



Sovereign
ÉMILE ZOLA

The LADIES'
PARADISE

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The Ladies' Paradise

NEW EDITION





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CHAPTER I

Denise had walked from the Saint-Lazare railway station, where a Cherbourg train had landed her and her two brothers, after a night passed on the hard seat of a third-class carriage. She was leading Pépé by the hand, and Jean was following her, all three fatigued after the journey, frightened and lost in this vast Paris, their eyes on every street name, asking at every corner the way to the Rue de la Michodière, where their uncle Baudu lived. But on arriving in the Place Gaillon, the young girl stopped short, astonished.

“Oh! look there, Jean,” said she; and they stood still, nestling close to one another, all dressed in black, wearing the old mourning bought at their father’s death. She, rather puny for her twenty years, was carrying a small parcel; on the other side, her little brother, five years old, was clinging to her arm; while behind her, the big brother, a strapping youth of sixteen, was standing empty-handed.

“Well,” said she, after a pause, “that is a shop!”

They were at the corner of the Rue de la Michodière and the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, in front of a draper’s shop, which displayed a wealth of color in the soft October light. Eight o’clock was striking at the church of Saint-Roch; not many people were about, only a few clerks on their way to business, and housewives doing their morning shopping. Before the door, two shopmen, mounted on a step-ladder, were hanging up some woollen goods, whilst in a window in the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin another young man, kneeling with his back to the pavement, was delicately plaiting a piece of blue silk. In the shop, where there were as yet no customers, there was a buzz as of a swarm of bees at work.

“By Jove!” said Jean, “this beats Valognes. Yours wasn’t such a fine shop.”

Denise shook her head. She had spent two years there, at Cornaille’s, the principal draper’s in the town, and this shop, encountered so suddenly—this, to her, enormous place, made her heart swell, and kept her excited, interested, and oblivious of everything else. The high plate-glass door, facing the Place Gaillon, reached the first storey, amidst a complication of ornaments

covered with gilding. Two allegorical figures, representing two laughing, bare-breasted women, unrolled the scroll bearing the sign, "The Ladies' Paradise." The establishment extended along the Rue de la Michodière and the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, and comprised, beside the corner house, four others—two on the right and two on the left, bought and fitted up recently. It seemed to her an endless extension, with its display on the ground floor, and the plate-glass windows, through which could be seen the whole length of the counters. Upstairs a young lady, dressed all in silk, was sharpening a pencil, while two others, beside her, were unfolding some velvet mantles.

"The Ladies' Paradise," read Jean, with the tender laugh of a handsome youth who had already had an adventure with a woman. "That must draw the customers—eh?"

But Denise was absorbed by the display at the principal entrance. There she saw, in the open street, on the very pavement, a mountain of cheap goods—bargains, placed there to tempt the passers-by, and attract attention. Hanging from above were pieces of woollen and cloth goods, merinoes, cheviots, and tweeds, floating like flags; the neutral, slate, navy-blue, and olive-green tints being relieved by the large white price-tickets. Close by, round the doorway, were hanging strips of fur, narrow bands for dress trimmings, fine Siberian squirrel-skin, spotless snowy swansdown, rabbit-skin imitation ermine and imitation sable. Below, on shelves and on tables, amidst a pile of remnants, appeared an immense quantity of hosiery almost given away knitted woollen gloves, neckerchiefs, women's hoods, waistcoats, a winter show in all colors, striped, dyed, and variegated, with here and there a flaming patch of red. Denise saw some tartan at nine sous, some strips of American vison at a franc, and some mittens at five sous. There appeared to be an immense clearance sale going on; the establishment seemed bursting with goods, blocking up the pavement with the surplus.

Uncle Baudu was forgotten. Pépé himself, clinging tightly to his sister's hand, opened his big eyes in wonder. A vehicle coming up, forced them to quit the road-way, and they turned up the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin mechanically, following the shop windows and stopping at each fresh display. At first they were captivated by a complicated arrangement: above, a number of umbrellas, laid obliquely, seemed to form a rustic roof; beneath these a quantity of silk stockings, hung on rods, showed the roundness of the calves,

some covered with rosebuds, others of all colors, black open-worked, red with embroidered corners, and flesh color, the silky grain of which made them look as soft as a fair woman's skin; and at the bottom of all, a symmetrical array of gloves, with their taper fingers and narrow palms, and that rigid virgin grace which characterizes such feminine articles before they are worn. But the last window especially attracted their attention. It was an exhibition of silks, satins, and velvets, arranged so as to produce, by a skilful artistic arrangement of colors, the most delicious shades imaginable. At the top were the velvets, from a deep black to a milky white: lower down, the satins—pink, blue, fading away into shades of a wondrous delicacy; still lower down were the silks, of all the colors of the rainbow, pieces set up in the form of shells, others folded as if round a pretty figure, arranged in a life-like natural manner by the clever fingers of the window dressers. Between each motive, between each colored phrase of the display ran a discreet accompaniment, a slight puffy ring of cream-colored silk. At each end were piled up enormous bales of the silk of which the house had made a specialty, the "Paris Paradise" and the "Golden Grain," two exceptional articles destined to work a revolution in that branch of commerce.

"Oh, that silk at five francs twelve sous!" murmured Denise, astonished at the "Paris Paradise."

Jean began to get tired. He stopped a passer-by. "Which is the Rue de la Michodière, please, sir?"

On hearing that it was the first on the right they all turned back, making the tour of the establishment. But just as she was entering the street, Denise was attracted by a window in which ladies' dresses were displayed. At Cornaille's that was her department, but she had never seen anything like this, and remained rooted to the spot with admiration. At the back a large sash of Bruges lace, of considerable value, was spread out like an altar-veil, with its two white wings extended; there were flounces of Alençon point, grouped in garlands; then from the top to the bottom fluttered, like a fall of snow, a cloud of lace of every description—Malines, Honiton, Valenciennes, Brussels, and Venetian-point. On each side the heavy columns were draped with cloth, making the background appear still more distant. And the dresses were in this sort of chapel raised to the worship of woman's beauty and grace. Occupying the centre was a magnificent article, a velvet mantle, trimmed with

silver fox; on one side a silk cape lined with miniver, on the other a cloth cloak edged with cocks' plumes; and last of all, opera cloaks in white cashmere and white silk trimmed with swansdown or chenille. There was something for all tastes, from the opera cloaks at twenty-nine francs to the velvet mantle marked up at eighteen hundred. The well-rounded neck and graceful figures of the dummies exaggerated the slimness of the waist, the absent head being replaced by a large price-ticket pinned on the neck; whilst the mirrors, cleverly arranged on each side of the window, reflected and multiplied the forms without end, peopling the street with these beautiful women for sale, each bearing a price in big figures in the place of a head.

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

This time he himself had become motionless, his mouth open. All this female luxury turned him rosy with pleasure. He had a girl's beauty—a beauty he seemed to have stolen from his sister—a lovely skin, curly hair, lips and eyes overflowing with tenderness. By his side Denise, in her astonishment, appeared thinner still, with her rather long face and large mouth, fading complexion, and light hair. Pépé, also fair, in the way of most children, clung closer to her, as if wanting to be caressed, troubled and delighted at the sight of the beautiful ladies in the window. They looked so strange, so charming, on the pavement, those three fair ones, poorly dressed in black—the sad-looking young girl between the pretty child and the handsome youth—that the passers-by looked back smilingly.

