

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

THE STEPMOTHER, A
DRAMA IN FIVE ACTS

Оноре де Бальзак

**The Stepmother, A
Drama in Five Acts**

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ACT I

SCENE FIRST

(A richly decorated drawing-room; on the walls are portraits of Napoleon I. and his son. The entry is by a large double glass door, which opens on a roofed veranda and leads by a short stairway to a park. The door of Pauline's apartments are on the right; those of the General and his wife are on the left. On the left side of the central doorway is a table, and on the right is a cabinet. A vase full of flowers stands by the entrance to Pauline's room. A richly carved marble mantel, with a bronze clock and candelabras, faces these apartments. In the front of the stage are two sofas, one on the left, the other on the right. Gertrude enters, carrying the flowers which she has just plucked, and puts them in the vase.)

Gertrude and the General.

Gertrude I assure you, my dear, that it would be unwise to defer any longer giving your daughter in marriage. She is now twenty-two. Pauline has been very slow in making her choice; and, in such a case, it is the duty of parents to see that their children are settled. Moreover, I am very much interested in her.

The General

In what way?

Gertrude The position of stepmother is always open to suspicion; and for some time it has been rumored in Louviers that I am the person who throws obstacles in the way of Pauline's marriage.

The General That is merely the idle gossip of little towns. I should like to cut out some of those silly tongues. And to think that they should attack you of all people, Gertrude, who have been a real mother to Pauline – whom you have educated most excellently!

Gertrude It is the way of the world! They will never forgive us for living so close to the town, yet never entering it. The society of the place revenges itself upon us for slighting it. Do you think that our happiness can escape envy? Even our doctor —

The General

Do you mean Vernon?

Gertrude Yes, Vernon is very envious of you; he is vexed to think that he has never been able to inspire any woman with such affection as I have for you. Moreover, he pretends that I am merely playing a part, – as if I could do it for twelve years! Rather unlikely, I should think.

The General No woman could keep up the pretence for twelve years without being found out. The idea is absurd! And Vernon also is —

Gertrude Oh, he is only joking! And so, as I told you before, you had better see Godard. I am astonished that he has not yet arrived. He is so rich that it would be folly to refuse him. He is in love with Pauline, and although he has his faults, and is somewhat provincial, he is quite able to make her happy.

The General

I have left Pauline quite free to choose a husband for herself.

Gertrude There is no cause for anxiety. A girl so gentle, so well brought up, so well behaved, is sure to do right.

The General

Gentle, did you say? She is headstrong, like her father.

Gertrude

She, headstrong? And you, come now, do you not always act as I wish?

The General You are no angel, and always wish what pleases me! By the bye, Vernon takes dinner with us after his autopsy.

Gertrude

Was it necessary to tell me that?

The General

I only told you, in order that he might have his favorite wines.

Felix (enters, announcing)

Monsieur de Rimonville!

The General

Ask him in.

Gertrude (making a sign to Felix to arrange the vase of flowers) I will go to Pauline's room, while you are talking business. I should like to superintend the arrangement of her toilet. Young people do not always understand what is most becoming to them.

The General She has no expense spared her! During the last eighteen months her dress has cost twice as much as it previously did; after all, poor girl, it is the only amusement she has.

Gertrude How can you say it is her only amusement while she has the privilege of living with us! If it were not my happy lot to be your wife, I should like to be your daughter. I will never leave you, not I! Did you say for the last eighteen months? That is singular! Well, when I come to think of it, she has begun to care more about laces, jewels, and other pretty things.

The General

She is quite rich enough to indulge her tastes.

Gertrude And she is now of age. (Aside) Her fondness of dress is the smoke. Can there be any fire? (Exit.)

SCENE SECOND

The General (alone) What a pearl among women! Thus I am made happy after twenty-six campaigns, a dozen wounds, and the death of an angel, whose place she has taken in my heart; truly a kind Providence owed me some such recompense as this, if it were only to console me for the death of the Emperor.

SCENE THIRD

Godard and the General.

Godard (entering)

Well, General!

The General

Ah! good day, Godard! I hope you are come to spend the day with us?

Godard I thought perhaps I might spend the week, General, if you should regard favorably the request which I shall venture to make of you.

The General

Go in and win! I know what request you mean – My wife is on your side.

Ah, Godard, you have attacked the fortress at its weak point!

Godard

General, you are an old soldier, and have no taste for mere phrases.

In all your undertakings you go straight ahead, as you did when under fire.

The General

Straight and facing the whole battery.

