

Rise and Fall of Cesar Birotteau eBook

Rise and Fall of Cesar Birotteau by Honoré de Balzac

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PART II

CESAR GRAPPLING WITH MISFORTUNE

I

Eight days after his ball, the last dying flash of a prosperity of eighteen years now about to be extinguished, Cesar Birotteau watched the passers-by from the windows of his shop, thinking over the expansion of his affairs, and beginning to find them burdensome. Until then all had been simple in his life; he manufactured and sold, or bought to sell again. To-day the land speculation, his share in the house of A. Popinot and Company, the repayment of the hundred and sixty thousand francs thrown upon the market, which necessitated either a traffic in promissory notes (of which his wife would disapprove), or else some unheard-of success in Cephalic Oil, all fretted the poor man by the multiplicity of ideas which they involved; he felt he had more irons in the fire than he could lay hold of. How would Anselme guide the helm? Birotteau treated Popinot as a professor of rhetoric treats a pupil,—he distrusted his methods, and regretted that he was not at his elbow. The kick he had given Popinot to make him hold his tongue at Vauquelin's explains the uneasiness which the young merchant inspired in his mind.

Birotteau took care that neither his wife nor his daughter nor the clerks should suspect his anxiety; but he was in truth like a humble boatman on the Seine whom the government has suddenly put in command of a frigate. Troubled thoughts filled his mind, never very capable of reflection, as if with a fog; he stood still, as it were, and peered about to see his way. At this moment a figure appeared in the street for which he felt a violent antipathy; it was that of his new landlord, little Molineux. Every one has dreamed dreams filled with the events of a lifetime, in which there appears and reappears some wayward being, commissioned to play the mischief and be the villain of the piece. To Birotteau's fancy Molineux seemed delegated by chance to fill some part in his life. His weird face had grinned diabolically at the ball, and he had looked at its magnificence with an evil eye. Catching sight of him again at this moment, Cesar was all the more reminded of the impression the little skin-flint (a word of his vocabulary) had made upon him, because Molineux excited fresh repugnance by reappearing in the midst of his anxious reverie.

"Monsieur," said the little man, in his atrociously hypocritical voice, "we settled our business so hastily that you forgot to guarantee the signatures on the little private deed."

Birotteau took the lease to repair the mistake. The architect came in at this moment, and bowed to the perfumer, looking about him with a diplomatic air.

“Monsieur,” he whispered to Cesar presently, “you can easily understand that the first steps in a profession are difficult; you said you were satisfied with me, and it would oblige me very much if you would pay me my commission.”

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Birotteau, who had stripped himself of ready money when he put his current cash into Roguin's hands two weeks earlier, called to Celestin to make out an order for two thousand francs at ninety days' sight, and to write the form of a receipt.

"I am very glad you took part of your neighbor's rental on yourself," said Molineux in a sly, half-sneering tone. "My porter came to tell me just now that the sheriff has affixed the seals to the Sieur Cayron's appartement; he has disappeared."

"I hope I'm not juggled out of five thousand francs," thought Birotteau.

"Cayron always seemed to do a good business," said Lourdois, who just then came in to bring his bill.

"A merchant is never safe from commercial reverses until he has retired from business," said little Molineux, folding up his document with fussy precision.

The architect watched the queer old man with the enjoyment all artists find in getting hold of a caricature which confirms their theories about the bourgeoisie.

"When we have got our head under an umbrella we generally think it is protected from the rain," he said.

Molineux noticed the mustachios and the little chin-tuft of the artist much more than he did his face, and he despised that individual folly as much as Grindot despised him. He waited to give him a parting scratch as he went out. By dint of living so long with his cats Molineux had acquired, in his manners as well as in his eyes, something unmistakably feline.

Just at this moment Ragon and Pillerault came in.

"We have been talking of the land affair with the judge," said Ragon in Cesar's ear; "he says that in a speculation of that kind we must have a warranty from the sellers, and record the deeds, and pay in cash, before we are really owners and co-partners."

"Ah! you are talking of the lands about the Madeleine," said Lourdois; "there is a good deal said about them: there will be some houses to build."

The painter who had come intending to have his bill settled, suddenly thought it more to his interest not to press Birotteau.

"I brought my bill because it was the end of the year," he whispered to Cesar; "but there's no hurry."

"What is the matter, Cesar?" said Pillerault, noticing the amazement of his nephew, who, having glanced at the bill, made no reply to either Ragon or Lourdois.

“Oh, a trifle. I took notes to the amount of five thousand francs from my neighbor, a dealer in umbrellas, and he has failed. If he has given me bad securities I shall be caught, like a fool.”

“And yet I have warned you many times,” cried Ragon; “a drowning man will catch at his father’s leg to save himself, and drown him too. I have seen so many failures! People are not exactly scoundrels when the disaster begins, but they soon come to be, out of sheer necessity.”

“That’s true,” said Pillerault.

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"If I ever get into the Chamber of Deputies, and ever have any influence in the government," said Birotteau, rising on his toes and dropping back on his heels,—

"What would you do?" said Lourdois, "for you've a long head."

Molineux, interested in any discussion about law, lingered in the shop; and as the attention of a few persons is apt to make others attentive, Pillerrault and Ragon listened as gravely as the three strangers, though they perfectly well knew Cesar's opinions.

"I would have," said the perfumer, "a court of irremovable judges, with a magistracy to attend to the application and execution of the laws. After the examination of a case, during which the judge should fulfil the functions of agent, assignee, and commissioner, the merchant should be declared *insolvent with rights of reinstatement*, or else *bankrupt*. If the former, he should be required to pay in full; he should be left in control of his own property and that of his wife; all his belongings and his inherited property should belong to his creditors, and he should administer his affairs in their interests under supervision; he should still carry on his business, signing always 'So-and-so, insolvent,' until the whole debt is paid off. If bankrupt, he should be condemned, as formerly, to the pillory on the Place de la Bourse, and exposed for two hours, wearing a green cap. His property and that of his wife, and all his rights of every kind should be handed over to his creditors, and he himself banished from the kingdom."

"Business would be more secure," said Lourdois; "people would think twice before launching into speculations."

"The existing laws are not enforced," cried Cesar, lashing himself up. "Out of every hundred merchants there are more than fifty who never realize seventy-five per cent of the whole value of their business, or who sell their merchandise at twenty-five per cent below the invoice price; and that is the destruction of commerce."

"Monsieur is very right," said Molineux; "the law leaves a great deal too much latitude. There should either be total relinquishment of everything, or infamy."

"Damn it!" said Cesar, "at the rate things are going now, a merchant will soon be a licensed thief. With his mere signature he can dip into anybody's money-drawer."

"You have no mercy, Monsieur Birotteau," said Lourdois.

"He is quite right," said old Ragon.

"All insolvents are suspicious characters," said Cesar, exasperated by his little loss, which sounded in his ears like the first cry of the view-halloo in the ears of the game.

At this moment the late major-domo brought in Chevet's account, followed by a clerk sent by Felix, a waiter from the cafe Foy, and Collinet's clarionet, each with a bill.

“Rabelais’ quarter of an hour,” said Ragon, smiling.

“It was a fine ball,” said Lourdois.

“I am busy,” said Cesar to the messengers; who all left the bills and went away.

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“Monsieur Grindot,” said Lourdois, observing that the architect was folding up Birotteau’s cheque, “will you certify my account? You need only to add it up; the prices were all agreed to by you on Monsieur Birotteau’s behalf.”

Pillerault looked at Lourdois and Grindot.

“Prices agreed upon between the architect and contractor?” he said in a low voice to his nephew,—“they have robbed you.”

Grindot left the shop, and Molineux followed him with a mysterious air.

“Monsieur,” he said, “you listened to me, but you did not understand me,—I wish you the protection of an umbrella.”

The architect was frightened. The more illegal a man’s gains the more he clings to them: the human heart is so made. Grindot had really studied the appartement lovingly; he had put all his art and all his time into it; he had given ten thousand francs worth of labor, and he felt that in so doing he had been the dupe of his vanity: the contractors therefore had little trouble in seducing him. The irresistible argument and threat, fully understood, of injuring him professionally by calumniating his work were, however, less powerful than a remark made by Lourdois about the lands near the Madeleine. Birotteau did not expect to hold a single house upon them; he was speculating only on the value of the land; but architects and contractors are to each other very much what authors and actors are, —mutually dependent. Grindot, ordered by Birotteau to stipulate the costs, went for the interests of the builders against the bourgeoisie; and the result was that three large contractors—Lourdois, Chaffaroux, and Thorein the carpenter—proclaimed him “one of those good fellows it is a pleasure to work for.” Grindot guessed that the contractor’s bills, out of which he was to have a share, would be paid, like his commission, in notes; and little Molineux had just filled his mind with doubts as to their payment. The architect was about to become pitiless,—after the manner of artists, who are most intolerant of men in their dealings with the middle classes.

By the end of December bills to the amount of sixty thousand francs had been sent in. Felix, the cafe Foy, Tanrade, and all the little creditors who ought to be paid in ready money, had asked for payment three times. Failure to pay such trifles as these do more harm in business than a real misfortune,—they foretell it: known losses are definite, but a panic defies all reckoning. Birotteau saw his coffers empty, and terror seized him: such a thing had never happened throughout his whole commercial life. Like all persons who have never struggled long with poverty, and who are by nature feeble, this circumstance, so common among the greater number of the petty Parisian tradesmen, disturbed for a moment Cesar’s brain. He ordered Celestin to send round the bills of his customers and ask for payment. Before doing so, the head clerk made him repeat the unheard-of order. The clients,—a fine

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term applied by retail shopkeepers to their customers, and used by Cesar in spite of his wife, who however ended by saying, "Call them what you like, provided they pay!"—his clients, then, were rich people, through whom he had never lost money, who paid when they pleased, and among whom Cesar often had a floating amount of fifty or sixty thousand francs due to him. The second clerk went through the books and copied off the largest sums. Cesar dreaded his wife: that she might not see his depression under this simoom of misfortune, he prepared to go out.

"Good morning, monsieur," said Grindot, entering with the lively manner artists put on when they speak of business, and wish to pretend they know nothing about it; "I cannot get your paper cashed, and I am obliged to ask you to give me the amount in ready money. I am truly unhappy in making this request, but I don't wish to go to the usurers. I have not hawked your signature about; I know enough of business to feel sure it would injure you. It is really in your own interest that I—"

"Monsieur," said Birotteau, horrified, "speak lower if you please; you surprise me strangely."

Lourdois entered.

"Lourdois," said Birotteau, smiling, "would you believe—"

The poor man stopped short; he was about to ask the painter to take the note given to Grindot, ridiculing the architect with the good nature of a merchant sure of his own standing; but he saw a cloud upon Lourdois' brow, and he shuddered at his own imprudence. The innocent jest would have been the death of his suspected credit. In such a case a prosperous merchant takes back his note, and does not offer it elsewhere. Birotteau felt his head swim, as though he had looked down the sides of a precipice into a measureless abyss.

"My dear Monsieur Birotteau," said Lourdois, drawing him to the back of the shop, "my account has been examined, audited, and certified; I must ask you to have the money ready for me to-morrow. I marry my daughter to little Crottat; he wants money, for notaries will not take paper; besides, I never give promissory notes."

"Send to me on the day after to-morrow," said Birotteau proudly, counting on the payment of his own bills. "And you too, Monsieur," he said to the architect.

"Why not pay at once?" said Grindot.

"I have my workmen in the faubourg to pay," said Birotteau, who knew not how to lie.

He took his hat once more intending to follow them out, but the mason, Thorein, and Chaffaroux stopped him as he was closing the door.

“Monsieur,” said Chaffaroux, “we are in great need of money.”

“Well, I have not the mines of Peru,” said Cesar, walking quickly away from them.

“There is something beneath all this,” he said to himself. “That cursed ball! All the world thinks I am worth millions. Yet Lourdois had a look that was not natural; there’s a snake in the grass somewhere.”

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He walked along the Rue Saint-Honore, in no special direction, and feeling much discomposed. At the corner of a street he ran against Alexandre Crottat, just as a ram, or a mathematician absorbed in the solution of a problem, might have knocked against another of his kind.

“Ah, monsieur,” said the future notary, “one word! Has Roguin given your four hundred thousand francs to Monsieur Claparon?”

“The business was settled in your presence. Monsieur Claparon gave me no receipt; my acceptances were to be—negotiated. Roguin was to give him—my two hundred and forty thousand francs. He was told that he was to pay for the property definitely. Monsieur Popinot the judge said —The receipt!—but—why do you ask the question?”

“Why ask the question? To know if your two hundred and forty thousand francs are still with Roguin. Roguin was so long connected with you, that perhaps out of decent feeling he may have paid them over to Claparon, and you will escape! But, no! what a fool I am! He has carried off Claparon’s money as well! Happily, Claparon had only paid over, to my care, one hundred thousand francs. I gave them to Roguin just as I would give you my purse, and I have no receipt for them. The owners of the land have not received one penny; they have just been talking to me. The money you thought you raised upon your property in the Faubourg du Temple had no existence for you, or the borrower; Roguin has squandered it, together with your hundred thousand francs, which he used up long ago,—and your last hundred thousand as well, for I just remember drawing them from the bank.”

The pupils of Cesar’s eyes dilated so enormously that he saw only red flames.

“Your hundred thousand francs in his hands, my hundred thousand for his practice, a hundred thousand from Claparon,—there’s three hundred thousand francs purloined, not to speak of other thefts which will be discovered,” exclaimed the young notary.

“Madame Roguin is not to be counted on. Du Tillet has had a narrow escape. Roguin tormented him for a month to get into that land speculation, but happily all his funds were tied up in an affair with Nucingen. Roguin has written an atrocious letter to his wife; I have read it. He has been making free with his clients’ money for years; and why? for a mistress,—la belle Hollandaise. He left her two weeks ago. The squandering hussy hasn’t a farthing left; they sold her furniture,—she had signed promissory notes. To escape arrest, she took refuge in a house in the Palais-Royal, where she was assassinated last night by a captain in the army. God has quickly punished her; she has wasted Roguin’s whole fortune and much more. There are some women to whom nothing is sacred: think of squandering the trust moneys of a notary! Madame Roguin won’t have a penny, except by claiming her rights of dower; the scoundrel’s whole property is encumbered to its full value. I bought the practice for three hundred thousand francs,—I,

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who thought I was getting a good thing!—and paid a hundred thousand down. I have no receipt; the creditors will think I am an accomplice if I say a word about that hundred thousand francs, and when a man is starting in life he must be careful of his reputation. There will hardly be thirty per cent saved for the creditors. At my age, to get such a setback! A man fifty-nine years of age to keep a mistress! the old villain! It is only two weeks since he told me not to marry Cesarine; he said you would soon be without bread,—the monster!”

Alexandre might have talked on indefinitely, for Birotteau stood still, petrified. Every phrase was a calamity, like the blows of a bludgeon. He heard the death-bells tolling in his ears,—just as his eyes had seen, at the first word, the flames of his fortune. Alexandre Crottat, who thought the worthy perfumer a strong and able man, was alarmed at his paleness and rigidity. He was not aware that Roguin had carried off Cesar’s whole property. The thought of immediate suicide passed through the brain of the victim, deeply religious as he was. In such a case suicide is only a way to escape a thousand deaths; it seems logical to take it. Alexandre Crottat gave him his arm, and tried to make him walk on, but it was impossible: his legs gave way under him as if he were drunk.

“What is the matter?” said Crottat. “Dear Monsieur Cesar, take courage! it is not the death of a man. Besides, you will get back your forty thousand francs. The lender hadn’t the money ready, you never received it,—that is sufficient to set aside the agreement.”

“My ball—my cross—two hundred thousand francs in paper on the market,—no money in hand! The Ragons, Pillerault,—and my wife, who saw true—”

A rain of confused words, revealing a weight of crushing thoughts and unutterable suffering, poured from his lips, like hail lashing the flowers in the garden of “The Queen of Roses.”

“I wish they would cut off my head,” he said at last; “its weight troubles me, it is good for nothing.”

“Poor Pere Birotteau,” said Alexandre, “are you in danger?”

“Danger!”

“Well, take courage; make an effort.”

“Effort!”

“Du Tillet was your clerk; he has a good head; he will help you.”

“Du Tillet!”

“Come, try to walk.”

“My God! I cannot go home as I am,” said Birotteau. “You who are my friend, if there are friends,—you in whom I took an interest, who have dined at my house,—take me somewhere in a carriage, for my wife’s sake. Xandrot, go with me!”

The young notary compassionately put the inert mechanism which bore the name of Cesar into a street coach, not without great difficulty.

“Xandrot,” said the perfumer, in a voice choked with tears,—for the tears were now falling from his eyes, and loosening the iron band which bound his brow,—“stop at my shop; go in and speak to Celestin for me. My friend, tell him it is a matter of life or death, that on no consideration must he or any one talk about Roguin’s flight. Tell Cesarine to come down to me, and beg her not to say a word to her mother. We must beware of our best friends, of Pillerault, Ragon, everybody.”

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The change in Birotteau's voice startled Crottat, who began to understand the importance of the warning; he fulfilled the instructions of the poor man, whom Celestin and Cesarine were horrified to find pale and half insensible in a corner of the carriage.

"Keep the secret," he said.

"Ah!" said Xandrot to himself, "he is coming to. I thought him lost."

From thence they went, at Cesar's request, to a judge of the commercial courts. The conference between Crottat and the magistrate lasted long, and the president of the chamber of notaries was summoned. Cesar was carried about from place to place, like a bale of goods; he never moved, and said nothing. Towards seven in the evening Alexandre Crottat took him home. The thought of appearing before Constance braced his nerves. The young notary had the charity to go before, and warn Madame Birotteau that her husband had had a rush of blood to the head.

"His ideas are rather cloudy," he said, with a gesture implying disturbance of the brain. "Perhaps he should be bled, or leeches applied."

"No wonder," said Constance, far from dreaming of a disaster; "he did not take his precautionary medicine at the beginning of the winter, and for the last two months he has been working like a galley slave, —just as if his fortune were not made."

The wife and daughter entreated Cesar to go to bed, and they sent for his old friend Monsieur Haudry. The old man was a physician of the school of Moliere, a great practitioner and in favor of the old-fashioned formulas, who dosed his patients neither more nor less than a quack, consulting physician though he was. He came, studied the expression of Cesar's face, and observing symptoms of cerebral congestion, ordered an immediate application of mustard plasters to the soles of his feet.

"What can have caused it?" asked Constance.

"The damp weather," said the doctor, to whom Cesarine had given a hint.

It often becomes a physician's duty to utter deliberately some silly falsehood, to save honor or life, to those who are about a sick-bed. The old doctor had seen much in his day, and he caught the meaning of half a word. Cesarine followed him to the staircase, and asked for directions in managing the case.

"Quiet and silence; when the head is clear we will try tonics."

Madame Cesar passed two days at the bedside of her husband, who seemed to her at times delirious. He lay in her beautiful blue room, and as he looked at the curtains, the furniture, and all the costly magnificence about him, he said things that were wholly incomprehensible to her.

“He must be out of his mind,” she whispered to Cesarine, as Cesar rose up in bed and recited clauses of the commercial Code in a solemn voice.

““If the expenditure is judged excessive!’ Away with those curtains!”

At the end of three terrible days, during which his reason was in danger, the strong constitution of the Tourangian peasant triumphed; his head grew clear. Monsieur Haudry ordered stimulants and generous diet, and before long, after an occasional cup of coffee, Cesar was on his feet again. Constance, wearied out, took her husband’s place in bed.

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"Poor woman!" said Cesar, looking at her as she slept.

"Come, papa, take courage! you are so superior a man that you will triumph in the end. This trouble won't last; Monsieur Anselme will help you."

Cesarine said these vague words in the tender tones which give courage to a stricken heart, just as the songs of a mother soothe the weary child tormented with pain as its cuts its teeth.

"Yes, my child, I shall struggle on; but say not a word to any one, —not to Popinot who loves us, nor to your uncle Pillerault. I shall first write to my brother; he is canon and vicar of the cathedral. He spends nothing, and I have no doubt he has means. If he saves only three thousand francs a year, that would give him at the end of twenty years one hundred thousand francs. In the provinces the priests lay up money."

Cesarine hastened to bring her father a little table with writing-things upon it,—among them the surplus of invitations printed on pink paper.

"Burn all that!" cried her father. "The devil alone could have prompted me to give that ball. If I fail, I shall seem to have been a swindler. Stop!" he added, "words are of no avail." And he wrote the following letter:—

My dear Brother,—I find myself in so severe a commercial crisis that I must ask you to send me all the money you can dispose of, even if you have to borrow some for the purpose.

Ever yours,
Cesar.

Your niece, Cesarine, who is watching me as I write, while my poor wife sleeps, sends you her tender remembrances.

This postscript was added at Cesarine's urgent request; she then took the letter and gave it to Raguet.

"Father," she said, returning, "here is Monsieur Lebas, who wants to speak to you."

"Monsieur Lebas!" cried Cesar, frightened, as though his disaster had made him a criminal,—“a judge!”

"My dear Monsieur Birotteau, I take too great an interest in you," said the stout draper, entering the room, "we have known each other too long,—for we were both elected judges at the same time,—not to tell you that a man named Bidault, called Gigonnet, a usurer, has notes of yours turned over to his order, and marked 'not guaranteed,' by the

house of Claparon. Those words are not only an affront, but they are the death of your credit.”

“Monsieur Claparon wishes to speak to you,” said Celestin, entering; “may I tell him to come up?”

“Now we shall learn the meaning of this insult,” said Lebas.

“Monsieur,” said Cesar to Claparon, as he entered, “this is Monsieur Lebas, a judge of the commercial courts, and my friend—”

“Ah! monsieur is Monsieur Lebas?” interrupted Claparon. “Delighted with the opportunity, Monsieur Lebas of the commercial courts; there are so many Lebas, you know, of one kind or another—”

“He has seen,” said Birotteau, cutting the gabbler short, “the notes which I gave you, and which I understood from you would not be put into circulation. He has seen them bearing the words ‘not guaranteed.’”

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"Well," said Claparon, "they are not in general circulation; they are in the hands of a man with whom I do a great deal of business,—Pere Bidault. That is why I affixed the words 'not guaranteed.' If the notes were intended for circulation you would have made them payable to his order. Monsieur Lebas will understand my position. What do these notes represent? The price of landed property. Paid by whom? By Birotteau. Why should I guarantee Birotteau by my signature? We are to pay, each on his own account, our half of the price of the said land. Now, it is enough to be jointly and separately liable to the sellers. I hold inflexibly to one commercial rule: I never give my guarantee uselessly, any more than I give my receipt for moneys not yet paid. He who signs, pays. I don't wish to be liable to pay three times."

"Three times!" said Cesar.

"Yes, monsieur," said Claparon, "I have already guaranteed Birotteau to the sellers, why should I guarantee him again to the bankers? The circumstances in which we are placed are very hard. Roguin has carried off a hundred thousand francs of mine; therefore, my half of the property costs me five hundred thousand francs instead of four hundred thousand. Roguin has also carried off two hundred and forty thousand francs of Birotteau's. What would you do in my place, Monsieur Lebas? Stand in my skin for a moment and view the case. Give me your attention. Say that we are engaged in a transaction on equal shares; you provide the money for your share, I give bills for mine; I offer them to you, and you undertake, purely out of kindness, to convert them into money. You learn that I, Claparon,—banker, rich, respected (I accept all the virtues under the sun),—that the virtuous Claparon is on the verge of failure, with six million of liabilities to meet: would you, at such a moment, give your signature to guarantee mine? Of course not; you would be mad to do it. Well, Monsieur Lebas, Birotteau is in the position which I have supposed for Claparon. Don't you see that if I endorse for him I am liable not only for my own share of the purchase, but I shall also be compelled to reimburse to the full amount of Birotteau's paper, and without—"

"To whom?" asked Birotteau, interrupting him.

"—without gaining his half of the property?" said Claparon, paying no attention to the interruption. "For I should have no rights in it; I should have to buy it over again; consequently, I repeat, I should have to pay for it three times."

"Reimburse whom?" persisted Birotteau.

"Why, the holder of the notes, if I were to endorse, and you were to fail."

"I shall not fail, monsieur," said Birotteau.

“Very good,” said Claparon. “But you have been a judge, and you are a clever merchant; you know very well that we should look ahead and foresee everything; you can’t be surprised that I should attend to my business properly.”

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"Monsieur Claparon is right," said Joseph Lebas.

"I am right," said Claparon,—“right commercially. But this is an affair of landed property. Now, what must I have? Money, to pay the sellers. We won't speak now of the two hundred and forty thousand francs,—which I am sure Monsieur Birotteau will be able to raise soon,” said Claparon, looking at Lebas. “I have come now to ask for a trifle, merely twenty-five thousand francs,” he added, turning to Birotteau.

"Twenty-five thousand francs!" cried Cesar, feeling ice in his veins instead of blood. "What claim have you, monsieur?"

"What claim? Hey! we have to make a payment and execute the deeds before a notary. Among ourselves, of course, we could come to an understanding about the payment, but when we have to do with a financial public functionary it is quite another thing! He won't palaver; he'll trust you no farther than he can see. We have got to come down with forty thousand francs, to secure the registration, this week. I did not expect reproaches in coming here, for, thinking this twenty-five thousand francs might be inconvenient to you just now, I meant to tell you that, by a mere chance, I have saved you—"

"What?" said Birotteau, with that rending cry of anguish which no man ever mistakes.

"A trifle! The notes amounting to twenty-five thousand francs on divers securities which Roguin gave me to negotiate I have credited to you, for the registration payment and the fees, of which I will send you an account; there will be a small amount to deduct, and you will then owe me about six or seven thousand francs."

"All that seems to me perfectly proper," said Lebas. "In your place, monsieur, I should do the same towards a stranger."

"Monsieur Birotteau won't die of it," said Claparon; "it takes more than one shot to kill an old wolf. I have seen wolves with a ball in their head run, by God, like—wolves!"

"Who could have foreseen such villany as Roguin's?" said Lebas, as much alarmed by Cesar's silence as by the discovery of such enormous speculations outside of his friend's legitimate business of perfumery.

"I came very near giving Monsieur Birotteau a receipt for his four hundred thousand francs," said Claparon. "I should have blown up if I had, for I had given Roguin a hundred thousand myself the day before. Our mutual confidence is all that saved me. Whether the money were in a lawyer's hands or in mine until the day came to pay for the land, seemed to us all a matter of no importance."

"It would have been better," said Lebas, "to have kept the money in the Bank of France until the time came to make the payments."

“Roguin was the bank to me,” said Cesar. “But he is in the speculation,” he added, looking at Claparon.

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"Yes, for one-fourth, by verbal agreement only. After being such a fool as to let him run off with my money, I sha'n't be such a fool as to throw any more after it. If he sends me my hundred thousand francs, and two hundred thousand more for his half of our share, I shall then see about it. But he will take good care not to send them for an affair which needs five years' pot-boiling before you get any broth. If he has only carried off, as they say, three hundred thousand francs, he will want the income of all of that to live suitably in foreign countries."

"The villain!"

"Eh! the devil take him! It was a woman who got him where he is," said Claparon. "Where's the old man who can answer for himself that he won't be the slave of his last fancy? None of us, who think ourselves so virtuous, know how we shall end. A last passion,—eh! it is the most violent of all! Look at Cardot, Camusot, Matifat; they all have their mistresses! If we have been gobbled up to satisfy Roguin's, isn't it our own fault? Why didn't we distrust a notary who meddles with speculations? Every notary, every broker, every trustee who speculates is an object of suspicion. Failure for them is fraudulent bankruptcy; they are sure to go before the criminal courts, and therefore they prefer to run out of the country. I sha'n't commit such a stupid blunder again. Well, well! we are too shaky ourselves in the matter not to let judgment go by default against the men we have dined with, who have given us fine balls,—men of the world, in short. Nobody complains; we are all to blame."

"Very much to blame," said Birotteau. "The laws about failures and insolvency should be looked into."

"If you have any need of me," said Lebas to Cesar, "I am at your service."

"Monsieur does not need any one," said the irrepressible chatterbox, whose floodgates du Tillet had set wide open when he turned on the water,—for Claparon was now repeating a lesson du Tillet had cleverly taught him. "His course is quite clear. Roguin's assets will give fifty per cent to the creditors, so little Crottat tells me. Besides this, Monsieur Birotteau gets back the forty thousand on his note to Roguin's client, which the lender never paid over; then, of course, he can borrow on that property. We have four months ahead before we are obliged to make a payment of two hundred thousand francs to the sellers. Between now and then, Monsieur Birotteau can pay off his notes; though of course he can't count on what Roguin has carried off to meet them. Even if Monsieur Birotteau should be rather pinched, with a little manipulation he will come out all right."

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The poor man took courage, as he heard Claparon analyzing the affair and summing it up with advice as to his future conduct. His countenance grew firm and decided; and he began to think highly of the late commercial traveller's capacity. Du Tillet had thought best to let Claparon believe himself really the victim of Roguin. He had given Claparon a hundred thousand francs to pay over to Roguin the day before the latter's flight, and Roguin had returned the money to du Tillet. Claparon, therefore, to that extent was playing a genuine part; and he told whoever would listen to him that Roguin had cost him a hundred thousand francs. Du Tillet thought Claparon was not bold enough, and fancied he had still too much honor and decency to make it safe to trust him with the full extent of his plans; and he knew him to be mentally incapable of conjecturing them.

"If our first friend is not our first dupe, we shall never find a second," he made answer to Claparon, on the day when his catchpenny banker reproached him for the trick; and he flung him away like a wornout instrument.

Monsieur Lebas and Claparon went out together.

"I shall pull through," said Birotteau to himself. "My liabilities amount to two hundred and thirty-five thousand francs; that is, sixty-five thousand in bills for the cost of the ball, and a hundred and seventy-five thousand given in notes for the lands. To meet these, I have my share of Roguin's assets, say perhaps one hundred thousand francs; and I can cancel the loan on my property in the Faubourg du Temple, as the mortgage never paid the money,—in all, one hundred and forty thousand. All depends on making a hundred thousand francs out of Cephalic Oil, and waiting patiently, with the help of a few notes, or a credit at a banker's, until I repair my losses or the lands about the Madeleine reach their full value."

