Pierre Grassou
Honoré de Balzac

Translation: Katherine Prescott Wormeley

DEDICATION

To the Lieutenant–Colonel of Artillery, Periollas,
As a Testimony of the Affectionate Esteem of the Author,

De Balzac

Whenever you have gone to take a serious look at the exhibition of works of sculpture and painting, such as it has been since the revolution of 1830, have you not been seized by a sense of uneasiness, weariness, sadness, at the sight of those long and over-crowded galleries? Since 1830, the true Salon no longer exists. The Louvre has again been taken by assault — this time by a populace of artists who have maintained themselves in it.

In other days, when the Salon presented only the choicest works of art, it conferred the highest honor on the creations there exhibited. Among the two hundred selected paintings, the public could still choose: a crown was awarded to the masterpiece by hands unseen. Eager, impassioned discussions arose about some picture. The abuse showered on Delacroix, on Ingres, contributed no less to their fame than the praises and fanaticism of their adherents. To-day, neither the crowd nor the criticism grows impassioned about the products of that bazaar. Forced to make the selection for itself, which in former days the examining jury made for it, the attention of the public is soon wearied and the exhibition closes. Before the year 1817 the pictures admitted never went beyond the first two columns of the long gallery of the old masters; but in that year, to the great astonishment of the public, they filled the whole space. Historical, high-art, genre paintings, easel pictures, landscapes, flowers, animals, and water-colors — these eight specialties could surely not offer more than twenty pictures in one year worthy of the eyes of the public, which, indeed, cannot give its attention to a greater number of such works. The more the number of artists increases, the more careful and exacting the jury of admission ought to be.

The true character of the Salon was lost as soon as it spread along the galleries. The Salon should have remained within fixed limits of inflexible proportions, where each distinct specialty could show its masterpieces only. An experience of ten years has shown the excellence of the former institution. Now, instead of a tournament, we have a mob; instead of a noble exhibition, we have a tumultuous bazaar; instead of a choice selection we have a chaotic mass. What is the result? A great artist is swamped. Decamps' "Turkish Cafe," "Children at a Fountain," "Joseph," and "The Torture," would have redounded far more to his credit if the four pictures had been exhibited in the great Salon with the hundred good pictures of that year, than his twenty pictures could, among three thousand others, jumbled together in six galleries.

By some strange contradiction, ever since the doors are open to every one there has been much talk of unknown and unrecognized genius. When, twelve years earlier, Ingres' "Courtesan," and that of Sigalon, the "Medusa" of Gericault, the "Massacre of Scio" by Delacroix, the "Baptism of Henri IV." by Eugene Deveria, admitted by celebrated artists accused of jealousy, showed the world, in spite of the denials of criticism, that young and vigorous palettes existed, no such complaint was made. Now, when the veriest dauber of canvas can send in his work, the whole talk is of genius neglected! Where judgment no longer exists, there is no longer anything judged. But whatever artists may be doing now, they will come back in time to the examination and selection which presents their works to the admiration of the crowd for whom they work. Without selection by the Academy there will be no Salon, and without the Salon art may perish.

Ever since the catalogue has grown into a book, many names have appeared in it which still remain in their native obscurity, in spite of the ten or a dozen pictures attached to them. Among these names perhaps the most unknown to fame is that of an artist named Pierre Grassou, coming from Fougeres, and called simply "Fougeres" among his brother-artists, who, at the present moment holds a place, as the saying is, "in the sun," and who suggested the rather bitter reflections by which this sketch of his life is introduced, — reflections that are applicable to many other individuals of the tribe of artists.

In 1832, Fougeres lived in the rue de Navarin, on the fourth floor of one of those tall, narrow houses which resemble the obelisk of Luxor, and possess an alley, a dark little stairway with dangerous turnings, three windows only on each floor, and, within the building, a courtyard, or, to speak more correctly, a square pit or well. Above the three or four rooms occupied by Grassou of Fougeres was his studio, looking over to Montmartre. This studio was painted in brick-color, for a background; the floor was tinted brown and well frotted; each chair was furnished with a bit of carpet bound round the edges; the sofa, simple enough, was clean as that in the bedroom of some worthy bourgeoise. All these things denoted the tidy ways of a small mind and the thrift of a poor man. A bureau was there, in which to put away the studio implements, a table for breakfast, a sideboard, a secretary; in short, all the articles necessary to a painter, neatly arranged and very clean. The stove participated in this Dutch cleanliness, which was all the more visible because the pure and little changing light from the north flooded with its cold clear beams the vast apartment. Fougeres, being merely a genre painter, does not need the immense machinery and outfit which ruin historical painters; he has never recognized within himself sufficient faculty to attempt high-art, and he therefore clings to easel painting.

