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~~FICTION~~

AT THE SIGN OF THE CAT AND
RACKET AND OTHER STORIES
BY HONORÉ DE BALZAC · TRANS-
LATED BY CLARA BELL · INTRO-
DUCTION BY GEORGE SAINTSBURY

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

AT THE SIGN OF THE CAT AND
RACKET AND OTHER STORIES



HONORÉ DE BALZAC

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INTRODUCTION

IN the very interesting preface, dated July 1842, which Balzac prefixed to the first collection of the *Comédie Humaine*, he endeavours, naturally enough, to represent the division into *Scènes de la Vie Parisienne*, etc., as a rational and reasoned one. Although not quite arbitrary, it was of course to a great extent determined by considerations which were not those of design; and we did not require the positive testimony which we find in the Letters to tell us that in the author's view, as well as in our own, not a few of the stories might have been shifted over from one division to another, and have filled their place just as well in the other as in the one.

'*La Maison du Chat-qui-Pelote*,' however, which originally bore the much less happy title of '*Gloire et Malheur*,' was a *Scène de la Vie Privée* from the first, and it bears out better than some of its companions its author's expressed intention of making these 'scenes' represent youth, whether Parisian or Provincial. Few of Balzac's stories have united the general suffrage for touching grace more than this; and there are few better examples of his minute Dutch-painting than the opening passages, or of his unconquerable delight in the details of business than his sketch of Monsieur Guillaume's establishment and its ways. The French equivalent of the '*Complete Tradesman*' of Defoe lasted much longer than his English counterpart; but, except in the smaller provincial towns, he is said to be uncommon now. As for the plot, if such a stately name can be given to so delicate a sketch, it is of course open to downright British judgment to pronounce the self-sacrifice of Lebas more ignoble than touching, the conduct of Théodore too childish to deserve the excuses sometimes possible for passionate inconstancy, and the character of Augustine angelically idiotic. This last outrage, if it were committed, would indeed only be an instance of the irreconcilable difference which almost to the present

day divides English and French ideas of ideally perfect girlhood, and of that state of womanhood which corresponds thereto. The *candeur adorable* which the Frenchman adores and exhibits in the girl; the uncompromising, though mortal, passion of the woman; are too different from any ideal that we have entertained, except for a very short period in the eighteenth century. But there are few more pathetic and charming impersonations of this other ideal than Augustine de Sommerieux.

All the stories associated with 'La Maison du Chat-qui-Pelote,' according to French standards—all, perhaps, according to all but the very strictest and oldest-fashioned of English—are perfectly free from the slightest objection on the score of that propriety against which Balzac has an amusing if not quite exact tirade in one of his books. And this is evidently not accidental, for the preface above referred to is an elaborate attempt to rebut the charge of *impropriety*, and to show that the author could draw virtuous as well as unvirtuous characters. But they are not, taking them as a whole, and omitting the 'Cat and Racket' itself, quite examples of putting the best foot foremost. 'Le Bal de Sceaux,' with its satire on contempt for trade, is in some ways more like Balzac's young friend and pupil Charles de Bernard than like himself; and I believe it attracted English notice pretty early. At least I seem, when quite a boy, and long before I read the *Comédie Humaine*, to have seen an English version or paraphrase of it. 'La Bourse,' though agreeable, is a little slight; and 'La Vendetta' might have been written on so well known a *donnée* by many persons besides Balzac. It happens, moreover, to contrast most unfortunately with the terrible and exquisite perfection of Mérimée's 'Mateo Falcone.' I should rank 'Madame Firmiani' a good deal higher than any of these three, though it too is a little slight, and though it is not in Balzac's most characteristic or important manner. Rather, perhaps, does it remind us of the 'Physiologies' and the other social 'skits' and sketches which he was writing for the *Caricature* and other papers at the time. Still, the various descriptions of the heroine have a point and sparkle which are almost peculiar to the not quite

mature work of men of genius ; and the actual story has a lightness which, perhaps, would have disappeared if Balzac had handled it at greater length.

