

Chapter I
Célestine's Origin, Education, Life and Character

Célestine Chopin was a gamine of the Faubourg du Temple. Her mother, Mademoiselle Chopin, the issue of nomadic parents, had, so to speak, raised herself on her own. At eight years old she had been placed to earn her nourishment, and the rest of her career had been spent going from one factory to another. For education, argot; for mores, license; for horizons, hazard—such had been Mademoiselle Chopin's education.¹

As she had become very beautiful, her life had been a composite of opulence and poverty. She had never made a fortune and had never had a stable situation, because, profoundly independent, she went forth following an idea or a caprice, not imagining anything beyond. It would have been astonishing, in talking to her, to dominate her by interest; it was not that she was romantic or delicate, it was simply that she did not know how to be bored, much less to constrain herself.

At rather distant intervals, she had brought three daughters into the world. The fathers were not exactly well known to the mother, so they were absolutely zero to the children, who never even imagined anything about them. They had had fathers, that much was certain, but as for knowing who they were, that was of no importance.

Célestine, the youngest of the three daughters, was fifteen years distanced from her sisters; they, who had become as beautiful as their mother, lived in much the same fashion, so that carelessness of all position and indifference to things established a kind of harmony in that family of sorts; they sustained it voluntarily and lived in good accord; above all, they were cheerful within it and indifferent to everything. If one of them left in the morning in a printed cotton dress and came back in the evening wearing velvet, no one asked for an explanation, and no action was followed by reflection. It ought to be said, too, that no event led to any moral alteration; there was always the same demeanor, the same individuality; if there was velvet, they felt its softness and its thickness, but the effect it produced stopped there.

Those three women, aiding one another, were not unhappy, and little Célestine, cherished by them after their fashion, was a doll with which they amused themselves all day long, dressing her up, teasing her and teaching her. The society admitted into the house completed that educational endeavor, and at eight years of age, Célestine could have rivaled an Opéra rat or a walk-on player at the Variétés in repartee.

At that age, it was decided to send her to school. Her instructresses wanted her to have the talents that demoiselles possessed; for themselves they cared as little about that as turning forty, but their idea was that it would be different for the little one, and that amused them.

"Célestine will be knowledgeable," they said. "It won't do her any good, but it will please us."

Célestine seconded their designs marvelously; she learned everything that anyone wished, wore clothes as if she had none on, and was all the more marvelous a masterpiece of form and beauty. At mealtimes, she often went to find her sisters at the factory; there, the bosses, the foremen, and the workers of both sexes edified the child that had already been loosely sketched by the contact with her family, so there could not have been a creature more disparate and more original than Célestine.

Superior in her endowments, she was the most perfect of young ladies at school, and among her family and its acquaintances the flightiest and most risqué hussy that it was possible to encounter. The reason for that was easily understandable; Célestine had one of those natures made to excel in everything; living in a low environment, she had grasped all the finesse of the genre, and elevated it, rendering it more cynical still by the piquancy of her wit and the prestige of her admirable person.

¹ Célestine's surname is not mentioned again after this paragraph, and has no need to be; the supplementation would be superfluous if it were not symbolic in some fashion. The name would inevitably have recalled the composer Frédéric Chopin, and the two things that everyone in France knew about him were that his music was divine and that George Sand had been his mistress.

Her sisters, increasingly enthused, wanted her to learn drawing and music; in any case, Célestine sang like a nightingale—there was a future in that, no doubt about it. The Opéra and the theater were whirling in those heads thereafter. At fifteen, Célestine quit her studies and occupied herself solely with her singing; that was a new phase, the world of aspiring artistes, and an environment in which there was another idiom to master and different mores to learn.

With her perfect sagacity, Célestine succeeded in familiarizing herself with things without being found out; she took on the surface of whatever surrounded her and did not reveal her interior self. Thus she appeared as a dream, an incarnation of the art—hence, profound jealousy on the part of pupils, exalted admiration on the part of professors.

