

# MONSIEUR - MADAME AND BEBE - V1

GUSTAVE DROZ\*

Beside the works mentioned in the above text, Gustave Droz wrote: 'Le Cahier bleu de Mademoiselle Cibot (1868), 'Auteur d'une Source (1869), 'Un Paquet de Lettres' (1870), 'Babolain' (1872), 'Les Etangs' (1875), 'Tristesses et Sourires (1883), and L'Enfant (1884).

He died in Paris, October 22, 1895.

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de l'Academie Francaise.

## CHAPTER I

### MY FIRST SUPPER PARTY

The devil take me if I can remember her name, notwithstanding I dearly loved her, the charming girl!

It is strange how rich we find ourselves when we rummage in old drawers; how many forgotten sighs, how many pretty little trinkets, broken, old-fashioned, and dusty, we come across. But no matter. I was now eighteen, and, upon my honor, very unsuspecting. It was in the arms of that dear—I have her name at the tip of my tongue, it ended in "ine"—it was in her arms, the dear child, that I murmured my first words of love, while I was close to her rounded shoulder, which had a pretty little mole, where I imprinted my first kiss. I adored her, and she returned my affection.

I really think I should have married her, and that cheerfully, I can assure you, if it had not been that on certain details of moral weakness her past life inspired me with doubts, and her present with uneasiness. No man is perfect; I was a trifle jealous.

Well, one evening—it was Christmas eve—I called to take her to supper with a friend of mine whom I esteemed much, and who became an examining magistrate, I do not know where, but he is now dead.

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I went upstairs to the room of the sweet girl, and was quite surprised to find her ready to start. She had on, I remember, a square-cut bodice, a little too low to my taste, but it became her so well that when she embraced me I was tempted to say: "I say, pet, suppose we remain here"; but she took my arm, humming a favorite air of hers, and we soon found ourselves in the street.

You have experienced, have you not, this first joy of the youth who at once becomes a man when he has his sweetheart on his arm? He trembles at his boldness, and scents on the morrow the paternal rod; yet all these fears are dissipated in the presence of the ineffable happiness of the moment. He is free, he is a man, he loves, he is loved, he is conscious that he is taking a forward step in life. He would like all Paris to see him thus, yet he is afraid of being recognized; he would give his little finger to grow three hairs on his upper lip, and to have a wrinkle on his brow, to be able to smoke a cigar without being sick, and to polish off a glass of punch without coughing.

When we reached my friend's, the aforesaid examining magistrate, we found a numerous company; from the anteroom we could hear bursts of laughter, noisy conversation, accompanied by the clatter of plate and crockery, which was being placed upon the table. I was a little excited; I knew that I was the youngest of the party, and I was afraid of appearing awkward on that night of revelry. I said to myself: "Old boy, you must face the music, do the grand, and take your liquor like a little man; your sweetheart is here, and her eyes are fixed on you." The idea, however, that I might be ill next morning did indeed trouble me; in my mind's eye, I saw my poor mother bringing me a cup of tea, and weeping over my excesses, but I chased away all such thoughts and really all went well up till suppertime. My sweetheart had been pulled about a little, no doubt; one or two men had even kissed her under my very nose, but I at once set down these details to the profit and loss column, and in all sincerity I was proud and happy.

"My young friends," suddenly exclaimed our host, "it is time to use your forks vigorously. Let us adjourn to the diningroom."

Joyful shouts greeted these words, and, amid great disorder, the guests arranged themselves round the table, at each end of which I noticed two plates filled up with those big cigars of which I could not smoke a quarter without having a fit of cold shivers.

"Those cigars will lead to a catastrophe, if I don't use prudence and dissemble," said I to myself.

I do not know how it was, but my sweetheart found herself seated on the left of the host. I did not like that, but what could I say? And then, the said host, with his twenty-five summers, his moustache curled up at the ends, and his self-assurance, seemed to me the most ideal, the most astounding of young devils, and I felt for him a shade of respect.

"Well," he said, with captivating volubility, "you are feeling yourself at home, are you not? You know any guest who feels uncomfortable in his coat may take it off . . . and the ladies, too. Ha! ha! ha! That's the way to make one's self happy, is it not, my little dears?" And before he had finished laughing he printed a kiss right and left on the necks of his two neighbors, one of whom, as I have already said, was my beloved.

The ill-bred dog! I felt my hair rise on end and my face glow like red-hot iron. For the rest, everybody burst out laughing, and from that moment the supper went on with increased animation.

"My young friends," was the remark of that infernal examining magistrate, "let us attack the cold meat, the sausages, the turkey, the salad; let us attack the cakes, the cheese, the oysters, and the grapes; let us attack the whole show. Waiter, draw the corks and we will eat up everything at once, eh, my cherubs? No ceremony, no false delicacy. This is fine fun; it is Oriental, it is splendid. In the centre of Africa everybody acts in this manner. We must introduce poetry into our pleasures. Pass me some cheese with my turkey. Ha! ha! ha! I feel queer, I am wild, I am crazy, am I not, pets?" And he bestowed two more kisses, as before. If I had not been already drunk, upon my honor, I should have made a scene.

I was stupid. Around me they were laughing, shouting, singing, and rattling their plates. A racket of popping corks and breaking glasses buzzed in my ears, but it seemed to me that a cloud had risen between me and the outer world; a veil separated me from the other guests, and, in spite of the evidence of my senses, I thought I was dreaming. I could distinguish, however, though in a confused manner, the animated glances and heightened color of the guests, and, above all, a disorder quite new to me in the toilettes of the ladies. Even my sweetheart appeared to have changed. Suddenly—it was as a flash of lightning—my beloved, my angel, my ideal, she whom that very morning I was ready to marry, leaned toward the examining magistrate and—I still feel the cold shudder—devoured three truffles which were on his plate.

I experienced keen anguish; it seemed to me as if my heart were breaking just then.

Here my recollections cease. What then took place I do not know. All I remember is that some one took me home in a cab. I kept asking: "Where is she? Where? Oh, where?"

I was told that she had left two hours before. The next morning I experienced a keen sense of despair when the truffles of the examining magistrate came back to mind. For a moment I had a vague idea of entering upon holy orders, but time—you know what it is—calmed my troubled breast. But what the devil was her name? It ended in "ine." Indeed, no, I believe it ended in "a."

## CHAPTER II

### THE SOUL IN AGONY.

TO MONSIEUR CLAUDE DE L——

Seminary of P——sur-C——

(Haute-Saone).

It affords me unspeakable pleasure to sit down to address you, dear Claude. Must I tell you that I can not think without pious emotion of that life which but yesterday we were leading together at the Jesuits' College. How well I remember our long talks under the great trees, the pious pilgrimages we daily made to the Father Superior's Calvary, our charming readings, the darting forth of our two souls toward the eternal source of all greatness and all goodness. I can still see the little chapel which you fitted up one day in your desk, the pretty wax tapers we made for it, which we lighted one day during the cosmography class.

Oh, sweet recollections, how dear you are to me! Charming details of a calm and holy life, with what happiness do I recall you! Time in separating you from me seems only to have brought you nearer in recollection. I have seen life, alas! during these six long months, but, in acquiring a knowledge of the world, I have learned to love still more the innocent ignorance of my past existence. Wiser than myself, you have remained in the service of the Lord; you have understood the divine mission which had been reserved for you; you have been unwilling to step over the profane threshold and to enter the world, that cavern, I ought to say, in which I am now assailed, tossed about like a frail bark during a tempest. Nay, the anger of the waves of the sea compared to that of the passions is mere child's play. Happy friend, who art ignorant of what I have learned. Happy friend, whose eyes have not yet measured the abyss into which mine are already sunk.

But what was I to do? Was I not obliged—despite my vocation and the tender friendship which called me to your side—was I not obliged, I say, to submit to the exigencies imposed by the name I bear, and also to the will of my father, who destined me for a military career in order to defend a noble cause which you too would defend? In short, I obeyed and quitted the college of the Fathers never to return again.

I went into the world, my heart charged with the salutary fears which our pious education had caused to grow up there. I advanced cautiously, but very soon recoiled horror-stricken. I am eighteen; I am still young,

I know, but I have already reflected much, while the experience of my pious instructors has imparted to my soul a precocious maturity which enables me to judge of many things; besides my faith is so firmly established and so deeply rooted in my being, that I can look about me without danger. I do not fear for my own salvation, but I am shocked when I think of the future of our modern society, and I pray the Lord fervently, from a heart untainted by sin, not to turn away His countenance in wrath from our unhappy country. Even here, at the seat of my cousin, the Marchioness K——de C——, where I am at the present moment, I can discover nothing but frivolity among the men, and dangerous coquetry among the women. The pernicious atmosphere of the period seems to pervade even the highest rank of the French aristocracy. Sometimes discussions occur on matters pertaining to science and morals, which aim a kind of indirect blow at religion itself, of which our Holy Father the Pope should alone be called on to decide. In this way God permits, at the present day, certain petty savants, flat-headed men of science, to explain in a novel fashion the origin of humanity, and, despite the excommunication which will certainly overtake them, to throw down a wild and impious challenge at the most venerable traditions.

I have not myself desired to be enlightened in regard to such base depravity, but I have heard with poignant grief men with great minds and illustrious names attach some importance to it.

As to manners and customs, they are, without being immoral, which would be out of the question in our society, distinguished by a frivolity and a faculty for being carried away with allurements which are shocking in the extreme. I will only give you a single example of this, although it is one that has struck me most forcibly.

Ten minutes' walk from the house there is a charming little stream overshadowed by spreading willows; the current is slight, the water pellucid, and the bed covered with sand so fine that one's feet sink into it like a carpet. Now, would you believe it, dear friend, that, in this hot weather, all those staying at the house go at the same time, together, and, without distinction of sex, bathe in it? A simple garment of thin stuff, and very tight, somewhat imperfectly screens the strangely daring modesty of the ladies. Forgive me, my pious friend, for entering into all these details, and for troubling the peacefulness of your soul by this picture of worldly scenes, but I promised to share with you my impressions, as well as my most secret thoughts. It is a sacred contract which I am fulfilling.

I will, therefore, acknowledge that these bathing scenes shocked me greatly, the first time I heard them spoken of. I resented it with a species of disgust easy to understand, while I positively refused to take part in them. To speak the truth, I was chafed a little; still, these worldly railleries could not touch me, and had no effect on my determination.

Yesterday, however, about five in the afternoon, the Marchioness sent for me, and managed the affair so neatly, that it was impossible for me not to act as her escort.

We started. The maid carried the bathing costumes both of the Marchioness and of my sister, who was to join us later.

"I know," said my cousin, "that you swim well; the fame of your abilities has reached us here from your college. You are going to teach me to float, eh, Robert?"

"I do not set much store by such paltry physical acquirements, cousin," I replied; "I swim fairly, nothing more."

And I turned my head to avoid an extremely penetrating aroma with which her hair was impregnated. You know very well that I am subject to nervous attacks.

"But, my dear child, physical advantages are not so much to be despised."

This "dear child" displeased me much. My cousin is twenty-six, it is true, but I am no longer, properly speaking, a "dear child," and besides, it denoted a familiarity which I did not care for. It was, on the part of the Marchioness, one of the consequences of that frivolity of mind, that carelessness of speech which I mentioned above, and nothing more; still, I was shocked at it. She went on:

"Exaggerated modesty is not good form in society," she said, turning toward me with a smile. "You will, in time, make a very handsome cavalier, my dear Robert, and that which you now lack is easy to acquire. For instance, you should have your hair dressed by the Marquis's valet. He will do it admirably, and then you will be charming."

You must understand, my dear Claude, that I met these advances with a frigidity of manner that left no doubt as to my intentions.

"I repeat, my cousin," said I to her, "I attach to all this very little importance," and I emphasized my words by a firm and icy look. Then only, for I had not before cast my eyes on her, did I notice the peculiar elegance of her toilette, an elegance for which, unhappily, the perishable beauty of her person served as a pretext and an encouragement.

Her arms were bare, and her wrists covered with bracelets; the upper part of her neck was insufficiently veiled by the too slight fabric of a transparent gauze; in short, the desire to please was displayed in her by all the details of her appearance. I was stirred at the aspect of so much frivolity, and I felt myself blush for pity, almost for shame.

We reached, at length, the verge of the stream. She loosed my arm and unceremoniously slid down, I can not say seated herself, upon the grass,

throwing back the long curls depending from her chignon. The word chignon, in the language of society, denotes that prominence of the cranium which is to be seen at the back of ladies' heads. It is produced by making coils or plaits of their long hair. I have cause to believe, from certain allusions I have heard, that many of these chignons are not natural. There are women, most worthy daughters of Eve, who purchase for gold the hair—horiesco referens—of the wretched or the dead. It sickens one.

"It is excessively hot, my dear cousin," said she, fanning herself. "I tremble every moment in such weather lest Monsieur de Beurenard's nose should explode or catch fire. Ha, ha, ha. Upon my word of honor I do."

She exploded with laughter at this joke, an unbecoming one, and without much point. Monsieur de Beurenard is a friend of the Marquis, who happens to have a high color. Out of politeness, I forced a smile, which she, no doubt, took for approbation, for she then launched out into conversation—an indescribable flow of chatter, blending the most profane sentiments with the strangest religious ideas, the quiet of the country with the whirl of society, and all this with a freedom of gesture, a charm of expression, a subtlety of glance, and a species of earthly poesy, by which any other soul than mine would have been seduced.

"This is a pretty spot, this charming little nook, is it not?"

"Certainly, my dear cousin."

"And these old willows with their large tops overhanging the stream; see how the field-flowers cluster gayly about their battered trunks! How strange, too, that young foliage, so elegant, so silvery, those branches so slender and so supple! So much elegance, freshness and youth shooting up from that old trunk which seems as if accursed!"

"God does not curse a vegetable, my cousin."

"That is possible; but I can not help finding in willows something which is suggestive of humanity. Perpetual old age resembles punishment. That old reprobate of the bank there is expiating and suffering, that old Quasimodo of the fields. What would you that I should do about it, my cousin, for that is the impression that it gives me? What is there to tell me that the willow is not the final incarnation of an impenitent angler?" And she burst out laughing.

"Those are pagan ideas, and as such are so opposed to the dogmas of faith, that I am obliged, in order to explain their coming from your mouth, to suppose that you are trying to make a fool of me."

"Not the least in the world; I am not making fun of you, my dear Robert. You are not a baby, you know! Come, go and get ready for a swim; I will

go into my dressing-tent and do the same.”

She saluted me with her hand, as she lifted one of the sides of the tent, with unmistakable coquetry. What a strange mystery is the heart of woman!

I sought out a spot shaded by the bushes, thinking over these things; but it was not long before I had got into my bathing costume. I thought of you, my pious friend, as I was buttoning the neck and the wrists of this conventional garment. How many times have you not helped me to execute this little task about which I was so awkward. Briefly, I entered the water and was about to strike out when the sound of the marchioness’s voice assailed my ears. She was talking with her maid inside the tent. I stopped and listened; not out of guilty curiosity, I can assure you, but out of a sincere wish to become better acquainted with that soul.

”No, no, Julie,” the marchioness was saying. ”No, no; I won’t hear you say any more about that frightful waterproof cap. The water gets inside and does not come out. Twist up my hair in a net; nothing more is required.”

”Your ladyship’s hair will get wet.”

