

# HONORÉ DE BALZAC

THE FIRM OF NUCINGEN

Оноре де Бальзак  
**The Firm of Nucingen**

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**де Бальзак О.**

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## Honoré de Balzac

# The Firm of Nucingen

You know how slight the partitions are between the private rooms of fashionable restaurants in Paris; Very's largest room, for instance, is cut in two by a removable screen. This Scene is *not* laid at Very's, but in snug quarters, which for reasons of my own I forbear to specify. We were two, so I will say, like Henri Monnier's Prudhomme, "I should not like to compromise *her!*"

We had remarked the want of solidity in the wall-structure, so we talked with lowered voices as we sat together in the little private room, lingering over the dainty dishes of a dinner exquisite in more senses than one. We had come as far as the roast, however, and still we had no neighbors; no sound came from the next room save the crackling of the fire. But when the clock struck eight, we heard voices and noisy footsteps; the waiters brought candles. Evidently there was a party assembled in the next room, and at the first words I knew at once with whom we had to do – four bold cormorants as ever sprang from the foam on the crests of the ever-rising waves of this present generation – four pleasant young fellows whose existence was problematical, since they were not known to possess either stock or landed estates, yet they lived, and lived well. These ingenious *condottieri* of a modern industrialism, that has come to be the most ruthless of all warfares, leave anxieties to their creditors, and keep the pleasures for themselves. They are careful for nothing, save dress. Still with the courage of the Jean Bart order, that will smoke cigars on a barrel of powder (perhaps by way of keeping up their character), with a quizzing humor that outdoes the minor newspapers, sparing no one, not even themselves; clear-sighted, wary, keen after business, grasping yet open handed, envious yet self-complacent, profound politicians by fits and starts, analyzing everything, guessing everything – not one of these in question as yet had contrived to make his way in the world which they chose for their scene of operations. Only one of the four, indeed, had succeeded in coming as far as the foot of the ladder.

To have money is nothing; the self-made man only finds out all that he lacks after six months of flatteries. Andoche Finot, the self-made man in question, stiff, taciturn, cold, and dull-witted, possessed the sort of spirit which will not shrink from groveling before any creature that may be of use to him, and the cunning to be insolent when he needs a man no longer. Like one of the grotesque figures in the ballet in *Gustave*, he was a marquis behind, a boor in front. And this high-priest of commerce had a following.

Emile Blondet, Journalist, with abundance of intellectual power, reckless, brilliant, and indolent, could do anything that he chose, yet he submitted to be exploited with his eyes open. Treacherous or kind upon impulse, a man to love, but not to respect; quick-witted as a *soubrette*, unable to refuse his pen to any one that asked, or his heart to the first that would borrow it, Emile was the most fascinating of those light-of-loves of whom a fantastic modern wit declared that "he liked them better in satin slippers than in boots."

The third in the party, Couture by name, lived by speculation, grafting one affair upon another to make the gains pay for the losses. He was always between wind and water, keeping himself afloat by his bold, sudden strokes and the nervous energy of his play. Hither and thither he would swim over the vast sea of interests in Paris, in quest of some little isle that should be so far a debatable land that he might abide upon it. Clearly Couture was not in his proper place.

As for the fourth and most malicious personage, his name will be enough – it was Bixiou! Not (alas!) the Bixiou of 1825, but the Bixiou of 1836, a misanthropic buffoon, acknowledged supreme, by reason of his energetic and caustic wit; a very fiend let loose now that he saw how he had squandered his intellect in pure waste; a Bixiou vexed by the thought that he had not come by his share of the wreckage in the last Revolution; a Bixiou with a kick for every one, like Pierrot at the Funambules. Bixiou had the whole history of his own times at his finger-ends, more particularly

its scandalous chronicle, embellished by added waggeries of his own. He sprang like a clown upon everybody's back, only to do his utmost to leave the executioner's brand upon every pair of shoulders.

