How The Chateau D'azay Came To Be Built

Honore de Balzac

Jehan, son of Simon Fourniez, called Simonnin, a citizen of Tours-- originally of the village of Moulinot, near to Beaune, whence, in imitation of certain persons, he took the name when he became steward to Louis the Eleventh--had to fly one day into Languedoc with his wife, having fallen into great disgrace, and left his son Jacques penniless in Touraine. This youth, who possessed nothing in the world except his good looks, his sword, and spurs, but whom worn-out old men would have considered very well off, had in his head a firm intention to save his father, and make his fortune at the court, then holden in Touraine. At early dawn this good Tourainian left his lodging, and, enveloped in his mantle, all except his nose, which he left open to the air, and his stomach empty, walked about the town without any trouble of digestion. He entered the churches, thought them beautiful, looked into the chapels, flicked the flies from the pictures, and counted the columns all after the manner of a man who knew not what to do with his time or his money. At other times he feigned to recite his paternosters, but really made mute prayers to the ladies, offered them holy water when leaving, followed them afar off, and endeavoured by these little services to encounter some adventure, in which at the peril of his life he would find for himself a protector or a gracious mistress. He had in his girdle two doubloons which he spared far more than his skin, because that would be replaced, but the doubloons never. Each day he took from his little hoard the price of a roll and a few apples, with which he sustained life, and drank at his will and his discretion of the water of the Loire. This wholesome and prudent diet, besides being good for his doubloons, kept him frisky and light as a greyhound, gave him a clear understanding and a warm heart for the water of the Loire is of all syrups the most strengthening, because having its course afar off it is invigorated by its long run, through many strands, before it reaches Tours. So you may be sure that the poor fellow imagined a thousand and one good fortunes and lucky adventures, and what is more, almost believed them true. Oh! The good times! One evening Jacques de Beaune (he kept the name although he was not lord of Beaune) was walking along the embankment, occupied in cursing his star and everything, for his last doubloon was with scant respect upon the point of quitting him; when at the corner of a little street, he nearly ran against a veiled lady, whose sweet odour gratified his amorous senses. This fair pedestrian was bravely mounted on pretty pattens, wore a beautiful dress of Italian velvet, with wide slashed satin sleeves; while as a sign of her great fortune, through her veil a white diamond of reasonable size shone upon her forehead like the rays of the setting sun, among her tresses, which were delicately rolled, built up, and so neat, that they must have taken her maids quite three hours to arrange. She walked like a lady who was only accustomed to a litter. One of her pages followed her, well armed. She was evidently some light o'love belonging to a noble of high rank or a lady of the court, since she held her dress high off the ground, and bent her back like a woman of quality. Lady or courtesan she pleased Jacques de Beaune, who, far from turning up his nose at her, conceived the wild idea of attaching himself to her for life. With this in view he determined to follow her in order to ascertain whither she would lead him--to Paradise or to the limbo of hell--to a gibbet or to an abode of love. Anything was a glean of hope to him in the depth of his misery. The lady strolled along the bank of the Loire towards Plessis inhaling like a fish the fine freshness of the water, toying, sauntering like a little mouse who wishes to see and taste everything. When the page perceived that Jacques de Beaune persistently followed his mistress in all her

