

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

UNCONSCIOUS
COMEDIANS

Оноре де Бальзак
Unconscious Comedians

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Leon de Lora, our celebrated landscape painter, belongs to one of the noblest families of the Roussillon (Spanish originally) which, although distinguished for the antiquity of its race, has been doomed for a century to the proverbial poverty of hidalgos. Coming, light-footed, to Paris from the department of the Eastern Pyrenees, with the sum of eleven francs in his pocket for all viaticum, he had in some degree forgotten the miseries and privations of his childhood and his family amid the other privations and miseries which are never lacking to “rapins,” whose whole fortune consists of intrepid vocation. Later, the cares of fame and those of success were other causes of forgetfulness.

If you have followed the capricious and meandering course of these studies, perhaps you will remember Mistigris, Schinner’s pupil, one of the heroes of “A Start in Life” (Scenes from Private Life), and his brief apparitions in other Scenes. In 1845, this landscape painter, emulator of the Hobbemas, Ruysdaels, and Lorraines, resembles no more the shabby, frisky rapin whom we then knew. Now an illustrious man, he owns a charming house in the rue de Berlin, not far from the hotel de Brambourg, where his friend Brideau lives, and quite close to the house of Schinner, his early master. He is a member of the Institute and an officer of the Legion of honor; he is thirty-six years old, has an income of twenty thousand francs from the Funds, his pictures sell for their weight in gold, and (what seems to him more extraordinary than the invitations he receives occasionally to court balls) his name and fame, mentioned so often for the last sixteen years by the press of Europe, has at last penetrated to the valley of the Eastern Pyrenees, where vegetate three veritable Loras: his father, his eldest brother, and an old paternal aunt, Mademoiselle Urraca y Lora.

In the maternal line the painter has no relation left except a cousin, the nephew of his mother, residing in a small manufacturing town in the department. This cousin was the first to bethink himself of Leon. But it was not until 1840 that Leon de Lora received a letter from Monsieur Sylvestre Palafox-Castal-Gazonal (called simply Gazonal) to which he replied that he was assuredly himself, – that is to say, the son of the late Leonie Gazonal, wife of Comte Fernand Didas y Lora.

During the summer of 1841 cousin Sylvestre Gazonal went to inform the illustrious unknown family of Lora that their little Leon had not gone to the Rio de la Plata, as they supposed, but was now one of the greatest geniuses of the French school of painting; a fact the family did not believe. The eldest son, Don Juan de Lora assured his cousin Gazonal that he was certainly the dupe of some Parisian wag.

Now the said Gazonal was intending to go to Paris to prosecute a lawsuit which the prefect of the Eastern Pyrenees had arbitrarily removed from the usual jurisdiction, transferring it to that of the Council of State. The worthy provincial determined to investigate this act, and to ask his Parisian cousin the reason of such high-handed measures. It thus happened that Monsieur Gazonal came to Paris, took shabby lodgings in the rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs, and was amazed to see the palace of his cousin in the rue de Berlin. Being told that the painter was then travelling in Italy, he renounced, for the time being, the intention of asking his advice, and doubted if he should ever find his maternal relationship acknowledged by so great a man.

During the years 1843 and 1844 Gazonal attended to his lawsuit. This suit concerned a question as to the current and level of a stream of water and the necessity of removing a dam, in which dispute the administration, instigated by the abutters on the river banks, had meddled. The removal of the dam threatened the existence of Gazonal’s manufactory. In 1845, Gazonal considered his cause as wholly lost; the secretary of the Master of Petitions, charged with the duty of drawing up the report, had

confided to him that the said report would assuredly be against him, and his own lawyer confirmed the statement. Gazonal, though commander of the National Guard in his own town and one of the most capable manufacturers of the department, found himself of so little account in Paris, and he was, moreover, so frightened by the costs of living and the dearness of even the most trifling things, that he kept himself, all this time, secluded in his shabby lodgings. The Southerner, deprived of his sun, execrated Paris, which he called a manufactory of rheumatism. As he added up the costs of his suit and his living, he vowed within himself to poison the prefect on his return, or to minotaurize him. In his moments of deepest sadness he killed the prefect outright; in gayer mood he contented himself with minotaurizing him.

One morning as he ate his breakfast and cursed his fate, he picked up a newspaper savagely. The following lines, ending an article, struck Gazonal as if the mysterious voice which speaks to gamblers before they win had sounded in his ear: "Our celebrated landscape painter, Leon de Lora, lately returned from Italy, will exhibit several pictures at the Salon; thus the exhibition promises, as we see, to be most brilliant." With the suddenness of action that distinguishes the sons of the sunny South, Gazonal sprang from his lodgings to the street, from the street to a street-cab, and drove to the rue de Berlin to find his cousin.