At the beginning of the month of December of that year, a season at which the bourgeois of Paris conceive, periodically, the burlesque idea of perpetuating their forms and figures already too bulky in themselves, Pierre Grassou, who had risen early, prepared his palette, and lighted his stove, was eating a roll steeped in milk, and waiting till the frost on his windows had melted sufficiently to let the full light in. The weather was fine and dry. At this moment the artist, who ate his bread with that patient, resigned air that tells so much, heard and recognized the step of a man who had upon his life the influence such men have on the lives of nearly all artists — the step of Elie Magus, a picture-dealer, a usurer in canvas. The next moment Elie Magus entered and found the painter in the act of beginning his work in the tidy studio.

“How are you, old rascal?” said the painter.

Fougeres had the cross of the Legion of honor, and Elie Magus bought his pictures at two and three hundred francs apiece, so he gave himself the airs of a fine artist.

“Business is very bad,” replied Elie. “You artists have such pretensions! You talk of two hundred francs when you haven’t put six sous’ worth of color on a canvas. However, you are a good fellow, I’ll say that. You are steady; and I’ve come to put a good bit of business in your way.”

“Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes,” said Fougeres. “Do you know Latin?”

“No.”

“Well, it means that the Greeks never proposed a good bit of business to the Trojans without getting their fair share of it. In the olden time they used to say, ‘Take my horse.’ Now we say, ‘Take my bear.’ Well, what do you want, Ulysses–Lagingeole-Elie Magus?”

These words will give an idea of the mildness and wit with which Fougeres employed what painters call studio fun.

“Well, I don’t deny that you are to paint me two pictures for nothing.”

“Oh! oh!”

“I’ll leave you to do it, or not; I don’t ask it. But you’re an honest man.”

“Come, out with it!”

“Well, I’m prepared to bring you a father, mother, and only daughter.”

“All for me?”

“Yes — they want their portraits taken. These bourgeois — they are crazy about art — have never dared to enter a studio. The girl has a ‘dot’ of a hundred thousand francs. You can paint all three — perhaps they’ll turn out family portraits.”

And with that the old Dutch log of wood who passed for a man and who was called Elie Magus, interrupted himself to laugh an uncanny laugh which frightened the painter. He fancied he heard Mephistopheles talking marriage.

“Portraits bring five hundred francs apiece,” went on Elie; “so you can very well afford to paint me three pictures.”

“True for you!” cried Fougeres, gleefully.

“And if you marry the girl, you won’t forget me.”

“Marry! I?” cried Pierre Grassou — “I, who have a habit of sleeping alone; and get up at cock-crow, and all my life arranged —”

“One hundred thousand francs,” said Magus, “and a quiet girl, full of golden tones, as you call ’em, like a Titian.”

“What class of people are they?”

“Retired merchants; just now in love with art; have a country-house at Ville d’Avray, and ten or twelve thousand francs a year.”

“What business did they do?”

“Bottles.”

“Now don’t say that word; it makes me think of corks and sets my teeth on edge.”

“Am I to bring them?”

“Three portraits — I could put them in the Salon; I might go in for portrait-painting. Well, yes!”

Old Elie descended the staircase to go in search of the Vervelle family. To know to what extend this proposition would act upon the painter, and what effect would be produced upon him by the Sieur and Dame Vervelle, adorned by their only daughter, it is necessary to cast an eye on the anterior life of Pierre Grassou of Fougeres.

When a pupil, Fougeres had studied drawing with Servin, who was thought a great draughtsman in academic circles. After that he went to Schinner’s, to learn the secrets of the powerful and magnificent color which distinguishes that master. Master and scholars were all discreet; at any rate Pierre discovered none of their secrets. From there he went to Sommervieux’ atelier, to acquire that portion of the art of painting which is called composition, but composition was shy and distant to him. Then he tried to snatch from Decamps and Granet the mystery of their interior effects. The two masters were not robbed. Finally Fougeres ended his education with Duval–Lecamus. During these studied and these different transformations Fougeres’ habits and ways of life were tranquil and moral to a degree that furnished matter of jesting to the various ateliers where he sojourned; but everywhere he disarmed his comrades by his modesty and by the patience and gentleness of a lamblike nature. The masters, however, had no sympathy for the good lad; masters prefer bright fellows, eccentric spirits, droll or fiery, or else gloomy and deeply reflective, which argue future talent. Everything about Pierre Grassou smacked of mediocrity. His nickname “Fougeres” (that of the painter in the play of “The Eglantine”) was the source of much teasing; but, by force of circumstances, he accepted the name of the town in which he had first seen light.

Grassou of Fougeres resembled his name. Plump and of medium height, he had a dull complexion, brown eyes, black hair, a turned-up nose, rather wide mouth, and long ears. His gentle, passive, and resigned air gave a certain relief to these leading features of a physiognomy that was full of health, but wanting in action. This young man, born to be a virtuous bourgeois, having left his native place and come to Paris to be clerk with a color-merchant (formerly of Mayenne and a distant connection of the Orgemonts) made himself a painter simply by the fact of an obstinacy which constitutes the Breton character. What he suffered, the manner in which he lived during those years of study, God only knows. He suffered as much as great men suffer when they are hounded by poverty and hunted like wild beasts by the pack of commonplace minds and by troops of vanities athirst for vengeance.

