HONORÉ DE BALZAC

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The Comte de Fontaine, head of one of the oldest families in Poitou, had served the Bourbon cause with intelligence and bravery during the war in La Vendee against the Republic. After having escaped all the dangers which threatened the royalist leaders during this stormy period of modern history, he was wont to say in jest, "I am one of the men who gave themselves to be killed on the steps of the throne." And the pleasantry had some truth in it, as spoken by a man left for dead at the bloody battle of Les Quatre Chemins. Though ruined by confiscation, the staunch Vendeen steadily refused the lucrative posts offered to him by the Emperor Napoleon. Immovable in his aristocratic faith, he had blindly obeyed its precepts when he thought it fitting to choose a companion for life. In spite of the blandishments of a rich but revolutionary parvenu, who valued the alliance at a high figure, he married Mademoiselle de Kergarouet, without a fortune, but belonging to one of the oldest families in Brittany.

When the second revolution burst on Monsieur de Fontaine he was encumbered with a large family. Though it was no part of the noble gentlemen's views to solicit favors, he yielded to his wife's wish, left his country estate, of which the income barely sufficed to maintain his children, and came to Paris. Saddened by seeing the greediness of his former comrades in the rush for

places and dignities under the new Constitution, he was about to return to his property when he received a ministerial despatch, in which a well-known magnate announced to him his nomination as marechal de camp, or brigadier-general, under a rule which allowed the officers of the Catholic armies to count the twenty submerged years of Louis XVIII.'s reign as years of service. Some days later he further received, without any solicitation, ex officio, the crosses of the Legion of Honor and of Saint-Louis.

Shaken in his determination by these successive favors, due, as he supposed, to the monarch's remembrance, he was no longer satisfied with taking his family, as he had piously done every Sunday, to cry "Vive le Roi" in the hall of the Tuileries when the royal family passed through on their way to chapel; he craved the favor of a private audience. The audience, at once granted, was in no sense private. The royal drawing-room was full of old adherents, whose powdered heads, seen from above, suggested a carpet of snow. There the Count met some old friends, who received him somewhat coldly; but the princes he thought ADORABLE, an enthusiastic expression which escaped him when the most gracious of his masters, to whom the Count had supposed himself to be known only by name, came to shake hands with him, and spoke of him as the most thorough Vendeen of them all. Notwithstanding this ovation, none of these august persons thought of inquiring as to the sum of his losses, or of the money he had poured so generously into the chests of the Catholic regiments. He discovered, a little late, that he had

made war at his own cost. Towards the end of the evening he thought he might venture on a witty allusion to the state of his affairs, similar, as it was, to that of many other gentlemen. His Majesty laughed heartily enough; any speech that bore the hall-mark of wit was certain to please him; but he nevertheless replied with one of those royal pleasantries whose sweetness is more formidable than the anger of a rebuke. One of the King's most intimate advisers took an opportunity of going up to the fortune-seeking Vendeen, and made him understand by a keen and polite hint that the time had not yet come for settling accounts with the sovereign; that there were bills of much longer standing than his on the books, and there, no doubt, they would remain, as part of the history of the Revolution. The Count prudently withdrew from the venerable group, which formed a respectful semi-circle before the august family; then, having extricated his sword, not without some difficulty, from among the lean legs which had got mixed up with it, he crossed the courtyard of the Tuileries and got into the hackney cab he had left on the quay. With the restive spirit, which is peculiar to the nobility of the old school, in whom still survives the memory of the League and the day of the Barricades (in 1588), he bewailed himself in his cab, loudly enough to compromise him, over the change that had come over the Court. "Formerly," he said to himself, "every one could speak freely to the King of his own little affairs; the nobles could ask him a favor, or for money, when it suited them, and nowadays one cannot recover the money advanced for his service without

raising a scandal! By Heaven! the cross of Saint-Louis and the rank of brigadier-general will not make good the three hundred thousand livres I have spent, out and out, on the royal cause. I must speak to the King, face to face, in his own room."

