

Madame Firmiani

Honore de Balzac

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DEDICATION

To my dear Alexandre de Berny.
His old friend,

De Balzac.

Many tales, either rich in situations or made dramatic by some of the innumerable tricks of chance, carry with them their own particular setting, which can be rendered artistically or simply by those who narrate them, without their subjects losing any, even the least of their charms. But there are some incidents in human experience to which the heart alone is able to give life; there are certain details—shall we call them anatomical?—the delicate touches of which cannot be made to reappear unless by an equally delicate rendering of thought; there are portraits which require the infusion of a soul, and mean nothing unless the subtlest expression of the speaking countenance is given; furthermore, there are things which we know not how to say or do without the aid of secret harmonies which a day, an hour, a fortunate conjunction of celestial signs, or an inward moral tendency may produce.

Such mysterious revelations are imperatively needed in order to tell this simple history, in which we seek to interest those souls that are naturally grave and reflective and find their sustenance in tender emotions. If the writer, like the surgeon beside his dying friend, is filled with a species of reverence for the subject he is handling, should not the reader share in that inexplicable feeling? Is it so difficult to put ourselves in unison with the vague and nervous sadness which casts its gray tints all about us, and is, in fact, a semi-illness, the gentle sufferings of which are often pleasing? If the reader is of those who sometimes think upon the dear ones they have lost, if he is alone, if the day is waning or the night has come, let him read on; otherwise, he should lay aside this book at once. If he has never buried a good old relative, infirm and poor, he will not understand these pages, which to some will seem redolent of musk, to others as colorless and virtuous as those of Florian. In short, the reader must have known the luxury of tears, must have felt the silent pangs of a passing memory, the vision of a dear yet far-off Shade,— memories which bring regret for all that earth has swallowed up, with smiles for vanished joys.

And now, believe that the writer would not, for the wealth of England, steal from poesy a single lie with which to embellish this narrative. The following is a true history, on which you may safely spend the treasures of your sensibility—if you have any.

In these days the French language has as many idioms and represents as many idiosyncracies as there are varieties of men in the great family of France. It is extremely curious and amusing to listen to the different interpretations or versions of the same thing or the same event by the various species which compose the genus Parisian,— "Parisian" is here used merely to generalize our remark.

Therefore, if you should say to an individual of the species Practical, "Do you know Madame Firmiani?" he would present that lady to your mind by the following inventory: "Fine house in the rue du Bac, salons handsomely furnished, good pictures, one hundred thousand francs a year, husband formerly receiver-general of the department of Montenotte." So saying, the Practical man, rotund and fat and usually dressed in black, will project his lower lip and wrap it over the upper, nodding his head as if to add: "Solid people, those; nothing to be said against them." Ask no further; Practical men settle everybody's status by figures, incomes, or solid acres,—a phrase of their lexicon.

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Turn to the right, and put the same question to that other man, who belongs to the species Lounger. "Madame Firmiani?" he says; "yes, yes, I know her well; I go to her parties; receives Wednesdays; highly creditable house."—Madame Firmiani is metamorphosed into a house! but the house is not a pile of stones architecturally superposed, of course not, the word presents in Lounger's language an indescribable idiom.—Here the Lounger, a spare man with an agreeable smile, a sayer of pretty nothings with more acquired cleverness than native wit, stoops to your ear and adds, with a shrewd glance: "I have never seen Monsieur Firmiani. His social position is that of looking after property in Italy. Madame Firmiani is a Frenchwoman, and spends her money like a Parisian. She has excellent tea. It is one of the few houses where you can amuse yourself; the refreshments are exquisite. It is very difficult to get admitted; therefore, of course, one meets only the best society in her salons." Here the Lounger takes a pinch of snuff; he inhales it slowly and seems to say: "I go there, but don't expect me to present YOU."

Evidently the Lounger considers that Madame Firmiani keeps a sort of inn, without a sign.

"Why do you want to know Madame Firmiani? Her parties are as dull as the Court itself. What is the good of possessing a mind unless to avoid such salons, where stupid talk and foolish little ballads are the order of the day." You have questioned a being classed Egotist, a species who would like to keep the universe under lock and key, and let nothing be done without their permission. They are unhappy if others are happy; they forgive nothing but vices, downfalls, frailties, and like none but proteges. Aristocrats by inclination, they make themselves democrats out of spite, preferring to consort with inferiors as equals.