At any rate, Célestine justified all expectations; whether because the ensemble of beauty united in her added an immense force to her abilities, or because there really was nothing with which to find fault; she did not, in sum, seem inferior.

As people talked about her, Célestine soon had a following. Between the homages rendered to her and those that she saw offered to her sisters on a daily basis, there was all the difference of aristocratic refinement and plebeian informality, but Célestine, as supple as a snake, responded right away to whatever role was played out before her; treated as a queen, she immediately acted as a queen, so magisterially that her courtiers could not imagine that they might have approached her in any other way; then, with her family, leaving behind her aura and prestige as one takes off a costume after a performance, Célestine became an authentic brazen hussy again, a typical daughter of the faubourg.

Once the effervescence of early youth had passed, Célestine began to reflect; her ideas had been considerably broadened by her frequentation with the various classes of society, and at twenty-two, she had learned to know men at first glance, as a skillful mechanic is able to take account of any system at the first examination. Her manner of procedure was particular to her: never using any subterfuge, she got straight to the point, saying what she wanted clearly, always imposing her will and never yielding to anyone.

“You’re ruining me, beautiful Célestine,” said one of her servant cavaliers one day.

“My dear,” she replied, disdainfully, “what’s the purpose of your fortune? To amuse yourself. Now, could you ever procure a more regal feast than being loved by me? You can see, therefore, that you’re making the best employment of your money that you could possibly make.”

“One is no longer infatuated!” the piqued dandy riposted.

“Prove it by leaving me,” said Célestine, mockingly.

The insult was sharp, and the favorite had a strong desire to go away, but Célestine appeared to him more beautiful than ever on that pedestal of arrogance, and, by virtue of a sudden change of mind, he felt that it was almost glorious to be touched by the iron hand that was crushing him. To remain was doubtless to be a slave, but by virtue of that fact, it was to count as something to be in proximity with the force; it was to be beaten, and that seemed to him to be an honor, for Célestine did not deign to martyrize everyone. As humble as a devotee in the presence of his God, the rebel knelt down, begged for mercy, and, having obtained it, hurled himself like a tornado in pursuit of his ruin.

Thus Célestine governed.

She had sung and acted in generic theaters; she would have been capable of achieving the most immense celebrity, but the entourage of suitors, incessant and relentless, the overabundant profusion that they heaped upon her, and the impossibility of the fantasy that they sowed beneath her feet, loosened the cords of her thought, and Célestine, carried away from enchantment to enchantment, no longer had the possibility of the rectitude of judgment that alone leads to genius.

Célestine could have played the part of the queen of love or some intoxicated goddess marvelously, in its purest sense, but it had become impossible for her to shed the morbidity that was dispiriting her life. Célestine was not the fiction of delirium, she was delirium personified.

That brain, by virtue of vibrating with overexcited notes, had lost its appetite for them. In the heights of the empyrean, Célestine suffered from spleen. She was then twenty-eight; she had exhausted the possible.

She decided to travel, not hoping for anything much, but tried it anyway. She departed for countries that were distant and hot, looking for something unexpected that might reanimate her depression, and wanting to leave all known horizons behind her. She disappeared without saying a word and embarked with a maidservant hired for the occasion.

The voyage did not charm her; that fiery imagination had more beauty within it than anything in nature, and she did not find anywhere the expression of the indefinite vagueness of which she dreamed without being able to make it precise. What she saw was magnificent, but what she aspired to was impossible, inconceivable and inaccessible. It was not a matter of beauty or ugliness; it required something superhuman to reanimate that creature, who, having become a statue by absorbing into herself everything that enabled life, was thus obliged to live internally, dying of her own ennui.

An event, however, came to cause her some agitation. Her ship was attacked by pirates. In the blink of an eye, the crew, too inferior in number, were taken prisoner, and the passengers were passed in review. At the sight of Célestine, a murmur of admiration went up. The corsair captain said that she was the most beautiful item in the cargo, and, immediately remembering that general booty had to be shared, ordered that Célestine be treated with all possible care, in order that the capital in question should not deteriorate, and that everyone could receive his share in good gold coin from some sultan or other—who, they knew, would give all the jewels in his kingdom to have such a superb item in his flock.

