

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

AT THE SIGN OF THE CAT
AND RACKET

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Half-way down the Rue Saint-Denis, almost at the corner of the Rue du Petit-Lion, there stood formerly one of those delightful houses which enable historians to reconstruct old Paris by analogy. The threatening walls of this tumbledown abode seemed to have been decorated with hieroglyphics. For what other name could the passer-by give to the Xs and Vs which the horizontal or diagonal timbers traced on the front, outlined by little parallel cracks in the plaster? It was evident that every beam quivered in its mortices at the passing of the lightest vehicle. This venerable structure was crowned by a triangular roof of which no example will, ere long, be seen in Paris. This covering, warped by the extremes of the Paris climate, projected three feet over the roadway, as much to protect the threshold from the rainfall as to shelter the wall of a loft and its sill-less dormer-window. This upper story was built of planks, overlapping each other like

slates, in order, no doubt, not to overweight the frail house.

One rainy morning in the month of March, a young man, carefully wrapped in his cloak, stood under the awning of a shop opposite this old house, which he was studying with the enthusiasm of an antiquary. In point of fact, this relic of the civic life of the sixteenth century offered more than one problem to the consideration of an observer. Each story presented some singularity; on the first floor four tall, narrow windows, close together, were filled as to the lower panes with boards, so as to produce the doubtful light by which a clever salesman can ascribe to his goods the color his customers inquire for. The young man seemed very scornful of this part of the house; his eyes had not yet rested on it. The windows of the second floor, where the Venetian blinds were drawn up, revealing little dingy muslin curtains behind the large Bohemian glass panes, did not interest him either. His attention was attracted to the third floor, to the modest sash-frames of wood, so clumsily wrought that they might have found a place in the Museum of Arts and Crafts to illustrate the early efforts of French carpentry. These windows were glazed with small squares of glass so green that, but for his good eyes, the young man could not have seen the blue-checked cotton curtains which screened the mysteries of the room from profane eyes. Now and then the watcher, weary of his fruitless contemplation, or of the silence in which the house was buried, like the whole neighborhood, dropped his eyes towards the lower regions. An involuntary smile parted his lips each time he looked

at the shop, where, in fact, there were some laughable details.

A formidable wooden beam, resting on four pillars, which appeared to have bent under the weight of the decrepit house, had been encrusted with as many coats of different paint as there are of rouge on an old duchess' cheek. In the middle of this broad and fantastically carved joist there was an old painting representing a cat playing rackets. This picture was what moved the young man to mirth. But it must be said that the wittiest of modern painters could not invent so comical a caricature. The animal held in one of its forepaws a racket as big as itself, and stood on its hind legs to aim at hitting an enormous ball, returned by a man in a fine embroidered coat. Drawing, color, and accessories, all were treated in such a way as to suggest that the artist had meant to make game of the shop-owner and of the passing observer. Time, while impairing this artless painting, had made it yet more grotesque by introducing some uncertain features which must have puzzled the conscientious idler. For instance, the cat's tail had been eaten into in such a way that it might now have been taken for the figure of a spectator – so long, and thick, and furry were the tails of our forefathers' cats. To the right of the picture, on an azure field which ill-disguised the decay of the wood, might be read the name "Guillaume," and to the left, "Successor to Master Chevrel." Sun and rain had worn away most of the gilding parsimoniously applied to the letters of this superscription, in which the Us and Vs had changed places in obedience to the laws of old-world orthography.

To quench the pride of those who believe that the world is growing cleverer day by day, and that modern humbug surpasses everything, it may be observed that these signs, of which the origin seems so whimsical to many Paris merchants, are the dead pictures of once living pictures by which our roguish ancestors contrived to tempt customers into their houses. Thus the Spinning Sow, the Green Monkey, and others, were animals in cages whose skills astonished the passer-by, and whose accomplishments prove the patience of the fifteenth-century artisan. Such curiosities did more to enrich their fortunate owners than the signs of "Providence," "Good-faith," "Grace of God," and "Decapitation of John the Baptist," which may still be seen in the Rue Saint-Denis.

