HONORÉ DE BALZAC

AN OLD MAID

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Содержание

CHAPTER I. ONE OF MANY CHEVALIERS DE VALOIS 4
CHAPTER II. SUSANNAH AND THE ELDERS 18
CHAPTER III. ATHANASE 43
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 49

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CHAPTER I. ONE OF MANY CHEVALIERS DE VALOIS

Most persons have encountered, in certain provinces in France, a number of Chevaliers de Valois. One lived in Normandy, another at Bourges, a third (with whom we have here to do) flourished in Alencon, and doubtless the South possesses others. The number of the Valesian tribe is, however, of no consequence to the present tale. All these chevaliers, among whom were doubtless some who were Valois as Louis XIV. was Bourbon, knew so little of one another that it was not advisable to speak to one about the others. They were all willing to leave the Bourbons in tranquil possession of the throne of France; for it was too plainly established that Henri IV. became king for want of a male heir in the first Orleans branch called the Valois. If there are any Valois, they descend from Charles de Valois, Duc d'Angouleme, son of Charles IX. and Marie Touchet, the male line from whom ended, until proof to the contrary be produced, in the person of the Abbe de Rothelin. The Valois-Saint-Remy, who descended from Henri II., also came to an end

in the famous Lamothe-Valois implicated in the affair of the Diamond Necklace.

Each of these many chevaliers, if we may believe reports, was, like the Chevalier of Alencon, an old gentleman, tall, thin, withered, and moneyless. He of Bourges had emigrated; he of Touraine hid himself; he of Alencon fought in La Vendee and "chouanized" somewhat. The youth of the latter was spend in Paris, where the Revolution overtook him when thirty years of age in the midst of his conquests and gallantries.

The Chevalier de Valois of Alencon was accepted by the highest aristocracy of the province as a genuine Valois; and he distinguished himself, like the rest of his homonyms, by excellent manners, which proved him a man of society. He dined out every day, and played cards every evening. He was thought witty, thanks to his foible for relating a quantity of anecdotes on the reign of Louis XV. and the beginnings of the Revolution. When these tales were heard for the first time, they were held to be well narrated. He had, moreover, the great merit of not repeating his personal bons mots and of never speaking of his love-affairs, though his smiles and his airs and graces were delightfully indiscreet. The worthy gentleman used his privilege as a Voltairean noble to stay away from mass; and great indulgence was shown to his irreligion because of his devotion to the royal cause. One of his particular graces was the air and manner (imitated, no doubt, from Mole) with which he took snuff from a gold box adorned with the portrait of the Princess

Goritza, – a charming Hungarian, celebrated for her beauty in the last years of the reign of Louis XV. Having been attached during his youth to that illustrious stranger, he still mentioned her with emotion. For her sake he had fought a duel with Monsieur de Lauzun.

The chevalier, now fifty-eight years of age, owned to only fifty; and he might well allow himself that innocent deception, for, among the other advantages granted to fair thin persons, he managed to preserve the still youthful figure which saves men as well as women from an appearance of old age. Yes, remember this: all of life, or rather all the elegance that expresses life, is in the figure. Among the chevalier's other possessions must be counted an enormous nose with which nature had endowed him. This nose vigorously divided a pale face into two sections which seemed to have no knowledge of each other, for one side would redden under the process of digestion, while the other continued white. This fact is worthy of remark at a period when physiology is so busy with the human heart. The incandescence, so to call it, was on the left side. Though his long slim legs, supporting a lank body, and his pallid skin, were not indicative of health, Monsieur de Valois ate like an ogre and declared he had a malady called in the provinces "hot liver," perhaps to excuse his monstrous appetite. The circumstance of his singular flush confirmed this declaration; but in a region where repasts are developed on the line of thirty or forty dishes and last four hours, the chevalier's stomach would seem to have

been a blessing bestowed by Providence on the good town of Alencon. According to certain doctors, heat on the left side denotes a prodigal heart. The chevalier's gallantries confirmed this scientific assertion, the responsibility for which does not rest, fortunately, on the historian.

In spite of these symptoms, Monsieur de Valois' constitution was vigorous, consequently long-lived. If his liver "heated," to use an old-fashioned word, his heart was not less inflammable. His face was wrinkled and his hair silvered; but an intelligent observer would have recognized at once the stigmata of passion and the furrows of pleasure which appeared in the crow's-feet and the marches-du-palais, so prized at the court of Cythera. Everything about this dainty chevalier bespoke the "ladies' man." He was so minute in his ablutions that his cheeks were a pleasure to look upon; they seemed to have been laved in some miraculous water. The part of his skull which his hair refused to cover shone like ivory. His eyebrows, like his hair, affected youth by the care and regularity with which they were combed. His skin, already white, seemed to have been extra-whitened by some secret compound. Without using perfumes, the chevalier exhaled a certain fragrance of youth, that refreshed the atmosphere. His hands, which were those of a gentleman, and were cared for like the hands of a pretty woman, attracted the eye to their rosy, well-shaped nails. In short, had it not been for his magisterial and stupendous nose, the chevalier might have been thought a trifle too dainty.

We must here compel ourselves to spoil this portrait by the avowal of a littleness. The chevalier put cotton in his ears, and wore, appended to them, two little ear-rings representing negroes' heads in diamonds, of admirable workmanship. He clung to these singular appendages, explaining that since his ears had been bored he had ceased to have headaches (he had had headaches). We do not present the chevalier as an accomplished man; but surely we can pardon, in an old celibate whose heart sends so much blood to his left cheek, these adorable qualities, founded, perhaps, on some sublime secret history.

Besides, the Chevalier de Valois redeemed those negroes' heads by so many other graces that society felt itself sufficiently compensated. He really took such immense trouble to conceal his age and give pleasure to his friends. In the first place, we must call attention to the extreme care he gave to his linen, the only distinction that well-bred men can nowadays exhibit in their clothes. The linen of the chevalier was invariably of a fineness and whiteness that were truly aristocratic. As for his coat, though remarkable for its cleanliness, it was always half worn-out, but without spots or creases. The preservation of that garment was something marvellous to those who noticed the chevalier's high-bred indifference to its shabbiness. He did not go so far as to scrape the seams with glass, – a refinement invented by the Prince of Wales; but he did practice the rudiments of English elegance with a personal satisfaction little understood by the people of Alencon. The world owes a great deal to persons

who take such pains to please it. In this there is certainly some accomplishment of that most difficult precept of the Gospel about rendering good for evil. This freshness of ablution and all the other little cares harmonized charmingly with the blue eyes, the ivory teeth, and the blond person of the old chevalier.

The only blemish was that this retired Adonis had nothing manly about him; he seemed to be employing this toilet varnish to hide the ruins occasioned by the military service of gallantry only. But we must hasten to add that his voice produced what might be called an antithesis to his blond delicacy. Unless you adopted the opinion of certain observers of the human heart, and thought that the chevalier had the voice of his nose, his organ of speech would have amazed you by its full and redundant sound. Without possessing the volume of classical bass voices, the tone of it was pleasing from a slightly muffled quality like that of an English bugle, which is firm and sweet, strong but velvety.

