HONORÉ DE BALZAC

A DAUGHTER OF EVE

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Содержание

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DEDICATION

To Madame la Comtesse Bolognini, nee Vimercati.

If you remember, madame, the pleasure your conversation gave to a traveller by recalling Paris to his memory in Milan, you will not be surprised to find him testifying his gratitude for many pleasant evenings passed beside you by laying one of his works at your feet, and begging you to protect it with your name, as in former days that name protected the tales of an ancient writer dear to the Milanese.

You have an Eugenie, already beautiful, whose intelligent smile gives promise that she has inherited from you the most precious gifts of womanhood, and who will certainly enjoy during her childhood and youth all those happinesses which a rigid mother denied to the Eugenie of these pages. Though Frenchmen are taxed with inconstancy, you will find me Italian in faithfulness and memory. While writing the name of "Eugenie," my thoughts have often led me back to that cool stuccoed salon and little garden in the Vicolo dei Cappucini, which echoed to the laughter of that dear child, to our sportive quarrels and our chatter. But you have left the Corso for the Tre Monasteri, and

I know not how you are placed there; consequently, I am forced to think of you, not among the charming things with which no doubt you have surrounded yourself, but like one of those fine figures due to Raffaelle, Titian, Correggio, Allori, which seem abstractions, so distant are they from our daily lives.

If this book should wing its way across the Alps, it will prove to you the lively gratitude and respectful friendship of

Your devoted servant,

De Balzac.

CHAPTER I. THE TWO MARIES

In one of the finest houses of the rue Neuve-des-Mathurins, at half-past eleven at night, two young women were sitting before the fireplace of a boudoir hung with blue velvet of that tender shade, with shimmering reflections, which French industry has lately learned to fabricate. Over the doors and windows were draped soft folds of blue cashmere, the tint of the hangings, the work of one of those upholsterers who have just missed being artists. A silver lamp studded with turquoise, and suspended by chains of beautiful workmanship, hung from the centre of the ceiling. The same system of decoration was followed in the smallest details, and even to the ceiling of fluted blue silk, with long bands of white cashmere falling at equal distances on the hangings, where they were caught back by ropes of pearl. A warm Belgian carpet, thick as turf, of a gray ground with blue posies, covered the floor. The furniture, of carved ebony, after a fine model of the old school, gave substance and richness to the rather too decorative quality, as a painter might call it, of the rest of the room. On either side of a large window, two etageres displayed a hundred precious trifles, flowers of mechanical art brought into bloom by the fire of thought. On a chimney-piece of slate-blue marble were figures in old Dresden, shepherds in bridal garb, with delicate bouquets in their hands, German fantasticalities surrounding a platinum clock, inlaid with

arabesques. Above it sparkled the brilliant facets of a Venice mirror framed in ebony, with figures carved in relief, evidently obtained from some former royal residence. Two jardinieres were filled with the exotic product of a hot-house, pale, but divine flowers, the treasures of botany.

In this cold, orderly boudoir, where all things were in place as if for sale, no sign existed of the gay and capricious disorder of a happy home. At the present moment, the two young women were weeping. Pain seemed to predominate. The name of the owner, Ferdinand du Tillet, one of the richest bankers in Paris, is enough to explain the luxury of the whole house, of which this boudoir is but a sample.

Though without either rank or station, having pushed himself forward, heaven knows how, du Tillet had married, in 1831, the daughter of the Comte de Granville, one of the greatest names in the French magistracy, – a man who became peer of France after the revolution of July. This marriage of ambition on du Tillet's part was brought about by his agreeing to sign an acknowledgment in the marriage contract of a dowry not received, equal to that of her elder sister, who was married to Comte Felix de Vandenesse. On the other hand, the Granvilles obtained the alliance with de Vandenesse by the largeness of the "dot." Thus the bank repaired the breach made in the pocket of the magistracy by rank. Could the Comte de Vandenesse have seen himself, three years later, the brother-in-law of a Sieur Ferdinand DU Tillet, so-called, he might not have married his

wife; but what man of rank in 1828 foresaw the strange upheavals which the year 1830 was destined to produce in the political condition, the fortunes, and the customs of France? Had any one predicted to Comte Felix de Vandenesse that his head would lose the coronet of a peer, and that of his father-in-law acquire one, he would have thought his informant a lunatic.

Bending forward on one of those low chairs then called "chaffeuses," in the attitude of a listener, Madame du Tillet was pressing to her bosom with maternal tenderness, and occasionally kissing, the hand of her sister, Madame Felix de Vandenesse. Society added the baptismal name to the surname, in order to distinguish the countess from her sister-in-law, the Marquise Charles de Vandenesse, wife of the former ambassador, who had married the widow of the Comte de Kergarouet, Mademoiselle Emilie de Fontaine.

Half lying on a sofa, her handkerchief in the other hand, her breathing choked by repressed sobs, and with tearful eyes, the countess had been making confidences such as are made only from sister to sister when two sisters love each other; and these two sisters did love each other tenderly. We live in days when sisters married into such antagonist spheres can very well not love each other, and therefore the historian is bound to relate the reasons of this tender affection, preserved without spot or jar in spite of their husbands' contempt for each other and their own social disunion. A rapid glance at their childhood will explain the situation.

Brought up in a gloomy house in the Marais, by a woman of narrow mind, a "devote" who, being sustained by a sense of duty (sacred phrase!), had fulfilled her tasks as a mother religiously, Marie-Angelique and Marie Eugenie de Granville reached the period of their marriage – the first at eighteen, the second at twenty years of age – without ever leaving the domestic zone where the rigid maternal eye controlled them. Up to that time they had never been to a play; the churches of Paris were their theatre. Their education in their mother's house had been as rigorous as it would have been in a convent. From infancy they had slept in a room adjoining that of the Comtesse de Granville, the door of which stood always open. The time not occupied by the care of their persons, their religious duties and the studies considered necessary for well-bred young ladies, was spent in needlework done for the poor, or in walks like those an Englishwoman allows herself on Sunday, saying, apparently, "Not so fast, or we shall seem to be amusing ourselves."

