

The Recruit

Honore de Balzac

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Translated by Katharine Prescott Wormeley

DEDICATION To my dear Albert Marchand de la Ribellerie.

At times they saw him, by a phenomenon of vision or locomotion, abolish space in its two forms of Time and Distance; the former being in

On an evening in the month of November, 1793, the principal persons of Carentan were assembled in the salon of Madame de Dey, where they met daily. Several circumstances which would never have attracted attention in a large town, though they greatly preoccupied the little one, gave to this habitual rendezvous an unusual interest. For the two preceding evenings Madame de Dey had closed her doors to the little company, on the ground that she was ill. Such an event would, in ordinary times, have produced as much effect as the closing of the theatres in Paris; life under those circumstances seems merely incomplete. But in 1793, Madame de Dey's action was likely to have fatal results. The slightest departure from a usual custom became, almost invariably for the nobles, a matter of life or death. To fully understand the eager curiosity and searching inquiry which animated on this occasion the Norman countenances of all these rejected visitors, but more especially to enter into Madame de Dey's secret anxieties, it is necessary to explain the role she played at Carentan. The critical position in which she stood at this moment being that of many others during the Revolution the sympathies and recollections of more than one reader will help to give color to this narrative.

Madame de Dey, widow of a lieutenant-general, chevalier of the Orders, had left the court at the time of the emigration. Possessing a good deal of property in the neighborhood of Carentan, she took refuge in that town, hoping that the influence of the Terror would be little felt there. This expectation, based on a knowledge of the region, was well-founded. The Revolution committed but few ravages in Lower Normandy. Though Madame de Dey had known none but the nobles of her own caste when she visited her property in former years, she now felt it advisable to open her house to the principle bourgeois of the town, and to the new governmental authorities; trying to make them pleased at obtaining her society, without arousing either hatred or jealousy. Gracious and kind, gifted by nature with that inexpressible charm which can please without having recourse to subserviency or to making overtures, she succeeded in winning general esteem by an exquisite tact; the sensitive warnings of which enabled her to follow the delicate line along which she might satisfy the exactions of this mixed society, without humiliating the touchy pride of the parvenus, or shocking that of her own friends.

Then about thirty-eight years of age, she still preserved, not the fresh plump beauty which distinguishes the daughters of Lower Normandy, but a fragile and, so to speak, aristocratic beauty. Her features were delicate and refined, her figure supple and easy. When she spoke, her pale face lighted and seemed to acquire fresh life. Her large dark eyes were full of affability and kindness, and yet their calm, religious expression seemed to say that the springs of her existence were no longer in her.

Married in the flower of her age to an old and jealous soldier, the falseness of her position in the midst of a court noted for its gallantry contributed much, no doubt, to draw a veil of melancholy over a face where the charms and the vivacity of love must have shone in earlier days. Obligated to repress the naive impulses and emotions of a woman when she simply feels them instead of reflecting about them, passion was still virgin in the depths of her heart. Her principal attraction came, in fact, from this innate youth, which sometimes, however, played her false, and gave to her ideas an innocent expression of desire. Her manner and appearance commanded respect, but there was always in her bearing, in her voice, a sort of looking forward to some unknown future, as in girlhood. The most insensible man would find himself in love with her, and yet be restrained by a sort of respectful fear, inspired by her courtly and polished manners. Her soul, naturally noble, but strengthened by cruel trials, was far indeed from the common run, and men did justice to it. Such a soul necessarily required a lofty passion; and the affections of Madame de Dey were concentrated on a single sentiment,—that of motherhood. The happiness and pleasure of which her married life was deprived, she found in the passionate love she bore her son. She loved him not only with the pure and deep devotion of a mother, but with the coquetry of a mistress, and the jealousy of a wife. She was miserable away from him, uneasy at his absence, could never see him enough, and

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loved only through him and for him. To make men understand the strength of this feeling, it suffices to add that the son was not only the sole child of Madame de Dey, but also her last relation, the only being in the world to whom the fears and hopes and joys of her life could be naturally attached.

