; but the self-satisfied du Bousquier saw nothing.

"Yes, monsieur," she said.

Du Bousquier then began bitter lamentations: he had the last payments to make on his house; the painter, the mason, the upholsterers must be paid. Suzanne let him run on; she was listening for the figures. Du Bousquier offered her three hundred francs. Suzanne made what is called on the stage a false exit; that is, she marched toward the door.

"Stop, stop! where are you going?" said du Bousquier, uneasily. "This is what comes of a bachelor's life!" thought he. "The devil take me if I ever did anything more than rumple her collar, and, lo and behold! she makes THAT a ground to put her hand in one's pocket!"

"I'm going, monsieur," replied Suzanne, "to Madame Granson, the treasurer of the Maternity Society, who, to my knowledge, has saved many a poor girl in my condition from suicide."

"Madame Granson!"

"Yes," said Suzanne, "a relation of Mademoiselle Cormon, the president of the Maternity Society. Saving your presence, the ladies of the town have created an institution to protect poor creatures from destroying their infants, like that handsome Faustine of Argentan who was executed for it three years ago."

"Here, Suzanne," said du Bousquier, giving her a key, "open that secretary, and take out the bag you'll find there: there's about six hundred francs in it; it is all I possess."

"Old cheat!" thought Suzanne, doing as he told her, "I'll tell about your false toupet."

She compared du Bousquier with that charming chevalier, who had given her nothing, it is true, but who had comprehended her, advised her, and carried all grisettes in his heart.

"If you deceive me, Suzanne," cried du Bousquier, as he saw her with her hand in the drawer, "you –"

"Monsieur," she said, interrupting him with ineffable impertinence, "wouldn't you have given me money if I had asked for it?"

Recalled to a sense of gallantry, du Bousquier had a remembrance of past happiness and grunted his assent. Suzanne took the bag and departed, after allowing the old bachelor to kiss her, which he did with an air that seemed to say, "It is a right which costs me dear; but it is better than being harried by a lawyer in the court of assizes as the seducer of a girl accused of infanticide."

Suzanne hid the sack in a sort of gamebag made of osier which she had on her arm, all the while cursing du Bousquier for his stinginess; for one thousand francs was the sum she wanted. Once tempted of the devil to desire that sum, a girl will go far when she has set foot on the path of trickery. As she made her way along the rue du Bercail, it came into her head that the Maternity Society, presided over by Mademoiselle Cormon, might be induced to complete the sum at which she had reckoned her journey to Paris, which to a grisette of Alençon seemed considerable. Besides, she hated du Bousquier. The latter had evidently feared a revelation of his supposed misconduct to Madame Granson; and Suzanne, at the risk of not getting a penny from the society, was possessed with the desire, on leaving Alençon, of entangling the old bachelor in the inextricable meshes of a provincial slander. In all grisettes there is something of the malevolent mischief of a monkey. Accordingly, Suzanne now went to see Madame Granson, composing her face to an expression of the deepest dejection.

### CHAPTER III ATHANASE

Madame Granson, widow of a lieutenant-colonel of artillery killed at Jena, possessed, as her whole means of livelihood, a meagre pension of nine hundred francs a year, and three hundred francs from property of her own, plus a son whose support and education had eaten up all her savings. She occupied, in the rue du Bercail, one of those melancholy ground-floor apartments which a traveller passing along the principal street of a little provincial town can look through at a glance. The street door opened at the top of three steep steps; a passage led to an interior courtyard, at the end of which was the staircase covered by a wooden gallery. On one side of the passage was the dining-room and the kitchen; on the other side, a salon put to many uses, and the widow's bedchamber.

Athanase Granson, a young man twenty-three years of age, who slept in an attic room above the second floor of the house, added six hundred francs to the income of his poor mother, by the salary of a little place which the influence of his relation, Mademoiselle Cormon, had obtained for him in the mayor's office, where he was placed in charge of the archives.

From these indications it is easy to imagine Madame Granson in her cold salon with its yellow curtains and Utrecht velvet furniture, also yellow, as she straightened the round straw mats which were placed before each chair, that visitors might not soil the red-tiled floor while they sat there; after which she returned to her cushioned armchair and little work-table placed beneath the portrait of the lieutenant-colonel of artillery between two windows, – a point from which her eye could rake the rue du Bercail and see all comers. She was a good woman, dressed with bourgeois simplicity in keeping with her wan face furrowed by grief. The rigorous humbleness of poverty made itself felt in all the accessories of this household, the very air of which was charged with the stern and upright morals of the provinces. At this moment the son and mother were together in the dining-room, where they were breakfasting with a cup of coffee, with bread and butter and radishes. To make the pleasure which Suzanne's visit was to give to Madame Granson intelligible, we must explain certain secret interests of the mother and son.

Athanase Granson was a thin and pale young man, of medium height, with a hollow face in which his two black eyes, sparkling with thoughts, gave the effect of bits of coal. The rather irregular lines of his face, the curve of his lips, a prominent chin, the fine modelling of his forehead, his melancholy countenance, caused by a sense of his poverty warring with the powers that he felt within him, were all indications of repressed and imprisoned talent. In any other place than the town of

Alencon the mere aspect of his person would have won him the assistance of superior men, or of women who are able to recognize genius in obscurity. If his was not genius, it was at any rate the form and aspect of it; if he had not the actual force of a great heart, the glow of such a heart was in his glance. Although he was capable of expressing the highest feeling, a casing of timidity destroyed all the graces of his youth, just as the ice of poverty kept him from daring to put forth all his powers. Provincial life, without an opening, without appreciation, without encouragement, described a circle about him in which languished and died the power of thought, – a power which as yet had scarcely reached its dawn. Moreover, Athanase possessed that savage pride which poverty intensifies in noble minds, exalting them in their struggle with men and things; although at their start in life it is an obstacle to their advancement. Genius proceeds in two ways: either it takes its opportunity – like Napoleon, like Moliere – the moment that it sees it, or it waits to be sought when it has patiently revealed itself. Young Granson belonged to that class of men of talent who distrust themselves and are easily discouraged. His soul was contemplative. He lived more by thought than by action. Perhaps he might have seemed deficient or incomplete to those who cannot conceive of genius without the sparkle of French passion; but he was powerful in the world of mind, and he was liable to reach, through a series of emotions imperceptible to common souls, those sudden determinations which make fools say of a man, "He is mad."

The contempt which the world pours out on poverty was death to Athanase; the enervating heat of solitude, without a breath or current of air, relaxed the bow which ever strove to tighten itself; his soul grew weary in this painful effort without results. Athanase was a man who might have taken his place among the glories of France; but, eagle as he was, cooped in a cage without his proper nourishment, he was about to die of hunger after contemplating with an ardent eye the fields of air and the mountain heights where genius soars. His work in the city library escaped attention, and he buried in his soul his thoughts of fame, fearing that they might injure him; but deeper than all lay buried within him the secret of his heart, – a passion which hollowed his cheeks and yellowed his brow. He loved his distant cousin, this very Mademoiselle Cormon whom the Chevalier de Valois and du Bousquier, his hidden rivals, were stalking. This love had had its origin in calculation. Mademoiselle Cormon was thought to be one of the richest persons in the town: the poor lad had therefore been led to love her by desires for material happiness, by the hope, long indulged, of gilding with comfort his mother's last years, by eager longing for the ease of life so needful to men who live by thought; but this most innocent point of departure degraded his passion in his own eyes. Moreover, he feared the ridicule the world would cast upon the love of a young man of twenty-three for an old maid of forty.

And yet his passion was real; whatever may seem false about such a love elsewhere, it can be realized as a fact in the provinces, where, manners and morals being without change or chance or movement or mystery, marriage becomes a necessity of life. No family will accept a young man of dissolute habits. However natural the liaison of a young man, like Athanase, with a handsome girl, like Suzanne, for instance, might seem in a capital, it alarms provincial parents, and destroys the hopes of marriage of a poor young man when possibly the fortune of a rich one might cause such an unfortunate antecedent to be overlooked. Between the depravity of certain liaisons and a sincere love, a man of honor and no fortune will not hesitate: he prefers the misfortunes of virtue to the evils of vice. But in the provinces women with whom a young man call fall in love are rare. A rich young girl he cannot obtain in a region where all is calculation; a poor young girl he is prevented from loving; it would be, as provincials say, marrying hunger and thirst. Such monkish solitude is, however, dangerous to youth.