Leon de Lora sent word by a servant to his cousin Gazonal that he invited him to breakfast the next day at the Cafe de Paris, but he was now engaged in a matter which did not allow him to receive his cousin at the present moment. Gazonal, like a true Southerner, recounted all his troubles to the valet.

The next day at ten o'clock, Gazonal, much too well-dressed for the occasion (he had put on his bottle-blue coat with brass buttons, a frilled shirt, a white waistcoat and yellow gloves), awaited his amphitryon a full hour, stamping his feet on the boulevard, after hearing from the master of the cafe that "these gentlemen" breakfasted habitually between eleven and twelve o'clock.

"Between eleven and half-past," he said when he related his adventures to his cronies in the provinces, "two Parisians dressed in simple frock-coats, looking like *nothing at all*, called out when they saw me on the boulevard, 'There's our Gazonal!'"

The speaker was Bixiou, with whom Leon de Lora had armed himself to "bring out" his provincial cousin, in other words, to make him pose.

"Don't be vexed, cousin, I'm at your service!" cried out that little Leon, taking me in his arms," related Gazonal on his return home. "The breakfast was splendid. I thought I was going blind when I saw the number of bits of gold it took to pay that bill. Those fellows must earn their weight in gold, for I saw my cousin give the waiter *thirty sous*— the price of a whole day's work!"

During this monstrous breakfast – advisedly so called in view of six dozen Osten oysters, six cutlets a la Soubise, a chicken a la Marengo, lobster mayonnaise, green peas, a mushroom pasty, washed down with three bottles of Bordeaux, three bottles of Champagne, plus coffee and liqueurs, to say nothing of relishes – Gazonal was magnificent in his diatribes against Paris. The worthy manufacturer complained of the length of the four-pound bread-loaves, the height of the houses, the indifference of the passengers in the streets to one another, the cold, the rain, the cost of hackney-coaches, all of which and much else he bemoaned in so witty a manner that the two artists took a mighty fancy to cousin Gazonal, and made him relate his lawsuit from beginning to end.

"My lawsuit," he said in his Southern accent and rolling his r's, "is a very simple thing; they want my manufactory. I've employed here in Paris a dolt of a lawyer, to whom I give twenty francs every time he opens an eye, and he is always asleep. He's a slug, who drives in his coach, while I go afoot and he splashes me. I see now I ought to have had a carriage! On the other hand, that Council of State are a pack of do-nothings, who leave their duties to little scamps every one of whom is bought up by our prefect. That's my lawsuit! They want my manufactory! Well, they'll get it! and they must manage the best they can with my workmen, a hundred of 'em, who'll make them sing another tune before they've done with them."

“Two years. Ha! that meddling prefect! he shall pay dear for this; I’ll have his life if I have to give mine on the scaffold – ”

“Which state councillor presides over your section?”

“A former newspaper man, – doesn’t pay ten sous in taxes, – his name is Massol.”

The two Parisians exchanged glances.

“Who is the commissioner who is making the report?”

“Ha! that’s still more queer; he’s Master of Petitions, professor of something or other at the Sorbonne, – a fellow who writes things in reviews, and for whom I have the profoundest contempt.”

“Claude Vignon,” said Bixiou.

“Yes, that’s his name,” replied Gazonal. “Massol and Vignon – there you have Social Reason, in which there’s no reason at all.”

“There must be some way out of it,” said Leon de Lora. “You see, cousin, all things are possible in Paris for good as well as for evil, for the just as well as the unjust. There’s nothing that can’t be done, undone, and redone.”

“The devil take me if I stay ten days more in this hole of a place, the dullest in all France!”

The two cousins and Bixiou were at this moment walking from one end to the other of that sheet of asphalt on which, between the hours of one and three, it is difficult to avoid seeing some of the personages in honor of whom Fame puts one or the other of her trumpets to her lips. Formerly that locality was the Place Royale; next it was the Pont Neuf; in these days this privilege had been acquired by the Boulevard des Italiens.

“Paris,” said the painter to his cousin, “is an instrument on which we must know how to play; if we stand here ten minutes I’ll give you your first lesson. There, look!” he said, raising his cane and pointing to a couple who were just then coming out from the Passage de l’Opera.

“Goodness! who’s that?” asked Gazonal.

