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| FICTION

EUGÉNIE GRANDET
BY HONORÉ DE BALZAC · TRANS-
LATED BY ELLEN MARRIAGE
PREFACE BY GEORGE SAINTSBURY

Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide,
In thy most need to go by thy side.

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HONORÉ DE BALZAC, born at Tours in May 1799. Abandoned the law for literature about the age of twenty. Married a Polish countess in March 1850; died in Paris on 19th August of same year.

EUGÉNIE GRANDET



HONORÉ DE BALZAC

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PREFACE

WITH *Eugénie Grandet*, as with one or two, but only one or two others of Balzac's works, we come to a case of *Quis vituperavit?* Here, and perhaps here only, with *Le Médecin de campagne* and *Le Père Goriot*, though there may be carpers and depreciators, there are no open deniers of the merit of the work. The pathos of *Eugénie*, the mastery of *Grandet*, the success of the minor characters, especially *Nanon*, are universally recognized. The importance of the work has sometimes been slightly questioned even by those who admit its beauty; but this questioning can only support itself on the unavowed but frequently present conviction or suspicion that a 'good' or 'goody' book must be a weak one. As a matter of fact, no book can be, or can be asked to be, better than perfect on its own scheme, and with its own conditions. And on its own scheme and with its own conditions *Eugénie Grandet* is very nearly perfect.

On the character of the heroine will turn the final decision whether, as has been said by some (I believe I might be charged with having said it myself), Balzac's virtuous characters are always more theatrical than real. The decision must take in the *Benassis* of *Le Médecin de campagne*, but with him it will have less difficulty; for *Benassis*, despite the beauty and pathos of his confession, is a little 'a person of the boards' in his unfailingly providential character and his complete devotion to others. Must *Eugénie*, his feminine companion in goodness, be put on these boards likewise?

I admit that of late years, and more particularly since the undertaking of this present task made necessary to

me a more complete and methodical study of the whole works, including the most miscellaneous miscellanies, than I had previously given, my estimate of Balzac's goodness has gone up very much—that of his greatness had no need of raising. But I still think that even about Eugénie there is a very little unreality, a slight touch of that ignorance of the actual nature of girls which even fervent admirers of French novelists in general, and of Balzac in particular, have confessed to finding in them and him. That Eugénie should be entirely subjugated first by the splendour, and then by the misfortune, of her Parisian cousin, is not in the least unnatural; nor do I for one moment pretend to deny the possibility or the likelihood of her having

lifted up her eyes,
And loved him with that love which was her doom.

It is also difficult to make too much allowance for the fatal effect of an education under an insignificant if amiable mother and a tyrannical father, and of a confinement to an excessively small circle of extremely provincial society, on a disposition of more nobility than intellectual height or range. Still it must, I think, be permitted to the *advocatus diaboli* to urge that Eugénie's martyrdom is almost too thorough; that though complete, it is not, as Gautier said of his own ill luck, '*artiste-ment complet*'; that though it may be difficult to put the finger on any special blot, to say: 'Here the girl should have revolted,' or 'Here she would have behaved in some other way differently'; still there is a vague sense of incomplete lifelikeness—of that tendency to mirage and exaggeration which has been, and will be, so often noticed.

Still it is vague and not unpleasantly obtrusive, and in all other ways Eugénie is a triumph. It is noticeable that her creator has dwelt on the actual traits of her face

with much more distinctness than is usual with him; for Balzac's extraordinary minuteness in many ways does not invariably extend to physical charms. This minuteness is indeed so great that one has a certain suspicion of the head being taken from a live and special original. Nor is her physical presence—abominably libelled, there is no doubt, by Mme des Grassins—the only distinct thing about Eugénie. We see her hovering about the *beau cousin* with an innocent officiousness capable of committing no less the major crime of lending him money than the minor, but even more audacious, because open, one of letting him have sugar. She is perfectly natural in the courage with which she bears her father's unjust rage, and in the forgiveness which, quite as a matter of course, she extends to him after he has broken her own peace and her mother's heart. It is perhaps necessary to be French to comprehend entirely why she could not heap that magnificent pile of coals of fire on her unworthy cousin's head without flinging herself and her seventeen millions into the arms of somebody else; but the thing can be accepted if not quite understood. And the whole transaction of this heaping is admirable.