However, our stranger was certainly not standing there to admire the cat, which a minute's attention sufficed to stamp on his memory. The young man himself had his peculiarities. His cloak, folded after the manner of an antique drapery, showed a smart pair of shoes, all the more remarkable in the midst of the Paris mud, because he wore white silk stockings, on which the splashes betrayed his impatience. He had just come, no doubt, from a wedding or a ball; for at this early hour he had in his hand a pair of white gloves, and his black hair, now out of curl, and flowing over his shoulders, showed that it had been dressed *a la Caracalla*, a fashion introduced as much by David's school of painting as by the mania for Greek and Roman styles which characterized the early years of this century.

In spite of the noise made by a few market gardeners, who, being late, rattled past towards the great market-place at a gallop, the busy street lay in a stillness of which the magic charm is known only to those who have wandered through deserted Paris at the hours when its roar, hushed for a moment, rises and spreads in the distance like the great voice of the sea. This strange young man must have seemed as curious to the shopkeeping folk of the "Cat and Racket" as the "Cat and Racket" was to him. A dazzlingly white cravat made his anxious face look even paler than it really was. The fire that flashed in his black eyes, gloomy and sparkling by turns, was in harmony with the singular outline of his features, with his wide, flexible mouth, hardened into a smile. His forehead, knit with violent annoyance, had a stamp of doom. Is not the forehead the most prophetic feature of a man? When the stranger's brow expressed passion the furrows formed in it were terrible in their strength and energy; but when he recovered his calmness, so easily upset, it beamed with a luminous grace which gave great attractiveness to a countenance in which joy, grief, love, anger, or scorn blazed out so contagiously that the coldest man could not fail to be impressed.

He was so thoroughly vexed by the time when the dormer-window of the loft was suddenly flung open, that he did not observe the apparition of three laughing faces, pink and white and chubby, but as vulgar as the face of Commerce as it is seen in sculpture on certain monuments. These three faces, framed

by the window, recalled the puffy cherubs floating among the clouds that surround God the Father. The apprentices snuffed up the exhalations of the street with an eagerness that showed how hot and poisonous the atmosphere of their garret must be. After pointing to the singular sentinel, the most jovial, as he seemed, of the apprentices retired and came back holding an instrument whose hard metal pipe is now superseded by a leather tube; and they all grinned with mischief as they looked down on the loiterer, and sprinkled him with a fine white shower of which the scent proved that three chins had just been shaved. Standing on tiptoe, in the farthest corner of their loft, to enjoy their victim's rage, the lads ceased laughing on seeing the haughty indifference with which the young man shook his cloak, and the intense contempt expressed by his face as he glanced up at the empty window-frame.

At this moment a slender white hand threw up the lower half of one of the clumsy windows on the third floor by the aid of the sash runners, of which the pulley so often suddenly gives way and releases the heavy panes it ought to hold up. The watcher was then rewarded for his long waiting. The face of a young girl appeared, as fresh as one of the white cups that bloom on the bosom of the waters, crowned by a frill of tumbled muslin, which gave her head a look of exquisite innocence. Though wrapped in brown stuff, her neck and shoulders gleamed here and there through little openings left by her movements in sleep. No expression of embarrassment detracted from the candor of

her face, or the calm look of eyes immortalized long since in the sublime works of Raphael; here were the same grace, the same repose as in those Virgins, and now proverbial. There was a delightful contrast between the cheeks of that face on which sleep had, as it were, given high relief to a superabundance of life, and the antiquity of the heavy window with its clumsy shape and black sill. Like those day-blowing flowers, which in the early morning have not yet unfurled their cups, twisted by the chills of night, the girl, as yet hardly awake, let her blue eyes wander beyond the neighboring roofs to look at the sky; then, from habit, she cast them down on the gloomy depths of the street, where they immediately met those of her adorer. Vanity, no doubt, distressed her at being seen in undress; she started back, the worn pulley gave way, and the sash fell with the rapid run, which in our day has earned for this artless invention of our forefathers an odious name, *Fenetre a la Guillotine*. The vision had disappeared. To the young man the most radiant star of morning seemed to be hidden by a cloud.