"Oh, Madame Firmiani, my dear fellow! she is one of those adorable women who serve as Nature's excuse for all the ugly ones she creates. Madame Firmiani is enchanting, and so kind! I wish I were in power and possessed millions that I might—" (here a whisper). "Shall I present you?" The speaker is a youth of the Student species, known for his boldness among men and his timidity in a boudoir.

"Madame Firmiani?" cries another, twirling his cane. "I'll tell you what I think of her; she is a woman between thirty and thirty-five; faded complexion, handsome eyes, flat figure, contralto voice worn out, much dressed, rather rouged, charming manners; in short, my dear fellow, the remains of a pretty woman who is still worth the trouble of a passion." This remark is from the species Fop, who has just breakfasted, doesn't weigh his words, and is about to mount his horse. At that particular moment Fops are pitiless.

"Magnificent collection of pictures in her house; go and see them by all means," answers another. "Nothing finer." You have questioned one of the species Connoisseur. He leaves you to go to Perignon's or Tripet's. To him, Madame Firmiani is a collection of painted canvases.

A Woman: "Madame Firmiani? I don't wish you to visit her." This remark is rich in meanings. Madame Firmiani! dangerous woman! a siren! dresses well, has taste; gives other women sleepless nights. Your informant belongs to the genus Spiteful.

An Attache to an embassy: "Madame Firmiani? Isn't she from Antwerp? I saw her ten years ago in Rome; she was very handsome then." Individuals of the species Attache have a mania for talking in the style of Talleyrand. Their wit is often so refined that the point is imperceptible; they are like billiard-players who avoid hitting the ball with consummate dexterity. These individuals are usually taciturn, and when they talk it is only about Spain, Vienna, Italy, or Petersburg. Names of countries act like springs in their mind; press them, and the ringing of their changes begins.

"That Madame Firmiani sees a great deal of the faubourg Saint-Germain, doesn't she?" This from a person who desires to belong to the class Distinguished. She gives the "de" to everybody,—to Monsieur Dupin senior, to Monsieur Lafayette; she flings it right and left and humiliates many. This woman spends her life in striving to know and do "the right thing"; but, for her sins, she lives in a the Marais, and her husband is a lawyer,—a lawyer

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before the Royal courts, however.

"Madame Firmiani, monsieur? I do not know her." This man belongs to the species Duke. He recognizes none but the women who have been presented at court. Pray excuse him, he was one of Napoleon's creations.

"Madame Firmiani? surely she used to sing at the Opera-house." Species Ninny. The individuals of this species have an answer for everything. They will tell lies sooner than say nothing.

Two old ladies, wives of former magistrates: The First (wears a cap with bows, her face is wrinkled, her nose sharp, voice hard, carries a prayer-book in her hand): "What was that Madame Firmiani's maiden name?"—The Second (small face red as a crab-apple, gentle voice): "She was a Cadignan, my dear, niece of the old Prince de Cadignan, consequently cousin to the present Duc de Maufrigneuse."

Madame Firmiani is a Cadignan. She might have neither virtue, nor wealth, nor youth, but she would still be a Cadignan; it is like a prejudice, always alive and working.

An Original: "My dear fellow, I've seen no galoshes in her antechamber; consequently you can visit her without compromising yourself, and play cards there without fear; if there ARE any scoundrels in her salons, they are people of quality and come in their carriages; such persons never quarrel."

Old man belonging to the genus Observer: "If you call on Madame Firmiani, my good friend, you will find a beautiful woman sitting at her ease by the corner of her fireplace. She will scarcely rise to receive you,—she only does that for women, ambassadors, dukes, and persons of great distinction. She is very gracious, she possesses charm; she converses well, and likes to talk on many topics. There are many indications of a passionate nature about her; but she has, evidently, so many adorers that she cannot have a favorite. If suspicion rested on two or three of her intimates, we might say that one or other of them was the "cavaliere servente"; but it does not. The lady is a mystery. She is married, though none of us have seen her husband. Monsieur Firmiani is altogether mythical; he is like that third post-horse for which we pay though we never behold it. Madame has the finest contralto voice in Europe, so say judges; but she has never been heard to sing more than two or three times since she came to Paris. She receives much company, but goes nowhere."

The Observer speaks, you will notice, as an Oracle. His words, anecdotes, and quotations must be accepted as truths, under pain of being thought without social education or intelligence, and of causing him to slander you with much zest in twenty salons where he is considered indispensable. The Observer is forty years of age, never dines at home, declares himself no longer dangerous to women, wears a maroon coat, and has a place reserved for him in several boxes at the "Bouffons." He is sometimes confounded with the Parasite; but he has filled too many real functions to be thought a sponger; moreover he possesses a small estate in a certain department, the name of which he has never been known to utter.

