

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

THE COLLECTION OF
ANTIQUITIES

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Honoré de Balzac

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DEDICATION

To Baron Von Hammer-Purgstall, Member of the Aulic Council, Author of the History of the Ottoman Empire.

Dear Baron, – You have taken so warm an interest in my long, vast “History of French Manners in the Nineteenth Century,” you have given me so much encouragement to persevere with my work, that you have given me a right to associate your name with some portion of it. Are you not one of the most important representatives of conscientious, studious Germany? Will not your approval win for me the approval of others, and protect this attempt of mine? So proud am I to have gained your good opinion, that I have striven to deserve it by continuing my labors with the unflagging courage characteristic of your methods of study, and of that exhaustive research among documents without which you could never have given your monumental work to the world of letters. Your sympathy with such labor as you yourself have bestowed upon the most brilliant civilization of the East, has often sustained my ardor through nights of toil given to the details of our modern civilization.

And will not you, whose naive kindness can only be compared with that of our own La Fontaine, be glad to know of this?

May this token of my respect for you and your work find you at Dobling, dear Baron, and put you and yours in mind of one of your most sincere admirers and friends.

DE BALZAC.

THE COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

There stands a house at a corner of a street, in the middle of a town, in one of the least important prefectures in France, but the name of the street and the name of the town must be suppressed here. Every one will appreciate the motives of this sage reticence demanded by convention; for if a writer takes upon himself the office of annalist of his own time, he is bound to touch on many sore subjects. The house was called the Hotel d'Esgrignon; but let d'Esgrignon be considered a mere fancy name, neither more nor less connected with real people than the conventional Belval, Floricour, or Derville of the stage, or the Adalberts and Mombreuses of romance. After all, the names of the principal characters will be quite as much disguised; for though in this history the chronicler would prefer to conceal the facts under a mass of contradictions, anachronisms, improbabilities, and absurdities, the truth will out in spite of him. You uproot a vine-stock, as you imagine, and the stem will send up lusty shoots after you have ploughed your vineyard over.

The "Hotel d'Esgrignon" was nothing more nor less than the house in which the old Marquis lived; or, in the style of ancient documents, Charles Marie Victor Ange Carol, Marquis d'Esgrignon. It was only an ordinary house, but the townspeople and tradesmen had begun by calling it the Hotel d'Esgrignon in jest, and ended after a score of years by giving it that name in earnest.

The name of Carol, or Karawl, as the Thierrys would have spelt it, was glorious among the names of the most powerful chieftains of the Northmen who conquered Gaul and established the feudal system there. Never had Carol bent his head before King or Communes, the Church or Finance. Intrusted in the days of yore with the keeping of a French March, the title of marquis in their family meant no shadow of imaginary office; it had been a post of honor with duties to discharge. Their fief had always been their domain. Provincial nobles were they in every sense of the word; they might boast of an unbroken line of great descent; they had been neglected by the court for two hundred years; they were lords paramount in the estates of a province where the people looked up to them with superstitious awe, as to the image of the Holy Virgin that cures the toothache. The house of d'Esgrignon, buried in its remote border country, was preserved as the charred piles of one of Caesar's bridges are maintained intact in a river bed. For thirteen hundred years the daughters of the house had been married without a dowry or taken the veil; the younger sons of every generation had been content with their share of their mother's dower and gone forth to be captains or bishops; some had made a marriage at court; one cadet of the house became an admiral, a duke, and a peer of France, and died without issue. Never would the Marquis d'Esgrignon of the elder branch accept the title of duke.

"I hold my marquisate as His Majesty holds the realm of France, and on the same conditions," he told the Constable de Luynes, a very paltry fellow in his eyes at that time.

You may be sure that d'Esgrignons lost their heads on the scaffold during the troubles. The old blood showed itself proud and high even in 1789. The Marquis of that day would not emigrate; he was answerable for his March. The reverence in which he was held by the countryside saved his head; but the hatred of the genuine sans-culottes was strong enough to compel him to pretend to fly, and for a while he lived in hiding. Then, in the name of the Sovereign People, the d'Esgrignon lands were dishonored by the District, and the woods sold by the Nation in spite of the personal protest made by the Marquis, then turned forty. Mlle. d'Esgrignon, his half-sister, saved some portions of the fief, thanks to the young steward of the family, who claimed on her behalf the partage de presuccession, which is to say, the right of a relative to a portion of the emigre's lands. To Mlle. d'Esgrignon, therefore, the Republic made over the castle itself and a few farms. Chesnel [Choisnel], the faithful steward, was obliged to buy in his own name the church, the parsonage house, the castle gardens, and other places to which his patron was attached – the Marquis advancing the money.

The slow, swift years of the Terror went by, and the Marquis, whose character had won the respect of the whole country, decided that he and his sister ought to return to the castle and improve

the property which Maitre Chesnel – for he was now a notary – had contrived to save for them out of the wreck. Alas! was not the plundered and dismantled castle all too vast for a lord of the manor shorn of all his ancient rights; too large for the landowner whose woods had been sold piecemeal, until he could scarce draw nine thousand francs of income from the pickings of his old estates?

It was in the month of October 1800 that Chesnel brought the Marquis back to the old feudal castle, and saw with deep emotion, almost beyond his control, his patron standing in the midst of the empty courtyard, gazing round upon the moat, now filled up with rubbish, and the castle towers razed to the level of the roof. The descendant of the Franks looked for the missing Gothic turrets and the picturesque weather vanes which used to rise above them; and his eyes turned to the sky, as if asking of heaven the reason of this social upheaval. No one but Chesnel could understand the profound anguish of the great d'Esgrignon, now known as Citizen Carol. For a long while the Marquis stood in silence, drinking in the influences of the place, the ancient home of his forefathers, with the air that he breathed; then he flung out a most melancholy exclamation.

“Chesnel,” he said, “we will come back again some day when the troubles are over; I could not bring myself to live here until the edict of pacification has been published; *they* will not allow me to set my scutcheon on the wall.”

He waved his hand toward the castle, mounted his horse, and rode back beside his sister, who had driven over in the notary's shabby basket-chaise.

The Hotel d'Esgrignon in the town had been demolished; a couple of factories now stood on the site of the aristocrat's house. So Maitre Chesnel spent the Marquis' last bag of louis on the purchase of the old-fashioned building in the square, with its gables, weather-vane, turret, and dovecote. Once it had been the courthouse of the bailiwick, and subsequently the presidial; it had belonged to the d'Esgrignons from generation to generation; and now, in consideration of five hundred louis d'or, the present owner made it over with the title given by the Nation to its rightful lord. And so, half in jest, half in earnest, the old house was christened the Hotel d'Esgrignon.

In 1800 little or no difficulty was made over erasing names from the fatal list, and some few emigres began to return. Among the very first nobles to come back to the old town were the Baron de Nouastre and his daughter. They were completely ruined. M. d'Esgrignon generously offered them the shelter of his roof; and in his house, two months later, the Baron died, worn out with grief. The Nouastres came of the best blood in the province; Mlle. de Nouastre was a girl of two-and-twenty; the Marquis d'Esgrignon married her to continue his line. But she died in childbirth, a victim to the unskilfulness of her physician, leaving, most fortunately, a son to bear the name of the d'Esgrignons. The old Marquis – he was but fifty-three, but adversity and sharp distress had added months to every year – the poor old Marquis saw the death of the loveliest of human creatures, a noble woman in whom the charm of the feminine figures of the sixteenth century lived again, a charm now lost save to men's imaginations. With her death the joy died out of his old age. It was one of those terrible shocks which reverberate through every moment of the years that follow. For a few moments he stood beside the bed where his wife lay, with her hands folded like a saint, then he kissed her on the forehead, turned away, drew out his watch, broke the mainspring, and hung it up beside the hearth. It was eleven o'clock in the morning.

