

AI-Generated Graded Readers

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About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice.

The text was generated using ChatGPT and prepared for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

This edition aims to support fluency development through accessible vocabulary, expanded narration, and improved readability while preserving the original story structure.

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Émile Zola, *The Ladies' Paradise* [*Au Bonheur des Dames*] (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified by ChatGPT)

Part 1

Denise came to Paris on foot from Saint-Lazare station. She had arrived by an early train from Cherbourg after a long night in a third-class carriage. She held little Pépé by the hand, and Jean walked behind her. All three were tired and hungry. All three wore black clothes for their father. Their mother and father were both dead, and now Denise, though only twenty, had to think for the three of them. They had asked many people for the way to the Rue de la Michodière, where their uncle Baudu lived.

When they reached the Place Gaillon, Denise stopped so suddenly that Jean nearly walked into her. She looked across the street with wide eyes. "Jean," she said softly, "look at that." The three stood close together on the pavement and stared. Before them rose a great shop, so large and bright that it seemed almost unreal in the pale light of the October morning.

"That is a shop?" Jean said. "It is like a palace."

Denise had worked for two years in a cloth shop at Valognes, and she knew what a good shop looked like. But this was something different. The great glass door rose high above the street. Golden decoration ran around it. Two painted women smiled from above the name: The Ladies' Paradise. The building seemed endless. Its windows ran along both streets. Upstairs, behind the glass, Denise could already see counters, cloth, and women at work.

At the entrance, cheap goods were hung outside like flags to catch the eye of anyone passing. There were pieces of wool, cloth, and fur. There were gloves, scarves, stockings, and winter hoods. White price cards shone everywhere. On tables and in boxes there were piles of small things sold at prices so low that Denise could hardly believe them. It looked as if the whole shop were throwing goods into the street.

"This is how they catch people," Denise murmured. But she could not pull her

eyes away.

They moved along the windows. In one window silk stockings hung in neat rows, with gloves laid below them. In another there were silks, satins, and velvets in deep black, white, pink, blue, and soft cream. Some were folded like flowers. Some were twisted like living cloth around an invisible woman's body. Denise saw two great piles of special silk from the store. She bent closer and whispered the price under her breath. It was lower than she thought possible.

Jean laughed. "No wonder women go in there," he said.

Then they came to the window of cloaks and mantles, and Denise forgot everything again. Lace hung like snow. Velvet, silk, and fine cloth made rich dark shapes behind it. There were simple cloaks and splendid ones, and some were so costly that their price seemed like a dream. The dummies had no heads. Large price cards were fixed at their necks instead. Mirrors at the sides repeated them again and again, so that the street seemed full of beautiful women for sale.

Jean blushed with pleasure. P  p   pressed closer against Denise's skirt. People passing in the street turned and smiled at the strange little group: the poor girl in black, the pretty boy, and the small child, all three standing still before the great shop as if before a church.

At last Denise remembered their uncle. She looked across the street. There, almost hidden by shadow, stood another shop. Above it hung a worn green sign with faded yellow letters: The Old Elbeuf. Cloths and Flannels. Baudu, late Hauchecorne. Compared with The Ladies' Paradise, it looked old, dark, and tired. The windows were deep and dusty. Inside them, cloth lay in heavy piles. The open door seemed to lead down into damp darkness.

"That must be it," Jean said.

A stout man with a yellow face and angry eyes stood at the door. Denise gathered her courage. "Monsieur Baudu?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

She blushed. "Uncle, it is me. Denise. And these are Jean and P  p  . We have come."

Baudu stared at them in surprise. He had not expected them. Denise explained

quickly. After their father's death, there had been no money left. Jean had found a place in Paris with an ivory carver and would begin work the next day. Denise hoped she could find work too. Then she could keep P  p   with her. They had come because there was nothing for them in Valognes.

Baudu listened with a hard face. Yet when he heard of the children's troubles, his anger softened a little. "Come in," he said at last. "You cannot stand there looking at that rubbish across the street."

The three children entered the shop. At first they could see almost nothing after the bright daylight outside. Slowly the room came into view. The ceiling was low and dark. Old oak counters stood on a damp floor. Large drawers with iron handles lined the walls. Bales of dark cloth rose almost to the beams. The air smelled of wool, dye, and old damp wood. At the far end, two young men and a young woman were putting away white flannel.

Madame Baudu came forward, pale and worn. Genevi  ve, their daughter, followed her. She was colorless too, except for her thick black hair. They welcomed Denise and the boys kindly enough, and Denise sat down with P  p   on her lap while Jean leaned against the wood paneling. But soon Baudu began to speak of business, and the kindness in the room grew cold.

"I did write to you once," he said, "but that was a year ago. Things have changed. Trade is bad. I have fewer workers now. I cannot take you into the shop."

Denise turned pale. She had come with so much hope, and now the floor seemed to move under her feet. Still, she answered quietly, "All right, uncle. I will manage somehow."

Baudu, ashamed and irritated, grew harsher. He said she should have written first. He said she had arrived without warning and made things difficult. Tears rose in Denise's eyes. Jean turned white. P  p   hid his face against his sister. At last Baudu stopped. He did not tell them to leave at once. They might sleep in the house that night, he said. After that, they would see.

So it was settled that Jean would go to his new master the next day. P  p   would be placed with an old woman who took in children. As for Denise, Baudu said they might try a nearby shop after lunch. Perhaps she could find work there.

They ate in a dark room behind the shop. The single window looked onto a narrow wet yard. Even in daytime the place felt gloomy. Baudu cut the meat carefully and counted every slice with the habit of a man who must save everything. Denise tried to eat, but her throat felt tight. She watched P  p   more than her plate. She was already suffering because she would soon have to leave him.

After the meal Baudu took her to see a draper named Vin  ard. The visit ended badly. Vin  ard had no place for her. Worse than that, Baudu saw clearly that another small shop was already trying to sell itself because of the great store across the street. On the way back he said almost nothing. He walked quickly, and Denise had to hurry beside him.

Near home, an old umbrella seller called Bourras stopped them at his door. His little house was pressed tightly between The Ladies' Paradise and a grand old building. He said the great store wanted to buy his place too. Baudu looked at him in silence. Both men seemed to understand that they were speaking of war.

When Denise returned to The Old Elbeuf, she stood for a moment inside the shop and looked out through the open door. Very few customers came into her uncle's place. One lady entered. Then two others. After that the dark room waited again in silence. It had an old smell, a smell of cloth, dust, and damp wood. It seemed to her like an honest old business left alone to die.

But across the street was the other world. The sky was cloudy, and the air was soft and warm for the season. Through the open doors of The Ladies' Paradise she could see movement, light, and color. Even from here she felt the heat of that place. The counters were crowded. The store seemed to work like a giant machine. It hummed and pulled women inside. It fed on silk, lace, fur, ribbons, and desire. Women entered, paused, looked, touched, and then seemed to lose themselves among the goods.

Baudu began to speak with bitter force. "A draper's shop should sell cloth," he said. "That used to be trade. Now they sell everything. They swallow all the small shops around them. They want the whole district."

Denise listened without answering. She still felt hurt by his harshness. Yet she

could not stop looking across the street. She pitied the old shop around her. She also felt the pull of the great new one. Between those two worlds, in that dark doorway, her life in Paris truly began.

Part 2

The next morning Denise woke before the others. She had slept little. The strange house, the worry about work, and the thought of leaving P  p   had kept her awake. When she rose, the shop below was still quiet. A gray light entered through the small window. From far away came the rumble of carts moving through the streets of Paris.

Denise dressed quickly. When she came down to the shop, Baudu was already there. He stood behind the counter, opening the shutters with slow movements. As the wooden panels moved aside, the dim shop filled with a pale cold light.

Denise looked again across the street.

The Ladies' Paradise was already awake.

Workers opened its great doors. Porters carried boxes inside. A long line of carts stood near the pavement, unloading goods wrapped in rough cloth. The windows were being cleaned so that the glass shone like water. Even at this early hour the place seemed alive.

Baudu followed her gaze and made a bitter sound.

“Look at it,” he said. “A monster. It grows every year.”

Denise said nothing.

Baudu went on, his voice growing sharper. “You have worked in a cloth shop. Tell me this. Is it reasonable that a shop which once sold only ladies' dress fabrics should now sell everything?”

Denise turned toward him politely. “I do not know, uncle.”

“Of course you know,” he said. “In the past, when trade was honest, a draper sold cloth and nothing else. Cloth was our business. Now those shops call themselves ‘ladies' fashion stores,’ but they sell gloves, lace, ribbons, shawls, hats, coats—everything. If that is so, why not call them bazaars?”

He struck the counter with his hand.

“They climb over their neighbors. They swallow everything. That is the plan. That is what this new commerce wants. The whole district complains about it. The small shops suffer terribly. And that man Mouret—he will ruin us all.”

Denise listened quietly. Baudu’s anger frightened her a little. Yet she also felt that he spoke from pain, not only from pride.

Baudu leaned closer.

“Look around you,” he continued. “The hosiery shop of Bedoré on the Rue Gaillon has already lost half its customers. And the lingerie shop of Mademoiselle Tatin in the Passage Choiseul has begun lowering prices. They are forced to fight. But they cannot fight that giant.”

At that moment Madame Baudu entered the shop with Geneviève. They began arranging cloth on the counter. Geneviève moved slowly, as if tired. Her thin face looked even paler in the morning light.

Baudu shook his head.

“Trade is dying,” he said.

Denise could feel the sadness in the room. The old shop seemed to breathe with difficulty, like a sick person.

A bell rang outside. Two ladies entered. Baudu greeted them warmly. Denise stepped aside and watched. The sale was small. The women examined the cloth carefully and spoke quietly. They asked many questions about quality and price before buying only a little.

When they left, the shop fell silent again.

Denise thought of the great store across the street. There, customers did not count every coin. They seemed to move quickly, carried forward by excitement.

