

# The Atheist's Mass

by

Honore de Balzac

Translated by Clara Bell

A Penn State Electronic Classics Series Publication

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**This is dedicated to Auguste Borget  
by his friend De Balzac**

BIANCHON, a physician to whom science owes a fine system of theoretical physiology, and who, while still young, made himself a celebrity in the medical school of Paris, that central luminary to which European doctors do homage, practised surgery for a long time before he took up medicine. His earliest studies were guided by one of the greatest of French surgeons, the illustrious Desplein, who flashed across science like a meteor. By the consensus even of his enemies,

he took with him to the tomb an incommunicable method. Like all men of genius, he had no heirs; he carried everything in him, and carried it away with him. The glory of a surgeon is like that of an actor: they live only so long as they are alive, and their talent leaves no trace when they are gone. Actors and surgeons, like great singers too, like the executants who by their performance increase the power of music tenfold, are all the heroes of a moment.

Desplein is a case in proof of this resemblance in the destinies of such transient genius. His name, yesterday so famous, to-day almost forgotten, will survive in his special department without crossing its limits. For must there not be some extraordinary circumstances to exalt the name of a professor from the history of Science to the general history of the human race? Had Desplein that universal command of knowledge which makes a man the living word, the great figure of his age? Desplein had a godlike eye; he saw into the sufferer and his malady by an intuition, natural or acquired, which enabled him to grasp the diagnostics peculiar to the individual, to determine the very time, the hour, the minute when an operation should be performed, making due allow-

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ance for atmospheric conditions and peculiarities of individual temperament. To proceed thus, hand in hand with nature, had he then studied the constant assimilation by living beings, of the elements contained in the atmosphere, or yielded by the earth to man who absorbs them, deriving from them a particular expression of life? Did he work it all out by the power of deduction and analogy, to which we owe the genius of Cuvier? Be this as it may, this man was in all the secrets of the human frame; he knew it in the past and in the future, emphasizing the present.

But did he epitomize all science in his own person as Hippocrates did and Galen and Aristotle? Did he guide a whole school towards new worlds? No. Though it is impossible to deny that this persistent observer of human chemistry possessed that antique science of the Magi, that is to say, knowledge of the elements in fusion, the causes of life, life antecedent to life, and what it must be in its incubation or ever it IS, it must be confessed that, unfortunately, everything in him was purely personal. Isolated during his life by his egoism, that egoism is now suicidal of his glory. On his tomb there is no proclaiming statue to repeat to posterity

the mysteries which genius seeks out at its own cost.

But perhaps Desplein's genius was answerable for his beliefs, and for that reason mortal. To him the terrestrial atmosphere was a generative envelope; he saw the earth as an egg within its shell; and not being able to determine whether the egg or the hen first was, he would not recognize either the cock or the egg. He believed neither in the antecedent animal nor the surviving spirit of man. Desplein had no doubts; he was positive. His bold and unqualified atheism was like that of many scientific men, the best men in the world, but invincible atheists—atheists such as religious people declare to be impossible. This opinion could scarcely exist otherwise in a man who was accustomed from his youth to dissect the creature above all others—before, during, and after life; to hunt through all his organs without ever finding the individual soul, which is indispensable to religious theory. When he detected a cerebral centre, a nervous centre, and a centre for aerating the blood—the first two so perfectly complementary that in the latter years of his life he came to a conviction that the sense of hearing is not absolutely necessary for hearing, nor the sense of sight for seeing, and that the

solar plexus could supply their place without any possibility of doubt—Desplein, thus finding two souls in man, confirmed his atheism by this fact, though it is no evidence against God. This man died, it is said, in final impenitence, as do, unfortunately, many noble geniuses, whom God may forgive.