The chevalier had repudiated the ridiculous costume still preserved by certain monarchical old men; he had frankly modernized himself. He was always seen in a maroon-colored coat with gilt buttons, half-tight breeches of poult-de-soie with gold buckles, a white waistcoat without embroidery, and a tight cravat showing no shirt-collar, – a last vestige of the old French costume which he did not renounce, perhaps, because it enabled him to show a neck like that of the sleekest abbe. His shoes were noticeable for their square buckles, a style of which the present generation has no knowledge; these buckles

were fastened to a square of polished black leather. The chevalier allowed two watch-chains to hang parallel to each other from each of his waistcoat pockets, – another vestige of the eighteenth century, which the Incroyables had not disdained to use under the Directory. This transition costume, uniting as it did two centuries, was worn by the chevalier with the high-bred grace of an old French marquis, the secret of which is lost to France since the day when Fleury, Mole's last pupil, vanished.

The private life of this old bachelor was apparently open to all eyes, though in fact it was quite mysterious. He lived in a lodging that was modest, to say the best of it, in the rue du Cours, on the second floor of a house belonging to Madame Lardot, the best and busiest washerwoman in the town. This circumstance will explain the excessive nicety of his linen. Ill-luck would have it that the day came when Alencon was guilty of believing that the chevalier had not always comported himself as a gentleman should, and that in fact he was secretly married in his old age to a certain Cesarine, – the mother of a child which had had the impertinence to come into the world without being called for.

"He had given his hand," as a certain Monsieur du Bousquier remarked, "to the person who had long had him under irons."

This horrible calumny embittered the last days of the dainty chevalier all the more because, as the present Scene will show, he had lost a hope long cherished to which he had made many sacrifices.

Madame Lardot leased to the chevalier two rooms on the

second floor of her house, for the modest sum of one hundred francs a year. The worthy gentleman dined out every day, returning only in time to go to bed. His sole expense therefore was for breakfast, invariably composed of a cup of chocolate, with bread and butter and fruits in their season. He made no fire except in the coldest winter, and then only enough to get up by. Between eleven and four o'clock he walked about, went to read the papers, and paid visits. From the time of his settling in Alencon he had nobly admitted his poverty, saying that his whole fortune consisted in an annuity of six hundred francs a year, the sole remains of his former opulence, – a property which obliged him to see his man of business (who held the annuity papers) quarterly. In truth, one of the Alencon bankers paid him every three months one hundred and fifty francs, sent down by Monsieur Bordin of Paris, the last of the *procureurs du Chatelet*. Every one knew these details because the chevalier exacted the utmost secrecy from the persons to whom he first confided them.

Monsieur de Valois gathered the fruit of his misfortunes. His place at table was laid in all the most distinguished houses in Alencon, and he was bidden to all soirees. His talents as a card-player, a narrator, an amiable man of the highest breeding, were so well known and appreciated that parties would have seemed a failure if the dainty connoisseur was absent. Masters of houses and their wives felt the need of his approving grimace. When a young woman heard the chevalier say at a ball, "You are delightfully well-dressed!" she was more pleased at such praise

than she would have been at mortifying a rival. Monsieur de Valois was the only man who could perfectly pronounce certain phrases of the olden time. The words, "my heart," "my jewel," "my little pet," "my queen," and the amorous diminutives of 1770, had a grace that was quite irresistible when they came from his lips. In short, the chevalier had the privilege of superlatives. His compliments, of which he was stingy, won the good graces of all the old women; he made himself agreeable to every one, even to the officials of the government, from whom he wanted nothing. His behavior at cards had a lofty distinction which everybody noticed: he never complained; he praised his adversaries when they lost; he did not rebuke or teach his partners by showing them how they ought to have played. When, in the course of a deal, those sickening dissertations on the game would take place, the chevalier invariably drew out his snuff-box with a gesture that was worthy of Mole, looked at the Princess Goritza, raised the cover with dignity, shook, sifted, massed the snuff, and gathered his pinch, so that by the time the cards were dealt he had decorated both nostrils and replaced the princess in his waistcoat pocket, – always on his left side. A gentleman of the "good" century (in distinction from the "grand" century) could alone have invented that compromise between contemptuous silence and a sarcasm which might not have been understood. He accepted poor players and knew how to make the best of them. His delightful equability of temper made many persons say, —

"I do admire the Chevalier de Valois!"

His conversation, his manners, seemed bland, like his person. He endeavored to shock neither man nor woman. Indulgent to defects both physical and mental, he listened patiently (by the help of the Princess Goritza) to the many dull people who related to him the petty miseries of provincial life, – an egg ill-boiled for breakfast, coffee with feathered cream, burlesque details about health, disturbed sleep, dreams, visits. The chevalier could call up a languishing look, he could take on a classic attitude to feign compassion, which made him a most valuable listener; he could put in an "Ah!" and a "Bah!" and a "What DID you do?" with charming appropriateness. He died without any one suspecting him of even an allusion to the tender passages of his romance with the Princess Goritza. Has any one ever reflected on the service a dead sentiment can do to society; how love may become both social and useful? This will serve to explain why, in spite of his constant winning at play (he never left a salon without carrying off with him about six francs), the old chevalier remained the spoilt darling of the town. His losses – which, by the bye, he always proclaimed, were very rare.

All who know him declare that they have never met, not even in the Egyptian museum at Turin, so agreeable a mummy. In no country in the world did parasitism ever take on so pleasant a form. Never did selfishness of a most concentrated kind appear less forth-putting, less offensive, than in this old gentleman; it stood him in place of devoted friendship. If some one asked Monsieur de Valois to do him a little service which might have

discommoded him, that some one did not part from the worthy chevalier without being truly enchanted with him, and quite convinced that he either could not do the service demanded, or that he should injure the affair if he meddled in it.

To explain the problematic existence of the chevalier, the historian, whom Truth, that cruel wanton, grasps by the throat, is compelled to say that after the "glorious" sad days of July, Alencon discovered that the chevalier's nightly winnings amounted to about one hundred and fifty francs every three months; and that the clever old nobleman had had the pluck to send to himself his annuity in order not to appear in the eyes of a community, which loves the main chance, to be entirely without resources. Many of his friends (he was by that time dead, you will please remark) have contested mordicus this curious fact, declaring it to be a fable, and upholding the Chevalier de Valois as a respectable and worthy gentleman whom the liberals calumniated. Luckily for shrewd players, there are people to be found among the spectators who will always sustain them. Ashamed of having to defend a piece of wrong-doing, they stoutly deny it. Do not accuse them of wilful infatuation; such men have a sense of their dignity; governments set them the example of a virtue which consists in burying their dead without chanting the Misere of their defeats. If the chevalier did allow himself this bit of shrewd practice, – which, by the bye, would have won him the regard of the Chevalier de Gramont, a smile from the Baron de Foeneste, a shake of the hand from the