The first cravings of gluttony satisfied, our neighbors reached the stage at which we also had arrived, to wit, the dessert; and, as we made no sign, they believed that they were alone. Thanks to the champagne, the talk grew confidential as they dallied with the dessert amid the cigar smoke. Yet through it all you felt the influence of the icy *esprit* that leaves the most spontaneous feeling frost-bound and stiff, that checks the most generous inspirations, and gives a sharp ring to the laughter. Their table-talk was full of bitter irony which turns a jest into a sneer; it told of the exhaustion of souls given over to themselves; of lives with no end in view but the satisfaction of self – of egoism induced by these times of peace in which we live. I can think of nothing like it save a pamphlet against mankind at large which Diderot was afraid to publish, a book that bares man's breast simply to expose the plague-sores upon it. We listened to just such a pamphlet as *Rameau's Nephew*, spoken aloud in all good faith, in the course of after-dinner talk in which nothing, not even the point which the speaker wished to carry, was sacred from epigram; nothing taken for granted, nothing built up except on ruins, nothing revered save the sceptic's adopted article of belief – the omnipotence, omniscience, and universal applicability of money.

After some target practice at the outer circle of their acquaintances, they turned their ill-natured shafts at their intimate friends. With a sign I explained my wish to stay and listen as soon as Bixiou took up his parable, as will shortly be seen. And so we listened to one of those terrific improvisations which won that artist such a name among a certain set of seared and jaded spirits; and often interrupted and resumed though it was, memory serves me as a reporter of it. The opinions expressed and the form of expression lie alike outside the conditions of literature. It was, more properly speaking, a medley of sinister revelations that paint our age, to which indeed no other kind of story should be told; and, besides, I throw all the responsibility upon the principal speaker. The pantomime and the gestures that accompanied Bixiou's changes of voice, as he acted the parts of the various persons, must have been perfect, judging by the applause and admiring comments that broke from his audience of three.

"Then did Rastignac refuse?" asked Blondet, apparently addressing Finot.

"Point-blank."

"But did you threaten him with the newspapers?" asked Bixiou.

"He began to laugh," returned Finot.

"Rastignac is the late lamented de Marsay's direct heir; he will make his way politically as well as socially," commented Blondet.

"But how did he make his money?" asked Couture. "In 1819 both he and the illustrious Bianchon lived in a shabby boarding-house in the Latin Quarter; his people ate roast cockchafers and their own wine so as to send him a hundred francs every month. His father's property was not worth a thousand crowns; he had two sisters and a brother on his hands, and now –"

"Now he has an income of forty thousand livres," continued Finot; "his sisters had a handsome fortune apiece and married into noble families; he leaves his mother a life interest in the property –"

"Even in 1827 I have known him without a penny," said Blondet.

"Oh! in 1827," said Bixiou.

"Well," resumed Finot, "yet to-day, as we see, he is in a fair way to be a Minister, a peer of France – anything that he likes. He broke decently with Delphine three years ago; he will not marry except on good grounds; and he may marry a girl of noble family. The chap had the sense to take up with a wealthy woman."

"My friends, give him the benefit of extenuating circumstances," urged Blondet. "When he escaped the clutches of want, he dropped into the claws of a very clever man."

"You know what Nucingen is," said Bixiou. "In the early days, Delphine and Rastignac thought him 'good-natured'; he seemed to regard a wife as a plaything, an ornament in his house. And that very fact showed me that the man was square at the base as well as in height," added Bixiou. "Nucingen

makes no bones about admitting that his wife is his fortune; she is an indispensable chattel, but a wife takes a second place in the high-pressure life of a political leader and great capitalist. He once said in my hearing that Bonaparte had blundered like a bourgeois in his early relations with Josephine; and that after he had had the spirit to use her as a stepping-stone, he had made himself ridiculous by trying to make a companion of her.”

“Any man of unusual powers is bound to take Oriental views of women,” said Blondet.