The late Comte de Dey was the last surviving scion of his family, and she herself was the sole heiress of her own. Human interests and projects combined, therefore, with the noblest deeds of the soul to exalt in this mother's heart a sentiment that is always so strong in the hearts of women. She had brought up this son with the utmost difficulty, and with infinite pains, which rendered the youth still dearer to her; a score of times the doctors had predicted his death, but, confident in her own presentiments, her own unflinching hope, she had the happiness of seeing him come safely through the perils of childhood, with a constitution that was ever improving, in spite of the warnings of the Faculty.

Thanks to her constant care, this son had grown and developed so much, and so gracefully, that at twenty years of age, he was thought a most elegant cavalier at Versailles. Madame de Dey possessed a happiness which does not always crown the efforts and struggles of a mother. Her son adored her; their souls understood each other with fraternal sympathy. If they had not been bound by nature's ties, they would instinctively have felt for each other that friendship of man to man, which is so rarely to be met in this life. Appointed sub-lieutenant of dragoons, at the age of eighteen, the young Comte de Dey had obeyed the point of honor of the period by following the princes of the blood in their emigration.

Thus Madame de Dey, noble, rich, and the mother of an emigre, could not be unaware of the dangers of her cruel situation. Having no other desire than to preserve a fortune for her son, she renounced the happiness of emigrating with him; and when she read the vigorous laws by virtue of which the Republic daily confiscated the property of emigres, she congratulated herself on that act of courage; was she not guarding the property of her son at the peril of her life? And when she heard of the terrible executions ordered by the Convention, she slept in peace, knowing that her sole treasure was in safety, far from danger, far from scaffolds. She took pleasure in believing that they had each chosen the wisest course, a course which would save to HIM both life and fortune.

With this secret comfort in her mind, she was ready to make all the concessions required by those evil days, and without sacrificing either her dignity as a woman, or her aristocratic beliefs, she conciliated the good-will of those about her. Madame de Dey had fully understood the difficulties that awaited her on coming to Carentan. To seek to occupy a leading position would be daily defiance to the scaffold; yet she pursued her even way. Sustained by her motherly courage, she won the affections of the poor by comforting indiscriminately all miseries, and she made herself necessary to the rich by assisting their pleasures. She received the procureur of the commune, the mayor, the judge of the district court, the public prosecutor, and even the judges of the revolutionary tribunal.

The first four of these personages, being bachelors, courted her with the hope of marriage, furthering their cause by either letting her see the evils they could do her, or those from which they could protect her. The public prosecutor, previously an attorney at Caen, and the manager of the countess's affairs, tried to inspire her with love by an appearance of generosity and devotion; a dangerous attempt for her. He was the most to be feared among her suitors. He alone knew the exact condition of the property of his former client. His passion was increased by cupidity, and his cause was backed by enormous power, the power of life and death throughout the district. This man, still young, showed so much apparent nobleness and generosity in his proceedings that Madame de Dey had not yet been able to judge him. But, disregarding the danger that attends all attempts at subtilty with Normans, she employed the inventive wit and slyness which Nature grants to women in opposing the four rivals one against the other. By thus gaining time, she hoped to come safe and sound to the end of the national troubles. At this period, the royalists in the interior of France expected day by day that the Revolution would be ended on the morrow. This conviction was the ruin of very many of them.

In spite of these difficulties, the countess had maintained her independence very cleverly until the day when, by an inexplicable imprudence, she closed her doors to her usual evening visitors. Madame de Dey inspired so genuine and deep an interest, that the persons who called upon her that evening expressed extreme anxiety on being told that she was unable to receive them. Then, with that frank curiosity which appears in provincial manners, they inquired what misfortune, grief, or illness afflicted her. In reply to these questions, an old housekeeper named Brigitte informed them that her mistress had shut herself up in her room and would see no one, not even the servants of the house. The semi-cloistral existence of the inhabitants of a little town creates so

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invincible a habit of analyzing and explaining the actions of their neighbors, that after compassionating Madame de Dey (without knowing whether she were happy or unhappy), they proceeded to search for the reasons of this sudden retreat.

"If she were ill," said the first Inquisitive, "she would have sent for the doctor; but the doctor has been all day long playing chess with me. He told me, laughing, that in these days there was but one malady, and that was incurable."

