

**HONORÉ DE
BALZAC**

DOMESTIC PEACE

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Honoré de Balzac

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The incident recorded in this sketch took place towards the end of the month of November, 1809, the moment when Napoleon's fugitive empire attained the apogee of its splendor. The trumpet-blasts of Wagram were still sounding an echo in the heart of the Austrian monarchy. Peace was being signed between France and the Coalition. Kings and princes came to perform their orbits, like stars, round Napoleon, who gave himself the pleasure of dragging all Europe in his train – a magnificent experiment in the power he afterwards displayed at Dresden. Never, as contemporaries tell us, did Paris see entertainments more superb than those which preceded and followed the sovereign's marriage with an Austrian archduchess. Never, in the most splendid days of the Monarchy, had so many crowned heads thronged the shores of the Seine, never had the French aristocracy been so rich or so splendid. The diamonds lavishly scattered over the women's dresses, and the gold and silver embroidery on the uniforms contrasted so strongly with the penury of the Republic, that the wealth of the globe seemed to be rolling through the drawing-rooms of Paris. Intoxication seemed

to have turned the brains of this Empire of a day. All the military, not excepting their chief, reveled like parvenus in the treasure conquered for them by a million men with worsted epaulettes, whose demands were satisfied by a few yards of red ribbon.

At this time most women affected that lightness of conduct and facility of morals which distinguished the reign of Louis XV. Whether it were in imitation of the tone of the fallen monarchy, or because certain members of the Imperial family had set the example – as certain malcontents of the Faubourg Saint-Germain chose to say – it is certain that men and women alike flung themselves into a life of pleasure with an intrepidity which seemed to forbode the end of the world. But there was at that time another cause for such license. The infatuation of women for the military became a frenzy, and was too consonant to the Emperor's views for him to try to check it. The frequent calls to arms, which gave every treaty concluded between Napoleon and the rest of Europe the character of an armistice, left every passion open to a termination as sudden as the decisions of the Commander-in-chief of all these busbys, pelisses, and aiguillettes, which so fascinated the fair sex. Hearts were as nomadic as the regiments. Between the first and fifth bulletins from the *Grand Armee* a woman might be in succession mistress, wife, mother, and widow.

Was it the prospect of early widowhood, the hope of a jointure, or that of bearing a name promised to history, which made the soldiers so attractive? Were women drawn to them by

the certainty that the secret of their passions would be buried on the field of battle? or may we find the reason of this gentle fanaticism in the noble charm that courage has for a woman? Perhaps all these reasons, which the future historian of the manners of the Empire will no doubt amuse himself by weighing, counted for something in their facile readiness to abandon themselves to love intrigues. Be that as it may, it must here be confessed that at that time laurels hid many errors, women showed an ardent preference for the brave adventurers, whom they regarded as the true fount of honor, wealth, or pleasure; and in the eyes of young girls, an epaulette – the hieroglyphic of a future – signified happiness and liberty.

One feature, and a characteristic one, of this unique period in our history was an unbridled mania for everything glittering. Never were fireworks so much in vogue, never were diamonds so highly prized. The men, as greedy as the women of these translucent pebbles, displayed them no less lavishly. Possibly the necessity for carrying plunder in the most portable form made gems the fashion in the army. A man was not ridiculous then, as he would be now, if his shirt-frill or his fingers blazed with large diamonds. Murat, an Oriental by nature, set the example of preposterous luxury to modern soldiers.

The Comte de Gondreville, formerly known as Citizen Malin, whose elevation had made him famous, having become a Lucullus of the Conservative Senate, which “conserved” nothing, had postponed an entertainment in honor of the peace only that

he might the better pay his court to Napoleon by his efforts to eclipse those flatterers who had been before-hand with him. The ambassadors from all the Powers friendly with France, with an eye to favors to come, the most important personages of the Empire, and even a few princes, were at this hour assembled in the wealthy senator's drawing-rooms. Dancing flagged; every one was watching for the Emperor, whose presence the Count had promised his guests. And Napoleon would have kept his word but for the scene which had broken out that very evening between him and Josephine – the scene which portended the impending divorce of the august pair. The report of this incident, at the time kept very secret, but recorded by history, did not reach the ears of the courtiers, and had no effect on the gaiety of Comte de Gondreville's party beyond keeping Napoleon away.