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

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

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

They raised their heads and looked round. Just in front of them, above the stout man, they perceived a green sign-board bearing in yellow letters, discolored by the rain: "The Old Elbeuf. Cloths,

Flannels. Baudu, late Hauchecorne." The house, coated with an ancient rusty white-wash, quite flat and unadorned, amidst the mansions in the Louis XIV. style which surrounded it, had only three front windows, and these windows, square, without shutters, were simply ornamented by a handrail and two iron bars in the form of a cross. But amidst all this nudity, what struck Denise the most, her eyes full of the light airy windows at The Ladies' Paradise, was the ground-floor shop, crushed by the ceiling, surmounted by a very low storey with half-moon windows, of a prison-like appearance. The wainscoting, of a bottle-green hue, which time had tinted with ochre and bitumen, encircled, right and left, two deep windows, black and dusty, in which the heaped up goods could hardly be seen. The open door seemed to lead into the darkness and dampness of a cellar.

"That's the house," said Jean.

"Well, we must go in," declared Denise. "Come on, P  p  ."

They appeared, however, somewhat troubled, as if seized with fear. When their father died, carried off by the same fever which had, a month previous, killed their mother, their uncle Baudu, in the emotion which followed this double mourning, had written to Denise, assuring her there would always be a place for her in his house whenever she would like to come to Paris. But this was nearly a year ago, and the young girl was now sorry to have left Valognes in a moment of temper without informing her uncle. The latter did not know them, never having set foot in Valognes since the day he left, as a boy, to enter as junior in the drapery establishment kept by Hauchecorne, whose daughter he afterwards married.

"Monsieur Baudu?" asked Denise, deciding at last to speak to the stout man who was still eyeing them, surprised at their appearance.

"That's me," replied he.

Denise blushed and stammered out: "Oh, I'm so pleased! I am Denise. This is Jean, and this is P  p  . You see we have come, uncle."

Baudu seemed amazed. His big eyes rolled in his yellow face; he spoke slowly and with difficulty. He was evidently far from thinking of this family which suddenly dropped down on him.

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

With her sweet but rather faltering voice she then explained that since the death of her father, who had spent everything in his dye-works, she had acted as a mother to the two children, but the

little she earned at Cornaille's did not suffice to keep the three of them. Jean worked at a cabinetmaker's, a repairer of old furniture, but didn't earn a sou. However, he had got to like the business, and had learned to carve in wood very well. One day, having found a piece of ivory, he amused himself by carving a head, which a gentleman staying in the town had seen and admired, and it was this gentleman who had persuaded them to leave Valognes, promising to find a place in Paris for Jean with an ivory-carver.

"So you see, uncle," continued Denise, "Jean will commence his apprenticeship at his new master's tomorrow. They ask no premium, and will board and lodge him. I felt sure P  p   and I could manage very well. We can't be worse off than we were at Valognes."

She said nothing about Jean's love affair, of certain letters written to the daughter of a nobleman living in the town, of kisses exchanged over a wall—in fact, quite a scandal which had determined her leaving. And she was especially anxious to be in Paris, to be able to look after her brother, feeling quite a mother's tender anxiety for this gay and handsome youth, whom all the women adored. Uncle Baudu couldn't get over it, and continued his questions. However, when he heard her speaking of her brothers in this way he became much kinder.

"So your father has left you nothing," said he. "I certainly thought there was still something left. Ah! how many times did I write advising him not to take that dye-work! A good-hearted fellow, but no head for business! And you've been obliged to keep and look after these two youngsters since?"

His bilious face had become clearer, his eyes were not so blood-shot as when he was glaring at The Ladies' Paradise. Suddenly he noticed that he was blocking up the doorway.

"Well," said he, "come in, now you're here. Come in, no use hanging about gaping at a parcel of rubbish."

And after having darted a last look of anger at The Ladies' Paradise, he made way for the children by entering the shop and calling his wife and daughter.

"Elizabeth, Genevi  ve, come down; here's company for you!"

But Denise and the two boys hesitated before the darkness of the shop. Blinded by the clear light of the street, they could hardly see. Feeling their way with their feet with an instinctive fear of encountering some treacherous step, and clinging still closer together from this vague fear, the child continuing to hold the young girl's

skirts, and the big boy behind, they made their entry with a smiling, anxious grace. The clear morning light described the dark profile of their mourning clothes; an oblique ray of sunshine gilded their fair hair.

“Come in, come in,” repeated Baudu.

In a few brief sentences he explained the matter to his wife and daughter. The first was a little woman, eaten up with anaemia, quite white—white hair, white eyes, white lips. Geneviève, in whom her mother’s degenerateness appeared stronger still, had the debilitated, colorless appearance of a plant reared in the shade. However, her magnificent black hair, thick and heavy, marvellously vigorous for such a weak, poor soil, gave her a sad charm.

“Come in,” said both the women in their turn; “you are welcome.”

And they made Denise sit down behind a counter. Pépé immediately jumped up on his sister’s lap, whilst Jean leant against some wood-work beside her. Looking round the shop the new-comers began to take courage, their eyes getting used to the obscurity. Now they could see it, with its low and smoky ceiling, oaken counters bright with use, and old-fashioned drawers with strong iron fittings. Bales of goods reached to the beams above; the smell of linen and dyed stuffs—a sharp chemical smell—seemed intensified by the humidity of the floor. At the further end two young men and a young woman were putting away pieces of white flannel.

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

“No, thanks,” replied Denise, “we had a cup of milk in a café opposite the station.” And as Geneviève looked at the small parcel she had laid down, she added: “I left our box there too.”

She blushed, feeling that she ought not to have dropped down on her friends in this way. Even as she was leaving Valognes, she had been full of regrets and fears; that was why she had left the box, and given the children their breakfast.

“Come, come,” said Baudu suddenly, “let’s come to an understanding.” “’Tis true I wrote to you, but that’s a year ago, and since then business hasn’t been flourishing, I can assure you, my girl.”

He stopped, choked with an emotion he did not wish to show. Madame Baudu and Geneviève, with a resigned look, had cast their eyes down.

“Oh,” continued he, “it’s a crisis which will pass, no doubt, but I have reduced my staff; there are only three here now, and this is

not the moment to engage a fourth. In short, my dear girl, I cannot take you as I promised."

Denise listened, and turned very pale. He dwelt upon the subject, adding: "It would do no good, either to you or to me."

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

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

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

He raised his voice, and that relieved him. His wife and daughter still kept their eyes on the ground, like submissive persons who would never think of interfering. However, whilst Jean had turned pale, Denise had hugged the terrified Pépé to her bosom. She dropped hot tears of disappointment.

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

At that he stopped, an awkward silence ensued. Then he resumed in a harsh tone: "I don't mean to turn you out. As you are here you must stay the night; tomorrow we will see."

