

Saltus Edgar

Balzac



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Edgar Saltus Balzac

CHAPTER I. THE VAGARIES OF GENIUS

“Great minds are bravely eccentric; they scorn the beaten track.” – Goldsmith.

In the city of Tours, in whose gabled streets there lingers still some memory of la belle Impéria, Honoré de Balzac was born on the 20th of May, 1799.

His childhood was in no wise extraordinary, save for the avidity with which he read the Bible and the keen delight which he took in the possession of a little red violin. He was indifferent to romps and games, and when not lost in the mysterious depths of the Scriptures he played by the hour on his fiddle, and extracted therefrom an enjoyment which was almost sensual in its intensity. His parents were well-considered people, in easy circumstances. Honoré was their first-born, and to him were subsequently given two sisters and a brother, concerning whom only a passing mention need be made. His eldest sister, Laure, became the wife of M. de Surville, a civil engineer, survived her illustrious brother, and published his letters, together with a weak sketch of his life; his second sister also married, but died at an early age; while his brother Henri sought his fortune, after the manner of younger sons, in the colonies, failed to find it, and was otherwise entirely uninteresting.

At the age of eight, Balzac was placed as boarder at the Collège de Vendôme, where, through the compression of his dreamy nature by unaccustomed tasks and rules, he soon lapsed into a careless neglect of his duties, and became, in consequence, one of the most frequently punished pupils in his class. Favored, however, by the tacit connivance of a tutor, he passed most of his time in the library. Science, philosophy, belles-lettres, religion, history, and even dictionaries, he read and inwardly digested, and during the six years that he remained at the school he assimilated the substance of all the books worth reading.

This absorption of ideas produced a noteworthy effect. His eye embraced six or eight lines at a time, and his mind appropriated the thought with a velocity equal to his glance; a single word in a phrase often sufficing for a clear understanding of the whole.

His memory was like a vise. He remembered not only the ideas which he had acquired in reading, but also those which conversation and reflection had suggested. Words, names, figures, and places he not only recalled at will, but he saw them within himself, brilliant and colored as they were at the moment when he had first perceived them.

Mentally fortified by his extensive reading, he wrote at the age of twelve the famous “*Traité de la Volonté*,” so often mentioned in his later works, but which was confiscated by the regent as the probable cause of his neglect of the regular curriculum, and which Balzac says he doubtless sold for waste paper without recognizing the value of the scientific treasures whose germs were thus wasted in ignorant hands.

After this loss, more than terrible to a young imagination, Balzac sought consolation in verse, and wrote a poem on the Incas, commencing: “*O Inca! roi infortuné et malheureux!*” which, with the exception of his subsequent “*Cromwell*,” was his sole familiarity with the peplum of the Muse; for, of the four sonnets in the “*Illusions Perdues*,” the first and second are by Lassailly, the third is by Madame de Girardin, and the fourth by Gautier, while the poem in “*Modeste Mignon*” was the work of Gérard de Nerval.

From these secret and laborious studies, as well as from possible fermentation of ideas, Balzac fell into a sort of coma and nervous fever, which was singularly inexplicable to his masters and

teachers. His parents were hastily summoned, and the precocious boy, now almost epileptic, was taken home, where rest and quiet gradually calmed the tumult in his brain, and restored the health and vivacity of boyhood. Little by little the results of his extraordinary labors became classified within his troubled mind, and to them were added other ideas of a less abstract nature; and in wandering on the banks of the Loire, or in attending the impressive ceremonies at the Cathedral of Saint-Gatien, he acquired not only a love of the beautiful, but also the sincere and abiding faith in religion with which he subsequently enriched the pages of the “Comédie Humaine.” At home, as at school, however, his intelligence was entirely unsuspected, and his sister, Madame de Surville, relates that whenever he chanced to make a brilliant remark his mother would invariably say, “It is impossible, Honoré, for you to understand what you are talking about;” whereupon Honoré would laugh, without deigning to enter into any explanations.¹ His father, however, who was an inoffensive disciple of both Montaigne and Swift, had his own reasons for thinking well of his son, and decided that a child of his could never by any chance be a fool; and while at that time he saw nothing in the boy which promised any immediate celebrity, he nevertheless cherished a few vague hopes.

But the prescience which the father lacked had already visited the son. From time to time he stated that he would some day be famous, and this boast appeared so outrageously insulting to his brother and sisters that they punished him with every torture which childish ingenuity could invent.

Balzac’s family soon after moved to Paris, where he again was placed at school. There, as at Vendôme, he gave no sign of future genius, and as before was regarded as an idler and a dullard.

His classes completed, he attended the lectures of Guizot, Cousin, and Villemain, and his degree of bachelier-ès-lettres obtained, he entered a law office which Scribe had just quitted. Here he acquired that luminous insight to law and procedure which served him to such advantage in the varied litigations of his future world, and enabled him, years after, to plead, as Voltaire did for Calas, in defense of Sébastien Peytel, a former acquaintance, accused of the murder of his wife and servant. The case was lost, and his client convicted; but his oration was none the less superb, and his argument is still cited as one of the most brilliant efforts in the annals of the French bar.