These reflections explain why provincial life is so firmly based on marriage. Thus we find that ardent and vigorous genius, forced to rely on the independence of its own poverty, quits these cold regions where thought is persecuted by brutal indifference, where no woman is willing to be a sister of charity to a man of talent, of art, of science.

Who will really understand Athanase Granson's love for Mademoiselle Cormon? Certainly neither rich men – those sultans of society who fill their harems – nor middle-class men, who follow the well-beaten high-road of prejudices; nor women who, not choosing to understand the passions of artists, impose the yoke of their virtues upon men of genius, imagining that the two sexes are governed by the same laws.

Here, perhaps, we should appeal to those young men who suffer from the repression of their first desires at the moment when all their forces are developing; to artists sick of their own genius smothering under the pressure of poverty; to men of talent, persecuted and without influence, often without friends at the start, who have ended by triumphing over that double anguish, equally agonizing, of soul and body. Such men will well understand the lancinating pains of the cancer which was now consuming Athanase; they have gone through those long and bitter deliberations made in presence of some grandiose purpose they had not the means to carry out; they have endured those secret miscarriages in which the fructifying seed of genius falls on arid soil. Such men know that the grandeur of desires is in proportion to the height and breadth of the imagination. The higher they spring, the lower they fall; and how can it be that ties and bonds should not be broken by such a fall? Their piercing eye has seen – as did Athanase – the brilliant future which awaited them, and from which they fancied that only a thin gauze parted them; but that gauze through which their eyes could see is changed by Society into a wall of iron. Impelled by a vocation, by a sentiment of art, they endeavor again and again to live by sentiments which society as incessantly materializes. Alas! the provinces calculate and arrange marriage with the one view of material comfort, and a poor artist or man of science is forbidden to double its purpose and make it the saviour of his genius by securing to him the means of subsistence!

Moved by such ideas, Athanase Granson first thought of marriage with Mademoiselle Cormon as a means of obtaining a livelihood which would be permanent. Thence he could rise to fame, and make his mother happy, knowing at the same time that he was capable of faithfully loving his wife. But soon his own will created, although he did not know it, a genuine passion. He began to study the old maid, and, by dint of the charm which habit gives, he ended by seeing only her beauties and ignoring her defects.

In a young man of twenty-three the senses count for much in love; their fire produces a sort of prism between his eyes and the woman. From this point of view the clasp with which Beaumarchis' Cherubin seizes Marceline is a stroke of genius. But when we reflect that in the utter isolation to which poverty condemned poor Athanase, Mademoiselle Cormon was the only figure presented to his gaze, that she attracted his eye incessantly, that all the light he had was concentrated on her, surely his love may be considered natural.

This sentiment, so carefully hidden, increased from day to day. Desires, sufferings, hopes, and meditations swelled in quietness and silence the lake widening ever in the young man's breast, as hour by hour added its drop of water to the volume. And the wider this inward circle, drawn by the imagination, aided by the senses, grew, the more imposing Mademoiselle Cormon appeared to Athanase, and the more his own timidity increased.

The mother had divined the truth. Like all provincial mothers, she calculated candidly in her own mind the advantages of the match. She told herself that Mademoiselle Cormon would be very lucky to secure a husband in a young man of twenty-three, full of talent, who would always be an honor to his family and the neighborhood; at the same time the obstacles which her son's want of fortune and Mademoiselle Cormon's age presented to the marriage seemed to her almost insurmountable; she could think of nothing but patience as being able to vanquish them. Like du Bousquier, like the Chevalier de Valois, she had a policy of her own; she was on the watch for circumstances, awaiting the propitious moment for a move with the shrewdness of maternal instinct. Madame Granson had no fears at all as to the chevalier, but she did suppose that du Bousquier, although refused, retained



certain hopes. As an able and underhand enemy to the latter, she did him much secret harm in the interests of her son; from whom, by the bye, she carefully concealed all such proceedings.

After this explanation it is easy to understand the importance which Suzanne's lie, confided to Madame Granson, was about to acquire. What a weapon put into the hands of this charitable lady, the treasurer of the Maternity Society! How she would gently and demurely spread the news while collecting assistance for the chaste Suzanne!

At the present moment Athanase, leaning pensively on his elbow at the breakfast table, was twirling his spoon in his empty cup and contemplating with a preoccupied eye the poor room with its red brick floor, its straw chairs, its painted wooden buffet, its pink and white curtains chequered like a backgammon board, which communicated with the kitchen through a glass door. As his back was to the chimney which his mother faced, and as the chimney was opposite to the door, his pallid face, strongly lighted from the window, framed in beautiful black hair, the eyes gleaming with despair and fiery with morning thoughts, was the first object which met the eyes of the incoming Suzanne. The grisette, who belonged to a class which certainly has the instinct of misery and the sufferings of the heart, suddenly felt that electric spark, darting from Heaven knows where, which can never be explained, which some strong minds deny, but the sympathetic stroke of which has been felt by many men and many women. It is at once a light which lightens the darkness of the future, a presentiment of the sacred joys of a shared love, the certainty of mutual comprehension. Above all, it is like the touch of a firm and able hand on the keyboard of the senses. The eyes are fascinated by an irresistible attraction; the heart is stirred; the melodies of happiness echo in the soul and in the ears; a voice cries out, "It is he!" Often reflection casts a douche of cold water on this boiling emotion, and all is over.

In a moment, as rapid as the flash of the lightning, Suzanne received the broadside of this emotion in her heart. The flame of a real love burned up the evil weeds fostered by a libertine and dissipated life. She saw how much she was losing of decency and value by accusing herself falsely. What had seemed to her a joke the night before became to her eyes a serious charge against herself. She recoiled at her own success. But the impossibility of any result; the poverty of the young man; a vague hope of enriching herself, of going to Paris, and returning with full hands to say, "I love you! here are the means of happiness!" or mere fate, if you will have it so, dried up the next moment this beneficent dew.

The ambitious grisette asked with a timid air for a moment's interview with Madame Granson, who took her at once into her bedchamber. When Suzanne came out she looked again at Athanase; he was still in the same position, and the tears came into her eyes. As for Madame Granson, she was radiant with joy. At last she had a weapon, and a terrible one, against du Bousquier; she could now deal him a mortal blow. She had of course promised the poor seduced girl the support of all charitable ladies and that of the members of the Maternity Society in particular; she foresaw a dozen visits which would occupy her whole day, and brew up a frightful storm on the head of the guilty du Bousquier. The Chevalier de Valois, while foreseeing the turn the affair would take, had really no idea of the scandal which would result from his own action.

"My dear child," said Madame Granson to her son, "we are to dine, you know, with Mademoiselle Cormon; do take a little pains with your appearance. You are wrong to neglect your dress as you do. Put on that handsome frilled shirt and your green coat of Elbeuf cloth. I have my reasons," she added slyly. "Besides, Mademoiselle Cormon is going to Prebaudet, and many persons will doubtless call to bid her good-bye. When a young man is marriageable he ought to take every means to make himself agreeable. If girls would only tell the truth, heavens! my dear boy, you'd be astonished at what makes them fall in love. Often it suffices for a man to ride past them at the head of a company of artillery, or show himself at a ball in tight clothes. Sometimes a mere turn of the head, a melancholy attitude, makes them suppose a man's whole life; they'll invent a romance to match the hero – who is often a mere brute, but the marriage is made. Watch the Chevalier de Valois: study him;

copy his manners; see with what ease he presents himself; he never puts on a stiff air, as you do. Talk a little more; one would really think you didn't know anything, – you, who know Hebrew by heart."

Athanase listened to his mother with a surprised but submissive air; then he rose, took his cap, and went off to the mayor's office, saying to himself, "Can my mother suspect my secret?"

He passed through the rue du Val-Noble, where Mademoiselle Cormon lived, – a little pleasure which he gave himself every morning, thinking, as usual, a variety of fanciful things: —

"How little she knows that a young man is passing before her house who loves her well, who would be faithful to her, who would never cause her any grief; who would leave her the entire management of her fortune without interference. Good God! what fatality! here, side by side, in the same town, are two persons in our mutual condition, and yet nothing can bring them together. Suppose I were to speak to her this evening?"

During this time Suzanne had returned to her mother's house thinking of Athanase; and, like many other women who have longed to help an adored man beyond the limit of human powers, she felt herself capable of making her body a stepping-stone on which he could rise to attain his throne.