The life of this man, great as he was, was marred by many meannesses, to use the expression employed by his enemies, who were anxious to diminish his glory, but which it would be more proper to call apparent contradictions. Envious people and fools, having no knowledge of the determinations by which superior spirits are moved, seize at once on superficial inconsistencies, to formulate an accusation and so to pass sentence on them. If, subsequently, the proceedings thus attacked are crowned with success, showing the correlations of the preliminaries and the results, a few of the vanguard of calumnies always survive. In our day, for instance, Napoleon was condemned by our contemporaries when he spread his eagle's wings to alight in England: only 1822 could explain 1804 and the flatboats at Boulogne.

As, in Desplein, his glory and science were invulnerable, his enemies attacked his odd moods and his temper, whereas,

in fact, he was simply characterized by what the English call eccentricity. Sometimes very handsomely dressed, like Crebillon the tragical, he would suddenly affect extreme indifference as to what he wore; he was sometimes seen in a carriage, and sometimes on foot. By turns rough and kind, harsh and covetous on the surface, but capable of offering his whole fortune to his exiled masters—who did him the honor of accepting it for a few days—no man ever gave rise to such contradictory judgements. Although to obtain a black ribbon, which physicians ought not to intrigue for, he was capable of dropping a prayer-book out of his pocket at Court, in his heart he mocked at everything; he had a deep contempt for men, after studying them from above and below, after detecting their genuine expression when performing the most solemn and the meanest acts of their lives.

The qualities of a great man are often federative. If among these colossal spirits one has more talent than wit, his wit is still superior to that of a man of whom it is simply stated that “he is witty.” Genius always presupposes moral insight. This insight may be applied to a special subject; but he who can see a flower must be able to see the sun. The man who

on hearing a diplomate he has saved ask, "How is the Emperor?" could say, "The courtier is alive; the man will follow!"—that man is not merely a surgeon or a physician, he is prodigiously witty also. Hence a patient and diligent student of human nature will admit Desplein's exorbitant pretensions, and believe—as he himself believed—that he might have been no less great as a minister than he was as a surgeon.

Among the riddles which Desplein's life presents to many of his contemporaries, we have chosen one of the most interesting, because the answer is to be found at the end of the narrative, and will avenge him for some foolish charges.

Of all the students in Desplein's hospital, Horace Bianchon was one of those to whom he most warmly attached himself. Before being a house surgeon at the Hotel-Dieu, Horace Bianchon had been a medical student lodging in a squalid boarding house in the Quartier Latin, known as the Maison Vauquer. This poor young man had felt there the gnawing of that burning poverty which is a sort of crucible from which great talents are to emerge as pure and incorruptible as diamonds, which may be subjected to any shock without being crushed. In the fierce fire of their unbridled passions they

acquire the most impeccable honesty, and get into the habit of fighting the battles which await genius with the constant work by which they coerce their cheated appetites.

Horace was an upright young fellow, incapable of tergiversation on a matter of honor, going to the point without waste of words, and as ready to pledge his cloak for a friend as to give him his time and his night hours. Horace, in short, was one of those friends who are never anxious as to what they may get in return for what they give, feeling sure that they will in their turn get more than they give. Most of his friends felt for him that deeply-seated respect which is inspired by unostentatious virtue, and many of them dreaded his censure. But Horace made no pedantic display of his qualities. He was neither a puritan nor a preacher; he could swear with a grace as he gave his advice, and was always ready for a jollification when occasion offered. A jolly companion, not more prudish than a trooper, as frank and outspoken—not as a sailor, for nowadays sailors are wily diplomates—but as an honest man who has nothing in his life to hide, he walked with his head erect, and a mind content. In short, to put the facts into a word, Horace was the Pylades of more

than one Orestes—creditors being regarded as the nearest modern equivalent to the Furies of the ancients.

He carried his poverty with the cheerfulness which is perhaps one of the chief elements of courage, and, like all people who have nothing, he made very few debts. As sober as a camel and active as a stag, he was steadfast in his ideas and his conduct.

