

The Message

Honore' de Balzac

Table of Contents

<u>The Message</u>	1
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The Message

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Translation by Ellen Marriage

To M. le Marquis Damaso Pareto

I have always longed to tell a simple and true story, which should strike terror into two young lovers, and drive them to take refuge each in the other's heart, as two children cling together at the sight of a snake by a woodside. At the risk of spoiling my story and of being taken for a coxcomb, I state my intention at the outset.

I myself played a part in this almost commonplace tragedy; so if it fails to interest you, the failure will be in part my own fault, in part owing to historical veracity. Plenty of things in real life are superlatively uninteresting; so that it is one-half of art to select from realities those which contain possibilities of poetry.

In 1819 I was traveling from Paris to Moulins. The state of my finances obliged me to take an outside place. Englishmen, as you know, regard those airy perches on the top of the coach as the best seats; and for the first few miles I discovered abundance of excellent reasons for justifying the opinion of our neighbors. A young fellow, apparently in somewhat better circumstances, who came to take the seat beside me from preference, listened to my reasoning with inoffensive smiles. An approximate nearness of age, a similarity in ways of thinking, a common love of fresh air, and of the rich landscape scenery through which the coach was lumbering along,—these things, together with an indescribable magnetic something, drew us before long into one of those short-lived traveller's intimacies, in which we unbend with the more complacency because the intercourse is by its very nature transient, and makes no implicit demands upon the future.

We had not come thirty leagues before we were talking of women and love. Then, with all the circumspection demanded in such matters, we proceeded naturally to the topic of our lady-loves. Young as we both were, we still admired "the woman of a certain age," that is to say, the woman between thirty-five and forty. Oh! any poet who should have listened to our talk, for heaven knows how many stages beyond Montargis, would have reaped a harvest of flaming epithet, rapturous description, and very tender confidences. Our bashful fears, our silent interjections, our blushes, as we met each other's eyes, were expressive with an eloquence, a boyish charm, which I have ceased to feel. One must remain young, no doubt, to understand youth.

Well, we understood one another to admiration on all the essential points of passion. We had laid it down as an axiom at the very outset, that in theory and practice there was no such piece of driveling nonsense in this world as a certificate of birth; that plenty of women were younger at forty than many a girl of twenty; and, to come to the point, that a woman is no older than she looks.

This theory set no limits to the age of love, so we struck out, in all good faith, into a boundless sea. At length, when we had portrayed our mistresses as young, charming, and devoted to us, women of rank, women of taste, intellectual and clever; when we had endowed them with little feet, a satin, nay, a delicately fragrant skin, then came the admission—on his part that Madame Such-an-one was thirty-eight years old, and on mine that I worshiped a woman of forty. Whereupon, as if released on either side from some kind of vague fear, our confidences came thick and fast, when we found that we were in the same confraternity of love. It was which of us should overtop the other in sentiment.

One of us had traveled six hundred miles to see his mistress for an hour. The other, at the risk of being shot for a wolf, had prowled about her park to meet her one night. Out came all our follies in fact. If it is pleasant to remember past dangers, is it not at least as pleasant to recall past delights? We live through the joy a second time.

The Message

We told each other everything, our perils, our great joys, our little pleasures, and even the humors of the situation. My friend's countess had lighted a cigar for him; mine made chocolate for me, and wrote to me every day when we did not meet; his lady had come to spend three days with him at the risk of ruin to her reputation; mine had done even better, or worse, if you will have it so. Our countesses, moreover, were adored by their husbands; these gentlemen were enslaved by the charm possessed by every woman who loves; and, with even supererogatory simplicity, afforded us that just sufficient spice of danger which increases pleasure. Ah! how quickly the wind swept away our talk and our happy laughter!

