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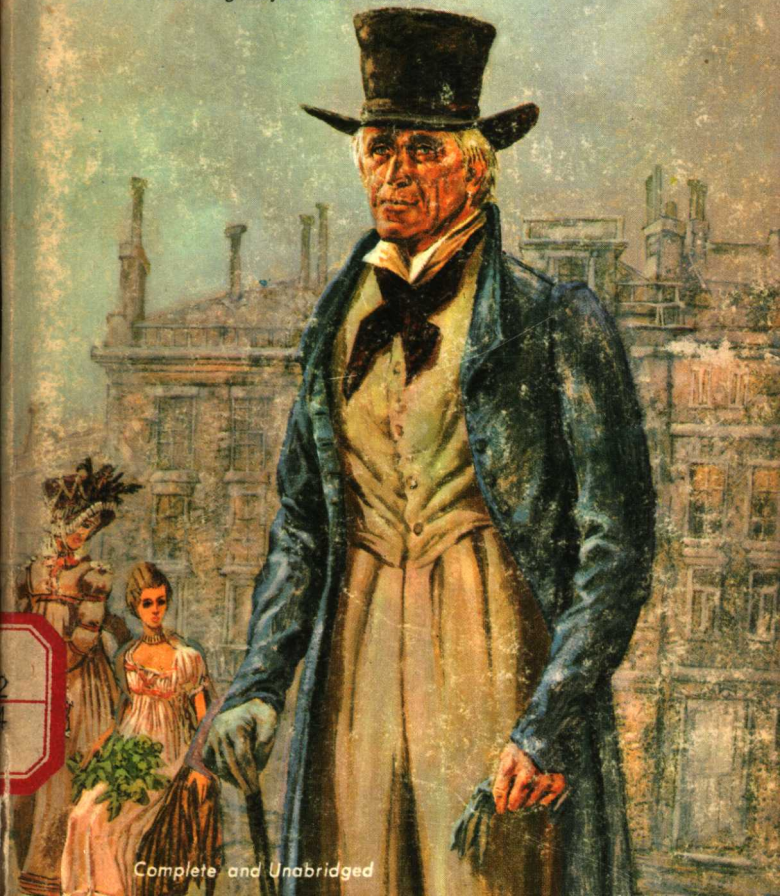
PÈRE GORIOT

HONORÉ de BALZAC

Introduction by Raymond R. Canon



Complete and Unabridged

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One of Balzac's chief characteristics is that he revels in description, and so we have a considerable portion of the first part of the book taken up with the description of the boardinghouse. The reader may be eager to get on with the story, but he cannot help but admit that the characters portrayed are a varied lot, and there is a certain amount of suspense created before the action begins. It is in these descriptive paragraphs that we see Balzac at his best.

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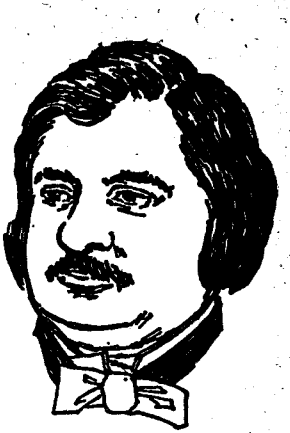

HONORÉ de BALZAC

Introduction

Approaching the works of Honoré de Balzac is like examining a Shakespeare, Goethe, or Dante—there seems to be no starting point. It would be convenient to say that his talent was recognized at an early age, and that he went on to achieve uninterrupted fame in everything to which he put his pen. But like many other writers of similar stature, such was not the case. Balzac, whose mother rejected him shortly after his birth in 1799, led a childhood that was anything but happy. He floundered about in school and did not recognize any desire to write until after he completed his education. Once he had made up his mind to be a writer, nothing deterred him. In spite of considerable family pressure, he persisted. It was his father who finally gave in and financed his first pitiful attempts, although the amount of money which he was given provided him with a mere existence in a badly heated garret.

His first major work was a drama, *Cromwell.* Opinion was unanimous. It was a failure. Balzac was wise enough to realize that his talent did not lie in this field. He turned to the novel, but his first efforts in this direction were no better; Balzac himself considered them to be incredibly bad and unnecessarily lurid. But they did provide him with his first income, and rendered him less dependent financially on his parents.

Spurred on by a love affair with a woman twenty-two years his senior, Balzac was able to acquire spiritual independence, and set about gaining complete material independence as well. With an assiduity which later was to become his trademark, he produced a series of potboilers which achieved for him this longed-for financial freedom.

