ÉMILE ZOLA

THE LADIES' PARADISE

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Zola É.

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Содержание

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INTRODUCTION

I certainly have no desire to frighten the female readers to whom this free rendering of one of M. Zola's best books so largely appeals, – it is indeed a book with a good sound moral, fit for every thoughtful woman to peruse – but, in endeavouring to point out its scope and purport, I must, in the first instance, refer to some matters in which women, as nowadays educated, take as a rule but the scantiest of interest. Still many of them may have heard that in the opinion of various *fin-de-siècle* seers and prophets the future of the human race lies in collectivism, a prediction which I do not intend to discuss, but respecting which I may remark that during the last half century in this country there has certainly been a tendency in the direction indicated, even amongst classes which profess to hold every form of socialism in horror.

This tendency towards collectivism has manifested itself notably in certain trades and industries by the introduction of various forms of co-operation, by the amalgamation, too, of rival businesses, and even by the formation of quasi-monopolies which, evil and unjust as they may appear to some, nevertheless rejoice the heart of many Socialists who consider that the fewer the individual interests to be overthrown, the easier will be their task of conquest when the time shall come for olden society to give up the ghost. And, further, a tendency towards collectivism is also to be traced in the establishment of those great "universal providing" concerns which we know by the name of "stores", and which many a Socialist will tell you are but the forerunners of the colossal "magazines of distribution" which will become necessary when collectivism shall have attained its ends.

On all sides nowadays the small trader and the small manufacturer are assailed, and in many instances can barely hold their own; for cheapness is the god of the hour, and in cheapness they cannot hope to compete with those who operate upon a colossal scale. Whether they will ultimately be obliged to give up the contest, whether the passion for individuality is destined to depart from the human race, these and the many other questions which the problem suggests, I will leave to the Collectivist prophets and to those who oppose their doctrines in our reviews and newspapers. I have merely desired to call the reader's attention to this problem and to the tendencies previously referred to, because he – or she – will find that they constitute no small portion of the subject of the present volume of M. Zola's works.

In "Au Bonheur des Dames" M. Zola has taken as his theme a particular phase of the amalgamation and "universal providing" tendencies, as they have presented themselves in France; and the phase in question is certainly one of the most interesting, if only for the fact that it is so closely connected with the desires and needs of women. In a word the work deals with those huge drapery establishments, like the "Bon Marché" and the "Louvre", which are renowned throughout the world.

We have no doubt several very large draper's emporiums in London, but I do not think that any one of them can claim to rival either in dimensions, extent of business, or completeness of organisation the great French establishments to which I have referred above. I can myself well remember the growth of the "Bon Marché" and the "Louvre". Transferred, when my education was but half-completed, from the solitude of the Sussex downs to the whirling vortex of Paris, I grew up amongst those Haussmannite transformations which virtually made the French capital a new city – a city which became my home for well nigh twenty years. Even now I am but a stranger in my own land, among my own kith and kin; and my memory ever dwells on those years when I saw Paris develop, opening her streets to air and light and health, increasing her wealth and her activity, on the one hand multiplying her workshops, ever busy, thanks to the taste and dexterity of her craftsmen, and on

the other, by the attraction of a thousand pleasures, becoming the caravanserai of Europe. And my fanatical admiration for M. Zola and for all his works, the passion which has induced me to translate so many of them, arises mainly from the fact that they deal so largely with Paris and her life at a period which I so well remember, with scenes and incidents which I can so readily recall and which carry me back to the days when the heart was light and buoyant, and sorrow was a thing unknown. And when, now and again sundry supercilious English critics, qualified by a smattering of French and a few months' residence in France, presume to sneer at M. Zola's pictures of French manners and customs in the days of the Second Empire, I merely shrug my shoulders at their ignorance. For my own part I believe, for like St. Thomas I have seen.

Among the subjects dealt with by M. Zola in the Rougon-Macquart series, that of the present work, – the development of the great *magasins de nouveautés*– is to me one of the most familiar, for the reason that I have always taken a keen interest in the attire and adornment of women, and in my salad days wrote some hundreds of columns of fashion's articles for English newspapers. And my duties in those days took me not only to the *salons* of M. Worth, M. Pingat and other *faiseurs à la mode*, but also to the great drapers', for if, on the one hand, I learned in the former establishments what would be worn by royalty, aristocracy and fashionable depravity, on the other, in the huge bazaars similar to "Au Bonheur des Dames", I ascertained what would be the popular craze of the hour, the material which would be seen on the back of every second woman one might meet, and the one or two colours which for a few months would catch the eye at every street corner. All this may seem to be frivolity, but it is on such frivolity that a goodly portion of civilized humanity subsists. I find M. André Cochut, a well informed writer, holding an official position, stating in 1866 – a year which comes within the period I am referring to – that there were then 26,000 shops and work-shops in Paris which sold or made (almost exclusively) articles of female attire; and these 26,000 establishments (many, of course, very small) gave employment to nearly 140,000 persons of both sexes, among whom there were 1500 designers. Moreover, the trade of Paris in materials and made-up goods was estimated at 570 millions of francs, or £22,800,000! Under these circumstances that Paris should have claimed the sovereignty of fashion is, I think, not surprising.

Nowadays the number of establishments selling or making goods for feminine attire has undoubtedly decreased, but the trade is greater than ever. Well nigh the only alteration one can trace, is that many of the smaller houses have been swallowed up by their big rivals in accordance with the usual conditions of the struggle for life. The big establishments did not, however, step into the arena, huge like Goliaths and armed *cap-à-pié*. As M. Zola relates in the following pages, they likewise had humble beginnings, and would never have expanded as they did, but for the commercial genius of their founders. I remember the "Bon Marché" having but one entrance (in the Rue du Bac, near the corner of the Rue de Sèvres) and ranking, in the opinion of the women of the neighbourhood, far below the "Petit St. Thomas" which it has since altogether outstripped. In the same way the huge block of building now occupied by the "Magasins du Louvre" comprised some forty different shops held by different tenants. Indeed the pile had originally been erected for an hotel, the Grand Hôtel du Louvre, and the shops, even those bearing the name of the Louvre, were at the outset, only a secondary consideration. But gradually a transformation was effected; the drapery emporium became larger and larger, secured the adjoining shops, and ultimately invaded the hotel itself.

Certainly all this was not easily brought about. Many neighbouring tenants refused to give way to the monster and clung stubbornly to their leases, fighting the unequal battle with the utmost obstinacy, – an obstinacy such as that which the Baudus, and old Bourras, the umbrella maker, will be found displaying in M. Zola's pages. In the case of the "Louvre", the last of these stubborn antagonists was, if I recollect rightly, a stationer whose shop fronted on the Place du Palais Royal, and I believe that he held out until his lease fell in. At the "Bon Marché" too, the Boucicauts had to contend against similar obstacles; and, there, the enlargement of the premises was attended by difficulties akin to those which M. Zola describes; for many of the adjoining houses were decrepit, tumble-down vestiges

of olden Paris; and each time the "Bon Marché" gained a few yards of frontage expensive building operations had to be carried out.

In his present work M. Zola has, of course, not taken as his theme the actual history of either of the great establishments to which I have been referring. But from that history and from the history of other important *magasins de nouveautés* he has borrowed a multitude of curious and interesting facts, which he has blended into a realistic whole. Curiously enough the site which he has chosen for "Au Bonheur des Dames" was really the site of a fairly large drapery emporium, which became the "Grands Magasins du 4 Septembre"; but perhaps that title, savouring as it did of revolution (the revolution of 1870), brought the establishment bad luck with women caring little or nothing for politics; for it failed to attain the success to which its central situation seemed to entitle it. The "Place Clichy," to which M. Zola will be found referring, still exists, and does a largely increasing business with all the north of Paris; whilst as for the "Four Seasons", which one of his characters, Bouthemont the silk-salesman, establishes near the grand opera-house, this is really the "Printemps," that white and blue and gilded palace which the Parisians owe to the commercial enterprise of M. Jules Jaluzot, by some people unkindly nicknamed "the man with the umbrella".

I have often thought that, from the commercial point of view there is considerable resemblance between M. Jaluzot and M. Zola's hero, Octave Mouret. The latter figures at an earlier stage of his life in another of M. Zola's novels – "Pot-Bouille" – but he there appears as a graceless Don Juan without a redeeming quality; whereas, in the present work, one observes the development of his business capacities, and the gradual progress of his reformation, till his career culminates in a marriage which ought to prove a very happy one, if there be any truth in the old saw that a reformed rake makes the best of husbands. I have, however, no desire to institute the faintest comparison between the private life of Octave Mouret and that of M. Jaluzot; but in describing the former's commercial genius and boldness M. Zola has, I think, more than once thought of the latter's hardihood and talent in carving for himself a great industrial kingdom beside those of the "Bon Marché" and the "Louvre".

M. Jaluzot is famous in Paris for the rare ability he displays in turning everything into advertisement, and this of course is an extremely valuable gift, as advertisement is the very life of the huge *magasins de nouveautés*. Some years ago the "Printemps" was burnt down; and when the necessary rebuilding operations began M. Jaluzot prevailed upon the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris to come and bless the foundation stone of the new edifice. This inspiration – well worthy of M. Zola's hero – secured to M. Jaluzot extensive patronage among the devout; and it was important at the time that he should reconcile himself with society, for on the occasion of the burning of his establishment the entire Parisian press had reproached him with showing greater eagerness to rush off and purchase an umbrella, for protection against a shower, than to minister to the needs of the numerous employees who had been cast on the pavement of Paris by the catastrophe. Hence the nickname to which I have previously referred.

With the every-day life of the Parisian drapery employee the present work is very largely concerned. From the personal investigations I made at former times, the many conversations I had with employees of this class, the numerous corroborative statements I have read in the works of other French writers, I believe M. Zola's pictures of the "counter jumper's" existence at the period dealt with, to be scrupulously accurate. It will be noticed that these pictures slowly change in certain respects as the story proceeds. Mouret at last begins to take more interest in the material comforts of his staff, provides it with better food, and treats it generally in a more reasonable manner; whilst among the employees themselves, their depravity and vulgarity, hidden beneath a surface elegance and politeness, is at times altogether stamped out, at others thrust back far more deeply. To the Boucicauts of the "Bon Marché" largely belongs the honour of having improved the material well-being, and raised the moral tone of shopmen of this class; and their example has been very generally followed. Still, as every Paris "calicot" well knows, there is one great emporium whose internal organization is still open to serious criticism.

"Calicot," I may mention, is the French equivalent of our term "counter-jumper"; and in this introduction to a work which deals so largely with the "calicot's" life it may not be out of place to explain the origin of the nickname. It dates from 1817, when a vaudeville called "*Le Combat des Montagnes, ou la Folie-Beaujon*" by Scribe and Dupin was performed at the Paris Théâtre des Variétés. At that period, with the wars of the Empire still fresh in their recollection, the Parisians generally evinced a cordial respect for those who had seen service; and the young men of the capital, promenading on the boulevards, were fond of affecting a military appearance and demeanour. Matters even came to such a pass that drapers'-assistants, *commis-marchands* as they were then called, cultivated huge moustaches and wore spurs on their boots even when behind their counters. To this ridiculous craze Scribe and Dupin alluded in their vaudeville, into which they introduced a certain "counter-jumper" called Monsieur Calicot, whom the other characters of the play at first mistook for some survivor of the Old Guard. The result, as might have been expected, was an explosion of rage among all the drapery employees of Paris. They besieged the theatre, and desperate and sanguinary battles ensued in the auditorium. The authorities, however, declined to place the vaudeville under interdict; and after several interventions on the part of the police, the irate employees were cowed by the presence of a detachment of grenadiers, who, with loaded muskets, stood on either side of the stage throughout each performance. And from that time to the present day "calicot" has been French for "counter-jumper"[1] so far as drapery is concerned.

However, the vaudeville did not cure the "calicot" of his partiality for moustaches. These he still cultivates, as all who have been in Paris well know; indeed he frequently grows a beard as well; but as such hirsute appendages have long since ceased to be the exclusive property of the military, nobody taunts him with affectation concerning them. On the other hand he has wisely renounced the practice of wearing spurs behind his counter, and if he sometimes evinces a little military precision or even swagger it would be unwise to deem this assumed; for in these days of the universal conscription it may well have been acquired by real service in the ranks. Indeed, we must not sneer at the "calicot"; he answers his country's call as readily as any other of her sons.

It remains for me to say a few words concerning the moral of this book. The story of Denise's struggles, hardships and temptations, her quiet courage and gentle steadfastness is invested by M. Zola with that simple pathos which adorns so many of his works. The young girl passes through the fire and emerges from it unscathed, protected by her own sense of rectitude and the purity of her love, whilst others, alas, are devoured. No more beautiful example of feminine resistance to evil could be imagined. We follow the heroine's fortunes with emotional interest and take a kindly satisfaction in her reward. Possibly, we might wish that she had loved a somewhat worthier man than Mouret, in whom there are many moral blemishes; but the reflection imposes itself, that under her caressing influence these blemishes will disappear, that Mouret will throw off all that remains in him of the old Adam and prove worthy of the love that he himself feels and has inspired. And surely woman's love can have no holier mission than that of the reformation of man. What, moreover, would become of humanity if a woman's heart were to be given only to the immaculate, in accordance with the paradoxical dictum of some latter day lady-novelists? Does not the woman who brings an erring man back into the straight path that he may contribute to the common weal, achieve more good than she who simply plights her troth to one as blameless as herself? And thus a halo encircles M. Zola's heroine, Denise, the personification of all that is best and truest in the female heart.

One word more. The compass of the present introduction does not permit me to establish a comparison between the relative positions of French and English salesmen and women in the great drapery establishments. I fear, however, from all I have heard, that several of M. Zola's strictures on the treatment meted out to the employees of Octave Mouret's bazaar, might be applied to English

[1] I find that Brunet who played the part of M. Calicot wore the following typical costume: high boots with spurs, white trousers, a buff waistcoat and a frock coat made of a green and white "mixture" —*chicorée à la crême*, as the tailors of those days termed it.

houses. And thus whilst I recommend this book to women, whom its subject cannot fail to interest and who will take a warning from the extravagance of Madame Marty and find a bright example in the unswerving rectitude of Denise, I also submit it to the attention of those who are seeking in this country to improve the position of shop employees, for I feel certain that they will find many a useful hint in its searching and accurate pages.

ERNEST A. VIZETELLY.

Merton, May 1895.

CHAPTER I

Denise had come on foot from the Saint-Lazare railway station, where a Cherbourg train had landed her and her two brothers, after a night spent on the hard seat of a third-class carriage. She was leading Pépé by the hand, while Jean followed her; all three of them exhausted by their journey, frightened and lost in that vast city of Paris, their eyes raised to the house fronts and their tongues for ever inquiring the way to the Rue de la Michodière, where their uncle Baudu lived. However, as she at last emerged into the Place Gaillon, the girl stopped short in astonishment.

"Oh! just look there, Jean," said she; and they remained stock still, nestling close to one another, dressed from head to foot in black, the old mourning bought at their father's death. Denise, rather puny for her twenty years, was carrying a small parcel in one hand, while on the other side, her little brother, five years old, clung to her arm, and in the rear her big brother in the flower of his sixteen summers stood erect with dangling arms.

"Well I never," said she, after a pause, "that *is* a shop!"

They were at the corner of the Rue de la Michodière and the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, in front of a draper's shop, whose windows displayed a wealth of bright colour in the soft, pale October light. Eight o'clock was striking at the church of Saint-Roch; and only the early birds of Paris were abroad, a few clerks on their way to business, and housewives flitting about on their morning shopping. Before the door of the drapery establishment, two shopmen, mounted on a step-ladder, were hanging up some woollen goods, whilst in a window facing the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin another young man, kneeling with his back to the pavement, was delicately plaiting a piece of blue silk. In the shop, which was as yet void of customers, and whose employees were only just beginning to arrive, there was a low buzz as in a bee hive just awakening.

"By Jove!" said Jean, "this beats Valognes. Yours wasn't such a fine shop."

Denise shook her head. She had spent two years at Valognes, with Cornaille, the principal draper in the town; and this Parisian shop so suddenly encountered and to her so vast made her heart swell and detained her there, interested, impressed, forgetful of everything else. The lofty plate-glass door in a corner facing the Place Gaillon reached the first storey amidst a medley of ornaments covered with gilding. Two allegorical female figures, with laughing faces and bare bosoms unrolled a scroll bearing the inscription "The Ladies' Paradise"; then, on either side, along the Rue de la Michodière and the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, stretched the windows of the establishment, not limited merely to the corner house but comprising four others – two on the right and two on the left which had been recently purchased and fitted up. It all appeared endless to Denise, thus seen in perspective, with the display down below and the plate glass windows above, through which a long line of counters was to be perceived. Upstairs a young lady, dressed in silk, could be espied sharpening a pencil, while two others, beside her, were unfolding some velvet mantles.

"The Ladies' Paradise," read Jean, with a soft laugh, like a handsome youth who already has thoughts of women. "That's a pretty name – that must draw customers – eh?"

But Denise was absorbed by the display at the principal entrance. There, in the open street, on the very pavement, she beheld a mass of cheap goods – doorway temptations, bargains to attract the passer-by. Pieces of woollen and cloth goods, merinoes, cheviots, and tweeds, hung from above like bunting, with their neutral, slate, navy-blue, and olive-green tints relieved by large white price-tickets. Close by, on either side of the doorway, dangled strips of fur, narrow bands for dress trimmings, ashen-hued Siberian squirrel-skin, swansdown of spotless snowiness, and rabbit-skin transformed into imitation ermine and imitation sable. Below, in boxes and on tables, amidst piles of remnants, appeared a quantity of hosiery which was virtually given away; knitted woollen gloves, neckerchiefs, women's hoods, cardigan waistcoats, a complete winter show with colours in mixtures, patterns and stripes and here and there a flaming patch of red. Denise saw some tartan at nine sous, some strips

of American bison at a franc the mètre, and some mittens at five sous a pair. An immense clearance sale was apparently going on; the establishment seemed to be bursting with goods, blocking up the pavement with the surplus of its contents. Uncle Baudu was forgotten. Even Pépé, clinging tightly to his sister's hand, opened his big eyes in wonder. However a vehicle in coming up forced them to quit the roadway, and they mechanically turned into the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, following the windows and stopping at each fresh display. At first they were captivated by an intricate arrangement: up above a number of umbrellas, placed obliquely, seemed to form a rustic roof; upon rods beneath them hung a quantity of silk stockings displaying neat ankles and well rounded calves, some of them dotted with rosebuds, others of divers hues, the black ones open-worked and the red ones elegantly clocked; whilst those which were of a flesh tint, looked, with their satiny texture, as soft as skin itself. Then, on the baize covering of the show-stage, came a symmetrical array of gloves with extended fingers and narrow palms recalling the hands of Byzantine Virgins, all the rigid and, as it were, adolescent grace which characterises feminine frippery before it is worn. However, it was especially the last window which detained their eyes. An exhibition of silks, satins and velvets, in a supple, vibrating scale of colour, here set, as in full bloom, the most delicate hues of the floral world. At the top were the velvets, deeply black, or white as curds; lower down came the satins, pinks and blues, bright at their folds, then fading into paler and paler tints of infinite delicacy; and lower still were silks, the rainbow's variegated scarf, the several pieces cocked shell-wise, plaited as though round some female waist, endowed, as it were, with life by the skilful manipulation of the employees; and between each *motif*, each glowing phrase of the display ran a discreet accompaniment, a light, puffy roll of creamy *foulard*. Here too at either end of the window, were huge piles of the two silks which were the exclusive property of the establishment, the "Paris Delight" and the "Golden Grain" – articles of exceptional quality destined to revolutionize the silk trade.

"Oh! look at that *faille* at five francs sixty!" murmured Denise, transported with astonishment at sight of the "Paris Delight".

Jean, however, was getting bored and stopped a passer-by. "Which is the Rue de la Michodière, please, sir?"

On hearing that it was the first on the right they all turned back, making the tour of the establishment. But just as she was entering the street, Denise was again attracted by a window in which ladies' mantles were displayed. At Cornaille's the mantles had been her department, but she had never seen anything like this, and remained rooted to the spot with admiration. At the rear a large scarf of Bruges lace, of considerable value, was spread out like an altar-veil, with its two creamy wings extended; then there were flounces of Alençon, grouped in garlands; and from the top to the bottom, like falling snow, fluttered lace of every description – Malines, Valenciennes, Brussels, and Venetian-point. On each side pieces of cloth rose up in dark columns imparting distance to the background. And the mantles were here, in this sort of chapel raised to the worship of woman's beauty and grace. In the centre was a magnificent article, a velvet mantle trimmed with silver fox; on one side of it appeared a silk cloak lined with miniver, on the other a cloth cloak edged with cocks' plumes; and, last of all, some opera cloaks in white cashmere and quilted silk trimmed with swansdown or chenille. There was something for every taste, from the opera cloaks at twenty-nine francs to the velvet mantle which was marked eighteen hundred. The round busts of the dummies filled out the stuff, the prominent hips exaggerating the slimness of the waists and the absent heads being replaced by large price-tickets pinned on the necks, whilst the mirrors, on each side of the window, reflected and multiplied all these forms, peopling the street, as it were, with beautiful women for sale, each bearing a price in big figures in lieu of a head.

"How stunning they are!" murmured Jean, finding no other words to express his emotion.

This time he himself had become motionless, and stood there gaping. All this female luxury turned him rosy with pleasure. He had a girl's beauty – a beauty which he seemed to have stolen from his sister – a fair white skin, ruddy curly hair, lips and eyes overflowing with tenderness. By his side

Denise, with her rather long face, large mouth, fading complexion and light hair, appeared thinner still. Pépé, who was also fair, with the fairness of infancy, now clung closer to her, as if anxious to be caressed, perturbed and delighted as he was by the sight of the beautiful ladies in the window. And those three fair ones, poorly clad in black, that sad-looking girl between the pretty child and the handsome youth, looked so strange yet so charming standing there on the pavement, that the passers-by glanced back smilingly.

For some minutes a stout man with grey hair and a large yellow face had been looking at them from a shop-door on the other side of the street. He had been standing there with bloodshot eyes and contracted mouth, beside himself with rage at the display made by The Ladies' Paradise, when the sight of the girl and her brothers had completed his exasperation. What were those three simpletons doing there, gaping in front of the cheap-jack's show booth?

"What about uncle?" asked Denise, suddenly, as if just waking up.

"We are in the Rue de la Michodière," replied Jean. "He must live somewhere about here."

