
Cousin Pons

Honoré de Balzac



The Project Gutenberg eBook of Cousin Pons, by Honore de Balzac

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org

Title: Cousin Pons

Author: Honore de Balzac

Translator: Ellen Marriage

Release Date: March 3, 2010 [EBook #1856]

Last Updated: November 23, 2016

Language: English

*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK COUSIN PONS ***

Produced by John Bickers, and Dagny, and David Widger

penny inherited from his mother had been spent in the course of a three-years' travel in Italy after the residence in Rome came to an end. He had seen Venice, Milan, Florence, Bologna, and Naples leisurely, as he wished to see them, as a dreamer of dreams, and a philosopher; careless of the future, for an artist looks to his talent for support as the *fille de joie* counts upon her beauty.

All through those splendid years of travel Pons was as happy as was possible to a man with a great soul, a sensitive nature, and a face so ugly that any "success with the fair" (to use the stereotyped formula of 1809) was out of the question; the realities of life always fell short of the ideals which Pons created for himself; the world without was not in tune with the soul within, but Pons had made up his mind to the dissonance. Doubtless the sense of beauty that he had kept pure and living in his inmost soul was the spring from which the delicate, graceful, and ingenious music flowed and won him reputation between 1810 and 1814.

Every reputation founded upon the fashion or the fancy of the hour, or upon the short-lived follies of Paris, produces its Pons. No place in the world is so inexorable in great things; no city of the globe so disdainfully indulgent in small. Pons' notes were drowned before long in floods of German harmony and the music of Rossini; and if in 1824 he was known as an agreeable musician, a composer of various drawing-room melodies, judge if he was likely to be famous in 1831! In 1844, the year in which the single drama of this obscure life began, Sylvain Pons was of no more value than an antediluvian semiquaver; dealers in music had never heard of his name,

though he was still composing, on scanty pay, for his own orchestra or for neighboring theatres.

And yet, the worthy man did justice to the great masters of our day; a masterpiece finely rendered brought tears to his eyes; but his religion never bordered on mania, as in the case of Hoffmann's Kreislers; he kept his enthusiasm to himself; his delight, like the paradise reached by opium or hashish, lay within his own soul.

The gift of admiration, of comprehension, the single faculty by which the ordinary man becomes the brother of the poet, is rare in the city of Paris, that inn whither all ideas, like travelers, come to stay for awhile; so rare is it, that Pons surely deserves our respectful esteem. His personal failure may seem anomalous, but he frankly admitted that he was weak in harmony. He had neglected the study of counterpoint; there was a time when he might have begun his studies afresh and held his own among modern composers, when he might have been, not certainly a Rossini, but a Herold. But he was alarmed by the intricacies of modern orchestration; and at length, in the pleasures of collecting, he found such ever-renewed compensation for his failure, that if he had been made to choose between his curiosities and the fame of Rossini—will it be believed?—Pons would have pronounced for his beloved collection.

Pons was of the opinion of Chenavard, the print-collector, who laid it down as an axiom—that you only fully enjoy the pleasure of looking at your Ruysdael, Hobbema, Holbein, Raphael, Murillo, Greuze, Sebastian del Piombo, Giorgione, Albrecht Durer, or what not, when you have paid less than sixty francs for your picture. Pons never gave more than a hundred francs for any purchase. If he laid

out as much as fifty francs, he was careful to assure himself beforehand that the object was worth three thousand. The most beautiful thing in the world, if it cost three hundred francs, did not exist for Pons. Rare had been his bargains; but he possessed the three qualifications for success—a stag's legs, an idler's disregard of time, and the patience of a Jew.

This system, carried out for forty years, in Rome or Paris alike, had borne its fruits. Since Pons returned from Italy, he had regularly spent about two thousand francs a year upon a collection of masterpieces of every sort and description, a collection hidden away from all eyes but his own; and now his catalogue had reached the incredible number of 1907. Wandering about Paris between 1811 and 1816, he had picked up many a treasure for ten francs, which would fetch a thousand or twelve hundred to-day. Some forty-five thousand canvases change hands annually in Paris picture sales, and these Pons had sifted through year by year. Pons had Sevres porcelain, *pate tendre*, bought of Auvergnats, those satellites of the Black Band who sacked chateaux and carried off the marvels of Pompadour France in their tumbril carts; he had, in fact, collected the drifted wreck of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; he recognized the genius of the French school, and discerned the merit of the Lepautres and Lavallee-Poussins and the rest of the great obscure creators of the Genre Louis Quinze and the Genre Louis Seize. Our modern craftsmen now draw without acknowledgment from them, pore incessantly over the treasures of the Cabinet des Estampes, borrow adroitly, and give out their *pastiches* for new inventions. Pons had obtained many a piece by exchange, and

therein lies the ineffable joy of the collector. The joy of buying bric-a-brac is a secondary delight; in the give-and-take of barter lies the joy of joys. Pons had begun by collecting snuff-boxes and miniatures; his name was unknown in bric-a-bracology, for he seldom showed himself in salesrooms or in the shops of well-known dealers; Pons was not aware that his treasures had any commercial value.