His legal apprenticeship completed, it was naturally expected that he would follow the law as a profession, but Balzac had other ideas; he felt as did Corneille *e tutti quanti*, that his vocation was not such as is found in courts, and expressed a preference for a purely literary life.

“But,” objected his father, “do you not know that in literature, to avoid being a slave, you must be a king?”

“Very well,” Balzac replied, “king I will be.”

After many arguments it was finally agreed that he should be allowed two years of probation; and as his family were about to return to the country, he was lodged in the Rue Lesdiguères, near the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, on an allowance of a hundred francs a month. His life there he has in “Facino Cane” described as follows: —

“I passed my days at the neighboring library. I lived frugally, for I had accepted all the conditions of that monastic life which is so necessary to students and thinkers. I seldom went out, and when I did a simple promenade was converted into a source of study, for I observed the customs of the faubourg, its inhabitants and their characters. As badly dressed as the workmen and as careless of decorum, I attracted no attention from them, and was enabled to mix among them and watch their bargains and disputes.

“Observation had become to me intuitive. It penetrated the spirit without neglecting the body, or rather it seized exterior details so clearly that it immediately went beyond them. It gave me the power of living the life of any individual upon whom it was exercised, and permitted me to substitute my personality for his, as did the dervish in the ‘Thousand and One Nights’ who had the power of occupying the body and soul of those over whom he pronounced certain words. When, therefore,

¹ Balzac, by Madame de Surville. Calmann Lévy, Paris.

between eleven and twelve at night, I encountered a workman and his wife returning from the theatre, I amused myself in following them from the Boulevard du Pont-aux-Choux to the Boulevard Beaumarchais. At first they would speak of the play which they had just witnessed. From that they would begin to talk of their own affairs, the mother dragging her child after her, listening neither to its complaints nor to its demands. The money which was to be paid to them was added, and then spent in twenty different ways. Then came the household details, murmurings on the excessive price of potatoes, the length of the winter, energetic discussions on the baker's bill, and finally little quarrels, in which they displayed their characters in picturesque words. While listening to them I espoused their life. I felt their rags on my back; my feet marched in their tattered shoes; their desires, their needs, all passed into my spirit, and mine into theirs: it was the dream of a waking man. With them I grew angry at their tyrannical masters or at their customers who made them come again and again without paying what they owed.

"To relinquish my identity, to become another through the intoxication of the moral faculties, and to play this game at will, such was my sole distraction. I have sometimes wondered if this gift was one of those faculties whose abuse leads to madness, but its causes I have never sought. I know, merely, that I possess and make use of it."

This ability to penetrate mentally the individuality of another is the evident explanation of the minuteness with which all of Balzac's characters are drawn, as well as the secret of their logical attitudes; for as in every-day life, while it is a question whether man is his own providence or is interwoven in a web of pre-ordained circumstances, yet in either case certain results are inevitable and a matter of statistic, so in Balzac there is no dodging of fate or shirking of consequences, and he is careful, in sending his own blood tingling through the veins of his creations, to surround them with the same laws to which he is himself subjected.

During his novitiate Balzac prepared a five-act tragedy in blank verse, entitled "Cromwell," a subject which it is curious to note was simultaneously chosen by Victor Hugo. At its completion, a professor of the École Polytechnique was requested to decide whether the lines contained a sufficient promise of genius to warrant a further pursuit of literary honors on the part of the young aspirant. The play, conscientiously examined, was deemed simply detestable, and the referee adjudged that Balzac might do what he would, but that literature was certainly not his vocation.

From this decision there was no present appeal; and while his mother and sisters begged him to engage in some other occupation, his father assured him that he would suppress his allowance should he persist in his intentions. Another perhaps would have yielded, but his pride and belief in his destiny made his resolution unalterable, and Balzac was left in solitary sadness to meditate on the coquetries of the Muse.

"I delighted," he says in "La Peau de Chagrin," "in the thought that I should live in the midst of tumultuous Paris in an inaccessible sphere of work and silence, in a world of my own, of books and ideas, where like the chrysalis I should build a tomb only to emerge again brilliant and famous.

"I took the chances of dying to live. In reducing existence to its actual needs, I found that three sous for *charcuterie* prevented me from dying of hunger and preserved my mind in a state of singular lucidity, while enabling me at the same time to observe the wonderful effects which diet produces on the imagination. My lodging cost three sous a day, I burned at night three sous' worth of oil, and for two sous more I heated my room with charcoal: and in this manner I lived in my aerial sepulchre, working night and day with such pleasure that study seemed the most beautiful theme, the happiest solution, of existence. The calm and silence necessary to the student possess an indescribable something which is as sweet and intoxicating as love, and study itself seems to lend a sort of magic to all that surrounds us. The forlorn desk on which I wrote, my piano, my bed, my chair, the zigzags of the wall-paper, – all these things became as though animated and humble friends, the silent accomplices of my future. Many a time I have communicated my soul to them in a glance, and often in looking at

the broken moulding I encountered new developments of thought, some striking proof of my system, or words which I considered peculiarly fitted to express ideas almost untranslatable.”

