

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

CHRIST IN FLANDERS

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Honoré de Balzac

Christ in Flanders

DEDICATION

To Marcelline Desbordes-Valmore, a daughter of Flanders, of whom these modern days may well be proud, I dedicate this quaint legend of old Flanders.

DE BALZAC.

CHRIST IN FLANDERS

At a dimly remote period in the history of Brabant, communication between the Island of Cadzand and the Flemish coast was kept up by a boat which carried passengers from one shore to the other. Middelburg, the chief town in the island, destined to become so famous in the annals of Protestantism, at that time only numbered some two or three hundred hearths; and the prosperous town of Ostend was an obscure haven, a straggling village where pirates dwelt in security among the fishermen and the few poor merchants who lived in the place.

But though the town of Ostend consisted altogether of some score of houses and three hundred cottages, huts or hovels built of the driftwood of wrecked vessels, it nevertheless rejoiced in the possession of a governor, a garrison, a forked gibbet, a convent, and a burgomaster, in short, in all the institutions of an advanced civilization.

Who reigned over Brabant and Flanders in those days? On this point tradition is mute. Let us confess at once that this tale savors strongly of the marvelous, the mysterious, and the vague; elements which Flemish narrators have infused into a story retailed so often to gatherings of workers on winter evenings, that the details vary widely in poetic merit and incongruity of detail. It has been told by every generation, handed down by grandames at the fireside, narrated night and day, and the chronicle has

changed its complexion somewhat in every age. Like some great building that has suffered many modifications of successive generations of architects, some sombre weather-beaten pile, the delight of a poet, the story would drive the commentator and the industrious winnowing of words, facts, and dates to despair. The narrator believes in it, as all superstitious minds in Flanders likewise believe; and is not a whit wiser nor more credulous than his audience. But as it would be impossible to make a harmony of all the different renderings, here are the outlines of the story; stripped, it may be, of its picturesque quaintness, but with all its bold disregard of historical truth, and its moral teachings approved by religion – a myth, the blossom of imaginative fancy; an allegory that the wise may interpret to suit themselves. To each his own pasturage, and the task of separating the tares from the wheat.

The boat that served to carry passengers from the Island of Cadzand to Ostend was upon the point of departure; but before the skipper loosed the chain that secured the shallop to the little jetty, where people embarked, he blew a horn several times, to warn late lingerers, this being his last journey that day. Night was falling. It was scarcely possible to see the coast of Flanders by the dying fires of the sunset, or to make out upon the hither shore any forms of belated passengers hurrying along the wall of the dykes that surrounded the open country, or among the tall reeds of the marshes. The boat was full.

"What are you waiting for? Let us put off!" they cried.

Just at that moment a man appeared a few paces from the jetty, to the surprise of the skipper, who had heard no sound of footsteps. The traveler seemed to have sprung up from the earth, like a peasant who had laid himself down on the ground to wait till the boat should start, and had slept till the sound of the horn awakened him. Was he a thief? or some one belonging to the custom-house or the police?

As soon as the man appeared on the jetty to which the boat was moored, seven persons who were standing in the stern of the shallop hastened to sit down on the benches, so as to leave no room for the newcomer. It was the swift and instinctive working of the aristocratic spirit, an impulse of exclusiveness that comes from the rich man's heart. Four of the seven personages belonged to the most aristocratic families in Flanders. First among them was a young knight with two beautiful greyhounds; his long hair flowed from beneath a jeweled cap; he clanked his gilded spurs, curled the ends of his moustache from time to time with a swaggering grace, and looked round disdainfully on the rest of the crew. A high-born damsel, with a falcon on her wrist, only spoke with her mother or with a churchman of high rank, who was evidently a relation. All these persons made a great deal of noise, and talked among themselves as though there were no one else in the boat; yet close beside them sat a man of great importance in the district, a stout burgher of Bruges, wrapped about with a vast cloak. His servant, armed to the teeth, had set down a couple of bags filled with gold at his side. Next to the

burgher came a man of learning, a doctor of the University of Louvain, who was traveling with his clerk. This little group of folk, who looked contemptuously at each other, was separated from the passengers in the forward part of the boat by the bench of rowers.

