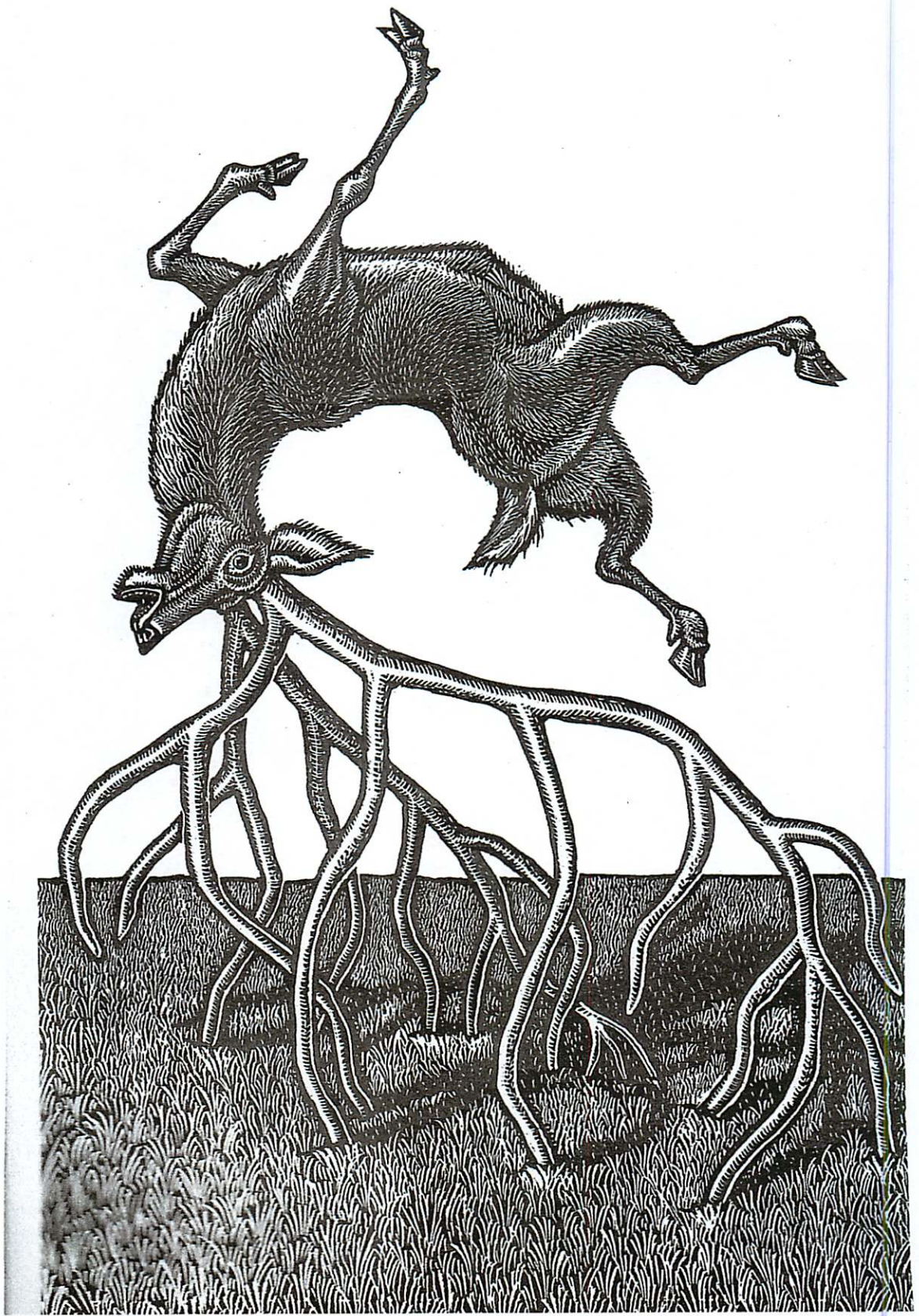


*Pride*

---



## HONORÉ DE BALZAC

Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) is one of the most important innovators of the modern, realist novel, in which detailed descriptions of setting and incident contribute to psychologically discerning portraits of men and women. Born in provincial France, Balzac later made his home in Paris. In the early 1830s, he conceived the idea of a vast literary project depicting all aspects of human society, which he titled *The Human Comedy*. He eventually added dozens of novels, short stories, and plays to this collection, many of them concerned with conflicts arising from class and financial ambition. Among Balzac's major works are the novels *Eugénie Grandet* (1833), *Père Goriot* (1835), and *Lost Illusions* (3 vols., 1837–1843). Balzac was an important influence on the writings of Henry James and Marcel Proust.

