OCTAVE MIRBEAU

# THE DIARY OF A CHAMBERMAID

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# The Diary of a Chambermaid

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# Table of Contents

# I

Table of Contents

September 14.

To-day, September 14, at three o'clock in the afternoon, in mild, gray, and rainy weather, I have entered upon my new place. It is the twelfth in two years. Of course I say nothing of the places which I held in previous years. It would be impossible for me to count them. Ah! I can boast of having seen interiors and faces, and dirty souls. And the end is not yet. Judging from the really extraordinary and dizzy way in which I have rolled, here and there, successively, from houses to employment-bureaus, and from employment-bureaus to houses, from the Bois de Boulogne to the Bastille, from the Observatory to Montmartre, from the Ternes to the Gobelins, everywhere, without ever succeeding in establishing myself anywhere, the masters in these days must be hard to please. It is incredible.

The affair was arranged through an advertisement in the "Figaro," and without any interview with Madame. We wrote letters to each other, that is all; a risky method, often resulting in surprises on both sides. Madame's letters are well written, it is true. But they reveal a meddlesome and fastidious character. Ah! the explanations and the commentaries that she insisted upon, the whys and the becauses. I do not know whether Madame is stingy; at any rate she is hardly ruining herself with her letter-paper. It is bought at the Louvre. I am not rich, but I have more

elegance than that. I write on paper perfumed *à la peau d'Espagne*, beautiful paper, some of it pink, some light blue, which I have collected from my former mistresses. Some of it even bears a countess's coronet engraved upon it. That must have been a crusher for her.

Well, at last, here I am in Normandy, at Mesnil-Roy. Madame's estate, which is not far from the country, is called the Priory. This is almost all that I know of the spot where henceforth I am to live.

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I am not without anxiety, or without regret, at having come, in consequence of a moment's rashness, to bury myself in the depths of the country. What I have seen of it frightens me a little, and I ask myself what further is going to happen to me here. Doubtless nothing good, and the usual worries. To worry is the clearest of our privileges. For every one who succeeds—that is, for every one who marries a worthy young fellow or forms an alliance with an old man—how many of us are destined to ill-luck, swept away in the great whirlwind of poverty? After all, I had no choice, and this is better than nothing.

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This is not the first time that I have had a place in the country. Four years ago I had one. Oh! not for long, and in really exceptional circumstances. I remember this adventure as if it had occurred yesterday. Although the details are

slightly indecorous, and even horrible, I wish to relate it. Moreover, I charitably warn my readers that it is my intention, in writing this diary, to keep nothing back, in relation either to myself or to others. On the contrary, I intend to put into it all the frankness that is in me, and, when necessary, all the brutality that is in life. It is not my fault if the souls from which we tear the veils, and which then appear in all their nakedness, exhale so strong an odor of rottenness.

Well, here it is.

I was engaged in an employment-bureau, by a sort of fat governess, to be a chambermaid in the house of a certain M. Rabour, in Touraine. The conditions accepted, it was agreed that I should take the train on such a day, at such an hour, for such a station; which was done, according to the programme.

As soon as I had given up my ticket at the exit, I found, outside, a sort of coachman with a rubicund and churlish face, who asked me:

"Are you M. Rabour's new chambermaid?"

"Yes."

"Have you a trunk?"

"Yes, I have a trunk."

"Give me your baggage ticket, and wait for me here."

He made his way to the platform. The employees hastened about him. They called him "Monsieur Louis" in a tone of friendly respect. Louis looked for my trunk in the pile of baggage, and had it placed in an English cart that stood near the exit.

"Well, will you get in?"

I took my seat beside him, and we started. The coachman looked at me out of the corner of his eye. I examined him similarly. I saw at once that I had to do with a countryman, an unpolished peasant, an untrained domestic who had never served in grand establishments. That annoyed me. For my part, I like handsome liveries. I dote on nothing so much as on white leather knee-breeches tightly fitting nervous thighs. And how lacking in elegance he was, this Louis, without driving-gloves, with a full suit of grayish-blue drugget that was too big for him, and a flat cap of glazed leather, ornamented with a double row of gold lace. No, indeed, they are slow in this region. And, with all, a scowling, brutal air, but not a bad fellow at bottom. I know these types. At first they assume a knowing air with the new people, and later a more friendly footing is arrived at. Often more friendly than one would like.

