

# Madame's Butterfly

## Madame's Butterfly (*Le Papillon de Madame*)



Having been born into a French family of merchants and landowners, forty-five-year-old Madame Matilde Chenille was wealthy. She had been married until her husband, Count Marcel Chenille, thirty years her senior, had died when she was but twenty-five years of age and in the ninth year of their arranged marriage. Matilde was beautiful, socially active, and after the time of mourning her husband's death, had many suitors, but a carriage accident rendered her bed- and wheelchair-ridden at thirty-five years of age. Family, friends, and acquaintances, who had initially sympathised with her, ceased dropping by, and even her only child, Jacques, rarely visited.

Now, except for a couple of servants, the dependable attendance of her young maid, Louise, and a sixty-year-old botanist, Bernard Dubois, Madame Matilde Chenille was living alone in her well-appointed chateau in the town of Giverny, enjoying her collection of contemporary impressionist paintings, engaging in tapestry work, and reading her cherished books. She derived the most pleasure from autobiographies of those that suffered and overcame; in particular, those penned by what some considered Catholic mystics. These writers became Matilde's most beloved leather-bound and linen-clad companions and counsellors who encouraged her to pour from her own cup of experience into a journal of "*pensées*" — a French word meaning "thoughts."

Matilde had been penning a page of such thoughts one morning when she heard a familiar whistling outside in the corridor followed by a knock on her library door.

"Come in, Bernard."

"*Bonjour*, Madame. Did you sleep well?"

"*Merci*, Bernard. I did."

With some difficulty, Madame Matilde Chenille propped herself up in her wheelchair to accommodate the debonair, grey-bearded gentleman's placement of a tray bearing a pot of coffee and a hot, buttered croissant.

"Oh, and a letter came for you, Madame, postmarked from Paris."

Matilde's eyes lit up. "Jacques' handwriting," she said, and sliced open the envelope. Her face fell as she began to read.

"Do you wish for me to leave, Madame?"

"*N-non.*"

A few minutes of sombre silence ensued.

"My son Jacques ... he's ... er, sick," she said at last.

"I am most awfully sorry, Madame. If there's anything I can do? ... Another croissant?"

"Trouble yourself no further, Bernard. Louise will resume my *petit déjeuner* task tomorrow morning."

"Tis far from trouble, Madame. I would deem it a pleasure to be of such help to you *every* morning."

"Ah, but your pressing work would leave little time for such dalliance," Matilde answered, managing a smile.

"I regard such service as neither a dalliance nor trifling, Madame," the gentleman said, straightening his bowtie. He bowed and turned to leave.

Matilde cleared her throat and adopted an impersonal tone. "S-so, how is your world ... er, *work* these days, Professor Dubois?"

"My work is slowing due to my ... er ... natural vigour abating, Madame, but my naturalist world of flora, fauna, and all creatures great and small never ceases to amaze me."

"Amazement..." Matilde said wistfully. She took a bite of her croissant, swallowed the morsel and continued. "An innocent, childlike wonder that one must retain, lest one inwardly expire."

"How true," said Bernard, "and one of her many virtues that Madame has most admirably cherished."

"Admirably?" The woman's pallid countenance flushed, and she turned to the window. "What else can I do but value the surrounding beauty?"

"But of course, Madame. Yet you have quickly achieved a state of mind for which countless folk struggle a lifetime to attain. Many in your ... er ... circumstances do but wallow in a bed of remorse, self-pity, or even bitterness."

"Believe you me, I have been tempted to do so many times," Matilde muttered.

"But thank the good Lord's grace that I have not yielded to that temptation," she said with finality. "The venerable Fénelon<sup>1</sup> wrote that self-pity and discouragement is not a fruit of humility, but of pride. It springs from a secret love of our own wounded excellence. Yet, I still marvel at ... never mind."

"You still marvel at what, Madame?"

"Oh, how God in His infinite care and wisdom allowed me to go through such wringing of body, soul and spirit, all the while knowing that despite all outward manifestations, I would emerge a much happier being. Like a butterfly hatching from its cocoon. ... Oh, *pardonne-moi*, I must be boring you with my ruminations."

"Not at all, Madame. I-is there anything else I can do for you or bring to you?"

"*Rien*, Bernard. You do more than enough, already.... *Non*, wait. It will soon be butterfly season here in Giverny. Claude ... I mean, Monsieur Monet shall undoubtedly devote his most vibrant colours and brush strokes to the event. You know how I love butterflies."

