

THE IDOL OF PARIS

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a white oil cloth bordered with gold-medallioned portraits of the line of French kings served as table cover at family meals.

The Darbois family consisted of Francois Darbois, professor of philosophy, a scholar of eminence and distinction; of Madame Darbois, his wife, a charming gentle little creature, without any pretensions; of Philippe Renaud, brother of Madame Darbois, an honest and able business man; of his son, Maurice Renaud, twenty-two and a painter, a fine youth filled with confidence because of the success he had just achieved at the last Salon; of a distant cousin, the family counsellor, a tyrannical landlord and self-centered bachelor, Adhemar Meydieux, and the child of whom he was godfather, and around whom all this particular little world revolved.

Esperance Darbois, the only daughter of the philosopher, was fifteen years old. She was long and slim without being angular. The flower head that crowned this slender stem was exquisitely fair, with the fairness of a little child, soft pale-gold, fair. Her face had, indeed, no strictly sculptural beauty; her long flax-coloured eyes were not large, her nose had no special character; only her sensitive and clear-cut nostrils gave the pretty face its suggestion of ancient lineage. Her mouth was a little large, and her full red lips opened on singularly white teeth as even as almonds; while a low Grecian forehead and a neck graceful in every curve gave Esperance a total effect of aristocratic distinction that was beyond dispute. Her low vibrant voice produced an impression that was almost physical on those who heard it. Quite without intention, she introduced into every word she spoke several inflections which made her manner of pronunciation

peculiarly her own.

Esperance was kneeling on a chair, leaning upon her arms on the table. Her blue dress, cut like a blouse, was held in at the waist by a narrow girdle knotted loosely. Although the child was arguing vigorously, with intense animation, there was such grace in her gestures, such charming vibrations in her voice, that it was impossible to resent her combative attitude.

"Papa, my dear papa," she was asserting to Fran_{cois} Darbois, "You are saying to-day just the opposite of what you were saying the other day to mother at dinner."

Her father raised his head. Her mother, on the contrary, dropped hers a little. "Pray Heaven," she was saying to herself, "that Fran_{cois} does not get angry with her!"

The godfather moved his chair forward; Philippe Renaud laughed; Maurice looked at his cousin with amazement.

"What are you saying?" asked Fran_{cois} Darbois.

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Esperance gazed at him tenderly. "You remember my godfather was dining with us and there had been a lot of talk; my godfather was against allowing any liberty to women, and he maintained that children have no right to choose their own careers, but must, without reasoning, give way to their parents, who alone are to decide their fates."

Adhemar wished to take the floor and cleared his throat in preparation, but Fran_{cois} Darbois, evidently a little nonplused, muttered, "And then after that—what are you coming to?"

"To what you answered, papa."

Her father looked at her a little anxiously, but she met his glance calmly and continued: "You said to my godfather, 'My dear Meydieux, you are absolutely mistaken. It is the right and the duty of everyone to select and to construct his future for himself.'"

Darbois attempted to speak....

"You even told mama, who had never known it, that grandfather wanted to place you in business, and that you rebelled."

"Ah! rebelled," murmured Darbois, with a slight shrug.

"Yes, rebelled. And you added, 'My father cut off my allowance for a year, but I stuck to it; I tutored poor students who couldn't get through their examinations, I lived from hand to mouth, but I did live, and I was able to continue my studies in philosophy.'"

Uncle Renaud was openly nodding encouragement. Adhemar Meydieux rose heavily, and straightening up with a succession of jerky movements, caught himself squarely on his heels, and then, with great conviction, said: "See here, child, if I were your father, I should take you by the ear and put you out of the room."

Esperance turned purple.

"I repeat, children should obey without question!"

"I hope to prove to my daughter by reasoning that she is probably wrong," said M. Darbois very quietly.

"Not at all. You must order, not persuade."

"Now, M. Meydieux," exclaimed the young painter, "it seems to me that you are going a little too far. Children should respect their parents' wishes as far as possible; but when it is a question of their own future, they have a right to present their side of the case. If my uncle Darbois's father had had his way, my uncle Darbois would probably now be a mediocre engineer, instead of the brilliant

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philosopher who is admired and recognized by the entire world."

Gentle little Madame Darbois sat up proudly, and Esperance looked at her father with a world of tenderness in her eyes.

"But, my lad," pursued Adhemar, swelling with conviction, "your uncle might well have made a fortune at machinery, while, as it is, he has just managed to exist."

"We are very happy"—Madame Darbois slipped in her word.

Esperance had bounded out of her chair, and from behind her father encircled his head with her arms. "Oh! yes, very happy," she murmured in a low voice, "and you would not, darling papa, spoil the harmony of our life together?"

"Remember, my dear little Esperance, what I said to your mother concerned only men—now we are considering the future of a young girl, and that is a graver matter!"

"Why?"

"Because men are better armed against the struggle, and life is, alas, one eternal combat."

"The armour of the intellect is the same for a young girl as for a young man."

Adhemar shook his shoulders impatiently. Seeing that he was getting angry and was like to explode, Esperance cried out, "Wait, godfather, you must let me try to convince my parents. Suppose, father, that I had chosen the same career as Maurice. What different armour should I need?"

François listened to his daughter affectionately, drawing her closer to him. "Understand me, my dearie. I am not denying your wish as a proof of my parental authority. No, remember this is the second time that you have expressed your will in the matter of the choice of your career. The first time I asked you to consider it for six months: The six months having passed, you now place me under the obligation of—"

"Oh! papa, what a horrid word!"

