

La Grenadiere

Honore de Balzac

Table of Contents

<u>La Grenadiere</u>	1
<u>Honore de Balzac</u>	1

La Grenadiere

Honore de Balzac

Translated by Ellen Marriage

To D. W.

La Grenadiere is a little house on the right bank of the Loire as you go down stream, about a mile below the bridge of Tours. At this point the river, broad as a lake, and covered with scattered green islands, flows between two lines of cliff, where country houses built uniformly of white stone stand among their gardens and vineyards. The finest fruit in the world ripens there with a southern exposure. The patient toil of many generations has cut terraces in the cliff, so that the face of the rock reflects the rays of the sun, and the produce of hot climates may be grown out of doors in an artificially high temperature.

A church spire, rising out of one of the shallower dips in the line of cliffs, marks the little village of Saint-Cyr, to which the scattered houses all belong. And yet a little further the Choisille flows into the Loire, through a fertile valley cut in the long low downs.

La Grenadiere itself, half-way up the hillside, and about a hundred paces from the church, is one of those old-fashioned houses dating back some two or three hundred years, which you find in every picturesque spot in Touraine. A fissure in the rock affords convenient space for a flight of steps descending gradually to the "dike"—the local name for the embankment made at the foot of the cliffs to keep the Loire in its bed, and serve as a causeway for the highroad from Paris to Nantes. At the top of the steps a gate opens upon a narrow stony footpath between two terraces, for here the soil is banked up, and walls are built to prevent landslips. These earthworks, as it were, are crowned with trellises and espaliers, so that the steep path that lies at the foot of the upper wall is almost hidden by the trees that grow on the top of the lower, upon which it lies. The view of the river widens out before you at every step as you climb to the house.

At the end you come to a second gateway, a Gothic archway covered with simple ornament, now crumbling into ruin and overgrown with wildflowers—moss and ivy, wallflowers and pellitory. Every stone wall on the hillside is decked with this ineradicable plant-life, which springs up along the cracks afresh with new wreaths for every time of year.

The worm-eaten gate gives into a little garden, a strip of turf, a few trees, and a wilderness of flowers and rose bushes—a garden won from the rock on the highest terrace of all, with the dark, old balustrade along its edge. Opposite the gateway, a wooden summer-house stands against the neighboring wall, the posts are covered with jessamine and honeysuckle, vines and clematis.

The house itself stands in the middle of this highest garden, above a vine-covered flight of steps, with an arched doorway beneath that leads to vast cellars hollowed out in the rock. All about the dwelling trellised vines and pomegranate-trees (the grenadiers, which give the name to the little close) are growing out in the open air. The front of the house consists of two large windows on either side of a very rustic-looking house door, and three dormer windows in the roof—a slate roof with two gables, prodigiously high-pitched in proportion to the low ground-floor. The house walls are washed with yellow color; and door, and first-floor shutters, all the Venetian shutters of the attic windows, all are painted green.

Entering the house, you find yourself in a little lobby with a crooked staircase straight in front of you. It is a crazy wooden structure, the spiral balusters are brown with age, and the steps themselves take a new angle at every turn. The great old-fashioned paneled dining-room, floored with square white tiles from Chateau-Regnault, is on

La Grenadiere

your right; to the left is the sitting-room, equally large, but here the walls are not paneled; they have been covered instead with a saffron-colored paper, bordered with green. The walnut-wood rafters are left visible, and the intervening spaces filled with a kind of white plaster.

The first story consists of two large whitewashed bedrooms with stone chimney-pieces, less elaborately carved than those in the rooms beneath. Every door and window is on the south side of the house, save a single door to the north, contrived behind the staircase to give access to the vineyard. Against the western wall stands a supplementary timber-framed structure, all the woodwork exposed to the weather being fledged with slates, so that the walls are checkered with bluish lines. This shed (for it is little more) is the kitchen of the establishment. You can pass from it into the house without going outside; but, nevertheless, it boasts an entrance door of its own, and a short flight of steps that brings you to a deep well, and a very rustical-looking pump, half hidden by water-plants and savin bushes and tall grasses. The kitchen is a modern addition, proving beyond doubt that La Grenadiere was originally nothing but a simple vendangeoir—a vintage-house belonging to townsfolk in Tours, from which Saint-Cyr is separated by the vast river-bed of the Loire. The owners only came over for the day for a picnic, or at the vintage-time, sending provisions across in the morning, and scarcely ever spent the night there except during the grape harvest; but the English settled down on Touraine like a cloud of locusts, and La Grenadiere must, of course, be completed if it was to find tenants. Luckily, however, this recent appendage is hidden from sight by the first two trees of a lime-tree avenue planted in a gully below the vineyards.

There are only two acres of vineyard at most, the ground rising at the back of the house so steeply that it is no very easy matter to scramble up among the vines. The slope, covered with green trailing shoots, ends within about five feet of the house wall in a ditch-like passage always damp and cold and full of strong growing green things, fed by the drainage of the highly cultivated ground above, for rainy weather washes down the manure into the garden on the terrace.

A vinedresser's cottage also leans against the western gable, and is in some sort a continuation of the kitchen. Stone walls or espaliers surround the property, and all sorts of fruit-trees are planted among the vines; in short, not an inch of this precious soil is wasted. If by chance man overlooks some dry cranny in the rocks, Nature puts in a fig-tree, or sows wildflowers or strawberries in sheltered nooks among the stones.

