

# HONORÉ DE BALZAC

THE SECRETS OF THE  
PRINCESSE DE CADIGNAN

Оноре де Бальзак

**The Secrets of the  
Princesse de Cadignan**

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**Honoré de Balzac**  
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**DEDICATION**

**To Theophile Gautier**

## CHAPTER I. THE LAST WORD OF TWO GREAT COQUETTES

After the disasters of the revolution of July, which destroyed so many aristocratic fortunes dependent on the court, Madame la Princesse de Cadignan was clever enough to attribute to political events the total ruin she had caused by her own extravagance. The prince left France with the royal family, and never returned to it, leaving the princess in Paris, protected by the fact of his absence; for their debts, which the sale of all their salable property had not been able to extinguish, could only be recovered through him. The revenues of the entailed estates had been seized. In short, the affairs of this great family were in as bad a state as those of the elder branch of the Bourbons.

This woman, so celebrated under her first name of Duchesse de Maufrigneuse, very wisely decided to live in retirement, and to make herself, if possible, forgotten. Paris was then so carried away by the whirling current of events that the Duchesse de Maufrigneuse, buried in the Princesse de Cadignan, a change of name unknown to most of the new actors brought upon the stage of society by the revolution of July, did really become a stranger in her own city.

In Paris the title of duke ranks all others, even that of prince; though, in heraldic theory, free of all sophism, titles signify nothing; there is absolute equality among gentlemen. This fine equality was formerly maintained by the House of France itself; and in our day it is so still, at least, nominally; witness the care with which the kings of France give to their sons the simple title of count. It was in virtue of this system that Francois I. crushed the splendid titles assumed by the pompous Charles the Fifth, by signing his answer: "Francois, seigneur de Vanves." Louis XI. did better still by marrying his daughter to an untitled gentleman, Pierre de Beaujeu. The feudal system was so thoroughly broken up by Louis XIV. that the title of duke became, during his reign, the supreme honor of the aristocracy, and the most coveted.

Nevertheless there are two or three families in France in which the principality, richly endowed in former times, takes precedence of the duchy. The house of Cadignan, which possesses the title of Duc de Maufrigneuse for its eldest sons, is one of these exceptional families. Like the princes of the house of Rohan in earlier days, the princes of Cadignan had the right to a throne in their own domain; they could have pages and gentlemen in their service. This explanation is necessary, as much to escape foolish critics who know nothing, as to record the customs of a world which, we are told, is about to disappear, and which, evidently, so many persons are assisting to push away without knowing what it is.

The Cadignans bear: or, five lozenges sable appointed, placed fess-wise, with the word "Memini" for motto, a crown with a cap of maintenance, no supporters or mantle. In these days the great crowd of strangers flocking to Paris, and the almost universal ignorance of the science of heraldry, are beginning to bring the title of prince into fashion. There are no real princes but those possessed of principalities, to whom belongs the title of highness. The disdain shown by the French nobility for the title of prince, and the reasons which caused Louis XIV. to give supremacy to the title of duke, have prevented Frenchmen from claiming the appellation of "highness" for the few princes who exist in France, those of Napoleon excepted. This is why the princes of Cadignan hold an inferior position, nominally, to the princes of the continent.

The members of the society called the faubourg Saint-Germain protected the princess by a respectful silence due to her name, which is one of those that all men honor, to her misfortunes, which they ceased to discuss, and to her beauty, the only thing she saved of her departed opulence. Society, of which she had once been the ornament, was thankful to her for having, as it were, taken the veil, and cloistered herself in her own home. This act of good taste was for her, more than for any

other woman, an immense sacrifice. Great deeds are always so keenly felt in France that the princess gained, by her retreat, as much as she had lost in public opinion in the days of her splendor.