The prettiest women in Paris, eager to be at the Count's on the strength of mere hearsay, at this moment were a besieging force of luxury, coquettishness, elegance, and beauty. The financial world, proud of its riches, challenged the splendor of the generals and high officials of the Empire, so recently gorged with orders, titles, and honors. These grand balls were always an opportunity seized upon by wealthy families for introducing their heiresses to Napoleon's Praetorian Guard, in the foolish hope of exchanging their splendid fortunes for uncertain favors. The women who believed themselves strong enough in their beauty alone came to test their power. There, as elsewhere, amusement was but a blind. Calm and smiling faces and placid brows covered sordid

interests, expressions of friendship were a lie, and more than one man was less distrustful of his enemies than of his friends.

These remarks are necessary to explain the incidents of the little imbroglio which is the subject of this study, and the picture, softened as it is, of the tone then dominant in Paris drawing-rooms.

“Turn your eyes a little towards the pedestal supporting that candelabrum – do you see a young lady with her hair drawn back *a la Chinoise!* – There, in the corner to the left; she has bluebells in the knot of chestnut curls which fall in clusters on her head. Do not you see her? She is so pale you might fancy she was ill, delicate-looking, and very small; there – now she is turning her head this way; her almond-shaped blue eyes, so delightfully soft, look as if they were made expressly for tears. Look, look! She is bending forward to see Madame de Vaudremont below the crowd of heads in constant motion; the high head-dresses prevent her having a clear view.”

“I see her now, my dear fellow. You had only to say that she had the whitest skin of all the women here; I should have known whom you meant. I had noticed her before; she has the loveliest complexion I ever admired. From hence I defy you to see against her throat the pearls between the sapphires of her necklace. But she is a prude or a coquette, for the tucker of her bodice scarcely lets one suspect the beauty of her bust. What shoulders! what lily-whiteness!”

“Who is she?” asked the first speaker.

“Ah! that I do not know.”

“Aristocrat! – Do you want to keep them all to yourself, Montcornet?”

“You of all men to banter me!” replied Montcornet, with a smile. “Do you think you have a right to insult a poor general like me because, being a happy rival of Soulanges, you cannot even turn on your heel without alarming Madame de Vaudremont? Or is it because I came only a month ago into the Promised Land? How insolent you can be, you men in office, who sit glued to your chairs while we are dodging shot and shell! Come, Monsieur le Maitre des Requetes, allow us to glean in the field of which you can only have precarious possession from the moment when we evacuate it. The deuce is in it! We have a right to live! My good friend, if you knew the German women, you would, I believe, do me a good turn with the Parisian you love best.”

“Well, General, since you have vouchsafed to turn your attention to that lady, whom I never saw till now, have the charity to tell me if you have seen her dance.”

“Why, my dear Martial, where have you dropped from? If you are ever sent with an embassy, I have small hopes of your success. Do not you see a triple rank of the most undaunted coquettes of Paris between her and the swarm of dancing men that buzz under the chandelier? And was it not only by the help of your eyeglass that you were able to discover her at all in the corner by that pillar, where she seems buried in the gloom, in spite of the candles blazing above her head? Between her and us there is such

a sparkle of diamonds and glances, so many floating plumes, such a flutter of lace, of flowers and curls, that it would be a real miracle if any dancer could detect her among those stars. Why, Martial, how is it that you have not understood her to be the wife of some sous-prefet from Lippe or Dyle, who has come to try to get her husband promoted?"

"Oh, he will be!" exclaimed the Master of Appeals quickly.

