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Cousin Betty

Honoré de Balzac · *1846* · *James Waring*

In July-monarchy Paris, a poor, proud spinster from the same Alsatian stock as a beautiful baroness spends a lifetime arranging the ruin of the family that pitied her. Lisbeth Fischer—Cousin Betty—is Balzac's great study of jealousy. This is James Waring's English.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What can envy do, over years, to a house, a marriage, and the envious soul itself?

"Lisbeth Fischer, though the daughter of the eldest of the three brothers, was five years younger than Madame Hulot; she was far from being as handsome as her cousin, and had been desperately jealous"

The first full portrait of Cousin Betty

The Baron Hulot d'Ervy is a high official and a man of chronic affairs. His wife is loyal and still beautiful; their daughter Hortense is hoped for; the family friend Crevel is a vulgar temptation. Lisbeth, the unmarried cousin from the workroom, nurses an old jealousy and finds, in the sculptor Wenceslas and in Valerie Marneffe, the instruments of a long revenge. Waring's English is the hosted text (PG #1749). The book is a Paris of money, lust, and official shame. It is for older students, and it does not flinch.

KEY CHARACTERS

Lisbeth Fischer (Cousin Betty)
The poor, able, jealous cousin whose hidden war with the Hulots is the plot.

Baron Hulot d'Ervy
The high official whose vices give envy its chance.

Baroness Hulot and Hortense
The loyal wife and the daughter, who stand in the path of the ruin.

Wenceslas and Valerie Marneffe
The sculptor Lisbeth meant to keep, and the woman who becomes a weapon in the house's fall.

DESPERATELY JEALOUS

> *"Lisbeth Fischer, though the daughter of the eldest of the three brothers, was five years younger than Madame Hulot; she was far from being as handsome as her cousin, and had been desperately jealous"*
>
> The first full portrait of Cousin Betty

Grades 11–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

A Baron's House, and a Caller

THE OPENING

Crevel calls; the Baroness Hulot's household is shown in its remaining dignity and its hidden debts. The family's honor is already thinner than it looks.

- The official world and the parlor world are one plot.
- Hulot's public rank and private vice start together.
- Crevel is comic and dangerous: money talking.

02

Lisbeth Fischer

THE COUSIN'S PORTRAIT

Cousin Betty, younger than the baroness, far less handsome, and desperately jealous, lives as a poor relation with a talent for work—and for waiting.

- The jealousy is named in the first portrait; it is the engine, not a hint.
- Lisbeth's industry and her bitterness are both real.
- A poor relation's smile can be a long campaign.

> *"Lisbeth Fischer, though the daughter of the eldest of the three brothers, was five years younger than Madame Hulot; she was far from being as handsome as her cousin, and had been desperately jealous"*
>
> The first full portrait of Cousin Betty

03

Wenceslas, and Hortense

THE SCULPTOR

Lisbeth has a secret: a young Pole, Wenceslas, whom she mothers and means to keep. The baroness's daughter will become a rival she cannot forgive.

- The love-plot is also a property-plot: who owns a talented man.
- Hortense's hope is innocent; the cost will not be.
- Balzac is exact about work, debt, and patronage in the arts.

04

Valerie, and a Fall

THE MIDDLE AND THE SCANDAL

Valerie Marneffe, and the circle around her, become the instrument by which Hulot's vice and Lisbeth's hatred pull the house down. Official ruin follows private shame.

- Do not treat Valerie as a mere ornament; she is a will.
- The public office and the private bills crash together.
- Madame Hulot's loyalty is the book's suffering conscience.

05

The Bill for Envy

THE CLOSE

The family's collapse, and Lisbeth's, are not tidied into a simple comeuppance. Balzac shows the city still turning while a household is consumed.

- The end is moral, and it is also social: money, rank, and the grave.
- This is Adult/Advanced: adultery, kept women, official corruption, a long revenge.
- Quote Waring, not a later English of the Human Comedy.

Envy · A Family's Ruin · Money and Office · Lust and Shame · Loyalty

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The hosted text is James Waring's English (Project Gutenberg #1749). Quote Waring, not a later Human Comedy translation. The baron is Hulot d'Ervy; Lisbeth Fischer is Cousin Betty; Valerie's name in this text includes Fortin / Marneffe as the plot gives it.
2. The novel is a long Paris study of jealousy, adultery, debt, and official disgrace. It is for older students. Do not soften Lisbeth into a merely comic poor relation; the first portrait already names her desperate jealousy.
3. The opening portrait quote ends at 'desperately jealous' as a continuous stretch in this file (the sentence continues). Keep any quotation a continuous stretch.

Quotations are verbatim from the James Waring, Project Gutenberg #1749, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/cousin-betty/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.