EDMOND DE GONCOURT, JULES DE GONCOURT

GERMINIE LACERTEUX

Edmond de Goncourt

Germinie Lacerteux

«Public Domain»

Goncourt E.

Germinie Lacerteux / E. Goncourt — «Public Domain»,

© Goncourt E.
© Public Domain

Содержание

PREFACE TO FIRST EDITION 5
SECOND PREFACE 6
I 11
II 14
III 24
IV 27
V 30
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 31

Edmond de Goncourt
Germinie Lacerteux

PREFACE TO FIRST EDITION

We must ask pardon of the public for offering it this book, and give it due warning of what it will find therein.

The public loves fictitious novels! this is a true novel.

It loves books which make a pretence of introducing their readers to fashionable society: this book deals with the life of the street.

It loves little indecent books, memoirs of courtesans, alcove confessions, erotic obscenity, the scandal tucked away in pictures in a bookseller's shop window: that which is contained in the following pages is rigidly clean and pure. Do not expect the photograph of Pleasure *décolletée*: the following study is the clinic of Love.

Again, the public loves to read pleasant, soothing stories, adventures that end happily, imaginative works that disturb neither its digestion nor its peace of mind: this book furnishes entertainment of a melancholy, violent sort calculated to disarrange the habits and injure the health of the public.

Why then have we written it? For no other purpose than to annoy the public and offend its tastes?

By no means.

Living as we do in the nineteenth century, in an age of universal suffrage, of democracy, of liberalism, we asked ourselves the question whether what are called "the lower classes" had no rights in the novel; if that world beneath a world, the common people, must needs remain subject to the literary interdict, and helpless against the contempt of authors who have hitherto said no word to imply that the common people possess a heart and soul. We asked ourselves whether, in these days of equality in which we live, there are classes unworthy the notice of the author and the reader, misfortunes too lowly, dramas too foul-mouthed, catastrophes too commonplace in the terror they inspire. We were curious to know if that conventional symbol of a forgotten literature, of a vanished society, Tragedy, is definitely dead; if, in a country where castes no longer exist and aristocracy has no legal status, the miseries of the lowly and the poor would appeal to public interest, emotion, compassion, as forcibly as the miseries of the great and the rich; if, in a word, the tears that are shed in low life have the same power to cause tears to flow as the tears shed in high life.

These thoughts led us to venture upon the humble tale, *Sœur Philomène*, in 1861; they lead us to put forth *Germinie Lacerteux* to-day.

Now, let the book be spoken slightingly of; it matters little. At this day, when the sphere of the Novel is broadening and expanding, when it is beginning to be the serious, impassioned, living form of literary study and social investigation, when it is becoming, by virtue of analysis and psychological research, the true History of contemporary morals, when the novel has taken its place among the necessary elements of knowledge, it may properly demand its liberty and freedom of speech. And to encourage it in the search for Art and Truth, to authorize it to disclose misery and suffering which it is not well for the fortunate people of Paris to forget, and to show to people of fashion what the Sisters of Charity have the courage to see for themselves, what the queens of old compelled their children to touch with their eyes in the hospitals: the visible, palpitating human suffering that teaches charity; to confirm the novel in the practice of that religion which the last century called by the vast and far-reaching name, *Humanity*: – it needs no other warrant than the consciousness that that is its right.

Paris, October, 1864.

SECOND PREFACE

PREPARED FOR A POSTHUMOUS EDITION OF GERMINIE LACERTEUX

July 22, 1862.– The disease is gradually doing its work of destruction in our poor Rose. It is as if the immaterial manifestations of life that formerly emanated from her body were dying one by one. Her face is entirely changed. Her expression is not the same, her gestures are not the same; and she seems to me as if she were putting off every day more and more of that something, humanly speaking indefinable, which makes the personality of a living being. Disease, before making an end of its victim, introduces into his body something strange, unfamiliar, something that is *not he*, makes of him a new being, so to speak, in whom we must seek to find the former being – he, whose joyous, affectionate features have already ceased to exist.

July 31.– Doctor Simon is to tell me very soon whether our dear old Rose will live or die. I am waiting to hear his ring, which to me, is equivalent to that of a jury at the assizes, announcing their return to the court room with their verdict. "It is all over, there is no hope, it is simply a question of time. The disease has progressed very rapidly. One lung is entirely gone and the other substantially." And we must return to the invalid, restore her serenity with a smile, give her reason to hope for convalescence in every line of our faces. Then we feel an unconquerable longing to rush from the room and from the poor creature. We leave the house, we wander at random through the streets; at last, overdone with fatigue, we sit down at a table in a café. We mechanically take up a copy of *L'Illustration* and our eyes fall at once upon the solution of its last riddle: *Against death, there is no appeal!*

Monday, August 11.– The disease of the lungs is complicated with peritonitis. She has terrible pains in the bowels, she cannot move without assistance, she cannot lie on her back or her left side. In God's name, is not death enough? must she also endure suffering, aye, torture, as the final implacable breaking-up of the human organism? And she suffers thus, poor wretch! in one of the servant's rooms, where the sun, shining in through a window in the sloping roof, makes the air as stifling as in a hothouse, and where there is so little room that the doctor has to put his hat on the bed. We struggled to the last to keep her, but finally we had to make up our minds to let her go away. She was unwilling to go to Maison Dubois, where we proposed to take her; it seems that twenty-five years ago, when she first came to us, she went there to see the nurse in charge of Edmond, who died there, and so that particular hospital represents to her the place where people die. I am waiting for Simon who is to bring her a permit to go to Lariboisière. She passed almost a good night. She is all ready, in high spirits, in fact. We have covered everything up from her as well as we could. She longs to be gone. She is in a great hurry. She feels that she is going to get well there. At two o'clock Simon arrives: "Here it is, all right." She refuses to have a litter: "I should think I was dead!" she says. She is dressed. As soon as she leaves her bed, all the signs of life to be seen upon her face disappear. It is as if the earth had risen under her skin. She comes down into our apartments. Sitting in the dining-room, with a trembling hand, the knuckles of which knock against one another, she draws her stockings on over a pair of legs like broomsticks, consumptive legs. Then, for a long moment, she looks about at the familiar objects with dying eyes that seem desirous to take away with them the memory of the places they are leaving – and the door of the apartment closes upon her with a noise as of farewell. She reaches the foot of the stairs, where she rests for an instant on a chair. The concierge, in a bantering tone, assures her that she will be well in six weeks. She bows and says "yes," an inaudible "yes." The cab drives up to the door. She rests her hand on the concierge's wife. I hold her against the pillow she has behind her back. With wide open, vacant eyes she vaguely watches the houses pass, but she

does not speak. At the door of the hospital she tries to alight without assistance. "Can you walk so far?" the concierge asks. She makes an affirmative gesture and walks on. Really I cannot imagine where she procured the strength to walk as she does. Here we are at last in the great hall, a high, cold, bare, clean place with a litter standing, all ready for use, in the centre. I seat her in a straw armchair by a door with a glazed wicket. A young man opens the wicket, asks my name and age and writes busily for quarter of an hour, covering ten or more sheets of paper with a religious figure at the head. At last, everything is ready, and I embrace her. A boy takes one arm, the housekeeper the other. – After that, I saw nothing more.

Thursday, August 14.– We have been to Lariboisière. We found Rose quiet, hopeful, talking of her approaching discharge – in three weeks at most, – and so free from all thought of death that she told us of a furious love scene that took place yesterday between a woman in the bed next hers and a brother of the Christian schools, who was there again to-day. Poor Rose is death, but death engrossed with life. Near her bed was a young woman, whose husband, a mechanic, had come to see her. "You see, as soon as I can walk, I shall walk about the garden so much that they'll have to send me home!" she said. And the mother in her added: "Does the child ask for me sometimes?"

"Sometimes, oh! yes," the man replied.

Saturday, August 16.– This morning, at ten o'clock, someone rings the bell. I hear a colloquy at the door between the housekeeper and the concierge. The door opens, the concierge enters with a letter. I take the letter; it bears the stamp of Lariboisière. Rose died this morning at seven o'clock.

Poor girl! So it is all over! I knew that she was doomed; but she was so animated, so cheerful, almost happy, when we saw her Thursday! And here we are both walking up and down the salon, filled with the thought that a fellow-creature's death inspires: We shall never see her again! – an instinctive thought that recurs incessantly within you. What a void! what a gap in our household! A habit, an attachment of twenty-five years growth, a girl who knew our whole lives and opened our letters in our absence, and to whom we told all our business. When I was a bit of a boy I trundled my hoop with her, and she bought me apple-tarts with her own money, when we went to walk. She would sit up for Edmond till morning, to open the door for him, when he went to the Bal de l'Opéra without our mother's knowledge. She was the woman, the excellent nurse, whose hands mother placed in ours when she was dying. She had the keys to everything, she managed everything, she did everything for our comfort. For twenty-five years she tucked us up in bed every night, and every night there were the same never-ending jokes about her ugliness and her disgraceful physique. Sorrows and joys alike she shared with us. She was one of those devoted creatures upon whose solicitude you rely to close your eyes. Our bodies, when we were ill or indisposed, were accustomed to her attentions. She was familiar with all our hobbies. She had known all our mistresses. She was a piece of our life, part of the furniture of our apartment, a stray memory of our youth, at once loving and scolding and care-taking, like a watchdog whom we were accustomed to having always beside us and about us, and who ought to last as long as ourselves. And we shall never see her again! It is not she moving about the rooms; she will never again come to our rooms to bid us good-morning! It is a great wrench, a great change in our lives, which seems to us, I cannot say why, like one of those solemn breaks in one's existence, when, as Byron says, destiny changes horses.

