Madame Tellier's Establishment

written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. FÉCAMP - RUE AUX JUIFS - NIGHT

A small, comfortable yellow house sits at the corner of a narrow street behind Saint-Étienne Church. From upper windows: docks with ships being unloaded, a wide salt marsh beyond, and a hill crowned by an old grey chapel.

A wire-caged lantern burns above a narrow door, like a saint's lamp in the wrong place.

INT. MAISON TELLIER - SALON DE JUPITER - NIGHT

Blue wallpaper. A large mythological drawing (Leda and the Swan) dominates the room.

Six or eight regular customers, respectable tradesmen and young clerks, sit as if in a gentlemen's club. They drink Chartreuse, a French liqueur, laugh with the girls, glance at clocks like men remembering decency. Among them, MONSIEUR POULIN (50s, ex-mayor, timber merchant, white whiskers) and MONSIEUR PHILIPPE (20s, banker's son, slick hair, gold chain).

MADAME TELLIER (tall, stout, widow, refined, pale varnished complexion, curly false fringe) sits among them-smiling, cheerful, reserve intact. She listens to town news like unofficial city hall.

FERNANDE (tall blonde, lazy, freckled), RAPHAËLE (thin, sharp) and ROSA (small, round, restless, shrill laugh) drift between chairs, topping glasses, tossing quick jokes.

A clock ticks.

MONSIEUR POULIN
In the end, everyone in this town has a business.

Madame sets down a glass with gentle precision.

MADAME TELLIER
And a business survives by keeping order.

Rosa opens her mouth, Fernande nudges her quiet and Raphaële watches the men, measuring weaknesses.

Downstairs, sailors laugh louder. Madame Tellier's smile remains polite, controlled.

MONSIEUR PHILIPPE
Midnight is when respectable men remember they're respectable.

Madame Tellier stands, signaling the ritual ending.

MADAME TELLIER
Good night, gentlemen.

Coats go on. Coins appear discreetly. The men leave with practiced ease.

The lantern extinguishes outside. Footsteps fade. As the last one exits, Fernande stretches.

FERNANDE
Tomorrow again.

Madame Tellier pauses. Her expression tightens, like an unshared thought.

MADAME TELLIER
Yes. Tomorrow.

Laughter rises from the floor below as the door closes behind them.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. MAISON TELLIER - TAPROOM - SAME NIGHT

Shaky marble tables. Half-bottles and beer jugs land hard. Sailors crowd loud and impatient.

LOUISE (nicknamed La Cocotte, wearing tricolor sash like symbol of French liberty) and FLORA (called Balançoire, copper coins braided in carroty hair, limping slightly) serve with worn efficiency.

FRÉDÉRIC (short, light-haired, beardless, horse-strong) muscles through bodies with practiced calm.

EXT. RUE AUX JUIFS - LATER THAT NIGHT

The street is wrong. Lantern dark. Shutters closed. No sound.

Monsieur Poulin arrives confident, stops dead seeing the door. He knocks gently. Nothing. Louder. Still nothing. He walks away, trying to look casual.

EXT. MARKET PLACE - NIGHT

Monsieur Poulin meets MONSIEUR DUVERT, a gunmaker, walking with same fake casualness.

MONSIEUR DUVERT
Closed?

MONSIEUR POULIN
It can't be.

EXT. RUE AUX JUIFS - CONTINUOUS

They return together. No answer. Suddenly, a loud noise sounded nearby.

They round the corner: English and French sailors hammer tap-room shutters, throwing stones, shouting.

Monsieur Poulin and Monsieur Duvert stiffen, caught in the same scandal. They start to retreat. A low hiss.

Suddenly, MONSIEUR TOURNEVAU (40s, fish curer, rumpled coat) emerges from shadows.

TOURNEVAU
Pst!

POULIN
The lantern's out. The place is sealed.

They meet Monsieur Philippe (banker's son), MONSIEUR PINIPESSE (collector), MONSIEUR DUPUIS (insurance agent) and MONSIEUR VASSE (Judge of Tribunal of Commerce).

Five first-floor customers flee. The group now numbers seven, all deprived regulars.

EXT. QUAY - LATER

The seven sit in a line on granite parapet, watching tide rise. Silence. Water laps stone.

