

# VARIOUS

CHAMBERS'S  
EDINBURGH JOURNAL,  
NO. 459

Various

**Chambers's Edinburgh  
Journal, No. 459**

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**Chambers's Edinburgh Journal, No. 459 /**  
**Volume 18, New Series, October 16, 1852**

**THE WOMAN OF THE WORLD**

We all know that there are certain conventional laws by which our social doings and seemings are regulated; but what is the power which compels the observance of these laws? There is no company police to keep people moving on, no fines or other penalties; nobody but the very outrageous need fear being turned out of the room; we have every one of us strong inclinations and strong will: then, how comes it that we get on so smoothly? Why are there no outbreaks of individual character? How is it that we seem dovetailed into each other, as if we formed a homogeneous mass? What is the influence which keeps up the weak and keeps down the strong, and spreads itself like oil upon the boiling sea of human passion? We have a notion of our own, that all this is the work of an individual of the female sex; and, indeed, even the most unconscious and unreflecting would appear to assign to that individual her true position and authority, in naming her the Woman of the World.

Society could never exist in a state of civilisation without the woman of the world. The man of the world has his own department, his own *métier*; but She it is who keeps up the general equilibrium. She is a calm, quiet, lady-like person, not obtrusive, and not easily put out of the way. You do not know by external observation that she is in the room; you feel it instinctively. The atmosphere she brings with her is peculiar, you cannot tell how. It is neither warm nor chill, neither moist nor dry; but it is repressive. You do not move in it with natural freedom, although you feel nothing that could be called *gêne*. Her manner is generally sweet, sometimes even caressing, and you feel flattered and elevated as you meet her approving eye. But you cannot get into it. There is a glassy surface, beautiful but hard, of which you can make nothing, and presently you feel a kind of strangeness come over you, as if you were not looking into the eye of a creature of your own kind. What you miss is sympathy.

It is to her want of sympathy the woman of the world owes her position. The same deficiency is indispensable in the other individuals—such as a great monarch, or a great general—who rule the fate of mankind; but with this difference, that in them it is partial and limited, and in her universal. In them, it bears relation to their trade or mission; in her, it is a peculiarity of her general nature. She is accused of inhumanity; of sporting with the feelings of those about her, and rending, when they interfere with her plans, the strings of the heart as ruthlessly as if they were fiddlestrings. But all that is nonsense. She does not, it is true, ignore the existence of strings and feelings; on the contrary, they are in her eyes a great fact, without which she could do nothing. But her theory is, that they are merely a superficial net-work surrounding the character, the growth of education and other circumstances, and that they may be twisted, broken, and fastened anew at pleasure by skilful fingers. No, she is not inhumane. She works for others' good and her own greatness. Sighs and tears may be the result of her operations; but so are they of the operations of the beneficent surgeon. She dislikes giving pain, and comforts and sustains the patient to the best of her power; but at the most, she knows sighs are but wind, and tears but water, and so she does her duty.

Although without sympathy, the woman of the world has great sensitiveness. She sits in the room like a spider, with her web fitting as closely to the whole area as the carpet; and she feels the slightest touch upon the slightest filament. So do the company: not understandingly like her, but instinctively and unconsciously, like a fly who only knows that somehow or other he is not at freedom. The thing that holds him is as soft and glossy and thin and small as silk; but even while dallying with its smoothness and pleasantness, a misty, indefinite sensation of impending danger creeps over him.

Be quiet, little fly! Gently—gently: slip away if you can—but no defiance, no tugging, no floundering, or you are lost!

A mythic story is told of the woman of the world: how in early life she was crossed in love; how she lost faith in feelings that seemed to exist exceptionally only in her own solitary bosom; and how a certain glassy hardness gathered upon her heart, as she sat waiting and waiting for a response to the inner voices she had suffered to burst forth—

The long-lost ventures of the heart,  
That send no answers back again!