Money, however, only served to bring out Balzac's utter lack of talent for business. In a remarkably short time, he managed to run up debts over ten times his literary income. Bailed out of this calamity by his family, he once more devoted his energies to writing, and it is at this point that we begin to see the greatness for which his later writings are famous.

Balzac was utterly convinced of his potential and devoted his energies toward becoming the most famous writer in all Europe. A typical day saw him rise at midnight, write until dawn and then spend most of the day correcting proofs and conducting his business affairs. After supper he would fall into bed, only to start again at midnight. He was fortified in this exhausting work by innumerable cups of coffee—in fact, someone has calculated that he must have drunk over 50,000 cups during his creative period. This staggering amount of coffee was to contribute to his premature death.

Balzac, who by this time called himself "de Balzac," shook off the effects of a disastrous love affair and dedicated himself to becoming the *historien des moeurs du 19ième siècle*, and to this end he began to lay the foundations for what was to become his "Comédie Humaine." He proposed writing this monumental work in three stages: the Studies of Manners, which was to contain all the repercussions of social conditions. This was to be followed by the "Philosophical Studies," a description of the causes of the above situation, and finally the "Analytical Studies"—a study of principles. The first series was to contain twenty-four volumes, the second, fifteen, and the third, nine.

It was during the 1830's that the majority of his great novels was produced. *Eugenie Grandet* in 1833, *Père Goriot* in 1835, and *César Birotteau* in 1837. These were, of course, written at the same breakneck speed as the remainder of his novels, and brought Balzac the fame he so ardently desired.

It was in 1833 that he met Madame de Hanska for the first time in Geneva. She had written to him earlier, signing her letter "L'Etrangère." This and subsequent letters so aroused Balzac's interest that he resolved to meet her as soon as possible. This was no sooner accomplished than he fell in love with her. She was a Polish aristocrat whose husband was considerably older than she, and Balzac saw in her the potentially rich widow he had so long searched for. The husband did not die until 1841, and surprisingly enough, Balzac did not marry her until March 1850, just a few months before his death. The irony of it all is that after Balzac had courted her throughout Europe, and succeeded in marrying her after all those years, she appeared quite unmoved by his serious illness. She was not even at his bedside during his last moments, although it was quite evident even to Victor Hugo, who visited him that day, that Balzac had only a very short time to live.

It is very difficult to judge Balzac by a single book, but if there are monuments to an author, it is *Père Goriot* which can serve as such an edifice. Like other books in the "Comédie Humaine," Balzac used one of the main figures as the title. Goriot is not, however, the central figure, for it is Rastignac who has that honor, while it is Vautrin who threatens to dominate the action.

One of Balzac's chief characteristics is that he revels in description, and so we have a considerable portion of the first part of the book taken up with the description of the boardinghouse. The reader may be eager to get on with the story, but he cannot help but admit that the characters portrayed are a varied lot, and there is a certain amount of suspense created before the action begins. It is in these descriptive paragraphs that we see Balzac at his best. The three main characters are all vividly contrasted, but at the same time they are part of Balzac himself. How Balzac could pour himself into his characters!

The three men, so different in their outlook, have only one thing in common: they stay at the same boardinghouse. But even the boardinghouse has its own unique character: broad enough to be able to take the variety that it does, it yet retains respectability for those who desire it.

You may judge Balzac's characters harshly or kindly, but in so doing you are judging Balzac himself, for more than most novelists he is inside his characters. This is especially true of *Père Goriot*, where Goriot's obsession with his daughters is morbid but yet basically a natural devotion. Just before his death the bitterness of the whole situation appears to him. He fluctuates between hope and despair, and dies without either of the daughters at his side. (How prophetic of Balzac and his wife!)

Even among Balzac's admirers there are many who would not go so far as to claim that he is among the great masters of French prose. It never occurred to him, for example, that a passage might be rendered much more effective by being shortened. To lengthen is to improve was his maxim. The final version sometimes reminds us of a field of corn whose seeds have been planted haphazardly.

We must, however, not lose sight of the fact that *Père Goriot*, fine a novel as it is by itself, is still a part of the "Comédie Humaine" and stands out even in that. Part of the series had been written before Balzac first hit upon the idea of incorporating his works into one master project. It does not seem to have hindered him much in his writing. Balzac is as much Balzac before as after this decision.

