

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

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Henri Heine

I inscribe this to you, my dear Heine, to you that represent in Paris the ideas and poetry of Germany, in Germany the lively and witty criticism of France; for you better than any other will know whatsoever this Study may contain of criticism and of jest, of love and truth.

DE BALZAC.

“My dear friend,” said Mme. de la Baudraye, drawing a pile of manuscript from beneath her sofa cushion, “will you pardon me in our present straits for making a short story of something which you told me a few weeks ago?”

“Anything is fair in these times. Have you not seen writers serving up their own hearts to the public, or very often their mistress’ hearts when invention fails? We are coming to this, dear; we shall go in quest of adventures, not so much for the pleasure of them as for the sake of having the story to tell afterwards.”

“After all, you and the Marquise de Rochefide have paid the rent, and I do not think, from the way things are going here, that I ever pay yours.”

“Who knows? Perhaps the same good luck that befell Mme. de Rochefide may come to you.”

“Do you call it good luck to go back to one’s husband?”

“No; only great luck. Come, I am listening.”

And Mme. de la Baudraye read as follows:

“Scene – a splendid salon in the Rue de Chartres-du-Roule. One of the most famous writers of the day discovered sitting on a settee beside a very illustrious Marquise, with whom he is on such terms of intimacy, as a man has a right to claim when a woman singles him out and keeps him at her side as a complacent *souffre-douleur* rather than a makeshift.”

“Well,” says she, “have you found those letters of which you spoke yesterday? You said that you could not tell me all about *him* without them?”

“Yes, I have them.”

“It is your turn to speak; I am listening like a child when his mother begins the tale of *Le Grand Serpentin Vert*.”

“I count the young man in question in that group of our acquaintances which we are wont to style our friends. He comes of a good family; he is a man of infinite parts and ill-luck, full of excellent dispositions and most charming conversation; young as he is, he is seen much, and while awaiting better things, he dwells in Bohemia. Bohemianism, which by rights should be called the doctrine of the Boulevard des Italiens, finds its recruits among young men between twenty and thirty, all of them men of genius

in their way, little known, it is true, as yet, but sure of recognition one day, and when that day comes, of great distinction. They are distinguished as it is at carnival time, when their exuberant wit, repressed for the rest of the year, finds a vent in more or less ingenious buffoonery.

“What times we live in! What an irrational central power which allows such tremendous energies to run to waste! There are diplomatists in Bohemia quite capable of overturning Russia’s designs, if they but felt the power of France at their backs. There are writers, administrators, soldiers, and artists in Bohemia; every faculty, every kind of brain is represented there. Bohemia is a microcosm. If the Czar would buy Bohemia for a score of millions and set its population down in Odessa – always supposing that they consented to leave the asphalt of the boulevards – Odessa would be Paris with the year. In Bohemia, you find the flower doomed to wither and come to nothing; the flower of the wonderful young manhood of France, so sought after by Napoleon and Louis XIV., so neglected for the last thirty years by the modern Gerontocracy that is blighting everything else – that splendid young manhood of whom a witness so little prejudiced as Professor Tissot wrote, ‘On all sides the Emperor employed a younger generation in every way worthy of him; in his councils, in the general administration, in negotiations bristling with difficulties or full of danger, in the government of conquered countries; and in all places Youth responded to his demands upon it. Young men were for Napoleon the *missi*

hominici of Charlemagne.’

“The word Bohemia tells you everything. Bohemia has nothing and lives upon what it has. Hope is its religion; faith (in oneself) its creed; and charity is supposed to be its budget. All these young men are greater than their misfortune; they are under the feet of Fortune, yet more than equal to Fate. Always ready to mount and ride an *if*, witty as a *feuilleton*, blithe as only those can be that are deep in debt and drink deep to match, and finally – for here I come to my point – hot lovers and what lovers! Picture to yourself Lovelace, and Henri Quatre, and the Regent, and Werther, and Saint-Preux, and Rene, and the Marechal de Richelieu – think of all these in a single man, and you will have some idea of their way of love. What lovers! Eclectic of all things in love, they will serve up a passion to a woman’s order; their hearts are like a bill of fare in a restaurant. Perhaps they have never read Stendhal’s *De l’Amour*, but unconsciously they put it in practice. They have by heart their chapters – Love-Taste, Love-Passion, Love-Caprice, Love-Crystalized, and more than all, Love-Transient. All is good in their eyes. They invented the burlesque axiom, ‘In the sight of man, all women are equal.’ The actual text is more vigorously worded, but as in my opinion the spirit is false, I do not stand nice upon the letter.

