

BALZAC

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Balzac by Edgar Everstone Saltus

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BY

EDGAR EVERTSON SALTUS



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CHAPTER I.

THE VAGARIES OF GENIUS.

"Great minds are bravely eccentric; they scorn the beaten track."
— GOLDSMITH.

IN the city of Tours, in whose gabled streets there lingers still some memory of *la belle Impéria*, Honoré de Balzac was born on the 20th of May, 1799.

His childhood was in no wise extraordinary, save for the avidity with which he read the Bible and the keen delight which he took in the possession of a little red violin. He was indifferent to romps and games, and when not lost in the mysterious depths of the Scriptures he played by the hour on his fiddle, and extracted therefrom an enjoyment which was almost sensual in its intensity. His parents were well-considered people, in easy circumstances. Honoré was their first-born, and to him were subsequently given two sisters and a brother, concerning whom only a passing men-

tion need be made. His eldest sister, Laure, became the wife of M. de Surville, a civil engineer, survived her illustrious brother, and published his letters, together with a weak sketch of his life ; his second sister also married, but died at an early age ; while his brother Henri sought his fortune, after the manner of younger sons, in the colonies, failed to find it, and was otherwise entirely uninteresting.

At the age of eight, Balzac was placed as boarder at the Collège de Vendôme, where, through the compression of his dreamy nature by unaccustomed tasks and rules, he soon lapsed into a careless neglect of his duties, and became, in consequence, one of the most frequently punished pupils in his class. Favored, however, by the tacit connivance of a tutor, he passed most of his time in the library. Science, philosophy, belles-lettres, religion, history, and even dictionaries, he read and inwardly digested, and during the six years that he remained at the school he assimilated the substance of all the books worth reading.

This absorption of ideas produced a noteworthy effect. His eye embraced six or eight lines at a time, and his mind appropriated the thought with a velocity equal to his glance ; a single word in a phrase often sufficing for a clear understanding of the whole.

His memory was like a vise. He remem-