

Study of a Woman

Honoré de Balzac

Translated by Katharine Prescott Wormeley

To the Marquis Jean–Charles di Negro.

The Marquise de Listomere is one of those young women who have been brought up in the spirit of the Restoration. She has principles, she fasts, takes the sacrament, and goes to balls and operas very elegantly dressed; her confessor permits her to combine the mundane with sanctity. Always in conformity with the Church and with the world, she presents a living image of the present day, which seems to have taken the word “legality” for its motto. The conduct of the marquise shows precisely enough religious devotion to attain under a new Maintenon to the gloomy piety of the last days of Louis XIV., and enough worldliness to adopt the habits of gallantry of the first years of that reign, should it ever be revived. At the present moment she is strictly virtuous from policy, possibly from inclination. Married for the last seven years to the Marquis de Listomere, one of those deputies who expect a peerage, she may also consider that such conduct will promote the ambitions of her family. Some women are reserving their opinion of her until the moment when Monsieur de Listomere becomes a peer of France, when she herself will be thirty-six years of age — a period of life when most women discover that they are the dupes of social laws.

The marquis is a rather insignificant man. He stands well at court; his good qualities are as negative as his defects; the former can no more make him a reputation for virtue than the latter can give him the sort of glamor cast by vice. As deputy, he never speaks, but he votes RIGHT. He behaves in his own home as he does in the Chamber. Consequently, he is held to be one of the best husbands in France. Though not susceptible of lively interest, he never scolds, unless, to be sure, he is kept waiting. His friends have named him “dull weather,”— aptly enough, for there is neither clear light nor total darkness about him. He is like all the ministers who have succeeded one another in France since the Charter. A woman with principles could not have fallen into better hands. It is certainly a great thing for a virtuous woman to have married a man incapable of follies.

Occasionally some fops have been sufficiently impertinent to press the hand of the marquise while dancing with her. They gained nothing in return but contemptuous glances; all were made to feel the shock of that insulting indifference which, like a spring frost, destroys the germs of flattering hopes. Beaux, wits, and fops, men whose sentiments are fed by sucking their canes, those of a great name, or a great fame, those of the highest or the lowest rank in her own

world, they all blanch before her. She has conquered the right to converse as long and as often as she chooses with the men who seem to her agreeable, without being entered on the tablets of gossip. Certain coquettish women are capable of following a plan of this kind for seven years in order to gratify their fancies later; but to suppose any such reservations in the Marquise de Listomere would be to calumniate her.

I have had the happiness of knowing this phoenix. She talks well; I know how to listen; consequently I please her, and I go to her parties. That, in fact, was the object of my ambition.

Neither plain nor pretty, Madame de Listomere has white teeth, a dazzling skin, and very red lips; she is tall and well-made; her foot is small and slender, and she does not put it forth; her eyes, far from being dulled like those of so many Parisian women, have a gentle glow which becomes quite magical if, by chance, she is animated. A soul is then divined behind that rather indefinite form. If she takes an interest in the conversation she displays a grace which is otherwise buried beneath the precautions of cold demeanor, and then she is charming. She does not seek success, but she obtains it. We find that for which we do not seek: that saying is so often true that some day it will be turned into a proverb. It is, in fact, the moral of this adventure, which I should not allow myself to tell if it were not echoing at the present moment through all the salons of Paris.

The Marquise de Listomere danced, about a month ago, with a young man as modest as he is lively, full of good qualities, but exhibiting, chiefly, his defects. He is ardent, but he laughs at ardor; he has talent, and he hides it; he plays the learned man with aristocrats, and the aristocrat with learned men. Eugene de Rastignac is one of those extremely clever young men who try all things, and seem to sound others to discover what the future has in store. While awaiting the age of ambition, he scoffs at everything; he has grace and originality, two rare qualities because the one is apt to exclude the other. On this occasion he talked for nearly half an hour with madame de Listomere, without any predetermined idea of pleasing her. As they followed the caprices of conversation, which, beginning with the opera of "Guillaume Tell," had reached the topic of the duties of women, he looked at the marquise, more than once, in a manner that embarrassed her; then he left her and did not speak to her again for the rest of the evening. He danced, played at ecarte, lost some money, and went home to bed. I have the honor to

assure you that the affair happened precisely thus. I add nothing, and I suppress nothing.

