

# Concerning A Poor Man Who Was Called Le Vieux Par-chemins

Honore de Balzac

The old chronicler who furnished the hemp to weave the present story, is said to have lived at the time when the affair occurred in the City of Rouen.

In the environs of this fair town, where at the time dwelt Duke Richard, an old man used to beg, whose name was Tryballot, but to whom was given the nickname of Le Vieux par-Chemins, or the Old Man of the Roads; not because he was yellow and dry as vellum, but because he was always in the high-ways and by-ways--up hill and down dale--slept with the sky for his counterpane, and went about in rags and tatters. Notwithstanding this, he was very popular in the duchy, where everyone had grown used to him, so much so that if the month went by without anyone seeing his cup held towards them, people would say, "Where is the old man?" and the usual answer was, "On the roads."

This said man had had for a father a Tryballot, who was in his lifetime a skilled artisan, so economical and careful, that he left considerable wealth to his son.

But the young lad soon frittered it away, for he was the very opposite of the old fellow, who, returning from the fields to his house, picked up, now here, now there, many a little stick of wood left right and left, saying, conscientiously, that one should never come home empty handed. Thus he warmed himself in the winter at the expense of the careless; and he did well. Everyone recognised what a good example this was for the country, since a year before his death no one left a morsel of wood on the road; he had compelled the most dissipated to be thrifty and orderly. But his son made ducks and drakes of everything, and did not follow his wise example. The father had predicted the thing. From the boy's earliest youth, when the good Tryballot set him to watch the birds who came to eat the peas, beans, and the grain, and to drive the thieves away, above all, the jays, who spoiled everything, he would study their habits, and took delight in watching with what grace they came and went, flew off loaded, and returned, watching with a quick eye the snares and nets; and he would laugh heartily at their cleverness in avoiding them. Tryballot senior went into a passion when he found his grain considerably less in a measure. But although he pulled his son's ears whenever he caught him idling and trifling under a nut tree, the little rascal did not alter his conduct, but continued to study the habits of the blackbirds, sparrows, and other intelligent marauders. One day his father told him that he would be wise to model himself after them, for that if he continued this kind of life, he would be compelled in his old age like them, to pilfer, and like them, would be pursued by justice. This came true; for, as has before been stated, he dissipated in a few days the crowns which his careful father had acquired in a life-time. He dealt with men as he did with the sparrows, letting everyone put a hand in his pocket, and contemplating the grace and polite demeanour of those who assisted to empty it. The end of his wealth was thus soon reached. When the devil had the empty money bag to himself, Tryballot did not appear at all cut up, saying, that he "did not wish to damn himself for this world's goods, and that he had studied philosophy in the school of the birds."

After having thoroughly enjoyed himself, of all his goods, there only remained to him a

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goblet bought at Landict, and three dice, quite sufficient furniture for drinking and gambling, so that he went about without being encumbered, as are the great, with chariots, carpets, dripping pans, and an infinite number of varlets. Tryballot wished to see his good friends, but they no longer knew him, which fact gave him leave no longer to recognise anyone. Seeing this, he determined to choose a profession in which there was nothing to do and plenty to gain. Thinking this over, he remembered the indulgences of the blackbirds and the sparrows. Then the good Tryballot selected for his profession that of begging money at people's houses, and pilfering. From the first day, charitable people gave him something, and Tryballot was content, finding the business good, without advance money or bad debts; on the contrary, full of accommodation. He went about it so heartily, that he was liked everywhere, and received a thousand consolations refused to rich people. The good man watched the peasants planting, sowing, reaping, and making harvest, and said to himself, that they worked a little for him as well. He who had a pig in his larder owed him a bit for it, without suspecting it. The man who baked a loaf in his oven often baked it for Tryballot without knowing it. He took nothing by force; on the contrary, people said to him kindly, while making him a present, "Here Vieux par-Chemins, cheer up, old fellow. How are you? Come, take this; the cat began it, you can finish it."

Vieux par-Chemins was at all the weddings, baptisms, and funerals, because he went everywhere where there was, openly or secretly, merriment and feasting. He religiously kept the statutes and canons of his order--namely, to do nothing, because if he had been able to do the smallest amount of work no one would ever give anything again. After having refreshed himself, this wise man would lay full length in a ditch, or against a church wall, and think over public affairs; and then he would philosophise, like his pretty tutors, the blackbirds, jays, and sparrows, and thought a great deal while mumping; for, because his apparel was poor, was that a reason his understanding should not be rich? His philosophy amused his clients, to whom he would repeat, by way of thanks, the finest aphorisms of his science. According to him, suppers produced gout in the rich: he boasted that he had nimble feet, because his shoemaker gave him boots that do not pinch his corns. There were aching heads beneath diadems, but his never ached, because it was touched neither by luxury nor any other chaplet. And again, that jewelled rings hinder the circulation of the blood. Although he covered himself with sores, after the manner of cadgers, you may be sure he was as sound as a child at the baptismal font.

