

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

ADIEU

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Adieu

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Honoré de Balzac

Adieu

DEDICATION

To Prince Frederic Schwartzburg

CHAPTER I. AN OLD MONASTERY

“Come, deputy of the Centre, forward! Quick step! march! if we want to be in time to dine with the others. Jump, marquis! there, that’s right! why, you can skip across a stubble-field like a deer!”

These words were said by a huntsman peacefully seated at the edge of the forest of Ile-Adam, who was finishing an Havana cigar while waiting for his companion, who had lost his way in the tangled underbrush of the wood. At his side four panting dogs were watching, as he did, the personage he addressed. To understand how sarcastic were these exhortations, repeated at intervals, we should state that the approaching huntsman was a stout little man whose protuberant stomach was the evidence of a truly ministerial “embonpoint.” He was struggling painfully across the furrows of a vast wheat-field recently harvested, the stubble of which considerably impeded him; while to add to his other miseries the sun’s rays, striking obliquely on his face, collected an abundance of drops of perspiration. Absorbed in the effort to maintain his equilibrium, he leaned, now forward, now back, in close imitation of the pitching of a carriage when violently jolted. The weather looked threatening. Though several spaces of blue sky still parted the thick black clouds toward the horizon, a flock of fleecy vapors were advancing with great rapidity and drawing a light gray curtain from east to west. As the wind was acting only on the upper region of the air, the atmosphere below it pressed down the hot vapors of the earth. Surrounded by masses of tall trees, the valley through which the hunter struggled felt like a furnace. Parched and silent, the forest seemed thirsty. The birds, even the insects, were voiceless; the tree-tops scarcely waved. Those persons who may still remember the summer of 1819 can imagine the woes of the poor deputy, who was struggling along, drenched in sweat, to regain his mocking friend. The latter, while smoking his cigar, had calculated from the position of the sun that it must be about five in the afternoon.

“Where the devil are we?” said the stout huntsman, mopping his forehead and leaning against the trunk of a tree nearly opposite to his companion, for he felt unequal to the effort of leaping the ditch between them.

“That’s for me to ask you,” said the other, laughing, as he lay among the tall brown brake which crowned the bank. Then, throwing the end of his cigar into the ditch, he cried out vehemently: “I swear by Saint Hubert that never again will I trust myself in unknown territory with a statesman, though he be, like you, my dear d’Albon, a college mate.”

“But, Philippe, have you forgotten your French? Or have you left your wits in Siberia?” replied the stout man, casting a sorrowfully comic look at a sign-post about a hundred feet away.

“True, true,” cried Philippe, seizing his gun and springing with a bound into the field and thence to the post. “This way, d’Albon, this way,” he called back to his friend, pointing to a broad paved path and reading aloud the sign: “‘From Baillet to Ile-Adam.’ We shall certainly find the path to Cassan, which must branch from this one between here and Ile-Adam.”

“You are right, colonel,” said Monsieur d’Albon, replacing upon his head the cap with which he had been fanning himself.

“Forward then, my respectable privy councillor,” replied Colonel Philippe, whistling to the dogs, who seemed more willing to obey him than the public functionary to whom they belonged.

“Are you aware, marquis,” said the jeering soldier, “that we still have six miles to go? That village over there must be Baillet.”

“Good heavens!” cried the marquis, “go to Cassan if you must, but you’ll go alone. I prefer to stay here, in spite of the coming storm, and wait for the horse you can send me from the chateau. You’ve played me a trick, Sucey. We were to have had a nice little hunt not far from Cassan, and beaten the coverts I know. Instead of that, you have kept me running like a hare since four o’clock this morning, and all I’ve had for breakfast is a cup of milk. Now, if you ever have a petition before the Court, I’ll make you lose it, however just your claim.”

The poor discouraged huntsman sat down on a stone that supported the signpost, relieved himself of his gun and his gamebag, and heaved a long sigh.

“France! such are thy deputies!” exclaimed Colonel de Sucey, laughing. “Ah! my poor d’Albon, if you had been like me six years in the wilds of Siberia – ”

He said no more, but he raised his eyes to heaven as if that anguish were between himself and God.

“Come, march on!” he added. “If you sit still you are lost.”

“How can I, Philippe? It is an old magisterial habit to sit still. On my honor! I’m tired out – If I had only killed a hare!”

