Honoré de Balzac

The Brotherhood of Consolation

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FIRST EPISODE. MADAME DE LA CHANTERIE

I. THE MALADY OF THE AGE

On a fine evening in the month of September, 1836, a man about thirty years of age was leaning on the parapet of that quay from which a spectator can look up the Seine from the Jardin des Plantes to Notre-Dame, and down, along the vast perspective of the river, to the Louvre. There is not another point of view to compare with it in the capital of ideas. We feel ourselves on the quarter-deck, as it were, of a gigantic vessel. We dream of Paris from the days of the Romans to those of the Franks, from the Normans to the Burgundians, the Middle-Ages, the Valois, Henri IV., Louis XIV., Napoleon, and Louis-Philippe. Vestiges are before us of all those sovereignties, in monuments that recall their memory. The cupola of Sainte-Genevieve towers above the Latin quarter. Behind us rises the noble apsis of the cathedral. The Hotel de Ville tells of revolutions; the Hotel-Dieu, of the miseries of Paris. After gazing at the splendors of the Louvre we can, by taking two steps, look down upon the rags and tatters of that ignoble nest of houses huddling between the quai de la Tournelle and the Hotel-Dieu, – a foul spot, which a modern municipality is endeavoring at the present moment to remove.

In 1836 this marvellous scene presented still another lesson to the eye: between the Parisian leaning on the parapet and the cathedral lay the "Terrain" (such was the ancient name of this barren spot), still strewn with the ruins of the Archiepiscopal Palace. When we contemplate from that quay so many commemorating scenes, when the soul has grasped the past as it does the present of this city of Paris, then indeed Religion seems to have alighted there as if to spread her hands above the sorrows of both banks and extend her arms from the faubourg Saint-Antoine to the faubourg Saint-Marceau. Let us hope that this sublime unity may be completed by the erection of an episcopal palace of the Gothic order; which shall replace the formless buildings now standing between the "Terrain," the rue d'Arcole, the cathedral, and the quai de la Cite.

This spot, the heart of ancient Paris, is the loneliest and most melancholy of regions. The waters of the Seine break there noisily, the cathedral casts its shadows at the setting of the sun. We can easily believe that serious thoughts must have filled the mind of a man afflicted with a moral malady as he leaned upon that parapet. Attracted perhaps by the harmony between his thoughts and those to which these diverse scenes gave birth, he rested his hands upon the coping and gave way to a double contemplation, – of Paris, and of himself! The shadows deepened, the lights shone out afar, but still he did not move, carried along as he was on the current of a meditation, such as comes to many of us, big with the future and rendered solemn by the past.

After a while he heard two persons coming towards him, whose voices had caught his attention on the bridge which joins the Ile de la Cite with the quai de la Tournelle. These persons no doubt thought themselves alone, and therefore spoke louder than they would have done in more frequented places. The voices betrayed a discussion which apparently, from the few words that reached the ear of the involuntary listener, related to a loan of money. Just as the pair approached the quay, one of them, dressed like a working man, left the other with a despairing gesture. The other stopped and called after him, saying: —

"You have not a sou to pay your way across the bridge. Take this," he added, giving the man a piece of money; "and remember, my friend, that God Himself is speaking to us when a good thought comes into our hearts."

This last remark made the dreamer at the parapet quiver. The man who made it little knew that, to use a proverbial expression, he was killing two birds with one stone, addressing two miseries, – a working life brought to despair, a suffering soul without a compass, the victim of what Panurge's sheep call progress, and what, in France, is called equality. The words, simple in themselves, became sublime from the tone of him who said them, in a voice that possesses a spell. Are there not, in fact, some calm and tender voices that produce upon us the same effect as a far horizon outlook?

By his dress the dreamer knew him to be a priest, and he saw by the last gleams of the fading twilight a white, august, worn face. The sight of a priest issuing from the beautiful cathedral of Saint-Etienne in Vienna, bearing the Extreme Unction to a dying person, determined the celebrated tragic author Werner to become a Catholic. Almost the same effect was produced upon the dreamer when he looked upon the man who had, all unknowing, given him comfort; on the threatening horizon of his future he saw a luminous space where shone the blue of ether, and he followed that light as the shepherds of the Gospel followed the voices that cried to them: "Christ, the Lord, is born this day."

The man who had said the beneficent words passed on by the wall of the cathedral, taking, as a result of chance, which often leads to great results, the direction of the street from which the dreamer came, and to which he was now returning, led by the faults of his life.

This dreamer was named Godefroid. Whoever reads this history will understand the reasons which lead the writer to use the Christian names only of some who are mentioned in it. The motives which led Godefroid, who lived in the quarter of the Chaussee-d'Antin, to the neighborhood of Notre-Dame at such an hour were as follows: —

The son of a retail shopkeeper, whose economy enabled him to lay by a sort of fortune, he was the sole object of ambition to his father and mother, who dreamed of seeing him a notary in Paris. For this reason, at the age of seven, he was sent to an institution, that of the Abbe Liautard, to be thrown among children of distinguished families who, during the Empire, chose this school for the education of their sons in preference to the lyceums, where religion was too much overlooked. Social inequalities were not noticeable among schoolmates; but in 1821, his studies being ended, Godefroid, who was then with a notary, became aware of the distance that separated him from those with whom he had hitherto lived on familiar terms.

Obliged to go through the law school, he there found himself among a crowd of the sons of the bourgeoisie, who, without fortunes to inherit or hereditary distinctions, could look only to their own personal merits or to persistent toil. The hopes that his father and mother, then retired from business, placed upon him stimulated the youth's vanity without exciting his pride. His parents lived simply, like the thrifty Dutch, spending only one fourth of an income of twelve thousand francs. They intended their savings, together with half their capital, for the purchase of a notary's practice for their son. Subjected to the rule of this domestic economy, Godefroid found his immediate state so disproportioned to the visions of himself and his parents, that he grew discouraged. In some feeble natures discouragement turns to envy; others, in whom necessity, will, reflection, stand in place of talent, march straight and resolutely in the path traced out for bourgeois ambitions. Godefroid, on the contrary, revolted, wished to shine, tried several brilliant ways, and blinded his eyes. He endeavored to succeed; but all his efforts ended in proving the fact of his own impotence. Admitting at last the inequality that existed between his desires and his capacities, he began to hate all social supremacies, became a Liberal, and attempted to reach celebrity by writing a book; but he learned, to his cost, to regard talent as he did nobility. Having tried the law, the notariat, and literature, without distinguishing himself in any way, his mind now turned to the magistracy.

About this time his father died. His mother, who contented herself in her old age with two thousand francs a year, gave the rest of the fortune to Godefroid. Thus possessed, at the age of twenty-five, of ten thousand francs a year, he felt himself rich; and he was so, relatively to the past. Until then his life had been spent on acts without will, on wishes that were impotent; now, to advance with the age, to act, to play a part, he resolved to enter some career or find some connection that should

further his fortunes. He first thought of journalism, which always opens its arms to any capital that may come in its way. To be the owner of a newspaper is to become a personage at once; such a man works intellect, and has all the gratifications of it and none of the labor. Nothing is more tempting to inferior minds than to be able to rise in this way on the talents of others. Paris has seen two or three parvenus of this kind, – men whose success is a disgrace, both to the epoch and to those who have lent them their shoulders.

In this sphere Godefroid was soon outdone by the brutal Machiavellianism of some, or by the lavish prodigality of others; by the fortunes of ambitious capitalists, or by the wit and shrewdness of editors. Meantime he was drawn into all the dissipations that arise from literary or political life, and he yielded to the temptations incurred by journalists behind the scenes. He soon found himself in bad company; but this experience taught him that his appearance was insignificant, that he had one shoulder higher than the other, without the inequality being redeemed by either malignancy or kindness of nature. Such were the truths these artists made him feel.

Small, ill-made, without superiority of mind or settled purpose, what chance was there for a man like that in an age when success in any career demands that the highest qualities of the mind be furthered by luck, or by tenacity of will which commands luck.

The revolution of 1830 stanched Godefroid's wounds. He had the courage of hope, which is equal to that of despair. He obtained an appointment, like other obscure journalists, to a government situation in the provinces, where his liberal ideas, conflicting with the necessities of the new power, made him a troublesome instrument. Bitten with liberalism, he did not know, as cleverer men did, how to steer a course. Obedience to ministers he regarded as sacrificing his opinions. Besides, the government seemed to him to be disobeying the laws of its own origin. Godefroid declared for progress, where the object of the government was to maintain the *statu quo*. He returned to Paris almost poor, but faithful still to the doctrines of the Opposition.

Alarmed by the excesses of the press, more alarmed still by the attempted outrages of the republican party, he sought in retirement from the world the only life suitable for a being whose faculties were incomplete, and without sufficient force to bear up against the rough jostling of political life, the struggles and sufferings of which confer no credit, – a being, too, who was wearied with his many miscarriages; without friends, for friendship demands either striking merits or striking defects, and yet possessing a sensibility of soul more dreamy than profound. Surely a retired life was the course left for a young man whom pleasure had more than once misled, – whose heart was already aged by contact with a world as restless as it was disappointing.

His mother, who was dying in the peaceful village of Auteuil, recalled her son to live with her, partly to have him near her, and partly to put him in the way of finding an equable, tranquil happiness which might satisfy a soul like his. She had ended by judging Godefroid, finding him at twenty-eight with two-thirds of his fortune gone, his desires dulled, his pretended capacities extinct, his activity dead, his ambition humbled, and his hatred against all that reached legitimate success increased by his own shortcomings.

She tried to marry him to an excellent young girl, the only daughter of a retired merchant, – a woman well fitted to play the part of guardian to the sickened soul of her son. But the father had the business spirit which never abandons an old merchant, especially in matrimonial negotiations, and after a year of attentions and neighborly intercourse, Godefroid was not accepted. In the first place, his former career seemed to these worthy people profoundly immoral; then, during this very year, he had made still further inroads into his capital, as much to dazzle the parents as to please the daughter. This vanity, excusable as it was, caused his final rejection by the family, who held dissipation of property in holy horror, and who now discovered that in six years Godefroid had spent or lost a hundred and fifty thousand francs of his capital.