“My friend, madame, is named Gabriel Jean Anne Victor Benjamin George Ferdinand Charles Edward Rusticoli, Comte de la Palferine. The Rusticolis came to France with Catherine de Medici, having been ousted about that time from their

infinitesimal Tuscan sovereignty. They are distantly related to the house of Este, and connected by marriage to the Guises. On the day of Saint-Bartholomew they slew a goodly number of Protestants, and Charles IX. bestowed the hand of the heiress of the Comte de la Palferine upon the Rusticoli of that time. The Comte, however, being a part of the confiscated lands of the Duke of Savoy, was repurchased by Henri IV. when that great king so far blundered as to restore the fief; and in exchange, the Rusticoli – who had borne arms long before the Medici bore them to-wit, *argent* a cross flory *azure* (the cross flower-de-luced by letters patent granted by Charles IX.), and a count's coronet, with two peasants for supporters with the motto IN HOC SIGNO VINCIMUS – the Rusticoli, I repeat, retained their title, and received a couple of offices under the crown with the government of a province.

“From the time of the Valois till the reign of Richelieu, as it may be called, the Rusticoli played a most illustrious part; under Louis XIV. their glory waned somewhat, under Louis XV. it went out altogether. My friend's grandfather wasted all that was left to the once brilliant house with Mlle. Laguerre, whom he first discovered, and brought into fashion before Bouret's time. Charles Edward's own father was an officer without any fortune in 1789. The Revolution came to his assistance; he had the sense to drop his title, and became plain Rusticoli. Among other deeds, M. Rusticoli married a wife during the war in Italy, a Capponi, a goddaughter of the Countess of Albany (hence La Palferine's

final names). Rusticoli was one of the best colonels in the army. The Emperor made him a commander of the Legion of Honor and a count. His spine was slightly curved, and his son was wont to say of him laughingly that he was *un comte refait (contrefait)*.

“General Count Rusticoli, for he became a brigadier-general at Ratisbon and a general of the division on the field of Wagram, died at Vienna almost immediately after his promotion, or his name and ability would sooner or later have brought him the marshal’s baton. Under the Restoration he would certainly have repaired the fortunes of a great and noble family so brilliant even as far back as 1100, centuries before they took the French title – for the Rusticoli had given a pope to the church and twice revolutionized the kingdom of Naples – so illustrious again under the Valois; so dexterous in the days of the Fronde, that obstinate Frondeurs though they were, they still existed through the reign of Louis XIV. Mazarin favored them; there was the Tuscan strain in them still, and he recognized it.

“Today, when Charles Edward de la Palferine’s name is mentioned, not three persons in a hundred know the history of his house. But the Bourbons have actually left a Foix-Grailly to live by his easel.

“Ah, if you but knew how brilliantly Charles Edward accepts his obscure position! how he scoffs at the bourgeois of 1830! What Attic salt in his wit! He would be the king of Bohemia, if Bohemia would endure a king. His *verve* is inexhaustible. To him we owe a map of the country and the names of the seven

castles which Nodier could not discover.”

“The one thing wanting in one of the cleverest skits of our time,” said the Marquise.

“You can form your own opinion of La Palferine from a few characteristic touches,” continued Nathan. “He once came upon a friend of his, a fellow-Bohemian, involved in a dispute on the boulevard with a bourgeois who chose to consider himself affronted. To the modern powers that be, Bohemia is insolent in the extreme. There was talk of calling one another out.

“‘One moment,’ interposed La Palferine, as much Lauzun for the occasion as Lauzun himself could have been. ‘One moment. Monsieur was born, I suppose?’

“‘What, sir?’

“‘Yes, are you born? What is your name?’

“‘Godin.’

“‘Godin, eh!’ exclaimed La Palferine’s friend.

