AN UNKNOWN STORY BY BALZAC

BY ALBERT SCHINZ

HERE has come to light a novel by Balzac the existence of which had remained unknown to the world for two-thirds of a century. This novel, *L'Amour Masqué*, or as the author at first called it, *Imprudence et Bonheur*, was written for the famous Duchesse de Dino. Balzac had been her guest repeatedly; he had recognised in her one of those rare women of former times, who by their intelligent and, as if it were, instinctive appreciation of genius can compensate for a great "incompris" like Balzac, the lack of recognition on the part of his contemporaries; one of those women near whom, thanks to tactful treatment, a man will in hours of depression regain confidence in himself and courage to go on. Although strong physically and powerful morally, Balzac was as tenderhearted as a girl, and as sensitive as a child; those delicate and angelic women that he liked to place in some of his most brutally realistic stories ought, of course, to have opened the eyes of people. Very few understood; but among them that woman in whose honour he wrote, as a token of his gratitude, this little novel. The manuscript was luxuriously bound by the artist Lesort, and occupied a place of honour in the collection of the Dino family. The present Duc de Dino presented it as a gift to Lucien Aubonel, the man of letters, who agreed that the editors of the collection *In Extenso* (Guillequin & Cie) should print it.

L'Amour Masqué has indeed the two chief characteristics of Balzac fiction: a very romanesque adventure, treated in a very philosophical spirit. Here lies the difference between all the famous novelists of the Romantic period who were so successful—the "best sellers" as we would say now—and Balzac, who was very much less so: Dumas' romanesque, e. g. is entertaining only; Balzac's forces one to think besides; Dumas' romanesque is its own end, Balzac's is only a means for some higher purpose.

It is on a Lundi gras, in Paris, at the Bal de l'Opéra. Léon de Préval, an officer, meets a bewitching masked woman. She is evidently a lady of good breeding, but her actions are disconcerting. She leaves the man desperately in love with her, only promising that he will see her in three weeks again. He tries in vain to trace her. She then persuades him to meet her at her own house, but on the condition that he will allow every precaution to be taken so that he will never know where he went. He accepts, prompted not so much by some romanesque turn of mind as by sincere love, and because she has inspired him with perfect confidence. The day after the mysterious *rendezvous* an explanation comes in the form of a letter. Léon learns that she is the daughter of a very rich planter in South America, has been married to a brute, who, fortunately for her, dies when she is twenty-five. She swears never to accept the law of a man again, and sails for Europe with friends. Still she is unhappy; her life is empty, she wants to devote her affection on some one; she wants to become a mother. Léon, unable to forget, is ordered with his regiment to some other town, and later to war. She herself has left Paris for Touraine. One day Léon receives a secret message that he is the father of a little girl. Two years later, on a visit in Paris, Elinor (it is the name of the unknown woman) accidentally hears that Léon is suffering terribly, and begins vaguely to realise that she has overstepped her rights . . . suffice it to say here that lucky occurrences bring one day the officer dangerously wounded to Elinor's country home; she saves his life, loves him. He, having seen her only masked, does not recognise her; and as he cannot resist her charm, while at the same time he feels unable to forget the masked woman, Elinor finds herself in the romantic situation of being her own

rival. She decides to reveal the truth to him in a romantic fashion again, namely in inducing some friend to take him to the Bal de l'Opéra, where she meets him masked as he had seen her three years before. Things do not go as easily as she had at first thought; but all ends well.

Typically Balzacian as one sees. As romanesque an adventure as one may wish; but that is by no means the end of it. Elinor is not a capricious woman. As a matter of fact, it is her very earnestness that leads her into that imprudent adventure. It was a very human feeling of revolt that made her detest matrimony, and it was again a very deep natural feeling that caused her to desire to own a child. "Do not believe me to pose for an *esprit fort*," she writes Léon, "and that I consider laws useful to society to be mere prejudices. No; I respect them, and if in this circumstance I have violated them, it was only for once, under special circumstances, allowing me to save appearances and my reputation."

At the same time, while Balzac will only have a superior character in his story, namely, one whose motives of action are sincere and worth looking into, he does not fail to be a moralist of the solid conservative type. Elinor has thought over her case, but not enough; she speaks of her case as of an exception; but there are no exceptions, answers Balzac. There is a natural order of society which is a divine order; and moreover, in spite of all appearances, everything is so arranged by God that it will turn out for the ultimate happiness of all concerned. "I am convinced of it now," admits Elinor at the end, when she sees that her dispositions would have wronged everybody, including herself, had they not been interfered with—"it is only at the expense of her own happiness that a woman can try to throw away the severe fetters which were imposed upon her sex."

Neither did Balzac ignore the psychological elements of the case: The woman comes to realise her wrong not directly by reasoning better than she had done at first; she was prompted to it by the instinctive pity of a woman for the suffering of a man. In other words, she does not finally love Léon because she understands, but she understands because first, divine nature has inspired her with compassion and love.

Balzac has been the only great writer of his time who understood thoroughly the social dangers of Romanticism; when everybody around him was imprudently preaching individualism. Balzac said: Take care; our social laws have deeper roots than any philosophy of an individual, no matter how great he is. And this is why his contemporaries, who all went to Musset or Vigny, refused to listen to him; at the same time, this is why he did not suffer wreck with the other writers of his generation, but on the contrary his fame grew with the fall of Romanticism; and finally this is why he is getting more popular every day. We are still discussing the problems brought about by the French Revolution and Romanticism; the evils proved to be much greater than was anticipated, and the good perhaps not as great. Balzac preached reform instead of revolution; that is all.