

The False Courtesan

Honore de Balzac

That which certain people do not know, is a the truth concerning the decease of the Duke of Orleans, brother of King Charles VI., a death which proceeded from a great number of causes, one of which will be the subject of this narrative. This prince was for certain the most lecherous of all the royal race of Monseigneur St. Louis (who was in his life time King of France), without even putting on one side some of the most debauched of this fine family, which was so concordant with the vices and especial qualities of our brave and pleasure-seeking nation, that you could more easily imagine Hell without Satan than France without her valorous, glorious, and jovial kings. So you can laugh as loudly at those muckworms of philosophy who go about saying, "Our fathers were better," as at the good, philanthropical old bunglers who pretend that mankind is on the right road to perfection. These are old blind bats, who observe neither the plumage of oysters nor the shells of birds, which change no more than our ways. Hip, hip, huzzah! then, make merry while you're young. Keep your throats wet and your eyes dry, since a hundredweight of melancholy is worth less than an ounce of jollity. The wrong doings of this lord, lover of Queen Isabella, whom he doted upon, brought about pleasant adventures, since he was a great wit, of Alcibaidescal nature, and a chip off the old block. It was he who first conceived the idea of a relay of sweethearts, so that when he went from Paris to Bordeaux, every time he unsettled his nag he found ready for him a good meal and a bed with as much lace inside as out. Happy Prince! who died on horseback, for he was always across something in-doors and out. Of his comical jokes our most excellent King Louis the Eleventh has given a splendid sample in the book of "Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles," written under his superintendence during his exile, at the Court of Burgundy, where, during the long evenings, in order to amuse themselves, he and his cousin Charolois would relate to each other the good tricks and jokes of the period; and when they were hard up for true stories, each of the courtiers tried who could invent the best one. But out of respect for the royal blood, the Dauphin has credited a townsman with that which happened to the Lady of Cany. It is given under the title of "La Medaille a revers", in the collection of which it is one of the brightest jewels, and commences the hundred. But now for mine.

The Duc d'Orleans had in his suite a lord of the province of Picardy, named Raoul d'Hocquetonville, who had taken for a wife, to the future trouble of the prince, a young lady related to the house of Burgundy, and rich in domains. But, an exception to the general run of heiresses, she was of so dazzling a beauty, that all the ladies of the court, even the Queen and Madame Valentine, were thrown into the shade; nevertheless, this was as nothing in the lady of Hocquetonville, compared with her Burgundian consanguinity, her inheritances, her prettiness, and gentle nature, because these rare advantages received a religious lustre from her supreme innocence, sweet modesty, and chaste education. The Duke had not long gazed upon this heaven-sent flower before he was seized with the fever of love. He fell into a state of melancholy, frequented no bad places, and only with regret now and then did he take a bite at his royal and dainty German morsel Isabella. He became passionate, and swore either by sorcery, by force, by trickery, or with her consent, to enjoy the flavours of this gentle lady, who, by the sight of her sweet body, forced him to the last extremity, during his now long and weary nights. At first, he pursued her with honied words, but he soon knew by her untroubled air that she was determined to remain virtuous, for without appearing astonished

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at his proceedings, or getting angry like certain other ladies, she replied to him, "My lord, I must inform you that I do not desire to trouble myself with the love of other persons, not that I despise the joys which are therein to be experienced (as supreme they must be, since so many ladies cast into the abyss of love their homes, their honour, their future, and everything), but from the love I bear my children. Never would I be the cause of a blush upon their cheeks, for in this idea will I bring up my daughters--that in virtue alone is happiness to be found. For, my lord, if the days of our old age are more numerous than those of our youth, of them must we think. From those who brought me up I learned to properly estimate this life, and I know that everything therein is transitory, except the security of the natural affections. Thus I wish for the esteem of everyone, and above all that of my husband, who is all the world to me. Therefore do I desire to appear honest in his sight. I have finished, and I entreat you to allow me unmolested to attend to my household affairs, otherwise I will unhesitatingly refer the matter to my lord and master, who will quit your service."

