

**COMÉDIE
HUMAINE.
EUGENIE GRANDET**

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Comédie humaine. Eugenie Grandet by H. de Balzac & Ellen Marriage

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H. DE BALZAC & ELLEN MARRIAGE

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Drawn and Etched by D. Murray Smith.

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 recognised. 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, '*artistement 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 Madame 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 license 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 September 19, 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.