

Zibeline — Volume 2 eBook

Zibeline — Volume 2

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THE INDUSTRIAL ORPHAN ASYLUM

When the prefectoral axe of the Baron Haussmann hewed its way through the Faubourg St. Germain in order to create the boulevard to which this aristocratic centre has given its flame, the appropriation of private property for public purposes caused to disappear numerous ancient dwellings bearing armorial devices, torn down in the interest of the public good, to the equalizing level of a line of tramways. In the midst of this sacrilegious upheaval, the Hotel de Montgeron, one of the largest in the Rue St. Dominique, had the good fortune to be hardly touched by the surveyor's line; in exchange for a few yards sliced obliquely from the garden, it received a generous addition of air and light on that side of the mansion which formerly had been shut in.

The Duke lived there in considerable state. His electors, faithful in all things, had made of their deputy a senator who sat in the Luxembourg, in virtue of the Republican Constitution, as he would have sat as a peer of France had the legitimate monarchy followed its course. He was a great lord in the true meaning of the word: gracious to the humble, affable among his equals, inclined, among the throng of new families, to take the part of the disinherited against that of the usurpers.

In Mademoiselle de Prerolles he had found a companion animated with the same sentiments, and the charitable organization, meeting again at the Duchess's residence, on the day following the revival of 'Adrienne Lecouvreur', to appoint officers for the Industrial Orphan Asylum, could not have chosen a president more worthy or more devoted.

Besides such austere patronesses as Madame Desvanneaux and her daughter, the organization included several persons belonging to the world of fashion, such as Madame de Lisieux and Madame de Nointel, whose influence was the more effective because their circle of acquaintance was more extensive. The gay world often fraternizes willingly with those who are interested in philanthropic works.

The founders of the Industrial Orphan Asylum intended that the institution should harbor, bring up, and instruct as great a number as possible of the children of infirm or deceased laborers.

The secretary, M. Andre Desvanneaux, churchwarden of Ste.-Clotilde, as was his father before him, and in addition a Roman count, had just finished his address, concluding by making the following double statement: First, the necessity for combining all available-funds for the purchase of the land required, and for the building of the asylum itself; second, to determine whether the institution could be maintained by the annual resources of the organization.

“I should like to observe,” said the Duchesse de Montgeron, “that the first of these two questions is the only order of the day. Not counting the purchase of the land, the architect’s plan calls for an estimate of five hundred thousand francs in round numbers.”

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“And we have on hand—” said the Comtesse de Lisieux.

“One hundred and sixty-odd thousand francs from the first subscriptions,” said M. Desvanneaux. “It has been decided that the work shall not begin until we have disposed of half of the sum total. Therefore, the difference we have to make up at present is about one hundred and forty thousand francs. In order to realize this sum, the committee of action proposes to organize at the Palais de l’Industrie a grand kermess, with the assistance of the principal artists from the theatres of Paris, including that of Mademoiselle Gontier, of the Comedie Francaise,” added the secretary, with a sly smile on observing the expression of General de Prerolles.

“Good!” Henri promptly rejoined. “That will permit Monsieur Desvanneaux to combine very agreeably the discharge of his official duties with the making of pleasant acquaintances!”

“The object of my action in this matter is above all suspicion,” remarked the churchwarden, with great dignity, while his wife darted toward him a furious glance.

“You? Come, come!” continued the General, who took a mischievous delight in making trouble for the worthy Desvanneaux. “Every one knows quite well that you have by no means renounced Satan, his pomps—”

“And his good works!” added Madame de Nointel, with a burst of laughter somewhat out of place in this formal gathering for the discussion of charitable works.

“We are getting outside of the question,” said the Duchess, striking her bell. “Moreover, is not the assistance of these ladies necessary?”

“Indispensable,” the secretary replied. “Their assistance will greatly increase the receipts.”

“What sum shall we decide upon as the price of admission?” asked Madame de Lisieux.

“Twenty francs,” said Desvanneaux. “We have a thousand tickets printed already, and, if the ladies present wish to solicit subscriptions, each has before her the wherewithal to inscribe appropriate notes of appeal.”

“To be drawn upon at sight,” said the Comtesse de Lisieux, taking a pen. “A tax on vanity, I should call it.”

She wrote rapidly, and then read aloud:

“My dear Baron:



“Your proverbial generosity justifies my new appeal. You will accept, I am sure, the ten tickets which I enclose, when you know that your confreres, the Messieurs Axenstein, have taken double that number.”

“And here,” said the Vicomtesse de Nointel, “is a tax on gallantry.” And she read aloud:

“My dear Prince:

“You have done me the honor to write to me that you love me. I suppose I ought to show your note to my husband, who is an expert swordsman; but I prefer to return to you your autograph letter for the price of these fifteen tickets. Go—and sin again, should your heart prompt you!”

“But that is a species of blackmail, Madame!” cried Madame Desvanneaux.

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"The end justifies the means," replied the Vicomtesse gayly. "Besides, I am accountable only to the Duc de Montgeron. What is his opinion?"

"I call it a very clever stroke," said the Duke.

"You hear, Madame! Only, of course, not every lady has a collection of similar little notes!" said the Vicomtesse de Nointel.

The entrance of M. Durand, treasurer of the society, interrupted the progress of this correspondence.

"Do not trouble yourselves so much, Mesdames," said the notary. "The practical solution of the matter I am about to lay before you, if Madame the president will permit me to speak."

"I should think so!" said the Duchess. "Speak, by all means!"

"A charitable person has offered to assume all the expenses of the affair," said the notary, "on condition that carte blanche is granted to her in the matter of the site. In case her offer is accepted, she will make over to the society, within three months, the title to the real estate, in regular order."

"Do you guarantee the solvency of this person?" demanded M. Desvanneaux, who saw the project of the kermess falling to the ground.

"It is one of my rich clients; but I have orders not to reveal her name unless her offer is accepted."

The unanimity with which all hands were raised did not even give time to put the question.