The fiery eyes of the pirates blazed at the sight of Célestine, but the bandits also looked at one another, the energy of every visage announcing a similar decision to its neighbor; without exchanging a word, they all understood and accepted that Célestine was reserved to be sold, because everyone had mutually affirmed that he would kill anyone who tried to appropriate her. That having been thought, it was done; such burning characters are as tenacious as they are prompt. Célestine was kept out of sight, and they set sail precipitately toward the realm of the sultan who was the most expansive in the matter of his harem. Her servant had orders, under threat of punishment, to look after her mistress' beauty.

As soon as they had disembarked, Célestine was taken to an isolated house and put into the hands of an old woman, but without being separated from her servant, for fear that the slightest annoyance might spoil the serenity of her physiognomy. Baths of all sorts, philters, oils, powders, opiates and downs were employed further to embellish—or, rather, fully to bring out—the unimaginable perfections of her body. Appropriate nourishment, amusements that provided recreation without fatigue, sleep, early morning walks—in sum, an existence of refined sensuality—rendered Célestine an unparalleled glamour.

Far from being sad, she adapted to that way of life, not resignedly but wholeheartedly, which allowed her to be stirred and molded without feeling the slightest impression. Thus, it required very little time to eradicate all but the most imperceptible trace of fatigue, and the pirates and the old woman never ceased ecstasizing over that masterpiece of character and beauty.

The captain resolved to make the most of this immense point with regard to the sultan, and, acting toward Célestine in a manner that was not his custom toward the other slaves, he told her that she was going to be presented to the sultan and asked her whether he might flatter himself that that condition was agreeable to her.

Célestine, reclining on her cushions, looked at the captain, smiled nonchalantly, and said half-heartedly that she would be pleased if he would spare her such ludicrous questions in the future.

“I’ll explain to you one more time,” she added, “that I consider men to be a stupid and insipid breed, so your sultan is of no consequence to me. Regulate your conduct on that basis, I beg you.”

“What! You wouldn’t have any preference if you were free?” asked the captain, profoundly astonished.

“Explain to me on what I could base my preference,” Célestine replied, lazily. “As regards sentiment, I’m blasé; as regards men, they’re all the same; and as regards those worthy to be loved, where are they to be found?”

The captain could not suppress a surge of anger. Célestine had said that in such a way that one sensed that her judgment was immutable, so he rebelled in his capacity as a man—but at the same time, he was stimulated by that disdain, and the woman he had thus far admired coldly he now coveted as a challenge; it seemed to him that to make that creature quiver would be the ultimate seething of life.

Lightning flashes passed through his head, but profit and his position interposed themselves like a cold shower; he felt that he would be vanquished if he hesitated for a second, and immediately, ordering Célestine to follow him, he set out for the sultan's residence.

Chapter II
Célestine and the Sultan.
Célestine's Strange Amusements.

There, in the most secret apartments, stripped of her garments, Célestine was exhibited to the expertise of the eunuchs. The latter immediately summoned the sultan, who, as soon as he had seen the magical creature, had no aspiration but to throw himself at the knees of that paradise of adoration. He made a sign to the eunuchs and they were obliged to count out the most insane sum to the corsair.

Célestine having asked for her maidservant, she was immediately granted to her.

The entire seraglio learned that a sun had set the master ablaze. Installed in an inaccessible place, Célestine had slaves of her own, and was served as an idol more than supreme. The old monarch would have invented the inconceivable if he could, simply to make that star of delights smile.

Never had such an annihilation been known to the slaves; everything to which the imagination could give birth, those unfortunates had to carry out, and without respite, day after day, from minute to minute and second to second—for, in order to make that statuesque face stir, the sultan would have pulverized the world, and himself. He was hanging from the fibers of that woman, and her slightest quivers were reverberated around her in ripples, bounds and crushings. She modulated life, and everyone echoed it in outbursts of strident joy or frightful howls.