That was an old woman, in a bonnet which had spent six months in a show-case, a very pretentious gown and a faded tartan shawl, whose face had been buried twenty years of her life in a damp lodge, and whose swollen hand-bag betokened no better social position than that of an exportress. With her was a slim little girl, whose eyes, fringed with black lashes, had lost their innocence and showed great weariness; her face, of a pretty shape, was fresh and her hair abundant, her forehead charming but audacious, her bust thin, – in other words, an unripe fruit.

“That,” replied Bixiou, “is a rat tied to its mother.”

“A rat! – what’s that?”

“That particular rat,” said Leon, with a friendly nod to Mademoiselle Ninette, “may perhaps win your suit for you.”

Gazonal bounded; but Bixiou had held him by the arm ever since they left the cafe, thinking perhaps that the flush on his face was rather vivid.

“That rat, who is just leaving a rehearsal at the Opera-house, is going home to eat a miserable dinner, and will return about three o’clock to dress, if she dances in the ballet this evening – as she will, to-day being Monday. This rat is already an old rat for she is thirteen years of age. Two years from now that creature may be worth sixty thousand francs; she will be all or nothing, a great danseuse or a marcheuse, a celebrated person or a vulgar courtesan. She has worked hard since she was eight years old. Such as you see her, she is worn out with fatigue; she exhausted her body this morning in the dancing-class, she is just leaving a rehearsal where the evolutions are as complicated as a Chinese puzzle; and she’ll go through them again to-night. The rat is one of the primary elements of the Opera; she is to the leading danseuse what a junior clerk is to a notary. The rat is – hope.”

“Who produces the rat?” asked Gazonal.

“Porters, paupers, actors, dancers,” replied Bixiou. “Only the lowest depths of poverty could force a child to subject her feet and joints to positive torture, to keep herself virtuous out of mere speculation until she is eighteen years of age, and to live with some horrible old crone like a beautiful

plant in a dressing of manure. You shall see now a procession defiling before you, one after the other, of men of talent, little and great, artists in seed or flower, who are raising to the glory of France that every-day monument called the Opera, an assemblage of forces, wills, and forms of genius, nowhere collected as in Paris.

“I have already seen the Opera,” said Gazonal, with a self-sufficient air.

“Yes, from a three-francs-sixty-sous seat among the gods,” replied the landscape painter; “just as you have seen Paris in the rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs, without knowing anything about it. What did they give at the Opera when you were there?”

“Guillaume Tell.”

“Well,” said Leon, “Matilde’s grand DUO must have delighted you. What do you suppose that charming singer did when she left the stage?”

“She – well, what?”

“She ate two bloody mutton-chops which her servant had ready for her.”

“Pooh! nonsense!”

“Malibran kept up on brandy – but it killed her in the end. Another thing! You have seen the ballet, and you’ll now see it defiling past you in its every-day clothes, without knowing that the face of your lawsuit depends on a pair of those legs.”

“My lawsuit!”

“See, cousin, here comes what is called a marcheuse.”

Leon pointed to one of those handsome creatures who at twenty-five years of age have lived sixty, and whose beauty is so real and so sure of being cultivated that they make no display of it. She was tall, and walked well, with the arrogant look of a dandy; her toilet was remarkable for its ruinous simplicity.

“That is Carabine,” said Bixiou, who gave her, as did Leon, a slight nod to which she responded by a smile.

“There’s another who may possibly get your prefect turned out.”

“A marcheuse! – but what is that?”

“A marcheuse is a rat of great beauty whom her mother, real or fictitious, has sold as soon as it was clear she would become neither first, second, nor third danseuse, but who prefers the occupation of coryphee to any other, for the main reason that having spent her youth in that employment she is unfitted for any other. She has been rejected at the minor theatres where they want danseuses; she has not succeeded in the three towns where ballets are given; she has not had the money, or perhaps the desire to go to foreign countries – for perhaps you don’t know that the great school of dancing in Paris supplies the whole world with male and female dancers. Thus a rat who becomes a marcheuse, – that is to say, an ordinary figurante in a ballet, – must have some solid attachment which keeps her in Paris: either a rich man she does not love or a poor man she loves too well. The one you have just seen pass will probably dress and redress three times this evening, – as a princess, a peasant-girl, a Tyrolese; by which she will earn about two hundred francs a month.”

“She is better dressed than my prefect’s wife.”