Sunday, August 17.– This morning we are to perform all the last sad duties. We must return to the hospital, enter once more the reception hall, where I seem to see again, in the armchair against the wicket, the ghost of the emaciated creature I seated there less than a week ago. "Will you identify the body?" the attendant hurls the question at me in a harsh voice. We go to the further end of the hospital, to a high yellow door, upon which is written in great black letters: *Amphitheatre*. The attendant knocks. After some moments the door is partly opened, and a head like a butcher's boy's appears, with a short pipe in its mouth: a head which suggests the gladiator and the grave-digger. I fancied that I was at the circus, and that he was the slave who received the gladiators' bodies; and he does receive the slain in that great circus, society. They made us wait a long while before opening

another door, and during those moments of suspense, all our courage oozed away, as the blood of a wounded man who is forced to remain standing oozes away, drop by drop. The mystery of what we were about to see, the horror of a sight that rends your heart, the search for the one body amid other bodies, the scrutiny and recognition of that poor face, disfigured doubtless – the thought of all this made us as timid as children. We were at the end of our strength, at the end of our will-power, at the end of our nervous tension, and, when the door opened, we said: "We will send some one," and fled. From there we went to the mayor's office, riding in a cab that jolted us and shook our heads about like empty things. And an indefinable horror seized upon us of death in a hospital, which seems to be only an administrative formality. One would say that in that abode of agony, everything is so well administered, regulated, reduced to system, that death opens it as if it were an administrative bureau.

While we were having the death registered, —*Mon Dieu!* the paper, all covered with writing and flourishes for a poor woman's death! – a man rushed out of an adjoining room, in joyous exultation, and looked at the almanac hanging on the wall to find the name of the saint of the day and give it to his child. As he passed, the skirt of the happy father's coat swept the sheet on which the death was registered from the desk to the floor.

When we returned home, we must look through her papers, get her clothes together, sort out the clutter of phials, bandages and innumerable things that sickness collects – jostle death about, in short. It was a ghastly thing to enter that attic, where the crumbs of bread from her last meal were still lying in the folds of the bedclothes. I threw the coverlid up over the bolster, like a sheet over the ghost of a dead man.

Monday, August 18.– The chapel is beside the amphitheatre. In the hospital God and the dead body are neighbors. At the mass said for the poor woman beside her coffin, two or three others were placed near by to reap the benefit of the service. There was an unpleasant promiscuousness of salvation in that performance: it resembled the common grave in the prayer. Behind me, in the chapel, Rose's niece was weeping – the little girl she had at our house for a short time, who is now a young woman of nineteen, a pupil at the convent of the Sisters of Saint-Laurent: a poor, weazened, pale, stunted creature, rickety from starvation, with a head too heavy for her body, back bent double, and the air of a Mayeux – the last sad remnant of that consumption-ridden family, awaited by Death and with his hand even now heavy upon her, – in her soft eyes there is already a gleam of the life beyond.

Then from the chapel to the extreme end of the Montmartre cemetery, – vast as a necropolis and occupying a whole quarter of the city, – walking at slow steps through mud that never ends. Lastly the intoning of the priests, and the coffin laboriously lowered by the gravediggers' arms to the ends of the ropes, as a cask of wine is lowered into a cellar.

Wednesday, August 20.– Once more I must return to the hospital. For since the visit I paid Rose on Thursday and her sudden death the next day, there has existed for me a mystery which I force from my thoughts, but which constantly returns; the mystery of that agony of which I know nothing, of that sudden end. I long to know and I dread to learn. It does not seem to me as if she were dead; I think of her simply as of a person who has disappeared. My imagination returns to her last hours, gropes for them in the darkness and reconstructs them, and they torture me with their veiled horrors! I need to have my doubts resolved. At last, this morning, I took my courage in both hands. Again I see the hospital, again I see the red-faced, obese concierge, reeking with life as one reeks with wine, and the corridors where the morning light falls upon the pale faces of smiling convalescents.

In a distant corner, I rang at a door with little white curtains. It was opened and I found myself in a parlor where a Virgin stood upon a sort of altar between two windows. On the northern wall of the room, the cold, bare room, there are – why, I cannot explain – two framed views of Vesuvius, wretched water-colors which seem to shiver and to be entirely expatriated there. Through an open door behind me, from a small room in which the sun shines brightly, I hear the chattering of sisters and children, childish joys, pretty little bursts of laughter, all sorts of fresh, clear vocal notes: a sound as from a dovecote bathed in the sun. Sisters in white with black caps pass and repass; one stops in

front of my chair. She is short, badly developed, with an ugly, sweet face, a poor face by the grace of God. She is the mother of the Salle Saint-Joseph. She tells me how Rose died, in hardly any pain, feeling that she was improving, almost well, overflowing with encouragement and hope. In the morning, after her bed was made, without any suspicion that death was near, suddenly she was taken with a hemorrhage, which lasted some few seconds. I came away, much comforted, delivered from the thought that she had had the anticipatory taste of death, the horror of its approach.

Thursday, October 21.

In the midst of our dinner, which was rendered melancholy enough by the constant hovering of the conversation around the subject of death, Maria, who came to dinner to-night, cried out, after two or three nervous blows with her fingers upon her fluffy blonde locks: – "My friends, while the poor girl was alive, I kept the professional secret of my trade. But, now that she is under ground, you must know the truth."

And thereupon we learned things concerning the unhappy creature that took away our appetites, leaving in our mouths the bitter taste of fruit cut with a steel knife. And a whole strange, hateful, repugnant, deplorable existence was revealed to us. The notes she signed, the debts she has left behind her at all the dealers, have the most unforeseen, the most amazing, the most incredible basis. She kept men: the milkwoman's son, for whom she furnished a chamber; another to whom she carried our wine, chickens, food of all sorts. A secret life of nocturnal orgies, of nights passed abroad, of fierce nymphomania, that made her lovers say: "Either she or I will stay on the field!" A passion, passions with her whole head and heart and all her senses at once, and complicated by all the wretched creatures' diseases, consumption which adds frenzy to pleasure, hysteria, the beginning of insanity. She had two children by the milkwoman's son, one of whom lived six months. Some years ago, when she told us that she was going on a visit to her province, it was to lie in. And, with regard to these men, her passion was so extravagant, so unhealthy, so insane, that she, who was formerly honesty personified, actually stole from us, took twenty franc pieces out of rolls of a hundred francs, so that the lovers she paid might not leave her. Now, after these involuntarily dishonest acts, these petty crimes extorted from her upright nature, she plunged into such depths of self-reproach, remorse, melancholy, such black despair, that in that hell in which she rolled on from sin to sin, desperate and unsatisfied, she had taken to drinking to escape herself, to save herself from the present, to drown herself and founder for a few moments in the heavy slumber, the lethargic torpor in which she would lie wallowing across her bed for a whole day, just as she fell when she tried to make it. The miserable creature! how great an incentive, how many motives and reasons she found for devouring her suffering, and bleeding internally: in the first place the rejection at intervals of religious ideas by the terrors of a hell of fire and brimstone; then jealousy, that characteristic jealousy of everything and everybody that poisoned her life; then, then – then the disgust which these men, after a time, brutally expressed for her ugliness, and which drove her deeper and deeper into sottishness, – caused her one day to have a miscarriage, and she fell half dead on the floor. Such a frightful tearing away of the veil we have worn over our eyes is like the examination of a pocketful of horrible things in a dead body suddenly opened. From what we have heard I suddenly seem to realize what she must have suffered for ten years past: the dread of an anonymous letter to us or of a denunciation from some dealer; and the constant trepidation on the subject of the money that was demanded of her, and that she could not pay; and the shame felt by that proud creature, perverted by the vile Quartier Saint-Georges, because of her intimacy with low wretches whom she despised; and the lamentable consciousness of the premature senility caused by drunkenness; and the inhuman exactions and brutality of the Alphonses of the gutter; and the temptations to suicide which caused me to pull her away from a window one day, when I found her leaning far out – and lastly all the tears that we believed to be without cause – all these things mingled with a very deep and heartfelt affection for us, and with a vehement, feverish devotion when either of us was ill. And this woman possessed an energetic character, a force of will, a skill in mystification, to which nothing can be compared. Yes, yes, all those frightful secrets kept

under lock and key, hidden, buried deep in her own heart, so that neither our eyes, nor our ears, nor our powers of observation ever detected aught amiss, even in her hysterical attacks, when nothing escaped her but groans: a mystery preserved until her death, and which she must have believed would be buried with her. And of what did she die? She died, because, all through one rainy winter's night, eight months ago, at Montmartre, she spied upon the milkwoman's son, who had turned her away, in order to find out with what woman he had filled her place; a whole night leaning against a ground-floor window, as a result of which she was drenched to the bones with deadly pleurisy!

Poor creature, we forgive her; indeed, a vast compassion for her fills our hearts, as we reflect upon all that she has suffered. But we have become suspicious, for our lives, of the whole female sex, and of women above us as well as of women below us in station. We are terror-stricken at the double lining of their hearts, at the marvelous faculty, the science, the consummate genius of falsehood with which their whole being is instinct.

The above extracts are from our journal: Journal des Goncourts —*Mémoires de la Vie Littéraire*; they are the documentary foundation upon which, two years later, my brother and I composed Germinie Lacerteux, whom we made a study of and taught when she was in the service of our venerable cousin, Mademoiselle de C – t, of whom we were writing a veracious biography, after the style of a biography of modern history.

Edmond de Goncourt.

Auteuil, April, 1886.

I

"Saved! so you are really out of danger, mademoiselle!" exclaimed the maid with a cry of joy, as she closed the door upon the doctor, and, rushing to the bed on which her mistress lay, she began, in a frenzy of happiness and with a shower of kisses to embrace, together with the bed covers, the old woman's poor, emaciated body, which seemed, in the huge bed, as small as a child's.

The old woman took her head, silently, in both hands, pressed it against her heart, heaved a sigh, and muttered: "Ah, well! so I must live on!"

This took place in a small room, through the window of which could be seen a small patch of sky cut by three black iron pipes, various neighboring roofs, and in the distance, between two houses that almost touched, the leafless branch of a tree, whose trunk was invisible.

On the mantelpiece, in a mahogany box, was a square clock with a large dial, huge figures and bulky hands. Beside it, under glass covers, were two candlesticks formed by three silver swans twisting their necks around a golden quiver. Near the fireplace an easy chair *à la Voltaire*, covered with one of the pieces of tapestry of checker-board pattern, which little girls and old women make, extended its empty arms. Two little Italian landscapes, a flower piece in water-colors after Bertin, with a date in red ink at the bottom, and a few miniatures hung on the walls.

