

**CONTES DE BALZAC,
WITH INTRODUCTION
AND NOTES**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649555550

Contes de Balzac, with Introduction and Notes by Honoré de Balzac & George McLean Harper & Louis Eugene Livingood

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HARPER & LOUIS EUGENE LIVINGOOD**

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WITH INTRODUCTION
AND NOTES**

Contes de Balzac

Edited, with Introduction and Notes

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NEW YORK:
WILLIAM R. JENKINS,
ÉDITEUR ET LIBRAIRE FRANÇAIS,
851-853 SIXTH AVENUE.

BOSTON: CARL SCHOENHOF.

TO

JOHN HOWELL WESTCOTT, PH. D.,

Professor of Latin in Princeton University,

WE DEDICATE THIS BOOK IN LOVING RECOGNITION

OF HIS HELP AND FRIENDSHIP.

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INTRODUCTION.

The popular charge against the French character and against French work, that they are superficial, is as constantly refuted by facts in the realm of art as it is apparently confirmed in the world of politics. Nowhere is the pursuit of letters undertaken so religiously and prosecuted so unweariedly as in France. For lives devoted to science, one naturally looks to Germany; but with equal confidence, one may turn one's eyes to Paris in search of indefatigable zeal in cultivating perfection of literary style, and in training the faculties of literary observation. With few exceptions, the great reputations in French literature have been won by men of gigantic strength of endurance, who demand our respect not more by their original endowments than by the fortitude and patience with which they disciplined themselves and marshalled their powers. Molière's achievement, for instance, is, to a greater extent than we should suppose, quantitative, for without writing so many plays he could not have exhibited the variety of situation which is one of his chief distinctions. Voltaire probably did more hard work than almost any other author in any language. Diderot toiled all his life with a strenuousness and conscientiousness which were not the only puritanical traits of his character. No English novelist of the first-class, except Walter Scott, has produced half as many works of such even excellence as did George Sand, Dumas, and Balzac.

And it is in the highest degree auspicious for the literary future of France that her best novelist, and the one who has seemed, and still seems, the master of all others whose work is progressive, should have been Balzac; no light, rapid worker, living in a wasteful Bohemian world, but one of the most earnest men this age has seen, a seeker after truth, although his art was fiction. If he had merely conceived the superbly audacious idea of reproducing, in a series of tales, all the

many-sided life of his time, we should have said he was a genius. When he actually accomplished what he set out to do, and did it in a manner beyond praise, and in an abundance that leaves nothing to be desired, we have no word left but genius still, unless we add that he was a hero.

The best authorities for the life of Balzac are: his sister's memoir, "Balzac, sa vie et ses œuvres, d'après sa correspondance, par Mme. L. Surville, née Balzac," 1 vol., Calmann Lévy, Paris, 1878; his correspondence, 2 vols., Paris, 1876, upon which Mr. Henry James has a fine essay in his "French Poets and Novelists"; "Histoire des Œuvres de H. de Balzac, par le Vicomte de Spoelberch de Louvenjoul," 3d edition, Paris, Calmann Lévy, 1888. Among criticisms which have strongly influenced the world's opinion of the man and his work, the best are Champfleury's essay on Balzac in his "Grands Figures d'hier et d'aujourd'hui," Sainte-Beuve's essay in Vol. II. of "Portraits Contemporains," and Taine's celebrated treatise in his "Nouveaux Essais de Critique et d'Histoire." There is an article on Balzac by Mr. Frederick Wedmore in the Great Writer Series; Mr. Leslie Stephen has written on the same subject; and, finally, Miss Katharine P. Wormeley has made an excellent compilation from various sources as an introductory volume to her translations, entitled "A Memoir of Honoré de Balzac," Roberts Brothers, Boston, 1892, in which she allows Balzac to tell us his own life as far as autobiographical material can be drawn from his stories and letters. Miss Wormeley says that M. Marcel Barrière is the most important critic of Balzac to-day. ("L'Œuvre de H. de Balzac, étude littéraire et philosophique," 1 vol., Calmann Lévy, Paris, 1890.)