The two men presented a rather rare contrast: the public functionary was forty-two years of age and seemed no more than thirty, whereas the soldier was thirty, and seemed forty at the least. Both wore the red rosette of the officers of the Legion of honor. A few spare locks of black hair mixed with white, like the wing of a magpie, escaped from the colonel’s cap, while handsome brown curls adorned the brow of the statesman. One was tall, gallant, high-strung, and the lines of his pallid face showed terrible passions or frightful griefs. The other had a face that was brilliant with health, and jovially worth of an epicurean. Both were deeply sun-burned, and their high gaiters of tanned leather showed signs of the bogs and the thickets they had just come through.

“Come,” said Monsieur de Sucey, “let us get on. A short hour’s march, and we shall reach Cassan in time for a good dinner.”

“It is easy to see you have never loved,” replied the councillor, with a look that was pitifully comic; “you are as relentless as article 304 of the penal code.”

Philippe de Sucey quivered; his broad brow contracted; his face became as sombre as the skies above them. Some memory of awful bitterness distorted for a moment his features, but he said nothing. Like all strong men, he drove down his emotions to the depths of his heart; thinking perhaps, as simple characters are apt to think, that there was something immodest in unveiling griefs when human language cannot render their depths and may only rouse the mockery of those who do not comprehend them. Monsieur d’Albon had one of those delicate natures which divine sorrows, and are instantly sympathetic to the emotion they have involuntarily aroused. He respected his friend’s silence, rose, forgot his fatigue, and followed him silently, grieved to have touched a wound that was evidently not healed.

“Some day, my friend,” said Philippe, pressing his hand, and thanking him for his mute repentance by a heart-rending look, “I will relate to you my life. To-day I cannot.”

They continued their way in silence. When the colonel’s pain seemed soothed, the marquis resumed his fatigue; and with the instinct, or rather the will, of a wearied man his eye took in the very depths of the forest; he questioned the tree-tops and examined the branching paths, hoping to discover some dwelling where he could ask hospitality. Arriving at a cross-ways, he thought he noticed a slight smoke rising among the trees; he stopped, looked more attentively, and saw, in the midst of a vast copse, the dark-green branches of several pine-trees.

“A house! a house!” he cried, with the joy the sailor feels in crying “Land!”

Then he sprang quickly into the copse, and the colonel, who had fallen into a deep reverie, followed him mechanically.

“I’d rather get an omelet, some cottage bread, and a chair here,” he said, “than go to Cassan for sofas, truffles, and Bordeaux.”

These words were an exclamation of enthusiasm, elicited from the councillor on catching sight of a wall, the white towers of which glimmered in the distance through the brown masses of the tree trunks.

“Ha! ha! this looks to me as if it had once been a priory,” cried the marquis, as they reached a very old and blackened gate, through which they could see, in the midst of a large park, a building

constructed in the style of the monasteries of old. “How those rascals the monks knew how to choose their sites!”

This last exclamation was an expression of surprise and pleasure at the poetical hermitage which met his eyes. The house stood on the slope of the mountain, at the summit of which is the village of Neville. The great centennial oaks of the forest which encircled the dwelling made the place an absolute solitude. The main building, formerly occupied by the monks, faced south. The park seemed to have about forty acres. Near the house lay a succession of green meadows, charmingly crossed by several clear rivulets, with here and there a piece of water naturally placed without the least apparent artifice. Trees of elegant shape and varied foliage were distributed about. Grottos, cleverly managed, and massive terraces with dilapidated steps and rusty railings, gave a peculiar character to this lone retreat. Art had harmonized her constructions with the picturesque effects of nature. Human passions seemed to die at the feet of those great trees, which guarded this asylum from the tumult of the world as they shaded it from the fires of the sun.

“How desolate!” thought Monsieur d’Albon, observing the sombre expression which the ancient building gave to the landscape, gloomy as though a curse were on it. It seemed a fatal spot deserted by man. Ivy had stretched its tortuous muscles, covered by its rich green mantle, everywhere. Brown or green, red or yellow mosses and lichen spread their romantic tints on trees and seats and roofs and stones. The crumbling window-casings were hollowed by rain, defaced by time; the balconies were broken, the terraces demolished. Some of the outside shutters hung from a single hinge. The rotten doors seemed quite unable to resist an assailant. Covered with shining tufts of mistletoe, the branches of the neglected fruit-trees gave no sign of fruit. Grass grew in the paths. Such ruin and desolation cast a weird poesy on the scene, filling the souls of the spectators with dreamy thoughts. A poet would have stood there long, plunged in a melancholy reverie, admiring this disorder so full of harmony, this destruction which was not without its grace. Suddenly, the brown tiles shone, the mosses glittered, fantastic shadows danced upon the meadows and beneath the trees; fading colors revived; striking contrasts developed, the foliage of the trees and shrubs defined itself more clearly in the light. Then – the light went out. The landscape seemed to have spoken, and now was silent, returning to its gloom, or rather to the soft sad tones of an autumnal twilight.