But this is a fable. The woman of the world was never young—not while playing with her doll. She grew just as you see her, and will suffer no change till the dissolution of the elements of her body. Love-passages she has indeed had like other women; but the love was all on one side, and that side not hers. It is curious to observe the passion thus lavished in vain. It reminds one of the German story of the Cave of Mirrors, where a fairy damsel, with beckoning hand and beseeching eyes, was reflected from a thousand angles. The pursuing lover, endeavouring to clasp his mistress, flung himself from one illusory image to another, finding only the sharp, polished, glittering glass in his embrace, till faint, breathless, and bleeding, he sank upon the ground.

The woman of the world, though a dangerous mistress, is an agreeable friend. She is partial to the everyday married lady, when presentable in point of dress and manners, and overwhelms her with little condescending kindnesses and caresses. This good lady, on her part, thinks her patroness a remarkably clever woman; not that she understands her, or knows exactly what she is about; but somehow or other she is *sure* she is prodigiously clever. As for the everyday young lady, who has a genius for reverence, she reveres her; and these two, with their male congeners, are the dress-figures the woman of the world places about her rooms like ivory pieces on a chessboard.

This admirable lady is sometimes a mother, and she is devotedly fond of her children, in their future. She may be seen gazing in their faces by the hour; but the picture that is before her mind's eye is the fulfilment of their present promise. An ordinary woman would dawdle away her time in admiring their soft eyes, and curly hair, and full warm cheeks; but the woman of the world sees the bud grown into the expanded flower, and the small cradle is metamorphosed into the boudoir by the magic of her maternal love. And verily, she has her reward: for death sometimes comes, to wither the bud, and disperse the dream in empty air. On such an occasion, her grief, as we may readily suppose, is neither deep nor lasting, for its object is twined round her imagination, not her heart. She regrets her wasted hopes and fruitless speculations; but the baby having never been present in its own entity, is now as that which has never been. The unthinking call her an unnatural mother, for they make no distinction. They do not know that death is with her a perfectly arranged funeral, a marble tablet, a darkened room, an attitude of wo, a perfumed handkerchief. They do not consider that when she lies down to rest, her eyes, in consequence of over-mental exertion, are too heavy with sleep to have room for tears. They do not reflect that in the morning she breaks into a new consciousness of reality from the clinging dreams of her maternal ambition, and not from the small visionary arms, the fragrant kiss, the angel whisper of her lost babe. They do not feel that in opening upon the light, her eyes part with the fading gleam of gems and satin, and kneeling coronets, and red right hands extending wedding-rings, and not with a winged and baby form, soaring into the light by which it is gradually absorbed, while distant hymns melt and die upon her ear.

The woman of the world is sometimes prosperous in her reign over society, and sometimes otherwise. Even she submits, although usually with sweetness and dignity, to the caprices of fortune. Occasionally, the threads of her management break in such a way, that, with all her dexterity, she is unable to reunite them: occasionally, the strings and feelings are too strong to rend; and occasionally, in rending, the whole system falls to pieces. Her daughter elopes, her son marries the governess, her

husband loses his seat in parliament; but there are other daughters to marry, other sons to direct, other honours to win; and so this excellent woman runs her busy and meritorious career. But years come on at last, although she lingers as long as she can in middle life; and, with her usual graceful dignity, she settles down into the reward the world bestows on its veterans, an old age of cards.

Even now, she sometimes turns round her head to look at the things and persons around her, and to exult in the reputation she has earned, and the passive influence her name still exercises over society; but, as a rule, the kings and queens and knaves take the place of human beings with this woman of genius; the deepest arcana of her art are brought into play for the odd trick, and her pride and ambition are abundantly gratified by the circumvention of a half-crown.

