HONORÉ DE BALZAC

HONORINE

Honoré Balzac
Honorine

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=25021035
Honorine:

Содержание

Honoré de Balzac
Honorine

HONORINE

If the French have as great an aversion for traveling as the English have a propensity for it, both English and French have perhaps sufficient reasons. Something better than England is everywhere to be found; whereas it is excessively difficult to find the charms of France outside France. Other countries can show admirable scenery, and they frequently offer greater comfort than that of France, which makes but slow progress in that particular. They sometimes display a bewildering magnificence, grandeur, and luxury; they lack neither grace nor noble manners; but the life of the brain, the talent for conversation, the "Attic salt" so familiar at Paris, the prompt apprehension of what one is thinking, but does not say, the spirit of the unspoken, which is half the French language, is nowhere else to be met with. Hence a Frenchman, whose raillery, as it is, finds so little comprehension, would wither in a foreign land like an uprooted tree. Emigration is counter to the instincts of the French nation. Many Frenchmen, of the kind here in question, have owned to pleasure at seeing the custom-house officers of their native land, which may seem the most daring hyperbole of patriotism.

This preamble is intended to recall to such Frenchmen as have traveled the extreme pleasure they have felt on occasionally finding their native land, like an oasis, in the drawing-room of some diplomate: a pleasure hard to be understood by those who have never left the asphalt of the Boulevard des Italiens, and to whom the Quais of the left bank of the Seine are not really Paris. To find Paris again! Do you know what that means, O Parisians? It is to find – not indeed the cookery of the *Rocher de Cancale* as Borel elaborates it for those who can appreciate it, for that exists only in the Rue Montorgueil – but a meal which reminds you of it! It is to find the wines of France, which out of France are to be regarded as myths, and as rare as the woman of whom I write! It is to find – not the most fashionable pleasantry, for it loses its aroma between Paris and the frontier – but the witty understanding, the critical atmosphere in which the French live, from the poet down to the artisan, from the duchess to the boy in the street.

In 1836, when the Sardinian Court was residing at Genoa, two Parisians, more or less famous, could fancy themselves still in Paris when they found themselves in a palazzo, taken by the French Consul-General, on the hill forming the last fold of the Apennines between the gate of San Tomaso and the well-known lighthouse, which is to be seen in all the keepsake views of Genoa. This palazzo is one of the magnificent villas on which Genoese nobles were wont to spend millions at the time when the aristocratic republic was a power.

If the early night is beautiful anywhere, it surely is at Genoa, after it has rained as it can rain there, in torrents, all the morning; when the clearness of the sea vies with that of the sky; when silence reigns on the quay and in the groves of the villa, and over the marble heads with yawning jaws, from which water mysteriously flows; when the stars are beaming; when the waves of the Mediterranean lap one after another like the avowal of a woman, from whom you drag it word by word. It must be confessed, that the moment when the perfumed air brings fragrance to the lungs and to our day-dreams; when voluptuousness, made visible and ambient as the air, holds you in your easy-chair; when, a spoon in your hand, you sip an ice or a sorbet, the town at your feet and fair woman opposite – such Boccaccio hours can be known only in Italy and on the shores of the Mediterranean.

Imagine to yourself, round the table, the Marquis di Negro, a knight hospitaller to all men of talent on their travels, and the Marquis Damaso Pareto, two Frenchmen disguised as Genoese, a Consul-General with a wife as beautiful as a Madonna, and two silent children – silent because sleep has fallen on them – the French Ambassador and his wife, a secretary to the Embassy who believes himself to be crushed and mischievous; finally, two Parisians, who have come to take leave of the Consul's wife at a splendid dinner, and you will have the picture presented by the terrace of the villa about the middle of May – a picture in which the predominant figure was that of a celebrated woman,

on whom all eyes centered now and again, the heroine of this improvised festival.

One of the two Frenchmen was the famous landscape painter, Leon de Lora; the other a well known critic Claude Vignon. They had both come with this lady, one of the glories of the fair sex, Mademoiselle des Touches, known in the literary world by the name of Camille Maupin.

