

Au Bonheur Des Dames = the Ladies' Delight Study Guide

Au Bonheur Des Dames = the Ladies' Delight by Émile Zola

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Denise and her brothers come to Paris a year after their parents' death, hoping for help from their uncle. Their uncle, however, is suffering from the competition of the growing shop Au Bonheur des Dames across the street. As the shop seduces Denise and consumes the neighborhood, its owner, Octave Mouret is finally conquered himself.

Denise and her brothers P  p   and Jean arrive in Paris after an exhausting trip. They are looking for their uncle's shop when they become entranced by Au Bonheur des Dames. The three children present an odd sight to the neighborhood as they stand gawking at the extravagant and luring displays. One of the neighbors is watching the three strangers. He turns out to be their uncle. Denise is repulsed by his small, dreary shop. Denise greets her uncle, who had written her after her parents' deaths that he would always have a place for her at his shop. However, that letter is nearly a year old when Denise arrives unannounced. Uncle Baudu is caught off-guard by the arrival of his niece and two nephews. Denise quickly explains the circumstances. Jean is starting a new apprenticeship with an ivory craftsman the next day. Denise thought she and P  p   would be no worse off than they were in Valgones, where she could not make enough money to feed all three of them. Denise leaves out the details of Jean's womanizing ways and her desire to keep an eye on him in Paris. Baudu introduces the children to his wife and daughter Madame Baudu and Genevi  ve.

As Baudu and Denise talk further, he reveals that business is no longer doing well enough to take Denise on in the shop. Baudu's resentment at his lack of luck escapes with a rising voice as he chides Denise for not letting him know her plans. She starts to leave when Baudu stops her. He offers to let her stay for the night and figure things out in the morning. Madame Baudu and Genevi  ve recommend Madame Gras, who can take P  p   for forty francs a month. Denise just needs a job and a place to live. Baudu takes her to meet Vin  ard, a silk shop owner, who has been looking for a salesgirl. Vin  ard is trying to sell his business to Robineau, the silk assistant buyer at Au Bonheur des Dames. Vin  ard has already filled his position, but Robineau mentions an opening in the ladies' wear department in his store.

Denise has already been attracted to the large, machine-like store. On the way home, her uncle rants about the Au Bonheur des Dames owner, Mouret, and his good luck, and the ruthless way he is crushing all of the neighboring businesses. Denise and Baudu meet Bourras, next-door neighbor to the Au Bonheur des Dames, who makes a declaration of war against Mouret for trying to buy out his lease to expand the large store. At dinner, Baudu rages further against the competing store and the new way of business that threatens him and all of his neighbors. However, after dinner, Denise watches the enticing shop across the street. Baudu realizes that Denise has been seduced, and that she will go tomorrow to get a job there.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Too early to apply for a job, Denise waits awkwardly outside Au Bonheur des Dames while Mouret rushes into the store. He goes to his study and meets with his right-hand man, Bourdoncle. Together, they start a thorough inspection of the store. They start in the reception area, where crates of goods are being unloaded in preparation for a big sale. In reception, Mouret and Bourdoncle meet Bouthemont, the buyer in the silk department. Mouret and Bourdoncle argue about the price of the special silk on which they are staking the store's future. Bouthemont also describes his difficulties with Gaujean, the silk manufacturer.

Mouret and Bourdoncle move to the dispatch department, where they discuss a mistake in a delivery from the previous day. After touring the mail order department, Bourdoncle reprimands Albert, the son of the ladies' wear buyer and a cash desk clerk, about the mistake. Albert's father Lhomme, the chief cashier, rushes to defend his son in regard to the mistake. Mouret plays benefactor and forgives Albert. Bourdoncle responds by tearing down other staff throughout the rest of their tour, while Mouret continues to smooth over the conflicts like a good prince. In the silk department, the two salesmen Hutin and Favier are undermining Robineau's authority. Hutin wants Robineau's job. Robineau tells Mouret that they need more room. Hutin is fussing over a display, which Mouret takes over and turns into a stunning presentation.