We sat a long time without saying a word. He assumed the manners of a grand coachman, holding the reins high and swinging his whip with rounded gestures. Oh! how ridiculous he was! For my part, with much dignity I surveyed the landscape, which had no special feature; simply fields, trees, and houses, just as everywhere else. He brought his horse down to a walk in order to ascend a hill, and then, suddenly, with a quizzing smile, he asked:

"I suppose that at least you have brought a good supply of shoes?"

"Undoubtedly," said I, astonished at this question, which rhymed with nothing, and still more at the singular tone in which he put it to me. "Why do you ask me that? It is a rather stupid question, don't you know, my old man?"

He nudged me slightly with his elbow, and, gliding over me a strange look whose two-fold expression of keen irony and, indeed, of jovial obscenity was unintelligible to me, he said, with a chuckle:

"Oh! yes, pretend that you know nothing. You are a good one, you are—a jolly good one!"

Then he clacked his tongue, and the horse resumed its rapid gait.

I was puzzled. What could be the meaning of this? Perhaps nothing at all. I concluded that the good man was a little silly, that he did not know how to talk with women, and that he had been able to think of no other way to start a conversation which, however, I did not see fit to continue.

M. Rabour's estate was sufficiently large and beautiful. A pretty house, painted light green, and surrounded by broad lawns adorned with flowers and by a pine forest which gave forth an odor of turpentine. I adore the country, but, oddly enough, it makes me sad and sleepy. I was utterly stupid when I entered the vestibule where the governess was awaiting me—she who had engaged me at the Paris employment-bureau, God knows after how many indiscreet questions as to my private habits and tastes, which ought to have made me distrustful. But in vain does one see and endure things stronger and stronger; they never teach you anything. The governess had not pleased me at the employment-bureau; here she instantly disgusted me. She seemed to me to have the air of an old procuress. She was a fat woman, and short, with puffed-up yellowish flesh, hair brushed flat and turning gray, huge and rolling breasts, and soft, damp hands as transparent as gelatine. Her grey eyes

indicated wickedness, a cold, calculating, vicious wickedness. The tranquil and cruel way in which she looked at you, searching soul and flesh, was almost enough to make you blush.

She escorted me into a little reception-room, and at once left me, saying that she was going to notify Monsieur, that Monsieur wished to see me before I should begin my service.

"For Monsieur has not seen you," she added. "I have taken you, it is true, but then it is necessary that you please Monsieur."

I inspected the room. It was extremely clean and orderly. The brasses, the furniture, the floor, the doors, thoroughly polished, waxed, varnished, shone like mirrors. No clap-trap, no heavy hangings, no embroidered stuffs, such as are seen in certain Paris houses; but serious comfort, an air of rich decency, of substantial country life, regular and calm. But my! how tiresome it must be to live here!

Monsieur entered. Oh! the queer man, and how he amused me! Fancy a little old man, looking as if he had just stepped out of a band-box, freshly shaven, and as pink as a doll. Very erect, very sprightly, very inviting, in fact, he hopped about, in walking, like a little grasshopper in the fields. He saluted me, and then asked, with infinite politeness:

"What is your name, my child?"

"Célestine, Monsieur."

"Célestine!" he exclaimed. "Célestine? The devil! It is a pretty name—that I do not deny—but too long, my child, much too long. I will call you Marie, if you are willing. That is

a very nice name, too, and it is short. And besides, I have called all my chambermaids Marie. It is a habit which it would distress me to abandon. I would rather abandon the person."

They all have this queer mania of never calling you by your real name. I was not too much astonished, having already borne all the names of all the saints in the calendar. He persisted:

"So it will not displease you if I call you Marie? That is agreed, is it?"

"Why, certainly, Monsieur."

"A pretty girl; good character; very well, very well."

He had said all this to me in a sprightly and extremely respectful way, and without staring at me, without seeming to undress me with his eyes, after the fashion of men generally. Scarcely had he looked at me. From the moment that he entered the room, his eyes had remained obstinately fixed upon my shoes.

"You have others?" he asked, after a short silence, during which it seemed to me that his eyes became strangely brilliant.

"Other names, Monsieur?"

"No, my child, other shoes."

And with a slender tongue he licked his lips, after the manner of cats.

I did not answer at once. This word shoes, reminding me of the coachman's salacious joke, had astounded me. Then that had a meaning? On a more pressing interrogation I finally answered, but in a voice somewhat hoarse and thick, as if I were, confessing a sin of gallantry:

"Yes, Monsieur, I have others."

