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Library Edition

SCENES FROM A COURTESAN'S
LIFE

THE GOVERNMENT CLERKS

BY

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

With Introductions by

GEORGE SAINTSBURY



THE THOMPSON PUBLISHING COMPANY
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Translator, JAMES WARING.

SCENES FROM A COURTESAN'S LIFE

INTRODUCTION

Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes has the interest (which it shares with only one or two others of Balzac's works), if not exactly of touching the two extremities of his prosperous career, at any rate of stretching over a great part of it. It also exemplifies the very uncertain and fortuitous scheme of the *Comédie* and its component scenes. At first nothing of it appeared but the first part, and only half of that, under the title of *La Torpille* (Esther Gobseck's nickname), which was published, together with *La Femme Supérieure*, the first form of *Les Employés*, and *La Maison Nucingen*, in 1838. Five years later it appeared in a newspaper as *Esther, ou Les Amours d'un vieux Banquier*, the first part being now completed, and the second added. It was not till 1846 that *Ou mènent les mauvais Chemins* appeared, and this book itself had different titles. Finally, in Balzac's very last period of writing at the end of 1846, or the beginning of 1847—for he and his bibliographer are at issue on that point,—*La dernière Incarnation de Vautrin* was added as a fourth part, making the book, already one of the longest, now by far the longest of all. But the four were not published together till the *édition définitive*, many years after Balzac's death.

It would in any case have been necessary to devote two of these volumes to so great a mass of matter, and I have taken the liberty of separating *Vautrin* from the rest for

the purposes of introduction. The truth is that the book ends much more artistically with *Ou mènent les mauvais Chemins*; and if Balzac really intended to make *La dernière Incarnation de Vautrin* a continuation, this, as well as the great length of the book, would lead me to imagine that he had in mind rather a sort of sub-division of the *Scènes de la Vie Parisienne* than a single work.

For it must be at once evident that with the deaths of Esther and of Lucien, art, sense, and truth require that the curtain should fall. It may have been very desirable to finish off Vautrin; and, as I shall have occasion to point out, he is a very interesting person. But his *mauvais chemin* is quite a different one from that of Esther; and he is only indirectly concerned with the particular *splendeurs et misères*.

On the other hand, the history of "La Torpille" and of Lucien de Rubempré is by itself smoother and more complete. It affords Balzac, no doubt, opportunities of indulging a very large number of his extensive assortment of fancies, not to say fads, and of bringing in a great number of the personages of his stock company. Vautrin, the terrible and mysterious, in his new avatar, is only one of these. Corentin reappears from the far distance of *Les Chouans*; but playing no very dissimilar part, though his machinations are directed against less innocent persons. We receive abundant information as to the way in which Baron Nucingen got rid of the money which he obtained by means already detailed with equal care elsewhere. Madame de Maufrigneuse and Madame de Sérizy play important parts; and many others come and go.

But still Esther van Gobseck and Lucien Chardon de Rubempré are as much the hero and heroine of the story, and make the first three parts as much a story to themselves,

as Le Père Goriot and Eugénie Grandet are the hero and heroine of the books to which they very justly give their names.

I forget whether Lucien de Rubempré, in the numerous and rather idle Balzac "keys" which MM. Cerfberr and Christophe have not deigned to include in their *Répertoire*, is identified with any actual personage. It has been, and will be observed, that Balzac was too great an artist either to need, or, indeed, often to attempt, this commonplace and catchpenny means of interest. But in the world of fiction in general, and of the *Comédie* in particular, Lucien is half-complement, half-counterpart of Eugène de Rastignac. He is the adventurer, not entirely without good blood in his veins, who ventures into the intersecting or overlapping worlds of fashion, of journalism, of speculation, and of politics, but who has not, like Rastignac, either strength or coolness of head to swim through the whirlpool and reach the shore. It may be interesting to the reader to form his own opinion how far Lucien's ruin—brought about, be it remembered, by charges of which he is actually innocent—is due to the evil, though not in his case intentionally hostile, influence of Vautrin, how far it is due to his own weakness. Balzac was too much of an artist to decide very definitely either way; but despite his rather mistaken admiration of Vautrin, I think he had the sense to give most weight to the internal causes. The moral—for there is always a moral in Balzac—is, of course, the old one of a thousand fables and a thousand forms, the best of which perhaps is the Spenserian apposition of "Be bold, be bold, and everywhere be bold," with "Be not *too* bold"—the moral that on the "Brigg of Dread" of ambition and covetousness there is nothing but absolute perdition for him who cannot keep his feet and his head. There is not perhaps

so much irony as there would be in some writers about the presentation of Lucien, who is really a poor creature enough, as the very darling of all the great ladies of Paris as well as of persons at the other end of the scale; but it is there.

With Esther it is even plainer sailing. Her history is simply that of a courtesan, embodying "lights and shadows" on a more fantastic and gorgeous scale, with the final fortune thrown in (this applies to Lucien as well as to her) for a climax of Nemesis. Perhaps there is another moral here—that when any one has once embarked on this particular *mauvais chemin* it is not merely idle, but ruinous, to indulge in sincere affection for anybody—that you must "play the game," here as elsewhere, and that you cannot be permitted to play the fair game and the foul at once.

On the whole, I should put this book a little below Balzac's very best, but in the forefront of his average work. Some I know have rated it very highly; but such a slightly glorified "Alphonse" as Rubempré is too disgusting a hero to be tolerated without even greater power than Balzac has here put forth, even though Esther to no small extent redeems him.

A good deal of the rather complicated bibliography of *Splendeurs et Misères* has necessarily been given above. Some additional details here may complete the information, in regard to the whole of it, as Balzac finally arranged it, that is to say, with the *Dernière Incarnation* included. *La Torpille* (*vide supra*) came out as a book without any previous newspaper publication, but with *La Femme Supérieure* (now called *Les Employés*) and *La Maison Nucingen* in 1838, published in two volumes by Werdet. It was divided into three chapters with a view to *feuilleton* publication in the *Presse*. But this did not appear. The rest of the present *Comment aiment les Filles*, with most of *A Combien l'Amour revient*

aux Vieillards, did appear in this form in *Le Parisien* during the month of June 1843 and a few days in May and July. The first part was included as well in this publication. *Le Parisien* was not successful, and the end of *A Combien l'Amour* never came out, but is included in a three-volume book publication of the thing next year by de Potter. Then the whole, which had in *Le Parisien* been called *Esther*, ou *Les Amours d'un vieux Banquier*, received its present general heading with the addition "Esther." The book was next entered in the *Comédie*, the first part being called *Esther Heureuse*. *Ou mènent les mauvais Chemins* appeared in the newspaper *L'Epoque* during July 1846, and was then called *Une Instruction criminelle*; but it was forthwith included in the *Comédie* under its actual title, and a year later published separately by Souverain. But *Splendeurs et Misères* had a bad habit of killing journals under it; and *L'Epoque* too, having died, *La dernière Incarnation* appeared in the *Presse* (strangely enough, seeing that this was the journal which ought to have published the first part ten years earlier) in April and May 1847. Chlendowski published it as a book the same year. The date "December 1847" appears to have been a mistake or a whim of Balzac's.

G. S.

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