<sup>1</sup> François Fénelon (1651–1715) was a French archbishop, theologian, and writer. His unorthodox views on religion, politics, and education caused opposition from church and state; however, his academic concepts and literary works had a lasting influence on French culture. (Taken from [Britannica](#).)





Having been acquainted with Madame Chenille for some ten years, Professor Bernard Dubois smiled, knowing that the sight of a butterfly on a flower would send the lady into childlike ecstasy. Come rain or shine, sleet or snow, he would wheel Madame Chenille out into the garden and elucidate on the wonders of nature. And in late springtime, when the butterfly cocoons were hatching, he would sit with her as she rapturously watched the winged swarm flutter over her flowerbeds.

Eventually (when Bernard became a little more intimate with her), he nicknamed her “*papillon*,” which is French for butterfly! On this particular morning, however, he finally mustered up just enough courage to tell madame that someone loved her.

“And this person always had...” he said, “from a distance.”

Matilde seemed unperturbed. After all, she had enjoyed the attentions of many suitors during her young years, but...

“Even now? In my incapacitation?”

“L-like God, I suppose,” Bernard added.

“But God doesn’t love me from a distance,” Matilde stated, clasping her bosom. “He has always loved me right *here*. Who is this ‘someone’ to whom you refer? A ... er ... f-flesh-and-blood human being?”

Bernard nodded. Matilde looked into his eyes and smiled. She said nothing, so Bernard haltingly continued.

“And apparently, h-he ... that flesh-and-blood human being ... can only hope that his love is but a fraction of that which beats in your heart.”

“Poetic, Bernard. I would never have expected such from a ... I am sorry, we have known each other for years, but what did you say is your profession?”

“A naturalist. At least that is what I have officially been dubbed.”

“Then what would you dub yourself?”

“A keen observer of creation, ma’am. The work of its Creator’s hands never ceases to amaze me—including my own flesh and blood.”

Bernard held his hands up to the light streaming from the window. “Down to the tiniest capillary—”

“You,” Matilde interjected with realisation dawning on her countenance.

“Me? What?”

“You, Bernard! Like God, you have always been right here.”

The man lowered and nodded his greying head.

“*Donc*, pour yourself a cognac and sit down, my loyal Saint Bernard!”

Bernard chuckled. “*Merci*, Madame. Is that not what they hang around that dog’s neck in the Alpine passes?”

“So says tradition,” Matilde continued, while Bernard gratefully helped himself to the amber contents of a crystal decanter. “But I was likening you to your venerable namesake, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux!<sup>2</sup> Anyway ... your, er ... admission has emboldened me to request something of you. You are aware that the gamekeeper’s cottage at the edge of my estate has stood empty for some years.”

<sup>2</sup> **St. Bernard of Clairvaux** (1090–1153) was a French [Cistercian monk](#) and [mystic](#), founder and [abbot](#) of the abbey of Clairvaux and one of the most influential churchmen of his time. (Taken from [Britannica](#).)

"Oui, Madame. Monsieur Fantin became suddenly indisposed. Family affairs called him away. ... Or so I gathered," he added, seeing Matilde's sad smile.

"That is what he would have wished us to gather," she said. "Social speculation and a slight but necessary reduction of wages due to my incapacitation consolidated his decision to leave my employ. I would have done anything within my power, as depleted as it was, to have kept him."

"An unfortunate loss, Madame. I am sorry."

"Do not be. It is no loss considering what I gain should you accept."

"Accept ... accept what?"

"The use of that cottage."

Bernard sputtered on a mouthful of his drink. "Th-the use of...? You mean ... to actually *live* there?"

Matilde nodded, and Bernard sat gaping at the carpet as she continued speaking. He had been dwelling with his analysis paraphernalia, books, and manuscripts crammed into a two-room atelier in Vernon, a town not far from Madame Chenille's chateau.

"You will, of course, care for the garden? A personal touch would be far superior to the present employment of slack-handed part-timers."

"O-of course, Madame."

"And you can continue with your research of botany and whatnot ... especially butterflies. Oh, that reminds me of something else. Would you be so kind as to bring me a cocoon of that which you consider the most majestic?"

"The most majestic? I would say the Monarch, Madame."

"*Bien*, I wish to see it hatch into its glory. I want to watch it day by day, even moment by moment until it breaks through its cocoon and emerges in its deserved beauty before it migrates."

"Well said, Madame ... well said. Will do, will do."

"*Merci*, Bernard."