It is now necessary to enter the house of this old maid toward whom so many interests are converging, where the actors in this scene, with the exception of Suzanne, were all to meet this very evening. As for Suzanne, that handsome individual bold enough to burn her ships like Alexander at her start in life, and to begin the battle by a falsehood, she disappears from the stage, having introduced upon it a violent element of interest. Her utmost wishes were gratified. She quitted her native town a few days later, well supplied with money and good clothes, among which was a fine dress of green reps and a charming green bonnet lined with pink, the gift of Monsieur de Valois, – a present which she preferred to all the rest, even the money. If the chevalier had gone to Paris in the days of her future brilliancy, she would certainly have left every one for him. Like the chaste Susannah of the Bible, whom the Elders hardly saw, she established herself joyously and full of hope in Paris, while all Alencon was deploring her misfortunes, for which the ladies of two Societies (Charity and Maternity) manifested the liveliest sympathy. Though Suzanne is a fair specimen of those handsome Norman women whom a learned physician reckons as comprising one third of her fallen class whom our monstrous Paris absorbs, it must be stated that she remained in the upper and more decent regions of gallantry. At an epoch when, as Monsieur de Valois said, Woman no longer existed, she was simply "Madame du Val-Noble"; in other days she would have rivalled the Rhodopes, the Imperias, the Ninons of the past. One of the most distinguished writers of the Restoration has taken her under his protection; perhaps he may marry her. He is a journalist, and consequently above public opinion, inasmuch as he manufactures it afresh every year or two.

### CHAPTER III

#### MADemoiselle CORMON

In nearly all the second-class prefectures of France there exists one salon which is the meeting-ground of those considerable and well-considered persons of the community who are, nevertheless, / not/ the cream of the best society. The master and mistress of such an establishment are counted among the leading persons of the town; they are received wherever it may please them to visit; no fete is given, no formal or diplomatic dinner takes place, to which they are not invited. But the chateau people, heads of families possessing great estates, in short, the highest personages in the department, do not go to their houses; social intercourse between them is carried on by cards from one to the other, and a dinner or soiree accepted and returned.

This salon, in which the lesser nobility, the clergy, and the magistracy meet together, exerts a great influence. The judgment and mind of the region reside in that solid, unostentatious society, where each man knows the resources of his neighbor, where complete indifference is shown to luxury and dress, – pleasures which are thought childish in comparison to that of obtaining ten or twelve acres

of pasture land, – a purchase coveted for years, which has probably given rise to endless diplomatic combinations. Immovable in its prejudices, good or evil, this social circle follows a beaten track, looking neither before it nor behind it. It accepts nothing from Paris without long examination and trial; it rejects cashmeres as it does investments on the Grand-Livre; it scoffs at fashions and novelties; reads nothing, prefers ignorance, whether of science, literature, or industrial inventions. It insists on the removal of a prefect when that official does not suit it; and if the administration resists, it isolates him, after the manner of bees who wall up a snail in wax when it gets into their hive.

In this society gossip is often turned into solemn verdicts. Young women are seldom seen there; when they come it is to seek approbation of their conduct, – a consecration of their self-importance. This supremacy granted to one house is apt to wound the sensibilities of other natives of the region, who console themselves by adding up the cost it involves, and by which they profit. If it so happens that there is no fortune large enough to keep open house in this way, the big-wigs of the place choose a place of meeting, as they did at Alençon, in the house of some inoffensive person, whose settled life and character and position offers no umbrage to the vanities or the interests of any one.

For some years the upper classes of Alençon had met in this way at the house of an old maid, whose fortune was, unknown to herself, the aim and object of Madame Granson, her second cousin, and of the two old bachelors whose secret hopes in that direction we have just unveiled. This lady lived with her maternal uncle, a former grand-vicar of the bishopric of Seez, once her guardian, and whose heir she was. The family of which Rose-Marie-Victoire Cormon was the present representative had been in earlier days among the most considerable in the province. Though belonging to the middle classes, she consorted with the nobility, among whom she was more or less allied, her family having furnished, in past years, stewards to the Duc d'Alençon, many magistrates to the long robe, and various bishops to the clergy. Monsieur de Sponde, the maternal grandfather of Mademoiselle Cormon, was elected by the Nobility to the States-General, and Monsieur Cormon, her father, by the Tiers-Etat, though neither accepted the mission. For the last hundred years the daughters of the family had married nobles belonging to the provinces; consequently, this family had thrown out so many suckers throughout the duchy as to appear on nearly all the genealogical trees. No bourgeois family had ever seemed so like nobility.

The house in which Mademoiselle Cormon lived, build in Henri IV.'s time, by Pierre Cormon, the steward of the last Duc d'Alençon, had always belonged to the family; and among the old maid's visible possessions this one was particularly stimulating to the covetous desires of the two old lovers. Yet, far from producing revenue, the house was a cause of expense. But it is so rare to find in the very centre of a provincial town a private dwelling without unpleasant surroundings, handsome in outward structure and convenient within, that Alençon shared the envy of the lovers.

This old mansion stands exactly in the middle of the rue du Val-Noble. It is remarkable for the strength of its construction, – a style of building introduced by Marie de' Medici. Though built of granite, – a stone which is hard to work, – its angles, and the casings of the doors and windows, are decorated with corner blocks cut into diamond facets. It has only one clear story above the ground-floor; but the roof, rising steeply, has several projecting windows, with carved spandrels rather elegantly enclosed in oaken frames, and externally adorned with balustrades. Between each of these windows is a gargoyle presenting the fantastic jaws of an animal without a body, vomiting the rain-water upon large stones pierced with five holes. The two gables are surmounted by leaden bouquets, – a symbol of the bourgeoisie; for nobles alone had the privilege in former days of having weather-vanes. To right of the courtyard are the stables and coach-house; to left, the kitchen, wood-house, and laundry.

One side of the porte-cochere, being left open, allowed the passers in the street to see in the midst of the vast courtyard a flower-bed, the raised earth of which was held in place by a low privet hedge. A few monthly roses, pinkes, lilies, and Spanish broom filled this bed, around which in the summer season boxes of paurestinus, pomegranates, and myrtle were placed. Struck by the scrupulous

cleanliness of the courtyard and its dependencies, a stranger would at once have divined that the place belonged to an old maid. The eye which presided there must have been an unoccupied, ferreting eye; minutely careful, less from nature than for want of something to do. An old maid, forced to employ her vacant days, could alone see to the grass being hoed from between the paving stones, the tops of the walls kept clean, the broom continually going, and the leather curtains of the coach-house always closed. She alone would have introduced, out of busy idleness, a sort of Dutch cleanliness into a house on the confines of Bretagne and Normandie, – a region where they take pride in professing an utter indifference to comfort.

Never did the Chevalier de Valois, or du Bousquier, mount the steps of the double stairway leading to the portico of this house without saying to himself, one, that it was fit for a peer of France, the other, that the mayor of the town ought to live there.

A glass door gave entrance from this portico into an antechamber, a species of gallery paved in red tiles and wainscoted, which served as a hospital for the family portraits, – some having an eye put out, others suffering from a dislocated shoulder; this one held his hat in a hand that no longer existed; that one was a case of amputation at the knee. Here were deposited the cloaks, clogs, overshoes, umbrellas, hoods, and pelisses of the guests. It was an arsenal where each arrival left his baggage on arriving, and took it up when departing. Along each wall was a bench for the servants who arrived with lanterns, and a large stove, to counteract the north wind, which blew through this hall from the garden to the courtyard.

The house was divided in two equal parts. On one side, toward the courtyard, was the well of the staircase, a large dining-room looking to the garden, and an office or pantry which communicated with the kitchen. On the other side was the salon, with four windows, beyond which were two smaller rooms, – one looking on the garden, and used as a boudoir, the other lighted from the courtyard, and used as a sort of office.