The happy phase of Bianchon's life began on the day when the famous surgeon had proof of the qualities and the defects which, these no less than those, make Doctor Horace Bianchon doubly dear to his friends. When a leading clinical practitioner takes a young man to his bosom, that young man has, as they say, his foot in the stirrup. Desplein did not fail to take Bianchon as his assistant to wealthy houses, where some complimentary fee almost always found its way into the student's pocket, and where the mysteries of Paris life were insensibly revealed to the young provincial; he kept him at his side when a consultation was to be held, and gave him occupation; sometimes he would send him to a watering-place with a rich patient; in fact, he was making a practice for him. The consequence was that in the course of time the

Tyrant of surgery had a devoted ally. These two men—one at the summit of honor and of his science, enjoying an immense fortune and an immense reputation; the other a humble Omega, having neither fortune nor fame—became intimate friends.

The great Desplein told his house surgeon everything; the disciple knew whether such or such a woman had sat on a chair near the master, or on the famous couch in Desplein's surgery, on which he slept. Bianchon knew the mysteries of that temperament, a compound of the lion and the bull, which at last expanded and enlarged beyond measure the great man's torso, and caused his death by degeneration of the heart. He studied the eccentricities of that busy life, the schemes of that sordid avarice, the hopes of the politician who lurked behind the man of science; he was able to foresee the mortifications that awaited the only sentiment that lay hid in a heart that was steeled, but not of steel.

One day Bianchon spoke to Desplein of a poor water-carrier of the Saint-Jacques district, who had a horrible disease caused by fatigue and want; this wretched Auvergnat had had nothing but potatoes to eat during the dreadful winter

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of 1821. Desplein left all his visits, and at the risk of killing his horse, he rushed off, followed by Bianchon, to the poor man's dwelling, and saw, himself, to his being removed to a sick house, founded by the famous Dubois in the Faubourg Saint-Denis. Then he went to attend the man, and when he had cured him he gave him the necessary sum to buy a horse and a water-barrel. This Auvergnat distinguished himself by an amusing action. One of his friends fell ill, and he took him at once to Desplein, saying to his benefactor, "I could not have borne to let him go to any one else."

Rough customer as he was, Desplein grasped the water-carrier's hand, and said, "Bring them all to me."

He got the native of Cantal into the Hotel-Dieu, where he took the greatest care of him. Bianchon had already observed in his chief a predilection for Auvergnats, and especially for water carriers; but as Desplein took a sort of pride in his cures at the Hotel-Dieu, the pupil saw nothing very strange in that.

One day, as he crossed the Place Saint-Sulpice, Bianchon caught sight of his master going into the church at about nine in the morning. Desplein, who at that time never went

a step without his cab, was on foot, and slipped in by the door in the Rue du Petit-Lion, as if he were stealing into some house of ill fame. The house surgeon, naturally possessed by curiosity, knowing his master's opinions, and being himself a rabid follower of Cabanis (Cabaniste en dyable, with the y, which in Rabelais seems to convey an intensity of devilry)—Bianchon stole into the church, and was not a little astonished to see the great Desplein, the atheist, who had no mercy on the angels—who give no work to the lancet, and cannot suffer from fistula or gastritis—in short, this audacious scoffer kneeling humbly, and where? In the Lady Chapel, where he remained through the mass, giving alms for the expenses of the service, alms for the poor, and looking as serious as though he were superintending an operation.

"He has certainly not come here to clear up the question of the Virgin's delivery," said Bianchon to himself, astonished beyond measure. "If I had caught him holding one of the ropes of the canopy on Corpus Christi day, it would be a thing to laugh at; but at this hour, alone, with no one to see—it is surely a thing to marvel at!"

Bianchon did not wish to seem as though he were spying the head surgeon of the Hotel-Dieu; he went away. As it happened, Desplein asked him to dine with him that day, not at his own house, but at a restaurant. At dessert Bianchon skilfully contrived to talk of the mass, speaking of it as mummery and a farce.

