

# BALZAC'S LOVE AFFAIR<sup>1</sup>

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THE failure of the Polish insurrection of 1830, and the subsequent tide of Polish emigration into France, naturally reawakened interest in the unfortunate country with which France had long had close diplomatic relations. To the Polish refugees, French culture and civilization were already familiar, since in opening her doors to such, France was merely returning the hospitality extended, years before, to the *émigrés* of 1789. It was largely due to the latter, many of whom had been tutors and governesses in Polish families, that French influence had penetrated to remote corners of Poland. The works of French eighteenth-century writers, and later, those of Chateaubriand, Lamartine and their contemporaries, had wiled away long evenings in many an isolated chateau on the banks of the Dnieper or the Vistula. Thus it came about that, one day in the year 1832, to the author of *Les Chouans*, then enjoying his first triumphs, there came, from the midst of the Ukranian steppes, the first mysterious message from his *Etrangère*.

Madame Hanska has been criticized with more severity than understanding.<sup>2</sup> Seen in the mirror of Balzac's letters to her, letters that contain many a soft reproach, she has doubtless appeared in an unsympathetic light to many students of Balzac, who have similarly been misled by the fact that, once free from encumbrances, this lady of high degree forced her unhappy lover to remain lonely and distraught until such time as suited her convenience to marry him, which was too late to make adequate amends. It has been hinted that she was no more than a cold-hearted blue-stocking, hindering Balzac in his work, thwarting his desires, and even humiliating, in various petty ways, the adoring genius whose greatness she never appreciated. Madame de Korwin-Piotrowska, a fellow-countrywoman of Madame Hanska, collaborates with Monsieur Marcel Bouteron, the eminent *Balzacien*<sup>3</sup> in reestablishing the fair fame of a much misunderstood person who, throughout years of forced separation, and at great personal sacrifice, was nevertheless Balzac's helpmeet, consolation and joy.

1. Sophie de Korwin-Piotrowska: *Balzac et le monde slave, these pour le Doctorat es Lettres*, Paris, Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion. 1933.

2. Cf. A. Bellesort: *Balzac et son oeuvre*, Paris, 1925; Henri Bordeaux: *Vies intimes, Balzac et Madame Hanska*, Paris, 1928; J. H. Floyd: *Les Femmes dans la vie de Balzac*, Paris, 1926, etc., etc.

3. Marcel Bouteron: *Apologie pour Madame Hanska*. (Revue des Deux Mondes, 15 decembre, 1925), etc.

Eveline Rzewuska, high-spirited, well-educated, dreamy and romantic, was married, when very young, and in accordance with her parents' wishes, to Wenceslas Hanski, a plain, kindly and quite uninteresting Polish gentleman, of immense property and wealth, many years her senior. The monotonous existence as *châtelaine* of a manor-house on the outskirts of Wierzchownia, near Kiev, drove her inevitably to seek distraction in books. If *La Peau de chagrin* and *Philosophie du mariage* created a sensation in Paris, what enchantment must they have brought to the lonely girl in pressing need of an object upon which to pour out her pent-up enthusiasm! Balzac received Eveline's first letter on the twenty-eighth of February, 1832, and touched by its note of sincerity, in spite of the grandiloquent language, answered it at length. Their correspondence continued and became voluminous, and when, in 1833, the two met at Neuchâtel, so overwhelmed by Balzac's magnetic charm was the "calculating" Eve that only the alarmed novelist's prayers for prudence prevented her from flinging wealth, husband and reputation to the winds, and following her lover.

Their real liaison did not begin until a year later, in Geneva, and was continued in Vienna, in 1835. But in the meantime, poor Eve had had to face the bitter fact that her great man had great faults. Balzac was vain, self-indulgent, unfaithful and even vulgar, one moment boasting of his conquests like a pascha, the next denying infidelity in a series of clumsy lies. His affection for Eveline remained unbroken; but by 1836, the tone of the letters that still came from Wierzchownia warned him that his influence over her was waning. The education of her little daughter claimed the greater part of her time and thoughts; what remained was devoted to pious contemplation. The disillusioned Eve, having sought and found consolation in the Catholic faith, bade fair, at that time, to become a religious mystic. Their correspondence lagged, as personal preoccupations absorbed each, until in 1841 Balzac learned that the woman whom, for all his inconstancy, he still greatly admired, was a widow, and a wealthy one. *On aime comme on peut*. One must remember Balzac's early education, his natural ambitions, his bitter struggles against poverty and debt. If there was dross in the gold of his love for Eveline Hanska, there was also much that was pure and shining. Like a wise woman, she took what was good and ignored the rest, and was as happy as might be in the circumstances.