"But that is it," he went on, playing with her pretty hair, "you have put me under the obligation of answering you definitely; and I have called this family council because I have not the courage, nor, perhaps, the right, to stand in your way—the way you wish to go."

Adhemar made a violent effort to leap to his feet, declaiming in his heavy voice, "Yes, François, you must try and prevent her from going

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this way, the most evil, the most perilous above all, for a woman."

Esperance began to tremble, but she stood resolutely away from her father, holding herself rigid with her arms hanging straight at her sides. The rose tint of her cheeks had disappeared and her blue eyes were dimmed with shadows.

Maurice hastily made a number of sketches of her; never before had he found his cousin so interesting.

Adhemar continued, "Pray allow me to proceed with what I have to say, my dear child. I have come from the country for this purpose, in answer to your father's summons. I wish to offer my experience for your protection. Your parents know nothing of life. François breathes the ether of a world peopled only by philosophers—whether dead or living, it makes little difference; your mother lives only for you two. I expressed at once my horror at the career that you have chosen, I expatiated upon all the dangers! You seem to have understood nothing, and your father, thanks to his philosophy, that least trustworthy of guides, continues futilely reasoning, for ever reasoning!"

His harangue was cut short. Esperance's clear voice broke in, "I do not wish to hear you speak in this manner of my father, godfather," she said coldly. "My father lives for my mother and me. He is good and generous. It is you who are the egoist, godfather!"

François started as if to check his daughter, but she continued, "When mama was so sick, six years ago, papa sent me with Marguerite, our maid, to take a letter to you. I did so want to read that letter, it must have been so splendid.... You answered...."

Adhemar tried to get in a word. Esperance in exasperation tapped the floor with her foot and rushed on, "You answered, 'Little one, you must tell your papa that I will give him all the advice he wants to help him out of this trouble, but it is a principle of mine never to lend money, above all to my good friends, for that always leads to a quarrel.' Then I left you and went to my Uncle Renaud, who gave me a great deal more even than we needed for mama."

Big Renaud looked hot and uncomfortable. His son pressed his hand so affectionately under the table that the good man's eyes grew wet.

"Ever since then, godfather, I have not cared for you any more."

The atmosphere of the little room seemed suddenly to congeal. The silence was intense. Adhemar himself remained thunderstruck in his chair, his tongue dry, his thoughts chaotic, unable to form a reply to the child's virulent attack. For the sake of breaking up this general paralysis, Maurice Renaud finally suggested that they should vote upon

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the decision to be given to his brave little cousin.

They gathered together around the table and began to talk in low tones. Esperance had sunk into a chair. Her face was very pale and great blue circles had appeared around her eyes. The discussion seemed to be once more in full swing when Maurice startled everyone by crying, "My God, Esperance is ill!"

The child had fainted, and her head hung limply back. Her golden hair made an aureola of light around the colourless face with its dead white lips.

Maurice raised the child in his arms, and Madame Darbois led him quickly to Esperance's little room where he laid the light form on its little bed. François Darbois moistened her temples quickly with Eau de Cologne. Madame Darbois supported Esperance's head, holding a little ether to her nose. As Maurice looked about the little room, as fresh, as white, as the two pots of marguerites on the mantel-shelf, an indefinable sentiment swelled up within him. Was it a kind of adoration for so much purity? Philippe Renaud had remained in the dining-room where he succeeded in keeping Adhemar, in spite of his efforts to follow the Darbois.

Esperance opened her eyes and seeing beside her only her father and mother, those two beings whom she loved so deeply, so tenderly, she reached out her arms and drew close to her their beloved heads.

Maurice had slipped out very quietly. "Papa dearie, Mama beloved, forgive me, it is not my fault," she sobbed.

"Don't cry, my child, now, not a tear," cried Darbois, bending over his little girl. "It is settled, you shall be...." and the word was lost in her little ear.

She went suddenly pink, and raising herself towards him, whispered her reply, "Oh! I thank you! How I love you both! Thank you! Thank you!"

CHAPTER II

Esperance, left alone with her mother, drank the tea this tender

parent brought to her, and the look of health began to come back to her face.

"Then to-morrow, mother dearest, we must go and be registered for the examinations that are soon to be held at the Conservatoire."

"You want to go to-morrow?"

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"Yes, to-day we must stay with papa, mustn't we? He is so kind!"

The two—mother and daughter—were silent a moment, occupied with the same tender thoughts.

"And now we will persuade him to go out with us, shan't we, mother dear?"

"That will be the very best thing for both of you," agreed Madame Darbois, and she went to make her preparations.

Left alone, Esperance cast aside her blue dress and surveyed herself in the long mirror. Her eyes were asking the questions that perplexed her whole being. She raised herself lightly on her little feet. "Oh! yes, surely I am going to be tall. I am only fifteen, and I am quite tall for my age. Oh! yes, I shall be tall." She came very close to the mirror and examined herself closely, hypnotizing herself little by little. She beheld herself under a million different aspects. Her whole life seemed passing before her, shadowy figures came and went—one of them, the most persistent, seemed to keep stretching towards her long appealing arms. She shivered, recoiled abruptly, and passing her hand across her forehead, dispelled the dizzy visions that were gathering there.

When her mother returned she found her quietly reading Victor Hugo, studying "Dona Sol" in Hernani. She had not heard the opening of the door, and she started at finding her mother close beside her.

"You see, I am not going to lose any time," she said, closing the book. "Ah! mama, how happy I am, how happy!"