The good man disported himself with other rogues, playing with his three dice, which he kept to remind him to spend his coppers, in order that he might always be poor. In spite of his vow, he was, like all the order of mendicants, so wealthy that one day at the Paschal feast, another beggar wishing to rent his profit from him, Vieux par-Chemins refused ten crowns for it; in fact, the same evening he spent fourteen crowns in drinking the health of the alms-givers, because it is the statutes of beggary that one should show one's gratitude to donors. Although he carefully got rid of that of which had been a source of anxiety to others, who, having too much wealth went in search of poverty, he was happier with nothing in the world than when he had his father's money. And seeing what are the conditions of nobility, he was always on the high road to it, because he did nothing except according to his fancy, and lived nobly without labour. Thirty crowns would not have got him out of a bed when he was in it. The morrow always dawned for him as it did for others, while leading this happy life; which, according to the statements of Plato, whose authority has more than once been invoked in these narratives, certain ancient sages had led before him. At last, Vieux par-Chemins reached the age of eighty-two years, having never been a

single day without picking up money, and possessed the healthiest colour and complexion imaginable. He believed that if he had persevered in the race for wealth he would have been spoiled and buried years before. It is possible he was right.

In his early youth Vieux par-Chemins had the illustrious virtue of being very partial to the ladies; and his abundance of love was, it is said, the result of his studies among the sparrows. Thus it was that he was always ready to give the ladies his assistance in counting the joists, and this generosity finds its physical cause in the fact that, having nothing to do, he was always ready to do something. His secret virtues brought about, it is said, that popularity which he enjoyed in the provinces. Certain people say that the lady of Chaumont had him in her castle, to learn the truth about these qualities, and kept him there for a week, to prevent him begging. But the good man jumped over the hedges and fled in great terror of being rich. Advancing in age, this great quintessencer found himself disdained, although his notable faculties of loving were in no way impaired. This unjust turning away on the part of the female tribe caused the first trouble of Vieux par-Chemins, and the celebrated trial of Rouen, to which it is time I came.

In this eighty-second year of his age he was compelled to remain continent for about seven months, during which time he met no woman kindly disposed towards him; and he declared before the judge that that had caused the greatest astonishment of his long and honourable life. In this most pitiable state he saw in the fields during the merry month of May a girl, who by chance was a maiden, and minding cows. The heat was so excessive that this cowherdess had stretched herself beneath the shadow of a beech tree, her face to the ground, after the custom of people who labour in the fields, in order to get a little nap while her animals were grazing. She was awakened by the deed of the old man, who had stolen from her that which a poor girl could only lose once. Finding herself ruined without receiving from the process either knowledge or pleasure, she cried out so loudly that the people working in the fields ran to her, and were called upon by her as witnesses, at the time when that destruction was visible in her which is appropriate only to a bridal night. She cried and groaned, saying that the old ape might just as well have played his tricks on her mother, who would have said nothing.

He made answer to the peasants, who had already raised their hoes to kill him, that he had been compelled to enjoy himself. These people objected that a man can enjoy himself very well without enjoying a maiden--a case for the provost, which would bring him straight to the gallows; and he was taken with great clamour to the jail of Rouen.

The girl, interrogated by the provost, declared that she was sleeping in order to do something, and that she thought she was dreaming of her lover, with whom she was then at loggerheads, because before marriage he wished to take certain liberties: and jokingly, in this dream she let him reconnoiter to a certain extent, in order to avoid any dispute afterwards, and that in spite of her prohibitions he went further than she had given him leave to go, and finding more pain than pleasure in the affair, she had been awakened by Vieux par-Chemins, who had attacked her as a gray-friar would a ham at the end of lent.

This trial caused so great a commotion in the town of Rouen that the provost was sent for by the duke, who had an intense desire to know if the thing were true. Upon the affirmation of the provost, he ordered Vieux par-Chemins to be brought to his palace, in order that he might hear what defence he had to make. The poor old fellow appeared before the prince,