Marquis de Moncade, – was he any the less that amiable guest, that witty talker, that imperturbable card-player, that famous teller of anecdotes, in whom all Alencon took delight? Besides, in what way was this action, which is certainly within the rights of a man's own will, – in what way was it contrary to the ethics of a gentleman? When so many persons are forced to pay annuities to others, what more natural than to pay one to his own best friend? But Laius is dead —

To return to the period of which we are writing: after about fifteen years of this way of life the chevalier had amassed ten thousand and some odd hundred francs. On the return of the Bourbons, one of his old friends, the Marquis de Pombreton, formerly lieutenant in the Black mousquetaires, returned to him – so he said – twelve hundred pistoles which he had lent to the marquis for the purpose of emigrating. This event made a sensation; it was used later to refute the sarcasms of the "Constitutionnel," on the method employed by some emigres in paying their debts. When this noble act of the Marquis de Pombreton was lauded before the chevalier, the good man reddened even to his right cheek. Every one rejoiced frankly at this windfall for Monsieur de Valois, who went about consulting moneyed people as to the safest manner of investing this fragment of his past opulence. Confiding in the future of the Restoration, he finally placed his money on the Grand-Livre at the moment when the funds were at fifty-six francs and twenty-five centimes. Messieurs de Lenoncourt, de Navarreins,

de Verneuil, de Fontaine, and La Billardiere, to whom he was known, he said, obtained for him, from the king's privy purse, a pension of three hundred francs, and sent him, moreover, the cross of Saint-Louis. Never was it known positively by what means the old chevalier obtained these two solemn consecrations of his title and merits. But one thing is certain; the cross of Saint-Louis authorized him to take the rank of retired colonel in view of his service in the Catholic armies of the West.

Besides his fiction of an annuity, about which no one at the present time knew anything, the chevalier really had, therefore, a bona fide income of a thousand francs. But in spite of this bettering of his circumstances, he made no change in his life, manners, or appearance, except that the red ribbon made a fine effect on his maroon-colored coat, and completed, so to speak, the physiognomy of a gentleman. After 1802, the chevalier sealed his letters with a very old seal, ill-engraved to be sure, by which the Casterans, the d'Esgrignons, the Troisvilles were enabled to see that he bore: *Party of France, two cottises gemelled gules, and gules, five mascles or, placed end to end; on a chief sable, a cross argent*. For crest, a knight's helmet. For motto: "Valeo." Bearing such noble arms, the so-called bastard of the Valois had the right to get into all the royal carriages of the world.

Many persons envied the quiet existence of this old bachelor, spent on whist, boston, backgammon, reversi, and piquet, all well played, on dinners well digested, snuff gracefully inhaled, and tranquil walks about the town. Nearly all Alencon believed

this life to be exempt from ambitions and serious interests; but no man has a life as simple as envious neighbors attribute to him. You will find in the most out-of-the way villages human mollusks, creatures apparently dead, who have passions for lepidoptera or for conchology, let us say, – beings who will give themselves infinite pains about moths, butterflies, or the concha Veneris. Not only did the chevalier have his own particular shells, but he cherished an ambitious desire which he pursued with a craft so profound as to be worthy of Sixtus the Fifth: he wanted to marry a certain rich old maid, with the intention, no doubt, of making her a stepping-stone by which to reach the more elevated regions of the court. There, then, lay the secret of his royal bearing and of his residence in Alencon.

CHAPTER II. SUSANNAH AND THE ELDERS

On a Wednesday morning, early, toward the middle of spring, in the year 16, – such was his mode of reckoning, – at the moment when the chevalier was putting on his old green-flowered damask dressing-gown, he heard, despite the cotton in his ears, the light step of a young girl who was running up the stairway. Presently three taps were discreetly struck upon the door; then, without waiting for any response, a handsome girl slipped like an eel into the room occupied by the old bachelor.

"Ah! is it you, Suzanne?" said the Chevalier de Valois, without discontinuing his occupation, which was that of stropping his razor. "What have you come for, my dear little jewel of mischief?"

"I have come to tell you something which may perhaps give you as much pleasure as pain?"

"Is it anything about Cesarine?"

"Cesarine! much I care about your Cesarine!" she said with a saucy air, half serious, half indifferent.

This charming Suzanne, whose present comical performance was to exercise a great influence in the principal personages of our history, was a work-girl at Madame Lardot's. One word here on the topography of the house. The wash-rooms occupied

the whole of the ground floor. The little courtyard was used to hang out on wire cords embroidered handkerchiefs, collarets, capes, cuffs, frilled shirts, cravats, laces, embroidered dresses, – in short, all the fine linen of the best families of the town. The chevalier assumed to know from the number of her capes in the wash how the love-affairs of the wife of the prefect were going on. Though he guessed much from observations of this kind, the chevalier was discretion itself; he was never betrayed into an epigram (he had plenty of wit) which might have closed to him an agreeable salon. You are therefore to consider Monsieur de Valois as a man of superior manners, whose talents, like those of many others, were lost in a narrow sphere. Only – for, after all, he was a man – he permitted himself certain penetrating glances which could make some women tremble; although they all loved him heartily as soon as they discovered the depth of his discretion and the sympathy that he felt for their little weaknesses.

The head woman, Madame Lardot's factotum, an old maid of forty-six, hideous to behold, lived on the opposite side of the passage to the chevalier. Above them were the attics where the linen was dried in winter. Each apartment had two rooms, – one lighted from the street, the other from the courtyard. Beneath the chevalier's room there lived a paralytic, Madame Lardot's grandfather, an old buccaneer named Grevin, who had served under Admiral Simeuse in India, and was now stone-deaf. As for Madame Lardot, who occupied the other lodging on the first floor, she had so great a weakness for persons of condition that

she may well have been thought blind to the ways of the chevalier. To her, Monsieur de Valois was a despotic monarch who did right in all things. Had any of her workwomen been guilty of a happiness attributed to the chevalier she would have said, "He is so lovable!" Thus, though the house was of glass, like all provincial houses, it was discreet as a robber's cave.

A born confidant to all the little intrigues of the work-rooms, the chevalier never passed the door, which usually stood open, without giving something to his little ducks, – chocolate, bonbons, ribbons, laces, gilt crosses, and such like trifles adored by grisettes; consequently, the kind old gentleman was adored in return. Women have an instinct which enables them to divine the men who love them, who like to be near them, and exact no payment for gallantries. In this respect women have the instinct of dogs, who in a mixed company will go straight to the man to whom animals are sacred.

The poor Chevalier de Valois retained from his former life the need of bestowing gallant protection, a quality of the seigneurs of other days. Faithful to the system of the "petite maison," he liked to enrich women, – the only beings who know how to receive, because they can always return. But the poor chevalier could no longer ruin himself for a mistress. Instead of the choicest bonbons wrapped in bank-bills, he gallantly presented paper-bags full of toffee. Let us say to the glory of Alencon that the toffee was accepted with more joy than la Duthe ever showed at a gilt service or a fine equipage offered by the Comte d'Artois.

