

**HONORÉ DE BALZAC IN TWENTY-FIVE
VOLUMES: THE FIRST COMPLETE
TRANSLATION INTO ENGLISH. THE CHILD
OF MALEDICTION. A MAD MUSICIAN.
THE KING'S FRIEND. VENETIAN NIGHTS.
VOLUME TWENTY THREE**

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COUNT DE HEROUVILLE

Balthus, vol twenty-three—Frontis

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IN TWENTY-FIVE VOLUMES

The First Complete Translation into English

THE CHILD OF MALEDICTION

A Mad Musician
The King's Friend
Venetian Nights

TRANSLATED BY
F. D. BYRNE AND LIONEL STRACHEY

Volume Twenty-Three

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM DRAWINGS ON THE WOOD
BY FAMOUS FRENCH ARTISTS



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THE CHILD OF MALEDICTION

THE CHILD OF MALEDICTION

I

HOW THE MOTHER LIVED

AT TWO O'CLOCK one winter's morning, the Countess Jeanne d'Herouville was suffering such severe pain, that, in spite of her inexperience, she divined that she would very soon become a mother; and the instinct which leads us to expect relief from a change of position counselled her to sit upright, either to study an entirely new kind of suffering, or to reflect on her situation. She was a prey to cruel fears, caused less by the risk of a first deliverance, which is a source of terror to most women, than by the dangers which threatened the child. To avoid awaking her husband, who was sleeping at her side, the poor woman took precautions which the fear that dominated her rendered as minute as those of an escaping prisoner. Although her agony became more and more intense at every moment, she ceased to feel it, so much was her strength occupied with the painful operation of changing her position, which she did by resting the weight of her body on her hands. Forced to keep an eye on the Count, she divided her attention between the bed-quilt and his broad, weather-beaten countenance, whose huge mustache brushed against her shoulder. Whenever her husband's respiration became audible for a second it inspired her with fears that revived the flush of crimson in her

cheeks, caused by her double anguish. The criminal trying to turn noiselessly in his prison lock the key which he has found could not be more timidly audacious. When the Countess found herself sitting upright without having awakened her guardian, her gesture of infantine joy revealed all the touching artlessness of her nature; but the half-formed smile on her inflamed lips was promptly repressed; a troubled thought clouded her pure forehead, and her large blue eyes resumed their expression of sadness. She heaved a deep sigh, and put back her hands, not without prudent precautions, on the conjugal pillow. Then, as though finding herself, for the first time since her marriage, free in thought and action, she regarded the objects about her, extending her neck in quick motions resembling those of a bird in a cage. Seeing her thus, one might easily have imagined that in days gone by she had been all joy and folly, but that suddenly destiny had destroyed her first hopes, and changed her ingenuous gayety into melancholy.

The room was one of those which, even in our own day, are pointed out by certain octogenarian care-takers to tourists visiting old castles, with the words: "This is the chamber in which Louis XIII. slept." Fine tapestries, generally dark in hue, hung on a background of walnut, the delicate carving of which had been blackened by time. The ceiling was decorated in the style of the preceding century, and still preserved its original walnut color. These decorations, of a rather severe cast, reflected the light so little that it was difficult to discern their design, even when the sun shone full into the room, which was lofty and large. Thus the silver lamp, placed on the mantel of a vast fireplace, did such poor service that its flickering light might have been compared to those nebulous stars, which, for moments only,