As soon as he thought himself able to fly on his own wings, Fougeres took a studio in the upper part of the rue des Martyrs, where he began to delve his way. He made his first appearance in 1819. The first picture he presented to the jury of the Exhibition at the Louvre represented a village wedding rather laboriously copied from Greuze's picture. It was rejected. When Fougeres heard of the fatal decision, he did not fall into one of those fits of epileptic self-love to which strong natures give themselves up, and which sometimes end in challenges sent to the director or the secretary of the Museum, or even by threats of assassination. Fougeres quietly fetched his canvas, wrapped it in a handkerchief, and brought it home, vowing in his heart that he would still make himself a great painter. He placed his picture on the easel, and went to one of his former masters, a man of immense talent — to Schinner, a kind and patient artist, whose triumph at that year's Salon was complete. Fougeres asked him to come and criticise the rejected work. The great painter left everything and went at once. When poor Fougeres had placed the work before him Schinner, after a glance, pressed Fougeres' hand.

"You are a fine fellow," he said; "you've a heart of gold, and I must not deceive you. Listen; you are fulfilling all the promises you made in the studios. When you find such things as that at the tip of your brush, my good Fougeres, you had better leave colors with Brullon, and not take the canvas of others. Go home early, put on your cotton night-cap, and be in bed by nine o'clock. The next morning early go to some government office, ask for a place, and give up art."

"My dear friend," said Fougeres, "my picture is already condemned; it is not a verdict that I want of you, but the cause of that verdict."

"Well — you paint gray and sombre; you see nature being a crape veil; your drawing is heavy, pasty; your composition is a medley of Greuze, who only redeemed his defects by the qualities which you lack."

While detailing these faults of the picture Schinner saw on Fougeres' face so deep an expression of sadness that he carried him off to dinner and tried to console him. The next morning at seven o'clock Fougeres was at his easel working over the rejected picture; he warmed the colors; he made the corrections suggested by Schinner, he touched up his figures. Then, disgusted with such patching, he carried the picture to Elie Magus. Elie Magus, a sort of Dutch–Flemish-Belgian, had three reasons for being what he became — rich and avaricious. Coming last from Bordeaux, he was just starting in Paris, selling old pictures and living on the boulevard Bonne–Nouvelle. Fougeres, who relied on his palette to go to the baker's, bravely ate bread and nuts, or bread and milk, or bread and cherries, or bread and cheese, according to the seasons. Elie Magus, to whom Pierre offered his first picture, eyed it for some time and then gave him fifteen francs.

"With fifteen francs a year coming in, and a thousand francs for expenses," said Fougeres, smiling, "a man will go fast and far."

Elie Magus made a gesture; he bit his thumbs, thinking that he might have had that picture for five francs.

For several days Pierre walked down from the rue des Martyrs and stationed himself at the corner of the boulevard opposite to Elie's shop, whence his eye could rest upon his picture, which did not obtain any notice from the eyes of the passers along the street. At the end of a week the picture disappeared; Fougeres walked slowly up and approached the dealer's shop in a lounging manner. The Jew was at his door.

"Well, I see you have sold my picture."

"No, here it is," said Magus; "I've framed it, to show it to some one who fancies he knows about painting."

Fougeres had not the heart to return to the boulevard. He set about another picture, and spent two months upon it — eating mouse's meals and working like a galley-slave.

One evening he went to the boulevard, his feet leading him fatefully to the dealer's shop. His picture was not to be seen.

"I've sold your picture," said Elie Magus, seeing him.

“For how much?”

“I got back what I gave and a small interest. Make me some Flemish interiors, a lesson of anatomy, landscapes, and such like, and I’ll buy them of you,” said Elie.

Fougeres would fain have taken old Magus in his arms; he regarded him as a father. He went home with joy in his heart; the great painter Schinner was mistaken after all! In that immense city of Paris there were some hearts that beat in unison with Pierre’s; his talent was understood and appreciated. The poor fellow of twenty-seven had the innocence of a lad of sixteen. Another man, one of those distrustful, surly artists, would have noticed the diabolical look on Elie’s face and seen the twitching of the hairs of his beard, the irony of his moustache, and the movement of his shoulders which betrayed the satisfaction of Walter Scott’s Jew in swindling a Christian.