During these little incidents the heavy inside shutters that protected the slight windows of the shop of the "Cat and Racket" had been removed as if by magic. The old door with its knocker was opened back against the wall of the entry by a man-servant, apparently coeval with the sign, who, with a shaking hand, hung upon it a square of cloth, on which were embroidered in yellow silk the words: "Guillaume, successor to Chevrel." Many a passer-by would have found it difficult to guess the class of

trade carried on by Monsieur Guillaume. Between the strong iron bars which protected his shop windows on the outside, certain packages, wrapped in brown linen, were hardly visible, though as numerous as herrings swimming in a shoal. Notwithstanding the primitive aspect of the Gothic front, Monsieur Guillaume, of all the merchant clothiers in Paris, was the one whose stores were always the best provided, whose connections were the most extensive, and whose commercial honesty never lay under the slightest suspicion. If some of his brethren in business made a contract with the Government, and had not the required quantity of cloth, he was always ready to deliver it, however large the number of pieces tendered for. The wily dealer knew a thousand ways of extracting the largest profits without being obliged, like them, to court patrons, cringing to them, or making them costly presents. When his fellow-tradesmen could only pay in good bills of long date, he would mention his notary as an accommodating man, and managed to get a second profit out of the bargain, thanks to this arrangement, which had made it a proverb among the traders of the Rue Saint-Denis: "Heaven preserve you from Monsieur Guillaume's notary!" to signify a heavy discount.

The old merchant was to be seen standing on the threshold of his shop, as if by a miracle, the instant the servant withdrew. Monsieur Guillaume looked at the Rue Saint-Denis, at the neighboring shops, and at the weather, like a man disembarking at Havre, and seeing France once more after a long voyage. Having convinced himself that nothing had changed while he

was asleep, he presently perceived the stranger on guard, and he, on his part, gazed at the patriarchal draper as Humboldt may have scrutinized the first electric eel he saw in America. Monsieur Guillaume wore loose black velvet breeches, pepper-and-salt stockings, and square toed shoes with silver buckles. His coat, with square-cut fronts, square-cut tails, and square-cut collar clothed his slightly bent figure in greenish cloth, finished with white metal buttons, tawny from wear. His gray hair was so accurately combed and flattened over his yellow pate that it made it look like a furrowed field. His little green eyes, that might have been pierced with a gimlet, flashed beneath arches faintly tinged with red in the place of eyebrows. Anxieties had wrinkled his forehead with as many horizontal lines as there were creases in his coat. This colorless face expressed patience, commercial shrewdness, and the sort of wily cupidity which is needful in business. At that time these old families were less rare than they are now, in which the characteristic habits and costume of their calling, surviving in the midst of more recent civilization, were preserved as cherished traditions, like the antediluvian remains found by Cuvier in the quarries.

The head of the Guillaume family was a notable upholder of ancient practices; he might be heard to regret the Provost of Merchants, and never did he mention a decision of the Tribunal of Commerce without calling it the *Sentence of the Consuls*. Up and dressed the first of the household, in obedience, no doubt, to these old customs, he stood sternly awaiting the appearance of