Later in the morning Baudu told Denise to help fold cloth. She worked carefully, grateful for something to do. Jean soon arrived to say goodbye before going to his new job. Pépé clung to Denise’s dress.

“You will come and see me soon?” he asked.

Denise kissed him gently. “Of course.”

When Jean left with the boy, the shop felt emptier than before.

Around midday Baudu prepared to go out. “Come,” he said to Denise. “We will try again to find work for you.”

They walked through several nearby streets. Baudu entered two shops where he knew the owners. Each time Denise waited politely while he spoke. Each time the answer was the same.

“No place.”

One shopkeeper explained that trade was too uncertain. Another said that business had become impossible since The Ladies’ Paradise had opened its new departments.

As they returned toward the Rue de la Michodière, Denise walked in silence beside her uncle. At last she spoke softly.

“Uncle... if I cannot find work in a small shop... could I perhaps try there?”

She pointed toward the great store.

Baudu stopped.

“There?” he said sharply. “You would go there?”

Denise lowered her eyes. “If they would take me.”

Baudu’s face turned red with anger.

“Never!” he cried. “No one from my family will serve in that place!”

Denise remained calm.

“But I must work somewhere.”

For a moment Baudu said nothing. His anger slowly turned into weary frustration. At last he sighed.

“Do as you wish,” he muttered. “Young people today think only of survival. They do not care about honor.”

Denise felt a little pain at these words, yet she understood that Baudu was wounded by the change in the world around him.

They reached the great entrance of The Ladies’ Paradise.

Denise stopped. The door stood open like the entrance to a vast hall. Inside, light poured down from the glass roof. Counters filled the floor. Goods lay everywhere in mountains of color.

Baudu remained outside.

“Go then,” he said harshly. “Ask if they need another girl to help destroy honest trade.”

Denise bowed her head slightly and entered.

At first the noise and movement confused her. Customers filled the wide space. Saleswomen moved quickly between the counters. Clerks carried boxes and cloth. Above them all ran galleries where more goods were displayed.

Denise approached a young woman behind a counter.

“Excuse me,” she said. “Could you tell me where I might ask about work?”

The woman looked at her quickly. Denise’s black dress and serious face seemed to please her.

“Go to the office upstairs,” she said. “Ask for Monsieur Bouthemont.”

Denise climbed the stairs. Her heart beat fast. She felt both fear and hope.

In a small office a thin man sat at a desk covered with papers. This was Bouthemont. He examined Denise carefully while she explained that she had worked in a cloth shop and was looking for employment.

Bouthemont asked a few questions.

“You know fabrics?”

“Yes, monsieur.”

“You can read prices and measure cloth?”

“Yes.”

He hesitated. Then he shrugged.

“We always need girls during busy seasons. You may begin tomorrow morning.”

Denise could hardly believe it.

“Thank you, monsieur.”

When she left the office and came down the great staircase again, the store seemed even larger than before. Everywhere women were touching goods, asking questions, and making purchases. The air smelled of perfume, cloth, and excitement.

Denise stepped outside.

Baudu waited across the street in front of his dark shop. When she told him the news, he shook his head sadly.

“So it begins,” he said.

Denise looked once more at the great building opposite.

Tomorrow she would enter it not as a visitor, but as a worker inside the enormous machine.

Part 3

Denise arrived early the next morning. The streets were still gray with the cold light of dawn, and the great doors of The Ladies’ Paradise had only just been opened. Workers were already carrying boxes inside. The smell of fresh cloth filled the air.

Denise stood for a moment at the entrance, looking up at the tall building. Yesterday she had entered with fear. Today she entered as one of the workers.

Inside, the store seemed even larger than she had remembered. The long counters stretched across the hall. Above them ran wide galleries with iron railings. A glass roof let the morning light fall softly over the mountains of cloth, ribbons, lace, gloves, stockings, and dresses.

Denise felt very small.

A young clerk approached her.

“You are the new girl?” he asked.

“Yes, monsieur.”

“Follow me.”

He led her through the crowd of early workers. Some girls were arranging goods on the counters. Others were opening drawers and placing cloth in careful folds. Men carried heavy boxes from the storage rooms. Everyone moved quickly. Everyone seemed to know exactly what to do.

The clerk stopped at a large counter covered with fine fabrics.

“This is the dress materials department,” he said. “You will work here.”

Behind the counter stood several women. One of them, tall and serious, was Madame Aurélie, the head of the department. Her dark eyes examined Denise from head to foot.

“Another one?” she said calmly. “Very well.”

Denise lowered her head respectfully.

“What is your name?” Madame Aurélie asked.

“Denise Baudu, madame.”

Madame Aurélie gave a small nod.

“You will begin by helping fold goods and watching how we serve customers. Do not speak unless you are asked. And do not make mistakes.”

Denise answered softly, “Yes, madame.”

The other saleswomen looked at her with interest. Clara, a beautiful girl with bright eyes, smiled slightly, though her smile did not seem friendly. Marguerite, older and kinder, gave Denise a quick encouraging glance.

Soon the store began to fill with customers.

The first women entered slowly, looking around with curiosity. Then more arrived. Within an hour the hall was alive with movement and voices.

Denise watched everything carefully.

Women stopped before the counters and asked for cloth. Saleswomen unfolded piece after piece of silk, wool, and velvet. They spread the fabric across the counters so that it shone under the light. Customers touched the cloth, rubbed it between their fingers, and held it up to their dresses to see how it looked.

“How much is this?” one lady asked.

“Three francs sixty, madame,” Clara answered quickly.

“That is cheap,” the lady said.

And she bought three meters.

Denise noticed that the customers seemed excited, almost restless. They moved from one counter to another, looking at everything.

Soon the noise of the store grew louder. Voices rose and fell. Drawers opened and closed. The sound of scissors cutting cloth came again and again.

Denise felt as if she were inside a great machine.

The counters worked like moving parts. Goods appeared, were unfolded, measured, cut, wrapped, and carried away. Customers entered, circled around the hall, and left again with packages in their hands.

From time to time a man passed through the department with quiet authority. He was tall and elegant, with a handsome face and quick eyes. Wherever he went, the employees straightened their backs and worked faster.

Denise soon learned that this was Monsieur Mouret, the owner of the store.

Mouret walked slowly along the counters, observing everything. He noticed small details: a ribbon placed badly, a careless fold of cloth, a saleswoman speaking too sharply to a customer.

When he reached Denise's counter, he stopped.

Madame Aurélie immediately approached him.

"Good morning, monsieur," she said respectfully.

Mouret smiled slightly.

"Good morning. Business looks good today."

His eyes moved across the counter and stopped on Denise.

"Who is this?" he asked.

"A new girl," Madame Aurélie replied. "She began this morning."

Mouret looked at Denise with interest. His gaze was calm but penetrating. Denise felt her face grow warm.

"From the provinces?" he asked.

"Yes, monsieur," she answered quietly.

Mouret nodded once and moved on.

Clara leaned closer to Denise and whispered with a light laugh, "Be careful. He notices everything."

The work continued without pause. Denise folded cloth until her fingers hurt. She watched the others carefully, trying to learn how they spoke to customers.

Around midday the store became even more crowded.

Women now filled the space in front of the counters. Some pushed forward impatiently. Others waited nervously while saleswomen searched for the right goods.

"Next, madame!" someone called.

"One moment, please!"

"Is there more of this fabric?"

Packages piled up everywhere.

Denise noticed how skillfully the experienced saleswomen worked. They moved quickly, smiling and speaking with confidence. They praised the goods and encouraged the customers to buy more.

“This silk is very fashionable this season,” Clara said to one lady. “And look how well it matches your dress.”

The lady hesitated only a moment before buying it.

Denise realized that selling was not only about cloth. It was also about words, gestures, and excitement.

When the customers finally began to leave in the late afternoon, the workers looked exhausted. Denise’s feet burned with pain. She had been standing for hours without rest.

Clara stretched her arms and laughed lightly.

“The first day is always the worst,” she said.

Marguerite nodded kindly.

“You did well,” she told Denise. “Many girls cry before the evening.”

Denise tried to smile, but she felt too tired.

As she left the store, she turned once more toward the great hall behind her. The counters were now quieter. Workers were putting away goods and closing drawers.

Yet even in the evening light the building seemed powerful and alive.

Denise understood that this place would shape her life.

Tomorrow she would return again to the great machine of The Ladies’ Paradise.

Part 4

Denise’s first weeks at The Ladies’ Paradise were harder than she had expected. Each morning she arrived before the doors opened, and each evening she left long after the customers had gone home. Her feet hurt constantly from standing all day. At night she slept in the crowded dormitory above the store with the other salesgirls.

The room was long and narrow, with rows of small beds placed close together.

Some girls talked quietly before sleeping. Others complained about customers or laughed about the young men who worked in the store. Denise usually said little. She was too tired.

At the counter the next morning the work began again at once.

Madame Aurélie ruled the department with strict discipline. Every piece of cloth had to be folded exactly. Every ribbon had to lie straight. If something was placed wrongly, she corrected it without a word, simply with a sharp glance.

Denise tried very hard to please her.

Yet the other girls did not make things easy. Clara often watched Denise with a half-smile that made Denise uneasy.

One morning Clara said quietly, "You are very serious, Denise. Customers do not like serious faces. They want charm."

Denise blushed. "I am trying."

"Try faster," Clara answered lightly.

The customers themselves were not always kind. Some were impatient and spoke as if the salesgirls were machines.

"Why are you so slow?" one lady asked angrily.

Denise apologized and hurried to find the right fabric.

Still, little by little she learned. She learned to measure cloth quickly. She learned to recognize the quality of different fabrics by touch. Most important of all, she learned to watch the customers.

She saw how they moved through the store, how their eyes stopped before certain goods, how they hesitated before making a decision.

One afternoon the store prepared for a great sale.

Workers carried enormous boxes into the hall. From them came piles of silk and wool. Soon the counters were covered with bright cloths in every color. Large price cards were placed above the goods.