“Mlle. d'Esgrignon,” he said, “let us pray God that this hour may not prove fatal yet again to our house. My uncle the archbishop was murdered at this hour; at this hour also my father died – ”

He knelt down beside the bed and buried his face in the coverlet; his sister did the same, in another moment they both rose to their feet. Mlle. d'Esgrignon burst into tears; but the old Marquis looked with dry eyes at the child, round the room, and again on his dead wife. To the stubbornness of the Frank he united the fortitude of a Christian.

These things came to pass in the second year of the nineteenth century. Mlle. d'Esgrignon was then twenty-seven years of age. She was a beautiful woman. An ex-contractor for forage to the armies of the Republic, a man of the district, with an income of six thousand francs, persuaded Chesnel

to carry a proposal of marriage to the lady. The Marquis and his sister were alike indignant with such presumption in their man of business, and Chesnel was almost heartbroken; he could not forgive himself for yielding to the *Sieur du Croisier's* [*du Bousquier*] blandishments. The Marquis' manner with his old servant changed somewhat; never again was there quite the old affectionate kindness, which might almost have been taken for friendship. From that time forth the Marquis was grateful, and his magnanimous and sincere gratitude continually wounded the poor notary's feelings. To some sublime natures gratitude seems an excessive payment; they would rather have that sweet equality of feeling which springs from similar ways of thought, and the blending of two spirits by their own choice and will. And *Maitre Chesnel* had known the delights of such high friendship; the Marquis had raised him to his own level. The old noble looked on the good notary as something more than a servant, something less than a child; he was the voluntary liege man of the house, a serf bound to his lord by all the ties of affection. There was no balancing of obligations; the sincere affection on either side put them out of the question.

In the eyes of the Marquis, *Chesnel's* official dignity was as nothing; his old servitor was merely disguised as a notary. As for *Chesnel*, the Marquis was now, as always, a being of a divine race; he believed in nobility; he did not blush to remember that his father had thrown open the doors of the salon to announce that "My Lord Marquis is served." His devotion to the fallen house was due not so much to his creed as to egoism; he looked on himself as one of the family. So his vexation was intense. Once he had ventured to allude to his mistake in spite of the Marquis' prohibition, and the old noble answered gravely – "Chesnel, before the troubles you would not have permitted yourself to entertain such injurious suppositions. What can these new doctrines be if they have spoiled *you*?"

Maitre Chesnel had gained the confidence of the whole town; people looked up to him; his high integrity and considerable fortune contributed to make him a person of importance. From that time forth he felt a very decided aversion for the *Sieur du Crosier*; and though there was little rancor in his composition, he set others against the sometime forage-contractor. *Du Croisier*, on the other hand, was a man to bear a grudge and nurse a vengeance for a score of years. He hated *Chesnel* and the *d'Esgrignon* family with the smothered, all-absorbing hate only to be found in a country town. His rebuff had simply ruined him with the malicious provincials among whom he had come to live, thinking to rule over them. It was so real a disaster that he was not long in feeling the consequences of it. He betook himself in desperation to a wealthy old maid, and met with a second refusal. Thus failed the ambitious schemes with which he had started. He had lost his hope of a marriage with *Mlle. d'Esgrignon*, which would have opened the *Faubourg Saint-Germain* of the province to him; and after the second rejection, his credit fell away to such an extent that it was almost as much as he could do to keep his position in the second rank.

In 1805, *M. de la Roche-Guyon*, the oldest son of an ancient family which had previously intermarried with the *d'Esgrignons*, made proposals in form through *Maitre Chesnel* for *Mlle. Marie Armande Clair d'Esgrignon*. She declined to hear the notary.

"You must have guessed before now that I am a mother, dear *Chesnel*," she said; she had just put her nephew, a fine little boy of five, to bed.

The old Marquis rose and went up to his sister, but just returned from the cradle; he kissed her hand reverently, and as he sat down again, found words to say:

"My sister, you are a *d'Esgrignon*."

A quiver ran through the noble girl; the tears stood in her eyes. *M. d'Esgrignon*, the father of the present Marquis, had married a second wife, the daughter of a farmer of taxes ennobled by *Louis XIV*. It was a shocking mesalliance in the eyes of his family, but fortunately of no importance, since a daughter was the one child of the marriage. *Armande* knew this. Kind as her brother had always been, he looked on her as a stranger in blood. And this speech of his had just recognized her as one of the family.

And was not her answer the worthy crown of eleven years of her noble life? Her every action since she came of age had borne the stamp of the purest devotion; love for her brother was a sort of religion with her.

“I shall die Mlle. d’Esgrignon,” she said simply, turning to the notary.

“For you there could be no fairer title,” returned Chesnel, meaning to convey a compliment. Poor Mlle. d’Esgrignon reddened.

“You have blundered, Chesnel,” said the Marquis, flattered by the steward’s words, but vexed that his sister had been hurt. “A d’Esgrignon may marry a Montmorency; their descent is not so pure as ours. The d’Esgrignons bear or, two bends, gules,” he continued, “and nothing during nine hundred years has changed their scutcheon; as it was at first, so it is to-day. Hence our device, *Cil est nostre*, taken at a tournament in the reign of Philip Augustus, with the supporters, a knight in armor on the right, and a lion gules on the left.”

“I do not remember that any woman I have ever met has struck my imagination as Mlle. d’Esgrignon did,” said Emile Blondet, to whom contemporary literature is indebted for this history among other things. “Truth to tell, I was a boy, a mere child at the time, and perhaps my memory-pictures of her owe something of their vivid color to a boy’s natural turn for the marvelous.

“If I was playing with other children on the Parade, and she came to walk there with her nephew Victurnien, the sight of her in the distance thrilled me with very much the effect of galvanism on a dead body. Child as I was, I felt as though new life had been given me.

“Mlle. Armande had hair of tawny gold; there was a delicate fine down on her cheek, with a silver gleam upon it which I loved to catch, putting myself so that I could see the outlines of her face lit up by the daylight, and feel the fascination of those dreamy emerald eyes, which sent a flash of fire through me whenever they fell upon my face. I used to pretend to roll on the grass before her in our games, only to try to reach her little feet, and admire them on a closer view. The soft whiteness of her skin, her delicate features, the clearly cut lines of her forehead, the grace of her slender figure, took me with a sense of surprise, while as yet I did not know that her shape was graceful, nor her brows beautiful, nor the outline of her face a perfect oval. I admired as children pray at that age, without too clearly understanding why they pray. When my piercing gaze attracted her notice, when she asked me (in that musical voice of hers, with more volume in it, as it seemed to me, than all other voices), ‘What are you doing little one? Why do you look at me?’ – I used to come nearer and wriggle and bite my finger-nails, and redden and say, ‘I do not know.’ And if she chanced to stroke my hair with her white hand, and ask me how old I was, I would run away and call from a distance, ‘Eleven!’

“Every princess and fairy of my visions, as I read the Arabian Nights, looked and walked like Mlle. d’Esgrignon; and afterwards, when my drawing-master gave me heads from the antique to copy, I noticed that their hair was braided like Mlle. d’Esgrignon’s. Still later, when the foolish fancies had vanished one by one, Mlle. Armande remained vaguely in my memory as a type; that Mlle. Armande for whom men made way respectfully, following the tall brown-robed figure with their eyes along the Parade and out of sight. Her exquisitely graceful form, the rounded curves sometimes revealed by a chance gust of wind, and always visible to my eyes in spite of the ample folds of stuff, revisited my young man’s dreams. Later yet, when I came to think seriously over certain mysteries of human thought, it seemed to me that the feeling of reverence was first inspired in me by something expressed in Mlle. d’Esgrignon’s face and bearing. The wonderful calm of her face, the suppressed passion in it, the dignity of her movements, the saintly life of duties fulfilled, – all this touched and awed me. Children are more susceptible than people imagine to the subtle influences of ideas; they never make game of real dignity; they feel the charm of real graciousness, and beauty attracts them, for childhood itself is beautiful, and there are mysterious ties between things of the same nature.