Fougeres marched along the boulevard in a state of joy which gave to his honest face an expression of pride. He was like a schoolboy protecting a woman. He met Joseph Bridau, one of his comrades, and one of those eccentric geniuses destined to fame and sorrow. Joseph Bridau, who had, to use his own expression, a few sous in his pocket, took Fougeres to the Opera. But Fougeres didn’t see the ballet, didn’t hear the music; he was imagining pictures, he was painting. He left Joseph in the middle of the evening, and ran home to make sketches by lamp-light. He invented thirty pictures, all reminiscence, and felt himself a man of genius. The next day he bought colors, and canvases of various dimensions; he piled up bread and cheese on his table, he filled a water-pot with water, he laid in a provision of wood for his stove; then, to use a studio expression, he dug at his pictures. He hired several models and Magus lent him stuffs.

After two months’ seclusion the Breton had finished four pictures. Again he asked counsel of Schinner, this time adding Bridau to the invitation. The two painters saw in three of these pictures a servile imitation of Dutch landscapes and interiors by Metzu, in the fourth a copy of Rembrandt’s “Lesson of Anatomy.”

“Still imitating!” said Schinner. “Ah! Fougeres can’t manage to be original.”

“You ought to do something else than painting,” said Bridau.

“What?” asked Fougeres.

“Fling yourself into literature.”

Fougeres lowered his head like a sheep when it rains. Then he asked and obtained certain useful advice, and retouched his pictures before taking them to Elie Magus. Elie paid him twenty-five francs apiece. At that price of course Fougeres earned nothing; neither did he lose, thanks to his sober living. He made a few excursions to the boulevard to see what became of his pictures, and there he underwent a singular hallucination. His neat, clean paintings, hard as tin and shiny as porcelain, were covered with a sort of mist; they looked like old daubs. Magus was out, and Pierre could obtain no information on this phenomenon. He fancied something was wrong with his eyes.

The painter went back to his studio and made more pictures. After seven years of continued toil Fougeres managed to compose and execute quite passable work. He did as well as any artist of the second class. Elie bought and sold all the paintings of the poor Breton, who earned laboriously about two thousand francs a year while he spent but twelve hundred.

At the Exhibition of 1829, Leon de Lora, Schinner, and Bridau, who all three occupied a great position and were, in fact, at the head of the art movement, were filled with pity for the perseverance and the poverty of their old friend; and they caused to be admitted into the grand salon of the Exhibition, a picture by Fougeres. This picture, powerful in interest but derived from Vigneron as to sentiment and from Dubufe's first manner as to execution, represented a young man in prison, whose hair was being cut around the nape of the neck. On one side was a priest, on the other two women, one old, one young, in tears. A sheriff's clerk was reading aloud a document. On a wretched table was a meal, untouched. The light came in through the bars of a window near the ceiling. It was a picture fit to make the bourgeois shudder, and the bourgeois shuddered. Fougeres had simply been inspired by the masterpiece of Gerard Douw; he had turned the group of the "Dropsical Woman" toward the window, instead of presenting it full front. The condemned man was substituted for the dying woman — same pallor, same glance, same appeal to God. Instead of the Dutch doctor, he had painted the cold, official figure of the sheriff's clerk attired in black; but he had added an old woman to the young one of Gerard Douw. The cruelly simple and good-humored face of the executioner completed and dominated the group. This plagiarism, very cleverly disguised, was not discovered. The catalogue contained the following:—

510. Grassou de Fougeres (Pierre), rue de Navarin, 2.
Death-toilet of a Chouan, condemned to execution in 1809.

Though wholly second-rate, the picture had immense success, for it recalled the affair of the "chauffeurs," of Mortagne. A crowd collected every day before the now fashionable canvas; even Charles X. paused to look at it. "Madame," being told of the patient life of the poor Breton, became enthusiastic over him. The Duc d'Orleans asked the price of the picture. The clergy told Madame la Dauphine that the subject was suggestive of good thoughts; and there was, in truth, a most satisfying religious tone about it. Monseigneur the Dauphin admired the dust on the stone-floor — a huge blunder, by the way, for Fougeres had painted greenish tones suggestive of mildew along the base of the walls. "Madame" finally bought the picture for a thousand francs, and the Dauphin ordered another like it. Charles X. gave the cross of the Legion of honor to this son of a peasant who had fought for the royal cause in 1799. (Joseph Bridau, the great painter, was not yet decorated.) The minister of the Interior ordered two church pictures of Fougeres.

This Salon of 1829 was to Pierre Grassou his whole fortune, fame, future, and life. Be original, invent, and you die by inches; copy, imitate, and you'll live. After this discovery of a gold mine, Grassou de Fougeres obtained his benefit of the fatal principle to which society owes the wretched mediocrities to whom are intrusted in these days the election of leaders in all social classes; who proceed, naturally, to elect themselves and who wage a bitter war against all true talent. The principle of election applied indiscriminately is false, and France will some day abandon it.

Nevertheless the modesty, simplicity, and genuine surprise of the good and gentle Fougeres silenced all envy and all recriminations. Besides, he had on his side all of his clan who had succeeded, and all who expected to succeed. Some persons, touched by the persistent energy of a man whom nothing had discouraged, talked of Domenichino and said:—

"Perseverance in the arts should be rewarded. Grassou hasn't stolen his successes; he has delved for ten years, the poor dear man!"

