

**HONORÉ DE
BALZAC**

THE RECRUIT

Honoré Balzac

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DEDICATION

To my dear Albert Marchand de la

Ribellerie

At times they saw him, by a phenomenon of vision or locomotion,

abolish space in its two forms of Time and Distance; the former

being intellectual space, the other physical space.

Intellectual History of Louis Lambert.

On an evening in the month of November, 1793, the principal persons of Carentan were assembled in the salon of Madame de Dey, where they met daily. Several circumstances which would never have attracted attention in a large town, though they greatly preoccupied the little one, gave to this habitual rendezvous an unusual interest. For the two preceding evenings Madame de Dey

had closed her doors to the little company, on the ground that she was ill. Such an event would, in ordinary times, have produced as much effect as the closing of the theatres in Paris; life under those circumstances seems merely incomplete. But in 1793, Madame de Dey's action was likely to have fatal results. The slightest departure from a usual custom became, almost invariably for the nobles, a matter of life or death. To fully understand the eager curiosity and searching inquiry which animated on this occasion the Norman countenances of all these rejected visitors, but more especially to enter into Madame de Dey's secret anxieties, it is necessary to explain the role she played at Carentan. The critical position in which she stood at this moment being that of many others during the Revolution the sympathies and recollections of more than one reader will help to give color to this narrative.

Madame de Dey, widow of a lieutenant-general, chevalier of the Orders, had left the court at the time of the emigration. Possessing a good deal of property in the neighborhood of Carentan, she took refuge in that town, hoping that the influence of the Terror would be little felt there. This expectation, based on a knowledge of the region, was well-founded. The Revolution committed but few ravages in Lower Normandy. Though Madame de Dey had known none but the nobles of her own caste when she visited her property in former years, she now felt it advisable to open her house to the principle bourgeois of the town, and to the new governmental authorities; trying to make them pleased at obtaining her society, without

arousing either hatred or jealousy. Gracious and kind, gifted by nature with that inexpressible charm which can please without having recourse to subserviency or to making overtures, she succeeded in winning general esteem by an exquisite tact; the sensitive warnings of which enabled her to follow the delicate line along which she might satisfy the exactions of this mixed society, without humiliating the touchy pride of the parvenus, or shocking that of her own friends.

Then about thirty-eight years of age, she still preserved, not the fresh plump beauty which distinguishes the daughters of Lower Normandy, but a fragile and, so to speak, aristocratic beauty. Her features were delicate and refined, her figure supple and easy. When she spoke, her pale face lighted and seemed to acquire fresh life. Her large dark eyes were full of affability and kindness, and yet their calm, religious expression seemed to say that the springs of her existence were no longer in her.

Married in the flower of her age to an old and jealous soldier, the falseness of her position in the midst of a court noted for its gallantry contributed much, no doubt, to draw a veil of melancholy over a face where the charms and the vivacity of love must have shone in earlier days. Obligated to repress the naive impulses and emotions of a woman when she simply feels them instead of reflecting about them, passion was still virgin in the depths of her heart. Her principal attraction came, in fact, from this innate youth, which sometimes, however, played her false, and gave to her ideas an innocent expression of desire.

Her manner and appearance commanded respect, but there was always in her bearing, in her voice, a sort of looking forward to some unknown future, as in girlhood. The most insensible man would find himself in love with her, and yet be restrained by a sort of respectful fear, inspired by her courtly and polished manners. Her soul, naturally noble, but strengthened by cruel trials, was far indeed from the common run, and men did justice to it. Such a soul necessarily required a lofty passion; and the affections of Madame de Dey were concentrated on a single sentiment, – that of motherhood. The happiness and pleasure of which her married life was deprived, she found in the passionate love she bore her son. She loved him not only with the pure and deep devotion of a mother, but with the coquetry of a mistress, and the jealousy of a wife. She was miserable away from him, uneasy at his absence, could never see him enough, and loved only through him and for him. To make men understand the strength of this feeling, it suffices to add that the son was not only the sole child of Madame de Dey, but also her last relation, the only being in the world to whom the fears and hopes and joys of her life could be naturally attached.

The late Comte de Dey was the last surviving scion of his family, and she herself was the sole heiress of her own. Human interests and projects combined, therefore, with the noblest deeds of the soul to exalt in this mother's heart a sentiment that is always so strong in the hearts of women. She had brought up this son with the utmost difficulty, and with infinite pains, which

rendered the youth still dearer to her; a score of times the doctors had predicted his death, but, confident in her own presentiments, her own unfailing hope, she had the happiness of seeing him come safely through the perils of childhood, with a constitution that was ever improving, in spite of the warnings of the Faculty.

Thanks to her constant care, this son had grown and developed so much, and so gracefully, that at twenty years of age, he was thought a most elegant cavalier at Versailles. Madame de Dey possessed a happiness which does not always crown the efforts and struggles of a mother. Her son adored her; their souls understood each other with fraternal sympathy. If they had not been bound by nature's ties, they would instinctively have felt for each other that friendship of man to man, which is so rarely to be met in this life. Appointed sub-lieutenant of dragoons, at the age of eighteen, the young Comte de Dey had obeyed the point of honor of the period by following the princes of the blood in their emigration.

Thus Madame de Dey, noble, rich, and the mother of an emigre, could not be unaware of the dangers of her cruel situation. Having no other desire than to preserve a fortune for her son, she renounced the happiness of emigrating with him; and when she read the vigorous laws by virtue of which the Republic daily confiscated the property of emigres, she congratulated herself on that act of courage; was she not guarding the property of her son at the peril of her life? And when she heard of the terrible executions ordered by the Convention, she slept in peace,

knowing that her sole treasure was in safety, far from danger, far from scaffolds. She took pleasure in believing that they had each chosen the wisest course, a course which would save to *him* both life and fortune.

With this secret comfort in her mind, she was ready to make all the concessions required by those evil days, and without sacrificing either her dignity as a woman, or her aristocratic beliefs, she conciliated the good-will of those about her. Madame de Dey had fully understood the difficulties that awaited her on coming to Carentan. To seek to occupy a leading position would be daily defiance to the scaffold; yet she pursued her even way. Sustained by her motherly courage, she won the affections of the poor by comforting indiscriminately all miseries, and she made herself necessary to the rich by assisting their pleasures. She received the procureur of the commune, the mayor, the judge of the district court, the public prosecutor, and even the judges of the revolutionary tribunal.

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