

A Woman of Thirty

by Honore de Balzac

Translated by Ellen Marriage

DEDICATION

To Louis Boulanger, Painter.

I. EARLY MISTAKES

It was a Sunday morning in the beginning of April 1813, a morning which gave promise of one of those bright days when Parisians, for the first time in the year, behold dry pavements underfoot and a cloudless sky overhead. It was not yet noon when a luxurious cabriolet, drawn by two spirited horses, turned out of the Rue de Castiglione into the Rue de Rivoli, and drew up behind a row of carriages standing before the newly opened barrier half-way down the Terrasse de Feuillants. The owner of the carriage looked anxious and out of health; the thin hair on his sallow temples, turning gray already, gave a look of premature age to his face. He flung the reins to a servant who followed on horseback, and alighted to take in his arms a young girl whose dainty beauty had already attracted the eyes of loungers on the Terrasse. The little

lady, standing upon the carriage step, graciously submitted to be taken by the waist, putting an arm round the neck of her guide, who set her down upon the pavement without so much as ruffling the trimmng of her green rep dress. No lover would have been so careful. The stranger could only be the father of the young girl, who took his arm familiarly without a word of thanks, and hurried him into the Garden of the Tuileries.

The old father noted the wondering stare which some of the young men gave the couple, and the sad expression left his face for a moment. Although he had long since reached the time of life when a man is fain to be content with such illusory delights as vanity bestows, he began to smile.

"They think you are my wife," he said in the young lady's ear, and he held himself erect and walked with slow steps,

which filled his daughter with despair.

He seemed to take up the coquette's part for her; perhaps of the two, he was the more gratified by the curious glances directed at those little feet, shod with plum-colored prunella; at the dainty figure outlined by a low-cut bodice, filled in with an embroidered chemisette, which only partially concealed the girlish throat. Her dress was lifted by her movements as she walked, giving glimpses higher than the shoes of delicately moulded outlines beneath open-work silk stockings. More than one of the idlers turned and passed the pair again, to admire or to catch a second glimpse of the young face, about which the brown tresses played; there was a glow in its white and red, partly reflected from the rose-colored satin lining of her fashionable bonnet, partly due to the eagerness and impatience which sparkled in every feature. A mischievous sweetness lighted up the beautiful, almond-

shaped dark eyes, bathed in liquid brightness, shaded by the long lashes and curving arch of eyebrow. Life and youth displayed their treasures in the petulant face and in the gracious outlines of the bust unspoiled even by the fashion of the day, which brought the girdle under the breast.

The young lady herself appeared to be insensible to admiration. Her eyes were fixed in a sort of anxiety on the Palace of the Tuileries, the goal, doubtless, of her petulant promenade. It wanted but fifteen minutes of noon, yet even at that early hour several women in gala dress were coming away from the Tuileries, not without backward glances at the gates and pouting looks of discontent, as if they regretted the lateness of the arrival which had cheated them of a longed-for spectacle. Chance carried a few words let fall by one of these disappointed fair ones to the ears of the charming stranger, and put her in a more than

common uneasiness. The elderly man watched the signs of impatience and apprehension which flitted across his copanion's pretty face with interest, rather than amusement, in his eyes, observing her with a close and careful attention, which perhaps could only be prompted by some after-thought in the depths of a father's mind.

It was the thirteenth Sunday of the year 1813. In two days' time Napoleon was to set out upon the disastrous campaign in which he was to lose first Bessieres, and then Duroc; he was to win the memrable battles of Lutzen and Bautzen, to see himself treacherously deserted by Austria, Saxony, Bavaria, and Bernadotte, and to dispute the dreadful field of Leipsic. The magnificent review commanded for that day by the Emperor was to be the last of so many which had long drawn forth the admiration of Paris and of foreign visitors. For the last time the Old Guard would execute their scientific military manoeuvres

with the pomp and precision which sometimes amazed the Giant himself. Napoleon was nearly ready for his duel with Europe. It was a sad sentiment which brought a brilliant and curious throng to the Tuileries. Each mind seemed to foresee the future, perhaps too in every mind another thought was dimly present, how that in the future, when the heroic age of France should have taken the half-fabulous color with which it is tinged for us to-day, men's imaginations would more than once seek to retrace the picture of the pageant which they were assembled to behold.

"Do let us go more quickly, father; I can hear the drums," the young girl said, and in a half-teasing, half-coaxing manner she urged her companion forward.

"The troops are marching into the Tuileries," said he.

"Or marching out of it--everybody is coming away," she answered in childish vexation, which drew a smile from her father.

"The review only begins at half-past twelve," he said; he had fallen half behind his impetuous daughter.

It might have been supposed that she meant to hasten their progress by a movement of her right arm, for it swung like an oar blade through the water. In her impatience she had crushed her handkerchief into a ball in her tiny, well-gloved fingers. Now and then the old man smiled, but the smiles were succeeded by an anxious look which crossed his withered face and saddened it. In his love for the fair young girl by his side, he was as fain to exalt the present moment as to dread the future. "She is happy to-day; will her happiness last?" he seemed to ask himself, for the old are somewhat prone to foresee their own sorrows in the

future of the young.

Father and daughter reached the peristyle under the tower where the tricolor flag was still waving; but as they passed under the arch by which people came and went between the Gardens of the Tuileries and the Place du Carrousel, the sentries on guard called out sternly:

"No admittance this way."