Nowhere else in all the world will you find a human dwelling so humble and yet so imposing, so rich in fruit, and fragrant scents, and wide views of country. Here is a miniature Touraine in the heart of Touraine—all its flowers and fruits and all the characteristic beauty of the land are fully represented. Here are grapes of every district, figs and peaches and pears of every kind; melons are grown out of doors as easily as licorice plants, Spanish broom, Italian oleanders, and jessamines from the Azores. The Loire lies at your feet. You look down from the terrace upon the ever-changing river nearly two hundred feet below; and in the evening the breeze brings a fresh scent of the sea, with the fragrance of far-off flowers gathered upon its way. Some cloud wandering in space, changing its color and form at every moment as it crosses the pure blue of the sky, can alter every detail in the widespread wonderful landscape in a thousand ways, from every point of view. The eye embraces first of all the south bank of the Loire, stretching away as far as Amboise, then Tours with its suburbs and buildings, and the Plessis rising out of the fertile plain; further away, between Vouvray and Saint-Symphorien, you see a sort of crescent of gray cliff full of sunny vineyards; the only limits to your view are the low, rich hills along the Cher, a bluish line of horizon broken by many a chateau and the wooded masses of many a park. Out to the west you lose yourself in the immense river, where vessels come and go, spreading their white sails to the winds which seldom fail them in the wide Loire basin. A prince might build a summer palace at La Grenadiere, but certainly it will always be the home of a poet's desire, and the sweetest of retreats for two young lovers—for this vintage house, which belongs to a substantial burgess of Tours, has charms for every imagination, for the humblest and dullest as well as for the most impassioned and lofty. No one can dwell there without feeling that happiness is in the air, without a glimpse of all that is meant by a peaceful life without care or ambition. There is that in the air and the sound of the river that sets you dreaming; the sands have a language, and are joyous or dreary, golden or wan; and the owner of the vineyard may sit motionless amid perennial flowers and tempting fruit, and feel all the stir of the world about him.

La Grenadiere

If an Englishman takes the house for the summer, he is asked a thousand francs for six months, the produce of the vineyard not included. If the tenant wishes for the orchard fruit, the rent is doubled; for the vintage, it is doubled again. What can La Grenadiere be worth, you wonder; La Grenadiere, with its stone staircase, its beaten path and triple terrace, its two acres of vineyard, its flowering roses about the balustrades, its worn steps, well-head, rampant clematis, and cosmopolitan trees? It is idle to make a bid! La Grenadiere will never be in the market; it was brought once and sold, but that was in 1690; and the owner parted with it for forty thousand francs, reluctant as any Arab of the desert to relinquish a favorite horse. Since then it has remained in the same family, its pride, its patrimonial jewel, its Regent diamond. "While you behold, you have and hold," says the bard. And from La Grenadiere you behold three valleys of Touraine and the cathedral towers aloft in air like a bit of filigree work. How can one pay for such treasures? Could one ever pay for the health recovered there under the linden-trees?

In the spring of one of the brightest years of the Restoration, a lady with her housekeeper and her two children (the oldest a boy thirteen years old, the youngest apparently about eight) came to Tours to look for a house. She saw La Grenadiere and took it. Perhaps the distance from the town was an inducement to live there.

She made a bedroom of the drawing-room, gave the children the two rooms above, and the housekeeper slept in a closet behind the kitchen. The dining-room was sitting-room and drawing-room all in one for the little family. The house was furnished very simply but tastefully; there was nothing superfluous in it, and no trace of luxury. The walnut-wood furniture chosen by the stranger lady was perfectly plain, and the whole charm of the house consisted in its neatness and harmony with its surroundings.

It was rather difficult, therefore, to say whether the strange lady (Mme. Willemsens, as she styled herself) belonged to the upper middle or higher classes, or to an equivocal, unclassified feminine species. Her plain dress gave rise to the most contradictory suppositions, but her manners might be held to confirm those favorable to her. She had not lived at Saint-Cyr, moreover, for very long before her reserve excited the curiosity of idle people, who always, and especially in the country, watch anybody or anything that promises to bring some interest into their narrow lives.

Mme. Willemsens was rather tall; she was thin and slender, but delicately shaped. She had pretty feet, more remarkable for the grace of her instep and ankle than for the more ordinary merit of slenderness; her gloved hands, too, were shapely. There were flitting patches of deep red in a pale face, which must have been fresh and softly colored once. Premature wrinkles had withered the delicately modeled forehead beneath the coronet of soft, well-set chestnut hair, invariably wound about her head in two plaits, a girlish coiffure which suited the melancholy face. There was a deceptive look of calm in the dark eyes, with the hollow, shadowy circles about them; sometimes, when she was off her guard, their expression told of secret anguish. The oval of her face was somewhat long; but happiness and health had perhaps filled and perfected the outlines. A forced smile, full of quiet sadness, hovered continually on her pale lips; but when the children, who were always with her, looked up at their mother, or asked one of the incessant idle questions which convey so much to a mother's ears, then the smile brightened, and expressed the joys of a mother's love. Her gait was slow and dignified. Her dress never varied; evidently she had made up her mind to think no more of her toilette, and to forget a world by which she meant no doubt to be forgotten. She wore a long, black gown, confined at the waist by a watered-silk ribbon, and by way of scarf a lawn handkerchief with a broad hem, the two ends passed carelessly through her waistband. The instinct of dress showed itself in that she was daintily shod, and gray silk stockings carried out the suggestion of mourning in this unvarying costume. Lastly, she always wore a bonnet after the English fashion, always of the same shape and the same gray material, and a black veil. Her health apparently was extremely weak; she looked very ill. On fine evenings she would take her only walk, down to the bridge of Tours, bringing the two children with her to breathe the fresh, cool air along the Loire, and to watch the sunset effects on a landscape as wide as the Bay of Naples or the Lake of Geneva.