This scene cooled Monsieur de Fontaine's ardor all the more effectually because his requests for an interview were never answered. And, indeed, he saw the upstarts of the Empire obtaining some of the offices reserved, under the old monarchy, for the highest families.

"All is lost!" he exclaimed one morning. "The King has certainly never been other than a revolutionary. But for Monsieur, who never derogates, and is some comfort to his faithful adherents, I do not know what hands the crown of France might not fall into if things are to go on like this. Their cursed constitutional system is the worst possible government, and can never suit France. Louis XVIII. and Monsieur Beugnot spoiled everything at Saint Ouen."

The Count, in despair, was preparing to retire to his estate, abandoning, with dignity, all claims to repayment. At this moment the events of the 20th March (1815) gave warning of a fresh storm, threatening to overwhelm the legitimate monarch and his defenders. Monsieur de Fontaine, like one of those generous souls who do not dismiss a servant in a torrent of rain; borrowed on his lands to follow the routed monarchy, without knowing whether this complicity in emigration would prove more propitious to him than his past devotion. But when

he perceived that the companions of the King's exile were in higher favor than the brave men who had protested, sword in hand, against the establishment of the republic, he may perhaps have hoped to derive greater profit from this journey into a foreign land than from active and dangerous service in the heart of his own country. Nor was his courtier-like calculation one of these rash speculations which promise splendid results on paper, and are ruinous in effect. He was – to quote the wittiest and most successful of our diplomates – one of the faithful five hundred who shared the exile of the Court at Ghent, and one of the fifty thousand who returned with it. During the short banishment of royalty, Monsieur de Fontaine was so happy as to be employed by Louis XVIII., and found more than one opportunity of giving him proofs of great political honesty and sincere attachment. One evening, when the King had nothing better to do, he recalled Monsieur de Fontaine's witticism at the Tuileries. The old Vendeen did not let such a happy chance slip; he told his history with so much vivacity that a king, who never forgot anything, might remember it at a convenient season. The royal amateur of literature also observed the elegant style given to some notes which the discreet gentleman had been invited to recast. This little success stamped Monsieur de Fontaine on the King's memory as one of the loyal servants of the Crown.

At the second restoration the Count was one of those special envoys who were sent throughout the departments charged with absolute jurisdiction over the leaders of revolt; but he used

his terrible powers with moderation. As soon as the temporary commission was ended, the High Provost found a seat in the Privy Council, became a deputy, spoke little, listened much, and changed his opinions very considerably. Certain circumstances, unknown to historians, brought him into such intimate relations with the Sovereign, that one day, as he came in, the shrewd monarch addressed him thus: "My friend Fontaine, I shall take care never to appoint you to be director-general, or minister. Neither you nor I, as employees, could keep our place on account of our opinions. Representative government has this advantage; it saves Us the trouble We used to have, of dismissing Our Secretaries of State. Our Council is a perfect inn-parlor, whither public opinion sometimes sends strange travelers; however, We can always find a place for Our faithful adherents."

This ironical speech was introductory to a rescript giving Monsieur de Fontaine an appointment as administrator in the office of Crown lands. As a consequence of the intelligent attention with which he listened to his royal Friend's sarcasms, his name always rose to His Majesty's lips when a commission was to be appointed of which the members were to receive a handsome salary. He had the good sense to hold his tongue about the favor with which he was honored, and knew how to entertain the monarch in those familiar chats in which Louis XVIII. delighted as much as in a well-written note, by his brilliant manner of repeating political anecdotes, and the political or parliamentary tittle-tattle – if the expression may pass – which at

that time was rife. It is well known that he was immensely amused by every detail of his Gouvernementabilite – a word adopted by his facetious Majesty.