"I doubt it," replied the Colonel of Cuirassiers, laughing. "She seems as raw in intrigue as you are in diplomacy. I dare bet, Martial, that you do not know how she got into that place."

The lawyer looked at the Colonel of Cuirassiers with an expression as much of contempt as of curiosity.

"Well," proceeded Montcornet, "she arrived, I have no doubt, punctually at nine, the first of the company perhaps, and probably she greatly embarrassed the Comtesse de Gondreville, who cannot put two ideas together. Repulsed by the mistress of the house, routed from chair to chair by each newcomer, and driven into the darkness of this little corner, she allowed herself to be walled in, the victim of the jealousy of the other ladies, who would gladly have buried that dangerous beauty. She had, of course, no friend to encourage her to maintain the place she first held in the front rank; then each of those treacherous fair ones would have enjoined on the men of her circle on no account to take out our poor friend, under pain of the severest punishment. That, my dear fellow, is the way in which those sweet faces, in appearance so tender and so artless, would have formed a

coalition against the stranger, and that without a word beyond the question, "Tell me, dear, do you know that little woman in blue?" – Look here, Martial, if you care to run the gauntlet of more flattering glances and inviting questions than you will ever again meet in the whole of your life, just try to get through the triple rampart which defends that Queen of Dyle, or Lippe, or Charente. You will see whether the dullest woman of them all will not be equal to inventing some wile that would hinder the most determined man from bringing the plaintive stranger to the light. Does it not strike you that she looks like an elegy?"

"Do you think so, Montcornet? Then she must be a married woman?"

"Why not a widow?"

"She would be less passive," said the lawyer, laughing.

"She is perhaps the widow of a man who is gambling," replied the handsome Colonel.

"To be sure; since the peace there are so many widows of that class!" said Martial. "But my dear Montcornet, we are a couple of simpletons. That face is still too ingenuous, there is too much youth and freshness on the brow and temples for her to be married. What splendid flesh-tints! Nothing has sunk in the modeling of the nose. Lips, chin, everything in her face is as fresh as a white rosebud, though the expression is veiled, as it were, by the clouds of sadness. Who can it be that makes that young creature weep?"

"Women cry for so little," said the Colonel.

“I do not know,” replied Martial; “but she does not cry because she is left there without a partner; her grief is not of to-day. It is evident that she has beautified herself for this evening with intention. I would wager that she is in love already.”

“Bah! She is perhaps the daughter of some German princeling; no one talks to her,” said Montcornet.

“Dear! how unhappy a poor child may be!” Martial went on. “Can there be anything more graceful and refined than our little stranger? Well, not one of those furies who stand round her, and who believe that they can feel, will say a word to her. If she would but speak, we should see if she has fine teeth.

“Bless me, you boil over like milk at the least increase of temperature!” cried the Colonel, a little nettled at so soon finding a rival in his friend.

“What!” exclaimed the lawyer, without heeding the Colonel’s question. “Can nobody here tell us the name of this exotic flower?”

“Some lady companion!” said Montcornet.

“What next? A companion! wearing sapphires fit for a queen, and a dress of Malines lace? Tell that to the marines, General. You, too, would not shine in diplomacy if, in the course of your conjectures, you jump in a breath from a German princess to a lady companion.”

Montcornet stopped a man by taking his arm – a fat little man, whose iron-gray hair and clever eyes were to be seen at the lintel of every doorway, and who mingled unceremoniously with the

various groups which welcomed him respectfully.

“Gondreville, my friend,” said Montcornet, “who is that quite charming little woman sitting out there under that huge candelabrum?”

“The candelabrum? Ravrio’s work; Isabey made the design.”

“Oh, I recognized your lavishness and taste; but the lady?”

“Ah! I do not know. Some friend of my wife’s, no doubt.”

“Or your mistress, you old rascal.”

“No, on my honor. The Comtesse de Gondreville is the only person capable of inviting people whom no one knows.”