When we reached Pouilly, I scanned my new friend with much interest, and truly, it was not difficult to imagine him the hero of a very serious love affair. Picture to yourselves a young man of middle height, but very well proportioned, a bright, expressive face, dark hair, blue eyes, moist lips, and white and even teeth. A certain not unbecoming pallor still overspread his delicately cut features, and there were faint dark circles about his eyes, as if he were recovering from an illness. Add, furthermore, that he had white and shapely hands, of which he was as careful as a pretty woman should be; add that he seemed to be very well informed, and was decidedly clever, and it should not be difficult for you to imagine that my traveling companion was more than worthy of a countess. Indeed, many a girl might have wished for such a husband, for he was a Vicomte with an income of twelve or fifteen thousand livres, "to say nothing of expectations."

About a league out of Pouilly the coach was overturned. My luckless comrade, thinking to save himself, jumped to the edge of a newly-ploughed field, instead of following the fortunes of the vehicle and clinging tightly to the roof, as I did. He either miscalculated in some way, or he slipped; how it happened, I do not know, but the coach fell over upon him, and he was crushed under it.

We carried him into a peasant's cottage, and there, amid the moans wrung from him by horrible sufferings, he contrived to give me a commission—a sacred task, in that it was laid upon me by a dying man's last wish. Poor boy, all through his agony he was torturing himself in his young simplicity of heart with the thought of the painful shock to his mistress when she should suddenly read of his death in a newspaper. He begged me to go myself to break the news to her. He bade me look for a key which he wore on a ribbon about his neck. I found it half buried in the flesh, but the dying boy did not utter a sound as I extricated it as gently as possible from the wound which it had made. He had scarcely given me the necessary directions—I was to go to his home at La Charite-sur-Loire for his mistress' love-letters, which he conjured me to return to her—when he grew speechless in the middle of a sentence; but from his last gesture, I understood that the fatal key would be my passport in his mother's house. It troubled him that he was powerless to utter a single word to thank me, for of my wish to serve him he had no doubt. He looked wistfully at me for a moment, then his eyelids drooped in token of farewell, and his head sank, and he died. His death was the only fatal accident caused by the overturn.

"But it was partly his own fault," the coachman said to me.

At La Charite, I executed the poor fellow's dying wishes. His mother was away from home, which in a manner was fortunate for me. Nevertheless, I had to assuage the grief of an old woman—servant, who staggered back at the tidings of her young master's death, and sank half-dead into a chair when she saw the blood-stained key. But I had another and more dreadful sorrow to think of, the sorrow of a woman who had lost her last love; so I left the old woman to her prosopopeia, and carried off the precious correspondence, carefully sealed by my friend of the day.

The Countess' chateau was some eight leagues beyond Moulins, and then there was some distance to walk across country. So it was not exactly an easy matter to deliver my message. For divers reasons into which I need not enter, I had barely sufficient money to take me to Moulins. However, my youthful enthusiasm determined to hasten thither on foot as fast as possible. Bad news travels swiftly, and I wished to be first at the chateau. I asked for the shortest way, and hurried through the field paths of the Bourbonnais, bearing, as it were, a dead man on my back. The nearer I came to the Chateau de Montpersan, the more aghast I felt at the idea of my strange

The Message

self-imposed pilgrimage. Vast numbers of romantic fancies ran in my head. I imagined all kinds of situations in which I might find this Comtesse de Montpersan, or, to observe the laws of romance, this Juliette, so passionately beloved of my traveling companion. I sketched out ingenious answers to the questions which she might be supposed to put to me. At every turn of a wood, in every beaten pathway, I rehearsed a modern version of the scene in which Sosie describes the battle to his lantern. To my shame be it said, I had thought at first of nothing but the part that I was to play, of my own cleverness, of how I should demean myself; but now that I was in the country, an ominous thought flashed through my soul like a thunderbolt tearing its way through a veil of gray cloud.

What an awful piece of news it was for a woman whose whole thoughts were full of her young lover, who was looking forward hour by hour to a joy which no words can express, a woman who had been at a world of pains to invent plausible pretexts to draw him to her side. Yet, after all, it was a cruel deed of charity to be the messenger of death! So I hurried on, splashing and bemiring myself in the byways of the Bourbonnais.