"Madame Firmiani? why, my dear fellow, she was Murat's former mistress." This man belongs to the Contradictors,—persons who note errata in memoirs, rectify dates, correct facts, bet a hundred to one, and are certain about everything. You can easily detect them in some gross blunder in the course of a single evening. They will tell you they were in Paris at the time of Mallet's conspiracy, forgetting that half an hour earlier they had described how they had crossed the Beresina. Nearly all Contradictors are "chevaliers" of the Legion of honor; they talk loudly, have retreating foreheads, and play high.

"Madame Firmiani a hundred thousand francs a year? nonsense, you are crazy! Some people will persist in giving millions with the liberality of authors, to whom it doesn't cost a penny to dower their heroines. Madame Firmiani is simply a coquette, who has lately ruined a young man, and now prevents him from making a fine marriage. If she were not so handsome she wouldn't have a penny."

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Ah, THAT ONE—of course you recognize him—belongs to the species Envious. There is no need to sketch him; the species is as well known as that of the *felis domestica*. But how explain the perennial vigor of envy?—a vice that brings nothing in!

Persons in society, literary men, honest folk,—in short, individuals of all species,—were promulgating in the month of January, 1824, so many different opinions about Madame Firmiani that it would be tedious to write them down. We have merely sought to show that a man seeking to understand her, yet unwilling or unable to go to her house, would (from the answers to his inquiries) have had equal reason to suppose her a widow or wife, silly or wise, virtuous or the reverse, rich or poor, soulless or full of feeling, handsome or plain,—in short, there were as many Madame Firmianis as there are species in society, or sects in Catholicism. Frightful reflection! we are all like lithographic blocks, from which an indefinite number of copies can be drawn by criticism,—the proofs being more or less like us according to a distribution of shading which is so nearly imperceptible that our reputation depends (barring the calumnies of friends and the witticisms of newspapers) on the balance struck by our criticsers between Truth that limps and Falsehood to which Parisian wit gives wings.

Madame Firmiani, like other noble and dignified women who make their hearts a sanctuary and disdain the world, was liable, therefore, to be totally misjudged by Monsieur de Bourbonne, an old country magnate, who had reason to think a great deal about her during the winter of this year. He belonged to the class of provincial Planters, men living on their estates, accustomed to keep close accounts of everything and to bargain with the peasantry. Thus employed, a man becomes sagacious in spite of himself, just as soldiers in the long run acquire courage from routine. The old gentleman, who had come to Paris from Touraine to satisfy his curiosity about Madame Firmiani, and found it not at all assuaged by the Parisian gossip which he heard, was a man of honor and breeding. His sole heir was a nephew, whom he greatly loved, in whose interests he planted his poplars. When a man thinks without annoyance about his heir, and watches the trees grow daily finer for his future benefit, affection grows too with every blow of the spade around her roots. Though this phenomenal feeling is not common, it is still to be met with in Touraine.

This cherished nephew, named Octave de Camps, was a descendant of the famous Abbe de Camps, so well known to bibliophiles and learned men,— who, by the bye, are not at all the same thing. People in the provinces have the bad habit of branding with a sort of decent reprobation any young man who sells his inherited estates. This antiquated prejudice has interfered very much with the stock-jobbing which the present government encourages for its own interests. Without consulting his uncle, Octave had lately sold an estate belonging to him to the Black Band.[*] The chateau de Villaines would have been pulled down were it not for the remonstrances which the old uncle made to the representatives of the "Pickaxe company." To increase the old man's wrath, a distant relative (one of those cousins of small means and much astuteness about whom shrewd provincials are wont to remark, "No lawsuits for me with him!") had, as it were by accident, come to visit Monsieur de Bourbonne, and INCIDENTALLY informed him of his nephew's ruin. Monsieur Octave de Camps, he said, having wasted his means on a certain Madame Firmiani, was now reduced to teaching mathematics for a living, while awaiting his uncle's death, not daring to let him know of his dissipations. This distant cousin, a sort of Charles Moor, was not ashamed to give this fatal news to the old gentleman as he sat by his fire, digesting a profuse provincial dinner.

[*] The "Bande Noire" was a mysterious association of speculators, whose object was to buy in landed estates, cut them up, and sell them off in small parcels to the peasantry, or others.