Then Madame Baudu and Geneviève understood they were free to arrange matters. There was no need to trouble about Jean, as he was to commence his apprenticeship the next day. As for Pépé, he would be well looked after by Madame Gras, an old lady living in the Rue des Orties, who boarded and lodged young children for forty francs a month. Denise said she had sufficient to pay for the first month, and as for herself they could soon find her a situation in the neighborhood, no doubt.

"Wasn't Vinçard wanting a saleswoman?" asked Geneviève.

"Of course!" cried Baudu; "we'll go and see him after lunch."

Nothing like striking the iron while it's hot."

Not a customer had been in to interrupt this family discussion; the shop remained dark and empty. At the other end, the two young men and the young women were still working, talking in a low hissing tone amongst themselves. However, three ladies arrived, and Denise was left alone for a moment. She kissed P  p   with a swelling heart, at the thought of their approaching separation. The child, affectionate as a kitten, hid his head without saying a word. When Madame Baudu and Genevi  ve returned, they remarked how quiet he was. Denise assured them he never made any more noise than that, remaining for days together without speaking, living on kisses and caresses. Until lunch-time the three women sat and talked about children, housekeeping, life in Paris and life in the country, in short, vague sentences, like relations feeling rather awkward through not knowing one another very well. Jean had gone to the shop-door, and stood there watching the passing crowd and smiling at the pretty girls. At ten o'clock a servant appeared. As a rule the cloth was laid for Baudu, Genevi  ve, and the first-hand. A second lunch was served at eleven o'clock for Madame Baudu, the other young man, and the young woman.

"Come to lunch!" called out the draper, turning towards his niece.

And as all sat ready in the narrow dining room behind the shop, he called the first-hand who had not come.

"Colomban!"

The young man apologized, having wished to finish arranging the flannels. He was a big, stout fellow of twenty-five, heavy and freckled, with an honest face, large weak mouth, and cunning eyes.

"There's a time for everything," said Baudu, solidly seated before a piece of cold veal, which he was carving with a master's skill and prudence, weighing each piece at a glance to within an ounce.

He served everybody, and even cut up the bread. Denise had placed P  p   near her to see that he ate properly. But the dark close room made her feel uncomfortable. She thought it so small, after the large well-lighted rooms she had been accustomed to in the country. A single window opened on a small back-yard, which communicated with the street by a dark alley along the side of the house. And this yard, sodden and filthy, was like the bottom of a well into which a glimmer of light had fallen. In the winter they were obliged to keep the gas burning all day long. When the weather enabled

them to do without gas it was duller still. Denise was several seconds before her eyes got sufficiently used to the light to distinguish the food on her plate.

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

Denise almost dropped the glass she had in her hand. “Oh! uncle—get married! How can you think of it? And the little ones!”

She was forced to laugh, it seemed to her such a strange idea. Besides, what man would care to have her—a girl without a sou, no fatter than a lath, and not at all pretty? No, no, she would never marry, she had quite enough children with her two brothers.

“You are wrong,” said her uncle; “a woman always needs a man. If you had found an honest young fellow, you wouldn’t have dropped on to the Paris pavement, you and your brothers, like a family of gypsies.”

He stopped, to divide with a parsimony full of justice, a dish of bacon and potatoes which the servant brought in. Then, pointing to Geneviève and Colomban with his spoon, he added: “Those two will be married next spring, if we have a good winter season.”

Such was the patriarchal custom of the house. The founder, Aristide Finet, had given his daughter, Desiree to his first-hand, Hauchecorne; he, Baudu, who had arrived in the Rue de la Michodière with seven francs in his pocket, had married old Hauchecorne’s daughter, Elizabeth; and he intended, in his turn, to hand over Geneviève and the business to Colomban as soon as trade should improve. If he thus delayed a marriage, decided on for three years past, it was by a scruple, an obstinate probity. He had received the business, in a prosperous state, and did not wish to pass it on to his son-in-law less patronized or in a worse position than when he took it. Baudu continued, introducing Colomban, who came from Rambouillet, the same place as Madame Baudu’s father; in fact they were distant cousins. A hard-working fellow, who for ten years had slaved in the shop, fairly earning his promotions! Besides, he was far from being a nobody; he had for father that noted toper, Colomban, a veterinary surgeon, known all over the department of Seine-et-Oise, an artist in his line, but so fond of the flowing bowl that he was ruining himself.

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

Whilst he was speaking Denise was examining Geneviève and Colomban. They sat close together at table, but remained very quiet, without a blush or a smile. From the day of his entry the young man had counted on this marriage. He had passed through the various stages: junior, counter-hand, etc., and had at last gained admittance into the confidence and pleasures of the family circle, all this patiently, and leading a clock-work style of life, looking upon this marriage with Geneviève as an excellent, convenient arrangement. The certainty of having her prevented him feeling any desire for her. And the young girl had also got to love him, but with the gravity of her reserved nature, and a real deep passion of which she herself was not aware, in her regular, monotonous daily life.

“Quite right, if they like each other, and can do it,” said Denise, smiling, considering it her duty to make herself agreeable.

“Yes, it always finishes like that,” declared Colomban, who had not spoken a word before, masticating slowly.

Geneviève, after giving him a long look, said in her turn: “When people understand each other, the rest comes naturally.”

Their tenderness had sprung up in this gloomy house of old Paris like a flower in a cellar. For ten years she had known no one but him, living by his side, behind the same bales of cloth, amidst the darkness of the shop; morning and evening they found themselves elbow to elbow in the narrow dining room, so damp and dull. They could not have been more concealed, more utterly lost had they been in the country, in the woods. But a doubt, a jealous fear, began to suggest itself to the young girl, that she had given her hand, forever, amidst this abetting solitude through sheer emptiness of heart and mental weariness.

However, Denise, having remarked a growing anxiety in the look Geneviève cast at Colomban, good-naturedly replied: “Oh! when people are in love they always understand each other.”

But Baudu kept a sharp eye on the table. He had distributed slices of Brie cheese, and, as a treat for the visitors, he called for a second dessert, a pot of red-currant jam, a liberality which seemed to surprise Colomban. Pépé, who up to then had been very good, behaved rather badly at the sight of the jam; whilst Jean, all attention during the conversation about Geneviève’s marriage, was

taking stock of the latter, whom he thought too weak, too pale, comparing her in his own mind to a little white rabbit with black ears and pink eyes.

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

Madame Baudu, the other shopman, and the young lady then came and took their places at the table. Denise, left alone again, sat near the door waiting for her uncle to take her to Vinçard’s. Pépé was playing at her feet, whilst Jean had resumed his post of observation at the door. She sat there for nearly an hour, taking an interest in what was going on around her. Now and again a few customers came in; a lady, then two others appeared, the shop retaining its musty odor, its half light, by which the old-fashioned business, good-natured and simple, seemed to be weeping at its desertion. But what most interested Denise was The Ladies’ Paradise opposite, the windows of which she could see through the open door. The sky remained clouded, a sort of humid softness warmed the air, notwithstanding the season; and in this clear light, in which there was, as it were, a hazy diffusion of sunshine, the great shop seemed alive and in full activity.

