

The Vicar Of Tours

by
Honoré de Balzac

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By

Honoré de Balzac



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The Vicar of Tours

Honore de Balzac

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The Vicar of Tours

by Honore de Balzac

Translated by Katharine Prescott Wormeley

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THE VICAR OF TOURS

BY

HONORE DE BALZAC

Translated By
Katharine Prescott Wormeley

DEDICATION

To David, Sculptor:

The permanence of the work on which I inscribe your name-- twice made illustrious in this century--is very problematical; whereas you have graven mine in bronze which survives nations --if only in their coins. The day may come when numismatists, discovering amid the ashes of Paris existences perpetuated by you, will wonder at the number of heads crowned in your atelier and endeavour to find in them new dynasties.

To you, this divine privilege; to me, gratitude.

De Balzac.

THE VICAR OF TOURS

I

Early in the autumn of 1826 the Abbe Birotteau, the principal personage of this history, was overtaken by a shower of rain as he returned home from a friend's house, where he had been passing the evening. He therefore crossed, as quickly as his corpulence would allow, the deserted little square called "The Cloister," which lies directly behind the chancel of the cathedral of Saint-Gatien at Tours.

The Abbe Birotteau, a short little man, apoplectic in constitution and about sixty years old, had already gone through several attacks of gout. Now, among the petty miseries of human life the one for which the worthy priest felt the deepest aversion was the sudden sprinkling of his shoes, adorned with silver buckles, and the wetting of their soles. Notwithstanding the woollen socks in which at all seasons he enveloped his feet with the extreme care that ecclesiastics take of themselves, he was apt at such times to get them a little damp, and the next day gout was sure to give him certain infallible proofs of constancy. Nevertheless, as the pavement of the Cloister was likely to be dry, and as the abbe had won three francs ten sous in his rubber with Madame de Listomere, he bore the rain resignedly from the middle of the place de l'Archeveche, where it began to come down in earnest. Besides, he was fondling his chimera,--a desire already twelve years old, the desire of a priest, a desire formed anew every evening and now, apparently, very near accomplishment; in short, he had wrapped himself so completely in the fur cape of a canon that he did not feel the inclemency of the weather. During the evening several of the company who habitually gathered at Madame de Listomere's had almost guaranteed to him his nomination to the office of canon (then vacant in the metropolitan Chapter of Saint-Gatien), assuring him that no one deserved such promotion as he, whose rights, long overlooked, were

indisputable.

If he had lost the rubber, if he had heard that his rival, the Abbe Poirel, was named canon, the worthy man would have thought the rain extremely chilling; he might even have thought ill of life. But it so chanced that he was in one of those rare moments when happy inward sensations make a man oblivious of discomfort. In hastening his steps he obeyed a more mechanical impulse, and truth (so essential in a history of manners and morals) compels us to say that he was thinking of neither rain nor gout.

In former days there was in the Cloister, on the side towards the Grand'Rue, a cluster of houses forming a Close and belonging to the cathedral, where several of the dignitaries of the Chapter lived. After the confiscation of ecclesiastical property the town had turned the passage through this close into a narrow street, called the Rue de la Psalette, by which pedestrians passed from the Cloister to the Grand'Rue. The name of this street, proves clearly enough that the precentor and his pupils and those connected with the choir formerly lived there. The other side, the left side, of the street is occupied by a single house, the walls of which are overshadowed by the buttresses of Saint-Gatien, which have their base in the narrow little garden of the house, leaving it doubtful whether the cathedral was built before or after this venerable dwelling. An archaeologist examining the arabesques, the shape of the windows, the arch of the door, the whole exterior of the house, now mellow with age, would see at once that it had always been a part of the magnificent edifice with which it is blended.

An antiquary (had there been one at Tours,--one of the least literary towns in all France) would even discover, where the narrow street enters the Cloister, several vestiges of an old arcade, which formerly made a portico to these ecclesiastical dwellings, and was, no doubt, harmonious in style with the general character of the architecture.

The house of which we speak, standing on the north side of the cathedral, was always in the shadow thrown by that vast edifice, on which time had cast its dingy mantle, marked its furrows, and shed its chill humidity, its lichen, mosses, and rank herbs. The darkened dwelling was wrapped in silence, broken only by the bells, by the chanting of the offices heard through the windows of the church, by the call of the jackdaws nesting in the belfries. The region is a desert of stones, a solitude with a character of its own, an arid spot, which could only be inhabited by beings who had either attained to absolute nullity, or were gifted with some abnormal strength of soul. The house in question had always been occupied by abbess, and it belonged to an old maid named Mademoiselle Gamard. Though the property had been bought from the national domain under the Reign of Terror by the father of Mademoiselle Gamard, no one objected under the Restoration to the old maid's retaining it, because she took priests to board and was very devout; it may be that religious persons gave her credit for the intention of leaving the property to the Chapter.

The Abbe Birotteau was making his way to this house, where he had lived for the last two years. His apartment had been (as was now the canonry) an object of envy and his "hoc erat in votis" for a dozen years. To be Mademoiselle Gamard's boarder and to become a canon were

the two great desires of his life; in fact they do present accurately the ambition of a priest, who, considering himself on the highroad to eternity, can wish for nothing in this world but good lodging, good food, clean garments, shoes with silver buckles, a sufficiency of things for the needs of the animal, and a canonry to satisfy self-love, that inexpressible sentiment which follows us, they say, into the presence of God,—for there are grades among the saints. But the covetous desire for the apartment which the Abbe Birotteau was now inhabiting (a very harmless desire in the eyes of worldly people) had been to the abbe nothing less than a passion, a passion full of obstacles, and, like more guilty passions, full of hopes, pleasures, and remorse.

The interior arrangements of the house did not allow Mademoiselle Gamard to take more than two lodgers. Now, for about twelve years before the day when Birotteau went to live with her she had undertaken to keep in health and contentment two priests; namely, Monsieur l'Abbe Troubert and Monsieur l'Abbe Chapeloud. The Abbe Troubert still lived. The Abbe Chapeloud was dead; and Birotteau had stepped into his place.

The late Abbe Chapeloud, in life a canon of Saint-Gatien, had been an intimate friend of the Abbe Birotteau. Every time that the latter paid a visit to the canon he had constantly admired the apartment, the furniture and the library. Out of this admiration grew the desire to possess these beautiful things. It had been impossible for the Abbe Birotteau to stifle this desire; though it often made him suffer terribly when he reflected that the death of his best friend could alone satisfy his secret covetousness, which increased as time went on. The Abbe Chapeloud and his friend Birotteau were not rich. Both were sons of peasants; and their slender savings had been spent in the mere costs of living during the disastrous years of the Revolution. When Napoleon restored the Catholic worship the Abbe Chapeloud was appointed canon of the cathedral and Birotteau was made vicar of it. Chapeloud then went to board with Mademoiselle Gamard. When Birotteau first came to visit his friend, he thought the arrangement of the rooms excellent, but he noticed nothing more. The outset of this concupiscence of chattels was very like that of a true passion, which often begins, in a young man, with cold admiration for a woman whom he ends in loving forever.

The apartment, reached by a stone staircase, was on the side of the house that faced south. The Abbe Troubert occupied the ground-floor, and Mademoiselle Gamard the first floor of the main building, looking on the street. When Chapeloud took possession of his rooms they were bare of furniture, and the ceilings were blackened with smoke. The stone mantelpieces, which were very badly cut, had never been painted. At first, the only furniture the poor canon could put in was a bed, a table, a few chairs, and the books he possessed. The apartment was like a beautiful woman in rags. But two or three years later, an old lady having left the Abbe Chapeloud two thousand francs, he spent that sum on the purchase of an oak bookcase, the relic of a chateau pulled down by the Bande Noire, the carving of which deserved the admiration of all artists. The abbe made the purchase less because it was very cheap than because the dimensions of the bookcase exactly fitted the space it was to fill in his gallery. His savings enabled him to renovate the whole gallery, which up to this time had been neglected and shabby. The floor was carefully waxed, the ceiling whitened, the

wood-work painted to resemble the grain and knots of oak. A long table in ebony and two cabinets by Boulle completed the decoration, and gave to this gallery a certain air that was full of character. In the course of two years the liberality of devout persons, and legacies, though small ones, from pious penitents, filled the shelves of the bookcase, till then half empty. Moreover, Chapeloud's uncle, an old Oratorian, had left him his collection in folio of the Fathers of the Church, and several other important works that were precious to a priest.

Birotteau, more and more surprised by the successive improvements of the gallery, once so bare, came by degrees to a condition of involuntary envy. He wished he could possess that apartment, so thoroughly in keeping with the gravity of ecclesiastical life. The passion increased from day to day. Working, sometimes for days together, in this retreat, the vicar could appreciate the silence and the peace that reigned there. During the following year the Abbe Chapeloud turned a small room into an oratory, which his pious friends took pleasure in beautifying. Still later, another lady gave the canon a set of furniture for his bedroom, the covering of which she had embroidered under the eyes of the worthy man without his ever suspecting its destination. The bedroom then had the same effect upon the vicar that the gallery had long had; it dazzled him. Lastly, about three years before the Abbe Chapeloud's death, he completed the comfort of his apartment by decorating the salon. Though the furniture was plainly covered in red Utrecht velvet, it fascinated Birotteau. From the day when the canon's friend first laid eyes on the red damask curtains, the mahogany furniture, the Aubusson carpet which adorned the vast room, then lately painted, his envy of Chapeloud's apartment became a monomania hidden within his breast. To live there, to sleep in that bed with the silk curtains where the canon slept, to have all Chapeloud's comforts about him, would be, Birotteau felt, complete happiness; he saw nothing beyond it. All the envy, all the ambition which the things of this world give birth to in the hearts of other men concentrated themselves for Birotteau in the deep and secret longing he felt for an apartment like that which the Abbe Chapeloud had created for himself. When his friend fell ill he went to him out of true affection; but all the same, when he first heard of his illness, and when he sat by his bed to keep him company, there arose in the depths of his consciousness, in spite of himself, a crowd of thoughts the simple formula of which was always, "If Chapeloud dies I can have this apartment." And yet--Birotteau having an excellent heart, contracted ideas, and a limited mind--he did not go so far as to think of means by which to make his friend bequeath to him the library and the furniture.

The Abbe Chapeloud, an amiable, indulgent egoist, fathomed his friend's desires--not a difficult thing to do--and forgave them; which may seem less easy to a priest; but it must be remembered that the vicar, whose friendship was faithful, did not fail to take a daily walk with his friend along their usual path in the Mail de Tours, never once depriving him of an instant of the time devoted for over twenty years to that exercise. Birotteau, who regarded his secret wishes as crimes, would have been capable, out of contrition, of the utmost devotion to his friend. The latter paid his debt of gratitude for a friendship so ingenuously sincere by saying, a few days before his death, as the vicar sat by him reading the "Quotidienne" aloud:

"This time you will certainly get the apartment. I feel it is all over with me now."

Accordingly, it was found that the Abbe Chapeloud had left his library and all his furniture to his friend Birotteau. The possession of these things, so keenly desired, and the prospect of being taken to board by Mademoiselle Gamard, certainly did allay the grief which Birotteau felt at the death of his friend the canon. He might not have been willing to resuscitate him; but he mourned him. For several days he was like Gargantus, who, when his wife died in giving birth to Pantagruel, did not know whether to rejoice at the birth of a son or grieve at having buried his good Babette, and therefore cheated himself by rejoicing at the death of his wife, and deploring the advent of Pantagruel.

The Abbe Birotteau spent the first days of his mourning in verifying the books in HIS library, in making use of HIS furniture, in examining the whole of his inheritance, saying in a tone which, unfortunately, was not noted at the time, "Poor Chapeloud!" His joy and his grief so completely absorbed him that he felt no pain when he found that the office of canon, in which the late Chapeloud had hoped his friend Birotteau might succeed him, was given to another. Mademoiselle Gamard having cheerfully agreed to take the vicar to board, the latter was thenceforth a participator in all those felicities of material comfort of which the deceased canon had been wont to boast.

Incalculable they were! According to the Abbe Chapeloud none of the priests who inhabited the city of Tours, not even the archbishop, had ever been the object of such minute and delicate attentions as those bestowed by Mademoiselle Gamard on her two lodgers. The first words the canon said to his friend when they met for their walk on the Mail referred usually to the succulent dinner he had just eaten; and it was a very rare thing if during the walks of each week he did not say at least fourteen times, "That excellent spinster certainly has a vocation for serving ecclesiastics."

"Just think," the canon would say to Birotteau, "that for twelve consecutive years nothing has ever been amiss,—linen in perfect order, bands, albs, surplices; I find everything in its place, always in sufficient quantity, and smelling of orris-root. My furniture is rubbed and kept so bright that I don't know when I have seen any dust—did you ever see a speck of it in my rooms? Then the firewood is so well selected. The least little things are excellent. In fact, Mademoiselle Gamard keeps an incessant watch over my wants. I can't remember having rung twice for anything—no matter what—in ten years. That's what I call living! I never have to look for a single thing, not even my slippers. Always a good fire, always a good dinner. Once the bellows annoyed me, the nozzle was choked up; but I only mentioned it once, and the next day Mademoiselle gave me a very pretty pair, also those nice tongs you see me mend the fire with."

For all answer Birotteau would say, "Smelling of orris-root!" That "smelling of orris-root" always affected him. The canon's remarks revealed ideal joys to the poor vicar, whose bands and albs were the plague of his life, for he was totally devoid of method and often forgot to order his dinner. Therefore, if he saw Mademoiselle Gamard at Saint-Gatien while saying mass or taking round the plate, he never

failed to give her a kindly and benevolent look,--such a look as Saint Teresa might have cast to heaven.

Though the comforts which all creatures desire, and for which he had so often longed, thus fell to his share, the Abbe Birotteau, like the rest of the world, found it difficult, even for a priest, to live without something to hanker for. Consequently, for the last eighteen months he had replaced his two satisfied passions by an ardent longing for a canonry. The title of Canon had become to him very much what a peerage is to a plebeian minister. The prospect of an appointment, hopes of which had just been held out to him at Madame de Listomere's, so completely turned his head that he did not observe until he reached his own door that he had left his umbrella behind him. Perhaps, even then, if the rain were not falling in torrents he might not have missed it, so absorbed was he in the pleasure of going over and over in his mind what had been said to him on the subject of his promotion by the company at Madame de Listomere's,--an old lady with whom he spent every Wednesday evening.

The vicar rang loudly, as if to let the servant know she was not to keep him waiting. Then he stood close to the door to avoid, if he could, getting showered; but the drip from the roof fell precisely on the toes of his shoes, and the wind blew gusts of rain into his face that were much like a shower-bath. Having calculated the time necessary for the woman to leave the kitchen and pull the string of the outer door, he rang again, this time in a manner that resulted in a very significant peal of the bell.