During the whole time of her stay at La Grenadiere she went but twice into Tours; once to call on the headmaster of the school, to ask him to give her the names of the best masters of Latin, drawing, and mathematics; and a

La Grenadiere

second time to make arrangements for the children's lessons. But her appearance on the bridge of an evening, once or twice a week, was quite enough to excite the interest of almost all the inhabitants of Tours, who make a regular promenade of the bridge. Still, in spite of a kind of spy system, by which no harm is meant, a provincial habit bred of want of occupation and the restless inquisitiveness of the principal society, nothing was known for certain of the newcomer's rank, fortune, or real condition. Only, the owner of La Grenadiere told one or two of his friends that the name under which the stranger had signed the lease (her real name, therefore, in all probability) was Augusta Willemsens, Countess of Brandon. This, of course, must be her husband's name. Events, which will be narrated in their place, confirmed this revelation; but it went no further than the little world of men of business known to the landlord.

So Madame Willemsens was a continual mystery to people of condition. Hers was no ordinary nature; her manners were simple and delightfully natural, the tones of her voice were divinely sweet,—this was all that she suffered others to discover. In her complete seclusion, her sadness, her beauty so passionately obscured, nay, almost blighted, there was so much to charm, that several young gentlemen fell in love; but the more sincere the lover, the more timid he became; and besides, the lady inspired awe, and it was a difficult matter to find enough courage to speak to her. Finally, if a few of the bolder sort wrote to her, their letters must have been burned unread. It was Mme. Willemsens' practice to throw all the letters which she received into the fire, as if she meant that the time spent in Touraine should be untroubled by any outside cares even of the slightest. She might have come to the enchanting retreat to give herself up wholly to the joy of living.

The three masters whose presence was allowed at La Grenadiere spoke with something like admiring reverence of the touching picture that they saw there of the close, unclouded intimacy of the life led by this woman and the children.

The two little boys also aroused no small interest. Mothers could not see them without a feeling of envy. Both children were like Mme. Willemsens, who was, in fact, their mother. They had the transparent complexion and bright color, the clear, liquid eyes, the long lashes, the fresh outlines, the dazzling characteristics of childish beauty.

The elder, Louis—Gaston, had dark hair and fearless eyes. Everything about him spoke as plainly of robust, physical health as his broad, high brow, with its gracious curves, spoke of energy of character. He was quick and alert in his movements, and strong of limb, without a trace of awkwardness. Nothing took him unawares, and he seemed to think about everything that he saw.

Marie—Gaston, the other child, had hair that was almost golden, though a lock here and there had deepened to the mother's chestnut tint. Marie—Gaston was slender; he had the delicate features and the subtle grace so charming in Mme. Willemsens. He did not look strong. There was a gentle look in his gray eyes; his face was pale, there was something feminine about the child. He still wore his hair in long, wavy curls, and his mother would not have him give up embroidered collars, and little jackets fastened with frogs and spindle-shaped buttons; evidently she took a thoroughly feminine pleasure in the costume, a source of as much interest to the mother as to the child. The elder boy's plain white collar, turned down over a closely fitting jacket, made a contrast with his brother's clothing, but the color and material were the same; the two brothers were otherwise dressed alike, and looked alike.

No one could see them without feeling touched by the way in which Louis took care of Marie. There was an almost fatherly look in the older boy's eyes; and Marie, child though he was, seemed to be full of gratitude to Louis. They were like two buds, scarcely separated from the stem that bore them, swayed by the same breeze, lying in the same ray of sunlight; but the one was a brightly colored flower, the other somewhat bleached and pale. At a glance, a word, an inflection in their mother's voice, they grew heedful, turned to look at her and listened, and did at once what they were bidden, or asked, or recommended to do. Mme. Willemsens had so accustomed them to understand her wishes and desires, that the three seemed to have their thoughts in common.

La Grenadiere

When they went for a walk, and the children, absorbed in their play, ran away to gather a flower or to look at some insect, she watched them with such deep tenderness in her eyes, that the most indifferent passer-by would feel moved, and stop and smile at the children, and give the mother a glance of friendly greeting. Who would not have admired the dainty neatness of their dress, their sweet, childish voices, the grace of their movements, the promise in their faces, the innate something that told of careful training from the cradle? They seemed as if they had never shed tears nor wailed like other children. Their mother knew, as it were, by electrically swift intuition, the desires and the pains which she anticipated and relieved. She seemed to dread a complaint from one of them more than the loss of her soul. Everything in her children did honor to their mother's training. Their threefold life, seemingly one life, called up vague, fond thoughts; it was like a vision of the dreamed-of bliss of a better world. And the three, so attuned to each other, lived in truth such a life as one might picture for them at first sight—the ordered, simple, and regular life best suited for a child's education.