Thanks to the Comte de Fontaine's good sense, wit, and tact, every member of his numerous family, however young, ended, as he jestingly told his Sovereign, in attaching himself like a silkworm to the leaves of the Pay-List. Thus, by the King's intervention, his eldest son found a high and fixed position as a lawyer. The second, before the restoration a mere captain, was appointed to the command of a legion on the return from Ghent; then, thanks to the confusion of 1815, when the regulations were evaded, he passed into the bodyguard, returned to a line regiment, and found himself after the affair of the Trocadero a lieutenant-general with a commission in the Guards. The youngest, appointed sous-prefet, ere long became a legal official and director of a municipal board of the city of Paris, where he was safe from changes in Legislature. These bounties, bestowed without parade, and as secret as the favor enjoyed by the Count, fell unperceived. Though the father and his three sons each had sinecures enough to enjoy an income in salaries almost equal to that of a chief of department, their political good fortune excited no envy. In those early days of the constitutional system, few persons had very precise ideas of the peaceful domain of the civil service, where astute favorites managed to find an equivalent for the demolished abbeys. Monsieur le Comte de Fontaine, who till lately boasted that he had not read the Charter,

and displayed such indignation at the greed of courtiers, had, before long, proved to his august master that he understood, as well as the King himself, the spirit and resources of the representative system. At the same time, notwithstanding the established careers open to his three sons, and the pecuniary advantages derived from four official appointments, Monsieur de Fontaine was the head of too large a family to be able to re-establish his fortune easily and rapidly.

His three sons were rich in prospects, in favor, and in talent; but he had three daughters, and was afraid of wearying the monarch's benevolence. It occurred to him to mention only one by one, these virgins eager to light their torches. The King had too much good taste to leave his work incomplete. The marriage of the eldest with a Receiver-General, Planat de Baudry, was arranged by one of those royal speeches which cost nothing and are worth millions. One evening, when the Sovereign was out of spirits, he smiled on hearing of the existence of another Demoiselle de Fontaine, for whom he found a husband in the person of a young magistrate, of inferior birth, no doubt, but wealthy, and whom he created Baron. When, the year after, the Vendeen spoke of Mademoiselle Emilie de Fontaine, the King replied in his thin sharp tones, "Amicus Plato sed magis amica Natio." Then, a few days later, he treated his "friend Fontaine" to a quatrain, harmless enough, which he styled an epigram, in which he made fun of these three daughters so skilfully introduced, under the form of a trinity. Nay, if report

is to be believed, the monarch had found the point of the jest in the Unity of the three Divine Persons.

"If your Majesty would only condescend to turn the epigram into an epithalamium?" said the Count, trying to turn the sally to good account.

"Though I see the rhyme of it, I fail to see the reason," retorted the King, who did not relish any pleasantry, however mild, on the subject of his poetry.

From that day his intercourse with Monsieur de Fontaine showed less amenity. Kings enjoy contradicting more than people think. Like most youngest children, Emilie de Fontaine was a Benjamin spoilt by almost everybody. The King's coolness, therefore, caused the Count all the more regret, because no marriage was ever so difficult to arrange as that of this darling daughter. To understand all the obstacles we must make our way into the fine residence where the official was housed at the expense of the nation. Emilie had spent her childhood on the family estate, enjoying the abundance which suffices for the joys of early youth; her lightest wishes had been law to her sisters, her brothers, her mother, and even her father. All her relations doted on her. Having come to years of discretion just when her family was loaded with the favors of fortune, the enchantment of life continued. The luxury of Paris seemed to her just as natural as a wealth of flowers or fruit, or as the rural plenty which had been the joy of her first years. Just as in her childhood she had never been thwarted in the satisfaction of her playful desires, so

now, at fourteen, she was still obeyed when she rushed into the whirl of fashion.

Thus, accustomed by degrees to the enjoyment of money, elegance of dress, of gilded drawing-rooms and fine carriages, became as necessary to her as the compliments of flattery, sincere or false, and the festivities and vanities of court life. Like most spoiled children, she tyrannized over those who loved her, and kept her blandishments for those who were indifferent. Her faults grew with her growth, and her parents were to gather the bitter fruits of this disastrous education. At the age of nineteen Emilie de Fontaine had not yet been pleased to make a choice from among the many young men whom her father's politics brought to his entertainments. Though so young, she asserted in society all the freedom of mind that a married woman can enjoy. Her beauty was so remarkable that, for her, to appear in a room was to be its queen; but, like sovereigns, she had no friends, though she was everywhere the object of attentions to which a finer nature than hers might perhaps have succumbed. Not a man, not even an old man, had it in him to contradict the opinions of a young girl whose lightest look could rekindle love in the coldest heart.