Their education did not go beyond the limits imposed by confessors, who were chosen by their mother from the strictest and least tolerant of the Jansenist priests. Never were girls delivered over to their husbands more absolutely pure and virgin than they; their mother seemed to consider that point, essential as indeed it is, the accomplishment of all her duties toward earth and heaven. These two poor creatures had never, before their marriage, read a tale, or heard of a romance; their very drawings were of figures whose anatomy would have been masterpieces

of the impossible to Cuvier, designed to feminize the Farnese Hercules himself. An old maid taught them drawing. A worthy priest instructed them in grammar, the French language, history, geography, and the very little arithmetic it was thought necessary in their rank for women to know. Their reading, selected from authorized books, such as the "Lettres Edifiantes," and Noel's "Lecons de Litterature," was done aloud in the evening; but always in presence of their mother's confessor, for even in those books there did sometimes occur passages which, without wise comments, might have roused their imagination. Fenelon's "Telemaque" was thought dangerous.

The Comtesse de Granville loved her daughters sufficiently to wish to make them angels after the pattern of Marie Alacoque, but the poor girls themselves would have preferred a less virtuous and more amiable mother. This education bore its natural fruits. Religion, imposed as a yoke and presented under its sternest aspect, wearied with formal practice these innocent young hearts, treated as sinful. It repressed their feelings, and was never precious to them, although it struck its roots deep down into their natures. Under such training the two Maries would either have become mere imbeciles, or they must necessarily have longed for independence. Thus it came to pass that they looked to marriage as soon as they saw anything of life and were able to compare a few ideas. Of their own tender graces and their personal value they were absolutely ignorant. They were ignorant, too, of their own innocence; how, then, could they know life? Without

weapons to meet misfortune, without experience to appreciate happiness, they found no comfort in the maternal jail, all their joys were in each other. Their tender confidences at night in whispers, or a few short sentences exchanged if their mother left them for a moment, contained more ideas than the words themselves expressed. Often a glance, concealed from other eyes, by which they conveyed to each other their emotions, was like a poem of bitter melancholy. The sight of a cloudless sky, the fragrance of flowers, a turn in the garden, arm in arm, – these were their joys. The finishing of a piece of embroidery was to them a source of enjoyment.

Their mother's social circle, far from opening resources to their hearts or stimulating their minds, only darkened their ideas and depressed them; it was made up of rigid old women, withered and graceless, whose conversation turned on the differences which distinguished various preachers and confessors, on their own petty indispositions, on religious events insignificant even to the "Quotidienne" or "l'Ami de la Religion." As for the men who appeared in the Comtesse de Granville's salon, they extinguished any possible torch of love, so cold and sadly resigned were their faces. They were all of an age when mankind is sulky and fretful, and natural sensibilities are chiefly exercised at table and on the things relating to personal comfort. Religious egotism had long dried up those hearts devoted to narrow duties and entrenched behind pious practices. Silent games of cards occupied the whole evening, and the two young girls under the

ban of that Sanhedrim enforced by maternal severity, came to hate the dispiriting personages about them with their hollow eyes and scowling faces.

On the gloom of this life one sole figure of a man, that of a music-master, stood vigorously forth. The confessors had decided that music was a Christian art, born of the Catholic Church and developed within her. The two Maries were therefore permitted to study music. A spinster in spectacles, who taught singing and the piano in a neighboring convent, wearied them with exercises; but when the eldest girl was ten years old, the Comte de Granville insisted on the importance of giving her a master. Madame de Granville gave all the value of conjugal obedience to this needed concession, – it is part of a devote's character to make a merit of doing her duty.

The master was a Catholic German; one of those men born old, who seem all their lives fifty years of age, even at eighty. And yet, his brown, sunken, wrinkled face still kept something infantile and artless in its dark creases. The blue of innocence was in his eyes, and a gay smile of springtide abode upon his lips. His iron-gray hair, falling naturally like that of the Christ in art, added to his ecstatic air a certain solemnity which was absolutely deceptive as to his real nature; for he was capable of committing any silliness with the most exemplary gravity. His clothes were a necessary envelope, to which he paid not the slightest attention, for his eyes looked too high among the clouds to concern themselves with such materialities. This great

unknown artist belonged to the kindly class of the self-forgetting, who give their time and their soul to others, just as they leave their gloves on every table and their umbrella at all doors. His hands were of the kind that are dirty as soon as washed. In short, his old body, badly poised on its knotted old legs, proving to what degree a man can make it the mere accessory of his soul, belonged to those strange creations which have been properly depicted only by a German, – by Hoffman, the poet of that which seems not to exist but yet has life.

Such was Schmucke, formerly chapel-master to the Margrave of Anspach; a musical genius, who was now examined by a council of devotes, and asked if he kept the fasts. The master was much inclined to answer, "Look at me!" but how could he venture to joke with pious dowagers and Jansenist confessors? This apocryphal old fellow held such a place in the lives of the two Maries, they felt such friendship for the grand and simple-minded artist, who was happy and contented in the mere comprehension of his art, that after their marriage, they each gave him an annuity of three hundred francs a year, – a sum which sufficed to pay for his lodging, beer, pipes, and clothes. Six hundred francs a year and his lessons put him in Eden. Schmucke had never found courage to confide his poverty and his aspirations to any but these two adorable young girls, whose hearts were blooming beneath the snow of maternal rigor and the ice of devotion. This fact explains Schmucke and the girlhood of the two Maries.