Soon, Célestine no longer deigned to move a muscle in her face; strive as the sultan's folly might, nothing moved that splendid statue, and the poor sire was exasperated by despair. One day, however—O joy!—the statue was animated, and, passing her arm adorably around the old man's neck, she manifested the desire to see him disguised as an ostrich.

An old leaven of dignity caused his Turkish majesty's eyebrows to frown, but, Célestine already having removed her arm and extinguished her smile, the master-slave, trembling like a leaf and grimacing an expression of happiness, thanked the idol for deigning to demand something of him. Célestine replaced her arm and smiled even more delightfully, and the intoxicated sultan asked her to fix the day.

"Immediately, if possible," she replied.

"Oh, my divine!" he said, in exaltation.

On quitting her, the sultan launched himself forth with great haste, and summoned the costumer. Under threat of death, the disguise had to be executed and delivered the same day, by midnight.

For her part, Célestine had ordered that the costumer be brought secretly to her. There was no possible objection; death was everywhere; the slaves resigned themselves to it and succeeded in introducing the requested foreigner.

"I want the ostrich to be made," Célestine told him, "in such a way that the bird's head can be detached and, as it falls, will leave the head of the disguised individual visible. Go. This purse will be your reward if you carry out my order; death awaits you if you dare to ignore it."

As the costumer did not leave, she asked him what he was thinking about.

"About the system I need to employ to produce the effect that you require," he replied, "for if I execute it without explaining it to you, it might be a waste of effort."

"That's all right," said Célestine, and sent for pencils and paper. The artist drew his plan, and five minutes later he demonstrated by means of lines where the joint had to be located and the functioning of the connection.

Célestine approved; the costumer went to work. Then she, in order to wait, had herself rocked in a hammock to the sound of soft voices and muted instruments, in the midst of a cloud of incense.

At eleven o'clock, she was woken up; she had supper with the sultan, emptied cup after cup, and, at the end of the meal, demanded the costume. The sultan suggested, timidly, that she might be content to see him thus decked out in private, but Célestine, thumping the table like an angry bacchante, dismissed the old fool's feeble scruples, and then softened immediately, with her enchanting grace, and asked him how he could fear ridicule dissimulated in such a shelter.

The convinced sultan donned the plumage joyfully, and then, Célestine having put him on a leash, the doors suddenly opened and in the midst of the most splendid glamour, a thousand variegated individuals dazzled the view. At the same time, as prompt as thought, they spread out in a unique dance, to the resounding accompaniment of cymbals, bells, glug-glugs, tom-toms and boom-booms.

Then, one leading the other, the ostrichian Majesty and his wardress steered through the sinuosities of those inextricable prancings. At first, the guided ostrich advanced gravely, but soon, carried away by the strangeness of the song and the rhythm, the obliging fowl began to caper himself in a manner that no voyager would be able to describe.

Meanwhile, Célestine, at the peak of hilarity, took it into her head to ride that strange mount; immediately, without deliberation, she leapt astride her beast; there was an acceleration of pace in order to sustain the long neck and maintain equilibrium on the feet, and Célestine, thus perched, recommenced madly the tour of the assembly.

Having returned to her departure point she halted, demanded something to drink. She drank regally, and then threw the glass away and suddenly leapt off the ostrich, dragging the long neck forward as she descended. What remained depicted the body of a bird preceded by a man's head representing the sultan.

The amazement was as great among the assembly as in the monarch. A surge of anger seemed to render his power to him; he took a menacing step toward Célestine, but she, simulating the most profound astonishment, said: "Oh, my Lord, that was you? What grace toward your slave. You deigned to take the care to amuse her yourself!" She turned severely toward the crowd, and said: "On your knees! On your knees before the sultan of sultans!" With an insinuating softness, she continued: "Lord, how can you not be loved?" And she kissed his hand tenderly.

