

PRIZE OF PROPRIETY.

— BY —

H. C. BUNNER.

The story of the Prize of Propriety was told in an old French town, by an old French doctor, a plump little man with rosy cheeks and short bristling gray hair standing up straight all over his head, and a short bristling gray beard standing out straight all around his face. He had a perpetual twinkle in his eyes, and the corners of his mouth looked as though they would like to wink. He sat on the parapet, that was built in the time of Julius Cæsar, and told the story with countless grimaces, and with a Frenchman's artistic enjoyment of his own recital. It was a town that had been famous many centuries ago, and that had since been many centuries forgotten. Its narrow streets ran between tall, old-fashioned stone houses, and twisted this way and that, up and down incredible grades, following necessities of an antiquity past comprehending.

The sunlight glinted on the swift little blue river that ran under the arches of the old stone bridge; here and there, over the high garden walls that bordered it, showed the top of a blossoming pear-tree, or a spray of peach, reaching up into the free air, and the soft Spring breeze brought on its breast a faint smell of lilacs and new grass and upturned mould.

And this is the story of the Prize of Propriety, given once on a time by Madame Husson.

"You would hardly think," began the Doctor, "that we inhabitants of this little town of Gisors, who still talk of the glories of our city in the days of the Romans; of its present superiority to the rival city of Gournay, at the other end of the valley; and who to this very day discuss and experiment with medical receipts for cooking eggs and making pasties—you would not believe that we had ever been accused of being a frivolous and ill-conducted populace."

"Yet such we were in the sight of Mme. Husson, a very rich and very respectable middle-aged lady who once dwelt among us many years ago. When I tell you that Mme. Husson was the only child of an old couple who had successfully conducted a young ladies' institute for English Misses, that she had in her first youth married a consumptive drawing master who had expired after six months of marital life; and that his widow had spent the twenty-five years that had elapsed since that date in one long series of religious exercises in memory of the defunct, you will understand that Mme. Husson was not of the world worldly. She took, however, a kindly, if somewhat narrow, interest in her fellow-beings, and at the time when she settled in Gisors she had come into possession of her parents' considerable fortune, and had reached the charitable stage, where she was anxious to do great things with her money; and to do them, moreover, in the sunny way that middle-aged ladies delight in."

"Now, I can not tell you, for I have forgotten, if I ever knew, in what cheate tower, in what secluded retreat of innocence, Mme. Husson had spent the twenty-five years of her widowhood; but I know that the good people of Gisors impressed her as being reckless and shameless in their public manners, to the verge of apparent profligacy. (Far simple, hearty, noisy, Norman ways; our Middle-Age phrase, a little too strong and racy for the modern taste; our big appetites and our big talk all shocked and offended her, and made her regard us as gross and sensual people of questionable morals, at the very least.)

"Most of all, it horrified her to look out of her window upon the public

market-place and see the market-woman, the farm-girls the dairy maids and the daughters of the peasantry jostling each other, laughing, shrieking scolding and quarrelling in their rough jovial way; and when two great strapping wenches would come to blows and exchange a few harmless love-taps, with their big, bare red arms flying through the air, Mme. Husson would close her shutters and send her maid, Joconde, for the *sal volatile*.

"It was not much wondered at in Gisors when it was announced that Mme. Husson had decided to offer a prize of virtue to the young woman bearing the best character in the town, to present that happy paragon with a rosy wreath and a purse of gold; in fact, to establish here the whole institution of the *rosière* with its attendant festivities. And as this simply meant that the town was to feed itself at the expense of its benefactress, joy, gratitude and satisfaction ran high in Gisors."

"But as time went on, and no further steps were taken in the matter, the people began to grow curious and suspicious; and inquiries were made, which shortly proved that Joconde, the maid, was at the bottom of the strange delay."

