

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

THE DESERTED WOMAN

Оноре де Бальзак
The Deserted Woman

«Public Domain»

де Бальзак О.

The Deserted Woman / О. де Бальзак — «Public Domain»,

Honoré de Balzac

The Deserted Woman

DEDICATION

To Her Grace the Duchesse d'Abrantes,

from her devoted servant,

Honore de Balzac

PARIS, August 1835

In the early spring of 1822, the Paris doctors sent to Lower Normandy a young man just recovering from an inflammatory complaint, brought on by overstudy, or perhaps by excess of some other kind. His convalescence demanded complete rest, a light diet, bracing air, and freedom from excitement of every kind, and the fat lands of Bessin seemed to offer all these conditions of recovery. To Bayeux, a picturesque place about six miles from the sea, the patient therefore betook himself, and was received with the cordiality characteristic of relatives who lead very retired lives, and regard a new arrival as a godsend.

All little towns are alike, save for a few local customs. When M. le Baron Gaston de Nueil, the young Parisian in question, had spent two or three evenings in his cousin's house, or with the friends who made up Mme. de Sainte-Severe's circle, he very soon had made the acquaintance of the persons whom this exclusive society considered to be "the whole town." Gaston de Nueil recognized in them the invariable stock characters which every observer finds in every one of the many capitals of the little States which made up the France of an older day.

First of all comes the family whose claims to nobility are regarded as incontestable, and of the highest antiquity in the department, though no one has so much as heard of them a bare fifty leagues away. This species of royal family on a small scale is distantly, but unmistakably, connected with the Navarreins and the Grandlieu family, and related to the Cadignans, and the Blamont-Chauvrys. The head of the illustrious house is invariably a determined sportsman. He has no manners, crushes everybody else with his nominal superiority, tolerates the sub-prefect much as he submits to the taxes, and declines to acknowledge any of the novel powers created by the nineteenth century, pointing out to you as a political monstrosity the fact that the prime minister is a man of no birth. His wife takes a decided tone, and talks in a loud voice. She has had adorers in her time, but takes the sacrament regularly at Easter. She brings up her daughters badly, and is of the opinion that they will always be rich enough with their name.

Neither husband nor wife has the remotest idea of modern luxury. They retain a livery only seen elsewhere on the stage, and cling to old fashions in plate, furniture, and equipages, as in language and manner of life. This is a kind of ancient state, moreover, that suits passably well with provincial thrift. The good folk are, in fact, the lords of the manor of a bygone age, *minus* the quitrents and heriots, the pack of hounds and the laced coats; full of honor among themselves, and one and all

loyally devoted to princes whom they only see at a distance. The historical house *incognito* is as quaint a survival as a piece of ancient tapestry. Vegetating somewhere among them there is sure to be an uncle or a brother, a lieutenant-general, an old courtier of the Kings's, who wears the red ribbon of the order of Saint-Louis, and went to Hanover with the Marechal de Richelieu: and here you will find him like a stray leaf out of some old pamphlet of the time of Louis Quinze.

This fossil greatness finds a rival in another house, wealthier, though of less ancient lineage. Husband and wife spend a couple of months of every winter in Paris, bringing back with them its frivolous tone and short-lived contemporary crazes. Madame is a woman of fashion, though she looks rather conscious of her clothes, and is always behind the mode. She scoffs, however, at the ignorance affected by her neighbors. *Her* plate is of modern fashion; she has "grooms," Negroes, a valet-de-chambre, and what-not. Her oldest son drives a tilbury, and does nothing (the estate is entailed upon him), his younger brother is auditor to a Council of State. The father is well posted up in official scandals, and tells you anecdotes of Louis XVIII. and Madame du Cayla. He invests his money in the five per cents, and is careful to avoid the topic of cider, but has been known occasionally to fall a victim to the craze for rectifying the conjectural sums-total of the various fortunes of the department. He is a member of the Departmental Council, has his clothes from Paris, and wears the Cross of the Legion of Honor. In short, he is a country gentleman who has fully grasped the significance of the Restoration, and is coining money at the Chamber, but his Royalism is less pure than that of the rival house; he takes the *Gazette* and the *Debats*, the other family only read the *Quotidienne*.