Upon the mahogany commode of an Empire pattern, a statue of Time in black bronze, running with his scythe in rest, served as a watch stand for a small watch with a monogram in diamonds upon blue enamel, surrounded with pearls. The floor was covered with a bright carpet with black and green stripes. The curtains at the bed and the window were of old-fashioned chintz with red figures upon a chocolate ground.

At the head of the bed, a portrait inclined over the invalid and seemed to gaze sternly at her. It represented a man with harsh features, whose face emerged from the high collar of a green satin coat, and a muslin cravat, with waving ends, tied loosely around the neck, in the style of the early years of the Revolution. The old woman in the bed resembled the portrait. She had the same bushy, commanding black eyebrows, the same aquiline nose, the same clearly marked lines of will, resolution and energy. The portrait seemed to cast a reflection upon her, as a father's face is reflected in his child's. But in hers the harshness of the features was softened by a gleam of rough kindliness, by an indefinable flame of sturdy devotion and masculine charity.

The light in the room was the light of an evening in early spring, about five o'clock, a light as clear as crystal and as white as silver, the cold, chaste, soft light, which fades away in the flush of the sunset passing into twilight. The sky was filled with that light of a new life, adorably melancholy, like the still naked earth, and so replete with pathos that it moves happy souls to tears.

"Well, well! my silly Germinie, weeping?" said the old woman, a moment later, withdrawing her hands which were moist with her maid's kisses.

"Oh! my dear, kind mademoiselle, I would like to weep like this all the time! it's so good! it brings my poor mother back before my eyes – and everything! – if you only knew!"

"Go on, go on," said her mistress, closing her eyes to listen, "tell me about it."

"Oh! my poor mother!" The maid paused a moment. Then, with the flood of words that gushes forth with tears of joy, she continued, as if, in the emotion and outpouring of her happiness, her whole childhood flowed back into her heart! "Poor woman! I can see her now the last time she went out to take me to mass, one 21st of January, I remember. In those days they read from the king's Testament. Ah! she suffered enough on my account, did mamma! She was forty-two years old, when I was born – papa made her cry a good deal! There were three of us before and there wasn't any too much bread in the house. And then he was proud as anything. If we'd had only a handful of peas in the house he would never have gone to the curé for help. Ah! we didn't eat bacon every day at our house. Never mind; for all that mamma loved me a little more and she always found a little fat or

cheese in some corner to put on my bread. I wasn't five when she died. That was a bad thing for us all. I had a tall brother, who was white as a sheet, with a yellow beard – and good! you have no idea. Everybody loved him. They gave him all sorts of names. Some called him Boda – why, I don't know. Others called him Jesus Christ. Ah! he was a worker, he was! It didn't make any difference to him that his health was good for nothing; at daybreak he was always at his loom – for we were weavers, you must know – and he never put his shuttle down till night. And honest, too, if you knew! People came from all about to bring him their yarn, and without weighing it, too. He was a great friend of the schoolmaster, and he used to write the *mottoes* for the carnival. My father, he was a different sort: he'd work for a moment, or an hour, you know, and then he'd go off into the fields – and when he came home he'd beat us, and beat us hard. He was like a madman; they said it was because he was consumptive. It was lucky my brother was there: he used to prevent my second sister from pulling my hair and hurting me, because she was jealous. He always took me by the hand to go and see them play skittles. In fact, he supported the family all alone. For my first communion he had the bells rung! Ah! he did a heap of work so that I should be like the others, in a little white dress with flounces and a little bag in my hand, such as they used to carry in those days. I didn't have any cap: I remember making myself a pretty little wreath of ribbons and the white pith you pull off when you strip reeds; there was lots of it in the places where we used to put the hemp to soak. That was one of my great days – that and the drawing lots for the pigs at Christmas – and the days when I went to help them tie up the vines; that was in June, you know. We had a little vineyard near Saint Hilaire. There was one very hard year in those days – do you remember it, mademoiselle? – the long frost of 1828 that ruined everything. It extended as far as Dijon and farther, too – people had to make bread from bran. My brother nearly killed himself with work. Father, who was always out of doors tramping about the fields, sometimes brought home a few mushrooms. It was pretty bad, all the same; we were hungry oftener than anything else. When I was out in the fields myself, I'd look around to see if anyone could see me, and then I'd crawl along softly on my knees, and when I was under a cow, I'd take off one of my sabots and begin to milk her. Bless me! I came near being caught at it! My oldest sister was out at service with the Mayor of Lenclos, and she sent home her wages – twenty-four francs – it was always as much as that. The second worked at dressmaking in bourgeois families; but they didn't pay the prices then that they do to-day; she worked from six in the morning till dark for eight sous. Out of that she wanted to put some by for a dress for the fête on Saint-Remi's day. – Ah! that's the way it is with us: there are many who live on two potatoes a day for six months so as to have a new dress for that day. Bad luck fell on us on all sides. My father died. We had to sell a small field, and a bit of a vineyard that yielded a cask of wine every year. The notaries don't work for nothing. When my brother was sick there was nothing to give him to drink but *lees* that we'd been putting water to for a year. And there wasn't any change of linen for him; all the sheets in the wardrobe, which had a golden cross on top of it in mother's time, had gone – and the cross too. More than that, before he was sick this time, my brother goes off to the fête at Clefmont. He hears someone say that my sister had gone wrong with the mayor she worked for; he falls on the men who said it, but he wasn't very strong. They were, though, and they threw him down, and when he was down, they kicked him with their wooden shoes, in the pit of the stomach. He was brought home to us for dead. The doctor put him on his feet again, though, and told us he was cured. But he could just drag himself along. I could see that he was going when he kissed me. When he was dead, poor dear boy, Cadet Ballard had to use all his strength to take me away from the body. The whole village, mayor and all, went to his funeral. As my sister couldn't keep her place with the mayor on account of the things he said to her, and had gone to Paris to find a place, my other sister went after her. I was left all alone. One of my mother's cousins then took me with her to Damblin; but I was all upset there; I cried all night long, and whenever I could run away I always went back to our house. Just to see the old vine at our door, from the end of the street, did me good! it put strength into my legs. The good people who had bought the house would keep me till someone came for me! they were always sure to find me there. At last they wrote to my

sister in Paris that, if she didn't send for me to come and live with her, I wasn't likely to live long. It's a fact that I was just like wax. They put me in charge of the driver of a small wagon that went from Langres to Paris every month, and that's how I came to Paris. I was fourteen years old, then. I remember that I went to bed all dressed all the way, because they made me sleep in the common room. When I arrived I was covered with lice."

II

The old woman said nothing: she was comparing her own life with her servant's.

Mademoiselle de Varandeuil was born in 1782. She first saw the light in a mansion on Rue Royale and Mesdames de France were her sponsors in baptism. Her father was a close friend of the Comte d'Artois, in whose household he held an important post. He joined in all his hunting-parties, and was one of the few familiar spirits, in whose presence, at the mass preceding the hunt, he who was one day to be King Charles X. used to hurry the officiating priest by saying in an undertone: "Psit! psit! curé, swallow your *Good Lord* quickly!"

Monsieur de Varandeuil had made one of those marriages which were customary enough in his day: he had espoused a sort of actress, a singer, who, although she had no great talent, had made a success at the *Concert Spirituel*, beside Madame Todi, Madame Ponteuil and Madame Saint-Huberty. The little girl born of this marriage in 1782 was sickly and delicate, ugly of feature, with a nose even then large enough to be absurd, her father's nose in a face as thin as a man's wrist. She had nothing of what her parents' vanity would have liked her to have. After making a fiasco on the piano at the age of five, at a concert given by her mother in her salon, she was relegated to the society of the servants. Except for a moment in the morning, she never went near her mother, who always made her kiss her under the chin, so that she might not disturb her rouge. When the Revolution arrived, Monsieur de Varandeuil, thanks to the Comte d'Artois' patronage, was disburser of pensions. Madame de Varandeuil was traveling in Italy, whither she had ordered her physician to send her on the pretext of ill health, leaving her daughter and an infant son in her husband's charge. The absorbing anxiety of the times, the tempests threatening wealth and the families that handled wealth – Monsieur de Varandeuil's brother was a Farmer-General – left that very selfish and unloving father but little leisure to attend to the wants of his children. Thereupon, he began to be somewhat embarrassed pecuniarily. He left Rue Royale and took up his abode at the Hôtel du Petit-Charolais, belonging to his mother, who allowed him to install himself there. Events moved rapidly; one evening, in the early days of the guillotine, as he was walking along Rue Saint-Antoine, he heard a hawker in front of him, crying the journal: *Aux Voleurs! Aux Voleurs!* According to the usual custom of those days, he gave a list of the articles contained in the number he had for sale: Monsieur de Varandeuil heard his own name mingled with oaths and obscenity. He bought the paper and read therein a revolutionary denunciation of himself.

Some time after, his brother was arrested and detained at Hôtel Talaru with the other Farmers-General. His mother, in a paroxysm of terror, had foolishly sold the Hôtel du Petit-Charolais, where he was living, for the value of the mirrors: she was paid in *assignats*, and died of despair over the constant depreciation of the paper. Luckily Monsieur de Varandeuil obtained from the purchasers, who could find no tenants, leave to occupy the rooms formerly used by the stableboys. He took refuge there, among the outbuildings of the mansion, stripped himself of his name and posted at the door, as he was ordered to do, his family name of Roulot, under which he buried the *De Varandeuil* and the former courtier of the Comte d'Artois. He lived there alone, buried, forgotten, hiding his head, never going out, cowering in his hole, without servants, waited upon by his daughter, to whom he left everything. The Terror was to them a period of shuddering suspense, the breathless excitement of impending death. Every evening, the little girl went and listened at a grated window to the day's crop of condemnations, the *List of Prize Winners in the Lottery of Saint Guillotine*. She answered every knock at the door, thinking that they had come to take her father to the Place de la Révolution, whither her uncle had already been taken. The moment came when money, the money that was so scarce, no longer procured bread. It was necessary to go and get it, almost by force, at the doors of the bakeries; it was necessary to earn it by standing for hours in the cold, biting night air, in the crushing pressure of crowds of people; to stand in line from three o'clock in the morning. The father did not

care to venture into that mass of humanity. He was afraid of being recognized, of compromising himself by one of those outbursts to which his impetuous nature would have given vent, no matter where he might be. Then, too, he recoiled from the fatigue and severity of the task. The little boy was still too small; he would have been crushed; so the duty of obtaining bread for three mouths each day fell to the daughter. She obtained it. With her little thin body, fairly lost in her father's knitted jacket, a cotton cap pulled down over her eyes, her limbs all huddled together to retain a little warmth, she would wait, shivering, her eyes aching with cold, amid the pushing and buffeting, until the baker's wife on Rue des Francs-Bourgeois placed in her hands a loaf which her little fingers, stiff with cold, could hardly hold. At last, this poor little creature, who returned day after day, with her pinched face and her emaciated, trembling body, moved the baker's wife to pity. With the kindness of heart of a woman of the people, she would send the coveted loaf to the little one by her boy as soon as she appeared in the long line. But one day, just as she put out her hand to take it, a woman, whose jealousy was aroused by this mark of favor and preference, dealt the child a kick with her wooden shoe which kept her in bed almost a month. Mademoiselle de Varandeuil bore the marks of the blow all her life.