But heirs cannot always rid themselves of uncles as easily as they would like to. Thanks to his obstinacy, this particular uncle refused to believe the story, and came out victorious from the attack of indigestion produced by his nephew's biography. Some shocks affect the heart, others the head; but in this case the cousin's blow fell on the digestive organs and did little harm, for the old man's stomach was sound. Like a true disciple of Saint Thomas, Monsieur de Bourbonne came to Paris, unknown to Octave, resolved to make full inquiries as to his nephew's insolvency. Having many acquaintances in the faubourg Saint-Germain, among the Listomeres, the

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Lenoncourts, and the Vandenesse, he heard so much gossip, so many facts and falsities, about Madame Firmiani that he resolved to be presented to her under the name of de Rouxellay, that of his estate in Touraine. The astute old gentleman was careful to choose an evening when he knew that Octave would be engaged in finishing a piece of work which was to pay him well,—for this so-called lover of Madame Firmiani still went to her house; a circumstance that seemed difficult to explain. As to Octave's ruin, that, unfortunately, was no fable, as Monsieur de Bourbonne had at once discovered.

Monsieur de Rouxellay was not at all like the provincial uncle at the Gymnase. Formerly in the King's guard, a man of the world and a favorite among women, he knew how to present himself in society with the courteous manners of the olden time; he could make graceful speeches and understand the whole Charter, or most of it. Though he loved the Bourbons with noble frankness, believed in God as a gentleman should, and read nothing but the "Quotidienne," he was not as ridiculous as the liberals of his department would fain have had him. He could hold his own in the court circle, provided no one talked to him of "Moses in Egypt," nor of the drama, or romanticism, or local color, nor of railways. He himself had never got beyond Monsieur de Voltaire, Monsieur le Comte de Buffon, Payronnet, and the Chevalier Gluck, the Queen's favorite musician.

"Madame," he said to the Marquise de Listomere, who was on his arm as they entered Madame Firmiani's salons, "if this woman is my nephew's mistress, I pity him. How can she live in the midst of this luxury, and know that he is in a garret? Hasn't she any soul? Octave is a fool to have given up such an estate as Villaines for a—"

Monsieur de Bourbonne belonged to the species Fossil, and used the language of the days of yore.

"But suppose he had lost it at play?"

"Then, madame, he would at least have had the pleasure of gambling."

"And do you think he has had no pleasure here? See! look at Madame Firmiani."

The brightest memories of the old man faded at the sight of his nephew's so-called mistress. His anger died away at the gracious exclamation which came from his lips as he looked at her. By one of those fortunate accidents which happen only to pretty women, it was a moment when all her beauties shone with peculiar lustre, due perhaps to the wax-lights, to the charming simplicity of her dress, to the ineffable atmosphere of elegance that surrounded her. One must needs have studied the transitions of an evening in a Parisian salon to appreciate the imperceptible lights and shades which color a woman's face and vary it. There comes a moment when, content with her toilet, pleased with her own wit, delighted to be admired, and feeling herself the queen of a salon full of remarkable men who smile to her, the Parisian woman reaches a full consciousness of her grace and charm; her beauty is enhanced by the looks she gathers in,—a mute homage which she transfers with subtle glances to the man she loves. At moments like these a woman is invested with supernatural power and becomes a magician, a charmer, without herself knowing that she is one; involuntarily she inspires the love that fills her own bosom; her smiles and glances fascinate. If this condition, which comes from the soul, can give attraction even to a plain woman, with what radiance does it not invest a woman of natural elegance, distinguished bearing, fair, fresh, with sparkling eyes, and dressed in a taste that wrings approval from artists and her bitterest rivals.

Have you ever, for your happiness, met a woman whose harmonious voice gives to her speech the same charm that emanates from her manners? a woman who knows how to speak and to be silent, whose words are happily chosen, whose language is pure, and who concerns herself in your interests with delicacy? Her raillery is caressing, her criticism never wounds; she neither discourses nor argues, but she likes to lead a discussion and stop it at the right moment. Her manner is affable and smiling, her politeness never forced, her readiness to serve others never servile; she reduces the respect she claims to a soft shadow; she never wearies you, and you leave her satisfied with her and with yourself. Her charming grace is conveyed to all the things with which she surrounds herself. Everything about her pleases the eye; in her presence you breathe, as it were, your native air. This woman

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is natural. There is no effort about her; she is aiming at no effect; her feelings are shown simply, because they are true. Frank herself, she does not wound the vanity of others; she accepts men as God made them; pitying the vicious, forgiving defects and absurdities, comprehending all ages, and vexed by nothing, because she has had the sense and tact to foresee all. Tender and gay, she gratifies before she consoles. You love her so well that if this angel did wrong you would be ready to excuse her. If, for your happiness, you have met with such a woman, you know Madame Firmiani.

