The Project Gutenberg EBook of Artists' Wives, by Alphonse Daudet

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Produced by David Widger

ARTISTS' WIVES

By Alphonse Daudet

Translated by Laura Ensor

Illustrated by De Bieler, Myrbach; And Rossi

[Illustration: Frontispiece]

[Illustration: Titlepage]

[Illustration: p007-018]

PROLOGUE.

\_Stretched at full length, on the great divan of a studio, cigar in

mouth, two friends--a poet and a painter--were talking together one

evening after dinner\_.

\_It was the hour of confidences and effusion. The lamp burned softly

beneath its shade, limiting its circle of light to the intimacy of the

conversation, leaving scarcely distinct the capricious luxury of the

vast walls, cumbered with canvases, hangings, panoplies, surmounted by a

glass roof through which the sombre blue shades of the night penetrated

unhindered. The portrait of a woman, leaning slightly forward, as if to

listen, alone stood out a little from the shadow; young with intelligent

eyes, a grave and sweet mouth and a spirituel smile which seemed to

defend the husband's easel from fools and disparagers. A low chair

pushed away from the fire, two little blue shoes lying on the carpet,

indicated also the presence of a child in the house; and indeed from the

next room, within which mother and child had but just disappeared,

came occasional bursts of soft laughter, of childish babble; the

pretty flutterings of a nest going off to sleep. All this shed over the

artistic interior a vague perfume of family happiness which the poet

breathed in with delight:\_

"\_Decidedly, my dear fellow?" he said to his friend, "you were in the

right. There are no two ways of being happy. Happiness lies in this and

in nothing else. You must find me a wife!\_"

THE PAINTER.

\_Good Heavens, no! not on any account. Find one for yourself, if you are

bent upon it. As for me, I will have nothing to do with it.\_

THE POET.

\_And why?\_

THE PAINTER.

\_Because--because artists ought never to marry.\_

THE POET.

\_That's rather too good. You dare to say that, and the lamp does not

go out suddenly, and the walls don't fall down upon your head! But just

think, wretch, that for two hours past, you have been setting before me

the enviable spectacle of the very happiness you forbid me. Are you by

chance like those odious millionaires whose well-being is in-creased by

the sufferings of others, and who better enjoy their own fireside when

they reflect that it is raining out of doors, and that there are plenty

of poor devils without a shelter?\_

THE PAINTER.

\_Think of me what you will. I have too much affection for you to help

you to commit a folly--an irreparable folly.\_

THE POET.

\_Come! what is it? You are not satisfied? And yet it seems to me that

one breathes in happiness here, just as freely as one does the air of

heaven at a country window.\_

THE PAINTER.

\_You are right, I am happy, completely happy, I love my wife with all my

heart. When I think of my child, I laugh aloud to myself with pleasure.

Marriage for me has been a harbour of calm and safe waters, not one in

which you make fast to a ring on the shore, at the risk of rusting

there for ever, but one of those blue creeks where sails and masts are

repaired for fresh excursions into unknown countries, I never worked as

well as I have since my marriage. All my best pictures date from then.\_

THE POET.

\_Well then!\_

THE PAINTER.

\_My dear fellow, at the risk of seeming a coxcomb, I will say that I

look upon my happiness as a kind of miracle, something abnormal and

exceptional. Yes! the more I see what marriage is, the more I look back

with terror at the risk I ran. I am like those who, ignorant of the

dangers they have unwittingly gone through, turn pale when all is over,

amazed at their own audacity.\_

THE POET.

\_But what then are these terrible dangers?\_

THE PAINTER.

\_The first and greatest of all, is the loss or degradation of one's

talent. This should count, I think, with an artist. For observe that

at this moment, I am not speaking of the ordinary conditions of life. I

grant you, that in general marriage is an excellent thing, and that the

majority of men only begin to be of some account when the family circle

completes them or makes them greater. Often, indeed, it is necessary to

a profession. A bachelor lawyer cannot even be imagined. He would not

have the needful air of weight and gravity. But for all of us, painters,

poets, sculptors, musicians, who live outside of life, wholly occupied

in studying it, in reproducing it, holding ourselves always a little

remote from it, as one steps back from a picture the better to see it, I

say that marriage can only be the exception. To that nervous, exacting,

impressionable being, that child-man that we call an artist, a special

type of woman, almost impossible to find, is needful, and the safest

thing to do is not to look for her. Ah! how well our great Delacroix,

whom you admire so much, understood that! What a fine existence was his,

bounded by his studio wall, devoted exclusively to Art! I was looking

the other day at his cottage at Champrosay and the prim little garden

full of roses, where he sauntered alone for twenty years! It has the

calm and the narrowness of celibacy. Well now! think for a moment of

Delacroix married, father of a family, with all the preoccupations of

children to bring up, of money matters, of illnesses; do you believe his

work would have been the same?\_

THE POET.

\_You cite Delacroix, I reply Victor Hugo. Do you think that marriage

hampered him for instance, while writing so many admirable books?\_

THE PAINTER.

\_I think as a matter of fact, that marriage did not hamper him in

anything. But all husbands have not the genius that obtains pardon,

nor a halo of glory with which to dry the tears they cause to flow. It

cannot be very amusing to be the wife of a genius. There are plenty of

labourers' wives who are happier.\_

THE POET.

\_A curious thing, all the same, this special pleading against marriage,

by a married man, who is happy in being so.\_

THE PAINTER.

\_I repeat that I don't give myself as an example. My opinion is formed by

all the sad things I have seen elsewhere; all the misunderstandings

so frequent in the households of artists, and caused solely by their

abnormal life. Look at that sculptor who, in full maturity of age and

talent, has just exiled himself, leaving wife and children behind him.

Public opinion condemns him, and certainly I offer no excuse for him.

And, nevertheless, I can well understand how he arrived at such a point!

Here was a fellow who adored his art, and had a horror of the world, and

society. The wife, though amiable and intelligent, instead of shielding

him from the social obligations he loathed, condemned him for some

ten years to all the exactions they involved. Thus she induced him to

undertake a lot of official busts, horrible respectabilities in velvet

skull caps, frights of women utterly devoid of grace; she disturbed him

ten times a day with importunate visitors, and then every evening

laid out for him a dress suit and light gloves, and dragged him from

drawing-room to drawing-room. You will tell me he could have rebelled,

could have replied point-blank: "No!" But don't you know that the very

fact of our sedentary existences leaves us more than other men dependent

on domestic influence? The atmosphere of the home envelopes us, and if

some touch of the ideal does not lighten it, soon wearies and drags us

down. Moreover, the artist as a rule puts what force and energy he

has into his work, and after his solitary and patient struggles, finds

himself left with no will to oppose to the petty importunities of life.

With him, feminine tyrannies have free play. No one is more easily

conquered and subdued. Only, beware! He must not be made to feel the

yoke too heavily. If one day the invisible bonds with which he is

surreptitiously fettered are drawn too tight and arrest the artistic

effort, he will all at once tear them asunder, and, mistrusting his own

weakness, will fly like our sculptor, over the hills and far away.\_

\_The wife of this sculptor was astounded at his flight. The unhappy

creature is still wondering: "What can I have done to him?" Nothing.

She simply did not understand him. For it is not enough to be good and

intelligent to be the true helpmate of an artist, A woman must also

possess infinite tact, smiling abnegation; and all this is found only by

a miracle in a young creature, curious though ignorant as regards life.

She is pretty, she has married a well-known man, received everywhere;

why should she not wish to show herself a little on his arm? Is it

not quite natural? The husband, on the contrary, growing intolerant

of society as his talent progresses, finding time short, and art

engrossing, refuses to be exhibited. Behold them both miserable, and

whether the man gives in or resists, his life is henceforward turned

from its course, and from its tranquillity. Ah! how many of these

ill-matched couples have I known, where the wife was sometimes

executioner, sometimes victim, but more often executioner, and nearly

always unwittingly so! The other evening I was at Dargenty's, the

musician. There were but a few guests, and he was asked to play. Hardly

had he begun one off those pretty mazurkas with a Polish rhythm, which

make him the successor of Chopin, when his wife began to talk, quite

low at first, then a little louder. By degrees the fire of conversation

spread. At the end of a minute I was the only listener. Then he shut the

piano, and said to me with a heart-rent smile: "It is always like this

here--my wife does not care for music." Can you imagine anything more

terrible than to marry a woman who does not care for your art? Take my

word for it, my friend, and don't marry. You are alone, you are free;

keep as precious things, your liberty and your loneliness.\_

THE POET.

\_That is all very well! You talk at your ease of solitude. Presently,

when I am gone, if some idea occurs to you, you will gently follow it

by the side of your dying embers, without feeling around you that

atmosphere of isolation, so vast, so empty, that in it inspiration

evaporates and disperses. And one may yet fear to be alone in the hours

of work; but there are moments of discouragement and weariness, when

one doubts oneself ones art even. That is the moment when it must be

happiness to find a faithful and loving heart, ever ready to sympathize

with one's depression, to which one may appeal without fearing to

disconcert a confidence and enthusiasm that are, in fact, unalterable.

And then the child. That sweet unconscious baby smile, is not that the

best moral rejuvenescence one can have? Ah! I have often thought over

that. For us artists, vain as all must be who live by success, by that

superficial esteem, capricious and fleeting, that we call the vogue; for

us, above all others, children are indispensable. They alone can console

us for growing old. All that we lose, the child gains. The success we

have missed, we think: "He will have it" and in proportion as our hair

grows thin, we have the joy of seeing it grow again, curly, golden, full

of life, on a little fair head at our side.\_

THE PAINTER.

\_Ah, poet! poet! have you thought also of all the mouthfuls by which

with the end of pen or brush we must nourish a brood?\_

THE POET.

\_Well! say what you like, the artist is made for family life, and

that is so true, that those among us who do not marry, take refuge in

temporary companionships, like travellers who, tired of being always

home-less, end by settling in a room in some hotel, and pass their lives

under the hackneyed notice of the signboard: "Apartments by the month or

night?"\_

THE PAINTER.

\_Such are all in the wrong. They accept the worries of wedlock and will

never know its joys.\_

THE POET.

\_"You acknowledge then that there are some joys?"\_

\_Here the painter, instead of replying, rose, searched out from among

drawings and sketches a much-thumbed manuscript, and returning to his

companion:\_

\_"We might argue like this," said he, "for ever so long without either

convincing the other. But since, notwithstanding my observations, you

seem determined to try marriage, here is a little work I beg you to

read. It is written--I would have you note--by a married man, much in

love with his wife, very happy in his home, an observer who, spending

his life among artists, amused himself by sketching one or two such

households as I spoke of just now. From the first to the last line of

this book, all is true, so true that the author would never publish it.

Read it, and come to me when you have read it. I think you will have

changed your mind."\_

\_The poet took the manuscript and carried it home with him; but he did

not keep the little book with all the needful care, for I have been able

to detach a few leaves from it and boldly offer them to the public.\_

[Illustration: p023-034]

MADAME HEURTEBISE.

She was certainly not intended for an artist's wife, above all for

such an artist as this outrageous fellow, impassioned, uproarious and

exuberant, who, with his nose in the air and bristling moustaches,

rushed through life defiantly flaunting the eccentric and whirlwind-like

name of Heurtebise,\* like a challenge thrown down to all the absurd

conventionalities and prejudices of the \_bourgeois\_ class. How, and by

what strange charm had the little woman, brought up in a jeweller's

shop, behind rows of watch chains and strings of rings, found the means

of captivating this poet?

\* Hit the blast (literally).

Picture to yourself the affected graces of a shopwoman with

insignificant features, cold and ever-smiling eyes, complacent and

placid physiognomy, devoid of real elegance, but having a certain love

for glitter and tinsel, no doubt caught at her father's shopwindow,

making her take pleasure in many-coloured satin bows, sashes and

buckles; and her hair glossy with cosmetic, stiffly arranged by the

hairdresser over a small, obstinate, narrow forehead, where the total

absence of wrinkles told less of youth than of complete lack of thought.

Such as she was, however, Heurtebise loved and wooed her, and as he

happened to possess a small income, found no difficulty in winning her.

What pleased her in this marriage was the idea of wedding an author,

a well-known man, who would take her to the theatre as often as she

wished. As for him, I verily believe that her sham elegance born of the

shop, her pretentious manners, pursed up mouth, and affectedly uplifted

little finger, fascinated him and appeared to him the height, of

Parisian refinement; for he was born a peasant and in spite of his

intelligence remained one to the end of his days.

[Illustration: p025-036]

Tempted by a quiet happiness and the family life of which he had been so

long deprived, Heurtebise spent two years far from his friends, buried

in the country, or in out-of-way suburban nooks, within easy distance

of that great city Paris, which overexcited him even while he yet sought

its attenuated atmosphere, just like those invalids who are recommended

sea air, but who, too delicate to bear it in all its strength, are

compelled to inhale it from a distance of some miles. From time to time,

his name appeared in a newspaper or magazine at the end of an article;

but already the freshness of style, the bursts of eloquence, were

lacking by which he had been formerly known. We thought: "He is too

happy! his happiness has spoilt him."

However, one day he returned amongst us, and we immediately saw that he

was not happy. His pallid countenance, drawn features contracted by a

perpetual irritability, the violent manners degenerated into a nervous

rage, the hollow sound of his once fine ringing laugh, all showed that

he was an altered man. Too proud to admit that he had made a mistake,

he would, not complain, but the old friends who gathered round him

were soon convinced that he had made a most foolish marriage, and that

henceforth his life must prove a failure. On the other hand, Madame

Heurtebise appeared to us, after two years of married life, exactly the

same as we had beheld her in the vestry on her wedding day. She wore

the same calm and simpering smile, she had as much as ever the air of

a shopwoman in her Sunday clothes, only she had gained self-possession.

She talked now. In the midst of artistic discussions into which

Heurtebise passionately threw himself, with arbitrary assertions, brutal

contempt, or blind enthusiasm, the false and honeyed voice of his

wife would suddenly make irruption, forcing him to listen to some idle

reasoning or foolish observation invariably outside of the subject

of discussion. Embarrassed and worried, he would cast us an imploring

glance, and strive to resume the interrupted conversation. Then at last,

wearied out by her familiar and constant contradiction, by the silliness

of her birdlike brain, inflated and empty as any cracknel, he held his

tongue, and silently resigned himself to let her go on to the bitter

end. But this determined silence exasperated Madame, seemed to her

more insulting, more disdainful than anything. Her sharp voice became

discordant, and growing higher and shriller, stung and buzzed, like

the ceaseless teasing of a fly, till at last her enraged husband in his

turn, burst out brutal and terrific.

She emerged from these incessant quarrels, which always ended in tears,

rested and refreshed, as a lawn after a watering, but he remained

broken, fevered, incapable of work, Little by little his very violence

was worn out One evening when I was present at one of these odious

scenes, as Madame Heurtebise triumphantly left the table, I saw on her

husband's face bent downwards during the quarrel and now upraised, an

expression of scorn and anger that no words could any longer express.

The little woman went off shutting the door with a sharp snap, and he,

flushed, with his eyes full of tears, and his mouth distorted by an

ironical and despairing smile, made like any school-boy behind his

master's back, an atrocious gesture of mingled rage and pain. After a

few moments, I heard him murmur, in a voice strangled by emotion: "Ah,

if it were not for the child, how I would be off at once!"

For they had a child, a poor little fellow, handsome and dirty, who

crawled all over the place, played with dogs bigger than himself, with

the spiders in the garden, and made mud-pies. His mother only noticed

him to declare him "disgusting" and that she had not put him out to

nurse.