As for bibliography, the 'Avant-Propos' (of which Momus may perhaps say that it is both a little too discursive and a little too apologetic) dates itself. I do not know whether there may be any interest for some readers in the fact that it originally appeared not in the *first*, but in the *last* 'livraison' of the first volume of the complete edition of the *Comédie*. 'La Maison du Chat-qui-Pelote,' under the title above referred to, saw the light first with other *Scènes de la Vie Privée* in 1830. But it was not dated as of the previous year till five years later, in its third edition ; while the title was not changed till the great collection itself. Of its companions, 'Le Bal de Sceaux' was an original one, and seems to have been written as well as published more or less at the same time. It at first had an alternative title, 'Ou le Pair de France,' which was afterwards dropped.

'La Bourse' was early, but not quite so early as these. It appeared in, and was apparently written for, the second edition of the *Scènes de la Vie Privée*, published in May 1832. In 1835 it was moved over to the *Scènes de la Vie Parisienne*, between which and the *Vie Privée* there is in fact a good deal of cross and arbitrary division. But when the full *Comédie* took shape it moved back again.

'La Vendetta' ranked from the first edition of these *Scènes* with them ; but, unlike those previously mentioned, it had had an earlier separate publication in part. For it is one of those stories which Balzac originally divided into chapters and afterwards printed without them. The first of these, which appeared in the *Silhouette* of April 1830, was entitled 'L'Atelier,' and the others were 'La Désobéissance,' 'Le Mariage,' and 'Le Châtiment.'

'Madame Firmiani' was first published in the *Revue de Paris* for February 1832 ; then became a *Conte Philosophique*, and still in the same year a *Scène de la Vie Parisienne*. It was in the 1842 collection that it took up its abode in the *Scènes de la Vie Privée*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

THE present volume gives the translation made by Mrs. CLARA BELL in 1898, revised by Mr. A. S. B. GLOVER in 1944. Mrs. BELL'S translation originally appeared in the edition of the *Comédie Humaine*, in 20 volumes, edited by Professor SAINTSBURY, and the following is a list, as arranged by the author, of the component novels and stories in the *Comédie* :—

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).
- A DAUGHTER OF EVE (Une Fille d'Eve. Mémoires de deux Jeunes Mariées).
- A WOMAN OF THIRTY, Etc. (La Femme de Trente Ans. La Femme abandonnée. La Grenadière. Le Message. Gobseck).
- A MARRIAGE SETTLEMENT (Le Contrat de Mariage. Un Début dans la Vie. Une Double Famille).
- MODESTE MIGNON (Modeste Mignon).
- BÉATRIX (Béatrix).
- THE ATHEIST'S MASS, Etc. (La Messe de l'Athée. Honorine. Le Colonel Chabert. L'Interdiction. Pierre Grassou).

Scènes de la Vie de Province.

- URSULE MIROUËT (Ursule Mirouët).
- EUGÉNIE GRANDET (Eugénie Grandet).
- PIERRETTE AND THE ABBÉ BIROTTEAU (Les Célibataires—I. Pierrette. Le Curé de Tours).
- A BACHELOR'S ESTABLISHMENT (Les Célibataires—II. Un Ménage de garçon).
- 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).
- LOST ILLUSIONS (Illusions Perdues—I. Les Deux Poètes. Eve et David).
- A DISTINGUISHED PROVINCIAL AT PARIS (Illusions Perdues—II. Un grand Homme de province à Paris. 1 and 2).

Scènes de la Vie Parisienne.

- A HARLOT'S PROGRESS. 2 vols. (Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes).
 THE UNCONSCIOUS MUMMERS, Etc. (Les Comédiens sans le savoir. Un Prince de la Bohème. Un Homme d'affaires. Gaudissart II. La Maison Nucingen. Facino Cane).
 THE THIRTEEN (Histoire des Treize. Ferragus. La Duchesse de Langeais).
 OLD GORIOT (Le Père Goriot).
 THE RISE AND FALL OF CÉSAR BIROTTEAU (Grandeur et Décadence de César Birotteau).
 A PRINCESS'S SECRETS (Les Secrets de la Princesse de Cadignan. Les Employés).
 COUSIN BETTY (Les Parents Pauvres—I. La Cousine Bette).
 COUSIN PONS (Les Parents Pauvres—II. Le Cousin Pons).