This blow struck the young man's already wounded heart the more deeply because the girl herself had no personal beauty. But, guided by his mother in judging her character, he had ended by

recognizing in the woman he sought the great value of an earnest soul, and the vast advantages of a sound mind. He had grown accustomed to the face; he had studied the countenance; he loved the voice, the manners, the glance of that young girl. Having cast on this attachment the last stake of his life, the disappointment he endured was the bitterest of all. His mother died, and he found himself, he who had always desired luxury, with five thousand francs a year for his whole fortune, and with the certainty that never in his future life could he repair any loss whatsoever; for he felt himself incapable of the effort expressed in that terrible injunction, to *make his way*.

Weak, impatient grief cannot easily be shaken off. During his mourning, Godefroid tried the various chances and distractions of Paris; he dined at table-d'hotes; he made acquaintances heedlessly; he sought society, with no result but that of increasing his expenditures. Walking along the boulevards, he often suffered deeply at the sight of a mother walking with a marriageable daughter, – a sight which caused him as painful an emotion as he formerly felt when a young man passed him riding to the Bois, or driving in an elegant equipage. The sense of his impotence told him that he could never hope for the best of even secondary positions, nor for any easily won career; and he had heart enough to feel constantly wounded, mind enough to make in his own breast the bitterest of elegies.

Unfitted to struggle against circumstances, having an inward consciousness of superior faculties without the will that could put them in action, feeling himself incomplete, without force to undertake any great thing, without resistance against the tastes derived from his earlier life, his education, and his indolence, he was the victim of three maladies, any one of which would be enough to sicken of life a young man long alienated from religious faith.

Thus it was that Godefroid presented, even to the eye, the face that we meet so often in Paris that it might be called the type of the Parisian; in it we may see ambitions deceived or dead, inward wretchedness, hatred sleeping in the indolence of a life passed in watching the daily and external life of Paris, apathy which seeks stimulation, lament without talent, a mimicry of strength, the venom of past disappointments which excites to cynicism, and spits upon all that enlarges and grows, misconceives all necessary authority, rejoicing in its embarrassments, and will not hold to any social form. This Parisian malady is to the active and permanent impulse towards conspiracy in persons of energy what the sapwood is to the sap of the trees; it preserves it, feeds it, and conceals it.

II. OLD HOUSE, OLD PEOPLE, OLD CUSTOMS

Weary of himself, Godefroid attempted one day to give a meaning to his life, after meeting a former comrade who had been the tortoise in the fable, while he in earlier days had been the hare. In one of those conversations which arise when schoolmates meet again in after years, – a conversation held as they were walking together in the sunshine on the boulevard des Italiens, – he was startled to learn the success of a man endowed apparently with less gifts, less means, less fortune than himself; but who had bent his will each morning to the purpose resolved upon the night before. The sick soul then determined to imitate that simple action.

"Social existence is like the soil," his comrade had said to him; "it makes us a return in proportion to our efforts."

Godefroid was in debt. As a first test, a first task, he resolved to live in some retired place, and pay his debts from his income. To a man accustomed to spend six thousand francs when he had but five, it was no small undertaking to bring himself to live on two thousand. Every morning he studied advertisements, hoping to find the offer of some asylum where his expenses could be fixed, where he might have the solitude a man wants when he makes a return upon himself, examines himself, and endeavors to give himself a vocation. The manners and customs of bourgeois boarding-houses shocked his delicacy, sanitariums seemed to him unhealthy, and he was about to fall back into the fatal irresolution of persons without will, when the following advertisement met his eye: —

> "To Let. A small lodging for seventy francs a month; suitable for an ecclesiastic. A quiet tenant desired. Board supplied; the rooms can be furnished at a moderate cost if mutually acceptable.
>
> "Inquire of M. Millet, grocer, rue Chanoinesse, near Notre-Dame, where all further information can be obtained."

Attracted by a certain kindliness concealed beneath these words, and the middle-class air which exhaled from them, Godefroid had, on the afternoon when we found him on the quay, called at four o'clock on the grocer, who told him that Madame de la Chanterie was then dining, and did not receive any one when at her meals. The lady, he said, was visible in the evening after seven o'clock, or in the morning between ten and twelve. While speaking, Monsieur Millet examined Godefroid, and made him submit to what magistrates call the "first degree of interrogation."

"Was monsieur unmarried? Madame wished a person of regular habits; the gate was closed at eleven at the latest. Monsieur certainly seemed of an age to suit Madame de la Chanterie."

"How old do you think me?" asked Godefroid.

"About forty!" replied the grocer.

This ingenuous answer threw the young man into a state of misanthropic gloom. He went off and dined at a restaurant on the quai de la Tournelle, and afterwards went to the parapet to contemplate Notre-Dame at the moment when the fires of the setting sun were rippling and breaking about the manifold buttresses of the apsis.

The young man was floating between the promptings of despair and the moving voice of religious harmonies sounding in the bell of the cathedral when, amid the shadows, the silence, the half-veiled light of the moon, he heard the words of the priest. Though, like most of the sons of our century, he was far from religious, his sensibilities were touched by those words, and he returned to the rue Chanoinesse, although he had almost made up his mind not to do so.

The priest and Godefroid were both surprised when they entered together the rue Massilon, which is opposite to the small north portal of the cathedral, and turned together into the rue Chanoinesse, at the point where, towards the rue de la Colombe, it becomes the rue des Marmousets. When Godefroid stopped before the arched portal of Madame de la Chanterie's house, the priest

turned towards him and examined him by the light of the hanging street-lamp, probably one of the last to disappear from the heart of old Paris.

"Have you come to see Madame de la Chanterie, monsieur?" said the priest.

"Yes," replied Godefroid. "The words I heard you say to that workman show me that, if you live here, this house must be salutary for the soul."

"Then you were a witness of my defeat," said the priest, raising the knocker of the door, "for I did not succeed."

"I thought, on the contrary, it was the workman who did not succeed; he demanded money energetically."

"Alas!" replied the priest, "one of the great evils of revolutions in France is that each offers a fresh premium to the ambitions of the lower classes. To get out of his condition, to make his fortune (which is regarded to-day as the only social standard), the working-man throws himself into some of those monstrous associations which, if they do not succeed, ought to bring the speculators to account before human justice. This is what trusts often lead to."

The porter opened a heavy door. The priest said to Godefroid: "Monsieur has perhaps come about the little suite of rooms?"

"Yes, monsieur."

The priest and Godefroid then crossed a wide courtyard, at the farther end of which loomed darkly a tall house flanked by a square tower which rose above the roof, and appeared to be in a dilapidated condition. Whoever knows the history of Paris, knows that the soil before and around the cathedral has been so raised that there is not a vestige now of the twelve steps which formerly led up to it. To-day the base of the columns of the porch is on a level with the pavement; consequently what was once the ground-floor of the house of which we speak is now its cellar. A portico, reached by a few steps, leads to the entrance of the tower, in which a spiral stairway winds up round a central shaft carved with a grape-vine. This style, which recalls the stairways of Louis XII. at the chateau of Blois, dates from the fourteenth century. Struck by these and other evidences of antiquity, Godefroid could not help saying, with a smile, to the priest: "This tower is not of yesterday."

"It sustained, they say, an assault of the Normans, and probably formed part of the first palace of the kings of Paris; but, according to actual tradition, it was certainly the dwelling of the famous Canon Fulbert, the uncle of Heloise."

As he ended these words, the priest opened the door of the apartment which appeared now to be the ground-floor of the house, but was in reality towards both the front and back courtyard (for there was a small interior court) on the first floor.

In the antechamber a maid-servant, wearing a cambric cap with fluted frills for its sole decoration, was knitting by the light of a little lamp. She stuck her needles into her hair, held her work in her hand, and rose to open the door of a salon which looked out on the inner court. The dress of the woman was somewhat like that of the Sisters of Mercy.

"Madame, I bring you a tenant," said the priest, ushering Godefroid into the salon, where the latter saw three persons sitting in armchairs near Madame de la Chanterie.

These three persons rose; the mistress of the house rose; then, when the priest had drawn up another armchair for Godefroid, and when the future tenant had seated himself in obedience to a gesture of Madame de la Chanterie, accompanied by the old-fashioned words, "Be seated, monsieur," the man of the boulevards fancied himself at some enormous distance from Paris, – in lower Brittany or the wilds of Canada.

Silence has perhaps its own degrees. Godefroid, already penetrated with the silence of the rues Massillon and Chanoinesse, where two carriages do not pass in a month, and grasped by the silence of the courtyard and the tower, may have felt that he had reached the very heart of silence in this still salon, guarded by so many old streets, old courts, old walls.

This part of the Ile, which is called “the Cloister,” has preserved the character of all cloisters; it is damp, cold, and monastically silent even at the noisiest hours of the day. It will be remarked, also, that this portion of the Cite, crowded between the flank of Notre-Dame and the river, faces the north, and is always in the shadow of the cathedral. The east winds swirl through it unopposed, and the fogs of the Seine are caught and retained by the black walls of the old metropolitan church. No one will therefore be surprised at the sensations Godefroid felt when he found himself in this old dwelling, in presence of four silent human beings, who seemed as solemn as the things which surrounded them.

He did not look about him, being seized with curiosity as to Madame de la Chanterie, whose name was already a puzzle to him. This lady was evidently a person of another epoch, not to say of another world. Her face was placid, its tones both soft and cold; the nose aquiline; the forehead full of sweetness; the eyes brown; the chin double; and all were framed in silvery white hair. Her gown could only be called by its ancient name of “fourreau,” so tightly was she sheathed within it, after the fashion of the eighteenth century. The material – a brown silk, with very fine and multiplied green lines – seemed also of that period. The bodice, which was one with the skirt, was partly hidden beneath a mantle of *poult-de-soie* edged with black lace, and fastened on the bosom by a brooch enclosing a miniature. Her feet, in black velvet boots, rested on a cushion. Madame de la Chanterie, like her maid, was knitting a stocking, and she, too, had a needle stuck through her white curls beneath the lace of her cap.

“Have you seen Monsieur Millet?” she said to Godefroid, in the head voice peculiar to the dowagers of the faubourg Saint-Germain, observing that her visitor seemed confused, and as if to put the words into his mouth.

“Yes, madame.”

“I fear that the apartment will scarcely suit you,” she said, noticing the elegance and newness of his clothes.

Godefroid was wearing polished leather boots, yellow gloves, handsome studs, and a very pretty gold chain passed through the buttonhole of his waistcoat of black silk with blue flowers. Madame de la Chanterie took a little silver whistle from her pocket and blew it. The serving-woman came.