Godard

That suits me well, for I am rather timid.

The General You! I owe you, my dear friend, an apology; I took you for a man who was too well aware of his own worth.

Godard You took me to be conceited! But General, as a matter of fact, I intend to marry because I don't know how to pay any court to women.

The General (aside) What a civilian! (Aloud) How is this? You talk like an old man, and – that is not the way to win my daughter.

Godard Do not misunderstand me. I have a warm heart; I wish only to feel sure that I shall be accepted.

The General

That means that you don't mind attacking unwalled towns.

Godard

That is not it at all, General. You quite alarm me, with your banter.

The General

What do you mean then?

Godard I understand nothing about the tricks of women. I know no more when their yes means no, than when their no means yes; and when I am in love, I wish to be loved in return.

The General (aside)

With such ideas as those he has precious little chance.

Godard There are plenty of men like me, men who are supremely bored by this little warfare of manners and whims.

The General But there is something also delightful in it, – I mean in the feminine show of resistance, which gives one the pleasure of overcoming it.

Godard Thank you, nothing of that sort for me! When I am hungry, I do not wish to coquette with my soup. I like to have things decided, and care very little how the decision is arrived at, although I do come from Normandy. In the world, I see coxcombs who creep into the favor of women by saying to them, "Ah! madame, what a pretty frock you have on. Your taste is perfect. You are the only person who could wear that," and starting from such speeches as that they go on and on – and gain their end. They are wonderful fellows, upon my honor! I don't see how they reach success by

such idle talk. I should beat about the bush through all eternity before I could tell a pretty woman the effect she had made on me.

The General

The men of the Empire were not of that sort.

Godard It is on account of that, that I put on a bold face! This boldness when backed by an income of forty thousand francs is accepted without protest, and wins its way to the front. That is why you took me for a good match. So long as there are no mortgages on the rich pasture lands of the Auge Valley, so long as one possesses a fine chateau, well furnished – for my wife need bring with her nothing but her trousseau, since she will find there even the cashmeres and laces of my late mother – when a man has all that, General, he has got all the courage he need have. Besides, I am now Monsieur de Rimonville.

The General

No, you're only Godard.

Godard

Godard de Rimonville.

The General

Godard for short.

Godard

General, you are trying my patience.

The General As for me, it would try my patience to see a man, even if he were my son-in-law, deny his father; and your father, a right honest man, used himself to drive his beeves from Caen to Poissy, and all along the road was known as Godard – Father Godard.

Godard

He was highly thought of.

The General He was, in his own class. But I see what's the matter; as his cattle provided you with an income of forty thousand francs, you are counting upon other animals to give you the name of De Rimonville.

Godard Now come, General, you had better consult Mlle. Pauline; she belongs to her own epoch – that she does. We are now in the year 1829 and Charles X. is king. She would sooner hear the valet call out, as she left a ballroom, "the carriage of Madame de Rimonville," than, "the carriage of Madame Godard."

The General Well, if such silliness as this pleases my daughter, it makes no difference to me. For, after all, you would be the one they'd poke fun at, my dear Godard.

Godard

De Rimonville.

The General Godard, you are a good fellow, you are young, you are rich, you say that you won't pay your court to women, but that your wife shall be the queen of your house. Well, if you gain her consent you can have mine; for bear in mind, Pauline will only marry the man she loves, rich or poor. There may be one exception, but that doesn't concern you. I would prefer to attend her funeral rather than take her to the registry office to marry a man who was a son, grandson, brother, nephew, cousin or connection of one of the four or five wretches who betrayed – you know what my religion is —

Godard

Betrayed the Emperor. Yes, everyone knows your creed, General.

The General God, first of all; then France or the Emperor – It is all the same to me. Lastly, my wife and children! Whoever meddles with my gods becomes my enemy; I would kill him like a hare, remorselessly. My catechism is short, but it is good. Do you know why, in the year 1816, after their cursed disbanding of the army of the Loire, I took my little motherless child and came here, I, colonel of the Young Guard, wounded at Waterloo, and became a cloth manufacturer of Louviers?

Godard

I suppose you didn't wish to hold office under them.

The General

No, because I did not wish to die as a murderer on the scaffold.

Godard

What do you mean?

The General If I had met one of those traitors, I should have finished his business for him. Even to-day, after some fifteen years, my blood boils if I read their names in the newspaper or anyone mentions them in my presence. And indeed, if I should meet one of them, nothing would prevent me from springing at his throat, tearing him to pieces, strangling him —

Godard

You would do right. (Aside) I must humor him.