"They can't be out," he said to himself, not hearing any movement on the premises.

Again he rang, producing a sound that echoed sharply through the house and was taken up and repeated by all the echoes of the cathedral, so that no one could avoid waking up at the remonstrating racket. Accordingly, in a few moments, he heard, not without some pleasure in his wrath, the wooden shoes of the servant-woman clacking along the paved path which led to the outer door. But even then the discomforts of the gouty old gentleman were not so quickly over as he hoped. Instead of pulling the string, Marianne was obliged to turn the lock of the door with its heavy key, and pull back all the bolts.

"Why did you let me ring three times in such weather?" said the vicar.

"But, monsieur, don't you see the door was locked? We have all been in bed ever so long; it struck a quarter to eleven some time ago. Mademoiselle must have thought you were in."

"You saw me go out, yourself. Besides, Mademoiselle knows very well I always go to Madame de Listomere's on Wednesday evening."

"I only did as Mademoiselle told me, monsieur."

These words struck the vicar a blow, which he felt the more because his late revery had made him completely happy. He said nothing and followed Marianne towards the kitchen to get his candlestick, which he supposed had been left there as usual. But instead of entering the kitchen Marianne went on to his own apartments, and there the vicar

beheld his candlestick on a table close to the door of the red salon, in a sort of antechamber formed by the landing of the staircase, which the late canon had inclosed with a glass partition. Mute with amazement, he entered his bedroom hastily, found no fire, and called to Marianne, who had not had time to get downstairs.

"You have not lighted the fire!" he said.

"Beg pardon, Monsieur l'abbe, I did," she said; "it must have gone out."

Birotteau looked again at the hearth, and felt convinced that the fire had been out since morning.

"I must dry my feet," he said. "Make the fire."

Marianne obeyed with the haste of a person who wants to get back to her night's rest. While looking about him for his slippers, which were not in the middle of his bedside carpet as usual, the abbe took mental notes of the state of Marianne's dress, which convinced him that she had not got out of bed to open the door as she said she had. He then recollected that for the last two weeks he had been deprived of various little attentions which for eighteen months had made life sweet to him. Now, as the nature of narrow minds induces them to study trifles, Birotteau plunged suddenly into deep meditation on these four circumstances, imperceptible in their meaning to others, but to him indicative of four catastrophes. The total loss of his happiness was evidently foreshadowed in the neglect to place his slippers, in Marianne's falsehood about the fire, in the unusual removal of his candlestick to the table of the antechamber, and in the evident intention to keep him waiting in the rain.

When the fire was burning on the hearth, and the lamp was lighted, and Marianne had departed without saying, as usual, "Does Monsieur want anything more?" the Abbe Birotteau let himself fall gently into the wide and handsome easy-chair of his late friend; but there was something mournful in the movement with which he dropped upon it. The good soul was crushed by a presentiment of coming calamity. His eyes roved successively to the handsome tall clock, the bureau, curtains, chairs, carpets, to the stately bed, the basin of holy-water, the crucifix, to a Virgin by Valentin, a Christ by Lebrun,--in short, to all the accessories of this cherished room, while his face expressed the anguish of the tenderest farewell that a lover ever took of his first mistress, or an old man of his lately planted trees. The vicar had just perceived, somewhat late it is true, the signs of a dumb persecution instituted against him for the last three months by Mademoiselle Gamard, whose evil intentions would doubtless have been fathomed much sooner by a more intelligent man. Old maids have a special talent for accentuating the words and actions which their dislikes suggest to them. They scratch like cats. They not only wound but they take pleasure in wounding, and in making their victim see that he is wounded. A man of the world would never have allowed himself to be scratched twice; the good abbe, on the contrary, had taken several blows from those sharp claws before he could be brought to believe in any evil intention.

But when he did perceive it, he set to work, with the inquisitorial

sagacity which priests acquire by directing consciences and burrowing into the nothings of the confessional, to establish, as though it were a matter of religious controversy, the following proposition:

"Admitting that Mademoiselle Gamard did not remember it was Madame de Listomere's evening, and that Marianne did think I was home, and did really forget to make my fire, it is impossible, inasmuch as I myself took down my candlestick this morning, that Mademoiselle Gamard, seeing it in her salon, could have supposed I had gone to bed. Ergo, Mademoiselle Gamard intended that I should stand out in the rain, and, by carrying my candlestick upstairs, she meant to make me understand it. What does it all mean?" he said aloud, roused by the gravity of these circumstances, and rising as he spoke to take off his damp clothes, get into his dressing-gown, and do up his head for the night. Then he returned from the bed to the fireplace, gesticulating, and launching forth in various tones the following sentences, all of which ended in a high falsetto key, like notes of interjection:

"What the deuce have I done to her? Why is she angry with me? Marianne did NOT forget my fire! Mademoiselle told her not to light it! I must be a child if I can't see, from the tone and manner she has been taking to me, that I've done something to displease her. Nothing like it ever happened to Chapeloud! I can't live in the midst of such torments as--At my age--"

He went to bed hoping that the morrow might enlighten him on the causes of the dislike which threatened to destroy forever the happiness he had now enjoyed two years after wishing for it so long. Alas! the secret reasons for the inimical feelings Mademoiselle Gamard bore to the luckless abbe were fated to remain eternally unknown to him,--not that they were difficult to fathom, but simply because he lacked the good faith and candor by which great souls and scoundrels look within and judge themselves. A man of genius or a trickster says to himself, "I did wrong." Self-interest and native talent are the only infallible and lucid guides. Now the Abbe Birotteau, whose goodness amounted to stupidity, whose knowledge was only, as it were, plastered on him by dint of study, who had no experience whatever of the world and its ways, who lived between the mass and the confessional, chiefly occupied in dealing the most trivial matters of conscience in his capacity of confessor to all the schools in town and to a few noble souls who rightly appreciated him,--the Abbe Birotteau must be regarded as a great child, to whom most of the practices of social life were utterly unknown. And yet, the natural selfishness of all human beings, reinforced by the selfishness peculiar to the priesthood and that of the narrow life of the provinces had insensibly, and unknown to himself, developed within him. If any one had felt enough interest in the good man to probe his spirit and prove to him that in the numerous petty details of his life and in the minute duties of his daily existence he was essentially lacking in the self-sacrifice he professed, he would have punished and mortified himself in good faith. But those whom we offend by such unconscious selfishness pay little heed to our real innocence; what they want is vengeance, and they take it. Thus it happened that Birotteau, weak brother that he was, was made to undergo the decrees of that great distributive Justice which goes about compelling the world to execute its judgments,--called by ninnies "the misfortunes of life."

There was this difference between the late Chapeloud and the vicar,--

one was a shrewd and clever egoist, the other a simple-minded and clumsy one. When the canon went to board with Mademoiselle Gamard he knew exactly how to judge of his landlady's character. The confessional had taught him to understand the bitterness that the sense of being kept outside the social pale puts into the heart of an old maid; he therefore calculated his own treatment of Mademoiselle Gamard very wisely. She was then about thirty-eight years old, and still retained a few pretensions, which, in well-behaved persons of her condition, change, rather later, into strong personal self-esteem. The canon saw plainly that to live comfortably with his landlady he must pay her invariably the same attentions and be more infallible than the pope himself. To compass this result, he allowed no points of contact between himself and her except those that politeness demanded, and those which necessarily exist between two persons living under the same roof. Thus, though he and the Abbe Troubert took their regular three meals a day, he avoided the family breakfast by inducing Mademoiselle Gamard to send his coffee to his own room. He also avoided the annoyance of supper by taking tea in the houses of friends with whom he spent his evenings. In this way he seldom saw his landlady except at dinner; but he always came down to that meal a few minutes in advance of the hour. During this visit of courtesy, as it may be called, he talked to her, for the twelve years he had lived under her roof, on nearly the same topics, receiving from her the same answers. How she had slept, her breakfast, the trivial domestic events, her looks, her health, the weather, the time the church services had lasted, the incidents of the mass, the health of such or such a priest,--these were the subjects of their daily conversation. During dinner he invariably paid her certain indirect compliments; the fish had an excellent flavor; the seasoning of a sauce was delicious; Mademoiselle Gamard's capacities and virtues as mistress of a household were great. He was sure of flattering the old maid's vanity by praising the skill with which she made or prepared her preserves and pickles and pates and other gastronomical inventions. To cap all, the wily canon never left his landlady's yellow salon after dinner without remarking that there was no house in Tours where he could get such good coffee as that he had just imbibed.

Thanks to this thorough understanding of Mademoiselle Gamard's character, and to the science of existence which he had put in practice for the last twelve years, no matter of discussion on the internal arrangements of the household had ever come up between them. The Abbe Chapeloud had taken note of the spinster's angles, asperities, and crabbedness, and had so arranged his avoidance of her that he obtained without the least difficulty all the concessions that were necessary to the happiness and tranquility of his life. The result was that Mademoiselle Gamard frequently remarked to her friends and acquaintances that the Abbe Chapeloud was a very amiable man, extremely easy to live with, and a fine mind.

As to her other lodger, the Abbe Troubert, she said absolutely nothing about him. Completely involved in the round of her life, like a satellite in the orbit of a planet, Troubert was to her a sort of intermediary creature between the individuals of the human species and those of the canine species; he was classed in her heart next, but directly before, the place intended for friends but now occupied by a fat and wheezy pug which she tenderly loved. She ruled Troubert completely, and the intermingling of their interests was so obvious

that many persons of her social sphere believed that the Abbe Troubert had designs on the old maid's property, and was binding her to him unawares with infinite patience, and really directing her while he seemed to be obeying without ever letting her perceive in him the slightest wish on his part to govern her.

When the Abbe Chapeloud died, the old maid, who desired a lodger with quiet ways, naturally thought of the vicar. Before the canon's will was made known she had meditated offering his rooms to the Abbe Troubert, who was not very comfortable on the ground-floor. But when the Abbe Birotteau, on receiving his legacy, came to settle in writing the terms of his board she saw he was so in love with the apartment, for which he might now admit his long cherished desires, that she dared not propose the exchange, and accordingly sacrificed her sentiments of friendship to the demands of self-interest. But in order to console her beloved canon, Mademoiselle took up the large white Chateau-Renaud bricks that made the floors of his apartment and replaced them by wooden floors laid in "point de Hongrie." She also rebuilt a smoky chimney.

For twelve years the Abbe Birotteau had seen his friend Chapeloud in that house without ever giving a thought to the motive of the canon's extreme circumspection in his relations to Mademoiselle Gamard. When he came himself to live with that saintly woman he was in the condition of a lover on the point of being made happy. Even if he had not been by nature purblind of intellect, his eyes were too dazzled by his new happiness to allow him to judge of the landlady, or to reflect on the limits which he ought to impose on their daily intercourse. Mademoiselle Gamard, seen from afar and through the prism of those material felicities which the vicar dreamed of enjoying in her house, seemed to him a perfect being, a faultless Christian, essentially charitable, the woman of the Gospel, the wise virgin, adorned by all those humble and modest virtues which shed celestial fragrance upon life.

So, with the enthusiasm of one who attains an object long desired, with the candor of a child, and the blundering foolishness of an old man utterly without worldly experience, he fell into the life of Mademoiselle Gamard precisely as a fly is caught in a spider's web. The first day that he went to dine and sleep at the house he was detained in the salon after dinner, partly to make his landlady's acquaintance, but chiefly by that inexplicable embarrassment which often assails timid people and makes them fear to seem impolite by breaking off a conversation in order to take leave. Consequently he remained there the whole evening. Then a friend of his, a certain Mademoiselle Salomon de Villenoix, came to see him, and this gave Mademoiselle Gamard the happiness of forming a card-table; so that when the vicar went to bed he felt that he had passed a very agreeable evening. Knowing Mademoiselle Gamard and the Abbe Troubert but slightly, he saw only the superficial aspects of their characters; few persons bare their defects at once, they generally take on a becoming veneer.

The worthy abbe was thus led to suggest to himself the charming plan of devoting all his evenings to Mademoiselle Gamard, instead of spending them, as Chapeloud had done, elsewhere. The old maid had for years been possessed by a desire which grew stronger day by day. This

desire, often formed by old persons and even by pretty women, had become in Mademoiselle Gamard's soul as ardent a longing as that of Birotteau for Chapeloud's apartment; and it was strengthened by all those feelings of pride, egotism, envy, and vanity which pre-exist in the breasts of worldly people.

This history is of all time; it suffices to widen slightly the narrow circle in which these personages are about to act to find the coefficient reasons of events which take place in the very highest spheres of social life.

Mademoiselle Gamard spent her evenings by rotation in six or eight different houses. Whether it was that she disliked being obliged to go out to seek society, and considered that at her age she had a right to expect some return; or that her pride was wounded at receiving no company in her house; or that her self-love craved the compliments she saw her various hostesses receive,--certain it is that her whole ambition was to make her salon a centre towards which a given number of persons should nightly make their way with pleasure. One morning as she left Saint-Gatien, after Birotteau and his friend Mademoiselle Salomon had spent a few evenings with her and with the faithful and patient Troubert, she said to certain of her good friends whom she met at the church door, and whose slave she had hitherto considered herself, that those who wished to see her could certainly come once a week to her house, where she had friends enough to make a card-table; she could not leave the Abbe Birotteau; Mademoiselle Salomon had not missed a single evening that week; she was devoted to friends; and--et cetera, et cetera. Her speech was all the more humbly haughty and softly persuasive because Mademoiselle Salomon de Villenoix belonged to the most aristocratic society in Tours. For though Mademoiselle Salomon came to Mademoiselle Gamard's house solely out of friendship for the vicar, the old maid triumphed in receiving her, and saw that, thanks to Birotteau, she was on the point of succeeding in her great desire to form a circle as numerous and as agreeable as those of Madame de Listomere, Mademoiselle Merlin de la Blottiere, and other devout ladies who were in the habit of receiving the pious and ecclesiastical society of Tours.

But alas! the abbe Birotteau himself caused this cherished hope to miscarry. Now if those persons who in the course of their lives have attained to the enjoyment of a long desired happiness and have therefore comprehended the joy of the vicar when he stepped into Chapeloud's vacant place, they will also have gained some faint idea of Mademoiselle Gamard's distress at the overthrow of her favorite plan.

After accepting his happiness in the old maid's salon for six months with tolerable patience, Birotteau deserted the house of an evening, carrying with him Mademoiselle Salomon. In spite of her utmost efforts the ambitious Gamard had recruited barely six visitors, whose faithful attendance was more than problematical; and boston could not be played night after night unless at least four persons were present. The defection of her two principal guests obliged her therefore to make suitable apologies and return to her evening visiting among former friends; for old maids find their own company so distasteful that they prefer to seek the doubtful pleasures of society.