"You are more than welcome, Madame. In fact, I am writing a thesis on the Monarch butterfly, and once it is completed, I will submit it to Antoine."

"Antoine?"

"My publisher, Antoine Chandler."

"*Intéressant*. So, when can you move in?"

Despite being perturbed that Madame Chenille had refrained from acknowledging his circuitous confession of love for her, Bernard Dubois eagerly set up a laboratory, study, and library in the vacant cottage at the edge of her estate. After a few weeks, however, Matilde deemed Bernard's care of the garden inferior to what Monsieur Fantin's once was, while Bernard's opinion was that the grounds required less intensive maintenance. He considered himself a "learned naturalist," and when Matilde drew attention to the neglected state of the roses and rhododendrons, Bernard reminded her that Henri Fantin had been "merely a gardener."

Fortunately, Bernard soon received a sizeable sum of money from the sale of his first book on botany, and they were able to employ a bona-fide gardener, through whom the estate's luxuriance flourished.

And Bernard brought Madame Chenille a large silken-shrouded chrysalis in a glass jar.

She knew it was a matter of time before it would transform, but between writing her journal of *pensées* and weaving a tapestry, Matilde's nightly vigils were fraught with impatience as she frequently awoke to peek at the cocoon lying dormant on a leaf in the jar on her bedside table.

"But are you sure it is alive, Monsieur Bernard?" she inquired one morning when he happened by her parlour.

"Of course it is, Madame. Do not fret. It only *appears* mummified. It is indeed a prize specimen—I could tell by its size."

"But does it need more light and fresh air?"

Bernard shook his head.

"Food or water?"

"Of course not, Madame. But, like waiting for a pot to boil, it will never happen as long as you watch it. Allow me to help you forget about it for a while as I take you out to dine at *Le Moulin de Fourges* this evening."

"Me? Dine at *Le Moulin de Fourges* in a wheelchair? Would you not be ashamed?"

"Nothing of the sort. It is an honour, Madame. I will ask Louise to dress you and call for a carriage at the appropriate time."



"But tell me, Bernard, why is it so still?" Matilde asked once the two of them had sat down at the restaurant table and the appetisers had arrived.

"What is, Madame?" said Bernard, absorbed with the menu. "The evening? True, there is but little breeze."

"Non, the butterfly. Why?"

"That is what he has chosen to do."

"Who has chosen what? God?"

"Indirectly. The caterpillar has chosen to bind himself so that to all intents and purposes – and to the very world itself – he is dead. Umm ... I think I will take *le viande*. And you?"

"I think I will take *le poulet*. But when will it hatch?"

"What? *Le poulet*?"

Matilde chuckled and rolled her eyes. "Non, Bernard. The butterfly."

"In due time, in due time. If I may be so bold, Madame, when you return home tonight, busy yourself with your *pensées*. It has been a lifesaver, has it not?"

"My writing? Ah, *oui*. I gain much solace from it."

"But equally *important*, Madame, your words are becoming a lifesaver and solace for many by cheering their hearts and giving them hope. A word fitly spoken, how good is it!<sup>3</sup> By the way, which vintage would Madame prefer?"

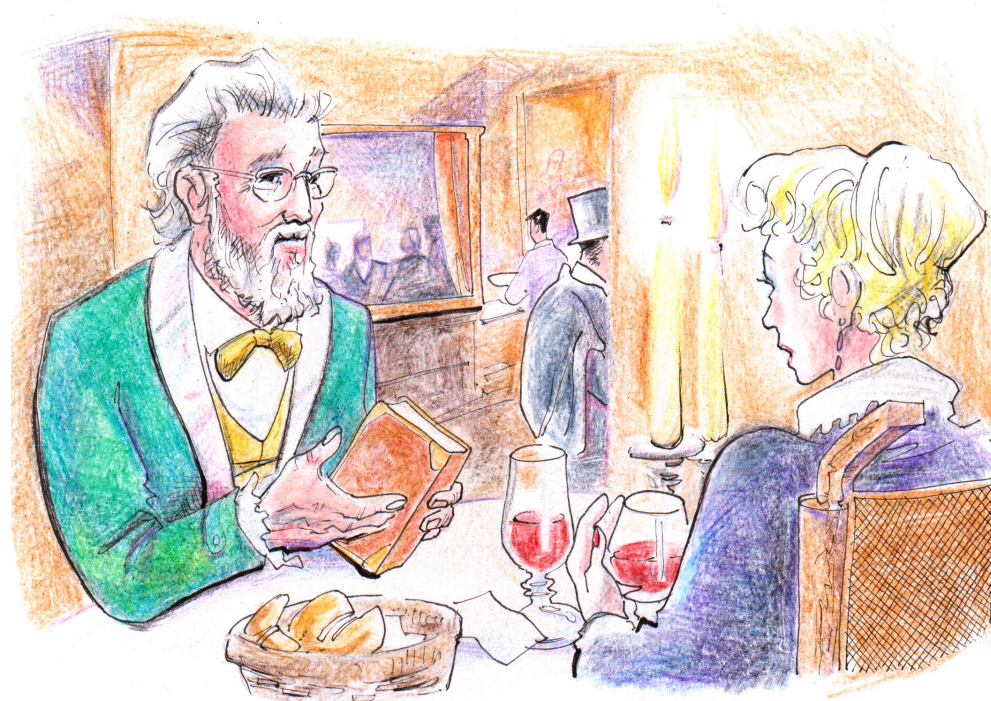
"I think I shall take the *Chateau Latour Grenache* ... but how would you know that my writings have done such for anyone other than you? I have never written for public acclaim, and I expect none now. I have only an invisible, but oh, so needy readership in mind."