movements, stopped when she stopped, and watched her trifling in a bare-faced fashion, as if he had a right so to do, he turned briskly round with a savage and threatening face, like that of a dog whose says, "Stand back, sir!" But the good Tourainian had his wits about him. Believing that if a cat may look at king, he, a baptised Christian, might certainly look at a pretty woman, he stepped forward, and feigning to grin at the page, he strutted now behind and now before the lady. She said nothing, but looked at the sky, which was putting on its nightcap, the stars, and everything which could give her pleasure. So things went on. At last, arrived outside Portillon, she stood still, and in order to see better, cast her veil back over her shoulder, and in so doing cast upon the youth the glance of a clever woman who looks round to see if there is any danger of being robbed. I may tell you that Jacques de Beaune was a thorough ladies' man, could walk by the side of a princess without disgracing her, had a brave and resolute air which please the sex, and if he was a little browned by the sun from being so much in the open air, his skin would look white enough under the canopy of a bed. The glance, keen as a needle, which the lady threw him, appeared to him more animated than that with which she would have honoured her prayer-book. Upon it he built the hope of a windfall of love, and resolved to push the adventure to the very edge of the petticoat, risking to go still further, not only his lips, which he held of little count, but his two ears and something else besides. He followed into the town the lady, who returned by the Rue des Trois-Pucelles, and led the gallant through a labyrinth of little streets, to the square in which is at the present time situated the Hotel de la Crouzille. There she stopped at the door of a splendid mansion, at which the page knocked. A servant opened it, and the lady went in and closed the door, leaving the Sieur de Beaune open-mouthed, stupefied, and as foolish as Monseigneur St. Denis when he was trying to pick up his head. He raised his nose in the air to see if some token of favour would be thrown to him, and saw nothing except a light which went up the stairs, through the rooms, and rested before a fine window, where probably the lady was also. You can believe that the poor lover remained melancholy and dreaming, and not knowing what to do. The window gave a sudden creak and broke his reverie. Fancying that his lady was about to call him, he looked up again, and but for the friendly shelter of the balcony, which was a helmet to him, he would have received a stream of water and the utensil which contained it, since the handle only remained in the grasp of the person who delivered the deluge. Jacques de Beaune, delighted at this, did not lose the opportunity, but flung himself against the wall, crying "I am killed," with a feeble voice. Then stretching himself upon the fragments of broken china, he lay as if dead, awaiting the issue. The servants rushed out in a state of alarm, fearing their mistress, to whom they had confessed their fault, and picked up the wounded man, who could hardly restrain his laughter at being then carried up the stairs.

"He is cold," said the page.

"He is covered with blood," said the butler, who while feeling his pulse had wetted his hand.

"If he revives," said the guilty one, "I will pay for a mass to St. Gatien."

"Madame takes after her late father, and if she does not have thee hanged, the least mitigation of thy penalty will be that thou wilt be kicked out of her house and service," said another. "Certes, he's dead enough, he is so heavy."

"Ah! I am in the house of a very great lady," thought Jacques.

"Alas! is he really dead?" demanded the author of the calamity. While with great labour the Tourainian was being carried up the stairs, his doublet caught on a projection, and the dead man cried, "Ah, my doublet!"

"He groans," said the culprit, with a sigh of relief. The Regent's servants (for this was the house of the Regent, the daughter of King Louis XI. of virtuous memory) brought Jacques de Beaune into a room, and laid him stiff and stark upon a table, not thinking for a moment that he could be saved.

"Run and fetch a surgeon," cried Madame de Beaujeu. "Run here, run there!"

The servants were down the stairs in a trice. The good lady Regent dispatched her attendants for ointment, for linen to bind the wounds, for goulard-water, for so many things, that she remained alone. Gazing upon this splendid and senseless man, she cried aloud, admiring his presence and his features, handsome even in death. "Ah! God wishes to punish me. Just for one little time in my life has there been born in me, and taken possession of me, a naughty idea, and my patron saint is angry, and deprives me of the sweetest gentleman I have ever seen. By the rood, and by the soul of my father, I will hang every man who has had a hand in this!"

"Madame," cried Jacques de Beaune, springing from the table, and falling at the feet of the Regent, "I will live to serve you, and am so little bruised that that I promise you this night as many joys as there are months in the year, in imitation of the Sieur Hercules, a pagan baron. For the last twenty days," he went on (thinking that matters would be smoothed by a little lying), "I have met you again and again. I fell madly in love with you, yet dared not, by reason of my great respect for your person, make an advance. You can imagine how intoxicated I must have been with your royal beauties, to have invented the trick to which I owe the happiness of being at your feet."

Thereupon he kissed her amorously, and gave her a look that would have overcome any scruples. The Regent, by means of time, which respects not queens, was, as everyone knows, in her middle age. In this critical and autumnal season, women formally virtuous and loveless desire now here, now there, to enjoy, unknown to the world, certain hours of love, in order that they may not arrive in the other world with hands and heart alike empty, through having left the fruit of the tree of knowledge untasted. The lady of Beaujeu, without appearing to be astonished while listening to the promises of this young man, since royal personages ought to be accustomed to having them by dozens, kept this ambitious speech in the depths of her memory or of her registry of love, which caught fire at his words. Then she raised the Tourainian, who still found in his misery the courage to smile at his mistress, who had the majesty of a full-blown rose, ears like shoes, and the complexion of a sick cat, but was so well-dressed, so fine in figure, so royal of foot, and so queenly in carriage, that he might still find in this affair means to gain his original object.