Before very long I reached a great chestnut avenue with a pile of buildings at the further end—the Chateau of Montpersan stood out against the sky like a mass of brown cloud, with sharp, fantastic outlines. All the doors of the chateau stood open. This in itself disconcerted me, and routed all my plans; but I went in boldly, and in a moment found myself between a couple of dogs, barking as your true country-bred animal can bark. The sound brought out a hurrying servant-maid; who, when informed that I wished to speak to Mme. la Comtesse, waved a hand towards the masses of trees in the English park which wound about the chateau with "Madame is out there——"

"Many thanks," said I ironically. I might have wandered for a couple of hours in the park with her "out there" to guide me.

In the meantime, a pretty little girl, with curling hair, dressed in a white frock, a rose-colored sash, and a broad frill at the throat, had overheard or guessed the question and its answer. She gave me a glance and vanished, calling in shrill, childish tones:

"Mother, here is a gentleman who wishes to speak to you!"

And, along the winding alleys, I followed the skipping and dancing white frill, a sort of will-o'-the-wisp, that showed me the way among the trees.

I must make a full confession. I stopped behind the last shrub in the avenue, pulled up my collar, rubbed my shabby hat and my trousers with the cuffs of my sleeves, dusted my coat with the sleeves themselves, and gave them a final cleansing rub one against the other. I buttoned my coat carefully so as to exhibit the inner, always the least worn, side of the cloth, and finally had turned down the tops of my trousers over my boots, artistically cleaned in the grass. Thanks to this Gascon toilet, I could hope that the lady would not take me for the local rate collector; but now when my thoughts travel back to that episode of my youth, I sometimes laugh at my own expense.

Suddenly, just as I was composing myself, at a turning in the green walk, among a wilderness of flowers lighted up by a hot ray of sunlight, I saw Juliette—Juliette and her husband. The pretty little girl held her mother by the hand, and it was easy to see that the lady had quickened her pace somewhat at the child's ambiguous phrase. Taken aback by the sight of a total stranger, who bowed with a tolerably awkward air, she looked at me with a coolly courteous expression and an adorable pout, in which I, who knew her secret, could read the full extent of her disappointment. I sought, but sought in vain, to remember any of the elegant phrases so laboriously prepared.

This momentary hesitation gave the lady's husband time to come forward. Thoughts by the myriad flitted through my brain. To give myself a countenance, I got out a few sufficiently feeble inquiries, asking whether the persons

The Message

present were really M. le Comte and Mme. la Comtesse de Montpersan. These imbecilities gave me time to form my own conclusions at a glance, and, with a perspicacity rare at that age, to analyze the husband and wife whose solitude was about to be so rudely disturbed.

The husband seemed to be a specimen of a certain type of nobleman, the fairest ornaments of the provinces of our day. He wore big shoes with stout soles to them. I put the shoes first advisedly, for they made an even deeper impression upon me than a seedy black coat, a pair of threadbare trousers, a flabby cravat, or a crumpled shirt collar. There was a touch of the magistrate in the man, a good deal more of the Councillor of the Prefecture, all the self-importance of the mayor of the arrondissement, the local autocrat, and the soured temper of the unsuccessful candidate who has never been returned since the year 1816. As to countenance—a wizened, wrinkled, sunburned face, and long, sleek locks of scanty gray hair; as to character—an incredible mixture of homely sense and sheer silliness; of a rich man's overbearing ways, and a total lack of manners; just the kind of husband who is almost entirely led by his wife, yet imagines himself to be the master; apt to domineer in trifles, and to let more important things slip past unheeded—there you have the man!