This joke was cautiously uttered. Men, women, old men, and young girls, all set to work to explore the vast field of conjecture. The next day, conjectures became suspicions. As life is all aboveboard in a little town, the women were the first to learn that Brigitte had made larger purchases than usual in the market. This fact could not be disputed: Brigitte had been seen there, very early in the morning; and, extraordinary event! she had bought the only hare the market afforded. Now all the town knew that Madame de Dey did not like game. The hare became, therefore, the point of departure for a vast array of suspicions. The old men who were taking their walks abroad, remarked a sort of concentrated activity about Madame de Dey's premises, shown by the very precautions which the servants took to conceal it. The foot-man was beating a carpet in the garden. The day before, no one would have noticed that fact; but the carpet now became a corner-stone on which the whole town built up its theories. Each individual had his or her surmise.

The second day, on learning that Madame de Dey declared herself ill, the principal personages of Carentan, assembled in the evening at the house of the mayor's brother, an old married merchant, a man of strict integrity, greatly respected, and for whom Madame de Dey had shown much esteem. There all the aspirants for the hand of the rich widow had a tale to tell that was more or less probable; and each expected to turn to his own profit the secret event which he thus recounted. The public prosecutor imagined a whole drama to result in the return by night of Madame de Dey's son, the emigre. The mayor was convinced that a priest who refused the oath had arrived from La Vendee and asked for asylum; but the day being Friday, the purchase of a hare embarrassed the good mayor not a little. The judge of the district court held firmly to the theory of a Chouan leader or a body of Vendean hotly pursued. Others were convinced that the person thus harbored was a noble escaped from the Paris prisons. In short, they all suspected the countess of being guilty of one of those generosities, which the laws of the day called crimes, and punished on the scaffold. The public prosecutor remarked in a low voice that it would be best to say no more, but to do their best to save the poor woman from the abyss toward which she was hurrying.

"If you talk about this affair," he said, "I shall be obliged to take notice of it, and search her house, and THEN--"

He said no more, but all present understood what he meant.

The sincere friends of Madame de Dey were so alarmed about her, that on the morning of the third day, the procureur-syndic of the commune made his wife write her a letter, urging her to receive her visitors as usual that evening. Bolder still, the old merchant went himself in the morning to Madame de Dey's house, and, strong in the service he wanted to render her, he insisted on seeing her, and was amazed to find her in the garden gathering flowers for her vases.

"She must be protecting a lover," thought the old man, filled with sudden pity for the charming woman.

The singular expression on the countess's face strengthened this conjecture. Much moved at the thought of such devotion, for all men are flattered by the sacrifices a woman makes for one of them, the old man told the countess of the rumors that were floating about the town, and the dangers to which she was exposing herself.

"For," he said in conclusion, "though some of the authorities will readily pardon a heroism which protects a priest, none of them will spare you if they discover that you are sacrificing yourself to the interests of your heart."

At these words Madame de Dey looked at the old man with a wild and bewildered air, that made him shudder.

"Come," she said, taking him by the hand and leading him into her bedroom. After assuring herself that they were quite alone, she drew from her bosom a soiled and crumpled letter.

"Read that," she said, making a violent effort to say the words.

She fell into a chair, seemingly exhausted. While the old man searched for his spectacles and rubbed their glasses, she raised her eyes to him, and seemed to study him with curiosity; then she said in an altered voice, and very softly,--

"I trust you."

"I am here to share your crime," replied the good man, simply.

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She quivered. For the first time in that little town, her soul sympathized with that of another. The old man now understood both the hopes and the fears of the poor woman. The letter was from her son. He had returned to France to share in Granville's expedition, and was taken prisoner. The letter was written from his cell, but it told her to hope. He did not doubt his means of escape, and he named to her three days, on one of which he expected to be with her in disguise. But in case he did not reach Carentan by the third day, she might know some fatal difficulty had occurred, and the letter contained his last wishes and a sad farewell. The paper trembled in the old man's hand.

"This is the third day," cried the countess, rising and walking hurriedly up and down.

"You have been very imprudent," said the merchant. "Why send Brigitte to buy those provisions?"

"But he may arrive half-dead with hunger, exhausted, and—"

She could say no more.

"I am sure of my brother the mayor," said the old man. "I will see him at once, and put him in your interests."