If the criticism be not thought something of a super-subtlety, it may perhaps be suggested that the inferiority which has generally been acknowledged in the lover is a confession or indication that there is something very slightly wrong with the scheme of Eugénie herself—that if she had been absolutely natural, it would not have been necessary to make Charles not merely a thankless brute, but a heedless fool. However great a scoundrel the ex-slave-trader may have been (and as presented to us earlier he does not seem so much scoundrelly as shallow), his respectable occupation must have made him a smart man of business; and as such, before burning his boats by such a letter as he writes, he might surely have found out how the land lay. But this does not matter much.

Nanon is, of course, quite excellent. She is not stupid, as her kind are supposed to be; she is only blindly faithful, as well as thoroughly good-hearted. Nor is the unfortunate Mme Grandet an idiot, nor are any of the *comparses* mere dummies. But naturally they all, even Eugénie herself to some extent, serve mainly as sets-off to the terrible Grandet. In him Balzac, a Frenchman of Frenchmen, has boldly depicted perhaps the worst and the commonest vice of the French character, the vice which is more common, and certainly worse than either the frivolity or the licence with which the nation is usually charged—the pushing, to wit, of thrift to the loathsome excess of an inhuman avarice. But he has justified himself to his country by communicating to his hero an unquestioned grandeur. The mirage works again, but it works with splendid effect. One need not be a sentimentalist to shudder a little at the *ta ta ta ta* of Grandet, the refrain of a money-grubbing which almost escapes greediness by its diabolic extravagance and success.

The bibliography of the book is not complicated. Balzac tried the first chapter (there were originally seven) in *L'Europe littéraire* for 19th September 1833; but he did not continue it there, and it appeared complete in the first volume of *Scènes de la vie de province* next year. Charpentier republished it in a single volume in 1839. The *Comédie* engulfed it in 1843, the chapter divisions then disappearing.

G. S.

NOTE

HONORÉ DE BALZAC was born at Tours 16th May 1799. His father had been a barrister before the Revolution, but at the time of Honoré's birth held a post in the Commissariat. His mother was much younger than his father, and survived her son. The novelist was the eldest of a family of four, two sisters being born after him and then a younger brother.

At the age of seven he was sent to the Oratorian Grammar School at Vendôme, where he stayed for seven years, without making any reputation for himself in the ordinary school course.

Leaving Tours towards the end of 1814, the Balzacs removed to Paris, where Honoré was sent to private schools and tutors till he had 'finished his classes,' in 1816. Then he attended lectures at the Sorbonne, and, being destined by his father for the law, he went through the necessary lectures and examinations, attending the offices of an attorney and a notary for three years.

Then a notary, a friend of his father, offered to Honoré a place in his office, with a prospect of succeeding him in the business on very favourable terms. As against this, however, Balzac protested he would be a man of letters and nothing else. His protest was successful, but only in a qualified way, for although he was allowed to follow his own bent, it was in solitude and with meagre supplies that he did so. His family had left Paris at about this time, and he remained in a sparsely furnished garret with an old woman to look after him. For ten years this period of probation lasted, although he did not remain in the garret the whole of this time.

We know, in detail, very little of him during this period. There are a good many of his letters during the first three years (1819-22) to his elder sister, Laure, who was his first confidante, and later his only authoritative biographer.

Between 1822 and 1829, when he first made his mark, there are very few of his letters. What concerns us most is, that in these ten years he wrote very numerous novels, though only ten of them were ever reprinted in the *Comédie humaine*, and these all omitted by him in his later arrangements of that stupendous series. He gained little by his writings during these years except experience, though he speaks of receiving sums of sixty, eighty, and one hundred pounds for some of them. One other thing, however, he learnt, which lasted him his life, but never did him the least good; this was the love of speculation. Amongst other businesses by which he thought to make money was that of publishing, and afterwards printing and typefounding.

It was with *Les Chouans* that Balzac made his first distinct success, and in the three years following 1829, besides doing much journalistic and other literary work, he published the following: *La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote*, the *Peau de chagrin*, most of the short *Contes philosophiques*, and many other stories, chiefly included in the *Scènes de la vie privée*. It cannot be said that he ever mixed much in society; it was impossible that he should do so, considering the vast amount of work he did and the manner in which he did it. His practice was to dine lightly about five or six; next to go to bed and sleep till eleven, twelve, or one; and then get up, and with the help only of enormous quantities of very strong coffee, to work for indefinite stretches of time into the morning or afternoon of the next day, often for sixteen hours at a time. The first draft of his work never presented it in anything like fullness, sometimes not amounting to more than a quarter of its final bulk, then, upon 'slip' proof with broad margins, he would almost rewrite it, making excisions, alterations, and, most of all, additions.