The cause of this desertion is plain enough. Although the vicar was one of those to whom heaven is hereafter to belong in virtue of the decree "Blessed are the poor in spirit," he could not, like some fools, endure the annoyance that other fools caused him. Persons without minds are like weeds that delight in good earth; they want to be amused by others, all the more because they are dull within. The incarnation of ennui to which they are victims, joined to the need they feel of getting a divorce from themselves, produces that passion for moving about, for being somewhere else than where they are, which distinguishes their species,--and also that of all beings devoid of sensitiveness, and those who have missed their destiny, or who suffer by their own fault.

Without really fathoming the vacuity and emptiness of Mademoiselle Gamard's mind, or stating to himself the pettiness of her ideas, the poor abbe perceived, unfortunately too late, the defects which she shared with all old maids, and those which were peculiar to herself. The bad points of others show out so strongly against the good that they usually strike our eyes before they wound us. This moral phenomenon might, at a pinch, be made to excuse the tendency we all have, more or less, to gossip. It is so natural, socially speaking, to laugh at the failings of others that we ought to forgive the ridicule our own absurdities excite, and be annoyed only by calumny. But in this instance the eyes of the good vicar never reached the optical range which enables men of the world to see and evade their neighbours' rough points. Before he could be brought to perceive the faults of his landlady he was forced to undergo the warning which Nature gives to all her creatures--pain.

Old maids who have never yielded in their habits of life or in their characters to other lives and other characters, as the fate of woman exacts, have, as a general thing, a mania for making others give way to them. In Mademoiselle Gamard this sentiment had degenerated into despotism, but a despotism that could only exercise itself on little things. For instance (among a hundred other examples), the basket of counters placed on the card-table for the Abbe Birotteau was to stand exactly where she placed it; and the abbe annoyed her terribly by moving it, which he did nearly every evening. How is this sensitiveness stupidly spent on nothings to be accounted for? what is the object of it? No one could have told in this case; Mademoiselle Gamard herself knew no reason for it. The vicar, though a sheep by nature, did not like, any more than other sheep, to feel the crook too often, especially when it bristled with spikes. Not seeking to explain to himself the patience of the Abbe Troubert, Birotteau simply withdrew from the happiness which Mademoiselle Gamard believed that she seasoned to his liking,--for she regarded happiness as a thing to be made, like her preserves. But the luckless abbe made the break in a clumsy way, the natural way of his own naive character, and it was not carried out without much nagging and sharp-shooting, which the Abbe Birotteau endeavored to bear as if he did not feel them.

By the end of the first year of his sojourn under Mademoiselle Gamard's roof the vicar had resumed his former habits; spending two evenings a week with Madame de Listomere, three with Mademoiselle Salomon, and the other two with Mademoiselle Merlin de la Blottiere. These ladies belonged to the aristocratic circles of Touraine society, to which Mademoiselle Gamard was not admitted. Therefore the

abbe's abandonment was the more insulting, because it made her feel her want of social value; all choice implies contempt for the thing rejected.

"Monsieur Birotteau does not find us agreeable enough," said the Abbe Troubert to Mademoiselle Gamard's friends when she was forced to tell them that her "evenings" must be given up. "He is a man of the world, and a good liver! He wants fashion, luxury, witty conversation, and the scandals of the town."

These words of course obliged Mademoiselle Gamard to defend herself at Birotteau's expense.

"He is not much a man of the world," she said. "If it had not been for the Abbe Chapeloud he would never have been received at Madame de Listomere's. Oh, what didn't I lose in losing the Abbe Chapeloud! Such an amiable man, and so easy to live with! In twelve whole years I never had the slightest difficulty or disagreement with him."

Presented thus, the innocent abbe was considered by this bourgeois society, which secretly hated the aristocratic society, as a man essentially exacting and hard to get along with. For a week Mademoiselle Gamard enjoyed the pleasure of being pitied by friends who, without really thinking one word of what they said, kept repeating to her: "How COULD he have turned against you?--so kind and gentle as you are!" or, "Console yourself, dear Mademoiselle Gamard, you are so well known that--" et cetera.

Nevertheless, these friends, enchanted to escape one evening a week in the Cloister, the darkest, dreariest, and most out of the way corner in Tours, blessed the poor vicar in their hearts.

Between persons who are perpetually in each other's company dislike or love increases daily; every moment brings reasons to love or hate each other more and more. The Abbe Birotteau soon became intolerable to Mademoiselle Gamard. Eighteen months after she had taken him to board, and at the moment when the worthy man was mistaking the silence of hatred for the peacefulness of content, and applauding himself for having, as he said, "managed matters so well with the old maid," he was really the object of an underhand persecution and a vengeance deliberately planned. The four marked circumstances of the locked door, the forgotten slippers, the lack of fire, and the removal of the candlestick, were the first signs that revealed to him a terrible enmity, the final consequences of which were destined not to strike him until the time came when they were irreparable.

As he went to bed the worthy vicar worked his brains--quite uselessly, for he was soon at the end of them--to explain to himself the extraordinarily discourteous conduct of Mademoiselle Gamard. The fact was that, having all along acted logically in obeying the natural laws of his own egotism, it was impossible that he should now perceive his own faults towards his landlady.

Though the great things of life are simple to understand and easy to express, the littlenesses require a vast number of details to explain them. The foregoing events, which may be called a sort of prologue to this bourgeois drama, in which we shall find passions as violent as

those excited by great interests, required this long introduction; and it would have been difficult for any faithful historian to shorten the account of these minute developments.

II

The next morning, on awaking, Birotteau thought so much of his prospective canonry that he forgot the four circumstances in which he had seen, the night before, such threatening prognostics of a future full of misery. The vicar was not a man to get up without a fire. He rang to let Marianne know that he was awake and that she must come to him; then he remained, as his habit was, absorbed in somnolent musings. The servant's custom was to make the fire and gently draw him from his half sleep by the murmured sound of her movements,--a sort of music which he loved. Twenty minutes passed and Marianne had not appeared. The vicar, now half a canon, was about to ring again, when he let go the bell-pull, hearing a man's step on the staircase. In a minute more the Abbe Troubert, after discreetly knocking at the door, obeyed Birotteau's invitation and entered the room. This visit, which the two abbe's usually paid each other once a month, was no surprise to the vicar. The canon at once exclaimed when he saw that Marianne had not made the fire of his quasi-colleague. He opened the window and called to her harshly, telling her to come at once to the abbe; then, turning round to his ecclesiastical brother, he said, "If Mademoiselle knew that you had no fire she would scold Marianne."

After this speech he inquired about Birotteau's health, and asked in a gentle voice if he had had any recent news that gave him hopes of his canonry. The vicar explained the steps he had taken, and told, naively, the names of the persons with whom Madam de Listomere was using her influence, quite unaware that Troubert had never forgiven that lady for not admitting him--the Abbe Troubert, twice proposed by the bishop as vicar-general!--to her house.

It would be impossible to find two figures which presented so many contrasts to each other as those of the two abbés. Troubert, tall and lean, was yellow and bilious, while the vicar was what we call, familiarly, plump. Birotteau's face, round and ruddy, proclaimed a kindly nature barren of ideas, while that of the Abbe Troubert, long and ploughed by many wrinkles, took on at times an expression of sarcasm, or else of contempt; but it was necessary to watch him very closely before those sentiments could be detected. The canon's habitual condition was perfect calmness, and his eyelids were usually lowered over his orange-colored eyes, which could, however, give clear and piercing glances when he liked. Reddish hair added to the gloomy effect of this countenance, which was always obscured by the veil which deep meditation drew across its features. Many persons at first sight thought him absorbed in high and earnest ambitions; but those who claimed to know him better denied that impression, insisting that he was only stupidly dull under Mademoiselle Gamard's despotism, or else worn out by too much fasting. He seldom spoke, and never laughed. When it did so happen that he felt agreeably moved, a feeble smile would flicker on his lips and lose itself in the wrinkles of his face.

Birotteau, on the other hand, was all expansion, all frankness; he loved good things and was amused by trifles with the simplicity of a

man who knew no spite or malice. The Abbe Troubert roused, at first sight, an involuntary feeling of fear, while the vicar's presence brought a kindly smile to the lips of all who looked at him. When the tall canon marched with solemn step through the naves and cloisters of Saint-Gatien, his head bowed, his eye stern, respect followed him; that bent face was in harmony with the yellowing arches of the cathedral; the folds of his cassock fell in monumental lines that were worthy of statuary. The good vicar, on the contrary, perambulated about with no gravity at all. He trotted and ambled and seemed at times to roll himself along. But with all this there was one point of resemblance between the two men. For, precisely as Troubert's ambitious air, which made him feared, had contributed probably to keep him down to the insignificant position of a mere canon, so the character and ways of Birotteau marked him out as perpetually the vicar of the cathedral and nothing higher.

Yet the Abbe Troubert, now fifty years of age, had entirely removed, partly by the circumspection of his conduct and the apparent lack of all ambitions, and partly by his saintly life, the fears which his suspected ability and his powerful presence had roused in the minds of his superiors. His health having seriously failed him during the last year, it seemed probable that he would soon be raised to the office of vicar-general of the archbishopric. His competitors themselves desired the appointment, so that their own plans might have time to mature during the few remaining days which a malady, now become chronic, might allow him. Far from offering the same hopes to rivals, Birotteau's triple chin showed to all who wanted his coveted canonry an evidence of the soundest health; even his gout seemed to them, in accordance with the proverb, an assurance of longevity.

The Abbe Chapeloud, a man of great good sense, whose amiability had made the leaders of the diocese and the members of the best society in Tours seek his company, had steadily opposed, though secretly and with much judgment, the elevation of the Abbe Troubert. He had even adroitly managed to prevent his access to the salons of the best society. Nevertheless, during Chapeloud's lifetime Troubert treated him invariably with great respect, and showed him on all occasions the utmost deference. This constant submission did not, however, change the opinion of the late canon, who said to Birotteau during the last walk they took together: "Distrust that lean stick of a Troubert,-- Sixtus the Fifth reduced to the limits of a bishopric!"

Such was the friend, the abiding guest of Mademoiselle Gamard, who now came, the morning after the old maid had, as it were, declared war against the poor vicar, to pay his brother a visit and show him marks of friendship.

"You must excuse Marianne," said the canon, as the woman entered. "I suppose she went first to my rooms. They are very damp, and I coughed all night. You are most healthily situated here," he added, looking up at the cornice.

"Yes; I am lodged like a canon," replied Birotteau.

"And I like a vicar," said the other, humbly.

"But you will soon be settled in the archbishop's palace," said the

kindly vicar, who wanted everybody to be happy.

"Yes, or in the cemetery, but God's will be done!" and Troubert raised his eyes to heaven resignedly. "I came," he said, "to ask you to lend me the 'Register of Bishops.' You are the only man in Tours I know who has a copy."

"Take it out of my library," replied Birotteau, reminded by the canon's words of the greatest happiness of his life.

The canon passed into the library and stayed there while the vicar dressed. Presently the breakfast bell rang, and the gouty vicar reflected that if it had not been for Troubert's visit he would have had no fire to dress by. "He's a kind man," thought he.

The two priests went downstairs together, each armed with a huge folio which they laid on one of the side tables in the dining-room.

"What's all that?" asked Mademoiselle Gamard, in a sharp voice, addressing Birotteau. "I hope you are not going to litter up my dining-room with your old books!"

"They are books I wanted," replied the Abbe Troubert. "Monsieur Birotteau has been kind enough to lend them to me."

"I might have guessed it," she said, with a contemptuous smile. "Monsieur Birotteau doesn't often read books of that size."

"How are you, mademoiselle?" said the vicar, in a mellifluous voice.

"Not very well," she replied, shortly. "You woke me up last night out of my first sleep, and I was wakeful for the rest of the night." Then, sitting down, she added, "Gentlemen, the milk is getting cold."

Stupefied at being so ill-naturedly received by his landlady, from whom he half expected an apology, and yet alarmed, like all timid people at the prospect of a discussion, especially if it relates to themselves, the poor vicar took his seat in silence. Then, observing in Mademoiselle Gamard's face the visible signs of ill-humour, he was goaded into a struggle between his reason, which told him that he ought not to submit to such discourtesy from a landlady, and his natural character, which prompted him to avoid a quarrel.

Torn by this inward misery, Birotteau fell to examining attentively the broad green lines painted on the oilcloth which, from custom immemorial, Mademoiselle Gamard left on the table at breakfast-time, without regard to the ragged edges or the various scars displayed on its surface. The priests sat opposite to each other in cane-seated arm-chairs on either side of the square table, the head of which was taken by the landlady, who seemed to dominate the whole from a high chair raised on casters, filled with cushions, and standing very near to the dining-room stove. This room and the salon were on the ground-floor beneath the salon and bedroom of the Abbe Birotteau.

When the vicar had received his cup of coffee, duly sugared, from Mademoiselle Gamard, he felt chilled to the bone at the grim silence in which he was forced to proceed with the usually gay function of

breakfast. He dared not look at Troubert's dried-up features, nor at the threatening visage of the old maid; and he therefore turned, to keep himself in countenance, to the plethoric pug which was lying on a cushion near the stove,--a position that victim of obesity seldom quitted, having a little plate of dainties always at his left side, and a bowl of fresh water at his right.

"Well, my pretty," said the vicar, "are you waiting for your coffee?"

The personage thus addressed, one of the most important in the household, though the least troublesome inasmuch as he had ceased to bark and left the talking to his mistress, turned his little eyes, sunk in rolls of fat, upon Birotteau. Then he closed them peevishly. To explain the misery of the poor vicar it should be said that being endowed by nature with an empty and sonorous loquacity, like the resounding of a football, he was in the habit of asserting, without any medical reason to back him, that speech favored digestion. Mademoiselle Gamard, who believed in this hygienic doctrine, had not as yet refrained, in spite of their coolness, from talking at meals; though, for the last few mornings, the vicar had been forced to strain his mind to find beguiling topics on which to loosen her tongue. If the narrow limits of this history permitted us to report even one of the conversations which often brought a bitter and sarcastic smile to the lips of the Abbe Troubert, it would offer a finished picture of the Boeotian life of the provinces. The singular revelations of the Abbe Birotteau and Mademoiselle Gamard relating to their personal opinions on politics, religion, and literature would delight observing minds. It would be highly entertaining to transcribe the reasons on which they mutually doubted the death of Napoleon in 1820, or the conjectures by which they mutually believed that the Dauphin was living,--rescued from the Temple in the hollow of a huge log of wood. Who could have helped laughing to hear them assert and prove, by reasons evidently their own, that the King of France alone imposed the taxes, that the Chambers were convoked to destroy the clergy, that thirteen hundred thousand persons had perished on the scaffold during the Revolution? They frequently discussed the press, without either of them having the faintest idea of what that modern engine really was. Monsieur Birotteau listened with acceptance to Mademoiselle Gamard when she told him that a man who ate an egg every morning would die in a year, and that facts proved it; that a roll of light bread eaten without drinking for several days together would cure sciatica; that all the workmen who assisted in pulling down the Abbey Saint-Martin had died in six months; that a certain prefect, under orders from Bonaparte, had done his best to damage the towers of Saint-Gatien,--with a hundred other absurd tales.

