HONORÉ DE BALZAC

THE EXILES

Honoré Balzac
The Exiles

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=25020651
The Exiles:

Содержание

Honoré de Balzac
The Exiles

ALMAE SORORI

In the year 1308 few houses were yet standing on the Island formed by the alluvium and sand deposited by the Seine above the Cite, behind the Church of Notre-Dame. The first man who was so bold as to build on this strand, then liable to frequent floods, was a constable of the watch of the City of Paris, who had been able to do some service to their Reverences the Chapter of the Cathedral; and in return the Bishop leased him twenty-five perches of land, with exemptions from all feudal dues or taxes on the buildings he might erect.

Seven years before the beginning of this narrative, Joseph Tirechair, one of the sternest of Paris constables, as his name (Tear Flesh) would indicate, had, thanks to his share of the fines collected by him for delinquencies committed within the precincts of the Cite, had been able to build a house on the bank of the Seine just at the end of the Rue du Port-Saint-Landry. To protect the merchandise landed on the strand, the municipality had constructed a sort of break-water of masonry, which may still be seen on some old plans of Paris, and which preserved the piles of the landing-place by meeting the rush of water and ice at

the upper end of the Island. The constable had taken advantage of this for the foundation of his house, so that there were several steps up to his door.

Like all the houses of that date, this cottage was crowned by a peaked roof, forming a gable-end to the front, or half a diamond. To the great regret of historians, but two or three examples of such roofs survive in Paris. A round opening gave light to a loft, where the constable's wife dried the linen of the Chapter, for she had the honor of washing for the Cathedral – which was certainly not a bad customer. On the first floor were two rooms, let to lodgers at a rent, one year with another, of forty sous *Parisis* each, an exorbitant sum, that was however justified by the luxury Tirechair had lavished on their adornment. Flanders tapestry hung on the walls, and a large bed with a top valance of green serge, like a peasant's bed, was amply furnished with mattresses, and covered with good sheets of fine linen. Each room had a stove called a *chauffe-doux*; the floor, carefully polished by Dame Tirechair's apprentices, shone like the woodwork of a shrine. Instead of stools, the lodgers had deep chairs of carved walnut, the spoils probably of some raided castle. Two chests with pewter mouldings, and tables on twisted legs, completed the fittings, worthy of the most fastidious knights-banneret whom business might bring to Paris.

The windows of those two rooms looked out on the river. From one you could only see the shores of the Seine, and the three barren islands, of which two were subsequently joined

together to form the Ile Saint-Louis; the third was the Ile de Louviers. From the other could be seen, down a vista of the Port-Saint-Landry, the buildings on the Greve, the Bridge of Notre-Dame, with its houses, and the tall towers of the Louvre, but lately built by Philippe-Auguste to overlook the then poor and squalid town of Paris, which suggests so many imaginary marvels to the fancy of modern romancers.

The ground floor of Tirechair's house consisted of a large hall, where his wife's business was carried on, through which the lodgers were obliged to pass on their way to their own rooms up a stairway like a mill-ladder. Behind this were a kitchen and a bedroom, with a view over the Seine. A tiny garden, reclaimed from the waters, displayed at the foot of this modest dwelling its beds of cabbages and onions, and a few rose-bushes, sheltered by palings, forming a sort of hedge. A little structure of lath and mud served as a kennel for a big dog, the indispensable guardian of so lonely a dwelling. Beyond this kennel was a little plot, where the hens cackled whose eggs were sold to the Canons. Here and there on this patch of earth, muddy or dry according to the whimsical Parisian weather, a few trees grew, constantly lashed by the wind, and teased and broken by the passer-by – willows, reeds, and tall grasses.

The Eyot, the Seine, the landing-place, the house, were all overshadowed on the west by the huge basilica of Notre-Dame casting its cold gloom over the whole plot as the sun moved. Then, as now, there was not in all Paris a more deserted spot, a

more solemn or more melancholy prospect. The noise of waters, the chanting of priests, or the piping of the wind, were the only sounds that disturbed this wilderness, where lovers would sometimes meet to discuss their secrets when the church-folds and clergy were safe in church at the services.

One evening in April in the year 1308, Tirechair came home in a remarkably bad temper. For three days past everything had been in good order on the King's highway. Now, as an officer of the peace, nothing annoyed him so much as to feel himself useless. He flung down his halbert in a rage, muttered inarticulate words as he pulled off his doublet, half red and half blue, and slipped on a shabby camlet jerkin. After helping himself from the bread-box to a hunch of bread, and spreading it with butter, he seated himself on a bench, looked round at his four whitewashed walls, counted the beams of the ceiling, made a mental inventory of the household goods hanging from the nails, scowled at the neatness which left him nothing to complain of, and looked at his wife, who said not a word as she ironed the albs and surplices from the sacristy.