"Her name?" demanded the Duchess.

"Here it is," replied the notary, handing her a visiting card.

"Valentine de Vermont," she read aloud.

"Zibeline?" cried Madame de Nointel. "Bravo! I offer her the assurance of my esteem!"

"And I also," added Madame de Lisieux.

"I can not offer mine," said Madame Desvanneaux, dryly. "A young woman who is received nowhere!"

“So generous an act should open all doors to her, beginning with mine,” said the Duchesse de Montgeron. “I beg that you will tell her so from me, Monsieur Durand.”

“At once, Madame. She is waiting below in her carriage.”

“Why did you not say so before? I must beg her myself to join us here,” said the master of the house, leaving the room in haste.

“See how any one can purchase admission to our world in these days!” whispered Madame Desvanneaux in her daughter’s ear.

“Heavens! yes, dear mother! The only question is whether one is able to pay the price.”

We must render justice to the two titled patronesses by saying that the immediate admission of Mademoiselle de Vermont to their circle seemed to them the least they could do, and that they greeted her appearance, as she entered on the arm of the Duke, with a sympathetic murmur which put the final stroke to the exasperation of the two malicious dames.

“You are very welcome here, Mademoiselle,” said the Duchess, advancing to greet her guest. “I am delighted to express to you, in behalf of all these ladies, the profound gratitude with which your generous aid inspires them!”

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"It is more than I deserve, Madame la Duchesse!" said Valentine. "The important work in which they have taken the initiative is so interesting that each of us should contribute to it according to his means. I am alone in Paris, without relatives or friends, and these ladies have furnished me the means to cure my idleness; so it is I, rather, who am indebted to them."

Whether this speech were studied or not, it was pronounced to be in very good taste, and the stranger's conquest of the assemblage was more and more assured.

"Since you wish to join us," resumed the Duchess, "allow me to present to you these gentlemen: Monsieur Desvanneaux, our zealous general secretary—"

"I have already had the pleasure of seeing Monsieur at my house," said Valentine, "also Madame Desvanneaux; and although I was unable to accede to their wishes, I retain, nevertheless, the pleasantest recollections of their visit."

"Good hit!" whispered Madame de Nointel to her neighbor.

"The Marquis de Prerolles, my brother," the Duchess continued.

"The smiles of Fortune must be sweet, Mademoiselle," said the General, bowing low.

"Not so sweet as those of Glory, General," Zibeline replied, with a pretty air of deference.

"She possesses a decidedly ready wit," said Madame de Lisieux in a confidential aside.

"Now, ladies," added the president, "I believe that the best thing we can do is to leave everything in the hands of Mademoiselle and our treasurer. The examination of the annual resources will be the object of the next meeting. For to-day, the meeting is adjourned."

Then, as Mademoiselle de Vermont was about to mingle with the other ladies, the Duchess detained her an instant, inquiring:

"Have you any engagement for this evening, Mademoiselle?"

"None, Madame."

"Will you do us the honor to join us in my box at the opera?"

"But—I have no one to accompany me," said Zibeline. "I dismissed my cousin De Sainte-Foy, thinking that I should have no further need of his escort to-day."

"That does not matter at all," the Duchess replied. "We will stop for you on our way."

"I should not like to trouble you so much, Madame. If you will allow me, I will stop at your door at whatever hour will be agreeable to you, and my carriage shall follow yours."

"Very well. At nine o'clock, if you please. They sing *Le Prophete* tonight, and we shall arrive just in time for the ballet."

"The 'Skaters' Ballet,'" said the General.

This remark recalled to Mademoiselle her triumph of the evening before. "Do you bear a grudge against me?" she said, with a smile.

"Less and less of one," the General replied.

"Then, let us make a compact of peace," said Zibeline, holding out her hand in the English fashion.

With these words she left the room on the arm of the Duke, who claimed the honor of escorting her to her carriage.

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"Shall you go to the opera also?" asked the Duchess of her brother.

"Yes, but later. I shall dine in town."

"Then-au-revoir—this evening!"

"This evening!"

CHAPTER XIV

A WOMAN'S INSTINCT

The General had been more favorably impressed with Zibeline's appearance than he cared to show. The generous action of this beautiful girl, her frankness, her ease of manner, her cleverness in repartee, were likely to attract the attention of a man of his character. He reproached himself already for having allowed himself to be influenced by the rancorous hostility of the Desvanneaux, and, as always happens with just natures, the sudden change of his mind was the more favorable as his first opinion had been unjust.

Such was the theme of his reflections on the route from the Hotel de Montgeron to that of Eugenic Gontie's, with whom he was engaged to dine with some of her friends, invited to celebrate her success of the evening before.

On entering her dining-room Eugenie took the arm of Lenaieff, placed Henri de Prerolles on her left and Samoreau opposite her—in his character of senior member, so that no one could mistake his transitory function with that of an accredited master of the house.

The four other guests were distinguished writers or artists, including the painter Edmond Delorme, and, like him, all were intimate friends of the mistress of the house.

Naturally the conversation turned upon the representation of Adrienne, and on the applause of the fashionable audience, usually rather undemonstrative.

"Never have I received so many flowers as were given to me last night," said Eugenic, displaying an enormous beribboned basket which ornamented the table. "But that which particularly flattered me," she added, "was the spontaneous tribute from that pretty foreigner who sought me in the greenroom expressly to offer me her bouquet."

"The young lady in the proscenium box, I will wager," said Lenaieff.

"Precisely. I know that they call her Zibeline, but I did not catch her real name."

"It is Mademoiselle de Vermont," said Edmond Delorme. "She is, in my opinion, the most dashing of all the Amazons in the Bois de Boulogne. The Chevalier de Sainte-Foy brought her to visit my studio last autumn, and I am making a life-size portrait of her on her famous horse, Seaman, the winner of the great steeplechase at Liverpool, in 1882."

"What were you pencilling on the back of your menu while you were talking?" asked the actress, curiously.

