

# CHAPTER 21 - Seven Small Duchesses

Chapter 21 of "The Ways of Men" discusses the transformation of the French aristocracy's social interactions from historical prestige to contemporary significance, as seen through the lives of the "Seven Small Duchesses." The chapter delves into the decline of the French nobility's influence on society, especially during the 19th century, attributing it to their aloofness and refusal to engage with the changing political landscape. Conversely, it highlights a shift towards re-engagement led by the younger generation, particularly a group of ducal women who invigorate the traditional aristocracy with their modern and lively approach to fulfilling their roles.

These duchesses, each holding a significant title and residing in historically rich châteaux, have become the trendsetters of French society. They exhibit a blend of respect for tradition and a spirited engagement with contemporary life, leading social events from Paris to the Riviera. Despite foreign and bourgeois influences on French society over the years, these women maintain a strict exclusivity, reflecting an enduring adherence to traditional values of heritage and pedigree.

Their choice of companionship remains firmly within their caste, highlighting a unique French perspective on social status and interaction that starkly contrasts with perceptions in countries like England and America. This exclusivity further extends to their cultural pursuits, with each duchess notable for particular skills in the arts, thereby enriching their social circle not only with status but with substantive cultural contributions.

The chapter closes by reflecting on the irony of modernity's touch on the aristocracy — where titles once synonymous with battlefield and courtly grandeur now belong to spirited young women leading their lives with a mix of tradition and contemporary flair. Yet, despite a more visible engagement with society, they keep a firm boundary against outsiders, preserving their exclusivity and continuing the legacy of the French aristocracy's distinct social structure.