But on this occasion poor Birotteau felt he was tongue-tied, and he resigned himself to eat a meal without engaging in conversation. After a while, however, the thought crossed his mind that silence was dangerous for his digestion, and he boldly remarked, "This coffee is excellent."

That act of courage was completely wasted. Then, after looking at the scrap of sky visible above the garden between the two buttresses of Saint-Gatien, the vicar again summoned nerve to say, "It will be finer weather to-day than it was yesterday."

At that remark Mademoiselle Gamard cast her most gracious look on the Abbe Troubert, and immediately turned her eyes with terrible severity on Birotteau, who fortunately by that time was looking on his plate.

No creature of the feminine gender was ever more capable of presenting to the mind the elegaic nature of an old maid than Mademoiselle Sophie Gamard. In order to describe a being whose character gives a momentous interest to the petty events of the present drama and to the anterior lives of the actors in it, it may be useful to give a summary of the ideas which find expression in the being of an Old Maid,--remembering always that the habits of life form the soul, and the soul forms the physical presence.

Though all things in society as well as in the universe are said to have a purpose, there do exist here below certain beings whose purpose and utility seem inexplicable. Moral philosophy and political economy both condemn the individual who consumes without producing; who fills a place on the earth but does not shed upon it either good or evil,--for evil is sometimes good the meaning of which is not at once made manifest. It is seldom that old maids of their own motion enter the ranks of these unproductive beings. Now, if the consciousness of work done gives to the workers a sense of satisfaction which helps them to support life, the certainty of being a useless burden must, one would think, produce a contrary effect, and fill the minds of such fruitless beings with the same contempt for themselves which they inspire in others. This harsh social reprobation is one of the causes which contribute to fill the souls of old maids with the distress that appears in their faces. Prejudice, in which there is truth, does cast, throughout the world but especially in France, a great stigma on the woman with whom no man has been willing to share the blessings or endure the ills of life. Now, there comes to all unmarried women a period when the world, be it right or wrong, condemns them on the fact of this contempt, this rejection. If they are ugly, the goodness of their characters ought to have compensated for their natural imperfections; if, on the contrary, they are handsome, that fact argues that their misfortune has some serious cause. It is impossible to say which of the two classes is most deserving of rejection. If, on the other hand, their celibacy is deliberate, if it proceeds from a desire for independence, neither men nor mothers will forgive their disloyalty to womanly devotion, evidenced in their refusal to feed those passions which render their sex so affecting. To renounce the pangs of womanhood is to abjure its poetry and cease to merit the consolations to which mothers have inalienable rights.

Moreover, the generous sentiments, the exquisite qualities of a woman will not develop unless by constant exercise. By remaining unmarried, a creature of the female sex becomes void of meaning; selfish and cold, she creates repulsion. This implacable judgment of the world is unfortunately too just to leave old maids in ignorance of its causes. Such ideas shoot up in their hearts as naturally as the effects of their saddened lives appear upon their features. Consequently they wither, because the constant expression of happiness which blooms on the faces of other women and gives so soft a grace to their movements has never existed for them. They grow sharp and peevish because all human beings who miss their vocation are unhappy; they suffer, and suffering gives birth to the bitterness of ill-will. In fact, before an old maid blames herself for her isolation she blames others, and

there is but one step between reproach and the desire for revenge.

But more than this, the ill grace and want of charm noticeable in these women are the necessary result of their lives. Never having felt a desire to please, elegance and the refinements of good taste are foreign to them. They see only themselves in themselves. This instinct brings them, unconsciously, to choose the things that are most convenient to themselves, at the sacrifice of those which might be more agreeable to others. Without rendering account to their own minds of the difference between themselves and other women, they end by feeling that difference and suffering under it. Jealousy is an indelible sentiment in the female breast. An old maid's soul is jealous and yet void; for she knows but one side--the miserable side--of the only passion men will allow (because it flatters them) to women. Thus thwarted in all their hopes, forced to deny themselves the natural development of their natures, old maids endure an inward torment to which they never grow accustomed. It is hard at any age, above all for a woman, to see a feeling of repulsion on the faces of others, when her true destiny is to move all hearts about her to emotions of grace and love. One result of this inward trouble is that an old maid's glance is always oblique, less from modesty than from fear and shame. Such beings never forgive society for their false position because they never forgive themselves for it.

Now it is impossible for a woman who is perpetually at war with herself and living in contradiction to her true life, to leave others in peace or refrain from envying their happiness. The whole range of these sad truths could be read in the dulled gray eyes of Mademoiselle Gamard; the dark circles that surrounded those eyes told of the inward conflicts of her solitary life. All the wrinkles on her face were in straight lines. The structure of her forehead and cheeks was rigid and prominent. She allowed, with apparent indifference, certain scattered hairs, once brown, to grow upon her chin. Her thin lips scarcely covered teeth that were too long, though still quite white. Her complexion was dark, and her hair, originally black, had turned gray from frightful headaches--a misfortune which obliged her to wear a false front. Not knowing how to put it on so as to conceal the junction between the real and the false, there were often little gaps between the border of her cap and the black string with which this semi-wig (always badly curled) was fastened to her head. Her gown, silk in summer, merino in winter, and always brown in color, was invariably rather tight for her angular figure and thin arms. Her collar, limp and bent, exposed too much the red skin of a neck which was ribbed like an oak-leaf in winter seen in the light. Her origin explains to some extent the defects of her conformation. She was the daughter of a wood-merchant, a peasant, who had risen from the ranks. She might have been plump at eighteen, but no trace remained of the fair complexion and pretty color of which she was wont to boast. The tones of her flesh had taken the pallid tints so often seen in "devotes." Her aquiline nose was the feature that chiefly proclaimed the despotism of her nature, and the flat shape of her forehead the narrowness of her mind. Her movements had an odd abruptness which precluded all grace; the mere motion with which she twitched her handkerchief from her bag and blew her nose with a loud noise would have shown her character and habits to a keen observer. Being rather tall, she held herself very erect, and justified the remark of a naturalist who once explained the peculiar gait of old maids by

declaring that their joints were consolidating. When she walked her movements were not equally distributed over her whole person, as they are in other women, producing those graceful undulations which are so attractive. She moved, so to speak, in a single block, seeming to advance at each step like the statue of the Commendatore. When she felt in good humour she was apt, like other old maids, to tell of the chances she had had to marry, and of her fortunate discovery in time of the want of means of her lovers,--proving, unconsciously, that her worldly judgment was better than her heart.

This typical figure of the genus Old Maid was well framed by the grotesque designs, representing Turkish landscapes, on a varnished paper which decorated the walls of the dining-room. Mademoiselle Gamard usually sat in this room, which boasted of two pier tables and a barometer. Before the chair of each abbe was a little cushion covered with worsted work, the colors of which were faded. The salon in which she received company was worthy of its mistress. It will be visible to the eye at once when we state that it went by the name of the "yellow salon." The curtains were yellow, the furniture and walls yellow; on the mantelpiece, surmounted by a mirror in a gilt frame, the candlesticks and a clock all of crystal struck the eye with sharp brilliancy. As to the private apartment of Mademoiselle Gamard, no one had ever been permitted to look into it. Conjecture alone suggested that it was full of odds and ends, worn-out furniture, and bits of stuff and pieces dear to the hearts of all old maids.

Such was the woman destined to exert a vast influence on the last years of the Abbe Birotteau.

For want of exercising in nature's own way the activity bestowed upon women, and yet impelled to spend it in some way or other, Mademoiselle Gamard had acquired the habit of using it in petty intrigues, provincial cabals, and those self-seeking schemes which occupy, sooner or later, the lives of all old maids. Birotteau, unhappily, had developed in Sophie Gamard the only sentiments which it was possible for that poor creature to feel,--those of hatred; a passion hitherto latent under the calmness and monotony of provincial life, but which was now to become the more intense because it was spent on petty things and in the midst of a narrow sphere. Birotteau was one of those beings who are predestined to suffer because, being unable to see things, they cannot avoid them; to them the worst happens.

"Yes, it will be a fine day," replied the canon, after a pause, apparently issuing from a reverie and wishing to conform to the rules of politeness.

Birotteau, frightened at the length of time which had elapsed between the question and the answer,--for he had, for the first time in his life, taken his coffee without uttering a word,--now left the dining-room where his heart was squeezed as if in a vise. Feeling that the coffee lay heavy on his stomach, he went to walk in a sad mood among the narrow, box-edged garden paths which outlined a star in the little garden. As he turned after making the first round, he saw Mademoiselle Gamard and the Abbe Troubert standing stock-still and silent on the threshold of the door,--he with his arms folded and motionless like a statue on a tomb; she leaning against the blind door. Both seemed to be gazing at him and counting his steps. Nothing is so embarrassing to

a creature naturally timid as to feel itself the object of a close examination, and if that is made by the eyes of hatred, the sort of suffering it causes is changed into intolerable martyrdom.

Presently Birotteau fancied he was preventing Mademoiselle Gamard and the abbe from walking in the narrow path. That idea, inspired equally by fear and kindness, became so strong that he left the garden and went to the church, thinking no longer of his canonry, so absorbed was he by the disheartening tyranny of the old maid. Luckily for him he happened to find much to do at Saint-Gatien,--several funerals, a marriage, and two baptisms. Thus employed he forgot his griefs. When his stomach told him that dinner was ready he drew out his watch and saw, not without alarm, that it was some minutes after four. Being well aware of Mademoiselle Gamard's punctuality, he hurried back to the house.

He saw at once on passing the kitchen door that the first course had been removed. When he reached the dining-room the old maid said, with a tone of voice in which were mingled sour rebuke and joy at being able to blame him:--

"It is half-past four, Monsieur Birotteau. You know we are not to wait for you."

The vicar looked at the clock in the dining-room, and saw at once, by the way the gauze which protected it from dust had been moved, that his landlady had opened the face of the dial and set the hands in advance of the clock of the cathedral. He could make no remark. Had he uttered his suspicion it would only have caused and apparently justified one of those fierce and eloquent expositions to which Mademoiselle Gamard, like other women of her class, knew very well how to give vent in particular cases. The thousand and one annoyances which a servant will sometimes make her master bear, or a woman her husband, were instinctively divined by Mademoiselle Gamard and used upon Birotteau. The way in which she delighted in plotting against the poor vicar's domestic comfort bore all the marks of what we must call a profoundly malignant genius. Yet she so managed that she was never, so far as eye could see, in the wrong.

III

Eight days after the date on which this history began, the new arrangements of the household and the relations which grew up between the Abbe Birotteau and Mademoiselle Gamard revealed to the former the existence of a plot which had been hatching for the last six months.

As long as the old maid exercised her vengeance in an underhand way, and the vicar was able to shut his eyes to it and refuse to believe in her malevolent intentions, the moral effect upon him was slight. But since the affair of the candlestick and the altered clock, Birotteau would doubt no longer that he was under an eye of hatred turned fully upon him. From that moment he fell into despair, seeing everywhere the skinny, clawlike fingers of Mademoiselle Gamard ready to hook into his heart. The old maid, happy in a sentiment as fruitful of emotions as that of vengeance, enjoyed circling and swooping above the vicar as a bird of prey hovers and swoops above a field-mouse before pouncing

down upon it and devouring it. She had long since laid a plan which the poor dumbfounded priest was quite incapable of imagining, and which she now proceeded to unfold with that genius for little things often shown by solitary persons, whose souls, incapable of feeling the grandeur of true piety, fling themselves into the details of outward devotion.

The petty nature of his troubles prevented Birotteau, always effusive and liking to be pitied and consoled, from enjoying the soothing pleasure of taking his friends into his confidence,--a last but cruel aggravation of his misery. The little amount of tact which he derived from his timidity made him fear to seem ridiculous in concerning himself with such pettiness. And yet those petty things made up the sum of his existence,--that cherished existence, full of busyness about nothings, and of nothingness in its business; a colorless barren life in which strong feelings were misfortunes, and the absence of emotion happiness. The poor priest's paradise was changed, in a moment, into hell. His sufferings became intolerable. The terror he felt at the prospect of a discussion with Mademoiselle Gamard increased day by day; the secret distress which blighted his life began to injure his health. One morning, as he put on his mottled blue stockings, he noticed a marked diminution in the circumference of his calves. Horrified by so cruel and undeniable a symptom, he resolved to make an effort and appeal to the Abbe Troubert, requesting him to intervene, officially, between Mademoiselle Gamard and himself.

When he found himself in presence of the imposing canon, who, in order to receive his visitor in a bare and cheerless room, had hastily quitted a study full of papers, where he worked incessantly, and where no one was ever admitted, the vicar felt half ashamed at speaking of Mademoiselle Gamard's provocations to a man who appeared to be so gravely occupied. But after going through the agony of the mental deliberations which all humble, undecided, and feeble persons endure about things of even no importance, he decided, not without much swelling and beating of the heart, to explain his position to the Abbe Troubert.

The canon listened in a cold, grave manner, trying, but in vain, to repress an occasional smile which to more intelligent eyes than those of the vicar might have betrayed the emotions of a secret satisfaction. A flame seemed to dart from his eyelids when Birotteau pictured with the eloquence of genuine feeling the constant bitterness he was made to swallow; but Troubert laid his hand above those lids with a gesture very common to thinkers, maintaining the dignified demeanor which was usual with him. When the vicar had ceased to speak he would indeed have been puzzled had he sought on Troubert's face, marbled with yellow blotches even more yellow than his usually bilious skin, for any trace of the feelings he must have excited in that mysterious priest.