When a man crushed by misfortune is once able to make the fiction of a hope for himself by a series of arguments, more or less reasonable, with which he bolsters himself up to rest his head, it often happens that he is really saved. Many a man has derived energy from the confidence born of illusions. Possibly, hope is the better half of courage; indeed, the Catholic religion makes it a virtue. Hope! has it not sustained the weak, and given the fainting heart time and patience to await the chances and changes of life? Cesar resolved to confide his situation to his wife's uncle before seeking for succor elsewhere. But as he walked down the Rue Saint-Honore towards the Rue des Bourdonnais, he endured an inward anguish and distress which shook him so violently that he fancied his health was giving way. His bowels seemed on fire. It is an established fact that persons who feel through their diaphragms suffer in those parts when overtaken by misfortune, just as others whose perceptions are in their heads suffer from cerebral pains and affections. In great crises, the physical powers are attacked at the point where

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the individual temperament has placed the vital spark. Feeble beings have the colic. Napoleon slept. Before assailing the confidence of a life-long friendship, and breaking down all the barriers of pride and self-assurance, an honorable man must needs feel in his heart—and feel it more than once —the spur of that cruel rider, necessity. Thus it happened that Birotteau had been goaded for two days before he could bring himself to seek his uncle; it was, indeed, only family reasons which finally decided him to do so. In any state of the case, it was his duty to explain his position to the severe old ironmonger, his wife's uncle. Nevertheless, as he reached the house he felt that inward faintness which a child feels when taken to a dentist's; but this shrinking of the heart involved the whole of his life, past, present, and to come, —it was not the fugitive pain of a moment. He went slowly up the stairs.

II

The old man was reading the “Constitutionnel” in his chimney-corner, before a little round table on which stood his frugal breakfast,—a roll, some butter, a plate of Brie cheese, and a cup of coffee.

“Here is true wisdom,” thought Birotteau, envying his uncle's life.

“Well!” said Pillerault, taking off his spectacles, “I heard at the cafe David last night about Roguin's affair, and the assassination of his mistress, la belle Hollandaise. I hope, as we desire to be actual owners of the property, that you obtained Claparon's receipt for the money.”

“Alas! uncle, no. The trouble is just there,—you have put your finger upon the sore.”

“Good God! you are ruined!” cried Pillerault, letting fall his newspaper, which Birotteau picked up, though it was the “Constitutionnel.”

Pillerault was so violently roused by his reflections that his face —like the image on a medal and of the same stern character—took a deep bronze tone, such as the metal itself takes under the oscillating tool of a coiner; he remained motionless, gazing through the window-panes at the opposite wall, but seeing nothing,—listening, however, to Birotteau. Evidently he heard and judged, and weighed the *pros* and *cons* with the inflexibility of a Minos who had crossed the Styx of commerce when he quitted the Quai des Morfondus for his little third storey.

“Well, uncle?” said Birotteau, who waited for an answer, after closing what he had to say with an entreaty that Pillerault would sell sixty thousand francs out of the Funds.

“Well, my poor nephew, I cannot do it; you are too heavily involved. The Ragons and I each lose our fifty thousand francs. Those worthy people have, by my advice, sold their

shares in the mines of Wortschin: I feel obliged, in case of loss, not to return the capital of course, but to succor them, and to succor my niece and Cesarine. You may all want bread, and you shall find it with me.”

“Want bread, uncle?”

“Yes, bread. See things as they are, Cesar. *You cannot extricate yourself.* With five thousand six hundred francs income, I could set aside four thousand francs for you and the Ragons. If misfortune overtakes you,—I know Constance, she will work herself to the bone, she will deny herself everything; and so will you, Cesar.”

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"All is not hopeless, uncle."

"I cannot see it as you do."

"I will prove that you are mistaken."

"Nothing would give me greater happiness."

Birotteau left Pillerrault without another word. He had come to seek courage and consolation, and he received a blow less severe, perhaps, than the first; but instead of striking his head it struck his heart, and his heart was the whole of life to the poor man. After going down a few stairs he returned.

"Monsieur," he said, in a cold voice, "Constance knows nothing. Keep my secret at any rate; beg the Ragons to say nothing, and not to take from my home the peace I need so much in my struggle against misfortune."

Pillerrault made a gesture of assent.

"Courage, Cesar!" he said. "I see you are angry with me; but later, when you think of your wife and daughter, you will do me justice."

Discouraged by his uncle's opinion, and recognizing its clear-sightedness, Cesar tumbled from the heights of hope into the miry marshes of doubt and uncertainty. In such horrible commercial straits a man, unless his soul is tempered like that of Pillerrault, becomes the plaything of events; he follows the ideas of others, or his own, as a traveller pursues a will-o'-the-wisp. He lets the gust whirl him along, instead of lying flat and not looking up as it passes; or else gathering himself together to follow the direction of the storm till he can escape from the edges of it. In the midst of his pain Birotteau bethought him of the steps he ought to take about the mortgage on his property. He turned towards the Rue Vivienne to find Derville, his solicitor, and institute proceedings at once, in case the lawyer should see any chance of annulling the agreement. He found Derville sitting by the fire, wrapped in a white woollen dressing-gown, calm and composed in manner, like all lawyers long used to receiving terrible confidences. Birotteau noticed for the first time in his life this necessary coldness, which struck a chill to the soul of a man grasped by the fever of imperilled interests,—passionate, wounded, and cruelly gashed in his life, his honor, his wife, his child, as Cesar showed himself to be while he related his misfortunes.

"If it can be proved," said Derville, after listening to him, "that the lender no longer had in Roguin's hands the sum which Roguin pretended to borrow for you upon your property, then, as there has been no delivery of the money, there is ground for annulling the contract; the lender may seek redress through the warranty, as you will for your hundred

thousand francs. I will answer for the case, however, as much as one can ever answer. No case is won till it is tried."

The opinion of so able a lawyer restored Cesar's courage a little, and he begged Derville to obtain a judgment within a fortnight. The solicitor replied that it might take three months to get such a judgment as would annul the agreement.

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"Three months!" cried Birotteau, who needed immediate resources.

"Though we may get the case at once on the docket, we cannot make your adversary keep pace with us. He will employ all the law's delays, and the barristers are seldom ready. Perhaps your opponents will let the case go by default. We can't always get on as we wish," said Derville, smiling.

"In the commercial courts—" began Birotteau.

"Oh!" said the lawyer, "the judges of the commercial courts and the judges of the civil courts are different sorts of judges. You dash through things. At the Palais de Justice we have stricter forms. Forms are the bulwarks of law. How would you like slap-dash judgments, which can't be appealed, and which would make you lose forty thousand francs? Well, your adversary, who sees that sum involved, will defend himself. Delays may be called judicial fortifications."

"You are right," said Birotteau, bidding Derville good-by, and going hurriedly away, with death in his heart.

"They are all right. Money! money! I must have money!" he cried as he went along the streets, talking to himself like other busy men in the turbulent and seething city, which a modern poet has called a vat. When he entered his shop, the clerk who had carried round the bills informed him that the customers had returned the receipts and kept the accounts, as it was so near the first of January.

"Then there is no money to be had anywhere," said the perfumer, aloud.

He bit his lips, for the clerks all raised their heads and looked at him.

Five days went by; five days during which Braschon, Lourdois, Thorein, Grindot, Chaffaroux, and all the other creditors with unpaid bills passed through the chameleon phases that are customary to uneasy creditors before they take the sanguinary colors of the commercial Bellona, and reach a state of peaceful confidence. In Paris the astringent stage of suspicion and mistrust is as quick to declare itself as the expansive flow of confidence is slow in gathering way. The creditor who has once turned into the narrow path of commercial fears and precautions speedily takes a course of malignant meanness which puts him below the level of his debtor. He passes from specious civility to impatient rage, to the surly clamor of importunity, to bursts of disappointment, to the livid coldness of a mind made up to vengeance, and the scowling insolence of a summons before the courts. Braschon, the rich upholsterer of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, who was not invited to the ball, and was therefore stabbed in his self-love, sounded the charge; he insisted on being paid within twenty-four hours. He demanded security; not an attachment on the furniture, but a second mortgage on the property in the Faubourg du Temple.

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In spite of such attacks and the violence of these recriminations, a few peaceful intervals occurred, when Birotteau breathed once more; but instead of resolutely facing and vanquishing the first skirmishings of adverse fortune, Cesar employed his whole mind in the effort to keep his wife, the only person able to advise him, from knowing anything about them. He guarded the very threshold of his door, and set a watch on all around him. He took Celestin into confidence so far as to admit a momentary embarrassment, and Celestin examined him with an amazed and inquisitive look. In his eyes Cesar lessened, as men lessen in presence of disasters when accustomed only to success, and when their whole mental strength consists of knowledge which commonplace minds acquire through routine.

Menaced as he was on so many sides at once, and without the energy or capacity to defend himself, Cesar nevertheless had the courage to look his position in the face. To meet the payments on his house and on his loans, and to pay his rents and his current expenses, he required, between the end of December and the fifteenth of January, a sum of sixty thousand francs, half of which must be obtained before the thirtieth of December. All his resources put together gave him a scant twenty thousand; he lacked ten thousand francs for the first payments. To his mind the position did not seem desperate; for like an adventurer who lives from day to day, he saw only the present moment. He resolved to attempt, before the news of his embarrassments was made public, what seemed to him a great stroke, and seek out the famous Francois Keller, banker, orator, and philanthropist, celebrated for his benevolence and for his desire to serve the interests of Parisian commerce,—with the view, we may add, of being always returned to the Chamber as a deputy of Paris.

The banker was Liberal, Birotteau was Royalist; but the perfumer judged by his own heart, and believed that the difference in their political opinions would only be one reason the more for obtaining the credit he intended to ask. In case actual securities were required he felt no doubt of Popinot's devotion, from whom he expected to obtain some thirty thousand francs, which would enable him to await the result of his law-suit by satisfying the demands of the most exacting of the creditors. The demonstrative perfumer, who told his dear Constance, with his head on her pillow, the smallest thoughts and feelings of his whole life, looking for the lights of her contradiction, and gathering courage as he did so, was now prevented from speaking of his situation to his head-clerk, his uncle, or his wife. His thoughts were therefore doubly heavy,—and yet the generous martyr preferred to suffer, rather than fling the fiery brand into the soul of his wife. He meant to tell her of the danger when it was over. The awe with which she inspired him gave him courage. He went every morning to hear Mass at Saint-Roch, and took God for his confidant.

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"If I do not meet a soldier coming home from Saint-Roch, my request will be granted. That will be God's answer," he said to himself, after praying that God would help him.

And he was overjoyed when it happened that he did not meet a soldier. Still, his heart was so heavy that he needed another heart on which to lean and moan. Cesarine, to whom from the first he confided the fatal truth, knew all his secrets. Many stolen glances passed between them, glances of despair or smothered hope,—interpellations of the eye darted with mutual eagerness, inquiries and replies full of sympathy, rays passing from soul to soul. Birotteau compelled himself to seem gay, even jovial, with his wife. If Constance asked a question—bah! everything was going well; Popinot (about whom Cesar knew nothing) was succeeding; the oil was looking up; the notes with Claparon would be paid; there was nothing to fear. His mock joy was terrible to witness. When his wife had fallen asleep in the sumptuous bed, Birotteau would rise to a sitting position and think over his troubles. Cesarine would sometimes creep in with her bare feet, in her chemise, and a shawl over her white shoulders.

"Papa, I hear you,—you are crying," she would say, crying herself.

Birotteau sank into such a torpor, after writing the letter which asked for an interview with the great Francois Keller, that his daughter took him out for a walk through the streets of Paris. For the first time he was roused to notice enormous scarlet placards on all the walls, and his eyes encountered the words "Cephalic Oil."

While catastrophes thus threatened "The Queen of Roses" to westward, the house of A. Popinot was rising, radiant in the eastern splendors of success. By the advice of Gaudissart and Finot, Anselme launched his oil heroically. Two thousand placards were pasted in three days on the most conspicuous spots in all Paris. No one could avoid coming face to face with Cephalic Oil, and reading a pithy sentence, constructed by Finot, which announced the impossibility of forcing the hair to grow and the dangers of dyeing it, and was judiciously accompanied by a quotation from Vauquelin's report to the Academy of Sciences,—in short, a regular certificate of life for dead hair, offered to all those who used Cephalic Oil. Every hair-dresser in Paris, and all the perfumers, ornamented their doorways with gilt frames containing a fine impression of the prospectus on vellum, at the top of which shone the engraving of Hero and Leander, reduced in size, with the following assertion as an epigraph: "The peoples of antiquity preserved their hair by the use of Cephalic Oil."

"He has devised frames, permanent frames, perpetual placards," said Birotteau to himself, quite dumbfounded as he stood before the shop-front of the Cloche d'Argent.

"Then you have not seen," said his daughter, "the frame which Monsieur Anselme has brought with his own hands, sending Celestin three hundred bottles of oil?"

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"No," he said.

"Celestin has already sold fifty to passers-by, and sixty to regular customers."

"Ah!" exclaimed Cesar.

The poor man, bewildered by the clash of bells which misery jangles in the ears of its victims, lived and moved in a dazed condition. The night before, Popinot had waited more than an hour to see him, and went away after talking with Constance and Cesarine, who told him that Cesar was absorbed in his great enterprise.

"Ah, true! the lands about the Madeleine."

Happily, Popinot—who for a month had never left the Rue des Cinq-Diamants, sitting up all night, and working all Sunday at the manufactory—had seen neither the Ragons, nor Pillerault, nor his uncle the judge. He allowed himself but two hours' sleep, poor lad! he had only two clerks, but at the rate things were now going, he would soon need four. In business, opportunity is everything. He who does not spring upon the back of success and clutch it by the mane, lets fortune escape. Popinot felt that his suit would prosper if six months hence he could say to his uncle and aunt, "I am secure; my fortune is made," and carry to Birotteau thirty or forty thousand francs as his share of the profits. He was ignorant of Roguin's flight, of the disasters and embarrassments which were closing down on Cesar, and he therefore could say nothing indiscreet to Madame Birotteau.

Popinot had promised Finot five hundred francs for every puff in a first-class newspaper, and already there were ten of them; three hundred francs for every second-rate paper, and there were ten of those,—in all of them Cephalic Oil was mentioned three times a month! Finot saw three thousand francs for himself out of these eight thousand—his first stake on the vast green table of speculation! He therefore sprang like a lion on his friends and acquaintances; he haunted the editorial rooms; he wormed himself to the very bedsides of editors in the morning, and prowled about the lobby of the theatres at night. "Think of my oil, dear friend; I have no interest in it—bit of good fellowship, you know!" "Gaudissart, jolly dog!" Such was the first and the last phrase of all his allocutions. He begged for the bottom lines of the final columns of the newspapers, and inserted articles for which he asked no pay from the editors. Wily as a supernumerary who wants to be an actor, wide-awake as an errand-boy who earns sixty francs a month, he wrote wheedling letters, flattered the self-love of editors-in-chief, and did them base services to get his articles inserted. Money, dinners, platitudes, all served the purpose of his eager activity. With tickets for the theatre, he bribed the printers who about midnight are finishing up the columns of a newspaper with little facts and ready-made items kept on hand. At that hour Finot hovered around printing-presses, busy, apparently, with proofs to be corrected. Keeping friends with everybody, he brought Cephalic Oil to a triumphant success over

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Pate de Regnauld, and Brazilian Mixture, and all the other inventions which had the genius to comprehend journalistic influence and the suction power that reiterated newspaper articles have upon the public mind. In these early days of their innocence many journalists were like cattle; they were unaware of their inborn power; their heads were full of actresses,—Florine, Tullia, Mariette, *etc.* They laid down the law to everybody, but they picked up nothing for themselves. As Finot's schemes did not concern actresses who wanted applause, nor plays to be puffed, nor vaudevilles to be accepted, nor articles which had to be paid for,—on the contrary, he paid money on occasion, and gave timely breakfasts,—there was soon not a newspaper in Paris which did not mention Cephalic Oil, and call attention to its remarkable concurrence with the principles of Vauquelin's analysis; ridiculing all those who thought hair could be made to grow, and proclaiming the danger of dyeing it.

These articles rejoiced the soul of Gaudissart, who used them as ammunition to destroy prejudices, bringing to bear upon the provinces what his successors have since named, in honor of him, "the charge of the tongue-battery." In those days Parisian newspapers ruled the departments, which were still (unhappy regions!) without *local organs*. The papers were therefore soberly studied, from the title to the name of the printer,—a last line which may have hidden the ironies of persecuted opinion. Gaudissart, thus backed up by the press, met with startling success from the very first town which he favored with his tongue. Every shopkeeper in the provinces wanted the gilt frames, and the prospectuses with Hero and Leander at the top of them.

In Paris, Finot fired at Macassar Oil that delightful joke which made people so merry at the Funambules, when Pierrot, taking an old hair-broom, anointed it with Macassar Oil, and the broom incontinently became a mop. This ironical scene excited universal laughter. Finot gaily related in after days that without the thousand crowns he earned through Cephalic Oil he should have died of misery and despair. To him a thousand crowns was fortune. It was in this campaign that he guessed —let him have the honor of being the first to do so—the illimitable power of advertisement, of which he made so great and so judicious a use. Three months later he became editor-in-chief of a little journal which he finally bought, and which laid the foundation of his ultimate success. Just as the tongue-battery of the illustrious Gaudissart, that Murat of travellers, when brought to bear upon the provinces and the frontiers, made the house of A. Popinot and Company a triumphant mercantile success in the country regions, so likewise did Cephalic Oil triumph in Parisian opinion, thanks to Finot's famishing assault upon the newspapers, which gave it as much publicity as that obtained by Brazilian Mixture and the Pate de Regnauld. From

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the start, public opinion, thus carried by storm, begot three successes, three fortunes, and proved the advance guard of that invasion of ambitious schemes which since have poured their crowded battalions into the arena of journalism, for which they have created—oh, mighty revolution!—the paid advertisement. The name of A. Popinot and Company now flaunted on all the walls and all the shop-fronts. Incapable of perceiving the full bearing of such publicity, Birotteau merely said to his daughter,—

“Little Popinot is following in my steps.”

He did not understand the difference of the times, nor appreciate the power of the novel methods of execution, whose rapidity and extent took in, far more promptly than ever before, the whole commercial universe. Birotteau had not set foot in his manufactory since the ball; he knew nothing therefore of the energy and enterprise displayed by Popinot. Anselme had engaged all Cesar’s workmen, and often slept himself on the premises. His fancy pictured Cesarine sitting on the cases, and hovering over the shipments; her name seemed printed on the bills; and as he worked with his coat off, and his shirt-sleeves rolled up, courageously nailing up the cases himself, in default of the necessary clerks, he said in his heart, “She shall be mine!”

* * * * *

The following day Cesar went to Francois Keller’s house in Rue du Houssaye, having spent the night turning over in his mind what he ought to say, or ought not to say, to a leading man in banking circles. Horrible palpitations of the heart assailed him as he approached the house of the Liberal banker, who belonged to a party accused, with good reason, of seeking the overthrow of the restored Bourbons. The perfumer, like all the lesser tradesmen of Paris, was ignorant of the habits and customs of the upper banking circles. Between the higher walks of finance and ordinary commerce, there is in Paris a class of secondary houses, useful intermediaries for banking interests, which find in them an additional security. Constance and Birotteau, who had never gone beyond their means, whose purse had never run dry, and who kept their moneys in their own possession, had so far never needed the services of these intermediary houses; they were therefore unknown in the higher regions of a bank. Perhaps it is a mistake not to take out credits, even if we do not need them. Opinions vary on this point. However that may be, Birotteau now deeply regretted that his signature was unknown. Still, as deputy-mayor, and therefore known in politics, he thought he had only to present his name and be admitted: he was quite ignorant of the ceremonial, half regal, which attended an audience with Francois Keller. He was shown into a salon which adjoined the study of the celebrated banker, —celebrated in various ways. Birotteau found himself among a numerous company of deputies, writers, journalists, stock-brokers, merchants of the upper grades, agents, engineers, and above all satellites, or

henchmen, who passed from group to group, and knocked in a peculiar manner at the door of the study, which they were, as it seemed, privileged to enter.

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"What am I in the midst of all this?" thought Birotteau, quite bewildered by the stir of this intellectual kiln, where the daily bread of the opposition was kneaded and baked, and the scenes of the grand tragi-comedy played by the Left were rehearsed. On one side he heard them discussing the question of loans to complete the net-work of canals proposed by the department on highways; and the discussion involved millions! On the other, journalists, pandering to the banker's self-love, were talking about the session of the day before, and the impromptu speech of the great man. In the course of two long hours Birotteau saw the banker three times, as he accompanied certain persons of importance three steps from the door of his study. But Francois Keller went to the door of the antechamber with the last, who was General Foy.

"There is no hope for me!" thought Birotteau with a shrinking heart.

When the banker returned to his study, the troop of courtiers, friends, and self-seekers pressed round him like dogs pursuing a bitch. A few bold curs slipped, in spite of him, into the sanctum. The conferences lasted five, ten, or fifteen minutes. Some went away chap-fallen; others affected satisfaction, and took on airs of importance. Time passed; Birotteau looked anxiously at the clock. No one paid the least attention to the hidden grief which moaned silently in the gilded armchair in the chimney corner, near the door of the cabinet where dwelt the universal panacea—credit! Cesar remembered sadly that for a brief moment he too had been a king among his own people, as this man was a king daily; and he measured the depth of the abyss down which he had fallen. Ah, bitter thought! how many tears were driven back during those waiting hours! how many times did he not pray to God that this man might be favorable to him! for he saw, through the coarse varnish of popular good humor, a tone of insolence, a choleric tyranny, a brutal desire to rule, which terrified his gentle spirit. At last, when only ten or twelve persons were left in the room, Birotteau resolved that the next time the outer door of the study turned on its hinges he would rise and face the great orator, and say to him, "I am Birotteau!" The grenadier who sprang first into the redoubt at Moscow displayed no greater courage than Cesar now summoned up to perform this act.

"After all, I am his mayor," he said to himself as he rose to proclaim his name.

The countenance of Francois Keller at once became affable; he evidently desired to be cordial. He glanced at Cesar's red ribbon, and stepping back, opened the door of his study and motioned him to enter, remaining himself for some time to speak with two men, who rushed in from the staircase with the violence of a waterspout.

"Decazes wants to speak to you," said one of them.

"It is a question of defeating the Pavillon Marsan!" cried the other. "The King's eyes are opened. He is coming round to us."

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"We will go together to the Chamber," said the banker, striking the attitude of the frog who imitates an ox.

"How can he find time to think of business?" thought Birotteau, much disturbed.

The sun of successful superiority dazzled the perfumer, as light blinds those insects who seek the falling day or the half-shadows of a starlit night. On a table of immense size lay the budget, piles of the Chamber records, open volumes of the "Moniteur," with passages carefully marked, to throw at the head of a Minister his forgotten words and force him to recant them, under the jeering plaudits of a foolish crowd incapable of perceiving how circumstances alter cases. On another table were heaped portfolios, minutes, projects, specifications, and all the thousand memoranda brought to bear upon a man into whose funds so many nascent industries sought to dip. The royal luxury of this cabinet, filled with pictures, statues, and works of art; the encumbered chimney-piece; the accumulation of many interests, national and foreign, heaped together like bales,—all struck Birotteau's mind, dwarfed his powers, heightened his terror, and froze his blood. On Francois Keller's desk lay bundles of notes and checks, letters of credit, and commercial circulars. Keller sat down and began to sign rapidly such letters as needed no examination.

"Monsieur, to what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

At these words, uttered for him alone by a voice which influenced all Europe, while the eager hand was running over the paper, the poor perfumer felt something that was like a hot iron in his stomach. He assumed the ingratiating manner which for ten years past the banker had seen all men put on when they wanted to get the better of him for their own purposes, and which gave him at once the advantage over them. Francois Keller accordingly darted at Cesar a look which shot through his head,—a Napoleonic look. This imitation of Napoleon's glance was a silly satire, then popular with certain parvenus who had never seen so much as the base coin of their emperor. This glance fell upon Birotteau, a devotee of the Right, a partisan of the government, —himself an element of monarchical election,—like the stamp of a custom-house officer affixed to a bale of merchandise.

"Monsieur, I will not waste your time; I will be brief. I come on commercial business only,—to ask if I can obtain a credit. I was formerly a judge of the commercial courts, and known to the Bank of France. You will easily understand that if I had plenty of ready money I need only apply there, where you are yourself a director. I had the honor of sitting on the Bench of commerce with Monsieur le baron Thibon, chairman of the committee on discounts; and he, most assuredly, would not refuse me. But up to this time I have never made use of my credit or my signature; my signature is virgin,—and you know what difficulties that puts in the way of negotiation."

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Keller moved his head, and Birotteau took the movement for one of impatience.

“Monsieur, these are the facts,” he resumed. “I am engaged in an affair of landed property, outside of my business—”

Francois Keller, who continued to sign and read his documents, without seeming to listen to Birotteau, here turned round and made him a little sign of attention, which encouraged the poor man. He thought the matter was taking a favorable turn, and breathed again.

“Go on; I hear you,” said Keller good-naturedly.

“I have purchased, at half its value, certain land about the Madeleine—”

“Yes; I heard Nucingen speak of that immense affair,—undertaken, I believe, by Claparon and Company.”

“Well,” continued Cesar, “a credit of a hundred thousand francs, secured on my share of the purchase, will suffice to carry me along until I can reap certain profits from a discovery of mine in perfumery. Should it be necessary, I will cover your risk by notes on a new establishment,—the firm of A. Popinot—”

Keller seemed to care very little about the firm of Popinot; and Birotteau, perceiving that he had made a false move, stopped short; then, alarmed by the silence, he resumed, “As for the interest, we—”

“Yes, yes,” said the banker, “the matter can be arranged; don’t doubt my desire to be of service to you. Busy as I am,—for I have the finances of Europe on my shoulders, and the Chamber takes all my time,—you will not be surprised to hear that I leave the vast bulk of our affairs to the examination of others. Go and see my brother Adolphe, downstairs; explain to him the nature of your securities; if he approves of the operation, come back here with him to-morrow or the day after, at five in the morning,—the hour at which I examine into certain business matters. We shall be proud and happy to obtain your confidence. You are one of those consistent royalists with whom, of course, we are political enemies, but whose good-will is always flattering—”

“Monsieur,” said Cesar, elated by this specimen of tribune eloquence, “I trust I am as worthy of the honor you do me as I was of the signal and royal favor which I earned by my services on the Bench of commerce, and by fighting—”

“Yes, yes,” interrupted the banker, “your reputation is a passport, Monsieur Birotteau. You will, of course, propose nothing that is not feasible, and you can depend on our co-operation.”

A lady, Madame Keller, one of the two daughters of the Comte de Gondreville, here opened a door which Birotteau had not observed.

“I hope to see you before you go the Chamber,” she said.

“It is two o’clock,” exclaimed the banker; “the battle has begun. Excuse me, monsieur, it is a question of upsetting the ministry. See my brother—”

He conducted the perfumer to the door of the salon, and said to one of the servants, “Show monsieur the way to Monsieur Adolphe.”

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As Cesar traversed a labyrinth of staircases, under the guidance of a man in livery, towards an office far less sumptuous but more useful than that of the head of the house, feeling himself astride the gentle steed of hope, he stroked his chin, and augured well from the flatteries of the great man. He regretted that an enemy of the Bourbons should be so gracious, so able, so fine an orator.

Full of these illusions he entered a cold bare room, furnished with two desks on rollers, some shabby armchairs, a threadbare carpet, and curtains that were much neglected. This cabinet was to that of the elder brother like a kitchen to a dining-room, or a work-room to a shop. Here were turned inside out all matters touching the bank and commerce; here all enterprises were sifted, and the first tithes levied, on behalf of the bank, upon the profits of industries judged worthy of being upheld. Here were devised those bold strokes by which short-lived monopolies were called into being and rapidly sucked dry. Here defects of legislation were chronicled; and bargains driven, without shame, for what the Bourse terms “pickings to be gobbled up,” commissions exacted for the smallest services, such as lending their name to an enterprise, and allowing it credit. Here were hatched the specious, legal plots by which silent partnerships were taken in doubtful enterprises, that the bank might lie in wait for the moment of success, and then crush them and seize the property by demanding a return of the capital at a critical moment,—an infamous trick, which involves and ruins many small shareholders.

The two brothers had each selected his appropriate part. Upstairs, Francois, the brilliant man of the world and of politics, assumed a regal air, bestowed courtesies and promises, and made himself agreeable to all. His manners were easy and complying; he looked at business from a lofty standpoint; he intoxicated new recruits and fledgling speculators with the wine of his favor and his fervid speech, as he made plain to them their own ideas. Downstairs, Adolphe unsaid his brother’s words, excused him on the ground of political preoccupation, and cleverly slipped the rake along the cloth. He played the part of the responsible partner, the careful business man. Two words, two speeches, two interviews, were required before an understanding could be reached with this perfidious house. Often the gracious “yes” of the sumptuous upper floor became a dry “no” in Adolphe’s region. This obstructive manoeuvre gave time for reflection, and often served to fool unskilful applicants. As Cesar entered, the banker’s brother was conversing with the famous Palma, intimate adviser of the house of Keller, who retired on the appearance of the perfumer. When Birotteau had explained his errand, Adolphe—much the cleverest of the two brothers, a thorough lynx, with a keen eye, thin lips, and a dry skin—cast at Birotteau, lowering his head to look over his spectacles as he did so, a look which we must call the banker-look,—a cross between that of a vulture and that of an attorney; eager yet indifferent, clear yet vague, glittering though sombre.

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"Have the goodness to send me the deeds relating to the affair of the Madeleine," he said; "our security in making you this credit lies there: we must examine them before we consent to make it, or discuss the terms. If the affair is sound, we shall be willing, so as not to embarrass you, to take a share of the profits in place of receiving a discount."

"Well," thought Birotteau, as he walked away, "I see what it means. Like the hunted beaver, I am to give up a part of my skin. After all, it is better to be shorn than killed."

He went home smiling gaily, and his gaiety was genuine.

"I am saved," he said to Cesarine. "I am to have a credit with the Kellers."

III

It was not until the 29th of December that Birotteau was allowed to re-enter Adolphe's cabinet. The first time he called, Adolphe had gone into the country to look at a piece of property which the great orator thought of buying. The second time, the two Kellers were deeply engaged for the whole day, preparing a tender for a loan proposed in the Chamber, and they begged Monsieur Birotteau to return on the following Friday. These delays were killing to the poor man. But Friday came at last. Birotteau found himself in the cabinet, placed in one corner of the fireplace, facing the light from a window, with Adolphe Keller opposite to him.

"They are all right, monsieur," said the banker, pointing to the deeds. "But what payments have you made on the price of the land?"

"One hundred and forty thousand francs."

"Cash?"

"Notes."

"Are they paid?"

"They are not yet due."

"But supposing you have paid more than the present value of the property, where will be our security? It will rest solely on the respect you inspire, and the consideration in which you are held. Business is not conducted on sentiment. If you had paid two hundred thousand francs, supposing that there were another one hundred thousand paid down in advance for possession of the land, we should then have had the security of a hundred thousand francs, to warrant us in giving you a credit of one hundred thousand. The result might be to make us owners of your share by our paying for it, instead of your doing so; consequently we must be satisfied that the affair is a sound one. To wait five years to double our capital won't do for us; it is better to employ it in

other ways. There are so many chances! You are trying to circulate paper to pay your notes when they fall due,—a dangerous game. It is wiser to step back for a better leap. The affair does not suit us.”