his three assistants, ready to scold them in case they were late. These young disciples of Mercury knew nothing more terrible than the wordless assiduity with which the master scrutinized their faces and their movements on Monday in search of evidence or traces of their pranks. But at this moment the old clothier paid no heed to his apprentices; he was absorbed in trying to divine the motive of the anxious looks which the young man in silk stockings and a cloak cast alternately at his signboard and into the depths of his shop. The daylight was now brighter, and enabled the stranger to discern the cashier's corner enclosed by a railing and screened by old green silk curtains, where were kept the immense ledgers, the silent oracles of the house. The too inquisitive gazer seemed to covet this little nook, and to be taking the plan of a dining-room at one side, lighted by a skylight, whence the family at meals could easily see the smallest incident that might occur at the shop-door. So much affection for his dwelling seemed suspicious to a trader who had lived long enough to remember the law of maximum prices; Monsieur Guillaume naturally thought that this sinister personage had an eye to the till of the Cat and Racket. After quietly observing the mute duel which was going on between his master and the stranger, the eldest of the apprentices, having seen that the young man was stealthily watching the windows of the third floor, ventured to place himself on the stone flag where Monsieur Guillaume was standing. He took two steps out into the street, raised his head, and fancied that he caught sight of Mademoiselle Augustine

Guillaume in hasty retreat. The draper, annoyed by his assistant's perspicacity, shot a side glance at him; but the draper and his amorous apprentice were suddenly relieved from the fears which the young man's presence had excited in their minds. He hailed a hackney cab on its way to a neighboring stand, and jumped into it with an air of affected indifference. This departure was a balm to the hearts of the other two lads, who had been somewhat uneasy as to meeting the victim of their practical joke.

"Well, gentlemen, what ails you that you are standing there with your arms folded?" said Monsieur Guillaume to his three neophytes. "In former days, bless you, when I was in Master Chevrel's service, I should have overhauled more than two pieces of cloth by this time."

"Then it was daylight earlier," said the second assistant, whose duty this was.

The old shopkeeper could not help smiling. Though two of these young fellows, who were confided to his care by their fathers, rich manufacturers at Louviers and at Sedan, had only to ask and to have a hundred thousand francs the day when they were old enough to settle in life, Guillaume regarded it as his duty to keep them under the rod of an old-world despotism, unknown nowadays in the showy modern shops, where the apprentices expect to be rich men at thirty. He made them work like Negroes. These three assistants were equal to a business which would harry ten such clerks as those whose sybaritical tastes now swell the columns of the budget. Not a sound disturbed the peace of this

solemn house, where the hinges were always oiled, and where the meanest article of furniture showed the respectable cleanliness which reveals strict order and economy. The most waggish of the three youths often amused himself by writing the date of its first appearance on the Gruyere cheese which was left to their tender mercies at breakfast, and which it was their pleasure to leave untouched. This bit of mischief, and a few others of the same stamp, would sometimes bring a smile on the face of the younger of Guillaume's daughters, the pretty maiden who has just now appeared to the bewitched man in the street.

Though each of these apprentices, even the eldest, paid a round sum for his board, not one of them would have been bold enough to remain at the master's table when dessert was served. When Madame Guillaume talked of dressing the salad, the hapless youths trembled as they thought of the thrift with which her prudent hand dispensed the oil. They could never think of spending a night away from the house without having given, long before, a plausible reason for such an irregularity. Every Sunday, each in his turn, two of them accompanied the Guillaume family to Mass at Saint-Leu, and to vespers. Mesdemoiselles Virginie and Augustine, simply attired in cotton print, each took the arm of an apprentice and walked in front, under the piercing eye of their mother, who closed the little family procession with her husband, accustomed by her to carry two large prayer-books, bound in black morocco. The second apprentice received no salary. As for the eldest, whose twelve years of perseverance

and discretion had initiated him into the secrets of the house, he was paid eight hundred francs a year as the reward of his labors. On certain family festivals he received as a gratuity some little gift, to which Madame Guillaume's dry and wrinkled hand alone gave value – netted purses, which she took care to stuff with cotton wool, to show off the fancy stitches, braces of the strongest make, or heavy silk stockings. Sometimes, but rarely, this prime minister was admitted to share the pleasures of the family when they went into the country, or when, after waiting for months, they made up their mind to exert the right acquired by taking a box at the theatre to command a piece which Paris had already forgotten.