His lordship the Bishop, a sometime Vicar-General, fluctuates between the two powers, who pay him the respect due to religion, but at times they bring home to him the moral appended by the worthy Lafontaine to the fable of the *Ass laden with Relics*. The good man's origin is distinctly plebeian.

Then come stars of the second magnitude, men of family with ten or twelve hundred livres a year, captains in the navy or cavalry regiments, or nothing at all. Out on the roads, on horseback, they rank half-way between the cure bearing the sacraments and the tax collector on his rounds. Pretty nearly all of them have been in the Pages or in the Household Troops, and now are peaceably ending their days in a *faisance-valoir*, more interested in felling timber and the cider prospects than in the Monarchy.

Still they talk of the Charter and the Liberals while the cards are making, or over a game at backgammon, when they have exhausted the usual stock of *dots*, and have married everybody off according to the genealogies which they all know by heart. Their womenkind are haughty dames, who assume the airs of Court ladies in their basket chaises. They huddle themselves up in shawls and caps by way of full dress; and twice a year, after ripe deliberation, have a new bonnet from Paris, brought as opportunity offers. Exemplary wives are they for the most part, and garrulous.

These are the principal elements of aristocratic gentility, with a few outlying old maids of good family, spinsters who have solved the problem: given a human being, to remain absolutely stationary. They might be sealed up in the houses where you see them; their faces and their dresses are literally part of the fixtures of the town, and the province in which they dwell. They are its tradition, its memory, its quintessence, the *genius loci* incarnate. There is something frigid and monumental about these ladies; they know exactly when to laugh and when to shake their heads, and every now and then give out some utterance which passes current as a witticism.

A few rich townspeople have crept into the miniature Faubourg Saint-Germain, thanks to their money or their aristocratic leanings. But despite their forty years, the circle still say of them, "Young So-and-so has sound opinions," and of such do they make deputies. As a rule, the elderly spinsters are their patronesses, not without comment.

Finally, in this exclusive little set include two or three ecclesiastics, admitted for the sake of their cloth, or for their wit; for these great nobles find their own society rather dull, and introduce the bourgeois element into their drawing-rooms, as a baker puts leaven into his dough.

The sum-total contained by all heads put together consists of a certain quantity of antiquated notions; a few new inflections brewed in company of an evening being added from time to time to the common stock. Like sea-water in a little creek, the phrases which represent these ideas surge up daily, punctually obeying the tidal laws of conversation in their flow and ebb; you hear the hollow echo of yesterday, to-day, to-morrow, a year hence, and for evermore. On all things here below they pass immutable judgments, which go to make up a body of tradition into which no power of mortal man can infuse one drop of wit or sense. The lives of these persons revolve with the regularity of clockwork in an orbit of use and wont which admits of no more deviation or change than their opinions on matters religious, political, moral, or literary.

If a stranger is admitted to the *cenacle*, every member of it in turn will say (not without a trace of irony), “You will not find the brilliancy of your Parisian society here,” and proceed forthwith to criticise the life led by his neighbors, as if he himself were an exception who had striven, and vainly striven, to enlighten the rest. But any stranger so ill advised as to concur in any of their freely expressed criticism of each other, is pronounced at once to be an ill-natured person, a heathen, an outlaw, a reprobate Parisian “as Parisians mostly are.”

Before Gaston de Nueil made his appearance in this little world of strictly observed etiquette, where every detail of life is an integrant part of a whole, and everything is known; where the values of personalty and real estate is quoted like stocks on the vast sheet of the newspaper – before his arrival he had been weighed in the unerring scales of Bayeusaine judgment.