This sentence struck Birotteau as if the executioner had stamped his shoulder with the marking-iron; he lost his head.

“Come,” said Adolphe, “my brother feels a great interest in you; he spoke of you to me. Let us examine into your affairs,” he added, glancing at Cesar with the look of a courtesan eager to pay her rent.

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Birotteau became Molineux,—a being at whom he had once laughed so loftily. Enticed along by the banker,—who enjoyed disentangling the bobbins of the poor man's thought, and who knew as well how to cross-question a merchant as Popinot the judge knew how to make a criminal betray himself,—Cesar recounted all his enterprises; he put forward his Double Paste of Sultans and Carminative Balm, the Roguin affair, and his lawsuit about the mortgage on which he had received no money. As he watched the smiling, attentive face of Keller and the motions of his head, Birotteau said to himself, "He is listening; I interest him; I shall get my credit!" Adolphe Keller was laughing at Cesar, just as Cesar had laughed at Molineux. Carried away by the lust of speech peculiar to those who are made drunk by misfortune, Cesar revealed his inner man; he gave his measure when he ended by offering the security of Cephalic Oil and the firm of Popinot,—his last stake. The worthy man, led on by false hopes, allowed Adolphe Keller to sound and fathom him, and he stood revealed to the banker's eyes as a royalist jackass on the point of failure. Delighted to foresee the bankruptcy of a deputy-mayor of the arrondissement, an official just decorated, and a man in power, Keller now curtly told Birotteau that he could neither give him a credit nor say anything in his favor to his brother Francois. If Francois gave way to idiotic generosity, and helped people of another way of thinking from his own, men who were his political enemies, he, Adolphe, would oppose with might and main any attempt to make a dupe of him, and would prevent him from holding out a hand to the adversary of Napoleon, wounded at Saint-Roch. Birotteau, exasperated, tried to say something about the cupidity of the great banking-houses, their harshness, their false philanthropy; but he was seized with so violent a pain that he could scarcely stammer a few words about the Bank of France, from which the Kellers were allowed to borrow.

"Yes," said Adolphe Keller; "but the Bank would never discount paper which a private bank refused."

"The Bank of France," said Birotteau, "has always seemed to me to miss its vocation when it congratulates itself, as it does in presenting its reports, on never losing more than one or two hundred thousand francs through Parisian commerce: it should be the guardian and protector of Parisian commerce."

Adolphe smiled, and got up with the air and gesture of being bored.

"If the Bank were mixed up as silent partners with people who are involved in the most knavish and hazardous market in the world, it would soon have to hand in its schedule. It has, even now, immense difficulty in protecting itself against forgeries and false circulations of all kinds. Where would it be if it had to take account of the business of every one who wanted to get something out of it?"

* * * * *

“Where shall I find ten thousand francs for to-morrow, the THIRTIETH?” cried Birotteau, as he crossed the courtyard.

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According to Parisian custom, notes were paid on the thirtieth, if the thirty-first was a holiday.

As Cesar reached the outer gate, his eyes bathed in tears, he scarcely saw a fine English horse, covered with sweat, which drew the handsomest cabriolet that rolled in those days along the pavements of Paris, and which was now pulled up suddenly beside him. He would gladly have been run over and crushed by it; if he died by accident, the confusion of his affairs would be laid to that circumstance. He did not recognize du Tillet, who in elegant morning dress jumped lightly down, throwing the reins to his groom and a blanket over the back of his smoking thoroughbred.

“What chance brings you here?” said the former clerk to his old patron.

Du Tillet knew very well what it was, for the Kellers had made inquiries of Claparon, who by referring them to du Tillet had demolished the past reputation of the poor man. Though quickly checked, the tears on Cesar’s face spoke volumes.

“It is possible that you have asked assistance from these Bedouins?” said du Tillet, “these cut-throats of commerce, full of infamous tricks; who run up indigo when they have monopolized the trade, and pull down rice to force the holders to sell at low prices, and so enable them to manage the market? Atrocious pirates, who have neither faith, nor law, nor soul, nor honor! You don’t know what they are capable of doing. They will give you a credit if they think you have got a good thing, and close it the moment you get into the thick of the enterprise; and then you will be forced to make it all over to them, at any villanous price they choose to give. Havre, Bordeaux, Marseilles, could tell you tales about them! They make use of politics to cover up their filthy ways. If I were you I should get what I could out of them in any way, and without scruple. Let us walk on, Birotteau. Joseph, lead the horse about, he is too hot: the devil! he is a capital of a thousand crowns.”

So saying, he turned toward the boulevard.

“Come, my dear master,—for you were once my master,—tell me, are you in want of money? Have they asked you for securities, the scoundrels? I, who know you, I offer you money on your simple note. I have made an honorable fortune with infinite pains. I began it in Germany; I may as well tell you that I bought up the debts of the king, at sixty per cent of their amount: your endorsement was very useful to me at that time, and I am not ungrateful,—not I. If you want ten thousand francs, they are yours.”

“Du Tillet!” cried Cesar, “can it be true? you are not joking with me? Yes, I am rather pinched, but only for a moment.”

“I know,—that affair of Roguin,” replied du Tillet. “Hey! I am in for ten thousand francs which the old rogue borrowed of me just before he went off; but Madame Roguin will



pay them back from her dower. I have advised the poor woman not to be so foolish as to spend her own fortune in paying debts contracted for a prostitute. Of course, it would be well if she paid everything, but she cannot favor some creditors to the detriment of others. You are not a Roguin; I know you," said du Tillet,—“you would blow your brains out rather than make me lose a sou. Here we are at Rue de la Chaussee-d'Antin; come home with me.”

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They entered a bedroom, with which Madame Birotteau's compared like that of a chorus-singer's on a fourth floor with the appartement of a prima-donna. The ceiling was of violet-colored satin, heightened in its effect by folds of white satin; a rug of ermine lay at the bedside, and contrasted with the purple tones of a Turkish carpet. The furniture and all the accessories were novel in shape, costly, and choice in character. Birotteau paused before an exquisite clock, decorated with Cupid and Psyche, just designed for a famous banker, from whom du Tillet had obtained the sole copy ever made of it. The former master and his former clerk at last reached an elegant coquettish cabinet, more redolent of love than finance. Madame Roguin had doubtless contributed, in return for the care bestowed upon her fortune, the paper-knife in chiselled gold, the paper-weights of carved malachite, and all the costly knick-knacks of unrestrained luxury. The carpet, one of the rich products of Belgium, was as pleasant to the eye as to the foot which felt the soft thickness of its texture. Du Tillet made the poor, amazed, bewildered perfumer sit down at a corner of the fireplace.

"Will you breakfast with me?"

He rang the bell. Enter a footman better dressed than Birotteau.

"Tell Monsieur Legras to come here, and then find Joseph at the door of the Messrs. Keller; tell him to return to the stable. Leave word with Adolphe Keller that instead of going to see him, I shall expect him at the Bourse; and order breakfast served immediately."

These commands amazed Cesar.

"He whistles to that formidable Adolphe Keller like a dog!—he, du Tillet!"

A little tiger, about a thumb high, set out a table, which Birotteau had not observed, so slim was it, and brought in a *pate de foie gras*, a bottle of claret, and a number of dainty dishes which only appeared in Birotteau's household once in three months, on great festive occasions. Du Tillet enjoyed the effect. His hatred towards the only man who had it in his power to despise him burned so hotly that Birotteau seemed, even to his own mind, like a sheep defending itself against a tiger. For an instant, a generous idea entered du Tillet's heart: he asked himself if his vengeance were not sufficiently accomplished. He hesitated between this awakened mercy and his dormant hate.

"I can annihilate him commercially," he thought; "I have the power of life or death over him,—over his wife who insulted me, and his daughter whose hand once seemed to me a fortune. I have got his money; suppose I content myself with letting the poor fool swim at the end of a line I'll hold for him?"

Honest minds are devoid of tact; their excellence is uncalculating, even unreflecting, because they are wholly without evasions or mental reservations of their own. Birotteau



now brought about his downfall; he incensed the tiger, pierced him to the heart without knowing it, made him implacable by a thoughtless word, a eulogy, a virtuous recognition,—by the kind-heartedness, as it were, of his own integrity. When the cashier entered, du Tillet motioned him to take notice of Cesar.

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“Monsieur Legras, bring me ten thousand francs, and a note of hand for that amount, drawn to my order, at ninety days’ sight, by monsieur, who is Monsieur Cesar Birotteau, you know.”

Du Tillet cut the pate, poured out a glass of claret, and urged Cesar to eat. The poor man felt he was saved, and gave way to convulsive laughter; he played with his watch-chain, and only put a mouthful into his mouth, when du Tillet said to him, “You are not eating!” Birotteau thus betrayed the depths of the abyss into which du Tillet’s hand had plunged him, from which that hand now withdrew him, and into which it had the power to plunge him again. When the cashier returned, and Cesar signed the note, and felt the ten bank-notes in his pocket, he was no longer master of himself. A moment sooner, and the Bank, his neighborhood, every one, was to know that he could not meet his payments, and he must have told his ruin to his wife; now, all was safe! The joy of this deliverance equalled in its intensity the tortures of his peril. The eyes of the poor man moistened, in spite of himself.

“What is the matter with you, my dear master?” asked du Tillet. “Would you not do for me to-morrow what I do for you to-day? Is it not as simple as saying, How do you do?”

“Du Tillet,” said the worthy man, with gravity and emphasis, and rising to take the hand of his former clerk, “I give you back my esteem.”

“What! had I lost it?” cried du Tillet, so violently stabbed in the very bosom of his prosperity that the color came into his face.

“Lost?—well, not precisely,” said Birotteau, thunder-struck at his own stupidity: “they told me certain things about your *liaison* with Madame Roguin. The devil! taking the wife of another man—”

“You are beating round the bush, old fellow,” thought du Tillet, and as the words crossed his mind he came back to his original project, and vowed to bring that virtue low, to trample it under foot, to render despicable in the marts of Paris the honorable and virtuous merchant who had caught him, red-handed, in a theft. All hatreds, public or private, from woman to woman, from man to man, have no other cause than some such detection. People do not hate each other for injured interests, for wounds, not even for a blow; all such wrongs can be redressed. But to have been seized, *flagrante delicto*, in a base act! The duel which follows between the criminal and the witness of his crime ends only with the death of the one or of the other.

“Oh! Madame Roguin!” said du Tillet, jestingly, “don’t you call that a feather in a young man’s cap? I understand you, my dear master; somebody has told you that she lent me money. Well, on the contrary it is I who have protected her fortune, which was strangely involved in her husband’s affairs. The origin of my fortune is pure, as I have just told you. I had nothing, you know. Young men are sometimes in positions of frightful

necessity. They may lose their self-control in the depths of poverty, and if they make, as the Republic made, forced loans—well, they pay them back; and in so doing they are more honest than France herself.”

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"That is true," cried Birotteau. "My son, God—is it not Voltaire who says,—

"'He rendered repentance the virtue of mortals'?"

"Provided," answered du Tillet, stabbed afresh by this quotation, —"provided they do not carry off the property of their neighbors, basely, meanly; as, for example, you would do if you failed within three months, and my ten thousand francs went to perdition."

"I fail!" cried Birotteau, who had taken three glasses of wine, and was half-drunk with joy. "Everybody knows what I think about failure! Failure is death to a merchant; I should die of it!"

"I drink your health," said du Tillet.

"Your health and prosperity," returned Cesar. "Why don't you buy your perfumery from me?"

"The fact is," said du Tillet, "I am afraid of Madame Cesar; she always made an impression on me. If you had not been my master, on my word! I—"

"You are not the first to think her beautiful; others have desired her; but she loves me! Well, now, du Tillet, my friend," resumed Birotteau, "don't do things by halves."

"What is it?"

Birotteau explained the affair of the lands to his former clerk, who pretended to open his eyes wide, and complimented the perfumer on his perspicacity and penetration, and praised the enterprise.

"Well, I am very glad to have your approbation; you are thought one of the wise-heads of the banking business, du Tillet. Dear fellow, you might get me a credit at the Bank of France, so that I can wait for the profits of Cephalic Oil at my ease."

"I can give you a letter to the firm of Nucingen," answered du Tillet, perceiving that he could make his victim dance all the figures in the reel of bankruptcy.

Ferdinand sat down to his desk and wrote the following letter:—

To Monsieur le baron de Nucingen:

My dear Baron,—The bearer of this letter is Monsieur Cesar Birotteau, deputy-mayor of the second arrondissement, and one of the best known manufacturers of Parisian perfumery; he wishes to have business relations with your house. You can confidently do all that he asks of you; and in obliging him you will oblige

Your friend,
F. Du Tillet.

Du Tillet did not dot the *i* in his signature. To those with whom he did business this intentional error was a sign previously agreed upon. The strongest recommendations, the warmest appeals contained in the letter were to mean nothing. All such letters, in which exclamation marks were suppliants and du Tillet placed himself, as it were, upon his knees, were to be considered as extorted by necessity; he could not refuse to write them, but they were to be regarded as not written. Seeing the *i* without a dot, the correspondent was to amuse the petitioner with empty promises. Even men of the world, and sometimes the most distinguished, are thus gulled like children by business men, bankers, and lawyers, who all have a double signature,—one dead, the other living. The cleverest among them are fooled in this way. To understand the trick, we must experience the two-fold effects of a warm letter and a cold one.

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"You have saved me, du Tillet!" said Cesar, reading the letter.

"Thank heaven!" said du Tillet, "ask for what money you want. When Nucingen reads my letter he will give you all you need. Unhappily, my own funds are tied up for a few days; if not, I certainly would not send you to the great banking princes. The Kellers are mere pygmies compared to Baron de Nucingen. Law reappears on earth in Nucingen. With this letter of mine you can face the 15th of January, and after that, we will see about it. Nucingen and I are the best friends in the world; he would not disoblige me for a million."

"It is a guarantee in itself," thought Birotteau, as he went away full of gratitude to his old clerk. "Well, a benefit is never lost!" he continued, philosophizing very wide of the mark. Nevertheless, one thought embittered his joy. For several days he had prevented his wife from looking into the ledgers; he had put the business on Celestin's shoulders and assisted in it himself; he wished, apparently, that his wife and daughter should be at liberty to take full enjoyment out of the beautiful appartement he had given them. But the first flush of happiness over, Madame Birotteau would have died rather than renounce her right of personally inspecting the affairs of the house,—of holding, as she phrased it, the handle of the frying-pan. Birotteau was at his wits' end; he had used all his cunning in trying to hide from his wife the symptoms of his embarrassment. Constance strongly disapproved of sending round the bills; she had scolded the clerks and accused Celestin of wishing to ruin the establishment, thinking that it was all his doing. Celestin, by Birotteau's order, had allowed himself to be scolded. In the eyes of the clerks Madame Cesar governed her husband; for though it is possible to deceive the public, the inmates of a household are never deceived as to who exercises the real authority. Birotteau knew that he must now reveal his real situation to his wife, for the account with du Tillet needed an explanation. When he got back to the shop, he saw, not without a shudder, that Constance was sitting in her old place behind the counter, examining the expense account, and no doubt counting up the money in the desk.

"How will you meet your payments to-morrow?" she whispered as he sat down beside her.

"With money," he answered, pulling out the bank-bills, and signing to Celestin to take them.

"Where did you get that money?"

"I'll tell you all about it this evening. Celestin, write down, 'Last of March, note for ten thousand francs, to du Tillet's order.'"

"Du Tillet!" repeated Constance, struck with consternation.

“I am going to see Popinot,” said Cesar; “it is very wrong in me not to have gone before. Have we sold his oil?”

“The three hundred bottles he sent us are all gone.”

“Birotteau, don’t go out; I want to speak to you,” said Constance, taking him by the arm, and leading him into her bedroom with an impetuosity which would have caused a laugh under other circumstances. “Du Tillet,” she said, when she had made sure no one but Cesarine was with them,—“du Tillet, who robbed us of three thousand francs! So you are doing business with du Tillet,—a monster, who wished to seduce me,” she whispered in his ear.

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"Folly of youth," said Birotteau, assuming for the nonce the tone of a free-thinker.

"Listen to me, Birotteau! You are all upset; you don't go to the manufactory any more; there is something the matter, I feel it! You must tell me; I must know what it is."

"Well," said Birotteau, "we came very near being ruined,—we were ruined this very morning; but it is all safe now."

And he told the horrible story of his two weeks' misery.

"So that was the cause of your illness!" exclaimed Constance.

"Yes, mamma," cried Cesarine, "and papa has been so courageous! All that I desire in life is to be loved as he loves you. He has thought only of your grief."

"My dream is fulfilled!" said the poor woman, dropping upon the sofa at the corner of the fireplace, pale, livid, terrified. "I foresaw it all. I warned you on that fatal night, in our old room which you pulled to pieces, that we should have nothing left but our eyes to weep with. My poor Cesarine, I—"

"Now, there you go!" cried Cesar; "you will take away from me the courage I need."

"Forgive me, dear friend," said Constance, taking his hand, and pressing it with a tenderness which went to the heart of the poor man. "I do wrong. Misfortune has come; I will be silent, resigned, strong to bear it. No, you shall never hear a complaint from me." She threw herself into his arms, weeping, and whispering, "Courage, dear friend, courage! I will have courage for both, if necessary."

"My oil, wife,—my oil will save us!"

"May God help us!" said Constance.

"Anselme will help my father," said Cesarine.

"I'll go and see him," cried Cesar, deeply moved by the passionate accents of his wife, who after nineteen years of married life was not yet fully known to him. "Constance, fear nothing! Here, read du Tillet's letter to Monsieur de Nucingen; we are sure to obtain a credit. Besides," he said, allowing himself a necessary lie, "there is our uncle Pillerault; that is enough to give us courage."

"If that were all!" said Constance, smiling.

Birotteau, relieved of a heavy weight, walked away like a man suddenly set at liberty, though he felt within him that indefinable sinking which succeeds great moral struggles in which more of the nervous fluid, more of the will is emitted than should be spent at

one time, and by which, if we may say so, the capital of the existence is drawn upon. Birotteau had aged already.

* * * * *

The house of A. Popinot, Rue des Cinq-Diamants, had undergone a great change in two months. The shop was repainted. The shelves, re-varnished and gilded and crowded with bottles, rejoiced the eye of those who had eyes to see the symptoms of prosperity. The floors were littered with packages and wrapping-paper. The storerooms held small casks of various oils, obtained for Popinot on commission by the devoted Gaudissart.

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The ledgers, the accounts, and the desks were moved into the rooms above the shop and the back-shop. An old cook did all the household work for the master and his three clerks. Popinot, penned up in a corner of the shop closed in with glass, might be seen in a serge apron and long sleeves of green linen, with a pen behind his ear, in the midst of a mass of papers, where in fact Birotteau now found him, as he was overhauling his letters full of proposals and checks and orders. At the words "Hey, my boy!" uttered by his old master, Popinot raised his head, locked up his cubby-hole, and came forward with a joyous air and the end of his nose a little red. There was no fire in the shop, and the door was always open.

"I feared you were never coming," he said respectfully.

The clerks crowded round to look at the distinguished perfumer, the decorated deputy-mayor, the partner of their own master. Birotteau, so pitifully small at the Kellers, felt a craving to imitate those magnates; he stroked his chin, rose on his heels with native self-complacency, and talked his usual platitudes.

"Hey, my lad! we get up early, don't we?" he remarked.

"No, for we don't always go to bed," said Popinot. "We must clutch success."

"What did I tell you? My oil will make your fortune!"

"Yes, monsieur. But the means employed to sell it count for something. I have set your diamond well."

"How do we stand?" said Cesar. "How far have you got? What are the profits?"

"Profits! at the end of two months! How can you expect it? Friend Gaudissart has only been on the road for twenty-five days; he took a post-chaise without saying a word to me. Oh, he is devoted! We owe a great deal to my uncle. The newspapers alone (here he whispered in Birotteau's ear) will cost us twelve thousand francs."

"Newspapers!" exclaimed the deputy-mayor.

"Haven't you read them?"

"No."

"Then you know nothing," said Popinot. "Twenty thousand francs worth of placards, gilt frames, copies of the prospectus. One hundred thousand bottles bought. Ah, it is all paying through the nose at this moment! We are manufacturing on a grand scale. If you had set foot in the faubourg, where I often work all night, you would have seen a

little nut-cracker which isn't to be sneezed at, I can tell you. On my own account, I have made, in the last five days, not less than ten thousand francs, merely by commissions on the sale of druggists' oils."

"What a capable head!" said Birotteau, laying his hand on little Popinot's thick hair and rubbing it about as if he were a baby. "I found it out."

Several persons here came in.

"On Sunday we dine at your aunt Ragon's," added Cesar, leaving Popinot to go on with his business, for he perceived that the fresh meat he had come to taste was not yet cut up.

"It is amazing! A clerk becomes a merchant in twenty-four hours," thought Birotteau, who understood the happiness and self-assurance of Anselme as little as the dandy luxury of du Tillet. "Anselme put on a little stiff air when I patted him on the head, just as if he were Francois Keller himself."

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Birotteau never once reflected that the clerks were looking on, and that the master of the establishment had his dignity to preserve. In this instance, as in the case of his speech to du Tillet, the worthy soul committed a folly out of pure goodness of heart, and for lack of knowing how to withhold an honest sentiment vulgarly expressed. By this trifling act Cesar would have wounded irretrievably any other man than little Popinot.

* * * * *

The Sunday dinner at the Ragon's was destined to be the last pleasure of the nineteen happy years of the Birotteau household,—years of happiness that were full to overflowing. Ragon lived in the Rue du Petit-Bourbon-Saint-Sulpice, on the second floor of a dignified old house, in an appartement decorated with large panels where painted shepherdesses danced in panniers, before whom fed the sheep of our nineteenth century, the sober and serious bourgeoisie,—whose comical demeanor, with their respectful notions about the nobility, and their devotion to the Sovereign and the Church, were all admirably represented by Ragon himself. The furniture, the clocks, linen, dinner-service, all seemed patriarchal; novel in form because of their very age. The salon, hung with old damask and draped with curtains in brocatelle, contained portraits of duchesses and other royalist tributes; also a superb Popinot, sheriff of Sancerre, painted by Latour,—the father of Madame Ragon, a worthy, excellent man, in a picture out of which he smiled like a parvenu in all his glory. When at home, Madame Ragon completed her natural self with a little King Charles spaniel, which presented a surprisingly harmonious effect as it lay on the hard little sofa, rococo in shape, that assuredly never played the part assigned to the sofa of Crebillon.

Among their many virtues, the Ragons were noted for the possession of old wines which had come to perfect mellowness, and for certain of Madame Anfoux's liqueurs, which certain persons, obstinately (though it was said hopelessly) bent on making love to Madame Ragon, had brought her from the West Indies. Thus their little dinners were much prized. Jeannette, the old cook, took care of the aged couple with blind devotion: she would have stolen the fruit to make their sweetmeats. Instead of taking her money to the savings-bank, she put it judiciously into lotteries, hoping that some day she could bestow a good round sum on her master and mistress. On the appointed Sundays when they received their guests, she was, despite her years, active in the kitchen to superintend the dishes, which she served at the table with an agility that (to use a favorite expression of the worthy Ragon) might have given points to Mademoiselle Contat when she played Susanne in the "Mariage de Figaro."

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The guests on this occasion were Popinot the judge, Pillerault, Anselme, the three Birotteaus, three Matifats, and the Abbe Loraux. Madame Matifat, whom we lately met crowned with a turban for the ball, now wore a gown of blue velvet, with coarse cotton stockings, leather shoes, gloves of chamois-skin with a border of green plush, and a bonnet lined with pink, filled in with white puffs about the face. These ten personages assembled at five o'clock. The old Ragons always requested their guests to be punctual. When this worthy couple were invited out, their hosts always put the dinner at the same hour, remembering that stomachs which were sixty-five years old could not adapt themselves to the novel hours recently adopted in the great world.

Cesarine was sure that Madame Ragon would place her beside Anselme; for all women, be they fools or saints, know what is what in love. The daughter of "The Queen of Roses" therefore dressed with the intention of turning Popinot's head. Her mother—having renounced, not without pain, the thought of marrying her to Crottat, who to her eyes played the part of heir-apparent—assisted, with some bitter thoughts, at the toilet. Maternal forethought lowered the modest gauzy neckerchief to show a little of Cesarine's shoulders and the spring of her graceful throat, which was remarkably elegant. The Grecian bodice, crossing from left to right with five folds, opened slightly, showing delicious curves; the gray merino dress with green furbelows defined the pretty waist, which had never looked so slender nor so supple. She wore earrings of gold fret-work, and her hair, gathered up *a la chinoise*, let the eye take in the soft freshness of a skin traced with blue veins, where the light shone chastely on the pure white tones. Cesarine was so coquettishly lovely that Madame Matifat could not help admitting it, without, however, perceiving that mother and daughter had the one purpose of bewitching Anselme.

Neither Birotteau, his wife, Madame Matifat nor any of the others disturbed the sweet converse which the young people, thrilling with love, held in whispering voices within the embrasure of a window, through whose chinks the north wind blew its chilly whistle. The conversation of the elders became animated when Popinot the judge let fall a word about Roguin's flight, remarking that he was the second notary who had absconded,—a crime formerly unknown. Madame Ragon, at the word Roguin, touched her brother's foot, Pillerault spoke loudly to drown his voice, and both made him a sign to remember Madame Birotteau.

"I know all," said Constance in a low, pained voice.

"Well, then," said Madame Matifat to Birotteau, who humbly bowed his head, "how much did he carry off? If we are to believe the gossips, you are ruined."

"He had two hundred thousand francs of mine," said Cesar. "As to the forty thousand he pretended to make me borrow from one of his clients, whose property he had already squandered, I am now bringing a suit to recover them."

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"The case will be decided this week," said Popinot. I thought you would not be unwilling that I should explain your situation to Monsieur le president; he has ordered that all Roguin's papers be submitted to the custody of the court, so as to ascertain the exact time when Roguin made away with the funds of his client, and thus verify the facts alleged by Derville, who made the argument himself to save you the expense."

"Shall we win?" asked Madame Birotteau.

"I don't know," answered Popinot. "Though I belong to the court in which the suit is bought, I shall abstain from giving an opinion, even if called upon."

"Can there be any doubt in such a simple case?" said Pillerault. "Such deeds make mention that payment has been made, and notaries are obliged to declare that they have seen the money passed from the lender to the borrower. Roguin would be sent to the galleys if the law could get hold of him."

"According to my ideas," said the judge, "the lender ought to have sued Roguin for the costs and the caution-money; but it sometimes happens at the Cour Royale that in matters even more plain than this the judges stand six against six."

"Mademoiselle, what are they saying? Has Monsieur Roguin absconded?" said Anselme, hearing at last what was going on about him. "Monsieur said nothing of it to me,—to me who would shed my blood for him—"

Cesarine fully understood that the whole family were included in the "for him"; for if the innocent girl could mistake the accent, she could not misunderstand the glance, which wrapped her, as it were, in a rosy flame.

"I know you would; I told him so. He hid everything from my mother, and confided only in me."

"You spoke to him of me?" said Popinot; "you have read my heart? Have you read all that is there?"

"Perhaps."

"I am very happy," said Popinot. "If you would lighten all my fears—in a year I shall be so prosperous that your father cannot object when I speak to him of our marriage. From henceforth I shall sleep only five hours a night."

"Do not injure yourself," said Cesarine, with an inexpressible accent and a look in which Popinot was suffered to read her thoughts.

"Wife," said Cesar, as they rose from table, "I think those young people love each other."

“Well, so much the better,” said Constance, in a grave voice; “my daughter will be the wife of a man of sense and energy. Talent is the best dower a man can offer.”

She left the room hastily and went to Madame Ragon’s bedchamber. Cesar during the dinner had made various fatuous remarks, which caused the judge and Pillerault to smile, and reminded the unhappy woman of how unfitted her poor husband was to grapple with misfortune. Her heart was full of tears; and she instinctively dreaded du Tillet, for every mother knows the *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*, even if she does not know Latin. Constance wept in the arms of Madame Ragon and her daughter, though she would not tell them the cause of her distress.

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"I'm nervous," she said.

The rest of the evening was spent by the elders at the card-table, and by the young people in those little games called innocent because they cover the innocent by-play of bourgeois love. The Matifats joined in these games.

"Cesar," said Constance as they drove home, "go and see Monsieur le Baron de Nucingen on the 8th so as to be sure of having your payments ready in advance of the 15th. If there should be any hitch, how could you scrape the money together if you have only one day to do it in?"

"I will see to it, wife," said Cesar, pressing his wife's hand and his daughter's, adding, "Ah, my dear white lambs, I have given you a sad New Year's gift!"

The two women, unable to see him in the obscurity of the hackney coach, felt his tears falling hot upon their hands.

"Be hopeful, dear friend," said Constance.

"All will go well, papa; Monsieur Anselme Popinot told me he would shed his blood for you."

"For me?" said Cesar, trying to speak gaily; "and for the family as well. Isn't it so?"

Cesarine pressed her father's hand, as if to let him know she was betrothed to Anselme.

IV

During the first three days of the year, two hundred visiting cards were sent to Birotteau. This rush of fictitious friendship, these empty testimonials of favor, are horrible to those who feel themselves drawn down into the vortex of misfortune. Birotteau presented himself three times at the hotel of the famous banker, the Baron de Nucingen, but in vain. The opening of the year with all its festivities sufficiently explained the absences of the financier. On the last occasion Birotteau got as far as the office of the banker, where the head-clerk, a German, told him that Monsieur de Nucingen had returned at five in the morning from a ball at the Kellers', and would not be visible until half-past nine o'clock. Birotteau had the luck to interest this man in his affairs, and remained talking with him more than half an hour. In the course of the afternoon this prime minister of the house of Nucingen wrote Birotteau that the baron would receive him the next day, 13th, at noon. Though every hour brought its drop of absinthe, the day went by with frightful rapidity. Cesar took a hackney coach, but stopped it several paces distant from the hotel, whose courtyard was crowded with carriages. The poor man's heart sank within him when he saw the splendors of that noted house.



“And yet he has failed twice,” he said to himself as he went up a superb staircase banked with flowers, and crossed the sumptuous rooms which helped to make Madame Delphine de Nucingen famous in the Chaussee d’Antin. The baronne’s ambition was to rival the great ladies of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, to whose houses she was not as yet admitted. The baron was breakfasting with his wife. In spite of the crowd which was waiting for him in the counting-room, he had left word that any friend of du Tillet was to be admitted. Birotteau trembled with hope as he noticed the change which the baron’s order had wrought in the hitherto insolent manner of the footman.