All these grisettes fully understood the fallen majesty of the Chevalier de Valois, and they kept their private familiarities with him a profound secret for his sake. If they were questioned about him in certain houses when they carried home the linen, they always spoke respectfully of the chevalier, and made him out older than he really was; they talked of him as a most respectable monsieur, whose life was a flower of sanctity; but once in their own regions they perched on his shoulders like so many parrots. He liked to be told the secrets which washerwomen discover in the bosom of households, and day after day these girls would tell him the cancans which were going the round of Alencon. He called them his "petticoat gazettes," his "talking feuilletons." Never did Monsieur de Sartines have spies more intelligent and less expensive, or minions who showed more honor while displaying their rascality of mind. So it may be said that in the mornings, while breakfasting, the chevalier usually amused himself as much as the saints in heaven.

Suzanne was one of his favorites, a clever, ambitious girl, made of the stuff of a Sophie Arnold, and handsome withal, as the handsomest courtesan invited by Titian to pose on black velvet for a model of Venus; although her face, fine about the eyes and forehead, degenerated, lower down, into commonness of outline. Hers was a Norman beauty, fresh, high-colored, redundant, the flesh of Rubens covering the muscles of the Farnese Hercules, and not the slender articulations of the Venus de' Medici, Apollo's graceful consort.

"Well, my child, tell me your great or your little adventure, whatever it is."

The particular point about the chevalier which would have made him noticeable from Paris to Pekin, was the gentle paternity of his manner to grisettes. They reminded him of the illustrious operatic queens of his early days, whose celebrity was European during a good third of the eighteenth century. It is certain that the old gentleman, who had lived in days gone by with that feminine nation now as much forgotten as many other great things, – like the Jesuits, the Buccaneers, the Abbes, and the Farmers-General, – had acquired an irresistible good-humor, a kindly ease, a laisser-aller devoid of egotism, the self-effacement of Jupiter with Alcmene, of the king intending to be duped, who casts his thunderbolts to the devil, wants his Olympus full of follies, little suppers, feminine profusions – but with Juno out of the way, be it understood.

In spite of his old green damask dressing-gown and the bareness of the room in which he sat, where the floor was covered with a shabby tapestry in place of carpet, and the walls were hung with tavern-paper presenting the profiles of Louis XVI. and members of his family, traced among the branches of a weeping willow with other sentimentalities invented by royalism during the Terror, – in spite of his ruins, the chevalier, trimming his beard before a shabby old toilet-table, draped with trumpery lace, exhaled an essence of the eighteenth century. All the libertine graces of his youth reappeared; he seemed to have

the wealth of three hundred thousand francs of debt, while his vis-a-vis waited before the door. He was grand, – like Berthier on the retreat from Moscow, issuing orders to an army that existed no longer.

"Monsieur le chevalier," replied Suzanne, drolly, "seems to me I needn't tell you anything; you've only to look."

And Suzanne presented a side view of herself which gave a sort of lawyer's comment to her words. The chevalier, who, you must know, was a sly old bird, lowered his right eye on the grisette, still holding the razor at his throat, and pretended to understand.

"Well, well, my little duck, we'll talk about that presently. But you are rather previous, it seems to me."

"Why, Monsieur le chevalier, ought I to wait until my mother beats me and Madame Lardot turns me off? If I don't get away soon to Paris, I shall never be able to marry here, where men are so ridiculous."

"It can't be helped, my dear; society is changing; women are just as much victims to the present state of things as the nobility themselves. After political overturn comes the overturn of morals. Alas! before long woman won't exist" (he took out the cotton-wool to arrange his ears): "she'll lose everything by rushing into sentiment; she'll wring her nerves; good-bye to all the good little pleasures of our time, desired without shame, accepted without nonsense." (He polished up the little negroes' heads.) "Women had hysterics in those days to get their ends, but

now" (he began to laugh) "their vapors end in charcoal. In short, marriage" (here he picked up his pincers to remove a hair) "will become a thing intolerable; whereas it used to be so gay in my day! The reigns of Louis XIV. and Louis XV. – remember this, my child – said farewell to the finest manners and morals ever known to the world."

"But, Monsieur le chevalier," said the grisette, "the matter now concerns the morals and honor of your poor little Suzanne, and I hope you won't abandon her."

"Abandon her!" cried the chevalier, finishing his hair; "I'd sooner abandon my own name."

"Ah!" exclaimed Suzanne.

"Now, listen to me, you little mischief," said the chevalier, sitting down on a huge sofa, formerly called a duchesse, which Madame Lardot had been at some pains to find for him.

He drew the magnificent Suzanne before him, holding her legs between his knees. She let him do as he liked, although in the street she was offish enough to other men, refusing their familiarities partly from decorum and partly for contempt for their commonness. She now stood audaciously in front of the chevalier, who, having fathomed in his day many other mysteries in minds that were far more wily, took in the situation at a single glance. He knew very well that no young girl would joke about a real dishonor; but he took good care not to knock over the pretty scaffolding of her lie as he touched it.

"We slander ourselves," he said with inimitable craft; "we

are as virtuous as that beautiful biblical girl whose name we bear; we can always marry as we please, but we are thirsty for Paris, where charming creatures – and we are no fool – get rich without trouble. We want to go and see if the great capital of pleasures hasn't some young Chevalier de Valois in store for us, with a carriage, diamonds, an opera-box, and so forth. Russians, Austrians, Britons, have millions on which we have an eye. Besides, we are patriotic; we want to help France in getting back her money from the pockets of those gentry. Hey! hey! my dear little devil's duck! it isn't a bad plan. The world you live in may cry out a bit, but success justifies all things. The worst thing in this world, my dear, is to be without money; that's our disease, yours and mine. Now inasmuch as we have plenty of wit, we thought it would be a good thing to parade our dear little honor, or dishonor, to catch an old boy; but that old boy, my dear heart, knows the Alpha and Omega of female tricks, – which means that you could easier put salt on a sparrow's tail than to make me believe I have anything to do with your little affair. Go to Paris, my dear; go at the cost of an old celibate, I won't prevent it; in fact, I'll help you, for an old bachelor, Suzanne, is the natural money-box of a young girl. But don't drag me into the matter. Listen, my queen, you who know life pretty well; you would me great harm and give me much pain, – harm, because you would prevent my marriage in a town where people cling to morality; pain, because if you are in trouble (which I deny, you sly puss!) I haven't a penny to get you out of it. I'm as poor as a church

mouse; you know that, my dear. Ah! if I marry Mademoiselle Cormon, if I am once more rich, of course I would prefer you to Cesarine. You've always seemed to me as fine as the gold they gild on lead; you were made to be the love of a great seigneur. I think you so clever that the trick you are trying to play off on me doesn't surprise me one bit; I expected it. You are flinging the scabbard after the sword, and that's daring for a girl. It takes nerve and superior ideas to do it, my angel, and therefore you have won my respectful esteem."

"Monsieur le chevalier, I assure you, you are mistaken, and – "

She colored, and did not dare to say more. The chevalier, with a single glance, had guessed and fathomed her whole plan.