## *La Grande Bretèche*

About a hundred paces from Vendôme, on the banks of the Loire, stands an old brown house, topped by a very high roof, so completely isolated that neither evil-smelling tannery nor ill-favored tavern, so common on the outskirts of small towns, are found in its vicinity. In front of the house, sloping down to the river, is a garden where the box trees bordering the footpaths, all neatly trimmed in former days, now grow in wild freedom. Some willows, growing in the Loire, soon formed a hedge and nearly conceal the house. The plants we call weeds adorn the riverbanks with their luxuriant vegetation. The fruit trees, untended for ten years, have ceased to bear fruit, and their offshoots form a wealth of undergrowth. The espaliers have come to look like hedgerows. The paths, formerly strewn with sand, are now overrun with purslane; but indeed, there are no longer any traces of the paths. From the top of the mountain, where stand the ruins of the old castle of the dukes of Vendôme, the only place from which you can get a view of this enclosure, you have the impression that at some time past, which it is difficult to define, this little spot was the joy of some country gentleman, a lover of roses, tulips, horticulture in a word, but especially fond of good fruit. You can see an arbor, or rather the remains of

one, under which there stands a table not entirely destroyed by time. The sight of this abandoned garden gives you an idea of the negative pleasures of a peaceful country life, just as the epitaph on his tombstone gives you some insight into the life of an honest merchant. As if to add a last touch to the melancholy, peaceful thoughts that fill your heart, one of the walls displays a sundial adorned with this respectable Christian inscription: *ULTIMAM COGITA!* The roofs of the house are terribly dilapidated, the shutters are always closed, the balconies are covered with swallows' nests, the doors remain shut night and day. Tall grasses trace green lines along the cracks in the steps, the ironwork is all rusty. The moon, the sun, winter, summer, and snowstorms, have worn away the woodwork, warped the boards, corroded the paint.

The gloomy silence which reigns there is only broken by the birds, martens, rats, and mice that scutter about, fight, and devour each other without fear of intrusion. Everywhere some invisible hand has written the word *mystery*. If curiosity induced you to go and look at the house from the street, you would see a great arched gate, in which the urchins of the neighborhood have made numerous holes. I learned later that this gate had not been opened for ten years. Through these irregular gaps, you could observe the perfect harmony existing between the front and back of the house, the garden and the courtyard. The same disorder reigns in both. Tufts of grass push up between the paving stones. Enormous cracks furrow the walls, and on their blackened tops the pellitory intertwines its thousand festoons. The steps up to the door are falling to pieces, the bell rope has rotted, the waterspouts are broken. "What fire has blasted the place? What court of justice has had salt scattered over this dwelling? Has God been flouted here? Has France been betrayed?" These are the questions you ask yourself. Reptiles crawl about without giving you an answer. This empty, deserted house is a formidable puzzle to which no one has the key. It was in former days a small

fief, and bears the name of La Grande Bretèche. During my stay in Vendôme, where Desplein had left me in charge of a wealthy patient, one of my greatest pleasures was to gaze at this extraordinary dwelling. Was it not better than a mere ruin? Memories of unquestioned authenticity attach to a ruin; but this house, still standing in spite of its slow destruction by an avenging hand, concealed some secret, some unknown thought; at any rate it revealed a caprice. Several times of an evening, I landed by the hedge that shut in the enclosure. I risked getting badly scratched, I made my way into the abandoned garden, into these grounds that were neither public nor private; I spent long hours there, contemplating the desolation. I did not want to ask any gossiping inhabitant a single question for the sake of learning the story that would doubtless explain this curious sight. There, I invented delightful romances; I indulged in little fits of melancholy that charmed me. If I had known the reason, probably commonplace, of this neglect, I should have lost the novel poetry that enraptured me. To my eyes, this lonely spot was symbolic of the most varied images of human life, darkened by its miseries: Sometimes it reminded me of a cloister without monks, sometimes of a cemetery without the dead speaking their language of epitaphs; one day it seemed like the house of the leper, the next like that of the Atrides; but above all it represented the country, with its pensiveness, its existence dribbling away like sand in an hourglass. I often wept there; I never felt like laughing. More than once I was seized with an involuntary terror on hearing overhead the dull whirl of a wood pigeon's wings as it flew swiftly on its way. The ground is damp there; you have to beware of the lizards, adders, frogs that move about in the wild abundance of nature; above all, you must not fear the cold, for in a few minutes you feel an icy mantle descending on your shoulders, like the hand of the commander on the neck of Don Juan. One evening I had a fright; the wind made an old rusty weathercock turn, and its screech sounded like a groan coming from

the house, just as I was ending a fairly lugubrious drama, in which I explained the grief expressed in this building. I returned to my inn, a prey to gloomy thoughts. When I had finished supper, my landlady came into my room with an air of mystery and said:

"Monsieur Regnault to see you, sir."

"Who's Monsieur Regnault?"

"Why, sir, don't you know Monsieur Regnault? Oh, that is queer!" she exclaimed as she went away.

Suddenly I saw a tall, spare man, clad all in black, appear, holding his hat in his hand, and looking like a ram ready to charge its rival, with his receding brow, his small pointed head, and pale face rather like a glass of turbid water. He might have been taken for the gentleman usher of a minister. This stranger was wearing an old tailcoat nearly threadbare at the seams; but he had a diamond in his shirt frill and gold earrings in his ears.

"Whom have I the honor of addressing, sir?" I asked.

He sat down on a chair in front of the fire, put his hat on my table, and answered as he rubbed his hands together:

"Ah! It is very cold! My name is Regnault, sir."

I bowed, saying to myself: "*Il Bondo cani!* I'm none the wiser!"

"I am," he continued, "a notary practicing at Vendôme."

"Delighted, sir," I exclaimed, "but I don't want to make my will just now, for reasons known to myself."

