HONORÉ DE BALZAC

THE MARRIAGE CONTRACT

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I. PRO AND CON

Monsieur de Manerville, the father, was a worthy Norman gentleman, well known to the Marechael de Richelieu, who married him to one of the richest heiresses of Bordeaux in the days when the old duke reigned in Guienne as governor. The Norman then sold the estate he owned in Bessin, and became a Gascon, allured by the beauty of the chateau de Lanstrac, a delightful residence owned by his wife. During the last days of the reign of Louis XV., he bought the post of major of the Gate Guards, and lived till 1813, having by great good luck escaped the dangers of the Revolution in the following manner.

Toward the close of the year, 1790, he went to Martinque, where his wife had interests, leaving the management of his property in Gascogne to an honest man, a notary's clerk, named Mathias, who was inclined to – or at any rate did – give into the new ideas. On his return the Comte de Manerville found his possessions intact and well-managed. This sound result was the fruit produced by grafting the Gascon on the Norman.

Madame de Manerville died in 1810. Having learned the importance of worldly goods through the dissipations of his

youth, and, giving them, like many another old man, a higher place than they really hold in life, Monsieur de Manerville became increasingly economical, miserly, and sordid. Without reflecting that the avarice of parents prepares the way for the prodigalities of children, he allowed almost nothing to his son, although that son was an only child.

Paul de Manerville, coming home from the college of Vendome in 1810, lived under close paternal discipline for three years. The tyranny by which the old man of seventy oppressed his heir influenced, necessarily, a heart and a character which were not yet formed. Paul, the son, without lacking the physical courage which is vital in the air of Gascony, dared not struggle against his father, and consequently lost that faculty of resistance which begets moral courage. His thwarted feelings were driven to the depths of his heart, where they remained without expression; later, when he felt them to be out of harmony with the maxims of the world, he could only think rightly and act mistakenly. He was capable of fighting for a mere word or look, yet he trembled at the thought of dismissing a servant, – his timidity showing itself in those contests only which required a persistent will. Capable of doing great things to fly from persecution, he would never have prevented it by systematic opposition, nor have faced it with the steady employment of force of will. Timid in thought, bold in actions, he long preserved that inward simplicity which makes a man the dupe and the voluntary victim of things against which certain souls hesitate to revolt, preferring to endure them

rather than complain. He was, in point of fact, imprisoned by his father's old mansion, for he had not enough money to consort with young men; he envied their pleasures while unable to share them.

The old gentleman took him every evening, in an old carriage drawn by ill-harnessed old horses, attended by ill-dressed old servants, to royalist houses, where he met a society composed of the relics of the parliamentary nobility and the martial nobility. These two nobilities coalescing after the Revolution, had now transformed themselves into a landed aristocracy. Crushed by the vast and swelling fortunes of the maritime cities, this Faubourg Saint-Germain of Bordeaux responded by lofty disdain to the sumptuous displays of commerce, government administrations, and the military. Too young to understand social distinctions and the necessities underlying the apparent assumption which they create, Paul was bored to death among these ancients, unaware that the connections of his youth would eventually secure to him that aristocratic pre-eminence which Frenchmen will forever desire.

He found some slight compensations for the dulness of these evenings in certain manual exercises which always delight young men, and which his father enjoined upon him. The old gentleman considered that to know the art of fencing and the use of arms, to ride well on horseback, to play tennis, to acquire good manners, – in short, to possess all the frivolous accomplishments of the old nobility, – made a young man of the present day

a finished gentleman. Accordingly, Paul took a fencing-lesson every morning, went to the riding-school, and practised in a pistol-gallery. The rest of his time was spent in reading novels, for his father would never have allowed the more abstruse studies now considered necessary to finish an education.

So monotonous a life would soon have killed the poor youth if the death of the old man had not delivered him from this tyranny at the moment when it was becoming intolerable. Paul found himself in possession of considerable capital, accumulated by his father's avarice, together with landed estates in the best possible condition. But he now held Bordeaux in horror; neither did he like Lanstrac, where his father had taken him to spend the summers, employing his whole time from morning till night in hunting.

As soon as the estate was fairly settled, the young heir, eager for enjoyment, bought consols with his capital, left the management of the landed property to old Mathias, his father's notary, and spent the next six years away from Bordeaux. At first he was attached to the French embassy at Naples; after that he was secretary of legation at Madrid, and then in London, – making in this way the tour of Europe.

After seeing the world and life, after losing several illusions, after dissipating all the loose capital which his father had amassed, there came a time when, in order to continue his way of life, Paul was forced to draw upon the territorial revenues which his notary was laying by. At this critical moment, seized

by one of the so-called virtuous impulses, he determined to leave Paris, return to Bordeaux, regulate his affairs, lead the life of a country gentleman at Lanstrac, improve his property, marry, and become, in the end, a deputy.

Paul was a count; nobility was once more of matrimonial value; he could, and he ought to make a good marriage. While many women desire a title, many others like to marry a man to whom a knowledge of life is familiar. Now Paul had acquired, in exchange for the sum of seven hundred thousand francs squandered in six years, that possession, which cannot be bought and is practically of more value than gold and silver; a knowledge which exacts long study, probation, examinations, friends, enemies, acquaintances, certain manners, elegance of form and demeanor, a graceful and euphonious name, – a knowledge, moreover, which means many love-affairs, duels, bets lost on a race-course, disillusions, deceptions, annoyances, toils, and a vast variety of undigested pleasures. In short, he had become what is called elegant. But in spite of his mad extravagance he had never made himself a mere fashionable man. In the burlesque army of men of the world, the man of fashion holds the place of a marshal of France, the man of elegance is the equivalent of a lieutenant-general. Paul enjoyed his lesser reputation, of elegance, and knew well how to sustain it. His servants were well-dressed, his equipages were cited, his suppers had a certain vogue; in short, his bachelor establishment was counted among the seven or eight whose splendor equalled that

of the finest houses in Paris.

But – he had not caused the wretchedness of any woman; he gambled without losing; his luck was not notorious; he was far too upright to deceive or mislead any one, no matter who, even a wanton; never did he leave his billets-doux lying about, and he possessed no coffer or desk for love-letters which his friends were at liberty to read while he tied his cravat or trimmed his beard. Moreover, not willing to dip into his Guienne property, he had not that bold extravagance which leads to great strokes and calls attention at any cost to the proceedings of a young man. Neither did he borrow money, but he had the folly to lend to friends, who then deserted him and spoke of him no more either for good or evil. He seemed to have regulated his dissipations methodically. The secret of his character lay in his father's tyranny, which had made him, as it were, a social mongrel.

So, one morning, he said to a friend named de Marsay, who afterwards became celebrated: —

"My dear fellow, life has a meaning."