MONSIEUR TOURNEVAU
This is not very amusing!

MONSIEUR PINIPESSE
Decidedly not.

EXT. STREETS / BRIDGE - NIGHT

Restless, they pace hill street, wooden bridge over Retenue, near railway, back to market place.

On bridge: Monsieur Pinipesse/Monsieur Tournevau quarrel over edible mushroom Monsieur Pinipesse claims he found. Voices rise.

Monsieur Poulin and Monsieur Dupuis snap, salary vs profit. Insults fly, half-serious, half-childish.

Distant roar builds.

EXT. MARKET PLACE - NIGHT

Sailors march arm-in-arm, two-by-two, shouting. French: "Marseillaise!" English: "Rule Britannia!"

The regulars flatten into doorway, hiding like boys.

Sailors vanish toward abbey. Noise fades.

Monsieur Poulin and Monsieur Dupuis peel off, still angry, no goodbye.

Remaining men drift back toward closed house.

DRUNKEN MAN
Frédéric…?

No answer. He sinks onto the doorstep and waits, stubborn as a child.

At the street's end, sailors return, louder, rougher. A fight erupts distant. Screams. More shouting.

The drunken man begins to cry, openly, humiliated by the closed door and his own helplessness.

The others retreat, defeated.

EXT. MAISON TELLIER - VERY LATE NIGHT

Only Monsieur Tournevau remains, prowling the façade like an inspector. Furious, almost righteous. He strikes a wax match, shielding it from wind.

A paper notice is stuck up on the shutter.

The matchlight trembles across words as he reads aloud:

MONSIEUR TOURNEVAU
Closed on account of the Confirmation.

His face shifts, confusion, outrage, resignation. He lets the match die and walks away.

Behind him, the drunk slides sideways, asleep on pavement, abandoned at the doorstep.

EXT. STREET - NEXT DAY - DAY

One by one, the regular customers pass through daylight with bundles of papers under their arms, ridiculous camouflage.

Each steals a furtive glance at the notice: "Closed on account of the Confirmation."

They keep walking without stopping, pretending the paper isn't the center of their day.

INT. MAISON TELLIER - PRIVATE ROOM - DAY

Madame Tellier sits alone with a letter from her carpenter brother in Virville open in her hands. Reluctant duty. She reads the letter aloud.

MADAME TELLIER
Dear Sister... Constance's Confirmation... Come if possible...

Madame Tellier exhales, calculating consequences.

MADAME TELLIER (CONT'D)
(quietly)
Virville...

She looks toward stairs, house. Girls-knowing what leaving even one day might unleash.

She stands, decisive.

INT. MAISON TELLIER - UPSTAIRS PARLOR - DAY

Fernande lounges half-awake. Raphaële fixes her hair in a mirror. Rosa sings softly, stops to eat, resumes humming.

Madame Tellier enters like a factory manager.

MADAME TELLIER
Girls. Listen.

They turn. Even Rosa goes quiet.

MADAME TELLIER (CONT'D)
We're going to Virville.

An explosion of questions.

ROSA
Virville? Where is that?

RAPHAËLE
Why?

FERNANDE
For how long?

MADAME TELLIER
One night. My goddaughter is being confirmed. I can't refuse.

Rosa's face softens.

ROSA
A child… That's sweet.

Raphaële narrows her eyes, practical.

RAPHAËLE
And the house?

MADAME TELLIER
I have no substitute. If I leave you here, you'll tear each other apart. Frédéric gets two days off.

She points, assigning.

MADAME TELLIER (CONT'D)
Pack. You travel as ladies. No scandals.

CUT TO:

EXT. FÉCAMP STATION - SATURDAY MORNING

A second-class carriage waits, soot-streaked.

The women arrive in impossible color: blue silk, red shawl, plaid dress, lilac with gold spots, pink flounces, flowered curtains turned to dresses. They climb aboard like a parade.

INT. TRAIN COMPARTMENT - MORNING

For a while, they are alone. Chatter like birds released.

ROSA
Do they have good food in Virville?

FERNANDE
They have cows. That's something.

RAPHAËLE
They have eyes. That's worse.