"The profile of General de Prerolles," the painter replied. "I think that his mare Aida would make a capital companion picture for Seaman, and that he himself would be an appropriate figure to adorn a canvas hung on the line opposite her at the next Salon!"

"Pardon me, dear master!" interrupted the General. "Spare me, I pray, the honor of figuring in this equestrian contradance. I have not the means to bequeath to posterity that your fair model possesses—"

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"Is she, then, as rich as they say?" inquired one of the guests.

"I can answer for that," said the Baron de Samoreau. "She has a letter of credit upon me from my correspondent in New York. Last night, during an entr'acte, she gave me an order to hold a million francs at her disposal before the end of the week."

"I know the reason why," added Henri.

"But," Lenaieff exclaimed, "you told me that you did not know her!"

"I have made her acquaintance since then."

"Ah! Where?" Eugenie inquired, with interest.

"At my sister's house, during the meeting of a charitable society."

"Had it anything to do with the society for which Monsieur Desvanneaux asked me to appear in a kermess?"

"Well, yes. In fact, he has gone so far as to announce that he is assured of your cooperation."

"I could not refuse him," said Eugenie. "Under the mantle of charity, the holy man paid court to me!"

"I knew well enough that he had not yet laid down his arms forever," said the General.

"Oh, he is not the only one. His son-in-law also honored me with an attack."

"What, Monsieur de Thomery? Well, that is a good joke!"

"But what is funnier yet," continued the actress, "is the fact that the first-named gentleman was on his knees, just about to make me a declaration, apparently, when the second was announced! Immediately the father-in-law jumped to his feet, entreating me not to allow them to meet. I was compelled to open for him the door leading to the servants' stairway—"

"And what did you do with the other man?" asked Lenaieff, laughing loudly.

"I rid myself of him in the same way. At a sign from me, my maid announced the name of the father-in-law, and the alarmed son-in-law escaped by the same road! Oh, but I know them! They will come back!"

"Under some other pretext, however," said the General. "Because Mademoiselle de Vermont's million francs have destroyed their amorous designs."

“So now we see Zibeline fairly launched,” remarked the banker. “Since the Duchesse de Montgeron has taken her up, all the naughty tales that have been fabricated about her will go to pieces like a house of cards.”

“That is very probable,” the General concluded, “for she has made a complete conquest of my sister.”

At these words a slight cloud passed over the actress’s face. The imagination of a jealous mistress sees rivals everywhere; especially that of an actress.

After dinner, while her other guests went into the smoking-room, Eugenic made a sign to her lover to remain with her, and seated herself beside him.

“I wish to ask you a question, Henri,” said she.

“What is it?”

“Do you still love me?”

“What reason have you to doubt it?”

“None that warrants me in reproaching you for anything. But so many things separate us! Your career, to which you owe everything! Your social standing, so different from mine! Oh, I know that you are sincere, and that if you ever have a scruple regarding our liaison, you will not be able to hide it from me. It is this possibility of which I think.”

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"You are quite wrong, I assure you. Did I hide myself last night in order to prove openly my admiration for you? Did I appear to disclaim the allusions which you emphasized in seeming to address me in the course of your role?"

"No, that is true. Shall I make a confession? When I am on the stage, I fear nothing, because there the points of comparison are all in my favor, since you can say to yourself: 'This woman on whom all eyes are fixed, whose voice penetrates to the depths of the soul—this woman, beautiful, applauded, courted, belongs to me—wholly to me,' and your masculine vanity is pleasantly flattered. But later, Henri! When the rouge is effaced from my lips, when the powder is removed from my cheeks —perhaps revealing some premature line caused by study and late hours— if, after that, you return to your own circle, and there encounter some fresh young girl, graceful and blooming, the object, in her turn, of the fickle admiration of the multitude, forgetful already of her who just now charmed them—tell me, Henri! do you not, as do the others, covet that beautiful exotic flower, and must not the poor comedienne weep for her lost prestige?"

"It is Mademoiselle de Vermont, then, who inspires you with this apprehension," said the General, smiling.

"Well, yes, it is she!"

"What childishness! Lenaieff will tell you that I have never even looked at her."

"Last night, perhaps—but to-day?"

"We exchanged no more than a dozen words."

"But the more I think of her visit to the greenroom, the more inexplicable it appears to me."

"You need not be surprised at that: she does nothing that any one else does."

"These things are not done to displease you."

"I may agree as to that; but what conclusion do you draw?"

"That she is trying to turn your head."

"My head! You jest! I might be her father."

"That is not always a reason—"

Nevertheless, Henri's exclamation had been so frank that Eugenie felt somewhat reassured.



“Are you going so soon?” she said, seeing him take his hat.

“I promised my sister to join her at the opera. Besides, this is your reception night, and I leave you to your duties as hostess. To-morrow, at the usual hour-and we will talk of something else, shall we not?”

“Ah, dearest, that is all I ask!” said Eugenie.

He attempted to kiss her hand, but she held up her lips. He pressed his own upon them in a long kiss, and left her.

CHAPTER XV

DEFIANCE OF MRS. GRUNDY

For more than fifty years the first proscenium box on the ground floor, to the left, at the Opera, had belonged exclusively to ten members of the jockey Club, in the name of the oldest member of which the box is taken. When a place becomes vacant through any cause, the nine remaining subscribers vote on the admission of a new candidate for the vacant chair; it is a sort of academy within the national Academy of Music.

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When this plan was originated, that particular corner was called “the infernal box,” but the name has fallen into desuetude since the dedication of the fine monument of M. Gamier. Nevertheless, as it is counted a high privilege to be numbered among these select subscribers, changes are rare among them; besides, the members are not, as a rule, men in their first youth. They have seen, within those walls, the blooming and the renewal of several generations of pretty women; and the number of singers and dancers to whom they have paid court in the coulisses is still greater.