[Illustration: p029-040]

She clung in fact to all the little shopkeeper traditions of her youth,

and the untidy home in which she went about from early morn in elaborate

costumes and astonishingly dressed hair, recalled the back-shops so dear

to her heart, rooms black with filth and want of air, where in the

short intervals of rest from commercial life, badly cooked meals were

hurriedly eaten, at a bare wooden table, listening all the while for the

tinkle of the shop-bell. With this class, nothing has importance but

the street, the street with its passing purchasers and idlers, and its

overflowing holiday crowd, that on Sundays throng the side walks and

pavements. And how bored she was, wretched creature, in the country, how

she regretted the Paris life! Heurtebise, on the contrary, required

the country for his mental health. Paris still bewildered him like some

countrified boor on his first visit. His wife could not understand it,

and bitterly complained of her exile. By way of diversion she invited

her old acquaintances, and when her husband was absent they amused

themselves by turning over his papers, his memoranda, and the work he

was engaged upon.

"Do look, my dear, how funny it is. He shuts himself up to write this.

He paces up and down, talking to himself. As for me, I understand

nothing of what he does."

And then came endless regrets, and recollections of her past life.

"Ah! if I had known. When I think that I might have married Aubertot and

Fajon, the linen-drapers." She always spoke of the two partners at the

same time, as though she would have married the firm. Neither did she

restrain her feelings in her husband's presence.

[Illustration: p031-042]

She disturbed him, prevented all work, settling down with her friends in

the very room he was writing in, and filling it with the silly

chatter of idle women, who talked loud, full of disdain for a literary

profession which brought in so little, and whose most laborious hours

always resemble a capricious idleness. From time to time Heurtebise

strove to escape from the life which he felt was daily becoming more

dismal. He rushed off to Paris, hired a small room at an hotel, tried to

fancy he was a bachelor; but suddenly he thought of his son, and with a

desperate longing to embrace him hurried back the same evening into the

country.

[Illustration: p032-043]

On these occasions, in order to avoid the inevitable scene on his

return, he took a friend back with him and kept him there as long as he

could. As soon as he was no longer alone face to face with his wife,

his fine intellect awoke and his interrupted schemes of work little by

little and one after the other came back to him. But what anguish it was

when his friends left! He would have kept his guests for ever, clinging

to them by all the strength of his \_ennui\_. With what sadness would he

accompany us to the stand of the little suburban omnibus which bore us

back to Paris! and when we left, how slowly he turned homewards over the

dusty road, with rounded shoulders and listless arms, listening to the

vanishing wheels.

In truth their \_tête-à-tête\_ life had become unbearable, and to avoid

it, he tried always to keep his house full. With his easy goodnature,

his weariness and indifference, he was soon surrounded by a lot of

literary starvelings. A set of scribblers, lazy, cracked day-dreamers,

settled down upon him and became more at home than himself; and as his

wife was but a fool, incapable of judging, because they talked more

loudly, she found them charming and very superior to her husband. The

days were spent in idle discussions. There was a clash of empty words,

a firing of smallest shot, and poor Heurtebise, motionless and silent

in the midst of the tumult, merely smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

Sometimes, however, towards the end of an interminable repast, when all

his guests, elbows on table, began around the brandy flasks one of

those lengthy maundering conversations, benumbing like clouds of tobacco

smoke, an immense feeling of disgust would seize hold of him, and not

having the courage to turn out all these poor wretches, he would himself

disappear and remain absent for a week.

[Illustration: p034-045]

"My house is full of imbeciles," he said one day to me. "I dare not

return." With this kind of existence, he no longer wrote. His name was

never seen, and his fortune, squandered in a perpetual craving to have

people in his house, disappeared in the outstretched hands around him.

[Illustration: p035-046]

It was a long time since we had met when I received one morning a line

of his dear little handwriting, formerly so firm, now trembling and

uncertain. "We are in Paris. Come and see me. I am so dull." I found him

with his wife, his child and his dogs, in a lugubrious little apartment

in the Batignolles. The disorder which in this narrow space could not be

spread about, seemed more hideous even than in the country. While the

child and dogs rolled about in rooms the size of a chessboard

compartment, Heurtebise; who was ill, lay with his face to the wall, in

a state of utter prostration. His wife, dressed out as usual, and ever

placid, hardly looked at him. "I don't know what is the matter with

him," she said to me with a gesture of indifference. On seeing me he had

for a moment a return of gaiety, and a minute of his old hearty laugh,

but it was soon stifled. As they had kept up in Paris all their suburban

habits, there appeared at the breakfast hour, in the midst of this

household disorganized by poverty and illness, a parasite, a seedy

looking little bald man, cranky and peevish, of whom they always spoke

as "the man who has read Proudhon." It was thus that Heurtebise, who

probably had never known his name, introduced him to everybody. When he

was asked "Who is that?" he unhesitatingly replied, "Oh! a very clever

fellow, who has thoroughly studied Proudhon." His knowledge was

certainly not very apparent, for this deep thinker rarely made himself

heard except to complain at table of an ill-cooked roast or a spoilt

sauce. On this occasion, the man who had read Proudhon declared that the

breakfast was detestable, which however did not prevent his devouring

the larger half of it himself.

How long and lugubrious this meal by the bedside of my sick friend

appeared to me! The wife gossiped as usual, with a tap now and then to

the child, a bone to the dogs, and a smile to the philosopher. Not once

did Heurtebise turn towards us, and yet he was not asleep. I hardly know

whether he thought. Dear, valiant fellow! In those paltry and ceaseless

struggles, the mainspring of his strong nature had broken, and he was

already beginning to die. The silent death agony, which however was

rather an abandonment of life, lasted several months; and then Madame

Heurtebise found herself a widow. Then, as no tears had dimmed her clear

eyes, as she always bestowed the same care on her glossy locks, and as

Aubertot and Fajon were still available, she married Aubertot and Fajon.

Perhaps it was Aubertot, perhaps it was Fajon, perhaps even both of

them. In any case, she was able to resume the life she was fitted for,

and the voluble gossip and eternal smile of the shopwoman.

[Illustration: p038-049]

[Illustration: p041-052]

THE CREDO OF LOVE.

To be the wife of a poet! that had been the dream of her life! but

ruthless fate, instead of the romantic and fevered existence she sighed

for, had doomed her to a peaceful, humdrum happiness, and married her to

a rich man at Auteuil, gentle and amiable, perhaps indeed a trifle

old for her, possessed of but one passion,--perfectly inoffensive and

unexciting--that of horticulture. This excellent man spent his days

pruning, scissors in hand, tending and trimming a magnificent collection

of rose trees, heating a greenhouse, watering flower beds; and really it

must be admitted that, for a poor little heart hungering after an ideal,

this was hardly sufficient food. Nevertheless for ten years her life

remained straightforward and uniform, like the smooth sanded paths in

her husband's garden, and she pursued it with measured steps, listening

with resigned weariness to the dry and irritating sound of the

ever-moving scissors, or to the monotonous and endless showers that fell

from the watering pots on to the leafy shrubs. The rabid horticulturist

bestowed on his wife the same scrupulous attention he gave to his

flowers. He carefully regulated the temperature of the drawing-room,

overcrowded with nosegays, fearing for her the April frosts or March

sun; and like the plants in pots that are put out and taken in at stated

times, he made her live methodically, ever watchful of a change of

barometer or phase of the moon.

She remained like this for a long time, closed in by the four walls

of the conjugal garden, innocent as a clematis, full however of wild

aspirations towards other gardens, less staid, less humdrum, where the

rose trees would fling out their branches untrained, and the wild growth

of weed and briar be taller than the trees, and blossom with unknown and

fantastic flowers, luxuriantly coloured by a warmer sun. Such gardens

are rarely found save in the books of poets, and so she read many

verses, all unknown to the nurseryman, who knew no other poetry than a

few almanac distichs such as:

Quand il pleut à la Saint-Médard,

Il pleut quarante jours plus tard.\*

\* When it rains on Saint Medard's day,

It rains on for forty more days.

At haphazard, the unfortunate creature ravenously devoured the paltriest

rhymes, satisfied if she found in them lines ending in "love" and

"passion"; then closing the book, she would spend hours dreaming and

sighing: "That would have been the husband for me!"

It is probable that all this would have remained in a state of vague

aspiration, if at the terrible age of thirty, which seems to be the

decisive critical moment for woman's virtue, as twelve o'clock is for

the day's beauty, the irresistible Amaury had not chanced to cross her

path. Amaury was a drawing-room poet, one of those fanatics in dress

coat and grey kid gloves, who between ten o'clock and midnight, go

and recite to the world their ecstasies of love, their raptures, their

despair, leaning mournfully against the mantel-piece, in the blaze of

the lights, while seated around him women, in full evening dress, listen

entranced behind their fans.

This one might pose as the very ideal of his kind; with his vulgar but

irresistible countenance, sunken eye, pallid complexion, hair cut short

and moustaches stiffly plastered with cosmetic. A desperate man such

as women love, hopeless of life but irreproachably dressed, a lyric

enthusiast, chilled and disheartened, in whom the madness of inspiration

can be divined only in the loose and neglected tie of his cravat. But

also what success awaits him, when he delivers in a strident voice

a tirade from his poem, the \_Credo of Love\_, more especially the one

ending in this extraordinary line:

Moi, je crois à l'amour comme je crois en Dieu! \*

\* I believe in love as I believe in God.

[Illustration: p045-56]

Mark you, I strongly suspect the rascal cares as little for God, as for

the rest; but women do not look so closely. They are easily caught by

a birdlime of words, and every time Amaury recites his \_Credo of Love\_,

you are certain to see all round the drawing-room rows upon rows of

little rosy mouths, eagerly opening, ready to swallow the taking bait

of mawkish sentimentality. Just fancy! A poet who has such beautiful

moustaches and who believes in love as he believes in God.

For the nurseryman's wife this proved indeed irresistible. In three

sittings she was conquered. Only, as at the bottom of this elegiac

nature there was some honesty and pride, she would not stoop to any

paltry fault. Moreover the poet himself declared in his \_Credo\_, that

he only understood one way of erring: that which was openly declared and

ready to defy both law and society. Taking therefore the \_Credo of Love\_

for her guide, the young woman one fine day escaped from the garden at

Auteuil and went off to throw herself into her poet's arms.--"I can no

longer live with that man! Take me away!"

In such cases the husband is always \_that man\_, even when he is a

horticulturist.

For a moment Amaury was staggered. How on earth could he have imagined

that an ordinary little housewife of thirty would have taken in earnest

a love poem, and followed it out literally? However he put the best face

he could on his over-good fortune, and as the lady had, thanks to her

little Auteuil garden, remained fresh and pretty, he carried her off

without a murmur. The first days, all was delightful. They feared lest

the husband should track them. They thought it advisable to hide under

fictitious names, change hotels, inhabit the most remote quarters of the

town, the suburbs of Paris, the outlying districts.

[Illustration: p047-058]

In the evening they stealthily sallied forth and took sentimental walks

along the fortifications. Oh the wonderful power of romance! The more

she was alarmed, the more precautions, window blinds and lowered veils,

were necessary, the greater did her poet seem. At night, they opened the

little window of their room and gazing at the stars rising on high above

the signal lights of the neighbouring railway, she made him repeat again

and again his wonderful verses:

Moi, je crois à l'amour comme je crois en Dieu.

And it was delightful!

[Illustration: p048-059]

Unfortunately it did not last. The husband left them too much

undisturbed. The fact is, \_that man\_ was a philosopher. His wife gone,

he had closed the green door of his oasis and quietly set about trimming

his roses again, happy in the thought that these at least, attached

to the soil by long roots, would not be able to run away from him. Our

reassured lovers returned to Paris and then suddenly the young woman

felt that some change had come over her poet. Their flight, fear of

detection, and constant alarms,--all these things which had fed

her passion existing no longer, she began to understand and see the

situation clearly.

[Illustration: p049-060]

Moreover, at every moment, in the settling of their little household,

in the thousand paltry details of every day life, the man she was living

with showed himself more thoroughly.

The few and scarce generous, heroic or delicate feelings he possessed

were spun out in his verses, and he kept none for his personal use.

He was mean, selfish, above all very niggardly, a fault love seldom

forgives. Then he had cut off his moustaches, and was disfigured by

the loss. How different from that fine gloomy fellow with his carefully

curled locks, as he appeared one evening declaiming his \_Credo\_, in the

blaze of two chandeliers! Now, in the enforced retreat he was undergoing

on her account, he gave way to all his crotchets, the greatest of which

was fancying himself always ill. Indeed, from constantly playing at

consumption, one ends by believing in it. The poet Amaury was fond of

decoctions, wrapped himself up in plaisters, and covered his chimney

piece with phials and powders. For some time the little woman took up

quite seriously her part of a nursing sister. Her devotion seemed to

excuse her fault and give an object to her life. But she soon tired of

it. In spite of herself, in the stuffy room where the poet sat wrapped

in flannel, she could not help thinking of her little garden so sweetly

scented, and the kind nurseryman seen from afar in the midst of

his shrubs and flowerbeds, appeared to her as simple, touching and

disinterested, as this other one was exacting and egotistical.

At the end of a month, she loved her husband, really loved him, not with

the affection induced by habit, but with a real and true love. One day

she wrote him a long letter full of passion and repentance. He did

not vouchsafe a reply. Perhaps he thought she was not yet sufficiently

punished. Then she despatched letter after letter, humbled herself,

begged him to allow her to return, saying she would die rather than

continue to live with that man. It was now the lover's turn to be called

"that man." Strange to say, she hid herself from him to write; for

she believed him still in love, and while imploring her husband's

forgiveness, she feared the exaltation of her lover.

"He will never allow me to leave," she said to herself.

Accordingly, when by dint of supplications she obtained forgiveness

and the nurseryman--I have already mentioned that he was a

philosopher,--consented to take her back, the return to her own home

bore all the mysterious and dramatic aspect of flight. She literally

eloped with her husband. It was her last culpable pleasure. One evening

as the poet, tired of their dual existence, and proud of his regrown

moustaches, had gone to an evening party to recite his \_Credo of Love\_,

she jumped into a cab that was awaiting her at the end of the street and

returned with her old husband to the little garden at Auteuil, for ever

cured of her ambition to be the wife of a poet. It is true that this

fellow was not much of a poet!

[Illustration: p055-066]

THE TRANSTEVERINA.

The play was just over, and while the crowd, with its many varied

impressions, hurried away and poured out under the glare of the

principal portico of the theatre, a few friends, of whom I was one,

awaited the poet at the artists' entrance in order to congratulate him.

His production had not, indeed, been very successful. Too powerful to

suit the timid and trivial imagination of the public of our day, it

was quite beyond the range of the stage, limited as that is by

conventionalities and tolerated traditions. Pedantic criticism declared:

"It is not fit for the stage!" and the scoffers of the boulevards

revenged themselves for the emotion these magnificent verses had given

them by repeating: "It won't pay!" As for us, we were proud of the

friend who had dared to roll forth in a ringing peal, his splendid

golden rhymes, flashing the best product of his genius beneath the

artificial and murderous light of the lustres, and presenting his

personages in life-like size, heedless of the optical illusion of the

modern stage, of the dimness of opera-glass and defective vision.

Amid a motley crowd of scene shifters, firemen, and \_figurants\_ muffled

up in comforters, the poet approached us, his tall figure bent double,

his coat collar chillily turned up over his thin beard and long grizzled

hair. He seemed depressed. The scant applause of the hired claque and

literary friends confined to a corner of the house foretold a limited

number of representations, choice and rare spectators, and posters

rapidly replaced without giving his name a chance of being known. When

one has worked twenty of talent and life, this obstinate refusal of

the public to comprehend is wearying and disheartening, and one ends by

thinking: "Perhaps after all they are right." Fear paralyses and words

fail. Our acclamations and enthusiastic greetings somewhat cheered him.