After a moment's silence the canon made one of those answers which required long study before their meaning could be thoroughly perceived, though later they proved to reflecting persons the astonishing depths of his spirit and the power of his mind. He simply crushed Birotteau by telling him that "these things amazed him all the more because he should never have suspected their existence were it not for his brother's confession. He attributed such stupidity on his

part to the gravity of his occupations, his labors, the absorption in which his mind was held by certain elevated thoughts which prevented his taking due notice of the petty details of life." He made the vicar observe, but without appearing to censure the conduct of a man whose age and connections deserved all respect, that "in former days, recluses thought little about their food and lodging in the solitude of their retreats, where they were lost in holy contemplations," and that "in our days, priests could make a retreat for themselves in the solitude of their own hearts." Then, reverting to Birotteau's affairs, he added that "such disagreements were a novelty to him. For twelve years nothing of the kind had occurred between Mademoiselle Gamard and the venerable Abbe Chapeloud. As for himself, he might, no doubt, be an arbitrator between the vicar and their landlady, because his friendship for that person had never gone beyond the limits imposed by the Church on her faithful servants; but if so, justice demanded that he should hear both sides. He certainly saw no change in Mademoiselle Gamard, who seemed to him the same as ever; he had always submitted to a few of her caprices, knowing that the excellent woman was kindness and gentleness itself; the slight fluctuations of her temper should be attributed, he thought, to sufferings caused by a pulmonary affection, of which she said little, resigning herself to bear them in a truly Christian spirit." He ended by assuring the vicar that "if he stayed a few years longer in Mademoiselle Gamard's house he would learn to understand her better and acknowledge the real value of her excellent nature."

Birotteau left the room confounded. In the direful necessity of consulting no one, he now judged Mademoiselle Gamard as he would himself, and the poor man fancied that if he left her house for a few days he might extinguish, for want of fuel, the dislike the old maid felt for him. He accordingly resolved to spend, as he formerly did, a week or so at a country-house where Madame de Listomere passed her autumns, a season when the sky is usually pure and tender in Touraine. Poor man! in so doing he did the thing that was most desired by his terrible enemy, whose plans could only have been brought to nought by the resistant patience of a monk. But the vicar, unable to divine them, not understanding even his own affairs, was doomed to fall, like a lamb, at the butcher's first blow.

Madame de Listomere's country-place, situated on the embankment which lies between Tours and the heights of Saint-Georges, with a southern exposure and surrounded by rocks, combined the charms of the country with the pleasures of the town. It took but ten minutes from the bridge of Tours to reach the house, which was called the "Alouette,"-- a great advantage in a region where no one will put himself out for anything whatsoever, not even to seek a pleasure.

The Abbe Birotteau had been about ten days at the Alouette, when, one morning while he was breakfasting, the porter came to say that Monsieur Caron desired to speak with him. Monsieur Caron was Mademoiselle Gamard's lawyer, and had charge of her affairs. Birotteau, not remembering this, and unable to think of any matter of litigation between himself and others, left the table to see the lawyer in a stage of great agitation. He found him modestly seated on the balustrade of a terrace.

"Your intention of ceasing to reside in Mademoiselle Gamard's house

being made evident--" began the man of business.

"Eh! monsieur," cried the Abbe Birotteau, interrupting him, "I have not the slightest intention of leaving it."

"Nevertheless, monsieur," replied the lawyer, "you must have had some agreement in the matter with Mademoiselle, for she has sent me to ask how long you intend to remain in the country. The event of a long absence was not foreseen in the agreement, and may lead to a contest. Now, Mademoiselle Gamard understanding that your board--"

"Monsieur," said Birotteau, amazed, and again interrupting the lawyer, "I did not suppose it necessary to employ, as it were, legal means to--"

"Mademoiselle Gamard, who is anxious to avoid all dispute," said Monsieur Caron, "has sent me to come to an understanding with you."

"Well, if you will have the goodness to return to-morrow," said the abbe, "I shall then have taken advice in the matter."

The quill-driver withdrew. The poor vicar, frightened at the persistence with which Mademoiselle Gamard pursued him, returned to the dining-room with his face so convulsed that everybody cried out when they saw him: "What IS the matter, Monsieur Birotteau?"

The abbe, in despair, sat down without a word, so crushed was he by the vague presence of approaching disaster. But after breakfast, when his friends gathered round him before a comfortable fire, Birotteau naively related the history of his troubles. His hearers, who were beginning to weary of the monotony of a country-house, were keenly interested in a plot so thoroughly in keeping with the life of the provinces. They all took sides with the abbe against the old maid.

"Don't you see, my dear friend," said Madame de Listomere, "that the Abbe Troubert wants your apartment?"

Here the historian ought to sketch this lady; but it occurs to him that even those who are ignorant of Sterne's system of "cognomology," cannot pronounce the three words "Madame de Listomere" without picturing her to themselves as noble and dignified, softening the sternness of rigid devotion by the gracious elegance and the courteous manners of the old monarchical regime; kind, but a little stiff; slightly nasal in voice; allowing herself the perusal of "La Nouvelle Heloise"; and still wearing her own hair.

"The Abbe Birotteau must not yield to that old vixen," cried Monsieur de Listomere, a lieutenant in the navy who was spending a furlough with his aunt. "If the vicar has pluck and will follow my suggestions he will soon recover his tranquillity."

All present began to analyze the conduct of Mademoiselle Gamard with the keen perceptions which characterize provincials, to whom no one can deny the talent of knowing how to lay bare the most secret motives of human actions.

"You don't see the whole thing yet," said an old landowner who knew

the region well. "There is something serious behind all this which I can't yet make out. The Abbe Troubert is too deep to be fathomed at once. Our dear Birotteau is at the beginning of his troubles. Besides, would he be left in peace and comfort even if he did give up his lodging to Troubert? I doubt it. If Caron came here to tell you that you intended to leave Mademoiselle Gamard," he added, turning to the bewildered priest, "no doubt Mademoiselle Gamard's intention is to turn you out. Therefore you will have to go, whether you like it or not. Her sort of people play a sure game, they risk nothing."

This old gentleman, Monsieur de Bourbonne, could sum up and estimate provincial ideas as correctly as Voltaire summarized the spirit of his times. He was thin and tall, and chose to exhibit in the matter of clothes the quiet indifference of a landowner whose territorial value is quoted in the department. His face, tanned by the Touraine sun, was less intellectual than shrewd. Accustomed to weigh his words and measure his actions, he concealed a profound vigilance behind a misleading appearance of simplicity. A very slight observation of him sufficed to show that, like a Norman peasant, he invariably held the upper hand in business matters. He was an authority on wine-making, the leading science of Touraine. He had managed to extend the meadow lands of his domain by taking in a part of the alluvial soil of the Loire without getting into difficulties with the State. This clever proceeding gave him the reputation of a man of talent. If Monsieur de Bourbonne's conversation pleased you and you were to ask who he was of a Tourainean, "Ho! a sly old fox!" would be the answer of those who were envious of him--and they were many. In Touraine, as in many of the provinces, jealousy is the root of language.

Monsieur de Bourbonne's remark occasioned a momentary silence, during which the persons who composed the little party seemed to be reflecting. Meanwhile Mademoiselle Salomon de Villenoix was announced. She came from Tours in the hope of being useful to the poor abbe, and the news she brought completely changed the aspect of the affair. As she entered, every one except Monsieur de Bourbonne was urging Birotteau to hold his own against Troubert and Gamard, under the auspices of the aristocratic society of the place, which would certainly stand by him.

"The vicar-general, to whom the appointments to office are entrusted, is very ill," said Mademoiselle Salomon, "and the archbishop has delegated his powers to the Abbe Troubert provisionally. The canonry will, of course, depend wholly upon him. Now last evening, at Mademoiselle de la Blottiere's the Abbe Poirel talked about the annoyances which the Abbe Birotteau had inflicted on Mademoiselle Gamard, as though he were trying to cast all the blame on our good abbe. 'The Abbe Birotteau,' he said, 'is a man to whom the Abbe Chapeloud was absolutely necessary, and since the death of that venerable man, he has shown'--and then came suggestions, calumnies! you understand?"

"Troubert will be made vicar-general," said Monsieur de Bourbonne, sententiously.

"Come!" cried Madame de Listomere, turning to Birotteau, "which do you prefer, to be made a canon, or continue to live with Mademoiselle Gamard?"

"To be a canon!" cried the whole company.

"Well, then," resumed Madame de Listomere, "you must let the Abbe Troubert and Mademoiselle Gamard have things their own way. By sending Caron here they mean to let you know indirectly that if you consent to leave the house you shall be made canon,--one good turn deserves another."

Every one present applauded Madame de Listomere's sagacity, except her nephew the Baron de Listomere, who remarked in a comic tone to Monsieur de Bourbonne, "I would like to have seen a fight between the Gamard and the Birotteau."

But, unhappily for the vicar, forces were not equal between these persons of the best society and the old maid supported by the Abbe Troubert. The time soon came when the struggle developed openly, went on increasing, and finally assumed immense proportions. By the advice of Madame de Listomere and most of her friends, who were now eagerly enlisted in a matter which threw such excitement into their vapid provincial lives, a servant was sent to bring back Monsieur Caron. The lawyer returned with surprising celerity, which alarmed no one but Monsieur de Bourbonne.

"Let us postpone all decision until we are better informed," was the advice of that Fabius in a dressing-gown, whose prudent reflections revealed to him the meaning of these moves on the Tourainean chess-board. He tried to enlighten Birotteau on the dangers of his position; but the wisdom of the old "sly-boots" did not serve the passions of the moment, and he obtained but little attention.

The conference between the lawyer and Birotteau was short. The vicar came back quite terrified.

"He wants me to sign a paper stating my relinquishment of domicile."

"That's formidable language!" said the naval lieutenant.

"What does it mean?" asked Madame de Listomere.

"Merely that the abbe must declare in writing his intention of leaving Mademoiselle Gamard's house," said Monsieur de Bourbonne, taking a pinch of snuff.

"Is that all?" said Madame de Listomere. "Then sign it at once," she added, turning to Birotteau. "If you positively decide to leave her house, there can be no harm in declaring that such is your will."

Birotteau's will!

"That is true," said Monsieur de Bourbonne, closing his snuff-box with a gesture the significance of which it is impossible to render, for it was a language in itself. "But writing is always dangerous," he added, putting his snuff-box on the mantelpiece with an air and manner that alarmed the vicar.

Birotteau was so bewildered by the upsetting of all his ideas, by the

rapidity of events which found him defenceless, by the ease with which his friends were settling the most cherished matters of his solitary life, that he remained silent and motionless as if moonstruck, thinking of nothing, though listening and striving to understand the meaning of the rapid sentences the assembled company addressed to him. He took the paper Monsieur Caron had given him and read it, as if he were giving his mind to the lawyer's document, but the act was merely mechanical. He signed the paper, by which he declared that he left Mademoiselle Gamard's house of his own wish and will, and that he had been fed and lodged while there according to the terms originally agreed upon. When the vicar had signed the document, Monsieur Caron took it and asked where his client was to send the things left by the abbe in her house and belonging to him. Birotteau replied that they could be sent to Madame de Listomere's,--that lady making him a sign that she would receive him, never doubting that he would soon be a canon. Monsieur de Bourbonne asked to see the paper, the deed of relinquishment, which the abbe had just signed. Monsieur Caron gave it to him.

"How is this?" he said to the vicar after reading it. "It appears that written documents already exist between you and Mademoiselle Gamard. Where are they? and what do they stipulate?"

"The deed is in my library," replied Birotteau.

"Do you know the tenor of it?" said Monsieur de Bourbonne to the lawyer.

"No, monsieur," said Caron, stretching out his hand to regain the fatal document.

"Ha!" thought the old man; "you know, my good friend, what that deed contains, but you are not paid to tell us," and he returned the paper to the lawyer.

"Where can I put my things?" cried Birotteau; "my books, my beautiful book-shelves, and pictures, my red furniture, and all my treasures?"

The helpless despair of the poor man thus torn up as it were by the roots was so artless, it showed so plainly the purity of his ways and his ignorance of the things of life, that Madame de Listomere and Mademoiselle de Salomon talked to him and consoled him in the tone which mothers take when they promise a plaything to their children.

"Don't fret about such trifles," they said. "We will find you some place less cold and dismal than Mademoiselle Gamard's gloomy house. If we can't find anything you like, one or other of us will take you to live with us. Come, let's play a game of backgammon. To-morrow you can go and see the Abbe Troubert and ask him to push your claims to the canonry, and you'll see how cordially he will receive you."

Feeble folk are as easily reassured as they are frightened. So the poor abbe, dazzled at the prospect of living with Madame de Listomere, forgot the destruction, now completed, of the happiness he had so long desired, and so delightfully enjoyed. But at night before going to sleep, the distress of a man to whom the fuss of moving and the breaking up of all his habits was like the end of the world, came upon

him, and he racked his brains to imagine how he could ever find such a good place for his book-case as the gallery in the old maid's house. Fancying he saw his books scattered about, his furniture defaced, his regular life turned topsy-turvy, he asked himself for the thousandth time why the first year spent in Mademoiselle Gamard's house had been so sweet, the second so cruel. His troubles were a pit in which his reason floundered. The canonry seemed to him small compensation for so much misery, and he compared his life to a stocking in which a single dropped stitch resulted in destroying the whole fabric. Mademoiselle Salomon remained to him. But, alas, in losing his old illusions the poor priest dared not trust in any later friendship.

In the "citta dolente" of spinsterhood we often meet, especially in France, with women whose lives are a sacrifice nobly and daily offered to noble sentiments. Some remain proudly faithful to a heart which death tore from them; martyrs of love, they learn the secrets of womanhood only through their souls. Others obey some family pride (which in our days, and to our shame, decreases steadily); these devote themselves to the welfare of a brother, or to orphan nephews; they are mothers while remaining virgins. Such old maids attain to the highest heroism of their sex by consecrating all feminine feelings to the help of sorrow. They idealize womanhood by renouncing the rewards of woman's destiny, accepting its pains. They live surrounded by the splendour of their devotion, and men respectfully bow the head before their faded features. Mademoiselle de Sombreuil was neither wife nor maid; she was and ever will be a living poem. Mademoiselle Salomon de Villenoix belonged to the race of these heroic beings. Her devotion was religiously sublime, inasmuch as it won her no glory after being, for years, a daily agony. Beautiful and young, she loved and was beloved; her lover lost his reason. For five years she gave herself, with love's devotion, to the mere mechanical well-being of that unhappy man, whose madness she so penetrated that she never believed him mad. She was simple in manner, frank in speech, and her pallid face was not lacking in strength and character, though its features were regular. She never spoke of the events of her life. But at times a sudden quiver passed over her as she listened to the story of some sad or dreadful incident, thus betraying the emotions that great sufferings had developed within her. She had come to live at Tours after losing the companion of her life; but she was not appreciated there at her true value and was thought to be merely an amiable woman. She did much good, and attached herself, by preference, to feeble beings. For that reason the poor vicar had naturally inspired her with a deep interest.