"Yes, yes! I understand: you want me to believe it," he said. "Well! I do believe it. But take my advice: go to Monsieur du Bousquier. Haven't you taken linen there for the last six or eight months? I'm not asking what went on between you; but I know the man: he has immense conceit; he is an old bachelor, and very rich; and he only spends a quarter of a comfortable income. If you are as clever as I suppose, you can go to Paris at his expense. There, run along, my little doe; go and twist him round your finger. Only, mind this: be as supple as silk; at every word take a double turn round him and make a knot. He is a man to fear scandal, and if he has given you a chance to put him in the pillory – in short, understand; threaten him with the ladies of the Maternity Hospital. Besides, he's ambitious. A man succeeds through his wife, and you are handsome and clever enough to

make the fortune of a husband. Hey! the mischief! you could hold your own against all the court ladies."

Suzanne, whose mind took in at a flash the chevalier's last words, was eager to run off to du Bousquier, but, not wishing to depart too abruptly, she questioned the chevalier about Paris, all the while helping him to dress. The chevalier, however, divined her desire to be off, and favored it by asking her to tell Cesarine to bring up his chocolate, which Madame Lardot made for him every morning. Suzanne then slipped away to her new victim, whose biography must here be given.

Born of an old Alencon family, du Bousquier was a cross between the bourgeois and the country squire. Finding himself without means on the death of his father, he went, like other ruined provincials, to Paris. On the breaking out of the Revolution he took part in public affairs. In spite of revolutionary principles, which made a hobby of republican honesty, the management of public business in those days was by no means clean. A political spy, a stock-jobber, a contractor, a man who confiscated in collusion with the syndic of a commune the property of emigres in order to sell them and buy them in, a minister, and a general were all equally engaged in public business. From 1793 to 1799 du Bousquier was commissary of provisions to the French armies. He lived in a magnificent hotel and was one of the matadors of finance, did business with Ouvrard, kept open house, and led the scandalous life of the period, – the life of a Cincinnatus, on sacks of corn

harvested without trouble, stolen rations, "little houses" full of mistresses, in which were given splendid fetes to the Directors of the Republic.

The citizen du Bousquier was one of Barras' familiars; he was on the best of terms with Fouche, stood very well with Bernadotte, and fully expected to become a minister by throwing himself into the party which secretly caballed against Bonaparte until Marengo. If it had not been for Kellermann's charge and Desaix's death, du Bousquier would probably have become a minister. He was one of the chief assistances of that secret government whom Napoleon's luck sent behind the scenes in 1793. (See "An Historical Mystery.") The unexpected victory of Marengo was the defeat of that party who actually had their proclamations printed to return to the principles of the Montagne in case the First Consul succumbed.

Convinced of the impossibility of Bonaparte's triumph, du Bousquier staked the greater part of his property on a fall in the Funds, and kept two couriers on the field of battle. The first started for Paris when Melas' victory was certain; the second, starting four hours later, brought the news of the defeat of the Austrians. Du Bousquier cursed Kellermann and Desaix; he dared not curse Bonaparte, who might owe him millions. This alternative of millions to be earned and present ruin staring him in the face, deprived the purveyor of most of his faculties: he became nearly imbecile for several days; the man had so abused his health by excesses that when the thunderbolt fell upon him

he had no strength to resist. The payment of his bills against the Exchequer gave him some hopes for the future, but, in spite of all efforts to ingratiate himself, Napoleon's hatred to the contractors who had speculated on his defeat made itself felt; du Bousquier was left without a sou. The immorality of his private life, his intimacy with Barras and Bernadotte, displeased the First Consul even more than his manoeuvres at the Bourse, and he struck du Bousquier's name from the list of the government contractors.

Out of all his past opulence du Bousquier saved only twelve hundred francs a year from an investment in the Grand Livre, which he had happened to place there by pure caprice, and which saved him from penury. A man ruined by the First Consul interested the town of Alencon, to which he now returned, where royalism was secretly dominant. Du Bousquier, furious against Bonaparte, relating stories against him of his meanness, of Josephine's improprieties, and all the other scandalous anecdotes of the last ten years, was well received.

About this time, when he was somewhere between forty and fifty, du Bousquier's appearance was that of a bachelor of thirty-six, of medium height, plump as a purveyor, proud of his vigorous calves, with a strongly marked countenance, a flattened nose, the nostrils garnished with hair, black eyes with thick lashes, from which darted shrewd glances like those of Monsieur de Talleyrand, though somewhat dulled. He still wore republican whiskers and his hair very long; his hands, adorned with bunches of hair on each knuckle, showed the power of his

muscular system in their prominent blue veins. He had the chest of the Farnese Hercules, and shoulders fit to carry the stocks. Such shoulders are seen nowadays only at Tortoni's. This wealth of masculine vigor counted for much in du Bousquier's relations with others. And yet in him, as in the chevalier, symptoms appeared which contrasted oddly with the general aspect of their persons. The late purveyor had not the voice of his muscles. We do not mean that his voice was a mere thread, such as we sometimes hear issuing from the mouth of these walruses; on the contrary, it was a strong voice, but stifled, an idea of which can be given only by comparing it with the noise of a saw cutting into soft and moistened wood, – the voice of a worn-out speculator.

In spite of the claims which the enmity of the First Consul gave Monsieur du Bousquier to enter the royalist society of the province, he was not received in the seven or eight families who composed the faubourg Saint-Germain of Alencon, among whom the Chevalier de Valois was welcome. He had offered himself in marriage, through her notary, to Mademoiselle Armande, sister of the most distinguished noble in the town; to which offer he received a refusal. He consoled himself as best he could in the society of a dozen rich families, former manufacturers of the old point d'Alencon, owners of pastures and cattle, or merchants doing a wholesale business in linen, among whom, as he hoped, he might find a wealthy wife. In fact, all his hopes now converged to the perspective of a fortunate marriage. He was not without a certain financial ability, which

many persons used to their profit. Like a ruined gambler who advises neophytes, he pointed out enterprises and speculations, together with the means and chances of conducting them. He was thought a good administrator, and it was often a question of making him mayor of Alencon; but the memory of his underhand jobbery still clung to him, and he was never received at the prefecture. All the succeeding governments, even that of the Hundred Days, refused to appoint him mayor of Alencon, – a place he coveted, which, could he have had it, would, he thought, have won him the hand of a certain old maid on whom his matrimonial views now turned.

Du Bousquier's aversion to the Imperial government had thrown him at first into the royalist circles of Alencon, where he remained in spite of the rebuffs he received there; but when, after the first return of the Bourbons, he was still excluded from the prefecture, that mortification inspired him with a hatred as deep as it was secret against the royalists. He now returned to his old opinions, and became the leader of the liberal party in Alencon, the invisible manipulator of elections, and did immense harm to the Restoration by the cleverness of his underhand proceedings and the perfidy of his outward behavior. Du Bousquier, like all those who live by their heads only, carried on his hatreds with the quiet tranquillity of a rivulet, feeble apparently, but inexhaustible. His hatred was that of a negro, so peaceful that it deceived the enemy. His vengeance, brooded over for fifteen years, was as yet satisfied by no victory, not even that of July,

1830.