No one knew then, or later, what abbe or pious spinster had discovered the old German then vaguely wandering about Paris, but as soon as mothers of families learned that the Comtesse de Granville had found a music-master for her daughters, they all inquired for his name and address. Before long, Schmucke had thirty pupils in the Marais. This tardy success was manifested by steel buckles to his shoes, which were lined with horse-hair soles, and by a more frequent change of linen. His artless gaiety, long suppressed by noble and decent poverty, reappeared. He gave vent to witty little remarks and flowery speeches in his German-Gallic patois, very observing and very quaint and said with an air which disarmed ridicule. But he was so pleased to bring a laugh to the lips of his two pupils, whose dismal life his sympathy had penetrated, that he would gladly have made himself wilfully ridiculous had he failed in being so by nature.

According to one of the nobler ideas of religious education, the young girls always accompanied their master respectfully to the door. There they would make him a few kind speeches, glad to do anything to give him pleasure. Poor things! all they could do was to show him their womanhood. Until their marriage, music was to them another life within their lives, just as, they say, a Russian peasant takes his dreams for reality and his actual life for a troubled sleep. With the instinct of protecting their souls against the pettiness that threatened to overwhelm them, against the all-pervading asceticism of their home, they flung themselves into the difficulties of the musical art, and spent

themselves upon it. Melody, harmony, and composition, three daughters of heaven, whose choir was led by an old Catholic faun drunk with music, were to these poor girls the compensation of their trials; they made them, as it were, a rampart against their daily lives. Mozart, Beethoven, Gluck, Paesiello, Cimarosa, Haydn, and certain secondary geniuses, developed in their souls a passionate emotion which never passed beyond the chaste enclosure of their breasts, though it permeated that other creation through which, in spirit, they winged their flight. When they had executed some great work in a manner that their master declared was almost faultless, they embraced each other in ecstasy and the old man called them his Saint Cecilias.

The two Maries were not taken to a ball until they were sixteen years of age, and then only four times a year in special houses. They were not allowed to leave their mother's side without instructions as to their behavior with their partners; and so severe were those instructions that they dared say only yes or no during a dance. The eye of the countess never left them, and she seemed to know from the mere movement of their lips the words they uttered. Even the ball-dresses of these poor little things were piously irreproachable; their muslin gowns came up to their chins with an endless number of thick ruches, and the sleeves came down to their wrists. Swathing in this way their natural charms, this costume gave them a vague resemblance to Egyptian hermae; though from these blocks of muslin rose enchanting little heads of tender melancholy. They felt themselves the objects of

pity, and inwardly resented it. What woman, however innocent, does not desire to excite envy?

No dangerous idea, unhealthy or even equivocal, soiled the pure pulp of their brain; their hearts were innocent, their hands were horribly red, and they glowed with health. Eve did not issue more innocent from the hands of God than these two girls from their mother's home when they went to the mayor's office and the church to be married, after receiving the simple but terrible injunction to obey in all things two men with whom they were henceforth to live and sleep by day and by night. To their minds, nothing could be worse in the strange houses where they were to go than the maternal convent.

Why did the father of these poor girls, the Comte de Granville, a wise and upright magistrate (though sometimes led away by politics), refrain from protecting the helpless little creatures from such crushing despotism? Alas! by mutual understanding, about ten years after marriage, he and his wife were separated while living under one roof. The father had taken upon himself the education of his sons, leaving that of the daughters to his wife. He saw less danger for women than for men in the application of his wife's oppressive system. The two Maries, destined as women to endure tyranny, either of love or marriage, would be, he thought, less injured than boys, whose minds ought to have freer play, and whose manly qualities would deteriorate under the powerful compression of religious ideas pushed to their utmost consequences. Of four victims the count saved two.

The countess regarded her sons as too ill-trained to admit of the slightest intimacy with their sisters. All communication between the poor children was therefore strictly watched. When the boys came home from school, the count was careful not to keep them in the house. The boys always breakfasted with their mother and sisters, but after that the count took them off to museums, theatres, restaurants, or, during the summer season, into the country. Except on the solemn days of some family festival, such as the countess's birthday or New Year's day, or the day of the distribution of prizes, when the boys remained in their father's house and slept there, the sisters saw so little of their brothers that there was absolutely no tie between them. On those days the countess never left them for an instant alone together. Calls of "Where is Angelique?" – "What is Eugenie about?" – "Where are my daughters?" resounded all day. As for the mother's sentiments towards her sons, the countess raised to heaven her cold and macerated eyes, as if to ask pardon of God for not having snatched them from iniquity.

Her exclamations, and also her reticences on the subject of her sons, were equal to the most lamenting verses in Jeremiah, and completely deceived the sisters, who supposed their sinful brothers to be doomed to perdition.

When the boys were eighteen years of age, the count gave them rooms in his own part of the house, and sent them to study law under the supervision of a solicitor, his former secretary. The two Maries knew nothing therefore of fraternity, except by

theory. At the time of the marriage of the sisters, both brothers were practising in provincial courts, and both were detained by important cases. Domestic life in many families which might be expected to be intimate, united, and homogeneous, is really spent in this way. Brothers are sent to a distance, busy with their own careers, their own advancement, occupied, perhaps, about the good of the country; the sisters are engrossed in a round of other interests. All the members of such a family live disunited, forgetting one another, bound together only by some feeble tie of memory, until, perhaps, a sentiment of pride or self-interest either joins them or separates them in heart as they already are in fact. Modern laws, by multiplying the family by the family, has created a great evil, – namely, individualism.