The next morning Rastignac woke late and stayed in bed, giving himself up to one of those matutinal reveries in the course of which a young man glides like a sylph under many a silken, or cashmere, or cotton drapery. The heavier the body from its weight of sleep, the more active the mind. Rastignac finally got up, without yawning over-much as many ill-bred persons are apt to do. He rang for his valet, ordered tea, and drank immoderately of it when it came; which will not seem extraordinary to persons who like tea; but to explain the circumstance to others, who regard that beverage as a panacea for indigestion, I will add that Eugene was, by this time, writing letters. He was comfortably seated, with his feet more frequently on the andirons than, properly, on the rug. Ah! to have one's feet on the polished bar which connects the two griffins of a fender, and to think of our love in our dressing-gown is so delightful a thing that I deeply regret the fact of having neither mistress, nor fender, nor dressing-gown.

The first letter which Eugene wrote was soon finished; he folded and sealed it, and laid it before him without adding the address. The second letter, begun at eleven o'clock, was not finished till mid-day. The four pages were closely filled.

"That woman keeps running in my head," he muttered, as he folded this second epistle and laid it before him, intending to direct it as soon as he had ended his involuntary revery.

He crossed the two flaps of his flowered dressing-gown, put his feet on a stool, slipped his hands into the pockets of his red cashmere trousers, and lay back in a delightful easy-chair with side wings, the seat and back of which described an angle of one hundred and twenty degrees. He stopped drinking tea and remained motionless, his eyes fixed on the gilded hand which formed the knob of his shovel, but without seeing either hand or shovel. He ceased even to poke the fire, — a vast mistake! Isn't it one of our greatest pleasures to play with the fire when we think of women? Our minds find speeches in those tiny blue flames which suddenly dart up and babble on the hearth. We interpret as we please the strong, harsh tones of a "burgundian."

Here I must pause to put before all ignorant persons an explanation of that word, derived from a very distinguished etymologist who wishes his name kept secret.

“Burgundian” is the name given, since the reign of Charles VI., to those noisy detonations, the result of which is to fling upon the carpet or the clothes a little coal or ember, the trifling nucleus of a conflagration. Heat or fire releases, they say, a bubble of air left in the heart of the wood by a gnawing worm. “Inde amor, inde burgundus.” We tremble when we see the structure we had so carefully erected between the logs rolling down like an avalanche. Oh! to build and stir and play with fire when we love is the material development of our thoughts.

It was at this moment that I entered the room. Rastignac gave a jump and said:—

“Ah! there you are, dear Horace; how long have you been here?”

“Just come.”

“Ah!”

He took up the two letters, directed them, and rang for his servant.

“Take these,” he said, “and deliver them.”

Joseph departed without a word; admirable servant!

We began to talk of the expedition to Morea, to which I was anxious to be appointed as physician. Eugene remarked that I should lose a great deal of time if I left Paris. We then conversed on various matters, and I think you will be glad if I suppress the conversation.

When the Marquise de Listomere rose, about half-past two in the afternoon of that day, her waiting-maid, Caroline, gave her a letter which she read while Caroline was doing her hair (an imprudence which many young women are thoughtless enough to commit).

“Dear angel of love,” said the letter, “treasure of my life and happiness —”

At these words the marquise was about to fling the letter in the fire; but there came into her head a fancy — which all virtuous women will readily understand — to see how a man who began a letter in that style could possibly end it. When she had turned the fourth page and read it, she let her arms drop like a person much fatigued.

“Caroline, go and ask who left this letter.”

“Madame, I received it myself from the valet of Monsieur le Baron de

Rastignac.”

After that there was silence for some time.

“Does Madame intend to dress?” asked Caroline at last.

“No — He is certainly a most impertinent man,” reflected the marquise.

I request all women to imagine for themselves the reflections of which this was the first.

