

principles and would-be 'aristocratic patrons,' as their prospectus had it, where, in company with the daughters of petty officials and small proprietors, she 'finished' her education.

She had always been a selfish child, though her parents in their blind idolatry had never realised the fact. Mariette was the first to see it when she returned to the paternal roof. Nothing pleased her—neither the house, nor the meals, nor the old-fashioned furniture, which her doting father began to replace in order to humor her. Her days were passed in idleness and solitude; for, insignificant, comparatively, as had been the social status of her companions at school, they were still several steps removed from the rank of tradesmen's daughters, and their intimacy, even their acquaintanceship, lapsed with the close of their schooldays.

On the other hand, Ernestine held herself entirely aloof from her former playmates of the Fauborg, to whom she became an object of ridicule. She was still her father's idol and used him for her own purposes by cajoling, flattering, reproaching him as the mood seized her, while for her mother she appeared to have nothing but contempt. Poor Mariette had learned to efface herself completely; she was nothing more than a servant in the household.

Meanwhile Ernestine lived in comparative isolation. The marriage on which her father had so counted seemed as far distant of accomplishment as a voyage to the moon. The young messieurs upon whom the girl would have smiled had they come to her vicinity would have nothing to say to the daughter of a common grocer, and toward the young men in her own rank of life she had no inclination. She had been educated above her station and was now reaping the harvest of her parents' mistake.

Thus three years passed and Ernestine was nearly twenty, when a young apothecary, sent by a firm that had a chain of shops in various cities and towns, established himself on a corner not far from Lorbier's shop. He fitted up the place very prettily, introducing among other things the novelty of 'American soda water,' which soon brought him many patrons.

M. Lorbier, attired in his Sunday clothes, was rather a good-looking man, and Ernestine was not above going for a walk with her father on Sunday afternoons. They found it pleasant and convenient to stop for refreshment at the apothecary's, and thus an intimacy was established. One autumn afternoon the grocer burst into the kitchen, where his wife was preparing supper, with a letter in his hand.

'M. Baptiste Huet asks for the hand of our Ernestine!' he cried. 'What do you think of that, mother?'

The cloth with which she had been drying the lettuce fluttered from the good woman's hand to the floor.

'An excellent match, is it not, Charles?' she murmured, trembling all over at the news.

'I should say—an excellent match. The finest shop in the town and a splendid fellow. He must be very well fixed.'

'Probably. But is he not working for others? The shop is not his own.'

'But what a salary he must have! There are four clerks. They only pick out first-class men for managers, and M. Huet has done a fine business since he has been here. I should not wonder if he would soon be promoted to Paris! That would take Ernestine away from us.' The poor mother, who, though she now enjoyed very little of her daughter's society, began to be alarmed at the idea of being entirely separated from her.

'Pooh, pooh!' rejoined her husband. 'That is only my idea. It may never happen. And if it should—parents must be prepared to be separated from their children when they marry.'

'I don't know—' began Mariette, reflectively, wiping her eyes with the napkin she had recovered from the kitchen floor. 'Until I married we had all remained for generations in the same neighborhood, but I remember—'

'Yes, yes, but those were different times and different circumstances. These young people belong to another day and generation. And now it is to see the girl herself, and tell her, and then to settle her dot.'

With Ernestine there was no difficulty. She hailed the arrival of a suitor as a parched tree welcomes water in a desert land. But regarding the dot, it was not so easy as M. Lorbier had expected.

'How much do you ask with my daughter?' he inquired of the prospective son-in-law at the first interview on the subject.

'How much did you think of giving her?' was the reply. 'I am no money-hunter, M. Lorbier—my ideas are very moderate.'

'Twenty-five thousand francs,' answered the grocer complacently, inwardly chuckling at the effect the announcement would be likely to produce upon the apothecary.

It was not what he had anticipated. The young man leaned back in his chair—they were seated in the laboratory behind the drug store—he lifted his eyebrows, passing his right forefinger lightly across his forehead, while with the left he flicked a scrap of lint from his coat sleeve, and replied in a suave but decided tone:

'Forty thousand was what I had calculated upon, Monsieur. With your business and accumulated competence it should be easy, very easy, and socially it is for you a—'

you understand. Of course, Monsieur, if you do not wish to, or find it impossible—but I have been led to believe, etc.'