Denise began to feel as if she were watching a machine working at full pressure, communicating its movement even as far as the windows. They were no longer the cold windows she had seen in the early morning; they seemed to be warm and vibrating from the activity within. There was a crowd before them, groups of women pushing and squeezing, devouring the finery with longing, covetous eyes. And the stuffs became animated in this passionate atmosphere: the laces fluttered, drooped, and concealed the depths of the shop with a troubling air of mystery; even the lengths of cloth, thick and heavy, exhaled a tempting odor, while the cloaks threw out their folds over the dummies, which assumed a soul, and the great velvet mantle particularly, expanded, supple and warm, as if on real fleshly shoulders, with a heaving of the bosom and a trembling of the hips. But the furnace-like glow which the house exhaled came above all from the sale, the crush at the counters, that could be felt behind the walls. There was the continual roaring of the machine at work, the marshalling of the customers, bewildered amidst the piles of goods, and finally pushed along to the pay-desk. And

all that went on in an orderly manner, with mechanical regularity, quite a nation of women passing through the force and logic of this wonderful commercial machine.

Denise had felt herself being tempted all day. She was bewildered and attracted by this shop, to her so vast, in which she saw more people in an hour than she had seen at Cornaille's in six months; and there was mingled with her desire to enter it a vague sense of danger which rendered the seduction complete. At the same time her uncle's shop made her feel ill at ease; she felt an unreasonable disdain, an instinctive repugnance for this cold, icy place, the home of old-fashioned trading. All her sensations—her anxious entry, her friends' cold reception, the dull lunch eaten in a prison-like atmosphere, her waiting amidst the sleepy solitude of this old house doomed to a speedy decay—all these sensations reproduced themselves in her mind under the form of a dumb protestation, a passionate longing for life and light. And notwithstanding her really tender heart, her eyes turned to The Ladies' Paradise, as if the saleswoman within her felt the need to go and warm herself at the glow of this immense business.

"Plenty of customers over there!" was the remark that escaped her.

But she regretted her words on seeing the Baudus near her. Madame Baudu, who had finished her lunch, was standing up, quite white, with her pale eyes fixed on the monster; every time she caught sight of this place, a mute, blank despair swelled her heart, and filled her eyes with scalding tears. As for Geneviève, she was anxiously watching Colomban, who, not supposing he was being observed, stood in ecstasy, looking at the handsome young saleswomen in the dress department opposite, the counter being visible through the first floor window. Baudu, his anger rising, merely said:

"All is not gold that glitters. Patience!"

The thought of his family evidently kept back the flood of rancor which was rising in his throat. A feeling of pride prevented him displaying his temper before these children, only that morning arrived. At last the draper made an effort, and tore himself away from the spectacle of the sale opposite.

"Well!" resumed he, "we'll go and see Vinçard. These situations are soon snatched up; it might be too late tomorrow."

But before going out he ordered the junior to go to the station and fetch Denise's box. Madame Baudu, to whom the young girl

had confided Pépé, decided to run over and see Madame Gras, to arrange about the child. Jean promised his sister not to stir from the shop.

“It’s two minutes’ walk,” explained Baudu as they went down the Rue Gaillon; “Vinçard has a silk business, and still does a fair trade. Of course he suffers, like everyone else, but he’s an artful fellow, who makes both ends meet by his miserly ways. I fancy, though, he wants to retire, on account of his rheumatics.”

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

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

Denise gathered that Vinçard was trying to sell his business to Robineau of The Paradise. He was giving his word of honor in a frank open way, with the facility of a man who could take any number of oaths without the slightest trouble. According to his account, the business was a golden one; and in the splendor of his rude health he interrupted himself to whine and complain of those infernal pains which prevented him stopping and making his fortune. But Robineau, nervous and tormented, interrupted him impatiently. He knew what a crisis the trade was passing through, and named a silk warehouse already ruined by The Paradise. Vinçard, inflamed, raised his voice.

“No wonder! The fall of that great booby of a Vabre was certain. His wife spent everything he earned. Besides, we are more than five hundred yards away, whilst Vabre was almost next door to The Paradise.”

Gaujean, the silk manufacturer, then chimed in, and their voices fell again. He accused the big establishments of ruining French manufacture; three or four laid down the law, reigning like masters over the market; and he gave it as his opinion that the only way of fighting them was to favor the small traders; above all, those who dealt in special classes of goods, to whom the future belonged. Therefore he offered Robineau plenty of credit.

“See how you have been treated at The Paradise,” said he. “No notice taken of your long service. You had the promise of the

first-hand's place long ago, when Bouthemont, an outsider without any claim, came in and got it at once."

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

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

"As you like," replied Vinçard, concealing his disappointment under a smiling countenance. "It's to my interest not to sell; and were it not for my rheumatics—"

And returning to the middle of the shop, he asked: "What can I do for you, Monsieur Baudu?"

The draper, who had been listening with one ear, introduced Denise, told him as much as he thought necessary of her story, adding that she had two years' country experience.

"And as I have heard you are wanting a good saleswoman."

Vinçard affected to be awfully sorry. "What an unfortunate thing!" said he. "I have, indeed, been looking for a saleswoman all the week; but I've just engaged one—not two hours ago."

A silence ensued. Denise seemed disheartened. Robineau, who was looking at her with interest, probably inspired with pity by her poor appearance, ventured to say:

"I know they're wanting a young person at our place, in the ready-made dress department."

Baudu could not help crying out fervently: "At your place? Never!"

Then he stopped, embarrassed. Denise had turned very red; she would never dare enter that great place, and yet the idea of being there filled her with pride.

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

The draper, to conceal his inward revolt, began to talk vaguely. He knew Madame Aurélie, or, at least, her husband, Lhomme, the cashier, a stout man, who had had his right arm severed by an omnibus. Then turning suddenly to Denise, he added: "However, that's

her business. She can do as she likes.”

And he went out, after having said “good-day” to Gaujean and Robineau. Vinçard went with him as far as the door, reiterating his regrets. The young girl had remained in the middle of the shop, intimidated, desirous of asking Robineau for further particulars. But not daring to, she in her turn bowed, and simply said: “Thank you, sir.”

On the way back Baudu said nothing to his niece, but walked very fast, forcing her to run to keep up with him, as if carried away by his reflections. Arrived in the Rue de la Michodière, he was going into his shop, when a neighboring shopkeeper, standing at his door, called him.

Denise stopped and waited.

“What is it, old Bourras?” asked the draper.

Bourras was a tall old man, with a prophet’s head, bearded and hairy, and piercing eyes under thick and bushy eyebrows. He kept an umbrella and walking-stick shop, did repairs, and even carved handles, which had won for him an artistic celebrity in the neighborhood. Denise glanced at the shop-window, where the umbrellas and sticks were arranged in straight lines. But on raising her eyes she was astonished at the appearance of the house, a hovel squeezed between The Ladies’ Paradise and a large building of the Louis XIV. style, sprung up one hardly knew how, in this narrow space, crushed by its two low storeys. Had it not been for the support on each side it must have fallen; the slates were old and rotten, and the two-windowed front was cracked and covered with stains, which ran down in long rusty lines over the worm-eaten sign-board.

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

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

“Must be prepared for anything now,” murmured Baudu at last.

Bourras then got angry, shaking his hair and flowing board. “Let him buy the house, he’ll have to pay four times the value for it! But I swear that as long as I live he shall not touch a stone of it. My lease has twelve years to run yet. We shall see! we shall see!”