In the depths of this solitude where their girlhood was spent, Angelique and Eugenie seldom saw their father, and when he did enter the grand apartment of his wife on the first floor, he brought with him a saddened face. In his own home he always wore the grave and solemn look of a magistrate on the bench. When the little girls had passed the age of dolls and toys, when they began, about twelve, to use their minds (an epoch at which they ceased to laugh at Schmucke) they divined the secret of the cares that lined their father's forehead, and they recognized beneath that mask of sternness the relics of a kind heart and a fine character. They vaguely perceived how he had yielded to the forces of religion in his household, disappointed as he was in his hopes of a husband, and wounded in the tenderest fibres of

paternity, – the love of a father for his daughters. Such griefs were singularly moving to the hearts of the two young girls, who were themselves deprived of all tenderness. Sometimes, when pacing the garden between his daughters, with an arm round each little waist, and stepping with their own short steps, the father would stop short behind a clump of trees, out of sight of the house, and kiss them on their foreheads; his eyes, his lips, his whole countenance expressing the deepest commiseration.

"You are not very happy, my dear little girls," he said one day; "but I shall marry you early. It will comfort me to have you leave home."

"Papa," said Eugenie, "we have decided to take the first man who offers."

"Ah!" he cried, "that is the bitter fruit of such a system. They want to make saints, and they make – " he stopped without ending his sentence.

Often the two girls felt an infinite tenderness in their father's "Adieu," or in his eyes, when, by chance, he dined at home. They pitied that father so seldom seen, and love follows often upon pity.

This stern and rigid education was the cause of the marriages of the two sisters welded together by misfortune, as Rita-Christina by the hand of Nature. Many men, driven to marriage, prefer a girl taken from a convent, and saturated with piety, to a girl brought up to worldly ideas. There seems to be no middle course. A man must marry either an educated girl, who reads the

newspapers and comments upon them, who waltzes with a dozen young men, goes to the theatre, devours novels, cares nothing for religion, and makes her own ethics, or an ignorant and innocent young girl, like either of the two Maries. Perhaps there may be as much danger with the one kind as with the other. Yet the vast majority of men who are not so old as Arnolphe, prefer a religious Agnes to a budding Celimene.

The two Maries, who were small and slender, had the same figure, the same foot, the same hand. Eugenie, the younger, was fair-haired, like her mother, Angelique was dark-haired, like the father. But they both had the same complexion, – a skin of the pearly whiteness which shows the richness and purity of the blood, where the color rises through a tissue like that of the jasmine, soft, smooth, and tender to the touch. Eugenie's blue eyes and the brown eyes of Angelique had an expression of artless indifference, of ingenuous surprise, which was rendered by the vague manner with which the pupils floated on the fluid whiteness of the eyeball. They were both well-made; the rather thin shoulders would develop later. Their throats, long veiled, delighted the eye when their husbands requested them to wear low dresses to a ball, on which occasion they both felt a pleasing shame, which made them first blush behind closed doors, and afterwards, through a whole evening in company.

On the occasion when this scene opens, and the eldest, Angelique, was weeping, while the younger, Eugenie, was consoling her, their hands and arms were white as milk. Each

had nursed a child, – one a boy, the other a daughter. Eugenie, as a girl, was thought very giddy by her mother, who had therefore treated her with especial watchfulness and severity. In the eyes of that much-feared mother, Angelique, noble and proud, appeared to have a soul so lofty that it would guard itself, whereas, the more lively Eugenie needed restraint. There are many charming beings misused by fate, – beings who ought by rights to prosper in this life, but who live and die unhappy, tortured by some evil genius, the victims of unfortunate circumstances. The innocent and naturally light-hearted Eugenie had fallen into the hands and beneath the malicious despotism of a self-made man on leaving the maternal prison. Angelique, whose nature inclined her to deeper sentiments, was thrown into the upper spheres of Parisian social life, with the bridle lying loose upon her neck.

CHAPTER II. A CONFIDENCE BETWEEN SISTERS

Madame de Vandenesse, Marie-Angelique, who seemed to have broken down under a weight of troubles too heavy for her soul to bear, was lying back on the sofa with bent limbs, and her head tossing restlessly. She had rushed to her sister's house after a brief appearance at the Opera. Flowers were still in her hair, but others were scattered upon the carpet, together with her gloves, her silk pelisse, and muff and hood. Tears were mingling with the pearls on her bosom; her swollen eyes appeared to make strange confidences. In the midst of so much luxury her distress was horrible, and she seemed unable to summon courage to speak.

"Poor darling!" said Madame du Tillet; "what a mistaken idea you have of my marriage if you think that I can help you!"

Hearing this revelation, dragged from her sister's heart by the violence of the storm she herself had raised there, the countess looked with stupefied eyes at the banker's wife; her tears stopped, and her eyes grew fixed.

"Are you in misery as well, my dearest?" she said, in a low voice.

"My griefs will not ease yours."

"But tell them to me, darling; I am not yet too selfish to listen. Are we to suffer together once more, as we did in girlhood?"

"But alas! we suffer apart," said the banker's wife. "You and I live in two worlds at enmity with each other. I go to the Tuileries when you are not there. Our husbands belong to opposite parties. I am the wife of an ambitious banker, – a bad man, my darling; while you have a noble, kind, and generous husband."

"Oh! don't reproach me!" cried the countess. "To understand my position, a woman must have borne the weariness of a vapid and barren life, and have entered suddenly into a paradise of light and love; she must know the happiness of feeling her whole life in that of another; of espousing, as it were, the infinite emotions of a poet's soul; of living a double existence, – going, coming with him in his courses through space, through the world of ambition; suffering with his griefs, rising on the wings of his high pleasures, developing her faculties on some vast stage; and all this while living calm, serene, and cold before an observing world. Ah! dearest, what happiness in having at all hours an enormous interest, which multiplies the fibres of the heart and varies them indefinitely! to feel no longer cold indifference! to find one's very life depending on a thousand trifles! – on a walk where an eye will beam to us from a crowd, on a glance which pales the sun! Ah! what intoxication, dear, to live! to *live* when other women are praying on their knees for emotions that never come to them! Remember, darling, that for this poem of delight there is but a single moment, – youth! In a few years winter comes, and cold. Ah! if you possessed these living riches of the heart, and were threatened with the loss of them – "

Madame du Tillet, terrified, had covered her face with her hands during the passionate utterance of this anthem.

