

# The Reproach

Honore de Balzac

The fair laundress of Portillon-les-Tours, of whom a droll saying has already been given in this book, was a girl blessed with as much cunning as if she had stolen that of six priests and three women at least. She did not want for sweethearts, and had so many that one would have compared them, seeing them around her, to bees swarming of an evening towards their hive. An old silk dyer, who lived in the Rue St. Montfumier, and there possessed a house of scandalous magnificence, coming from his place at La Grenadiere, situated on the fair borders of St. Cyr, passed on horseback through Portillon in order to gain the Bridge of Tours. By reason of the warmth of the evening, he was seized with a wild desire on seeing the pretty washerwoman sitting upon her door-step. Now as for a very long time he had dreamed of this pretty maid, his resolution was taken to make her his wife, and in a short time she was transformed from a washerwoman into a dyer's wife, a good townswoman, with laces, fine linen, and furniture to spare, and was happy in spite of the dyer, seeing that she knew very well how to manage him. The good dyer had for a crony a silk machinery manufacturer who was small in stature, deformed for life, and full of wickedness. So on the wedding-day he said to the dyer, "You have done well to marry, my friend, we shall have a pretty wife!"; and a thousand sly jokes, such as it is usual to address to a bridegroom.

In fact, this hunchback courted the dyer's wife, who from her nature, caring little for badly built people, laughed to scorn the request of the mechanician, and joked him about the springs, engines, and spools of which his shop was full. However, this great love of the hunchback was rebuffed by nothing, and became so irksome to the dyer's wife that she resolved to cure it by a thousand practical jokes. One evening, after the sempiternal pursuit, she told her lover to come to the back door and towards midnight she would open everything to him. Now note, this was on a winter's night; the Rue St. Montfumier is close to the Loire, and in this corner there continually blow in winter, winds sharp as a hundred needle-points. The good hunchback, well muffled up in his mantle, failed not to come, and trotted up and down to keep himself warm while waiting for the appointed hour. Towards midnight he was half frozen, as fidgety as thirty-two devils caught in a stole, and was about to give up his happiness, when a feeble light passed by the cracks of the window and came down towards the little door.

"Ah, it is she!" said he.

And this hope warned him once more. Then he got close to the door, and heard a little voice--

"Are you there?" said the dyer's wife to him.

"Yes."

"Cough, that I may see."

The hunchback began to cough.

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"It is not you."

Then the hunchback said aloud--

"How do you mean, it is not I? Do you not recognise my voice? Open the door!"

"Who's there?" said the dyer, opening the window.

"There, you have awakened my husband, who returned from Amboise unexpectedly this evening."

Thereupon the dyer, seeing by the light of the moon a man at the door, threw a big pot of cold water over him, and cried out, "Thieves! thieves!" in such a manner that the hunchback was forced to run away; but in his fear he failed to clear the chain stretched across the bottom of the road and fell into the common sewer, which the sheriff had not then replaced by a sluice to discharge the mud into the Loire. In this bath the mechanic expected every moment to breathe his last, and cursed the fair Tascherette, for her husband's name being Taschereau, she was so called by way of a little joke by the people of Tours.

Carandas--for so was named the manufacturer of machines to weave, to spin, to spool, and to wind the silk--was not sufficiently smitten to believe in the innocence of the dyer's wife, and swore a devilish hate against her. But some days afterwards, when he had recovered from his wetting in the dyer's drain he came up to sup with his old comrade. Then the dyer's wife reasoned with him so well, flavoured her words with so much honey, and wheedled him with so many fair promises, that he dismissed his suspicions.

He asked for a fresh assignation, and the fair Tascherette with the face of a woman whose mind is dwelling on a subject, said to him, "Come tomorrow evening; my husband will be staying some days at Chinonceaux. The queen wishes to have some of her old dresses dyed and would settle the colours with him. It will take some time."