She now saw only one of her old friends, the Marquise d'Espard, and even to her she never went on festive occasions or to parties. The princess and the marquise visited each other in the forenoons, with a certain amount of secrecy. When the princess went to dine with her friend, the marquise closed her doors. Madame d'Espard treated the princess charmingly; she changed her box at the opera, leaving the first tier for a baignoire on the ground-floor, so that Madame de Cadignan could come to the theatre unseen, and depart incognito. Few women would have been capable of a delicacy which deprived them of the pleasure of bearing in their train a fallen rival, and of publicly being her benefactress. Thus relieved of the necessity for costly toilets, the princess could enjoy the theatre, whither she went in Madame d'Espard's carriage, which she would never have accepted openly in the daytime. No one has ever known Madame d'Espard's reasons for behaving thus to the Princesse de Cadignan; but her conduct was admirable, and for a long time included a number of little acts which, viewed single, seem mere trifles, but taken in the mass become gigantic.

In 1832, three years had thrown a mantle of snow over the follies and adventures of the Duchesse de Maufrigneuse, and had whitened them so thoroughly that it now required a serious effort of memory to recall them. Of the queen once adored by so many courtiers, and whose follies might have given a theme to a variety of novels, there remained a woman still adorably beautiful, thirty-six years of age, but quite justified in calling herself thirty, although she was the mother of Duc Georges de Maufrigneuse, a young man of eighteen, handsome as Antinous, poor as Job, who was expected to obtain great successes, and for whom his mother desired, above all things, to find a rich wife. Perhaps this hope was the secret of the intimacy she still kept up with the marquise, in whose salon, which was one of the first in Paris, she might eventually be able to choose among many heiresses for Georges' wife. The princess saw five years between the present moment and her son's marriage, – five solitary and desolate years; for, in order to obtain such a marriage for her son, she knew that her own conduct must be marked in the corner with discretion.

The princess lived in the rue de Miromesnil, in a small house, of which she occupied the ground-floor at a moderate rent. There she made the most of the relics of her past magnificence. The elegance of the great lady was still redolent about her. She was still surrounded by beautiful things which recalled her former existence. On her chimney-piece was a fine miniature portrait of Charles X., by Madame Mirbel, beneath which were engraved the words, "Given by the King"; and, as a pendant, the portrait of "Madame", who was always her kind friend. On a table lay an album of costliest price, such as none of the bourgeois who now lord it in our industrial and fault-finding society would have dared to exhibit. This album contained portraits, about thirty in number, of her intimate friends, whom the world, first and last, had given her as lovers. The number was a calumny; but had rumor said ten, it might have been, as her friend Madame d'Espard remarked, good, sound gossip. The portraits of Maxime de Trailles, de Marsay, Rastignac, the Marquis d'Esgrignon, General Montriveau, the Marquis de Ronquerolles and d'Ajuda-Pinto, Prince Galathionne, the young Ducs de Grandlieu and de Rhetore, the Vicomte de Serizy, and the handsome Lucien de Rubempre, had all been treated with the utmost coquetry of brush and pencil by celebrated artists. As the princess now received only two or three of these personages, she called the book, jokingly, the collection of her errors.

Misfortune had made this woman a good mother. During the fifteen years of the Restoration she had amused herself far too much to think of her son; but on taking refuge in obscurity, this illustrious egoist bethought her that the maternal sentiment, developed to its extreme, might be an absolution for her past follies in the eyes of sensible persons, who pardon everything to a good mother. She loved her son all the more because she had nothing else to love. Georges de Maufrigneuse was, moreover, one of those children who flatter the vanities of a mother; and the princess had, accordingly, made all sorts of sacrifices for him. She hired a stable and coach-house, above which he lived in a little entresol with three rooms looking on the street, and charmingly furnished; she had even borne several

privations to keep a saddle-horse, a cab-horse, and a little groom for his use. For herself, she had only her own maid, and as cook, a former kitchen-maid. The duke's groom had, therefore, rather a hard place. Toby, formerly tiger to the "late" Beaudenord (such was the jesting term applied by the gay world to that ruined gentleman), – Toby, who at twenty-five years of age was still considered only fourteen, was expected to groom the horses, clean the cabriolet, or the tilbury, and the harnesses, accompany his master, take care of the apartments, and be in the princess's antechamber to announce a visitor, if, by chance, she happened to receive one.

