

# HONORÉ DE BALZAC

Z. MARCAS

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*Z. Marcas:*

# **Honoré de Balzac**

## **Z. Marcas**

### **DEDICATION**

**To His Highness Count William  
of Wurtemberg, as a token of the**

**Author's respectful gratitude**

**DE BALZAC**

I never saw anybody, not even among the most remarkable men of the day, whose appearance was so striking as this man's; the study of his countenance at first gave me a feeling of great melancholy, and at last produced an almost painful impression.

There was a certain harmony between the man and his name. The Z. preceding Marcas, which was seen on the addresses of his letters, and which he never omitted from his signature, as the last letter of the alphabet, suggested some mysterious fatality.

MARCAS! say this two-syllabled name again and again; do you not feel as if it had some sinister meaning? Does it not seem to you that its owner must be doomed to martyrdom? Though foreign, savage, the name has a right to be handed down to posterity; it is well constructed, easily pronounced, and has the brevity that beseems a famous name. Is it not pleasant as well as odd? But does it not sound unfinished?

I will not take it upon myself to assert that names have no influence on the destiny of men. There is a certain secret and inexplicable concord or a visible discord between the events of a man's life and his name which is truly surprising; often some remote but very real correlation is revealed. Our globe is round; everything is linked to everything else. Some day perhaps we shall revert to the occult sciences.

Do you not discern in that letter Z an adverse influence? Does it not prefigure the wayward and fantastic progress of a storm-tossed life? What wind blew on that letter, which, whatever language we find it in, begins scarcely fifty words? Marcas' name was Zephirin; Saint Zephirin is highly venerated in Brittany, and Marcas was a Breton.

Study the name once more: Z Marcas! The man's whole life lies in this fantastic juxtaposition of seven letters; seven! the most significant of all the cabalistic numbers. And he died at five-and-thirty, so his life extended over seven lustres.

Marcas! Does it not hint of some precious object that is broken with a fall, with or without a crash?

I had finished studying the law in Paris in 1836. I lived at that time in the Rue Corneille in a house where none but students came to lodge, one of those large houses where there is a winding staircase quite at the back lighted below from the street, higher up by borrowed lights, and at the top by a skylight. There were forty furnished rooms – furnished as students' rooms are! What does youth demand more than was here supplied? A bed, a few chairs, a chest of drawers, a looking-glass, and a table. As soon as the sky is blue the student opens his window.

But in this street there are no fair neighbors to flirt with. In front is the Odeon, long since closed, presenting a wall that is beginning to go black, its tiny gallery windows and its vast expanse of slate roof. I was not rich enough to have a good room; I was not even rich enough to have a room to myself. Juste and I shared a double-bedded room on the fifth floor.

On our side of the landing there were but two rooms – ours and a smaller one, occupied by Z. Marcas, our neighbor. For six months Juste and I remained in perfect ignorance of the fact. The old woman who managed the house had indeed told us that the room was inhabited, but she had added that we should not be disturbed, that the occupant was exceedingly quiet. In fact, for those six months, we never met our fellow-lodger, and we never heard a sound in his room, in spite of the thinness of the partition that divided us – one of those walls of lath and plaster which are common in Paris houses.

Our room, a little over seven feet high, was hung with a vile

cheap paper sprigged with blue. The floor was painted, and knew nothing of the polish given by the *frotteur's* brush. By our beds there was only a scrap of thin carpet. The chimney opened immediately to the roof, and smoked so abominably that we were obliged to provide a stove at our own expense. Our beds were mere painted wooden cribs like those in schools; on the chimney shelf there were but two brass candlesticks, with or without tallow candles in them, and our two pipes with some tobacco in a pouch or strewn abroad, also the little piles of cigar-ash left there by our visitors or ourselves.

A pair of calico curtains hung from the brass window rods, and on each side of the window was a small bookcase in cherry-wood, such as every one knows who has stared into the shop windows of the Quartier Latin, and in which we kept the few books necessary for our studies.

The ink in the inkstand was always in the state of lava congealed in the crater of a volcano. May not any inkstand nowadays become a Vesuvius? The pens, all twisted, served to clean the stems of our pipes; and, in opposition to all the laws of credit, paper was even scarcer than coin.

How can young men be expected to stay at home in such furnished lodgings? The students studied in the cafes, the theatre, the Luxembourg gardens, in *grisettes'* rooms, even in the law schools – anywhere rather than in their horrible rooms – horrible for purposes of study, delightful as soon as they were used for gossiping and smoking in. Put a cloth on the table, and the

impromptu dinner sent in from the best eating-house in the neighborhood – places for four – two of them in petticoats – show a lithograph of this “Interior” to the veriest bigot, and she will be bound to smile.

We thought only of amusing ourselves. The reason for our dissipation lay in the most serious facts of the politics of the time. Juste and I could not see any room for us in the two professions our parents wished us to take up. There are a hundred doctors, a hundred lawyers, for one that is wanted. The crowd is choking these two paths which are supposed to lead to fortune, but which are merely two arenas; men kill each other there, fighting, not indeed with swords or fire-arms, but with intrigue and calumny, with tremendous toil, campaigns in the sphere of the intellect as murderous as those in Italy were to the soldiers of the Republic. In these days, when everything is an intellectual competition, a man must be able to sit forty-eight hours on end in his chair before a table, as a General could remain for two days on horseback and in his saddle.

