

**POPULAR FRENCH
NOVELS. A
WOMAN'S DIARY, AND
THE LITTLE COUNTESS**

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Popular French Novels. A Woman's Diary, and the Little Countess by Octave Feuillet

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BY OCTAVE FEUILLET.



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A WOMAN'S DIARY.

PART I.

May, 1872.

WHEN I was at the convent, my quarterly reports almost invariably ended with this definition of my moral character : "Happy disposition, sound mind, gravity beyond her years, well-balanced nature. Conscience, however, a little uneasy."

"Conscience a little uneasy"—I do not deny it ; but as to the rest, asking pardon of these ladies, I must be allowed to assert the direct opposite. And as my beloved instructresses were mistaken, it is not astonishing that the world should be deceived also. I fancy that the cause of these false judgments is my external appearance. I am a dark brunette and pale ; my expression, of a tiresome unchangeability, is as severe as that of a young girl can be. Somewhat pronounced near-sightedness lends a look of sleepy indifference to my black eyes (whose brilliancy would without this troublesome circumstance certainly be too striking). Besides, I have naturally a calm manner of speaking, walking, sitting, and of moving noiselessly, which gives an observer an illusory impression of tranquil serenity. I have neither the desire nor the means of correcting the opinion of the public in this respect ; and, until there is a new order of things, my locked diary alone will know that this grave, wise, and well-balanced Charlotte is at heart an excessively romantic and impulsive young person.

And this is precisely why I am so late in beginning this magnificent locked diary, which I so enthusiastically bought three days after I left the convent, and which has waited three years for my first confidences. Twenty times have I seated myself before its white pages, burning—like King Midas's barber—to intrust my secrets to them; twenty times my "uneasy conscience" has made me throw aside my pen. This conscience said to me that I was about to undertake an imprudent and foolish thing; that the habit of recording my impressions, of analysing my emotions, of nursing my dreams and giving substance to them, would have one inevitable consequence—that of bringing to the surface those romantic and passionate depths which are dangerous to a woman, which might prove fatal to the repose and dignity of my life, and which I ought rather to force myself unceasingly to suppress and extinguish.

Something my grandmother said this evening has, thank heaven! removed these scruples. We had had some people to dinner. Afterwards we played the game of "secretary," which consists of writing questions on slips of paper, folding them, and shaking them together in a basket; each player draws a question by chance, and replies to it as best he may. But one of our guests, a young deputy, who prides himself on his profundity, always managed in some way to keep his own question in order to reply to it the more brilliantly. On one occasion he asked himself, "What kind of a woman best performs her duty?" I was charged with the collection of the little slips, and I read his question and at the same time his reply, which was worded thus: "The woman who best performs her duty is one who does not seek romance in life, for no real good comes of it; who does not seek poetry in it, for duty is not poetic; who does not seek in it passion, for passion is only a polite name for vice."

A concert of flattering murmurs, in which I had the

cowardice to join, greeted this elegant maxim, during which the author betrayed his incognito by a modest smile. He was disconcerted, however, by an exclamation from my grandmother, who had abruptly suspended her netting. "Oh! oh! pardon me!" cried she, "but I cannot let such heresies pass before these young women. Under pretext of making dutiful women, would you make fools, young puritan? In the first place, I do not understand this mania for always opposing passion to duty—passion on this side, duty on that—as if one were necessarily the opposite of the other. But we can put passion into duty, and we not only can, but ought; and I would even say, my dear sir, that this is the secret of the lives of virtuous women, for duty all by itself is very dry, I assure you. You say that it is not poetic. That is certainly my opinion, but it must become so before any one can take pleasure in it; and it is precisely in rendering vulgar duty poetic that these romantic dispositions, against which you hurl your anathemas, serve us. If you ever marry, choose a woman who is not romantic, and see what will come of it."

"What will come of it?" asked the young deputy.

"Well, it will turn out that everything in her life will seem flat and insipid—her husband first, if you will excuse me; then her fireside, her children, even her religion. Ah! surely it is not against romantic ideas that the present generation has need of guarding itself, my dear sir, I assure you; the danger for the moment is not there; we do not perish from enthusiasm, we perish from platitude. But to return to our humble sex, which is alone in question: look at the women whom they talk about in Paris—I mean those whom they talk about too much; is it their poetic imagination that blinds them? Is it the search for the ideal that misleads them? Ah, great heaven, three-fourths of them have the emptiest brains and the barrenest imaginations in creation!

Ladies, and especially you young ladies," added my grandmother, "believe me, do not fetter yourselves. Be enthusiastic, be as romantic as you choose. Try to have a grain of poetry in your heads; you will be the more easily virtuous and the more surely happy. Poetic sentiment at the fireside of a woman is like music and incense in a church; it is the charm of right living!"

So spoke my dear grandmother, God bless her! and that is why I have at last opened, at midnight, and in peace with my conscience, my precious locked diary, and why I dare say to myself, "Good-night, romantic and impulsive Charlotte!"

May 20th.

Yesterday I was in my boudoir, torturing my piano and perfecting myself in my vocal exercises, when Cécile de Stèle, my friend from childhood and my dearest companion at the convent, rushed in like a whirlwind, as usual, seized my hands, turned her two rosy cheeks to me, and said, in her vehement and affectionate way, "Charlotte, are you always and ever my dear sister, my guide, my support, my little spiritual mother, my golden heart, and my ivory tower?"

"Why this litany, dear?"

"Because you can do me an immense service. Fancy that my father is going away—"

"The general going to leave Paris?"

"Oh! only for a few weeks. He is going to make a tour of inspection in the provinces. Meanwhile he sends me into the country, to my aunt De Lonvercy, in the department of the Eure, in the heart of the woods. My aunt is the best of women, but she lives alone in her château with her son, my cousin Roger, you know? who has been half mad ever since he was so frightfully wounded in the war; poor fellow! he has no longer a human figure—no arms, no legs! It is the *greatest pity*, you know, but—you can fancy what a house-