"You must be twenty-seven years of age before you can find it out," replied de Marsay, laughing.

"Well, I am twenty-seven; and precisely because I am twenty-seven I mean to live the life of a country gentleman at Lanstrac. I'll transport my belongings to Bordeaux into my father's old mansion, and I'll spend three months of the year in Paris in this house, which I shall keep."

"Will you marry?"

"I will marry."

"I'm your friend, as you know, my old Paul," said de Marsay, after a moment's silence, "and I say to you: settle down into a worthy father and husband and you'll be ridiculous for the rest of your days. If you could be happy and ridiculous, the thing might be thought of; but you will not be happy. You haven't a strong enough wrist to drive a household. I'll do you justice and say you are a perfect horseman; no one knows as well as you how to pick up or thrown down the reins, and make a horse prance, and sit firm to the saddle. But, my dear fellow, marriage is another thing. I see you now, led along at a slapping pace by Madame la Comtesse de Manerville, going whither you would not, oftener at a gallop than a trot, and presently unhorsed! – yes, unhorsed into a ditch and your legs broken. Listen to me. You still have some forty-odd thousand francs a year from your property in the Gironde. Good. Take your horses and servants and furnish your house in Bordeaux; you can be king of Bordeaux, you can promulgate there the edicts that we put forth in Paris; you can be the correspondent of our stupidities. Very good. Play the rake in the provinces; better still, commit follies; follies may win you celebrity. But – don't marry. Who marries now-a-days? Only merchants, for the sake of their capital, or to be two to drag the cart; only peasants who want to produce children to work for them; only brokers and notaries who want a wife's 'dot' to pay for their practice; only miserable kings who are forced to continue their miserable dynasties. But we are exempt from the pack, and

you want to shoulder it! And why DO you want to marry? You ought to give your best friend your reasons. In the first place, if you marry an heiress as rich as yourself, eighty thousand francs a year for two is not the same thing as forty thousand francs a year for one, because the two are soon three or four when the children come. You haven't surely any love for that silly race of Manerville which would only hamper you? Are you ignorant of what a father and mother have to be? Marriage, my old Paul, is the silliest of all the social immolations; our children alone profit by it, and don't know its price until their horses are nibbling the flowers on our grave. Do you regret your father, that old tyrant who made your first years wretched? How can you be sure that your children will love you? The very care you take of their education, your precautions for their happiness, your necessary sternness will lessen their affection. Children love a weak or a prodigal father, whom they will despise in after years. You'll live betwixt fear and contempt. No man is a good head of a family merely because he wants to be. Look round on all our friends and name to me one whom you would like to have for a son. We have known a good many who dishonor their names. Children, my dear Paul, are the most difficult kind of merchandise to take care of. Yours, you think, will be angels; well, so be it! Have you ever sounded the gulf which lies between the lives of a bachelor and a married man? Listen. As a bachelor you can say to yourself: 'I shall never exhibit more than a certain amount of the ridiculous; the public will think of me what I choose it to think.' Married,

you'll drop into the infinitude of the ridiculous! Bachelor, you can make your own happiness; you enjoy some to-day, you do without it to-morrow; married, you must take it as it comes; and the day you want it you will have to go without it. Marry, and you'll grow a blockhead; you'll calculate dowries; you'll talk morality, public and religious; you'll think young men immoral and dangerous; in short, you'll become a social academician. It's pitiable! The old bachelor whose property the heirs are waiting for, who fights to his last breath with his nurse for a spoonful of drink, is blest in comparison with a married man. I'm not speaking of all that will happen to annoy, bore, irritate, coerce, oppose, tyrannize, narcotize, paralyze, and idiotize a man in marriage, in that struggle of two beings always in one another's presence, bound forever, who have coupled each other under the strange impression that they were suited. No, to tell you those things would be merely a repetition of Boileau, and we know him by heart. Still, I'll forgive your absurd idea if you will promise me to marry "en grand seigneur"; to entail your property; to have two legitimate children, to give your wife a house and household absolutely distinct from yours; to meet her only in society, and never to return from a journey without sending her a courier to announce it. Two hundred thousand francs a year will suffice for such a life and your antecedents will enable you to marry some rich English woman hungry for a title. That's an aristocratic life which seems to me thoroughly French; the only life in which we can retain the respect and friendship of a woman; the only life

which distinguishes a man from the present crowd, – in short, the only life for which a young man should even think of resigning his bachelor blessings. Thus established, the Comte de Manerville may advise his epoch, place himself above the world, and be nothing less than a minister or an ambassador. Ridicule can never touch him; he has gained the social advantages of marriage while keeping all the privileges of a bachelor."

"But, my good friend, I am not de Marsay; I am plainly, as you yourself do me the honor to say, Paul de Manerville, worthy father and husband, deputy of the Centre, possibly peer of France, – a destiny extremely commonplace; but I am modest and I resign myself."

"Yes, but your wife," said the pitiless de Marsay, "will she resign herself?"

"My wife, my dear fellow, will do as I wish."

"Ah! my poor friend, is that where you are? Adieu, Paul. Henceforth, I refuse to respect you. One word more, however, for I cannot agree coldly to your abdication. Look and see in what the strength of our position lies. A bachelor with only six thousand francs a year remaining to him has at least his reputation for elegance and the memory of success. Well, even that fantastic shadow has enormous value in it. Life still offers many chances to the unmarried man. Yes, he can aim at anything. But marriage, Paul, is the social 'Thus far shalt thou go and no farther.' Once married you can never be anything but what you then are – unless your wife should deign to care for you."

"But," said Paul, "you are crushing me down with exceptional theories. I am tired of living for others; of having horses merely to exhibit them; of doing all things for the sake of what may be said of them; of wasting my substance to keep fools from crying out: 'Dear, dear! Paul is still driving the same carriage. What has he done with his fortune? Does he squander it? Does he gamble at the Bourse? No, he's a millionaire. Madame such a one is mad about him. He sent to England for a harness which is certainly the handsomest in all Paris. The four-horse equipages of Messieurs de Marsay and de Manerville were much noticed at Longchamps; the harness was perfect' – in short, the thousand silly things with which a crowd of idiots lead us by the nose. Believe me, my dear Henri, I admire your power, but I don't envy it. You know how to judge of life; you think and act as a statesman; you are able to place yourself above all ordinary laws, received ideas, adopted conventions, and acknowledged prejudices; in short, you can grasp the profits of a situation in which I should find nothing but ill-luck. Your cool, systematic, possibly true deductions are, to the eyes of the masses, shockingly immoral. I belong to the masses. I must play my game of life according to the rules of the society in which I am forced to live. While putting yourself above all human things on peaks of ice, you still have feelings; but as for me, I should freeze to death. The life of that great majority, to which I belong in my commonplace way, is made up of emotions of which I now have need. Often a man coquets with a dozen women and obtains none. Then, whatever

be his strength, his cleverness, his knowledge of the world, he undergoes convulsions, in which he is crushed as between two gates. For my part, I like the peaceful chances and changes of life; I want that wholesome existence in which we find a woman always at our side."