While Mouret is still in the silk department, Denise arrives, flustered and somehow not able to follow instructions to find the ladies' wear department. She stops and looks at the display Mouret has created, and this endears her to Mouret. Hutin takes extra care to direct Denise, which makes a big impression on her. Denise waits in the ladies' wear department for Madame Aurélie, the buyer and prospective hiring manager. While Denise waits, the two sales girls and the assistant buyer treat her with hostility. When Madame Aurélie arrives, the two sales girls help start an argument between the buyer and assistant buyer. Denise finally tells Madame Aurélie that she wants to apply for a job, just as Mouret arrives in the department on his tour of the store. All four women in the department want to reject her, but Mouret intervenes, still enchanted by Denise's reaction to his silk display. Denise leaves, not sure whether she will get the job (or even if she wants it), and runs into Henry Deloche again, who she had met outside the store earlier in the morning and who has also just applied for a job.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Madame Desforbes, Mouret's lover, hosts a gathering of friends for tea, including many of the ladies who are Mouret's customers. Mouret hopes to meet one of her former lovers, Baron Hartmann, the director of the Crédit Immobilier. As the guests arrive, Mouret meets an old school friend, Paul Vallagnosc. They talk about what they have been doing since school. Madame Desforbes introduces Mouret to the Baron. Mouret flatters him about the Crédit Immobilier and a new road being planned, secretly concerned about his plans for expansion at Au Bonheur des Dames. Mouret shares his business plan, being truthful about its precarious position, and seeking to establish a partnership with the Baron. The Baron resists at first, having already helped several of Madame Desforbes' friends. Talking in a corner with the Baron, Mouret explains his business practices. Meanwhile, in the next room, the ladies unknowingly illustrate what good customers they are. The Baron begins to understand Mouret's methods.

The ladies call Mouret back into the room to ask about the upcoming sale and the Paris-Bonheur. Mouret tells them about other materials that will be available. The ladies discuss Sauveur, the dressmaker, and Mouret reveals that the dressmaker buys many of her materials at Au Bonheur des Dames. He entices them to the sale by talking of the bargains. Madame Marty, the compulsive shopper, finally gives in to the urge to show off her purchases, even though her nearly destitute husband is present. As the ladies look at the goodies, the Baron begins to realize the power that Mouret has over women. He warns, as Bourdoncle has, that some woman will take revenge for them. The Baron tries to discreetly warn Madame Desforbes that Mouret will devour her, but he is convinced that if the sale on Monday goes well, he can make a deal with Mouret over the land to allow Mouret to expand even more.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Au Bonheur des Dames is ready for the big winter sale. Denise arrives in her department for her first day of work in time to hear the salesgirls Clara and Marguerite arguing about who is first. When Denise's turn comes, the customer is a regular, and Madame Aurélie, the buyer, will not let her make the sale. Denise holds back her tears while she does the work assigned to her, wondering how she will make enough money for Pépé and Jean if they do not let her sell. Mouret waits in the hall, nervous that no one will come to the sale. As, he watches the crowds slowly swell, the silk department employees demonstrate their fierce competition and rivalry for sales and sexual conquests.

Madame Desforges comes to the sale, illustrating the manner of a distinguished woman. She joins other customers and friends from her tea, Madame Marty and Valentine, and they all go to the silk department, where they meet frugal Madame Bourdelais briefly. Hutin puts on his charm for the ladies, but Madame Desforges encourages Madame Marty to get something better. Irritated with the circumstances and at himself for choosing to wait on a poor customer, Hutin escorts the ladies to the ladies' wear department, where no one but Denise is available. Denise attempts to serve them, but instead becomes Marguerite's coat model, and everyone, including the customers, the other sales girls, and even Mouret, criticize her big dress and messy hair. Amidst this humiliation, Pauline, a salesgirl from lingerie, encourages Denise to stay strong so that she can make it through this initiation.