and informed him naively of the misfortune which his impulsive nature brought upon him, declaring that he was like a young fellow impelled by imperious desires; that up to the present year he had sweethearts of his own, but for the last eight months he had been a total abstainer; that he was too poor to find favour with the girls of the town; that honest women who once were charitable to him, had taken a dislike to his hair, which had feloniously turned white in spite of the green youth of his love, and that he felt compelled to avail himself of the chance when he saw this maiden, who, stretched at full length under the beech tree, left visible the lining of her dress and two hemispheres, white as snow, which had deprived him of reason; that the fault was the girl's and not his, because young maidens should be forbidden to entice passers-by by showing them that which caused Venus to be named Callipyge; finally the prince ought to be aware what trouble a man had to control himself at the hour of noon, because that was the time of day at which King David was smitten with the wife of the Sieur Uriah, that where a Hebrew king, beloved of God, had succumbed, a poor man, deprived of all joy, and reduced to begging for his bread, could not expect to escape; that for that matter of that, he was quite willing to sing psalms for the remainder of his days, and play upon a lute by way of penance, in imitation of the said king, who had had the misfortune to slay a husband, while he had only done a trifling injury to a peasant girl. The duke listened to the arguments of Vieux par-Chemins, and said that he was a man of good parts. Then he made his memorable decree, that if, as this beggar declared, he had need of such gratification at his age he gave permission to prove it at the foot of the ladder which he would have to mount to be hanged, according to the sentence already passed on him by the provost; that if then, the rope being round his neck, between the priest and the hangman, a like desire seized him he should have a free pardon.

This decree becoming known, there was a tremendous crowd to see the old fellow led to the gallows. There was a line drawn up as if for a ducal entry, and in it many more bonnets than hats. Vieux par-Chemins was saved by a lady curious to see how this precious violator would finish his career. She told the duke that religion demanded that he should have a fair chance. And she dressed herself as if for a ball; she brought intentionally into evidence two hillocks of such snowy whiteness that the whitest linen neckerchief would have paled before them; indeed, these fruits of love stood out, without a wrinkle, over her corset, like two beautiful apples, and made one's mouth water, so exquisite were they. This noble lady, who was one of those who rouse one's manhood, had a smile ready on her lips for the old fellow. Vieux par-Chemins, dressed in garments of coarse cloth, more certain of being in the desired state after hanging than before it, came along between the officers of justice with a sad countenance, glancing now here and there, and seeing nothing but head-dresses; and he would he declared, have given a hundred crowns for a girl tucked up as was the cowherdess, whose charms, though they had been his ruin, he still remembered, and they might still have saved him; but, as he was old, the remembrance was not sufficiently recent. But when, at the foot of the ladder, he saw the twin charms of the lady, and the pretty delta that their confluent rotundities produced, the sight so much excited him that his emotion was patent to the spectators.

"Make haste and see that the required conditions are fulfilled," said he to the officers. "I have gained my pardon but I cannot answer for my saviour."

The lady was well pleased with this homage, which, she said, was greater than his offence. The guards, whose business it was to proceed to a verification, believed the culprit to be the devil, because never in their wits had they seen an "I" so perpendicular as was the old man.

He was marched in triumph through the town to the palace of the duke, to whom the guards and others stated the facts. In that period of ignorance, this affair was thought so much of that the town voted the erection of a column on the spot where the old fellow gained his pardon, and he was portrayed thereon in stone in the attitude he assumed at the sight of that honest and virtuous lady. The statue was still to be seen when Rouen was taken by the English, and the writers of the period have included this history among the notable events of the reign.

As the town offered to supply the old man with all he required, and see to his sustenance, clothing, and amusements, the good duke arranged matters by giving the injured maiden a thousand crowns and marrying her to her seducer, who then lost his name of Vieux par-Chemins. He was named by the duke the Sieur de Bonne-C----- . This wife was confined nine months afterwards of a perfectly formed male child, alive and kicking, and born with two teeth. From this marriage came the house of Bonne-C-----, who from motives modest but wrong, besought our well-beloved King Louis Eleventh to grant them letters patent to change their names into that of Bonne-Chose. The king pointed out to the Sieur de Bonne-C----- that there was in the state of Venice an illustrious family named Coglioni, who wore three "C----- au natural" on their coat of arms. The gentlemen of the House of Bonne-C----- stated to the king that their wives were ashamed to be thus called in public assemblies; the king answered that they would lose a great deal, because there is a great deal in a name. Nevertheless, he granted the letters. After that this race was known by this name, and founded families in many provinces. The first Sieur de Bonne-C----- lived another 27 years, and had another son and two daughters. But he grieved much at becoming rich, and no longer being able to pick up a living in the street.

From this you can obtain finer lessons and higher morals than from any story you will read all your life long--of course excepting these hundred glorious Droll Tales--namely, that never could adventure of this sort have happened to the impaired and ruined constitutions of court rascals, rich people and others who dig their graves with their teeth by over-eating and drinking many wines that impair the implements of happiness; which said over-fed people were lolling luxuriously in costly draperies and on feather beds, while the Sieur de Bonne-Chose was roughing it. In a similar situation, if they had eaten cabbage, it would have given them the diarrhoea. This may incite many of those who read this story to change their mode of life, in order to imitate Vieux par-Chemins in his old age.

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