After Monsieur de Bourbonne had talked with her for ten minutes, sitting beside her, his nephew was forgiven. He perceived that whatever the actual truth might be, the relation between Madame Firmiani and Octave covered some mystery. Returning to the illusions that gild the days of youth, and judging Madame Firmiani by her beauty, the old gentleman became convinced that a woman so innately conscious of her dignity as she appeared to be was incapable of a bad action. Her dark eyes told of inward peace; the lines of her face were so noble, the profile so pure, and the passion he had come to investigate seemed so little to oppress her heart, that the old man said to himself, while noting all the promises of love and virtue given by that adorable countenance, "My nephew is committing some folly."

Madame Firmiani acknowledged to twenty-five. But the Practicals proved that having married the invisible Firmiani (then a highly respectable individual in the forties) in 1813, at the age of sixteen, she must be at least twenty-eight in 1825. However the same persons also asserted that at no period of her life had she ever been so desirable or so completely a woman. She was now at an age when women are most prone to conceive a passion, and to desire it, perhaps, in their pensive hours. She possessed all that earth sells, all that it lends, all that it gives. The Attaches declared there was nothing of which she was ignorant; the Contradictors asserted that there was much she ought to learn; the Observers remarked that her hands were white, her feet small, her movements a trifle too undulating. But, nevertheless, individuals of all species envied or disputed Octave's happiness, agreeing, for once in a way, that Madame Firmiani was the most aristocratically beautiful woman in Paris.

Still young, rich, a perfect musician, intelligent, witty, refined, and received (as a Cadignan) by the Princesse de Blamont-Chauvry, that oracle of the noble faubourg, loved by her rivals the Duchesse de Maufrigneuse her cousin, the Marquise d'Espard, and Madame de Macumer, —Madame Firmiani gratified all the vanities which feed or excite love. She was therefore sought by too many men not to fall a victim to Parisian malice and its charming calumnies, whispered behind a fan or in a safe aside. It was necessary to quote the remarks given at the beginning of this history to bring out the true Firmiani in contradistinction to the Firmiani of society. If some women forgave her happiness, others did not forgive her propriety. Now nothing is so dangerous in Paris as unfounded suspicions,—for the reason that it is impossible to destroy them.

This sketch of a woman who was admirably natural gives only a faint idea of her. It would need the pencil of an Ingres to render the pride of that brow, with its wealth of hair, the dignity of that glance, and the thoughts betrayed by the changing colors of her cheeks. In her were all things; poets could have found an Agnes Sorel and a Joan of Arc, also the woman unknown, the Soul within that form, the soul of Eve, the knowledge of the treasures of good and the riches of evil, error and resignation, crime and devotion, the Donna Julia and the Haidee of Lord Byron.

The former guardsman stayed, with apparent impertinence, after the other guests had left the salons; and Madame Firmiani found him sitting quietly before her in an armchair, evidently determined to remain, with the pertinacity of a fly which we are forced to kill to get rid of it. The hands of the clock marked two in the morning.

"Madame," said the old gentlemen, as Madame Firmiani rose, hoping to make him understand that it was her good pleasure he should go, "Madame, I am the uncle of Monsieur Octave de Camps."

Madame Firmiani immediately sat down again, and showed her emotion. In spite of his sagacity the old Planter was unable to decide whether she turned pale from shame or pleasure. There are pleasures, delicious emotions the

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chaste heart seeks to veil, which cannot escape the shock of startled modesty. The more delicacy a woman has, the more she seeks to hide the joys that are in her soul. Many women, incomprehensible in their tender caprices, long to hear a name pronounced which at other times they desire to bury in their hearts. Monsieur de Bourbonne did not interpret Madame Firmiani's agitation exactly in this way: pray forgive him, all provincials are distrustful.

"Well, monsieur?" said Madame Firmiani, giving him one of those clear, lucid glances in which we men can never see anything because they question us too much.

"Well, madame," returned the old man, "do you know what some one came to tell me in the depths of my province? That my nephew had ruined himself for you, and that the poor fellow was living in a garret while you were in silk and gold. Forgive my rustic sincerity; it may be useful for you to know of these calumnies."

