

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

A MAN OF BUSINESS

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Honoré de Balzac

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DEDICATION

To Monsieur le Baron James de Rothschild, Banker and

Austrian Consul-General at Paris

The word *lorette* is a euphemism invented to describe the status of a personage, or a personage of a status, of which it is awkward to speak; the French Academie, in its modesty, having omitted to supply a definition out of regard for the age of its forty members. Whenever a new word comes to supply the place of an unwieldy circumlocution, its fortune is assured; the word *lorette* has passed into the language of every class of society, even where the *lorette* herself will never gain an entrance. It was only invented in 1840, and derived beyond a doubt from the agglomeration of such swallows' nests about the Church of Our Lady of Loretto. This information is for etymologists only. Those gentlemen would not be so often in a quandary if mediaeval writers had only taken such pains with details of contemporary manners as we take in these days of analysis and description.

Mlle. Turquet, or Malaga, for she is better known by her pseudonym (See *La fausse Maitresse.*), was one of the earliest parishioners of that charming church. At the time to which this story belongs, that lighthearted and lively damsel gladdened the existence of a notary with a wife somewhat too bigoted, rigid, and frigid for domestic happiness.

Now, it so fell out that one Carnival evening Maitre Cardot was entertaining guests at Mlle. Turquet's house – Desroches the attorney, Bixiou of the caricatures, Lousteau the journalist, Nathan, and others; it is quite unnecessary to give any further description of these personages, all bearers of illustrious names in the *Comedie Humaine*. Young La Palferine, in spite of his title of Count and his great descent, which, alas! means a great descent in fortune likewise, had honored the notary's little establishment with his presence.

At dinner, in such a house, one does not expect to meet the patriarchal beef, the skinny fowl and salad of domestic and family life, nor is there any attempt at the hypocritical conversation of drawing-rooms furnished with highly respectable matrons. When, alas! will respectability be charming? When will the women in good society vouchsafe to show rather less of their shoulders and rather more wit or geniality? Marguerite Turquet, the Aspasia of the Cirque-Olympique, is one of those frank, very living personalities to whom all is forgiven, such unconscious sinners are they, such intelligent penitents; of such as Malaga one might ask, like Cardot – a witty man enough, albeit a notary – to be well “deceived.” And yet you must not think that any enormities were committed. Desroches and Cardot were good fellows grown too gray in the profession not to feel at ease with Bixiou, Lousteau, Nathan, and young La Palferine. And they on their side had too often had recourse to their legal advisers, and knew them too well to try to “draw them out,” in *lorette* language.

Conversation, perfumed with seven cigars, at first was as fantastic as a kid let loose, but finally it settled down upon the strategy of the constant war waged in Paris between creditors and debtors.

Now, if you will be so good as to recall the history and antecedents of the guests, you will know that in all Paris, you could scarcely find a group of men with more experience in this matter; the professional men on one hand, and the artists on the other, were something in the position of

magistrates and criminals hobnobbing together. A set of Bixiou's drawings to illustrate life in the debtors' prison, led the conversation to take this particular turn; and from debtors' prisons they went to debts.

It was midnight. They had broken up into little knots round the table and before the fire, and gave themselves up to the burlesque fun which is only possible or comprehensible in Paris and in that particular region which is bounded by the Faubourg Montmartre, the Rue Chaussee d'Antin, the upper end of the Rue de Navarin and the line of the boulevards.

In ten minutes' time they had come to an end of all the deep reflections, all the moralizings, small and great, all the bad puns made on a subject already exhausted by Rabelais three hundred and fifty years ago. It was not a little to their credit that the pyrotechnic display was cut short with a final squib from Malaga.

"It all goes to the shoemakers," she said. "I left a milliner because she failed twice with my hats. The vixen has been here twenty-seven times to ask for twenty francs. She did not know that we never have twenty francs. One has a thousand francs, or one sends to one's notary for five hundred; but twenty francs I have never had in my life. My cook and my maid may, perhaps, have so much between them; but for my own part, I have nothing but credit, and I should lose that if I took to borrowing small sums. If I were to ask for twenty francs, I should have nothing to distinguish me from my colleagues that walk the boulevard."

"Is the milliner paid?" asked La Palferine.

"Oh, come now, are you turning stupid?" said she, with a wink. "She came this morning for the twenty-seventh time, that is how I came to mention it."

"What did you do?" asked Desroches.

"I took pity upon her, and – ordered a little hat that I have just invented, a quite new shape. If Mlle. Amanda succeeds with it, she will say no more about the money, her fortune is made."

