The Ladies' Paradise

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DENISE HAD COME on foot from Saint-Lazare station where, after a night spent on the hard bench of a third-class carriage, she and her two brothers had been set down by a train from Cherbourg. She was holding Pépé's hand, and Jean was following her; they were all three aching from the journey, scared and lost in the midst of the vast city of Paris. Noses in the air, they were looking at the houses, and at each cross-road they asked the way to the Rue de la Michodière where their Uncle Baudu lived. But, just as she was finally emerging into the Place Gaillon, the girl stopped short in surprise.

"Oh!" she said. "Just have a look at that, Jean!"

And there they stood, huddled together, all in black, dressed in the old, worn-out mourning clothes from their father's funeral. She, a meagre twenty-year-old, was carrying a light parcel, while on her other side, her small brother of five was hanging on her arm; her big brother, in the full flower of his magnificent sixteen years, stood looking over her shoulder, his arms dangling.

"Well!" she resumed, after a silence. "There's a shop for you!"

There was, at the corner of the Rue de la Michodière and the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, a drapery shop, the windows of which, on that mild pale October day, were bursting with bright colours. The clock at Saint-Roch was striking eight, only those Parisians who were early risers were about, workers hurrying to their offices, and housewives hurrying to the shops. Two shop assistants, standing on a double ladder outside the door, had just finished hanging up some woollen material, while in the shop window in the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin another shop assistant, on hands and knees and with his back turned to them, was daintily folding a piece of blue silk. The shop, as yet void of customers and in which the staff had only just arrived, was buzzing inside like a beehive waking up.

"My word!" said Jean. "That beats Valognes… Yours wasn't so fine."

Denise tossed her head. She had spent two years in Valognes, at Cornaille's, the foremost draper in the town; and this shop so suddenly encountered, this building which seemed to her enormous, brought a lump to her throat and held her there, stirred, fascinated, oblivious to everything else. The high door, which cut off the corner of the Place Gaillon, was all of glass, surrounded by intricate decorations loaded with gilding, and reached to the mezzanine floor. Two allegorical figures, two laughing women, their bare bosoms exposed, were unrolling an inscription: AU BONHEUR DES DAMES.* And the shop windows continued beyond, skirting the Rue de la Michodière and the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin where, apart from the corner house, they occupied four other houses which had recently been bought and converted, two on the left and two on the right. Seen in perspective, with the show windows on the ground floor and the plate-glass mezzanine-floor windows, behind which all the internal life of the departments was visible, it seemed to her to be an endless vista. Upstairs a girl in a silk dress was sharpening a pencil, while near her two other girls were unfolding some velvet coats.

"*Au Bonheur des Dames*," Jean read out with his romantic laugh – the laugh of a handsome adolescent who had already had an affair with a woman at Valognes. "That's nice, isn't it? That should make people flock here!"

But Denise remained absorbed in front of the display at the main door. There, outside in the street, on the pavement itself, was a cascade of cheap goods, the bait at the entrance, bargains which stopped passers-by. It all fell from above: pieces of woollen material and bunting, merino, cheviot cloth, flannels were falling from the mezzanine floor, floating like flags, with their neutral tones – slate grey, navy blue, olive green – broken up by the white cards of the price tags. To the side, framing the threshold, strips of fur were likewise hanging, straight bands for dress trimmings, the fine ash of squirrel, the pure snow of swansdown, imitation ermine and imitation marten made of rabbit. And below this, on shelves and tables, surrounded by a pile of remnants, there was a profusion of knitted goods being sold for a song, gloves and knitted woollen scarves, hooded capes, cardigans, a regular

winter display of variegated colours, mottled, striped, with bleeding stains of red. Denise saw a tartan material at forty-five centimes, strips of American mink at one franc, and mittens at twenty-five centimes. It was a giant fairground spread of hawker's wares, as if the shop were bursting and throwing its surplus into the street.

Uncle Baudu was forgotten. Even Pépé, who had not let go his sister's hand, was staring with wide-open eyes. A carriage forced all three of them to leave the centre of the square; mechanically they went along the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, past the shop windows, stopping again in front of each fresh display. First they were attracted by a complicated arrangement: above, umbrellas, placed obliquely, seemed to be forming the roof of some rustic hut; below, suspended from rods and displaying the rounded outline of calves of the leg, there were silk stockings, some strewn with bunches of roses, others of every hue – black net, red with embroidered clocks, flesh-coloured ones with a satiny texture which had the softness of a blonde woman's skin; lastly, on the backcloth of the shelves, gloves were symmetrically distributed, their fingers elongated, their palms tapering like those of a Byzantine virgin, with the stiff and seemingly adolescent grace of women's clothes which have never been worn. But the last window, above all, held their attention. A display of silks, satins and velvets was blossoming out there, in a supple and shimmering range of the most delicate flower tones; at the summit were the velvets, of deepest black, and as white as curds and whey; lower down were the satins, pinks and blue with bright folds gradually fading into infinitely tender pallors; further down still were the silks, all the colours of the rainbow, pieces of silk rolled up into shells, folded as if round a drawn-in waist, brought to life by the knowing hands of the shop assistants; and, between each motif, between each coloured phrase of the display, there ran a discreet accompaniment, a delicate gathered strand of cream-coloured foulard. And there, in colossal heaps at either end, were the two silks for which the shop held exclusive rights, the Paris-Bonheur and the Cuir d'Or, exceptional wares which were to revolutionize the drapery trade.

"Oh! That faille at five francs sixty!" murmured Denise, amazed at the Paris-Bonheur.

Jean was beginning to feel bored. He stopped a passer-by.

"The Rue de la Michodière, Monsieur?"

