

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

LA GRANDE BRETECHE

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“Ah! madame,” replied the doctor, “I have some appalling stories in my collection. But each one has its proper hour in a conversation – you know the pretty jest recorded by Chamfort, and said to the Duc de Fronsac: ‘Between your sally and the present moment lie ten bottles of champagne.’”

“But it is two in the morning, and the story of Rosina has prepared us,” said the mistress of the house.

“Tell us, Monsieur Bianchon!” was the cry on every side.

The obliging doctor bowed, and silence reigned.

“At about a hundred paces from Vendôme, on the banks of the Loir,” said he, “stands an old brown house, crowned with very high roofs, and so completely isolated that there is nothing near it, not even a fetid tannery or a squalid tavern, such as are commonly seen outside small towns. In front of this house is a garden down to the river, where the box shrubs, formerly clipped close to edge the walks, now straggle at their own will. A few willows, rooted in the stream, have grown up quickly like an enclosing fence, and half hide the house. The wild plants we call weeds have clothed the bank with their beautiful luxuriance.

The fruit-trees, neglected for these ten years past, no longer bear a crop, and their suckers have formed a thicket. The espaliers are like a copse. The paths, once graveled, are overgrown with purslane; but, to be accurate there is no trace of a path.

“Looking down from the hilltop, to which cling the ruins of the old castle of the Dukes of Vendôme, the only spot whence the eye can see into this enclosure, we think that at a time, difficult now to determine, this spot of earth must have been the joy of some country gentleman devoted to roses and tulips, in a word, to horticulture, but above all a lover of choice fruit. An arbor is visible, or rather the wreck of an arbor, and under it a table still stands not entirely destroyed by time. At the aspect of this garden that is no more, the negative joys of the peaceful life of the provinces may be divined as we divine the history of a worthy tradesman when we read the epitaph on his tomb. To complete the mournful and tender impressions which seize the soul, on one of the walls there is a sundial graced with this homely Christian motto, ‘Ultimam cogita.’

“The roof of this house is dreadfully dilapidated; the outside shutters are always closed; the balconies are hung with swallows’ nests; the doors are for ever shut. Straggling grasses have outlined the flagstones of the steps with green; the ironwork is rusty. Moon and sun, winter, summer, and snow have eaten into the wood, warped the boards, peeled off the paint. The dreary silence is broken only by birds and cats, polecats, rats, and mice, free to scamper round, and fight, and eat each other. An invisible hand

has written over it all: 'Mystery.'

"If, prompted by curiosity, you go to look at this house from the street, you will see a large gate, with a round-arched top; the children have made many holes in it. I learned later that this door had been blocked for ten years. Through these irregular breaches you will see that the side towards the courtyard is in perfect harmony with the side towards the garden. The same ruin prevails. Tufts of weeds outline the paving-stones; the walls are scored by enormous cracks, and the blackened coping is laced with a thousand festoons of pellitory. The stone steps are disjointed; the bell-cord is rotten; the gutter-spouts broken. What fire from heaven could have fallen there? By what decree has salt been sown on this dwelling? Has God been mocked here? Or was France betrayed? These are the questions we ask ourselves. Reptiles crawl over it, but give no reply. This empty and deserted house is a vast enigma of which the answer is known to none.

"It was formerly a little domain, held in fief, and is known as La Grande Bretèche. During my stay at Vendôme, where Despleins had left me in charge of a rich patient, the sight of this strange dwelling became one of my keenest pleasures. Was it not far better than a ruin? Certain memories of indisputable authenticity attach themselves to a ruin; but this house, still standing, though being slowly destroyed by an avenging hand, contained a secret, an unrevealed thought. At the very least, it testified to a caprice. More than once in the evening I boarded the hedge, run wild, which surrounded the enclosure. I braved

scratches, I got into this ownerless garden, this plot which was no longer public or private; I lingered there for hours gazing at the disorder. I would not, as the price of the story to which this strange scene no doubt was due, have asked a single question of any gossiping native. On that spot I wove delightful romances, and abandoned myself to little debauches of melancholy which enchanted me. If I had known the reason – perhaps quite commonplace – of this neglect, I should have lost the unwritten poetry which intoxicated me. To me this refuge represented the most various phases of human life, shadowed by misfortune; sometimes the peace of the graveyard without the dead, who speak in the language of epitaphs; one day I saw in it the home of lepers; another, the house of the Atridae; but, above all, I found there provincial life, with its contemplative ideas, its hour-glass existence. I often wept there, I never laughed.

“More than once I felt involuntary terrors as I heard overhead the dull hum of the wings of some hurrying wood-pigeon. The earth is dank; you must be on the watch for lizards, vipers, and frogs, wandering about with the wild freedom of nature; above all, you must have no fear of cold, for in a few moments you feel an icy cloak settle on your shoulders, like the Commendatore’s hand on Don Giovanni’s neck.