“A farce,” said Desplein, “which has cost Christendom more blood than all Napoleon’s battles and all Broussais’ leeches. The mass is a papal invention, not older than the sixth century, and based on the Hoc est corpus. What floods of blood were shed to establish the Fete-Dieu, the Festival of Corpus Christi—the institution by which Rome established her triumph in the question of the Real Presence, a schism which rent the Church during three centuries! The wars of the Count of Toulouse against the Albigenses were the tail end of that dispute. The Vaudois and the Albigenses refused to recognize this innovation.”

In short, Desplein was delighted to disport himself in his most atheistical vein; a flow of Voltairean satire, or, to be accurate, a vile imitation of the Citateur.

“Hallo! where is my worshiper of this morning?” said

Bianchon to himself.

He said nothing; he began to doubt whether he had really seen his chief at Saint-Sulpice. Desplein would not have troubled himself to tell Bianchon a lie, they knew each other too well; they had already exchanged thoughts on quite equally serious subjects, and discussed systems de natura rerum, probing or dissecting them with the knife and scalpel of incredulity.

Three months went by. Bianchon did not attempt to follow the matter up, though it remained stamped on his memory. One day that year, one of the physicians of the Hotel-Dieu took Desplein by the arm, as if to question him, in Bianchon’s presence.

“What were you doing at Saint-Sulpice, my dear master?” said he.

“I went to see a priest who has a diseased knee-bone, and to whom the Duchesse d’Angouleme did me the honor to recommend me,” said Desplein.

The questioner took this defeat for an answer; not so Bianchon.

“Oh, he goes to see damaged knees in church!—He went

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to mass," said the young man to himself.

Bianchon resolved to watch Desplein. He remembered the day and hour when he had detected him going into Saint-Sulpice, and resolved to be there again next year on the same day and at the same hour, to see if he should find him there again. In that case the periodicity of his devotion would justify a scientific investigation; for in such a man there ought to be no direct antagonism of thought and action.

Next year, on the said day and hour, Bianchon, who had already ceased to be Desplein's house surgeon, saw the great man's cab standing at the corner of the Rue de Tournon and the Rue du Petit-Lion, whence his friend jesuitically crept along by the wall of Saint-Sulpice, and once more attended mass in front of the Virgin's altar. It was Desplein, sure enough! The master-surgeon, the atheist at heart, the worshiper by chance. The mystery was greater than ever; the regularity of the phenomenon complicated it. When Desplein had left, Bianchon went to the sacristan, who took charge of the chapel, and asked him whether the gentleman were a constant worshiper.

"For twenty years that I have been here," replied the man,

"M. Desplein has come four times a year to attend this mass. He founded it."

"A mass founded by him!" said Bianchon, as he went away. "This is as great a mystery as the Immaculate Conception—an article which alone is enough to make a physician an unbeliever."

Some time elapsed before Doctor Bianchon, though so much his friend, found an opportunity of speaking to Desplein of this incident of his life. Though they met in consultation, or in society, it was difficult to find an hour of confidential solitude when, sitting with their feet on the fire-dogs and their head resting on the back of an armchair, two men tell each other their secrets. At last, seven years later, after the Revolution of 1830, when the mob invaded the Archbishop's residence, when Republican agitators spurred them on to destroy the gilt crosses which flashed like streaks of lightning in the immensity of the ocean of houses; when Incredulity flaunted itself in the streets, side by side with Rebellion, Bianchon once more detected Desplein going into Saint-Sulpice. The doctor followed him, and knelt down by him without the slightest notice or demonstration of sur-

prise from his friend. They both attended this mass of his founding.

“Will you tell me, my dear fellow,” said Bianchon, as they left the church, “the reason for your fit of monkishness? I have caught you three times going to mass—— You! You must account to me for this mystery, explain such a flagrant disagreement between your opinions and your conduct. You do not believe in God, and yet you attend mass? My dear master, you are bound to give me an answer.”

“I am like a great many devout people, men who on the surface are deeply religious, but quite as much atheists as you or I can be.”

And he poured out a torrent of epigrams on certain political personages, of whom the best known gives us, in this century, a new edition of Moliere’s *Tartufe*.