When it had been pointed out to him, the first on the right, the three retraced their steps, going round the shop. But, as she was entering the street, Denise was caught again by a shop window where ladies' ready-mades were being displayed. At Cornaille's in Valognes, ready-made clothes had been her speciality. But never had she seen anything like that! She was rooted to the pavement in admiration. In the background a great shawl of Bruges lace, of considerable value, extended like an altar cloth, its two russetty-white wings unfurled; flounces of Alençon lace were strewn as garlands; then there was a lavish, shimmering stream of every kind of lace, Mechlin, Valenciennes, Brussels appliqué, Venetian lace, like a fall of snow. To the right and left, pieces of cloth stood erect in sombre columns, which made the distant tabernacle seem even further away. And there, in that chapel dedicated to the worship of feminine graces, were the clothes: occupying the central position there was a garment quite out of the common, a velvet coat trimmed with silver fox; on one side of it, a silk cloak lined with squirrel; on the other side, a cloth overcoat edged with cock's feathers; and lastly evening wraps in white cashmere, in white quilted silk, trimmed with swansdown or chenille. There was something for every whim, from evening wraps at twenty-nine francs, to the velvet coat which was labelled eighteen hundred francs. The dummies' round bosoms swelled out the material, their ample hips exaggerated the narrowness of the waists, their missing heads were replaced by large tickets with pins stuck through them into the red bunting in the necks; while mirrors on either side of the windows, by a deliberate trick, reflected and multiplied them endlessly, populated the street with these beautiful women who were for sale, and who bore their prices in large figures, in place of their heads.

"They're first rate!" murmured Jean, who could think of no other way of expressing his emotion.

This time he had become motionless again himself, his mouth open. All this luxurious femininity was making him pink with pleasure. He had the beauty of a girl, beauty which he seemed to have stolen from his sister – dazzling skin, curly auburn hair, lips and eyes moist with love. Next to him, in her astonishment Denise looked even thinner, her mouth too large in her long face, her complexion beneath her pale head of hair already tired. And

Pépé, fair too with the fairness of childhood, was pressing even closer to her, as if overcome by an anxious desire for affection, confused and entranced by the beautiful ladies in the shop window. The three fair figures, poorly clad in black – the sad young girl between the pretty child and the superb boy – were so conspicuous and so charming standing there on the pavement that passers-by were turning around and smiling at them.

For some time a fat man with white hair and a big yellowish face, who was standing on the threshold of a shop at the other end of the street, had been looking at them. There he had been standing, his eyes bloodshot, his mouth contracted, beside himself with rage at the displays at the Bonheur des Dames, when the sight of the young girl and her brothers had compounded his exasperation. What were they doing there, those three simpletons, standing gaping at a mountebank's tomfoolery?

"But what about Uncle?" Denise pointed out suddenly, as if waking with a start.

"We are in the Rue de la Michodière," said Jean. "He must live somewhere near here."

They raised their heads and looked about them. Then, just in front of them, above the fat man, they saw a green signboard, its yellow letters discoloured by rain: AU VIEIL ELBEUF, CLOTHS AND FLANNELS – BAUDU (FORMERLY HAUCHECORNE). The house, painted with ancient, mildewed whitewash, and squat in comparison to the big Louis XIV mansions adjacent to it, had only three front windows – and these windows, square and without shutters, were decorated merely with an iron railing, two crossed bars. But of all this bareness, what most struck Denise, whose eyes were still full of the bright displays at the Bonheur des Dames, was the shop on the ground floor, crushed down by a low ceiling, surmounted by a very low mezzanine floor, with prison-like, half-moon-shaped windows. To the right and the left, woodwork of the same colour as the signboard – bottle-green, shaded by time with ochre and pitch – surrounded two deep-set shop windows, black and dusty, in which one could vaguely distinguish bits of material piled up. The door, which was ajar, seemed to open onto the dank gloom of a cellar.

"This is it," said Jean.

"Well, we'd better go in," Denise declared. "Let's go. Come on, Pépé."

Yet they all three faltered, suddenly nervous. When their father had died, a victim of the same fever which had carried off their mother a month earlier, their Uncle Baudu, overwhelmed by this double bereavement, had indeed written to his niece that there would always be room for her in his house if she should ever wish to try her fortune in Paris. But this letter had been written almost a year ago, and the girl now felt sorry that she had left Valognes like that, on the spur of the moment, without warning her uncle. He did not know them at all, for he had never set foot in Valognes again since he had left there, as quite a young man, to become a junior assistant in the draper's shop of Monsieur Hauchecorne, whose daughter he had subsequently married.

"Monsieur Baudu?" Denise inquired, finally bringing herself to speak to the fat man, who was still looking at them, surprised at their behaviour.

"That's me," he answered.

Then, blushing deeply, Denise stammered:

"Oh, thank goodness! I am Denise, and here is Jean and this is Pépé… You see, we did come, Uncle."

Baudu seemed to be stupefied. His big bloodshot eyes wavered in his yellow face, his slow words were confused. It was evident that he had been very far from thinking of this family which had fallen on him out of the blue.

"What's this? What's this? You here!" he repeated several times. "But you were in Valognes! Why aren't you in Valognes?"

In her gentle voice, which was trembling a little, she had to explain to him. After the death of their father, who had squandered every penny he had in his dyeworks, she had mothered the two children. What she had earned at Cornaille's had not been sufficient to feed all three of them. Jean had been working well with a cabinet-maker who mended antique furniture, but he had not received a penny for it. All the same, he had developed a taste for old things, he carved figures in wood; in fact, one day he had found a piece of ivory and had amused himself by making a head out of it which a gentleman who was passing through the town had seen – and it was precisely this gentleman who, by finding a job with an ivory-worker in Paris for Jean, had made them decide to leave Valognes.