"Just a moment!" he continued, raising his hand as if to impose silence. "Permit me, sir! Permit me! I have been informed that you sometimes go to walk in the garden of La Grande Bretèche."

"That is so, sir."

"Just a moment!" he said, making the same gesture. "You have been guilty of trespassing. Sir, I come on behalf of the late Countess of Merret, and as her executor to beg you to discontinue these visits. Just a minute, please! I am not unreasonable, and I don't want to accuse you of a crime. Besides, it is only natural that you should not be aware of

the circumstances which oblige me to let the finest mansion in Vendôme go to ruin. Yet, sir, you appear well informed, and must know that the law forbids anyone to enter private grounds, under severe penalties. A hedge serves the same purpose as a wall. But the present condition of the house may excuse your curiosity. I would gladly give you permission to walk about the house and grounds; but as I have to execute the countess's will, I must ask you, sir, not to go into the garden again. I, myself, sir, since the reading of the will, have not set foot in the house, which, as I have had the honor of telling you, forms part of the estate of the late Madame de Merret. We have merely verified the number of doors and windows so as to assess the taxes I pay annually from a sum allotted for this purpose by the late Madame de Merret. Ah! my dear sir, her will caused a great deal of talk in Vendôme, I can tell you!"

At this point the worthy lawyer stopped to blow his nose. I respected his loquacity, understanding quite well that Madame de Merret's will was the most important event in his life—his reputation, his glory, his restoration. I must bid farewell to my dreams and romances; so I did not regret having to learn the truth from an official source.

"Sir," I said, "would it be impertinent to ask you the reasons for this strange state of things?"

At these words, an expression revealing all the satisfaction of a man used to riding his hobbyhorse passed over the lawyer's face. He arranged his shirt collar with a fatuous air; took out his snuffbox; opened it and offered me a pinch; and, on my refusing, helped himself copiously. He was happy! A man who has no hobbyhorse does not realize all that can be got out of life. Such a state is a happy medium between passion and monomania. At this moment I understood the full meaning of this pretty expression of Sterne's, and I had the lifelike picture of the joy with which Uncle Toby bestrode his charger, helped by Trim.

"Sir," said Monsieur Regnault, "I was head clerk in the office of Maître Roquin, in Paris. An excellent practice, of

which you have heard perhaps? You haven't? Yet it was made famous by a regrettable bankruptcy. Not having a large-enough fortune to buy a practice at the price to which such offices soared in 1816, I came here and acquired the practice of my predecessor. I had relatives in Vendôme, among others, a very wealthy aunt, who gave me her daughter in marriage—Sir," he continued, after a short pause, "three months after I had been admitted by the Garde des Sceaux, I was sent for one evening, just as I was going to bed (I was not yet married), by the Countess of Merret at her Chateau of Merret. Her maid, a good girl who is now a servant at this inn, was at the door with the countess's barouche. Oh! just a moment, please!—I forgot to tell you, sir, that the count had gone to Paris and died there two months before I came here. He came to a sad end, indulging in all sorts of excesses. You understand, don't you? On the day of his departure, the countess left La Grande Bretèche, and had it dismantled. Some people even say that she had the furniture and tapestries burned, and in short all the various articles furnished the premises hereby let to the aforesaid tenant—(Oh! my goodness! What am I saying? Forgive me, I thought I was dictating a lease)—that she had them all burned in the meadow at Merret. Have you been there, sir? You have not?" he said, supplying my answer himself. "Well, it's a very beautiful spot! For about three months," he went on, after nodding his head, "the count and countess had been living a queer life; they stopped seeing any visitors, the countess lived on the ground floor, and her husband on the first floor. When the countess was left in solitude, she ceased going to church. Later on, in her chateau, she refused to see the friends who went to call on her. She had already greatly changed before she left La Grande Bretèche to go to Merret. Such a dear lady—I say 'dear' because she gave me this diamond; I only saw her once myself); so, this good lady was very ill; she had probably no hope of recovering, for she died without summoning a doctor; and indeed, many of the ladies about

here thought she was queer in the head on that account. So my curiosity was greatly aroused, sir, when I learned that Madame de Merret required my services. I was not the only person who took an interest in the situation. That very evening, although it was late, the whole town knew I was going to Merret. The maid gave noncommittal answers to the questions I asked her on the way; nevertheless, she told me her mistress had received the last sacraments, administered by the curé of Merret that same day, and she would probably not live through the night. It was about eleven o'clock when I arrived at the chateau. I went up the great staircase. After passing through high, spacious rooms, dark, cold, horribly damp, I came to the state bedroom where the countess lay. Judging from the gossip one heard about this lady (I should never finish if I were to tell you all the rumors circulated about her), I fancied she must be a coquette. Well, you'll be surprised to learn that I could hardly distinguish her on the great bed where she lay. It is true she had only one of those ancient Argant lamps to light the enormous bedroom with its old-fashioned friezes, so dusty that the mere sight of them made you want to sneeze. But you haven't been to Merret! Well, sir, the bed is one of those old four-posters, with a high tester covered with flowered print. A small night commode stood near the bed, and, lying on it, I noticed the *Imitation of Christ*, which, by the way, I bought for my wife, together with the lamp. There was also a large armchair for the woman tending her, and two chairs. But no fire. That was all the furniture. It would not have filled ten lines in an inventory. Oh! my dear sir, if you had seen this enormous room, hung with brown tapestry, as I saw it then, you would have thought you had been wafted to the scene of a real romance. It was icy cold, and, what is more, deathlike," he added, raising his arm with a dramatic gesture, and pausing. "After gazing for a long time at the bed, I at last discovered Madame de Merret, thanks again to the glow from the lamp, whose light fell on the pillows. Her face was as