'Wait a moment, Monsieur,' interposed the grocer, knitting his brows and leaning heavily upon the little table, from the other side of which the apothecary was calmly regarding him.

He began to run over rapidly in his own mind a list of securities which he might sell—securities on which he had depended for his old age when he and Mariette would not have to work any longer. Indeed, he had always contemplated retirement on the marriage of his daughter, who would naturally not enjoy introducing her parents as the keepers of a corner grocery.

After a moment or two he continued:

'I can do it—I will do it, M. Huet; you shall have the forty thousand.'

After that all went smoothly.

'To be sure,' said Lorbier to his wife, as they conversed in the solitude of their chamber, 'it will mean a little more hard work for you and me, Mariette, a little longer to hold our noses to the grindstone, but we shall be compensated in the good fortune we shall have brought to our daughter. Yes, yes, my dear—I always believed that Ernestine would make a good match, and, you see, it is coming to pass.'

And, as had always been her custom since their marriage, Mariette acquiesced in what her husband said.

During the period that elapsed between the betrothal and the marriage, Ernestine was amiability itself. Knowing that she would soon be free of the undesirable environment at which she had long chafed and which she despised, and wishing to obtain from her parents all they could possibly bestow upon her, she wheedled and flattered them into spending a great deal more upon her trousseau than they could afford.

'This means altogether at least five more years for us in harness, Mariette,' said the grocer one evening to his wife, as he examined some bills. 'But it is all for the child. When we are gone she will be provided for. We shall have the consolation of knowing, when we are dying, that Ernestine has made a good marriage.'

Mariette did not say much on these occasions; the penetration of the mother had begun to understand of what small account her parents were to the daughter in whom the pride of the father had centred every hope and ambition of his heart. She had long since become unexpectant and resigned. But she did not try to undeceive her husband.

M. Lorbier would have liked a large wedding, to which he could have invited his friends and neighbors; but, as Mariette had foreseen, both Ernestine and her fiancé opposed it. His father, mother, sister, and brother were coming and all must be done quietly, as they were of a different order from the friends and patrons of the grocer. M. Lorbier was not a little disappointed, but, being a sensible man, he saw the wisdom of this course. The wedding, therefore, was very simple and unostentatious; the relatives of M. Huet, though somewhat distant, were not at all patronising. The young couple went for a few days to the seashore, and M. Lorbier and his wife returned to their counter. And then began anew the refrain from the lips of the grocer:

'Now we shall have to work a little harder, Mariette, and to economise in order to make up for Ernestine's dot. But it is a fine thing for us to know that she has made a good marriage.'

Sometimes Mariette would murmur a mechanical 'Yes, Charles,' but more often she said nothing. She spent the first hours of Ernestine's absence in alternate hope and fear, mingled with bitter self-reproach that she could so soon pass judgment on the daughter whose future was yet untried. But it happened as she had anticipated.

The morning after the young people returned Ernestine made her appearance in the house of her parents. She looked very pretty and seemed very happy; M. Lorbier beamed all over with pride and affection.

Almost as soon as she had saluted them the bride said:

'Papa, you must begin to think about giving up the shop as soon as ever you can sell out to some one who will give you what it is worth. It will be very embarrassing, otherwise, for me. You see, my circle of friends will be—well, different. M. Huet's family associate only with the best people.'

'My dear Ernestine,' replied her father, 'it will be impossible for me to sell out immediately. In order to meet M. Huet's demands as to your dowry, I have been obliged to dispose of some securities on which I had counted as a provision for our old age. It is necessary to make up that amount. For a time we shall have to work harder than ever.'

Ernestine shrugged her shoulders and, rising, shook out her ruffled and embroidered skirts.

'I shall be mortified all the time, then,' she said. 'I think it is too bad, after all these years, father—surely you must have saved enough to retire to some little place—farm, garden, or whatever you have been planning for—I know nothing about such things. You could raise all your own vegetables, fowl, and so on. Mother is such an admirable manager that you could live on almost nothing. Think about it, I beseech you.'