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"Pardon me, my tear," said the baron to his wife, in a strong German accent, as he rose and nodded to Birotteau, "monsieur is a good royalist, and der intimate frient of tu Tillet. Bezides, monsieur is debudy-mayor of der zecond arrondissement, and gifs palls of Aziatique magnifissence; so vill you mak his acquentence mit blaysure."

"I should be delighted to take lessons from Madame Birotteau, for Ferdinand—"

"She calls him Ferdinand!" thought Cesar.

"—spoke of the ball with great admiration, which is all the more valuable because he usually admires nothing. Ferdinand is a harsh critic; in his eyes everything ought to be perfect. Shall you soon give another ball?" she inquired affably.

"Madame, poor people, such as we are, seldom have many amusements of that kind," said the perfumer, not knowing whether she meant to ridicule him, or was merely paying an empty compliment.

"Monsieur Grindot suberintented der resdoration of your abbartement, I zink?" said the baron.

"Ah, Grindot! that nice little architect who has just returned from Rome," said Delphine de Nucingen. "I dote on him; he makes delicious drawings in my album."

No culprit enduring the torments of hell in Venetian dungeons ever suffered more from the torture of the boot than Birotteau did, standing there in his ordinary clothes. He felt a sneer in every word.

"Vill you gif oder little palls?" said the banker, with a searching look at the perfumer. "You see all der vorld ist inderesded."

"Will Monsieur Birotteau breakfast with us, without ceremony?" said Delphine, motioning towards the table which was sumptuously served.

"Madame la baronne, I came on business, and I am—"

"Yes, matame, vill you bermit us to speak of business?"

Delphine made a little sign of assent, saying to her husband, "Are you going to buy perfumery?" The baron shrugged his shoulders and turned to Cesar, who trembled with anxiety.

"Tu Tillet takes der graadest indertest in you," he said.

"At last," thought the poor man, "we are coming to the point."

“His ledder gif you in my house a creydit vich is only limided by der limids of my private fortune.”

The exhilarating balm infused into the water offered by the angel to Hagar in the desert, must have been the same cordial which flowed through Cesar’s veins as he listened to these words. The wily banker retained the horrible pronunciation of the German Jews, —possibly that he might be able to deny promises actually given, but only half-understood.

“You shall haf a running aggont. Ve vill broceed in dis vay—” said this great and good and venerable financier, with Alsatian good-humor.

Birotteau doubted no longer; he was a merchant, and new very well that those who have no intention of rendering a service never enter into the details of executing it.

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"I neet not tell you dat der Bank demands of all, graat and small alaike, dree zignatures. So denn, you traw a cheque to die order of our frient tu Tillet, and I vill sent it, same tay, to der Bank mit mein zignature; so shall you haf, at four o'clock, der amount of die cheque you trew in der morning; and at der costs of die Bank. I vill not receif a commission, no! I vill haf only der blaysure to be agreeable to you. But I mak one condeetion," he added, laying his left finger lightly on his nose with an inimitably sly gesture.

"Monsieur le baron, it is granted on the sport," said Birotteau, who thought it concerned some tithe to be levied on his profits.

"A condeetion to vich I attache der graatest imbortance, because I vish Matame de Nucingen should receif, as she say, zom lessons from Matame Pirodot."

"Monsieur le baron! pray do not laugh at me, I entreat you."

"Monsieur Pirodot," said the financier, with a serious air, "it is deen agreeet; you vill invite us to your nex pall? My vife is shalous; she vish to see your abbartement, of vich she hear so mooch."

"Monsieur le baron!—"

"Oh! if you reffuse me, no creydit! Yes, I know der Prayfic of die Seine was at your las pall."

"Monsieur le baron!—"

"You had Pillartiere, shentelman of der betchamber; goot royalist like you, who vas vounded at Zaint-Roqqe—"

"On the 13th Vendemiaire, Monsieur le baron."

"Denn you hat Monsieur de Lazabed, Monsieur Fauquelin of der Agatemi—"

"Monsieur le baron!—"

"Hey! der tefle! dont pe zo humple, Monsieur der debudy-mayor; I haf heard dat der king say dat your ball—"

"The king?" exclaimed Birotteau, who was destined to hear no more, for, at this moment, a young man entered the room familiarly, whose step, recognized from afar by the beautiful Delphine de Nucingen, brought the color to her cheek.

"Goot morning, my tear te Marsay; tak my blace. Dere is a crowd, zey tell me, waiting in der gounting-room. I know vy. Der mines of Wortschin bay a graat divitent! I haf



received die aggonis. You vill haf one hundred tousand francs, Matame de Nucingen, so you can buy jewels and oder tings to make you bretty,—as if you could be brettier!”

“Good God! the Ragons sold their shares!” exclaimed Birotteau.

“Who are those persons?” asked the elegant de Marsay, smiling.

“Egzactly,” said Monsieur de Nucingen, turning back when he was almost at the door. “I zink tat dose persons—te Marsay, dis is Monsieur Pirodot, your berfumer, who gifs palls of a magnifissence druly Aziatique, and whom der king has decoraded.”

De Marsay lifted his eyeglass, and said, “Ah! true, I thought the face was not unknown to me. So you are going to perfume your affairs with potent cosmetics, oil them with—”

“Ah! dose Rakkons,” interrupted the baron, making a grimace expressive of disgust; “dey had an aggonit mit us; I fafored dem, and dey could haf made der fortune, but dey would not wait one zingle day longer.”

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“Monsieur le baron!” cried Birotteau.

The worthy man thought his own prospects extremely doubtful, and without bowing to Madame de Nucingen, or to de Marsay, he hastily followed the banker. The baron was already on the staircase, and Birotteau caught him at the bottom just as he was about to enter the counting-room. As Nucingen opened the door he saw the despairing gesture of the poor creature behind him, who felt himself pushed into a gulf, and said hastily,—

“Vell, it is all agreeet. See tu Tillet, and arranche it mit him.”

Birotteau, thinking that de Marsay might have some influence with Nucingen, ran back with the rapidity of a swallow, and slipped into the dining-room where he had left the baronne and the young man, and where Delphine was waiting for a cup of *café à la crème*. He saw that the coffee had been served, but the baronne and the dandy had disappeared. The footman smiled at the astonishment of the worthy man, who slowly re-descended the stairs. Cesar rushed to du Tillet's, and was told that he had gone into the country with Madame Roguin. He took a cabriolet, and paid the driver well to be taken rapidly to Nogent-sur-Marne. At Nogent-sur-Marne the porter told him that monsieur and madame had started for Paris. Birotteau returned home, shattered in mind and body. When he related his wild-goose chase to his wife and daughter he was amazed to find his Constance, usually perched like a bird of ill omen on the smallest commercial mishap, now giving him the tenderest consolation, and assuring him that everything would turn out well.

The next morning, Birotteau mounted guard as early as seven o'clock before du Tillet's door. He begged the porter, slipping ten francs into his hand, to put him in communication with du Tillet's valet, and obtained from the latter a promise to show him in to his master the moment that du Tillet was visible: he slid two pieces of gold into the valet's hand. By such little sacrifices and great humiliations, common to all courtiers and petitioners, he was able to attain his end. At half-past eight, just as his former clerk was putting on a dressing-gown, yawning, stretching, and shaking off the cobwebs of sleep, Birotteau came face to face with the tiger, hungry for revenge, whom he now looked upon as his only friend.

“Go on with your dressing,” said Birotteau.

“What do you want, *my good Cesar*?” said du Tillet.

Cesar stated, with painful trepidation, the answer and requirements of Monsieur de Nucingen to the inattentive ears of du Tillet, who was looking for the bellows and scolding his valet for the clumsy manner in which he had lighted the fire.

The valet listened. At first Cesar did not notice him; when he did so he stopped short, confused, but resumed what he was saying as du Tillet touched him with the spur exclaiming, "Go on! go on! I am listening to you."

The poor man's shirt was wet; his perspiration turned to ice as du Tillet looked fixedly at him, and he saw the silver-lined pupils of those eyes, streaked with threads of gold, which pierced to his very heart with a diabolical gleam.

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"My dear master, the Bank has refused to take your notes which the house of Claparon passed over to Gigonnet *not guaranteed*. Is that my fault? How is it that you, an old commercial judge, should commit such blunders? I am, first and foremost, a banker. I will give you my money, but I cannot risk having my signature refused at the Bank. My credit is my life; that is the case with all of us. Do you want money?"

"Can you give me what I want?"

"That depends on how much you owe. How much do you want?"

"Thirty thousand francs."

"Are the chimney-bricks coming down on my head?" exclaimed du Tillet, bursting into a laugh.

Cesar, misled by the luxury about him, fancied it was the laugh of a man to whom the sum was a mere trifle; he breathed again. Du Tillet rang the bell.

"Send the cashier to me."

"He has not come, monsieur," said the valet.

"These fellows take advantage of me! It is half-past eight o'clock, and he ought to have done a million francs' worth of business by this time."

Five minutes later Monsieur Legras came in.

"How much have we in the desk?"

"Only twenty thousand francs. Monsieur gave orders to buy into the Funds to the amount of thirty thousand francs cash, payable on the 15th."

"That's true; I am half-asleep still."

The cashier gave Birotteau a suspicious look as he left the room.

"If truth were banished from this earth, she would leave her last word with a cashier," said du Tillet. "Haven't you some interest in this little Popinot, who has set up for himself?" he added, after a dreadful pause, in which the sweat rolled in drops from Cesar's brow.

"Yes," he answered, naively. "Do you think you could discount his signature for a large amount?"

“Bring me his acceptances for fifty thousand francs, and I will get them discounted for you at a reasonable rate by old Gobseck, who is very easy to deal with when he has funds to invest; and he has some now.”

Birotteau went home broken-hearted, not perceiving that the bankers were tossing him from one to the other like a shuttle-cock; but Constance had already guessed that credit was unattainable. If three bankers refused it, it was very certain that they had inquired of each other about so prominent a man as a deputy-mayor; and there was, consequently, no hope from the Bank of France.

“Try to renew your notes,” she said; “go and see Monsieur Claparon, your copartner, and all the others to whom you gave notes for the 15th, and ask them to renew. It will be time enough to go to the money-lenders with Popinot’s paper if that fails.”

“To-morrow is the 13th,” said Birotteau, completely crushed.

In the language of his own prospectus, he enjoyed a sanguine temperament, which was subject to an enormous waste through emotions and the pressure of thought, and imperatively demanded sleep to repair it. Cesarine took her father into the salon and played to him “Rousseau’s Dream,”—a pretty piece of music by Herold; while Constance sat sewing beside him. The poor man laid his head on a cushion, and every time he looked up at his wife he saw a soft smile upon her lips; and thus he fell asleep.

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“Poor man!” said Constance; “what misery is in store for him! God grant he may have strength to bear it!”

“Oh! what troubles you, mamma?” said Cesarine, seeing that her mother was weeping.

“Dear daughter, I see a failure coming. If your father is forced to make an assignment, we must ask no one’s pity. My child, be prepared to become a simple shop-girl. If I see you accepting your life courageously, I shall have strength to begin my life over again. I know your father,—he will not keep back one farthing; I shall resign my dower; all that we possess will be sold. My child, you must take your jewels and your clothes tomorrow to your uncle Pillerault; for you are not bound to any sacrifice.”

Cesarine was seized with a terror beyond control as she listened to these words, spoken with religious simplicity. The thought came into her mind to go and see Anselme; but her native delicacy checked it.

On the morrow, at nine o’clock, Birotteau, following his wife’s advice, went to find Claparon in the Rue de Provence, in the grasp of anxieties quite other than those through which he had lately passed. To ask for a credit is an ordinary business matter; it happens every day that those who undertake an enterprise are obliged to borrow capital; but to ask for the renewal of notes is in commercial jurisprudence what the correctional police is to the court of assizes, —a first step towards bankruptcy, just as a misdemeanor leads to crime. The secret of your embarrassment is in other hands than your own. A merchant delivers himself over, bound hand and foot, to another merchant; and mercy is a virtue not practised at the Bourse.

Cesar, who once walked the streets of Paris with his head high and his eye beaming with confidence, now, unstrung by perplexity, shrank from meeting Claparon; he began to realize that a banker’s heart is mere viscera. Claparon had seemed to him so brutal in his coarse jollity, and he had felt the man’s vulgarity so keenly, that he shuddered at the necessity of accosting him.

“But he is nearer to the people; perhaps he will therefore have more heart!” Such was the first reproachful word which the anguish of his position forced from Cesar’s lips.

Birotteau drew upon the dregs of his courage, and went up the stairway of a mean little *entresol*, at whose windows he had caught a glimpse of green curtains yellowed by the sun. He read the word “Offices,” stamped in black letters on an oval copper-plate; he rapped, nobody answered, and he went in. The place, worse than humble, conveyed an idea of penury, or avarice, or neglect. No employe was to be seen behind the brass lattice which topped an unpainted white wooden enclosure, breast-high, within which were tables and desks in stained black wood. These deserted places were littered with inkstands, in which the ink was mouldy and the pens as rumpled as a ragammufin’s head, and twisted like sunfish; with boxes and papers and

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printed matter,—all worthless, no doubt. The floor was as dirty, defaced, and damp as that of a boarding-house. The second room, announced by the word “Counting-Room” on its door, harmonized with the grim *facetiae* of its neighbor. In one corner was a large space screened off by an oak balustrade, trellised with copper wire and furnished with a sliding cat-hole, within which was an enormous iron chest. This space, apparently given over to the rioting of rats, also contained an odd-looking desk, with a shabby arm-chair, which was ragged, green, and torn in the seat,—from which the horse-hair protruded, like the wig of its master, in half a hundred libertine curls. The chief adornment of this room, which had evidently been the salon of the appartement before it was converted into a banking-office, was a round table covered with a green cloth, round which stood a few old chairs of black leather with tarnished gilt nails. The fireplace, somewhat elegant, showed none of the sooty marks of a fire; the hearth was clean; the mirror, covered with fly-specks, had a paltry air, in keeping with a mahogany clock bought at the sale of some old notary, which annoyed the eye, already depressed by two candelabras without candles and the sticky dust that covered them. The wall-paper, mouse-gray with a pink border, revealed, by certain fuliginous stains, the unwholesome presence of smokers. Nothing ever more faithfully represented that prosaic precinct called by the newspapers an “editorial sanctum.” Birotteau, fearing that he might be indiscreet, knocked sharply three times on the door opposite to that by which he entered.

“Come in!” cried Claparon, the reverberation of whose voice revealed the distance it had to traverse and the emptiness of the room,—in which Cesar heard the crackling of a good fire, though the owner was apparently not there.

The room was, in truth, Claparon’s private office. Between the ostentatious reception-room of Francois Keller and the untidy abode of the counterfeit banker, there was all the difference that exists between Versailles and the wigwam of a Huron chief. Birotteau had witnessed the splendors of finance; he was now to see its fooleries. Lying in bed, in a sort of oblong recess or den opening from the farther end of the office, and where the habits of a slovenly life had spoiled, dirtied, greased, torn, defaced, obliterated, and ruined furniture which had been elegant in its day, Claparon, at the entrance of Birotteau, wrapped his filthy dressing-gown around him, laid down his pipe, and drew together the curtains of the bed with a haste which made even the innocent perfumer suspect his morals.

“Sit down, monsieur,” said the make-believe banker.

Claparon, without his wig, his head wrapped up in a bandanna handkerchief twisted awry, seemed all the more hideous to Birotteau because, when the dressing-gown gaped open, he saw an undershirt of knitted wool, once white, but now yellowed by wear indefinitely prolonged.

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"Will you breakfast with me?" said Claparon, recollecting the perfumer's ball, and thinking to make him a return and also to put him off the scent by this invitation.

Cesar now perceived a round table, hastily cleared of its litter, which bore testimony to the presence of jovial company by a pate, oysters, white wine, and vulgar kidneys, *sautes au vin de champagne*, sodden in their own sauce. The light of a charcoal brazier gleamed on an *omelette aux truffes*.

Two covers and two napkins, soiled by the supper of the previous night, might have enlightened the purest innocence. Claparon, thinking himself very clever, pressed his invitation in spite of Cesar's refusal.

"I was to have had a guest, but that guest has disappointed me," said the crafty traveller, in a voice likely to reach a person buried under coverlets.

"Monsieur," said Birotteau, "I came solely on business, and I shall not detain you long."

"I'm used up," said Claparon, pointing to the desk and the tables piled with documents; "they don't leave me a poor miserable moment to myself! I don't receive people except on Saturdays. But as for you, my dear friend, I'll see you at any time. I haven't a moment to love or to loaf; I have lost even the inspiration of business; to catch its vim one must have the sloth of ease. Nobody ever sees me now on the boulevard doing nothing. Bah! I'm sick of business; I don't want to talk about business; I've got money enough, but I never can get enough happiness. My gracious! I want to travel,—to see Italy! Oh, that dear Italy! beautiful in spite of all her reverses! adorable land, where I shall no doubt encounter some angel, complying yet majestic! I have always loved Italian women. Did you ever have an Italian woman yourself? No? Then come with me to Italy. We will see Venice, the abode of doges,—unfortunately fallen into those intelligent Austrian hands that know nothing of art! Bah! let us get rid of business, canals, loans, and peaceful governments. I'm a good fellow when I've got my pockets lined. Thunder! let's travel."

"One word, monsieur, and I will release you," said Birotteau. "You made over my notes to Monsieur Bidault."

"You mean Gigonnet, that good little Gigonnet, easy-going—"

"Yes," said Cesar; "but I wish,—and here I count upon your honor and delicacy,—"

Claparon bowed.

"—to renew those notes."

"Impossible!" snapped the banker. "I'm not alone in the matter. We have met in council,—regular Chamber; but we all agreed like bacon in a frying-pan. The devil! we

deliberated. Those lands about the Madeleine don't amount to anything; we are operating elsewhere. Hey! my dear sir, if we were not involved in the Champs Elysees and at the Bourse which they are going to finish, and in the quartier Saint-Lazare and at Tivoli, we shouldn't be, as that fat Nucingen says, in *peaseness* at all. What's the Madeleine to us?—a midge of a thing. Pr-r-r! We don't play low, my good fellow," he said, tapping Birotteau on the stomach and catching him round the waist. "Come, let's have our breakfast, and talk," added Claparon, wishing to soften his refusal.

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"Very good," said Birotteau. "So much the worse for the other guest," he thought, meaning to make Claparon drunk, and to find out who were his real associates in an affair which began to look suspicious to him.

"All right! Victoire!" called the banker.

This call brought a regular Leonarde, tricked out like a fish-woman.

"Tell the clerks that I can't see any one,—not even Nucingen, Keller, Gigonnet, and all the rest of them."

"No one has come but Monsieur Lempereur."

"He can receive the great people," said Claparon; "the small fry are not to get beyond the first room. They are to say I'm cogitating a great enterprise—in champagne."

To make an old commercial traveller drunk is an impossibility. Cesar mistook the elation of the man's vulgarity when he attempted to sound his mind.

"That infamous Roguin is still connected with you," he began; "don't you think you ought to write and tell him to assist an old friend whom he has compromised,—a man with whom he dined every Sunday, and whom he has known for twenty years?"

"Roguin? A fool! his share is ours now. Don't be worried, old fellow, all will go well. Pay up to the 15th, and after that we will see—I say, we will see. Another glass of wine? The capital doesn't concern me one atom; pay or don't pay, I sha'n't make faces at you. I'm only in the business for a commission on the sales, and for a share when the lands are converted into money; and it's for that I manage the owners. Don't you understand? You have got solid men behind you, so I'm not afraid, my good sir. Nowadays, business is all parcelled out in portions. A single enterprise requires a combination of capacities. Go in with us; don't potter with pomatum and perfumes,—rubbish! rubbish! Shave the public; speculate!"

"Speculation!" said Cesar, "is that commerce?"

"It is abstract commerce," said Claparon,—"commerce which won't be developed for ten years to come, according to Nucingen, the Napoleon of finance; commerce by which a man can grasp the totality of fractions, and skim the profits before there are any. Gigantic idea! one way of pouring hope into pint cups,—in short, a new necromancy! So far, we have only got ten or a dozen hard heads initiated into the cabalistic secrets of these magnificent combinations."

Cesar opened his eyes and ears, endeavoring to understand this composite phraseology.

“Listen,” said Claparon, after a pause. “Such master-strokes need men. There’s the man of genius who hasn’t a sou—like all men of genius. Those fellows spend their thoughts and spend their money just as it comes. Imagine a pig rooting round a truffle-patch; he is followed by a jolly fellow, a moneyed man, who listens for the grunt as piggy finds the succulent. Now, when the man of genius has found a good thing, the moneyed man taps him on the shoulder and says, ‘What have you got there? You are rushing into the

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fiery furnace, my good fellow, and you haven't the loins to run out again. There's a thousand francs; just let me take it in hand and manage the affair.' Very good! The banker then convokes the traders: 'My friends, let us go to work: write a prospectus! Down with humbug!' On that they get out the hunting-horns and shout and clamor,— 'One hundred thousand francs for five sous! or five sous for a hundred thousand francs! gold mines! coal mines!' In short, all the clap-trap of commerce. We buy up men of arts and sciences; the show begins, the public enters; it gets its money's worth, and we get the profits. The pig is penned up with his potatoes, and the rest of us wallow in banknotes. There it all is, my good sir. Come, go into the business with us. What would you like to be,—pig, buzzard, clown, or millionaire? Reflect upon it; I have now laid before you the whole theory of the modern loan-system. Come and see me often; you'll always find me a jovial, jolly fellow. French joviality—gaiety and gravity, all in one—never injures business; quite the contrary. Men who quaff the sparkling cup are born to understand each other. Come, another glass of champagne! it is good, I tell you! It was sent to me from Epernay itself, by a man for whom I once sold quantities at a good price—I used to be in wines. He shows his gratitude, and remembers me in my prosperity; very rare, that."

Birotteau, overcome by the frivolity and heedlessness of a man to whom the world attributed extreme depth and capacity, dared not question him any further. In the midst of his own haziness of mind produced by the champagne, he did, however, recollect a name spoken by du Tillet; and he asked Claparon who Gobseck the banker was, and where he lived.

"Have you got as far as that?" said Claparon. "Gobseck is a banker, just as the headsman is a doctor. The first word is 'fifty per cent'; he belongs to the race of Harpagon; he'll take canary birds at all seasons, fur tippets in summer, nankeens in winter. What securities are you going to offer him? If you want him to take your paper without security you will have to deposit your wife, your daughter, your umbrella, everything down to your hat-box, your socks (don't you go in for ribbed socks?), your shovel and tongs, and the very wood you've got in the cellar! Gobseck! Gobseck! in the name of virtuous folly, who told you to go to that commercial guillotine?"

"Monsieur du Tillet."

"Ah! the scoundrel, I recognize him! We used to be friends. If we have quarrelled so that we don't speak to each other, you may depend upon it my aversion to him is well-founded; he let me read down to the bottom of his infamous soul, and he made me uncomfortable at that beautiful ball you gave us. I can't stand his impudent airs—all because he has got a notary's wife! I could have countesses if I wanted them; I sha'n't respect him any the more for that. Ah! my respect is a princess who'll never give birth to such

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as he. But, I say, you are a funny fellow, old man, to flash us a ball like that, and two months after try to renew your paper! You seem to have some go in you. Let's do business together. You have got a reputation which would be very useful to me. Oh! du Tillet was born to understand Gobseck. Du Tillet will come to a bad end at the Bourse. If he is, as they say, the tool of old Gobseck, he won't be allowed to go far. Gobseck sits in a corner of his web like an old spider who has travelled round the world. Sooner or later, ztit! the usurer will toss him off as I do this glass of wine. So much the better! Du Tillet has played me a trick—oh! a damnable trick."

At the end of an hour and a half spend in just such senseless chatter, Birotteau attempted to get away, seeing that the late commercial traveller was about to relate the adventure of a republican deputy of Marseilles, in love with a certain actress then playing the part of la belle Arsene, who, on one occasion, was hissed by a royalist crowd in the pit.

"He stood up in his box," said Claparon, "and shouted: 'Arrest whoever hissed her! Eugh! If it's a woman, I'll kiss her; if it's a man, we'll see about it; if it's neither the one nor the other, may God's lightning blast it!' Guess how it ended."

"Adieu, monsieur," said Birotteau.

"You will have to come and see me," said Claparon; "that first scrap of paper you gave Cayron has come back to us protested; I endorsed it, so I've paid it. I shall send after you; business before everything."

Birotteau felt stabbed to the heart by this cold and grinning kindness as much as by the harshness of Keller or the coarse German banter of Nucingen. The familiarity of the man, and his grotesque gabble excited by champagne, seemed to tarnish the soul of the honest bourgeois as though he came from a house of financial ill-fame. He went down the stairway and found himself in the streets without knowing where he was going. As he walked along the boulevards and reached the Rue Saint-Denis, he recollected Molineux, and turned into the Cour Batave. He went up the dirty, tortuous staircase which he once trod so proudly. He recalled to mind the mean and niggardly acrimony of Molineux, and he shrank from imploring his favor. The landlord was sitting in the chimney-corner, as on the occasion of Cesar's first visit, but his breakfast was now in process of digestion. Birotteau proffered his request.

"Renew a note for twelve hundred francs?" said Molineux, with mocking incredulity.

"Have you got to that, monsieur? If you have not twelve hundred francs to pay me on the 15th, do you intend to send back my receipt for the rent unpaid? I shall be sorry; but I have not the smallest civility in money-matters,—my rents are my living. Without them how could I pay what I owe myself? No merchant will deny the soundness of that



principle. Money is no respecter of persons; money has no ears, it has no heart. The winter is hard, the price of wood has gone up. If you don't pay me on the 15th, a little summons will be served upon you at twelve o'clock on the 16th. Bah! the worthy Mitral, your bailiff, is mine as well; he will send you the writ in an envelope, with all the consideration due to your high position."

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"Monsieur, I have never received a summons in my life," said Birotteau.

"There is a beginning to everything," said Molineux.

Dismayed by the curt malevolence of the old man, Cesar was cowed; he heard the knell of failure ringing in his ears, and every jangle woke a memory of the stern sayings his pitiless justice had uttered against bankrupts. His former opinions now seared, as with fire, the soft substance of his brain.

"By the by," said Molineux, "you neglected to put upon your notes, 'for value received in rental,' which would secure me preference."

"My position will prevent me from doing anything to the detriment of my creditors," said Cesar, stunned by the sudden sight of the precipice yawning before him.

"Very good, monsieur, very good; I thought I knew everything relating to rentals and tenants, but I have learned through you never to take notes in payment. Ah! I shall sue you, for your answer shows plainly enough that you are not going to meet your liabilities. Hard cash is a matter which concerns every landlord in Paris."

Birotteau went out, weary of life. It is in the nature of such soft and tender souls to be disheartened by a first rebuff, just as a first success encourages them. Cesar no longer had any hope except in the devotion of little Popinot, to whom his thoughts naturally turned as he crossed the Marche des Innocents.

"Poor boy! who could have believed it when I launched him, only six weeks ago, in the Tuileries?"

It was just four o'clock, the hour at which the judges left their court-rooms. Popinot the elder chanced to go and see his nephew. This judge, whose mind was singularly acute on all moral questions, was also gifted with a second-sight which enabled him to discover secret intentions, to perceive the meaning of insignificant human actions, the germs of crime, the roots of wrongdoing; and he now watched Birotteau, though Birotteau was not aware of it. The perfumer, who was annoyed at finding the judge with his nephew, seemed to him harassed, preoccupied, pensive. Little Popinot, always busy, with his pen behind his ear, lay down as usual flat on his stomach before the father of his Cesarine. The empty phrases which Cesar addressed to his partner seemed to the judge to mask some important request. Instead of going away, the crafty old man stayed in spite of his nephew's evident desire, for he guessed that the perfumer would soon try to get rid of him by going away himself. Accordingly, when Birotteau went out the judge followed, and saw Birotteau hanging about that part of the Rue des Cinq-Diamants which leads into the Rue Aubry-le-Boucher. This trifling circumstance roused the suspicions of old Popinot as to Cesar's intentions; he turned into the Rue

des Lombards, and when he saw the perfumer re-enter Anselme's door, he came hastily back again.

"My dear Popinot," said Cesar to his partner, "I have come to ask a service of you."

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“What can I do?” cried Popinot with generous ardor.

“Ah! you save my life,” exclaimed the poor man, comforted by this warmth of heart which flamed upon the sea of ice he had traversed for twenty-five days.

“You must give me a note for fifty thousand francs on my share of the profits; we will arrange later about the payment.”

Popinot looked fixedly at Cesar. Cesar dropped his eyes. At this moment the judge re-entered.

“My son—ah! excuse me, Monsieur Birotteau—Anselme, I forget to tell you—” and with an imperious gesture he led his nephew into the street and forced him, in his shirt-sleeves and bareheaded, to listen as they walked towards the Rue des Lombards. “My nephew, your old master may find himself so involved that he will be forced to make an assignment. Before taking that step, honorable men who have forty years of integrity to boast of, virtuous men seeking to save their good name, will play the part of reckless gamblers; they become capable of anything; they will sell their wives, traffic with their daughters, compromise their best friends, pawn what does not belong to them; they will frequent gambling-tables, become dissemblers, hypocrites, liars; they will even shed tears. I have witnessed strange things. You yourself have seen Roguin’s respectability, —a man to whom they would have given the sacraments without confession. I do not apply these remarks in their full force to Monsieur Birotteau,—I believe him to be an honest man; but if he asks you to do anything, no matter what, against the rules of business, such as endorsing notes out of good-nature, or launching into a system of ‘circulations,’ which, to my mind, is the first step to swindling,—for it is uttering counterfeit paper-money,—if he asks you to do anything of the kind, promise me that you will sign nothing without consulting me. Remember that if you love his daughter you must not—in the very interests of your love you must not—destroy your future. If Monsieur Birotteau is to fall, what will it avail if you fall too? You will deprive yourselves, one as much as the other, of all the chances of your new business, which may prove his only refuge.”

“Thank you, my uncle; a word to the wise is enough,” said Popinot, to whom Cesar’s heart-rending exclamation was now explained.

The merchant in oils, refined and otherwise, returned to his gloomy shop with an anxious brow. Birotteau saw the change.

“Will you do me the honor to come up into my bedroom? We shall be better there. The clerks, though very busy, might overhear us.”

Birotteau followed Popinot, a prey to the anxiety a condemned man goes through from the moment of his appeal for mercy until its rejection.