From their post of observation nothing that occurs either before or behind the curtain escapes their analysis—an analysis undoubtedly benevolent on the part of men who have seen much of life, and who accord willingly, to their younger fellow-members, a little of that indulgence of which they stand in need themselves.

An event so unexpected as the enthronement of Zibeline in one of the two large boxes between the columns, in company with the Duchesse de Montgeron, Madame de Lisieux, and Madame de Nointel, did not escape their observation and comment.

“The Duchess is never thoughtless in her choice of associates,” said one of the ten. “There must be some very powerful motive to induce her to shield with her patronage a foreigner who sets so completely at defiance anything that people may say about her.”

“Nonsense! What is it, after all, that they say about this young woman?” demanded the senior member of the party. “That she rides alone on horseback. If she were to ride with a groom, some one would be sure to say that he was her lover. They say that she drives out without any female chaperon beside her in the carriage. Well, if she had one, they would probably find some other malicious thing to say. Paris has become like a little country town in its gossip.”

“And all this,” added a third member, “because she is as lovely as a dream, and because she drives the handsomest turnout in the Bois. If she were ugly, and contented herself with a hired carriage, she would be absolved without confession!”

“Where the deuce does Christian charity come in, in all this gossip?” said Henri de Prerolles to himself, who had just entered the box and overheard the last remarks. “Will you grant me your hospitality until the beginning of the next act, gentlemen?” he said aloud. “My sister’s box is full of guests and transient visitors; she can not admit even me!”

The General was a great favorite with the members of the club. One of them rose to offer him his place.

“I shall stay only a moment, to escape a cloud of questioners in the foyer. Every one that stops me asks—”

“About the new recruit in the Duchess’s box, eh?” said a member. “We, too, wish to inquire about her; we are all leagued together.”

“Thank you, no,” said the General.

“But if it is a secret—”

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"There is no secret about it," the General replied; and in a few words he explained the enigma.

"Why, then," exclaimed the senior member, "she is indeed the fowl that lays the golden eggs! What a lucky bird will be the one that mates with her!"

The rising curtain sent the spectators back to their places. The augurs of the Duchess's box reinstalled themselves before it where they could examine at their ease through their lorgnettes the fair stranger of whom so much had been said; and, mounting to the next floor, the General was at last able to find room among his sister's guests.

"You can see for yourself that our young friend is altogether charming," whispered Madame de Nointel, behind the shelter of her fan, and indicating Zibeline.

"If you pronounce her so, Madame, she can receive no higher praise," said Henri.

"Say at once that you think me exasperating," laughed the lady.

"Was it not you that first called her Zibeline?" Henri inquired.

"Yes, but she calls herself Valentine—which rhymes, after all. Not richly enough for her, I know, but her means allow her to do without the supporting consonant. See how beautiful she is to-night!"

In fact, twenty-four hours had sufficed to change the lonely stranger of the day before into the heroine of this evening, and the satisfaction that shone in her face tempered the somewhat haughty and disdainful expression that had hitherto characterized her.

"You have not yet said 'good-evening' to Mademoiselle de Vermont, Henri," said the Duchess to her brother, and he changed his place in order to act upon her hint.

"Ah, is it you, General?" said Zibeline, affecting not to have seen him until that moment. "It seems that music interests you less than comedy."

"What has made you form that opinion, Mademoiselle?"

"The fact that you arrive much later at the opera than at the Comedie Francaise."

"Have you, then, kept watch upon my movements?"

"Only a passing observation of signs—quite allowable in warfare!"

"But I thought we had made a compact of peace."

"True enough, we did make it, but suppose it were only an armistice?"

“You are ready, then, to resume hostilities?” said Henri.

“Now that I have Madame la Duchesse, your sister, for an ally, I fear no enemies.”

“Not even if I should call for aid upon the camp of Desvanneaux?”

“Alceste leagued with Tartufe? That idea never occurred to Moliere,” said Zibeline, mischievously.

“Take care!” said the Duchess, interrupting this skirmishing, “you will fall over into the orchestra! It is growing late, and if Mademoiselle de Vermont does not wish to remain to see the final conflagration, we might go now, before the crowd begins to leave.”

“I await your orders, Madame la Duchesse,” said Zibeline, rising.

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The other ladies followed her example, receiving their cloaks from the hands of their cavaliers, and the occupants of the box made their exit in the following order: Zibeline, on the arm of the Duke; the Comtesse de Lisieux, leaning upon M. de Nointel; Madame de Nointel with the General; the Duchess bringing up the procession with M. de Lisieux.

As soon as they reached the outer lobby their footmen ran to find their carriages, and that of the Duc de Montgeron advanced first.

"I beg, Madame, that you will not trouble yourself to wait here until my carriage comes," said Mademoiselle de Vermont to the Duchess, who hesitated to leave her guest alone.

"Since you wish it, I will leave you, then," said the Duchess, "and we thank you for giving us your society this evening. My brother will accompany you to your carriage."

When Zibeline's vehicle drove up to the entrance in its turn, the General conducted his charge to the door of a marvellously equipped brougham, to which was harnessed a carriage-horse of powerful frame, well suited to the kind of vehicle he drew.

A thaw had begun, not yet transforming the gutters into yellow torrents rushing toward the openings of the sewer, but covering the streets with thick, black mud, over which the wheels rolled noiselessly.

"Your carriage is late, is it not?" said Zibeline, after the General had handed her into the brougham.

"My carriage?" said the General. "Behold it!"

He pointed to a passing fiacre, at the same time hailing the driver.

"Don't call him. I will take you home myself," said Zibeline, as if such a suggestion were the most natural thing in the world.

"You know that in France it is not the custom," said the General.

"What! Do you bother yourself with such things at your age?"

"If my age seems to you a sufficient guaranty, that is different. I accept your invitation."

"To the Hotel de Montgeron," said Zibeline to her footman.

"I never shall forget your sister's kindness to me," she continued, as the carriage rolled away. "She fulfils my idea of the great lady better than any other woman I have seen."