Madame de Listomere ended hers by a formal decision to forbid her porter to admit Monsieur de Rastignac, and to show him, herself, something more than disdain when she met him in society; for his insolence far surpassed that of other men which the marquise had ended by overlooking. At first she thought of keeping the letter; but on second thoughts she burned it.

“Madame had just received such a fine love-letter; and she read it,” said Caroline to the housemaid.

“I should never have thought that of madame,” replied the other, quite surprised.

That evening Madame de Listomere went to a party at the Marquis de Beauseant’s, where Rastignac would probably betake himself. It was Saturday. The Marquis de Beauseant was in some way a connection of Monsieur de Rastignac, and the young man was not likely to miss coming. By two in the morning Madame de Listomere, who had gone there solely for the purpose of crushing Eugene by her coldness, discovered that she was waiting in vain. A brilliant man — Stendhal — has given the fantastic name of “crystallization” to the process which Madame de Listomere’s thoughts went through before, during, and after this evening.

Four days later Eugene was scolding his valet.

“Ah ca! Joseph; I shall soon have to send you away, my lad.”

“What is it, monsieur?”

“You do nothing but make mistakes. Where did you carry those letters I gave you Saturday?”

Joseph became stolid. Like a statue in some cathedral porch, he stood motionless, entirely absorbed in the labors of imagination. Suddenly he smiled idiotically, and said:—

“Monsieur, one was for the Marquise de Listomere, the other was for Monsieur’s lawyer.”

“You are certain of what you say?”

Joseph was speechless. I saw plainly that I must interfere, as I happened to be again in Eugene’s apartment.

“Joseph is right,” I said.

Eugene turned and looked at me.

“I read the addresses quite involuntarily, and —”

“And,” interrupted Eugene, “one of them was *not* for Madame de Nucingen?”

“No, by all the devils, it was not. Consequently, I supposed, my dear fellow, that your heart was wandering from the rue Saint-Lazare to the rue Saint-Dominique.”

Eugene struck his forehead with the flat of his hand and began to laugh; by which Joseph perceived that the blame was not on him.

Now, there are certain morals to this tale on which young men had better reflect. *First mistake*: Eugene thought it would be amusing to make Madame de Listomere laugh at the blunder which had made her the recipient of a love-letter which was not intended for her. *Second mistake*: he did not call on Madame de Listomere for several days after the adventure, thus allowing the thoughts of that virtuous young woman to crystallize. There were other mistakes which I will here pass over in silence, in order to give the ladies the pleasure of deducing them, “*ex professo*,” to those who are unable to guess them.

Eugene at last went to call upon the marquise; but, on attempting to pass into the house, the porter stopped him, saying that Madame la marquise was out. As he was getting back into his carriage the Marquis de Listomere came home.

“Come in, Eugene,” he said. “My wife is at home.”

Pray excuse the marquis. A husband, however good he may be, never attains perfection. As they went up the staircase Rastignac perceived at least a dozen blunders in worldly wisdom which had, unaccountably, slipped into this page of the glorious book of his life.

When Madame de Listomere saw her husband ushering in Eugene she could

not help blushing. The young baron saw that sudden color. If the most humble-minded man retains in the depths of his soul a certain conceit of which he never rids himself, any more than a woman ever rids herself of coquetry, who shall blame Eugene if he did say softly in his own mind: "What! that fortress, too?" So thinking, he posed in his cravat. Young men may not be grasping but they like to get a new coin in their collection.

Monsieur de Listomere seized the "Gazette de France," which he saw on the mantelpiece, and carried it to a window, to obtain, by journalistic help, an opinion of his own on the state of France.

A woman, even a prude, is never long embarrassed, however difficult may be the position in which she finds herself; she seems always to have on hand the fig-leaf which our mother Eve bequeathed to her. Consequently, when Eugene, interpreting, in favor of his vanity, the refusal to admit him, bowed to Madame de Listomere in a tolerably intentional manner, she veiled her thoughts behind one of those feminine smiles which are more impenetrable than the words of a king.

"Are you unwell, madame? You denied yourself to visitors."

"I am well, monsieur."