"A trifle indecorous, your marriage!" exclaimed de Marsay.

Paul was not to be put out of countenance, and continued: "Laugh if you like; I shall feel myself a happy man when my valet enters my room in the morning and says: 'Madame is awaiting monsieur for breakfast'; happier still at night, when I return to find a heart – "

"Altogether indecorous, my dear Paul. You are not yet moral enough to marry."

" – a heart in which to confide my interests and my secrets. I wish to live in such close union with a woman that our affection shall not depend upon a yes or a no, or be open to the disillusions of love. In short, I have the necessary courage to become, as you say, a worthy husband and father. I feel myself fitted for family joys; I wish to put myself under the conditions prescribed by society; I desire to have a wife and children."

"You remind me of a hive of honey-bees! But go your way, you'll be a dupe all your life. Ha, ha! you wish to marry to have a wife! In other words, you wish to solve satisfactorily to your own profit the most difficult problem invented by those bourgeois morals which were created by the French Revolution; and, what is more, you mean to begin your attempt by a life of retirement.

Do you think your wife won't crave the life you say you despise? Will *she* be disgusted with it, as you are? If you won't accept the noble conjugality just formulated for your benefit by your friend de Marsay, listen, at any rate, to his final advice. Remain a bachelor for the next thirteen years; amuse yourself like a lost soul; then, at forty, on your first attack of gout, marry a widow of thirty-six. Then you may possibly be happy. If you now take a young girl to wife, you'll die a madman."

"Ah ca! tell me why!" cried Paul, somewhat piqued.

"My dear fellow," replied de Marsay, "Boileau's satire against women is a tissue of poetical commonplaces. Why shouldn't women have defects? Why condemn them for having the most obvious thing in human nature? To my mind, the problem of marriage is not at all at the point where Boileau puts it. Do you suppose that marriage is the same thing as love, and that being a man suffices to make a wife love you? Have you gathered nothing in your boudoir experience but pleasant memories? I tell you that everything in our bachelor life leads to fatal errors in the married man unless he is a profound observer of the human heart. In the happy days of his youth a man, by the caprice of our customs, is always lucky; he triumphs over women who are all ready to be triumphed over and who obey their own desires. One thing after another – the obstacles created by the laws, the sentiments and natural defences of women – all engender a mutuality of sensations which deceives superficial persons as to their future relations in marriage, where obstacles no longer exist, where

the wife submits to love instead of permitting it, and frequently repulses pleasure instead of desiring it. Then, the whole aspect of a man's life changes. The bachelor, who is free and without a care, need never fear repulsion; in marriage, repulsion is almost certain and irreparable. It may be possible for a lover to make a woman reverse an unfavorable decision, but such a change, my dear Paul, is the Waterloo of husbands. Like Napoleon, the husband is thenceforth condemned to victories which, in spite of their number, do not prevent the first defeat from crushing him. The woman, so flattered by the perseverance, so delighted with the ardor of a lover, calls the same things brutality in a husband. You, who talk of marrying, and who will marry, have you ever meditated on the Civil Code? I myself have never muddied my feet in that hovel of commentators, that garret of gossip, called the Law-school. I have never so much as opened the Code; but I see its application on the vitals of society. The Code, my dear Paul, makes woman a ward; it considers her a child, a minor. Now how must we govern children? By fear. In that one word, Paul, is the curb of the beast. Now, feel your own pulse! Have you the strength to play the tyrant, – you, so gentle, so kind a friend, so confiding; you, at whom I have laughed, but whom I love, and love enough to reveal to you my science? For this is science. Yes, it proceeds from a science which the Germans are already calling Anthropology. Ah! if I had not already solved the mystery of life by pleasure, if I had not a profound antipathy for those who think instead of act, if I did not despise the ninnies who are silly enough

to believe in the truth of a book, when the sands of the African deserts are made of the ashes of I know not how many unknown and pulverized Londons, Romes, Venices, and Parises, I would write a book on modern marriages made under the influence of the Christian system, and I'd stick a lantern on that heap of sharp stones among which lie the votaries of the social 'multiplicamini.' But the question is, Does humanity require even an hour of my time? And besides, isn't the more reasonable use of ink that of snaring hearts by writing love-letters? – Well, shall you bring the Comtesse de Manerville here, and let us see her?"

"Perhaps," said Paul.

"We shall still be friends," said de Marsay.

"If – " replied Paul.

"Don't be uneasy; we will treat you politely, as Maison-Rouge treated the English at Fontenoy."

CHAPTER II. THE PINK OF FASHION

Though the foregoing conversation affected the Comte de Manerville somewhat, he made it a point of duty to carry out his intentions, and he returned to Bordeaux during the winter of the year 1821.

The expenses he incurred in restoring and furnishing his family mansion sustained the reputation for elegance which had preceded him. Introduced through his former connections to the royalist society of Bordeaux, to which he belonged as much by his personal opinions as by his name and fortune, he soon obtained a fashionable pre-eminence. His knowledge of life, his manners, his Parisian acquirements enchanted the Faubourg Saint-Germain of Bordeaux. An old marquise made use of a term formerly in vogue at court to express the flowery beauty of the fops and beaux of the olden time, whose language and demeanor were social laws: she called him “the pink of fashion.” The liberal clique caught up the word and used it satirically as a nickname, while the royalist party continued to employ it in good faith.

Paul de Manerville acquitted himself gloriously of the obligations imposed by his flowery title. It happened to him, as to many a mediocre actor, that the day when the public granted him their full attention he became, one may almost

say, superior. Feeling at his ease, he displayed the fine qualities which accompanied his defects. His wit had nothing sharp or bitter in it; his manners were not supercilious; his intercourse with women expressed the respect they like, – it was neither too deferential, nor too familiar; his foppery went no farther than a care for his personal appearance which made him agreeable; he showed consideration for rank; he allowed young men a certain freedom, to which his Parisian experience assigned due limits; though skilful with sword and pistol, he was noted for a feminine gentleness for which others were grateful. His medium height and plumpness (which had not yet increased into obesity, an obstacle to personal elegance) did not prevent his outer man from playing the part of a Bordelais Brummell. A white skin tinged with the hues of health, handsome hands and feet, blue eyes with long lashes, black hair, graceful motions, a chest voice which kept to its middle tones and vibrated in the listener's heart, harmonized well with his sobriquet. Paul was indeed that delicate flower which needs such careful culture, the qualities of which display themselves only in a moist and suitable soil, – a flower which rough treatment dwarfs, which the hot sun burns, and a frost lays low. He was one of those men made to receive happiness, rather than to give it; who have something of the woman in their nature, wishing to be divined, understood, encouraged; in short, a man to whom conjugal love ought to come as a providence.