“‘One moment, my dear fellow,’ interrupted La Palferine. ‘There are the Trigaudins. Are you one of them?’

“‘Astonishment.

“‘No? Then you are one of the new dukes of Gaeta, I suppose, of imperial creation? No? Oh, well, how can you expect my friend to cross swords with you when he will be secretary of an embassy and ambassador *some day*, and you will owe him respect? *Godin!* the thing is non-existent! You are a nonentity, Godin. My friend cannot be expected to beat the air! When one is somebody, one cannot fight with a nobody! Come, my dear

fellow – good-day.’

“‘My respects to madame,’ added the friend.

“Another day La Palferine was walking with a friend who flung his cigar end in the face of a passer-by. The recipient had the bad taste to resent this.

“‘You have stood your antagonist’s fire,’ said the young Count, ‘the witnesses declare that honor is satisfied.’

“La Palferine owed his tailor a thousand francs, and the man instead of going himself sent his assistant to ask for the money. The assistant found the unfortunate debtor up six pairs of stairs at the back of a yard at the further end of the Faubourg du Roule. The room was unfurnished save for a bed (such a bed!), a table, and such a table! La Palferine heard the preposterous demand – ‘A demand which I should qualify as illegal,’ he said when he told us the story, ‘made, as it was, at seven o’clock in the morning.’

“‘Go,’ he answered, with the gesture and attitude of a Mirabeau, ‘tell your master in what condition you find me.’

“The assistant apologized and withdrew. La Palferine, seeing the young man on the landing, rose in the attire celebrated in verse in *Britannicus* to add, ‘Remark the stairs! Pay particular attention to the stairs; do not forget to tell him about the stairs!’

“In every position into which chance has thrown La Palferine, he has never failed to rise to the occasion. All that he does is witty and never in bad taste; always and in everything he displays the genius of Rivarol, the polished subtlety of the old French noble. It was he who told that delicious anecdote of a friend of Laffitte the

banker. A national fund had been started to give back to Laffitte the mansion in which the Revolution of 1830 was brewed, and this friend appeared at the offices of the fund with, 'Here are five francs, give me a hundred sous change!' – A caricature was made of it. – It was once La Palferine's misfortune, in judicial style, to make a young girl a mother. The girl, not a very simple innocent, confessed all to her mother, a respectable matron, who hurried forthwith to La Palferine and asked what he meant to do.

"'Why, madame,' said he, 'I am neither a surgeon nor a midwife.'

"'She collapsed, but three or four years later she returned to the charge, still persisting in her inquiry, 'What did La Palferine mean to do?'

"'Well, madame,' returned he, 'when the child is seven years old, an age at which a boy ought to pass out of women's hands' – an indication of entire agreement on the mother's part – 'if the child is really mine' – another gesture of assent – 'if there is a striking likeness, if he bids fair to be a gentleman, if I can recognize in him my turn of mind, and more particularly the Rusticoli air; then, oh – ah!' – a new movement from the matron – 'on my word and honor, I will make him a cornet of – sugar-plums!'

"'All this, if you will permit me to make use of the phraseology employed by M. Sainte-Beuve for his biographies of obscurities – all this, I repeat, is the playful and sprightly yet already somewhat decadent side of a strong race. It smacks rather of

the Parc-aux-Cerfs than of the Hotel de Rambouillet. It is a race of the strong rather than of the sweet; I incline to lay a little debauchery to its charge, and more than I should wish in brilliant and generous natures; it is gallantry after the fashion of the Marechal de Richelieu, high spirits and frolic carried rather too far; perhaps we may see in it the *outrances* of another age, the Eighteenth Century pushed to extremes; it harks back to the Musketeers; it is an exploit stolen from Champcenetz; nay, such light-hearted inconstancy takes us back to the festooned and ornate period of the old court of the Valois. In an age as moral as the present, we are bound to regard audacity of this kind sternly; still, at the same time that ‘cornet of sugar-plums’ may serve to warn young girls of the perils of lingering where fancies, more charming than chastened, come thickly from the first; on the rosy flowery unguarded slopes, where trespasses ripen into errors full of equivocal effervescence, into too palpitating issues. The anecdote puts La Palferine’s genius before you in all its vivacity and completeness. He realizes Pascal’s *entre-deux*, he comprehends the whole scale between tenderness and pitilessness, and, like Epaminondas, he is equally great in extremes. And not merely so, his epigram stamps the epoch; the *accoucheur* is a modern innovation. All the refinements of modern civilization are summed up in the phrase. It is monumental.”

