

# La Curée

## Chapter Summary

**Warning: This summary gives full plot outline**

All page references are to the 2004 translation by A. Goldhammer and published by Random House Inc.

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### Chapter 1 (p3-42)

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The introduction of the circle around which the novel is based seen leaving the bois de Boulogne in their carriages. We start with an introduction of a number of characters streaming at us like their carriages. All introduced with a description of their coaches (pp4-5)

Mention is made of Saccard and the fact that he bought some diamonds that paid off his mistress's debts and gave his wife a desirable present introducing us to the type of society we are dealing with. (p6)

Two other women are singled out in a lesbian relationship, Mme le marquise Adeline d'Espagnet-The marquis had recently embraced the republican cause-and, Mme Suzanne Haffner-Wife of an industrialist from Colmar. He was a millionaire 20 times over. Both were known to Renée since boarding school (p7)

Renée provides the background to her and Maxime's side of the novel when she declares "...Oh, I'm bored! I'm bored to death."

As they leave the bois they ponder how a woman who has everything and men eating out of her hand can be bored.



A house on the edge of the parc monceau.

P15-32

We are then given a description of the opulent house the Saccards live in and a little background preceding the story as a dinner party is held. Both the house and the dinner party are described in detail. The guests include two newly rich contractors, Mignon and Charrier, a senator as well as the in crowd from Paris society. The talk over dinner explains the changes that are taking place in Paris during the second empire and it becomes clear that the assembled dinner guests are at the heart of this change.

P34-42

As they leave the table Mussy tries to get Maxime (an old school friend) to speak to Renée on his behalf. He does so but Renée seems more concerned that Maxime has been getting on so well with Louise Mareuil. She goes on to spy on them at the end of the evening and amidst the exotic plants of the conservatory, Zola hints at the forbidden passion that is forming in Renée's mind.

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## *Chapter 2 (p43-89)*

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The chapter goes back in time and starts with Aristide's arrival in Paris in January 1852 with his wife and daughter (Maxime has been left with his grandmother in Plassans).

On his first night Aristide walks the streets of Paris and the next day looks up his politician older brother who promises to find him a position.

p46-50

Several weeks later Aristide has a meeting with Eugène who has found him a position as assistant surveyor of roads. It is also at this stage that Aristide changes his name to Saccard. There follows three years of poverty.

p51-53

Now at the beginning of 1853 and Aristide is promoted to surveyor of roads. He has become aware, from snooping around the hotel de ville of the plans for the redevelopment of the city (Hausmann), and by early 1854 he is looking for capital.

p53-58

This is an interlude to give us the background on Sidonie and what has happened to her since we last met her (briefly) in Plassans. Apart from her various business dealings we are also introduced to her eccentric obsession with a 3bn FF debt owed from England at the time of the Stuarts. It will keep appearing throughout the story. Saccard approaches her for capital but is rebuffed.

p58-64

It is now 1854 and Angèle is dying. While she is still on her death bed Sidonie introduces the idea of Aristide marrying Renée for money. Saccard agrees in his wife's hearing. As soon as she is dead, Clotilde is packed off to her uncle in Plassans and Aristide moves into new accommodation in the Marais.

p64-65

We are given a brief background on Renée's family and her current plight.

p65-72

Saccard now has a series of meetings with Aunt Elizabeth where the marriage is settled and in particular the money and properties that will pass to Saccard and his wife to be. We then have the wedding itself and the reconciliation with Renée's father before the newlyweds set off for their new home on the Rue de Rivoli.

p72-85

Saccard's first speculative venture begins with his famous carving up of Paris from the Buttes Monmartre while out with Angèle. We are then given the details of how he buys his new wife's house from her using a front and by a number of intricate dealings pushes up the value from FF150k to FF600k of which he will take FF450k as profit as well as being in control of FF100k of his wife's proceeds. We are also introduced to 2 members of the municipal council and the Société Générale des Ports du Maroc.

p86-89

The chapter ends with a nostalgic look back to Renée's home on the Isle Saint-Louis.



A street on the Isle Saint-Louis

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### Chapter 3 (p90-128)

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P90-96

It is 1854 and Maxime, who is 13, is brought to Paris by Saccard. He and Renée hit it off from the start. He is rather effeminate, but becomes the centre of attention for Renée and her old schoolfriends.

p96-101

Maxime's schooldays and his education in society by Renée, his time spent with her at Worms, and its culmination at the age of 17(1858) when he gets Renée's chambermaid pregnant.

p101-103

Saccard's success in his corrupt property deals are outlined and it is clear that he has become extremely wealthy.

p104-107

Saccard's dealings with Crédit Viticole and Toutin-Laroche are explained and in particular how they managed to bring the city of Paris within its grasp and hence avoid any investigation into their dealings. Saccard declines the invitation to invest in the Société Générale des Ports du Maroc.