After talking with the mayor, the shrewd old man made visits on various pretexts to the principal families of Carentan, to all of whom he mentioned that Madame de Dey, in spite of her illness, would receive her friends that evening. Matching his own craft against those wily Norman minds, he replied to the questions put to him on the nature of Madame de Dey's illness in a manner that hoodwinked the community. He related to a gouty old dame, that Madame de Dey had almost died of a sudden attack of gout in the stomach, but had been relieved by a remedy which the famous doctor, Tronchin, had once recommended to her,—namely, to apply the skin of a freshly-flayed hare on the pit of the stomach, and to remain in bed without making the slightest movement for two days. This tale had prodigious success, and the doctor of Carentan, a royalist "in petto," increased its effect by the manner in which he discussed the remedy.

Nevertheless, suspicions had taken too strong a root in the minds of some obstinate persons, and a few philosophers, to be thus dispelled; so that all Madame de Dey's usual visitors came eagerly and early that evening to watch her countenance: some out of true friendship, but most of them to detect the secret of her seclusion.

They found the countess seated as usual, at the corner of the great fireplace in her salon, a room almost as unpretentious as the other salons in Carentan; for, in order not to wound the narrow view of her guests, she denied herself the luxuries to which she was accustomed. The floor of her reception room was not even waxed, the walls were still hung with dingy tapestries; she used the country furniture, burned tallow candles, and followed the customs of the town,—adopting provincial life, and not shrinking from its pettiness or its many disagreeable privations. Knowing, however, that her guests would pardon luxuries if provided for their own comfort, she neglected nothing which conduced to their personal enjoyment, and gave them, more especially, excellent dinners.

Toward seven o'clock on this memorable evening, her guests were all assembled in a wide circle around the fireplace. The mistress of the house, sustained in her part by the sympathizing glances of the old merchant, submitted with wonderful courage to the minute questioning and stupid, or frivolous, comments of her visitors. At every rap upon her door, every footfall echoing in the street, she hid her emotions by starting topics relating to the interests of the town, and she raised such a lively discussion on the quality of ciders, which was ably seconded by the old merchant, that the company almost forgot to watch her, finding her countenance quite natural, and her composure imperturbable. The public prosecutor and one of the judges of the revolutionary tribunal was taciturn, observing attentively every change in her face; every now and then they addressed her some embarrassing question, to which, however, the countess answered with admirable presence of mind. Mothers have such courage!

After Madame de Dey had arranged the card parties, placing some guests at the boston, and some at the whist tables, she stood talking to a number of young people with extreme ease and liveliness of manner, playing her part like a consummate actress. Presently she suggested a game of loto, and offered to find the box, on the ground that she alone knew where it was, and then she disappeared.

"I am suffocating, my poor Brigitte," she cried, wiping the tears that gushed from her eyes, now brilliant with fever, anxiety, and impatience. "He does not come," she moaned, looking round the room prepared for her son. "Here alone I can breathe, I can live! A few minutes more and he MUST be here; for I know he is living. I am certain of it, my heart says so. Don't you hear something, Brigitte? I would give the rest of my life to know at this moment whether he were still in prison, or out in the free country. Oh! I wish I could stop thinking—"

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She again examined the room to see if all were in order. A good fire burned on the hearth, the shutters were carefully closed, the furniture shone with rubbing; even the manner in which the bed was made showed that the countess had assisted Brigitte in every detail; her hopes were uttered in the delicate care given to that room where she expected to fold her son in her arms. A mother alone could have thought of all his wants; a choice repast, rare wine, fresh linen, slippers, in short, everything the tired man would need,—all were there that nothing might be lacking; the comforts of his home should reveal to him without words the tenderness of his mother!

"Brigitte!" said the countess, in a heart-rending tone, placing a chair before the table, as if to give a semblance of reality to her hopes, and so increase the strength of her illusions.

"Ah! madame, he will come. He is not far off. I haven't a doubt he is living, and on his way," replied Brigitte. "I put a key in the Bible, and I held it on my fingers while Cottin read a chapter in the gospel of Saint John; and, madame, the key never turned at all!"

"Is that a good sign?" asked the countess.

"Oh! madame, that's a well-known sign. I would wager my salvation, he still lives. God would not so deceive us."