Both children rose an hour after daybreak and repeated a short prayer, a habit learned in their babyhood. For seven years the sincere petition had been put up every morning on their mother's bed, and begun and ended by a kiss. Then the two brothers went through their morning toilet as scrupulously as any pretty woman; doubtless they had been trained in habits of minute attention to the person, so necessary to health of body and mind, habits in some sort conducive to a sense of wellbeing. Conscientiously they went through their duties, so afraid were they lest their mother should say when she kissed them at breakfast-time, "My darling children, where can you have been to have such black finger-nails already?" Then the two went out into the garden and shook off the dreams of the night in the morning air and dew, until sweeping and dusting operations were completed, and they could learn their lessons in the sitting-room until their mother joined them. But although it was understood that they must not go to their mother's room before a certain hour, they peeped in at the door continually; and these morning inroads, made in defiance of the original compact, were delicious moments for all three. Marie sprang upon the bed to put his arms around his idolized mother, and Louis, kneeling by the pillow, took her hand in his. Then came inquiries, anxious as a lover's, followed by angelic laughter, passionate childish kisses, eloquent silences, lispings words, and the little ones' stories interrupted and resumed by a kiss, stories seldom finished, though the listener's interest never failed.

"Have you been industrious?" their mother would ask, but in tones so sweet and so kindly that she seemed ready to pity laziness as a misfortune, and to glance through tears at the child who was satisfied with himself.

She knew that the thought of pleasing her put energy into the children's work; and they knew that their mother lived for them, and that all her thoughts and her time were given to them. A wonderful instinct, neither selfishness nor reason, perhaps the first innocent beginnings of sentiment teaches children to know whether or not they are the first and sole thought, to find out those who love to think of them and for them. If you really love children, the dear little ones, with open hearts and unerring sense of justice, are marvelously ready to respond to love. Their love knows passion and jealousy and the most gracious delicacy of feeling; they find the tenderest words of expression; they trust you—put an entire belief in you. Perhaps there are no undutiful children without undutiful mothers, for a child's affection is always in proportion to the affection that it receives—in early care, in the first words that it hears, in the response of the eyes to which a child first looks for love and life. All these things draw them closer to the mother or drive them apart. God lays the child under the mother's heart, that she may learn that for a long time to come her heart must be its home. And yet—there are mothers cruelly slighted, mothers whose sublime, pathetic tenderness meets only a harsh return, a hideous ingratitude which shows how difficult it is to lay down hard—and-fast rules in matters of feeling.

Here, not one of all the thousand heart ties that bind child and mother had been broken. The three were alone in the world; they lived one life, a life of close sympathy. If Mme. Willemsens was silent in the morning, Louis and Marie would not speak, respecting everything in her, even those thoughts which they did not share. But the older boy, with a precocious power of thought, would not rest satisfied with his mother's assertion that she was perfectly well. He scanned her face with uneasy forebodings; the exact danger he did not know, but dimly he felt it threatening in those purple rings about her eyes, in the deepening hollows under them, and the feverish red that

La Grenadiere

deepened in her face. If Marie's play began to tire her, his sensitive tact was quick to discover this, and he would call to his brother:

"Come, Marie! let us run in to breakfast, I am hungry!"

But when they reached the door, he would look back to catch the expression on his mother's face. She still could find a smile for him, nay, often there were tears in her eyes when some little thing revealed her child's exquisite feeling, a too early comprehension of sorrow.

Mme. Willemsens dressed during the children's early breakfast and game of play; she was coquettish for her darlings; she wished to be pleasing in their eyes; for them she would fain be in all things lovely, a gracious vision, with the charm of some sweet perfume of which one can never have enough.

She was always dressed in time to hear their lessons, which lasted from ten till three, with an interval at noon for lunch, the three taking the meal together in the summer-house. After lunch the children played for an hour, while she—poor woman and happy mother—lay on a long sofa in the summer-house, so placed that she could look out over the soft, ever-changing country of Touraine, a land that you learn to see afresh in all the thousand chance effects produced by daylight and sky and the time of year.

The children scampered through the orchard, scrambled about the terraces, chased the lizards, scarcely less nimble than they; investigating flowers and seeds and insects, continually referring all questions to their mother, running to and fro between the garden and the summer-house. Children have no need of toys in the country, everything amuses them.

Mme. Willemsens sat at her embroidery during their lessons. She never spoke, nor did she look at masters or pupils; but she followed attentively all that was said, striving to gather the sense of the words to gain a general idea of Louis' progress. If Louis asked a question that puzzled his master, his mother's eyes suddenly lighted up, and she would smile and glance at him with hope in her eyes. Of Marie she asked little. Her desire was with her eldest son. Already she treated him, as it were, respectfully, using all a woman's, all a mother's tact to arouse the spirit of high endeavor in the boy, to teach him to think of himself as capable of great things. She did this with a secret purpose, which Louis was to understand in the future; nay, he understood it already.

Always, the lesson over, she went as far as the gate with the master, and asked strict account of Louis' progress. So kindly and so winning was her manner, that his tutors told her the truth, pointing out where Louis was weak, so that she might help him in his lessons. Then came dinner, and play after dinner, then a walk, and lessons were learned till bedtime.