By standing on tiptoe the young girl contrived to catch a glimpse of a crowd of well-dressed women, thronging either side of the old marble arcade along which the Emperor was to pass.

"We were too late in starting, father; you can see that quite well." A little piteous pout revealed the immense importance which she attached to the sight of this

particular review.

"Very well, Julie--let us go away. You dislike a crush."

"Do let us stay, father. Even here I may catch a glimpse of the Emperor; he might die during this campaign, and then I should never have seen him."

Her father shuddered at the selfish speech. There were tears in the girl's voice; he looked at her, and thought that he saw tears beneath her lowered eyelids; tears caused not so much by the disappointment as by one of the troubles of early youth, a secret easily guessed by an old father. Suddenly Julie's face flushed, and she uttered an exclamation. Neither her father nor the sentinels understood the meaning of the cry; but an officer within the barrier, who sprang across the court towards the staircase, heard it, and turned abruptly at the sound. He

went to the arcade by the Gardens of the Tuileries, and recognized the young lady who had been hidden for a moment by the tall bearskin caps of the grenadiers. He set aside in favor of the pair the order which he himself had given. Then, taking no heed of the murmurings of the fashionable crowd seated under the arcade, he gently drew the enraptured child towards him.

"I am no longer surprised at her vexation and enthusiasm, if /you/ are in waiting," the old man said with a half-smiling, half-serious glance at the officer.

"If you want a good position, M. le Duc," the young man answered, "we must not spend any time in talking. The Emperor does not like to be kept waiting, and the Grand Marshal has sent me to announce our readiness."

As he spoke, he had taken Julie's arm with a certain air of

old acquaintance, and drew her rapidly in the direction of the Place du Carrousel. Julie was astonished at the sight. An immense crowd was penned up in a narrow space, shut in between the gray walls of the palace and the limits marked out by chains round the great sanded squares in the midst of the courtyard of the Tuileries. The cordon of sentries posted to keep a clear passage for the Emperor and his staff had great difficulty in keeping back the eager humming swarm of human beings.

"Is it going to be a very fine sight?" Julie asked (she was radiant now).

"Pray take care!" cried her guide, and seizing Julie by the waist, he lifted her up with as much vigor as rapidity and set her down beside a pillar.

But for his prompt action, his gazing kinswoman would

have come into collision with the hindquarters of a white horse which Napoleon's Mameluke held by the bridle; the animal in its trappings of green velvet and gold stood almost under the arcade, some ten paces behind the rest of the horses in readiness for the Emperor's staff.

The young officer placed the father and daughter in front of the crowd in the first space to the right, and recommended them by a sign to the two veteran grenadiers on either side. Then he went on his way into the palace; a look of great joy and happiness had succeeded to his horror-struck expression when the horse backed. Julie had given his hand a mysterious pressure; had she meant to thank him for the little service he had done her, or did she tell him, "After all, I shall really see you?" She bent her head quite graciously in response to the respectful bow by which the officer took leave of them before he vanished.

The old man stood a little behind his daughter. He looked grave. He seemed to have left the two young people together for some purpose of his own, and now he furtively watched the girl, trying to lull her into false security by appearing to give his whole attention to the magnificent sight in the Place du Carrousel. When Julie's eyes turned to her father with the expression of a schoolboy before his master, he answered her glance by a gay, kindly smile, but his own keen eyes had followed the officer under the arcade, and nothing of all that passed was lost upon him.

"What a grand sight!" said Julie in a low voice, as she pressed her father's hand; and indeed the pomp and picturesqueness of the spectacle in the Place du Carrousel drew the same exclamation from thousands upon thousands of spectators, all agape with wonder. Another

array of sightseers, as tightly packed as the ranks behind the old noble and his daughter, filled the narrow strip of pavement by the railings which crossed the Place du Carrousel from side to side in a line parallel with the Palace of the Tuileries. The dense living mass, variegated by the colors of the women's dresses, traced out a bold line across the centre of the Place du Carrousel, filling in the fourth side of a vast parallelogram, surrounded on three sides by the Palace of the Tuileries itself. Within the precincts thus railed off stood the regiments of the Old Guard about to be passed in review, drawn up opposite the Palace in imposing blue columns, ten ranks in depth. Without and beyond in the Place du Carrousel stood several regiments likewise drawn up in parallel lines, ready to march in through the arch in the centre; the Triumphal Arch, where the bronze horses of St. Mark from Venice used to stand in those days. At either end, by the Galeries du Louvre, the regimental bands were

stationed,masked by the Polish Lancers then on duty.

The greater part of the vast graveled space was empty as an arena,ready for the evolutions of those silent masses disposed with the symmetry of military art. The sunlight blazed back from ten thousand bayonets in thin points of flame; the breeze ruffled the men's helmet plumes till they swayed like the crests of forest-trees before a gale.The mute glittering ranks of veterans were full of bright contrasting colors, thanks to their different uniforms, weapons, accoutrements,and aiguillettes; and the whole great picture, that miniature battlefield before the combat, was framed by the majestic towering walls of the Tuileries, which officers and men seemed to rival in their immobility. Involuntarily the spectator made the coparison between the walls of men and the walls of stone. The spring sunlight,flooding white masonry reared but yesterday and buildings centuries old, shone full