At the end of the day, the sales people figure up their percentages, while Mouret and Bourdoncle await the total figures from Lhomme. The final astounding figure is larger than any ladies' wear shop has ever made in a single day. Mouret is sure they could sell more with more space. Denise goes back to her room and, once again in her own clothes, allows herself the emotional release she has held back all day.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Denise encounters Mouret one more time before spending the next two months working hard, trying to adapt to the hard labor of working at the shop. She still does not win any respect from her coworkers. She fears Bourdoncle, who is set against her, as well as Jouve, an inspector, who is nice to her, hoping for sexual favors. Jean comes to the store, in spite of Denise's forbidding it, to get money for one of his affairs. Denise barely has enough for P  p  's board, much less the things for herself that she badly needs. Jean manages to convince her to give him the money anyway, worsening Denise's constant worries about money.

Denise is in her room cleaning and repairing her things when Pauline knocks on her door. The girls exchange stories and complain about the other girls in the ladies' wear department, as well as Bourdoncle and Jouve. Pauline advises Denise to get a lover, but Denise rejects the idea. Pauline tells about her history and her current boyfriend. Pauline loans Denise the six francs she needs before sneaking back to her own room. As Denise becomes interested in the romantic life flourishing in and around Au Bonheur des Dame, she discovers that Colomban, her uncle's assistant, desires Clara, the scandalous sales clerk in her department. Denise develops a crush on Hutin.

In the spring, Denise finally gets a salary and can afford some things for herself. However, things are still difficult in her department and with the other sales clerks. Bourdoncle catches Albert kissing the girl from lingerie. This conflict brings the rivalry between lingerie and ladies' wear to a head. Everyone blames Denise because of her friendship with Pauline. To punish Denise, Madame Aur  lie invites all of the other ladies' wear employees to her country house. In response, Denise, Pauline and her boyfriend, Baug  , go together on an outing to Joinville. After lunch, they decide to stay in the country all day. They see Hutin in a rowing contest, and later he arrives at the restaurant with his showgirl. Hutin is trying to drink away and spend all of the money he made during the week. Denise, so affected by Hutin's apparent kindness in the store, is horrified at his behavior. Finally outside, Denise meets Deloche as Pauline and Baug   walk ahead. As they walk, Deloche reveals that he loves Denise, which makes her cry. She just wants to be friends with Deloche, and dejected, he starts to cry, too. They discover common histories and become friends.

Back in Paris, Denise goes back to Baug  's place with Pauline. Pauline undresses in front of Denise, preparing to spend the night there after bribing Madame Cabin, who is in charge of the sales girls' rooms, to let her stay out all night. Denise leaves embarrassed. When she returns to Au Bonheur des Dames, she goes into the shop instead of the apartments, thinking she hears someone. She makes her way through the dark shop, and runs into Mouret, who thinks she's been out with a man. He wonders not only how she will grow up, but also how he can corrupt her.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The summer slow season brings mass layoffs to reduce costs in the store. Bourdoncle fires many and gives unpaid holidays to salesmen they want to keep. Denise fears being fired. When the department learns of her brothers, they assume Jean is Denise's lover, and Pépé is her child. When Denise confides in Robineau about what a hard time she is having making ends meet, he finds her some moonlighting work, which she stays up at night to do. However, the business goes bankrupt, leaving Denise unpaid for her work. When Jean needs money urgently, Denise looks for Robineau, hoping he can help her collect her wages.

The silk department employees are wishing that Robineau would not come back from his holiday, so that everyone can move up. Hutin and Favier go to the dining room for dinner, where another assistant asks whether they have solved their problem with Robineau. While they are dining, Mouret and Bourdoncle come down for a meeting to discuss the food quality. Mouret promises to make things better. Then Mouret and Bourdoncle meet with Bouthemont in the buyer's dining room to discuss Robineau. Mouret and Bourdoncle do not want to fire Robineau, because he is such a good salesman, but the issue of him finding outside work for salesgirls comes up and changes things. However, when Mouret finds out it is Denise, he makes excuses for her and only wants to reprimand them. Mouret and Bourdoncle leave to talk to Robineau.

Hutin and Favier tell Denise where to look for Robineau as they leave dinner. Denise plans to leave dinner last so that she can catch Robineau before returning to her department. While the ladies are finishing up their dinners, Jouve comes in, which encourages everyone but Denise to leave dinner early. Jouve invites Denise to his house, where she knows she is expected to grant sexual favors. When Jouve tries to kiss her, she resists with violence, pushing him so hard that wine splatters his tie.