"By my halidom," he said, to open the conversation, "I cannot think, Jacqueline, where you go to catch your apprenticed maids. Now, here is one," he went on, pointing to a girl who was folding an altar-cloth, clumsily enough, it must be owned, "who looks to me more like a damsel rather free of her person than a sturdy country wench. Her hands are as white as a fine lady's! By the Mass! and her hair smells of essences, I verily believe, and her

hose are as find as a queen's. By the two horns of Old Nick, matters please me but ill as I find them here."

The girl colored, and stole a look at Jacqueline, full of alarm not unmixed with pride. The mistress answered her glance with a smile, laid down her work, and turned to her husband.

"Come now," said she, in a sharp tone, "you need not harry me. Are you going to accuse me next of some underhand tricks? Patrol your roads as much as you please, but do not meddle here with anything but what concerns your sleeping in peace, drinking your wine, and eating what I set before you, or else, I warn you, I will have no more to do with keeping you healthy and happy. Let any one find me a happier man in all the town," she went on, with a scolding grimace. "He has silver in his purse, a gable over the Seine, a stout halbert on one hand, an honest wife on the other, a house as clean and smart as a new pin! And he growls like a pilgrim smarting from Saint Anthony's fire!"

"Hey day!" exclaimed the sergeant of the watch, "do you fancy, Jacqueline, that I have any wish to see my house razed down, my halbert given to another, and my wife standing in the pillory?"

Jacqueline and the dainty journeywoman turned pale.

"Just tell me what you are driving at," said the washerwoman sharply, "and make a clean breast of it. For some days, my man, I have observed that you have some maggot twisting in your poor brain. Come up, then, and have it all out. You must be a pretty coward indeed if you fear any harm when you have only

to guard the common council and live under the protection of the Chapter! Their Reverences the Canons would lay the whole bishopric under an interdict if Jacqueline brought a complaint of the smallest damage."

As she spoke, she went straight up to her husband and took him by the arm.

"Come with me," she added, pulling him up and out on to the steps.

When they were down by the water in their little garden, Jacqueline looked saucily in her husband's face.

"I would have you to know, you old gaby, that when my lady fair goes out, a piece of gold comes into our savings-box."

"Oh, ho!" said the constable, who stood silent and meditative before his wife. But he presently said, "Any way, we are done for. – What brings the dame to our house?"

"She comes to see the well-favored young clerk who lives overhead," replied Jacqueline, looking up at the window that opened on to the vast landscape of the Seine valley.

"The Devil's in it!" cried the man. "For a few base crowns you have ruined me, Jacqueline. Is that an honest trade for a sergeant's decent wife to ply? And, be she Countess or Baroness, the lady will not be able to get us out of the trap in which we shall find ourselves caught sooner or later. Shall we not have to square accounts with some puissant and offended husband? for, by the Mass, she is fair to look upon!"

"But she is a widow, I tell you, gray gander! How dare you

accuse your wife of foul play and folly? And the lady has never spoken a word to yon gentle clerk, she is content to look on him and think of him. Poor lad! he would be dead of starvation by now but for her, for she is as good as a mother to him. And he, the sweet cherub! it is as easy to cheat him as to rock a new-born babe. He believes his pence will last for ever, and he has eaten them through twice over in the past six months."

"Woman," said the sergeant, solemnly pointing to the Place de Greve, "do you remember seeing, even from this spot, the fire in which they burnt the Danish woman the other day?"

"What then?" said Jacqueline, in a fright.

"What then?" echoed Tirechair. "Why, the two men who lodge with us smell of scorching. Neither Chapter nor Countess or Protector can serve them. Here is Easter come round; the year is ending; we must turn our company out of doors, and that at once. Do you think you can teach an old constable how to know a gallows-bird? Our two lodgers were on terms with la Porette, that heretic jade from Denmark or Norway, whose last cries you heard from here. She was a brave witch; she never blenched at the stake, which was proof enough of her compact with the Devil. I saw her as plain as I see you; she preached to the throng, and declared she was in heaven and could see God.