When one thinks of what the beautiful Duchesse de Maufrigneuse had been under the Restoration, – one of the queens of Paris, a dazzling queen, whose luxurious existence equalled that of the richest women of fashion in London, – there was something touching in the sight of her in that humble little abode in the rue de Miromesnil, a few steps away from her splendid mansion, which no amount of fortune had enabled her to keep, and which the hammer of speculators has since demolished. The woman who thought she was scarcely well served by thirty servants, who possessed the most beautiful reception-rooms in all Paris, and the loveliest little private apartments, and who made them the scene of such delightful fetes, now lived in a small apartment of five rooms, – an antechamber, dining-room, salon, one bed-chamber, and a dressing-room, with two women-servants only.

"Ah! she is devoted to her son," said that clever creature, Madame d'Espard, "and devoted without ostentation; she is happy. Who would ever have believed so frivolous a woman was capable of such persistent resolution! Our good archbishop has, consequently, greatly encouraged her; he is most kind to her, and has just induced the old Comtesse de Cinq-Cygne to pay her a visit."

Let us admit a truth! One must be a queen to know how to abdicate, and to descend with dignity from a lofty position which is never wholly lost. Those only who have an inner consciousness of being nothing in themselves, show regrets in falling, or struggle, murmuring, to return to a past which can never return, – a fact of which they themselves are well aware. Compelled to do without the choice exotics in the midst of which she had lived, and which set off so charmingly her whole being (for it is impossible not to compare her to a flower), the princess had wisely chosen a ground-floor apartment; there she enjoyed a pretty little garden which belonged to it, – a garden full of shrubs, and an always verdant turf, which brightened her peaceful retreat. She had about twelve thousand francs a year; but that modest income was partly made up of an annual stipend sent her by the old Duchesse de Navarreins, paternal aunt of the young duke, and another stipend given by her mother, the Duchesse d'Uxelles, who was living on her estate in the country, where she economized as old duchesses alone know how to economize; for Harpagon is a mere novice compared to them. The princess still retained some of her past relations with the exiled royal family; and it was in her house that the marshal to whom we owe the conquest of Africa had conferences, at the time of "Madame's" attempt in La Vendee, with the principal leaders of legitimist opinion, – so great was the obscurity in which the princess lived, and so little distrust did the government feel for her in her present distress.

Beholding the approach of that terrible fortieth year, the bankruptcy of love, beyond which there is so little for a woman as woman, the princess had flung herself into the kingdom of philosophy. She took to reading, she who for sixteen years had felt a cordial horror for serious things. Literature and politics are to-day what piety and devotion once were to her sex, – the last refuge of their feminine pretensions. In her late social circle it was said that Diane was writing a book. Since her transformation from a queen and beauty to a woman of intellect, the princess had contrived to make a reception in her little house a great honor which distinguished the favored person. Sheltered by her supposed occupation, she was able to deceive one of her former adorers, de Marsay, the most influential personage of the political bourgeoisie brought to the fore in July 1830. She received him sometimes in the evenings, and, occupied his attention while the marshal and a few legitimists were talking, in a low voice, in her bedroom, about the recovery of power, which could be attained only by a general co-operation of ideas, – the one element of success which all conspirators overlook. It

was the clever vengeance of the pretty woman, who thus inveigled the prime minister, and made him act as screen for a conspiracy against his own government.

This adventure, worthy of the finest days of the Fronde, was the text of a very witty letter, in which the princess rendered to “Madame” an account of the negotiations. The Duc de Maufrigneuse went to La Vendee, and was able to return secretly without being compromised, but not without taking part in “Madame’s” perils; the latter, however, sent him home the moment she saw that her cause was lost. Perhaps, had he remained, the eager vigilance of the young man might have foiled that treachery. However great the faults of the Duchesse de Maufrigneuse may have seemed in the eyes of the bourgeoisie, the behavior of her son on this occasion certainly effaced them in the eyes of the aristocracy. There was great nobility and grandeur in thus risking her only son, and the heir of an historic name. Some persons are said to intentionally cover the faults of their private life by public services, and vice versa; but the Princesse de Cadignan made no such calculation. Possibly those who apparently so conduct themselves make none. Events count for much in such cases.

On one of the first fine days in the month of May, 1833, the Marquise d’Espard and the princess were turning about – one could hardly call it walking – in the single path which wound round the grass-plot in the garden, about half-past two in the afternoon, just as the sun was leaving it. The rays reflected on the walls gave a warm atmosphere to the little space, which was fragrant with flowers, the gift of the marquise.