When we examine the "Comédie Humaine" as a whole, the amazing thing about it is that the characters that form the unity of it all are the ones that play essentially minor roles. In

Père Goriot, Rastignac is one of the few recurring figures who plays an essential part. This approach has the effect of increasing interest in the works as a whole, for the characters of any one book are those who are already a known quantity. We look for news of them as we do of old friends, and await their appearance in later novels.

The size of the "Comédie Humaine" is not its chief claim to greatness, but there is enough good writing in it to hold it together and even to incite interest in reading on. *Père Goriot* stands out as one of these adhesive elements.

RAYMOND R. CANON, M.A.

PÈRE GORIOT

Père Goriot

Madame Vauquer (*née* De Conflans) is an elderly person who for the past forty years has kept a lodging house in the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève, in the district that lies between the Latin Quarter and the Faubourg Saint-Marcel. Her house (known in the neighborhood as the Maison Vauquer) receives men and women, old and young, and no word has ever been breathed against her respectable establishment. But at the same time it must be said that as a matter of fact no young woman has been, under her roof for thirty years, and that if a young man stays there for any length of time it is a sure sign that his allowance must be of the slenderest. In 1819, however, the time when this drama opens, there was an almost penniless young girl among Madame Vauquer's boarders.

The lodging house is Madame Vauquer's own property. It is still standing at the lower end of the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève, just where the road slopes so sharply down to the Rue de l'Arbalète that wheeled traffic seldom passes that way, because it is so stony and steep. This position is sufficient to account for the silence prevalent in the streets shut in between the dome of the Panthéon and the dome of the Val-de-Grâce, two conspicuous public buildings that give a yellowish tone to the landscape and darken the whole district that lies beneath the shadow of their leaden-hued cupolas.

In that district the pavements are clean and dry, there is neither mud nor water in the gutters, grass grows in the chinks of the walls. The most heedless passer-by feels the depressing influences of a place where the sound of wheels creates a sensation; there is a grim look about the houses, a suggestion of a jail about those high garden walls. A Parisian straying into a suburb apparently composed of lodging houses and public institutions would see poverty and dullness, old age lying down to die, and joyous youth condemned to drudgery. It is the ugliest

quarter of Paris and, it may be added, the least known. But before all things, the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève is like a bronze frame for a picture for which the mind cannot be too well prepared by the contemplation of sad hues and sober images. Even so, step by step the daylight decreases, and the cicerone's droning voice grows hollower as the traveler descends into the Catacombs. The comparison holds good! Who shall say which is more ghastly, the sight of bleached skulls or of dried-up human hearts?

The front of the lodging house is at right angles to the road, and looks out upon a little garden, so that you see the side of the house in section, as it were, from the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève. Beneath the wall of the house front there lies a channel a fathom wide, paved with cobblestones, and beside it runs a graveled walk bordered by geraniums and oleanders and pomegranates set in great blue-and-white glazed earthenware pots. Access into the graveled walk is afforded by a door, above which the words MAISON VAUQUER may be read, and beneath, in rather smaller letters, *"Lodgings for both sexes,"* et cetera.

During the day a glimpse into the garden is easily obtained through a wicket to which a bell is attached. On the opposite wall, at the farther end of the graveled walk, a green marble arch was painted once upon a time by a local artist, and in this semblance of a shrine a statue representing Cupid is installed—a Parisian Cupid, so blistered and disfigured that he looks like a candidate for one of the adjacent hospitals, and might suggest an allegory to lovers of symbolism. The half-obliterated inscription on the pedestal beneath determines the date of this work of art, for it bears witness to the widespread enthusiasm felt for Voltaire on his return to Paris in 1777:

"Who'er thou art, thy master see!
He is, or was, or ought to be."

At night the wicket gate is replaced by a solid door. The little garden is no wider than the front of the house; it is shut in between the wall of the street and the partition wall of the neighboring house. A mantle of ivy conceals the bricks and attracts the eyes of passer-by to an effect that is picturesque in Paris, for each of the walls is covered with trellised vines that yield a scanty dusty crop of fruit, and furnish besides a subject of conversation for Madame Vauquer and her lodgers; every year the widow trembles for her vintage.

A straight path beneath the walls on either side of the garden leads to a clump of lime trees at the farther end of it—*line* trees,

as Madame Vauquer persists in calling them, in spite of the fact that she was a De Conflans, and regardless of repeated corrections from her lodgers.