“The Baron blended the opinions of East and West in a charming Parisian creed. He abhorred de Marsay; de Marsay was unmanageable, but with Rastignac he was much pleased; he exploited him, though Rastignac was not aware of it. All the burdens of married life were put on him. Rastignac bore the brunt of Delphine’s whims; he escorted her to the Bois de Boulogne; he went with her to the play; and the little politician and great man of to-day spent a good deal of his life at that time in writing dainty notes. Eugene was scolded for little nothings from the first; he was in good spirits when Delphine was cheerful, and drooped when she felt low; he bore the weight of her confidences and her ailments; he gave up his time, the hours of his precious youth, to fill the empty void of that fair Parisian’s idleness. Delphine and he held high councils on the toilettes which went best together; he stood the fire of bad temper and broadsides of pouting fits, while she, by way of trimming the balance, was very nice to the Baron. As for the Baron, he laughed in his sleeve; but whenever he saw that Rastignac was bending under the strain of the burden, he made ‘as if he suspected something,’ and reunited the lovers by a common dread.”

“I can imagine that a wealthy wife would have put Rastignac in the way of a living, and an honorable living, but where did he pick up his fortune?” asked Couture. “A fortune so considerable as his at the present day must come from somewhere; and nobody ever accused him of inventing a good stroke of business.”

“Somebody left it to him,” said Finot.

“Who?” asked Blondet.

“Some fool that he came across,” suggested Couture.

“He did not steal the whole of it, my little dears,” said Bixiou.

“Let not your terrors rise to fever-heat,

Our age is lenient with those who cheat.

Now, I will tell you about the beginnings of his fortune. In the first place, honor to talent! Our friend is not a ‘chap,’ as Finot describes him, but a gentleman in the English sense, who knows the cards and knows the game; whom, moreover, the gallery respects. Rastignac has quite as much intelligence as is needed at a given moment, as if a soldier should make his courage payable at ninety days’ sight, with three witnesses and guarantees. He may seem captious, wrong-headed, inconsequent, vacillating, and without any fixed opinions; but let something serious turn up, some combination to scheme out, he will not scatter himself like Blondet here, who chooses these occasions to look at things from his neighbor’s point of view. Rastignac concentrates himself, pulls himself together, looks for the point to carry by storm, and goes full tilt for it. He charges like a Murat, breaks squares, pounds away at shareholders, promoters, and the whole shop, and returns, when the breach is made, to his lazy, careless life. Once more he becomes the man of the South, the man of pleasure, the trifling, idle Rastignac. He has earned the right of lying in bed till noon because a crisis never finds him asleep.”

“So far so good, but just get to his fortune,” said Finot.

“Bixiou will lash that off at a stroke,” replied Blondet. “Rastignac’s fortune was Delphine de Nucingen, a remarkable woman; she combines boldness with foresight.”

“Did she ever lend you money?” inquired Bixiou. Everybody burst out laughing.

“You are mistaken in her,” said Couture, speaking to Blondet; “her cleverness simply consists in making more or less piquant remarks, in loving Rastignac with tedious fidelity, and obeying him blindly. She is a regular Italian.”

“Money apart,” Andoche Finot put in sourly.

“Oh, come, come,” said Bixiou coaxingly; “after what we have just been saying, will you venture to blame poor Rastignac for living at the expense of the firm of Nucingen, for being installed in furnished rooms precisely as La Torpille was once installed by our friend des Lupeaulx? You would sink to the vulgarity of the Rue Saint-Denis! First of all, ‘in the abstract,’ as Royer-Collard says, the question may abide the *Kritik of Pure Reason*; as for the impure reason – ”

“There he goes!” said Finot, turning to Blondet.

“But there is reason in what he says,” exclaimed Blondet. “The problem is a very old one; it was the grand secret of the famous duel between La Chataigneraie and Jarnac. It was cast up to Jarnac that he was on good terms with his mother-in-law, who, loving him only too well, equipped him sumptuously. When a thing is so true, it ought not to be said. Out of devotion to Henry II., who permitted himself this slander, La Chataigneraie took it upon himself, and there followed the duel which enriched the French language with the expression *coup de Jarnac*.”

“Oh! does it go so far back? Then it is noble?” said Finot.

“As a proprietor of newspapers and reviews of old standing, you are not bound to know that,” said Blondet.

“There are women,” Bixiou gravely resumed, “and for that matter, men too, who can cut their lives in two and give away but one-half. (Remark how I word my phrase for you in humanitarian language.) For these, all material interests lie without the range of sentiment. They give their time, their life, their honor to a woman, and hold that between themselves it is not the thing to meddle with bits of tissue paper bearing the legend, ‘*Forgery is punishable with death*.’ And equally they will take nothing from a woman. Yes, the whole thing is debased if fusion of interests follows on fusion of souls. This is a doctrine much preached, and very seldom practised.”

