

**LITTLE FRENCH
MASTERPIECES. HONORÉ
DE BALSAC, PP. 1-275**

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Little French Masterpieces. Honoré de Balsac, pp. 1-275 by Alexander Jessup & Ferdinand Brunientiere & George Burnham Ives

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HONORÉ DE BALZAC
From a steel engraving

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Introduction

Honoré de Balzac

(1799-1850)

BALZAC'S short stories, which we call in French *nouvelles*, are, generally speaking, not the best-known or the most popular part of his work; nor are they the part best fitted to give a true and complete idea of his genius. But some of them are none the less masterpieces in their kind; they have characteristics and a significance not always possessed by their author's long novels, such as *Eugénie Grandet* or *Cousin Pons*; and finally, for this very reason, they hold in the unfinished structure of *The Human Comedy* a place which it will be interesting to try to determine. That is all that will be attempted in this Introduction.

Some of the stories contained in the present

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volume were written under curious circumstances. In the first place it is to be noted that they all date from 1830, 1831, and 1832,¹ and therefore precede the conception and planning of *The Human Comedy*. Their value is far from being diminished by that fact. *An Episode under the Terror* (1830), for instance, was composed as an introduction to the *Memoirs* of Sanson—that executioner who of all executioners in the world's history probably despatched the fewest criminals and yet shed the most blood; and the *Memoirs* themselves, which are entirely apocryphal, are also in part Balzac's own work. But, though composed in this way, to order and as a piece of hack work, *An Episode under the Terror* is in its artistic brevity one of Balzac's most tragic and most finished narratives. *La Grande Bretèche* (1832) was at

¹ According to Lovenjoul, *A Seashore Drama* was first published in the fourth edition of the *Philosophic Studies*, in 1835. But this fact in no wise lessens the force of M. Brunetière's argument.—[Ed.]

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first only an episode inserted among the more extended narratives of which it made part, as in the old-fashioned novel of tales within tales of which *Gil Blas* is the type; and brief as it is, Balzac nevertheless rewrote it three or four times. It is therefore anything but an improvisation. Yet no other of these short stories can give more vividly than *La Grande Bretèche* the impression of a work sprung at once in full completeness from its author's brain, and conceived from the very first in its indivisible unity. But, precisely, it is one of the characteristic traits of Balzac's genius that we hardly need to know when or for what purpose he wrote this or that one of his novels or stories. He bore them all within him at once — we might say that the germ of them was preëxistent in him before he had any conscious thought of objectivising them. His characters were born in him, as though from all eternity, before he knew them himself; and before he himself suspected it, *The Human Comedy* was alive, was confusedly moving,