"Quick," said her mother, her finger to her lips. "Your father is waiting for us, ready to go out."

Esperance seized her hat and coat quickly and ran to join her father. He was sitting as if thinking, his head resting in his hands. She understood the struggle between love and reason in his soul, and her upright little soul suffered with his. Bending gently beside him she murmured, "Do not be unhappy, papa. You know that I can never suffer as long as I have you two. If I am quite mistaken, if life doesn't bring me any of the things that I expect, I shall find comfort in your love."

Francois Darbois raised his head and looked deep into the lovely eyes, "God keep you, my little daughter!"

Next morning Esperance was ready to go to the Conservatoire long before the appointed hour. M. Darbois was already in his study with one of his pupils, so she ran to her mother's room and found her busy

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with some papers.

"You have my birth certificate?"

"Yes, yes."

"And papa's written consent?"

"Yes, yes," sighed Madame Darbois.

"He hesitated to give it to you?"

"Oh! no, you know your father! His word is sacred, but it cost him a great deal. My dear little girl, never let him regret it."

Esperance put her finger across her mother's lips. "Mama, you know that I am honest and honourable, how can I help it when I am the child

of two darlings as good as you and papa? My longing for the theatre is stronger than I can tell. I believe that if papa had refused his permission, it would have made me unhappy and that I should have fallen ill and pined away. You remember how, about a year ago, I almost died of anaemia and consumption. Really, mother dear, my illness was simply caused by my overstrung nerves. I had often heard papa express his disapproval of the theatre; and you, you remember, said one day, in reference to the suicide of a well-known actress, 'Ah, her poor mother, God keep me from seeing my daughter on the stage!'"

Madame Darbois was silent for a moment; then two tears rolled quietly from beneath her eyelids and a little sob escaped her.

"Ah! mama, mama," cried Esperance, "have pity, don't let me see you suffer so. I feared it; I did not want to be sure of it. I am an ungrateful daughter. You love me so much! You have indulged me so! I ought to give in. I can not, and your grief will kill me. I suffered so yesterday, out driving, feeling papa so far away. I kept feeling as if he were holding himself aloof in an effort to forget, and now you are crying.... Mama, it is terrible! I must make myself give you back your happiness—at least your peace of mind. Alas!—I can not give you back your happiness, for I think that I shall die if I cannot have my way."

Madame Darbois trembled. She was familiar with her daughter's nervous, high-strung temperament. In a tone of more authority than Esperance had ever heard her use, "Come, child, be quick, we are losing time," she said, "I have all the necessary papers, come."

They found at the Conservatoire several women, who had arrived before them, waiting to have their daughters entered for the course. Four youths were standing in a separate group, staring at the young girls

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beside their mothers. In a corner of the room was a little office, where the official, charged with receiving applications, was ensconced. He was a man of fifty, gruff, jaundiced from liver trouble, looking down superciliously at the girls whose names he had just received. When Madame Darbois entered with Esperance, the distinguished manner of the two ladies caused a little stir. The group of young men drew nearer. Madame Darbois looked about, and seeing an empty bench near a window, went towards it with her daughter. The sun, falling upon Esperance's blonde hair, turned it suddenly into an aureola of gold. A murmur as of admiration broke from the spectators.

"Now there is someone," murmured a big fat woman with her hands stuffed into white cotton gloves, "who may be sure of her future!"

The official raised his head, dazzled by the radiant vision.

Forgetting the lack of courtesy he had shown those who had preceded her, he advanced towards Madame Darbois and, raising his black velvet cap, "Do you wish to register for the entrance examinations?" he said to Esperance.

She indicated her mother with an impatient movement of her little head. "Yes," said Madame Darbois, "but I come after these other people. I will wait my turn."

The man shrugged his shoulders with an air of assurance. "Please follow me, ladies."

They rose. A sound of discontent was audible.

"Silence," cried the official in fury. "If I hear any more noise, I will turn you all out."

Silence descended again. Many of these women had come a long way. A little dressmaker had left her workshop to bring her daughter. A big chambermaid had obtained the morning's leave from the bourgeois house where she worked. Her daughter stood beside her, a beautiful child of sixteen with colourless hair, impudent as a magpie. A music teacher with well-worn boots had excused herself from her pupils. Her two daughters flanked her to right and left, Parisian blossoms, pale and anaemic. Both wished to pass the entrance examinations, the one as an ingenue in comedy, the other in tragedy. They were neither comic nor tragic, but modest and charming. There was also a small shop-keeper, covered with jewels. She sat very rigid, far forward on the bench, compressed into a terrible corset which forced her breast and back into the humps of a punchinello; her legs hanging just short of the floor. Her daughter paced up and down the long room like a colt snorting impatiently to be put through its paces. She had the beauty of a classic type, without spot or blemish, but her joints looked too heavy and her neck was thrust without grace between her large shoulders. Anyone who looked into the future would have been able to

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predict for her, with some certainty, an honourable career as a tragedian in the provinces.

Madame Darbois seated herself on the only chair in the little office. When the official had read Esperance's birth certificate, he exclaimed, "What! Mademoiselle is the daughter of the famous professor of philosophy?"

The two women looked at each other with amazement.

"Why, ladies," went on the official, radiantly, "my son is taking courses with M. Darbois at the Sorbonne. What a pleasure it is to meet you—but how does it happen that M. Darbois has allowed...?" His sentence died in his throat. Madame Darbois had become very pale and her daughter's nostrils quivered. The official finished with his papers, returned them politely to Madame Darbois, and said in a low tone, "Have no anxiety, Madame, the little lady has a wonderful future before her."