They raised their heads and looked round; and just in front of them, above the stout man, they perceived a green sign-board on which in yellow letters, discoloured by the rain was the following inscription: "THE OLD ELBEUF. Cloths and Flannels. BAUDU, late HAUCHECORNE." The house, coated with ancient rusty paint, and quite flat and unadorned amidst the surrounding mansions of the Louis XIV. period, had only three front windows up above, square and shutterless windows simply provided with handrails supported by two iron bars placed crosswise. But what most struck Denise, whose eyes were full of the bright display of The Ladies' Paradise, was the low ground-floor shop, surmounted by an equally low storey with half-moon windows, of prison-like appearance. Right and left, framed round by wood work of a bottle-green hue, which time had tinted with ochre and bitumen, were two deep windows, black and dusty, in which pieces of cloth heaped one on another could vaguely be seen. The open doorway seemed to conduct into the darkness and dampness of a cellar.

"That's the house," said Jean.

"Well, we must go in," declared Denise. "Come on, Pépé."

All three, however, grew somewhat troubled, as if seized with fear. When their father had died, carried off by the same fever which a month previously had killed their mother, their uncle Baudu, in the emotion born of this double bereavement, had certainly written to Denise, assuring her that there would always be a place for her in his house whenever she might like to try fortune in Paris. But this had taken place nearly a year ago, and the young girl was now sorry that she should have so impulsively left Valognes without informing her uncle. The latter did not know them, never having set foot in the little town since the day when he had left it as a boy, to enter the service of the draper Hauchecorne, whose daughter he had subsequently married.

"Monsieur Baudu?" asked Denise, at last making up her mind to speak to the stout man who was still eyeing them, surprised by their appearance and manners.

"That's me," he replied.

Then Denise blushed deeply and stammered: "Oh, I'm so pleased! I am Denise. This is Jean, and this is Pépé. You see, we have come, uncle."

Baudu seemed lost in amazement. His big eyes rolled in his yellow face; he spoke slowly and with difficulty. He had evidently been far from thinking of this family which now suddenly dropped down upon him.

"What – what, you here?" he several times repeated. "But you were at Valognes. Why aren't you at Valognes?"

In her sweet but rather faltering voice she then explained that since the death of her father, who had spent every penny he possessed in his dye-works, she had acted as a mother to the two children; but the little she had earned at Cornaille's did not suffice to keep the three of them. Jean certainly worked at a cabinet-maker's, a repairer of old furniture, but didn't earn a sou. Still, he had got to like

the business, and had even learned to carve. One day, having found a piece of ivory, he had amused himself by carving it into a head, which a gentleman staying in the town had seen and praised; and this gentleman it was who had been the cause of their leaving Valognes, as he had found Jean a place with an ivory-carver in Paris.

"So you see, uncle," continued Denise, "Jean will commence his apprenticeship at his new master's to-morrow. They ask no premium, and will board and lodge him. And so I felt sure that Pépé and I would be able to jog along. At all events we can't be worse off than we were at Valognes."

She said nothing about a certain love affair of Jean's, of certain letters which he had written to the daughter of a nobleman of the town, of the kisses which the pair had exchanged over a wall – in fact, quite a scandal which had strengthened her in her determination to leave. And if she was so anxious to be in Paris herself it was that she might be able to look after her brother, feeling, as she did, quite a mother's tender anxiety for this gay and handsome youth, whom all the women adored. Uncle Baudu, however, couldn't get over it, but continued his questions.

"So your father left you nothing," said he. "I certainly thought there was still something left. Ah! how many times did I write advising him not to take those dye-works! He was a good-hearted fellow certainly, but he had no head for business And you were left with those two youngsters to look after – you've had to keep them, eh?"

His bilious face had now become clearer, his eyes were not so bloodshot as when he had stood glaring at The Ladies' Paradise. All at once he noticed that he was blocking up the doorway. "Well," said he, "come in, now you're here. Come in, that'll be better than gaping at a parcel of rubbish."

And after addressing a last pout of anger to The Ladies' Paradise, he made way for the children by entering the shop and calling his wife and daughter: "Elizabeth, Geneviève, come down; here's company for you!"

Denise and the two boys, however, hesitated at sight of the darkness of the shop. Blinded by the clear outdoor light, they blinked as on the threshold of some unknown pit, and felt their way with their feet with an instinctive fear of encountering some treacherous step. And drawn yet closer together by this vague fear, the child still holding the girl's skirts, and the big boy behind, they made their entry with a smiling, anxious grace. The clear morning light outlined the dark silhouettes of their mourning clothes; and an oblique ray of sunshine gilded their fair hair.

"Come in, come in," repeated Baudu.

Then, in a few sentences he explained matters to his wife and daughter. The former was a little woman, consumed by anæmia and quite white – white hair, white eyes and white lips. Geneviève, the daughter, in whom the maternal degeneracy appeared yet more marked, had the sickly, colourless appearance of a plant reared in the shade. However, a thick, heavy crop of magnificent black hair, marvellously vigorous for such poor soil, gave her, as it were, a mournful charm.

"Come in," said both the women in their turn; "you are welcome." And they at once made Denise sit down behind a counter.

Pépé then jumped upon his sister's lap, whilst Jean leant against the panelling beside her. They were regaining their assurance and looking round the shop where their eyes had grown used to the obscurity. They could now distinctly see it all, with its low and smoky ceiling, its oaken counters polished by use, and its old-fashioned nests of drawers with strong iron fittings. Bales of dark goods reached to the beams above; a smell of wool and dye – a sharp chemical smell – prevailed, intensified it seemed by the humidity of the floor. At the further end two young men and a young woman were putting away some pieces of white flannel.

"Perhaps this young gentleman would like to take something?" said Madame Baudu, smiling at Pépé.

"No, thanks," replied Denise, "we each had a cup of milk at a café opposite the station." And as Geneviève looked at the small parcel she had laid on the floor near her, she added: "I left our box there too."

She blushed as she spoke feeling that she ought not to have dropped down on her friends in this way. Even in the train, just as she was leaving Valognes, she had been assailed by regrets and fears; and this was why she had left the box at the station and given the children their breakfast immediately on arriving in Paris.

"Well, well," suddenly said Baudu, "let's come to an understanding. 'Tis true that I wrote to you, but that was a year ago, and since then business hasn't been flourishing, I can assure you, my girl."

He stopped short, choked by an emotion he did not wish to show. Madame Baudu and Geneviève, had cast down their eyes with an air of resignation.

"Oh," continued he, "it's a crisis which will pass, no doubt, I'm not uneasy; but I have reduced my staff; there are only three here now, and this is not the moment to engage a fourth. In short, my poor girl, I cannot take you as I promised."

Denise listened, aghast and very pale. He repeated his words, adding: "It would do no good to either of us."

"All right, uncle," at last she replied, with a painful effort, "I'll try to manage all the same."

The Baudus were not bad sort of people. But they complained of never having had any luck. In the flourishing days of their business, they had had to bring up five sons, of whom three had died before attaining the age of twenty; the fourth had gone wrong, and the fifth had just started for Mexico, as a captain. Geneviève was the only one now left at home. From first to last, however, this large family had cost a deal of money, and Baudu had made things worse by buying a great lumbering country house, at Rambouillet, near his wife's father's place. Thus, a sharp, sour feeling was springing up in the honest old tradesman's breast.

"You might have warned us," he resumed, gradually getting angry at his own harshness. "You might have written and I should have told you to stay at Valognes. When I heard of your father's death I said what is right on such occasions, but you drop down on us without a word of warning. It's very awkward."

He raised his voice, as he thus relieved himself. His wife and daughter still kept their eyes on the floor, like submissive persons who would never think of interfering. Jean, however, had turned pale, whilst Denise hugged the terrified Pépé to her bosom. Hot tears of disappointment fell from her eyes.

"All right, uncle," she said, "we'll go away."

At that he ceased speaking, and an awkward silence ensued. Then he resumed in a surly tone: "I don't mean to turn you out. As you are here you can sleep upstairs to-night; after that, we'll see."

Then, as he glanced at them, Madame Baudu and Geneviève understood that they were free to arrange matters. And all was soon settled. There was no need to trouble about Jean, as he was to enter on his apprenticeship the next day. As for Pépé, he would be well looked after by Madame Gras, an old lady who rented a large ground floor in the Rue des Orties, where she boarded and lodged young children for forty francs a month. Denise said that she had sufficient to pay for the first month, and, so the only remaining question was to find a place for herself. Surely they would be able to discover some situation for her in the neighbourhood.

"Wasn't Vinçard in want of a saleswoman?" asked Geneviève.

"Of course, so he was!" cried Baudu; "we'll go and see him after lunch. There's nothing like striking the iron while it's hot."

Not a customer had come in to interrupt this family discussion; the shop remained dark and empty as before. At the far end, the two young men and the young woman were still working, talking in low sibilant whispers amongst themselves. At last, however, three ladies arrived, and Denise was then left alone for a moment. She kissed Pépé with a swelling heart, at the thought of their approaching separation. The child, affectionate as a kitten, hid his little head without saying a word. When Madame Baudu and Geneviève returned, they remarked how quiet he was, and Denise assured them that he never made any more noise than that, but remained for days together without speaking, living solely on kisses and caresses. Then until lunch-time the three women sat and talked together about children,

housekeeping, life in Paris and life in the country, in curt, cautious sentences, like relations whom ignorance of one another renders somewhat awkward. Jean meantime had gone to the shop-door, and stood there watching all the outdoor life and smiling at the pretty girls. At ten o'clock a servant appeared. As a rule the cloth was then laid for Baudu, Geneviève, and the first-hand; a second lunch being served at eleven o'clock for Madame Baudu, the other young man, and the young woman.

"Come to lunch!" exclaimed the draper, turning towards his niece; and when they sat ready in the narrow dining-room behind the shop, he called the first-hand who had lingered behind: "Colomban lunch!"

The young man entered apologising; he had wished to finish arranging the flannels, he said. He was a big fellow of twenty-five, heavy but crafty, for although his face, with its large weak mouth, seemed at first sight typical of honesty there was a veiled cunning in his eyes.

"There's a time for everything," rejoined Baudu, who sat before a piece of cold veal, carving it with a master's skill and prudence, calculating the weight of each thin slice to within a quarter of an ounce.

He served everybody, and even cut up the bread. Denise had placed Pépé near her to see that he ate properly; but the dark close room made her feel uncomfortable. She thought it so small, after the large, well-lighted rooms to which she had been accustomed in the country. A single window overlooked a small back-yard, which communicated with the street by a dark passage running along the side of the house. And this yard, dripping wet and evil-smelling, was like the bottom of some well into which fell a circular glimmer of light. In the winter they were obliged to keep the gas burning all day, and when the weather enabled them to do without it the room seemed more melancholy still. Several seconds elapsed before Denise's eyes got sufficiently used to the light to distinguish the food on her plate.

"That young chap has a good appetite," remarked Baudu, observing that Jean had finished his veal. "If he works as well as he eats, he'll make a fine fellow. But you, my girl, you are not eating. And, I say, now that we can talk a bit, tell us why you didn't get married at Valognes?"

At this Denise almost dropped the glass she held in her hand. "Oh! uncle – get married! How can you think of it? And the little ones!"

She ended by laughing, it seemed to her such a strange idea. Besides, what man would have cared to take her – a girl without a sou, no fatter than a lath, and not at all pretty? No, no, she would never marry, she had quite enough children with her two brothers.

"You are wrong," said her uncle; "a woman always needs a man. If you had found an honest young fellow over there you wouldn't have dropped on to the Paris pavement, you and your brothers, like a party of gipsies."

He paused in order to apportion with a parsimony full of justice, a dish of bacon and potatoes which the servant had just brought in. Then, pointing to Geneviève and Colomban with his spoon, he added: "Those two will get married next spring, if we have a good winter season."

Such was the patriarchal custom of the house. The founder, Aristide Finet, had given his daughter, Désirée, to his first-hand, Hauchecorne; he, Baudu, who had arrived in the Rue de la Michodière with seven francs in his pocket, had married old Hauchecorne's daughter, Elizabeth; and in his turn he intended to hand over Geneviève and the business to Colomban as soon as trade should improve. If he still delayed the marriage which had been decided on three years previously, it was because a scruple had come to him, a fixed resolve to act in all honesty. He himself had received the business in a prosperous state, and did not wish to pass it on to his son-in-law with fewer customers or doubtful sales. And, continuing his talk, he formally introduced Colomban, who came from Rambouillet, like Madame Baudu's father; in fact they were distant cousins. A hard-working fellow was Colomban, said he; for ten years he had slaved in the shop, fairly earning all his promotions! Besides, he was far from being a nobody; his father was that noted toper, Colomban, the veterinary

surgeon so well known all over the department of Seine-et-Oise, an artist in his line, but so addicted to the flowing bowl that his money fast slipped through his fingers.

"Thank heaven!" said the draper in conclusion, "if the father drinks and runs after women, the son at all events has learnt the value of money here."

Whilst he was thus speaking Denise began to examine Geneviève and Colomban. Though they sat close together at table, they remained very quiet, without a blush or a smile. From the day of entering the establishment the young man had counted on this marriage. He had passed through the various stages of junior hand, salesman, etc., at last gaining admittance into the confidence and pleasures of the family circle, and all this patiently, whilst leading a clock-work style of life and looking upon his marriage with Geneviève as a legitimate stroke of business. The certainty of having her as his wife prevented him from feeling any desire for her. On her side the girl had got to love him with the gravity of her reserved nature, full of a real deep passion of which she was not aware, in the regulated monotony of her daily life.

"Oh! it's quite right, when folks like each other, and can do it," at last said Denise, smiling, with a view to making herself agreeable.

"Yes, it always finishes like that," declared Colomban, who, slowly masticating, had not yet spoken a word.

Geneviève gave him a long look, and then in her turn remarked: "When people understand each other, the rest comes naturally."

Their affection had sprung up in this gloomy nook of old Paris like a flower in a cellar. For ten years past she had known no one but him, living by his side, behind the same bales of cloth, amidst the darkness of the shop; and morning and evening they had found themselves elbow to elbow in the tiny dining-room, so damp and vault-like. They could not have been more concealed, more utterly lost had they been far away in the country, under the screening foliage of the trees. Only the advent of doubt, of jealous fear, could make it plain to the girl, that she had given herself, for ever, amidst this abetting solitude, through sheer emptiness of heart and mental weariness.

As it was, Denise, fancied she could detect a growing anxiety in the look Geneviève had cast at Colomban, so she good-naturedly replied: "Oh! when people are in love they always understand each other."

Meantime Baudu kept a sharp eye on the table. He had distributed some "fingers" of Brie cheese, and, as a treat for the visitors, called for a second dessert, a pot of red-currant jam, a liberality which seemed to surprise Colomban. Pépé, who so far had been very good, behaved rather badly at the sight of the jam; whilst Jean, his attention attracted by the conversation about his cousin Geneviève's marriage, began to take stock of the girl, whom he thought too puny and too pale, comparing her in his own mind to a little white rabbit with black ears and pink eyes.

"Well, we've chatted enough, and must make room for the others," said the draper, giving the signal to rise from table. "Just because we've had a treat there is no reason why we should want too much of it."

Madame Baudu, the other shopman, and the young lady then came and took their places at table. Denise, again left to herself, sat down near the door waiting until her uncle should be able to take her to Vinçard's. Pépé was playing at her feet, whilst Jean had resumed his post of observation on the threshold. And Denise sat there for nearly an hour, taking interest in what went on around her. Now and again a few customers came in; a lady, then two others appeared, the shop meanwhile retaining its musty odour and its half light, in which old-fashioned commerce, simple and good natured, seemed to weep at finding itself so deserted. What most interested Denise, however, was The Ladies' Paradise opposite, whose windows she could see through the open doorway. The sky remained cloudy, a sort of humid mildness warmed the air, notwithstanding the season; and in the clear light, permeated, as it were, by a hazy diffusion of sunshine, the great shop acquired abundant life and activity.

To Denise it seemed as if she were watching a machine working at full pressure, setting even the window-shows in motion. They were no longer the cold windows she had seen in the early morning; they seemed to have been warmed and to vibrate with all the activity within. There were folks before them, groups of women pushing and squeezing against the sheets of glass, a perfect crowd excited with covetousness. And in this passionate atmosphere the stuffs themselves seemed endowed with life; the laces quivered, drooped, and concealed the depths of the shop with a disturbing air of mystery; even the thick square-cut lengths of cloth breathed, exhaling a tempting odour, while the tailor-made coats seemed to draw themselves up more erectly on the dummies, which acquired souls, and the velvet mantle expanded, supple and warm, as if falling from real shoulders, over a heaving bosom and quivering hips. But the factory-like glow which pervaded the house came above all from the sales, the crush at the counters, which could be divined behind the walls. There was the continual roaring of a machine at work, an engulfing of customers close-pressed against the counters, bewildered amidst the piles of goods, and finally hurled towards the pay-desks. And all went on in an orderly manner, with mechanical regularity, force and logic carrying quite a nation of women through the gearing of this commercial machine.

Denise had felt tempted ever since early morning. She was bewildered and attracted by this shop, to her so vast, which she saw more people enter in an hour than she had seen enter Cornaille's in six months; and with her desire to enter it was mingled a vague sense of danger which rendered her seduction complete. At the same time her uncle's shop made her feel ill at ease; she felt unreasonable disdain, instinctive repugnance for this cold, icy place, the home of old-fashioned trading. All her sensations – her anxious entry, her relatives' cold reception, the dull lunch partaken of in a prison-like atmosphere, her spell of waiting amidst the sleepy solitude of this old establishment doomed to speedy decay – all these became concentrated in mute protest, in a passionate longing for life and light. And despite her good heart, her eyes ceaselessly turned to The Ladies' Paradise, as if, saleswoman as she was, she felt the need of warming herself in the glow of that immense business.

"Plenty of customers over there at all events!" was the remark which at last escaped her.

But she promptly regretted these words on seeing the Baudus near her. Madame Baudu, who had finished her lunch, was standing there, quite white, with her pale eyes fixed on the monster; and resigned though she tried to be, she could never catch sight of that place across the road, without mute despair filling her eyes with tears. As for Geneviève, she was anxiously watching Colomban, who, unaware that he was being observed, remained in ecstasy, looking at the young saleswomen in the mantle department of the Paradise, whose counter was visible through the first floor window. Baudu, for his part, though his anger was written on his face, merely remarked: "All is not gold that glitters. Patience!"

The members of the family evidently kept back the flood of rancour rising in their throats. A feeling of self-esteem prevented them from displaying their temper before these children, who had only that morning arrived. At last the draper made an effort, and tore himself away from the spectacle of The Paradise and its sales.

"Well!" he resumed, "we'll go and see Vinçard. Situations are soon snatched up and it might be too late to-morrow."

However, before starting, he ordered his junior salesman to go to the railway station to fetch Denise's box. On her side Madame Baudu, to whom the girl had confided Pépé, decided to run over to see Madame Gras in order to arrange about the child. Jean on the other hand promised his sister not to stir from the shop.

"It's two minutes' walk," explained Baudu as he went down the Rue Gaillon with his niece: "Vinçard has a silk business, and still does a fair trade. Oh, of course he has his worries, like every one else, but he's an artful fellow, who makes both ends meet by his miserly ways. I fancy, though, he wants to retire, on account of his rheumatics."

Vinçard's shop was in the Rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs, near the Passage Choiseul. It was clean and light, well fitted up in the modern style, but rather small, and contained but a poor stock. Baudu and Denise found Vinçard in consultation with two gentlemen.

"Never mind us," called out the draper; "we are in no hurry; we can wait." And discreetly returning to the door he whispered to Denise: "That thin fellow is second in the silk department at The Paradise, and the stout man is a silk manufacturer from Lyons."

Denise gathered that Vinçard was trying to sell his business to Robineau of The Paradise. With a frank air, and open face, he was giving his word of honour, with the facility of a man whom assurances never troubled. According to him, his business was a golden one; and albeit in the splendour of robust health he broke off to whine and complain of those infernal pains of his which prevented him from remaining in business and making his fortune. Robineau who seemed nervous and uneasy interrupted him impatiently. He knew what a crisis the trade was passing through, and named a silk warehouse which had already been ruined by the vicinity of The Paradise. Then Vinçard, inflamed, raised his voice.

"No wonder! The downfall of that big booby Vabre was a foregone conclusion. His wife spent everything he earned. Besides, we are more than five hundred yards away, whilst Vabre was almost next door to The Paradise."

Gaujean, the silk manufacturer, then chimed in, and their voices fell again. He accused the big establishments of ruining French manufactures; three or four laid down the law, reigning like masters over the market; and he gave it as his opinion that the only way to fight them was to favour the small traders; above all, those who dealt in specialties, for to them the future belonged. For that reason he offered Robineau plenty of credit.

"See how you have been treated at The Paradise," said he. "No notice has been taken of your long service. You had the promise of the first-hand's place long ago, when Bouthemont, an outsider without any claim at all, came in and got it at once."

Robineau was still smarting under this act of injustice. However, he hesitated to start business on his own account, explaining that the money came from his wife, who had inherited sixty thousand francs, and he was full of scruples regarding this money, saying that he would rather cut off his right hand than compromise it in a doubtful affair.

"No," said he, "I haven't yet made up my mind; give me time to think over it. We'll have another talk about it."

"As you like," replied Vinçard, concealing his disappointment under a smiling countenance. "My interest, you know, is not to sell; and I certainly shouldn't were it not for my rheumatics – "

Then stepping to the middle of the shop, he inquired: "What can I do for you, Monsieur Baudu?"

The draper, who had been slily listening, thereupon introduced Denise, telling Vinçard as much as he thought necessary of her story and adding that she had two years' country experience. "And as I heard you are wanting a good saleswoman – " he added.

But Vinçard, affecting extreme sorrow, cut him short: "How unfortunate!" said he. "I had, indeed, been looking for a saleswoman all this week; but I've just engaged one – not two hours ago."

A silence ensued. Denise seemed to be in consternation. Robineau, who was looking at her with interest, probably inspired with pity by her poverty-stricken appearance, ventured to remark: "I know they're wanting a young person at our place, in the mantle department."

At this Baudu could not restrain a fervent outburst: "At your place indeed! Never!"

Then he stopped short in embarrassment. Denise had turned very red; she would never dare to enter that great shop, and yet the idea of belonging to it filled her with pride.

"Why not?" asked Robineau, surprised. "It would be a good opening for the young lady. I advise her to go and see Madame Aurélie, the first-hand, to-morrow. The worst that can happen to her is to be refused."

The draper, to conceal his inward revolt, then began talking vaguely. He knew Madame Aurélie, or, at least, her husband, Lhomme, the cashier, a stout man, who had had his right arm crushed by an omnibus. Then suddenly turning to Denise, he added: "However, it's her business, it isn't mine. She can do as she likes."

And thereupon he went off, after wishing Gaujean and Robineau "good-day". Vinçard accompanied him as far as the door, reiterating his regrets. The girl meantime had remained in the middle of the shop, intimidated yet desirous of asking Robineau for further particulars. However she could not muster the courage to do so, but in her turn bowed, and simply said: "Thank you, sir."