That exclamation of "poor dear man!" counted for half in the support and the congratulations which the painter received. Pity sets up mediocrities as envy pulls down great talents, and in equal numbers. The newspapers, it is true, did not spare criticism, but the chevalier Fougeres digested them as he had digested the counsel of his friends, with angelic patience.

Possessing, by this time, fifteen thousand francs, laboriously earned, he furnished an apartment and studio in the rue de Navarin, and painted the picture ordered by Monseigneur the Dauphin, also the two church pictures, and delivered them at the time agreed on, with a punctuality that was very discomforting to the exchequer of the ministry, accustomed to a different course of action. But — admire the good fortune of men who are methodical — if Grassou, belated with his work, had been caught by the revolution of July he would not have got his money.

By the time he was thirty-seven Fougeres had manufactured for Elie Magus some two hundred pictures, all of them utterly unknown, by the help of which he had attained to that satisfying manner, that point of execution before which the true artist shrugs his shoulders and the bourgeoisie worships. Fougeres was dear to friends for rectitude of ideas, for steadiness of sentiment, absolute kindliness, and great loyalty; though they had no esteem for his palette, they loved the man who held it.

“What a misfortune it is that Fougeres has the vice of painting!” said his comrades.

But for all this, Grassou gave excellent counsel, like those feuilletonists incapable of writing a book who know very well where a book is wanting. There was this difference, however, between literary critics and Fougeres; he was eminently sensitive to beauties; he felt them, he acknowledged them, and his advice was instinct with a spirit of justice that made the justness of his remarks acceptable. After the revolution of July, Fougeres sent about ten pictures a year to the Salon, of which the jury admitted four or five. He lived with the most rigid economy, his household being managed solely by an old charwoman. For all amusement he visited his friends, he went to see works of art, he allowed himself a few little trips about France, and he planned to go to Switzerland in search of inspiration. This detestable artist was an excellent citizen; he mounted guard duly, went to reviews, and paid his rent and provision-bills with bourgeois punctuality.

Having lived all his life in toil and poverty, he had never had the time to love. Poor and a bachelor, until now he did not desire to complicate his simple life. Incapable of devising any means of increasing his little fortune, he carried, every three months, to his notary, Cardot, his quarterly earnings and economies. When the notary had received about three thousand francs he invested them in some first mortgage, the interest of which he drew himself and added to the quarterly payments made to him by Fougeres. The painter was awaiting the fortunate moment when his property thus laid by would give him the imposing income of two thousand francs, to allow himself the otium cum dignitate of the artist and paint pictures; but oh! what pictures! true pictures! each a finished picture! chouette, Koxnoff, chocnosoff! His future, his dreams of happiness, the superlative of his hopes — do you know what it was? To enter the Institute and obtain the grade of officer of the Legion of honor; to side down beside Schinner and Leon de Lora, to reach the Academy before Bridau, to wear a rosette in his buttonhole! What a dream! It is only commonplace men who think of everything.

Hearing the sound of several steps on the staircase, Fougeres rubbed up his hair, buttoned his jacket of bottle-green velveteen, and was not a little amazed to see, entering his doorway, a simpleton face vulgarly called in studio slang a "melon." This fruit surmounted a pumpkin, clothed in blue cloth adorned with a bunch of tintinnabulating baubles. The melon puffed like a walrus; the pumpkin advanced on turnips, improperly called legs. A true painter would have turned the little bottle-vendor off at once, assuring him that he didn't paint vegetables. This painter looked at his client without a smile, for Monsieur Vervelle wore a three-thousand-franc diamond in the bosom of his shirt.

Fougeres glanced at Magus and said: "There's fat in it!" using a slang term then much in vogue in the studios.

Hearing those words Monsieur Vervelle frowned. The worthy bourgeois drew after him another complication of vegetables in the persons of his wife and daughter. The wife had a fine veneer of mahogany on her face, and in figure she resembled a cocoa-nut, surmounted by a head and tied in around the waist. She pivoted on her legs, which were tap-rooted, and her gown was yellow with black stripes. She proudly exhibited unutterable mittens on a puffy pair of hands; the plumes of a first-class funeral floated on an over-flowing bonnet; laces adorned her shoulders, as round behind as they were before; consequently, the spherical form of the cocoa-nut was perfect. Her feet, of a kind that painters call abatis, rose above the varnished leather of the shoes in a swelling that was some inches high. How the feet were ever got into the shoes, no one knows.

Following these vegetable parents was a young asparagus, who presented a tiny head with smoothly banded hair of the yellow-carroty tone that a Roman adores, long, stringy arms, a fairly white skin with reddish spots upon it, large innocent eyes, and white lashes, scarcely any brows, a leghorn bonnet bound with white satin and adorned with two honest bows of the same satin, hands virtuously red, and the feet of her mother. The faces of these three beings wore, as they looked round the studio, an air of happiness which bespoke in them a respectable enthusiasm for Art.