This brave reply rendered the king's brother more amorous than ever, and he endeavoured to ensnare this noble woman in order to possess her, dead or alive, and he never doubted a bit that he would have her in his clutches, relying upon his dexterity at this kind of sport, the most joyous of all, in which it is necessary to employ the weapons of all other kinds of sport, seeing that this sweet game is taken running, by taking aim, by torchlight, by night, by day, in the town, in the country, in the woods, by the waterside, in nets, with falcons, with the lance, with the horn, with the gun, with the decoy bird, in snares, in the toils, with a bird call, by the scent, on the wing, with the cornet, in slime, with a bait, with the lime-twig--indeed, by means of all the snares invented since the banishment of Adam. And gets killed in various different ways, but generally is overridden.

The artful fellow ceased to mention his desires, but had a post of honour given to the Lady of Hocquetonville, in the queen's household. Now, one day that the said Isabella went to Vincennes, to visit the sick King, and left him master of the Hotel St. Paul, he commanded the chef to have a delicate and royal supper prepared, and to serve it in the queen's apartments. Then he sent for his obstinate lady by express command, and by one of the pages of the household. The Countess d'Hocquetonville, believing that she was desired by Madame Isabella for some service appertaining to her post, or invited to some sudden amusement, hastened to the room. In consequence of the precautions taken by the disloyal lover, no one had been able to inform the noble dame of the princess's departure, so she hastened to the splendid chamber, which, in the Hotel St. Paul, led into the queen's bedchamber; there she found the Duc d'Orleans alone. Suspecting some treacherous plot, she went quickly into the other room, found no queen, but heard the Prince give vent to a hearty laugh.

"I am undone!" said she. Then she endeavoured to run away.

But the good lady-killer had posted about devoted attendants, who, without knowing what was going on, closed the hotel, barricaded the doors, and in this mansion, so large that it equalled a fourth of Paris, the Lady d'Hocquetonville was as in a desert, with no other aid than that of her patron saint and God. Then, suspecting the truth, the poor lady trembled from head to foot and fell into a chair; and then the working of this snare, so cleverly conceived, was, with many a hearty laugh, revealed to her by her lover. Directly the duke made a movement to approach her this woman rose and exclaimed, arming herself first with

her tongue, and flashing one thousand maledictions from her eyes--

"You will possess me--but dead! Ha! my lord, do not force me to a struggle which must become known to certain people. I may yet retire, and the Sire d'Hocquetonville shall be ignorant of the sorrow with which you have forever tinged my life. Duke, you look too often in the ladies' faces to find time to study men's, and you do not therefore know your man. The Sire d'Hocquetonville would let himself be hacked to pieces in your service, so devoted is he to you, in memory of your kindness to him, and also because he is partial to you. But as he loves so does he hate; and I believe him to be the man to bring his mace down upon your head, to take his revenge, if you but compel me to utter one cry. Do you desire both my death and your own? But be assured that, as an honest woman, whatever happens to me, good or evil, I shall keep no secret. Now, will you let me go?"

The bad fellow began to whistle. Hearing his whistling, the good woman went suddenly into the queen's chamber, and took from a place known to her therein, a sharp stiletto. Then, when the duke followed her to ascertain what this flight meant, "When you pass that line," cried she, pointing to a board, "I will kill myself."