At Beuzeville, a peasant couple enters. PEASANT MAN: old blue blouse, huge green umbrella, basket with three duck heads poking out. PEASANT WOMAN: stiff, sharp nose, face like a wary hen.

Silence falls. The ladies instantly adopt respectable expressions.

MADAME TELLIER
We must set a good example.

At Bolbec, a TRAVELER enters: light whiskers, gold chain, rings, parcels wrapped in oilcloth.

He surveys the women with amusement.

TRAVELER
Are you ladies changing your quarters?

The women freeze.

Madame Tellier snaps upright, offended.

MADAME TELLIER
I think you might try and be polite!

TRAVELER
I beg your pardon, I ought to have said your nunnery.

Madame Tellier compresses her lips. No reply comes.

The traveler turns to the ducks. He winks, then tickles their bills.

TRAVELER (CONT'D)
We have left our little pond, quack! quack!
(MORE)

TRAVELER (CONT'D)
to make the acquaintance of the little spit, qu-ack! qu-ack!

The ducks erupt into distressed quacking.

The women burst into laughter, leaning forward, pushing to see. Rosa kisses a duck head impulsively.

ROSA
Oh! The poor things!

Everyone wants to kiss them now. The traveler pulls them closer, playful, too familiar.

The peasant woman stares straight ahead, scandalized.

The traveler opens a parcel with flourish. Inside: garters- blue silk, pink silk, red silk, violet silk, mauve silk. Buckles shaped like gilt cupids embracing.

The women's faces change instantly: serious, appraising, like shoppers at a fine counter.

TRAVELER
Come, my kittens… you must try them on.

A storm of protests. Skirts pulled tight between knees. Mock dignity.

RAPHAËLE
Absolutely not.

The traveler pretends to pack them away.

TRAVELER
Well, if you will not try them on I shall pack them up again. I offer any pair they like to those who will try them on.

They sit straighter, resisting.

The traveler turns to Flora, coaxing.

TRAVELER (CONT'D)
Come, my dear, a little courage! Just look at that lilac pair. It will suit your dress admirably.

Flora hesitates, then lifts her skirt enough to show a thick leg in a coarse stocking.

The traveler fastens the garter with exaggerated gallantry.

Flora's face glows-half shame, half triumph.

TRAVELER (CONT'D)
Who next?

All the women shout at once.

WOMEN
I! I!

The compartment becomes chaos: laughter, fabric, color, knees, squeals.

Rosa presents a round, ankle-less leg with pride.

Raphaële comments under her breath.

RAPHAËLE
A sausage of a leg.

Finally Madame Tellier extends a strong Norman calf.

The traveler removes his hat dramatically, saluting.

The peasant couple looks like they're witnessing the end of the world.

TRAVELER
Co-co-ri-co.

Another wave of laughter.

At Motteville, the peasant couple escapes with basket and umbrella. As they leave, the woman mutters:

PEASANT WOMAN
They are no good and are off to
that cursed place, Paris.

At Rouen, the traveler exits after pushing too far.

Madame Tellier regains authority.

MADAME TELLIER
This will teach us not to talk to
the first comer.

The women suddenly become ladies again, arranging hats and smoothing skirts.

EXT. VIRVILLE STATION - DAY

Madame Tellier's brother, JOSEPH (carpenter, proud, eager), waits with cart full of chairs pulled by a small white horse. He kisses all the ladies with rustic ceremony.

JOSEPH
Welcome, welcome! You've come a long way!

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD TO VIRVILLE - DAY

The cart jolts terribly. Chairs bounce like puppets. Bonnets slip. Women scream and laugh and cling to sides.

Joseph clicks his tongue, elbows high, driving the horse faster with ridiculous pride.

Fields roll by: yellow colza, red poppies like spilled paint, blue cornflowers. The cart full of bright dresses looks like a moving bouquet.

Rosa, without a seat, perches on Fernande's knees.

ROSA
If we die, at least we'll die beautifully.

FERNANDE
Don't talk. Hold on.

They arrive at one o'clock, hungry and pale.

MADAME RIVET rushes out, kissing Madame Tellier again and again.

INT. RIVET HOUSE - WORKSHOP - DAY

Lunch: omelet, boiled chitterlings, hard cider. Planed wood smell fills the air.