Mademoiselle de Villenoix, who returned to Tours the next morning, took Birotteau with her and set him down on the quay of the cathedral leaving him to make his own way to the Cloister, where he was bent on going, to save at least the canonry and to superintend the removal of his furniture. He rang, not without violent palpitations of the heart, at the door of the house whither, for fourteen years, he had come daily, and where he had lived blissfully, and from which he was now exiled forever, after dreaming that he should die there in peace like his friend Chapeloud. Marianne was surprised at the vicar's visit. He told her that he had come to see the Abbe Troubert, and turned towards the ground-floor apartment where the canon lived; but Marianne called to him:--

"Not there, monsieur le vicaire; the Abbe Troubert is in your old apartment."

These words gave the vicar a frightful shock. He was forced to comprehend both Troubert's character and the depths of the revenge so slowly brought about when he found the canon settled in Chapeloud's library, seated in Chapeloud's handsome armchair, sleeping, no doubt, in Chapeloud's bed, and disinheriting at last the friend of Chapeloud, the man who, for so many years, had confined him to Mademoiselle Gamard's house, by preventing his advancement in the church, and closing the best salons in Tours against him. By what magic wand had the present transformation taken place? Surely these things belonged to Birotteau? And yet, observing the sardonic air with which Troubert glanced at that bookcase, the poor abbe knew that the future vicar-general felt certain of possessing the spoils of those he had so bitterly hated,--Chapeloud as an enemy, and Birotteau, in and through whom Chapeloud still thwarted him. Ideas rose in the heart of the poor man at the sight, and plunged him into a sort of vision. He stood motionless, as though fascinated by Troubert's eyes which fixed themselves upon him.

"I do not suppose, monsieur," said Birotteau at last, "that you intend to deprive me of the things that belong to me. Mademoiselle may have been impatient to give you better lodgings, but she ought to have been sufficiently just to give me time to pack my books and remove my furniture."

"Monsieur," said the Abbe Troubert, coldly, not permitting any sign of emotion to appear on his face, "Mademoiselle Gamard told me yesterday of your departure, the cause of which is still unknown to me. If she installed me here at once, it was from necessity. The Abbe Poirel has taken my apartment. I do not know if the furniture and things that are in these rooms belong to you or to Mademoiselle; but if they are yours, you know her scrupulous honesty; the sanctity of her life is the guarantee of her rectitude. As for me, you are well aware of my simple modes of living. I have slept for fifteen years in a bare room without complaining of the dampness,--which, eventually will have caused my death. Nevertheless, if you wish to return to this apartment I will cede it to you willingly."

After hearing these terrible words, Birotteau forgot the canonry and ran downstairs as quickly as a young man to find Mademoiselle Gamard. He met her at the foot of the staircase, on the broad, tiled landing which united the two wings of the house.

"Mademoiselle," he said, bowing to her without paying any attention to the bitter and derisive smile that was on her lips, nor to the extraordinary flame in her eyes which made them lucent as a tiger's, "I cannot understand how it is that you have not waited until I removed my furniture before--"

"What!" she said, interrupting him, "is it possible that your things have not been left at Madame de Listomere's?"

"But my furniture?"

"Haven't you read your deed?" said the old maid, in a tone which would

have to be rendered in music before the shades of meaning that hatred is able to put into the accent of every word could be fully shown.

Mademoiselle Gamard seemed to rise in stature, her eyes shone, her face expanded, her whole person quivered with pleasure. The Abbe Troubert opened a window to get a better light on the folio volume he was reading. Birotteau stood as if a thunderbolt had stricken him. Mademoiselle Gamard made his ears hum when she enunciated in a voice as clear as a cornet the following sentence:--

"Was it not agreed that if you left my house your furniture should belong to me, to indemnify me for the difference in the price of board paid by you and that paid by the late venerable Abbe Chapeloud? Now, as the Abbe Poirel has just been appointed canon--"

Hearing the last words Birotteau made a feeble bow as if to take leave of the old maid, and left the house precipitately. He was afraid if he stayed longer that he should break down utterly, and give too great a triumph to his implacable enemies. Walking like a drunken man he at last reached Madame de Listomere's house, where he found in one of the lower rooms his linen, his clothing, and all his papers packed in a trunk. When he eyes fell on these few remnants of his possessions the unhappy priest sat down and hid his face in his hands to conceal his tears from the sight of others. The Abbe Poirel was canon! He, Birotteau, had neither home, nor means, nor furniture!

Fortunately Mademoiselle Salomon happened to drive past the house, and the porter, who saw and comprehended the despair of the poor abbe, made a sign to the coachman. After exchanging a few words with Mademoiselle Salomon the porter persuaded the vicar to let himself be placed, half dead as he was, in the carriage of his faithful friend, to whom he was unable to speak connectedly. Mademoiselle Salomon, alarmed at the momentary derangement of a head that was always feeble, took him back at once to the Alouette, believing that this beginning of mental alienation was an effect produced by the sudden news of Abbe Poirel's nomination. She knew nothing, of course, of the fatal agreement made by the abbe with Mademoiselle Gamard, for the excellent reason that he did not know of it himself; and because it is in the nature of things that the comical is often mingled with the pathetic, the singular replies of the poor abbe made her smile.

"Chapeloud was right," he said; "he is a monster!"

"Who?" she asked.

"Chapeloud. He has taken all."

"You mean Poirel?"

"No, Troubert."

At last they reached the Alouette, where the priest's friends gave him such tender care that towards evening he grew calmer and was able to give them an account of what had happened during the morning.

The phlegmatic old fox asked to see the deed which, on thinking the matter over, seemed to him to contain the solution of the enigma.

Birotteau drew the fatal stamped paper from his pocket and gave it to Monsieur de Bourbonne, who read it rapidly and soon came upon the following clause:--

"Whereas a difference exists of eight hundred francs yearly between the price of board paid by the late Abbe Chapeloud and that at which the said Sophie Gamard agrees to take into her house, on the above-named stipulated condition, the said Francois Birotteau; and whereas it is understood that the undersigned Francois Birotteau is not able for some years to pay the full price charged to the other boarders of Mademoiselle Gamard, more especially the Abbe Troubert; the said Birotteau does hereby engage, in consideration of certain sums of money advanced by the undersigned Sophie Gamard, to leave her, as indemnity, all the household property of which he may die possessed, or to transfer the same to her should he, for any reason whatever or at any time, voluntarily give up the apartment now leased to him, and thus derive no further profit from the above-named engagements made by Mademoiselle Gamard for his benefit--"

"Confound her! what an agreement!" cried the old gentleman. "The said Sophie Gamard is armed with claws."

Poor Birotteau never imagined in his childish brain that anything could ever separate him from that house where he expected to live and die with Mademoiselle Gamard. He had no remembrance whatever of that clause, the terms of which he had not discussed, for they had seemed quite just to him at a time when, in his great anxiety to enter the old maid's house, he would readily have signed any and all legal documents she had offered him. His simplicity was so guileless and Mademoiselle Gamard's conduct so atrocious, the fate of the poor old man seemed so deplorable, and his natural helplessness made him so touching, that in the first glow of her indignation Madame de Listomere exclaimed: "I made you put your signature to that document which has ruined you; I am bound to give you back the happiness of which I have deprived you."

"But," remarked Monsieur de Bourbonne, "that deed constitutes a fraud; there may be ground for a lawsuit."

"Then Birotteau shall go to the law. If he loses at Tours he may win at Orleans; if he loses at Orleans, he'll win in Paris," cried the Baron de Listomere.

"But if he does go to law," continued Monsieur de Bourbonne, coldly, "I should advise him to resign his vicariat."

"We will consult lawyers," said Madame de Listomere, "and go to law if law is best. But this affair is so disgraceful for Mademoiselle Gamard, and is likely to be so injurious to the Abbe Troubert, that I think we can compromise."

After mature deliberation all present promised their assistance to the Abbe Birotteau in the struggle which was now inevitable between the poor priest and his antagonists and all their adherents. A true presentiment, an infallible provincial instinct, led them to couple the names of Gamard and Troubert. But none of the persons assembled on this occasion in Madame de Listomere's salon, except the old fox, had

any real idea of the nature and importance of such a struggle. Monsieur de Bourbonne took the poor abbe aside into a corner of the room.

"Of the fourteen persons now present," he said, in a low voice, "not one will stand by you a fortnight hence. If the time comes when you need some one to support you you may find that I am the only person in Tours bold enough to take up your defence; for I know the provinces and men and things, and, better still, I know self-interests. But these friends of yours, though full of the best intentions, are leading you astray into a bad path, from which you won't be able to extricate yourself. Take my advice; if you want to live in peace, resign the vicariat of Saint-Gatien and leave Tours. Don't say where you are going, but find some distant parish where Troubert cannot get hold of you."

"Leave Tours!" exclaimed the vicar, with indescribable terror.

To him it was a kind of death; the tearing up of all the roots by which he held to life. Celibates substitute habits for feelings; and when to that moral system, which makes them pass through life instead of really living it, is added a feeble character, external things assume an extraordinary power over them. Birotteau was like certain vegetables; transplant them, and you stop their ripening. Just as a tree needs daily the same sustenance, and must always send its roots into the same soil, so Birotteau needed to trot about Saint-Gatien, and amble along the Mail where he took his daily walk, and saunter through the streets, and visit the three salons where, night after night, he played his whist or his backgammon.

"Ah! I did not think of it!" replied Monsieur de Bourbonne, gazing at the priest with a sort of pity.

All Tours was soon aware that Madame la Baronne de Listomere, widow of a lieutenant-general, had invited the Abbe Birotteau, vicar of Saint-Gatien, to stay at her house. That act, which many persons questioned, presented the matter sharply and divided the town into parties, especially after Mademoiselle Salomon spoke openly of a fraud and a lawsuit. With the subtle vanity which is common to old maids, and the fanatic self-love which characterizes them, Mademoiselle Gamard was deeply wounded by the course taken by Madame de Listomere. The baroness was a woman of high rank, elegant in her habits and ways, whose good taste, courteous manners, and true piety could not be gainsaid. By receiving Birotteau as her guest she gave a formal denial to all Mademoiselle Gamard's assertions, and indirectly censured her conduct by maintaining the vicar's cause against his former landlady.

It is necessary for the full understanding of this history to explain how the natural discernment and spirit of analysis which old women bring to bear on the actions of others gave power to Mademoiselle Gamard, and what were the resources on her side. Accompanied by the taciturn Abbe Troubert she made a round of evening visits to five or six houses, at each of which she met a circle of a dozen or more persons, united by kindred tastes and the same general situation in life. Among them were one or two men who were influenced by the gossip and prejudices of their servants; five or six old maids who spent their time in sifting the words and scrutinizing the actions of their

neighbours and others in the class below them; besides these, there were several old women who busied themselves in retailing scandal, keeping an exact account of each person's fortune, striving to control or influence the actions of others, prognosticating marriages, and blaming the conduct of friends as sharply as that of enemies. These persons, spread about the town like the capillary fibres of a plant, sucked in, with the thirst of a leaf for the dew, the news and the secrets of each household, and transmitted them mechanically to the Abbe Troubert, as the leaves convey to the branch the moisture they absorb.

Accordingly, during every evening of the week, these good devotees, excited by that need of emotion which exists in all of us, rendered an exact account of the current condition of the town with a sagacity worthy of the Council of Ten, and were, in fact, a species of police, armed with the unerring gift of spying bestowed by passions. When they had divined the secret meaning of some event their vanity led them to appropriate to themselves the wisdom of their sanhedrim, and set the tone to the gossip of their respective spheres. This idle but ever busy fraternity, invisible, yet seeing all things, dumb, but perpetually talking, possessed an influence which its nonentity seemed to render harmless, though it was in fact terrible in its effects when it concerned itself with serious interests. For a long time nothing had entered the sphere of these existences so serious and so momentous to each one of them as the struggle of Birotteau, supported by Madame de Listomere, against Mademoiselle Gamard and the Abbe Troubert. The three salons of Madame de Listomere and the Demoiselles Merlin de la Blottiere and de Villenoix being considered as enemies by all the salons which Mademoiselle Gamard frequented, there was at the bottom of the quarrel a class sentiment with all its jealousies. It was the old Roman struggle of people and senate in a molehill, a tempest in a teacup, as Montesquieu remarked when speaking of the Republic of San Marino, whose public offices are filled by the day only,--despotic power being easily seized by any citizen.

But this tempest, petty as it seems, did develop in the souls of these persons as many passions as would have been called forth by the highest social interests. It is a mistake to think that none but souls concerned in mighty projects, which stir their lives and set them foaming, find time too fleeting. The hours of the Abbe Troubert fled by as eagerly, laden with thoughts as anxious, harassed by despairs and hopes as deep as the cruellest hours of the gambler, the lover, or the statesman. God alone is in the secret of the energy we expend upon our occult triumphs over man, over things, over ourselves. Though we know not always whither we are going we know well what the journey costs us. If it be permissible for the historian to turn aside for a moment from the drama he is narrating and ask his readers to cast a glance upon the lives of these old maids and abbes, and seek the cause of the evil which vitiates them at their source, we may find it demonstrated that man must experience certain passions before he can develop within him those virtues which give grandeur to life by widening his sphere and checking the selfishness which is inherent in every created being.

Madame de Listomere returned to town without being aware that for the previous week her friends had felt obliged to refute a rumour (at which she would have laughed had she known if it) that her affection

for her nephew had an almost criminal motive. She took Birotteau to her lawyer, who did not regard the case as an easy one. The vicar's friends, inspired by the belief that justice was certain in so good a cause, or inclined to procrastinate in a matter which did not concern them personally, had put off bringing the suit until they returned to Tours. Consequently the friends of Mademoiselle Gamard had taken the initiative, and told the affair wherever they could to the injury of Birotteau. The lawyer, whose practice was exclusively among the most devout church people, amazed Madame de Listomere by advising her not to embark on such a suit; he ended the consultation by saying that "he himself would not be able to undertake it, for, according to the terms of the deed, Mademoiselle Gamard had the law on her side, and in equity, that is to say outside of strict legal justice, the Abbe Birotteau would undoubtedly seem to the judges as well as to all respectable laymen to have derogated from the peaceable, conciliatory, and mild character hitherto attributed to him; that Mademoiselle Gamard, known to be a kindly woman and easy to live with, had put Birotteau under obligations to her by lending him the money he needed to pay the legacy duties on Chapeloud's bequest without taking from him a receipt; that Birotteau was not of an age or character to sign a deed without knowing what it contained or understanding the importance of it; that in leaving Mademoiselle Gamard's house at the end of two years, when his friend Chapeloud had lived there twelve and Troubert fifteen, he must have had some purpose known to himself only; and that the lawsuit, if undertaken, would strike the public as an act of ingratitude;" and so forth. Letting Birotteau go before them to the staircase, the lawyer detained Madame de Listomere a moment to entreat her, if she valued her own peace of mind, not to involve herself in the matter.