"Stop, monsieur," said Madame Firmiani, with an imperative gesture; "I know all that. You are too polite to continue this subject if I request you to leave it, and too gallant—in the old-fashioned sense of the word," she added with a slight tone of irony—"not to agree that you have no right to question me. It would be ridiculous in me to defend myself. I trust that you will have a sufficiently good opinion of my character to believe in the profound contempt which, I assure you, I feel for money,—although I was married, without any fortune, to a man of immense wealth. It is nothing to me whether your nephew is rich or poor; if I have received him in my house, and do now receive him, it is because I consider him worthy to be counted among my friends. All my friends, monsieur, respect each other; they know that I have not philosophy enough to admit into my house those I do not esteem; this may argue a want of charity; but my guardian—angel has maintained in me to this day a profound aversion for tattle, and also for dishonesty."

Through the ring of her voice was slightly raised during the first part of this answer, the last words were said with the ease and self—possession of Celimene bantering the Misanthrope.

"Madame," said Monsieur de Bourbonne, in a voice of some emotion, "I am an old man; I am almost Octave's father, and I ask your pardon most humbly for the question that I shall now venture to put to you, giving you my word of honor as a loyal gentleman that your answer shall die here,"—laying his hand upon his heart, with an old-fashioned gesture that was truly religious. "Are these rumors true; do you love Octave?"

"Monsieur," she replied, "to any other man I should answer that question only by a look; but to you, and because you are indeed almost the father of Monsieur de Camps, I reply by asking what you would think of a woman if to such a question she answered YOU? To avow our love for him we love, when he loves us—ah! that may be; but even when we are certain of being loved forever, believe me, monsieur, it is an effort for us, and a reward to him. To say to another!—"

She did not end her sentence, but rose, bowed to the old man, and withdrew into her private apartments, the doors of which, opening and closing behind her, had a language of their own to his sagacious ears.

"Ah! the mischief!" thought he; "what a woman! she is either a sly one or an angel"; and he got into his hired coach, the horses of which were stamping on the pavement of the silent courtyard, while the coachman was asleep on his box after cursing for the hundredth time his tardy customer.

The next morning about eight o'clock the old gentleman mounted the stairs of a house in the rue de l'Observance where Octave de Camps was living. If there was ever an astonished man it was the young professor when he beheld his uncle. The door was unlocked, his lamp still burning; he had been sitting up all night.

"You rascal!" said Monsieur de Bourbonne, sitting down in the nearest chair; "since when is it the fashion to laugh at uncles who have twenty—six thousand francs a year from solid acres to which we are the sole heir? Let me tell you that in the olden time we stood in awe of such uncles as that. Come, speak up, what fault have you to

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find with me? Haven't I played my part as uncle properly? Did I ever require you to respect me? Have I ever refused you money? When did I shut the door in your face on pretence that you had come to look after my health? Haven't you had the most accommodating and the least domineering uncle that there is in France,—I won't say Europe, because that might be too presumptuous. You write to me, or you don't write,—no matter, I live on pledged affection, and I am making you the prettiest estate in all Touraine, the envy of the department. To be sure, I don't intend to let you have it till the last possible moment, but that's an excusable little fancy, isn't it? And what does monsieur himself do?— sells his own property and lives like a lackey!—"

"Uncle—"

"I'm not talking about uncles, I'm talking nephew. I have a right to your confidence. Come, confess at once; it is much the easiest way; I know that by experience. Have you been gambling? have you lost money at the Bourse? Say, 'Uncle, I'm a wretch,' and I'll hug you. But if you tell me any lies greater than those I used to tell at your age I'll sell my property, buy an annuity, and go back to the evil ways of my youth—if I can."

"Uncle—"

"I saw your Madame Firmiani yesterday," went on the old fellow, kissing the tips of his fingers, which he gathered into a bunch. "She is charming. You have the consent and approbation of your uncle, if that will do you any good. As to the sanction of the Church I suppose that's useless, and the sacraments cost so much in these days. Come, speak out, have you ruined yourself for her?"

"Yes, uncle."

"Ha! the jade! I'd have wagered it. In my time the women of the court were cleverer at ruining a man than the courtesans of to-day; but this one—I recognized her!—it is a bit of the last century."

"Uncle," said Octave, with a manner that was tender and grave, "you are totally mistaken. Madame Firmiani deserves your esteem, and all the adoration the world gives her."

"Youth, youth! always the same!" cried Monsieur de Bourbonne. "Well, go on; tell me the same old story. But please remember that my experience in gallantry is not of yesterday."

"My dear, kind uncle, here is a letter which will tell you nearly all," said Octave, taking it from an elegant portfolio, HER gift, no doubt. "When you have read it I will tell you the rest, and you will then know a Madame Firmiani who is unknown to the world."

"I haven't my spectacles; read it aloud."

