

The Maid Of Thilouse

Honore de Balzac

The lord of Valennes, a pleasant place, of which the castle is not far from the town of Thilouse, had taken a mean wife, who by reason of taste or antipathy, pleasure or displeasure, health or sickness, allowed her good husband to abstain from those pleasures stipulated for in all contracts of marriage. In order to be just, it should be stated that the above-mentioned lord was a dirty and ill-favoured person, always hunting wild animals and not the more entertaining than is a room full of smoke. And what is more, the said sportsman was all sixty years of age, on which subject, however, he was as silent as a hempen widow on the subject of rope. But nature, which the crooked, the bandy-legged, the blind, and the ugly abuse so unmercifully here below, and have no more esteem for her than the well-favoured,--since, like workers of tapestry, they know not what they do,--gives the same appetite to all and to all the same mouth for pudding. So every beast finds a mate, and from the same fact comes the proverb, "There is no pot, however ugly, that does not one day find a cover." Now the lord of Valennes searched everywhere for nice little pots to cover, and often in addition to wild, he hunted tame animals; but this kind of game was scarce in the land, and it was an expensive affair to discover a maid. At length however by reason of much ferreting about and much enquiry, it happened that the lord of Valennes was informed that in Thilouse was the widow of a weaver who had a real treasure in the person of a little damsel of sixteen years, whom she had never allowed to leave her apronstrings, and whom, with great maternal forethought, she always accompanied when the calls of nature demanded her obedience; she had her to sleep with her in her own bed, watched over her, got her up in the morning, and put her to such a work that between the twain they gained about eight pennies a day. On fete days she took her to the church, scarcely giving her a spare moment to exchange a merry word with the young people; above all was she strict in keeping hands off the maiden.

But the times were just then so hard that the widow and her daughter had only bread enough to save them from dying of hunger, and as they lodged with one of their poor relations, they often wanted wood in winter and clothes in summer, owing enough rent to frighten sergeants of justice, men who are not easily frightened at the debts of others; in short, while the daughter was increasing in beauty, the mother was increasing in poverty, and ran into debt on account of her daughter's virginity, as an alchemist will for the crucible in which his all is cast. As soon as his plans were arranged and perfect, one rainy day the said lord of Valennes by a mere chance came into the hovel of the two spinners, and in order to dry himself sent for some fagots to Plessis, close by. While waiting for them, he sat on a stool between the two poor women. By means of the grey shadows and half light of the cabin, he saw the sweet countenance of the maid of Thilouse; her arms were red and firm, her breasts hard as bastions, which kept the cold from her heart, her waist round as a young oak and all fresh and clean and pretty, like the first frost, green and tender as an April bud; in fact, she resembled all that is prettiest in the world. She had eyes of a modest and virtuous blue, with a look more coy than that of the Virgin, for she was less forward, never having had a child.

Had any one said to her, "Come, let us make love," she would have said, "Love! What is that?" she was so innocent and so little open to the comprehensions of the thing.

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The good old lord twisted about upon his stool, eyeing the maid and stretching his neck like a monkey trying to catch nuts, which the mother noticed, but said not a word, being in fear of the lord to whom the whole of the country belonged. When the fagot was put into the grate and flared up, the good hunter said to the old woman, "Ah, ah! that warms one almost as much as your daughter's eyes."

"But alas, my lord," said she, "we have nothing to cook on that fire."

"Oh yes," replied he.

"What?"

"Ah, my good woman, lend your daughter to my wife, who has need of a good handmaiden: we will give you two fagots every day."

"Oh, my lord, what could I cook at such a good fire?"

"Why," replied the old rascal, "good broth, for I will give you a measure of corn in season."

"Then," replied the old hag, "where shall I put it?"

"In your dish," answered the purchaser of innocence.

"But I have neither dish nor flower-bin, nor anything."

"Well I will give you dishes and flower-bins, saucepans, flagons, a good bed with curtains, and everything."

"Yes," replied the good widow, "but the rain would spoil them, I have no house."

"You can see from here," replied the lord, "the house of La Tourbelliere, where lived my poor huntsmen Pillegrain, who was ripped up by a boar?"

"Yes," said the old woman.

"Well, you can make yourself at home there for the rest of your days."

"By my faith;" cried the mother, letting fall her distaff, "do you mean what you say?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, what will you give my daughter?"

"All that she is willing to gain in my service."

"Oh! my lord, you are a joking."

"No," said he.

"Yes," said she.

"By St. Gatien, St. Eleuther, and by the thousand million saints who are in heaven, I swear that--"

"Ah! Well; if you are not jesting I should like those fagots to pass through the hands of the notary."

"By the blood of Christ and the charms of your daughter am I not a gentleman? Is not my word good enough?"

"Ah! well I don't say that it is not; but as true as I am a poor spinner I love my child too much to leave her; she is too young and weak at present, she will break down in service. Yesterday, in his sermon, the vicar said that we should have to answer to God for our children."

"There! There!" said the lord, "go and find the notary."