On the way back, Baudu said nothing to his niece, but as if carried away by his reflections walked on very fast, forcing her to run in order to keep up with him. On reaching the Rue de la Michodière, he was about to enter his establishment when a neighbouring shopkeeper, standing at his door, called to him.

Denise stopped and waited.

"What is it, Père Bourras?" asked the draper.

Bourras was a tall old man, with a prophet's head, bearded and hairy, with piercing eyes shining from under bushy brows. He kept an umbrella and walking-stick shop, did repairs, and even carved handles, which had won for him an artistic celebrity in the neighbourhood. Denise glanced at the windows of his shop where the sticks and umbrellas were arranged in straight lines. But on raising her eyes she was astonished by the appearance of the house – it was an old hovel squeezed in between The Ladies' Paradise and a large Louis XIV. mansion; you could hardly conceive how it had sprung up in the narrow slit where its two low dumpy storeys displayed themselves. Had it not been for the support of the buildings on either side it must have fallen; the slates of its roof were old and rotten, and its two-windowed front was cracked and covered with stains, running down in long rusty lines to the worm-eaten sign-board over the shop.

"You know he's written to my landlord, offering to buy the house?" said Bourras, looking steadily at the draper with his fiery eyes.

Baudu became paler still, and bent his shoulders. There was a silence, during which the two men remained face to face, looking very serious.

"We must be prepared for anything," murmured Baudu at last.

Thereupon Bourras flew into a passion, shaking his hair and flowing beard while he shouted: "Let him buy the house, he'll have to pay four times the value for it! But I swear that as long as I live he shan't touch a stone of it. My lease has twelve years to run yet. We shall see! we shall see!"

It was a declaration of war. Bourras was looking towards The Ladies' Paradise, which neither of them had named. For a moment Baudu remained shaking his head in silence, and then crossed the street to his shop, his legs almost failing him as he repeated: "Ah! good Lord! ah! good Lord!"

Denise, who had listened, followed her uncle. Madame Baudu had just come back with Pépé, whom Madame Gras had agreed to receive at any time. Jean, however, had disappeared, and this made his sister anxious. When he returned with a flushed face, talking in an animated way of the boulevards, she looked at him with such a sad expression that he blushed with shame. Meantime their box had arrived, and it was arranged that they should sleep in the attic.

"Ah! By the way, how did you get on at Vinçard's?" inquired Madame Baudu.

The draper thereupon gave an account of his fruitless errand, adding that Denise had heard of a situation; and, pointing to The Ladies' Paradise with a scornful gesture, he exclaimed: "There – in there!"

The whole family felt hurt at the idea. The first dinner was at five o'clock. Denise and the two children sat down to it with Baudu, Geneviève, and Colomban. A single gas jet lighted and warmed the little dining-room which reeked with the smell of food. The meal passed off in silence, but at dessert Madame Baudu, who was restless, left the shop, and came and sat down behind Denise. And

then the storm, kept back all day, broke out, one and all seeking to relieve their feelings by abusing the "monster".

"It's your business, you can do as you like," repeated Baudu. "We don't want to influence you. But if you only knew what sort of place it is – " And in broken sentences he commenced to relate the story of that Octave Mouret to whom The Paradise belonged. He had been wonderfully lucky! A fellow who had come up from the South of France with the smiling audacity of an adventurer, who had no sooner arrived in Paris than he had begun to distinguish himself by all sorts of disgraceful pranks, figuring most prominently in a matrimonial scandal, which was still the talk of the neighbourhood; and who, to crown all, had suddenly and mysteriously made the conquest of Madame Hédouin, who had brought him The Ladies' Paradise as a marriage portion.

"That poor Caroline!" interrupted Madame Baudu. "We were distantly related. If she had lived things would be different. She wouldn't have let them ruin us like this. And he's the man who killed her. Yes, with that very building! One morning, when she was visiting the works, she fell into a hole, and three days after she died. A fine, strong, healthy woman, who had never known what illness was! There's some of her blood in the foundations of that house."

So speaking she pointed to the establishment opposite with her pale and trembling hand. Denise, listening as to a fairy tale, slightly shuddered; the sense of fear which had mingled with the temptation she had felt since morning, was due, perhaps, to the presence of that woman's blood, which she fancied she could now detect in the red mortar of the basement.

"It seems as if it brought him good luck," added Madame Baudu, without mentioning Mouret by name.

But the draper, full of disdain for these old women's tales, shrugged his shoulders and resumed his story, explaining the situation commercially. The Ladies' Paradise had been founded in 1822 by two brothers, named Deleuze. On the death of the elder, his daughter, Caroline, had married the son of a linen manufacturer, Charles Hédouin; and, later on, becoming a widow, she had married Mouret. She thus brought him a half share in the business. Three months after the marriage, however, the second brother Deleuze died childless; so that when Caroline met her death, Mouret became sole heir, sole proprietor of The Ladies' Paradise. Yes, he had been wonderfully lucky!

"He's what they call a man of ideas, a dangerous busybody, who will overturn the whole neighbourhood if he's left to himself!" continued Baudu. "I fancy that Caroline, who was rather romantic also, must have been carried away by the gentleman's extravagant plans. In short, he persuaded her to buy the house on the left, then the one on the right; and he himself, on becoming his own master, bought two others; so that the establishment has kept on growing and growing to such a point that it now threatens to swallow us all up!"

He was addressing Denise, but was in reality speaking for himself, feeling a feverish longing to recapitulate this story which continually haunted him. At home he was always angry and full of bile, always violent, with fists ever clenched. Madame Baudu, ceasing to interfere, sat motionless on her chair; Geneviève and Colomban, with eyes cast down, were picking up and eating the crumbs off the table, just for the sake of something to do. It was so warm, so stuffy in that tiny room that Pépé had fallen asleep with his head on the table, and even Jean's eyes were closing.

"But wait a bit!" resumed Baudu, seized with a sudden fit of anger, "such jokers always go to smash! Mouret is hard-pushed just now; I know that for a fact. He's been forced to spend all his savings on his mania for extensions and advertisements. Moreover, in order to raise additional capital, he has induced most of his shop-people to invest all they possess with him. And so he hasn't a sou to help himself with now; and, unless a miracle be worked, and he manages to treble his sales, as he hopes to do, you'll see what a crash there'll be! Ah! I'm not ill-natured, but that day I'll illuminate my shop-front, I will, on my word of honour!"

And he went on in a revengeful voice; to hear him you would have thought that the fall of The Ladies' Paradise would restore the dignity and prestige of commerce. Had any one ever seen such

doings? A draper's shop selling everything! Why not call it a bazaar at once? And the employees! a nice set they were too – a lot of puppies, who did their work like porters at a railway station, treating both goods and customers as if they were so many parcels; taking themselves off or getting the sack at a moment's notice. No affection, no morals, no taste! And all at once he appealed to Colomban as a witness; he, Colomban, brought up in the good old school, knew how long it took to learn all the cunning and trickery of the trade. The art was not to sell much, but to sell dear. And then too, Colomban could tell them how he had been treated, carefully looked after, his washing and mending done, nursed in illness, considered as one of the family – loved, in fact!

"Of course, of course," repeated Colomban, after each statement made by his governor.

"Ah, you're the last of the old stock, my dear fellow," Baudu ended by declaring. "After you're gone there'll be none left. You are my sole consolation, for if all that hurry and scurry is what they now call business I understand nothing of it and would rather clear out."

Geneviève, with her head on one side as if her thick hair were weighing down her pale brow, sat watching the smiling shopman; and in her glance there was a gleam of suspicion, a wish to see whether Colomban, stricken with remorse, would not blush at all this praise. But, like a fellow well acquainted with every trick of the old style of trade, he retained his sedateness, his good-natured air, with just a touch of cunning about his lips. However, Baudu still went on, louder than ever, accusing the people opposite – that pack of savages who murdered each other in their struggle for existence – of even destroying all family ties. And he mentioned his country neighbours, the Lhommes – mother, father, and son – all employed in the infernal shop, people who virtually had no home but were always out and about, leading a hotel, *table d'hôte* kind of existence, and never taking a meal at their own place excepting on Sundays. Certainly his dining-room wasn't over large or too well aired or lighted; but at least it spoke to him of his life, for he had lived there amidst the affection of his kith and kin. Whilst speaking, his eyes wandered about the room; and he shuddered at the unavowed idea that if those savages should succeed in ruining his trade they might some day turn him out of this hole where he was so comfortable with his wife and child. Notwithstanding the seeming assurance with which he predicted the utter downfall of his rivals, he was in reality terrified, feeling at heart that the neighbourhood was being gradually invaded and devoured.

"Well, I don't want to disgust you," he resumed, trying to calm himself; "if you think it to your interest to go there, I shall be the first to say, 'go.'"

"I am sure of that, uncle," murmured Denise in bewilderment, her desire to enter The Ladies' Paradise, growing keener and keener amidst all this display of passion.

Baudu had put his elbows on the table, and was wearying her with his fixed stare. "But look here," he resumed; "you who know the business, do you think it right that a simple draper's shop should sell everything? Formerly, when trade was trade, drapers sold nothing but drapery. But now they are doing their best to snap up every branch of trade and ruin their neighbours. The whole neighbourhood complains of it, every small tradesman is beginning to suffer terribly. This man Mouret is ruining them. For instance, Bédoré and his sister, who keep the hosiery shop in the Rue Gaillon, have already lost half their customers; Mademoiselle Tatin, who sells under-linen in the Passage Choiseul, has been obliged to lower her prices, to be able to sell at all. And the effects of this scourge, this pest, are felt as far as the Rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs, where I hear that Messrs. Vanpouille Brothers, the furriers, cannot hold out much longer. Ah! Drapers selling fur goods – what a farce! another of Mouret's ideas!"

"And gloves," added Madame Baudu; "isn't it monstrous? He has even dared to add a glove department! Yesterday, when I passed down the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, I saw Quinette, the glover, at his door, looking so downcast that I hadn't the heart to ask him how business was going."

"And umbrellas," resumed Baudu; "that's the climax! Bourras is convinced that Mouret simply wants to ruin him; for, in short, where's the rhyme between umbrellas and drapery? But Bourras is firm on his legs, and won't let himself be butchered! We shall see some fun one of these days."

Then Baudu went on to speak of other tradesmen, passing the whole neighbourhood in review. Now and again he let slip a confession. If Vinçard wanted to sell it was time for the rest to pack up, for Vinçard was like the rats who make haste to leave a house when it threatens ruin. Then, however, immediately afterwards, he contradicted himself, and talked of an alliance, an understanding between the small tradesmen to enable them to fight the colossus. For a moment, his hands shaking, and his mouth twitching nervously, he hesitated as to whether he should speak of himself. At last he made up his mind to do so.

"As for me," he said, "I can't complain as yet. Of course he has done me harm, the scoundrel! But up to the present he has only kept ladies' cloths, light stuffs for dresses and heavier goods for mantles. People still come to me for men's goods, velvets and velveteens for shooting suits, cloths for liveries, without speaking of flannels and *molletons*, of which I defy him to show so complete an assortment as my own. But he thinks he will annoy me by placing his cloth department right in front of my door. You've seen his display, haven't you? He always places his finest mantles there, surrounded by a framework of cloth in pieces – a cheapjack parade to tempt the hussies. Upon my word, I should be ashamed to use such means! The Old Elbeuf has been known for nearly a hundred years, and has no need of any such catchpenny devices at its door. As long as I live, it shall remain as I took it, with its four samples on each side, and nothing more!"

The whole family was becoming affected; and after a spell of silence Geneviève ventured to make a remark:

"Our customers know and like us, papa," said she. "We mustn't lose heart. Madame Desforges and Madame de Boves have been to-day, and I am expecting Madame Marty for some flannel."

"For my part," declared Colomban, "I took an order from Madame Bourdelais yesterday. 'Tis true she spoke of an English cheviot marked up opposite ten sous cheaper than ours, and the same stuff, it appears."

"Fancy," murmured Madame Baudu in her weak voice, "we knew that house when it was scarcely larger than a handkerchief! Yes, my dear Denise, when the Deleuzes started it, it had only one window in the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin; and such a tiny one, there was barely room for a couple of pieces of print and two or three pieces of calico. There was no room to turn round in the shop, it was so small. At that time The Old Elbeuf, after sixty years' trading, was already such as you see it now. Ah! all has greatly changed, greatly changed!"

She shook her head; the drama of her whole life was expressed in those few words. Born in the old house, she loved each of its damp stones, living only for it and by it; and, formerly so proud of that house, the finest, the best patronised in the neighbourhood, she had had the daily grief of seeing the rival establishment gradually growing in importance, at first disdained, then equal to her own and finally towering above it, and threatening all. This was to her an ever-open sore; she was slowly dying from sheer grief at seeing The Old Elbeuf humiliated; if she still lived it was, as in the case of the shop itself, solely by the effect of impulsion; but she well realised that the death of the shop would be hers as well, and that she would pass away on the day when it should close.

Silence fell. Baudu began softly beating a tattoo with his fingers on the American cloth on the table. He experienced a sort of lassitude, almost a regret at having once more relieved his feelings in this way. The whole family shared his despondency, and with dreamy eyes chewed the cud of his bitter story. They never had had any luck. The children had been brought up and fortune had seemed at hand, when suddenly this competition had arisen and ruined all their hopes. And there was, also, that house at Rambouillet, that country house to which the draper had been dreaming of retiring for the last ten years – a bargain, he had thought when he acquired it, but it had proved a sorry old building, always in want of repairs, and he had let it to people who never paid any rent. His last profits were swallowed up by this place – the only folly he had been guilty of in his honest, upright career as a tradesman stubbornly attached to the old ways.

"Come, come!" he suddenly exclaimed, "we must make room for the others. That's enough of this useless talk!"

It was like an awakening. The gas was hissing in the lifeless, stifling air of the tiny room. They all jumped up, breaking the melancholy silence. Pépé, however, was sleeping so soundly that they decided to lay him on some bales of cloth. Jean had already returned to the street door yawning.

"In short," repeated Baudu to his niece, "you can do as you like. We have explained the matter to you, that's all. You know your own business best."

He gave her an urgent glance, waiting for a decisive answer. But Denise, whom these stories had inspired with a still greater longing to enter The Ladies' Paradise, instead of turning her from it, retained her quiet gentle demeanour beneath which lurked a genuine Norman obstinacy. And she simply replied: "We'll see, uncle."

Then she spoke of going to bed early with the children, for they were all three very tired. But it had only just struck six, so she decided to stay in the shop a little longer. Night had now come on, and she found the street quite dark, drenched by a fine close rain, which had been falling since sunset. It came on her as a surprise. A few minutes had sufficed to fill the roadway with puddles, a stream of dirty water was running along the gutters, the pavement was sticky with a thick black mud; and through the beating rain she saw nothing but a confused stream of umbrellas, pushing along and swelling in the gloom like great black wings. She started back at first, feeling very cold, oppressed at heart by the badly-lighted shop, now so extremely dismal. A moist breeze, the breath of that old quarter of Paris, came in from the street; it seemed as if the rain, streaming from the umbrellas, was running right up to the counters, as if the pavement with its mud and its puddles was coming into the shop, putting the finishing touch to the mouldiness of that ancient, cavernous ground-floor, white with saltpetre. It was quite a vision of old Paris in the wet, and it made her shiver with distressful astonishment at finding the great city so cold and so ugly.

But across the road The Ladies' Paradise glowed with its deep, serried lines of gas jets. She moved nearer, again attracted and, as it were, warmed by that ardent blaze. The machine was still roaring, active as ever, letting its steam escape with a last roar, whilst the salesmen folded up the stuffs, and the cashiers counted the receipts. Seen through the hazy windows, the lights swarmed vaguely, revealing a confused factory-like interior. Behind the curtain of falling rain, the vision, blurred and distant, assumed the appearance of a giant furnace-house, where the shadows of firemen passed black against the red glare of the furnaces. The displays in the windows likewise became indistinct: you could only distinguish the snowy lace, its whiteness heightened by the ground glass globes of a row of gas jets, and against this chapel-like background the ready-made goods stood out vigorously, the velvet mantle trimmed with silver fox setting amidst them all the curved silhouette of a headless woman who seemed to be running through the rain to some entertainment in the unknown shades of nocturnal Paris.

Denise, yielding to the fascination, had gone to the door, heedless of the raindrops dripping upon her. At this hour, The Ladies' Paradise, with its furnace-like brilliancy, completed its conquest of her. In the great metropolis, black and silent beneath the rain – in this Paris, to which she was a stranger, it shone out like a lighthouse, and seemed to be of itself the life and light of the city. She dreamed of her future there, working hard to bring up the children, with other things besides – she hardly knew what – far-off things however, the desire and fear of which made her tremble. The idea of that woman who had met her death amidst the foundations came back to her; and she felt afraid, fancying that the lights were tinged with blood; but the whiteness of the lace quieted her, a hope, quite a certainty of happiness, sprang up in her heart, whilst the fine rain, blowing on her, cooled her hands, and calmed the feverishness within her, born of her journey.

"It's Bourras," all at once said a voice behind her.

She leant forward, and perceived the umbrella-maker, motionless before the window containing the ingenious roof-like construction of umbrellas and walking-sticks which she had noticed in the

morning. The old man had slipped up there in the dark, to feast his eyes on that triumphant show; and so great was his grief that he was unconscious of the rain beating down on his bare head, and streaming off his long white hair.

"How stupid he is, he'll make himself ill," resumed the voice.

Then, turning round, Denise again found the Baudus behind her. Though they thought Bourras so stupid, they also, despite themselves, ever and ever returned to the contemplation of that spectacle which rent their hearts. It was, so to say, a rageful desire to suffer. Geneviève, very pale, had noticed that Colomban was watching the shadows of the saleswomen pass to and fro on the first floor opposite; and, whilst Baudu almost choked with suppressed rancour, Madame Baudu began silently weeping.

"You'll go and see, to-morrow, won't you, Denise?" asked the draper, tormented with uncertainty, but feeling that his niece was conquered like the rest.

She hesitated, then gently replied: "Yes, uncle, unless it pains you too much."

CHAPTER II

The next morning, at half-past seven, Denise was outside The Ladies' Paradise, wishing to call there before taking Jean to his new place, which was a long way off, at the top of the Faubourg du Temple. But, accustomed as she was to early hours, she had come down too soon; the employees were barely arriving and, afraid of looking ridiculous, overcome by timidity, she remained for a moment walking up and down the Place Gaillon.

The cold wind that blew had already dried the pavement. From all the surrounding streets, illumined by a pale early light, falling from an ashen sky, shopmen were hurriedly approaching with their coat-collars turned up, and their hands in their pockets, taken unawares by this first chill of winter. Most of them hurried along alone, and vanished into the warehouse, without addressing a word or look to their colleagues marching along around them. Others however came up in twos and threes, talking fast, and monopolising the whole of the pavement; and all, with a similar gesture, flung away their cigarettes or cigars before crossing the threshold.

Denise noticed that several of the gentlemen took stock of her in passing. This increased her timidity; and she no longer had courage to follow them, but resolved to wait till they had entered, blushing at the mere idea of being elbowed at the door by all these men. However the stream of salesmen still flowed on, and in order to escape their looks, she took a walk round the Place. When she came back again, she found a tall young man, pale and awkward, who appeared to be waiting like herself.

"I beg your pardon, mademoiselle," he finished by stammering, "but perhaps you belong to the establishment?"

She was so troubled at hearing a stranger address her that she did not at first reply.

"The fact is," he continued, getting more confused than ever, "I thought of applying to see if I could get an engagement, and you might have given me a little information."

He was as timid as she was, and had probably risked speaking to her because he divined that she was trembling like himself.

"I would with pleasure, sir," she at last replied. "But I'm no better off than you are; I'm just going to apply myself."

"Ah, very good," said he, quite out of countenance.

Thereupon they both blushed deeply, and still all timidity remained for a moment face to face, affected by the striking similarity of their positions yet not daring to openly express a desire for each other's success. Then, as nothing further fell from either and both became more and more uncomfortable, they parted awkwardly, and renewed their wait, one on either side at a distance of a few steps.

The shopmen continued to arrive, and Denise could now hear them joking as they passed, casting side glances towards her. Her confusion increased at finding herself thus on exhibition, and she had decided to take half an hour's walk in the neighbourhood, when the sight of a young man approaching rapidly by way of the Rue Port-Mahon, detained her for another moment. He was probably the manager of a department, thought she, for all the others raised their hats to him. Tall, with a clear skin and carefully trimmed beard, he had eyes the colour of old gold and of a velvety softness, which he fixed on her for a moment as he crossed the Place. He was already entering the shop with an air of indifference, while she remained motionless, quite upset by that glance of his, filled indeed with a singular emotion, in which there was more uneasiness than pleasure. Without doubt, fear was gaining on her, and, to give herself time to collect her courage, she began slowly walking down the Rue Gaillon, and then along the Rue Saint-Roch.

The person who had so disturbed her was more than the manager of a department, it was Octave Mouret in person. He had been making a night of it, and his tightly buttoned overcoat concealed a

dress suit and white tie. In all haste he ran upstairs to his rooms, washed himself and changed his clothes, and when he at last seated himself at his table, in his private office on the first floor, he was at his ease and full of strength, with bright eyes and cool skin, as ready for work as if he had enjoyed ten hours' sleep. The spacious office, furnished in old oak and hung with green rep, had but one ornament, the portrait of that Madame Hédouin, who was still the talk of the whole neighbourhood. Since her death Octave ever thought of her with tender regret, grateful as he felt to her for the fortune she had bestowed on him with her hand. And before commencing to sign the drafts laid upon his blotting-pad he darted upon her portrait the contented smile of a happy man. Was it not always before her that he returned to work, after the escapades of his present single-blessedness?

There came a knock however, and before Mouret could answer, a young man entered, a tall, bony fellow, very gentlemanly and correct in his appearance, with thin lips, a sharp nose and smooth hair already showing signs of turning grey. Mouret raised his eyes, then whilst still signing the drafts, remarked:

"I hope you slept well, Bourdoncle?"

"Very well, thanks," replied the young man, walking about as if he were quite at home.

Bourdoncle, the son of a poor farmer near Limoges, had begun his career at The Ladies' Paradise at the same time as Mouret, when it only occupied the corner of the Place Gaillon. Very intelligent and very active, it then seemed as if he would easily supplant his comrade, who was much less steady, and far too fond of love-affairs; but he had neither the instinctive genius of the impassioned Southerner, nor his audacity, nor his winning grace. Besides, by a wise instinct, he had, from the first bowed before him, obedient without a struggle. When Mouret had advised his people to put their money into the business, Bourdoncle had been one of the first to do so, even investing in the establishment the proceeds of an unexpected legacy left him by an aunt; and little by little, after passing through all the various stages, such as salesman, second, and then first-hand in the silk department, he had become one of Octave's most cherished and influential lieutenants, one of the six intéressés[2] who assisted him to govern The Ladies' Paradise – forming something like a privy council under an absolute king. Each one watched over a department or province. Bourdoncle, for his part, exercised a general surveillance.