The late lamented Dusommerard tried his best to gain Pons' confidence, but the prince of bric-a-brac died before he could gain an entrance to the Pons museum, the one private collection which could compare with the famous Sauvageot museum. Pons and M. Sauvageot indeed resembled each other in more ways than one. M. Sauvageot, like Pons, was a musician; he was likewise a comparatively poor man, and he had collected his bric-a-brac in much the same way, with the same love of art, the same hatred of rich capitalists with well-known names who collect for the sake of running up prices as cleverly as possible. There was yet another point of resemblance between the pair; Pons, like his rival competitor and antagonist, felt in his heart an insatiable craving after specimens of the craftsman's skill and miracles of workmanship; he loved them as a man might love a fair mistress; an auction in the salerooms in the Rue des Jeuneurs, with its accompaniments of hammer strokes and brokers' men, was a crime of *lese-bric-a-brac* in Pons' eyes. Pons' museum was for his own delight at every hour; for the soul created to know and feel all the beauty of a masterpiece has this in common with the lover—to-day's joy is as great as the joy of yesterday; possession never palls; and a masterpiece, happily, never grows old. So

the object that he held in his hand with such fatherly care could only be a “find,” carried off with what affection amateurs alone know!

After the first outlines of this biographical sketch, every one will cry at once, “Why! this is the happiest man on earth, in spite of his ugliness!” And, in truth, no spleen, no dullness can resist the counter-irritant supplied by a “craze,” the intellectual moxa of a hobby. You who can no longer drink of “the cup of pleasure,” as it has been called through all ages, try to collect something, no matter what (people have been known to collect placards), so shall you receive the small change for the gold ingot of happiness. Have you a hobby? You have transferred pleasure to the plane of ideas. And yet, you need not envy the worthy Pons; such envy, like all kindred sentiments, would be founded upon a misapprehension.

With a nature so sensitive, with a soul that lived by tireless admiration of the magnificent achievements of art, of the high rivalry between human toil and the work of Nature—Pons was a slave to that one of the Seven Deadly Sins with which God surely will deal least hardly; Pons was a glutton. A narrow income, combined with a passion for bric-a-brac, condemned him to a regimen so abhorrent to a discriminating palate, that, bachelor as he was, he had cut the knot of the problem by dining out every day.

Now, in the time of the Empire, celebrities were more sought after than at present, perhaps because there were so few of them, perhaps because they made little or no political pretension. In those days, besides, you could set up for a poet, a musician, or a painter, with so little expense. Pons, being regarded as the probable rival of

Nicolo, Paer, and Berton, used to receive so many invitations, that he was forced to keep a list of engagements, much as barristers note down the cases for which they are retained. And Pons behaved like an artist. He presented his amphitryons with copies of his songs, he “obliged” at the pianoforte, he brought them orders for boxes at the Feydeau, his own theatre, he organized concerts, he was not above taking the fiddle himself sometimes in a relation’s house, and getting up a little impromptu dance. In those days, all the handsome men in France were away at the wars exchanging sabre-cuts with the handsome men of the Coalition. Pons was said to be, not ugly, but “peculiar-looking,” after the grand rule laid down by Moliere in Eliante’s famous couplets; but if he sometimes heard himself described as a “charming man” (after he had done some fair lady a service), his good fortune went no further than words.

It was between the years 1810 and 1816 that Pons contracted the unlucky habit of dining out; he grew accustomed to see his hosts taking pains over the dinner, procuring the first and best of everything, bringing out their choicest vintages, seeing carefully to the dessert, the coffee, the liqueurs, giving him of their best, in short; the best, moreover, of those times of the Empire when Paris was glutted with kings and queens and princes, and many a private house emulated royal splendours.

People used to play at Royalty then as they play nowadays at parliament, creating a whole host of societies with presidents, vice-presidents, secretaries and what not—agricultural societies, industrial societies, societies for the promotion of sericulture, viticulture, the growth of flax, and so forth. Some have even gone so far as to