---

yellow as wax, and looked like two clasped hands. The countess wore a lace cap, through which you could see her lovely hair, white as freshly spun yarn. She was sitting up, and appeared to do so with great difficulty. Her big black eyes, heavy and sunken with fever and already almost lifeless, hardly moved under the bones of the eyebrows. There," he said, touching his own brow. "Her forehead was damp. Her thin hands seemed like bones with skin stretched over them; her veins and muscles all stood out visibly. She must have been beautiful once; but at that moment an indefinable feeling came over me as I looked at her. Never, judging from what the persons who prepared her for burial said, had a human being reached such a stage of emaciation and remained alive. In short, it was a terrible sight. She had wasted away so completely during her illness that she was no more than a phantom. Her lips, pale violet in color, did not seem to move when she spoke to me. Although my profession has trained me to such sights, often taking me to the bedside of the dying to receive their last will and testament, I must admit that these stricken families and the death scenes I have witnessed were nothing compared to this lonely, silent woman in this spacious castle. I could hear no sound, I could not see the bedclothes rising and falling with the patient's breath, and I stood quite motionless, gazing at her intently in a sort of stupor. I feel as though I were still there. At last her great eyes moved, she tried to raise her right hand, which fell back on the bed, and these words came from her lips like a breath, for her voice was a voice no longer: 'I was waiting for you to come.' She flushed hotly. It was an effort for her to speak, sir. 'Madame—,' I said. She motioned me to be silent. At this moment the aged waiting woman rose and whispered in my ear: 'Do not speak, the countess cannot stand the slightest sound: and what you say might upset her.' I took a seat. A few minutes later, Madame de Merret summoned all her remaining strength to move her right arm, put it, not without great difficulty, under her bolster; she lay still

a moment; then she made a last effort to withdraw her hand, and, when she had pulled out a sealed paper, drops of sweat rolled down her forehead. 'I leave my will in your hands—,' she said. 'Ah! my God! Ah!' That was all. She seized a crucifix that lay on her bed, put it quickly to her lips, and expired. The expression in her motionless eyes still makes me shudder when I think of it. She must have suffered cruelly! At the very last, there was a look of joy in her eyes, an expression which remained stamped there after she was dead. I took the will away with me; and when it was opened, I saw that Madame de Merret had appointed me her executor. She bequeathed her fortune, apart from a few private legacies, to the Vendôme Hospital. But there were stipulations with regard to La Grande Bretèche. She requested me to let the house stand untouched for a period of fifty years from the date of her death, forbidding any person whatsoever to enter the rooms, or any repairs to be done, even arranging for the payment of caretakers, if necessary, to make sure that her wishes were executed in every detail. At the expiration of this period, if the wishes of the testatrix are obeyed, the estate is to pass to my heirs, for you are aware, sir, that notaries are not allowed to accept legacies; otherwise La Grande Bretèche returns to the rightful heirs, but on condition they fulfill the terms stated in a codicil added to the will, and not to be opened before the expiration of the above-mentioned fifty years. The will has not been contested, so—"

With these words, and not troubling to finish his sentence, the lanky notary glanced at me with an air of triumph; I filled his cup of happiness by paying him a few compliments.

"Sir," I said, "your story has made so vivid an impression on me that I fancy I can see the dying countess, whiter than her sheets; her shining eyes fill me with terror; I shall surely dream of her tonight. But you must have formed some conjectures with regard to the provisions of the extraordinary will."

"Sir," he said, with comic reticence, "I never take the liberty of criticizing the doings of persons who have done me the honor of giving me a diamond."

I soon managed to loosen the tongue of the scrupulous lawyer, who told me, not without lengthy digressions, of the observations supplied by the shrewd wiseacres of both sexes whose word holds sway in Vendôme. But these observations were so contradictory, so diffuse, that I nearly fell asleep, in spite of the interest this authentic story roused in me. The dull tones and the monotonous speech of the lawyer, no doubt accustomed to listening to himself and making his fellows listen to him, got the better of my curiosity. Fortunately, he took leave of me.

"Let me tell you, sir," he said, as he went down the stairs, "there's a lot of people would like to live another forty-five years; but just a minute, please!"

And, with a knowing air, he laid the forefinger of his right hand against his nose, as if to say, "Yes, mark my words!"

"But to live as long as that," he said, "you must not have reached the age of sixty!"

I closed the door, after being roused from my state of apathy by this parting shot, which the lawyer thought very witty; then I sat down in my armchair with my feet on the two andirons in the fireplace. I was deep in a romance in the style of Mrs. Radcliffe built on the legal information supplied by Monsieur Regnault, when the door turned on its hinges, opened by the skillful hand of a woman. I saw my landlady come in, a stout, jolly, good-natured woman who had missed her vocation: she should have been a Flemish woman in one of Teniers's pictures.