So their days went. It was a uniform but full life; work and amusements left them not a dull hour in the day. Discouragement and quarreling were impossible. The mother's boundless love made everything smooth. She taught her little sons moderation by refusing them nothing, and submission by making them see underlying Necessity in its many forms; she put heart into them with timely praise; developing and strengthening all that was best in their natures with the care of a good fairy. Tears sometimes rose to her burning eyes as she watched them play, and thought how they had never caused her the slightest vexation. Happiness so far-reaching and complete brings such tears, because for us it represents the dim imaginings of Heaven which we all of us form in our minds.

Those were delicious hours spent on that sofa in the garden-house, in looking out on sunny days over the wide stretches of river and the picturesque landscape, listening to the sound of her children's voices as they laughed at their own laughter, to the little quarrels that told most plainly of their union of heart, of Louis' paternal care of Marie, of the love that both of them felt for her. They spoke English and French equally well (they had had an English nurse since their babyhood), so their mother talked to them in both languages; directing the bent of their childish minds with admirable skill, admitting no fallacious reasoning, no bad principle. She ruled by kindness,

La Grenadiere

concealing nothing, explaining everything. If Louis wished for books, she was careful to give him interesting yet accurate books—books of biography, the lives of great seamen, great captains, and famous men, for little incidents in their history gave her numberless opportunities of explaining the world and life to her children. She would point out the ways in which men, really great in themselves, had risen from obscurity; how they had started from the lowest ranks of society, with no one to look to but themselves, and achieved noble destinies.

These readings, and they were not the least useful of Louis' lessons, took place while little Marie slept on his mother's knee in the quiet of the summer night, and the Loire reflected the sky; but when they ended, this adorable woman's sadness always seemed to be doubled; she would cease to speak, and sit motionless and pensive, and her eyes would fill with tears.

"Mother, why are you crying?" Louis asked one balmy June evening, just as the twilight of a soft-lit night succeeded to a hot day.

Deeply moved by his trouble, she put her arm about the child's neck and drew him to her.

"Because, my boy, the lot of Jameray Duval, the poor and friendless lad who succeeded at last, will be your lot, yours and your brother's, and I have brought it upon you. Before very long, dear child, you will be alone in the world, with no one to help or befriend you. While you are still children, I shall leave you, and yet, if only I could wait till you are big enough and know enough to be Marie's guardian! But I shall not live so long. I love you so much that it makes me very unhappy to think of it. Dear children, if only you do not curse me some day!——"

"But why should I curse you some day, mother?"

"Some day," she said, kissing him on the forehead, "you will find out that I have wronged you. I am going to leave you, here, without money, without"—and she hesitated—"without a father," she added, and at the word she burst into tears and put the boy from her gently. A sort of intuition told Louis that his mother wished to be alone, and he carried off Marie, now half awake. An hour later, when his brother was in bed, he stole down and out to the summer-house where his mother was sitting.

"Louis! come here."

The words were spoken in tones delicious to his heart. The boy sprang to his mother's arms, and the two held each other in an almost convulsive embrace.

"Cherie," he said at last, the name by which he often called her, finding that even loving words were too weak to express his feeling, "cherie, why are you afraid that you are going to die?"

"I am ill, my poor darling; every day I am losing strength, and there is no cure for my illness; I know that."

"What is the matter with you?"

"Something that I ought to forget; something that you must never know. —You must not know what caused my death."

The boy was silent for a while. He stole a glance now and again at his mother; and she, with her eyes raised to the sky, was watching the clouds. It was a sad, sweet moment. Louis could not believe that his mother would die soon, but instinctively he felt trouble which he could not guess. He respected her long musings. If he had been rather older, he would have read happy memories blended with thoughts of repentance, the whole story of a woman's life in that sublime face—the careless childhood, the loveless marriage, a terrible passion, flowers springing up in storm and struck down by the thunderbolt into an abyss from which there is no return.

La Grenadiere

"Darling mother," Louis said at last, "why do you hide your pain from me?"

"My boy, we ought to hide our troubles from strangers," she said; "we should show them a smiling face, never speak of ourselves to them, nor think about ourselves; and these rules, put in practice in family life, conduce to its happiness. You will have much to bear one day! Ah me! then think of your poor mother who died smiling before your eyes, hiding her sufferings from you, and you will take courage to endure the ills of life."

She choked back her tears, and tried to make the boy understand the mechanism of existence, the value of money, the standing and consideration that it gives, and its bearing on social position; the honorable means of gaining a livelihood, and the necessity of a training. Then she told him that one of the chief causes of her sadness and her tears was the thought that, on the morrow of her death, he and Marie would be left almost resourceless, with but a slender stock of money, and no friend but God.

"How quick I must be about learning!" cried Louis, giving her a piteous, searching look.

"Oh! how happy I am!" she said, showering kisses and tears on her son. "He understands me!—Louis," she went on, "you will be your brother's guardian, will you not? You promise me that? You are no longer a child!"

"Yes, I promise," he said; "but you are not going to die yet—say that you are not going to die!"

"Poor little ones!" she replied, "love for you keeps the life in me. And this country is so sunny, the air is so bracing, perhaps——"

"You make me love Touraine more than ever," said the child.