While Denise is taking the long way to her department, looking for Robineau, she spots Jean looking for her. She leads him to the basement to chide him for his behavior. Jouve sees them, and they race away, hoping not to be recognized. Denise forgets about Robineau again. Jouve tells Bourdoncle, who decides not to consult Mouret. Madame Aurélie is reprimanding Denise for being gone so much lately when Bourdoncle and Jouve arrive. Bourdoncle fires Denise. Denise is worried that Mouret will believe the story about her and a man in the basement, but she ends up giving up and collecting her pay. She finally sees Robineau, who promises to help, but he ends up getting fired as well. Mouret finds out that Denise really was just trying to support her brothers, but Bourdoncle convinces him that everyone is better with Denise gone.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Denise responds to her dismissal by wandering around in a daze. She keeps returning to Au Bonheur des Dames, and finally walks down her uncle's street. She sees the sign for a room for rent at the house of her uncle's friend, Bourras. Bourras thinks she is too respectable for his cheap rooms, but she convinces him to board her. She spends the next two months scraping by in terrible poverty and fear of the bold men in and around her building. She lives in the shadow of Au Bonheur des Dames and its employees. Colomban comes to see her to talk about Clara. When P  p   gets sick in the fall, Bourras brings bread, soup and a job offer for Denise. Denise accepts his charity while he invents work for her for the next few months. Bourras and Denise constantly talk about Au Bonheur des Dames, as Bourras rants about the cheap goods they sell and the attempts to squeeze him out of his house. Denise tells him to give in and accept the offer for his lease and stock, but he refuses. One day, Bourras gets the news that Mouret has bought the H  tel Duvillard. Mouret's renewed offer to buy out Bourras just makes him angry. Bourras makes repairs to the house, trying to win back customers. He tries to compete on price with Au Bonheur des Dames, and fails.

Deloche tells Denise that Robineau has bought Vin  ard's shop. She gets a job there with a small salary and meals. One night at dinner, Gaujean and Robineau are complaining about competition with the large manufacturers and stores. Denise finds herself arguing in favor of the large stores, in spite of how they treated her. Gaujean and Robineau plan their challenge to Au Bonheur des Dames based on a black silk. Robineau advertises in the newspaper and has an initial success with his lower prices. Then Au Bonheur des Dames lowers prices and the battle continues until both stores are selling silk at a loss. After Robineau adds a ready-made-clothing counter, Madame de Boves complains about the quality of the material in a coat. Robineau rudely reveals that he bought it from Au Bonheur des Dames. He loses customers over the story, and business slowly declines.

In July, Denise is out for a walk in the Tuileries gardens when she runs into Mouret. Mouret meets P  p   and apologizes for the mistaken misbehavior over which Denise was fired. Denise is happy to keep her reputation pure in his eyes. They talk about the battle between the small stores and his, and he warns her that she should return to Au Bonheur des Dames, because Robineau will not make it. Denise tells some of her ideas on the side of big business. When Denise arrives home, Bourras is mad because he has just gotten the news that his building has also sold to Mouret. Denise decides it is a good time to pass on Mouret's increased offer to Bourras, but it just makes him even madder. While raging, Baudu comes in to see if the rumor is true. He and Denise are finally reconciled, and he invites her and P  p   to dinner.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

While Au Bonheur des Dames is expanding, and the Rue du Dix-Décembre road is under construction, Au Vieil Elbeuf is dreary and empty. When Denise and Pépé join the Baudu's for dinner, they talk about the large shop across the street, and Denise defends it. Baudu gets angry at the hopelessness of competing, but he hopes that when the road is finished, his business will increase. Baudu realizes that Denise is on the side of the big shop, and invites her to return to work there without it coming between them this time.

Colomban and Geneviève's marriage is postponed again because Baudu's pride will not allow him to pass on an almost bankrupt business to them. Madame Baudu guesses why her daughter is so sad. When Denise and Geneviève are alone, Geneviève breaks down, her hair coming undone in her grief. Denise pins it back again and loosens her cousin's dress, noticing how thin she is. Geneviève asks Denise if Colomban loves Clara. Denise tries to lie, but ends up telling the truth trying to prove that Colomban and Clara do not meet. Geneviève's heart is breaking because she has already thought of Colomban as her husband for ten years. Over the coming months, Denise visits Geneviève every day to try to cheer her.