It was not without some private intention that the Chevalier de Valois had turned Suzanne's designs upon Monsieur du Bousquier. The liberal and the royalist had mutually divined each other in spite of the wide dissimulation with which they hid their common hope from the rest of the town. The two old bachelors were secretly rivals. Each had formed a plan to marry the Demoiselle Cormon, whom Monsieur de Valois had mentioned to Suzanne. Both, ensconced in their idea and wearing the armor of apparent indifference, awaited the moment when some lucky chance might deliver the old maid over to them. Thus, if the two old bachelors had not been kept asunder by the two political systems of which they each offered a living expression, their private rivalry would still have made them enemies. Epochs put their mark on men. These two individuals proved the truth of that axiom by the opposing historic tints that were visible in their faces, in their conversation, in their ideas, and in their clothes. One, abrupt, energetic, with loud, brusque manners, curt, rude speech, dark in tone, in hair, in look, terrible apparently, in reality as impotent as an insurrection, represented the republic admirably. The other, gentle and polished, elegant and nice, attaining his ends by the slow and infallible means of diplomacy, faithful to good taste, was the express image of the old courtier regime.

The two enemies met nearly every evening on the same ground. The war was courteous and benign on the side of

the chevalier; but du Bousquier showed less ceremony on his, though still preserving the outward appearances demanded by society, for he did not wish to be driven from the place. They themselves fully understood each other; but in spite of the shrewd observation which provincials bestow on the petty interests of their own little centre, no one in the town suspected the rivalry of these two men. Monsieur le Chevalier de Valois occupied a vantage-ground: he had never asked for the hand of Mademoiselle Cormon; whereas du Bousquier, who entered the lists soon after his rejection by the most distinguished family in the place, had been refused. But the chevalier believed that his rival had still such strong chances of success that he dealt him this coup de Jarnac with a blade (namely, Suzanne) that was finely tempered for the purpose. The chevalier had cast his plummet-line into the waters of du Bousquier; and, as we shall see by the sequel, he was not mistaken in any of his conjectures.

Suzanne tripped with a light foot from the rue du Cours, by the rue de la Porte de Seez and the rue du Bercail, to the rue du Cygne, where, about five years earlier, du Bousquier had bought a little house built of gray Jura stone, which is something between Breton slate and Norman granite. There he established himself more comfortably than any householder in town; for he had managed to preserve certain furniture and decorations from the days of his splendor. But provincial manners and morals obscured, little by little, the rays of this fallen Sardanapalus; these vestiges of his former luxury now produced the effect of a glass

chandelier in a barn. Harmony, that bond of all work, human or divine, was lacking in great things as well as in little ones. The stairs, up which everybody mounted without wiping their feet, were never polished; the walls, painted by some wretched artisan of the neighborhood, were a terror to the eye; the stone mantelpiece, ill-carved, "swore" with the handsome clock, which was further degraded by the company of contemptible candlesticks. Like the period which du Bousquier himself represented, the house was a jumble of dirt and magnificence. Being considered a man of leisure, du Bousquier led the same parasite life as the chevalier; and he who does not spend his income is always rich. His only servant was a sort of Jocrisse, a lad of the neighborhood, rather a ninny, trained slowly and with difficulty to du Bousquier's requirements. His master had taught him, as he might an orang-outang, to rub the floors, dust the furniture, black his boots, brush his coats, and bring a lantern to guide him home at night if the weather were cloudy, and clogs if it rained. Like many other human beings, this lad hadn't stuff enough in him for more than one vice; he was a glutton. Often, when du Bousquier went to a grand dinner, he would take Rene to wait at table; on such occasions he made him take off his blue cotton jacket, with its big pockets hanging round his hips, and always bulging with handkerchiefs, clasp-knives, fruits, or a handful of nuts, and forced him to put on a regulation coat. Rene would then stuff his fill with the other servants. This duty, which du Bousquier had turned into a reward, won him the most absolute

discretion from the Breton servant.

"You here, mademoiselle!" said Rene to Suzanne when she entered; "'t'isn't your day. We haven't any linen for the wash, tell Madame Lardot."

"Old stupid!" said Suzanne, laughing.

The pretty girl went upstairs, leaving Rene to finish his porringer of buckwheat in boiled milk. Du Bousquier, still in bed, was revolving in his mind his plans of fortune; for ambition was all that was left to him, as to other men who have sucked dry the orange of pleasure. Ambition and play are inexhaustible; in a well-organized man the passions which proceed from the brain will always survive the passions of the heart.

"Here am I," said Suzanne, sitting down on the bed and jangling the curtain-rings back along the rod with despotic vehemence.

"Quesaco, my charmer?" said the old bachelor, sitting up in bed.

"Monsieur," said Suzanne, gravely, "you must be astonished to see me here at this hour; but I find myself in a condition which obliges me not to care for what people may say about it."

"What does all that mean?" said du Bousquier, crossing his arms.

"Don't you understand me?" said Suzanne. "I know," she continued, making a pretty little face, "how ridiculous it is in a poor girl to come and nag at a man for what he thinks a mere nothing. But if you really knew me, monsieur, if you knew all

that I am capable of for a man who would attach himself to me as much as I'm attached to you, you would never repent having married me. Of course it isn't here, in Alencon, that I should be of service to you; but if we went to Paris, you would see where I could lead a man with your mind and your capacities; and just at this time too, when they are remaking the government from top to toe. So – between ourselves, be it said —*is* what has happened a misfortune? Isn't it rather a piece of luck, which will pay you well? Who and what are you working for now?"

"For myself, of course!" cried du Bousquier, brutally.

"Monster! you'll never be a father!" said Suzanne, giving a tone of prophetic malediction to the words.

"Come, don't talk nonsense, Suzanne," replied du Bousquier; "I really think I am still dreaming."

"How much more reality do you want?" cried Suzanne, standing up.

Du Bousquier rubbed his cotton night-cap to the top of his head with a rotatory motion, which plainly indicated the tremendous fermentation of his ideas.

"He actually believes it!" thought Suzanne, "and he's flattered. Heaven! how easy it is to gull men!"

"Suzanne, what the devil must I do? It is so extraordinary – I, who thought – The fact is that – No, no, it can't be – "

"What? you can't marry me?"

"Oh! as for that, no; I have engagements."

"With Mademoiselle Armande or Mademoiselle Cormon,

who have both refused you? Listen to me, Monsieur du Bousquier, my honor doesn't need gendarmes to drag you to the mayor's office. I sha'n't lack for husbands, thank goodness! and I don't want a man who can't appreciate what I'm worth. But some day you'll repent of the way you are behaving; for I tell you now that nothing on earth, neither gold nor silver, will induce me to return the good thing that belongs to you, if you refuse to accept it to-day."