"Really do you think so? Is it well done? 'Tis true I have given all I

knew." And his feverish hands anxiously clutched ours, his eyes full

of tears sought a sincere and reassuring glance. It was the imploring

anguish of the sick person, asking the doctor: "It is not true, I'm

not going to die?" No! poet, you will not die. The operettas and fairy

pieces that have had hundreds of representations and thousands of

spectators will be long since forgotten, scattered to the winds with

their last playbills, while your work will ever remain fresh and living.

As we stood on the now deserted pavement, exhorting and cheering him, a

loud contralto voice vulgarised by an Italian accent burst upon us.

"Hullo, artist! enough \_pouégie\_. Let's go and eat the \_estoufato!\_"

[Illustration: p058-069]

At the same moment a stout woman wrapped up in a hooded cape and a red

tartan shawl linked her arm in that of our friend, in a manner so

brutal and despotic that his countenance and attitude became at once

embarrassed.

"My wife," he said, then turning towards her with a hesitating smile:

"Suppose we take them home and show them how you make an \_estoufato?\_"

Flattered in the conceit of her culinary accomplishments, the Italian

graciously consented to receive us, and five or six of us started off

for the heights of Montmartre where they dwelt, to share their stewed

beef.

I confess I took a certain interest in the artist's home life. Since his

marriage our friend had led a very secluded existence, almost always in

the country; but what I knew of his life whetted my curiosity. Fifteen

years before, when in all the freshness of a romantic imagination,

he had met in the suburbs of Rome a magnificent creature with whom he

immediately fell desperately in love. Maria Assunta, her father, and a

brood of brothers and sisters inhabited one of those little houses of

the Transtevera with walls uprising from the waters of the Tiber, and an

old fishing boat rocking level with the door. One day he caught sight of

the handsome Italian girl, with bare feet in the sand, red skirt tightly

pleated around her, and unbleached linen sleeves tucked up to the

shoulders, catching eels out of a large gleaming wet net. The silvery

scales glistening through the meshes full of water, the golden river

and scarlet petticoat, the beautiful black eyes deep and pensive, which

seemed darkened in their musing by the surrounding sunlight struck the

artist, perhaps even rather trivially, like some coloured print on the

titlepage of a song in a music-seller's window.

[Illustration: p060-071]

It so chanced that the girl was heart-whole, having till now bestowed

her affections on a big tom-cat, yellow and sly, also a great fisher of

eels, who bristled up all over when anyone approached his mistress.

[Illustration: p061-072]

Beasts and men, our lover managed to tame all these folk, was married at

Santa-Maria of the Transtevera and brought back to France the beautiful

Assunta and her \_cato\_.

Ah! poor fellow, he ought also to have brought away at the same time

some of the sunlight of that country, a scrap of the blue sky, the

eccentric costume and the bulrushes of the Tiber, and the large swing

nets of the \_Ponte Rotto\_; in fact the frame with the picture. Then he

would have been spared the cruel disenchantment he experienced when,

having settled in a modest flat on the fourth storey, on the heights of

Montmartre, he saw his handsome Transteverina decked out in a crinoline,

a flounced dress, and a Parisian bonnet, which, constantly out of

balance on the top of her heavy braids, assumed the most independent

attitudes. Under the clear cold light of Parisian skies, the unfortunate

man soon perceived that his wife was a fool, an irretrievable fool. Not

a single idea even lurked in the velvety depths of those beautiful black

eyes, lost in infinite contemplation. They glittered like an animal's

in the calm of digestion, or in a chance gleam of light, nothing more.

Withal the lady was common, vulgar, accustomed to govern by a slap all

the little world of her native hut, and the least opposition threw her

into uncontrollable rages.

Who would have guessed that the fine mouth, straitened by silence into

the purest shape of an antique face, would suddenly open to let flow

torrents of vulgar abuse? Without respect for herself or for him, out

loud, in the street, at the theatre, she would pick a quarrel with him,

and indulge in scenes of fearful jealousy. To crown all, devoid of

any artistic feeling, she was completely ignorant of her husband's

profession and language, of manners, in fact of everything. The little

French she could be taught, only made her forget Italian, and the result

was that she composed a kind of half and half jargon which had the most

comical effect. In short this love story, begun like one of Lamartine's

poems, was ending like a novel of Champfleury's. After having for a long

time struggled to civilise this wild woman, the poet saw he must abandon

the task. Too honourable to leave her, probably still too much in love,

he made up his mind to shut himself up, see no one, and work hard. The

few intimate friends he admitted to his house, saw that they embarrassed

him and ceased to come.

[Illustration: p064-075]

Hence it was that for the last fifteen years he had been living boxed up

in his household like in a leper's cell.

As I pondered over this wretched existence, I watched the strange couple

walking before me. He, slender, tall and round-shouldered.

[Illustration: p065-076]

She, squarely built, heavy, shaking her shawl by an impatient shrug

of her shoulders, with a free gait like a man's. She was tolerably

cheerful, her speech was loud, and from time to time she turned round to

see if we followed, familiarly shouting and calling by name those of us

she happened to know, accentuating her words by much gesticulation as

she would have hailed a fishing boat on the Tiber. When we reached their

house, the \_concierge\_, furious at seeing so noisy a crew at such an

unearthly hour, tried to prevent our entry. The Italian and he had a

fearful row on the staircase. We were all dotted about on the winding

stairs dimly lighted by the dying gas, ill at ease, uncomfortable,

hardly knowing if we ought not to come down again.

"Come, quick, let us go up," said the poet in a low tone, and we

followed him silently, while, leaning over the banisters that shook

under her weight and anger, the Italian let fly a volley of abuse in

which Roman imprecations alternated with the vocabulary of the

back slums. What a return home for the poet who had just roused the

admiration of artistic Paris, and still retained in his fevered eyes

the dazzling intoxication of his first performance! What a humiliating

recall to every-day life!

It was only by the fireside in his little sitting room that the icy

chill caused by this silly adventure was dispelled, and we should soon

have completely forgotten it, had it not been for the piercing voice and

bursts of laughter of the signora whom we heard in the kitchen telling

her maid how soundly she had rated that \_choulato!\_ When the table was

laid and supper ready, she came and seated herself amongst us, having

taken off her shawl, bonnet and veil, and I was able to examine her at

my leisure. She was no longer handsome. The square face, the broad heavy

jaw, the coarse hair turning grey, and above all the vulgar expression

of the mouth, contrasted singularly with the eternal and meaningless

reverie of the dreamy gaze. Resting her elbows on the table, familiar

and shapeless, she joined in the conversation without for an instant

losing sight of her plate. Just over her head, proud amid all the

melancholy rubbish of the drawing-room, a large portrait signed by an

illustrious name, stood out of the surrounding shade,--it was Maria

Assunta at twenty. The purple costume, the milky white of the pleated

wimple, the bright gold of the over-abundant imitation jewelry, set off

magnificently the brilliancy of a sunny complexion, the velvety shades

of the thick hair growing low on the forehead, which seemed to be united

by an almost imperceptible down to the superb and straight line of

the eyebrows. How could such an exuberance of life and beauty have

deteriorated and become such a mass of vulgarity? And curiously while

the Transteverina talked, I interrogated her lovely eyes, so deep and

soft on the canvas.

[Illustration: p068-079]

The excitement of the meal had put her in a good humour. To cheer up

the poet, to whom his mingled failure and glory were doubly painful,

she thumped him on the back, laughed with her mouth full, saying in her

hideous jargon, that it was not worth while for such a trifle to fling

oneself head downwards from the \_campanile del Duomo\_.

[Illustration: p069-080]

"Isn't it true, \_il cato?\_" she added turning to the old tom-cat

crippled by rheumatism, snoring in front of the fire. Then suddenly, in

the middle of an interesting discussion, she screamed out to her husband

in a voice senseless and brutal as the crack of a rifle:

"Hey! artist! \_la lampo qui filo!\_"

The poor fellow immediately interrupted his conversation to wind up the

lamp, humble, submissive, anxious to avoid the scene he dreaded, and

which in spite of all, he did not escape.

On returning from the theatre we had stopped at the \_Maison d'Or\_ to get

a bottle of choice wine to wash down the \_estoufato\_. All along the road

Maria Assunta had piously carried it under her shawl, and on her arrival

she had placed it on the table where she could cast tender looks upon

it, for Roman women are fond of good wine. Already twice or three times

mistrustful of her husband's absence of mind, and the length of his

arms, she had said:

"Mind the \_boteglia\_--you're going to break it."

At last, as she went off to the kitchen to take up with her own hands

the famous \_estoufato\_, she again called out to him:

"Whatever you do, don't break the \_boteglia\_."

Unluckily, the moment his wife had disappeared, the poet seized the

opportunity to talk about art, theatres, success, so freely and with so

much gusto and vivacity, that--crash! By a gesture more eloquent than

the others, the wonderful bottle was thrown down and fell to the ground

in a thousand pieces. Never have I beheld such terror. He stopped short,

and became deadly pale. At the same moment, Assunta's contralto was

heard in the next room, and the Italian appeared on the threshold with

flashing eyes, lips swollen with rage, red with the heat of the kitchen

range.

"The \_boteglia!\_" she roared in a terrible voice.

Then timidly bending down to me, he whispered:

"Say it's you."

And the poor devil was so frightened, that I felt his long legs tremble

under the table.

[Illustration: p075-086]

A COUPLE OF SINGERS.

How could they help falling in love? Handsome and famous as they both

were, singing in the same operas, living each night during five whole

acts the same artificial and passionate existence. You cannot play with

fire without being burnt. You cannot say twenty times a month: "I love

you!" to the sighing of a flute or the tremolos of a violin, without at

last being caught by the emotion of your own voice. In course of time,

passion awoke in the surrounding harmonies, the rhythmical surprises,

the gorgeousness of costume and scenery. It was wafted to them through

the window that Elsa and Lohengrin threw wide open on a night vibrating

with sound and luminousness:

"Come let us breathe the intoxicating perfumes."

It slipped in between the white columns of the Capulets' balcony, where

Romeo and Juliet linger in the dawning light of day:

"It was the nightingale, and not the lark."

And softly it caught Faust and Marguerite in a ray of moonlight, that

rose from the rustic bench to the shutters of their little chamber, amid

the entangled ivy and blossoming roses:

"Let me once more gaze upon thy face."

Soon all Paris knew their love and became interested in it. It was the

wonder of the season. The world came to admire the two splendid stars

gently gravitating towards each other in the musical firmament of the

Opera House. At last one evening, after an enthusiastic recall, as the

curtain fell, separating the house full of noisy applause and the

stage littered with bouquets, where the white gown of Juliet swept

over scattered camellia blossoms, the two singers were seized with an

irresistible impulse, as though their love, a shade artificial, had but

awaited the emotion of a splendid success to reveal itself.

[Illustration: p077-088]

Hands were clasped, vows exchanged, vows consecrated by the distant

and persistent plaudits of the house. The two stars had made their

conjunction.

After the wedding, some time passed before they were again seen on the

stage. Then, when their holiday was ended, they reappeared in the

same piece. This reappearance was a revelation. Until then, of the two

singers, the man had been the most prized. Older and more accustomed to

the public, whose foibles and preferences he had studied, he held the

pit and boxes under the spell of his voice. Beside him, the other one

seemed but an admirably gifted pupil, the promise of a future genius;

but her voice was young and had angles in it, just as her shoulders were

too slight and thin. And when on her return she appeared in one of her

former parts, and the full rich, powerful sound poured out in the very

first notes, abundant and pure, like the water of some sparkling spring,

there ran through the house such a thrill of delight and surprise, that

all the interest of the evening was concentrated on her. For the young

woman, it was one of those happy days, in which the ambient atmosphere

becomes limpid, light and vibrating, wafting towards one all the

radiance and adulations of success. As for the husband, they almost

forgot to applaud him, and as a dazzling light ever seems to make the

shade around it darker, so he, found himself relegated, as it were, to

the most insignificant part of the stage, as if he were neither more nor

less than a mere walking gentleman.

After all, the passion that was revealed in the songstress's acting, in

her voice full of charm and tenderness, was inspired by him. He alone

lent fire to the glances of those deep eyes, and that idea ought to have

made him proud, but the comedian's vanity proved stronger. At the end

of the performance he sent for the leader of the \_claque\_ and rated him

soundly. They had missed his entry and his exit, forgotten the recall at

the third act; he would complain to the manager, &c.

Alas! In vain he struggled, in vain did the paid applause greet him,

the good graces of the public, henceforth bestowed on his wife, remained

definitively acquired to her. She was fortunate too in a choice of parts

appropriate to her talent and her beauty, in which she appeared with all

the assurance of a woman of the world entering a ball-room, dressed in

the colours best suited to her, and certain of an ovation. At each fresh

success the husband was depressed, nervous, and irritable. This vogue

which left him and so absolutely became hers only, seemed to him a kind

of robbery. For a long while he strove to hide from every one, more

especially from his wife, this unavowable anguish; but one evening, as

she was going up the stairs leading to her dressing-room, holding up

with both hands her skirt-laden with bouquets, carried away by her

triumphal success, she said to him with a voice still overcome by the

excitement of applause: "We have had a magnificent house to-night." He

replied: "You think so!" in such an ironical and bitter tone, that the

young wife suddenly understood all.

Her husband was jealous! Not with the jealousy of a lover, who will

only allow his wife to be beautiful for him, but with the jealousy of an

artist, cold, furious, implacable. At times, when she stopped at the end

of an air and multitudes of bravos were thrown to her from outstretched

hands, he affected an indifferent and absent manner, and his listless

gaze seemed to say to the spectators: "When you have finished

applauding, I'll sing."

Ah! the applause, that sound like hail reechoing so delightfully through

the lobbies, the house, and the side scenes, once the sweets of it are

tasted, it is impossible to live without it. Great actors do not die of

illness or old age, they cease to exist when applause no longer greets

them. At the indifference of the public, this one was really seized with

a feeling of despair. He grew thin, became peevish and bad-tempered. In

vain did he reason with himself, look his incurable folly well in the

face, repeat to himself before he came on the stage:

"And yet she is my wife, and I love her!"

In the artificial atmosphere of the stage the true sentiment of life

vanished at once. He still loved the wife, but detested the singer. She

realized it, and as one nurses an invalid, watched the sad mania. At

first she thought of lessening her success, of making a sparing use and

not giving the full power of her voice and talent; but her resolutions

like those of her husband could not withstand the glare of the

footlights. Her talent, almost unconsciously, overstepped her will. Then

she humbled herself before him, belittled herself. She asked his advice,

inquired if he thought her interpretation correct, if he understood the

part in that way.

Of course he was never satisfied. With assumed goodnature, in the tone

of false friendship that comedians use so much amongst each other, he

would say, on the evenings of her greatest successes:

"You must watch yourself, dear, you are not doing very well just now,

not improving."

At other times he tried to prevent her singing:

"Take care, you are lavishing yourself. You are doing too much. Don't

wear out your luck. Believe me, you ought to take a holiday."

He even condescended to the most paltry pretexts. Said she had a cold,

was not in good voice. Or else he would try to pick some mean stage

quarrel:

"You took up the end of the duet too quickly; you spoilt my effect. You

did it on purpose."

He never saw, poor wretch, that it was he who hindered her bye play,

hurrying on with his cue in order to prevent any applause, and in his

anxiety to regain the public ear, monopolizing the front of the stage,

leaving his wife in the background. She never complained, for she loved

him too well; moreover success makes us indulgent and every evening

she was compelled to quit the shade in which she strove to conceal and

efface herself, to obey the summons enthusiastically calling her to the

footlights. This singular jealousy was soon noticed at the theatre, and

their fellow actors made fun of it. They overwhelmed the singer with

compliments about his wife's singing. They thrust under his eyes the

newspaper article in which after four long columns devoted to the star,

the critic bestowed a few lines to the fast fading vogue of the husband.