It was a declaration of war. Bourras looked towards The Ladies’ Paradise, which neither had directly named. Baudu shook his

head in silence, and then crossed the street to his shop, his legs almost failing under him. "Ah! good Lord! ah! good Lord!" he kept repeating.

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

"How did you get on at Vinçard's?" asked Madame Baudu, suddenly.

The draper related his useless errand, adding that Denise had heard of a situation; and, pointing to The Ladies' Paradise with a scornful gesture, he cried out: "There—in there!"

The whole family felt wounded at the idea. The first dinner was at five o'clock. Denise and the two children took their places, with Baudu, Geneviève, and Colombar. A single jet of gas lighted and warmed the little dining room, reeking with the smell of hot food. The meal passed off in silence, but at dessert Madame Baudu, who could not rest anywhere, left the shop, and came and sat down near Denise. And then the storm, kept back all day, broke out, everyone feeling a certain relief in abusing the monster.

"It's your business, you can do as you like," repeated Baudu. "We don't want to influence you. But if you only knew what sort of place it is—"And he commenced to relate, in broken sentences, the history of this Octave Mouret. Wonderful luck! A fellow who had come up from the South of France with the amiable audacity of an adventurer; no sooner arrived than he commenced to distinguish himself by all sorts of disgraceful pranks with the ladies; had figured in an affair, which was still the talk of the neighborhood; and to crown all, had suddenly and mysteriously made the conquest of Madame Hédouin, who brought him The Ladies' Paradise as a marriage portion.

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

her blood in the foundation of that house.

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

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

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

"A sharp fellow, a dangerous busybody, who will overthrow the whole neighborhood if allowed to!" continued Baudu. "I fancy that Caroline, a rather romantic woman, must have been carried away by the gentleman's extravagant ideas. In short, he persuaded her to buy the house on the left, then the one on the right; and he himself, on becoming his own master, bought two others; so that the establishment has continued to grow—extending in such a way that it now threatens to swallow us all up!"

He was addressing Denise, but was really speaking more to himself, feeling a feverish longing to go over this history which haunted him continually. At home he was always angry, always violent, clenching his fists as if longing to go for somebody. Madame Baudu ceased to interfere, sitting motionless on her chair; Geneviève and Colombar, their eyes cast down, were picking up and eating the crumbs off the table, just for the sake of something to do. It was so warm, so stuffy in the small room, that Pépé was sleeping with his head on the table, and even Jean's eyes were closing.

"Wait a bit!" resumed Baudu, seized with a sudden fit of anger, "such jokers always go to smash! Mouret is hard-pushed just now; I know that for a fact. He's been forced to spend all his savings on his mania for extensions and advertisements. Moreover, in order

to raise money, he has induced most of his shop-people to invest all they possess with him. So that he hasn't a sou to help himself with now; and, unless a miracle be worked, and he treble his sales, as he hopes to do, you'll see what a crash there'll be! Ah! I'm not ill-natured, but that day I'll illuminate my shop-front, on my word of honor!"

And he went on in a revengeful voice; one would have thought that the fall of The Ladies' Paradise was to restore the dignity and prestige of compromised business. Had anyone ever seen such a thing? A draper's shop selling everything! Why not call it a bazaar at once? And the employees! a nice set they were too—a lot of puppies, who did their work like porters at a railway station, treating goods and customers like so many parcels; leaving the shop or getting the sack at a moment's notice. No affection, no manners, no taste! And all at once he quoted Colomban as an example of a good tradesman, brought up in the old school, knowing how long it took to learn all the cunning and tricks of the trade. The art was not to sell a large quantity, but to sell dear. Colomban could say how he had been treated, carefully looked after, his washing and mending done, nursed in illness, considered as one of the family—loved, in fact!

"Of course," repeated Colomban, after every statement the governor made.

"Ah, you're the last of the old stock," Baudu ended by declaring. "After you're gone there'll be none left. You are my sole consolation, for if they call all this sort of thing business I give up, I would rather clear out."

Geneviève, her head on one side, as if her thick hair were too heavy for her pale forehead, was watching the smiling shopman; and in her look there was a suspicion, a wish to see whether Colomban, stricken with remorse, would not blush at all this praise. But, like a fellow up to every trick of the old trade, he preserved his quiet manner, his good-natured and cunning look. However, Baudu still went on, louder than ever, condemning the people opposite, calling them a pack of savages, murdering each other in their struggle for existence, destroying all family ties. And he mentioned some country neighbors, the Lhommes—mother, father, and son—all employed in the infernal shop, people without any home life, always out, leading a comfortless, savage existence, never dining at home except on Sunday, feeding all the week at restaurants, hotels, anywhere.

Certainly his dining room wasn't too large nor too well-lighted; but it was part of their home, and the family had grown up affectionately about the domestic hearth. Whilst speaking his eyes wandered about the room; and he shuddered at the unavowed idea that the savages might one day, if they succeeded in ruining his trade, turn him out of this house where he was so comfortable with his wife and child. Notwithstanding the assurance with which he predicted the utter downfall of his rivals, he was really terrified, feeling that the neighborhood was being gradually invaded and devoured.

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

"I am sure of that, uncle," murmured Denise, bewildered, all this excitement rendering her more and more desirous of entering The Ladies' Paradise.

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

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

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

He spoke of other tradesmen, passing the whole neighbourhood in review. Now and again he let slip a confession. If Vinçard wanted to sell it was time for the rest to pack up, for Vinçard was like the rats who leave a house when it threatens to fall in. Then, immediately after, he contradicted himself, alluded to an alliance, an understanding between the small tradesmen in order to fight the colossus. He hesitated an instant before speaking of himself, his hands shaking, and his mouth twitching in a nervous manner. At last he made up his mind.

“As for myself, I can’t complain as yet. Of course he has done me harm, the scoundrel! But up to the present he only keeps ladies’ cloths, light stuffs for dresses and heavier goods for mantles. People still come to me for men’s goods, velvets for shooting suits, cloths for liveries, without speaking of flannels and serges, of which I defy him to show as good an assortment. But he thinks to annoy me by planting his cloth department right in front of my door. You’ve seen his display, haven’t you? He always places his finest made-up goods there, surrounded by a framework of various cloths—a cheapjack parade to tempt the women. Upon my word, I should be ashamed to use such means! The Old Elbeuf has been known for nearly a hundred years, and has no need for such at its door. As long as I live, it shall remain as I took it, with a few samples on each side, and nothing more!”

The whole family was affected. Geneviève ventured to make a remark after a silence:

“You know, papa, our customers know and like us. We mustn’t lose heart. Madame Desforges and Madame de Boves have been today, and I am expecting Madame Marty for some flannel.”

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

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

She shook her head; the drama of her whole life was expressed in these few words. Born in the old house, she loved every part of it, living only for it and by it; and, formerly proud of this house, the finest, the best patronized in the neighborhood, she had had the daily grief of seeing the rival establishment gradually growing in importance, at first disdained, then equal to theirs, and finally towering above it, and threatening all the rest. This was for her a continual, open sore; she was slowly dying from sheer grief at seeing The Old Elbeuf humiliated, though still living, as if by the force of impulse, like a machine wound up. But she felt that the death of the shop would be hers as well, and that she would never survive the closing of it.