"You may be proud of her friendship," said Henri. "When once she likes a person, it is forever. I am like her in that respect. Only I am rather slow in forming friendships."

“And so am I.”

“That is obvious, else you would have been married ere this.”

“No doubt—to some one like young Desvanneaux, perhaps. You are very flattering! If you think that I would sacrifice my independence for a man like that—”

“But surely you do not intend to remain unmarried.”

“Perhaps I shall—if I do not meet my ideal.”

“All women say that, but they usually change their minds in the end.”

“Mine is one and indivisible. If I do not give all I give nothing.”

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"And shall you wait patiently until your ideal presents himself?"

"On the contrary, I am always looking for him."

"Did you come to Europe for that purpose?"

"For that and for nothing else."

"And suppose, should you find your ideal, that he himself raises obstacles?"

"I shall try to smooth them away."

"Do you believe, then, that the power of money is irresistible?"

"Far from it! A great fortune is only a trust which Providence has placed in our hands, in order that we may repair, in its name, the injustices of fate. But I have another string to my bow."

"What is it?"

"The force of my will."

"You have plenty of that! But suppose, by some impossible chance, your ideal resists you even then?"

"Then I know what will remain for me to do."

"You will resort to the pistol?"

"Not for him, but for myself," she replied, in a tone so resolute as to exclude any suggestion of bravado.

Zibeline's horse, which was a rapid trotter, now stopped before the Hotel de Montgeron, arriving just in advance of the Duchess's carriage, for which the Swiss was watching at the threshold of the open Porte cochere. He drew himself up; the brougham entered the gate at a swift pace, described a circle, and halted under the marquee at the main entrance. The General sprang lightly to the ground.

"I thank you, Mademoiselle," bowing, hat in hand, to his charming conductor.

"Call me Valentine, please," she responded, with her usual ease of manner.

"Even in the character of a stage father, that would be rather too familiar," said the Marquis.

"Not so much so as to call me Zibeline," said Mademoiselle de Vermont, laughing.

“Ha! ha! You know your sobriquet, then?”

“I have known it a long time! Good-night, General! We shall meet again.”

Then, addressing her footman, she said in English: “Home!”

CHAPTER XVI

FRATERNAL ADVICE

Like all residences where the owners receive much company, the Hotel de Montgeron had a double porte-cochere. Just as the Swiss opened the outer gate to allow the departure of Mademoiselle de Vermont, the two carriages crossed each other on the threshold. In fact, Henri had had hardly time to cross the courtyard to mount to his own apartments before his brother-in-law and his sister stopped him at the foot of the steps. He rejoined them to say good-night.

“Won’t you come and take a cup of tea with us in the little salon?” they asked.

“Willingly,” was his response. He followed them, and all three seated themselves beside a table which was already laid, and upon which the boiling water sang in the kettle.

“Leave us,” said the Duchess to the butler. “I will serve tea myself. Did Mademoiselle de Vermont bring you home?” she asked, when the servant had retired.

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"Well," said Henri, "in proposing to do so she mentioned my discreet age, which appeared to her to make the thing all right! If I had declined her invitation, I should have seemed to pose as a compromising person! That is the reason why I accepted."

"You did quite right. What do you really think of her?"

"She is very different from what I had fancied her: I find her frank, intellectual, full of originality. I have only one fault to mention: she is too rich."

"Well, surely, you do not expect her to ruin herself to please you."

"I should think not! Besides, what would be the object?"

"To permit you to fall in love with her."

"Oh, that is what you are thinking of, is it?"

"Certainly, for, if need be, perhaps you would make a sacrifice to your feelings."

"In what way?"

"In the toleration of a few remaining millions which she might retain, so that when you marry her neither of you will be reduced to absolute beggary!"

"Marry her!—I?" cried the General, astonished.

"What is there to prevent your doing so?"

"The past, my dear sister. To speculate upon my title and my rank in order to make a wealthy marriage? To quit my nomad's tent for a fixed residence other than that where the Prerolles have succeeded one another from generation to generation? Never! Of all our ancient prejudices, that is the only one I cherish. Besides, I am free at present to serve my country under any form of government which it may please her to adopt. But, with his hereditary estates lost, through his own fault, shall he who has nothing left to him but his name form a mere branch of another family? He has no right to do so."

This declaration was categorical. Madame de Montgeron bent her head; her jesting vein was quenched in a moment.

After a moment of silence the Duke spoke.

"There are scruples that one does not discuss," he said. "But, on the other hand, if I do not deceive myself, there are others which can be adjusted to suit circumstances."

"What circumstances?" said the General.



“The subject is rather delicate—especially to mention before you, my dear Jeanne.”

“I was just about to propose that I should retire,” said the Duchess. “Good-night, Henri!” And she bent to kiss him.

“You are not vexed?” said her brother, embracing her tenderly.

“What an idea! Good-night!”

“Am I always to be considered as occupying the stool of repentance?” Henri inquired, as soon as his sister had left the room.

“Yes, but you will not be offended if I interrogate you a little, after the manner of a judge?” said the Duke.

“Quite the contrary. Go on; I will listen.”

“Had you not just now expressed yourself very distinctly in disfavor of any project of marriage because of perfectly unimpeachable principles, I should not permit myself to make any allusion to your private life. Every man is his own master in his choice of liaisons, and on that head is answerable only to his own conscience. In these days, moreover, art is on a level with birth, and talent with military glory. You see that I am quite modern in my ideas! However—”

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"Ah, there is a reserve?"

"Without liability. Mademoiselle Gontier is surrounded by great luxury. She maintains an expensive house and keeps an open table. Her annual salary and her income can not possibly cover these expenses. Whence does she obtain further resources?"

"From the investments made for her by the Baron de Samoreau."

"Without her having to pay a commission of any kind? A most remarkable case of disinterestedness!"

"I never have sought to examine the matter particularly," said Henri.

"And is that the way you keep yourself informed? A future general-in-chief!"