"In my opinion," put in Desroches, "the finest things that I have seen in a duel of this kind give those who know Paris a far better picture of the city than all the fancy portraits that they paint. Some of you think that you know a thing or two," he continued, glancing round at Nathan, Bixiou, La Palferine, and Lousteau, "but the king of the ground is a certain Count, now busy ranging himself. In his time, he was supposed to be the cleverest, adroitest, canniest, boldest, stoutest, most subtle and experienced of all the pirates, who, equipped with fine manners, yellow kid gloves, and cabs, have ever sailed or ever will sail upon the stormy seas of Paris. He fears neither God nor man. He applies in private life the principles that guide the English Cabinet. Up to the time of his marriage, his life was one continual war, like – Lousteau's, for instance. I was, and am still his solicitor."

"And the first letter of his name is Maxime de Trailles," said La Palferine.

"For that matter, he has paid every one, and injured no one," continued Desroches. "But as your friend Bixiou was saying just now, it is a violation of the liberty of the subject to be made to pay in March when you have no mind to pay till October. By virtue of this article of his particular code, Maxime regarded a creditor's scheme for making him pay at once as a swindler's trick. It was a long time since he had grasped the significance of the bill of exchange in all its bearings, direct and remote. A young man once, in my place, called a bill of exchange the 'asses' bridge' in his hearing. 'No,' said he, 'it is the Bridge of Sighs; it is the shortest way to an execution.' Indeed, his knowledge of commercial law was so complete, that a professional could not have taught him anything. At that time he had nothing, as you know. His carriage and horses were jobbed; he lived in his valet's house; and, by the way, he will be a hero to his valet to the end of the chapter, even after the marriage that he proposes to make. He belonged to three clubs, and dined at one of them whenever he did not dine out. As a rule, he was to be found very seldom at his own address –"

"He once said to me," interrupted La Palferine, "'My one affectation is the pretence that I make of living in the Rue Pigalle.'"

“Well,” resumed Desroches, “he was one of the combatants; and now for the other. You have heard more or less talk of one Claparon?”

“Had hair like this!” cried Bixiou, ruffling his locks till they stood on end. Gifted with the same talent for mimicking absurdities which Chopin the pianist possesses to so high a degree, he proceeded forthwith to represent the character with startling truth.

“He rolls his head like this when he speaks; he was once a commercial traveler; he has been all sorts of things – ”

“Well, he was born to travel, for at this minute, as I speak, he is on the sea on his way to America,” said Desroches. “It is his only chance, for in all probability he will be condemned by default as a fraudulent bankrupt next session.”

“Very much at sea!” exclaimed Malaga.

“For six or seven years this Claparon acted as man of straw, cat’s paw, and scapegoat to two friends of ours, du Tillet and Nucingen; but in 1829 his part was so well known that – ”

“Our friends dropped him,” put in Bixiou.

“They left him to his fate at last, and he wallowed in the mire,” continued Desroches. “In 1833 he went into partnership with one Cerizet – ”

“What! he that promoted a joint-stock company so nicely that the Sixth Chamber cut short his career with a couple of years in jail?” asked the lorette.

“The same. Under the Restoration, between 1823 and 1827, Cerizet’s occupation consisted in first putting his name intrepidly to various paragraphs, on which the public prosecutor fastened with avidity, and subsequently marching off to prison. A man could make a name for himself with small expense in those days. The Liberal party called their provincial champion ‘the courageous Cerizet,’ and towards 1828 so much zeal received its reward in ‘general interest.’

“‘General interest’ is a kind of civic crown bestowed on the deserving by the daily press. Cerizet tried to discount the ‘general interest’ taken in him. He came to Paris, and, with some help from capitalists in the Opposition, started as a broker, and conducted financial operations to some extent, the capital being found by a man in hiding, a skilful gambler who overreached himself, and in consequence, in July 1830, his capital foundered in the shipwreck of the Government.”

“Oh! it was he whom we used to call the System,” cried Bixiou.

“Say no harm of him, poor fellow,” protested Malaga. “D’Estourny was a good sort.”

“You can imagine the part that a ruined man was sure to play in 1830 when his name in politics was ‘the courageous Cerizet.’ He was sent off into a very snug little sub-prefecture. Unluckily for him, it is one thing to be in opposition – any missile is good enough to throw, so long as the flight lasts; but quite another to be in office. Three months later, he was obliged to send in his resignation. Had he not taken it into his head to attempt to win popularity? Still, as he had done nothing as yet to imperil his title of ‘courageous Cerizet,’ the Government proposed by way of compensation that he should manage a newspaper; nominally an Opposition newspaper, but Ministerialist *in petto*

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