Construction work on Au Bonheur des Dames continues, even at night. The growing departments squeeze out the neighborhood shops out one by one. Baudu keeps trying, but he finally has to sell his country house to the Lhommes. Madame Baudu asks her husband if he notices their daughter's health. Baudu decides to talk to Colomban. Baudu tells Colomban they need to keep postponing the wedding, which relieves Colomban. The assistant says nothing but finally agrees with his employer. Baudu reports to his wife that he is ready to take a final stand against Au Bonheur des Dames himself. Denise senses that Robineau needs to let her go, but does not know how, so she arranges to return to Au Bonheur des Dames. Bourras is fighting the attempts to build tunnels under his house. Denise gives him notice that she is moving out. He sees that she could not refuse such a great salary. Denise talks to Deloche. He tells her of Mouret's affair with Clara, which upsets her, though she does not know why.

Denise sees Colomban alone in the shop the next day. She confronts him about causing her cousin so much grief, but he is ignorant about his fiancée's health. He does not realize that Baudu had hoped Colomban would put up resistance to the delayed marriage. Denise finally tells Colomban the brutal details of Clara's sordid life. Colomban does not care, and he proclaims how much he loves Clara, just as Geneviève walks into the shop. Just then, Madame Bourdelais, one of the last faithful customers arrives. Baudu comes in and argues with her over prices. Baudu ends up insulting her, and she leaves for Au Bonheur des Dames. Denise tries to cheer the Baudus, but they feel Au Bonheur des Dames is stealing everything from them, even Denise. They look out with despair at the shop, construction nearly complete, as the

eight carriages working for Au Bonheur des Dames's dispatch office load up with an enormous amount of goods.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

While getting ready for a big sale day, Mouret suddenly decides to rearrange the departments. Denise runs into him on her way to her department, and he invites her to his office after work. After the doors to the store open, the shopkeepers' and workers' wives come in to fight over the bargains, creating quite a crowd. Madame de Boves and her daughter Blanche see Madame Marty and her daughter Valentine outside the store. None of them had planned to go in, but they get swept in with the crowd. Madame Marty wants to buy a simple braid, but gets lost on her way to the haberdashery. The store's confusing layout and wonderful displays and salesmen trap them. Madame Marty begins her spending spree. Madame de Boves does not have any money, but she enjoys the store in her own way. They meet Madame Bourdelais, who has brought her children for some cheap entertainment.

In the reading room, Madame Bourdelais sees Madame Guibal. Madame Guibal claims to be returning something, but she is really waiting for a rendezvous with Monsieur de Boves. Monsieur de Boves arrives with Paul Vallagnosc, just as Mouret is passing the reading room on his tour of the store. As Paul and Mouret talk, Madame Desforges comes into the store. She buys silk from Bouthemont, who is now sometimes a guest at her Saturday teas. Bouthemont has mentioned Mouret's fling with Clara, without naming her, and Madame Desforges is determined to find out more. Denise passes through the silk department just as Madame Desforges is ready to go to ladies' wear, and escorts her back to her department. Mouret sees Denise with Madame Desforges. He distracts himself by talking with Paul about the problem of thieves. Madame Desforges notices the look that Mouret gives Denise and feels that Denise must be her rival.

In ladies' wear, Denise serves Madame Desforges, who is determined to make things difficult for her. Madame Marty arrives and tells Madame Desforges that the fling is actually with Clara. Madame Desforges rudely says that maybe Mouret is having both of them, which hurts Denise. Denise escorts her to another department, stopping along the way for Madame Marty's continued shopping spree. Once there, Madame Desforges changes her mind and wants to go back to ladies' wear. Monsieur de Boves and Vallagnosc go down to lace, where they run into Madame de Boves, who is supposed to be at home sick. When she sees Madame Guibal nearby, she regains her confidence, recognizing her husband's mistress. Jouve stops a pregnant woman he had been trying to catch as a thief. He realizes too late that her friend was the real thief. Madame Desforges leaves, hoping to find a way to humiliate Denise in her house.