"Glazed?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Highly, highly glazed?"

"Why, yes, Monsieur."

"Good, good! And of yellow leather?"

"I have none of that kind, Monsieur."

"You will have to have some; I will give you some."

"Thank you, Monsieur."

"Good, good! Be still!"

I was frightened, for dull gleams had just passed over his eyes, and drops of sweat were rolling down his forehead. Thinking that he was about to faint, I was on the point of shouting, of calling for help. But the crisis quieted down, and, after a few minutes, he continued in a calmer voice, though a little saliva still foamed at the corner of his lips.

"It is nothing. It is over. Understand me, my child. I am a little of a maniac. At my age that is allowed, is it not? For instance, I do not think it proper that a woman should black her own shoes, much less mine. I have a great respect for women, Marie, and cannot endure that. So I will black your shoes, your little shoes, your dear little shoes. I will take care of them. Listen to me. Every evening, before going to bed, you will carry your shoes into my room; you will place them near the bed, on a little table, and every morning, on coming to open my windows, you will take them away again."

And, as I manifested a prodigious astonishment, he added:

"Oh! now, it is nothing enormous that I ask of you; it is a very natural thing, after all. And if you are very nice.… "

Quickly he took from his pocket two louis, which he handed to me.

"If you are very nice, very obedient, I will often make you little presents. The governess will pay you your wages every month. But between ourselves, Marie, I shall often make you little presents. And what is it that I ask of you? Come, now, it is not extraordinary. Is it, then, indeed, so extraordinary?"

Monsieur was getting excited again. As he spoke his eyelids rapidly rose and fell, like leaves in a tempest.

"Why do you say nothing, Marie? Say something. Why do you not walk? Walk a little, that I may see them move, that I may see them live—your little shoes."

He knelt down, kissed my shoes, kneaded them with his feverish and caressing fingers, unlaced them. And, while kissing, kneading, and caressing them, he said, in a supplicating voice, in the voice of a weeping child:

"Oh! Marie, Marie, your little shoes; give them to me directly, directly, directly. I want them directly. Give them to me."

I was powerless. Astonishment had paralyzed me. I did not know whether I was really living or dreaming. Of Monsieur's eyes I saw nothing but two little white globes streaked with red. And his mouth was all daubed with a sort of soapy foam.

At last he took my shoes away and shut himself up with them in his room for two hours.

"Monsieur is much pleased with you," said the governess to me, in showing me over the house. "Try to continue to

please him. The place is a good one."

Four days later, in the morning, on going at the usual hour to open the windows, I came near fainting with horror in the chamber. Monsieur was dead. Stretched on his back in the middle of the bed, he lay with all the rigidity of a corpse. He had not struggled. The bed-clothing was not disarranged. There was not the slightest trace of shock, of agony, of clinched hands striving to strangle Death. And I should have thought him asleep, if his face had not been violet, frightfully violet, the sinister violet of the egg-plant. And—terrifying spectacle, which, still more than this face, caused me to quake with fear—Monsieur held, pressed between his teeth, one of my shoes, so firmly pressed between his teeth that, after useless and horrible efforts, I was obliged to cut the leather with a razor, in order to tear it from him.

I am no saint; I have known many men, and I know, by experience, all the madness, all the vileness, of which they are capable. But a man like Monsieur? Oh! indeed, is it not ridiculous all the same that such types exist? And where do they go in search of all their conceits, when it is so simple and so good to love each other prettily, as other people do?

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I do not think that anything of that kind will happen to me here. Here, evidently, they are of another sort. But is it better? Is it worse? As to that, I know nothing.