The two ladies thanked the official and made their way toward the door. The group of young men bowed to the young girl, and she inclined her head ever so slightly.

"Oh, la-la," screamed the big chamber-maid.

Esperance stopped on the threshold and looked directly at the woman, who blushed, and said nothing more.

"Ho, ho," jeered one of the youths, "she settled you finely that time, didn't she?"

An argument ensued instantly, but Esperance had gone her way, trembling with happiness. Everything in life seemed opening for her. For the first time she was aware of her own individuality; for the first time she recognized in herself a force: would that force work for creation or destruction? The child pressed her hands against her fluttering heart.

M. Darbois was waiting at the window. At sight of him, Esperance jumped from the carriage before it stopped. "What a little creature of extremes!" mused the professor.

When she threw her arms about him to thank him, he loosed her hands quickly. "Come, come, we haven't time to talk of that. We must sit down at once. Marguerite is scolding because the dinner is going to be spoiled."

To Esperance the dinner was of less than no importance, but she threw aside her hat obediently, pulled forward her father's chair, and sat down between the two beings whom she adored, but whom she was forced
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to see suffer if she lived in her own joy—and that she could not, and would not, hide.

CHAPTER III

The weeks before the long-expected day of the examination went by all too slowly to suit Esperance. She had chosen, for the comedy test to study a scene from *Les Femmes Savantes* (the rôle of "Henriette"), and in tragedy a scene from *Iphigenia*. Adhemar Meydieux often came to inquire about his goddaughter's studies. He wished to hear her recite, to give her advice; but Esperance refused energetically, still remembering his former opposition against him. She would let no one hear her recitations, but her mother. Madame Darbois put all her heart into her efforts to help her daughter. Every morning she went through her work with Esperance. To her the rôle of "Henriette" was inexplicable. She consulted her husband, who replied, "Henriette" is a little philosopheress with plenty of sense. Esperance is right to have chosen this scene from *Les Femmes Savantes*. Molière's genius has never exhibited finer raillery than in this play." And he enlarged upon the psychology of "Henriette's" character until Madame Darbois realized with surprise that her daughter was completely in accord with the ideas laid down by her father as to the interpretation of this rôle. Esperance was so young it seemed impossible that she could yet understand all the double subtleties....

Esperance had taken her first communion when she was eleven, and after her religious studies ended, she had thought of nothing but poetry, and had even tried to compose some verses. Her father had encouraged her, and procured her a professor of literature. From that time the child had given herself completely to the art of the drama, learning by heart and reciting aloud the most beautiful parts of French literature. Her parents, listening with pleasure to her recitations of Ronsard or Victor Hugo, little guessing that the child was already dreaming of the theatre. Often since then, Madame Darbois had reproached herself for having foreseen so little, but her husband, whose wisdom recognized the uselessness of vain regrets, would calm her, saying with a shake of his head, "You can prevent nothing, my dear wife, destiny is a force against which all is impotent! We can but remove the stumbling-blocks from the path which Esperance must follow. We must be patient!"

At last the day arrived! Never had the young girl been more charming. Francois Darbois had been working arduously on the correction of a book he was about to publish, when he saw her coming into his library. He turned towards her and, regarding her there in the doorway, seemed
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to see the archangel of victory—such radiance emanated from this frail little body.

"I wanted to kiss you, father, before going ... there. Pardon me for having disturbed you." He pressed her close against his heart without speaking, unwilling to pronounce the words of regret that mounted to his lips.

Esperance was silent for an instant before her father's grief: then with an exaltation of her whole being she flung herself on her

father's neck: "Oh, father, dear father, I am so happy that you must not suffer; you love me so much that you must be happy in this happiness I owe to you; to-morrow, perhaps, will bring me tears. Let us live for to-day."

The professor gently stroked his daughter's velvet cheek. "Go, my darling, go and return triumphant."

In the reception-room Esperance and Madame Darbois went to the same bench, where they had sat upon their former visit. Some fifty people were assembled.

The same official came to speak to them, and, consulting the list which he was holding ostentatiously, "There are still five pupils before you, Mademoiselle, two boys and three young ladies. Whom have you chosen to give you your cues?"

Esperance looked at him with amazement. "I don't understand," she said, Madame Darbois was perturbed.

"But," answered the man, "you must have an ' Armande ' for Les Femmes Savantes , an ' Agememnon ' and a ' Clytemnestra ' for Iphygenia ."

"But we did not know that," stammered Madame Darbois.

The official smiled and assumed still more importance. "Wait just a moment, ladies." Soon he returned, leading a tall, young girl with a dignified bearing, and a young man of evident refinement. "Here is Mlle. Hardouin, who is willing to give you the cues for ' Armande ' and ' Clytemnestra , ' and M. Jean Perliez, who will do the ' Agememnon . ' Only, I believe," he added, "you will have to rehearse with them. I will take all four of you into my little office where no one can disturb you."

Mlle. Hardouin was a beautiful, modest young girl of eighteen, with charming manners. She was an orphan and lived with a sister ten years older, who had been a mother to her. They adored each other. The older sister had established a good trade for herself as a dressmaker; both sisters were respected and loved.

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Jean Perliez was the son of a chemist. His father had been unwilling that he should choose a theatrical career until he should have completed his studies at college. He had obeyed, graduated brilliantly, and was now presenting himself for the entrance examination as a tragedian.

The three young people went over the two scenes Esperance had chosen together.