"I did not even think of reproaching you, my beloved," she said at last, seeing her sister's face bathed in hot tears. "You have cast into my soul, in one moment, more brands than I have tears to quench. Yes, the life I live would justify to my heart a love like that you picture. Let me believe that if we could have seen each other oftener, we should not now be where we are. If you had seen my sufferings, you must have valued your own happiness the more, and you might have strengthened me to resist my tyrant, and so have won a sort of peace. Your misery is an incident which chance may change, but mine is daily and perpetual. To my husband I am a peg on which to hang his luxury, the sign-post of his ambition, a satisfaction to his vanity. He has no real affection for me, and no confidence. Ferdinand is hard and polished as that piece of marble," she continued, striking the chimney-piece. "He distrusts me. Whatever I may want for myself is refused before I ask it; but as for what flatters his vanity and proclaims his wealth, I have no occasion to express a wish. He decorates my apartments; he spends enormous sums upon my entertainments; my servants, my opera-box, all external matters are maintained with the utmost splendor. His vanity spares no expense; he would trim his children's swaddling-clothes with lace if he could, but he would never hear their cries, or guess their needs. Do you understand me? I am covered with diamonds when I go to court; I wear the richest jewels in society, but I have not one farthing I

can use. Madame du Tillet, who, they say, is envied, who appears to float in gold, has not a hundred francs she can call her own. If the father cares little for his child, he cares less for its mother. Ah! he has cruelly made me feel that he bought me, and that in marrying me without a 'dot' he was wronged. I might perhaps have won him to love me, but there's an outside influence against it, – that of a woman, who is over fifty years of age, the widow of a notary, who rules him. I shall never be free, I know that, so long as he lives. My life is regulated like that of a queen; my meals are served with the utmost formality; at a given hour I must drive to the Bois; I am always accompanied by two footmen in full dress; I am obliged to return at a certain hour. Instead of giving orders, I receive them. At a ball, at the theatre, a servant comes to me and says: 'Madame's carriage is ready,' and I am obliged to go, in the midst, perhaps, of something I enjoy. Ferdinand would be furious if I did not obey the etiquette he prescribes for his wife; he frightens me. In the midst of this hateful opulence, I find myself regretting the past, and thinking that our mother was kind; she left us the nights when we could talk together; at any rate, I was living with a dear being who loved me and suffered with me; whereas here, in this sumptuous house, I live in a desert."

At this terrible confession the countess caught her sister's hand and kissed it, weeping.

"How, then, can I help you," said Eugenie, in a low voice. "He would be suspicious at once if he surprised us here, and would insist on knowing all that you have been saying to me. I should

be forced to tell a lie, which is difficult indeed with so sly and treacherous a man; he would lay traps for me. But enough of my own miseries; let us think of yours. The forty thousand francs you want would be, of course, a mere nothing to Ferdinand, who handles millions with that fat banker, Baron de Nucingen. Sometimes, at dinner, in my presence, they say things to each other which make me shudder. Du Tillet knows my discretion, and they often talk freely before me, being sure of my silence. Well, robbery and murder on the high-road seem to me merciful compared to some of their financial schemes. Nucingen and he no more mind destroying a man than if he were an animal. Often I am told to receive poor dupes whose fate I have heard them talk of the night before, – men who rush into some business where they are certain to lose their all. I am tempted, like Leonardo in the brigand's cave, to cry out, 'Beware!' But if I did, what would become of me? So I keep silence. This splendid house is a cut-throat's den! But Ferdinand and Nucingen will lavish millions for their own caprices. Ferdinand is now buying from the other du Tillet family the site of their old castle; he intends to rebuild it and add a forest with large domains to the estate, and make his son a count; he declares that by the third generation the family will be noble. Nucingen, who is tired of his house in the rue Saint-Lazare, is building a palace. His wife is a friend of mine – Ah!" she cried, interrupting herself, "she might help us; she is very bold with her husband; her fortune is in her own right. Yes, she could save you."

"Dear heart, I have but a few hours left; let us go to her this evening, now, instantly," said Madame de Vandenesse, throwing herself into Madame du Tillet's arms with a burst of tears.

"I can't go out at eleven o'clock at night," replied her sister.

"My carriage is here."

"What are you two plotting together?" said du Tillet, pushing open the door of the boudoir.

He came in showing a torpid face lighted now by a speciously amiable expression. The carpets had dulled his steps and the preoccupation of the two sisters had kept them from noticing the noise of his carriage-wheels on entering the court-yard. The countess, in whom the habits of social life and the freedom in which her husband had left her had developed both wit and shrewdness, – qualities repressed in her sister by marital despotism, which simply continued that of their mother, – saw that Eugenie's terror was on the point of betraying them, and she evaded that danger by a frank answer.

"I thought my sister richer than she is," she replied, looking straight at her brother-in-law. "Women are sometimes embarrassed for money, and do not wish to tell their husbands, like Josephine with Napoleon. I came here to ask Eugenie to do me a service."

"She can easily do that, madame. Eugenie is very rich," replied du Tillet, with concealed sarcasm.

"Is she?" replied the countess, smiling bitterly.

"How much do you want?" asked du Tillet, who was not sorry

to get his sister-in-law into his meshes.

"Ah, monsieur! but I have told you already we do not wish to let our husbands into this affair," said Madame de Vandenesse, cautiously, – aware that if she took his money, she would put herself at the mercy of the man whose portrait Eugenie had fortunately drawn for her not ten minutes earlier. "I will come to-morrow and talk with Eugenie."

"To-morrow?" said the banker. "No; Madame du Tillet dines to-morrow with a future peer of France, the Baron de Nucingen, who is to leave me his place in the Chamber of Deputies."