"This Joconde most notably belied her name. She was a sour-visaged spinster, even more of a rigid, uncompromising, narrow-minded moralist than was her mistress. In her eyes there were just two absolutely untainted and faultless females in the whole world—Mme. Husson and herself—and it behooved even them to be careful and to walk straightly. To Joconde had been entrusted the task of making inquiry into the reputation of the local damsels, and she had performed her duties with absolutely fanatical zeal. Her standard was of course of the loftiest. She demanded decorum, modesty of bearing, and absolute propriety in the smallest details of speech and conduct—qualities not often to be found among a lot of hard-working, honest, ignorant, rough-living daughters of poverty. Joconde inquired everywhere, caught up every bit of gossip, every vague suspicion, every malicious hint, and noted all down in the little memorandum-book in which she inscribed the articles of her day's marketing. Here," said the Doctor, opening a capacious wallet, "is a copy of a page of that famous memorandum book which I have carried with me these many years:"

Bread 4 sous; milk 1 pt., 2 sous; butter 8 sous.

Melvine Levesque got herself talked about last year, tickling the buttermen's Boy in the ribs done it.

Chops 1 franc; salt 2 sous.

Rosalie Vatel called Francois Pirenoir a language.

Radishes 1 sou; vinegar 2 sous.

Josephine Dardent aint had nothing said only she gets letters from the young Man was turned out of the Pickle Shop last spring.

"Every entry like one of these settled the fate of a victim. And as there was no girl whatever about whom some one had not, at some time, said some unkind thing, it very soon became obvious that Gisors could not furnish a young woman up to the wonderful standard of propriety exacted by Mme. and her maid. The surrounding towns were ransacked with no better success."

"And one morning Joconde said to her mistress:

"Madame, if any one is to get that prize, Isidore is the only one who deserves it—and he's a man—last ways a boy. He never danced, nor said, nor thought anything improper in all his whole life, I'll be bound."

"Madame Husson pondered long over this curious suggestion. There was no doubt about Isidore's qualification, save in the matter of sex. He was a great, pale, gawky boy of twenty, whose mother kept a fruit-stand in the market place. Isidore's invincible,

positively morbid bashfulness had made him in a way the butt of the town. He had passed his youth at his mother's apron-strings, and he had no companions of his own age, even among the boys with whom he had grown up. The sight of a girl was enough to suffuse his face with painful blushes and to paralyze his never too-ready tongue. His sensitive and shrinking delicacy of speech and behavior, at an age when most boys do their best to be taken for little monsters of vulgarity and iniquity, had attracted the attention of all the town's people. You see, Gisors is, after all, not a very large place. The consequence was that Isidore was known among the coarse-spoken town's-folk of the baser sort as a milk-sop and goody-goody, and was made an object of general persecution. The girls laughed and winked at him; the boys baited him with broad jests as he sat behind the piles of fruit in his mother's little shop. Isidore blushed and bore it.

"Mme. Husson could not make up her mind. A rosy wreath for the head of a young man was a development of her plans that she had not contemplated. And yet, if she rejected Isidore, all her great dream for doing good and setting depraved Gisors a virtuous example must go for nothing. She consulted her Father-Confessor."

"Why, my dear Madame," said that good gentleman, thinking it over with the assistance of a pinch of snuff, "I see nothing out of the way in the idea. Propriety knows no sex, or rather it may be an attribute of either sex. Certainly no human being was ever more proper than Isidore. Why, I don't believe the boy has ever drunk anything stronger than milk in his life; and he can not be accused of setting a bad example to the rest of our young people."

"That decided Mme. Husson. She called on the Maire of Gisors, and that functionary highly approved. Show me the municipal functionary who does not highly approve of giving tax-payers a right good holiday and festival—when it does not cost the town anything."

"We'll make a great occasion of it, of course," he said. "We'll decorate the public square; and, yea, we'll have the military out, and get up a procession."

"They fixed the date for the ceremony for the 15th of August as being the festival of the Emperor Napoleon."

"When Isidore was consulted about it, he blushed and appeared pleased."