Balzac had not as yet any settled plan of work, but he tried his hand, while forming his style, at a quantity of comic operas, dramas, comedies, and romances, none of which, however, were accepted save by the gutter’s sneering fatalist, the ragpicker.

After many fruitless attempts and knocks at many a door, Balzac succeeded at last in finding a publisher, but of a type seen only in opéra bouffe, who proffered in payment of a romance a promissory note with a year to run. Balzac of course had no choice. He wished to appear in print. The bargain was concluded, and the “Héritière de Birague” was produced. Then, under various pseudonyms, such as Lord R’hoone, the anagram of Honoré, Dom Rago, M. de Viellerglé, and Horace de Saint-Aubin, he produced a quantity of novels somewhat after the style of Pegault Lebrun, and yet so diverse in treatment that one of them, “Wann-Chlore,”² was attributed to a luminary of the Romantic school, and another, “Annette et le Criminel,” was suppressed by the censorship. Some of these books, whose paternity he always denied, have since been collected under the title of “Œuvres de Jeunesse,” but of the greater part no trace remains.

Exhausted by privations and worn with continued study, Balzac was obliged to return to his family, then established at Villeparisis, where, broken in mind and health, he sank into an almost hopeless dejection.

“Is this what you term life,” he wrote³ to his sister, – “this involuntary rotation and perpetual return of the same things? I am in the springtide of a flowerless life, and I long to have some charm thrown over my chill existence; for of what use is fortune and pleasure when youth is gone? Of what use is the actor’s gown if he play no longer his part? Old age is a man who has dined and looks at others eat; and I, I am young, and I hunger before an empty plate – Laura, Laura, shall I, then, never realize my two immense desires, to be celebrated and to be loved?”

But Balzac soon wearied of this plaintive inactivity, and, fertile in projects, conceived the plan of printing Molière complete in one volume, and of following it with similar editions of the French classics. When these had appeared, he proposed, like Richardson, to produce his own works, and his illuminous imagination immediately foresaw new Clarissas issuing from the press.

The necessary working capital he procured from his family, who, though far from rich, were none the less glad to aid him in an enterprise for which literature would be abandoned and a legitimate business adopted.

But after the publication of Molière and La Fontaine, in each of which he inserted an elaborate and original introduction, he was obliged, through the cabals of the other publishers, to relinquish his plan, while burdened at the same time with a load of debt which oppressed almost every hour of his after life.

He was now absolutely without resources. The expense of a few sous attending the carriage of a letter, an omnibus ride, anything, in fact, which demanded the outlay of ready money, he was obliged to forego, and even remained in his garret that he might preserve as long as possible the only shoes which he owned.

“My sole possessions,” he wrote to his sister, “are my books, which I cannot part with, and my good taste, which unfortunately for the rich cannot be bought. If I were in prison I should be happier; life then would cost me nothing, and in any event I could not be more of a captive than I am.”

But the pecuniary loss which he had sustained, and which amounted to about 120,000 francs, served but as a stimulus to renewed activity; and resolving that he would recover from the printing press all that it had robbed him of, he commenced to seek some undiscovered vein of literary treasure, and in 1829 brought out “Le Dernier Chouan,” the first romance which he considered worthy to

² *Correspondance de H. de Balzac*. Calmann Lévy, Paris, 1877.

³ The present title is *Jane la Pâle*.

bear his own name. Its ferocity and passion attracted great attention, and the public became at once favorably disposed toward him; but when, a few months later, the “*Physiologie du Mariage*” appeared, its success was not only instantaneous, but Balzac was heralded as a new Molière. He now emerged from quasi obscurity into the white light of fame. Publishers were submissive, praise was unstinted. He had realized the first of his immense desires, and had it not been for his weight of debt he might perhaps have been able to realize the other, but his time was not his own. He labored, if possible, more incessantly than ever, conceived the plan of the “*Comédie Humaine*,” and from that time up to almost the day of his death produced a series of masterpieces which in point of interest and erudition form the most gigantic monument in the history of modern literature.

His work accompanied him wherever he went. He dreamed of it; he wrote while he ate; he traveled over the better part of Europe, and wrote while he traveled; he composed in the omnibus and in the street; and had he had a mistress he would, in all probability, have followed the example of Baudelaire, and composed in her arms. Thoroughly conscientious, he invariably visited the place where the scenes of a drama were to be located. “I am going to Alençon,” he would say; “you know Mlle. Cormon⁴ lives there;” or, “I am off for Grenoble; there is where M. Benassis⁵ lives;” for it should be remembered that not only were Balzac’s characters as realistically vivid to him as are the hallucinations of a neurosthene, but he invariably spoke of them as another world of friends and acquaintances. “Let us talk of realities,” he one day said to Jules Sandeau, who had been speaking to him of an invalid relative, “let us talk about ‘Eugénie Grandet;’” and at another time, when his sister asked for some information about Captain Jordy,⁶ Balzac replied very simply, “I never knew the man before he came to Nemours, but if he interests you, I will try to learn something of him.” It was a long time before he was able to find a suitable husband for Mlle. Camille Grandlieu, and rejected all who were suggested to him. “They are not in the same set,” he would say. “Chance alone can supply her with a husband, and chance is a commodity which a novelist should use but sparingly. Reality alone justifies the improbable, and the probable alone is permitted to us.” But Mlle. de Grandlieu was not destined to braid St. Catherine’s tresses, and afterwards, to Balzac’s great delight, found a suitable husband in the person of the young Comte de Restaud,⁷ who in spite of his mother’s derelictions⁸ was otherwise a very acceptable suitor.