“We shall soon lose de Marsay,” said the marquise; “and with him will disappear your last hope of fortune for your son. Ever since you played him that clever trick, he has returned to his affection for you.”

“My son will never capitulate to the younger branch,” returned the princess, “if he has to die of hunger, or I have to work with my hands to feed him. Besides, Berthe de Cinq-Cygne has no aversion to him.”

“Children don’t bind themselves to their parents’ principles,” said Madame d’Espard.

“Don’t let us talk about it,” said the princess. “If I can’t coax over the Marquise de Cinq-Cygne, I shall marry Georges to the daughter of some iron-founderer, as that little d’Esgrignon did.”

“Did you love Victurnien?” asked the marquise.

“No,” replied the princess, gravely, “d’Esgrignon’s simplicity was really only a sort of provincial silliness, which I perceived rather too late – or, if you choose, too soon.”

“And de Marsay?”

“De Marsay played with me as if I were a doll. I was so young at the time! We never love men who pretend to teach us; they rub up all our little vanities.”

“And that wretched boy who hanged himself?”

“Lucien? An Antinous and a great poet. I worshiped him in all conscience, and I might have been happy. But he was in love with a girl of the town; and I gave him up to Madame de Serizy... If he had cared to love me, should I have given him up?”

“What an odd thing, that you should come into collision with an Esther!”

“She was handsomer than I,” said the Princess. – “Very soon it shall be three years that I have lived in solitude,” she resumed, after a pause, “and this tranquillity has nothing painful to me about it. To you alone can I dare to say that I feel I am happy. I was surfeited with adoration, weary of pleasure, emotional on the surface of things, but conscious that emotion itself never reached my heart. I have found all the men whom I have known petty, paltry, superficial; none of them ever caused me a surprise; they had no innocence, no grandeur, no delicacy. I wish I could have met with one man able to inspire me with respect.”

“Then are you like me, my dear?” asked the marquise; “have you never felt the emotion of love while trying to love?”

“Never,” replied the princess, laying her hand on the arm of her friend.

They turned and seated themselves on a rustic bench beneath a jasmine then coming into flower. Each had uttered one of those sayings that are solemn to women who have reached their age.

“Like you,” resumed the princess, “I have received more love than most women; but through all my many adventures, I have never found happiness. I committed great follies, but they had an object, and that object retreated as fast as I approached it. I feel to-day in my heart, old as it is, an innocence which has never been touched. Yes, under all my experience, lies a first love intact, – just as I myself, in spite of all my losses and fatigues, feel young and beautiful. We may love and not be happy; we may be happy and never love; but to love and be happy, to unite those two immense human experiences, is a miracle. That miracle has not taken place for me.”

“Nor for me,” said Madame d’Espard.

“I own I am pursued in this retreat by dreadful regret: I have amused myself all through life, but I have never loved.”

“What an incredible secret!” cried the marquise.

“Ah! my dear,” replied the princess, “such secrets we can tell to ourselves, you and I, but nobody in Paris would believe us.”

“And,” said the marquise, “if we were not both over thirty-six years of age, perhaps we would not tell them to each other.”

“Yes; when women are young they have so many stupid conceits,” replied the princess. “We are like those poor young men who play with a toothpick to pretend they have dined.”

“Well, at any rate, here we are!” said Madame d’Espard, with coquettish grace, and a charming gesture of well-informed innocence; “and, it seems to me, sufficiently alive to think of taking our revenge.”

“When you told me, the other day, that Beatrix had gone off with Conti, I thought of it all night long,” said the princess, after a pause. “I suppose there was happiness in sacrificing her position, her future, and renouncing society forever.”

“She was a little fool,” said Madame d’Espard, gravely. “Mademoiselle des Touches was delighted to get rid of Conti. Beatrix never perceived how that surrender, made by a superior woman who never for a moment defended her claims, proved Conti’s nothingness.”

“Then you think she will be unhappy?”

“She is so now,” replied Madame d’Espard. “Why did she leave her husband? What an acknowledgment of weakness!”

“Then you think that Madame de Rochefide was not influenced by the desire to enjoy a true love in peace?” asked the princess.