Denise goes to Mouret's office. Mouret gives the open assistant buyer job to Denise. Denise is worried about seniority, but Mouret insists that she is the best choice. Lhomme comes in with the takings of the day, another record day of earnings. Mouret offers to let Denise take a handful of money. She starts to wonder if he loves her, but the

scene is interrupted when Bourdoncle arrives. Denise takes that opportunity to slip away.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

August brings stock-taking day. Denise is recuperating from a sprained ankle when she gets a letter from Mouret. The letter is for an innocent dinner, but full of implications. Denise realizes she loves Mouret. Pauline comes into her room and Denise reveals the letter to her. Everyone thinks Denise and Mouret are already together. Denise cries, and Pauline advises her to go to the dinner. Pauline is marrying Baugé, which Denise believes is the proper thing to do when you love someone. Pauline lectures her further as Denise cries more. After Pauline leaves, Madame Aurélie comes to check on Denise. Denise insists on helping with the stock-taking.

As the employees work on the inventory, everyone is gossiping and talking about raises. Liénard, having overheard Pauline tell Deloche, has spread the gossip about Mouret inviting Denise to dinner. The employees are all gossiping about a fight between Favier and Deloche over Denise's reputation as well. Denise's crush on Hutin comes out. Favier goes to lunch where the men gossip more about Denise and Mouret, and Deloche throws wine in Favier's face. As Denise is going down to dinner, she sees Pauline and Baugé kissing as he is leaving dinner. Deloche tries to apologize to Denise for making things worse and reproaches Pauline for telling him about Denise's letter where someone else could hear. Denise forgives Pauline, now knowing why everyone is whispering about her.

Back in the ladies' wear department, Madame Aurélie takes Denise to the sample room to finish the paperwork. When Mouret comes by, Madame Aurélie finds a way to leave him alone with Denise. Denise tells Mouret she cannot come to dinner. When Mouret presses her, she finally says she just does not want to meet with him. Mouret tells Denise that he loves her. He offers to set her up, but she does not want to be bought. Mouret does not understand her refusal, and starts to become violent. She responds calmly and with dignity. Mouret leaves angry. Madame Aurélie wonders why Mouret is so angry when they have such a good inventory report, but everyone realizes that Denise has refused Mouret when she leaves early to go to dinner with her family.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Madame Desforges is having another Saturday tea. Bouthemont now regularly comes. Madame Desforges is talking with him about her plan to get Denise and Mouret at her house together. However, the truth is that Mouret is spending tons of money on other women to get over his rejection from Denise. Bouthemont talks to Madame Desforges about the possibility of setting up another department store as competition to Au Bonheur des Dames.

Mouret arrives with Vallagnosc. Mouret tells Bouthemont that the store's management is angry with him. Denise arrives to help Madame Desforges with a coat. Madame Marty and Madame de Boves arrive and talk about the coat. While Madame Desforges makes Denise wait, Baron Hartman arrives. Denise stands, waiting patiently in the antechamber. Finally, Mouret recognizes Denise from the other room, and gets uncomfortable, which Madame Desforges notices. Baron Hartman and Madame Marty talk about the reputation of shop girls. Mouret vehemently defends the shop girls' honor. Bouthemont points out that there are all sorts of girls. While the morals are improving, the shop clerks do make an indistinct class, lacking education, yet with dressing savvy and immersed in luxury. Bouthemont says this is the root of their vices. The ladies talk about jealousy and the expectation of the lower classes to be treated as superiors by the sales servants.

Madame Desforges finally goes out to Denise. Mouret and Baron go to the drawing room to discuss further expansion and women's revenge. Madame Desforges asks Mouret to come advise her on the coat. Denise helps Madame Desforges put on the coat. Madame Desforges orders Denise as she silently places the pins in the coat. Madame Desforges shows Denise that Mouret knows his way around her bedroom. Mouret tries to get the ordeal over with more quickly. Denise finishes, thinking this display was Mouret's idea as revenge for her refusal of him. Denise and Madame Desforges argue about her figure. Madame Desforges finally insults Denise and Mouret tells Denise to leave and forget the whole thing happened, reassuring her that Madame Desforges is the only one behind the insult. Madame Desforges realizes her trap backfired and that Mouret will leave her. Mouret tells her that he does love Denise. Mouret returns to Vallagnosc. They talk about Mouret's suffering and their opposite philosophies of life.