In spite of this very acrimonious comment, the fat little man’s lips did not lose the smile which the Colonel’s suggestion had brought to them. Montcornet returned to the lawyer, who had rejoined a neighboring group, intent on asking, but in vain, for information as to the fair unknown. He grasped Martial’s arm, and said in his ear:

“My dear Martial, mind what you are about. Madame de Vaudremont has been watching you for some minutes with ominous attentiveness; she is a woman who can guess by the mere movement of your lips what you say to me; our eyes have already told her too much; she has perceived and followed their direction, and I suspect that at this moment she is thinking even more than we are of the little blue lady.”

“That is too old a trick in warfare, my dear Montcornet! However, what do I care? Like the Emperor, when I have made a conquest, I keep it.”

“Martial, your fatuity cries out for a lesson. What! you, a civilian, and so lucky as to be the husband-designate of Madame de Vaudremont, a widow of two-and-twenty, burdened with four thousand napoleons a year – a woman who slips such a diamond as this on your finger,” he added, taking the lawyer’s left hand, which the young man complacently allowed; “and, to crown all, you affect the Lovelace, just as if you were a colonel and obliged to keep up the reputation of the military in home quarters! Fie, fie! Only think of all you may lose.”

“At any rate, I shall not lose my liberty,” replied Martial, with a forced laugh.

He cast a passionate glance at Madame de Vaudremont, who responded only by a smile of some uneasiness, for she had seen the Colonel examining the lawyer’s ring.

“Listen to me, Martial. If you flutter round my young stranger, I shall set to work to win Madame de Vaudremont.”

“You have my full permission, my dear Cuirassier, but you will not gain this much,” and the young Maitre des Requetes put his polished thumb-nail under an upper tooth with a little mocking click.

“Remember that I am unmarried,” said the Colonel; “that my sword is my whole fortune; and that such a challenge is setting Tantalus down to a banquet which he will devour.”

“Prrr.”

This defiant roll of consonants was the only reply to the Colonel’s declaration, as Martial looked him from head to foot

before turning away.

The fashion of the time required men to wear at a ball white kerseymere breeches and silk stockings. This pretty costume showed to great advantage the perfection of Montcornet's fine shape. He was five-and-thirty, and attracted attention by his stalwart height, insisted on for the Cuirassiers of the Imperial Guard whose handsome uniform enhanced the dignity of his figure, still youthful in spite of the stoutness occasioned by living on horseback. A black moustache emphasized the frank expression of a thoroughly soldierly countenance, with a broad, high forehead, an aquiline nose, and bright red lips. Montcornet's manner, stamped with a certain superiority due to the habit of command, might please a woman sensible enough not to aim at making a slave of her husband. The Colonel smiled as he looked at the lawyer, one of his favorite college friends, whose small figure made it necessary for Montcornet to look down a little as he answered his raillery with a friendly glance.

Baron Martial de la Roche-Hugon was a young Provençal patronized by Napoleon; his fate might probably be some splendid embassy. He had won the Emperor by his Italian suppleness and a genius for intrigue, a drawing-room eloquence, and a knowledge of manners, which are so good a substitute for the higher qualities of a sterling man. Through young and eager, his face had already acquired the rigid brilliancy of tinned iron, one of the indispensable characteristics of diplomatists, which allows them to conceal their emotions and disguise their

feelings, unless, indeed, this impassibility indicates an absence of all emotion and the death of every feeling. The heart of a diplomat may be regarded as an insoluble problem, for the three most illustrious ambassadors of the time have been distinguished by perdurable hatreds and most romantic attachments.

Martial, however, was one of those men who are capable of reckoning on the future in the midst of their intensest enjoyment; he had already learned to judge the world, and hid his ambition under the fatuity of a lady-killer, cloaking his talent under the commonplace of mediocrity as soon as he observed the rapid advancement of those men who gave the master little umbrage.

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