There is one thing that torments me. I ought, perhaps, to have finished, once for all, with all these dirty places, and

squarely taken the step from domesticity into gallantry, like so many others that I have known, and who—I say it without pride—had fewer "advantages" than I. Though I am not what is called pretty, I am better; without conceit I may say that I have an atmosphere, a style, which many society women and many women of the *demi-monde* have often envied me. A little tall, perhaps, but supple, slender, and well-formed, with very beautiful blonde hair, very beautiful deep-blue eyes, an audacious mouth, and, finally, an original manner and a turn of mind, very lively and languishing at once, that pleases men. I might have succeeded. But, in addition to the fact that, by my own fault, I have missed some astonishing opportunities, which probably will never come to me again, I have been afraid. I have been afraid, for one never knows where that will lead you. I have rubbed against so many miseries in that sphere of life; I have received so many distressing confidences. And those tragic calvaries from the Depot to the Hospital, which one does not always escape! And, for a background to the picture, the hell of Saint-Lazare! Such things cause one to reflect and shudder. Who knows, too, whether I should have had, as woman, the same success that I have had as chambermaid? The particular charm which we exercise over men does not lie solely in ourselves, however pretty we may be. It depends largely, as I have had occasion to know, on our environment, on the luxury and vice of our surroundings, on our mistresses themselves and on the desire which they excite. In loving us, it is a little of them and much of their mystery that men love in us.

But there is something else. In spite of my dissolute life, I have luckily preserved, in the depths of my being, a very sincere religious feeling, which saves me from definitive falls and holds me back at the edge of the worst abysses. Ah! if there were no religion; if, on evenings of gloom and moral distress, there were no prayer in the churches; if it were not for the Holy Virgin, and Saint Anthony of Padua, and all the rest of the outfit—we should be much more unhappy, that is sure. And what would become of us, and how far we should go, the devil only knows!

Finally—and this is more serious—I have not the least defence against men. I should be the constant victim of my disinterestedness and their pleasure. I am too amorous—yes, I am too much in love with love, to draw any profit whatever out of love. It is stronger than I; I cannot ask money of one who gives me happiness and sets ajar for me the radiant gates of Ecstasy.

So here I am, then, at the Priory, awaiting what? Indeed, I do not know. The wisest way would be not to think about it, and trust everything to luck. Perhaps it is thus that things go best. Provided that to-morrow, and pursued even here by that pitiless mischance which never leaves me, I am not forced once more to quit my place. That would annoy me. For some time I have had pains in my loins, a feeling of weariness in my whole body; my stomach is becoming impaired, my memory is weakening; I am growing more irritable and nervous. Just now, when looking in the glass, I discovered that my face had a really tired look, and that my complexion—that amber complexion of which I was so proud—had taken on an almost ashen hue. Can I be growing old

already? I do not wish to grow old yet. In Paris it is difficult to take care of one's self. There is no time for anything. Life there is too feverish, too tumultuous; one comes continually in contact with too many people, too many things, too many pleasures, too much of the unexpected. But you have to go on, just the same. Here it is calm. And what silence! The air that one breathes must be healthy and good. Ah! if, at the risk of being bored, I could but rest a little.

In the first place, I have no confidence. Certainly Madame is nice enough with me. She has seen fit to pay me some compliments on my appearance, and to congratulate herself on the reports that she has received concerning me. Oh! her head, if she knew that these reports are false, or at least that they were given simply to oblige! What especially astonishes her is my elegance. And then, as a rule, they are nice the first day, these camels. While all is new, all is beautiful. That is a well-known song. Yes, and the next day the air changes into another one equally well known. Especially as Madame has very cold, hard eyes, which do not please me—the eyes of a miser, full of keen suspicion and spying inquiry. Nor do I like her dry and too thin lips, which seem to be covered with a whitish crust, or her curt, cutting speech, which turns an amiable word almost into an insult or a humiliation. When, in questioning me concerning this or that, concerning my aptitudes and my past, she looked at me with that tranquil and sly impudence of an old customs official which they all have, I said to myself:

"There is no mistake about it. Here is another one who is bound to put everything under lock and key, to count every evening her grapes and her lumps of sugar, and to put

marks on the bottles. Oh! yes, indeed, we change and change, but we find always the same thing."

Nevertheless, it will be necessary to see, and not rely on this first impression. Among so many mouths that have spoken to me, among so many looks that have searched my soul, I shall find perhaps, some day—who knows?—a friendly mouth, a sympathetic look. It costs me nothing to hope.

As soon as I had arrived, still under the deadening influence of four hours in a third-class railway carriage, and before any one in the kitchen had even thought of offering me a slice of bread, Madame took me over the house, from cellar to garret, in order to immediately familiarize me with my duties. Oh! she does not waste her time, or mine. How big this house is! And how many things and corners it contains! Oh! no, thank you, to keep it in order as it should be, four servants would not suffice. Besides the ground floor, which in itself is very important—for there are two little pavilions, in the form of a terrace, which constitute additions and continuations—it has two stories, in which I shall have to be forever going up and down, since Madame, who stays in a little room near the dining-room, has had the ingenious idea of placing the linen-room, where I am to work, at the top of the house, by the side of our chambers. And cupboards, and bureaus, and drawers, and store-rooms, and litters of all sorts—if you like these things, there are plenty of them. Never shall I find myself in all this.