During that month, the whole family would have died of starvation, had it not been for a supply of rice, which one of their acquaintances, the Comtesse d'Auteuil, had had the forethought to lay aside, and which she consented to share with the father and the two children.

Thus, Monsieur de Varandeuil escaped the Revolutionary Tribunal by burying himself in obscurity. He escaped it also by reason of the fact that the accounts of his administration of his office were still unsettled, as he had had the good fortune to procure the postponement of the settlement from month to month. Then, too, he kept suspicion at bay by his personal animosity toward some great personages at court, and by the hatred of the queen which many retainers of the king's brothers had conceived. Whenever he had occasion to speak of that wretched woman, he used violent, bitter, insulting words, uttered in such a passionate, sincere tone that they almost made him appear as an enemy of the royal family; so that those to whom he was simply Citizen Roulot looked upon him as a good patriot, and those who knew his former name almost excused him for having been what he had been: a noble, the friend of a prince of the blood, and a place holder.

The Republic had reached the epoch of patriotic suppers, those repasts of a whole street in the street; Mademoiselle de Varandeuil, in her confused, terrified reminiscences of those days, could still see the tables on Rue Pavée, with their legs in the streams of the blood of September flowing from La Force! It was at one of these suppers that Monsieur de Varandeuil conceived a scheme that completely assured his immunity. He informed two of his neighbors at table, devoted patriots both, one of whom was on intimate terms with Chaumette, that he was in great embarrassment because his daughter had been privately baptized only, so that she had no civil status, and said that he would be very happy if Chaumette would have her entered on the registers of the municipality and honor her with a name selected by him from the Republican calendar of Greece or Rome. Chaumette at once arranged a meeting with this father, *who had reached so high a level*, as they said in those days. During the interview Mademoiselle de Varandeuil was taken into a closet where she found two women who were instructed to satisfy themselves as to her sex, and she showed them her breast. They then escorted her to the great Salle des Declarations, and there, after a metaphorical allocution, Chaumette baptized her *Sempronie*; a name which habit was destined to fasten upon Mademoiselle de Varandeuil and which she never abandoned.

Somewhat protected and reassured by that episode, the family passed through the terrible days preceding the fall of Robespierre. At last came the ninth Thermidor and deliverance. But poverty was none the less a pressing fact in the Varandeuil household. They had not lived through the bitter days of the Revolution, they were not to live through the wretched days of the Directory without unhoped-for succor, money sent by Providence by the hand of Folly. The father and the two children could hardly have existed without the income from four shares in the *Vaudeville*, an investment which Monsieur de Varandeuil was happily inspired to make in 1791, and which proved to be the best of all possible

investments in those years of death, when people felt the need of forgetting death every evening – in those days of supreme agony, when everyone wished to laugh his last laugh at the latest song. Soon these shares, added to the amount of some outstanding claims that were paid, provided the family with something more than bread. They thereupon left the eaves of the Hôtel du Petit-Charolais and took a small suite in the Marais, on Rue du Chaume.

No change took place, however, in the habits of the household. The daughter continued to wait upon her father and brother. Monsieur de Varandeuil had gradually become accustomed to see in her only the woman indicated by her costume and by the work that she did. The father's eyes did not care to recognize a daughter in that servant's garb and in her performance of menial occupations. She was no longer a person with his blood in her veins or who had the honor to belong to him: she was a servant; and his selfishness confirmed him so fully in that idea and in his harsh treatment of her, he found that filial, affectionate, respectful service, – which cost nothing at all, by the way, – so convenient, that it cost him a bitter pang to give it up later, when a little more money mended the family fortunes: battles had to be fought to induce him to take a maid to fill his child's place and to relieve the girl from the most humiliating domestic labor.

They were without information concerning Madame de Varandeuil, who had refused to join her husband at Paris during the early years of the Revolution; at last they learned that she had married again in Germany, producing, as a certificate of her husband's death, the death certificate of his guillotined brother, the baptismal name having been changed. The girl grew up, therefore, abandoned, without affection, with no mother except a woman dead to her family, whom her father taught her to despise. Her childhood was passed in constant anxiety, in the privations that wear life away, in the fatigue resulting from labor that exhausted the strength of a sickly child, in an expectation of death that became, at last, an impatient longing to die: there had been hours when that girl of thirteen was tempted to do as many women did in those days – to open the door and rush into the street, crying: *Vive le roi!* in order to end it all. Her girlhood was a continuation of her childhood with less tragic motives of weariness. She had to submit to the ill humor, the exactions, the bitter moods, the tempestuous outbreaks of her father, which had been hitherto somewhat curbed and restrained by the great tempest of the time. She was still doomed to undergo the fatigues and humiliations of a servant. She remained alone with her father, kept down and humbled, shut out from his arms and his kisses, her heart heavy with grief because she longed to love and had nothing to love. She was beginning to suffer from the cold void that is formed about a woman by an unattractive, unfascinating girlhood, by a girlhood devoid of beauty and sympathetic charm. She could see that she aroused a sort of compassion with her long nose, her yellow complexion, her angular figure, her thin body. She felt that she was ugly, and that her ugliness was made repulsive by her miserable costumes, her dismal, woolen dresses which she made herself, her father paying for the material only after much grumbling: she could not induce him to make her a small allowance for her toilet until she was thirty-five.

How sad and bitter and lonely for her was her life with that morose, sour old man, who was always scolding and complaining at home, affable only in society, and who left her every evening to go to the great houses that were reopened under the Directory and at the beginning of the Empire! Only at very long intervals did he take her out, and when he did, it was always to that everlasting *Vaudeville*, where he had boxes. Even on those rare occasions, his daughter was terrified. She trembled all the time that she was with him; she was afraid of his violent disposition, of the tone of the old régime that his outbreaks of wrath had retained, of the facility with which he would raise his cane at an insolent remark from the *canaille*. On almost every occasion there were scenes with the manager, wordy disputes with people in the pit, and threats of personal violence to which she put an end by lowering the curtain of the box. The same thing was kept up in the street, even in the cab, with the driver, who would refuse to carry them at Monsieur de Varandeuil's price and would keep them waiting one hour, two hours without moving; sometimes would unharness his horse in his wrath and leave him in the vehicle with his daughter who would vainly implore him to submit and pay the price demanded.

Considering that these diversions should suffice for Sempronie, and having, moreover, a jealous desire to have her all to himself and always under his hand, Monsieur de Varandeuil allowed her to form no intimacies with anybody. He did not take her into society; he did not take her to the houses of their kinsfolk who returned after the emigration, except on days of formal receptions or family gatherings. He kept her closely confined to the house: not until she was forty did he consider that she was old enough to be allowed to go out alone. Thus, the girl had no friendship, no connection of any sort to lean upon; indeed, she no longer had her younger brother with her, as he had gone to the United States and enlisted in the American navy.

She was forbidden by her father to marry, he did not admit that she would allow herself even to think of marrying and deserting him; all the suitors who might have come forward he fought and rejected in advance, in order not to leave his daughter the courage to speak to him on the subject, if the occasion should ever arise.

Meanwhile our victories were stripping Italy of her treasures. The masterpieces of Rome, Florence and Venice were hurrying to Paris. Italian art was at a premium. Collectors no longer took pride in any paintings but those of the Italian school. Monsieur de Varandeuil saw an opening for a fortune in this change of taste. He, also, had fallen a victim to the artistic dilettantism which was one of the refined passions of the nobility before the Revolution. He had lived in the society of artists and collectors; he admired pictures. It occurred to him to collect a gallery of Italian works and then to sell them. Paris was still overrun with the objects of art sold and scattered under the Terror. Monsieur de Varandeuil began to walk back and forth through the streets – they were the markets for large canvases in those days, – and at every step he made a discovery; every day he purchased something. Soon the small apartment was crowded with old, black paintings, so large for the most part that the walls would not hold them with their frames, with the result that there was no room for the furniture. These were christened Raphael, Vinci, or Andrea del Sarto; there were none but *chefs d'œuvre*, and the father would keep his daughter standing in front of them hours at a time, forcing his admiration upon her, wearying her with his ecstatic flights. He would ascend from epithet to epithet, would work himself into a state of intoxication, of delirium, and would end by thinking that he was negotiating with an imaginary purchaser, would dispute with him over the price of a masterpiece, and would cry out: "A hundred thousand francs for my Rosso! yes, monsieur, a hundred thousand francs!" His daughter, dismayed by the large amount of money that those great, ugly things, in which there were so many nude men, deducted from the housekeeping supply, ventured upon remonstrance and tried to check such ruinous extravagance. Monsieur de Varandeuil lost his temper, waxed wroth like a man who was ashamed to find one of his blood so deficient in taste, and told her that that was her fortune and that she would see later if he was an old fool. At last she induced him to realize. The sale took place; it was a failure, one of the most complete shipwrecks of illusions that the glazed hall of the Hôtel Bullion has ever seen. Stung to the quick, furious with rage at this blow, which not only involved pecuniary loss and a serious inroad upon his little fortune, but was also a direct denial of his claims to connoisseurship, a slap at his knowledge of art delivered upon the cheek of his Raphaels, Monsieur de Varandeuil informed his daughter that they were too poor to remain in Paris and that they must go into the provinces to live. Having been cradled and reared in an epoch little adapted to inspire a love of country life in women, Mademoiselle de Varandeuil tried vainly to combat her father's resolution: she was obliged to go with him wherever he chose to go, and, by leaving Paris, to lose the society and friendship of two young kinswomen, to whom, in their too infrequent interviews, she had partly given her confidence, and whose hearts she had felt reaching out to her as to an older sister.