“My dear benefactor,” said Anselme, “you cannot doubt my devotion; it is absolute. Permit me only to ask you one thing. Will this sum clear you entirely, or is it only a means of delaying some catastrophe? If it is that, what good will it do to drag me down also? You want notes at ninety days. Well, it is absolutely impossible that I could meet them in that time.”

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Birotteau rose, pale and solemn, and looked at Popinot.

Popinot, horror-struck, cried out, "I will do them for you, if you wish it."

"UNGRATEFUL!" said his master, who spent his whole remaining strength in hurling the word at Anselme's brow, as if it were a living mark of infamy.

Birotteau walked to the door, and went out. Popinot, rousing himself from the sensation which the terrible word produced upon him, rushed down the staircase and into the street, but Birotteau was out of sight. Cesarine's lover heard that dreadful charge ringing in his ears, and saw the distorted face of the poor distracted Cesar constantly before him; Popinot was to live henceforth, like Hamlet, with a spectre beside him.

Birotteau wandered about the streets of the neighborhood like a drunken man. At last he found himself upon the quay, and followed it till he reached Sevres, where he passed the night at an inn, maddened with grief, while his terrified wife dared not send in search of him. She knew that in such circumstances an alarm, imprudently given, might be fatal to his credit, and the wise Constance sacrificed her own anxiety to her husband's commercial reputation: she waited silently through the night, mingling her prayers and terrors. Was Cesar dead? Had he left Paris on the scent of some last hope? The next morning she behaved as though she knew the reasons for his absence; but at five o'clock in the afternoon when Cesar had not returned, she sent for her uncle and begged him to go at once to the Morgue. During the whole of that day the courageous creature sat behind her counter, her daughter embroidering beside her. When Pillerault returned, Cesar was with him; on his way back the old man had met him in the Palais-Royal, hesitating before the entrance to a gambling-house.

This was the 14th. At dinner Cesar could not eat. His stomach, violently contracted, rejected food. The evening hours were terrible. The shaken man went through, for the hundredth time, one of those frightful alternations of hope and despair which, by forcing the soul to run up the scale of joyous emotion and then precipitating it to the last depths of agony, exhaust the vital strength of feeble beings. Derville, Birotteau's advocate, rushed into the handsome salon where Madame Cesar was using all her persuasion to retain her husband, who wished to sleep on the fifth floor,—“that I may not see,” he said, “these monuments of my folly.”

“The suit is won!” cried Derville.

At these words Cesar's drawn face relaxed; but his joy alarmed Derville and Pillerault. The women left the room to go and weep by themselves in Cesarine's chamber.

“Now I can get a loan!” cried Birotteau.

“It would be imprudent,” said Derville; “they have appealed; the court might reverse the judgment; but in a month it would be safe.”

“A month!”

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Cesar fell into a sort of slumber, from which no one tried to rouse him,—a species of catalepsy, in which the body lived and suffered while the functions of the mind were in abeyance. This respite, bestowed by chance, was looked upon by Constance, Cesarine, Pillerault, and Derville as a blessing from God. And they judged rightly: Cesar was thus enabled to bear the harrowing emotions of that night. He was sitting in a corner of the sofa near the fire; his wife was in the other corner watching him attentively, with a soft smile upon her lips,—the smile which proves that women are nearer than men to angelic nature, in that they know how to mingle an infinite tenderness with an all-embracing compassion; a secret belonging only to angels seen in dreams providentially strewn at long intervals through the history of human life. Cesarine, sitting on a little stool at her mother's feet, touched her father's hand lightly with her hair from time to time, as she gave him a caress into which she strove to put the thoughts which, in such crises, the voice seems to render intrusive.

Seated in his arm-chair, like the Chancelier de l'Hopital on the peristyle of the Chamber of Deputies, Pillerault—a philosopher prepared for all events, and showing upon his countenance the wisdom of an Egyptian sphinx—was talking to Derville and his niece in a suppressed voice. Constance thought it best to consult the lawyer, whose discretion was beyond a doubt. With the balance-sheet written in her head, she explained the whole situation in low tones. After an hour's conference, held in presence of the stupefied Cesar, Derville shook his head and looked at Pillerault.

"Madame," he said, with the horrible coolness of his profession, "you must give in your schedule and make an assignment. Even supposing that by some contrivance you could meet the payments for to-morrow, you would have to pay down at least three hundred thousand francs before you could borrow on those lands. Your liabilities are five hundred thousand. To meet them you have assets that are very promising, very productive, but not convertible at present; you must fail within a given time. My opinion is that it is better to jump out of the window than to roll downstairs."

"That is my advice, too, dear child," said Pillerault.

Derville left, and Madame Cesar and Pillerault went with him to the door.

"Poor father!" said Cesarine, who rose softly to lay a kiss on Cesar's head. "Then Anselme could do nothing?" she added, as her mother and Pillerault returned.

"UNGRATEFUL!" cried Cesar, struck by the name of Anselme in the only living part of his memory,—as the note of a piano lifts the hammer which strikes its corresponding string.

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From the moment when that word “Ungrateful” was flung at him like an anathema, little Popinot had not had an hour’s sleep nor an instant’s peace of mind. The unhappy lad cursed his uncle, and finally went to see him. To get the better of that experienced judicial wisdom he poured forth the eloquence of love, hoping it might seduce a being from whose mind human speech slips like water from a duck’s back,—a judge!

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"From a commercial point of view," he said, "custom does allow the managing-partner to advance a certain sum to the sleeping-partner on the profits of the business, and we are certain to make profits. After close examination of my affairs I do feel strong enough to pay forty thousand francs in three months. The known integrity of Monsieur Cesar is a guarantee that he will use that forty thousand to pay off his debts. Thus the creditors, if there should come a failure, can lay no blame on us. Besides, uncle, I would rather lose forty thousand francs than lose Cesarine. At this very moment while I am speaking, she has doubtless been told of my refusal, and will cease to esteem me. I vowed my blood to my benefactor! I am like a young sailor who ought to sink with his captain, or a soldier who should die with his general."

"Good heart and bad merchant, you will never lose my esteem," said the judge, pressing the hand of his nephew. "I have thought a great deal of this," he added. "I know you love Cesarine devotedly, and I think you can satisfy the claims of love and the claims of commerce."

"Ah! my uncle, if you have found a way my honor is saved!"

"Advance Birotteau fifty thousand on his share in your oil, which has now become a species of property, reserving to yourself the right of buying it back. I will draw up the deed."

Anselme embraced his uncle and rushed home, made notes to the amount of fifty thousand francs, and ran from the Rue des Cinq-Diamants to the Place Vendome, so that just as Cesarine, her mother, and Pillerault were gazing at Cesar, amazed at the sepulchral tone in which he had uttered the word "Ungrateful!" the door of the salon opened and Popinot appeared.

"My dear and beloved master!" he cried, wiping the perspiration from his forehead, "here is what you asked of me!" He held out the notes. "Yes, I have carefully examined my situation; you need have no fear, I shall be able to pay them. Save—save your honor!"

"I was sure of him!" cried Cesarine, seizing Popinot's hand, and pressing it with convulsive force.

Madame Cesar embraced him; Birotteau rose up like the righteous at the sound of the last trumpet, and issued, as it were, from the tomb. Then he stretched out a frenzied hand to seize the fifty stamped papers.

"Stop!" said the terrible uncle, Pillerault, snatching the papers from Popinot, "one moment!"

The four individuals present,—Cesar, his wife, Cesarine, and Popinot, —bewildered by the action of the old man and by the tone of his voice, saw him tear the papers and fling them in the fire, without attempting to interfere.

“Uncle!”

“Uncle!”

“Uncle!”

“Monsieur!”

Four voices and but one heart; a startling unanimity! Uncle Pillerault passed his arm round Popinot’s neck, held him to his breast, and kissed him.

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"You are worthy of the love of those who have hearts," he said. "If you loved a daughter of mine, had she a million and you had nothing but that [pointing to the black ashes of the notes], you should marry her in a fortnight, if she loved you. Your master," he said, pointing to Cesar, "is beside himself. My nephew," resumed Pillerault, gravely, addressing the poor man,—“my nephew, away with illusions! We must do business with francs, not feelings. All this is noble, but useless. I spent two hours at the Bourse this afternoon. You have not one farthing's credit; every one is talking of your disaster, of your attempts to renew, of your appeals to various bankers, of their refusals, of your follies,—going up six flights of stairs to beg a gossiping landlord, who chatters like a magpie, to renew a note of twelve hundred francs!—your ball, given to conceal your embarrassments. They have gone so far as to say you had no property in Roguin's hands; according to your enemies, Roguin is only a blind. A friend of mine, whom I sent about to learn what is going on, confirms what I tell you. Every one foresees that Popinot will issue notes, and believes that you set him up in business expressly as a last resource. In short, every calumny or slander which a man brings upon himself when he tries to mount a rung of the social ladder, is going the rounds among business men to-day. You might hawk about those notes of Popinot in vain; you would meet humiliating refusals; no one would take them; no one could be sure how many such notes you are issuing; every one expects you to sacrifice the poor lad to your own safety. You would destroy to no purpose the credit of the house of Popinot. Do you know how much the boldest money-lender would give you for those fifty thousand francs? Twenty thousand at the most; twenty thousand, do you hear me? There are crises in business when we must stand up three days before the world without eating, as if we had indigestion, and on the fourth day we may be admitted to the larder of credit. You cannot live through those three days; and the whole matter lies there. My poor nephew, take courage! file your schedule, make an assignment. Here is Popinot, here am I; we will go to work as soon as the clerks have gone to bed, and spare you the agony of it."

"My uncle!" said Cesar, clasping his hands.

"Cesar, would you choose a shameful failure, in which there are no assets? Your share in the house of Popinot is all that saves your honor."

Cesar, awakened by this last and fatal stream of light, saw at length the frightful truth in its full extent; he fell back upon the sofa, from thence to his knees, and his mind seemed to wander; he became like a little child. His wife thought he was dying. She knelt down to raise him, but joined her voice to his when she saw him clasp his hands and lift his eyes, and recite, with resigned contrition, in the hearing of his uncle, his daughter, and Popinot, the sublime catholic prayer:—

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“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven; GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD; and forgive us our offences, as we forgive those who have offended against us. So be it!”

Tears came into the eyes of the stoic Pillerault; Cesarine, overcome and weeping, leaned her head upon Popinot’s shoulder, as he stood pale and rigid as a statue.

“Let us go below,” said the old merchant, taking the arm of the young man.

It was half-past eleven when they left Cesar to the care of his wife and daughter. Just at that moment Celestin, the head-clerk, to whom the management of the house had been left during this secret tumult, came up to the appartement and entered the salon. Hearing his step, Cesarine ran to meet him, that he might not see the prostration of his master.

“Among the letters this evening there was one from Tours, which was misdirected and therefore delayed. I thought it might be from monsieur’s brother, so I did not open it.”

“Father!” cried Cesarine; “a letter from my uncle at Tours!”

“Ah, I am saved!” cried Cesar. “My brother! oh, my brother!” He kissed the letter, as he broke the seal, and read it aloud to his wife and daughter in a trembling voice:—

Answer of Francois to Cesar Birotteau.
Tours, 10th.

My beloved Brother,—Your letter gave me the deepest pain. As soon as I had read it, I went at once and offered to God the holy sacrifice of the Mass, imploring Him by the blood which His Son, our divine Redeemer, shed for us, to look with mercy upon your afflictions. At the moment when I offered the prayer *Pro meo fratre Caesare*, my eyes were filled with tears as I thought of you,—from whom, unfortunately, I am separated in these days when you must sorely need the support of fraternal friendship. I have thought that the worthy and venerable Monsieur Pillerault would doubtless replace me. My dear Cesar, never forget, in the midst of your troubles, that this life is a scene of trial, and is passing away; that one day we shall be rewarded for having suffered for the holy name of God, for His holy Church, for having followed the teachings of His Gospel and practised virtue. If it were otherwise, this world would have no meaning. I repeat to you these maxims, though I know how good and pious you are, because it may happen that those who, like you, are flung into the storms of life upon the perilous waves of human interests might be tempted to utter blasphemies in the midst of their adversity,—carried away as they are by anguish. Curse neither the men who injure you nor the God who mingles, at His will, your joy with bitterness. Look not on life, but lift your eyes to heaven; there is comfort for the weak, there are riches for the poor, there are terrors for the—

“But, Birotteau,” said his wife, “skip all that, and see what he sends us.”

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"We will read it over and over hereafter," said Cesar, wiping his eyes and turning over the page,—letting fall, as he did so, a Treasury note. "I was sure of him, poor brother!" said Birotteau, picking up the note and continuing to read, in a voice broken by tears.

I went to Madame de Listomere, and without telling her the reason of my request I asked her to lend me all she could dispose of, so as to swell the amount of my savings. Her generosity has enabled me to make up a thousand francs; which I send herewith, in a note of the Receiver-General of Tours on the Treasury.

"A fine sum!" said Constance, looking at Cesarine.

By retrenching a few superfluities in my life, I can return the four hundred francs Madame de Listomere has lent me in three years; so do not make yourself uneasy about them, my dear Cesar. I send you all I have in the world; hoping that this sum may help you to a happy conclusion of your financial difficulties, which doubtless are only momentary. I well know your delicacy, and I wish to forestall your objections. Do not dream of paying me any interest for this money, nor of paying it back at all in the day of prosperity which ere long will dawn for you if God deigns to hear the prayers I offer to Him daily. After I received your last letter, two years ago, I thought you so rich that I felt at liberty to spend my savings upon the poor; but now, all that I have is yours. When you have overcome this little commercial difficulty, keep the sum I now send for my niece Cesarine; so that when she marries she may buy some trifle to remind her of her old uncle, who daily lifts his hands to heaven to implore the blessing of God upon her and all who are dear to her. And also, my dear Cesar, recollect I am a poor priest who dwells, by the grace of God, like the larks in the meadow, in quiet places, trying to obey the commandment of our divine Saviour, and who consequently needs but little money. Therefore, do not have the least scruple in the trying circumstances in which you find yourself; and think of me as one who loves you tenderly. Our excellent Abbe Chapeloud, to whom I have not revealed your situation, desires me to convey his friendly regards to every member of your family, and his wishes for the continuance of your prosperity. Adieu, dear and well-beloved brother; I pray that at this painful juncture God will be pleased to preserve your health, and also that of your wife and daughter. I wish you, one and all, patience and courage under your afflictions.

Francois Birotteau,
Priest, Vicar of the Cathedral and Parochial Church
of Saint-Gatien de Tours.

"A thousand francs!" cried Madame Birotteau.

"Put them away," said Cesar gravely; "they are all he had. Besides, they belong to our daughter, and will enable us to live; so that we need ask nothing of our creditors."

"They will think you are abstracting large sums."

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"Then I will show them the letter."

"They will say that it is a fraud."

"My God! my God!" cried Birotteau. "I once thought thus of poor, unhappy people who were doubtless as I am now."

Terribly anxious about Cesar's state, mother and daughter sat plying their needles by his side, in profound silence. At two in the morning Popinot gently opened the door of the salon and made a sign to Madame Cesar to come down. On seeing his niece Pillerault took off his spectacles.

"My child, there is hope," he said; "all is not lost. But your husband could not bear the uncertainty of the negotiations which Anselme and I are about to undertake. Don't leave your shop to-morrow, and take the addresses of all the bills; we have till four o'clock in the afternoon of the 15th. Here is my plan: Neither Ragon nor I am to be considered. Suppose that your hundred thousand francs deposited with Roguin had been remitted to the purchasers, you would not have them then any more than you have them now. The hundred and forty thousand francs for which notes were given to Claparon, and which must be paid in any state of the case, are what you have to meet. Therefore it is not Roguin's bankruptcy which has ruined you. I find, to meet your obligations, forty thousand francs which you can, sooner or later, borrow on your property in the Faubourg du Temple, and sixty thousand for your share in the house of Popinot. Thus you can make a struggle, for later you may borrow on the lands about the Madeleine. If your chief creditor agrees to help you, I shall not consider my interests; I shall sell out my Funds and live on dry bread; Popinot will get along between life and death, and as for you, you will be at the mercy of the smallest commercial mischance; but Cephalic Oil will undoubtedly make great returns. Popinot and I have consulted together; we will stand by you in this struggle. Ah! I shall eat my dry bread gaily if I see daylight breaking on the horizon. But everything depends on Gigonnet, who holds the notes, and the associates of Claparon. Popinot and I are going to see Gigonnet between seven and eight o'clock in the morning, and then we shall know what their intentions are."

Constance, wholly overcome, threw herself into her uncle's arms, voiceless except through tears and sobs.

Neither Popinot nor Pillerault knew or could know that Bidault, called Gigonnet, and Claparon were du Tillet under two shapes; and that du Tillet was resolved to read in the "Journal des Petites Affiches" this terrible article:—

"Judgment of the Court of Commerce, which declares the Sieur Cesar Birotteau, merchant-perfumer, living in Paris, Rue Saint-Honore, no. 397, insolvent, and appoints

the preliminary examination on the 17th of January, 1819. Commissioner, Monsieur Gobenheim-Keller. Agent, Monsieur Molineux.”

Anselme and Pillerault examined Cesar’s affairs until daylight. At eight o’clock in the morning the two brave friends,—one an old soldier, the other a young recruit, who had never known, except by hearsay, the terrible anguish of those who commonly went up the staircase of Bidault called Gigonnet,—wended their way, without a word to each other, towards the Rue Grenetat. Both were suffering; from time to time Pillerault passed his hand across his brow.

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The Rue Grenetat is a street where all the houses, crowded with trades of every kind, have a repulsive aspect. The buildings are horrible. The vile uncleanness of manufactories is their leading feature. Old Gigonnet lived on the third floor of a house whose window-sashes, with small and very dirty panes, swung by the middle, on pivots. The staircase opened directly upon the street. The porter's lodge was on the *entresol*, in a space which was lighted only from the staircase. All the lodgers, with the exception of Gigonnet, worked at trades. Workmen were continually coming and going. The stairs were caked with a layer of mud, hard or soft according to the state of the atmosphere, and were covered with filth. Each landing of this noisome stairway bore the names of the occupants in gilt letters on a metal plate, painted red and varnished, to which were attached specimens of their craft. As a rule, the doors stood open and gave to view queer combinations of the domestic household and the manufacturing operations. Strange cries and grunts issued therefrom, with songs and whistles and hisses that recalled the hour of four o'clock in the Jardin des Plantes. On the first floor, in an evil-smelling lair, the handsomest braces to be found in the *article-Paris* were made. On the second floor, the elegant boxes which adorn the shop-windows of the boulevards and the Palais-Royal at the beginning of the new year were manufactured, in the midst of the vilest filth. Gigonnet eventually died, worth eighteen hundred thousand francs, on a third floor of this house, from which no consideration could move him; though his niece, Madame Saillard, offered to give him an appartement in a hotel in the Place Royale.

"Courage!" said Pillerault, as he pulled the deer's hoof hanging from the bell-rope of Gigonnet's clean gray door.

Gigonnet opened the door himself. Cesar's two supporters, entering the precincts of bankruptcy, crossed the first room, which was clean and chilly and without curtains to its windows. All three sat down in the inner room where the money-lender lived, before a hearth full of ashes, in the midst of which the wood was successfully defending itself against the fire. Popinot's courage froze at sight of the usurer's green boxes and the monastic austerity of the room, whose atmosphere was like that of a cellar. He looked with a wondering eye at the miserable blueish paper sprinkled with tricolor flowers, which had been on the walls for twenty-five years; and then his anxious glance fell upon the chimney-piece, ornamented with a clock shaped like a lyre, and two oval vases in Sevres blue richly mounted in copper-gilt. This relic, picked up by Gigonnet after the pillage of Versailles, where the populace broke nearly everything, came from the queen's boudoir; but these rare vases were flanked by two candelabra of abject shape made of wrought-iron, and the barbarous contrast recalled the circumstances under which the vases had been acquired.

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"I know that you have not come on your own account," said Gigonnet, "but on behalf of the great Birotteau. Well, what is it, my friends?"

"We can tell you nothing that you do not already know; so I will be brief," said Pillerrault. "You have notes to the order of Claparon?"

"Yes."

"Will you exchange the first fifty thousand of those notes against the notes of Monsieur Popinot, here present,—less the discount, of course?"

Gigonnet took off the terrible green cap which seemed to have been born on him, pointed to his skull, denuded of hair and of the color of fresh butter, made his usual Voltairean grimace, and said: "You wish to pay me in hair-oil; have I any use for it?"

"If you choose to jest, there is nothing to be done but to beat a retreat," said Pillerrault.

"You speak like the wise man that you are," answered Gigonnet, with a flattering smile.

"Well, suppose I endorse Monsieur Popinot's notes?" said Pillerrault, playing his last card.

"You are gold by the ingot, Monsieur Pillerrault; but I don't want bars of gold, I want my money."

Pillerrault and Popinot bowed and went away. Going down the stairs, Popinot's knees shook under him.

"Is that a man?" he said to Pillerrault.

"They say so," replied the other. "My boy, always bear in mind this short interview. Anselme, you have just seen the banking-business unmasked, without its cloak of courtesy. Unexpected events are the screw of the press, we are the grapes, the bankers are the casks. That land speculation is no doubt a good one; Gigonnet, or some one behind him, means to strangle Cesar and step into his skin. It is all over; there's no remedy. But such is the Bank: be warned; never have recourse to it!"

After this horrible morning, during which Madame Birotteau for the first time sent away those who came for their money, taking their addresses, the courageous woman, happy in the thought that she was thus sparing her husband from distress, saw Popinot and Pillerrault, for whom she waited with ever-growing anxiety, return at eleven o'clock, and read her sentence in their faces. The assignment was inevitable.

"He will die of grief," said the poor woman.

"I could almost wish he might," said Pillerault, solemnly; "but he is so religious that, as things are now, his director, the Abbe Loraux, alone can save him."

Pillerault, Popinot, and Constance waited while a clerk was sent to bring the Abbe Loraux, before they carried up to Cesar the schedule which Celestin had prepared, and asked him to affix his signature. The clerks were in despair, for they loved their master. At four o'clock the good priest came; Constance explained the misfortune that had fallen upon them, and the abbe went upstairs as a soldier mounts the breach.

"I know why you have come!" cried Birotteau.

"My son," said the priest, "your feelings of resignation to the Divine will have long been known to me; it now remains to apply them. Keep your eyes upon the cross; never cease to behold it, and think upon the humiliations heaped upon the Saviour of men. Meditate upon the agonies of his passion, and you will be able to bear the mortification which God has laid upon you—"

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"My brother, the abbe, has already prepared me," said Cesar, showing the letter, which he had re-read and now held out to his confessor.

"You have a good brother," said Monsieur Loraux, "a virtuous and gentle wife, a tender daughter, two good friends,—your uncle and our dear Anselme,—two indulgent creditors, the Ragons: all these kind hearts will pour balm upon your wounds daily, and will help you to bear your cross. Promise me to have the firmness of a martyr, and to face the blow without faltering."

The abbe coughed, to give notice to Pillerault who was waiting in the salon.

"My resignation is unbounded," said Cesar, calmly. "Dishonor has come; I must now think only of reparation."

The firm voice of the poor man and his whole manner surprised Cesarine and the priest. Yet nothing could be more natural. All men can better bear a known and definite misfortune than the cruel uncertainties of a fate which, from one moment to another, brings excessive hope or crushing sorrow.

"I have dreamed a dream for twenty-two years; to-day I awake with my cudgel in my hand," said Cesar, his mind turning back to the Tourangian peasant days.

Pillerault pressed his nephew in his arms as he heard the words. Birotteau saw that his wife, Anselme, and Celestin were present. The papers which the head-clerk held in his hand were significant. Cesar calmly contemplated the little group where every eye was sad but loving.

"Stay!" he said, unfastening his cross, which he held out to the Abbe Loraux; "give it back to me on the day when I can wear it without shame. Celestin," he added, "write my resignation as deputy-mayor, —Monsieur l'abbe will dictate the letter to you; date it the 14th, and send it at once to Monsieur de la Billardiere by Raguet."

Celestin and the abbe went down stairs. For a quarter of an hour silence reigned unbroken in Cesar's study. Such strength of mind surprised the family. Celestin and the abbe came back, and Cesar signed his resignation. When his uncle Pillerault presented the schedule and the papers of his assignment, the poor man could not repress a horrible nervous shudder.

"My God, have pity upon me!" he said, signing the dreadful paper, and holding it out to Celestin.

"Monsieur," said Anselme Popinot, over whose dejected brow a luminous light flashed suddenly, "madame, do me the honor to grant me the hand of Mademoiselle Cesarine."

At these words tears came into the eyes of all present except Cesar; he rose, took Anselme by the hand and said, in a hollow voice, "My son, you shall never marry the daughter of a bankrupt."

Anselme looked fixedly at Birotteau and said: "Monsieur, will you pledge yourself, here, in presence of your whole family, to consent to our marriage, if mademoiselle will accept me as her husband, on the day when you have retrieved your failure?"

There was an instant's silence, during which all present were affected by the emotions painted on the worn face of the poor man.

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"Yes," he said, at last.

Anselme made a gesture of unspeakable joy, as he took the hand which Cesarine held out to him, and kissed it.

"You consent, then?" he said to her.

"Yes," she answered.

"Now that I am one of the family, I have the right to concern myself in its affairs," he said, with a strange, excited expression of face.

He left the room precipitately, that he might not show a joy which contrasted too cruelly with the sorrow of his master. Anselme was not actually happy at the failure, but love is such an egoist! Even Cesarine felt within her heart an emotion that counteracted her bitter grief.

"Now that we have got so far," whispered Pillerault to Constance, "shall we strike the last blow?"

Madame Birotteau let a sign of grief rather than of acquiescence escape her.

"My nephew," said Pillerault, addressing Cesar, "what do you intend to do?"

"To carry on my business."

"That would not be my judgment," said Pillerault. "Take my advice, wind up everything, make over your whole assets to your creditors, and keep out of business. I have often imagined how it would be if I were in a situation such as yours—Ah, one has to foresee everything in business! a merchant who does not think of failure is like a general who counts on never being defeated; he is only half a merchant. I, in your position, would never have continued in business. What! be forced to blush before the men I had injured, to bear their suspicious looks and tacit reproaches? I can conceive of the guillotine—a moment, and all is over. But to have the head replaced, and daily cut off anew, —that is agony I could not have borne. Many men take up their business as if nothing had happened: so much the better for them; they are stronger than Claude-Joseph Pillerault. If you pay in cash, and you are obliged to do so, they say that you have kept back part of your assets; if you are without a penny, it is useless to attempt to recover yourself. No, give up your property, sell your business, and find something else to do."

"What could I find?" said Cesar.

"Well," said Pillerault, "look for a situation. You have influential friends,—the Duc and the Duchesse de Lenoncourt, Madame de Mortsauf, Monsieur de Vandenesse. Write to



them, go and see them; they might get you a situation in the royal household which would give you a thousand crowns or so; your wife could earn as much more, and perhaps your daughter also. The situation is not hopeless. You three might earn nearly ten thousand francs a year. In ten years you can pay off a hundred thousand francs, for you shall not use a penny of what you earn; your two women will have fifteen hundred francs a year from me for their expenses, and, as for you,—we will see about that.”

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Constance and Cesar laid these wise words to heart. Pillerault left them to go to the Bourse, which in those days was held in a provisional wooden building of a circular shape, and was entered from the Rue Faydeau. The failure, already known, of a man lately noted and envied, excited general comment in the upper commercial circles, which at that period were all “constitutionnel.” The gentry of the Opposition claimed a monopoly of patriotism. Royalists might love the king, but to love your country was the exclusive privilege of the Left; the people belonged to it. The downfall of the protege of the palace, of a ministerialist, an incorrigible royalist who on the 13th Vendemiaire had insulted the cause of liberty by fighting against the glorious French Revolution,—such a downfall excited the applause and tittle-tattle of the Bourse. Pillerault wished to learn and study the state of public opinion. He found in one of the most animated groups du Tillet, Gobenheim-Keller, Nucingen, old Guillaume, and his son-in-law Joseph Lebas, Claparon, Gigonnet, Mongenod, Camusot, Gobseck, Adolphe Keller, Palma, Chiffreville, Matifat, Grindot, and Lourdois.

“What caution one needs to have!” said Gobenheim to du Tillet. “It was a mere chance that one of my brothers-in-law did not give Birotteau a credit.”

“I am in for ten thousand francs,” said du Tillet; “he asked me for them two weeks ago, and I let him have them on his own note without security. But he formerly did me some service, and I am willing to lose the money.”

“Your nephew has done like all the rest,” said Lourdois to Pillerault, —“given balls and parties! That a scoundrel should try to throw dust in people’s eyes, I can understand; but it is amazing that a man who passed for as honest as the day should play those worn-out, knavish tricks which we are always finding out and condemning.”

“Don’t trust people unless they live in hovels like Claparon,” said Gigonnet.

“Hey! mein freint,” said the fat Nucingen to du Tillet, “you haf joust missed blaying me a bretty drick in zenting Pirodot to me. I don’t know,” he added, addressing Gobenheim the manufacturer, “vy he tid not ask me for fify tousand francs. I should haf gif dem to him.”

“Oh, no, Monsieur le baron,” said Joseph Lebas, “you knew very well that the Bank had refused his paper; you made them reject it in the committee on discounts. The affair of this unfortunate man, for whom I still feel the highest esteem, presents certain peculiar circumstances.”

Pillerault pressed the hand of Joseph Lebas.

“Yes,” said Mongenod, “it seems impossible to believe what has happened, unless we believe that concealed behind Gigonnet there are certain bankers who want to strangle the speculation in the lands about the Madeleine.”

“What has happened is what happens always to those who go out of their proper business,” said Claparon, hastily interrupting Mongenod. “If he had set up his own Cephalic Oil instead of running up the price of all the land in Paris by pouncing upon it, he might have lost his hundred thousand francs with Roguin, but he wouldn’t have failed. He will go on now under the name of Popinot.”

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"Keep a watch on Popinot," said Gigonnet.

Roguin, in the parlance of such worthy merchants, was now the "unfortunate Roguin." Cesar had become "that wretched Birotteau." The one seemed to them excused by his great passion; the other they considered all the more guilty for his harmless pretensions.

Gigonnet, after leaving the Bourse, went round by the Rue Perrin-Gasselin on his way home, in search of Madame Madou, the vendor of dried fruits.

"Well, old woman," he said, with his coarse good-humor, "how goes the business?"

"So-so," said Madame Madou, respectfully, offering her only armchair to the usurer, with a show of attention she had never bestowed on her "dear defunct."