From that day, when Mme. Willemsens, foreseeing the approach of death, spoke to Louis of his future, he concentrated his attention on his work, grew more industrious, and less inclined to play than heretofore. When he had coaxed Marie to read a book and to give up boisterous games, there was less noise in the hollow pathways and gardens and terraced walks of La Grenadiere. They adapted their lives to their mother's melancholy. Day by day her face was growing pale and wan, there were hollows now in her temples, the lines in her forehead grew deeper night after night.

August came. The little family had been five months at La Grenadiere, and their whole life was changed. The old servant grew anxious and gloomy as she watched the almost imperceptible symptoms of slow decline in the mistress, who seemed to be kept in life by an impassioned soul and intense love of her children. Old Annette seemed to see that death was very near. That mistress, beautiful still, was more careful of her appearance than she had ever been; she was at pains to adorn her wasted self, and wore paint on her cheeks; but often while she walked on the upper terrace with the children, Annette's wrinkled face would peer out from between the savin trees by the pump. The old woman would forget her work, and stand with wet linen in her hands, scarce able to keep back her tears at the sight of Mme. Willemsens, so little like the enchanting woman she once had been.

The pretty house itself, once so gay and bright, looked melancholy; it was a very quiet house now, and the family seldom left it, for the walk to the bridge was too great an effort for Mme. Willemsens. Louis had almost identified himself, as it were, with his mother, and with his suddenly developed powers of imagination he saw the weariness and exhaustion under the red color, and constantly found reasons for taking some shorter walk.

So happy couples coming to Saint-Cyr, then the Petite Courtille of Tours, and knots of folk out for their evening walk along the "dike," saw a pale, thin figure dressed in black, a woman with a worn yet bright face, gliding like a shadow along the terraces. Great suffering cannot be concealed. The vinedresser's household had grown quiet also. Sometimes the laborer and his wife and children were gathered about the door of their cottage, while Annette was washing linen at the well-head, and Mme. Willemsens and the children sat in the summer-house,

La Grenadiere

and there was not the faintest sound in those gardens gay with flowers. Unknown to Mme. Willemsens, all eyes grew pitiful at the sight of her, she was so good, so thoughtful, so dignified with those with whom she came in contact.

And as for her.—When the autumn days came on, days so sunny and bright in Touraine, bringing with them grapes and ripe fruits and healthful influences which must surely prolong life in spite of the ravages of mysterious disease—she saw no one but her children, taking the utmost that the hour could give her, as if each hour had been her last.

Louis had worked at night, unknown to his mother, and made immense progress between June and September. In algebra he had come as far as equations with two unknown quantities; he had studied descriptive geometry, and drew admirably well; in fact, he was prepared to pass the entrance examination of the Ecole polytechnique.

Sometimes of an evening he went down to the bridge of Tours. There was a lieutenant there on half-pay, an Imperial naval officer, whose manly face, medal, and gait had made an impression on the boy's imagination, and the officer on his side had taken a liking to the lad, whose eyes sparkled with energy. Louis, hungering for tales of adventure, and eager for information, used to follow in the lieutenant's wake for the chance of a chat with him. It so happened that the sailor had a friend and comrade in the colonel of a regiment of infantry, struck off the rolls like himself; and young Louis—Gaston had a chance of learning what life was like in camp or on board a man-of-war. Of course, he plied the veterans with questions; and when he had made up his mind to the hardships of their rough callings, he asked his mother's leave to take country walks by way of amusement. Mme. Willemsens was beyond measure glad that he should ask; the boy's astonished masters had told her that he was overworking himself. So Louis went for long walks. He tried to inure himself to fatigue, climbed the tallest trees with incredible quickness, learned to swim, watched through the night. He was not like the same boy; he was a young man already, with a sunburned face, and a something in his expression that told of deep purpose.

When October came, Mme. Willemsens could only rise at noon. The sunshine, reflected by the surface of the Loire, and stored up by the rocks, raised the temperature of the air till it was almost as warm and soft as the atmosphere of the Bay of Naples, for which reason the faculty recommend the place of abode. At mid-day she came out to sit under the shade of green leaves with the two boys, who never wandered from her now. Lessons had come to an end. Mother and children wished to live the life of heart and heart together, with no disturbing element, no outside cares. No tears now, no joyous outcries. The elder boy, lying in the grass at his mother's side, basked in her eyes like a lover and kissed her feet. Marie, the restless one, gathered flowers for her, and brought them with a subdued look, standing on tiptoe to put a girlish kiss on her lips. And the pale woman, with the great tired eyes and languid movements, never uttered a word of complaint, and smiled upon her children, so full of life and health—it was a sublime picture, lacking no melancholy autumn pomp of yellow leaves and half-despoiled branches, nor the softened sunlight and pale clouds of the skies of Touraine.

At last the doctor forbade Mme. Willemsens to leave her room. Every day it was brightened by the flowers that she loved, and her children were always with her. One day, early in November, she sat at the piano for the last time. A picture—a Swiss landscape—hung above the instrument; and at the window she could see her children standing with their heads close together. Again and again she looked from the children to the landscape, and then again at the children. Her face flushed, her fingers flew with passionate feeling over the ivory keys. This was her last great day, an unmarked day of festival, held in her own soul by the spirit of her memories. When the doctor came, he ordered her to stay in bed. The alarming dictum was received with bewildered silence.