“Oh, what rubbish!” cried Blondet. “The Marechal de Richelieu understood something of gallantry, and he settled an allowance of a thousand louis d’or on Mme. de la Popeliniere after that affair of the hiding-place behind the hearth. Agnes Sorel, in all simplicity, took her fortune to Charles VII., and the King accepted it. Jacques Coeur kept the crown for France; he was allowed to do it, and woman-like, France was ungrateful.”

“Gentlemen,” said Bixiou, “a love that does not imply an indissoluble friendship, to my thinking, is momentary libertinage. What sort of entire surrender is it that keeps something back? Between these two diametrically opposed doctrines, the one as profoundly immoral as the other, there is no possible compromise. It seems to me that any shrinking from a complete union is surely due to a belief that the union cannot last, and if so, farewell to illusion. The passion that does not believe that it will last for ever is a hideous thing. (Here is pure unadulterated Fenelon for you!) At the same time, those who know the world, the observer, the man of the world, the wearers of irreproachable gloves and ties, the men who do not blush to marry a woman for her money, proclaim the necessity of a complete separation of sentiment and interest. The other sort are lunatics that love and imagine that they and the woman they love are the only two beings in the world; for them millions are dirt; the glove or the camellia flower that She wore is worth millions. If the squandered filthy lucre is never to be found again in their possession, you find the remains of floral relics hoarded in dainty cedar-wood boxes. They cannot distinguish themselves one from the other; for them there is no ‘I’ left. *Thou*— that is their Word made flesh. What can you do? Can you stop the course of this ‘hidden disease of the heart’? There are fools that love without calculation and wise men that calculate while they love.”

“To my thinking Bixiou is sublime,” cried Blondet. “What does Finot say to it?”

“Anywhere else,” said Finot, drawing himself up in his cravat, “anywhere else, I should say, with the ‘gentlemen’; but here, I think – ”

“With the scoundrelly scapegraces with whom you have the honor to associate?” said Bixiou.

“Upon my word, yes.”

“And you?” asked Bixiou, turning to Couture.

“Stuff and nonsense!” cried Couture. “The woman that will not make a stepping-stone of her body, that the man she singles out may reach his goal, is a woman that has no heart except for her own purposes.”

“And you, Blondet?”

“I do not preach, I practise.”

“Very good,” rejoined Bixiou in his most ironical tones. “Rastignac was not of your way of thinking. To take without repaying is detestable, and even rather bad form; but to take that you may render a hundred-fold, like the Lord, is a chivalrous deed. This was Rastignac’s view. He felt profoundly humiliated by his community of interests with Delphine de Nucingen; I can tell you that he regretted it; I have seen him deploring his position with tears in his eyes. Yes, he shed tears, he did indeed – after supper. Well, now to *our* way of thinking – ”

“I say, you are laughing at us,” said Finot.

“Not the least in the world. We were talking of Rastignac. From your point of view his affliction would be a sign of his corruption; for by that time he was not nearly so much in love with Delphine. What would you have? he felt the prick in his heart, poor fellow. But he was a man of noble descent and profound depravity, whereas we are virtuous artists. So Rastignac meant to enrich Delphine; he was a poor man, she a rich woman. Would you believe it? – he succeeded. Rastignac, who might have fought at need, like Jarnac, went over to the opinion of Henri II. on the strength of his great maxim, ‘There is no such thing as absolute right; there are only circumstances.’ This brings us to the history of his fortune.”

“You might just as well make a start with your story instead of drawing us on to traduce ourselves,” said Blondet with urbane good humor.

“Aha! my boy,” returned Bixiou, administering a little tap to the back of Blondet’s head, “you are making up for lost time over the champagne!”

“Oh! by the sacred name of shareholder, get on with your story!” cried Couture.

“I was within an ace of it,” retorted Bixiou, “but you with your profanity have brought me to the climax.”

“Then, are there shareholders in the tale?” inquired Finot.