”Then you can powder it. Nothing is better for drying than powder. And so, I shall wear my light blue dress this evening; blond powder will go with it exactly. My child, you are becoming foolish. I told you to shorten my bathing costume, by taking it up at the knees. Just see what it looks like!”

”I was fearful that your ladyship would find it too tight for swimming.”

”Tight! Then why have you taken it in three good inches just here? See how it wrinkles up; it is ridiculous, don’t you see it, my girl, don’t you see it?”

The sides of the tent were moved; and I guessed that my cousin was somewhat impatiently assuming the costume in question, in order the better to point out its defects to her maid.

”I don’t want to look as if I were wound up in a sheet, but yet I want to be left freedom of action. You can not get it into your head, Julie, that this material will not stretch. You see now that I stoop a little—Ah! you see it at last, that’s well.”

Weak minds! Is it not true, my pious friend, that there are those who can be absorbed by such small matters? I find these preoccupations to be so frivolous that I was pained at being even the involuntary recipient of them, and I splashed the water with my hands to announce my presence and put a stop to a conversation which shocked me.

"I am coming to you, Robert; get into the water. Has your sister arrived yet?" said my cousin, raising her voice; then softly, and addressing her maid, she added: "Yes, of course, lace it tightly. I want support."

One side of the tent was raised, and my relative appeared. I know not why I shuddered, as if at the approach of some danger. She advanced two or three steps on the fine sand, drawing from her fingers as she did so, the gold rings she was accustomed to wear; then she stopped, handed them to Julie, and, with a movement which I can see now, but which it is impossible for me to describe to you, kicked off into the grass the slippers, with red bows, which enveloped her feet.

She had only taken three paces, but it sufficed to enable me to remark the singularity of her gait. She walked with short, timid steps, her bare arms close to her sides.

She had divested herself of all the outward tokens of a woman, save the tresses of her hair, which were rolled up in a net. As for the rest, she was a comical-looking young man, at once slender yet afflicted by an unnatural plumpness, one of those beings who appear to us in dreams, and in the delirium of fever, one of those creatures toward whom an unknown power attracts us, and who resemble angels too nearly not to be demons.

"Well, Robert, of what are you thinking? Give me your hand and help me to get into the water."

She dipped the toes of her arched foot into the pellucid stream.

"This always gives one a little shock, but the water ought to be delightful to-day," said she. "But what is the matter with you?—your hand shakes. You are a chilly mortal, cousin."

The fact is, I was not trembling either through fear or cold; but on approaching the Marchioness, the sharp perfume which emanated from her hair went to my head, and with my delicate nerves you will readily understand that I was about to faint. I mastered this sensation, however. She took a firm grip of my hand, as one would clasp the knob of a cane or the banister of a stair, and we advanced into the stream side by side.

As we advanced the stream became deeper. The Marchioness, as the water rose higher, gave vent to low cries of fear resembling the hiss of a serpent; then she broke out into ringing bursts of laughter, and drew closer and closer to me. Finally, she stopped, and turning she looked straight into my eyes. I felt then that moment was a solemn one. I thought a hidden precipice was concealed at my feet, my heart throbbed as if it would burst, and my head seemed to be on fire.

"Come now, teach me to float on my back, Robert. Legs straight and extended, arms close to the body, that's the way, is it not?"

"Yes, my dear cousin, and move your hands gently under you."

"Very good; here goes, then. One, two, three-off! Oh, what a little goose I am, I'm afraid! Oh cousin, support me, just a little bit."

That was the moment when I ought to have said to her: "No, Madame, I am not the man to support coquettes, and I will not." But I did not dare say that; my tongue remained silent, and I passed my arm round the Marchioness's waist, in order to support her more easily.

Alas! I had made a mistake; perhaps an irreparable one.

In that supreme moment it was but too true that I adored her seductive charms. Let me cut it short. When I held her thus it seemed to me that all the blood in my body rushed back to my heart—a deadly thrill ran through every limb—from shame and indignation, no doubt; my vision became obscure; it seemed as if my soul was leaving my body, and I fell forward fainting, and dragged her down to the bottom of the water in a mortal clutch.

I heard a loud cry. I felt her arms interlace my neck, her clenched fingers sink deep into my flesh, and all was over. I had lost consciousness.

When I came to myself I was lying on the grass. Julie was chafing my hands, and the Marchioness, in her bathing-dress, which was streaming with water, was holding a vinaigrette to my nose. She looked at me severely, although in her glance there was a shade of pleased satisfaction, the import of which escaped me.

"Baby! you great baby!" said she.

Now that you know all the facts, my pious friend, bestow on me the favor of your counsel, and thank heaven that you live remote from scenes like these.

With heart and soul,  
Your sincere friend,  
ROBERT DE K—DEC—.

## CHAPTER III

MADAME DE K.

It is possible that you know Madame de K.; if this be so, I congratulate you, for she is a very remarkable person. Her face is pretty, but they do not say of her, "Ah, what a pretty woman!" They say: "Madame de K.? Ah! to be sure, a fine woman!" Do you perceive the difference? it is easy to grasp it. That which charms in her is less what one sees than what one guesses at. Ah! to be sure, a fine woman! That is what is said after dinner when we have dined at her house, and when her husband, who unfortunately is in bad health and does not smoke, has gone to fetch cigars from his desk. It is said in a low tone, as though in confidence; but from this affected reserve, it is easy to read conviction on the part of each of the guests. The ladies in the drawing room do not suspect the charming freedom which characterizes the gossip of the gentlemen when they have gone into the smoking-room to puff their cigars over a cup of coffee.

"Yes, yes, she is a very fine woman."

"Ah! the deuce, expansive beauty, opulent."

"But poor De K. makes me feel anxious; he does not seem to get any better. Does it not alarm you, Doctor?"

Every one smiles 'sub rosa' at the idea that poor De K., who has gone to fetch cigars, pines away visibly, while his wife is so well.

"He is foolish; he works too hard, as I have told him. His position at the ministry—thanks, I never take sugar."

"But, really, it is serious, for after all he is not strong," ventures a guest, gravely, biting his lips meanwhile to keep from laughing.

"I think even that within the last year her beauty has developed," says a little gentleman, stirring his coffee.

"De K.'s beauty? I never could see it."

"I don't say that."

"Excuse me, you did; is it not so, Doctor?"

"Forsooth!"—"How now! Come, let us make the distinction."—"Ha, ha, ha!" And there is a burst of that hearty laughter which men affect to assist digestion. The ice is broken, they draw closer to each other and continue in low tones:

"She has a fine neck! for when she turned just now it looked as if it had been sculptured."

"Her neck, her neck! but what of her hands, her arms and her shoulders! Did you see her at Leon's ball a fortnight ago? A queen, my dear fellow,

a Roman empress. Neck, shoulders, arms—”

”And all the rest,” hazards some one, looking down into his cup. All laugh heartily, and the good De K. comes in with a box of cigars which look exceptional.

”Here you are, my friends,” he says, coughing slightly, ”but let me recommend you to smoke carefully.”

I have often dined with my friend De K., and I have always, or almost always, heard a conversation similar to the preceding. But I must avow that the evening on which I heard the impertinent remark of this gentleman I was particularly shocked; first, because De K. is my friend, and in the second place because I can not endure people who speak of that of which they know nothing. I make bold to say that I alone in Paris understand this matter to the bottom. Yes, yes, I alone; and the reason is not far to seek. Paul and his brother are in England; Ernest is a consul in America; as for Leon, he is at Hycres in his little subprefecture. You see, therefore, that in truth I am the only one in Paris who can—

”But hold, Monsieur Z., you must be joking. Explain yourself; come to the point. Do you mean to say that Madame de K.—oh! dear me! but that is most ’inconvenant’!”

Nothing, nothing! I am foolish. Let us suppose that I had not spoken, ladies; let us speak of something else. How could the idea have got into my head of saying anything about ”all the rest”? Let us talk of something else.

It was a real spring morning, the rain fell in torrents and the north wind blew furiously, when the damsel, more dead than alive—

The fact is, I feel I can not get out of it. It will be better to tell all. Only swear to me to be discreet. On your word of honor? Well, then, here goes.

I am, I repeat, the only man in Paris who can speak from knowledge of ”all the rest” in regard to Madame de K.

Some years ago—but do not let us anticipate—I say, some years ago I had an intimate friend at whose house we met many evenings. In summer the windows were left open, and we used to sit in armchairs and chat of affairs by the light of our cigars. Now, one evening, when we were talking of fishing—all these details are still fresh in my memory—we heard the sound of a powerful harpsichord, and soon followed the harsh notes of a voice more vigorous than harmonious, I must admit.

”Aha! she has altered her hours,” said Paul, regarding one of the windows of the house opposite.

"Who has changed her hours, my dear fellow?"

"My neighbor. A robust voice, don't you think so? Usually she practises in the morning, and I like that better, for it is the time I go out for a walk."

Instinctively I glanced toward the lighted window, and through the drawn curtains I distinctly perceived a woman, dressed in white, with her hair loose, and swaying before her instrument like a person conscious that she was alone and responding to her own inspirations.

"My Fernand, go, seek glo-o-o-ry," she was singing at the top of her voice. The singing appeared to me mediocre, but the songstress in her peignoir interested me much.

"Gentlemen," said I, "it appears to me there is behind that frail tissue"—I alluded to the curtain—"a very handsome woman. Put out your cigars, if you please; their light might betray our presence and embarrass the fair singer."

The cigars were at once dropped—the window was even almost completely closed for greater security—and we began to watch.

This was not, I know, quite discreet, but, as the devil willed it, we were young bachelors, all five of us, and then, after all, dear reader, would not you have done the same?

When the song was concluded, the singer rose. It was very hot and her garment must have been very thin, for the light, which was at the farther end of the room, shone through the fabric. It was one of those long robes which fall to the feet, and which custom has reserved for night wear. The upper part is often trimmed with lace, the sleeves are wide, the folds are long and flowing, and usually give forth a perfume of ambergris or violet. But perhaps you know this garment as well as I. The fair one drew near the looking-glass, and it seemed to us that she was contemplating her face; then she raised her hands in the air, and, in the graceful movement she made, the sleeve, which was unbuttoned and very loose, slipped from her beautifully rounded arm, the outline of which we distinctly perceived.

"The devil!" said Paul, in a stifled voice, but he could say no more.

The songstress then gathered up her hair, which hung very low, in her two hands and twisted it in the air, just as the washerwomen do. Her head, which we saw in profile, inclined a little forward, and her shoulders, which the movement of her arms threw back, presented a more prominent and clear outline.

"Marble, Parian marble!" muttered Paul. "O Cypris! Cytherea! Paphia!"

"Be quiet, you donkey!"

It really seemed as if the flame of the candle understood our appreciation and ministered specially to our admiration. Placed behind the fair songstress, it illuminated her so perfectly that the garment with the long folds resembled those thin vapors which veil the horizon without hiding it, and in a word, the most inquisitive imagination, disarmed by so much courtesy, was ready to exclaim, "That is enough!"

Soon the fair one moved forward toward her bed, sat down in a very low armchair, in which she stretched herself out at her ease, and remained for some moments, with her hands clasped over her head and her limbs extended. just then midnight struck; we saw her take her right leg slowly and cross it over her left, when we perceived that she had not yet removed her shoes and stockings.

But what is the use of asking any more about it? These recollections trouble me, and, although they have fixed themselves in my mind-very firmly indeed, I can assure you-I feel an embarrassment mingled with modesty at relating all to you at length. Besides, at the moment she turned down the clothes, and prepared, to get into bed, the light went out.

On the morrow, about ten o'clock in the evening, we all five again found ourselves at Paul's, four of us with opera-glasses in our pockets. As on the previous evening, the fair songstress sat down at her piano, then proceeded slowly to make her night toilette. There was the same grace, the same charm, but when we came to the fatal moment at which on the preceding night the candle had gone out, a faint thrill ran through us all. To tell the truth, for my part, I was nervous. Heaven, very fortunately, was now on our side; the candle continued to burn. The young woman then, with her charming hand, the plump outlines of which we could easily distinguish, smoothed the pillow, patted it, arranged it with a thousand caressing precautions in which the thought was suggested, "With what happiness shall I now go and bury my head in it!"

Then she smoothed down the little wrinkles in the bed, the contact with which might have irritated her, and, raising herself on her right arm, like a horseman, about to get into the saddle, we saw her left knee, smooth and shining as marble, slowly bury itself. We seemed to hear a kind of creaking, but this creaking sounded joyful. The sight was brief, too brief, alas! and it was in a species of delightful confusion that we perceived a well-rounded limb, dazzlingly white, struggling in the silk of the quilt. At length everything became quiet again, and it was as much as we could do to make out a smooth, rose-tinted little foot which, not being sleepy, still lingered outside and fidgeted with the silken covering.

Delightful souvenir of my lively youth! My pen splutters, my paper seems to blush to the color of that used by the orange-sellers. I believe I have said too much.

I learned some time afterward that my friend De K. was about to be married, and, singularly enough, was going to wed this beautiful creature with whom I was so well acquainted.

"A charming woman!" I exclaimed one day.

"You know her, then?" said someone.

"I? No, not the least in the world."

"But?"

"Yes-no, let me see; I have seen her once at high mass."

"She is not very pretty," some one remarked to me.

"No, not her face," I rejoined, and added to myself, "No, not her face, but all the rest!"

It is none the less true that for some time past this secret has been oppressing me, and, though I decided to-day to reveal it to you, it was because it seems to me that to do so would quiet my conscience.

But, for Heaven's sake, let me entreat you, do not noise abroad the affair!

## CHAPTER IV

### SOUVENIRS OF LENT

The faithful are flocking up the steps of the temple; spring toilettes already glitter in the sun; trains sweep the dust with their long flowing folds; feathers and ribbons flutter; the bell chimes solemnly, while carriages keep arriving at a trot, depositing upon the pavement all that is most pious and most noble in the Faubourg, then draw up in line at the farther end of the square.

Be quick, elbow your way through the crowd if you want a good place; the Abbe Gelon preaches to-day on abstinence, and when the Abbe Gelon preaches it is as if Patti were singing.

Enter Madame, pushes the triple door, which recloses heavily, brushes

with rapid fingers the holywater sprinkler which that pious old man holds out, and carefully makes a graceful little sign of the cross so as not to spot her ribbons.

Do you hear these discreet and aristocratic whisperings?

"Good morning, my dear."

"Good morning, dear. It is always on abstinence that he preaches, is it not? Have you a seat?"

"Yes, yes, come with me. You have got on your famous bonnet, I see?"

"Yes; do you like it? It is a little showy, is it not? What a multitude of people! Where is your husband?"

"Showy! Oh, no, it is splendid. My husband is in the churchwarden's pew; he left before me; he is becoming a fanatic—he speaks of lunching on radishes and lentils."

"That ought to be very consoling to you."

"Don't mention it. Come with me. See; there are Ernestine and Louise. Poor Louise's nose, always the same; who would believe that she drinks nothing stronger than water?"

The ladies push their way among the chairs, some of which they upset with the greatest unconcern.

Arrived at their places they sink down on their knees, and, moist-eyed and full of feeling, cast a look of veiled adoration toward the high altar, then hide their faces with their gloved hands.

For a very few minutes they gracefully deprecate themselves in the eyes of the Lord, then, taking their seats, coquettishly arrange the immense bows of their bonnet-strings, scan the assembly through a gold eyeglass, with the little finger turning up; finally, while smoothing down the satin folds of a dress difficult to keep in place, they scatter, right and left, charming little recognitions and delightful little smiles.

