

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

A STREET OF PARIS AND
ITS INHABITANT

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PREFACE

This little Parisian silhouette in prose was written by Balzac to be the first chapter of a new series of the "Comedie Humaine" that he was preparing while the first was finishing. Balzac was never tired. He said that the men who were tired were those who rested and tried to work afterwards.

"A Street of Paris and its Inhabitant" was in its author's mind when Hetzel, engaged in collecting a copy for the work entitled "Le Diable a Paris" that all book lovers admire, asked Balzac for an unpublished manuscript.

Balzac gave him this, after retouching it, in order that it should have the air of a finished story. Why Hetzel did not use it in "Le Diable a Paris," no one knows. He went into exile, in Brussels, at the military revolution that made Napoleon III Emperor and, needing money, sold "A Street of Paris and its Inhabitant" with other manuscripts to Le Siecle.

Balzac's work was printed entire in three pages of the journal Le Siecle, in Paris, July 28, 1845. M. le Vicomte Spoelberch

de Lovenjoul owns Balzac's autograph manuscript of it. These details are given by him and might be reproduced here with his signature. But the publishers wish not to be deprived of the pleasure of paying homage to the Vicomte Spoelberch de Lovenjoul.

He has made in the biography of Balzac, in editions of his books, in the pious collection of his unpublished writings, the ideal literary man's monument.

H. P. du B.

I

PHYSIOGNOMY OF THE STREET

Paris has curved streets, streets that are serpentine. It counts, perhaps, only the Rue Boudreau in the Chaussee d'Antin and the Rue Duguay-Trouin near the Luxembourg as streets shaped exactly like a T-square. The Rue Duguay-Trouin extends one of its two arms to the Rue d'Assas and the other to the Rue de Fleurus.

In 1827 the Rue Duguay-Trouin was paved neither on one side nor on the other; it was lighted neither at its angle nor at its ends. Perhaps it is not, even to-day, paved or lighted. In truth, this street has so few houses, or the houses are so modest, that one does not see them; the city's forgetfulness of them is explained, then, by their little importance.

Lack of solidity in the soil is a reason for that state of things. The street is situated on a point of the Catacombs so dangerous that a portion of the road disappeared recently, leaving an excavation to the astonished eyes of the scarce inhabitants of that corner of Paris.

A great clamor arose in the newspapers about it. The government corked up the "Fontis" – such is the name of that territorial bankruptcy – and the gardens that border the street, destitute of passers-by, were reassured the more easily because

the tax list did not weigh on them.

The arm of the street that extends to the Rue de Fleurus is entirely occupied, at the left, by a wall on the top of which shine broken bottles and iron lances fixed in the plaster – a sort of warning to hands of lovers and of thieves.

In this wall is a door, the famous little garden door, so necessary to dramas and to novels, which is beginning to disappear from Paris.

This door, painted in dark green, having an invisible lock, and on which the tax collector had not yet painted a number; this wall, along which grow thistles and grass with beaded blades; this street, with furrows made by the wheels of wagons; other walls gray and crowned with foliage, are in harmony with the silence that reigns in the Luxembourg, in the convent of the Carmelites, in the gardens of the Rue de Fleurus.

If you went there, you would ask yourself, "Who can possibly live here?"

Who? Wait and see.

II

SILHOUETTE OF THE INHABITANT

One day, about three in the afternoon, that door was opened. Out of it came a little old man, fat, provided with an abdomen heavy and projecting which obliges him to make many sacrifices. He has to wear trousers excessively wide, not to be troubled in walking. He has renounced, long ago, the use of boots and trouser straps. He wears shoes. His shoes were hardly polished.

The waistcoat, incessantly impelled to the upper part of the gastric cavities by that great abdomen, and depressed by the weight of two thoracic bumps that would make the happiness of a thin woman, offers to the pleasantries of the passers-by a perfect resemblance to a napkin rolled on the knees of a guest absorbed in discussion at dessert.

The legs are thin, the arm is long, one of the hands is gloved only on most solemn occasions and the other hand ignores absolutely the advantage of a second skin.

That personage avoids the alms and the pity that his venerable green frock coat invites, by wearing the red ribbon at his button-hole. This proves the utility of the Order of the Legion of Honor which has been contested too much in the past ten years, the new Knights of the Order say.

The battered hat, in a constant state of horror in the places where a reddish fuzz endures, would not be picked up by a rag picker, if the little old man let it fall and left it at a street corner.

Too absent-minded to submit to the bother that the wearing of a wig entails, that man of science – he is a man of science – shows, when he makes a bow, a head that, viewed from the top, has the appearance of the Farnese Hercules's knee.

Above each ear, tufts of twisted white hair shine in the sun like the angry silken hairs of a boar at bay. The neck is athletic and recommends itself to the notice of caricaturists by an infinity of wrinkles, of furrows; by a dewlap faded but armed with darts in the fashion of thistles.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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