“All that has nothing to do with my question,” retorted Bianchon. “I want to know the reason for what you have just been doing, and why you founded this mass.”

“Faith! my dear boy,” said Desplein, “I am on the verge of the tomb; I may safely tell you about the beginning of my life.”

At this moment Bianchon and the great man were in the Rue des Quatre-Vents, one of the worst streets in Paris. Desplein pointed to the sixth floor of one of the houses looking like obelisks, of which the narrow door opens into a passage with a winding staircase at the end, with windows appropriately termed “borrowed lights”—or, in French, *jours de souffrance*. It was a greenish structure; the ground floor occupied by a furniture-dealer, while each floor seemed to shelter a different and independent form of misery. Throwing up his arm with a vehement gesture, Desplein exclaimed:

“I lived up there for two years.”

“I know; Arthez lived there; I went up there almost every day during my first youth; we used to call it then the pickle-jar of great men! What then?”

“The mass I have just attended is connected with some events which took place at the time when I lived in the garret where you say Arthez lived; the one with the window where the clothes line is hanging with linen over a pot of flowers. My early life was so hard, my dear Bianchon, that I may dispute the palm of Paris suffering with any man living. I have endured everything: hunger and thirst, want of money,

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want of clothes, of shoes, of linen, every cruelty that penury can inflict. I have blown on my frozen fingers in that *pickle-jar of great men*, which I should like to see again, now, with you. I worked through a whole winter, seeing my head steam, and perceiving the atmosphere of my own moisture as we see that of horses on a frosty day. I do not know where a man finds the fulcrum that enables him to hold out against such a life.

“I was alone, with no one to help me, no money to buy books or to pay the expenses of my medical training; I had not a friend; my irascible, touchy, restless temper was against me. No one understood that this irritability was the distress and toil of a man who, at the bottom of the social scale, is struggling to reach the surface. Still, I had, as I may say to you, before whom I need wear no draperies, I had that ground-bed of good feeling and keen sensitiveness which must always be the birthright of any man who is strong enough to climb to any height whatever, after having long trampled in the bogs of poverty. I could obtain nothing from my family, nor from my home, beyond my inadequate allowance. In short, at that time, I breakfasted off a roll which

the baker in the Rue du Petit-Lion sold me cheap because it was left from yesterday or the day before, and I crumbled it into milk; thus my morning meal cost me but two sous. I dined only every other day in a boarding-house where the meal cost me sixteen sous. You know as well as I what care I must have taken of my clothes and shoes. I hardly know whether in later life we feel grief so deep when a colleague plays us false as we have known, you and I, on detecting the mocking smile of a gaping seam in a shoe, or hearing the armhole of a coat split, I drank nothing but water; I regarded a cafe with distant respect. Zoppi's seemed to me a promised land where none but the Lucullus of the pays Latin had a right of entry. 'Shall I ever take a cup of coffee there with milk in it?' said I to myself, 'or play a game of dominoes?'

“I threw into my work the fury I felt at my misery. I tried to master positive knowledge so as to acquire the greatest personal value, and merit the position I should hold as soon as I could escape from nothingness. I consumed more oil than bread; the light I burned during these endless nights cost me more than food. It was a long duel, obstinate, with no sort of consolation. I found no sympathy anywhere. To

have friends, must we not form connections with young men, have a few sous so as to be able to go tippling with them, and meet them where students congregate? And I had nothing! And no one in Paris can understand that nothing means *nothing*. When I even thought of revealing my beggary, I had that nervous contraction of the throat which makes a sick man believe that a ball rises up from the oesophagus into the larynx.

“In later life I have met people born to wealth who, never having wanted for anything, had never even heard this problem in the rule of three: A young man is to crime as a five-franc piece is to X.—These gilded idiots say to me, ‘Why did you get into debt? Why did you involve yourself in such onerous obligations?’ They remind me of the princess who, on hearing that the people lacked bread, said, ‘Why do not they buy cakes?’ I should like to see one of these rich men, who complain that I charge too much for an operation,—yes, I should like to see him alone in Paris without a sou, without a friend, without credit, and forced to work with his five fingers to live at all! What would he do? Where would he go to satisfy his hunger?