At every minute, in showing me something, Madame said to me:

"You will have to be careful about this, my girl. This is very pretty, my girl. This is very rare, my girl. This is very

expensive, my girl."

She could not, then, call me by my name, instead of saying all the time, "My girl," this, "My girl," that, in that tone of wounding domination which discourages the best wills and straightway puts such a distance, so much hatred, between our mistresses and us? Do I call her "little mother"? And then Madame has always on her lips the words "very expensive." It is provoking. Everything that belongs to her, even paltry articles that cost four sous, are "very expensive." One has no idea where the vanity of the mistress of a house can hide itself. It is really pitiful. In explaining to me the working of an oil lamp, which in no way differed from all other lamps, she said to me:

"My girl, you know that this lamp is very expensive, and that it can be repaired only in England. Take care of it, as if it were the apple of your eye."

Oh! the cheek that they have, and the fuss that they make about nothing! And when I think that it is all done just to humiliate you, to astonish you!

And the house is not so much after all. There is really no reason to be so proud of it. The exterior, to be sure, with the great clusters of trees that sumptuously frame it and the gardens that descend to the river in gentle slopes, ornamented with broad rectangular lawns, gives an impression of some importance. But within it is sad, old, rickety, and has a musty smell. I do not understand how they can live in it. Nothing but rats' nests, break-neck wooden stairways, whose warped steps tremble and creak beneath your feet; low and dark passage-ways, whose floors, instead of being covered with soft carpets, consist of

badly-laid tiles, of a faded red color, and glazed, glazed, slippery, slippery. The too thin partitions, made of too dry planks, make the chambers as sonorous as the inside of a violin. Oh! it is all hollow and provincial. It surely is not furnished in the Paris fashion. In all the rooms old mahogany, old worm-eaten stuffs, old worn-out faded rugs, and arm-chairs and sofas, ridiculously stiff, without springs, worm-eaten, and rickety. How they must grind one's shoulders! Really, I, who am so fond of light-colored hangings, broad elastic divans, where one can stretch voluptuously on heaps of cushions, and all these pretty modern furnishings, so luxurious, so rich, and so gay—I feel utterly saddened by the gloomy sadness of these. And I am afraid that I shall never get accustomed to such an absence of comfort, to such a lack of elegance, to so much old dust and so many dead forms.

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Nor is Madame dressed in Parisian fashion. She is lacking in style, and is unacquainted with the great dressmakers. She is somewhat of a fright, as they say. Although she shows a certain pretension in her costumes, she is at least ten years behind the fashion. And what a fashion! Still, she would not be bad-looking, if she chose not to be; at least, she would not be too bad-looking. Her worst fault is that she awakens in you no sympathy—that she is a woman in nothing. But she has regular features, pretty hair naturally blonde, and a beautiful skin; in fact, she has too much color, as if she were suffering from some internal malady. I know

this type of woman, and I am not to be deceived by the brilliancy of their complexion. They are pink on the surface, yes, but within they are rotten. They cannot stand up straight, they cannot walk, they cannot live, except by the aid of girdles, trusses, pessaries, and a whole collection of secret horrors and complex mechanisms. Which does not prevent them from making a show in society. Yes, indeed, they are coquettish, if you please; they flirt in the corners, they exhibit their painted flesh, they ogle, they wiggle; and yet they are fit for nothing but preservation in alcohol. Oh! misfortune! One has but little satisfaction with them, I assure you, and it is not always agreeable to be in their service.

I do not know whether it is from temperament or from organic indisposition, but, judging from the expression of Madame's face, her severe gestures, and the stiff bending of her body, she cares nothing at all for love. She has the sharpness and sourness of an old maid, and her whole person seems dried up and mummified—a rare thing with blondes. Not such women as Madame does beautiful music, like that of "Faust"—oh! that "Faust"!—cause to fall with languor and swoon voluptuously in the arms of a handsome man. Oh, no indeed! She does not belong to that class of very ugly women into whose faces the ardor of sex sometimes puts so much of radiant life, so much of seductive beauty. After all, though, one cannot trust too securely in airs like those of Madame. I have known women of the most severe and crabbed type, who drove away all thought of desire and love, and who yet were famous rovers.

