

# The Danger Of Being Too Innocent

Honore de Balzac

The Lord of Montcontour was a brave soldier of Tours, who in honour of the battle gained by the Duke of Anjou, afterwards our right glorious king, caused to be built at Vouvray the castle thus named, for he had borne himself most bravely in that affair, where he overcame the greatest of heretics, and from that was authorised to take the name. Now this said captain had two sons, good Catholics, of whom the eldest was in favour at court. After the peace, which was concluded before the stratagem arranged for St Bartholomew's Day, the good man returned to his manor, which was not ornamented as it is at the present day. There he received the sad announcement of the death of his son, slain in a duel by the lord of Villequier. The poor father was the more cut up at this, as he had arranged a capital marriage for the said son with a young lady of the male branch of Amboise. Now, by this death most piteously inopportune, vanished all the future and advantages of his family, of which he wished to make a great and noble house. With this idea, he had put his other son in a monastery, under the guidance and government of a man renowned for his holiness, who brought him up in a Christian manner, according to the desire of his father, who wished from high ambition to make him a cardinal of renown. For this the good abbot kept the young man in a private house, and had to sleep by his side in his cell, allowed no evil weeds to grow in his mind, brought him up in purity of soul and true condition, as all priests should be. This said clerk, when turned nineteen years, knew no other love than the love of God, no other nature than that of the angels who had not our carnal properties, in order that they may live in purity, seeing that otherwise they would make good use of them. The which the King on high, who wished to have His pages always proper, was afraid of. He has done well, because His good little people cannot drink in dram shops or riot in brothels as ours do. He is divinely served; but then remember, He is Lord of all. Now in this plight the lord of Montcontour determined to withdraw his second son from the cloister, and invest him with the purple of the soldier and courtier, in the place of the ecclesiastical purple; and determined to give him in marriage to the maiden, affianced to the dead man, which was wisely determined because wrapped round with continence and sobriety in all ways as was the little monk, the bride would be as well used and happier than she would have been with the elder, already well hauled over, upset, and spoiled by the ladies of the court. The befrocked, unfrocked, and very sheepish in his ways, followed the sacred wishes of his father, and consented to the said marriage without knowing what a wife, and--what is more curious--what a girl was. By chance, his journey having been hindered by the troubles and marches of conflicting parties, this innocent--more innocent than it is lawful for a man to be innocent--only came to the castle of Montcontour the evening before the wedding, which was performed with dispensations bought in by the archbishopric of Tours. It is necessary here to describe the bride. Her mother, long time a widow, lived in the House of M. de Braguelongne, civil lieutenant of the Chatelet de Paris, whose wife lived with lord of Lignieres, to the great scandal of the period. But everyone then had so many joists in his own eye that he had no right to notice the rafters in the eyes of others. Now, in all families people go to perdition, without noticing their neighbours, some at an amble, others at a gentle trot, many at a gallop, and a small number walking, seeing that the road is all downhill. Thus in these times the devil had many a good orgy in all things, since that

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misconduct was fashionable. The poor old lady Virtue had retired trembling, no one knew whither, but now here, now there, lived miserably in company with honest women.

In the most noble house Amboise there still lived the Dowager of Chaumont, an old woman of well proved virtue, in whom had retired all the religion and good conduct of this fine family. The said lady had taken to her bosom, from the age of ten years, the little maiden who is concerned in this adventure, and who had never caused Madame Amboise the least anxiety, but left her free in her movements, and she came to see her daughter once a year, when the court passed that way. In spite of this high maternal reserve, Madame Amboise was invited to her daughter's wedding, and also the lord of Braguelongne, by the good old soldier, who knew his people. But the dear dowager came not to Montcontour, because she could not obtain relief from her sciatica, her cold, nor the state of her legs, which gamboled no longer. Over this the good woman cried copiously. It hurt her much to let go into the dangers of the court and of life this gentle maiden, as pretty as it was possible for a pretty girl to be, but she was obliged to give her her wings. But it was not without promising her many masses and orisons every evening for her happiness. And comforted a little, the good old lady began to think that the staff of her old age was passing into the hands of a quasi-saint, brought up to do good by the above-mentioned abbot, with whom she was acquainted, the which had aided considerably in the prompt exchange of spouses. At length, embracing her with tears, the virtuous dowager made those last recommendations to her that ladies make to young brides, as that she ought to be respectful to his mother, and obey her husband in everything.