"You see, Uncle, Jean will start his apprenticeship as from tomorrow, at his new master's. They don't want any money

from me, he will be housed and fed… So I thought that Pépé and I would always be able to manage. We can't be more unhappy than we were at Valognes."

What she did not mention was Jean's amorous escapade, letters written to a very young girl of the local aristocracy, kisses exchanged over a wall – quite a scandal which had made her decide to leave, and she had accompanied her brother to Paris above all in order to watch over him, for she was a prey to maternal fears for this big child, who was so handsome and so gay that all the women adored him.

Uncle Baudu was having difficulty in recovering. He was repeating his questions. Meanwhile, when he had listened to what she told him about her brothers, he addressed her in familiar terms.

"So your father didn't leave you anything? I did think he still had a little left. Oh, I told him often enough in my letters not to take on that dyeworks! He had a good heart, but not an ounce of sense… And you were left with these lads on your hands, you had to feed this little lot!"

His irascible face had lightened, his eyes were no longer bloodshot as when he had been looking at the Bonheur des Dames. Suddenly he noticed that he was barring the door.

"Come along," he said. "Come in, since you've turned up… Come in, it's better than wasting your time looking at nonsense."

And, having directed a last furious scowl at the displays opposite, he made way for the children and went into the shop, calling his wife and daughter as he did so.

"Élisabeth, Geneviève, come along do, here are some people to see you!"

But the gloom of the shop made Denise and the boys hesitate. Blinded by the daylight of the street, they were blinking as if on the verge of some unknown chasm, feeling the ground with their feet with an instinctive fear of some treacherous step. This vague dread drew them together and, keeping even closer to each other, the little boy still clutching the girl's skirts and the big boy behind, they made their entrance gracefully, smiling and nervous. The morning brightness made the black silhouette of their mourning clothes stand out, an oblique light gilded their fair hair.

"Come in, come in," repeated Baudu.

In a few brief sentences, he explained everything to Madame Baudu and her daughter. The former was a little woman riddled with anaemia, white all over, with white hair, white eyes, white lips. Geneviève, in whom her mother's physical deficiency was even more pronounced, had the debility and the colourlessness of a plant grown in the dark. And yet she had a melancholy charm which she owed to her magnificent black hair, miraculously growing out of that miserable flesh.

"Come in," said the two women in their turn. "Welcome!"

And they made Denise sit down behind the counter. Pépé immediately climbed on to his sister's lap, while Jean, leaning against some panelling, kept close to her. They were becoming reassured, were looking at the shop, where their eyes were growing used to the darkness. Now they could see it, its low ceiling blackened with smoke, its oak counters polished with use, its age-old showcases with strong hasps. Bales of dark-coloured goods reached right up to the rafters. The smell of cloth and dyes, a sharp, chemical smell, seemed to be increased tenfold by the dampness of the floorboards. At the back of the shop two male assistants and a girl were putting away lengths of white flannel.

"Perhaps this little man would like to have something to eat?" said Madame Baudu, smiling at Pépé.

"No, thank you," Denise answered, "We had a glass of milk in a café outside the station."

And, as Geneviève was looking at the light parcel she had put on the floor, she added:

"I left our trunk there."

She blushed; she understood that in polite circles people did not turn up out of the blue like that. Already, in the carriage, as soon as the train had left Valognes, she had felt full of regret, and that was why on their arrival she had left the trunk at the station and given the children their breakfast.

"Look here," said Baudu suddenly, "let's be brief and to the point… I did write to you, it's true, but it was a year ago – and you see, my dear, business has not been going at all well for a year…"

He stopped, strangled by an emotion which he did not wish to show. Madame Baudu and Geneviève with a resigned air had lowered their eyes.

"Oh!" he continued. "It's a crisis which will pass. I'm not at all worried… Only, I've reduced my staff, there are only three people now, and the time is certainly not ripe for hiring a fourth. In short, my dear, I can't take you on as I offered to."

Denise was listening to him, startled, very pale. He rubbed it in by adding:

"It wouldn't be worth it, neither for you nor us."

"Very well, Uncle," she finally said bleakly, "I shall try to manage all the same."

The Baudus were not bad people. But they complained of never having had any luck. At the time when their business had been going well they had had to bring up five boys, of whom three had died before they were twenty – the fourth had gone to the bad, the fifth, a captain, had just left for Mexico. They had no one left but Geneviève. Their family had cost them a great deal, and Baudu had completed his own ruin by purchasing a great barn of a house at Rambouillet, his father-in-law's home town. Consequently there was a growing bitterness beneath his fanatical loyalty, which was that of a tradesman of the old school.

"One lets people know," he went on, gradually getting angry at his own hardness. "You could have written to me, I should have replied that you should stay there… To be sure, when I heard of your father's death I said the usual things to you. But you turn up here, without warning… It's very embarrassing."

He was raising his voice, relieving his feelings. His wife and daughter, submissive people that they were, who never made so bold as to interfere, were still looking at the ground. Meanwhile Jean had turned very pale, whereas Denise had clasped the terrified Pépé to her bosom. She let fall two big tears.

"Very well, Uncle," she repeated. "We will go away."

At that he controlled himself. An embarrassed silence reigned. Then he resumed in a surly tone:

"I'm not going to turn you out of the house… Since you're here now, you may as well sleep upstairs this evening. Afterwards we'll see."