Carandas put on his best clothes, failed not to keep the appointment, appeared at the time fixed, and found a good supper prepared, lampreys, wine of Vouvray, fine white napkins--for it was not necessary to remonstrate with the dyer's wife on the colour of her linen--and everything so well prepared that it was quite pleasant to him to see the dishes of fresh eels, to smell the good odour of the meats, and to admire a thousand little nameless things about the room, and La Tascherette fresh and appetising as an apple on a hot day. Now, the mechanic, excited to excess by these warm preparations, was on the point of attacking the charms of the dyer's wife, when Master Taschereau gave a loud knock at the street door.

"Ha!" said madame, "what has happened? Put yourself in the clothes chest, for I have been much abused respecting you; and if my husband finds you, he may undo you; he is so violent in his temper."

And immediately she thrust the hunchback into the chest, and went quickly to her good husband, whom she knew well would be back from Chinonceaux to supper. Then the dyer was kissed warmly on both his eyes and on both his ears and he caught his good wife to him and bestowed upon her two hearty smacks with his lips that sounded all over the room.

Then the pair sat down to supper, talked together and finished by going to bed; and the mechanic heard all, though obliged to remain crumpled up, and not to cough or to make a single movement. He was in with the linen, crushed up as close as a sardine in a box, and had about as much air as he would have had at the bottom of a river; but he had, to divert him, the music of love, the sighs of the dyer, and the little jokes of La Tascherette. At last, when he fancied his old comrade was asleep, he made an attempt to get out of the chest.

"Who is there?" said the dyer.

"What is the matter my little one?" said his wife, lifting her nose above the counterpane.

"I heard a scratching," said the good man.

"We shall have rain to-morrow; it's the cat," replied his wife.

The good husband put his head back upon the pillow after having been gently embraced by his spouse. "There, my dear, you are a light sleeper. It's no good trying to make a proper husband of you. There, be good. Oh! oh! my little papa, your nightcap is on one side. There, put it on the other way, for you must look pretty even when you are asleep. There! are you all right?"

"Yes."

"Are you sleep?" said she, giving him a kiss.

"Yes."

In the morning the dyer's wife came softly and let out the mechanic, who was whiter than a ghost.

"Give me air, give me air!" said he.

And away he ran cured of his love, but with as much hate in his heart as a pocket could hold of black wheat. The said hunchback left Tours and went to live in the town of Bruges, where certain merchants had sent for him to arrange the machinery for making hauberks.

During his long absence, Carandas, who had Moorish blood in his veins, since he was descended from an ancient Saracen left half dead after the great battle which took place between the Moors and the French in the commune of Bellan (which is mentioned in the preceding tale), in which place are the Landes of Charlemagne, where nothing grows because of the cursed wretches and infidels there interred, and where the grass disagrees even with the cows--this Carandas never rose up or lay down in a foreign land without thinking of how he could give strength to his desires of vengeance; and he was dreaming always of it, and wishing nothing less than the death of the fair washerwoman of Portillon and often would cry out "I will eat her flesh! I will cook one of her breasts, and swallow it without sauce!" It was a tremendous hate of good constitution--a cardinal hate--a hate of a wasp or an old maid. It was all known hates moulded into one single hate, which boiled itself, concocted itself, and resolved self into an elixir of wicked and diabolical sentiments, warmed at the fire of the most flaming furnaces of hell--it was, in fact, a master hate.