"Who are you?" said the Regent, putting on the stern look of her father.

"I am your very faithful subject, Jacques de Beaune, son of your steward, who has fallen into disgrace in spite of his faithful services."

"Ah, well!" replied the lady, "lay yourself on the table again. I hear someone coming; and it is not fit that my people should think me your accomplice in this farce and mummery."

The good fellow perceived, by the soft sound of her voice, that he was pardoned the enormity of his love. He lay down upon the table again, and remembered how certain lords had ridden to court in an old stirrup --a thought which perfectly reconciled him to his present position.

"Good," said the Regent to her maid-servants, "nothing is needed. This gentleman is better; thanks to heaven and the Holy Virgin, there will have been no murder in my house."

Thus saying, she passed her hand through the locks of the lover who had fallen to her from the skies, and taking a little reviving water she bathed his temples, undid his doublet, and under pretence of aiding his recovery, verified better than an expert how soft and young was the skin on this young fellow and bold promiser of bliss, and all the bystanders, men and women, were amazed to see the Regent act thus. But humanity never misbecomes those of royal blood. Jacques stood up, and appeared to come to his senses, thanked the Regent most humbly, and dismissed the physicians, master surgeons, and other imps in black, saying that he had thoroughly recovered. Then he gave his name, and saluting Madame de Beaujeu, wished to depart, as though afraid of her on account of his father's disgrace, but no doubt horrified at his terrible vow.

"I cannot permit it," said she. "Persons who come to my house should not meet with such treatment as you have encountered. The Sieur de Beaune will sup here," she added to her major domo. "He who has so unduly insulted him will be at his mercy if he makes himself known immediately; otherwise, I will have him found out and hanged by the provost."

Hearing this, the page who had attended the lady during her promenade stepped forward.

"Madame," said Jacques, "at my request pray both pardon and reward him, since to him I owe the felicity of seeing you, the favour of supping in your company, and perhaps that of getting my father re- established in the office to which it pleased your glorious father to appoint him."

"Well said," replied the Regent. "D'Estouteville," said she, turning towards the page, "I give thee command of a company of archers. But for the future do not throw things out of the window."

Then she, delighted with de Beaune, offered him her hand, and led him most gallantly into her room, where they conversed freely together while supper was being prepared. There the Sieur Jacques did not fail to exhibit his talents, justify his father, and raise himself in the estimation of the lady, who, as is well known, was like a father in disposition, and did everything at random. Jacques de Beaune thought to himself that it would be rather difficult for him to remain all night with the Regent. Such matters are not so easily arranged as the amours of cats, who have always a convenient refuge upon the housetops for their moments of dalliance. So he rejoiced that he was known to the Regent without being compelled to fulfil his rash promise, since for this to be carried out it was necessary that the servants and others should be out of the way, and her reputation safe. Nevertheless, suspecting the powers of intrigue of the good lady, at times he would ask himself if he were equal to the

task. But beneath the surface of conversation, the same thing was in the mind of the Regent, who had already managed affairs quite as difficult, and she began most cleverly to arrange the means. She sent for one of her secretaries, an adept in all arts necessary for the perfect government of a kingdom, and ordered him to give her secretly a false message during the supper. Then came the repast, which the lady did not touch, since her heart had swollen like a sponge, and so diminished her stomach, for she kept thinking of this handsome and desirable man, having no appetite save for him. Jacques did not fail to make a good meal for many reasons. The messenger came, madame began to storm, and to knit her brows after the manner of the late king, and to say, "Is there never to be peace in this land? Pasques Dieu! can we not have one quiet evening?" Then she rose and strode about the room. "Ho there! My horse! Where is Monsieur de Vieilleville, my squire? Ah, he is in Picardy. D'Estouteville, you will rejoin me with my household at the Chateau d'Amboise...." And looking at Jacques, she said, "You shall be my squire, Sieur de Beaune. You wish to serve the state. The occasion is a good one. Pasques Dieu! come! There are rebels to subdue, and faithful knights are needed."