"Well, sir," she said, "Monsieur Regnault has, no doubt, been telling you his favorite yarn about La Grande Bretèche?"

"Yes, he has, Madame Lepas."

"What did he tell you?"

I told her briefly the bleak, gloomy story of Madame de Merret. At every sentence the landlady strained her head

forward, looking at me with an innkeeper's perspicacity, a sort of cross between the instinct of a gendarme, the cunning of a spy, and the craftiness of a tradesman.

"My dear Madame Lepas," I added when I had finished, "you seem to know more than I do, now don't you? Otherwise why should you have come up to see me?"

"Oh, on my honor, as true as my name is Lepas—"

"Now, don't be so positive; your eyes betray your secret. You knew Monsieur de Merret. What sort of a man was he?"

"Indeed, Monsieur de Merret was a fine, handsome gentleman, so tall you could hardly see the end of him! A worthy nobleman of Picard origin, who played the deuce, as we say, on small provocation. He always paid ready money to avoid having trouble with anyone. He was quick tempered, you see. The ladies were all very fond of him."

"Because he was quick tempered?" I asked her.

"Yes, perhaps," she said. "You'll quite understand, sir, that there must have been something about him, as the saying goes, for him to have married Madame de Merret, who, no offense to others of course, was the loveliest and richest lady in Vendôme. She had about twenty thousand francs' income. The whole town was at the wedding. The bride was charming and beautiful, a real treasure. Oh, they made a fine couple in those days!"

"Was it a happy marriage?"

"Well, yes and no, as far as one can guess, for you'll easily understand we were not on very familiar terms with them! Madame de Merret was a kind lady, very sweet tempered, who perhaps had to put up with her husband's bad temper at times; but we were fond of him, though he was rather standoffish. After all, it was only natural for him to be like that! When a man's of noble birth, you know—"

"Yet there must have been some catastrophe for them to have separated so violently?"

"I never said there had been any catastrophe, sir. I know nothing about it."

"All right. I'm sure now you know everything."

"Well, sir, I'll tell you everything. When I saw Monsieur Regnault going up to see you, I knew he'd talk about Madame de Merret, in connection with La Grande Bretèche. That made me think I'd consult you, sir, for you seem a man of good counsel, and incapable of betraying a poor woman like me who's never harmed anyone, and is now tortured by her conscience. Until now, I've never dared to confide in the people here, a lot of steel-tongued gossips. In short, sir, I've never yet had a gentleman stay as long as you at the inn, and a gentleman to whom I could tell the story of the fifteen thousand francs—"

"My dear Madame Lepas," I answered, stopping her flow of words, "if your disclosure is in any way likely to compromise me, I should not consent to hear it for anything in the world."

"Have no fear," she said, interrupting me. "You'll soon see."

Her eagerness made me certain that I was not the only person who has been entrusted with the good landlady's secret, of which I was to be the sole confidant, and I listened.

"Sir," she said, "when the emperor sent the Spanish or other prisoners of war here, I had a young Spaniard, sent to Vendôme on parole, billeted on me. Although he was on parole, he had to report every day at the subprefecture. He was a Spanish grandee! Just fancy! He had a name ending in *-os* and *-dia*, something like Bagos de Férédia. I've got it written on my registers; you can read it, if you like. Oh! he was a fine-looking fellow for a Spaniard, who are all said to be ugly. He was only some five foot two or three inches tall, but he was well built; he had small hands, and you should have seen how he looked after them! He had as many brushes for his hands as a woman has for the whole of her toilet! He had long, black hair, flashing eyes, a bronzed complexion, but I liked it all the same. He wore finer linen than I've ever seen on anyone, although I've had princesses

stay here, and among others, General Bertrand, the Duke and Duchess of Abrantès, Monsieur Decazes, and the king of Spain. He ate very little; but he had such courteous, pleasant manners, that you couldn't bear him a grudge for that. I was very fond of him, I can tell you, although he didn't say four words a day, and it was impossible to have any conversation with him; if you spoke to him, he did not answer: It was a mania, a queer habit they all have, so I've been told. He read his breviary like a priest, he went regularly to Mass and all the church services. Where did he sit in church? We noticed that later: a few yards from Madame de Merret's chapel. As he took his place there the very first time he went to church, nobody thought he had any special reason for doing so. Besides, the poor young gentleman never raised his eyes from his prayer book. At that time, sir, he used to walk about the hillside of an evening, among the ruins of the castle. It was the poor gentleman's only distraction. There he was reminded of his own country. They say there's nothing but mountains in Spain! The very first day of his detention here, he stayed out very late. I was anxious at not seeing him come in till midnight; but we all grew used to his whims; he would take the door key, and we stopped sitting up for him. His room was in the house we have in the Rue des Casernes. Then, one of the stable boys told us that one evening, as he was going to water the horses, he thought he had seen the Spanish grandee swimming like a fish in the river some way off. When he returned, I told him to beware of the weeds; he seemed to be put out at having been seen in the water. At last, sir, one day or rather one morning, we found his room empty; he had not come back. After searching everywhere, I found a note in the drawer of his table where there were also fifty Spanish gold coins, which we call Portugueses, worth about five thousand francs, and diamonds to the value of about ten thousand francs in a small sealed box. The note said, that in case he should not return, he left us the money and the diamonds, on condition we had Masses said for the salvation of his soul, and