“If you should go to her house,” said Bixiou, “you would find there a chamber-maid, a cook, and a man-servant. She occupies a fine apartment in the rue Saint-Georges; in short, she is, in proportion to French fortunes of the present day compared with those of former times, a relic of the eighteenth century ‘opera-girl.’ Carabine is a power; at this moment she governs du Tillet, a banker who is very influential in the Chamber of Deputies.”

“And above these two rounds in the ballet ladder what comes next?” asked Gazonal.

“Look!” said his cousin, pointing to an elegant caleche which was turning at that moment from the boulevard into the rue Grange-Bateliere, “there’s one of the leading danseuses whose name on the posters attracts all Paris. That woman earns sixty thousand francs a year and lives like a princess;

the price of your manufactory all told wouldn't suffice to buy you the privilege of bidding her good-morning a dozen times."

"Do you see," said Bixiou, "that young man who is sitting on the front seat of her carriage? Well, he's a viscount who bears a fine old name; he's her first gentleman of the bed-chamber; does all her business with the newspapers; carries messages of peace or war in the morning to the director of the Opera; and takes charge of the applause which salutes her as she enters or leaves the stage."

"Well, well, my good friends, that's the finishing touch! I see now that I knew nothing of the ways of Paris."

"At any rate, you are learning what you can see in ten minutes in the Passage de l'Opera," said Bixiou. "Look there."

Two persons, a man and a woman, came out of the Passage at that moment. The woman was neither plain nor pretty; but her dress had that distinction of style and cut and color which reveals an artist; the man had the air of a singer.

"There," said Bixiou, "is a baritone and a second danseuse. The baritone is a man of immense talent, but a baritone voice being only an accessory to the other parts he scarcely earns what the second danseuse earns. The danseuse, who was celebrated before Taglioni and Ellsler appeared, has preserved to our day some of the old traditions of the character dance and pantomime. If the two others had not revealed in the art of dancing a poetry hitherto unperceived, she would have been the leading talent; as it is, she is reduced to the second line. But for all that, she fingers her thirty thousand francs a year, and her faithful friend is a peer of France, very influential in the Chamber. And see! there's a danseuse of the third order, who, as a dancer, exists only through the omnipotence of a newspaper. If her engagement were not renewed the ministry would have one more journalistic enemy on its back. The corps de ballet is a great power; consequently it is considered better form in the upper ranks of dandyism and politics to have relations with dance than with song. In the stalls, where the habitués of the Opera congregate, the saying 'Monsieur is all for singing' is a form of ridicule."

A short man with a common face, quite simply dressed, passed them at this moment.

"There's the other half of the Opera receipts – that man who just went by; the tenor. There is no longer any play, poem, music, or representation of any kind possible unless some celebrated tenor can reach a certain note. The tenor is love, he is the Voice that touches the heart, that vibrates in the soul, and his value is reckoned at a much higher salary than that of a minister. One hundred thousand francs for a throat, one hundred thousand francs for a couple of ankle-bones, – those are the two financial scourges of the Opera."

"I am amazed," said Gazonal, "at the hundreds of thousands of francs walking about here."

"We'll amaze you a good deal more, my dear cousin," said Leon de Lora. "We'll take Paris as an artist takes his violoncello, and show you how it is played, – in short, how people amuse themselves in Paris."

"It is a kaleidoscope with a circumference of twenty miles," cried Gazonal.

"Before piloting monsieur about, I have to see Gaillard," said Bixiou.

"But we can use Gaillard for the cousin," replied Leon.

"What sort of machine is that?" asked Gazonal.

"He isn't a machine, he is a machinist. Gaillard is a friend of ours who has ended a miscellaneous career by becoming the editor of a newspaper, and whose character and finances are governed by movements comparable to those of the tides. Gaillard can contribute to make you win your lawsuit –"

"It is lost."

"That's the very moment to win it," replied Bixiou.

When they reached Theodore Gaillard's abode, which was now in the rue de Menars, the valet ushered the three friends into a boudoir and asked them to wait, as monsieur was in secret conference.

"With whom?" asked Bixiou.

“With a man who is selling him the incarceration of an *unseizable* debtor,” replied a handsome woman who now appeared in a charming morning toilet.

“In that case, my dear Suzanne,” said Bixiou, “I am certain we may go in.”

“Oh! what a beautiful creature!” said Gazonal.

“That is Madame Gaillard,” replied Leon de Lora, speaking low into his cousin’s ear. “She is the most humble-minded woman in Paris, for she had the public and has contented herself with a husband.”

“What is your will, messeigneurs?” said the facetious editor, seeing his two friends and imitating Frederic Lemaitre.