The belated traveler glanced about him as he stepped on board, saw that there was no room for him in the stern, and went to the bows in quest of a seat. They were all poor people there. At first sight of the bareheaded man in the brown camlet coat and trunk-hose, and plain stiff linen collar, they noticed that he wore no ornaments, carried no cap nor bonnet in his hand, and had neither sword nor purse at his girdle, and one and all took him for a burgomaster sure of his authority, a worthy and kindly burgomaster like so many a Fleming of old times, whose homely features and characters have been immortalized by Flemish painters. The poorer passengers, therefore, received him with demonstrations of respect that provoked scornful tittering at the other end of the boat. An old soldier, inured to toil and hardship, gave up his place on the bench to the newcomer, and seated himself on the edge of the vessel, keeping his balance by planting his feet against one of those traverse beams, like the backbone of a fish, that hold the planks of a boat together. A young mother, who bore her baby in her arms, and seemed to belong to the working class in Ostend, moved aside to make room for the stranger. There was neither servility nor scorn in her manner of doing this; it was a simple sign of the goodwill by which the

poor, who know by long experience the value of a service and the warmth that fellowship brings, give expression to the open-heartedness and the natural impulses of their souls; so artlessly do they reveal their good qualities and their defects. The stranger thanked her by a gesture full of gracious dignity, and took his place between the young mother and the old soldier. Immediately behind him sat a peasant and his son, a boy ten years of age. A beggar woman, old, wrinkled, and clad in rags, was crouching, with her almost empty wallet, on a great coil of rope that lay in the prow. One of the rowers, an old sailor, who had known her in the days of her beauty and prosperity, had let her come in "for the love of God," in the beautiful phrase that the common people use.

"Thank you kindly, Thomas," the old woman had said. "I will say two *Paters* and two *Aves* for you in my prayers to-night."

The skipper blew his horn for the last time, looked along the silent shore, flung off the chain, ran along the side of the boat, and took up his position at the helm. He looked at the sky, and as soon as they were out in the open sea, he shouted to the men: "Pull away, pull with all your might! The sea is smiling at a squall, the witch! I can feel the swell by the way the rudder works, and the storm in my wounds."

The nautical phrases, unintelligible to ears unused to the sound of the sea, seemed to put fresh energy into the oars; they kept time together, the rhythm of the movement was still even and steady, but quite unlike the previous manner of rowing; it was as

if a cantering horse had broken into a gallop. The gay company seated in the stern amused themselves by watching the brawny arms, the tanned faces, and sparkling eyes of the rowers, the play of the tense muscles, the physical and mental forces that were being exerted to bring them for a trifling toll across the channel. So far from pitying the rowers' distress, they pointed out the men's faces to each other, and laughed at the grotesque expressions on the faces of the crew who were straining every muscle; but in the fore part of the boat the soldier, the peasant, and the old beggar woman watched the sailors with the sympathy naturally felt by toilers who live by the sweat of their brow and know the rough struggle, the strenuous excitement of effort. These folk, moreover, whose lives were spent in the open air, had all seen the warnings of danger in the sky, and their faces were grave. The young mother rocked her child, singing an old hymn of the Church for a lullaby.

"If we ever get there at all," the soldier remarked to the peasant, "it will be because the Almighty is bent on keeping us alive."

"Ah! He is the Master," said the old woman, "but I think it will be His good pleasure to take us to Himself. Just look at that light down there..." and she nodded her head as she spoke towards the sunset.

Streaks of fiery red glared from behind the masses of crimson-flushed brown cloud that seemed about to unloose a furious gale. There was a smothered murmur of the sea, a moaning sound

that seemed to come from the depths, a low warning growl, such as a dog gives when he only means mischief as yet. After all, Ostend was not far away. Perhaps painting, like poetry, could not prolong the existence of the picture presented by sea and sky at that moment beyond the time of its actual duration. Art demands vehement contrasts, wherefore artists usually seek out Nature's most striking effects, doubtless because they despair of rendering the great and glorious charm of her daily moods; yet the human soul is often stirred as deeply by her calm as by her emotion, and by silence as by storm.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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