There was a painful silence. Baudu was softly beating a tattoo with his fingers on the American cloth on the table. He experienced a sort of lassitude, almost a regret at having relieved his feelings once more in this way. In fact, the whole family felt the effects of his despondency, and could not help ruminating on the bitter story. They never had had any luck. The children had been educated and started in the world, fortune was beginning to smile on them, when suddenly this competition sprang up and ruined their hopes. There was, also, the house at Rambouillet, that country house to which he had been dreaming of retiring for the last ten years—a bargain, he thought; but it had turned out to be an old building always wanting repairs, and which he had let to people who never paid any rent. His last profits were swallowed up by the place—the only folly he had committed in his honest, upright career as a tradesman, obstinately attached to the old ways.

“Come, come!” said he, suddenly, “we must make room for the others. Enough of this useless talk!”

It was like an awakening. The gas hissed, in the dead and stifling air of the small room. They all jumped up, breaking the melancholy silence. However, Pépé was sleeping so soundly that they laid him on some bales of cloth. Jean had already returned to the street door yawning.

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

He looked at her sharply, waiting for a decisive answer. Denise, whom these stories had inspired with a still greater longing to enter The Ladies’ Paradise, instead of turning her from it, preserved

her quiet gentle demeanor with a Norman obstinacy. She simply replied: "We shall see, uncle."

And she spoke of going to bed early with the children, for they were all three very tired. But it had only just struck six, so she decided to stay in the shop a little longer. Night had come on, and she found the street quite dark, enveloped in a fine close rain, which had been falling since sunset. She was surprised. A few minutes had sufficed to fill the street with small pools, a stream of dirty water was running along the gutters, the pavement was thick with a sticky black mud; and through the beating rain she saw nothing but a confused stream of umbrellas, pushing, swinging along in the gloom like great black wings. She started back at first, feeling very cold, oppressed at heart by the badly-lighted shop, very dismal at this hour of the day. A damp breeze, the breath of the old quarter, came in from the street; it seemed that the rain, streaming from the umbrellas, was running right into the shop, that the pavement with its mud and its puddles extended all over the place, putting the finishing touches to the moldiness of the old shop front, white with saltpetre. It was quite a vision of old Paris, damp and uncomfortable, which made her shiver, astonished and heart-broken to find the great city so cold and so ugly.

But opposite, the gas-lamps were being lighted all along the frontage of The Ladies' Paradise. She moved nearer, again attracted and, as it were, warmed by this wealth of illumination. The machine was still roaring, active as ever, hissing forth its last clouds of steam; whilst the salesmen were folding up the stuffs, and the cashiers counting up the receipts. It was, as seen through the hazy windows, a vague swarming of lights, a confused factory-like interior. Behind the curtain of falling rain, this apparition, distant and confused, assumed the appearance of a giant furnace-house, where the black shadows of the firemen could be seen passing by the red glare of the furnaces. The displays in the windows became indistinct also; one could only distinguish the snowy lace, heightened in its whiteness by the ground glass globes of a row of gas jets, and against this chapel-like background the ready-made goods stood out vigorously, the velvet mantle trimmed with silver fox threw into relief the curved profile of a headless woman running through the rain to some entertainment in the unknown of the shades of the Paris night.

Denise, yielding to the seduction, had gone to the door, heedless

of the raindrops falling on her. At this hour, The Ladies' Paradise, with its furnace-like brilliancy, entirely conquered her. In the great metropolis, black and silent, beneath the rain—in this Paris, to which she was a stranger, it shone out like a lighthouse, and seemed to be of itself the life and light of the city. She dreamed of her future there, working hard to bring up the children, and of other things besides—she hardly knew what—far-off things, the desire and the fear of which made her tremble. The idea of this woman who had met her death amidst the foundations came back to her; she felt afraid, she thought she saw the lights bleeding; then, the whiteness of the lace quieting her, a vague hope sprang up in her heart, quite a certainty of happiness; whilst the fine rain, blowing on her, cooled her hands, and calmed her after the excitement of her journey.

“It's Bourras,” said a voice behind her.

She leant forward, and perceived the umbrella-maker, motionless before the window containing the ingenious display of umbrellas and walking-sticks. The old man had slipped up there in the dark, to feast his eyes on the triumphant show; and so great was his grief that he was unconscious of the rain which was beating on his bare head, and trickling off his white hair.

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

Turning round, Denise found the Baudus behind her again. Though they thought Bourras so stupid, they were obliged, against their will, to return to this spectacle which was breaking their hearts. Geneviève, very pale, had noticed that Colombar was watching the shadows of the saleswomen pass to and fro on the first floor opposite; and, whilst Baudu was choking with suppressed rancor, Madame Baudu was silently weeping.

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

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

CHAPTER II

The next morning, at half-past seven, Denise was outside The Ladies' Paradise, wishing to call there before taking Jean to his new place, which was a long way off, at the top of the Faubourg du Temple. But, accustomed to early hours, she had arrived too soon; the shop was hardly opened, and, afraid of looking ridiculous, full of timidity, she walked up and down the Place Gaillon for a moment.

The cold wind that blew had already dried the pavement. Shopmen were hurriedly turning out of every street in the neighborhood, their coat-collars turned up, and their hands in their pockets, taken unawares by this first chill of winter. Most of them hurried along alone, and disappeared in the depths of the warehouse, without addressing a word or look to their colleagues marching along by their side. Others were walking in twos and threes, talking fast, and taking up the whole of the pavement; while they all threw away with a similar gesture, their cigarette or cigar before crossing the threshold.

Denise noticed that several of these gentlemen took stock of her in passing. This increased her timidity; she felt quite unable to follow them, and resolved to wait till they had all entered before going in, blushing at the idea of being elbowed at the door by all these men. But the stream continued, so to escape their looks, she took a walk round. When she returned to the principal entrance, she found a tall young man, pale and awkward, who appeared to be waiting as she was.

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

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

"The fact is," he continued, getting more confused than ever, "I thought of asking them to engage me, and you might have given me a little information."

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

"I would with pleasure, sir," replied she at last. "But I'm no

better off than you are; I'm just going to apply myself."

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

And they blushed violently, their two timidities remaining face to face for a moment, affected by the similarity of their positions, not, daring, however, to wish each other success openly. Then, as they said nothing further, and became more and more uncomfortable, they separated awkwardly, and recommenced their waiting, one on either side, a few steps apart.

The shopmen continued to arrive, and Denise could now hear them joking as they passed, casting side glances towards her. Her confusion increased at finding herself exposed to this unpleasant ordeal, and she had decided to take half an hour's walk in the neighborhood, when the sight of a young man coming rapidly through the Rue Port-Mahon, detained her for a moment. He was evidently the manager of a department, she thought, for the others raised their hats to him. He was tall, with a clear skin and carefully trimmed beard; and he had eyes the color of old gold, of a velvety softness, which he fixed on her for a moment as he crossed the street. He already entered the shop, indifferent that she remained motionless, quite upset by his look, filled with a singular emotion, in which there was more uneasiness than pleasure. She began to feel really afraid, and, to give herself time to collect her courage somewhat, she walked slowly down the Rue Gaillon, and then along the Rue Saint-Roch.