"Perhaps you were going out?"

"Not at all."

"You expected some one?"

"No one."

"If my visit is indiscreet you must blame Monsieur le marquis. I had already accepted your mysterious denial, when he himself came up, and introduced me into the sanctuary."

"Monsieur de Listomere is not in my confidence on this point. It is not always prudent to put a husband in possession of certain secrets."

The firm and gentle tones in which the marquise said these words, and the imposing glance which she cast upon Rastignac made him aware that he had posed in his cravat a trifle prematurely.

"Madame, I understand you," he said, laughing. "I ought, therefore, to be doubly thankful that Monsieur le marquis met me; he affords me an opportunity

to offer you excuses which might be full of danger were you not kindness itself.”

The marquise looked at the young man with an air of some surprise, but she answered with dignity:—

“Monsieur, silence on your part will be the best excuse. As for me, I promise you entire forgetfulness, and the pardon which you scarcely deserve.”

“Madame,” said Rastignac, hastily, “pardon is not needed where there was no offence. The letter,” he added, in a low voice, “which you received, and which you must have thought extremely unbecoming, was not intended for you.”

The marquise could not help smiling, though she wished to seem offended.

“Why deceive?” she said, with a disdainful air, although the tones of her voice were gentle. “Now that I have duly scolded you, I am willing to laugh at a subterfuge which is not without cleverness. I know many women who would be taken in by it: ‘Heavens! how he loves me!’ they would say.”

Here the marquise gave a forced laugh, and then added, in a tone of indulgence:—

“If we desire to continue friends let there be no more *mistakes*, of which it is impossible that I should be the dupe.”

“Upon my honor, madame, you are so — far more than you think,” replied Eugene.

“What are you talking about?” asked Monsieur de Listomere, who, for the last minute, had been listening to the conversation, the meaning of which he could not penetrate.

“Oh! nothing that would interest you,” replied his wife.

Monsieur de Listomere tranquilly returned to the reading of his paper, and presently said:—

“Ah! Madame de Mortsauf is dead; your poor brother has, no doubt, gone to Clochegourde.”

“Are you aware, monsieur,” resumed the marquise, turning to Eugene, “that what you have just said is a great impertinence?”

“If I did not know the strictness of your principles,” he answered, naively, “I should think that you wished either to give me ideas which I deny myself, or else

to tear a secret from me. But perhaps you are only amusing yourself with me.”

The marquise smiled. That smile annoyed Eugene.

“Madame,” he said, “can you still believe in an offence I have not committed? I earnestly hope that chance may not enable you to discover the name of the person who ought to have read that letter.”

“What! can it be *still* Madame de Nucingen?” cried Madame de Listomere, more eager to penetrate that secret than to revenge herself for the impertinence of the young man’s speeches.

Eugene colored. A man must be more than twenty-five years of age not to blush at being taxed with a fidelity that women laugh at — in order, perhaps, not to show that they envy it. However, he replied with tolerable self-possession:—

“Why not, madame?”

Such are the blunders we all make at twenty-five.

This speech caused a violent commotion in Madame de Listomere’s bosom; but Rastignac did not yet know how to analyze a woman’s face by a rapid or sidelong glance. The lips of the marquise paled, but that was all. She rang the bell for wood, and so constrained Rastignac to rise and take his leave.

“If that be so,” said the marquise, stopping Eugene with a cold and rigid manner, “you will find it difficult to explain, monsieur, why your pen should, by accident, write my name. A name, written on a letter, is not a friend’s opera-hat, which you might have taken, carelessly, on leaving a ball.”

Eugene, discomfited, looked at the marquise with an air that was both stupid and conceited. He felt that he was becoming ridiculous; and after stammering a few juvenile phrases he left the room.

A few days later the marquise acquired undeniable proofs that Eugene had told the truth. For the last fortnight she has not been seen in society.

The marquis tells all those who ask him the reason of this seclusion:—

“My wife has an inflammation of the stomach.”

But I, her physician, who am now attending her, know it is really nothing more than a slight nervous attack, which she is making the most of in order to stay quietly at home.