When the doctor had gone, she turned to the older boy.

"Louis," she said, "take me out on the terrace, so that I may see my country once more."

La Grenadiere

The boy gave his arm at those simply uttered words, and brought his mother out upon the terrace; but her eyes turned, perhaps unconsciously, to heaven rather than to the earth, and indeed, it would have been hard to say whether heaven or earth was the fairer— for the clouds traced shadowy outlines, like the grandest Alpine glaciers, against the sky. Mme. Willemsens' brows contracted vehemently; there was a look of anguish and remorse in her eyes. She caught the children's hands, and clutched them to a heavily-throbbing heart.

"Parentage unknown!" she cried, with a look that went to their hearts. "Poor angels, what will become of you? And when you are twenty years old, what strict account may you not require of my life and your own?"

She put the children from her, and leaning her arms upon the balustrade, stood for a while hiding her face, alone with herself, fearful of all eyes. When she recovered from the paroxysm, she saw Louis and Marie kneeling on either side of her, like two angels; they watched the expression of her face, and smiled lovingly at her.

"If only I could take that smile with me!" she said, drying her eyes.

Then she went into the house and took to the bed, which she would only leave for her coffin.

A week went by, one day exactly like another. Old Annette and Louis took it in turns to sit up with Mme. Willemsens, never taking their eyes from the invalid. It was the deeply tragical hour that comes in all our lives, the hour of listening in terror to every deep breath lest it should be the last, a dark hour protracted over many days. On the fifth day of that fatal week the doctor interdicted flowers in the room. The illusions of life were going one by one.

Then Marie and his brother felt their mother's lips hot as fire beneath their kisses; and at last, on the Saturday evening, Mme. Willemsens was too ill to bear the slightest sound, and her room was left in disorder. This neglect for a woman of refined taste, who clung so persistently to the graces of life, meant the beginning of the death-agony. After this, Louis refused to leave his mother. On Sunday night, in the midst of the deepest silence, when Louis thought that she had grown drowsy, he saw a white, moist hand move the curtain in the lamplight.

"My son!" she said. There was something so solemn in the dying woman's tones, that the power of her wrought-up soul produced a violent reaction on the boy; he felt an intense heat pass through the marrow of his bones.

"What is it, mother?"

"Listen! To-morrow all will be over for me. We shall see each other no more. To-morrow you will be a man, my child. So I am obliged to make some arrangements, which must remain a secret, known only to us. Take the key of my little table. That is it. Now open the drawer. You will find two sealed papers to the left. There is the name of LOUIS on one, and on the other MARIE."

"Here they are, mother."

"Those are your certificates of birth, darling; you will want them. Give them to our poor, old Annette to keep for you; ask her for them when you need them. Now," she continued, "is there not another paper as well, something in my handwriting?"

"Yes, mother," and Louis began to read, "MARIE WILLEMSSENS, BORN AT-----"

"That is enough," she broke in quickly, "do not go on. When I am dead, give that paper, too, to Annette, and tell her to send it to the registrar at Saint-Cyr; it will be wanted if my certificate of death is to be made out in due form. Now find writing materials for a letter which I will dictate to you."

La Grenadiere

When she saw that he was ready to begin, and turned towards her for the words, they came from her quietly:—

"Monsieur le Comte, your wife, Lady Brandon, died at Saint-Cyr, near Tours, in the department of Indre-et-Loire. She forgave you."

"Sign yourself———" she stopped, hesitating and perturbed.

"Are you feeling worse?" asked Louis.

"Put 'Louis-Gaston,' " she went on.

She sighed, then she went on.

"Seal the letter, and direct it. To Lord Brandon, Brandon Square, Hyde Park, London, Angleterre.—That is right. When I am dead, post the letter in Tours, and prepay the postage.—Now," she added, after a pause, "take the little pocketbook that you know, and come here, my dear child. . . . There are twelve thousand francs in it," she said, when Louis had returned to her side. "That is all your own. Oh me! you would have been better off if your father——"

"My father," cried the boy, "where is he?"

"He is dead," she said, laying her finger on her lips; "he died to save my honor and my life."

She looked upwards. If any tears had been left to her, she would have wept for pain.

"Louis," she continued, "swear to me, as I lie here, that you will forget all that you have written, all that I have told you."

"Yes, mother."

"Kiss me, dear angel."

She was silent for a long while, she seemed to be drawing strength from God, and to be measuring her words by the life that remained in her.

"Listen," she began. "Those twelve thousand francs are all that you have in the world. You must keep the money upon you, because when I am dead the lawyers will come and seal everything up. Nothing will be yours then, not even your mother. All that remains for you to do will be to go out, poor orphan children, God knows where. I have made Annette's future secure. She will have an annuity of a hundred crowns, and she will stay at Tours no doubt. But what will you do for yourself and your brother?"

She raised herself, and looked at the brave child, standing by her bedside. There were drops of perspiration on his forehead, he was pale with emotion, and his eyes were dim with tears.