The General Yes, sir, I would strangle him! And if my son-in-law were to ill-treat my dear child, I would do the same to him.

Godard

Ah!

The General I shouldn't wish him to be altogether under her thumb. A man ought to be king in his own house, as I am here.

Godard (aside)

Poor man! How he deceives himself!

The General

Did you speak?

Godard I said, General, that your threat had no terrors for me! When one has nothing but a wife to love, he loves her well.

The General Quite right, my dear Godard. And now with regard to the marriage settlement?

Godard

Oh, yes!

The General

My daughter's portion consists of —

Godard

Consists of —

The General It comprises her mother's fortune and the inheritance of her uncle Boncoeur. It will be undivided, for I give up my rights to it. This will amount to three hundred and fifty thousand francs and a year's interest, for Pauline is twenty-two.

Godard This will make up three hundred and sixty-seven thousand five hundred francs.

The General

No.

Godard

Why not?

The General

It will be more!

Godard

More?

The General

Four hundred thousand francs. (Godard seems astonished.) I make up the difference! But when I die there will be nothing more coming to her.

Do you understand?

Godard

I do not understand.

The General

I am very much attached to little Napoleon.

Godard

You mean the young Duke of Reichstadt?

The General No, my son whom they would enter in the register only under the name of Leon; but I had inscribed here (he places his hand upon his heart) the name of Napoleon! Do you see I must provide for him and his mother?

Godard (aside)

Especially for his mother; she'll take care of that!

The General

What are you saying? If you don't agree with me, out with it!

Godard (aside) If I did so, we should find ourselves in the law courts. (Aloud) I agree, and will back you in everything, General.

The General

Good for you! And I'll tell you why, my dear Godard.

Godard

De Rimonville.

The General Godard, I prefer Godard. I'll tell you why. After having commanded the grenadiers of the Young Guard, I, General Comte de Grandchamp, now weave the cloth for their uniforms.

Godard This is very commendable! You should keep on storing up, General, so that your widow may not be left without a fortune.

The General

She is an angel, Godard!

Godard

De Rimonville.

The General Godard, she is an angel, to whom you are indebted for the education of your intended, whom she has moulded after her own image. Pauline is a pearl, a jewel; she has never left this home; she is as pure and innocent as she was in her cradle.

Godard

General, let me admit that Mlle. Pauline is beautiful!

The General

I am quite sure of that.

Godard She is very beautiful; but there are numbers of beautiful girls in Normandy, some of them very rich, much richer than she is. Well now, you'll scarcely believe how the mothers and fathers of these heiresses run after me! It is scarcely decent. But it amuses me immensely; I visit their chateaus; they overwhelm me with attentions —

The General

I said he was conceited!

Godard Oh, I am quite aware that it is not for my sake! I don't delude myself as to that; it is for my unmortgaged pastures; for my savings, and for my habit of living within my income. Do you know what it is that makes me seek an alliance with you above all others?

The General

No.

Godard

There are certain rich would-be fathers-in-law who promise to obtain from his Majesty a decree, by which I shall be created Comte de

Rimonville and Peer of France.

The General

You?

Godard

Yes, I.

The General Have you won any battles? Have you saved your country? Have you added to its glory? This is pitiful!

Godard Pitiful? (Aside) What shall I say? (Aloud) We differ in our views on this subject, but do you know why I prefer your adorable Pauline?

The General

I suppose it is because you love her.

Godard That is a matter of course; but it is also on account of the harmony, the tranquillity, the happiness which reign here! It is so delightful to enter a family of high honor, of pure, sincere, patriarchal manners! I am a man of observation.

The General

That is to say, you are inquisitive.

Godard Curiosity, General, is the mother of observation. I know the seamy side of the whole department.

The General

Really?

Godard Yes, really! In all the families of which I have spoken to you, I have seen some shabbiness or other. The public sees the decent exterior of irreproachable mothers of family, of charming young persons, of good fathers, of model uncles; they are admitted to the sacrament without confession, they are entrusted with the investments of others. But just learn their inner side, and it is enough to startle a police magistrate.

The General Ah! That is the way you look at the world, is it? For my part, I try to keep up the illusions in which I have lived. To peer into the inner life of people in that way is the business of priests and magistrates; I have no love for the black robed gentlemen, and I hope to die without ever having seen them! But the sentiment which you express with regard to my house is more pleasing to me than all your fortune. Stick to that point, and you will win my esteem, something which I lightly bestow on no one.