Scènes de la Vie Politique.

- A GONDREVILLE MYSTERY (Une Ténébreuse Affaire. Un Episode sous la Terreur).
 THE SEAMY SIDE OF HISTORY (L'Envers de l'Histoire Contemporaine. Z. Marcas).
 THE MEMBER FOR ARCIS (Le Député d'Arcis).

Scènes de la Vie Militaire.

- THE CHOUANS (Les Chouans).

Scènes de la Vie de Campagne.

- THE COUNTRY DOCTOR (Le Médecin de Campagne).
 THE COUNTRY PARSON (Le Curé de Village).
 THE PEASANTRY (Les Paysans).

Études Philosophiques.

- THE WILD ASS'S SKIN (La Peau de Chagrin).
 THE QUEST OF THE ABSOLUTE (La Recherche de l'Absolu).
 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).
 ABOUT CATHERINE DE MÉDICIS (Sur Catherine de Médicis).
 SERAPHITA (Seraphita. Louis Lambert. Les Proscrits).
 THE MIDDLE CLASSES (Les Petits Bourgeois).

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AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

IN giving the general title of 'The Human Comedy' to a work begun nearly thirteen years since, it is necessary to explain its motive, to relate its origin, and briefly sketch its plan, while endeavouring to speak of these matters as though I had no personal interest in them. This is not so difficult as the public might imagine. Few works conduce to much vanity; much labour conduces to great diffidence. This observation accounts for the study of their own works made by Corneille, Molière, and other great writers; if it is impossible to equal them in their fine conceptions, we may try to imitate them in this feeling.

The idea of *The Human Comedy* was at first as a dream to me, one of those impossible projects which we caress and then let fly; a chimera that gives us a glimpse of its smiling woman's face, and forthwith spreads its wings and returns to a heavenly realm of fantasy. But this chimera, like many another, has become a reality; it has its behests, its tyranny, which must be obeyed.

The idea originated in a comparison between Humanity and Animality.

It is a mistake to suppose that the great dispute, which has lately made a stir, between Cuvier and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, arose from a scientific innovation. *Unity of structure*, under other names, had occupied the greatest minds during the two previous centuries. As we read the extraordinary writings of the mystics who studied the sciences in their relation to the infinite, such as Swedenborg, Saint-Martin, and others, and the works of the greatest authors on Natural History—Leibnitz, Buffon, Charles Bonnet, etc., we detect in the *monads* of Leibnitz, in the *organic molecules* of Buffon, in the *vegetative force* of Needham, in the cor-

relation of similar organs of Charles Bonnet—who in 1760 was so bold as to write, 'Animals vegetate as plants do'—we detect, I say, the rudiments of the great law of Self for Self, which lies at the root of *Unity of Structure*. There is but one Animal. The Creator works on a single model for every organised being. 'The Animal' is elementary, and takes its external form, or, to be accurate, the differences in its form, from the environment in which it is obliged to develop. Zoological species are the result of these differences. The announcement and defence of this system, which is indeed in harmony with our preconceived ideas of Divine Power, will be the eternal glory of Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, Cuvier's victorious opponent on this point of higher science, whose triumph was hailed by Goethe in the last article he wrote.

I, for my part, convinced of this scheme of nature long before the discussion to which it has given rise, perceived that in this respect society resembled nature. For does not society modify Man, according to the conditions in which he lives and acts, into men as manifold as the species in Zoology? The differences between a soldier, an artisan, a man of business, a lawyer, an idler, a student, a statesman, a merchant, a sailor, a poet, a beggar, a priest, are as great, though not so easy to define, as those between the wolf, the lion, the ass, the crow, the shark, the seal, the sheep, etc. Thus social species have always existed, and will always exist, just as there are zoological species. If Buffon could produce a magnificent work by attempting to represent in a book the whole realm of zoology, was there not room for a work of the same kind on society? But the limits set by nature to the variations of animals have no existence in society. When Buffon describes the lion, he dismisses the lioness with a few phrases; but in society a wife is not always the female of the male. There may be two perfectly dissimilar beings in one household. The wife of a shopkeeper is sometimes worthy of a prince, and the wife