My lord, without being in the least terrified, took a chair, placed it at the very edge of the plank in question, and commenced a glowing description of certain things, hoping to influence the mind of this brave woman, and work her to that point that her brain, her heart, and everything should be at his mercy. Then he commenced to say to her, in that delicate manner to which princes are accustomed, that, in the first place, virtuous women pay dearly for their virtue, since in order to gain the uncertain blessings of the future, they lose all the sweetest joys of the present, because husbands were compelled, from motives of conjugal policy, not show them all the jewels in the shrine of love, since the said jewels would so affect their hearts, was so rapturously delicious, so titillatingly voluptuous, that a woman would no longer consent to dwell in the cold regions of domestic life; and he declared this marital abomination to be a great felony, because the least thing a man could do in recognition of the virtuous life of a good woman and her great merits, was to overwork himself, to exert, to exterminate himself, to please her in every way, with fondlings and kissings and wrestlings, and all the delicacies and sweet confectionery of love; and that, if she would taste a little of the seraphic joys of these little ways to her unknown, she would believe all the other things of life as not worth a straw; and that, if such were her wish, he would forever be as silent as the grave, and last no scandal would besmear her virtue. And the lewd fellow, perceiving that the lady did not stop her ears, commenced to describe to her, after the fashion of arabesque pictures, which at that time were much esteemed, the wanton inventions of debauchery. Then did his eyes shoot flame, his words burn, and his voice ring, and he himself took great pleasure in calling to mind the various ways of his ladies, naming them to Madame d'Hocquetonville, and even revealing to her the tricks, caresses, and amorous ways of Queen Isabella, and he made use of expression so gracious and so ardently inciting, that, fancying it caused the lady to relax her hold upon the stiletto a little, he made as if to approach her. But she, ashamed to be found buried in thought, gazed proudly at the diabolical leviathan who tempted her, and said to him, "Fine sir, I thank you. You have caused me to love my husband all the more, for from your discourse I learn how much he esteems me by holding me in such respect that he does not dishonour his couch with the tricks of street-walkers and bad women. I should think myself forever disgraced, and should be contaminated to all eternity if I put my foot in these sloughs where go these shameless hussies. A man's wife is one thing, and his mistress another."

"I will wager," said the duke, smiling, "that, nevertheless, for the future you spur the Sire d'Hocquetonville to a little sharper pace."

At this the good woman trembled, and cried, "You are a wicked man. Now I both despise and abominate you! What! unable to rob me of my honour, you attempt to poison my mind! Ah, my lord, this night's work will cost you dear--"

"If I forget it, a yet,
God will not forget.
"Are not those of verse is yours?"

"Madame," said the duke, turning pale with anger, "I can have you bound--"

"Oh no! I can free myself," replied she, brandishing the stiletto.

The rascalion began to laugh.

"Never mind," said he. "I have a means of plunging you into the sloughs of three brazen hussies, as you call them."

"Never, while I live."

"Head and heels you shall go in--with your two feet, two hands, two ivory breasts, and two other things, white as snow--your teeth, your hair, and everything. You will go of your own accord; you shall enter into it lasciviously, and in a way to crush your cavalier, as a wild horse does its rider--stamping, leaping, and snorting. I swear it by Saint Castud!"

Instantly he whistled for one of his pages. And when the page came, he secretly ordered him to go and seek the Sire d'Hocquetonville, Savoisy, Tanneguy, Cypierre, and other members of his band, asking them to these rooms to supper, not without at the same time inviting to meet his guests a pretty petticoat or two.

Then he came and sat down in his chair again, ten paces from the lady, off whom he had not taken his eye while giving his commands to the page in a whisper.

"Raoul is jealous," said he. "Now let me give you a word of advice. In this place," he added, pointing to a secret door, "are the oils and superfine perfumes of the queen; in this other little closet she performs her ablutions and little feminine offices. I know by much experience that each one of you gentle creatures has her own special perfume, by which she is smelt and recognised. So if, as you say, Raoul is overwhelmingly jealous with the worst of all jealousies, you will use these fast hussies' scents, because your danger approaches fast."

"Ah, my lord, what do you intend to do?"

"You will know when it is necessary that you should know. I wish you no harm, and pledge you my honour, as a loyal knight, that I will almost thoroughly respect you, and be forever silent concerning my discomfiture. In short, you will know that the Duc d'Orleans has a

good heart, and revenges himself nobly on ladies who treat him with disdain, by placing in their hands the key of Paradise. Only keep your ears open to the joyous words that will be handed from mouth to mouth in the next room, and cough not if you love your children."