"Ah! if he would only come—no matter for his danger here."

"Poor Monsieur Auguste!" cried Brigitte, "he must be toiling along the roads on foot."

"There's eight o'clock striking now," cried the countess, in terror.

She dared not stay away any longer from her guests; but before re-entering the salon, she paused a moment under the peristyle of the staircase, listening if any sound were breaking the silence of the street. She smiled at Brigitte's husband, who was standing sentinel at the door, and whose eyes seemed stupefied by the intensity of his attention to the murmurs of the street and night.

Madame de Dey re-entered her salon, affecting gaiety, and began to play loto with the young people; but after a while she complained of feeling ill, and returned to her chimney-corner.

Such was the situation of affairs, and of people's minds in the house of Madame de Dey, while along the road, between Paris and Cherbourg, a young man in a brown jacket, called a "carmagnole," worn de rigueur at that period, was making his way to Carentan. When drafts for the army were first instituted, there was little or no discipline. The requirements of the moment did not allow the Republic to equip its soldiers immediately, and it was not an unusual thing to see the roads covered with recruits, who were still wearing citizen's dress. These young men either preceded or lagged behind their respective battalions, according to their power of enduring the fatigues of a long march.

The young man of whom we are now speaking, was much in advance of a column of recruits, known to be on its way from Cherbourg, which the mayor of Carentan was awaiting hourly, in order to give them their billets for the night. The young man walked with a jades step, but firmly, and his gait seemed to show that he had long been familiar with military hardships. Though the moon was shining on the meadows about Carentan, he had noticed heavy clouds on the horizon, and the fear of being overtaken by a tempest may have hurried his steps, which were certainly more brisk than his evident lassitude could have desired. On his back was an almost empty bag, and he held in his hand a boxwood stick, cut from the tall broad hedges of that shrub, which is so frequent in Lower Normandy.

This solitary wayfarer entered Carentan, the steeples of which, touched by the moonlight, had only just appeared to him. His step woke the echoes of the silent streets, but he met no one until he came to the shop of a weaver, who was still at work. From him he inquired his way to the mayor's house, and the way-worn recruit soon found himself seated in the porch of that establishment, waiting for the billet he had asked for. Instead of receiving it at once, he was summoned to the mayor's presence, where he found himself the object of minute observation. The young man was good-looking, and belonged, evidently, to a distinguished family. His air and manner were those of the nobility. The intelligence of a good education was in his face.

"What is your name?" asked the mayor, giving him a shrewd and meaning look.

"Julien Jussieu."

"Where do you come from?" continued the magistrate, with a smile of incredulity.

"Paris."

"Your comrades are at some distance," resumed the Norman official, in a sarcastic tone.

"I am nine miles in advance of the battalion."

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"Some strong feeling must be bringing you to Carentan, citizen recruit," said the mayor, slyly. "Very good, very good," he added hastily, silencing with a wave of his hand a reply the young man was about to make. "I know where to send you. Here," he added, giving him his billet, "take this and go to that house, 'Citizen Jussieu.'"

So saying, the mayor held out to the recruit a billet, on which the address of Madame de Dey's house was written. The young man read it with an air of curiosity.

"He knows he hasn't far to go," thought the mayor as the recruit left the house. "That's a bold fellow! God guide him! He seemed to have his answers ready. But he'd have been lost if any one but I had questioned him and demanded to see his papers."

At that instant, the clocks of Carentan struck half-past nine; the lanterns were lighted in Madame de Dey's antechamber; the servants were helping their masters and mistresses to put on their clogs, their cloaks, and their mantles; the card-players had paid their debts, and all the guests were preparing to leave together after the established customs of provincial towns.

"The prosecutor, it seems, has stayed behind," said a lady, perceiving that that important personage was missing, when the company parted in the large square to go to their several houses.

That terrible magistrate was, in fact, alone with the countess, who waited, trembling, till it should please him to depart.

"Citoyenne," he said, after a long silence in which there was something terrifying, "I am here to enforce the laws of the Republic."

Madame de Dey shuddered.

"Have you nothing to reveal to me?" he demanded.

"Nothing," she replied, astonished.

