

Camille

By

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Chapter 1

In my opinion, it is impossible to create characters until one has spent a long time in studying men, as it is impossible to speak a language until it has been seriously acquired. Not being old enough to invent, I content myself with narrating, and I beg the reader to assure himself of the truth of a story in which all the characters, with the exception of the heroine, are still alive. Eye-witnesses of the greater part of the facts which I have collected are to be found in Paris, and I might call upon them to confirm me if my testimony is not enough. And, thanks to a particular circumstance, I alone can write these things, for I alone am able to give the final details, without which it would have been impossible to make the story at once interesting and complete.

This is how these details came to my knowledge. On the 12th of March, 1847, I saw in the Rue Lafitte a great yellow placard announcing a sale of furniture and curiosities. The sale was to take place on account of the death of the owner. The owner's name was not mentioned, but the sale was to be held at 9, Rue d'Antin, on the 16th, from 12 to 5. The placard further announced that the rooms and furniture could be seen on the 13th and 14th.

I have always been very fond of curiosities, and I made up my mind not to miss the occasion, if not of buying some, at all events of seeing them. Next day I called at 9, Rue d'Antin.

It was early in the day, and yet there were already a number of visitors, both men and women, and the women, though they were dressed in cashmere and velvet, and had their carriages waiting for them at the door, gazed with astonishment and admiration at the luxury which they saw before them.

I was not long in discovering the reason of this astonishment and admiration, for, having begun to examine things a little carefully, I discovered without difficulty that I was in the house of a kept woman. Now, if there is one thing which women in society would like to see (and there were society women there), it is the home of those women whose carriages splash their own carriages day by day, who, like them, side by side with them, have their boxes at the Opera and at the Italiens, and who parade in Paris the opulent insolence of their beauty, their diamonds, and their scandal.

This one was dead, so the most virtuous of women could enter even her bedroom. Death had purified the air of this abode of splendid foulness, and if more excuse were needed, they had the excuse that they had merely come to a sale, they knew not whose. They had read the placards, they wished to see what the placards had announced, and to make their choice beforehand. What could be more natural? Yet, all the same, in the midst of all these beautiful things, they

could not help looking about for some traces of this courtesan's life, of which they had heard, no doubt, strange enough stories.

Unfortunately the mystery had vanished with the goddess, and, for all their endeavours, they discovered only what was on sale since the owner's decease, and nothing of what had been on sale during her lifetime. For the rest, there were plenty of things worth buying. The furniture was superb; there were rosewood and buhl cabinets and tables, Sevres and Chinese vases, Saxe statuettes, satin, velvet, lace; there was nothing lacking.

I sauntered through the rooms, following the inquisitive ladies of distinction. They entered a room with Persian hangings, and I was just going to enter in turn, when they came out again almost immediately, smiling, and as if ashamed of their own curiosity. I was all the more eager to see the room. It was the dressing-room, laid out with all the articles of toilet, in which the dead woman's extravagance seemed to be seen at its height.

On a large table against the wall, a table three feet in width and six in length, glittered all the treasures of Aucoc and Odier. It was a magnificent collection, and there was not one of those thousand little things so necessary to the toilet of a woman of the kind which was not in gold or silver. Such a collection could only have been got together little by little, and the same lover had certainly not begun and ended it.

Not being shocked at the sight of a kept woman's dressing-room, I amused myself with examining every detail, and I discovered that these magnificently chiselled objects bore different initials and different coronets. I looked at one after another, each recalling a separate shame, and I said that God had been merciful to the poor child, in not having left her to pay the ordinary penalty, but rather to die in the midst of her beauty and luxury, before the coming of old age, the courtesan's first death.

Is there anything sadder in the world than the old age of vice, especially in woman? She preserves no dignity, she inspires no interest. The everlasting repentance, not of the evil ways followed, but of the plans that have miscarried, the money that has been spent in vain, is as saddening a thing as one can well meet with. I knew an aged woman who had once been "gay," whose only link with the past was a daughter almost as beautiful as she herself had been. This poor creature to whom her mother had never said, "You are my child," except to bid her nourish her old age as she herself had nourished her youth, was called Louise, and, being obedient to her mother, she abandoned herself without volition, without passion, without pleasure, as she would have worked at any other profession that might have been taught her.