The woman of the world at length dies: and what then? Why, then, nothing—nothing but a funeral, a tablet, dust, and oblivion. This is reasonable, for, great as she was, she had to do only with the external forms of life. Her existence was only a material game, and her men and women were only court and common cards; diamonds and hearts were alike to her, their value depending on what was trumps. She saw keenly and far, but not deeper than the superficial net-work of the heart, not higher than the ceiling of the drawing-room. Her enjoyments, therefore, were limited in their range; her nature, though perfect in its kind, was small and narrow; and her occupation, though so interesting to those concerned, was in itself mean and frivolous. This is always her misfortune, the misfortune of this envied woman. She lives in a material world, blind and deaf to the influences that thrill the bosoms of others. No noble thought ever fires her soul, no generous sympathy ever melts her heart. Her share of that current of human nature which has welled forth from its fountain in the earthly paradise is dammed up, and cut off from the general stream that overflows the world. None of those minute and invisible ducts connects it with the common waters which make one feel instinctively, lovingly, yearningly, that he is not alone upon the earth, but a member of the great human family. And so, having played her part, she dies, this woman of the world, leaving no sign to tell that an immortal spirit has passed: nothing above the ground but a tablet, and below, only a handful of rotting bones and crumbling dust.

## MARIE DE LA TOUR

The basement front of No. 12 Rue St Antoine, a narrow street in Rouen, leading from the Place de la Pucelle, was opened by Madame de la Tour, in the millinery business, in 1817, and tastefully arranged, so far as scant materials permitted the exercise of decorative genius. She was the widow of a once flourishing *courtier maritime* (ship-broker), who, in consequence of some unfortunate speculations, had recently died in insolvent circumstances. At about the same time, Clément Derville, her late husband's confidential clerk, a steady, persevering, clever person, took possession of the deceased ship-broker's business premises on the quay, the precious savings of fifteen years of industrious frugality enabling him to install himself in the vacant commercial niche before the considerable connection attached to the well-known establishment was broken up and distributed amongst rival *courtiers*. Such vicissitudes, frequent in all trading communities, excite but a passing interest; and after the customary commonplaces commiserative of the fallen fortunes of the still youthful widow, and gratulatory good-wishes for the prosperity of the *ci-devant* clerk, the matter gradually faded from the minds of the sympathisers, save when the rapidly rising fortunes of Derville, in contrast with the daily lowlier ones of Madame de la Tour, suggested some tritely sentimental reflection upon the precariousness and instability of all mundane things. For a time, it was surmised by some of the fair widow's friends, if not by herself, that the considerable services Derville had rendered her were prompted by a warmer feeling than the ostensible one of respect for the relict of his old and liberal employer; and there is no doubt that the gentle, graceful manners, the mild, starlit face of Madame de la Tour, had made a deep impression upon Derville, although the hope or expectation founded thereon vanished with the passing time. Close, money-loving, business-absorbed as he might be, Clément Derville was a man of vehement impulse and extreme susceptibility of female charm—weaknesses over which he had again and again resolved to maintain vigilant control, as else fatal obstacles to his hopes of realising a large competence, if not a handsome fortune. He succeeded in doing so; and as year after year glided away, leaving him richer and richer, Madame de la Tour poorer and poorer, as well as less and less personally attractive, he grew to marvel that the bent form, the clouded eyes, the sorrow-sharpened features of the woman he occasionally met hastening along the streets, could be those by which he had been once so powerfully agitated and impressed.

He did not, however, form any new attachment; was still a bachelor at forty-five; and had for some years almost lost sight of, and forgotten, Madame de la Tour, when a communication from Jeanne Favart, an old servant who had lived with the De la Tours in the days of their prosperity, vividly recalled old and fading memories. She announced that Madame de la Tour had been for many weeks confined to her bed by illness, and was, moreover, in great pecuniary distress.

'*Diantre!*' exclaimed Derville, a quicker and stronger pulse than usual tinging his sallow cheek as he spoke. 'That is a pity. Who, then, has been minding the business for her?'

'Her daughter Marie, a gentle, pious child, who seldom goes out except to church, and,' added Jeanne, with a keen look in her master's countenance, 'the very image of the Madame de la Tour we knew some twenty years ago.'

'Ha!' M. Derville was evidently disturbed, but not so much so as to forget to ask with some asperity if 'dinner was not ready?'

'In five minutes,' said Jeanne, but still holding the half-opened door in her hand. 'They are very, very badly off, monsieur, those unfortunate De la Tours,' she persisted. 'A *huissier* this morning seized their furniture and trade-stock for rent, and if the sum is not made up by sunset, they will be utterly ruined.'