Octave began:—

"My beloved—"

"Hey, then you are still intimate with her?" interrupted his uncle.

"Why yes, of course."

"You haven't parted from her?"

"Parted!" repeated Octave, "we are married."

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"Heavens!" cried Monsieur de Bourbonne, "then why do you live in a garret?"

"Let me go on."

"True—I'm listening."

Octave resumed the letter, but there were passages which he could not read without deep emotion.

"My beloved Husband,—You ask me the reason of my sadness. Has it, then, passed from my soul to my face; or have you only guessed it?—but how could you fail to do so, one in heart as we are? I cannot deceive you; this may be a misfortune, for it is one of the conditions of happy love that a wife shall be gay and caressing. Perhaps I ought to deceive you, but I would not do it even if the happiness with which you have blessed and overpowered me depended on it.

"Ah! dearest, how much gratitude there is in my love. I long to love you forever, without limit; yes, I desire to be forever proud of you. A woman's glory is in the man she loves. Esteem, consideration, honor, must they not be his who receives our all? Well, my angel has fallen. Yes, dear, the tale you told me has tarnished my past joys. Since then I have felt myself humiliated in you,—you whom I thought the most honorable of men, as you are the most loving, the most tender. I must indeed have deep confidence in your heart, so young and pure, to make you this avowal which costs me much. Ah! my dear love, how is it that you, knowing your father had unjustly deprived others of their property, that YOU can keep it?

"And you told me of this criminal act in a room filled with the mute witnesses of our love; and you are a gentleman, and you think yourself noble, and I am yours! I try to find excuses for you; I do find them in your youth and thoughtlessness. I know there is still something of the child about you. Perhaps you have never thought seriously of what fortune and integrity are. Oh! how your laugh wounded me. Reflect on that ruined family, always in distress; poor young girls who have reason to curse you daily; an old father saying to himself each night: "We might not now be starving if that man's father had been an honest man—""

"Good heavens!" cried Monsieur de Bourbonne, interrupting his nephew, "surely you have not been such a fool as to tell that woman about your father's affair with the Bourgneufs? Women know more about wasting a fortune than making one."

"They know about integrity. But let me read on, uncle."

"Octave, no power on earth has authority to change the principles of honor. Look into your conscience and ask it by what name you are to call the action by which you hold your property."

The nephew looked at the uncle, who lowered his head.

"I will not tell you all the thoughts that assail me; they can be reduced to one,—this is it: I cannot respect the man who, knowingly, is smirched for a sum of money, whatever the amount may be; five francs stolen at play or five times a hundred thousand gained by a legal trick are equally dishonoring. I will tell you all. I feel myself degraded by the very love which has hitherto been all my joy. There rises in my soul a voice which my tenderness cannot stifle. Ah! I have wept to feel that I have more conscience than love. Were you to commit a crime I would hide you in my bosom from human justice, but my devotion could go no farther. Love, to a woman, means boundless confidence, united to a need of reverencing, of esteeming, the being to whom she belongs. I have never conceived of love otherwise than as a fire in which all noble feelings are purified still more,—a fire which develops them.

"I have but one thing else to say: come to me poor, and my love shall be redoubled. If not, renounce it. Should I see you no more, I shall know what it means.

Madame Firmiani

"But I do not wish, understand me, that you should make restitution because I urge it. Consult your own conscience. An act of justice such as that ought not to be a sacrifice made to love. I am your wife and not your mistress, and it is less a question of pleasing me than of inspiring in my soul a true respect.

"If I am mistaken, if you have ill-explained your father's action, if, in short, you still think your right to the property equitable (oh! how I long to persuade myself that you are blameless), consider and decide by listening to the voice of your conscience; act wholly and solely from yourself. A man who loves a woman sincerely, as you love me, respects the sanctity of her trust in him too deeply to dishonor himself.

"I blame myself now for what I have written; a word might have sufficed, and I have preached to you! Scold me; I wish to be scolded,—but not much, only a little. Dear, between us two the power is yours—you alone should perceive your own faults."

"Well, uncle?" said Octave, whose eyes were full of tears.

"There's more in the letter; finish it."

"Oh, the rest is only to be read by a lover," answered Octave, smiling.

"Yes, right, my boy," said the old man, gently. "I have had many affairs in my day, but I beg you to believe that I too have loved, 'et ego in Arcadia.' But I don't understand yet why you give lessons in mathematics."