Mademoiselle des Touches had been to Florence on business. With the charming kindness of which she is prodigal, she had brought with her Leon de Lora to show him Italy, and had gone on as far as Rome that he might see the Campagna. She had come by Simplon, and was returning by the Cornice road to Marseilles. She had stopped at Genoa, again on the landscape painter's account. The Consul-General had, of course, wished to do the honors of Genoa, before the arrival of the Court, to a woman whose wealth, name, and position recommend her no less than her talents. Camille Maupin, who knew her Genoa down to its smallest chapels, had left her landscape painter to the care of the diplomate and the two Genoese marquises, and was miserly of her minutes. Though the ambassador was a distinguished man of letters, the celebrated lady had refused to yield to his advances, dreading what the English call an exhibition; but she had drawn in the claws of her refusals when it was proposed that they should spend a farewell day at the Consul's villa. Leon de Lora had told Camille that her presence at the villa was the only return he could make to the Ambassador and his wife, the two

Genoese noblemen, the Consul and his wife. So Mademoiselle des Touches had sacrificed one of those days of perfect freedom, which are not always to be had in Paris by those on whom the world has its eye.

Now, the meeting being accounted for, it is easy to understand that etiquette had been banished, as well as a great many women even of the highest rank, who were curious to know whether Camille Maupin's manly talent impaired her grace as a pretty woman, and to see, in a word, whether the trousers showed below her petticoats. After dinner till nine o'clock, when a collation was served, though the conversation had been gay and grave by turns, and constantly enlivened by Leon de Lora's sallies – for he is considered the most roguish wit of Paris to-day – and by the good taste which will surprise no one after the list of guests, literature had scarcely been mentioned. However, the butterfly flittings of this French tilting match were certain to come to it, were it only to flutter over this essentially French subject. But before coming to the turn in the conversation which led the Consul-General to speak, it will not be out of place to give some account of him and his family.

This diplomate, a man of four-and-thirty, who had been married about six years, was the living portrait of Lord Byron. The familiarity of that face makes a description of the Consul's unnecessary. It may, however, be noted that there was no affectation in his dreamy expression. Lord Byron was a poet, and the Consul was poetical; women know and recognize

the difference, which explains without justifying some of their attachments. His handsome face, thrown into relief by a delightful nature, had captivated a Genoese heiress. A Genoese heiress! the expression might raise a smile at Genoa, where, in consequence of the inability of daughters to inherit, a woman is rarely rich; but Onorina Pedrotti, the only child of a banker without heirs male, was an exception. Notwithstanding all the flattering advances prompted by a spontaneous passion, the Consul-General had not seemed to wish to marry. Nevertheless, after living in the town for two years, and after certain steps taken by the Ambassador during his visits to the Genoese Court, the marriage was decided on. The young man withdrew his former refusal, less on account of the touching affection of Onorina Pedrotti than by reason of an unknown incident, one of those crises of private life which are so instantly buried under the daily tide of interests that, at a subsequent date, the most natural actions seem inexplicable.

This involution of causes sometimes affects the most serious events of history. This, at any rate, was the opinion of the town of Genoa, where, to some women, the extreme reserve, the melancholy of the French Consul could be explained only by the word passion. It may be remarked, in passing, that women never complain of being the victims of a preference; they are very ready to immolate themselves for the common weal. Onorina Pedrotti, who might have hated the Consul if she had been altogether scorned, loved her *sposo* no less, and perhaps more, when she

know that he had loved. Women allow precedence in love affairs. All is well if other women are in question.

A man is not a diplomate with impunity: the *sposo* was as secret as the grave – so secret that the merchants of Genoa chose to regard the young Consul's attitude as premeditated, and the heiress might perhaps have slipped through his fingers if he had not played his part of a love-sick *malade imaginaire*. If it was real, the women thought it too degrading to be believed.

Pedrotti's daughter gave him her love as a consolation; she lulled these unknown griefs in a cradle of tenderness and Italian caresses.

Il Signor Pedrotti had indeed no reason to complain of the choice to which he was driven by his beloved child. Powerful protectors in Paris watched over the young diplomate's fortunes. In accordance with a promise made by the Ambassador to the Consul-General's father-in-law, the young man was created Baron and Commander of the Legion of Honor. Signor Pedrotti himself was made a Count by the King of Sardinia. Onorina's dower was a million of francs. As to the fortune of the Casa Pedrotti, estimated at two millions, made in the corn trade, the young couple came into it within six months of their marriage, for the first and last Count Pedrotti died in January 1831.