M. Clément Derville took several hasty turns about the room, and the audible play of his fingers amongst the Napoleons in his pockets inspired Jeanne with a hope that he was about to draw forth a sufficient number for the relief of the cruel necessities of her former mistress. She was mistaken.

Perhaps the touch of his beloved gold stilled for a time the agitation that had momentarily stirred his heart.

'It is a pity,' he murmured; and then briskly drawing out his watch, added sharply: 'But pray let us have dinner. Do you know that it is full seven minutes past the time that it should be served?'

Jeanne disappeared, and M. Derville was very soon seated at table. But although the sad tidings he had just heard had not been able to effectually loosen his purse-strings, they had at least power utterly to destroy his appetite, albeit the *poulet* was done to a turn. Jeanne made no remark on this, as she removed the almost untasted meal, nor on the quite as unusual fact, that the wine *carafe* was already half emptied, and her master himself restless, dreamy, and preoccupied. Concluding, however, from these symptoms, that a fierce struggle between generosity and avarice was going on in M. Derville's breast, she quietly determined on bringing an auxiliary to the aid of generosity, that would, her woman's instinct taught her, at once decide the conflict.

No doubt the prosperous ship-broker *was* unusually agitated. The old woman's news had touched a chord which, though dulled and slackened by the heat and dust of seventeen years of busy, anxious life, still vibrated strongly, and awakened memories that had long slept in the chambers of his brain, especially one pale Madonna face, with its soft, tear-trembling eyes that— '*Ciel!*' he suddenly exclaimed, as the door opened and gave to view the very form his fancy had conjured up: '*Ciel!* can it be— Pshaw!' he added, as he fell back into the chair from which he had leaped up; 'you must suppose me crazed, Mademoiselle—Mademoiselle de la Tour, I am quite certain.'

It was indeed Marie de la Tour whom Jeanne Favart had, with much difficulty, persuaded to make a personal appeal to M. Derville. She was a good deal agitated, and gladly accepted that gentleman's gestured invitation to be seated, and take a glass of wine. Her errand was briefly, yet touchingly told, but not apparently listened to by Derville, so abstracted and intense was the burning gaze with which he regarded the confused and blushing petitioner. Jeanne, however, knew whom he recognised in those flushed and interesting features, and had no doubt of the successful result of the application.

M. Clément Derville *had* heard and comprehended what was said, for he broke an embarrassing silence of some duration by saying, in a pleased and respectful tone: 'Twelve Napoleons, you say, mademoiselle. It is nothing: here are twenty. No thanks, I beg of you. I hope to have an opportunity of rendering you—of rendering Madame de la Tour, I mean, some real and lasting service.'

Poor Marie was profoundly affected by this generosity, and the charming blushfulness, the sweet-toned trembling words that expressed her modest gratitude, were, it should seem, strangely interpreted by the excited ship-broker. The interview was not prolonged, and Marie de la Tour hastened with joy-lightened steps to her home.

Four days afterwards, M. Derville called at the Rue St Antoine, only to hear that Madame de la Tour had died a few hours previously. He seemed much shocked; and after a confused offer of further pecuniary assistance, respectfully declined by the weeping daughter, took a hurried leave.

There is no question that, from the moment of his first interview with her, M. Derville had conceived an ardent passion for Mademoiselle de la Tour—so ardent and bewildering as not only to blind him to the great disparity of age between himself and her—which he might have thought the much greater disparity of fortune in his favour would balance and reconcile—but to the very important fact, that Hector Bertrand, a young *menuisier* (carpenter), who had recently commenced business on his own account, and whom he so frequently met at the charming *modiste's* shop, was her accepted, affianced lover. An *éclaircissement*, accompanied by mortifying circumstances, was not, however, long delayed.

