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Library Edition

THE MAGIC SKIN

THE QUEST OF THE ABSOLUTE
AND OTHER STORIES

BY

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

With Introductions by
GEORGE SAINTSBURY



THE THOMPSON PUBLISHING COMPANY
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THE MAGIC SKIN

HONORÉ DE BALZAC.

"Sans génie, je suis flambé!"

Volumes,* almost libraries, have been written about Balzac; and perhaps of very few writers, putting aside the three or four greatest of all, is it so difficult to select one or a few short phrases which will in any way denote them, much more sum them up. Yet the five words quoted above, which come from an early letter to his sister when as yet he had not "found his way," characterize him, I think, better than at least some of the volumes I have read about him, and supply, when they are properly understood, the most valuable of all keys and companions for his comprehension.

"If I have not genius, it is all up with me!" A very matter-of-fact person may say: "Why! there is nothing wonderful in this. Everybody knows that genius is wanted to make a name in literature, and most people think they have it." But this would be a little short-sighted, and only excusable because of the way in which the word "genius" is too commonly bandied about. As a matter of fact, there is not so very much genius in the world; and a great deal of more

*This general introduction attempts to deal chiefly, if not solely, with Balzac's life, and with the general characteristics of his work and genius. Particular books and special exemplifications of that genius will be only incidentally referred to in it; more detailed criticism as well as a summary of the bibliographical information, which is often so interesting and sometimes so important in Balzac's case, being reserved for the short prefaces to the various volumes of the series. I have, however, attempted, while making these short prefaces or introductions independently intelligible and sufficient, to link them to each other and to this general essay, so that the whole may present a sufficient study of Balzac and a sufficient commentary on his work.

than fair performance is attainable and attained by more or less decent allowances or exhibitions of talent. In prose, more especially, it is possible to gain a very high place, and to deserve it, without any genius at all: though it is difficult, if not impossible, to do so in verse. But what Balzac felt (whether he was conscious in detail of the feeling or not) when he used these words to his sister Laure, what his critical readers must feel when they have read only a very little of his work, what they must feel still more strongly when they have read that work as a whole—is that for him there is no such door of escape and no such compromise. He had the choice, by his nature, his aims, his capacities, of being a genius or nothing. He had no little gifts, and he was even destitute of some of the separate and divisible great ones. In mere writing, mere style, he was not supreme; one seldom or never derives from anything of his the merely artistic satisfaction given by perfect prose. His humor, except of the grim and gigantic kind, was not remarkable; his wit, for a Frenchman, curiously thin and small. The minor felicities of the literature generally were denied to him. *Sans génie, il était flambé; flambé* as he seemed to be, and very reasonably seemed, to his friends when as yet the genius had not come to him, and when he was desperately striving to discover where his genius lay in those wondrous works which "Lord R'Hoone," and "Horace de Saint Aubin," and others obligingly fathered for him.

It must be the business of these introductions to give what assistance they may to discover where it did lie; it is only necessary, before taking up the task in the regular biographical and critical way of the introductory cicerone, to make two negative observations. It did not lie, as some have ap-

parently thought, in the conception, or the outlining, or the filling up of such a scheme as the *Comédie Humaine*. In the first place, the work of every great writer, of the creative kind, including that of Dante himself, is a *comédie humaine*. All humanity is latent in every human being; and the great writers are merely those who call most of it out of latency and put it actually on the stage. And, as students of Balzac know, the scheme and adjustment of his comedy varied so remarkably as time went on that it can hardly be said to have even in its latest form (which would pretty certainly have been altered again) a distinct and definite character. Its so-called scenes (cheap criticism may add, and may add truly, though not to much purpose) are even in the mass by no means an exhaustive, and are, as they stand, a very "cross," division of life: nor are they peopled by anything like an exhaustive selection of personages. Nor again is Balzac's genius by any means a mere vindication of the famous definition of that quality as an infinite capacity of taking pains. That Balzac had that capacity—had it in a degree probably unequalled even by the dullest plodders on record—is very well known, is one of the best known things about him. But he showed it for nearly ten years before the genius came, and though no doubt it helped him when genius had come, the two things are in his case, as in most, pretty sufficiently distinct. What the genius itself was I must do my best to indicate hereafter, always beseeching the reader to remember that all genius is in its essence and quiddity indefinable. You can no more get close to it than you can get close to the rainbow; and your most scientific explanation of it will always leave as much of the heart of the fact unexplained as the scientific explanation of the rainbow leaves of that.

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