His cousin, Mme. de Sainte-Severe, had already given out the amount of his fortune, and the sum of his expectations, had produced the family tree, and expatiated on the talents, breeding, and modesty of this particular branch. So he received the precise amount of attentions to which he was entitled; he was accepted as a worthy scion of a good stock; and, for he was but twenty-three, was made welcome without ceremony, though certain young ladies and mothers of daughters looked not unkindly upon him.

He had an income of eighteen thousand livres from land in the valley of the Auge; and sooner or later his father, as in duty bound, would leave him the chateau of Manerville, with the lands thereunto belonging. As for his education, political career, personal qualities, and qualifications – no one so much as thought of raising the questions. His land was undeniable, his rentals steady; excellent plantations had been made; the tenants paid for repairs, rates, and taxes; the apple-trees were thirty-eight years old; and, to crown all, his father was in treaty for two hundred acres of woodland just outside the paternal park, which he intended to enclose with walls. No hopes of a political career, no fame on earth, can compare with such advantages as these.

Whether out of malice or design, Mme. de Sainte-Severe omitted to mention that Gaston had an elder brother; nor did Gaston himself say a word about him. But, at the same time, it is true that the brother was consumptive, and to all appearance would shortly be laid in earth, lamented and forgotten.

At first Gaston de Nueil amused himself at the expense of the circle. He drew, as it were, for his mental album, a series of portraits of these folk, with their angular, wrinkled faces, and hooked noses, their crotchets and ludicrous eccentricities of dress, portraits which possessed all the racy flavor of truth. He delighted in their “Normanisms,” in the primitive quaintness of their ideas and characters. For a short time he flung himself into their squirrel’s life of busy gyrations in a cage. Then he began to feel the want of variety, and grew tired of it. It was like the life of the cloister, cut short before it had well begun. He drifted on till he reached a crisis, which is neither spleen nor disgust, but combines all the symptoms of both. When a human being is transplanted into an uncongenial soil, to lead a starved, stunted existence, there is always a little discomfort over the transition. Then, gradually, if nothing removes him from his surroundings, he grows accustomed to them, and adapts himself to the vacuity which grows upon him and renders him powerless. Even now, Gaston’s lungs were accustomed to the air; and he was willing to discern a kind of vegetable happiness in days that brought no mental exertion and no responsibilities. The constant stirring of the sap of life, the fertilizing influences of mind on

mind, after which he had sought so eagerly in Paris, were beginning to fade from his memory, and he was in a fair way of becoming a fossil with these fossils, and ending his days among them, content, like the companions of Ulysses, in his gross envelope.

One evening Gaston de Nueil was seated between a dowager and one of the vicars-general of the diocese, in a gray-paneled drawing-room, floored with large white tiles. The family portraits which adorned the walls looked down upon four card-tables, and some sixteen persons gathered about them, chattering over their whist. Gaston, thinking of nothing, digesting one of those exquisite dinners to which the provincial looks forward all through the day, found himself justifying the customs of the country.

He began to understand why these good folk continued to play with yesterday's pack of cards and shuffle them on a threadbare tablecloth, and how it was that they had ceased to dress for themselves or others. He saw the glimmerings of something like a philosophy in the even tenor of their perpetual round, in the calm of their methodical monotony, in their ignorance of the refinements of luxury. Indeed, he almost came to think that luxury profited nothing; and even now, the city of Paris, with its passions, storms, and pleasures, was scarcely more than a memory of childhood.

He admired in all sincerity the red hands, and shy, bashful manner of some young lady who at first struck him as an awkward simpleton, unattractive to the last degree, and surprisingly ridiculous. His doom was sealed. He had gone from the provinces to Paris; he had led the feverish life of Paris; and now he would have sunk back into the lifeless life of the provinces, but for a chance remark which reached his ear – a few words that called up a swift rush of such emotion as he might have felt when a strain of really good music mingles with the accompaniment of some tedious opera.

“You went to call on Mme. de Beauseant yesterday, did you not?” The speaker was an elderly lady, and she addressed the head of the local royal family.

“I went this morning. She was so poorly and depressed, that I could not persuade her to dine with us to-morrow.”

“With Mme. de Champignelles?” exclaimed the dowager with something like astonishment in her manner.