“Mlle. d’Esgrignon was one of my religions. To this day I can never climb the staircase of some old manor-house but my foolish imagination must needs picture Mlle. Armande standing there, like the spirit of feudalism. I can never read old chronicles but she appears before my eyes in the shape

of some famous woman of old times; she is Agnes Sorel, Marie Touchet, Gabrielle; and I lend her all the love that was lost in her heart, all the love that she never expressed. The angel shape seen in glimpses through the haze of childish fancies visits me now sometimes across the mists of dreams.”

Keep this portrait in mind; it is a faithful picture and sketch of character. Mlle. d’Esgrignon is one of the most instructive figures in this story; she affords an example of the mischief that may be done by the purest goodness for lack of intelligence.

Two-thirds of the emigres returned to France during 1804 and 1805, and almost every exile from the Marquis d’Esgrignon’s province came back to the land of his fathers. There were certainly defections. Men of good birth entered the service of Napoleon, and went into the army or held places at the Imperial court, and others made alliances with the upstart families. All those who cast in their lots with the Empire retrieved their fortunes and recovered their estates, thanks to the Emperor’s munificence; and these for the most part went to Paris and stayed there. But some eight or nine families still remained true to the proscribed noblesse and loyal to the fallen monarchy. The La Roche-Guyons, Nouastres, Verneuils, Casterans, Troisvilles, and the rest were some of them rich, some of them poor; but money, more or less, scarcely counted for anything among them. They took an antiquarian view of themselves; for them the age and preservation of the pedigree was the one all-important matter; precisely as, for an amateur, the weight of metal in a coin is a small matter in comparison with clean lettering, a flawless stamp, and high antiquity. Of these families, the Marquis d’Esgrignon was the acknowledged head. His house became their cenacle. There His Majesty, Emperor and King, was never anything but “M. de Bonaparte”; there “the King” meant Louis XVIII., then at Mittau; there the Department was still the Province, and the prefecture the intendance.

The Marquis was honored among them for his admirable behavior, his loyalty as a noble, his undaunted courage; even as he was respected throughout the town for his misfortunes, his fortitude, his steadfast adherence to his political convictions. The man so admirable in adversity was invested with all the majesty of ruined greatness. His chivalrous fair-mindedness was so well known, that litigants many a time had referred their disputes to him for arbitration. All gently bred Imperialists and the authorities themselves showed as much indulgence for his prejudices as respect for his personal character; but there was another and a large section of the new society which was destined to be known after the Restoration as the Liberal party; and these, with du Croisier as their unacknowledged head, laughed at an aristocratic oasis which nobody might enter without proof of irreproachable descent. Their animosity was all the more bitter because honest country squires and the higher officials, with a good many worthy folk in the town, were of the opinion that all the best society thereof was to be found in the Marquis d’Esgrignon’s salon. The prefect himself, the Emperor’s chamberlain, made overtures to the d’Esgrignons, humbly sending his wife (a Grandlieu) as ambassadress.

Wherefore, those excluded from the miniature provincial Faubourg Saint-Germain nicknamed the salon “The Collection of Antiquities,” and called the Marquis himself “M. Carol.” The receiver of taxes, for instance, addressed his applications to “M. Carol (ci-devant des Grignons),” maliciously adopting the obsolete way of spelling.

“For my own part,” said Emile Blondet, “if I try to recall my childhood memories, I remember that the nickname of ‘Collection of Antiquities’ always made me laugh, in spite of my respect – my love, I ought to say – for Mlle. d’Esgrignon. The Hotel d’Esgrignon stood at the angle of two of the busiest thoroughfares in the town, and not five hundred paces away from the market place. Two of the drawing-room windows looked upon the street and two upon the square; the room was like a glass cage, every one who came past could look through it from side to side. I was only a boy of twelve at the time, but I thought, even then, that the salon was one of those rare curiosities which seem, when you come to think of them afterwards, to lie just on the borderland between reality and dreams, so that you can scarcely tell to which side they most belong.

“The room, the ancient Hall of Audience, stood above a row of cellars with grated air-holes, once the prison cells of the old court-house, now converted into a kitchen. I do not know that the

magnificent lofty chimney-piece of the Louvre, with its marvelous carving, seemed more wonderful to me than the vast open hearth of the salon d'Esgrignon when I saw it for the first time. It was covered like a melon with a network of tracery. Over it stood an equestrian portrait of Henri III., under whom the ancient duchy of appanage reverted to the crown; it was a great picture executed in low relief, and set in a carved and gilded frame. The ceiling spaces between the chestnut cross-beams in the fine old roof were decorated with scroll-work patterns; there was a little faded gilding still left along the angles. The walls were covered with Flemish tapestry, six scenes from the Judgment of Solomon, framed in golden garlands, with satyrs and cupids playing among the leaves. The parquet floor had been laid down by the present Marquis, and Chesnel had picked up the furniture at sales of the wreckage of old chateaux between 1793 and 1795; so that there were Louis Quatorze consoles, tables, clock-cases, andirons, candle-sconces and tapestry-covered chairs, which marvelously completed a stately room, large out of all proportion to the house. Luckily, however, there was an equally lofty ante-chamber, the ancient Salle des Pas Perdus of the presidial, which communicated likewise with the magistrate's deliberating chamber, used by the d'Esgrignons as a dining-room.

“Beneath the old paneling, amid the threadbare braveries of a bygone day, some eight or ten dowagers were drawn up in state in a quavering line; some with palsied heads, others dark and shriveled like mummies; some erect and stiff, others bowed and bent, but all of them tricked out in more or less fantastic costumes as far as possible removed from the fashion of the day, with be-ribboned caps above their curled and powdered ‘heads,’ and old discolored lace. No painter however earnest, no caricature however wild, ever caught the haunting fascination of those aged women; they come back to me in dreams; their puckered faces shape themselves in my memory whenever I meet an old woman who puts me in mind of them by some faint resemblance of dress or feature. And whether it is that misfortune has initiated me into the secrets of irremediable and overwhelming disaster; whether that I have come to understand the whole range of human feelings, and, best of all, the thoughts of Old Age and Regret; whatever the reason, nowhere and never again have I seen among the living or in the faces of the dying the wan look of certain gray eyes that I remember, nor the dreadful brightness of others that were black.

“Neither Hoffmann nor Maturin, the two weirdest imaginations of our time, ever gave me such a thrill of terror as I used to feel when I watched the automaton movements of those bodies sheathed in whalebone. The paint on actors' faces never caused me a shock; I could see below it the rouge in grain, the rouge de naissance, to quote a comrade at least as malicious as I can be. Years had leveled those women's faces, and at the same time furrowed them with wrinkles, till they looked like the heads on wooden nutcrackers carved in Germany. Peeping in through the window-panes, I gazed at the battered bodies, and ill-jointed limbs (how they were fastened together, and, indeed, their whole anatomy was a mystery I never attempted to explain); I saw the lantern jaws, the protuberant bones, the abnormal development of the hips; and the movements of these figures as they came and went seemed to me no whit less extraordinary than their sepulchral immobility as they sat round the card-tables.

“The men looked gray and faded like the ancient tapestries on the wall, in dress they were much more like the men of the day, but even they were not altogether convincingly alive. Their white hair, their withered waxen-hued faces, their devastated foreheads and pale eyes, revealed their kinship to the women, and neutralized any effects of reality borrowed from their costume.

“The very certainty of finding all these folk seated at or among the tables every day at the same hours invested them at length in my eyes with a sort of spectacular interest as it were; there was something theatrical, something unearthly about them.