"Ah! madame," cried the prosecutor, changing his tone and seating himself beside her, "at this moment, for want of a word between us, you and I may be risking our heads on the scaffold. I have too long observed your character, your soul, your manners, to share the error into which you have persuaded your friends this evening. You are, I cannot doubt, expecting your son."

The countess made a gesture of denial; but she had turned pale, the muscles of her face contracted from the effort that she made to exhibit firmness, and the implacable eye of the public prosecutor lost none of her movements.

"Well, receive him," continued the functionary of the Revolution, "but do not keep him under your roof later than seven o'clock in the morning. To-morrow, at eight, I shall be at your door with a denunciation."

She looked at him with a stupid air that might have made a tiger pitiful.

"I will prove," he continued in a kindly voice, "the falsity of the denunciation, by making a careful search of the premises; and the nature of my report will protect you in future from all suspicions. I will speak of your patriotic gifts, your civic virtues, and that will save you."

Madame de Dey feared a trap, and she stood motionless; but her face was on fire, and her tongue stiff in her mouth. A rap sounded on the door.

"Oh!" cried the mother, falling on her knees, "save him! save him!"

"Yes, we will save him," said the official, giving her a look of passion; "if it costs us our life, we will save him."

"I am lost!" she murmured, as the prosecutor raised her courteously.

"Madame," he said, with an oratorical movement, "I will owe you only— to yourself."

"Madame, he has come," cried Brigitte, rushing in and thinking her mistress was alone.

At sight of the public prosecutor, the old woman, flushed and joyous as she was, became motionless and livid.

"Who has come?" asked the prosecutor.

"A recruit, whom the mayor has sent to lodge here," replied Brigitte, showing the billet.

"True," said the prosecutor, reading the paper. "We expect a detachment to-night."

And he went away.

The countess had too much need at this moment to believe in the sincerity of her former attorney, to distrust his promise. She mounted the stairs rapidly, though her strength seemed failing her; then she opened the door, saw her son, and fell into his arms half dead,—

"Oh! my child! my child!" she cried, sobbing, and covering him with kisses in a sort of frenzy.

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"Madame!" said an unknown man.

"Ah! it is not he!" she cried, recoiling in terror, and standing erect before the recruit, at whom she gazed with a haggard eye.

"Holy Father! what a likeness!" said Brigitte.

There was silence for a moment. The recruit himself shuddered at the aspect of Madame de Dey.

"Ah! monsieur," she said, leaning on Brigitte's husband, who had entered the room, and feeling to its fullest extent an agony the fear of which had already nearly killed her. "Monsieur, I cannot stay with you longer. Allow my people to attend upon you."

She returned to her own room, half carried by Brigitte and her old servant.

"Oh! madame," said Brigitte, as she undressed her mistress, "must that man sleep in Monsieur Auguste's bed, and put on Monsieur Auguste's slippers, and eat the pate I made for Monsieur Auguste? They may guillotine me if I—"

"Brigitte!" cried Madame de Dey.

Brigitte was mute.

"Hush!" said her husband in her ear, "do you want to kill madame?"

At that moment the recruit made a noise in the room above by sitting down to his supper.

"I cannot stay here!" cried Madame de Dey. "I will go into the greenhouse; there I can hear what happens outside during the night."

She still floated between the fear of having lost her son and the hope of his suddenly appearing.

The night was horribly silent. There was one dreadful moment for the countess, when the battalion of recruits passed through the town, and went to their several billets. Every step, every sound, was a hope,— and a lost hope. After that the stillness continued. Towards morning the countess was obliged to return to her room. Brigitte, who watched her movements, was uneasy when she did not reappear, and entering the room she found her dead.

"She must have heard that recruit walking about Monsieur Auguste's room, and singing their damned Marseillaise, as if he were in a stable," cried Brigitte. "That was enough to kill her!"

The death of the countess had a far more solemn cause; it resulted, no doubt, from an awful vision. At the exact hour when Madame de Dey died at Carentan, her son was shot in the Morbihan. That tragic fact may be added to many recorded observations on sympathies that are known to ignore the laws of space: records which men of solitude are collecting with far-seeing curiosity, and which will some day serve as the basis of a new science for which, up to the present time, a man of genius has been lacking.