Theodore Gaillard, formerly a wit, had ended by becoming a stupid man in consequence of remaining constantly in one centre, – a moral phenomenon frequently to be observed in Paris. His principal method of conversation consisted in sowing his speeches with sayings taken from plays then in vogue and pronounced in imitation of well-known actors.

“We have come to blague,” said Leon.

“Again, young men” (Odry in the Saltimbauques).

“Well, this time, we’ve got him, sure,” said Gaillard’s other visitor, apparently by way of conclusion.

“Are you sure of it, pere Fromenteau?” asked Gaillard. “This is the eleventh time you’ve caught him at night and missed him in the morning.”

“How could I help it? I never saw such a debtor! he’s a locomotive; goes to sleep in Paris and wakes up in the Seine-et-Oise. A safety lock I call him.” Seeing a smile on Gaillard’s face he added: “That’s a saying in our business. Pinch a man, means arrest him, lock him up. The criminal police have another term. Vidoeq said to his man, ‘You are served’; that’s funnier, for it means the guillotine.”

A nudge from Bixiou made Gazonal all eyes and ears.

“Does monsieur grease my paws?” asked Fromenteau of Gaillard, in a threatening but cool tone.

“A question that of fifty centimes” (Les Saltimbauques), replied the editor, taking out five francs and offering them to Fromenteau.

“And the rascallions?” said the man.

“What rascallions?” asked Gaillard.

“Those I employ,” replied Fromenteau calmly.

“Is there a lower depth still?” asked Bixiou.

“Yes, monsieur,” said the spy. “Some people give us information without knowing they do so, and without getting paid for it. I put fools and ninnies below rascallions.”

“They are often original, and witty, your rascallions!” said Leon.

“Do you belong to the police?” asked Gazonal, eying with uneasy curiosity the hard, impassible little man, who was dressed like the third clerk in a sheriff’s office.

“Which police do you mean?” asked Fromenteau.

“There are several?”

“As many as five,” replied the man. “Criminal, the head of which was Vidoeq; secret police, which keeps an eye on the other police, the head of it being always unknown; political police, – that’s Fouche’s. Then there’s the police of Foreign Affairs, and finally, the palace police (of the Emperor, Louis XVIII., etc.), always squabbling with that of the quai Malaquais. It came to an end under Monsieur Decazes. I belonged to the police of Louis XVIII.; I’d been in it since 1793, with that poor Contenson.”

The four gentlemen looked at each other with one thought: “How many heads he must have brought to the scaffold!”

“Now-a-days, they are trying to get on without us. Folly!” continued the little man, who began to seem terrible. “Since 1830 they want honest men at the prefecture! I resigned, and I’ve made myself a small vocation by arresting for debt.”

“He is the right arm of the commercial police,” said Gaillard in Bixiou’s ear, “but you can never find out who pays him most, the debtor or the creditor.”

“The more rascally a business is, the more honor it needs. I’m for him who pays me best,” continued Fromenteau addressing Gaillard. “You want to recover fifty thousand francs and you talk farthings to your means of action. Give me five hundred francs and your man is pinched to-night, for we spotted him yesterday!”

“Five hundred francs for you alone!” cried Theodore Gaillard.

“Lizette wants a shawl,” said the spy, not a muscle of his face moving. “I call her Lizette because of Beranger.”

“You have a Lizette, and you stay in such a business!” cried the virtuous Gazonal.

“It is amusing! People may cry up the pleasures of hunting and fishing as much as they like but to stalk a man in Paris is far better fun.”

“Certainly,” said Gazonal, reflectively, speaking to himself, “they must have great talent.”

“If I were to enumerate the qualities which make a man remarkable in our vocation,” said Fromenteau, whose rapid glance had enabled him to fathom Gazonal completely, “you’d think I was talking of a man of genius. First, we must have the eyes of a lynx; next, audacity (to tear into houses like bombs, accost the servants as if we knew them, and propose treachery – always agreed to); next, memory, sagacity, invention (to make schemes, conceived rapidly, never the same – for spying must be guided by the characters and habits of the persons spied upon; it is a gift of heaven); and, finally, agility, vigor. All these facilities and qualities, monsieur, are depicted on the door of the *Gymnase-Amoros* as *Virtue*. Well, we must have them all, under pain of losing the salaries given us by the State, the *rue de Jerusalem*, or the minister of Commerce.”

“You certainly seem to me a remarkable man,” said Gazonal.