"And you," resumed he, familiarly, "have you slept Well?"

When Mouret replied that he had not been to bed, he shook his head, murmuring: "Bad habits."

"Why?" replied the other, gaily. "I'm not so tired as you are, my dear fellow. You are half asleep now, you lead too quiet a life. Take a little amusement, that'll wake you up a bit."

This was their constant friendly dispute. Bourdoncle who professed to hate all women, contented himself with encouraging the extravagance of the lady customers, feeling meantime the greatest disdain for the frivolity which led them to ruin themselves in stupid gewgaws. Mouret, on the contrary, affected to worship them, ever showed himself delighted and cajoling in their presence and was ever embarking in fresh love-affairs. This served, as it were, as an advertisement for his business; and you might have said that he enveloped all women in the same caress the better to bewilder them and keep them at his mercy.

"I saw Madame Desforges last night, she was looking delicious at that ball," said he, beginning to relate his evening experiences. But then, abruptly breaking off, he took up another bundle of drafts, which he began to sign whilst Bourdoncle continued to walk about, stepping towards the lofty plate-glass windows whence he glanced into the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin. Then, retracing his steps, he suddenly exclaimed: "You know they'll have their revenge."

"Who will?" asked Mouret, who had lost the thread of the conversation.

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[2] In the great Paris magasins de nouveautés such as the Louvre and Bon Marché there have been at various stages numerous intéressés, that is partners of a kind who whilst entitled to some share of the profits, exercise but a strictly limited control in the management of the establishment's affairs. —*Trans.*

"Why, the women."

At this, Mouret became quite merry, displaying, beneath his adorative manner, his really brutal character. With a shrug of the shoulders he seemed to declare he would throw them all over, like so many empty sacks, as soon as they should have finished helping him to make his fortune. But Bourdoncle in his frigid way obstinately repeated: "They will have their revenge; there will be one who will some day avenge all the others. It's bound to be."

"No fear," cried Mouret, exaggerating his Southern accent. "That one isn't born yet, my boy. And if she comes, you know, why there – "

So saying he raised his penholder, brandishing it and pointing it in the air, as if he were bent on stabbing some invisible heart with a knife. Bourdoncle thereupon resumed his walk, bowing as usual before the superiority of the governor, whose genius, with all its lapses, disconcerted him. He, himself so clear-headed, logical and passionless, incapable of falling into the toils of a syren, had yet to learn the feminine character of success, all Paris yielding herself with a kiss to her boldest assailant.

A silence fell, broken only by the sound of Mouret's pen. Then, in reply to his brief questions, Bourdoncle gave him various information respecting of the great sale of winter novelties, which was to commence on the following Monday. This was an important affair, the house was risking its fortune in it; for the rumours of the neighbourhood had some foundation, Mouret was throwing himself into speculation like a poet, with such ostentation, such desire to attain the colossal, that everything seemed likely to give way under him. It was quite a new style of doing business, a seeming commercial phantasy which had formerly made Madame Hédouin anxious, and even now, notwithstanding certain successes, quite dismayed those who had capital in the business. They blamed the governor in secret for going too quick; accused him of having enlarged the establishment to a dangerous extent, before making sure of a sufficient increase of custom; above all, they trembled on seeing him put all the available cash into one venture, filling the departments with a pile of goods without leaving a copper in the reserve fund. Thus, for this winter sale, after the heavy sums recently paid to the builders, the whole capital was exhausted and it once more became a question of victory or death. Yet Mouret in the midst of all this excitement, preserved a triumphant gaiety, a certainty of gaining millions, like a man so worshipped by women, that there could be no question of betrayal. When Bourdoncle ventured to express certain fears with reference to the excessive development given to several departments of doubtful profit he gave vent to a laugh full of confidence, and exclaimed:

"Pooh, pooh! my dear fellow, the place is still too small!"

The other appeared dumbfounded, seized with a fear which he no longer attempted to conceal. The house too small! an establishment which comprised nineteen departments, and numbered four hundred and three employees!

"Of course," resumed Mouret, "we shall be obliged to enlarge our premises again before another eighteen months are over. I'm seriously thinking about the matter. Last night Madame Desforges promised to introduce me to some one who may be useful. In short, we'll talk it over when the idea is ripe."

Then having finished signing his drafts, he rose, and tapped his lieutenant on the shoulder in a friendly manner, but the latter could not get over his astonishment. The fright displayed by the prudent people around him amused Mouret. In one of those fits of brusque frankness with which he sometimes overwhelmed his familiars, he declared that he was at heart a greater Jew than all the Jews in the world; he took, said he, after his father, whom he resembled physically and morally, a fellow who knew the value of money; and, if his mother had given him that dash of nervous fantasy which he displayed, it was, perhaps, the principal element of his luck, for he felt that his ability to dare everything was an invincible force.

"Oh! You know very well that we'll stand by you to the last," Bourdoncle finished by saying.

Then, before going down into the shop to give their usual look round, they settled certain other details. They examined a specimen of a little book of account forms, which Mouret had just invented

for the use of his employees. Having remarked that the old-fashioned goods, the dead stock, went off the more rapidly the higher the commission allowed to the employees, he had based on this observation quite a new system, that of interesting his people in the sale of all the goods, giving them a commission on even the smallest piece of stuff, the most trumpery article they sold. This innovation had caused quite a revolution in the drapery trade, creating between the salespeople a struggle for existence of which the masters reaped the benefits. To foment this struggle was indeed Mouret's favourite method, the principle which he constantly applied. He excited his employees' passions, pitted one against the other, allowed the stronger to swallow up the weaker ones, and for his own part battened on this struggle of conflicting interests. The sample account book was duly approved of; at the top of each leaf on both counterfoil and bill form, appeared particulars of the department and the salesman's number; then also in duplicate came columns for the measurement, the description of the goods sold, and their price. The salesman simply signed the bill form before handing it to the cashier; and in this way an easy account was kept: it was only necessary to compare the bill-forms delivered by the cashier's department to the clearing-house with the salesmen's counterfoils. Every week the latter would receive their commission, without any possibility of error.

"We shan't be robbed so much," remarked Bourdoncle, with satisfaction. "This was a very good idea of yours."

"And I thought of something else last night," explained Mouret. "Yes, my dear fellow, at supper. I have an idea of giving the clearing-house clerks a little bonus for every error they detect while checking the bills. You understand, eh? Like this we shall be sure that they won't pass any, for rather than do that they'll be inventing mistakes!"

He began to laugh, whilst the other looked at him admiringly. This new application of the struggle-for-existence theory delighted Mouret; he had a real genius for administrative functions, and dreamed of so organizing the establishment as to trade upon the selfish instincts of his employees, for the greater satisfaction of his own appetites. He often said that to make people do their best, and even to keep them fairly honest, it was first of all necessary to excite their selfish desires.

"Well, let's go downstairs," he resumed. "We must look after this sale. The silk arrived yesterday, I believe, and Bouthemont must be getting it in now."

Bourdoncle followed him. The receiving office was in the basement on the side of the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin. There, on a level with the pavement, was a kind of glazed cage, into which the vans discharged the goods. They were weighed, and then shot down a rapid slide, whose oak and iron work was polished by the constant chaffing of bales and cases. Everything entered by this yawning trap; it was a continuous swallowing up, a niagara of goods, falling with a roar like that of a torrent. At the approach of big sale times especially, the slide brought down an endless stream of Lyons silks, English woollens, Flemish linens, Alsatian calicoes, and Rouen prints. The vans were sometimes obliged to wait their turn along the street; and as each bale rushed down to the basement there arose a sound as of a stone thrown into deep water.

On his way Mouret stopped for a moment before the slide, which was in full activity. Rows of cases were coming down of themselves, falling like rain from some upper stream. Then bales appeared, toppling over in their descent like rolling stones. Mouret looked on, without saying a word. But this wealth of goods rushing in to his establishment at the rate of thousands of francs each minute, made his clear eyes glisten. He had never before had such a clear, definite idea of the struggle he was engaged in. It was this falling mountain of goods which he must cast to the four corners of Paris. He did not open his mouth, however, but continued his inspection.

By the grey light which came in through the large vent-holes, a squad of men were receiving the goods, whilst others removed the lids of the cases and opened the bales in presence of the managers of different departments. A dockyard kind of bustle filled this basement, whose vaulted roofing was supported by wrought-iron pillars and whose bare walls were simply cemented.

"Have you got everything there, Bouthemont?" asked Mouret, approaching a broad-shouldered young fellow who was checking the contents of a case.

"Yes, everything seems all right," replied he, "but the counting will take me all the morning."

Then the manager of the silk department ran down an invoice he held, standing the while before a large counter on which one of his salesmen deposited, one by one, the pieces of silk which he took from an open case. Behind them ran other counters, also littered with goods which a small army of shopmen was examining. It was a general unpacking, a seeming confusion of stuffs, inspected, turned over, and marked, amidst a continuous buzz of voices.

Bouthemont who was becoming a celebrity in the trade, had the round, jovial face of a right good fellow, with a coal-black beard, and fine hazel eyes. Born at Montpellier, noisy, and over fond of pleasure, he was not of much good for the sales, but in buying he had not his equal. Sent to Paris by his father, who kept a draper's shop in his native town, he had absolutely refused to return home when the old fellow, thinking that he ought to know enough to succeed him in his business, had summoned him to do so; and from that moment a rivalry had sprung up between father and son, the former, absorbed in his little country business and shocked to see a simple shopman earning three times as much as he did himself, and the latter joking at the old man's humdrum routine, chinking his money, and throwing the whole house into confusion at every flying visit he paid. Like the other managers, Bouthemont drew, besides his three thousand francs regular pay, a commission on the sales. Montpellier, surprised and respectful, whispered that young Bouthemont had made fifteen thousand francs the year before, and that that was only a beginning – people prophesied to the exasperated father that this figure would certainly increase.

Meantime Bourdoncle had taken up one of the pieces of silk, and was examining the texture with the eye of a connoisseur. It was a faille with a blue and silver selvage, the famous Paris Delight, with which Mouret hoped to strike a decisive blow.

"It is really very good," observed Bourdoncle.

"And the effect it produces is better than its real quality," said Bouthemont. "Dumonteil is the only one capable of manufacturing such stuff. Last journey when I fell out with Gaujean, the latter was willing to set a hundred looms to work on this pattern, but he asked five sous a yard more."

Nearly every month Bouthemont went to Lyons, staying there days together, living at the best hôtels, with orders to treat the manufacturers with open purse. He enjoyed, moreover, a perfect liberty, and bought what he liked, provided that he increased the yearly business of his department in a certain proportion, settled beforehand; and it was on this proportion that his commission was based. In short, his position at The Ladies' Paradise, like that of all the managers, was that of a special tradesman, in a grouping of various businesses, a sort of vast trading city.

"So," resumed he, "it's decided we mark it at five francs twelve sous? It's barely the cost price, you know."

"Yes, yes, five francs twelve sous," said Mouret, quickly; "and if I were alone, I'd sell it at a loss."

The manager laughed heartily. "Oh! I don't mind, its cheapness will treble the sales and my only interest is to secure heavy receipts – "

But Bourdoncle remained grave, biting his lips. For his part he drew his commission on the total profits, and it was not to his advantage that the prices should be lowered. As it happened, a part of his duties was to exercise a control over the prices fixed upon in order to prevent Bouthemont from selling at too small a profit for the sole purpose of increasing the sales. Moreover, all his former anxiety reappeared in the presence of these advertising combinations which he did not understand, and he ventured to display his repugnance by remarking:

"If we sell it at five francs twelve sous, it will be like selling it at a loss, as we must allow for our expenses, which are considerable. It would fetch seven francs anywhere."

At this Mouret got angry. Striking the silk with his open hand he exclaimed excitedly: "I know that, that's why I want to give it to our customers. Really, my dear fellow, you'll never understand women's ways. Don't you see that they'll fight together over this silk?"

"No doubt," interrupted the other, obstinately, "and the more they buy, the more we shall lose."

"We shall lose a few sous on the stuff, very likely. But what can that matter, if in return we attract all the women here, and keep them at our mercy, fascinated, maddened by the sight of our goods, emptying their purses without thinking? The principal thing, my dear fellow, is to inflame them, and for that purpose you must have an article which will flatter them and cause a sensation. Afterwards, you can sell the other articles as dear as they are sold anywhere else, they'll still think yours the cheapest. For instance, our Golden Grain, that taffetas at seven francs and a half, sold everywhere at the same price, will go down as an extraordinary bargain, and suffice to make up for the loss on the Paris Delight. You'll see, you'll see!"

He was becoming quite eloquent. "Don't you understand?" he resumed, "In a week's time from to-day I want the Paris Delight to effect a revolution in the market. It's our master-stroke, which will save us and send our name everything. Nothing else will be talked of; that blue and silver selvage will be known from one to the other end of France. And you'll hear the furious complaints of our competitors. The small traders will lose another wing by it. Yes, we shall have done for all those slop-sellers who are dying of rheumatism in their cellars!"

The shopmen checking the goods round-about were listening and smiling. Mouret liked to talk in this way without contradiction. Bourdoncle yielded once more. However, the case of silk was now empty and two men were opening another.

"It's the manufacturers who are vexed," now said Bouthemont. "At Lyons they are all furious with you, they pretend that your cheap trading is ruining them. You are aware that Gaujean has positively declared war against me. Yes, he has sworn to give long credits to the little houses rather than accept my prices."

Mouret shrugged his shoulders. "If Gaujean doesn't behave sensibly," he replied, "Gaujean will be floored. What do they all complain of? We pay ready money and we take all they can make; it's strange if they can't work cheaper at that rate. Besides, the public gets the benefit, and that's everything."

The shopman now began emptying the second case, whilst Bouthemont checked the pieces by the invoice. Another employee at the end of the counter then marked them in plain figures, and the checking finished, the invoice, signed by the manager, had to be sent to the chief cashier's office. For another minute Mouret continued looking at the work, at all the activity around this unpacking of goods which threatened to drown the basement; then, never adding a word but with the air of a captain satisfied with his men, he went off, again followed by Bourdoncle.

They slowly crossed the basement floor. The air-holes placed at intervals admitted a pale light; while in the dark corners, and along the narrow corridors, gas was constantly burning. In these corridors were the reserves, large vaults closed with iron railings, containing the surplus goods of each department. As he passed along Mouret glanced at the heating apparatus which was to be lighted on the following Monday for the first time, and at the firemen guarding a giant gas-meter enclosed in an iron cage. The kitchen and dining-rooms, old cellars turned into habitable apartments, were on the left near the corner of the Place Gaillon. At last, right at the other end of the basement, he arrived at the delivery office. Here, all the purchases which customers did not take away with them, were sent down, sorted on tables, and placed in compartments each of which represented a particular district of Paris; then by a large staircase opening just opposite The Old Elbeuf, they were sent up to the vans standing alongside the pavement. In the mechanical working of The Ladies' Paradise, this staircase in the Rue de la Michodière was ever disgorging the goods devoured by the slide in the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, after they had passed through the mill of the counters up above.

"Campion," said Mouret to the delivery manager, a retired sergeant with a thin face, "why weren't six pairs of sheets, bought by a lady yesterday about two o'clock, delivered in the evening?"

"Where does the lady live?" asked the employee.

"In the Rue de Rivoli, at the corner of the Rue d'Alger – Madame Desforges."

At this early hour the sorting tables were yet bare and the compartments only contained a few parcels left over night. Whilst Campion was searching amongst these packets, after consulting a list, Bourdoncle looked at Mouret, reflecting that this wonderful fellow knew everything, thought of everything, even when he was supposed to be amusing himself. At last Campion discovered the error; the cashiers' department had given a wrong number, and the parcel had come back.

"What is the number of the pay-desk that debited the order?" asked Mouret: "No. 10, you say?" And turning towards his lieutenant, he added: "No. 10; that's Albert, isn't it? We'll just say two words to him."

However, before starting on a tour round the shops, he wanted to go up to the postal order department, which occupied several rooms on the second floor. It was there that all the provincial and foreign orders arrived; and he went up every morning to see the correspondence. For two years this correspondence had been increasing daily. At first occupying only a dozen clerks, it now required more than thirty. Some opened the letters and others read them, seated on either side of the same table; others again classified them, giving each one a running number, which was repeated on a pigeon-hole. Then when the letters had been distributed to the different departments and the latter had delivered the articles ordered, these articles were placed in the pigeon-holes as they arrived, in accordance with running numbers. Nothing then remained but to check and pack them, which was done in a neighbouring room by a squad of workmen who were nailing and tying up from morning to night.

Mouret put his usual question: "How many letters this morning, Levasseur?"

"Five hundred and thirty-four, sir," replied the chief clerk. "After the new sale has begun on Monday, I'm afraid we sha'n't have enough hands. Yesterday we were driven very hard."

Bourdoncle expressed his satisfaction by a nod of the head. He had not reckoned on five hundred and thirty-four letters arriving on a Tuesday. Round the table, the clerks continued opening and reading the letters, the paper rustling all the time, whilst before the pigeon-holes the various articles ordered began to arrive. This was one of the most complicated and important departments of the establishment, and the rush was continual, for, strictly speaking, all the orders received in the morning ought to be sent off the same evening.

"You shall have whatever more hands you want," replied Mouret, who had seen at a glance that the work of the department was well done. "When there's work," he added, "we never refuse the men."

Up above, under the roof, were the bedrooms occupied by the saleswomen. However, Mouret went downstairs again and entered the chief cash office, which was near his own. It was a room with a glazed partition in which was a metal-work wicket, and it contained an enormous safe, fixed in the wall. Two cashiers here centralised the receipts which Lhomme, the chief cashier of the sales' service, brought in every evening; and with these receipts they discharged the current expenses, paid the manufacturers, the staff, all the people indeed who lived by the house. Their office communicated with another, full of green cardboard boxes, where some ten clerks checked the innumerable invoices. Then came yet a third office, the clearing-house, so to say, where six young men bending over black desks, with quite a collection of registers behind them, made up the commission accounts of the salesmen, by checking the debit notes. This department but recently organized did not as yet work particularly well.

Mouret and Bourdoncle crossed the cashier's office and the invoice room and when they passed into the third office the young men there, who were laughing and joking together, started with surprise. Mouret, without reprimanding them, thereupon explained his scheme of giving them a little bonus for each error they might detect in the debit notes; and when he went out the clerks, quite cured of all inclination for idle laughter, set to work in earnest, hunting for errors.

On reaching the ground-floor, occupied by the shops, Mouret went straight to pay-desk No. 10, where Albert Lhomme was polishing his nails, pending the arrival of customers. People currently spoke of "the Lhomme dynasty," since Madame Aurélie, first-hand in the mantle department, after helping her husband to secure the post of chief cashier, had further managed to get a pay desk for her son, a tall, pale, vicious young man who had been unable to remain in any situation, and had caused her an immense deal of anxiety. On reaching his desk, Mouret, who never cared to render himself unpopular by performing police duty, and from policy and taste preferred to play the part of a benign Providence, retired into the back ground, after gently nudging Bourdoncle with his elbow. It was Bourdoncle, the infallible and impeccable, whom he generally charged with the duty of reprimanding.

"Monsieur Albert," said Bourdoncle, severely, "you have again taken an address wrong; the parcel has come back. It is unbearable!"

The cashier, thinking it advisable to defend himself, called as a witness the assistant who had tied up the packet. This assistant, named Joseph, also belonged to the Lhomme dynasty, for he was Albert's foster brother, and likewise owed his place to Madame Aurélie's influence. Albert sought to make him say that the mistake had been made by the customer herself, but all Joseph could do was to stutter and twist the shaggy beard that ornamented his scarred face, struggling the while between his conscience and his gratitude to his protectors.

"Let Joseph alone," Bourdoncle exclaimed at last, "and don't say any more. It's a lucky thing for you that we are mindful of your mother's good services!"

However, at this moment Lhomme senior came running up. From his office near the door he could see his son's pay-desk, which was in the glove department, and doubtless the colloquy had alarmed him. Quite white-haired already, deadened by his sedentary life, he had a flabby, colourless face, blanched and worn, as it were, by the reflection of the money he was continually handling. The circumstance that he had lost an arm did not at all incommode him in this work, and indeed people would go to his office out of curiosity to see him verify the receipts, so rapidly did the notes and coins slip through his left hand, the only one remaining to him. The son of a tax-collector at Chablis, he had come to Paris as clerk to a merchant of the Port-aux-Vins. Then, whilst lodging in the Rue Cuvier, he had married the daughter of his doorkeeper, a petty Alsatian tailor, and from that day onward he had bowed submissively before his wife, whose commercial ability filled him with respect. She now earned more than twelve thousand francs a year in the mantle department, whilst he only drew a fixed salary of five thousand francs. And the deference he felt for this wife who brought such large sums into the household was extended to their son, whom he also owed to her.

"What's the matter?" he murmured; "is Albert in fault?"

Then, according to his custom, Mouret reappeared on the scene, to play the part of an indulgent prince. When Bourdoncle had made himself feared, he looked after his own popularity.

"Oh! nothing of consequence!" he answered. "My dear Lhomme, your son Albert is a careless fellow, who should take an example from you." Then, changing the subject, showing himself more amiable than ever, he continued: "And by the way, how about that concert the other day – did you get a good seat?"

A blush spread over the white cheeks of the old cashier. Music was his only vice, a secret vice which he indulged in solitarily, frequenting theatres, concerts and recitals. Moreover, despite the loss of his arm, he played on the French horn, thanks to an ingenious system of claws; and as Madame Lhomme detested noise, before playing his instrument of an evening he would wrap it in cloth, and then draw from it all sorts of weird muffled sounds which delighted him to the point of ecstasy. In the forced irregularity of their domestic life he had made himself an oasis of his passion for music – that, his cash receipts and his admiration for his wife, summed up his whole existence.

"A very good seat," he replied with sparkling eyes. "You are really too kind, sir."

Mouret, who took a personal pleasure in satisfying other people's passions, sometimes gave Lhomme the tickets forced upon him by lady patronesses and he put the finishing touch to the old

man's delight by remarking: "Ah, Beethoven! ah, Mozart! What music!" Then, without waiting for a reply, he went off, rejoining Bourdoncle, who had already started on his tour of inspection through the departments.