After the place of his novel had been visited, viewed from every aspect, the customs noted and the localisms acquired, Balzac would return to Paris, shut himself up in a garret, – the garret has its poetry, – and for weeks and sometimes months at a time he would not only disappear entirely from view, but all trace of him would be lost.

At other times, he would lodge under an assumed name, which he imparted only to his most intimate friends. “My address,” he wrote to Madame Carraud in 1834, “is always Madame Veuve Durand, 13, Rue des Batailles;” and in 1837, he wrote to Dablin, “To see the Widow Durand, a name must be given. Yours is on the list.”

“The house,” Gautier wrote,⁹ “of the Widow Durand was as well guarded as the Garden of the Hesperides. Two or three passwords were exacted, and that they might not become vulgarized they were frequently changed. Among others, I recall the following. On telling the janitor that the season for prunes had arrived, the visitor was permitted to cross the threshold; to the servant who prowled about the head of the stairway, it was necessary to murmur ‘I bring laces from Belgium;’

⁴ *Les Rivalités*.

⁵ *Le Médecin de Campagne*.

⁶ *Ursule Mirouët*.

⁷ *Gobseck*.

⁸ *Le Père Goriot*.

⁹ *Honoré de Balzac*, par Théophile Gautier. Un volume in-18, chez Poulet-Malanis, 1859.

and on assuring the valet de chambre that Madame Bertrand was in excellent health, the visitor was ushered into the great man's presence."

It was in the Rue des Batailles that the famous boudoir of the "Fille aux Yeux d'Or" actually existed; and though its luxury would not appear unusual to-day, it was, nevertheless, a source of continual wonder to his Bohemian friends, and his own description of it is not devoid of interest:¹⁰ —

"One side of the boudoir formed a graceful semicircle, while in the centre of the other, which was perfectly square, there shone a mantel-piece of marble and gold. The door, which was concealed behind a rich portière of tapestry, was directly in front of the window.

"In the horseshoe was a Turkish divan, fifty feet in circumference and as high as a bed. The covering was of white cashmere tufted with bows of black and lilac silk, which were disposed as at the angles of a lozenge.

"The back of this immense bed rose several inches above a pile of cushions, which added to the general effect by their coloring and artistic arrangement.

"The boudoir was hung with a red material, over which was draped an Indian muslin fluted like a Corinthian column by a piping alternately hollow and round, and bordered at top and bottom by a band of lilac embroidered with black arabesques. Beneath the muslin the red became pink, and this delicate shading was repeated in the window curtains, which were of Indian muslin lined with pink silk and ornamented with a fringe of black and lilac.

"At equal distances on the wall above the divan were six sockets of silver-gilt, each of which supported two candles, while from the centre of the ceiling hung a highly polished lustre of the same material.

"The carpet was like a camel's-hair shawl, and seemed a mute reminder of the poetry of Persia. The furniture was covered with white cashmere relieved by lilac and black. The clock and candelabras were of gold and marble. The one table which the boudoir contained was covered with white cashmere, while all about were jardinières of white and red roses."

Behind the semicircle was a secret passage, at one end of which was an iron cot and at the other a desk; and here it was that Balzac, secure from intrusion, worked and composed at his ease.

To return, however, to the Widow Durand. In 1838 he wrote to Madame Hanska, the lady who subsequently became his wife: —

"The Widow Durand is dead. She was killed by the contemptible conduct of the daily papers, who have betrayed a secret which should have been sacred to every man of honor."

After this misfortune Balzac installed himself openly at Les Jardies, a country house which he had built at Ville d'Avray, and where he was, as he expressed it, "like the lantern of Demosthenes, and not, as every one else says, of Diogenes;" but when, a year or two later, he took up his residence in the Rue Basse, at Passy he surrounded himself with all his former precautions, instituted a series of countersigns which he changed weekly, and transformed himself into "Madame Bri..."

When guarded in this way from any intrusion, Balzac would work from twelve to twenty-one hours a day. His usual hours of sleep were from six in the evening until midnight. Then he would bathe, don the white robe of a Dominican friar, poise a black skull cap on his head, and, under the influence of coffee and by the light of a dozen candles, would work incessantly till he could work no more.

His work completed, the lion would forsake his den, and for an evening or two he would be seen in the Loge Infernale at the opera, invariably carrying a massive cane whose head glittered with jewels, and which Madame de Girardin was pleased to imagine rendered him invisible at will;¹¹ or he would make brief apparitions in the salons of the literati and nobility, and then, suddenly, without a word of warning, he would shut himself up as impenetrably as before.

¹⁰ *La Fille aux Yeux d'Or*.

¹¹ See *La Canne de M. de Balzac*, par Madame de Girardin. Dumont, 1838.