Onorina Pedrotti is one of those beautiful Genoese women who, when they are beautiful, are the most magnificent creatures in Italy. Michael Angelo took his models in Genoa for the tomb of Giuliano. Hence the fulness and singular placing of

the breast in the figures of Day and Night, which so many critics have thought exaggerated, but which is peculiar to the women of Liguria. A Genoese beauty is no longer to be found excepting under the mezzaro, as at Venice it is met with only under the *fazzioli*. This phenomenon is observed among all fallen nations. The noble type survives only among the populace, as after the burning of a town coins are found hidden in the ashes. And Onorina, an exception as regards her fortune, is no less an exceptional patrician beauty. Recall to mind the figure of Night which Michael Angelo has placed at the feet of the *Pensieroso*, dress her in modern garb, twist that long hair round the magnificent head, a little dark in complexion, set a spark of fire in those dreamy eyes, throw a scarf about the massive bosom, see the long dress, white, embroidered with flowers, imagine the statue sitting upright, with her arms folded like those of Mademoiselle Georges, and you will see before you the Consul's wife, with a boy of six, as handsome as a mother's desire, and a little girl of four on her knees, as beautiful as the type of childhood so laboriously sought out by the sculptor David to grace a tomb.

This beautiful family was the object of Camille's secret study. It struck Mademoiselle des Touches that the Consul looked rather too absent-minded for a perfectly happy man.

Although, throughout the day, the husband and wife had offered her the pleasing spectacle of complete happiness, Camille wondered why one of the most superior men she had

ever met, and whom she had seen too in Paris drawing-rooms, remained as Consul-General at Genoa when he possessed a fortune of a hundred odd thousand francs a year. But, at the same time, she had discerned, by many of the little nothings which women perceive with the intelligence of the Arab sage in *Zadig*, that the husband was faithfully devoted. These two handsome creatures would no doubt love each other without a misunderstanding till the end of their days. So Camille said to herself alternately, "What is wrong? – Nothing is wrong," following the misleading symptoms of the Consul's demeanor; and he, it may be said, had the absolute calmness of Englishmen, of savages, of Orientals, and of consummate diplomatists.

In discussing literature, they spoke of the perennial stock-in-trade of the republic of letters – woman's sin. And they presently found themselves confronted by two opinions: When a woman sins, is the man or the woman to blame? The three women present – the Ambassadress, the Consul's wife, and Mademoiselle des Touches, women, of course, of blameless reputations – were without pity for the woman. The men tried to convince these fair flowers of their sex that some virtues might remain in a woman after she had fallen.

"How long are we going to play at hide-and-seek in this way?" said Leon de Lora.

"*Cara vita*, go and put your children to bed, and send me by Gina the little black pocket-book that lies on my Boule cabinet," said the Consul to his wife.

She rose without a reply, which shows that she loved her husband very truly, for she already knew French enough to understand that her husband was getting rid of her.

"I will tell you a story in which I played a part, and after that we can discuss it, for it seems to me childish to practise with the scalpel on an imaginary body. Begin by dissecting a corpse."

Every one prepared to listen, with all the greater readiness because they had all talked enough, and this is the moment to be chosen for telling a story. This, then, is the Consul-General's tale: —

"When I was two-and-twenty, and had taken my degree in law, my old uncle, the Abbe Loraux, then seventy-two years old, felt it necessary to provide me with a protector, and to start me in some career. This excellent man, if not indeed a saint, regarded each year of his life as a fresh gift from God. I need not tell you that the father confessor of a Royal Highness had no difficulty in finding a place for a young man brought up by himself, his sister's only child. So one day, towards the end of the year 1824, this venerable old man, who for five years had been Cure of the White Friars at Paris, came up to the room I had in his house, and said:

"'Get yourself dressed, my dear boy; I am going to introduce you to some one who is willing to engage you as secretary. If I am not mistaken, he may fill my place in the event of God's taking me to Himself. I shall have finished mass at nine o'clock; you have three-quarters of an hour before you. Be ready.'