The constant sight of dissipation, precocious dissipation, in addition to her constant sickly state, had extinguished in her mind all the knowledge of good and

evil that God had perhaps given her, but that no one had ever thought of developing. I shall always remember her, as she passed along the boulevards almost every day at the same hour, accompanied by her mother as assiduously as a real mother might have accompanied her daughter. I was very young then, and ready to accept for myself the easy morality of the age. I remember, however, the contempt and disgust which awoke in me at the sight of this scandalous chaperoning. Her face, too, was inexpressibly virginal in its expression of innocence and of melancholy suffering. She was like a figure of Resignation.

One day the girl's face was transfigured. In the midst of all the debauches mapped out by her mother, it seemed to her as if God had left over for her one happiness. And why indeed should God, who had made her without strength, have left her without consolation, under the sorrowful burden of her life? One day, then, she realized that she was to have a child, and all that remained to her of chastity leaped for joy. The soul has strange refuges. Louise ran to tell the good news to her mother. It is a shameful thing to speak of, but we are not telling tales of pleasant sins; we are telling of true facts, which it would be better, no doubt, to pass over in silence, if we did not believe that it is needful from time to time to reveal the martyrdom of those who are condemned without bearing, scorned without judging; shameful it is, but this mother answered the daughter that they had already scarce enough for two, and would certainly not have enough for three; that such children are useless, and a lying-in is so much time lost.

Next day a midwife, of whom all we will say is that she was a friend of the mother, visited Louise, who remained in bed for a few days, and then got up paler and feebler than before.

Three months afterward a man took pity on her and tried to heal her, morally and physically; but the last shock had been too violent, and Louise died of it. The mother still lives; how? God knows.

This story returned to my mind while I looked at the silver toilet things, and a certain space of time must have elapsed during these reflections, for no one was left in the room but myself and an attendant, who, standing near the door, was carefully watching me to see that I did not pocket anything.

I went up to the man, to whom I was causing so much anxiety. "Sir," I said, "can you tell me the name of the person who formerly lived here?"

"Mademoiselle Marguerite Gautier."

I knew her by name and by sight.

"What!" I said to the attendant; "Marguerite Gautier is dead?"

"Yes, sir."

"When did she die?"

"Three weeks ago, I believe."

"And why are the rooms on view?"

"The creditors believe that it will send up the prices. People can see beforehand the effect of the things; you see that induces them to buy."

"She was in debt, then?"

"To any extent, sir."

"But the sale will cover it?"

"And more too."

"Who will get what remains over?"

"Her family."

"She had a family?"

"It seems so."

"Thanks."

The attendant, reassured as to my intentions, touched his hat, and I went out.

"Poor girl!" I said to myself as I returned home; "she must have had a sad death, for, in her world, one has friends only when one is perfectly well." And in spite of myself I began to feel melancholy over the fate of Marguerite Gautier.

It will seem absurd to many people, but I have an unbounded sympathy for women of this kind, and I do not think it necessary to apologize for such sympathy.

One day, as I was going to the Prefecture for a passport, I saw in one of the neighbouring streets a poor girl who was being marched along by two policemen. I do not know what was the matter. All I know is that she was weeping bitterly as she kissed an infant only a few months old, from whom her arrest was to separate her. Since that day I have never dared to despise a woman at first sight.

Chapter 2

The sale was to take place on the 16th. A day's interval had been left between the visiting days and the sale, in order to give time for taking down the hangings, curtains, etc. I had just returned from abroad. It was natural that I had not heard of Marguerite's death among the pieces of news which one's friends always tell on returning after an absence. Marguerite was a pretty woman; but though the life of such women makes sensation enough, their death makes very little. They are suns which set as they rose, unobserved. Their death, when they die young, is heard of by all their lovers at the same moment, for in Paris almost all the lovers of a well-known woman are friends. A few recollections are exchanged, and everybody's life goes on as if the incident had never occurred, without so much as a tear.