"Are you comfortable, dear?"

"Quite, thanks. Do you see in front there, between the two tapers, Louise and Madame de C——? Is it allowable in any one to come to church got up like that?"

"Oh! I have never believed much in the piety of Madame de C——. You know her history—the story of the screen? I will tell it you later. Ah! there is the vergier."

The verger shows his bald head in the pulpit of truth. He arranges the seat, adjusts the kneeling-stool, then withdraws and allows the Abbe Gelon, who is somewhat pale from Lenten fasting, but striking, as he always is, in dignity, elegance, and unction. A momentary flutter passes through the congregation, then they settle down comfortably. The noise dies away, and all eyes are eagerly looking toward the face of the preacher. With his eyes turned to heaven, the latter stands upright and motionless; a light from above may be divined in his inspired look; his beautiful, white hands, encircled at the wrists by fine lace, are carelessly placed on the red velvet cushion of the pulpit. He waits a few moments, coughs twice, unfolds his handkerchief, deposits his square hat in a corner, and, bending forward, lets fall from his lips in those sweet slow, persuasive tones, by which he is known, the first words of his sermon, "Ladies!"

With this single word he has already won all hearts. Slowly he casts over his audience a mellow glance, which penetrates and attracts; then, having uttered a few Latin words which he has the tact to translate quickly into French, he continues:

"What is it to abstain? Why should we abstain? How should we abstain? Those are the three points, ladies, I shall proceed to discuss."

He blows his nose, coughs; a holy thrill stirs every heart. How will he treat this magnificent subject? Let us listen.

Is it not true, Madame, that your heart is piously stirred, and that at this moment you feel an actual thirst for abstinence and mortification?

The holy precincts are bathed in a soft obscurity, similar to that of your boudoir, and inducing reverie.

I know not how much of the ineffable and of the vaguely exhilarating penetrates your being. But the voice of this handsome and venerated old man has, amidst the deep silence, something deliciously heavenly about it. Mysterious echoes repeat from the far end of the temple each of his words, and in the dim light of the sanctuary the golden candlesticks glitter like precious stones. The old stained-glass windows with their symbolic figures become suddenly illuminated, a flood of light and sunshine spreads through the church like a sheet of fire. Are the heavens opening? Is the Spirit from on high descending among us?

While lost in pious reverie, which soothes and lulls, one gazes with ecstasy on the fanciful details of the sculptures which vanish in the groined roof above, and on the quaint pipes of the organ with its hundred voices. The beliefs of childhood piously inculcated in your heart suddenly reawaken; a vague perfume of incense again penetrates the air. The stone pillars shoot up to infinite heights, and from these celestial arches depends the golden lamp which sways to and fro in space, diffusing its eternal light. Truly, God is great.

By degrees the sweet tones of the preacher enrapture one more and more, and the sense of his words are lost; and, listening to the divine murmur of that saint-like voice, your eyes, like those of a child falling asleep in the bosom of the Creator, close.

You do not go to sleep, but your head inclines forward, the ethereal light surrounds you, and your soul, delighting in the uncertain, plunges into celestial space, and loses itself in infinity.

What a sweet and holily intoxicating sensation, a delicious ecstasy! Nevertheless, there are those who smile at this religious raise-en-scene, these pomps and splendors, this celestial music, which soothes the nerves and thrills the brain! Pity on these scoffers who do not comprehend the ineffable delight of being able to open at will the gates of Paradise to themselves, and to become, at odd moments, one with the angels! But what purpose does it serve to speak of the faithless and of their harmless, smiles? As the Abbe Gelon has in his inimitable manner observed, "The heart is a fortress, incessantly assailed by the spirit of darkness."

The idea of a constant struggle with this powerful being has something about it that adds tenfold to our strength and flatters our vanity. What, alone in your fortress, Madame; alone with the spirit of darkness.

But hush! the Abbe Gelon is finishing in a quivering and fatigued voice. His right hand traces in the air the sign of peace. Then he wipes his humid forehead, his eyes sparkle with divine light, he descends the narrow stairs, and we hear on the pavement the regular taps of the rod of the verger, who is reconducting him to the vestry.

"Was he not splendid, dear?"

"Excellent! when he said, 'That my eyes might close forever, if.....' you remember?"

"Superb! and further on: 'Yes, ladies, you are coquettes.' He told us some hard truths; he speaks admirably."

"Admirably! He is divine!"

It is four o'clock, the church is plunged in shadow and silence. The confused rumble of the vehicles without hardly penetrates this dwelling of prayer, and the creak of one's boots, echoing in the distance, is the only human noise which ruffles the deep calm.

However, in proportion as we advance, we perceive in the chapels groups of the faithful, kneeling, motionless and silent. In viewing the despair that their attitude appears to express, we are overwhelmed with sadness and uneasiness. Is it an appeal for the damned?

The aspects of one of these chapels is peculiar. A hundred or a hundred and fifty ladies, almost buried in silk and velvet, are crowded devoutly about the confessional. A sweet scent of violets and vervain permeates the vicinity, and one halts, in spite of one's self, in the presence of this large display of elegance.

From each of the two cells adjoining the confessional shoot out the folds of a rebellious skirt, for the penitent, held fast at the waist, has been able to get only half of her form into the narrow space. However, her head can be distinguished moving in the shadow, and we can guess from the contrite movements of her white feather that her forehead is bowed by reason of remonstrance and repentance.

Hardly has she concluded her little story when a dozen of her neighbors rush forward to replace her. This eagerness is quite explicable, for this chapel is the one in which the Abbe Gelon hears confessions, and I need not tell you that when the Abbe Gelon confesses it is the same as if he were preaching—there is a crowd.

The good Abbe confesses all these ladies, and, with angelic devotion, remains shut up for hours in this dark, narrow, suffocating box, through the grating of which two penitents are continually whispering their sins.

The dear Abbe! the most likable thing about him is that he is not long over the business. He knows how to get rid of useless details; he perceives, with subtle instinct and a sureness of vision that spares you a thousand embarrassments, the condition of a soul, so that, besides being a man of intelligence and of the world, he renders the repetition of those little weaknesses, of which he has whispered the one half to you, almost agreeable.

In coming to him with one's little burden of guilt, one feels somewhat embarrassed, but while one is hesitating about telling him all, he, with a discreet and skilful hand, disencumbers one of it rapidly, examines the contents, smiles or consoles, and the confession is made without one having uttered a single word; so that after all is over the penitent exclaims, prostrating one's self before God, "But, Lord, I was pure, pure as the lily, and yet how uneasy I was!"

Even when he assumes the sacerdotal habit and ceases to be a man, and speaks in the name of God, the tones of his voice, the refinement of his look, reveal innate distinction and that spotless courtesy which can not harm even a minister of God, and which one must cultivate on this side of the Rue du Bac.

If God wills that there must be a Faubourg St.-Germain in the world—and it can not be denied that He does—is it not proper that He should give us a minister who speaks our language and understands our weaknesses? Nothing is more obvious, and I really do not comprehend some of these ladies who talk to me about the Abbe Brice. Not that I wish to speak ill

of the good Abbe, for this is neither the time nor the place for it; he is a holy man, but his sanctity is a little bourgeois and needs polish.

With him one has to dot one's i's; he is dull in perception, or does not perceive at all.

Acknowledge a peccadillo, and his brows knit, he must know the hour, the moment, the antecedents; he examines, he probes, he weighs, and finishes his thousand questions by being indiscreet and almost improper. Is there not, even in the holy mission of the priest, a way of being politely severe, and of acting the gentleman to people well born?

The Abbe Brice—and there is no reason why I should conceal it—smells of the stable, which must be prejudicial to him. He is slightly Republican, too, wears clumsy boots, has awful nails, and when he gets new gloves, twice a year, his fingers stand out stiff and separate.

I do not, I would have you remark, deny his admirable virtues; but say what you like, you will never get a woman of fashion to confide her "little affairs" to a farmer's son, and address him as "Father." Matters must not be carried the length of absurdity; besides, this Abbe Brice always smells detestably of snuff.

He confesses all sorts of people, and you will agree that it is not pleasant to have one's maid or one's cook for one's visa-vis at the confessional.

There is not a woman who understands Christian humility better than yourself, dear Madame; but all the same you are not accustomed to travel in an omnibus. You may be told that in heaven you will only be too happy to call your coachman "Brother," and to say to Sarah Jane, "Sister," but these worthy folk shall have first passed through purgatory, and fire purifies everything. Again, what is there to assure us that Sarah Jane will go to heaven, since you yourself, dear Madame, are not so sure of entering there?

It is hence quite well understood why the Abbe Gelon's chapel is crowded. If a little whispering goes on, it is because they have been waiting three long hours, and because everybody knows one another.

All the ladies, you may be sure, are there.

"Make a little room for me, dear," whispers a newcomer, edging her way through trains, kneeling-stools, and chairs.

"Ah! is that you, dear? Come here. Clementine and Madame de B. are there in the corner at the cannon's mouth. You will have to wait two good hours."

"If Madame de B. is there, it does not surprise me. She is inexhaustible, and there is no other woman who is so long in telling a thing. Have all these people not had their turn yet? Ah! there is Ernestine." (She waves her hand to her quietly.) "That child is an angel. She acknowledged to me the other day that her conscience troubled her because, on reading the 'Passion,' she could not make up her mind to kiss the mat."

"Ah! charming; but, tell me, do you kiss the mat yourself?"

"I! no, never in my life; it is so nasty, dear."

"You confess to the omission, at least?"

"Oh! I confess all those little trifles in a lump. I say, 'Father, I have erred out of human self-respect.' I give the total at once."

"That is just what I do, and that dear Abbe Gelon discharges the bill."

"Seriously, time would fail him if he acted otherwise. But it seems to me that we are whispering a little too much, dear; let me think over my little bill."

Madame leans upon her praying-stool. Gracefully she removes, without taking her eyes off the altar, the glove from her right hand, and with her thumb turns the ring of Ste-Genevieve that serves her as a rosary, moving her lips the while. Then, with downcast eyes and set lips, she loosens the fleur-de-lys-engraved clasp of her Book of Hours, and seeks out the prayers appropriate to her condition.

She reads with fervency: "'My God, crushed beneath the burden of my sins I cast myself at thy feet'—how annoying that it should be so cold to the feet. With my sore throat, I am sure to have influenza,—'that I cast myself at thy feet'—tell me, dear, do you know if the chapel-keeper has a footwarmer? Nothing is worse than cold feet, and that Madame de P. sticks there for hours. I am sure she confesses her friends' sins along with her own. It is intolerable; I no longer have any feeling in my right foot; I would pay that woman for her foot-warmer—I bow my head in the dust under the weight of repentance, and of.....'"

"Ah! Madame de P. has finished; she is as red as the comb of a turkey-cock."

Four ladies rush forward with pious ardor to take her place.

"Ah! Madame, do not push so, I beg of you."

"But I was here before you, Madame."

"I beg a thousand pardons, Madame."

"You surely have a very strange idea of the respect which is due to this hallowed spot."

"Hush, hush! Profit by the opportunity, Madame; slip through and take the vacant place. (Whispering.) Do not forget the big one last night, and the two little ones of this morning."

## CHAPTER V

### MADAME AND HER FRIEND CHAT BY THE FIRESIDE

Madam—(moving her slender fingers)—It is ruched, ruched, ruched, loves of ruches, edged all around with blond.

Her Friend—That is good style, dear.

Madame—Yes, I think it will be the style, and over this snowlike foam fall the skirts of blue silk like the bodice; but a lovely blue, something like—a little less pronounced than skyblue, you know, like—my husband calls it a subdued blue.

Her Friend—Splendid. He is very happy in his choice of terms.

Madame—Is he not? One understands at once—a subdued blue. It describes it exactly.

Her Friend—But apropos of this, you know that Ernestine has not forgiven him his pleasantry of the other evening.

Madame—How, of my husband? What pleasantry? The other evening when the Abbe Gelon and the Abbe Brice were there?

Her Friend—And his son, who was there also.

Madame—What! the Abbe's son? (Both break into laughter.)

Her Friend—But—ha! ha! ha!—what are you saying, ha! ha! you little goose?

Madame—I said the Abbe Gelon and the Abbe Brice, and you add, 'And his son.' It is your fault, dear. He must be a choir-boy, that cherub. (More laughter.)

Her Friend—(placing her hand over her mouth)—Be quiet, be quiet; it is too bad; and in Lent, too!

Madame—Well, but of whose son are you speaking?

Her Friend—Of Ernestine's son, don't you know, Albert, a picture of innocence. He heard your husband's pleasantry, and his mother was vexed.

Madame—My dear, I really don't know to what you refer. Please tell me all about it.

Her Friend—Well, on entering the drawing-room, and perceiving the candelabra lit up, and the two Abbés standing at that moment in the middle of the room, your husband appeared as if looking for something, and when Ernestine asked him what it was, he said aloud: "I am looking for the holy-water; please, dear neighbor, excuse me for coming in the middle of the service."

Madame—Is it possible? (Laughing.) The fact is, he can not get out of it; he has met the two Abbés, twice running, at Ernestine's. Her drawing-room is a perfect sacristy.

Her Friend (dryly)—A sacristy! How regardless you are getting in your language since your marriage, dear.

Madame—Not more than before. I never cared to meet priests elsewhere than at church.

Her Friend—Come, you are frivolous, and if I did not know you better—but do you not like to meet the Abbe Gelon?

Madame—Ah! the Abbe Gelon, that is quite different. He is charming.

Her Friend—(briskly)—His manners are so distingue.

Madame—And respectful. His white hair is such an admirable frame for his pale face, which is so full of unction.

Her Friend—Oh! yes, he has unction, and his looks—those sweetly softened looks! The other day, when he was speaking on the mediation of Christ, he was divine. At one moment he wiped away a tear; he was no longer master of his emotions; but he grew calm almost immediately—his power of self-command is marvellous; then he went on quietly, but the emotion in turn had overpowered us. It was electrifying. The Countess de S., who was near me, was bubbling like a spring, under her yellow bonnet.

Madame—Ah! yes, I have seen that yellow bonnet. What a sight that Madame de S. is!

Her Friend—The truth is, she is always dressed like an applewoman. A bishopric has been offered these messieurs, I know, on good authority; my husband had it from De l'Euvre. Well—

Madame—(interrupting her)—A bishopric offered to Madame de S. It was wrong to do so.

Her Friend—You make fun of everything, my dear; there are, however, some subjects which should be revered. I tell you that the mitre and the ring have been offered to the Abbe Gelon. Well, he refused them. God knows, however, that the pastoral ring would well become his hand.

Madame—Oh! yes, he has a lovely hand.

Her Friend—He has a white, slender, and aristocratic hand. Perhaps it is a wrong for us to dwell on these worldly details, but after all his hand is really beautiful. Do you know (enthusiastically) I find that the Abbe Gelon compels love of religion? Were you ever present at his lectures?

Madame—I was at the first one. I would have gone again on Thursday, but Madame Savain came to try on my bodice and I had a protracted discussion with her about the slant of the skirts.

Her Friend—Ah! the skirts are cut slantingly.

Madame—Yes, yes, with little cross-bars, which is an idea of my own—I have not seen it anywhere else; I think it will not look badly.

Her Friend—Madame Savain told me that you had suppressed the shoulders of the corsage.