“Bianchon, if you have sometimes seen me hard and bitter, it was because I was adding my early sufferings on to the insensibility, the selfishness of which I have seen thousands of instances in the highest circles; or, perhaps, I was thinking of the obstacles which hatred, envy, jealousy, and calumny raised up between me and success. In Paris, when certain people see you ready to set your foot in the stirrup, some pull your coat-tails, others loosen the buckle of the strap that you may fall and crack your skull; one wrenches off your horse’s shoes, another steals your whip, and the least treacherous of them all is the man whom you see coming to fire his pistol at you point blank.

“You yourself, my dear boy, are clever enough to make acquaintance before long with the odious and incessant warfare waged by mediocrity against the superior man. If you should drop five-and-twenty louis one day, you will be accused of gambling on the next, and your best friends will report that you have lost twenty-five thousand. If you have a headache, you will be considered mad. If you are a little hasty, no one can live with you. If, to make a stand against this armament of pigmies, you collect your best powers, your

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best friends will cry out that you want to have everything, that you aim at domineering, at tyranny. In short, your good points will become your faults, your faults will be vices, and your virtues crime.

“If you save a man, you will be said to have killed him; if he reappears on the scene, it will be positive that you have secured the present at the cost of the future. If he is not dead, he will die. Stumble, and you fall! Invent anything of any kind and claim your rights, you will be crotchety, cunning, ill-disposed to rising younger men.

“So, you see, my dear fellow, if I do not believe in God, I believe still less in man. But do not you know in me another Desplein, altogether different from the Desplein whom every one abuses?—However, we will not stir that mud-heap.

“Well, I was living in that house, I was working hard to pass my first examination, and I had no money at all. You know. I had come to one of those moments of extremity when a man says, ‘I will enlist.’ I had one hope. I expected from my home a box full of linen, a present from one of those old aunts who, knowing nothing of Paris, think of your shirts, while they imagine that their nephew with thirty francs

a month is eating ortolans. The box arrived while I was at the schools; it had cost forty francs for carriage. The porter, a German shoemaker living in a loft, had paid the money and kept the box. I walked up and down the Rue des Fosses-Saint-Germain-des-Pres and the Rue de l’Ecole de Medecine without hitting on any scheme which would release my trunk without the payment of the forty francs, which of course I could pay as soon as I should have sold the linen. My stupidity proved to me that surgery was my only vocation. My good fellow, refined souls, whose powers move in a lofty atmosphere, have none of that spirit of intrigue that is fertile in resource and device; their good genius is chance; they do not invent, things come to them.

“At night I went home, at the very moment when my fellow lodger also came in—a water-carrier named Bourgeat, a native of Saint-Flour. We knew each other as two lodgers do who have rooms off the same landing, and who hear each other sleeping, coughing, dressing, and so at last become used to one another. My neighbor informed me that the landlord, to whom I owed three quarters’ rent, had turned me out; I must clear out next morning. He himself was also

turned out on account of his occupation. I spent the most miserable night of my life. Where was I to get a messenger who could carry my few chattels and my books? How could I pay him and the porter? Where was I to go? I repeated these unanswerable questions again and again, in tears, as madmen repeat their tunes. I fell asleep; poverty has for its friends heavenly slumbers full of beautiful dreams.

“Next morning, just as I was swallowing my little bowl of bread soaked in milk, Bourgeat came in and said to me in his vile Auvergne accent:

“Mouchieur l’Etudiant, I am a poor man, a foundling from the hospital at Saint-Flour, without either father or mother, and not rich enough to marry. You are not fertile in relations either, nor well supplied with the ready? Listen, I have a hand-cart downstairs which I have hired for two sous an hour; it will hold all our goods; if you like, we will try to find lodgings together, since we are both turned out of this. It is not the earthly paradise, when all is said and done.’