"Then permit her to join me in my box at the Opera," said the countess, without even glancing at her sister, so much did she fear that Eugenie's candor would betray them.

"She has her own box, madame," said du Tillet, nettled.

"Very good; then I will go to hers," replied the countess.

"It will be the first time you have done us that honor," said du Tillet.

The countess felt the sting of that reproach, and began to laugh.

"Well, never mind; you shall not be made to pay anything this time. Adieu, my darling."

"She is an insolent woman," said du Tillet, picking up the flowers that had fallen on the carpet. "You ought," he said to his wife, "to study Madame de Vandenesse. I'd like to see you before the world as insolent and overbearing as your sister has just been here. You have a silly, bourgeois air which I detest."

Eugenie raised her eyes to heaven as her only answer.

"Ah ca, madame! what have you both been talking of?" said the banker, after a pause, pointing to the flowers. "What has happened to make your sister so anxious all of a sudden to go to your opera-box?"

The poor helot endeavored to escape questioning on the score of sleepiness, and turned to go into her dressing-room to prepare for the night; but du Tillet took her by the arm and brought her back under the full light of the wax-candles which were burning in two silver-gilt sconces between fragrant nosegays. He plunged his light eyes into hers and said, coldly: —

"Your sister came here to borrow forty thousand francs for a man in whom she takes an interest, who'll be locked up within three days in a debtor's prison."

The poor woman was seized with a nervous trembling, which she endeavored to repress.

"You alarm me," she said. "But my sister is far too well brought up, and she loves her husband too much to be interested in any man to that extent."

"Quite the contrary," he said, dryly. "Girls brought up as you two were, in the constraints and practice of piety, have a thirst for liberty; they desire happiness, and the happiness they get in marriage is never as fine as that they dreamt of. Such girls make bad wives."

"Speak for me," said poor Eugenie, in a tone of bitter feeling, "but respect my sister. The Comtesse de Vandenesse is happy;

her husband gives her too much freedom not to make her truly attached to him. Besides, if your supposition were true, she would never have told me of such a matter."

"It is true," he said, "and I forbid you to have anything to do with the affair. My interests demand that the man shall go to prison. Remember my orders."

Madame du Tillet left the room.

"She will disobey me, of course, and I shall find out all the facts by watching her," thought du Tillet, when alone in the boudoir. "These poor fools always think they can do battle against us."

He shrugged his shoulders and rejoined his wife, or to speak the truth, his slave.

The confidence made to Madame du Tillet by Madame Felix de Vandenesse is connected with so many points of the latter's history for the last six years, that it would be unintelligible without a succinct account of the principal events of her life.

CHAPTER III. THE HISTORY OF A FORTUNATE WOMAN

Among the remarkable men who owed their destiny to the Restoration, but whom, unfortunately, the restored monarchy kept, with Martignac, aloof from the concerns of government, was Felix de Vandenesse, removed, with several others, to the Chamber of peers during the last days of Charles X. This misfortune, though, as he supposed, temporary, made him think of marriage, towards which he was also led, as so many men are, by a sort of disgust for the emotions of gallantry, those fairy flowers of the soul. There comes a vital moment to most of us when social life appears in all its soberness.

Felix de Vandenesse had been in turn happy and unhappy, oftener unhappy than happy, like men who, at their start in life, have met with Love in its most perfect form. Such privileged beings can never subsequently be satisfied; but, after fully experiencing life, and comparing characters, they attain to a certain contentment, taking refuge in a spirit of general indulgence. No one deceives them, for they delude themselves no longer; but their resignation, their disillusionment is always graceful; they expect what comes, and therefor they suffer less. Felix might still rank among the handsomest and most agreeable men in Paris. He was originally commended to many women by

one of the noblest creatures of our epoch, Madame de Mortsauf, who had died, it was said, out of love and grief for him; but he was specially trained for social life by the handsome and well-known Lady Dudley.

In the eyes of many Parisian women, Felix, a sort of hero of romance, owed much of his success to the evil that was said of him. Madame de Manerville had closed the list of his amorous adventures; and perhaps her dismissal had something to do with his frame of mind. At any rate, without being in any way a Don Juan, he had gathered in the world of love as many disenchantments as he had met with in the world of politics. That ideal of womanhood and of passion, the type of which – perhaps to his sorrow – had lighted and governed his dawn of life, he despaired of ever finding again.

At thirty years of age, Comte Felix determined to put an end to the burden of his various felicities by marriage. On that point his ideas were extremely fixed; he wanted a young girl brought up in the strictest tenets of Catholicism. It was enough for him to know how the Comtesse de Granville had trained her daughters to make him, after he had once resolved on marriage, request the hand of the eldest. He himself had suffered under the despotism of a mother; he still remembered his unhappy childhood too well not to recognize, beneath the reserves of feminine shyness, the state to which such a yoke must have brought the heart of a young girl, whether that heart was soured, embittered, or rebellious, or whether it was still peaceful, lovable, and ready to unclose

to noble sentiments. Tyranny produces two opposite effects, the symbols of which exist in two grand figures of ancient slavery, Epictetus and Spartacus, – hatred and evil feelings on the one hand, resignation and tenderness, on the other.

The Comte de Vandenesse recognized himself in Marie-Angelique de Granville. In choosing for his wife an artless, innocent, and pure young girl, this young old man determined to mingle a paternal feeling with the conjugal feeling. He knew his own heart was withered by the world and by politics, and he felt that he was giving in exchange for a dawning life the remains of a worn-out existence. Beside those springtide flowers he was putting the ice of winter; hoary experience with young and innocent ignorance. After soberly judging the position, he took up his conjugal career with ample precaution; indulgence and perfect confidence were the two anchors to which he moored it. Mothers of families ought to seek such men for their daughters. A good mind protects like a divinity; disenchantment is as keen-sighted as a surgeon; experience as foreseeing as a mother. Those three qualities are the cardinal virtues of a safe marriage. All that his past career had taught to Felix de Vandenesse, the observations of a life that was busy, literary, and thoughtful by turns, all his forces, in fact, were now employed in making his wife happy; to that end he applied his mind.