Everyone was on their knees, trembling with fear. The dejected sultan did not say anything; he wanted to turn round, but his sheath, which until then he had, so to speak, not felt, caused him at that moment to fly into a furious rage.

"Get me out of this ignoble thing," he said to Célestine, harshly, "and hurry, for..." And he growled.

"I shall never forget such a favor as long as I live," Célestine continued to proclaim. "I've seen a great deal, but nothing has moved me so much. What sentiment! What soul! What fire!" As she slowly detached the bird-monarch, she exclaimed emphatically: "How one is warmed at the hearth of such a heart!"

The sultan followed her with his eyes, while lending himself to the operation; he strove to disentangle irony from truth, but was impotent in that task.

"My dear Lord, how warm you must be," said the mocking woman, finally enabling the costume to fall.

Without further explanation, the sultan withdrew, and while the slaves went to bed, shivering with fear, Célestine laughed as she had not laughed for a long time.

The next day the sultan, although mortified, dared not say anything, and as the wearied Célestine had resumed her torpor, it was the master who asked the slave what might distract her, and even, after a moment, offered voluntarily to recommence the previous evening's performance.

"No," said Célestine, lazily, "that wouldn't amuse me anymore."

They both fell silent. Suddenly, Célestine sat up straight, sharp and petulant. "I want to see the Christian Hell," she said. "Have it represented for me."

The adherent of Mohammed hastened to condescend to that desire. In accordance with Célestine's ideas, costumes were made representing the vices in animal form. Leopards, snakes, goats, hyenas, monkeys, foxes and chameleons with human heads were to depict the various forms of society. This time, the sultan was exempted from any role. In the center of appropriately vast subterranean caverns, a formless swarm was made to move through the gloom and the mire, a hideous chaos of those animals with human faces, animated by musical instruments and voices chanting to a savage rhythm.

When that cloaca had exposed all its horrors, a troop of blissful devotees, hypocrites of wisdom, renegade philosophers and cynically pious journalists made their entrance with compunction, but soon, seeing the emptiness of their mummery and the aspect of the place, those unctuous individuals took off their masks and exceeded in great leaps and wild dances everything that Hell had to offer.

Then, appeared in their turn the people incensed by those false devotees, the hypocrites of virtue, the renegade philosophers and journalists available to the highest bidder. At first those canonized individuals tried to impose themselves by means of a benignly paternoster attitude, but seeing their apostles hooting even more loudly than the damned, they too launched themselves into the general riot, and, heads here, arms there and legs in the air, moving, capering, stumbling and howling, the infernal band executed a round dance such as Satan had never beheld.

Passing back and forth with an ungraspable briskness, sometimes it was ascetic girls who were prancing a frantic jig with a few filthy beasts, sometimes satyrs with holy costumes and over-ripe complexions dislocating their joints in frantic contortions; sometimes, all of them caressed one another, stroked one another, and then suddenly fell backwards, wrenching and spitting. Hell itself, bewildered by such excess, would have stopped and applauded wildly.

Soon, the dancers, overexcited by the enthusiasm, dragged everyone into their circle; then, the founders of Hell, demons and reprobates alike, whirled joyously in a colossal and irresistible gallop, drawing Célestine with them.

Shortly thereafter, the inferno disappeared, leaving Célestine swooning with fatigue.

When she woke up, as she gave evidence of great satisfaction, a slave, in order to pay court to her, proposed the representation of Paradise. On hearing that, Célestine rudely threw her slipper at the impertinent individual and demanded to know why anyone dared to offer her something so insipid. Then, without waiting for a reply, she declared that the slave was mad and had him locked away in a lunatic asylum.

Meanwhile, that mode of life took its toll on the sultan; his health gradually declined; soon he had to take to his bed, and the physicians declared that he would not get up again.

A crazy, ludicrous idea immediately crossed Célestine's mind; she demanded to know how long the sultan's life might last.

"Two months, perhaps," was the reply she received.