Then the maid arrived with a great noise, conducted by servants, chamberlains, grooms, gentlemen, and people of the house of Chaumont, so that you would have imagined her suite to be that of a cardinal legate. So arrived the two spouses the evening before marriage. Then, the feasting over, they were married with great pomp on the Lord's Day, a mass being said at the castle by the Bishop of Blois, who was a great friend of the lord of Montcontour; in short, the feasting, the dancing, and the festivities of all sorts lasted till the morning. But on the stroke of midnight the bridesmaids went to put the bride to bed, according to the custom of Touraine; and during this time they kept quarrelling with the innocent husband, to prevent him going to this innocent wife, who sided with them from ignorance. However, the good lord of Montcontour interrupted the jokers and the wits, because it was necessary that his son should occupy himself in well-doing. Then went the innocent into the chamber of his wife, whom he thought more beautiful than the Virgin Mary painted in Italian, Flemish, and other pictures, at whose feet he had said his prayers. But you may be sure he felt very much embarrassed at having so soon become a husband, because he knew nothing of his business, and saw that certain forms had to be gone through concerning which from great and modest reserve, he had no time to question even his father, who had said sharply to him--

"You know what you have to do; be valiant therein."

Then he saw the gentle girl who was given him, comfortably tucked up in the bedclothes, terribly curious, her head buried under, but hazarding a glance as at the point of a halberd, and saying to herself--

"I must obey him."

And knowing nothing, she awaited the will of this slightly ecclesiastical gentleman, to whom, in fact, she belonged. Seeing which, the Chevalier de Montcontour came close to the bed, scratched his ear, and knelt down, a thing in which he was expert.

"Have you said your prayers?" said he.

"No," said she; "I have forgotten them. Do wish me to say them?"

Then the young couple commenced the business of a housekeeping by imploring God, which was not at all out of place. But unfortunately the devil heard, and at once replied to their requests, God being much occupied at that time with the new and abominable reformed religion.

"What did they tell you to do?" said the husband.

"To love you," said she, in perfect innocence.

"This has not been told to me; but I love you, I am ashamed to say, better than I love God."

This speech did not alarm the bride.

"I should like," said the husband, "to repose myself in your bed, if it will not disturb you."

"I will make room for you willingly because I am to submit myself to you."

"Well," said he, "don't look at me again. I'm going to take my clothes off, and come."

At this virtuous speech, the young damsel turned herself towards the wall in great expectation, seeing that it was for the very first time that she was about to find herself separated from a man by the confines of a shirt only. Then came the innocent, gliding into bed, and thus they found themselves, so to speak, united, but far from what you can imagine what. Did you ever see a monkey brought from across the seas, who for the first time is given a nut to crack? This ape, knowing by high apish imagination how delicious is the food hidden under the shell, sniffs and twists himself about in a thousand apish ways, saying, I know not what, between his chattering jaws. Ah! with what affection he studies it, with what study he examines it, in what examination he holds it, then throws it, rolls and tosses it about with passion, and often, when it is an ape of low extraction and intelligence, leaves the nut. As much did the poor innocent who, towards the dawn, was obliged to confess to his dear wife that, not knowing how to perform his office, or what that office was, or where to obtain the said office, it would be necessary for him to inquire concerning it, and have help and aid.

"Yes," said she; "since, unhappily, I cannot instruct you."