Madame—Ah! the gossip! Yes, I will have nothing on the shoulders but a ribbon, a trifle, just enough to fasten a jewel to—I was afraid that the corsage would look a little bare. Madame Savain had laid on, at intervals, some ridiculous frippery. I wanted to try something else—my plan of crossbars, there and then—and I missed the dear Abbe Gelon's lecture. He was charming, it seems.

Her Friend—Oh! charming. He spoke against bad books; there was a large crowd. He demolished all the horrible opinions of Monsieur Renan. What a monster that man is!

Madame—You have read his book?

Her Friend—Heaven forbid! Don't you know it is impossible for one to find anything more—well, it must be very bad 'Messieurs de l'OEuvre' for the Abbe Gelon, in speaking to one of these friends of my husband, uttered the word—

Madame—Well, what word?

Her Friend—I dare not tell you, for, really, if it is true it would make one shudder. He said that it was (whispering in her ear) the Antichrist! It makes one feel aghast, does it not! They sell his photograph; he has a satanic look. (Looking at the clock.) Half-past two—I must run away; I have given no orders about dinner. These three fast-days in the week are to me martyrdom. One must have a little variety; my husband is very fastidious. If we did not have water-fowl I should lose my head. How do you get on, dear?

Madame—Oh! with me it is very simple, provided I do not make my husband leaner; he eats anything. You know, Augustus is not very much—

Her Friend—Not very much! I think that he is much too spare; for, after all, if we do not in this life impose some privations upon ourselves—no, that would be too easy. I hope, indeed, that you have a dispensation?

Madame—Oh! yes, I am safe as to that.

Her Friend—I have one, of course, for butter and eggs, as vice-chancellor of the Association. The Abbe Gelon begged me to accept a complete dispensation on account of my headaches, but I refused. Yes! I refused outright. If one makes a compromise with one's principles—but then there are people who have no principles.

Madame—If you mean that to apply to my husband, you are wrong. Augustus is not a heathen—he has excellent principles.

Her Friend—Excellent principles! You make my blood boil. But there, I must go. Well, it is understood, I count upon you for Tuesday; he will preach upon authority, a magnificent subject, and we may expect allusions—Ah! I forgot to tell you; I am collecting and I expect your mite, dear. I take as low a sum as a denier (the twelfth of a penny). I have an idea of collecting with my little girl on my praying-stool. Madame de K. collected on Sunday at St. Thomas's and her baby held the alms-bag. The little Jesus had an immense success—immense!

Madame—I must go now. How will you dress?

Her Friend—Oh! for the present, quite simply and in black; you understand.

Madame—Besides, black becomes you so well.

Her Friend—Yes, everything is for the best; black does not suit me at all ill. Tuesday, then. But my dear, try to bring your husband, he likes music so much.

Madame—Well, I can not promise that.

Her Friend—Ah! mon Dieu! they are all like that, these men; they are strong-minded, and when grace touches them, they look back on their past life with horror. When my husband speaks of his youth, the tears come into his eyes. I must tell you; that he has not always been as he is now; he was a gay boy in his youth, poor fellow. I do not detest a man because he knows life a little, do you? But I am gossiping and time passes; I have a call to make yet on Madame W. I do not know whether she has found her juvenile lead.

Madame—What for, in Heaven's name?

Her Friend—For her evening party. There are to be private theatricals at her house, but for a pious object, you may be sure, during Lent; it is so as to have a collection on behalf of the Association. I must fly. Good-by, dear.

Madame—Till Tuesday, dear; in full uniform?

Her Friend—(smiling)—In full uniform. Kind regards to your reprobate. I like him very much all the same. Good-by.

## CHAPTER VI

### A DREAM

Sleeplessness is almost always to be traced to indigestion. My friend, Dr. Jacques, is there and he will tell you so.

Now, on that particular evening, it was last Friday, I had committed the mistake of eating brill, a fish that positively disagrees with me.

God grant that the account of the singular dream which ensued may inspire you with some prudent reflections.

Be that as it may, this was my dream, in all its extravagance.

I had, in this dream, the honor to belong, as senior curate, to one of the most frequented parish churches in Paris. What could be more ridiculous! I was, moreover, respectably stout, possessed a head decked with silver locks, well-shaped hands, an aquiline nose, great unction, the friendship of the lady worshippers, and, I venture to add, the esteem of the rector.

While I was reciting the thanksgiving after service, and at the same time

unfastening the cords of my alb, the rector came up to me (I see him even now) blowing his nose.

"My dear friend," said he, "you hear confessions this evening, do you not?"

"Most certainly. Are you well this morning? I had a good congregation at mass."

Having said this, I finished my thanksgiving, put my alb into the wardrobe, and, offering a pinch to the rector, added cheerily:

"This is not breaking the fast, is it?"

"Ha! ha! no, no, no! Besides, it wants five minutes to twelve and the clock is slow."

We took a pinch together and walked off arm in arm by the little side door, for night sacraments, chatting in a friendly way.

Suddenly I found myself transported into my confessional. The chapel was full of ladies who all bowed at my approach. I entered my narrow box, the key of which I had. I arranged on the seat the air-cushion which is indispensable to me on the evenings preceding great church festivals, the sittings at that season being always prolonged. I slipped the white surplice which was hanging from a peg over my cassock, and, after meditating for a moment, opened the little shutter that puts me in communication with the penitents.

I will not undertake to describe to you one by one the different people who came and knelt before me. I will not tell you, for instance, how one of them, a lady in black, with a straight nose, thin lips, and sallow complexion, after reciting her Confiteor in Latin, touched me infinitely by the absolute confidence she placed in me, though I was not of her sex. In five minutes she found the opportunity to speak to me of her sister-in-law, her brother, an uncle who was on the point of death whose heiress she was, her nephews, and her servants; and I could perceive, despite the tender benevolence that appeared in all her words, that she was the victim of all these people. She ended by informing me she had a marriageable daughter, and that her stomach was an obstacle to her fasting.

I can still see a throng of other penitents, but it would take too long to tell you about them, and we will confine ourselves, with your permission, to the last two, who, besides, impressed upon my memory themselves particularly.

A highly adorned little lady rushed into the confessional; she was brisk, rosy, fresh. Despite her expression of deep thoughtfulness, she spoke very quickly in a musical voice, and rattled through her Confiteor,

regardless of the sense.

"Father," she said, "I have one thing that is troubling me."

"Speak, my child; you know that a confessor is a father."

"Well, father—but I really dare not."

There are many of these timid little hearts that require to be encouraged. I said, "Go on, my child, go on."

"My husband," she murmured confusedly, "will not abstain during Lent. Ought I to compel him, father?"

"Yes, by persuasion."

"But he says that he will go and dine at the restaurant if I do not let him have any meat. Oh! I suffer terribly from that. Am I not assuming the responsibility of all that meat, father?"

This young wife really interested me; she had in the midst of one cheek, toward the corner of the mouth, a small hollow, a kind of little dimple, charming in the profane sense of the word, and giving a special expression to her face. Her tiny white teeth glittered like pearls when she opened her mouth to relate her pious inquietudes; she shed around, besides, a perfume almost as sweet as that of our altars, although of a different kind, and I breathed this perfume with an uneasiness full of scruples, which for all that inclined me to indulgence. I was so close to her that none of the details of her face escaped me; I could distinguish, almost in spite of myself, even a little quiver of her left eyebrow, tickled every now and again by a stray tress of her fair hair.

"Your situation," I said, "is a delicate one; on one hand, your domestic happiness, and on the other your duty as a Christian." She gave a sigh from her very heart. "Well, my dear child, my age warrants my speaking to you like that, does it not?"

"Oh, yes, father."

"Well, my dear child"—I fancy I noticed at that moment that she had at the outer corner of her eyes a kind of dark mark something like an arrow-head—"try, my dear child, to convince your husband, who in his heart—" In addition, her lashes, very long and somewhat curled, were underlined, I might almost say, by a dark streak expanding and shading off delicately toward the middle of the eye. This physical peculiarity did not seem to me natural, but an effect of premeditated coquetry.

Strange fact, the verification of such weakness in this candid heart only increased my compassion. I continued in a gentle tone:

"Strive to bring your husband to God. Abstinence is not only a religious observance, it is also a salutary custom. 'Non solum lex Dei, sed etiam'. Have you done everything to bring back your husband?"

"Yes, father, everything."

"Be precise, my child; I must know all."

"Well, father, I have tried sweetness and tenderness."

I thought to myself that this husband must be a wretch.

"I have implored him for the sake of our child," continued the little angel, "not to risk his salvation and my own. Once or twice I even told him that the spinach was dressed with gravy when it was not. Was I wrong, father?"

"There are pious falsehoods which the Church excuses, for in such cases it only takes into consideration the intention and the greater glory of God. I can not, therefore, say that you have done wrong. You have not, have you, been guilty toward your husband of any of those excusable acts of violence which may escape a Christian soul when it is struggling against error? For it really is not natural that an honest man should refuse to follow the prescription of the Church. Make a few concessions at first."

"I have, father, and perhaps too many," she said, contritely.

"What do you mean?"

"Hoping to bring him back to God, I accorded him favors which I ought to have refused him. I may be wrong, but it seems to me that I ought to have refused him."

"Do not be alarmed, my dear child, everything depends upon degrees, and it is necessary in these matters to make delicate distinctions."

"That is what I say to myself, father, but my husband unites with his kindness such a communicative gaiety—he has such a graceful and natural way of excusing his impiety—that I laugh in spite of myself when I ought to weep. It seems to me that a cloud comes between myself and my duties, and my scruples evaporate beneath the charm of his presence and his wit. My husband has plenty of wit," she added, with a faint smile, in which there was a tinge of pride.

"Hum! hum!" (the blackness of this man's heart revolted me). "There is no seductive shape that the tempter does not assume, my child. Wit in itself is not to be condemned, although the Church shuns it as far as she is concerned, looking upon it as a worldly ornament; but it may become dangerous, it may be reckoned a veritable pest when it tends to weaken

faith. Faith, which is to the soul, I hardly need tell you, what the bloom is to the peach, and—if I may so express myself, what the—dew is—to the flower—hum, hum! Go on, my child.”

”But, father, when my husband has disturbed me for a moment, I soon repent of it. He has hardly gone before I pray for him.”

”Good, very good.”

”I have sewn a blessed medal up in his overcoat.” This was said more boldly, though still with some timidity.

”And have you noticed any result?”

”In certain things he is better, yes, father, but as regards abstinence he is still intractable,” she said with embarrassment.

”Do not be discouraged. We are in the holy period of Lent. Make use of pious subterfuges, prepare him some admissible viands, but pleasant to the taste.”

”Yes, father, I have thought of that. The day before yesterday I gave him one of these salmon pasties that resemble ham.”

”Yes, yes, I know them. Well?”

”Well, he ate the salmon, but he had a cutlet cooked afterward.”

”Deplorable!” I exclaimed, almost in spite of myself, so excessive did the perversity of this man seem to me. ”Patience, my child, offer up to Heaven the sufferings which your husband’s impiety causes you, and remember that your efforts will be set down to you. You have nothing more to tell me?”

”No, father.”

”Collect yourself, then. I will give you absolution.”

The dear soul sighed as she joined her two little hands.

Hardly had my penitent risen to withdraw when I abruptly closed my little shutter and took a long pinch of snuff—snuff-takers know how much a pinch soothes the mind—then having thanked God rapidly, I drew from the pocket of my cassock my good old watch, and found that it was earlier than I thought. The darkness of the chapel had deceived me, and my stomach had shared my error. I was hungry. I banished these carnal preoccupations from my mind, and after shaking my hands, on which some grains of snuff had fallen, I slackened one of my braces that was pressing a little on one shoulder, and opened my wicket.

"Well, Madame, people should be more careful," said the penitent on my left, addressing a lady of whom I could only see a bonnet-ribbon; "it is excusable."

My penitent's voice, which was very irritated, though restrained by respect for the locality, softened as if by magic at the creaking of my wicket. She knelt down, piously folded her two ungloved hands, plump, perfumed, rosy, laden with rings—but let that pass. I seemed to recognize the hands of the Countess de B., a chosen soul, whom I had the honor to visit frequently, especially on Saturday, when there is always a place laid for me at her table.

She raised her little lace veil and I saw that I was not mistaken. It was the Countess. She smiled at me as at a person with whom she was acquainted, but with perfect propriety; she seemed to be saying, "Good-day, my dear Abbe, I do not ask how your rheumatism is, because at this moment you are invested with a sacred character, but I am interested in it all the same."

This little smile was irreproachable. I replied by a similar smile, and I murmured in a very low tone, giving her, too, to understand by the expression of my face that I was making a unique concession in her favor, "Are you quite well, dear Madame?"

"Thanks, father, I am quite well." Her voice had resumed an angelic tone. "But I have just been in a passion."

"And why? Perhaps you have taken for a passion what was really only a passing moment of temper?"

It does not do to alarm penitents.

"Ah! not at all, it was really a passion, father. My dress had just been torn from top to bottom; and really it is strange that one should be exposed to such mishaps on approaching the tribunal of—"

"Collect yourself, my dear Madame, collect yourself," and assuming a serious look I bestowed my benediction upon her.

The Countess sought to collect herself, but I saw very well that her troubled spirit vainly strove to recover itself. By a singular phenomenon I could see into her brain, and her thoughts appeared to me one after the other. She was saying to herself, "Let me collect myself; our Father, give me grace to collect myself," but the more effort she made to restrain her imagination the more it became difficult to restrain and slipped through her fingers. "I had made a serious examination of my conscience, however," she added. "Not ten minutes ago as I was getting out of my carriage I counted up three sins; there was one above all I wished to mention. How these little things escape me! I must have left them in the carriage." And she could not help smiling to herself at the

idea of these three little sins lost among the cushions. "And the poor Abbe waiting for me in his box. How hot it must be in there! he is quite red. Good Heavens! how shall I begin? I can not invent faults? It is that torn dress which has upset me. And there is Louise, who is to meet me at five o'clock at the dressmaker's. It is impossible for me to collect myself. O God, do not turn away your face from me, and you, Lord, who can read in my soul—Louise will wait till a quarter past five; besides, the bodice fits—there is only the skirt to try on. And to think that I had three sins only a minute ago."

All these different thoughts, pious and profane, were struggling together at once in the Countess's brain, so that I thought the moment had come to interfere and help her a little.

"Come," I said, in a paternal voice, leaning forward benevolently and twisting my snuff-box in my fingers. "Come, my dear Madame, and speak fearlessly; have you nothing to reproach yourself with? Have you had no impulses of worldly coquetry, no wish to dazzle at the expense of your neighbor?"

I had a vague idea that I should not be contradicted.

"Yes, father," she said, smoothing down her bonnet strings, "sometimes; but I have always made an effort to drive away such thoughts."

"That good intention in some degree excuses you, but reflect and see how empty are these little triumphs of vanity, how unworthy of a truly poor soul and how they draw it aside from salvation. I know that there are certain social exigencies—society. Yes, yes, but after all one can even in those pleasures which the Church tolerates—I say tolerates—bring to bear that perfume of good-will toward one's neighbor of which the Scriptures speak, and which is the appanage—in some degree . . . the glorious appanage. Yes, yes, go on."

"Father, I have not been able to resist certain temptations to gluttony."

"Again, again! Begin with yourself. You are here at the tribunal of penitence; well, promise God to struggle energetically against these little carnal temptations, which are not in themselves serious sins—oh! no, I know it—but, after all, these constant solicitations prove a persistent attachment—displeasing to Him—to the fugitive and deceitful delights of this world. Hum, hum! and has this gluttony shown itself by more blameworthy actions than usual—is it simply the same as last month?"