If such a character creates difficulties in private life, it is gracious and full of attraction for the world. Consequently, Paul

had great success in the narrow social circle of the provinces, where his mind, always, so to speak, in half-tints, was better appreciated than in Paris.

The arrangement of his house and the restoration of the chateau de Lanstrac, where he introduced the comfort and luxury of an English country-house, absorbed the capital saved by the notary during the preceding six years. Reduced now to his strict income of forty-odd thousand a year, he thought himself wise and prudent in so regulating his household as not to exceed it.

After publicly exhibiting his equipages, entertaining the most distinguished young men of the place, and giving various hunting parties on the estate at Lanstrac, Paul saw very plainly that provincial life would never do without marriage. Too young to employ his time in miserly occupations, or in trying to interest himself in the speculative improvements in which provincials sooner or later engage (compelled thereto by the necessity of establishing their children), he soon felt the need of that variety of distractions a habit of which becomes at last the very life of a Parisian. A name to preserve, property to transmit to heirs, social relations to be created by a household where the principal families of the neighborhood could assemble, and a weariness of all irregular connections, were not, however, the determining reasons of his matrimonial desires. From the time he first returned to the provinces he had been secretly in love with the queen of Bordeaux, the great beauty, Mademoiselle Evangelista.

About the beginning of the century, a rich Spaniard, named Evangelista, established himself in Bordeaux, where his letters of recommendation, as well as his large fortune, gave him an entrance to the salons of the nobility. His wife contributed greatly to maintain him in the good graces of an aristocracy which may perhaps have adopted him in the first instance merely to pique the society of the class below them. Madame Evangelista, who belonged to the Casa-Reale, an illustrious family of Spain, was a Creole, and, like all women served by slaves, she lived as a great lady, knew nothing of the value of money, repressed no whims, even the most expensive, finding them ever satisfied by an adoring husband who generously concealed from her knowledge the running-gear of the financial machine. Happy in finding her pleased with Bordeaux, where his interests obliged him to live, the Spaniard bought a house, set up a household, received in much style, and gave many proofs of possessing a fine taste in all things. Thus, from 1800 to 1812, Monsieur and Madame Evangelista were objects of great interest to the community of Bordeaux.

The Spaniard died in 1813, leaving his wife a widow at thirty-two years of age, with an immense fortune and the prettiest little girl in the world, a child of eleven, who promised to be, and did actually become, a most accomplished young woman. Clever as Madame Evangelista was, the Restoration altered her position; the royalist party cleared its ranks and several of the old families left Bordeaux. Though the head and hand of her husband

were lacking in the direction of her affairs, for which she had hitherto shown the indifference of a Creole and the inaptitude of a lackadaisical woman, she was determined to make no change in her manner of living. At the period when Paul resolved to return to his native town, Mademoiselle Natalie Evangelista was a remarkably beautiful young girl, and, apparently, the richest match in Bordeaux, where the steady diminution of her mother's capital was unknown. In order to prolong her reign, Madame Evangelista had squandered enormous sums. Brilliant fetes and the continuation of an almost regal style of living kept the public in its past belief as to the wealth of the Spanish family.

Natalie was now in her nineteenth year, but no proposal of marriage had as yet reached her mother's ear. Accustomed to gratify her fancies, Mademoiselle Evangelista wore cashmeres and jewels, and lived in a style of luxury which alarmed all speculative suitors in a region and at a period when sons were as calculating as their parents. The fatal remark, "None but a prince can afford to marry Mademoiselle Evangelista," circulated among the salons and the cliques. Mothers of families, dowagers who had granddaughters to establish, young girls jealous of Natalie, whose elegance and tyrannical beauty annoyed them, took pains to envenom this opinion with treacherous remarks. When they heard a possible suitor say with ecstatic admiration, as Natalie entered a ball-room, "Heavens, how beautiful she is!" "Yes," the mammas would answer, "but expensive." If some newcomer thought Mademoiselle Evangelista bewitching and said to

a marriageable man that he couldn't do it better, "Who would be bold enough," some woman would reply, "to marry a girl whose mother gives her a thousand francs a month for her toilet, – a girl who has horses and a maid of her own, and wears laces? Yes, her 'peignoirs' are trimmed with mechlin. The price of her washing would support the household of a clerk. She wears pelerines in the morning which actually cost six francs to get up."

These, and other speeches said occasionally in the form of praise extinguished the desires that some men might have had to marry the beautiful Spanish girl. Queen of every ball, accustomed to flattery, "blasee" with the smiles and the admiration which followed her every step, Natalie, nevertheless, knew nothing of life. She lived as the bird which flies, as the flower that blooms, finding every one about her eager to do her will. She was ignorant of the price of things; she knew neither the value of money, nor whence it came, how it should be managed, and how spent. Possibly she thought that every household had cooks and coachmen, lady's-maids and footmen, as the fields have hay and the trees their fruits. To her, beggars and paupers, fallen trees and waste lands seemed in the same category. Pampered and petted as her mother's hope, no fatigue was allowed to spoil her pleasure. Thus she bounded through life as a courser on his steppe, unbridled and unshod.

Six month's after Paul's arrival the Pink of Fashion and the Queen of Balls met in presence of the highest society of the town of Bordeaux. The two flowers looked at each other with apparent

coldness, and mutually thought each other charming. Interested in watching the effects of the meeting, Madame Evangelista divined in the expression of Paul's eyes the feelings within him, and she muttered to herself, "He will be my son-in-law." Paul, on the other hand, said to himself, as he looked at Natalie, "She will be my wife."

The wealth of the Evangelistas, proverbial in Bordeaux, had remained in Paul's mind as a memory of his childhood. Thus the pecuniary conditions were known to him from the start, without necessitating those discussions and inquiries which are as repugnant to a timid mind as to a proud one. When some persons attempting to say to Paul a few flattering phrases as to Natalie's manner, language, and beauty, ending by remarks, cruelly calculated to deter him, on the lavish extravagance of the Evangelistas, the Pink of Fashion replied with a disdain that was well-deserved by such provincial pettiness. This method of receiving such speeches soon silenced them; for he now set the tone to the ideas and language as well as to the manners of those about him. He had imported from his travels a certain development of the Britannic personality with its icy barriers, also a tone of Byronic pessimism as to life, together with English plate, boot-polish, ponies, yellow gloves, cigars, and the habit of galloping.