"Well might he be pleased! It was his hour of triumph. The girls who had laughed at him, the boys who had jeered him, found the tables turned upon them. It is all very well to laugh at a fellow for a milk-sop and a goody-goody, but when milk-soppery and goody-goodness bring a fellow in five hundred francs, a savings-bank-book, a gold watch, a public dinner, municipal and military honors, and a large increase in the fellow's mother's fruit trade, why, a fellow is neither to be laughed at or sneezed at, even if he does happen to be a little straight-laced."

"It was the 15th of August. The long main street leading to the market-place of Gisors was hung with banners and draperies its whole length. In the market-place itself were spread the long gayly-decked tables for the general collation,—their snowy covering contrasting bravely with the crimson-striped awnings and other canopies that stretched above them, supported by painted and gilded flag poles that bore streaming banners high in the Summer air. With a thunder of martial music, the Gisors Grenadiers swept into the square."

"Dividing the great crowd that had already gathered, the military pride of Gisors marched on, flags flying and drums beating; drew up before the humble shop of Isidore's mother, and presented arms as Isidore appeared at the portal. He was dressed from head to foot in spotless, immaculate white,

with a bunch of orange-blossoms in his white straw hat.

"With the Maire of the town on one side and Mme. Husson radiant, trembling with excitement, on the other, Isidore advanced and took his place in the procession. Amid the cheers of the populace, following the rolling music of the Grenadier band, they moved onward toward the cathedral. In front of Isidore a detachment of very little girls indeed strewed flowers in his pathway—beautiful white flowers. Isidore marched on with a happy smile upon his innocent face, and the crowd cheered again and again."

"Before the collation began, the Maire made his address. It was dignified and imposing."

"The honor that the benefactress and your town extend to you, young man, is also, in some sense, an obligation upon you. In the face of this vast multitude who have met to acclaim your triumph as an example of virtue, propriety and decorum, you must be considered to have taken upon yourself a high and sacred engagement to keep that bright example shining in undiminished purity and splendor before the eyes of this community, from now even unto your latest day."

"Then, stepping solemnly forward, he pressed the young man to his bosom, and sat the wreath of roses on his head; and Isidore sobbed, sobbed with a vague, innocent, ignorant joy and pride. Then the Maire put into his hands the silken purse that contained his five hundred francs in gold, his savings-bank-book, his gold watch, and the freedom of the town of Gisors, enclosed in a silver casket. The last gifts had been purchased by popular subscription."

"The repast was magnificent, too magnificent. It was a repast of the true Norman style, with countless dishes and immense portions; and we gulped it down in good Norman style, floating it on its way in floods of rich golden cider and generous red wine, while the glasses clinked, the plates clashed, the knives and forks rattled, and the Grenadier band poured forth its music all the time that it was not eating or drinking—which, indeed, was no inconsiderable time, for we sat at those tables from high noon until the soft warm evening's mist came rolling up our narrow streets from the low pasture lands about the town, bringing with them a pleasant country smell and faint, far-off sounds of tink-bells and lowing cattle."

"And then we took Isidore home. Poor boy; no one seemed to have noticed that this child of temperance and frugality had been eating all the day as he had never eaten before—since never before had he seen such viands—and, moreover, drinking all day, as unquestionably he had never drunk before—a glass of wine having probably been a rare and extreme indulgence with him. And there he sat from twelve to from six to seven, and with one or another of the thoughtless, excited, warm-hearted, heavy drinkers about him, poor Isidore had drunk every one of the score of toasts with which the banquet concluded—and heaven knows how much more beside."

"Still, the nervous excitement of the occasion kept him up; and save for the glitter of his eyes and the color in his cheek he seemed to those who marched with him to that little fruit-shop to be quite his usual, undemonstrative, silent self. His mother was not yet come home; a little band of friends was accompanying her from house to house to show her son's wreath and to receive the congratulations of her neighbors. There was also a plan on foot to close the festivities with a grand serenade to Mme. Husson. So it happened that Isidore was somewhat unceremoniously deposited in the darkened shop; while the unsatisfied merry-makers of his guard-of-honor hurried on to the next excitement."