Mouret tells Bouthemont that the board has decided to fire him. When Madame Desforges finally comes in, cleaned up from crying, the ladies are talking about department stores again. Bouthemont talks again to Madame Desforges about setting up competition to Au Bonheur des Dames, this time more seriously since he has lost his job. Madame Desforges talks to Baron Hartman about backing him financially.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Mouret gets Baron Hartman and the Crédit Immobilier to approve his expansion, but his triumph is empty. Clara decides to steal Colomban from his fiancée, which makes Denise angry. Denise realizes that her refusal of Mouret has given her power in the store, but she has no thoughts of marrying Mouret. Bourdoncle has Jouve looking for the slightest thing as reason to dismiss her. The store is still gossiping about Denise going with Hutin and Deloche. Mouret tours the entire store, feeling nothing but despair that Denise still says no to him.

One day, Bourdoncle tells Mouret about the gossip of Denise's lovers. Mouret starts firing people in his jealous rage. When an inspector finds Mignot, salesman in gloves, helping girls steal, Mouret loses his temper. Albert is also guilty. Mouret sees Favier lowering silk prices. Favier blames Hutin. Mouret yells at Hutin, who knows it is really about Denise. Deloche makes a habit of catching Denise on her way to the dressmaker's workshop. Hutin spies on him while Deloche is talking with Denise about their childhood homes and his continued love for her. Hutin sends for Bourdoncle, who sends Jouve to the construction site for Mouret. Just as Mouret arrives, Deloche kisses Denise's hand. Bourdoncle, Jouve, and Deloche all leave.

Mouret takes Denise to his office. In his jealousy, Mouret brings up all the rumors of her lovers, threatening to dismiss them. Denise wants to leave the store if he believes that she is that kind of a girl. Denise refuses to defend herself against his accusations. He tells her he loves her, begging her to stay. He reveals that he has given up all his other women. Denise stays calm and finally says that Deloche is as innocent as she. Mouret asks why she keeps rejecting him if she does not love anyone else. This embarrasses her, but Mouret does not realize that he is the one she loves. Denise agrees to stay if he believes in her good conduct. She leaves his office joking about making him a good man.

The next day, Denise becomes buyer in a new children's wear department, which brings her success, respect, and new friendships. In the new position, Denise and Mouret often chat. She tells him her business ideas. Denise sets up a staff orchestra and gets other improvements for the staff, like game rooms, classes, a library, and a doctor. Everyone agrees that her power over Mouret comes from her refusal of him. Denise intervenes with Pauline, who is threatened of dismissal because she is pregnant. Mouret instead gets a special midwife for married assistants. Denise visits Pauline in the new sick room. Pauline accuses Denise of manipulating Mouret to get him to marry her, but Denise protests. Denise says she will have to leave because of these new rumors. Mouret watches the final construction of his dream come to life. However, his wealth brings nothing but emptiness. Knowing money will not work on Denise, he starts to think about marrying her.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Geneviève sends for Denise, dying with grief that Colomban has left. The Baudus are not succeeding in their attempt to compete with Au Bonheur des Dames. Baudu blames himself for Colomban's departure. Denise tells him that Colomban would have found a way out, regardless of Baudu's actions. Geneviève asks Denise about Colomban and Clara. Denise tells her of his sad state, not even with Clara anymore and looking for another job. Geneviève has wasted away to the body of a child. She knows she is dying and tells Denise goodbye. Geneviève dies the next morning.