"'What, uncle! must I say good-bye to this room, where for four years I have been so happy?'

"'I have no fortune to leave you,' said he.

"'Have you not the reputation of your name to leave me, the memory of your good works – ?'

"'We need say nothing of that inheritance,' he replied, smiling. 'You do not yet know enough of the world to be aware that a legacy of that kind is hardly likely to be paid, whereas by taking you this morning to M. le Comte' – Allow me," said the Consul, interrupting himself, "to speak of my protector by his Christian name only, and to call him Comte Octave. – 'By taking you this morning to M. le Comte Octave, I hope to secure you his patronage, which, if you are so fortunate as to please that virtuous statesman – as I make no doubt you can – will be worth, at least, as much as the fortune I might have accumulated for you, if my brother-in-law's ruin and my sister's death had not fallen on me like a thunder-bolt from a clear sky.'

"'Are you the Count's director?'

"'If I were, could I place you with him? What priest could be capable of taking advantage of the secrets which he learns at the tribunal of repentance? No; you owe this position to his Highness, the Keeper of the Seals. My dear Maurice, you will be as much at home there as in your father's house. The Count will give you a salary of two thousand four hundred francs, rooms in his house, and an allowance of twelve hundred francs in lieu of feeding you. He will not admit you to his table, nor give you a

separate table, for fear of leaving you to the care of servants. I did not accept the offer when it was made to me till I was perfectly certain that Comte Octave's secretary was never to be a mere upper servant. You will have an immense amount of work, for the Count is a great worker; but when you leave him, you will be qualified to fill the highest posts. I need not warn you to be discreet; that is the first virtue of any man who hopes to hold public appointments.'

"You may conceive of my curiosity. Comte Octave, at that time, held one of the highest legal appointments; he was in the confidence of Madame the Dauphiness, who had just got him made a State Minister; he led such a life as the Comte de Serizy, whom you all know, I think; but even more quietly, for his house was in the Marais, Rue Payenne, and he hardly ever entertained. His private life escaped public comment by its hermit-like simplicity and by constant hard work.

"Let me describe my position to you in a few words. Having found in the solemn headmaster of the College Saint-Louis a tutor to whom my uncle delegated his authority, at the age of eighteen I had gone through all the classes; I left school as innocent as a seminarist, full of faith, on quitting Saint-Sulpice. My mother, on her deathbed, had made my uncle promise that I should not become a priest, but I was as pious as though I had to take orders. On leaving college, the Abbe Loraux took me into his house and made me study law. During the four years of study requisite for passing all the examinations, I worked hard, but

chiefly at things outside the arid fields of jurisprudence. Weaned from literature as I had been at college, where I lived in the headmaster's house, I had a thirst to quench. As soon as I had read a few modern masterpieces, the works of all the preceding ages were greedily swallowed. I became crazy about the theatre, and for a long time I went every night to the play, though my uncle gave me only a hundred francs a month. This parsimony, to which the good old man was compelled by his regard for the poor, had the effect of keeping a young man's desires within reasonable limits.

"When I went to live with Comte Octave I was not indeed an innocent, but I thought of my rare escapades as crimes. My uncle was so truly angelic, and I was so much afraid of grieving him, that in all those four years I had never spent a night out. The good man would wait till I came in to go to bed. This maternal care had more power to keep me within bounds than the sermons and reproaches with which the life of a young man is diversified in a puritanical home. I was a stranger to the various circles which make up the world of Paris society; I only knew some women of the better sort, and none of the inferior class but those I saw as I walked about, or in the boxes at the play, and then only from the depths of the pit where I sat. If, at that period, any one had said to me, 'You will see Canalis, or Camille Maupin,' I should have felt hot coals in my head and in my bowels. Famous people were to me as gods, who neither spoke, nor walked, nor ate like other mortals.

"How many tales of the Thousand-and-one Nights are comprehended in the ripening of a youth! How many wonderful lamps must we have rubbed before we understand that the True Wonderful Lamp is either luck, or work, or genius. In some men this dream of the aroused spirit is but brief; mine has lasted until now! In those days I always went to sleep as Grand Duke of Tuscany, – as a millionaire, – as beloved by a princess, – or famous! So to enter the service of Comte Octave, and have a hundred louis a year, was entering on independent life. I had glimpses of some chance of getting into society, and seeking for what my heart desired most, a protectress, who would rescue me from the paths of danger, which a young man of two-and-twenty can hardly help treading, however prudent and well brought up he may be. I began to be afraid of myself.