She had been educated with a care which her sisters had not enjoyed; painted pretty well, spoke Italian and English, and played the piano brilliantly; her voice, trained by the best masters, had a ring in it which made her singing irresistibly charming. Clever, and intimate with every branch of literature, she might

have made folks believe that, as Mascarille says, people of quality come into the world knowing everything. She could argue fluently on Italian or Flemish painting, on the Middle Ages or the Renaissance; pronounced at haphazard on books new or old, and could expose the defects of a work with a cruelly graceful wit. The simplest thing she said was accepted by an admiring crowd as a fetfah of the Sultan by the Turks. She thus dazzled shallow persons; as to deeper minds, her natural tact enabled her to discern them, and for them she put forth so much fascination that, under cover of her charms, she escaped their scrutiny. This enchanting veneer covered a careless heart; the opinion – common to many young girls – that no one else dwelt in a sphere so lofty as to be able to understand the merits of her soul; and a pride based no less on her birth than on her beauty. In the absence of the overwhelming sentiment which, sooner or later, works havoc in a woman's heart, she spent her young ardor in an immoderate love of distinctions, and expressed the deepest contempt for persons of inferior birth. Supremely impertinent to all newly-created nobility, she made every effort to get her parents recognized as equals by the most illustrious families of the Saint-Germain quarter.

These sentiments had not escaped the observing eye of Monsieur de Fontaine, who more than once, when his two elder girls were married, had smarted under Emilie's sarcasm. Logical readers will be surprised to see the old Royalist bestowing his eldest daughter on a Receiver-General, possessed, indeed, of

some old hereditary estates, but whose name was not preceded by the little word to which the throne owed so many partisans, and his second to a magistrate too lately Baronified to obscure the fact that his father had sold firewood. This noteworthy change in the ideas of a noble on the verge of his sixtieth year – an age when men rarely renounce their convictions – was due not merely to his unfortunate residence in the modern Babylon, where, sooner or later, country folks all get their corners rubbed down; the Comte de Fontaine's new political conscience was also a result of the King's advice and friendship. The philosophical prince had taken pleasure in converting the Vendeen to the ideas required by the advance of the nineteenth century, and the new aspect of the Monarchy. Louis XVIII. aimed at fusing parties as Napoleon had fused things and men. The legitimate King, who was not less clever perhaps than his rival, acted in a contrary direction. The last head of the House of Bourbon was just as eager to satisfy the third estate and the creations of the Empire, by curbing the clergy, as the first of the Napoleons had been to attract the grand old nobility, or to endow the Church. The Privy Councillor, being in the secret of these royal projects, had insensibly become one of the most prudent and influential leaders of that moderate party which most desired a fusion of opinion in the interests of the nation. He preached the expensive doctrines of constitutional government, and lent all his weight to encourage the political see-saw which enabled his master to rule France in the midst of storms. Perhaps Monsieur de Fontaine hoped that one of

the sudden gusts of legislation, whose unexpected efforts then startled the oldest politicians, might carry him up to the rank of peer. One of his most rigid principles was to recognize no nobility in France but that of the peerage – the only families that might enjoy any privileges.

"A nobility bereft of privileges," he would say, "is a tool without a handle."

As far from Lafayette's party as he was from La Bourdonnaye's, he ardently engaged in the task of general reconciliation, which was to result in a new era and splendid fortunes for France. He strove to convince the families who frequented his drawing-room, or those whom he visited, how few favorable openings would henceforth be offered by a civil or military career. He urged mothers to give their boys a start in independent and industrial professions, explaining that military posts and high Government appointments must at last pertain, in a quite constitutional order, to the younger sons of members of the peerage. According to him, the people had conquered a sufficiently large share in practical government by its elective assembly, its appointments to law-offices, and those of the exchequer, which, said he, would always, as heretofore, be the natural right of the distinguished men of the third estate.