Godard Thank you, General. (Aside) I have won over the father-in-law at any rate.

SCENE FOURTH

The same persons, Pauline and Gertrude.

The General (catching sight of Pauline)

Ah! Here you are, darling.

Gertrude

Doesn't she look beautiful?

Godard

Madame.

Gertrude

Forgive me, sir. I had no eyes excepting for my handiwork.

Godard

Mademoiselle is radiant!

Gertrude We have some people to dinner to-day, and I am something more than a stepmother to her; I love to deck her out, for she is to me like my own daughter.

Godard (aside)

They were evidently expecting me!

Gertrude (aside to Godard) I am going to leave you alone with her. Now is the time for your declaration. (To the General) My dear, let us go out on the veranda and see if our friend the doctor is coming.

The General

I am at your service, as usual. (To Pauline) Good-bye, my pet. (To

Godard) I shall see you later.

(Gertrude and the General go to the veranda, but Gertrude keeps her eye on Godard and Pauline. Ferdinand shows his head at the door of Pauline's chamber, but at a quick sign from her, he hurriedly withdraws it unobserved.)

Godard (at the front of the stage) Let me see, what fine and dainty speech can I make to her? Ah, I have it! (To Pauline) It is a very fine day, mademoiselle.

Pauline

It certainly is, sir.

Godard

Mademoiselle —

Pauline

Sir?

Godard

It is in your power to make the day still finer for me.

Pauline

How can I do that?

Godard Don't you understand me? Has not Madame de Grandchamp said anything to you about the subject nearest my heart?

Pauline While she was helping me to dress, an instant ago, she said a great many complimentary things about you!

Godard

And did you agree with her, even in the slightest way?

Pauline

Oh, sir, I agreed with all she said!

Godard (seating himself on a chair, aside) So far so good. (Aloud) Did she commit a pardonable breach of confidence by telling you that I was so much in love with you that I wished to see you the mistress of Rimonville?

Pauline She gave me to understand by her hints that you were coming with the intention of paying me a very great compliment.

Godard (falling on his knees)

I love you madly, mademoiselle; I prefer you to Mlle. de Blondville, to Mlle. de Clairville, to Mlle. de Verville, to Mlle. de

Pont-de-Ville – to —

Pauline Oh, that is sufficient, sir, you throw me into confusion by these proofs of a love which is quite unexpected! Your victims make up almost a hecatomb. (Godard rises.) Your father was contented with taking the victims to market! But you immolate them.

Godard (aside) I really believe she is making fun of me. But wait awhile! Wait awhile!

Pauline

I think at least we ought to wait awhile; and I must confess —

Godard You do not wish to marry yet. You are happy with your parents, and you are unwilling to leave your father.

Pauline

That is it, exactly.

Godard In that case, there are some mothers who would agree that their daughter was too young, but as your father admits that you are twenty-two I thought that you might possibly have a desire to be settled in life.

Pauline

Sir!

Godard You are, I know, quite at liberty to decide both your own destiny and mine; but in accordance with the wishes of your father and of your second mother, who imagine that your heart is free, may I be permitted still to have hope?

Pauline Sir, however flattering to me may be your intention in thus seeking me out, that does not give you any right to question me so closely.

Godard (aside) Is it possible I have a rival? (Aloud) No one, mademoiselle, gives up the prospect of happiness without a struggle.

Pauline

Do you still continue in this strain? I must leave you, sir.

Godard

Thank you, mademoiselle. (Aside) So much for your sarcasm.

Pauline Come sir, you are rich, and nature has given you a fine person; you are so well educated and so witty that you will have no difficulty in finding some young person richer and prettier than I am.

Godard

How can that be when one is in love?

Pauline

Well sir, that is the very point.

Godard (aside)

She is in love with someone; I must find out who it is. (Aloud)

Mademoiselle, will you at least permit me to feel that I am not in disgrace and that I may stay here a few days?

Pauline

My father will answer you on that score.

Gertrude (coming forward to Godard)

Well, how are things going?

Godard A blunt refusal, without even a hope of her relenting; her heart is evidently already occupied.

Gertrude (to Godard) Her heart occupied? This child has been brought up by me, and I know to the contrary; and besides that, no one ever comes here. (Aside) This youth has roused in me suspicions which pierce my heart like a dagger. (To Godard) Why don't you ask her if such is the case?

Godard How could I ask her anything? At my first word of jealous suspicion, she resented my curiosity.

Gertrude

Well, I shall have no hesitation in questioning her.