“Manon, my child, show this gentleman the apartment. Would you, my dear vicar, be so kind as to accompany him?” she said, addressing the priest. “If by chance,” she added, rising and again looking at Godefroid, “the apartment suits you, we will talk of the conditions.”

Godefroid bowed and went out. He heard the rattle of keys which Manon took from a drawer, and he saw her light the candle in a large brass candlestick. Manon went first, without uttering a word. When Godefroid found himself again on the staircase, winding up two flights, he doubted the reality of life, he dreamed awake, he saw with his eyes the fantastic world of romances he had read in his idle hours. Any Parisian leaving, as he did, the modern quarter, with its luxury of houses and furniture, the glitter of its restaurants and theatres, the tumult and movement of the heart of Paris, would have shared his feeling.

The candle carried by the woman feebly lighted the winding stair, where spiders swung their draperies gray with dust. Manon wore a petticoat with heavy plaits of a coarse woollen stuff; the bodice was square before and square behind, and all her clothes seemed to hang together. When she reached the second floor, which, it will be remembered, was actually the third, Manon stopped, turned a key in an ancient lock, and opened a door painted in a coarse imitation of mahogany.

“This is it,” she said, entering first.

Was it a miser, was it an artist dying in penury, was it a cynic to whom the world was naught, or some religious soul detached from life, who had occupied this apartment? That triple question might well be asked by one who breathed the odor of that poverty, who saw the greasy spots upon the papers yellow with smoke, the blackened ceilings, the dusty windows with their casement panes, the discolored floor-bricks, the wainscots layered with a sort of sticky glaze. A damp chill came from the chimneys with their mantels of painted stone, surmounted by mirrors in panels of the style of the

seventeenth century. The apartment was square, like the house, and looked out upon the inner court, which could not now be seen because of the darkness.

"Who has lived here?" asked Godefroid of the priest.

"A former councillor of the parliament, a great-uncle of madame, Monsieur de Boisfrelon. After the Revolution he fell into dotage; but he did not die until 1832, at the age of ninety-six. Madame could not at first make up her mind to let his rooms to a stranger, but she finds she cannot afford to lose the rent."

"Madame will have the apartment cleaned and furnished in a manner to satisfy monsieur," said Manon.

"That will depend on the arrangement you make with her," said the priest. "You have here a fine parlor, a large sleeping-room and closet, and those little rooms in the angle will make an excellent study. It is the same arrangement as in my apartment below, also in the one overhead."

"Yes," said Manon, "Monsieur Alain's apartment is just like this, only his has a view of the tower."

"I think I had better see the rooms by daylight," said Godefroid, timidly.

"Perhaps so," said Manon.

The priest and Godefroid went downstairs, leaving the woman to lock the doors. When they re-entered the salon, Godefroid, who was getting inured to the surroundings, looked about him while discoursing with Madame de la Chanterie, and examined the persons and things there present.

The salon had curtains at its windows of old red damask, with lambrequins, tied back at the sides with silken cords. The red-tiled floor showed at the edges of an old tapestry carpet too small to cover the whole room. The woodwork was painted gray. The plastered ceiling, divided in two parts by a heavy beam which started from the fireplace, seemed a concession tardily made to luxury. Armchairs, with their woodwork painted white, were covered with tapestry. A paltry clock, between two copper-gilt candlesticks, decorated the mantel-shelf. Beside Madame de la Chanterie was an ancient table with spindle legs, on which lay her balls of worsted in a wicker basket. A hydrostatic lamp lighted the scene. The four men, who were seated there, silent, immovable, like bronze statues, had evidently stopped their conversation with Madame de la Chanterie when they heard the stranger returning. They all had cold, discreet faces, in keeping with the room, the house, the quarter of the town.

Madame de la Chanterie admitted the justice of Godefroid's observations; but told him that she did not wish to make any change until she knew the intentions of her lodger, or rather her boarder. If he would conform to the customs of the house he could become her boarder; but these customs were widely different from those of Paris. Life in the rue Chanoinesse was like provincial life: the lodger must always be in by ten o'clock at night; they disliked noise; and could have no women or children to break up their customary habits. An ecclesiastic might conform to these ways. Madame de la Chanterie desired, above all, some one of simple life, who would not be exacting; she could afford to put only the strictest necessaries into the apartment. Monsieur Alain (here she designated one of the four men present) was satisfied, and she would do for a new tenant just as she did for the others.

"I do not think," said the priest, "that monsieur is inclined to enter our convent."

"Eh! why not?" said Monsieur Alain; "we are all well off here; we have nothing to complain of."

"Madame," said Godefroid, rising, "I shall have the honor of calling again to-morrow."

Though he was a young man, the four old men and Madame de la Chanterie rose, and the vicar accompanied him to the portico. A whistle sounded. At that signal the porter came with a lantern, guided Godefroid to the street, and closed behind him the enormous yellow door, – ponderous as that of a prison, and decorated with arabesque ironwork of a remote period that was difficult to determine.

Though Godefroid got into a cabriolet, and was soon rolling into the living, lighted, glowing regions of Paris, what he had seen still appeared to him a dream, and his impressions, as he made his way along the boulevard des Italiens, had already the remoteness of a memory. He asked himself, "Shall I to-morrow find those people there?"

III. THE HOUSE OF MONGENOD

The next day, as Godefroid rose amid the appointments of modern luxury and the choice appliances of English "comfort," he remembered the details of his visit to that cloister of Notre-Dame, and the meaning of the things he had seen there came into his mind. The three unknown and silent men, whose dress, attitude, and stillness acted powerfully upon him, were no doubt boarders like the priest. The solemnity of Madame de la Chanterie now seemed to him a secret dignity with which she bore some great misfortune. But still, in spite of the explanations which Godefroid gave himself, he could not help fancying there was an air of mystery about those sober figures.

He looked around him and selected the pieces of furniture that he would keep, those that were indispensable to him; but when he transported them in thought to the miserable lodging in the rue Chanoinesse, he began to laugh at the contrast they would make there, resolving to sell all and let Madame de la Chanterie furnish the rooms for him. He wanted a new life, and the very sight of these objects would remind him of that which he wished to forget. In his desire for transformation (for he belonged to those characters who spring at a bound into the middle of a situation, instead of advancing, as others do, step by step), he was seized while he breakfasted with an idea, – he would turn his whole property into money, pay his debts, and place the remainder of his capital in the banking-house with which his father had done business.

This house was the firm of Mongenod and Company, established in 1816 or 1817, whose reputation for honesty and uprightness had never been questioned in the midst of the commercial depravity which smirched, more or less, all the banking-houses of Paris. In spite of their immense wealth, the houses of Nucingen, du Tillet, the Keller Brothers, Palma and Company, were each regarded, more or less, with secret disrespect, although it is true this disrespect was only whispered. Evil means had produced such fine results, such political successes, dynastic principles covered so completely base workings, that no one in 1834 thought of the mud in which the roots of these fine trees, the mainstay of the State, were plunged. Nevertheless there was not a single one of those great bankers to whom the confidence expressed in the house of Mongenod was not a wound. Like English houses, the Mongenods made no external display of luxury. They lived in dignified stillness, satisfied to do their business prudently, wisely, and with a stern uprightness which enabled them to carry it from one end of the globe to the other.

The actual head of the house, Frederic Mongenod, is the brother-in-law of the Vicomte de Fontaine; therefore, this numerous family is allied through the Baron de Fontaine to Monsieur Grossetete, the receiver-general, brother of the Grossetete and Company of Limoges, to the Vandenesses, and to Planat de Baudry, another receiver-general. These connections, having procured for the late Mongenod, father of the present head of the house, many favors in the financial operations under the Restoration, obtained for him also the confidence of the old *noblesse*, whose property and whose savings, which were immense, were deposited in this bank. Far from coveting a peerage, like the Kellers, Nucingen, and du Tillet, the Mongenods kept away from politics, and only knew as much about them as their banking interests demanded.

The house of Mongenod is established in a fine old mansion in the rue de la Victoire, where Madame Mongenod, the mother, lived with her two sons, all three being partners in the house, – the share of the Vicomtesse de Fontaine having been bought out by them on the death of the elder Mongenod in 1827.

Frederic Mongenod, a handsome young man about thirty-five years of age, cold, silent, and reserved in manner like a Swiss, and neat as an Englishman, had acquired by intercourse with his father all the qualities necessary for his difficult profession. Better educated than the generality of bankers, his studies had the breadth and universality which characterize the polytechnic training; and he had, like most bankers, predilections and tastes outside of his business, – he loved mechanics and

chemistry. The second brother, who was ten years younger than Frederic, held the same position in the office of his elder brother that a head clerk holds in that of a notary or lawyer. Frederic trained him, as he had himself been trained by his father, in the variety of knowledge necessary to a true banker, who is to money what a writer is to ideas, – they must both know all of that with which they have to deal.

When Godefroid reached the banking house and gave his name, he saw at once the estimation in which his father had been held; for he was ushered through the offices without delay to the private counting-room of the Mongenods. This counting-room was closed with a glass door, so that Godefroid, without any desire to listen, overheard as he approached it what was being said there.

"Madame, your account is balanced to sixteen hundred thousand francs," said the younger Mongenod. "I do not know what my brother's intentions are; he alone can say whether an advance of a hundred thousand francs can be made. You must have been imprudent. Sixteen hundred thousand francs should not be entrusted to any business."

"Do not speak so loud, Louis!" said a woman's voice. "Your brother has often told you to speak in a low voice. There may be some one in the next room."

At this moment Frederic Mongenod himself opened the door of communication between his private house and the counting-room. He saw Godefroid and crossed the room, bowing respectfully to the lady who was conversing with his brother.

"To whom have I the honor of speaking?" he said to Godefroid.

As soon as Godefroid gave his name, Frederic begged him to be seated; and as the banker opened the lid of his desk, Louis Mongenod and the lady, who was no other than Madame de la Chanterie, rose and went up to him. All three then moved into the embrasure of a window and talked in a low voice with Madame Mongenod, the mother, who was sitting there, and to whom all the affairs of the bank were confided. For over thirty years this woman had given, to her husband first and then to her sons, such proofs of business sagacity that she had long been a managing partner in the firm and signed for it.

Godefroid, as he looked about him, noticed on a shelf certain boxes ticketed with the words "De la Chanterie," and numbered 1 to 7. When the conference was ended by the banker saying to his brother, "Very good; go down to the cashier," Madame de la Chanterie turned round, saw Godefroid, checked a gesture of surprise, and asked a few questions of the banker in a low voice, to which he replied in a few words spoken equally in a whisper.