to thank God for his escape. At that time my husband was alive, and he went to look for him. And—this is the queer part of the story!—he brought back the Spaniard's clothes, which he found beneath a big stone under some piles by the riverside, not far from the castle, almost opposite La Grande Bretèche. My husband had gone there so early that no one had seen him. He burned the clothes after he had read the letter, and we declared that the Count Férédia had escaped, as he asked us to. The subprefect sent all his gendarmes in pursuit of him; but it was all no use, they didn't catch him. Lepas thought the Spaniard has been drowned. I don't think so, sir; I am rather inclined to believe he played some part in the mystery of Madame de Merret, seeing Rosalie told me the crucifix her mistress was so attached to that it was buried with her was of ebony and silver; now, in the early days of his stay here, Monsieur Férédia had an ebony and silver one, which I did not see later on. Now, sir, is it not true that I need not let my conscious trouble me about the Spaniard's fifteen thousand francs, and that they are really mine?"

"Certainly. But haven't you tried to question Rosalie?" I said.

"Oh, yes, indeed I have, sir. But the girl's like a blank wall. She knows something, but it's impossible to get a word out of her."

After chatting a little longer with me, the landlady left me a prey to rambling, gloomy fancies, romantic curiosity, and a religious awe much like the deep emotion that comes over us when we go at night into a dark church, where a feeble light appears in the distance under the high arches, a dim form glides along, we can hear the rustling of a gown or cassock, and our flesh creeps. La Grande Bretèche, and its tall grass, its closed windows, its rusty ironwork, its shut doors, and empty rooms suddenly appeared fantastically before my eyes. I tried to penetrate into this mysterious dwelling by seeking the key to this gloomy tale, the drama that had caused the death of three people. Rosalie became in my eyes the most interesting person in Vendôme. As I

looked at her, I fancied I could make out the traces of some secret knowledge, in spite of the robust health that shone on her plump face. There was in her some spring of remorse or hope; her bearing showed she had a secret to keep, as does that of pious women praying to excess, or of a girl who has killed her baby and hears its last cry unceasingly. Yet her behavior was simple and unrefined, there was nothing criminal in her silly smile, and you would have judged her innocent at the very sight of the big red-and-blue-checked kerchief that covered her ample bosom, tucked into a tightly fitting dress with white and purple stripes.

"No," I thought, "I will not leave Vendôme without getting to the bottom of the mystery of La Grande Bretèche. To gain my ends, I'll even become Rosalie's lover, if it's absolutely necessary."

"Rosalie?" I said to her one evening.

"Yes, sir."

"You're not married?"

She started slightly.

"Oh, I'll have plenty of men to choose from, when I've a fancy to make myself unhappy!" she said with a laugh.

She recovered quickly from her private emotion, for all women, from great ladies to maidservants in country inns, have a self-possession that is peculiar to them.

"You are young and attractive enough not to lack admirers! But, tell me, Rosalie, why you became a maid at this inn after you left Madame de Merret? Is it because she did not make any provision for you?"

"Oh, but she did indeed, sir. But I've the best place in Vendôme here."

This answer was what judges and attorneys would call noncommittal. Rosalie seemed to me to occupy in this romantic story a position like the middle square on the draught board; the interest and the truth centered around her; she seemed tied in the knot. She ceased to be an ordinary girl I was going to try to seduce; in her lay the last chapter of a romance; and so, from that time, Rosalie

became the chief object of my attentions. Studying the girl, I discovered in her, as we do in all women that occupy the chief place in our thoughts, a crowd of good qualities: She was clean, neat, and tidy; needless to say, she was beautiful; she soon had all the attractions with which our desire endows women, whatever their rank. A fortnight after the notary's visit, I said to Rosalie one evening, or rather one morning, for it was in the early hours, "Now tell me all you know about Madame de Merret."

"Oh!" she answered in terror, "don't ask me that, Master Horace!"

Her beautiful face darkened, her vivid, glowing color grew pale, and her eyes lost their moist, innocent brightness. Nevertheless, I insisted.

"Well," she went on, "since you will have it so, I'll tell you: But you must be sure and keep the secret."

"I promise you, my poor girl, I'll keep your secret with a thief's honesty, the truest there is."

"I'd sooner you kept it with your own," she said, "if it's all the same to you."

Thereupon she smoothed her kerchief, and settled herself to tell her story; for, indeed, there is an attitude of confidence and ease necessary for the telling of a story. The best tales are told at a certain hour. Nobody can tell a good story standing, or on an empty stomach. But if I were to reproduce word for word the long-winded eloquence of Rosalie, a whole volume would hardly be enough. Now, as the event of which she gave me a confused account would stand halfway between the gossip of Madame Lepas and that of the notary, as precisely as the averages in an arithmetical proportion are between the two extremes, all I have to do is to relate it in a few words. This is it briefly:

