

# **THE PHYSIOLOGY OF MARRIAGE**

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The Physiology of Marriage by Honoré de Balzac

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**HONORÉ DE BALZAC**

**THE PHYSIOLOGY  
OF MARRIAGE**



The  
Physiology of Marriage

By  
Honoré de Balzac <sup>1799-1850</sup>



London  
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*"We rail against foolish laws until they are reformed, and in the meantime we submit to them blindly."—Diderot*

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## PART THREE

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*"Beautiful as the seraphim of Klopstock, terrible as the devils  
of Milton."*—Diderot

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## INTRODUCTION

**M**ARRIAGE in no way owes its origin to Nature.—The family of the East is altogether different from that of the West.—Man is the minister of Nature, and society engrafts itself upon her.—Laws are made in the interests of morality, and morality is subject to variation.

‘Therefore marriage can be subjected to that gradual process of improvement which everything belonging to mankind seems to undergo.’

These words, which were spoken before the Council of State by Napoleon at the time of the debate upon the Civil Code, struck the present writer very forcibly, and sowed, perhaps without his knowing it, the seeds of the work which he is offering to the public to-day. Indeed, when at a much younger age I was studying French law, the word ‘Adultery’ made a strange impression on me. It was writ large in the Code, and the word never presented itself to my imagination without bringing a dismal array of fancies in its train. Tears, shame, hatred, terror, secret crimes, bloody wars, fatherless families, misery, would all be conjured up and suddenly present themselves before me as I read the significant word, ‘Adultery’! Later in life, when I had gained a place in the most highly cultured society, I realised that adultery did not uncommonly mitigate the severity of the marriage laws; I found a far greater number of unhappy than of happy marriages, and I considered myself to be the first to observe that, of all human relations, that of marriage was the least advanced. But it was the observation of a young



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man ; and, in my case, as in the case of so many others, like a stone cast upon the bosom of a lake, it was lost in the whirlpool of my tumultuous thoughts. And yet, almost unbeknown to myself, I continued to observe, and a swarm of ideas, more or less true, upon the nature of things matrimonial gathered slowly in my imagination. These ideas are perhaps built up in an author's soul in the same mysterious way as truffles grow in the perfumed plains of Périgord. One day a tiny thought, the expression of my ideas, was begotten of the holy horror with which I had originally been filled by the word 'adultery'—the outcome of a thoughtless remark. It was a satire on marriage : for the first time after twenty-seven years of married life, husband and wife had come to love another.

I amused myself for a while with this little book on matrimony, and spent a delightful week in working into this innocent trifle the mass of ideas which, to my great astonishment, I found I had acquired. The joke was ruined by the criticism of an authority, and, always ready to learn from advice, I fell back upon my life of unconcerned idleness. Nevertheless this modest beginning alike of knowledge and of humour gradually grew to perfection in my fields of thought; every sentence of the condemned work took root and gathered weight, and it remained in my mind, just as a little branch of a tree, if left on the ground on a winter's night, will be found next morning covered with strange white crystals which the frost has so freakishly fashioned. Thus the first sketch grew and became in its turn the starting-point of many offshoots, all relating to morals and manners. Like a polypus, it was bred out of itself. The impressions of my youth, the observations which I was enabled to make, found support in the most trifling events. Gradually this mass of ideas became welded in harmony ; they seemed endowed with real life, ready to traverse those imaginary lands where the soul

## INTRODUCTION

delights to let her wayward offspring wander. Amidst the anxieties of the world and of life, I heard again and again a voice as from one within me making the most mocking discoveries at the very moment when with the greatest pleasure I was watching a woman dancing or smiling or chatting. Just as Mephistopheles, at the awful assembly on the Brocken, pointed out the evil faces to Faust, so the author, in the heart of a ball-room, would feel a demon tap him familiarly on the shoulder and say, 'Dost thou see that charming smile? —it is a smile of hatred.' At one time the demon would strut about like a captain in one of Hardy's old comedies; he would tear the purple embroidery from his cloak and endeavour to trim it anew with gold lace and tinsel. At another he would raise a free and hearty Rabelaisian laugh, and trace upon the wall of some street a word serving as the companion to 'Clink,' the only oracle which the sacred bottle ever utters. This literary Trilby would often appear seated on piles of books, pointing wickedly with his crooked fingers to two yellow volumes with a dazzling title. Then, having gained the author's attention, in tones as piercing as those of a harmonica, he would spell out the words: 'Physiology of Marriage'! But more often than not he would come at night, at dream-time; and then, like a good fairy, he would endeavour to subdue the soul which he had singled out with gentle words and caresses. He was as much a scoffer as a tempter; supple as a woman, and cruel as a tiger, his friendship was more to be dreaded than his enmity; he could not embrace without hurting. One night, having tried the power of all his spells, he crowned them with a final effort, and he came and sat on the edge of the bed as might a young girl whose heart was full of love, who sits with shining eyes, silent at first, but is certain in the end to disclose her secret.

'Here,' said he, 'are the details of a cork-jacket by means of which you may walk dry-footed on the Seine.

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This second volume is the Institute's report on a dress which enables you to go through fire unburnt. Can you not propose anything that may render marriage indifferent to heat and cold? But listen! here we have the Art of Preserving Food, the Art of Preventing Chimneys from Smoking, the Art of Making good Cement, the Art of Putting on a Tie, the Art of Carving.'

In a minute he had named such a prodigious number of books that, as I listened, I was overcome with a feeling of giddiness.

'These myriads of books have all been devoured,' he said, 'and yet all the world does not build nor eat, all the people in the world do not wear ties, nor can all warm themselves, whereas all do get married—to a certain extent! . . . But look!'

Here he made a movement with his hand, and seemed to expose to view a distant sea, where all the books of the century, moving to and fro, rose and fell like waves. The 18mo's rebounded; the 8vo's, as they were thrown in, fell with a thud to the bottom, and only came to the surface again with difficulty, being hindered by the 12mo's and the 32mo's which swarmed on every hand and dissolved into light foam. The wild surge was a mass of journalists, foremen, paper-manufacturers, apprentices, printers' clerks, of whom only the heads were visible, jumbled together among the books. Shouts as of schoolboys bathing went up from thousands of voices. Men were passing hither and thither in canoes, engaged in fishing for the books, bringing them to shore and placing them in front of a tall, disdainful-looking man, clad in black, who, standing dry and cold by the water-side, represented the libraries and the public. The demon pointed out a skiff newly-decked with flags, running with full sail, and flying for ensign a placard, which, with a sardonic laugh, and in a piercing voice, he read out,—'The Physiology of Marriage.'

Upon my falling in love the devil ceased to molest me,