Now one fine day, the said Carandas came back into Touraine with much wealth, that he brought from the country of Flanders, where he had sold his mechanical secrets. He bought a splendid house in Rue St. Montfumier, which is still to be seen, and is the astonishment of the passers-by, because it has certain very queer round humps fashioned upon the stones of the wall. Carandas, the hater, found many notable changes at the house of his friend, the dyer, for the good man had two sweet children, who, by a curious chance, presented no resemblance either to the mother or to the father. But as it is necessary that children bear a resemblance to someone, there are certain people who look for the features of their ancestors, when they are good-looking--the flatters. So it was found by the good husband that his two boys were like one of his uncles, formerly a priest at Notre Dame de l'Egrignolles, but according to certain jokers, these two children were the living portraits of a good-looking shaven crown officiating in the Church of Notre Dame la Riche, a celebrated parish situated between Tours and Plessis. Now, believe one thing, and inculcate it upon your minds, and when in this book you shall only have gleaned, gathered, extracted, and learned this one principle of truth, look upon yourself as a lucky man--namely, that a man can never dispense with his nose, id est, that a man will always be snotty--that is to say, he will remain a man, and thus will continue throughout all future centuries to laugh and drink, to find himself in his shirt without feeling either better or worse there, and will have the same occupations. But these preparatory ideas are to better to fix in the understanding that this two-footed soul will always accept as true those things which flatter his passions, caress his hates, or serve his amours: from this comes logic. So it was that, the first day the above-mentioned Carandas saw his old comrade's children, saw the handsome priest, saw the beautiful wife of the dyer, saw La Taschereau, all seated at the table, and saw to his detriment the best piece of lamprey given with a certain air by La Tascherette to her friend the priest, the mechanic said to himself, "My old friend is a cuckold, his wife intrigues with the little confessor, and the children have been begotten with his holy water. I'll show them that the hunchbacks have something more than other men."

And this was true--true as it is that Tours has always had its feet in the Loire, like a pretty girl who bathes herself and plays with the water, making a flick-flack, by beating the waves with her fair white hands; for the town is more smiling, merry, loving, fresh, flowery, and fragrant than all the other towns of the world, which are not worthy to comb her locks or to buckle her waistband. And be sure if you go there you will find, in the centre of it, a sweet place, in which is a delicious street where everyone promenades, where there is always a breeze, shade, sun, rain, and love. Ha! ha! laugh away, but go there. It is a street always new, always royal, always imperial--a patriotic street, a street with two paths, a street open at both ends, a wide street, a street so large that no one has ever cried, "Out of the way!" there. A street which does not wear out, a street which leads to the abbey of Grand-mont, and to a trench, which works very well with the bridge, and at the end of which is a finer fair ground. A street well paved, well built, well washed, as clean as a glass, populous, silent at certain times, a coquette with a sweet nightcap on its pretty blue tiles--to be short, it is the street where I was born; it is the queen of streets, always between the earth and sky; a street with a fountain; a street which lacks nothing to be celebrated among streets; and, in fact, it is the real street, the only street of Tours. If there are others, they are dark, muddy, narrow, and damp, and all come respectfully to salute this noble street, which commands them. Where am I? For once in this street no one cares to come out of it, so pleasant it is. But I owed this filial homage, this descriptive hymn sung from the heart to my natal street, at the corners of which there are wanting only the brave figures of my good master

Rabelais, and of Monsieur Descartes, both unknown to the people of the country. To resume: the said Carandas was, on his return from Flanders, entertained by his comrade, and by all those by whom he was liked for his jokes, his drollery, and quaint remarks. The good hunchback appeared cured of his old love, embraced the children, and when he was alone with the dyer's wife, recalled the night in the clothes-chest, and the night in the sewer, to her memory, saying to her, "Ha, ha! what games you used to have with me."

"It was your own fault," said she, laughing. "If you had allowed yourself by reason of your great love to be ridiculed, made a fool of, and bantered a few more times, you might have made an impression on me, like the others." Thereupon Carandas commenced to laugh, though inwardly raging all the time. Seeing the chest where he had nearly been suffocated, his anger increased the more violently because the sweet creature had become still more beautiful, like all those who are permanently youthful from bathing in the water of youth, which waters are naught less than the sources of love. The mechanician studied the proceedings in the way of cuckoldom at his neighbour's house, in order to revenge himself, for as many houses as there are so many varieties of manner are there in this business; and although all amours resemble each other in the same manner that all men resemble each other, it is proved to the abstractors of true things, that for the happiness of women, each love has its especial physiognomy, and if there is nothing that resembles a man so much as a man, there is also nothing differs from a man so much as a man. That it is, which confuses all things, or explains the thousand fancies of women, who seek the best men with a thousand pains and a thousand pleasures, perhaps more the one than the other. But how can I blame them for their essays, changes, and contradictory aims? Why, Nature frisks and wriggles, twists and turns about, and you expect a woman to remain still! Do you know if ice is really cold? No. Well then, neither do you know that cuckoldom is not a lucky chance, the produce of brains well furnished and better made than all the others. Seek something better than ventosity beneath the sky. This will help to spread the philosophic reputation of this eccentric book. Oh yes; go on. He who cries "vermin powder," is more advanced than those who occupy themselves with Nature, seeing that she is a proud jade and a capricious one, and only allows herself to be seen at certain times. Do you understand? So in all languages does she belong to the feminine gender, being a thing essentially changeable and fruitful and fertile in tricks.