"What a pretty voice you have, Mademoiselle," said Genevieve Hardouin timidly.

After the rehearsal of Les Femmes Savantes , when they finished the scene of Iphygenia , Jean Perliez turned to Madame Darbois and inquired the name of Esperance's instructor.

"Why, she had none. My daughter has worked alone; I have given her the cues." She smiled that benevolent smile, which always lighted her features with a charm of true goodness and distinction.

"That is indeed remarkable," murmured Jean Perliez, as he looked at the young girl. Then bending towards Madame Darbois, "May I be permitted, Madame, to ask your daughter to give me the cues of ' Junia ' in Britannicus ? The young lady who was to have played it is ill."

Madame Darbois hesitated to reply and looked towards Esperance.

"Oh! yes, mama, of course you will let me," said that young lady, in great spirits. And without more ado, "We must rehearse, must we not? Let us begin at once."

The young man offered her the lines. "I don't need them," she said laughing, "I know 'Junia' by heart." And, indeed, the rehearsal passed off without a slip, and the little cast separated after exchanging the most enthusiastic expressions of pleasure.

A comrade asked Perliez, "Is she any good, that pretty little blonde?" "Very good," Perliez replied curtly.

Everything went well for Esperance. Her appearance on the miniature stage where the examinations were held caused a little sensation among the professor-judges.

"What a heavenly child!" exclaimed Victorien Sardou.

"Here is truly the beauty of a noble race," murmured Delaunay, the well-known member of the Comedie-Francaise.

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The musical purity of Esperance's voice roused the assembly immediately out of its torpor. The judges, no longer bored and indifferent, followed her words with breathless attention, and when she stopped a low murmur of admiration was wafted to her.

"Scene from Iphigenia," rasped the voice of the man whose duty it was to make announcements. There was a sound of chairs being dragged forward, and the members of the jury settling themselves to the best advantage for listening. Here in itself was a miniature triumph, repressed by the dignity assumed by all the judges, but which Esperance appreciated none the less. She bowed with the sensitive grace characteristic of her. Genevieve Hardouin and Jean Perliez congratulated her with hearty pressures of the hand.

As she was leaving Sardou stopped her in the vestibule. "Tell me, please, Mademoiselle, are you related to the professor of philosophy?"

"He is my father," the girl answered very proudly.

Delaunay had arisen. "You are the daughter of Francois Darbois! We are, indeed, proud to be able to present our compliments to you. You have an extraordinary father. Please tell him that his daughter has won every vote."

Esperance read so much respect and sincerity in his expression that she curtsied as she replied, "My father will be very happy that these words have been spoken by anyone whom he admires as sincerely as M. Delaunay."

Then she went quickly on her way.

As soon as they were back on the Boulevard Raspail and home, Esperance and her mother moved towards the library. Marguerite, the maid, stopped them. "Monsieur has gone out. He was so restless. Is Mademoiselle satisfied?"

"I was; but I am not any more, Marguerite, since papa is not here. Was he feeling badly?"

"Well, he was not very cheerful, Mademoiselle, but I should not say that there was anything really the matter with him."

Mother and daughter started. Someone was coming upstairs. Esperance ran to the door and fell into the arms of that dearly-loved parent. He kissed her tenderly. His eyes were damp.

"Come, come, dear, that I may tell you...."

"Your lunch is ready," announced Marguerite.

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"Thank you," replied Esperance; "papa, mama, and I, we are all dying of hunger."

Madame Darbois gently removed her daughter's hat.

"Please, dear papa, I want to tell you everything."

"Too late, dear child, I know everything!"

The two ladies seemed surprised. "But—? How?"

"Through my friend, Victor Perliez, the chemist; who is, like me, a father who feels deeply about his child's choice of a career."

Esperance made a little move.

"No, little girl," went on François Darbois, "I do not want to cause you the least regret. Every now and then my innermost thoughts may escape me; but that will pass.... I know that you showed unusual simplicity as 'Henriette', and emotion as 'Iphigenia'. Perliez's son, whom I used to know when he was no higher than that," he said, stretching out his hand, "was enthusiastic? He is, furthermore, a clever boy, who might have made something uncommon out of himself as a lawyer, perhaps. But—"

"But, father dear, he will make a fine lawyer; he will have an influence in the theatre that will be more direct, more beneficial, more far-reaching, than at the Bar. Oh! but yes! You remember, don't you, mama, how disturbed you were by M. Dubare's plea on behalf of the assassin of Jeanne Verdier? Well, is it not noble to defend the poets, and introduce to the public all the new scientific and political ideas?"

"Often wrong ideas," remarked Darbois.

"That is perhaps true, but what of it? Have you not said a thousand times that discussion is the necessary soil for the development of new ideas?"

The professor of philosophy looked at his daughter, realizing that every word he had spoken in her hearing, all the seed that he had cast to the wind, had taken root in her young mind.

"But," inquired Madame Darbois, "where did you see M. Perliez?"

The professor began to smile. "Outside the Conservatoire. Perliez and I ran into each other, both impelled by the same extreme anxiety towards the scene of our sacrifice. It is not really necessary to consult all the philosophical authorities on this subject of inanition

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of will," he added, wearily.

"Oh! chocolate custard," cried out Esperance with rapture, "Marguerite is giving us a treat."

"Yes, Mademoiselle, I knew very well...."

A ring at the front door bell cut short her words. They listened silently, and heard the door open, and someone come in. Then the maid entered with a card.

François Darbois rose at once. "I will see him in the salon," he said.