"I was not aware that I am in an enemy's country."

"No, but you are in a conquered country, which is still more dangerous. Oh, no one will attack you face to face at the point of the sword. But behind your back, in the shadow, you have already massed against you various rejected swains, the Desvanneaux of the coulisses, jealous of a preference which wounds their own vanity, and the more ready to throw discredit—were they able—upon a man of your valor, because they are better armed against him with the logic of facts."

"What logic, in heaven's name?"

"That which emanates from the following dilemma: Either Danae is obliged to hide from Jupiter—or, rather, from Maecenas—her intimacy with you— and you are only a lover who simply loves her—or else Maecenas is an epicurean who has no objection to share his fortune philosophically; so that ostensibly you sit at the feast without paying the cost—which is worse yet."

"Does any one dare to say that of me?" cried the General, springing from his chair.

"They are beginning to say it," the Duke replied, his eyes fixed on his brother-in-law, who paced to and fro, gnawing his moustache. "I ask your pardon for throwing such a bucket of ice-water on you, but with men of your constitution—"

"Pleurisy is not mortal," Henri interrupted briefly. "I know. Don't worry about me."

"I knew you would understand," said the Duke, going toward the door of his own apartments. "That is the reason why I have not spared you a thorough ducking!"

"I thank you," said the General, as he was about to leave the room. "I will talk to you about this tomorrow. The night brings counsel."

Wrapped in thought, he made his way to the little suite of apartments between the ground floor and the first story which he occupied, and which had a separate door opening on the Rue de Bellechase.

At the foot of the stairs, in a coach-house which had been transformed into a chamber, slept the orderlies beneath the apartment of their chief. This apartment, composed of four rooms, was of the utmost simplicity, harmonizing with the poverty of its occupant, who made it a point of honor not to attempt to disguise his situation.

The ante-chamber formed a military bureau for the General and his chief orderly.

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The salon, hung with draperies to simulate a tent, had no other decoration than some trophies of Arabian arms, souvenirs of raids upon rebellious tribes.

More primitive still was the bedroom, furnished with a simple canteen bed, as if it were put up in a temporary camp, soon to be abandoned.

The only room which suggested nothing of the anchorite was the dressing-room, furnished with all the comforts and conveniences necessary to an elegant and fastidious man of the world.

But his real luxury, which, by habit and by reason of his rank, the General had always maintained, was found among his horses, as he devoted to them all the available funds that could be spared from his salary. Hence the four box-stalls placed at his disposal in the stables of his brother-in-law were occupied by four animals of remarkably pure blood, whose pedigrees were inscribed in the French stud-book. Neither years, nor the hard service which their master had seen, had deteriorated any of his ability as a dashing horseman. His sober and active life having even enabled him to preserve a comparatively slender figure, he would have joined victoriously in the races, except that his height made his weight too heavy for that amusement.

Entering his own domain, still overwhelmed, with the shock of the revelations and the gossip of which he never had dreamed, he felt himself wounded to the quick in all those sentiments upon which his 'amour propre' had been most sensitive.

The more he pondered proudly over his pecuniary misfortunes, the more grave the situation appeared to him, and the more imperious the necessity of a rupture.

When it had been a question of dismissing Fanny Dorville, an actress of humble standing, his parting gift, a diamond worth twenty-five thousand francs, had seemed to him a sufficient indemnity to cancel all accounts.

But now, in the presence of an artiste of merit, who had given herself without calculation and who loved him for himself alone, how, without wounding her heart and her dignity, could he break violently a chain so light yesterday, so heavy to-day?

To indulge in tergiversation, to invent some subterfuge to cover his retreat—he did not feel himself capable of such a course; moreover, his manoeuvre would be quickly suspected by a clever woman whom nothing escaped.

To ask to be sent back to Africa, just at the time when his intelligent and practical instruction in the latest grand manoeuvres had drawn all eyes upon him, would compromise, by an untimely retirement, the advantages of this new office, the object of his ambition.

For the first time this nobleman, always prompt and radical in his decisions, found himself hesitating; and, such is the power of human egotism even in generous natures, he felt almost incensed against Eugenie, the involuntary cause of his hesitation.

After weighing everything carefully in his mind, he finally said to himself that an open confession, sincere and unrestricted, would be the best solution of the difficulty; and just as the first light of day came to dissipate the shadow that overcast his mind, when his orderly entered to open the blinds in his chamber, he formed a fixed resolution as to his course.

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CHAPTER XVII

THE LADY BOUNTIFUL

Valentine de Vermont was not yet twenty-two years old.

Her birth had cost the life of her mother, and, brought up by an active and enterprising man, her education had been directed by plain common-sense, rather masculine, perhaps, but without injury to her personal attractions, nor to those of her delicate and lofty spirit.

Her father, who was endowed with a veritable genius for commercial action, had monopolized more than the fur-trade of Alaska and of Hudson's Bay. From year to year he had extended the field of his operations: in Central America, dealing in grains and salt meats; in Europe in wines and brandy; commodities always bought at the right time, in enormous quantities, and, without pausing in transshipment from one country to another, carried in vessels belonging to him and sailing under the English flag.

Without giving her any unnecessary instruction as to the management of his affairs, he wished his daughter to possess sufficient knowledge of them to handle herself the wealth that she would receive as a dowry and at his death; and he decided that she should not contract a marriage except under the law of the separation of goods, according to the custom generally adopted in the United States.

An attack of paralysis having condemned him to his armchair, he consecrated the remainder of his days to settling all his enterprises, and when he died, about two years before the arrival of Valentine in Paris, that young lady found herself in the possession of more than one hundred and twenty million francs, nearly all invested in English, American, and French State bonds.

At the expiration of her period of mourning, the wealthy heiress could then live in London, New York, or Paris, at her pleasure; but the French blood that ran in her veins prevented her from hesitating a moment, and she chose the last named of the three cities for her abode.