In less time than an old beggar would have taken to say thank you, the horses were bridled, saddled, and ready. Madame was on her mare, and the Tourainian at her side, galloping at full speed to her castle at Amboise, followed by the men-at-arms. To be brief and come to the facts without further commentary, the De Beaune was lodged not twenty yards from Madame, far from prying eyes. The courtiers and the household, much astonished, ran about inquiring from what quarter the danger might be expected; but our hero, taken at his word, knew well enough where to find it. The virtue of the Regent, well known in the kingdom, saved her from suspicion, since she was supposed be as impregnable as the Chateau de Peronne. At curfew, when everything was shut, both ears and eyes, and the castle silent, Madame de Beaujeu sent away her handmaid, and called for her squire. The squire came. Then the lady and the adventurer sat side by side upon a velvet couch, in the shadow of a lofty fireplace, and the curious Regent, with a tender voice, asked of Jacques "Are you bruised? It was very wrong of me to make a knight, wounded by one on my servants, ride twelve miles. I was so anxious about it that I would not go to bed without having seen you. Do you suffer?"

"I suffer with impatience," said he of the dozen, thinking it would not do to appear reluctant. "I see well," continued he, "my noble and beautiful mistress, that your servant has found favour in your sight."

"There, there!" replied she; "did you not tell a story when you said--"

"What?" said he.

"Why, that you had followed me dozens of times to churches, and other places to which I went."

"Certainly," said he.

"I am astonished," replied the Regent, "never to have seen until today a noble youth whose courage is so apparent in his countenance. I am not ashamed of that which you heard me say when I believed you dead. You are agreeable to me, you please me, and you wish to do well."

Then the hour of the dreaded sacrifice having struck, Jacques fell at the knees of the Regent, kissed her feet, her hands, and everything, it is said; and while kissing her, previous to retirement, proved by many arguments to the aged virtue of his sovereign, that a lady bearing the burden of the state had a perfect right to enjoy herself-- a theory which was not directly admitted by the Regent, who determined to be forced, in order to throw the burden of this sin upon her lover. This notwithstanding, you may be sure that she had highly perfumed and elegantly attired herself for the night, and shone with desire for embraces, for desire lent her a high colour which greatly improved her complexion; and in spite of her feeble resistance she was, like a young girl, carried by assault in her royal couch, where the good lady and her young dozener, embraced each other. Then from play to quarrel, quarrel to riot, from riot to ribaldry, from thread to needle, the Regent declared that she believed more in the virginity of the Holy Mary than in the promised dozen. Now, by chance, Jacques de Beaune did not find this great lady so very old between the sheets, since everything is metamorphosed by the light of the lamps of the night. Many women of fifty by day are twenty at midnight, as others are twenty at mid-day and a hundred after vespers. Jacques, happier at this sight than at that of the King on a hanging day, renewed his undertaking. Madame, herself astonished, promised every assistance on her part. The manor of Azay-le-Brule, with a good title thereto, she undertook to confer upon her cavalier, as well as the pardon of his father, if from this encounter she came forth vanquished, then the clever fellows said to himself, "This is to save my father from punishment! this for the fief! this for the letting and selling! this for the forest of Azay! item for the right of fishing! another for the Isles of the Indre! this for the meadows! I may as well release from confiscation our land of La Carte, so dearly bought by my father! Once more for a place at court!" Arriving without hindrance at this point, he believed his dignity involved, and fancied that having France under him, it was a question of the honour of the crown. In short, at the cost of a vow which he made to his patron, Monsieur St. Jacques, to build him a chapel at Azay, he presented his liege homage to the Regent eleven clear, clean, limpid, and genuine periphrases. Concerning the epilogue of this slow conversation, the Tourainian had the great self-confidence to wish excellently to regale the Regent, keeping for her on her waking the salute of an honest man, as it was necessary for the lord of Azay to thank his sovereign, which was wisely thought. But when nature is oppressed, she acts like a spirited horse, lays down, and will die under the whip sooner than move until it pleases her to rise reinvigorated. Thus, when in the morning the seignior of the castle of Azay desired to salute the daughter of King Louis XI., he was constrained, in spite of his courtesy, to make the salute as royal salutes should be made--with blank cartridge only. Therefore the Regent, after getting up, and while she was breakfasting with Jacques, who called himself the legitimate Lord of Azay, seized the occasion of this insufficiency to contradict her esquire, and pretend, that as he had not gained his wager, he had not earned the manor.