"The persistent study of other people's rights into which I had plunged was not always enough to repress painful imaginings. Yes, sometimes in fancy I threw myself into theatrical life; I thought I could be a great actor; I dreamed of endless triumphs and loves, knowing nothing of the disillusion hidden behind the curtain, as everywhere else – for every stage has its reverse behind the scenes. I have gone out sometimes, my heart boiling, carried away by an impulse to rush hunting through Paris, to attach myself to some handsome woman I might meet, to follow her to her door, watch her, write to her, throw myself on her mercy, and conquer her by sheer force of passion. My poor uncle, a heart consumed by charity, a child of seventy years, as clear-

sighted as God, as guileless as a man of genius, no doubt read the tumult of my soul; for when he felt the tether by which he held me strained too tightly and ready to break, he would never fail to say, 'Here, Maurice, you too are poor! Here are twenty francs; go and amuse yourself, you are not a priest!' And if you could have seen the dancing light that gilded his gray eyes, the smile that relaxed his fine lips, puckering the corners of his mouth, the adorable expression of that august face, whose native ugliness was redeemed by the spirit of an apostle, you would understand the feeling which made me answer the Cure of White Friars only with a kiss, as if he had been my mother.

"'In Comte Octave you will find not a master, but a friend,' said my uncle on the way to the Rue Payenne. 'But he is distrustful, or to be more exact, he is cautious. The statesman's friendship can be won only with time; for in spite of his deep insight and his habit of gauging men, he was deceived by the man you are succeeding, and nearly became a victim to his abuse of confidence. This is enough to guide you in your behavior to him.'

"When we knocked at the enormous outer door of a house as large as the Hotel Carnavalet, with a courtyard in front and a garden behind, the sound rang as in a desert. While my uncle inquired of an old porter in livery if the Count were at home, I cast my eyes, seeing everything at once, over the courtyard where the cobblestones were hidden in the grass, the blackened walls where little gardens were flourishing above the decorations of the elegant architecture, and on the roof, as high as that of the

Tuileries. The balustrade of the upper balconies was eaten away. Through a magnificent colonnade I could see a second court on one side, where were the offices; the door was rotting. An old coachman was there cleaning an old carriage. The indifferent air of this servant allowed me to assume that the handsome stables, where of old so many horses had whinnied, now sheltered two at most. The handsome facade of the house seemed to me gloomy, like that of a mansion belonging to the State or the Crown, and given up to some public office. A bell rang as we walked across, my uncle and I, from the porter's lodge —*Inquire of the Porter* was still written over the door – towards the outside steps, where a footman came out in a livery like that of Labranche at the Theatre Francais in the old stock plays. A visitor was so rare that the servant was putting his coat on when he opened a glass door with small panes, on each side of which the smoke of a lamp had traced patterns on the walls.

"A hall so magnificent as to be worthy of Versailles ended in a staircase such as will never again be built in France, taking up as much space as the whole of a modern house. As we went up the marble steps, as cold as tombstones, and wide enough for eight persons to walk abreast, our tread echoed under sonorous vaulting. The banister charmed the eye by its miraculous workmanship – goldsmith's work in iron – wrought by the fancy of an artist of the time of Henri III. Chilled as by an icy mantle that fell on our shoulders, we went through ante-rooms, drawing-rooms opening one out of the other, with

carpetless parquet floors, and furnished with such splendid antiquities as from thence would find their way to the curiosity dealers. At last we reached a large study in a cross wing, with all the windows looking into an immense garden.

"'Monsieur le Cure of the White Friars, and his nephew, Monsieur de l'Hostal,' said Labranche, to whose care the other theatrical servant had consigned us in the first ante-chamber.

"Comte Octave, dressed in long trousers and a gray flannel morning coat, rose from his seat by a huge writing-table, came to the fireplace, and signed to me to sit down, while he went forward to take my uncle's hands, which he pressed.

