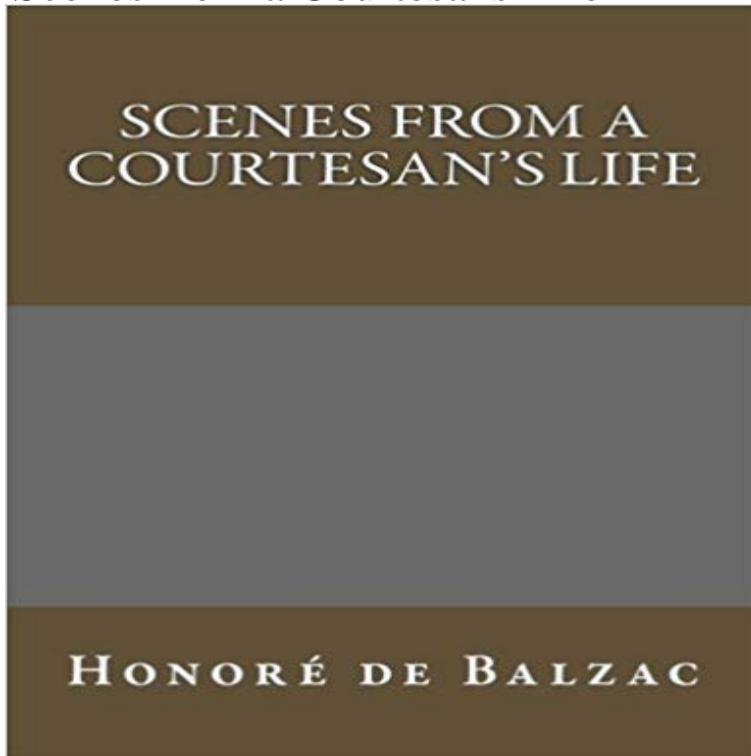


Scenes from a Courtesans Life



In 1824, at the last opera ball of the season, several masks were struck by the beauty of a youth who was wandering about the passages and greenroom with the air of a man in search of a woman kept at home by unexpected circumstances. The secret of this behavior, now dilatory and again hurried, is known only to old women and to certain experienced loungers. In this immense assembly the crowd does not trouble itself much to watch the crowd; each one's interest is impassioned, and even idlers are preoccupied. The young dandy was so much absorbed in his anxious quest that he did not observe his own success; he did not hear, he did not see the ironical exclamations of admiration, the genuine appreciation, the biting gibes, the soft invitations of some of the masks. Though he was so handsome as to rank among those exceptional persons who come to an opera ball in search of an adventure, and who expect it as confidently as men looked for a lucky coup at roulette in Frascati's day, he seemed quite philosophically sure of his evening; he must be the hero of one of those mysteries with three actors which constitute an opera ball, and are known only to those who play a part in them; for, to young wives who come merely to say, I have seen it, to country people, to inexperienced youths, and to foreigners, the opera house must on those nights be the palace of fatigue and dulness. To these, that black swarm, slow and serried coming, going, winding, turning, returning, mounting, descending, comparable only to ants on a pile of wood is no more intelligible than the Bourse to a Breton peasant who has never heard of the Grand livre.

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