"So it is you, monsieur, who are going to take our likenesses?" said the father, assuming a jaunty air.

"Yes, monsieur," replied Grassou.

"Vervelle, he has the cross!" whispered the wife to the husband while the painter's back was turned.

"Should I be likely to have our portraits painted by an artist who wasn't decorated?" returned the former bottle-dealer.

Elie Magus here bowed to the Vervelle family and went away. Grassou accompanied him to the landing.

"There's no one but you who would fish up such whales."

"One hundred thousand francs of 'dot'!"

"Yes, but what a family!"

"Three hundred thousand francs of expectations, a house in the rue Boucherat, and a country-house at Ville d'Avray!"

"Bottles and corks! bottles and corks!" said the painter; "they set my teeth on edge."

"Safe from want for the rest of your days," said Elie Magus as he departed.

That idea entered the head of Pierre Grassou as the daylight had burst into his garret that morning.

While he posed the father of the young person, he thought the bottle-dealer had a good countenance, and he admired the face full of violent tones. The mother and daughter hovered about the easel, marvelling at all his preparations; they evidently thought him a demigod. This visible admiration pleased Fougeres. The golden calf threw upon the family its fantastic reflections.

"You must earn lots of money; but of course you don't spend it as you get it," said the mother.

"No, madame," replied the painter; "I don't spend it; I have not the means to amuse myself. My notary invests my money; he knows what I have; as soon as I have taken him the money I never think of it again."

"I've always been told," cried old Vervelle, "that artists were baskets with holes in them."

"Who is your notary — if it is not indiscreet to ask?" said Madame Vervelle.

"A good fellow, all round," replied Grassou. "His name is Cardot."

"Well, well! if that isn't a joke!" exclaimed Vervelle. "Cardot is our notary too."

"Take care! don't move," said the painter.

"Do pray hold still, Antenor," said the wife. "If you move about you'll make monsieur miss; you should just see him working, and then you'd understand."

"Oh! why didn't you have me taught the arts?" said Mademoiselle Vervelle to her parents.

"Virginie," said her mother, "a young person ought not to learn certain things. When you are married — well, till then, keep quiet."

During this first sitting the Vervelle family became almost intimate with the worthy artist. They were to come again two days later. As they went away the father told Virginie to walk in front; but in spite of this separation, she overheard the following words, which naturally awakened her curiosity.

"Decorated — thirty-seven years old — an artist who gets orders — puts his money with our notary. We'll consult Cardot. Hein! Madame de Fougeres! not a bad name — doesn't look like a bad man either! One might prefer a merchant; but before a merchant retires from business one can never know what one's daughter may come to; whereas an economical artist — and then you know we love Art — Well, we'll see!"

While the Vervelle family discussed Pierre Grassou, Pierre Grassou discussed in his own mind the Vervelle family. He found it impossible to stay peacefully in his studio, so he took a walk on the boulevard, and looked at all the red-haired women who passed him. He made a series of the oddest reasonings to himself: gold was the handsomest of metals; a tawny yellow represented gold; the Romans were fond of red-haired women, and he turned Roman, etc. After two years of marriage what man would ever care about the color of his wife's hair? Beauty fades — but ugliness remains! Money is one-half of all happiness. That night when he went to bed the painter had come to think Virginie Vervelle charming.

When the three Vervelles arrived on the day of the second sitting the artist received them with smiles. The rascal had shaved and put on clean linen; he had also arranged his hair in a pleasing manner, and chosen a very becoming pair of trousers and red leather slippers with pointed toes. The family replied with smiles as flattering as those of the artist. Virginie became the color of her hair, lowered her eyes, and turned aside her head to look at the sketches. Pierre Grassou thought these little affectations charming, Virginie had such grace; happily she didn't look like her father or her mother; but whom did she look like?

During this sitting there were little skirmishes between the family and the painter, who had the audacity to call pere Vervelle witty. This flattery brought the family on the double-quick to the heart of the artist; he gave a drawing to the daughter, and a sketch to the mother.

"What! for nothing?" they said.

Pierre Grassou could not help smiling.

"You shouldn't give away your pictures in that way; they are money," said old Vervelle.

At the third sitting pere Vervelle mentioned a fine gallery of pictures which he had in his country-house at Ville d'Avray — Rubens, Gerard Douw, Mieris, Terburg, Rembrandt, Titian, Paul Potter, etc.

"Monsieur Vervelle has been very extravagant," said Madame Vervelle, ostentatiously. "He has over one hundred thousand francs' worth of pictures."

"I love Art," said the former bottle-dealer.