In the central hall – an inner courtyard with a glass roof – was the silk department. At first Mouret and his companion turned into the Rue-Saint-Augustin gallery occupied by the linen department, from one end to the other. Nothing unusual striking them, they passed on slowly through the crowd of respectful assistants. Next they turned into the cotton and hosiery departments, where the same good order reigned. But in the department devoted to woollens, occupying the gallery which ran towards the Rue de la Michodière, Bourdoncle resumed the part of executioner, on observing a young man seated on the counter, looking quite knocked up by a sleepless night; and this young man, a certain Liénard, son of a rich Angers draper, bowed his head beneath the reprimand, for in the idle, careless life of pleasure which he led his one great fear was that he might be recalled from Paris by his father. And now reprimands began to shower down on all sides like hail, and quite a storm burst in the gallery of the Rue de la Michodière. In the drapery department a salesman, a fresh hand, who slept in the house, had come in after eleven o'clock and in the haberdashery department, the second counterman had allowed himself to be caught smoking a cigarette downstairs. But the tempest attained its greatest violence in the glove department, where it fell upon one of the few Parisians in the house, handsome Mignot, as he was called, the illegitimate son of a music-mistress. His crime was that of causing a scandal in the dining-room by complaining of the food. As there were three tables, one at half-past nine, one at half-past ten, and another at half-past eleven, he wished to explain that, belonging as he did to the third table, he always had the leavings, the worst of everything for his share.

"What! the food not good?" asked Mouret, with a naive air, opening his mouth at last.

He only allowed the chief cook, a terrible Auvergnat, a franc and a half a head per day, out of which small sum this man still contrived to make a good profit; and indeed the food was really execrable. But Bourdoncle shrugged his shoulders: a cook who had four hundred luncheons and four hundred dinners to serve, even in three series, had no time to waste on the refinements of his art.

"Never mind," said the governor, good-naturedly, "I wish all our employees to have good and abundant food. I'll speak to the cook." And thus Mignot's complaint was shelved.

Then returning to their point of departure, standing near the door, amidst the umbrellas and neckties, Mouret and Bourdoncle received the report of one of the four inspectors, who were charged with the police service of the establishment. The inspector in question, old Jouve, a retired captain, decorated for his bravery at Constantine and still a fine-looking man with his big sensual nose and majestic baldness, drew their attention to a salesman, who, in reply to a simple remonstrance on his part, had called him "an old humbug," and the salesman was immediately discharged.

Meantime, the shop was still without customers, that is, except a few housewives of the neighbourhood who were passing through the almost deserted galleries. At the door the time-keeper had just closed his book, and was making out a separate list of the late arrivals. The salesmen on their side were taking possession of their departments, which had been swept and brushed by the assistants before their arrival. Each young man put away his hat and over-coat as he arrived, stifling a yawn, still half asleep as he did so. Some exchanged a few words, gazed about the shop and sought to pull themselves together for another day's work; while others leisurely removed the green baize with which they had covered the goods over night, after folding them up. Then the piles of stuffs appeared symmetrically arranged, and the whole shop looked clean and orderly, brilliant in the gay morning light pending the rush of business which would once more obstruct it, and, as it were, reduce its dimensions by the unpacking and display of linen, cloth, silk, and lace.

In the bright light of the central hall, two young men were talking in a low voice at the silk counter. One of them, short but well set and good looking, with a pinky skin, was endeavouring to blend the colours of some silks for an indoor show. His name was Hutin, his father kept a café at Yvetot, and after eighteen months' service he had managed to become one of the principal salesmen,

thanks to a natural flexibility of character and a continual flow of caressing flattery, under which were concealed furious appetites which prompted him to grasp at everything and devour everybody just for the pleasure of the thing.

"Well, Favier, I should have struck him if I had been in your place, honour bright!" said he to his companion, a tall bilious fellow with a dry yellow skin, who had been born at Besançon of a family of weavers, and concealed under a cold graceless exterior a disquieting force of will.

"It does no good to strike people," he murmured, phlegmatically; "better wait."

They were both speaking of Robineau, the "second" in the department, who was looking after the shopmen during the manager's absence in the basement. Hutin was secretly undermining Robineau, whose place he coveted. To wound him and induce him to leave, he had already introduced Bouthemont to fill the post of manager which had been previously promised to Robineau. However, the latter stood firm, and it was now an hourly battle. Hutin dreamed of setting the whole department against him, of hounding him out by dint of ill-will and vexation. Still he went to work craftily, ever preserving his amiable air. And it was especially Favier whom he strove to excite against the "second" – Favier, who stood next to himself as salesman, and who appeared willing to be led, though he had certain brusque fits of reserve by which one could divine that he was bent on some private campaign of his own.

"Hush! seventeen!" he all at once hastily remarked to his colleague, intending by this peculiar exclamation to warn him of the approach of Mouret and Bourdoncle. These two, still continuing their inspection, were now traversing the hall and stopped to ask Robineau for an explanation respecting a stock of velvets, the boxes of which were encumbering a table. And as Robineau replied that there wasn't enough room to store things away, Mouret exclaimed with a smile:

"Ah! I told you so, Bourdoncle, the place is already too small. We shall soon have to knock down the walls as far as the Rue de Choiseul. You'll see what a crush there'll be next Monday."

Then, respecting the coming sale, for which they were preparing at every counter, he asked further questions of Robineau and gave him various orders. For some minutes however, whilst still talking, he had been watching Hutin, who was slowly arranging his silks – placing blue, grey, and yellow side by side and then stepping back to judge of the harmony of the tints. And all at once Mouret interfered: "But why are you endeavouring to please the eye?" he asked. "Don't be afraid; blind the customers! This is the style. Look! red, green, yellow."

While speaking he had taken up some of the pieces of silk, throwing them together, crumpling them and producing an extremely violent effect of colour. Every one allowed the governor to be the best "dresser" in Paris albeit one of a revolutionary stamp, an initiator of the brutal and the colossal in the science of display. His fancy was a tumbling of stuffs, heaped pell-mell as if they had fallen by chance from the bursting boxes, and glowing with the most ardent contrasting colours, which heightened each other's intensity. The customers, said he, ought to feel their eyes aching by the time they left the shop. Hutin, who on the contrary belonged to the classic school whose guiding principles were symmetry and a melodious blending of shades, watched him lighting this conflagration of silk on the table, without venturing to say a word; but on his lips appeared the pout of an artist whose convictions were sorely hurt by such a debauch of colour.

"There!" exclaimed Mouret, when he had finished.

"Leave it as it is; you'll see if it doesn't fetch the women on Monday."

Just then, as he rejoined Bourdoncle and Robineau, there arrived a woman, who stopped short, breathless at sight of this show. It was Denise, who, after waiting for nearly an hour in the street, a prey to a violent attack of timidity, had at last decided to enter. But she was so beside herself with bashfulness that she mistook the clearest directions; and the shopmen, of whom in stammering accents she asked for Madame Aurélie, in vain directed her to the staircase conducting to the first floor; she thanked them, but turned to the left if they told her to turn to the right; so that for the last ten minutes she had been wandering about the ground-floor, going from department to department,

amidst the ill-natured curiosity and boorish indifference of the salesmen. She longed to run away, but was at the same time retained by a wish to stop and admire. She felt herself lost, so little in this monstrous place, this machine which was still at rest, and trembled with fear lest she should be caught in the movement with which the walls already began to quiver. And in her mind the thought of The Old Elbeuf, so black and narrow, increased the immensity of this vast establishment, which seemed bathed in a golden light and similar to a city with its monuments, squares, and streets, in which it seemed impossible she should ever find her way.

However, she had previously not dared to venture into the silk hall whose high glass roof, luxurious counters, and cathedral-like aspect frightened her. Then when she did venture in, to escape the shopmen of the linen department, who were grinning at her, she stumbled right on Mouret's display; and, despite her bewilderment, the woman was aroused within her, her cheeks suddenly flushed, and she forgot everything in looking at the glow of this conflagration of silk.

"Hullo!" said Hutin in Favier's ear; "there's the drab we saw on the Place Gaillon."

Mouret, whilst affecting to listen to Bourdoncle and Robineau, was at heart flattered by the startled look of this poor girl, just as a marchioness might be by the brutal admiration of a passing drayman. But Denise had raised her eyes, and her confusion increased at the sight of this young man, whom she took for the manager of a department. She thought he was looking at her severely. Then not knowing how to get away, quite lost, she once more applied to the nearest shopman, who happened to be Favier.

"Madame Aurélie, if you please?"

However Favier, who was disagreeable, contented himself with replying sharply: "On the first floor."

Then, Denise, longing to escape the looks of all these men, thanked him, and was again turning her back to the stairs she ought to have ascended when Hutin, yielding naturally to his instinctive gallantry, stopped her with his most amiable salesman's smile albeit he had just spoken of her as a drab.

"No – this way, mademoiselle, if you please," said he.

And he even went with her a little way, as far indeed as the foot of the staircase on the left-hand side of the hall. There he bowed, and smiled at her, as he smiled at all women.

"When you get upstairs turn to the left," he added. "The mantle department will then be in front of you."

This caressing politeness affected Denise deeply. It was like a brotherly hand extended to her; she raised her eyes and looked at Hutin, and everything in him touched her – his handsome face, his smiling look which dissolved her fears, and his voice which seemed to her of a consoling softness. Her heart swelled with gratitude, and she gave him her friendship in the few disjointed words which her emotion allowed her to utter.

"Really, sir, you are too kind. Pray don't trouble to come any further. Thank you very much."

Hutin was already rejoining Favier, to whom he coarsely whispered: "What a bag of bones – eh?"

Upstairs the young girl suddenly found herself in the midst of the mantle department. It was a vast room, with high carved oak cupboards all round it and clear glass windows overlooking the Rue de la Michodière. Five or six women in silk dresses, looking very coquettish with their frizzy chignons and crinolines drawn back, were moving about and talking. One of them, tall and thin, with a long head, and a run-away-horse appearance, was leaning against a cupboard, as if already knocked up with fatigue.

"Madame Aurélie?" inquired Denise.

The saleswoman did not reply but looked at her, with an air of disdain for her shabby dress; then turning to one of her companions, a short girl with a sickly white skin and an innocent and

disgusted expression of countenance, she asked: "Mademoiselle Vadon, do you know where Madame Aurélie is?"

The girl, who was arranging some mantles according to their sizes, did not even take the trouble to raise her head. "No, Mademoiselle Prunaire, I don't know at all," she replied in a mincing tone.

Silence fell. Denise stood still, and no one took any further notice of her. However, after waiting a moment, she ventured to put another question: "Do you think Madame Aurélie will be back soon?"

Thereupon, the second-hand, a thin, ugly woman, whom she had not noticed before, a widow with a projecting jaw-bone and coarse hair, cried out from a cupboard, board, where she was checking some tickets: "You'd better wait if you want to speak to Madame Aurélie herself." And, addressing another saleswoman, she added: "Isn't she downstairs?"

"No, Madame Frédéric, I don't think so," was the reply. "She said nothing before going, so she can't be far off."

Denise, thus meagrely informed, remained standing. There were several chairs for the customers; but as she had not been asked to sit down, she did not dare to take one although her perturbation well nigh deprived her legs of strength. All these young ladies had evidently guessed that she was an applicant for the vacancy, and were taking stock of her, ill-naturedly pulling her to pieces with the secret hostility of people at table who do not like to close up to make room for hungry outsiders. Then Denise's confusion increasing, she slowly crossed the room and looked out of the window into the street, for the purpose of keeping countenance. Over the way, The Old Elbeuf, with its rusty front and lifeless windows, appeared to her so ugly and so wretched, thus viewed from amidst the luxury and life of her present standpoint, that a sort of remorse filled her already swollen heart with grief.

"I say," whispered tall Mdlle. Prunaire to little Mdlle. Vadon, "have you seen her boots?"

"And her dress!" murmured the other.

With her eyes still turned towards the street, Denise divined that she was being devoured. But she was not angry; she did not think them handsome, neither the tall one with her carroty chignon falling over her horse-like neck, nor the little one with her curdled-milk complexion, which gave her flat and, as it were, boneless face a flabby appearance. Clara Prunaire, daughter of a clogmaker of the woods of Vivet had begun to misconduct herself at the time when she was employed as needlewoman at the Château de Mareuil. Later on she had come to Paris from a shop at Langres, and was avenging herself in the capital for all the kicks with which her father had regaled her when at home. On the other hand Marguerite Vadon, born at Grenoble, where her parents kept a linen shop, had been obliged to come to Paris, where she had entered The Ladies' Paradise, in order to conceal a misfortune due to her frailty. Since then, however, she had ever been a well-conducted girl, and intended to return to Grenoble to take charge of her parents' shop, and marry a cousin who was waiting for her.

"Ah! well," resumed Clara, in a low voice, "that girl won't be of much account here even if she does get in."

But they all at once stopped talking, for a woman of about forty-five was coming in. It was Madame Aurélie, very stout and tightly laced in her black silk dress, the body of which, strained over her massive shoulders and full bust, shone like a piece of armour. Under dark folds of hair, she had big fixed eyes, a severe mouth, and broad and rather drooping cheeks; and in the majesty of her position as manageress her face seemed to swell with pride like the puffy countenance of a Cæsar.

"Mademoiselle Vadon," said she, in an irritated voice, "you didn't return the pattern of that mantle to the workroom yesterday, it seems?"

"There was an alteration to be made, madame," replied the saleswoman, "so Madame Frédéric kept it."

The second-hand thereupon took the pattern out of a cupboard, and the explanation continued. Every one gave way to Madame Aurélie, when she thought it expedient to assert her authority. Very vain, even to the point of objecting to be called by her husband's name, Lhomme, which annoyed her,

and of denying the humble position of her father to whom she always referred as a regularly established tailor, she only proved gracious towards those young ladies who showed themselves flexible and caressing and bowed down in admiration before her. Formerly, whilst trying to establish herself in a shop of her own, her temper had been soured by continual bad luck; the feeling that she was born to fortune and encountered nothing but a series of catastrophes had exasperated her; and now, even after her success at The Ladies' Paradise, where she earned twelve thousand francs a year, it seemed as if she still nourished a secret spite against every one. She was in particular very hard with beginners, even as life had shown itself hard for her at first.

"That will do!" said she, sharply; "You are not more reasonable than the others, Madame Frédéric. Let the alteration be made immediately."

During this explanation, Denise had ceased looking into the street. She had no doubt this was Madame Aurélie; but, frightened by her sharp voice, she remained standing, still waiting. The two saleswomen, delighted to have set their two superiors at variance, had returned to their work with an air of profound indifference. A few minutes elapsed, nobody being charitable enough to extricate the young girl from her uncomfortable position. At last, Madame Aurélie herself perceived her, and astonished to see her standing there motionless inquired what she wanted.

"Madame Aurélie, please."

"I am Madame Aurélie."

Denise's mouth was dry and parched, her hands were cold; she felt some such fear as when she was a child and trembled at the thought of being whipped. At last she stammered out her request, but was obliged to repeat it to make herself understood. Madame Aurélie gazed upon her with her large fixed eyes, not a line of her imperial countenance deigning to relax.

"How old are you?" she eventually inquired.

"Twenty, madame."

"What, twenty years old? you don't look sixteen!"

The saleswomen again raised their heads. Denise hastened to add: "Oh, I'm very strong!"

Madame Aurélie shrugged her broad shoulders and then coldly remarked: "Well! I don't mind entering your name. We enter the names of all who apply. Mademoiselle Prunaire, give me the book."

But the book could not be found; Jouve, the inspector, had probably got it. And just as tall Clara was about to fetch it, Mouret arrived, still followed by Bourdoncle. They had made the tour of the other departments on the first floor – they had passed through the lace, the shawls, the furs, the furniture and the under-linen, and were now winding up with the mantles. Madame Aurélie left Denise for a moment to speak to them about an order for some cloaks which she thought of giving to one of the large Paris houses. As a rule, she bought direct, and on her own responsibility; but, for important purchases, she preferred to consult the chiefs of the house. Bourdoncle then told her of her son Albert's latest act of carelessness, which seemed to fill her with despair. That boy would kill her; his father, although not a man of talent, was at least well-conducted, careful, and honest. All this dynasty of the Lhommes, of which she was the acknowledged head, very often caused her a great deal of trouble. However, Mouret, surprised to come upon Denise again, bent down to ask Madame Aurélie what that young person was doing there; and, when the first-hand replied that she was applying for a saleswoman's situation, Bourdoncle, with his disdain for women, seemed suffocated by such pretension.

"You don't mean it," he murmured; "it must be a joke, she's too ugly!"

"The fact is, there's nothing handsome about her," replied Mouret, not daring to defend her, although he was still moved by the rapture she had displayed downstairs before his arrangement of the silks.

However, the book having been brought, Madame Aurélie returned to Denise, who had certainly not made a favourable impression. She looked very clean in her thin black woollen dress; still the question of shabbiness was of no importance, as the house furnished a uniform, the regulation silk

dress; but she appeared weak and puny, and had a melancholy face. Without insisting on handsome girls, the managers of the house liked their assistants to be of agreeable appearance. And beneath the gaze of all the men and women who were studying her, estimating her like farmers would a horse at a fair, Denise lost what little countenance had still remained to her.

"Your name?" asked Madame Aurélie, standing at the end of a counter, pen in hand, ready to write.

"Denise Baudu, madame."

"Your age?"

"Twenty years and four months." And risking a glance at Mouret, at this supposed manager, whom she met everywhere and whose presence troubled her so much, she repeated: "I don't look like it, but I am really very strong."

They smiled. Bourdoncle showed evident signs of impatience; her remark fell, moreover, amidst a most discouraging silence.

"What establishment have you been at, in Paris?" resumed Madame Aurélie.

"I've just arrived from Valognes, madame."

This was a fresh disaster. As a rule, The Ladies' Paradise only engaged as saleswomen such girls as had had a year's experience in one of the small houses in Paris. Denise thought all was lost; and, had it not been for the children, had she not been obliged to work for them, she would have brought this futile interrogatory to an end by leaving the place.

"Where were you at Valognes?" asked Madame Aurélie.

"At Cornaille's."

"I know him – good house," remarked Mouret.

It was very seldom that he interfered in the engagement of the employees, the manager of each department being responsible for his or her staff. But with his fine appreciation of women, he divined in this girl a hidden charm, a wealth of grace and tenderness of which she herself was ignorant. The good reputation of the establishment in which the candidate had started was of great importance, often deciding the question in his or her favour. Thus even Madame Aurélie continued in a kinder tone: "And why did you leave Cornaille's?"

"For family reasons," replied Denise, turning scarlet. "We have lost our parents, I have been obliged to follow my brothers. Here is a certificate."

It was excellent. Her hopes were reviving, when another question troubled her.

"Have you any other references in Paris? Where do you live?"

"At my uncle's," she murmured, hesitating to name him for she feared that they would never engage the niece of a competitor. "At my uncle Baudu's, opposite."

At this, Mouret interfered a second time. "What! are you Baudu's niece?" said he, "is it Baudu who sent you here?"

"Oh! no, sir!" answered Denise; and she could not help laughing as she spoke for the idea appeared to her so singular. That laugh was like a transfiguration; she became quite rosy, and the smile playing round her rather large mouth lighted up her whole face. Her grey eyes sparkled with a soft flame, her cheeks filled with delicious dimples, and even her light hair seemed to partake of the frank and courageous gaiety that pervaded her whole being.

"Why, she's really pretty," whispered Mouret to Bourdoncle.

The latter with a gesture of boredom refused to admit it. Clara on her side bit her lips, and Marguerite turned away; Madame Aurélie alone seemed won over, and encouraged Mouret with a nod when he resumed: "Your uncle was wrong not to bring you here; his recommendation sufficed. It is said he has a grudge against us. We are people of more liberal minds, and if he can't find employment for his niece in his house, why we will show him that she has only had to knock at our door to be received. Just tell him I still like him very much, and that if he has cause for complaint he must blame,

not me, but the new circumstances of commerce. Tell him, too, that he will ruin himself if he insists on keeping to his ridiculous old-fashioned ways."

Denise turned quite white again. It was Mouret; no one had mentioned his name, but he revealed himself, and she guessed who he was, and understood why the sight of him had caused her such emotion in the street, in the silk department, and again here. This emotion, which she could not analyze, pressed more and more upon her heart like an unbearable weight. All the stories related by her uncle came back to her, increasing Mouret's importance in her eyes, surrounding him with a sort of halo in his capacity as the master of the terrible machine between whose wheels she had felt herself all the morning. And, behind his handsome face, with its well-trimmed beard, and eyes the colour of old gold, she beheld the dead woman, that Madame Hédouin, whose blood had helped to cement the stones of the house. The shiver she had felt the previous night again came upon her; and she thought she was merely afraid of him.

However, Madame Aurélie had closed the book. She only wanted one saleswoman, and she already had ten applications. True, she was too anxious to please the governor to hesitate for a moment, still the application would follow its course, inspector Jouve would go and make inquiries, send in his report, and then she would come to a decision.

"Very good, mademoiselle," said she majestically, as though to preserve her authority; "we will write to you."

Denise stood there, unable to move for a moment, hardly knowing how to take her leave in the midst of all these people. At last she thanked Madame Aurélie, and on passing Mouret and Bourdoncle, she bowed. The gentlemen, however, were examining the pattern of a mantle with Madame Frédéric and took no further notice of her. Clara looked in a vexed way towards Marguerite, as if to predict that the new-comer would not have a very pleasant time of it in the establishment. Denise doubtless felt this indifference and rancour behind her, for she went downstairs with the same troubled feeling that had possessed her on going up, asking herself whether she ought to be sorry or glad at having come. Could she count on having the situation? She doubted it, amidst the uneasiness which had prevented her from clearly understanding what had been said. Of her various sensations, two remained and gradually effaced all others – the emotion, almost fear, with which Mouret had inspired her, and the pleasure she had derived from the amiability of Hutin, the only pleasure she had enjoyed the whole morning, a souvenir of charming sweetness which filled her with gratitude. When she crossed the shop on her way out she looked for the young man, happy in the idea of thanking him again with her eyes, and she was very sorry not to see him.

"Well, mademoiselle, have you succeeded?" inquired a timid voice, as she at last reached the pavement. She turned round and recognised the tall, awkward young fellow who had spoken to her in the morning. He also had just come out of The Ladies' Paradise, and seemed even more frightened than herself, still bewildered by the examination through which he had just passed.

"I really don't know as yet, sir," she replied.

"You're like me, then. What a way they have of looking at you and talking to you in there – eh? I'm applying for a place in the lace department. I was at Crevecœur's in the Rue du Mail."

They were once more standing face to face; and, not knowing how to take leave, they again began to blush. Then the young man, by way of saying something, timidly ventured to ask in his good-natured, awkward way: "What is your name, mademoiselle?"

"Denise Baudu."

"My name is Henri Deloche."

Then they smiled, and, yielding to a fraternal feeling born of the similarity of their positions, shook each other by the hand.

"Good luck!" said Deloche.

"Yes, good luck!" was Denise's reply.