The bedroom that Madame de Merret occupied at La Grande Bretèche was on the ground floor. A cupboard, some four feet in depth, built into the wall, served as her wardrobe. Three months before the evening I am going to tell you of, Madame de Merret was so unwell that her

husband left her alone in her room, and took to sleeping in a bedroom on the first floor. By some unforeseen chance, on that evening, he returned two hours later than usual from the club where he went to read the newspapers and talk politics with the townspeople. His wife thought he was back, in bed, and asleep. But the invasion of France had been the subject of a very heated discussion; the game of billiards had become lively, he had lost forty francs, a large sum in Vendôme, where everyone is economical and a praiseworthy moderation is the rule, which perhaps becomes the source of real content, such as no Parisian cares for. For some time past, Monsieur de Merret had merely inquired of Rosalie if his wife had retired; as he invariably received an affirmative answer, he went to his own room immediately with the good humor born of habit and confidence. When he came back on that night, he took it into his head to go and see Madame de Merret, to tell her of his bad luck, and perhaps to get some consolation as well. During dinner he had thought Madame de Merret was very charmingly dressed; on his way back from the club he reflected that his wife no longer was ailing, that her convalescence had increased her beauty, and, as is usually the case with husbands, he noticed it a little too late. Instead of calling Rosalie, who was in the kitchen at the time, busy watching the cook and coachman playing a difficult game of *brisque*, Monsieur de Merret turned his steps toward his wife's room, lighting himself with his lantern, which he had placed on the first step of the staircase. His footsteps, easily recognizable, echoed under the vaulted roof of the corridor. As he turned the key of his wife's room, he fancied he heard the door of the cupboard I told you of being closed; but when he entered, Madame de Merret was alone, standing in front of the fire. Her husband thought it was Rosalie in the closet; yet a suspicion, ringing in his ears like a bell, put him on his guard; he looked at his wife, and fancied he saw something mysteriously wild and anxious in her eyes.

"You're back very late," she said.

Her voice, usually so pure and musical, seemed to his ears to have lost some of its beauty. Monsieur de Merret did not answer, for Rosalie came in at that moment. He had had a terrible shock. He folded his arms and paced up and down the room, walking from window to window with absolute regularity.

"Have you had bad news, or are you not well?" his wife asked him timidly, while Rosalie undressed her.

He remained silent.

"You can leave me," said Madame de Merret to her maid. "I will put my curl papers in myself."

The very sight of her husband's face made her fear some misfortune, and she wished to be alone with him. When Rosalie had gone, or was thought to have gone, for she listened for a few moments in the corridor, Monsieur de Merret went and stood in from of his wife and said coldly: "Madam, there is someone in that cupboard!"

She looked calmly at her husband, and said simply: "There is not, sir."

This denial distressed Monsieur de Merret; he did not believe it: Yet never had his wife seemed to him purer and holier than at that moment. He rose to go and open the door; Madame de Merret seized his hand, stopped him, gazed at him sadly, and said in a strangely tremulous voice: "If you find no one, remember that all is over between us!"

The extraordinary dignity of his wife's attitude revived the nobleman's deep respect for her, and made him think of a course of action which only needed a more imposing setting to become immortal.

"No, Josephine," he said, "I will not go. In either case we should be separated forever. Now listen, I know how pure your heart is, and how good your life; you would not commit a deadly sin, even to save your life."

At these words, Madame de Merret glanced at her husband with haggard eyes.

"Come, take your crucifix," he added. "Swear before God that there is no one there, I will believe you, I will never open the door."

Madame de Merret took the crucifix and said: "I swear it."

"Louder," said her husband, "and repeat this: 'I swear before God that there is no one in that cupboard.'"

She repeated the sentence without embarrassment.

"Very good," said Monsieur de Merret coldly.

After a moment's silence, "This is a beautiful thing I have never seen before," he said, examining the ebony crucifix inlaid with silver and very artistically carved.

"I found it at Duvivier's; he bought it from a Spanish monk, when those troops of prisoners passed through Vendôme last year."

"Indeed!" said Monsieur de Merret, putting the crucifix back on its nail.

And he rang the bell. Rosalie was not long in coming. Monsieur de Merret hurried across the room to meet her, led her to the window overlooking the garden, and whispered: "I know that Gorenflot wants to marry you, and that you are only prevented from setting up house by your lack of money, and that you have told him that you won't be his wife until he becomes a master mason. . . . Well, go and bring him here; tell him to come with his trowel and his tools. See that you don't waken anyone but him in the house; his fortune will surpass your ambitions. Above all, don't chatter here before you go, or else—"

He frowned. Rosalie went off; he called her back.

"Here, take my key," he said.

"Jean!" shouted Monsieur de Merret down the corridor, in a voice of thunder.

Jean, who was his coachman as well as his valet, left his game of *brisque* and came.

"Go to bed, all of you," said his master, beckoning to him to approach.

And then the nobleman added in a whisper: "When they are all asleep, sound asleep, you understand, you are to come down and tell me."

Monsieur de Merret, who had not taken his eyes off his wife while he gave these orders, went calmly back to her by the fire, and began to tell her of the incidents of the game of billiards and the talk at the club. When Rosalie returned, she found Monsieur and Madame de Merret conversing in a friendly fashion. The nobleman had recently had all the ceilings of the reception rooms on the ground floor replastered. Plaster is very scarce at Vendôme, the transport increases its price considerably, so he had had a fairly large supply sent, knowing he would be able to sell it, if any were left over. This circumstance made him think of the plan he now put into action.

"Gorenflot has come, sir," said Rosalie in a whisper.