Joseph drinks to excess, proud.

JOSEPH
To family! To Constance! To my sister!

Madame Tellier glances at the time, measuring trains and profit.

MADAME TELLIER
We must be punctual tomorrow.

A burst of laughter upstairs interrupts the meal.

INT. RIVET HOUSE - UPSTAIRS ROOM - AFTERNOON

Joseph, drunk, teases Rosa, pulling at her skirt, trying to force a kiss.

Rosa laughs and wriggles away, half amused, half trapped.

Louise and Flora hold Joseph's arms, scandalized.

Raphaële and Fernande egg him on, shrieking.

Joseph gets angry, red-faced, struggling, stammering incoherent words.

Madame Tellier enters. Everything stops. Her eyes lock on her brother, furious, ashamed, in command. She grabs him by the shoulders and THROWS him out into the hall with surprising strength.

Joseph crashes against the wall.

A beat.

Then, outside, water splashes as he pumps water over his head in the yard.

INT. RIVET HOUSE - NIGHT

Sleeping arrangements are tight: two by two. Rosa gets a small dark cupboard near the attic where CONSTANCE (12, the candidate) sleeps.

The village is silent. A religious silence. The women, used to noise, feel exposed. In bed, they cling to each other.

Rosa alone hears faint sobbing through the wall.

ROSA
(whispering)
Who's there?

A weak voice answers, broken by tears.

CONSTANCE (O.S.)
I'm afraid…

Rosa's face changes, tenderness floods her. She slips out, fetches the child, and brings her into her warm bed.

ROSA
Come here. Don't cry. I'm here.

Constance settles with her head on Rosa's breast.

Rosa kisses her hair, suddenly calm.

EXT. VIRVILLE - DAWN

The Angelus bell rings at five. The women wake too early, blinking like night creatures in morning light.

Villagers carry muslin dresses and long wax tapers tied with silk bows. Chickens roam. A black cock crows. Vehicles line the road-carts, wagons, traps.

INT. RIVET HOUSE - MORNING

The house is a beehive. Constance stands on a table while the women dress her, pinning folds, tightening the waist.

Madame Tellier directs like a general.

MADAME TELLIER
Careful. Don't prick her. Keep the ribbon straight.

Constance endures kisses and caresses patiently, overwhelmed.

EXT. VIRVILLE STREET - LATER MORNING

The procession forms: boys, then girls in muslin whipped cream, singing a hymn. The town ladies fall in behind, dresses flashing like fireworks.

A VILLAGER whispers.

VILLAGER
They came from Fécamp.

INT. FLINT CHURCH - MORNING

Slate steeple. Damp stone, candlewax, packed bodies.

Choir : children kneel, girls left, boys right-wax tapers like lances. Three CANTORS chant Latin endlessly. Organ reed whines thin.

MAYOR offers front pew-right, by choir.

Madame Tellier, her sister-in-law, Fernande, Raphaële ahead. Rosa, Louise, Flora, Joseph behind.

Rosa fidgets, then Latin, incense and silence breaks her. Gaze drifts to memory. Eyes water. Sob escapes.

Flora catches Louise. All three sob-deep, uncontrollable.

Contagion spreads : wife cries, mother trembles, congregation shakes-handkerchiefs soaked, air vibrates.

PRIEST falters, voice cracks. Cantors wobble. Priest raises hand-silence falls.

Steps to chancel, eyes on Fécamp women.

PRIEST
(trembling)
What has happened... this emotion... this grace...

He gathers himself, then speaks directly toward Madame Tellier's group.

PRIEST (CONT'D)
I especially thank you, my dear sisters, who have come from such a distance… whose evident faith and ardent piety have set such a salutary example. You have edified my parish… Your emotion has warmed all hearts… Without you, this great day would not, perhaps, have had this really divine character.
It is sufficient, at times, that there should be one chosen lamb… for the Lord to descend on His flock.

His voice fails completely. He ends the service quickly, humbled.

EXT. CHURCHYARD - LATE MORNING

Outside: noise returns. Village becomes a babel of accents and greetings.

Families form two lines, then break apart to claim their children.