The upper floor contained a complete apartment for a family household, and a suite of rooms where the venerable Abbe de Sponde had his abode. The garrets offered fine quarters to the rats and mice, whose nocturnal performances were related by Mademoiselle Cormon to the Chevalier de Valois, with many expressions of surprise at the inutility of her efforts to get rid of them. The garden, about half an acre in size, is margined by the Brillante, so named from the particles of mica which sparkle in its bed elsewhere than in the Val-Noble, where its shallow waters are stained by the dyehouses, and loaded with refuse from the other industries of the town. The shore opposite to Mademoiselle Cormon's garden is crowded with houses where a variety of trades are carried on; happily for her, the occupants are quiet people, – a baker, a cleaner, an upholsterer, and several bourgeois. The garden, full of common flowers, ends in a natural terrace, forming a quay, down which are several steps leading to the river. Imagine on the balustrade of this terrace a number of tall vases of blue and white pottery, in which are gilliflowers; and to right and left, along the neighboring walls, hedges of linden closely trimmed in, and you will gain an idea of the landscape, full of tranquil chastity, modest cheerfulness, but commonplace withal, which surrounded the venerable edifice of the Cormon family. What peace! what tranquillity! nothing pretentious, but nothing transitory; all seems eternal there!

The ground-floor is devoted wholly to the reception-rooms. The old, unchangeable provincial spirit pervades them. The great square salon has four windows, modestly cased in woodwork painted gray. A single oblong mirror is placed above the fireplace; the top of its frame represented the Dawn led by the Hours, and painted in camaieu (two shades of one color). This style of painting infested the decorative art of the day, especially above door-frames, where the artist displayed his eternal Seasons, and made you, in most houses in the centre of France, abhor the odious Cupids, endlessly employed in skating, gleaning, twirling, or garlanding one another with flowers. Each window was draped in green damask curtains, looped up by heavy cords, which made them resemble a vast dais. The furniture, covered with tapestry, the woodwork, painted and varnished, and remarkable for the

twisted forms so much the fashion in the last century, bore scenes from the fables of La Fontaine on the chair-backs; some of this tapestry had been mended. The ceiling was divided at the centre of the room by a huge beam, from which depended an old chandelier of rock-crystal swathed in green gauze. On the fireplace were two vases in Sevres blue, and two old girandoles attached to the frame of the mirror, and a clock, the subject of which, taken from the last scene of the "Deserteur," proved the enormous popularity of Sedaine's work. This clock, of bronze-gilt, bore eleven personages upon it, each about four inches tall. At the back the Deserter was seen issuing from prison between the soldiers; in the foreground the young woman lay fainting, and pointing to his pardon. On the walls of this salon were several of the more recent portraits of the family, – one or two by Rigaud, and three pastels by Latour. Four card tables, a backgammon board, and a piquet table occupied the vast room, the only one in the house, by the bye, which was ceiled.

The dining-room, paved in black and white stone, not ceiled, and its beams painted, was furnished with one of those enormous sideboards with marble tops, required by the war waged in the provinces against the human stomach. The walls, painted in fresco, represented a flowery trellis. The seats were of varnished cane, and the doors of natural wood. All things about the place carried out the patriarchal air which emanated from the inside as well as the outside of the house. The genius of the provinces preserved everything; nothing was new or old, neither young nor decrepit. A cold precision made itself felt throughout.

Tourists in Normandy, Brittany, Maine, and Anjou must all have seen in the capitals of those provinces many houses which resemble more or less that of the Cormons; for it is, in its way, an archetype of the burgher houses in that region of France, and it deserves a place in this history because it serves to explain manners and customs, and represents ideas. Who does not already feel that life must have been calm and monotonously regular in this old edifice? It contained a library; but that was placed below the level of the river. The books were well bound and shelved, and the dust, far from injuring them, only made them valuable. They were preserved with the care given in these provinces deprived of vineyards to other native products, desirable for their antique perfume, and issued by the presses of Bourgogne, Touraine, Gascogne, and the South. The cost of transportation was too great to allow any but the best products to be imported.

The basis of Mademoiselle Cormon's society consisted of about one hundred and fifty persons; some went at times to the country; others were occasionally ill; a few travelled about the department on business; but certain of the faithful came every night (unless invited elsewhere), and so did certain others compelled by duties or by habit to live permanently in the town. All the personages were of ripe age; few among them had ever travelled; nearly all had spent their lives in the provinces, and some had taken part in the chouannerie. The latter were beginning to speak fearlessly of that war, now that rewards were being showered on the defenders of the good cause. Monsieur de Valois, one of the movers in the last uprising (during which the Marquis de Montauran, betrayed by his mistress, perished in spite of the devotion of Marche-a-Terre, now tranquilly raising cattle for the market near Mayenne), – Monsieur de Valois had, during the last six months, given the key to several choice stratagems practised upon an old republican named Hulot, the commander of a demi-brigade stationed at Alencon from 1798 to 1800, who had left many memories in the place. [See "The Chouans."]

The women of this society took little pains with their dress, except on Wednesdays, when Mademoiselle Cormon gave a dinner, on which occasion the guests invited on the previous Wednesday paid their "visit of digestion." Wednesdays were gala days: the assembly was numerous; guests and visitors appeared in fiocchi; some women brought their sewing, knitting, or worsted work; the young girls were not ashamed to make patterns for the Alencon point lace, with the proceeds of which they paid for their personal expenses. Certain husbands brought their wives out of policy, for young men were few in that house; not a word could be whispered in any ear without attracting the attention of all; there was therefore no danger, either for young girls or wives, of love-making.

Every evening, at six o'clock, the long antechamber received its furniture. Each habitue brought his cane, his cloak, his lantern. All these persons knew each other so well, and their habits and ways were so familiarly patriarchal, that if by chance the old Abbe de Sponde was lying down, or Mademoiselle Cormon was in her chamber, neither Josette, the maid, nor Jacquelin, the man-servant, nor Mariette, the cook, informed them. The first comer received the second; then, when the company were sufficiently numerous for whist, piquet, or boston, they began the game without awaiting either the Abbe de Sponde or mademoiselle. If it was dark, Josette or Jacquelin would hasten to light the candles as soon as the first bell rang. Seeing the salon lighted up, the abbe would slowly hurry to come down. Every evening the backgammon and the piquet tables, the three boston tables, and the whist table were filled, – which gave occupation to twenty-five or thirty persons; but as many as forty were usually present. Jacquelin would then light the candles in the other rooms.

Between eight and nine o'clock the servants began to arrive in the antechamber to accompany their masters home; and, short of a revolution, no one remained in the salon at ten o'clock. At that hour the guests were departing in groups along the street, discoursing on the game, or continuing conversations on the land they were covetous of buying, on the terms of some one's will, on quarrels among heirs, on the haughty assumption of the aristocratic portion of the community. It was like Paris when the audience of a theatre disperses.

Certain persons who talk much of poesy and know nothing about it, declaim against the habits of life in the provinces. But put your forehead in your left hand, rest one foot on the fender, and your elbow on your knee; then, if you compass the idea of this quiet and uniform scene, this house and its interior, this company and its interests, heightened by the pettiness of its intellect like goldleaf beaten between sheets of parchment, ask yourself, What is human life? Try to decide between him who scribbles jokes on Egyptian obelisks, and him who has "bostoned" for twenty years with Du Bousquier, Monsieur de Valois, Mademoiselle Cormon, the judge of the court, the king's attorney, the Abbe de Sponde, Madame Granson, and tutti quanti. If the daily and punctual return of the same steps to the same path is not happiness, it imitates happiness so well that men driven by the storms of an agitated life to reflect upon the blessings of tranquillity would say that here was happiness /enough/.

To reckon the importance of Mademoiselle Cormon's salon at its true value, it will suffice to say that the born statistician of the society, du Bousquier, had estimated that the persons who frequented it controlled one hundred and thirty-one votes in the electoral college, and mustered among themselves eighteen hundred thousand francs a year from landed estate in the neighborhood.

The town of Alencon, however, was not entirely represented by this salon. The higher aristocracy had a salon of their own; moreover, that of the receiver-general was like an administration inn kept by the government, where society danced, plotted, fluttered, loved, and supped. These two salons communicated by means of certain mixed individuals with the house of Cormon, and vice-versa; but the Cormon establishment sat severely in judgment on the two other camps. The luxury of their dinners was criticised; the ices at their balls were pondered; the behavior of the women, the dresses, and "novelties" there produced were discussed and disapproved.

Mademoiselle Cormon, a species of firm, as one might say, under whose name was comprised an imposing coterie, was naturally the aim and object of two ambitious men as deep and wily as the Chevalier de Valois and du Bousquier. To the one as well as to the other, she meant election as deputy, resulting, for the noble, in the peerage, for the purveyor, in a receiver-generalship. A leading salon is a difficult thing to create, whether in Paris or the provinces, and here was one already created. To marry Mademoiselle Cormon was to reign in Alencon. Athanase Granson, the only one of the three suitors for the hand of the old maid who no longer calculated profits, now loved her person as well as her fortune.