The General Ah, here comes the doctor! We shall now learn the truth concerning the death of Champagne's wife.

SCENE FIFTH

The same persons and Dr. Vernon.

The General

Well, how are you?

Vernon I was quite sure of it. Ladies (he bows to them), as a general rule when a man beats his wife, he takes care not to poison her; he would lose too much by that. He doesn't want to be without a victim.

The General (to Godard)

He is a charming fellow!

Godard

Charming!

The General (to the doctor, presenting Godard to him)

M. Godard.

Godard

De Rimonville.

Vernon (looking at Godard) If he kills her, it is by mistake from having hit her a little too hard; and he is overwhelmed with grief; while Champagne is innocently delighted to have been made a widower by natural causes. As a matter of fact, his wife died of cholera. It was a very rare case, but he who has once seen Asiatic cholera cannot forget it, and I am glad that I had that opportunity; for, since the campaign in Egypt, I have never met with a case. If I had been called in time I could have saved her.

Gertrude How fortunate we are, for if a crime had been committed in this establishment, which for twelve years has been so free from disturbance, I should have been horrified.

The General Here you see the effect of all this tittle-tattle. But are you quite sure, Vernon?

Vernon Am I certain? That's a fine question to put to a retired surgeon-in-chief who has attended twelve French armies, from 1793 to 1815, and has practiced in Germany, in Spain, in Italy, in Russia, in Poland, and in Egypt!

The General (poking him in the ribs) Away, you charlatan! I reckon you have killed more people than I have in those countries.

Godard

What is this talk that you are alluding to?

Gertrude This poor Champagne, our foreman, was supposed to have poisoned his wife.

Vernon Unhappily, the night before she died, they had had an altercation which ended in blows. Ah! they don't take example from their masters.

Godard Such happiness as reigns here ought to be contagious, but the virtues which are exemplified in the countess are very rare.

Gertrude Is there any merit in loving an excellent husband and a daughter such as these?

The General Come, Gertrude, say no more! Such words ought not to be spoken in public.

Vernon (aside) Such things are always said in this way, when it is necessary to make people believe them.

The General (to Vernon)

What are you muttering about?

Vernon I was saying that I was sixty-seven years old, and that I was younger than you are, and that I should wish to be loved like that. (Aside) If only I could be sure that it was love.

The General (to the doctor) I see you are dubious! (to his wife) My dear child, there is no need for me to bless the power of God on your behalf, but I think He must have lent it me, in order that I might love you sufficiently.

Vernon

You forget that I am a doctor, my dear friend. What you are saying to Madame is only good for the burden of a ballad.

Gertrude

The burdens of some ballads, doctor, are exceedingly true.

The General Doctor, if you continue teasing my wife, we shall quarrel; to doubt on such a subject as that is an insult.

Vernon I have no doubt about it. (to the General) I would merely say, that you have loved so many women with the powers of God, that I am in an ecstasy as a doctor to see you still so good a Christian at seventy!

(Gertrude glides softly towards the sofa, where the doctor is seated.)

The General

Pshaw! The last passions, my friend, are always the strongest.

Vernon You are right. In youth, we love with all our strength which grows weaker with age, while in age we love with all our weakness which is ever on the increase.

The General

Oh, vile philosophy!

Gertrude (to Vernon) Doctor, how is it that you, who are so good, try to infuse doubts into the heart of Grandchamp? You know that he is so jealous that he would kill a man on suspicion. I have such respect for his feelings that I have concluded upon seeing no one, but you, the mayor and the cure. Do you want me also to forego your society which is so pleasant, so agreeable to us? Ah! Here is Napoleon.

Vernon (aside) I take this for a declaration of war. She has sent away everyone else, she intends to dismiss me.

Godard (to Vernon) Doctor, you are an intimate friend of the house, tell me, pray, what do you think of Mlle. Pauline?

(The doctor rises from his seat, looks at the speaker, blows his nose, and goes to the middle of the stage. The dinner bells sounds.)

SCENE SIXTH

The same persons, Napoleon and Felix.

Napoleon

Papa, papa, didn't you say I could ride Coco?

The General

Certainly.

Napoleon (to Felix)

Do you hear that?

Gertrude (wiping her son's forehead)

He is quite warm!

The General

But only on the condition that some one goes with you.

Felix You see I was right, Master Napoleon. General, the little rascal wished to go on his pony alone into the country.

Napoleon

He was frightened for me! Do you think I am afraid of anything?

(Exit Felix. Dinner bell rings.)

The General Come and let me kiss you for that word. He is a little soldier and belongs to the Young Guard.