"Bring him in!" the gentleman answered aloud.

Madame de Merret turned a little pale on seeing the mason.

"Gorenflot," said her husband, "go and fetch the bricks from under the shed, and bring enough to wall up the door of this closet; you can coat it over with the rest of the plaster."

Then, drawing Rosalie and workman aside, he said in an undertone "Listen, Gorenflot, you must sleep here tonight. But tomorrow morning you shall have a passport to go abroad to a town I'll tell you of. I'll give you six thousand francs for your journey. You must stay in that town for ten years; if you don't like it, you can go elsewhere, as long as it is in the same country. You will travel via Paris, where you must wait for me. There I will give you an agreement whereby you will receive another sum of six thousand francs on your return, provided you have fulfilled the conditions of our contract. In return for this money, you must observe the most absolute silence about what you do here tonight. As for you, Rosalie, I will give you ten thousand

francs which will only be paid to you on your wedding day, and on condition you marry Gorenflot; but you must both keep your counsel, if you want to marry. Otherwise you'll have no dowry."

"Rosalie," said Madame de Merret, "come and do my hair."

Her husband paced calmly up and down the room, keeping his eyes on the door, the mason, and his wife, but not betraying any offensive distrust. Gorenflot could not avoid making a noise. Madame de Merret took advantage of a moment when the workman was unloading some bricks and her husband was at the other end of the room, to say to Rosalie: "There's a thousand francs a year for you, dear girl, if you can tell Gorenflot to leave a crack at the bottom."

Then she said aloud with composure: "Now go and help him!"

Monsieur and Madame de Merret were silent all the time Gorenflot was walling in the door. This silence was strategic on the husband's part, for he did not want to give his wife an opportunity of saying words that might have a double meaning; and in the case of Madame de Merret it was prudence or pride. When the wall was halfway up, the cunning mason banged his pick through one of the glass panes of the door, taking advantage of a moment when the nobleman was at the other end of the room. This act proved to Madame de Merret that Rosalie had spoken to Gorenflot.

Then the three of them saw the dark, bronzed face of a man, with black hair, and flaming eyes. Before her husband had turned back again, the poor woman had time to nod to the stranger, to whom this signal meant: "Don't lose hope!" At four o'clock, when the day was beginning to dawn, for it was September, the wall was finished. The mason stayed on in the custody of Jean, and Monsieur de Merret slept in his wife's room. The next morning when he got up, he said carelessly: "Oh, by the way, I must go to Mairie to see about the passport!"

He put his hat on his head, took three steps toward the door, stopped as if something had just occurred to him, and took the crucifix. His wife's heart leaped with joy.

"He will go to Duvivier's," she thought.

As soon as the nobleman had gone, Madame de Merret rang for Rosalie; then she cried in a voice of anguish: "Quick, quick, bring me the pick. I saw how Gorenflot went to work yesterday; we shall have time to make a hole and block it up again!"

In less than no time Rosalie brought her mistress a sort of hatchet, and, with an indescribable energy, she began to demolish the wall. She had already displaced a few bricks, when, just as she was preparing to spring forward so as to strike a harder blow than before, she suddenly saw Monsieur de Merret behind her; she fainted.

"Put your mistress on her bed," said the nobleman coldly.

Foreseeing what was sure to happen in his absence, he had laid a trap for his wife; he had merely written to the mayor, and sent for Duvivier. The jeweler arrived just as the room had been put in order again.

"Duvivier," asked the nobleman, "have you not purchased crucifixes from the Spaniards who passed through the town?"

"No, sir."

"Very good, I thank you," he said, with a tigerish glance at his wife. "Jean," he added, turning to his valet, "you will serve my meals in Madame de Merret's room; she is unwell, and I shall not leave her until she is better."

The cruel count never left his wife for three weeks. At the beginning, when there was a sound in the walled cupboard, and Josephine made an attempt to beg him to have pity on the dying stranger, he answered, without allowing her to say a word: "You swore on the crucifix that there was no one there."

### QUESTIONS

1. Why does the narrator derive so much pleasure from gazing at the dilapidated La Grande Bretèche? Why is he reluctant to ask the inhabitants of the town about the house?
2. Why does the notary Regnault disclose to the narrator so many details of his dealings with his client, the Countess of Merret, almost to the point of breaching professional confidentiality?
3. Does the landlady, Madame Lepas, have a clear conscience about the fifteen thousand francs that she acquired when the Spaniard disappeared?
4. Why does Rosalie tell the narrator the entire story of how the Spaniard was killed, even though she herself and her fiancé Gorenflot are implicated in the murder?
5. Why does the narrator make a point of comparing the ways of Vendôme, "where everyone is economical and a praiseworthy moderation is the rule," to the less restrained ways of the Parisians? (19)
6. Why doesn't the Countess of Merret recant her oath on the crucifix and admit to her husband that the Spaniard is concealed in the cupboard?
7. What explains the Countess of Merret's stipulation that La Grande Bretèche be untouched for fifty years after her death?

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Is there a difference between the professional pride of the notary and the pride of the Countess de Merret?
2. Why does Balzac tell his tale of events in a provincial town through the eyes of a sophisticated, urbane outsider?
3. How are greed and pride intermingled in the motivations and actions of the characters in the story?