To employ the jargon of the day, is there not a singular drama in the situation of these four personages? Surely there is something odd and fantastic in three rivalries silently encompassing a woman who never guessed their existence, in spite of an eager and legitimate desire to be married.

And yet, though all these circumstances make the spinsterhood of this old maid an extraordinary thing, it is not difficult to explain how and why, in spite of her fortune and her three lovers, she was still unmarried. In the first place, Mademoiselle Cormon, following the custom and rule of her house, had always desired to marry a nobleman; but from 1788 to 1798 public circumstances were very unfavorable to such pretensions. Though she wanted to be a woman of condition, as the saying is, she was horribly afraid of the Revolutionary tribunal. The two sentiments, equal in force, kept her stationary by a law as true in ethics as it is in statics. This state of uncertain expectation is pleasing to unmarried women as long as they feel themselves young, and in a position to choose a husband. France knows that the political system of Napoleon resulted in making many widows. Under that regime heiresses were entirely out of proportion in numbers to the bachelors who wanted to marry. When the Consulate restored internal order, external difficulties made the marriage of Mademoiselle Cormon as difficult to arrange as it had been in the past. If, on the one hand, Rose-Marie-Victoire refused to marry an old man, on the other, the fear of ridicule forbade her to marry a very young one.

In the provinces, families marry their sons early to escape the conscription. In addition to all this, she was obstinately determined not to marry a soldier: she did not intend to take a man and then give him up to the Emperor; she wanted him for herself alone. With these views, she found it therefore impossible, from 1804 to 1815, to enter the lists with young girls who were rivalling each other for suitable matches.

Besides her predilection for the nobility, Mademoiselle Cormon had another and very excusable mania: that of being loved for herself. You could hardly believe the lengths to which this desire led her. She employed her mind on setting traps for her possible lovers, in order to test their real sentiments. Her nets were so well laid that the luckless suitors were all caught, and succumbed to the test she applied to them without their knowledge. Mademoiselle Cormon did not study them; she watched them. A single word said heedlessly, a joke (that she often was unable to understand), sufficed to make her reject an aspirant as unworthy: this one had neither heart nor delicacy; that one told lies, and was not religious; a third only wanted to coin money under the cloak of marriage; another was not of a nature to make a woman happy; here she suspected hereditary gout; there certain immoral antecedents alarmed her. Like the Church, she required a noble priest at her altar; she even wanted to be married for imaginary ugliness and pretended defects, just as other women wish to be loved for the good qualities they have not, and for imaginary beauties. Mademoiselle Cormon's ambition took its rise in the most delicate and sensitive feminine feeling; she longed to reward a lover by revealing to him a thousand virtues after marriage, as other women then betray the imperfections they have hitherto concealed. But she was ill understood. The noble woman met with none but common souls in whom the reckoning of actual interests was paramount, and who knew nothing of the nobler calculations of sentiment.

The farther she advanced towards that fatal epoch so adroitly called the "second youth," the more her distrust increased. She affected to present herself in the most unfavorable light, and played her part so well that the last wooers hesitated to link their fate to that of a person whose virtuous blind-man's-buff required an amount of penetration that men who want the virtuous ready-made would not bestow upon it. The constant fear of being married for her money rendered her suspicious and uneasy beyond all reason. She turned to the rich men; but the rich are in search of great marriages; she feared the poor men, in whom she denied the disinterestedness she sought so eagerly. After each disappointment in marriage, the poor lady, led to despise mankind, began to see them all in a false light. Her character acquired, necessarily, a secret misanthropy, which threw a tinge of bitterness into her conversation, and some severity into her eyes. Celibacy gave to her manners and habits a certain increasing rigidity; for she endeavored to sanctify herself in despair of fate. Noble vengeance! she was cutting for God the rough diamond rejected by man. Before long public opinion was against her; for society accepts the verdict an independent woman renders on herself by not marrying, either through losing suitors or rejecting them. Everybody supposed that these rejections were founded on secret

reasons, always ill interpreted. One said she was deformed; another suggested some hidden fault; but the poor girl was really as pure as a saint, as healthy as an infant, and full of loving kindness; Nature had intended her for all the pleasures, all the joys, and all the fatigues of motherhood.

Mademoiselle Cormon did not possess in her person an obliging auxiliary to her desires. She had no other beauty than that very improperly called *la beauté du diable*, which consists of a buxom freshness of youth that the devil, theologically speaking, could never have, – though perhaps the expression may be explained by the constant desire that must surely possess him to cool and refresh himself. The feet of the heiress were broad and flat. Her leg, which she often exposed to sight by her manner (be it said without malice) of lifting her gown when it rained, could never have been taken for the leg of a woman. It was sinewy, with a thick projecting calf like a sailor's. A stout waist, the plumpness of a wet-nurse, strong dimpled arms, red hands, were all in keeping with the swelling outlines and the fat whiteness of Norman beauty. Projecting eyes, undecided in color, gave to her face, the rounded outline of which had no dignity, an air of surprise and sheepish simplicity, which was suitable perhaps for an old maid. If Rose had not been, as she was, really innocent, she would have seemed so. An aquiline nose contrasted curiously with the narrowness of her forehead; for it is rare that that form of nose does not carry with it a fine brow. In spite of her thick red lips, a sign of great kindliness, the forehead revealed too great a lack of ideas to allow of the heart being guided by intellect; she was evidently benevolent without grace. How severely we reproach Virtue for its defects, and how full of indulgence we all are for the pleasanter qualities of Vice!

Chestnut hair of extraordinary length gave to Rose Cormon's face a beauty which results from vigor and abundance, – the physical qualities most apparent in her person. In the days of her chief pretensions, Rose affected to hold her head at the three-quarter angle, in order to exhibit a very pretty ear, which detached itself from the blue-veined whiteness of her throat and temples, set off, as it was, by her wealth of hair. Seen thus in a ball-dress, she might have seemed handsome. Her protuberant outlines and her vigorous health did, in fact, draw from the officers of the Empire the approving exclamation, —

"What a fine slip of a girl!"

But, as years rolled on, this plumpness, encouraged by a tranquil, wholesome life, had insensibly so ill spread itself over the whole of Mademoiselle Cormon's body that her primitive proportions were destroyed. At the present moment, no corset could restore a pair of hips to the poor lady, who seemed to have been cast in a single mould. The youthful harmony of her bosom existed no longer; and its excessive amplitude made the spectator fear that if she stooped its heavy masses might topple her over. But nature had provided against this by giving her a natural counterpoise, which rendered needless the deceitful adjunct of a bustle; in Rose Cormon everything was genuine. Her chin, as it doubled, reduced the length of her neck, and hindered the easy carriage of her head. Rose had no wrinkles, but she had folds of flesh; and jesters declared that to save chafing she powdered her skin as they do an infant's.

This ample person offered to a young man full of ardent desires like Athanase an attraction to which he had succumbed. Young imaginations, essentially eager and courageous, like to rove upon these fine living sheets of flesh. Rose was like a plump partridge attracting the knife of a gourmet. Many an elegant deep in debt would very willingly have resigned himself to make the happiness of Mademoiselle Cormon. But, alas! the poor girl was now forty years old. At this period, after vainly seeking to put into her life those interests which make the Woman, and finding herself forced to be still unmarried, she fortified her virtue by stern religious practices. She had recourse to religion, the great consoler of oppressed virginity. A confessor had, for the last three years, directed Mademoiselle Cormon rather stupidly in the path of maceration; he advised the use of scourging, which, if modern medical science is to be believed, produces an effect quite the contrary to that expected by the worthy priest, whose hygienic knowledge was not extensive.



These absurd practices were beginning to shed a monastic tint over the face of Rose Cormon, who now saw with something like despair her white skin assuming the yellow tones which proclaim maturity. A slight down on her upper lip, about the corners, began to spread and darken like a trail of smoke; her temples grew shiny; decadence was beginning! It was authentic in Alencon that Mademoiselle Cormon suffered from rush of blood to the head. She confided her ills to the Chevalier de Valois, enumerating her foot-baths, and consulting him as to refrigerants. On such occasions the shrewd old gentleman would pull out his snuff-box, gaze at the Princess Goritza, and say, by way of conclusion: —

"The right composing draught, my dear lady, is a good and kind husband."

"But whom can one trust?" she replied.