Vernon (with a glance at Gertrude)

He takes after his father!

Gertrude (quickly) As regards courage, he is his father's counterpart; but as to physique, he resembles me.

Felix

Dinner is served.

Gertrude Very well! But do you know where Ferdinand is? He is generally so punctual. Here, Napoleon, go to the entrance of the factory and see if he is coming. Tell him to hurry; the bell has rung.

The General

We need not wait for Ferdinand. Godard, give your arm to Pauline.

(Vernon offers his arm to Gertrude.) Excuse me, Vernon, you ought to be aware that I never permit anybody but myself to take my wife's arm.

Vernon (aside)

Decidedly, he is incurable.

Napoleon (running back)

I saw Ferdinand down in the main avenue.

Vernon

Give me your hand, you little tyrant!

Napoleon

Tyrant yourself! I'll bet I could tire you out.

(Napoleon turns Vernon round and round. All leave, chatting gaily.)

SCENE SEVENTH

Ferdinand (cautiously stealing from Pauline's room) The youngster saved me, but I do not know how he happened to see me in the avenue! One more piece of carelessness like this may ruin us! I must extricate myself from this situation at any price. Here is Pauline refusing Godard's proposal. The General, and especially Gertrude, will try to find out the motives of her refusal! But I must hasten to reach the veranda, so that I may have the appearance of having come from the main avenue, as Leon said. I hope no one will catch sight of me from the dining-room. (He meets Ramel.) What, Eugene Ramel!

SCENE EIGHTH

Ferdinand and Ramel.

Ramel

You here, Marcandal!

Ferdinand Hush! Don't pronounce that name in this place! If the General heard that my name was Marcandal, he would kill me at once as if I were a mad dog.

Ramel

And why?

Ferdinand

Because I am the son of General Marcandal.

Ramel A general to whom the Bourbons are in part indebted for their second innings.

Ferdinand In the eyes of General Grandchamp, to leave Napoleon for service under the Bourbons was treason against France. Alas! this was also my father's opinion, for he died of grief. You must therefore remember to call me by the name of Ferdinand Charny, my mother's maiden name.

Ramel

And what are you doing here?

Ferdinand

I am the manager, the cashier, the factotum of Grandchamp's factory.

Ramel

How is this? Do you do it from necessity?

Ferdinand From dire necessity! My father spent everything, even the fortune of my poor mother, who lived during her later years in Brittany on the pension she received as widow of a lieutenant-general.

Ramel How is it that your father, who had command of the Royal Guard, a most brilliant position, died without leaving you anything, not even a patron?

Ferdinand Had he never betrayed his friends, and changed sides, without any reason —

Ramel

Come, come, we won't talk any more about that.

Ferdinand My father was a gambler – that was the reason why he was so indulgent to me. But may I ask what has brought you here?

Ramel

A fortnight ago I was appointed king's attorney at Louviers.

Ferdinand I heard something about it. But the appointment was published under another name.

Ramel

De la Grandiere, I suppose.

Ferdinand

That is it.

Ramel In order that I might marry Mlle. de Boudeville, I obtained permission to assume my mother's name – as you have done. The Boudeville family have given me their protection, and in a year's time I shall doubtless be attorney-general at Rouen – a stepping-stone towards a position at Paris.

Ferdinand

And what brings you to our quiet factory?

Ramel I came to investigate a criminal case, a poisoning affair, – a fine introduction into my office.

(Felix enters.)

Felix

Monsieur, Madame is worrying about you —

Ferdinand Please ask her to excuse me for a few moments. (Exit Felix.) My dear Eugene, in case the General – who like all retired troopers is very inquisitive – should inquire how we happen to meet here, don't forget to say that we came up the main avenue. It is important for me that you should say so. But go on with your story. It is on account of the wife of Champagne, our foreman, that you have come here; but he is innocent as a new-born babe!

Ramel You believe so, do you? Well, the officers of justice are paid for being incredulous. I see that you still remain, as I left you, the noblest, the most enthusiastic fellow in the world; in short, a poet! A poet who puts the poetry into his life instead of writing it, and believes in the good and the beautiful! And that reminds me – that angel of your dreams, that Gertrude of yours, whatever has become of her?

Ferdinand Hush! Not only has the minister of justice sent you here, but some celestial influence has sent to me at Louviers the friend whose help I need in my terrible perplexity. Eugene, come here and listen to me a while. I am going to appeal to you as my college friend, as the confidant of my youth; you won't put on the airs of the prosecuting attorney to me, will you? You will see from the nature of my admissions that I impose upon you the secrecy of the confessional.