The news spread quickly through Paris. The Ladies' Paradise would sell a special fabric at a price lower than anyone had ever seen.

On the morning of the sale, crowds filled the street before the doors even opened.

Denise stood behind the counter and watched through the glass entrance. Women waited impatiently, talking excitedly.

“Open the doors!” someone cried.

When the doors finally opened, the crowd moved inside like a wave.

Within minutes the hall was full.

Customers pushed toward the counters. Voices rose everywhere.

“Where is the silk?”

“Show me that fabric!”

“How much is this?”

The salesgirls worked without pause. Denise unfolded cloth after cloth while customers examined the goods with shining eyes.

Some women seemed almost feverish with excitement.

They touched the silk again and again. They spoke rapidly to one another. They forgot the prices of other goods and thought only about the bargain before them.

Denise suddenly understood something.

The store was not simply selling cloth.

It was creating desire.

Later that day, Mouret stood in a quiet corner of the store speaking with Bourdoncle, one of his most trusted managers. Denise was folding cloth nearby and could not help hearing part of their conversation.

Bourdoncle looked worried.

“Monsieur,” he said, “we may lose money on this fabric. The price is extremely low.”

Mouret smiled calmly.

“Yes,” he replied. “On this article we may lose a few centimes.”

Bourdoncle frowned. “Then why sell it so cheaply?”

Mouret’s eyes brightened with energy.

“Because of what comes after,” he said.

He pointed toward the crowded hall where women moved excitedly between the counters.

“Look at them. If we attract women here—if we draw every woman in Paris

into this store—what will happen? They will stand before our mountains of goods. They will be tempted. They will lose their heads. They will empty their purses without counting.”

Bourdoncle remained silent.

Mouret continued with growing enthusiasm.

“The important thing is to set women on fire. We must excite them. For that we need spectacular bargains—goods so cheap that the whole city talks about them. Once the women come here for those bargains, they will buy many other things at normal prices. And they will believe they are saving money.”

He laughed softly.

“That is the secret.”

Denise felt a strange mixture of admiration and uneasiness. Mouret spoke of customers as if they were part of a great experiment.

Later that day the excitement in the store became even greater.

Women ran from counter to counter carrying packages. Some laughed loudly. Others argued with the salesgirls because the cloth they wanted had already been sold.

Denise saw one lady buy far more fabric than she needed.

“It is so cheap,” the lady explained to her friend. “I would be foolish not to buy it.”

Denise remembered Baudu’s dark shop across the street.

There, customers examined every meter carefully before buying. Here, they bought because they feared losing a bargain.

As the afternoon passed, the piles of fabric on Denise’s counter grew smaller and smaller.

At last the final piece was sold.

The crowd slowly began to leave the store.

The salesgirls leaned against the counters in exhaustion. The floor was covered with bits of paper and thread from the day’s work.

Denise looked around the hall.

The great machine had worked perfectly.

And she, now, was one of its smallest moving parts.

Part 5

In the weeks that followed, Denise began to understand the strange life of the customers who filled The Ladies' Paradise. At first she had seen only a crowd. Now she began to recognize faces and habits.

Women did not come to the store for the same reasons.

Some came to buy. Others came only to look. Some came because they could not resist the excitement of the place.

Madame Marty was one of the most curious customers.

She arrived often, usually in the afternoon, and she always seemed restless. Her eyes moved quickly across the counters. She touched everything, asked for many goods, and rarely left without several packages.

"Show me that ribbon," she would say.

Then, a moment later, "And that lace too. And perhaps the silk beside it."

She did not examine the goods carefully. She chose almost at random, as if the act of buying itself gave her pleasure.

"Madame buys quickly," Clara once whispered to Denise with a small laugh. "And she always returns."

Denise soon saw that it was true.

Madame Marty often left the store with so many packages that a clerk had to carry them behind her. Yet her face never looked satisfied. She always seemed ready to buy more.

Other women behaved very differently.

Madame Guibal was one of them. She came to the store several times each week but almost never bought anything. Instead she walked slowly through the departments, stopping at every counter.

She looked at the silks, the gloves, the dresses, and the hats. Sometimes she asked the salesgirls to unfold goods so that she could admire them more closely.

"It is beautiful," she would say softly.

Then she would move on again without buying.

She seemed perfectly happy simply to look.

“She enjoys the spectacle,” Marguerite explained kindly. “For some ladies the store itself is enough.”

Another customer, Madame de Boves, came with a different expression. She moved through the store with a tense face and shining eyes.

Denise noticed that she often stopped before very expensive goods. She touched them slowly and looked at them for a long time.

Yet she rarely bought anything.

One afternoon Denise heard her speaking quietly to a friend.

“I cannot afford these things,” Madame de Boves said. “But I cannot stop wanting them.”

Her voice trembled slightly.

Denise felt a little pity for her.

Then there was Madame Bourdelais.

She was calm, practical, and intelligent. When she entered the store she walked directly toward the bargain counters.

She examined the goods carefully, comparing prices and quality.

“I never hurry,” she told Denise once with a smile. “The store always lowers prices sooner or later. One only has to wait.”

She seemed proud of her patience.

“I will not allow a store to cheat me,” she added.

Denise noticed that Madame Bourdelais usually bought excellent goods at very low prices. She seemed to use the store’s own system against it.

The behavior of these women fascinated Denise.

Sometimes she spoke about it with Marguerite in the quiet moments between customers.

“They are all different,” Denise said one evening.

Marguerite nodded.

“Yes. Some women come here because they need things. Others come because they dream. And some come because they cannot control themselves.”

Denise looked across the hall.

Madame Marty had just arrived again. She moved quickly toward a counter where bright parasols were displayed.

“That red one is amusing,” she said suddenly. “I will take it.”

The parasol cost fourteen francs and fifty centimes.

Madame Bourdelais happened to be standing nearby. She raised her eyebrows slightly.

“You should not hurry, madame,” she said politely. “In a month that parasol will cost ten francs.”

Madame Marty laughed nervously.

“Perhaps. But I like it now.”

She bought it without hesitation.

Madame Bourdelais shook her head.

“I prefer to wait,” she said to Denise. “The store always lowers prices. One must be patient and buy only the true bargains.”

She smiled proudly.

“In this way I save a great deal of money.”

Denise wondered whether the store really lost money with such customers.

That evening, as the store closed, Denise saw Madame Marty again.

She stood near the entrance speaking excitedly with several friends. Around her lay a collection of packages: ribbons, gloves, lace, and the red parasol she had just bought.

Denise noticed that a pale man stood nearby.

He looked thin and tired, with anxious eyes.

Suddenly Madame Marty looked up and saw him.

Her smile disappeared.

“My husband,” she whispered.

The man approached slowly. His face had turned almost white.

He looked at the packages in silence.

For a moment no one spoke.

Then Madame Marty tried to laugh.

“They were bargains,” she said quickly.

Monsieur Marty did not answer at once.

Denise saw a strange expression on his face. It was not anger. It was something more painful.

It was the look of a man who sees the money he has earned with great effort disappearing before his eyes.

Every piece of lace seemed to wound him.

Every ribbon seemed to carry away a small part of his life.

Denise turned away, deeply moved.

In that moment she understood that the great store created not only pleasure and excitement.

It also created quiet tragedies in the lives of many families.

Part 6

As the winter advanced, Denise began to understand the life of the employees inside The Ladies' Paradise. The store looked bright and magnificent to customers, but behind the counters the workers lived a much harder life.

The salesgirls rose early every morning. They dressed quickly in the dormitory and hurried down to their departments before the doors opened. If anyone arrived late, Madame Aurélie noticed immediately.

“Punctuality is the first rule,” she said coldly.

Denise tried never to be late.

All day the girls stood behind the counters. They were not allowed to sit. Even when no customers came, they had to remain standing, ready to serve.

By afternoon Denise's feet often burned with pain. She sometimes felt that her legs would fail her.

Marguerite once noticed her expression.

“You will grow used to it,” she said kindly. “Or you will leave.”

Denise smiled faintly.

“Do many girls leave?”

Marguerite hesitated before answering.

“Many disappear,” she said quietly.

Denise did not understand at first. Later she learned what Marguerite meant.

The girls who worked in the store lived in a strange position between two worlds. They were no longer simple working women, yet they were not ladies either.

Every day they served rich customers. They saw beautiful dresses, expensive jewels, and elegant manners. They learned to speak politely and move with grace.

Yet they themselves remained poor.

Their lives were strict and controlled. The store provided food and beds, but little freedom. They had few friends outside the store. Many of them had come from distant provinces and had no family in Paris.

Denise sometimes thought they formed a new kind of class in society.

One evening she spoke about this with Marguerite.

“We are not like the women who work in factories,” Denise said. “But we are not like the ladies who come here either.”

Marguerite nodded.

“Exactly. We live somewhere between them.”

Denise soon saw the dangers of this uncertain position.

Some girls tried to imitate the rich customers. They dreamed of luxury and pleasure. When they could not reach those dreams, they became bitter.

Others simply grew tired.

The work exhausted them. Standing all day in warm rooms full of dust and cloth made them weak. Many coughed during the winter months.

One afternoon Denise saw a new girl arrive at the counter. She was very young, perhaps sixteen. Her eyes were red from crying.

Madame Aurélie gave her quick instructions and left her to begin work.

The girl tried to smile at the customers, but her hands trembled as she unfolded the cloth.

Clara laughed quietly.

“Another provincial bird,” she said.

Denise felt sympathy for the girl. She remembered her own first day.

During the afternoon the young girl made several mistakes. She measured a piece of cloth incorrectly and gave the wrong price to a customer.

Madame Aurélie corrected her sharply.

“Pay attention!” she said. “You will ruin the department.”

The girl’s eyes filled with tears.

Later Denise found her standing alone near the stairs.

“Are you all right?” Denise asked gently.

The girl nodded, though her face remained pale.

“My feet hurt,” she whispered. “And I am afraid of making mistakes.”

