

UNE TÉNÉBREUSE AFFAIRE

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Une ténébreuse affaire by Honoré de Balzac & Marie A. Péchinot

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UNE TÉNÉBREUSE AFFAIRE

OXFORD MODERN FRENCH SERIES

EDITED BY LEON DELBOS, M.A.

UNE
TÉNÉBREUSE AFFAIRE

BY

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GENERAL PREFACE

THE position of French and German as a part of school education has latterly become one of so much importance, that it is necessary to discover the best possible way of teaching these languages which will lead to a thorough and scholarly knowledge of them. The teaching of modern languages has generally been approached from a merely practical point of view, but there is no doubt that their literary aspect is by far the more important. The one object in learning a language should be to become acquainted with the greatest thoughts which have been handed down, or are current in it, and for this a merely practical knowledge is quite inadequate. Yet many who use what is called the New Method teach exclusively on these utilitarian lines, which are supposed to give the pupil a knowledge of modern colloquial conversation such as would be useful in travelling abroad. In reality the pupil acquires nothing, and gains no real knowledge of the literary language, no true appreciation of the ideas or of the history of the country. This method of instruction is clearly a reaction from the old system which taught only by exercises in translation and paid little attention to the spoken

language. In order to acquire a scholarly knowledge of any foreign tongue it is not sufficient to spend a few months in the country where it is spoken, and it would be well if we realized, at once, that nothing worth learning can be acquired by desultory study, or 'picked up.' If French and German are to take their places by the side of Latin and Greek in modern education, the excellent literary training which the study of these ancient tongues affords must be obtained in the same measure for students of modern languages.

To make the student acquainted with a language at once in its literary and in its current forms, he should first be provided with selections from the best foreign literature of the nineteenth century. The literature of the last century has been preferred because the thoughts and ideas it deals with, as well as the language, are more in accordance with the thoughts and ideas of our own time, and with the manner of expressing them; nor have such ample selections from this literature been put before English pupils as from the literature of previous centuries. These selections should be read and translated carefully and thoroughly into grammatical and literary English.

Translation should always serve a double purpose, namely, first, to acquaint the pupil with the best forms of expression used in the foreign language, and, secondly, to improve his knowledge of the capabilities of his own tongue by turning the thought of the original into English. It is therefore necessary that translations should not only be accurate and grammatical, but

appreciative and intelligent. The individuality of the author must necessarily suffer in translation, but the loss may partly be atoned for if the student thoroughly grasps the spirit of the original before he begins his translation, and does not allow the effort of rendering the author's expressions into equivalent English to interfere with the atmosphere of the work as a whole. In this lies the difference between a literal and a free translation. Mr. Gilbert Murray has explained his views on the subject, which seem to give the key to the secret of good translation. 'My aim has been,' he says, 'to build up something as like the original as I possibly could, in form and in what one calls "spirit." To do this, the first thing needed was a work of painstaking scholarship, a work in which there should be no neglect of the letter in an attempt to snatch at the spirit, but, on the contrary, close study of the letter and careful tracking of the spirit by means of its subtleties.'

The pupil should be taught to use thoroughly idiomatic English in translation, and to observe the necessary rules of good composition. Guess-work should always be avoided, and the habit should be formed of learning vocabularies and even sentences by heart, in order to become familiar with a large number of words and with the proper construction of sentences; for without these we can never hope to obtain a mastery of a language, be it ancient or modern. The pupil should also be encouraged to discuss in the foreign language the subject-matter of the text which he has been study-

ing, framing his sentences as far as possible on the model of the author. Translation, taught and supplemented in this way, becomes one of the most valuable parts of literary training in the school curriculum. So far I have found no better method of teaching a language practically; and my experience has taught me beyond a doubt that those who speak a modern language best invariably possess a good literary knowledge of it.

The important question is, What kind of literature is to be chosen for reading and translation? To this question I have already given my answer; undoubtedly it is desirable to set a high standard from the beginning, and to challenge the powers of the pupil by putting before him well-chosen selections from the best authors, rather than to entice his sympathy with easy and amusing literature. If the teacher tries to amuse his pupils and make the time pass quickly, he will fail to awaken their interest in the subject; but, if he appeals to their intelligence from the first, appreciation will quickly grow.

It is with this object that the present series is being undertaken—a series in which certain modern standard French works, of various kinds, have been chosen, and edited with the smallest possible number of notes, mostly on points of literary and historical interest.

LEON DELBOS.

H.M.S. *Britannia*, DARTMOUTH.
August, 1904.

UNE TÉNÉBREUSE AFFAIRE

A MONSIEUR DE MARGONE

Son hôte du château de Saché reconnaissant.

DE BALZAC.

I

Les Chagrins de la Police.

L'AUTOMNE de l'année 1803 fut un des plus beaux de la première période de ce siècle que nous nommons l'Empire. En octobre, quelques pluies avaient rafraîchi les prés, les arbres étaient encore verts et feuillés au milieu
5 du mois de novembre. Aussi le peuple commençait-il à établir entre le ciel et Bonaparte, alors déclaré consul à vie, une entente à laquelle cet homme a dû l'un de ses prestiges ; et, chose étrange ! le jour où, en 1812, le soleil lui manqua, ses prospérités cessèrent. Le 15
10 novembre de cette année, vers quatre heures du soir, le soleil jetait comme une poussière rouge sur les cimes centenaires de quatre rangées d'ormes d'une longue avenue seigneuriale ; il faisait briller le sable et les touffes d'herbe d'un de ces immenses ronds-points qui se trouvent dans
15 les campagnes, où la terre fut jadis assez peu coûteuse pour être sacrifiée à l'ornement. L'air était si pur, l'atmosphère était si douce, qu'une famille prenait alors le frais comme en été. Un homme vêtu d'une veste de chasse de coutil vert, à boutons verts, et d'une culotte de
20 même étoffe, chaussé de souliers à semelles minces, et qui avait des guêtres de coutil montant jusqu'au genou, nettoyait une carabine avec le soin que mettent à cette occupation les chasseurs adroits, dans leurs moments de loisir. Cet homme n'avait ni carnier, ni gibecière, enfin