At that Madame Baudu and Geneviève understood with a glance that they could go ahead and make arrangements. Everything was settled. There was no need to do anything for Jean. As to Pépé, the best thing for him would be to lodge with

Madame Gras, an old lady who lived on the ground floor of a house in the Rue des Orties, where she took in young children at forty francs a month, full board. Denise declared that she had enough money to pay for the first month. It only remained for her to find a place herself. It would be easy to find her a job in the neighbourhood.

"Wasn't Vinçard looking for a salesgirl?" said Geneviève.

"Why, so he was!" exclaimed Baudu. "We'll go and see him after lunch. We must strike while the iron's hot!"

Not a single customer had come to interrupt this family conclave. The shop remained dark and empty. In the background the two male assistants and the girl continued their task, making whispered, sibilant remarks. However, three ladies did eventually appear, and Denise remained alone for a moment. Heavy-hearted at the thought of their approaching separation, she kissed Pépé who, affectionate as a kitten, was hiding his head without saying a word. When Madame Baudu and Geneviève came back they found him being very good, and Denise assured them that he never made more noise; he would remain silent for whole days on end, living on love. Then, until lunchtime, the three women talked about children, housekeeping, life in Paris and in the provinces, using the short vague sentences of relations who are rather embarrassed at not knowing each other. Jean had gone out on to the doorstep of the shop and, intrigued by the life in the street, he remained there, smiling at the pretty girls who passed.

At ten o'clock a maid appeared. Usually the first meal was served for Baudu, Geneviève and the first assistant. There was a second meal at eleven o'clock for Madame Baudu, the other male assistant and the girl.

"Let's have a bite!" exclaimed the draper, turning towards his niece.

And, as the others were all already seated in the cramped dining room at the back of the shop, he called the first assistant who was lagging behind.

"Colomban!"

The young man apologized, saying he had wanted to finish arranging some flannel. He was a fat lad of twenty-five, stupid but crafty. His honest face, with its big, flabby mouth, had wily eyes.

"For Heaven's sake! There's a time for everything," said Baudu who, squarely installed, was cutting a piece of cold veal with a master's prudence and skill, with a glance weighing up the meagre portions to an ounce.

He served everyone, and even cut some bread. Denise had put Pépé close to her in order to see that he ate properly. But the dark room made her feel uneasy; as she was looking at it she felt a lump in her throat, for she was used to the spacious rooms, bare and light, of her native province. A single window opened onto a little inside courtyard which communicated with the street by means of a dark alley, and this yard, soaking wet and reeking, was like the bottom of a well into which there fell a circle of sinister light. On winter days the gas had to be lit from morning to night. When the weather was good enough for it not to be lit, the effect was even more depressing. It was a moment before Denise's eyes were sufficiently accustomed to the dark to distinguish what was on her plate.

"There's a fellow with a good appetite," Baudu declared, noticing that Jean had polished off his veal. "If he works as much as he eats, he'll be a tough man… But what about you, my dear, you're not eating? And now that we can talk, tell me why you didn't get married at Valognes?"

Denise put down the glass which she was raising to her mouth.

"Oh Uncle, me get married? You don't mean it!… And the little ones?"

She ended up laughing, so quaint did the idea seem to her. In any case, would any man have wanted her, without a penny, as thin as a rake and not, so far, beautiful? No, no, she would never marry, she already had enough with two children.

"You're mistaken," her uncle repeated, "a woman always needs a man. If you'd found a decent young chap you wouldn't have landed on the street in Paris, like gypsies, you and your brothers."

He broke off in order once more to divide, with a parsimony that was nothing if not fair, a dish of bacon and potatoes which the maid was bringing. Then, indicating Geneviève and Colomban with a spoon, he continued:

"Why, those two there will be married in the spring, if the winter season is good."

It was the shop's patriarchal tradition. The founder, Aristide Finet, had given his daughter Désirée to his first assistant, Hauchecorne; he, Baudu, who had arrived in the Rue de la Michodière with seven francs in his pocket, had married old man Hauchecorne's daughter, Élisabeth; and he intended, in his turn, to hand over his daughter Geneviève and the shop to Colomban as soon as business revived. If that would mean having to postpone a marriage which had been decided on three years earlier, he did so from scruple, from stubbornness born of integrity: he had received the business in a prosperous state, he did not wish to hand it over to a son-in-law with fewer customers and when business was uncertain.

Baudu went on talking, introduced Colomban, who came from Rambouillet like Madame Baudu's father; they were even distantly related, in fact. He was a great worker and, for ten years, had been slogging away in the shop and had really earned his promotions! Besides, he wasn't just anybody, his father was that old sinner Colomban, a veterinary surgeon known throughout the Seine-et-Oise, an artist in his own line, but so fond of food that there was nothing he wouldn't eat.

"Thank God!" said the draper in conclusion. "Even if his father does drink and chase skirts, the boy has been able to learn the value of money here."

While he was talking, Denise was studying Colomban and Geneviève. They were sitting next to each other, but they remained there quite calmly, without a blush, without a smile. Since his first day in the shop the young man had been counting on this marriage. He had passed through all the different stages, junior assistant, salaried salesman, had been admitted finally to the confidences and pleasures of the family, and had gone through it all patiently, leading a clockwork-like life and looking on Geneviève as an excellent and honest business deal. The certitude that she would be his prevented him from desiring her. And the girl too had grown accustomed to loving him, but she loved him with all the seriousness of her reserved nature – and although in the tame, regular, every-day existence which she led she did not realize it herself, she loved him with deep passion.

"When people like each other, and when it's possible…" Denise felt forced to say with a smile, in order to be nice.

"Yes, it always ends up like that in the end," declared Colomban, who had not yet said a word, but was slowly munching.

Geneviève, after giving him a long glance, said in her turn:

"People must get on together, afterwards it's plain sailing."