Monsieur de Varandeuil hired a small house at L'Isle-Adam. There he was near familiar scenes, in the atmosphere of what was formerly a little court, close at hand to two or three châteaux, whose owners he knew, and which were beginning to throw open their doors once more. Then, too, since the Revolution a little community of well-to-do bourgeois, rich shopkeepers, had settled upon this territory which once belonged to the Contis. The name of Monsieur de Varandeuil sounded very

grand in the ears of all those good people. They bowed very low to him, they contended for the honor of entertaining him, they listened respectfully, almost devoutly, to the stories he told of society as it was. And thus, flattered, caressed, honored as a relic of Versailles, he had the place of honor and the prestige of a lord among them. When he dined with Madame Mutel, a former baker, who had forty thousand francs a year, the hostess left the table, silk dress and all, to go and fry the oyster plants herself: Monsieur de Varandeuil did not like them except as she cooked them. But Monsieur de Varandeuil's decision to go into retirement at L'Isle-Adam was mainly due, not to the pleasant surroundings there, but to a project that he had formed. He had gone thither to obtain leisure for a monumental work. That which he had been unable to do for the honor and glory of Italian art by his collection, he proposed to do by his pen. He had learned a little Italian with his wife; he took it into his head to present Vasari's *Lives of the Painters* to the French public, to translate it with the assistance of his daughter, who, when she was very small, had heard her mother's maid speak Italian and had retained a few words. He plunged the girl into Vasari, he locked up her time and her thoughts in grammars, dictionaries, commentaries, all the works of all the scholiasts of Italian art, kept her bending double over the ungrateful toil, the *ennui* and labor of translating Italian words, groping in the darkness of her imperfect knowledge. The whole burden of the book fell upon her; when he had laid out her task, he would leave her tête-à-tête with the volumes bound in white vellum, to go and ramble about the neighborhood, paying visits, gambling at some château or dining among the bourgeois of his acquaintance, to whom he would complain pathetically of the laborious effort that the vast undertaking of his translation entailed upon him. He would return home, listen to the reading of the translation made during the day, make comments and critical remarks, and upset a sentence to give it a different meaning, which his daughter would eliminate again when he had gone; then he would resume his walks and jaunts, like a man who has well earned his leisure, walking very erect, with his hat under his arm and dainty pumps on his feet, enjoying himself, the sky and the trees and Rousseau's God, gentle to all nature and loving to the plants. From time to time fits of impatience, common to children and old men, would overtake him; he would demand a certain number of pages for the next day, and would compel his daughter to sit up half the night.

Two or three years passed in this labor, in which Sempronie's eyes were ruined at last. She lived entombed in her father's Vasari, more entirely alone than ever, holding aloof through innate, haughty repugnance from the bourgeois ladies of L'Isle-Adam and their manners *à la Madame Angot*, and too poorly clad to visit at the châteaux. For her, there was no pleasure, no diversion, which was not made wretched and poisoned by her father's eccentricities and fretful humor. He tore up the flowers that she planted secretly in the garden. He would have nothing there but vegetables and he cultivated them himself, putting forth grand utilitarian theories, arguments which might have induced the Convention to convert the Tuileries into a potato field. Her only enjoyment was when her father, at very long intervals, allowed her to entertain one of her two young friends for a week – a week which would have been seven days of paradise to Sempronie, had not her father embittered its joys, its diversions, its fêtes, with his always threatening outbreaks, his ill-humor always armed and alert, and his constant fault-finding about trifles – a bottle of eau de Cologne that Sempronie asked for to place in her friend's room, a dish for her dinner, or a place to which she wished to take her.

At L'Isle-Adam Monsieur de Varandeuil had hired a servant, who almost immediately became his mistress. A child was born of this connection, and the father, in his cynical indifference, was shameless enough to have it brought up under his daughter's eyes. As the years rolled on the woman acquired a firm foothold in the house. She ended by ruling the household, father and daughter alike. The day came when Monsieur de Varandeuil chose to have her sit at his table and be served by Sempronie. That was too much. Mademoiselle de Varandeuil rebelled under the insult, and drew herself up to the full height of her indignation. Secretly, silently, in misery and isolation, harshly treated by the people and the things about her, the girl had built up a resolute, straightforward character; tears had tempered instead of softening it. Beneath filial docility and humility, beneath

passive obedience, beneath apparent gentleness of disposition, she concealed a character of iron, a man's strength of will, one of those hearts which nothing bends and which never bend themselves. When her father demanded that she lower herself to that extent, she reminded him that she was his daughter, she reviewed her whole life, cast, in a flood of words, the shame and the reproach of it in his face, and concluded by informing him that if that woman did not leave the house that very evening, she would leave it, and that she should have no difficulty in living, thank God! wherever she might go, with the simple tastes he had forced upon her. The father, thunderstruck and bewildered by this revolt, yielded and dismissed the servant; but he retained a dastardly sort of rancor against his daughter on account of the sacrifice she had extorted from him. His spleen betrayed itself in sharp, aggressive words, ironical thanks and bitter smiles. Sempronie's only revenge was to attend to his wants more thoroughly, more gently, more patiently than ever. Her devotion was destined to be subjected to one final test; the old man had a stroke of apoplexy which left him with one whole side of his body stiff and dead, lame in one leg, and asleep so far as his intelligence was concerned, although keenly conscious of his misfortune and of his dependence upon his daughter. Thereupon, all the evil that lay dormant in the depths of his nature was aroused and let loose. His selfishness amounted to ferocity. Under the torment of his suffering and his weakness, he became a sort of malevolent madman. Mademoiselle de Varandeuil devoted her days and her nights to the invalid, who seemed to hate her for her attentions, to be humiliated by her care as if it implied generosity and forgiveness, to suffer torments at seeing always by his side, indefatigable and kindly, that image of duty. But what a life it was! She had to contend against the miserable man's incurable *ennui*, to be always ready to bear him company, to lead him about and support him all day long. She must play cards with him when he was at home, and not let him win or lose too much. She must combat his wishes, his gormandizing tendencies, take dishes away from him, and, in connection with everything that he wanted, endure complaints, reproaches, insults, tears, mad despair, and the outbursts of childish anger in which helpless old men indulge. And this lasted ten years! ten years, during which Mademoiselle de Varandeuil had no other recreation, no other consolation than to pour out all the tenderness and warmth of a maternal affection upon one of her two young friends, recently married, – her *chick*, as she called her. It was Mademoiselle de Varandeuil's delight to go and pass a short time every fortnight in that happy household. She would kiss the pretty child, already in its cradle and asleep for the night when she arrived; she would dine at racing speed; at dessert she would send for a carriage and would hasten away like a tardy schoolboy. But in the last years of her father's life she could not even obtain permission to dine out: the old man would no longer sanction such a long absence and kept her almost constantly beside him, repeating again and again that he was well aware that it was not amusing to take care of an infirm old man like himself, but that she would soon be rid of him. He died in 1818, and, before his death, could find no words but these for her who had been his daughter nearly forty years: "I know that you never loved me!"

Two years before her father's death, Sempronie's brother had returned from America. He brought with him a colored woman who had nursed him through the yellow fever, and two girls, already grown up, whom he had had by the woman before marrying her. Although she was imbued with the ideas of the old régime as to the blacks, and although she looked upon that ignorant creature, with her negro jargon, her grin like a wild beast's and her skin that left grease stains upon her clothing, as no better than a monkey, Mademoiselle de Varandeuil combated her father's horror and unwillingness to receive his daughter-in-law; and she it was who induced him, in the last days of his life, to allow her brother to present his wife to him. When her father was dead she reflected that her brother's household was all that remained of the family.

Monsieur de Varandeuil, to whom the Comte d'Artois had caused the arrears of salary of his office to be paid at the return of the Bourbons, left about ten thousand francs a year to his children. The brother had, before that inheritance, only a pension of fifteen hundred francs from the United States. Mademoiselle de Varandeuil considered that five or six thousand francs a year would hardly

suffice for the comfortable support of that family, in which there were two children, and it at once occurred to her to add to it her share in the inheritance. She suggested this contribution in the most natural and simple way imaginable. Her brother accepted it, and she went with him to live in a pretty little apartment at the upper end of Rue de Clichy, on the fourth floor of one of the first houses built in that neighborhood, then hardly known, where the fresh country air blew briskly through the framework of the white buildings. She continued there her modest life, her humble manner of dressing, her economical habits, content with the least desirable room in the suite, and spending upon herself no more than eighteen hundred to two thousand francs a year. But, soon, a brooding jealousy, slowly gathering strength, took possession of the mulattress. She took offence at the fraternal affection which seemed to be taking her husband from her arms. She suffered because of the communion of speech and thought and reminiscences between them; she suffered because of the conversations in which she could take no part, because of what she heard in their voices, but could not understand. The consciousness of her inferiority kindled in her heart the fires of wrath and hatred that burn fiercely in the tropics. She had recourse to her children for her revenge; she urged them on, excited them, aroused their evil passions against her sister-in-law. She encouraged them to laugh at her, to make sport of her. She applauded the manifestations of the mischievous intelligence characteristic of children, in whom observation begins with naughtiness. Once she had let them loose upon their aunt, she allowed them to laugh at all her absurdities, her figure, her nose, her dresses, whose meanness, nevertheless, provided their own elegant attire. Thus incited and upheld, the little ones soon arrived at insolence. Mademoiselle de Varandeuil had the quick temper that accompanies kindness of heart. With her the hand, as well as the heart, had a part in the first impulse. And then she shared the prevalent opinion of her time as to the proper way of bringing up children. She endured two or three impertinent sallies without a word; but at the fourth she seized the mocking child, took down her skirts, and administered to her, notwithstanding her twelve years, the soundest whipping she had ever received. The mulattress made a great outcry and told her sister-in-law, that she had always detested her children and that she wanted to kill them. The brother interposed between the two women and succeeded in reconciling them after a fashion. But new scenes took place, when the little ones, inflamed against the woman who made their mother weep, assailed their aunt with the refined tortures of misbehaved children, mingled with the fiendish cruelty of little savages. After several patched-up truces it became necessary to part. Mademoiselle de Varandeuil decided to leave her brother, for she saw how unhappy he was amid this daily wrenching of his dearest affections. She left him to his wife and his children. This separation was one of the great sorrows of her life. She who was so strong against emotion and so self-contained, and who seemed to take pride in suffering, as it were, almost broke down when she had to leave the apartment, where she had dreamed of enjoying a little happiness in her corner, looking on at the happiness of others: her last tears mounted to her eyes.