When Marie-Angelique left the maternal purgatory, she rose at once into the conjugal paradise prepared for her by Felix, rue du Rocher, in a house where all things were redolent of

aristocracy, but where the varnish of society did not impede the ease and "laisser-aller" which young and loving hearts desire so much. From the start, Marie-Angelique tasted all the sweets of material life to the very utmost. For two years her husband made himself, as it were, her purveyor. He explained to her, by degrees, and with great art, the things of life; he initiated her slowly into the mysteries of the highest society; he taught her the genealogies of noble families; he showed her the world; he guided her taste in dress; he trained her to converse; he took her from theatre to theatre, and made her study literature and current history. This education he accomplished with all the care of a lover, father, master, and husband; but he did it soberly and discreetly; he managed both enjoyments and instructions in such a manner as not to destroy the value of her religious ideas. In short, he carried out his enterprise with the wisdom of a great master. At the end of four years, he had the happiness of having formed in the Comtesse de Vandenesse one of the most lovable and remarkable young women of our day.

Marie-Angelique felt for Felix precisely the feelings with which Felix desired to inspire her, – true friendship, sincere gratitude, and a fraternal love, in which was mingled, at certain times, a noble and dignified tenderness, such as tenderness between husband and wife ought to be. She was a mother, and a good mother. Felix had therefore attached himself to his young wife by every bond without any appearance of garroting her, – relying for his happiness on the charms of habit.

None but men trained in the school of life – men who have gone round the circle of disillusionment, political and amorous – are capable of following out a course like this. Felix, however, found in his work the same pleasure that painters, writers, architects take in their creations. He doubly enjoyed both the work and its fruition as he admired his wife, so artless, yet so well-informed, witty, but natural, lovable and chaste, a girl, and yet a mother, perfectly free, though bound by the chains of righteousness. The history of all good homes is that of prosperous peoples; it can be written in two lines, and has in it nothing for literature. So, as happiness is only explicable to and by itself, these four years furnish nothing to relate which was not as tender as the soft outlines of eternal cherubs, as insipid, alas! as manna, and about as amusing as the tale of "Astrea."

In 1833, this edifice of happiness, so carefully erected by Felix de Vandenesse, began to crumble, weakened at its base without his knowledge. The heart of a woman of twenty-five is no longer that of a girl of eighteen, any more than the heart of a woman of forty is that of a woman of thirty. There are four ages in the life of woman; each age creates a new woman. Vandenesse knew, no doubt, the law of these transformations (created by our modern manners and morals), but he forgot them in his own case, – just as the best grammarian will forget a rule of grammar in writing a book, or the greatest general in the field under fire, surprised by some unlooked-for change of base, forgets his military tactics. The man who can perpetually bring his thought to bear upon his

facts is a man of genius; but the man of the highest genius does not display genius at all times; if he did, he would be like to God.

After four years of this life, with never a shock to the soul, nor a word that produced the slightest discord in this sweet concert of sentiment, the countess, feeling herself developed like a beautiful plant in a fertile soil, caressed by the sun of a cloudless sky, awoke to a sense of a new self. This crisis of her life, the subject of this Scene, would be incomprehensible without certain explanations, which may extenuate in the eyes of women the wrong-doing of this young countess, a happy wife, a happy mother, who seems, at first sight, inexcusable.

Life results from the action of two opposing principles; when one of them is lacking the being suffers. Vandenesse, by satisfying every need, had suppressed desire, that king of creation, which fills an enormous place in the moral forces. Extreme heat, extreme sorrow, complete happiness, are all despotic principles that reign over spaces devoid of production; they insist on being solitary; they stifle all that is not themselves. Vandenesse was not a woman, and none but women know the art of varying happiness; hence their coquetry, refusals, fears, quarrels, and the all-wise clever foolery with which they put in doubt the things that seemed to be without a cloud the night before. Men may weary by their constancy, but women never. Vandenesse was too thoroughly kind by nature to worry deliberately the woman he loved; on the contrary, he kept her in the bluest and least cloudy heaven of love. The problem of

eternal beatitude is one of those whose solution is known only to God. Here, below, the sublimest poets have simply harassed their readers when attempting to picture paradise. Dante's reef was that of Vandenesse; all honor to such courage!

Felix's wife began to find monotony in an Eden so well arranged; the perfect happiness which the first woman found in her terrestrial paradise gave her at length a sort of nausea of sweet things, and made the countess wish, like Rivarol reading Florian, for a wolf in the fold. Such, judging by the history of ages, appears to be the meaning of that emblematic serpent to which Eve listened, in all probability, out of ennui. This deduction may seem a little venturesome to Protestants, who take the book of Genesis more seriously than the Jews themselves.

The situation of Madame de Vandenesse can, however, be explained without recourse to Biblical images. She felt in her soul an enormous power that was unemployed. Her happiness gave her no suffering; it rolled along without care or uneasiness; she was not afraid of losing it; each morning it shone upon her, with the same blue sky, the same smile, the same sweet words. That clear, still lake was unruffled by any breeze, even a zephyr; she would fain have seen a ripple on its glassy surface. Her desire had something so infantine about it that it ought to be excused; but society is not more indulgent than the God of Genesis. Madame de Vandenesse, having now become intelligently clever, was aware that such sentiments were not permissible, and she refrained from confiding them to her "dear little husband." Her

genuine simplicity had not invented any other name for him; for one can't call up in cold blood that delightfully exaggerated language which love imparts to its victims in the midst of flames.