One day, having just read one of these articles, he rushed into his

wife's dressing-room, holding the open paper in his hand and said to

her, pale with rage:

"The fellow must have been your lover." He had indeed reached this

degree of injustice. In fact the unhappy woman, praised and envied,

whose name figured in large type on the play bills and might be read on

all the walls of Paris, who was seized upon as a successful advertising

medium and placed on the tiny gilt labels of the confectioner or

perfumer, led the saddest and most humiliating of lives. She dared not

open a paper for fear of reading her own praises, wept over the flowers

that were thrown to her and which she left to die in a corner of her

dressing-room, that she might avoid perpetuating at home the cruel

memories of her triumphant evenings. She even wanted to quit the stage,

but her husband objected.

[Illustration: p084-095]

"It will be said that I make you leave it." And the horrible torture

continued for both.

One night of a first representation, the songstress was going to the

front, when somebody said to her: "Mind what you are about. There is

a cabal in the house against you." She laughed at the idea. A cabal

against her? And for what reason, Good Heavens! She who only met with

sympathy, who did not belong to any coterie! It was true however. In

the middle of the opera, in a grand duet with her husband, at the moment

when her magnificent voice had reached the highest pitch of its compass,

finishing the sound in a succession of notes, even and pure like the

rounded pearls of a necklace, a volley of hisses cut her short. The

audience was as much moved and surprised as herself. All remained

breathless, as though each one felt prisoner within them the passage

she had not been able to finish. Suddenly a horrible, mad idea flashed

across her mind. He was alone on the stage, in front of her. She gazed

at him steadily and saw in his eyes the passing gleam of a cruel smile.

The poor woman understood all. Sobs suffocated her.

She could only burst into tears and blindly disappear through the

crowded side scenes.

It was her own husband who had had her hissed!

[Illustration: p086-097]

[Illustration: p088-099]

A MISUNDERSTANDING -- THE WIFE'S VERSION.

What can be the matter with him? What can he complain of? I cannot

understand it. And yet I have done all I could to make him happy. To be

sure, I don't say that instead of a poet I would not rather have married

a notary or a lawyer, something rather more serious, rather less vague

as a profession; nevertheless, such as he was he took my fancy.

I thought him a trifle visionary, but charming all the same, and

well-mannered; besides he had some fortune, and I thought that once

married poetizing would not prevent him from seeking out some good

appointment which would set us quite at ease.

[Illustration: p089-100]

[Illustration: p090-101]

He, too at that time seemed to find me to his taste. When he came to see

me at my aunt's in the country, he could not find words enough to admire

the order and arrangement of our little house, kept like a convent, "It

is so quaint!" he used to say. He would laugh and call me all sorts of

names taken from the poems and romances he had read. That shocked me a

little I confess; I should have liked him to be more serious. But it

was not until we were married and settled in Paris, that I felt all the

difference of our two natures.

I had dreamed of a little home kept scrupulously bright and clean;

instead of which, he began at once to encumber our apartment with

useless old-fashioned furniture, covered with dust, and with faded

tapestries, old as the hills. In everything it was the same. Would you

believe that he obliged me to put away in the attic a sweetly

pretty Empire clock, which had come to me from my aunt, and some

splendidly-framed pictures given me by my school friends. He thought

them hideous. I am still wondering why? For after all, his study was one

mass of lumber, of old smoky pictures; statuettes I blushed to look at,

chipped antiquities of all kinds, good for nothing; vases that would not

hold water, odd cups, chandeliers covered with verdigris.

[Illustration: p094-105]

By the side of my beautiful rosewood piano, he had put another, a little

shabby thing with all the polish off, half-the notes wanting, and so

old and worn that one could hardly hear it. I began to think: "Good

gracious! is an artist then, really a little mad? Does he only care for

useless things, and despise all that is useful?"

When I saw his friends', the society he received, it was still worse.

Men with long hair, great beards, scarcely combed, badly dressed, who

did not hesitate to smoke in my presence, while to listen to them made

me quite uncomfortable, so widely opposed were their ideas to mine. They

used long words, fine phrases, nothing natural, nothing simple. Then

with all this, not a notion of ordinary civilities: you might ask them

to dinner twenty times running, and there would be never a call, never

a return of any kind. Not even a card or a bonbon on New Year's day.

Nothing. Some of these gentry were married and brought their wives to

see us. You should have seen the style of these persons! For every day

wear, superb toilettes such as thank heaven, I would wear at no time!

And so ill-arranged, without order or method. Hair loose, skirts

trailing, and such a bold display of their talents! There were some who

sang like actresses, played the piano like professors, all talked on

every subject just like men. I ask you, is this reasonable?

Ought serious women once married to think of anything but the care of

their household? This is what I tried to make my husband understand,

when he was vexed at seeing me give up my music. Music is all very well

when one is a little girl and has nothing better to do. But candidly,

I should consider myself very ridiculous if I sat down every day to the

piano.

[Illustration: p098-109]

Oh! I am quite aware that his great complaint against me is that I

wished to draw him from the strange society I considered so dangerous

for him. "You have driven away all my friends?" he often used to say

reproachfully. Yes, I did do so, and I don't regret it. Those creatures

would have ended by driving him crazy. After leaving them, he would

often spend the night in making rhymes and in marching up and down and

talking aloud. As if he were not already sufficiently eccentric and

original in himself without being excited by others! What caprices, what

whims have I not put up with! Suddenly one morning, he would appear in

my room: "Quick, get your hat--we are off to the country." Then one

must leave everything, sewing, household affairs, take a carriage, go

by rail, spend a mint of money! And I, who only thought of economy! For

after all, it is not with fifteen thousand francs (six hundred pounds)

a year that one can be counted rich in Paris or make any provision for

one's children. At first he used to laugh at my observations, and try

to make me laugh; then when he saw how firmly I was resolved to remain

serious, he found fault with my simplicity and my taste for home. Am

I to blame because I detest theatres and concerts, and those artistic

soirées to which he wished to drag me, and where he met his old

acquaintances, a lot of scatterbrains, dissipated and Bohemian?

At one time, I thought he was becoming more reasonable. I had managed to

with-draw him from his good-for-nothing circle of friends, and to gather

round us a society of sensible people, well-settled in life, who might

be of use to us. But no! Monsieur was bored. He was always bored,

from morning till night. At our little soirees, where I was careful to

arrange a whist table and a tea table, all as it should be, he would

appear with such a face! in such a temper! When we were alone, it was

just the same. Nevertheless, I was full of little attentions. I used to

say to him: "Read me something of what you are doing." He recited to me

verses, tirades, of which I understood nothing, but I put on an air of

interest, and here and there made some little remark, which by the way,

inevitably had the knack of annoying him. In a year, working night and

day, he could only make of all his rhymes, one single volume which never

sold, I said to him: "Ah! you see," just in a reasoning spirit, to bring

him to something more comprehensible, more remunerative, He got into a

frightful rage, and afterwards sank into a state of gloomy depression

which made me very unhappy. My friends advised me as well as they could:

"You see, my dear, it is the ennui and bad temper of an unoccupied man.

If he worked a little more, he would not be so gloomy."

Then I set to work, and all my belongings too, to seek him an

appointment, I moved heaven and earth, I made I don't know how many

visits to the wives of government officials, heads of departments; I

even penetrated into a minister's office. It was a surprise I reserved

for him, I said to my-self: "We shall see whether he will be pleased

this time," At length, the day when I received his nomination in a

lovely envelope with five big seals, I carried it myself to his table,

half wild with joy. It was provision for the future, comfort, self

content, the tranquillity of regular work. Do you know what he did? He

said: "He would never forgive me." After which he tore the minister's

letter into a thousand pieces, and rushed out, banging the doors. Oh!

these artists, poor unsettled brains taking life all the wrong way! What

could be done with such a man? I should have liked to talk to him, to

reason with him. In vain. Those were indeed right, who had said to me:

"He is a madman." Of what use moreover to talk to him? We do not

speak the same language. He would not understand me, any more than I

understand him. And now, here we must sit and look at each other. I see

hatred in his glance, and yet I have true affection for him. It is very

painful.

\* \* \* \* \*

A MISUNDERSTANDING -- THE HUSBAND'S VERSION.

I had thought of everything, taken all my precautions. I would not have

a Parisian, because Parisian women alarm me. I would not have a rich

wife because she might be too exacting and extravagant. I also

dreaded family ties, that terrible network of homely affections, which

monopolizes, imprisons, dwarfs and stifles. My wife was the realization

of my fondest dreams. I said to myself: "She will owe me everything."

[Illustration: p091-102]

What pleasure to educate this simple mind to the contemplation of

beauty, to initiate this pure soul to my enthusiasms and hopes, to give

life, in short, to this statue! The fact is she had the air of a

statue, with her great serious calm eyes, her regular Greek profile, her

features, which although rather too marked and severe, were softened by

the rose-tinted bloom of youth and the shadow of the waving hair. Added

to all this was a faint provincial accent that was my especial joy, an

accent to which with closed eyes, I listened as a recollection of happy

childhood, the echo of a tranquil life in some far away, utterly unknown

nook. And to think that now, this accent has become unbearable to me!

But in those days, I had faith. I loved, I was happy, and disposed to

be still more so. Full of ardour for my work, I had as soon as I was

married begun a new poem, and in the evening I read to her the verses

of the day. I wished to make her enter completely into my existence. The

first time or two, she said to me: "Very pretty," and I was grateful

to her for this childish approbation, hoping that in time she would

comprehend better what was the very breath of my life.

Poor creature! How I must have bored her! After having read her my

verses, I explained them to her, seeking in her beautiful astonished

eyes the hoped-for gleam of light, ever fancying I should surprise it.

[Illustration: p095-106]

I obliged her to give me her opinion and I passed over all that was

foolish to retain only what a chance inspiration might contain of good.

I so longed to make of her my true help mate, the real artist's wife!

But no! She could not understand. In vain did I read to her the great

poets, choosing the strongest, the tenderest,--the golden rhymes of the

love poems fell upon her ear as coldly and tediously as a hailstorm.

Once I remember, we were reading \_la Nuit d'Octobre\_; she interrupted

me, to ask for something more serious! I tried then to explain to her

that there is nothing in the world more serious than poetry, which is

the very essence of life, floating above it like a glory of light,

in the % vibrations of which words and thoughts are elevated and

transfigured. Oh! what a disdainful smile passed over her pretty mouth

and what condescension in her glance! As though a child or a madman had

spoken to her.

What have I not thus wasted of strength and useless eloquence! Nothing

was of any use. I stumbled perpetually against what she called good

sense, reason, that eternal excuse of dried up hearts and narrow minds.

And it was not only poetry that bored her. Before our marriage, I had

believed her to be a musician. She seemed to understand the pieces

she played, aided by the underlinings of her teacher. Scarcely was she

married when she closed her piano, and gave up her music.

[Illustration: p099-110]

Can there be anything more melancholy than this abandonment by the young

wife of all that had pleased in the young girl? The reply given, the

part ended, the actress quits her costume. It was all done with a view

to marriage; a surface of petty accomplishments, of pretty smiles, and

fleeting elegance. With her the change was instantaneous. At first I

hoped that the taste I could not give her, an artistic intelligence and

love of the beautiful, would come to her in spite of herself, through

the medium of this wonderful Paris, with its unconscious refining

influence on eyes and mind. But what can be done with a woman who does

not know how to open a book, to look at a picture, who is always bored

and refuses to see anything? I soon understood that I must resign myself

to have by my side nothing but a housewife, active and economical,

indeed very economical. According to Proudhon, a woman, nothing more. I

could have shaped my course accordingly; so many artists are in the same

plight! But this modest rôle was not enough for her.

Little by little, slyly, silently, she managed to get rid of all my

friends. We had not made any difference in our talk because of \* her

presence. We talked as we always had done in the past, but she never

understood the irony or the fantasy of our artistic exaggerations, of

our wild axioms, or paradoxes, in which-an idea is travestied only to

figure more brilliantly. It only irritated and puzzled her. Seated in

a quiet corner of the drawing-room, she listened and said nothing,

planning all the while how she should eliminate one by one those who

so much shocked her. Notwithstanding the seeming friendliness of the

welcome, there could already be felt in my rooms that thin current

of cold air, which warns that the door is open and that it is time to

leave.

My friends once gone, she replaced them by her own. I found myself

surrounded by an absurd set of worthies, strangers to art, who hated

poetry and scorned it because "it made no money." On purpose the names

of fashionable writers who manufacture plays and novels by the dozen

were cited before me, with the remark: "So and so makes a great deal of

money!"

Make money! this is the all-important point for these creatures, and

I had the pain of seeing my wife think with them. In this fatal

atmosphere, her provincial habits, her mean and narrow views were made

still more odious by an incredible stinginess.

Fifteen thousand francs (six hundred pounds) a year! It seemed to me

that with this income we could live without fear of the morrow. Not

at all! She was always grumbling, talking of economy, reform, good

investments. As she overpowered me with these dull details, I felt all

desire and taste for work ebb away from me. Sometimes she came to

my table and scornfully turned over the scattered half-written

pages:--"Only that!" she would say, counting the hours lost upon the

insignificant little lines. Ah I if I had listened to her, my glorious

title of poet, which it has taken me so many years to win, would be now

dragged through the black mire of sensational literature. And when

I think that to this selfsame woman I had at first opened my heart,

confided all my dreams; and when I think that the contempt she now

shows me because I do not make money dates from the first days of our

marriage; I am indeed ashamed, both of myself and of her.

I make no money! That explains everything, the reproach of her glance,

her admiration for fruitful commonplaces, culminating in the steps she

took but lately to obtain for me I don't know what post in a government

office.

At this, however, I resisted. No defence remains to me but this, a force

of inertia, which yields to no assault, to no persuasion. She may speak

for hours, freeze me with her chilliest smile, my thought ever escapes

her, will always escape her. And we have come to this! Married and

condemned to live together, leagues of distance separate us; and we are

both too weary, too utterly discouraged, to care to make one step that

might draw us together. It is horrible!

[Illustration: p108-119]

[Illustration: p111-122]

ASSAULT WITH VIOLENCE.

MR. PETITBRY, Chamber Counsel.

\_To Madame Nina de B., at her Aunt's house, in Moulins\_.

Madame, conformably to the wishes of Madame your aunt, I have looked

into the matter in question. I have noted down one by one all the

different points and submitted your grievances to the most scrupulous

investigation. Well, on my soul and conscience, I do not find the

fruit ripe enough, or to speak plainly, I do not consider that you have

sufficient grounds to justify your petition for a judicial separation.

Let us not forget that the French law is a very downright kind of thing,

totally devoid of delicate feeling for nice distinctions. It recognizes

only acts, serious, brutal acts, and unfortunately it is these acts

we lack. Most assuredly I have been deeply touched while reading the

account of the first year of your married life, so very painful to you.

You have paid dearly for the glory of marrying a famous artist, one of

those men in whom fame and adulation develop monstrous egotism, and who

under penalty of shattering the frail and timid life that would attach

itself to theirs, must live alone. Ah! madame, since the commencement of

my career, how many wretched wives have I not beheld in the same cruel

position as yourself! Artists who live only by and for the public, carry

nothing home to their hearth but fatigue from glory, or the melancholy

of their disappointments. An ill-regulated existence, without compass

or rudder, subversive ideas contrary to all social conventionality,

contempt of family life and its happiness, cerebral excitement sought

for in the abuse of tobacco and strong drink, without mentioning

anything else, this constitutes the terrible artistic element from which

your dear Aunt is desirous of withdrawing you; but I must repeat, that

while I fully comprehend her anxiety, nay her remorse even at having

consented to such a marriage, I cannot see that matters have reached a

point calculated to warrant your petition.