Mother Madou, who would have floored a recalcitrant or too-familiar wagoner and gone fearlessly to the assault of the Tuileries on the 10th of October, who jeered her best customers and was capable of speaking up to the king in the name of her associate market-women, —Angelique Madou received Gigonnet with abject respect. Without strength in his presence, she shuddered under his rasping glance. The lower classes will long tremble at sight of the executioner, and Gigonnet was the executioner of petty commerce. In the markets no power on earth is so respected as that of the man who controls the flow of money; all other human institutions are as nothing beside him. Justice herself takes the form of a commissioner, a familiar personage in the eyes of the market; but usury seated behind its green boxes, —usury, entreated with fear tugging at the heart-strings, dries up all jesting, parches the throat, lowers the proudest look, and makes the commonest market women respectful.

"Do you want anything of me?" she said.

"A trifle, a mere nothing. Hold yourself ready to make good those notes of Birotteau; the man has failed, and claims must be put in at once. I will send you the account to-morrow morning."

Madame Madou's eyes contracted like those of a cat for a second, and then shot out flames.

"Ah, the villain! Ah, the scoundrel! He came and told me himself he was a deputy-mayor,—a trumped-up story! Reprobate! is that what he calls business? There is no honor among mayors; the government deceives us. Stop! I'll go and make him pay me; I will—"

"Hey! at such times everybody looks out for himself, my dear!" said Gigonnet, lifting his leg with the quaint little action of a cat fearing to cross a wet place,—a habit to which he

owed his nickname. "There are some very big wigs in the matter who mean to get themselves out of the scrape."

"Yes, and I'll pull my nuts out of the fire, too! Marie-Jeanne, bring my clogs and my rabbit-skin cloak; and quick, too, or I'll warm you up with a box on the ear."

"There'll be warm work down there!" thought Gigonnet, rubbing his hands as he walked away. "Du Tillet will be satisfied; it will make a fine scandal all through the quarter. I don't know what that poor devil of a perfumer has done to him; for my part I pity the fellow as I do a dog with a broken leg. He isn't a man, he has got no force."

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Madame Madou bore down, like an insurrectionary wave from the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, upon the shop-door of the hapless Birotteau, which she opened with excessive violence, for her walk had increased her fury.

“Heap of vermin! I want my money; I will have my money! You shall give me my money, or I carry off your scent-bags, and that satin trumpery, and the fans, and everything you’ve got here, for my two thousand francs. Who ever heard of mayors robbing the people? If you don’t pay me I’ll send you to the galleys; I’ll go to the police, —justice shall be done! I won’t leave this place till I’ve got my money.”

She made a gesture as if to break the glass before the shelves on which the valuables were placed.

“Mother Madou takes a drop too much,” whispered Celestin to his neighbor.

The virago overheard him,—for in paroxysms of passion the organs are either paralyzed or trebly acute,—and she forthwith applied to Celestin’s ear the most vigorous blow that ever resounded in a Parisian perfumery.

“Learn to respect women, my angel,” she said, “and don’t smirch the names of the people you rob.”

“Madame,” said Madame Birotteau, entering from the back-shop, where she happened to be with her husband,—whom Pillerault was persuading to go with him, while Cesar, to obey the law, was humbly expressing his willingness to go to prison,—“madame, for heaven’s sake do not raise a mob, and bring a crowd upon us!”

“Hey! let them come,” said the woman; “I’ll tell them a tale that will make you laugh the wrong side of your mouth. Yes, my nuts and my francs, picked up by the sweat of my brow, helped you to give balls. There you are, dressed like the queen of France in woollen which you sheared off the backs of poor sheep such as me! Good God! it would burn my shoulders, that it would, to wear stolen goods! I’ve got nothing but rabbit-skin to cover my carcass, but it is mine! Brigands, thieves, my money or—”

She darted at a pretty inlaid box containing toilet articles.

“Put that down, madame!” said Cesar, coming forward, “nothing here is mine; everything belongs to my creditors. I own nothing but my own person; if you wish to seize that and put me in prison, I give you my word of honor”—the tears fell from his eyes—“that I will wait here till you have me arrested.”

The tone and gesture were so completely in keeping with his words that Madame Madou’s anger subsided.

“My property has been carried off by a notary; I am innocent of the disasters I cause,” continued Cesar, “but you shall be paid in course of time if I have to die in the effort, and work like a galley-slave as a porter in the markets.”

“Come, you are a good man,” said the market-woman. “Excuse my words, madame; but I may as well go and drown myself, for Gigonnet will hound me down. I can’t get any money for ten months to redeem those damned notes of yours which I gave him.”

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"Come and see me to-morrow morning," said Pillerault, showing himself. "I will get you the money from one of my friends, at five per cent."

"Hey! if it isn't the worthy Pere Pillerault! Why, to be sure, he's your uncle," she said to Constance. "Well, you are all honest people, and I sha'n't lose my money, shall I? To-morrow morning, then, old fellow!" she said to the retired iron-monger.

* * * * *

Cesar was determined to live on amid the wreck of his fortunes at "The Queen of Roses," insisting that he would see his creditors and explain his affairs to them himself. Despite Madame Birotteau's earnest entreaties, Pillerault seemed to approve of Cesar's decision and took him back to his own room. The wily old man then went to Monsieur Haudry, explained the case, and obtained from him a prescription for a sleeping draught, which he took to be made up, and then returned to spend the evening with the family. Aided by Cesarine he induced her father to drink with them. The narcotic soon put Cesar to sleep, and when he woke up, fourteen hours later, he was in Pillerault's bedroom, Rue des Bourdonnais, fairly imprisoned by the old man, who was sleeping himself on a cot-bed in the salon.

When Constance heard the coach containing Pillerault and Cesar roll away from the door, her courage deserted her. Our powers are often stimulated by the necessity of upholding some being feebler than ourselves. The poor woman wept to find herself alone in her home as she would have wept for Cesar dead.

"Mamma," said Cesarine, sitting on her mother's knee, and caressing her with the pretty kittenish grace which women only display to perfection amongst themselves, "you said that if I took up my life bravely, you would have strength to bear adversity. Don't cry, dear mother; I am ready and willing to go into some shop, and I shall never think again of what we once were. I shall be like you in your young days; and you shall never hear a complaint, nor even a regret, from me. I have a hope. Did you not hear what Monsieur Anselme said?"

"That dear boy! he shall not be my son-in-law—"

"Oh, mamma!"

"—he shall be my own son."

"Sorry has one good," said Cesarine, kissing her mother; "it teaches us to know our true friends."

The daughter at last eased the pain of the poor woman by changing places and playing the mother to her. The next morning Constance went to the house of the Duc de Lenoncourt, one of the gentlemen of the king's bedchamber, and left a letter asking for



an interview at a later hour of the day. In the interval she went to Monsieur de la Billardiere, and explained to him the situation in which Roguin's flight had placed Cesar, begging him to go with her to the duke and speak for her, as she feared she might explain matters ill herself. She wanted a place for Birotteau. Birotteau, she said, would be the most upright of cashiers,—if there could be degrees of integrity among honest men.

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"The King has just appointed the Comte de Fontaine master of his household; there is no time to be lost in making the application," said the mayor.

At two o'clock Monsieur de la Billardiere and Madame Cesar went up the grand staircase of the Hotel de Lenoncourt, Rue Saint-Dominique, and were ushered into the presence of the nobleman whom the king preferred to all others,—if it can be said that Louis XVIII. ever had a preference. The gracious welcome of this great lord, who belonged to the small number of true gentlemen whom the preceding century bequeathed to ours, encouraged Madame Cesar. She was dignified, yet simple, in her sorrow. Grief ennobles even the plainest people; for it has a grandeur of its own; to reflect its lustre, a nature must needs be true. Constance was a woman essentially true.

The question was, how to speak to the king at once. In the midst of the conference Monsieur de Vandenesse was announced; and the duke exclaimed, "Here is our support!"

Madame Birotteau was not unknown to this young man, who had been to her shop two or three times in search of those trifles which are sometimes of more importance than greater things. The duke explained Monsieur de la Billardiere's wishes. As soon as he learned the misfortune which had overtaken the godson of the Marquise d'Uxelles, Vandenesse went at once, accompanied by Monsieur de la Billardiere, to the Comte de Fontaine, begging Madame Birotteau to wait their return. Monsieur le Comte de Fontaine was, like Monsieur de la Billardiere, one of those fine provincial gentlemen, the heroes, almost unknown, who made "la Vendee." Birotteau was not a stranger to him, for he had seen him in the old days at "The Queen of Roses." Men who had shed their blood for the royal cause enjoyed at this time certain privileges, which the king kept secret, so as not to give umbrage to the Liberals.

Monsieur de Fontaine, always a favorite with Louis XVIII., was thought to be wholly in his confidence. Not only did the count positively promise a place, but he returned with the two gentlemen to the Duc de Lenoncourt, and asked him to procure for him an audience that very evening; and also to obtain for Billardiere an audience with MONSIEUR, who was greatly attached to the old Vendeen diplomatist.

The same evening, the Comte de Fontaine came from the Tuileries to "The Queen of Roses," and announced to Madame Birotteau that as soon as the proceedings in bankruptcy were over, her husband would be officially appointed to a situation in the Sinking-fund Office, with a salary of two thousand five hundred francs,—all the functions in the household of the king being overcrowded with noble supernumeraries to whom promises had already been made.

This success was but one part of the task before Madame Birotteau. The poor woman now went to the "Maison du Chat-qui-pelote," in the Rue Saint-Denis, to find Joseph



Lebas. As she walked along she met Madame Roguin in a brilliant equipage, apparently making purchases. Their eyes met; and the shame which the rich woman could not hide as she looked at the ruined woman, gave Constance fresh courage.

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"Never will I roll in a carriage bought with the money of others," she said to herself.

Joseph Lebas received her kindly, and she begged him to obtain a place for Cesarine in some respectable commercial establishment. Lebas made no promises; but eight days later Cesarine had board, lodging, and a salary of three thousand francs from one of the largest linen-drapers in Paris, who was about to open a branch establishment in the quartier des Italiens. Cesarine was put in charge of the desk, and the superintendence of the new shop was entrusted to her; she filled, in fact, a position above that of forewoman, and supplied the place of both master and mistress.

Madame Cesar went from the "Chat-qui-pelote" to the Rue des Cinq-Diamants, and asked Popinot to let her take charge of his accounts and do his writing, and also manage his household. Popinot felt that his was the only house where Cesar's wife could meet with the respect that was due to her, and find employment without humiliation. The noble lad gave her three thousand francs a year, her board, and his own room; going himself into an attic occupied by one of his clerks. Thus it happened that the beautiful woman, after one month's enjoyment of her sumptuous home, came to live in the wretched chamber looking into a damp, dark court, where Gaudissart, Anselme, and Finot had inaugurated Cephalic Oil.

When Molineux, appointed agent by the Court of Commerce, came to take possession of Cesar Birotteau's assets, Madame Birotteau, aided by Celestin, went over the inventory with him. Then the mother and daughter, plainly dressed, left the house on foot and went to their uncle Pillerault's, without once turning their heads to look at the home where they had passed the greater part of their lives. They walked in silence to the Rue des Bourdonnais, where they were to dine with Cesar for the first time since their separation. It was a sad dinner. Each had had time for reflection,—time to weigh the duties before them, and sound the depths of their courage. All three were like sailors ready to face foul weather, but not deceived as to their danger. Birotteau gathered courage as he was told of the interest people in high places had taken in finding employment for him, but he wept when he heard what his daughter was to become. Then he held out his hand to his wife, as he saw the courage with which she had returned to labor. Old Pillerault's eyes were wet, for the last time in his life, as he looked at these three beings folded together in one embrace; from the centre of which Birotteau, feeblest of the three and the most stricken, raised his hands, saying:—

"Let us have hope!"

"You shall live with me," said Pillerault, "for the sake of economy; you shall have my chamber, and share my bread. I have long been lonely; you shall replace the poor child I lost. From my house it is but a step to your office in the Rue de l'Oratoire."

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“God of mercy!” exclaimed Birotteau; “in the worst of a storm a star guides me.”

Resignation is the last stage of man’s misfortune. From this moment Cesar’s downfall was accomplished; he accepted it, and strength returned to him.

VI

After admitting his insolvency and filing his schedule, a merchant should find some retired spot in France, or in foreign countries, where he may live without taking part in life, like the child that he is; for the law declares him a minor, and not competent for any legal action as a citizen. This, however, is never done. Before reappearing he obtains a safe-conduct, which neither judge nor creditor ever refuses to give; for if the debtor were found without this *exeat* he would be put in prison, while with it he passes safely, as with a flag of truce, through the enemy’s camp,—not by way of curiosity, but for the purpose of defeating the severe intention of the laws relating to bankruptcy. The effect of all laws which touch private interests is to develop, enormously, the knavery of men’s minds. The object of a bankrupt, like that of other persons whose interests are thwarted by any law, is to make void the law in his particular case.

The status of civil death in which the bankrupt remains a chrysalis lasts for about three months,—a period required by formalities which precede a conference at which the creditors and their debtor sign a treaty of peace, by which the bankrupt is allowed the ability to make payments, and receives a bankrupt’s certificate. This transaction is called the *concordat*,—a word implying, perhaps, that peace reigns after the storm and stress of interests violently in opposition.

As soon as the insolvent’s schedule is filed, the Court of commerce appoints a judge-commissioner, whose duty it is to look after the interests of the still unknown body of creditors, and also to protect the insolvent against the vexatious measures of angry creditors,—a double office, which might be nobly magnified if the judges had time to attend to it. The commissioner, however, delegates an agent to take possession of the property, the securities, and the merchandise, and to verify the schedule; when this is done, the court appoints a day for a meeting of the creditors, notice of which is trumpeted forth in the newspapers. The creditors, real or pretended, are expected to be present and choose the provisional assignees, who are to supersede the agent, step into the insolvent’s shoes, become by a fiction of law the insolvent himself, and are authorized to liquidate the business, negotiate all transactions, sell the property,—in short, recast everything in the interest of the creditors, provided the bankrupt makes no opposition. The majority of Parisian failures stop short at this point, and the reason is as follows:

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The appointment of one or more permanent assignees is an act which gives opportunity for the bitterest action on the part of creditors who are thirsting for vengeance, who have been tricked, baffled, cozened, trapped, duped, robbed, and cheated. Although, as a general thing, all creditors are cheated, robbed, duped, trapped, cozened, tricked, and baffled, yet there is not in all Paris a commercial passion able to keep itself alive for ninety days. The paper of commerce alone maintains its vitality, and rises, athirst for payment, in three months. Before ninety days are over, the creditors, worn out by coming and going, by the marches and countermarches which a failure entails, are asleep at the side of their excellent little wives. This may help a stranger to understand why it is that the provisional in France is so often the definitive: out of every thousand provisional assignees, not more than five ever become permanent. The subsidence of passions stirred up by failures is thus accounted for.

But here it becomes necessary to explain to persons who have not had the happiness to be in business the whole drama of bankruptcy, so as to make them understand how it constitutes in Paris a monstrous legal farce; and also how the bankruptcy of Cesar Birotteau was a signal exception to the general rule.

This fine commercial drama is in three distinct acts,—the agent's act, the assignee's act, the *concordat*, or certificate-of-bankruptcy act. Like all theatrical performances, it is played with a double-intent: it is put upon the stage for the public eye, but it also has a hidden purpose; there is one performance for the pit, and another for the side-scenes. Posted in the side-scenes are the bankrupt and his solicitor, the attorney of the creditors, the assignees, the agent, and the judge-commissioner himself. No one out of Paris knows, and no one in Paris does not know, that a judge of the commercial courts is the most extraordinary magistrate that society ever allowed itself to create. This judge may live in dread of his own justice at any moment. Paris has seen the president of her courts of commerce file his own schedule. Instead of being an experienced retired merchant, to whom the magistracy might properly be made the reward of a pure life, this judge is a trader, bending under the weight of enormous enterprises, and at the head of some large commercial house. The *sine qua non* condition in the election of this functionary, whose business it is to pass judgment on the avalanche of commercial suits incessantly rolling through the courts, is that he shall have the greatest difficulty in managing his own affairs. This commercial tribunal, far from being made a useful means of transition whereby a merchant might rise, without ridicule, into the ranks of the nobility, is in point of fact made up of traders who are trading, and who are liable to suffer for their judgments when they next meet with dissatisfied parties,—very much as Birotteau was now punished by du Tillet.

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The commissioner is of necessity a personage before whom much is said; who listens, recollecting all the while his own interests, and leaves the cause to the assignees and the attorneys,—except, possibly, in a few strange and unusual cases where dishonesty is accompanied by peculiar circumstances, when the judge usually observes that the debtor, or the creditors, as it may happen, are clever people. This personage, set up in the drama like the royal bust in a public audience-chamber, may be found early in the morning at his wood-yard, if he sells wood; in his shop, if, like Birotteau, he is a perfumer; or, in the evenings, at his dessert after dinner,—always, it should be added, in a terrible hurry; as a general thing he is silent. Let us, however, do justice to the law: the legislation that governs his functions, and which was pushed through in haste, has tied the hands of this commissioner; and it sometimes happens that he sanctions fraud which he cannot hinder,—as the reader will shortly see.

The agent to whom the judge delegates the first proceedings, instead of serving the creditors, may become if he please a tool of the debtor. Every one hopes to swell his own gains by getting on the right side of the debtor, who is always supposed to keep back a hidden treasure. The agent may make himself useful to both parties; on the one hand by not laying the bankrupt's business in ashes, on the other by snatching a few morsels for men of influence,—in short, he runs with the hare and holds with the hounds. A clever agent has frequently arrested judgment by buying up the debts and then releasing the merchant, who then rebounds like an india-rubber ball. The agent chooses the best-stocked crib, whether it leads him to cover the largest creditors and shear the debtor, or to sacrifice the creditors for the future prosperity of the restored merchant. The action of the agent is decisive. This man, together with the bankrupt's solicitor, plays the utility role in the drama, where it may be said neither the one nor the other would accept a part if not sure of their fees. Taking the average of a thousand failures, an agent would be found nine hundred and fifty times on the side of the bankrupt. At the period of our history, the solicitors frequently sought the judge with the request that he would appoint an agent whom they proposed to him, —a man, as they said, to whom the affairs of the bankrupt were well-known, who would know how to reconcile the interests of the whole body of creditors with those of a man honorably overtaken by misfortune. For some years past the best judges have sought the advice of the solicitors in this matter for the purpose of not taking it, endeavoring to appoint some other agent *quasi* virtuous.

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During this act of the drama the creditors, real or pretended, come forward to select the provisional assignees, who are often, as we have said, the final ones. In this electoral assembly all creditors have the right to vote, whether the sum owing to them is fifty sous, or fifty thousand francs. This assembly, in which are found pretended creditors introduced by the bankrupt,—the only electors who never fail to come to the meeting,—proposes the whole body of creditors as candidates from among whom the commissioner, a president without power, is supposed to select the assignees. Thus it happens that the judge almost always appoints as assignees those creditors whom it suits the bankrupt to have,—another abuse which makes the catastrophe of bankruptcy one of the most burlesque dramas to which justice ever lent her name. The honorable bankrupt overtaken by misfortune is then master of the situation, and proceeds to legalize the theft he premeditated. As a rule, the petty trades of Paris are guiltless in this respect. When a shopkeeper gets as far as making an assignment, the worthy man has usually sold his wife's shawl, pawned his plate, left no stone unturned, and succumbs at last with empty hands, ruined, and without enough money to pay his attorney, who in consequence cares little for him.

The law requires that the *concordat*, at which is granted the bankrupt's certificate that remits to the merchant a portion of his debt, and restores to him the right of managing his affairs, shall be attended by a majority of the creditors, and also that they shall represent a certain proportion of the debt. This important action brings out much clever diplomacy, on the part of the bankrupt, his assignees, and his solicitor, among the contending interests which cross and jostle each other. A usual and very common manoeuvre is to offer to that section of the creditors who make up in number and amount the majority required by law certain premiums, which the debtor consents to pay over and above the dividend publicly agreed upon. This monstrous fraud is without remedy. The thirty commercial courts which up to the present time have followed one after the other, have each known of it, for all have practised it. Enlightened by experience, they have lately tried to render void such fraudulent agreements; and as the bankrupts have reason to complain of the extortion, the judges had some hope of reforming to that extent the system of bankruptcy. The attempt, however, will end in producing something still more immoral; for the creditors will devise other rascally methods, which the judges will condemn as judges, but by which they will profit as merchants.

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Another much-used stratagem, and one to which we owe the term “serious and legitimate creditor,” is that of creating creditors,—just as du Tillet created a banker and a banking-house,—and introducing a certain quantity of Claparons under whose skin the bankrupt hides, diminishing by just so much the dividends of the true creditors, and laying up for the honest man a store for the future; always, however, providing a sufficient majority of votes and debts to secure the passage of his certificate. The “gay and illegitimate creditors” are like false electors admitted into the electoral college. What chance has the “serious and legitimate creditor” against the “gay and illegitimate creditor?” Shall he get rid of him by attacking him? How can he do it? To drive out the intruder the legitimate creditor must sacrifice his time, his own business, and pay an attorney to help him; while the said attorney, making little out of it, prefers to manage the bankruptcy in another capacity, and therefore works for the genuine credit without vigor.

To dislodge the illegitimate creditor it is necessary to thread the labyrinth of proceedings in bankruptcy, search among past events, ransack accounts, obtain by injunction the books of the false creditors, show the improbability of the fiction of their existence, prove it to the judges, sue for justice, go and come, and stir up sympathy; and, finally, to charge like Don Quixote upon each “gay and illegitimate creditor,” who if convicted of “gaiety” withdraws from court, saying with a bow to the judges, “Excuse me, you are mistaken, I am very ‘serious.’” All this without prejudice to the rights of the bankrupt, who may carry Don Quixote and his remonstrance to the upper courts; during which time Don Quixote’s own business is suffering, and he is liable to become a bankrupt himself.

The upshot of all this is, that in point of fact the debtor appoints his assignees, audits his own accounts, and draws up the certificate of bankruptcy himself.

Given these premises, it is easy to imagine the devices of Frontin, the trickeries of Sganarelle, the lies of Mascarille, and the empty bags of Scapin which such a system develops. There has never been a failure which did not generate enough matter to fill the fourteen volumes of “Clarissa Harlowe,” if an author could be found to describe them. A single example will suffice. The illustrious Gobseck,—ruler of Palma, Gigonnet, Werbrust, Keller, Nucingen, and the like,—being concerned in a failure where he attempted to roughly handle the insolvent, who had managed to get the better of him, obtained notes from his debtor for an amount which together with the declared dividend made up the sum total of his loss. These notes were to fall due after the *concordat*. Gobseck then brought about a settlement in the *concordat* by which sixty-five per cent was remitted to the bankrupt. Thus the creditors were swindled in the interests of Gobseck. But the bankrupt had signed the illicit notes with the name of his insolvent firm, and he was therefore able to bring them under the reduction of sixty-five per cent. Gobseck, the great Gobseck, received scarcely fifty per cent on his loss. From that day forth he bowed to his debtor with ironical respect.

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As all operations undertaken by an insolvent within ten days before his failure can be impeached, prudent men are careful to enter upon certain affairs with a certain number of creditors whose interest, like that of the bankrupt, is to arrive at the *concordat* as fast as possible. Skilful creditors will approach dull creditors or very busy ones, give an ugly look into the failure, and buy up their claims at half what they are worth at the liquidation; in this way they get back their money partly by the dividend on their own claims, partly from the half, or third, or fourth, gained on these purchased claims.

A failure is the closer, more or less hermetically tight, of a house where pillage has left a few remaining bags of silver. Lucky the man who can get in at a window, slide down a chimney, creep in through a cellar or through a hole, and seize a bag to swell his share! In the general rout, the *sauve qui peut* of Beresina is passed from mouth to mouth; all is legal and illegal, false and true, honest and dishonest. A man is admired if he “covers” himself. To “cover” himself means that he seizes securities to the detriment of the other creditors. France has lately rung with the discussion of an immense failure that took place in a town where one of the upper courts holds its sittings, and where the judges, having current accounts with the bankrupts, wore such heavy india-rubber mantles that the mantle of justice was rubbed into holes. It was absolutely necessary, in order to avert legitimate suspicion, to send the case for judgment in another court. There was neither judge nor agent nor supreme court in the region where the failure took place that could be trusted.

This alarming commercial tangle is so well understood in Paris, that unless a merchant is involved to a large amount he accepts a failure as total shipwreck without insurance, passes it to his profit-and-loss account, and does not commit the folly of wasting time upon it; he contents himself with brewing his own malt. As to the petty trader, worried about his monthly payments, busied in pushing the chariot of his little fortunes, a long and costly legal process terrifies him. He gives up trying to see his way, imitates the substantial merchant, bows his head, and accepts his loss.

The wholesale merchants seldom fail, nowadays; they make friendly liquidations; the creditors take what is given to them, and hand in their receipts. In this way many things are avoided,—dishonor, judicial delays, fees to lawyers, and the depreciation of merchandise. All parties think that bankruptcy will give less in the end than liquidation. There are now more liquidations than bankruptcies in Paris.

The assignee’s act in the drama is intended to prove that every assignee is incorruptible, and that no collusion has ever existed between any of them and the bankrupt. The pit—which has all, more or less, been assignee in its day—knows very well that every assignee is a “covered” merchant. It listens, and believes as it likes. After three months employed in auditing the debtor and creditor accounts, the time comes for the *concordat*. The provisional assignees make a little report at the meeting, of which the following is the usual formula:—

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Messieurs,—There is owing to the whole of us, in bulk, about a million. We have dismantled our man like a condemned frigate. The nails, iron, wood, and copper will bring about three hundred thousand francs. We shall thus get about thirty per cent of our money. Happy in obtaining this amount, when our debtor might have left us only one hundred thousand, we hereby declare him an Aristides; we vote him a premium and crown of encouragement, and propose to leave him to manage his assets, giving him ten or twelve years in which to pay us the fifty per cent which he has been so good as to offer us. Here is the certificate of bankruptcy; have the goodness to walk up to the desk and sign it.

At this speech, all the fortune creditors congratulate each other and shake hands. After the ratification of the certificate, the bankrupt becomes once more a merchant, precisely such as he was before; he receives back his securities, he continues his business, he is not deprived of the power to fail again, on the promised dividend,—an additional little failure which often occurs, like the birth of a child nine months after the mother has married her daughter.

If the certificate of bankruptcy is not granted, the creditors then select the permanent assignees, take extreme measures, and form an association to get possession of the whole property and the business of their debtor, seizing everything that he has or ever will have, —his inheritance from his father, his mother, his aunt, *et caetera*. This stern measure can only be carried through by an association of creditors.

* * * * *

There are therefore two sorts of failures,—the failure of the merchant who means to repossess himself of his business, and the failure of the merchant who has fallen into the water and is willing to sink to the bottom. Pillerrault knew the difference. It was, to his thinking and to that of Ragon, as hard to come out pure from the first as to come out safe from the second. After advising Cesar to abandon everything to his creditors, he went to the most honorable solicitor in such matters, that immediate steps might be taken to liquidate the failure and put everything at once at the disposition of the creditors. The law requires that while the drama is being acted, the creditors shall provide for the support of the bankrupt and his family. Pillerrault notified the commissioner that he would himself supply the wants of his niece and nephew.

Du Tillet had worked all things together to make the failure a prolonged agony for his old master; and this is how he did it. Time is so precious in Paris that it is customary, when two assignees are appointed, for only one to attend to the affair: the duty of the other is merely formal,—he approves and signs, like the second notary in notarial deeds. By this means, the largest failures in Paris are so vigorously handled that, in spite of the law's delays, they are adjusted, settled, and secured with such rapidity that within a hundred days the judge can echo the atrocious saying of the Minister, —“Order reigns in Warsaw.”

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Du Tillet meant to compass Cesar's commercial death. The names of the assignees selected through the influence of du Tillet were very significant to Pillerrault. Monsieur Bidault, called Gigonnet,—the principal creditor,—was the one to take no active part; and Molineux, the mischievous old man who lost nothing by the failure, was to manage everything. Du Tillet flung the noble commercial carcass to the little jackal, that he might torment it as he devoured it. After the meeting at which the creditors appointed the assignees, little Molineux returned home "honored," so he said, "by the suffrages of his fellow-citizens"; happy in the prospect of hectoring Birotteau, just as a child delights in having an insect to maltreat. The landlord, astride of his hobby,—the law,—begged du Tillet to favor him with his ideas; and he bought a copy of the commercial Code. Happily, Joseph Lebas, cautioned by Pillerrault, had already requested the president of the Board of Commerce to select a sagacious and well-meaning commissioner. Gobenheim-Keller, whom du Tillet hoped to have, found himself displaced by Monsieur Camusot, a substitute-judge,—a rich silk-merchant, Liberal in politics, and the owner of the house in which Pillerrault lived; a man counted honorable.

* * * * *

One of the cruellest scenes of Cesar's life was his forced conference with little Molineux,—the being he had once regarded as a nonentity, who now by a fiction of law had become Cesar Birotteau. He was compelled to go to the Cour Batave, to mount the six flights, and re-enter the miserable appartement of the old man, now his custodian, his *quasi* judge,—the representative of his creditors. Pillerrault accompanied him.

"What is the matter?" said the old man, as Cesar gave vent to an exclamation.

"Ah, uncle! you do not know the sort of man this Molineux is!"

"I have seen him from time to time for fifteen years past at the cafe David, where he plays dominoes. That is why I have come with you."

Monsieur Molineux showed the utmost politeness to Pillerrault, and much disdainful condescension to the bankrupt; he had thought over his part, studied the shades of his demeanor, and prepared his ideas.

"What information is it that you need?" asked Pillerrault. "There is no dispute as to the claims."

"Oh," said little Molineux, "the claims are in order,—they have been examined. The creditors are all serious and legitimate. But the law, monsieur,—the law! The expenditures of the bankrupt have been disproportional to his fortune. It appears that the ball—"

"At which you were present," interrupted Pillerrault.



“—cost nearly sixty thousand francs, and at that time the assets of the insolvent amounted to not more than one hundred and a few thousand francs. There is cause to arraign the bankrupt on a charge of wilful bankruptcy.”

“Is that your intention?” said Pillerault, noticing the despondency into which these words had cast Birotteau.

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“Monsieur, I make a distinction; the Sieur Birotteau was a member of the municipality—”

“You have not sent for us, I presume, to explain that we are to be brought into a criminal police court?” said Pillerrault. “The cafe David would laugh finely at your conduct this evening.”

The opinion of the cafe David seemed to frighten the old man, who looked at Pillerrault with a startled air. He had counted on meeting Birotteau alone, intending to pose as the sovereign arbiter of his fate,—a legal Jupiter. He meant to frighten him with the thunder-bolt of an accusation, to brandish the axe of a criminal charge over his head, enjoy his fears and his terrors, and then allow himself to be touched and softened, and persuaded at last to restore his victim to a life of perpetual gratitude. Instead of his insect, he had got hold of an old commercial sphinx.