"'Though I am in the parish of Saint-Paul,' said he, 'I could scarcely have failed to hear of the Cure of the White Friars, and I am happy to make his acquaintance.'

"'Your Excellency is most kind,' replied my uncle. 'I have brought to you my only remaining relation. While I believe that I am offering a good gift to your Excellency, I hope at the same time to give my nephew a second father.'

"'As to that, I can only reply, Monsieur l'Abbe, when we shall have tried each other,' said Comte Octave. 'Your name?' he added to me.

"'Maurice.'

"'He has taken his doctor's degree in law,' my uncle observed.

"'Very good, very good!' said the Count, looking at me from head to foot. 'Monsieur l'Abbe, I hope that for your nephew's sake in the first instance, and then for mine, you will do me

the honor of dining here every Monday. That will be our family dinner, our family party.'

"My uncle and the Count then began to talk of religion from the political point of view, of charitable institutes, the repression of crime, and I could at my leisure study the man on whom my fate would henceforth depend. The Count was of middle height; it was impossible to judge of his build on account of his dress, but he seemed to me to be lean and spare. His face was harsh and hollow; the features were refined. His mouth, which was rather large, expressed both irony and kindliness. His forehead perhaps too spacious, was as intimidating as that of a madman, all the more so from the contrast of the lower part of the face, which ended squarely in a short chin very near the lower lip. Small eyes, of turquoise blue, were as keen and bright as those of the Prince de Talleyrand – which I admired at a later time – and endowed, like the Prince's, with the faculty of becoming expressionless to the verge of gloom; and they added to the singularity of a face that was not pale but yellow. This complexion seemed to bespeak an irritable temper and violent passions. His hair, already silvered, and carefully dressed, seemed to furrow his head with streaks of black and white alternately. The trimness of this head spoiled the resemblance I had remarked in the Count to the wonderful monk described by Lewis after Schedoni in the *Confessional of the Black Penitents (The Italian)*, a superior creation, as it seems to me, to *The Monk*.

"The Count was already shaved, having to attend early at the

law courts. Two candelabra with four lights, screened by lampshades, were still burning at the opposite ends of the writing-table, and showed plainly that the magistrate rose long before daylight. His hands, which I saw when he took hold of the bell-pull to summon his servant, were extremely fine, and as white as a woman's.

"As I tell you this story," said the Consul-General, interrupting himself, "I am altering the titles and the social position of this gentleman, while placing him in circumstances analogous to what his really were. His profession, rank, luxury, fortune, and style of living were the same; all these details are true, but I would not be false to my benefactor, nor to my usual habits of discretion.

"Instead of feeling – as I really was, socially speaking – an insect in the presence of an eagle," the narrator went on after a pause, "I felt I know not what indefinable impression from the Count's appearance, which, however, I can now account for. Artists of genius" (and he bowed gracefully to the Ambassador, the distinguished lady, and the two Frenchmen), "real statesmen, poets, a general who has commanded armies – in short, all really great minds are simple, and their simplicity places you on a level with themselves. – You who are all of superior minds," he said, addressing his guests, "have perhaps observed how feeling can bridge over the distances created by society. If we are inferior to you in intellect, we can be your equals in devoted friendship. By the temperature – allow me the word – of our hearts I felt myself as near my patron as I was far below him in rank. In short, the

soul has its clairvoyance; it has presentiments of suffering, grief, joy, antagonism, or hatred in others.

"I vaguely discerned the symptoms of a mystery, from recognizing in the Count the same effects of physiognomy as I had observed in my uncle. The exercise of virtue, serenity of conscience, and purity of mind had transfigured my uncle, who from being ugly had become quite beautiful. I detected a metamorphosis of a reverse kind in the Count's face; at the first glance I thought he was about fifty-five, but after an attentive examination I found youth entombed under the ice of a great sorrow, under the fatigue of persistent study, under the glowing hues of some suppressed passion. At a word from my uncle the Count's eyes recovered for a moment the softness of the periwinkle flower, and he had an admiring smile, which revealed what I believed to be his real age, about forty. These observations I made, not then but afterwards, as I recalled the circumstances of my visit.