Denise spoke softly to comfort her.

“It becomes easier with time.”

Yet even as she spoke those words, Denise remembered what Marguerite had said: many girls disappeared.

Some married quickly and left the store. But others simply vanished.

Denise sometimes wondered what happened to them.

One evening the answer came partly by accident.

As she left the store, Denise saw two former employees standing on the street corner. Their dresses were worn and their faces tired.

Clara noticed them too.

“They worked here once,” Clara said carelessly.

“Why did they leave?” Denise asked.

Clara shrugged.

“Too weak. Or perhaps they were dismissed.”

Denise watched the two women walk away slowly into the evening crowd.

She felt a deep sadness.

The store used many young lives.

The work consumed their strength year after year. Few remained long enough to grow old there. Most disappeared before they reached forty.

Denise thought of the bright counters and shining fabrics inside the store.

Behind that beauty stood the quiet exhaustion of hundreds of workers.

That night she lay awake in the dormitory for a long time.

She wondered whether this great machine of commerce could ever become more humane.

She did not yet know that one day she herself would try to change it.

Part 7

Denise continued to work patiently in the dress materials department. Week after week she learned more about the store. She observed not only the customers but also the great system that controlled everything inside The Ladies' Paradise.

One morning she saw Monsieur Mouret walking through the store with Baron Hartmann, one of the men who had invested money in the business.

The two men moved slowly through the hall while Bourdoncle followed them at a distance.

Denise could not hear everything they said, but their voices sometimes reached her as they passed near the counters.

Mouret spoke with calm confidence.

"You see, Baron," he said, "the entire mechanism is very simple."

Hartmann looked around the great hall with curiosity.

"Simple?" he asked. "It appears very complicated to me."

Mouret smiled slightly.

"Only at first sight. In truth we do not need enormous profits on each article. The secret is to sell goods quickly."

He picked up a piece of silk from a nearby counter.

"We buy goods," he continued, "and we sell them as rapidly as possible. Then we replace them with new goods. Every time the goods change, the capital brings profit again."

Hartmann nodded slowly.

"So the same money works many times."

"Exactly," Mouret replied. "If we move goods quickly enough, we can accept smaller profits. But the total result becomes very large."

Denise listened carefully while pretending to fold cloth.

Mouret continued his explanation with enthusiasm.

“Another essential point is accumulation. When goods are gathered together in great quantities, they strengthen each other.”

He gestured toward the long rows of counters.

“A customer enters to buy cloth. A few steps later she sees ribbons. A little farther she sees coats. By the time she leaves the store she has bought far more than she intended.”

Hartmann laughed quietly.

“You lead them through a labyrinth.”

Mouret’s eyes shone.

“Yes. A labyrinth of temptation.”

Denise felt again the strange mixture of admiration and uneasiness that Mouret’s ideas always created in her.

Mouret now spoke about another important change in modern commerce.

“In the past,” he said, “shopkeepers hid their prices. They tried to sell goods at the highest possible price to each customer.”

Hartmann nodded.

“That was the traditional system.”

“But we have changed it,” Mouret continued. “We display our prices openly. Every customer sees the same price.”

He pointed toward the white price cards that hung above the goods.

“This fixed price system creates a new kind of competition. Shops must lower prices as much as possible. They accept smaller profits in order to attract more customers.”

Hartmann smiled thoughtfully.

“So deception disappears.”

“Exactly,” Mouret replied. “A merchant can no longer sell cloth at twice its value. The public sees the price immediately.”

Denise realized that Mouret spoke of these changes with the pride of an inventor.

He believed that he was creating a new form of commerce.

As the two men continued their walk, they passed near the staircase that led to the upper floors.

Mouret stopped and looked upward.

“Come,” he said. “There is another department you should see.”

They climbed the stairs and disappeared from Denise’s view.

Later that day she learned where they had gone.

Marguerite explained it to her during a quiet moment.

“On the third floor there are several rooms used by the mail order department,” she said.

Denise looked surprised.

“Mail orders?”

Marguerite nodded.

“Orders arrive from all over France. Some even come from other countries. Customers write letters asking for goods. The store sends them by post.”

Denise had never heard of such a system.

“Does it bring many orders?” she asked.

“More every year,” Marguerite replied. “Two years ago only a few clerks worked there. Now more than thirty people answer letters and prepare packages.”

Denise imagined the letters arriving each morning, carrying requests from distant towns and villages.

The store was spreading its influence far beyond Paris.

In the afternoon Denise again saw Mouret walking through the department.

His expression was thoughtful.

Clara whispered quietly to Denise.

“He is always planning something new.”

Denise watched him as he moved through the store. She understood that Mouret did not see The Ladies’ Paradise as a simple shop.

For him it was an enormous machine that could grow without limit.

And each new idea made the machine stronger.

One morning Denise was sent upstairs with a message for the mail order department. She climbed the long staircase that led to the upper floors of The Ladies' Paradise.

The noise of the sales floor slowly faded behind her.

When she reached the third floor, she entered a series of large rooms filled with desks and shelves. At first she thought she had stepped into a post office.

Letters lay everywhere.

Men and women sat at long tables reading them. Others wrote replies quickly with their pens. Nearby, workers prepared packages filled with gloves, ribbons, cloth, stockings, and lace.

Denise stood still for a moment in astonishment.

A clerk noticed her.

"Yes?" he asked.

Denise handed him the message she had brought. While he read it, she looked around the room again.

Piles of letters arrived in baskets. One clerk opened them and sorted them quickly. Another clerk read each order and wrote the necessary notes. Workers then searched the shelves for the goods requested.

Finally the goods were wrapped carefully and placed into boxes ready for shipment.

The work continued without pause.

Denise saw that some letters came from nearby towns, but others carried stamps from distant places.

She picked up one envelope that lay open on a desk.

"From Marseille," she read quietly.

Another letter came from Belgium. A third had been written in a language she could not understand.

The clerk who had taken her message smiled when he saw her curiosity.

"The store receives letters from everywhere," he explained. "Many customers cannot travel to Paris. They order goods by post instead."

Denise looked again at the busy room.

“And the orders increase every year?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “Two years ago this department had only ten workers. Now there are more than thirty.”

Denise imagined the packages leaving Paris each day and traveling across the country.

The Ladies’ Paradise was no longer only a building in one street. It was becoming a network that reached into thousands of homes.

When she returned downstairs, the store was already crowded again.

That afternoon Mouret spoke with Bourdoncle near the entrance.

Denise heard fragments of their conversation.

“The crowd must always appear large,” Mouret said quietly.

Bourdoncle nodded.

“Even when business is slow?”

Mouret smiled.

“Especially then.”

He pointed toward the entrance of the store.

Large baskets filled with cheap goods stood near the doors. Gloves, ribbons, and small pieces of cloth lay piled together with bright price cards.

Around these baskets several women had already gathered.

“You see,” Mouret continued, “these goods cost us very little. But they attract people.”

Bourdoncle understood.

“The crowd at the entrance makes the store appear full.”

“Exactly,” Mouret replied. “People passing in the street see the crowd and believe something exciting is happening inside. Curiosity brings them in.”

Denise watched the women at the entrance.

They examined the cheap goods eagerly. Their presence blocked part of the doorway so that new customers had to push through the small crowd to enter.

From the street the store looked overflowing with people.

A little later Mouret spoke again.

“But the arrangement inside the store is even more important.”

Bourdoncle listened attentively.

Mouret gestured toward the counters.

“Once I arranged the departments logically,” he said. “Cloth in one place, ready-made clothes in another. It seemed sensible.”

He shook his head.

“But it was a mistake.”

Bourdoncle looked surprised.

“Why?”

Mouret’s eyes shone with excitement.

“Because customers must not move directly to what they want. They must wander.”

Denise pretended to work while listening carefully.

Mouret continued his explanation.

“When a woman enters the store, she may intend to buy only one thing. Perhaps she wants a dress. But if the dress department lies far away, she must cross the store to reach it.”

Bourdoncle began to understand.

“And on the way she passes many other goods.”

Mouret nodded.

“Exactly. She sees gloves, ribbons, lace, coats. Each department calls to her.”

He smiled slightly.

“And even if she resists most temptations, she rarely resists all of them.”

Bourdoncle laughed quietly.

“So the size of the store seems greater.”

“Yes,” Mouret said. “The customer feels she has walked through an enormous world of goods.”

Denise realized that even the confusion of the store had been carefully designed.

Nothing inside The Ladies’ Paradise existed by accident.

The crowds, the cheap goods at the entrance, the arrangement of departments—all were part of a deliberate plan.

That evening Denise left the store slowly.
She turned once more toward the bright windows.
The Ladies' Paradise was not only a shop.
It was a new kind of power growing in the heart of the city.

Part 9

During the spring a new struggle began in the neighborhood around The Ladies' Paradise. The small shops that surrounded the great store had watched its growth with fear for several years. Now some of them tried to fight back.

One of these men was Robineau.

Robineau had once worked inside The Ladies' Paradise. He had been a capable clerk, but he had lost his position and later opened a small cloth shop of his own. His shop stood only a short distance away.

Denise heard the news one morning from Clara.

"Robineau has declared war," Clara said with amusement.

"War?" Denise asked.

"Yes. He is using the same methods as our store."

Curious, Denise went to look during her midday break.

Robineau's shop window was filled with piles of silk. The cloth had been arranged carefully so that it rose in a bright mountain of color.

Above it hung a large white sign with bold black letters:

SILK — 5 FRANCS 50

Women already stood before the window, talking excitedly.

"It is cheaper than The Ladies' Paradise," one of them said.

Denise understood at once why the shop was attracting attention. The price was indeed two sous lower than the famous silk that Mouret had been selling.

When she returned to work, the news had already reached the store.

The managers spoke together in worried voices.

Bourdoncle himself visited several departments to examine the situation.

"Customers are talking about Robineau," one clerk reported.

Mouret listened calmly.

“Very well,” he said. “We will answer.”