The central space between the walls is filled with artichokes and rows of pyramid fruit trees, and surrounded by a border of lettuce, potherbs, and parsley. Under the lime trees there are a few green-painted garden seats and a wooden table, and hither during the dog days such of the lodgers as are rich enough to indulge in a cup of coffee come to take their pleasure, though it is hot enough to roast eggs even in the shade.

The house itself is three stories high, without counting the attics under the roof. It is built of rough stone, and covered with the yellowish stucco that gives a mean appearance to almost every house in Paris. There are five windows in each story in the front of the house; all the blinds visible through the small square panes are drawn up awry, so that the lines are all at cross purposes. At the side of the house there are but two windows on each floor, and the lowest of all are adorned with a heavy iron grating.

Behind the house a yard extends for some twenty feet, a space inhabited by a happy family of pigs, poultry, and rabbits. The woodshed is situated on the farthest side, and on the wall between the woodshed and the kitchen window hangs the meat safe, just above the place where the sink discharges its greasy streams. The cook sweeps all the refuse out through a little door into the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève, and frequently cleanses the yard with copious supplies of water, to ward off the plague.

The house might have been built on purpose for its present uses. Access is given by a French window to the first room on the ground floor, a sitting room that looks out upon the street through the two barred windows already mentioned. Another door opens out of it into the dining room, which is separated from the kitchen by the well of the staircase, the steps being constructed partly of wood, partly of tiles that are colored and beeswaxed. Nothing can be more depressing than the sight of that sitting room. The furniture is covered with horsehair woven in alternate dull and glossy stripes. There is a round table in the middle, with a purplish-red marble top, on which there stands by way of ornament the inevitable white china tea service covered with a half-effaced gilt network. The floor is sufficiently uneven, the wainscot rises to elbow height, and the rest of the wall space is decorated with a varnished paper on which the principal scenes from *Télémaque* are depicted, the various classical personages being colored. The hearth is always so clean and neat that it is evident a fire is kindled there only on great occasions; the stone

chimney piece is adorned by a couple of vases filled with faded artificial flowers imprisoned under glass shades, on either side of a bluish marble clock in the very worst taste.

The first room exhales an odor for which there is no name in the language, and which should be called the *odeur de pension*. The damp atmosphere sends a chill through you as you breathe it; it has a stuffy, musty, and rancid quality; it permeates your clothing; after-dinner scents seem to be mingled in it with smells from the kitchen and the scullery and the reek of a hospital. It might be possible to describe it if someone should discover a process by which to distill from the atmosphere all the nauseating elements with which it is charged by the catarrhal exhalations of every individual lodger, young or old. Yet in spite of these stale horrors, the sitting room is as charming and as delicately perfumed as a boudoir when compared with the adjoining dining room.

The paneled walls of that apartment were once painted some color now a matter of conjecture, for the surface is encrusted with accumulated layers of grimy deposit, which cover it with fantastic outlines. A collection of dim-ribbed glass decanters, metal disks with a satin sheen on them, and piles of blue-edged earthenware plates of Touraine ware cover the sticky surfaces of the sideboards that line the room. In a corner stands a box containing a set of numbered pigeonholes in which the lodgers' table napkins, more or less soiled and stained with wine, are kept. Here you see those indestructible furnishings, never met with elsewhere, which find their way into lodging houses much as the wrecks of our civilization drift into hospitals for incurables. You expect in such places as these to find the weather house whence a Capuchin issues on wet days. You look to find the execrable engravings that spoil your appetite, framed every one in a black varnished frame with a gilt beading round it. You know the sort of tortoise-shell clock case inlaid with brass; the green stove, the Argand lamps covered with oil and dust, have met your eyes before.

The oilcloth that covers the long table is so greasy that a waggish *externe* will write his name on the surface, using his thumb-nail as a stylus. The chairs are broken-down invalids, the wretched little hempen mats slip away from under your feet without slipping away for good, and finally, the foot warmers are miserable wrecks, hingeless, charred, broken away about the holes. It would be impossible to give an idea of the old, rotten, shaky, cranky, worm-eaten, halt, maimed, one-eyed, and ramshackle condition of the furniture without an exhaustive description which would delay the progress of the story to an extent that impatient people would not pardon. The red tiles of the floor are full of depressions brought about by scouring and periodical renewings of color. In

short, there is no illusory grace left to the poverty that reigns here; it is dire, parsimonious, concentrated, threadbare poverty. As yet it has not sunk into the mire, it is only splashed by it; though not in rags as yet, its clothing is ready to drop to pieces.