When Madame Vervelle's portrait was begun that of her husband was nearly finished, and the enthusiasm of the family knew no bounds. The notary had spoken in the highest praise of the painter. Pierre Grassou was, he said, one of the most honest fellows on earth; he had laid by thirty-six thousand francs; his days of poverty were over; he now saved about ten thousand francs a year and capitalized the interest; in short, he was incapable of making a woman unhappy. This last remark had enormous weight in the scales. Vervelle's friends now heard of nothing but the celebrated painter Fougeres.

The day on which Fougeres began the portrait of Mademoiselle Virginie, he was virtually son-inlaw to the Vervelle family. The three Vervelles bloomed out in this studio, which they were now accustomed to consider as one of their residences; there was to them an inexplicable attraction in this clean, neat, pretty, and artistic abode. Abyssus abyssum, the commonplace attracts the commonplace. Toward the end of the sitting the stairway shook, the door was violently thrust open by Joseph Bridau; he came like a whirlwind, his hair flying. He showed his grand haggard face as he looked about him, casting everywhere the lightning of his glance; then he walked round the whole studio, and returned abruptly to Grassou, pulling his coat together over the gastric region, and endeavouring, but in vain, to button it, the button mould having escaped from its capsule of cloth.

"Wood is dear," he said to Grassou.

"Ah!"

"The British are after me" (slang term for creditors) "Gracious! do you paint such things as that?"

"Hold your tongue!"

"Ah! to be sure, yes."

The Vervelle family, extremely shocked by this extraordinary apparition, passed from its ordinary red to a cherry-red, two shades deeper.

"Brings in, hey?" continued Joseph. "Any shot in your locker?"

"How much do you want?"

"Five hundred. I've got one of those bull-dog dealers after me, and if the fellow once gets his teeth in he won't let go while there's a bit of me left. What a crew!"

"I'll write you a line for my notary."

"Have you got a notary?"

"Yes."

"That explains to me why you still make cheeks with pink tones like a perfumer's sign."

Grassou could not help coloring, for Virginie was sitting.

“Take Nature as you find her,” said the great painter, going on with his lecture. “Mademoiselle is red-haired. Well, is that a sin? All things are magnificent in painting. Put some vermillion on your palette, and warm up those cheeks; touch in those little brown spots; come, butter it well in. Do you pretend to have more sense than Nature?”

“Look here,” said Fougeres, “take my place while I go and write that note.”

Vervelle rolled to the table and whispered in Grassou’s ear:—

“Won’t that country lout spoilt it?”

“If he would only paint the portrait of your Virginie it would be worth a thousand times more than mine,” replied Fougeres, vehemently.

Hearing that reply the bourgeois beat a quiet retreat to his wife, who was stupefied by the invasion of this ferocious animal, and very uneasy at his co-operation in her daughter’s portrait.

“Here, follow these indications,” said Bridau, returning the palette, and taking the note. “I won’t thank you. I can go back now to d’Arthez’ chateau, where I am doing a dining-room, and Leon de Lora the tops of the doors — masterpieces! Come and see us.”

And off he went without taking leave, having had enough of looking at Virginie.

“Who is that man?” asked Madame Vervelle.

“A great artist,” answered Grassou.

There was silence for a moment.

“Are you quite sure,” said Virginie, “that he has done no harm to my portrait? He frightened me.”

“He has only done it good,” replied Grassou.

“Well, if he is a great artist, I prefer a great artist like you,” said Madame Vervelle.

The ways of genius had ruffled up these orderly bourgeois.

The phase of autumn so pleasantly named “Saint Martin’s summer” was just beginning. With the timidity of a neophyte in presence of a man of genius, Vervelle risked giving Fougeres an invitation to come out to his country-house on the following Sunday. He knew, he said, how little attraction a plain bourgeois family could offer to an artist.

“You artists,” he continued, “want emotions, great scenes, and witty talk; but you’ll find good wines, and I rely on my collection of pictures to compensate an artist like you for the bore of dining with mere merchants.”

This form of idolatry, which stroked his innocent self-love, was charming to our poor Pierre Grassou, so little accustomed to such compliments. The honest artist, that atrocious mediocrity, that heart of gold, that loyal soul, that stupid draughtsman, that worthy fellow, decorated by royalty itself with the Legion of honor, put himself under arms to go out to Ville d’Avray and enjoy the last fine days of the year. The painter went modestly by public conveyance, and he could not but admire the beautiful villa of the bottle-dealer, standing in a park of five acres at the summit of Ville d’Avray, commanding a noble view of the landscape. Marry Virginie, and have that beautiful villa some day for his own!

He was received by the Vervelles with an enthusiasm, a joy, a kindliness, a frank bourgeois absurdity which confounded him. It was indeed a day of triumph. The prospective son-inlaw was marched about the grounds on the nankeen-colored paths, all raked as they should be for the steps of so great a man. The trees themselves looked brushed and combed, and the lawns had just been mown. The pure country air wafted to the nostrils a most enticing smell of cooking. All things about the mansion seemed to say:

“We have a great artist among us.”