“No; she was simply imitating Madame de Beausant and Madame de Langeais, who, be it said, between you and me, would have been, in a less vulgar period than ours, the La Villiere, the Diane de Poitiers, the Gabrielle d’Estrees of history.”

“Less the king, my dear. Ah! I wish I could evoke the shades of those women, and ask them –”

“But,” said the marquise, interrupting the princess, “why ask the dead? We know living women who have been happy. I have talked on this very subject a score of times with Madame de Montcornet since she married that little Emile Blondet, who makes her the happiest woman in the world; not an infidelity, not a thought that turns aside from her; they are as happy as they were the first day. These long attachments, like that of Rastignac and Madame de Nucingen, and your cousin, Madame de Camps, for her Octave, have a secret, and that secret you and I don’t know, my dear. The world has paid us the extreme compliment of thinking we are two rakes worthy of the court of the regent; whereas we are, in truth, as innocent as a couple of school-girls.”

“I should like that sort of innocence,” cried the princess, laughing; “but ours is worse, and it is very humiliating. Well, it is a mortification we offer up in expiation of our fruitless search; yes, my dear, fruitless, for it isn’t probable we shall find in our autumn season the fine flower we missed in the spring and summer.”

“That’s not the question,” resumed the marquise, after a meditative pause. “We are both still beautiful enough to inspire love, but we could never convince any one of our innocence and virtue.”

“If it were a lie, how easy to dress it up with commentaries, and serve it as some delicious fruit to be eagerly swallowed! But how is it possible to get a truth believed? Ah! the greatest of men have been mistaken there!” added the princess, with one of those meaning smiles which the pencil of Leonardo da Vinci alone has rendered.

“Fools love well, sometimes,” returned the marquise.

“But in this case,” said the princess, “fools wouldn’t have enough credulity in their nature.”

“You are right,” said the marquise. “But what we ought to look for is neither a fool nor even a man of talent. To solve our problem we need a man of genius. Genius alone has the faith of childhood, the religion of love, and willingly allows us to band its eyes. Look at Canalis and the Duchesse de Chaulieu! Though we have both encountered men of genius, they were either too far removed from us or too busy, and we too absorbed, too frivolous.”

“Ah! how I wish I might not leave this world without knowing the happiness of true love,” exclaimed the princess.

“It is nothing to inspire it,” said Madame d’Espard; “the thing is to feel it. I see many women who are only the pretext for a passion without being both its cause and its effect.”

“The last love I inspired was a beautiful and sacred thing,” said the princess. “It had a future in it. Chance had brought me, for once in a way, the man of genius who is due to us, and yet so difficult to obtain; there are more pretty women than men of genius. But the devil interfered with the affair.”

“Tell me about it, my dear; this is all news to me.”

“I first noticed this beautiful passion about the middle of the winter of 1829. Every Friday, at the opera, I observed a young man, about thirty years of age, in the orchestra stalls, who evidently came there for me. He was always in the same stall, gazing at me with eyes of fire, but, seemingly, saddened by the distance between us, perhaps by the hopelessness of reaching me.”

“Poor fellow! When a man loves he becomes eminently stupid,” said the marquise.

“Between every act he would slip into the corridor,” continued the princess, smiling at her friend’s epigrammatic remark. “Once or twice, either to see me or to make me see him, he looked through the glass sash of the box exactly opposite to mine. If I received a visit, I was certain to see him in the corridor close to my door, casting a furtive glance upon me. He had apparently learned to know the persons belonging to my circle; and he followed them when he saw them turning in the direction of my box, in order to obtain the benefit of the opening door. I also found my mysterious adorer at the Italian opera-house; there he had a stall directly opposite to my box, where he could gaze at me in naive ecstasy – oh! it was pretty! On leaving either house I always found him planted in the lobby, motionless; he was elbowed and jostled, but he never moved. His eyes grew less brilliant if he saw me on the arm of some favorite. But not a word, not a letter, no demonstration. You must acknowledge that was in good taste. Sometimes, on getting home late at night, I found him sitting upon one of the stone posts of the porte-cochere. This lover of mine had very handsome eyes, a long, thick, fan-shaped beard, with a moustache and side-whiskers; nothing could be seen of his skin but his white cheek-bones, and a noble forehead; it was truly an antique head. The prince, as you know, defended the Tuileries on the riverside, during the July days. He returned to Saint-Cloud that night, when all was lost, and said to me: ‘I came near being killed at four o’clock. I was aimed at by one of the insurgents, when a young man, with a long beard, whom I have often seen at the opera, and who was leading the attack, threw up the man’s gun, and saved me.’ So my adorer was evidently a republican! In 1831, after I came to lodge in this house, I found him, one day, leaning with his back against the wall of it; he seemed pleased with my disasters; possibly he may have thought they drew us nearer together. But after the affair of Saint-Merri I saw him no more; he was killed there. The evening before the funeral of General Lamarque, I had gone out on foot with my son, and