“With my wife,” calmly assented the noble. “Mme. de Beauseant is descended from the House of Burgundy, on the spindle side, 'tis true, but the name atones for everything. My wife is very much attached to the Vicomtesse, and the poor lady has lived alone for such a long while, that – ”

The Marquis de Champignelles looked round about him while he spoke with an air of cool unconcern, so that it was almost impossible to guess whether he made a concession to Mme. de Beauseant's misfortunes, or paid homage to her noble birth; whether he felt flattered to receive her in his house, or, on the contrary, sheer pride was the motive that led him to try to force the country families to meet the Vicomtesse.

The women appeared to take counsel of each other by a glance; there was a sudden silence in the room, and it was felt that their attitude was one of disapproval.

“Does this Mme. de Beauseant happen to be the lady whose adventure with M. d'Ajuda-Pinto made so much noise?” asked Gaston of his neighbor.

“The very same,” he was told. “She came to Courcelles after the marriage of the Marquis d'Ajuda; nobody visits her. She has, besides, too much sense not to see that she is in a false position, so she has made no attempt to see any one. M. de Champignelles and a few gentlemen went to call upon her, but she would see no one but M. de Champignelles, perhaps because he is a connection of the family. They are related through the Beauseants; the father of the present Vicomte married a Mlle. de Champignelles of the older branch. But though the Vicomtesse de Beauseant is supposed to be a descendant of the House of Burgundy, you can understand that we could not admit a wife separated from her husband into our society here. We are foolish enough still to cling to these old-fashioned ideas. There was the less excuse for the Vicomtesse, because M. de Beauseant is a well-

bred man of the world, who would have been quite ready to listen to reason. But his wife is quite mad – ” and so forth and so forth.

M. de Nueil, still listening to the speaker's voice, gathered nothing of the sense of the words; his brain was too full of thick-coming fancies. Fancies? What other name can you give to the alluring charms of an adventure that tempts the imagination and sets vague hopes springing up in the soul; to the sense of coming events and mysterious felicity and fear at hand, while as yet there is no substance of fact on which these phantoms of caprice can fix and feed? Over these fancies thought hovers, conceiving impossible projects, giving in the germ all the joys of love. Perhaps, indeed, all passion is contained in that thought-germ, as the beauty, and fragrance, and rich color of the flower is all packed in the seed.

M. de Nueil did not know that Mme. de Beauseant had taken refuge in Normandy, after a notoriety which women for the most part envy and condemn, especially when youth and beauty in some sort excuse the transgression. Any sort of celebrity bestows an inconceivable prestige. Apparently for women, as for families, the glory of the crime effaces the stain; and if such and such a noble house is proud of its tale of heads that have fallen on the scaffold, a young and pretty woman becomes more interesting for the dubious renown of a happy love or a scandalous desertion, and the more she is to be pitied, the more she excites our sympathies. We are only pitiless to the commonplace. If, moreover, we attract all eyes, we are to all intents and purposes great; how, indeed, are we to be seen unless we raise ourselves above other people's heads? The common herd of humanity feels an involuntary respect for any person who can rise above it, and is not over-particular as to the means by which they rise.

It may have been that some such motives influenced Gaston de Nueil at unawares, or perhaps it was curiosity, or a craving for some interest in his life, or, in a word, that crowd of inexplicable impulses which, for want of a better name, we are wont to call “fatality,” that drew him to Mme. de Beauseant.

The figure of the Vicomtesse de Beauseant rose up suddenly before him with gracious thronging associations. She was a new world for him, a world of fears and hopes, a world to fight for and to conquer. Inevitably he felt the contrast between this vision and the human beings in the shabby room; and then, in truth, she was a woman; what woman had he seen so far in this dull, little world, where calculation replaced thought and feeling, where courtesy was a cut-and-dried formality, and ideas of the very simplest were too alarming to be received or to pass current? The sound of Mme. de Beauseant's name revived a young man's dreams and wakened urgent desires that had lain dormant for a little.