I have, however, set down the outlines of a judicial memorandum, in

which your principal grievances are grouped and skilfully brought into

prominence. Here are the principal divisions of the work:

1°. \_Insulting conduct of Monsieur towards Madame's family\_.--Refusal

to receive our Aunt from Moulins, who brought us up, and is tenderly

attached to us.--Nicknames such as \_Tata Bobosse\_, Fairy Carabossa,

and others, bestowed on that venerable old maid, whose back is slightly

bent.--Jests and quips, drawings in pen and pencil of the aforesaid and

her infirmity.

2°. \_Unsociableness\_.--Refusal to see Ma-dame's friends, to make wedding

calls, to send cards, to answer invitations, etc.

3°. \_Wanton extravagance\_.--Money lent without acknowledgment to all

kinds of Bohemians.--Open house and free quarters, turning the house

into an inn.--Constant subscriptions for statues, tombs, and productions

of unfortunate fellow artists.--Starting an artistic and literary

magazine!!!

4°. \_Insulting conduct to Madame\_.--Having said out loud when alluding

to us: "What a fool!"

5°. \_Cruelty and violence\_.--Excessive brutality on the part of

Monsieur.--Rage on the slightest pretext.--Breakage of china and

furniture.--Scandalous rows, offensive expressions.

All this, as you see, dear Madame, constitutes a somewhat respectable

amount of evidence, but is not however sufficient. We lack assault with

violence. Ah! if we had only an assault with violence, a tiny little

assault before witnesses, our case would be grand! But now that you have

put a hundred and fifty miles between your husband and yourself we can

scarcely hope for an incident of this kind. I say "hope" because in the

present state of affairs, a brutal act on the part of this man would be

the most fortunate thing that could befall you.

I remain, Madame, awaiting your commands, your devoted and obedient

servant,

Petitbry.

PS.--Violence before witnesses, of course!

[Illustration: p115-126]

\_To Monsieur Petitbry, in Paris\_.

What, Sir! have we come to such a pass as this! Is this what your laws

have made of antique French chivalry! So then, when a misunderstanding

is often sufficient to separate two hearts for ever, your law courts

require acts of violence to justify such a separation. Is it not

scandalous, unjust, barbarous, outrageous? To think that in order to

regain her freedom, my poor darling will be obliged to run her neck

into the halter, to abandon herself to all the fury of that monster,

to excite it even. But no matter, our mind is made up. An assault with

personal violence is necessary. Well! we will have it. No later than

to-morrow, Nina will return to Paris, How will she be received? What

will take place there? I cannot think of it without a shudder. At this

idea my hand trembles, my eyes become dimmed. Ah! Monsieur. Ah! Monsieur

Petitbry. Ah!

Nina's unhappy Aunt.

MR. MARESTANG, ATTORNEY At the Law Court of the Seine.

\_To Monsieur Henri de B., Literary man in Paris\_.

Be calm, be calm, be calm! I forbid your going to Moulins or rushing off

in pursuit of the fugitive. It is more judicious and safer to await her

return in your own house, by your fireside. In point of fact, what has

taken place? You refused to receive that ridiculous and ill-natured old

maid; your wife has gone to join her. You should have expected as much.

Family ties are very strong in the heart of such an extremely youthful

bride. You were in too great a hurry. Remember that this Aunt brought

her up, that she has no other relations in the world. She has her

husband, you will say. Ah! my dear fellow, between ourselves we may

admit that husbands are not always amiable. I know one more especially

who in spite of his good heart is so nervous, so violent! I am well

aware that hard work and artistic preoccupations have a good deal to do

with it. Be that as it may, the bird has been scared, and has flown back

to its former cage. Don't be alarmed, it won't stay there long. Either

I am very much mistaken or the Parisian of yesterday will soon weary of

the antiquated surroundings, and ere long regret the vivacities of her

poet. Above all don't stir.

Your old friend,

Marestang.

\_To Monsieur Marestang, attorney in Paris\_.

At the same moment with your rational and friendly letter, I received a

telegram from Moulins, announcing Nina's return. Ah! what a true prophet

you were! She is coming back this evening, all alone, just as she left

me, without the slightest advance on my part. The thing now will be to

arrange so easy and agreeable a life for her, that she shall never

again be tempted to leave me. I have laid in a stock of tenderness and

patience during her week's absence. There is only one point on which

I remain inflexible: I will not again receive that horrible \_Tata

Bobosse\_, that blue stocking of 1820, who gave me her niece only in the

hopes that my modest fame would serve to heighten hers. Remember, my

dear Marestang, that ever since my marriage this wicked little old woman

has always come between my wife and me, pushing her hump into all our

amusements at the theatres, the exhibitions, in society, in the country,

everywhere in fact. And you wonder after that, at my having displayed

a certain haste in getting rid of her, and packing her off to her good

town of Moulins. Indeed, my dear fellow, you have no idea of all the

harm those old maids, suspicious and ignorant of life, are capable of

doing in a young household. This one had stuffed my wife's pretty

little head full of false, old fashioned, preposterous ideas, trumpery

sentimentality of the time of Ipsiboé or young Florange: "Ah! if my

lady love saw me!" For her, I was a poâte, the poâte one sees on the

frontispieces of Renduel or Ladvocat, crowned with laurels, a lyre

on his hips, and his short velvet-collared cloak blown aside by a

Parnassian gust of wind. That was the husband she had promised her

niece, and you may fancy how terribly my poor Nina must have been

disappointed. Nevertheless I admit that I was very bungling with the

dear child. As you say, I wanted to go ahead too rapidly, I frightened

her. It was my part gently to modify all that the rather narrowing and

false education of the convent and the sentimental dreams of the Aunt

had effected, leaving the provincial perfume time to evaporate. However

all this can be repaired since she is returning. She is returning, my

dear friend! This evening, I shall go and meet her at the station and we

shall walk home arm in arm, reconciled and happy.

Henri de B.

\_Nina de B. to her Aunt in Moulins\_.

He was waiting for me at the station and greeted me with a smile and

open arms, as though I were returning from some ordinary journey. You

can imagine that I put on my iciest appearance. Directly I reached home,

I shut myself up in my room, where I dined alone, pleading fatigue.

After which, I locked myself in. He came to bid me good-night through

the key-hole, and to my great surprise, went away on tiptoe without

anger or importunity. This morning, I called on Monsieur Petitbry, who

gave me detailed instructions as to the way I was to act, the hour,

place, witnesses. Ah! my dear Aunt, if you knew how frightened I am as

the hour draws near.

[Illustration: p121-132]

His violence is so dreadful. Even when he is gentle like yesterday, his

eyes have flashes of lightning. However, I will try and be courageous in

thinking of you, my darling Aunt. Besides, as Monsieur Petitbry said to

me, it is only a short painful moment to get over, and then we will both

resume our former quiet life, so calm and happy.

Nina de B.

[Illustration: p122-134]

[Illustration: p123-134]

\_From the same to the same\_.

Dear Aunt, I am writing to you from my bed, torn by the emotions of

that terrible scene. Who could have supposed that things would take this

turn? Nevertheless I had taken every precaution. I had warned Marthe and

her sister, who were to come at one o'clock, and I had chosen for the

great scene the moment when on leaving the table, the servants are

clearing away in the dining-room next to the study. From early morn

my plans were laid; an hour of scales and exercises on the piano, the

\_Cloches du Monastère\_, the \_Rêveries de Rosellen\_, all the pieces

he hates. This did not prevent his working away without betraying the

slightest irritability. At breakfast, the same patience. A detestable

breakfast, scraps, and the sweet dishes he loathes. And if you had seen

my costume! A dress with a cape some five years out of date, a little

black silk apron, and uncurled hair! In vain I sought for some signs

of irritation, that well-known straight line that Monsieur hollows out

between his eyebrows at the least annoyance. Well no! nothing! Really I

might have thought they had changed my husband. He said to me in a calm

and rather sad tone:

"Ah, you have done your hair in the old way."

I hardly answered, not wishing to hurry on matters before my witnesses

had arrived, and then, strangely enough, I felt somewhat moved and upset

beforehand by the scene I was trying to get up. At last, after a few

still shorter replies on my part, he rose from the table and went into

his own room. I followed him trembling. I heard my friends stationing

themselves in the little drawing-room, and Pierre who came and went,

arranging the glasses and silver. The decisive moment had arrived. He

must now be brought to the needful point of violence, and it seemed

to me this would be easy, after all I had done since the morning to

irritate him.

When I entered his study I must have been very pale. I felt myself in

the lion's cage. The thought flashed across me: "Suppose he killed me!"

He did not present a very terrible appearance, however, leaning back on

his divan, a cigar in his mouth.

"Do I disturb you?" I asked in my most ironical voice.

He replied gently:

"No. You see. I am not working."

Myself, viciously:

"Ah! indeed you don't work then at all, now?"

He still very mild.

"You are mistaken, my dear. On the contrary, I work a great deal. Only

our craft is one in which a great deal of work can be done without

having a tool in hand."

"And what may you be doing at this moment? Ah! yes, I know, your play

in verse; always the same thing for the last two years. It is certainly

lucky that your wife had a fortune! That allows you to idle at your

ease."

I thought he would have sprung upon me at this. Not a bit of it. He came

up to me and took hold of my hands gently:

"Come, is it to be always the same thing? Are we to begin our life of

warfare again? If so, why did you come back?"

I confess I felt rather moved by his sad and affectionate tone; but

I thought of you, my poor Aunt, of your exile, of his harsh conduct

towards us, and that gave me courage. I said to him the bitterest, most

wounding things I could think of--I know not what--that I wished to

heaven I had never married an artist; that at Moulins, every one pitied

me; that I found my friends married to magistrates, serious, influential

men, in good positions, while he--If even he made money--But no,

Monsieur would work for fame only! and what fame!

[Illustration: p127-138]

At Moulins no one knew him; at Paris, his pieces were hissed. His books

did not sell. And so on, and so on. My brain seemed to whirl round as

all the malicious words came from me one after the other. He looked

at me without replying, in chilly anger. Of course this coldness

exasperated me still more. I was so much excited, that I no longer

recognized my own voice, raised to an extraordinary pitch, and the last

words I screamed at him--I can't remember what unjust and mad remark

it was--seemed to buzz indistinctly in my ears. For a moment, I thought

Monsieur Petitbry's assault with violence was an accomplished fact.

Pallid, with set teeth Henri made two steps towards me:

"Madame!"

Then suddenly, his anger fell, his face became impassive again, and

he looked at me with so scornful, insolent and calm a glance, that my

patience came to an end. I raised my hand, and gave him the best box on

the ear I ever gave in my life. At the noise, the door opened, and my

witnesses appeared solemn and indignant.

"Monsieur! this is infamous!"

"Yes, isn't it?" said the poor fellow, showing his red cheek.

You can imagine my confusion. Happily, I took the line of fainting, and

melting into torrents of tears, which relieved me greatly. At present,

Henri is in my room. He watches by me, nurses me, and is really

most kind. What can I do? What a checkmate! This will not prove very

satisfactory to Monsieur Petitbry.

Nina de B.

[Illustration: p129-140]

[Illustration: p130-141]

[Illustration: p133-144]

BOHEMIA AT HOME.

I hardly fancy it would be possible to find in the whole of Paris, a

more lively and peculiar house than that of the sculptor Simaise. Life

there is one continual round of festivities. At whatever hour you drop

in upon them, a sound of singing and laughter, or the jingle of a piano,

guitar, or tamtam greets you. You can never enter the studio without

finding a waltz going on, or a set of quadrilles, or a game of

battledore and shuttlecock, or else it is cumbered with all the litter

and preparations for a ball; shreds of tulle and ribbons lying scattered

among the sculptor's chisels; artificial flowers hanging over the busts,

and spangled skirts spreading over groups of moist clay.

[Illustration: p134-145]

The fact is that four big t daughters of sixteen to twenty-five years

of age, all very pretty indeed, take up a great deal of room; and when

these young ladies whirl round with their hair streaming down their

backs, with floating ribbons, long pins, and showy ornaments, it really

seems as if instead of four there were eight, sixteen, thirty-two Misses

Simaise, as dashing the one as the other, talking and laughing loudly,

with the hoydenish manner peculiar to artists' daughters, with the

studio jests, the familiarity of students, and knowing also better than

anyone how to dismiss a creditor or blow up a tradesman impertinent

enough to present his bill at an inopportune moment.

[Illustration: p135-146]

These young damsels are the real mistresses of the house. From early

dawn the father works, chisels, models unceasingly, for he has no

settled income. At first he was ambitious and strove to do good work;

some early successful exhibitions promised him future fame; but the

necessity of providing for the support of his family, the clothing,

feeding and future establishment of his children, threw him back

into the ordinary work of the trade. As for Madame Simaise, she never

attended to anything.

Very handsome when she married, very much admired in the artistic world

into which her husband introduced her, at first satisfied with being

only a pretty woman, later on she resigned herself to the part of a

woman who had been pretty. A créole by birth, at least such was her

pretension--although it was asserted that her parents had never left

Courbevoie,--she spent the days from morning to night in a hammock swung

up in turn in all the different rooms of the house, fanning herself and

taking siestas, full of contempt for the material details of everyday

life. She had so often sat to her husband as model for Hebes and Dianas,

that she fancied her only duty was to pass through life carrying some

emblem of a goddess, such as a crescent on her head or a goblet in her

hand. Indeed the disorder of the establishment was a sight in itself.

The least thing necessitated a full hour's search.

"Have you seen my thimble? Marthe, Eva, Geneviève, Madeleine, who has

seen my thimble?"

The drawers, in which books, powder, rouge, spangles, spoons and fans

are tossed at haphazard, though crammed full, contain absolutely nothing

useful; moreover they belong to strange pieces of furniture, curious,

battered and incomplete. And how peculiar is the house itself! As they

are constantly changing their residence, they never have time to settle

anywhere, and this merry household seems to be perpetually awaiting the

setting to rights indispensable after a ball. Only so many things are

lacking, that it is not worth while settling, and as long as they can

put on a bit of finery, display themselves out of doors with something

of a meteor flash, a semblance of style and appearance of luxury, honour

is saved! Encampment does not in any way distress this migratory tribe.

Through the half-opened doors, their poverty is betrayed by the four

bare walls of an unfurnished chamber, or the litter of an overcrowded

room. It is bohemianism in the domestic circle, a life full of

improvidence and surprises.

At the very moment when they sit down to table, they suddenly perceive

that everything is wanting, and that the breakfast must be sent out for

at once. In this manner hours are spent rapidly, bustling and idling,

and herein lies a certain advantage. After a late breakfast, one does

not need to dine, but can sup at the ball, which fills up nearly every

evening. These ladies also give evening parties. Tea is drunk out of

all kinds of queer receptacles, goblets, old tankards, ancient glasses,

Japanese shells, the whole chipped and cracked by the constant moves.

[Illustration: p138-149]

The serene calm of both mother and daughters in the midst of this

poverty is truly admirable. They have indeed other ideas running through

the brain than mere housekeeping details. One has plaited her hair

like a Swiss girl, another is curled like any English baby, and Madame

Simaise, from the top of her hammock, lives in the beatitude of her

former beauty. As for father Simaise, he is always delighted. As long

as he hears the merry laugh of his daughters around him, he is ready

cheerfully to assume all the weight of this disorderly existence. To him

are addressed in a coaxing manner such requests as: "Papa, I want a

bonnet. Papa, I must have a dress." Sometimes the winter is severe. They

are in such request, receive so many invitations. Pooh! the father has

but to get up a couple of hours earlier. They will have a fire only in

the studio, where all the family will gather. The girls will cut out and

make their own dresses, while the hammock ropes swing slowly to and fro,

and the father works on, perched upon his high stool.