“Monsieur,” he replied, “I see nothing to laugh at.”

“Excuse me,” said Pillerrault. “You have negotiated largely with Monsieur Claparon; you have neglected the interests of the main body of the creditors, so as to make sure that certain claims shall have a preference. Now I can as one of the creditors interfere. The commissioner is to be taken into account.”

“Monsieur,” said Molineux, “I am incorruptible.”

“I am aware of it,” said Pillerrault. “You have only taken your iron out of the fire, as they say. You are keen; you are acting just as you do with your tenants—”

“Oh, monsieur!” said the assignee, suddenly dropping into the landlord,—just as the cat metamorphosed into a woman ran after a mouse when she caught sight of it,—“my affair of the Rue Montorgeuil is not yet settled. What they call an impediment has arisen. The tenant is the chief tenant. This conspirator declares that as he has paid a year in advance, and having only one more year to”—here Pillerrault gave Cesar a look which advised him to pay strict attention —“and, the year being paid for, that he has the right to take away his furniture. I shall sue him! I must hold on to my securities to the last; he may owe something for repairs before the year is out.”

“But,” said Pillerrault, “the law only allows you to take furniture as security for the rent—”

“And its accessories!” cried Molineux, assailed in his trenches. “That article in the Code has been interpreted by various judgments rendered in the matter: however, there ought to be legislative rectification to it. At this very moment I am elaborating a memorial to his Highness, the Keeper of the Seals, relating to this flaw in our statutes. It is desirable that the government should maintain the interests of landlords. That is the chief question in statecraft. We are the tap-root of taxation.”

“You are well fitted to enlighten the government,” said Pillerault; “but in what way can we enlighten you—about our affairs?”

“I wish to know,” said Molineux, with pompous authority, “if Monsieur Birotteau has received moneys from Monsieur Popinot.”

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"No, monsieur," said Birotteau.

Then followed a discussion on Birotteau's interests in the house of Popinot, from which it appeared that Popinot had the right to have all his advances paid in full, and that he was not involved in the failure to the amount of half the costs of his establishment, due to him by Birotteau. Molineux, judiciously handled by Pillerault, insensibly got back to gentler ways, which only showed how he cared for the opinion of those who frequented the cafe David. He ended by offering consolation to Birotteau, and by inviting him, as well as Pillerault, to share his humble dinner. If the ex-perfumer had gone alone, he would probably have irritated Molineux, and the matter would have become envenomed. In this instance, as in others, old Pillerault was his tutelary angel.

Commercial law imposes a horrible torture upon the bankrupt; he is compelled to appear in person at the meeting of his creditors, when they decide upon his future fate. For a man who can hold himself above it all, or for a merchant who expects to recover himself, this ceremony is little feared. But to a man like Cesar Birotteau it was agony only to be compared to the last day of a criminal condemned to death. Pillerault did all in his power to make that terrible day endurable to his nephew.

The steps taken by Molineux, and agreed to by the bankrupt, were as follows: The suit relating to the mortgage on the property in the Faubourg du Temple having been won in the courts, the assignees decided to sell that property, and Cesar made no opposition. Du Tillet, hearing privately that the government intended to cut a canal which should lead from Saint-Denis to the upper Seine through the Faubourg du Temple, bought the property of Birotteau for seventy thousand francs. All Cesar's rights in the lands about the Madeleine were turned over to Monsieur Claparon, on condition that he on his side would abandon all claim against Birotteau for half the costs of drawing up and registering the contracts; also for all payments on the price of the lands, by receiving himself, under the failure, the dividend which was to be paid over to the sellers. The interests of the perfumer in the house of Popinot and Company were sold to the said Popinot for the sum of forty-eight thousand francs. The business of "The Queen of Roses" was bought by Celestin Crevel at fifty-seven thousand francs, with the lease, the fixtures, the merchandise, furniture, and all rights in the Paste of Sultans and the Carminative Balm, with twelve years' lease of the manufactories, whose various appliances were also sold to him. The assets when liquidated came to one hundred and ninety-five thousand francs, to which the assignees added seventy thousand produced by Birotteau's claims in the liquidation of the "unfortunate" Roguin. Thus the total amount made over to Cesar's creditors was two hundred and fifty-five thousand francs. The debts amounted to four hundred and forty thousand; consequently, the creditors received more than fifty per cent on their claims.

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Bankruptcy is a species of chemical transmutation, from which a clever merchant tries to emerge in fresh shape. Birotteau, distilled to the last drop in this retort, gave a result which made du Tillet furious. Du Tillet looked to see a dishonorable failure; he saw an honorable one. Caring little for his own gains, though he was about to get possession of the lands around the Madeleine without ever drawing his purse-strings, he wanted to see his old master dishonored, lost, and vilified. The creditors at the general meeting would undoubtedly show the poor man that they respected him.

By degrees, as Birotteau's courage came back to him, Pillerault, like a wise doctor, informed him, by gradual doses, of the transactions resulting from his failure. These harsh tidings were like so many blows. A merchant cannot learn without a shock the depreciation of property which represents to him so much money, so much solicitude, so much labor. The facts his uncle now told him petrified the poor man.

"Fifty-seven thousand francs for 'The Queen of Roses'! Why, the shop alone cost ten thousand; the appartement cost forty thousand; the mere outlay on the manufactories, the utensils, the frames, the boilers, cost thirty thousand. Why! at fifty per cent abatement, if my creditors allow me that, there would still be ten thousand francs worth of property in the shop. Why! the Paste and the Balm are solid property,—worth as much as a farm!"

Poor Cesar's jeremiads made no impression upon Pillerault. The old merchant took them as a horse takes a down-pour; but he was alarmed by the gloomy silence Birotteau maintained when it was a question of the meeting. Those who comprehend the vanities and weaknesses which in all social spheres beset mankind, will know what a martyrdom it was for this poor man to enter as a bankrupt the commercial tribunal of justice where he once sat as judge; to meet affronts where so often he had been thanked for services rendered,—he, Birotteau, whose inflexible opinions about bankruptcy were so well known; he who had said, "A man may be honest till he fails, but he comes out of a meeting of his creditors a swindler." Pillerault watched for the right moment to familiarize Cesar's mind with the thought of appearing before his creditors as the law demands. The thought killed him. His mute grief and resignation made a deep impression on his uncle, who often heard him at night, through the partition, crying out to himself, "Never! never! I will die sooner."

Pillerault, a strong man,—strong through the simplicity of his life, —was able to understand weakness. He resolved to spare Cesar the anguish of appearing before his creditors,—a terrible scene which the law renders inevitable, and to which, indeed, he might succumb. On this point the law is precise, formal, and not to be evaded. The merchant who refused to appear would, for that act alone, be brought before the criminal police courts.

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But though the law compels the bankrupt to appear, it has no power to oblige the creditor to do so. A meeting of creditors is a ceremony of no real importance except in special cases,—when, for instance, a swindler is to be dispossessed and a coalition among the creditors agreed upon, when there is difference of opinion between the privileged creditors and the unsecured creditors, or when the *concordat* is specially dishonest, and the bankrupt is in need of a deceptive majority. But in the case of a failure when all has been given up, the meeting is a mere formality. Pillerault went to each creditor, one after the other, and asked him to give his proxy to his attorney. Every creditor, except du Tillet, sincerely pitied Cesar, after striking him down. Each knew that his conduct was scrupulously honest, that his books were regular, and his business as clear as the day. All were pleased to find no “gay and illegitimate creditor” among them. Molineux, first the agent and then the provisional assignee, had found in Cesar’s house everything the poor man owned, even the engraving of Hero and Leander which Popinot had given him, his personal trinkets, his breast-pin, his gold buckles, his two watches,—things which an honest man might have taken without thinking himself less than honest. Constance had left her modest jewel-case. This touching obedience to the law struck the commercial mind keenly. Birotteau’s enemies called it foolishness; but men of sense held it up to its true light as a magnificent supererogation of integrity. In two months the opinion of the Bourse had changed; every one, even those who were most indifferent, admitted this failure to be a rare commercial wonder, seldom seen in the markets of Paris. Thus the creditors, knowing that they were secure of nearly sixty per cent of their claims, were very ready to do what Pillerault asked of them. The solicitors of the commercial courts are few in number; it therefore happened that several creditors employed the same man, giving him their proxies. Pillerault finally succeeded in reducing the formidable assemblage to three solicitors, himself, Ragon, the two assignees, and the commissioner.

Early in the morning of the solemn day, Pillerault said to his nephew,—

“Cesar, you can go to your meeting to-day without fear; nobody will be there.”

Monsieur Ragon wished to accompany his debtor. When the former master of “The Queen of Roses” first made known the wish in his little dry voice, his ex-successor turned pale; but the good old man opened his arms, and Birotteau threw himself into them as a child into the arms of its father, and the two perfumers mingled their tears. The bankrupt gathered courage as he felt the indulgences shown to him, and he got into the coach with his uncle and Ragon. Precisely at half past ten o’clock the three reached the cloister Saint-Merri, where the Court of Commerce was then held. At that hour there was no one in the Hall of Bankruptcy. The

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day and the hour had been chosen by agreement with the judge and the assignees. The three solicitors were already there on behalf of their clients. There was nothing, therefore, to distress or intimidate Cesar Birotteau; yet the poor man could not enter the office of Monsieur Camusot—which chanced to be the one he had formerly occupied—without deep emotion, and he shuddered as he passed through the Hall of Bankruptcy.

"It is cold," said Monsieur Camusot to Birotteau. "I am sure these gentlemen will not be sorry to stay here, instead of our going to freeze in the Hall." He did not say the word "Bankruptcy." "Gentlemen, be seated."

Each took his seat, and the judge gave his own armchair to Birotteau, who was bewildered. The solicitors and the assignees signed the papers.

"In consideration of the surrender of your entire property," said Camusot to Birotteau, "your creditors unanimously agree to relinquish the rest of their claims. Your certificate is couched in terms which may well soften your pain; your solicitor will see that it is promptly recorded; you are now free. All the judges of this court, dear Monsieur Birotteau," said Camusot, taking him by the hand, "feel for your position, and are not surprised at your courage; none have failed to do justice to your integrity. In the midst of a great misfortune you have been worthy of what you once were here. I have been in business for twenty years, and this is only the second time that I have seen a fallen merchant gaining, instead of losing, public respect."

Birotteau took the hands of the judge and wrung them, with tears in his eyes. Camusot asked him what he now meant to do. Birotteau replied that he should work till he had paid his creditors in full to the last penny.

"If to accomplish that noble task you should ever want a few thousand francs, you will always find them with me," said Camusot. "I would give them with a great deal of pleasure to witness a deed so rare in Paris."

Pillerault, Ragon, and Birotteau retired.

"Well! that wasn't the ocean to drink," said Pillerault, as they left the court-room.

"I recognize your hand in it," said the poor man, much affected.

"Now, here you are, free, and we are only a few steps from the Rue des Cinq-Diamants; come and see my nephew," said Ragon.

A cruel pang shot through Cesar's heart when he saw Constance sitting in a little office in the damp, dark *entresol* above the shop, whose single window was one third darkened by a sign which intercepted the daylight and bore the name,—A. POPINOT.

“Behold a lieutenant of Alexander,” said Cesar, with the gaiety of grief, pointing to the sign.

This forced gaiety, through which an inextinguishable sense of the superiority which Birotteau attributed to himself was naively revealed, made Ragon shudder in spite of his seventy years. Cesar saw his wife passing down letters and papers for Popinot to sign; he could neither restrain his tears nor keep his face from turning pale.

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"Good-morning, my friend," she said to him, smiling.

"I do not ask if you are comfortable here," said Cesar, looking at Popinot.

"As if I were living with my own son," she answered, with a tender manner that struck her husband.

Birotteau took Popinot and kissed him, saying,—

"I have lost the right, forever, of calling him my son."

"Let us hope!" said Popinot. "*Your* oil succeeds—thanks to my advertisements in the newspapers, and to Gaudissart, who has travelled over the whole of France; he has inundated the country with placards and prospectuses; he is now at Strasburg getting the prospectuses printed in the German language, and he is about to descend, like an invasion, upon Germany itself. We have received orders for three thousand gross."

"Three thousand gross!" exclaimed Cesar.

"And I have bought a piece of land in the Faubourg Saint-Marceau,—not dear,—where I am building a manufactory."

"Wife," whispered Cesar to Constance, "with a little help we might have pulled through."

* * * * *

After that fatal day Cesar, his wife, and daughter understood each other. The poor clerk resolved to attain an end which, if not impossible, was at least gigantic in its enterprise,—namely, the payment of his debts to their last penny. These three beings,—father, mother, daughter,—bound together by the tie of a passionate integrity, became misers, denying themselves everything; a farthing was sacred in their eyes. Out of sheer calculation Cesarine threw herself into her business with the devotion of a young girl. She sat up at night, taxing her ingenuity to find ways of increasing the prosperity of the establishment, and displaying an innate commercial talent. The masters of the house were obliged to check her ardor for work; they rewarded her by presents, but she refused all articles of dress and the jewels which they offered her. Money! money! was her cry. Every month she carried her salary and her little earnings to her uncle Pillerault. Cesar did the same; so did Madame Birotteau. All three, feeling themselves incapable, dared not take upon themselves the responsibility of managing their money, and they made over to Pillerault the whole business of investing their savings. Returning thus to business, the latter made the most of these funds by negotiations at the Bourse. It was known afterwards that he had been helped in this work by Jules Desmarests and Joseph Lebas, both of whom were eager to point out opportunities which Pillerault might take without risk.



Cesar, though he lived with his uncle, never ventured to question him as to what was done with the money acquired by his labor and that of his wife and daughter. He walked the streets with a bowed head, hiding from every eye his stricken, dull, distraught face. He felt, with self-reproach, that the cloth he wore was too good for him.

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"At least," he said to Pillerault, with a look that was angelic, "I do not eat the bread of my creditors. Your bread is sweet to me, though it is your pity that gives it; thanks to your sacred charity, I do not steal a farthing of my salary!"

The merchants, his old associates, who met the clerk could see no vestige of the perfumer. Even careless minds gained an idea of the immensity of human disaster from the aspect of this man, on whose face sorrow had cast its black pall, who revealed the havoc caused by that which had never before appeared in him,—by thought! *N'est pas détruit qui veut*. Light-minded people, devoid of conscience, to whom all things are indifferent, can never present such a spectacle of disaster. Religion alone sets a special seal upon fallen human beings; they believe in a future, in a divine Providence; from within them gleams a light that marks them, a look of saintly resignation mingled with hope, which lends them a certain tender emotion; they realize all that they have lost, like the exiled angel weeping at the gates of heaven. Bankrupts are forbidden to enter the Bourse. Cesar, driven from the regions of integrity, was like an angel sighing for pardon. For fourteen months he lived on, full of religious thoughts with which his fall inspired him, and denying himself every pleasure. Though sure of the Ragons' friendship, nothing could induce him to dine with them, nor with the Lebas, nor the Matifats, nor the Protez and Chiffrevilles, not even with Monsieur Vauquelin; all of whom were eager to do honor to his rare virtue. Cesar preferred to be alone in his room rather than meet the eye of a creditor. The warmest greetings of his friends reminded him the more bitterly of his position. Constance and Cesarine went nowhere. On Sundays and fete days, the only days when they were at liberty, the two women went to fetch Cesar at the hour for Mass, and they stayed with him at Pillerault's after their religious duties were accomplished. Pillerault often invited the Abbe Loraux, whose words sustained Cesar in this life of trial. And in this way their lives were spent. The old ironmonger had too tough a fibre of integrity not to approve of Cesar's sensitive honor. His mind, however, turned on increasing the number of persons among whom the poor bankrupt might show himself with an open brow, and an eye that could meet the eyes of his fellows.

VII

In the month of May, 1821, this family, ever grappling with adversity, received a first reward for its efforts at a little fete which Pillerault, the arbiter of its destinies, prepared for it. The last Sunday of that month was the anniversary of the day on which Constance had consented to marry Cesar. Pillerault, in concert with the Ragons, hired a little country-house at Sceaux, and the worthy old ironmonger silently prepared a joyous house-warming.

"Cesar," said Pillerault, on the Saturday evening, "to-morrow we are all going into the country, and you must come."

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Cesar, who wrote a superb hand, spent his evenings in copying for Derville and other lawyers. On Sundays, justified by ecclesiastical permission, he worked like a Negro.

"No," he said, "Monsieur Derville is waiting for a guardianship account."

"Your wife and daughter ought to have some reward. You will meet none but our particular friends,—the Abbe Loraux, the Ragons, Popinot, and his uncle. Besides, I wish it."

Cesar and his wife, carried along by the whirlwind of business, had never revisited Sceaux, though from time to time each longed to see once more the tree under which the head-clerk of "The Queen of Roses" had fainted with joy. During the trip, which Cesar made in a hackney-coach with his wife and daughter, and Popinot who escorted them, Constance cast many meaning glances at her husband without bringing to his lips a single smile. She whispered a few words in his ear; for all answer he shook his head. The soft signs of her tenderness, ever-present yet at the moment forced, instead of brightening Cesar's face made it more sombre, and brought the long-repressed tears into his eyes. Poor man! he had gone over this road twenty years before, young, prosperous, full of hope, the lover of a girl as beautiful as their own Cesarine; he was dreaming then of happiness. To-day, in the coach before him, sat his noble child pale and worn by vigils, and his brave wife, whose only beauty now was that of cities through whose streets have flowed the lava waves of a volcano. Love alone remained to him! Cesar's sadness smothered the joy that welled up in the hearts of Cesarine and Anselme, who embodied to his eyes the charming scene of other days.

"Be happy, my children! you have earned the right," said the poor father in heart-rending tones. "You may love without one bitter thought."

As he said these words he took his wife's hands and kissed them with a sacred and admiring effect which touched Constance more than the brightest gaiety. When they reached the house where Pillerault, the Ragons, the Abbe Loraux, and Popinot the judge were waiting for them, these five choice people assumed an air and manner and speech which put Cesar at his ease; for all were deeply moved to see him still on the morrow of his great disaster.

"Go and take a walk in the Aulnay woods," said Pillerault, putting Cesar's hand into that of Constance; "go with Anselme and Cesarine! but come back by four o'clock."

"Poor souls, we should be a restraint upon them," said Madame Ragon, touched by the deep grief of her debtor. "He will be very happy presently."

"It is repentance without sin," said the Abbe Loraux.

"He could rise to greatness only through adversity," said the judge.

To forget is the great secret of strong, creative natures,—to forget, in the way of Nature herself, who knows no past, who begins afresh, at every hour, the mysteries of her untiring travail.

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Feeble existences, like that of Birotteau, live sunk in sorrows, instead of transmuting them into doctrines of experience: they let them saturate their being, and are worn-out, finally, by falling more and more under the weight of past misfortunes.

When the two couples reached the path which leads to the woods of Aulnay, placed like a crown upon the prettiest hillside in the neighborhood of Paris, and from which the Vallee-aux-Loups is seen in all its coquetry, the beauty of the day, the charm of the landscape, the first spring verdure, the delicious memory of the happiest day of all his youth, loosened the tight chords in Cesar's soul; he pressed the arm of his wife against his beating heart; his eye was no longer glassy, for the light of pleasure once more brightened in it.

"At last," said Constance to her husband, "I see you again, my poor Cesar. I think we have all behaved well enough to allow ourselves a little pleasure now and then."

"Ought I?" said the poor man. "Ah! Constance, thy affection is all that remains to me. Yes, I have lost even my old self-confidence; I have no strength left; my only desire is that I may live to die discharged of debt on earth. Thou, dear wife, thou who art my wisdom and my prudence, thou whose eyes saw clear, thou who art irreproachable, thou canst have pleasure. I alone—of us three—am guilty. Eighteen months ago, in the midst of that fatal ball, I saw my Constance, the only woman I have ever loved, more beautiful than the young girl I followed along this path twenty years ago—like our children yonder! In eighteen months I have blasted that beauty,—my pride, my legitimate and sanctioned pride. I love thee better since I know thee well. Oh, *dear!*" he said, giving to the word a tone which reached to the inmost heart of his wife, "I would rather have thee scold me, than see thee so tender to my pain."

"I did not think," she said, "that after twenty years of married life the love of a wife for her husband could deepen."

These words drove from Cesar's mind, for one brief moment, all his sorrows; his heart was so true that they were to him a fortune. He walked forward almost joyously to *their* tree, which by chance had not been felled. Husband and wife sat down beneath it, watching Anselme and Cesarine, who were sauntering across the grassy slope without perceiving them, thinking probably that they were still following.

"Mademoiselle," Anselme was saying, "do not think me so base and grasping as to profit by your father's share which I have acquired in the Cephalic Oil. I am keeping his share for him; I nurse it with careful love. I invest the profits; if there is any loss I put it to my own account. We can only belong to one another on the day when your father is restored to his position, free of debt. I work for that day with all the strength that love has given me."

"Will it come soon?" she said.

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“Soon,” said Popinot. The word was uttered in a tone so full of meaning, that the chaste and pure young girl inclined her head to her dear Anselme, who laid an eager and respectful kiss upon her brow,—so noble was her gesture and action.

“Papa, all is well,” she said to Cesar with a little air of confidence. “Be good and sweet; talk to us, put away that sad look.”

When this family, so tenderly bound together, re-entered the house, even Cesar, little observing as he was, saw a change in the manner of the Ragons which seemed to denote some remarkable event. The greeting of Madame Ragon was particularly impressive; her look and accent seemed to say to Cesar, “We are paid.”

At the dessert, the notary of Sceaux appeared. Pillerault made him sit down, and then looked at Cesar, who began to suspect a surprise, though he was far indeed from imagining the extent of it.

“My nephew, the savings of your wife, your daughter, and yourself, for the last eighteen months, amounted to twenty thousand francs. I have received thirty thousand by the dividend on my claim. We have therefore fifty thousand francs to divide among your creditors. Monsieur Ragon has received thirty thousand francs for his dividend, and you have now paid him the balance of his claim in full, interest included, for which monsieur here, the notary of Sceaux, has brought you a receipt. The rest of the money is with Crottat, ready for Lourdois, Madame Madou, the mason, carpenter, and the other most pressing creditors. Next year, we may do as well. With time and patience we can go far.”

Birotteau’s joy is not to be described; he threw himself into his uncle’s arms, weeping.

“May he not wear his cross?” said Ragon to the Abbe Loraux.

The confessor fastened the red ribbon to Cesar’s buttonhole. The poor clerk looked at himself again and again during the evening in the mirrors of the salon, manifesting a joy at which people thinking themselves superior might have laughed, but which these good bourgeois thought quite natural.

The next day Birotteau went to find Madame Madou.

“Ah, there you are, good soul!” she cried. “I didn’t recognize you, you have turned so gray. Yet you don’t really drudge, you people; you’ve got good places. As for me, I work like a turnspit that deserves baptism.”

“But, madame—”

“Never mind, I don’t mean it as a reproach,” she said. “You have got my receipt.”

"I came to tell you that I shall pay you to-morrow, at Monsieur Crottat's, the rest of your claim in full, with interest."

"Is that true?"

"Be there at eleven o'clock."

"Hey! there's honor for you! good measure and running over!" she cried with naive admiration. "Look here, my good monsieur, I am doing a fine trade with your little red-head. He's a nice young fellow; he lets me earn a fair penny without haggling over it, so that I may get an equivalent for that loss. Well, I'll get you a receipt in full, anyhow; you keep the money, my poor old man! La Madou may get in a fury, and she does scold; but she has got something here—" she cried, thumping the most voluminous mounds of flesh ever yet seen in the markets.

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"No," said Birotteau, "the law is plain. I wish to pay you in full."

"Then I won't deny you the pleasure," she said; "and to-morrow I'll trumpet your conduct through the markets. Ha! it's rare, rare!"

The worthy man had much the same scene, with variations, at Lourdois the house painter's, father-in-law of Crottat. It was raining; Cesar left his umbrella at the corner of the door. The prosperous painter, seeing the water trickling into the room where he was breakfasting with his wife, was not tender.

"Come, what do you want, my poor Pere Birotteau?" he said, in the hard tone which some people take to importunate beggars.

"Monsieur, has not your son-in-law told you—"

"What?" cried Lourdois, expecting some appeal.

"To be at his office this morning at half past eleven, and give me a receipt for the payment of your claims in full, with interest?"

"Ah, that's another thing! Sit down, Monsieur Birotteau, and eat a mouthful with us."

"Do us the pleasure to share our breakfast," said Madame Lourdois.

"You are doing well, then?" asked the fat Lourdois.

"No, monsieur, I have lived from hand to mouth, that I might scrape up this money; but I hope, in time, to repair the wrongs I have done to my neighbor."

"Ah!" said the painter, swallowing a mouthful of *pate de foie gras*, "you are truly a man of honor."

"What is Madame Birotteau doing?" asked Madame Lourdois.

"She is keeping the books of Monsieur Anselme Popinot."

"Poor people!" said Madame Lourdois, in a low voice to her husband.

"If you ever need me, my dear Monsieur Birotteau, come and see me," said Lourdois. "I might help—"

"I do need you—at eleven o'clock to-day, monsieur," said Birotteau, retiring.

* * * * *

This first result gave courage to the poor bankrupt, but not peace of mind. On the contrary, the thought of regaining his honor agitated his life inordinately; he completely lost the natural color of his cheeks, his eyes grew sunken and dim, and his face hollow. When old acquaintances met him, in the morning at eight o'clock or in the evening at four, as he went to and from the Rue de l'Oratoire, wearing the surtout coat he wore at the time of his fall, and which he husbanded as a poor sub-lieutenant husbanded his uniform,—his hair entirely white, his face pale, his manner timid,—some few would stop him in spite of himself; for his eye was alert to avoid those he knew as he crept along beside the walls, like a thief.

"Your conduct is known, my friend," said one; "everybody regrets the sternness with which you treat yourself, also your wife and daughter."

"Take a little more time," said others; "the wounds of money do not kill."

"No, but the wounds of the soul do," the poor worn Cesar answered one day to his friend Matifat.

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* * * * *

At the beginning of the year 1822, the Canal Saint-Martin was begun. Land in the Faubourg du Temple increased enormously in value. The canal would cut through the property which du Tillet had bought of Cesar Birotteau. The company who obtained the right of building it agreed to pay the banker an exorbitant sum, provided they could take possession within a given time. The lease Cesar had granted to Popinot, which went with the sale to du Tillet, now hindered the transfer to the canal company. The banker came to the Rue des Cinq-Diamants to see the druggist. If du Tillet was indifferent to Popinot, it is very certain that the lover of Cesarine felt an instinctive hatred for du Tillet. He knew nothing of the theft and the infamous scheme of the prosperous banker, but an inward voice cried to him, "The man is an unpunished rascal." Popinot would never have transacted the smallest business with him; du Tillet's very presence was odious to his feelings. Under the present circumstances it was doubly so, for the banker was now enriched through the forced spoliation of his former master; the lands about the Madeleine, as well as those in the Faubourg du Temple, were beginning to rise in price, and to foreshadow the enormous value they were to reach in 1827. So that after du Tillet had explained the object of his visit, Popinot looked at him with concentrated wrath.

"I shall not refuse to give up my lease; but I demand sixty thousand francs for it, and I shall not take one farthing less."

"Sixty thousand francs!" exclaimed du Tillet, making a movement to leave the shop.

"I have fifteen years' lease still to run; it will, moreover, cost me three thousand francs a year to get other buildings. Therefore, sixty thousand francs, or say no more about it," said Popinot, going to the back of the shop, where du Tillet followed him.

The discussion grew warm, Birotteau's name was mentioned; Madame Cesar heard it and came down, and saw du Tillet for the first time since the famous ball. The banker was unable to restrain a gesture of surprise at the change which had come over the beautiful woman; he lowered his eyes, shocked at the result of his own work.

"Monsieur," said Popinot to Madame Cesar, "is going to make three hundred thousand francs out of *your* land, and he refuses *us* sixty thousand francs' indemnity for *our* lease."

"That is three thousand francs a year," said du Tillet.

"Three—thousand—francs!" said Madame Cesar, slowly, in a clear, penetrating voice.

Du Tillet turned pale. Popinot looked at Madame Birotteau. There was a moment of profound silence, which made the scene still more inexplicable to Anselme.

“Sign your relinquishment of the lease, which I have made Crottat draw up,” said du Tillet, drawing a stamped paper from a side-pocket. “I will give you a cheque on the Bank of France for sixty thousand francs.”

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Popinot looked at Madame Cesar without concealing his astonishment; he thought he was dreaming. While du Tillet was writing his cheque at a high desk, Madame Cesar disappeared and went upstairs. The druggist and the banker exchanged papers. Du Tillet bowed coldly to Popinot, and went away.

“At last, in a few months,” thought Popinot, as he watched du Tillet going towards the Rue des Lombards, where his cabriolet was waiting, “thanks to this extraordinary affair, I shall have my Cesarine. My poor little wife shall not wear herself out any longer. A look from Madame Cesar was enough! What secret is there between her and that brigand? The whole thing is extraordinary.”

Popinot sent the cheque at once to the Bank, and went up to speak to Madame Birotteau; she was not in the counting-room, and had doubtless gone to her chamber. Anselme and Constance lived like mother-in-law and son-in-law when people in that relation suit each other; he therefore rushed up to Madame Cesar’s appartement with the natural eagerness of a lover on the threshold of his happiness. The young man was prodigiously surprised to find her, as he sprang like a cat into the room, reading a letter from du Tillet, whose handwriting he recognized at a glance. A lighted candle, and the black and quivering phantoms of burned letters lying on the floor made him shudder, for his quick eyes caught the following words in the letter which Constance held in her hand:—

“I adore you! You know it well, angel of my life, and—”

“What power have you over du Tillet that could force him to agree to such terms?” he said with a convulsive laugh that came from repressed suspicion.

“Do not let us speak of that,” she said, showing great distress.

“No,” said Popinot, bewildered; “let us rather talk of the end of all your troubles.” Anselme turned on his heel towards the window, and drummed with his fingers on the panes as he gazed into the court. “Well,” he said to himself, “even if she did love du Tillet, is that any reason why I should not behave like an honorable man?”

“What is the matter, my child?” said the poor woman.

“The total of the net profits of Cephalic Oil mount up to two hundred and forty-two thousand francs; half of that is one hundred and twenty-one thousand,” said Popinot, brusquely. “If I withdraw from that amount the forty-eight thousand francs which I paid to Monsieur Birotteau, there remains seventy-three thousand, which, joined to these sixty thousand paid for the relinquishment of the lease, gives *you* one hundred and thirty-three thousand francs.”

Madame Cesar listened with fluctuations of joy which made her tremble so violently that Popinot could hear the beating of her heart.

