

DON'T forget you are going to Aunt Alicia's. Do you hear me, Gilberte? Come here and let me do your curls, Gilberte, do you hear me?'

'Couldn't I go there without having my hair curled, Grandmamma?'

'I don't think so!' said Madame Alvarez, quietly. She took an old pair of curling-irons, with prongs that ended in little round metal knobs, and put them to heat over the blue flame of a spirit-lamp while she prepared the tissue-papers.

'Grandmamma, couldn't you crimp my hair in waves down the side of my head for a change?'

'Out of the question. Ringlets at the very ends – that's as far as a girl of your age can possibly go. Now sit down on the footstool.'

To do so, Gilberte folded up under her the heron-like legs of a girl of fifteen. Below her tartan skirt, she revealed ribbed cotton stockings to just above the knees, unconscious of the perfect oval shape of her knee-caps. Slender calf and high-arched instep – Madame Alvarez never let her eyes run over these fine points without regretting that her granddaughter had not studied dancing professionally. At the moment she was thinking only of the girl's hair. She had corkscrewed the ends and fixed them in tissue-paper, and was now compressing the ash-blonde ringlets between the heated knobs. With patient, soft-fingered skill, she gathered up the full magnificent weight of finely kept hair into sleek ripples which fell to just below Gilberte's shoulders. The girl sat quite still. The smell of the heated tongs, and the whiff of vanilla in the curling-papers, made her feel drowsy. Besides, Gilberte knew that resistance would be useless. She hardly ever tried to elude the authority exercised by her family.

'Is Mamma singing Frasquita today?'

'Yes. And this evening in *Si j'étais Roi*. I have told you before, when you're sitting on a low seat you must keep your knees close to each other, and lean both of them to-

gether, either to the right or to the left, for the sake of decorum.'

'But, Grandmamma, I've got on my drawers and my petticoat.'

'Drawers are one thing, decorum is another,' said Madame Alvarez. 'Everything depends on the attitude.'

'Yes. I know. Aunt Alicia has told me often enough,' Gilberte murmured from under her tent of hair.

'I do not require the help of my sister,' said Madame Alvarez testily, 'to instruct you in the elements of propriety. On that subject, thank goodness, I know rather more than she does.'

'Supposing you let me stay here with you today, Grandmamma, couldn't I go and see Aunt Alicia next Sunday?'

'What next!' said Madame Alvarez haughtily. 'Have you any other *purposal* to make to me?'

'Yes, I have,' said Gilberte. 'Have my skirts made a little longer, so I don't have to fold myself up in a Z every time I sit down. . . . You see, Grandmamma, with my skirts too short, I have to keep thinking of my you-know-what.'

'Silence! Aren't you ashamed to call it your you-know-what?'

'I don't mind calling it by any other name, only . . .'

Madame Alvarez blew out the spirit-lamp, looked at the reflection of her heavy Spanish face in the looking-glass above the mantelpiece, and then laid down the law.

'There is no other name.'

A sceptical look passed across the girl's eyes. Beneath the cockle-shells of fair hair they showed a lovely dark blue, the colour of glistening slate. Gilberte unfolded with a bound.

'But, Grandmamma, all the same, do look! If only my skirts were just that much longer! Or if a small frill could be added!'

'That *would* be nice for your mother, to be seen about with a great gawk looking at least eighteen! In her profession! Where are your brains!'

'In my head,' said Gilberte. 'Since I hardly ever go out with Mamma, what would it matter?'

She pulled down her skirt, which had rucked up towards her slim waist, and asked, 'Can I go in my everyday coat? It's quite good enough.'

'That wouldn't show that it's Sunday! Put on your serge coat and blue sailor-hat. When will you learn what's what?'

When on her feet, Gilberte was as tall as her grandmother. Madame Alvarez had taken the name of a Spanish lover now dead, and accordingly had acquired a creamy complexion, an ample bust, and hair lustrous with brilliantine. She used too white a powder, her heavy cheeks had begun to draw down her lower eyelids a little, and so eventually she took to calling herself Inez. Her unchartered family pursued their fixed orbit around her. Her unmarried daughter Andrée, forsaken by Gilberte's father, now preferred the sober life of a second-lead singer in a State-controlled theatre to the fitful opulence of a life of gallantry. Aunt Alicia – none of her admirers, it seemed, had even mentioned marriage – lived alone, on an income she pretended was modest. The family had a high opinion of Alicia's judgment, and of her jewels.