He handed the card to his wife and went to meet his visitor. Esperance leaned towards her mother and read with her the celebrated name, "Victorien Sardou." Together they questioned the import of this visit, without being able to find any satisfactory explanation.

When François entered the salon, Sardou was standing, his hands clasped behind him, examining through half-closed eyes a delicate pastel, signed Chaplain—a portrait of Madame Darbois at twenty. At the professor's entry, he turned round and exclaimed with the engaging friendliness that was one of his special charms, "What a very pretty thing, and what superb colour!"

Then advancing, "It is to M. François Darbois that I have the pleasure of speaking, is it not?"

He had not missed the formality in the surprise evinced by the professor as, without speaking, the professor bowed him towards a chair.

"Let me say to begin with, my dear professor, that I am one of your

most fervent followers. Your last book, Philosophy is not Indifference, is, in my opinion, a work of real beauty. Your doctrine does not discourage youth, and after reading your book, I decided to send my sons to your lectures."

François Darbois thanked the great author. The ice was broken. They discussed Plato, Aristotle, Montaigne, Schopenhauer, etc. Victorien Sardou heard the clock strike; he had lunched hastily and had to be back at the Conservatoire by two o'clock, as the jury still had to hear eleven pupils. He began laughing and talking very fast, in his habitual manner: "I must tell you, however, why I have come; your daughter, who passed her examination this morning, is very excellent. She has the making of a real artist; the voice, the smile, the grace, the distinction, the manner, the rhythm. This child of fifteen has every gift! I am now arranging a play for the Vaudeville. The principal rôle is that of a very young girl. Just at present there are only well-worn professionals in the theatre."

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He rose. "Will you trust your daughter to me? I promise her a good part, an engagement only for my play, and I assure you of her success."

M. Darbois, in his amazement and in spite of the impatience of the academician, withheld his answer. "Pray permit me," he said, touching the bell, "to send for my daughter. It is with great anxiety, I admit to you, that I have given her permission to follow a theatrical career, so now I must consult her, while still trying to advise."

Then to the maid, "Ask Madame and Mademoiselle to come here."

Sardou came up to the professor and pressed his hand gratefully. "You are consistent with your principles. I congratulate you; that is very rare," he said.

The two ladies came in.

"Ah," he continued, glancing toward the pastel, after he had greeted Madame Darbois, "Here is the model of this beautiful portrait."

The gracious lady flushed, a little embarrassed, but flattered. After the introduction, Sardou repeated his proposal to Esperance, who, with visible excitement, looked questioningly at her father.

"It seems to me," said Madame Darbois, timidly, "that this is rather premature. Do you feel able to play so soon in a real theatre, before so many people?"

"I feel ready for anything," said the radiant girl quickly, in a clear voice.

Sardou raised his head and looked at her.

"If you think, M. Sardou, that I can play the character, I shall be only too happy to try; the chance you give me seems to come from destiny. I must endeavour as soon as possible to appease my dear father for his regret for having given me my own way."

François would have spoken, but she prevented him, drawing closer to him. "Oh, dear papa, in spite of yourself, I see this depression comes back to you. I want to succeed, and so drive away your heavy thoughts."

"Then," said Sardou quickly, to relieve them all of the emotion they were feeling, "it is quite agreed." Turning to Madame Darbois, who was trembling, "Do not be alarmed, dear Madame; we still have six or eight months before the plan will be ready for realization, which I feel sure will be satisfactory to all of us. I see that you are ready to go

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out; are you returning to the Conservatoire?"

"Yes," said Esperance, "I promised to give ' Junia's ' cues to M. Jean Perliez."

"The son of another learned man! The Conservatoire is favoured to-day," said Sardou. "I shall be pleased to escort you, Madame," he added, bowing politely to Madame Darbois, "and this child shall unfold to me on the way her ideas on the drama: they must be well worth hearing." It was already late. The two gentlemen shook hands, anticipating that, henceforth, they would meet as friends.

When they had left him, Francois looked at the pastel, which he had not examined for a long time. The young girl smiled at him with that smile that had first charmed him. He saw himself asking M. de Gossec, a rich merchant, for the hand of his daughter Germaine. He brushed his hand across his forehead as if to remove the memory of the refusal he had received on that occasion: then he smiled at the new vision which rose before his imagination. He saw himself in the church of St. Germain des Pres, kneeling beside Germaine de Gossec, trembling with emotion and happiness. A cloud of sadness passed over his face: now he was following the hearse of his father-in-law, who had committed suicide, leaving behind him a load of debt. The philosopher's expression grew proud and fierce. The first thirteen years of his marriage had been devoted to paying off this debt: then came the death of the sister of M. de Gossec, leaving her niece eight hundred thousand francs, five hundred thousand of which had served to pay the debt. For the last four years the family had been living in this comfortable apartment on the Boulevard Raspail, very happy and without material worries: but how cruel those first thirteen years had been for this young woman! He gazed at the pastel for a long time, his eyes filling with tears. "Oh, my dear, dear wife!"

In the carriage on the way to the Conservatoire the conversation was very animated. The dramatic author was listening with great interest while the young girl explained her theories on art and life. "What a strange little being," he thought, and his penetrating glance tried in vain to discover what weakness was most likely to attack this little creature who seemed so perfect.

The carriage stopped at the Conservatoire. Jean Perliez was waiting at the foot of the stairs. At sight of them his face lighted up. "I was afraid that you had forgotten me in the joy of your success."

The girl looked at him in amazement. "How could I forget when I had given my word?"