“Whenever, in after times, I have gone through museums of old furniture in Paris, London, Munich, or Vienna, with the gray-headed custodian who shows you the splendors of time past, I have peopled the rooms with figures from the Collection of Antiquities. Often, as little schoolboys of eight or ten we used to propose to go and take a look at the curiosities in their glass cage, for the fun of

the thing. But as soon as I caught sight of Mlle. Armande's sweet face, I used to tremble; and there was a trace of jealousy in my admiration for the lovely child Victurnien, who belonged, as we all instinctively felt, to a different and higher order of being from our own. It struck me as something indescribably strange that the young fresh creature should be there in that cemetery awakened before the time. We could not have explained our thoughts to ourselves, yet we felt that we were bourgeois and insignificant in the presence of that proud court."

The disasters of 1813 and 1814, which brought about the downfall of Napoleon, gave new life to the Collection of Antiquities, and what was more than life, the hope of recovering their past importance; but the events of 1815, the troubles of the foreign occupation, and the vacillating policy of the Government until the fall of M. Decazes, all contributed to defer the fulfilment of the expectations of the personages so vividly described by Blondet. This story, therefore, only begins to shape itself in 1822.

In 1822 the Marquis d'Esgrignon's fortunes had not improved in spite of the changes worked by the Restoration in the condition of emigres. Of all the nobles hardly hit by Revolutionary legislation, his case was the hardest. Like other great families, the d'Esgrignons before 1789 derived the greater part of their income from their rights as lords of the manor in the shape of dues paid by those who held of them; and, naturally, the old seigneurs had reduced the size of the holdings in order to swell the amounts paid in quit-rents and heriots. Families in this position were hopelessly ruined. They were not affected by the ordinance by which Louis XVIII. put the emigres into possession of such of their lands as had not been sold; and at a later date it was impossible that the law of indemnity should indemnify them. Their suppressed rights, as everybody knows, were revived in the shape of a land tax known by the very name of *domaines*, but the money went into the coffers of the State.

The Marquis by his position belonged to that small section of the Royalist party which would hear of no kind of compromise with those whom they styled, not Revolutionaries, but revolted subjects, or, in more parliamentary language, they had no dealings with Liberals or Constitutionnels. Such Royalists, nicknamed *Ultras* by the opposition, took for leaders and heroes those courageous orators of the Right, who from the very beginning attempted, with M. de Polignac, to protest against the charter granted by Louis XVIII. This they regarded as an ill-advised edict extorted from the Crown by the necessity of the moment, only to be annulled later on. And, therefore, so far from co-operating with the King to bring about a new condition of things, the Marquis d'Esgrignon stood aloof, an upholder of the strictest sect of the Right in politics, until such time as his vast fortune should be restored to him. Nor did he so much as admit the thought of the indemnity which filled the minds of the Villele ministry, and formed a part of a design of strengthening the Crown by putting an end to those fatal distinctions of ownership which still lingered on in spite of legislation.

The miracles of the Restoration of 1814, the still greater miracle of Napoleon's return in 1815, the portents of a second flight of the Bourbons, and a second reinstatement (that almost fabulous phase of contemporary history), all these things took the Marquis by surprise at the age of sixty-seven. At that time of life, the most high-spirited men of their age were not so much vanquished as worn out in the struggle with the Revolution; their activity, in their remote provincial retreats, had turned into a passionately held and immovable conviction; and almost all of them were shut in by the enervating, easy round of daily life in the country. Could worse luck befall a political party than this – to be represented by old men at a time when its ideas are already stigmatized as old-fashioned?

When the legitimate sovereign appeared to be firmly seated on the throne again in 1818, the Marquis asked himself what a man of seventy should do at court; and what duties, what office he could discharge there? The noble and high-minded d'Esgrignon was fain to be content with the triumph of the Monarchy and Religion, while he waited for the results of that un hoped-for, indecisive victory, which proved to be simply an armistice. He continued as before, lord-paramount of his salon, so felicitously named the Collection of Antiquities.

But when the victors of 1793 became the vanquished in their turn, the nickname given at first in jest began to be used in bitter earnest. The town was no more free than other country towns from the hatreds and jealousies bred of party spirit. Du Croisier, contrary to all expectation, married the old maid who had refused him at first; carrying her off from his rival, the darling of the aristocratic quarter, a certain Chevalier whose illustrious name will be sufficiently hidden by suppressing it altogether, in accordance with the usage formerly adopted in the place itself, where he was known by his title only. He was “the Chevalier” in the town, as the Comte d’Artois was “Monsieur” at court. Now, not only had that marriage produced a war after the provincial manner, in which all weapons are fair; it had hastened the separation of the great and little noblesse, of the aristocratic and bourgeois social elements, which had been united for a little space by the heavy weight of Napoleonic rule. After the pressure was removed, there followed that sudden revival of class divisions which did so much harm to the country.

The most national of all sentiments in France is vanity. The wounded vanity of the many induced a thirst for Equality; though, as the most ardent innovator will some day discover, Equality is an impossibility. The Royalists pricked the Liberals in the most sensitive spots, and this happened specially in the provinces, where either party accused the other of unspeakable atrocities. In those days the blackest deeds were done in politics, to secure public opinion on one side or the other, to catch the votes of that public of fools which holds up hands for those that are clever enough to serve out weapons to them. Individuals are identified with their political opinions, and opponents in public life forthwith became private enemies. It is very difficult in a country town to avoid a man-to-man conflict of this kind over interests or questions which in Paris appear in a more general and theoretical form, with the result that political combatants also rise to a higher level; M. Laffitte, for example, or M. Casimir-Perier can respect M. de Villele or M. de Payronnet as a man. M. Laffitte, who drew the fire on the Ministry, would have given them an asylum in his house if they had fled thither on the 29th of July 1830. Benjamin Constant sent a copy of his work on Religion to the Vicomte de Chateaubriand, with a flattering letter acknowledging benefits received from the former Minister. At Paris men are systems, whereas in the provinces systems are identified with men; men, moreover, with restless passions, who must always confront one another, always spy upon each other in private life, and pull their opponents’ speeches to pieces, and live generally like two duelists on the watch for a chance to thrust six inches of steel between an antagonist’s ribs. Each must do his best to get under his enemy’s guard, and a political hatred becomes as all-absorbing as a duel to the death. Epigram and slander are used against individuals to bring the party into discredit.

In such warfare as this, waged ceremoniously and without rancor on the side of the Antiquities, while du Croisier’s faction went so far as to use the poisoned weapons of savages – in this warfare the advantages of wit and delicate irony lay on the side of the nobles. But it should never be forgotten that the wounds made by the tongue and the eyes, by gibe or slight, are the last of all to heal. When the Chevalier turned his back on mixed society and entrenched himself on the Mons Sacer of the aristocracy, his witticisms thenceforward were directed at du Croisier’s salon; he stirred up the fires of war, not knowing how far the spirit of revenge was to urge the rival faction. None but purists and loyal gentlemen and women sure one of another entered the Hotel d’Esgrignon; they committed no indiscretions of any kind; they had their ideas, true or false, good or bad, noble or trivial, but there was nothing to laugh at in all this. If the Liberals meant to make the nobles ridiculous, they were obliged to fasten on the political actions of their opponents; while the intermediate party, composed of officials and others who paid court to the higher powers, kept the nobles informed of all that was done and said in the Liberal camp, and much of it was abundantly laughable. Du Croisier’s adherents smarted under a sense of inferiority, which increased their thirst for revenge.

In 1822, du Croisier put himself at the head of the manufacturing interest of the province, as the Marquis d’Esgrignon headed the noblesse. Each represented his party. But du Croisier, instead of

giving himself out frankly for a man of the extreme Left, ostensibly adopted the opinions formulated at a later date by the 221 deputies.