Madame de la Chanterie now wore gray silk stockings and small prunella shoes; her gown was the same as before, but she was wrapped in a Venetian "mantua," – a sort of cloak which was just then returning into fashion. On her head was a drawn bonnet of green silk, lined with white silk, of a style called *a la bonne femme*. Her face was framed by a cloud of lace. She held herself very erect, in an attitude which bespoke, if not noble birth, certainly the habits of an aristocratic life. Without the extreme affability of her manner, she might have seemed haughty; she was certainly imposing.

"It is the will of Providence rather than mere chance that has brought us here together, monsieur," she said to Godefroid; "for I had almost decided to refuse a lodger whose ways of life seemed to me quite antipathetic to those of my household; but Monsieur Mongenod has just given me some information about your family which – "

"Ah, madame, – monsieur!" said Godefroid, addressing both Madame de la Chanterie and the banker, "I have no longer a family; and I have come here now to ask some financial advice of my father's business advisers as to the best method of adapting my means to a new way of life."

Godefroid then succinctly, and in as few words as possible, related his history, and expressed his desire to change his existence.

"Formerly," he said, "a man in my position would have made himself a monk; but there are no longer any religious orders."

"Go and live with madame, if she is willing to take you," said Frederic Mongenod, after exchanging a glance with Madame de la Chanterie, "and do not sell out your property; leave it in my hands. Give me the exact amount of your debts; I will agree with your creditors for payment at certain dates, and you can have for yourself about a hundred and fifty francs a month. It will thus take two years to clear you. During those two years, if you take those quiet lodgings, you will have time to think of a career, especially among the persons with whom you will live, who are all good counsellors."

Here Louis Mongenod returned, bringing in his hand a hundred notes of a thousand francs each, which he gave to Madame de la Chanterie. Godefroid offered his arm to his future hostess, and took her down to the hackney-coach which was waiting for her.

"I hope I shall see you soon, monsieur," she said in a cordial tone of voice.

"At what hour shall you be at home, madame?" he asked.

"At two o'clock."

"I shall have time to sell my furniture," he said, as he bowed to her.

During the short time that Madame de la Chanterie's arm rested upon his as they walked to the carriage, Godefroid could not escape the glamour of the words: "Your account is for sixteen hundred thousand francs!" – words said by Louis Mongenod to the woman whose life was spent in the depths of the cloisters of Notre-Dame. The thought, "She must be rich!" entirely changed his way of looking at the matter. "How old is she?" he began to ask himself; and a vision of a romance in the rue Chanoinesse came to him. "She certainly has an air of nobility! Can she be concerned in some bank?" thought he.

In our day nine hundred and ninety-nine young men out of a thousand in Godefroid's position would have had the thought of marrying that woman.

A furniture dealer, who also had apartments to let, paid about three thousand francs for the articles Godefroid was willing to sell, and agreed to let him keep them during the few days that were needed to prepare the shabby apartment in the rue Chanoinesse for this lodger with a sick mind. Godefroid went there at once, and obtained from Madame de la Chanterie the address of a painter who, for a moderate sum, agreed to whiten the ceilings, clean the windows, paint the woodwork, and stain the floors, within a week. Godefroid took the measure of the rooms, intending to put the same carpet in all of them, – a green carpet of the cheapest kind. He wished for the plainest uniformity in this retreat, and Madame de la Chanterie approved of the idea. She calculated, with Manon's assistance, the number of yards of white calico required for the window curtains, and also for those of the modest iron bed; and she undertook to buy and have them made for a price so moderate as to surprise Godefroid. Having brought with him a certain amount of furniture, the whole cost of fitting up the rooms proved to be not over six hundred francs.

"We lead here," said Madame de la Chanterie, "a Christian life, which does not, as you know, accord with many superfluities; I think you have too many as it is."

In giving this hint to her future lodger, she looked at a diamond which gleamed in the ring through which Godefroid's blue cravat was slipped.

"I only speak of this," she added, "because of the intention you expressed to abandon the frivolous life you complained of to Monsieur Mongenod."

Godefroid looked at Madame de la Chanterie as he listened to the harmonies of her limpid voice; he examined that face so purely white, resembling those of the cold, grave women of Holland whom the Flemish painters have so wonderfully reproduced with their smooth skins, in which a wrinkle is impossible.

"White and plump!" he said to himself, as he walked away; "but her hair is white, too."

Godefroid, like all weak natures, took readily to a new life, believing it satisfactory; and he was now quite eager to take up his abode in the rue Chanoinesse. Nevertheless, a prudent thought, or, if you prefer to say so, a distrustful thought, occurred to him. Two days before his installation, he

went again to see Monsieur Mongenod to obtain some more definite information about the house he was to enter.

During the few moments he had spent in his future lodgings overlooking the changes that were being made in them, he had noticed the coming and going of several persons whose appearance and behavior, without being exactly mysterious, excited a belief that some secret occupation or profession was being carried on in that house. At that particular period there was much talk of attempts by the elder branch of the Bourbons to recover the throne, and Godefroid suspected some conspiracy. When he found himself in the banker's counting-room held by the scrutinizing eye of Frederic Mongenod while he made his inquiry, he felt ashamed as he saw a derisive smile on the lips of the listener.

"Madame la Baronne de la Chanterie," replied the banker, "is one of the most obscure persons in Paris, but she is also one of the most honorable. Have you any object in asking for information?"

Godefroid retreated into generalities: he was going to live among strangers; he naturally wished to know something of those with whom he should be intimately thrown. But the banker's smile became more and more sarcastic; and Godefroid, more and more embarrassed, was ashamed of the step he had taken, and which bore no fruit, for he dared not continue his questions about Madame de la Chanterie and her inmates.

IV. FAREWELL TO THE LIFE OF THE WORLD

Two days later, of a Monday evening, having dined for the last time at the Cafe Anglais, and seen the two first pieces at the Varietes, he went, at ten o'clock, to sleep for the first time in the rue Chanoinesse, where Manon conducted him to his room.

Solitude has charms comparable only to those of savage life, which no European has ever really abandoned after once tasting them. This may seem strange at an epoch when every one lives so much to be seen of others that all the world concern themselves in their neighbors' affairs, and when private life will soon be a thing of the past, so bold and so intrusive are the eyes of the press, – that modern Argus. Nevertheless, it is a truth which rests on the authority of the first six Christian centuries, during which no recluse ever returned to social life. Few are the moral wounds that solitude will not heal.

So, at first, Godefroid was soothed by the deep peace and absolute stillness of his new abode, as a weary traveller is relaxed by a bath.

The very day after his arrival at Madame de la Chanterie's he was forced to examine himself, under the sense that he was separated from all, even from Paris, though he still lived in the shadow of its cathedral. Stripped of his social vanities, he was about to have no other witnesses of his acts than his own conscience and the inmates of that house. He had quitted the great high-road of the world to enter an unknown path. Where was that path to lead him to? to what occupation should he now be drawn?

He had been for two hours absorbed in such reflections when Manon, the only servant of the house, knocked at his door to tell him that the second breakfast was served and the family were waiting for him. Twelve o'clock was striking. The new lodger went down at once, stirred by a wish to see and judge the five persons among whom his life was in future to be spent.

When he entered the room he found all the inmates of the house standing; they were dressed precisely as they were on the day when he came to make his first inquiries.

"Did you sleep well?" asked Madame de la Chanterie.

"So well that I did not wake up till ten o'clock," replied Godefroid, bowing to the four men, who returned the bow with gravity.

"We thought so," said an old man named Alain, smiling.

"Manon spoke of a second breakfast," said Godefroid; "but I fear that I have already broken some rule. At what hour do you rise?"

"Not quite so early as the old monks," said Madame de la Chanterie, courteously, "but as early as the working-men, – six in winter, half-past three in summer. Our bed-time is ruled by that of the sun. We are always asleep by nine in winter and eleven in summer. On rising, we all take a little milk, which comes from our farm, after saying our prayers, except the Abbe de Veze, who says the first mass, at six o'clock in summer and seven o'clock in winter, at Notre-Dame, where these gentlemen are present daily, as well as your humble servant."

Madame de la Chanterie ended her explanation as the five lodgers took their seats at table.

The dining-room, painted throughout in gray, the design of the woodwork being in the style of Louis XIV., adjoined the sort of antechamber in which Manon was usually stationed, and it seemed to be parallel with Madame de la Chanterie's bedroom, which also opened into the salon. This room had no other ornament than a tall clock. The furniture consisted of six chairs with oval backs covered with worsted-work, done probably by Madame de la Chanterie's own hand, two buffets and a table, all of mahogany, on which Manon did not lay a cloth for breakfast. The breakfast, of monastic frugality, was composed of a small turbot with a white sauce, potatoes, a salad, and four dishes of fruit, – peaches, grapes, strawberries, and fresh almonds; also, for relishes, honey in the comb (as in Switzerland), radishes, cucumbers, sardines, and butter, – the whole served in the well-known china with tiny blue

flowers and green leaves on a white ground, which was no doubt a luxury in the days of Louis XIV., but had now, under the growing demands of luxury, come to be regarded as common.

"We keep the fasts," said Monsieur Alain. "As we go to mass every morning, you will not be surprised to find us blindly following all the customs of the Church, even the severest."

"And you shall begin by imitating us," said Madame de la Chanterie, with a glance at Godefroid, whom she had placed beside her.

Of the five persons present Godefroid knew the names of three, – Madame de la Chanterie, the Abbe de Veze, and Monsieur Alain. He wished to know those of the other two; but they kept silence and ate their food with the attention which recluses appear to give to every detail of a meal.

"Does this fine fruit come also from your farm, madame?" asked Godefroid.

"Yes, monsieur," she replied. "We have a little model farm, like the government itself; we call it our country house; it is twelve miles from here, on the road to Italy, near Villeneuve-Saint-Georges."

"It is a property that belongs to us all, and is to go to the survivor," said the goodman Alain.

"Oh, it is not very considerable!" added Madame de la Chanterie, rather hastily, as if she feared that Godefroid might think these remarks a bait.

"There are thirty acres of tilled land," said one of the two personages still unknown to Godefroid, "six of meadow, and an enclosure containing four acres, in which our house, which adjoins the farmhouse, stands."

"But such a property as that," said Godefroid, "must be worth a hundred thousand francs."