It was better than a manager of a department, it was Octave Mouret in person. He had not been to bed, for after having spent the evening at a stockbroker's, he had gone to supper with a friend and two women, picked up behind the scenes of a small theatre. His tightly buttoned overcoat concealed a dress suit and white tie. He quickly ran upstairs, performed his toilet, changed, and entered his office, quite ready for work, with beaming eyes, and complexion as fresh as if he had had ten hours' sleep. The spacious office, furnished in old oak and hung with green rep, had for sole ornament the portrait of that Madame Hédouin, who was still the talk of the neighborhood. Since her death Octave thought of her with a tender regret, showing himself grateful to the memory of her, who, by marrying him, had made his fortune. And before commencing to sign the drafts laid on his desk, he bestowed the contented smile of a happy man on the portrait. Was it not always before her that he returned to work, after his young widower's escapades, every

time he issued from the alcoves where his craving for amusement attracted him?

There was a knock, and without waiting, a young man entered, a tall, thin fellow, with thin lips and a sharp nose, very gentlemanly and correct in his appearance, with his smooth hair already showing signs of turning grey. Mouret raised his eyes, then continuing to sign, said:

“I hope you slept well, Bourdoncle?”

“Very well, thanks,” replied the young man, walking about as if quite at home.

Bourdoncle, the son of a poor farmer near Limoges, had started at The Ladies' Paradise at the same time as Mouret, when it only occupied the corner of the Place Gaillon. Very intelligent, very active, it seemed as if he ought to have easily supplanted his comrade, who was not so steady, and who had, besides various other faults, a careless manner and too many intrigues with women; but he lacked that touch of genius possessed by the impassioned Southerner, and had not his audacity, his winning grace. Besides, by a wise instinct, he had always, from the first, bowed before him, obedient and without a struggle; and when Mouret advised his people to put all their money into the business, Bourdoncle was one of the first to respond, even investing the proceeds of an unexpected legacy left him by an aunt; and little by little, after passing through the various grades, salesman, second, and then first-hand in the silk department, he had become one of the governor's most cherished and influential lieutenants, one of the six persons who assisted Mouret to govern The Ladies' Paradise—something like a privy council under an absolute king. Each one watched over a department. Bourdoncle exercised a general control.

“And you,” resumed he, familiarly, “have you slept well?”

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

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

This was their constant friendly dispute. Bourdoncle had, at the commencement, beaten his mistresses, because, said he, they prevented him sleeping. Now he professed to hate women, having, no doubt, chance love affairs of which he said nothing, so small was the place they occupied in his life; he contented himself with

encouraging the extravagance of his lady customers, feeling the greatest disdain for their frivolity, which led them to ruin themselves in stupid gewgaws. Mouret, on the contrary, affected to worship them, remained before them delighted and cajoling, continually carried away by fresh love-affairs; and this served as an advertisement for his business. One would have said that he enveloped all the women in the same caress, the better to bewilder them and keep them at his mercy.

"I saw Madame Desforges last night," said he; "she was looking delicious at the ball."

"But it wasn't with her that you went to supper, was it?" asked the other.

Mouret protested. "Oh! no, she's very virtuous, my dear fellow. I went to supper with little Heloise, of the Folly. Stupid as a donkey, but so comical!"

He took another bundle of drafts and went on signing. Bourdoncle continued to walk about. He went and took a look through the lofty plate-glass windows, into the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, then returned, saying: "You know they'll have their revenge."

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

"Why, the women."

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

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

He had raised his penholder, brandishing it and pointing it in the air, as if he would have liked to stab some invisible heart with a knife. Bourdoncle resumed walking, bowing as usual before the superiority of the governor, whose genius, though faulty, had always got the better of him. He, so clear-headed, logical and passionless, incapable of falling, had yet to learn the feminine character of success, Paris yielding herself with a kiss to the boldest.

A silence reigned, broken only by Mouret's pen. Then, in reply to his brief questions, Bourdoncle gave him the particulars of the

great sale of winter novelties, which was to commence the following Monday. This was an important affair, and the house was risking its fortune in it; for the rumor had some foundation, Mouret was throwing himself into speculation like a poet, with such ostentation, such a determination to attain the colossal, that everything seemed bound to give way under him. It was quite a new style of doing business, an apparent commercial recklessness which had formerly made Madame Hédouin anxious, and which even now, notwithstanding the first successes, quite dismayed those who had capital in the business. They blamed the governor in secret for going too quick; accused him of having enlarged the establishment to a dangerous extent, before making sure of a sufficient increase of custom; above all, they trembled on seeing him put all the capital into one venture, filling the place with a pile of goods without leaving a sou in the reserve fund. Thus, for this sale, after the heavy sums paid to the builders, the whole capital was out, and it was once more a question of victory or death. And he, in the midst of all this excitement, preserved a triumphant gaiety, a certainty of gaining millions, like a man worshipped by the women, and who cannot be betrayed. When Bourdoncle ventured to express certain fears with reference to the too great development given to several not very productive departments, he broke out into a laugh full of confidence, and exclaimed:

“No fear! my dear fellow, the place is too small!”

The other appeared dumbfounded, seized with a fear he no longer attempted to conceal. The house too small! a draper’s shop having nineteen departments, and four hundred and three employees!

“Of course,” resumed Mouret, “we shall be obliged to enlarge our premises before another eighteen months. I’m seriously thinking about the matter. Last night Madame Desforges promised to introduce me to someone. In short, we’ll talk it over when the idea is ripe.”

And having finished signing his drafts, he got up, and tapped his lieutenant on the shoulder in a friendly manner, but the latter could not get over his astonishment. The fright felt by the prudent people around him amused Mouret. In one of his fits of brusque frankness with which he sometimes overwhelmed his familiars, he declared he was at heart a bigger Jew than all the Jews in the world; he took after his father, whom he resembled physically and morally, a fellow who knew the value of money; and, if his mother had

given him that particle of nervous fantasy, why it was, perhaps, the principal element of his luck, for he felt the invincible force of his daring reckless grace.

“You know very well that we’ll stand by you to the last,” Bourdoncle finished by saying.

Before going down into the various departments to give their usual look round, they settled certain other details. They examined the specimen of a little book of account forms, which Mouret had just invented for use at the counters. Having remarked that the old-fashioned goods, the dead stock, went off all the more rapidly when the commission given to the employees was high, he had based on this observation a new system. In future he intended to interest his people in the sale of all goods, giving them a commission on the smallest piece of stuff, the slightest article sold: a system which had caused a revolution in the drapery trade, creating between the salespeople a struggle for existence of which the proprietor reaped the benefit. This struggle formed his favorite method, the principle of organization he constantly applied. He excited his employees’ passions, pitted one against the other, allowed the strongest to swallow up the weakest, fattening on this interested struggle. The specimen book was approved of; at the top of the two forms—the one retained, and the one torn off—were the particulars of the department and the salesman’s number; then there were columns on both for the measurement, description of the articles sold, and the price; the salesman simply signed the bill before handing it to the cashier. In this way an easy account was kept, it sufficed to compare the bills delivered by the cashier’s department to the clearing-house with the salesmen’s counterfoils. Every week the latter would receive their commission, and that without the least possibility of any error.