Bernard smiled and reached into his briefcase. "A portion of that needy readership has just become visible. Begging your pardon, but I brought you here to show you this..."

Madame Chenille's mouth fell open. "A book? 'The *Pensées* of M-Madame Papillon'?"

"A sample of the f-first edition, Madame. I took the l-liberty..."

"Liberty? Bernard! You have betrayed my trust in allowing you, and *only* you, to read my confessions!"



"Monsieur Chandler was overwhelmed, Madame. He read portions of it to his wife and daughter and..."

"I cannot. I *will* not..."

"...and a young niece of theirs, who is dying from consumption, read it and regained hope. I am sorry, Madame, but I could not bear to see you hide your light under a bushel."<sup>4</sup>

"I-I cannot. I *must* not!"

"What, Madame? Hide your light under a bushel?"

"*Oui* ... er ... *non*, I mean..." Matilde said, lowering her voice as the waiter brought and poured the wine.

<sup>3</sup> See Proverbs 25:11.

<sup>4</sup> See Matthew 5:15.



Bernard smiled mischievously as he raised his glass for a toast. "It should be of some comfort to know that you would be using an alias."

"To Bernard..." Matilde whispered, returning his smile, and raising her glass. "To my dear and loyal saint."

And from that day forth, Madame Matilde Chenille's light was set on the Chandler Publishing Company's "candlestick," and her book's success provoked Antoine Chandler himself to demand a sequel. Nevertheless, despite Bernard's reassurance that she would remain anonymous, Matilde was reluctant to take what she considered inordinate opportunity of her achievement.

"We will wait," she stated in the face of Bernard's insistence over breakfast one morning. "Monsieur Chandler will have his sequel in due time. I cannot tell you when ... but, to be honest, I have few, if any, ideas."

"Ah," said Bernard. "They will come. They will come."

"So you say, but I cannot drum them up of my own accord."

"Of course, Madame. I will bear that in mind and in my prayers. Oh, and by the way, I suggested that the book's frontispiece be an engraving of one of your beautiful tapestries."

"*Oui*? And which one?"

"The very one that you are working on at the moment."

"How do you think it is developing, Louise?"

Matilde Chenille's maid dithered and looked quizzical. "Your tapestry, ma'am?"

"*Oui*. That is what you are perusing, is it not?"

"E-er ... *oui*."



"So, what do you think?"

"Uh ... well, I don't know, ma'am. It's not for me to say — me not being artistic and suchlike."

"Don't be afraid to say what you think, Louise."

"Well, in my opinion, it seems the threads need a little trimming. It's hard to see what it represents."

"Represents? Is it not clearly a *butterfly*, Louise? A Monarch, the grandest of the specie."

"Er ... *oui*, Madame. I can sort of make out the shape now that you mention it. It's just that all those strands are in the way."

"Strands? Oh, silly me, I was assuming that you were looking at the front. Turn it over."

The maid did so and gasped. "Madame, it is *beautiful*. So intricate, and the colour is *exquisiment vibrant*. How did you get the wings to look so, umm ... *transparent*?"



Madame Chenille shrugged. "A combination of amber and silver threads, maybe?"

"Anyway, ma'am, it is most strange how the tapestry appears when you look at it from the wrong side."

"A wise observation," said Matilde.