That afternoon he gathered Bourdoncle and several senior clerks.

“The silk must be lowered to five francs forty,” he announced.

Bourdoncle stared at him.

“But that is almost the cost price,” he said.

“Yes,” Mouret replied calmly.

“Then we lose money.”

Mouret smiled slightly.

“Perhaps. But we cannot allow a rival to appear stronger than us.”

Denise later heard the story from Marguerite.

“Mouret argued fiercely with the managers,” she explained. “They were afraid of losing too much money.”

Denise nodded slowly.

“But he convinced them.”

“Yes,” Marguerite said. “He told them that the store must win this battle, even if it costs something.”

The next day a new sign appeared in the window of The Ladies’ Paradise.

SILK — 5 FRANCS 40

The price created immediate excitement.

Women rushed inside the store to examine the famous fabric again.

But Robineau was not ready to surrender.

Within a few days he lowered his price to five francs thirty.

Mouret answered at once.

Five francs twenty.

The struggle continued.

Five francs fifteen.

Five francs ten.

Each new reduction spread quickly through the neighborhood. Customers spoke of the contest everywhere.

Denise saw women laughing with delight as they compared prices.

“Let them fight,” one lady said happily. “We are the winners.”

The rivalry soon became almost insane.

Both shops sold the silk at prices that brought no profit at all. Each reduction cost money.

Even the clerks at The Ladies’ Paradise grew nervous.

Denise once heard two of them whispering together.

“We are selling below cost,” one said.

“It cannot continue,” the other replied.

Yet the battle continued.

At last Mouret placed the price at five francs.

The announcement shocked the entire store.

Robineau stood in his shop window staring at the new sign with disbelief. His face turned pale.

He understood that he could not lower the price further without destroying himself.

Finally he matched the price—five francs—but went no lower.

The struggle ended there.

Both shops had lost money on the silk. But Mouret had achieved what he wanted.

Customers had seen the power of The Ladies’ Paradise.

That evening Denise passed Robineau’s shop on her way home.

The piles of silk still stood in the window, but the excitement had already begun to fade.

Robineau himself stood inside the shop, motionless behind the counter.

Denise felt a quiet sadness.

She knew that the great store had once again proven its strength.

And she also knew that for small merchants like Robineau, such battles could lead only to ruin.

Part 10

The struggle with Robineau soon became the talk of the entire neighborhood. Customers laughed about it as if it were a game. Yet for the small shopkeepers the situation was far from amusing.

Denise heard the complaints often when she visited her uncle Baudu.

One evening she crossed the street after work and entered the dark shop of The Old Elbeuf. The familiar smell of wool and damp wood greeted her. Baudu stood behind the counter speaking with several neighboring merchants.

Their faces were serious.

When Denise entered, Baudu nodded to her but continued his conversation.

“It will never end,” he said bitterly. “Every year that place adds another department.”

One of the men sighed.

“First it was cloth,” he said. “Then ready-made dresses. Now they sell hats, perfumes, gloves—everything.”

Baudu struck the counter with his hand.

“Yes! Flowers, ladies’ hats, perfumes, shoes! Soon they will sell the whole world.”

The men laughed quietly, but their laughter carried little joy.

Baudu continued angrily.

“Do you know who will suffer next? The perfume seller Gronier on the Rue Gramont. And the hat shop of Madame Chadeuil will not survive another two years. One by one they will all disappear.”

Denise listened silently.

“The disease spreads through the whole district,” Baudu said. “Soon nothing will remain but that monster across the street.”

Another shopkeeper shook his head.

“They even speak of selling children’s toys now.”

Baudu laughed harshly.

“Why not? If those drapers begin selling soap and wooden shoes, perhaps tomorrow they will sell fried potatoes as well!”

The men exchanged weary looks.

Denise could feel their despair.

Yet she also knew that the customers loved the great store.

After leaving her uncle's shop, she returned to The Ladies' Paradise the next morning and saw again the crowds entering the doors with eager faces.

That day the store prepared a new attraction.

Mouret had created a department for children.

Bright balloons filled the space above the counters. Small toys and colorful objects lay in baskets. When mothers entered with their children, clerks handed the children red balloons tied with long strings.

The balloons carried the name of the store in large letters.

Soon they floated through the streets of Paris like living advertisements.

Denise watched the scene with surprise.

A small boy ran through the store laughing while holding his balloon.

His mother stopped at a nearby counter to examine lace.

Clara laughed softly.

"The child captures the mother," she said.

Denise realized that Mouret had found another clever way to bring customers inside.

Advertising itself had become an enormous force.

Marguerite once explained the scale of it to Denise.

"The store now spends hundreds of thousands of francs on advertising every year," she said.

"Hundreds of thousands?" Denise repeated.

Marguerite nodded.

"Catalogues, posters, newspaper notices. For the summer sale they printed two hundred thousand catalogues."

Denise stared at her.

"Two hundred thousand!"

"Yes. And many of them are sent abroad. The catalogues are even translated into several languages."

Denise had seen the catalogues. They were large books filled with pictures of

dresses, fabrics, and accessories. Some pages even carried small samples of cloth.

Mouret believed strongly in the power of publicity.

He often said that women could not resist it.

Denise once overheard him discussing the matter with Bourdoncle.

“Women are powerless before advertising,” Mouret said confidently.
“Reputation attracts them like a magnet.”

Bourdoncle nodded thoughtfully.

“And low prices help.”

“Exactly,” Mouret replied. “Women cannot resist the idea of a bargain. Even when they do not need something, they buy it because it seems advantageous.”

From this observation Mouret had created another system.

Unsold goods were gradually reduced in price.

Customers learned that if they waited, prices might fall. Yet many still bought immediately because they feared losing the opportunity.

Mouret had also introduced another powerful idea.

One afternoon Denise heard him explaining it to a group of managers.

“If a lady changes her mind,” he said, “she may return the goods.”

The managers looked surprised.

“Return them?” one asked.

Mouret nodded calmly.

“Yes. Let them take the goods home. If they later decide they do not like them, we will accept the return.”

Bourdoncle frowned.

“But that encourages impulsive purchases.”

Mouret smiled.

“Precisely.”

Denise understood the cleverness of the idea.

Women who feared making a mistake now felt safe buying immediately.

The possibility of returning goods removed the last barrier to impulsive shopping.

As Denise left the store that evening, she thought about everything she had

learned.

The Ladies' Paradise did not simply sell goods.

It studied human desire and used that knowledge to create ever greater waves of consumption.

Part 11

As the store continued to grow, Denise began to notice another side of its success. The crowds inside The Ladies' Paradise seemed joyful, but outside the neighborhood slowly changed.

Old shops closed one after another.

One evening Denise saw Madame Baudu standing quietly at the door of her shop. She looked tired and worried.

Denise approached her.

"Is business very bad?" she asked gently.

Madame Baudu sighed.

"Worse each month."

She glanced across the street toward the bright windows of The Ladies' Paradise.

"Customers go there now. They believe everything is cheaper."

Denise did not know what to say.

Inside the store the counters were crowded every day. Yet across the street the old shop waited in silence.

A few customers entered occasionally, but many passed without even looking.

Geneviève, Baudu's daughter, suffered greatly from the situation. She worked quietly beside her parents, but her pale face grew thinner each week.

Denise sometimes visited her in the evening.

One night Geneviève spoke softly.

"It feels as if the whole world is changing," she said. "Our shop no longer belongs to this new world."

Denise looked at her sadly.

“Perhaps things will improve.”

Geneviève shook her head slowly.

“No. That great store will swallow everything.”

Denise could not deny the possibility.

Meanwhile life inside The Ladies’ Paradise continued with increasing energy.

One day a group of visitors arrived to see the famous building. Mouret himself guided them through the store.

Denise happened to hear part of their conversation near the staircase.

One of the visitors asked about the design of the building.

Mouret gestured proudly toward the interior.

“The store is built like a railway station,” he explained.

Denise looked up.

The high galleries ran around the upper floors like balconies. Iron staircases curved boldly upward. Bridges crossed the open space above the counters.

The structure seemed light and modern, filled with air and movement.

Mouret continued speaking.

“Customers must feel that they have entered a vast world of goods.”

The visitors nodded with admiration.

Later that afternoon another conversation caught Denise’s attention.

A man named Vallagnosc, who often visited the store, spoke quietly to Mouret.

“With such crowds,” he said, “you must suffer from many thefts.”

Mouret laughed and spread his hands.

“More than you can imagine.”

He seemed almost pleased by the subject.

“There are several kinds of thieves,” he continued.

Denise listened with curiosity.

“First there are the professionals,” Mouret said. “But the police know most of them. They cause the least trouble.”

Vallagnosc nodded.

“And the others?”

Mouret’s expression grew thoughtful.

“There are women who steal because they cannot control themselves.”

Denise felt surprised.

“A doctor once studied the problem,” Mouret explained. “He said that the temptation of great stores like ours creates a new kind of illness.”

Vallagnosc raised his eyebrows.

“An illness?”

“Yes,” Mouret said. “An irresistible desire to steal.”

He then described another strange case.

“Pregnant women sometimes steal particular objects. Once the police discovered forty-eight pairs of pink gloves taken from different counters by a single woman.”

Vallagnosc laughed in disbelief.

Denise felt uneasy.

The store seemed to awaken strange desires in many people.

That same week another incident proved Mouret’s words true.

Madame de Boves, the elegant lady who often wandered through the departments, had been suffering from a growing obsession.

Denise had noticed her increasingly nervous behavior.

One afternoon Madame de Boves entered the glove department. Her movements were tense and hurried.

Denise saw her glance quickly around the counter.

Then, in a moment when the salesgirl turned away, Madame de Boves slipped a pair of gloves into her sleeve.

Denise felt shocked.

Yet Madame de Boves was not poor. Her husband allowed her to spend money freely.

She did not steal because she needed the goods.

She stole because she felt a strange and irresistible pleasure.

Denise later heard the truth from Marguerite.