These new notions of the head of the Fontaines, and the prudent matches for his eldest girls to which they had led, met with strong resistance in the bosom of his family. The Comtesse de Fontaine remained faithful to the ancient beliefs which no

woman could disown, who, through her mother, belonged to the Rohans. Although she had for a while opposed the happiness and fortune awaiting her two eldest girls, she yielded to those private considerations which husband and wife confide to each other when their heads are resting on the same pillow. Monsieur de Fontaine calmly pointed out to his wife, by exact arithmetic that their residence in Paris, the necessity for entertaining, the magnificence of the house which made up to them now for the privations so bravely shared in La Vendee, and the expenses of their sons, swallowed up the chief part of their income from salaries. They must therefore seize, as a boon from heaven, the opportunities which offered for settling their girls with such wealth. Would they not some day enjoy sixty – eighty – a hundred thousand francs a year? Such advantageous matches were not to be met with every day for girls without a portion. Again, it was time that they should begin to think of economizing, to add to the estate of Fontaine, and re-establish the old territorial fortune of the family. The Countess yielded to such cogent arguments, as every mother would have done in her place, though perhaps with a better grace; but she declared that Emilie, at any rate, should marry in such a way as to satisfy the pride she had unfortunately contributed to foster in the girl's young soul.

Thus events, which ought to have brought joy into the family, had introduced a small leaven of discord. The Receiver-General and the young lawyer were the objects of a ceremonious formality which the Countess and Emilie contrived to create.

This etiquette soon found even ampler opportunity for the display of domestic tyranny; for Lieutenant-General de Fontaine married Mademoiselle Mongenod, the daughter of a rich banker; the President very sensibly found a wife in a young lady whose father, twice or thrice a millionaire, had traded in salt; and the third brother, faithful to his plebeian doctrines, married Mademoiselle Grossetete, the only daughter of the Receiver-General at Bourges. The three sisters-in-law and the two brothers-in-law found the high sphere of political bigwigs, and the drawing-rooms of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, so full of charm and of personal advantages, that they united in forming a little court round the overbearing Emilie. This treaty between interest and pride was not, however, so firmly cemented but that the young despot was, not unfrequently, the cause of revolts in her little realm. Scenes, which the highest circles would not have disowned, kept up a sarcastic temper among all the members of this powerful family; and this, without seriously diminishing the regard they professed in public, degenerated sometimes in private into sentiments far from charitable. Thus the Lieutenant-General's wife, having become a Baronne, thought herself quite as noble as a Kergarouet, and imagined that her good hundred thousand francs a year gave her the right to be as impertinent as her sister-in-law Emilie, whom she would sometimes wish to see happily married, as she announced that the daughter of some peer of France had married Monsieur So-and-So with no title to his name. The Vicomtesse de Fontaine amused

herself by eclipsing Emilie in the taste and magnificence that were conspicuous in her dress, her furniture, and her carriages. The satirical spirit in which her brothers and sisters sometimes received the claims avowed by Mademoiselle de Fontaine roused her to wrath that a perfect hailstorm of sharp sayings could hardly mitigate. So when the head of the family felt a slight chill in the King's tacit and precarious friendship, he trembled all the more because, as a result of her sisters' defiant mockery, his favorite daughter had never looked so high.

In the midst of these circumstances, and at a moment when this petty domestic warfare had become serious, the monarch, whose favor Monsieur de Fontaine still hoped to regain, was attacked by the malady of which he was to die. The great political chief, who knew so well how to steer his bark in the midst of tempests, soon succumbed. Certain then of favors to come, the Comte de Fontaine made every effort to collect the elite of marrying men about his youngest daughter. Those who may have tried to solve the difficult problem of settling a haughty and capricious girl, will understand the trouble taken by the unlucky father. Such an affair, carried out to the liking of his beloved child, would worthily crown the career the Count had followed for these ten years at Paris. From the way in which his family claimed salaries under every department, it might be compared with the House of Austria, which, by intermarriage, threatens to pervade Europe. The old Vendeen was not to be discouraged in bringing forward suitors, so much had he his

daughter's happiness at heart, but nothing could be more absurd than the way in which the impertinent young thing pronounced her verdicts and judged the merits of her adorers. It might have been supposed that, like a princess in the Arabian Nights, Emilie was rich enough and beautiful enough to choose from among all the princes in the world. Her objections were each more preposterous than the last: one had too thick knees and was bow-legged, another was short-sighted, this one's name was Durand, that one limped, and almost all were too fat. Livelier, more attractive, and gayer than ever after dismissing two or three suitors, she rushed into the festivities of the winter season, and to balls, where her keen eyes criticised the celebrities of the day, delighted in encouraging proposals which she invariably rejected.