[Illustration: p139-150]

Have you ever met these ladies in society? The moment they appear there

is a commotion. It is long since the first two came out, but they are

always so well adorned and so smart, that they are in great request as

partners. They have as much success as the younger sisters, almost as

much as the mother in former days; moreover they carry off their tawdry

jewelry and finery so well, and have such charming easy manners, with

the giddy laugh of spoilt children, and such a Spanish way of flirting

with a fan. Nevertheless they do not get married. No admirer has ever

been able to get over the sight of that singular home. The wasteful and

useless extravagance, the want of plates, the profusion of old tapestry

in holes, of antique and ungilt lustres, the draughty doors, the

constant visits of creditors, the slatternly appearance of the young

ladies in slipshod slippers and dressing gowns, put to flight the best

intentioned. In truth, it is not everyone who could resign himself to

hang up the hammock of an idle woman in his home for the rest of his

life.

I am very much afraid that the Misses Simaise will never marry. They

had, however, a golden and unique opportunity during the Commune. The

family had taken refuge in Normandy, in a small and very litigious town,

full of lawyers, attorneys, and business men. No sooner had the father

arrived, than he looked out for orders. His fame as a sculptor was of

service to him, and as in the public square of the town there happened

to be a statue of Cujas done by him, all the notabilities of the place

wanted to have their busts done.

[Illustration: p141-152]

The mother at once fastened up the hammock in a corner of the studio,

and the young ladies organized a few parties. They at once met with

great success. Here at least, poverty seemed but an accident due to

exile; the disorder of the establishment was accounted for. The handsome

girls laughed loudly themselves at their destitution.

[Illustration: p142-153]

They had started off without anything; and nothing could be had now

Paris was closed. It lent to them an extra charm. It called to mind

travelling gipsies, combing their beautiful hair in barns, and quenching

their thirst in streams. The least poetical compared them in their minds

to the exiles of Coblentz, those ladies of Marie-Antoinette's court who,

obliged to fly in haste, without powder or hoops, or bedchamber women,

were driven to all sorts of makeshifts, learning to wait upon themselves,

and keeping up the frivolity of the French court, the piquant smile of

the lost patches.

[Illustration: p143-154]

Every evening a throng of dazzled lawyers crowded Simaise's studio. To

the sounds of a hired piano, all this little world danced the polka,

waltzed, schottisched,--they still schottische in Normandy. "I shall

end by marrying off one," thought old Simaise; and the fact is if one

had gone off, all the others would have followed suit. Unluckily the

first never went off, but it was a near touch. Amongst the numerous

partners of these young ladies, in that corps de ballet of lawyers,

attorneys and solicitors, the most rabid dancer was a widowed lawyer,

who was extremely attentive to the eldest daughter. He was called by

them "the first dancing attorney," in memory of Moliere's ballets, and

certainly, considering the rate at which the fellow whirled round, Papa

Simaise might well build the greatest hopes on him. But then business

men do not dance like everybody else. This fellow, all the time he was

waltzing, reflected silently: "The Simaise family is charming. Tra, la

la, la la la, but it's useless their trying to hurry me on, la la la, la

la la. I shall not propose till the gates of Paris are reopened. Tra la

la, and I shall be able to make all necessary inquiries, la la la!" Thus

thought the first dancing attorney, and in fact, directly the blockade

of Paris was raised, he got his information about the family, and the

marriage did not come off.

Since then, the poor little creatures have missed many other chances.

However, this has in no way spoilt the happiness of the singular

household. On the contrary, the more they live, the merrier they are.

Last winter they changed quarters three times, were sold up once, and

notwithstanding all this, gave two large fancy balls!

[Illustration: p145-156]

[Illustration: p146-157]

[Illustration: p149-160]

FRAGMENT OF A WOMAN'S LETTER FOUND IN THE RUE NOTRE-DAME-DES-CHAMPS

... What it has cost me to marry an artist! Oh, my dear! if I had known!

but young girls have singular ideas about so many things. Just imagine

that at the Exhibition, when I read in the catalogue the addresses of

far-away quiet streets at the further end of Paris, I pictured to myself

peaceable, stay-at-home lives, devoted to work and the family circle,

and I said to myself (feeling beforehand a certainty that I should be

dreadfully jealous), "That is the sort of husband to suit me. He will

always be with me. We shall spend our days together; he at his picture

or sculpture, while I read or sew beside him, in the concentrated light

of the studio." Poor dear innocent! I had not the faintest idea then

what a studio really was, nor of the singular creatures one meets there.

Never, in gazing at those statues of bold undressed goddesses had the

idea occurred to me that there were women daring enough to--and that

even I myself----. Otherwise, I can assure you I should never have

married a sculptor. No, indeed, most decidedly not! I must own, they

were all against this marriage at home; notwithstanding my husband's

fortune, his already famous name, and the fine house he was having built

for us two. It was I alone who would have it so. He was so elegant, so

charming, so eager. I thought, however, he meddled a little too much

about my dress, and the arrangement of my hair: "Do your hair like this;

so," and he would amuse himself by placing a flower in the midst of

my curls with far greater skill than any one of our milliners. So much

experience in a man was alarming, wasn't it? I ought to have distrusted

him. Well, you will see. Listen.

[Illustration: p151-162]

We returned from our honeymoon. While I was busy settling myself in my

pretty and charmingly furnished rooms, that paradise you know so well,

my husband, from the moment of his arrival, had set to work and spent

the days at his studio, which was away from the house. When he returned

in the evening, he would talk to me with feverish eagerness of his next

subject for exhibition.

[Illustration: p152-163]

The subject was "a Roman lady leaving the bath." He wanted the marble

to reproduce that faint shiver of the skin at the contact of air, the

moisture of the delicate textures clinging to the shoulders, and all

sorts of other fine things which I no longer remember. Between you and

me, when he speaks to me of his sculpture, I do-not always understand

him very well. However, I used to say confidently: "It will be very

pretty," and already I saw myself treading the finely sanded walks

admiring my husband's work, a beautiful marble sculpture gleaming white

against the green hangings; while behind me I heard whispered: "the wife

of the sculptor."

[Illustration: p153-164]

At last one day, curious to see how our Roman lady was getting on, the

idea occurred to me, to go and take him by surprise in his studio, which

I had not yet visited. It was one of the first times I had gone out

alone, and I had made myself very smart, I can tell you. When I arrived,

I found the door of the little garden leading to the ground floor, wide

open. So I walked straight in; and, conceive my indignation, when I

beheld my husband in a white smock like a stone mason, with ruffled

hair, hands grimed with clay, and in front of him, upright on a

platform, a woman, my dear, a great creature, almost undressed,

and looking just as composed in this airy costume as though it were

perfectly natural.

[Illustration: p154-165]

Her wretched clothes covered with mud, thick walking boots, and a round

hat trimmed with a feather out of curl, were thrown beside her on a

chair. All this I saw in an instant, for you may imagine how I fled.

Etienne would have spoken to me--detained me; but with a gesture of

horror at the clay-covered hands, I rushed off to mama, and reached her

barely alive. You can imagine my appearance.

[Illustration: p155-166]

"Good heavens, dear child! what is the matter?"

I related to mama what I had seen, where this dreadful woman was, and

in what costume. And I cried, and cried. My mother, much moved, tried to

console me, explained to me that it must have been a model.

"What! but it is abominable; no one ever told me about that before I was

married!"

Hereupon Etienne arrived, greatly distressed, and tried in his turn to

make me understand that a model is not a woman like other women, and

that besides sculptors cannot get on without them; but these reasons

had no effect upon me, and I stoutly declared I would have nothing to

do with a husband who spent his days \_tête-à-tête\_ with young ladies in

such a costume.

"Come, my dear Etienne," said poor mama, trying hard to arrange

everything peaceably, "could you not out of respect for your wife's

feelings, replace this creature by a dummy, a lay figure?"

My husband bit his moustaches furiously.

"Quite impossible, dear mother."

"Still, my dear, it seems to me--a bright idea! milliners have

pasteboard heads on which they trim bonnets. Well, what can be done for

a head, could it not be done for----?" It seems this is not possible.

At least, this was what Etienne tried to demonstrate at great length,

with all sorts of details and technical words. He really looked very

unhappy. I watched him out of the corner of my eye while I dried my

tears, and I saw that my grief affected him deeply. At last, after

an endless discussion, it was agreed that since the model was

indispensable, I should be there whenever she came. There chanced to

be on one side of the studio a very convenient little lumber-room, from

which I could see without being seen. I ought to be ashamed, you will

say, of being jealous of such kind of creatures, and of showing my

jealousy. But, my pet, you must have gone through these emotions before

you can offer an opinion about them.

Next day, the model was to be there. I therefore summoned up my courage,

and installed myself in my hiding-place, with the express condition that

at the least tap at the partition my husband should come to me at once.

Scarcely had I shut myself in, when the dreadful model I had seen

the other day arrived, dressed Heaven knows how, and so wretched in

appearance, that I asked myself how I could have been jealous of a woman

who could walk abroad without a scrap of white cuff at her wrists,

and in an old shawl with green fringe. Well, my dear, when I saw this

creature throw off shawl and dress in the middle of the studio, and

begin to undress in the coolest and boldest manner, it had an effect

upon me I cannot describe. I choked with rage. I thumped at the

partition. Etienne came to me. I trembled; I was pale. He laughed at me,

gently re-assured me, and returned to his work. By this time the woman

was standing up, half-naked, her thick hair loosened and hanging down

her back in glossy heaviness. It was no longer the poor wretch of a

moment ago, but already almost a statue, notwithstanding her common and

listless air. My heart died within me. However, I said nothing. All at

once, I heard my husband cry: "The left leg; the left leg forward." And

as the model did not understand him at once, he went to her, and--Oh! I

could contain myself no longer. I knocked. He did not hear me. I knocked

again, furiously. This time he ran to me, frowning a little at being

disturbed in the heat of work. "Come, Armande, do be reasonable!"

Bathed in tears, I leant my head upon his shoulder, and sobbed out: "I

can't bear it, my dear, I can't; indeed, I can't!"

[Illustration: p159-170]

At this, without answering me, he went sharply into the studio, and made

a sign to that horror of a woman, who dressed herself and departed.

For several days, Etienne did not return to the studio. He remained

at home with me, would not go out, refused even to see his friends;

otherwise he was quite kind and gentle, but he had such a melancholy

air. Once I asked him timidly: "You are not working any more?" which

earned me this reply: "One can't work without a model." I had not the

courage to pursue the subject, for I felt how much I was to blame,

and that he had a right to be vexed with me. Nevertheless, by dint of

caresses and endearments, I cajoled him into returning to his studio and

trying to finish the statue--how do they say it? out of his head, from

imagination, in short, by mama's process. To me, this seemed quite

feasible; but it gave the poor fellow endless trouble. Every evening

he came in, with irritated nerves and more and more discouraged; almost

ill, indeed. To cheer him up, I used often to go and see him. I always

said: "It is charming." But, as a fact, the statue made no progress

whatever. I don't even know if he worked at it. When I arrived, I would

find him always smoking on his divan, or perhaps, rolling up pellets of

clay, which he angrily threw against the opposite wall.

One afternoon, when I was gazing at the unfortunate Roman lady, who,

half modelled, had been so long in stepping out of her bath, an idea

occurred to me. The Roman lady was about the same figure as myself;

perhaps at a pinch I might----

"What do you mean by a well-turned leg?" I asked my husband suddenly.

He explained it to me at great length, showing me all that was still

lacking to his statue, and which he could by no means give it without a

model. Poor fellow! He had such a heart-broken air as he said this. Do

you know what I did? Well, I bravely picked up the drapery which was

lying in a corner, I went into my hiding-place; then, very softly

without saying a word, while he was still looking at his statue, I

placed myself on the platform in front of him, in the costume and

attitude in which I had seen that abominable model. Ah my dear I What

emotion I felt when he raised his eyes! I could have laughed and

cried. I was blushing all over. And that tiresome muslin took so

much arranging. Never mind! Etienne was so delighted that I was soon

re-assured. Indeed, to hear him, my dear, you might suppose----.

[Illustration: p162-173]

[Illustration: p164-175]

[Illustration: p165-176]

A GREAT MAN'S WIDOW

No one was astonished at hearing she was going to marry again.

Notwithstanding all his genius, perhaps even on account of his genius,

the great man had for fifteen years led her a hard life, full of

caprices and mad freaks that had attracted the attention of all

Paris. On the high road to fame, over which he had so triumphantly and

hurriedly travelled, like those who are to die young, she had sat behind

him, humbly and timidly, in a corner of the chariot, ever fearful of

collisions. Whenever she complained, relatives, friends, every one was

against her: "Respect his weaknesses," they would say to her, "they are

the weaknesses of a god. Do not disturb him, do not worry him. Remember

that your husband does not belong exclusively to you. He belongs much

more to Art, to his country, than to his family. And who knows if

each of the faults you reproach him with has not given us some sublime

creation?" At last, however, her patience was worn out, she rebelled,

became indignant and even unjust, so much indeed, that at the moment of

the great man's death, they were on the point of demanding a judicial

separation and ready to see their great and celebrated name dragged into

the columns of a society paper.

After the agitation of this unhappy match, the anxieties of the last

illness, and the sudden death which for a moment revived her former

affection, the first months of her widowhood acted on the young woman

like a healthy calming water-cure. The enforced retirement, the quiet

charm of mitigated sorrow, lent to her thirty-five years a second youth

almost as attractive as the first.

[Illustration: p167-178]

Moreover black suited her, and then she had the responsible and rather

proud look of a woman left alone in life, with all the weight of a great

name to carry honourably. Mindful of the fame of the departed one, that

wretched fame that had cost her so many tears, and now grew day by day,

like a magnificent flower nourished by the black earth of the tomb, she

was to be seen draped in her long sombre veils holding interviews with

theatrical managers and publishers, busying herself in getting her

husband's operas put again on the stage, superintending the printing of

his posthumous works and unfinished manuscripts, bestowing on all these

details a kind of solemn care and as it were the respect for a shrine.

It was at this moment that her second husband met her. He too was a

musician, almost unknown it is true, the author of a few waltzes

and songs, and of two little operas, of which the scores, charmingly

printed, were scarcely more played than sold. With a pleasant

countenance, a handsome fortune that he owed to his exceedingly

\_bourgeois\_ family, he had above all an infinite respect for genius,

a curiosity about famous men, and the ingenuous enthusiasm of a still

youthful artist. Thus when he met the wife of the great man, he was

dazzled and bewildered. It was as though the image of the glorious muse

herself had appeared to him. He at once fell in love, and as the widow

was beginning to receive a few friends, he had himself presented to her.

There his passion grew in the atmosphere of genius that still lingered

in all the corners of the drawing-room. There was the bust of the

master, the piano he composed on, his scores spread over all the

furniture, melodious even to look at, as though from between their

half-opened pages, the written phrases re-echoed musically. The actual

and very real charm of the widow surrounded by those austere memories as

by a frame that became her, brought his love to a climax.

[Illustration: p169-180]

After hesitating a long time, the poor fellow at last proposed, but

in such humble and timid terms! "He knew how unworthy he was of her. He

understood all the regret she would feel, in exchanging her illustrious

name for his, so unknown and insignificant." And a thousand other

artless phrases in the same style. In reality, the lady was indeed very

much flattered by her conquest; however, she played the comedy of a

broken heart, and assumed the disdainful, wearied airs of a woman whose

life is ended without hopes of renewal. She, who had never in her life

been so quiet and comfortable as since the death of her great man, she

actually found tears with which to mourn for him, and an enthusiastic

ardour in speaking of him. This, of course, only inflamed her youthful

adorer the more and made him more eloquent and persuasive.

