

The Physiology of Marriage, Part II.

Honore de Balzac

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Author: Honore de Balzac

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THE PHYSIOLOGY OF MARRIAGE

SECOND PART

BY

HONORE DE BALZAC

MEANS OF DEFENCE, INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR.

"To be or not to be,
That is the question."
--Shakspeare, _Hamlet_.

MEDITATION X.

A TREATISE ON MARITAL POLICY.

When a man reaches the position in which the first part of this book sets him, we suppose that the idea of his wife being possessed by another makes his heart beat, and rekindles his passion, either by an appeal to his *_amour propre_*, his egotism, or his self-interest, for unless he is still on his wife's side, he must be one of the lowest of men and deserves his fate.

In this trying moment it is very difficult for a husband to avoid making mistakes; for, with regard to most men, the art of ruling a wife is even less known than that of judiciously choosing one. However, marital policy consists chiefly in the practical application of three principles which should be the soul of your conduct. The first is never to believe what a woman says; the second, always to look for the spirit without dwelling too much upon the letter of her actions; and the third, not to forget that a woman is never so garrulous as when she holds her tongue, and is never working with more energy than when she keeps quiet.

From the moment that your suspicions are aroused, you ought to be like a man mounted on a tricky horse, who always watches the ears of the beast, in fear of being thrown from the saddle.

But art consists not so much in the knowledge of principles, as in the manner of applying them; to reveal them to ignorant people is to put a

razor in the hand of a monkey. Moreover, the first and most vital of your duties consists in perpetual dissimulation, an accomplishment in which most husbands are sadly lacking. In detecting the symptoms of minotaurism a little too plainly marked in the conduct of their wives, most men at once indulge in the most insulting suspicions. Their minds contract a tinge of bitterness which manifests itself in their conversation, and in their manners; and the alarm which fills their heart, like the gas flame in a glass globe, lights up their countenances so plainly, that it accounts for their conduct.

Now a woman, who has twelve hours more than you have each day to reflect and to study you, reads the suspicion written upon your face at the very moment that it arises. She will never forget this gratuitous insult. Nothing can ever remedy that. All is now said and done, and the very next day, if she has opportunity, she will join the ranks of inconsistent women.

You ought then to begin under these circumstances to affect towards your wife the same boundless confidence that you have hitherto had in her. If you begin to lull her anxieties by honeyed words, you are lost, she will not believe you; for she has her policy as you have yours. Now there is as much need for tact as for kindness in your behavior, in order to inculcate in her, without her knowing it, a feeling of security, which will lead her to lay back her ears, and prevent you from using rein or spur at the wrong moment.

But how can we compare a horse, the frankest of all animals, to a being, the flashes of whose thought, and the movements of whose impulses render her at moments more prudent than the Servite Fra-Paolo, the most terrible adviser that the Ten at Venice ever had; more deceitful than a king; more adroit than Louis XI; more profound than Machiavelli; as sophisticated as Hobbes; as acute as Voltaire; as pliant as the fiancée of Mamolin; and distrustful of no one in the

whole wide world but you?

Moreover, to this dissimulation, by means of which the springs that move your conduct ought to be made as invisible as those that move the world, must be added absolute self-control. That diplomatic imperturbability, so boasted of by Talleyrand, must be the least of your qualities; his exquisite politeness and the grace of his manners must distinguish your conversation. The professor here expressly forbids you to use your whip, if you would obtain complete control over your gentle Andalusian steed.

LXI.

If a man strike his mistress it is a self-inflicted wound; but if he strike his wife it is suicide!

How can we think of a government without police, an action without force, a power without weapons?--Now this is exactly the problem which we shall try to solve in our future meditations. But first we must submit two preliminary observations. They will furnish us with two other theories concerning the application of all the mechanical means which we propose you should employ. An instance from life will refresh these arid and dry dissertations: the hearing of such a story will be like laying down a book, to work in the field.