Ramel

Is it anything criminal?

Ferdinand Oh, nonsense! My faults are such as the judges themselves would be willing to commit.

Ramel

Perhaps I had better not listen to you; or, if I do listen to you —

Ferdinand

Well!

Ramel

I could demand a change of position.

Ferdinand You are always my best and kindest friend. Listen then! For over three years I have been in love with Mlle. Pauline de Grandchamp, and she —

Ramel

You needn't go on; I understand. You have been reviving *Romeo and Juliet*— in the heart of Normandy.

Ferdinand With this difference, that the hereditary hatred which stood between the two lovers of the play was a mere trifle in comparison with the loathing with which the Comte de Grandchamp contemplates the son of the traitor Marcandal!

Ramel Let me see! Mlle. Pauline de Grandchamp will be free in three years; she is rich in her own right – I know this from the Boudevilles. You can easily take her to Switzerland and keep her there until the General's wrath has had time to cool; and then you can make him the respectful apologies required under the circumstances.

Ferdinand Do you think I would have asked your advice if the only difficulty lay in the attainment of this trite and easy solution of the problem?

Ramel

Ah! I see, my dear friend. You have already married your

Gertrude – your angel – who has become to you like all other angels, after their metamorphoses into a lawful wives.

Ferdinand

'Tis a hundred times worse than that! Gertrude, my dear sir, is now Madame de Grandchamp.

Ramel

Oh, dear! How is it you've thrust yourself into such a hornets' nest?

Ferdinand In the same way that people always thrust themselves into hornets' nests; that is, with the hope of finding honey there.

Ramel Oh, oh! This is a very serious matter! Now, really, you must conceal nothing from me.

Ferdinand Mlle. Gertrude de Meilhac, educated at St. Denis, without doubt loved me first of all through ambition; she was glad to know that I was rich, and did all she could to gain my attachment with a view to marriage.

Ramel

Such is the game of all these intriguing orphan girls.

Ferdinand But how came it about that Gertrude has ended by loving me so sincerely? For her passion may be judged by its effects. I call it a passion, but with her it is first love, sole and undivided love, which dominates her whole life, and seems to consume her. When she found that I was a ruined man, towards the close of the year 1816, and knowing that I was like you, a poet, fond of luxury and art, of a soft and happy life, in short, a mere spoilt child, she formed a plan at once base and sublime, such a plan as disappointed passion suggests to women who, for the sake of their love, do all that despots do for the sake of their power; for them, the supreme law is that of their love —

Ramel The facts, my dear fellow, give me the facts! You are making your defence, recollect, and I am prosecuting attorney.

Ferdinand While I was settling my mother in Brittany, Gertrude met General de Grandchamp, who was seeking a governess for his daughter. She saw nothing in this battered warrior, then fifty-eight years old, but a money-box. She expected that she would soon be left a widow, wealthy and in circumstances to claim her lover and her slave. She said to herself that her marriage would be merely a bad dream, followed quickly by a happy awakening. You see the dream has lasted twelve years! But you know how women reason.

Ramel

They have a special jurisprudence of their own.

Ferdinand Gertrude is a woman of the fiercest jealousy. She wishes for fidelity in her lover to recompense her for her infidelity to her husband, and as she has suffered martyrdom, she says, she wishes —

Ramel To have you in the same house with her, that she may keep watch over you herself.

Ferdinand She has been successful in getting me here. For the last three years I have been living in a small house near the factory. I should have left the first week after my arrival, but that two days' acquaintance with Pauline convinced me that I could not live without her.

Ramel Your love for Pauline, it seems to me as a magistrate, makes your position here somewhat less distasteful.

Ferdinand My position? I assure you, it is intolerable, among the three characters with whom I am cast. Pauline is daring, like all young persons who are innocent, to whom love is a wholly ideal thing, and who see no evil in anything, so long as it concerns a man whom they intend to marry. The penetration of Gertrude is very acute, but we manage to elude it through Pauline's terror lest my name should be divulged; the sense of this danger gives her strength to dissemble! But now Pauline has just refused Godard, and I do not know what may be the consequences.

Ramel I know Godard; under a somewhat dull exterior he conceals great sagacity, and he is the most inquisitive man in the department. Is he here now?

Ferdinand

He dines here to-day.

Ramel

Do not trust him.