Although Madame forces herself to be amiable, she surely is not up to date, like some that I have seen. I believe her to be very wicked, very spying, very fault-finding—a dirty character and a wicked heart. She must be continually at people's heels, pestering them in all ways. "Do you know how to do this?" and "Do you know how to do that?" or again: "Are you in the habit of breaking things? Are you careful? Have you a good memory? Are you orderly?" There is no end to it. And also: "Are you clean? I am very particular about cleanliness; I pass over many things, but I insist upon cleanliness." Does she take me for a farm girl, a peasant, a country servant? Cleanliness? Oh! I know that chestnut. They all say that. And often, when one goes to the bottom of things, when one turns up their skirts and examines their linen, how filthy they are! Sometimes it is disgusting enough to turn one's stomach.

Consequently I distrust Madame's cleanliness. When she showed me her dressing-room, I did not notice any bath, or any of the things that are necessary to a woman who takes proper care of herself. And what a scant supply she has of *bibelots*, bottles, and all those private and perfumed articles with which I am so fond of messing! I long, for the sake of amusement, to see Madame naked. She must be a pretty sight.

In the evening, as I was setting the table, Monsieur entered the dining-room. He had just returned from a hunt. He is a very tall man, with broad shoulders, a heavy black moustache, and a dull complexion. His manners are a little heavy and awkward, but he seems good-natured. Evidently he is not a man of genius, like M. Jules Lemaître, whom I

have so often served in the Rue Christophe-Colomb, or a man of elegance, like M. de Janzé. Ah, M. de Janzé! There was a man for you! Yet he is sympathetic. His thick and curly hair, his bull neck, his calves that look like a wrestler's, his thick, intensely red, and smiling lips, testify to his strength and good humor. He is not indifferent. That I saw directly from his mobile, sniffing, sensual nose, and from his extremely brilliant eyes, which are at once gentle and fun-loving. Never, I think, have I met a human being with such eyebrows, thick to the point of obscenity, and with so hairy hands. Like most men of little intelligence and great muscular development, he is very timid.

He surveyed me with a very queer air, an air in which there was kindness, surprise, and satisfaction—something also of salaciousness, but without impudence, something of an undressing look, but without brutality. It is evident that Monsieur is not accustomed to such chambermaids as I, that I astonish him, and that I have made a great impression on him at the start. He said to me, with a little embarrassment:

"Ah! Ah! So you are the new chambermaid?"

I bent forward, slightly lowered my eyes, and then, modest and mutinous at once, I answered simply, in my gentlest voice:

"Why, yes, Monsieur."

Then he stammered:

"So you have come? That's very good, that's very good."

He would have liked to say something further—was trying, indeed, to think of something to say—but, being neither eloquent or at his ease, he did not find anything. I

was greatly amused at his embarrassment. But, after a short silence, he asked:

"You come from Paris, like that?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"That's very good, that's very good."

And growing bolder:

"What is your name?"

"Célestine, Monsieur."

He rubbed his hands—a mannerism of his—and went on:

"Célestine. Ah! Ah! that's very good. Not a common name; in fact, a pretty name. Provided Madame does not oblige you to change it. She has that mania."

I answered, in a tone of dignified submission:

"I am at Madame's disposition."

"Undoubtedly, undoubtedly. But it is a pretty name."

I almost burst out laughing. Monsieur began to walk up and down the room; then, suddenly, he sat down in a chair, stretched out his legs, and, putting into his look something like an apology, and into his voice something like a prayer, he asked:

"Well, Célestine—for my part, I shall always call you Célestine—will you help me to take off my boots? That does not annoy you, I hope."

"Certainly not, Monsieur."

"Because, you see, these confounded boots are very difficult to manage; they come off very hard."

With a movement that I tried to make harmonious and supple, and even provocative, I knelt before him, and, while I was helping him to take off his boots, which were damp and covered with mud, I was perfectly conscious that the

perfumes of my neck were exciting his nose, and that his eyes were following with increasing interest the outlines of my form as seen through my gown. Suddenly he murmured:

"Great heavens! Célestine, but you smell good."

Without raising my eyes, I assumed an air of innocence:

"I, Monsieur?"

