

THE WILD ASS'S SKIN

(*La Peau de Chagrin*)

P R E F A C E

THE *Peau de Chagrin* is the one book of Balzac's which it is difficult for those who know it to approach without a somewhat uncritical enthusiasm. It is not faultless; no book of his is, and this cannot challenge the epithet even to the extent to which not a few others can challenge it. It is earlier than almost any of the mature novels, except the *Chouans*; and it bears in some respects the marks of its earliness as well as, in others, those of that rather artificial scheme of representing life, which was so strongly characteristic of the author, and which, while it helped him in conceiving the *Comédie Humaine*, imposed a certain restraint and hamper on the *Comédie* itself. We could spare a good deal of the journalist and other talk at the orgie; and more persons than Emile have gone to sleep over, or have escaped sleep only by skipping, the unconscionable length of Raphael's story.

But these are the merest and most miserable of details. In the first place, the conception is of the very finest. You may call it an *étude philosophique*, or you may not; you may class it as an 'allegory' on the banks of the Nile or the Seine; or any other river, if you like. Neither title will do it any harm, and neither can explain it or exalt it

higher. The Law of Nemesis—the law that every extraordinary expansion or satisfaction of heart or brain or will is paid for—paid for inevitably, incommutably, without the possibility of putting off or transferring the payment—is one of the truths about which no human being with a soul a little above the brute has the slightest doubt. It may be put religiously as, ‘Know that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment’; or philosophically, as in the same book, ‘All things are double, one against the other’; or in any other fashion or language. But it is an eternal and immutable verity, and the soul of man bears witness to it.

It is Balzac’s way to provide abundant, and not always economically arranged backgrounds and contrasts for his central pictures; and the gaming-house (the model of how many gaming-houses since?), the gorgeous *capharnaum* of the curiosity shop, and the ‘orgie’ provide these in the present case lavishly enough. The orgie is undoubtedly the weakest. It is only touched with others by the pleasant and good-humoured skit of Gautier in *Les Jeunes-France*; but the note there struck is, as usual with ‘Théo,’ the right one. You cannot ‘organise’ an orgie; the thing comes naturally or not at all; and in the splendours of Taillefer, as in those of Trimalchio, there is a certain coldness.

But this is soon forgotten in the absorbing interest of the Skin and its master. The only adverse comment which has ever occurred to me is, that one might perhaps have expected a longer period of *insouciance*, of more or less reckless enjoyment of the privileges, to elapse before a vivid consciousness of the curse and of the penalty. I know no answer, unless it be that Balzac took the orgie

itself to be, as it were, the wild oats of Raphael's period—in which case he had not much to show for it. But when the actual consciousness wakes, when the Skin has been measured on the napkin, and its shrinking noted, nothing is questionable any longer. The frenzied anxiety of the victim is not overdone; the way in which his very frenzy leads him to make greater and ever greater drafts on his capital of power without any corresponding satisfaction is masterly. And the close is more masterly still. To some tastes the actual conclusion may be a thought too allegorical, but in *mil-huit-cent-trente* your allegory was your only wear; and Gautier, in the pleasant book above cited, was thoroughly in the fashion when he audaciously put a hidden literary meaning on the merry tale of 'Celle-ci et celle-là.' Here, too, if anywhere, the opposition of Pauline and Fœdora in this way is justified. It softens off the too high-strung tragedy of the *Catastrophe* at the same time that it points the moral, and it rounds as much as it adorns the tale.

It has been observed, in no carping or hypercritical spirit, that passages of the book are somewhat high-flown in style. The fact is that Balzac had rather a tendency to this style, and only outgrew it, if he ever did outgrow it, by dint of its greater and greater unfitness for his chosen subjects. Here, if anywhere, it was excusable, just as here, if anywhere, the gigantic element in his genius found scope and play. There had been some 'inventories' in literature before, and there have been many more since the description of the curiosity shop; but none, if we except the brief Shakespearian perfection of that in Clarence's dream, and none at all in a heaped and minute style, can approach this. The thing is nightmarish—you see the

magots and the armour, the pictures and the statues, and amongst them all the sinister 'piece of shagreen,'¹ with the ineffaceable letters stamped on it.

. And so over all the book there is the note of the *voyant*, of the seer who sees and who makes others see. This note is seldom an idyllic or merely pleasant one; the writer who has it must have, even in such a book as the *Médecin de Campagne*, a black thread in his twist, a sombre background to his happy valley. Here the subject not only excuses, but demands a constant sombreness, a tone of thunder in the air, of eclipse and earthquake. And the tone is given. A very miserable person would he be who endeavoured to pick out burlesque points in the *Peau de Chagrin*, the most apocalyptic of the novels of the nineteenth century, and yet one of the most soberly true in general theme and theory. When one thinks of the tireless efforts which have been made, especially of late years, to 'pejorate' pessimism and blacken gloom, and of the too general conclusion of yawn or laugh to which they bring us, it is doubly curious to come back to this sermon by a very unpriestly preacher on the simple text, 'Whom the gods curse, to him they grant the desires of his heart.'

La Peau de Chagrin appeared first in August 1831, published in two volumes, by Gosselin and Canel, with a Preface and a '*Moralité*,' which the author afterwards cut out. Of its four chapters or divisions the first

¹ I hesitated between 'The Piece of Shagreen' and 'The Wild Ass's Skin' for the title, but Balzac's own remarks decided me. 'The Magic Skin' is very weak, and 'The Skin of Shagreen' hideous.