By taking up this position, he could keep in touch with the magistrates and local officials and the capitalists of the department. Du Croisier's salon, a power at least equal to the salon d'Esgrignon, larger numerically, as well as younger and more energetic, made itself felt all over the countryside; the Collection of Antiquities, on the other hand, remained inert, a passive appendage, as it were, of a central authority which was often embarrassed by its own partisans; for not merely did they encourage the Government in a mistaken policy, but some of its most fatal blunders were made in consequence of the pressure brought to bear upon it by the Conservative party.

The Liberals, so far, had never contrived to carry their candidate. The department declined to obey their command knowing that du Croisier, if elected, would take his place on the Left Centre benches, and as far as possible to the Left. Du Croisier was in correspondence with the Brothers Keller, the bankers, the oldest of whom shone conspicuous among "the nineteen deputies of the Left," that phalanx made famous by the efforts of the entire Liberal press. This same M. Keller, moreover, was related by marriage to the Comte de Gondreville, a Constitutional peer who remained in favor with Louis XVIII. For these reasons, the Constitutional Opposition (as distinct from the Liberal party) was always prepared to vote at the last moment, not for the candidate whom they professed to support, but for du Croisier, if that worthy could succeed in gaining a sufficient number of Royalist votes; but at every election du Croisier was regularly thrown out by the Royalists. The leaders of that party, taking their tone from the Marquis d'Esgrignon, had pretty thoroughly fathomed and gauged their man; and with each defeat, du Croisier and his party waxed more bitter. Nothing so effectually stirs up strife as the failure of some snare set with elaborate pains.

In 1822 there seemed to be a lull in hostilities which had been kept up with great spirit during the first four years of the Restoration. The salon du Croisier and the salon d'Esgrignon, having measured their strength and weakness, were in all probability waiting for opportunity, that Providence of party strife. Ordinary persons were content with the surface quiet which deceived the Government; but those who knew du Croisier better, were well aware that the passion of revenge in him, as in all men whose whole life consists in mental activity, is implacable, especially when political ambitions are involved. About this time du Croisier, who used to turn white and red at the bare mention of d'Esgrignon or the Chevalier, and shuddered at the name of the Collection of Antiquities, chose to wear the impassive countenance of a savage. He smiled upon his enemies, hating them but the more deeply, watching them the more narrowly from hour to hour. One of his own party, who seconded him in these calculations of cold wrath, was the President of the Tribunal, M. du Ronceret, a little country squire, who had vainly endeavored to gain admittance among the Antiquities.

The d'Esgrignons' little fortune, carefully administered by Maitre Chesnel, was barely sufficient for the worthy Marquis' needs; for though he lived without the slightest ostentation, he also lived like a noble. The governor found by his Lordship the Bishop for the hope of the house, the young Comte Victurnien d'Esgrignon, was an elderly Oratorian who must be paid a certain salary, although he lived with the family. The wages of a cook, a waiting-woman for Mlle. Armande, an old valet for M. le Marquis, and a couple of other servants, together with the daily expenses of the household, and the cost of an education for which nothing was spared, absorbed the whole family income, in spite of Mlle. Armande's economies, in spite of Chesnel's careful management, and the servants' affection. As yet, Chesnel had not been able to set about repairs at the ruined castle; he was waiting till the leases fell in to raise the rent of the farms, for rents had been rising lately, partly on account of improved methods of agriculture, partly by the fall in the value of money, of which the landlord would get the benefit at the expiration of leases granted in 1809.

The Marquis himself knew nothing of the details of the management of the house or of his property. He would have been thunderstruck if he had been told of the excessive precautions needed "to make both ends of the year meet in December," to use the housewife's saying, and he was so

near the end of his life, that every one shrank from opening his eyes. The Marquis and his adherents believed that a House, to which no one at Court or in the Government gave a thought, a House that was never heard of beyond the gates of the town, save here and there in the same department, was about to revive its ancient greatness, to shine forth in all its glory. The d'Esgrignons' line should appear with renewed lustre in the person of Victurnien, just as the despoiled nobles came into their own again, and the handsome heir to a great estate would be in a position to go to Court, enter the King's service, and marry (as other d'Esgrignons had done before him) a Navarreins, a Cadignan, a d'Uxelles, a Beusant, a Blamont-Chauvry; a wife, in short, who should unite all the distinctions of birth and beauty, wit and wealth, and character.

The intimates who came to play their game of cards of an evening – the Troisvilles (pronounced Treville), the La Roche-Guyons, the Casterans (pronounced Cateran), and the Duc de Verneuil – had all so long been accustomed to look up to the Marquis as a person of immense consequence, that they encouraged him in such notions as these. They were perfectly sincere in their belief; and indeed, it would have been well founded if they could have wiped out the history of the last forty years. But the most honorable and undoubted sanctions of right, such as Louis XVIII. had tried to set on record when he dated the Charter from the one-and-twentieth year of his reign, only exist when ratified by the general consent. The d'Esgrignons not only lacked the very rudiments of the language of latter-day politics, to wit, money, the great modern *relief*, or sufficient rehabilitation of nobility; but, in their case, too, “historical continuity” was lacking, and that is a kind of renown which tells quite as much at Court as on the battlefield, in diplomatic circles as in Parliament, with a book, or in connection with an adventure; it is, as it were, a sacred ampulla poured upon the heads of each successive generation. Whereas a noble family, inactive and forgotten, is very much in the position of a hard-featured, poverty-stricken, simple-minded, and virtuous maid, these qualifications being the four cardinal points of misfortune. The marriage of a daughter of the Troisvilles with General Montcornet, so far from opening the eyes of the Antiquities, very nearly brought about a rupture between the Troisvilles and the salon d'Esgrignon, the latter declaring that the Troisvilles were mixing themselves up with all sorts of people.

There was one, and one only, among all these folk who did not share their illusions. And that one, needless to say, was Chesnel the notary. Although his devotion, sufficiently proved already, was simply unbounded for the great house now reduced to three persons; although he accepted all their ideas, and thought them nothing less than right, he had too much common sense, he was too good a man of business to more than half the families in the department, to miss the significance of the great changes that were taking place in people's minds, or to be blind to the different conditions brought about by industrial development and modern manners. He had watched the Revolution pass through the violent phase of 1793, when men, women, and children wore arms, and heads fell on the scaffold, and victories were won in pitched battles with Europe; and now he saw the same forces quietly at work in men's minds, in the shape of ideas which sanctioned the issues. The soil had been cleared, the seed sown, and now came the harvest. To his thinking, the Revolution had formed the mind of the younger generation; he touched the hard facts, and knew that although there were countless unhealed wounds, what had been done was past recall. The death of a king on the scaffold, the protracted agony of a queen, the division of the nobles' lands, in his eyes were so many binding contracts; and where so many vested interests were involved, it was not likely that those concerned would allow them to be attacked. Chesnel saw clearly. His fanatical attachment to the d'Esgrignons was whole-hearted, but it was not blind, and it was all the fairer for this. The young monk's faith that sees heaven laid open and beholds the angels, is something far below the power of the old monk who points them out to him. The ex-steward was like the old monk; he would have given his life to defend a worm-eaten shrine.

He tried to explain the “innovations” to his old master, using a thousand tactful precautions; sometimes speaking jestingly, sometimes affecting surprise or sorrow over this or that; but he always met the same prophetic smile on the Marquis' lips, the same fixed conviction in the Marquis' mind,

that these follies would go by like others. Events contributed in a way which has escaped attention to assist such noble champions of forlorn hope to cling to their superstitions. What could Chesnel do when the old Marquis said, with a lordly gesture, “God swept away Bonaparte with his armies, his new great vassals, his crowned kings, and his vast conceptions! God will deliver us from the rest.” And Chesnel hung his head sadly, and did not dare to answer, “It cannot be God’s will to sweep away France.” Yet both of them were grand figures; the one, standing out against the torrent of facts like an ancient block of lichen-covered granite, still upright in the depths of an Alpine gorge; the other, watching the course of the flood to turn it to account. Then the good gray-headed notary would groan over the irreparable havoc which the superstitions were sure to work in the mind, the habits, and ideas of the Comte Victurnien d’Esgrignon.