"*Au contraire*, Madame, for I feel so foolish. Although I do a little cross-stitch and embroidery at my mother's insistence, I know little to nothing of tapestry work."

"Ah, but you have given me much today, Louise."

"Merely a well-deserved *compliment*, Madame."

"While your *compliment* is much appreciated," said Matilde, "more valuable is the life lesson you have given me that I can include in my new book of *pensées*. I have almost finished it, but I have been hard-pressed for a conclusive idea. Thanks to you, I have that idea."

The maid looked puzzled. "Thanks to me, ma'am? But what did I do?"

"Did you not say, 'Strange how *incompréhensible* it appears when you look at it from the wrong side'?"

"So I did, Madame. Speaking of the tapestry."

"*Oui*. The tapestry, like life, is a matter of perception. One day, when we get to see it from the other side, we will ... never mind. *Merci*, Louise, and *bonjour*."

The maid curtsied. "*Bonjour*, Madame."

Love and springtime were rejuvenating Bernard's step as he breezed into Madame Chenille's parlour whistling a tune while Louise served breakfast.

"You seem especially happy," Matilde said during light conversation, coffee, and croissants.

"How can I be anything else, *ma papillon*? Birds are singing, bells are ringing, and spring is flinging our cares away! And above all, you have almost completed the sequel to your book."

"True, my dear Bernard—thanks to you and Louise here. But I have some sad news: a situation more pressing for me right now. Come along, finish your coffee, and even at the risk of alleged indiscretion, see me to my boudoir. I wish to show you something."

Bernard wheeled Matilde into her chamber, and she pointed to her bedside table. There upon a white doily, limped a large Monarch butterfly. It was out of its cocoon, but its great wings were lifeless and colourless and seemed to be but a burden to the creature, which appeared powerless to employ them for flight. Bernard looked perplexed.

"As you know," said Matilde, "I have been eagerly watching the cocoon as spring drew on, and I was delighted to see it finally begin to emerge. But I knew in a moment that something was the matter."

"In a moment of what, Madame?"

"Of it escaping from its cocoon. It had been having some difficulty, umm ... *hatching*."

"They always do," said Bernard. "It is a struggle."

"So it seemed," said Matilde. "It pushed and strained, and seemed to make so little headway. So I helped the poor thing on its way."

"You did? How?"

"Oh, I noticed that a fine thread was binding the opening of the cocoon. So, I took a tiny pair of scissors, and ever so delicately, mind you, I snipped that thread. Immediately, the cocoon opened wide, and the butterfly crawled out without any further struggle."

Bernard grunted and tugged at his beard.

"I must admit," continued Matilde, "that I congratulated myself on the success of my experiment, assuming that I had saved the poor thing's life. But seeing this, I realised it must have already been sick and would have been unable to break through anyway, let alone fly."

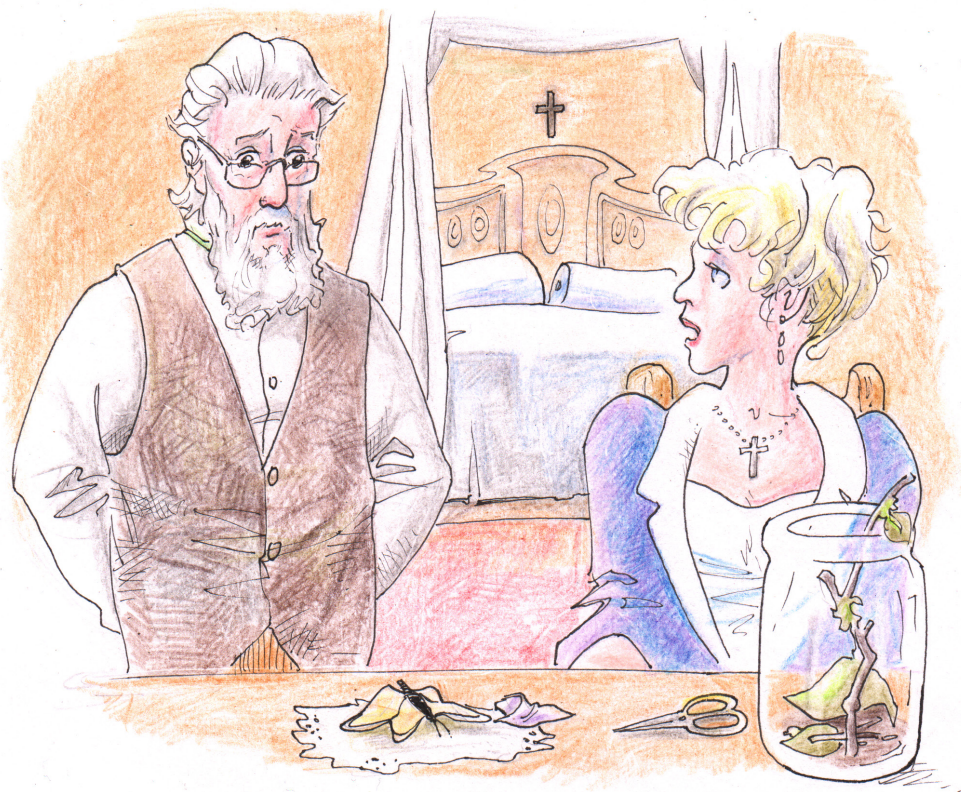
Bernard grunted again and cleared his throat. He spoke gently, but firmly. "The creature was not sick, *ma papillon*."