Ferdinand If two women, between whom there is no love lost, make the discovery that they are rivals, one of them, I can't say which, is capable of killing the other, for one is strong in innocence

and lawful love; the other, furious to see the fruit of so much dissimulation, so many sacrifices, even crimes lost to her forever.

(Enter Napoleon.)

Ramel You alarm me – me, the prosecuting attorney! Upon my word and honor, women often cost more than they are worth.

Napoleon Dear friend! Papa and mamma are impatient about you; they send word that you must leave your business, and Vernon says that your stomach requires it.

Ferdinand

You little rogue! You are come eavesdropping!

Napoleon

Mamma whispered in my ear: "Go and see what your friend is doing."

Ferdinand Run away, you little scamp! Be off! I am coming. (To Ramel) You see she makes this innocent child a spy over me.

(Exit Napoleon.)

Ramel

Is this the General's child?

Ferdinand

Yes.

Ramel

He is twelve years old?

Ferdinand

About.

Ramel

Have you anything more to tell me?

Ferdinand

Really, I think I have told you enough.

Ramel Very well! Go and get your dinner. Say nothing of my arrival, nor of my purpose here. Let them finish their dinner in peace. Now go at once.

(Exit Ferdinand.)

SCENE NINTH

Ramel (alone) Poor fellow! If all young people had studied the annals of the court, as I have done in seven years of a magistrate's work, they would come to the conclusion that marriage must be accepted as the sole romance which is possible in life. But if passion could control itself it would be virtue.

Curtain to First Act.

ACT II

SCENE FIRST

(Stage setting remains as in Act I.)

Ramel and Marguerite; later, Felix.

(Ramel is buried in his reflections, reclining on the sofa in such a way as to be almost out of sight. Marguerite brings in lights and cards. Night is approaching.)

Marguerite Four card tables – that will be enough, even though the cure, the mayor and his assistant come. (Felix lights the candles.) I'll wager anything that my poor Pauline will not be married this time. Dear child! If her late mother were to see that she was not queen of the house, she would weep in her coffin! I only remain here in order to comfort and to wait upon her.

Felix (aside) What is this old woman grumbling about? (Aloud) Whom are you complaining of now, Marguerite? I'll bet it is the mistress.

Marguerite

No, it is not; I am blaming the master.

Felix The General? You had better mind your own business. He is a saint, is that man.

Marguerite

Yes, a stone saint, for he is blind.

Felix

You had better say that he has been blinded.

Marguerite

You hit the nail on the head there.

Felix

The General has but one fault – he is jealous.

Marguerite

Yes, and obstinate, too.

Felix Yes, obstinate; it is the same thing. When once he suspects anything he comes down like a hammer. That was the way he laid two men lifeless at a blow. Between ourselves, there is only one way to treat a trooper of that sort; you must stuff him with flattery. And the mistress certainly does stuff him. Besides, she is clever enough to put blinders on him, such as they put on shying horses; he can see neither to the right nor to the left, and she says to him, "My dear, look straight ahead!" So she does!

Marguerite Ah! You think with me that a woman of thirty-two does not love a man of seventy without some object. She is scheming something.

Ramel (aside)

Oh, these servants! whom we pay to spy over us!

Felix What can be her scheme? She never leaves the house, she never sees anyone.

Marguerite She would skin a flint! She has taken away the keys from me – from me who always had the confidence of the former mistress; do you know why she did so?

Felix

I suppose she is saving up her pile.

Marguerite Yes, out of the fortune of Mlle. Pauline, and the profits of the factory. That is the reason why she puts off the marriage of the dear child as long as she can, for she has to give up her fortune when she marries her.

Felix

Yes, that's the law.

Marguerite I would forgive her everything, if only she made Mademoiselle happy; but I sometimes catch my pet in tears, and I ask her what is the matter, and she says nothing but "Good Marguerite!" (Exit Felix.) Let me see, have I done everything? Yes, here are the card tables – the candles – the cards – Ah! the sofa. (She catches sight of Ramel) Good Lord! A stranger!

Ramel

Don't be startled, Marguerite.

Marguerite

You must have heard all we said.

Ramel Don't be alarmed. My business is to keep secrets. I am the state's attorney.

Marguerite

Oh!

SCENE SECOND

The same persons, Pauline, Godard, Vernon, Napoleon, Ferdinand, the General, Madame de Grandchamp.

(Gertrude rushes to Marguerite and snatches the cushions from her hands.)

Gertrude Marguerite, you know very well what pain you give me, by not allowing me to do everything for your master; besides, I am the only one who knows how to arrange the cushions to his liking.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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