It thus happened that Paul escaped the discouragements hitherto presented to marriageable men by dowagers and young girls. Madame Evangelista began by asking him to formal

dinners on various occasions. The Pink of Fashion would not, of course, miss festivities to which none but the most distinguished young men of the town were bidden. In spite of the coldness that Paul assumed, which deceived neither mother nor daughter, he was drawn, step by step, into the path of marriage. Sometimes as he passed in his tilbury, or rode by on his fine English horse, he heard the young men of his acquaintance say to one another: —

"There's a lucky man. He is rich and handsome, and is to marry, so they say, Mademoiselle Evangelista. There are some men for whom the world seems made."

When he met the Evangelistas he felt proud of the particular distinction which mother and daughter imparted to their bows. If Paul had not secretly, within his heart, fallen in love with Mademoiselle Natalie, society would certainly have married him to her in spite of himself. Society, which never causes good, is the accomplice of much evil; then when it beholds the evil it has hatched maternally, it rejects and revenges it. Society in Bordeaux, attributing a "dot" of a million to Mademoiselle Evangelista, bestowed it upon Paul without awaiting the consent of either party. Their fortunes, so it was said, agreed as well as their persons. Paul had the same habits of luxury and elegance in the midst of which Natalie had been brought up. He had just arranged for himself a house such as no other man in Bordeaux could have offered her. Accustomed to Parisian expenses and the caprices of Parisian women, he alone was fitted to meet the pecuniary difficulties which were likely to follow this marriage

with a girl who was as much of a Creole and a great lady as her mother. Where they themselves, remarked the marriageable men, would have been ruined, the Comte de Manerville, rich as he was, could evade disaster. In short, the marriage was made. Persons in the highest royalist circles said a few engaging words to Paul which flattered his vanity: —

"Every one gives you Mademoiselle Evangelista. If you marry her you will do well. You could not find, even in Paris, a more delightful girl. She is beautiful, graceful, elegant, and takes after the Casa-Reales through her mother. You will make a charming couple; you have the same tastes, the same desires in life, and you will certainly have the most agreeable house in Bordeaux. Your wife need only bring her night-cap; all is ready for her. You are fortunate indeed in such a mother-in-law. A woman of intelligence, and very adroit, she will be a great help to you in public life, to which you ought to aspire. Besides, she has sacrificed everything to her daughter, whom she adores, and Natalie will, no doubt, prove a good wife, for she loves her mother. You must soon bring the matter to a conclusion."

"That is all very well," replied Paul, who, in spite of his love, was desirous of keeping his freedom of action, "but I must be sure that the conclusion shall be a happy one."

He now went frequently to Madame Evangelista's, partly to occupy his vacant hours, which were harder for him to employ than for most men. There alone he breathed the atmosphere of grandeur and luxury to which he was accustomed.

At forty years of age, Madame Evangelista was beautiful, with the beauty of those glorious summer sunsets which crown a cloudless day. Her spotless reputation had given an endless topic of conversation to the Bordeaux cliques; the curiosity of the women was all the more lively because the widow gave signs of the temperament which makes a Spanish woman and a Creole particularly noted. She had black eyes and hair, the feet and form of a Spanish woman, – that swaying form the movements of which have a name in Spain. Her face, still beautiful, was particularly seductive for its Creole complexion, the vividness of which can be described only by comparing it to muslin overlying crimson, so equally is the whiteness suffused with color. Her figure, which was full and rounded, attracted the eye by a grace which united nonchalance with vivacity, strength with ease. She attracted and she imposed, she seduced, but promised nothing. She was tall, which gave her at times the air and carriage of a queen. Men were taken by her conversation like birds in a snare; for she had by nature that genius which necessity bestows on schemes; she advanced from concession to concession, strengthening herself with what she gained to ask for more, knowing well how to retreat with rapid steps when concessions were demanded in return. Though ignorant of facts, she had known the courts of Spain and Naples, the celebrated men of the two Americas, many illustrious families of England and the continent, all of which gave her so extensive an education superficially that it seemed immense. She received

her society with the grace and dignity which are never learned, but which come to certain naturally fine spirits like a second nature; assimilating choice things wherever they are met. If her reputation for virtue was unexplained, it gave at any rate much authority to her actions, her conversation, and her character.

Mother and daughter had a true friendship for each other, beyond the filial and maternal sentiment. They suited one another, and their perpetual contact had never produced the slightest jar. Consequently many persons explained Madame Evangelista's actions by maternal love. But although Natalie consoled her mother's persistent widowhood, she may not have been the only motive for it. Madame Evangelista had been, it was said, in love with a man who recovered his titles and property under the Restoration. This man, desirous of marrying her in 1814 had discreetly severed the connection in 1816. Madame Evangelista, to all appearance the best-hearted woman in the world, had, in the depths of her nature, a fearful quality, explainable only by Catherine de Medici's device: "Odiate e aspettate" – "Hate and wait." Accustomed to rule, having always been obeyed, she was like other royalties, amiable, gentle, easy and pleasant in ordinary life, but terrible, implacable, if the pride of the woman, the Spaniard, and the Casa-Reale was touched. She never forgave. This woman believed in the power of her hatred; she made an evil fate of it and bade it hover above her enemy. This fatal power she employed against the man who had jilted her. Events which seemed to prove the influence

of her "jettatura" – the casting of an evil eye – confirmed her superstitious faith in herself. Though a minister and peer of France, this man began to ruin himself, and soon came to total ruin. His property, his personal and public honor were doomed to perish. At this crisis Madame Evangelista in her brilliant equipage passed her faithless lover walking on foot in the Champes Elysees, and crushed him with a look which flamed with triumph. This misadventure, which occupied her mind for two years, was the original cause of her not remarrying. Later, her pride had drawn comparisons between the suitors who presented themselves and the husband who had loved her so sincerely and so well.

She had thus reached, through mistaken calculations and disappointed hopes, that period of life when women have no other part to take in life than that of mother; a part which involves the sacrifice of themselves to their children, the placing of their interests outside of self upon another household, – the last refuge of human affections.

Madame Evangelista divined Paul's nature intuitively, and hid her own from his perception. Paul was the very man she desired for a son-in-law, for the responsible editor of her future power. He belonged, through his mother, to the family of Maulincour, and the old Baronne de Maulincour, the friend of the Vidame de Pamiers, was then living in the centre of the faubourg Saint-Germain. The grandson of the baroness, Auguste de Maulincour, held a fine position in the army. Paul would therefore be an

excellent introducer for the Evangelistas into Parisian society. The widow had known something of the Paris of the Empire, she now desired to shine in the Paris of the Restoration. There alone were the elements of political fortune, the only business in which women of the world could decently co-operate. Madame Evangelista, compelled by her husband's affairs to reside in Bordeaux, disliked the place. She desired a wider field, as gamblers rush to higher stakes. For her own personal ends, therefore, she looked to Paul as a means of destiny, she proposed to employ the resources of her own talent and knowledge of life to advance her son-in-law, in order to enjoy through him the delights of power. Many men are thus made the screens of secret feminine ambitions. Madame Evangelista had, however, more than one interest, as we shall see, in laying hold of her daughter's husband.