"I have thought it over, mother," he answered in a deep voice. "I will take Marie to the school here in Tours. I will give ten thousand francs to our old Annette, and ask her to take care of them, and to look after Marie. Then, with the remaining two thousand francs, I will go to Brest, and go to sea as an apprentice. While Marie is at school, I will rise to be a lieutenant on board a man-of-war. There, after all, die in peace, my mother; I shall come back again a rich man, and our little one shall go to the Ecole polytechnique, and I will find a career to suit his bent."

La Grenadiere

A gleam of joy shone in the dying woman's eyes. Two tears brimmed over, and fell over her fevered cheeks; then a deep sigh escaped between her lips. The sudden joy of finding the father's spirit in the son, who had grown all at once to be a man, almost killed her.

"Angel of heaven," she cried, weeping, "by one word you have effaced all my sorrows. Ah! I can bear them.—This is my son," she said, "I bore, I reared this man," and she raised her hands above her, and clasped them as if in ecstasy, then she lay back on the pillow.

"Mother, your face is growing pale!" cried the lad.

"Some one must go for a priest," she answered, with a dying voice.

Louis wakened Annette, and the terrified old woman hurried to the parsonage at Saint-Cyr.

When morning came, Mme. Willemsens received the sacrament amid the most touching surroundings. Her children were kneeling in the room, with Annette and the vinedresser's family, simple folk, who had already become part of the household. The silver crucifix, carried by a chorister, a peasant child from the village, was lifted up, and the dying mother received the Viaticum from an aged priest. The Viaticum! sublime word, containing an idea yet more sublime, an idea only possessed by the apostolic religion of the Roman church.

"This woman has suffered greatly!" the old cure said in his simple way.

Marie Willemsens heard no voices now, but her eyes were still fixed upon her children. Those about her listened in terror to her breathing in the deep silence; already it came more slowly, though at intervals a deep sigh told them that she still lived, and of a struggle within her; then at last it ceased. Every one burst into tears except Marie. He, poor child, was still too young to know what death meant.

Annette and the vinedresser's wife closed the eyes of the adorable woman, whose beauty shone out in all its radiance after death. Then the women took possession of the chamber of death, removed the furniture, wrapped the dead in her winding-sheet, and laid her upon the couch. They lit tapers about her, and arranged everything—the crucifix, the sprigs of box, and the holy-water stoup—after the custom of the countryside, bolting the shutters and drawing the curtains. Later the curate came to pass the night in prayer with Louis, who refused to leave his mother. On Tuesday morning an old woman and two children and a vinedresser's wife followed the dead to her grave. These were the only mourners. Yet this was a woman whose wit and beauty and charm had won a European reputation, a woman whose funeral, if it had taken place in London, would have been recorded in pompous newspaper paragraphs, as a sort of aristocratic rite, if she had not committed the sweetest of crimes, a crime always expiated in this world, so that the pardoned spirit may enter heaven. Marie cried when they threw the earth on his mother's coffin; he understood that he should see her no more.

A simple, wooden cross, set up to mark her grave, bore this inscription, due to the cure of Saint-Cyr:—

HERE LIES AN UNHAPPY WOMAN, WHO DIED AT THE AGE OF THIRTY-SIX. KNOWN IN HEAVEN BY THE NAME OF AUGUSTA. Pray for her!

When all was over, the children came back to La Grenadiere to take a last look at their home; then, hand in hand, they turned to go with Annette, leaving the vinedresser in charge, with directions to hand over everything duly to the proper authorities.

At this moment, Annette called to Louis from the steps by the kitchen door, and took him aside with, "Here is madame's ring, Monsieur Louis."

La Grenadiere

The sight of this vivid remembrance of his dead mother moved him so deeply that he wept. In his fortitude, he had not even thought of this supreme piety; and he flung his arms round the old woman's neck. Then the three set out down the beaten path, and the stone staircase, and so to Tours, without turning their heads.

"Mamma used to come there!" Marie said when they reached the bridge.

Annette had a relative, a retired dressmaker, who lived in the Rue de la Guerche. She took the two children to this cousin's house, meaning that they should live together thenceforth. But Louis told her of his plans, gave Marie's certificate of birth and the ten thousand francs into her keeping, and the two went the next morning to take Marie to school.

Louis very briefly explained his position to the headmaster, and went. Marie came with him as far as the gateway. There Louis gave solemn parting words of the tenderest counsel, telling Marie that he would now be left alone in the world. He looked at his brother for a moment, and put his arms about him, took one more long look, brushed a tear from his eyes, and went, turning again and again till the very last to see his brother standing there in the gateway of the school.

A month later Louis–Gaston, now an apprentice on board a man–of–war, left the harbor of Rochefort. Leaning over the bulwarks of the corvette Iris, he watched the coast of France receding swiftly till it became indistinguishable from the faint blue horizon line. In a little while he felt that he was really alone, and lost in the wide ocean, lost and alone in the world and in life.

"There is no need to cry, lad; there is a God for us all," said an old sailor, with rough kindness in his thick voice.

The boy thanked him with pride in his eyes. Then he bowed his head, and resigned himself to a sailor's life. He was a father.

ANGOULEME, August, 1832.

ADDENDUM

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

Brandon, Lady Marie Augusta The Member for Arcis The Lily of the Valley La Grenadiere

Gaston, Louis La Grenadiere Letters of Two Brides

Gaston, Marie La Grenadiere Letters of Two Brides The Member for Arcis