"The same as last month, father."

"Yes, yes, pastry between meals," I sighed gravely.

"Yes, father, and almost always a glass of Capri or of Syracuse after

it.”

”Or of Syracuse after it. Well, let that pass, let that pass.”

I fancied that the mention of this pastry and those choice wines was becoming a source of straying thoughts on my part, for which I mentally asked forgiveness of heaven.

”What else do you recall?” I asked, passing my hand over my face.

”Nothing else, father; I do not recollect anything else.”

”Well let a sincere repentance spring up in your heart for the sins you have just admitted, and for those which you may have forgotten; commune with yourself, humble yourself in the presence of the great act you have just accomplished. I will give you absolution. Go in peace.”

The Countess rose, smiled at me with discreet courtesy, and, resuming her ordinary voice, said in a low tone, ”Till Saturday evening, then?”

I bowed as a sign of assent, but felt rather embarrassed on account of my sacred character.

## CHAPTER VII

### AN EMBASSY BALL

”Don’t say that it is not pretty,” added my aunt, brushing the fire-dog with the tip of her tiny boot. ”It lends an especial charm to the look, I must acknowledge. A cloud of powder is most becoming, a touch of rouge has a charming effect, and even that blue shadow that they spread, I don’t know how, under the eye. What coquettes some women are! Did you notice Anna’s eyes at Madame de Sieurac’s last Thursday? Is it allowable? Frankly, can you understand how any one can dare?”

”Well, aunt, I did not object to those eyes, and between ourselves they had a softness.”

”I do not deny that, they had a softness.”

”And at the same time such a strange brilliancy beneath that half shadow, an expression of such delicious languor.”

”Yes, certainly, but, after all, it is making an exhibition of one’s self. But for that—it is very pretty sometimes—I have seen in the Bois charming creatures under their red, their black, and their blue, for they

put on blue too, God forgive me!"

"Yes, aunt, Polish blue; it is put on with a stump; it is for the veins."

With interest: "They imitate veins! It is shocking, upon my word. But you seem to know all about it?"

"Oh, I have played so often in private theatricals; I have even quite a collection of little pots of color, hare's-foot stumps, pencils, et cetera."

"Ah! you have, you rascal! Are you going to the fancy ball at the Embassy to-morrow?"

"Yes, aunt; and you, are you going in character?"

"One must, since every one else will. They say the effect will be splendid." After a silence: "I shall wear powder; do you think it will suit me?"

"Better than any one, my dear aunt; you will look adorable, I feel certain."

"We shall see, you little courtier."

She rose, gave me her hand to kiss with an air of exquisite grace, and seemed about to withdraw, then, seemingly changing her mind:

"Since you are going to the Embassy to-morrow, Ernest, call for me; I will give you a seat in the carriage. You can give me your opinion on my costume, and then," she broke into a laugh, and taking me by the hand, added in my ear: "Bring your little pots and come early. This is between ourselves." She put her finger to her lip as a signal for discretion. "Till tomorrow, then."

The following evening my aunt's bedroom presented a spectacle of most wild disorder.

Her maid and the dressmaker, with haggard eyes, for they had been up all night, were both on their knees, rummaging amidst the bows of satin, and feverishly sticking in pins.

"How late you are," said my aunt to me. "Do you know that it is eleven o'clock? and we have," she continued, showing her white teeth, "a great many things to do yet. The horses have been put to this last hour. I am sure they will take cold in that icy courtyard." As she spoke she stretched out her foot, shod with a red-heeled slipper, glittering with gold embroidery. Her plump foot seemed to overflow the side of the shoe a trifle, and through the openwork of her bright silk stocking the rosy

skin of her ankle showed at intervals.

"What do you think of me, Monsieur Artist?"

"But, Countess, my dear aunt, I mean, I—I am dazzled by this July sun, the brightest of all the year, you know. You are adorable, adorable—and your hair!"

"Is it not well arranged? Silvani did it; he has not his equal, that man. The diamonds in the hair go splendidly, and then this lofty style of head-dressing gives a majestic turn to the neck. I do not know whether you are aware that I have always been a coquette as regards my neck; it is my only bit of vanity. Have you brought your little color-pots?"

"Yes, aunt, I have the whole apparatus, and if you will sit down—"

"I am frightfully pale—just a little, Ernest; you know what I told you," and she turned her head, presenting her right eye to me. I can still see that eye.

I do not know what strange perfume, foreign to aunts in general, rose from her garments.

"You understand, my dear boy, that it is only an occasion like the present, and the necessities of a historical costume, that make me consent to paint like this."

"My dear little aunt, if you move, my hand will shake." And, indeed, in touching her long lashes, my hand trembled.

"Ah! yes, in the corner, a little—you are right, it gives a softness, a vagueness, a—it is very funny, that little pot of blue. How ugly it must be! How things lead on one to another! Once one's hair is powdered, one must have a little pearl powder on one's face in order not to look as yellow as an orange; and one's cheeks once whitened, one can't—you are tickling me with your brush—one can't remain like a miller, so a touch of rouge is inevitable. And then—see how wicked it is—if, after all that, one does not enlarge the eyes a bit, they look as if they had been bored with a gimlet, don't they? It is like this that one goes on little by little, till one comes to the gallows."

My aunt began to laugh freely, as she studied her face.

"Ah! that is very effective what you have just done—well under the eye, that's it. What animation it gives to the look! How clever those creatures are, how well they know everything that becomes one! It is shameful, for with them it is a trick, nothing more. Oh! you may put on a little more of that blue of yours, I see what it does now. It has a very good effect. How you are arching the eyebrows. Don't you think it

is a little too black? You know I should not like to look as if—you are right, though. Where did you learn all that? You might earn a deal of money, do you know, if you set up a practice.”

”Well, aunt, are you satisfied?”

My aunt held her hand-glass at a distance, brought it near, held it away again, smiled, and, leaning back in her chair, said: ”It must be acknowledged that it is charming, this. What do your friends call it?”

”Make-up, aunt.”

”It is vexatious that it has not another name, for really I shall have recourse to it for the evening—from time to time. It is certain that it is attractive. Haven’t you a little box for the lips?”

”Here it is.”

”Ah! in a bottle, it is liquid.”

”It is a kind of vinegar, as you see. Don’t move, aunt. Put out your lips as if you wished to kiss me. You don’t by chance want to?”

”Yes, and you deserve it. You will teach me your little accomplishments, will you not?”

”Willingly, aunt.”

”Your vinegar is miraculous! what brightness it gives to the lips, and how white one’s teeth look. It is true my teeth were always—”

”Another of your bits of vanity.”

”It is done, then. Thank you.” She smiled at me mincingly, for the vinegar stung her lips a little.

With her moistened finger she took a patch which she placed with charming coquetry under her eye, and another which she placed near the corner of her mouth, and then, radiant and adorable, exclaimed: ”Hide away your little color-pots; I hear your uncle coming for me. Clasp my bracelets for me. Midnight! O my poor horses!”

At that moment my uncle entered in silk shorts and a domino.

”I hope I do not intrude,” said he, gayly, on seeing me.

”What nonsense!” said my aunt, turning toward him. ”Ernest is going to the Embassy, like ourselves, and I have offered him a seat in the carriage.”

At the aspect of my aunt, my uncle, dazzled, held out his gloved hand to her, saying, "You are enchanting this evening, my dear." Then, with a sly smile, "Your complexion has a fine brightness, and your eyes have a wonderful brilliancy."

"Oh, it is the fire they have been making up—it is stifling here. But you, my dear, you look splendid; I have never seen your beard so black."

"It is because I am so pale—I am frozen. Jean forgot to look after my fire at all, and it went out. Are you ready?"

My aunt smiled in turn as she took up her fan.

## CHAPTER VIII

### MY AUNT AS VENUS

Since that day when I kissed Madame de B. right on the centre of the neck, as she held out her forehead to me, there has crept into our intercourse an indescribable, coquettish coolness, which is nevertheless by no means unpleasant. The matter of the kiss has never been completely explained. It happened just as I left Saint-Cyr. I was full of ardor, and the cravings of my heart sometimes blinded me. I say that they sometimes blinded me; I repeat, blinded me, and this is true, for really I must have been possessed to have kissed my aunt on the neck as I did that day. But let that pass.

It was not that she was hardly worth it; my little auntie, as I used to call her then, was the prettiest woman in the world—coquettish, elegant; and what a foot! and, above all, that delightful little—I don't know what—which is so fashionable now, and which tempts one always to say too much.

When I say that I must have been possessed, it is because I think of the consequences to which that kiss might have led. Her husband, General de B., being my direct superior, it might have got me into a very awkward position; besides, there is the respect due to one's family. Oh, I have never failed in that.

But I do not know why I am recalling all these old recollections, which have nothing in common with what I am about to relate to you. My intention was simply to tell you that since my return from Mexico I go pretty frequently to Madame de B.'s, as perhaps you do also, for she keeps up a rather good establishment, receives every Monday evening, and there is usually a crowd of people at her house, for she is very entertaining. There is no form of amusement that she does not resort to

in order to keep up her reputation as a woman of fashion. I must own, however, that I had never seen anything at her house to equal what I saw last Monday.

I was in the ante-room, where the footman was helping me off with my top-coat, when Jean, approaching me with a suspicion of mystery, said: "My mistress expects to see you immediately, Monsieur, in her bedroom. If you will walk along the passage and knock at the door at the end, you will find her."

When one has just returned from the other side of the world, such words sound queer. The old affair of the kiss recurred to me in spite of myself. What could my aunt want with me?

I tapped quietly at the door, and heard at once an outburst of stifled laughter.

"Wait a moment," exclaimed a laughing voice.

"I won't be seen in this state," whispered another—"Yes"—"No"—"You are absurd, my dear, since it is an affair of art."—"Ha, ha, ha." And they laughed and laughed again.

At last a voice cried, "Come in," and I turned the handle.

At first glance I could only make out a confused chaos, impossible to describe, amidst which my aunt was bustling about clad in pink fleshings. Clad, did I say?—very airily.

The furniture, the carpet, the mantel-piece were encumbered, almost buried under a heterogeneous mass of things. Muslin petticoats, tossed down haphazard, pieces of lace, a cardboard helmet covered with gilt paper, open jewel-cases, bows of ribbon; curling-tongs, half hidden in the ashes; and on every side little pots, paint-brushes, odds and ends of all kinds. Behind two screens, which ran across the room, I could hear whisplings, and the buzzing sound peculiar to women dressing themselves. In one corner Silvani—the illustrious Silvani, still wearing the large white apron he assumes when powdering his clients—was putting away his powder-puff and turning down his sleeves with a satisfied air. I stood petrified. What was going on at my aunt's?

She discovered my astonishment, and without turning round she said in agitated tones:

"Ah! is it you, Ernest?" Then as if making up her mind, she broke into a hearty burst of laughter, like all women who have good teeth, and added, with a slightly superior air, "You see, we are having private theatricals."

Then turning toward me with her elegant coiffure powdered to excess, I

could see that her face was painted like that of a priestess of antiquity. That gauze, that atmosphere, redolent with feminine perfumes, and behind those screens-behind those screens!

"Women in society," I said to myself, looking about me, "must be mad to amuse themselves in this fashion."

"And what piece are you going to play, aunt, in such an attractive costume?"

"Good evening, Captain," called out a laughing voice from behind the screen on the right.

"We were expecting you," came from behind the screen on the left.

"Good evening, ladies; what can I do for you?"

"It is not a play," observed my aunt, modestly drawing together her seaweed draperies. "How behind the age you are, to think that any one plays set-pieces nowadays. It is not a piece, it is a 'tableau vivant', 'The judgment of Paris.' You know 'The Judgment of Paris'? I take the part of Venus—I did not want to, but they all urged me—give me a pin—on the mantelpiece—near the bag of bonbons—there to the left, next to the jewel-case—close by the bottle of gum standing on my prayer-book. Can't you see? Ah! at last. In short, the knife to my throat to compel me to play Venus."

Turning to the screen on the right she said: "Pass me the red for the lips, dear; mine are too pale." To the hairdresser, who is making his way to the door: "Silvani, go to the gentlemen who are dressing in the billiard-room, and in the Baron's dressing-room, they perhaps may need you. Madame de S. and her daughters are in the boudoir—ah! see whether Monsieur de V. has found his apple again—he plays Paris," added my aunt, turning toward me once more; "the apple must not be lost—well, dear, and that red for the lips I asked you for? Pass it to the Captain over the screen."

"Here it is; but make haste, Captain, my cuirass cracks as soon as I raise my arm."

I descried above the screen two slender fingers, one of which, covered with glittering rings, held in the air a little pot without a cover.

"What,—is your cuirass cracking, Marchioness?"

"Oh! it will do, but make haste and take it, Captain."

"You may think it strange, but I tremble like a leaf," exclaimed my aunt. "I am afraid of being ill. Do you hear the gentlemen who are dressing in there in the Baron's dressing room? What a noise! Ha! ha! ha! it is

charming, a regular gang of strollers. It is exhilarating, do you know, this feverish existence, this life in front of the footlights. But, for the love of Heaven, shut the door, Marie, there is a frightful draught blowing on me. This hourly struggle with the public, the hisses, the applause, would, with my impressionable nature, drive me mad, I am sure."

The old affair of the kiss recurred to me and I said to myself, "Captain, you misunderstood the nature of your relative."

"But that is not the question at all," continued my aunt; "ten o'clock is striking. Ernest, can you apply liquid white? As you are rather experienced—"

"Rather—ha! ha! ha!" said some one behind the screen.

"On the whole," continued the Baroness, "it would be very singular if, in the course of your campaigns, you had never seen liquid white applied."

"Yes, aunt, I have some ideas; yes, I have some ideas about liquid white, and by summoning together all my recollections—"

"Is it true, Captain, that it causes rheumatism?"

"No, not at all; have a couple of logs put on the fire and give me the stuff."

So saying, I turned up my sleeves and poured some of the "Milk of Beauty" into a little onyx bowl that was at hand, then I dipped a little sponge into it, and approached my Aunt Venus with a smile.

"You are sure that it has no effect on the skin—no, I really dare not." As she said this she looked as prim as a vestal. "It is the first time, do you know, that I ever used this liquid white, ah! ah! ah! What a baby I am! I am all in a shiver."

"But, my dear, you are foolish," exclaimed the lady of the screen, breaking into a laugh; "when one acts one must submit to the exigencies of the footlights."

"You hear, aunt? Come, give me your arm."

She held out her full, round arm, on the surface of which was spread that light and charming down, symbol of maturity. I applied the wet sponge.

"Oh! oh! oh!" exclaimed the Baroness; "it is like ice, a regular shower-bath, and you want to put that all over me?"

Just then there was a knock at the door which led out of the Baron's dressing-room, and instinctively I turned toward it.

"Who's there? Oh! you are letting it splutter all over me!" exclaimed the Baroness. "You can't come in; what is it?"

"What is the matter, aunt?"

"You can't come in," exclaimed some one behind the screen; "my cuirass has split. Marie, Rosine, a needle and thread, the gum."

"Oh! there is a stream all down my back, your horrid white is running down," said the Baroness, in a rage.

"I will wipe it. I am really very sorry."

"Can you get your hand down my back, do you think?"

"Why not, aunt?"