"The man-servant came in carrying a tray with his master's breakfast on it.

"'I did not ask for breakfast,' remarked the Count; 'but leave it, and show monsieur to his rooms.'

"I followed the servant, who led the way to a complete set of pretty rooms, under a terrace, between the great courtyard and the servants' quarters, over a corridor of communication between the kitchens and the grand staircase. When I returned to the Count's study, I overheard, before opening the door, my uncle

pronouncing this judgment on me:

"'He may do wrong, for he has strong feelings, and we are all liable to honorable mistakes; but he has no vices.'

"'Well,' said the Count, with a kindly look, 'do you like yourself there? Tell me. There are so many rooms in this barrack that, if you were not comfortable, I could put you elsewhere.'

"'At my uncle's I had but one room,' replied I.

"'Well, you can settle yourself this evening,' said the Count, 'for your possessions, no doubt, are such as all students own, and a hackney coach will be enough to convey them. To-day we will all three dine together,' and he looked at my uncle.

"A splendid library opened from the Count's study, and he took us in there, showing me a pretty little recess decorated with paintings, which had formerly served, no doubt, as an oratory.

"'This is your cell,' said he. 'You will sit there when you have to work with me, for you will not be tethered by a chain;' and he explained in detail the kind and duration of my employment with him. As I listened I felt that he was a great political teacher.

"It took me about a month to familiarize myself with people and things, to learn the duties of my new office, and accustom myself to the Count's methods. A secretary necessarily watches the man who makes use of him. That man's tastes, passions, temper, and manias become the subject of involuntary study. The union of their two minds is at once more and less than a marriage.

"During these months the Count and I reciprocally studied each other. I learned with astonishment that Comte Octave was

but thirty-seven years old. The merely superficial peacefulness of his life and the propriety of his conduct were the outcome not solely of a deep sense of duty and of stoical reflection; in my constant intercourse with this man – an extraordinary man to those who knew him well – I felt vast depths beneath his toil, beneath his acts of politeness, his mask of benignity, his assumption of resignation, which so closely resembled calmness that it is easy to mistake it. Just as when walking through forest-lands certain soils give forth under our feet a sound which enables us to guess whether they are dense masses of stone or a void; so intense egoism, though hidden under the flowers of politeness, and subterranean caverns eaten out by sorrow sound hollow under the constant touch of familiar life. It was sorrow and not despondency that dwelt in that really great soul. The Count had understood that actions, deeds, are the supreme law of social man. And he went on his way in spite of secret wounds, looking to the future with a tranquil eye, like a martyr full of faith.

"His concealed sadness, the bitter disenchantment from which he suffered, had not led him into philosophical deserts of incredulity; this brave statesman was religious, without ostentation; he always attended the earliest mass at Saint-Paul's for pious workmen and servants. Not one of his friends, no one at Court, knew that he so punctually fulfilled the practice of religion. He was addicted to God as some men are addicted to a vice, with the greatest mystery. Thus one day I came to find the Count at the summit of an Alp of woe much higher than

that on which many are who think themselves the most tried; who laugh at the passions and the beliefs of others because they have conquered their own; who play variations in every key of irony and disdain. He did not mock at those who still follow hope into the swamps whither she leads, nor those who climb a peak to be alone, nor those who persist in the fight, reddening the arena with their blood and strewing it with their illusions. He looked on the world as a whole; he mastered its beliefs; he listened to its complaining; he was doubtful of affection, and yet more of self-sacrifice; but this great and stern judge pitied them, or admired them, not with transient enthusiasm, but with silence, concentration, and the communion of a deeply-touched soul. He was a sort of catholic Manfred, and unstained by crime, carrying his choiceness into his faith, melting the snows by the fires of a sealed volcano, holding converse with a star seen by himself alone!

"I detected many dark riddles in his ordinary life. He evaded my gaze not like a traveler who, following a path, disappears from time to time in dells or ravines according to the formation of the soil, but like a sharpshooter who is being watched, who wants to hide himself, and seeks a cover. I could not account for his frequent absences at the times when he was working the hardest, and of which he made no secret from me, for he would say, 'Go on with this for me,' and trust me with the work in hand.