Nature had bestowed on her all the advantages needed for playing the part of Celimene. Tall and slight, Emilie de Fontaine could assume a dignified or a frolicsome mien at her will. Her neck was rather long, allowing her to affect beautiful attitudes of scorn and impertinence. She had cultivated a large variety of those turns of the head and feminine gestures, which emphasize so cruelly or so happily a hint of a smile. Fine black hair, thick and strongly-arched eyebrows, lent her countenance an expression of pride, to which her coquettish instincts and her mirror had taught her to add terror by a stare, or gentleness by the softness of her gaze, by the set of the gracious curve of her lips, by the coldness or the sweetness of her smile. When Emilie meant to conquer a heart, her pure voice did not lack

melody; but she could also give it a sort of curt clearness when she was minded to paralyze a partner's indiscreet tongue. Her colorless face and alabaster brow were like the limpid surface of a lake, which by turns is rippled by the impulse of a breeze and recovers its glad serenity when the air is still. More than one young man, a victim to her scorn, accused her of acting a part; but she justified herself by inspiring her detractors with the desire to please her, and then subjecting them to all her most contemptuous caprice. Among the young girls of fashion, not one knew better than she how to assume an air of reserve when a man of talent was introduced to her, or how to display the insulting politeness which treats an equal as an inferior, and to pour out her impertinence on all who tried to hold their heads on a level with hers. Wherever she went she seemed to be accepting homage rather than compliments, and even in a princess her airs and manner would have transformed the chair on which she sat into an imperial throne.

Monsieur de Fontaine discovered too late how utterly the education of the daughter he loved had been ruined by the tender devotion of the whole family. The admiration which the world is at first ready to bestow on a young girl, but for which, sooner or later, it takes its revenge, had added to Emilie's pride, and increased her self-confidence. Universal subservience had developed in her the selfishness natural to spoilt children, who, like kings, make a plaything of everything that comes to hand. As yet the graces of youth and the charms of talent hid these faults

from every eye; faults all the more odious in a woman, since she can only please by self-sacrifice and unselfishness; but nothing escapes the eye of a good father, and Monsieur de Fontaine often tried to explain to his daughter the more important pages of the mysterious book of life. Vain effort! He had to lament his daughter's capricious indocility and ironical shrewdness too often to persevere in a task so difficult as that of correcting an ill-disposed nature. He contented himself with giving her from time to time some gentle and kind advice; but he had the sorrow of seeing his tenderest words slide from his daughter's heart as if it were of marble. A father's eyes are slow to be unsealed, and it needed more than one experience before the old Royalist perceived that his daughter's rare caresses were bestowed on him with an air of condescension. She was like young children, who seem to say to their mother, "Make haste to kiss me, that I may go to play." In short, Emilie vouchsafed to be fond of her parents. But often, by those sudden whims, which seem inexplicable in young girls, she kept aloof and scarcely ever appeared; she complained of having to share her father's and mother's heart with too many people; she was jealous of every one, even of her brothers and sisters. Then, after creating a desert about her, the strange girl accused all nature of her unreal solitude and her wilful griefs. Strong in the experience of her twenty years, she blamed fate, because, not knowing that the mainspring of happiness is in ourselves, she demanded it of the circumstances of life. She would have fled to the ends of the earth to escape a

marriage such as those of her two sisters, and nevertheless her heart was full of horrible jealousy at seeing them married, rich, and happy. In short, she sometimes led her mother – who was as much a victim to her vagaries as Monsieur de Fontaine – to suspect that she had a touch of madness.

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