“It has become a habit,” Marguerite whispered. “She steals even when she carries plenty of money.”

Denise felt a deep sadness.

The great store offered beauty and excitement.

But it also awakened hidden weaknesses in the human heart.

And sometimes those weaknesses led to quiet disasters.

Part 12

One afternoon during the busy spring season, Denise saw Madame Marty again in the store. The lady seemed more excited than usual.

She moved quickly through the departments, stopping wherever bright goods caught her attention.

First she bought several embroidered handkerchiefs. Then she chose a pair of decorated gloves. Soon afterward she selected a red parasol that shone brightly under the lights.

Denise watched her with growing concern.

Madame Marty did not even ask the price before making her choices.

Behind her, a young clerk struggled to carry the packages that were quickly accumulating. At last the clerk placed the bundles on a chair so that he could pull them along beside her.

On the chair lay an extraordinary collection of goods: petticoats, napkins, curtains, a small lamp, and even several mats for cleaning shoes.

The clerk pulled the chair slowly behind Madame Marty as she continued her wandering through the store.

Clara laughed quietly.

“She is having another attack,” she whispered.

Denise looked puzzled.

“An attack?”

“A shopping attack,” Clara replied lightly. “It happens often.”

Denise watched the lady again.

Madame Marty’s eyes shone with excitement. She seemed almost dizzy with pleasure as she moved from counter to counter.

At last she stopped near the entrance where several of her friends were waiting.
“Look what I found!” she cried happily.

She opened one of the packages and showed them the lace she had just bought.
The ladies admired it with enthusiasm.

Denise noticed that the clerk with the chair stood nearby, breathing heavily
from the effort of pulling the heavy load.

Suddenly Madame Marty looked up.

Her expression changed instantly.

Standing before her was a thin man with pale cheeks and worried eyes.

It was her husband.

Monsieur Marty had been searching for her.

For a moment the group fell silent.

Monsieur Marty looked slowly at the pile of packages.

His face became even paler.

Denise felt as if she were witnessing a painful private scene.

Madame Marty tried to speak lightly.

“These were bargains,” she said quickly. “I could not resist.”

Monsieur Marty did not answer immediately.

He seemed frozen in place.

Denise could see the suffering in his eyes.

He was a schoolteacher, a man who earned his salary through long hours of
difficult work. Each month he struggled to support his household.

And now he saw the results of his labor disappearing in a single afternoon of
shopping.

The new lace seemed to him like a disaster.

The bright parasol represented another sacrifice.

All the effort of his life—his lessons, his careful saving, his modest hopes—
appeared to be melting away in those packages.

At last he spoke softly.

“You have bought many things.”

Madame Marty lowered her eyes.

The scene ended quietly, but Denise could not forget it.

That evening she spoke about it with Marguerite while they arranged goods after closing.

“It is sad,” Denise said.

Marguerite nodded.

“Yes. The store excites people. Some enjoy it. Others suffer.”

Denise thought about the different women she had seen.

There was Madame Marty, driven by an uncontrollable desire to buy.

There was Madame Bourdelais, calm and calculating, determined to defeat the store by waiting for lower prices.

And there was Madame Guibal, who found happiness simply in looking at beautiful things.

The great store contained all these lives.

Yet the store itself felt nothing.

It continued to sell goods, day after day, feeding the desires of thousands of customers.

Denise sometimes wondered whether such power could ever be used more wisely.

She had begun to believe that commerce did not have to destroy everything around it.

But for the moment she was only a small salesgirl in a vast system.

Her ideas remained only quiet thoughts in her mind.

Part 13

As summer approached, life inside The Ladies’ Paradise changed again. The crowds of spring began to disappear. Fewer customers came into the store each day.

The great hall still looked impressive, but the noise was quieter now. The counters were no longer surrounded by excited groups of women.

Denise noticed the change immediately.

One morning she asked Marguerite about it.

“Is business slowing down?”

Marguerite nodded.

“Summer is always quieter. Many families leave Paris. The city becomes empty.”

Denise thought that the calm might give the workers some rest.

She soon discovered that she was mistaken.

A strange tension filled the store during the quiet weeks of July.

Employees spoke in whispers. Clerks watched the managers nervously.

Denise heard the reason one afternoon when Mouret and Bourdoncle walked through the department.

Mouret spoke in a low voice.

“We must reduce expenses.”

Bourdoncle nodded seriously.

“Yes. The dead season has begun.”

Denise listened carefully while pretending to arrange cloth.

Bourdoncle continued.

“During winter we employ many extra workers so that sales remain efficient during the busy months.”

Mouret agreed.

“But now the store is half empty.”

Bourdoncle lowered his voice even more.

“It is time to dismiss the weakest.”

Denise felt a cold sensation run through her body.

Dismiss the weakest.

The meaning of those words spread quickly through the departments.

Fear filled the dormitories that night.

Salesgirls spoke anxiously while preparing for bed.

“They will dismiss one third of the workers,” someone whispered.

“Who will go?” another asked nervously.

No one knew.

The next morning the managers began their inspections.

Mouret and Bourdoncle walked slowly through the store. When they wished to speak privately with a department head, they stepped aside near the counters.

From time to time an employee was called away.

When that person returned, the expression on his or her face revealed the result.

Some came back pale and silent.

Others did not return at all.

Denise felt her heart beating painfully each time a manager approached the dress materials department.

She knew that many workers depended entirely on their wages. Losing their position meant immediate poverty.

The dismissals continued for several days.

Each evening the dormitory seemed emptier.

Beds remained unused.

Names disappeared from the lists posted near the stairs.

Denise thought often about the young girl she had comforted earlier in the year.

One morning that girl was called to the office.

She never came back.

Marguerite tried to speak calmly about the situation.

“It happens every year,” she explained.

“But it is cruel,” Denise said quietly.

Marguerite looked at her with tired eyes.

“The store must survive.”

Denise did not answer.

She could not forget the faces of those who had been dismissed.

Later that week she visited her uncle Baudu again.

He listened silently as she described the situation.

At last he said bitterly, “The weak are eaten by the strong.”

Denise understood the truth of his words.

The great store devoured not only its competitors but also many of the people who worked inside it.

Yet something in Denise's heart rebelled against this harsh system.

She believed that another way must exist.

For the moment, however, she could do nothing except continue her work and hope that she would not be the next to disappear.

Part 14

During the quiet weeks of summer, Denise had more time to observe the interior of The Ladies' Paradise. When the crowds disappeared, the enormous building seemed even more impressive.

From the floor of the main hall she could see the entire structure rising above her.

The store looked almost like a railway station.

Two wide galleries ran around the upper floors. Iron railings lined the edges. Light poured down from the glass roof high above.

The staircases fascinated Denise most of all.

Two great spiral staircases of iron curved upward in bold circles. They seemed to float in the air. At each level wide landings opened onto the different departments.

Small bridges crossed the open space from one side of the building to the other.

When the store was full of customers, women moved across those bridges like colorful birds.

Denise often paused for a moment to admire the scene.

"It feels like a city," she once said to Marguerite.

Marguerite nodded.

"Yes. A city made of cloth."

Yet the building contained other rooms that customers never saw.

Behind the counters lay long storage areas filled with boxes of goods. In other rooms workers wrapped packages or counted accounts.

One afternoon Denise passed through a corridor and noticed several guards speaking quietly together.

They looked serious.

Curious, she asked Marguerite about them later.

“The store must watch for thieves,” Marguerite explained.

Denise remembered the conversation she had heard earlier between Mouret and Vallagnosc.

“Are there many thefts?” she asked.

Marguerite smiled faintly.

“More than you might think.”

Denise looked surprised.

“Even among respectable customers?”

“Especially among respectable customers,” Marguerite replied.

She then told Denise about a recent scandal.

Madame de Boves, the elegant lady Denise had often seen wandering through the departments, had finally been discovered stealing.

The story had spread quickly among the employees.

Madame de Boves had entered the store carrying a large purse filled with money. Her husband allowed her complete freedom to spend as she wished.

Yet she had continued to steal small objects from the counters.

It was no longer a question of money.

She stole simply because the act gave her a strange excitement.

Her desire had grown stronger each month.

At last one of the guards saw her hide a piece of lace beneath her cloak.

The store managers were informed immediately.

The situation was delicate. Madame de Boves belonged to an important family. A public scandal would have damaged her reputation and embarrassed the store as well.

Mouret solved the problem quietly.

Madame de Boves was taken to a private office where the stolen goods were returned.

No police were called.

She left the store trembling with humiliation.

Denise felt pity when she heard the story.

“It must be terrible to feel such a desire,” she said softly.

Marguerite shrugged.

“The store awakens many desires.”

Denise understood.

Everywhere inside The Ladies’ Paradise temptation surrounded the customers.

Mountains of silk, lace, ribbons, gloves, perfumes, and hats created a dazzling world.

For some women the temptation became too strong.

Denise thought again of Madame Marty and her endless purchases.

She thought of Madame Bourdelais patiently waiting for lower prices.

And now Madame de Boves had crossed another boundary entirely.

The store had become a place where human desires were tested.

As Denise returned to her counter, she looked once more across the enormous hall.

The bright goods shone under the glass roof.

The building seemed magnificent.

Yet she knew that behind its beauty lay many hidden struggles—among customers, among merchants, and even among the workers themselves.

Part 15

During the following months Denise became more respected inside the dress materials department. Her patience and careful work slowly earned the confidence of Madame Aurélie.

Customers began to notice her calm manner.

Unlike some of the other salesgirls, Denise did not pressure them aggressively. She listened quietly and tried to understand what they truly wanted.

Many women appreciated this.

One afternoon a lady returned directly to Denise’s counter.

“I prefer to speak with you,” she said. “You do not rush me.”

Denise felt encouraged.

Even Madame Aurélie began to trust her with more responsibility.

“Serve this customer,” she said one morning, stepping aside so that Denise could manage the sale.

Clara watched the scene with narrowed eyes.

