

**GÉRARD'S MARRIAGE: A
NOVEL FROM THE FRENCH
OF ANDRÉ THEURIET**

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Gérard's Marriage: A Novel from the French of André Theuriet by André Theuriet

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GÉRARD'S MARRIAGE.

I.

WHAT soothing voices there are in the provincial bells that still ring out the curfew in some of the small cities! This familiar music gently closes the labors of the day, and hushes the children to sleep in their cradles better than the nurse's lullaby. There is something comforting and sympathetic in these full, clear, and peaceful sounds. The curfew-bell of Juvigny-en-Barrois has these tones. Every evening—at eight o'clock in the winter and nine in the summer—its welcome voice is heard coming from the top of the massive clock-tower, the only ornament left in the mural crown of the ancient city by Louis XIV., the great dismantler of our Lorraine fortresses. At the moment when this story commences, a beautiful Sunday in July, 186-, the last vibrations of the bell had just died away along the vine-covered hills, where the

houses of Juvigny scattered about in the midst of the verdure descend toward the river Ornain, as an undisciplined flock of white sheep descend to the watering-place. In one of the deliciously green gardens behind the old houses of the upper city, a young man, resting his elbow on the terrace-wall, was gazing upon the declivities of the gorge of Polval, shut in between two vineyards, and already thrown into shadow by the twilight. The first stars were opening their diamond eyes above the forests bordering the horizon, and, in the distance, toward the woods, the rumbling of wagons resounded over the stony road, and then the sounds grew fainter as they passed farther away. In the midst of the comparative silence that succeeded the last notes of the bell, the east wind suddenly brought in joyous gusts the music of a rural ball hidden under the foliage of a neighboring grove. The young man raised his head and breathed long draughts of the sonorous air, as if he would drink in the melodious sounds scattered by the wind.

"Monsieur Gérard," cried the old house-servant suddenly behind him in strong nasal tones, "M. de Seigneulles has already gone to bed, Baptiste and I are going also ; don't you mean to come into the house soon ?"

"Presently, Manette."

The servant, having locked the gate that opened upon the vineyards, returned toward her young master.

"Good-night, then!" she said; "when you go up-stairs, don't forget to bolt the vestibule. You know your father does not like to sleep with the doors open."

"Yes, yes," he replied impatiently; "good-night!"

Gérard de Seigneulles was a young man twenty-three years old, tall and well-proportioned, though rather slight. His pale complexion and deep-blue eyes were in striking contrast with his black hair and dark beard. His countenance was mobile and nervous; the strong traits of character that found expression there were veiled and restrained by a singular timidity, and this strange blending gave to his whole bearing an appearance of reserve that was usually mistaken for an inflexible firmness. His father, a knight of St. Louis, who had been a *garde-du-corps* under the Restoration, had married late, and lost his wife a few years after his marriage. Gérard was M. de Seigneulles's only son, and had been brought up very strictly, in the old-fashioned way. The *chevalier*, as he was called at Juvigny, was an ardent and obstinate Legitimist, with little cultivation, but thoroughly upright and of proverbial loyalty. He believed in the passive obe-

dience of sons to parental authority until they became of age, and agreed with the ancient law which fixed the majority at twenty-five.

Gérard, when he was twelve years old, had been sent to a Jesuit college at Metz. He still remembered with a shudder the mortal terror that took possession of him when, on coming home for vacations, he brought back bad reports. He would often walk around the city five or six times before daring to enter the house and brave the outburst of his father's anger. Soon after his graduation he studied law at Nancy; but, even here, the same paternal severity made his life a burden. M. de Seigneulles found a boarding-place for his son with an aged relative who was very religious, and scarcely ever left the house. Gérard, in order to reach his own room, was obliged to pass through that of this respectable old dowager, which made it necessary for him to return home early, while her vigilance rendered impossible any attempt to escape at a later hour. The young man, under these conditions, did not feel anxious to lengthen out his law-studies. After having passed his examinations and received his degree, he had returned to Juvigny scarcely a fortnight before the events we are going to relate. In spite of this monastic education, Gérard loved the world with an intense affection, and the severe strictness to which he

was subjected weighed heavily upon his spirits. The instincts can no more be changed than the temperament, and the young law-student had an irresistible longing for terrestrial pleasures. The enjoyments of life had thus far been placed beyond his reach, and he determined to taste them to the full, if he could once lay hold of them. Unfortunately, on the first week after his return, he felt that his hopes were destined to disappointment. The city had few sources of amusement, and the life under the paternal roof was not very gay for a youth whose twenty-three years demanded change and excitement. M. de Seigneulles entertained no company but the parish priest and two or three worthy gentlemen of the place. In giving his son more liberty, he gave him little opportunity to profit by it. Besides, among the young people of Juvigny, whose manners and conversation were so unlike his own, Gérard was awkward and out of his element.

How he longed for a change! Impatient aspirations agitated his heart and rose to his lips. With the warm blood of youth coursing in his veins, he felt that every hour of this doleful existence was so much taken out of the enjoyment of life, and, as restless in his solitude as a squirrel in its wheel, he became the victim of weariness and languor. The day before, Reine

Lecomte, a young work-woman whom Manette employed by the day, surprised him in this despondent mood. He was walking in the garden, stretching out his arms and yawning in utter listlessness. The girl, coquettish and forward like most of the grisettes of Juvigny, cast sly glances at him while she was gathering up the linen that had been spread on the grass to dry.

"Monsieur Gérard," said she, suddenly, "you look as if you were tired to death!"

"That is true," he replied, blushing; "the days are very long."

"That is because you don't know how to have a good time. Why don't you go to the ball at the Wil-lows to-morrow evening?"

"To the ball!" murmured Gérard, trembling, lest his father should hear.

"Yes, like all the gentlemen. . . . The country-people will think you are proud, and turn up your nose at our work-women's balls."

"They are mistaken," he replied; "the reason I do not go is because I am not acquainted with any one."

"Nonsense! You will find plenty of partners; if you will go to-morrow, I will promise you a quadrille."

Little Reine chattered in this way as she folded the linen, the mid-day sun lighting up her laughing eyes,