Gaston de Nueil was absent-minded and preoccupied for the rest of the evening. He was pondering how he might gain access to Mme. de Beauseant, and truly it was no very easy matter. She was believed to be extremely clever. But if men and women of parts may be captivated by something subtle or eccentric, they are also exacting, and can read all that lies below the surface; and after the first step has been taken, the chances of failure and success in the difficult task of pleasing them are about even. In this particular case, moreover, the Vicomtesse, besides the pride of her position, had all the dignity of her name. Her utter seclusion was the least of the barriers raised between her and the world. For which reasons it was well-nigh impossible that a stranger, however well born, could hope for admittance; and yet, the next morning found M. de Nueil taking his walks abroad in the direction of Courcelles, a dupe of illusions natural at his age. Several times he made the circuit of the garden walls, looking earnestly through every gap at the closed shutters or open windows, hoping for some romantic chance, on which he founded schemes for introducing himself into this unknown lady's presence, without a thought of their impracticability. Morning after morning was spent in this way to mighty purpose; but with each day's walk, that vision of a woman living apart from the world, of love's martyr buried in solitude, loomed larger in his thoughts, and was enshrined in his soul. So

Gaston de Nueil walked under the walls of Courcelles, and some gardener's heavy footstep would set his heart beating high with hope.

He thought of writing to Mme. de Beauseant, but on mature consideration, what can you say to a woman whom you have never seen, a complete stranger? And Gaston had little self-confidence. Like most young persons with a plentiful crop of illusions still standing, he dreaded the mortifying contempt of silence more than death itself, and shuddered at the thought of sending his first tender epistle forth to face so many chances of being thrown on the fire. He was distracted by innumerable conflicting ideas. But by dint of inventing chimeras, weaving romances, and cudgeling his brains, he hit at last upon one of the hopeful stratagems that are sure to occur to your mind if you persevere long enough, a stratagem which must make clear to the most inexperienced woman that here was a man who took a fervent interest in her. The caprice of social conventions puts as many barriers between lovers as any Oriental imagination can devise in the most delightfully fantastic tale; indeed, the most extravagant pictures are seldom exaggerations. In real life, as in the fairy tales, the woman belongs to him who can reach her and set her free from the position in which she languishes. The poorest of calenders that ever fell in love with the daughter of the Khalif is in truth scarcely further from his lady than Gaston de Nueil from Mme. de Beauseant. The Vicomtesse knew absolutely nothing of M. de Nueil's wanderings round her house; Gaston de Nueil's love grew to the height of the obstacles to overleap; and the distance set between him and his extemporized lady-love produced the usual effect of distance, in lending enchantment.

One day, confident in his inspiration, he hoped everything from the love that must pour forth from his eyes. Spoken words, in his opinion, were more eloquent than the most passionate letter; and, besides, he would engage feminine curiosity to plead for him. He went, therefore, to M. de Champignelles, proposing to employ that gentleman for the better success of his enterprise. He informed the Marquis that he had been entrusted with a delicate and important commission which concerned the Vicomtesse de Beauseant, that he felt doubtful whether she would read a letter written in an unknown handwriting, or put confidence in a stranger. Would M. de Champignelles, on his next visit, ask the Vicomtesse if she would consent to receive him – Gaston de Nueil? While he asked the Marquis to keep his secret in case of a refusal, he very ingeniously insinuated sufficient reasons for his own admittance, to be duly passed on to the Vicomtesse. Was not M. de Champignelles a man of honor, a loyal gentleman incapable of lending himself to any transaction in bad taste, nay, the merest suspicion of bad taste! Love lends a young man all the self-possession and astute craft of an old ambassador; all the Marquis' harmless vanities were gratified, and the haughty grandee was completely duped. He tried hard to fathom Gaston's secret; but the latter, who would have been greatly perplexed to tell it, turned off M. de Champignelles' adroit questioning with a Norman's shrewdness, till the Marquis, as a gallant Frenchman, complimented his young visitor upon his discretion.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.