Madame Alvarez looked her granddaughter up and down, from the felt sailor-hat trimmed with a quill to the ready-made Cavalier shoes.

'Can't you ever manage to keep your legs together? When you stand like that, the Seine could flow between them. You haven't the shadow of a stomach, and yet you somehow contrive to stick it out. And don't forget your gloves, I beg of you.'

Gilberte's every posture was still governed by the unconcern of childish innocence. At times she looked like Robin Hood, at others like a carved angel, or again like a boy in skirts; but she seldom resembled a nearly grown up girl. 'How can you expect to be put into long skirts, when you haven't the sense of a child of eight?' Madame Alvarez asked. And Andrée sighed, 'I find Gilberte so discourag-

ing.' To which Gilberte answered quietly, 'If you didn't find *me* discouraging, then you'd find something else.' For she was sweet and gentle, resigned to a stay-at-home life and seeing few people outside the family. As for her features, no one could yet predict their final mould. A large mouth, which showed beautiful strong white teeth when she laughed, no chin to speak of, and, between high cheekbones, a nose – 'Heavens, where did she get that button?' whispered her mother under her breath. 'If you can't answer that question, my girl, who can?' retorted Madame Alvarez. Whereupon Andrée, who had become prudish too late in life and disgruntled too soon, relapsed into silence, automatically stroking her sensitive larynx. 'Gigi is just a bundle of raw material,' Aunt Alicia affirmed. 'It may turn out very well – and, just as easily, all wrong.'

'Grandmamma, there's the bell! I'll open the door on my way out.'

'Grandmamma,' she shouted from the passage, 'it's Uncle Gaston! !'

She came back into the room with a tall, youngish-looking man, her arm linked through his, chattering to him with the childish pomposity of a schoolgirl out of class.

'What a pity it is, Tonton, that I've got to desert you so soon! Grandmamma wishes me to pay a call on Aunt Alicia. Which motor-car are you out in today? Did you come in the new four-seater de Dion-Bouton with the collapsible hood? I hear it can be driven simply with one hand! Goodness, Tonton, those are smart gloves, and no mistake! So you've had a row with Liane, Tonton?'

'Gilberte!' scolded Madame Alvarez. 'What business of yours can that be?'

'But Grandmamma, everybody knows about it. The whole story came out in *Gil Blas*. It began: *A secret bitterness is seeping into the sweet product of the sugar beet . . .* At school, all the girls were asking me about it, for of course they know I know you. And I can tell you, Tonton, there's not a soul at school who takes Liane's side! They all agree that she's behaved disgracefully!'

'Gilberte!' repeated Madame Alvarez. 'Say goodbye to Monsieur Lachaille, and run along!'

'Leave her alone, poor child,' Gaston Lachaille sighed. 'She, at any rate, intends no harm. And it's perfectly true that all's over between Liane and me. You're off to Aunt Alicia's, Gigi? Take my motor-car and send it back for me.'

Gilberte gave a little cry, a jump for joy, and hugged Lachaille.

'Thank you, Tonton! Just think of Aunt Alicia's face! The concierge's eyes will be popping from her head!'

Off she went, with the clatter of a young filly not yet shod.

'You spoil her, Gaston,' said Madame Alvarez.

But in this she was not altogether speaking the truth. Gaston Lachaille did not know how to 'spoil' anyone – even himself. His luxuries were cut and dried: motor-cars, a dreary mansion on the Parc Monceau, Liane's monthly allowance and birthday jewels, champagne and baccarat at Deauville in the summer, at Monte Carlo in the winter. From time to time he would drop a fat cheque into some charity fund, or finance a new daily paper, or buy a yacht only to resell it almost at once to some Central European monarch: yet from none of this did he get any fun. He would say, as he looked at himself in the glass, 'That's the face of a man who is branded.' Because of his rather long nose and large dark eyes he was regarded on all sides as easy game. His commercial instinct and rich man's caution stood him in good stead, however; no one had succeeded in robbing him of his pearl studs, of his massive gold or silver cigarette-cases encrusted with precious stones, of his dark sable-lined top coat.