of a prince is often worthless compared with the wife of an artisan. The social state has freaks which Nature does not allow herself; it is nature plus society. The description of social species would thus be at least double that of animal species, merely in view of the two sexes. Then, among animals the drama is limited; there is scarcely any confusion; they turn and rend each other—that is all. Men, too, rend each other; but their greater or less intelligence makes the struggle far more complicated. Though some savants do not yet admit that the animal nature flows into human nature through an immense tide of life, the grocer certainly becomes a peer, and the noble sometimes sinks to the lowest social grade. Again, Buffon found that life was extremely simple among animals. Animals have little property, and neither arts nor sciences; while man, by a law that has yet to be sought, has a tendency to express his culture, his thoughts, and his life in everything he appropriates to his use. Though Leeuwenhoek, Swammerdam, Spallanzani, Réaumur, Charles Bonnet, Müller, Haller, and other patient investigators have shown us how interesting are the habits of animals, those of each kind are, at least to our eyes, always and in every age alike; whereas the dress, the manners, the speech, the dwelling of a prince, a banker, an artist, a citizen, a priest, and a pauper are absolutely unlike, and change with every phase of civilisation.

Hence the work to be written needed a threefold form—men, women, and things; that is to say, persons and the material expression of their minds; man, in short, and life.

As we read the dry and discouraging list of events called History, who can have failed to note that the writers of all periods, in Egypt, Persia, Greece, and Rome, have forgotten to give us the history of manners? The fragment of Petronius on the private life of the Romans excites rather than satisfies our curiosity. It was from observing this great void in the field of history that the Abbé Barthélemy

devoted his life to a reconstruction of Greek manners in *Le Jeune Anacharsis*.

But how could such a drama, with the three or four thousand persons which a society offers, be made interesting? How, at the same time, please the poet, the philosopher, and the masses who want both poetry and philosophy under striking imagery? Though I could conceive of the importance and of the poetry of such a history of the human heart, I saw no way of writing it; for hitherto the most famous story-tellers had spent their talent in creating two or three typical actors, in depicting one aspect of life. It was with this idea that I read the works of Walter Scott. Walter Scott, the modern troubadour, or finder (*trouvère = trouvreur*), had just then given an aspect of grandeur to a class of composition unjustly regarded as of the second rank. Is it not really more difficult to compete with personal and parochial interests by writing of Daphnis and Chloe, Roland, Amadis, Panurge, Don Quixote, Manon Lescaut, Clarissa, Lovelace, Robinson Crusoe, Gil Blas, Ossian, Julie d'Etanges, My Uncle Toby, Werther, René, Corinne, Adolphe, Paul and Virginia, Jeanie Deans, Claverhouse, Ivanhoe, Manfred, Mignon, than to set forth in order facts more or less similar in every country, to investigate the spirit of laws that have fallen into desuetude, to review the theories which mislead nations, or, like some metaphysicians, to explain what *Is*? In the first place, these actors, whose existence becomes more prolonged and more authentic than that of the generations which saw their birth, almost always live solely on condition of their being a vast reflection of the present. Conceived in the womb of their own period, the whole heart of humanity stirs within their frame, which often covers a complete system of philosophy. Thus Walter Scott raised to the dignity of the philosophy of History the novel, that literary form which, from age to age, sets perennial gems in the poetic crown of every nation where letters are cultivated. He vivified it with the spirit

of the past; he combined drama, dialogue, portraiture, scenery, and description; he fused the marvellous with truth—the two elements of the epic; and he brought poetry into close contact with the familiarity of the humblest speech. But as he had not so much devised a system as hit upon a manner in the ardour of his work, or as its logical outcome, he never thought of connecting his compositions in such a way as to form a complete history of which each chapter was a novel, and each novel the picture of a period.