"Oh, we don't get anything out of it but our provisions!" said the same personage.

He was a tall, grave, spare man, with all the appearance of having served in the army. His white hair showed him to be past sixty, and his face betrayed some violent grief controlled by religion.

The second unnamed person, who seemed to be something between a master of rhetoric and a business agent, was of ordinary height, plump, but active withal. His face had the jovial expression which characterizes those of lawyers and notaries in Paris.

The dress of these four personages revealed a neatness due to the most scrupulous personal care. The same hand, and it was that of Manon, could be seen in every detail. Their coats were perhaps ten years old, but they were preserved, like the coats of vicars, by the occult power of the servant-woman, and the constant care with which they were worn. These men seemed to wear on their backs the livery of a system of life; they belonged to one thought, their looks said the same word, their faces breathed a gentle resignation, a provoking quietude.

"Is it an indiscretion, madame," said Godefroid, "to ask the names of these gentlemen? I am ready to explain my life; can I know as much of theirs as custom will allow?"

"That gentleman," said Madame de la Chanterie, motioning to the tall, thin man, "is Monsieur Nicolas; he is a colonel of gendarmerie, retired with the rank of brigadier-general. And this," she added, looking towards the stout little man, "is a former councillor of the royal courts of Paris, who retired from the magistracy in 1830. His name is Monsieur Joseph. Though you have only been with us one day, I will tell you that in the world Monsieur Nicolas once bore the name of the Marquis de Montauran, and Monsieur Joseph that of Lecamus, Baron de Tresnes; but for us, as for the world, those names no longer exist. These gentlemen are without heirs; they only advance by a little the oblivion which awaits their names; they are simply Monsieur Nicolas and Monsieur Joseph, as you will be Monsieur Godefroid."

As he heard those names, – one so celebrated in the annals of royalism by the catastrophe which put an end to the uprising of the Chouans; the other so revered in the halls of the old parliament of Paris, – Godefroid could not repress a quiver. He looked at these relics of the grandest things of the fallen monarchy, – the *noblesse* and the law, – and he could see no movement of the features, no change in the countenance, that revealed the presence of a worldly thought. Those men no longer remembered, or did not choose to remember, what they had been. This was Godefroid's first lesson.

"Each of your names, gentlemen, is a whole history in itself," he said respectfully.

“Yes, the history of my time, – ruins,” replied Monsieur Joseph.

“You are in good company,” said Monsieur Alain.

The latter can be described in a word: he was the small bourgeois of Paris, the worthy middle-class being with a kindly face, relieved by pure white hair, but made insipid by an eternal smile.

As for the priest, the Abbe de Veze, his presence said all. The priest who fulfils his mission is known by the first glance he gives you, and by the glance that others who know him give to him.

That which struck Godefroid most forcibly at first was the profound respect which the four lodgers manifested for Madame de la Chanterie. They all seemed, even the priest, in spite of the sacred character his functions gave him, to regard her as a queen. Godefroid also noticed their sobriety. Each seemed to eat only for nourishment. Madame de la Chanterie took, as did the rest, a single peach and half a bunch of grapes; but she told her new lodger, as she offered him the various dishes, not to imitate such temperance.

Godefroid’s curiosity was excited to the highest degree by this first entrance on his new life. When they returned to the salon after breakfast, he was left alone; Madame de la Chanterie retired to the embrasure of a window and held a little private council with her four friends. This conference, entirely devoid of animation, lasted half an hour. They spoke together in a low voice, exchanging words which each of them appeared to have thought over. From time to time Monsieur Alain and Monsieur Joseph consulted a note-book, turning over its leaves.

“See the faubourg,” said Madame de la Chanterie to Monsieur Joseph, who left the house.

That was the only word Godefroid distinguished.

“And you the Saint-Marceau quarter,” she continued, addressing Monsieur Nicolas. “Hunt through the faubourg Saint-Germain and see if you can find what we want;” this to the Abbe de Veze, who went away immediately. “And you, my dear Alain,” she added, smiling at the latter, “make an examination. There, those important matters are all settled,” she said, returning to Godefroid.

She seated herself in her armchair, took a little piece of linen from the table before her, and began to sew as if she were employed to do so.

Godefroid, lost in conjecture, and still thinking of a royalist conspiracy, took his landlady’s remark as an opening, and he began to study her as he seated himself beside her. He was struck by the singular dexterity with which she worked. Although everything about her bespoke the great lady, she showed the dexterity of a workwoman; for every one can see at a glance, by certain manipulations, the work of a workman or an amateur.

“You do that,” said Godefroid, “as if you knew the trade.”

“Alas!” she answered, without raising her head, “I did know it once out of necessity.”

Two large tears came into her eyes, and rolled down her cheeks to the linen in her hand.

“Forgive me, madame!” cried Godefroid.

Madame de Chanterie looked at her new lodger, and saw such an expression of genuine regret upon his face, that she made him a friendly sign. After drying her eyes, she immediately recovered the calmness that characterized her face, which was less cold than chastened.

“You are here, Monsieur Godefroid, – for you know already that we shall call you by your baptized name, – you are here in the midst of ruins caused by a great tempest. We have each been struck and wounded in our hearts, our family interests, or our fortunes, by that whirlwind of forty years, which overthrew religion and royalty, and dispersed the elements of all that made old France. Words that seem quite harmless do sometimes wound us all, and that is why we are so silent. We speak rarely of ourselves; we forget ourselves, and we have found a way to substitute another life for our lives. It is because, after hearing your confidence at Monsieur Mongenod’s, I thought there seemed a likeness between your situation and ours, that I induced my four friends to receive you among us; besides, we wanted another monk in our convent. But what are you going to do? No one can face solitude without some moral resources.”

"Madame, I should be very glad, after hearing what you have said, if you yourself would be the guide of my destiny."

"You speak like a man of the world," she answered, "and are trying to flatter me, – a woman of sixty! My dear child," she went on, "let me tell you that you are here among persons who believe strongly in God; who have all felt his hand, and have yielded themselves to him almost as though they were Trappists. Have you ever remarked the profound sense of safety in a true priest when he has given himself to the Lord, when he listens to his voice, and strives to make himself a docile instrument in the hand of Providence? He has no longer vanity or self-love, – nothing of all that which wounds continually the hearts of the world. His quietude is equal to that of the fatalist; his resignation does truly enable him to bear all. The true priest, such a one as the Abbe de Veze, lives like a child with its mother; for the Church, my dear Monsieur Godefroid, is a good mother. Well, a man can be a priest without the tonsure; all priests are not in orders. To vow one's self to good, that is imitating a true priest; it is obedience to God. I am not preaching to you; I am not trying to convert you; I am explaining our lives to you."

"Instruct me, madame," said Godefroid, deeply impressed, "so that I may not fail in any of your rules."

"That would be hard upon you; you will learn them by degrees. Never speak here of your misfortunes; they are slight compared to the catastrophes by which the lives of those you are now among were blasted."

While speaking thus, Madame de la Chanterie drew her needle and set her stitches with unbroken regularity; but here she paused, raised her head, and looked at Godefroid. She saw him charmed by the penetrating sweetness of her voice, which possessed, let us say it here, an apostolic unction. The sick soul contemplated with admiration the truly extraordinary phenomenon presented by this woman, whose face was now resplendent. Rosy tints were spreading on the waxen cheeks, her eyes shone, the youthfulness of her soul changed the light wrinkles into gracious lines, and all about her solicited affection. Godefroid in that one moment measured the gulf that separated this woman from common sentiments. He saw her inaccessible on a peak to which religion had led her; and he was still too worldly not to be keenly piqued, and to long to plunge through the gulf and up to the summit on which she stood, and stand beside her. Giving himself up to this desire, he related to her all the mistakes of his life, and much that he could not tell at Mongenod's, where his confidences had been confined to his actual situation.

"Poor child!"

That exclamation, falling now and then from Madame de la Chanterie's lips as he went on, dropped like balm upon the heart of the sufferer.

"What can I substitute for so many hopes betrayed, so much affection wasted?" he asked, looking at his hostess, who had now grown thoughtful. "I came here," he resumed, "to reflect and choose a course of action. I have lost my mother; will you replace her?"

"Will you," she said, "show a son's obedience?"

"Yes, if you will have the tenderness that commands it."

"I will try," she said.

Godefroid put out his hand to take that of his hostess, who gave it to him, guessing his intentions. He carried it respectfully to his lips. Madame de la Chanterie's hand was exquisitely beautiful, – without a wrinkle; neither fat nor thin; white enough to be the envy of all young women, and shapely enough for the model of a sculptor. Godefroid had already admired those hands, conscious of their harmony with the spell of her voice, and the celestial blue of her glance.

"Wait a moment," said Madame de la Chanterie, rising and going into her own room.

Godefroid was keenly excited; he did not know to what class of ideas her movement was to be attributed. His perplexity did not last long, for she presently returned with a book in her hand.

“Here, my dear child,” she said, “are the prescriptions of a great physician of souls. When the things of ordinary life have not given us the happiness we expected of them, we must seek for happiness in a higher life. Here is the key of a new world. Read night and morning a chapter of this book; but bring your full attention to bear upon what you read; study the words as you would a foreign language. At the end of a month you will be another man. It is now twenty years that I have read a chapter every day; and my three friends, Messieurs Nicolas, Alain, and Joseph, would no more fail in that practice than they would fail in getting up and going to bed. Do as they do for love of God, for love of me,” she said, with a divine serenity, an august confidence.

Godefroid turned over the book and read upon its back in gilt letters, IMITATION OF JESUS CHRIST. The simplicity of this old woman, her youthful candor, her certainty of doing a good deed, confounded the ex-dandy. Madame de la Chanterie’s face wore a rapturous expression, and her attitude was that of a woman who was offering a hundred thousand francs to a merchant on the verge of bankruptcy.

“I have used that volume,” she said, “for twenty-six years. God grant its touch may be contagious. Go now and buy me another copy; for this is the hour when persons come here who must not be seen.”

Godefroid bowed and went to his room, where he flung the book upon the table, exclaiming, —

“Poor, good woman! Well, so be it!”