In fact, in spite of their efforts, essay of all kinds--in spite of a thousand things which the innocents invent, and which the wise in matters of love know nothing about--the pair dropped off to sleep, wretched at having been unable to discover the secret of marriage. But they wisely agreed to say that they had done so. When the wife got up, still a maiden, seeing that she had not been crowned, she boasted of her night, and said she had the king of

husbands, and went on with her chattering and repartee as briskly as those who know nothing of these things. Then everyone found the maiden a little too sharp, since for a two-edged joke a lady of Roche-Corbon having incited a young maiden, de la Bourdaisiere, who knew nothing of such things, to ask the bride--

"How many loaves did your husband put in the oven?"

"Twenty-four," she replied.

Now, as the bridegroom was roaming sadly about, thereby distressing his wife, who followed him with her eyes, hoping to see his state of innocence come to an end, the ladies believed that the joy of that night had cost him dear, and that the said bride was already regretting having so quickly ruined him. And at breakfast came the bad jokes, which at that time were relished as excellent, one said that the bride had an open expression; another, that there had been some good strokes of business done that night in the castle; this one, that the oven had been burned; that one that the two families have lost something that night that they would never find again. And a thousand other jokes, stupidities, and double meanings that, unfortunately the husband did not understand. But on account of the great affluence of the relations, neighbours, and others, no one had been to bed; all had danced, rollicked, and frolicked, as is the custom at noble weddings.

At this was quite contented my said Sieur de Braguelongne, upon whom my lady of Amboise, excited by the thought of the good things which were happening to her daughter, cast the glances of a falcon in matters of gallant assignation. The poor Lieutenant civil, learned in bailiffs' men and sergeants, and who nabbed all the pickpockets and scamps of Paris, pretended not to see his good fortune, although his good lady required him to do. You may be sure this great lady's love weighed heavily upon him, so he only kept to her from a spirit of justice, because it was not seeming in a lieutenant judiciary to change his mistresses as often as a man at court, because he had under his charge morals, the police and religion. This notwithstanding his rebellion must come to an end. On the day after the wedding a great number of the guests departed; then Madame d'Amboise and Monsieur de Braguelongne could go to bed, their guests having decamped. Sitting down to supper, the lieutenant received a half-verbal summons to which it was not becoming, as in legal matters, to oppose any reasons for delay.

During supper the said lady d'Amboise made more than a hundred little signs in order to draw the good Braguelongne from the room where he was with the bride, but out came instead of the lieutenant the husband, to walk about in company with the mother of his sweet wife. Now, in the mind of this innocent there had sprung up like a mushroom an expedient--namely, to interrogate this good lady, whom he considered discreet, for remembering the religious precepts of his abbot, who had told him to inquire concerning all things of old people expert in the ways of life, he thought of confiding his case to the said lady d'Amboise. But he made first awkwardly and shyly certain twists and turns, finding no terms in which to unfold his case. And the lady was also perfectly silent, since she was outrageously struck with the blindness, deafness and voluntary paralysis of the lord of Braguelongne; and said to herself, walking by the side of this delicate morsel, a young innocent of whom she did not think, little imagining that this cat so well provided with young bacon could think of old--

"This Ho, Ho, with a beard of flies' legs, a flimsy, old, grey, ruined, shaggy beard--beard without comprehension, beard without shame, without any feminine respect--beard which pretends neither to feel nor to hear, nor to see, a pared away beard, a beaten down, disordered, gutted beard. May the Italian sickness deliver me from this vile joker with a squashed nose, fiery nose, frozen nose, nose without religion, nose dry as a lute table, pale nose, nose without a soul, nose which is nothing but a shadow; nose which sees not, nose wrinkled like the leaf of a vine; nose that I hate, old nose, nose full of mud--dead nose. Where had my eyes been to attach myself to truffle nose, to this old hulk that no longer knows his way? I give my share to the devil of this juiceless beard, of this grey beard, of this monkey face, of these old tatters, of this old rag of a man, of this--I know not what; and I'll take a young husband who'll marry me properly, and . . . and often--every day--and well--"