“Yes; rich as rich can be – like yours.”

“It seems to me,” Finot began stiffly, “that some consideration is owing to a good fellow to whom you look for a bill for five hundred francs upon occasion – ”

“Waiter!” called Bixiou.

“What do you want with the waiter?” asked Blondet.

“I want five hundred francs to repay Finot, so that I can tear up my I. O. U. and set my tongue free.”

“Get on with your story,” said Finot, making believe to laugh.

“I take you all to witness that I am not the property of this insolent fellow, who fancies that my silence is worth no more than five hundred francs. You will never be a minister if you cannot gauge people’s consciences. There, my good Finot,” he added soothingly, “I will get on with my story without personalities, and we shall be quits.”

“Now,” said Couture with a smile, “he will begin to prove for our benefit that Nucingen made Rastignac’s fortune.”

“You are not so far out as you think,” returned Bixiou. “You do not know what Nucingen is, financially speaking.”

“Do you know so much as a word as to his beginnings?” asked Blondet.

“I have only known him in his own house,” said Bixiou, “but we may have seen each other in the street in the old days.”

“The prosperity of the firm of Nucingen is one of the most extraordinary things seen in our days,” began Blondet. “In 1804 Nucingen’s name was scarcely known. At that time bankers would

have shuddered at the idea of three hundred thousand francs' worth of his acceptances in the market. The great capitalist felt his inferiority. How was he to get known? He suspended payment. Good! Every market rang with a name hitherto only known in Strasbourg and the Quartier Poissonniere. He issued deposit certificates to his creditors, and resumed payment; forthwith people grew accustomed to his paper all over France. Then an unheard-of-thing happened – his paper revived, was in demand, and rose in value. Nucingen's paper was much inquired for. The year 1815 arrives, my banker calls in his capital, buys up Government stock before the battle of Waterloo, suspends payment again in the thick of the crisis, and meets his engagements with shares in the Wortschin mines, which he himself issued at twenty per cent more than he gave for them! Yes, gentlemen! – He took a hundred and fifty thousand bottles of champagne of Grandet to cover himself (forseeing the failure of the virtuous parent of the present Comte d'Aubrion), and as much Bordeaux wine of Duberghe at the same time. Those three hundred thousand bottles which he took over (and took at thirty sous apiece, my dear boy) he supplied at the price of six francs per bottle to the Allies in the Palais Royal during the foreign occupation, between 1817 and 1819. Nucingen's name and his paper acquired a European celebrity. The illustrious Baron, so far from being engulfed like others, rose the higher for calamities. Twice his arrangements had paid holders of his paper uncommonly well; *he* try to swindle them? Impossible. He is supposed to be as honest a man as you will find. When he suspends payment a third time, his paper will circulate in Asia, Mexico, and Australia, among the aborigines. No one but Ouvrard saw through this Alsacien banker, the son of some Jew or other converted by ambition; Ouvrard said, 'When Nucingen lets gold go, you may be sure that it is to catch diamonds.'

"His crony, du Tillet, is just such another," said Finot. "And, mind you, that of birth du Tillet has just precisely as much as is necessary to exist; the chap had not a farthing in 1814, and you see what he is now; and he has done something that none of us has managed to do (I am not speaking of you, Couture), he has had friends instead of enemies. In fact, he has kept his past life so quiet, that unless you rake the sewers you are not likely to find out that he was an assistant in a perfumer's shop in the Rue Saint Honore, no further back than 1814."

"Tut, tut, tut!" said Bixiou, "do not think of comparing Nucingen with a little dabbler like du Tillet, a jackal that gets on in life through his sense of smell. He scents a carcass by instinct, and comes in time to get the best bone. Besides, just look at the two men. The one has a sharp-pointed face like a cat, he is thin and lanky; the other is cubical, fat, heavy as a sack, imperturbable as a diplomatist. Nucingen has a thick, heavy hand, and lynx eyes that never light up; his depths are not in front, but behind; he is inscrutable, you never see what he is making for. Whereas du Tillet's cunning, as Napoleon said to somebody (I have forgotten the name), is like cotton spun too fine, it breaks."