Honoré de Balzac was born of wealthy and respectable parents, in the the pleasant city of Tours, May 16, 1799. His father, who had been a lawyer, was at that time fifty-three years old, and a man of positive views and many peculiarities. At the age of eight, Honoré was sent off to a renowned boarding-school kept by the Oratorian fraternity at Vendôme, where his sister affirms that he spent nearly seven years *without a*

single holiday, and whence he was taken in a pitiable state of health. He had devoured most of the books in the school library, but had come to adolescence through an unboyish boyhood. The years at Vendôme could not have been cheerless, however, if the philosophical novel, "Louis Lambert," gives us a true picture, as it perhaps does, of the intellectual joys he there discovered. It was a strange, deep life, and doubtless saw the birth of the theories and ideals and plans which he developed and clothed in external forms during his more active existence.

This activity began when he was fourteen. He already knew his own heart, and had pondered on many of the mysteries of life. Now, in a happier time, in that sunny valley of the Loire, surrounded by wealth and love, guarded and petted by a mother and sister, he learned the more open features of the world. For a while he was instructed by tutors at his father's house in Tours, but between 1814 and 1816 he attended private schools in Paris, whither the family had moved temporarily. Then he spent three not unfruitful years in law offices, picking up the types and the phraseology which make his books so strong in describing legal proceedings.

When he came of age his father unfolded to him a scheme of purchasing a fine law practice and settling down in that profession. Honoré rebelled, and pleaded to be allowed to try his chances of living by literature, and to lead his own life. With a good sense which is wholly modern in this connection, his father yielded, and the young man was established, by April of 1819, in a Parisian attic, living frugally and in perfect solitude, and writing with fiery zeal. There are in nearly all Balzac's letters a sweet, good-natured way of taking hardships, and a boyish frankness in discussing himself and his work, which are very winning, and particularly at this period: "*Dans un grenier, à vingt ans.*"

His head was teeming with dramas and stories and comic operas, though, of course, the tragic predominated. He wrote and corrected, burned and rewrote, read feverishly, carried on a wild, excited, but humorous correspondence with his sister Laure, and tore through the streets of Paris in a desperate

search for types and faces, costumes, names, and colors. His father was no longer the rich man he had been, and the lad's garret economy was not purely artificial. At any rate it was always severe.

Most artistic careers are illumined from the start by congenial friendships with other persons already celebrated, but young Balzac seems to have made few acquaintances, and none of them, at this early time, were men or women of note. Alone, in the crowded streets of Paris, he would follow people for great distances, catching words of their conversation, and building romances out of this fragmentary material. "To quit my own life, to become some other individual through the excitation of a moral faculty, and to play this game at will, was the relaxation of my studious hours. To what have I owed this gift? Is it second-sight? Can it be one of those faculties, the abuse of which, leads to insanity? I have never sought to discover the causes of this power; I only know that I possess it, and use it. I must tell you that ever since I became aware of this faculty, I have decomposed the elements of those heterogeneous masses called the People, and I have analyzed them in a manner that enables me to appraise both their good and evil qualities."

Dreading lest his father might deprive him of his precious independence, Balzac took the first step in that series of business ventures and misadventures which runs like an inharmonious accompaniment beneath his glorious art-life, and which would be comical if it were not pathetic, for though his financial difficulties made him work like a slave, and the result was *La Comédie Humaine*, they poisoned his existence and probably hastened his death. His first attempt was in the publishing business, and its result was debt. He wrote feverishly, to satisfy his creditors, works to which he did not attach his name, but which would have shown us the history of his marvellous style, could we but know them all. This style, so exact, so full of argument and imagination, so closely hinged, so adequate to the expression of philosophical observation of life, appears already formed in the first story he was willing to acknowledge, "*Les Chouans*," which was composed in 1829.