Later she spoke to Denise sharply.

“You are becoming very important,” she said.

Denise answered gently.

“I only try to do my work well.”

Clara laughed softly.

“Perhaps. But Monsieur Mouret also seems interested in you.”

Denise lowered her eyes without replying.

Mouret had indeed begun to notice her more frequently.

Whenever he passed through the department, his gaze often paused for a moment on Denise.

One afternoon he spoke to her directly.

“You work hard,” he said simply.

Denise felt her cheeks grow warm.

“Thank you, monsieur.”

Mouret studied her quietly.

“You came from the provinces, did you not?”

“Yes.”

“And you support your family?”

“My younger brother,” Denise answered.

Mouret nodded thoughtfully before moving on.

Denise felt strangely uneasy after the conversation.

She admired Mouret’s intelligence and energy, yet she also sensed the power he held over everyone in the store.

Meanwhile another important change was beginning to develop.

Denise had never forgotten the fear she had felt during the summer dismissals. The sudden loss of work had deeply troubled her.

She continued to think about the lives of the employees.

One evening she spoke about the problem to Marguerite.

“It is unjust,” Denise said quietly. “The store hires many workers during the busy months, then dismisses them when business slows.”

Marguerite sighed.

“That is how commerce works.”

“But must it be so?” Denise insisted.

Marguerite looked at her with curiosity.

“What else could the store do?”

Denise hesitated before answering.

“Perhaps during the quiet season the employees could take holidays instead of being dismissed.”

Marguerite smiled faintly.

“You think like a reformer.”

Denise did not answer.

Yet the idea remained in her mind.

Some weeks later an unexpected opportunity appeared.

Mouret once again noticed Denise’s intelligence while she was advising a customer about fabrics.

After the sale he approached her.

“You understand customers well,” he said.

Denise bowed slightly.

“I try to listen carefully.”

Mouret studied her face.

“Tell me something,” he continued. “If you could improve the store, what would you change?”

Denise hesitated. She felt nervous speaking openly to the owner of such a powerful business.

But Mouret waited patiently.

At last she spoke.

“The employees fear the quiet season,” she said softly. “Many are dismissed

when business slows. Perhaps the store could give them holidays instead.”

Mouret raised his eyebrows with interest.

“Holidays?”

Denise nodded.

“The workers would rest during the quiet months and return refreshed when business grows again.”

Mouret remained silent for a moment.

Then he smiled slightly.

“That is an interesting idea.”

Denise felt surprised.

She had expected him to dismiss her suggestion.

Mouret continued thoughtfully.

“Commerce must grow, but perhaps it can grow more wisely.”

He nodded once more before walking away.

Denise watched him disappear among the counters.

She did not yet know whether her words would have any effect.

But for the first time she felt that even within the enormous machine of The Ladies’ Paradise, change might be possible.

Part 16

As the months passed, Denise’s position in the store slowly improved. Her quiet intelligence and kindness toward customers began to attract attention.

Madame Aurélie now trusted her with difficult sales. When wealthy customers arrived, Denise was often asked to assist them.

“You are patient,” Madame Aurélie told her one day. “That is valuable.”

Denise worked harder than ever.

Yet her success created jealousy among some of the other salesgirls.

Clara in particular watched her with cold eyes.

One afternoon Clara spoke sharply while arranging ribbons.

“You are becoming very important,” she said. “Soon you may even manage the

department.”

Denise answered calmly.

“I only do what Madame Aurélie asks.”

Clara laughed quietly.

“And Monsieur Mouret also asks many things, I suppose.”

Denise felt uncomfortable and changed the subject.

Meanwhile the situation across the street continued to worsen.

When Denise visited her uncle Baudu, she found the shop emptier each time.

The old counters remained covered with heavy cloth, but few customers came to examine it.

Baudu himself had grown thinner and more bitter.

One evening he spoke angrily while Denise sat beside him.

“They are expanding again,” he said.

“The store?” Denise asked.

“Yes. They plan new departments—perfumes, hats, shoes, even flowers.”

Baudu shook his head.

“Every new department destroys another shop in this neighborhood.”

Denise listened sadly.

She knew that Baudu spoke the truth.

Each new section of The Ladies’ Paradise attracted more customers away from the small stores nearby.

Yet inside the great store the mood was entirely different.

Mouret’s ambition seemed limitless.

One morning Denise overheard him speaking to Bourdoncle again.

“We must conquer every corner of the market,” Mouret said.

Bourdoncle nodded.

“The public already believes that everything can be found here.”

Mouret smiled with satisfaction.

“That belief must become a certainty.”

Denise felt the enormous force of Mouret’s vision.

The Ladies’ Paradise was no longer merely competing with neighboring shops.

It aimed to dominate all commerce connected with women's goods.

At the same time Mouret's attention toward Denise became more obvious.

Sometimes he paused beside her counter longer than necessary.

Once he asked her quietly after closing time to walk with him through the nearly empty hall.

Denise followed him respectfully.

The store looked very different at night. The counters were quiet. The gas lamps cast long shadows across the floor.

Mouret spoke slowly as they walked.

"You understand this place better than many of my managers," he said.

Denise felt embarrassed.

"I only observe."

Mouret looked at her thoughtfully.

"Observation is the beginning of wisdom."

They stopped near the great staircase.

Mouret looked up toward the glass roof.

"This store represents the future," he said.

Denise remained silent.

Mouret then turned toward her.

"And yet the future must also consider the people who work inside it."

Denise realized that he had remembered her suggestion about holidays for employees.

Mouret continued.

"I have been thinking about your idea."

Denise felt both surprised and hopeful.

"Perhaps the store can create a system to protect workers during the quiet season," Mouret said.

Denise's heart beat faster.

Mouret smiled slightly.

"You see, Denise, even a great machine can sometimes learn compassion."

Denise lowered her eyes.

She felt that her influence inside the enormous store was slowly growing.

But she also knew that many people around her were still suffering from the changes that the store brought to the city.

The success of The Ladies' Paradise remained both magnificent and troubling.

Part 17

While Denise's life inside The Ladies' Paradise slowly improved, the situation in her uncle Baudu's shop grew worse each month.

The Old Elbeuf stood in shadow across the street from the great store. Its windows were dusty, and the piles of cloth inside seemed heavier and darker than ever.

Denise visited often when she could.

One evening she found Geneviève sitting behind the counter, pale and silent.

"You look tired," Denise said gently.

Geneviève smiled weakly.

"I am only a little unwell."

But Denise could see that the girl was suffering deeply.

For years Geneviève had loved Colomban, the shop's young assistant. Everyone had expected that they would marry one day.

Yet things had changed.

Colomban had recently begun spending time with Clara, one of the salesgirls from The Ladies' Paradise.

Clara's bright beauty had attracted him easily. Compared with the quiet and fragile Geneviève, Clara seemed full of life and excitement.

Denise had noticed the change with growing sadness.

One afternoon she saw Colomban walking with Clara near the entrance of the store. They were laughing together.

Denise said nothing, but she knew that Geneviève must have heard the rumors.

A few days later Denise visited the Baudu house again.

She found Geneviève sitting in a chair near the window. The room felt strangely

still.

Madame Baudu stood beside her daughter, looking worried.

Denise approached quietly.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

Geneviève tried to answer, but her voice was weak.

“Just tired.”

Madame Baudu shook her head sadly.

“The doctor says her lungs are weak.”

Denise understood the truth immediately.

The disappointment and stress of recent months had destroyed Geneviève’s strength.

The decline of the shop, the betrayal of Colomban, and the constant worry had broken her spirit.

Over the following weeks Geneviève grew weaker.

Denise visited whenever she could, but the young woman’s condition continued to worsen.

One evening Baudu spoke with heavy anger.

“This is what that cursed store has done,” he said.

Denise did not reply.

She knew that Geneviève’s illness came from many causes, yet the change in the neighborhood had certainly played its part.

A few days later the worst happened.

Geneviève died quietly during the night.

The small house fell into deep mourning.

Baudu moved through the shop like a broken man.

Madame Baudu rarely spoke.

Colomban disappeared from the neighborhood soon afterward.

Denise felt a deep sorrow.

Geneviève had been one of the gentle souls destroyed by the transformation of the city.

Meanwhile The Ladies’ Paradise continued to grow stronger.

Customers filled the store every day. New goods arrived constantly.

Yet Denise could not forget the tragedy across the street.

She understood more clearly than ever that the triumph of the great store carried a heavy human cost.

The world of modern commerce brought progress and wealth.

But it also left many wounded lives behind.

Part 18

Not long after Geneviève's death, another dramatic event shook the neighborhood.

Near The Ladies' Paradise stood a tiny umbrella shop owned by an old man named Bourras. His narrow house was pressed tightly between larger buildings. The little shop had existed there for many years.

Mouret had long wanted to buy that property.

The store needed more space. Each new department required additional rooms, and Bourras's shop stood directly in the way of the next expansion.

But Bourras refused to sell.

"I will die here," he said stubbornly whenever anyone mentioned the subject.

For a long time the matter remained unresolved.

Then one morning news spread through the district.

Mouret had purchased the building from the landlord.

Bourras was ordered to leave.

Denise heard the story from Marguerite.

"They have already begun removing the goods," she said quietly.

Denise felt uneasy and went to see the situation herself after work.

When she arrived, several workers were carrying furniture from the small shop. The shelves were empty. Umbrellas and tools had been packed into boxes.

The interior of the shop looked strangely bare.

Yet Bourras himself remained inside.

He had moved his bed into a corner of the room and refused to leave.