In short, this severe widowhood ended in a marriage; but the widow did

not abdicate, and remained--although married--more than ever the widow

of a great man; well knowing that herein lay, in the eyes of her second

husband, her real prestige. As she felt herself much older than he, to

prevent his perceiving it, she overwhelmed him with her disdain, with

a kind of vague pity, and unexpressed and offensive regret at her

condescending marriage. However, he was not wounded by it, quite the

contrary. He was so convinced of his inferiority and thought it so

natural that the memory of such a man should reign despotically in her

heart! In order the better to maintain in him this humble attitude, she

would at times read over with him the letters the great man had

written to her when he was courting her. This return towards the past

rejuvenated her some fifteen years, lent her the assurance of a handsome

and beloved woman, seen through all the wild love and delightful

exaggeration of written passion. That she had since then changed her

young husband cared little, loving her on the faith of another, and

drawing therefrom I know not what strange kind of vanity. It seemed

to him that these passionate appeals added to his own, and that he

inherited a whole past of love.

A strange couple indeed! It was in society, however, that they presented

the most curious spectacle. I sometimes caught sight of them at the

theatre. No one would have recognized the timid and shy young woman, who

formerly accompanied the \_maestro\_, lost in the gigantic shadow he cast

around him. Now, seated upright in the front of the box, she displayed

herself, attracting all eyes by the pride of her own glance. It might be

said that her head was surrounded by her first husband's halo of glory,

his name re-echoing around her like a homage or a reproach. The other

one, seated a little behind her, with the subservient physiognomy of one

ready for every abnegation in life, watched each of her movements, ready

to attend to her slightest wish.

At home, the peculiarity of their attitude was still more noticeable. I

remember a certain evening party they gave a year after their marriage.

The husband moved about among the crowd of guests, proud but rather

embarrassed at gathering together so many in his own house. The wife,

disdainful, melancholy, and very superior, was on that evening more than

ever the widow of a great man! She had a peculiar way of glancing at her

husband from over her shoulder, of calling him "my poor dear friend," of

casting on him all the wearisome drudgery of the reception, with an air

of saying: "You are only fit for that." Around her gathered a circle of

former friends, those who had been spectators of the brilliant debuts of

the great man, of his struggles, and his success. She simpered to them;

played the young girl! They had known her so young! Nearly all of

them called her by her Christian name, "Anaïs." They formed a kind of

conaculum, which the poor husband respectfully approached, to hear his

predecessor spoken of. They recalled the glorious first nights, those

evenings on which nearly every battle was won, and the great man's

manias, his way of working; how, in order to summon up inspiration, he

insisted on his wife being by his side, decked out in full ball dress.

"Do you remember, Anaïs?" And Anaïs sighed and blushed.

It was at that time that he had written his most tender pieces, above

all \_Savonarole\_, the most passionate of his creations, with a grand

duet, interwoven with rays of moonshine, the perfume of roses and the

warbling of nightingales. An enthusiast sat down and played it on the

piano, amid a silence of attentive emotion. At the last note of the

magnificent piece, the lady burst into tears. "I cannot help it," she

said, "I have never been able to hear it without weeping." The great

man's old friends surrounded his unhappy widow with sympathetic

expressions, coming up to her one by one, like at a funereal ceremony,

to give a thrilling clasp to her hand. "Come, come, Anaïs, be

courageous." And the drollest thing was to see the second husband,

standing by the side of his wife, deeply touched and affected, shaking

hands all round, and accepting, he too, his share of sympathy. "What

genius! what genius!" he repeated as he mopped his eyes. It was at the

same time ridiculous and affecting.

[Illustration: p174-185]

[Illustration: p177-188]

THE DECEIVER.

I have loved but one woman in my life, the painter D------ said one day

to us.

I spent five years of perfect happiness and peaceful and fruitful

tranquillity with her. I may say that to her I owe my present celebrity,

so easy was work, and so spontaneous was inspiration by her side. Even

when I first met her, she seemed to have been mine from time immemorial.

Her beauty, her character were the realization of all my dreams. That

woman never left me; she died in my house, in my arms, loving to the

last. Well, when I think of her, it is with a feeling of rage. If I

strive to recall her, the same as I ever saw her during those five

years, in all the radiance of love, with her lithe yielding figure, the

gilded pallor of her cheeks, her oriental Jewish features, regular and

delicate in the soft roundness of her face, her slow speech as velvety

as her glance, if I seek to embody that charming vision, it is only in

order the more fiercely to cry to it: "I hate you!"

Her name was Clotilde. At the house of the mutual acquaintances where we

met, she was known under the name of Madame Deloche, and was said to be

the widow of a captain in the merchant service. Indeed, she appeared to

have travelled a great deal. In the course of conversation, she would

suddenly say: When I was at Tampico; or else: once in the harbour at

Valparaiso. But apart from this, there was no trace in her manners or

language of a wandering existence, nothing betrayed the disorder or

precipitation of sudden departures or abrupt returns. She was a thorough

Parisian, dressed in perfect good taste, without any of those bur-nooses

or eccentric \_sarapés\_ by which one recognizes the wives of officers and

sailors who are always arrayed in travelling costume.

[Illustration: p179-190]

When I found that I loved her, my first, my only idea was to ask her in

marriage. Someone spoke on my behalf. She simply replied that she would

never marry again. Henceforth I avoided meeting her; and as my thoughts

were too wholly absorbed and occupied by her to allow me to work,

I determined to travel. I was busily engaged in preparations for my

departure, when one morning, in my own apartment, in the midst of all

the litter of opened drawers and scattered trunks, to my great surprise,

I saw Madame Deloche enter.

"Why are you leaving?" she said softly. "Because you love me? I also

love. I love you. Only (and here her voice shook a little) only, I am

married." And she told me her history.

It was a romance of love and desertion. Her husband drank, struck her!

At the end of three years they had separated Her family, of whom she

seemed very proud, held a high position in Paris, but ever since her

marriage had refused to receive her. She was the niece of the Chief

Rabbi. Her sister, the widow of a superior officer, had married for the

second time a Chief Ranger of the woods and forests of Saint-Germain. As

for her, ruined by her husband, she had fortunately had a very thorough

education and possessed some accomplishments, by which she was able to

augment her resources. She gave music lessons in various rich houses

of the Chaussée d'Antin and Faubourg Saint Honoré, and gained an ample

livelihood.

The story was touching, although somewhat lengthy, full of the

pretty repetitions, the interminable incidents that entangle feminine

discourse.

[Illustration: p181-192]

Indeed she took several days to relate it. I had hired for us two, a

little house in the Avenue de l'Impératrice, standing between the silent

streets and peaceful lawns. I could have spent a year listening to and

looking at her, without a thought for my work. She was the first to send

me back to my studio, and I could not prevent her from again taking up

her lessons. I was touched by her concern for the dignity of her life.

I admired the proud spirit, notwithstanding that I could not help being

rather humiliated at her expressed determination to owe nothing save to

her own exertions. We were therefore separated all day long, and only

met in the evening in our little house.

With what joy did I not return home, what impatience I felt when she was

late, and how happy I was when I found her there before me! She would

bring me back bouquets and choice flowers from her journeys to Paris.

Often I pressed upon her some present, but she laughingly said she was

richer than I; and in truth her lessons must have been very well paid,

for she always dressed in an expensively elegant manner, and the black

dresses which, with coquettish care for her complexion and style of

beauty she preferred, had the dull softness of velvet, the brilliancy

of satin and jet, a confusion of silken lace, which revealed to the

astonished eye, under an apparent simplicity, a world of feminine

elegance in the thousand shades contained in a single colour.

[Illustration: p183-194]

Moreover her occupation was by no means laborious, she said. All her

pupils, daughters of bankers or stock brokers, loved and respected her;

and many a time she would show me a bracelet or a ring, that had been

presented as a mark of gratitude for her care. Except for our work, we

never left one another, and we went nowhere. Only on Sundays she went

off to Saint-Germain to see her sister, the wife of the Chief Ranger,

with whom she was now reconciled. I would accompany her to the station.

She would return the same evening, and often in the long summer days, we

would agree to meet at some station on the way, by the riverside or in

the woods. She would tell me about her visit, the children's good looks,

the air of happiness that reigned in the household. My heart bled for

her, deprived of the pleasures of family life as she was doomed to be;

and my tenderness increased tenfold in order to make her forget the

falseness of her position, so painful to a woman of her character.

What a happy time of perfect confidence, and how well I worked! I

suspected nothing. All she said seemed so true, so natural. I could only

reproach her with one thing. When talking of the houses she frequented,

and the different families of her pupils, she would indulge in a

superabundance of imaginary details and fancied intrigues, which she

invented without any \_apropos\_.

[Illustration: p185-196]

Calm herself, she was ever conjuring up romances around her, and her

life was spent in composing dramatic situations. These idle fancies

disturbed my happiness. I, who longed to leave the world and society, in

order to devote myself exclusively to her, found her too much taken up

by indifferent subjects. However, I could easily excuse this defect in a

young and unhappy woman, whose life had been hitherto a sad romance, the

issue of which could not be foreseen.

Once only did a suspicion or rather a presentiment cross my mind. One

Sunday evening she failed to return home. I was in despair. What could

I do? Go to Saint-Germain? I might compromise her. Nevertheless, after a

dreadful night of anguish, I had decided on starting, when she arrived,

looking pale and worried. Her sister was ill, she had been obliged to

stay and nurse her. I believed all she told me, not distrusting the

overflow of words called forth by the slightest question, which swamped

the principal matter in a deluge of idle details: such as the hour of

arrival, the rudeness of a guard, the lateness of the train. Twice or

three times in the same week, she returned to Saint-Germain and slept

there; then, her sister's illness over, she resumed her regular and

peaceful existence.

[Illustration: p187-198]

Unfortunately, shortly after this, she in her turn fell ill. She came

back one day from her lessons, shivering, wet, and fevered. Inflammation

of the lungs set in; from the first her case was serious, and soon--the

doctor told me--hopeless. My despair was maddening. Then I thought only

of soothing her last moments. The family she loved so well, of which she

was so proud, I would bring to her deathbed. Without letting her know,

I first wrote to her sister at Saint-Germain, and I went off at

once myself to her uncle, the Chief Rabbi. I hardly remember at what

unreasonable hour I reached his house. Great catastrophes throw such a

confusion into life and upset every detail. I fancy the good Rabbi was

dining. He came out into the hall, wondering and amazed, to speak to me.

"Monsieur," I said to him, "there are moments when all hatred must

cease."

He turned his venerable face towards me with a bewildered look.

I resumed:

"Your niece is dying!"

"My niece! But I have no niece; you are mistaken."

"Oh, Sir! I implore you, lay aside all foolish family rancour. I am

speaking of Madame Deloche, the wife of Captain----"

"I do not know Madame Deloche. You are mistaken, my son, I assure you."

And he gently pushed me toward the door, taking me for a hoaxer or

a madman. I must in fact have appeared very odd. What I heard was so

unexpected, so terrible. She had lied to me then. Wherefore?

Suddenly an idea flashed across me. I directed the cabman to drive me

to the address of one of those pupils of whom she had so often spoken to

me, the daughter of a well-known banker.

I inquired of the servant: "Madame Deloche?"

"There is no one here of that name."

"Yes, I know that. It is a lady who gives music lessons to your young

ladies."

"We have no young ladies here, not even a piano. I don't know what you

mean."

And he angrily shut the door in my face.

I made no further inquiries. I felt sure of meeting with the same

answer, the same disappointment. On my return to our little house,

they gave me a letter with the postmark of Saint-Germain. I opened

it, instinctively guessing the contents. The Chief Ranger also had no

knowledge of Madame Deloche. Moreover he had neither wife nor child.

This was the last blow. Thus for five years each of her words had been

a lie. A thousand jealous thoughts took possession of me, and madly,

hardly knowing what I was about, I entered the room in which she was

dying. All the questions that were torturing me burst forth over that

bed of suffering: "Why did you go to Saint-Germain on Sundays? Where did

you spend your days? Where did you spend that night? Come, answer

me." And I bent over her, seeking in the depths of her still proud and

beautiful eyes answers that I awaited with anguish; but she remained

mute and impassive.

I resumed, trembling with rage: "You never gave any lessons. I have been

everywhere. Nobody knows you. Whence came that money, those laces, those

jewels?" She threw me a glance full of despairing sadness, and that was

all. In truth, I ought to have spared her, and allowed her to die in

peace. But I had loved her too well. My jealousy was stronger than my

pity. I continued: "For five years you have deceived me, lying to me

every day, every hour. You knew my whole life, and I knew nothing of

yours. Nothing, not even your name. For it is not yours, is it, the name

you bear? Ah liar! liar! What, she is going to die, and I do not even

know by what name to call her! Come, tell me who you are? Whence come

you? Why did you intrude into my life? Speak! Tell me something!"

Vain efforts! Instead of answering, she with difficulty turned her face

to the wall, as though she feared that her last glance might betray her

secret. And thus the unhappy creature died! Died without a word, liar to

the last.

[Illustration: p191-202]

[Illustration: p195-206]

THE COMTESSE IRMA.

"\_M. Charles d'Athis, literary man, has the honour to inform you of the

birth of his son Robert.\_

"\_The child is doing well.\_"

Some dozen years ago, all literary and artistic Paris received this

little note on the glossiest of paper, embossed with the arms of the

Counts of d'Athis-Mons, of whom the last Charles d'Athis had--while

still young--succeeded in making for himself a genuine reputation as a

poet.

"The child is doing well." And the mother? Of her there was no mention

in the note. Every one knew her but too well. She was the daughter of an

old poacher of Seine et Oise; a quondam model, named Irma Salle, whose

portrait had figured in every exhibition, as the original had in every

studio. Her low forehead, lip curled like an antique, this chance return

of the peasant's face to primitive lines--a turkey herd with Greek

features--the slightly tanned skin common to all whose childhood

is spent in the open air, giving to fair hair reflections of pale

silkiness, adorned this minx with a kind of wild originality, completed

by a pair of magnificently green eyes, burning beneath heavy eyebrows.

[Illustration: p196-207]

One night, on leaving a \_bal de l'Opéra\_, d'Athis had taken her to sup

with him, and though this was two years ago, the supper still continued.

But, whereas Irma had become completely a part of the poet's life,

this intimation of the child's birth, curt and haughty as it was,

sufficiently indicated how little she was considered by him. And in

truth, in this temporary household, the woman was scarcely more than a

housekeeper, showing in the management of the gentleman-poet's house

the hard shrewdness of her dual nature of peasant and courtesan; and

endeavouring, at no matter what price, to render herself indispensable.

[Illustration: p197-208]

Too rustic, and too stupid to understand anything of d'Athis' genius, of

those fine verses, fashionable and refined, which made of him a sort of

Parisian Tennyson, she nevertheless understood how to bend to all his

whims, and be silent under his contempt; as if in the depths of that

peasant nature lurked something of the boor's humble admiration for his

lord. The birth of the child only served to accentuate her unimportance

in the house.

When the dowager Comtesse d'Athis-Mons, the mother of the poet, a

distinguished and very great lady, learned that a grandson was born to

her, a sweet little Vicomte, duly recognized and authenticated by the

author of his being,\* she was seized with a wish to see and kiss the

child. It was, to be sure, a rather bitter reflection for the former

reader to Queen Marie-Amélie to think that the heir of such a great name

should have such a mother; but, keeping strictly to the terms of

the \_billets de faire pari\_ the venerable lady could forget that the

creature existed.