The chevalier would then brush away the snuff which had settled in the folds of his waistcoat or his paduasoy breeches. To the world at large this gesture would have seemed very natural; but it always gave extreme uneasiness to the poor woman.

The violence of this hope without an object was so great that Rose was afraid to look a man in the face lest he should perceive in her eyes the feelings that filled her soul. By a wilfulness, which was perhaps only the continuation of her earlier methods, though she felt herself attracted toward the men who might still suit her, she was so afraid of being accused of folly that she treated them ungraciously. Most persons in her society, being incapable of appreciating her motives, which were always noble, explained her manner towards her co-celibates as the revenge of a refusal received or expected. When the year 1815 began, Rose had reached that fatal age which she dared not avow. She was forty-two years old. Her desire for marriage then acquired an intensity which bordered on monomania, for she saw plainly that all chance of progeny was about to escape her; and the thing which in her celestial ignorance she desired above all things was the possession of children. Not a person in all Alencon ever attributed to this virtuous woman a single desire for amorous license. She loved, as it were, in bulk without the slightest imagination of love. Rose was a Catholic Agnes, incapable of inventing even one of the wiles of Moliere's Agnes.

For some months past she had counted on chance. The disbandment of the Imperial troops and the reorganization of the Royal army caused a change in the destination of many officers, who returned, some on half-pay, others with or without a pension, to their native towns, — all having a desire to counteract their luckless fate, and to end their life in a way which might to Rose Cormon be a happy beginning of hers. It would surely be strange if, among those who returned to Alencon or its neighborhood, no brave, honorable, and, above all, sound and healthy officer of suitable age could be found, whose character would be a passport among Bonaparte opinions; or some *ci-devant* noble who, to regain his lost position, would join the ranks of the royalists. This hope kept Mademoiselle Cormon in heart during the early months of that year. But, alas! all the soldiers who thus returned were either too old or too young; too aggressively Bonapartist, or too dissipated; in short, their several situations were out of keeping with the rank, fortune, and morals of Mademoiselle Cormon, who now grew daily more and more desperate. The poor woman in vain prayed to God to send her a husband with whom she could be piously happy: it was doubtless written above that she should die both virgin and martyr; no man suitable for a husband presented himself. The conversations in her salon every evening kept her informed of the arrival of all strangers in Alencon, and of the facts of their fortunes, rank, and habits. But Alencon is not a town which attracts visitors; it is not on the road to any capital; even sailors, travelling from Brest to Paris, never stop there. The poor woman ended by admitting to herself that she was reduced to the aborigines. Her eye now began to assume a certain savage expression, to which the malicious chevalier responded by a shrewd look as he drew out his snuff-box and gazed at the Princess Goritza. Monsieur de Valois was well aware that in the feminine ethics of love fidelity to a first attachment is considered a pledge for the future.

But Mademoiselle Cormon — we must admit it — was wanting in intellect, and did not understand the snuff-box performance. She redoubled her vigilance against "the evil spirit"; her rigid devotion and

fixed principles kept her cruel sufferings hidden among the mysteries of private life. Every evening, after the company had left her, she thought of her lost youth, her faded bloom, the hopes of thwarted nature; and, all the while immolating her passions at the feet of the Cross (like poems condemned to stay in a desk), she resolved firmly that if, by chance, any suitor presented himself, to subject him to no tests, but to accept him at once for whatever he might be. She even went so far as to think of marrying a sub-lieutenant, a man who smoked tobacco, whom she proposed to render, by dint of care and kindness, one of the best men in the world, although he was hampered with debts.

But it was only in the silence of night watches that these fantastic marriages, in which she played the sublime role of guardian angel, took place. The next day, though Josette found her mistress' bed in a tossed and tumbled condition, Mademoiselle Cormon had recovered her dignity, and could only think of a man of forty, a land-owner, well preserved, and a quasi-young man.

The Abbe de Sponde was incapable of giving his niece the slightest aid in her matrimonial manoeuvres. The worthy soul, now seventy years of age, attributed the disasters of the French Revolution to the design of Providence, eager to punish a dissolute Church. He had therefore flung himself into the path, long since abandoned, which anchorites once followed in order to reach heaven: he led an ascetic life without proclaiming it, and without external credit. He hid from the world his works of charity, his continual prayers, his penances; he thought that all priests should have acted thus during the days of wrath and terror, and he preached by example. While presenting to the world a calm and smiling face, he had ended by detaching himself utterly from earthly interests; his mind turned exclusively to sufferers, to the needs of the Church, and to his own salvation. He left the management of his property to his niece, who gave him the income of it, and to whom he paid a slender board in order to spend the surplus in secret alms and gifts to the Church.

All the abbe's affections were concentrated on his niece, who regarded him as a father, but an abstracted father, unable to conceive the agitations of the flesh, and thanking God for maintaining his dear daughter in a state of celibacy; for he had, from his youth up, adopted the principles of Saint John Chrysostom, who wrote that "the virgin state is as far above the marriage state as the angel is above humanity." Accustomed to reverence her uncle, Mademoiselle Cormon dared not initiate him into the desires which filled her soul for a change of state. The worthy man, accustomed, on his side, to the ways of the house, would scarcely have liked the introduction of a husband. Preoccupied by the sufferings he soothed, lost in the depths of prayer, the Abbe de Sponde had periods of abstraction which the habitues of the house regarded as absent-mindedness. In any case, he talked little; but his silence was affable and benevolent. He was a man of great height and spare, with grave and solemn manners, though his face expressed all gentle sentiments and an inward calm; while his mere presence carried with it a sacred authority. He was very fond of the Voltairean chevalier. Those two majestic relics of the nobility and clergy, though of very different habits and morals, recognized each other by their generous traits. Besides, the chevalier was as unctuous with the abbe as he was paternal with the grisettes.

Some persons may fancy that Mademoiselle Cormon used every means to attain her end; and that among the legitimate lures of womanhood she devoted herself to dress, wore low-necked gowns, and employed the negative coquetries of a magnificent display of arms. Not at all! She was as heroic and immovable in her high-necked chemisette as a sentry in his box. Her gowns, bonnets, and chignons were all cut and made by the dressmaker and the milliner of Alencon, two hump-backed sisters, who were not without some taste. In spite of the entreaties of these artists, Mademoiselle Cormon refused to employ the airy deceits of elegance; she chose to be substantial in all things, flesh and feathers. But perhaps the heavy fashion of her gowns was best suited to her cast of countenance. Let those laugh who will at this poor girl; you would have thought her sublime, O generous souls! who care but little what form true feeling takes, but admire it where it is.

Here some light-minded person may exclaim against the truth of this statement; they will say that there is not in all France a girl so silly as to be ignorant of the art of angling for men; that

Mademoiselle Cormon is one of those monstrous exceptions which commonsense should prevent a writer from using as a type; that the most virtuous and also the silliest girl who desires to catch her fish knows well how to bait the hook. But these criticisms fall before the fact that the noble catholic, apostolic, and Roman religion is still erect in Brittany and in the ancient duchy of Alencon. Faith and piety admit of no subtleties. Mademoiselle Cormon trod the path of salvation, preferring the sorrows of her virginity so cruelly prolonged to the evils of trickery and the sin of a snare. In a woman armed with a scourge virtue could never compromise; consequently both love and self-interest were forced to seek her, and seek her resolutely. And here let us have the courage to make a cruel observation, in days when religion is nothing more than a useful means to some, and a poesy to others. Devotion causes a moral ophthalmia. By some providential grace, it takes from souls on the road to eternity the sight of many little earthly things. In a word, pious persons, devotes, are stupid on various points. This stupidity proves with what force they turn their minds to celestial matters; although the Voltairean Chevalier de Valois declared that it was difficult to decide whether stupid people became naturally pious, or whether piety had the effect of making intelligent young women stupid. But reflect upon this carefully: the purest catholic virtue, with its loving acceptance of all cups, with its pious submission to the will of God, with its belief in the print of the divine finger on the clay of all earthly life, is the mysterious light which glides into the innermost folds of human history, setting them in relief and magnifying them in the eyes of those who still have Faith. Besides, if there be stupidity, why not concern ourselves with the sorrows of stupidity as well as with the sorrows of genius? The former is a social element infinitely more abundant than the latter.