Since there was no egress from the royal chamber, and the bars crossing hardly left room to put one's head through, the good prince closed the door of the room, certain of keeping the lady a safe prisoner there, and again impressed upon her the necessity of silence. Then came the merry blades in great haste, and found a good and substantial supper smiling at them from the silver plates upon the table, and the table well arranged and well lighted, loaded with fine silver cups, and cups full of royal wine. Then said their master to them--

"Come! Come! to your places my good friends. I was becoming very weary. Thinking of you, I wished to arrange with you a merry feast after the ancient method, when the Greeks and Romans said their Pater noster to Master Priapus, and the learned god called in all countries Bacchus. The feast will be proper and a right hearty one, since at our libation there will be present some pretty crows with three beaks, of which I know from great experience the best one to kiss."

Then all of them recognising their master in all things, took pleasure in this discourse, except Raoul d'Hocquetonville, who advanced and said to the prince--

"My lord, I will aid you willingly in any battle but that of the petticoats, in that of spear and axe, but not of the wine flasks. My good companions here present have not wives at home, it is otherwise with me. I have a sweet wife, to whom I owe my company, and an account of all my deeds and actions."

"Then, since I am a married man I am to blame?" said the duke.

"Ah! my dear master, you are a prince, and can do as you please."

These brave speeches made, as you can imagine, the heart of the lady prisoner hot and cold.

"Ah! my Raoul," thought she, "thou art a noble man!"

"You are," said the duke, "a man whom I love, and consider more faithful and praiseworthy than any of my people. The others," said he, looking at the three lords, "are wicked men. But, Raoul," he continued, "sit thee down. When the linnets come--they are linnets of high degree--you can make your way home. S'death! I had treated thee as a virtuous man, ignorant of the extra-conjugal joys of love, and had carefully put for thee in that room the queen of raptures--a fair demon, in whom is concentrated all feminine inventions. I wished that once in thy life thou, who has never tasted the essence of love, and dreamed but of war, should know the secret marvels of the gallant amusement, since it is shameful that one of my followers should serve a fair lady badly."

Thereupon the Sire d'Hocquetonville sat down to a table in order to please his prince as far as he could lawfully do so. Then they all commenced to laugh, joke, and talk about the ladies; and according to their custom, they related to each other their good fortunes and their love adventures, sparing no woman except the queen of the house, and betraying the little habits of each one, to which followed horrible little confidences, which increased in

treachery and lechery as the contents of the goblets grew less. The duke, gay as a universal legatee, drew the guests out, telling lies himself to learn the truth from them; and his companions ate at a trot, drank at a full gallop, and their tongues rattled away faster than either.

Now, listening to them, and heating his brain with wine, the Sire d'Hocquetonville unharnessed himself little by little from the reluctance. In spite of his virtues, he indulged certain desires, and became soaked in these impurities like a saint who defiles himself while saying his prayers. Perceiving which, the prince, on the alert to satisfy his ire and his bile, began to say to him, joking him--

"By Saint Castud, Raoul, we are all tarred with the same brush, all discreet away from here. Go; we will say nothing to Madame. By heaven! man, I wish thee to taste of the joys of paradise. There," said he, tapping the door of the room in which was Madame d'Hocquetonville, "in there is a lady of the court and a friend of the queen, but the greatest priestess of Venus that ever was, and her equal is not to be found in any courtesan, harlot, dancer, doxy, or hussy. She was engendered at a moment when paradise was radiant with joy, when nature was procreating, when the planets were whispering vows of love, when the beasts were frisking and capering, and everything was aglow with desire. Although the women make an altar of her bed, she is nevertheless too great a lady to allow herself to be seen, and too well known to utter any words but the sounds of love. No light will you need, for her eyes flash fire, and attempt no conversation, since she speaks only with movements and twistings more rapid than those of a deer surprised in the forest. Only, my dear Raoul, but so merry a nag look to your stirrups, sit light in the saddle, since with one plunge she would hurl thee to the ceiling, if you are not careful. She burns always, and is always longing for male society. Our poor dead friend, the young Sire de Giac, met his death through her; she drained his marrow in one springtime. God's truth! to know such bliss as that of which she rings the bells and lights the fires, what man would not forfeit a third of his future happiness? and he who has known her once would for a second night forfeit without regret eternity."