“I know that, my good Bourgeat,’ said I. ‘But I am in a great fix. I have a trunk downstairs with a hundred francs’ worth of linen in it, out of which I could pay the landlord

and all I owe to the porter, and I have not a hundred sous.’

“‘Pooh! I have a few dibs,’ replied Bourgeat joyfully, and he pulled out a greasy old leather purse. ‘Keep your linen.’

“Bourgeat paid up my arrears and his own, and settled with the porter. Then he put our furniture and my box of linen in his cart, and pulled it along the street, stopping in front of every house where there was a notice board. I went up to see whether the rooms to let would suit us. At midday we were still wandering about the neighborhood without having found anything. The price was the great difficulty. Bourgeat proposed that we should eat at a wine shop, leaving the cart at the door. Towards evening I discovered, in the Cour de Rohan, Passage du Commerce, at the very top of a house next the roof, two rooms with a staircase between them. Each of us was to pay sixty francs a year. So there we were housed, my humble friend and I. We dined together. Bourgeat, who earned about fifty sous a day, had saved a hundred crowns or so; he would soon be able to gratify his ambition by buying a barrel and a horse. On learning of my situation—for he extracted my secrets with a quiet craftiness and good nature, of which the remembrance touches my

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heart to this day, he gave up for a time the ambition of his whole life; for twenty-two years he had been carrying water in the street, and he now devoted his hundred crowns to my future prospects.”

Desplein at these words clutched Bianchon's arm tightly. “He gave me the money for my examination fees! That man, my friend, understood that I had a mission, that the needs of my intellect were greater than his. He looked after me, he called me his boy, he lent me money to buy books, he would come in softly sometimes to watch me at work, and took a mother's care in seeing that I had wholesome and abundant food, instead of the bad and insufficient nourishment I had been condemned to. Bourgeat, a man of about forty, had a homely, mediaeval type of face, a prominent forehead, a head that a painter might have chosen as a model for that of Lycurgus. The poor man's heart was big with affections seeking an object; he had never been loved but by a poodle that had died some time since, of which he would talk to me, asking whether I thought the Church would allow masses to be said for the repose of its soul. His dog, said he, had been a good Christian, who for twelve years had accompanied

him to church, never barking, listening to the organ without opening his mouth, and crouching beside him in a way that made it seem as though he were praying too.

“This man centered all his affections in me; he looked upon me as a forlorn and suffering creature, and he became, to me, the most thoughtful mother, the most considerate benefactor, the ideal of the virtue which rejoices in its own work. When I met him in the street, he would throw me a glance of intelligence full of unutterable dignity; he would affect to walk as though he carried no weight, and seemed happy in seeing me in good health and well dressed. It was, in fact, the devoted affection of the lower classes, the love of a girl of the people transferred to a loftier level. Bourgeat did all my errands, woke me at night at any fixed hour, trimmed my lamp, cleaned our landing; as good as a servant as he was as a father, and as clean as an English girl. He did all the housework. Like Philopoemen, he sawed our wood, and gave to all he did the grace of simplicity while preserving his dignity, for he seemed to understand that the end ennobles every act.

“When I left this good fellow, to be house surgeon at the Hotel-Dieu, I felt an indescribable, dull pain, knowing that

he could no longer live with me; but he comforted himself with the prospect of saving up money enough for me to take my degree, and he made me promise to go to see him whenever I had a day out: Bourgeat was proud of me. He loved me for my own sake, and for his own. If you look up my thesis, you will see that I dedicated it to him.

“During the last year of my residence as house surgeon I earned enough to repay all I owed to this worthy Auvergnat by buying him a barrel and a horse. He was furious with rage at learning that I had been depriving myself of spending my money, and yet he was delighted to see his wishes fulfilled; he laughed and scolded, he looked at his barrel, at his horse, and wiped away a tear, as he said, ‘It is too bad. What a splendid barrel! You really ought not. Why, that horse is as strong as an Auvergnat!’