Being passionately fond of saddle and driving-horses, she did not stop in England without taking the necessary time to acquire everything of the best for the fitting-up of a stable, and after a time she established herself temporarily in a sumptuous apartment in the Place de l'Etoile, furnished with a taste worthy of the most thorough Parisian.

On the evening after her appearance at the Opera, just as she left her breakfast-table, M. Durand presented himself at her dwelling with the architect's plan for the building of the orphan asylum, and declared himself ready to take her orders regarding the plan, as well as on the subject of the gift of money to the Society.

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"I have resolved," said Zibeline, "to transform into an asylum, following a certain plan, the model farm belonging to the estate that I have recently purchased through you. If I required carte blanche in choosing the site, it was because I desire that Monsieur Desvanneaux shall have nothing to do with the matter until the day when I shall put the committee in possession of the building and its premises, which I have engaged to furnish, free of all expense to the Society. I shall employ my own architect to execute the work, and I shall ask you to indemnify, for me, the architect who has drawn up this first plan, which will remain as the minimum expense incurred on my part. But I wish to be the only person to superintend the arrangements, and to be free to introduce, without control, such improvements as I may judge suitable. Should the committee demand a guaranty, I have on deposit with Monsieur de Samoreau a million francs which I intend to use in carrying out these operations. Half of that sum may be consigned to the hands of some one they may wish to choose; the other half will serve to pay the laborers in proportion to their work. In order to insure even greater regularity, have the kindness to draw up, to cover the interval that will elapse before I make my final definite donation, a provisional document, setting forth the engagement that I have undertaken to carry out."

"Here it is," said the notary; "I have already prepared it."

Having examined the document carefully, to assure herself that all statements contained therein were according to her intentions, Zibeline took her pen and wrote at the foot of the page: "Read and approved," and signed the paper.

"Mademoiselle appears to be well accustomed to business habits," observed M. Durand, with a smile.

"That is because I have been trained to them since childhood," she replied. "My plan is to place this document myself in the hands of Madame la Duchesse de Montgeron."

"You can do so this very afternoon, if you wish. Thursday is her reception day," said the notary, rising with a bow, preparatory to taking his leave.

"I shall take good care not to fail to call," earnestly replied the fair Lady Bountiful.

She telephoned immediately to her head-groom, ordering him to bring around her brougham at three o'clock.

CHAPTER XVIII

A MODERN TARTUFE

At the same hour that the elegant carriage of Zibeline was conducting her to the Hotel de Montgeron, M. Desvanneaux descended from a modest fiacre at the gate of the hotel occupied by Eugenie Gontier.

The first impulse of the actress—who was engaged in studying a new role in her library—was not to receive her importunate visitor; but a sudden idea changed her determination, and she gave the order to admit him.

“This is the first time that I have had the high favor of being admitted to this sanctuary,” said the churchwarden, kissing with ardor the hand that the actress extended to him.

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"Don't let us have so great a display of pious manifestations," she said, withdrawing her hand from this act of humility, which was rather too prolonged. "Sit down and be sensible," she added.

"Can one be sensible when he finds himself at your feet, dear Mademoiselle? At the feet of the idol who is so appropriately enthroned among so many artistic objects!" replied the honey-tongued Prudhomme, adjusting his eyeglasses. "The bust of General de Prerolles, no doubt?" he added, inquiringly, scrutinizing a marble statuette placed on the high mantelpiece.

"You are wrong, Monsieur Desvanneaux; it is that of Moliere!"

"I beg your pardon!—I am standing so far below it! I, too, have on my bureau a bust of our great Poquelin, but Madame Desvanneaux thinks that this author's style is somewhat too pornographic, and has ordered me to replace his profane image by the more edifying one of our charitable patron, Saint Vincent de Paul."

"Is it to tell me of your family jars that you honor me with this visit?" said Eugenie.

"No, indeed! It was rather to escape from them, dear Mademoiselle! But alas! my visit has also another object: to release you from the promise you were so kind as to make me regarding the matter of our kermess; a project now unfortunately rendered futile by that Zibeline!"

"Otherwise called 'Mademoiselle de Vermont.'"

"I prefer to call her Zibeline—that name is better suited to a courtesan."

"You are very severe toward her!"

"I can not endure hypocrites!" naively replied the worthy man.

"She appeared to me to be very beautiful, however," continued Eugenie Gontier, in order to keep up the conversation on the woman who she felt instinctively was her rival.

"Beautiful! Not so beautiful as you," rejoined M. Desvanneaux, gallantly. "She is a very ambitious person, who throws her money at our heads, the better to humiliate us."

"But, since it is all in the interest of the Orphan Asylum—"

"Say, rather, in her own interest, to put herself on a pedestal because of her generosity! Oh, she has succeeded at the first stroke! Already, at the Hotel de Montgeron they swear by her; and if this sort of thing goes on, I shall very soon be regarded only as a pariah!"



“Poor Monsieur Desvanneaux!”

“You pity me, dear Mademoiselle? I thank you! The role of consoler is truly worthy of your large heart, and if you do not forbid me to hope—” said this modern Tartufe, approaching Eugenie little by little.

“Take care!” said she; “suppose the General should be hidden under that table, like Orgon!”

“The General!” exclaimed Desvanneaux; “he is too much occupied elsewhere!”

“Occupied with whom?”

“With Zibeline, probably. He never left her side all the evening, last night at the Opera.”

“Pardon me! He was here until after ten o’clock.”

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"Yes, but afterward—when the opera was over?"

"Well, what happened when the opera was over?" Eugenie inquired, forcing herself to hide her emotion.

"They went away together! I saw them—I was watching them from behind a column. What a scandal!"

"And your conclusion on all this, Monsieur Desvanneaux?"

"It is that the General is deceiving you, dear Mademoiselle."

"With that young girl?"