“Look here, my dear Nathan, what farrago of nonsense is this?” asked the Marquise in bewilderment.

“Madame la Marquise,” returned Nathan, “you do not know the value of these ‘precious’ phrases; I am talking Sainte-Beuve, the new kind of French. – I resume. Walking one day arm in arm with a friend along the boulevard, he was accosted by a ferocious creditor, who inquired:

“Are you thinking of me, sir?”

“Not the least in the world,” answered the Count.

“Remark the difficulty of the position. Talleyrand, in similar circumstances, had already replied, ‘You are very inquisitive, my dear fellow!’ To imitate the inimitable great man was out of the question. – La Palferine, generous as Buckingham, could not bear to be caught empty-handed. One day when he had nothing to give a little Savoyard chimney-sweeper, he dipped a hand into a barrel of grapes in a grocer’s doorway and filled the child’s cap from it. The little one ate away at his grapes; the grocer began by laughing, and ended by holding out his hand.

“Oh, fie! monsieur,” said La Palferine, ‘your left hand ought not to know what my right hand doth.’

“With his adventurous courage, he never refuses any odds, but there is wit in his bravado. In the Passage de l’Opera he chanced to meet a man who had spoken slightly of him, elbowed him as he passed, and then turned and jostled him a second time.

“You are very clumsy!”

“On the contrary; I did it on purpose.”

“The young man pulled out his card. La Palferine dropped it. ‘It has been carried too long in the pocket. Be good enough to

give me another.’

“On the ground he received a thrust; blood was drawn; his antagonist wished to stop.

“‘You are wounded, monsieur!’

“‘I disallow the *botte*,’ said La Palferine, as coolly as if he had been in the fencing-saloon; then as he riposted (sending the point home this time), he added, ‘There is the right thrust, monsieur!’

“His antagonist kept his bed for six months.

“This, still following on M. Sainte-Beuve’s tracks, recalls the *raffines*, the fine-edged raillery of the best days of the monarchy. In this speech you discern an untrammelled but drifting life; a gaiety of imagination that deserts us when our first youth is past. The prime of the blossom is over, but there remains the dry compact seed with the germs of life in it, ready against the coming winter. Do you not see that these things are symptoms of something unsatisfied, of an unrest impossible to analyze, still less to describe, yet not incomprehensible; a something ready to break out if occasion calls into flying upleaping flame? It is the *accidia* of the cloister; a trace of sourness, of ferment engendered by the enforced stagnation of youthful energies, a vague, obscure melancholy.”

“That will do,” said the Marquise; “you are giving me a mental shower bath.”

“It is the early afternoon languor. If a man has nothing to do, he will sooner get into mischief than do nothing at all; this invariably happens in France. Youth at present day has two sides

to it; the studious or unappreciated, and the ardent or *passionne*.”

“That will do!” repeated Mme. de Rochefide, with an authoritative gesture. “You are setting my nerves on edge.”

“To finish my portrait of La Palferine, I hasten to make the plunge into the gallant regions of his character, or you will not understand the peculiar genius of an admirable representative of a certain section of mischievous youth – youth strong enough, be it said, to laugh at the position in which it is put by those in power; shrewd enough to do no work, since work profiteth nothing; yet so full of life that it fastens upon pleasure – the one thing that cannot be taken away. And meanwhile a bourgeois, mercantile, and bigoted policy continues to cut off all the sluices through which so much aptitude and ability would find an outlet. Poets and men of science are not wanted.

“To give you an idea of the stupidity of the new court, I will tell you of something which happened to La Palferine. There is a sort of relieving officer on the civil list. This functionary one day discovered that La Palferine was in dire distress, drew up a report, no doubt, and brought the descendant of the Rusticolis fifty francs by way of alms. La Palferine received the visitor with perfect courtesy, and talked of various persons at court.

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