“It is the palace of the Sleeping Beauty,” said the marquis, beginning to view the house with the eyes of a land owner. “I wonder to whom it belongs! He must be a stupid fellow not to live in such an exquisite spot.”

At that instant a woman sprang from beneath a chestnut-tree standing to the right of the gate, and, without making any noise, passed before the marquis as rapidly as the shadow of a cloud. This vision made him mute with surprise.

“Why, Albon, what’s the matter?” asked the colonel.

“I am rubbing my eyes to know if I am asleep or awake,” replied the marquis, with his face close to the iron rails as he tried to get another sight of the phantom.

“She must be beneath that fig-tree,” he said, pointing to the foliage of a tree which rose above the wall to the left of the gate.

“She! who?”

“How can I tell?” replied Monsieur d’Albon. “A strange woman rose up there, just before me,” he said in a low voice; “she seemed to come from the world of shades rather than from the land of the living. She is so slender, so light, so filmy, she must be diaphanous. Her face was as white as milk; her eyes, her clothes, her hair jet black. She looked at me as she flitted by, and though I may say I’m no coward, that cold immovable look froze the blood in my veins.”

“Is she pretty?” asked Philippe.

“I don’t know. I could see nothing but the eyes in that face.”

“Well, let the dinner at Cassan go to the devil!” cried the colonel. “Suppose we stay here. I have a sudden childish desire to enter that singular house. Do you see those window-frames painted

red, and the red lines on the doors and shutters? Doesn't the place look to you as if it belonged to the devil? – perhaps he inherited it from the monks. Come, let us pursue the black and white lady – forward, march!” cried Philippe, with forced gaiety.

At that instant the two huntsmen heard a cry that was something like that of a mouse caught in a trap. They listened. The rustle of a few shrubs sounded in the silence like the murmur of a breaking wave. In vain they listened for other sounds; the earth was dumb, and kept the secret of those light steps, if, indeed, the unknown woman moved at all.

“It is very singular!” said Philippe, as they skirted the park wall.

The two friends presently reached a path in the forest which led to the village of Chauvry. After following this path some way toward the main road to Paris, they came to another iron gate which led to the principal facade of the mysterious dwelling. On this side the dilapidation and disorder of the premises had reached their height. Immense cracks furrowed the walls of the house, which was built on three sides of a square. Fragments of tiles and slates lying on the ground, and the dilapidated condition of the roofs, were evidence of a total want of care on the part of the owners. The fruit had fallen from the trees and lay rotting on the ground; a cow was feeding on the lawn and treading down the flowers in the borders, while a goat browsed on the shoots of the vines and munched the unripe grapes.

“Here all is harmony; the devastation seems organized,” said the colonel, pulling the chain of a bell; but the bell was without a clapper.

The huntsmen heard nothing but the curiously sharp noise of a rusty spring. Though very dilapidated, a little door made in the wall beside the iron gates resisted all their efforts to open it.

“Well, well, this is getting to be exciting,” said de Sucey to his companion.

“If I were not a magistrate,” replied Monsieur d’Albon, “I should think that woman was a witch.”

As he said the words, the cow came to the iron gate and pushed her warm muzzle towards them, as if she felt the need of seeing human beings. Then a woman, if that name could be applied to the indefinable being who suddenly issued from a clump of bushes, pulled away the cow by its rope. This woman wore on her head a red handkerchief, beneath which trailed long locks of hair in color and shape like the flax on a distaff. She wore no fichu. A coarse woollen petticoat in black and gray stripes, too short by several inches, exposed her legs. She might have belonged to some tribe of Red-Skins described by Cooper, for her legs, neck, and arms were the color of brick. No ray of intelligence enlivened her vacant face. A few whitish hairs served her for eyebrows; the eyes themselves, of a dull blue, were cold and wan; and her mouth was so formed as to show the teeth, which were crooked, but as white as those of a dog.

“Here, my good woman!” called Monsieur de Sucey.

She came very slowly to the gate, looking with a silly expression at the two huntsmen, the sight of whom brought a forced and painful smile to her face.

“Where are we? Whose house is this? Who are you? Do you belong here?”

To these questions and several others which the two friends alternately addressed to her, she answered only with guttural sounds that seemed more like the growl of an animal than the voice of a human being.

“She must be deaf and dumb,” said the marquis.

“Bons-Hommes!” cried the peasant woman.