"Why not, why not! Because where there is room for a drop of water, there is not room for the hand of a lancer."

Another knock, this time at the door opening from the passage.

"What is it now?"

"The torches have come, Madame," said a footman. "Will you have them lighted?"

"Ah! the torches of Mesdemoiselles de N., who are dressing in the boudoir. No, certainly not, do not light them, they are not wanted till the second tableau."

"Do not stir, aunt, I beg of you. Mesdemoiselles de N. appears too, then?"

"Yes, with their mamma; they represent 'The Lights of Faith driving out Unbelief,' thus they naturally require torches. You know, they are tin tubes with spirits of wine which blazes up. It will be, perhaps, the prettiest tableau of the evening. It is an indirect compliment we wish to pay to the Cardinal's nephew; you know the dark young man with very curly hair and saintly eyes; you saw him last Monday. He is in high favor at court. The Comte de Geloni was kind enough to promise to come this evening, and then Monsieur de Saint P. had the idea of this tableau. His imagination is boundless, Monsieur de Saint P., not to mention his good taste, if he would not break his properties."

"Is he not also a Chevalier of the Order of Saint Gregory?"

"Yes, and, between ourselves, I think that he would not be sorry to become an officer in it."

"Ah! I understand, 'The Lights of Faith driving out,' et cetera. But tell me, aunt, am I not brushing you too hard? Lift up your arm a little, please. Tell me who has undertaken the part of Unbelief?"

"Don't speak of it, it is quite a history. As it happened, the casting of the parts took place the very evening on which his Holiness's Encyclical was published, so that the gentlemen were somewhat excited. Monsieur de Saint P. took high ground, really very high ground; indeed, I thought for a moment that the General was going to flare out. In short, no one would have anything to do with Unbelief, and we had to have recourse to the General's coachman, John—you know him? He is a good-looking fellow; he is a Protestant, moreover, so that the part is not a novel one to him."

"No matter, it will be disagreeable for the De N.'s to appear side by side with a servant."

"Come! such scruples must not be carried too far; he is smeared over with black and lies stretched on his face, while the three ladies trample on him, so you see that social proprieties are observed after all. Come, have you done yet? My hair is rather a success, is it not? Silvani is the only man who understands how to powder one. He wanted to dye it red, but I prefer to wait till red hair has found its way a little more into society."

"There; it is finished, aunt. Is it long before you have to go on?"

"No. Good Heavens, it is close on eleven o'clock! The thought of appearing before all these people—don't the flowers drooping from my head make my neck appear rather awkward, Ernest? Will you push them up a little?"

Then going to the door of the dressing-room she tapped at it gently, saying, "Are you ready, Monsieur de V.?"

"Yes, Baroness, I have found my apple, but I am horribly nervous. Are Minerva and Juno dressed? Oh! I am nervous to a degree you have no idea of."

"Yes, yes, every one is ready; send word to the company in the drawing-room. My poor heart throbs like to burst, Captain."

## CHAPTER IX

### HUSBAND AND WIFE

MY DEAR SISTERS:

Marriage, as it is now understood, is not exactly conducive to love. In this I do not think that I am stating an anomaly. Love in marriage is, as a rule, too much at his ease; he stretches himself with too great listlessness in armchairs too well cushioned. He assumes the unconstrained habits of dressing-gown and slippers; his digestion goes wrong, his appetite fails and of an evening, in the too-relaxing warmth of a nest, made for him, he yawns over his newspaper, goes to sleep, snores, and pines away. It is all very well, my sisters, to say, "But not at all—but how can it be, Father Z.?—you know nothing about it, reverend father."

I maintain that things are as I have stated, and that at heart you are absolutely of my opinion. Yes, your poor heart has suffered very often; there are nights during which you have wept, poor angel, vainly awaiting the dream of the evening before.

"Alas!" you say, "is it then all over? One summer's day, then thirty years of autumn, to me, who am so fond of sunshine." That is what you have thought.

But you say nothing, not knowing what you should say. Lacking self-confidence and ignorant of yourself, you have made it a virtue to keep silence and not wake your husband while he sleeps; you have got into the habit of walking on the tips of your toes so as not to disturb the household, and your husband, in the midst of this refreshing half-sleep, has begun to yawn luxuriously; then he has gone out to his club, where he has been received like the prodigal son, while you, poor poet without pen or ink, have consoled yourself by watching your sisters follow the same road as yourself.

You have, all of you, ladies, your pockets full of manuscripts, charming poems, delightful romances; it is a reader who is lacking to you, and your husband takes up his hat and stick at the very sight of your handwriting; he firmly believes that there are no more romances except those already in print. From having read so many, he considers that no more can be written.

This state of things I regard as absolutely detestable. I look upon you, my dear sisters, as poor victims, and if you will permit I will give you my opinion on the subject.

Esteem and friendship between husband and wife are like our daily bread, very pleasant and respectable; but a little jam would not spoil that, you will admit! If, therefore, one of your friends complains of the freedom that reigns in this little book, let her talk on and be sure beforehand that this friend eats dry bread. We have described marriage as we think it should be—depicting smiling spouses, delighted to be together.

Is it because love is rare as between husband and wife that it is considered unbecoming to relate its joys? Is it regret, or envy, that renders you fastidious on the subject, sisters? Reserve your blushes for the pictures of that society of courtesans where love is an article of commerce, where kisses are paid for in advance. Regard the relation of these coarse pleasures as immodest and revolting, be indignant, scold your brethren—I will admit that you are in the right beforehand; but for Heaven's sake do not be offended if we undertake your defence, when we try to render married life pleasant and attractive, and advise husbands to love their wives, wives to love their husbands.

You must understand that there is a truly moral side to all this. To prove that you are adorable; that there are pleasures, joys, happiness, to be found outside the society of those young women—such is our object; and since we are about to describe it, we venture to hope that after reflecting for a few minutes you will consider our intentions praiseworthy, and encourage us to persevere in them.

I do not know why mankind has chosen to call marriage a man-trap, and all sorts of frightful things; to stick up all round it boards on which one reads: "Beware of the sacred ties of marriage;" "Do not jest with the sacred duties of a husband;" "Meditate on the sacred obligation of a father of a family;" "Remember that the serious side of life is beginning;" "No weakness; henceforth you are bound to find yourself face to face with stern reality," etc., etc.

I will not say that it is imprudent to set forth all those fine things; but when done it should be done with less affectation. To warn people that there are thorns in the path is all very well; but, hang it! there is something else in married life, something that renders these duties delightful, else this sacred position and these ties would soon be nothing more than insupportable burdens. One would really think that to take to one's self a pretty little wife, fresh in heart and pure in mind, and to condemn one's self to saw wood for the rest of one's days, were one and the same thing.

Well, my dear sisters, have you any knowledge of those who have painted the picture in these gloomy colors and described as a punishment that which should be a reward? They are the husbands with a past and having rheumatism. Being weary and—how shall I put it?—men of the world, they choose to represent marriage as an asylum, of which you are to be the angels. No doubt to be an angel is very nice, but, believe me, it is either too much or too little. Do not seek to soar so high all at once, but, instead, enter on a short apprenticeship. It will be time enough to don the crown of glory when you have no longer hair enough to dress in any other fashion.

But, O husbands with a past! do you really believe that your own angelic quietude and the studied austerity of your principles are taken for anything else than what they really mean—exhaustion?

You wish to rest; well and good; but it is wrong in you to wish everybody else about you to rest too; to ask for withered trees and faded grass in May, the lamps turned down and the lamp-shades doubled; to require one to put water in the soup and to refuse one's self a glass of claret; to look for virtuous wives to be highly respectable and somewhat wearisome beings; dressing neatly, but having had neither poetry, youth, gayety, nor vague desires; ignorant of everything, undesirous of learning anything; helpless, thanks to the weighty virtues with which you have crammed them; above all, to ask of these poor creatures to bless your wisdom, caress your bald forehead, and blush with shame at the echo of a kiss.

The deuce! but that is a pretty state of things for marriage to come to.

Delightful institution! How far are your sons, who are now five-and-twenty years of age, in the right in being afraid of it! Have they not a right to say to you, twirling their moustaches:

"But, my dear father, wait a bit; I am not quite ripe for it!"

"Yes; but it is a splendid match, and the young lady is charming."

"No doubt, but I feel that I should not make her happy. I am not old enough—indeed, I am not."

And when the young man is seasoned for it, how happy she will be, poor little thing!—a ripe husband, ready to fall from the tree, fit to be put away in the apple-loft! What happiness! a good husband, who the day after his marriage will piously place his wife in a niche and light a taper in front of her; then take his hat and go off to spend elsewhere a scrap of youth left by chance at the bottom of his pocket.

Ah! my good little sisters who are so very much shocked and cry "Shame!" follow our reasoning a little further. It is all very well that you should be treated like saints, but do not let it be forgotten that you are women, and, listen to me, do not forget it yourselves.

A husband, majestic and slightly bald, is a good thing; a young husband who loves you and eats off the same plate is better. If he rumples your dress a little, and imprints a kiss, in passing, on the back of your neck, let him. When, on coming home from a ball, he tears out the pins, tangles the strings, and laughs like a madman, trying to see whether you are ticklish, let him. Do not cry "Murder!" if his moustache pricks you, but think that it is all because at heart he loves you well. He worships your virtues; is it surprising hence that he should cherish their outward coverings? No doubt you have a noble soul; but your body is not therefore to be despised; and when one loves fervently, one loves everything at the same time. Do not be alarmed if in the evening, when the fire is burning brightly and you are chatting gayly beside it, he

should take off one of your shoes and stockings, put your foot on his lap, and in a moment of forgetfulness carry irreverence so far as to kiss it; if he likes to pass your large tortoise-shell comb through your hair, if he selects your perfumes, arranges your plaits, and suddenly exclaims, striking his forehead: "Sit down there, darling; I have an idea how to arrange a new coiffure."

If he turns up his sleeves and by chance tangles your curls, where really is the harm? Thank Heaven if in the marriage which you have hit upon you find a laughing, joyous side; if in your husband you find the loved reader of the pretty romance you have in your pocket; if, while wearing cashmere shawls and costly jewels in your ears, you find the joys of a real intimacy—that is delicious! In short, reckon yourself happy if in your husband you find a lover.

But before accepting my theories, ladies, although in your heart and conscience you find them perfect, you will have several little prejudices to overcome; above all, you will have to struggle against your education, which is deplorable, as I have already said, but that is no great matter. Remember that under the pretext of education you have been stuffed, my dear sisters. You have been varnished too soon, like those pictures painted for sales, which crack all over six months after purchase. Your disposition has not been properly directed; you are not cultivated; you have been stifled, pruned; you have been shaped like those yew-trees at Versailles which represent goblets and birds. Still, you are women at the bottom, though you no longer look it.

You are handed over to us men swaddled, distorted, stuffed with prejudices and principles, heavy as paving-stones; all of which are the more difficult to dislodge since you look upon them as sacred; you are started on the matrimonial journey with so much luggage reckoned as indispensable; and at the first station your husband, who is not an angel, loses his temper amidst all these encumbrances, sends it all to the devil under some pretext or other, lets you go on alone, and gets into another carriage. I do not require, mark me, that you should be allowed to grow up uncared for, that good or evil instincts should be suffered to spring up in you anyhow: but it were better that they should not treat your poor mind like the foot of a well-born Chinese girl—that they should not enclose it in a porcelain slipper.

A marriageable young lady is a product of maternal industry, which takes ten years to fructify, and needs from five to six more years of study on the part of the husband to purify, strip, and restore to its real shape. In other words, it takes ten years to make a bride and six years at least to turn this bride into a woman again. Admit frankly that this is time lost as regards happiness, but try to make it up if your husband will permit you to do so.

The sole guaranty of fidelity between husband and wife is love. One remains side by side with a fellow-traveller only so long as one

experiences pleasure and happiness in his company. Laws, decrees, oaths, may prevent faithlessness, or at least punish it, but they can neither hinder nor punish intention. But as regards love, intention and deed are the same.

Is it not true, my dear sisters, that you are of this opinion? Do not you thoroughly understand that if love is absent from marriage it should, on the contrary, be its real pivot? To make one's self lovable is the main thing. Believe my white hairs that it is so, and let me give you some more advice.

Yes, I favor marriage—I do not conceal it—the happy marriage in which we cast into the common lot our ideas and our sorrows, as well as our good-humor and our affections. Suppress, by all means, in this partnership, gravity and affectation, yet add a sprinkling of gallantry and good-fellowship. Preserve even in your intimacy that coquetry you so readily assume in society. Seek to please your husband. Be amiable. Consider that your husband is an audience, whose sympathy you must conquer.

In your manner of loving mark those shades, those feminine delicacies, which double the price of things. Do not be miserly, but remember that the manner in which one gives adds to the value of the gift; or rather do not give—make yourself sought after. Think of those precious jewels that are arranged with such art in their satin-lined jewel-case; never forget the case. Let your nest be soft, let your presence be felt in all its thousand trifles. Put a little of yourself into the ordering of everything. Be artistic, delicate, and refined—you can do so without effort—and let your husband perceive in everything that surrounds him, from the lace on the curtains to the perfume that you use, a wish on your part to please him.

Do not say to him, "I love you"; that phrase may perhaps recall to him a recollection or two. But lead him on to say to you, "You do love me, then?" and answer "No," but with a little kiss which means "Yes." Make him feel beside you the present to be so pleasant that the past will fade from his memory; and to this end let nothing about you recall that past, for, despite himself, he would never forgive it in you. Do not imitate the women whom he may have known, nor their head-dresses or toilettes; that would tend to make him believe he has not changed his manner of life. You have in yourself another kind of grace, another wit, another coquetry, and above all that rejuvenescence of heart and mind which those women have never had. You have an eagerness in life, a need of expansion, a freshness of impression which are—though perhaps you may not imagine it—irresistible charms. Be yourselves throughout, and you will be for this loved spouse a novelty, a thousand times more charming in his eyes than all the by-gones possible. Conceal from him neither your inclinations nor your inexperience, your childish joys or your childish fears; but be as coquettish with all these as you are of the features of your face, of your fine, black eyes and your long, fair hair.

Nothing is more easily acquired than a little adroitness; do not throw yourself at his head, and always have confidence in yourself.

Usually, a man marries when he thinks himself ruined; when he feels in his waistcoat pocket—not a louis—he is then seasoned; he goes at once before the registrar. But let me tell you, sisters, he is still rich. He has another pocket of which he knows nothing, the fool! and which is full of gold. It is for you to act so that he shall find it out and be grateful to you for the happiness he has had in finding a fortune.

I will sum up, at once, as time is flying and I should not like you to be late for dinner. For Heaven's sake, ladies, tear from the clutches of the women, whose toilettes you do very wrong in imitating, your husbands' affections. Are you not more refined, more sprightly, than they? Do for him whom you love that which these women do for all the world; do not content yourselves with being virtuous—be attractive, perfume your hair, nurture illusion as a rare plant in a golden vase. Cultivate a little folly when practicable; put away your marriage-contract arid look at it only once in ten years; love one another as if you had not sworn to do so; forget that there are bonds, contracts, pledges; banish from your mind the recollection of the Mayor and his scarf. Sometimes when you are alone fancy that you are only sweethearts; sister, is not that what you eagerly desire?

Ah! let candor and youth flourish. Let us love and laugh while spring blossoms. Let us love our babies, the little dears, and kiss our wives. Yes, that is moral and healthy; the world is not a shivering convent, marriage is not a tomb. Shame on those who find in it only sadness, boredom, and sleep.