Denise watched from the street.
The old man lay quietly on the bed as if he were sleeping.
The workers spoke among themselves in uncertain voices.
“What shall we do?” one of them asked.
“We cannot carry him out by force,” another replied.
For a while the situation remained frozen.
Then the demolition workers arrived.
They had orders to begin removing the roof.
Even while Bourras lay on his bed beneath it.
Denise felt a shock of disbelief.
The men climbed onto the roof and began their work. Pieces of wood fell away.
Dust drifted down into the shop.
The old man did not move.
The walls creaked and the ceiling trembled.
Yet Bourras remained lying quietly among the falling debris.
The scene seemed unreal.
At last the police were called.
They entered the building and spoke to Bourras firmly. After long resistance he finally allowed himself to be removed.
The small shop stood empty.
Within hours the demolition workers began tearing it apart completely.
Denise watched the destruction with a heavy heart.
The tiny shop had fought as long as it could.
But the great store had won.
Like a small fly crushed beneath a giant machine, the last resistance of the old commerce had been destroyed.
In the following days the construction workers began extending The Ladies’ Paradise across the space where Bourras’s shop had stood.
The building grew even larger.
Denise realized that nothing could stop the expansion now.
The great commercial empire continued to conquer the neighborhood, one

small shop at a time.

Part 19

After the death of Geneviève and the destruction of Bourras's little shop, the old commercial life of the neighborhood began to disappear completely.

The Baudu family could no longer continue their business.

One evening Denise entered the familiar shop of The Old Elbeuf and immediately felt that something had changed.

The counters were empty.

The shelves that once held piles of cloth now stood bare.

The air smelled of dust and abandonment.

Baudu himself sat quietly in a chair near the door.

His shoulders were bent, and his eyes looked dull with exhaustion.

Denise approached him gently.

"Uncle..."

Baudu lifted his head slowly.

"It is finished," he said.

His voice sounded hollow.

The shop had closed.

After years of struggle the old business had finally collapsed. There were no customers left. The remaining goods had been sold to pay debts.

Madame Baudu moved silently through the room, gathering the last objects that belonged to the family.

Denise felt an overwhelming sadness.

The shop had once been full of life and pride. Now it looked like a tomb.

Within a few days the wooden shutters were closed across the windows.

They would never be opened again.

Weeks passed.

Rain and mud from the street slowly stained the shutters. Posters were pasted across them until the wood was hidden beneath layers of paper.

One morning Denise stopped before the old shop on her way to work.

The posters had multiplied during the night.

Advertisements covered the entire surface of the shutters like a flood of paper.

Among them one poster stood out clearly.

It was bright yellow.

Large letters nearly two feet high filled the center of the page.

THE LADIES' PARADISE

GREAT SALE

The poster hung directly in the middle of the old shop front.

It looked like a flag planted in conquered territory.

Denise felt a painful emotion.

The advertisements seemed to throw the final shovelful of earth onto the grave of the old business.

The neighborhood had changed completely.

The great store now dominated everything.

Its posters, catalogues, and announcements appeared everywhere in the city.

Marguerite once told Denise how enormous the advertising budget had become.

"The store now spends almost six hundred thousand francs each year on publicity," she said.

Denise stared in amazement.

"Six hundred thousand!"

"Yes. Nearly four hundred thousand catalogues are sent out. And more than one hundred thousand francs' worth of fabric samples are cut each year to attach to the catalogues."

Denise realized that the influence of the store reached far beyond the street where it stood.

Its advertisements spread through the entire country.

That evening Denise walked past the closed shop again.

The bright yellow poster shone against the dark shutters.

Behind it lay the silent ruins of the old commercial world.

In front of it the great store continued to attract crowds of eager customers.

The victory of the new commerce was now complete.

Part 20

As the years passed, Denise's influence inside The Ladies' Paradise continued to grow. Her calm intelligence and compassion had impressed many people, including Mouret himself.

The idea she had once suggested—protecting employees during the quiet season—had not been forgotten.

Mouret had begun to think seriously about it.

One afternoon he spoke with Bourdoncle and several managers in a private office.

“The dismissals create too much misery,” Mouret said.

Bourdoncle looked surprised.

“But they reduce expenses.”

Mouret nodded.

“Yes. But they also weaken loyalty. Workers who live in fear cannot serve the store well.”

The managers listened carefully.

Mouret continued.

“Instead of dismissing employees during the quiet months, we will give them holidays.”

Bourdoncle frowned slightly.

“Paid holidays?”

“Not entirely,” Mouret replied. “But enough to protect them from sudden unemployment.”

He paused before adding another idea.

“We will also create a mutual aid fund.”

The managers exchanged glances.

Mouret explained further.

“Each employee will contribute a small amount of money to the fund. The store

will add additional support. If a worker becomes ill or must leave employment, the fund will provide assistance.”

Bourdoncle slowly nodded.

“It would protect them from disaster.”

“Exactly,” Mouret said.

News of the changes spread quickly through the departments.

When Denise heard about the reforms, she felt deeply moved.

One evening Marguerite approached her with a warm smile.

“Your idea has changed everything.”

Denise shook her head modestly.

“It was Mouret’s decision.”

“Perhaps,” Marguerite replied. “But you planted the seed.”

The new system soon began to operate.

Employees who had once feared the quiet months now received scheduled holidays instead of dismissal.

The mutual aid fund offered protection in cases of illness or sudden hardship.

Life inside the store slowly became more stable.

Denise saw the difference in the faces of the workers around her.

They no longer spoke with the same fear that had filled the dormitories during earlier summers.

Yet even as conditions improved for the employees, the outside world continued to change in harsher ways.

The small shops of the neighborhood had almost entirely disappeared.

The old streets that once contained many independent merchants were now dominated by the enormous presence of The Ladies’ Paradise.

Denise understood that her reforms could not repair all the damage created by the rise of the great store.

One evening she walked through the department after closing time.

The counters stood silent beneath the soft light of the lamps.

She thought about the thousands of workers who depended on the store for their livelihood.

The reforms had protected them, but the power of modern commerce remained immense.

Denise realized that she stood at the beginning of a new social world.

The great store had become a symbol of the future.

And in that future, the relationship between business and human life would continue to evolve.

Part 21

After the new system for employees had been introduced, life inside The Ladies' Paradise became calmer. Workers felt more secure. Even Bourdoncle admitted that the change had improved the atmosphere in the store.

"They work better now," he said one day.

Mouret nodded quietly.

"A satisfied worker is more useful than a frightened one."

Yet another matter continued to trouble Mouret.

It was Denise.

For a long time he had admired her intelligence and independence. At first his interest had been simple attraction. But over time his feelings had grown deeper.

Denise, however, remained cautious.

She respected Mouret and recognized his extraordinary talent. But she did not wish to become merely another conquest for the powerful owner of the store.

One evening Mouret asked her to walk with him again after closing time.

The great hall was almost empty. Only a few workers moved quietly in the distance.

Mouret and Denise walked slowly along the counters.

"You have changed this store," Mouret said at last.

Denise shook her head gently.

"The store was already powerful."

Mouret stopped near the central staircase.

"Power is not enough," he replied. "It must also learn justice."

Denise looked at him carefully.

“You have already begun that work.”

Mouret smiled faintly.

“Because you showed me another way.”

For a moment they stood in silence.

Then Mouret spoke again, more quietly.

“Denise, I want you to stay beside me—not only in the store.”

Denise understood immediately.

She had expected this moment, yet she still felt nervous.

Mouret continued.

“Together we could guide this business. You understand the workers and the customers better than anyone.”

Denise looked around the enormous hall.

She thought about the long path she had traveled since arriving in Paris as a poor girl with her two brothers.

She had seen the beauty and the cruelty of modern commerce.

She had watched small shops collapse and new fortunes rise.

She had seen workers suffer and customers lose themselves in temptation.

Mouret waited patiently.

At last Denise answered.

“I will not belong to the store as a possession,” she said calmly.

Mouret listened carefully.

“If I remain beside you,” she continued, “it must be as an equal.”

Mouret’s expression softened.

“That is exactly what I want.”

Denise felt that he was sincere.

She had helped shape the store’s future. Now she realized that she could influence it even more strongly.

Slowly she nodded.

Mouret’s face brightened with genuine happiness.

The vast hall around them seemed suddenly warmer.

Denise knew that her decision would change her life forever.

Part 22

News of Denise's engagement to Mouret spread quickly through The Ladies' Paradise.

At first many employees were surprised.

Some had expected that Mouret would eventually marry a woman from a wealthy or noble family. Denise, after all, had arrived in Paris as a poor provincial girl.

But those who knew her best were not surprised.

Marguerite spoke warmly about the news.

"No one understands this store better than Denise," she said. "She has earned her place."

Even Bourdoncle, who usually judged people with cold practicality, admitted that the match made sense.

"She sees clearly," he said to Mouret one afternoon. "That is rare."

Clara reacted differently.

When she heard the news, she laughed sharply.

"So the little provincial girl has conquered the emperor," she said.

Yet even she could not hide a certain admiration.

Meanwhile the store itself continued to flourish.

New departments opened. Goods arrived from factories across France and beyond. The catalogues reached more distant customers every year.

The Ladies' Paradise had become more than a shop.

It was now a vast commercial empire.

One evening Denise walked alone through the store after closing time. The counters were quiet beneath the soft lamps.

She paused near the entrance where the crowds usually gathered.

For a moment she remembered the first day she had stood there, a frightened young woman searching for work.

Everything had changed since then.

She had learned how the great machine of commerce functioned.

She had seen how desire could be awakened, how crowds could be guided, how goods could be arranged to create irresistible temptation.

But she had also seen the suffering hidden behind that success.

The ruined shops of the old neighborhood.

The dismissed workers.

The customers whose desires turned into obsession.

Denise knew that those problems would not disappear simply because she had risen to a position of power.

Yet she also believed that commerce could become more humane.

Mouret joined her near the entrance.

“You are thinking about the future,” he said.

Denise smiled slightly.

“Yes.”

Mouret looked around the vast hall with satisfaction.

“This store represents the new world,” he said.

Denise nodded.

“Then we must make that world better.”

Mouret took her hand gently.

Outside, the streets of Paris were full of life. The bright windows of The Ladies’ Paradise shone like a beacon in the evening city.

The great store would continue to grow.

And now Denise would help guide its future.