

Innocence

Honore de Balzac

By the double crest of my fowl, and by the rose lining of my sweetheart's slipper! By all the horns of well-beloved cuckolds, and by the virtue of their blessed wives! the finest work of man is neither poetry, nor painted pictures, nor music, nor castles, nor statues, be they carved never so well, nor rowing, nor sailing galleys, but children.

Understand me, children up to the age of ten years, for after that they become men or women, and cutting their wisdom teeth, are not worth what they cost; the worst are the best. Watch them playing, prettily and innocently, with slippers; above all, cancelled ones, with the household utensils, leaving that which displeases them, crying after that which pleases them, munching the sweets and confectionery in the house, nibbling at the stores, and always laughing as soon as their teeth are cut, and you will agree with me that they are in every way lovable; besides which they are flower and fruit--the fruit of love, the flower of life. Before their minds have been unsettled by the disturbances of life, there is nothing in this world more blessed or more pleasant than their sayings, which are naive beyond description. This is as true as the double chewing machine of a cow. Do not expect a man to be innocent after the manner of children, because there is an, I know not what, ingredient of reason in the naivety of a man, while the naivety of children is candid, immaculate, and has all the finesse of the mother, which is plainly proved in this tale.

Queen Catherine was at that time Dauphine, and to make herself welcome to the king, her father-in-law, who at that time was very ill indeed, presented him, from time to time, with Italian pictures, knowing that he liked them much, being a friend of the Sieur Raphael d'Urbain and of the Sieurs Primaticcio and Leonardo da Vinci, to whom he sent large sums of money. She obtained from her family--who had the pick of these works, because at that time the Duke of the Medicis governed Tuscany-- a precious picture, painted by a Venetian named Titian (artist to the Emperor Charles, and in very high flavour), in which there were portraits of Adam and Eve at the moment when God left them to wander about the terrestrial Paradise, and were painted their full height, in the costume of the period, in which it is difficult to make a mistake, because they were attired in their ignorance, and caparisoned with the divine grace which enveloped them--a difficult thing to execute on account of the colour, but one in which the said Sieur Titian excelled. The picture was put into the room of the poor king, who was then ill with the disease of which he eventually died. It had a great success at the Court of France, where everyone wished to see it; but no one was able to until after the king's death, since at his desire it was allowed to remain in his room as long as he lived.

One day Madame Catherine took with her to the king's room her son Francis and little Margot, who began to talk at random, as children will. Now here, now there, these children had heard this picture of Adam and Eve spoken about, and had tormented their mother to take them there. Since the two little ones at times amused the old king, Madame the Dauphine consented to their request.

"You wished to see Adam and Eve, who were our first parents; there they are," said she.

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Then she left them in great astonishment before Titian's picture, and seated herself by the bedside of the king, who delighted to watch the children.

"Which of the two is Adam?" said Francis, nudging his sister Margot's elbow.

"You silly!" replied she, "to know that, they would have to be dressed!"

This reply, which delighted the poor king and the mother, was mentioned in a letter written in Florence by Queen Catherine.

No writer having brought it to light, it will remain, like a sweet flower, in a corner of these Tales, although it is no way droll, and there is no other moral to be drawn from it except that to hear these pretty speeches of infancy one must beget the children.

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