"This man, wrapped in the threefold duties of the statesman, the judge, and the orator, charmed me by a taste for flowers,

which shows an elegant mind, and which is shared by almost all persons of refinement. His garden and his study were full of the rarest plants, but he always bought them half-withered. Perhaps it pleased him to see such an image of his own fate! He was faded like these dying flowers, whose almost decaying fragrance mounted strangely to his brain. The Count loved his country; he devoted himself to public interests with the frenzy of a heart that seeks to cheat some other passion; but the studies and work into which he threw himself were not enough for him; there were frightful struggles in his mind, of which some echoes reached me. Finally, he would give utterance to harrowing aspirations for happiness, and it seemed to me he ought yet to be happy; but what was the obstacle? Was there a woman he loved? This was a question I asked myself. You may imagine the extent of the circles of torment that my mind had searched before coming to so simple and so terrible a question. Notwithstanding his efforts, my patron did not succeed in stifling the movements of his heart. Under his austere manner, under the reserve of the magistrate, a passion rebelled, though coerced with such force that no one but I who lived with him ever guessed the secret. His motto seemed to be, 'I suffer, and am silent.' The escort of respect and admiration which attended him; the friendship of workers as valiant as himself – Grandville and Serizy, both presiding judges – had no hold over the Count: either he told them nothing, or they knew all. Impassible and lofty in public, the Count betrayed the man only on rare intervals when, alone in his garden or his

study, he supposed himself unobserved; but then he was a child again, he gave course to the tears hidden beneath the toga, to the excitement which, if wrongly interpreted, might have damaged his credit for perspicacity as a statesman.

"When all this had become to me a matter of certainty, Comte Octave had all the attractions of a problem, and won on my affection as much as though he had been my own father. Can you enter into the feeling of curiosity, tempered by respect? What catastrophe had blasted this learned man, who, like Pitt, had devoted himself from the age of eighteen to the studies indispensable to power, while he had no ambition; this judge, who thoroughly knew the law of nations, political law, civil and criminal law, and who could find in these a weapon against every anxiety, against every mistake; this profound legislator, this serious writer, this pious celibate whose life sufficiently proved that he was open to no reproach? A criminal could not have been more hardly punished by God than was my master; sorrow had robbed him of half his slumbers; he never slept more than four hours. What struggle was it that went on in the depths of these hours apparently so calm, so studious, passing without a sound or a murmur, during which I often detected him, when the pen had dropped from his fingers, with his head resting on one hand, his eyes like two fixed stars, and sometimes wet with tears? How could the waters of that living spring flow over the burning strand without being dried up by the subterranean fire? Was there below it, as there is under the sea, between it and the central fires of

the globe, a bed of granite? And would the volcano burst at last?

"Sometimes the Count would give me a look of that sagacious and keen-eyed curiosity by which one man searches another when he desires an accomplice; then he shunned my eye as he saw it open a mouth, so to speak, insisting on a reply, and seeming to say, 'Speak first!' Now and then Comte Octave's melancholy was surly and gruff. If these spurts of temper offended me, he could get over it without thinking of asking my pardon; but then his manners were gracious to the point of Christian humility.

"When I became attached like a son to this man – to me such a mystery, but so intelligible to the outer world, to whom the epithet eccentric is enough to account for all the enigmas of the heart – I changed the state of the house. Neglect of his own interests was carried by the Count to the length of folly in the management of his affairs. Possessing an income of about a hundred and sixty thousand francs, without including the emoluments of his appointments – three of which did not come under the law against plurality – he spent sixty thousand, of which at least thirty thousand went to his servants. By the end of the first year I had got rid of all these rascals, and begged His Excellency to use his influence in helping me to get honest servants. By the end of the second year the Count, better fed and better served, enjoyed the comforts of modern life; he had fine horses, supplied by a coachman to whom I paid so much a month for each horse; his dinners on his reception days, furnished by Chevet at a price agreed upon, did him credit; his daily meals

were prepared by an excellent cook found by my uncle, and helped by two kitchenmaids. The expenditure for housekeeping, not including purchases, was no more than thirty thousand francs a year; we had two additional men-servants, whose care restored the poetical aspect of the house; for this old palace, splendid even in its rust, had an air of dignity which neglect had dishonored.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.