"Ventre-Saint-Paterne! I have been near enough," said Jacques. "But my dear lady and noble sovereign it is not proper for either you or me to judge in this cause. The case being an allodial case, must be brought before your council, since the fief of Azay is held from the crown."

"Pasques dieu!" replied the Regent with a forced laugh. "I give you the place of the Sieur de Vieilleville in my house. Don't trouble about your father. I will give you Azay, and will place you in a royal office if you can, without injury to my honour, state the case in full council; but if one word falls to the damage of my reputation as a virtuous women, I--"

"May I be hanged," said Jacques, turning the thing into a joke, because there was a shade of anger in the face of Madame de Beaujeu.

In fact, the daughter of King Louis thought more of her royalty than of the roguish dozen, which she considered as nothing, since fancying she had had her night's amusement without loosening her purse-strings, she preferred the difficult recital of his claim to another dozen offered her by the Tourainian.

"Then, my lady," replied her good companion, "I shall certainly be your squire."

The captains, secretaries, and other persons holding office under the regency, astonished at the sudden departure of Madame de Beaujeu, learned the cause of her anxiety, and came in haste to the castle of Amboise to discover whence preceded the rebellion, and were in readiness to hold a council when her Majesty had arisen. She called them together, not to be suspected of having deceived them, and gave them certain falsehoods to consider, which they considered most wisely. At the close of the sitting, came the new squire to accompany his mistress. Seeing the councillors rising, the bold Tourainian begged them to decide a point of law which concerned both himself and the property of the Crown.

"Listen to him," said the Regent. "He speaks truly."

Then Jacques de Beaune, without being nervous at the sight of this august court, spoke as follows, or thereabouts:--"Noble Lords, I beg you, although I am about to speak to you of walnut shells, to give your attention to this case, and pardon me the trifling nature of my language. One lord was walking with another in a fruit garden, and noticed a fine walnut tree, well planted, well grown, worth looking at, worth keeping, although a little empty; a nut tree always fresh, sweet-smelling, the tree which you would not leave if you once saw it, a tree of love which seemed the tree of good and evil, forbidden by the Lord, through which were banished our mother Eve and the gentleman her husband. Now, my lords, this said walnut tree was the subject of a slight dispute between the two, and one of those many wagers which are occasionally made between friends. The younger boasted that he could throw twelve times through it a stick which he had in his hand at the time--as many people have who walk in a garden--and with each flight of the stick he would send a nut to the ground--"

"That is, I believe the knotty point of the case," said Jacques turning towards the Regent.

"Yes, gentlemen," replied she, surprised at the craft of her squire.

"The other wagered to the contrary," went on the pleader. "Now the first named throws his stick with such precision of aim, so gently, and so well that both derived pleasure therefrom, and by the joyous protection of the saints, who no doubt were amused spectators, with each throw there fell a nut; in fact, there fell twelve. But by chance the last of the fallen nuts was empty, and had no nourishing pulp from which could have come another nut tree, had the gardener planted it. Has the man with the stick gained his wager? Judge."

"The thing is clear enough," said Messire Adam Fumee, a Tourainian, who at that time was the keeper of the seals. "There is only one thing for the other to do."

"What is that?" said the Regent.

"To pay the wager, Madame."

"He is rather too clever," said she, tapping her squire on the cheek. "He will be hanged one of these days."