V. THE INFLUENCE OF BOOKS

The book, like all books frequently read, opened in a particular place. Godefroid sat down as if to put his ideas in order, for he had gone through more emotion during this one morning than he had often done in the agitated months of his life; but above all, his curiosity was keenly excited. Letting his eyes fall by chance, as people will when their souls are launched in meditation, they rested mechanically on the two open pages of the book; almost unconsciously he read the following heading: —

CHAPTER XII.
THE ROYAL WAY OF THE HOLY CROSS

He took up the book; a sentence of that noble chapter caught his eye like a flash of light: —

> "He has walked before thee, bearing his cross; he died for thee, that thou mightest bear thy cross, and be glad to die upon it.
>
> "Go where thou wilt, seek what thou wilt, never canst thou find a nobler, surer path than the royal way of the holy cross.
>
> "Dispose and order all things according to thy desires and thine own judgment and still thou shalt find trials to suffer, whether thou wilt or no; and so the cross is there; be it pain of body or pain of mind.
>
> "Sometimes God will seem to leave thee, sometimes men will harass thee. But, far worse, thou wilt find thyself a burden to thyself, and no remedy will deliver thee, no consolation comfort thee: until it pleases God to end thy trouble thou must bear it; for it is God's will that we suffer without consolation, that we may go to him without one backward look, humble through tribulation."

"What a strange book!" thought Godefroid, turning over the leaves. Then his eyes lighted on the following words: —

> "When thou hast reached the height of finding all afflictions sweet, since they have made thee love the love of Jesus Christ, then know thyself happy; for thou hast found thy paradise in this world."

Annoyed by this simplicity (the characteristic of strength), angry at being foiled by a book, he closed the volume; but even then he saw, in letters of gold on the green morocco cover, the words: —

SEEK THAT WHICH IS ETERNAL, AND THAT ONLY.

"Have they found it here?" he asked himself.

He went out to buy the handsomest copy he could find of the "Imitation of Jesus Christ" thinking that Madame de la Chanterie would wish to read her chapter that night. When he reached the street he stood a moment near the door, uncertain which way to take and debating in what direction he was likely to find a bookseller. As he stood there he heard the heavy sound of the massive porte-cochere closing.

Two men were leaving the hotel de la Chanterie. If the reader has fully understood the character of this old house he will know that it was one of the ancient mansions of the olden time. Manon, herself, when she called Godefroid that morning, had asked him, smiling, how he had slept in the hotel de la Chanterie.

Godefroid followed the two men without the slightest intention of watching them; they took him for an accidental passer, and spoke in tones which enabled him to hear distinctly in those lonely streets.

The two men passed along the rue Massillon beside the church and crossed the open space in front of it.

“Well, you see, old man, it is easy enough to catch their sous. Say what they want you to say, that’s all.”

“But we owe money.”

“To whom?”

“To that lady – ”

“I’d like to see that old body try to get it; I’d – ”

“You’d pay her.”

“Well, you’re right, for if I paid her I’d get more another time.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to do as they advise, and build up a good business?”

“Pooh!”

“But she said she would get some one to lend us the money.”

“Then we should have to give up the life of – ”

“Well, I’d rather; I’m sick of it; it isn’t being a man at all to be drunk half one’s time.”

“Yes, but you know the abbe turned his back on old Marin the other day; he refused him everything.”

“Because old Marin tried to swindle, and nobody can succeed in that but millionnaires.”

Just then the two men, whose dress seemed to show that they were foremen in some workshop, turned abruptly round towards the place Maubert by the bridge of the Hotel-Dieu. Godefroid stepped aside to let them pass. Seeing him so close behind them they looked rather anxiously at each other, and their faces expressed a regret for having spoken.

Godefroid was the more interested by this conversation because it reminded him of the scene between the Abbe de Veze and the workman the day of his first visit.

Thinking over this circumstance, he went as far as a bookseller’s in the rue Saint-Jacques, whence he returned with a very handsome copy of the finest edition published in France of the “Imitation of Jesus Christ.” Walking slowly back, in order that he might arrive exactly at the dinner hour, he recalled his own sensations during this morning and he was conscious of a new impulse in his soul. He was seized by a sudden and deep curiosity, but his curiosity paled before an inexplicable desire. He was drawn to Madame de la Chanterie; he felt the keenest desire to attach himself to her, to devote himself to her, to please her, to deserve her praise: in short, he felt the first emotions of platonic love; he saw glimpses of the untold grandeur of that soul, and he longed to know it in its entirety. He grew impatient to enter the inner lives of these pure Catholics. In that small company of faithful souls, the majesty of practical religion was so thoroughly blended with all that is most majestic in a French woman that Godefroid resolved to leave no stone unturned to make himself accepted as a true member of the little body. These feelings would have been unnaturally sudden in a busy Parisian eagerly occupied with life, but Godefroid was, as we have seen, in the position of a drowning man who catches at every floating branch thinking it a solid stay, and his soul, ploughed and furrowed with trial, was ready to receive all seed.

He found the four friends in the salon, and he presented the book to Madame de la Chanterie, saying:

“I did not like to deprive you of it to-night.”

“God grant,” she said, smiling, as she looked at the magnificent volume, “that this may be your last excess of elegance.”

Looking at the clothes of the four men present and observing how in every particular they were reduced to mere utility and neatness, and seeing, too, how rigorously the same principle was applied to all the details of the house, Godefroid understood the value of the reproach so courteously made to him.

“Madame,” he said, “the persons whom you obliged this morning are scoundrels; I overheard, without intending it, what they said to each other when they left the house; it was full of the basest ingratitude.”

“They were the two locksmiths of the rue Mouffetard,” said Madame de la Chanterie to Monsieur Nicolas; “that is your affair.”

“The fish gets away more than once before it is caught,” said Monsieur Alain, laughing.

The perfect indifference of Madame de la Chanterie on hearing of the immediate ingratitude of persons to whom she had, no doubt, given money, surprised Godefroid, who became thoughtful.

The dinner was enlivened by Monsieur Alain and Monsieur Joseph; but Monsieur Nicolas remained quiet, sad, and cold; he bore on his features the ineffaceable imprint of some bitter grief, some eternal sorrow. Madame de la Chanterie paid equal attentions to all. Godefroid felt himself observed by these persons, whose prudence equalled their piety; his vanity led him to imitate their reserve, and he measured his words.

This first day was much more interesting than those which succeeded it. Godefroid, who found himself set aside from all the serious conferences, was obliged, during several hours in mornings and evenings when he was left wholly to himself, to have recourse to the “Imitation of Jesus Christ;” and he ended by studying that book as a man studies a book when he has but one, or is a prisoner. A book is then like a woman with whom we live in solitude; we must either hate or adore that woman, and, in like manner, we must either enter into the soul of the author or not read ten lines of his book.

Now, it is impossible not to be impressed by the “Imitation of Jesus Christ,” which is to dogma what action is to thought. Catholicism vibrates in it, pulses, breathes, and lives, body to body, with human life. The book is a sure friend. It speaks to all passions, all difficulties, even worldly ones; it solves all problems; it is more eloquent than any preacher, for its voice is your own, it is the voice within your soul, you hear it with your spirit. It is, in short, the Gospel translated, adapted to all ages, the summit and crest of all human situations. It is extraordinary that the Church has never canonized John Gersen, for the Divine Spirit evidently inspired his pen.

For Godefroid, the hotel de la Chanterie now held a woman and a book; day by day he loved the woman more; he discovered flowers buried beneath the snows of winter in her heart; he had glimpses of the joys of a sacred friendship which religion permits, on which the angels smile; a friendship which here united these five persons and against which no evil could prevail.

This is a sentiment higher than all others; a love of soul to soul, resembling those rarest flowers born on the highest peaks of earth; a love of which a few examples are offered to humanity from age to age, by which lovers are sometimes bound together in one being, and which explains those faithful attachments which are otherwise inexplicable by the laws of the world. It is a bond without disappointment, without misunderstanding, without vanity, without strife, without even contradictions; so completely are the moral natures blended into one.

This sentiment, vast, infinite, born of Catholic charity, Godefroid foresaw with all its joys. At times he could not believe the spectacle before his eyes, and he sought for reasons to explain the sublime friendship of these five persons, wondering in his heart to find true Catholics, true Christians of the early Church, in the Paris of 1836.

VI. THE BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE OF CHANTERIE AND COMPANY

Within a week after his arrival Godefroid had seen such a concourse of persons, he had overheard fragments of conversation relating to so many serious topics, that he began to perceive an enormous activity in the lives of the five inmates of the house. He noticed that none of them slept more than five hours at the most.

They had all made, in some sort, a first day, before the second breakfast. During that time strangers came and went, bringing or carrying away money, sometimes in considerable sums. A messenger from the Mongenod counting-room often came, – always very early in the morning, so that his errand might not interfere with the business of the bank.

One evening Monsieur Mongenod came himself, and Godefroid noticed that he showed to Monsieur Alain a certain filial familiarity added to the profound respect which he testified to the three other lodgers of Madame de la Chanterie.

On that evening the banker merely put a few matter-of-fact questions to Godefroid: "Was he comfortable? Did he intend to stay?" etc., – at the same time advising him to persevere in his plan.

"I need only one thing to make me contented," said Godefroid.

"What is that?" asked the banker.

"An occupation."

"An occupation!" remarked the Abbe de Veze. "Then you have changed your mind? I thought you came to our cloister for rest."

"Rest, without the prayers that enlivened monasteries, without the meditation which peopled the Thebaids, becomes a disease," said Monsieur Joseph, sententiously.

"Learn book-keeping," said Monsieur Mongenod, with a smile; "you might become in a few months very useful to my friends here."

"Oh! with pleasure," cried Godefroid.

The next day was Sunday; Madame de la Chanterie requested him to give her his arm to high mass.

"It is," she said, "the only coercion I shall put upon you. Several times during the past week I have wished to speak to you of religion, but it did not seem to me that the time had come. You would find plenty of occupation if you shared our beliefs, for then you would share our labors as well."

During mass Godefroid noticed the fervor of Messieurs Nicolas, Joseph, and Alain; and as during the last few days he had also noticed their superiority and intelligence, and the vast extent of their knowledge; he concluded, when he saw how they humbled themselves, that the Catholic religion had secrets which had hitherto escaped him.

"After all," he said to himself, "it is the religion of Bossuet, Pascal, Racine, Saint-Louis, Louis XIV., Raffaelle, Michel-Angelo, Ximenes, Bayard, du Guesclin; and how could I, weakling that I am, compare myself to those intellects, those statesmen, those poets, those heroes?"

If there were not some real instruction in these minor details it would be imprudent to dwell upon them in these days; but they are indispensable to the interests of this history, in which the present public will be none too ready to believe, and which presents at the outset a fact that is almost ridiculous, – namely, the empire which a woman of sixty obtained over a young man disappointed with the world.