My sisters, my sisters, strive to be real; that is the blessing I wish you.

## CHAPTER X

### MADAME'S IMPRESSIONS

The marriage ceremony at the Town Hall has, no doubt, a tolerable importance; but is it really possible for a well-bred person to regard this importance seriously? I have been through it; I have undergone like every one else this painful formality, and I can not look back on it without feeling a kind of humiliation. On alighting from the carriage I descried a muddy staircase; walls placarded with bills of every color, and in front of one of them a man in a snuff-colored coat, bare-headed, a pen behind his ear, and papers under his arm, who was rolling a cigarette

between his inky fingers. To the left a door opened and I caught a glimpse of a low dark room in which a dozen fellows belonging to the National Guard were smoking black pipes. My first thought on entering this barrack-room was that I had done wisely in not putting on my gray dress. We ascended the staircase and I saw a long, dirty, dim passage, with a number of half-glass doors, on which I read: "Burials. Turn the handle," "Expropriations," "Deaths. Knock loudly," "Inquiries," "Births," "Public Health," etc., and at length "Marriages."

We entered in company with a small lad who was carrying a bottle of ink; the atmosphere was thick, heavy, and hot, and made one feel ill. Happily, an attendant in a blue livery, resembling in appearance the soldiers I had seen below, stepped forward to ask us to excuse him for not having at once ushered us into the Mayor's drawing-room, which is no other than the first-class waiting-room. I darted into it as one jumps into a cab when it begins to rain suddenly. Almost immediately two serious persons, one of whom greatly resembled the old cashier at the Petit-Saint-Thomas, brought in two registers, and, opening them, wrote for some time; only stopping occasionally to ask the name, age, and baptismal names of both of us, then, saying to themselves, "Semi-colon . . . between the aforesaid . . . fresh paragraph, etc., etc."

When he had done, the one like the man cashier at the Petit-Saint-Thomas read aloud, through his nose, that which he had put down, and of which I could understand nothing, except that my name was several times repeated as well as that of the other "aforesaid." A pen was handed to us and we signed. Voila.

"Is it over?" said I to Georges, who to my great surprise was very pale.

"Not yet, dear," said he; "we must now go into the hall, where the marriage ceremony takes place."

We entered a large, empty hall with bare walls; a bust of the Emperor was at the farther end over a raised platform, some armchairs, and some benches behind them, and dust upon everything. I must have been in a wrong mood, for it seemed to me I was entering the waiting-room at a railway-station; nor could I help looking at my aunts, who were very merry, over the empty chairs. The gentlemen, who no doubt affected not to think as we did, were, on the contrary, all very serious, and I could discern very well that Georges was actually trembling. At length the Mayor came in by a little door and appeared before us, awkward and podgy in his dress-coat, which was too large for him, and which his scarf caused to rise up. He was a very respectable man who had amassed a decent fortune from the sale of iron bedsteads; yet how could I bring myself to think that this embarrassed-looking, ill-dressed, timid little creature could, with a word hesitatingly uttered, unite me in eternal bonds? Moreover, he had a fatal likeness to my piano-tuner.

The Mayor, after bowing to us, as a man bows when without his hat, and in

a white cravat, that is to say, clumsily, blew his nose, to the great relief of his two arms which he did not know what to do with, and briskly began the little ceremony. He hurriedly mumbled over several passages of the Code, giving the numbers of the paragraphs; and I was given confusedly to understand that I was threatened with the police if I did not blindly obey all the orders and crotchets of my husband, and if I did not follow wherever he might choose to take me, even if it should be to a sixth floor in the Rue-Saint-Victor. A score of times I was on the point of interrupting the Mayor, and saying, "Excuse me, Monsieur, but those remarks are hardly polite as regards myself, and you yourself must know that they are devoid of meaning."

But I restrained myself for fear I might frighten the magistrate, who seemed to me to be in a hurry to finish. He added, however, a few words on the mutual duties of husband and wife—copartnership—paternity, etc., etc.; but all these things, which would perhaps have made me weep anywhere else, seemed grotesque to me, and I could not forget that dozen of soldiers playing piquet round the stove, and that row of doors on which I had read "Public Health," "Burials," "Deaths," "Expropriations," etc. I should have been aggrieved at this dealer in iron bedsteads touching on my cherished dreams if the comic side of the situation had not absorbed my whole attention, and if a mad wish to laugh outright had not seized me.

"Monsieur Georges ——, do you swear to take for your wife Mademoiselle ——," said the Mayor, bending forward.

My husband bowed and answered "Yes" in a very low voice. He has since acknowledged to me that he never felt more emotion in his life than in uttering that "Yes."

"Mademoiselle Berthe ——," continued the magistrate, turning to me, "do you swear to take for your husband ——"

I bowed, with a smile, and said to myself: "Certainly; that is plain enough; I came here for that express purpose."

That was all. I was married!

My father and my husband shook hands like men who had not met for twenty years; the eyes of both were moist. As for myself, it was impossible for me to share their emotion. I was very hungry, and mamma and I had the carriage pulled up at the pastry-cook's before going on to the dressmaker's.

The next morning was the great event, and when I awoke it was hardly daylight. I opened the door leading into the drawing-room; there my dress was spread out on the sofa, the veil folded beside it, my shoes, my wreath in a large white box, nothing was lacking. I drank a glass of water. I was nervous, uneasy, happy, trembling. It seemed like the

morning of a battle when one is sure of winning a medal. I thought of neither my past nor my future; I was wholly taken up with the idea of the ceremony, of that sacrament, the most solemn of all, of the oath I was about to take before God, and also by the thought of the crowd gathered expressly to see me pass.

We breakfasted early. My father was in his boots, his trousers, his white tie, and his dressing-gown. My mother also was half dressed. It seemed to me that the servants took greater pains in waiting on me and showed me more respect. I even remember that Marie said, "The hairdresser has come, Madame." Madame! Good girl, I have not forgotten it.

It was impossible for me to eat; my throat was parched and I experienced all over me shudders of impatience, something like the sensation one has when one is very-thirsty and is waiting for the sugar to melt. The tones of the organ seemed to haunt me, and the wedding of Emma and Louis recurred to my mind. I dressed; the hairdresser called me "Madame" too, and arranged my hair so nicely that I said, I remember, "Things are beginning well; this coiffure is a good omen." I stopped Marie, who wished to lace me tighter than usual. I know that white makes one look stouter and that Marie was right; but I was afraid lest it should send the blood to my head. I have always had a horror of brides who looked as if they had just got up from table. Religious emotions should be too profound to be expressed by anything save pallor. It is silly to blush under certain circumstances.

When I was dressed I entered the drawing-room to have a little more room and to spread out my trailing skirts. My father and Georges were already there, talking busily.

"Have the carriages come?—yes—and about the 'Salutaris'?—very good, then, you will see to everything—and the marriage coin—certainly, I have the ring—Mon Dieu! where is my certificate of confession? Ah! good, I left it in the carriage."

They were saying all this hurriedly and gesticulating like people having great business on hand. When Georges caught sight of me he kissed my hand, and while the maids kneeling about me were settling the skirt, and the hairdresser was clipping the tulle of the veil, he said in a husky voice, "You look charming, dear."

He was not thinking in the least of what he was saying, and I answered mechanically:

"Do you think so? Not too short, the veil, Monsieur Silvani. Don't forget the bow on the bodice, Marie."

When one has to look after everything, one needs all one's wits. However, Georges' husky voice recurred to me, and I said to myself, "I am

sure that he has caught a cold; it is plain that he has had his hair cut too short.”

I soon got at the true state of the case.

”You have a cold, my dear fellow,” said my father.

”Don’t speak of it,” he answered in a low voice. And still lower, and with a somewhat embarrassed smile: ”Will you be so kind as to give me an extra pocket-handkerchief? I have but one—”

”Certainly, my dear boy.”

”Thanks, very much.”

It was a trifle, to be sure, but I felt vexed, and I remember that, when going downstairs with them holding up my train behind me, I said to myself, ”I do hope that he does not sneeze at the altar.”

I soon forgot all about it. We got into the carriage; I felt that every one was looking at me, and I caught sight of groups of spectators in the street beyond the carriage gates. What I felt is impossible to describe, but it was something delightful. The sound of the beadles’ canes on the pavement will forever reecho in my heart. We halted for a moment on the red druggat. The great organ poured forth the full tones of a triumphal march; thousands of eager faces turned toward me, and there in the background, amidst an atmosphere of sunshine, incense, velvet, and gold, were two gilt armchairs for us to seat ourselves on before the altar.

I do not know why an old engraving in my father’s study crossed my mind. It represents the entry of Alexander the Great into Babylon; he is on an elephant which is glittering with precious stones. You must know it. Only, Alexander was a heathen who had many things to reproach himself with, while I was not.

God smiled on me, and with His paternal hand invited me to seat myself in His house, on His red druggat, in His gilt armchair. The heavens, full of joy, made music for me, and on high, through the glittering stained-glass windows, the archangels, full of kind feeling, whispered as they watched me. As I advanced, heads were bent as a wheat-field bends beneath the breeze. My friends, my relatives, my enemies, bowed to us, and I saw—for one sees everything in spite of one’s self on these solemn occasions—that they did not think that I looked ugly. On reaching the gilt chair, I bent forward with restrained eagerness—my chignon was high, revealing my neck, which is passable—and thanked the Lord. The organ ceased its triumphal song and I could hear my poor mother bursting into tears beside me. Oh! I understand what a mother’s heart must feel during such a ceremony. While watching with satisfaction the clergy who were solemnly advancing, I noticed Georges; he seemed irritated; he was stiff, upright, his nostrils dilated, and his lips set. I have always

been rather vexed at him for not having been a little more sensible to what I was experiencing that day, but men do not understand this kind of poetry.

The discourse of his Reverence who married us was a masterpiece, and was delivered, moreover, with that unction, that dignity, that persuasive charm peculiar to him. He spoke of our two families "in which pious belief was hereditary, like honor." You could have heard a pin drop, such was the attention with which the prelate's voice was listened to. Then at one point he turned toward me, and gave me to understand with a thousand delicacies that I was wedding one of the noblest officers in the army. "Heaven smiles," said he, "on the warrior who places at the service of his country a sword blessed by God, and who, when he darts into the fray, can place his hand upon his heart and shout to the enemy that noble war-cry, 'I believe!'" How well that was turned! What grandeur in this holy eloquence! A thrill ran through the assembly. But that was not all. His Lordship then addressed Georges in a voice as soft and unctuous as it had before been ringing and enthusiastic.

"Monsieur, you are about to take as your companion a young girl"—I scarcely dare recall the graceful and delicate things that his Reverence said respecting me—"piously reared by a Christian mother who has been able to share with her, if I may say so, all the virtues of her heart, all the charms of her mind." (Mamma was sobbing.) "She will love her husband as she has loved her father, that father full of kindness, who, from the cradle, implanted in her the sentiments of nobility and disinterestedness which—" (Papa smiled despite himself.) "Her father, whose name is known to the poor, and who in the house of God has his place marked among the elect." (Since his retirement, papa has become churchwarden.) "And you, Monsieur, will respect, I feel certain, so much purity, such ineffable candor"—I felt my eyes grow moist—"and without forgetting the physical and perishable charms of this angel whom God bestows upon you, you will thank Heaven for those qualities a thousand times more precious and more lasting contained in her heart and her mind."

We were bidden to stand up, and stood face to face with one another like the divine spouses in the picture of Raphael. We exchanged the golden ring, and his Reverence, in a slow, grave voice, uttered some Latin words, the sense of which I did not understand, but which greatly moved me, for the prelate's hand, white, delicate, and transparent, seemed to be blessing me. The censer, with its bluish smoke, swung by the hands of children, shed in the air its holy perfume. What a day, great heavens! All that subsequently took place grows confused in my memory. I was dazzled, I was transported. I can remember, however, the bonnet with white roses in which Louise had decked herself out. Strange it is how some people are quite wanting in taste!

Going to the vestry, I leaned on the General's arm, and it was then that I saw the spectators' faces. All seemed touched.

Soon they thronged round to greet me. The vestry was full, they pushed and pressed round me, and I replied to all these smiles, to all these compliments, by a slight bow in which religious emotion peeped forth in spite of me. I felt conscious that something solemn had just taken place before God and man; I felt conscious of being linked in eternal bonds. I was married!

By a strange fancy I then fell to thinking of the pitiful ceremony of the day before. I compared—God forgive me for doing so!—the ex-dealer in iron bedsteads, ill at ease in his dress-coat, to the priest; the trivial and commonplace words of the mayor, with the eloquent outbursts of the venerable prelate. What a lesson! There earth, here heaven; there the coarse prose of the man of business, here celestial poesy.

Georges, to whom I lately spoke about this, said:

”But, my dear, perhaps you don’t know that marriage at the Town Hall before the registrar is gratis, while—” I put my hand over his mouth to prevent him from finishing; it seemed to me that he was about to utter some impiety.

Gratis, gratis. That is exactly what I find so very unseemly.

## CHAPTER XI

### A WEDDING NIGHT

Thanks to country manners and the solemnity of the occasion, the guests had left fairly early. Almost every one had shaken hands with me, some with a cunning smile and others with a foolish one, some with an officious gravity that suggested condolence, and others with a stupid cordiality verging on indiscretion.

General de S. and the prefect, two old friends of the family, were lingering over a game of ecarte, and frankly, in spite of all the goodwill I bore toward them, I should have liked to see them at the devil, so irritable did I feel that evening.

All this took place, I had forgotten to tell you, the very day of my marriage, and I was really rather tired. Since morning I had been overwhelmed by an average of about two hundred people, all actuated by the best intentions, but as oppressive as the atmosphere before a storm. Since morning I had kept up a perpetual smile for all, and then the good village priest who had married us had thought it his duty, in a very neat sermon so far as the rest of it went, to compare me to Saint Joseph, and

that sort of thing is annoying when one is Captain in a lancer regiment. The Mayor, who had been good enough to bring his register to the chateau, had for his part not been able, on catching sight of the prefect, to resist the pleasure of crying, "Long live the Emperor!" On quitting the church they had fired off guns close to my ears and presented me with an immense bouquet. Finally—I tell you this between ourselves—since eight o'clock in the morning I had had on a pair of boots rather too tight for me, and at the moment this narrative begins it was about half an hour after midnight.

I had spoken to every one except my dear little wife, whom they seemed to take pleasure in keeping away from me. Once, however, on ascending the steps, I had squeezed her hand on the sly. Even then this rash act had cost me a look, half sharp and half sour, from my mother-in-law, which had recalled me to a true sense of the situation. If, Monsieur, you happen to have gone through a similar day of violent effusion and general expansion, you will agree with me that during no other moment of your life were you more inclined to irritability.

What can you say to the cousins who kiss you, to the aunts who cling round your neck and weep into your waistcoat, to all these smiling faces ranged one beyond the other before you, to all those eyes which have been staring at you for twelve hours past, to all those outbursts of affection which you have not sought, but which claim a word from the heart in reply?