It was by discerning this lack of unity, which in no way detracts from the Scottish writer's greatness, that I perceived at once the scheme which would favour the execution of my purpose, and the possibility of executing it. Though dazzled, so to speak, by Walter Scott's amazing fertility, always himself and always original, I did not despair, for I found the source of his genius in the infinite variety of human nature. Chance is the greatest romancer in the world; we have only to study it. French society would be the real author; I should be only the secretary. By drawing up an inventory of vices and virtues, by collecting the chief facts of the passions, by depicting characters, by choosing the principal incidents of social life, by composing types out of a combination of homogeneous characteristics, I might perhaps succeed in writing the history which so many historians have neglected: that of Manners. By patience and perseverance I might produce for France in the nineteenth century the book which we must all regret that Rome, Athens, Tyre, Memphis, Persia, and India have not bequeathed to us; that history of their social life which, prompted by the Abbé Barthélemy, Monteil patiently and steadily tried to write for the middle ages, but in an unattractive form.

The work, so far, was nothing. By adhering to the strict lines of a reproduction a writer might be a more or less faithful and more or less successful, patient, or courageous painter of types of humanity, a narrator of the dramas of

private life, an archaeologist of social furniture, a cataloguer of professions, a registrar of good and evil; but to deserve the praise of which every artist must be ambitious, must I not also investigate the reasons or the cause of these social effects, detect the hidden sense of this vast assembly of figures, passions, and incidents? And finally, having sought—I will not say having found—this reason, this motive power, must I not reflect on first principles, and discover in what particulars societies approach or deviate from the eternal law of truth and beauty? In spite of the wide scope of the preliminaries, which might of themselves constitute a book, the work, to be complete, would need a conclusion. Thus depicted, society ought to bear in itself the reason of its working.

The law of the writer, in virtue of which he is a writer, and which I do not hesitate to say makes him the equal, or perhaps the superior, of the statesman, is his judgment, whatever it may be, on human affairs, and his absolute devotion to certain principles. Machiavelli, Hobbes, Bossuet, Leibnitz, Kant, Montesquieu are the science which statesmen apply. 'A writer ought to have settled opinions on morals and politics; he should regard himself as a tutor of men; for men need no masters to teach them to doubt,' says Bonald. I took these noble words as my guide long ago; they are the law of the monarchical as of the democratic writer. And those who would confute me by my own words will find that they have misinterpreted some ironical phrase, or that they have turned against me a speech given to one of my actors—a trick peculiar to calumniators.

As to the intimate purpose, the soul of this work, these are the principles on which it is based.

Man is neither good nor bad; he is born with instincts and capabilities; society, far from depraving him, as Rousseau asserts, improves him, makes him better; but self-interest develops his evil tendencies also. Christianity, above all, Catholicism, being—as I have pointed out in the

Country Doctor (*le Médecin de Campagne*)—a complete system for the repression of the depraved tendencies of man, is the most powerful element of social order.

In reading attentively the presentment of society cast, as it were, from the life, with all that is good and all that is bad in it, we learn this lesson—if thought, or if passion, which combines thought and feeling, is the vital social element, it is also its destructive element. In this respect social life is like the life of man. Nations live long only by moderating their vital energy. Teaching, or rather education, by religious bodies is the grand principle of life for nations, the only means for diminishing the sum of evil and increasing the sum of good in all society. Thought, the living principle of good and ill, can only be trained, quelled, and guided by religion. The only possible religion is Christianity (see the letter from Paris in 'Louis Lambert,' in which the young mystic explains, à propos of Swedenborg's doctrines, how there has never been but one religion since the world began). Christianity created modern nationalities, and it will preserve them. Hence, no doubt, the necessity for the monarchical principle. Catholicism and Royalty are twin principles.

As to the limits within which these two principles should be confined by various institutions, so that they may not become absolute, every one will feel that a brief preface ought not to be a political treatise. I cannot, therefore, enter on religious discussions, nor on the political discussions of the day. I write under the light of two eternal truths—Religion and Monarchy; two necessities, as they are shown to be by contemporary events, towards which every writer of sound sense ought to try to guide the country back. Without being an enemy to election, which is an excellent principle as a basis of legislation, I reject election regarded as *the only social instrument*, especially so badly organised as it now is (1842); for it fails to represent imposing minorities, whose ideas and interests would occupy