But the Countess! Ah, how sharp and startling the contrast between husband and wife! The Countess was a little woman, with a flat, graceful figure and enchanting shape; so fragile, so dainty was she, that you would have feared to break some bone if you so much as touched her. She wore a white muslin dress, a rose-colored sash, and rose-colored ribbons in the pretty cap on her head; her chemisette was moulded so deliciously by her shoulders and the loveliest rounded contours, that the sight of her awakened an irresistible desire of possession in the depths of the heart. Her eyes were bright and dark and expressive, her movements graceful, her foot charming. An experienced man of pleasure would not have given her more than thirty years, her forehead was so girlish. She had all the most transient delicate detail of youth in her face. In character she seemed to me to resemble the Comtesse de Lignolles and the Marquise de B——, two feminine types always fresh in the memory of any young man who has read Louvet's romance.

In a moment I saw how things stood, and took a diplomatic course that would have done credit to an old ambassador. For once, and perhaps for the only time in my life, I used tact, and knew in what the special skill of courtiers and men of the world consists.

I have had so many battles to fight since those heedless days, that they have left me no time to distil all the least actions of daily life, and to do everything so that it falls in with those rules of etiquette and good taste which wither the most generous emotions.

"M. le Comte," I said with an air of mystery, "I should like a few words with you," and I fell back a pace or two.

He followed my example. Juliette left us together, going away unconcernedly, like a wife who knew that she can learn her husband's secrets as soon as she chooses to know them.

I told the Count briefly of the death of my traveling companion. The effect produced by my news convinced me that his affection for his young collaborator was cordial enough, and this emboldened me to make reply as I did.

"My wife will be in despair," cried he; "I shall be obliged to break the news of this unhappy event with great caution."

"Monsieur," said I, "I addressed myself to you in the first instance, as in duty bound. I could not, without first informing you, deliver a message to Mme. la Comtesse, a message intrusted to me by an entire stranger; but this commission is a sort of sacred trust, a secret of which I have no power to dispose. From the high idea of your character which he gave me, I felt sure that you would not oppose me in the fulfilment of a dying request. Mme. la Comtesse will be at liberty to break the silence which is imposed upon me."

The Message

At this eulogy, the Count swung his head very amiably, responded with a tolerably involved compliment, and finally left me a free field. We returned to the house. The bell rang, and I was invited to dinner. As we came up to the house, a grave and silent couple, Juliette stole a glance at us. Not a little surprised to find her husband contriving some frivolous excuse for leaving us together, she stopped short, giving me a glance—such a glance as women only can give you. In that look of hers there was the pardonable curiosity of the mistress of the house confronted with a guest dropped down upon her from the skies and innumerable doubts, certainly warranted by the state of my clothes, by my youth and my expression, all singularly at variance; there was all the disdain of the adored mistress, in whose eyes all men save one are as nothing; there were involuntary tremors and alarms; and, above all, the thought that it was tiresome to have an unexpected guest just now, when, no doubt, she had been scheming to enjoy full solitude for her love. This mute eloquence I understood in her eyes, and all the pity and compassion in me made answer in a sad smile. I thought of her, as I had seen her for one moment, in the pride of her beauty; standing in the sunny afternoon in the narrow alley with the flowers on either hand; and as that fair wonderful picture rose before my eyes, I could not repress a sigh.

"Alas, madame, I have just made a very arduous journey-----, undertaken solely on your account."

"Sir!"

"Oh! it is on behalf of one who calls you Juliette that I am come," I continued. Her face grew white.

"You will not see him to-day."

"Is he ill?" she asked, and her voice sank lower.

"Yes. But for pity's sake, control yourself. . . . He intrusted me with secrets that concern you, and you may be sure that never messenger could be more discreet nor more devoted than I."

"What is the matter with him?"

"How if he loved you no longer?"

"Oh! that is impossible!" she cried, and a faint smile, nothing less than frank, broke over her face. Then all at once a kind of shudder ran through her, and she reddened, and she gave me a wild, swift glance as she asked:

"Is he alive?"

Great God! What a terrible phrase! I was too young to bear that tone in her voice; I made no reply, only looked at the unhappy woman in helpless bewilderment.