In this wise train of thought was she when the innocent began his anthem to this woman, so warmly excited, who at the first paraphrase took fire in her understanding, like a piece of old touchwood from the carbine of a soldier; and finding it wise to try her son-in-law, said to herself--

"Ah! young beard, sweet scented! Ah! pretty new nose--fresh beard-- innocent nose--virgin appeared--nose full of joy it--beard of springtime, small key of love!"

She kept on talking the round of the garden, which was long, and then arranged with the Innocent that, night come, he should sally forth from his room and get into hers, where she engaged to render him more learned than ever was his father. And the husband was well content, and thanked Madame d'Amboise, begging her to say nothing of this arrangement.

During this time the good old Braguelongne had been growling and saying to himself, "Old ha, ha! old ho, ho! May the plague take thee! may a cancer eat thee!--worthless old currycomb! old slipper, too big for the foot! old arquebus! ten year old codfish! old spider that spins no more! old death with open eyes! old devil's cradle! vile lantern of an old town-crier too! Old wretch whose look kills! old moustache of an old theriacler! old wretch to make dead men weep! old organ-pedal! old sheath with a hundred knives! old church porch, worn out by the knees! old poor-box in which everyone has dropped. I'll give all my future to be quit of thee!" As he finished these gentle thoughts the pretty bride, who was thinking of her young husband's great sorrow at not knowing the particulars of that essential item of marriage, and not having the slightest idea what it was, thought to save him much tribulation, shame, and labour by instructing herself. And she counted upon much astonishing and rejoicing him the next night when she should say to him, teaching him his duty, "That's the thing my love!" Brought up in great respect of old people by her dear dowager, she thought of inquiring of this good man in her sweetest manner to distil for her the sweet mysteries of the commerce. Now, the lord of Braguelongne, ashamed of being lost in sad contemplation of this evening's work, and of saying nothing to his gay companion, put this summary interrogation to the fair bride--"If she was not happy with so good a young husband--"

"He is very good," said she.

"Too good, perhaps," said the lieutenant smiling.

To be brief, matters were so well arranged between them that the Lord engaged to spare no pains to enlighten the understanding of Madame d'Amboise's daughter-in-law, who promised to come and study her lesson in his room. The said lady d'Amboise pretended after supper to play terrible music in a high key to Monsieur Braguelongne saying that he had no gratitude for the blessings she had brought him--her position, her wealth, her fidelity, etc. In fact, she talked for half an hour without having exhausted a quarter of her ire. From this a hundred knives were drawn between them, but they kept the sheaths. Meanwhile the spouses in bed were arranging to themselves how to get away, in order to please each other. Then the innocent began to say he fell quite giddy, he knew not from what, and wanted to go into the open air. And his maiden wife told him to take a stroll in the moonlight. And then the good fellow began to pity his wife in being left alone a moment. At her desire, both of them at different times left their conjugal couch and came to their preceptors, both very impatient, as you can well believe; and good instruction was given to them. How? I cannot say, because everyone has his own method and practice, and of all sciences this is the most variable in principle. You may be sure that never did scholars receive more gayly the precepts of any language, grammar, or lessons whatsoever. And the two spouses returned to their nest, delighted at being able to communicate to each other the discoveries of their scientific peregrinations.

"Ah, my dear," said the bride, "you already know more than my master."

From these curious tests came their domestic joy and perfect fidelity; because immediately after their entry into the married state they found out how much better each of them was adapted for love than anyone else, their masters included. Thus for the remainder of their days they kept to the legitimate substance of their own persons; and the lord of Montcontour said in old age to his friends--

"Do like me, be cuckolds in the blade, and not in the sheath."

Which is the true morality of the conjugal condition.

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