“Well, I have always considered Monsieur Birotteau as my partner,” he went on; “we can use this sum to pay his creditors in full. Add the twenty-eight thousand you have saved and placed in our uncle Pillerault’s hands, and we have one hundred and sixty-one thousand francs. Our uncle will not refuse his receipt for his own claim of twenty-five thousand. No human power can deprive me of the right of lending to my father-in-law, by anticipating our profits of next year, the necessary sum to make up the total amount due to his creditor, and —he—will—be—reinstated—restored—”

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“Restored!” cried Madame Cesar, falling on her knees beside a chair. She joined her hands and said a prayer; as she did so, the letter slid from her fingers. “Dear Anselme,” she said, crossing herself, “dear son!” She took his head in her hands, kissed him on the forehead, pressed him to her heart, and seemed for a moment beside herself. “Cesarine is thine! My daughter will be happy at last. She can leave that shop where she is killing herself—”

“For love?” said Popinot.

“Yes,” answered the mother, smiling.

“Listen to a little secret,” said Popinot, glancing at the fatal letter from a corner of his eye. “I helped Celestin to buy your business; but I did it on one condition,—your appartement was to be kept exactly as you left it. I had an idea in my head, though I never thought that chance would favor it so much. Celestin is bound to sub-let to you your old appartement, where he has never set foot, and where all the furniture will be yours. I have kept the second story, where I shall live with Cesarine, who shall never leave you. After our marriage I shall come and pass the days from eight in the morning till six in the evening here. I will buy out Monsieur Cesar’s share in this business for a hundred thousand francs, and that will give you an income to live on. Shall you not be happy?”

“Tell me no more, Anselme, or I shall go out of my mind.”

The angelic attitude of Madame Cesar, the purity of her eyes, the innocence of her candid brow, contradicted so gloriously the thoughts which surged in the lover’s brain that he resolved to make an end of their monstrosities forever. Sin was incompatible with the life and sentiments of such a woman.

“My dear, adored mother,” said Anselme, “in spite of myself, a horrible suspicion has entered my soul. If you wish to see me happy, you will put an end to it at once.”

Popinot stretched out his hand and picked up the letter.

“Without intending it,” he resumed, alarmed at the terror painted on Constance’s face, “I read the first words of this letter of du Tillet. The words coincide in a singular manner with the power you have just shown in forcing that man to accept my absurd exactions; any man would explain it as the devil explains it to me, in spite of myself. Your look—three words suffice—”

“Stop!” said Madame Cesar, taking the letter and burning it. “My son, I am severely punished for a trifling error. You shall know all, Anselme. I shall not allow a suspicion inspired by her mother to injure my daughter; and besides, I can speak without blushing. What I now tell you, I could tell my husband. Du Tillet wished to seduce me; I

informed my husband of it, and du Tillet was to have been dismissed. On the very day my husband was about to send him away, he robbed us of three thousand francs.”

“I was sure of it!” said Popinot, expressing his hatred by the tones of his voice.

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"Anselme, your future, your happiness, demand this confidence; but you must let it die in your heart, just as it is dead in mine and in Cesar's. Do you not remember how my husband scolded us for an error in the accounts? Monsieur Birotteau, to avoid a police-court which might have destroyed the man for life, no doubt placed in the desk three thousand francs,—the price of that cashmere shawl which I did not receive till three years later. All this explains the scene. Alas! my dear child, I must admit my foolishness; du Tillet wrote me three love-letters, which pictured him so well that I kept them," she said, lowering her eyes and sighing, "as a curiosity. I have not re-read them more than once; still, it was imprudent to keep them. When I saw du Tillet just now I was reminded of them, and I came upstairs to burn them; I was looking over the last as you came in. That's the whole story, my friend."

Anselme knelt for a moment beside her and kissed her hand with an unspeakable emotion, which brought tears into the eyes of both; Madame Cesar raised him, stretched out her arms and pressed him to her heart.

* * * * *

This day was destined to be a day of joy to Cesar. The private secretary of the king, Monsieur de Vandenesse, called at the Sinking-Fund Office to find him. They walked out together into the little courtyard.

"Monsieur Birotteau," said the Vicomte de Vandenesse, "your efforts to pay your creditors in full have accidentally become known to the king. His Majesty, touched by such rare conduct, and hearing that through humility you no longer wear the cross of the Legion of honor, has sent me to command you to put it on again. Moreover, wishing to help you in meeting your obligations, he has charged me to give you this sum from his privy purse, regretting that he is unable to make it larger. Let this be a profound secret. His Majesty thinks it derogatory to the royal dignity to have his good deeds divulged," said the private secretary, putting six thousand francs into the hand of the poor clerk, who listened to this speech with unutterable emotion. The words that came to his lips were disconnected and stammering. Vandenesse waved his hand to him, smiling, and went away.

The principle which actuated poor Cesar is so rare in Paris that his conduct by degrees attracted admiration. Joseph Lebas, Popinot the judge, Camusot, the Abbe Loraux, Ragon, the head of the important house where Cesarine was employed, Lourdois, Monsieur de la Billardiere, and others, talked of it. Public opinion, undergoing a change, now lauded him to the skies.

"He is indeed a man of honor!" The phrase even sounded in Cesar's ears as he passed along the streets, and caused him the emotion an author feels when he hears the muttered words: "That is he!" This noble recovery of credit enraged du Tillet. Cesar's first thought on receiving the bank-notes sent by the king was to use them in paying the

debt still due to his former clerk. The worthy man went to the Rue de la Chaussee d'Antin just as the banker was returning from the Bourse; they met upon the stairway.

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"Well, my poor Birotteau!" said du Tillet, with a stealthy glance.

"Poor!" exclaimed the debtor proudly, "I am very rich. I shall lay my head this night upon my pillow with the happiness of knowing that I have paid you in full."

This speech, ringing with integrity, sent a sharp pang through du Tillet. In spite of the esteem he publicly enjoyed, he did not esteem himself; an inextinguishable voice cried aloud within his soul, "The man is sublime!"

"Pay me?" he said; "why, what business are you doing?"

Feeling sure that du Tillet would not repeat what he told him, Birotteau answered: "I shall never go back to business, monsieur. No human power could have foreseen what has happened to me there. Who knows that I might not be the victim of another Roguin? But my conduct has been placed under the eyes of the king; his heart has deigned to sympathize with my efforts; he has encouraged them by sending me a sum of money large enough to—"

"Do you want a receipt?" said du Tillet, interrupting him; "are you going to pay—"

"In full, with interest. I must ask you to come with me now to Monsieur Crottat, only two steps from here."

"Before a notary?"

"Monsieur; I am not forbidden to aim at my complete reinstatement; to obtain it, all deeds and receipts must be legal and undeniable."

"Come, then," said du Tillet, going out with Birotteau; "it is only a step. But where did you take all that money from?"

"I have not taken it," said Cesar; "I have earned it by the sweat of my brow."

"You owe an enormous sum to Claparon."

"Alas! yes; that is my largest debt. I think sometimes I shall die before I pay it."

"You never can pay it," said du Tillet harshly.

"He is right," thought Birotteau.

As he went home the poor man passed, inadvertently, along the Rue Saint-Honore; for he was in the habit of making a circuit to avoid seeing his shop and the windows of his former home. For the first time since his fall he saw the house where eighteen years of happiness had been effaced by the anguish of three months.



"I hoped to end my days there," he thought; and he hastened his steps, for he caught sight of the new sign,—

CELESTIN CREVEL

Successor to Cesar Birotteau

"Am I dazzled, am I going blind? Was that Cesarine?" he cried, recollecting a blond head he had seen at the window.

He had actually seen his daughter, his wife, and Popinot. The lovers knew that Birotteau never passed before the windows of his old home, and they had come to the house to make arrangements for a fete which they intended to give him. This amazing apparition so astonished Birotteau that he stood stock-still, unable to move.

"There is Monsieur Birotteau looking at his old house," said Monsieur Molineux to the owner of a shop opposite to "The Queen of Roses."

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"Poor man!" said the perfumer's former neighbor; "he gave a fine ball —two hundred carriages in the street."

"I was there; and he failed in three months," said Molineux. "I was the assignee."

Birotteau fled, trembling in every limb, and hastened back to Pillerrault.

Pillerrault, who had just been informed of what had happened in the Rue des Cinq-Diamants, feared that his nephew was scarcely fit to bear the shock of joy which the sudden knowledge of his restoration would cause him; for Pillerrault was a daily witness of the moral struggles of the poor man, whose mind stood always face to face with his inflexible doctrines against bankruptcy, and whose vital forces were used and spent at every hour. Honor was to Cesar a corpse, for which an Easter morning might yet dawn. This hope kept his sorrow incessantly active. Pillerrault took upon himself the duty of preparing his nephew to receive the good news; and when Birotteau came in he was thinking over the best means of accomplishing his purpose. Cesar's joy as he related the proof of interest which the king had bestowed upon him seemed of good augury, and the astonishment he expressed at seeing Cesarine at "The Queen of Roses" afforded, Pillerrault thought, an excellent opening.

"Well, Cesar," said the old man, "do you know what is at the bottom of it?—the hurry Popinot is in to marry Cesarine. He cannot wait any longer; and you ought not, for the sake of your exaggerated ideas of honor, to make him pass his youth eating dry bread with the fumes of a good dinner under his nose. Popinot wishes to lend you the amount necessary to pay your creditors in full."

"Then he would buy his wife," said Birotteau.

"Is it not honorable to reinstate his father-in-law?"

"There would be ground for contention; besides—"

"Besides," exclaimed Pillerrault, pretending anger, "you may have the right to immolate yourself if you choose, but you have no right to immolate your daughter."

A vehement discussion ensued, which Pillerrault designedly excited.

"Hey! if Popinot lent you nothing," cried Pillerrault, "if he had called you his partner, if he had considered the price which he paid to the creditors for your share in the Oil as an advance upon the profits, so as not to strip you of everything—"

"I should have seemed to rob my creditors in collusion with him."

Pillerrault feigned to be defeated by this argument. He knew the human heart well enough to be certain that during the night Cesar would go over the question in his own

mind, and the mental discussion would accustom him to the idea of his complete vindication.

“But how came my wife and daughter to be in our old appartement?” asked Birotteau, while they were dining.

“Anselme wants to hire it, and live there with Cesarine. Your wife is on his side. They have had the banns published without saying anything about it, so as to force you to consent. Popinot says there will be much less merit in marrying Cesarine after you are reinstated. You take six thousand francs from the king, and you won’t accept anything from your relations! I can well afford to give you a receipt in full for all that is owing to me; do you mean to refuse it?”

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"No," said Cesar; "but that won't keep me from saving up everything to pay you."

"Irrational folly!" cried Pillerault. "In matters of honor I ought to be believed. What nonsense were you saying just now? How have you robbed your creditors when you have paid them all in full?"

Cesar looked earnestly at Pillerault, and Pillerault was touched to see, for the first time in three years, a genuine smile on the face of his poor nephew.

"It is true," he said, "they would be paid; but it would be selling my daughter."

"And I wish to be bought!" cried Cesarine, entering with Popinot.

The lovers had heard Birotteau's last words as they came on tiptoe through the antechamber of their uncle's little appartement, Madame Birotteau following. All three had driven round to the creditors who were still unpaid, requesting them to meet at Alexandre Crottat's that evening to receive their money. The all-powerful logic of the enamored Popinot triumphed in the end over Cesar's scruples, though he persisted for some time in calling himself a debtor, and in declaring that he was circumventing the law by a substitution. But the refinements of his conscience gave way when Popinot cried out: "Do you want to kill your daughter?"

"Kill my daughter!" said Cesar, thunderstruck.

"Well, then," said Popinot, "I have the right to convey to you the sum which I conscientiously believe to be your share in my profits. Do you refuse it?"

"No," said Cesar.

"Very good; then let us go at once to Crottat and settle the matter, so that there may be no backing out of it. We will arrange about our marriage contract at the same time."

* * * * *

A petition for reinstatement with corroborative documents was at once deposited by Derville at the office of the *procureur-general* of the Cour Royale.

During the month required for the legal formalities and for the publication of the banns of marriage between Cesarine and Anselme, Birotteau was a prey to feverish agitation. He was restless. He feared he should not live till the great day when the decree for his vindication would be rendered. His heart throbbed, he said, without cause. He complained of dull pains in that organ, worn out as it was by emotions of sorrow, and now wearied with the rush of excessive joy. Decrees of rehabilitation are so rare in the bankrupt court of Paris that seldom more than one is granted in ten years.

To those persons who take society in its serious aspects, the paraphernalia of justice has a grand and solemn character difficult perhaps to define. Institutions depend altogether on the feelings with which men view them and the degree of grandeur which men's thoughts attach to them. When there is no longer, we will not say religion, but belief among the people, whenever early education has loosened all conservative bonds by accustoming youth to the practice of pitiless analysis, a nation will be found in process of dissolution; for it will then be held together only by the base solder of material interests, and by the formulas of a creed created by intelligent egotism.

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Bred in religious ideas, Birotteau held justice to be what it ought to be in the eyes of men,—a representation of society itself, an august utterance of the will of all, apart from the particular form by which it is expressed. The older, feebler, grayer the magistrate, the more solemn seemed the exercise of his function,—a function which demands profound study of men and things, which subdues the heart and hardens it against the influence of eager interests. It is a rare thing nowadays to find men who mount the stairway of the old Palais de Justice in the grasp of keen emotions. Cesar Birotteau was one of those men.

Few persons have noticed the majestic solemnity of that stairway, admirably placed as it is to produce a solemn effect. It rises, beyond the outer peristyle which adorns the courtyard of the Palais, from the centre of a gallery leading, at one end, to the vast hall of the Pas Perdue, and at the other to the Sainte-Chapelle,—two architectural monuments which make all buildings in their neighborhood seem paltry. The church of Saint-Louis is among the most imposing edifices in Paris, and the approach to it through this long gallery is at once sombre and romantic. The great hall of the Pas Perdue, on the contrary, presents at the other end of the gallery a broad space of light; it is impossible to forget that the history of France is linked to those walls. The stairway should therefore be imposing in character; and, in point of act, it is neither dwarfed nor crushed by the architectural splendors on either side of it. Possibly the mind is sobered by a glimpse, caught through the rich gratings, of the Place du Palais-de-Justice, where so many sentences have been executed. The staircase opens above into an enormous space, or antechamber, leading to the hall where the Court holds its public sittings.

Imagine the emotions with which the bankrupt, susceptible by nature to the awe of such accessories, went up that stairway to the hall of judgment, surrounded by his nearest friends,—Lebas, president of the Court of Commerce, Camusot his former judge, Ragon, and Monsieur l'Abbe Loraux his confessor. The pious priest made the splendors of human justice stand forth in strong relief by reflections which gave them still greater solemnity in Cesar's eyes. Pillerrault, the practical philosopher, fearing the danger of unexpected events on the worn mind of his nephew, had schemed to prepare him by degrees for the joys of this festal day. Just as Cesar finished dressing, a number of his faithful friends arrived, all eager for the honor of accompanying him to the bar of the Court. The presence of this retinue roused the honest man to an elation which gave him strength to meet the imposing spectacle in the halls of justice. Birotteau found more friends awaiting him in the solemn audience chamber, where about a dozen members of the council were in session.

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After the cases were called over, Birotteau's attorney made his demand for reinstatement in the usual terms. On a sign from the presiding judge, the *procureur-general* rose. In the name of his office this public prosecutor, the representative of public vindictiveness, asked that honor might be restored to the merchant who had never really lost it,—a solitary instance of such an appeal; for a condemned man can only be pardoned. Men of honor alone can imagine the emotions of Cesar Birotteau as he heard Monsieur de Grandville pronounce a speech, of which the following is an abridgement:—

"Gentlemen," said that celebrated official, "on the 16th of January, 1820, Birotteau was declared a bankrupt by the commercial tribunal of the Seine. His failure was not caused by imprudence, nor by rash speculations, nor by any act that stained his honor. We desire to say publicly that this failure was the result of a disaster which has again and again occurred, to the detriment of justice and the great injury of the city of Paris. It has been reserved for our generation, in which the bitter leaven of republican principles and manners will long be felt, to behold the notariat of Paris abandoning the glorious traditions of preceding centuries, and producing in a few years as many failures as two centuries of the old monarchy had produced. The thirst for gold rapidly acquired has beset even these officers of trust, these guardians of the public wealth, these mediators between the law and the people!"

On this text followed an allocution, in which the Comte de Grandville, obedient to the necessities of his role, contrived to incriminate the Liberals, the Bonapartists, and all other enemies of the throne. Subsequent events have proved that he had reason for his apprehension.

"The flight of a notary of Paris who carried off the funds which Birotteau had deposited in his hands, caused the fall of your petitioner," he resumed. "The Court rendered in that matter a decree which showed to what extent the confidence of Roguin's clients had been betrayed. A *concordat* was held. For the honor of your petitioner, we call attention to the fact that his proceedings were remarkable for a purity not found in any of the scandalous failures which daily degrade the commerce of Paris. The creditors of Birotteau received the whole property, down to the smallest articles that the unfortunate man possessed. They received, gentlemen, his clothes, his jewels, things of purely personal use,—and not only his, but those of his wife, who abandoned all her rights to swell the total of his assets. Under these circumstances Birotteau showed himself worthy of the respect which his municipal functions had already acquired for him; for he was at the time a deputy-mayor of the second arrondissement and had just received the decoration of the Legion of honor, granted as much for his devotion to the royal cause in Vendemiaire, on the steps of the Saint-Roch,

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which were stained with his blood, as for his conciliating spirit, his estimable qualities as a magistrate, and the modesty with which he declined the honors of the mayoralty, pointing out one more worthy of them, the Baron de la Billardiere, one of those noble Vendeens whom he had learned to value in the dark days.”

“That phrase is better than mine,” whispered Cesar to Pillerault.

“At that time the creditors, who received sixty per cent of their claims through the aforesaid relinquishment on the part of this loyal merchant, his wife, and his daughter of all that they possessed, recorded their respect for their debtor in the certificate of bankruptcy granted at the *concordat* which then took place, giving him at the same time a release from the remainder of their claims. This testimonial is couched in terms which are worthy of the attention of the Court.”

Here the *procureur-general* read the passage from the certificate of bankruptcy.

“After receiving such expressions of good-will, gentlemen, most merchants would have considered themselves released from obligation and free to return boldly into the vortex of business. Far from so doing, Birotteau, without allowing himself to be cast down, resolved within his conscience to toil for the glorious day which has at length dawned for him here. Nothing disheartened him. Our beloved sovereign granted to the man who shed his blood on the steps of Saint-Roch an office where he might earn his bread. The salary of that office the bankrupt laid by for his creditors, taking nothing for his own wants; for family devotion has supported him.”

Birotteau pressed his uncle’s hand, weeping.

“His wife and his daughter poured their earnings into the common fund, for they too espoused the noble hope of Birotteau. Each came down from the position she had held and took an inferior one. These sacrifices, gentlemen, should be held in honor, for they are harder than all others to bear. I will now show you what sort of task it was that Birotteau imposed upon himself.”

Here the *procureur-general* read a summing-up of the schedule, giving the amounts which had remained unpaid and the names of the creditors.

“Each of these sums, with the interest thereon, has been paid, gentlemen; and the payment is not shown by receipts under private seal, which might be questioned: they are payments made before a notary, properly authenticated; and according to the inflexible requirements of this Court they have been examined and verified by the proper authority. We now ask you to restore Birotteau, not to honor, but to all the rights of which he was deprived. In doing this you are doing justice. Such exhibitions of character are so rare in this Court that we cannot refrain from testifying to the petitioner

how heartily we applaud his conduct, which an august approval has already privately encouraged.”

The prosecuting officer closed by reading his charge in the customary formal terms.

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The Court deliberated without retiring, and the president rose to pronounce judgement.

“The Court,” he said, in closing, “desires me to express to Birotteau the satisfaction with which it renders such a judgment. Clerk, call the next case.”

Birotteau, clothed with the caftan of honor which the speech of the illustrious *procureur-general* had cast about him, stood dumb with joy as he listened to the solemn words of the president, which betrayed the quiverings of a heart beneath the impassibility of human justice. He was unable to stir from his place before the bar, and seemed for a moment nailed there, gazing at the judges with a wondering air, as though they were angels opening to him the gates of social life. His uncle took him by the arm and led him from the hall. Cesar had not as yet obeyed the command of Louis XVIII., but he now mechanically fastened the ribbon of the Legion of honor to his button-hole. In a moment he was surrounded by his friends and borne in triumph down the great stairway to his coach.

“Where are you taking me, my friends?” he said to Joseph Lebas, Pillerrault, and Ragon.

“To your own home.”

“No; it is only three o’clock. I wish to go to the Bourse, and use my rights.”

“To the Bourse!” said Pillerrault to the coachman, making an expressive sign to Joseph Lebas, for he saw symptoms in Cesar which led him to fear he might lose his mind.

The late perfumer re-entered the Bourse leaning on the arms of the two honored merchants, his uncle and Joseph Lebas. The news of his rehabilitation had preceded him. The first person who saw them enter, followed by Ragon, was du Tillet.

“Ah! my dear master,” he cried, “I am delighted that you have pulled through. I have perhaps contributed to this happy ending of your troubles by letting that little Popinot drag a feather from my wing. I am as glad of your happiness as if it were my own.”

“You could not be otherwise,” said Pillerrault. “Such a thing can never happen to you.”

“What do you mean by that?” said du Tillet.

“Oh! all in good part,” said Lebas, smiling at the malicious meaning of Pillerrault, who, without knowing the real truth, considered the man a scoundrel.

Matifat caught sight of Cesar, and immediately the most noted merchants surrounded him and gave him an *ovation boursiere*. He was overwhelmed with flattering compliments and grasped by the hand, which roused some jealousy and caused some remorse; for out of every hundred persons walking about that hall fifty at least had

“liquidated” their affairs. Gigonnet and Gobseck, who were talking together in a corner, looked at the man of commercial honor very much as a naturalist must have looked at the first electric-eel that was ever brought to him,—a fish armed with the power of a Leyden jar, which is the greatest curiosity of the animal kingdom. After inhaling the incense of his triumph, Cesar got into the coach to go to his own home, where the marriage contract of his dear Cesarine and the devoted Popinot was ready for signature. His nervous laugh disturbed the minds of the three old friends.

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It is a fault of youth to think the whole world vigorous with its own vigor,—a fault derived from its virtues. Youth sees neither men nor things through spectacles; it colors all with the reflex glory of its ardent fires, and casts the superabundance of its own life upon the aged. Like Cesar and like Constance, Popinot held in his memory a glowing recollection of the famous ball. Constance and Cesar through their years of trial had often, though they never spoke of it to each other, heard the strains of Collinet's orchestra, often beheld that festive company, and tasted the joys so swiftly and so cruelly chastised,—as Adam and Eve must have tasted in after times the forbidden fruit which gave both death and life to all posterity; for it appears that the generation of angels is a mystery of the skies.

Popinot, however, could dream of the fete without remorse, nay, with ecstasy. Had not Cesarine in all her glory then promised herself to him—to him, poor? During that evening had he not won the assurance that he was loved for himself alone? So when he bought the appartement restored by Grindot, from Celestin, when he stipulated that all should be kept intact, when he religiously preserved the smallest things that once belonged to Cesar and to Constance, he was dreaming of another ball,—his ball, his wedding-ball! He made loving preparation for it, imitating his old master in necessary expenses, but eschewing all follies,—follies that were now past and done with. So the dinner was to be served by Chevet; the guests were to be mostly the same: the Abbe Loraux replaced the chancellor of the Legion of honor; the president of the Court of Commerce, Monsieur Lebas, had promised to be there; Popinot invited Monsieur Camusot in acknowledgment of the kindness he had bestowed upon Birotteau; Monsieur de Vandenesse and Monsieur de Fontaine took the place of Roguin and his wife. Cesarine and Popinot distributed their invitations with much discretion. Both dreaded the publicity of a wedding, and they escaped the jar such scenes must cause to pure and tender hearts by giving the ball on the evening of the day appointed for signing the marriage-contract.

Constance found in her room the gown of cherry velvet in which she had shone for a single night with fleeting splendor. Cesarine cherished a dream of appearing before Popinot in the identical ball-dress about which, time and time again, he had talked to her. The appartement was made ready to present to Cesar's eyes the same enchanting scene he had once enjoyed for a single evening. Neither Constance, nor Cesarine, nor Popinot perceived the danger to Cesar in this sudden and overwhelming surprise, and they awaited his arrival at four o'clock with a delight that was almost childish.

Following close upon the unspeakable emotion his re-entrance at the Bourse had caused him, the hero of commercial honor was now to meet the sudden shock of felicity that awaited him in his old home. He entered the house, and saw at the foot of the staircase (still new as he had left it) his wife in her velvet robe, Cesarine, the Comte de Fontaine, the Vicomte de Vandenesse, the Baron de la Billardiere, the illustrious Vauquelin. A light film dimmed his eyes, and his uncle Pillerault, who held his arm, felt him shudder inwardly.

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"It is too much," said the philosopher to the happy lover; "he can never carry all the wine you are pouring out to him."

Joy was so vivid in their hearts that each attributed Cesar's emotion and his stumbling step to the natural intoxication of his feelings, —natural, but sometimes mortal. When he found himself once more in his own home, when he saw his salon, his guests, the women in their ball-dresses, suddenly the heroic measure in the finale of the great symphony rang forth in his head and heart. Beethoven's ideal music echoed, vibrated, in many tones, sounding its clarions through the membranes of the weary brain, of which it was indeed the grand finale.

Oppressed with this inward harmony, Cesar took the arm of his wife and whispered, in a voice suffocated by a rush of blood that was still repressed: "I am not well."

Constance, alarmed, led him to her bedroom; he reached it with difficulty, and fell into a chair, saying: "Monsieur Haudry, Monsieur Loraux."

The Abbe Loraux came, followed by the guests and the women in their ball-dresses, who stopped short, a frightened group. In presence of that shining company Cesar pressed the hand of his confessor and laid his head upon the bosom of his kneeling wife. A vessel had broken in his heart, and the rush of blood strangled his last sigh.

"Behold the death of the righteous!" said the Abbe Loraux solemnly, pointing to Cesar with the divine gesture which Rembrandt gave to Christ in his picture of the Raising of Lazarus.

Jesus commanded the earth to give up its prey; the priest called heaven to behold a martyr of commercial honor worthy to receive the everlasting palm.

ADDENDUM

The following personages appear in other stories of the Human Comedy.

Bianchon, Horace
Father Goriot
The Atheist's Mass
The Commission in Lunacy
Lost Illusions
A Distinguished Provincial at Paris
A Bachelor's Establishment
The Secrets of a Princess
The Government Clerks
Pierrette
A Study of Woman



Scenes from a Courtesan's Life

Honorine

The Seamy Side of History

The Magic Skin

A Second Home

A Prince of Bohemia

Letters of Two Brides

The Muse of the Department

The Imaginary Mistress

The Middle Classes

Cousin Betty

The Country Parson

In addition, M. Bianchon narrated the following:

Another Study of Woman

La Grande Breteche

Bidault (known as Gigonnet)

The Government Clerks

Gobseck

The Vendetta

The Firm of Nucingen

A Daughter of Eve

Birotteau, Cesar

A Bachelor's Establishment

At the Sign of the Cat and Racket

Birotteau, Abbe Francois

The Lily of the Valley

The Vicar of Tours

Braschon

Scenes from a Courtesan's Life



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A Bachelor's Establishment
Cousin Pons
The Muse of the Department
At the Sign of the Cat and Racket

Camusot de Marville, Madame

The Vendetta
Jealousies of a Country Town
Scenes from a Courtesan's Life
Cousin Pons

Cardot, Jean-Jerome-Severin

A Start in Life
Lost Illusions
A Distinguished Provincial at Paris
A Bachelor's Establishment
At the Sign of the Cat and Racket

Chaffaroux

A Prince of Bohemia
The Middle Classes

Chiffreville, Monsieur and Madame

The Quest of the Absolute

Claparon, Charles

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Melmoth Reconciled
The Firm of Nucingen
A Man of Business
The Middle Classes

Cochin, Emile-Louis-Lucien-Emmanuel

The Government Clerks
The Firm of Nucingen
The Middle Classes

Cochin, Adolphe

The Firm of Nucingen



Crevel, Celestin
Cousin Betty
Cousin Pons

Crottat, Monsieur and Madame
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Crottat, Alexandre
Colonel Chabert
A Start in Life
A Woman of Thirty
Cousin Pons

Derville, Madame
Gobseck

Desmartes, Jules
The Thirteen

Desmartes, Madame Jules
The Thirteen

Finot, Andoche
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Scenes from a Courtesan's Life
The Government Clerks
A Start in Life
Gaudissart the Great
The Firm of Nucingen

Fontaine, Comte de
The Chouans
Modeste Mignon
The Ball at Sceaux
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Gaudissart, Felix
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Gobseck, Jean-Esther Van
Gobseck
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Gobseck, Sarah Van

Gobseck

The Maranas

Scenes from a Courtesan's Life

The Member for Arcis

Granville, Vicomte de (later Comte)

The Gondreville Mystery

Honorine

A Second Home

Farewell (Adieu)

Scenes from a Courtesan's Life

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Grindot

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Guillaume

At the Sign of the Cat and Racket

Haudry (doctor)

The Thirteen

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The Seamy Side of History

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Domestic Peace

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Lebas, Madame Joseph (Virginie)

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The Lily of the Valley

Jealousies of a Country Town

The Gondreville Mystery

Beatrix

Listomere, Baronne de

The Vicar of Tours

The Muse of the Department

Loraux, Abbe

A Start in Life

A Bachelor's Establishment

Honorine

Lourdois

At the Sign of the Cat and Racket

Matifat (wealthy druggist)

A Bachelor's Establishment

Lost Illusions

A Distinguished Provincial at Paris

The Firm of Nucingen

Cousin Pons

Matifat, Madame

The Firm of Nucingen

Matifat, Mademoiselle

The Firm of Nucingen

Pierrette

Molineux, Jean-Baptiste

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The Purse



Mongenod

The Seamy Side of History

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The Chouans

Nucingen, Baron Frederic de

The Firm of Nucingen

Father Goriot

Pierrette

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Another Study of Woman

The Secrets of a Princess

A Man of Business

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The Unconscious Humorists

Nucingen, Baronne Delphine de

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The Thirteen

Eugenie Grandet

Melmoth Reconciled

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A Distinguished Provincial at Paris

The Commission in Lunacy

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Modeste Mignon

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The Member for Arcis

Palma (banker)

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Cousin Pons
Cousin Betty

Popinot, Madame Anselme
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Cousin Betty
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Protez and Chiffreville
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Werbrust
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