"And since that, I tell you, I have never slept quietly in my bed. My lord, who lodges over us, is of a surety more of a wizard than a Christian. On my word as an officer, I shiver when that old man passes near me; he never sleeps of nights; if I wake, his

voice is ringing like a bourdon of bells, and I hear him muttering incantations in the language of hell. Have you ever seen him eat an honest crust of bread or a hearth-cake made by a good Catholic baker? His brown skin has been scorched and tanned by hell-fires. Marry, and I tell you his eyes hold a spell like that of serpents. Jacqueline, I will have none of those two men under my roof. I see too much of the law not to know that it is well to have nothing to do with it. – You must get rid of our two lodgers; the elder because I suspect him; the youngster, because he is too pretty. They neither of them seem to me to keep Christian company. The boy is ever staring at the moon, the stars, and the clouds, like a wizard watching for the hour when he shall mount his broomstick; the other old rogue certainly makes some use of the poor boy for his black art. My house stands too close to the river as it is, and that risk of ruin is bad enough without bringing down fire from heaven, or the love affairs of a countess. I have spoken. Do not rebel."

In spite of her sway in the house, Jacqueline stood stupefied as she listened to the edict fulminated against his lodgers by the sergeant of the watch. She mechanically looked up at the window of the room inhabited by the old man, and shivered with horror as she suddenly caught sight of the gloomy, melancholy face, and the piercing eye that so affected her husband, accustomed as he was to dealing with criminals.

At that period, great and small, priests and laymen, all trembled before the idea of any supernatural power. The word

"magic" was as powerful as leprosy to root up feelings, break social ties, and freeze piety in the most generous soul. It suddenly struck the constable's wife that she had never, in fact, seen either of her lodgers exercising any human function. Though the younger man's voice was as sweet and melodious as the tones of a flute, she so rarely heard it that she was tempted to think his silence the result of a spell. As she recalled the strange beauty of that pink-and-white face, and saw in memory the fine hair and moist brilliancy of those eyes, she believed that they were indeed the artifices of the Devil. She remembered that for days at a time she had never heard the slightest sound from either room. Where were the strangers during all those hours?

Suddenly the most singular circumstances recurred to her mind. She was completely overmastered by fear, and could even discern witchcraft in the rich lady's interest in the young Godefroid, a poor orphan who had come from Flanders to study at the University of Paris. She hastily put her hand into one of her pockets, pulled out four livres of Tournay in large silver coinage, and looked at the pieces with an expression of avarice mingled with terror.

"That, at any rate, is not false coin," said she, showing the silver to her husband. "Besides," she went on, "how can I turn them out after taking next year's rent paid in advance?"

"You had better inquire of the Dean of the Chapter," replied Tirechair. "Is not it his business to tell us how we should deal with these extraordinary persons?"

"Ay, truly extraordinary," cried Jacqueline. "To think of their cunning; coming here under the very shadow of Notre-Dame! Still," she went on, "or ever I ask the Dean, why not warn that fair and noble lady of the risk she runs?"

As she spoke, Jacqueline went into the house with her husband, who had not missed a mouthful. Tirechair, as a man grown old in the tricks of his trade, affected to believe that the strange lady was in fact a work-girl; still, this assumed indifference could not altogether cloak the timidity of a courtier who respects a royal incognity. At this moment six was striking by the clock of Saint-Denis du Pas, a small church that stood between Notre-Dame and the Port-Saint-Landry – the first church erected in Paris, on the very spot where Saint-Denis was laid on the gridiron, as chronicles tell. The hour flew from steeple to tower all over the city. Then suddenly confused shouts were heard on the left bank of the Seine, behind Notre-Dame, in the quarter where the schools of the University harbored their swarms.

At this signal, Jacqueline's elder lodger began to move about his room. The sergeant, his wife, and the strange lady listened while he opened and shut his door, and the old man's heavy step was heard on the steep stair. The constable's suspicions gave such interest to the advent of this personage, that the lady was startled as she observed the strange expression of the two countenances before her. Referring the terrors of this couple to the youth she was protecting – as was natural in a lover – the young lady

awaited, with some uneasiness, the event thus heralded by the fears of her so-called master and mistress.

The old man paused for a moment on the threshold to scrutinize the three persons in the room, and seemed to be looking for his young companion. This glance of inquiry, unsuspicious as it was, agitated the three. Indeed, nobody, not even the stoutest man, could deny that Nature had bestowed exceptional powers on this being, who seemed almost supernatural. Though his eyes were somewhat deeply shaded by the wide sockets fringed with long eyebrows, they were set, like a kite's eyes, in eyelids so broad, and bordered by so dark a circle sharply defined on his cheek, that they seemed rather prominent. These singular eyes had in them something indescribably domineering and piercing, which took possession of the soul by a grave and thoughtful look, a look as bright and lucid as that of a serpent or a bird, but which held one fascinated and crushed by the swift communication of some tremendous sorrow, or of some super-human power.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.