Vandenesse, glad of this adorable reserve, kept his wife, by deliberate calculations, in the temperate regions of conjugal affection. He never condescended to seek a reward or even an acknowledgment of the infinite pains which he gave himself; his wife thought his luxury and good taste her natural right, and she felt no gratitude for the fact that her pride and self-love had never suffered. It was thus in everything. Kindness has its mishaps; often it is attributed to temperament; people are seldom willing to recognize it as the secret effort of a noble soul.

About this period of her life, Madame Felix de Vandenesse had attained to a degree of worldly knowledge which enabled her to quit the insignificant role of a timid, listening, and observing supernumerary, – a part played, they say, for some time, by Giulia Grisi in the chorus at La Scala. The young countess now felt herself capable of attempting the part of prima-donna, and she did so on several occasions. To the great satisfaction of her husband, she began to mingle in conversations. Intelligent ideas and delicate observations put into her mind by her intercourse with her husband, made her remarked upon, and success emboldened her. Vandenesse, to whom the world admitted that his wife was beautiful, was delighted when the same assurance was given that she was clever and witty. On their return from a ball, concert, or rout where Marie had shone

brilliantly, she would turn to her husband, as she took off her ornaments, and say, with a joyous, self-assured air, —

"Were you pleased with me this evening?"

The countess excited jealousies; among others that of her husband's sister, Madame de Listomere, who until now had patronized her, thinking that she protected a foil to her own merits. A countess, beautiful, witty and virtuous! – what a prey for the tongues of the world! Felix had broken with too many women, and too many women had broken with him, to leave them indifferent to his marriage. When these women beheld in Madame de Vandenesse a small woman with red hands, and rather awkward manner, saying little, and apparently not thinking much, they thought themselves sufficiently avenged. The disasters of July, 1830, supervened; society was dissolved for two years; the rich evaded the turmoil and left Paris either for foreign travel or for their estates in the country, and none of the salons reopened until 1833. When that time came, the faubourg Saint-Germain still sulked, but it held intercourse with a few houses, regarding them as neutral ground, – among others that of the Austrian ambassador, where the legitimist society and the new social world met together in the persons of their best representatives.

Attached by many ties of the heart and by gratitude to the exiled family, and strong in his personal convictions, Vandenesse did not consider himself obliged to imitate the silly behavior of his party. In times of danger, he had done his duty at the

risk of his life; his fidelity had never been compromised, and he determined to take his wife into general society without fear of its becoming so. His former mistresses could scarcely recognize the bride they had thought so childish in the elegant, witty, and gentle countess, who now appeared in society with the exquisite manners of the highest female aristocracy. Mesdames d'Espard, de Manerville, and Lady Dudley, with others less known, felt the serpent waking up in the depths of their hearts; they heard the low hissings of angry pride; they were jealous of Felix's happiness, and would gladly have given their prettiest jewel to do him some harm; but instead of being hostile to the countess, these kind, ill-natured women surrounded her, showed her the utmost friendship, and praised her to me. Sufficiently aware of their intentions, Felix watched their relations with Marie, and warned her to distrust them. They all suspected the uneasiness of the count at their intimacy with his wife, and they redoubled their attentions and flatteries, so that they gave her an enormous vogue in society, to the great displeasure of her sister-in-law, the Marquise de Listomere, who could not understand it. The Comtesse Felix de Vandenesse was cited as the most charming and the cleverest woman in Paris. Marie's other sister-in-law, the Marquise Charles de Vandenesse, was consumed with vexation at the confusion of names and the comparisons it sometimes brought about. Though the marquise was a handsome and clever woman, her rivals took delight in comparing her with her sister-in-law, with all the more point because the countess was a dozen

years younger. These women knew very well what bitterness Marie's social vogue would bring into her intercourse with both of her sisters-in-law, who, in fact, became cold and disobliging in proportion to her triumph in society. She was thus surrounded by dangerous relations and intimate enemies.

Every one knows that French literature at that particular period was endeavoring to defend itself against an apathetic indifference (the result of the political drama) by producing works more or less Byronian, in which the only topics really discussed were conjugal delinquencies. Infringements of the marriage tie formed the staple of reviews, books, and dramas. This eternal subject grew more and more the fashion. The lover, that nightmare of husbands, was everywhere, except perhaps in homes, where, in point of fact, under the bourgeois regime, he was less seen than formerly. It is not when every one rushes to their window and cries "Thief!" and lights the streets, that robbers abound. It is true that during those years so fruitful of turmoil – urban, political, and moral – a few matrimonial catastrophes took place; but these were exceptional, and less observed than they would have been under the Restoration. Nevertheless, women talked a great deal together about books and the stage, then the two chief forms of poesy. The lover thus became one of their leading topics, – a being rare in point of act and much desired. The few affairs which were known gave rise to discussions, and these discussions were, as usually happens, carried on by immaculate women.

A fact worthy of remark is the aversion shown to such conversations by women who are enjoying some illicit happiness; they maintain before the eyes of the world a reserved, prudish, and even timid countenance; they seem to ask silence on the subject, or some condonation of their pleasure from society. When, on the contrary, a woman talks freely of such catastrophes, and seems to take pleasure in doing so, allowing herself to explain the emotions that justify the guilty parties, we may be sure that she herself is at the crossways of indecision, and does not know what road she might take.

During this winter, the Comtesse de Vandenesse heard the great voice of the social world roaring in her ears, and the wind of its stormy gusts blew round her. Her pretended friends, who maintained their reputations at the height of their rank and their positions, often produced in her presence the seductive idea of the lover; they cast into her soul certain ardent talk of love, the "mot d'enigme" which life propounds to woman, the grand passion, as Madame de Stael called it, – preaching by example. When the countess asked naively, in a small and select circle of these friends, what difference there was between a lover and a husband, all those who wished evil to Felix took care to reply in a way to pique her curiosity, or fire her imagination, or touch her heart, or interest her mind.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.