As to the other assistants, the barrier of respect which formerly divided a master draper from his apprentices was that they would have been more likely to steal a piece of cloth than to infringe this time-honored etiquette. Such reserve may now appear ridiculous; but these old houses were a school of honesty and sound morals. The masters adopted their apprentices. The young man's linen was cared for, mended, and often replaced by the mistress of the house. If an apprentice fell ill, he was the object of truly maternal attention. In a case of danger the master lavished his money in calling in the most celebrated physicians, for he was not answerable to their parents merely for the good conduct and training of the lads. If one of them, whose character was unimpeachable, suffered misfortune, these old tradesmen knew how to value the intelligence he had displayed, and they did

not hesitate to entrust the happiness of their daughters to men whom they had long trusted with their fortunes. Guillaume was one of these men of the old school, and if he had their ridiculous side, he had all their good qualities; and Joseph Lebas, the chief assistant, an orphan without any fortune, was in his mind destined to be the husband of Virginie, his elder daughter. But Joseph did not share the symmetrical ideas of his master, who would not for an empire have given his second daughter in marriage before the elder. The unhappy assistant felt that his heart was wholly given to Mademoiselle Augustine, the younger. In order to justify this passion, which had grown up in secret, it is necessary to inquire a little further into the springs of the absolute government which ruled the old cloth-merchant's household.

Guillaume had two daughters. The elder, Mademoiselle Virginie, was the very image of her mother. Madame Guillaume, daughter of the Sieur Chevrel, sat so upright in the stool behind her desk, that more than once she had heard some wag bet that she was a stuffed figure. Her long, thin face betrayed exaggerated piety. Devoid of attractions or of amiable manners, Madame Guillaume commonly decorated her head – that of a woman near on sixty – with a cap of a particular and unvarying shape, with long lappets, like that of a widow. In all the neighborhood she was known as the “portress nun.” Her speech was curt, and her movements had the stiff precision of a semaphore. Her eye, with a gleam in it like a cat's, seemed to spite the world because she was so ugly. Mademoiselle Virginie, brought up,

like her younger sister, under the domestic rule of her mother, had reached the age of eight-and-twenty. Youth mitigated the graceless effect which her likeness to her mother sometimes gave to her features, but maternal austerity had endowed her with two great qualities which made up for everything. She was patient and gentle. Mademoiselle Augustine, who was but just eighteen, was not like either her father or her mother. She was one of those daughters whose total absence of any physical affinity with their parents makes one believe in the adage: "God gives children." Augustine was little, or, to describe her more truly, delicately made. Full of gracious candor, a man of the world could have found no fault in the charming girl beyond a certain meanness of gesture or vulgarity of attitude, and sometimes a want of ease. Her silent and placid face was full of the transient melancholy which comes over all young girls who are too weak to dare to resist their mother's will.

The two sisters, always plainly dressed, could not gratify the innate vanity of womanhood but by a luxury of cleanliness which became them wonderfully, and made them harmonize with the polished counters and the shining shelves, on which the old man-servant never left a speck of dust, and with the old-world simplicity of all they saw about them. As their style of living compelled them to find the elements of happiness in persistent work, Augustine and Virginie had hitherto always satisfied their mother, who secretly prided herself on the perfect characters of her two daughters. It is easy to imagine the results of the training

they had received. Brought up to a commercial life, accustomed to hear nothing but dreary arguments and calculations about trade, having studied nothing but grammar, book-keeping, a little Bible-history, and the history of France in Le Ragois, and never reading any book but what their mother would sanction, their ideas had not acquired much scope. They knew perfectly how to keep house; they were familiar with the prices of things; they understood the difficulty of amassing money; they were economical, and had a great respect for the qualities that make a man of business. Although their father was rich, they were as skilled in darning as in embroidery; their mother often talked of having them taught to cook, so that they might know how to order a dinner and scold a cook with due knowledge. They knew nothing of the pleasures of the world; and, seeing how their parents spent their exemplary lives, they very rarely suffered their eyes to wander beyond the walls of their hereditary home, which to their mother was the whole universe. The meetings to which family anniversaries gave rise filled in the future of earthly joy to them.