"I do not myself see that Nucingen has any advantage over du Tillet," said Blondet, "unless it is that he has the sense to see that a capitalist ought not to rise higher than a baron's rank, while du Tillet has a mind to be an Italian count."

"Blondet – one word, my boy," put in Couture. "In the first place, Nucingen dared to say that honesty is simply a question of appearances; and secondly, to know him well you must be in business yourself. With him banking is but a single department, and a very small one; he holds Government contracts for wines, wools, indigoes – anything, in short, on which any profit can be made. He has an all-round genius. The elephant of finance would contract to deliver votes on a division, or the Greeks to the Turks. For him business means the sum-total of varieties; as Cousin would say, the unity of specialties. Looked at in this way, banking becomes a kind of statecraft in itself, requiring a powerful head; and a man thoroughly tempered is drawn on to set himself above the laws of a morality that cramps him."

"Right, my son," said Blondet; "but we, and we alone, can comprehend that this means bringing war into the financial world. A banker is a conquering general making sacrifices on a tremendous scale to gain ends that no one perceives; his soldiers are private people's interests. He has stratagems to plan out, partisans to bring into the field, ambushes to set, towns to take. Most men of this stamp are

so close upon the borders of politics, that in the end they are drawn into public life, and thereby lose their fortunes. The firm of Necker, for instance, was ruined in this way; the famous Samuel Bernard was all but ruined. Some great capitalist in every age makes a colossal fortune, and leaves behind him neither fortune nor a family; there was the firm of Paris Brothers, for instance, that helped to pull down Law; there was Law himself (beside whom other promoters of companies are but pigmies); there was Bouret and Beaujon – none of them left any representative. Finance, like Time, devours its own children. If the banker is to perpetuate himself, he must found a noble house, a dynasty; like the Fuggers of Antwerp, that lent money to Charles V. and were created Princes of Babenhausen, a family that exists at this day – in the *Almanach de Gotha*. The instinct of self-preservation, working it may be unconsciously, leads the banker to seek a title. Jacques Coeur was the founder of the great noble house of Noirmoutier, extinct in the reign of Louis XIII. What power that man had! He was ruined for making a legitimate king; and he died, prince of an island in the Archipelago, where he built a magnificent cathedral.”

“Oh! you are giving us an historical lecture, we are wandering away from the present, the crown has no right of conferring nobility, and barons and counts are made with closed doors; more is the pity!” said Finot.

“You regret the times of the *savonnette a vilain*, when you could buy an office that ennobled?” asked Bixiou. “You are right. *Je reviens a nos moutons*. – Do you know Beaudenord? No? no? no? Ah, well! See how all things pass away! Poor fellow, ten years ago he was the flower of dandyism; and now, so thoroughly absorbed that you no more know him than Finot just now knew the origin of the expression ‘*coup de Jarnac*’ – I repeat that simply for the sake of illustration, and not to tease you, Finot. Well, it is a fact, he belonged to the Faubourg Saint-Germain.

“Beaudenord is the first pigeon that I will bring on the scene. And, in the first place, his name was Godefroid de Beaudenord; neither Finot, nor Blondet, nor Couture, nor I am likely to undervalue such an advantage as that! After a ball, when a score of pretty women stand behooded waiting for their carriages, with their husbands and adorers at their sides, Beaudenord could hear his people called without a pang of mortification. In the second place, he rejoiced in the full complement of limbs; he was whole and sound, had no mote in his eyes, no false hair, no artificial calves; he was neither knock-kneed nor bandy-legged, his dorsal column was straight, his waist slender, his hands white and shapely. His hair was black; he was of a complexion neither too pink, like a grocer’s assistant, nor yet too brown, like a Calabrese. Finally, and this is an essential point, Beaudenord was not too handsome, like some of our friends that look rather too much of professional beauties to be anything else; but no more of that; we have said it, it is shocking! Well, he was a crack shot, and sat a horse to admiration; he had fought a duel for a trifle, and had not killed his man.