"Monsieur, monsieur, give me an answer!" she cried.

"Yes, madame."

"Is it true? Oh! tell me the truth; I can hear the truth. Tell me the truth! Any pain would be less keen than this suspense."

I answered by two tears wrung from me by that strange tone of hers. She leaned against a tree with a faint, sharp cry.

"Madame, here comes your husband!"

The Message

"Have I a husband?" and with those words she fled away out of sight.

"Well," cried the Count, "dinner is growing cold.—Come, monsieur."

Thereupon I followed the master of the house into the dining-room. Dinner was served with all the luxury which we have learned to expect in Paris. There were five covers laid, three for the Count and Countess and their little daughter; my own, which should have been HIS; and another for the canon of Saint-Denis, who said grace, and then asked:

"Why, where can our dear Countess be?"

"Oh! she will be here directly," said the Count. He had hastily helped us to the soup, and was dispatching an ample plateful with portentous speed.

"Oh! nephew," exclaimed the canon, "if your wife were here, you would behave more rationally."

"Papa will make himself ill!" said the child with a mischievous look.

Just after this extraordinary gastronomical episode, as the Count was eagerly helping himself to a slice of venison, a housemaid came in with, "We cannot find madame anywhere, sir!"

I sprang up at the words with a dread in my mind, my fears written so plainly in my face, that the old canon came out after me into the garden. The Count, for the sake of appearances, came as far as the threshold.

"Don't go, don't go!" called he. "Don't trouble yourselves in the least," but he did not offer to accompany us.

We three—the canon, the housemaid, and I—hurried through the garden walks and over the bowling-green in the park, shouting, listening for an answer, growing more uneasy every moment. As we hurried along, I told the story of the fatal accident, and discovered how strongly the maid was attached to her mistress, for she took my secret dread far more seriously than the canon. We went along by the pools of water; all over the park we went; but we neither found the Countess nor any sign that she had passed that way. At last we turned back, and under the walls of some outbuildings I heard a smothered, wailing cry, so stifled that it was scarcely audible. The sound seemed to come from a place that might have been a granary. I went in at all risks, and there we found Juliette. With the instinct of despair, she had buried herself deep in the hay, hiding her face in it to deaden those dreadful cries—pudency even stronger than grief. She was sobbing and crying like a child, but there was a more poignant, more piteous sound in the sobs. There was nothing left in the world for her. The maid pulled the hay from her, her mistress submitting with the supine listlessness of a dying animal. The maid could find nothing to say but "There! madame; there, there——"

"What is the matter with her? What is it, niece?" the old canon kept on exclaiming.

At last, with the girl's help, I carried Juliette to her room, gave orders that she was not to be disturbed, and that every one must be told that the Countess was suffering from a sick headache. Then we came down to the dining-room, the canon and I.

Some little time had passed since we left the dinner-table; I had scarcely given a thought to the Count since we left him under the peristyle; his indifference had surprised me, but my amazement increased when we came back and found him seated philosophically at table. He had eaten pretty nearly all the dinner, to the huge delight of his little daughter; the child was smiling at her father's flagrant infraction of the Countess' rules. The man's odd indifference was explained to me by a mild altercation which at once arose with the canon. The Count was suffering from some serious complaint. I cannot remember now what it was, but his medical advisers had put him

The Message

on a very severe regimen, and the ferocious hunger familiar to convalescents, sheer animal appetite, had overpowered all human sensibilities. In that little space I had seen frank and undisguised human nature under two very different aspects, in such a sort that there was a certain grotesque element in the very midst of a most terrible tragedy.

The evening that followed was dreary. I was tired. The canon racked his brains to discover a reason for his niece's tears. The lady's husband silently digested his dinner; content, apparently, with the Countess' rather vague explanation, sent through the maid, putting forward some feminine ailment as her excuse. We all went early to bed.