Paul was naturally captivated by this woman, who charmed him all the more because she seemed to seek no influence over him. In reality she was using her ascendancy to magnify herself, her daughter, and all her surroundings in his eyes, for the purpose of ruling from the start the man in whom she saw a means of gratifying her social longings. Paul, on the other hand, began to value himself more highly when he felt himself appreciated by the mother and daughter. He thought himself much cleverer than he really was when he found his reflections and sayings accepted and understood by Mademoiselle Natalie – who raised her head and smiled in response to them – and by the mother,

whose flattery always seemed involuntary. The two women were so kind and friendly to him, he was so sure of pleasing them, they ruled him so delightfully by holding the thread of his self-love, that he soon passed all his time at the hotel Evangelista.

A year after his return to Bordeaux, Comte Paul, without having declared himself, was so attentive to Natalie that the world considered him as courting her. Neither mother nor daughter appeared to be thinking of marriage. Mademoiselle Evangelista preserved towards Paul the reserve of a great lady who can make herself charming and converse agreeably without permitting a single step into intimacy. This reserve, so little customary among provincials, pleased Paul immensely. Timid men are shy; sudden proposals alarm them. They retreat from happiness when it comes with a rush, and accept misfortune if it presents itself mildly with gentle shadows. Paul therefore committed himself in his own mind all the more because he saw no effort on Madame Evangelista's part to bind him. She fairly seduced him one evening by remarking that to superior women as well as men there came a period of life when ambition superseded all the earlier emotions of life.

"That woman is fitted," thought Paul, as he left her, "to advance me in diplomacy before I am even made a deputy."

If, in all the circumstances of life a man does not turn over and over both things and ideas in order to examine them thoroughly under their different aspects before taking action, that man is weak and incomplete and in danger of fatal failure. At this

moment Paul was an optimist; he saw everything to advantage, and did not tell himself than an ambitious mother-in-law might prove a tyrant. So, every evening as he left the house, he fancied himself a married man, allured his mind with its own thought, and slipped on the slippers of wedlock cheerfully. In the first place, he had enjoyed his freedom too long to regret the loss of it; he was tired of a bachelor's life, which offered him nothing new; he now saw only its annoyances; whereas if he thought at times of the difficulties of marriage, its pleasures, in which lay novelty, came far more prominently before his mind.

"Marriage," he said to himself, "is disagreeable for people without means, but half its troubles disappear before wealth."

Every day some favorable consideration swelled the advantages which he now saw in this particular alliance.

"No matter to what position I attain, Natalie will always be on the level of her part," thought he, "and that is no small merit in a woman. How many of the Empire men I've seen who suffered horribly through their wives! It is a great condition of happiness not to feel one's pride or one's vanity wounded by the companion we have chosen. A man can never be really unhappy with a well-bred wife; she will never make him ridiculous; such a woman is certain to be useful to him. Natalie will receive in her own house admirably."

So thinking, he taxed his memory as to the most distinguished women of the faubourg Saint-Germain, in order to convince himself that Natalie could, if not eclipse them, at any rate stand

among them on a footing of perfect equality. All comparisons were to her advantage, for they rested on his own imagination, which followed his desires. Paris would have shown him daily other natures, young girls of other styles of beauty and charm, and the multiplicity of impressions would have balanced his mind; whereas in Bordeaux Natalie had no rivals, she was the solitary flower; moreover, she appeared to him at a moment when Paul was under the tyranny of an idea to which most men succumb at his age.

Thus these reasons of propinquity, joined to reasons of self-love and a real passion which had no means of satisfaction except by marriage, led Paul on to an irrational love, which he had, however, the good sense to keep to himself. He even endeavored to study Mademoiselle Evangelista as a man should who desires not to compromise his future life; for the words of his friend de Marsay did sometimes rumble in his ears like a warning. But, in the first place, persons accustomed to luxury have a certain indifference to it which misleads them. They despise it, they use it; it is an instrument, and not the object of their existence. Paul never imagined, as he observed the habits of life of the two ladies, that they covered a gulf of ruin. Then, though there may exist some general rules to soften the asperities of marriage, there are none by which they can be accurately foreseen and evaded. When trouble arises between two persons who have undertaken to render life agreeable and easy to each other, it comes from the contact of continual intimacy, which, of course, does not exist

between young people before they marry, and will never exist so long as our present social laws and customs prevail in France. All is more or less deception between the two young persons about to take each other for life, – an innocent and involuntary deception, it is true. Each endeavors to appear in a favorable light; both take a tone and attitude conveying a more favorable idea of their nature than they are able to maintain in after years. Real life, like the weather, is made up of gray and cloudy days alternating with those when the sun shines and the fields are gay. Young people, however, exhibit fine weather and no clouds. Later they attribute to marriage the evils inherent in life itself; for there is in man a disposition to lay the blame of his own misery on the persons and things that surround him.

To discover in the demeanor, or the countenance, or the words, or the gestures of Mademoiselle Evangelista any indication that revealed the imperfections of her character, Paul must have possessed not only the knowledge of Lavater and Gall, but also a science in which there exists no formula of doctrine, – the individual and personal science of an observer, which, for its perfection, requires an almost universal knowledge. Natalie's face, like that of most young girls, was impenetrable. The deep, serene peace given by sculptors to the virgin faces of Justice and Innocence, divinities aloof from all earthly agitations, is the greatest charm of a young girl, the sign of her purity. Nothing, as yet, has stirred her; no shattered passion, no hope betrayed has clouded the placid expression of that pure face. Is that expression

assumed? If so, there is no young girl behind it.

Natalie, closely held to the heart of her mother, had received, like other Spanish women, an education that was solely religious, together with a few instructions from her mother as to the part in life she was called upon to play. Consequently, the calm, untroubled expression of her face was natural. And yet it formed a casing in which the woman was wrapped as the moth in its cocoon. Nevertheless, any man clever at handling the scalpel of analysis might have detected in Natalie certain indications of the difficulties her character would present when brought into contact with conjugal or social life. Her beauty, which was really marvellous, came from extreme regularity of feature harmonizing with the proportions of the head and the body. This species of perfection augurs ill for the mind; and there are few exceptions to the rule. All superior nature is found to have certain slight imperfections of form which become irresistible attractions, luminous points from which shine vivid sentiments, and on which the eye rests gladly. Perfect harmony expresses usually the coldness of a mixed organization.

