

BALZAC

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Balzac by Emile Faguet

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BALZAC



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BALZAC

BY

ÉMILE FAGUET

OF THE ACADEMIE FRANÇAISE

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BALZAC

I

HIS LIFE

HONORÉ BALZAC, who subsequently assumed the name of Honoré *de* Balzac, was born at Tours on the 16th of May (Saint Honoré's Day) 1799. His father, François Balssa, had very early changed his name to Balzac; he was born at Nougairie, in the *département* of the Tam, in 1746. Honoré's grandfather went by the name of Balssa, and farmed land in the parish of Nougairie; his mother's name was Laure Sallambier, and she was born at Paris in 1778. This duality of strain in Balzac's progenitors frees the biographer from any need to go into the question of ethnology. Balzac was not the product of Touraine, nor of Languedoc, nor of Paris; he was merely of the French breed.

His father was vigorous, full-blooded, a great talker and reader, a man of startling projects

and ideas (traits of character which are again to be met with in his son); in later life hardly caring for anything save how to prolong his days so that he might at least rival Fontenelle.¹ Honoré de Balzac has bestowed many of his father's characteristics on Doctor Bénassi, in the *Médecin de Campagne*.

M. Balzac, the elder, had been, under the former régime, a lawyer of the humbler sort and very obscure. The Revolution doubtlessly brought him the shoulder-tap to higher dignity, for we find him, in 1793, figuring in the *Almanach National* as municipal official and member of the general council of the Commune. He was then sent to the frontier of the *Nord* as director of supplies. In 1797 he married Laure Sallambier, whose father belonged to the same governmental board. From 1804 to 1811 he was master of the workhouse at Tours. From 1798 onward he had been occupied in the direction of the almshouses at Tours, and in this town Honoré was born, and the *mot du temps* culled by Taine—'It's a fine hospital mushroom'—was probably, while

¹ Fontenelle was a nephew of Cornelle. He wrote popular scientific works of great worth, and died a centenarian in 1757.
—TR.