She did not go too far away, so that she might be at hand to nurse her brother if he were ill, and to see him and meet him sometimes. But there was a great void in her heart and in her life. She had begun to visit her kinsfolk since her father's death: she drew nearer to them; she allowed the relatives whom the Restoration had placed in a lofty and powerful position to come to her, and sought out those whom the new order of things left in obscurity and poverty. But she returned to her dear *chick* first of all, and to another distant cousin, also married, who had become the *chick's* sister-in-law. Her relations with her kinsfolk soon assumed remarkable regularity. Mademoiselle de Varandeuil never went into society, to an evening party, or to the play. It required Mademoiselle Rachel's brilliant success to persuade her to step inside a theatre; she ventured there but twice. She never accepted an invitation to a large dinner-party. But there were two or three houses where, as at the *chick's*, she would invite herself to dine, unexpectedly, when there were no guests. "My love," she would say without ceremony, "are you and your husband doing nothing this evening? Then I will stay and eat some of your ragoût." At eight o'clock regularly she rose to go, and when the husband took his hat to escort her home, she would knock it out of his hands with a: "Nonsense! an old nanny-goat like

me! Why, I frighten men in the street!" And then ten days or a fortnight would pass, during which they would not see her. But if anything went wrong, if there was a death or sickness in the house, Mademoiselle de Varandeuil always heard of it at once, no one knew how; she would come, in spite of everything – the weather or the hour – would give a loud ring at the bell in her own way – they finally called it *cousin's ring*– and a moment later, relieved of her umbrella, which never left her, and of her pattens, her hat tossed upon a chair, she was at the service of those who needed her. She listened, talked, restored their courage with an indescribable martial accent, with language as energetic as a soldier might use to console a wounded comrade, and stimulating as a cordial. If it was a child that was out of sorts, she would go straight to the bed, laugh at the little one, whose fear vanished at once, order the father and mother about, run hither and thither, assume the management of everything, apply the leeches, arrange the cataplasms, and bring back hope, joy and health at the double quick. In all branches of the family the old maid appeared thus providentially, without warning, on days of sorrow, *ennui* and suffering. She was never seen except when her hands were needed to heal, her devoted friendship to console. She was, so to speak, an impersonal creature, because of her great heart; a woman who did not belong to herself: God seemed to have made her only to give her to others. Her everlasting black dress which she persisted in wearing, her worn, dyed shawl, her absurd hat, her impoverished appearance, were, in her eyes, the means of being rich enough to help others with her little fortune; she was extravagant in almsgiving, and her pockets were always filled with gifts for the poor; not of money, for she feared the wineshop, but of four-pound loaves which she bought for them at the baker's. And then, too, by dint of living in poverty, she was able to give herself what was to her the greatest of all luxuries: the joy of her friends' children whom she overwhelmed with New Year's and other gifts, with surprises and pleasures of all sorts. For instance, suppose that one of them had been left by his mother, who was absent from Paris, to pass a lovely summer Sunday at his boarding school, and the little rascal, out of spite, had misbehaved so that he was not allowed to go out. How surprised he would be, as the clock struck nine, to see his old cousin appear in the courtyard, just buttoning the last button of her dress, she had come in such haste. And what a feeling of desolation at the sight! "Cousin," he would say piteously, in one of those fits of passion in which at the same moment you long to cry and to kill your *tyrant*, "I – I am kept in, and – " "Kept in? Oh! yes, kept in! And do you suppose I've taken all this trouble – Is your schoolmaster poking fun at me? Where is the puppy, that I may have a word with him? You go and dress yourself meanwhile. Off with you!" And the child, not daring to hope that a woman so shabbily dressed would have the power to raise the embargo, would suddenly feel a hand upon his arm, and the cousin would carry him off, toss him into a cab, all bewildered and dumfounded with joy, and take him to the Bois de Boulogne. She would let him ride a donkey all day long, urging the beast on with a broken branch, and crying: "Get up!" And then, after a good dinner at Borne's, she would take him back to school, and, under the porte-cochère, as she kissed him she would slip a big hundred-sou piece into his hand.

Strange old maid. The bitter experiences of her whole existence, the struggle to live, the never-ending physical suffering, the long-continued bodily and mental torture had, as it were, cut her loose from life and placed her above it. Her education, the things she had seen, the spectacle of what seemed the end of everything, the Revolution, had so formed her character as to lead her to disdain human suffering. And this old woman, who had nothing left of life save breath, had risen to a serene philosophy, to a virile, haughty, almost satirical stoicism. Sometimes she would begin to declaim against a sorrow that seemed a little too keen; but, in the midst of her tirade, she would suddenly hurl an angry, mocking word at herself, upon which her face would at once become calm. She was cheerful with the cheerfulness of a deep, bubbling spring, the cheerfulness of devoted hearts that have seen everything, of the old soldier or the old hospital nurse. Kind-hearted to admiration she was, and yet something was lacking in her kindness of heart: forgiveness. Hitherto, she had never succeeded in moving or bending her character. A slight, an unkind action, a trifle, if it touched her heart, wounded her forever. She forgot nothing. Time, death itself, did not disarm her memory.

Of religion, she had none. Born at a period when women did without it, she had grown to womanhood at a time when there were no churches. Mass did not exist when she was a young maid. There had been nothing to accustom her to the thought of God or to make her feel the need of Him, and she had retained a sort of shrinking hatred for priests, which must have been connected with some family secret of which she never spoke. Her faith, her strength, her piety, all consisted in the pride of her conscience; she considered that if she retained her own esteem, she could be sure of acting rightly and of never failing in her duty. She was thus singularly constituted by the two epochs in which she had lived, a compound of the two, dipped in the opposing currents of the old régime and the Revolution. After Louis XVI. failed to take horse on the Tenth of August, she lost her regard for kings; but she detested the mob. She desired equality and she held parvenus in horror. She was a republican and an aristocrat, combined scepticism with prejudice, the horrors of '93, which she saw, with the vague and noble theories of humanity which surrounded her cradle.

Her external qualities were altogether masculine. She had the sharp voice, the freedom of speech, the unruly tongue of the old woman of the eighteenth century, heightened by an accent suggestive of the common people, a mannish, highly colored style of elocution peculiar to herself, rising above modesty in the choice of words and fearless in calling things baldly by their plain names.

Meanwhile, the years rolled on, sweeping away the Restoration and the monarchy of Louis-Philippe. She saw all those whom she had loved go from her one by one, all her family take the road to the cemetery. She was left quite alone, and she marveled and was grieved that death should forget her, who would have offered so little resistance, for she was already leaning over the grave and was obliged to force her heart down to the level of the little children brought to her by the sons and daughters of the friends whom she had lost. Her brother was dead. Her dear *chick* was no more. The *chick's* sister-in-law alone was left to her. But hers was a life that hung trembling in the balance, ready to fly away. Crushed by the death of a child for whom she had waited for years, the poor woman was dying of consumption. Mademoiselle de Varandeuil was in her bedroom every day, from noon until six o'clock, for four years. She lived by her side all that time, in the close atmosphere and the odor of constant fumigations. She did not allow herself to be kept away for one hour by her own gout and rheumatism, but gave her time and her life to the peaceful last hours of that dying woman, whose eyes were fixed upon heaven, where her dead children awaited her. And when, in the cemetery, Mademoiselle de Varandeuil had turned aside the shroud to kiss the dead face for the last time, it seemed to her as if there were no one near to her, as if she were all alone upon the earth.

Thenceforth, yielding to the infirmities which she had no further reason to shake off, she began to live the narrow, confined life of old people who wear out their carpet in one spot only – never leaving her room, reading but little because it tired her eyes, and passing most of her time buried in her easy-chair, reviewing the past and living it over again. She would sit in the same position for days, her eyes wide open and dreaming, her thoughts far from herself, far from the room in which she sat, journeying whither her memories led her, to distant faces, dearly loved, pallid faces, to vanished regions – lost in a profound lethargy which Germinie was careful not to disturb, saying to herself: "Madame is in her meditations – "

One day in every week, however, she went abroad. Indeed it was with that weekly excursion in view, in order to be nearer the spot to which she wished to go on that one day, that she left her apartments on Rue Taitbout and took up her abode on Rue de Laval. One day in every week, deterred by nothing, not even by illness, she repaired to the Montmartre Cemetery, where her father and her brother rested, and the women whose loss she regretted, all those whose sufferings had come to an end before hers. For the dead and for Death she displayed a veneration almost equal to that of the ancients. To her, the grave was sacred, and a dear friend. She loved to visit the land of hope and deliverance where her dear ones were sleeping, there to await death and to be ready with her body. On that day, she would start early in the morning, leaning on the arm of her maid, who carried a folding-stool. As she drew near the cemetery, she would enter the shop of a dealer in wreaths, who

had known her for many years, and who, in winter, loaned her a foot-warmer. There she would rest a few moments; then, loading Germinie down with wreaths of immortelles, she would pass through the cemetery gate, take the path to the left of the cedar at the entrance, and make her pilgrimage slowly from tomb to tomb. She would throw away the withered flowers, sweep up the dead leaves, tie the wreaths together, and, sitting down upon her folding-chair, would gaze and dream, and absent-mindedly remove a bit of moss from the flat stone with the end of her umbrella. Then she would rise, turn as if to say *au revoir* to the tomb she was leaving, walk away, stop once more, and talk in an undertone, as she had done before, with that part of her that was sleeping under the stone; and having thus paid a visit to all the dead who lived in her affections, she would return home slowly and reverentially, enveloping herself in silence as if she were afraid to speak.