As I passed the door of the Countess' room on the way to my night's lodging, I asked the servant timidly for news of her. She heard my voice, and would have me come in, and tried to talk, but in vain—she could not utter a sound. She bent her head, and I withdrew. In spite of the painful agitation, which I had felt to the full as youth can feel, I fell asleep, tired out with my forced march.

It was late in the night when I was awakened by the grating sound of curtain rings drawn sharply over the metal rods. There sat the Countess at the foot of my bed. The light from a lamp set on my table fell full upon her face.

"Is it really true, monsieur, quite true?" she asked. "I do not know how I can live after that awful blow which struck me down a little while since; but just now I feel calm. I want to know everything."

"What calm!" I said to myself as I saw the ghastly pallor of her face contrasting with her brown hair, and heard the guttural tones of her voice. The havoc wrought in her drawn features filled me with dumb amazement.

Those few hours had bleached her; she had lost a woman's last glow of autumn color. Her eyes were red and swollen, nothing of their beauty remained, nothing looked out of them save her bitter and exceeding grief; it was as if a gray cloud covered the place through which the sun had shone.

I gave her the story of the accident in a few words, without laying too much stress on some too harrowing details. I told her about our first day's journey, and how it had been filled with recollections of her and of love. And she listened eagerly, without shedding a tear, leaning her face towards me, as some zealous doctor might lean to watch any change in a patient's face. When she seemed to me to have opened her whole heart to pain, to be deliberately plunging herself into misery with the first delirious frenzy of despair, I caught at my opportunity, and told her of the fears that troubled the poor dying man, told her how and why it was that he had given me this fatal message. Then her tears were dried by the fires that burned in the dark depths within her. She grew even paler. When I drew the letters from beneath my pillow and held them out to her, she took them mechanically; then, trembling from head to foot, she said in a hollow voice:

"And I burned all his letters!—I have nothing of him left!— Nothing! nothing!"

She struck her hand against her forehead.

"Madame——" I began.

She glanced at me in the convulsion of grief.

"I cut this from his head, this lock of his hair."

And I gave her that last imperishable token that had been a very part of him she loved. Ah! if you had felt, as I felt then, her burning tears falling on your hands, you would know what gratitude is, when it follows so closely upon the benefit. Her eyes shone with a feverish glitter, a faint ray of happiness gleamed out of her terrible suffering, as

The Message

she grasped my hands in hers, and said, in a choking voice:

"Ah! you love! May you be happy always. May you never lose her whom you love."

She broke off, and fled away with her treasure.

Next morning, this night–scene among my dreams seemed like a dream; to make sure of the piteous truth, I was obliged to look fruitlessly under my pillow for the packet of letters. There is no need to tell you how the next day went. I spent several hours of it with the Juliette whom my poor comrade had so praised to me. In her lightest words, her gestures, in all that she did and said, I saw proofs of the nobleness of soul, the delicacy of feeling which made her what she was, one of those beloved, loving, and self–sacrificing natures so rarely found upon this earth.

In the evening the Comte de Montpersan came himself as far as Moulins with me. There he spoke with a kind of embarrassment:

"Monsieur, if it is not abusing your good–nature, and acting very inconsiderately towards a stranger to whom we are already under obligations, would you have the goodness, as you are going to Paris, to remit a sum of money to M. de ---- (I forget the name), in the Rue du Sentier; I owe him an amount, and he asked me to send it as soon as possible."

"Willingly," said I. And in the innocence of my heart, I took charge of a rouleau of twenty–five louis d'or, which paid the expenses of my journey back to Paris; and only when, on my arrival, I went to the address indicated to repay the amount to M. de Montpersan's correspondent, did I understand the ingenious delicacy with which Juliette had obliged me. Was not all the genius of a loving woman revealed in such a way of lending, in her reticence with regard to a poverty easily guessed?

And what rapture to have this adventure to tell to a woman who clung to you more closely in dread, saying, "Oh, my dear, not you! YOU must not die!"