Constance emerges, pale and thoughtful in muslin, candle in hand.

The houseful of women surrounds her, kissing, fussing, smoothing her dress as if she were royalty.

Rosa is the most demonstrative, overwhelmed by tenderness. Madame Tellier takes Constance's hand. Rosa takes the other. Raphaële and Fernande lift her long muslin skirt so it won't drag in dust. Louise and Flora follow behind with Madame Rivet.

They walk through the village like a guard of honor escorting a saint.

INT. RIVET WORKSHOP - AFTERNOON (DINNER)

Long boards on trestles. The workshop becomes a banquet hall.

Through open doors and windows, the village feasts, every house noisy with Sunday best, cider poured again and again.

At Joseph's, the women's earlier emotion leaves lingering restraint. Joseph alone is loudly cheerful, drinking more than he should.

Madame Tellier checks the clock repeatedly. The return train is a fixed point in her mind.

MADAME TELLIER
We must take the 3:55.

Madame Rivet corners her with soft urgency.

MADAME RIVET
She adores you… You have no children…

Madame Tellier holds Constance on her knee, protective, not committing.

MADAME TELLIER
There is time. We will see.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - LATE AFTERNOON

The cart jolts again. Under hot sun, restraint evaporates.

The women begin laughing at the bouncing chairs, shoving each other, squealing.

Fernande, who loves music, nudges Rosa.

FERNANDE
Sing something.

Rosa opens her mouth and launches into a bawdy tune.

Madame Tellier cuts it off instantly.

MADAME TELLIER
Not that. Today of all days. No.
Sing something… proper.

Rosa hesitates, then starts a sentimental song, worn-out voice, earnest feeling.

Soon all the women join in the chorus, even Madame Tellier, briefly forgetting herself.

Joseph, carried away by rhythm, taps time on the shaft, flicks the reins.

The little white horse breaks into a wild gallop at every refrain.

The cart lurches, chairs slide, women tumble into a laughing heap.

They scream with delight, cling to each other, and keep singing into the bright fields.

A stone-breaker looks up through wire spectacles, stunned by the shouting bouquet of women.

EXT. STATION - LATE AFTERNOON

They arrive breathless and disheveled.

Joseph is suddenly sentimental.

JOSEPH
I'm sorry you're going. We might
have had good times together.

MADAME TELLIER
Everything has its right time.

Joseph's eyes sparkle. An idea.

JOSEPH
I'll come to Fécamp next month.

He shoots Rosa a roguish look.

MADAME TELLIER
You may come. If you behave.

The guard calls passengers. The train whistles.

Joseph kisses everyone.

When he reaches Rosa, he tries to kiss her mouth. Rosa keeps turning her head away, smiling with lips closed, dodging each attempt.

Joseph, frustrated, waves his whip behind her in ridiculous desperation.

GUARD (O.S.)
Passengers for Rouen. Take your seats!

They board.

As the train pulls out, Joseph runs alongside, cracking his whip, shouting the chorus of their song at the top of his lungs, until distance swallows him.

A white handkerchief waves from the carriage window, then disappears.

INT. MAISON TELLIER - NIGHT (RETURN TO FÉCAMP)

Madame Tellier exhales in relief, almost against her will.

MADAME TELLIER
It was all very well… but I was longing to get home.

They eat quickly. Then change into their evening clothes like workers putting on uniforms.

Outside, the colored lamp glows again: the sign that the house is open.

News spreads instantly, mysteriously.

CUT TO:

INT. MONSIEUR TOURNEVAU HOUSE - SUNDAY EVENING

Monsieur Tournevau sits with family and cousins at dinner, coffee afterward.

A MESSENGER arrives with a letter.

Monsieur Tournevau opens it and goes pale. He reads.

MONSIEUR TOURNEVAU
The cargo of cod has been found; the ship has come into port; good business for you… Come immediately.

Tournevau blushes to his ears. He forces himself to stand.

MONSIEUR TOURNEVAU (CONT'D)
I must go out.

He hands the note to his wife as if it were business. He calls for his coat. The moment he reaches the street, he hurries, impatient, almost running.