“We sha’n’t be robbed so much,” remarked Bourdoncle, with satisfaction. “A very good idea of yours.”

“And I thought of something else last night,” explained Mouret. “Yes, my dear fellow, at the supper. I should like to give the clearing-house clerks a trifle for every error found in checking. You can understand that we shall then be certain they won’t pass any, for they would rather invent some.”

He began to laugh, whilst the other looked at him in admiration. This new application of the struggle for existence delighted Mouret; he had a real genius for administrative business, and dreamed of

organizing the house, so as to play upon the selfish instincts of his employees, for the complete and quiet satisfaction of his own appetites. He often said that to make people do their best, and even to keep them fairly honest, it was necessary to excite their selfish desires first.

“Well, let’s go downstairs,” resumed Mouret. “We must look after this sale. The silk arrived yesterday, I believe, and Bouthemont must be getting it in now.”

Bourdoncle followed him. The receiving office was on the basement floor, in the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin. There, on a level with the pavement, was a kind of glazed cage, where the vans discharged the goods. They were weighed, and then slipped down a rapid slide, its oak and iron work shining, brightened by the chafing of goods and cases. Everything entered by this yawning trap; it was a continual swallowing up, a fall of goods, causing a roaring like that of a cataract. At the approach of big sale times especially, the slide carried down a perpetual stream of Lyons silks, English woollens, Flemish linens, Alsatian calicoes, and Rouen printed goods; and the vans were sometimes obliged to wait their turn along the street; the bales running down produced the peculiar noise made by a stone thrown into deep water.

Mouret stopped a moment before the slide, which was in full activity. Rows of cases were going down of themselves, falling like rain from some upper stream. Then some huge bales appeared, toppling over in their descent like so many pebbles. Mouret looked on, without saying a word. But this wealth of goods rushing in at the rate of thousands of francs a minute, made his eyes glisten. He had never before had such a clear, definite idea of the struggle he was engaged in. Here was this mountain of goods that he had to launch to the four corners of Paris. He did not open his mouth, continuing his inspection.

By the grey light penetrating the air-holes, a squad of men were receiving the goods, whilst others were undoing and opening the cases and bales in presence of the managers of different departments. A dockyard agitation filled this cellar, this basement, where wrought-iron pillars supported the arches, and the bare walls of which were cemented.

“Have you got all there, Bouthemont?” asked Mouret, going up to a broad-shouldered young fellow who was checking the contents of a case.

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

The manager was glancing at the invoice every now and then, standing up before a large counter on which one of his salesmen was laying, one by one, the pieces of silk he was taking from the case. Behind them ran other counters, also encumbered with goods that a small army of shopmen were examining. It was a general unpacking, an apparent confusion of stuffs, examined, turned over, and marked, amidst a buzz of voices.

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

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

"It is really very good," observed Bourdoncle.

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

Nearly every month Bouthemont went to Lyons, staying there days together, living at the best hotels, with orders to treat the manufacturers with open purse. He enjoyed, moreover, a perfect liberty, and bought what he liked, provided that he increased the

yearly business of his department in a certain proportion, settled beforehand; and it was on this proportion that his commission was based. In short, his position at The Ladies' Paradise, like that of all the managers, was that of a special tradesman, in a grouping of various businesses, a sort of vast trading city.

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

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

The manager laughed heartily. "Oh! I don't mind, that will just suit me; it will treble the sale, and as my only interest is to attain heavy receipts."

But Bourdoncle remained very grave, biting his lips. He drew his commission on the total profits, and it did not suit him to lower the prices. Part of his business was to exercise a control over the prices fixed upon, to prevent Bouthemont selling at too small a profit in order to increase the sales. Moreover, his former anxiety reappeared in the presence of these advertising combinations which he did not understand. He ventured to show his repugnance by saying:

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

At this Mouret got angry. He struck the silk with his open hand, crying out excitedly: "I know that, that's why I want to give it to our customers. Really, my dear fellow, you'll never understand women's ways. Don't you see they'll be crazy after this silk?"

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

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

He became quite eloquent.

“Don’t you understand? In a week’s time from today I want the Paris Paradise to make a revolution in the market. It’s our master-stroke, which will save us, and get our name up. Nothing else will be talked of; the blue and silver selvage will be known from one end of France to the other. And you’ll hear the furious complaints of our competitors. The small traders will lose another wing by it; they’ll be done for, all those rheumatic old brokers shivering in their cellars!”

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

“It’s the manufacturers who are not exactly pleased,” said Bouthemont. “At Lyons they are all furious with you, they pretend that your cheap trading is ruining them. You are aware that Gaujean has positively declared war against me. Yes, he has sworn to give the little houses longer credit, rather than accept my prices.”

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

The shopman was emptying the second case, whilst Bouthemont was checking the pieces by the invoice. Another shopman, at the end of the counter, was marking them in plain figures, and the checking finished, the invoice, signed by the manager, had to be sent to the chief cashier’s office. Mouret continued looking at this work for a moment, at all this activity round this unpacking of goods which threatened to drown the basement; then, without adding a word, with the air of a captain satisfied with his troops, he went away, followed by Bourdoncle.

They slowly crossed the basement floor. The air-holes placed at intervals admitted a pale light; while in the dark corners, and along the narrow corridors, gas was constantly burning. In these corridors were situated the reserves, large vaults closed with iron railings, containing the surplus goods of each department. Mouret glanced in passing at the heating apparatus, to be lighted on the Monday for the first time, and at the post of firemen guarding a giant gas-meter enclosed in an iron cage. The kitchen and dining

rooms, old cellars turned into habitable apartments, were on the left at the corner of the Place Gaillon. At last he arrived at the delivery department, right at the other end of the basement floor. The parcels not taken away by the customers were sent down there, sorted on tables, placed in compartments each representing a district of Paris; then sent up by a large staircase opening just opposite The Old Elbeuf, to the vans standing alongside the pavement. In the mechanical working of The Ladies' Paradise, this staircase in the Rue de la Michodière disgorged without ceasing the goods swallowed up by the slide in the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, after they had passed through the mechanism of the counters up above.

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

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

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

At this early hour the sorting tables were bare, the compartment only contained a few parcels left over night. Whilst Campion was searching amongst these packets, after having consulted a list, Bourdoncle was looking at Mouret, thinking that this wonderful fellow knew everything, thought of everything, even when at the supper-tables of restaurants or in the alcoves of his mistresses. At last Campion discovered the error; the cashier's department had given a wrong number, and the parcel had come back.

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

But before starting on their tour round the shops, he wanted to go up to the postal order department, which occupied several rooms on the second floor. It was there that all the provincial and foreign orders arrived; and he went up every morning to see the correspondence. For two years this correspondence had been increasing daily. At first occupying only about ten clerks, it now required more than thirty. Some opened the letters, others read them, seated at both sides of the same table; others again classed them, giving each one a running number, which was repeated on a pigeon-hole. Then when the letters had been distributed to the different departments and the latter had delivered the articles, these articles were