"But, Suzanne, are you sure?"

"Oh, monsieur!" cried the grisette, wrapping her virtue round her, "what do you take me for? I don't remind you of the promises you made me, which have ruined a poor young girl whose only blame was to have as much ambition as love."

Du Bousquier was torn with conflicting sentiments, joy, distrust, calculation. He had long determined to marry Mademoiselle Cormon; for the Charter, on which he had just been ruminating, offered to his ambition, through the half of her property, the political career of a deputy. Besides, his marriage with the old maid would put him socially so high in the town that he would have great influence. Consequently, the storm upraised by that malicious Suzanne drove him into the wildest embarrassment. Without this secret scheme, he would have married Suzanne without hesitation. In which case, he could openly assume the leadership of the liberal party in Alencon. After such a marriage he would, of course, renounce the best society and take up with the bourgeois class of tradesmen, rich

manufacturers and graziers, who would certainly carry him in triumph as their candidate. Du Bousquier already foresaw the Left side.

This solemn deliberation he did not conceal; he rubbed his hands over his head, displacing the cap which covered its disastrous baldness. Suzanne, meantime, like all those persons who succeed beyond their hopes, was silent and amazed. To hide her astonishment, she assumed the melancholy pose of an injured girl at the mercy of her seducer; inwardly she was laughing like a grisette at her clever trick.

"My dear child," said du Bousquier at length, "I'm not to be taken in with such *bosh*, not I!"

Such was the curt remark which ended du Bousquier's meditation. He plumed himself on belonging to the class of cynical philosophers who could never be "taken in" by women, – putting them, one and all, unto the same category, as *suspicious*. These strong-minded persons are usually weak men who have a special catechism in the matter of womenkind. To them the whole sex, from queens of France to milliners, are essentially depraved, licentious, intriguing, not a little rascally, fundamentally deceitful, and incapable of thought about anything but trifles. To them, women are evil-doing queens, who must be allowed to dance and sing and laugh as they please; they see nothing sacred or saintly in them, nor anything grand; to them there is no poetry in the senses, only gross sensuality. Where such jurisprudence prevails, if a woman is not perpetually tyrannized

over, she reduces the man to the condition of a slave. Under this aspect du Bousquier was again the antithesis of the chevalier. When he made his final remark, he flung his night-cap to the foot of the bed, as Pope Gregory did the taper when he fulminated an excommunication; Suzanne then learned for the first time that du Bousquier wore a toupet covering his bald spot.

"Please to remember, Monsieur du Bousquier," she replied majestically, "that in coming here to tell you of this matter I have done my duty; remember that I have offered you my hand, and asked for yours; but remember also that I behaved with the dignity of a woman who respects herself. I have not abased myself to weep like a silly fool; I have not insisted; I have not tormented you. You now know my situation. You must see that I cannot stay in Alencon: my mother would beat me, and Madame Lardot rides a hobby of principles; she'll turn me off. Poor work-girl that I am, must I go to the hospital? must I beg my bread? No! I'd rather throw myself into the Brillante or the Sarthe. But isn't it better that I should go to Paris? My mother could find an excuse to send me there, – an uncle who wants me, or a dying aunt, or a lady who sends for me. But I must have some money for the journey and for – you know what."

This extraordinary piece of news was far more startling to du Bousquier than to the Chevalier de Valois. Suzanne's fiction introduced such confusion into the ideas of the old bachelor that he was literally incapable of sober reflection. Without this agitation and without his inward delight (for vanity is a swindler

which never fails of its dupe), he would certainly have reflected that, supposing it were true, a girl like Suzanne, whose heart was not yet spoiled, would have died a thousand deaths before beginning a discussion of this kind and asking for money.

"Will you really go to Paris, then?" he said.

A flash of gayety lighted Suzanne's gray eyes as she heard these words; but the self-satisfied du Bousquier saw nothing.

"Yes, monsieur," she said.

Du Bousquier then began bitter lamentations: he had the last payments to make on his house; the painter, the mason, the upholsterers must be paid. Suzanne let him run on; she was listening for the figures. Du Bousquier offered her three hundred francs. Suzanne made what is called on the stage a false exit; that is, she marched toward the door.

"Stop, stop! where are you going?" said du Bousquier, uneasily. "This is what comes of a bachelor's life!" thought he. "The devil take me if I ever did anything more than rumple her collar, and, lo and behold! she makes THAT a ground to put her hand in one's pocket!"

"I'm going, monsieur," replied Suzanne, "to Madame Granson, the treasurer of the Maternity Society, who, to my knowledge, has saved many a poor girl in my condition from suicide."

"Madame Granson!"

"Yes," said Suzanne, "a relation of Mademoiselle Cormon, the president of the Maternity Society. Saving your presence,

the ladies of the town have created an institution to protect poor creatures from destroying their infants, like that handsome Faustine of Argentan who was executed for it three years ago."

"Here, Suzanne," said du Bousquier, giving her a key, "open that secretary, and take out the bag you'll find there: there's about six hundred francs in it; it is all I possess."

"Old cheat!" thought Suzanne, doing as he told her, "I'll tell about your false toupet."

She compared du Bousquier with that charming chevalier, who had given her nothing, it is true, but who had comprehended her, advised her, and carried all grisettes in his heart.

"If you deceive me, Suzanne," cried du Bousquier, as he saw her with her hand in the drawer, "you – "

"Monsieur," she said, interrupting him with ineffable impertinence, "wouldn't you have given me money if I had asked for it?"

Recalled to a sense of gallantry, du Bousquier had a remembrance of past happiness and grunted his assent. Suzanne took the bag and departed, after allowing the old bachelor to kiss her, which he did with an air that seemed to say, "It is a right which costs me dear; but it is better than being harried by a lawyer in the court of assizes as the seducer of a girl accused of infanticide."

Suzanne hid the sack in a sort of gamebag made of osier which she had on her arm, all the while cursing du Bousquier for his stinginess; for one thousand francs was the sum she

wanted. Once tempted of the devil to desire that sum, a girl will go far when she has set foot on the path of trickery. As she made her way along the rue du Bercail, it came into her head that the Maternity Society, presided over by Mademoiselle Cormon, might be induced to complete the sum at which she had reckoned her journey to Paris, which to a grisette of Alencon seemed considerable. Besides, she hated du Bousquier. The latter had evidently feared a revelation of his supposed misconduct to Madame Granson; and Suzanne, at the risk of not getting a penny from the society, was possessed with the desire, on leaving Alencon, of entangling the old bachelor in the inextricable meshes of a provincial slander. In all grisettes there is something of the malevolent mischief of a monkey. Accordingly, Suzanne now went to see Madame Granson, composing her face to an expression of the deepest dejection.