“One evening I felt a shudder; the wind had turned an old rusty weathercock, and the creaking sounded like a cry from the house, at the very moment when I was finishing a gloomy drama to account for this monumental embodiment of woe. I returned to

my inn, lost in gloomy thoughts. When I had supped, the hostess came into my room with an air of mystery, and said, ‘Monsieur, here is Monsieur Regnault.’

“Who is Monsieur Regnault?”

“What, sir, do you not know Monsieur Regnault? – Well, that’s odd,” said she, leaving the room.

“On a sudden I saw a man appear, tall, slim, dressed in black, hat in hand, who came in like a ram ready to butt his opponent, showing a receding forehead, a small pointed head, and a colorless face of the hue of a glass of dirty water. You would have taken him for an usher. The stranger wore an old coat, much worn at the seams; but he had a diamond in his shirt frill, and gold rings in his ears.

“Monsieur,” said I, ‘whom have I the honor of addressing?’ – He took a chair, placed himself in front of my fire, put his hat on my table, and answered while he rubbed his hands: ‘Dear me, it is very cold. – Monsieur, I am Monsieur Regnault.’

“I was encouraging myself by saying to myself, ‘Seek!’

“I am,” he went on, ‘notary at Vendôme.’

“I am delighted to hear it, monsieur,” I exclaimed. ‘But I am not in a position to make a will for reasons best known to myself.’

“One moment!” said he, holding up his hand as though to gain silence. ‘Allow me, monsieur, allow me! I am informed that you sometimes go to walk in the garden of la Grande Bretèche.’

“Yes, monsieur.’

“One moment!” said he, repeating his gesture. ‘That

constitutes a misdemeanor. Monsieur, as executor under the will of the late Comtesse de Merret, I come in her name to beg you to discontinue the practice. One moment! I am not a Turk, and do not wish to make a crime of it. And besides, you are free to be ignorant of the circumstances which compel me to leave the finest mansion in Vendôme to fall into ruin. Nevertheless, monsieur, you must be a man of education, and you should know that the laws forbid, under heavy penalties, any trespass on enclosed property. A hedge is the same as a wall. But, the state in which the place is left may be an excuse for your curiosity. For my part, I should be quite content to make you free to come and go in the house; but being bound to respect the will of the testatrix, I have the honor, monsieur, to beg that you will go into the garden no more. I myself, monsieur, since the will was read, have never set foot in the house, which, as I had the honor of informing you, is part of the estate of the late Madame de Merret. We have done nothing there but verify the number of doors and windows to assess the taxes I have to pay annually out of the funds left for that purpose by the late Madame de Merret. Ah! my dear sir, her will made a great commotion in the town.'

“The good man paused to blow his nose. I respected his volubility, perfectly understanding that the administration of Madame de Merret’s estate had been the most important event of his life, his reputation, his glory, his Restoration. As I was forced to bid farewell to my beautiful reveries and romances, I was to reject learning the truth on official authority.

“Monsieur,” said I, ‘would it be indiscreet if I were to ask you the reasons for such eccentricity?’

“At these words an expression, which revealed all the pleasure which men feel who are accustomed to ride a hobby, overspread the lawyer’s countenance. He pulled up the collar of his shirt with an air, took out his snuffbox, opened it, and offered me a pinch; on my refusing, he took a large one. He was happy! A man who has no hobby does not know all the good to be got out of life. A hobby is the happy medium between a passion and a monomania. At this moment I understood the whole bearing of Sterne’s charming passion, and had a perfect idea of the delight with which my uncle Toby, encouraged by Trim, bestrode his hobby-horse.

“Monsieur,” said Monsieur Regnault, ‘I was head-clerk in Monsieur Roguin’s office, in Paris. A first-rate house, which you may have heard mentioned? No! An unfortunate bankruptcy made it famous. – Not having money enough to purchase a practice in Paris at the price to which they were run up in 1816, I came here and bought my predecessor’s business. I had relations in Vendôme; among others, a wealthy aunt, who allowed me to marry her daughter. – Monsieur,’ he went on after a little pause, ‘three months after being licensed by the Keeper of the Seals, one evening, as I was going to bed – it was before my marriage – I was sent for by Madame la Comtesse de Merret, to her Chateau of Merret. Her maid, a good girl, who is now a servant in this inn, was waiting at my door with the Countess’ own carriage.

Ah! one moment! I ought to tell you that Monsieur le Comte de Merret had gone to Paris to die two months before I came here. He came to a miserable end, flinging himself into every kind of dissipation. You understand?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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