There is really very little biographical detail to be stated. On the 14th March 1850 he was married at Vierzschovnia, in the Ukraine, to Madame Hanska, born Countess Rzevuška, for whom he had waited nearly, if not quite, fourteen years, and returned to Paris at the end of May, dying in his house, in the rue Fortunée, on the 18th August the same year.

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The present volume is a reprint of the translation made by Miss Ellen Marriage for the edition of the *Comédie humaine*, in forty uniform volumes, edited by Professor Saintsbury. This edition contains all that is most significant of Balzac's work, and the following is a list, as arranged by the author, of its component novels and stories:

SCÈNES DE LA VIE PRIVÉE

- At the Sign of the Cat and Racket*, etc. (*La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote. Le Bal de Sceaux. La Bourse. La Vendetta. Mme Firmiani*).
- La Grande Bretèche*, etc. (*La Grande Bretèche. La Paix du ménage. La Fausse Maîtresse. Étude de femme. Autre étude de femme. Albert Savarus*). Translated by Mrs Clara Bell.
- A Daughter of Eve* (*Une Fille d'Ève. Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées*). Translated by Mrs R. S. Scott.
- A Woman of Thirty*, etc. (*La Femme de trente ans. La Femme abandonnée. La Grenadière. Le Message. Gobseck*). Translated by Miss Ellen Marriage.
- A Marriage Settlement* (*Le Contrat de mariage. Un Début dans la vie. Une Double Famille*).
- Modeste Mignon* (*Modeste Mignon*). Translated by Mrs Clara Bell.
- Béatrix* (*Béatrix*). Translated by James Waring.
- The Atheist's Mass*, etc. (*La Messe de l'athée. Honorine. Le Colonel Chabert. L'Interdiction. Pierre Grassou*). Translated by Mrs Clara Bell.

SCÈNES DE LA VIE DE PROVINCE

- Ursule Mirouët* (*Ursule Mirouët*). Translated by Mrs Clara Bell.
- Eugénie Grandet* (*Eugénie Grandet*). Translated by Miss Ellen Marriage.
- Pierrette and The Abbé Birotteau* (*Les Célibataires—I. Pierrette. Le Curé de Tours*). Translated by Mrs Clara Bell.
- A Bachelor's Establishment* (*Les Célibataires—II. Un Ménage de garçon*). Translated by Mrs Clara Bell.
- Parisians in the Country* (*Les Parisiens en province. L'Illustre Gaudissart. La Muse du département*).
- The Jealousies of a Country Town* (*Les Rivalités. La Vieille Fille. Le Cabinet des antiques*).
- The Lily of the Valley* (*Le Lys dans la vallée*). Translated by James Waring.
- Lost Illusions* (*Illusions perdues—I. Les Deux Poètes. Ève et David*). Translated by Miss Ellen Marriage.
- A Distinguished Provincial at Paris* (*Illusions perdues—II. Un Grand Homme de province à Paris. 1 and 2*). Translated by Miss Ellen Marriage.

SCÈNES DE LA VIE PARISIENNE

- A Harlot's Progress*. 2 vols. (*Splendeurs et Misères des courtisanes*). Translated by James Waring.
- The Unconscious Mummies*, etc. (*Les Comédiens sans le savoir. Un Prince de la Bohème. Un Homme d'affaires. Gaudissart II. La Maison Nucingen. Facino Cane*). Translated by Miss Ellen Marriage.
- The Thirteen* (*Histoire des treize. Ferragus. La Duchesse de Langeais*).
- Old Goriot* (*Le Père Goriot*). Translated by Miss Ellen Marriage.
- The Rise and Fall of César Birotteau* (*Grandeur et Décadence de César Birotteau*). Translated by Miss Ellen Marriage.
- A Princess's Secrets* (*Les Secrets de la Princesse de Cadignan. Les Employés*).
- Cousin Betty* (*Les Parents pauvres—I. La Cousine Bette*). Translated by James Waring.
- Cousin Pons* (*Les Parents pauvres—II. Le Cousin Pons*). Translated by Miss Ellen Marriage.