Natalie's waist was round, – a sign of strength, but also the infallible indication of a will which becomes obstinacy in persons whose mind is neither keen nor broad. Her hands, like those of a Greek statue, confirmed the predictions of face and figure by revealing an inclination for illogical domination, of willing for will's sake only. Her eyebrows met, – a sign, according to some observers, which indicates jealousy. The jealousy of superior

minds becomes emulation and leads to great things; that of small minds turns to hatred. The “hate and wait” of her mother was in her nature, without disguise. Her eyes were black apparently, though really brown with orange streaks, contrasting with her hair, of the ruddy tint so prized by the Romans, called auburn in England, a color which often appears in the offspring of persons of jet black hair, like that of Monsieur and Madame Evangelista. The whiteness and delicacy of Natalie’s complexion gave to the contrast of color in her eyes and hair an inexpressible charm; and yet it was a charm that was purely external; for whenever the lines of a face are lacking in a certain soft roundness, whatever may be the finish and grace of the details, the beauty therein expressed is not of the soul. These roses of deceptive youth will drop their leaves, and you will be surprised in a few years to see hardness and dryness where you once admired what seemed to be the beauty of noble qualities.

Though the outlines of Natalie’s face had something august about them, her chin was slightly “empate,” – a painter’s expression which will serve to show the existence of sentiments the violence of which would only become manifest in after life. Her mouth, a trifle drawn in, expressed a haughty pride in keeping with her hand, her chin, her brows, and her beautiful figure. And – as a last diagnostic to guide the judgment of a connoisseur – Natalie’s pure voice, a most seductive voice, had certain metallic tones. Softly as that brassy ring was managed, and in spite of the grace with which its sounds ran through the

compass of the voice, that organ revealed the character of the Duke of Alba, from whom the Casa-Reales were collaterally descended. These indications were those of violent passions without tenderness, sudden devotions, irreconcilable dislikes, a mind without intelligence, and the desire to rule natural to persons who feel themselves inferior to their pretensions.

These defects, born of temperament and constitution, were buried in Natalie like ore in a mine, and would only appear under the shocks and harsh treatment to which all characters are subjected in this world. Meantime the grace and freshness of her youth, the distinction of her manners, her sacred ignorance, and the sweetness of a young girl, gave a delicate glamour to her features which could not fail to mislead an unthinking or superficial mind. Her mother had early taught her the trick of agreeable talk which appears to imply superiority, replying to arguments by clever jests, and attracting by the graceful volubility beneath which a woman hides the subsoil of her mind, as Nature disguises her barren strata beneath a wealth of ephemeral vegetation. Natalie had the charm of children who have never known what it is to suffer. She charmed by her frankness, and had none of that solemn air which mothers impose on their daughters by laying down a programme of behavior and language until the time comes when they marry and are emancipated. She was gay and natural, like any young girl who knows nothing of marriage, expects only pleasure from it, replies to all objections with a jest, foresees no troubles, and

thinks she is acquiring the right to have her own way.

How could Paul, who loved as men love when desire increases love, perceive in a girl of this nature whose beauty dazzled him, the woman, such as she would probably be at thirty, when observers themselves have been misled by these appearances? Besides, if happiness might prove difficult to find in a marriage with such a girl, it was not impossible. Through these embryo defects shone several fine qualities. There is no good quality which, if properly developed by the hand of an able master, will not stifle defects, especially in a young girl who loves him. But to render ductile so intractable a woman, the iron wrist, about which de Marsay had preached to Paul, was needful. The Parisian dandy was right. Fear, inspired by love is an infallible instrument by which to manage the minds of women. Whoso loves, fears; whoso fears is nearer to affection than to hatred.

Had Paul the coolness, firmness, and judgment required for this struggle, which an able husband ought not to let the wife suspect? Did Natalie love Paul? Like most young girls, Natalie mistook for love the first emotions of instinct and the pleasure she felt in Paul's external appearance; but she knew nothing of the things of marriage nor the demands of a home. To her, the Comte de Manerville, a rising diplomatist, to whom the courts of Europe were known, and one of the most elegant young men in Paris, could not seem, what perhaps he was, an ordinary man, without moral force, timid, though brave in some ways, energetic perhaps in adversity, but helpless against the vexations and annoyances

that hinder happiness. Would she, in after years, have sufficient tact and insight to distinguish Paul's noble qualities in the midst of his minor defects? Would she not magnify the latter and forget the former, after the manner of young wives who know nothing of life? There comes a time when wives will pardon defects in the husband who spares her annoyances, considering annoyances in the same category as misfortunes. What conciliating power, what wise experience would uphold and enlighten the home of this young pair? Paul and his wife would doubtless think they loved when they had really not advanced beyond the endearments and compliments of the honeymoon. Would Paul in that early period yield to the tyranny of his wife, instead of establishing his empire? Could Paul say, "No?" All was peril to a man so weak where even a strong man ran some risks.

The subject of this Study is not the transition of a bachelor into a married man, – a picture which, if broadly composed, would not lack the attraction which the inner struggles of our nature and feelings give to the commonest situations in life. The events and the ideas which led to the marriage of Paul with Natalie Evangelista are an introduction to our real subject, which is to sketch the great comedy that precedes, in France, all conjugal pairing. This Scene, until now singularly neglected by our dramatic authors, although it offers novel resources to their wit, controlled Paul's future life and was now awaited by Madame Evangelista with feelings of terror. We mean the discussion which takes place on the subject of the marriage contract in

all families, whether noble or bourgeois, for human passions are as keenly excited by small interests as by large ones. These comedies, played before a notary, all resemble, more or less, the one we shall now relate, the interest of which will be far less in the pages of this book than in the memories of married persons.

CHAPTER III. THE MARRIAGE CONTRACT – FIRST DAY

At the beginning of the winter of 1822, Paul de Manerville made a formal request, through his great-aunt, the Baronne de Maulincour, for the hand of Mademoiselle Natalie Evangelista. Though the baroness never stayed more than two months in Medoc, she remained on this occasion till the last of October, in order to assist her nephew through the affair and play the part of a mother to him. After conveying the first suggestions to Madame Evangelista the experienced old woman returned to inform Paul of the results of the overture.

"My child," she said, "the affair is won. In talking of property, I found that Madame Evangelista gives nothing of her own to her daughter. Mademoiselle Natalie's dowry is her patrimony. Marry her, my dear boy. Men who have a name and an estate to transmit, a family to continue, must, sooner or later, end in marriage. I wish I could see my dear Auguste taking that course. You can now carry on the marriage without me; I have nothing to give you but my blessing, and women as old as I are out of place at a wedding. I leave for Paris to-morrow. When you present your wife in society I shall be able to see her and assist her far more to the purpose than now. If you had had no house in Paris I would gladly have arranged the second floor of mine for you."