She meant it as a joke, but these words were the real horoscope of the steward, who mounted the gallows by the ladder of royal favour, through the vengeance of another old woman, and the notorious treason of a man of Ballan, his secretary, whose fortune he had made, and whose name was Prevost, and not Rene Gentil, as certain persons have wrongly called him. The Ganelon and bad servant gave, it is said, to Madame d'Angouleme, the receipt for the money which had been given him by Jacques de Beaune, then become Baron of Samblancay, lord of La Carte and Azay, and one of the foremost men in the state. Of his two sons, one was Archbishop of Tours the other Minister of Finance and Governor of Touraine. But this is not the subject of the present history.

Now that which concerns the present narrative, is that Madame de Beaujeu, to whom the pleasure of love had come rather late in the day, well pleased with the great wisdom and knowledge of public affairs which her chance lover possessed, made him Lord of the Privy Purse, in which office he behaved so well, and added so much to the contents of it, that his great renown procured for him one day the handling of the revenues which he superintended and controlled most admirably, and with great profit to himself, which was but fair. The good Regent paid the bet, and handed over to her squire the manor of Azay-le-Brule, of which the castle had long before been demolished by the first bombardiers who came from Touraine, as everyone knows. For this powdery miracle, but for the intervention of the king, the said engineers would have been condemned as heretics and abettors of Satan, by the ecclesiastical tribune of the chapter.

At this time there was being built with great care by Messire Bohier, Minister of Finance, the Castle of Chenonceaux, which as a curiosity and novel design, was placed right across the river Cher.

Now the Baron de Samblancay, wishing to oppose the said Bohier, determined to lay the foundation of this at the bottom of the Indre, where it still stands, the gem of this fair green valley, so solidly was it placed upon the piles. It cost Jacques de Beaune thirty thousand crowns, not counting the work done by his vassals. You may take it for granted this castle was one of the finest, prettiest, most exquisite and most elaborate castles of our sweet Touraine, and laves itself in the Indre like a princely creature, gayly decked with pavilions and lace curtained windows, with fine weather-beaten soldiers on her vanes, turning whichever way the wind blows, as all soldiers do. But Samblancay was hanged before it was finished, and since that time no one has been found with sufficient money to complete it. Nevertheless, his master, King Francis the First, was once his guest, and the royal chamber is still shown there. When the king was going to bed, Samblancay, whom the king called "old fellow," in honour of his white hairs, hearing his royal master, to whom he was devotedly attached, remark, "Your clock has just struck twelve, old fellow!" replied, "Ah! sire, to twelve strokes of a hammer, an old one now, but years ago a good one, at this hour of the clock do I owe my lands, the money spent on this place, and honour of being in your

service."

The king wished to know what his minister meant by these strange words; and when his majesty was getting into bed, Jacques de Beaune narrated to him the history with which you are acquainted. Now Francis the First, who was partial to these spicy stories, thought the adventure a very droll one, and was the more amused thereat because at that time his mother, the Duchess d'Angouleme, in the decline of life, was pursuing the Constable of Bourbon, in order to obtain of him one of these dozens. Wicked love of a wicked woman, for therefrom proceeded the peril of the kingdom, the capture of the king, and the death--as has been before mentioned--of poor Samblancay.

I have here endeavoured to relate how the Chateau d'Azay came to be built, because it is certain that thus was commenced the great fortune of that Samblancay who did so much for his natal town, which he adorned; and also spent such immense sums upon the completion of the towers of the cathedral. This lucky adventure has been handed down from father to son, and lord to lord, in the said place of Azay-les- Ridel, where the story frisks still under the curtains of the king, which have been curiously respected down to the present day. It is therefore the falsest of falsities which attributes the dozen of the Tourainian to a German knight, who by this deed would have secured the domains of Austria to the House of Hapsburgh. The author of our days, who brought this history to light, although a learned man, has allowed himself to be deceived by certain chroniclers, since the archives of the Roman Empire make no mention of an acquisition of this kind. I am angry with him for having believed that a "braguette" nourished with beer, could have been equal to the alchemical operations of the Chinonian "braguettes," so much esteemed by Rabelais. And I have for the advantage of the country, the glory of Azay, the conscience of the castle, and renown of the House of Beaune, from which sprang the Sauves and the Noirmoutiers, re-established the facts in all their veritable, historical, and admirable beauty. Should any ladies pay a visit to the castle, there are still dozens to be found in the neighbourhood, but they can only be procured retail.

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