CHAPTER III

Every Saturday, between four and six, Madame Desforges offered a cup of tea and a few sweet biscuits to those friends who were kind enough to visit her. She occupied the third floor of a house at the corner of the Rue de Rivoli and the Rue d'Alger; and the windows of her two drawing-rooms overlooked the gardens of the Tuileries.

That Saturday, just as a footman was about to introduce him into the principal drawing-room, Mouret from the anteroom perceived, through an open doorway, Madame Desforges crossing the smaller salon. She stopped on seeing him, and he went in that way, bowing to her with a ceremonious air. But when the footman had closed the door, he quickly caught hold of the young woman's hand, and tenderly kissed it.

"Take care, I have company!" she remarked, in a low voice, glancing towards the door of the larger room. "I've just come to fetch this fan to show them," and so saying she playfully tapped him on the face with the tip of the fan she held. She was dark and inclined to stoutness, and had big jealous eyes.

However, he still held her hand and inquired: "Will he come?"

"Certainly," she replied: "I have his promise."

They both referred to Baron Hartmann, the director of the Crédit Immobilier. Madame Desforges, daughter of a Councillor of State, was the widow of a speculator, who had left her a fortune, underrated to the point of nothingness by some and greatly over-estimated by others. During her husband's lifetime she had already known Baron Hartmann, whose financial tips had proved very useful to them; and later on, after her husband's death, the connection had been kept up in a discreet fashion; for she never courted notoriety in any way, and was received everywhere in the upper-middle class to which she belonged. Even now too when she had other lovers – the passion of the banker, a sceptical, crafty man, having subsided into a mere paternal affection – she displayed such delicate reserve and tact, such adroit knowledge of the world that appearances were saved, and no one would have ventured to openly express any doubt of her conduct. Having met Mouret at a mutual friend's she had at first detested him; but had been carried away by the violent love which he professed for her, and since he had begun manœuvring to approach Baron Hartmann through her, she had gradually got to love him with real and profound tenderness, adoring him with all the violence of a woman of thirty-five, who only acknowledged the age of twenty-nine, and distressed at feeling him younger than herself, which made her tremble lest she should lose him.

"Does he know about it?" he resumed.

"No, you'll explain the affair to him yourself," was her reply.

Meantime she looked at him, reflecting that he couldn't know anything or he would not employ her in this way with the baron, whom he appeared to consider simply as an old friend of hers. However, Mouret still held her hand and called her his good Henriette, at which she felt her heart melting. Then silently she presented her lips, pressed them to his, and whispered: "Remember they're waiting for me. Come in behind me."

A murmur of voices, deadened by the heavy hangings, came from the principal drawing-room. Madame Desforges went in, leaving the folding doors open behind her, and handed the fan to one of the four ladies who were seated in the middle of the room.

"There it is," said she; "I didn't know exactly where it was. My maid would never have found it." And turning round she added in her cheerful way: "Come in, Monsieur Mouret, come through the little drawing-room; it will be less solemn."

Mouret bowed to the ladies, whom he knew. The drawing-room, with its Louis XVI. furniture upholstered in flowered brocatel, its gilded bronzes and large green plants, had a pleasant, cozy,

feminine aspect, albeit the ceiling was so lofty; and through the two windows could be seen the chestnut trees of the Tuileries Gardens, whose leaves were blowing about in the October wind.

"But this Chantilly isn't at all bad!" exclaimed Madam Bourdelais, who had taken the fan.

She was a short fair woman of thirty, with a delicate nose and sparkling eyes. A former schoolfellow of Henriette's, married to a chief clerk at the Ministry of Finances, and belonging to an old middle-class family, she managed her household and three children with rare activity, good grace, and exquisite knowledge of practical life.

"And you paid twenty-five francs for it?" she resumed, examining each mesh of the lace. "At Luc, I think you said, to a country-woman? No, it isn't dear; still you had to get it mounted, hadn't you?"

"Of course," replied Madame Desforges. "The mounting cost me two hundred francs."

Madame Bourdelais began to laugh. And that was what Henriette called a bargain! Two hundred francs for a plain ivory mount, with a monogram! And that for a mere piece of Chantilly, over which she had perhaps saved five francs. Similar fans could be had, ready mounted, for a hundred and twenty francs, and she named a shop in the Rue Poissonnière where she had seen them.

However, the fan was handed round to all the ladies. Madame Guibal barely glanced at it. She was a tall, slim woman, with red hair, and a face full of indifference, in which her grey eyes, belying her unconcerned air, occasionally cast a hungry gleam of selfishness. She was never seen out with her husband, a barrister well-known at the Palais de Justice, who led, it was said, a pretty free life between his briefs and his pleasures.

"Oh," she murmured, passing the fan to Madame de Boves, "I've scarcely bought one in my life. One always receives too many of such things."

"You are fortunate, my dear, in having a gallant husband," answered the countess in a tone of delicate irony. And bending over to her daughter, a tall girl of twenty, she added: "Just look at the monogram, Blanche. What pretty work! It's the monogram that must have increased the price of the mounting like that."

Madame de Boves had just turned forty. She was a superb woman, with the neck and shoulders of a goddess, a large regular face, and big sleepy eyes. Her husband, an Inspector-General of the State Studs, had married her for her beauty. She appeared quite moved by the delicacy of the monogram, seized indeed by a desire which so stirred her as to make her turn pale; and suddenly turning she continued: "Give us your opinion, Monsieur Mouret. Is it too dear – two hundred francs for this mount?"

Mouret had remained standing among the five women, smiling and affecting an interest in what interested them. He took the fan, examined it, and was about to give his opinion, when the footman opened the door and announced:

"Madame Marty."

There then entered a thin, ugly woman, disfigured by small-pox but dressed with elaborate elegance. She seemed of uncertain age, her five-and-thirty years sometimes appearing equal to thirty, and sometimes to forty, according to the intensity of the nervous fever which so often agitated her. A red leather bag, which she had not been willing to leave in the anteroom, hung from her right hand.

"Dear madame," said she to Henriette, "you will excuse me bringing my bag. Just fancy, as I was coming, along I went into The Paradise, and as I have again been very extravagant, I did not like to leave it in my cab for fear of being robbed." Then, having perceived Mouret, she resumed laughing: "Ah! sir, I didn't mean to give you an advertisement, for I didn't know you were here. But you really have some extraordinarily fine lace just now."

This turned the attention from the fan, which the young man laid on the table. The ladies were now all anxious to see what Madame Marty had bought. She was known to be very extravagant, totally unable to resist certain temptations. Strict in her conduct, incapable of any sexual transgression she proved weak and cowardly before the least bit of finery. Daughter of a clerk of small means, she

was ruining her husband, the fifth-class professor at the Lycée Bonaparte, who in order to meet the constantly increasing expenses of the household was compelled to double his income of six thousand francs by giving private lessons. However, she did not open her bag, but held it tightly on her lap, and began to talk about her daughter Valentine, a girl of fourteen whom she dressed like herself, in all the fashionable novelties to whose irresistible fascination she succumbed.

"You know," said she, "they are making girls' dresses trimmed with narrow lace this winter. So when I saw a very pretty Valenciennes – "

Thereupon she at last decided to open her bag; and the ladies were craning their necks, when, amidst the silence, the door-bell was heard.

"It's my husband," stammered Madame Marty, in great confusion. "He promised to call for me on leaving the Lycée Bonaparte."

Forthwith she shut her bag again, and instinctively hid it away under her chair. All the ladies set up a laugh. This made her blush for her precipitation, and she took the bag on her knees again, explaining, however, that men never understood matters and that they need not know everything.

"Monsieur de Boves, Monsieur de Vallagnosc," announced the footman.

It was quite a surprise. Madame de Boves herself did not expect her husband. The latter, a fine man, wearing a moustache and an imperial in the correct military fashion so much liked at the Tuileries, kissed the hand of Madame Desforges, whom he had known as a young girl at her father's. And then he made way so that his companion, a tall, pale fellow, of an aristocratic poverty of blood, might in his turn make his bow to the lady of the house. However, the conversation had hardly been resumed when two exclamations rang out.

"What! Is that you, Paul?"

"Why, Octave!"

Mouret and Vallagnosc thereupon shook hands, much to Madame Desforges's surprise. They knew each other, then? Of course, they had grown up side by side at the college at Plassans, and it was quite by chance they had not met at her house before. However, jesting together and with their hands still united they stepped into the little drawing-room, just as the servant brought in the tea, a china service on a silver waiter, which he placed near Madame Desforges, on a small round marble table with a light brass mounting. The ladies drew up and began talking in louder tones, raising a cross-fire of endless chatter; whilst Monsieur de Boves, standing behind them leant over every now and then to put in a word or two with the gallantry of a handsome functionary. The spacious room, so prettily and cheerfully furnished, became merrier still with these gossiping voices interspersed with laughter.

"Ah! Paul, old boy," repeated Mouret.

He was seated near Vallagnosc, on a sofa. And alone in the little drawing-room – which looked very coquettish with its hangings of buttercup silk – out of hearing of the ladies, and not even seeing them, except through the open doorway, the two old friends commenced grinning whilst they scrutinized each other and exchanged slaps on the knees. Their whole youthful career was recalled, the old college at Plassans, with its two courtyards, its damp class-rooms, and the dining-hall in which they had consumed so much cod-fish, and the dormitories where the pillows flew from bed to bed as soon as the monitor began to snore. Paul, who belonged to an old parliamentary family, noble, poor, and proud, had proved a good scholar, always at the top of his class and continually held up as an example by the master, who prophesied a brilliant future for him; whereas Octave had remained at the bottom, amongst the dunces, but nevertheless fat and jolly, indulging in all sorts of pleasures outside. Notwithstanding the difference in their characters, a fast friendship had rendered them inseparable until they were examined for their bachelor's degrees, which they took, the one with honours, the other in just a passable manner after two vexatious rebuffs. Then they went out into the world, each on his own side, and had now met again, after the lapse of ten years, already changed and looking older.

"Well," asked Mouret, "what's become of you?"

"Nothing at all," replied the other.

Vallagnosc indeed, despite the pleasure of this meeting, retained a tired and disenchanted air; and as his friend, somewhat astonished, insisted, saying: "But you must do something. What do you do?" he merely replied: "Nothing."

Octave began to laugh. Nothing! that wasn't enough. Little by little, however, he succeeded in learning Paul's story. It was the usual story of penniless young men, who think themselves obliged by their birth to choose a liberal profession and bury themselves in a sort of vain mediocrity, happy even when they escape starvation, notwithstanding their numerous degrees. For his part he had studied law by a sort of family tradition; and had then remained a burden on his widowed mother, who already hardly knew how to dispose of her two daughters. Having at last got quite ashamed of his position he had left the three women to vegetate on the remnants of their fortune, and had accepted a petty appointment at the Ministry of the Interior, where he buried himself like a mole in his hole.

"What do you get there?" resumed Mouret.

"Three thousand francs."

"But that's pitiful pay! Ah! old man, I'm really sorry for you. What! a clever fellow like you, who floored all of us! And they only give you three thousand francs a year, after having already ground you down for five years! No, it isn't right!" He paused and then thinking of his own good fortune resumed: "As for me, I made them a humble bow long ago. You know what I'm doing?"

"Yes," said Vallagnosc, "I heard you were in business. You've got that big place on the Place Gaillon, haven't you?"

"That's it. Counter-jumper, my boy!"

Mouret raised his head, again slapped his friend on the knee, and repeated, with the sterling gaiety of a man who did not blush for the trade by which he was making his fortune:

"Counter-jumper, and no mistake! You remember, no doubt, I didn't nibble much at their baits, although at heart I never thought myself a bigger fool than the others. When I took my degree, just to please the family, I could have become a barrister or a doctor quite as easily as any of my school-fellows, but those trades frightened me, for one sees so many chaps starving at them. So I just threw the ass's skin away – oh! without the least regret and plunged head-first into business."

Vallagnosc smiled with an awkward air, and ultimately muttered: "It's quite certain that your degree can't be of much use to you in selling linen."

"Well!" replied Mouret, joyously, "all I ask is, that it shan't stand in my way; and you know, when one has been stupid enough to burden one's self with such a thing, it is difficult to get rid of it. One goes at a tortoise's pace through life, whilst those who are bare-footed run like madmen." Then, noticing that his friend seemed troubled, he took his hand in his, and continued: "Come, come, I don't want to hurt your feelings, but confess that your degrees have not satisfied any of your wants. Do you know that my manager in the silk department will draw more than twelve thousand francs this year. Just so! a fellow of very clear intelligence, whose knowledge is confined to spelling, and the first four rules of arithmetic. The ordinary salesmen in my place make from three to four thousand francs a year, more than you can earn yourself; and their education did not cost anything like what yours did, nor were they launched into the world with a written promise to conquer it. Of course, it is not everything to make money; only between the poor devils possessed of a smattering of science who now block up the liberal professions, without earning enough to keep themselves from starving, and the practical fellows armed for life's struggle, knowing every branch of their trade, I don't hesitate one moment, I'm for the latter against the former, I think they thoroughly understand the age they live in!"

His voice had become impassioned and Henriette, who was pouring out the tea, turned her head. When he caught her smile, at the further end of the large drawing-room, and saw two other ladies listening, he was the first to make merry over his own big phrases.

"In short, old man, every counter-jumper who commences, has, at the present day, a chance of becoming a millionaire."

Vallagnosc indolently threw himself back on the sofa, half-closing his eyes and assuming an attitude of mingled fatigue and disdain in which a dash of affectation was added to his real hereditary exhaustion.

"Bah!" murmured he, "life isn't worth all that trouble. There is nothing worth living for." And as Mouret, quite shocked, looked at him with an air of surprise, he added: "Everything happens and nothing happens; a man may as well remain with his arms folded."

He then explained his pessimism – the mediocrities and the abortions of existence. For a time he had thought of literature, but his intercourse with certain poets had filled him with unlimited despair. He always came to the conclusion that every effort was futile, every hour equally weary and empty, and the world incurably stupid and dull. All enjoyment was a failure, there was even no pleasure in wrong-doing.

"Just tell me, do you enjoy life yourself?" asked he at last.

Mouret was now in a state of astonished indignation, and exclaimed: "What? Do I enjoy myself? What are you talking about? Why, of course I do, my boy, and even when things give way, for then I am furious at hearing them cracking. I am a passionate fellow myself, and don't take life quietly; that's what interests me in it perhaps." He glanced towards the drawing-room, and lowered his voice. "Oh! there are some women who've bothered me awfully, I must confess. Still I have my revenge, I assure you. But it is not so much the women, for to speak truly, I don't care a hang for them; the great thing in life is to be able to will and do – to create, in short. You have an idea; you fight for it, you hammer it into people's heads, and you see it grow and triumph. Ah! yes, my boy, I enjoy life!"

All the joy of action, all the gaiety of existence, resounded in Mouret's words. He repeated that he went with the times. Really, a man must be badly constituted, have his brain and limbs out of order, to refuse to work in an age of such vast undertakings, when the entire century was pressing forward with giant strides. And he railed at the despairing ones, the disgusted ones, the pessimists, all those weak, sickly offsprings of our budding sciences, who assumed the lachrymose airs of poets, or the affected countenances of sceptics, amidst the immense activity of the present day. 'Twas a fine part to play, decent and intelligent, that of yawning before other people's labour!

"But yawning in other people's faces is my only pleasure," said Vallagnosc, smiling in his cold way.

At this Mouret's passion subsided, and he became affectionate again. "Ah, Paul, you're not changed. Just as paradoxical as ever! However, we've not met to quarrel. Each man has his own ideas, fortunately. But you must come and see my machine at work; you'll see it isn't a bad idea. And now, what news? Your mother and sisters are quite well, I hope? And weren't you supposed to get married at Plassans, about six months ago?"

A sudden movement made by Vallagnosc stopped him, and as his friend had glanced into the larger drawing-room with an anxious expression, he also turned round, and noticed that Mademoiselle de Boves was closely watching them. Blanche, tall and sturdy, resembled her mother; but her face was already puffed out and her features seemed large – swollen, as it were, by unhealthy fat. Then, in reply to a discreet question, Paul intimated that nothing was yet settled; perhaps nothing would be settled. He had made the young person's acquaintance at Madame Desforges's, where he had visited a good deal the previous winter, but whither he now very rarely came, which explained why he had not met Octave there before. In their turn, the Boves invited him, and he was especially fond of the father, an ex-man about town who had retired into an official position. On the other hand there was no money, Madame de Boves having brought her husband nothing but her Juno-like beauty as a marriage portion. So the family were living poorly on their last mortgaged farm, to the little money derived from which were fortunately added the nine thousand francs a year drawn by the count as Inspector-General of the State Studs. Certain escapades, however, continued to empty his purse; and the ladies, mother and daughter, were kept very short of money, being at times reduced to turning their dresses themselves.

"In that case, why marry?" was Mouret's simple question.

"Well! I can't go on like this for ever," said Vallagnosc, with a weary movement of the eyelids. "Besides, there are certain expectations, we are waiting for the death of an aunt."

However, Mouret still kept his eye on Monsieur de Boves, who, seated next to Madame Guibal, proved most attentive to her, laughing softly the while, with an amorous air. Thereupon Octave turned to his friend with such a significant twinkle of the eye that the latter added:

"Not that one – at least not yet. The misfortune is, that his duties call him to the four corners of France, to the breeding dépôts, so that he has frequent pretexts for absenting himself. Last month, whilst his wife supposed him to be at Perpignan, he was simply carrying on in Paris, in an out-of-the-way neighbourhood."

There ensued a pause. Then the young man, who was also watching the count's gallantry towards Madame Guibal, resumed in a low tone: "Really, I think you are right. The more so as the dear lady is not exactly a saint, if all people say be true. But just look at him! Isn't he comical, trying to magnetize her with his eyes? The old-fashioned gallantry, my dear fellow! I adore that man, and if I marry his daughter, he may safely say it's for his sake!"

Mouret laughed, greatly amused. He questioned Vallagnosc again, and when he found that the first idea of a marriage between him and Blanche had come from Madame Desforges, he thought the story better still. That dear Henriette took a widow's delight in marrying people, so much so, that when she had provided for the girls, she sometimes allowed their fathers to choose friends from her company.

At that moment she appeared at the door of the little drawing-room, followed by a gentleman apparently about sixty years old, whose arrival had not been observed by the two friends, absorbed as they were in the conversation they were carrying on, to the accompaniment of the ladies' voices. These voices at times rang out in a shriller key above the tinkling of the small spoons in the china cups; and from time to time, during a brief silence you heard a saucer being harshly laid down on the marble table. A sudden gleam of the setting sun, which had just emerged from behind a thick cloud, gilded the crests of the chestnut-trees in the gardens, and streamed through the windows in a red, golden flame, whose glow lighted up the brocatel and brass-work of the furniture.

"This way, my dear baron," said Madame Desforges. "Allow me to introduce to you Monsieur Octave Mouret, who is longing to express the admiration he feels for you." And turning round towards Octave, she added: "Baron Hartmann."

A smile played on the old man's lips. He was short, and vigorous, with a large Alsatian head, and a heavy face, which lighted up with a gleam of intelligence at the slightest curl of his mouth, the slightest movement of his eyelids. For the last fortnight he had resisted Henriette's wish that he should consent to this interview; not that he felt any immoderate jealousy of Mouret, but because this was the third friend Henriette had introduced to him, and he was afraid of becoming ridiculous at last. And so on approaching Octave he put on the discreet smile of one who, albeit willing to behave amiably, is not disposed to be a dupe.

"Oh! sir," said Mouret, with his Provençal enthusiasm, "the Crédit Immobilier's last operation was really astonishing! You cannot think how happy and proud I am to know you."

"Too kind, sir, too kind," repeated the baron, still smiling.

Henriette, robed in a lace dress, which revealed her delicate neck and wrists, looked at them with her clear eyes without any sign of embarrassment; standing between the two, raising her head, and going from one to the other she indeed appeared delighted to see them so friendly together.

"Gentlemen," said she at last, "I leave you to your conversation." And, turning towards Paul, who had risen from the sofa, she resumed: "Will you accept a cup of tea, Monsieur de Vallagnosc?"

"With pleasure, madame," he replied, and they both returned to the larger drawing-room.

Mouret resumed his seat on the sofa, when Baron Hartmann likewise had sat down on it; and forthwith the young man broke into renewed praise of the Crédit Immobilier's operations. From that

he went on to the subject so near his heart, speaking of the new thoroughfare, a lengthening of the Rue Réaumur, a section of which running from the Place de la Bourse to the Place de l'Opéra was about to be opened under the name of the Rue du Dix-Décembre. It had been declared a work of public utility eighteen months previously; the expropriation jury had just been appointed; and the whole neighbourhood was excited about this new street, anxiously awaiting the commencement of the works, and taking a keen interest in the houses condemned to disappear. For three years Mouret had been waiting for this work – first, in the expectation of an increase of his own business; secondly, for the furtherance of certain schemes of enlargement which he dared not openly avow, so extensive were his ideas. As the Rue du Dix-Décembre was to cut through the Rue de Choiseul and the Rue de la Michodière, he pictured The Ladies' Paradise occupying the whole block of building which these streets and the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin surrounded; and he already imagined it with a princely frontage in the new thoroughfare, dominating everything around like some lord and master of the conquered city. Hence his strong desire to make Baron Hartmann's acquaintance, as soon as he had learnt that the Crédit Immobilier had contracted with the authorities to open and build this Rue du Dix-Décembre, on condition that it should receive the frontage ground on each side of the street.

"Really," he repeated, trying to assume a naive look, "you'll hand over the street ready made, with sewers, pavements, and gas lamps. And the frontage ground will suffice to compensate you. Oh! it's curious, very curious!"

At last he came to the delicate point. He was aware that the Crédit Immobilier was secretly buying up the houses forming part of the same block as The Ladies' Paradise, not only those which were to fall under the demolishers' pickaxes, but the others as well, those which were to remain standing; and he suspected the existence of a project for founding some great establishment, which made him anxious about those enlargements of his own premises of which he was ever dreaming, seized with fear at the idea that he might one day come into collision with a powerful company owning property which they certainly would not sell. It was precisely this fear which had prompted him to seek an alliance between himself and the Baron under Henriette's auspices. No doubt he could have seen the financier at his office, and have there talked the affair over at his ease; but he felt that he would be stronger in Henriette's house. To be near her, within the beloved perfume of her presence, to have her ready to convince them both with a smile, seemed to him a certain guarantee of success.

"Haven't you bought the former Hôtel Duvillard, that old building next to my place?" he suddenly inquired.

The baron hesitated for a moment, and then denied it. But Mouret looked him straight in the face and smiled, from that moment beginning to play the part of an open-hearted young man who was always straightforward in business.

"Look here, Monsieur le Baron," said he, "as I have the unexpected honour of meeting you, I must make a confession. Oh, I don't ask you for any of your secrets, but I am going to entrust you with mine, for I'm certain that I couldn't place them in better hands. Besides, I want your advice. I have long wished to call and see you, but dared not do so."