\* According to French law, an unmarried man recognizing his illegitimate

child, thereby confers on him all the rights of a legitimate one,

including both title and fortune.

When she went to see the child out at nurse, she chose the days on which

she would be sure not to meet any one; she admired him, spoilt him, took

him to her heart, worshipped him with that grandmotherly adoration which

is the last love of a woman's life, giving her an excuse for living

a few years longer in order to see the little ones springing up and

growing around her. Then when the baby Vicomte was a little bigger and

returned to live with his father and mother, a treaty was made, for

the Comtesse could not give up her beloved visits; at the sound of the

grandmother's ring, Irma humbly and silently disappeared, or else the

child was taken to his grandmother's house, and thus spoilt by his

two mothers. He loved them equally, somewhat astonished to feel in

the warmth of their caresses, a kind of exclusive-ness, a wish to

monopolize. D'Athis, careless of everything but his verses, absorbed by

his growing fame, was content to adore his little Robert, to talk of him

to everyone and to imagine that the child belonged to him, and him only.

This illusion did not last.

"I should like to see you married," his mother said to him one day.

"Yes, but how about the child?" "Don't worry yourself about that. I have

picked out for you a young girl of good family but poor, who adores you.

I have introduced Robert to her, and they are already great friends.

Besides, the first year I will keep the darling with me. Afterwards, we

shall see."

[Illustration: p200-211]

"And--the mother?" hesitated the poet, reddening a little, for it was

the first time that he had spoken of Irma to his mother.

[Illustration: p201-212]

"Pooh!" replied the old dowager, laughing, "we will settle something

handsome on her, and I am quite sure she will soon be married also. The

\_bourgeois\_ of Paris is not particular."

That very evening, d'Athis, who had never been desperately in love

with his mistress, spoke to her of these arrangements and found her as

usual--submissive and apparently docile to his will. But the next

day, when he returned home, he found that mother and child had flown.

Finally, they were discovered in a wretched hut on the borders of the

Forest of Rambouillet, with Irma's father; and when the poet arrived he

found his son, his young prince, in his velvet and lace, jumping on

the old poacher's knee, playing with his pipe, running after the hens,

delighted to shake his fair curls in the fresh air. D'Athis, though much

upset by emotion, pretended to laugh the affair off, and wished at once

to take his fugitives home with him. But Irma did not see the matter

in the same light. She had been dismissed; she took her child with her.

What more natural? Nothing short of the poet's promise that he would

give up all thoughts of marriage decided her to return. Moreover, she

made her own conditions. It had been too long forgotten that she was

Robert's mother. Always to disappear and hide whenever Madame d'Athis

appeared, was no longer possible for her. The child was growing too old

for her to be exposed to such humiliations before him. It was therefore

agreed that as Madame d'Athis had refused to be brought into contact

with her son's mistress, she should no longer go to his house, but that

the child should be brought to her every day.

Then began for the old grandmother a regular torture. Every day fresh

pretexts were made to keep the child away; he had coughed, it was too

cold, it was raining. Then came his walks, rides, gymnastic exercises.

The poor old lady never saw her grandson. At first she tried complaining

to d'Athis; but women alone have the secret of carrying on these little

warfares. Their ruses remain invisible, like the hidden stitches which

catch back the folds and laces of their dress. The poet could see

nothing of it; and the saddened grandmother spent her life in waiting

for her darling's visit, in watching for him in the street, when he

walked out with a servant; and these furtive kisses and hasty glances

only augmented her maternal passion without satisfying it.

During this time, Irma Salle--always by means of the child--succeeded in

gaining ground in the father's heart. She was the recognized head of the

house now, received visitors, gave parties, settled herself as a woman

who means to remain where she is. Still she took care to say from time

to time to the little Vicomte, before his father: "Do you remember the

chickens at Grandpapa Salle's? Shall we go back and see them?"

[Illustration: p204-215]

And by this everlasting threat of departure, she paved the way to the

end she had in view--marriage.

It took her five years to become a Comtesse, but at length she gained

her point. One day, the poet came in fear and trembling to announce to

his mother that he had decided to marry his mistress, and the old lady,

instead of being indignant hailed the calamity as a deliverance, seeing

but one thing in the marriage; the possibility of once more entering her

son's door, and of freely indulging her affection for her little Robert.

[Illustration: p205-216]

In truth, the real honeymoon was for the grandmother. D'Athis, after

this rash act, wished to be away from Paris for a time. He felt uneasy

there. And as the child, clinging to his mother's skirts ruled the

house, they all established themselves in Irma's native country, within

hail of old father Salle's chickens. It was indeed the most curious, the

most ill-assorted household that could be imagined. Grandmama d'Athis

and Grandpapa Salle met each night at the evening toilet of their

grandson. The old poacher, his short black pipe wedged into the corner

of his mouth; and the former reader at the Tuileries, with her silvery

hair, and her imposing manner, together watched the lovely child rolling

before them on the carpet, and admired him equally. The one brought

him from Paris the newest, most expensive, most showy toys; the other

manufactured for him the most splendid whistles from bits of elder; and,

by Jove! the Dauphin hesitated between them!

Upon the whole, among all these beings grouped as it were by force

around a cradle, the only really unhappy one was Charles d'Athis. His

elegant and patrician inspiration suffered from this life in the depths

of a forest, like a delicate Parisian woman for whom the country air is

too strong. He could no longer work, and far from that terrible Paris

who shuts her gates so quickly against the absent, he felt himself

already nearly forgotten. Fortunately the child was there, and when the

child smiled, the father thought no more of his successes as a poet, nor

of the past of Irma Salle.

And now, would you know the finale of this singular drama? Read the

brief note bordered with black, that I received only a few days ago, and

which is the last page of this truly Parisian adventure:

"\_M. le Comte and Mme. la Comtesse d'Athis grieve to inform you of the

death of their son Robert!\_"

Unhappy creatures! Imagine them all four gazing at each other before

that empty cradle!

[Illustration: p207-218]

[Illustration: p208-219]

[Illustration: p211-222]

THE CONFIDENCES OF AN ACADEMIC COAT.

That morning was the dawn of a glorious day for the sculptor Guillardin.

Elected on the previous day a member of the \_Institut\_, he was about

to inaugurate before the five Academies gathered together in solemn

concourse, his academic coat, a magnificent garment ornamented with

green palm-leaves, resplendent in its new cloth and silken embroidery,

colour of hope. The blessed coat, opened ready to slip on, lay spread on

an arm-chair, and Guillardin contemplated it tenderly as he arranged the

bow of his white tie.

"Above all no hurry," thought the good fellow. "I have plenty of time."

The fact is that in his feverish impatience he had dressed a couple of

hours too soon; and the beautiful Madame Guillardin--always very slow

over her dressing--had positively declared that on this day she would

only be ready at the precise moment--not a minute earlier, do you hear!

Unfortunate Guillardin! What could he do to kill the time?

"Well, all the same, I will try on my coat," he said, and gently as

though he were handling tulle and lace, he lifted the precious frippery,

and having donned it with infinite precaution, he placed himself in

front of his looking-glass. Oh! what a charming picture the

mirror disclosed to him! What an amiable little Academician, freshly

hatched, happy, smiling, grizzled, and protuberant, with arms too short

in proportion to his figure, which in the new sleeves acquired a stiff

and automatic dignity!

[Illustration: p213-224]

Thoroughly satisfied with his appearance, Guillardin marched up and

down, bowed as though entering the Academy, smiled to his colleagues of

the fine arts, and assumed academical attitudes. Nevertheless, whatever

pride one may feel at one's personal appearance, it is impossible to

remain two hours in full dress, before a looking-glass. At last our

Academician felt somewhat fatigued, and fearful lest he should rumple

his coat, made up his mind to take it off and lay it back very carefully

on the arm-chair. Then seating himself opposite on the other side of the

fireplace, with his legs stretched out and his two hands crossed over

his dress waistcoat, he began to indulge in sweet dreams as he gazed at

the green coat.

Like the traveller who, arrived at the end of his journey, likes

to remember the dangers and difficulties that have beset his path,

Guillardin retraced his life, year by year, from the day when he began

to learn modelling in Jouffroy's studio. Ah! the outset is hard in that

confounded profession. He remembered the fireless winters, the sleepless

nights, the endless walks in search of work, the desperate rage

experienced at feeling so small, so lost, and unknown in the immense

crowd that pushes, hustles, upsets, and crushes. And yet all alone,

without patronage or money, he had managed to rise. By sheer talent,

sir! And his head thrown back, and eyes half-shut, the worthy man kept

repeating out loud to himself: "By sheer talent. Nothing but talent."

[Illustration: p215-226]

A long burst of laughter, dry and creaky like an old man's laugh,

suddenly interrupted him. Slightly startled, Guillardin glanced around

the room. He was alone, quite alone, \_tête-à-tête\_ with his green coat,

the ghost of an Academician solemnly spread out opposite him, on the

other side of the fire. And still the insolent laugh rang on. Then as

he looked at it more intently, the sculptor almost fancied that his coat

was no longer in the place where he had put it, but really seated in the

arm-chair, with tails turned up, and sleeves resting on the arms of the

chair, the fronts puffed out with an appearance of life. Incredible as

it may seem, it was this thing that was laughing. Yes, it was from this

singular green coat that arose the uncontrollable fits of laughter by

which it was agitated, shaken and convulsed, causing it to jerk its

tails, throw itself back in the chair, and at moments place its two

sleeves against its sides, as though to check this supernatural and

inextinguishable excess of mirth. At the same time, a feeble voice, sly

and mischievous, could be heard saying between two hiccups: "Oh dear,

oh dear, how it hurts one to laugh like this! How it hurts one to laugh

like this!" "Who the devil is there, for mercy's sake?" asked the poor

Academician with wide staring eyes.

The voice continued still more slyly and mischievously:

"But it's I, Monsieur Guillardin, I, your palm-embroidered coat, waiting

for you to start for the reception. I must crave pardon for having so

unseasonably interrupted your musing; but really it is too funny to hear

you talk of your talent! I could not restrain myself. Come, you can't be

serious? Can you conscientiously believe that your talent has sufficed

to raise you so rapidly to the point you have attained in life; that it

has given you all you possess: honours, position, fame, fortune? Do

you really think that possible, Guillardin? Examine yourself, my dear

friend, before answering; go down, far, far down, into your inmost

conscience. Now, answer me? Don't you see you dare not?"

"And yet," stammered Guillardin, with comical hesitation, "I've.... I've

worked a great deal."

"Oh yes, a great deal, you have fagged tremendously. You are a toiler,

a drudge, you knock off a great deal of work. You count your task by the

hour, like a cabdriver. But the spark, my dear boy, which, like a golden

bee flits through the brain of the true artist, and emits from its wings

both light and music, when has it ever visited you? Not once, and you

are well aware of it. It has always frightened you, that divine little

bee! And yet it is this only that gives real talent. Ah! I know many who

also work, but very differently from you, with all the anxiety and fever

of sincere research, and yet who will never reach the point you have

attained. Look here, acknowledge this much, now we are alone. Your one

talent has been marrying a pretty woman."

"Monsieur!" interrupted Guillardin, turning purple. The voice proceeded

unchanged: "Ah well! This burst of indignation is a good sign. It proves

to me what all the world knows indeed; that you are certainly more fool

than knave. Come, come, you need not roll such furious eyes at me. In

the first place, if you touch me, if you make the least crease or tear

in me, it will be impossible to go to the reception to-day, and then,

what will Madame Guillardin say? For after all, it is to her that all

the glory of this great day is due.

[Illustration: p219-230]

It is she whom the five Academies are about to receive, and I can assure

you that if I appeared at the \_Institut\_ on her pretty person, still

so elegant and slender notwithstanding her age, I should cut a very

different figure than with you. Confound it, Monsieur Guillardin,

we must look facts in the face! You owe everything to that woman;

everything, your house, your forty thousand francs (sixteen hundred

pounds) a year, your cross of the Legion of Honour, your laurels, your

medals."

And with the gesture of a one-armed man, the green coat, with its empty

embroidered sleeve, pointed out to the unfortunate sculptor the glorious

insignia hung up on the walls of his alcove. Then, as though wishing

the better to torment his victim, to assume every aspect, and every

attitude, the cruel coat drew nearer the fire, and leaning forward on

his arm-chair with a little old-fashioned and confidential air, he spoke

familiarly, in the tone of a long-established intimacy:

"Come, old boy, what I've said seems to upset you. Yet it is better you

should know what everybody is aware of. And who could tell you better

than your own coat? Let us reason a little. What had you when you

married? Nothing. What did your wife bring you? Nothing. Then how do

you explain your present fortune? You are going to repeat again that you

have, worked very hard. But my poor friend, working day and night, with

all the patronage and the orders from government which have certainly

not been wanting to you since your marriage, you have never made more

than fifteen thousand francs (six hundred pounds) a year. Can you for

one moment suppose that was sufficient to keep up an establishment like

yours? Remember that the beautiful Madame Guillardin has always been

cited as a model of elegance, frequenting the richest society. Of course

I am well aware that shut up as you were from morning till night in your

studio, you never gave a thought to all this. You were satisfied with

saying to your friends: 'I have a wife who is a surprisingly skilful

manager. With what I gain, she not only pays our expenses, but manages

also to put by money.' It was you who were surprising, poor man! The

truth was that you had married one of those pretty little unscrupulous

creatures of which Paris is full, an ambitious flirt, serious in what

concerned your interests and unprejudiced in regard of her own, knowing

how to reconcile your affairs and her pleasures. The life of these

women, my dear fellow, resembles a dance programme in which sums would

be placed side by side with the dancers' names. Yours reasoned in the

following manner: 'My husband has no talent, no fortune, no good looks

either; but he is an excellent man, good-natured, credulous, as little

in the way as possible. Provided he leaves me free to amuse myself as

I choose, I can undertake to give him all he lacks!' And from that day

forth, money, orders, decorations from all countries kept pouring

in upon your studio, with their pretty metallic sound and their

many-coloured ribbons. Look at the row on my lapel. Then one fine

morning, Madame was seized with the fancy--a fancy of beauty on the

wane--to be the wife of an Academician, and it is her delicately

gloved hand that has opened before you one by one all the doors of the

sanctuary. Ah! my poor old fellow, your colleagues alone can tell you

what all these green palms have cost you!"

"You lie, you lie!" screamed Guillardin, half choked by indignation.

"Ah no! my old friend, indeed I do not lie. You need only to look

around you presently, when you enter the reception hall. You will see a

malicious gleam in every eye, a smile at the corner of every lip,

while they will whisper as you pass by: 'Here is the beautiful Madame

Guillardin's husband.' For you will never be anything else in life, my

dear fellow, but the husband of a pretty woman."

This time, Guillardin could bear it no longer. Pale with rage, he

bounded forward, to seize and dash into the fire, after first tearing

from it the pretty green palm wreath, this insolent and raving coat; but

a door opens and a well-known voice, tinged with a mixture of contempt

and mild condescension, opportunely awakes him from his horrible

nightmare:

"Oh! that is just like you, asleep at the corner of the fire on such an

important day!"

And Madame Guillardin stands before him, tall and still handsome,

although rather too imposing with her almost natural pink complexion,

her powdered hair, and the exaggerated brilliancy of her painted eyes.

With the gesture of the superior woman, she takes up the green-palmed

coat, and briskly, with a little smile, helps her husband to don it;

while he, poor man, still trembling with the horrors of his nightmare,

draws a deep sigh of relief and thinks to himself: "Thank goodness! It

was a dream!"

[Illustration: p224-235]

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