His manner of writing was stamped with the same eccentricity which characterized all his habits. When a subject which he proposed to treat had been well considered, he would cover thirty or forty sheets with a scaffolding of ideas and phrases, which he then sent off to the printer, who returned them in columns wired and centred on large placards. The work, freed in this way from any personality and its errors at once apparent, was then strengthened and corrected. On a second reading the forty pages grew to a hundred, two hundred on the third, and so on, while on the proof-sheets themselves new lines would start from the beginning, the middle, or the end of a phrase; and if the margins were insufficient, other sheets of paper were pinned or glued to the placards, which were again and again returned, corrected, and reprinted, until the work was at last satisfactorily completed.

But perhaps the most graphic description of Balzac's manner of writing is the one contained in an article by Edouard Ourliac in the "Figaro" for the 15th of December, 1837, of which the following is a free translation: —

THE MISFORTUNES AND ADVENTURES OF CÉSAR BIROTTEAU BEFORE HIS BIRTH

Let us sing, drink, and embrace, like the chorus in an opéra bouffe; let us waft kisses in the air and turn on our toes, as they do in the ballet.

Let us rejoice now that we may. The "Figaro," without appearing to have done so, has conquered the elements, all the malefactors, and every sublunary cataclysm.

The "Figaro" has conquered César Birotteau.

Never did the angered gods, never did Juno, Neptune, M. de Rambuteau, or the prefect of the police, oppose against Jason, Theseus, or the wayfarers of the capital, greater obstacles, monsters, ruins, dragons, demolitions, than these two unhappy octavos. We have them at last, and we know their cost.

The public will have but the trouble to read them, though that should count as a pleasure.

As to M. de Balzac, twenty days of labor, two reams of paper, another masterpiece, that counts as nothing.

Whatever else it may be considered, it is at least a typographical exploit and a worthy example of literary and commercial heroism.

Writer, publisher, and printer, all deserve the praise of their countrymen.

Posterity will gossip about the binders, and our grand-nephews will regret that they do not know the names of the apprentices.

I regret it myself, — otherwise I would tell them.

The "Figaro" promised the book for the 15th of December, and M. de Balzac began it on the 17th of November.

M. de Balzac and the "Figaro" have the singular habit of keeping their word.

The printing-press was prepared, and pawed the ground like an excited charger.

M. de Balzac sent immediately two hundred sheets, scribbled in five nights of fever.

Every one knows how he writes. It was an outline, a chaos, an apocalypse, a Hindu poem.

The office paled. The time was short, the writing unheard of. The monster was transformed and translated as nearly as possible into familiar signs. No one could make head or tail of it. Back it went to the author. The author sent back the first two proofs glued on enormous placards.

It was frightful, it was pitiful. From each sign, from each printed word, shot a penstroke, gleaming and gliding like a sky-rocket, and bursting at the extremity in a luminous fire of phrases, epithets, substantives, underlined, crossed, intermingled, erased, and superposed. Its aspect was simply dazzling.

Fancy four or five hundred arabesques of this kind, interlacing, knotted together, climbing and slipping from one margin to another and from the bottom to the top.

Fancy twelve geographical maps entangling cities, rivers, and mountains in the same confusion, a skein harassed by a cat, all the hieroglyphics of the Pharonian dynasty, or twenty fireworks exploding at once.

The office then was far from gay. The typesetters beat their breasts, the presses groaned, the proof-readers tore their hair and the apprentices became howling idiots. The most intelligent recognized the Persian alphabet, others the Madagascan, while one or two considered them to be the symbolic characters of Vishnu.

They worked on chance and by the grace of God.

The next day M. de Balzac sent back two pages of the purest Chinese. It was then the 1st of December. A generous typesetter offered to blow out his brains. Then other sheets were brought, written in the most legible Siamese. Three compositors lost their sight and the little French that they knew.

The proofs were sent back seven consecutive times; then, a few symptoms of excellent French appeared, and there was even noticed a certain connection between the phrases; but the day was fast approaching, and we felt that the book would never appear.

Desolation was at its height, and it was at this point that the work became further complicated by an admirable concourse of calamities.

At the time when haste was the greatest, the miserable being who that night carried the proof-sheets to M. de Balzac was waylaid and robbed.

M. de Balzac had had the forethought to establish himself at Chaillot. The miserable being screamed and yelled. The bandits took to their heels. One proof-sheet was found at Neuilly, another in an orchard, a third descending the Seine. It is certain that they were thrown away only on account of their illegibility. Misfortune has its advantages.

The proofs were recovered, but the night was lost. There were cries and gnashing of teeth. The end was fast approaching. However, the typesetters took courage and the workmen took the bit in their teeth. The office galloped. The compositors foamed at the mouth, the presses ravened, the binders were on springs, the apprentices danced with excitement, the proof-reader shook like an epileptic, and the foreman had convulsions. The office was a cage of palsied lunatics.

The work was again taken in hand, and M. de Balzac and the “Figaro” have kept their word.

“César Birotteau” will see the light of day on the 15th of December. We have it now, and we hold it tight. The office is armed, insured, and barricaded. Smoking is not permitted. There are lightning-rods on the roof, and mounted guards at the door.

Every precaution has been taken against accidents and the ardor of our subscribers.