But that evening the poor vicar, suffering the torments of a man under sentence of death who awaits in the condemned cell at Bicetre the result of his appeal for mercy, could not refrain from telling his assembled friends the result of his visit to the lawyer.

"I don't know a single pettifogger in Tours," said Monsieur de Bourbonne, "except that Radical lawyer, who would be willing to take the case,--unless for the purpose of losing it; I don't advise you to undertake it."

"Then it is infamous!" cried the navel lieutenant. "I myself will take the abbe to the Radical--"

"Go at night," said Monsieur de Bourbonne, interrupting him.

"Why?"

"I have just learned that the Abbe Troubert is appointed vicar-general in place of the other man, who died yesterday."

"I don't care a fig for the Abbe Troubert."

Unfortunately the Baron de Listomere (a man thirty-six years of age) did not see the sign Monsieur de Bourbonne made him to be cautious in what he said, motioning as he did so to a friend of Troubert, a councillor of the Prefecture, who was present. The lieutenant therefore continued:--

"If the Abbe Troubert is a scoundrel--"

"Oh," said Monsieur de Bourbonne, cutting him short, "why bring Monsieur Troubert into a matter which doesn't concern him?"

"Not concern him?" cried the baron; "isn't he enjoying the use of the Abbe Birotteau's household property? I remember that when I called on the Abbe Chapeloud I noticed two valuable pictures. Say that they are worth ten thousand francs; do you suppose that Monsieur Birotteau meant to give ten thousand francs for living two years with that Gamard woman,--not to speak of the library and furniture, which are worth as much more?"

The Abbe Birotteau opened his eyes at hearing he had once possessed so enormous a fortune.

The baron, getting warmer than ever, went on to say: "By Jove! there's that Monsieur Salmon, formerly an expert at the Museum in Paris; he is down here on a visit to his mother-in-law. I'll go and see him this very evening with the Abbe Birotteau and ask him to look at those pictures and estimate their value. From there I'll take the abbe to the lawyer."

Two days after this conversation the suit was begun. This employment of the Liberal lawyer did harm to the vicar's cause. Those who were opposed to the government, and all who were known to dislike the priests, or religion (two things quite distinct which many persons confound), got hold of the affair and the whole town talked of it. The Museum expert estimated the Virgin of Valentin and the Christ of Lebrun, two paintings of great beauty, at eleven thousand francs. As to the bookshelves and the gothic furniture, the taste for such things was increasing so rapidly in Paris that their immediate value was at least twelve thousand. In short, the appraisal of the whole property by the expert reached the sum of over thirty-six thousand francs. Now it was very evident that Birotteau never intended to give Mademoiselle Gamard such an enormous sum of money for the small amount he might owe her under the terms of the deed; therefore he had, legally speaking, equitable grounds on which to demand an amendment of the agreement; if this were denied, Mademoiselle Gamard was plainly guilty of intentional fraud. The Radical lawyer accordingly began the affair by serving a writ on Mademoiselle Gamard. Though very harsh in language, this document, strengthened by citations of precedents and supported by certain clauses in the Code, was a masterpiece of legal argument, and so evidently just in its condemnation of the old maid that thirty or forty copies were made and maliciously distributed through the town.

IV

A few days after this commencement of hostilities between Birotteau and the old maid, the Baron de Listomere, who expected to be included as captain of a corvette in a coming promotion lately announced by the minister of the Navy, received a letter from one of his friends warning him that there was some intention of putting him on the retired list. Greatly astonished by this information he started for

Paris immediately, and went at once to the minister, who seemed to be amazed himself, and even laughed at the baron's fears. The next day, however, in spite of the minister's assurance, Monsieur de Listomere made inquiries in the different offices. By an indiscretion (often practised by heads of departments in favor of their friends) one of the secretaries showed him a document confirming the fatal news, which was only waiting the signature of the director, who was ill, to be submitted to the minister.

The Baron de Listomere went immediately to an uncle of his, a deputy, who could see the minister of the Navy at the chamber without loss of time, and begged him to find out the real intentions of his Excellency in a matter which threatened the loss of his whole future. He waited in his uncle's carriage with the utmost anxiety for the end of the session. His uncle came out before the Chamber rose, and said to him at once as they drove away: "Why the devil have you meddled in a priest's quarrel? The minister began by telling me you had put yourself at the head of the Radicals in Tours; that your political opinions were objectionable; you were not following in the lines of the government,--with other remarks as much involved as if he were addressing the Chamber. On that I said to him, 'Nonsense; let us come to the point.' The end was that his Excellency told me frankly you were in bad odor with the diocese. In short, I made a few inquiries among my colleagues, and I find that you have been talking slightly of a certain Abbe Troubert, the vicar-general, but a very important personage in the province, where he represents the Jesuits. I have made myself responsible to the minister for your future conduct. My good nephew, if you want to make your way be careful not to excite ecclesiastical enmities. Go at once to Tours and try to make your peace with that devil of a vicar-general; remember that such priests are men with whom we absolutely **MUST** live in harmony. Good heavens! when we are all striving and working to re-establish religion it is actually stupid, in a lieutenant who wants to be made a captain, to affront the priests. If you don't make up matters with that Abbe Troubert you needn't count on me; I shall abandon you. The minister of ecclesiastical affairs told me just now that Troubert was certain to be made bishop before long; if he takes a dislike to our family he could hinder me from being included in the next batch of peers. Don't you understand?"

These words explained to the naval officer the nature of Troubert's secret occupations, about which Birotteau often remarked in his silly way: "I can't think what he does with himself,--sitting up all night."

The canon's position in the midst of his female senate, converted so adroitly into provincial detectives, and his personal capacity, had induced the Congregation of Jesus to select him out of all the ecclesiastics in the town, as the secret proconsul of Touraine. Archbishop, general, prefect, all men, great and small, were under his occult dominion. The Baron de Listomere decided at once on his course.

"I shall take care," he said to his uncle, "not to get another round shot below my water-line."

Three days after this diplomatic conference between the uncle and nephew, the latter, returning hurriedly in a post-chaise, informed his aunt, the very night of his arrival, of the dangers the family were

running if they persisted in supporting that "fool of a Birotteau." The baron had detained Monsieur de Bourbonne as the old gentleman was taking his hat and cane after the usual rubber of whist. The clear-sightedness of that sly old fox seemed indispensable for an understanding of the reefs among which the Listomere family suddenly found themselves; and perhaps the action of taking his hat and cane was only a ruse to have it whispered in his ear: "Stay after the others; we want to talk to you."

The baron's sudden return, his apparent satisfaction, which was quite out of keeping with a harrassed look that occasionally crossed his face, informed Monsieur de Bourbonne vaguely that the lieutenant had met with some check in his crusade against Gamard and Troubert. He showed no surprise when the baron revealed the secret power of the Jesuit vicar-general.

"I knew that," he said.

"Then why," cried the baroness, "did you not warn us?"

"Madame," he said, sharply, "forget that I was aware of the invisible influence of that priest, and I will forget that you knew it equally well. If we do not keep this secret now we shall be thought his accomplices, and shall be more feared and hated than we are. Do as I do; pretend to be duped; but look carefully where you set your feet. I did warn you sufficiently, but you would not understand me, and I did not choose to compromise myself."

"What must we do now?" said the baron.

The abandonment of Birotteau was not even made a question; it was a first condition tacitly accepted by the three deliberators.

"To beat a retreat with the honors of war has always been the triumph of the ablest generals," replied Monsieur de Bourbonne. "Bow to Troubert, and if his hatred is less strong than his vanity you will make him your ally; but if you bow too low he will walk over you rough-shod; make believe that you intend to leave the service, and you'll escape him, Monsieur le baron. Send away Birotteau, madame, and you will set things right with Mademoiselle Gamard. Ask the Abbe Troubert, when you meet him at the archbishop's, if he can play whist. He will say yes. Then invite him to your salon, where he wants to be received; he'll be sure to come. You are a woman, and you can certainly win a priest to your interests. When the baron is promoted, his uncle peer of France, and Troubert a bishop, you can make Birotteau a canon if you choose. Meantime yield,--but yield gracefully, all the while with a slight menace. Your family can give Troubert quite as much support as he can give you. You'll understand each other perfectly on that score. As for you, sailor, carry your deep-sea line about you."

"Poor Birotteau?" said the baroness.

"Oh, get rid of him at once," replied the old man, as he rose to take leave. "If some clever Radical lays hold of that empty head of his, he may cause you much trouble. After all, the court would certainly give a verdict in his favour, and Troubert must fear that. He may forgive

you for beginning the struggle, but if they were defeated he would be implacable. I have said my say."

He snapped his snuff-box, put on his overshoes, and departed.

The next day after breakfast the baroness took the vicar aside and said to him, not without visible embarrassment:--

"My dear Monsieur Birotteau, you will think what I am about to ask of you very unjust and very inconsistent; but it is necessary, both for you and for us, that your lawsuit with Mademoiselle Gamard be withdrawn by resigning your claims, and also that you should leave my house."

As he heard these words the poor abbe turned pale.

"I am," she continued, "the innocent cause of your misfortunes, and, moreover, if it had not been for my nephew you would never have begun this lawsuit, which has now turned to your injury and to ours. But listen to me."

She told him succinctly the immense ramifications of the affair, and explained the serious nature of its consequences. Her own meditations during the night had told her something of the probable antecedents of Troubert's life; she was able, without misleading Birotteau, to show him the net so ably woven round him by revenge, and to make him see the power and great capacity of his enemy, whose hatred to Chapeloud, under whom he had been forced to crouch for a dozen years, now found vent in seizing Chapeloud's property and in persecuting Chapeloud in the person of his friend. The harmless Birotteau clasped his hands as if to pray, and wept with distress at the sight of human horrors that his own pure soul was incapable of suspecting. As frightened as though he had suddenly found himself at the edge of a precipice, he listened, with fixed, moist eyes in which there was no expression, to the revelations of his friend, who ended by saying: "I know the wrong I do in abandoning your cause; but, my dear abbe, family duties must be considered before those of friendship. Yield, as I do, to this storm, and I will prove to you my gratitude. I am not talking of your worldly interests, for those I take charge of. You shall be made free of all such anxieties for the rest of your life. By means of Monsieur de Bourbonne, who will know how to save appearances, I shall arrange matters so that you shall lack nothing. My friend, grant me the right to abandon you. I shall ever be your friend, though forced to conform to the axioms of the world. You must decide."

The poor, bewildered abbe cried aloud: "Chapeloud was right when he said that if Troubert could drag him by the feet out of his grave he would do it! He sleeps in Chapeloud's bed!"

"There is no use in lamenting," said Madame de Listomere, "and we have little time now left to us. How will you decide?"

Birotteau was too good and kind not to obey in a great crisis the unreflecting impulse of the moment. Besides, his life was already in the agony of what to him was death. He said, with a despairing look at his protectress which cut her to the heart, "I trust myself to you--I am but the stubble of the streets."

He used the Touraine word "bourrier" which has no other meaning than a "bit of straw." But there are pretty little straws, yellow, polished, and shining, the delight of children, whereas the bourrier is straw discolored, muddy, sodden in the puddles, whirled by the tempest, crushed under feet of men.

"But, madame, I cannot let the Abbe Troubert keep Chapeloud's portrait. It was painted for me, it belongs to me; obtain that for me, and I will give up all the rest."

"Well," said Madame de Listomere. "I will go myself to Mademoiselle Gamard." The words were said in a tone which plainly showed the immense effort the Baronne de Listomere was making in lowering herself to flatter the pride of the old maid. "I will see what can be done," she said; "I hardly dare hope anything. Go and consult Monsieur de Bourbonne; ask him to put your renunciation into proper form, and bring me the paper. I will see the archbishop, and with his help we may be able to stop the matter here."

Birotteau left the house dismayed. Troubert assumed in his eyes the dimensions of an Egyptian pyramid. The hands of that man were in Paris, his elbows in the Cloister of Saint-Gatien.

"He!" said the victim to himself, "HE to prevent the Baron de Listomere from becoming peer of France!--and, perhaps, 'by the help of the archbishop we may be able to stop the matter here!'"

In presence of such great interests Birotteau felt he was a mere worm; he judged himself harshly.

The news of Birotteau's removal from Madame de Listomere's house seemed all the more amazing because the reason of it was wholly impenetrable. Madame de Listomere said that her nephew was intending to marry and leave the navy, and she wanted the vicar's apartment to enlarge her own. Birotteau's relinquishment was still unknown. The advice of Monsieur de Bourbonne was followed. Whenever the two facts reached the ears of the vicar-general his self-love was certain to be gratified by the assurance they gave that even if the Listomere family did not capitulate they would at least remain neutral and tacitly recognize the occult power of the Congregation,--to recognize it was, in fact, to submit to it. But the lawsuit was still sub judice; his opponents yielded and threatened at the same time.

The Listomeres had thus taken precisely the same attitude as the vicar-general himself; they held themselves aloof, and yet were able to direct others. But just at this crisis an event occurred which complicated the plans laid by Monsieur de Bourbonne and the Listomeres to quiet the Gamard and Troubert party, and made them more difficult to carry out.

Mademoiselle Gamard took cold one evening in coming out of the cathedral; the next day she was confined to her bed, and soon after became dangerously ill. The whole town rang with pity and false commiseration: "Mademoiselle Gamard's sensitive nature has not been able to bear the scandal of this lawsuit. In spite of the justice of her cause she was likely to die of grief. Birotteau has killed his

benefactress." Such were the speeches poured through the capillary tubes of the great female conclave, and taken up and repeated by the whole town of Tours.

Madame de Listomere went the day after Mademoiselle Gamard took cold to pay the promised visit, and she had the mortification of that act without obtaining any benefit from it, for the old maid was too ill to see her. She then asked politely to speak to the vicar-general.

Gratified, no doubt, to receive in Chapeloud's library, at the corner of the fireplace above which hung the two contested pictures, the woman who had hitherto ignored him, Troubert kept the baroness waiting a moment before he consented to admit her. No courtier and no diplomatist ever put into a discussion of their personal interests or into the management of some great national negotiation more shrewdness, dissimulation, and ability than the baroness and the priest displayed when they met face to face for the struggle.

Like the seconds or sponsors who in the Middle Age armed the champion, and strengthened his valor by useful counsel until he entered the lists, so the sly old fox had said to the baroness at the last moment: "Don't forget your cue. You are a mediator, and not an interested party. Troubert also is a mediator. Weigh your words; study the inflection of the man's voice. If he strokes his chin you have got him."