He did make his confession, and related his debut in life, not even concealing the financial crisis through which he was passing in the midst of his triumph. Everything was brought up, the successive enlargements of his premises, the continual reinvestments of all profits in the business, the sums contributed by his employees, the existence of the establishment risked at every fresh sale, in which the entire capital was staked, as it were, on a single throw of the dice. However, it was not money he wanted, for he had a fanatic's faith in his customers; his ambition ran higher; and he proposed to the baron a partnership, in which the Crédit Immobilier should contribute the colossal palace which he pictured in his dreams, whilst for his part he would give his genius and the business he had already created. Everything would be properly valued, nothing appeared to him easier to realise.

"What are you going to do with your land and buildings?" he asked persistently. "You have a plan, no doubt. But I'm quite certain that your idea is not so good as mine. Think of it. We build

fresh galleries on the vacant ground, we pull the houses down or re-arrange them and open the most extensive establishment in Paris – a bazaar which will bring in millions." And then he let this fervent, heartfelt exclamation escape him: "Ah! if I could only do without you! But you hold everything now. Besides, I shall never have the necessary capital. Come, we must come to an understanding. It would be a crime not to do so."

"How you go ahead, my dear sir!" Baron Hartmann contented himself with replying. "What an imagination you have!"

He shook his head, and continued to smile, resolved not to return confidence for confidence. In point of fact the idea of the Crédit Immobilier was to found in the Rue du Dix-Décembre a huge rival to the Grand Hôtel, a luxurious hostelry whose central position would attract foreigners. At the same time, however, as the hotel was only to occupy a certain frontage, the baron might also have entertained Mouret's idea, and have treated for the rest of the block of houses, which still represented a vast surface. However, he had already advanced funds to two of Henriette's friends, and he was getting tired of his lavishness. Besides, despite his passion for activity, which prompted him to open his purse to every fellow of intelligence and courage, Mouret's commercial genius astonished rather than captivated him. Was not the founding of such a gigantic shop a fanciful, imprudent scheme? Would he not court certain failure by thus enlarging the drapery trade beyond all reasonable bounds? In short, he didn't believe in the idea and refused his support.

"No doubt the idea is attractive," said he, "but it's a poet's idea. Where would you find the customers to fill such a cathedral?"

Mouret looked at him for a moment in silence, as if stupefied by the refusal which these words implied. Was it possible? – a man of such foresight, who divined the presence of money at no matter what depth! And suddenly, with an extremely eloquent gesture, he pointed to the ladies in the drawing-room and exclaimed: "Customers? – why look there!"

The sun was paling and the golden-red flame was now but a yellowish gleam, dying away on the silk of the hangings and the panels of the furniture. At this approach of twilight, the large room was steeped in warm cosy pleasantness. While Monsieur de Boves and Paul de Vallagnosc stood chatting near one of the windows, their eyes wandering far away into the gardens, the ladies had closed up, forming in the middle of the room a small circle of skirts whence arose bursts of laughter, whispered words, ardent questions and replies, all woman's passion for expenditure and finery. They were talking about dress, and Madame de Boves was describing a gown she had seen at a ball.

"First of all, a mauve silk skirt, covered with flounces of old Alençon lace, twelve inches deep."

"Oh! is it possible!" exclaimed Madame Marty. "Some women are very fortunate!"

Baron Hartmann, who had followed Mouret's gesture, was looking at the ladies through the doorway which was wide open. And he continued listening to them with one ear, whilst the young man, inflamed by his desire to convince him, went yet deeper into the question, explaining the mechanism of the new style of drapery business. This branch of commerce was now based on a rapid and continual turning over of capital, which it was necessary to convert into goods as often as possible in the same year. For instance, that year his capital, which only amounted to five hundred thousand francs, had been turned over four times, and had thus produced business to the amount of two millions. But this was a mere trifle, which could be increased tenfold, for later on, in certain departments, he certainly hoped to turn the capital over fifteen or twenty times in the course of the twelvemonth.

"You understand, baron, the whole system lies in that. It is very simple, but it had to be found out. We don't need an enormous working capital; the sole effort we have to make is to get rid of the stock we buy as quickly as possible so as to replace it by other stock which each time will make our capital return interest. In this way we can content ourselves with a very small profit; as our general expenses amount to as much as sixteen per cent., and as we seldom make more than twenty per cent. on our goods, there is only a net profit of four per cent. at the utmost; only this will finish by

representing millions when we can operate on large quantities of goods incessantly renewed. You follow me, don't you? nothing can be clearer."

The baron again shook his head doubtfully. He who had entertained the boldest schemes and whose daring at the time of the introduction of gas-lighting was still spoken of, remained in the present instance uneasy and obstinate.

"I quite understand," said he; "you sell cheap in order to sell a quantity, and you sell a quantity in order to sell cheap. But you must sell, and I repeat my former question: Whom will you sell to? How do you hope to keep up such a colossal sale?"

A loud exclamation, coming from the drawing-room, interrupted Mouret just as he began to reply. It was Madame Guibal declaring that she would have preferred the flounces of old Alençon simply round the upper skirt of the dress.

"But, my dear," said Madame de Boves, "the upper skirt was covered with it as well. I never saw anything richer."

"Ah, that's a good idea," resumed Madame Desforges, "I've got several yards of Alençon somewhere; I must look them up for a trimming."

Then the voices fell again, sinking into a murmur. Prices were quoted, a feverish desire to buy and bargain stirred all the ladies; they were purchasing lace by the mile.

"Why?" declared Mouret, when he could at last speak, "one can sell what one likes when one knows how to sell! Therein lies our triumph."

And then with his southern enthusiasm, he pictured the new business at work in warm, glowing phrases which brought everything vividly before the eyes. First came the wonderful power resulting from the assemblage of goods, all accumulated on one point and sustaining and facilitating the sale of one another. There was never any stand-still, the article of the season was always on hand; and from counter to counter the customer found herself caught and subjugated, at one buying the material for a gown; at another cotton and trimming, elsewhere a mantle, in fact everything necessary to complete her costume; while in addition there were all the unforeseen purchases, chases, a surrender to a longing for the useless and the pretty. Next he began to sing the praises of the plain figure system. The great revolution in the business sprang from this fortunate inspiration. If the old-fashioned small shops were dying out it was because they could not struggle against the low prices which the tickets guaranteed. Competition now went on under the very eyes of the public; a look in the windows enabled people to contrast the prices of different establishments; and each shop in turn was lowering its rates, contenting itself with the smallest possible profit. There could be no deceit, no long prepared stroke of fortune by selling an article at double its value; there were simply current operations, a regular percentage levied on all goods, and success depended solely on the skilful working of the sales which became the larger from the very circumstance that they were carried on openly and honestly. Was it not altogether an astonishing development? And it was already revolutionizing the markets and transforming Paris, for it was made of woman's flesh and blood.

"I have the women, I don't care a hang for the rest!" exclaimed Mouret, with a brutal frankness born of his passion.

At this cry Baron Hartmann appeared somewhat moved. His smile lost its touch of irony and he glanced at the young man, gradually won over by the confidence he displayed and feeling a growing friendship for him.

"Hush!" he murmured, paternally, "they will hear you."

But the ladies were now all speaking at once, so excited that they did not even listen to each other. Madame de Boves was finishing the description of an evening-dress; a mauve silk tunic, draped and caught up by bows of lace; the bodice cut very low, with similar bows of lace on the shoulders.

"You'll see," said she. "I am having a bodice made like it, with some satin – "

"For my part," interrupted Madame Bourdelais, "I was bent on buying some velvet. Oh! such a bargain!"

Then suddenly Madame Marty asked: "How much did the silk cost?"

And off they started again, all together. Madame Guibal, Henriette, and Blanche were measuring, cutting out, and making up. It was a pillage of material, a ransacking of all the shops, an appetite for luxury seeking satisfaction in toilettes envied and dreamed of – with such happiness at finding themselves in an atmosphere of finery, that they buried themselves in it, as in warm air necessary to their existence.

Mouret had glanced towards the larger drawing-room, and in a few phrases, whispered in the baron's ear, as if he were confiding to him one of those amorous secrets which men sometimes venture to reveal among themselves, he finished explaining the mechanism of modern commerce. And, above all that he had already spoken of, dominating everything else, appeared the exploitation of woman to which everything conduced, the capital incessantly renewed, the system of assembling goods together, the attraction of cheapness and the tranquillizing effect of the marking in plain figures. It was for woman that all the establishments were struggling in wild competition; it was woman whom they were continually catching in the snares of their bargains, after bewildering her with their displays. They had awakened new desires in her flesh; they constituted an immense temptation, before which she fatally succumbed, yielding at first to reasonable purchases of articles needed in the household, then tempted by her coquetry, and finally subjugated and devoured. By increasing their business tenfold and popularizing luxury, they – the drapers – became a terrible instrument of prodigality, ravaging households, and preparing mad freaks of fashion which proved ever more and more costly. And if woman reigned in their shops like a queen, cajoled, flattered and overwhelmed with attentions, she was one on whom her subjects traffic, and who pays for each fresh caprice, with a drop of her blood. From beneath the very gracefulness of his gallantry, Mouret thus allowed the baron to divine the brutality of a Jew who sells woman by the pound weight. He raised a temple to her, caused her to be steeped in incense by a legion of shopmen, prepared the ritual of a new cultus, thinking of nothing but woman and ever seeking to imagine more powerful fascinations. But, behind her back, when he had emptied her purse and shattered her nerves, he remained full of the secret scorn of a man to whom a woman has been foolish enough to yield.

"Once have the women on your side," he whispered to the baron, laughing boldly, "and you could sell the very world."

Now the baron understood. A few sentences had sufficed, he guessed the rest, and such a gallant exploitation inflamed him, stirring up the memories of his past life of pleasure. His eyes twinkled in a knowing way, and he ended by looking with an air of admiration at the inventor of this machine for devouring the female sex. It was really clever. And then he made precisely the same remark as Bourdoncle, a remark suggested to him by his long experience: "They'll make you suffer for it, by and by, you know," said he.

But Mouret shrugged his shoulders with an air of overwhelming disdain. They all belonged to him, they were his property, and he belonged to none of them. After deriving his fortune and his pleasures from them he intended to throw them all over for those who might still find their account in them. It was the rational, cold disdain of a Southerner and a speculator.

"Well! my dear baron," he asked in conclusion, "will you join me? Does this affair appear possible to you?"

Albeit half conquered, the baron did not wish to enter into any engagement yet. A doubt remained beneath the charm which was gradually operating on him; and he was going to reply in an evasive manner, when a pressing call from the ladies spared him the trouble. Amidst light bursts of laughter voices were repeating "Monsieur Mouret! Monsieur Mouret!"

And as the latter, annoyed at being interrupted, pretended not to hear, Madame de Boves, who had risen a moment previously, came as far as the door of the little drawing-room.

"You are wanted, Monsieur Mouret. It isn't very gallant of you to bury yourself in a corner to talk over business."

Thereupon he decided to join the ladies, with an apparent good grace, a well-feigned air of rapture which quite astonished the baron. Both of them rose and passed into the other room.

"But I am quite at your service, ladies," said Mouret on entering, a smile on his lips.

He was greeted with an acclamation of triumph and was obliged to step forward; the ladies making room for him in their midst. The sun had just set behind the trees in the gardens, the daylight was departing, delicate shadows were gradually invading the spacious apartment. It was the emotional hour of twilight, that quiet voluptuous moment which reigns in Parisian flats between the dying brightness of the street and the lighting of the lamps in the kitchen. Monsieur de Boves and Vallagnosc, still standing before a window, cast shadows upon the carpet: whilst, motionless in the last gleam of light which came in by the other window, Monsieur Marty, who had quietly entered, shewed his poverty-stricken silhouette, his worn-out, well-brushed frock coat, and his pale face wan from constant teaching and the more haggard as what he had heard of the ladies' conversation had quite upset him.

"Is your sale still fixed for next Monday?" Madame Marty was just asking.

"Certainly, madame," replied Mouret, in a flute-like voice, an actor's voice, which he assumed when speaking to women.

Henriette thereupon intervened. "We are all going, you know. They say you are preparing wonders."

"Oh! wonders!" he murmured, with an air of modest fatuity. "I simply try to deserve your patronage."

But they pressed him with questions: Madame Bourdelais, Madame Guibal, even Blanche wanted to know something.

"Come, give us some particulars," repeated Madame de Boves, persistently. "You are making us die of curiosity."

And they were surrounding him, when Henriette observed that he had not even taken a cup of tea. At this they were plunged into desolation and four of them set about serving him, stipulating however that he must answer them afterwards. Henriette poured the tea out, Madame Marty held the cup, whilst Madame de Boves and Madame Bourdelais contended for the honour of sweetening it. Then, when he had declined to sit down, and began to drink his tea slowly, standing up in the midst of them, they all drew nearer, imprisoning him in the circle of their skirts; and with their heads raised and their eyes sparkling, they smiled upon him.

"And what about silk, your Paris Delight which all the papers are talking of?" resumed Madame Marty, impatiently.

"Oh!" he replied, "it's an extraordinary article, large-grained faille, supple and strong. You'll see it, ladies, and you'll see it nowhere else, for we have bought the exclusive right to it."

"Really! a fine silk at five francs sixty centimes!" said Madame Bourdelais, enthusiastic. "One can hardly believe it."

Ever since the advertisements and puffs had appeared, this silk had occupied a considerable place in their daily life. They talked of it, promising themselves some of it, all agog with desire and doubt. And, beneath the inquisitive chatter with which they overwhelmed the young man, one could divine their different temperaments as purchasers. Madame Marty, carried away by her rage for spending money, bought everything at The Ladies' Paradise without selecting, just as things chanced to be placed in the windows or on the counters. Madame Guibal on the other hand walked about the shop for hours without ever buying anything, happy and satisfied in simply feasting her eyes; Madame de Boves, short of money and always tortured by some immoderate desire, nourished a feeling of rancour against the goods she could not carry away with her; Madame Bourdelais, with the sharp eyes of a careful and practical housewife, made straight for the bargains, availing herself of the big establishments with such skill that she saved a lot of money; and lastly, Henriette, having very elegant tastes, only purchased certain articles there, such as gloves, hosiery, and her coarser linen.

"We have other stuffs of astonishing cheapness and richness," continued Mouret, in his musical voice. "For instance, I recommend you our Golden Grain, a taffeta of incomparable brilliancy. In the fancy silks there are some charming lines, designs specially chosen from among thousands by our buyer; and in velvets you will find an exceedingly rich collection of shades. I warn you, however, that cloth will be greatly worn this year; you'll see our *matelassés* and our cheviots."

They had ceased to interrupt him, and drew yet closer, their lips parted by vague smiles, their faces eagerly out-stretched as if their whole beings were springing towards the tempter. Their eyes grew dim, and slight quivers ran through them but he meantime retained his calm, conquering air, amidst the intoxicating perfumes which their hair exhaled; and between each sentence he continued to sip a little of his tea, the aroma of which softened those sharper odours. At sight of such a power of fascination, so well controlled, strong enough to play with woman without being overcome by the intoxication which she diffuses, Baron Hartmann, who had not ceased to look at Mouret, felt his admiration increasing.

"So cloth will be worn?" resumed Madame Marty, whose rugged face sparkled with coquettish passion. "I must have a look at it."

Madame Bourdelais, who kept a cool look-out, in her turn remarked: "Your remnant sales take place on Thursdays, don't they? I shall wait. I have all my little ones to clothe." And turning her delicate blonde head towards the mistress of the house, she asked: "Sauveur is still your dressmaker, I suppose?"

"Yes," replied Henriette, "Sauveur is very dear, but she is the only person in Paris who knows how to make a dress-body. Besides, Monsieur Mouret may say what he likes but she has the prettiest designs, designs that are not seen anywhere else. I can't bear to see the same dresses as mine on every woman's back."

At first Mouret slightly smiled. Then he intimated that Madame Sauveur bought her material at his shop; no doubt she went to the manufacturers direct for certain designs of which she acquired the sole right of sale: but for black silks, for instance, she watched for The Paradise bargains, laying in a considerable stock, which she disposed of at double and treble the price she gave. "Thus I am quite sure that her buyers will snap up our Paris Delight. Why should she go to the manufacturers and pay dearer for this silk than she would at my place? On my word of honour, we shall sell it at a loss."

This was a decisive blow for the ladies. The idea of getting goods below cost price awoke in them all the natural greed of woman, whose enjoyment in purchasing is doubled when she thinks that she is robbing the tradesman. He knew the sex to be incapable of resisting anything cheap.

"But we sell everything for nothing!" he exclaimed gaily, taking up Madame Desforges's fan, which lay behind him on the table. "For instance, here's this fan. How much do you say it cost."

"The Chantilly cost twenty-five francs, and the mounting two hundred," said Henriette.

"Well, the Chantilly isn't dear. However, we have the same at eighteen francs; as for the mount, my dear madame, it's a shameful robbery. I should not dare to sell one like it for more than ninety francs."

"Just what I said!" exclaimed Madame Bourdelais.

"Ninety francs!" murmured Madame de Boves, "one must be very poor indeed to go without one at that price."

She had taken up the fan, and was again examining it with her daughter Blanche; and, over her large regular face and in her big, sleepy eyes, spread an expression of suppressed and despairing longing which she could not satisfy. The fan once more went the round of the ladies, amidst various remarks and exclamations. Monsieur de Boves and Vallagnosc, meantime, had left the window, and whilst the former returned to his place behind Madame Guibal, whose charms he again began to admire, with his correct and superior air, the young man leant over Blanche, endeavouring to think of some agreeable remark.

"Don't you think it rather gloomy, mademoiselle, that white mount and the black lace?"

"Oh," she replied, gravely, not a blush colouring her inflated cheeks, "I saw one made of mother-of-pearl and white feathers. Something truly virginal!"

Then Monsieur de Boves, who had doubtless observed the distressful glances with which his wife was following the fan, at last added his word to the conversation. "Those flimsy things soon break," said he.

"Of course they do!" declared Madame Guibal, with a pout, affecting an air of indifference. "I'm tired of having mine mended."

For several minutes, Madame Marty, very much excited by the conversation, had been feverishly turning her red leather bag about on her lap, for she had not yet been able to show her purchases. She was burning with a sort of sensual desire to display them; and, suddenly forgetting her husband's presence, she opened the bag and took out of it a few yards of narrow lace wound on a piece of cardboard.

"This is the Valenciennes for my daughter," said she. "It's an inch and a half wide. Isn't it delicious? One franc ninety centimes the metre."

The lace passed from hand to hand. The ladies were astonished. Mouret assured them that he sold these little trimmings at cost price. However, Madame Marty had closed the bag, as if to conceal certain things she must not show. But after the success obtained by the Valenciennes she was unable to resist the temptation of taking out a handkerchief.

"There was this handkerchief as well. Real Brussels, my dear. Oh! a bargain! Twenty francs!"

And after that the bag became inexhaustible. She blushed with pleasure, at each fresh article she took out. There was a Spanish blonde-lace cravat, thirty francs: she hadn't wanted it, but the shopman had sworn it was the last one in stock, and that in future the price would be raised. Next came a Chantilly veil: rather dear, fifty francs; if she didn't wear it she could make it do for her daughter.

"Really, lace is so pretty!" she repeated with her nervous laugh. "Once I'm inside I could buy everything."

"And this?" asked Madame de Boves, taking up and examining some guipure.

"That," replied she, "is for an insertion. There are twenty-six yards – a franc the yard. Just fancy!"

"But," asked Madame Bourdelais, in surprise, "What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm sure I don't know. But it was such a funny pattern!"

At that moment however, she chanced to raise her eyes and perceived her terrified husband in front of her. He had turned paler than ever, his whole person expressive of the patient, resigned anguish of a powerless man, witnessing the reckless expenditure of his dearly earned salary. Every fresh bit of lace to him meant disaster; bitter days of teaching, long journeys to pupils through the mud, the whole constant effort of his life resulting in secret misery, the hell of a necessitous household. And she, perceiving the increasing wildness of his look, wanted to catch up the veil, cravat and handkerchief and put them out of sight, moving her feverish hands about and repeating with forced laughter: "You'll get me a scolding from my husband. I assure you, my dear, I've been very reasonable; for there was a large lace flounce at five hundred francs, oh! a marvel!"

"Why didn't you buy it?" asked Madame Guibal, calmly. "Monsieur Marty is the most gallant of men."

The poor professor was obliged to bow and say that his wife was quite free to buy what she liked. But at thought of the danger to which that large flounce had exposed him, an icy shiver sped down his back; and as Mouret was just at that moment affirming that the new shops increased the comfort of middle-class households, he glared at him with a terrible expression, the flash of hatred of a timid man who would like to throttle the destroyer but dares not.

But the ladies had still retained possession of the lace. They were intoxicating themselves with their prolonged contemplation of it. The several pieces were unrolled and then passed from one to the other, drawing them all still closer together, linking them, as it were, with delicate meshes. On

their laps there was a continual caress of this wondrously delicate tissue amidst which their guilty fingers fondly lingered. They still kept Mouret a close prisoner and overwhelmed him with fresh questions. As the daylight continued to decline, he was now and again obliged to bend his head, grazing their hair with his beard, as he examined a mesh, or indicated a design. Nevertheless in this soft voluptuousness of twilight, in this warm feminine atmosphere, Mouret still remained the master whatever the rapture he affected. He seemed to be a woman himself, they felt penetrated, overcome by the delicate sense of their secret passions which he possessed, and surrendered themselves to him quite captivated; whilst he, certain that he had them at his mercy, appeared like the despotic monarch of finery, enthroned above them all.

"Oh, Monsieur Mouret! Monsieur Mouret!" they stammered in low, rapturous voices, amidst the increasing gloom of the drawing-room.

The last pale gleams of the heavens were dying away on the brass-work of the furniture. The laces alone retained a snowy reflection against the dark dresses of the ladies, who in a confused group around the young man had a vague appearance of kneeling, worshipping women. A final glow still shone on one side of the silver teapot, a gleam like that of a night-light, burning in an alcove balmy with the perfume of tea. But suddenly the servant entered with two lamps, and the charm was destroyed. The drawing-room awoke, light and cheerful once more. Madame Marty replaced her lace in her little bag and Madame de Boves ate another sponge cake, whilst Henriette who had risen began talking in a low tone to the baron, near one of the windows.

"He's a charming fellow," said the baron.

"Isn't he?" she exclaimed, with the involuntary impulse of a woman in love.

He smiled, and looked at her with paternal indulgence. This was the first time he had seen her so completely conquered; and, too high-minded to suffer from it, he experienced nothing but compassion at seeing her in the hands of this handsome fellow, seemingly so tender and yet so cold-hearted. He thought he ought to warn her, and so in a joking way he muttered: "Take care, my dear, or he'll eat you all up."