"You know Victorien Sardou?"

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"Only to-day," said Esperance laughing; "yesterday we did not know him."

They were back in the reception-room which was only a little less noisy than it was in the morning. Many candidates believed that they had been accepted; several had even received encouraging applause; others, who had been received in frigid silence, comforted themselves with the reflection that they had at least been allowed to finish.

When Jean Perliez and Esperance entered the auditorium there was a flattering stir, as much in pleasure at seeing the young girl again, as in welcome to the future actor.

"Scene from Britannicus , M. Jean Perliez, ' Nero ' ; Mlle. Esperance Darbois, ' Junia ,'" proclaimed the usher.

The scene was so very well enacted that a "Bravo" broke from the learned group around the table. Which one of the judges had not been able to contain his admiration? The young actors could not decide.

Each one believed sincerely the success was due to the other. They congratulated each other with charming expressions of delight, and took each other by the hand.

"We shall be good friends, shall we not, M. Perliez?" said Esperance. The young man turned quite red, and when Madame Darbois held out her hand to him, he kissed it politely, with the kiss he had not dared to give to Esperance.

CHAPTER IV

Esperance having chosen the stage as her career, the whole household was more or less thrown into confusion. It became necessary to make several new arrangements. As Francois Darbois was not willing that his wife should accompany Esperance every day to the Conservatoire, it became quite a problem to find a suitable person to undertake this duty.

For the first time in her life Madame Darbois had to endure humiliating refusals. The young widow of an officer was directed by a friend of the family to apply. She seemed a promising person.

"You will have to be here every morning by nine," Madame Darbois said to her, "and you will be free every afternoon by four. The course is given in the morning, but twice a week there are classes also in the afternoon; on those days you will lunch with us."

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"And Sundays?"

"Your Sundays will be your own. The Conservatoire has no classes on Sunday."

"So I understand that you would employ me only to accompany your daughter to the Conservatoire, Madame!" said the officer's widow, dryly. "I shall be compelled to refuse your offer. I am unfortunately forced to work to support my two children, but I owe some respect to the name I bear. The Conservatoire is a place of perdition, and I am astonished," she added, "that the professor, who is so universally esteemed and respected, could have been able...."

Madame Darbois rose to her feet. She was very pale. "It is not necessary for you to judge the actions of my husband, Madame. That is enough."

When she was left alone Madame Darbois reflected sadly upon the narrow-mindedness of her fellow creatures. Then she reproached herself with her own inexperience that put her at the mercy of the first stupid prude she encountered. She was well aware that the Conservatoire was not supposed to be a centre of culture and education, but she had already observed the modesty and independence of several of the young girls there: the well-informed minds of most of the young men. Nevertheless, she had had her lesson, and was careful not to lay herself open to any new affront. After some consideration, she engaged a charming old lady, named Eleanore Frahender, who had been companion in a Russian family, and was now living in a convent in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, where only trustworthy guests could be received. The old lady loved art and poetry, and as soon as she had met Esperance, was full of enthusiasm for her new duties. The young girl and she agreed in many tastes, and very soon they were great friends.

M. Darbois was quite contented with the arrangement, and could now attend to his work with complete tranquillity. Every morning the family gathered in the dining-room at half-past eight to take their coffee together. Esperance would recount all the little events of the

day before and her studies for the day to come. Whenever she felt any doubt about an ambiguous phrase, she went at once to get her father's advice upon it. Sometimes Genevieve Hardouin would drop in to talk with her and Mlle. Frahender. Esperance adored Racine and refused to study Corneille, before whom Genevieve bowed in enthusiastic admiration.

"He is superhuman," she exclaimed, fervently.

"That is just what I reproach him for," returned Esperance. "Racine is human, that is why I love him. None of Corneille's heroines move me at 21

all, and I loathe the sorrows of ' Phaedre .'"

"And ' Chimene ' ?" asked Genevieve Hardouin.

"' Chimene ' has no interest for me. She never does as she wishes."

"How feminine!" said the professor, gently.

"Oh! you may be right, father dear, but grief is one and indivisible.

Her father, cruelly killed by her lover, must kill her love for the lover, or else she does not love her father: and, that being the case, she doesn't interest me at all. She is a horrid girl." Tenderly she embraced her father, who could easily pardon her revolt against Corneille, because he shared her weakness for Racine.

Several months after Esperance's most encouraging admission to the Conservatoire, Victorien Sardou wrote a note to Francois Darbois, with whom he had come to be warm friends, warning him that he was soon coming to lunch with them, to read his new play to the family.

Esperance was wild with excitement. The time of waiting for the event seemed interminable to her. Her father tried in vain to calm her with philosophical reflections. Creature of feeling and impulse that she was, nothing could control her excitement.

Sardou had also asked Francois Darbois to invite Mlle. Frahender, whose generous spirit and whose tact and judgment he much esteemed.

The old lady arrived, carrying as usual the little box with the lace cap which she donned as soon as her bonnet was laid aside. On this great day the little cap was embellished by a mauve satin ribbon, contrasting charmingly with the silver of her hair.

All through lunch Esperance was delightful. Her quick responses to Sardou's questions were amazing in their logic. The extreme purity of this young soul seeking self-expression so courageously, struck the two men with particular emphasis.

The reading was a great success. The part intended for Esperance, the young girl's part, the heroine of the piece, had become of primary importance. Sardou had been able to study Esperance's qualifications during the months he had been a frequent visitor at the Darbois's home, and he had made the most of his prescience.