Their fondness for each other had grown up in this ground-floor shop in old Paris. It was like a flower in a cellar. For ten years she had known no one but him, had spent her days beside him, behind the same piles of cloth, in the depths of the shop's gloom; and, morning and evening, they had met again side by side in the cramped dining room, as chilly as a well. They could not have been more lost, more buried, in the depths of the countryside beneath the leaves. Only a doubt, a jealous fear, was to make the girl discover that, from emptiness of heart and boredom of mind, she had given herself for ever in the midst of those conspiring shadows.

Yet Denise thought she noticed a dawning anxiety in the glance which Geneviève had cast at Colomban. Therefore, in a kindly way, she replied:

"Nonsense! When people love each other, they always get on together."

But Baudu was superintending the table with authority. He had distributed slivers of Brie, and in honour of his relatives he ordered a second dessert, a pot of gooseberry preserves – such liberality appeared to surprise Colomban. Pépé, who had been very good until then, behaved badly over the preserves. Jean, whose interest had been aroused by the conversation about marriage, was staring at his cousin Geneviève, whom he considered too lifeless, too pale; deep inside him he was comparing her to a little white rabbit, with black ears and red eyes.

"That's enough chat, we must make room for the others!" the draper concluded, giving the signal to leave the table. "Just because we've allowed ourselves a treat, it's no reason for taking an unfair advantage over everything."

Madame Baudu, the other male assistant, and the girl came and sat down at the table in their turn. Once more Denise remained sitting alone near the door, waiting until her uncle was able to take her to see Vinçard. Pépé was playing at her feet, Jean had taken up his observation post on the doorstep again. And, for almost an hour, she watched what was happening around her. At infrequent intervals customers came into the shop: one lady

appeared, then two more. The shop retained its smell of age, its half-light, in which all the way of business of bygone days, good-natured and simple, seemed to be weeping at its neglect. But what fascinated her was the Bonheur des Dames on the other side of the road, for she could see the shop windows through the open door. The sky was still overcast, the mildness brought by rain was warming the air in spite of the season, and in the pale daylight which seemed to be sparsely dusted with sunshine the great shop was coming to life, business was in full swing.

Now Denise had the sensation of a machine working at high pressure, the impetus of which seemed to reach to the very displays themselves. They were no longer the cold shop windows of the morning; now they seemed to be warmed and vibrating with the bustle inside. A crowd was looking at them, women who had stopped were crushing each other in front of the windows. There was a regular mob, made brutal by covetousness. And these passions of the street were giving life to the materials: the laces seemed to be shivering, then subsiding again with an exciting air of mystery, concealing the depths of the shop as they did so; the very pieces of cloth, thick and square, were breathing, exuding a whiff of temptation, while the overcoats were drawing themselves up even more on the lay figures, who themselves were acquiring souls, and the huge velvet coat was billowing out, supple and warm, as if on shoulders of flesh and blood, with heaving breast and quivering hips. But the furnace-like heat with which the shop was ablaze was coming, above all, from the selling, from the bustle of the counters, which could be sensed behind the walls. From there came the continuous rumble of a machine at work, of customers crowding in the departments, bedazzled by the merchandise, then propelled towards the cash desk. And all this regulated, organized with the remorselessness of a machine; a vast horde of women caught in the wheels of an inevitable force.

Since the morning Denise had been undergoing temptation. This shop, to her so vast, which she had seen more people enter in one hour than had visited Cornaille's in six months, dazed and attracted her, and in her desire to penetrate within it there was a vague fear, which made her all the more fascinated. At the same time, her uncle's shop gave her an uneasy feeling. She felt an irrational disdain, an instinctive repugnance for this frigid hideout of old-fashioned methods of business. All the sensations

she had passed through, her anxious entry, her relations' sour welcome, the depressing lunch in the dungeon-like darkness, her long wait in the drowsy solitude of the old house in its death throes – all this was combining to form a veiled protest, a passionate desire for life and for light. And, in spite of her kind heart, her eyes always went back to the Bonheur des Dames, as if the salesgirl in her felt a need to take fresh warmth from the blaze of that huge sale.

She let slip a remark:

"They've got plenty of people there, at any rate!"

But she regretted her words when she caught sight of the Baudus nearby. Madame Baudu, who had finished her lunch, was standing up, white as a sheet, her white eyes fixed on the monster, and resigned though she was, she could not see it, could not thus by chance catch sight of it on the other side of the street, without dumb despair making her eyes fill with tears. As to Geneviève, with growing anxiety she was watching Colomban who, not knowing that he was being observed, was looking in rapture at the girls selling coats, whose department was visible behind the mezzanine windows. Baudu, rage on his face, contented himself by saying:

"All is not gold that glitters, you just wait!"

Obviously the family was choking back the surge of resentment which was rising in its throat. A sense of self-respect prevented it from letting itself go so soon in front of the children who had only arrived that morning. In the end, the draper made an effort, and turned round in order to drag himself away from the sight of the selling going on opposite.

"Well," he went on, "let's go and see about Vinçard. Jobs are very sought after, tomorrow it may be too late."

But, before going out, he told the second assistant to go to the station and fetch Denise's trunk. For her part Madame Baudu, to whom the girl had entrusted Pépé, decided that she would take advantage of a free moment by going with the little boy to Madame Gras in the Rue des Orties in order to have a chat with her and come to some agreement. Jean promised his sister that he would not quit the shop.

"It'll only take a couple of minutes," Baudu explained as he was going along the Rue Gaillon with his niece. "Vinçard specializes in silks, and he's still doing some business in that line.

