

## *Entrance Fee*

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This, then, is the story of Cosette and the Saint-Cyrien, much as they tell it (and these many years have been telling it) in the smoky popotes of the French army.

In the nineties, when one heard less ugly babel of alien tongues in the sidewalk cafés, the talk at the apéritif hour was sure to turn sooner or later on Cosette — Mlle. Cosette of the Variétés, who was regarded by common consent as the most desirable woman in France. She was no hedged-in royal courtesan, as her possessive fellow-citizens would point out with satisfaction, but a distributed du Barry, the chère amie of a republic.

Her origins were misty. Some said she had been born of fisher folk at Plonbazlanec on the Brittany coast. Others preferred the tale that she was the love-child of a famous actress by a very well-known king. In any case, she was now a national legend, and in her pre-eminence the still-bruised French people found in some curious way a balm for their wounded self-esteem. Her photographs, which usually showed her sitting piquantly on a café table, were cut from L'Illustration and pinned up in every barracks. Every French lad dreamed of her, and every right-minded French girl quite understood that her sweetheart was saying in effect, "Since I cannot hope to have Cosette, will you come to the river's edge at sundown?" Quite understood, and did not blame him.

Everyone had seen the pictures of Cosette's tiny, vine-hung villa at Saint-Cloud, with its high garden wall and its twittering aviary. And even those for whom that wall was hopelessly high took morbid pride in a persistent detail of the legend which said that no man was ever a guest there for the night who could not bring five thousand francs with him. This was in the nineties, mind you, when francs were francs, and men — by a coincidence then more dependable — were men.

The peasant blend of charm and thrift in Cosette filled the cadets at Saint-Cyr with a gentle melancholy. In their twilight hours of relaxation they talked it over, and all thought it a sorrowful thing that, so wretched is the soldier's pittance, not one of those who must some day direct the great Revanche would ever carry into battle a memory of the fairest woman in France. For what cadet could hope to raise five thousand francs? It was very sad. But, cried one of their number, his voice shaking, his eyes alight, there

were a thousand students at Saint-Cyr, and not one among them so lacking in resource that he could not, if given time, manage to raise at least five francs.

That was how the Cosette Sweepstakes were started. There followed then all the anxious distraction of ways and means, with such Spartan exploits in self-denial, such Damon-and-Pythias borrowings, such flagrant letters of perjured appeal to unsuspecting aunts and godmothers, as Saint-Cyr had never known. But by the appointed time the last man had his, or somebody's, five francs.

The drawing of numbers was well under way when a perplexed instructor stumbled on the proceedings and reported his discovery to the Commandant. When the old General heard the story he was so profoundly moved that it was some time before he spoke.

"The lad who wins the lottery," he said at last, "will be the envy of his generation. But the lad who conceived the idea — ah, he, my friend, will some day be a Marshal of France!"

Then he fell to laughing at the thought of the starry-eyed youngster arriving at the stage door of the Variétés with nothing but his youth and his entrance fee. The innocent budget had made no provision for the trip to Paris, none for a carriage, a bouquet, perhaps a supper party. The Commandant said that he would wish to meet this margin of contingency from his own fatherly pocket.

"There will be extras," he said. "Let the young rascal who wins be sent to me before he leaves for Paris."

It was a cadet from the Vendée who reported to the Commandant next afternoon — very trim in his red breeches and blue tunic, his white gloves spotless, his white cockade jaunty, his heart in his mouth. The Commandant said no word to him, but put a little purse of gold louis in his hand, kissed him on both cheeks in benediction, and stood at his window, moist-eyed and chuckling, to watch until the white cockade disappeared down the avenue of trees.

The sunlight, latticed by the jalousies, was making a gay pattern on Cosette's carpet the next morning when she sat up and meditated on the day which stretched ahead of her. Her little cadet was cradled in a sweet, dreamless sleep, and it touched her rather to see how preposterously young he was. Indeed, it quite set her thinking of her early days, and how she had come up in the world. Then she began speculating on his early days, realized with a pang that he was still in the midst of them, and suddenly grew puzzled. Being a woman of action, she prodded him.

"Listen, my old one," she said, "how did a cadet at Saint-Cyr ever get hold of five thousand francs?"

Thus abruptly questioned, he lost his head and blurted out the tale of the sweepstakes. Perhaps he felt it could do no harm now, and anyway she listened so avidly, with such flattering little gasps of surprise and such sunny ripples of laughter, that he quite warmed to his story. When he came to the part about the Commandant, she rose and strode up and down, the lace of her peignoir fluttering behind her, tears in her violet eyes.

"Saint-Cyr has paid me the prettiest compliment I have ever known," she said, "and I am the proudest woman in France this day. But surely I must do my part. You shall go back and tell them all that Cosette is a woman of sentiment. When you are an old, old man in the Vendée you shall tell your grandchildren that once in your youth you knew the dearest favors in France, and they cost you not a sou. Not a sou."

At that she hauled open the little drawer where he had seen her lock up the lottery receipts the night before.

"Here," she said, with a lovely gesture. "I give you back your money."

And she handed him his five francs

#### Story Notes:

"Entrance Fee" is a miniature gem of the *conte* tradition – the short, polished anecdote raised to the level of art. Its author works in a mode that is essentially French in spirit: urbane, warm, and shot through with an irony that never curdles into cynicism. The story earns its effects economically, and its famous final punch – *she handed him his five francs* – lands with the satisfying precision of a good joke and the resonance of something more.

The setup is handled with confident ease. Cosette is established not merely as a celebrated courtesan but as a figure of near-mythological status, a "distributed du Barry" who functions as a kind of secular saint for wounded national pride. This elevation is crucial: it transforms what might otherwise be a slightly risqué barrack-room tale into something approaching fable. The cadets' sweepstakes scheme follows naturally from this mythology, and the author is shrewd enough to linger on its details – the self-denial, the borrowed francs, the perjured letters to godmothers – so that we feel the collective tenderness and absurdity of the enterprise before the plot proper begins.

The Commandant is the story's most delicate touch. His response to the scheme – moving from emotion, to laughter, to practical generosity – does a great deal of quiet work. He authenticates the romantic silliness of the cadets by taking it seriously himself, and his

contribution of *les extras* adds just enough worldly realism to prevent the tale from floating off into pure whimsy.

Cosette's final gesture is where the story reveals its true colors. Her arithmetic is perfect and devastating: a thousand men contributed five francs each to assemble her usual fee of five thousand, and she returns to the winner exactly his share – five francs – with a "lovely gesture." It is at once generous and precise, sentimental and cannily businesslike, entirely in keeping with the "peasant blend of charm and thrift" the narrator attributed to her at the outset. The characterization is vindicated by the resolution in a way that feels both surprising and inevitable – the mark of a well-made story.

What prevents the tale from being merely clever is its genuine warmth. The narrator's affection for all the parties – the scheming cadets, the avuncular Commandant, and Cosette herself – is evident throughout, and it is this generosity of spirit that elevates the story above the merely anecdotal. We leave it feeling that something true has been said, not just about French military culture in the 1890s, but about youth, desire, honor, and the pleasures of a world in which romance and practicality can, on occasion, strike a graceful bargain.