Idolized by his father, idolized by his aunt, the young heir was a spoilt child in every sense of the word; but still a spoilt child who justified paternal and maternal illusions. Maternal, be it said, for Victurnien’s aunt was truly a mother to him; and yet, however careful and tender she may be that never bore a child, there is something lacking in her motherhood. A mother’s second sight cannot be acquired. An aunt, bound to her nursling by ties of such pure affection as united Mlle. Armande to Victurnien, may love as much as a mother might; may be as careful, as kind, as tender, as indulgent, but she lacks the mother’s instinctive knowledge when and how to be severe; she has no sudden warnings, none of the uneasy presentiments of the mother’s heart; for a mother, bound to her child from the beginnings of life by all the fibres of her being, still is conscious of the communication, still vibrates with the shock of every trouble, and thrills with every joy in the child’s life as if it were her own. If Nature has made of woman, physically speaking, a neutral ground, it has not been forbidden to her, under certain conditions, to identify herself completely with her offspring. When she has not merely given life, but given of her whole life, you behold that wonderful, unexplained, and inexplicable thing – the love of a woman for one of her children above the others. The outcome of this story is one more proof of a proven truth – a mother’s place cannot be filled. A mother foresees danger long before a Mlle. Armande can admit the possibility of it, even if the mischief is done. The one prevents the evil, the other remedies it. And besides, in the maiden’s motherhood there is an element of blind adoration, she cannot bring herself to scold a beautiful boy.

A practical knowledge of life, and the experience of business, had taught the old notary a habit of distrustful clear-sighted observation something akin to the mother’s instinct. But Chesnel counted for so little in the house (especially since he had fallen into something like disgrace over that unlucky project of a marriage between a d’Esgrignon and a du Croisier), that he had made up his mind to adhere blindly in future to the family doctrines. He was a common soldier, faithful to his post, and ready to give his life; it was never likely that they would take his advice, even in the height of the storm; unless chance should bring him, like the King’s bedesman in *The Antiquary*, to the edge of the sea, when the old baronet and his daughter were caught by the high tide.

Du Croisier caught a glimpse of his revenge in the anomalous education given to the lad. He hoped, to quote the expressive words of the author quoted above, “to drown the lamb in its mother’s milk.” *This* was the hope which had produced his taciturn resignation and brought that savage smile on his lips.

The young Comte Victurnien was taught to believe in his own supremacy as soon as an idea could enter his head. All the great nobles of the realm were his peers, his one superior was the King, and the rest of mankind were his inferiors, people with whom he had nothing in common, towards whom he had no duties. They were defeated and conquered enemies, whom he need not take into account for a moment; their opinions could not affect a noble, and they all owed him respect. Unluckily, with the rigorous logic of youth, which leads children and young people to proceed to extremes whether good or bad, Victurnien pushed these conclusions to their utmost consequences. His own external advantages, moreover, confirmed him in his beliefs. He had been extraordinarily beautiful as a child; he became as accomplished a young man as any father could wish.

He was of average height, but well proportioned, slender, and almost delicate-looking, but muscular. He had the brilliant blue eyes of the d'Esgrignons, the finely-moulded aquiline nose, the perfect oval of the face, the auburn hair, the white skin, and the graceful gait of his family; he had their delicate extremities, their long taper fingers with the inward curve, and that peculiar distinction of shapeliness of the wrist and instep, that supple felicity of line, which is as sure a sign of race in men as in horses. Adroit and alert in all bodily exercises, and an excellent shot, he handled arms like a St. George, he was a paladin on horseback. In short, he gratified the pride which parents take in their children's appearance; a pride founded, for that matter, on a just idea of the enormous influence exercised by physical beauty. Personal beauty has this in common with noble birth; it cannot be acquired afterwards; it is everywhere recognized, and often is more valued than either brains or money; beauty has only to appear and triumph; nobody asks more of beauty than that it should simply exist.

Fate had endowed Victurnien, over and above the privileges of good looks and noble birth, with a high spirit, a wonderful aptitude of comprehension, and a good memory. His education, therefore, had been complete. He knew a good deal more than is usually known by young provincial nobles, who develop into highly-distinguished sportsmen, owners of land, and consumers of tobacco; and are apt to treat art, sciences, letters, poetry, or anything offensively above their intellects, cavalierly enough. Such gifts of nature and education surely would one day realize the Marquis d'Esgrignon's ambitions; he already saw his son a Marshal of France if Victurnien's tastes were for the army; an ambassador if diplomacy held any attractions for him; a cabinet minister if that career seemed good in his eyes; every place in the state belonged to Victurnien. And, most gratifying thought of all for a father, the young Count would have made his way in the world by his own merits even if he had not been a d'Esgrignon.

All through his happy childhood and golden youth, Victurnien had never met with opposition to his wishes. He had been the king of the house; no one curbed the little prince's will; and naturally he grew up insolent and audacious, selfish as a prince, self-willed as the most high-spirited cardinal of the Middle Ages, – defects of character which any one might guess from his qualities, essentially those of the noble.

The Chevalier was a man of the good old times when the Gray Musketeers were the terror of the Paris theatres, when they horsewhipped the watch and drubbed servers of writs, and played a host of page's pranks, at which Majesty was wont to smile so long as they were amusing. This charming deceiver and hero of the ruelles had no small share in bringing about the disasters which afterwards befell. The amiable old gentleman, with nobody to understand him, was not a little pleased to find a budding Faublas, who looked the part to admiration, and put him in mind of his own young days. So, making no allowance for the difference of the times, he sowed the maxims of a roue of the Encyclopaedic period broadcast in the boy's mind. He told wicked anecdotes of the reign of His Majesty Louis XV.; he glorified the manners and customs of the year 1750; he told of the orgies in petites maisons, the follies of courtesans, the capital tricks played on creditors, the manners, in short, which furnished forth Dancourt's comedies and Beaumarchais' epigrams. And unfortunately, the corruption lurking beneath the utmost polish tricked itself out in Voltairean wit. If the Chevalier went rather too far at times, he always added as a corrective that a man must always behave himself like a gentleman.

Of all this discourse, Victurnien comprehended just so much as flattered his passions. From the first he saw his old father laughing with the Chevalier. The two elderly men considered that the pride of a d'Esgrignon was a sufficient safeguard against anything unbecoming; as for a dishonorable action, no one in the house imagined that a d'Esgrignon could be guilty of it. *Honor*, the great principle of Monarchy, was planted firm like a beacon in the hearts of the family; it lighted up the least action, it kindled the least thought of a d'Esgrignon. "A d'Esgrignon ought not to permit himself to do such and such a thing; he bears a name which pledges him to make a future worthy of the past" – a noble

teaching which should have been sufficient in itself to keep alive the tradition of noblesse – had been, as it were, the burden of Victurnien's cradle song. He heard them from the old Marquis, from Mlle. Armande, from Chesnel, from the intimates of the house. And so it came to pass that good and evil met, and in equal forces, in the boy's soul.

At the age of eighteen, Victurnien went into society. He noticed some slight discrepancies between the outer world of the town and the inner world of the Hotel d'Esgrignon, but he in no wise tried to seek the causes of them. And, indeed, the causes were to be found in Paris. He had yet to learn that the men who spoke their minds out so boldly in evening talk with his father, were extremely careful of what they said in the presence of the hostile persons with whom their interests compelled them to mingle. His own father had won the right of freedom of speech. Nobody dreamed of contradicting an old man of seventy, and besides, every one was willing to overlook fidelity to the old order of things in a man who had been violently despoiled.