"Dear aunt," said Paul, "I thank you heartily. But what do you mean when you say that the mother gives nothing of her own, and that the daughter's dowry is her patrimony?"

"The mother, my dear boy, is a sly cat, who takes advantage of her daughter's beauty to impose conditions and allow you only that which she cannot prevent you from having; namely, the daughter's fortune from her father. We old people know the importance of inquiring closely, What has he? What has she? I advise you therefore to give particular instructions to your notary. The marriage contract, my dear child, is the most sacred of all duties. If your father and your mother had not made their bed properly you might now be sleeping without sheets. You will have children, they are the commonest result of marriage, and you must think of them. Consult Maitre Mathias our old notary."

Madame de Maulincour departed, having plunged Paul into a state of extreme perplexity. His mother-in-law a sly cat! Must he struggle for his interests in the marriage contract? Was it necessary to defend them? Who was likely to attack them?

He followed the advice of his aunt and confided the drawing-up of the marriage contract to Maitre Mathias. But these threatened discussions oppressed him, and he went to see Madame Evangelista and announce his intentions in a state of rather lively agitation. Like all timid men, he shrank from allowing the distrust his aunt had put into his mind to be seen; in fact, he considered it insulting. To avoid even a slight jar with a person so imposing to his mind as his future mother-in-law, he

proceeded to state his intentions with the circumlocution natural to persons who dare not face a difficulty.

"Madame," he said, choosing a moment when Natalie was absent from the room, "you know, of course, what a family notary is. Mine is a worthy old man, to whom it would be a sincere grief if he were not entrusted with the drawing of my marriage contract."

"Why, of course!" said Madame Evangelista, interrupting him, "but are not marriage contracts always made by agreement of the notaries of both families?"

The time that Paul took to reply to this question was occupied by Madame Evangelista in asking herself, "What is he thinking of?" for women possess in an eminent degree the art of reading thoughts from the play of countenance. She divined the instigations of the great-aunt in the embarrassed glance and the agitated tone of voice which betrayed an inward struggle in Paul's mind.

"At last," she thought to herself, "the fatal day has come; the crisis begins – how will it end? My notary is Monsieur Solonet," she said, after a pause. "Yours, I think you said, is Monsieur Mathias; I will invite them to dinner to-morrow, and they can come to an understanding then. It is their business to conciliate our interests without our interference; just as good cooks are expected to furnish good food without instructions."

"Yes, you are right," said Paul, letting a faint sigh of relief escape from him.

By a singular transposition of parts, Paul, innocent of all wrong-doing, trembled, while Madame Evangelista, though a prey to the utmost anxiety, was outwardly calm.

The widow owed her daughter one-third of the fortune left by Monsieur Evangelista, – namely, nearly twelve hundred thousand francs, – and she knew herself unable to pay it, even by taking the whole of her property to do so. She would therefore be placed at the mercy of a son-in-law. Though she might be able to control Paul if left to himself, would he, when enlightened by his notary, agree to release her from rendering her account as guardian of her daughter's patrimony? If Paul withdrew his proposals all Bordeaux would know the reason and Natalie's future marriage would be made impossible. This mother, who desired the happiness of her daughter, this woman, who from infancy had lived honorably, was aware that on the morrow she must become dishonest. Like those great warriors who fain would blot from their lives the moment when they had felt a secret cowardice, she ardently desired to cut this inevitable day from the record of hers. Most assuredly some hairs on her head must have whitened during the night, when, face to face with facts, she bitterly regretted her extravagance as she felt the hard necessities of the situation.

Among these necessities was that of confiding the truth to her notary, for whom she sent in the morning as soon as she rose. She was forced to reveal to him a secret defaulting she had never been willing to admit to herself, for she had steadily advanced to the

abyss, relying on some chance accident, which never happened, to relieve her. There rose in her soul a feeling against Paul, that was neither dislike, nor aversion, nor anything, as yet, unkind; but HE was the cause of this crisis; the opposing party in this secret suit; he became, without knowing it, an innocent enemy she was forced to conquer. What human being did ever yet love his or her dupe? Compelled to deceive and trick him if she could, the Spanish woman resolved, like other women, to put her whole force of character into the struggle, the dishonor of which could be absolved by victory only.

In the stillness of the night she excused her conduct to her own mind by a tissue of arguments in which her pride predominated. Natalie had shared the benefit of her extravagance. There was not a single base or ignoble motive in what she had done. She was no accountant, but was that a crime, a delinquency? A man was only too lucky to obtain a wife like Natalie without a penny. Such a treasure bestowed upon him might surely release her from a guardianship account. How many men had bought the women they loved by greater sacrifices? Why should a man do less for a wife than for a mistress? Besides, Paul was a nullity, a man of no force, incapable; she would spend the best resources of her mind upon him and open to him a fine career; he should owe his future power and position to her influence; in that way she could pay her debt. He would indeed be a fool to refuse such a future; and for what? a few paltry thousands, more or less. He would be infamous if he withdrew for such a reason.

"But," she added, to herself, "if the negotiation does not succeed at once, I shall leave Bordeaux. I can still find a good marriage for Natalie by investing the proceeds of what is left, house and diamonds and furniture, – keeping only a small income for myself."

When a strong soul constructs a way of ultimate escape, – as Richelieu did at Brouage, – and holds in reserve a vigorous end, the resolution becomes a lever which strengthens its immediate way. The thought of this finale in case of failure comforted Madame Evangelista, who fell asleep with all the more confidence as she remembered her assistance in the coming duel.

This was a young man named Solonet, considered the ablest notary in Bordeaux; now twenty-seven years of age and decorated with the Legion of honor for having actively contributed to the second return of the Bourbons. Proud and happy to be received in the home of Madame Evangelista, less as a notary than as belonging to the royalist society of Bordeaux, Solonet had conceived for that fine setting sun one of those passions which women like Madame Evangelista repulse, although flattered and graciously allowing them to exist upon the surface. Solonet remained therefore in a self-satisfied condition of hope and becoming respect. Being sent for, he arrived the next morning with the promptitude of a slave and was received by the coquettish widow in her bedroom, where she allowed him to find her in a very becoming dishabille.

"Can I," she said, "count upon your discretion and your entire devotion in a discussion which will take place in my house this evening? You will readily understand that it relates to the marriage of my daughter."

The young man expended himself in gallant protestations.

"Now to the point," she said.

"I am listening," he replied, checking his ardor.

Madame Evangelista then stated her position baldly.

"My dear lady, that is nothing to be troubled about," said Maitre Solonet, assuming a confident air as soon as his client had given him the exact figures. "The question is how have you conducted yourself toward Monsieur de Manerville? In this matter questions of manner and deportment are of greater importance than those of law and finance."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.