An old woodcutter ran to the scrivener, who came and drew up a contract, to which the lord of Valennes then put his cross, not knowing how to write, and when all was signed and sealed--

"Well, old lady," said he, "now you are no longer answerable to God for the virtue of your child."

"Ah! my lord, the vicar said until the age of reason, and my child is quite reasonable." Then turning towards her, she added, "Marie Fiquet, that which is dearest to you is your honour, and there where you are going everyone, without counting my lord, will try to rob you of it, but you see well what it is worth; for that reason do not lose it save willingly and in proper manner. Now in order not to contaminate your virtue before God and before man, except for a legitimate motive, take heed that your chance of marriage be not damaged beforehand, otherwise you will go to the bad."

"Yes, dear mother," replied the maid.

And thereupon she left the poor abode of her relation, and came to the chateau of Valennes, there to serve my lady, who found her both pretty and to her taste.

When the people of Valennes, Sache, Villaines, and other places, learned the high price given for the maid of Thilouse, the good housewives recognising the fact that nothing is more profitable than virtue, endeavoured to nourish and bring up their daughters virtuous, but the business was as risky as that of rearing silkworms, which are liable to perish, since innocence is like a medlar, and ripens quickly on the straw. There were, however, some girls noted for it in Touraine, who passed for virgins in the convents of the religious, but I cannot vouch for these, not having proceeded to verify them in the manner laid down by Verville, in order to make sure of the perfect virtue of women. However, Marie Fiquet followed the wise counsel of her mother, and would take no notice of the soft requests, honied words, or apish tricks of her master, unless they were flavoured with a promise of marriage.

When the old lord tried to kiss her, she would put her back up like a cat at the approach of a dog, crying out "I will tell Madame!" In short at the end of six months he had not even recovered the price of a single fagot. From her labour Marie Fiquet became harder and firmer. Sometimes she would reply to the gentle request of her master, "When you have taken it from me will you give it me back again?"

Another time she would say, "If I were as full of holes as a sieve not one should be for you, so ugly do I think you."

The good old man took these village sayings for flowers of innocence, and ceased not make little signs to her, long harangues and a hundred vows and sermons, for by reason of seeing the fine breasts of the maid, her plump hips, which at certain movements came into prominent relief, and by reason of admiring other things capable of inflaming the mind of a saint, this dear men became enamoured of her with an old man's passion, which augments in geometrical proportions as opposed to the passions of young men, because the old men love with their weakness which grows greater, and the young with their strength which grows less. In order to leave this headstrong girl no loophole for refusal, the old lord took into his confidence the steward, whose age was seventy odd years, and made him understand that he ought to marry in order to keep his body warm, and that Marie Fiquet was the very girl to suit him. The old steward, who had gained three hundred pounds by different services about the house, desired to live quietly without opening the front door again; but his good master begged him to marry to please him, assuring him that he need not trouble about his wife. So the good steward wandered out of sheer good nature into this marriage. The day of the wedding, bereft of all her reasons, and not able to find objections to her pursuer, she made him give her a fat settlement and dowry as the price of her conquest, and then gave the old knave leave to wink at her as often as he could, promising him as many embraces as he had given grains of wheat to her mother. But at his age a bushel was sufficient.

The festivities over, the lord did not fail, as soon as his wife had retired, to wend his way towards the well-glazed, well-carpeted, and pretty room where he had lodged his lass, his money, his fagots, his house, his wheat, and his steward. To be brief, know that he found the maid of Thilouse the sweetest girl in the world, as pretty as anything, by the soft light of the fire which was gleaming in the chimney, snug between the sheets, and with a sweet odour about her, as a young maiden should have, and in fact he had no regret for the great price of this jewel. Not being able to restrain himself from hurrying over the first mouthfuls of this royal morsel, the lord treated her more as a past master than a young beginner. So the happy man by too much gluttony, managed badly, and in fact knew nothing of the sweet business of love. Finding which, the good wench said, after a minute or two, to her old cavalier, "My lord, if you are there, as I think you are, give a little more swing to your bells."

From this saying, which became spread about, I know not how, Marie Fiquet became famous, and it is still said in our country, "She is a maid of Thilouse," in mockery of a bride, and to signify a "fricquenelle."

"Fricquenelle" is said of a girl I do not wish you to find in your arms on your wedding night, unless you have been brought up in the philosophy of Zeno, which puts up with

anything, and there are many people obliged to be Stoics in this funny situation, which is often met with, for Nature turns, but changes not, and there are always good maids of Thilouse to be found in Touraine, and elsewhere. Now if you asked me in what consists, or where comes in, the moral of this tale? I am at liberty to reply to the ladies; that the Cent Contes Drolatiques are made more to teach the moral of pleasure than to procure the pleasure of pointing a moral. But if it were a used up old rascal who asked me, I should say to him with all the respect due to his yellow or grey locks; that God wishes to punish the lord of Valennes, for trying to purchase a jewel made to be given.

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