“If you wish to know in what pure, complete, and unadulterated happiness consists in this Nineteenth Century in Paris – the happiness, that is to say, of a young man of twenty-six – do you realize that you must enter into the infinitely small details of existence? Beaudenord’s bootmaker had precisely hit off his style of foot; he was well shod; his tailor loved to clothe him. Godefroid neither rolled his r’s, nor lapsed into Normanisms nor Gascon; he spoke pure and correct French, and tied his cravat correctly (like Finot). He had neither father nor mother – such luck had he! – and his guardian was the Marquis d’Aiglemont, his cousin by marriage. He could go among city people as he chose, and the Faubourg Saint-Germain could make no objection; for, fortunately, a young bachelor is allowed to make his own pleasure his sole rule of life, he is at liberty to betake himself wherever amusement is to be found, and to shun the gloomy places where cares flourish and multiply. Finally, he had been vaccinated (you know what I mean, Blondet).

“And yet, in spite of all these virtues,” continued Bixiou, “he might very well have been a very unhappy young man. Eh! eh! that word happiness, unhappily, seems to us to mean something absolute, a delusion which sets so many wiseacres inquiring what happiness is. A very clever woman said that ‘Happiness was where you chose to put it.’”

“She formulated a dismal truth,” said Blondet.

“And a moral,” added Finot.

“Double distilled,” said Blondet. “Happiness, like Good, like Evil, is relative. Wherefore La Fontaine used to hope that in the course of time the damned would feel as much at home in hell as a fish in water.”

“La Fontaine’s sayings are known in Philistia!” put in Bixiou.

“Happiness at six-and-twenty in Paris is not the happiness of six-and-twenty at – say Blois,” continued Blondet, taking no notice of the interruption. “And those that proceed from this text to rail at the instability of opinion are either knaves or fools for their pains. Modern medicine, which passed (it is its fairest title to glory) from a hypothetical to a positive science, through the influence of the great analytical school of Paris, has proved beyond a doubt that a man is periodically renewed throughout – ”

“New haft, new blade, like Jeannot’s knife, and yet you think that he is still the same man,” broke in Bixiou. “So there are several lozenges in the harlequin’s coat that we call happiness; and – well, there was neither hole nor stain in this Godefroid’s costume. A young man of six-and-twenty, who would be happy in love, who would be loved, that is to say, not for his blossoming youth, nor for his wit, nor for his figure, but spontaneously, and not even merely in return for his own love; a young man, I say, who has found love in the abstract, to quote Royer-Collard, might yet very possibly find never a farthing in the purse which She, loving and beloved, embroidered for him; he might owe rent to his landlord; he might be unable to pay the bootmaker before mentioned; his very tailor, like France herself, might at last show signs of disaffection. In short, he might have love and yet be poor. And poverty spoils a young man’s happiness, unless he holds our transcendental views of the fusion of interests. I know nothing more wearing than happiness within combined with adversity without. It is as if you had one leg freezing in the draught from the door, and the other half-roasted by a brazier – as I have at this moment. I hope to be understood. Comes there an echo from thy waistcoat-pocket, Blondet? Between ourselves, let the heart alone, it spoils the intellect.

“Let us resume. Godefroid de Beaudenord was respected by his tradespeople, for they were paid with tolerable regularity. The witty woman before quoted – I cannot give her name, for she is still living, thanks to her want of heart – ”

“Who is this?”

“The Marquise d’Espard. She said that a young man ought to live on an entresol; there should be no sign of domesticity about the place; no cook, no kitchen, an old manservant to wait upon him, and no pretence of permanence. In her opinion, any other sort of establishment is bad form. Godefroid de Beaudenord, faithful to this programme, lodged on an entresol on the Quai Malaquais; he had, however, been obliged to have this much in common with married couples, he had put a bedstead in his room, though for that matter it was so narrow that he seldom slept in it. An Englishwoman might have visited his rooms and found nothing ‘improper’ there. Finot, you have yet to learn the great law of the ‘Improper’ that rules Britain. But, for the sake of the bond between us – that bill for a thousand francs – I will just give you some idea of it. I have been in England myself. – I will give him wit enough for a couple of thousand,” he added in an aside to Blondet.