"You did not pray at all," said Madame de la Chanterie to Godefroid as they left the portal of Notre-Dame; "not for any one, – not even for the soul of your mother."

Godefroid colored and said nothing.

"Will you do me the favor," continued Madame de la Chanterie, "to go to your room and not come into the salon for an hour? You can meditate, if you love me, on the first chapter in the third book of the 'Imitation' – the one entitled: 'Of inward communing.'"

Godefroid bowed stiffly and went to his room.

"The devil take them!" he exclaimed to himself, giving way to downright anger. "What do they want with me here? What is all this traffic they are carrying on? Pooh! all women, even pious ones, are up to the same tricks. If Madame" (giving her the name by which her lodgers spoke of her) "wants me out of the way it is probably because they are plotting something against me."

With that thought in his mind he tried to look from his window into that of the salon; but the situation of the rooms did not allow it. He went down one flight, and then returned, – reflecting that according to the rigid principles of the house he should be dismissed if discovered spying. To lose the respect of those five persons seemed to him as serious as public dishonor.

He waited three quarters of an hour; then he resolved to surprise Madame de la Chanterie and come upon her suddenly before she expected him. He invented a lie to excuse himself, saying that his watch was wrong; for which purpose he set it on twenty minutes. Then he went downstairs, making no noise, reached the door of the salon, and opened it abruptly.

He saw a man, still young, but already celebrated, a poet, whom he had frequently met in society, Victor de Vernisset, on his knees before Madame de la Chanterie and kissing the hem of her dress. If the sky had fallen, and shivered to atoms like glass, as the ancients thought it was, Godefroid could not have been more astonished. Shocking thoughts came into his mind, and then a reaction more terrible still when, before the sarcasm he was about to utter had left his lips, he saw Monsieur Alain in a corner of the room counting out bank-notes.

In an instant Vernisset was on his feet, and the worthy Alain looked thunderstruck. Madame de la Chanterie, on her part, gave Godefroid a look which petrified him; for the twofold expression on the face of the visitor had not escaped him.

"Monsieur is one of us," she said to the young poet, with a sign towards Godefroid.

"Then you are a happy man, my dear fellow," said Vernisset; "you are saved! But, madame," he added, turning to Madame de la Chanterie, "if all Paris had seen me, I should rejoice in it. Nothing can ever mark my gratitude to you. I am yours forever; I belong to you utterly. Command me as you will and I obey. I owe you my life, and it is yours."

"Well, well, young man!" said the kind Alain, "then be wise, be virtuous, – only, *work*; but do not attack religion in your books. Moreover, remember that you owe a debt."

And he handed him an envelope thick with the bank-notes he had counted out. The tears were in Victor de Vernisset's eyes; he kissed Madame de la Chanterie's hand respectfully, and went away, after shaking hands with Monsieur Alain and Godefroid.

"You have not obeyed madame," said the goodman Alain solemnly, with a sad expression on his face that Godefroid had never before seen there; "and that is a great wrong; if it happens again we must part. This may seem hard to you after we had begun to give you our confidence."

"My dear Alain," said Madame de la Chanterie, "have the kindness for my sake to say no more about this piece of thoughtlessness. We ought not to ask too much a new arrival, who has been spared great misfortunes and knows nothing of religion; and who, moreover, has only an excessive curiosity about our vocation, and does not yet believe in us."

"Forgive me, madame," said Godefroid; "I do desire, from this time forth, to be worthy of you. I will submit to any trial you think necessary before initiating me into the secrets of your work; and if the Abbe de Veze will undertake to instruct me I will listen to him, soul and mind."

These words made Madame de la Chanterie so happy that a faint color stole upon her cheeks. She took Godefroid's hand and pressed it, then she said, with strange emotion, "It is well."

That evening, after dinner, visitors came in: a vicar-general of the diocese of Paris, two canons, two former mayors of Paris, and one of the ladies who distributed the charities of Notre-Dame. No cards were played; but the conversation was gay, without being vapid.

A visit which surprised Godefroid greatly was that of the Comtesse de Cinq-Cygne, one of the highest personages in aristocratic society, whose salon was inaccessible to the bourgeoisie and to parvenus. The presence of this great lady in Madame de la Chanterie's salon was sufficiently surprising; but the manner in which the two women met and treated each other seemed to Godefroid inexplicable; for it showed the closest intimacy and a constant intercourse which gave Madame de la Chanterie an added value in his eyes. Madame de Cinq-Cygne was gracious and affectionate in manner to the four friends of her friend, and showed the utmost respect to Monsieur Nicolas.

We may see here how social vanities still governed Godefroid; for up to this visit of Madame de Cinq-Cygne he was still undecided; but he now resolved to give himself up, with or without conviction, to whatever Madame de la Chanterie and her friends might exact of him, in order to get affiliated with their order and initiated into their secrets, assuring himself that in that way he should find a career.

The next day he went to a book-keeper whom Madame de la Chanterie recommended, and arranged with him the hours at which they should work together. His whole time was now employed. The Abbe de Veze instructed him in the mornings; he was two hours a day with the book-keeper; and he spent the rest of his time between breakfast and dinner in doing imaginary commercial accounts which his master required him to write at home.

Some time passed thus, during which Godefroid felt the charm of a life in which each hour has its own employment. The recurrence of a settled work at settled moments, regularity of action, is the secret of many a happy life; and it proves how deeply the founders of religious orders had meditated on the nature of man. Godefroid, who had made up his mind to listen to the Abbe de Veze, began to have serious thoughts of a future life, and to find how little he knew of the real gravity of religious questions.

Moreover, from day to day Madame de la Chanterie, with whom he always remained for an hour after the second breakfast, allowed him to discover the treasures that were in her; he knew then that he never could have imagined a loving-kindness so broad and so complete. A woman of Madame de la Chanterie's apparent age no longer has the pettiness of younger women. She is a friend who offers you all feminine refinements, who displays the graces, the choice attractions which nature inspires in a woman for man; she gives them, and no longer sells them. Such a woman is either detestable or perfect; for her gifts are either not of the flesh or they are worthless. Madame de la Chanterie was perfect. She seemed never to have had a youth; her glance never told of a past. Godefroid's curiosity was far from being appeased by a closer and more intimate knowledge of this sublime nature; the discoveries of each succeeding day only redoubled his desire to learn the anterior life of a woman whom he now thought a saint. Had she ever loved? Had she been a wife, – a mother? Nothing about her was characteristic of an old maid; she displayed all the graces of a well-born woman; and an observer would perceive in her robust health, in the extraordinary phenomena of her physical preservation, a divine life, and a species of ignorance of the earthly existence.

Except the gay and cheery goodman Alain, all these persons had suffered; but Monsieur Nicolas himself seemed to give the palm of martyrdom to Madame de la Chanterie. Nevertheless, the memory of her sorrows was so restrained by religious resignation, by her secret avocations, that she seemed to have been always happy.

"You are the life of your friends," Godefroid said to her one day; "you are the tie that unites them, – the house-mother, as it were, of some great work; and, as we are all mortal, I ask myself sometimes what your association would become without you."

"That is what frightens the others; but Providence, to whom we owe our new book-keeper," she said, smiling, "will provide. Besides, I am on the look-out."

"Will your new book-keeper soon be allowed to work at your business?" asked Godefroid.

“That depends on himself,” she answered, smiling. “He must be sincerely religious, truly pious, without the least self-interest, not concerned about the riches of our house, able to rise above all petty social considerations on the two wings which God has given us.”

“What are they?”

“Singleness of mind and purity,” replied Madame de la Chanterie. “Your ignorance shows that you have neglected the reading of our book.” she added, laughing at the innocent trick she had played to know if Godefroid had read the “Imitation of Jesus Christ.” “And, lastly,” she went on, “fill your soul with Saint Paul’s epistle upon Charity. When that is done,” she added, with a sublime look, “it will not be you who belong to us, we shall belong to you, and you will be able to count up greater riches than the sovereigns of this world possess; you will enjoy as we enjoy; yes, let me tell you (if you remember the ‘Arabian Nights’) that the treasures of Aladdin are nothing to those we possess. And so for the last year we have not sufficed for our affairs, and we needed, as you see, a book-keeper.”

While speaking, she studied Godefroid’s face; he, on his part, did not know how to take this extraordinary confidence. But as the scene in the counting-room at Mongenod’s came often to his mind, he hovered between doubt and belief.

“Ah, you will be very happy!” she said.

Godefroid was so consumed with curiosity that from this moment he determined to break through the reserve of one of the four friends and question him. Now, the one to whom he felt the most drawn, and who seemed naturally to excite the sympathies of all classes, was the kind, gay, simple Monsieur Alain. By what strange path could Providence have led a being so guileless into this monastery without a lock, where recluses of both sexes lived beneath a rule in the midst of Paris, in absolute freedom, as though they were guarded by the sternest of superiors? What drama, what event, had made him leave his own road in life, and take this path among the sorrows of the great city?

Godefroid resolved to ask.

VII. MONSIEUR ALAIN TELLS HIS SECRETS

One evening Godefroid determined to pay a visit to his neighbor on the floor above him, with the intention of satisfying a curiosity more excited by the apparent impossibility of a catastrophe in such an existence than it would have been under the expectation of discovering some terrible episode in the life of a corsair.

At the words “Come in!” given in answer to two raps struck discreetly on the door, Godefroid turned the key which was in the lock and found Monsieur Alain sitting by the fire reading, before he went to bed, his accustomed chapter in the “Imitation of Jesus Christ,” by the light of two wax-candles, each protected by a moveable green shade, such as whist-players use.

The goodman wore trousers *a pied* and his gray camlet dressing-gown. His feet were at a level with the fire, resting on a cushion done in worsted-work, as were his slippers, by Madame de la Chanterie. The fine head of the old man, without other covering than its crown of white hair, almost like that of a monk, stood out in clear relief against the brown background of an enormous armchair.

Monsieur Alain gently laid his book, which was much worn at the corners, on a little table with twisted legs, and signed to the young man to take another chair, removing as he did so a pair of spectacles which were hanging on the end of his nose.

“Are you ill, that you have left your room at this hour?” he asked.

“Dear Monsieur Alain,” said Godefroid, frankly, “I am tortured with a curiosity which one word from you will make very harmless or very indiscreet; and that explains clearly enough the spirit in which I shall ask my question.”