SCÈNES DE LA VIE POLITIQUE

- A Gondreville Mystery* (*Une Ténébreuse Affaire. Un Épisode sous la Terreur*).
- The Seamy Side of History* (*L'Envers de l'histoire contemporaine. Z. Marcas*). Translated by Mrs Clara Bell.
- The Member for Arcis* (*Le Député d'Arcis*).

SCÈNES DE LA VIE MILITAIRE

- The Chouans* (*Les Chouans*). Translated by Miss Ellen Marriage.

SCÈNES DE LA VIE DE CAMPAGNE

- The Country Doctor* (*Le Médecin de campagne*). Translated by Miss Ellen Marriage.
- The Country Parson* (*Le Curé de village*). Translated by Miss Ellen Marriage.
- The Peasantry* (*Les Paysans*). Translated by Miss Ellen Marriage.

ÉTUDES PHILOSOPHIQUES

- The Wild Ass's Skin* (*La Peau de chagrin*). Translated by Miss Ellen Marriage.
- The Quest of the Absolute* (*La Recherche de l'absolu*). Translated by Miss Ellen Marriage.
- A Father's Curse* (*L'Enfant maudit. Gambara. Massimilla Doni. Maître Cornélius*).

The Unknown Masterpiece, etc. (Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu. Jésus-Christ en Flandre. Melmoth réconcilié. Les Marana. Adieu. Le Réquisitionnaire. El Verdugo. Un Drame au bord de la mer. L'Auberge rouge. L'Élixir de longue vie).
Translated by Miss Ellen Marriage.

About Catherine de' Medici (Sur Catherine de Médicis). Translated by Mrs Clara Bell.

Seraphita (Séraphita. Louis Lambert. Les Proscrits). Translated by Mrs Clara Bell.

The Middle Classes (Les Petits Bourgeois).

EUGÉNIE GRANDET

To Maria

Your portrait is the fairest ornament of this book, and here it is fitting that your name should be set, like the branch of box taken from some unknown garden to lie for a while in the holy water, and afterwards set by pious hands above the threshold, where the green spray, ever renewed, is a sacred talisman to ward off all evil from the house.

IN some country towns there are houses more depressing to the sight than the dimmest cloister, the most melancholy ruins, or the dreariest stretch of sandy waste. Perhaps such houses as these combine the characteristics of all the three, and to the dumb silence of the monastery they unite the gauntness and grimness of the ruin, and the arid desolation of the waste. So little sign is there of life or of movement about them, that a stranger might take them for uninhabited dwellings; but the sound of an unfamiliar footstep brings someone to the window, a passive face suddenly appears above the sill, and the traveller receives a listless and indifferent glance—it is almost as if a monk leaned out to look for a moment on the world.

There is one particular house front in Saumur which possesses all these melancholy characteristics; the house is still standing at the end of the steep street which leads to the castle, at the upper end of the town. The street is very quiet nowadays; it is hot in summer and cold in winter, and very dark in places; besides this, it is

remarkably narrow and crooked, there is a peculiarly formal and sedate air about its houses, and it is curious how every sound reverberates through it—the cobble stones (always clean and dry) ring with every passing footfall.

This is the oldest part of the town, the ramparts rise immediately above it. The houses of the quarter have stood for three centuries; and albeit they are built of wood, they are strong and sound yet. Each house has a certain character of its own, so that for the artist and antiquary this is the most attractive part of the town of Saumur. Indeed, it would hardly be possible to go past the houses without a wondering glance at the grotesque figures carved on the projecting ends of the huge beams, set like a black bas-relief above the ground floor of almost every dwelling. Sometimes, where these beams have been protected from the weather by slates, a strip of dull blue runs across the crumbling walls, and crowning the whole is a high-pitched roof oddly curved and bent with age; the shingle boards that cover it are all warped and twisted by the alternate sun and rain of many a year. There are bits of delicate carving too, here and there, though you can scarcely make them out, on the worn and blackened window sills that seem scarcely strong enough to bear the weight of the red flower-pot in which some poor workwoman has set her tree carnation or her monthly rose.

Still further along the street there are more pretentious house doors studded with huge nails. On these our forefathers exercised their ingenuity, tracing hieroglyphs and mysterious signs which were once understood in every household, but all clues to their meaning are forgotten now—they will be understood no more of any mortal. In such wise would a Protestant make his profession of faith, there also would a Leaguer curse Henry IV in graven symbols. A burgher would commemorate