It occurred one fine evening in July. M. Derville, in passing through the *marché aux fleurs*, had selected a brilliant bouquet for presentation to Mademoiselle de la Tour; and never to him had she appeared more attractive, more fascinating, than when accepting, with hesitating, blushing reluctance, the proffered flowers. She stepped with them into the little sitting-room behind the shop; M. Derville

followed; and the last remnant of discretion and common-sense that had hitherto restrained him giving way at once, he burst out with a vehement declaration of the passion which was, he said, consuming him, accompanied, of course, by the offer of his hand and fortune in marriage. Marie de la Tour's first impulse was to laugh in the face of a man who, old enough to be her father, addressed her in such terms; but one glance at the pale face and burning eyes of the speaker, convinced her that levity would be ill-timed—possibly dangerous. Even the few civil and serious words of discouragement and refusal with which she replied to his ardent protestations, were oil cast upon flame. He threw himself at the young girl's feet, and clasped her knees in passionate entreaty, at the very moment that Hector Bertrand, with one De Beaune, entered the room. Marie de la Tour's exclamation of alarm, and effort to disengage her dress from Derville's grasp, in order to interpose between him and the new-comers, were simultaneous with several heavy blows from Bertrand's cane across the shoulders of the kneeling man, who instantly leaped to his feet, and sprang upon his assailant with the yell and spring of a madman. Fortunately for Bertrand, who was no match in personal strength for the man he had assaulted, his friend De Beaune promptly took part in the encounter; and after a desperate scuffle, during which Mademoiselle de la Tour's remonstrances and entreaties were unheard or disregarded, M. Derville was thrust with inexcusable violence into the street.

According to Jeanne Favart, her master reached home with his face all bloody and discoloured, his clothes nearly torn from his back, and in a state of frenzied excitement. He rushed past her up stairs, shut himself into his bedroom, and there remained unseen by any one for several days, partially opening the door only to receive food and other necessaries from her hands. When he did at last leave his room, the impassive calmness of manner habitual to him was quite restored, and he wrote a note in answer to one that had been sent by Mademoiselle de la Tour, expressive of her extreme regret for what had occurred, and enclosing a very respectful apology from Hector Bertrand. M. Derville said, that he was grateful for her sympathy and kind wishes; and as to M. Bertrand, he frankly accepted his excuses, and should think no more of the matter.

This mask of philosophic indifference or resignation was not so carefully worn but that it slipped occasionally aside, and revealed glimpses of the volcanic passion that raged beneath. Jeanne was not for a moment deceived; and Marie de la Tour, the first time she again saw him, perceived with woman's intuitive quickness through all his assumed frigidity of speech and demeanour, that his sentiments towards her, so far from being subdued by the mortifying repulse they had met with, were more vehemently passionate than ever! He was a man, she felt, to be feared and shunned; and very earnestly did she warn Bertrand to avoid meeting, or, at all events, all possible chance of collision with his exasperated, and, she was sure, merciless and vindictive rival.

Bertrand said he would do so; and kept his promise as long as there was no temptation to break it. About six weeks after his encounter with M. Derville, he obtained a considerable contract for the carpentry work of a large house belonging to a M. Mangier—a fantastic, Gothic-looking place, as persons acquainted with Rouen will remember, next door but one to Blaise's banking-house. Bertrand had but little capital, and he was terribly puzzled for means to purchase the requisite materials, of which the principal item was Baltic timber. He essayed his credit with a person of the name of Dufour, on the quay, and was refused. Two hours afterwards, he again sought the merchant, for the purpose of proposing his friend De Beaune as security. Dufour and Derville were talking together in front of the office; and when they separated on Bertrand's approach, the young man fancied that Derville saluted him with unusual friendliness. De Beaune's security was declined by the cautious trader; and as Bertrand was leaving, Dufour said, half-jestingly no doubt: 'Why don't you apply to your friend Derville? He has timber on commission that will suit you, I know; and he seemed very friendly just now.' Bertrand made no reply, and walked off, thinking probably that he might as well ask the statue of the 'Pucelle' for assistance as M. Derville. He was, naturally enough, exceedingly put out, and vexed; and unhappily betook himself to a neighbouring tavern for 'spirituous' solacement—a very rare thing, let me add, for him to do. He remained there till about eight o'clock, and by that