At this moment “César Birotteau” is a work in two volumes, an immense tableau, an entire poem, composed, written, and corrected fifteen times by M. de Balzac in twenty days, and deciphered, disentangled, and reprinted fifteen times in the same period. It may be added that M. de Balzac kept forty other workmen busy with something else at another office.

We will not now consider the value of the work.

It may be everything, or but a masterpiece.

The names of Balzac’s characters are all taken from real life; for, like Dickens, his theory was that names which were invented gave no life to imaginary creations, and, as did the English novelist, he gathered many of them from the signboards in the street. His joy at the discovery of Matifat was almost as great as his delight in finding Cardot. He found the former in the Rue de la Perle, in the Marais. “I can see him now,” he said; “he will have the pallid face of a cat. But Cardot is different: he will be dry as a bone, hasty and ill-tempered.”

In 1840, Balzac proposed to write for the “Revue Parisienne” – a periodical which, it may be explained, appeared but three times, and whose three numbers Balzac wrote entirely – the story of a man of genius, who, used as a tool by others, died through the ingratitude of those whom he had raised to magnificent positions, and who had then abandoned him to poverty and want.

Such a character needed a name proportioned to his destiny; a name which explained and announced him as clearly as the cannon-ball announces the cannon; a name which would be peculiarly his own, and would reflect his face, his figure, his voice, his past, his future, his genius, his passions, his misfortunes, and his glory.

But this supernatural alliance of man and name was not immediately discoverable, and Balzac, who had put into circulation as many cognomens as are contained in the “Almanach de Gotha,” expressed himself incapable of manufacturing it. A name, he considered, could no more be fabricated than could granite or marble. They were all three the work of time and revolutions. They made themselves.

As a last and supreme resource, therefore, he set out one day, in company with Léon Gozlan, on a journey, in search of a baptismal signboard for his hero; and from the Barrière de l’Étoile to the summits of Montmartre they zigzagged across Paris, subjecting every name they encountered to the closest scrutiny.

Thousands of names were examined, analyzed, and rejected, until at last Gozlan, utterly worn out, refused to walk another step.

Balzac looked at him, it is to be supposed, very much as Columbus looked at his mutinous sailors, and by force of entreaties obtained, not three days’ grace, but three streets more.

In the first two nothing was found, but at the extremity of the third Balzac suddenly changed color, and cried in a voice broken by emotion, —

“There, there! Read that name!”

Above a narrow, oblong door, which opened on a sombre courtyard, there hung a sign which bore for device the name of Marcas.

“Our journey is at an end!” Balzac exclaimed; “it terminates in a blaze of glory. The name of my hero shall be Marcas. Marcas contains the philosopher, the statesman, and the poet. I will call him Z. Marcas, and thereby add to his name a flame, a tiara, and a star. Nothing could be better. I wonder, however, who this Marcas is; surely some great artist.”

“He is a tailor,” Gozlan brutally replied; “there is another sign of his in the courtyard.”

Balzac looked deeply chagrined.

“No matter,” he said; “he merited a better fate. If I seem annoyed, it is not that I am lacking in respect for tailors in general, but because his calling reminds me of certain debts and a few protested notes.”

A day or two later the “Revue Parisienne” appeared, and with it the story of Z. Marcas, now forming part of the “Scènes de la Vie Politique” and containing the following monograph: —

“A certain harmony existed between the man and the name. This Z. with which Marcas was preceded, which was to be seen on the address of his letters, and with which he always completed his signature, — this last letter of the alphabet presented to the imagination a something which was indescribably fatal.

“Marcas! Repeat over to yourself this name, composed of two syllables: does it not seem to contain a sinister significance? does it not seem as though its owner were born to be martyred.

“Though weird and wild, this name has nevertheless the right to descend to posterity: it is well composed, it is easily pronounced, and possesses the brevity required of famous names. Is it not as soft as it is bizarre? but does it not also seem unfinished?

“I would not dare to affirm that destiny is uninfluenced by a name, for between the deeds of men and their names there are inexplicable affinities and visible discords which at once astonish and surprise. But this subject will some day assuredly form part of the occult sciences.

“Does not the Z. present a thwarted and contradicted appearance? does it not represent the contingent and fantastic zigzags of a tormented life? What ill wind can have blown on this letter that in every language to which it is admitted commands barely fifty words! Marcas’ Christian name was Zéphérin. Saint Zéphérin is highly venerated in Brittany. Marcas was a Breton.

“Examine the name again. Z. Marcas! The entire existence of the man is contained in the fantastic assemblage of these seven letters. Seven! – the most significant of the cabalistic numbers. Marcas died at the age of thirty-five; his life therefore was composed of but seven lustres. Marcas! Does not the sound bring to you the idea of something precious, broken in a noiseless fall?”

The fatality which Balzac conceived as attaching to Marcas was by no means limited to this imaginary creation. It followed him into real life, and was at one time a source of such serious preoccupation that he stood one evening for two hours in the square of the Château d’Eau confidently awaiting some fortunate occurrence, and like Gautier in “Mademoiselle de Maupin” he awoke on certain days in a state of great agitation, trembling at every noise, and convinced that the happiness of his life was somehow at stake.