"My dear uncle, I am your nephew; isn't that as good as saying that I had dipped into the capital left me by my father? After I had read this letter a sort of revolution took place within me. I paid my whole arrearage of remorse in one day. I cannot describe to you the state I was in. As I drove in the Bois a voice called to me, 'That horse is not yours'; when I ate my dinner it was saying, 'You have stolen this food.' I was ashamed. The fresher my honesty, the more intense it was. I rushed to Madame Firmiani. Uncle! that day I had pleasures of the heart, enjoyments of the soul, that were far beyond millions. Together we made out the account of what was due to the Bourgneufs, and I condemned myself, against Madame Firmiani's advice, to pay three per cent interest. But all I had did not suffice to cover the full amount. We were lovers enough for her to offer, and me to accept, her savings—"

"What! besides her other virtues does that adorable woman lay by money?" cried his uncle.

"Don't laugh at her, uncle; her position has obliged her to be very careful. Her husband went to Greece in 1820 and died there three years later. It has been impossible, up to the present time, to get legal proofs of his death, or obtain the will which he made leaving his whole property to his wife. These papers were either lost or stolen, or have gone astray during the troubles in Greece,—a country where registers are not kept as they are in France, and where we have no consul. Uncertain whether she might not be forced to give up her fortune, she has lived with the utmost prudence. As for me, I wish to acquire property which shall be MINE, so as to provide for my wife in case she is forced to lose hers."

"But why didn't you tell me all this? My dear nephew, you might have known that I love you enough to pay all your good debts, the debts of a gentleman. I'll play the traditional uncle now, and revenge myself!"

"Ah! uncle, I know your vengeance! but let me get rich by my own industry. If you want to do me a real service, make me an allowance of two or three thousand francs a year, till I see my way to an enterprise for which I shall want capital. At this moment I am so happy that all I desire is just the means of living. I give lessons so that I may not live at the cost of ANY ONE. If you only knew the happiness I had in making that restitution! I found the Bourgneufs, after a good deal of trouble, living miserably and in need of everything. The old father was a lottery agent; the two daughters kept his books and took care of the house; the mother was always ill. The daughters are

Madame Firmiani

charming girls, but they have been cruelly taught that the world thinks little of beauty without money. What a scene it was! I entered their house the accomplice in a crime; I left it an honest man, who had purged his father's memory. Uncle, I don't judge him; there is such excitement, such passion in a lawsuit that even an honorable man may be led astray by them. Lawyers can make the most unjust claims legal; laws have convenient syllogisms to quiet consciences. My visit was a drama. To BE Providence itself; actually to fulfil that futile wish, 'If heaven were to send us twenty thousand francs a year,'—that silly wish we all make, laughing; to bring opulence to a family sitting by the light of one miserable lamp over a poor turf fire!—no, words cannot describe it. My extreme justice seemed to them unjust. Well! if there is a Paradise my father is happy in it now. As for me, I am loved as no man was ever loved yet. Madame Firmiani gives me more than happiness; she has inspired me with a delicacy of feeling I think I lacked. So I call her MY DEAR CONSCIENCE,—a love-word which expresses certain secret harmonies within our hearts. I find honesty profitable; I shall get rich in time by myself. I've an industrial scheme in my head, and if it succeeds I shall earn millions."

"Ah! my boy, you have your mother's soul," said the old man, his eyes filling at the thought of his sister.

Just then, in spite of the distance between Octave's garret and the street, the young man heard the sound of a carriage.

"There she is!" he cried; "I know her horses by the way they are pulled up."

A few moments more, and Madame Firmiani entered the room.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, with a gesture of annoyance at seeing Monsieur de Bourbonne. "But our uncle is not in the way," she added quickly, smiling; "I came to humbly entreat my husband to accept my fortune. The Austrian Embassy has just sent me a document which proves the death of Monsieur Firmiani, also the will, which his valet was keeping safely to put into my own hands. Octave, you can accept it all; you are richer than I, for you have treasures here" (laying her hand upon his heart) "to which none but God can add." Then, unable to support her happiness, she laid her head upon her husband's breast.

"My dear niece," said the old man, "in my day we made love; in yours, you love. You women are all that is best in humanity; you are not even guilty of your faults, for they come through us."

ADDENDUM

The following personages appear in other stories of the Human Comedy.

Blamont–Chauvry, Princesse de The Thirteen Madame Firmiani The Lily of the Valley

Bourbonne, De Madame Firmiani The Vicar of Tours

Camps, Octave de Madame Firmiani The Member for Arcis

Camps, Madame Octave de Madame Firmiani The Government Clerks A Woman of Thirty A Daughter of Eve
The Member for Arcis