CHAPTER III. ATHANASE

Madame Granson, widow of a lieutenant-colonel of artillery killed at Jena, possessed, as her whole means of livelihood, a meagre pension of nine hundred francs a year, and three hundred francs from property of her own, plus a son whose support and education had eaten up all her savings. She occupied, in the rue du Bercail, one of those melancholy ground-floor apartments which a traveller passing along the principal street of a little provincial town can look through at a glance. The street door opened at the top of three steep steps; a passage led to an interior courtyard, at the end of which was the staircase covered by a wooden gallery. On one side of the passage was the dining-room and the kitchen; on the other side, a salon put to many uses, and the widow's bedchamber.

Athanase Granson, a young man twenty-three years of age, who slept in an attic room above the second floor of the house, added six hundred francs to the income of his poor mother, by the salary of a little place which the influence of his relation, Mademoiselle Cormon, had obtained for him in the mayor's office, where he was placed in charge of the archives.

From these indications it is easy to imagine Madame Granson in her cold salon with its yellow curtains and Utrecht velvet furniture, also yellow, as she straightened the round straw mats which were placed before each chair, that visitors might not soil

the red-tiled floor while they sat there; after which she returned to her cushioned armchair and little work-table placed beneath the portrait of the lieutenant-colonel of artillery between two windows, – a point from which her eye could rake the rue du Bercail and see all comers. She was a good woman, dressed with bourgeois simplicity in keeping with her wan face furrowed by grief. The rigorous humbleness of poverty made itself felt in all the accessories of this household, the very air of which was charged with the stern and upright morals of the provinces. At this moment the son and mother were together in the dining-room, where they were breakfasting with a cup of coffee, with bread and butter and radishes. To make the pleasure which Suzanne's visit was to give to Madame Granson intelligible, we must explain certain secret interests of the mother and son.

Athanase Granson was a thin and pale young man, of medium height, with a hollow face in which his two black eyes, sparkling with thoughts, gave the effect of bits of coal. The rather irregular lines of his face, the curve of his lips, a prominent chin, the fine modelling of his forehead, his melancholy countenance, caused by a sense of his poverty warring with the powers that he felt within him, were all indications of repressed and imprisoned talent. In any other place than the town of Alencon the mere aspect of his person would have won him the assistance of superior men, or of women who are able to recognize genius in obscurity. If his was not genius, it was at any rate the form and aspect of it; if he had not the actual force of a great

heart, the glow of such a heart was in his glance. Although he was capable of expressing the highest feeling, a casing of timidity destroyed all the graces of his youth, just as the ice of poverty kept him from daring to put forth all his powers. Provincial life, without an opening, without appreciation, without encouragement, described a circle about him in which languished and died the power of thought, – a power which as yet had scarcely reached its dawn. Moreover, Athanase possessed that savage pride which poverty intensifies in noble minds, exalting them in their struggle with men and things; although at their start in life it is an obstacle to their advancement. Genius proceeds in two ways: either it takes its opportunity – like Napoleon, like Moliere – the moment that it sees it, or it waits to be sought when it has patiently revealed itself. Young Granson belonged to that class of men of talent who distrust themselves and are easily discouraged. His soul was contemplative. He lived more by thought than by action. Perhaps he might have seemed deficient or incomplete to those who cannot conceive of genius without the sparkle of French passion; but he was powerful in the world of mind, and he was liable to reach, through a series of emotions imperceptible to common souls, those sudden determinations which make fools say of a man, "He is mad."

The contempt which the world pours out on poverty was death to Athanase; the enervating heat of solitude, without a breath or current of air, relaxed the bow which ever strove to tighten itself; his soul grew weary in this painful effort without results.

Athanase was a man who might have taken his place among the glories of France; but, eagle as he was, cooped in a cage without his proper nourishment, he was about to die of hunger after contemplating with an ardent eye the fields of air and the mountain heights where genius soars. His work in the city library escaped attention, and he buried in his soul his thoughts of fame, fearing that they might injure him; but deeper than all lay buried within him the secret of his heart, – a passion which hollowed his cheeks and yellowed his brow. He loved his distant cousin, this very Mademoiselle Cormon whom the Chevalier de Valois and du Bousquier, his hidden rivals, were stalking. This love had had its origin in calculation. Mademoiselle Cormon was thought to be one of the richest persons in the town: the poor lad had therefore been led to love her by desires for material happiness, by the hope, long indulged, of gilding with comfort his mother's last years, by eager longing for the ease of life so needful to men who live by thought; but this most innocent point of departure degraded his passion in his own eyes. Moreover, he feared the ridicule the world would cast upon the love of a young man of twenty-three for an old maid of forty.

And yet his passion was real; whatever may seem false about such a love elsewhere, it can be realized as a fact in the provinces, where, manners and morals being without change or chance or movement or mystery, marriage becomes a necessity of life. No family will accept a young man of dissolute habits. However natural the liaison of a young man, like Athanase,

with a handsome girl, like Suzanne, for instance, might seem in a capital, it alarms provincial parents, and destroys the hopes of marriage of a poor young man when possibly the fortune of a rich one might cause such an unfortunate antecedent to be overlooked. Between the depravity of certain liaisons and a sincere love, a man of honor and no fortune will not hesitate: he prefers the misfortunes of virtue to the evils of vice. But in the provinces women with whom a young man call fall in love are rare. A rich young girl he cannot obtain in a region where all is calculation; a poor young girl he is prevented from loving; it would be, as provincials say, marrying hunger and thirst. Such monkish solitude is, however, dangerous to youth.

These reflections explain why provincial life is so firmly based on marriage. Thus we find that ardent and vigorous genius, forced to rely on the independence of its own poverty, quits these cold regions where thought is persecuted by brutal indifference, where no woman is willing to be a sister of charity to a man of talent, of art, of science.

Who will really understand Athanase Granson's love for Mademoiselle Cormon? Certainly neither rich men – those sultans of society who fill their harems – nor middle-class men, who follow the well-beaten high-road of prejudices; nor women who, not choosing to understand the passions of artists, impose the yoke of their virtues upon men of genius, imagining that the two sexes are governed by the same laws.

Here, perhaps, we should appeal to those young men who

suffer from the repression of their first desires at the moment when all their forces are developing; to artists sick of their own genius smothering under the pressure of poverty; to men of talent, persecuted and without influence, often without friends at the start, who have ended by triumphing over that double anguish, equally agonizing, of soul and body. Such men will well understand the lancinating pains of the cancer which was now consuming Athanase; they have gone through those long and bitter deliberations made in presence of some grandiose purpose they had not the means to carry out; they have endured those secret miscarriages in which the fructifying seed of genius falls on arid soil. Such men know that the grandeur of desires is in proportion to the height and breadth of the imagination. The higher they spring, the lower they fall; and how can it be that ties and bonds should not be broken by such a fall? Their piercing eye has seen – as did Athanase – the brilliant future which awaited them, and from which they fancied that only a thin gauze parted them; but that gauze through which their eyes could see is changed by Society into a wall of iron. Impelled by a vocation, by a sentiment of art, they endeavor again and again to live by sentiments which society as incessantly materializes. Alas! the provinces calculate and arrange marriage with the one view of material comfort, and a poor artist or man of science is forbidden to double its purpose and make it the saviour of his genius by securing to him the means of subsistence!

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.