Victurnien was deceived by appearances, and his behavior set up the backs of the townspeople. In his impetuous way he tried to carry matters with too high a hand over some difficulties in the way of sport, which ended in formidable lawsuits, hushed up by Chesnel for money paid down. Nobody dared to tell the Marquis of these things. You may judge of his astonishment if he had heard that his son had been prosecuted for shooting over his lands, his domains, his covers, under the reign of a son of St. Louis! People were too much afraid of the possible consequences to tell him about such trifles, Chesnel said.

The young Count indulged in other escapades in the town. These the Chevalier regarded as "amourettes," but they cost Chesnel something considerable in portions for forsaken damsels seduced under imprudent promises of marriage: yet other cases there were which came under an article of the Code as to the abduction of minors; and but for Chesnel's timely intervention, the new law would have been allowed to take its brutal course, and it is hard to say where the Count might have ended. Victurnien grew the bolder for these victories over bourgeois justice. He was so accustomed to be pulled out of scrapes, that he never thought twice before any prank. Courts of law, in his opinion, were bugbears to frighten people who had no hold on him. Things which he would have blamed in common people were for him only pardonable amusements. His disposition to treat the new laws cavalierly while obeying the maxims of a Code for aristocrats, his behavior and character, were all pondered, analyzed, and tested by a few adroit persons in du Croisier's interests. These folk supported each other in the effort to make the people believe that Liberal slanders were revelations, and that the Ministerial policy at bottom meant a return to the old order of things.

What a bit of luck to find something by way of proof of their assertions! President du Ronceret, and the public prosecutor likewise, lent themselves admirably, so far as was compatible with their duty as magistrates, to the design of letting off the offender as easily as possible; indeed, they went deliberately out of their way to do this, well pleased to raise a Liberal clamor against their overlarge concessions. And so, while seeming to serve the interests of the d'Esgrignons, they stirred up feeling against them. The treacherous de Ronceret had it in his mind to pose as incorruptible at the right moment over some serious charge, with public opinion to back him up. The young Count's worst tendencies, moreover, were insidiously encouraged by two or three young men who followed in his train, paid court to him, won his favor, and flattered and obeyed him, with a view to confirming his belief in a noble's supremacy; and all this at a time when a noble's one chance of preserving his power lay in using it with the utmost discretion for half a century to come.

Du Croisier hoped to reduce the d'Esgrignons to the last extremity of poverty; he hoped to see their castle demolished, and their lands sold piecemeal by auction, through the follies which this harebrained boy was pretty certain to commit. This was as far as he went; he did not think, with President du Ronceret, that Victurnien was likely to give justice another kind of hold upon him. Both men found an ally for their schemes of revenge in Victurnien's overweening vanity and love of pleasure. President du Ronceret's son, a lad of seventeen, was admirably fitted for the part of

instigator. He was one of the Count's companions, a new kind of spy in du Croisier's pay; du Croisier taught him his lesson, set him to track down the noble and beautiful boy through his better qualities, and sardonically prompted him to encourage his victim in his worst faults. Fabien du Ronceret was a sophisticated youth, to whom such a mystification was attractive; he had precisely the keen brain and envious nature which finds in such a pursuit as this the absorbing amusement which a man of an ingenious turn lacks in the provinces.

In three years, between the ages of eighteen and one-and-twenty, Victurnien cost poor Chesnel nearly eighty thousand francs! And this without the knowledge of Mlle. Armande or the Marquis. More than half of the money had been spent in buying off lawsuits; the lad's extravagance had squandered the rest. Of the Marquis' income of ten thousand livres, five thousand were necessary for the housekeeping; two thousand more represented Mlle. Armande's allowance (parsimonious though she was) and the Marquis' expenses. The handsome young heir-presumptive, therefore, had not a hundred louis to spend. And what sort of figure can a man make on two thousand livres? Victurnien's tailor's bills alone absorbed his whole allowance. He had his linen, his clothes, gloves, and perfumery from Paris. He wanted a good English saddle-horse, a tilbury, and a second horse. M. du Croisier had a tilbury and a thoroughbred. Was the bourgeoisie to cut out the noblesse? Then, the young Count must have a man in the d'Esgrignon livery. He prided himself on setting the fashion among young men in the town and the department; he entered that world of luxuries and fancies which suit youth and good looks and wit so well. Chesnel paid for it all, not without using, like ancient parliaments, the right of protest, albeit he spoke with angelic kindness.

"What a pity it is that so good a man should be so tiresome!" Victurnien would say to himself every time that the notary staunched some wound in his purse.

Chesnel had been left a widower, and childless; he had taken his old master's son to fill the void in his heart. It was a pleasure to him to watch the lad driving up the High Street, perched aloft on the box-seat of the tilbury, whip in hand, and a rose in his button-hole, handsome, well turned out, envied by every one.

Pressing need would bring Victurnien with uneasy eyes and coaxing manner, but steady voice, to the modest house in the Rue du Bercail; there had been losses at cards at the Troisvilles, or the Duc de Verneuil's, or the prefecture, or the receiver-general's, and the Count had come to his providence, the notary. He had only to show himself to carry the day.

"Well, what is it, M. le Comte? What has happened?" the old man would ask, with a tremor in his voice.

On great occasions Victurnien would sit down, assume a melancholy, pensive expression, and submit with little coquetries of voice and gesture to be questioned. Then when he had thoroughly roused the old man's fears (for Chesnel was beginning to fear how such a course of extravagance would end), he would own up to a peccadillo which a bill for a thousand francs would absolve. Chesnel possessed a private income of some twelve thousand livres, but the fund was not inexhaustible. The eighty thousand francs thus squandered represented his savings, accumulated for the day when the Marquis should send his son to Paris, or open negotiations for a wealthy marriage.

Chesnel was clear-sighted so long as Victurnien was not there before him. One by one he lost the illusions which the Marquis and his sister still fondly cherished. He saw that the young fellow could not be depended upon in the least, and wished to see him married to some modest, sensible girl of good birth, wondering within himself how a young man could mean so well and do so ill, for he made promises one day only to break them all on the next.

But there is never any good to be expected of young men who confess their sins and repent, and straightway fall into them again. A man of strong character only confesses his faults to himself, and punishes himself for them; as for the weak, they drop back into the old ruts when they find that the bank is too steep to climb. The springs of pride which lie in a great man's secret soul had been slackened in Victurnien. With such guardians as he had, such company as he kept, such a life as he

led, he had suddenly become an enervated voluptuary at that turning-point in his life when a man most stands in need of the harsh discipline of misfortune and adversity which formed a Prince Eugene, a Frederick II., a Napoleon. Chesnel saw that Victurnien possessed that uncontrollable appetite for enjoyments which should be the prerogative of men endowed with giant powers; the men who feel the need of counterbalancing their gigantic labors by pleasures which bring one-sided mortals to the pit.

At times the good man stood aghast; then, again, some profound sally, some sign of the lad's remarkable range of intellect, would reassure him. He would say, as the Marquis said at the rumor of some escapade, "Boys will be boys." Chesnel had spoken to the Chevalier, lamenting the young lord's propensity for getting into debt; but the Chevalier manipulated his pinch of snuff, and listened with a smile of amusement.

"My dear Chesnel, just explain to me what a national debt is," he answered. "If France has debts, egad! why should not Victurnien have debts? At this time and at all times princes have debts, every gentleman has debts. Perhaps you would rather that Victurnien should bring you his savings? – Do you know that our great Richelieu (not the Cardinal, a pitiful fellow that put nobles to death, but the Marechal), do you know what he did once when his grandson the Prince de Chinon, the last of the line, let him see that he had not spent his pocket-money at the University?"

"No, M. le Chevalier."