“Ah! I see. This is, no doubt, the old monastery of the Bons-Hommes,” said the marquis.

He renewed his questions. But, like a capricious child, the peasant woman colored, played with her wooden shoe, twisted the rope of the cow, which was now feeding peaceably, and looked at the two hunters, examining every part of their clothing; then she yelped, growled, and clucked, but did not speak.

“What is your name?” said Philippe, looking at her fixedly, as if he meant to mesmerize her.

“Genevieve,” she said, laughing with a silly air.

“The cow is the most intelligent being we have seen so far,” said the marquis. “I shall fire my gun and see if that will being some one.”

Just as d’Albon raised his gun, the colonel stopped him with a gesture, and pointed to the form of a woman, probably the one who had so keenly piqued his curiosity. At this moment she seemed lost in the deepest meditation, and was coming with slow steps along a distant pathway, so that the two friends had ample time to examine her.

She was dressed in a ragged gown of black satin. Her long hair fell in masses of curls over her forehead, around her shoulders, and below her waist, serving her for a shawl. Accustomed no doubt to this disorder, she seldom pushed her hair from her forehead; and when she did so, it was with a sudden toss of her head which only for a moment cleared her forehead and eyes from the thick veil. Her gesture, like that of an animal, had a remarkable mechanical precision, the quickness of which seemed wonderful in a woman. The huntsmen were amazed to see her suddenly leap up on the branch of an apple-tree, and sit there with the ease of a bird. She gathered an apple and ate it; then she dropped to the ground with the graceful ease we admire in a squirrel. Her limbs possessed an elasticity which took from every movement the slightest appearance of effort or constraint. She played upon the turf, rolling herself about like a child; then, suddenly, she flung her feet and hands forward, and lay at full length on the grass, with the grace and natural ease of a young cat asleep in the sun. Thunder sounded in the distance, and she turned suddenly, rising on her hands and knees with the rapidity of a dog which hears a coming footstep.

The effects of this singular attitude was to separate into two heavy masses the volume of her black hair, which now fell on either side of her head, and allowed the two spectators to admire the white shoulders glistening like daisies in a field, and the throat, the perfection of which allowed them to judge of the other beauties of her figure.

Suddenly she uttered a distressful cry and rose to her feet. Her movements succeeded each other with such airiness and grace that she seemed not a creature of this world but a daughter of the atmosphere, as sung in the poems of Ossian. She ran toward a piece of water, shook one of her legs lightly to cast off her shoe, and began to dabble her foot, white as alabaster, in the current, admiring, perhaps, the undulations she thus produced upon the surface of the water. Then she knelt down at the edge of the stream and amused herself, like a child, in casting in her long tresses and pulling them abruptly out, to watch the shower of drops that glittered down, looking, as the sunlight struck athwart them, like a chaplet of pearls.

“That woman is mad!” cried the marquis.

A hoarse cry, uttered by Genevieve, seemed uttered as a warning to the unknown woman, who turned suddenly, throwing back her hair from either side of her face. At this instant the colonel and Monsieur d’Albon could distinctly see her features; she, herself, perceiving the two friends, sprang to the iron railing with the lightness and rapidity of a deer.

“Adieu!” she said, in a soft, harmonious voice, the melody of which did not convey the slightest feeling or the slightest thought.

Monsieur d’Albon admired the long lashes of her eyelids, the blackness of her eyebrows, and the dazzling whiteness of a skin devoid of even the faintest tinge of color. Tiny blue veins alone broke the uniformity of its pure white tones. When the marquis turned to his friend as if to share with him his amazement at the sight of this singular creature, he found him stretched on the ground as if dead. D’Albon fired his gun in the air to summon assistance, crying out “Help! help!” and then endeavored to revive the colonel. At the sound of the shot, the unknown woman, who had hitherto stood motionless, fled away with the rapidity of an arrow, uttering cries of fear like a wounded animal, and running hither and thither about the meadow with every sign of the greatest terror.

Monsieur d’Albon, hearing the rumbling of a carriage on the high-road to Ile-Adam, waved his handkerchief and shouted to its occupants for assistance. The carriage was immediately driven up to the old monastery, and the marquis recognized his neighbors, Monsieur and Madame de Granville,

who at once gave up their carriage to the service of the two gentlemen. Madame de Granville had with her, by chance, a bottle of salts, which revived the colonel for a moment. When he opened his eyes he turned them to the meadow, where the unknown woman was still running and uttering her distressing cries. A smothered exclamation escaped him, which seemed to express a sense of horror; then he closed his eyes again, and made a gesture as if to implore his friend to remove him from that sight.

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