Now Carandas soon recognised the fact that among cuckoldoms the best understood and the most discreet is ecclesiastical cuckoldom. This is how the good dyer's wife had laid her plans. She went always towards her cottage at Grenadiere-les-St.-Cyr on the eve of the Sabbath, leaving her good husband to finish his work, to count up and check his books, and to pay his workmen; then Taschereau would join her there on the morrow, and always found a good breakfast ready and his good wife gay, and always brought the priest with him. The fact is, this damnable priest crossed the Loire the night before in a small boat, in order to keep the dyer's wife warm, and to calm her fancies, in order that she might sleep well during the night, a duty which young men understand very well. Then this fine curber of phantasies got back to his house in the morning by the time Taschereau came to invite him to spend the day at La Grenadiere, and the cuckold always found the priest asleep in his bed. The boatman being well paid, no one knew anything of these goings on, for the lover journeyed the night before after night fall, and on the Sunday in the early morning. As soon as Carandas had verified the arrangement and constant practice of these gallant diversions, he determined to wait for a day when the lovers would meet, hungry one for the other, after some accidental abstinence. This meeting took place very soon, and the curious hunchback

saw the boatman waiting below the square, at the Canal St. Antoine, for the young priest, who was handsome, blonde, slender, and well-shaped, like the gallant and cowardly hero of love, so celebrated by Monsieur Ariosto. Then the mechanic went to find the old dyer, who always loved his wife and always believed himself the only man who had a finger in her pie.

"Ah!, good evening, old friend," said Carandas to Taschereau; and Taschereau made him a bow.

Then the mechanic relates to him all the secret festivals of love, vomits words of peculiar import, and pricks the dyer on all sides.

At length, seeing he was ready to kill both his wife and the priest, Carandas said to him, "My good neighbour, I had brought back from Flanders a poisoned sword, which will instantly kill anyone, if it only make a scratch upon him. Now, directly you shall have merely touched your wench and her paramour, they will die."

"Let us go and fetch it," said the dyer.

Then the two merchants went in great haste to the house of the hunchback, to get the sword and rush off to the country.

"But shall we find them in flagrante delicto?" asked Taschereau.

"You will see," said the hunchback, jeering his friend. In fact, the cuckold had not long to wait to behold the joy of the two lovers.

The sweet wench and her well-beloved were busy trying to catch, in a certain lake that you probably know, that little bird that sometimes makes his nest there, and they were laughing and trying, and still laughing.

"Ah, my darling!" said she, clasping him, as though she wished to make an outline of him on her chest, "I love thee so much I should like to eat thee! Nay, more than that, to have you in my skin, so that you might never quit me."

"I should like it too," replied the priest, "but as you can't have me altogether, you must try a little bit at a time."

It was at this moment that the husband entered, he sword unsheathed and flourished above him. The beautiful Tascherette, who knew her lord's face well, saw what would be the fate of her well-beloved the priest. But suddenly she sprang towards the good man, half naked, her hair streaming over her, beautiful with shame, but more beautiful with love, and cried to him, "Stay, unhappy man! Wouldst thou kill the father of thy children?"

Thereupon the good dyer staggered by the paternal majesty of cuckoldom, and perhaps also by the fire of his wife's eyes, let the sword fall upon the foot of the hunchback, who had followed him, and thus killed him.

This teaches us not to be spiteful.

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