"A bold hussy, I tell you! A Messalina! Ah, I pity you sincerely in my turn! And should a devoted consoler, a discreet avenger, be able to make you forget this outrage to your charms, behold me at your feet, devoting to you my prayers, awaiting only a word from you to become the most fortunate among the elect—"

A loud knock at the outer door spared Mademoiselle Gontier the trouble of repelling her ridiculous adorer, who promptly scrambled to his feet at the sound.

"A visitor!" he murmured, turning pale. "Decidedly, I have no luck—"

"Monsieur le Marquis de Prerolles is in the drawing-room," a domestic announced.

"Beg him to wait," said Eugenie, reassured by this visit, which was earlier than the usual hour. "You see that you are badly informed, Monsieur Desvanneaux," she added.

"For heaven's sake, spare me this embarrassing meeting!" said the informer, whose complexion had become livid.

"I understand. You fear a challenge?"

"Oh, no, not that! My religious principles would forbid me to fight a duel. But the General would not fail to rally me before my wife regarding my presence here, and Madame Desvanneaux would be pitiless."

"Own, however, that you richly deserve a lesson, Lovelace that you are! But I will take pity on you," said Eugenie, opening a door at the end of the room. "The servants' stairway is at the end of that corridor. You know the way!" she added, laughing.

"I am beginning to know it, dear Mademoiselle!" said the pitiful beguiler, slipping through the doorway on tiptoe.



CHAPTER XIX

BROKEN TIES

After picking up a chair which, in his alarm, the fugitive had overturned in his flight, Mademoiselle Gontier herself opened the door leading to the drawing-room.

"Come in, Henri!" said she, lifting the portiere.

"Do I disturb you?" the General inquired, entering the library.

"Never! You know that well! But how gravely you asked the question!"

"For the reason that I wish to speak to you about serious matters, my dear Eugenie."

The image of Zibeline passed before the eyes of the actress. That which Desvanneaux had revealed, in accusing the girl of debauchery, now appeared plausible to her, if considered in another way.

"You are about to marry!" she exclaimed.

They were the same words pronounced by Fanny Dorville in similar circumstances.

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"Never! You know that well enough!" he replied, in his turn.

"Speak, then!" said she, sinking upon a chair and motioning him to a seat before her.

He obeyed, and sitting so far forward upon his chair that his knees touched her skirt, he took both her hands in his own, and said gently:

"You know how much I love you, and how much I esteem you. You know, too, the story of my life: my past follies, and also the honorable career I have run in order to atone for them morally, for in a material sense they are irreparable—according to my ideas, at least. This career has been fortunate. I have reached the highest rank that a soldier can attain to-day. But my rapid promotion, however justifiable it may be, has none the less awakened jealousy. The nature of my services being above all possibility of suspicion, calumny has sought another quarter at which to strike, and at this moment it is my delicacy which is impugned."

"Your delicacy, Henri! What do you mean?" asked Eugenie, in an altered voice.

"Our friendship is well known. You are rich, and I have only my pay: the antithesis is flagrant! The gossips comment upon it, and exploit the fact against me."

"Against you!" cried Eugenie, indignantly.

"Against me—yes. I have proof of it. A man in private life would be justified in ignoring such gossip, but for a man in my profession ambiguity has no place, nor has compromise. Himself a severe judge of the conduct of others, he must not afford them a single instance whereby they can accuse him of not following his own precepts."

And, as his companion remained silent and startled before an explanation so unexpected, he added:

"You say nothing, my love. You must divine the depth of my chagrin at the prospect of a necessary separation, and you are sufficiently charitable not to remind me that I ought to have made these tardy reflections before I yielded to a fascination which made me close my eyes to facts."

"I reproach you with nothing, Henri," said Eugenie in a trembling voice. "I myself yielded to the same enchantment, and in abandoning myself to it, I did not foresee that some day it might be prejudicial to your honor. A singular moral law is that of the world!" she pursued, growing more excited. "Let General de Prerolles be the lover of Madame de Lisieux or of Madame de Nointel; let him sit every day at their tables— if there be only a husband whose hand he may clasp in greeting, no one will call this hospitable liaison a crime! But let him feel anything more than a passing fancy for Eugenie Gontier, who violates no conjugal vow in loving him, but whose love he is not rich enough to buy—even were that love for sale—oh, then, everyone must point at him the finger of scorn!"

As for myself, it seems that it was useless for me to resist so many would-be lovers in order to open my door more freely to the

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man of my choice—an action which no one holds against me, however, because I am only an actress, and the public classes us in a separate category, so that they may more readily offer up to us the incense with which they smother us! Be it so! There are also in my profession disinterested hearts which may serve as examples—and I pretend to the very highest rank as an actress in every role I assume, even in this city. Take back your liberty, Henri!”

“I have most unwillingly offended you,” said he, sadly.

“You? Ah, no! I know that you are loyal and sincere, and I could not harbor resentment against you after your avowal. You would have lacked self-confidence had you acted otherwise. But,” she continued, “have you indeed told me all?”

“All!” he replied, without hesitation.

“Will you give me your word of honor that no other woman stands between you and me?”

“I swear it to you!”

“I thank you! You are incapable of lying. Whatever happens, you never will have a better friend than I, for your just pride is still more dear to me than my own. If you cease to come to the theatre, and appear no more at my receptions, that will be sufficient to insure the silence of gossip concerning us. Go without remorse, Henri! But come back to see me sometimes—quietly, without the knowledge of the envious—will you not?”

“Do you doubt it?” he responded, folding her tenderly in his arms.

“Yes and no! But if this is our supreme farewell, do not tell me so!”

ETEXT EDITOR’S BOOKMARKS:

Ambiguity has no place, nor has compromise
But if this is our supreme farewell, do not tell me so!
Chain so light yesterday, so heavy to-day
Every man is his own master in his choice of liaisons
If I do not give all I give nothing
Indulgence of which they stand in need themselves
Ostensibly you sit at the feast without paying the cost
Paris has become like a little country town in its gossip
The night brings counsel
You are in a conquered country, which is still more dangerous