“Oh! oh! and what is your question?” said the good soul, looking at the young man with an eye that was half mischievous.

“What was it that brought you here to lead the life that you live here? For, surely, to accept the doctrines of such total renunciation of all personal interests, a man must have been disgusted with the world, or else have injured others.”

“Eh! my dear lad,” replied the old man, letting a smile flicker on his large lips, which gave to his rosy mouth the kindliest expression that the genius of a painter ever imagined, “can we not be moved to the deepest pity by the spectacle of human wretchedness which Paris holds within her walls? Did Saint Vincent de Paul need the spur of remorse or wounded vanity to make him devote himself to outcast children?”

“You close my mouth, for if ever a soul resembled that of the Christian hero, it is yours,” said Godefroid.

In spite of the hardness which age had given to the wrinkled yellow skin of his face, the old man blushed, for he seemed to have provoked that comparison; though any one who knew his modesty would have been certain he never dreamed of it. Godefroid was aware by this time that Madame de la Chanterie’s inmates had no taste for that sort of incense. Nevertheless, the extreme simplicity of the good old soul was more disturbed by this idea than a young girl would have been by an improper thought.

“Though I am very far indeed from Saint Vincent de Paul morally,” said Monsieur Alain, “I think I do resemble him physically.”

Godefroid was about to speak, but was stopped by a gesture of the old man, whose nose, it must be owned, had the tuberous appearance of that of the Saint, and whose face, a good deal like that of an old vine-dresser, was an exact duplicate of the broad, common face of the founder of Foundling hospitals.

“As for me, you are right enough,” he went on; “my vocation for our work was brought about by repentance, as the result of a – folly.”

“A folly, – you!” Godefroid exclaimed softly, the word entirely putting out of his head what he meant to say.

“Ah! dear me, what I am going to tell you will seem, I dare say, a trifle to you, – a mere bit of nonsense; but before the tribunal of conscience it was another thing. If you persist in wishing to share our work after hearing what I shall tell you, you will understand that the power of a sentiment is according to the nature of souls, and that a matter which would not in the least trouble a strong mind may very well torment the conscience of a weak Christian.”

After a preface of this kind, the curiosity of the disciple of course knew no bounds. What could be the crime of the worthy soul whom Madame de la Chanterie called her *paschal lamb*? The thought crossed Godefroid’s mind that a book might be written on it, called “The Sins of a Sheep.” Sheep are sometimes quite ferocious towards grass and flowers. One of the tenderest republicans of those days was heard to assert that the best of human beings was cruel to something. But the kindly Alain! – he, who like my uncle Toby, wouldn’t crush a gnat till it had stung him twenty times, – that sweet soul to have been tortured by repentance!

This reflection in Godefroid’s mind filled the pause made by the old man after saying, “Now listen to me!” – a pause he filled himself by pushing his cushion under Godefroid’s feet to share it with him.

“I was then about thirty years of age,” he said. “It was the year ‘98, if I remember right, – a period when young men were forced to have the experience of men of sixty. One morning, a little before my breakfast hour, which was nine o’clock, my old housekeeper ushered in one of the few friends remaining to me after the Revolution. My first word was to ask him to breakfast. My friend – his name was Mongenod, a fellow about twenty-eight years of age – accepted, but he did so in an awkward manner. I had not seen him since 1793!”

“Mongenod!” cried Godefroid; “why, that is – ”

“If you want to know the end before the beginning, how am I to tell you my history?” said the old man, smiling.

Godefroid made a sign which promised absolute silence.

“When Mongenod sat down,” continued Monsieur Alain, “I noticed that his shoes were worn out. His stockings had been washed so often that it was difficult to say if they were silk or not. His breeches, of apricot-colored cassimere, were so old that the color had disappeared in spots; and the buckles, instead of being of steel, seemed to me to be made of common iron. His white, flowered waistcoat, now yellow from long wearing, also his shirt, the frill of which was frayed, betrayed a horrible yet decent poverty. A mere glance at his coat was enough to convince me that my friend had fallen into dire distress. That coat was nut-brown in color, threadbare at the seams, carefully brushed, though the collar was greasy from pomade or powder, and had the white metal buttons now copper-colored. The whole was so shabby that I tried not to look at it. The hat – an opera hat of a kind we then carried under the arm, and not on the head – had seen many governments. Nevertheless, my poor friend must have spent a few sous at the barber’s, for he was neatly shaved; and his hair, gathered behind his head with a comb and powdered carefully, smelt of pomade. I saw two chains hanging down on his breeches, – two rusty steel chains, – but no appearance of a watch in his pocket. I tell you all these details, as they come to me,” said Monsieur Alain; “I seldom think of this matter now; but when I do, all the particulars come vividly before me.”

He paused a moment and then resumed: —

“It was winter, and Mongenod evidently had no cloak; for I noticed that several lumps of snow, which must have dropped from the roofs as he walked along, were sticking to the collar of his coat. When he took off his rabbit-skin gloves, and I saw his right hand, I noticed the signs of labor, and toilsome labor, too. Now his father, the advocate of the Grand Council, had left him some property, – about five or six thousand francs a year. I saw at once that he had come to me to borrow money. I had, in a secret hiding-place, two hundred louis d’or, – an enormous hoard at that time; for they were

worth I couldn't now tell you how many hundred thousand francs in assignats. Mongenod and I had studied at the same collage, – that of Grassins, – and we had met again in the same law-office, – that of Bordin, – a truly honest man. When you have spent your boyhood and played your youthful pranks with the same comrade, the sympathy between you and him has something sacred about it; his voice, his glance, stir certain chords in your heart which only vibrate under the memories that he brings back. Even if you have had cause of complaint against such a comrade, the rights of the friendship between you can never be effaced. But there had never been the slightest jar between us two. At the death of his father, in 1787, Mongenod was left richer than I. Though I had never borrowed money from him, I owed him pleasures which my father's economy denied me. Without my generous comrade I should never had seen the first representation of the 'Marriage of Figaro.' Mongenod was what was called in those days a charming cavalier; he was very gallant. Sometimes I blamed him for his facile way of making intimacies and his too great amiability. His purse opened freely; he lived in a free-handed way; he would serve a man as second having only seen him twice. Good God! how you send me back to the days and the ways of my youth!" said the worthy man, with his cheery smile.

"Are you sorry?" said Godefroid.

"Oh, no! and you can judge by the minuteness with which I am telling you all this how great a place this event has held in my life.

"Mongenod, endowed with an excellent heart and fine courage, a trifle Voltairean, was inclined to play the nobleman," went on Monsieur Alain. "His education at Grassins, where there were many young nobles, and his various gallantries, had given him the polished manners and ways of people of condition, who were then called aristocrats. You can therefore imagine how great was my surprise to see such symptoms of poverty in the young and elegant Mongenod of 1787 when my eyes left his face and rested on his garments. But as, at that unhappy period of our history, some persons assumed a shabby exterior for safety, and as he might have had some other and sufficient reasons for disguising himself, I awaited an explanation, although I opened the way to it. 'What a plight you are in, my dear Mongenod!' I said, accepting the pinch of snuff he offered me from a copper and zinc snuff-box. 'Sad indeed!' he answered; 'I have but one friend left, and that is you. I have done all I could to avoid appealing to you; but I must ask you for a hundred louis. The sum is large, I know,' he went on, seeing my surprise; 'but if you gave me fifty I should be unable ever to return them; whereas with one hundred I can seek my fortune in better ways, – despair will inspire me to find them.' 'Then you have nothing?' I exclaimed. 'I have,' he said, brushing away a tear, 'five sous left of my last piece of money. To come here to you I have had my boots blacked and my face shaved. I possess what I have on my back. But,' he added, with a gesture, 'I owe my landlady a thousand francs in assignats, and the man I buy cold victuals from refused me credit yesterday. I am absolutely without resources.' 'What do you think of doing?' 'Enlisting as a soldier if you cannot help me.' 'You! a soldier, Mongenod?' 'I will get myself killed, or I will be General Mongenod.' 'Well,' I said, much moved, 'eat your breakfast in peace; I have a hundred louis.'

"At that point," said the goodman, interrupting himself and looking at Godefroid with a shrewd air, "I thought it best to tell him a bit of a fib."

"'That is all I possess in the world,' I said. 'I have been waiting for a fall in the Funds to invest that money; but I will put it in your hands instead, and you shall consider me your partner; I will leave to your conscience the duty of returning it to me in due time. The conscience of an honest man,' I said, 'is a better security than the Funds.' Mongenod looked at me fixedly as I spoke, and seemed to be inlaying my words upon his heart. He put out his right hand, I laid my left into it, and we held them together, – I deeply moved, and he with two big tears rolling down his cheeks. The sight of those tears wrung my heart. I was more moved still when Mongenod pulled out a ragged foulard handkerchief to wipe them away. 'Wait here,' I said; and I went to my secret hiding-place with a heart as agitated as though I had heard a woman say she loved me. I came back with two rolls of fifty louis each. 'Here, count them.' He would not count them; and he looked about him for a desk on which to write, he

said, a proper receipt. I positively refused to take any paper. ‘If I should die,’ I said, ‘my heirs would trouble you. This is to be between ourselves.’

“Well,” continued Monsieur Alain, smiling, “when Mongenod found me a good friend he ceased to look as sad and anxious as when he entered; in fact, he became quite gay. My housekeeper gave us some oysters, white wine, and an omelet, with broiled kidneys, and the remains of a pate my old mother had sent me; also some dessert, coffee, and liqueur of the Iles. Mongenod, who had been starving for two days, was fed up. We were so interested in talking about our life before the Revolution that we sat at table till three in the afternoon. Mongenod told me how he had lost his fortune. In the first place, his father having invested the greater part of his capital in city loans, when they fell Mongenod lost two thirds of all he had. Then, having sold his house in the rue de Savoie, he was forced to receive the price in assignats. After that he took into his head to found a newspaper, ‘La Sentinelle;’ that compelled him to fly at the end of six months. His hopes, he said, were now fixed on the success of a comic opera called ‘Les Peruviens.’ When he said that I began to tremble. Mongenod turned author, wasting his money on a newspaper, living no doubt in the theatres, connected with singers at the Feydeau, with musicians, and all the queer people who lurk behind the scenes, – to tell you the truth, he didn’t seem my Mongenod. I trembled. But how could I take back the hundred louis? I saw each roll in each pocket of his breeches like the barrels of two pistols.

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