HONORÉ DE BALZAC

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Содержание

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Bianchon, a physician to whom science owes a fine system of theoretical physiology, and who, while still young, made himself a celebrity in the medical school of Paris, that central luminary to which European doctors do homage, practised surgery for a long time before he took up medicine. His earliest studies were guided by one of the greatest of French surgeons, the illustrious Desplein, who flashed across science like a meteor. By the consensus even of his enemies, he took with him to the tomb an incommunicable method. Like all men of genius, he had no heirs; he carried everything in him, and carried it away with him. The glory of a surgeon is like that of an actor: they live only so long as they are alive, and their talent leaves no trace when they are gone. Actors and surgeons, like great singers too, like the executants who by their performance increase the power of music tenfold, are all the heroes of a moment.

Desplein is a case in proof of this resemblance in the destinies of such transient genius. His name, yesterday so famous, to-day almost forgotten, will survive in his special department without crossing its limits. For must there not be some extraordinary

circumstances to exalt the name of a professor from the history of Science to the general history of the human race? Had Desplein that universal command of knowledge which makes a man the living word, the great figure of his age? Desplein had a godlike eye; he saw into the sufferer and his malady by an intuition, natural or acquired, which enabled him to grasp the diagnostics peculiar to the individual, to determine the very time, the hour, the minute when an operation should be performed, making due allowance for atmospheric conditions and peculiarities of individual temperament. To proceed thus, hand in hand with nature, had he then studied the constant assimilation by living beings, of the elements contained in the atmosphere, or yielded by the earth to man who absorbs them, deriving from them a particular expression of life? Did he work it all out by the power of deduction and analogy, to which we owe the genius of Cuvier? Be this as it may, this man was in all the secrets of the human frame; he knew it in the past and in the future, emphasizing the present.

But did he epitomize all science in his own person as Hippocrates did and Galen and Aristotle? Did he guide a whole school towards new worlds? No. Though it is impossible to deny that this persistent observer of human chemistry possessed that antique science of the Mages, that is to say, knowledge of the elements in fusion, the causes of life, life antecedent to life, and what it must be in its incubation or ever it *is*, it must be confessed that, unfortunately, everything in him was purely

personal. Isolated during his life by his egoism, that egoism is now suicidal of his glory. On his tomb there is no proclaiming statue to repeat to posterity the mysteries which genius seeks out at its own cost.

But perhaps Desplein's genius was answerable for his beliefs, and for that reason mortal. To him the terrestrial atmosphere was a generative envelope; he saw the earth as an egg within its shell; and not being able to determine whether the egg or the hen first was, he would not recognize either the cock or the egg. He believed neither in the antecedent animal nor the surviving spirit of man. Desplein had no doubts; he was positive. His bold and unqualified atheism was like that of many scientific men, the best men in the world, but invincible atheists – atheists such as religious people declare to be impossible. This opinion could scarcely exist otherwise in a man who was accustomed from his youth to dissect the creature above all others – before, during, and after life; to hunt through all his organs without ever finding the individual soul, which is indispensable to religious theory. When he detected a cerebral centre, a nervous centre, and a centre for aerating the blood – the first two so perfectly complementary that in the latter years of his life he came to a conviction that the sense of hearing is not absolutely necessary for hearing, nor the sense of sight for seeing, and that the solar plexus could supply their place without any possibility of doubt – Desplein, thus finding two souls in man, confirmed his atheism by this fact, though it is no evidence against God. This man died,

it is said, in final impenitence, as do, unfortunately, many noble geniuses, whom God may forgive.

The life of this man, great as he was, was marred by many meannesses, to use the expression employed by his enemies, who were anxious to diminish his glory, but which it would be more proper to call apparent contradictions. Envious people and fools, having no knowledge of the determinations by which superior spirits are moved, seize at once on superficial inconsistencies, to formulate an accusation and so to pass sentence on them. If, subsequently, the proceedings thus attacked are crowned with success, showing the correlations of the preliminaries and the results, a few of the vanguard of calumnies always survive. In our day, for instance, Napoleon was condemned by our contemporaries when he spread his eagle's wings to alight in England: only 1822 could explain 1804 and the flatboats at Boulogne.

As, in Desplein, his glory and science were invulnerable, his enemies attacked his odd moods and his temper, whereas, in fact, he was simply characterized by what the English call eccentricity. Sometimes very handsomely dressed, like Crebillon the tragical, he would suddenly affect extreme indifference as to what he wore; he was sometimes seen in a carriage, and sometimes on foot. By turns rough and kind, harsh and covetous on the surface, but capable of offering his whole fortune to his exiled masters – who did him the honor of accepting it for a few days – no man ever gave rise to such contradictory judgements. Although

to obtain a black ribbon, which physicians ought not to intrigue for, he was capable of dropping a prayer-book out of his pocket at Court, in his heart he mocked at everything; he had a deep contempt for men, after studying them from above and below, after detecting their genuine expression when performing the most solemn and the meanest acts of their lives.

The qualities of a great man are often federative. If among these colossal spirits one has more talent than wit, his wit is still superior to that of a man of whom it is simply stated that "he is witty." Genius always presupposes moral insight. This insight may be applied to a special subject; but he who can see a flower must be able to see the sun. The man who on hearing a diplomate he has saved ask, "How is the Emperor?" could say, "The courtier is alive; the man will follow!" – that man is not merely a surgeon or a physician, he is prodigiously witty also. Hence a patient and diligent student of human nature will admit Desplein's exorbitant pretensions, and believe – as he himself believed – that he might have been no less great as a minister than he was as a surgeon.

Among the riddles which Desplein's life presents to many of his contemporaries, we have chosen one of the most interesting, because the answer is to be found at the end of the narrative, and will avenge him for some foolish charges.

Of all the students in Desplein's hospital, Horace Bianchon was one of those to whom he most warmly attached himself. Before being a house surgeon at the Hotel-Dieu, Horace Bianchon had been a medical student lodging in a squalid

boarding house in the *Quartier Latin*, known as the Maison Vauquer. This poor young man had felt there the gnawing of that burning poverty which is a sort of crucible from which great talents are to emerge as pure and incorruptible as diamonds, which may be subjected to any shock without being crushed. In the fierce fire of their unbridled passions they acquire the most impeccable honesty, and get into the habit of fighting the battles which await genius with the constant work by which they coerce their cheated appetites.

Horace was an upright young fellow, incapable of tergiversation on a matter of honor, going to the point without waste of words, and as ready to pledge his cloak for a friend as to give him his time and his night hours. Horace, in short, was one of those friends who are never anxious as to what they may get in return for what they give, feeling sure that they will in their turn get more than they give. Most of his friends felt for him that deeply-seated respect which is inspired by unostentatious virtue, and many of them dreaded his censure. But Horace made no pedantic display of his qualities. He was neither a puritan nor a preacher; he could swear with a grace as he gave his advice, and was always ready for a jollification when occasion offered. A jolly companion, not more prudish than a trooper, as frank and outspoken – not as a sailor, for nowadays sailors are wily diplomates – but as an honest man who has nothing in his life to hide, he walked with his head erect, and a mind content. In short, to put the facts into a word, Horace was the Pylades of

more than one Orestes – creditors being regarded as the nearest modern equivalent to the Furies of the ancients.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.