A flash of jealousy darted from Henriette's fine eyes. Doubtless she understood that Mouret had simply made use of her to get at the baron; but she vowed that she would render him mad with passion, he whose hurried style of love-making was instinct with the facile charm of a song thrown to the four winds of heaven. "Oh," said she, affecting to joke in her turn, "the lamb always finishes by eating up the wolf."

Thereupon the baron, greatly amused, encouraged her with a nod. Could she be the woman who was to avenge all the others?

When Mouret, after reminding Vallagnosc that he wanted to show him his machine at work, came up to take his leave, the baron retained him near the window opposite the gardens, now steeped in darkness. He was at last yielding to the young man's power of fascination; confidence had come to him on seeing him amidst those ladies. Both conversed for a moment in a low tone, and then the banker exclaimed: "Well, I'll look into the affair. It's settled if your Monday's sale proves as important as you expect."

They shook hands, and Mouret, delighted, took his leave, for he never enjoyed his dinner unless before sitting down at table he had been to glance at the day's receipts at The Ladies' Paradise.

CHAPTER IV

On the following Monday, the 10th of October, a bright sun of victory pierced through the grey clouds which had darkened Paris during the previous week. There had even been a drizzle throughout the previous night, a sort of watery mist whose moisture had dirtied the streets; but in the early morning, thanks to the sharp breezes driving the clouds away, the pavement had become drier; and now the blue sky displayed a limpid, spring-like gaiety.

Thus, already at eight o'clock, The Ladies' Paradise blazed forth beneath the clear sun-rays in all the glory of its great sale of winter novelties. Flags were flying at the door, pieces of woollens were flapping about in the fresh morning air, animating the Place Gaillon with the bustle of a country fair; whilst along both streets the windows developed symphonious displays whose brilliant tones were yet heightened by the clearness of the glass. It was like a debauch of colour, a street pleasure bursting forth, a wealth of purchasable articles publicly displayed, on which everybody could feast their eyes.

But at this early hour very few people entered, a few customers pressed for time, housewives of the neighbourhood, women desirous of avoiding the afternoon crush. Behind the stuffs which decorated the shop, one could divine that it was empty, under arms and waiting for customers, with its waxed floors and its counters overflowing with goods.

The busy morning crowd barely glanced at the windows, as it passed without slackening its steps. In the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin and on the Place Gaillon, where the vehicles were to take their stand, there were at nine o'clock only two cabs. The inhabitants of the district, and especially the small traders, stirred up by such a show of streamers and decorations, alone formed little groups in the doorways and at the street corners, gazing at the Paradise and venting bitter remarks. What most filled them with indignation was the sight of one of the four delivery vans just introduced by Mouret, which was standing in the Rue de la Michodière, in front of the delivery office. These vans were green, picked out with yellow and red, their brilliantly varnished panels gleaming with gold and purple in the sunlight. This particular one with its brand-new medley of colours, and the name of the establishment painted on either side, whilst up above appeared an announcement of the day's sale, finished by going off at the fast trot of a splendid horse, after being filled with parcels left over from the previous night; and Baudu, who was standing on the threshold of The Old Elbeuf, watched it rolling off towards the boulevard, where it disappeared to spread amid a starry radiance the hated name of The Ladies' Paradise all over Paris.

Meantime, a few cabs were arriving and forming in line. Each time a customer entered, there was a movement amongst the shop messengers, who dressed in livery consisting of a light green coat and trousers, and red and yellow striped waistcoat were drawn up under the lofty doorway. Jouve, the inspector and retired captain, was also there, in a frock-coat and white tie, wearing his decoration as a mark of respectability and probity, and receiving the ladies with a gravely polite air. He bent over them to point out the departments, and then they vanished into the vestibule, which had been transformed into an oriental saloon.

From the very threshold it was a marvel, a surprise, which enchanted all of them. It was to Mouret that this idea had occurred. Before all others, he had been the first to purchase at very advantageous rates in the Levant a collection of old and new carpets, articles then but seldom seen and only sold at curiosity shops, at high prices; and he intended to flood the market with them, selling them at but little more than cost price, and simply utilizing them as a splendid decoration which would attract the best class of art customers to his establishment. From the centre of the Place Gaillon you could see this oriental saloon, composed solely of carpets and door-curtains hung up under his direction. The ceiling was covered with a quantity of Smyrna carpets, whose intricate designs stood out boldly on red grounds. Then from each side there hung Syrian and Karamanian door-curtains, streaked with green, yellow, and vermilion; Diarbekir hangings of a commoner type, rough to the

touch, like shepherds' cloaks; and carpets which could also be used as door-curtains – long Ispahan, Teheran, and Kermancha rugs, broader ones from Schoumaka and Madras, a strange florescence of peonies and palms, fantastic blooms in a garden of dreamland. On the floor too were more carpets, a heap of greasy fleeces: in the centre was an Agra carpet, an extraordinary article with a white ground and a broad, delicate blue border, through which ran a violet-coloured pattern of exquisite design. And then, here, there and everywhere came a display of marvels; Mecca carpets with velvety reflections, prayer carpets from Daghestan with the symbolic points, Kurdistan carpets covered with blooming flowers; and finally, in a corner a pile of cheap goods, Gherdes, Koula, and Kirchur rugs from fifteen francs a-piece.

This seeming and sumptuous tent, fit for a caliph, was furnished with divans and arm-chairs, made of camel sacks, some ornamented with variegated lozenges, others with primitive roses. Turkey, Arabia, Persia and the Indies were all there. They had emptied the palaces, looted the mosques and bazaars. A tawny gold prevailed in the weft of the old carpets, whose faded tints retained still a sombre warmth, like that of an extinguished furnace, a beautiful mellow hue suggestive of the old masters. Visions of the East floated before you at sight of all the luxury of this barbarous art, amid the strong odour which the old wool retained of the land of vermin and of the rising sun.

In the morning at eight o'clock, when Denise, who was to enter on her duties that very Monday, crossed the oriental saloon, she stopped short, lost in astonishment, unable to recognise the shop entrance, and quite overcome by this harem-like decoration planted at the door. A messenger having shown her to the top of the house, and handed her over to Madame Cabin, who cleaned and looked after the rooms, this person installed her in No. 7, where her box had already been placed. It was a narrow cell, opening on the roof by a skylight, and furnished with a small bed, a walnut-wood wardrobe, a toilet-table, and two chairs. Twenty similar rooms ran along the yellow-painted convent-like corridor; and, of the thirty-five young ladies in the house, the twenty who had no relations in Paris slept there, whilst the remaining fifteen lodged outside, a few with borrowed aunts and cousins. Denise at once took off her shabby woollen dress, worn thin by brushing and mended at the sleeves, the only gown that she had brought from Valognes; and then donned the uniform of her department, a black silk dress which had been altered for her and which she found ready on the bed. This dress was still too large, too wide across the shoulders; but she was so flurried by her emotion that she paid no heed to petty questions of coquetry. She had never worn silk before; and when rigged out in this unwonted finery she went downstairs again and looked at her shining skirt, she felt quite ashamed of the noisy rustling of the silk.

Down below, as she was entering her department, a quarrel burst out and she heard Clara exclaim in a shrill voice:

"Madame, I came in before her."

"It isn't true," replied Marguerite. "She pushed past me at the door, but I had already one foot in the room."

The matter in dispute was their inscription on the list of turns, which regulated the sales. The girls wrote their names on a slate in the order of their arrival, and whenever one of them had served a customer, she re-inscribed her name beneath the others. Madame Aurélie finished by deciding in Marguerite's favour.

"Always some injustice here!" muttered Clara, furiously.

However Denise's entry reconciled these young ladies. They looked at her, then smiled at each other. How could a person truss herself up in that way! The young girl went and awkwardly wrote her name on the list, where she found herself last. Meanwhile, Madame Aurélie examined her with an anxious pout and could not help saying:

"My dear, two like you could get into your dress; you must have it taken in. Besides, you don't know how to dress yourself. Come here and let me arrange you a bit."

Then she placed her before one of the tall glasses alternating with the massive doors of the cupboards containing the dresses. The spacious apartment, surrounded by these mirrors and carved oak wood-work, its floor covered with red carpet of a large pattern, resembled the commonplace drawing-room of an hotel, traversed by a continual stream of travellers. The young ladies dressed in regulation silk, and promenading their charms about, without ever sitting down on the dozen chairs reserved for the customers, completed the resemblance. Between two button-holes of their dress bodies they all wore a long pencil, with its point in the air; and protruding from their pockets, you could see the white leaves of a book of debit-notes. Several ventured to wear jewellery – rings, brooches and chains; but their great coquetry, the point of display in which, given the forced uniformity of their dress they all struggled for pre-eminence, was their hair, hair ever overflowing, its volume augmented by plaits and chignons when their own did not suffice, and combed, curled, and decked in every possible fashion.

"Pull the waist down in front," said Madame Aurélie to Denise. "There, you now have no hump on your back. And your hair, how can you massacre it like that? It would be superb, if you only took a little trouble."

This was, in fact, Denise's only beauty. Of a beautiful flaxen hue, it fell to her ankles: and when she did it up, it was so troublesome that she simply rolled it in a knot, keeping it together with the strong teeth of a bone comb. Clara, greatly annoyed by the sight of this abundant hair, affected to laugh at it, so strange did it look, twisted up anyhow with savage grace. She made a sign to a saleswoman in the under-linen department, a girl with a broad face and agreeable manner. The two departments, which adjoined one another, were ever at variance, still the young ladies sometimes joined together in laughing at other people.

"Mademoiselle Cugnot, just look at that mane," said Clara, whom Marguerite was nudging, also feigning to be on the point of bursting into laughter.

But Mademoiselle Cugnot was not in the humour for joking. She had been looking at Denise for a moment and remembered what she had suffered herself during the first few months after her arrival in the establishment.

"Well, what?" said she. "Everybody hasn't got such a mane as that!"

And thereupon she returned to her place, leaving the two others crestfallen. Denise, who had heard everything, followed her with a glance of gratitude, while Madame Aurélie gave her a book of debit-notes with her name on it, remarking:

"To-morrow you must get yourself up better; and now, try and pick up the ways of the house, and wait your turn for selling. To-day's work will be very hard; we shall be able to judge of your capabilities."

Despite her prophecies, the department still remained deserted; very few customers came to buy mantles at this early hour. The young ladies husbanded their strength, prudently preparing for the exertion of the afternoon. Denise, intimidated by the thought that they were watching her, sharpened her pencil, for the sake of something to do; then, imitating the others, she stuck it in her bosom, between two buttonholes, and summoned up all her courage, for it was necessary that she should conquer a position. On the previous evening she had been told that she was accepted as a probationer, that is to say, without any fixed salary; she would simply have the commission and allowance on what she sold. However, she fully hoped to earn twelve hundred francs a year even in this way, knowing that the good saleswomen earned as much as two thousand, when they liked to take the trouble. Her expenses were regulated; a hundred francs a month would enable her to pay Pépé's board and lodging, assist Jean, who did not earn a sou, and procure some clothes and linen for herself. Only, in order to attain to this large amount, she would have to prove industrious and pushing, taking no notice of the ill-will displayed by those around her but fighting for her share and even snatching it from her comrades if necessary. While she was thus working herself up for the struggle, a tall young man, passing the department, smiled at her; and when she saw that it was Deloche, who had been engaged

in the lace department on the previous day, she returned his smile, happy at the friendship which thus presented itself and accepting his recognition as a good omen.

At half-past nine a bell rang for the first luncheon. Then a fresh peal announced the second; and still no customers appeared. The second-hand, Madame Frédéric, who, with the sulky harshness of widowhood, delighted in prophesying disasters, declared curtly that the day was lost, that they would not see a soul, that they might close the cupboards and go away; predictions which clouded the flat face of Marguerite who was eager to make money, whilst Clara, with her runaway-horse appearance, already began dreaming of an excursion to the woods of Verrières should the house really fail. As for Madame Aurélie, she remained silent and serious, promenading her Cæsarian countenance about the empty department, like a general who has responsibility whether in victory or in defeat.

About eleven o'clock a few ladies appeared; and Denise's turn for serving had arrived when the approach of a customer was signalled.

"The fat old girl from the country – you know whom I mean," murmured Marguerite to Clara.

It was a woman of forty-five, who occasionally journeyed to Paris from the depths of some out-of-the-way department where she saved her money up for months together. Then, hardly out of the train, she made straight for The Ladies' Paradise, and spent all her savings. She very rarely ordered anything by letter for she liked to see and handle the goods, and would profit by her journeys to lay in a stock of everything, even down to needles, which she said were extremely dear in her small town. The whole staff knew her, was aware that her name was Boutarel, and that she lived at Albi, but troubled no further about her, neither about her position nor her mode of life.

"How do you do, madame?" graciously asked Madame Aurélie, who had come forward. "And what can we show you? You shall be attended to at once." Then, turning round she added: "Now, young ladies!"

Denise approached; but Clara had sprung forward. As a rule, she was very careless and idle, not caring about the money she earned in the shop, as she could get plenty outside. However, the idea of doing the newcomer out of a good customer spurred her on.

"I beg your pardon, it's my turn," said Denise, indignantly.

Madame Aurélie set her aside with a severe look, exclaiming: "There are no turns. I alone am mistress here. Wait till you know, before serving our regular customers."

The young girl retired, and as tears were coming to her eyes, and she wished to conceal her sensibility, she turned her back and stood up before the window, pretending to gaze into the street. Were they going to prevent her selling? Would they all conspire to deprive her of the important sales, like that? Fear for the future came over her, she felt herself crushed between so many contending interests. Yielding to the bitterness of her abandonment, her forehead against the cold glass, she gazed at The Old Elbeuf opposite, thinking that she ought to have implored her uncle to keep her. Perhaps he himself regretted his decision, for he had seemed to her greatly affected the previous evening. And now she was quite alone in this vast house, where no one cared for her, where she found herself hurtled, lost. Pépé and Jean, who had never left her side, were living with strangers; she was parted from everything, and the big tears which she strove to keep back made the street dance before her in a sort of fog. All this time, the hum of voices continued behind her.

"This one makes me look a fright," Madame Boutarel was saying.

"You really make a mistake, madame," said Clara; "the shoulders fit perfectly – but perhaps you would prefer a pelisse to a mantle?"

Just then Denise started. A hand was laid on her arm. Madame Aurélie addressed her severely:

"Well, you're doing nothing now, eh? only looking at the people passing? Things can't go on like this, you know!"

"But since I'm not allowed to sell, madame?"

"Oh, there's other work for you, mademoiselle! Begin at the beginning. Do the folding-up."

In order to please the few customers who had called, they had already been obliged to ransack the cupboards, and on the two long oaken tables, to the right and left, lay heaps of mantles, pelisses, and capes, garments of all sizes and materials. Without replying, Denise began to sort and fold them carefully and arrange them again in the cupboards. This was the lowest work, generally performed by beginners. She ceased to protest, however, knowing that they required the strictest obedience, and prepared to wait until the first-hand should be good enough to let her sell, as she seemed at first to have the intention of doing. She was still folding, when Mouret appeared upon the scene. To her his arrival came as a shock, she blushed without knowing why, and again seized by a strange fear, thinking that he was going to speak to her. But he did not even see her; he no longer remembered the little girl whom a momentary impression had induced him to support.

"Madame Aurélie," he called curtly.

He was rather pale, but his eyes were clear and resolute. In making the tour of the departments he had found them empty, and the possibility of defeat had suddenly presented itself before him amidst all his obstinate faith in fortune. True, it was only eleven o'clock; he knew by experience that as a rule the crowd never arrived much before the afternoon. But certain symptoms troubled him. On the inaugural days of previous sales a general movement had manifested itself even in the morning; besides, he did not see any of those bareheaded women, customers living in the neighbourhood, who usually dropped into his shop as into a neighbour's. Despite his habitual resolution, like all great captains, he felt at the moment of giving battle a superstitious weakness growing on him. Things would not succeed, he was lost, and he could not have explained why; yet he thought he could read his defeat on the faces of the passing ladies. Just at that moment, Madame Boutarel, she who always bought something, turned away, explaining, "No, you have nothing that pleases me. I'll see, I'll decide later on."

Mouret watched her depart. Then, as Madame Aurélie ran up at his call, he took her aside, and they exchanged a few rapid words. She waved her hands despairingly and was evidently admitting that things were bad. For a moment they remained face to face, overcome by one of those doubts which generals conceal from their soldiers. But at last, in his brave way, he exclaimed aloud: "If you want any assistance, take a girl from the workroom. She'll be a little help to you."

Then he continued his inspection, in despair. He had avoided Bourdoncle all the morning, for his assistant's anxious doubts irritated him. However, on leaving the under-linen department, where business was still worse than in the mantle gallery, he suddenly came upon him, and was obliged to listen to the expression of his fears. Still he did not hesitate to send him to the devil, with the brutality which he did not spare even his principal employees when things were looking bad.

"Do keep quiet!" said he, "Everything is going on all right. I shall end by pitching the tremblers out of doors."

Then, alone and erect, he took his stand on the landing overlooking the central hall, whence he commanded a view of almost the entire shop; around him were the first-floor departments; beneath him those of the ground-floor. Up above, the emptiness seemed heart-breaking; in the lace department an old woman was having every box searched and yet buying nothing; whilst three good-for-nothing minxes in the under-linen department were slowly choosing some collars at eighteen sous a-piece. Down below, in the covered galleries, in the rays of light which come in from the street, he noticed that customers were gradually becoming more numerous. There was a slow, intermittent procession wending its way past the counters; in the mercery and the haberdashery departments some women of the commoner class were pushing about, still there was hardly a soul among the linens or the woollens. The shop messengers, in their green swallow-tails with bright brass buttons, were waiting for customers with dangling hands. Now and again there passed an inspector with a ceremonious air, very stiff in his white choker. And Mouret was especially grieved by the mortal silence which reigned in the hall, where the light fell from a ground-glass roofing through which the sunrays filtered in a white diffuse hovering dust, whilst down below the silk department seemed to be asleep, in a quivering,

church-like quietude. A shopman's footstep, a few whispered words, the rustling of a passing skirt, were the only faint sounds; and these the warm air of the heating apparatus almost stifled. However, carriages were beginning to arrive, the sudden pulling up of the horses was heard, followed by the banging of the doors of the vehicles. Outside, a distant tumult was commencing to rise, inquisitive folks were jostling in front of the windows, cabs were taking up their positions on the Place Gaillon, there were all the appearances of a crowd's approach. Still on seeing the idle cashiers leaning back on their chairs behind their wickets, and observing that the parcel-tables with their boxes of string and reams of blue packing-paper remained unlittered, Mouret, though indignant with himself for being afraid, thought he could feel his immense machine ceasing to work and turning cold beneath him.

"I say, Favier," murmured Hutin, "look at the governor up there. He doesn't seem to be enjoying himself."

"Oh! this is a rotten shop!" replied Favier. "Just fancy, I've not sold a thing yet."

Both of them, on the look-out for customers, from time to time whispered such short remarks as these, without looking at each other. The other salesmen of the department were occupied in piling up pieces of the Paris Delight under Robineau's orders; whilst Bouthemont, in full consultation with a thin young woman, seemed to be taking an important order. Around them, on light and elegant shelves, were heaps of plain silks, folded in long pieces of creamy paper, and looking like pamphlets of an unusual size; whilst, encumbering the counters, were fancy silks, moires, satins and velvets, resembling beds of cut flowers, quite a harvest of delicate and precious tissues. This was the most elegant of all the departments, a veritable drawing-room, where the goods, so light and airy, seemed to be simply so much luxurious furnishing.

"I must have a hundred francs by Sunday," said Hutin. "If I don't make an average of twelve francs a day, I'm lost. I reckoned on this sale."

"By Jove! a hundred francs; that's rather stiff," retorted Favier. "I only want fifty or sixty. You must go in for swell jollifications, then?"

"Oh, no, my dear fellow. It's a stupid affair; I made a bet and lost. So I have to stand a dinner for five persons, two fellows and three girls. Hang me! I'll let the first that passes in for twenty yards of Paris Delight!"

They continued talking for a few minutes, relating what they had done on the previous day, and what they intended to do on the ensuing Sunday. Favier followed the races while Hutin did a little boating, and patronized music-hall singers. But they were both possessed by the same eager desire for money, fighting for it throughout the week, and spending it all on Sunday. It was their sole thought in the shop, a thought which urged them into an incessant and pitiless struggle. And to think that cunning Bouthemont had just managed to get hold of Madame Sauveur's messenger, the skinny woman with whom he was talking! That meant good business, three or four dozen pieces, at least, for the celebrated dressmaker always gave large orders. A moment before too, Robineau had taken it into his head to trick Favier out of a customer.

"Oh! as for that fellow, we must settle his hash," said Hutin, who took advantage of the slightest incidents to stir up the salesmen against the man whose place he coveted. "Ought the first and second hands to sell? 'Pon my word! my dear fellow, if ever I become second you'll see how well I'll act with the others."

Thereupon, with his plump, amiable little Norman person he began energetically playing the good-natured man. Favier could not help casting a side glance at him; however he retained his phlegmatic air and contented himself with replying:

"Yes, I know. For my part I should be only too pleased." Then, as a lady came up, he added in a lower tone: "Look out! Here's one for you."

It was a lady with a blotchy face, wearing a yellow bonnet, and a red dress. Hutin immediately divined in her a woman who would buy nothing; so in all haste he stooped behind the counter,

pretending to be doing up his boot-lace: and, thus concealed, he murmured: "No fear, let some one else take her. I don't want to lose my turn!"

However, Robineau was calling him: "Whose turn, gentlemen? Monsieur Hutin's? Where's Monsieur Hutin?"

And as that gentleman still gave no reply, it was the next salesman who served the lady with the blotches. Hutin was quite right, she simply wanted some patterns with the prices; and she detained the salesman more than ten minutes, overwhelming him with questions. However, Robineau had seen Hutin get up from behind the counter; and so when another customer arrived, he interfered with a stern air, and stopped the young man just as he was rushing forward.

"Your turn has passed. I called you, and as you were there behind – "

"But I didn't hear you, sir."

"That'll do! write your name at the bottom. Now, Monsieur Favier, it's your turn."

Favier, greatly amused at heart by this adventure, gave his friend a glance, as if to excuse himself. Hutin, with pale lips, had turned his head away. What particularly enraged him was that he knew the customer very well, an adorable blonde who often came to their department, and whom the salesmen called amongst themselves "the pretty lady," knowing nothing of her except her looks, not even her name. She always made a good many purchases, instructed a messenger to take them to her carriage, and then immediately disappeared. Tall, elegant, dressed with exquisite taste, she appeared to be very rich, and to belong to the best society.

"Well! and your hussy?" asked Hutin of Favier, when the latter returned from the pay-desk, whither he had accompanied the lady.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.