These extraordinary sensations naturally led to a belief in the supernatural; and as his mother, who was also interested in the abnormal, was acquainted with all the celebrated mesmerists and mediums of the day, he was readily furnished with opportunities of experimenting in magnetism and clairvoyance. His charming story of “Ursule Mirouët” unquestionably proves that he subsequently became a firm believer in that occult electricity which is variously known as the Theopœa of the ancients, the Akâsa of the modern Hindu, and the psychic force of Sergeant Cox; while his account of the soul-projection of “Séraphita” is vivid enough to satisfy the most exacting hierophant, and would have passed him, initiate, into the brotherhood of the Theosophists.

But perhaps the most curious evidence of his every-day faith in divination is that contained in the two following extracts from his correspondence: —

TO M. CHAPELAIN, PHYSICIAN

Paris, May, 1832.

Sir, – I am attracted by the power of somnambulism, and wonder why you have not sought to obtain from some lucid subject the causes of this disaster.¹²

Science is interested therein, and its discovery would be an eternal honor to us.

Had I not been ill for a week past I would have ascended to the honors of practice, and endeavored to convince myself whether the power of a somnambulist was limited or infinite.

The second extract is from a letter addressed to his mother a year later: —

“I send you herewith two pieces of flannel which I have worn on the body. Take them to M. Chapelain, and when he has examined the first, ask of him the cause and position of the malady¹³ and how it should be treated. See that everything is clearly explained. Then with the second piece ask the why and wherefore of the blister ordered in the precedent consultation.

“Be careful to keep the flannels well wrapped up, that the emanations may not be disturbed.”

Balzac’s hatred of journalists was intense, and from Sainte-Beuve down to the most insignificant penny-a-liner all were enveloped in the same superb contempt.

No branch of the profession was exempt from this antipathy, and critics and *feuilletonistes* shared alike in his wholesale condemnation: —

“They want my scalp, do they, these Mohicans of the press! Bah! I will drink out of their skulls.”

Drink he did, indeed, and long delicious draughts, at that; and in picking up with the point of his pen the venality, envy, and petty spites of the trade, he drew in the “*Illusions Perdues*,” in which Jules Janin figures in the transparent disguise of Étienne Lousteau, a picture of journalism which was as faithfully unpleasant as it was pitying and contemptuous. In this respect, however, it is well to state

¹² The cholera.

¹³ Stomachic disorders, caused by the abuse of coffee.

that no one was as indifferent to the opinion of the press as Balzac himself. He rarely, if ever, read the criticisms on his books, and left them, in the consciousness of their worth, to find their level unaided.

One of the causes of his disdain of everything which smacked of journalism was this: He had engaged to write “*Séraphita*” for the “*Revue des Deux Mondes*,” and shortly after the story had been delivered he learned that it was published at St. Petersburg. Thinking, as was but natural, that the editor had been the victim of some audacious theft, he hastened to tell him what he had heard; and his astonishment may be readily imagined when he was informed that the Russian edition had appeared with the sanction of the editor himself, who not only insisted that he had a perfect right to do as he pleased with the manuscript, but positively refused to make any indemnity. Thereupon, Balzac, in spite of the remonstrances of his friends, who pointed out that any contest with the “*Revue*,” whose word was law, would inevitably result in the closing of its columns to him, began a lawsuit, alleging that, independent of the pecuniary loss which he suffered, a precedent of this kind, once established, would in the future be highly prejudicial, not only to him, but to all his confrères. Much to his amazement, however, the defendant appeared in court with a list of signatures of almost all of those whom he had sought to defend at his own risk and peril, who attested that from a literary as well as from an ethical standpoint they considered the action of the editor of the “*Revue des Deux Mondes*” as eminently right and proper.

The law was, none the less, perfectly clear. Balzac won the suit, and with it a host of enemies, whose hatred was so vigorous that it barely abated, even after his death. Their insults delighted him. “Fire away,” he would say; “the armor is strong. Your abuse is an advertisement; your praise would lull the public to sleep, but your diatribes wake them up. Besides, you hit the mark sometimes, and every fault you signalize I correct, which in the end is so much gained.”

Among the host of enemies thus aroused were those who, not content with denying his genius, advanced their artillery into private life, and painted him in the possession of every vice in the criminal statutes; and it is from the falsehoods of these guerrilleros that all the stupidities which have been told concerning him found their primal gestation. Not only his morality, his honesty, his sobriety, were attacked, but even his name was denied to him. The *de* was declared not only an affectation, but a theft; and when some one said to him, in allusion thereto, “But you are no connection of the De Balzac d’Entragues,” “Ah! am I not?” he answered placidly. “Well, then, so much the worse for them.”

CHAPTER II. THE COMÉDIE HUMAINE

“One would say he had read the inscription on the gates of Busyrane, – ‘Be bold;’ and on the second gate, – ‘Be bold, be bold, and evermore be bold;’ and then again had paused well at the third gate, – ‘Be not too bold.’” – Emerson, *Plato*.