So, then, Mademoiselle Cormon was guilty in the eyes of the world of the divine ignorance of virgins. She was no observer, and her behavior with her suitors proved it. At this very moment, a young girl of sixteen, who had never opened a novel, would have read a hundred chapters of a love story in the eyes of Athanase Granson, where Mademoiselle Cormon saw absolutely nothing. Shy herself, she never suspected shyness in others; she did not recognize in the quavering tones of his speech the force of a sentiment he could not utter. Capable of inventing those refinements of sentimental grandeur which hindered her marriage in her early years, she yet could not recognize them in Athanase. This moral phenomenon will not seem surprising to persons who know that the qualities of the heart are as distinct from those of the mind as the faculties of genius are from the nobility of soul. A perfect, all-rounded man is so rare that Socrates, one of the noblest pearls of humanity, declared (as a phrenologist of that day) that he was born to be a scamp, and a very bad one. A great general may save his country at Zurich, and take commissions from purveyors. A great musician may conceive the sublimest music and commit a forgery. A woman of true feeling may be a fool. In short, a devotee may have a sublime soul and yet be unable to recognize the tones of a noble soul beside her. The caprices produced by physical infirmities are equally to be met with in the mental and moral regions.

This good creature, who grieved at making her yearly preserves for no one but her uncle and herself, was becoming almost ridiculous. Those who felt a sympathy for her on account of her good qualities, and others on account of her defects, now made fun of her abortive marriages. More than one conversation was based on what would become of so fine a property, together with the old maid's savings and her uncle's inheritance. For some time past she had been suspected of being *au fond*, in spite of appearances, an "original." In the provinces it was not permissible to be original: being original means having ideas that are not understood by others; the provinces demand equality of mind as well as equality of manners and customs.

The marriage of Mademoiselle Cormon seemed, after 1804, a thing so problematical that the saying "married like Mademoiselle Cormon" became proverbial in Alencon as applied to ridiculous failures. Surely the sarcastic mood must be an imperative need in France, that so excellent a woman should excite the laughter of Alencon. Not only did she receive the whole society of the place at her house, not only was she charitable, pious, incapable of saying an unkind thing, but she was fully in

accord with the spirit of the place and the habits and customs of the inhabitants, who liked her as the symbol of their lives; she was absolutely inlaid into the ways of the provinces; she had never quitted them; she imbibed all their prejudices; she espoused all their interests; she adored them.

In spite of her income of eighteen thousand francs from landed property, a very considerable fortune in the provinces, she lived on a footing with families who were less rich. When she went to her country-place at Prebaudet, she drove there in an old wicker carriage, hung on two straps of white leather, drawn by a wheezy mare, and scarcely protected by two leather curtains rusty with age. This carriage, known to all the town, was cared for by Jacquelin as though it were the finest coupe in all Paris. Mademoiselle valued it; she had used it for twelve years, – a fact to which she called attention with the triumphant joy of happy avarice. Most of the inhabitants of the town were grateful to Mademoiselle Cormon for not humiliating them by the luxury she could have displayed; we may even believe that had she imported a caleche from Paris they would have gossiped more about that than about her various matrimonial failures. The most brilliant equipage would, after all, have only taken her, like the old carriage, to Prebaudet. Now the provinces, which look solely to results, care little about the beauty or elegance of the means, provided they are efficient.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **AN OLD MAID'S HOUSEHOLD**

To complete the picture of the internal habits and ways of this house, it is necessary to group around Mademoiselle Cormon and the Abbe de Sponde Jacquelin, Josette, and Mariette, the cook, who employed themselves in providing for the comfort of uncle and niece.

Jacquelin, a man of forty, short, fat, ruddy, and brown, with a face like a Breton sailor, had been in the service of the house for twenty-two years. He waited at table, groomed the mare, gardened, blacked the abbe's boots, went on errands, chopped the wood, drove the carriage, and fetched the oats, straw, and hay from Prebaudet. He sat in the antechamber during the evening, where he slept like a dormouse. He was in love with Josette, a girl of thirty, whom Mademoiselle would have dismissed had she married him. So the poor fond pair laid by their wages, and loved each other silently, waiting, hoping for mademoiselle's own marriage, as the Jews are waiting for the Messiah. Josette, born between Alencon and Mortagne, was short and plump; her face, which looked like a dirty apricot, was not wanting in sense and character; it was said that she ruled her mistress. Josette and Jacquelin, sure of results, endeavored to hide an inward satisfaction which allows it to be supposed that, as lovers, they had discounted the future. Mariette, the cook, who had been fifteen years in the household, knew how to make all the dishes held in most honor in Alencon.

Perhaps we ought to count for much the fat old Norman brown-bay mare, which drew Mademoiselle Cormon to her country-seat at Prebaudet; for the five inhabitants of the house bore to this animal a maniacal affection. She was called Penelope, and had served the family for eighteen years; but she was kept so carefully and fed with such regularity that mademoiselle and Jacquelin both hoped to use her for ten years longer. This beast was the subject of perpetual talk and occupation; it seemed as if poor Mademoiselle Cormon, having no children on whom her repressed motherly feelings could expend themselves, had turned those sentiments wholly on this most fortunate animal.

The four faithful servants – for Penelope's intelligence raised her to the level of the other good servants; while they, on the other hand, had lowered themselves to the mute, submissive regularity of the beast – went and came daily in the same occupations with the infallible accuracy of mechanism. But, as they said in their idiom, they had eaten their white bread first. Mademoiselle Cormon, like all persons nervously agitated by a fixed idea, became hard to please, and nagging, less by nature than from the need of employing her activity. Having no husband or children to occupy her, she fell back on petty details. She talked for hours about mere nothings, on a dozen napkins marked "Z," placed in the closet before the "O's."

"What can Josette be thinking of?" she exclaimed. "Josette is beginning to neglect things."

Mademoiselle inquired for eight days running whether Penelope had had her oats at two o'clock, because on one occasion Jacquelin was a trifle late. Her narrow imagination spent itself on trifles. A layer of dust forgotten by the feather-duster, a slice of toast ill-made by Mariette, Josette's delay in closing the blinds when the sun came round to fade the colors of the furniture, – all these great little things gave rise to serious quarrels in which mademoiselle grew angry. "Everything was changing," she would cry; "she did not know her own servants; the fact was she spoiled them!" On one occasion Josette gave her the "Journée du Chrétien" instead of the "Quinzaine de Pâques." The whole town heard of this disaster the same evening. Mademoiselle had been forced to leave the church and return home; and her sudden departure, upsetting the chairs, made people suppose a catastrophe had happened. She was therefore obliged to explain the facts to her friends.

"Josette," she said gently, "such a thing must never happen again."

Mademoiselle Cormon was, without being aware of it, made happier by such little quarrels, which served as cathartics to relieve her bitterness. The soul has its needs, and, like the body, its gymnastics. These uncertainties of temper were accepted by Josette and Jacquelin as changes in the weather are accepted by husbandmen. Those worthy souls remark, "It is fine to-day," or "It rains," without arraigning the heavens. And so when they met in the morning the servants would wonder in what humor mademoiselle would get up, just as a farmer wonders about the mists at dawn.

Mademoiselle Cormon had ended, as it was natural she should end, in contemplating herself only in the infinite pettinesses of her life. Herself and God, her confessor and the weekly wash, her preserves and the church services, and her uncle to care for, absorbed her feeble intellect. To her the atoms of life were magnified by an optic peculiar to persons who are selfish by nature or self-absorbed by some accident. Her perfect health gave alarming meaning to the least little derangement of her digestive organs. She lived under the iron rod of the medical science of our forefathers, and took yearly four precautionary doses, strong enough to have killed Penelope, though they seemed to rejuvenate her mistress. If Josette, when dressing her, chanced to discover a little pimple on the still satiny shoulders of mademoiselle, it became the subject of endless inquiries as to the various alimentary articles of the preceding week. And what a triumph when Josette reminded her mistress of a certain hare that was rather "high," and had doubtless raised that accursed pimple! With what joy they said to each other: "No doubt, no doubt, it /was/ the hare!"

"Mariette over-seasoned it," said mademoiselle. "I am always telling her to do so lightly for my uncle and for me; but Mariette has no more memory than –"

"The hare," said Josette.

"Just so," replied Mademoiselle; "she has no more memory than a hare, – a very just remark."