In the year 1822, on a fine morning in the month of February, I was traversing the boulevards of Paris, from the quiet circles of the Marais to the fashionable quarters of the Chaussee-d'Antin, and I observed for the first time, not without a certain philosophic joy, the diversity of physiognomy and the varieties of costume which, from the Rue du Pas-de-la-Mule even to the Madeleine, made each portion of the boulevard a world of itself, and this whole zone of Paris, a grand panorama of manners. Having at that time no idea of what the world was, and little thinking that one day I should have the audacity to set myself up as a legislator on marriage, I was going to take lunch at the house of a college friend, who was perhaps too early in life afflicted with a wife and two children. My former professor of mathematics lived at a short distance from the house of my college friend, and I promised myself the pleasure of a visit to this worthy mathematician before indulging my appetite for the dainties of friendship. I accordingly made my way to the heart of a study, where everything was covered with a dust which bore witness to the lofty abstraction of the scholar. But a surprise was in store for me there. I perceived a pretty woman seated on the arm of an easy chair, as if mounted on an English horse; her face took on the look of conventional surprise worn by mistresses of the house towards those they do not know, but she did not disguise the expression of annoyance which, at my appearance, clouded her countenance with the thought that I was aware how ill-timed was my presence. My master, doubtless absorbed in an equation, had not yet raised his head; I therefore waved my right hand towards the young lady, like a fish moving his fin, and on tiptoe I retired with a mysterious smile which might be translated "I will not be the one to prevent him committing an act of infidelity to Urania." She nodded her head with one of those sudden gestures whose graceful vivacity is not to be translated into words.

"My good friend, don't go away," cried the geometrician. "This is my wife!"

I bowed for the second time!--Oh, Coulon! Why wert thou not present to applaud the only one of thy pupils who understood from that moment the expression, "anacreontic," as applied to a bow?--The effect must have been very overwhelming; for Madame the Professoress, as the Germans say, rose hurriedly as if to go, making me a slight bow which seemed to say: "Adorable!----" Her husband stopped her, saying:

"Don't go, my child, this is one of my pupils."

The young woman bent her head towards the scholar as a bird perched on a bough stretches its neck to pick up a seed.

"It is not possible," said the husband, heaving a sigh, "and I am going to prove it to you by A plus B."

"Let us drop that, sir, I beg you," she answered, pointing with a wink to me.

If it had been a problem in algebra, my master would have understood this look, but it was Chinese to him, and so he went on.

"Look here, child, I constitute you judge in the matter; our income is ten thousand francs."

At these words I retired to the door, as if I were seized with a wild desire to examine the framed drawings which had attracted my attention. My discretion was rewarded by an eloquent glance. Alas! she did not know that in Fortunio I could have played the part of Sharp-Ears, who heard the truffles growing.

"In accordance with the principles of general economy," said my master, "no one ought to spend in rent and servant's wages more than two-tenths of his income; now our apartment and our attendance cost altogether a hundred louis. I give you twelve hundred francs to dress with" [in saying this he emphasized every syllable]. "Your food," he went on, takes up four thousand francs, our children demand at least twenty-five louis; I take for myself only eight hundred francs; washing, fuel and light mount up to about a thousand francs; so that there does not remain, as you see, more than six hundred francs for unforeseen expenses. In order to buy the cross of diamonds, we must draw a thousand crowns from our capital, and if once we take that course, my little darling, there is no reason why we should not leave Paris which you love so much, and at once take up our residence in the country, in order to retrench. Children and household expenses will increase fast enough! Come, try to be reasonable!"

"I suppose I must," she said, "but you will be the only husband in Paris who has not given a New Year's gift to his wife."

And she stole away like a school-boy who goes to finish an imposed duty. My master made a gesture of relief. When he saw the door close he rubbed his hands, he talked of the war in Spain; and I went my way to the Rue de Provence, little knowing that I had received the first installment of a great lesson in marriage, any more than I dreamt of the conquest of Constantinople by General Diebitsch. I arrived at my host's house at the very moment they were sitting down to luncheon, after having waited for me the half hour demanded by usage. It was, I believe, as she opened a *pate de foie gras* that my pretty hostess

said to her husband, with a determined air:

"Alexander, if you were really nice you would give me that pair of ear-rings that we saw at Fossin's."

"You shall have them," cheerfully replied my friend, drawing from his pocketbook three notes of a thousand francs, the sight of which made his wife's eyes sparkle. "I can no more resist the pleasure of offering them to you," he added, "than you can that of accepting them. This is the anniversary of the day I first saw you, and the diamonds will perhaps make you remember it!----"

"You bad man!" said she, with a winning smile.