“I never saw a more touching scene. Bourgeat insisted on buying for me the case of instruments mounted in silver which you have seen in my room, and which is to me the most precious thing there. Though enchanted with my first success, never did the least sign, the least word, escape him which might imply, ‘This man owes all to me!’ And yet, but

for him, I should have died of want; he had eaten bread rubbed with garlic that I might have coffee to enable me to sit up at night.

“He fell ill. As you may suppose, I passed my nights by his bedside, and the first time I pulled him through; but two years after he had a relapse; in spite of the utmost care, in spite of the greatest exertions of science, he succumbed. No king was ever nursed as he was. Yes, Bianchon, to snatch that man from death I tried unheard-of things. I wanted him to live long enough to show him his work accomplished, to realize all his hopes, to give expression to the only need for gratitude that ever filled my heart, to quench a fire that burns in me to this day.

“Bourgeat, my second father, died in my arms,” Desplein went on, after a pause, visibly moved. “He left me everything he possessed by a will he had had made by a public scrivener, dating from the year when we had gone to live in the Cour de Rohan.

“This man’s faith was perfect; he loved the Holy Virgin as he might have loved his wife. He was an ardent Catholic, but never said a word to me about my want of religion. When

## The Atheist's Mass

he was dying he entreated me to spare no expense that he might have every possible benefit of clergy. I had a mass said for him every day. Often, in the night, he would tell me of his fears as to his future fate; he feared his life had not been saintly enough. Poor man! he was at work from morning till night. For whom, then, is Paradise—if there be a Paradise? He received the last sacrament like the saint that he was, and his death was worthy of his life.

“I alone followed him to the grave. When I had laid my only benefactor to rest, I looked about to see how I could pay my debt to him; I found he had neither family nor friends, neither wife nor child. But he believed. He had a religious conviction; had I any right to dispute it? He had spoken to me timidly of masses said for the repose of the dead; he would not impress it on me as a duty, thinking that it would be a form of repayment for his services. As soon as I had money enough I paid to Saint-Sulpice the requisite sum for four masses every year. As the only thing I can do for Bourgeat is thus to satisfy his pious wishes, on the days when that mass is said, at the beginning of each season of the year, I go for his sake and say the required prayers; and I say with the good

faith of a sceptic—’Great God, if there is a sphere which Thou hast appointed after death for those who have been perfect, remember good Bourgeat; and if he should have anything to suffer, let me suffer it for him, that he may enter all the sooner into what is called Paradise.’

“That, my dear fellow, is as much as a man who holds my opinions can allow himself. But God must be a good fellow; He cannot owe me any grudge. I swear to you, I would give my whole fortune if faith such as Bourgeat’s could enter my brain.”

BIANCHON, who was with Desplein all through his last illness, dares not affirm to this day that the great surgeon died an atheist. Will not those who believe like to fancy that the humble Auvergnat came to open the gate of Heaven to his friend, as he did that of the earthly temple on whose pediment we read the words—”A grateful country to its great men.”

*Paris, January 1836.*

*Addendum*

The following personages appear in other stories of the Human Comedy.

Bianchon, Horace

Father Goriot

Cesar Birotteau

The Commission in Lunacy

Lost Illusions

A Distinguished Provincial at Paris

A Bachelor's Establishment

The Secrets of a Princess

The Government Clerks

Pierrette

A Study of Woman

Scenes from a Courtesan's Life

Honorine

The Seamy Side of History

The Magic Skin

A Second Home

A Prince of Bohemia

Letters of Two Brides

The Muse of the Department

The Imaginary Mistress

The Middle Classes

Cousin Betty

The Country Parson

In addition, M. Bianchon narrated the following:

Another Study of Woman

La Grande Breteche

Desplein

Cousin Pons

Lost Illusions

The Thirteen

The Government Clerks

Pierrette

A Bachelor's Establishment

The Seamy Side of History

Modeste Mignon

Scenes from a Courtesan's Life

Honorine

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