my republican accompanied us, sometimes behind, sometimes in front, from the Madeleine to the Passage des Panoramas, where I was going.”

“Is that all?” asked the marquise.

“Yes, all,” replied the princess. “Except that on the morning Saint-Merri was taken, a gamin came here and insisted on seeing me. He gave me a letter, written on common paper, signed by my republican.”

“Show it to me,” said the marquise.

“No, my dear. Love was too great and too sacred in the heart of that man to let me violate its secrets. The letter, short and terrible, still stirs my soul when I think of it. That dead man gives me more emotions than all the living men I ever coquetted with; he constantly recurs to my mind.”

“What was his name?” asked the marquise.

“Oh! a very common one: Michel Chrestien.”

“You have done well to tell me,” said Madame d’Espard, eagerly. “I have often heard of him. This Michel Chrestien was the intimate friend of a remarkable man you have already expressed a wish to see, – Daniel d’Arthez, who comes to my house some two or three times a year. Chrestien, who was really killed at Saint-Merri, had no lack of friends. I have heard it said that he was one of those born statesmen to whom, like de Marsay, nothing is wanting but opportunity to become all they might be.”

“Then he had better be dead,” said the princess, with a melancholy air, under which she concealed her thoughts.

“Will you come to my house some evening and meet d’Arthez?” said the marquise. “You can talk of your ghost.”

“Yes, I will,” replied the princess.

## CHAPTER II. DANIEL D'ARTHEZ

A few days after this conversation Blondet and Rastignac, who knew d'Arthez, promised Madame d'Espard that they would bring him to dine with her. This promise might have proved rash had it not been for the name of the princess, a meeting with whom was not a matter of indifference to the great writer.

Daniel d'Arthez, one of the rare men who, in our day, unite a noble character with great talent, had already obtained, not all the popularity his works deserve, but a respectful esteem to which souls of his own calibre could add nothing. His reputation will certainly increase; but in the eyes of connoisseurs it had already attained its full development. He is one of those authors who, sooner or later, are put in their right place, and never lose it. A poor nobleman, he had understood his epoch well enough to seek personal distinction only. He had struggled long in the Parisian arena, against the wishes of a rich uncle who, by a contradiction which vanity must explain, after leaving his nephew a prey to the utmost penury, bequeathed to the man who had reached celebrity the fortune so pitilessly refused to the unknown writer. This sudden change in his position made no change in Daniel d'Arthez's habits; he continued to work with a simplicity worthy of the antique past, and even assumed new toils by accepting a seat in the Chamber of Deputies, where he took his seat on the Right.

Since his accession to fame he had sometimes gone into society. One of his old friends, the now-famous physician, Horace Bianchon, persuaded him to make the acquaintance of the Baron de Rastignac, under-secretary of State, and a friend of de Marsay, the prime minister. These two political officials acquiesced, rather nobly, in the strong wish of d'Arthez, Bianchon, and other friends of Michel Chrestien for the removal of the body of that republican to the church of Saint-Merri for the purpose of giving it funeral honors. Gratitude for a service which contrasted with the administrative rigor displayed at a time when political passions were so violent, had bound, so to speak, d'Arthez to Rastignac. The latter and de Marsay were much too clever not to profit by that circumstance; and thus they won over other friends of Michel Chrestien, who did not share his political opinions, and who now attached themselves to the new government. One of them, Leon Giraud, appointed in the first instance master of petitions, became eventually a Councillor of State.

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