"Surely, you; it can hardly be my feet."

"Oh! Monsieur!"

And this "Oh! Monsieur!" at the same time that it was a protest in favor of his feet, was also a sort of friendly reprimand—friendly to the point of encouragement—for his familiarity. Did he understand? I think so, for again, with more force, and even with a sort of amorous trembling, he repeated:

"Célestine, you smell awfully good—awfully good."

Ah! but the old gentleman is making free. I appeared as if slightly scandalized by his insistence, and kept silence. Timid as he is, and knowing nothing of the tricks of women, Monsieur was disturbed. He feared undoubtedly that he had gone too far, and, suddenly changing his idea, he asked:

"Are you getting accustomed to the place, Célestine?"

That question? Was I getting accustomed to the place? And I had been there but three hours. I had to bite my lips to keep from laughing. The old gentleman has queer ways; and, really, he is a little stupid.

But that makes no difference. He does not displease me. In his very vulgarity he reveals a certain power and masculinity which are not disagreeable to me.

When his boots had been taken off, and to leave him with a good impression of me, I asked him, in my turn:

"I see Monsieur is a hunter. Has Monsieur had a good hunt to-day?"

"I never have good hunts, Célestine," he answered, shaking his head. "I hunt for the sake of walking—for the sake of riding—that I may not be here, where I find it tiresome."

"Ah! Monsieur finds it tiresome here?"

After a pause, he gallantly corrected himself.

"That is to say, I did find it tiresome. For now, you see, it is different."

Then, with a stupid and moving smile:

"Célestine?"

"Monsieur."

"Will you get me my slippers? I ask your pardon."

"But, Monsieur, it is my business."

"Yes, to be sure; they are under the stairs, in a little dark closet, at the left."

I believe that I shall get all that I want of this type. He is not shrewd; he surrenders at the start. Ah! one could lead him far.

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The dinner, not very luxurious, consisting of the leavings from the day before, passed off without incident, almost silently. Monsieur devours, and Madame picks fastidiously at the dishes with sullen gestures and disdainful mouthings. But she absorbs powders, syrups, drops, pills, an entire pharmacy which you have to be very careful to place on the table, at every meal, beside her plate. They talked very

little, and what they did say concerned local matters and people of little or no interest to me. But I gathered that they have very little company. Moreover, it was plain that their thoughts were not on what they were saying. They were watching me, each according to the ideas that prompted him or her, each moved by a different curiosity; Madame, severe and stiff, contemptuous even, more and more hostile, and dreaming already of all the dirty tricks that she would play me; Monsieur, slyly, with very significant winks, and, although he tried to conceal them, with strange looks at my hands. Really, I don't know what there is about my hands that so excites men. For my part, I seemed to be taking no notice of their game. I went and came with dignity, reserved, adroit, and distant. Ah! if they could have seen my soul, if they could have heard my soul, as I saw and heard theirs!

I adore waiting on table. It is there that one surprises one's masters in all the filthiness, in all the baseness of their inner natures. Prudent at first, and watchful of each other, little by little they reveal themselves, exhibit themselves as they are, without paint and without veils, forgetting that some one is hovering around them, listening and noting their defects, their moral humps, the secret sores of their existence, and all the infamies and ignoble dreams that can be contained in the respectable brains of respectable people. To collect these confessions, to classify them, to label them in our memory, for use as a terrible weapon on the day of settlement, is one of the great and intense joys of our calling, and the most precious revenge for our humiliations.

From this first contact with my new masters I have obtained no precise and formal indications. But I feel that things do not go well here, that Monsieur is nothing in the house, that Madame is everything, that Monsieur trembles before Madame like a little child. Oh! he hasn't a merry time of it, the poor man! Surely he sees, hears, and suffers all sorts of things. I fancy that I shall get some amusement out of it, at times. At dessert, Madame, who, during the meal, had been continually sniffing at my hands, my arms, and my waist, said, in a clear and cutting tone:

"I do not like the use of perfumes."

As I did not answer, pretending to ignore the fact that the remark was addressed to me, she added:

"Do you hear, Célestine?"

"Very well, Madame."

Then I looked stealthily at poor Monsieur, who likes perfumes, or who at least likes my perfume. With his elbows on the table, apparently indifferent, but really humiliated and distressed, he was following the flight of a wasp which had been lingering over a plate of fruit. And there was now a dismal silence in this dining-room, which the twilight had just invaded, and something inexpressibly sad, something unspeakably heavy, fell from the ceiling on these two beings, concerning whom I really asked myself of what use they are and what they are doing on earth.