time was in such a state of confused elation from the unusual potations he had imbibed, that Dufour's suggestion assumed a sort of drunken likelihood; and he resolved on applying—there could not, he thought, be any wonderful harm, if no good, in that—to the ship-broker. M. Derville was not at home, and the office was closed; but Jeanne Favart, understanding Bertrand to say that he had important business to transact with her master—she supposed by appointment—shewed him into M. Derville's private business-rooms, and left him there. Bertrand seated himself, fell asleep after awhile, woke up about ten o'clock considerably sobered, and quite alive to the absurd impropriety of the application he had tipsily determined on, and was about to leave the place, when M. Derville arrived. The ship-broker's surprise and anger at finding Hector Bertrand in his house were extreme, and his only reply to the intruder's stammering explanation, was a contemptuous order to leave the place immediately. Bertrand slunk away sheepishly enough; and slowly as he sauntered along, had nearly reached home, when M. Derville overtook him.

'One word, Monsieur Bertrand,' said Derville. 'This way, if you please.'

Bertrand, greatly surprised, followed the ship-broker to a lane close by—a dark, solitary locality, which suggested an unpleasant misgiving, very pleasantly relieved by Derville's first words.

'Monsieur Bertrand,' he said, 'I was hasty and ill-tempered just now; but I am not a man to cherish malice, and for the sake of—of Marie—of Mademoiselle de la Tour, I am disposed to assist you, although I should not, as you will easily understand, like to have any public or known dealings with you. Seven or eight hundred francs, I understood you to say, the timber you required would amount to?'

'Certainly not more than that, monsieur,' Bertrand contrived to answer, taken away as his breath nearly was by astonishment.

'Here, then, is a note of the Bank of France for one thousand francs.'

'Monsieur!—monsieur!' gasped the astounded recipient.

'You will repay me,' continued Derville, 'when your contract is completed; and you will please to bear strictly in mind, that the condition of any future favour of a like kind is, that you keep this one scrupulously secret.' He then hurried off, leaving Bertrand in a state of utter amazement. This feeling, however, slowly subsided, especially after assuring himself, by the aid of his chamber-lamp, that the note was a genuine one, and not, as he had half feared, a valueless deception. 'This Monsieur Derville,' drowsily murmured Bertrand as he ensconced himself in the bed-clothes, 'is a *bon enfant*, after all—a generous, magnanimous prince, if ever there was one. But then, to be sure, he wishes to do Marie a service by secretly assisting her *futur* on in life. *Sapristie!* It is quite simple, after all, this generosity; for undoubtedly Marie is the most charming—charm—cha'—

Hector Bertrand went to Dufour's timber-yard at about noon the next day, selected what he required, and pompously tendered the thousand-franc note in payment. 'Whe-e-e-w!' whistled Dufour, 'the deuce!' at the same time looking with keen scrutiny in his customer's face.

'I received it from Monsieur Mangier in advance,' said Hector in hasty reply to that look, blurting out in some degree inadvertently the assertion which he had been thinking would be the most feasible solution of his sudden riches, since he had been so peremptorily forbidden to mention M. Derville's name.

'It is very generous of Monsieur Mangier,' said Dufour; 'and he is not famous for that virtue either. But let us go to Blaise's bank: I have not sufficient change in the house, and I daresay we shall get silver for it there.'

As often happens in France, a daughter of the banker was the cashier of the establishment; and it was with an accent of womanly commiseration that she said, after minutely examining the note: 'From whom, Monsieur Bertrand, did you obtain possession of this note?'

Bertrand hesitated. A vague feeling of alarm was beating at his heart, and he confusedly bethought him, that it might be better not to repeat the falsehood he had told M. Dufour. Before,

however, he could decide what to say, Dufour answered for him: 'He *says* from Monsieur Mangier, just by.'

'Strange!' said Mademoiselle Blaise. 'A clerk of Monsieur Derville's has been taken into custody this very morning on suspicion of having stolen this very note.'

Poor Bertrand! He felt as if seized with vertigo; and a stunned, chaotic sense of mortal peril shot through his brain, as Marie's solemn warning with respect to Derville rose up like a spectre before him.

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