CUT TO:

INT. MAISON TELLIER - DOWNSTAIRS TAPROOM - NIGHT

Deafening noise. Sailors everywhere. Louise and Flora are pulled in every direction, drinking with one, called by another.

INT. MAISON TELLIER - UPSTAIRS PARLOR - NIGHT

By nine o'clock, the room is full. Monsieur Vasse, Madame Tellier's regular almost-platonic admirer, speaks with her in a low corner, both smiling as if approaching an understanding.

Rosa sits with Poulin. She runs her fingers through his white whiskers, teasing him gently.

Fernande sprawls on the sofa, feet on Monsieur Pinipesse's coat. She leans back into Philippe, right arm around his neck, cigarette in left hand.

Raphaële speaks seriously with Monsieur Dupuis, eyes steady, mouth soft-ending with a promise.

RAPHAËLE
Yes… I will. Yes.

Footsteps pound on the stairs, fast, urgent. Suddenly, the upstairs door flies open.

Monsieur Tournevau bursts in, breathless, cheeks red from running, eyes bright with victory and impatience.

The room erupts.

MEN (VARIOUS, SHOUTING)
Long live Tournevau!

Raphaële, suddenly giddy, dances in place, then throws herself into Monsieur Tournevau's arms. He seizes her and lifts her high as if she weighs nothing.

Laughter. Applause. A true holiday mood.

Monsieur Philippe stands, grandly inspired.

MONSIEUR PHILIPPE
Champagne. Three bottles, Madame Tellier!

Fernande hugs him, mouth near his ear.

FERNANDE
Play us a waltz. Will you?

INT. UPSTAIRS PARLOR - CONTINUOUS

Monsieur Philippe crosses to the old piano in the corner. The instrument looks tired; he forces a hoarse waltz out of it anyway.

Couples form: Fernande loops her arms around Monsieur Pinipesse.

Madame Tellier allows Monsieur Vasse to take her at the waist, careful at first, then captivated as he waltzes with practiced elegance. They turn, kissing as they dance, respectability dissolved into rhythm.

Frédéric arrives with champagne. The first cork pops like a pistol shot; foam flashes in lamplight.

Philippe switches to a quadrille. Suddenly everyone plays society: bows, curtsies, proper turns, mock elegance, real delight. They drink. Glasses clink. The holiday swells.

Monsieur Philippe launches a lively polka.

Monsieur Tournevau starts with Raphaële, holding her so firmly her feet barely touch the floor, spinning, laughing, louder than the sailors downstairs.

Monsieur Pinipesse and Monsieur Vasse whirl with renewed vigor.

From time to time, couples break apart just long enough to swallow sparkling wine, then collide back into dance. The dance threatens to become endless.

Rosa throws the door open dramatically, cheeks flushed.

ROSA
I want to dance!

She grabs Dupuis off the couch, he's been idle too long, and drags him into motion. The room roars approval.

INT. UPSTAIRS PARLOR - LATER

Empty bottles. Wet rings on tables. Lipstick on glass.

Monsieur Tournevau, exhilarated, slaps money down.

TOURNEVAU
I'll pay for one.

VASSE
(smiling)
So will I.

Monsieur Dupuis joins in, not to be outdone.

MONSIEUR DUPUIS
And I'll do the same.

Clapping breaks out. Now it's officially a ball.

Downstairs, sailors call for Louise and Flora. The two women dash up, take a few quick turns laughing, spinning, then flee back down, reluctant, while their customers grow impatient.

INT. UPSTAIRS PARLOR - MIDNIGHT

Still dancing.

Madame Tellier lets them enjoy it, but keeps drifting back into corners with Monsieur Vasse long, private talks, intimate and businesslike at once, as though last details are being settled.

INT. UPSTAIRS PARLOR - 1:00 A.M.

At last, the two married men, Monsieur Tournevau and Monsieur Pinipesse, remember their homes.

They stop, breathless, smoothing coats, searching for dignity. They want to pay.

Madame Tellier only charges for the champagne and at a reduced price, generous, almost maternal.

The men protest, surprised.

Madame Tellier beams, radiant in the warm mess of the room.

MADAME TELLIER
We don't have a holiday every day.

CLOSE ON Madame Tellier, radiant, almost maternal.

FADE OUT.

THE END