Nowadays, at twenty-five, tears have become so rare a thing that they are not to be squandered indiscriminately. It is the most that can be expected if the parents who pay for being wept over are wept over in return for the price they pay.

As for me, though my initials did not occur on any of Marguerite's belongings, that instinctive indulgence, that natural pity that I have already confessed, set me thinking over her death, more perhaps than it was worth thinking over. I remembered having often met Marguerite in the Bois, where she went regularly every day in a little blue coupe drawn by two magnificent bays, and I had noticed in her a distinction quite apart from other women of her kind, a distinction which was enhanced by a really exceptional beauty.

These unfortunate creatures whenever they go out are always accompanied by somebody or other. As no man cares to make himself conspicuous by being seen in their company, and as they are afraid of solitude, they take with them either those who are not well enough off to have a carriage, or one or another of those elegant, ancient ladies, whose elegance is a little inexplicable, and to whom one can always go for information in regard to the women whom they accompany.

In Marguerite's case it was quite different. She was always alone when she drove in the Champs-Elysees, lying back in her carriage as much as possible, dressed in furs in winter, and in summer wearing very simple dresses; and though she often passed people whom she knew, her smile, when she chose to smile, was seen only by them, and a duchess might have smiled in just such a manner. She did not drive to and fro like the others, from the Rond-Point to the end of the Champs-Elysees. She drove straight to the Bois. There she left her carriage, walked for an hour, returned to her carriage, and drove rapidly home.

All these circumstances which I had so often witnessed came back to my memory, and I regretted her death as one might regret the destruction of a beautiful work of art.

It was impossible to see more charm in beauty than in that of Marguerite. Excessively tall and thin, she had in the fullest degree the art of repairing this oversight of Nature by the mere arrangement of the things she wore. Her

cashmere reached to the ground, and showed on each side the large flounces of a silk dress, and the heavy muff which she held pressed against her bosom was surrounded by such cunningly arranged folds that the eye, however exacting, could find no fault with the contour of the lines. Her head, a marvel, was the object of the most coquettish care. It was small, and her mother, as Musset would say, seemed to have made it so in order to make it with care.

Set, in an oval of indescribable grace, two black eyes, surmounted by eyebrows of so pure a curve that it seemed as if painted; veil these eyes with lovely lashes, which, when drooped, cast their shadow on the rosy hue of the cheeks; trace a delicate, straight nose, the nostrils a little open, in an ardent aspiration toward the life of the senses; design a regular mouth, with lips parted graciously over teeth as white as milk; colour the skin with the down of a peach that no hand has touched, and you will have the general aspect of that charming countenance. The hair, black as jet, waving naturally or not, was parted on the forehead in two large folds and draped back over the head, leaving in sight just the tip of the ears, in which there glittered two diamonds, worth four to five thousand francs each. How it was that her ardent life had left on Marguerite's face the virginal, almost childlike expression, which characterized it, is a problem which we can but state, without attempting to solve it.

Marguerite had a marvellous portrait of herself, by Vidal, the only man whose pencil could do her justice. I had this portrait by me for a few days after her death, and the likeness was so astonishing that it has helped to refresh my memory in regard to some points which I might not otherwise have remembered. Some among the details of this chapter did not reach me until later, but I write them here so as not to be obliged to return to them when the story itself has begun.

Marguerite was always present at every first night, and passed every evening either at the theatre or the ball. Whenever there was a new piece she was certain to be seen, and she invariably had three things with her on the ledge of her ground-floor box: her opera-glass, a bag of sweets, and a bouquet of camellias. For twenty-five days of the month the camellias were white, and for five they were red; no one ever knew the reason of this change of colour, which I mention though I can not explain it; it was noticed both by her friends and by the habitue's of the theatres to which she most often went. She was never seen with any flowers but camellias. At the florist's, Madame Barjon's, she had come to be called "the Lady of the Camellias," and the name stuck to her.