For Madame Hanska a second marriage was by no means as simple a matter as Balzac imagined. By her marriage-contract she was entitled to the usufruct of the late Monsieur Hanski's

fortune and estates. But opposition on the part of a brother-in-law threatened not only to deprive her and her daughter Anna of these revenues, but placed both fortune and estates in danger of confiscation by the Russian Government, in the event of a lawsuit. Alone, and practically defenceless, Madame Hanska took the matter in hand with admirable courage and sagacity, and eventually had the satisfaction of seeing the family fortune safeguarded, and her daughter well married. All this, however, took time, and meanwhile, in Paris, Balzac languished and fumed. It was only seventeen years after their first meeting that the pair attained to the happiness that was so long sought, and was to be so short-lived. Their marriage took place in March, 1850; in August of the same year Balzac died.

It was inevitable that a liaison of such importance and of such long duration should leave its mark on Balzac's work. The *Comédie Humaine*, from *Séraphita* to *Les Paysans*, reflects the personality, milieu and experience of the Polish Egeria. Madame Piotrowska's examination of this influence is most detailed and careful. In *Séraphita* and *Eugénie Grandet* she finds the expression of Balzac's love for Eve Hanska at its tenderest and most reverent moment, when, at Neuchâtel, she first appeared to him as an angel of purity and goodness, inspiring him to portray womanhood and womanly affection in their loveliest and most generous guise. Again, in *Le Lys dans la Vallée*, there is much of Madame Hanska in the delightful portrait of Henriette, as there is in gentle Adeline Hulot, envied and disliked by her abominable cousin Bette. Modeste Mignon, writing to her dreadful Canalis, (Liszt, of whom Balzac was furiously, though needlessly jealous), is none other than Eveline, with perhaps a touch of Bettina von Arnim. *Une Fille d'Eve* shows Balzac's reaction against Madame Hanska's rather dangerous tendency toward religious mysticism, and by way of warning, he points to the young Angélique de Vandenesse, the daughter of a *dévoté*, bored and lonely, and, like Madame Hanska in her youth, conceiving a passion for, not a genius, but a mediocre poseur whom the deluded girl mistakes for another Balzac.

Members of Madame Hanska's entourage appear every here and there throughout the *Comédie Humaine*. Anna Hanska, Eveline's daughter, is the prototype of charming and pathetic little Pierrette, while Cousine Bette is vouched for by Balzac himself as being a composite of the three persons he most detested,—Madame Valmore, Rosalie Rzewuska, Eveline's aunt, and the author's own mother. Balzac became, in time, well acquainted with the Polish character, at home and in exile, at its best and its

worst. He presents it to us, now enthusiastic and generous, like Thadée Paz, drawn from Thaddeus Wylezynski, Eve's cousin and protector, now single of purpose to the point of fanaticism, like Balthazar Claës, (General Chodkiewicz, her uncle), or again, temperamental, indolent and weak, as is his Polish artist, Wenceslas Steinbock.

Wronski, Mickiewicz and other Polish writers imparted greater knowledge of the Slav and his mentality; and, once the journey to Wierzchownia, in 1847, accomplished, Polish landscapes and pursuits provided additional material for novels. *Les Paysans* is a study of agriculture and its problems as Balzac saw them in Ukrania, and of the relations between seigneur and peasant, drawn in against a French background. It is certain that Balzac's production was enormously enriched and strengthened by contact with the Slavic mind and world, and this thanks to Madame Hanska who, if she did not actually initiate Balzac into Polish civilization, was nevertheless largely instrumental in sustaining and intensifying his interest therein. Moreover, as Madame Piotrowska points out, it was when Balzac's relations with his Eve were happiest and most intimate that he invariably did his best work.

The author has been at great pains to collect a vast amount of documentary evidence, and her book, apart from the main theme, contains much interesting information concerning the history, mentality and literature of her native land. Her style is prolix and a little sentimental,—the adjectives *pauvre* and *cher* recur with irritating frequency—but at least her thesis has a human quality rare in such volumes, while the author's enthusiasm for her subject would atone for more faults than may be found in her work. She has a mastery of the French language worthy of note even in a writer blessed with the Slavic gift of tongues. All credit is due to her for clearing this most romantic heroine of unmerited blame, and revealing her in her true light as the inspiration and faithful lover of one of the greatest of writers.