"It wasn't?"

"No. If you will pardon me saying so, due to your sincere yet mistaken kindness, instead of having up to six weeks of liberation, the butterfly has now but a few days of a miserable sickly existence."

"What do you mean by my 'mistaken kindness'?"

"You see, it required that very pushing and struggling to send the life fluid into the veins of its butterfly wings. Shortening that struggle left its wings colourless and lifeless."



Matilde sat in silence for a while, staring at the weak, struggling creature.

"I see," she finally said quietly. "*Merci*, Monsieur Dubois, you may go."

The next day Matilde called for Bernard to join her again for breakfast.

"I have been thanking her that she never cut the cord barring my entrance to this new life," she said, once Louise had set before them a pot of coffee and a plate of cream-laden, strawberry-filled crepes.

"Thanking who?"

"Our Holy Mother Mary. If she had done so, I would have been unable to live life to its full potential."

"And you feel you are doing so, even in this constrained state?"

"Oui. The venerable Fénelon was right—it is the vitality of the inner life, my dear Bernard."

"That is apparent, *ma papillon*. You have so much to give."

"*Merci*. Although..." Matilde's eyes glazed, and she spoke distantly. "I fear I did so with my son, Jacques."

"Did what?"

"Tenderly cut that cord. I indulged him to a fault. Sincere yet mistaken kindness, you know. The times I did not expect as much of him as I ought to have, covering for his failures, paying off his debts and even bail, led to his debauchery. Thank God he finally married, although I fear that now, with his affliction..."

"Do not torture yourself over it, *ma petite papillon*. Suffice it to be thankful that the good Lord Himself did not indulge *you* in such a fashion."

"Oh, He has indulged me plenty, Bernard. Yet at the same time, I have learned a lesson from the butterfly. While I have castigated myself over that indulgence of my son, I have rejoiced that in their goodness, God and our Holy Mother did not deal so with him or me."

Bernard paused to answer, nodding as he reflected. "I see ... you rejoice that God has not dealt with you as, pardon my rather callous reference, *une b-batarde*!"



To Bernard's relief, Matilde threw her head back and laughed. "You could say it that way. But Paul did say we *all* are partakers!"

"Then will you address such in your latest book, *Pensées d'un Cocon*'?"

"I will. I wish only for my confession to benefit others."

"It most certainly shall, *papillon*. You have suffered and learned much for the nurture of many souls."

"*Oui*, Bernard, but I pray that my son will be gracious about it."

Fortunately, Jacques Chenille, who had meanwhile lost his wife to another's attentions because of his debilitating sickness, was gracious about his mother's published confession. Its gains brought him to her bedside and expedited his move into the Chenille estate, where he adroitly concluded her long-neglected business affairs. Furthermore, after exercising gentle persuasion, Bernard secured Matilde's hand in marriage and a promotion from his position in the gamekeeper's cottage to a place in his *papillon's* chateau and boudoir.

"Just so, our soul's wings need the struggle and effort of conflict," Madame Matilde Chenille-Dubois (under the alias of Madame Papillon) wrote in her book, *Pensées d'un Cocon*. "To grant it an escape from such, would weaken its power to 'mount up with wings as eagles...'"

And, having endured a similar struggle to the Monarch butterfly, Matilde, aided by Jacques' business acumen, sold her chateau and migrated south



together with him, her loyal 'Saint Bernard,' and her faithful Louise. There on the Caribbean Island of Martinique, they serenely spent the rest of their days.