"But," said Raoul, "in things which should be so much alike, how is it that there is so great a difference?"

"Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Thereupon the company burst out laughing, and animated by the wine and a wink from their master, they all commenced relating droll and quaint conceits, laughing, shouting, and making a great noise. Now, knowing not that an innocent scholar was there, these jokers, who had drowned their sense of shame in the wine-cups, said things to make the figures on the mantel shake, the walls and the ceilings blush; and the duke surpassed them all, saying, that the lady who was in bed in the next room awaiting a gallant should be the empress of these warm imaginations, because she practised them every night. Upon this the flagons being empty, the duke pushed Raoul, who let himself be pushed willingly, into the room, and by this means the prince compelled the lady to deliberate by which dagger she would live or die. At midnight the Sire d'Hocquetonville came out gleefully, not without remorse at having been false to his good wife. Then the Duc d'Orleans led Madame d'Hocquetonville out by a garden door, so that she gained her residence before her husband arrived here.

"This," said she, in the prince's ear, as she passed the postern, "will cost us all dear."

One year afterwards, in the old Rue du Temple, Raoul d'Hocquetonville, who had quitted the service of the Duke for that of Jehan of Burgundy, gave the king's brother a blow on the head with a club, and killed him, as everyone knows. In the same year died the Lady d'Hocquetonville, having faded like a flower deprived of air and eaten by a worm. Her good husband had engraved upon her marble tomb, which is in one of the cloisters of Peronne, the following inscription--

HERE LIES
BERTHA DE BOURGONGE
THE NOBLE AND COMELY WIFE
OF
RAOUL, SIRE DE HOCQUETONVILLE.

ALAS! PRAY NOT FOR HER SOUL
SHE
BLOSSOMED AGAIN IN PARADISE
THE ELEVENTH DAY OF JANUARY
IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD MCCCCVIII.,
IN THE TWENTY-THIRD YEAR OF HER AGE,
LEAVING TWO SONS AND HER LORD SPOUSE
INCONSOLABLE.

This epitaph was written in elegant Latin, but for the convenience of all it was necessary to translate it, although the word comely is feeble beside that of formosa, which signifies beautiful in shape. The Duke of Burgundy, called the Fearless, in whom previous to his death the Sire d'Hocquetonville confided the troubles cemented with lime and sand in his heart, used to say, in spite of his hardheartedness in these matters, that this epitaph plunged him into a state of melancholy for a month, and that among all the abominations of his cousin of Orleans, there was one for which he would kill him over again if the deed had not already been done, because this wicked man had villianously defaced with vice the most divine virtue in the world and had prostituted two noble hearts, the one by the other. When saying this he would think of the lady of Hocquetonville and of his own, which portrait had been unwarrantably placed in the cabinet where his cousin placed the likeness of his wenches.

The adventure was so extremely shocking, that when it was related by the Count de Charolois to the Dauphin, afterwards Louis XI., the latter would not allow his secretaries to publish it in his collection, out of respect for his great uncle the Duke d'Orleans, and for Dunois his old comrade, the son of the same. But the person of the lady of Hocquetonville is so sublimely virtuous, so exquisitely melancholy, that in her favour the present publication of this narrative will be forgiven, in spite of the diabolical invention and vengeance of Monseigneur d'Orleans. The just death of this rascal nevertheless caused many serious rebellions, which finally Louis XI., losing all patience, put down with fire and sword.

This shows us that there is a woman at the bottom of everything, in France as elsewhere, and that sooner or later we must pay for our follies.

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