From the window he watched his motor-car start up. That year, fashionable automobiles were being built with a slightly higher body and a rather wider top, to accommodate the exaggerated hats affected by Caroline Otero, Liane de Pougy, and other conspicuous figures of 1899: and, in consequence, they would sway gently at every turn of the wheel.

'Mamita,' said Gaston Lachaille, 'you wouldn't make me a cup of camomile?'

'Two rather than one,' answered Madame Alvarez. 'Sit down, my poor Gaston.'

From the depths of a dilapidated armchair she removed some crumpled illustrated papers, a stocking waiting to be darned, and a box of liquorice allsorts, known as *agents de change*. The jilted man settled down into it luxuriously, while his hostess put out the tray and two cups.

'Why does the camomile they brew at home always smell of faded chrysanthemums?' sighed Gaston.

'It's simply a matter of taking pains. You may not believe it, Gaston, but I often picked my best camomile flowers in Paris, on waste ground, insignificant little flowers you would hardly notice. But they have a taste that is *unesteemable*. My goodness, what beautiful cloth your suit is made of! That deep-woven stripe is as smart as can be. Just the sort of material your father liked! But, I must confess, he would never have carried it with such distinction.'

Never more than once during the course of a conversation did Madame Alvarez evoke the memory of an elder Lachaille, whom she claimed to have known intimately. From her former relationship, real or invented, she drew no advantage other than the close friendship of Gaston Lachaille, and the pleasure to be derived from watching a rich man enjoying the comforts of the poor when he made himself at home in her old armchair. Under their gas-blackened ceiling, these three feminine creatures never asked him for pearls, chinchillas, or solitaire diamonds, and they knew how to converse with tact and due solemnity on scandalous topics traditional and recondite. From the age of twelve, Gigi had known that Madame Otero's string of large black pearls were 'dipped' – that is to say, artificially tinted – while the three strings of her matchlessly graded pearl necklace were worth 'a king's ransom'; that Madame de Pougy's seven rows lacked 'life'; that Eugénie Fougère's famous diamond bolero was quite worthless;

and that no self-respecting woman gadded about, like Madame Antokolski, in a coupé upholstered in mauve satin. She had obediently broken her friendship with a school friend, Lydia Poret, after the girl had shown her a *solitaire*, set as a ring, the gift of Baron Ephraim.

'A *solitaire*!' Madame Alvarez had exclaimed. 'For a girl of fifteen! Her mother must be mad!'

'But Grandmamma,' pleaded Gigi, 'it's not Lydia's fault if the Baron gave it to her!'

'Silence! I'm not blaming the Baron. The Baron knows what is expected of him. But plain common-sense should have told the mother to put the ring in a safe at the Bank, while waiting.'

'While waiting for what, Grandmamma?'

'To see how things turn out.'

'Why not in her jewel-case?'

'Because one never knows. Especially as the Baron is the sort of man who might change his mind. If, on the other hand, he has declared himself openly, Madame Poret has only to withdraw her daughter from her studies. Until the matter has been properly cleared up, you will oblige me by not walking home with that little Poret. Whoever heard of such a thing!'

'But supposing she marries, Grandmamma?'

'Marries? Marries whom, pray?'

'Why, the Baron!'

Madame Alvarez and her daughter exchanged glances of stupefaction. 'I find the child so discouraging,' Andrée had murmured. 'She comes from another planet.'

'My poor Gaston,' said Madame Alvarez, 'is it really true, then, that you have broken with her? In some ways it may be the best thing for you; but in others I'm sure you must find it most upsetting. Whom can one trust, I ask you!'

Poor Gaston listened while he drank the scalding camomile. The taste of it gave him as much comfort as the sight of the plaster rose on the ceiling, still black from the hanging lamp now 'converted to electricity', and still faith-