Lack of experience of the theatre, so natural in a child of sixteen, suggested several scenes of pure comedy. Then, as the drama developed, the author had heightened the intensity of the rôle by several scenes of real pathos, relying completely on Esperance to interpret them for him. Quite overcome by the death of the heroine she was to impersonate, she thanked the author, with tears streaming down her cheeks, her hands icy, her heart beating so furiously that the linen 22

of her white blouse rose and fell.

"It is rather I who shall be thanking you the day of the first production," said Sardou much touched, as he wrapped round his neck the large, white square he always wore. "I believe that to-day has not

been wasted."

The rehearsals began. Sardou had asked for and obtained from the Conservatoire six months leave for his young protégée, but Esperance would on no account consent to give up her classes. The only concession she would make was to give up the afternoon classes twice a week.

The press began to notice this infant prodigy, who wished to remain quite unheralded until her debut. François Darbois, in spite of his friendship with several journalists, could not make them adhere to their promises of silence, and when he complained bitterly to the head of a great daily, "But, my friend," the editor rejoined, "that daughter of yours is particularly fascinating, and certainly when you launched her into this whirlpool, you should have remembered that the only exits are triumph or despair!"

The philosopher grew pale.

"I believe," went on his friend, "that this child will vanquish every obstacle by the force of her will, will stifle all jealousies by the grace of her purity, and she already belongs to the public, while the fame of your name has simply served for a stepping-stone. You, in your wisdom, have been able to impart true wisdom to your child. But before the public has ever seen her she is famous, and Sardou affirms that the day after her appearance she will be the idol of all Paris. I owe it to the profession of journalism to write her up in my paper, and I am doing it, you must admit, with the utmost reserve."

CHAPTER V

And so at last the day of the performance came. Esperance, who was so easily shaken by the ordinary events of life, met any danger or great event quite calmly. For this young girl, so delicately fair, so frail of frame, possessed the soul of a warrior.

The sale of tickets had opened eight days in advance. The agents had realized big profits. The first night always creates a sensation in Paris. All the social celebrities were in the audience: and, what is less usual, many "intellectuals." They wished to testify by their presence their friendship for François Darbois, and to protest against

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certain journalists, who had not hesitated to say in print that such a furore about an actress (poor Esperance) was prejudicial to the dignity of philosophy.

In a box was the Minister of Belgium, who had been married lately, and wanted to show his young wife a "first night" in Paris. The First Secretary of the Legation was sitting behind the Minister's wife.

"Look there, that is Count Albert Styvens," said a journalist, pointing out the Secretary to his neighbour, a young beauty in a very décolletée gown.

The neighbour laughed. "Is he as reserved and as serious as he looks?" she inquired.

"So they say."

"Poor fellow," answered the pretty woman, with affected pity, examining him through her opera glasses.

Sardou, behind the scenes, was coming and going, arranging a chair, changing the position of a table, catching his foot in a carpet, swearing, nervous in the extreme. He made a hundred suggestions to the manager, which were received with weariness. He entered into conversation with the firemen. "Watch and listen, won't you, so that you can give me your impression after the first act?" For Sardou

always preferred the spontaneous expressions of workmen and common people to the compliments of his own confrères .

The distant skurry in the wings that always precedes the raising of the curtain was audible on the stage. This rattling of properties is very noticeable to actors new to the theatre, though it is quite unsuspected by the general public.

The first act began. The audience was sympathetic, but impatient. However, the author knew his public, knew when to spring his surprises, how to hold the emotion in reserve until a climax of applause at the final triumph.

Esperance made her first entrance, laughing and graceful, as her rôle demanded. A murmur of admiration mounted from the orchestra to the balcony. Hers was such startling, such radiant fairness! Her musical, fluting voice acted like as a strange enchantment on the astonished audience. From the first moment the public was hers. The critic touched his neighbour's elbow. "Look at Count Albert, he seems stunned!"

As the Count leaned forward to watch more intently: "Great Heavens, do you suppose he will fall in love with her, do you believe he will really care for that little thing?" murmured the woman, mockingly.

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The curtain fell amidst a shower of "Bravos." Esperance had to return three times before the public, which continued to applaud her unstintedly, as she smiled and blushed under her make-up. In spite of fifteen minutes' waiting, the intermission did not seem long. The occupants of the boxes were busy exchanging calls.

"She is perfectly adorable, she takes your breath. Just think of it, only sixteen and a half!"

"Do you think it is a wig?"

"Oh! no, that is her own hair—but what a revelation of loveliness!

And what a carriage!"

"But her voice above all! I do not think that I have ever heard such declamation!"

"She is still at the Conservatoire?"

"Yes."

"The Theatre-Française ought to engage her immediately. They would find it would at once increase their subscription list."

"They say that her father is very much distressed to see her in the theatre. Why there they are, the Darbois. Don't you see them, in that box far back? They are looking very pleased."

A tall, pale man passed by.

"Ah! there goes Count Styvens. Have you read the article he wrote in the Debats this morning?"

"No, he puts me to sleep."

"I read it; it was rather unusual."

"What about?"

"About the fecundity of the pollen of flowers."

The chatter ceased. The count was within hearing.

"What have you to say about Esperance Darbois?" inquired a young lady.

The count blushed vividly, an unaccustomed light gleaming in his clear eyes. "It is too soon to pass judgment yet," he said, losing himself in the throng again.

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In the Darbois's box there was a constant coming and going of friends. Jean Perliez joined them, his face betraying a conflict of emotions that were not lost on the father of Esperance.

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