Oh, he has his difficulties, like everyone else, but he's artful and makes both ends meet by being as stingy as can be. But I think he wants to retire, because of his rheumatism."

The shop was in the Rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs, near the Choiseul Arcade. It was clean and light, smart in an up-to-date way, though small and poorly stocked. Baudu and Denise found Vinçard deep in conference with two gentlemen.

"Don't bother about us," exclaimed the draper. "We're not in a hurry, we'll wait."

And, going tactfully back towards the door he added, bending down to the girl's ear:

"The thin one is at the Bonheur, assistant buyer in the silk department, and the fat one is a manufacturer from Lyons."

Denise gathered that Vinçard was talking up his shop to Robineau, the assistant from the Bonheur des Dames. With a frank air and open manner he was giving his word of honour, with the facility of a man whose style would not be cramped by oaths of that kind. According to him, the shop was a gold mine, and, bursting as he was with rude health, he broke off in order to complain, to whine about his confounded pains which were forcing him to give up making his fortune. But Robineau, highly strung and anxious, was interrupting him impatiently: he knew about the slump which drapers were going through, he quoted a shop specializing in silks which had already been ruined by the proximity of the Bonheur. Vinçard, blazing with anger, raised his voice.

"To be sure! That silly old chump Vabre's crash was inevitable. His wife squandered everything… Besides, here we are more than five hundred yards away, whereas Vabre was right next door to it."

Then Gaujean, the silk manufacturer, broke into the conversation. Once more their voices were lowered. Gaujean was accusing the big stores of ruining the French textile industry; three or four of them were dictating it, were ruling the market, and he insinuated that the only way to fight against them was to encourage small businesses, above all those which specialized, for the future belonged to them. For this reason he was offering very generous credit to Robineau.

"Look how the Bonheur has treated you!" he repeated. "They take no account of services rendered, they're just machines for

exploiting the people… They promised you the job of buyer ages ago, and then Bouthemont, who came from outside and had no right to it, got it in the end."

This injustice was still rankling with Robineau. All the same, he was hesitating about setting up in business himself, he explained that the money was not his; his wife had inherited sixty thousand francs, and he was full of scruples about this sum because, so he said, he would rather cut both his hands off on the spot than risk it in bad business.

"No. I have not made up my mind," he concluded at last. "Give me time to think it over, we'll discuss it again."

"As you like," said Vinçard, hiding his disappointment under a good-natured air. "It's not in my own interest to sell. Really, if it wasn't for my rheumatism…"

And, returning to the centre of the shop he said:

"What can I do for you, Monsieur Baudu?"

The draper, who was listening with one ear, introduced Denise, told as much as he thought necessary of her story, said that she had been working in the provinces for two years.

"And, as I hear that you're looking for a good salesgirl…"

Vinçard pretended to be in great despair.

"Oh! That is bad luck! Certainly, I was looking for a salesgirl for over a week. But I've just hired one less than two hours ago."

A silence fell. Denise seemed to be overwhelmed with dismay. Then Robineau, who was looking at her with interest, no doubt touched by her poor appearance, volunteered some information.

"I know that they want someone at our place in the ready-made department."

Baudu could not suppress a heartfelt exclamation.

"At your place! My goodness – no!"

Then he became embarrassed. Denise had blushed all over; never would she dare to go into that huge shop! And the idea of being there filled her with pride.

"Why not?" resumed Robineau, surprised. "On the contrary, it would be an opportunity for her… I'd advise her to go to see Madame Aurélie, the buyer, tomorrow morning. The worst that can happen is that they won't take her."

The draper, in order to hide his inner revulsion, launched into vague phrases: he knew Madame Aurélie, or at any rate

her husband, Lhomme, the cashier, a fat man who had had his right arm cut off by an omnibus. Then, abruptly coming back to Denise, he said:

"In any case, it's her affair, not mine… She's quite free…"

And he went out, after saying goodbye to Gaujean and Robineau. Vinçard accompanied him to the door, once more saying how sorry he was. The girl had remained in the middle of the shop, self-conscious, anxious to get fuller information from the shop assistant. But she did not dare, and said goodbye in her turn, adding simply:

"Thank you, Monsieur."

Once in the street, Baudu did not speak to his niece. He was walking fast, forcing her to run, as if carried away by his own thoughts. In the Rue de la Michodière he was about to go into his house when a neighbouring shopkeeper who was standing outside his door made a sign to attract him. Denise stopped to wait for him.

"What is it, Bourras, old chap?" asked the draper.

Bourras was a tall old man, long-haired and bearded, with the head of a prophet and piercing eyes under great bushy eyebrows. He had a walking-stick and umbrella business, did repairs, and even carved handles, a skill which had earned for him in the neighbourhood the renown of an artist. Denise glanced at the shop windows, where umbrellas and walking sticks were lined up in regular ranks. But she looked up, and above all she was astonished by the house: it was a hovel, squashed in between the Bonheur des Dames and a large Louis XIV mansion, pushed, no one could tell how, into the narrow crevice, at the bottom of which its two low storeys were collapsing. Without supports on the right and left it would have fallen down; the slates on its roof were crooked and rotten, its façade scarred with cracks and running with long streaks of iron mould on the half-eaten-away woodwork of the signboard.

"You know, he's written to my landlord about buying the house," said Bourras, looking at the draper intently with his blazing eyes.

Baudu became even paler and hunched his shoulders. There was a silence, the two men remained looking at each other with a serious air.

"One must be prepared for everything," he murmured finally.

At that the old man flew into a passion, shaking his hair and his flowing beard.

"Let him buy the house, he'll pay four times its value for it! But I swear to you that while I'm still alive he shan't have a single stone of it. My lease is for twelve more years… We'll see, we'll see!"