She poked two fingers into her bodice, and pulling out a bouquet of violets she threw them with childlike contempt into the face of my friend. Alexander gave her the price of the jewels, crying out:

"I had seen the flowers!"

I shall never forget the lively gesture and the eager joy with which, like a cat which lays its spotted paw upon a mouse, the little woman seized the three bank notes; she rolled them up blushing with pleasure, and put them in the place of the violets which before had perfumed her bosom. I could not help thinking about my old mathematical master. I did not then see any difference between him and his pupil, than that which exists between a frugal man and a prodigal, little thinking that he of the two who seemed to calculate the better, actually calculated the worse. The luncheon went off merrily. Very soon, seated in a little drawing-room newly decorated, before a cheerful fire which gave warmth and made our hearts expand as in spring time, I felt compelled to make this loving couple a guest's compliments on the furnishing of their little bower.

"It is a pity that all this costs so dear," said my friend, "but it is right that the nest be worthy of the bird; but why the devil do you compliment me upon curtains which are not paid for?--You make me remember, just at the time I am digesting lunch, that I still owe two thousand francs to a Turk of an upholsterer."

At these words the mistress of the house made a mental inventory of the pretty room with her eyes, and the radiancy of her face changed to thoughtfulness. Alexander took me by the hand and led me to the recess of a bay window.

"Do you happen," he said in a low voice, "to have a thousand crowns to lend me? I have only twelve thousand francs income, and this year--"

"Alexander," cried the dear creature, interrupting her husband, while, rushing up, she offered him the three banknotes, "I see now that it is a piece of folly--"

"What do you mean?" answered he, "keep your money."

"But, my love, I am ruining you! I ought to know that you love me so much, that I ought not to tell you all that I wish for."

"Keep it, my darling, it is your lawful property--nonsense, I shall gamble this winter and get all that back again!"

"Gamble!" cried she, with an expression of horror. "Alexander, take back these notes! Come, sir, I wish you to do so."

"No, no," replied my friend, repulsing the white and delicious little hand. "Are you not going on Thursday to a ball of Madame de B-----?"

"I will think about what you asked of me," said I to my comrade.

I went away bowing to his wife, but I saw plainly after that scene that my anacreontic salutation did not produce much effect upon her.

"He must be mad," thought I as I went away, "to talk of a thousand crowns to a law student."

Five days later I found myself at the house of Madame de B-----, whose balls were becoming fashionable. In the midst of the quadrilles I saw the wife of my friend and that of the mathematician. Madame Alexander wore a charming dress; some flowers and white muslin were all that composed it. She wore a little cross *_a la Jeannette_*, hanging by a black velvet ribbon which set off the whiteness of her scented skin; long pears of gold decorated her ears. On the neck of Madame the Professress sparkled a superb cross of diamonds.

"How funny that is," said I to a personage who had not yet studied the world's ledger, nor deciphered the heart of a single woman.

That personage was myself. If I had then the desire to dance with those fair women, it was simply because I knew a secret which emboldened my timidity.

"So after all, madame, you have your cross?" I said to her first.

"Well, I fairly won it!" she replied, with a smile hard to describe.

"How is this! no ear-rings?" I remarked to the wife of my friend.

"Ah!" she replied, "I have enjoyed possession of them during a whole luncheon time, but you see that I have ended by converting Alexander."

"He allowed himself to be easily convinced?"

She answered with a look of triumph.

Eight years afterwards, this scene suddenly rose to my memory, though I had long since forgotten it, and in the light of the candles I distinctly discerned the moral of it. Yes, a woman has a horror of being convinced of anything; when you try to persuade her she immediately submits to being led astray and continues to play the role which nature gave her. In her view, to allow herself to be won over is to grant a favor, but exact arguments irritate and confound her; in order to guide her you must employ the power which she herself so frequently employs and which lies in an appeal to sensibility. It is therefore in his wife, and not in himself, that a husband can find the instruments of his despotism; as diamond cuts diamond so must the woman be made to tyrannize over herself. To know how to offer the ear-rings in such a way that they will be returned, is a secret whose application embraces the slightest details of life. And now let us

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