Having received that information, she sent for a professor, and with an exaggerated ardor—as with everything she did when she took it into her head—she applied herself from morning till night studying the language of the country. Her sojourn with the corsair and in the seraglio had taught her, without her thinking about it, the most common locutions, so, as soon as she wanted to, she discovered in her memory a quantity of terms that she immediately translated. Her progress was incredible.

When she could jabber away about anything, she sent for the captain of the guard and, deploying her irresistible seduction, rendered the man madly infatuated with her. When she saw him thus disposed, she told him that the price she required for her person was so immense that it would be better not to talk about it any longer and that he had to forget her.

The unfortunate threw himself at her feet and even offered to murder the sultan, but Célestine refused to listen to him and sent him away.

As soon as he had gone, however, she summoned the young servant she had taken on when she left Paris. That daughter of hazard possessed infinite merit; devoid of ties and family, she had attached herself to Célestine and adored her as an idol rather than regarding her as an employer.

"Marthe," said Célestine, when the servant was before her, "I'm going to confide my plans to you because I believe you to be worthy of that confidence. In any case, if I'm mistaken, it will only be one fantasy less in my career, that's all. You're intelligent; a few words will suffice: I want to reign." With a marvelous smile, she added: "Not for long! My only means of arriving at the throne is to seduce the sultan's guard; with that and the time I have before me, I can render myself mistress of the realm. The captain is at my disposal, but a little artifice will deliver him to me even more fully. After having cast my spell upon him, I've sent him away; it's therefore necessary for you, under the appearance of letting him win you over, to introduce him to my apartments. That semblance of intrigue will render him even more insane, and I'll obtain anything I want from him. Go, and serve me if you wish."

The servant kissed the hand of her dear mistress, who smiled at her affectionately, and went out without saying a word.

On the evening of that same day, Marthe took Célestine to one side and told him that, the captain having run head first into the trap as easily as an innocent bird, the supposedly temeritous individual would arrive at her room at any time she cared to indicate.”

“You’re a pearl of diplomacy,” said Célestine, laughing. “Hazard is a good purveyor; my daughter, I put my left hand over my right when I took you into my service. Thank you.”

Things went as ordered. The captain thought that he was emerging clandestinely into the presence of his favorite, and the latter feigned amazement and anger as no great actress ever imagined. She appeared to soften, however, although keeping the supposed adventurer at a distance, and she agreed, in response to his crazed pleas, to tell him the fatal conditions that he demanded.

“I don’t like verbiage,” she said. “Open your ears and try not to be stupid. I want to reign for a month, but to reign alone, absolutely, as a man. “Her gaze fixed upon the captain’s frightened eyes, she added, emphatically: “In brief, I want to be the sultan. When that month is over, I’ll return the throne to you, and you can, as a faithful servant, pass it on to whomever you please, and boast of having stolen it from me.” Coldly, she concluded: “Well, what do you choose?”

The overwhelmed captain stared and tried to pull himself together; he wanted to say that he could not do it, but the magic of the woman and the fear of peril battled within him, and paralyzed him completely

“But how?” he said, finally, breathless with emotion.

“Does a woman have to inform a warrior, then?” Célestine replied, disdainfully. “Disarm the cohorts under some pretext; put together a troop of tatterdemalions; the large salaries suppressed for a month will pay your expenses amply, and the nation will even save money in the process.”

“And if I promise you the throne,” asked the captain, feverishly, “what will I get?”

“A promise in return for promise,” replied Célestine, while tranquilly taking a small pistol from her pocket. “I’m buying a crown; in order to pay for it, it’s at least necessary that I possess it.”

“So I have no say in the bargain?” asked the captain, angrily.

“Oh, no sentimental banalities, I beg you,” said Célestine, drawling sulkily.

“Well, then, no sentimental banalities,” said the captain, launching himself toward Célestine—but she cocked her pistol phlegmatically.

“You or me,” she said. “Decide.”

The man stopped short, and, even more subjugated by that new allure, stepped back. Before disappearing, he swore that he would succeed.