When the great drawing-room on the second floor was to be prepared to receive company – Madame Roguin, a Demoiselle Chevrel, fifteen months younger than her cousin, and bedecked with diamonds; young Roubourdin, employed in the Finance Office; Monsieur Cesar Birotteau, the rich perfumer, and his wife, known as Madame Cesar; Monsieur Camusot, the richest silk mercer in the Rue des Bourdonnais, with his father-in-

law, Monsieur Cardot, two or three old bankers, and some immaculate ladies – the arrangements, made necessary by the way in which everything was packed away – the plate, the Dresden china, the candlesticks, and the glass – made a variety in the monotonous lives of the three women, who came and went and exerted themselves as nuns would to receive their bishop. Then, in the evening, when all three were tired out with having wiped, rubbed, unpacked, and arranged all the gauds of the festival, as the girls helped their mother to undress, Madame Guillaume would say to them, “Children, we have done nothing today.”

When, on very great occasions, “the portress nun” allowed dancing, restricting the games of boston, whist, and backgammon within the limits of her bedroom, such a concession was accounted as the most unhopd felicity, and made them happier than going to the great balls, to two or three of which Guillaume would take the girls at the time of the Carnival.

And once a year the worthy draper gave an entertainment, when he spared no expense. However rich and fashionable the persons invited might be, they were careful not to be absent; for the most important houses on the exchange had recourse to the immense credit, the fortune, or the time-honored experience of Monsieur Guillaume. Still, the excellent merchant’s daughters did not benefit as much as might be supposed by the lessons the world has to offer to young spirits. At these parties, which were

indeed set down in the ledger to the credit of the house, they wore dresses the shabbiness of which made them blush. Their style of dancing was not in any way remarkable, and their mother's surveillance did not allow of their holding any conversation with their partners beyond Yes and No. Also, the law of the old sign of the Cat and Racket commanded that they should be home by eleven o'clock, the hour when balls and fetes begin to be lively. Thus their pleasures, which seemed to conform very fairly to their father's position, were often made insipid by circumstances which were part of the family habits and principles.

As to their usual life, one remark will sufficiently paint it. Madame Guillaume required her daughters to be dressed very early in the morning, to come down every day at the same hour, and she ordered their employments with monastic regularity. Augustine, however, had been gifted by chance with a spirit lofty enough to feel the emptiness of such a life. Her blue eyes would sometimes be raised as if to pierce the depths of that gloomy staircase and those damp store-rooms. After sounding the profound cloistral silence, she seemed to be listening to remote, inarticulate revelations of the life of passion, which accounts feelings as of higher value than things. And at such moments her cheek would flush, her idle hands would lay the muslin sewing on the polished oak counter, and presently her mother would say in a voice, of which even the softest tones were sour, "Augustine, my treasure, what are you thinking about?" It is possible that two romances discovered by

Augustine in the cupboard of a cook Madame Guillaume had lately discharged —*Hippolyte Comte de Douglas* and *Le Comte de Comminges*— may have contributed to develop the ideas of the young girl, who had devoured them in secret, during the long nights of the past winter.

And so Augustine's expression of vague longing, her gentle voice, her jasmine skin, and her blue eyes had lighted in poor Lebas' soul a flame as ardent as it was reverent. From an easily understood caprice, Augustine felt no affection for the orphan; perhaps she did not know that he loved her. On the other hand, the senior apprentice, with his long legs, his chestnut hair, his big hands and powerful frame, had found a secret admirer in Mademoiselle Virginie, who, in spite of her dower of fifty thousand crowns, had as yet no suitor. Nothing could be more natural than these two passions at cross-purposes, born in the silence of the dingy shop, as violets bloom in the depths of a wood. The mute and constant looks which made the young people's eyes meet by sheer need of change in the midst of persistent work and cloistered peace, was sure, sooner or later, to give rise to feelings of love. The habit of seeing always the same face leads insensibly to our reading there the qualities of the soul, and at last effaces all its defects.

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