The neighborhood comes out for the funeral. After the service, the procession passes Au Bonheur des Dames again on the way to the cemetery. Bourras talks with Denise about the death of old trade and all the businesses going under, as well as the new departments at Au Bonheur des Dames. Bourras still maintains his fight against getting tunnels under his building or in letting Mouret buy out his lease. Denise calls him stubborn and urges him to give in. He says his struggle against being bought by Mouret is just like hers. At the burial, Bourras says they are burying the whole neighborhood. Mouret meets with Denise that evening, and the conversation comes around to the funeral. Mouret is very angry about Bourras preventing him from finishing his work. He has some sympathy for Denise's family, but he also says the misfortunes are their own fault for not changing their ways in these new times. She talks to Mouret about helping Baudu and Bourras.

One day Denise discovers Robineau with broken legs after an accident in Place Gaillon. Denise goes ahead of the crowd to warn Robineau's wife. Madame Robineau is pregnant and worried about their dire straits when Denise breaks the news of the accident to her. Robineau comes in on his stretcher, and confesses that he was trying to kill himself. Madame Robineau tries to console him about losing her money. The doctor finally arrives and says that the injury is a simple fracture and not serious. Gaujean comes in, as worried as Robineau, hoping to get back in the good graces of Au Bonheur des Dames. Denise tells him to see Mouret.

Madame Baudu dies in January. The funeral procession is a repeat of Geneviève's a few months before, with only a few victims of Au Bonheur des Dames's massacre of the neighborhood missing. Bourras is declared bankrupt and evicted. He watches as the demolition team takes down his house. Denise watches with him and begs him to take the offer of help. He refuses. Baudu sits in his shop alone for hours. Denise tells Baudu that Bourras' old house is gone. She asks what he will do, knowing the creditors have decided not to force him into bankruptcy. She offers a job as an inspector, but seeing how wrong it would be, she retracts the offer. Denise has trouble sleeping again, despairing at her own powerlessness in the struggle for survival.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Au Bonheur des Dames is ready for its Great White Sale to celebrate the completion of the final expansion. Madame de Boves and Madame Guibal meet Madame Desforges, who has only come out of jealous curiosity about the rumors that Mouret will marry Denise. When the ladies go in, Inspector Jouve keeps his eyes on Madame de Boves. To escape the rumors, Denise has given her notice and is planning to leave after the sale for a month in Valgonnes. Bourdoncle finds Mouret in his office crying. Bourdoncle and Mouret go on their tour of the store during the sale. Jean and P  p   arrive to finish some purchases and exchanges for Jean's new wife before they leave with Denise the next day. Mouret comes by while Denise is mothering her brothers. He remembers seeing a much younger P  p   on their walk in the Tuileries gardens years ago. Mouret asks Denise to come to his office after the sale. As Denise goes around the store with her brothers, everyone treats her like a queen, asking her not to go, but still whispering about her and Mouret. Denise meets Mouret again without a word, but Madame Desforges sees them and they see her watching them.

In the lace department, Madame de Boves is having Deloche show her great quantities of expensive lace. Jouve is still watching her, and he catches her stealing. Jouve escorts Madame de Boves to Bourdoncle's office. She claims ignorance, putting on an arrogant show, but the men get some salesgirls to search her and find a fortune in stolen goods on her. Bourdoncle offers her a quiet solution to maintain her dignity and pride. At first, Madame de Boves refuses, but she finally signs the statement instead of facing prison. While Blanche is waiting outside the office for her mother, Vallagnosc, her new husband, finds her, and she tells him about her mother's stealing. Vallagnosc sees Mouret, who assures him that his officers will handle the matter discreetly. Vallagnosc still overreacts, but finally joins his mother-in-law, who again takes on her haughty manner.

Mouret watches his store devouring customers, and finally decides to let himself be defeated. He waits in his office. When Lhomme brings in the takings, which have finally surpassed the one million mark for one day, Mouret is indifferent to the money. Bourdoncle comes in, realizing what Mouret has decided and encourages him. Mouret recognizes that Bourdoncle wants to take advantage of his weakness, and puts him back in his place. Denise arrives. Mouret asks again if she will stay. He offers to marry her, and she still protests, afraid of what people will think of her. Mouret despairs and Denise finally admits she loves him and not someone else. Mouret lets her go to Valgonnes, planning to go there to marry her, so that she can come back as queen.