Like all those who move in a certain set in Paris, I knew that Marguerite had lived with some of the most fashionable young men in society, that she spoke of it openly, and that they themselves boasted of it; so that all seemed equally pleased with one another. Nevertheless, for about three years, after a visit to Bagnes, she was said to be living with an old duke, a foreigner, enormously rich, who had tried to remove her as far as possible from her former life, and, as it seemed, entirely to her own satisfaction.

This is what I was told on the subject. In the spring of 1847 Marguerite was so ill that the doctors ordered her to take the waters, and she went to Bagnères. Among the invalids was the daughter of this duke; she was not only suffering

from the same complaint, but she was so like Marguerite in appearance that they might have been taken for sisters; the young duchess was in the last stage of consumption, and a few days after Marguerite's arrival she died. One morning, the duke, who had remained at Bagneres to be near the soil that had buried a part of his heart, caught sight of Marguerite at a turn of the road. He seemed to see the shadow of his child, and going up to her, he took her hands, embraced and wept over her, and without even asking her who she was, begged her to let him love in her the living image of his dead child. Marguerite, alone at Bagneres with her maid, and not being in any fear of compromising herself, granted the duke's request. Some people who knew her, happening to be at Bagneres, took upon themselves to explain Mademoiselle Gautier's true position to the duke. It was a blow to the old man, for the resemblance with his daughter was ended in one direction, but it was too late. She had become a necessity to his heart, his only pretext, his only excuse, for living. He made no reproaches, he had indeed no right to do so, but he asked her if she felt herself capable of changing her mode of life, offering her in return for the sacrifice every compensation that she could desire. She consented.

It must be said that Marguerite was just then very ill. The past seemed to her sensitive nature as if it were one of the main causes of her illness, and a sort of superstition led her to hope that God would restore to her both health and beauty in return for her repentance and conversion. By the end of the summer, the waters, sleep, the natural fatigue of long walks, had indeed more or less restored her health. The duke accompanied her to Paris, where he continued to see her as he had done at Bagneres.

This liaison, whose motive and origin were quite unknown, caused a great sensation, for the duke, already known for his immense fortune, now became known for his prodigality. All this was set down to the debauchery of a rich old man, and everything was believed except the truth. The father's sentiment for Marguerite had, in truth, so pure a cause that anything but a communion of hearts would have seemed to him a kind of incest, and he had never spoken to her a word which his daughter might not have heard.

Far be it from me to make out our heroine to be anything but what she was. As long as she remained at Bagneres, the promise she had made to the duke had not been hard to keep, and she had kept it; but, once back in Paris, it seemed to her, accustomed to a life of dissipation, of balls, of orgies, as if the solitude, only interrupted by the duke's stated visits, would kill her with boredom, and the hot breath of her old life came back across her head and heart.

We must add that Marguerite had returned more beautiful than she had ever been; she was but twenty, and her malady, sleeping but not subdued, continued to give her those feverish desires which are almost always the result of diseases of the chest.

It was a great grief to the duke when his friends, always on the lookout for some scandal on the part of the woman with whom, it seemed to them, he was compromising himself, came to tell him, indeed to prove to him, that at times when she was sure of not seeing him she received other visits, and that these visits were often prolonged till the following day. On being questioned, Marguerite

admitted everything to the duke, and advised him, without arriere-pensee, to concern himself with her no longer, for she felt incapable of carrying out what she had undertaken, and she did not wish to go on accepting benefits from a man whom she was deceiving. The duke did not return for a week; it was all he could do, and on the eighth day he came to beg Marguerite to let him still visit her, promising that he would take her as she was, so long as he might see her, and swearing that he would never utter a reproach against her, not though he were to die of it.

This, then, was the state of things three months after Marguerite's return; that is to say, in November or December, 1842.

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