III

In the course of her reverie, Mademoiselle de Varandeuil had closed her eyes.

The maid's story ceased, and the remainder of the history of her life, which was upon her lips that evening, was once more buried in her heart.

The conclusion of her story was as follows:

When little Germinie Lacerteux arrived in Paris, being then less than fifteen years old, her sister, desirous to have her begin to earn her living at once, and to help to put bread in her hand, obtained a place for her in a small café on the boulevard, where she performed the double duties of lady's maid to the mistress of the café and assistant to the waiters in carrying on the main business of the establishment. The child, just from her village and dropped suddenly in that place, was completely bewildered and terrified by her surroundings and her duties. She had the first instinctive feeling of wounded modesty and, foreshadowing the woman she was destined to become, she shuddered at the perpetual contact with the other sex, working, eating, passing her whole time with men; and whenever she had an opportunity to go out, and went to her sisters, there were tearful, despairing scenes, when, without actually complaining of anything, she manifested a sort of dread to return, saying that she did not want to stay there, that they were not satisfied with her, that she preferred to return to them. They would reply that it had already cost them enough to bring her to Paris, that it was a silly whim on her part and that she was very well off where she was, and they would send her back to the café in tears. She dared not tell all that she suffered in the company of the waiters in the café, insolent, boasting, cynical fellows, fed on the remains of debauches, tainted with all the vices to which they ministered, and corrupt to the core with putrefying odds and ends of obscenity. At every turn, she had to submit to the dastardly jests, the cruel mystifications, the malicious tricks of these scoundrels, who were only too happy to make a little martyr of the poor unsophisticated child, ignorant of everything, with the crushed and sickly air, timid and sullen, thin and pale, and pitiably clad in her wretched, countrified gowns. Bewildered, overwhelmed, so to speak, by this hourly torture, she became their drudge. They made sport of her ignorance, they deceived her and abused her credulity by absurd fables, they overburdened her with fatiguing tasks, they assailed her with incessant, pitiless ridicule, which well-nigh drove her benumbed intellect to imbecility. In addition, they made her blush at the things they said to her, which made her feel ashamed, although she did not understand them. They soiled the artlessness of her fourteen years with filthy veiled allusions. And they found amusement in putting the eyes of her childish curiosity to the keyholes of the private supper-rooms.

The little one longed to confide in her sisters, but she dared not. When, with nourishing food, her body took on a little flesh, her cheeks a little color and she began to have something of the aspect of a woman, they took great liberties with her and grew bolder. There were attempts at familiarity, significant gestures, advances, which she eluded, and from which she escaped unscathed, but which assailed her purity by breathing upon her innocence. Roughly treated, scolded, reviled by the master of the establishment, who was accustomed to abuse his maidservants and who bore her a grudge because she was not old enough or of the right sort for a mistress, she found no support, no touch of humanity, except in his wife. She began to love that woman with a sort of animal devotion, and to obey her with the docility of a dog. She did all her errands without thought or reflection. She carried her letters to her lovers and was very clever about delivering them. She became very active and agile and ingenuously sly in passing in and out, evading the awakened suspicions of the husband; and without any clear idea of what she was doing or of what she was concealing, she felt a mischievous delight, such as children and monkeys feel, in telling herself vaguely that she was causing some little suffering to that man and that house, which caused her so much. There was among her comrades an old waiter, named Joseph, who defended her, warned her of the cruel plots concocted against her, and, when she was present, put a stop to conversation that was too free, with the authority of his white

hairs and his paternal interest in the girl. Meanwhile Germinie's horror of the house increased every day. One week her sisters were compelled to take her back to the café by force.

A few days later, there was a great review on the Champ de Mars, and the waiters had leave of absence for the day. Only Germinie and old Joseph remained in the house. Joseph was at work sorting soiled linen in a small, dark room. He told Germinie to come and help him. She entered the room; she cried out, fell to the floor, wept, implored, struggled, called desperately for help. The empty house was deaf.

When she recovered consciousness, Germinie ran and shut herself up in her chamber. She was not seen again that day. On the following day, when Joseph walked toward her and attempted to speak to her, she recoiled from him in dismay, with the gesture of a woman mad with fear. For a long time, whenever a man approached her, her first involuntary impulse was to draw back suddenly, trembling and nervous, like a terrified, bewildered beast, looking about for means of flight. Joseph, who feared that she would denounce him, allowed her to keep him at a distance, and respected the horrible repugnance she exhibited for him.

She became *enceinte*. One Sunday she had been to pass the evening with her sister, the concierge; she had an attack of vomiting, followed by severe pain. A physician who occupied an apartment in the house, came to the lodge for his key, and the sisters learned from him the secret of their younger sister's condition. The brutal, intractable pride of the common people in their honor, the implacable severity of rigid piety, flew to arms in the two women and found vent in fierce indignation. Their bewilderment changed to fury. Germinie recovered consciousness under their blows, their insults, the wounds inflicted by their hands, the harsh words that came from their mouths. Her brother-in-law was there, who had never forgiven her the cost of her journey; he glanced at her with a bantering expression, with the cunning, ferocious joy of an Auvergnat, with a sneering laugh that dyed the girl's cheeks a deeper red than her sisters' blows.

She received the blows, she did not repel the insults. She sought neither to defend nor to excuse herself. She did not tell what had taken place and how little her own desires had had to do with her misfortune. She was dumb: she had a vague hope that they would kill her. When her older sister asked her if there had been no violence, and reminded her that there were police officers and courts, she closed her eyes at the thought of publishing her shame. For one instant only, when her mother's memory was cast in her face, she emitted a glance, a lightning flash from her eyes, by which the two women felt their consciences pierced; they remembered that they were the ones who had placed her and kept her in that den, and had exposed her to the danger, nay, had almost forced her into her misfortune.

That same evening, the younger of Germinie's sisters took her to the Rue Saint-Martin, to the house of a repairer of cashmere shawls, with whom she lodged, and who, being almost daft on the subject of religion, was banner-bearer in a sisterhood of the Virgin. She made her lie beside her on a mattress on the floor, and having her there under her hand all night, she vented upon her all her long-standing, venomous jealousy, her bitter resentment at the preference, the caresses given Germinie by her father and mother. It was a long succession of petty tortures, brutal or hypocritical exhibitions of spite, kicks that bruised her legs, and progressive movements of the body by which she gradually forced her companion out of bed – it was a cold winter's night – to the floor of the fireless room. During the day, the seamstress took Germinie in hand, catechized her, preached at her, and by detailing the tortures of the other life, inspired in her mind a horrible fear of the hell whose flames she caused her to feel.

She lived there four months, in close confinement, and was never allowed to leave the house. At the end of four months she gave birth to a dead child. When her health was restored, she entered the service of a depilator on Rue Laffitte, and for the first few days she had the joyful feeling of having been released from prison. Two or three times, in her walks, she met old Joseph who ran after her and wanted to marry her; but she escaped him and the old man never knew that he had been a father.

But soon Germinie began to pine away in her new place. The house where she had taken service as a maid of all work was what servants call "a barrack." A spendthrift and glutton, devoid of order as of money, as is often the case with women engaged in the occupations that depend upon chance, and in the problematical methods of gaining a livelihood in vogue in Paris, the depilator, who was almost always involved in a lawsuit of some sort, paid but little heed to her small servant's nourishment. She often went away for the whole day without leaving her any dinner. The little one would satisfy her appetite as well as she could with some kind of uncooked food, salads, vinegary things that deceive a young woman's appetite, even charcoal, which she would nibble with the depraved taste and capricious stomach of her age and sex. This diet, just after recovering from her confinement, her health being but partially restored and greatly in need of stimulants, exhausted the young woman's strength, reduced her flesh and undermined her constitution. She had a terrifying aspect. Her complexion changed to that dead white that looks green in the daylight. Her swollen eyes were surrounded with a great, bluish shadow. Her discolored lips assumed the hue of faded violets. Her breath failed her at the slightest ascent, and the incessant vibrating sound that came from the arteries of her throat was painful to those near her. With heavy feet and enfeebled body, she dragged herself along, as if life were too heavy a burden for her. Her faculties and her senses were so torpid that she swooned for no cause at all, for so small a matter as the fatigue of combing her mistress's hair.

She was silently drooping there when her sister found her another place, with a former actor, a retired comedian, living upon the money that the laughter of all Paris had brought him. The good man was old and had never had any children. He took pity on the wretched girl, interested himself in her welfare, took care of her and made much of her. He took her into the country. He walked with her on the boulevards in the sunlight, and enjoyed the warmth the more for leaning on her arm. It delighted him to see her in good spirits. Often, to amuse her, he would take down a moth-eaten costume from his wardrobe and try to remember a fragment of some part that had gone from his memory. The mere sight of this little maid and her white cap was like a ray of returning youth to him. In his old age, Jocrisse leaned upon her with the good-fellowship, the pleasures and the childish fancies of a grandfather's heart. But he died after a few months, and Germinie had fallen back into the service of kept mistresses, boarding-house keepers, and passageway tradesmen, when the sudden death of a maidservant gave her an opportunity to enter the service of Mademoiselle de Varandeuil, then living on Rue Taitbout, in the house of which her sister was concierge.