It was a declaration of war. Bourras turned round towards the Bonheur des Dames, which neither of them had named. For an instant Baudu tossed his head in silence; then he crossed the street to go to his house, his legs worn out, repeating only:

"Oh God!… Oh God!"

Denise, who had been listening, followed her uncle. Madame Baudu came in too with Pépé, and she said at once that Madame Gras would take the child whenever they so desired. But Jean had just disappeared, which worried his sister. When he returned, his face alight, talking excitedly about the boulevard, she looked at him in a sad way which made him blush. Their trunk had been brought, and they were to sleep upstairs in the attic.

"By the way, what happened at Vinçard's?" asked Madame Baudu.

The draper told her about his fruitless errand, then added that he had been told about a job for his niece, and, with his arm stretched out towards the Bonheur des Dames in a gesture of contempt, he blurted out the words:

"In there, to be sure!"

The whole family felt hurt about it. In the evening, the first meal was at five o'clock. Denise and the two children once more took their places with Baudu, Geneviève and Colomban. The small dining room was lit by a gas jet and the smell of food was stifling. The meal proceeded in silence. But during the dessert Madame Baudu, who was restless, left the shop to come and sit down behind her niece. And then the wave which had been held up since the morning broke, and they all relieved their feelings by slating the monster.

"It's your own business, you're quite free…" repeated Baudu, first of all. "We don't want to influence you… Only, if you knew what sort of place it is!…"

In broken sentences he told her the story of Octave Mouret. Nothing but luck! A lad from the Midi who had turned up in Paris possessing all the attractive audacity of an adventurer, and

from the very next day there had been nothing but affairs with women, an endless exploitation of women, a scandal, which the neighbourhood was still talking about, when he had been caught red-handed; then his sudden and inexplicable conquest of Madame Hédouin, who had brought him the Bonheur des Dames.

"Poor Caroline!" Madame Baudu interrupted. "I was distantly related to her. Ah! If she had lived things would have been different. She wouldn't have allowed us to be murdered… And it was he who killed her. Yes, on his building site! One morning, when she was looking at the work, she fell into a hole. Three days later she died. She, who'd never had a day's illness, who was so healthy, so beautiful! There's some of her blood beneath the stones of that shop!"

With her pale, trembling hand she pointed through the walls towards the great shop. Denise, who was listening as one listens to a fairy tale, shivered slightly. The fear, which since that morning she had been feeling at the roots of the temptation being brought to bear on her, came, perhaps, from the blood of that woman whom she seemed now to see in the red cement of the basement.

"It looks as if it brings him luck," added Madame Baudu without naming Mouret.

But the draper shrugged his shoulders, contemptuous of these old wives' tales. He resumed his story, he explained the situation from the commercial angle. The Bonheur des Dames had been founded in 1822 by the Deleuze brothers. When the eldest died, his daughter Caroline had married the son of a linen manufacturer, Charles Hédouin, and later on, having become a widow, she had married this man Mouret. Through her, therefore, he had acquired a half-share in the shop. Three months after their marriage, her uncle Deleuze had in his turn died, without children; so that, when Caroline had left her bones in the foundations, this man Mouret had become sole heir, sole proprietor of the Bonheur. Nothing but luck!

"A man with ideas, a dangerous troublemaker who'll turn the whole neighbourhood topsy-turvy if he's allowed to!" Baudu went on. "I think Caroline, who was a bit romantic too, must have been taken in by the gentleman's absurd plans… In short, he prevailed on her to buy the house on the left, then the house on the right – and he himself, when he was left on his own,

bought two others, so that the shop has gone on growing, gone on growing to such an extent that it threatens to eat us all up now!"

His words were addressed to Denise, but he was speaking for his own benefit, brooding over this story which obsessed him, in order to justify himself. When alone with his family he was an irascible, violent man, his fists always clenched. Madame Baudu was immobile where she sat, no longer taking part in the conversation; Geneviève and Colomban, their eyes lowered, were absent-mindedly collecting and eating crumbs. It was so hot, so stifling in the small room that Pépé had fallen asleep on the table, and even Jean's eyes were closing.

"You wait!" Baudu went on, seized with sudden rage. "Those mountebanks will break their necks! I know that Mouret is going through a difficult time. I know he is. He's had to put all his profits into his mad schemes of expansion and advertisement. What's more, he's taken it into his head to persuade most of his staff to invest their money in his business. So he hasn't a penny now, and if a miracle doesn't occur, if he doesn't manage to triple his sales, as he hopes, you'll see what a crash there'll be! Ah! I'm not a spiteful man, but on that day I'll put out the flags, word of honour!"

He continued in a revengeful voice; one would have thought that the slighted honour of the trade could only be restored by the fall of the Bonheur. Had the like ever been seen before? A draper's shop which sold everything! A real bazaar! And a fine staff they had, too: a crowd of country bumpkins who shunted things about as if they were in a station, who treated the goods and the customers like parcels, dropping their employer or being dropped by him for a word – no affection, no morals, no art! And suddenly he called Colomban to witness: of course he, Colomban, brought up in the good old school, knew the slow, sure way in which one attained to the real subtleties, to the tricks of the trade. The art was not to sell a lot, but to sell at a high price. And then Colomban could also mention how he'd been treated, how he'd become a member of the family, nursed when he was ill, his things laundered and mended, looked after paternally – in a word: loved.

"Of course!" Colomban repeated after each of his employer's shouts.

"You're the last, my boy," said Baudu finally, with emotion. "After you it won't be like that any more… You're my only consolation, for if a scramble like that is what they call business nowadays, I don't understand a thing, I'd rather quit."