He does form an alliance with Mignon, Charrier and Co. the contracting company who were the beneficiaries of the second empires equivalent of the British Government's Private Finance Initiative.

p108-111

We are given an insight into Renée's behaviour in society and details of her lovers to date.

p111-112

Details of Mme de Lauwerens and the goings on in her apartment

p112-114

Maxime's relationship with his aunt and his increasing use of prostitutes which he discusses with Renée on their trips to the Bois. Their home life has now become three individuals sharing a house.

p114-116

Renée and Maxime play intimate games with a photo album and share intimate secrets

p116-118

Where Saccard and Maxime run into each other in brothels and go off whoring together.

p118-120

Maxime's infatuation with the prostitute Little Sylvia and Renée's jealousy over the bracelet Maxime had bought her.

p120-122

We are introduced to the family Mareuil and the history behind Maxime's engagement to Louise.

p123-128

The chapter closes with a recap up to 1860 in which money flows like water and a question is raised over where Saccard's capital is coming from but is quickly danced away in the decadence and debauchery of the time. Saccard is decorated and Renée gets to go to the Tuileries and meet the emperor who meets her and says to one of his generals that she is like a carnation. The general replies she is worth picking and putting in your buttonhole. To Renée this was the highpoint of her life.

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*Chapter 4 (p129-178)*

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P129-135

The opening paragraph brings us back into the current time by a link back to the end of chapter 1 and Renée biting on the tanghin leaf.

In a few weeks (late October) Renée is asking to go to Blanche Muller's party (an etiquette no no). Maxime agrees to take her. She goes disguised in a black domino and mask but having spent time examining the house and the women came away at 11.30pm quite disappointed. Having driven around the boulevards for a while Renée is hungry and Maxime stops at the Café Riche saying she can dine with him.

p136-148

The waiter takes them to a private room. The tension here is that this is usually what Maxime or any other society gentleman would do with a prostitute. They send the waiter away and eat oysters and partridge and drink wine and champagne. After the meal they lock the door and before long have committed their first act of incest. "What we have just done is vile" exclaims Renée. On the trip home in the cab they are both caught up in their private thoughts of regret but in the end find reasons to forgive themselves.

p149-159

The next morning Saccard lets Renée know that he cannot pay her FF136k tailor's bill and it transpires he is in serious debt due to some of his deals going wrong. The decision not to pay her bill is part of his plot to get his hands on the Charonne property-something to which she eventually agrees via a convoluted agreement involving Larsonneau. On leaving her Saccard places a kiss on the back of her neck.

p160-163

Sidonie comes to see Renée and after relating the story of the English debt agrees to find Renée someone to lend her money.

p163-169

The next day Renée sparkles at the ministry ball and the jewellery that she is wearing achieves Saccard's aim of shoring up his credit. Saccard leaves early to see Laure d'Aurigny and asks Maxime to accompany Renée home. On arriving there she falls into his arms and after a detailed description of her rooms she lets him undress her and takes him to bed where he stays until 6am the next day.

p170-178

The chapter ends by describing how this incestuous relationship grew and how it developed into Maxime's nightly visits to Renée.

p179-182

The extent of the schemes that Larsonneau and Saccard are caught up in are further explained.

p182-188

We are given a summary of the next year in Renée's life with Maxime. The gatherings with friends, skating in the bois de Boulogne, summer at the beach and back to Paris in the Autumn.

p188-190

Back in Paris, Renée's debts are mounting along with those of Maxime. Renée owes Worms FF200k as well as several promissory notes to Larsonneau.

Saccard offers to make a gift of money to her in return for sexual favours which she rejects. He is only using this as part of his overall scheme to obtain her total property.

p190-197

Renée sets off to visit her father with a view to asking him for FF50k. However, she lacks the courage to ask him and after leaving him, goes immediately to Mme Sidonie's. Sidonie informs her that M. de Saffré is in love with her and could be a source for the loan. With that he arrives in the room next to the bedroom in which Sidonie and Renée are meeting. However, when Sidonie suggests showing him in, Renée flees saying she is not for sale. That night she sleeps with Saccard and next day has the money she needs. She starts sleeping with Saccard again without explaining to Maxime what is going on. Maxime takes it in his stride and assumes she is getting older and therefore less fun.

p197-198

The sharing of husband and stepson starts to effect Renée and she undertakes some odd acts such as proposing a duel with one lady and a race around Longchamps with another.

p198-201

A visit to the theatre with Maxime, where they see a play about incest(Phèdre), deeply upsets Renée but she thinks of what other society ladies get up to and eventually gets used to her incest.

p202-205

Louise de Mareuil sees Renée kissing Maxime but seems to make nothing of it. However, she is terminally ill and Saccard is keen to marry Maxime off to her in order to get his hands on her dowry of FF1m. Her father agreed due to the fact that he needed Saccard's help to get out of a political scrape and Maxime agreed because he wanted the money and to end his affair with Renée.

p205-208

Maxime comes back one night and sees a man in Renée's apartment. He demands to know who it is and she eventually tells him it is de Saffré. (It is in fact Saccard). Maxime leaves disgusted, calling Renée a whore and telling her that their affair is over.

p208-219

We are given a long story of how Saccard plans to get the Charonne property from Renée and at the same time get the incriminating ledger back from Larsonneau. It involves various complicated dealings, dragging in Laure d'Aurigny and the Duc de Rozan amongst others.

p219-228

Saccard having settled the Charonne details informs Maxime that the date for his wedding has been set and while giving him some fatherly advice lets Maxime know that relations between him and Renée have been restored for the past six weeks. Maxime, surprised by this goes to see Renée. They seem to have reached the position of remaining good friends when Maxime is driven by Renée's belief in Saccard to tell her how he is duping her. He ends up staying the night and the next day Renée refuses to sign the Charonne papers. Saccard is furious and suspecting a lover goes to his sister Sidonie asking her to find out what is going on.