Four times a year, at the beginning of each season, Mademoiselle Cormon went to pass a certain number of days on her estate of Prebaudet. It was now the middle of May, the period at which she wished to see how her apple-trees had "snowed," a saying of that region which expressed the effect produced beneath the trees by the falling of their blossoms. When the circular deposit of these fallen petals resembled a layer of snow the owner of the trees might hope for an abundant supply of cider. While she thus gauged her vats, Mademoiselle Cormon also attended to the repairs which the winter necessitated; she ordered the digging of her flower-beds and her vegetable garden, from which she supplied her table. Every season had its own business. Mademoiselle always gave a dinner of farewell to her intimate friends the day before her departure, although she was certain to see them again within three weeks. It was always a piece of news which echoed through Alençon when Mademoiselle Cormon departed. All her visitors, especially those who had missed a visit, came to bid her good-bye; the salon was thronged, and every one said farewell as though she were starting for Calcutta. The next day the shopkeepers would stand at their doors to see the old carriage pass, and they seemed to be telling one another some news by repeating from shop to shop: —

"So Mademoiselle Cormon is going to Prebaudet!"

Some said: "/Her/ bread is baked."

"Hey! my lad," replied the next man. "She's a worthy woman; if money always came into such hands we shouldn't see a beggar in the country."

Another said: "Dear me, I shouldn't be surprised if the vineyards were in bloom; here's Mademoiselle Cormon going to Prebaudet. How happens it she doesn't marry?"

"I'd marry her myself," said a wag; "in fact, the marriage is half-made, for here's one consenting party; but the other side won't. Pooh! the oven is heating for Monsieur du Bousquier."

"Monsieur du Bousquier! Why, she has refused him."

That evening at all the gatherings it was told gravely: —

"Mademoiselle Cormon has gone."

Or: —

"So you have really let Mademoiselle Cormon go."

The Wednesday chosen by Suzanne to make known her scandal happened to be this farewell Wednesday, — a day on which Mademoiselle Cormon drove Josette distracted on the subject of packing. During the morning, therefore, things had been said and done in the town which lent the utmost interest to this farewell meeting. Madame Granson had gone the round of a dozen houses while the old maid was deliberating on the things she needed for the journey; and the malicious Chevalier de Valois was playing piquet with Mademoiselle Armande, sister of a distinguished old marquis, and the queen of the salon of the aristocrats. If it was not uninteresting to any one to see what figure the seducer would cut that evening, it was all important for the chevalier and Madame Granson to know how Mademoiselle Cormon would take the news in her double capacity of marriageable woman and president of the Maternity Society. As for the innocent du Bousquier, he was taking a walk on the promenade, and beginning to suspect that Suzanne had tricked him; this suspicion confirmed him in his principles as to women.

On gala days the table was laid at Mademoiselle Cormon's about half-past three o'clock. At that period the fashionable people of Alençon dined at four. Under the Empire they still dined as in former times at half-past two; but then they supped! One of the pleasures which Mademoiselle Cormon valued most was (without meaning any malice, although the fact certainly rests on egotism) the unspeakable satisfaction she derived from seeing herself dressed as mistress of the house to receive her guests. When she was thus under arms a ray of hope would glide into the darkness of her heart; a voice told her that nature had not so abundantly provided for her in vain, and that some man, brave and enterprising, would surely present himself. Her desire was refreshed like her person; she contemplated herself in her heavy stuffs with a sort of intoxication, and this satisfaction continued when she descended the stairs to cast her redoubtable eye on the salon, the dinner-table, and the boudoir. She would then walk about with the naive contentment of the rich, — who remember at all moments that they are rich and will never want for anything. She looked at her eternal furniture, her curiosities, her lacquers, and said to herself that all these fine things wanted was a master. After admiring the dining-room, and the oblong dinner-table, on which was spread a snow-white cloth adorned with twenty covers placed at equal distances; after verifying the squadron of bottles she had ordered to be brought up, and which all bore honorable labels; after carefully verifying the names written on little bits of paper in the trembling handwriting of the abbe (the only duty he assumed in the household, and one which gave rise to grave discussions on the place of each guest), — after going through all these preliminary acts mademoiselle went, in her fine clothes, to her uncle, who was accustomed at this, the best hour in the day, to take his walk on the terrace which overlooked the Brillante, where he could listen to the warble of birds which were resting in the coppice, unafraid of either sportsmen or children. At such times of waiting she never joined the Abbe de Sponde without asking him some ridiculous question, in order to draw the old man into a discussion which might serve to amuse him. And her reason was this, — which will serve to complete our picture of this excellent woman's nature: —

Mademoiselle Cormon regarded it as one of her duties to talk; not that she was talkative, for she had unfortunately too few ideas, and did not know enough phrases to converse readily. But she believed she was accomplishing one of the social duties enjoined by religion, which orders us to make ourselves agreeable to our neighbor. This obligation cost her so much that she consulted her director, the Abbe Couturier, upon the subject of this honest but puerile civility. In spite of the humble remark of his penitent, confessing the inward labor of her mind in finding anything to say, the old priest, rigid on the point of discipline, read her a passage from Saint-Francois de Sales on the duties of women in society, which dwelt on the decent gayety of pious Christian women, who were bound to reserve their sternness for themselves, and to be amiable and pleasing in their homes, and see that their neighbors enjoyed themselves. Thus, filled with a sense of duty, and wishing, at all costs, to obey her director, who bade her converse with amenity, the poor soul perspired in her corset when the talk around her languished, so much did she suffer from the effort of emitting ideas in order to revive it. Under such circumstances she would put forth the silliest statements, such as: "No one can be in two places at once – unless it is a little bird," by which she one day roused, and not without success, a discussion on the ubiquity of the apostles, which she was unable to comprehend. Such efforts at conversation won her the appellation of "that good Mademoiselle Cormon," which, from the lips of the beaux esprits of society, means that she was as ignorant as a carp, and rather a poor fool; but many persons of her own calibre took the remark in its literal sense, and answered: —

"Yes; oh yes! Mademoiselle Cormon is an excellent woman."

Sometimes she would put such absurd questions (always for the purpose of fulfilling her duties to society, and making herself agreeable to her guests) that everybody burst out laughing. She asked, for instance, what the government did with the taxes they were always receiving; and why the Bible had not been printed in the days of Jesus Christ, inasmuch as it was written by Moses. Her mental powers were those of the English "country gentleman" who, hearing constant mention of "posterity" in the House of Commons, rose to make the speech that has since become celebrated: "Gentlemen," he said, "I hear much talk in this place about Posterity. I should be glad to know what that power has ever done for England."

Under these circumstances the heroic Chevalier de Valois would bring to the succor of the old maid all the powers of his clever diplomacy, whenever he saw the pitiless smile of wiser heads. The old gentleman, who loved to assist women, turned Mademoiselle Cormon's sayings into wit by sustaining them paradoxically, and he often covered the retreat so well that it seemed as if the good woman had said nothing silly. She asserted very seriously one evening that she did not see any difference between an ox and a bull. The dear chevalier instantly arrested the peals of laughter by asserting that there was only the difference between a sheep and a lamb.

But the Chevalier de Valois served an ungrateful dame, for never did Mademoiselle Cormon comprehend his chivalrous services. Observing that the conversation grew lively, she simply thought that she was not so stupid as she was, – the result being that she settled down into her ignorance with some complacency; she lost her timidity, and acquired a self-possession which gave to her "speeches" something of the solemnity with which the British enunciate their patriotic absurdities, – the self-conceit of stupidity, as it may be called.

As she approached her uncle, on this occasion, with a majestic step, she was ruminating over a question that might draw him from a silence, which always troubled her, for she feared he was dull.

"Uncle," she said, leaning on his arm and clinging to his side (this was one of her fictions; for she said to herself "If I had a husband I should do just so"), – "uncle, if everything here below happens according to the will of God, there must be a reason for everything."

"Certainly," replied the abbe, gravely. The worthy man, who cherished his niece, always allowed her to tear him from his meditations with angelic patience.

"Then if I remain unmarried, – supposing that I do, – God wills it?"

"Yes, my child," replied the abbe.

"And yet, as nothing prevents me from marrying to-morrow if I choose,  
His will can be destroyed by mine?"

"That would be true if we knew what was really the will of God," replied the former prior of the Sorbonne. "Observe, my daughter, that you put in an /if/."

The poor woman, who expected to draw her uncle into a matrimonial discussion by an argument *ad omnipotentem*, was stupefied; but persons of obtuse mind have the terrible logic of children, which consists in turning from answer to question, – a logic that is frequently embarrassing.



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