“In England, Finot, you grow extremely intimate with a woman in the course of an evening, at a ball or wherever it is; next day you meet her in the street and look as though you knew her again – ‘improper.’ – At dinner you discover a delightful man beneath your left-hand neighbor’s dresscoat; a clever man; no high mightiness, no constraint, nothing of an Englishman about him. In accordance with the tradition of French breeding, so urbane, so gracious as they are, you address your neighbor – ‘improper.’ – At a ball you walk up to a pretty woman to ask her to dance – ‘improper.’ You wax enthusiastic, you argue, laugh, and give yourself out, you fling yourself heart and soul into the conversation, you give expression to your real feelings, you play when you are at the card-table, chat while you chat, eat while you eat – ‘improper! improper! improper!’ Stendhal, one of the cleverest

and profoundest minds of the age, hit off the ‘improper’ excellently well when he said that such-and-such a British peer did not dare to cross his legs when he sat alone before his own hearth for fear of being improper. An English gentlewoman, were she one of the rabid ‘Saints’ – that most straitest sect of Protestants that would leave their whole family to starve if the said family did anything ‘improper’ – may play the deuce’s own delight in her own bedroom, and need not be ‘improper,’ but she would look on herself as lost if she received a visit from a man of her acquaintance in the aforesaid room. Thanks to propriety, London and its inhabitants will be found petrified some of these days.”

“And to think that there are asses here in France that want to import the solemn tomfoolery that the English keep up among themselves with that admirable self-possession which you know!” added Blondet. “It is enough to make any man shudder if he has seen the English at home, and recollects the charming, gracious French manners. Sir Walter Scott was afraid to paint women as they are for fear of being ‘improper’; and at the close of his life repented of the creation of the great character of Effie in *The Heart of Midlothian*.”

“Do you wish not to be ‘improper’ in England?” asked Bixiou, addressing Finot.

“Well?”

“Go to the Tuileries and look at a figure there, something like a fireman carved in marble (‘Themistocles,’ the statuary calls it), try to walk like the Commandant’s statue, and you will never be ‘improper.’ It was through strict observance of the great law of the *improper* that Godefroid’s happiness became complete. There is the story:

“Beaudenord had a tiger, not a ‘groom,’ as they write that know nothing of society. The tiger, a diminutive Irish page called Paddy, Toby, Joby (which you please), was three feet in height by twenty inches in breadth, a weasel-faced infant, with nerves of steel tempered in fire-water, and agile as a squirrel. He drove a landau with a skill never yet at fault in London or Paris. He had a lizard’s eye, as sharp as my own, and he could mount a horse like the elder Franconi. With the rosy cheeks and yellow hair of one of Rubens’ Madonnas he was double-faced as a prince, and as knowing as an old attorney; in short, at the age of ten he was nothing more nor less than a blossom of depravity, gambling and swearing, partial to jam and punch, pert as a *feuilleton*, impudent and light-fingered as any Paris street-arab. He had been a source of honor and profit to a well-known English lord, for whom he had already won seven hundred thousand francs on the race-course. The aforesaid nobleman set no small store on Toby. His tiger was a curiosity, the very smallest tiger in town. Perched aloft on the back of a thoroughbred, Joby looked like a hawk. Yet – the great man dismissed him. Not for greediness, not for dishonesty, nor murder, nor rudeness to my lady, nor for cutting holes in my lady’s own woman’s pockets, nor because he had been ‘got at’ by some of his master’s rivals on the turf, nor for playing games of a Sunday, nor for bad behavior of any sort or description. Toby might have done all these things, he might even have spoken to milord before milord spoke to him, and his noble master might, perhaps, have pardoned that breach of the law domestic. Milord would have put up with a good deal from Toby; he was very fond of him. Toby could drive a tandem dog-cart, riding on the wheeler, postilion fashion; his legs did not reach the shafts, he looked in fact very much like one of the cherub heads circling about the Eternal Father in old Italian pictures. But an English journalist wrote a delicious description of the little angel, in the course of which he said that Paddy was quite too pretty for a tiger; in fact, he offered to bet that Paddy was a tame tigress. The description, on the heads of it, was calculated to poison minds and end in something ‘improper.’ And the superlative of ‘improper’ is the way to the gallows. Milord’s circumspection was highly approved by my lady.

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