Some sketchers are fond of caricaturing the contrast often observable between "what is said" and "what is thought" by the speaker. To catch the full meaning of the duel of words which now took place between the priest and the lady, it is necessary to unveil the thoughts that each hid from the other under spoken sentences of apparent insignificance. Madame de Listomere began by expressing the regret she had felt at Birotteau's lawsuit; and then went on to speak of her desire to settle the matter to the satisfaction of both parties.

"The harm is done, madame," said the priest, in a grave voice. "The pious and excellent Mademoiselle Gamard is dying." ("I don't care a fig for the old thing," thought he, "but I mean to put her death on your shoulders and harass your conscience if you are such a fool as to listen to it.")

"On hearing of her illness," replied the baroness, "I entreated Monsieur Birotteau to relinquish his claims; I have brought the document, intending to give it to that excellent woman." ("I see what you mean, you wily scoundrel," thought she, "but we are safe now from your calumnies. If you take this document you'll cut your own fingers by admitting you are an accomplice.")

There was silence for a moment.

"Mademoiselle Gamard's temporal affairs do not concern me," said the priest at last, lowering the large lids over his eagle eyes to veil his emotions. ("Ho! ho!" thought he, "you can't compromise me. Thank God, those damned lawyers won't dare to plead any cause that could smirch me. What do these Listomeres expect to get by crouching in this way?")

"Monsieur," replied the baroness, "Monsieur Birotteau's affairs are no more mine than those of Mademoiselle Gamard are yours; but, unfortunately, religion is injured by such a quarrel, and I come to you as a mediator--just as I myself am seeking to make peace." ("We are not deceiving each other, Monsieur Troubert," thought she. "Don't you feel the sarcasm of that answer?")

"Injury to religion, madame!" exclaimed the vicar-general. "Religion is too lofty for the actions of men to injure." ("My religion is I," thought he.) "God makes no mistake in His judgments, madame; I recognize no tribunal but His."

"Then, monsieur," she replied, "let us endeavor to bring the judgments of men into harmony with the judgments of God." ("Yes, indeed, your religion is you.")

The Abbe Troubert suddenly changed his tone.

"Your nephew has been to Paris, I believe." ("You found out about me there," thought he; "you know now that I can crush you, you who dared to slight me, and you have come to capitulate.")

"Yes, monsieur; thank you for the interest you take in him. He returns to-night; the minister, who is very considerate of us, sent for him; he does not want Monsieur de Listomere to leave the service." ("Jesuit, you can't crush us," thought she. "I understand your civility.")

A moment's silence.

"I did not think my nephew's conduct in this affair quite the thing," she added; "but naval men must be excused; they know nothing of law." ("Come, we had better make peace," thought she; "we sha'n't gain anything by battling in this way.")

A slight smile wandered over the priest's face and was lost in its wrinkles.

"He has done us the service of getting a proper estimate on the value of those paintings," he said, looking up at the pictures. "They will be a noble ornament to the chapel of the Virgin." ("You shot a sarcasm at me," thought he, "and there's another in return; we are quits, madame.")

"If you intend to give them to Saint-Gatien, allow me to offer frames that will be more suitable and worthy of the place, and of the works themselves." ("I wish I could force you to betray that you have taken Birotteau's things for your own," thought she.)

"They do not belong to me," said the priest, on his guard.

"Here is the deed of relinquishment," said Madame de Listomere; "it ends all discussion, and makes them over to Mademoiselle Gamard." She laid the document on the table. ("See the confidence I place in you," thought she.) "It is worthy of you, monsieur," she added, "worthy of your noble character, to reconcile two Christians,--though at present I am not especially concerned for Monsieur Birotteau--"

"He is living in your house," said Troubert, interrupting her.

"No, monsieur, he is no longer there." ("That peerage and my nephew's promotion force me to do base things," thought she.)

The priest remained impassible, but his calm exterior was an indication of violent emotion. Monsieur Bourbonne alone had fathomed the secret of that apparent tranquillity. The priest had triumphed!

"Why did you take upon yourself to bring that relinquishment," he asked, with a feeling analogous to that which impels a woman to fish for compliments.

"I could not avoid a feeling of compassion. Birotteau, whose feeble nature must be well known to you, entreated me to see Madaemoiselle Gamard and to obtain as the price of his renunciation--"

The priest frowned.

"of rights upheld by distinguished lawyers, the portrait of--"

Troubert looked fixedly at Madame de Listomere.

"the portrait of Chapeloud," she said, continuing: "I leave you to judge of his claim." ("You will be certain to lose your case if we go to law, and you know it," thought she.)

The tone of her voice as she said the words "distinguished lawyers" showed the priest that she knew very well both the strength and weakness of the enemy. She made her talent so plain to this connoisseur emeritus in the course of a conversation which lasted a long time in the tone here given, that Troubert finally went down to Mademoiselle Gamard to obtain her answer to Birotteau's request for the portrait.

He soon returned.

"Madame," he said, "I bring you the words of a dying woman. 'The Abbe Chapeloud was so true a friend to me,' she said, 'that I cannot consent to part with his picture.' As for me," added Troubert, "if it were mine I would not yield it. My feelings to my late friend were so faithful that I should feel my right to his portrait was above that of others."

"Well, there's no need to quarrel over a bad picture." ("I care as little about it as you do," thought she.) "Keep it, and I will have a copy made of it. I take some credit to myself for having averted this deplorable lawsuit; and I have gained, personally, the pleasure of your acquaintance. I hear you have a great talent for whist. You will forgive a woman for curiosity," she said, smiling. "If you will come and play at my house sometimes you cannot doubt your welcome."

Troubert stroked his chin. ("Caught! Bourbonne was right!" thought she; "he has his quantum of vanity!")

It was true. The vicar-general was feeling the delightful sensation

which Mirabeau was unable to subdue when in the days of his power he found gates opening to his carriage which were barred to him in earlier days.

"Madame," he replied, "my avocations prevent my going much into society; but for you, what will not a man do?" ("The old maid is going to die; I'll get a footing at the Listomere's, and serve them if they serve me," thought he. "It is better to have them for friends than enemies.")

Madame de Listomere went home, hoping that the archbishop would complete the work of peace so auspiciously begun. But Birotteau was fated to gain nothing by his relinquishment. Mademoiselle Gamard died the next day. No one felt surprised when her will was opened to find that she had left everything to the Abbe Troubert. Her fortune was appraised at three hundred thousand francs. The vicar-general sent to Madame de Listomere two notes of invitation for the services and for the funeral procession of his friend; one for herself and one for her nephew.

"We must go," she said.

"It can't be helped," said Monsieur de Bourbonne. "It is a test to which Troubert puts you. Baron, you must go to the cemetery," he added, turning to the lieutenant, who, unluckily for him, had not left Tours.

The services took place, and were performed with unusual ecclesiastical magnificence. Only one person wept, and that was Birotteau, who, kneeling in a side chapel and seen by none, believed himself guilty of the death and prayed sincerely for the soul of the deceased, bitterly deploring that he was not able to obtain her forgiveness before she died.

The Abbe Troubert followed the body of his friend to the grave; at the verge of which he delivered a discourse in which, thanks to his eloquence, the narrow life the old maid had lived was enlarged to monumental proportions. Those present took particular note of the following words in the peroration:--

"This life of days devoted to God and to His religion, a life adorned with noble actions silently performed, and with modest and hidden virtues, was crushed by a sorrow which we might call undeserved if we could forget, here at the verge of this grave, that our afflictions are sent by God. The numerous friends of this saintly woman, knowing the innocence and nobility of her soul, foresaw that she would issue safely from her trials in spite of the accusations which blasted her life. It may be that Providence has called her to the bosom of God to withdraw her from those trials. Happy they who can rest here below in the peace of their own hearts as Sophie now is resting in her robe of innocence among the blest."

"When he had ended his pompous discourse," said Monsieur de Bourbonne, after relating the incidents of the internment to Madame de Listomere when whist was over, the doors shut, and they were alone with the baron, "this Louis XI. in a cassock--imagine him if you can!--gave a last flourish to the sprinkler and aspersed the coffin with holy

water." Monsieur de Bourbonne picked up the tongs and imitated the priest's gesture so satirically that the baron and his aunt could not help laughing. "Not until then," continued the old gentleman, "did he contradict himself. Up to that time his behavior had been perfect; but it was no doubt impossible for him to put the old maid, whom he despised so heartily and hated almost as much as he hated Chapeloud, out of sight forever without allowing his joy to appear in that last gesture."

The next day Mademoiselle Salomon came to breakfast with Madame de Listomere, chiefly to say, with deep emotion: "Our poor Abbe Birotteau has just received a frightful blow, which shows the most determined hatred. He is appointed curate of Saint-Symphorien."

Saint-Symphorien is a suburb of Tours lying beyond the bridge. That bridge, one of the finest monuments of French architecture, is nineteen hundred feet long, and the two open squares which surround each end are precisely alike.

"Don't you see the misery of it?" she said, after a pause, amazed at the coldness with which Madame de Listomere received the news. "It is just as if the abbe were a hundred miles from Tours, from his friends, from everything! It is a frightful exile, and all the more cruel because he is kept within sight of the town where he can hardly ever come. Since his troubles he walks very feebly, yet he will have to walk three miles to see his old friends. He has taken to his bed, just now, with fever. The parsonage at Saint-Symphorien is very cold and damp, and the parish is too poor to repair it. The poor old man will be buried in a living tomb. Oh, it is an infamous plot!"

To end this history it will suffice to relate a few events in a simple way, and to give one last picture of its chief personages.

Five months later the vicar-general was made Bishop of Troyes; and Madame de Listomere was dead, leaving an annuity of fifteen hundred francs to the Abbe Birotteau. The day on which the dispositions in her will were made known Monseigneur Hyacinthe, Bishop of Troyes, was on the point of leaving Tours to reside in his diocese, but he delayed his departure on receiving the news. Furious at being foiled by a woman to whom he had lately given his countenance while she had been secretly holding the hand of a man whom he regarded as his enemy, Troubert again threatened the baron's future career, and put in jeopardy the peerage of his uncle. He made in the salon of the archbishop, and before an assembled party, one of those priestly speeches which are big with vengeance and soft with honied mildness. The Baron de Listomere went the next day to see this implacable enemy, who must have imposed sundry hard conditions on him, for the baron's subsequent conduct showed the most entire submission to the will of the terrible Jesuit.

The new bishop made over Mademoiselle Gamard's house by deed of gift to the Chapter of the cathedral; he gave Chapeloud's books and bookcases to the seminary; he presented the two disputed pictures to the Chapel of the Virgin; but he kept Chapeloud's portrait. No one knew how to explain this almost total renunciation of Mademoiselle Gamard's bequest. Monsieur de Bourbonne supposed that the bishop had secretly kept moneys that were invested, so as to support his rank

with dignity in Paris, where of course he would take his seat on the Bishops' bench in the Upper Chamber. It was not until the night before Monseigneur Troubert's departure from Tours that the sly old fox unearthed the hidden reason of this strange action, the deathblow given by the most persistent vengeance to the feeblest of victims. Madame de Listomere's legacy to Birotteau was contested by the Baron de Listomere under a pretence of undue influence!

A few days after the case was brought the baron was promoted to the rank of captain. As a measure of ecclesiastical discipline, the curate of Saint-Symphorien was suspended. His superiors judged him guilty. The murderer of Sophie Gamard was also a swindler. If Monseigneur Troubert had kept Mademoiselle Gamard's property he would have found it difficult to make the ecclesiastical authorities censure Birotteau.

At the moment when Monseigneur Hyacinthe, Bishop of Troyes, drove along the quay Saint-Symphorien in a post-chaise on his way to Paris poor Birotteau had been placed in an armchair in the sun on a terrace above the road. The unhappy priest, smitten by the archbishop, was pale and haggard. Grief, stamped on every feature, distorted the face that was once so mildly gay. Illness had dimmed his eyes, formerly brightened by the pleasures of good living and devoid of serious ideas, with a veil which simulated thought. It was but the skeleton of the old Birotteau who had rolled only one year earlier so vacuous but so content along the Cloister. The bishop cast one look of pity and contempt upon his victim; then he consented to forget him, and went his way.

There is no doubt that Troubert would have been in other times a Hildebrand or an Alexander the Sixth. In these days the Church is no longer a political power, and does not absorb the whole strength of her solitaries. Celibacy, however, presents the inherent vice of concentrating the faculties of man upon a single passion, egotism, which renders celibates either useless or mischievous. We live at a period when the defect of governments is to make Man for Society rather than Society for Man. There is a perpetual struggle going on between the Individual and the Social system which insists on using him, while he is endeavoring to use it to his own profit; whereas, in former days, man, really more free, was also more loyal to the public weal. The round in which men struggle in these days has been insensibly widened; the soul which can grasp it as a whole will ever be a magnificent exception; for, as a general thing, in morals as in physics, impulsion loses in intensity what it gains in extension. Society can not be based on exceptions. Man in the first instance was purely and simply, father; his heart beat warmly, concentrated in the one ray of Family. Later, he lived for a clan, or a small community; hence the great historical devotions of Greece and Rome. After that he was a man of caste or of a religion, to maintain the greatness of which he often proved himself sublime; but by that time the field of his interests became enlarged by many intellectual regions. In our day, his life is attached to that of a vast country; sooner or later his family will be, it is predicted, the entire universe.

Will this moral cosmopolitanism, the hope of Christian Rome, prove to be only a sublime error? It is so natural to believe in the realization of a noble vision, in the Brotherhood of Man. But, alas!

the human machine does not have such divine proportions. Souls that are vast enough to grasp a range of feelings bestowed on great men only will never belong to either fathers of families or simple citizens. Some physiologists have thought that as the brain enlarges the heart narrows; but they are mistaken. The apparent egotism of men who bear a science, a nation, a code of laws in their bosom is the noblest of passions; it is, as one may say, the maternity of the masses; to give birth to new peoples, to produce new ideas they must unite within their mighty brains the breasts of woman and the force of God. The history of such men as Innocent the Third and Peter the Great, and all great leaders of their age and nation will show, if need be, in the highest spheres the same vast thought of which Troubert was made the representative in the quiet depths of the Cloister of Saint-Gatien.

ADDENDUM

The following personages appear in other stories of the Human Comedy.

Birotteau, Abbe Francois
The Lily of the Valley
Cesar Birotteau

Troubert, Abbe Hyacinthe
The Member for Arcis

Bourbonne, De
Madame Firmiani

Villenoix, Pauline Salomon de
Louis Lambert
A Seaside Tragedy

Listomere, Baronne de
Cesar Birotteau
The Muse of the Department

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