At the end of such a day one's very heart is foundered. You say to yourself: "Come, is it all over? Is there yet a tear to wipe away, a compliment to receive, an agitated hand to clasp? Is every one satisfied? Have they seen enough of the bridegroom? Does any one want any more of him? Can I at length give a thought to my own happiness, think of my dear little wife who is waiting for me with her head buried in the folds of her pillow? Who is waiting for me!" That flashes through your mind all at once like a train of powder. You had not thought of it. During the whole of the day this luminous side of the question had remained veiled, but the hour approaches, at this very moment the silken laces of her bodice are swishing as they are unloosed; she is blushing, agitated, and dare not look at herself in the glass for fear of noting her own confusion. Her aunt and her mother, her cousin and her bosom friend, surround and smile at her, and it is a question of who shall unhook her dress, remove the orange-blossoms from her hair, and have the last kiss.

Good! now come the tears; they are wiped away and followed by kisses. The mother whispers something in her ear about a sacrifice, the future, necessity, obedience, and finds means to mingle with these simple but carefully prepared words the hope of celestial benedictions and of the intercession of a dove or two hidden among the curtains.

The poor child does not understand anything about it, except it be that

something unheard-of is about to take place, that the young man—she dare not call him anything else in her thoughts—is about to appear as a conqueror and address her in wondrous phrases, the very anticipation of which makes her quiver with impatience and alarm. The child says not a word—she trembles, she weeps, she quivers like a partridge in a furrow. The last words of her mother, the last farewells of her family, ring confusedly in her ears, but it is in vain that she strives to seize on their meaning; her mind—where is that poor mind of hers? She really does not know, but it is no longer under her control.

”Ah! Captain,” I said to myself, ”what joys are hidden beneath these alarms, for she loves you. Do you remember that kiss which she let you snatch coming out of church that evening when the Abbe What’s-his-name preached so well, and those hand-squeezings and those softened glances, and—happy Captain, floods of love will inundate you; she is awaiting you!”

Here I gnawed my moustache, I tore my gloves off and then put them on again, I walked up and down the little drawing-room, I shifted the clock, which stood on the mantel-shelf; I could not keep still. I had already experienced such sensations on the morning of the assault on the Malakoff. Suddenly the General, who was still going on with his eternal game at *ecarte* with the prefect, turned round.

”What a noise you are making, Georges!” said he. ”Cards, if you please, Prefect.”

”But, General, the fact is that I feel, I will not conceal from you, a certain degree of emotion and—”

”The king-one-and four trumps. My dear friend, you are not in luck,” said he to the prefect, and pulling up with an effort the white waistcoat covering his stomach, he slipped some louis which were on the table L931 into his fob; then bethinking himself, he added: ”In fact, my poor fellow, you think yourself bound to keep us company. It is late and we have three leagues to cover from here to B. Every one has left, too.”

At last he departed. I can still see his thick neck, the back of which formed a roll of fat over his ribbon of the Legion of Honor. I heard him get into his carriage; he was still laughing at intervals. I could have thrashed him.

”At last!” I said to myself; ”at last!” I mechanically glanced at myself in the glass. I was crimson, and my boots, I am ashamed to say, were horribly uncomfortable. I was furious that such a grotesque detail as tight boots should at such a moment have power to attract my attention; but I promised to be sincere, and I am telling you the whole truth.

Just then the clock struck one, and my mother-in-law made her appearance.

Her eyes were red, and her ungloved hand was crumpling up a handkerchief visibly moistened.

At the sight of her my first movement was one of impatience. I said to myself, "I am in for a quarter of an hour of it at least."

Indeed, Madame de C. sank down on a couch, took my hand, and burst into tears. Amid her sobs she ejaculated, "Georges—my dear boy—Georges—my son."

I felt that I could not rise to the occasion. "Come, Captain," I said to myself, "a tear; squeeze forth a tear. You can not get out of this becomingly without a tear, or it will be, 'My son-in-law, it is all off.'"

When this stupid phrase, derived from I do not know where—a Palais Royal farce, I believe—had once got into my head, it was impossible for me to get rid of it, and I felt bursts of wild merriment welling up to my lips.

"Calm yourself, Madame; calm yourself."

"How can I, Georges? Forgive me, my dear boy."

"Can you doubt me, Madame?"

I felt that "Madame" was somewhat cold, but I was afraid of making Madame de C. seem old by calling her "mother." I knew her to be somewhat of a coquette.

"Oh, I do not doubt your affection; go, my dear boy, go and make her happy; yes, oh, yes! Fear nothing on my account; I am strong."

Nothing is more unbearable than emotion when one does not share it. I murmured "Mother!" feeling that after all she must appreciate such an outburst; then approaching, I kissed her, and made a face in spite of myself—such a salt and disagreeable flavor had been imparted to my mother-in-law's countenance by the tears she had shed.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE HONEYMOON

It had been decided that we should pass the first week of our honeymoon at Madame de C.'s chateau. A little suite of apartments had been fitted up for us, upholstered in blue chintz, delightfully cool-looking. The term "cool-looking" may pass here for a kind of bad joke, for in reality

it was somewhat damp in this little paradise, owing to the freshly repaired walls.

A room had been specially reserved for me, and it was thither that, after heartily kissing my dear mother-in-law, I flew up the stairs four at a time. On an armchair, drawn in front of the fire, was spread out my maroon velvet dressing-gown and close beside it were my slippers. I could not resist, and I frantically pulled off my boots. Be that as it may, my heart was full of love, and a thousand thoughts were whirling through my head in frightful confusion. I made an effort, and reflected for a moment on my position:

"Captain," said I to myself, "the approaching moment is a solemn one. On the manner in which you cross the threshold of married life depends your future happiness. It is not a small matter to lay the first stone of an edifice. A husband's first kiss"—I felt a thrill run down my back—"a husband's first kiss is like the fundamental axiom that serves as a basis for a whole volume. Be prudent, Captain. She is there beyond that wall, the fair young bride, who is awaiting you; her ear on the alert, her neck outstretched, she is listening to each of your movements. At every creak of the boards she shivers, dear little soul."

As I said this, I took off my coat and my cravat. "Your line of conduct lies before you ready traced out," I added; "be impassioned with due restraint, calm with some warmth, good, kind, tender; but at the same time let her have a glimpse of the vivacities of an ardent affection and the attractive aspect of a robust temperament." Suddenly I put my coat on again. I felt ashamed to enter my wife's room in a dressing-gown and night attire. Was it not equal to saying to her: "My dear, I am at home; see how I make myself so"? It was making a show of rights which I did not yet possess, so I rearranged my dress, and after the thousand details of a careful toilette I approached the door and gave three discreet little taps. Oh! I can assure you that I was all in a tremble, and my heart was beating so violently that I pressed my hand to my chest to restrain its throbs.

She answered nothing, and after a moment of anguish I decided to knock again. I felt tempted to say in an earnest voice, "It is I, dear; may I come in?" But I also felt that it was necessary that this phrase should be delivered in the most perfect fashion, and I was afraid of marring its effect; I remained, therefore, with a smile upon my lips as if she had been able to see me, and I twirled my moustache, which, without affectation, I had slightly perfumed.

I soon heard a faint cough, which seemed to answer me and to grant me admission. Women, you see, possess that exquisite tact, that extreme delicacy, which is wholly lacking to us. Could one say more cleverly, in a more charming manner, "Come, I await you, my love, my spouse"? Saint Peter would not have hit upon it. That cough was heaven opening to me. I turned the handle, the door swept noiselessly over the soft

carpet. I was in my wife's room.

A delightful warmth met me face to face, and I breathed a vague perfume of violets and orris-root, or something akin, with which the air of the room was laden. A charming disorder was apparent, the ball dress was spread upon a lounging-chair, two candles were discreetly burning beneath rose-colored shades.

I drew near the bed where Louise was reposing, on the farther side of it, with her face to the wall, and her head buried in the pillows. Motionless and with closed eyes she appeared to be asleep, but her heightened color betrayed her emotion. I must acknowledge that at that moment I felt the most embarrassed of mankind. I resolved humbly to request hospitality. That would be delicate and irreproachable. Oh! you who have gone through these trials, search your memories and recall that ridiculous yet delightful moment, that moment of mingled anguish and joy, when it becomes necessary, without any preliminary rehearsal, to play the most difficult of parts, and to avoid the ridicule which is grinning at you from the folds of the curtains; to be at one and the same time a diplomatist, a barrister, and a man of action, and by skill, tact, and eloquence render the sternest of realities acceptable without banishing the most ideal of dreams.

I bent over the bed, and in the softest notes, the sweetest tones my voice could compass, I murmured, "Well, darling?"

One does what one can at such moments; I could not think of anything better, and yet, Heaven knows, I had tried.

No reply, and yet she was awake. I will admit that my embarrassment was doubled. I had reckoned—I can say as much between ourselves—upon more confidence and greater yielding. I had calculated on a moment of effusiveness, full of modesty and alarm, it is true, but, at any rate, I had counted upon such effusiveness, and I found myself strangely disappointed. The silence chilled me.

"You sleep very soundly, dear. Yet I have a great many things to say; won't you talk a little?"

As I spoke I touched her shoulder with the tip of my finger, and saw her suddenly shiver.

"Come," said I; "must I kiss you to wake you up altogether?"

She could not help smiling, and I saw that she was blushing.

"Oh! do not be afraid, dear; I will only kiss the tips of your fingers gently, like that," and seeing that she let me do so, I sat down on the bed.

She gave a little cry. I had sat down on her foot, which was straying beneath the bedclothes.

"Please let me go to sleep," she said, with a supplicating air; "I am so tired."

"And how about myself, my dear child? I am ready to drop. See, I am in evening dress, and have not a pillow to rest my head on, not one, except this one." I had her hand in mine, and I squeezed it while kissing it. "Would you be very vexed to lend this pillow to your husband? Come, are you going to refuse me a little bit of room? I am not troublesome, I can assure you."

I thought I noted a smile on her lips, and, impatient to escape from my delicate position, in a moment I rose, and, while continuing to converse, hastelessly and noiselessly undressed. I was burning my ships. When my ships were burned there was absolutely nothing left for me to do but to get into bed.

Louise gave a little cry, then she threw herself toward the wall, and I heard a kind of sob.

I had one foot in bed and the other out, and remained petrified, a smile on my lips, and supporting myself wholly on one arm.

"What is the matter-dear; what is the matter? Forgive me if I have offended you."

I brought my head closer to her own, and, while inhaling the perfume of her hair, whispered in her ear:

"I love you, my dear child; I love you, little wife; don't you think that I do?"

She turned toward me her eyes, moistened with tears, and said in a voice broken by emotion and so soft, so low, so tender, that it penetrated to the marrow of my bones:

"I love you, too. But let me sleep!"

"Sleep, my loved angel; sleep fearlessly, my love. I am going away; sleep while I watch over you," I said.

Upon my honor I felt a sob rise to my throat, and yet the idea that my last remark was not badly turned shot through my brain. I pulled the coverings over her again and tucked her up like a child. I can still see her rosy face buried in that big pillow, the curls of fair hair escaping from under the lace of her little nightcap. With her left hand she held the counterpane close up under her chin, and I saw on one of her fingers the new and glittering wedding-ring I had given her that morning. She

was charming, a bird nestling in cottonwool, a rosebud fallen amid snow. When she was settled I bent over her and kissed her on the forehead.

"I am repaid," said I to her, laughing; "are you comfortable, Louise?"

She did not answer, but her eyes met mine and I saw in them a smile which seemed to thank me, but a smile so subtle that in any other circumstances I should have seen a shadow of raillery in it.

"Now, Captain, settle yourself in this armchair and goodnight!" I said this to myself, and I made an effort to raise my unfortunate foot which I had forgotten, a heroic effort, but it was impossible to accomplish it. The leg was so benumbed that I could not move it. As well as I could I hoisted myself upon the other leg, and, hobbling, reached my armchair without appearing too lame. The room seemed to me twice as wide to cross as the Champ de Mars, for hardly had I taken a step in its chilly atmosphere—the fire had gone out, it was April, and the chateau overlooked the Loire—when the cold reminded me of the scantiness of my costume. What! to cross the room before that angel, who was doubtless watching me, in the most grotesque of costumes, and with a helpless leg into the bargain! Why had I forgotten my dressing-gown? However, I reached the armchair, into which I sank. I seized my dress-coat which was beside me, threw it over my shoulders, twisted my white cravat round my neck, and, like a soldier bivouacking, I sought a comfortable position.

It would have been all very well without the icy cold that assailed my legs, and I saw nothing in reach to cover me. I said to myself, "Captain, the position is not tenable," when at length I perceived on the couch—One sometimes is childishly ashamed, but I really dared not, and I waited for a long minute struggling between a sense of the ridiculous and the cold which I felt was increasing. At last, when I heard my wife's breathing become more regular and thought that she must be asleep, I stretched out my arm and pulled toward me her wedding-gown which was on the couch—the silk rustled enough to wake the dead—and with the energy which one always finds on an emergency, wrapped it round me savagely like a railway rug. Then yielding to an involuntary fit of sybaritism, I unhooked the bellows and tried to get the fire to burn.

"After all," I said to myself, arranging the blackened embers and working the little instrument with a thousand precautions, "after all, I have behaved like a gentleman. If the General saw me at this moment he would laugh in my face; but no matter, I have acted rightly."

Had I not sworn to be sincere, I do not know whether I should acknowledge to you that I suddenly felt horrible tinglings in the nasal regions. I wished to restrain myself, but the laws of nature are those which one can not escape. My respiration suddenly ceased, I felt a superhuman power contract my facial muscles, my nostrils dilated, my eyes closed, and all at once I sneezed with such violence that the bottle of Eau des Carmes

shook again. God forgive me! A little cry came from the bed, and immediately afterward the most silvery frank and ringing outbreak of laughter followed. Then she added in her simple, sweet, musical tones:

"Have you hurt yourself—, Georges?" She had said Georges after a brief silence, and in so low a voice that I scarcely heard it.

"I am very ridiculous, am I not, dear? and you are quite right to laugh at me. What would you have? I am camping out and I am undergoing the consequences."

"You are not ridiculous, but you are catching cold," and she began to laugh again.

"Naughty girl!"

"Cruel one, you ought to say, and you would not be wrong if I were to let you fall ill." She said this with charming grace. There was a mingling of timidity and tenderness, modesty and raillery, which I find it impossible to express, but which stupefied me. She smiled at me, then I saw her move nearer to the wall in order to leave room for me, and, as I hesitated to cross the room.

"Come, forgive me," she said.

I approached the bed; my teeth were chattering.

"How kind you are to me, dear," she said to me after a moment or so; "will you wish me good-night?" and she held out her cheek to me. I approached nearer, but as the candle had just gone out I made a mistake as to the spot, and my lips brushed hers. She quivered, then, after a brief silence, she murmured in a low tone, "You must forgive me; you frightened me so just now."

"I wanted to kiss you, dear."

"Well, kiss me, my husband."

Within the trembling young girl the coquetry of the woman was breaking forth in spite of herself.

I could not help it; she exhaled a delightful perfume which mounted to my brain, and the contact of this dear creature whom I touched, despite myself, swept away all my resolutions.

My lips—I do not know how it was—met hers, and we remained thus for a long moment; I felt against my breast the echo of the beating heart, and her rapid breathing came full into my face.

"You do love me a little, dear?" I whispered in her ear.

I distinguished amid a confused sigh a little "Yes!" that resembled a mere breath.

"I don't frighten you any longer?"

"No," she murmured, very softly.

"You will be my little wife, then, Louise; you will let me teach you to love me as I love you?"

"I do love you," said she, but so softly and so gently that she seemed to be dreaming.

How many times have we not laughed over these recollections, already so remote.