"Oh, well; he flung the purse out of the window to a sweeper in the courtyard, and said to his grandson, 'Then they do not teach you to be a prince here?'"

Chesnel bent his head and made no answer. But that night, as he lay awake, he thought that such doctrines as these were fatal in times when there was one law for everybody, and foresaw the first beginnings of the ruin of the d'Esgrignons.

But for these explanations which depict one side of provincial life in the time of the Empire and the Restoration, it would not be easy to understand the opening scene of this history, an incident which took place in the great salon one evening towards the end of October 1822. The card-tables were forsaken, the Collection of Antiquities – elderly nobles, elderly countesses, young marquises, and simple baronesses – had settled their losses and winnings. The master of the house was pacing up and down the room, while Mlle. Armande was putting out the candles on the card-tables. He was not taking exercise alone, the Chevalier was with him, and the two wrecks of the eighteenth century were talking of Victurnien. The Chevalier had undertaken to broach the subject with the Marquis.

"Yes, Marquis," he was saying, "your son is wasting his time and his youth; you ought to send him to court."

"I have always thought," said the Marquis, "that if my great age prevents me from going to court – where, between ourselves, I do not know what I should do among all these new people whom his Majesty receives, and all that is going on there – that if I could not go myself, I could at least send my son to present our homage to His Majesty. The King surely would do something for the Count – give him a company, for instance, or a place in the Household, a chance, in short, for the boy to win his spurs. My uncle the Archbishop suffered a cruel martyrdom; I have fought for the cause without deserting the camp with those who thought it their duty to follow the Princes. I held that while the King was in France, his nobles should rally round him. – Ah! well, no one gives us a thought; a Henry IV. would have written before now to the d'Esgrignons, 'Come to me, my friends; we have won the day!' – After all, we are something better than the Troisvilles, yet here are two Troisvilles made peers of France; and another, I hear, represents the nobles in the Chamber." (He took the upper electoral colleges for assemblies of his own order.) "Really, they think no more of us than if we did not exist. I was waiting for the Princes to make their journey through this part of the world; but as the Princes do not come to us, we must go to the Princes."

"I am enchanted to learn that you think of introducing our dear Victurnien into society," the Chevalier put in adroitly. "He ought not to bury his talents in a hole like this town. The best fortune

that he can look for here is to come across some Norman girl” (mimicking the accent), “country-bred, stupid, and rich. What could he make of her? – his wife? Oh! good Lord!”

“I sincerely hope that he will defer his marriage until he has obtained some great office or appointment under the Crown,” returned the gray-haired Marquis. “Still, there are serious difficulties in the way.”

And these were the only difficulties which the Marquis saw at the outset of his son’s career.

“My son, the Comte d’Esgrignon, cannot make his appearance at court like a tatterdemalion,” he continued after a pause, marked by a sigh; “he must be equipped. Alas! for these two hundred years we have had no retainers. Ah! Chevalier, this demolition from top to bottom always brings me back to the first hammer stroke delivered by M. de Mirabeau. The one thing needful nowadays is money; that is all that the Revolution has done that I can see. The King does not ask you whether you are a descendant of the Valois or a conquerer of Gaul; he asks whether you pay a thousand francs in *tailles* which nobles never used to pay. So I cannot well send the Count to court without a matter of twenty thousand crowns – ”

“Yes,” assented the Chevalier, “with that trifling sum he could cut a brave figure.”

“Well,” said Mlle. Armande, “I have asked Chesnel to come to-night. Would you believe it, Chevalier, ever since the day when Chesnel proposed that I should marry that miserable du Croisier – ”

“Ah! that was truly unworthy, mademoiselle!” cried the Chevalier.

“Unpardonable!” said the Marquis.

“Well, since then my brother has never brought himself to ask anything whatsoever of Chesnel,” continued Mlle. Armande.

“Of your old household servant? Why, Marquis, you would do Chesnel honor – an honor which he would gratefully remember till his latest breath.”

“No,” said the Marquis, “the thing is beneath one’s dignity, it seems to me.”

“There is not much question of dignity; it is a matter of necessity,” said the Chevalier, with the trace of a shrug.

“Never,” said the Marquis, riposting with a gesture which decided the Chevalier to risk a great stroke to open his old friend’s eyes.

“Very well,” he said, “since you do not know it, I will tell you myself that Chesnel has let your son have something already, something like – ”

“My son is incapable of accepting anything whatever from Chesnel,” the Marquis broke in, drawing himself up as he spoke. “He might have come to *you* to ask you for twenty-five louis – ”

“Something like a hundred thousand livres,” said the Chevalier, finishing his sentence.

“The Comte d’Esgrignon owes a hundred thousand livres to a Chesnel!” cried the Marquis, with every sign of deep pain. “Oh! if he were not an only son, he should set out to-night for Mexico with a captain’s commission. A man may be in debt to money-lenders, they charge a heavy interest, and you are quits; that is right enough; but *Chesnel!* a man to whom one is attached! – ”

“Yes, our adorable Victornien has run through a hundred thousand livres, dear Marquis,” resumed the Chevalier, flicking a trace of snuff from his waistcoat; “it is not much, I know. I myself at his age – But, after all, let us let old memories be, Marquis. The Count is living in the provinces; all things taken into consideration, it is not so much amiss. He will not go far; these irregularities are common in men who do great things afterwards – ”

“And he is sleeping upstairs, without a word of this to his father,” exclaimed the Marquis.

“Sleeping innocently as a child who has merely got five or six little bourgeois into trouble, and now must have duchesses,” returned the Chevalier.

“Why, he deserves a *lettre de cachet!*”

“‘They’ have done away with *lettres de cachet,*” said the Chevalier. “You know what a hubbub there was when they tried to institute a law for special cases. We could not keep the provost’s courts, which M. *de Bonaparte* used to call *commissions militaires.*”

“Well, well; what are we to do if our boys are wild, or turn out scapegraces? Is there no locking them up in these days?” asked the Marquis.

The Chevalier looked at the heartbroken father and lacked courage to answer, “We shall be obliged to bring them up properly.”

“And you have never said a word of this to me, Mlle. d’Esgrignon,” added the Marquis, turning suddenly round upon Mlle. Armande. He never addressed her as Mlle. d’Esgrignon except when he was vexed; usually she was called “my sister.”

“Why, monsieur, when a young man is full of life and spirits, and leads an idle life in a town like this, what else can you expect?” asked Mlle. d’Esgrignon. She could not understand her brother’s anger.

“Debts! eh! why, hang it all!” added the Chevalier. “He plays cards, he has little adventures, he shoots, – all these things are horribly expensive nowadays.”

“Come,” said the Marquis, “it is time to send him to the King. I will spend to-morrow morning in writing to our kinsmen.”

“I have some acquaintance with the Ducs de Navarreins, de Lenoncourt, de Maufrigneuse, and de Chaulieu,” said the Chevalier, though he knew, as he spoke, that he was pretty thoroughly forgotten.

“My dear Chevalier, there is no need of such formalities to present a d’Esgrignon at court,” the Marquis broke in. – “A hundred thousand livres,” he muttered; “this Chesnel makes very free. This is what comes of these accursed troubles. M. Chesnel protects my son. And now I must ask him... No, sister, you must undertake this business. Chesnel shall secure himself for the whole amount by a mortgage on our lands. And just give this harebrained boy a good scolding; he will end by ruining himself if he goes on like this.”

The Chevalier and Mlle. d’Esgrignon thought these words perfectly simple and natural, absurd as they would have sounded to any other listener. So far from seeing anything ridiculous in the speech, they were both very much touched by a look of something like anguish in the old noble’s face. Some dark premonition seemed to weigh upon M. d’Esgrignon at that moment, some glimmering of an insight into the changed times. He went to the settee by the fireside and sat down, forgetting that Chesnel would be there before long; that Chesnel, of whom he could not bring himself to ask anything.

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