Little old Vervelle himself rolled like an apple through his park, the daughter meandered like an eel, the mother followed with dignified step. These three beings never let go for one moment of Pierre Grassou for seven hours. After dinner, the length of which equalled its magnificence, Monsieur and Madame Vervelle reached the moment of their grand theatrical effect — the opening of the picture gallery illuminated by lamps, the reflections of which were managed with the utmost care. Three neighbours, also retired merchants, an old uncle (from whom were expectations), an elderly Demoiselle Vervelle, and a number of other guests invited to be present at this ovation to a great artist followed Grassou into the picture gallery, all curious to hear his opinion of the famous collection of pere Vervelle, who was fond of oppressing them with the fabulous value of his paintings. The bottle-merchant seemed to have the idea of competing with King Louis–Philippe and the galleries of Versailles.

The pictures, magnificently framed, each bore labels on which was read in black letters on a gold ground:

> Rubens
> Dance of fauns and nymphs
>
> Rembrandt
> Interior of a dissecting room. The physician van Tromp instructing his pupils.

In all, there were one hundred and fifty pictures, varnished and dusted. Some were covered with green baize curtains which were not undrawn in presence of young ladies.

Pierre Grassou stood with arms pendent, gaping mouth, and no word upon his lips as he recognized half his own pictures in these works of art. He was Rubens, he was Rembrandt, Mieris, Metzu, Paul Potter, Gerard Douw! He was twenty great masters all by himself.

“What is the matter? You’ve turned pale!”

“Daughter, a glass of water! quick!” cried Madame Vervelle. The painter took pere Vervelle by the button of his coat and led him to a corner on pretence of looking at a Murillo. Spanish pictures were then the rage.

“You bought your pictures from Elie Magus?”

“Yes, all originals.”

“Between ourselves, tell me what he made you pay for those I shall point out to you.”

Together they walked round the gallery. The guests were amazed at the gravity in which the artist proceeded, in company with the host, to examine each picture.

“Three thousand francs,” said Vervelle in a whisper, as they reached the last, “but I tell everybody forty thousand.”

“Forty thousand for a Titian!” said the artist, aloud. “Why, it is nothing at all!”

“Didn’t I tell you,” said Vervelle, “that I had three hundred thousand francs’ worth of pictures?”

“I painted those pictures,” said Pierre Grassou in Vervelle’s ear, “and I sold them one by one to Elie Magus for less than ten thousand francs the whole lot.”

“Prove it to me,” said the bottle-dealer, “and I double my daughter’s ‘dot,’ for if it is so, you are Rubens, Rembrandt, Titian, Gerard Douw!”

“And Magus is a famous picture-dealer!” said the painter, who now saw the meaning of the misty and aged look imparted to his pictures in Elie’s shop, and the utility of the subjects the picture-dealer had required of him.

Far from losing the esteem of his admiring bottle-merchant, Monsieur de Fougeres (for so the family persisted in calling Pierre Grassou) advanced so much that when the portraits were finished he presented them gratuitously to his father-inlaw, his mother-inlaw and his wife.

At the present day, Pierre Grassou, who never misses exhibiting at the Salon, passes in bourgeois regions for a fine portrait-painter. He earns some twenty thousand francs a year and spoils a thousand francs’ worth of canvas. His wife has six thousand francs a year in dowry, and he lives with his father-inlaw. The Vervelles and the Grassous, who agree delightfully, keep a carriage, and are the happiest people on earth. Pierre Grassou never emerges from the bourgeois circle, in which he is considered one of the greatest artists of the period. Not a family portrait is painted between the barrier du Trone and the rue du Temple that is not done by this great painter; none of them costs less than five hundred francs. The great reason which the bourgeois families have for employing him is this:—

“Say what you will of him, he lays by twenty thousand francs a year with his notary.”

As Grassou took a creditable part on the occasion of the riots of May 12th he was appointed an officer of the Legion of honor. He is a major in the National Guard. The Museum of Versailles felt it incumbent to order a battle-piece of so excellent a citizen, who thereupon walked about Paris to meet his old comrades and have the happiness of saying to them:—

“The King has given me an order for the Museum of Versailles.”

Madame de Fougeres adores her husband, to whom she has presented two children. This painter, a good father and a good husband, is unable to eradicate from his heart a fatal thought, namely, that artists laugh at his work; that his name is a term of contempt in the studios; and that the feuilletons take no notice of his pictures. But he still works on; he aims for the Academy, where, undoubtedly, he will enter. And — oh! vengeance which dilates his heart! — he buys the pictures of celebrated artists who are pinched for means, and he substitutes these true works of arts that are not his own for the wretched daubs in the collection at Ville d'Avray.

There are many mediocrities more aggressive and more mischievous than that of Pierre Grassou, who is, moreover, anonymously benevolent and truly obliging.