The general plan and outline of the “Comédie Humaine” originated in a comparison between humanity and animal existence. That which Buffon had achieved in zoölogy, Balzac proposed to accomplish in moral science, and the habits and customs as well as the vices and virtues of his contemporaries found in him a secretary whose inventory offers to posterity an elaborate insight into the every-day life of France in the nineteenth century, and realizes for their future curiosity that work which the ancient monarchies have neglected to bequeath to us as their own civilizations.

But the pictures of two or three thousand of the most striking figures of an epoch required, in a general history of society, not only frames but galleries, and the work therefore is divided into,

Scènes de la Vie Privée.
Scènes de la Vie de Province.
Scènes de la Vie Parisienne.
Scènes de la Vie Politique.
Scènes de la Vie Militaire.
Scènes de la Vie de Campagne.

These six subdivisions are grouped under the general title of “Études de Mœurs,” and in them the attempt has been made to examine and explain the general causes of earthly happiness and misery, as demonstrated in the results obtainable in the practice of the great principles of order and mortality, or in the selfish abandonment to purely personal interests.

Happiness, Balzac considered, consisted in the exercise of our faculties as applied to realities. But inasmuch as its principles vary with each latitude, and ideas of right and wrong find their modifications in the climate, he concluded that morals and convictions were valueless terms, and that happiness was to be found, first, in violent emotions which undermine existence; second, in regular occupations functioning like mechanism; or, lastly, in the study of the laws of nature and in the application of the lessons thereby derived.

In his treatment of this subject he has prepared a complete history of the effects of the agitation of social existence, and each of the foregoing divisions represents a particular aspect of life.

In the “Scènes de la Vie Privée,” life is represented between the last developments of childhood and the first calculations of virility. These scenes contain tableaux of the emotions and undefined sensations combined with pictures of the errors committed through ignorance of the exigencies of the world.

The “Scènes de la Vie de Province” represents that phase of existence in which passions, calculations, and ideas take the place of sensations, impulses, and illusions. The instincts of the young man of twenty are generous; at thirty he calculates and turns egotist. These scenes therefore initiate the reader into the thousand aspects of the transition through which a man passes when abandoning the thoughtless impulses of adolescence for the politic attitudes of manhood. Life becomes serious: positive interests jostle with violent passions, disillusionings begin, the social machinery is revealed, and from the shock of moral or pecuniary interests the crime bursts in the midst of the most tranquil household.

Herein are unveiled the petty annoyances by whose periodicity a poignant interest is concentrated in the slightest detail of existence. Herein are also exposed the petty rivalries, the jealousies born of vicinage, and the family worries, whose increasing force degrades and weakens

the most resolute will. The charm of dreams escapes; the prosaic and the matter of fact alone exist; woman reasons, and no longer feels; she calculates where before she gave. Life is now ripened and shaded.

In the “*Scènes de la Vie Parisienne*” the questions are enlarged, and existence painted in bold outlines gradually arrives at the frontiers of decrepitude. Herein purity of sentiment is exceptional: it is broken in the play of interests and scattered by the mechanism of the world. Virtue is calumniated, innocence is purchased. Passions become vices, emotions ruinous gratifications; everything is analyzed, bought, and sold. Life is a bazaar; humanity has but two forms, that of the deceiver and the deceived; it is a struggle and a combat, and the victor is he who best throttles society and moulds it to his own ends. The death of relatives is awaited; the honest man is a simpleton; generosity is a means, religion a governmental necessity, probity a policy; everything is marketable; absurdity is an advertisement, ridicule a passport, and youth, which has lived a hundred years, insults old age.

These scenes close the tableaux of individual existence, and their three frameworks contain representations of youth, manhood, and old age. First the bloom of life, the expansion of the soul, and the radiance of love; then come the calculations, the transformation of affection into passion; and, lastly, the accumulation of interests and the continual satisfaction of the senses joined to the inevitable weariness of mind and body.

Nothing but that which affects the individual proper has herein been treated, and the fragments of the “*Scènes de la Vie Politique*” express, in consequence, a wider range of thought. In these pages the actors represent the interest of the masses, and place themselves above those laws to which the types in the preceding series were subjected. The foregoing divisions described the constant antagonism of thought and sentiment, but in these scenes thought is an organizing force and sentiment is completely abolished. They are, however, incomplete, as are also the “*Scènes de la Vie Militaire*,” in which Balzac proposed to represent the action as taking place, not in an apartment, but on the battle-field; not in the struggle of man with man, but in the concussion of France and Europe, in the slaughter of the conquered and the pæans of the victors.

After these pages, whose completion was prevented by his sudden death, the calm and peaceful pictures of the “*Scènes de la Vie de Campagne*” follow in orderly sequence. They represent rest after exertion, landscapes after interiors, the hush of the country after the uproar of the city, the cicatrice after the wound. This last division contains the same interests and the same struggles, but weakened now by lack of contact, like passions grown dull in solitude. It is the twilight of a busy day, a summer evening solemn with sombre shadows. It contains the purest characters and the application of the great principles of order, morality, and religion, and its actors, worn with the fatigues of the world, mingle complacently with the innocence of childhood.¹⁴

¹⁴ See Introduction by M. Felix Davin to the first edition of the *Comédie Humaine*.

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