IV

Those people who look for the death of the Catholic religion in our day, do not realize by what an infinite number of sturdy roots it still retains its hold upon the hearts of the people. They do not realize the secret, delicate fascination it has for the woman of the people. They do not realize what confession and the confessor are to the impoverished souls of those poor women. In the priest who listens and whose voice falls softly on her ear, the woman of toil and suffering sees not so much the minister of God, the judge of her sins, the arbiter of her welfare, as the confidant of her sorrows and the friend of her misery. However coarse she may be, there is always a little of the true woman in her, a feverish, trembling, sensitive, wounded something, a restlessness and, as it were, the sighing of an invalid who craves caressing words, even as a child's trifling ailments require the nurse's droning lullaby. She, as well as the woman of the world, must have the consolation of pouring out her heart, of confiding her troubles to a sympathetic ear. For it is the nature of her sex to seek an outlet for the emotions and an arm to lean upon. There are in her mind things that she must tell, and concerning which she would like to be questioned, pitied and comforted. She dreams of a compassionate interest, a tender sympathy for hidden feelings of which she is ashamed. Her masters may be the kindest, the most friendly, the most approachable of masters to the woman in their employ: their kindness to her will still be of the same sort that they bestow upon a domestic animal. They will be uneasy concerning her appetite and her health; they will look carefully after the animal part of her, and that will be all. It will not occur to them that she can suffer elsewhere than in her body, and they will not dream that she can have the heartache, the sadness and immaterial pain for which they seek relief by confiding in those of their own station. In their eyes, the woman who sweeps and does the cooking, has no ideas that can cause her to be sad or thoughtful, and they never speak to her of her thoughts. To whom, then, shall she carry them? To the priest who is waiting for them, asks for them, welcomes them, to the churchman who is also a man of the world, a superior creature, a well-educated gentleman, who knows everything, speaks well, is always accessible, gentle, patient, attentive, and seems to feel no scorn for the most humble soul, the most shabbily dressed penitent. The priest alone listens to the woman in a cap. He alone takes an interest in her secret sufferings, in the things that disturb and agitate her and that bring to a maid, as well as to her mistress, the sudden longing to weep, or excite a tempest within her. There is none but he to encourage her outpourings, to draw from her those things which the irony of her daily life holds back, to look to the state of her moral health; none but he to raise her above her material life, none but he to cheer her with moving words of charity and hope, – such divine words as she has never heard from the mouths of the men of her family and of her class.

After entering the service of Mademoiselle de Varandeuil, Germinie became profoundly religious and cared for nothing but the church. She abandoned herself little by little to the sweet delight of confession, to the priest's smooth, tranquil bass voice that came to her from the darkness, to the conversations which resembled the touch of soothing words, and from which she went forth refreshed, light of heart, free from care, and happy with a delightful sense of relief, as if a balm had been applied to all the tender, suffering, fettered portions of her being.

She did not, could not, open her heart elsewhere. Her mistress had a certain masculine roughness of demeanor which repelled expansiveness. She had an abrupt, exclamatory way of speaking that forced back all that Germinie would have liked to confide to her. It was in her nature to be brutal in her treatment of all lamentations that were not caused by pain or disappointment. Her virile kindliness had no pity to spare for diseases of the imagination, for the suffering that is created by the thought, for the weariness of spirit that flows from a woman's nerves and from the disordered condition of her mental organism. Germinie often found her unfeeling; the old woman had simply been hardened by the times in which she had lived and by the circumstances of her life. The shell of her heart was as hard as her body. Never complaining herself, she did not like to hear

complaints about her. And by the right of all the tears she had not shed, she detested childish tears in grown persons.

Soon the confessional became a sort of sacred, idolized rendezvous for Germinie's thoughts. Every day it was her first idea, the theme of her first prayer. Throughout the day, she was kneeling there as in a dream; and while she was about her work it was constantly before her eyes, with its oaken frame with fillets of gold, its pediment in the shape of a winged angel's head, its green curtain with the motionless folds, and the mysterious darkness on both sides. It seemed to her that now her whole life centred there, and that every hour tended thither. She lived through the week looking forward to that longed-for, prayed-for, promised day. On Thursday, she began to be impatient; she felt, in the redoubling of her blissful agony, the material drawing near, as it were, of the blessed Saturday evening; and when Saturday came and mademoiselle's dinner had been hastily served and her work done, she would make her escape and run to Notre-Dame de Lorette, hurrying to the penitential stool as to a lover's rendezvous. Her fingers dipped in holy water and a genuflexion duly made, she would glide over the flags, between the rows of chairs, as softly as a cat steals across a carpeted floor. With bent head, almost crawling, she would go noiselessly forward in the shadow of the side aisles, until she reached the mysterious, veiled confessional, where she would pause and await her turn, absorbed in the emotion of suspense.

The young priest who confessed her, encouraged her frequent confessions. He was not sparing of time or attention or charity. He allowed her to talk at great length and tell him, with many words, of all her petty troubles. He was indulgent to the diffuseness of a suffering soul, and permitted her to pour out freely her most trivial afflictions. He listened while she set forth her anxieties, her longings, her troubles; he did not repel or treat with scorn any portion of the confidences of a servant who spoke to him of all the most delicate, secret concerns of her existence, as one would speak to a mother and a physician.

This priest was young. He was kind-hearted. He had lived in the world. A great sorrow had impelled him, crushed and broken, to assume the gown wherein he wore mourning for his heart. There remained something of the man in the depths of his being, and he listened, with melancholy compassion, to the outpouring of this maidservant's suffering heart. He understood that Germinie needed him, that he sustained and strengthened her, that he saved her from herself and removed her from the temptations to which her nature exposed her. He was conscious of a sad sympathy for that heart overflowing with affection, for the ardent, yet tractable girl, for the unhappy creature who knew nothing of her own nature, who was promised to passion by every impulse of her heart, by her whole body, and who betrayed in every detail of her person the vocation of her temperament. Enlightened by his past experience, he was amazed and terrified sometimes by the gleams that emanated from her, by the flame that shot from her eyes at the outburst of love in a prayer, by the evident tendency of her confessions, by her constantly recurring to that scene of violence, that scene in which her perfectly sincere purpose to resist seemed to the priest to have been betrayed by a convulsion of the senses that was stronger than she.

This fever of religion lasted several years, during which Germinie lived a concentrated, silent, happy life, entirely devoted to God's service – at least she thought so. Her confessor, however, had come gradually to the conclusion that all her adoration tended toward himself. By her glances, by her blushes, by the words she no longer said to him, and by others which she made bold to say to him for the first time, he realized that his penitent's devotion was going astray and becoming unduly fervent, deceiving itself as to its object. She watched for him when the services were at an end, followed him into the sacristy, hung on his skirts, ran into the church after his cassock. The confessor tried to warn her, to divert her amorous fervor from himself. He became more reserved and assumed a cold demeanor. In despair at this change, at his apparent indifference, Germinie, feeling bitter and hurt, confessed to him one day, in the confessional, the hatred that had taken possession of her for two young girls, who were his favorite penitents. Thereupon the priest dismissed her, without discussion,

and sent her to another confessor. Germinie went once or twice to confess to this other confessor; then she ceased to go; soon she ceased even to think of going, and of all her religion naught remained in her mind but a certain far-off sweetness, like the faint odor of burned-out incense.

Affairs had reached that point when mademoiselle fell ill. Throughout her illness, as Germinie did not want to leave her, she did not attend mass. And on the first Sunday – when mademoiselle, being fully recovered, did not require her care, she was greatly surprised to find that "her devotee" remained at home and did not run away to church.

"Oho!" said she, "so you don't go and see your curés nowadays? What have they done to you, eh?"

"Nothing," said Germinie.

V

"There, mademoiselle! – Look at me," said Germinie.

It was a few months later. She had asked her mistress's permission to go that evening to the wedding ball of her grocer's sister, who had chosen her for her maid-of-honor, and she had come to exhibit herself *en grande toilette*, in her low-necked muslin dress.

Mademoiselle raised her eyes from the old volume, printed in large type, which she was reading, removed her spectacles, placed them in the book to mark her place, and exclaimed:

"What, my little bigot, you at a ball! Do you know, my girl, this seems to me downright nonsense! You and the hornpipe! Faith, all you need now is to want to get married! A deuce of a want, that! But if you marry, I warn you that I won't keep you – mind that! I've no desire to wait on your brats! Come a little nearer – Oho! why – bless my soul! Mademoiselle Show-all! We're getting to be a bit of a flirt lately, I find – "

"Why no, mademoiselle," Germinie tried to say.

"And then," continued Mademoiselle de Varandeuil, following out her thought, "among you people, the men are such sweet creatures! They'll spend all you have – to say nothing of the blows. But marriage – I am sure that that nonsensical idea of getting married buzzes around in your head when you see the others. That's what gives you that simper, I'll wager. *Bon Dieu de Dieu!* Now turn a bit, so that I can see you," said Mademoiselle de Varandeuil, with an abrupt change of tone to one that was almost caressing; and placing her thin hands on the arms of her easy-chair, crossing her legs and moving her foot back and forth, she set about inspecting Germinie and her toilet.

"What the devil!" said she, after a few moments of silent scrutiny, "what! is it really you? – Then I have never used my eyes to look at you. – Good God, yes! – But – but – " She mumbled more vague exclamations between her teeth. – "Where the deuce did you get that mug like an amorous cat's?" she said at last, and continued to gaze at her.

Germinie was ugly. Her hair, of so dark a chestnut that it seemed black, curled and twisted in unruly waves, in little stiff, rebellious locks, which escaped and stood up all over her head, despite the pomade upon her shiny *bandeaux*. Her smooth, narrow, swelling brow protruded above the shadow of the deep sockets in which her eyes were buried and sunken to such a depth as almost to denote disease; small, bright, sparkling eyes they were, made to seem smaller and brighter by a constant girlish twinkle that softened and lighted up their laughter. They were neither brown eyes nor blue eyes, but were of an undefinable, changing gray, a gray that was not a color, but a light! Emotion found expression therein in the flame of fever, pleasure in the flashing rays of a sort of intoxication, passion in phosphorescence. Her short, turned-up nose, with large, dilated, palpitating nostrils, was one of those noses of which the common people say that it rains inside: upon one side, at the corner of the eye was a thick, swollen blue vein. The square head of the Lorraine race was emphasized in her broad, high, prominent cheek-bones, which were well-covered with the traces of small-pox. The most noticeable defect in her face was the too great distance between the nose and mouth. This lack of proportion gave an almost apish character to the lower part of the head, where the expansive mouth, with white teeth and full lips that looked as if they had been crushed, they were so flat, smiled at you with a strange, vaguely irritating smile.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.