"The lamp, Célestine."

It was Madame's voice, sharper than ever in the silence and the shade. It made me start.

"Do you not see that it is dark? I should not have to ask you for the lamp. Let it be the last time."

While lighting the lamp—this lamp which can be repaired only in England—I had a strong desire to cry out to poor Monsieur:

"Just wait a little, my old man, and fear nothing, and don't distress yourself. You shall eat and drink the perfumes that you so love, and of which you are so deprived. You shall breathe them, I promise you; you shall breathe them in my hair, on my lips, on my neck. And the two of us will lead this blockhead a merry dance, I answer for it."

And, to emphasize this silent invocation, I took care, as I placed the lamp upon the table, to slightly brush against Monsieur's arm, and I went out.

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The servants' hall is not gay. Besides myself, there are only two domestics—a cook, who is always scolding, and a gardener-coachman, who never says a word. The cook's name is Marianne; that of the gardener-coachman, Joseph. Stupid peasants. And what heads they have! She, fat, soft, flabby, sprawling, a neck emerging in a triple cushion from a dirty neckkerchief which looks as if she wiped her kettles with it, two enormous and shapeless breasts rolling beneath a sort of blue cotton camisole covered with grease, her too short dress disclosing thick ankles and big feet encased in grey woolen; he, in shirt-sleeves, work-apron, and wooden shoes, shaven, dry, nervous, with an evil grimace on his lips which stretch from ear to ear, and a devious gait, the sly movements of a sacristan. Such are my two companions.

No dining-room for the servants. We take our meals in the kitchen, at the same table where, during the day, the cook does her dirty work, carves her meats, cleans her fish, and cuts up her vegetables, with fingers fat and round as sausages. Really, that is scarcely proper. The fire in the stove renders the atmosphere of the room stifling; odors of old grease, of rancid sauces, of continual fryings, circulate in the air. While we eat, a kettle in which the dogs' soup is boiling exhales a fetid vapor that attacks your throat and makes you cough. One almost vomits. More respect is shown for prisoners in their cells and dogs in their kennels.

We had bacon and cabbage, and stinking cheese; for drink, sour cider. Nothing else. Earthen plates, with cracked enamel, and which smell of burnt grease, and tin forks, complete this pretty service.

Being too new in the house, I did not wish to complain. But neither did I wish to eat. Do further damage to my stomach, no, thank you!

"Why don't you eat?" asked the cook.

"I am not hungry."

I uttered this in a very dignified tone; then Marianne grunted: "Perhaps Mademoiselle must have truffles?"

Without showing anger, but with a stiff and haughty air, I replied:

"Why, you know, I have eaten truffles. Not everybody here can say as much."

That shut her up.

Meantime the gardener-coachman was filling his mouth with big pieces of bacon and examining me stealthily. I cannot say why, but this man has an embarrassing look,

and his silence troubles me. Although he is no longer young, I am astonished at the suppleness and elasticity of his movements; the undulations of his loins are reptilian. Let me describe him in greater detail. His stiff, grizzled hair, his low forehead, his oblique eyes, his prominent cheek-bones, his broad, strong jaw, and his long, fleshy, turned-up chin, give him a strange character that I cannot define. Is he a simpleton? Is he a rascal? I cannot tell. Yet it is curious that this man holds my attention as he does. After a time this obsession lessens and disappears. And I realize that this is simply another of the thousands and thousands of tricks of my excessive, magnifying, and romantic imagination, which causes me to see things and people as too beautiful or as too ugly, and which compels me to make of this miserable Joseph a being superior to the stupid countryman, to the heavy peasant that he really is.

Towards the end of the dinner, Joseph, still without saying a word, took from his apron-pocket the "Libre Parole," and began to read it attentively, and Marianne, softened by having drunk two full decanters of cider, became more amiable. Sprawling on her chair, her sleeves rolled up and revealing bare arms, her cap set a little awry upon her uncombed hair, she asked me where I came from, where I had been, if I had had good places, and if I was against the Jews. And we talked for some time, in an almost friendly way. In my turn I asked her for information concerning the house, whether many people came and what sort of people, whether Monsieur was attentive to the chambermaids, whether Madame had a lover.