This apartment is in all its glory at seven o'clock in the morning, when Madame Vauquer's cat appears, announcing the near approach of his mistress, and jumps up on the sideboards to sniff at the milk in the bowls, each protected by a plate, while he purrs his morning greeting to the world. A moment later the widow shows her face. She is tricked out in a net cap attached to a false front set on awry, and shuffles into the room in her slipshod fashion. She is an oldish woman with a bloated countenance and a nose like a parrot's beak set in the middle of it; her fat little hands (she is as sleek as a church rat) and her shapeless, slouching figure are in keeping with the room that reeks of misfortune, where hope is reduced to speculate for the meanest stakes.

Madame Vauquer alone can breathe that tainted air without being disheartened by it. Her face is as fresh as a frosty morning in autumn; there are wrinkles about the eyes that vary in their expression from the set smile of a ballet dancer to the dark, suspicious scowl of a discounter of bills. In short, she is at once the embodiment and the interpretation of her lodging house, as surely as her lodging house implies the existence of its mistress. You can no more imagine the one without the other than you can think of a jail without a turnkey. The unwholesome corpulence of the little woman is produced by the life she leads, just as typhus fever is bred in the tainted air of a hospital. The very knitted woolen petticoat that she wears beneath a skirt made of an old gown, with the wadding protruding through the rents in the material, is a sort of epitome of the sitting room, the dining room, and the little garden. It discovers the cook, it foreshadows the lodgers—the picture of the house is completed by the portrait of its mistress.

Madame Vauquer at the age of fifty is like all women who "have seen a deal of trouble." She has the glassy eyes and the innocent air of a trafficker in flesh and blood who will wax virtuously indignant to obtain a higher price for her services, but who is quite ready to betray a Georges or a Pichegru if a Georges or a Pichegru were in hiding and still to be betrayed, or for any other expedient that may alleviate her lot. Still, "She is a good woman at bottom," said the lodgers, who believed that the widow was wholly dependent upon the money that they paid her, and sympathized when they heard her cough and groan like one of themselves.

What had Monsieur Vauquer been? The lady was never very explicit on this head. How had she lost her money? "Through

trouble," was her answer. He had treated her badly, had left her nothing but her eyes to cry over his cruelty, the house she lived in, and the privilege of pitying nobody, because, so she was wont to say, she herself had been through every possible misfortune.

Sylvie, the stout cook, hearing her mistress's shuffling footsteps, hastened to serve the lodgers' breakfasts. Besides those who lived in the house, Madame Vauquer took boarders who came for their meals; but these *externes* usually only came to dinner, for which they paid thirty francs a month.

At the time when this story begins, the lodging house contained seven inmates. The best rooms in the house were on the first story, Madame Vauquer herself occupying the least important; the rest were let to a Madame Couture, the widow of a commissary general in the service of the Republic. With her lived Victorine Taillefer, a schoolgirl, to whom she filled the place of mother. These two ladies paid eighteen hundred francs a year.

The two sets of rooms on the second floor were respectively occupied by an old man named Poiret and a man of forty or thereabouts, the wearer of a black wig and dyed whiskers, and who gave out that he was a retired merchant, and was addressed as Monsieur Vautrin. Two of the four rooms on the third floor were also let—one to an elderly spinster, a Mademoiselle Michonneau, and the other to a retired manufacturer of vermicelli, Italian paste, and starch, who allowed the others to address him as "Father Goriot." The remaining rooms were allotted to various birds of passage, to impecunious students who, like "Father Goriot" and Mademoiselle Michonneau, could only muster forty-five francs a month to pay for their board and lodging. Madame Vauquer had little desire for lodgers of this sort; they ate too much bread, and she only took them in default of better.

At that time one of the rooms was tenanted by a law student, a young man from the neighborhood of Angoulême, one of a large family who pinched and starved themselves to spare twelve hundred francs a year for him. Misfortune had accustomed Eugène de Rastignac—for that was his name—to work. He belonged to the number of young men who know as children that their parents' hopes are centered on them, and deliberately prepare themselves for a great career, subordinating their studies from the first to this end, carefully watching the indications of the course of events, calculating the probable turn that affairs will take, that they may be the first to profit by them. But for his observant curiosity, and the skill with which he managed to introduce himself into the salons of Paris, this story would not have been colored by the tones of truth that it certainly owes to him, for they are entirely due to his penetrating sagacity and his desire to fathom the mysteries of an appalling condition of things that was