Geneviève, her head leaning towards her shoulder as if her thick head of black hair was too heavy for her pale forehead, was scrutinizing the smiling shop assistant, and in her look there was a suspicion, a desire to see if Colomban, prey to a sense of remorse, would not blush at such panegyrics. But, as if he was used to the old tradesman's act, he maintained his calm straightforwardness, his bland air, and the wily crease on his lips.

However, Baudu was shouting more loudly, accusing the bazaar opposite, those savages who were massacring each other in their struggle for existence, of going so far as to destroy the family. He quoted as an example their neighbours in the countryside, the Lhommes, mother, father and son, all three employed in that hole, people with no home life, always out, only eating at home on Sundays, nothing but a hotel and restaurant life! To be sure, his own dining room was not large, one could even have done with a bit more light and air – but at least his life was centred there, and there he had lived surrounded by the love of his family. As he spoke his eyes travelled round the little room, and he was seized with a fit of trembling at the idea, which he refused to acknowledge, that the savages could one day, if they succeeded in killing his business, dislodge him from this nook where, with his wife and daughter on either side of him, he felt warm. In spite of the air of assurance which he put on while foretelling the final crash, deep in his heart he was full of terror; he did really feel that the neighbourhood would be overrun, gradually devoured.

"I'm not saying this to put you off," he resumed, trying to be calm. "If it's in your interest to get a job there, I shall be the first to say: 'Go there.'"

"Yes, I'm sure, Uncle," murmured Denise, bewildered; in the midst of all this emotion her desire to be at the Bonheur des Dames was growing.

He had placed his elbows on the table, and was wearing her out with his stare.

"But come, you've been in the trade, tell me, is it sense for a plain draper's shop to start selling everything under the sun? In

the old days, when trade was honest, drapery meant materials, and nothing else. Nowadays their only idea is to ride roughshod over their neighbours and to eat up everything… That's what the neighbourhood is complaining about, for the little shops are beginning to suffer terribly. This man Mouret is ruining them… Why! Bédoré and his sister, in the hosiery shop in the Rue Gaillon, have already lost half their customers. At Mademoiselle Tatin's, the lingerie shop in the Choiseul Arcade, they've reached the point of lowering prices, competing in cheapness. And the effect of this scourge, this plague, makes itself felt as far as the Rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs, where I have been told that the Vanpouille brothers, the furriers, can't hold out. Eh? Drapers who sell furs, it's too silly! Another idea of Mouret's!"

"And the gloves," said Madame Baudu, "isn't it scandalous? He's had the nerve to create a glove department! Yesterday, when I was going along the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, Quinette was standing by his door looking so depressed that I didn't dare ask him if business was good."

"And umbrellas," Baudu went on. "Really, that beats everything! Bourras is convinced that Mouret simply wanted to ruin him; for after all, what sense does it make, umbrellas and materials together? But Bourras is tough, he won't let himself be done in. We'll have the last laugh one of these days."

He talked about other shopkeepers, reviewed the whole neighbourhood. Occasionally he would let out a confession: if Vinçard was trying to sell, they might as well all pack their bags, for Vinçard was like a rat leaving a sinking ship. Then immediately he would contradict himself, he would dream of an alliance, a league of little retailers to hold out against the colossus. For some time now, with restless hands and his mouth twisted with a nervous twitch, he had been hesitating to talk about himself. Finally, he took the plunge.

"So far as I'm concerned, up till now I haven't had much to complain about. Oh! He has done me some harm, the scoundrel! But so far he only keeps cloth for women, light cloth for dresses and heavier cloth for coats. People always come to me to buy things for men, special types of velvet, liveries – not to mention flannels and duffels, of which I really challenge him to have such a wide assortment. Only he plagues me, he thinks he makes my blood boil because he's put his drapery department there,

opposite. You've seen his display, haven't you? He always plants his most beautiful dresses there, set in a framework of lengths of cloth, a real circus parade to catch the girls… Honest to God! I'd blush to use such methods. The Vieil Elbeuf has been famous for almost a hundred years, and it doesn't need booby traps like that at its door. So long as I live, the shop will stay the same as it was when I got it, with its four sample pieces of cloth on the right and on the left, and nothing else!"

His emotion was spreading to the rest of the family. After a silence, Geneviève ventured to say something:

"Our customers are fond of us, Papa. We must remain hopeful… Only today Madame Desforges and Madame de Boves were here, and I'm expecting Madame Marty to look at some flannels."

"As for me," Colomban declared, "I got an order from Madame Bourdelais yesterday. It's true that she told me about an English tweed, the same as ours it seems, but priced fifty centimes cheaper opposite."

"And to think," said Madame Baudu in her tired voice, "that we knew that shop opposite when it was no bigger than a pocket handkerchief! Yes really, my dear Denise, when the Deleuzes founded it, it only had one window in the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin – a proper cupboard it was, where a couple of pieces of chintz were jammed together with three of calico… One couldn't turn round in the shop, it was so small… At that time the Vieil Elbeuf, which had existed for over sixty years, was already just as you see it today… Ah! It's all changed, greatly changed!"

She was shaking her head, her slow phrases told of the drama of her life. Born at the Vieil Elbeuf, she loved it even down to its damp stones, she lived only for it and because of it; in bygone days she had been full of pride for this shop, which had been the largest, the most thriving business in the neighbourhood. She had had the continual pain of seeing the rival shop gradually growing, at first despised, then equal in importance, then surpassing it, menacing it. For her it was an ever-open wound, she was dying of the Vieil Elbeuf's humiliation; she, like it, was still living from force of impetus, but she well knew that the shop's death throes would be her own too, that on the day when the shop closed down she would be finished.