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## Chapter 6 (p229-273)

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This chapter is set on one evening (Mid Lent Thursday) and the Saccard's are holding a costume ball at their house overlooking Parc Monceau.

p229-230

The centrepiece of the party is to be a [tableau vivant](#) in three scenes entitled "The Amours of handsome Narcissus and the Nymph Echo" There are nine ladies and Maxime taking part and the piece has been planned by M. Hupel.

p230-234

The gathering is described as 11.30pm is reached. Saccard and Mareuil agree Sunday as the day for the formal engagement and Saccard lets slip he will announce the engagement tonight. Meanwhile Toutin-Laroche is discussing the collapse (in a scandal) of the Société Générale des ports du Maroc. However, Toutin-Laroche has come out of it with a seat in the Senate thanks to some government member who wanted to avoid a problem.

p234-246

It is now gone midnight and the tableau vivant gets underway an hour late. The first two scenes are a great success. During the second scene Eugène Rougon and his secretary arrive. Saccard uses this arrival to announce the forthcoming marriage of Maxime, and Eugène and Toutin-Laroche agree to be witnesses much to Saccard's and Maureuil's delight. M. Hupel de la Noue is thrown by the arrival of the minister and the ladies arrange themselves on stage without him, causing him even greater consternation. The third tableau was not so well received but after polite applause M. Hupel was able to regale the builders Mignon and Charrier with tales from the classics for 2 hours.

p246-254

With the tableau over Eugène Rougon leaves as the ball is about to get underway. The ladies from the tableau return in their costumes from scene 2, apart from Renée who enters dressed in very little which meets the approval of the men but less so of the ladies! After describing the dancing we are taken to the dining room where there is a crush for the buffet. The dancing continues and reaches an end with M. de Saffré being pressed to conduct the cotillion.

p254-264

The final section of the chapter moves with amazing rapidity. Renée learns from Toutin-Laroche of the forthcoming marriage. She is shocked and there follows alternating scenes from the cotillion being contrasted with Renée's frantic search for Maxime and her manic scheme to run away with him against his will. She signs the promissory note for FF100k and tells Maxime she will lock him in her room until later and will then cash the note on the way to the train. This is brought to an abrupt end when Saccard walks in while she is kissing Maxime. His initial anger subsides when he sees the note which he pockets before calmly taking Maxime downstairs to say goodbye to the guests.

p264-274

Renée is left alone and as she looks at herself in the mirror she reviews her life and how she got to this physical and metaphorical state of nakedness. She focuses on Saccard and Maxime and sums up their characters and her place in Saccard's scheme(267). Her anger is rekindled and she puts on a fur and goes downstairs, where the cotillion is still going on. She attempts to whisper something to Louise but she is left with a half whispered sentence as they leave and is then left on her own to go into the conservatory. Here she observes the final throes of the cotillion and reflects how it mirrors her own life.

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## Chapter 7 (p274-294)

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P274-281

Time has moved on three months to a wet spring morning. Saccard is out with a valuation committee valuing his own

property with a group from city hall. The property has been taken from Renée and sold via Larsonneau to a fictitious creditor at an inflated price. The committee wander through the ruins of houses being demolished and finally reach the Saccard property. The group leave Saccard to write up the report and he duly receives FF3m with which he pays off some of his creditors.

p281-282

He gave Sidonie FF10k and she went off to London chasing her large British debt to no avail.

p283-286

Renée drifts lower. Her aunt has died and her sister is married. Maxime has married Louise and they went to Italy where Louise died. On his return he moves out into his own house and takes up horse racing. Renée found consolation in her maid until she announces she is returning to her home to buy a house. On the way to the station she fills the mistress in regarding Baptiste's fondness for stable boys.

p287-292

On her way back from the station Renée instructs the coachman to go to the bois where she reminisces. She watches all the society people go by in symmetry with the opening pages. She reflects how she has given way under the burden of pleasure whereas they must be made of sterner stuff. Finally she sees Saccard and Maxime walking arm in arm. As she leaves the bois the Emperor drives by in his landau. For Renée this fleeting sight of glory and radiance sums up her life and she orders the coachman to go to her fathers.



The Bagatelle Gardens in the heart of the Bois de Boulogne

p292-294

Renée returns to her childhood nursery and looking out over the city weeps into the night for her lost happiness. She dies the following winter of acute meningitis. As if to sum up the materialistic centrality in the novel, Zola ends it by stating that Renée's father paid her debts. "The bill from Worms came to 275,000 francs." A sad, empty ending which encapsulates the whole novel.