The throng of aspirants has necessitated a division of the Faculty of Medicine into categories. There is the physician who writes and the physician who practises, the political physician, and the physician militant – four different ways of being a physician, four classes already filled up. As to the fifth class, that of physicians who sell remedies, there is such a competition that they fight each other with disgusting advertisements on the walls of Paris.

In all the law courts there are almost as many lawyers as there are cases. The pleader is thrown back on journalism, on politics, on literature. In fact, the State, besieged for the smallest appointments under the law, has ended by requiring that the applicants should have some little fortune. The pear-shaped head of the grocer's son is selected in preference to the square skull of a man of talent who has not a sou. Work as he will, with all his energy, a young man, starting from zero, may at the end of ten years find himself below the point he set out from. In these days, talent must have the good luck which secures success to the most incapable; nay, more, if it scorns the base compromises which insure advancement to crawling mediocrity, it will never get on.

If we thoroughly knew our time, we also knew ourselves, and we preferred the indolence of dreamers to aimless stir, easy-going pleasure to the useless toil which would have exhausted our courage and worn out the edge of our intelligence. We had analyzed social life while smoking, laughing, and loafing. But, though elaborated by such means as these, our reflections were none the less judicious and profound.

While we were fully conscious of the slavery to which youth is condemned, we were amazed at the brutal indifference of the authorities to everything connected with intellect, thought, and poetry. How often have Juste and I exchanged glances when reading the papers as we studied political events, or the debates in the Chamber, and discussed the proceedings of a Court whose wilful ignorance could find no parallel but in the platitude of the

courtiers, the mediocrity of the men forming the hedge round the newly-restored throne, all alike devoid of talent or breadth of view, of distinction or learning, of influence or dignity!

Could there be a higher tribute to the Court of Charles X. than the present Court, if Court it may be called? What a hatred of the country may be seen in the naturalization of vulgar foreigners, devoid of talent, who are enthroned in the Chamber of Peers! What a perversion of justice! What an insult to the distinguished youth, the ambitions native to the soil of France! We looked upon these things as upon a spectacle, and groaned over them, without taking upon ourselves to act.

Juste, whom no one ever sought, and who never sought any one, was, at five-and-twenty, a great politician, a man with a wonderful aptitude for apprehending the correlation between remote history and the facts of the present and of the future. In 1831, he told me exactly what would and did happen – the murders, the conspiracies, the ascendancy of the Jews, the difficulty of doing anything in France, the scarcity of talent in the higher circles, and the abundance of intellect in the lowest ranks, where the finest courage is smothered under cigar ashes.

What was to become of him? His parents wished him to be a doctor. But if he were a doctor, must he not wait twenty years for a practice? You know what he did? No? Well, he is a doctor; but he left France, he is in Asia. At this moment he is perhaps sinking under fatigue in a desert, or dying of the lashes of a barbarous horde – or perhaps he is some Indian prince's prime minister.

Action is my vocation. Leaving a civil college at the age of twenty, the only way for me to enter the army was by enlisting as a common soldier; so, weary of the dismal outlook that lay before a lawyer, I acquired the knowledge needed for a sailor. I imitate Juste, and keep out of France, where men waste, in the struggle to make way, the energy needed for the noblest works. Follow my example, friends; I am going where a man steers his destiny as he pleases.

These great resolutions were formed in the little room in the lodging-house in the Rue Corneille, in spite of our haunting the Bal Musard, flirting with girls of the town, and leading a careless and apparently reckless life. Our plans and arguments long floated in the air.

Marcas, our neighbor, was in some degree the guide who led us to the margin of the precipice or the torrent, who made us sound it, and showed us beforehand what our fate would be if we let ourselves fall into it. It was he who put us on our guard against the time-bargains a man makes with poverty under the sanction of hope, by accepting precarious situations whence he fights the battle, carried along by the devious tide of Paris – that great harlot who takes you up or leaves you stranded, smiles or turns her back on you with equal readiness, wears out the strongest will in vexatious waiting, and makes misfortune wait on chance.

At our first meeting, Marcas, as it were, dazzled us. On our return from the schools, a little before the dinner-hour, we were accustomed to go up to our room and remain there a while, either

waiting for the other, to learn whether there were any change in our plans for the evening. One day, at four o'clock, Juste met Marcas on the stairs, and I saw him in the street. It was in the month of November, and Marcas had no cloak; he wore shoes with heavy soles, corduroy trousers, and a blue double-breasted coat buttoned to the throat, which gave a military air to his broad chest, all the more so because he wore a black stock. The costume was not in itself extraordinary, but it agreed well with the man's mien and countenance.

My first impression on seeing him was neither surprise, nor distress, nor interest, nor pity, but curiosity mingled with all these feelings. He walked slowly, with a step that betrayed deep melancholy, his head forward with a stoop, but not bent like that of a conscience-stricken man. That head, large and powerful, which might contain the treasures necessary for a man of the highest ambition, looked as if it were loaded with thought; it was weighted with grief of mind, but there was no touch of remorse in his expression. As to his face, it may be summed up in a word. A common superstition has it that every human countenance resembles some animal. The animal for Marcas was the lion. His hair was like a mane, his nose was sort and flat; broad and dented at the tip like a lion's; his brow, like a lion's, was strongly marked with a deep median furrow, dividing two powerful bosses. His high, hairy cheek-bones, all the more prominent because his cheeks were so thin, his enormous mouth and hollow jaws, were accentuated by lines of tawny shadows.

This almost terrible countenance seemed illuminated by two lamps – two eyes, black indeed, but infinitely sweet, calm and deep, full of thought. If I may say so, those eyes had a humiliated expression.

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