Fromenteau looked at the provincial without replying, without betraying the smallest sign of feeling, and departed, bowing to no one, – a trait of real genius.

“Well, cousin, you have now seen the police incarnate,” said Leon to Gazonal.

“It has something the effect of a dinner-pill,” said the worthy provincial, while Gaillard and Bixiou were talking together in a low voice.

“I’ll give you an answer to-night at *Carabine’s*,” said Gaillard aloud, re-seating himself at his desk without seeing or bowing to Gazonal.

“He is a rude fellow!” cried the Southerner as they left the room.

“His paper has twenty-two thousand subscribers,” said Leon de Lora. “He is one of the five great powers of the day, and he hasn’t, in the morning, the time to be polite. Now,” continued Leon, speaking to Bixiou, “if we are going to the Chamber to help him with his lawsuit let us take the longest way round.”

“Words said by great men are like silver-gilt spoons with the gilt washed off; by dint of repetition they lose their brilliancy,” said Bixiou. “Where shall we go?”

“Here, close by, to our hatter?” replied Leon.

“Bravo!” cried Bixiou. “If we keep on in this way, we shall have an amusing day of it.”

“Gazonal,” said Leon, “I shall make the man pose for you; but mind that you keep a serious face, like the king on a five-franc piece, for you are going to see a choice original, a man whose importance has turned his head. In these days, my dear fellow, under our new political dispensation, every human being tries to cover himself with glory, and most of them cover themselves with ridicule; hence a lot of living caricatures quite new to the world.”

“If everybody gets glory, who can be famous?” said Gazonal.

“Fame! none but fools want that,” replied Bixiou. “Your cousin wears the cross, but I’m the better dressed of the two, and it is I whom people are looking at.”

After this remark, which may explain why orators and other great statesmen no longer put the ribbon in their buttonholes when in Paris, Leon showed Gazonal a sign, bearing, in golden letters, the

illustrious name of “Vital, successor to Finot, manufacturer of hats” (no longer “hatter” as formerly), whose advertisements brought in more money to the newspapers than those of any half-dozen vendors of pills or sugarplums, – the author, moreover, of an essay on hats.

“My dear fellow,” said Bixiou to Gazonal, pointing to the splendors of the show-window, “Vital has forty thousand francs a year from invested property.”

“And he stays a hatter!” cried the Southerner, with a bound that almost broke the arm which Bixiou had linked in his.

“You shall see the man,” said Leon. “You need a hat and you shall have one gratis.”

“Is Monsieur Vital absent?” asked Bixiou, seeing no one behind the desk.

“Monsieur is correcting proof in his study,” replied the head clerk.

“Hein! what style!” said Leon to his cousin; then he added, addressing the clerk: “Could we speak to him without injury to his inspiration?”

“Let those gentlemen enter,” said a voice.

It was a bourgeois voice, the voice of one eligible to the Chamber, a powerful voice, a wealthy voice.

Vital deigned to show himself, dressed entirely in black cloth, with a splendid frilled shirt adorned with one diamond. The three friends observed a young and pretty woman sitting near the desk, working at some embroidery.

Vital is a man between thirty and forty years of age, with a natural joviality now repressed by ambitious ideas. He is blessed with that medium height which is the privilege of sound organizations. He is rather plump, and takes great pains with his person. His forehead is getting bald, but he uses that circumstance to give himself the air of a man consumed by thought. It is easy to see by the way his wife looks at him and listens to him that she believes in the genius and glory of her husband. Vital loves artists, not that he has any taste for art, but from fellowship; for he feels himself an artist, and makes this felt by disclaiming that title of nobility, and placing himself with constant premeditation at so great a distance from the arts that persons may be forced to say to him: “You have raised the construction of hats to the height of a science.”

“Have you at last discovered a hat to suit me?” asked Leon de Lora.

“Why, monsieur! in fifteen days?” replied Vital, “and for you! Two months would hardly suffice to invent a shape in keeping with your countenance. See, here is your lithographic portrait: I have studied it most carefully. I would not give myself that trouble for a prince; but you are more; you are an artist, and you understand me.”

“This is one of our greatest inventors,” said Bixiou presenting Gazonal. “He might be as great as Jacquart if he would only let himself die. Our friend, a manufacturer of cloth, has discovered a method of replacing the indigo in old blue coats, and he wants to see you as another great phenomenon, because he has heard of your saying, ‘The hat is the man.’ That speech of yours enraptured him. Ah! Vital, you have faith; you believe in something; you have enthusiasm for your work.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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